

The Highest House



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Moth has learned the truth about Obsidian's demonic nature—and though he is troubled by it, he also knows that he cannot achieve his goals without Obsidian's help. Meanwhile, Lord Demini has plans to travel to the Southlands, where he suspects he can find answers about those who move against him. He chooses Moth to be his guide, and Moth finds himself on the road back to his homeland—and out of Obsidian's reach...

Obsidian's Bargain, Part 6

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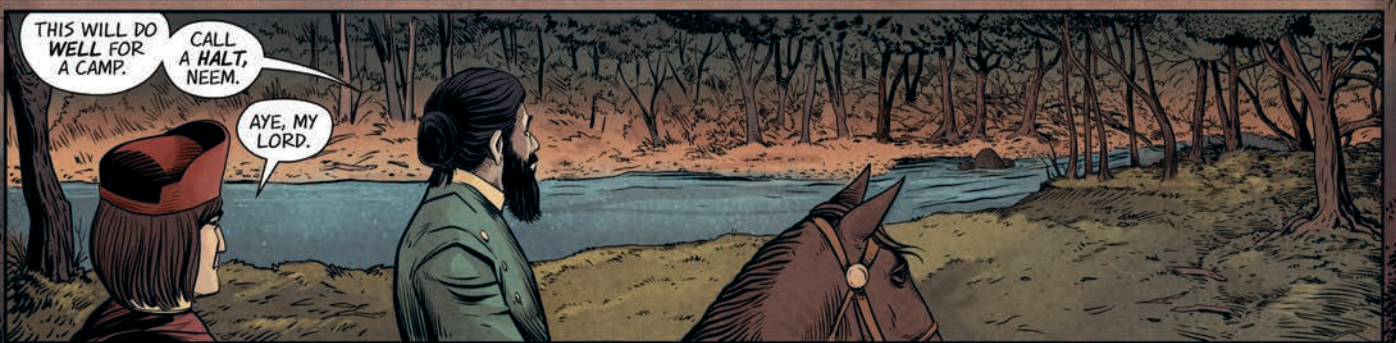
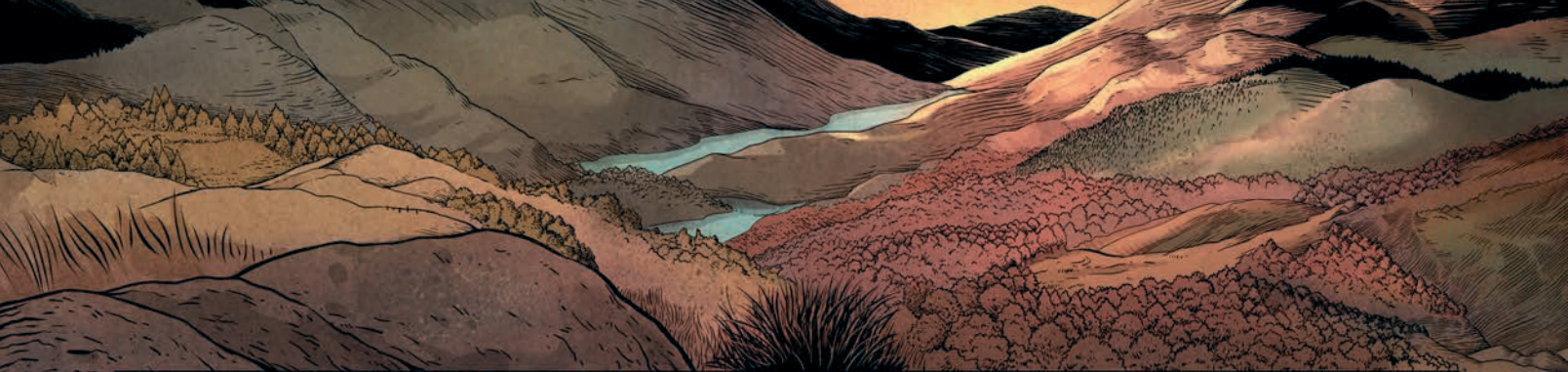
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VERY WELL, SIEUR.

IF I'M TO BE READY, PERHAPS I CAN ASK YOU WHY WE MUST DESTROY THE PAPER.



NO, MOTH. YOU CAN'T ASK ME. BUT YOU CAN TELL ME

WHAT? SIEUR EXTAT--

THINK IT THROUGH. I KNOW YOU HAVE A BRAIN.



YOU SAID THE PAPER IS A PROMISE.

INDEED. A PROMISE OF WEALTH. A GUARANTEE.

WHO IS THE PROMISE MADE TO?

WHOEVER HOLDS THE PAPER.



BUT MORE THAN ONE MAN MIGHT COME TO HOLD THE PAPER. YOU COULD LOSE IT. OR EXCHANGE IT.

IN FACT, THAT'S WHAT IT'S MEANT FOR, ISN'T IT? IF THE PROMISE IS GOOD, THE PAPER IS LIKE GOLD, OR HOUSEMARKED STEEL.



VERY GOOD. AND DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT ERBEO OFFERED HIS LORDSHIP WHEN HE FIRST ARRIVED AT HIGHEST HOUSE?



"FIVE HUNDRED BARS, TO BE SENT, OR FOUR HUNDRED IN SCRIP THAT I CARRY WITH ME."



JUST SO.

THE SCRIP, IN OTHER WORDS, IS NOW WORTH MORE THAN THE STEEL.

IT CARRIES A HIGHER VALUE. OR ELSE IS THOUGHT TO, WHICH COMES TO THE SAME THING.



AND STEEL IS THE BASIS OF HOUSE ALDERCREST'S WEALTH. WE OWN MOST OF OSSANIUL'S IRON MINES.

THAT'S TRUE.

SO A PORTABLE AND POPULAR ALTERNATIVE TO STEEL...



GO WARM YOURSELF AT THE FIRE NOW, MOTH.

WHEN YOUR BRAIN NEEDS FURTHER EXERCISE, I WILL ALERT YOU TO THE FACT.



OH, THE LASSIE WENT TO THE BUTCHER'S SHOP, FOR A PENNYWORTH OF MUTTON...

WHAT'S THE JOKE, LAD?



NOTHING. IT'S JUST THAT YOUR SONG REMINDS ME OF A FRIEND.



WE'RE CLOSE TO THE EDGE OF ANIVOR, I THINK?

I BELIEVE SO, MY LORD.

THIS FAR WEST, THE FOREST COMES RIGHT UP TO THE BANK OF THE RIVER.



NEEM, SEE THAT THE HORSES AND THE SLAVES ARE WATERED.

AND SEND THE BOY TO ME UP ON YONDER RIDGE.



YOU SUMMONED ME, MY LORD.

AYE. DO YOU KNOW WHERE WE ARE, MOTH?

IN SOLLEN, MY LORD. ANIVOR IS TO THE RISING SUN AND JEG MOOT IS TO THE SETTING.



THIS IS CURIOUS STUFF. THE DESIGNS ARE SO INTRICATE THAT IT WOULD TAKE A SCRIBE MORE THAN A DAY TO COPY THEM.

AND EVERY ONE IS PRECISELY ALIKE. HOW IS THAT DONE, THINK YOU?

MY LORD, I KNOW NOT.



NO. BUT YOU KNOW THIS FOREST. YOU'D NOTICE THINGS THAT HAD NO PLACE HERE. THEY'D JUMP TO YOUR EYE.

I'M MIND TO PUT THAT EYE TO USE, IF YOU'RE WILLING.



MY LORD
HAS ONLY TO
COMMAND.

THANK
YOU,
MOTH.

THE PLAN'S
A SIMPLE ONE. IN
THE GUISE OF A
WOODCUTTER, YOU
WALK THE PATHS OF
ANIVOR, LOOKING
FOR WORK.



BUT ALSO,
LOOKING FOR
SOMEONE WHO FELS
A GREAT MANY TREES
YET SELLS ON
NO LUMBER.

AND THEN,
MY LORD?



WHY, THEN
YOU COME
AWAY.

AND
LEAVE
THE REST
TO ME.



HERE'S MONEY, TOO.
A JUDICIOUS **BRIBE**
CAN ACCOMPLISH
MANY THINGS.

THANK
YOU, **SIEUR**.

LOOK NOW, **MOTH**. I'LL
GIVE YOU AN **ESCORT** AS FAR
AS **ALIMATHY**. AFTER THAT,
YOU MUST WALK **ALONE**, FOR
THE LOOK OF THINGS.

I'LL
NOT FAIL
YOU, MY
LORD.



I HAVE GOOD HOPE. BUT IF
YOU FIND NOTHING, THERE'S
NO SHAME. I HAVE **ANOTHER**
PLAN THAT WILL SERVE.

AND
WHAT'S THAT,
MY LORD?



I'LL **BURN**
THE FOREST
DOWN.

THEY
CAN'T WORK
WITHOUT
WOOD.



MY LORD,
THE FOREST
IS LIVELIHOOD TO
THOUSANDS. **FOOD**
TO THOUSANDS
MORE.

WHICH
IS WHY I
HOPE YOU
PROSPER.

GODDESS BYE
YOU, **MOTH**.
AND GOOD
SPEED.



KEEP YOUR MEN CLOSE, CAPTAIN TEMET. SINGLE FILE IS BEST HERE.

YOUR PARDON, GOODMAN BOY. MY LORD TOLD ME TO KEEP YOU SAFE.

HE DIDN'T SAY I SHOULD TAKE ORDERS FROM YOU.



THE EARTH IS RED HERE.

DON'T YOU MARK IT?

I'VE SEEN CLAY BEFORE. WHAT OF IT?



IT'S NOT CLAY. THERE ARE BLOOD TREES HERE, AND THEIR SAP STAINS THE SOIL.

THE EARTH ON THE ROAD IS PACKED DOWN HARD ENOUGH THAT THE ROOTS CAN'T BREAK THROUGH. BUT IF YOU STRAY TOO FAR--



--ANIVOR WILL DO ITS BEST TO EAT YOU.

GODDESS!



FILTH! WHERE DID THEY SPRING FROM?

THEY WERE PLANTED IN THE MAGE WARS. OR SO I WAS TOLD. IN THE SOUTHERN REACH, WE KEEP OUR EYES ON THE GROUND.



AYE. IF I LIVED HERE, I'D DOUBTLESS DO LIKEWISE.

YOUR ROADS HAVE NO SIGNS AND YOUR WOMEN HAVE NO TITS, SO WHAT ELSE IS THERE TO LOOK AT?