

POACHER'S CREST

Poacher's Crest is a thriving trade town at the meeting of the King's Road and the winding Lynham river. Known for its excellent apples, vibrantly dyed fabrics, smoked game meats, and the fine metalwork of its master whitesmith, Tylsit Burkham.

The town has been granted rights by its bishopric to hold a market day twice monthly, at the full moon and the new. These trade holidays are well attended, and continue well after sundown. All who visit the trade day of the full moon are required to mask themselves until the faire has ended. Local legend holds that this is so the Poachers of the Wood can attend without retribution, though some whisper that it is for the protection of the fey and darker powers, who hide amid the crowd. Legend says that on the market day of the full moon, they make deals not for apples and tin smithery, but for newborns and souls.

Every generation of the town's history has been marked by some would-be tyrant, petty or clever, trying to establish his rule over the city. These stories invariably end the same way; The local peasantry bend the knee for a week or two or three, before the poachers of the wood depose the would-be ruler, hogtie him, and send him downriver as a warning to those who would rule Poacher's Crest.

Many of these would-be rulers try to clear the wood around the crest, to guard against these vigilantes. They soon find the woods are made of ironwood trees that resist the bite of any saw or axe. Whatever camp they set up to rule from is within bowshot, night and day, and they can never sleep in safety. Within weeks they are driven mad by lack of sleep, and the stories take a dark turn then, followed by final retribution as the poachers exact vengeance on the tyrant. The village is freed again, to live in peace and prosperity for another generation.

The last attempt to rule Poacher's Crest came 17 years ago. The villagers joke that it is time they'll have to defend themselves again, come the new year.

They're right, but their newest enemy doesn't play like the old.

Bishop Kyle Uthwy, also Earl of the North Fork, fourth of his name by the grace of the most holy, etc., etc., covets the lucrative trade that flows through Poacher's Hollow. Slow and patient, his campaign to take over the town has started not with an invasion, but with song. He sponsors minstrels to visit all the neighboring towns, and sing of the Dark Creatures that attend the Faire of the Full Moon in Poacher's Hollow. They sing of how the elders of the town rule by decree of these devils, and their decadent reign hides depravities most foul.

Sentiment is turning against Poacher's Crest, and when the Bishop moves, he plans to have a willing ally to imprison for each of the families of The Crest in a different town, two days ride apart, so they cannot conspire together. When retribution comes from the wood, there will be no one in the town to rescue, and no one to trade with and support the poachers. Uthwy knows it will take a hard winter to dislodge the poachers from the wood, deprived of the support of the village. His court astronomer tells him the next winter will be the cruelest in three generations. Uthwy is counting on it.

There is a fault in his plan: The stories his minstrels tell are not untrue...

Written by Sam Brown