

Sacrifice

Michael Yichao

From set *Shadows Over Innistrad*

Dark and deep, Lake Zhava lies in the highlands of Nephalia, near the border with Gavony. Villagers who live on the lake's shores and fish its waters have long spoken of a monster living in its depths. But despite the villagers' pleas, the church of Avacyn has sent no cathar or angel to protect them. As the madness in Innistrad grows, how will the villagers face the horrors of the lake?



Mia didn't believe in the old horror stories.

Not because she didn't believe in horrors. Quite the opposite. She believed in many things that even most adults would consider too horrible to think about. Spirits that haunted the living. Reanimated corpses, stitched together by madmen. Werewolves, feral and ravenous. Vampires who viewed villages as nothing more than a selection of choice morsels. She believed in these things, things that were not *polite* to speak of—as if not speaking of them would keep them from being real.

No, there were too many horrors in the world, horrors the village elders feared to name, for her to give much credence to town gossip, vague in details and heavy in hysteria.

Wilbur had quite a different opinion.

"It is *too* real," he insisted, pounding his fist on the grass. "Veryl said he saw it once—just a glimpse, but it was as wide as his ship."

Mia rolled her eyes. “Veryl also once claimed he kissed an angel,” she said. “How long have we heard tales of the Gitrog? And how many credible people have seen it? Aren’t we a little old to believe such nonsense?”

Wilbur stood up, shaking his head. “This isn’t some dumb story. You don’t go out on Lake Zhava every day, Mia. You don’t see what I do. Especially lately. The unnatural fog. The lingering chill. There’s more than fish in those depths.”

“Is that your expert opinion as a fisherman? A fisherman who has turned fifteen and still isn’t allowed to sail on his own yet?”

Wilbur blushed. “This has nothing to do with that, Mia! I’m being serious, and you’re being a jerk.”

Mia shrugged as she walked toward her flock. A few had straggled farther afield than she liked. “There’s no sense in being afraid of the dark, Wil. What you should be fearing is what’s *in* the dark.”

Wilbur scowled, chasing after her. “What is that, another quote from your brilliant father?” Mia didn’t take the bait, but Wilbur pressed on anyway. “Famed slayer, traveling the land as a noble agent of the Skiltfolk, but too busy to deal with monsters back home?”

“Too busy to deal with the whining delusions of small-minded townsfolk!” Mia whipped around, brandishing her crook. “Look around, Wilbur. None of this matters. This village doesn’t matter. *We* don’t matter. This stupid little hamlet isn’t even *big* enough for real terrors to haunt it! We’re just a no-name nowhere mountain town slowly driving itself to madness through runaway imaginations.”



Art by Andreas Rocha

She turned, looked out at her flock, and sighed. One sheep had wandered far from the group. The little bell around its neck jangled faintly as it continued its adventure up the stony hillside. She started after it.

“Is that what your father told you when he left you behind? That you don’t matter?”

Mia stopped in her tracks. She shot Wilbur an angry glare. Wilbur, to his credit, looked slightly green and like he was trying to swallow the words that just flew out of his mouth. Mia scowled.

"You didn't mean that."

"...Maybe I did—"

"We both know I can take you in a fight. You *didn't* mean that."

She turned away before Wilbur could answer and whirled the crook above her head, breaking into a light run. A short jog, a few sharp commands, and one crook under a stubborn sheep's chin later, she had herded most of her flock toward the field.

She glanced back to see if Wilbur had run home. To her surprise, he still stood there, looking dumb and lost.

"I didn't mean that!" he shouted across the field. Mia sighed, a smile sneaking across her face.

"I know." Mia let out a sharp whistle, herding her sheep onto the path back home. Wilbur hurried across the field to catch up.

"And it's not because you could take me in a fight. I mean, you could. But that's not why." Wilbur fell into stride next to her. Mia laughed.

"I know, Wil. That's why I like you."

The two walked on, the comfortable silence between them broken by occasional bleats from sheep.

Later that week, Mia awoke to a cold, gray dawn and found a section of her sheep pen broken. A quick count showed that one sheep was missing. She spent the morning searching to no avail. A rambunctious sheep probably broke out of the pen, as they were wont to do from time to time, and wandered off to get eaten by wolves in the woods. Mia cursed her luck and mended the fence, thinking nothing more of it.

Mia walked through the market, picking at the meager wares. The village's marketplace had never been thriving, but last season's poor crops and the decrease in caravans coming through the mountain pass made the options even more sparse than usual. Even the selection of fish seemed paltry, with the best offering being a sad sack of unimpressive cod.

"Poor haul this week, Lehen?" Mia nodded to the old fisherman.

Lehen shook his head, letting out a sigh. "Haven't spent much time on the waters. Fog's heavier than usual. Dangerous."

"It's dangerous all right," croaked a voice. "And not just due to fog. Wise fishermen are staying off the lake."



Art by John Stanko

Mia looked at the speaker and rolled her eyes. “If all the fishermen were as wise as you, Veryl, they’d all have starved to death by now.”

“The wise know that the Gitrog rises again!” pressed Veryl, a sneer sneaking into his voice. “Only a fool would fish the lake.”

“I’ve never met a fisherman so afraid of the lake, or so eager to blame his poor skills on imaginary beasts.” Mia picked out the fattest cod from Lehren’s haul, making a show of handing him extra coin as she did so.

“Watch what you call imaginary, girl,” a deep voice rumbled.

Mia turned to face the speaker and stopped, surprised. Kalim, barrel-chested and towering above the rest of the merchants, looked stern as ever. Thick brows, a thick, dark beard, thick arms sculpted from hauling nets—the only slender thing on his body was the curved fishing knife on his belt.

“The Gitrog is real. Surely a slayer’s daughter knows better than to doubt the monsters of the world.”

Mia noticed several other merchants and shoppers leaning in to listen or sneaking furtive glances. She gritted her teeth.

“A slayer’s daughter knows to first rule out all other possibilities before crying ‘monster’ like a frightened child.”

Veryl sidled up behind Kalim, greasy blond hair flopping across his eyes. “Rude words from a shepherd girl. Talking like *you* are the slayer.”

“I’m more of a slayer than you are a fisherman, Veryl.” As much as she wanted to knock the smugness (and just a *few* teeth) from Veryl’s face, she knew better than to throw a punch with Kalim watching. She turned her attention to him.

“Surely *you* of all people do not believe Veryl’s tall tales about actually *seeing* the Gitrog, Elder Kalim.”

“I believe. For I *have* seen it.”

The marketplace fell silent, and Mia lost all decorum as she stared at Kalim. Veryl started to say something, but Kalim put his hand across Veryl's chest, shushing the lad, and turned to address the whole marketplace. "The Elders convened last night, and we decree that fishing on the lake is suspended until further notice. We will post the announcement in the square this afternoon." He held up his hand against the groans and alarmed shouts. "The safety of the village comes first. I...I have also written to the Church of Avacyn for help." His gaze fell back on Mia. "Perhaps you could write your father as well."

A hushed silence fell over the crowd. Mia's pulse quickened as she met Kalim's gaze. Beneath the calm and commanding exterior, she saw it—terror, deep and rumbling, a flooding undercurrent in his otherwise resolute stare. She swallowed, a feeling of dread creeping up and clenching her throat.

"Father, I finally found some coriander!" Mia and Kalim turned as Wilbur came running down the market street. He waved the leafy greens, a stupid grin plastered on his face—until he tripped and went sprawling across the cobblestones. Mia let out a nervous laugh, exhaling—only then realizing she had been holding her breath. Around her, onlookers resumed their previous activities, some laughing at Wilbur, many whispering and murmuring, all dispersing, the tension of the moment broken.

Kalim took the coriander and ruffled Wilbur's hair. Wilbur looked around sheepishly until he caught Mia's eye. His face went from goofy embarrassment to serious in an instant, his brow furrowing. *You okay?* he mouthed.

Mia blinked, surprised, and shrugged. She started to speak, but Wilbur had already turned to Kalim, chattering and leading him from the marketplace, away from her. She stood alone, awash in a whirlpool of emotions, thoughts, and questions.

"He asked you to write your father?" Wilbur stared, incredulous. Mia nodded, stirring slowly. "But... he hates your father."

"Trust me. I haven't forgotten."

Mia tasted the soup, then offered the spoon to Wilbur. He sipped, made a face, and reached over to throw another pinch of salt into the pot.

The two huddled in Mia's cabin near her small hearth. The flickering flame cast a warm glow over the room as the woodsmoke mixed with the savory smell of mutton stew. Mia carefully pulled the pot off the fire and set it down on a nearby table while Wilbur retrieved a fresh loaf of bread from his pack. Mia slumped into a chair and drew a knife from her hip, slicing the bread. Wilbur frowned. "Tell me you've cleaned that since using it to cut rope in the sheep pen this morning. Or since cutting mutton for the stew. Or since cutting your hair three months ago."

Mia scowled. "It's my best knife. Multifunctional."

Wilbur shrugged, grabbed bowls from the nearby shelf, and sat down to spoon out generous portions of stew. "Do you even know how to reach him?" Mia looked up, confused. "Your father, that is."

"I know the branch of Skiltfolk in Drunau where he is based," Mia answered, sheathing her knife. She dipped the bread into the stew and took a bite, marveling at how it always seemed to taste better when Wilbur helped make it.

"Has he ever written back?" Wilbur watched Mia intently, ignoring his stew.

"I have never written him."

"How could—"

"I did not want to trouble him with trivial matters." Mia ate another spoonful and gestured to Wilbur's stew. Wilbur grumbled, then took a bite.

"Are you going to write him now?"

Mia continued eating, trying not to grind her teeth. Wilbur didn't seem to notice.

"Do you think he'd come? Maybe bring others? I mean, I don't think even he could take on the Gitrog without help—"

"I don't know!" Mia slammed her fist on the table, cutting him off. "I don't even know if I'll write to him."

"But—I mean, this is what he does, right? Slay monsters?"



Midnight Guard | Art by Jason A. Engle

Mia stood, throwing her hands in the air in exasperation. "We still don't know if there *is* a monster!"

Wilbur gaped at Mia, dumbfounded. "You still don't believe?"

"I still don't *know* for certain. It's all anecdotal evidence—"

Now Wilbur stood, an edge of anger sharpening his voice.

"My father has seen it! Veryl has seen it! Mia, I don't know why you refuse to—"

"Veryl is still an idiot, and your father is—your father." Mia looked into Wilbur's eyes. The two stood across the table, faces flushed and tempers raised. Even in that heated moment, Mia couldn't help but notice she and Wilbur stood eye to eye. Just that summer she had stood taller than him by a palm.

"My father is what, Mia?"

"An Elder. It's his job to err on the side of caution," Mia backpedaled.

"He said he saw it. He's not issuing decrees because he's cautious. He saw it."

"Unless he didn't." Mia sat down and started eating Wilbur's stew.

“Are you calling my father a liar?” The pain in Wilbur’s voice cut far deeper than the angry shouting moments ago.

“People make mistakes. See things in the fog. They always have. A slayer must distinguish—”

Wilbur groaned. “Stop talking like that, Mia! You’re no slayer!”

“And you’re no fisherman!” Mia’s eyes flashed angrily.

Wilbur’s brow scrunched in anger for a moment, then his face slowly cleared and he sighed.

“None of us are. Fishermen, that is. Not until aid comes from the Church.” Wilbur walked to the pot, grabbing Mia’s empty bowl and scooping himself more stew. Mia frowned. Stupid Wil, can’t even get angry long enough for a real fight. She shoveled stew into her mouth as Wilbur sat back down.

The two ate in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts.

“It’s not just anecdotal.”

Mia looked up over her bowl at Wilbur, curious. Wilbur stared into his. “Boats destroyed. Property damaged. And recently, livestock going missing. Pa says we’re lucky no *person* has been hurt.”

Mia paused. Her missing sheep...

Wilbur looked up. “Please, Mia. You have to believe. Or at least, pretend to. Just...be safe? I—I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Mia hesitated. Wilbur looked at her with the same seriousness as that moment in the market, a seriousness that looked strange on a face so familiar. It made him seem older. It made her feel...she couldn’t figure out how it made her feel, so she looked away.

“You’re right,” she sighed. “I’m not saying I’m convinced,” she interjected, catching Wilbur’s excitement out of the corner of her eye. “But there’s enough reason for doubt. There’s the possibility. And the moment we move from improbable to possible, we must stand watch. Now, vigilance and diligence is demanded—if you’re on watch, no noise is harmless and no shadow can be ignored.”



Mausoleum Guard | Art by David Palumbo

“Why do you always talk like you’re reciting some slayer handbook?” Wilbur rested his head against his hand, raising an eyebrow at Mia, a crooked grin sneaking onto his face.

“I may not be a slayer yet, but I turn fifteen in just two months.” Mia went over to the cabinet and began rummaging through it, partially to find something, and partially to avoid looking at Wilbur’s stupid face. Stupid, dopey, kind, sweet face.

“You’re going to join the Skiltfolk?”

Mia pushed aside some old parchment and books in the cabinet, still searching. “I’m going to try. I have no intention of tending sheep the rest of my life—aha!” Mia turned around, bringing a small case back to the table. Though simple, it looked sturdy—oak panels, iron reinforcement, a heavy lock on the front. Mia reached to the necklace hidden beneath her blouse, took the key, and unlocked the chest.

“Oh wow.” Wilbur’s eyes grew wide as she pulled out a small crossbow, ornately dressed in silver. The craftsmanship was clear, even in the dim firelight. Holy runes lined both sides of its stock. Though it was slender and light, Mia felt its power as she cranked back its bowstring with a practiced hand. She took sight down its length, pointing it toward the front window, her finger lightly brushing the trigger. A heavy *twang* rang out, dust flurrying in the flickering light, cast loose by the reverberating string.

“Is that your father’s?”

“It’s mine.” Mia grinned. “You don’t think Olgard, famed Skiltfolk shieldbearer, would stand for the embarrassment of a daughter who couldn’t defend herself, did you?”

“I know you can handle yourself. I just didn’t know you knew how to shoot.” Wilbur leaned back, admiring the weapon. “Why do you keep it locked up?”

“Weapons heighten tension and danger, even if there’s none present before.” Mia took out the quiver of bolts, counting through them. “Only have your arms at ready when necessary. Only draw them when you must.”



Wolfhunter’s Quiver | Art by Daniel Ljunggren

Wilbur shook his head, grinning. “I think, very soon, no one can tell you to stop speaking like you’re a slayer.”

“I certainly hope so.” Mia picked up the crossbow and quiver, walking to the small room in the rear to place it by her bed. When she returned, Wilbur had already cleared the bowls. He smiled at her.

“Thanks, Mia. Even if you’re just doing this for me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Mia grinned at him, ignoring the fluttering feeling in her stomach.

Wilbur stood. “You’ll see. The Church will send help. Or, if you decide to write him, perhaps your father will come back. In the meantime, though, we’ll do what we can to keep the Gitrog at bay.”

“If it exists.” Mia couldn’t help herself. Wilbur graciously ignored it.

“I trust my father to do what he can to keep us safe.”

Wilbur looked at her again, serious again.

“And I’ll do what I can to keep us safe.”

Mia walked up to him, close, their noses inches apart.

She then planted her palm on his face, giving it a light shove.

Wilbur laughed in surprise, stumbling back a step. Mia rolled her eyes.

“Get out of my house, Wil. Lest the Gitrog eat you as you walk home in the darkness.”

Wilbur grinned and gave her a little wave, turning and walking out the cabin. Mia walked to the door and watched him amble out of sight.

Yeah. That was the correct way to react to his stupid face.

The joy of that evening didn’t last long. Days turned to weeks, creeping by cold and dreary. As winter approached, the fog reached its gray tendrils farther and farther off Lake Zhava, creeping deeper into the village before the feeble sun would chase it back to the shore. On colder mornings, it even enshrouded Mia’s cabin on the hill.

Mia kept her crossbow by her bed at night, and carved time out to practice her aim.

In all that time, no slayer from the Church came. Soon, the caravans stopped altogether, and more and more fishermen loitered around the marketplace, huddled together, grumbling and whispering. Mia broke down and wrote her father, scrapping a dozen drafts before settling on a brief and formal missive asking for aid.

She received no reply. Shortly after, the postal rider stopped coming to town. Within two days, accounts of the Gitrog devouring the mail carrier transformed from rumor to story to fact. Mia thought the poor lad didn’t want to make the cold and dangerous trek to a wretched little village. He probably chose to spend the winter in Drunau instead.

However, there were many Gitrog rumors that Mia couldn’t explain away. By first snowfall, three more sheep had gone missing. Each time, the fence was broken in a different spot—as though something was testing the strength of her pen. Or, as Mia reminded herself, spooked sheep pick random points to break fences. But what could be spooking them? The latest time, she had heard the fence snap in the night, but by the time she burst out of the cabin, crossbow in hand, there was nothing but broken wood and alarmed bleating.

After that, she had finally given in and hired the local carpenter to help her reinforce the pen, dipping into the money her father had left her. Though she hated spending anything she hadn't earned herself, she knew she was fortunate to have this cache. The fishermen, banned from the lake early in the season, struggled as snowfall began. Many relied on the kindness of neighbors—but the poor soil of the village could only produce so much. Fights in the local tavern became more frequent. Cursing the Gitrog intensified. More and more townsfolk retreated to their homes earlier and earlier in the day, barring their doors and boarding up windows as the pervasive fog rolled in thicker and deeper than ever before.

Through it all, it appeared that Wilbur was right when he promised his father would do something. As winter deepened, armed men and women began patrolling the streets, some wielding torches and blades, but many armed with only a pitchfork or meat cleaver. They always wore heavy cloaks with the hoods drawn up—to guard against the creeping chill, but also as uniforms. Mia wondered what a baker with a bread knife could do against the Gitrog. It gnawed at her until one afternoon, she made the mistake of asking Wilbur.



Sharpened Pitchfork | Art by Winona Nelson

“They’re patrols. Extra eyes. You said it before yourself, Mia. ‘Vigilance and diligence.’ We watch, and sound the alarm if we see anything.” Wilbur looked annoyed, his lanky figure dripping from the rain.

“I just wonder if it’s actually useful.” Mia also wondered why Wilbur refused to take off his coat and boots. Or take a seat. Or smile.

“I just wonder if you’ll sell me the wool so I can go home.”

“You’re not staying for dinner?”

“Some of us have more than ourselves to take care of.” Wilbur crossed his arms, and Mia wondered when he had grown taller than her.

“What, do you have to walk around brandishing your fishing rod, protecting the people?” The words left her mouth as her heart begged her to shut up.

“There are things I can’t tell you. You see the surface of what we’re doing to keep the village safe, to keep people alive, and all you can do is mock.”

The truth in his words dragged like sandpaper across her heart, leaving her bloody and raw.

“Why are you still here, Mia?”

Mia looked at his the stern line of his mouth, his furrowed brow, his eyes cold and questioning. Her stomach churned between anger and sadness, a bitterness rising in her throat. Wilbur pressed on. “Why haven’t you left for the Skiltfolk headquarters to take your test and leave us behind like your father did?”

“I am not my father. And I..I’m not fifteen yet.”

Wilbur laughed, and Mia’s chest tightened. She had never heard that laugh from him—empty of joy, full of daggers.

“You knew the snow would come before your birthday. You know the pass is nigh unpassable after the snowfall. If you really wanted to test, you would’ve left already.” His words snapped, sharp and biting as the frigid air. “You’re scared. Scared you’re all memorized rules and bluster.”

Mia grabbed the bundle of wool and threw it at him. “Take it. Get out.”

Wilbur reached to the pouch at his belt, but Mia gave him a hard shove. “I said get out! Keep your father’s coin. I don’t want it.”

“You mean you don’t need it.”

Mia bit her lip. It was her own fault he knew how to hurt her most.

Wilbur turned with the wool under one arm and tossed the pouch behind him as he crossed her threshold. The coins bounced out and scattered, clattering against the floor.

Mia paused, sweating despite the cold. This was the third time today she’d had to change the water for her sheep, breaking through the ice that formed in the troughs. Between this and all her other errands and chores, she hardly had a moment to catch her breath. The sun was already sinking below the horizon, throwing a few last, feeble rays against a sky of iron clouds. The wind howled as she returned to her cabin, cutting through her coat, chilling her to the bone.

At least it isn’t snowing, she thought.

Two hours later, Mia watched the flurry of white slowly overtake the scenery through the window. Of course. What a perfect end to a cold and miserable birthday.



Art by Florian de Gesincourt

She had hoped to make it into the village. Hoped to find her way to Wilbur's house. They hadn't spoken since their fight, and the intervening time grew heavier every passing day, lending heft to the silence and breadth to the distance now separating them. Though she did not put much stock in them, she couldn't help hoping that her birthday would bring Wilbur visiting like he used to.

She sighed, forehead on the glass, breath fogging.

She didn't know when she had dozed off—just that something woke her some time later.

She stretched. The fire had died down to soft orange embers, and outside, the faint glow of moonlit snow edged a silhouette of the landscape. The storm had broken crisp and clear, stars winking in the inky sky. All seemed so peaceful. What had woken her?

Then she heard it again.

A loud *snap-crack!* rang outside the cabin. Mia sat up with a start, heart racing. She listened intently, peering out into the silvery semidarkness, senses on alert, mind racing. Nothing but silence.

She took a deep breath and leaned back, head drifting sleepily back onto her arm. It was likely a frozen tree, bursting as its sap expanded in the cold. Nothing to worry about if there wasn't anything el—

Suddenly, Mia was sprinting, grabbing her crossbow, throwing on her coat, and bursting outside, fear and dread clutching at her chest.

It wasn't the sound that scared her.

It was the silence that followed.

No bleating of startled sheep. No jangling of bells. Even as she ran out into the snow, she could hear nothing. She held her crossbow at the ready, slowing to a brisk walk as she approached the pen.

The sight that greeted her stopped her cold.

An entire side of the pen was in tatters, the fence posts ripped clean from the ground. Broken planks littered the snow, and as she watched, one post cracked and the lean-to roof collapsed.

Slowly, Mia crept closer, praying and hoping, even though she already knew. As she quietly crossed into the pen, her fears were confirmed.



To the Slaughter | Art by Christine Choi

Not one sheep remained. Instead, blood and gore covered the ground and splattered the few planks still standing. Cold wind swept through the wreckage, and the pungent smell of viscera hit her. She doubled over, crossbow falling by her side as she inhaled through her coat sleeve, trying to calm her stomach.

As she gathered herself, a strange shape in the snow caught her eye. She snapped erect, crossbow leveled, squinting at the...thing. She cursed herself for not bringing a torch, slowly moving aside, shifting her shadow away.

The pale moonlight revealed a massive footprint in the fresh powder. She walked closer. The imprint looked like a large, webbed foot, with three talon-like divots at one end. As she looked across the pen, she saw several more prints, scattered among sweeping, dragging tracks and more pools of blood.

The Gitrog.

Mia's pulse pounded in her ears as she gazed out. Leading away from the pen was a wide swath of drag marks and three-toed, webbed footprints pointing to the woods toward the lake.

Her mind swam. The Gitrog was real! It had devoured her flock. Which also meant it roamed quite far from the lake. Which meant it probably had ventured into the village! She had to tell Wilbur. Had to apologize. Had to warn them! She began marching toward the faint lights in the distance, boots crunching through the snow, when a nagging voice in her mind stopped her.

If a menace is confirmed as monster and not man, a slayer must track and isolate it if possible. Slay it away from townsfolk and cities—avoid the panic and mayhem of frightened innocents.

Mia stood, her breath flaring in front of her in pale puffs, torn on what to do. Surely there's no way she could handle something like the Gitrog. Not alerting the town seemed incredibly foolish. She needed to talk to Wilbur—Wilbur's father, rather. Kalim and the Elders would know what to do.

But would they even help her? After all her doubts? Even if they wanted to help, what could they do? The image of bakers and farmers armed with bread knives and pitchforks flashed through her mind. If the Gitrog could devour her entire flock with hardly a sound...

Mia looked down at the crossbow in her hand. The silver gleamed in the moonlight, and she ran her finger along the runes etched in the side. She reached to her hip and rested her hand on the hilt of the long dagger there. The familiar blade had seen more use as a utility knife, but its cold iron edge was crafted to slay spirits and witches.

She had dreamed of becoming a slayer, following in her father's footsteps. But he left her here where it was "safe" and gave her a flock to keep her busy—keep her distracted. Her weapons gathered dust or became household tools, even as she tried to hone her skills on her own. Now, here she was—fifteen years old, with danger falling into her lap. She had played the role of shepherd too long, waiting for permission to become what she most wanted.

Mia took a deep breath through her nose, the cold air sharpening her focus. This was it. Her first step toward becoming a slayer. A practical trial. Even if she couldn't take down the Gitrog, she would at least track it, learn more of its patterns, perhaps even catch sight of it before it slipped back into the lake—and then she could bring that information to Kalim, or her father and the Skiltfolk of Drunau.

Mia shouldered her crossbow and followed the tracks methodically, her reckless, fear-driven pace slowing in the face of purpose.

It didn't make any sense.

She had followed the tracks carefully into the woods. They were easy to follow—the Gitrog did little to hide. However, the tracks vanished just a short span past the tree line. It did not make sense, unless the Gitrog could climb thin trees or burrow into ground frozen solid. Something that left footprints that big didn't just disappear.

She doubled back, examining the tracks more closely, expanding her search to the surrounding area. That's when she found it—a fresh, human footprint some distance from where the Gitrog trail ended. At first, she feared someone had been caught. However, the faint, isolated print didn't suggest struggle. Something didn't add up.

Mia again held her crossbow at the ready and spiraled out from the footprint looking for clues, ears sharp to any sound. Two spans from the footprint, a series of tracks and signs of dragging resumed—but they weren't Gitrog tracks. Human footprints intermingled with long furrows like sled marks, headed to the lake.

Anger replaced fear. Mia walked faster, eyes darting between the tracks and her surroundings. Someone had gone to the trouble of faking an attack, of making false prints, then sweeping away their tracks. Someone wanted to make her look like a fool. Someone had slaughtered her flock.

Someone was going to pay.

The tracks led her almost straight to the lake. As she got closer, her pace slowed. Flickers of torch-light danced by the shore. She moved quickly from tree to tree, staying under cover. Soon, she was near enough to hear voices drift through the cold night air. The torches illuminated several figures, all wearing dark cloaks with hoods pulled up. From Mia's spot, she couldn't make out any faces—nor could she hear any words that were spoken. They stood in a circle, heads bowed, chanting something in a low drone. After a moment, they filed onto a nearby ship, a fair-sized fishing vessel. *Lehren's ship*, Mia realized, heart dropping. What was going on?

Mia watched as the hooded figures boarded. She ground her teeth, suppressing an angry shout, as she watched each stop to load their cargo—lamb carcasses lifted from a nearby sled. She nocked a bolt, about to demand an explanation, when a strange sight stopped her.

One of the hooded figures stood on the boarding ramp, blocking the way. Even with the high ground, the one on the ramp seemed dwarfed by the figure before him, the latter casting an imposing shadow in the moonlight. The taller figure leaned forward and whispered something to the person on the ramp, then walked past. The two bumped shoulders, and the face of the figure on the ramp caught the moonlight. Mia stifled as gasp as Wilbur gave one last lingering gaze into the woods before turning to board.

A million questions flashed through her mind—but she had no time for them as the ship began to pull away from the shore. Slinging her crossbow across her back, Mia sprinted, leaping to catch the boat as it pushed off into water, hanging on the small ladder on the stern. She was sure she would be seen, but peeking over the deck, she saw most of the hooded figures had moved to the bow, looking ahead. A few held torches and lanterns that illuminated the group feebly. Only one stood near her, and his eyes were glued to the horizon as he helmed the ship. Two more poled on either side, pushing hunks of ice away from the ship. Her feet dipped into the water as the ship bobbed, and she shifted up a rung—but she didn't dare move farther.

As she clung to the ship, voices drifted back to her, familiar voices she had heard countless times. They talked about the weather and the icy conditions as though they were all just gossiping at the marketplace. If it weren't for the hooded cloaks and pile of dead lamb carcasses piled high at the center of the deck, Mia would've thought this were a casual outing onto the lake. The effect was dizzyingly surreal—a terrible dream come to life.

She wasn't sure how long she held onto the side of that ship. The temperature dropped as they sailed farther onto the water, and the fog grew thicker. Just when she thought she couldn't hold on any longer, they lurched to a stop. Mia looked about—on all sides, gray mist obscured her sight. The water looked calm, a few jagged blocks of ice bobbing nearby.

"We are here," announced a deep voice. Mia knew that voice, knew the face even before she looked over the deck, even before she saw Kalim pull down his hood and stand before the gathered assembly.

"Brothers and sisters, tonight we bring sacrifice in the hopes that it brings peace. Tonight, we offer that which was unwillingly given, from a nonbeliever. Tonight we gift the Gitrog with the sheep of the slayer's daughter."



Welcome to the Fold | Art by David Palumbo

Curses and dark muttering spread among the gathered hooded figures, but Mia had stopped listening at that point. She had pulled herself over the ledge of the boat and had the butt of her crossbow lined up with the back of what she was fairly certain was Lehren's head. *Just one quick, sharp blow*, she thought.

The figure coughed a sad, wheezing cough. Mia grimaced. She couldn't hit a frail old man.

A frail old man who helped half the village slaughter your entire flock.

She sighed. Lehren started to turn.

Thud! Wumpf.

Lehman dropped like a sack of potatoes. Mia immediately flipped her crossbow around, aiming it at the cluster of figures in hoods—just in time to watch them begin to throw the lamb carcasses overboard.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

The hooded figures turned to stare at her almost as one. Not one person spoke. Mia took an uneasy step back, lifting her crossbow higher.

"You do not understand, child." Kalim broke the silence, striding forward. He sounded calm and quiet. She trained the crossbow on him, and Kalim halted.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," she snarled, "and reparations to pay."

"Your sheep are serving a greater purpose," Kalim said. Many hooded figures muttered in agreement, echoing Kalim's words.

"What purpose is that?" She swung her crossbow to aim at a figure who had started inching toward her. The figure halted, and from beneath the hood, Veryl's face stared at her. She shivered a little, almost not recognizing him. His cheeks had taken on a gaunt look and his eyes flickered wildly from staring at her to gazing back to Kalim to looking off in seemingly random directions.

"We must appease the Gitrog!" shouted one of the hooded figures.

“The Gitrog!” echoed among the crowd.

“There is no Gitrog! You destroyed my pen and slaughtered my herd!” A sudden realization dawned on her. “It was you all, wasn’t it—killing my sheep, a few at a time, before tonight?”

“They’re the only thing that could stop it.” Kalim again moved toward her, right hand now drifting towards his waist. Mia raised her crossbow again, but this time he continued at his glacial pace forward, forcing Mia slowly back. “The only thing that could satiate its hunger. The only thing that stopped it from coming for us.”

“You’re mad. You’re the only one who’s seen it.” Mia took another step back, her foot hitting the edge of the boat.

“We have all seen it. Why do you think we’re all here? We have seen the truth. We have gazed into its eyes. We know we cannot stop it. We can only feed it so it does not feed on us.” Kalim was almost upon her now. Her eyes jumped to the other villagers in hoods. Familiar faces, twisted by shadows and the moonlight, gazed blankly back at her. She didn’t want to shoot Kalim, but if he didn’t stop...a sudden idea flickered in her head.

“Show me, then.”

Kalim stopped, looking at her. Mia stood up straighter. “Show me your Gitrog.” Kalim stared at her for a long time.

Finally, he took a step back and waved his hand. The other villagers all rushed to the pile of sheep carcasses, carrying them to the bow of the boat and casting them into the water. One loud splash after another broke the stillness of the lake and the quiet of the night. Soon, all that remained was a bloody stain on the wooden deck. All the hooded figures stepped back from the edge. Mia kept her crossbow trained on Kalim, walking with her back to the edge of the boat until she could look off one side toward the bow. She saw an inky patch of water spread, the blood from the sheep staining the water. A few bubbles floated to the surface, then stillness resumed.

A tense silence ticked by as everyone on the ship watched the placid waters.

“Nothing,” whispered Mia. “There’s nothing there.”

She turned to the villagers on the boat. “Do you all see now? There’s no such thing as the—”

A sudden burst of water and roar of sound cut Mia’s tirade short. The horrific sound of the crunching of bones rang out across the water, and hooded villagers scrambled and shoved their way toward the back of the boat. Mia pushed her way through the terrified crowd, rushing to the bow to see what happened.

The water churned and roiled a short distance from the boat. Mia squinted her eyes in the moonlight, looking for what was out there. As the water settled, she saw it. The monster. The Gitrog.

She scoffed.

“That? That’s it? That’s the Gitrog?” She looked back at the villagers huddled on the other end of the boat. “It’s...it’s just a giant frog.”

Veryl ran up to her, pushing back his hood. He grabbed her shoulders before she could swing her crossbow up and shook her violently, a look of sheer terror in his eyes.



Art by David Gaillet

“You don’t understand, Mia! If it isn’t satisfied by the sheep, then we are all—”

Mia never did get to find out what they all were. At that moment, Veryl went flying backward off the ship, screaming through the air, and disappeared with a splash into the water. Mia didn’t understand what happened—until she saw the Gitrog open its mouth again and a dark shape lash out and fly at the ship. She dove for the deck as the thing whizzed overhead, striking the mast and knocking shards of wood clean off the boat. As villagers screamed and cried, Mia realized—that thing *was its tongue*.

Another loud crack boomed out as the Gitrog struck again, punching a chunk out of the mast this time. As the Gitrog pulled its tongue back, Mia sprang up from the deck and took aim with her crossbow. Just as she pulled the trigger, however, a sudden force hit her from behind and she fell back to the deck, hard.

She turned around and saw a hooded figure clinging to her legs. “What are you doing!” she cried, squirming against his grasp.

“You must not anger the Gitrog! We cannot bear its wrath!” The hood had flopped down in the struggle, and Mia saw the village baker clinging tighter to her legs, his voice squeaking as he shouted.

“Too late for that,” Mia grunted, pulling one leg loose. She kicked hard, hitting the baker square in the nose, her boot producing an audible crunch. The baker let go and Mia rolled away, scrambling to her feet.

“The sheep no longer satisfy it!” She looked back to the cluster of hooded villagers crying out.

“It wants more.”

“Feed it the girl!”

“What did you just say?” She stared at the woman who shouted the last thing. It was the blacksmith’s wife, Sarah, who had once baked her cookies for her birthday.

“Kill her! A sacrifice to the Gitrog!” Sarah let out a chilling scream and rushed towards Mia, drawing a mean-looking knife. With a shout, several others followed suit, hoisting their makeshift weapons. Mia

scrambled backward, loading a new bolt into her crossbow as the crazed villagers descended on her. Sarah slashed at Mia's face, coming closer with each swing, when another battering from the Gitrog's tongue swatted her and two others overboard.

Screams rang out, cut short by sudden gurgles and muffled pleas for help. In the chaos, another pair of hands grasped her throat from behind, squeezing hard. Mia struck out blindly with an elbow. The grip loosened and she turned around and fired blindly into the stomach of her assailant.

The man fell back, and Mia caught sight of familiar blue eyes—*Kyle, the cobbler's apprentice*—just before another hooded figure charged her, his hood down—*Terrance, Veryl's younger brother*. Mia reached for another bolt, but he was on her, an actual sword in hand, swinging wildly. Mia stumbled back and fell, the tip of the sword grazing her shoulder and drawing blood. Terrance drew back for a killing stroke—and was knocked across the back of the head by another hooded figure wielding a club. As Terrance slumped to the deck, Mia finally loaded a bolt. She leveled the crossbow to the club-wielding figure's face, finger on the trigger.

"Wait! Mia, it's me!" The figure threw back his hood, and Mia cried out.

"Wilbur! What is—"

"I'm so sorry. Everything got out of hand. We were just trying to keep the village safe, but when they started stealing your sheep—"

Another loud crash resounded behind them as the Gitrog's tongue swung by.

"So you've seen it before this?"

Wilbur shook his head. "Only bubbles."

A burst of splinters rained down on the pair. They looked up—just in time to see the Gitrog's tongue retract, leaving a massive hole in the mast. With a slow, creaking groan, the mast wobbled, leaned, and finally snapped and toppled over, smashing against the side of the boat and into the water.

"Tell me more later." Mia grabbed his hand, fired the crossbow at another villager charging toward them with a pitchfork—*Verna, flower girl*—and ran for the aft of the boat.

"Where are we going?" Wilbur shouted.

"I—I don't know!" Mia looked out at the chaos surrounding her. With each swing of the Gitrog's tongue, more villagers were knocked into the water or grabbed and swallowed whole. Some just cowered in the boat, trying to hide. A few had dived into the water and were now trying to swim away. Mia considered jumping overboard as well—until she saw one swimmer (*Elder Ethan's son*) disappear beneath the water, leaving nothing but a trail of bubbles in his wake.



Art by James Paick

“There’s nowhere to run.” Mia and Wilbur spun around, looking at the speaker. Kalim stood before them, his gaze locked onto Mia.

“Dad! What do we do? This...this is insanity!” Wilbur still held tightly onto Mia’s hand, and even in all the mayhem, Mia could feel his pulse throbbing through his fingers.

“Your dad’s right,” Mia said, looking at Wilbur with sudden clarity. “We can’t outrun it. We have to try to kill it.” Mia let go of Wilbur’s hand and raised her crossbow, drawing one of her bolts as she looked back to Kalim. “That’s our only hope now.”

To her surprise, Kalim laughed.

“You are a fool. You cannot kill the Gitrog. There is only one thing to do.” Kalim’s eyes narrowed. “Sacrifice.”

Kalim lunged forward, fishing knife suddenly drawn and in his hand, swinging straight for Mia’s throat. Mia stumbled back, surprised, falling to the deck and barely dodging the assault. She scrambled back as Kalim flipped the knife in his hand into an icepick grip and drove it down toward her. Mia rolled out of the way of a second strike and fired her crossbow wildly. The bolt lodged into Kalim’s shoulder on a lucky shot—but he seemed not to notice, slashing again at Mia’s face—just as Wilbur tackled Kalim to the ground.

Mia loaded a new bolt and aimed it at the two struggling on the deck, unable to get a clean shot. Just then, the ship lurched to port with a sudden thud. All three turned to look at the source of the sound. Immediately, Kalim and Wilbur pushed off each other, scrambling to stand while Mia swung her crossbow around, backing up as fast as she could.

The Gitrog lumbered forward onto the ship, its webbed limbs heaving its body over the side of the boat and plopping wetly on the deck. Kalim, Wilbur, and Mia stood frozen and staring. The Gitrog gazed back at them with blank, dead eyes. With lightning speed, Kalim reached out and grabbed Mia, flicking the knife against her throat and holding her body to him in a bear grip.

“Oh great Gitrog! I offer this girl in sacrifice to you! Eat, and forgive this village of its sins, and slumber so we may live in peace!”

He's mad. Mia pushed against his hands, but Kalim's grip was too strong. Wilbur was shouting something, but all Mia could see was Kalim raising his hand, the dagger flashing in the torchlight.

Thwap! The Gitrog's tongue suddenly lashed out and smashed straight into Kalim's face. The dagger flew out of his hand in surprise as he let go of Mia, both hands grabbing onto the tongue. The Gitrog pulled, and Mia was knocked into the ground as Kalim flew forward, his yells muted by the monstrous tongue wrapping around his head. Mia scrambled up, letting loose one, two, three bolts into the Gitrog as it dragged Kalim along the ground. The beast didn't even flinch as the bolts were buried into its flesh, drawing its tongue slowly back. Mia watched in horror as Kalim's head disappeared into its gullet, watched as his feet kicked desperately once, twice, then no more as the Gitrog's maw closed down. Another swallow, and Kalim's feet disappeared as well.

Mia was vaguely aware that Wilbur was shouting as she turned to again grab his hand. She tossed her crossbow down as she ran to the aft of the boat, stopping only to knock over a torch onto the deck. As flames bloomed, she saw the Gitrog slowly waddle toward them, stopping to devour the villagers huddling behind barrels. She watched as it scooped up the unconscious form of Lehren. She watched as it lethargically plodded through the flames, coming slowly their way.

Only then did Mia snap back to herself. She turned forward and without a pause dove into the icy water, dragging Wilbur with her.

The two swam hard, pushed beyond endurance by terror and adrenaline. Slowly, the boat became nothing but a bright ember fading in the fog. The two swam, the freezing water a thousand needles stabbing into skin, toes and fingers falling numb, then hands, then bodies as they flailed back toward the shore. Mia was certain the Gitrog would find them at any moment, would drag them under, would swallow them whole.

Somehow, they made it back onto land.

The two crawled from the water. Wilbur flopped down, face-first in the pebbles, shivering. Mia forced herself to sit and tried to think. They needed to make it back to her cabin. Back to warmth. Otherwise the cold would kill them before the Gitrog could. Then, the moment they were dry and warm...they would leave. Flee the village. Leave it all behind. Run anywhere else. Face down a thousand vampires, or werewolves, or ghouls. Anywhere without the Gitrog.

A wet *plop* sounded from behind Mia.

She sat, frozen.

Another *plop*.

She needed to stand. Needed to see. Needed to run.

But she could do none of those things.

Another *plop*, and suddenly Wilbur was dragging her to her feet, pulling her away. The two didn't make it far before they collapsed on the stones. Mia's muscles screamed. The adrenaline had worn away, leaving nothing but stiff bodies locked with terror. Slowly, she rolled over.

The Gitrog loomed over her, its girth taking up all her vision. It gazed down at her, its eyes two black, fathomless pits, empty of emotion, empty of thought. Mia stared into its eyes and saw...nothing. Wilbur was pulling her to her feet again, yelling something about running, but Mia couldn't hear him. A low drone echoed in her skull, growing in volume, as she fell into the endless hole of the Gitrog's gaze. She fell, tumbling through oozing shadows, fell through the crevices of her mind, collapsed through the

membranes into the spongy slime of delirium, cocooned by a strange warmth seeping into her bones and chasing away the pesky cold of doubt and fear and uncertainty. She knew, knew everything now. She saw truth in its blackest form, the clarity of a thousand lifetimes compressed into one moment.

She turned to Wilbur, who was still tugging at her arm. She saw his lips move, trembling blue, saying something to the Gitrog, begging, pleading. She reached a tender hand to his cheek, stopping his babbling. He did not see. He could not hear. He did not know yet. Wilbur turned, his frantic eyes locking with Mia as the Gitrog loomed over them. How green they were, two crystal clear pools, currently swimming with tears. Mia could see herself in them, in their fractured, speckled surface. She smiled, and for a second, Wilbur seemed to calm a little. She saw trust and faith in his eyes, and she smiled as she caressed his cheek, smiled as she ran her fingers through his sandy hair, smiled as she slid her dagger out of its sheath and through his rib cage in one smooth motion.

She heard him then, finally surfaced from the drone in her skull to hear his gasp of surprise, his breath turning from the ragged pant of hypothermia to one of pain and shock. Mia smiled softly and put a finger to his lips, sliding the dagger out, then back in again, this time through his abdomen. She smiled as Wilbur slumped against her, smiled as he whispered her name weakly. She whispered quietly in his ear.

“All hail the Gitrog,” She breathed more than spoke. She put her ear to Wilbur’s chest, listening as his pulse slowed and stopped. She looked up at the Gitrog, bowing her head in supplication.

“All is sacrifice.”

The Gitrog gazed down at Mia. Then, slowly, it opened its maw, and a monstrous tongue lapped out, grasping the body of the broken boy beside her. Mia sat in her position, a wide grin on her face, as the slurp and crackle of bone and blood and organs sloshed over her. She smiled as the wet sounds of webbed feet plodding against stones echoed away from her. Smiled until all was still again, the chill fog pierced by the now-rising morning sun. Then she rose, still smiling, stumbling away from the shore.

When spring broke that year and the snows finally melted, a young apprentice rode his horse through the pass, into a sleepy little fishing village near Lake Zhava. He carried with him a satchel of letters, many long overdue, written before the first snowfalls of the winter before. He did not think too much of the windows and doors snapping shut as he rode by; many small hamlets had fearful or mistrusting townsfolk, especially after a harsh season. He also noticed but didn’t think much of how many empty homes there seemed to be, letters delivered to properties clearly abandoned.

His final letter carried him to a small cabin on the hill. As he rode up, he couldn’t help but notice a dilapidated pen of some sort rotting nearby. He feared he would find yet another empty home, until he noticed the small wisps of smoke coming from the chimney. He knocked on the door, and a wild-eyed girl answered. She seemed uninterested in the post, even unimpressed by the letter that came from the Skiltfolk of Drunau. However, her eyes lit up when he mentioned the lake, and she invited him in to stay for the night, offering to feed him and give him rest, and even to take him onto the lake if he wished. The boy blushed and agreed, as he had always been curious of boats and the water. He thanked her for her kindness.

Mia smiled.



The Gitrog Monster | Art by Jason Kang