
Dead End

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From set *Duskmourn: House of Horror*
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Morning broke, the lesser sun rising lonely in the western sky and doing what little it could to beat back the ever-present gloom. The greater sun had been gone for months, swallowed up by that terrible ... *thing* ... that had sprouted from the city. According to the ones who'd managed to escape the city's grasp, it had been a house in the beginning, as simple and unnatural as any other. It had been possessed of walls, ceilings, windows, a roof. Perhaps it was still a house, somewhere within the nightmare tangle of tendrils and bulges that it had become. Perhaps it still had all those pieces, all those things that a person of the city would look at and say "house." But if that was the case, House no longer kept them on display.

Oh, House had windows, glass eyes that opened and closed along the bulk of it, seeming to watch the narrow protectorate remaining from the natural world. And it had walls, for what is a wall but a distinction between one thing and another? A skin is a wall, if looked at from the right direction.

Shevara stood high in one of the ancient, dreaming beech trees, counting windows as they reflected the lesser sun's pale light across the landscape. House watched her in silent, menacing stillness. No one ever saw it move. That was the necessity of the watches. They lost sight of the great edifice at night, when even the signal fires couldn't possibly allow a view from every angle, but during the day, they could trade off their observation spots and their watchtowers, they could keep their eyes open, and they could count the windows set into House's skin, using them to make guesses about what direction it might try to take within the light of day.

It had all come so very quickly. When this all began, a scant handful of years ago, the elves of the Rotrue Wood had viewed it as a sickness of city, born to city, swallowing city for its crimes against the natural world. Surely, the swelling horror they watched from their borders would stop when it had finished consuming its makers. Surely, it would come no closer to the ancient, tangled trees.

And for a time, it had behaved exactly as they expected. It had swallowed city and then grown outward, following roads and rails and highways to richer feeding grounds. The elves of other woods had sent word when House was first seen in their territories, when it covered the mountains, when it consumed the sea. They had warned the elves of the Rotrue, again and again, "You are not safe." House was coming.

One by one, those warnings had ceased, their messengers vanishing from the sky, messages sent out unreturned. The elves of the Rotrue might well be the last yet living outside the walls of House. The thought was a terrible one, and Shevara faltered, almost losing count of the windows. That they might be the last elves in all the world ... it was a horror beyond all consideration, an idea too terrible to bear.

But bear it she must. Bear it they all must. If they were all that remained of the natural world, then they would hold their heads high and remember that life always won, in the end. Death and decay were natural things, and from them, new life would begin. House could not defeat them as long as they clung to the cycle.

It had been a year into what Shevara could only consider the siege, when House had stretched one tall, terrible tower into the sky, a spindly, glass-sided thing taller than any tree had ever grown, piercing the clouds. One tower window had opened wide, so large that it was visible even from the ground, and then it had slammed shut, and the greater sun was gone, leaving the lesser sun to shine alone, as it had never been intended to do.

House was an ever-changing, ever-protean entity. For a time, the greater sun's light had beamed through the tower walls, until gradually the tower had been pulled closer and closer to the ground, absorbing back into the bulk of House. Until finally, one day, the tower was gone, and the greater sun's light was gone as well, and the eternal gloom that was all that remained had fallen over them.

The last refugees of the city had arrived that very day, wounded and winded, limping into the safety of the trees with the few possessions they'd managed to save clutched tightly in their arms. The clan's leadership had been there to meet them, and to explain the terms of sanctuary.

"Whatever blight this is, city brought it on themselves," said the king, his once booming voice hollow and pale from months of terror and privation. Crops didn't grow without the light of the greater sun, and the game of the forest was increasingly underfed and difficult to catch. Resources were running low, and the king ate only after the more vulnerable had been fed. "No machines. None of your clever creations. They aren't allowed among our trees."

Some of the refugees had protested, as they always did. They loved their comforts and the proof of their ingenuity. They loved to feel better than the world around them. Well, look what their love had wrought. The king had held firm, as he always did, and in the end, only a handful had chosen to risk being swallowed by House rather than leave their toys at the forest's edge. The rest had abandoned their forbidden machinery and joined the elves in the fading green, and from them, much had been learned of House, for they were the ones who had survived the longest in its hunting grounds.

It swallowed the world around it like a fungus consumes a piece of ripe fruit, spreading first across the skin and then devouring deeper, until there was nothing left of the original form. Its first incursions were sometimes architectural and strange; a door where no door should be, a window frame tangled in the branches of a tree; a baseboard without a wall. But those specks of House would begin to grow rooms around themselves, and what it surrounded, it possessed.

Other signs were less clear, if no less dangerous. Moths that flew in the middle of the day, wings like brocade or intricate as snowflakes. Human children who appeared out of nowhere without anyone to supervise them, playing at clapping games and skip-rope, their chants filled with menacing cruelties. The children were the worst sign of all, according to the refugees; once you saw the children, House was almost upon you, like an angler viper that couldn't resist flashing its lure at prey already well entangled.

Shevara finished her count, finding the number of windows to be the same as it had been the night before, if somewhat more focused to the north, and descended toward the ground, dropping from branch to branch with ease. The Rotrue might be the last free forest in the world, but it was still a beautiful one. The trees had always blocked most of the light from reaching the ground; the plants which grew there were used to doing so in darkness, shrouded in shadow as they put forth flowers and fruit. And the game might be thin and sparse, but there was enough. Their druids would make sure of it. The forest would provide, as it had always provided, and House, with nothing left to claim, would surely wither into bitter memory.

She was still some branches away from the forest floor when she heard rhythmic, unfamiliar clapping. The hair on the back of her neck stood up, the flesh on her arms drawing itself into hard, uncomfortable

lumps. She shivered and began to move toward the sound, more slowly than before. She was a warrior of the Rotrue. She had a responsibility to her clan.

Peering down, she saw a small circle of human children, five in total, dressed in summer clothing, too light for the current chill, their faces drawn into expressions of serious concentration as they clapped in an intricate pattern, each smacking palms with the two to either side.

"Knock, knock, knock at the hidden door: linebreak It isn't hidden anymore. linebreak It takes its victims, two, three, four. linebreak You can't escape the hidden door."

"Knock, knock, knock on the hungry door. linebreak No point in running anymore. linebreak You'll learn just what it has in store linebreak When you unlock the hungry door ..."

The children. Shevara went cold, the fear becoming an almost physical thing. If the children were here, then House was in the forest. They had missed something. The watch, or the daily patrols of the border, had missed something.

Shevara grabbed the nearest branch, swinging herself higher into the tree, and began to run through the trees, choosing speed over silence. Snapped twigs and rustling leaves marked her progress toward the center of the Rotrue, until she dropped down outside the circle of the elders, falling immediately into a respectful crouch, one knee pressed to good, honest earth, the other providing a rest for her forehead. She supplicated herself before the forest, and only hoped that it would protect her.

"Shevara?" The king's voice, unsure and uneasy. "You bow before me, daughter? What's happened?"

"House." She raised her head. "House is in the forest. I saw the children, playing at their clapping game, in a clearing near the western tree line. We've missed something. House is here."

"House would never dare," he said, offering his hand to pull her from the ground. "We are beloved of the trees, and none of House's city seeds have been carried in this deep."

"We *missed* something," she insisted. "House is here."

"Peace, child. Peace." He sighed. "We'll wait for the other scouts to return and see how many of them have seen House."

"But sire—"

"We wait."



Art by: Josu Hernaiz

He pulled her with him into the circle, and she sat, sullen in the knowledge that she had done her duty and been rewarded with idleness when she knew what she'd seen. The tangled undergrowth around her seemed suddenly full of shapes she couldn't explain—the outline of a door, the four-paneled sharpness of a window. Shuddering, she wrapped her arms around herself and looked away.

One by one, the other scouts returned. None of them had seen anything like she reported. All were jumpy, flinching and looking behind themselves as they gathered, rubbing their arms like they were chasing away a chill. One young hunter paused near Shevara, and she leaned toward him, asking, “Are you *sure* you didn't see anything?”

He looked at her with the moon-wide eyes of a frightened colt and hurried away to stand with the others.

The king walked back toward her, a regretful expression on his face. “Shevara ...”

“I know what I saw!” She stood as she spoke, as if height would lend her authority. “House is *here* !”

“House will never be here,” he said. “We have strong trees to protect us, and no taint of city beneath our boughs. Calm yourself, lest you speak your nightmares into being.”

There would be no understanding here. Shevara clenched her fists and turned her face away before she could disrespect her king and thus shame herself further than she already had.

The daytime scouts were at their posts. The dawn scouts were all recalled. As they began to make their reports of the night she slipped away, into the tangled brush. She knew what she had seen. She knew what was coming. But no one would *listen* .

After she had wandered a while, she saw them, another circle of unattended human children, their faces turned toward the dim sunlight filtering through the trees, eyes closed and hands clapping fast enough to become a blur.

“There used to be a house next door. linebreak There's not a house there anymore. linebreak Duskmourn got restless, reaching out, linebreak It followed fear, it followed doubt. linebreak It ate that house up,

nails and all. It ate the windows and the walls. It ate the roof—when it was through, It bared its teeth and ate me, too. And soon the House will swallow you.

On the final word, they opened their eyes as one and turned toward Shevara, standing silent among the trees. She shied away, then turned and ran as the sound of clapping began again.

She returned to the circle of elders to find it silent and still, the hunters and the king sitting slumped with eyes closed and moths alighting in their hair. She ran to the king, frantically slapping the moths away, until they were gone and he clutched her arms, raising his head.

“Shevara?” he asked, sounding baffled. “What’s—?”

“House is here,” she said, resignation choking her. She gestured to the motionless hunters around them, the moths still resting in their hair. “It’s too late. We were the last forest in the world, and we lost. The Rotrue is fallen.”

The king straightened, turning her so that her back was to his chest, and put his arms around her waist, holding her close as the delicate filigree of silver-tinted wood that had started growing up from the trees around them wove together in a spire overhead, the spaces between vines already beginning to fill in with glass panes as House constructed its conservatory, with the last of the elves inside. Sunlight through the glass would create an artificial summer; winter would never come. The cycle was broken, and so the world had lost, and House had won.

The walls grew strong. The glass grew thick. The elves of the Rotrue joined the other survivors, scrambling to survive inside the walls of House, and House was the world, and the world was held inside those halls, those rooms, like a cruel and clutching hand.

No one noticed on the day when House took the lesser sun.

There was no one left outside to see.