



DUSK IS COMING

JAMES  HOCKLEY

Dusk is Coming

A Tiny Tale of Godslost

James Hockley

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Dusk is Coming

1,571 years after the Fall of the Gods

Lidye

“I don’t want to!” The little git hammered at her with his hands, pounding away. Where had he learned that? Lidye manhandled him, grabbing him about the middle and spinning him away from her, his fists still flailing. She wrestled him to the hay-packed bed, but he was a wriggly customer. He twisted himself onto his back, pummelling once more.

She breathed in deep and bared her teeth. Did bedtime really have to be this tough? Her son caught her on the arm and she stepped back, yelping. He climbed off the bed, defiant.

“I don’t want to.”

“It’s not about what you want.”

It didn’t work, so she grabbed him by the scruff only for him to kick back. The little... She hated fighting with her children: it just wasn’t quite right, and tore at her every time it happened. But her son really was making this hard. Eventually she pinned his arms in place and pulled the woollen sheet over him using her teeth. Fruitless. His two sisters were jumping about on their bed, squealing and egging their big brother on. She was well and truly outnumbered.

“What’s going on here?”

Oh, thank the *Father*! She released her beloved son, getting well out of the way of him, and turned to her husband. Her dear husband. Wulfen was a big man, and he commanded the room instantly. The girls dropped to their mattress and feigned innocence. Her husband had that effect.

He was sweaty where he’d been working outside, chopping wood for the fire this evening. The view out of the window showed a clear sky, and that meant that it would be a cold one. They would need a fire tonight. First things first though: get the little ones into bed.

“And what is going here?”

She deflated, and sighed. Wulfen was here, and with his assistance, the battle was won. He was a commanding presence; trunk-like arms, matching legs, and a neck that shamed the Columns of Everida. He was tanned where he worked outside, and he looked every bit the man of the land that he was. Even Undari, their challenging son, worshipped the ground that Wulfen walked upon.

She sniffed and rubbed her arms. “Undari here has been boldly claiming that he won’t be going to bed. He seems to think he has a choice.” She pushed the words out unwaveringly, but the fight had got to her and her tone cracked. She sniffed again and shook herself right. They were only children, after all.

Her son looked rightly sheepish. “No ma, I was just playing.”

The bruises that were already flourishing were hardly playful, but she wouldn’t spite her son. He was just doing what all nine-year-olds would do, wasn’t he? She would like to compare experiences, but one look through the crudely hacked window reinforced their isolation. They were a long way from anything.

“But now is not the time for play, is it Undari?” She stared at her son, daring him to challenge. He didn’t, and she almost cried. Almost. Instead, she breathed in. It had been a tough day, but now her husband was here and it was all fine. She linked arms with him and he blew out his chest.

“No! Definitely not the time for play. Do you know what time it is?”

Undari pulled his knees up and hugged them tight. He looked about the room – taking in the mud caked wattle; the rickety twig hewn furniture; the dusty earthen floor – and then looked back at them. It was tough making a living out here in deepest Centro, let alone a house, and her husband had done a good job. They had a livelihood, they had freedom, and they had everything their own. Undari disagreed, which was a regular source of friction.

Mother Bright – the life-giver – sank further, and the darkness of the wilderness caught up with her. She only rarely now craved the bustle of the city – of her past – but now was one of those moments. They were alone out here in everything they did, and every now and then that weighed heavy. She stared out of the window, taking in the spectacular sight of *Mother’s* path over the horizon. Shadows stretched from the west, broken only by the

twinkle of distant towns, and she shook herself right. Not now. Her husband pulled away from her, and she smiled. Thank the *Father* he was here to help.

The girls leaned over the crude bed-end, waiting on the telling, eyes twinkling. Even Undari smiled, and cocked his head.

“What time is it, Father?”

“It is the time to cower; the time to hide; the time to creep into bed. For Dusk is coming to get you!” He shouted the last bit, and leapt in Undari’s direction. Their son jolted, even despite the repeated telling. In fact, Undari was already drawing his bedsheet instinctively up. How was it that easy?

“What does the Dusk want, Father?”

Her husband was absolutely fantastic with the telling.

“It wants you!” He mimicked claws stretching for Undari, then he swung around to the girls. “And you! And you. Dusk does not discriminate. It wants all children equally.”

“Why?” The sheet was over her son’s knees.

“Because long ago there was a great battle between the ancient people of this world. In those days, many thousands of years ago, the world was different and *Mother Bright* was permanent. But an evil man grew jealous of her authority, and he climbed the highest mountain to try and take her down. He wanted to keep her for himself. That man was called Kunati.”

The children were entranced. Why could she not tell this story like her husband could? She moved over to the girls, and eased them into bed, their attention still fixed on Wulfen’s telling. *Mother* dipped over the mountains, and the room grew noticeably colder. It added to the telling.

Undari leaned forward. “Did Kunati succeed?”

Her husband dropped to his knees and pushed their son gently back, tucking him in. His head swung and his eyes darted between the boy and the two girls.

“Do you see *Mother Bright* every day of your life?”

Undari nodded quickly, and the girls copied.

“Then there is your answer. But Kunati did not fail completely. He came close to pulling *Mother Bright* from the sky, but he was met on the mountain by one of the *Father’s* loyal children – an ancient guardian who goes by the name of Uts. Uts and Kunati fought for a long time on the tallest mountain of the Central Belt, and as Kunati clawed at *Mother*, Uts

fought back and knocked her over the horizon; out of the reach of Kunati. All went dark, and the night was born.”

The three children were now tucked in. How easy her husband made it seem! She came up behind him and laid a gentle hand on the small of his back. He twitched subtly, but stayed focused on the telling. His audience was under a spell.

Their eldest girl, Niella, shuffled in bed. “Did Kunati get tired when it went dark?”

Wulfen stalked across the room, stomping over the dusty earth like some demon. “No, he didn’t. If anything, he grew more powerful. With *Mother* gone, his followers, who were creatures of shadow, emerged from the sheltered places of the world. They came out and they swarmed over the continent, destroying all before them. Everything they touched turned to dust, and they drained the living of their very souls. Some of the ancient people fought back, and most died, but the sensible of the world found places to hide, and stayed there. The whole world was changed; it was dark and it was cruel; and yet, still Kunati battled with Uts. It was a mighty fight indeed.”

It was only at this point that she recognised the brutality of the tale, especially for a children’s fairy tale. They were shady suggestions – dark; cruel; death – but her bone-weariness suppressed any concern. She would do anything to get the little darlings to sleep.

Her husband stood up. “The stories say that Uts almost failed in his fight. They say that Kunati’s onslaught was so ferocious that a gash was carved from the mountains themselves, and you can still see that damage to this day. But Uts did not give up in the face of this onslaught, and as the shadow creatures stared up from the devastated world below, Uts pulled the very last breath from his lungs. He fought on, against stacking odds, doomed to fail. Doomed to fail. Kunati would be beaten by no mortal.”

Undari sat up. “Did Uts die?”

Her husband smiled, and the effect was magnificent. “He did die, but not that day. You see, the night came when *Mother* was thrown over the horizon, the first night that this world has ever known. But what do we know of night?”

The three children sat bolt upright, grinning. “Night comes to an end!”

“Exactly. And night did come to an end. To Kunati’s horror, *Mother Bright* climbed back over the eastern horizon and revealed herself to the world. As brightness spread across the continent, the shadows retreated, and with that shift, Uts was renewed. The survivors of the world crawled out from their hiding places and they offered their support to their champion. At this, Uts prevailed.

“Kunati wilted under the gaze of the god he had tried to dethrone, and he was picked up by Uts and cast into the sky. It is in the sky that Kunati remains – a red twinkling star that looks jealously down upon us – and it is in the sky that he will remain.” With that conclusion, his muscular arm swept towards the window and pointed out the disc of red light. True darkness was closing in, and the star known as the *Stranger* burned in the sky. It was cold, and she wrapped her arms about herself.

“But that is just a story, Papa. Kunati was expelled, and now we are all safe.”

Wulfen stalked again. “That’s where you’re wrong, my boy.” With this he kissed Undari on the forehead and pushed him gently back onto the mattress. “Kunati looks down upon us, but clever demon as he is, he is always scheming. And what else is now different about the world?”

Niella squeaked. “*Mother Bright* still circles the world.”

“Exactly!” Wulfen stalked to the girls, a demon once more. “*Mother* arrives every day, but she also departs. And with her departure, the darkness arrives. All those followers of Kunati are still here, and they are waiting, biding their time. And they are snatching. They are stealing from the world.”

This was the hardest bit, but then this was what kept the children in bed.

“Stealing what, Pa?”

“Stealing children, like you! And you. And you! They are looking for children to turn to their side, children of the light that they can darken. Children they can enslave.” He waited, and a sudden shrill wind added to his telling. “Dusk is coming to get you.”

The little darlings were now all but cowering beneath their sheets, fear visible on the face of their youngest, Ari. The routine was almost done.

“What do they want with us, Papa?”

Her husband smiled, and looked almost cruel with the telling. “You, children, are the future of this world. Kunati wants to steal the future.”

The wind was picking up, whistling violently across the wide plains of Centro. She was glad her husband had chopped some wood – they would need it. Her children nestled down into bed, pulling blankets tight, warding against the cold. Succumbing. She moved about the room and blew out the candles. She picked up the candle closest to the door and Wulfen kissed Undari on the head. Her arm ached where she'd fought him, but in that moment she smiled. He was her son.

Wulfen came over and turned to the room. Just one last time. This was the bedtime law.

“Dusk is coming to get you. Stay hidden.”

She blew out the candle and then they were free, in the anteroom that served as access to the bedrooms as-well as the home for their chickens. She put her arms around her husband and pulled him tight. She loved the big bugger and reached up with her lips, standing on tiptoe. In fact, in that moment she was tempted to lead him to straight to the bedroom, there and then. But her stomach rumbled and food beckoned. Bed would be nice, but it would be nicer on a full stomach.

“Let’s eat.” She winked and got another smile from her rugged man. Then she turned to the door of the living area and noted the inviting glow from the room. A fire was already going and she shivered with delight. There was a tempting aroma, too, so she took her husband’s hands and led him to his meal.

She looked into his dark eyes and smiled. “What would we do without you and your story?”

He laughed gruffly. “I don’t know. It’s amazing the bloody thing still works at all. You can’t tell that one too often.”

They entered the living area, roaring fire and all, and she instantly froze. An old man stared stonily at her, a terrible crazy in his eyes. Her husband stepped in behind her, and the old man sniffed, then cocked his head. He showed brown and broken teeth.

“You tell that story too often.”

Her blood boiled. “What’s he doing here?”

“He’s my father.” *Bloody Brother* – she wished her damned husband would tell her before bringing this old fool back with him.

“What’s that got to do with it?”

Her husband just pushed past.

It was amazing how quickly her mood had fouled. Her father-in-law had been incessantly at her side for many of the years that her husband had served in the People's Army, and it was amazing how badly that experience grated. It wasn't like he was a bad grandfather – quite the opposite in fact, he was fabulous with the kids – but it was his morbid state of mind which really riled her. Being around the man was just damned unpleasant.

“You haven't answered. What's he doing here?”

“He has a right to see the children.”

“But the children are in bed.” Only silence. He meant for the old man to stay over.

“Hello Lidye. It's good to see you.”

She exhaled noisily, not caring what the old codger read into it. He was well aware of her feelings.

“Hello Wulfen.” That was annoying too. Who gave their son the same name?

The old man, who had a smooth pate like an egg and a lone wisp of grey hair around the circumference, turned to her husband. Wulfen Junior.

“Wulf. You use that story too often.”

Not that again. That was probably the most annoying thing of all; this old man's preposterous caution of that children's fairy tale. It was the only bedtime tool they had, so stuff the old git. Did he wish suffering upon them?

“Not this, Pa. You said you'd try.”

The stubborn old man straightened, a scowl on his face. “I am trying, but I feel I must warn you again. You should not use that story too much.”

“Why not? You used it almost every night of my childhood.”

The old bugger spat. “Well, I made a mistake.”

“And I'm happy to make the same mistake. Now, shall we eat?”

Ugh. Now she wasn't hungry at all. Not in the company of this old fool. Perhaps she could take her food to her own space? No, she couldn't. Her husband was wound up by this fool as much as she was, so they should be united. She sighed and went to the pot which had already been warmed through. It did smell good, but not enough to slake her poor mood.

It was strange, though. When she'd met her husband, Junior and Senior were near-inseparable, the son worshipping the father almost like a god. But something happened very abruptly that changed all that. And it wasn't

something in her husband either, even though he'd been off in the war-torn Desolation. No, it was a change in the father. Wulfen Senior turned very suddenly into something angry, fearful and unlikeable. He had been the same man ever since, preaching random snippets of questionable wisdom to anyone who would listen. But no-one would listen, and the old bastard grew even more animated. It was something of a vicious cycle.

And yet he was family. They must endure.

Senior nodded gruffly and the debate on the fairy-tale ended. When he had his earthen pot of soup in one hand, and a hunk of wholemeal bread in the other, his concentration shifted, and the silence was like freedom. Of sorts. The old man was appreciative at the very least. The soup juice was dripping from his silvery beard.

Her own soup scolded the top of her mouth, but once she'd got past that, it was actually quite tasty too. It was remarkable given what had gone into the mixture. Who would have thought that pig's trotters could offer so much flavour? It was just a shame they offered precious little meat.

"So, Wulfen. What brings you here?" They were stuck together for the night, so she might as well be civil.

Those ashen eyes turned upon her. "A need to stop you telling that damned story." She needn't have bothered.

Her husband shifted beside her. "What are you? The fairy-tale marshal? It's a bloody story."

"How often has that been said in this forsaken world? But think on this, son: all stories have their roots in reality. Think on this story that you tell your children, and think on which particular aspect you would accept as truth."

There was only an eerie wind-filled silence, and it had gotten mighty dark. The cosmos was splayed out across the heavens, startling and daunting in equal measures. The candles in their living room flickered and wilted under the weight of the sky, and it was at times like this that she missed the claustrophobic sensation of a city. Amongst people. Oh, how she missed people.

"See, can't think on it, can you?" The old codger was not giving up.

In a brief break of the wind, a faint impact sounded – maybe a horse's hoof? But no, it must have been her imagination.

She swallowed her soup and pointed her spoon at Senior. “None of that story is true.”

The old man sighed and shook his head, returning to the sanctity of his soup. Perhaps this was a rare occasion that his fight could be smothered. She smiled at her father-in-law. It was time to attack.

“Well, you obviously think differently. What do you think?”

He stared at her with narrowed eyes, probing. That was fair enough. She rarely lent him an ear these days, so he had a right to be suspicious.

“I think it is all true.” She laughed. It was more like a grunt.

“And why do you think that?”

“Because I have read first-hand accounts that vouch for it.”

It was entirely ludicrous, of course it was, but a tiny part of her was intrigued. “First-hand accounts. From whom?”

The old man smiled, and revealed his poor dental condition. His canines were still there, rotten and stained, but two whole incisors were missing from the right side of his jaw. He didn’t seem to care.

“Uts.”

The wind crashed down on the roof, and in the following lull, there was another sound – the clink of metal on metal. She stretched herself, straining towards the window, but there was nothing more. Her mind must be playing tricks on her. Either that or she was already half-asleep. Now, where was she? Ah yes – mocking her father-in-law.

“Uts is dead.”

“Then you admit that he lived.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I mean that even if he did live, it was so long ago that any record of his writing would be destroyed.” The old man seemed joyed at the direction of travel. She had become the ear he never earned.

“But that’s where you’re wrong.” He placed his soup down, spilling some of the liquid onto the table without a care. Then he dug about an old bag and eventually triumphed, pulling out a tatty old article. It was a leather-bound journal, very old. He opened it, and the pages were little more than cracking parchment, yellowed almost to the point of being illegible. As it turned out, the scrawl on the pages was entirely illegible. It could barely be a language.

Her husband sighed and shook his head. “Not this, Pa.”

“Yes this! It is the key.”

She took the old tattered document and delicately flicked through the pages. Nothing was decipherable. “I can’t read this.”

“No? Then you must trust me when I say that I can.”

She rolled her eyes. “Who else can read it?”

The writing – and that over dignified the scrawl – appeared to be constructed of only short lines, long lines, and dots. Absolute rubbish. She’d had a good education in her time in the city – how had she ended up here? – and nothing she had come across looked anything like this.

Her father-in-law confirmed her suspicions. “No-one that I have met, but I have read it. I had a translating tool.”

“Oh. And where is that tool?”

He hung his head; the last resignation of the crazy. “It is lost.”

She put her own head in her hands, and her jewellery clinked. No! She wore no jewellery. At least she didn’t these days. There it was again; only faint, but there. Distinct. There was also a snort, and that definitely wasn’t her mind playing tricks.

She turned to her husband. “Have you left your horses outside?”

Her husband looked quizzically at her. She turned back to Senior, but he shrugged.

“I rode with Wulf.”

Her husband furrowed brow, straining towards the window, but then perked up. The sound of metal on metal was now more obvious, and there was even the sound of hooves pawing at the dusty ground. Then another snort, and it was certain. There was a horse out there, and it didn’t belong to anyone in the room. They kept their sole horse locked in a stable out the back.

“Bloody bandits.”

Her husband ground his teeth and clenched his fists, his military habits taking over. Bandits out here were rare, but still too frequent. It was fortunate that her husband was more than capable of handling a bunch of opportunistic scavengers.

“Be careful.”

“The bastards aren’t worthy of my care.” He rolled his shoulders, flexing his arms, and then he was up. He stepped to the door and picked up the pile-

hammer, a fearsome tool that embedded fence posts in the ground. He pushed the creaky door open.

“Don’t go, son. Dusk is coming.”

He turned and scowled at his father. “Dusk has been and gone. Now, let me give them what’s coming.”

And he was gone. He was through the door, wood creaking into place behind him. The sound of the horse’s hooves was clear, as were the footsteps of her husband. A part of her was charged by the approaching conflict, but only a part. This was a more than annual occurrence. Once a year at the very least.

And she was left with Wulfen, the old fret. He absently fingered his crusty old journal, not bothered about the crisp corners which were breaking in his equally dry and cracked hands. She should probe the silence between them. There was little else to do.

“What are you afraid of, Wulfen?”

The old man leaned forward, and he turned his stony eyes on her. The look was familiar, but it was also different. Usually there was frustration in him, anger, and a persistent desire to be taken seriously. But here and now, those reactive layers had been stripped away, leaving only the core of the old man’s soul. And what was left was simple, and terrifying. It was fear.

“I’m afraid of the second coming.”

“What second coming?”

“The second coming of Dusk.”

He was persistent, that was for certain. She sighed and wiped her brow. Outside, her husband was applying the same persistence to the bandits.

“I suggest you move along quickly!”

But the bandits didn’t respond. Her husband thumped the pile-hammer into the ground, but still no reaction other than the whinny of a horse. It sounded like a big horse.

“Look here, I am a corporal of the People’s Army, and I strongly suggest you get off my land!” There would be blood soon – there sometimes was – and she shuddered. She ignored her husband’s rising voice, and probed her father-in-law further.

“Dusk is just a children’s story. What is there to be afraid of?”

A tense moment filled both the conflict outside, and the interrogation within. The elder Wulfen stared at her, eyes of stone. His lips quivered and

his hand shook.

“This is what I’m afraid of.”

He was spouting the crazy again, wasn’t he? But then she jolted. The rattling roar grew out of the darkest night, splitting her head, trembling tears from her eyes. She squealed involuntarily. The bandits were not bandits at all.

“There is no People’s Army. Will you comply?” When it spoke, it was with a gravelly quality that was frictional on the soul.

Her jaw dropped, and she looked back at Senior. For the first time since she was nine years old, she cowered at the story.

“Dusk is coming to get you.”

2

Wulfen the Senior

It was here. It was here. Wulfen shivered in his old skin, wobbling where he wouldn't have done if he was still a young man. What could he do? Nothing. He was too frail. Even his son didn't stand a chance. He told that story too often.

In a queer way, he was actually pleased. He had suffered the mocking eyes of the ignorant for too long. It was time for his redemption, whatever the price. He sniffed and looked at the dusty floor.

"What is it?" His daughter-in-law's face had morphed. It was now painted with horror. He leaned forward, rotating his neck, smoothing away the pains of age, and stared firmly across the room. He held up the cracked volume at eye level, and shook it violently.

"The Second Coming. It is here."

He dropped the journal to the floor and it kicked up dust. Then he stamped on it, grinding the impossibly delicate old pages into the dirt. There was no need for the invaluable volume anymore. No-one had taken notice.

"But it's a story."

A theatrical pause and the sound of his heart crashed against his ears. But it wasn't cowardice; not at all. This was the end. At least he'd had the foresight to see it coming.

"Does that sound like a story to you?"

His son, Wulfen Junior, was not cowed yet. "Look, I don't know who or what you are, but this is my land and my house. You are not welcome." His voice had cracked.

Lidye was creeping towards the window, on her hands and knees, shivering. He should warn her against looking. It would do no good.

“Do you comply?” The stubborn response had the same gravelly quality. It was earthen, but also other-worldly.

“Comply with what? You have no right here.”

His son’s show of confidence was remarkable if truth be told; but it was also useless. He swallowed a lump in his throat and looked back at the ground. A father should never outlive his offspring.

The next moments were chaos, and he rocked back and forth. What was about to happen would only drive him insane, so he retreated into his head. Why had no-one listened?

He had told the story of Dusk as a young man, and as a father to young children. After all, everyone used the story because it was so effective. It had been part of his childhood, and the terror had always crept upon him when his father relayed the familiar words: ‘Dusk is coming to get you.’ And even though Dusk never did come, it always worked. It always worked.

And this was fascinating.

And when his children had grown up, this fact had always stuck in his head; lodged there. Festering. He’d used the story freely as a father, but it was more than just a tool to him. It was also a puzzle. Why did it work so well? Why did children always believe? And he did believe, even as an adult. He did believe. Even as a grandfather he was cautious of Dusk, and that differentiated him. He’d always feared the story, and it polluted his dreams.

Lidye screamed, an ear-splitting sound. Wulf Junior was dead, and the old man wiped his eyes. He sniffed, all he could offer up at the death of his child. Why hadn’t Wulf listened? But it was too late anyway. He should have tried harder, all those years, however fruitless that might have been.

His daughter-in-law looked at him, absolute horror in her lovely blue eyes. She rushed over; spinning; not knowing; turning; terrified. A rat in a trap. He clasped his hands together and tipped his head, muttering at her, pleading. Pleading for what? It was already over.

She pointed at the window. “Out there. Wulfen. It’s-s-s-s Dusk.”

He nodded, screwing up his eyes. She had seen it; she had seen Dusk. The same thing stalked his nightmares, and now it stalked reality too. The story echoed in his head, and he shuddered: ‘With Mother gone, Kunati’s followers, who were creatures of shadow, emerged from the sheltered places of the world. They came out and they swarmed all over the

continent, destroying all before them. Everything they touched turned to dust, and they drained the living of their very souls.'

Why had no-one listened? After all: 'all stories have at least a seed of basis in truth.' So here it was. The truth. Dusk was coming after all.

"Wulfen, what will we do?"

He turned his creaking old head, no hurry in it. Lidye, by contrast, was frantic. Just a few heartbeats had passed since the dying scream of his son, but time had a stuttering quality. Tears moistened her cheeks, and he offered her a rag. Scant consolation for a recent widow. But what comfort could he give? He had warned them over and over.

"We can comply." He peered at the shattered remnants of Uts's journal. His warning. Why had no-one listened?

He'd never been a scholar because he'd never had the smarts for that. But children's stories fascinated him on a level that transcended intelligence. He'd been hungry for the detail; devouring information; chasing fruitless paths; and seeking an answer. But an answer for what? At the back of his mind he hid the answer that he feared, hoping that it wasn't true. He didn't even dare mutter it. Instead, he searched for the fact that would disprove his theory. He'd spent more and more of his spare time searching, and it wasn't long before he was obsessed.

It interfered with his work, and he was eventually relieved of military service. Even his wife eventually despaired of his deepening obsession. She cast him away often, sending him to Lidye while Wulf was out at war; a helping hand. But out here, under the watchful gaze of the stars and the Stranger himself, it was more real than it was anywhere else. Without books, his study suffered in the isolation, but his belief flourished. It was out here where he became a fanatic, and it was out here that his obsession truly bloomed.

Only fitting then that this should be where he finally comes face to face with that horror.

An almighty thud groped his ear, the sound of a well-suited warrior jumping from his mount. The beast whinnied, and it was like rolling thunder. Metal implements clattered, but they were not shiny things and delicate fixings. It was the sound of heavy iron clanking against wholesome iron. This was an earthen warrior, forged of purpose and fundamental

strength. This was the shadow servant of Kunati, a nightmare from his nightmares.

The first step sounded, almighty in his aged ears. He had imagined how the clatter of Dusk would sound for so long, and it was everything he expected. Everything he expected and so much more. It burrowed inside him.

“The children!”

They screamed, Undari first, and then the girls. That was the worst sound of all; the children’s terror. It was a permanent and bone shattering screech that burrowed inside him, but what could he do? He covered his ears and looked at Lidy. What could he do?

“Dusk is coming to get them.”

She was not so impotent, and she rushed for the door. She hauled it open wildly and took the first step through, but stopped. And looked up. Then she screamed. And she screamed and screamed. She was a woman in despair, and she smashed the door closed, even though her children were still there. She turned to him, and he nodded knowingly. Why hadn’t they listened? Maybe now she would believe him.

“The second coming is here.”

It had been the root of the children’s stories that grabbed him and shook him to near-insanity. Or was it insanity? He’d been correct after all. But regardless, it was the root of these tales which sucked him deep, and it was this that he always researched. Every children’s story was woven to the audience, cleansed to some degree, made fit for purpose, but that was just the polish. What he found time after time was that every one of those ridiculous tales – the crazy ones; the impossible ones; and even the silly ones – every one of those stories had its basis rooted in some past event. Nothing was genuinely unique. It was all modified history. The Jangly Men and even Lumbering Jack: they were all true to some extent. Every last damned one of them.

It was obvious really, when considered properly. They were warnings of morality, behaviour, and life. They were lessons passed from generation to generation, and a plea to remember. A wise man once said that: ‘Anyone who doesn’t make mistakes is an idiot. We all make mistakes, and those who refuse to accept them will make the same mistakes again.’ And what a great

lesson that was. He'd certainly made mistakes, and telling that story was the worst of them. It was used too much.

Because the other thing this wise man said was that: 'All stories have their basis in fact.' And this was something he had evidenced for himself. All but one story. Until he found Uts' journal.

The footsteps ceased just outside the door, and he raised his head, hands clasped. Fidgeting. He had always been ready, ever since he'd known, and in that he was different from everyone else. The door almost shuddered under the gaze of the thing, and he swallowed. His nightmare was so near. So near.

Lidye came towards him; staggering; fretful; balling. The house's inner door smashed open, cracking against the stone of the walls, and the screams of the children grew. They were flung into the room, a collective huddle of horror, eyes like discs of shattered ice. When they saw her, they reached out.

"Mama!"

"Oh, babies." She reached out to them, but the outer door smashed open, splinters spinning through the room, arresting her movement. It entered: the shadow of Kunati. It was everything he had expected, and more. So much more, and so much worse.

Uts had lived. By the Brother's Balls, he had lived, and he had documented his experience. The small volume had been strangely immaculate, perfectly refined as a collection of archaic linguistics. And even despite the primitive language and the crude translation, there was an obvious and powerful sub-text. There was wisdom in those pages, and they told of a warning.

They were warning of Dusk.

Because Dusk wasn't rooted in reality. Oh no. It was reality. The entire story had been true, and that was horrific. But what was most shivering was that the brutal children's story was heavily edited, and yet it still terrified. If that was the cleansed edition, then what must the reality be? It was time to find out.

So much worse. He gulped.

It strolled into the room, heavy steps kicking dust into the air. Iron encased its bulk, armour of such malevolence that it radiated its own power. The heavy material was entirely matt, a dull threat, typifying the sense of

the creature. The armour was everywhere, encasing the monster in a protective barrier of worldly strength. But that wasn't the worst of it. The glorious mineral bastion was nothing compared to what lay inside.

Shadow. Pure flickering shadow.

Where its head might be, and also in the place of hands, there was only a thick permeating fog of darkness. Dusk personified. The shadow flickered and dissipated, like fire, but there was no easing in the effect. The soldier of Dusk wore its armour with a permanent air, and that flame of shadow would never go out. This was the *Stranger's* legacy.

It moved its head and the shadow-flame swayed, leaving a temporary trail in the air. The soldier stepped forward and stared. But stared where? It was impossible to know where the damned thing was looking. After all, a shadow has no face.

"Will you comply?"

There was that same gritty quality, and he shivered once more. So much worse than his nightmares. He forgot his frailties and tucked his knees up, squeezing himself into a ball. His creaking body objected, but he ignored it. Age had no meaning here.

The shadow-warrior swung sharply around, and the shadow-flame flickered in his direction. He was the target, and he gulped. Lidyé shuffled forward, and the shadow shifted once more.

"Will you comply?"

Lidyé paused, and squeaked. There was little to argue, but then he was no mother. Mothers were different creatures, and logic would never be good enough for her. He uncurled himself and reached out, but she was too far away. She crept slowly towards her children.

The monster stamped, kicking dust into the candle-lit air. Lidyé stalled, stuttering under the scrutiny. The children crouched on the ground, whimpering pitifully as was a child's right, but Dusk only growled at this symbolic immaturity.

"Quiet!" The same gravelly quality, but the two syllables were distinct and harsh. The children silenced.

The shadow turned once more, pressing Lidyé. "Do you comply?"

She turned to him, a trembling lip. "What does it mean?"

"You must comply with the demands of this thing." He didn't mean to sound like a bastard, but there really was no other way.

Her face slipped. “What demands?”

He shook his head. How callous he must seem. This gave him no pleasure, but he had warned them and they had wilfully ignored.

He sniffed. “All of the demands. This thing demands your obedience to the House of Red.”

The inner door creaked, moving. Only then did he notice the shadow-flicker of the second creature. It was watching the children, their prize; guarding them. The children’s heads swivelled from side to side, from monster to monster, and then back to mother. The bigger of the two monsters, the one at the exterior door, stepped further into the room, and the children retreated against the wall. Further from their mother. The poor pups were terrified.

Lidye sniffed, gritted her teeth, and turned. Her eyes were steely. “What is the House of Red?”

He stretched an arm to the window. “The Red House is Kunati’s house. You are to serve the *Stranger*. We all are.”

She sat silently for a moment, going over the facts now laid out. Her husband was dead by the reach of Dusk, and so would she be unless she complied. Her children were lost, and there was no other way. There was no choice.

“But...”

She really had no choice. There was no point in fighting. “Dusk is coming.”

Remarkably, she grew at that. She sat up, wiped her eyes, and cleared her throat. Her head whipped between her children and the monsters, but she straightened her back and pushed her chest out. And then she turned back on him.

“You knew all this?” Her brow was furrowed, her finger pointed right at him. Did she blame him?

“I warned you. I told you that you used that story too much. You became complacent.”

She shook her head slowly, gritting her teeth. A sob escaped her.

“But it’s just a story.”

“All stories have their basis in fact.” If only the world had listened.

“Then you should have ushered us away from this place. You should have taken us back to the city! *Dearly Departed*, why did you leave us out here

to die? You have killed us!”

He laughed, but with a grizzly edge. “You think that the cities are safe? They are probably already taken.”

He glanced at the darkness, and there seemed to be something mutual in the fog. Was there an ever so subtle respect for his foresight? Perhaps. Not that it was cause for elation. The taste of his wisdom grew more bitter with every passing moment.

“Then, there was never an escape?”

“Only flight. Only eternal flight.”

The shadows moved further into the room, and flight had never seemed further away. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, back cracking. What other way was there to explain this?

“Will you comply?” He jumped at the gravelly words. They didn’t get any easier.

Lidye was teetering on the edge of frantic, but no good would come of that. She must see logic.

“Lidye. Daughter-in-law, please. Listen to me. I know that you have considered me mad for many years, but now, confronted by this, be sensible. I implore you. I was right, wasn’t I? I was not mad.”

There was an imperceptible nod and a rolling tear. After all these years of preaching, that was the first flutter of recognition. He should revel in that small victory, but it was too little too late. What use in being selfish? He had to be strong.

“Then believe me now when I say that you have no choice, or at least none that you wish to make. There is only servitude in the House of Red. I promise. The alternative is not worth thinking on.”

She sniffed, hands clasped before her. “What about my babies?”

This was the hardest part, but it was all in the fairy tale. “The children are the future. They are already lost.”

Her lip trembled, poor thing. This must be a terrible choice, even if there was no choice at all. But Dusk would have its answer, and Dusk would have its answer now.

“Will you comply?”

Lidye turned her head slowly, life leeching out of her features. She had conceded, and she would do what was required. He watched and swallowed. It grated.

Undari screamed, the pitch piercing. What was happening? Beyond the shadow-monster, the young boy was starting across the room, reaching for his mother. Lidye responded and outstretched her arms, but it was useless. Just a waste.

Undari screamed once more, and it was worse. Much worse.

The second shadow reached out from behind the door with surprising speed, grabbing Undari's waist and hoisting the poor boy into the air. The pressure of the grip increased and the youngster's scream snapped and broke, starved of fuel. His face turned red. It was heart-breaking, and then the young boy's head was roughly bent towards the shadowy fiend, so that Undari was facing his end. The shadow stepped into the room, in a show of majesty. The head of the thing flickered with night.

"You should have complied."

The small body was cast across the room, smashing into the opposing wall. It dropped to the dusty floor, just beyond his reach; broken. The body landed and bounced, inanimate once it settled. Undari was dead before he even touched the ground.

And Lidye screamed. Oh how she screamed.

Blood was sprayed about where the boy's head had contacted with the rough quartz embedded in the wall. Some of it had even misted his face. He wanted to lick his lips, but he wouldn't. He couldn't. Tears were coming now, heaving sobs that were out of control. He looked at the wreckage on the floor, and it only got worse. It was a pain beyond reason to outlive one's child. To outlive a grandchild was another punishment altogether.

But the truth was that Undari had already been lost. Perhaps this was the better option.

He stared at the shadow-fiends, teeth clenched. But what could he do? He was a useless old man and he couldn't even comfort his daughter-in-law. His back was curled with age and pain, and even his hands wouldn't open properly. What could he do against these iron and shadow demi-gods? There was no fight and there was no resistance. There was only flight, but no-one had listened.

But Lidye was not so impotent. The plight of her children consumed her, and she screamed.

"Lidye, no. Please no."

"My baby!"

She jumped with the screech of a wounded animal, lurching forward. She pounded across the small room, heading for shadow, running into the night. Charging Dusk itself. Her hands clawed at the thing, deadly and pointless in equal measures, but she would not be stopped. She tore into the abyss, kicking and screaming, clawing at the monstrosity. Her anger was unquenchable, pummelling the earthen iron of the armour, her fists turning red. She climbed the thing, climbed the monster, reaching for the flickering shadow. She got a footing on the sill by the door, and hauled herself up. What was she doing?

“Lidye, no. Stop that, please.”

She went on. She fought like a demon, smashing and crashing, grabbing whatever she could, hammering the bastard. She bit at the iron armour, a tooth-shard flying from her mouth. Then she gripped the neckline, knuckles kissing shadow, and she screamed. It was her moment of victory, arms raised, but Dusk was not so soft.

Dusk was immune to mortality. It was night; the master of the dark things; servant of death. Only the gods could strike down the darkness, and Lidye was no god.

The beast grabbed her descending wrist, twisting it until it snapped and then cracked. This scream was different, but in every way worse. Her head flew back, and she wailed at the ceiling. To the heavens beyond. She would be there soon.

Her body was dumped mercilessly to the ground, a sickening crunch to it. Her eyes opened, but there was no time for pleas. A club dropped upon her and she was crushed where she lay. Her life leaked away into the dusty floor.

The two girls looked on, blood showering them; the blood of their mother who would no longer care for them. They would comply, and they would face servitude. The House of Red had come for them, and they were lost.

But the House of Red had come for him too. He sniffed heavily, and then heaved. It was a dry heave full of sadness and pain. His throat was raw, and he had seen enough. There was no more pain that he feared. Not at his age. He had failed terribly, and he could not go on.

“I will not comply!”

Dusk turned upon him. “You will comply.”

“No, I won’t! Kill me if you must.”

It shook its shadowy head. “You will comply. You will spread your story. That is your role.”

They meant to leave him! They meant to let him live, and to carry this horror through his travels. He had tried to warn the world, but no-one had believed him. He had failed.

“This time, people will listen.”

He shuddered. When spoken by Dusk itself, it could only be true. He was their messenger now. What else was there to do?

“No, you can’t—” But the beast ducked through the door, leaving it banging in the wind, whipping the two young girls away. His granddaughters were gone.

And he was alone. With the dead.

His legs ached, and his back was so much worse, but he suppressed it all under a blanket of mourning. He went looking for a shovel, and went through his options. There were none, not really. Not anymore, and not ever again.

He went to bury his family.

Your Voice Shapes the Story

Thank you for joining me on this short journey through Godslost — your time and imagination are truly appreciated. I hope this little adventure brought a spark of wonder to your day. Many more tales are on the horizon, so stay close.

If you enjoyed the story, I'd be grateful if you could spare a moment to leave a review. These short stories aren't published anywhere else, so your thoughts help keep the world alive and growing. You can share your feedback here:

[Goodreads](#)

Your words really do make a difference. Thank you again for reading, and I look forward to bringing you more magic soon.

About James Hockley



James has always been a daydreamer—just ask his teachers. While others wrestled with simultaneous equations, James was busy escaping into imagined worlds, though back then, the dreaming had no direction. That changed in 2002, when the cinematic release of *The Lord of the Rings* lit a fire in his imagination. Within a week, he'd devoured the trilogy, the prequel, and everything Tolkien-related he could find—back when the internet was still dial-up and dusty bookshelves ruled.

Suddenly, the daydreams had purpose. James began shaping the world of *Godslost*, a sprawling fantasy realm born from scattered ideas and stubborn determination. With a background in mathematics, writing didn't come naturally—but progress came in fits and starts, whenever life allowed.

Today, James juggles family, work, and the ongoing mission to bring *Godslost* to life. His writing style is modern, fast-paced, and intimate—designed to make the most of precious time and keep the story moving. He hopes one day to share *Godslost* with his kids, who might just think it's cool. Maybe.

For now, the journey continues—with more red publish buttons to press, and more magic to uncover.

The Tiny Tales of Godslost



JAMES HOCKLEY 

Find out more at jhockley.com