

Woodsmen

The pungent smell of the beast's urine stung Uwenogh's nostrils. He could tell from its strength that the animal had been here very recently. That didn't worry Uwenogh, it was unlikely that the creature would return until it needed to patrol its territory again. Then it would mark the same spots, a dire warning for any unwanted competition. And that made it the ideal place to lay a trap. Uwenogh and the other four woodsmen had been tracking the animal all day, painstakingly positioning traps at several of its marking spots in the hope that one would be sprung. Having set the last one they returned to camp. With luck, later that night, they would return to find the animal caught.

Uwenogh indicated to the others that they were done for the day. The summer sun was beginning its descent, its strength waning. Dappled light played over the smooth tree trunks and in the dying heat insects lazily flitted about in the shade. In the distance a flock of birds sent up a cacophony of caws that echoed through the forest and closer by a small animal splashed through the water amongst the tufts of knee-length grass. The swamp was preparing for night.

The woodsmen trudged bare-foot through the watery terrain. It was no hardship as the soles of their feet were as tough as hardened leather and their fine body fur repelled water more efficiently than any shoe, as well as providing an efficient defence against the myriad of biting insects. Uwenogh led the band in a winding, circuitous route lengthening their journey considerably - but it was necessary - they didn't want to fall foul of the deep waters or be sucked down into the treacherous mud. The sun bid its final farewell and gave birth to a dense darkness but the men were safe - they had reached their camp just in time.

There was no need for orders or guidance, the woodsmen immediately set about their evening tasks. One started making a fire whilst another two headed down to the river to catch the night's meal and collect water. The remaining man checked the bivouacs and made the required adjustments. Uwenogh scouted the perimeter and ensured the trip wires and traps were safely in place. He recovered a small mammal that had fallen foul of one of the snap-traps, reset the trap and headed back to the camp.

The fire was burning well as Uwenogh rejoined his friends. They chatted companionably as he bled, skinned, gutted and prepared the dead mammal. Nothing went to waste. The intestines were thrown into a pot to be brought to boil, then the carcass spitted whilst the blood was collected in a wooden bowl and passed around for all to drink. Before long the

roast was spitting into the glowing embers firing up lazy tendrils of smoke.

The catch from the river yielded three silver fish as long as a forearm. There would be no need to catch anything else for several days. They prepared the fish and threw the offal in the pot to cook with the mammal's innards, a handful of roots and herbs and the recipe was complete. The moon rose over the river sending silver beams of light through the forest canopy. One of the woodsmen produced a skin of Ghugg which made its rounds amongst the men. Uwenogh hadn't eaten since midday, his hunger fuelled by the aroma wafting from the fire and he felt the intoxicating effects of the brew hit him mercilessly after only a few draughts.

Uwenogh enjoyed the balmy weather. He knew it wouldn't last long. Even in summer there were storms of torrential rains and high winds that repeatedly ravaged the land but tonight it was warm and calm and the woodsmen relaxed in each others' company and laughed at their cliquy jokes.

The food was quickly devoured, the fire began to die and the skin of Ghugg lay empty and discarded. They needed an early start so Uwenogh suggested sleep before the hour got too late. He didn't need to resort to orders as they all knew their roles - what was required of them - so they willingly executed the night's ritual. Before turning in Uwenogh headed to the latrine pit and relieved himself. As he stood there he knew it would only be a matter of hours before he had to repeat the action. Age was slowly creeping up on him. He glanced to his right and saw the predator only just as it was upon him but it was too late. The beast leapt, slamming high into Uwenogh's body, wrapping its forelimbs over his shoulders, foreclaws gouging deep into his back. The beast's back claws sank easily into the flesh of his torso, digging for purchase, indiscriminately piercing muscle and sinew. Uwenogh's throat was torn out before he could loose a cry for help.

The predator proudly dragged its kill behind it, padding quietly into the night. It had stalked the woodsmen for several days, studying their movements and watching for patterns. Like all predators it had noticed that they marked a spot to show the limit of their den. It was the best place to set a trap.