THE GODKILLERS' SAGA

THE LEOCAN OPERATION

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A free preview from *The Godkillers' Saga*

CHAPTER ONE The Leocan Operation

Malik settled in for his day-long ride to Leoca. Roughly three miles down the road its cobblestone surface, maintained by Temple acolytes, fell away to reveal the unpaved, but heavily worn roadway that led down the mountain through the big pines of the Starlight Forest. The air was so still and thick with pollen this time of year that the coat of Malik's horse took on a faint greenish yellow hue. Neither Malik nor his horse seemed to mind. As Malik passed his first travelers of the day, hearing their loud conversation about what they saw in Leoca the night before, he reflected on the conversation he had had earlier that morning with his friend and advisor, Rictor, a fellow Temple Scholar.

"Scholar" was a title marking a level of authority granted to warrior monks of the Temple, similar to how the term "Sir" was used among knights. Temple Scholars were highly regarded throughout Cambria, as much for their knowledge of ancient texts as for their martial prowess. Although all Scholars were trained in armed and unarmed combat, each was also encouraged to pursue a combat specialization. Malik's was sorcery, though he already had extensive experience as a military veteran.

Malik was mindful of the rhythmic shifting of his body, rolling back and forth in his saddle as his horse walked along the hard-packed dirt road. Malik took a long draw from his water skin. As his horse navigated the trail, Malik recalled Rictor's description of the Leocan request for assistance. Something about the Leocan messenger's story about what was happening seemed off. Rictor said the messenger described werewolf attacks on the outskirts of town, but the conditions recounted by the messenger didn't seem to fit what has been recorded about werewolf behavior.

Malik had been so focused on his thoughts about the unusual circumstances being reported from Leoca that he rode past the tavern he usually visited on trips down the mountain. Fortunately, Malik habitually observed a practice he adopted when he was attached to the Hamur army in his youth. Malik always traveled with a store of meat from local game animals and a skin of fermented goat milk the Hamuri called airag. Malik reached down and grabbed a piece of meat he had tenderizing under his

saddle. He ripped off a piece and took a good bite. Malik stopped chewing briefly, closed his eyes and sighed as he savored the meat. Malik complimented his seasoned meat with a mouthful of airag. Malik never left the Temple without his staple reserves.

Malik's thoughts returned to his mission. Although they don't actively avoid water, werewolves typically prefer terrain like marshes or plains, where their prey has little opportunity to hide or to find resources they might use to fortify a defense. "Maybe a weretiger?" Malik muttered aloud to himself. He shook his head as he mentally rifled through the catalog of knowledge he had amassed about beasts common to the area. Not a weretiger. Come to think of it, werewolves haven't been seen in this area for decades, either. Malik decided he would need more information; information he could only get firsthand from laying his eyes directly on the scenes of the attacks.

Malik came to the edge of the mesa overlooking Scrub Canyon, at the bottom of which was Scrub River. Malik figured he was now only about three hours away from Leoca.

The river island village of Leoca is a peaceful, mist-laden community, famous for its fishing and winding paths that hug the riverbanks. Malik had visited Leoca many times. He liked the people and the Leocan wine.

Over the years, Leoca had become quite the hub for trade, food, and culture. A relatively short, one-day-ride from three major travel destinations made Leoca a natural stop-over location; and the fact that its geographical size is limited due to the fact it is located on a river island at the bottom of the Scrub Canyon makes Leoca a quaint, relatively wealthy, culturally diverse travel destination in its own right.

It is in nobody's better interests to make Leoca a blight on any level. Leoca was practically devoid of any hint of visible crime or civil unrest. Thieves and brawlers were dealt with quickly and severely.

That being said, because of its location and conditions favorable to comfortable travel between two major cities and a Scholar Temple, along Leoca's quiet underbelly runs the arterial flow of all manner of smuggling. On any given night, as long as they kept it quiet, smugglers could easily traffic slave labor, illicit goods, effects related to banned

rituals, and information. There was an unwritten rule among the usually hard, unsavory characters that typically travel the dark highway that Leoca was a sanctuary where competitive rivalries were off limits.

Although the land along the road leading to Leoca was highly fertile, being fed water and nutrients with the changing of the seasons, monsoons that wash rich silt down the canyon to settle along the Scrub River's banks, most farmland became dedicated vineyards, supplying grapes and exotic fruits for Leoca's prosperous wine industry. Landowners in the area typically carved out plots of land they used as gardens to produce food for their own families and hands. Inns and taverns generally imported the food they served to travelers. The obvious exception was river-grown food like fish, shrimp, eels, crawfish and a variety of useful flora cultivated in the river.

Because the river itself was too close to its source to be of much use for shipping cargo, the docks surrounding Leoca were mostly dedicated to fishing. So, the river water surrounding Leoca was very clean. In fact, one particularly industrious Leocan even created a marked selling Leocan River Water to travelers as a drinking water delicacy.

Malik arrived at the Leocan gate at dusk. Malik dismounted and stabled his horse at the available facility. He stretched his legs and walked across the wooden bridge to Leoca, the scent of river algae and moist earth surrounding him. He tightened his cloak against the damp chill, his eyes scanning the quiet village. The people were wary, glancing over their shoulders, pulling their children indoors. The Elder of the village, Bernad, met Malik by the water's edge.

Bernad gripped Malik's hand tightly, "Thank you for coming, Scholar. You've heard, I assume, of our plight."

Nodding, scanning the village's edge where fields meet forest, Malik answered "I only know what your messenger relayed, Elder. I'm fuzzy on the details. Can you show me where the attacks took place? Is there enough of the victims' remains left to be of any value to my investigation?" Malik had several more initial questions, but he didn't want to overwhelm Bernad.

Not wanting to disappoint the Scholar, to his chagrin Bernad shook his head. “I’m sorry I can’t be more help, Scholar. Details are hard to come by. By the time we find the remains, there’s not much to look at. Strange tracks—larger than any wolf but with claw marks that sink too deep. And it’s happening closer, Scholar. First in the woods, then the fields, now — two nights ago — inside the village.”

Malik muttered softly, mostly to himself “As if it’s testing your defenses.”

“Aye!” Bernad exclaimed, “and the people are getting frightened. Some have already left, taking the ferries downriver. Those that remain want action. They believe a werewolf prowls among us.”

Malik studies Bernad's lined face, his eyes shadowed with fear and insomnia. Bernad was at a loss.

The Scholar scratched the two-days growth of whiskers that covered his chin. He was about to lay out his general plan for the operation when he was interrupted.

Approaching with hesitation, her hands crossed demurely in front of her, feet together and head bowed humbly, the young widow of the creature’s most recent victim, Ruth asked, “Scholar Malik, will you...will you put a stop to it? This monster?”

Firmly, looking at both Bernad and Ruth, Malik offered, “That’s why I’ve come. But first, I must investigate. I need to see those tracks, examine what remains you’ve found.”

Malik and Bernad trekked out to the edge of the forest, where the latest attack took place. Several curious villagers followed along. Malik knelt by the remains of a goat, its carcass splayed out and partially eaten. He examined the scene closely, observing the deep claw marks in the earth.

Malik had a tick, a nervous reflex that revealed itself whenever he focused intently on a subject. Malik murmured as he studied the scene, “These are not the marks of a wolf, nor even a large predator. They’re...cloven.” Malik said aloud. “Not quite hooves, but close. And the spread of the claws — do you see, Bernad?” Malik crawled around the carcass to get a closer look at the wounds.

Frowning, his voice uneasy. “These wounds seem different than those from the other attacks.” Bernad carefully worked out the implications that this might be more than an ordinary werewolf problem. Bernad considered the impacts this news might have on the Leocan economy and his future as Village Elder if he fails to end this scandal. “What are we dealing with, here?” Bernad asked Malik, his gaze never leaving the goat carcass. “We have witnesses reports describing many of the attacks. Every person witnessing an attack described what they saw in a way that suggested only one suspect — one shadowy creature that attacked with savage fury. It attacked with a purpose, as though it made an exhibition of the act to inspire fear.”

Malik stood, dusting off his hands. He took a few steps back to get a better view of the entirety of the scene, “It’s cunning. Each of these attacks draws closer to your homes. And the precision… it suggests intelligence. This creature knows what it’s doing.”

Malik explained that based on his understanding of werewolves, while in wolf form the afflicted were largely overcome by the beast, losing their ability to reason to the extent they could in their human form. “The totality of the evidence at hand: the brutality of the scenes as well as the witnesses’ descriptions of the attacks, points to a creature with a clear and deliberate intent. This is no mere werewolf.”

Ruth’s voice trembled “So...it’s true then? A monster? One of the old tales?”

Malik looked at Rose as he rubbed his chin, “Perhaps.” He pivoted to face Bernad. “In my travels, I’ve come across references to creatures who resemble this description. One in particular — a kludde. Native to the north and to high mountainous areas. Kluddes are clever beasts with no true form, save for shadows and claws. It shifts and deceives, feeding on fear.”

Bernad’s face grew pale as Malik spoke. Ruth clutched a small amulet around her neck as she quietly whispered a prayer.

Bernad said decisively, “Then we need to stop it. More men. A militia. I’ll have them guard every path, every door—”

Malik held up a hand “Of course we need to stop it, but militarizing will only make it bolder. If it’s indeed a kludde, then force alone won’t stop it. These creatures are drawn to fear and thrive on panic. No, I need a little time to develop a plan, exploit the beast’s weaknesses.”

“Well, while you sit here and think of what you want, I’m going to do something.” Bernad strode away.

Bernad wasted no time organizing a militia. Plenty of the townsfolk agreed with Bernad that the kludde posed an unprecedented risk to the livelihood of Leoca itself. His position as Elder gave Bernad full operational authority over the militia, which grew by the hour. What started as a manageable team of five loyal Leocan landowners expanded to a sprawling mob of thirty plus angry men, many of whom Bernad had never seen before, and a few who none of the Leocan citizens knew.

The militia went right to work posting handbills informing the townsfolk of the temporary rules of martial law. These lists of rules included some of the harsh penalties for failing to obey the new rules. Most of the townsfolk understood the necessity for the heightened restrictions, but many others were not happy, publicly disavowing the change.

It had been two days since the last attack, nevertheless, inasmuch time the atmosphere in Leoca shifted from contented and peaceful to tense and anxious to downright oppressive. The militia seemed to have taken on a life of its own. Poisoned by the influence of a handful of disgruntled volunteers, the focus of the militia was quickly shifting from protection of Leoca from the kludde to preservation of the militia. The once helpful “soldiers” who agreed to patrol the streets only days earlier, became ever more officious, enforcing martial law in a manner that only served their own self-interests. Leoca was clearly divided.

Malik met with Bernad at the village square to discuss his plans to capture and destroy the kludde. Malik was surprised how quickly martial law was usurped by the opportunistic militia volunteers. “Bernad, this...fearmongering will not protect your people. It only serves the creature.”

“And what would you have me do, Scholar? Let it continue to tear us apart? No! My people are frightened, and if a militia brings them peace of mind, then so be it.” Beneath his weak veneer of defense Bernad knew the militia had been hijacked and that he was now commander of the militia in name only. Nevertheless, something more than ego alone compelled Bernad to stop short of disbanding the militia altogether.

Malik replied grimly, “Peace of mind? Look around you. There is no peace, only suspicion. This creature, if it’s a kludde is feeding off this fear, Bernad. Every curfew, every patrol strengthens it.”

Bernad resisted his urge to defend the militia, “Alright, what do you suggest, Scholar?”

Malik sighed, “We need to draw it out on our terms. I have a plan — a trap, but it requires patience and discipline. Give me two nights. If I fail, then you may double your patrols. But give me two nights without interference.”

Bernad agreed.



That night, Malik gathered his resources. Malik took pride in his practice of using native elements of magic to accomplish his incantations. The fact that the Temple was only one-day’s ride from Leoca combined with the town’s popularity among travelers afforded Malik the opportunity to have developed a vast knowledge of materials indigenous to the area. This meant Malik was at his full magical potential, able to cast nearly every spell he knew. If he was going to capture a kludde, Malik knew there was no better place and time than here and now.

A young militiaman named Fin guarded the general area around the most recent attack. Fin was well known as a hard-working son of one of the local vineyard families. He was a good boy. Fin saw Malik walking towards him, struggling to carry some clumsy implements that Fin didn’t recognize. Raised on a farm, trained to recognize and respond to a need for help, Fin rushed over to Malik. Without a word, Fin grabbed what appeared to be some sort of trap inscribed with what looked to Fin like unintelligible scribble along with a length of iron chain. He walked with Malik and offered whatever assistance he could. Malik pointed and gave

specific instructions to Fin while he busily worked to set his trap in place.

During a momentary pause, Fin thrust forth his hand, noticed it was dirty, quickly wiped his palm against his pants and then offered it again to Malik, “I’m Fin.”

Malik decided to keep it formal, “Scholar, Malik.”

The two went back to work.

After a few minutes, Fin asked nervously, “Scholar, is it true what they say? That you can capture this...thing?”

Focused, hammering an iron stake into the ground Malik replied, “If it’s what I suspect—a kludde—then yes. But this isn’t like hunting wolves, Fin. This creature is intelligent, cunning.” He turned to Fin, “Even a moment’s hesitation or fear could cost us.” Malik turned back to his work, muttered something Fin didn’t understand. Tacit runes that had been inscribed on the stakes glowed brightly and then faded away.

A thin smile curled Fin’s lip. Fin had never seen magic before. Impressed, he said determinedly, “Then I’ll stand with you, sir. I’ve lost family to this beast. I’ll do whatever it takes to see it brought down.”

Malik nodded, appreciative of Fin’s resolve. They finished setting the trap as darkness closed in. Malik murmured a final incantation, and the traps seemed to completely disappear. All that was remaining was an incredibly convincing illusion of a drunken man passed-out, snoring, reeking of booze set as bait for the trap. They took their positions, weapons ready, and waited.

Hours passed in tense silence. About an hour before sunrise, Malik speculated that the kludde may be more intelligent than he presumed. Malik decided he would dispel the illusion and take its place. Seconds before Malik started his ritual to dismiss the phantom sot, he and Fin heard rustling in the underbrush that sounded like a creature moving quickly toward the trap. Fin pointed toward an outline of a shape moving through the tall grass. It was Rose. She was chasing a chicken that had been scared out of its pen by a couple stray dogs. Rose stopped when she saw the drunken man. Thinking he was real, Rose called out to the man gently, “Are you okay? You really shouldn’t be out here right now. Let me get you home. Where do you live?” The phantasm grumbled but did

not speak.

Malik decided the expedition was a bust and decided to call it a night. As he stood from his covered vantage point to make Rose aware of his presence Malik, Fin and Rose all froze. They could feel the deep tones of the kludde's growl as much as they heard it. Malik's heart pounded as the shape materialized: a twisted, monstrous form that seemed both solid and shadow.

The kludde slowly took the form of a huge man-shaped beast. Its eyes glowed a deep, malevolent red and were fixed on Rose. Malik realized the kludde hadn't yet noticed him or Fin. The kludde was larger than Malik anticipated, a grotesque amalgamation of beast and shadow, with jagged teeth and claws that glinted in the faint light as the monster took solid form. Malik steadied himself, hoping the trap would hold.

Whispering, his voice trembling as much out of excitement as terror Fin exclaimed, "It's...real."

Quietly, without taking his eyes off the creature, Malik reminded Fin, "Hold your ground, Finn. Remember, no fear." Fin put his game face on and focused on the task before him.

The kludde prowled, circling Rose (and the trap). It hesitated, sensing something amiss. Then, with a snarl, it charged at Rose—only to be thrown back by an invisible barrier as it collided with Malik's wards. The creature howled, enraged, lashing out at the air around it, clawing and snapping as it tried to break through. When it realized it was trapped, the kludde tried to change shapes to try to escape its invisible cage. Spells written into the bonds prevented the kludde from shapeshifting. It was stuck in the monstrous form it had taken to slaughter Rose. Malik wished it had taken the form of a bunny rabbit or a duck before it triggered the trap, but he counted himself fortunate that the trap worked as well as it had. For now, it was holding.

Malik repeated deep throated chants that reinforced the barrier, interrupting the din only long enough to shout to Fin, "Stay strong, Finn. Attack it with everything you have."

Fin checked his fear with a well-discipline battle cry as he loosed arrow after arrow into the beast, each reporting with a thud that sounded

like a stick hitting the trunk of a healthy oak tree. For all his work, Fin wasn't accomplishing much.

Malik yelled again for Fin to use some of the weapons from the pack he had prepared for himself. Fin heard Malik, grabbed the pack and dumped its contents onto the ground where he stood. Fin picked up a quiver of arrows. As he touched each arrow, it glowed with its own individual enchantments written into the shaft. He knocked one and loosed it at the beast. The arrow took flight with incredible speed, burying itself deeply into the kludde. The monster screamed in pain. Fin yelled, "Yes! That's what pain feels like you foul beast!" The kludde panicked. It had never known pain or fear itself. It continued to thrash and snap as it howled in pain with each arrow that sunk itself into its unchangeable flesh. Fin fired until his quiver was empty. Fin looked around for another weapon. His hands found a spear. When he touched it, the spear hummed with a bright, high tone. Runes in the spear's head glowed a bright blue.

But the kludde was relentless, its strength pounded against the wards. With every attack, the barrier weakened. Malik continued his relentless chants to maintain the trap's hold, he could feel the kludde's desperation straining against the magical bonds as he felt his own strength wane.

Malik shouted, "I'm losing it!" as Fin charged the beast with his spear. The kludde was able to punch one of its massive claws through the barrier that held it in place. It grabbed Fin with such force that Fin's arm shattered immediately. Fin dropped the spear and screamed in agony, struggling to remain conscious against the pain. The Kludde released Fin, turned toward Malik and glared at him, a quiet growl signaling the struggle would soon be over; with Malik, Fin and the rest of the Leocans soon to pay the price for its pain. Malik's strength finally failed, and his chants trailed off to silence. As the kludde's bonds weakened almost to the point it could walk free of them with no effort, Rose lunged forward with Malik's enchanted spear, using all her weight to drive the spear through the creature's side. The kludde howled with a sound that seems to tear through the fabric of reality before it collapses in a heap, its form shifting ever more slowly until the monster's life finally left its body. Fin laid right next to it, alive but unconscious, his arm a mangled wreck.

Breathless, staring at the creature's remains, Rose asked Malik, "Is...is it over?"

Malik was completely spent. Slumping down, he looked up at Rose. He had never taken the time to appreciate how beautiful her face was. The scholar answered Rose's question, "For now. But it will take time for the village to recover. The fear that seems to have been taking control of this town isn't going to be as easy to kill as the kludde was." They both chuckled.



Malik slept for days. When he woke, he found himself lying in a clean bed. The room was modestly furnished, adorned with an arrangement of flowers on the nightstand, which gave the room a decidedly feminine touch. Malik saw his cleaned clothes neatly folded sitting on a small stool at the foot of the bed. Malik rolled over and pushed himself to a sitting position so he could get dressed.

Malik could see Rose standing in the room's doorway. It was covered by a curtain rather than a proper door. Rose stood silently, politely averting her gaze from Malik to afford him a little modesty. She knocked quietly on the door frame. Malik stood and slid open the curtain, greeting Rose with a smile, "Is anyone else as hungry as I am?" Rose returned Malik's smile and asked if bacon and eggs would be acceptable. Malik could already smell the breakfast Rose was cooking, "That would be great. I'm starving."

While they ate, Rose told Malik about Fin's condition. His arm was far from fully healed, but it was much further along than Malik expected. Rose told Malik Fin was looking good. Leoca was home to some of the region's better healers. Malik was grateful. With the threat of the kludde gone, Malik wondered about the status of the militia. Rose explained to Malik that many of the militia members were reluctant to give up the power and authority that came with being part of the militia — including Bernad, who had developed a taste for martial control and was no longer content with being simply the Town Elder.

Malik was not expecting this outcome. It was unusual in this region for a local leader to even consider assuming any degree of martial control.

The people of Cambria took great pride in their level of civilization compared to other continents more disposed to authoritarian rule. For example, the Saceran continent seems to turn over dictators like most people change their trousers. Cambrians, on the other hand, don't seem to tolerate being ruled at all. While Malik felt confident that the free market would soon depose Bernad and restore the natural order in Leoca, probably even before he even made it back to the Temple; the events of the Leocan operation were sufficiently unusual on enough levels that Malik felt compelled to return to the Temple in haste to report his experience and seek council.