

The Hall of Black Trees

By Andrew Warwick

A Primal Tale

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This story is part of the Pure Escapism collection, further stories, as well as regular updates, of which can be found at <http://mistandshadows.com/pure-escapism/>

There are a number of creatures that appear in the *Hall of Black Trees* that may appear fanciful in the extreme, but are in fact based on real, though extinct, animals. If you are interested in finding out a bit more about these fascinating creatures, I have written up a post about them at <http://mistandshadows.com/megafauna-in-pure-escapism>.

The small Huatti lizardman ran headlong through the shrouding forests, blindly, heedless of the direction his short, scurrying legs were taking him. Dangling vines and branches lashed at him as he ran, striking at his scaly face, snagging at the long, dark robes he wore and tearing the cloth. Roots and shrubs tangled up his feet, scuffing his boots and causing him to stumble in his stride.

The forest around was thick and gloomy, light from the sun barely able to penetrate the tightly woven canopy overhead, while alien sounds echoed amongst the trees, strange and startling calls and screeches that added to the terror that gripped him.

Something large crashed through the trees behind him and there accompanied it bellowing calls, sounding somewhat like the honk of a waterfowl, but this call was far deeper and far more foreboding than that of an ordinary waterfowl.

Another root rose up from the ground before him and his foot caught on it. The little Huatti stumbled for a few steps, arms flailing wildly as he sought in vain to retain his footing, but to no avail. He pitched forward, landing heavily on the forest floor amongst fallen leaves and twigs. A moss covered rock emerged from the detritus on the ground and he grabbed a hold of it, using it to pull himself back up onto his feet. Much of the moss came free in his hand as he did so.

Tossing it aside, he cast a panicked glance behind him and set off running again. His pursuer was closer. Though he could not yet see it, the honking calls and sounds of crashing trees were drawing closer.

Running, he clambered over a fallen log that lay before him, finding on the other side a slope leading down. He descended down it, his passage half a scramble, half a slide. At the base of the slope a forest stream trickled, shallow in depth, but broad across, the waters tinged a dark brown, flowing across a bed thick with smooth, worn stones of many shapes and sizes.

The Huatti ran for the stream, charging into water that rapidly rose to near his knees, soaking through boots and robes. He surged forward, forcing weary limbs through the water, desperate to reach the far bank.

The loud blast of a menacing honk sounded from behind him as he reached the midway mark of the stream. A glance behind him showed his pursuer, silhouetted atop the rise he had scrambled down towards the stream.

The bird was a giant, fully three metres in height, three times as tall as the Huatti himself. It had a stocky

body and powerful legs, with dark feathers making up its plumage. The wings at its side were stubby, rendering it flightless, while its long neck supported a head that seemed all beak, a deep, narrow beak, but above all powerful and razor sharp. A Thunder Bird, an eater of meat and terror of the forests. A second bird joined the first, and the pair exchanged honks loudly before beginning a scrambled down the slope, vicious claws digging deep into the soil to support their descent.

Fresh terror gripped the Huatti and he waded faster, limbs burning with absolute fatigue. An involuntary whimper escaped his lips. It was all for nought he knew. They would soon have him and the feeding would begin; a frenzy of savage tearing, rending violence. He would not stop running though, not until that moment came.

He reached the far bank, stones clattering beneath his feet as he set off racing again, charging blindly under the trees, desperate for any shelter. A wind picked up and the leaves above, silent until that moment, whispered to one another while branches groaned in somnolent protest.

A branch lashed at him as he ran passed, the stinging blow catching him across the cheek, drawing dark blood. Still he ran on, ignoring it. The sounds of the Thunder Birds were close now, right behind him. He could hear their claws scrabbling at fallen branches and leaves while their calls were deafeningly loud. He imagined that he could already feel the warmth of their fetid breath upon his back.

Then, all unexpected, came the sound of a roaring snarl and the Thunder Birds erupted in screeches on panic. There was the sound of heavy impact and bodies crashing to the ground, splintering branches with the savagery of their collision.

Hastily looking behind him, the little Huatti saw a large cat the size of a lion standing on the body of one of the Thunder Lizards, its jaws locked tight around the bird's neck. It appeared much like a cat, but there were differences. It was more solid than a normal cat, especially in the forelimbs and hindquarters, built for power and not for speed. The tail was thick and strong, while the jaws appeared more powerful than normal and bespoke a terrible, crushing strength. Its fur had hints of red amongst the brown, the hindquarters flecked with white spots.

The jaws crunched down tight and the Thunder Bird within the cat's bite thrashed for a moment before it was still, a pool of blood spreading out from the terrible wound to its throat. The second bird was circling around, head low, screeching incessantly. There was wariness in it towards the predator that had ambushed and slain its companion. The cat released its grip on the fallen bird and snarled, beginning to prowl forward, low to the ground, ears flattened. Its eyes were intent on the larger bird, as were the Huatti's.

"You are a long way from home, little one." The voice was quiet and unexpected, and the Huatti jumped in startled surprise. A giant had arrived silently as the Huatti watched the animals fight, a giant with pale eyes and dark hair. He wore hides almost black in colour, sleeveless, attached to them, and hanging around his neck as well, curiously carved bones. He carried no weapons beyond a simple bone knife at his belt. Like all of the giants who called themselves humans, this one stood near twice the height of the Huatti, and those of his people that lived in more civilised lands beyond the forests.

"I got separated from the others," the Huatti tried to explain.

The giant nodded slowly, his face serious. "So I heard. It is lucky my friend found you before the birds did."

"Friend?" The Huatti looked around in confusion, for he could see no others of the giants. The giant motioned towards the cat, which had sprung onto the second bird. Sharp claws had dug in to drag it down, while once more the jaws closed tight around the neck, huge blade-like teeth shearing through flesh and feathers. The bird gave a pitiful squawk as it feebly struggled, but it did not last long.

"Alia, my friend," the giant said as the cat padded over to join them, blood stained maw opening wide in a yawn, showing its terrible teeth. "I am Braega," he told the little Huatti, scratching behind Alia's ears as the cat rubbed its considerable bulk against Braega's legs, a rumbling purr coming from her.

"Tudhala Ramal." Up close the cat was even more terrifying to behold, almost looking level into Tudhala's narrow face.

"Come, we will see you back safely to your friends, Tudhala."

Braega smiled to himself as he watched Tudhala scramble on his short legs to keep up with his stride. Encounters with the Huatti, the People as they called themselves were rare, and he had had little chance to see one up this close before. There were universally short, no more than a metre in height, living beyond the forests and wilds in the civilised lands beyond. There was a reptilian, scaly appearance to their skin, in Tudhala's case reddish in hue mottled with greens and browns, while a frill of webbed spines rose like a crown from his head, sweeping back. To his people they were creatures of legend and outrageous tales, known as lizardfolk and newts and skinks. Seldom did they venture into the forests, yet this one, Tudhala, had, despite the many dangers that lingered in it that could set upon him.

The Thunder Birds that Alia had dispatched with ruthless efficiency were only one of the horrors that could take a Huatti for a snack. Monstrous snakes and giant goannas also stalked the forests, while giant crocodiles that even his people feared silently prowled the rivers, ever hungry.

"What brings you here?" he asked. Alia was prowling off ahead, sniffing out for any danger that might beset them on the trek back.

"We are looking for something," Tudhala explained as he ducked under a low lying branch. "The Hiyah Anodan Avad." Braega cocked an eyebrow in Tudhala's direction in query. "The Hall of Black Trees," the Huatti translated.

Braega came to a complete stop, Tudhala continuing on for a few paces before realising. "You know of it?" he asked, turning to face Braega.

"I know of the place you speak of," Braega said quietly. "You should not seek it out. Go back to your lands if you value your lives. It is not safe there."

"Then it does exist?" Tudhala asked, evident excitement in his voice.

"It does, but you should forget that it exists," Braega warned.

Tudhala looked up at Braega, his brows furrowing in concern. "None of the tales of the Hiyah Anodan Avad make any references to there being dangers associated with it."

"All things change with time," Braega told him. "It is the same with this place. Something dark and dangerous has crept into it and taken up residence."

"Like what?" Tudhala asked, curiosity overcoming concern.

"We do not know," Braega replied. "There have been deaths amongst those who venture too close and even the beasts stay well away."

"We have come too far to turn back now," Tudhala announced stubbornly.

Braega gave a shrug of his broad shoulders before setting off again. "If that is your wish, we shall not hinder your passage."

There came the sound of something large blundering through the forest and Tudhala's eyes widened.

"It is no threat," Braega told him. "Watch."

The quadruped that came lumbering from beneath the trees was truly massive, as tall as Braega was, and even longer in the body. It paused upon catching sight of Braega, Tudhala and Alia, snuffling at the air as it considered them, allowing Tudhala to get a good look at it. It bore some resemblance to the much smaller wombats, with its coarse brown fur and stubby nose, but on a much larger scale.

"What is it?" Tudhala asked, voice almost a whisper.

"Good eating," Braega replied, a wry grin emerging on his face. "They are called Diprotodon, a kind of giant wombat. Plant eaters, generally passive, but it is best to stay out of their way if they are going places. They move much faster than you would give them credit for, and they will run you over even before they are aware of your presence, especially for one as small as you."

Tudhala nodded in agreement, starting at the beast. The giant wombat, obviously of the mind that no threat was posed towards it, ambled off in a waddling gait, disappearing from sight amongst the trees, though the sounds of its heavy tread echoed for some time.

There was an old track that wound through the forests, and it was this that the Huatti had been following. Their wagons for the time being had been driven off the side of it however, and a rough camp

established. There were a couple of dozen of the diminutive people in the camp, tending to cargo, talking, arguing, and above all, all seemingly busy. There was a blur of activity, but for all of it, the results were not apparently obvious. The mules that pulled the wagons were off to one side, watching proceedings passively as they grazed on grass and leaves.

By contrast to the Huatti, the handful of tall, rangy humans who stood around the periphery were quiet, their expressions one of stoic patience, simply leaning on their spears and waiting.

Braega led Tudhala back into the encampment, nodding to one of the waiting men, even taller than he was. The man had a scar running across an empty left eye socket and a thick, bushy dark beard.

"Found him, then," the man noted in a laconic drawl, expression remaining unchanging.

"Couple of birds wanted to make a snack of him," Braega explained. "Much happen here?"

The one-eyed man gave a non-committal shrug. "Hard to tell. The Newts are running around like an upturned ants nest."

"They are heading for the Black Trees, Hamat."

Hamat was silent upon receiving Braega's revelation, but showed little reaction beyond a brief shake of his head. "Why?"

"That is what I intend to find out. Tudhala?"

"Arnuisar can tell you," the little Huatti replied. Braega nodded slowly, looking down to Alia. The great cat yawned, stretched then turned and padded off to the nearest tree. She leapt, claws digging into the trunk, swiftly clambering up until she reached a branch high above upon which she sprawled out, eyes sinking shut.

Tudhala lead Braega into the camp, taking him to another Huatti who seemed to lie at the heart of the organised chaos that swirled about. He was slightly taller than Tudhala, with a greener tinge to his scaly skin and a prominent ridge running up the centre of his frilled crest. He wore robes, much like Tudhala, but his were of browns and reds, gold thread stitching along the hems, collar and cuffs. The pair spoke for some time in their native language, Braega's presence apparently forgotten.

Finally the second Huatti turned to Braega and spoke to him. "Tudhala tells me you know the location of the Hiyah Anodan Avad."

Braega nodded in reply. "Yes."

"That is most excellent."

"Why do you wish to find it?" Braega asked.

The question seemed to confuse Arnuisar, bringing him up short in surprise. "Why?"

"Yes. It is not a safe place."

"There is something there that I seek."

Braega looked around at the Huatti, a thoughtful look on his face. "You seek the Red Heart," he said softly, though there was an accusatory tone to his voice.

"You know of it?"

"More than I wish." He shook his head. "Take my advice and go no further. Go back to your homes.

If you go to the Black Trees none of you shall return."

"I can not," Arnuisar told him. "There is too much at stake to turn back now."

"If I can not persuade you otherwise, then I will show you the way to the Black Trees, but you will regret not heeding my warnings."

There was an ancient road that ran through the forest, leading towards the Hall of Black Trees, so old that none knew who had built it, nor when, but those few who deemed such matters of import considered that it was likely built by the same forgotten people who had built the Halls long before.

The road had long since been overrun by the forest, trees crowding around it, their canopy arching over it. Despite the degradations of time the road still endured, mosses thick upon its tightly fitting pacing stones, grasses struggling up between the cracks. In places trees had sprouted beneath it, shouldering aside pavers, their roots cracking open others and marring the even surface that had once existed.

Braega had led the Huatti to the road, their wagons following its path. The going was at times slow as they had to navigate fallen logs and trees that grew in importune locations. Alone of their people, Braega

and Hamat lead the Huatti, the others of their people having returned to their village, unwilling to brave the Black Trees. Alia stalked alongside the road amongst the trees, a silent ghost that shadowed their progress.

Tudhala, his little legs pumping rapidly, hurried to the front of the procession to join Braega and Hamat where they ambled along with their long strides.

"You seem to know a bit about the Hiyah Anodan Avad," he said to Braega.

"There are stories," Braega answered evasively.

"What is the Red Heart?"

The two men exchanged a brief glance above Tudhala's scaly head. "You do not know?" Braega asked carefully.

"Arnuisar has made no mention of it, even when he was putting together this expedition."

"That does not surprise me," Hamat noted dryly.

"Why is that?"

It was Braega that answered him. "It is said to be an item of great and terrible power."

"Why would he be after it then," Tudhala mused.

"You would need to ask him for that."

"What else do you know of it?"

"The stories say," Braega began, "That long ago there lived a man named Hataki. One day he found a red gemstone the size of a man's heart, a gem that glowed with an inner fire that was warm to the touch and that within it the fire throbbed like a beating heart. Hataki at first considered it nothing but a curiosity until one day in a moment of need he unlocked the power of the gem, discovering he could bring fires to life with it."

"That is not possible," Tudhala exclaimed. "Magic does not work like that. Earth and stone and metal can not be touched by magic, and nor can fire."

Braega shrugged indifferently. "As I said, it is just a story."

"What has it to do with the Hiyah Anodan Avad though?"

"Hataki used the Red Heart and the powers it contained to become a great champion. Then he heard of a darkness that had settled upon the lands, at a place called the Hall of the Black Trees. It came to his mind to vanquish this darkness and so he journeyed to that place. He never returned."

"He was of your people?"

"No. He came from beyond our lands, from the People of Iron it is said, but travelled amongst our people many generations back before he ventured into the Black Trees. Over the years many who have heard the story have sought to find the Heart amongst the Black Trees but none have ever emerged again."

"It is just a story," Tudhala said confidently.

"We shall see."

They camped that night off the road, alongside a small stream that splashed noisily down a series of small falls. There were a number of broken old columns there, some still standing, but most fallen and now covered with moss and vines. Braega had simply shrugged when asked if he knew anything of them. Before night had fallen, Braega and Alia had disappeared off into the forest, returning some time later with the body of a giant snake, some three metres in length. Away from the camp he had skinned and gutted it, preparing the meat to eat. Over the fire that burnt in the centre of the camp he had roasted the meat, though few of the Huatti had been game to try it, instead sticking to their own supplies. Braega, Hamat and Alia had tucked into the snake meat with apparent relish and had persuaded a reluctant Tudhala to at least attempt it. The two men grinned as they watched Tudhala tentatively place the morsel they had given him into his mouth. Slowly he had chewed it, finding the flavour it gave off strong, but not unpleasant.

As the night closed in and darkness fell, they built up the fire, huddling close around it as the sounds of the forest at night came to life, growing louder. The hoots and screeches and cries were unnerving to the Huatti, but the two men had lain down on the ground, seemingly unconcerned, falling asleep almost at

once. The Huatti found it much harder, many spending a sleepless night hounded by the strange calls that rang out amongst the darkness.

During the course of the following day's trek, Tudhala approached Arnuisar, deciding to seek answers.

"You did not mention this Red Heart before."

"I didn't?"

"No."

"The Hadna Tustaya? I am certain I must of," Arnuisar went on. "In any case, it is of little concern."

"Yet you knew of it."

"Only in passing. During my research of the Hiyah Anodan Avad I heard a few mentions of it in the old tales. It is just something to keep in mind while we examine the ruins."

"Braega thinks it is dangerous."

Arnuisar gave a short laugh. "They would think that. These humans are a primitive lot, superstitious and easily frightened by what they do not understand."

"Braega does not seem the type to scare easily."

"Perhaps, for that which he knows and understands. This is far beyond his experience and it is only natural he would be concerned by it."

It was late in the afternoon that Braega announced that they were nearing their destination. The ancient road had been slowly climbing up a rise until it suddenly arrived at the crest of a ridge. Below them appeared a giant sinkhole in the earth, fully a kilometre across.

The road continued down the other side, twisting its way down a steep, rugged slope to the floor of the sinkhole below. At the heart of the sinkhole there lay a lake, its waters the blackest that Tudhala had seen before, while the sinkhole's floor was thick with trees and wild growth. Beside the lake, in the direction that the road led, some kind of ruins stood, shrouded in foliage so they could barely be seen. Only a stepped spire that rose above the trees was able to be made out in any detail from where they stood looking down.

Despite the sun that still shone above, the sinkhole seemed to have an unnatural gloom about it, shadows clinging within and those that looked upon it had a chill sense of foreboding.

"We can camp here tonight," Braega announced, "And continue on down in the morning."

"Here? Nonsense," Arnuisar dismissed the suggestion brusquely. "We will camp beside the lake down there."

Arnuisar was normally not that reckless, a careful, considerate man Tudhala knew, yet Tudhala also understood the reasoning behind Arnuisar's apparently rash decision. It was an attempt to show the humans that he did not believe their superstitions, not a rational man like he.

"I advice against it," Braega warned, but Arnuisar ignored it, waving the group forward. The wagons carefully crested the ridge and began the slow journey down the descent that lead to the floor of the sinkhole.

As he followed, Tudhala caught sight of the one-eyed Hamat giving Braega a quick glance. "We can't let the newts go down there alone, Brae," he quietly said.

Braega reluctantly nodded. "I know."

There was an oddly unnatural silence as they descended down, the birdsongs and other sounds of the forest above falling away to stillness. At first the Huatti tried to ignore it, talking and laughing amongst each other as if nothing was wrong, but soon the atmosphere of the place pressed in upon them and one by one they too fell silent.

The trees down there were also different from the strong, vibrant ones that grew above. These were gnarled and twisted, half dead, crowding in upon the road, branches knotted together. Even though no winds blew to break the stillness, every once in a while a tree creaked and groaned, shuddering as if an unfelt wind was blowing across it.

A thick layer of fallen grey leaves, and rotting, broken branches lay upon the forest floor, a strong smell of damp and decay emanating from them.

Braega and Hamat were watchful as they walked along the road, eyes flickering from side to side, their bodies tense and expectant. The great cat Alia prowled low to the ground, her ears back and twitching. From time to time she and Braega exchanged knowing glances. To Tudhala it almost seemed to speak of some form of silent communication passing between them.

It was a sombre band that reached the lake, emerging from beneath the oppressive, crowding trees with evident relief. The shore around the lake was a mix of black earth and broken stones, whilst rotting reeds grew in the still waters. Hordes of small insects, the first animals they had seen, buzzed amongst the reeds. All around, from the waters, to the shores to the reeds themselves, came the pervasive, foul aroma of decay and rot.

Just up from the dark waters of the lake, where the trees met the shore, stood the shell of an old building. The roof and wall that lay closest to the lake had long since fallen in, and weeds grew thick amongst the fallen masonry. It was a fair sized building with wide, empty windows, though there were no indications of what its exact purpose had once been.

The wagons were drawn up before the missing wall, forming a crude barricade, and their gear was unloaded and carried inside the shell to set up a camp.

"We will need firewood, and lots of it," Braega said quietly. It was the first time that any had spoken for some time, and it seemed an almost unnatural sound in the dread silence. Arnuisar nodded and motioned for some of the Huatti to commence collecting it, though he did not speak a command, the gloomy melancholy afflicting even him. Others began clearing aside rubble and beating down the weeds to establish a place for their camp and the fireplace.

Plenty of fallen wood lay below the trees, but none of those collecting it ventured far in beneath them, not out of sight of the ruins nor of the lake itself. Much of the wood they found had rotten through and as they picked it up they were constantly upheaving colonies of squirming, many legged insects, horrendous to look upon. The insects scurried and burrowed beneath the dead leaves of the forest floor as their homes were dislodged.

Tudhala was staggering back carrying a heavy load of wood, walking along the black shore, when out on the lake the waters splashed as if something had disturbed them. By the time he had turned all he could make out where rings rippling across its black surface. Braega stood nearby, also looking out at the waters with some concern.

"Fish?" Tudhala asked timidly

"Possibly," the tall hunter replied. "Not any I would eat in any case."

The sun sunk beyond the rim of the sinkhole and the shadows that gripped it had deepened by the time they had finished collecting a large pile of wood that Hamat had declared barely adequate for the night. The mules had been brought in amongst the ruins with them, hobbled with tether cords off to one side. The fire had been built up, its glow brilliant against the darkness that descended.

The meal that evening was the quietest that Tudhala could remember. The Huatti, normally so gregarious, were withdrawn and subdued by the mood of the place. There were no jokes or laughter, and precious little said. They drew in close to the fire, drawn by the warmth and light that it provided, their thoughts solitary. Overhead the skies were strangely dark, while the stars that normally lay scattered brightly across its vast bulk were not to be seen.

"It is just clouds," Arnuisar had pronounced, somewhat unconvincingly, when someone had raised the lack of stars in the night's sky.

"There are no clouds," Braega quietly replied. "It is this place."

Arnuisar looked as if he was about to respond to Braega when from out in the darkness came a low, mournful wail that seemingly lasted forever.

"A wolf?" Tudhala asked.

"No," Braega answered simply.

"Then what?"

"Something else," was the ominous reply.

The night passed unsettlingly quiet, beyond the crackling of the fire and the sound made by those few who could sleep. The wild noises of the previous night were gone and all the Huatti would have preferred that to the foreboding silence that enclosed them that night.

Sleep was restless, and always a pair of the group was awake to tend the fire and keep an eye out as best as they could for any danger, though none did eventuate. Not even that long wail of the previous evening was heard of again.

The burgeoning light that marked the arrival of dawn revealed that a light mist had come in during the night, settling lightly over the still, dark waters of the lake, and twisting in disturbing patterns amongst the trees, reducing the vista to a place of sombre shadows.

"I don't like this, Brae," Hamat told Braega as the pair walked around the ruined building, checking for any signs of disturbances, while the Huatti prepared a breakfast. They spoke in hushed tones. "I don't like this a lot. I have a heavy feeling upon me, almost as if we are being watched."

"Yet we haven't seen anything alive down here beyond a few bugs."

"I know. That only makes it worse."

"The sooner Arnuisar has his look at these ruins, the sooner we can leave."

Hamat nodded, before shuddering as he shook himself. "This place weighs down heavily on my spirit. Something bad is coming."

Breakfast was a hasty affair, Arnuisar insisting on seeing the ruins of the Black Trees almost immediately. With him he took half the Huatti, accompanied by Braega and Alia. The rest stayed behind with Hamat to tend the camp, and to restock the firewood that they had burnt through during the night. Arnuisar carried with him a large book, bound shut with an iron clasp, which he gripped tightly to his chest with both arms and permitted no others to touch.

The walk beneath the twisted, knotted canopy was a short one, perhaps no more than ten minutes in time, yet to Tudhala it felt far longer. The mist was slowly dissipating, yet out of the corner of his eye he thought that from time to time he caught strange shapes in it, shapes that were no longer there when he quickly tuned to look. Each time, his heart seemed to beat faster in his chest, and his ears rang with its sound. Others also noted the strange apparitions in the mist, likewise glancing about, and Braega himself was seemingly prowling in the same manner of Alia, alert, vigilant and on edge.

Then they were out from under the trees and at the ruins of the Hiyah Avodan Avad, with it the tension pent up in their bodies easing to some degree. Before them spread a vast courtyard, the stone pavers that made up its surface barely visible beneath the moss and grass that grew across it, while fallen stonework lay strewn over its surface.

Down either side of the courtyard ran a series of immense black stone columns, their forms carved into the appearance of trees, arching out overhead like branches, which had once supported a roof that had long since fallen away. Tangled vines draped down their lengths, beneath which could be made out the carved shapes of snakes that twisted their way up the length of the columns, their heads lodged in the branches above.

At the far end of the courtyard steps climbed up to a still standing building, atop which the spire they had spotted from the ridge of the sinkhole rose, climbing high above the foliage of the crowding trees. The doorway to the building lay open, and within it could be seen a towering stone statue, fully thrice as tall as Braega. In appearance it was that of a four armed humanoid, its head like that of a bird with a sharp and viciously curved beak. It stood in a one legged pose, its other leg raised in the manner of that of a stork. In each clawed hand it held a stone bowl.

"What is that thing?" Tudhala asked, keeping his voice low.

"He is called Taru Shewa, the Watcher," Arnuisar replied.

"It is evil," Braega added. "It is a Spirit-Stalker, a creature of the shadows, which comes from the Outerlands. This is a cursed place for it to be here."

Arnuisar frowned at Braega, shaking his head. "You are confused, human. The Spirit-Stalkers look

nothing like this. Taru Shewa is not a Spirit-Stalker."

Alia suddenly snarled, dropping low into a threatening crouch towards the statue, ready to pounce.

There came from that direction a low moan, not unlike the one they had heard during the previous night, and there shuffled from behind the statue a shambling figure.

It made towards them, lurching down the steps in a peculiar lopsided gait, its right leg dragging behind it as if pulled down by a heavy weight.

"We must go, now," Braega warned in a low growl. Arnuisar stood still, gaping at the thing coming their way. Braega gave him a quick shove. "Go, now!"

The thing that came towards them looked much like a man, and may even have been one in the past but that was no longer the case. Its skin was pallid and gaunt, almost skull like as it was pulled tight around its head. Only a few wispy strands of dark hair still clung to its scalp. Hands stretched out towards them, the nails long and sharp like claws.

"Go!" Braega yelled again and the stunned Huatti began to back off. To Tudhala's surprise Braega did not go with them, but began to rush towards shambling creature. Almost abstractly as he backed away, Tudhala noticed that Braega curiously did not draw the bone knife he carried in his belt.

The creature lunged at Braega with a speed that belied its lurching gait, clawed hands slashing at the air. Braega was not there though. Instead he leapt a prodigious almost impossible leap into the air, above the flailing claws. His left foot pushed off the creature's chest, propelling him even higher. His right foot hammered forward, crunching with brutal force into the creature's face. Its head snapped back from the impact and its legs went out from beneath it. Even as it fell to the ground, Braega landed on it boots first with a bone-shattering crunch. It spasmed for a moment and then moved no more. Braega turned and raced back towards the Huatti, with not a glance back at the crumpled form.

"Run!"

Alia growled again. The columns that lined the courtyard had begun to shake, the vines that tangled about them rustling. From beneath them the stone snakes that had festooned the columns began to stir and slide downwards towards the ground.

The Huatti turned on their tails and fled back towards the camp beside the lake.

The race back through the trees by Tudhala and his fellow Huatti as they tried to reach safety was a nightmarish one. The forest had seemingly come alive in a malevolent fashion, moans and strange cackles erupting from amongst them, while the trees themselves shook, roots rising in their path to trip them and branches fell like rain around them. Strange, unearthly shapes seemed to flit between the trees, remaining just out of sight so that their true form and nature could not be seen.

Braega raced back and forward amongst the Huatti, herding them forward, helping them to their feet when they stumbled and fell. Alia had disappeared amongst the trees early in the flight and of her there was no sight, but her frequent deep-throated snarls marked her passage alongside them.

Tudhala almost sobbed with a sense of overwhelming relief as he at last dashed out from the trees onto the black shores at the edge of the lake. Braega was the last out, half carrying, half dragging one of the other Huatti, Hebuat, who had been dazed by one of the falling branches and had been unable to walk straight, let alone run.

The sense of relief was brought to an abrupt end though. Snaking out from the ruins, where the wagons had been tossed aside, down across the shore and into the lake, a distance of some ten metres, was a vast, sinuous, reptilian form, slime thick over its pale scales.

The serpent that had struck the camp was immense, its body a metre thick and true length remaining unknown by the portion that was still hidden in the lake. There was an evil cast to its head, but the malevolent eyes in its head were now dull and lifeless. Fangs like daggers emerged from the mouth, from them dripping venom that hissed and smoked as it struck ground. Hamat's spear was driven deep into flesh behind the head, slaying it.

The camp itself was in ruins, the crushed and broken bodies of both mules and Huatti tossed around by the fury of the serpent. Hamat was slumped against the back wall, left leg twisted at an angle and obviously broken, while he held his right arm tight to his side. Only a couple of the Huatti were still alive,

and they were picking their way amongst the fallen, checking for any signs of life.

"We never heard it coming," Hamat told Braega, voice slurred. "First we knew of it was when it crashed through the wagons."

Braega dropped down at his friend's side to inspect the broken leg.

Hamat weakly shook his head. "It is too late for me, Brae," he announced, voice pained and drifting off. His arm fell away from his side, revealing torn hides through which could be seen two large puncture marks. The flesh around them was already grey and showing signs of corruption. "I got him though. It will make a grand tale for the Hunting Fields." A tight gurgle came from deep in his throat and he twitched for a moment before his head slumped back against the wall, his one good eye staring lifelessly at the sky.

Braega leant forward, shutting Hamat's eye for the last time. "There will be songs around the fires telling of your bravery, my friend," he promised.

He slowly rose to his feet, turning towards Arnuisar. The short Huatti was looking on dazed, confused, his expression of one uncomprehending of what was occurring before him. "We warned you," Braega growled, voice low but all the more terrible for it. "We told you of the danger of this place, but you did not listen."

Arnuisar blinked, suddenly looking about with concern. "My book," was all he said. His expression became frantic. "Where is my book? I must find it!" Before any could react he dashed off, Braega giving an exasperated growl.

Braega pointed at the other Huatti. "You lot, stay here. Don't go anywhere. Build up the fire. Use what is left of the wagons if you have to. With the mules dead, they serve no other purpose now anyway."

"Where are you going?" Tudhala asked, looking concerned.

"I am going to fetch him back if I can. He is dead otherwise, and there has been enough death today already."

"I am going with you," Tudhala told him.

Braega shook his head. "No, I need you to stay here. I can travel faster by myself."

"You do not understand. I have to go with you." Tudhala's statement was firm, causing Braega to study the small Huatti closely. Finally he nodded.

"Very well. You can explain what you mean later."

They ran back through the trees, Alia loping alongside them, fresh blood upon her flanks. Whether it came for her or something else could not easily be told. Braega examined the ground as they ran, following tracks left behind by Arnuisar.

"He is headed back to the ruins. Madness."

A terrible rasping hiss echoed from ahead of them and from amongst the trees slithered a giant black form, a serpent that raised itself as hit approached, head flared and tongue darting forth, one of the beasts that had come from the columns that formed the Black Trees.

Alia snarled a vicious challenge, surging forward before they pair could react to the threat. The great cat rose up on her hind legs in the moment of impact, her terrible jaws slamming shut around the serpent's neck, while her forepaws grappled with it, claws digging in deep to seek purchase. The shearing teeth clamped shut with ferocious force, slicing through scale, flesh and bone. The serpent thrashed in Alia's grip, seeking in its death throes to coil around and crush her.

Braega raced forward to lend aid to Alia, leaping up, fingers bent like claws, slashing at the serpent's face. Blood bloomed as he struck, the beast's eye ripped away as terrible gouges were left behind across its scaled head. For a moment, so suddenly that Tudhala thought he must have been imagining it, Braega's hand had seemed to warp into a fierce clawed form as it had struck, but then it was gone. On reflection he thought it must have been the fear and shock that had caused him to see it.

A solid kick from Braega sent the serpent crashing to ground, Alia releasing her death grip on it. It thrashed and twisted around itself for a moment, blood pouring from the terrible wounds at its throat to pool across the dead leaves of the forest floor before at last it lay dead. Braega and Alia ran on without a moments look back, and Tudhala had to hurry on after them.

Arnuisar was already at the Hiyah Anodan Avad by the time they arrived, the book he was after in his hands. He stood before the statue of Taru Shewa, the book open. From it he was reading and slowly chanting.

"What is he doing?" Braega asked as they entered the courtyard, starting down its length between the black columns.

"I do not know," Tudhala replied. "The book he carries is the Hantala Urhu Teshab, the Book of Years Unnumbered. It is a book of knowledge and great power. I have not yet been permitted to read from its pages, and of the many secrets it holds, but I have seen bearers of the Hantala Urhu Teshab perform many strange wonders over the years."

Arnuisar span as they reached the base of the steps, his eyes wild. "The Hadna Tustaya is here, I know it," he told them in a frantic voice. "I must find it!"

Braega held up his hands to show he posed no threat, slowly starting up the stairs. "Too many have already died, Arnuisar."

"It won't matter if I can't find the Hadna Tustaya, none of it will. Can you not understand?"

"Can't say I do, but this is not the place to discuss it. You have your book, and now we must leave before we too die."

Arnuisar shook his head violently. "No! I can't! I won't!"

Braega looked over to Tudhala, face tightening at the corner of his eyes. "See if you can speak sense to him, Tudhala, otherwise he will have to stay behind if we are to save ourselves."

Tudhala looked shocked at the suggestion, but he nodded and quickly scurried up the stairs to speak with Arnuisar. Their words came quickly, spilling out; Tudhala pleading with Arnuisar to leave who in turn was vehement in his determination to remain.

Alia padded over to stand beside Braega, her thick tail slashing behind her. She looked up at him, and then yawned, displaying the full might of her powerful jaws and teeth.

"I know," Braega said to her quietly. He gave a soft sigh before shaking his head. Alia growled and sunk low, facing her body back down along the black columns. From amongst the trees began to emerge creatures and monsters, all twisted and vile to behold.

"Arnuisar, Tudhala, we must go now!"

Tudhala hurried back down the stairs. "He won't come. He is obsessed in finding the Hadna Tustaya, and I now know why."

"That is great," Braega told him, "But we have company. Look."

Tudhala turned to where Braega was gesturing. There were more of the shambling men alike to the one they had seen earlier making their ungainly way down the courtyard, and with them were monster lizards, some up to three or four metres in length. They were low slung to the ground, their feet widespread. Their skin was mottled, patches of deathly pallor spread across dull grey scales, and around them trailed a miasma of sickly green. Tongues flickered and eyes burned with an unnatural fervour as they advanced.

"They are not natural," Tudhala gasped, while behind him Arnuisar had returned to his chanting, voice at a fever pitch.

"No, they are not," Braega agreed with Tudhala. "There is darkness in this place, a corruption that has seeped into all living things. Trees, people, animals, all are brought down by it and twisted into perversions of what they once were. I can feel the stench of it, clawing at me." He looked at Tudhala, eyes hard and serious. "No matter what happens now little Tudhala, you must run. Get back to your companions and lead them to safety. Here, take my knife," he added, drawing the bone knife from his belt and passing it hilt first to Tudhala. "It is not much, and I hope that you are not required to use it, but it is better than nothing."

"What of you?"

Braega smiled, but there was a grimness about it. "Life must counter death," he answered simply. "Be ready to run when I say." He turned back to face the oncoming monsters, face steeling itself. He took a deep breath and shook himself out.

A shudder rippled through his body and then, before Tudhala's amazed eyes, he began to warp, to change, and to twist into a new form. Fingers began to lengthen and partially fuse together, while nails sprouted into thick and terrible claws. Dark fur grew across forearms and hands that were now more like paws, even as his face began to warp into a more feral, bestial countenance, not unlike that of a great fanged bear. He swelled and broadened in size until at last he was something else entirely, a pale eyed, dark furred creature that was part man and part beast. A savage roar split the air and he bounded forward down the stairs, knuckling along on his hands, Alia in pursuit, racing at the oncoming foe. As he ran, the dry grass that grew thick in the courtyard seemed to ripple and part before him, as if a wind was passing across it. The grass seemed to blossom in the wake of his passage, a verdant tinge spreading amongst the grey and brown, flourishing with renewed life.

Alia let forth a reverberating snarl, leaping atop a piece of fallen, broken masonry before her great body soared skywards from it, to crash solidly into one of the shambling men. The impact sent both crashing, rolling across the ground in a flail of fangs and claws and snarls.

One of the monster lizards lunged for Braega, teeth snapping at him, but Braega one more leapt easily above the clumsy attack, landing on the back of the lizard, the force driving the lizard to the ground. Braega jumped from it, clawed hand slashing at a passing shambler, sending the creature tumbling over, its face ripped open in a spray of blood by the dreadful claws that now sprouted from Braega's hands. Alia was up again, surging forward at one of the lizards that had spun around to track Braega's progress. Tudhala watched on in wonder, all thought of flight forgotten by the spectacle before him. The pair seemed to flow fluidly amongst their ungainly foes, in a dance of claw and fang and more, in perfect co-ordination with the other. A lizard lunged at Braega's back only for Alia to barrel it over, while a shambler moving in to strike at Alia was met with a vicious backhanded blow from the hulking Braega. Yet there were too many of the monsters. Some were down amongst the ever flourishing grass, yet more were arriving to replace them and Alia and Braega both were marked, bleeding from errant blows that had wounded them. Tudhala wanted to help, but knew that there was little that he could do, not against the monsters arrayed before him, and not with naught but a simple bone knife at hand.

All unexpected, Arnuisar gave a thunderous cry of triumph. In the confusion of the battle, Tudhala had all but forgotten him. He span around to see Arnuisar standing exultantly, one hand raised above his head. He spoke one more word, a word that echoed down amongst the black columns and beyond, reverberating back on itself, growing in strength and power as it flooded back into the building where the statue stood, a word that changed in and of itself, and at last, having reached its peak, it exploded in a thunderous denotation that shook the surroundings with its fury.

There was a moment of shocked silence that followed the explosion, a moment when all was still and perfectly quiet, broken when the monsters that were engaged in combat across the courtyard fled in terrified panic. A low groan came from one of the black columns as slowly, slowly it tilted and began a long and lingering collapse, toppling to crash to the ground where it shattered into a thousand flying fragments.

Tudhala's mouth was left wide open in utter shock at what had just happened. Arnuisar was beaming with exultation.

It did not last long, brusquely interrupted by a rumbling from the four armed statue that Arnuisar called Taru Shewa. The leg that had been tucked up began to slowly unfold and was set down, the talons of its feet ringing ominously at they touched the ground. The bowls it had been holding in its clawed hands fell away to bounce clattering across the ground, one tumbling down the steps. All four hands began to flex and stretch. Within the cold orbs of its eyes a fey green fire began to burn, cruel and terrifying in nature to behold. The curved beak opened and the sound that issued forth from it was an overwhelming screech, the sounds of it ringing in their ears and leaving thoughts scrambled.

It lent forward, fixing its baleful eyes upon Arnuisar who stood closest to it. Slowly it reached out with one of its hands, claws closing around the terrified Huatti and plucking him from his feet. The book tumbled from his stricken hands to fall open on the ground.

"Release me, I command you!" Arnuisar bellowed, recovering his wits long enough to cry out. His hands beat ineffectually at the hand that encircled him. "I demand that by the Words that empower and bind

you, release me, and that you reveal to me the resting place of the Hadna Tustaya."

The sound that came from Taru Shewa could only be described as laughter, for there was no other sound it could be, but it was an echoing, alien, malevolent laughter. "You dare to command me?" it rasped, the resonance of its voice sending shivers running through Tudhala's body. The beak slashed forward and tore Arnuisar's head from his body, the head falling to bounce away, a last expression of shock and surprise set on its features.

"Run, Tudhala, run!" Braega bellowed. He had returned to his natural form, one now bloody and bruised, face scored with pain and weariness. Fear gripped him, kicking him into action and, snatching up the fallen book, the Hantala Urhu Teshab, he bolted down the stairs. Taru Shewa tossed aside the headless corpse of Arnuisar and with a screech he darted after Tudhala, taloned feet clattering upon the stairs.

A clawed hand slashed through the air narrowly behind him, close enough he could feel the force of its passage upon his back from the air it disturbed. A frustrated screech followed it. Terror gripping him, pumping through him, he ran like he had never run before, arms holding tight the Hantala Urhu Teshab to him.

Braega fell in alongside Tudhala, bleeding heavily from a cut to his right forearm and another beneath his left eye. He turned to face Taru Shewa, eyes blazing, raising his hands as if lifting a vast weight. Sweat beaded and flowed across his brow and he seemed to shudder and stagger. The grasses across the courtyard swayed and grew, wrapping around the legs of Taru Shewa, trying to bind and slow him. Tudhala began to slow, to look back towards Braega, but the man gave him a look of absolutely soul-rending weariness. "Go on," he urged, voice tight and strained. "Get out of here. Alia, see him safe."

The cat gave a plaintive yowl, but turned on its feet, loping after Tudhala. Hollow laughter echoed behind and Tudhala risked one last brief glance, only to see Taru Shewa tear himself loose of the growth that was seeking to bind him and lunge forward. A clawed hand flailed in a blow that Braega desperately sought to dodge aside from, but he was too slow and too weak. It caught him a glancing blow, sending him tumbling through the air to crash unmoving to the ground some metres away.

Then Tudhala was running again.

The thought occurred to Tudhala as he raced beneath the twisted trees, lungs aflame and legs screaming with fatigue, that he had spent far too much of the last few days on the run from horror and death. It was not a state of affairs he relished or wished to repeat again.

A fresh screech and the crash of the lumbering Taru Shewa shouldering aside trees in his chase brought an involuntary cry from Tudhala's lips, and spurred him in an attempt to run faster, though he knew he had no more to give. Like all Huatti, when pressed to it, he could put forth a fair turn of speed that belied his size, but that was only over short distances, and his body was already trembling from the mix of fear and fatigue that afflicted it.

Something loomed out of the shadows amongst the trees ahead, but Tudhala barely had time to register its presence, let alone consider how to deal with it, before Alia had bowled it over in her run, sending it tumbling away. Tudhala sprinted wearily passed, not sparing a moment's glance at it, for he had no energy to do so.

The faint scent of smoke came to him from ahead, just a hint amongst the sickly rot of decaying vegetation that lay thick around, enough to encourage him. The camp lay close at hand, though he realised he had no plans for when he arrived. Then he was out from under the trees again, back on the black shores of the lake. A thick pillar of smoke was rising from within the ruins, while all about beasts shambled, hesitant to approach the roaring fire. Tudhala darted between a pair of mottled lizards before they even realised he was upon them, ducking into the ruins. One of the broken wagons was well ablaze, the Huatti who had remained behind holding burning brands with which they menaced anything that ventured too close.

Tudhala collapsed to the ground, dropping the Hantala Urhu Teshab alongside him. He was absolutely spent, body tremulous, aching in every joint, in every fibre of his being. Alia lay down alongside him,

yawning a toothy yawn before resting her head on her forepaws, waiting and looking expectantly back the way they had come.

"I am sure he is alright," Tudhala hoarsely gasped, fighting for breath. The cat looked up at him steadily before resting her head again. He was not sure if she had understood or not, though she had displayed remarkable intelligence during the time he had known Braega.

Tudhala wasn't even sure if Braega was alive. The blow he had taken had been a formidable one, but if any could have survived it, Braega could. The man had displayed remarkable, if rather primal, power and it was not completely beyond the bounds of belief that he may have survived. He certainly hoped Braega had survived, for he was at a loss as to what to do next. It was not an eventuality that he had had any training for, and even if they did manage to escape the beasts that surrounded them, making it to safety back through the forest with limited supplies was another formidable hurdle to surmount.

The forest burst open and Taru Shewa erupted from it in a shower of falling leaves and shattered branches, emerging on the shores of the black lake, green eyes burning like fel fires. The beasts that had been lurking around shrewdly scattered at its appearance, rather than risk its enraged wrath.

It stalked forward, taloned feet digging deep into the ground, head cocked to one side. "Fires do not frighten me," it rasped as it drew close, eyes flaring brighter.

The Huatti began to back off as it loomed closer and the fear of its very presence hit them. Tudhala rose wearily, shakily to his feet. If they ran then they were lost, but to stand and fight against a foe like Taru Shewa was itself an exercise in futility.

From the broken trees where Taru Shewa had burst forth there came a roar, a challenging bellow.

Stepping from the shadows out into the light was Braega, though not as Tudhala had last seen him. From a shaggy maned head sprouted a pair of curled ram's horns. Lowering his head, he surged forward, straight for Taru Shewa, fleet of foot, seemingly bounding across the shore.

The four armed creature turned in astonishment at the suddenness of Braega's arrival, startled into momentary inaction. Braega's horned head slammed into him with startling force, the crack of the collision loudly audible. Braega rebound from the confrontation, falling backwards on the black earth, yet Taru Shewa himself was thrown by the impact, tossed into the dark waters of the lake itself.

He floundered for a moment, screeching in irritation, seeking for a foothold. Then the waters boiled and a sinuous white serpentine form rose up and twined about Taru Shewa. The beast thrashed, trying to break free of the hold the serpent had upon him and fountains of water erupted from the contest.

Tudhala raced over to where Braega lay, fatigue momentarily forgotten. The tall hunter's features melted back into his own, familiar ones, and he slowed picked himself up, right arm hanging limply at his side.

His face was deathly pale, almost grey in places. He managed a few steps towards the ruins before doubling over and retching in obvious discomfort.

"The corruption here," he gasped out, "It is too much for me. We must leave, now."

Tudhala had no dispute with that. He helped Braega over to where the remnant of the expedition waited with the expectant Alia, as best as he could. They quickly grabbed what they could, of which Tudhala made sure the Hantala Urhu Teshab was a part, and then hurriedly departed, leaving behind the two fel beasts to struggle in the waters of the fetid lake.

Tudhala breathed deep of the clean airs of the forest as the weary group clambered up the last incline to the top of the ridge of the sinkhole, clear at last of the cloying scent of decay that pervaded it. Braega too appeared much better for the fresher air, his pallor improving, having been sick more than once in their race for the safety of the heights, a race that had remained strangely unhindered.

From their vantage point as they rested, Tudhala could see the smoke still rising from the burning wagon in the ruins beside the lake. The waters were still again, the struggling monsters no more to be seen.

"You think it won?" Tudhala asked Braega.

"Likely so."

"Will it follow us?"

"I hope not, but I do not think so. The creatures of that place seem bound to it. None have been seen to leave."

"You spoke of a corruption in that place. What was it doing to you?"

"There is a sickness there, a darkness that spread through all living things around the Black Trees. What it is I do not know, but it is a corruption of nature, seeping into all things and changing them, lingering in them. When I do what I do, I draw on the power of life from around me, but down there I drew in that corruption as well."

"Can it be defeated, the darkness?"

Braega smiled faintly. "I would like to believe so, but not by the likes of us."

Tudhala nodded in response, quiet for a while. "I am sorry about your friend," he said softly after a bit.

"He died well. What of your master?"

"He brought it upon himself." Tudhala shook his head. "And others paid for it as well." He looked to Braega, expressions serious. "You saved my life. Thank you."

Braega inclined his head, then gave a wry grin. "Again."

Tudhala chuckled. "Yes. You seem to be making a habit of it. I owe you a great debt, one that must be repaid, and with Arnuisar dead I am a free person once more. Until that debt is repaid, I shall accompany you."

Braega clapped Tudhala on the shoulder. "The way you attract trouble, I do not think that that will be long in coming."

Tudhala laughed as the pair began to walk away, leaving behind the lingering gloom that once more seeped in to shroud the Hall of Black Trees.

PURE ESCAPISM

There are a number of creatures that appear in the *Hall of Black Trees* that may appear fanciful in the extreme, but are in fact based on real, though extinct, animals. If you are interested in finding out a bit more about these fascinating creatures, I have written up a post about them at <http://mistandshadows.com/megafauna-in-pure-escapism>.