

Twenty-One Tales from Charwarg



I present the opening passage of *The Biography of Lucullus, First Gardener of Lir*, written by Silas, the second gardener of Lir:

Rearing flowers is an exercise in vigilance, for it is the nature of fertile soil to sprout weeds, and it is the nurturing of the gardener that pulls those weeds before they grow. The inattentive gardener soon finds his flowers overrun by the wilds.

Just as neglect fertilizes nature's wilds, so too do fictions sprout where there are no facts; without proper attention, they grow to myths and soon bloom as legends. It is the inattentive historian who finds his histories overrun by those legends.

In my ages of traveling the Thorn Lands, I have found no destination in which history's landscape has been cultivated with less concern for fact than Charwarg. The myths are never pulled, never pruned. They sprawl as a kudzu, their invasive spirit siphoning nourishment from reason, evidence, truth.

For four days and three nights, I traveled along the Grass Road, from Farhearth to Charwarg, and in my journey, I consistently encountered bands of wayfarers, exiles, and road merchants. Not one of them shed a rumor or cared to relish one. It wasn't until I crossed the perimeter of Charwarg that rumors became the currency of the people, disbursed with pride, received with gluttony.

One person's account seldom supported another's, however. The bards and lyricists, the armorers and innkeepers, the herders and healers: they all told a different story. When I asked twenty-one of Charwarg's tenants for a history of the Thorn King, I was given twenty-one tales, with few consistencies between them. In my effort to faithfully record each account, I noticed two things:

First, over generations and across occupations, the people of Charwarg have assigned the Thorn King a hundred suffixes as surnames. Thorn, the Undertide, a raft captain calls him. Thorn, the Unraveled, says a squire of the Shieldguard. Thorn, the Deathless, according to a tavern bard. His titles go on, and I came to appreciate that naming a story waters its roots, nurturing its place in the garden. Without a name, the rumor might wither and die.

Second, just as the names of Thorn differ, so do the narratives themselves. There is a birdcaller who pronounces him fiction; there is a butcher who says he's a fish. Some say he is the world's creator, others its destroyer. The fables are fragmented, and the many inconsistencies illuminate the many deceptions. However, it is the remiss gardener who sees this as reason to uproot the entire plot, for surely flowers grow within the wilds and truths amid the myths. Likewise, it is the reckless historian who discards all facts contaminated by fictions.

Today, recklessness has endured, impeding the penning of any record. Because the stories of Thorn are not confined to scholarship, they have never been shelved in the libraries of Farhearth. The archives containing the histories of the Connected Continents lack any mention of their central land. There is no page recounting its origin or detailing the creature who dwells at its heart.

On many subjects, the rumors of Charwarg contain more knowledge than the books of Farhearth, but that knowledge is fickle and often fails to withstand the first blush of scrutiny. On the subject of Thorn, these rumors provide the most abundant source of information we have, so it is where we must begin our history. Cobbling together the synoptic stories may be the most reliable starting place, but it proves to be an exercise requiring both patience and imagination. On the pages that follow, I have provided the twenty-one tales of Thorn, documented as faithfully as I can, from my visit to Charwarg.

According to Minerva, clockmaker:

At the morning of the world, when all the lands were young, and the white sun shown on their great expanse, they called him The Pale Priest of Thorn. And the days were good.

At the world's noon, at the building of the bridges, when the lands had grown up and pulled apart, and the inhabitants had taken root, they called him The Hag Priest of Thorn. And the days were spent in toil.

At the arrival of the world's dusk, when the north had succumbed to winter and the neighboring lands had grown old, no longer as supple as in youth, they called him The Fallen Priest of Thorn. And spirited days concealed their peril.

Now, at the starlight of the world, stories of the Thorn King have scattered as a dandelion takes to the gust. The only sincerity lies in their duplicity. And the days are numbered.

According to Agnes, innkeeper:

Every sundown, people of all kinds come around here asking up questions. And they aren't all buying themselves rooms. Only a few of them are taking my beds. Far fewer are drumming for anything about Thorn. In my younger years, they did. That's all anyone asked about when I was growing and first remembering. But not for a lot of seasons, has it been. On the occasion someone does ask, they're usually just looking for a little aim: some direction on crossing Thorn to get where they're headed. The last person with curiosity asking was Mundus, that grizzled explorer out of Farhearth. I've seen his maps. And I've seen a lot of maps by the other explorers. I can tell you this: Mundus is the only one who scales Thorn to its true size. Every other map of the continents has Thorn looking like a little sibling of the other lands, like it's the runt of the litter. And even Mundus eventually stopped labeling our world's reaches the Thorn Lands, as the oldest maps all did. There hasn't been a map painted up in my lifetime that doesn't call them the Connected Continents. But it was *from* Thorn that each of our lands sprung, and it was *to* Thorn that their people once paid offering. But I wonder how many tenants staying here tonight are going to put bread in their shoes before they turn in. None of us is my bet. Instead of honoring Thorn at the feet of our journeys, we just start calling it by other names and creating it smaller and smaller in our maps. That kind of behavior is meant to conceal our fears, but it only succeeds in betraying them. If you want to do right by Thorn in your days, navigate by Mundus' maps. And if you want to do right by Thorn each night, then put some bread in your shoes before you draw your sheets.

According to Rex, squire of Grinspoon

They call him Thorn, the Unraveled and they say he rides into battle on a bloodmare with a hide like the black woods and red sap in its wounds. And he gallops to a sinister beat, the hooves drumming their death song into the earth as he charges, bearing the endless apocalypse.

That's one story. How it begins, anyway. But most of these stories just come from other stories. There haven't been many soldiers who've confronted the Thorn King and lived. And only survivors can tell tales. So folk're just saying what they've heard and passing it along. Hard to know what is and isn't true. Probably some details lost and gained in the retellings. But part of becoming a squire is learning all of those tales, and putting their poetry before the facts. Whether those facts really happened, there's usually a lesson in their telling.

I've known two soldiers who've seen the Thorn King for themselves, which is two more than most. There are others though. Every survivor returns home with a story. And every story has a name. Thorn, the Spirit Auger. Thorn, Night Summoner. Thorn, Scourge Weaver. Thorn, the whatever describing whoever's encounter.

The first one I heard, which earned the Thorn King his title of "the Unraveled", came from my father, Samuel:

Twenty-five summers ago, five before I was even a lad, Thorn came galloping onto our eastern lands. My father lived in the outer billets of Lyonhall and had not yet met my mother. She was still pampering her youthful dreams in Thevro, as every lass did and still does there. And my mother is the only one of the lot whose indulgent imagination I can excuse. Not because she's my mother, but because she left. And in doing so, left behind those infectious delusions before they matured to expectations and then to demands. And then to disappointment.

Her departure wasn't some sort of protest, as in: "*Realism is lost on you fools!*" She left because she got injured... in the way everyone does there: atop a horse, distracted with grander amendments to already-grand visions. Everyone obviously blames the horse. And no one, obviously, believes it. In part because of how sincerely the story is told. I've learned to distrust any tale told without doubt. A storyteller's eyes widen, a voice grows firm, a brow furrows, a finger points, a truth is stretched. Honest statements are made in modesty, not bellowed by salesmen. But however elastic the particulars of this particular story, a horse definitely bucked her. And so she was taken to Estevro, where the healer was better, in a carriage pulled by a new, blameless horse. That's when, why, and how she left Thevro.

But when she got to Estevro, she was told the healer had recently left for Lyonhall, having nearly as recently given birth to a son, whom she wanted to grow up amid the discipline and the protection the great fortress offered. With her newborn son cradled in her tired arms, the healer finished her journey, arriving at the gates of Lyonhall, on the morning the tournament began. My mother arrived the next day. A man from Lonvaraka arrived the next, demanding arena admittance so he could paint Mizjak's grace in battle.

The day my mother arrived, the healer from Estevro was already employed on the combat grounds, hired to provide aid for the wounded competitors. My mother pretended to be one of those competitors so she could receive care for what was surely portrayed as a heroic equestrian injury, the details of her feat expounded with the conviction of a magistrate's verdict. That's how she met my father. He fought Mizjak on the second day of the tournament, which meant he finished the match at the healer, who, at the time, was treating my mother.

As my mother tells the story, "You'll have to wait!" were her first words to my father. To that, he replied with a long period of courting. But that courting was interrupted the next night when the Thorn King came.

At dawn, Mizjak fought his first bout of the day. That morning, they say he won round after round with self-imposed handicaps: immobilized feet, only using his opposite hand, only using his opposite hand while holding his sword upside down. At noon, the man from Lonvaraka arrived and decided not to paint Mizjak after all; rather, he saw more art in the healer and her child, and he vowed to commit them to his canvas instead. At dusk, uninjured, unstruck, and generally unchallenged, Mizjak was drinking his brandy. Elsewhere, my mother and father were limping, but healing, and doing both together. And not for a lack of looking, nobody knew where the healer, her baby, or the painter were. It was at that moment that the disc of the moon turned red, its sky rent asunder, and darkness itself began to echo outside the fortress walls. Then, high above the world, Thorn's star was ignited.

For a Lyonhall soldier, the privilege to take up arms is always a gratifying one, done with not just duty, but zeal. This was not one of those alwayses. It was duty unaccompanied by any sign of eagerness that marched them out the front gate, where they filed into the western grounds and began assembling into formation: two flanks, my father in one of them. And the details of this story belong to him.

He said the Thorn King rode in, darkness in tow, and enveloped the first flank like shade blown in on a gale. The not-yet-assailed soldiers, among whom my father stood, could only *hear* the brief sounds of war. What they could neither see for themselves nor stop themselves from picturing was the sound made when metal finds metal, and then it meets bone. The staccato knocks of blade to bone were beating at a rhythm that was almost musical. And then it was silent.

In that silence, the soldiers in the waiting flank understood that there would be no acceptance of surrender and there would be no battle; there would only be mutiny.

As all well-trained soldiers do, they surely postured a bit, counterfeiting a stance of bravery as they estimated the likelihood of their doom. It was in this moment, while watching the darkness turn toward them, that one of those soldiers ran: Samuel, whose poetic saga continues in even more strident conviction from there.

That it is a tale of humility – a soldier flees his station – tells me there is truth to it. That it depicts the power of Thorn in factually incorrect detail tells me there isn't. The sounds of metal on metal, for instance, would not come from the Thorn King, whom the fables say brandishes only his stick. Parts of the story just don't add up, but it was given a name nonetheless. Thorn, the Unraveled. Because of what happened next. But it doesn't really matter what supposedly happened because I can't verify its truth. The important thing is that the story is given a title at all: Thorn, the ominous yet catchy name.

But I don't know why an account of Thorn needs a name any more than does a tree. When it's called by that name, it doesn't come. It never responds. It shows no sign of acknowledgement. Although some say if given a proper name Thorn would go to rest. And maybe that's the reason for so many diverse tales.

According to Kargov, river butcher:

Every story told is embellished somewhere or another, calling him things like Thorn, the Bone Collector. They keep on saying children approaching the black woods will be taken, and their bones taken from them, and from those bones, the Thorn King animates some ancient life.

There's no truth in that, but it doesn't mean a Thorn King never was real. Just the reality is he's a water creature. Like a pigmy leviathan. Big enough that the water level drops when you pull him from it, but not so big he can't be pulled.

I've carved up every swimming beast in the seas but a Thorn King. There only ever was a few. So rare, folks go on thinking every fin sighted belongs to the same one, coming and going, up and down the bend. We've all tried to nab ourselves one of them, but he just can't be caught with a fisherman's hook.

So he may not be some towering bone thief – those kids aren't losing skeletons to any woodland dweller – but they shouldn't be swimming near the black trees. If you can't see the bottom, you're just waiting for some other kind of harm.

According to Shiloh, the hermit:

They call him Thorn, the Pathless Ferryman, unbounded by the fogs and the winds, the currents and the waves. He's the only one who can sail the Crooked River into the heart of Thorn, the Pale Lake under the depths of the mountain's pit, and the Starless Crossing past the limits of our lands.

The boat builders of Rivervale have tried to traverse all three; most aspire to leave our continents. They cast off from their ports into the morning waters, gently lapping the piers, inviting their voyage. The architecture of their crafts is worthy; the aim of their bows is true. But the moment our shores disappear from sight, the head sea rescinds its welcome. The first rogue wave is followed by another and another. They break into white cliffs and crash against the hull. The seas rock with violence, thunders crash above, and the rains lash down. The sturdiest vessel cannot brace itself; the truest aim turns false.

There are those who have passed that perimeter and entered the Starless Crossing, where the guiding sun divorces the day. When they look up into the enduring night, no stars glimmer to correct their course. There's no reckoning in those waters, only guessing. In time, every boat returns to its port, sometimes whole. The sailors of the intact vessels can usually be found at Moonkrug. The surviving captains may return to Rivervale, to the drawing boards, but they're running out of crews.

According to Euriel, birdcaller:

Many fables that characterize the Thorn King describe little more than a dark effigy haunting the night, like the scarecrows from the western fields: unliving creations, composite figures of straw, wood, and cotton. They're simple gifts of the earth, assembled by ingenuity and animated only in imagination. Other fables describe the Thorn King as a living creator, assembling and animating our world to his liking and likeness. In both cases, it was the storytellers who were inventing the Thorn King in their own image, but their images and imaginations were limited to the natural world. They couldn't quite conceive the inconceivable without playing witness themselves. The oldest birdcallers did have sight. And those witnesses have recorded a different history. Here is their account:

There was an age when the Thorn King lived and roved, but he was a mistake in nature, a lapse in its order. At his birth, his body was crooked and deformed. And nature isn't selective in its contaminations: a poisoned mind will oft inhabit a poisoned body. The crooked spine is merely an outward sign of a twisted spirit. And as the Thorn King grew from babe to boy and boy to beast, his spirit and figure released none of their coils. Deformity bred deformity until their bearer had been shaped out of the line of nature.

When he died, he was buried where he was born, at the center of the continents. And so unnatural was his form that none of it returned to the land; it continues to reside where it was set to rest, upside-down, presiding beneath the surface like a sentinel of some netherworld, warding off the nightborne creatures.

Today, whether he's thought to be a scarecrow or a builder, our fables have personified the whims of nature as a violent king, often riding a violent mare. These fictions were devised and revised to keep trespassers away: keep children from climbing the black trees and keep woodsmen from chopping them down.

According to Haster, the cursed baron:

There are three territories that are free from the wrath of the Thorn King.

In the far east, off the coast of the Grass Lands, there are dunes that rise from the deep in the ebbing hours of the morning. Every day, they appear in the darkness as if cueing the sun. And every noon's tidewaters draw them back under. Those dunes are where the living fisherman stand and the dead fishermen sleep, and their work and slumber are never disturbed.

In the far west, off the coast of the Sand Lands, the jungled borders of the Nameless Isle are never breached. But the Thorn King is the only creature more hostile than that island's inhabitants, so the protection of its rooted reef offers sanctuary to no visitor.

And in the northernmost reaches of the north, the Thorn King is rumored to leave the snows as they've fallen. But one cannot travel the distance to escape his perimeter. Not for a lack of effort; the trial is not untried. The range is simply too vast, the frost too cold, and the food too heavy to bear. Steeds and sleds are of no use. The only hope is a rumor that a hand from the Smithy of the Sorrowing Song will present itself to the worthy. And in that hand is the wisdom to pass through the mountains. There is no crossing but within and no assurance that you'll be counted among his worthy.

Among the three havens in our lands, one sinks every day, one is nearly as dangerous, and one will never be reached. Everywhere else submits to the fear and the rule of Thorn.

According to Plung, the drunkard:

Truth is I saw him up in the close. He was broad as the Sizarhorn Strait and taller than the time I stacked all of Sigurd's donkeys on top of each other just to see if I could. From the close, I watched him move like a clump of ghost sticks but he must have been ten donkeys tall. Ten of them, but ghost sticks.

According to Godington, shopkeeper

They call him Thorn, the Bone Collector. And they say at the center of Thorn, there's a fire that's never extinguished, filled with the bones of his victims.

No one knows for certain being as our curiosities don't prevail over our fears. Long as I've been alive, I've wanted to see what's inside of those timber halls. So I've gone and stood as close as the rim. That black wall of bark. And even a step or two inside.

It's a different world from its outer skirts. We've all crossed the southern pass, traveling by the coastline. That's never been unsafe, but nor is it easy on the conscience. Standing on the sand, as far from the trees as land goes, even there, you get an eerie sense, one that's not rising off the beach or the bank. The fogs and black trees live at a distance only young eyes can squint into focus. But your blood still takes on that chill that comes when you have the feeling that you're being watched.

If you trek a little inland, up the bank, the closer you get to the woods, the colder the air comes grazing over you. The suspicion of some unblinking eye out there all watchful over you is replaced by a terrible chill. One step into the woods and that chill's sent straight to your bones, freezing up your marrow. And as they say about the Bone Collector, the frost won't be departing until it's singed away by the fire in the heart of Thorn. All who have seen that heart have felt it, and all who have felt it have passed, for the soul of the black woods is a hag god with no bones of its own. So every time those bones stand up and gather into a clunking walk, you know the cost of that stroll was life.

According to Abram, tithes collector:

Our libraries are filled with pages that recount tales of the meek felling the mighty. There's the squire who bested Mizjak, Mizjak who defeated the giant, and the giant who vanquished the gods. In our fables, every weakling has a champion and every champion has a demise.

These stories inspire hope, they assemble armies, and they always end in death, because victory never suspends its favor. The weak will never triumph over the strong by way of desire, nor the foolish over the brilliant by way of luck.

All we can do is pay our tithes to those above us. There is no winning. We can only attain honor; honor is upheld by values; and our values are revealed by our sacrifices.

We don't know why the Thorn King takes the lives he does, but he is the rule of law. It's a higher justice and we can't expect to understand it. Those who choose to fight what they don't understand have inherited a prejudice toward the Thorn King that they cling to for no reason of their own.

The daily bread is a modest expense against the cost of life, and yet we see greed of our pantries begetting the loss of our days.

According to Talitha, daughter of Barl and bookkeeper:

They call him Thorn, Death's Poet. He wrote and what he wrote came true. Some say he's a smithy of the very earth, springing into life on the heels of the first dawn, and then writing the advent of the second. At morning light, it was his words that drew the sun from its slumber, and every night, it was those words that put it to rest.

In the age when he wrote of life, life sprang forth, weaving eternities into the earth. And in the age when he wrote of death, that life was unwoven. Many years ago, his words were only of lush springs, and so spirited were the flocks, so flowered were the fields. But in the years that followed, he wrote of snows, and so the fields wilted and so famished grew the flocks.

Today, the Thorn King engraves no instruction for nature. Summers and winters turn on their own, and lives no longer turn up missing. Some say he sailed back to his own land; others say he wrote of his own winter and wilted with his word.

According to Barl, the eldest wagoner:

They say it was the Thorn King who laid snow to the north. It was once stone lands like the south. And even harder folks occupied its expanse, shaping its stone into palaces and monuments. Ages ago, it was home to the greatest cities on the five Connected Continents. It was a land of eternal construction, where grandeur bred grander ambition. It was centuries that erected the monuments. One could not count the timepieces that separated the spires from their floors. The cities just kept building. Time was its mason; vanity was its maiden.

But in vengeance for its ambition, the Thorn King blanketed the north land in snow. They say in the farthest reaches of the north, beyond the uncrossable abyss, the memory of what lies beneath is kept. There, the Hymn of the Melanchoir can be heard from those who escaped the falling winter.

According to Gideon, woodland hewer

In the woodlands, he's known as Thorn, the Hunted Gatherer. He's the great gardener who planted the world's seeds. First the Chattering Trees and then nature's sprawl. But when their offering flowered, he didn't reap the harvest. Only when his flora gave bloom to fauna did the Thorn King begin gathering its lives. One at a time, and then in droves.

Today, it's been more than twenty years since any of us last witnessed an attack. So we all try to forget him. Even those born before are inflating their doubts, probably to instill them in their young. But our effort to suppress any consideration of belief doesn't effectively hide the fear of it. It's as though every time someone incants his name, his life gets restored, and the spirit of the Thorn King once again strides among the living.

We should remember that we only have the privilege of disbelief because the Nameless Hunt finally drove him into hiding. They were the only band of men brave enough to pursue the Thorn King and united enough to face him.

We don't know the reason for their war. We just know it's been waged for lifetimes and will surely someday end. The Nameless Hunt has no enemy but Thorn and their reason is the only secret unknown in Charwarg. That's why we have taken such a keen interest in the Nameless people; the secret revealed is never as interesting as the secret kept. But the secret itself is never as interesting as the reason the secret is kept. The Nameless people are not inclined to disclose, but as long as their interests are consistent with our own, we support their effort. And we offer a wide berth whenever they march across our landscapes bearing banners of the Crescent Sun.

Today, they've only succeeded enough for us to forget. The Thorn King used to attack sweeping, violent. Now he lurks in the thicket. He still takes lives, but he does so in silence. There's no panic, no resistance, no evidence of his slaughter. The stillness of his claim sounds no alarm. The many maintain a fearless oblivion. But one widow adder hiding in the pasture, slithering between the grasses, can fell a flock of ewes between supper's graze and evening's close.

According to Ragdin, the wanderer:

For those who know the truth of Thorn, unto no ears may it be repeated and with no quill may it be recorded. For to know the will of Thorn is to sympathize. And to sympathize is to die.

According to Clarabel, collector of fables:

When I was a child, my mother told me bedtime stories, which her mother had told her when she herself was a child. And those stories had been inherited from her mother before her. In those days, each continent claimed its own origin myth, passed down as nighttime tales from daughter to daughter to daughter to daughter. It's been generations since any of those stories were believed, and fragments are surely lost with the passing of each teller. But there remains history in the fiction: what did the original storytellers first believe about the world they were born into?

In an age before the sciences, before exploration, before the world was mapped, each continent saw itself as the cradle of life. And now, in the age of literature, I have attempted to recreate those myths as once told by the mothers in each land.

From the west:

In the Sand Lands, there is a river that is swallowed by a mountain. As it passes that mountain's stony gates, its calm, reflective waters awaken into white rapids. Those rapids bend and race underground as deeply and coiled as the roots of the first tree. While carving its way deeper and deeper, it grows colder and colder, and its pace grows slower and slower, until it finally empties into the Pale Lake. The upper air is as black as pitch, but the water's surface is ashen, as though its life has been blanched from its nature. It stretches out from the river, waveless and silent. Yet it is uncrossable; its stillness is a deception. On the opposite shore of its narrowest expanse resides the Pale Bridge, providing passage to a deeper kingdom whence the Thorn King makes berth. It is from that world that he unloosed every creature of the fables that all have known and none have seen.

From the south:

In the Stone Lands, in the northwestern ranges, the mountain spires are so tall that the lowest peak reaches the clouds. No one knows what rests atop the highest peak. They only know that each year, on the eve of the anniversary the world was born, the Thorn King would descend from its unscalable heights, as mighty as a mountain himself, and ride out to claim the lands below with our world's history harbored in his breast. At dawn, he would be heard racing down the volcanoside, hooves stomping against stone, beat after beat, each one crashing into the ground bloody. And when he rode into view, you could see the vengeance in his heart manifested as vengeance on his face. But it was only ever a glimpse, because chasing him down the slopes was a vast blanket of sunbaked mountain clouds, preparing to engulf the terrain below, cursing it with scorching heat and roiling the seas that girdle its southern shore. To this day, the Stone Lands bid welcome to no stranger, but it is not merely the natives, so calloused in hand and heart, driving them away. Much more, it is the relentless heat of the air that expels them. And it makes those who remain no kinder than the land they inhabit.

From the east:

In the Grass Lands, the Thorn King is the second oldest creature, born from the first acorn of Nemusenex, whose natal blossom only sought companionship. After cracking free of his maternal shell, the Thorn King looked out on the sweeps of empty horizon before him. Fearing his own loneliness, he resolved to create an entire forest of friendly companions. So he took the next one thousand acorns and planted the Chattering Trees. Once their trunks had grown tall and garrulous, the Thorn King left the company of Nemusenex, which turned the cheer of its acorns sad. From that day forth, few of them took root; most died when they fell. But still they leapt bravely from their branches. And it is the scarce offspring of those acorns over a thousand, thousand springs that gave rise to the Grey Woods of Nemus. After those woods had come of age, but before the continents separated, the Thorn King took to grooming every tree in the forest and sowing the fields beyond. It is he who dredged the shallow shorelines, added paws in the prairies, shells in the sea, and the songs of the sea inside of those shells. Nemusenex waited many years for the return of its first child, but he never came. So it gave up waiting and its seeking roots began to reach out. They grew past the shorelines and their singing shells. They pierced the fens and meadows, the deserts and moors, and they grew deeper than the depths of their own lands. In doing so, they breached a land that should not have been disturbed. The soul of the black woods was culled from that netherland, and as it emerged, it inhabited the lost child of Nemusenex. So when the Thorn King finally returned, it was not the same creature that was born of the shell.

According to Rhoda, garden tender:

They call him The Moss King of Thorn. He used to live among the vegetables, the funguses, and the soils. He grew his form in the shade and expanded his kingdom in the night. But he found evolution's secret in the seedling fields. And today, moss no longer carpets and softens the cold stones; now they're just cold.

According to Sigurd, horsemaster:

They call him Stormsiege, King of Thorn. And he once had a love. She was his final creation. He first created the water. From the water, he created the land. From the land, he created his mistress, and he gave to her his own bones, leaving him hollow as a ghost. In doing so, his ability to create land from water was passed to her. And for many seasons, they were happy.

But in the age of the north, when boys were taken from their beds to labor on the lands, and girls were taken to create still more laborers, the mistress of the Thorn King was taken.

That's when both she and her captors learned that her tears were a salve for nature. With a single drop, parched and burned lands softened. Another drop turned the softened soil green.

Thorn's mistress was soon more prized than all of the laborers shaping all of the continent's stone. It was greed that kept her caged and it was greed that made her weep. And the more she wept, the richer the harvests they reaped. What used to be a land of slave-sculpted palaces, towers, and monuments was becoming a majestic jungle. Feasts grew without cultivation; green canopies shielded the heat of the sun; carpenters replaced masons and they built grander palaces. But as her tears continued to turn barren wastes into rich vegetation, rain and winds began to accompany her pain, and thunder could be heard rumbling with her sadness. Now, every time she wept, the land received a salve and a storm.

Some small bands of northerners left when the storms had claimed their homes, and some boys and girls they held captive are said to have escaped. But in those who stayed, greed overpowered caution. And the violence of the weather grew. Soon, the tears were reclaiming nature's gifts faster than they were refining them. And from her cage, the northerners began to fear her, calling her Mistress of the Storm.

They stopped inciting her tears, but it was too late. She wept on, silently, for the life that had been taken from her. And the storms continued to rage.

Her captors attempted to soothe her, but her tears could not be undone by gifts from the land they had created. Afraid the land would return to infertile stone, they set her cage ablaze and burned her to ash.

That's the day the endless winter came, burying the continent. Still today, nobody knows what lies beneath the snowfields.

According to Cartus, tavern bard:

They call him Thorn, the Deathless.

No living memory remembers a time before him. The continents slowly slide from sea to sea and still he creeps across them.

They say, before the four bridges were built, he was the author of the sky and the rivers and the fields.

According to Rasulka, raft captain and river diver:

They call him Thorn, the Undertide, and he came from the far side of the world, on a stretch of earth that was never mapped: The Darklands, where all light is stolen from the sun, and all life is a consubstantial union of root and walker.

During the first days of that life, it branched skyward, seeking the glow of a nurturing sun, and the heavy air veiling its ascent took hold inside of its dark heartwood. Finding no light or warmth in the heights, it began to grow deep, and deeper, until it finally found a pulse in the buried depths. It drank from that pulse and diverted it above. Thereafter it could be heard beating always inside the imprisoning edifice of the black bark.

Soon, those trunks of living lumber were separated from branch and root. They learned to tread the grasses and cross the waves, and the ships they fashioned were not lifeless planks, bent, bolted, and trussed. They could slither and swim and navigate the deeper tides of the Starless Crossing between the Darklands and the coasts of our continents.

That's where all of the kings of our history came from. Once, there were more of them; today, the Thorn King is the only one who still treads the mortal grounds, watching from the sanctuary of his black woods.

Some say when the dark ships docked, they rooted and the black trees mark their landing. Others say the roots of the Darklands grew straight through the world, now piercing both poles as its living axis. Perhaps the kings planted their woods when they arrived; perhaps they poisoned some once-pure outgrowth of Nemus.

Just as no one has ever sailed to the Darklands, nor have they breached the center of their homeland: the sylvan circle of Thorn. And so no one knows what it holds.

Every map used today details its rim and contrives its interior; each mapmaker has stood at that rim, put his ear to the cold bark, and heard the steady beating of its heartwood. But only the most adventurous and reckless of them have attempted to pass the perimeter, entering the darkness beneath the black canopy. Feet cannot carry one far, and the maps reflect that. The only way in is by the Crooked River, which runs backward from the sea as a vein returns blood to the heart.

They say the Thorn King is the undertide guiding the spirit of the River Rose through the winding waterway to the woods that swallow it. And among the mariners who aspire to reach the Darklands, few endeavor the currents of the backward river. Those few never return, which is why the maps now show land-stranded boats lining the river's bends.

At Rivervale, most scholars believe that only a vessel built by the black woods of Thorn can make the Starless Crossing and sail the Crooked River, but this belief has never been put to the test. It's not arrested in theoretics owing to a lack of strain or resolve, however; Grath, Gideon, and Ascia, the mightiest hewers on each continent, have all attempted to fell the trees, and failed. The wood will not split by saw or splinter by axe.

At Farhearth, some scholars believe the black woods can be tempted from their maternal loam and consigned to architecture, but not by force or tool. Instead, it must be done as a shepherd drives and stables his cattle and sheep: the builder must guide his flock of living beams to pastoral order. And if they are stabled as a ship, then tides and tempests will not sway its reckoning.

According to Grinspoon, member of the Shieldguard:

As a boy, I was told the visage of Thorn, manifested anywhere, was an omen, a bad one, marking the loss of the coming battle.

Twenty-five summers ago, I saw that omen. I was still a boy; my body hadn't yet grown to fill a suit of armor, but I could swing a sword if I used two hands.

So I set off to become a squire.

I believed then as I believe today that the most honorable occupation is the squire. The role is populated by the young and the principled. They devote themselves to any task and haven't yet learned the value of time.

However, most do eventually learn to cherish their hours and abhor their wastage. That's when they stop being squires. The one I employ remains bereft of this lesson. That's why he's still a squire. The single oldest one to be in service.

He spends so much time in study of the brain that he can't find a moment to study the blade. He can barely swing it. He can indeed tell you every thought that passes through the head of his very fortunate opponent, but that won't stop his own head's severance from its post. He's a smart lad. He knows this. And he's at least terrified of being struck, if not a bit more fearful than that. So he avoids any situation that risks it. So he avoids all training. So he remains a squire. That said, I know he has promise. Because I, too, served as a squire, and made all the same mistakes.

In my squiring years, the greatest swordsman of that age, and probably any other, appointed me his squire. He always returned my duty with honor, and at the same time, he was patient with my follies and foibles.

That was in the age of the tournaments. During every Harvest Moon, Lyonhall would host an enormous tournament. Its grounds and stands would be filled with fighters and fans from Daybroken Bay to Sunset Sea. The feasts were expensive, the gambling was extensive, and the glory was eternal. It was that kind of event.

I tried to enter it myself every year, three in a row, but I was under age and caught. I remember my third catching well. I was attempting to register, sans squire, using a voice that deepened my natural fluting tones to the pitch of a broader woodwind, really reaching for those low notes.

Mizjak, having witnessed this sad encounter, took pity on my thwarted dream, and took a liking to my apparent ambition. He permitted me to squire for him. On the second day, I escorted a theatrically limping, defeated opponent to the grounds' healer to have his health either cleared or assisted in its restoration. As this man futilely hobbled, he explained to me that he *needed* to face Mizjak. Needed to. That way, he would have a single story of pride that he could tell his son... whom he did not yet have... but whom I found myself promising to someday squire... once sired. I guess this man assumed that I, Mizjak's current squire, would myself develop into a Mizjak, as though it's a title of royalty that, at mortality, passes to the next of kin. And whomever I had adopted as my own squire would be next in line, making this man's son heir to a great fortune.

Although this man was several years my senior, and I couldn't make sense of his reasoning, I understood the reason behind it: family pride. My pedigree is one of enormous pride, and respect for the services obliged by it: grace to those in need, kindness to those with abundance, and generosity to those most deserving others. My family tree has grown in Lyonhall, generation after generation, since it was mere roots.

That's why, understanding the desperation with which this man sought his pride, I agreed. And it was the preservation of my own pride that eventually saw my delivery on that old promise. I took on his son as my squire. Twenty years ago. And squire he remains.

On the day I made my very causal promise to this man, Mizjak fought six more times. The story is often told that he confronted his opponents while blindfolded, or that he was holding his sword backwards, defeating them with its handle. While entertaining, none of that swashbuckling is true. Myths always get attached to the already-mythical. And the mythical truth of Mizjak was his sheer beauty. It wasn't elegance. There's a difference. To understand elegance, one must comprehend a great deal more. All life hangs on a tress of perfect mathematics. One must unweave the sciences with which our world is woven to grasp the fathoms of its elegance. It requires learning and explanation. Beauty, however, is simply understood. Its recognition requires no training. It is simply felt.

The Thorn King may have been the very soul of elegance, but Mizjak was beautiful. In sixteen years of participation, he did not merely win every tournament, he had never been struck. Ritual dictated his steps and rhythms until his blade took flight. And that's when any vestige of elegance was wholly sacrificed for beauty.

The first day I squired for him, I just stared in disbelief. During the second day, whatever I felt watching him fight one day prior felt ugly by comparison to this new, overwhelming sensation. On the third day, I couldn't imagine comparable beauty existed in nature.

And then the Thorn King came.

I did not accompany Mizjak on the battlefield. Whatever role I was given in the tournament was a matter of sympathy for the rejection he had witnessed. It was a matter of mercy. Now, against Thorn, Mizjak's display of mercy was to confine me inside of Lyonhall.

I raced up to the battlements and looked down. It was just after sunset and the sky was faintly aglow. And then it was dark. And then Thorn's star appeared, as if lit by some devilry. And then the Thorn King himself emerged from the western field, proceeding slowly under the soft, purple light. And then, whatever stillness the landscape had previously held was broken by a creature that didn't move like the rest of creation. It looked like cut lumber leaping into stride, racing forward as though some dark magic had animated a hangman's scaffold.

The soldiers hardly had time to assemble in the field, less time to organize into flanks. Many of the men who were not yet in position cowered in front of the Thorn King, who claimed none of them. They were all spared. But other soldiers resisted. And the Thorn King mowed through their bodies as a farmer's scythe cuts through rows of barley.

One soldier, who had initially joined a crowd of men that nearly resembled a second flank, changed his mind and ran. It was the man whose nonexistent son I promised to adopt as my squire. The Thorn King's permission of his escape is why I still squire that son.

Much of what I now know about battle, and have attempted to pass on to Mizjak's theoretical heir, I learned that day. It was the first battle I ever saw. Not training, not a tournament, but death. Looking down from the Vulture Perch at Lyonhall, the highest accessible elevation in the whole city, the movements below didn't seem real. I knew they belonged to bodies, and those bodies belonged to people, many of whom I had met. But I couldn't connect the cessation of any body's movement with the removal of its owner's life.

Except for two.

The first was Mizjak. He resisted the Thorn King with a bravery I never saw before and haven't seen since. And it was in that moment that Mizjak's beauty was lost. I watched him strain every sinew and fail every strike. His form was first reduced to grace and then it, too, stopped moving.

The other death that still haunts me belonged to an artist who had the misfortune to come to Lyonhall the day of Thorn's arrival simply to paint the grounds' healer. As I looked down at the unwinnable battle below, the Thorn King seemed almost meticulous in sparing those who did not resist. Except for this man, who neither fought nor fled. Instead, he simply wandered, heedless of the life shed beside him. And he was run down. Trampled. Pierced by the black mare's hooves. What had been harmless a moment before was now lifeless.

I watched this happen under the purple light of Thorn's star, seething so brightly, practically throbbing down its beams. The artist seemed drawn to it, addled by its glow, reaching out for the source of that glow with his arms, his steps, his thoughts.

So entranced, he failed to hear the thundering of the hooves riding at him like a living avalanche, homing its helpless target. And it struck him squarely.

As soon as he had died, his killer began slinking – slowly, heartlessly – back to Thorn. And the dark star above began to fade from its post. Once it had vanished completely, a darkness deeper than any night before swept overhead and, in the dead heat of the summer night, we were struck with the chill of winter. The air turned quiet. And it remained quiet the next morning when the light returned. Morning's rays shined dimly on a landscape that remained still for three full seasons.

Long had I known Thorn was a mortal omen. That day I learned it is also the fulfillment.

According to Varia, healer and herb crafter:

They call him Thorn, the Soul Sower, and he once had a mistress whom he created as a gardener duplicates a flower: he grew her from a cutting. But this cutting was from himself. And what he excised from his form to create her could only be done once. So when the north men took her, the Thorn King was separated from his spirit.

When the north men learned that the tears of Thorn's mistress could turn desolate stone green, she was caged, hidden, and made to weep. Gradually, the salt stones gave way to saplings, and the saplings to harvests. But as her fertile tears brought harvests, so they brought storms. Although Thorn could no longer create, he could amend.

The enormous stone monuments were the first of the landscape to wear the mantle of those storms. Soon, the caverns crumbled, palaces cracked, the spires ruptured.

Then the new trees, branching into the upper air, lost their bounty. And finally, the sun-kissed and windswept fields hardened with frost. Still she wept. Each tearfall first turned the ground green, then white. And still she wept. As she did, the snows came colder and the air whistled louder.

So the north men sentenced her to ash.

When that ash took to the sky, the final snows came. The north was buried beneath a world of winter. And it was still. Silent.

Today, in the south of the north, the last statue still stands, forever atoning for its sins. And Thorn, the Soul Sower can be found trying to recreate his mistress, attempting to ignite her birth from a cutting of the ancestors of the children who survived the northern snows.

-Maren of Farhearth