

Tales of the Old Margreve

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How Mikhail Gave the Moonlit King His First Taste of Good Forest Beer

ARGELAS THE BARD'S NOCE: The lands in and around the Old Margreve Forest are alive with tales both light and dark. One scarcely begins a conversation with a Margrevian when they will say, "This reminds me of a story that my grandmother once told me..." And then you are on a journey through a landscape peopled by mighty warriors, tragic lovers, unspeakable horrors, and a seemingly endless array of fools who offended the forest and met terrible ends.

When the cooking-fires are burning low or when beer is set before them, the woodcutters of the Old Margreve tell tales of the greatest of their number: Mikhail the Woodcutter, also known as Mikhail of the Margreve or Mikhail of the Forest. A mighty figure who could fell 100 trees with a sweep of his axe, Mikhail went mad when his family was taken from him and carved the Great Northern Road out of the forest in his desperate and doomed attempt to find them. His fate is not clear: some say his quest took him into the Heart of the Forest, where he lives still. Others say his body lies in a secret tomb somewhere along the road, along with his magic axe.

One day when Mikhail the Woodcutter was coming home after a hard day's work in the forest, he heard the sound of merry-making deep in the woods and smelled the fine smell of meat on the spit. As J said, it was the end of the day, and Mikhail had a powerful hunger and thirst on him. His stomach growled like a dragon, and his mouth watered as he thought of the good food that lay beyond the trees. "I will go see who it is," he said to himself, "and maybe they will share their meat and drink in exchange for a good tale or service." And so he went.

Soon he came to a clearing, and what did he find but the Moonlit King and his court resting after a day's hunting in the Old Margreve. The king and his courtiers lay on silken pillows beneath a canopy of midnight blue and drank fine wine from silver goblets, while deer and boar roasted over magical fires on spits turned by the king's slaves.

As Mikhail stood wondering what he ought to do (for he knew tales of poor mortals who crossed

the Moonlit King's path and regretted it), the king's courtiers saw him. "This human has stumbled on us unawares," they said to each other. "Let us call him over, and we will have some sport with him." And so they did. Mikhail went when they called, but he said to himself, "I will keep my wits about me."

When Mikhail stood before the king and his courtiers, the courtiers laughed at his simple clothes and the dirt on his hands and the mud on his boots. They said to him, "Come, man, and rest your weary body on one of our fine pillows."

But Mikhail said, "Ah, generous lords! I cannot rest upon your fine pillows, for as you see, I am covered in filth and would spoil them."

The courtiers laughed and said, "You are wise to refuse, for if you had rested on one of our pillows you would have fallen into a deep sleep and never awoken." (The Moonlit King said nothing because he was a king and Mikhail was only a woodcutter.)

Then the courtiers offered Mikhail a plate saying, "Come, man, and sate your hunger with our fine food."

But Mikhail said, "Ah, most excellent of lords! I cannot accept your kind offer, for you see, as a poor woodcutter, I live on naught but stale bread and ill-cooked mutton, and your food would be much too fine for me."

The courtiers laughed and said, "You are wise to refuse, for if you had tasted our food you would have become our slave, and we would have carried you back to Shadow to serve us for 100 years." (The Moonlit King said nothing, because he was a king and Mikhail was only a woodcutter.)

Then the courtiers offered Mikhail a silver goblet brimming with wine saying, "Come, man, and slake your thirst with our fine wine." And full of mischief they said, "But perhaps you will tell us that you have no stomach for strong drink."

This, Mikhail could not abide. He took the goblet