



**DUSK IS COMING**

# **Dusk is Coming**

A short story of l'Unna | draft 2

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Website Edition

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## Foreword

This is a short story about the world of l'Unna, the world that offers the backdrop for a series of fantasy novels – a series called 'the Age of Ku'. The world has a rich history and varied cultures, much of which will be explored as we encounter stories which are set in this fantasy-scape. But understanding the history of this largely barren continent is not enough to understand the central thread of the Age of Ku. No indeed – to understand that, we must go beyond history and into the wisps of mythology.

So, how does this mythology leak into the medieval world of l'Unna? Well largely it is forgotten, but there is one shard which lives on: an old fairy-tale that parents use to encourage their children to sleep. But is it a fairy-tale? Few would give it more credence than elaborately crafted fiction, but such is the nature of mythology that no-one can be sure.

Until now.

## Dusk is Coming

“I DON'T WANT TO!” The little git hammered at her with his hands, pounding away. Where did he learn that? She manhandled him, grabbing him about the middle and spinning him away from her, his fists still flailing. But once she'd wrestled him to the hay-packed bed, he forced himself onto his back and started pummeling once more.

Desperation creeping upon her, Lidye tried to lay down the law, “it's not about what you want.”

It didn't work, and he kicked back. The little... She hated getting angry with him; it just didn't feel right and tore a bit of her soul away. But he really was making this hard. Eventually she had to pin him down, holding his arms in place as she tried to pull the woollen sheet over his writhing body. His two sisters were jumping about on their bed, squealing excitedly and egging their big brother on. She was well and truly outnumbered.

“What's going on here?”

Oh thank Ero! She released her beloved son, making sure to get well out of the way of his retaliation, and turned to face her husband. As a big man, he commanded the room instantly. The girls dropped to their mattress and feigned obedience.

Her man was sweaty where he'd been working outside, chopping wood for the fire this evening – after all, the view out of the window suggested it was going to be a cold one. In the calm of her husband's appearance, Lidye was suddenly aware of Mother Bright sinking towards the horizon, transforming her hue from a bold gold to a slightly embarrassed rose. But embarrassed for what? The Mother had nothing to be embarrassed about; she was the life-giver. And her husband was on a par: tanned skin; thick trunk-like arms; dark wiry hair; strong. He was a life-giver in this desolate place. She almost wept at his intervention, but she did retain the composure to speak.

“Undari here has been boldly claiming that he won't be going to bed. He seems to think he has a choice.” She tried to sound stern as she spoke, but it had been tough. It always was.

Her son looked rightly sheepish. He may play up for her, but his father was another proposition altogether.

“No ma, I was just playing.”

The bruises that were already flourishing didn't feel like play to her, but she wouldn't spite her son. He was just doing as all nine year olds would do, wasn't he? She would like to compare experiences, but one look through the crudely hacked window was enough to highlight their isolation.

“Well, now is not the time for play.” She almost wanted to cry as she spoke, but not quite. It had been a tough day, but now he was here to help. Her husband boomed.

“No! Definitely not the time for play. Do you know what time it is?”

Their son pulled his knees up and hugged them tight. He looked about the room - taking in the mud caked wattle; the rickety twig hewn furniture; the dusty earthen floor - and her eyes followed. It was tough to make a living out here in deepest Centro, let alone a house, and Lidye thought that her husband had done a good job. They had a livelihood, they had freedom, and they had everything their own. As Mother Bright sank further, she realised that she only rarely now craved the bustle and social variety of the city - of her past. But she thought about it then.

Her eyes were drawn to the now bright red disc of the Mother as she dipped over the distant mountains of Ambretta. That was a country which was many hundreds of days of travel, a war-torn place, but the outline of Ambretta's mountainous terrain made for an interesting backdrop. Shadows stretched from the west, and she knew exactly what her husband was doing.

The girls leaned over the crude bed-end, waiting on the telling, and their son played along dutifully.

“What time is it, father?”

“It is the time to cower; the time to hide; the time to creep into bed.” And then his voice jumped with impact, “for Dusk is coming to get you!”

He leapt in Undari's direction, making the boy jump even despite the repeated telling. As the young man quizzed his father further, his bed-sheet was already being drawn instinctively up.

“What does the Dusk want?”

Her husband was absolutely fantastic at the telling.

“It wants you!” He mimicked claws stretching for Undari, then he swung around to the girls, “and you! And you. Dusk does not discriminate. It wants all children equally.”

“Why?” The sheet was over her son's knees as he spoke.

“Because long ago there was a great battle between the ancient people of this world. In those days, many thousands of years ago, the world was different and Mother Bright was permanent. But an evil man grew jealous of her authority, and he climbed the highest mountain to try and take her down; he wanted to keep her for himself. That man was called Kunati.”

The children were entranced. Why could she not tell this story like her husband could? She had taken the opportunity to move over to the girls, and was easing them into bed as they continued to stare on, enchanted by the tale. The room grew noticeably colder, and she thought it added to the telling.

“Did Kunati succeed?”

Her husband dropped to his knees and tucked Undari in, the father's eyes darting between the boy and the two girls.

“Do you see Mother Bright every day of your life?”

Undari nodded eagerly, and the girls copied.

“Then there is your answer. But Kunati did not fail completely. He came close to pulling Mother Bright from the sky, but he was met on the mountain by one of Unthara's loyal children – an ancient guardian who goes by the name of Uts. Uts and Kunati fought for a long time on the tallest mountain of the Central Belt, and as Kunati clawed at the Mother, Uts fought back and knocked her over the horizon, out of the reach of Kunati. All went dark and the night was born.”

The three children were now tucked up. How easy her husband made it seem! She came up behind him and laid a gentle hand on the small of his back. He twitched subtly, recognition of her touch, but he stayed focused on the story. His audience was under a spell.

It was their eldest girl, Niella, who probed the story further.

“Did Kunati get tired when it went dark?”

Her man stalked across the room, stomping over the dusty earth like some demon.

“No he didn't. If anything, he grew more powerful. With the Mother gone, his followers, who were creatures of shadow, emerged from the sheltered places of the world. They came out and they swarmed over the continent, destroying all before them. Everything they touched turned to dust, and they drained the living of their very souls. Some of the ancient people fought back; most died. But the sensible of the world found places to hide, and stayed there. The whole world was changed – it was dark and it was cruel.

“And still Kunati battled with Uts.”

It was only at this point that Lidye recognised the brutality of the tale. They were shady suggestions – dark; cruel; death – but her tiredness dominated any concern. She would do anything to get the little darlings to sleep.

Her husband continued, “the stories say that Uts almost failed in his fight, and Kunati's onslaught was so ferocious that a gash was carved from the mountains themselves – you can still see that damage to this day. But Uts did not give up, and as the shadow creatures stared up from the devastated world below, Uts pulled the very last breath from his lungs and retaliated. And yet Kunati was unrelenting; he would never be beaten.”

It was Undari's turn to question.

“Did Uts die?”

Her husband stood and smiled. The effect was magnificent.

“He did die. But not that day. You see, the night came - the first night that this world has ever known - but what do we know of night?”

The three children sat upright, excited to have the answer.

“Night comes to an end!”

“Yes. And night did come to an end. To Kunati's horror, Mother Bright climbed

back over the eastern horizon and revealed herself to the world once more. As brightness spread across the continent, the shadows retreated, and with that shift Uts was renewed. The survivors crawled out from their hiding places, and as they offered their support to their champion, he prevailed.

“As Kunati wilted under the gaze of the god he had tried to dethrone, he was picked up by Uts and cast into the sky. It is in the sky that he remains – a red twinkling star that looks jealously down upon us.”

With that conclusion, his muscular arm extended to the window and pointed out the disc of red light. Mother had now dipped over the horizon, and true darkness was closing in – as was the cold. Lidye wrapped her arms about herself.

This was the point where the children grew bold.

“But that is just a story, papa. Kunati was expelled, and we are now safe.”

“But that's where you're wrong, my boy.” With this he kissed Undari on the forehead. “Kunati looks down upon us, but clever demon as he is, he is always scheming. And what else is now different about the world?”

Niella spoke up. “Mother Bright still circles the world.”

“Exactly!” He stalked to the girls as a demon once more. “Mother arrives every day, but she also departs. And with her departure, the darkness arrives. All those followers of Kunati are still here. They are waiting, biding their time, and they are snatching. They are stealing from the world.”

This was the hardest bit, but then this was what kept the children in bed.

“Stealing what, papa?”

“Stealing children, like you! And you. And you! They are looking for children to turn to their side, children of the light that they can darken. Children they can enslave.” He waited as a sudden shrill wind added to his telling. “Dusk is coming to get you.”

The little darlings were now all but cowering beneath their sheets, fear visible on the face of their youngest, Ari. It was Undari who asked the obligatory question.

“What do they want with us?”

Her husband smiled, and looked almost cruel with the telling. “You, children, are the future of this world. Kunati wants to steal the future.”

The wind was picking up, whistling violently across the wide open plains of Centro. She was glad her husband had chopped some wood. As her children looked stunned by the revelations of her husband, she moved about the room and blew out the candles. The last candle was put out just as her husband kissed Undari on the head. But before they left through the crude wooden door, he turned, and laid down the bedtime law a final time.

“Dusk is coming to get you. Stay hidden.”

And then they were free, in the anteroom that served as access to the bedrooms as-

well as the home for their chickens. She put her arms around her husband and pulled him tight. She loved the big bugger, and reached up with her lips. In fact, she was half minded to lead him to the bedroom there and then, but as he squeezed her arse, she inadvertently thought of food. Her stomach rumbled.

“Let's eat.” She winked and got a rare smile from her rugged man. Then she turned to the door of the living area and noted the inviting candle-glow around the edges, as-well as the tempting aroma. She took her husband's hands into her own, and led him to his meal.

“What would we do without you and your story?”

He laughed gruffly.

“I don't know. It's amazing the bloody thing continues to work at all. You can't tell that one too often.”

They entered the living area, and Lidye immediately halted as she saw what faced her. An old man stared stonily in her direction, a terrible wisdom in his eyes. Her husband stepped after her, and the old man spoke.

“You tell that story too often.”

Her blood boiled.

“What's he doing here?”

Bloody hell – she wished her damned husband would tell her before bringing this old fool back with him.

“He's my father.”

“What's that got to do with it?”

It was amazing how quickly her mood fouled at the sight of this man. Her damned father-in-law had been incessantly at her side for many of the years that her husband had served in the army, and it was amazing how badly that experience grated. It wasn't like he was a bad grandfather – quite the opposite in fact, he was fabulous with the kids – but it was his morbid state of mind which really dragged.

“He has a right to see the children.”

That made no sense. “But the children are in bed.”

Only silence – the bugger. He meant for the old man to stay over.

“Hello Lidye. It's good to see you.”

She exhaled in that resigned way that she did, not caring who heard or what they read into it. It was academic in any case – she had just been laying into the old codger.

“Hello Wulfen.”

The old man, who had a smooth pate like an egg and a sad wisp of grey hair around the circumference, turned to her husband – his son.

“Wulf, you use that story too often.”

Not that again. That was probably the most annoying thing of all; this old man's

preposterous caution of that children's story. It was the only bedtime tool they had, so stuff him. Did he wish suffering upon them?

“Not this, pa. Come on, you said you'd try your hardest.”

The stubborn old git straightened, a scowl on his face. “I am trying, but I feel I must warn you again. You must not use that story too much.”

“Why not? You used it almost every night.”

The old bugger spat as he fought back.

“Well, I made a mistake.”

“And I'm happy to make the same mistake. Now, shall we eat?”

Suddenly, Lidye was not hungry. Not in the company of this old fool. Perhaps she could take her food to her own space.

But no – she knew that her husband despaired of time with this old man almost as much as she did. They had to stay united.

It was strange, though. When she'd met her husband, Wulf and Wulfen were near inseparable, the son worshipping the father almost like a god. But something happened very abruptly to change all that. It was not because of something in Wulf Junior – even despite the fact that he had been off at war in the Desolation. No, it was a change in the father. He turned suddenly into something angry, fearful and unlikeable. He had been the same man ever since, preaching random snippets of questionable wisdom to anyone who would listen. But no-one would listen, and that annoyed the old bastard even more.

And yet he was family. They must endure.

Wulfen seemed to consent to the end of the debate with a gruff nod. When he had his earthen pot of soup in one hand, and a hunk of wholemeal bread in the other, his concentration shifted, and Lidye suddenly felt like she was freed. He was appreciative – she had to give him that. The soup juice was dripping from his silvery beard.

Her own soup scolded the top her mouth, but once that distress had passed, she found it to be quite tasty. It was remarkable given what had gone into the mixture: who would have thought that pig's trotters could offer so much flavour? It was just a shame they offered precious little meat.

“So, Wulfen, what brings you here.”

Those ashen eyes turned upon her. “A need to stop you telling that damned story, by the sounds of it.”

Wulf retaliated. “What are you? The fairytale marshal? It's a bloody story.”

“How often has that been said in this forsaken world? But think on this, son: all stories must, somewhere, have their roots in reality. Think on this story that you tell your children, and think on which particular aspect you would accept as truth.” There was only an eerie wind-filled silence then, and Lidye noticed how dark it had gotten. The cosmos was splayed across the heavens, startling and daunting in equal measures.

The sad candles in their living room seemed to flicker and wilt under the weight of the sky outside, and it was at times like this that she missed the claustrophobic sensation of being in a city – amongst people. Oh how she missed people.

“See, can't think on it, can you?”

She had momentarily been diverted from the old codger's ramblings, but he was not going to concede easily. In a brief break of the wind, she thought she heard the faintest of impacts – maybe a horse's hoof? – but her mind quickly dismissed the suggestion.

“None of that story is true.”

Wulfen Senior sighed and shook his head, returning to the sanctity of his soup. Lidye grew mischievous in the candlelight, and probed.

“Well, you obviously think differently. What do you think, Wulfen?”

He stared suspiciously at her, which was fair enough. She rarely lent him an ear these days.

“I think it is all true.”

That was madness. “And why do you think this?”

“Because I have read first hand accounts that vouch for this very fact.”

It was entirely ludicrous, of course it was, but a tiny part of her was intrigued to hear the expansion of such fantasy.

“First-hand accounts. From who?”

The old man smiled, and revealed his poor dental condition. His canines were still there, rotten and stained, but two whole incisors were missing from the right side of his jaw. He didn't seem to care.

“Uts.”

The wind seemed to come crashing down on the roof, and in the following lull, she thought she heard the clink of metal on metal. She stretched herself, straining to hear more, but there was nothing more to hear and she put it down to a frustrated mind. Her attention switched back to the preposterous statement.

“Uts is dead.”

“Then you admit that he lived.”

“No, that's not what I meant. I mean that even if he did live, it was so long ago that any record of his writing would be destroyed.”

The old man seemed joyed at the direction of travel. She had become the ear he never earned.

“But that's where you're wrong.” He placed his soup excitedly down, spilling some of the liquid onto the table without a care. Moments later he was digging about an old bag, and he eventually triumphed, pulling out a tatty old article. It appeared to be a leather-bound journal, and when he opened it, the pages were made of cracking parchment, yellowed almost to the point of being illegible. As it turned out, the scrawl

on the pages was entirely illegible. It could barely be a language.

Her husband sighed and shook his head. “Not this, pa.”

“Yes this! It is the key.”

She took the old tattered document and delicately flicked through the pages. Nothing was decipherable.

“I can't read this.”

“No? Then you must trust me when I say that I can.”

This seemed entirely ridiculous.

“Who else can read it?” The writing – and that seemed to be over dignifying the scrawl – appeared to be constructed of only short lines, long lines, and dots. Absolute rubbish. She'd had a good education in linguistics in her time in the city – how had she ended up here? – and nothing she had come across looked anything like this.

Wulfen confirmed her suspicions. “No-one that I have met, but I have read it. I had a translating tool.”

“Oh. And where is that tool?”

He hung his head; the last resignation of the crazy. “It is lost.”

She put her own head in her hands, and her jewellery clinked. Hang on! She wore no jewellery. At least she didn't these days. There it was again; only faint, but there. Distinct. A snort also reached her ears, and she knew that her mind was not playing tricks.

“Have you left your horses outside?”

Both men looked quizzically at her, confused at the sudden deviation. It was actually Wulfen who recognised her meaning quickest.

“I rode with Wulf.”

Her husband had furrowed brows as he forced his senses, but then he heard it. The sound of metal on metal was now more obvious, and she could even make out the pawing of hooves on the dusty ground outside. Then another snort, and it was certain. There was a horse out there, and it was clear that it didn't belong to anyone in the room. They kept their sole horse locked in a stable.

“Bloody bandits.”

Her husband had grown visibly tense, his military habits taking over. His hands clenched and unclenched, and his square jaw ground his teeth together. Bandits out here were rare, but still too frequent. It was fortunate that Wulf was more than capable of handling a bunch of opportunistic scavengers.

“Be careful.”

“The bastards aren't worthy of my care.”

He was up, still clenching his fists, and he made the few short steps to the external door with aggression knotting his shoulders. He picked up the pile hammer, a fearsome tool that he used to embed fence posts in the ground, and pushed the creaky

door open. Wulfen added his own warning.

“Don't go, son. Dusk is coming.”

The anger in her man was not capable of harbouring such stupidity. He scowled at his father.

“Dusk has been and gone. Now, let me give them what's coming to them.”

And he was gone. He was through the door, wood creaking into place behind him. The sound of a horse's hooves was audible again, as were the footsteps of her husband. A part of her was charged by the approaching conflict, but another part was bored. This was a more than annual occurrence.

And she was left with Wulfen, the old fret. He fingered his crusty old journal absently, not recognising that crisp corners were breaking to dust in his equally dry and cracked hands. Lidye decided to probe the silence between them.

“What are you afraid of, Wulfen?”

The old man leaned forward, and he turned his stony eyes to her. The look was familiar, but it was also different. Usually she saw frustration in him, anger, and a persistent desire to be taken seriously. But here and now, those reactive layers had been stripped away, leaving only the core of her father-in-law's soul. What she saw was simple, and terrifying. She saw fear.

“I'm afraid of the Second Coming.”

But despite the emotional flood, she could not marry the words with current events. Was he genuinely crazy? Nothing about his day-to-day person suggested as such, except these wild ideas.

“What second coming?”

“The Second Coming of Dusk.”

He was persistent – a quality also abundant in her husband. Wulf Junior was outside, repeating his threat for the third time.

“I suggest you move along quickly!”

She ignored her husband's rising voice, and probed her father-in-law further.

“Dusk is a children's story. What is there to be afraid of?”

Outside, Wulf's voice was impossible to ignore as he ratcheted up the level of aggression. She could see him tensing his muscles in her mind's eye. It made her hot.

“Look here, I am a corporal of the Imperial Army, and I strongly suggest you get off my land!”

A tense moment filled both the conflict outside, and the interrogation within. It was the elder Wulfen who spoke first.

“This is what I'm afraid of.”

It confused her for a moment, but then not. The rattling roar grew out of the darkest night, splitting her head, trembling tears from her eyes and making her squeal in terror. When it spoke, it was with a gravelly quality that was frictional on the soul.

“There is no Imperial Army. Will you comply?”

Her jaw dropped, and she turned back to Wulfen – who hadn't moved a muscle. For the first time since she was nine years old, the story made her cower.

“Dusk is coming to get you.”

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It was here. It was here. Wulfen shivered in his old skin, wobbling where he wouldn't have done if he was still a young man. What could he do? Nothing – he was too frail. Even his son didn't stand a chance. He told that story too often.

In a queer way, he was actually pleased. He had suffered the mocking eyes of the ignorant for too long. It was time for his redemption.

“What is it?”

His daughter-in-law's face had morphed from mocking pity to desperate terror in but a heartbeat. Wulfen leaned forward, rotating his neck in an attempt to ease the pain of his age, and stared firmly across the room. He held up the cracked volume to eye level, and shook it violently.

“The Second Coming. It is here.”

He dropped the journal to the floor: it kicked up dust. Then he stamped on it, grinding the impossibly delicate old pages into the dirt. There was no need for the invaluable volume anymore – no-one had taken notice of his warning.

“But it's a story.”

A theatric pause. He heard his heart crashing against his ears. Of course he was nervous. This was the end. At least he had the foresight to see it coming. “Does that sound like a story to you?”

His son, Wulfen Junior, continued to defy, but his voice had now cracked.

“Look, I don't know who or what you are, but this is my land and my house. You are not welcome.”

Lidye was creeping towards the window, on her hands and knees, shivering as she went. It did not take long for Dusk's response. The voice had the same grating quality.

“Do you comply?”

His son's show of confidence was remarkable if truth be told; but it was also useless. Wulfen shed a tear and looked to the ground. A father should never outlive his offspring.

The retaliation drifted through the window, but Wulfen Senior hardly listened. It was too hard. “Comply with you? Never.”

The next moments were chaos, and Wulfen rocked back and forth. He did not want to recognise.

He had told the story as a young man, as a father to young children. Everyone used it, because it was so effective. Even he recalled his childhood, the terror that crept

into him when his father relayed the familiar words – 'Dusk is coming to get you.' And even though Dusk never did come, it always worked. It always worked.

And this was fascinating.

As an older man, this always stuck in his head, lodged there, festering. He used the story freely, but rather than seeing it only as a tool, he considered it a puzzle. Why did it work so well? Why do we always believe? And he did believe. He did believe. Even as an adult, Wulfen was cautious of Dusk. It made him shiver, and it gave him nightmares.

Lidye screamed, an ear splitting sound. Wulf Junior was dead, and the old man wiped his eye. He sniffed, the only offering he had for the death of his child – he had tried to warn him. But it was too late. He should have tried harder.

His daughter-in-law looked at him, absolute horror in her lovely blue eyes, and she rushed over; spinning; not knowing; turning; terrified – a rat in a trap. Wulfen could offer her only pity. He knew what she had seen. The same thing had stalked his nightmares. He could see it now in his imagination, the impossible shock of it. He recalled the story, and it made him shudder: 'With Mother gone, his followers, who were creatures of shadow, emerged from the sheltered places of the world. They came out and they swarmed all over the continent, destroying all before them. Everything they touched turned to dust, and they drained the living of their very souls.' His son had succumbed.

“Wulfen, what will we do?”

He turned his creaking old head, no hurry in him; at stark odds with the frantic woman. Just a few heartbeats had passed since the scream, but time had a stuttering quality in this here. Tears moistened her cheeks, and Wulfen held out a rag. It was scant comfort, but he could do little else. He offered the sad advice.

“We can comply.”

He had never been a scholar – had never had the smart for that – but children's stories fascinated on a level that transcended intelligence. He was hungry for the detail; devouring information; chasing fruitless paths; seeking an answer. But an answer to what? In his deepest soul he knew the answer he sought, but he didn't like to speak it, even to himself. It was too unnerving. Instead he kept searching, desperate to find the fact that would ease the burden and dispel the answer he feared. He spent more and more of his spare time searching, until he was obsessed.

It interfered with his work, and he was eventually relieved of service. Even his wife became annoyed with his deepening obsession, and she cast him away often, sending him to support Lidye while Wulf was out at war. Out here, under the watchful gaze of Kunati, it felt more real than it did anywhere else, and while his study suffered in the isolation, his belief flourished. It was out here where he became a fanatic.

Only fitting that this should be where he finally comes to face that horror.

An almighty thud groped his ear, the sound of a well suited warrior jumping from his mount. The beast whinnied, and it was like crackling thunder. Metal accoutrements clattered, but they were not shiny things and delicate fixings. It was the sound of heavy iron clanking against wholesome iron. This was an earthen warrior, forged of purpose and fundamental strength – the shadow servant of Kunati. The first step sounded, almighty in his aged ears. He had imagined how the clatter of Dusk would sound for so long, and it was everything he expected. And so much more. It burrowed inside him.

“The children!”

They screamed, Undari at first, and then the girls. That was the worst sound of all; the children's terror. It was a permanent and bone shattering screech, but what could he do? He looked sadly at Lidye.

“Dusk is coming to get them.”

She was not so impotent, and she rushed for the door to the anteroom. Once open, she readied herself to run through, but was stalled. She screamed. And she screamed and screamed. She was a woman in despair, and she smashed the door closed once more. As she turned to him, he nodded knowingly.

“The Second Coming is here.”

It was the root of the stories that grabbed him, shook him into his near insanity. Or was it insanity? He was correct after all. Regardless, it was the basis for these children's yarns which sucked him into his obsession, and it was this that he always researched. Every children's story was woven to the audience, cleansed to some degree, made fit for purpose. But what he found time after time was that every one of those ridiculous tales - the utterly stupid ones; the crazy ones; the impossible ones; and the silly ones - every one of those stories had its basis rooted in some past event. Nothing was genuinely unique – it was all modified history. Every last one of them.

And that made sense – they were warnings of morality, behaviour, and life. A wise man once said – and Wulfen knew exactly which wise man too – that, 'A man who doesn't make mistakes is an idiot. We all make mistakes, and those who refuse to accept them will make the same mistakes again.' Wulfen had certainly made mistakes, and telling that story was the worst of them. It was used too much.

Because the other thing this wise man said was that, 'All stories have their basis in fact,' and this was something he had evidenced for himself. All but one story. Until he found Uts' journal.

The footsteps ceased just outside the door, and Wulfen raised his head; ready. He had always been ready, ever since he'd known, and that made him different. It was almost as if the wood of the door quivered at just the gaze of the thing – so close to his nightmare. Lidye came towards him; staggering; fretful; balling; absolutely rattled. The house's inner door smashed open, cracking against the stone of the walls, and the

screams of the children grew. They were flung into the room, a collective huddle of horror, eyes like discs of shattering ice. When they saw her, they called out to her.

“Mama!”

“Oh, babies.”

A mother's calm enveloped her, but it was at exactly that moment that the outer door smashed open, splinters spinning through the room. It entered. The shadow of Kunati. It was everything he had expected, and more. So much more, and so much worse.

Uts had lived – he had bloody well lived. Unless that journal was a hoax, but what sort of an elaborate hoax would that be? Come now; and what benefit? To see an old man go mad? He would not put it past the bounds of reason. But no! It was too well thought out. The small volume had been strangely immaculate, perfectly refined as a collection of linguistics. Even despite the primitive language and the crude translation, he knew that there was a powerful sub-text. There was wisdom in those pages, and they told of a warning.

They were warning of dusk.

Because the entire story had been reality, and that was horrific. But what scared him the most was that the brutal children's story was heavily edited – and yet it still terrified. If that was the cleansed edition, then what must the reality be? It was time to find out.

So much worse. Wulfen gulped.

It strolled into the room, heavy steps kicking dust into the air. Iron encased the impossible bulk, armour of such malevolence that it seemed to have its own power. The heavy material was entirely matt, a dull threat, typifying the sense of the creature. The armour was everywhere, encasing the monster in a protective barrier of wordly strength, but that was cause for the least of the shock. The glorious mineral bastion was nothing compared to what lay inside: shadow. Pure flickering shadow.

Where its head might be, and also in the place of hands, there was only a thick permeating fog of darkness – dusk personified. The shadow seemed to flicker and dissipate, like fire, but there was no easing in the effect. The soldier of Dusk wore its armour with a permanent air. As it moved its head, the shadow flame swayed in response, leaving a temporary trail. It stepped forward, unsettling the constitution of its fog before settling once more, staring. But staring where? No-one could know. It was impossible to determine where the damned thing was looking; the shadow had no face.

“Will you comply?”

That same gritty quality made him shiver once more – so much worse than his nightmares. Wulfen forgot his frailties and tucked his knees in, hearing the objecting crunch as he did. Then the shadow swung violently around, and he knew that he was

the momentary target. But Lidye had to answer, and she seemed barely capable.

“Will you comply?”

In Wulfen's mind, there was little to argue with. But he was not a mother. Mothers were different creatures, but he wanted to warn her nonetheless. But what could he do? She had never heeded his advice before.

She crept slowly towards her children.

The monster stamped violently, kicking dust into the candle-lit air. The mother stalled instantly, stuttering under the threat. The children crouched on the ground, whimpering pitifully – a child's right. Dusk seemed to grow frustrated at this symbolic immaturity.

“Quiet!” The same gravelly quality, but the two syllables were distinct and harsh. The children silenced.

The dark cloud turned once more, presumably in the direction of the weeping mother. The same question was smothered across the space between them.

“Do you comply?”

She turned to him of all people – him! – but then, who else was there to turn to? If anything, Wulfen had eased in the passing moments. None of this was unexpected. It was only worse.

“What does it mean?”

He didn't want to sound like a bastard – he wanted to ease her suffering – but there really was no other way.

“Will you comply with the demands of this thing?”

Her face betrayed stubborn confusion, a refusal to see the obvious.

“What demands?”

Wulfen could only shake his head – how callous he must look. This gave him no pleasure, but there was a grim satisfaction at the realisation of his prophecy.

“All of them. It demands your obedience to the House of Red.”

The inner door creaked stubbornly, and it was only then that Wulfen recognised the shadow flicker of a second creature. The children's heads swivelled madly as they switched their attention between the two monstrosities, desperate to maximise their distance from both. Unfortunately, the bigger of the two monsters, the one in the outer doorway, stepped in and restricted their space further. A renewed shivering took the youngsters.

Lidye persisted with her questioning – her quest for logic in the face of insanity.

“What is the House of Red?”

Wulfen stretched an arm to the window. “The Red House is Kunati's house. You are to serve Kunati.”

She still seemed to fight the facts that were now brutally laid before her: that her husband was dead by the reach of Dusk, and that she would not be far behind unless

she complied. Her children were resigned to their fate. There could be no other; it was all foretold.

“But...”

He offered the words in as stern a manner as he could manage. She needed to recognise the reality.

“Dusk is coming.”

Remarkably, or so he thought, she seemed to grow at that. She sat up, wiped her eyes, and cleared her throat. Her head continued to whip between Wulfen and the monsters, but her mind reached back to the past.

“You knew all this?” This question was aimed at him. The shadow seemed to betray frustration, if that was possible on an ink-stained canvas, but Wulfen spoke regardless.

“I warned you. I told you that you used that story too much. You became complacent.”

She shook her head slowly, anger now flaring in those lagoon blue eyes. Anger aimed at him perhaps? Probably, but that was okay. If ever there was a time for anger, it was now – just before the end.

“But it's a story.”

The words chimed in his head, as they had done for years. If only the world had listened to his madness.

“All stories have their basis in fact.”

“Then you should have ushered us away from this place. You should have taken us back to the city! Dearest Ero, why did you leave us out here to die? You have killed us!”

He laughed, but only with a grizzly edge. “You think that the cities are safe? They are probably already taken.”

He glanced at the darkness, and seemed to recognise something mutual in the fog. Was there an ever so subtle respect for his foresight? Perhaps. He was certainly the only one that openly believed in the story. The taste of his wisdom grew more bitter with every passing moment.

“Then, there was never an escape?”

“Only flight. Only eternal flight.”

The shadows stepped into the room, and flight had never seemed further away. Wulfen leaned forward, elbows on knees. He was remarkably calm. Their leader was not.

“Will you comply?”

Lidye was teetering on the edge of frantic once more, and Wulfen felt it his duty to guide her from that path. No good could come from rash action.

“Lidye, daughter-in-law, please. Listen to me. I know that you have considered me

mad for many years, but now, confronted by this, be sensible – I implore you. I was right, wasn't I? I was not mad.”

There was an imperceptible nod, accompanied by a rolling tear. What felt like a stone materialised at the back of Wulfen's throat, agony on the swallow, but there was no room for weakness. He had to be strong.

“Then believe me now when I say that you have no choice, or at least none that you wish to make. There is only servitude in the House of Red, I promise. The alternative is not worth thinking on.”

A damp patch of sorrow was now forming upon the dusty earth by her feet – such a sad monument to this painstaking decision. She nodded slowly, again, but made no move to look upon the horror. She was not won yet.

“What about my babies?”

This was the hardest part – the truth of the Plague. It was the children they came for; the future.

“They are already lost.”

He tried to keep his voice down, shivering as Lidye's lip quivered. This was horrendous – but it was foreseen. And Dusk would have its answer. Dusk would have its answer now.

“Will you comply?”

Lidye turned her head slowly, pain etched right across her face, but she had conceded. She knew what must be done. Wulfen could see the start of a head-bob, but then the situation changed. Then it all unravelled.

Undari screamed, the pitch piercing the very centre of Wulfen's consciousness. He winced, and when he opened his eyes, the young boy was starting across the room, reaching for his mother. Lidye responded by outstretching her arms, but Wulf knew it was useless. He blinked heavily and shook his head.

And Undari screamed once more.

The second guardian of night reached out from behind the door with astonishing speed, encircling Undari's waist and hoisting the poor boy into the air. As the pressure of the grip grew on the youngster, he screamed harder, and then it became a desperate strain, his face turning red. It was heartbreaking. His face was pointedly turned upon the fiend, who stepped into the room in a show of majesty. Then Undari was given his penance.

“You should have complied.”

The small body was cast across the room, smashing into the opposing wall, and dropping to the floor, just beyond Wulfen's reach. The body bounced as it landed, inanimate once it had settled. Undari was dead before he even touched the ground.

And Lidye screamed. Oh how she screamed.

Blood was visible where the boy's head had made contact with the rough quartz

embedded in the wall – some of it misted Wulfen's face. He wanted to lick his lips, but he wouldn't. He couldn't. Tears had come to his own face as he looked upon the wreckage just beyond his feet. It was a pain beyond reason to outlive one's child. To outlive a grandchild was another punishment altogether.

But the truth was that Undari had already been lost. Perhaps this was the better option.

He stared at the shadows, anger etching itself into his tear and fear-streaked face. But what could he do? He was a useless old man – utterly useless. He couldn't even comfort his daughter-in-law. His back was curled in resistance to the pain of ageing, and his old body wouldn't relent. He cracked his knuckles, but felt remarkably impotent nonetheless. Oh Mother, how he was useless.

And all the time, the red tinge of Kunati bathed the small room in his malice. It was only faint – he was one star amongst many after all – but it was noticeable; a crimson hue against the deep sunset flicker of the candle. Unadari's blood seemed to sparkle as it spread.

And the red took Lidye. How could it not? A mother's fury is not to be balked at, and Wulfen was suddenly desperate to restrain her. But he was useless. And she was beyond reason.

“Lidye, no, please no.”

“My baby!”

She jumped to her feet, the screech of a wounded animal escaping her. She pounded across the small room, heading for shadow, running into the night – charging Dusk itself. There was absolute purpose as her hands clawed before her, deadly and pointless in equal measures. She tore into the abyss, kicking and screaming, clawing at the monstrosity. Her anger was unquenchable, her fists turning red as she pummelled the earthen iron of the armour. She tried climbing the thing, reaching for the flickering shadow, desperate to inflict pain, any pain, and rightful pain. As she got a footing on the sill by the door, Wulf managed a plea.

“Lidye, no. Stop that, please.” He was so pitiful.

And she was not. She fought like a demon, smashing and crashing, grabbing whatever she could, hammering the bastard, whatever might hurt. She bit at the iron armour, a tooth chip flying from her mouth, and as she managed to grip the neckline, victory was in sight. She screamed manically as she climbed on top of the brute and collected her fury. She was going to hurt it. She was going to hurt it. She was going to hurt it bad.

But Dusk could not feel hurt. It was the constitution of night; master of the dark things; servant of death. Only the gods could strike down the darkness, and Lidye was no god.

The beast grabbed her descending wrist, twisting it until it snapped and then

cracked. This scream was different, but in every way worse. Her head inclined, and she wailed to the ceiling; and to the heavens beyond. She would be there soon.

Her body was dumped aggressively to the ground, and as the impact subsided and her eyes opened, a great club dropped mercilessly upon her. She was crushed where she lay, and her life leaked away.

And two girls looked on, blood showering them, the blood of their mother who would no longer care for them. They would comply, and they would face servitude. The House of Red had come for them, and they were taken.

And it had come for Wulfen too. He sniffed heavily, and then heaved – a dry heave full of sadness and pain. His throat was raw, and as the weapon was taken from Lidye's corpse, the extent of the damage was revealed. Wulfen heaved in disgust.

Anger took him. He could not carry this, it was too much. He couldn't save the children, and he could not go on. He had tried to warn the world, he really had, but they hadn't listened. Did he do it wrong? It didn't matter – he had failed. As Dusk engulfed the two young souls and led them from their home, Wulf did the very thing he warned against. He could not go on.

“I will not comply!”

Dusk turned upon him, and brought down the veil.

“You will comply.”

“No, I won't!”

“You will comply. You will spread your story.” They meant to leave him! They meant to let him live, to carry this through his travels. He had tried, he had tried to warn the world, but no-one believed him. He was just a crazy old man, but Dusk had other ideas. “This time, people will listen.” And he knew it was true, because this time he carried the horror with him – the real horror. Only now would they listen.

Was there a fate worse than death? Yes – this.

“No, you can't—”

But the beast ducked through the door, leaving it banging in the wind. And Wulfen was alone. With the dead.

His legs ached, and his back screamed against the prospect of use, but none of it registered, not against the hurt of what he'd seen. He went to find a shovel, and considered his options. There were none, not really, not any more. Not ever again.

He went to bury his family.

## The Story Continues...

As you've probably gathered, this is not where the story ends. No indeed – this is just a taster of what's to come. The story continues in the epic fantasy trilogy, the [Age of Ku](#), the first book of which is called [Fear's Union](#) and is available at all major online book retailers. A prequel novella to Fear's Union, titled [Mandestroy](#), is also available for free from all major online retailers.

## About the Author:



James Hockley has a normal job, a brilliant family, great friends, and he enjoys beer and grilled meat. He also spends almost all of his spare time locked in his own imagination, and the rest of his spare time trying to articulate that mental chaos into English.

In 2016, James became a self-published author (hurrah!) of epic fantasy fiction. His first work, the first instalment of the Age of Ku trilogy called Fear's Union, was available in eBook format from April 2016. And his second work, a prequel to Fear's Union called Mandestroy, was made available from the end of July. But there is much more to come from the World of Ku, so keep in touch.

James also blogs about his writing and publishing experiences on his [website](#), as well as reviewing all his fantasy reads. James lives in Bristol, UK, with his wife and his young son.

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