

# THE BLACKTONGUE THIEF

**YOUR  
SMALLEST MISTAKE  
COULD BECOME  
YOUR BIGGEST  
ADVENTURE.**

**CHRISTOPHER BUEHLMAN**

**"Highly entertaining ride through a world as monstrous as it is wondrous."**

**—Anthony Ryan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Blood Song***

THE  
**Blacktongue  
Thief**

*Christopher Buehlman*



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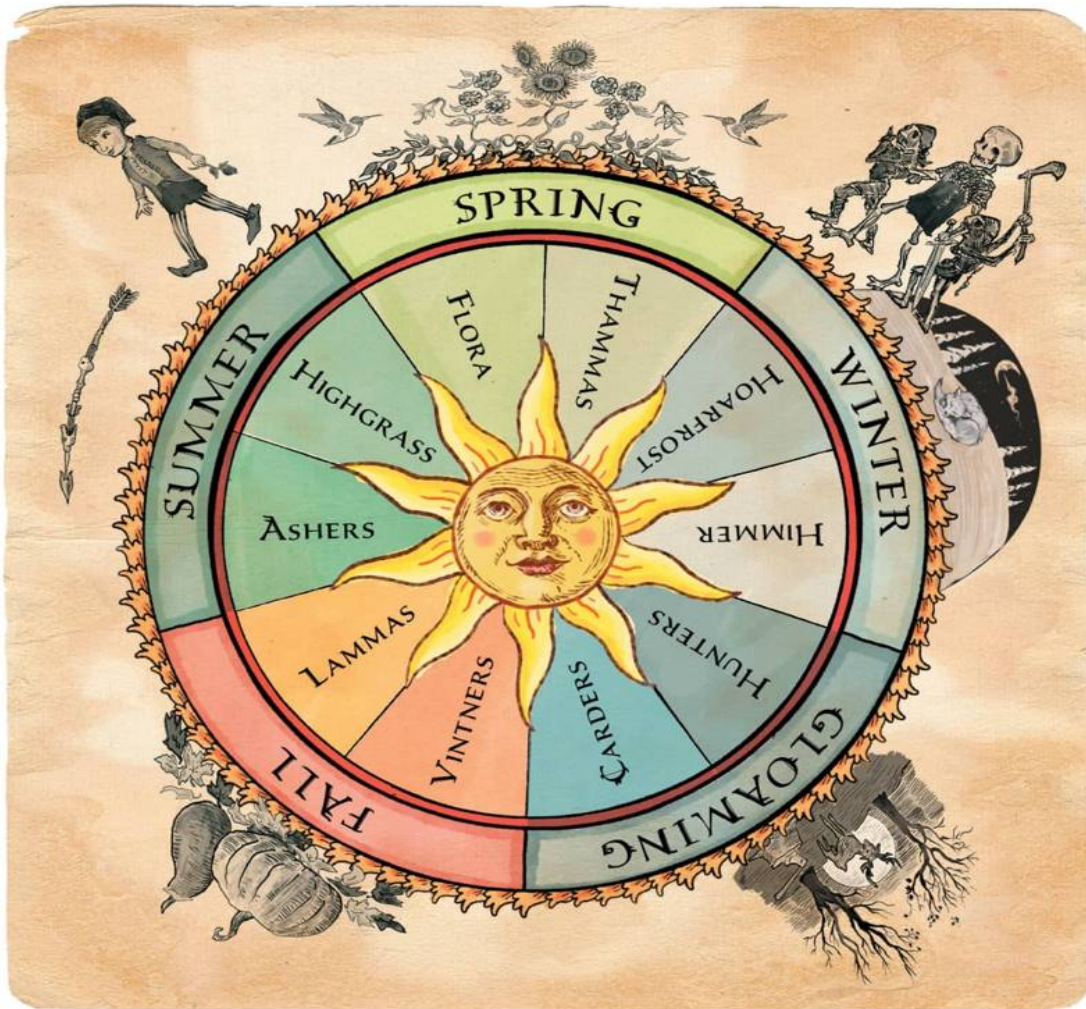
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**For Jennifer,**

*atlast,  
underthisandany moon.*







LUNDA	HARTDAY	KNOTSDAY	RINGDAY	OATHDAY	WIDDERSDAY	LAMBSDAY	FRULDAY	SATHSDAY
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
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# 1

## The Forest of Orphans

I was about to die.

Worse, I was about to die with bastards.

Not that I was afraid to die, but maybe who you die with is important. It's important who's with you when you're born, after all. If everybody's wearing clean linen and silk and looking down at you squirming in your bassinet, you'll have a very different life than if the first thing you see when you open your eyes is a billy goat. I looked over at Pagran and decided he looked uncomfortably like a billy goat, what with his long head, long beard, and unlovely habit of chewing even when he had no food. Pagran used to be a farmer. Frella, just next to him in rusty ring mail, used to be his wife.

Now they were thieves, but not subtle thieves like me. I was trained in lock-picking, wall-scaling, fall-breaking, lie-weaving, voice-throwing, trap-making, trap-finding, and not a half-bad archer, fiddler, and knife-fighter besides. I also knew several dozen cantrips—small but useful magic. Alas, I owed the Takers Guild so much money for my training that I found myself squatting in the Forest of Orphans with these thick bastards, hoping to rob somebody the old-fashioned way. You know, threaten them with death.

It pays surprisingly well, being a highwayman. I was only a month in with this group, and we had robbed wagons with too few guards, kidnapped

stragglers off groups with too many, and even sold a merchant's boy to a group of crooked soldiers who were supposed to be chasing us. Killing never came easily to me, but I was willing to throw a few arrows to keep myself out of the shyte. It's the way the world was made. I had more than half what I needed for my Lammas payment to the Guild to keep them from making my tattoo worse. The tattoo was bad enough already, thank you very much.

So there I was, crouched in ambush, watching a figure walking alone down the White Road toward us. I had a bad feeling about our potential victim, and not just because she walked like nobody was going to hurt her, and not just because ravens were shouting in the trees. I had studied magic, you see, just a little, and this traveler had some. I wasn't sure what kind, but I felt it like a chill or that charge in the air before a storm that raises gooseflesh. Besides, what could one woman have on her that would be worth much split seven ways? And let's not forget our leader's double share, which would end up looking more like half.

I looked at Pagan and gave him a little shake of my head. He looked back at me, the whites of his eyes standing out because he'd mudded himself, all but his hands, which he left white to make handcanting easier. Pagan used a soldier's handcant he'd learned in the Goblin Wars, only half like the thieves' cant I learned at the Low School. His two missing fingers didn't help matters. When I shook my head at him, he canted at me. I thought he said to repair my purse, so I checked to see if money was falling out, but then I realized he was saying I should check to see if my balls were still attached. Right, he was impugning my courage.

I pointed at the stranger and made the sign for magicker, not confident they would know that one, and I'm not sure if Pagan did; he told me there was a magicker behind me, or at least that's what I thought at first, but he was actually telling me to put a magicker in my arse. I looked away from the chief bastard I was about to die with and back at the woman about to kill us.

Just a feeling I had.



To walk alone down the White Road through the Forest of Orphans, even on a pleasantly warm late-summer day in the month of Ashers, you would have to be a magicker. If you weren't, you'd have to be a drunk, a foreigner, a suicide, or some sloppy marriage of the three. This one had the look of a foreigner. She had the olive tones and shaggy black hair-mop of a Spanth. With good cheekbones, like they have there, a gift from the old empire, and there was no telling her age. Youngish. Thirty? Built small but hard. Those sleepy eyes could well be a killer's, and she was dressed for fighting. She had a round shield on her back, a gorget to save her throat a cutting, and if I didn't miss my guess, she wore light chain mail under her shirt.

The blade on her belt was a bit shorter than most. Probably a *spadín*, or bullnutter, which would definitely make her Ispanthian. Their knights used to be the best horsemen in the world, back when the world had horses. Now they relied on the sword-and-shield art of Old Kesh, known as Calar Bajat, taught from the age of eight. Spanths don't take threats well—I was all but sure if we moved, it would be to kill, not intimidate. Would Pagan think it was worth bothering? Money pouches hung on the stranger's belt, but would Pagan order the attack just for that?

No.

He would be looking at the shield.

Now that the maybe-Spanth was closer, I could see the rosy blush on the wood rim peeking over the stranger's shoulder marking the shield as one of springwood. A tree we cut so fast during the Goblin Wars it was damned-near extinct—the last groves grew in Ispanthia, under the king's watchful eye, where trespassing would get you a noose, and trespassing with a saw would get you boiled. Thing about springwood is, if it's properly cured and cared for, it's known to stay living after it's been cut and heal itself. And as long as it's alive, it's hard to burn.

Pagan wanted that shield. As much as I hoped he'd move his cupped palm down like he was snuffing a candle, I knew he would jab his thumb forward and the attack would start. Three scarred brawlers stood beside Pagan, and I heard the other two archers shifting near me—one

superstitious young squirt of piss named Naerfas, though we called him Nervous, kissing the grubby fox pendant carved from deer bone he wore on a cord around his neck; his pale, wall-eyed sister shifted in the leaves behind him. I never liked it that we worshipped the same god, they and I, but they were Galts like me, born with the black tongues that mark us all, and Galtish thieves fall in with the lord of foxes. We can't help ourselves.

I pulled an arrow with a bodkin point, good for slipping between links of chain mail, and nocked it on the string.

We watched our captain.

He watched the woman.

The ravens screamed.

Pagran jabbed the thumb.

What happened next happened fast.



I pulled and loosed first, feeling the good release of pressure in my fingers and the bite of the bowstring on my inner arm. I also had that warm-heart feeling when you know you've shot true—if you haven't handled a bow, I can't explain it. I heard the hiss of my fellows' arrows chasing mine. But the target was already moving—she crouched and turned so fast she seemed to disappear behind the shield. Never mind that it wasn't a large shield—she made herself small behind it.

Two arrows hit the springwood and bounced, and where my own arrow went I couldn't see. Then there went Pagran and his three brawlers, Pagran's big glaive up in the air like an oversized kitchen knife on a stick, Frella's broadsword behind her neck ready to chop, two others we'll just call Spear and Axe running behind. The Spanth would have to stand to meet their charge, and when she did, I would stick her through the knee.

Now things got confusing.

I saw motion in the trees across the road.

I thought three things at once:



*A raven is breaking from the tree line.*

*The ravens have stopped shouting.*

*That raven is too big.*

A raven the size of a stag rushed onto the road.

I made a little sound in my throat without meaning to.

It's an unforgettable thing, seeing your first war corvid.

Especially if it's not on your side.

It plucked Spear's foot out from under her, spilling her on her face, then began shredding her back with its hardened beak. I woke myself out of just watching it and thought I should probably nock another arrow, but the corvid was already moving at Axe, whose name was actually Jarril. I tell you this not because you'll know him long but because what happened to him was so awful I feel bad just calling him Axe.

Jarril sensed the bird coming up on his flank and stopped his run, wheeling to face it. He didn't have time to do more than raise his axe before the thing speared him with its beak where no man wants beak nor spear. His heavy chain mail hauberk measured to his knees, but those birds punch holes in skulls, so what was left of Jarril's parts under the chain mail didn't bear thinking about. He dropped, too badly hurt even to yell. Frella yelled, though. I glanced left and saw Pagran bent over, covered in blood, but I think it was Frella's—she was bleeding enough for both of them, spattering the ground from a vicious underarm cut that looked to run elbow to tit.

As the Spanth switched directions, I caught a glimpse of her naked sword, which was definitely a *spadín*. Sharp enough to stab, heavy enough to chop. A good sword, maybe the best short sword ever made. And she could use it. She moved like a blur now, stepping past Frella and booting her broadsword out of reach.

Spear, her back in tatters, was just getting up on all fours like a baby about to try walking. Beside me, Nervous cried out, "*Awain Baith*," Galtish for "death-bird," and dropped his bow and ran, his older sister turning tail with him, leaving me the only archer in the trees. I had no shot at the Spanth, who kept her shield raised toward me even as she lopped Spear's hand off below

the wrist. Funny what the mind keeps close—I glimpsed the shield closer now and saw its central steel boss was wrought in the shape of a blowing storm cloud’s face, like the kind on the edge of a map.

Pagran had taken up his dropped glaive and was trying to ward the corvid circling him. It bit at the glaive’s head twice, easily avoiding Pagran’s jab and not seeming to notice my missed arrow—these things don’t move predictably, and at twenty paces, an arrow doesn’t hit the instant it flies. Now the war bird grabbed the glaive-head and wrenched sideways so Pagran had to turn with it or lose the weapon. Pagran turned at just the instant the Spanth leapt fast and graceful as a panther and cut him deep just above the heel. Our leader dropped and curled up into a moaning ball. The fight on the road was over.

Shyte.

I nocked another arrow as Spanth and bird looked at me.

The bow wasn’t going to be enough. I had a fine fighting knife on the front of my belt; in a tavern fight, it would turn a geezer inside out, but it was useless against chain. At my back, I had a nasty spike of a rondel dagger, good to punch through mail, but against *that* sword in *that* woman’s hand, not to mention the fucking bird, it might as well have been a twig.

They moved closer.

I could outrun the Spanth, but not the bird.

I pissed myself a little, I’m not ashamed to tell you.

“Archer,” she said in that *r*-tapping Ispanthian accent. “Come out and help your friends.”

★ ★ ★

That they weren’t really my friends wasn’t a good enough reason to leave them maimed and wrecked on the White Road, nor was the fact that they deserved it. The Spanth had fished an arrow from the bloody tangle of shirt under her arm, matched its fletching to the arrows still in my side-quiver, and said, “Good shot.”

She gave me the arrow back. She also gave me a mouthful of wine from her wineskin, good thick, black wine, probably from Ispanthia like she was. Pagan, grimacing and dragging himself to lean against a tree, got nothing. Frella, who seemed within two drops of bleeding herself unconscious, got nothing, even though she looked hopefully at the Spanth while I tied her arm off with one stocking and a stick. The wine was just for me, and only because I had shot true. That's a Spanth for you. The surest way to make one love you is to hurt them.

To speak of the injured, Jarril was still unconscious, which was good—let him sleep; no stander wants to wake up a squatter, especially one barely old enough to know the use of what he'd lost. Spear had picked up her lost hand and run into the forest like she knew a sewer-on of hands whose shop closed soon. I don't know where the bird went, or didn't at the time. It was like it disappeared. As for the Spanth, she was off down the road like nothing happened past a scratch and a bloody shirt, but something *had* happened.

Meeting that Ispanthian birder had just changed my fate.

## 2

### The Bee and Coin

Getting Frella and Pagan back to our camp was no easy matter. I gave Pagan back his glaive to crutch himself along on and had to let Frella lean her weight on me over a mile of uneven ground. Luckily, she was skinny—fit for palisades, as soldiers say, so she was less of a burden than she might have been. My masters at the Low School would have chided me for helping those two. They would have seen that getting trounced on the White Road was the end of our none-too-jolly band and that the archers who ran away, being brother and sister, were loyal only to each other and likely to help themselves to whatever we'd left behind before scampering off to the next adventure.

What I'd left behind was my fiddle, a fine helmet I'd hoped to sell, and a jug of Galtish whiskey. I didn't really care about the helmet, and there was barely enough burnwater left to wet my lips, but that fiddle meant something to me. I'd like to tell you it had belonged to my da or something, but my da was a sad bastard miner and couldn't play the arse-horn after a quart of beans and cabbage. I stole that fiddle. Walked off with it while a mate argued with a music student about whether his singing at a tavern had been in key. For the record, it wasn't, but it was a damned fine fiddle. So much so that, after our con, I paid my mate his half of its worth rather than sell it. And now



it was likely off to be sold for next to nothing and the two shytes who will have taken it so far ahead of me I had little chance to catch them.



Cadoth was the first town west of the Forest of Orphans and the last town in Holt proper before you get to the yet gloomier forests and broad highlands of Norholt. You can tell how big a town is by how many gods have temples there and how big those temples are. For example, a village with one mud road, one tavern that's really just the back of a fat man's house, and a dying ox everyone shares at plowing time will have an Allgod church. No roof, logs to sit on, an altar with tallow candles and a niche where different gods' statues will go depending on the holiday. Those statues will be carved from ash or hickory, with generous breasts on the goddesses and unthreatening pillicocks on the gods, except Haros, who will be hung like the stag he is, because everyone knows he screws the moon so hard she has to sink beneath the hills and rest from it.

A slightly bigger town, one with a full-time whore who doesn't also brew beer or mend shirts, will have an Allgod church with a thatched roof and a bronze disc in a square of lead or iron, plus a proper temple to whichever local deity they feel will defecate least upon their hopeful, upturned faces.

Cadoth was as big as a town gets before someone decides it's a city. A proper trade town at a proper crossroads, it had an Allgod church crowned with a bronze sun, a huge tower to Haros topped with wooden stag horns, plus temples to a dozen other divinities scattered here and there. Notably absent were Mithrenor, god of the sea—nobody much bothers inland—and the Forbidden God, for obvious reasons.

One thing a town this size *will* have is a proper Hanger's House, as the Takers Guild Hall is called, and I would need to head there to discuss my debt to them. My adventures with Pagran and his cutty, stabby, punchy crew had gone well enough that summer, until we got our arses pulped and handed to us by the Spanth and her murder-bird. Now Nervous and

Snowcheeks, the sibling archers who'd scampered when the bird joined the fray, had all but cleaned me out. I needed money—fast—and playing a few hands of Towers would be a good way to start.

I knew I'd find a game at the Bee and Coin because a Bee and a Coin were two of the cards in the Towers deck, besides the Towers, the Kings and Queens, Soldiers, Shovels, Archers, Death, the Traitor, and, of course, Thieves, signified in common decks by an illustration of a grasping hand.

Not everyone in the tavern would be a cards player. A few sheepherders and root farmers faithful to the gods of sour frowns held down edgeward tables, talking low about rain and weevils, their never-washed woolens insulated with decades of hand-wiped meat grease. Two younger bravos near the bar had short copper cups at their belts, used in Towers to collect coin. Despite their swords, these fellows seemed leery of a trio of hard-looking older women *clink-clinking* away at Towers around a worm-bitten table.

I was leery, too, but I wanted a game.

"Do you care for a fourth?" I said, mostly to the bald killer shuffling the deck. She looked at my tattoo. She had every right to slap me for it but didn't seem keen on it. Neither of the other two playing cards wanted a beer more than they wanted a cordial start to the game, so neither of them claimed the prize either.

Baldy nodded at the empty chair, so I put my arse in it.

"Lamnur deck or Mouray?" I said.

"What'chye fuckin' think?"

"Right. Lamnur."

Nobles and such used the Mouray deck. Better art on that one. But folks with permanent dirt on their collars played the Lamnur deck, simpler images, two queens instead of three, no Doctor card to save you if you draw Death. For my part, I prefer the Mouray deck, but I'm partial to second chances.

"Now pay the price," she said.

I dug sufficient coins out of my purse to ante.

*Clink-clink!*

She dealt me in.

I won two of the three Tourney rounds and folded the third so not to seem to be cheating, but the War round's chest was too fat to pass up. The pale blondy woman with the scar like a fishhook bet heavy, thinking herself invincible with the last King in the deck, but I dropped the Traitor on her, arched off the Queen that would have caught the Traitor, took that King, and won. Again. A lot.

"The fuck'r ye doin' that, ye slipper?" the bald one said, leaving out the *how* like a good Holtish street thug. *Slipper* wasn't such a nice thing to be called, either, but then I had just bankrouted her.

"Just lucky," I said, not lying.

More about luck later.

She hovered between stabbing me and slapping me, settling finally on exile.

"The fuck out th'table" she said, as in *I should get*, so I pouched my winnings up in my shirt, slid them into my belt-purse, and walked away smiling, followed after by several comments about my father, none of which I hoped were true. They all wanted to slap me, but were too enthralled by the game; they would stay nailed to the table until two of them were destitute, and then they'd likely fight. Little wonder preachers of so many gods rail against the game—it had killed more folk than the Murder Alphabet. I almost said it killed more than goblins had, but that would be too gross an exaggeration even for me.

I made my way toward the bar, and what should I see leaning on its rough wood, past a large fellow built for eclipse, but the Spanth from the road. We shared an awkward nod. The space at the bar next to her, the one I had been just moving to occupy, was suddenly taken by some rentboy with too much black makeup around the eyes. Those eyes inventoried the birder and found much to approve. She was a very handsome woman in her way, what with her black hair and seawater-blue eyes, but I hadn't worked out if she would look better if she didn't seem sleepy or if the heavy-lidded look gave her a certain charm. Men love a woman who doesn't seem to give a damn, so long

as she's handsome. We also love a happy woman, so long as she's fair, or a sad pretty one, or an angry girleen with a good face. You see how this works. So, yes, the Spanth was fair. But if she had to summon a smile to put out a fire, half the town would burn. She didn't seem to notice the keen young pennycock next to her, rather occupying herself with her wine and staring into the middle distance. Troubled girl with good bones. The lads love that.

I found another place to stand.

A Galtish harper of some talent was singing "The Tattered Sea," a song that had become popular after enough men had died to make calling humanity *mankind* sound a bit off. The word in vogue these last twenty years was *kynd*.

Her voice wasn't half-bad, so nobody threw a bottle at her.

*One day upon the Tattered Sea  
I waded out upon the waves  
A comely young man for to see  
Who looked to me more knight than knave*

*Now swam he toward a maiden brave  
Who treaded water in the brine  
I should have left, my shame to save  
But I swam after, close behind*

*For I was young and poorly bred  
With much to learn of lechery  
Beneath the waves I dunked my head  
And what there should I hap to see?*

*I found a tail fin fairly twinned  
Where I had sought four legs entwined  
Said I, "O, brother, are you kynd?"  
Said he, "No kynd, but surely kind*