



Ursula The Scourge

by Tony Graham

It took them all day to climb the wooded mountain. The twelve weary riders rounded the grey stone peak at sunset, leaving the forest behind. Kurgan, the leader of the Scourge warband, called a halt. His company, all armed and wearing some form of armor, sat alert in their saddles, not a one getting off to walk their horse after the long climb.

Before them lay the small farmstead. A single-story, low-roofed house overgrown with creeper vines sat in the center of the roughly circular, low rock wall. A barn, a fenced pig wallow and the small rise of a root cellar were the only other buildings within the wall. The whole was nearly overgrown with wild flowers and a poorly tended garden.

Kurgan was not impressed. He'd been repeatedly told a Noble lived up here atop Prickly Mountain by the people in the valleys below. This did not look like a noble's home as described to him by the Preachers of the Scourge. No small army of servants. No sparkle, no grand magic, nothing. Three separate gates broke the circle that Kurgan could see. A woman sat on a stump in the center of the circle before a small fire. Kurgan could smell the burning hickory.

It was a clear, crisp evening. No wind to speak of. Quiet. The stars beginning to show as the sun dropped down the other side of the stone peak at their backs. There was no other farmstead in sight, and this was the top of the mountain. Kurgan figured this must be the place. If not, the folk below would regret their lies. He led his men to the farm.

Ursula watched the lead warrior push her gate open without asking. He didn't bother to dismount. The rest of the soldiers followed him into her wild garden. All stayed on their horses, carelessly trampling her flowers. She was irritated, felt rage rising for a moment before realizing that it wasn't her anger. Big Paw wasn't happy with these strangers. Ursula calmed herself. The flowers would quickly grow back. Besides, riding through them had filled the night air with their scent, almost overpowering the hickory.

The lead warrior stopped his horse across the fire from her. Two of his soldiers had bows. Had to keep an eye on them, she told herself.

Kurgan stared at the woman. Soft leather boots, dark blue skirt, white shirt. Tough to tell her age, no spring chicken, but not too old. No armor. No weapons. She didn't look dangerous. Didn't look noble either. Kurgan was rapidly becoming frustrated.

"I can't feed a dozen with no warning, much less invitation," Ursula greeted them.





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Kurgan reminded himself these hill folk were stupid. “This your place?” Kurgan tried to be polite.

“You see anyone else on your way up here?”

Kurgan gave up on patience. “Lady, my men have been in the saddle since daybreak. You best keep a civil tongue in your mouth, or I’ll have it cut out.” The woman stared at him. He could see the fear in her, but she kept it under control. He liked that, admiring her courage.

A long howl broke the quiet of the evening. The horses stirred beneath their riders.

Ursula shivered. It wasn't chill. Anticipation intruded. Aware of herself, Ursula quickly recognized the source. A Morgan pack had followed these riders up the mountain. It pleased her to see her trust in her cousins rewarded.

The lead warrior smiled at her, no doubt thinking himself friendly. “We were told there was a Noble living up here.”

“You're with the Scourge.” Ursula made it confirmation rather than a question.

Kurgan nodded.

“You the ones burned out the Dunbar farm last week?”

“We heard tales of their sorcery. Punished them with scourge and cleansed them with fire. They were of Noble blood,” Kurgan assured her.

“So you killed them.” Ursula stood up. Now she was angry.

“The Nobles betrayed and murdered the Emperor Gallidon. They must be punished, purged from the land before Na'naat turns her face back to us,” Kurgan recited to her. Several of his men nodded.

“Well, the Dunbars weren't noble. One or two of them had a touch of the Gift, but no noble blood. They're just people you murdered.”

“They performed acts of sorcery. Several people put to the questioning by the Preachers confessed to their black deeds. We are the hand of the Scourge. We know how to deal with nobles,” Kurgan boasted.

“Truly? Well then, I'm Ursula Corvus. Of the Noble House of Corvus. This is my land.”

Kurgan and his warriors sat in their saddles, caught off guard by the small woman's open challenge.

Ursula cocked her head to one side. “You're just trash, aren't you? Stupid trash.”

Kurgan pulled his sword. One of the archers raised his bow.



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Ursula clapped her hands, hurling impressions of fire into the minds of their horses. The men of the Scourge fought to stay in their saddles. Most failed to stay on their panicked mounts.

Ursula retreated through one of the small gates, casting her thoughts, releasing Big Paw to do his will and calling the Morgan pack in.

The grizzly bear burst forth from the barn. Rising to his full ten-foot height, Big Paw charged, killing Kurgan's horse with a single crushing blow before seizing its rider with long claw and fang.

The wolf pack came over the low stone walls, driving the horses off and falling on the riders. The screams of the Scourge soldiers echoed across the mountain.

Ursula met the Morgan boy at the cliff's edge. She didn't know this one by name, but easily recognized his Gift.

“A party of rangers are on the way, an hour or so behind me,” he apologized to her. “We been chasing these men for days.”

“Make sure none of those fools gets off my mountain alive.”



Illustration *Big Paw Attacks* by Andy Underwood.

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First Published November, 2008.