

# **BLACK LAKE MANOR**

Also from Guy Morpuss and Viper  
*Five Minds*

# BLACK LAKE MANOR

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To Omi

# BLACK LAKE MANOR

*The Wolf That Eats Time*  
From the Oral Traditions of the Akaht

*Only one who is Hamatsa may summon the Wolf*  
*The Wolf will eat no more than one quarter of one Day*  
*Only the Hamatsa and any who pass to the Night will remember*  
*The Wolf will heed the call of each Hamatsa only once*

1804



# 1

## THE WRECK OF THE *WHITBY*

4 NOVEMBER 1804, PACHENA BAY, VANCOUVER ISLAND

Maquina, chief of the Mowachaht, watched impassively as the *Pride of Whitby* broke her back.

He and a companion had scrambled up the rocky path that led to the clifftops surrounding Pachena Bay, leaving the rest of the whaling party below. On seeing lights near the entrance to the bay Maquina had been curious to know who it was that had braved the first storm of winter.

This was not a night for venturing out in a cedar log canoe. Far safer to do as Maquina had done: wait onshore for the storm to blow a drift whale into the bay. As he had predicted, a carcass had been washed ashore, and he had left his men butchering it while he investigated the lights.

Once they climbed the cliffs it was swiftly apparent that the vessel was no canoe. Maquina lowered his stolen telescope, tucking the precious instrument back into his cloak, away from the driving rain.

‘There are three masts, so she’s one of yours,’ he said to his companion.

The other man nodded. ‘What the devil do they think they’re doing?’

‘They’ll be on the reefs any minute.’

‘Perhaps they think this is Friendly Cove. It’s an easy enough mistake to make in the dark, especially on a night like this.’

The two men watched in silence, squinting into the rain. As the ship was driven closer in they didn’t need the telescope to see figures scurrying between pools of light on deck. Some seemed to be trying to trim the sails, pulling on lines. Others were gathering near a lifeboat stowed at the rear of the ship, perhaps already looking for an escape. A tall man stood in the centre of the chaos, shouting and gesturing to the crew. He appeared to be the captain but his orders were either being ignored or drowned out by the roar of the wind.

He gave up, striding aft, elbowing a crewman out of his way. As the man fell to the deck, the captain grabbed the ship’s wheel, and turned it hard. For a moment nothing happened, then the bow began to point further into the bay. Towards safety.

At first Maquina thought they might make it, that they would clear the reefs that guarded the narrow entrance.

Then the inevitable happened.

The ship stopped dead. One of the masts cracked, and toppled forward. The captain stumbled, joining his crewman on the deck.

The ship’s bow was held firm on the reef, but the stern continued to be battered by the waves. She was twisted round, timbers cracking, until she was side on to the watchers. And worse, side on to the waves.

‘Hell,’ muttered Maquina’s companion. ‘We have to do something.’

‘We do nothing.’

‘They are all going to die! We have to help them.’

Maquina turned to look at the other man. ‘Of course they will die, and I will have none of my people die with them.’

The other turned back towards the path. ‘Then I will go alone,’ he said angrily. ‘We can’t just stand here and watch.’

‘No you won’t,’ said Maquina firmly. ‘Don’t forget, Jewitt, that you are my property, and I’ll not see it destroyed. If I want that, I’ll destroy it

myself.' He touched the telescope through the folds of his cloak. 'I put your master's head on a stake after I took this from him, and another twenty-four heads next to his. It won't hurt me to add one more.'

Jewitt muttered something that was carried away by the wind. He turned back to the stricken ship, scowling.

Maquina felt nothing for these strangers who had journeyed halfway across the world to die on the shores of his island. He reached for the telescope again.

Several men were now in the water round the ship, flung overboard by the impact with the reef. None would survive for long. On deck, where the mast had fallen, was a tangled mess of lines and canvas. Anyone trapped under that was probably dead already, or soon would be.

The waves were starting to break over the side of the ship, washing across the deck as she settled lower.

Maquina swung the telescope aft. The only activity now was around the lifeboat. The captain had got back to his feet, and was shouting orders to those who remained. This time they appeared to be paying some attention, perhaps because they saw that their lives depended on it. Some were untying a canvas that had been covering the boat. Others were hauling on ropes, raising it up off the deck.

Maquina counted. Apart from the captain, there were six men left. Perhaps that was enough to row to shore, but it seemed unlikely. Odds were that even if they managed to launch the boat, they would quickly be swamped.

He snapped the telescope shut and put it away again.

'We head back down,' he said. 'And then home. We need to get the meat to our people.'

'What about the crew?' asked Jewitt. 'We should wait in case they get to the shore. It won't cost us anything to help them then.'

'They won't get here,' said Maquina. 'And if they do, you know we don't have food to keep them all alive till spring. Will you let your wife die so some stranger can live?'

‘They aren’t strangers to me.’

‘These aren’t your people any more,’ said Maquina. ‘The storm is going to blow itself out late tomorrow, so we’ll return then, to salvage what we can. There should be metal, which will give you something to do through the winter.’

He turned his back on the ship, heading for the path to the beach.

Jewitt cast a last glance at the *Pride of Whitby*. The crew were still battling with the lifeboat, one end now higher than the other, as their ship sank ever lower into the water.

Jewitt cursed.

Then he too turned away, and followed his chief back into the night.

**2025**



## 2

# MURDER AT THE GRANGE

19:28, 13 FEBRUARY 2025, OMBERSLEY GRANGE, ENGLAND

Throughout his life the 8th Duke of Ombersley had found the lessons contained in *Debrett's Correct Form* to be more than adequate for coping with unfamiliar situations. As a young boy those lessons had, on occasion, literally been beaten into him. And while they might not precisely cover every circumstance, there was usually some guidance on which he could draw.

But for once his youthful learning was of limited value.

He seemed to recall that *Debrett's* included a passage on how to deal with the house guest who overstayed his welcome. Also, he was pretty sure that there was something about smoothing your guest's departure when it was time to leave.

Yet, much as he wanted this particular guest to leave, and swiftly, neither piece of advice seemed particularly apposite for someone who was pointing a pistol at the duke's stomach.

He fell back on ingrained good manners. 'Come on, old chap, is that really necessary? Let me get you a drink and we can talk about this.'

The duke hadn't wanted this meeting in the first place. It seemed a little grubby to be selling off his heritage to a man whose family had until recently been living in tents in the desert and herding goats. And it was taking the duke away from the tournament that he had spent six months organising.

But needs must. It didn't come cheap to bring four of the world's top ten grandmasters to your home, even when you threw in the venue for free.

So, despite his irritation at the sheikh being almost half an hour late, the duke had put on his best smile as he walked down the front steps to greet his visitor. The silver Rolls-Royce Phantom that crunched to a halt at the end of the long gravel driveway was rather too flashy for the duke's taste. He preferred the Bentley Continental that he had inherited along with the Grange. Still, it was at least a nod to tradition.

The man who emerged was dressed in a smart grey suit, paired with a plain white keffiyeh headdress. His face was half hidden, but from what the duke could see he looked younger than expected. That should, perhaps, have been the first clue. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. Which, with hindsight, was the second clue.

But it was not in the duke's nature to doubt or judge his guests. Trust was important; besides, he knew the sheikh's father.

The duke stepped forward, holding out his hand. 'Sheikh al-Katoun. It is a pleasure finally to meet in person.'

The man's handshake was brief. He offered no apology for being late. 'Please, call me Naz,' he said, looking around him. 'Cool place.'

The duke shrugged modestly. 'It suits us.'

He turned as a young man descended the steps from the front door. 'Sheikh al-Katoun, this is my personal secretary, Lincoln Shan. He will show your driver where he can wait, and will join us to sort out the paperwork.'

The sheikh shook his head. 'No need,' he said shortly. 'We won't be long, so my man can wait with the car. And I'd rather speak with you alone.'

For a moment the duke looked nonplussed. 'I'm sorry. I thought the



plan was for you to stay for the tournament final and then dinner. Your father told me you are a keen follower of speed chess.'

'That is true, but something has cropped up in London with the family interests so I need to get back tonight.'

The duke grimaced. 'Personally, I go to the City as little as possible, and I leave my business there for others to manage. It's a real shame that you can't stay. I'm hoping that the final will be between Hagen and Petrov, which would be a fine match.'

'Sadly not,' said the sheikh. He looked pointedly up the steps. 'Shall we?'

'Of course.' The duke guided him to the front door.

They entered a high-ceilinged hallway which ended in a grand double staircase. To their right tall wooden doors were open, giving a glimpse into a reception room from which a murmur of voices emerged.

'The diamond is in my study,' said the duke, gesturing to a closed door on the other side of the hall.

'We go alone,' said the sheikh, looking at Lincoln.

The duke turned to his secretary. 'Wait here. Or better still, see how the tournament is going. They're about to start the semi-finals, and Xi versus Hagen will be interesting, a real contrast of styles.'

Lincoln smiled. 'I fear the subtleties will be lost on me, sir, as I'm not much of a player.'

'Well go and see who wins, and then come and join us in ...' He turned to his guest. 'Ten minutes? I'll need Lincoln to sort out the contract: that's all a bit beyond me.'

'Make it fifteen,' said the sheikh.

Lincoln bowed slightly, glancing at his watch. 'Very well, sir.'

As the two men turned towards the study, the lights in the tournament room dimmed, then began to flash. Booming music emerged from the room, bouncing off the walls of the entrance hall: '*Ich bin ein Pandabär, Ich bin ein Pandabär ...*'

The sheikh jerked round, staring behind him. 'What the hell is that?'

The duke smiled weakly. 'That'll be Xi making his entrance.'

The sheikh looked at him blankly. Which should have been the third clue. 'What?'

'Xi Liang,' said the duke. 'The world Number Five. Or, as I'm told we are now meant to call him, "The Panda from Anda." He shuddered. 'Apparently this is the way to bring chess to the younger generation: flashy lights and music, and they introduce the players like boxers. Personally, I think it's all a bit gauche, but I suppose they know better than I do what works. Come on.'

As the music faded, the duke opened the door to his study, and ushered his guest inside. The room was dominated by an oak desk the size of a snooker table. There were two leather armchairs in front of it, and the walls were lined with books.

He shut the door, and gestured to a drinks trolley in one corner. 'Can I get you something?'

'No, thanks. I just want to see the diamond.'

The duke walked over to a bookshelf, pulled a hidden lever, and two shelves of books swung out, revealing a keypad. He looked over his shoulder. 'Sometimes the old ways are the best.'

The sheikh nodded impatiently.

The duke typed in a code, and reached inside the safe to extract a small wooden box. He walked to the desk, put it down, and carefully opened the lid. Nestled in velvet was a rectangular cut stone of the deepest blue.

'Here it is: the Ellora Blue. It once graced the forehead of a maharani, and has been in our family for more than two hundred years. It's said to be cursed, but I don't believe in that stuff, do you?'

The sheikh stepped over to the desk, glanced briefly at the stone, then shut the box.

The duke frowned. 'What's wrong, don't you want to inspect it?'

'No need. I trust you.'

'That was quick. You have the bonds? Shall I call Lincoln to bring the contract, then?'

'Again, no need.' The sheikh tucked the wooden box under one arm,

and with his other hand reached inside his jacket. He produced a pistol, which he pointed at the duke. 'Perhaps you should have paid more attention to the curse.'

'Oh dear.' The duke looked his guest up and down. 'You're not really Sheikh al-Katoun, are you?'

The man smiled. 'No. We picked him up on his way here, and he's being held close by. Once this is over we'll stage a car crash with him in it, which should cause enough confusion while we get out of the country with his bearer bonds and the diamond. Apart from you, the only person to see me here is your secretary. I don't imagine he'll remember much beyond the headdress.'

The duke was studying him closely. 'I will remember you.'

The other man smiled thinly. 'Sadly, yes. And that's not a risk I can afford.' He raised the gun. 'This pistol belongs to the sheikh, and I'll leave it here to be found by the police.'

The duke took a step back. 'Come on, old chap, is that really necessary? Let me get you a drink and we can talk about this.'

The man merely stared at him in response.

The duke squared his shoulders. In 1944 his grandfather, the 6th Duke of Ombersley, had marched towards the German guns at Sword Beach armed with nothing more than his Webley service revolver, a swagger stick and a stiff upper lip. So the duke supposed that he ought to be able to face down one man with a pistol.

Nevertheless, he swallowed. 'Let's—'

The man shook his head. And pulled the trigger.

Twice.

Lincoln watched as his employer followed the sheikh into the study and shut the door behind them. Their guest was an odd one; he seemed ill at ease, and had a sweat stain on the back of his expensive jacket.

But the duke knew the sheikh's father, and apparently trusted the man.

Lincoln shrugged. So today he was a 'personal secretary'. The duke

hadn't wanted a bodyguard, and Lincoln had been forced on him by investors, nervous about the duke's high profile and low security. Amiable though he was, he still tended to dismiss Lincoln at every opportunity.

Although perhaps that didn't really matter, since Lincoln wasn't that sort of bodyguard. He didn't even carry a weapon.

He walked through the double doors into the tournament room. The lights had dimmed, but at the far end of the room he could make out a stage with a table in the centre, and a screen behind displaying a chess-board. A man was settling himself into a chair next to the table. Lincoln cared nothing for chess, but he assumed that must be Xi Liang.

There was scattered applause from the spectators occupying the rows of seats between Lincoln and the stage.

A voice came over the speakers: 'And now we welcome the third seed at today's tournament, and World Number Six, from Oslo, Norway, here to blow your mind ... it's ... Inger Hagen!'

The voice was replaced by music, and the lights flashed again. The opening lines to 'Killer Queen' echoed round the room.

Lincoln supposed that he was the demographic at which this new approach was targeted, but it wasn't doing much for him. Maybe it helped to have some interest in chess to start with. So far he had managed to avoid the duke's efforts to get him to watch. He might just about be able to work out who had won, but the rest would be lost on him.

Inger Hagen received a rapturous welcome as she made her way on stage. Someone stood up and shouted, 'Crush him, Inger!'

Lincoln lost interest. As the lights came back up he turned to the tables against the back wall of the room. Most were covered with stacks of books and other chess-related merchandise. He was surprised the duke had allowed it at the Grange, but then the whole thing seemed a bit tacky to Lincoln's eyes.

There was one display that was different. In the far corner, squeezed between the wall and a table, was a waist-high black plinth, topped with something shiny that caught the light. As Lincoln walked over he realised

that it was a chessboard, each of the chess pieces made of glass. He reached out to touch one of them, but then noticed that someone was halfway through a game, with several pieces missing. He'd better not disturb it.

'Go ahead,' said a soft voice from behind him. 'It's fine to pick them up.'

Lincoln looked round in surprise. The speaker was a young girl who'd been sitting in the back row of the audience. She had straggly red hair which looked as though it was never brushed, and thick-lensed black-framed glasses. Lincoln wasn't good on ages, but she looked to him to be no more than fourteen or fifteen. She had a gentle accent that he couldn't place.

'This is yours?' he asked.

'Well, it's my father's really, but he's up there watching the match. He told me to keep an eye on things.'

Lincoln looked past her to the stage. At first he'd been concerned about talking, as he'd assumed the chess match would be conducted in hushed tones, but it was far from quiet. Hagen was on her feet, striding around the stage and occasionally returning to the board. The audience was loudly discussing – and sometimes cheering – each move.

The girl walked round to the other side of the plinth. 'Try it. Come on, play me.'

Lincoln looked down at the board. 'I don't really know what to do.'

'It's easy. Take your knight – you know which one that is?'

Lincoln nodded, and picked up the glass piece. It felt strangely slippery, almost liquid. 'What do I do with it?'

'It can capture my rook, here.' She pointed to a piece on her side of the board. 'Touch the rook with the knight.'

Lincoln did as she said.

The pieces felt solid as they touched, but then the rook vanished.

Lincoln stared. 'What the hell just happened?'

The girl laughed. 'Isn't it clever? Let me show you again. Put your knight where the rook was.' Lincoln complied, and she moved a bishop across the board, tapping the knight.

Which itself vanished.

The girl smiled at Lincoln, and reached across the board, holding out her hand. 'Hi, I'm Rebecca. It's pretty cool, isn't it?'

Lincoln shook her hand. 'How did you do that without me seeing? You weren't even touching the pieces when I moved them.'

'It's not a trick,' said the girl. 'Not really. It's done with hard light. You must have heard of that – it looks and feels like glass, but it's made out of light. There's a projector in here that generates the pieces.' She touched the plinth.

'It's fantastic. How do I buy one?' asked Lincoln.

'I thought you didn't know how to play.'

'I don't care about the game. It's the tech that interests me.'

'Talk to my father when they're finished,' said Rebecca. 'This isn't really for sale yet, although he is looking for investors. He's been offering prototypes for half a million.'

Lincoln gaped. 'Pounds? That's crazy!'

The girl looked confused. 'I thought you were here with them.' She gestured to the audience. 'Judging by the cars parked outside they all have loads of money, and it's cutting edge.'

Lincoln laughed. 'I just work here. Thanks for the demonstration but I don't think I'll be buying one.'

As he turned away from her there was a loud cheer from the audience, and clapping. Xi stood up, briefly shook his opponent's hand, and stalked off the stage. Hagen turned to the audience, raising her arms in triumph. 'Killer Queen' blared through the speakers again.

But then, over the sound of the music, Lincoln heard something else, like a door slamming loudly. Twice.

Had the sheikh left already? Had something gone wrong with the negotiations?

He moved quickly back into the hallway, but it was empty. The door to the duke's study was still shut. Lincoln had been told to stay away for fifteen minutes, but something felt wrong. Hesitantly he crossed the hallway, and put his ear to the door. He could hear nothing, not even voices.

As he put a hand to the door handle, Lincoln heard the roar of a car engine, and the crunch of tyres on gravel.

He ran to the front door and flung it open.

The Rolls-Royce was leaving fast, kicking up a spray of stones behind it.

He couldn't catch them, and besides, the duke was his priority. Lincoln ran back to the study.

The first thing that struck him was the smell. A harsh combination of something acrid and salty. That was quickly forgotten when he saw the duke, lying on his back by an armchair, blood staining his pristine white shirt.

Lincoln ran over and knelt beside him. The duke's eyes were shut, his chest rising and falling rapidly, breath rasping, blood bubbling on his lips.

Lincoln's first instinct was to run for help. Then he stopped, and looked behind him at the open door of the study. The rest of the Grange's staff were busy with the tournament, and no one seemed to have noticed anything untoward. Yet.

Perhaps it would be better to let the duke die. Unconscious he was no use to anyone.

Lincoln grabbed the duke's hand, squeezing hard. There was no response.

He needed to think. He got up and pushed the door shut, then stood over the duke, chewing on his lip, trying to work things out.

If the duke died quickly there was no problem. But what if he didn't? What if he stayed unconscious for days, and never woke up? That would be a disaster for all of them, particularly Lincoln.

He walked around the body. The flow of blood seemed to be easing, but the duke was still breathing. Was that a good sign?

Did he want him to live?

On his second circuit Lincoln noticed the gun left on the desk. He reached out a hand. He could use that right now to solve everything. Did he dare?

But maybe the duke would recover.

Lincoln hesitated, then lost his courage. He pulled out his phone, and dialled 999.

‘I need an ambulance at Ombersley Grange. It’s urgent.’

Lincoln perched on the edge of the desk as the green-suited paramedics worked on the duke.

In the ten minutes it had taken them to reach the Grange he had picked up the gun three times, wondering whether to end it all. Eventually, though, he had hidden it on one of the bookshelves.

There were two paramedics, a man and a woman. They had told him to leave, but then ignored him when he failed to comply. They were knelt over the duke, who was rapidly disappearing under a pile of medical equipment, the purpose of which Lincoln could not discern.

He had closed and locked the study door in the face of the staff and guests who had emerged from the tournament room on the arrival of the ambulance. He had belatedly noticed the open window through which the duke’s attacker must have fled. So far, though, no one had come into the garden to peer through.

The female paramedic paused from her efforts for a moment, and looked up at Lincoln. ‘You’re the one who called this in?’

Lincoln nodded.

‘Who shot him? How long till the police get here?’

‘They’re on their way,’ said Lincoln. ‘He was shot by a burglar who left through the window.’ He gestured to his right.

The paramedic looked down again, seemingly accepting, at least for now, that she was not sharing a room with a potential murderer.

‘Is he going to live?’ asked Lincoln.

She ignored him, so he repeated the question.

She hesitated, then looked up. ‘Hopefully, if we can get him to hospital quickly, but he’s lost a lot of blood already. Are you family?’

Lincoln shook his head. ‘I just work here. If he dies, will it be soon?’



‘I really don’t know,’ said the woman. ‘Look, I realise you’re in shock, but we need to get on and stabilise him fast. I can tell you more when we’ve done that.’

‘It’s important,’ Lincoln insisted. ‘Could he be unconscious and then die? Could he die after more than’ – he looked at his watch – ‘say, five and a half hours?’

‘What?’ The woman looked up at him sharply. ‘I just don’t know.’

‘Are you saying he could be unconscious for the next six hours, and then die without ever waking?’ asked Lincoln.

‘Of course it’s possible,’ said the woman. ‘Please, just let us get him to hospital and then I’ll answer any questions you’ve got.’ She went back to working on the duke.

Lincoln breathed out heavily. ‘Fuck,’ he muttered under his breath.

His choices had narrowed to one.

Wearily he pushed himself off the desk, and walked over to the bookshelf. This hadn’t been in the job description.

He retrieved the gun.

The woman saw him first. She glanced up, then down, then quickly up again, and scrambled backwards, falling over, ending up sitting on the floor. ‘Shit! What are you doing?’

The man had his back to Lincoln, so was slower to catch on. Then he turned, and stood, facing Lincoln, his palms raised.

‘Calm down, sir. Put the gun away. I don’t know what’s going on here, but this isn’t going to make things better.’

Lincoln brought the gun up, holding it with both hands. They were shaking, the barrel jerking up and down.

‘Step away,’ he said, gesturing with the gun. As the man hesitated, Lincoln shouted: ‘Now! I mean it.’

The paramedic took a step back towards the door. His colleague remained sitting on the floor, watching.

Lincoln knelt next to the duke. He put the barrel of the gun to the duke’s head. He was struggling to hold the gun still, and wasn’t sure where

the bullet would go. And could he really do this? He moved the gun lower, pointing it at where he thought the heart would be. The medics would know, but they were hardly going to tell him.

As he tightened his grip on the gun Lincoln sensed movement. Realising what he was about to do, the female paramedic was lunging for him.

Before she could get close, Lincoln shut his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

He was deafened by the first shot, and wasn't sure how many more times he fired before the woman crashed into him.

Lincoln was face down on the floor when he felt a second person land on his back. A hand grabbed for the gun. He let it go.

'Is he dead?' he shouted. 'Tell me! Is he dead?'

He felt the weight on his body ease slightly, and twisted his head to look at the duke. The female paramedic was bent over him again, a hand to his neck. After a moment she turned to her colleague, her face white.

'He's gone.' She reached into her pocket. 'Hold him while I call for help.'

For the first time in what seemed forever, Lincoln relaxed. His ears were still ringing, and his body shaking. But it was over.

'I can't breathe,' he gasped. 'Can I sit up?'

'Stay on the floor,' said the man. He stood, stepping away from Lincoln.

As he rolled over Lincoln could see that the man was holding the gun, pointed at him.

Lincoln sat up carefully, arms crossed over his knees. He twisted his right arm, looking at the black ink tattoo on the inside of his wrist. A circle enclosing the head of a howling wolf. He moved the fingers of his left hand to touch the wolf.

'What are you doing?' said the paramedic. 'Stop it.'

Lincoln smiled up at him. If this didn't work he was in all sorts of shit.

'*Kuwitap*,' he said softly.

And the wolf ate time.