

A TALE OF FOUR MONSTERS

Board Games aren't known for their stories—but Privateer Press is. We love adding great storytelling to everything we do.

Each of the seven scenarios in *Widower's Wood* advances an ongoing storyline that reveals more about the setting, the villainous plot, and our heroic monsters trying to save their home. Crafted by Privateer's own Director of Business and frequent staff author Will Shick and Iron Kingdoms creator Matthew D. Wilson, the *Widower's Wood* story is an epic tale told within the framework of a board game, a story that would be right at home on the bookshelf alongside our Skull Island eXpeditions novels. To give you a taste of the adventure that awaits you, you can read the prologue to the entire tale here!

PROLOGUE

Purple tentacles break the surface of the pond, thrashing wildly in a desperate attempt to escape the constricting net. In the murky depths below, Olo grips a rock with both webbed feet as he strains against the flailing swamp squid, maneuvering the net into position with his four-fingered hand. Just as the pan-sized eye of the squid comes into view, Olo thrusts forward with his fishing spear, piercing the black pupil and driving the spear deep into the creature's brain. Immediately, the thrashing stops, the squid's tentacles now as listless as the waterweeds gently brushing against Olo's legs.

Clambering up a muddy embankment, Olo drags the horse-sized leviathan ashore. His speckled green skin glistens in the dappled afternoon light, the water sliding off in beads. Olo smiles, wide lips stretching across his frog-like face. It is a good catch, he thinks; his customers will be pleased. Bringing a swamp squid in before it discharges its ink sac takes great skill, and the full gland will fetch him better trades with the local bonegrinder. Everyone will be satisfied: the farrow tribe will feast on this beast tonight, and Olo will return home rich with all the wares his mate desires and a bag full of baubles for his polliwogs, too.

Five pairs of bulbous eyes appear at the edge of the water. One by one, five tiny green heads bob up and down, chirping enthusiastically in the tongue of the croaks, praising their father for his accomplishment. Olo's vocal sac expands proudly, filling with air before he warbles an affectionate reply. What fine boys, he thinks. Swift swimmers and strong as tadpoles could be. Soon, they'll be hopping around on all fours, ready to join Olo and his beloved Burita in the treetop nest they built together.

Despite its name, *Widower's Wood* is a good home, far from the fighting that plagues their native Shattered Spine Islands and just wild enough that it only rarely sees the wayward human from the nearby city of Corvis. Here, Olo can raise his boys. And one day, this lonely pond with one small nest might be a village.

Atop a flat rock, Olo slices off the squid's tentacles with a sharp, obsidian blade and packs them tightly into a large burlap bag. Cutting through the tough hide protecting the great mollusk's organs, he reaches within its body cavity to carefully extract the full ink sac, which he gently places in a padded, oilskin pouch he can carry around his neck.

Seeing him about to depart, Burita calls from the window, high up in the nest of woven sticks and rope, urging him to return quickly; dinner will be waiting. He hoists the heavy bag of squid meat over his shoulder and waves back to his beloved before setting off to peddle his catch. He goes with nothing less than a spring in his step and a whistle on his wide froggy lips.

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Olo tightens the grip on his knife as the sound grows nearer—a clumsy, uneven shuffling, like a wounded animal staggering through the thick reeds. At last, whatever is producing the ruckus is nearly upon him. Olo braces himself, tensing his long limbs, ready to strike, then relaxes in visible relief as a long maw full of jagged teeth breaks through the wall of cattails.

"Oy, Sheldon!" Olo chirps cheerfully, rocking quickly from one webbed foot to the other in the manner of the croaks to greet a friend.

Sheldon snaps his scaly jaws together and squints his reptilian eyes, looking Olo up and down as if trying to recall who or what has called his name. "Ahh, the croaker," he finally rasps, using the more common term for Olo's kind.

The gatorman is thin for his kind, bordering on feeble. His head twitches nervously, and his eyes dart anxiously left and right, high and low, as if he expects to discover danger in all directions. Olo smiles in an effort to conceal his sadness for his friend. The fates had been cruel to this gatorman, afflicting him with an incurable wasting disease and a neurotic aversion to dark water, which should otherwise be his natural habitat. He was an outcast among the local gatorman tribes, left to die, miserable and alone.

Olo opens his bag and produces a thick length of squid tentacle. "Here, my friend. You need to eat."

Despite his own maladies, the gatorman has been skilled in the natural cures and remedies of the region, which he spends his days rooting for. On more than one occasion, he has shared his wisdom, if not a comforting treacle or poultice, with Olo and Burita, who are both relatively new to these parts. Most of the region's non-gatorman enclaves are exclusive and want nothing to do with the sickly creature, but for a few of the swamp's residents who have no issues with his demeanor that's so radically different from most gatorman, he is perceived as a bit of a country doctor, if not also a bit bumbling.

Sheldon—the name Olo calls him by, unable to pronounce his full gatorman name—eyes the fresh meat suspiciously, then snatches it with one trembling claw, nearly fumbling it to the ground before hurling it into his gorge.

"Yesss. Thank'ee, croaker. You're a right mate." The words grind from his quivering gullet.

Olo offers him more of the squid meat, but Sheldon holds up one palsied claw. Olo puts it away. "Where are you bound, Sheldon? It's been a dozen rains since I've seen you."

The gatorman heaves slightly, his abdomen gurgling. "Here. There. Nowhere ssspecific." Sheldon's squinty eye wanders to the tip of a long, crooked staff he carries, one that Olo only notices for the first time. Tied to its top are small animal skulls, feathers and other odd fetishes, looking more like trappings of a shaman than those of a frail, old, truffle hunter.

"Burita's making a stew tonight. Join us, please, Sheldon. You can meet the boys."

"Boyssss?" The gatorman's quivering suddenly stops and both eyes fix Olo with a quizzical stare.

"They hatched after the new moon. Five of them!" Olo beams. "You won't believe how quickly they're growing."

"Five, you sssay? And Burita?" Sheldon smacks his gums and quickly tallies Olo's offspring on one trembling hand, growing visibly agitated after repeatedly running out of claws to count on.

"They'll be delighted to see you, Sheldon. I'm certain of it." Olo hoists his bag over his shoulder. "I'll be right behind you after I deliver this catch to the farrow camp."

The gatorman freezes, his throat rattling as he chokes up a small, chitinous tooth from a squid sucker. "Farrow camp? That one, back there?" He snaps his long jaws in the direction from which he came.

"I won't be long," Olo calls over his shoulder, marching forward through the reeds. "But don't wait on me to eat."

Sheldon's tail swishes sporadically, flattening cattails on either side of him. "Wait? I don't wait for nuthin. Not anymore," he mutters, already tromping speedily through the thicket, his fetish staff jangling with every uneven step.

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Olo drops his bag and kneels beside the motionless farrow. He places two of his sucker-tipped fingers to her neck, searching below her coarse hair for a pulse. He exhales in relief. Her heart still beats somewhere within her muscle-bound mass. The same cannot be said for any of the other farrow in the camp.

Like trees laid low by a storm, a dozen of the boar-headed warriors lay dead—even the bonegrinder Olo had hoped would trade for the squid ink. Eviscerated, their entrails strewn upon the ground, their tongues cut out, and their eyeballs plucked from their skulls, every farrow had met the same grisly end. This hadn't been a battle, the likes of which occurred from time to time between the various wild species that called Widower's Wood home. This had been a massacre.

"Agata," Olo whispers, unable to detect any reaction behind the heavy steel mask strapped over the farrow's tusked muzzle. "Agata, can you—"

Before he can finish, a metal-shod hand shoots past the loose skin of his vocal sac and clamps vise-like around his esophagus.

The farrow warrior slams Olo to his back, clambering atop him and crushing his ribs under her armored bulk. Spittle flies from the steel grill encasing her snout, and she snorts rabidly.

"Agata KILL!"

Olo writhes, gasping for air, clawing futilely at the slaughterhouse's trunk-like forearms. Her grip tightens, and his eyes bulge from their protruding stalks.

Just as his vision begins to blur, Olo's hand finds the oilskin satchel around his neck. Fumbling it open, Olo squeezes the bag, bursting the swamp squid ink gland within. Black ichor explodes across the farrow's facemask, flowing through the eye slits and breathing vents. Agata reels back, gagging, flailing blindly, but her grip on Olo's throat holds fast.

Pulling his knees up to his chest, Olo braces both webbed feet against the cast-iron plate covering the farrow's corpulent abdomen. With the last ounce of strength he can muster, Olo kicks, his powerful leg-muscles propelling the massive farrow in an arc through the air. With a clamor that shakes the woods around them, the slaughterhouse crashes into a wooden wagon, smashing it to pieces.

Olo rolls to his feet and hefts his knife, pointing it at the farrow. "Agata! Stop! It's me, Olo!"

Retching on the squid ink, the farrow staggers to her feet, her heavy hooves trampling the remains of a fallen campmate. Reaching behind her porcine skull, she unbuckles her steel mask and flings it to the ground. She spits, vomits, and rubs her eyes until her rage finally subsides.

Casting her stare about the camp, she is suddenly overcome. She squeals in agony, falls to her haunches, and blubbers uncontrollably at the sight of her butchered, blinded brethren.

"Agata." Olo approaches her cautiously, lowering his knife and holding out one four-fingered hand. "What happened here?"

"Too many," she sobs. "Bokors. Evil hocus-pocus." She reaches for the face of her nearest campmate, brushing her hand over his face to shut the lids of his hollow sockets. "He took brother's eyes..."

"Thank the fates you were spared, Agata," Olo says, kneeling beside her and placing his hand gently on her bristling spine.

"No spare!" she roars. She grabs her metal mask off the ground and shakes it at the sky, crying out in anguish. "He not get Agata mask off!"

Olo knows she would rather have died alongside her kin, that she regards her survival as nothing more than a cruel joke. "Who, Agata? Who did this?"

Agata looks straight into Olo's eyes, her snout furrowing in an expression of pure hatred. "Bumblehead, hobble-foot, scrawny, spineless lizard doc. That who."

The color blanches from Olo's green skin. He gulps as the realization kicks him in the pit of his stomach.

"Agata kill," she mutters between sobs. But Olo is already racing for home. She follows him.

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His heart ready to explode in his chest, Olo reaches his homestead, croaking at the top of his lungs for Burita. Smoke billows from the wattle nest and flames lick out from the spaces between the branches and netting that hold it together.

In two leaps, Olo bounds up the trunk of the mangrove, twenty feet to the opening in the nest's convex wall. Inside, he finds his home ablaze, those furnishings and trappings not already on fire flung about as if they were scattered in a violent encounter. He screams for Burita, the flames blistering his wet skin as he pushes deeper into the nest, searching for his beloved. Finally, he is forced to retreat, coughing on the smoke. The flames do not have her, but his heart aches to consider who might.

Olo can barely stand as he staggers away from the burning tree. Agata watches him silently, as sorrowful an expression upon her face as a warthog can manage. Olo shuffles toward the pond to collapse by the water's edge. His hands in the mud, he weeps, tears flowing from his bulging eyes creating ripples over the glassy surface of the still pond.

Then, something catches his eye. A movement—subtle, cautious, deep within the murky water. He cranes forward, eyes wide, hope swelling in his chest. Beneath the surface, a pair of familiar beloved eyes peers back. Burita rises slowly to the surface, her face just breaking the waterline. The sight of a deep slash across her face causes Olo to gasp, and he reaches forward, tenderly touching her face with a single finger.

"It will heal," she says quietly.

Olo's voice catches in his throat. "The boys?"

One by one, five little polliwog heads bob to the surface, chirping softly. Olo's shoulders slouch in relief, his worst fears banished in an instant.

"Good thing Sheldon can't swim," he says in an attempt to make light of their grim predicament.

Burita nods. "Good thing."

Rising to his feet, Olo holds out his hands to her. "Come. We must find something to carry the boys in and leave here at once."

Burita drifts ever so slightly backward in the water. "The boys cannot travel, Olo. They will not survive being moved overland. Not yet."

"But, beloved, he could come back," he says, glancing back at the smoldering nest. "And our home...it's destroyed."

"This is still our home. I will rebuild our nest," she says, walking slowly out of the water and placing her webbed hands on his shoulders. "And you, dear Olo, will make it safe again, as you always have."

Gently, she touches her lips to the smooth green skin between his eyes.

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Olo had been a warrior for a time and a skilled fisher for even longer. But he was no tracker. Still, the path of carnage had been easy enough to follow, and were it not for the plodding hooves of his traveling companion, Olo believed he might have caught up to Sheldon by now.

Agata possessed a fury Olo knew could not even be quenched by the gatorman's death. Still, her loss had been infinitely greater than his own, and he knew he had no right to ask her to stay back, even if it meant he might travel faster or more stealthily. She craved revenge, and he wanted a safe place to raise his family. The solution was the same for both of them, and thus their paths were joined. Two heads of the same beast, as the croak saying went. It weighed upon his heart, but Olo knew Sheldon could not be allowed to live, not after what he had done, not after what he had tried to do.

Olo only wished he knew why he had done it at all. The misfit gatorman had never shown signs of being dangerous, particularly as gatormen go. He was nervous and awkward and sickly, but Olo knew him to be kind and generous, at least when he wasn't keeping entirely to himself. What could have caused this murderous rampage? What could compel Sheldon's good nature to turn so sharply? Who was aiding him? Perhaps, Olo thinks, there is an explanation, something that might not warrant the gatorman's death.

"Brain worms," Agata snorts, as if reading Olo's mind. Olo raises his rubbery eye ridges at her as she adds, "Make gators cuckoo."

Olo shrugs, fighting fatigue to stay alert as dusk falls over the marshy wood.

"Agata hate gators," the farrow warrior rants in the stilted common tongue of the region's humans. As she runs down a litany of reasons that the only good gatormen are dead gatormen, Olo finally realizes they have lost Sheldon's trail.

The evening mists have obscured the damp earth beneath them and the woods are slowly being consumed by a soupy fog that turns everything grey in the little moonlight that manages to penetrate the forest canopy. Even Olo's eyes, keen as they are in the dark, cannot make out more than shadows and shapes in the brume.

As Olo slows his pace, Agata stops completely. "Frog man lost," she says. Brutish as she is, Olo has decided she possesses an uncommon intuition.

"Not lost," Olo says, searching the fog. "I'm just not sure which way to go."

Agata snorts and hacks at the nearest tree with several mighty slashes from her bladed gauntlets. "Lost!" she grunts, kicking the tree with a powerful hoof, landing the blow just above her weapon's cuts. With a pop and a crack, the tree topples over, its thunderous crash startling every whip-poor-will for miles. Agata points down the length of the trunk, indicating Olo to lead the way. "Not lost."

Olo opens his mouth to protest, but Agata stamps her hoof and snarls, convincing the croak that he has more to lose by

disagreeing with her. But he only manages a few uncertain steps forward before something whizzes over his head.

"Drop your weapons and walk forward slowly," growls a voice in the darkness.

Agata howls in rage, but another arrow, as long and thick as a spear, slices through the fog to strike the earth between the farrow's feet.

"Drop them, Agata," Olo urges quietly, tossing his knife down. "If he wanted us dead, we would be already." The farrow looks at him for several moments, before finally letting her weapons fall to the ground.

Together, croak and farrow walk cautiously forward, hands spread apart to mitigate any appearance of hostility. With each step, their feet sink deeper into the marsh, the cool water rising to Olo's knobby knees. A tranquil breeze parts the mist before them, and Olo sees a wall of rippling muscle. With bulging biceps and forearms, the wall stretches a bow, one festooned with spikes and taller than Olo, aiming its spear-sized arrow directly at the croak's heart.

Olo recognizes the tracker. He could pass for human if he were a couple feet shorter, and if he had anything other than the face of a vicious, predatory beast. "You are Skarg the Voracious," Olo says. "We have traded before."

The Tharn stands rigid, the bow perfectly still in his iron grip. "You are loud. You smell of rotting fish and dead swine. You wake these woods and disturb my hunt."

Half-submerged in the marsh just beyond the Tharn are a trio of dead bog trog warriors, swamp-dwelling fish-men, their carcasses so fresh that steam still rises from their exposed innards. Olo raises his hands. "We humbly beg your pardon, oh Voracious one," he says, inclining his head. "We intended no trespass on your hunting grounds."

Skarg scowls. "This rancid dung heap is not my land. These are trog waters. Can't you smell them?"

"You kill many fish-man," Agata says, seemingly impressed. "Not bad."

The Tharn finally relaxes the bow, throwing back his head in exasperation. "I did not kill these trogs! Do I, Skarg the Voracious, look as if I would waste my time on these bottom feeders?"

Olo crosses his eyes in confusion. "Then what is it you hunt here?"

Skarg clenches his teeth. "I hunt a prey worthy of an offering to the great Devourer." Stepping back to provide an unobstructed view, he gestures with his arrow at the bog trog corpses. "I hunt whatever did this."

Walking forward, Olo peers closer at the dead fish-men. Gaping tongueless mouths, empty eye sockets—the handiwork is all too familiar.

"Tree was right," Agata grunts at him.

"Skarg," Olo says, cocking his frog-like head to one side, "I do believe we're all headed in the same direction after all."

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The Tharn halts, bending down to pluck a single blade of grass from the wet ground. Running the grass across his tongue, he closes his eyes for a moment, keying to some invisible trace of his quarry's passing. He lifts his head and inhales through his nostrils in short, rapid breaths, seeing with his olfactory senses as clearly as Olo can with his eyes.

Having chosen a new heading, Skarg strides ahead, pausing only to remind Olo and Agata for the umpteenth time to move more silently. This is not a problem for Olo, but for the hefty farrow, clad in clanking plate armor, suppressing her noise is no small feat. And her inability to do so is driving Skarg mad.

Skarg's tracking skills are so great, Olo muses, that the three of them might actually beat Sheldon to wherever he is headed, as long as Olo can keep the hotheaded Tharn from impaling the farrow the next time Agata erupts in one of her snorting spasms. It has already taken much persuasion on Olo's part to convince the tracker to lead them after Sheldon, and he hopes his



exaggeration of the gatorman's physical prowess will not enrage the Tharn once they find their quarry. Olo is certain that if Skarg knew they hunted a sickly gatorman with chronic shakes and an unnatural fear of the water, the Tharn would likely head in search of bigger game. And perhaps kill Olo before he left, just out of spite. Still, something had killed those trogs, and both Agata and Burita had witnessed Sheldon's violence. Still, Olo remains hopeful his exaggerations will turn out to be just that.

Suddenly, the Tharn wheels to face him, plucking an arrow from his quiver and nocking it on the bowstring in the blink of an eye. Reflexively, both Olo and Agata duck, but the arrow is aimed at neither of them.

"Show yourself, Blackclad," Skarg snarls. "I grow tired of your games."

The swamp around them has taken on a warm glow in the breaking dawn. Kites and thrushes have awakened, chattering as they feast on nocturnal slugs and insects that are too late in finding refuge after their nightly foray. Only in the moment that Skarg reacts does Olo realize those familiar sounds of morning in the swamp have gone eerily silent. How long ago this happened, Olo has no idea.

Searching the trail behind them, Olo watches as a twisted mangrove trunk takes on the form of a cloaked man, his face shrouded by the cavernous hood pulled over his head. Slowly, the man approaches, one palm held before him in a gesture of peace.

"Save your arrows, hunter," the man says flatly. "I am Vaskis the Knotkeeper, and we are both servants of the Wurm."

"That does not make us allies," growls Skarg, holding his bow steady.

"True," the man replies—a member of the druidic cult Circle Orboros, Olo surmises. Skarg called him a blackclad, which Olo knows means he is a frighteningly powerful mystic. "But the quarry you seek does make us allies."

Olo stands, motioning for Skarg to lower his weapon. He turns to the blackclad, confused. "Forgive me, but what care does the Circle have for a bunch of scattered swamp dwellers? We barely notice each other here most of the time anyway."

The druid tucks his hands into his voluminous sleeves, and Olo would swear that he rises off the very ground, if only he could see the blackclad's feet beneath his long, dark robes. "A powerful force grows within these woods. This new witch doctor threatens to upset the natural order if he is not eliminated quickly. I have been sent by my order to make sure this occurs."

"Witch doctor? I don't think we're talking about the same guy," Olo says, chuckling nervously at the growing intensity of the druid.

"There is more to your gatorman than meets the eye."

Olo gulps, his vocal sac undulating quickly, a trait he hates in himself for the unmistakable way it advertises his fears.

"You are right to be afraid," the druid continues. "The witch doctor is not alone. He is gathering an army using the great magic he commands. I alone can negate the power he wields, but you must first get me to him."

"His trail has vanished." Skarg clears his throat. "Magic."

Olo jerks his head around, mouth hanging open wide. "What have we been doing, then?"

"Making noise," Skarg grimaces, glaring at Agata.

The farrow snorts indignantly, gyrating her bulk to produce a cacophony of metallic clinks and clangs that echo throughout the surrounding woods.

Olo's eyeballs roll back in their protruding sockets. He has little hope the eclectic band of companions he has gathered might survive in the face of mounting danger, but he knows Sheldon must be stopped, and he knows success will be much more likely with this company than on his own.

Scanning the area around them, clearer now in the growing light, he spots a particularly massive mangrove tree, towering over the surrounding foliage.

"I know this place," he says, striding off in the direction of the tree. "Follow me."