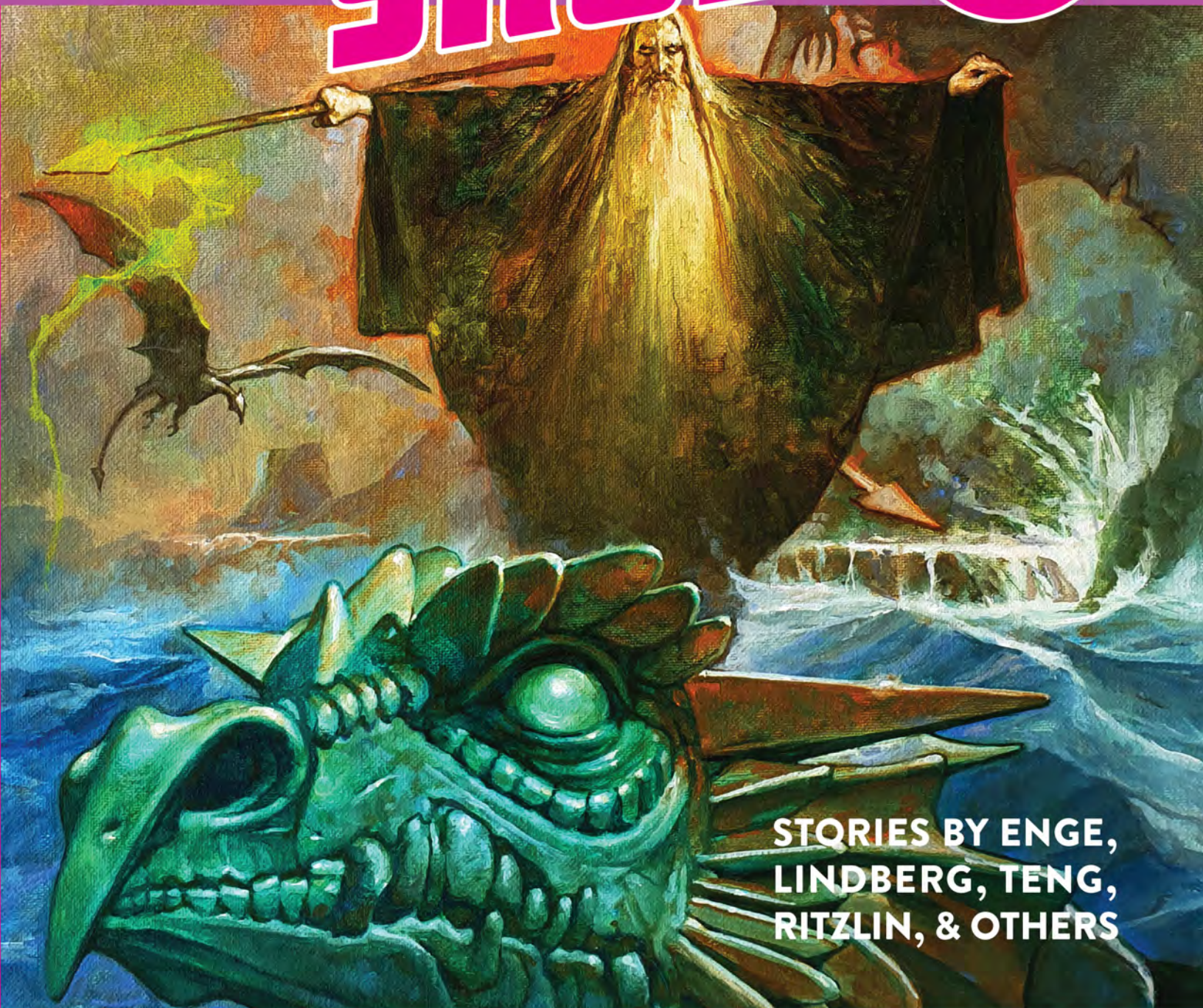


Tales From The **MAGICIAN'S SKULL**

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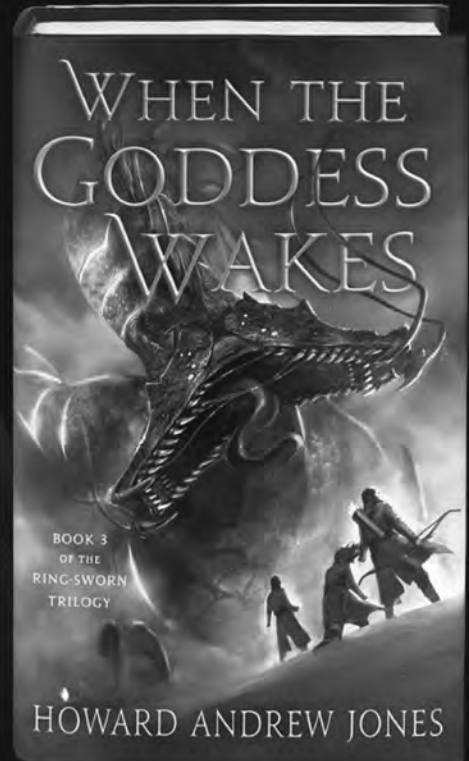
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A gong shivers ... the mists part to reveal a grisly visage lying upon a mound of rubble, dead but for one glowing, malefic eye ... It speaks, in a voice of cold command: *Silence, mortal dogs! It is time now for*

Tales From The MAGICIAN'S SKULL



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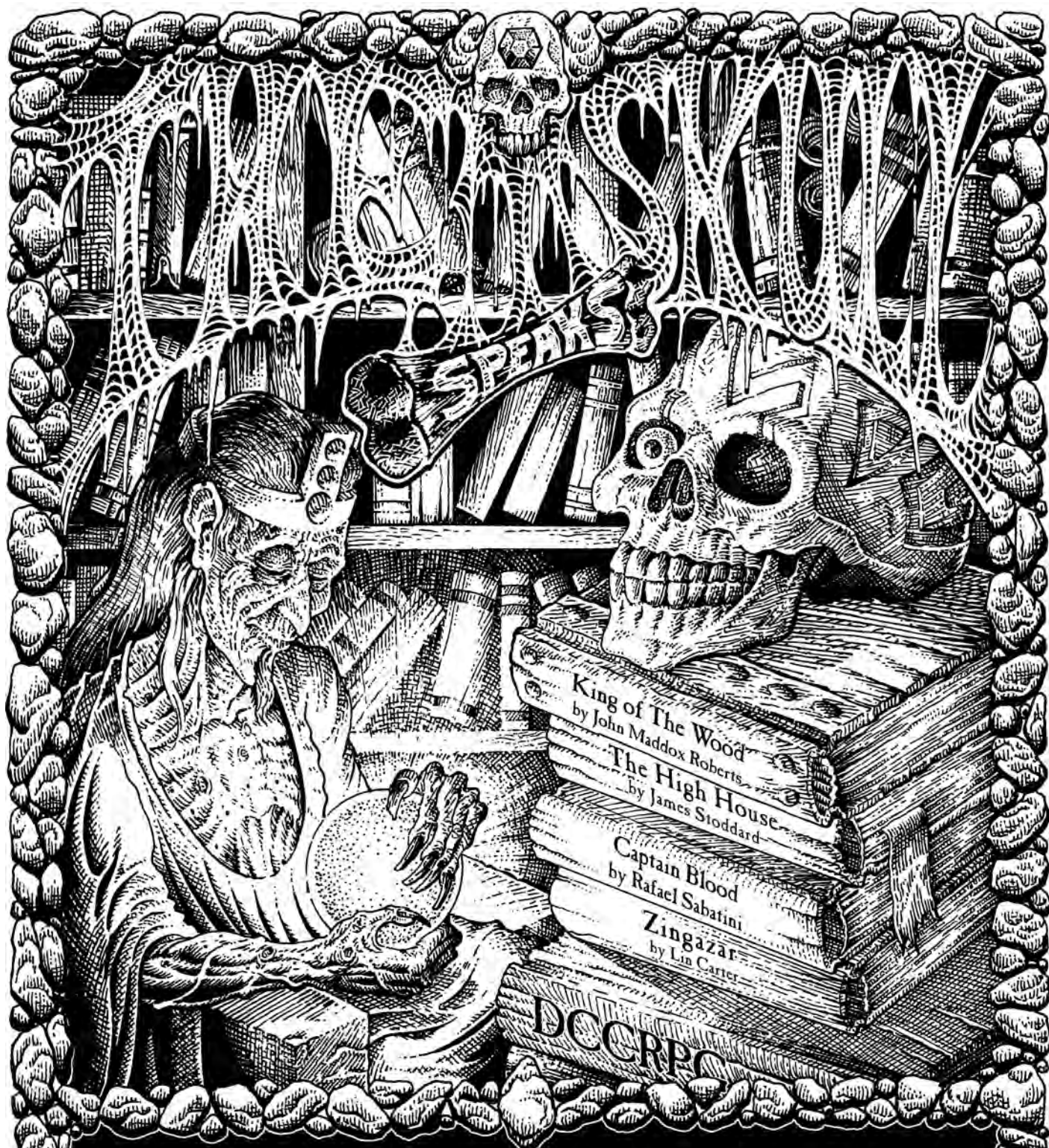
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JOSEPH GOODMAN, Publisher
HOWARD ANDREW JONES, Editor

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Wonders await you, mortal dogs! Enclosed herein are tales to terrify and delight you in equal measure! Whether you are a long time reader or a recent follower, you shall soon gape with astonishment at the portal to adventure I have opened! Jones the Managing Editor informs me that this is the first regular issue with more than fifty percent of its contents supplied from our open submissions period during the 2021 year. Yet more treasures were discovered during that time period, marvels which I will one day share with you, so long as you send me the praise I am due and spread word of my glorious magazine!

Our Human Resources team has recently instituted a series of displeasing changes to our facility, owing to something known as "insurance liability" and vexing fine print involving "hazardous waste disposal." Were I less pleased with the success of my glorious magazine during these discussions, my wrath would have waxed great indeed, especially when I was told the green flame burning beneath the banners in the lobby soared too high and burned too hotly! I was initially enthusiastic when I learned that we were to conduct company fire drills, but then learned those suggested by Human Resources were entirely different from the ones I had in mind. Fortunately, all complaints about building code violations need not be addressed in the naturally occurring subterranean caves beneath my corporate headquarters! There do my interns labor, and are well rewarded with only the finest gruel. Enough! Go now, read the tales, then send me thanks and praise! So Sayeth the Skull!

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

As I write this, I've only recently returned from Gen Con 2022. I can't tell you what a pleasure it was to be back at my very favorite convention. Not only was it the first time I saw the rest of the Goodman Games crew in physical form for long years, it was the first time so many issues of The Skull's favorite magazine could be displayed on a magazine rack. I don't think it's any wonder Joseph and I look so proud standing next to them.



Howard Andrew Jones and Joseph Goodman

Of course, Joseph has a lot to be proud of, given not just our ongoing success, but the enthusiastic response to his entire publishing empire. This year his booth space was larger than ever, and a mighty skull-faced ziggurat rose from its rear. From this very ziggurat The Skull himself emerged every day to accost greet his loyal subjects.



Jen Brinkman and Jennifer Knighton

And word has it that while Gen Con attendance still hasn't recovered from its pre Covid numbers, sales remained brisk throughout the exhibit hall. Certainly I myself dropped some cash at various vendors and I know my friends were doing the same.

It was a joy to interact with the staff and fans of the magazine and fellow enthusiasts of all this grand stuff, from tabletop games to role-playing to card games and comics to miniatures and dice and on and on. If you like any of that you owe it to yourself to make the trip and see Gen Con at least once. You'll be energized to see so many people who love the same things, and your eyes will be aglow when you enter the exhibit hall and encounter all the treasures.



But you really ought to sign up for a trial game, or even a tournament for whatever game system you love, and if that love is Dungeon Crawl Classics you might even be able to play out of the wizard van!



And don't forget to swing by and check out a couple of panels dedicated to your favorite subjects, like, say, sword-and-sorcery, or horror, or upcoming Dungeon Crawl Classics releases, and all sorts of other wonders.

I'm usually so busy with behind-the-scenes things I never get to sit down for any games, and this convention was no exception. The Gen Con Writer's Symposium (a wonderful resource for writers and readers with a huge array of panels on different subjects) was back in full force,

DO YOU HAVE SUGGESTIONS, QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, OR CONCERNS? DO YOU WISH TO SEND US ACCOLADES, INVITATIONS, OR JEWEL GLOBES? IF YOU DARE TO CONTACT THE SKULL, REACH OUT TO US AT: skull@goodman-games.com WHEN THE STARS ARE RIGHT, SOMEONE SHALL RESPOND.

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and none other than The Skull's only named intern, Seth Lindberg, was one of its key organizers, which may be why there were numerous sword-and-sorcery related panels available this year. I think those and others of interest can be found online.

Near the tail-end of the con, Joseph and I sat down for a one-on-one about the magazine that will surely be viewable on the Goodman Games twitch channel by the time you hold this issue in your hands, and I hear that The Skull himself sat down with Joseph, though I'm told the interview terminated abruptly and that one of the cameras may have suffered some inadvertent mutations.

Next year the stand will be stuffed with even more issues of *Tales From the Magician's Skull*, and I hope that I'll have the chance to chat with more of The Skull's fans in person come August of 2023.

But now it's time to turn eyes back to the issue in your hands, the first populated so thoroughly by stories found originally in our open submissions call. The whole team is excited to hear what you think of the treasures we found within.

As may already be apparent if you've been with us for a while, we occasionally feature a piece that is primarily historical, with supernatural elements merely implied or possibly even absent. While pure historicals are never our central focus, we at The Skull's favorite magazine love a grand adventure from adjacent genres just as well as the sacred one. But then historical swashbucklers are integral to the history of sword-and-sorcery.

When I was a young man first digging through fantasy fiction, and sword-and-sorcery in particular, an avid reader could burn through the available offerings quickly. There just weren't that many of them. The A range stuff was in short supply and one got through the second tier books nearly as fast. Some of the lesser material was diverting and even fun, but it's hard to subsist solely on desserts, which is why many of us turned to the historicals. And as it happens, the writers of so many of the foundational tales were inspired by the historicals, both on the page and on the screen (like Errol Flynn's *Captain Blood*, released in 1933). Any of those familiar with the work of Robert E. Howard surely know that he was an avid reader of *Adventure*, a magazine that frequently published historical adventures, and he, of course, penned a few swashbucklers himself that many Howard scholars, as well as this particular Howard, feel to be among his greatest work.

A great historical can have all the intrigue and sword play and colorful setting even if it's not an imaginary one that a great fantasy

story has, and, of course, writers can insert sorcery or horror or not, depending upon the depth of realism they're going for. You can find titles of some of the best ones listed from time to time on the book spines featured in the opening pages of every issue of *Tales From the Magician's Skull*. Arthur D. Howden-Smith is probably most famous for the Swain Viking saga and the cycle of stories about the sword, Gray Maiden, passed down through the ages to different wielders. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, often in concert with Farnham Bishop, drafted a wide range of rip-snorting historical adventures, including my very favorite by him, a Viking novel only recently reprinted, *He Rules Who Can*. Edison Marshall wrote a whole slew of historicals set in different time periods but my absolute favorite is the novel *Earth Giant*, about a historically credible Hercules. It's probably no surprise to most of you that my favorite of all of these older writers is Harold Lamb, and I recommend either starting with his first Cossack collection (*Wolf of the Steppes*) or his Crusader collection, *Swords From the West*. *Wolf* starts promisingly, and then, within two or three of the short stories listed within, Lamb is suddenly writing adventure stories so polished they can stand shoulder to shoulder with some of the finest ever printed.

I could go on and on, but for now let's return to discussion of some modern writers in our own pages. This issue features a historical as well, Phillip Brian Hall's macabre "Raven Feeder's Tower," and you will have to read it yourself to learn whether its sorceries are real or imagined. You'll find a pair of sword-and-sorcery luminaries new to our pages in here as well — DMR's own D.M. Ritzlin brings us a surprising tale of a necromancer and an ancient hero, and *Black Gate* Managing Editor and longest surviving intern Seth Lindberg gives us the darkly beautiful "Orphan Maker."

You can't possibly miss the other fine work in the magazine, however, opening as it does with another fantastic adventure of Morlock and containing the spellbinding tale of "The Glass Dragon." Then there's the morbidly delightful adventure of Tais Teng's "Blue Archenar." Last, but not least, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser return again to our magazine with "Pawn's Gambit," wherein none other but Ningauble sets our heroes on the road to adventure that leads to different places than any of them expect. Nathan Long has delivered another stirring tale in the tradition of the great Fritz Leiber, and I can hardly wait to hear what you think of it.

Enjoy your time among these pages, and, as always...

Swords Together!

— Howard Andrew Jones



PUBLISHER'S NOTE FROM GEN CON

The Skull has conquered Indianapolis! In August 2022, Goodman Games returned to Indy for Gen Con. We hadn't exhibited there since 2019, before the pandemic. This year, we added extensively to our presence: a wizard van, an art show, a ziggurat — but most importantly, the Skull himself. He deigned to make a personal appearance, sharing his insights and insults at seminars, the booth, and in the van itself. His undead charm and immortal wit cast a spell over us all, and Gen Con was the better for it.

Publishing *Tales From The Magician's Skull* is a great delight, and not just for the amazing stories and fantastic art contained in these pages. The character of the Skull has evolved from an evocative painting by Jim Pavelec on the cover of issue #1, to a series of humorous anecdotes told by Howard and myself over Kickstarter posts, into a personality of his

own. He seems almost real now. And, thanks to the magic of latex masks, we can actually have his presence by our side at an in-person show.

If you can ever make it to Indianapolis for Gen Con, you should join us. The seminars on the craft of writing are a great resource for all writers — whether aspiring or accomplished — and Gen Con is quite the spectacle. Even more so with the Skull added to the mix!

In the pages that follow you'll find another amazing issue of *Tales From The Magician's Skull*. There is no best story in these pages: they're all equally outstanding. I hope they transport you to other worlds as they do with me.

— Joseph Goodman, August 2022



NAMED INTERN TRANSLOCATED!

Heed me, Mortal Dogs!

Upon learning that our named intern could no longer be found upon the premises, I summoned the HR director to my chambers, but he proved even less useful than usual, especially since Goodman would not permit me to read his entrails!

But hope was not lost, and after consulting the Oracles of Carnishto I learned that the winged apes had flown away with loyal Blergen (I think that is his name) and returned with him to the sunken city of Dianapolis! I enlisted the aid of my new ally, Molan the Chaos Lord, and together we set off in the Wizard Van to rescue the hapless intern and return him to my ~~slave pens~~ work place!

So Sayeth the Skull

The Skull departed with orders that this be printed in the issue, and there's no way to reach him. Turns out that Seth Lindberg, the sole named intern, intern of the year, and now scribe of *The Magician's Skull*, has too many other sword-and-sorcery related duties to continue in his role as publicity intern, and submitted a polite resignation letter last week.

The HR director just didn't have the heart — or rather, feared losing one — to tell the Skull, hence the confusion. We'll tell him when he gets back. But Joseph and I want to wish Seth the very best in his new endeavors. We expect to be working with you in other ways, and want to thank you for your service! Congratulations again for serving so long without facing immolation!

— Your Humble Editor

THE SKULL TRAVELS TO GEN CON

You may be aware that I have assumed control over the carcass of intern #64 so that I no longer have to levitate, nor use spells to turn door knobs. Goodman informed me that my appearance is still too glorious for something known as an “intercontinental flight” and thus I used sorcery to transport myself through the ether and emerge upon the floor of the Gen Con exhibit hall within a fabulous ziggurat.



Goodman was on hand to greet me with much of his loyal staff, and directed me straight away to where three of my future authors awaited to offer praise. Seth Lindberg, Matt John, and Jason Ray Carney (seen below) then offered the aforementioned Matt in tribute, but I informed them the time was not yet, for I had hopes he had tales still to tell me.



Later, I presented our only named intern (whom I discovered is none other than mortal scribe Seth Lindberg!) with his intern of the year award, and he was greatly pleased. I also permitted Goodman to question me in front of a videonic camera transmission device so that my followers could delight in my presence and the glory that is sword-and-sorcery.



Ah, glorious were those days amongst the mortals! As I wandered the exhibit hall there were some who complimented me upon my “costume,”

thinking I was but some ordinary mortal engaged in something known as “clawspay.” Goodman had advised me that I consider no one for immolation, no matter how tempting, so these mortals were left unscathed.

In the final days of the convention I spent time among the members of the Goodman Games staff, who are always grateful for my wondrous oversight, assigning intern numbers to various of them and posing with those who wished proof of their interaction with me.



Finally, though, so much time amongst mortals vexed me. I discovered that there was another sorcerous immortal in attendance, and we decided to transport ourselves through time and space in search of enlightenment and entertainments that would blast the minds of you mortal wretches.



Goodman provided brief instruction on the driving of a “wizard van” and after I charged its power crystal, I drove my new friend from the convention and off on a whirlwind tour of the cosmos!

I returned to my headquarters richly invigorated and with even more ambitious plans for my doings at Gen Con2023! Come, dogs, and give your thanks to me in person!

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Necromancy in Nilztiria by D.M. Ritzlin

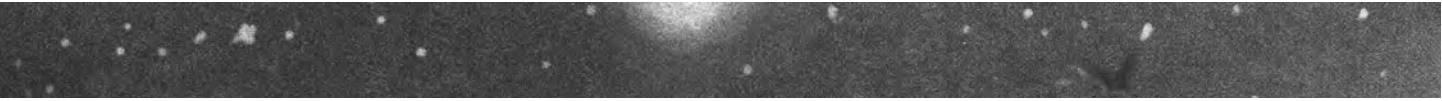
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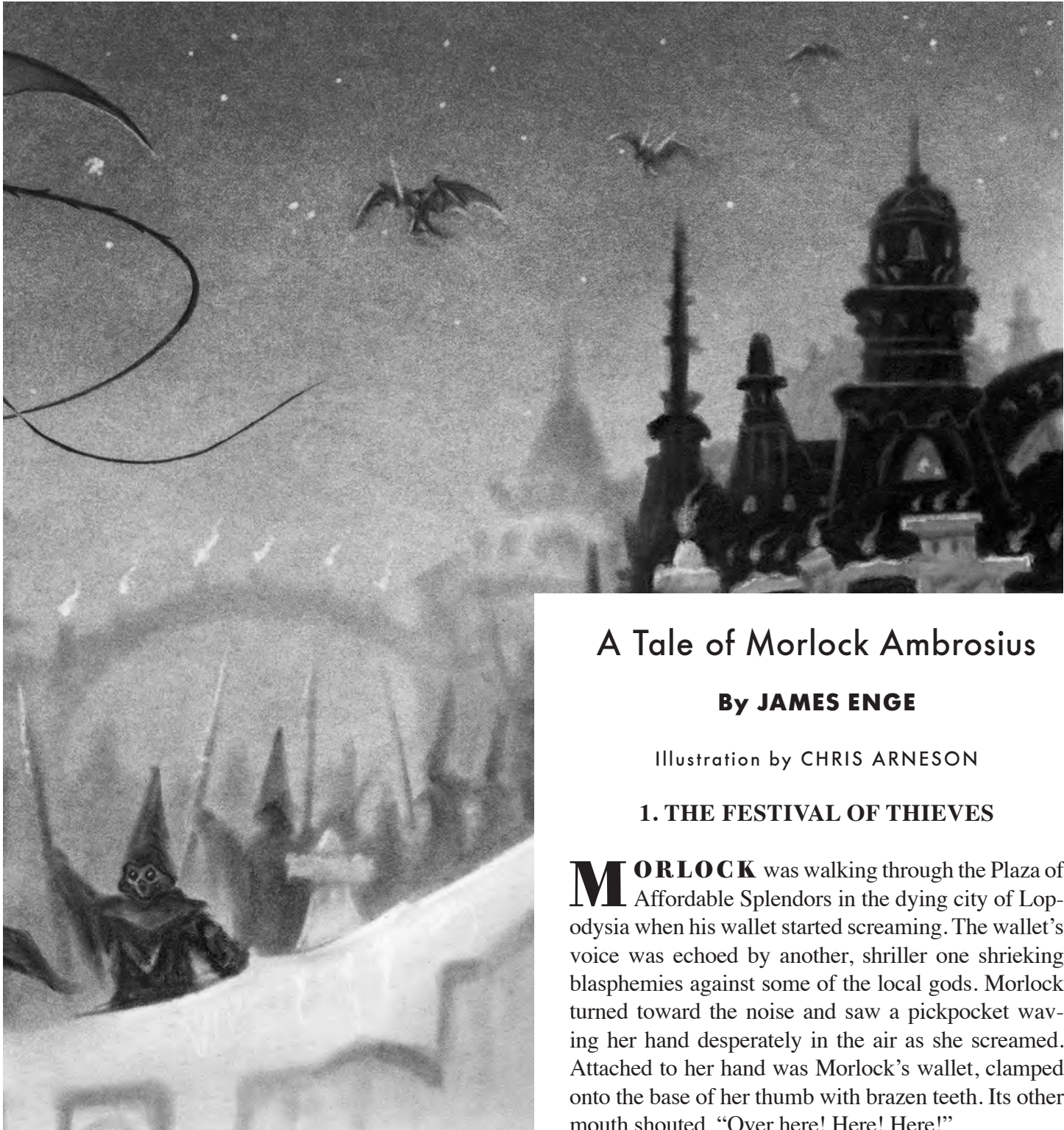
David C. Smith, Adrian Cole, Howard Andrew Jones and four more of today's top fantasists weave tales of undiscovered lands beyond your imagination.

THREE





FESTIVALS



A Tale of Morlock Ambrosius

By **JAMES ENGE**

Illustration by **CHRIS ARNESON**

1. THE FESTIVAL OF THIEVES

MORLOCK was walking through the Plaza of Affordable Splendors in the dying city of Lopodysia when his wallet started screaming. The wallet's voice was echoed by another, shriller one shrieking blasphemies against some of the local gods. Morlock turned toward the noise and saw a pickpocket waving her hand desperately in the air as she screamed. Attached to her hand was Morlock's wallet, clamped onto the base of her thumb with brazen teeth. Its other mouth shouted, "Over here! Here! Here!"

Morlock grabbed the thief's flailing arm, and silenced the wallet with a tap from his free hand. He took hold of the wallet and said a three-syllable word in Khroic. The wallet's long green-streaked bronze teeth retracted from the thief's bleeding hand. Morlock pocketed the wallet, and said to the thief, "Who's your fence?"

"I'm not a snortling, shickwit!"

"I don't know what that means. I will give money for a true answer to my question."

"It means I don't sell my mates, see," the thief said, but without real conviction. The mention of money had shaken her resolve, as he'd expected it would.

Morlock let go her arm. "If any of your mates want to get money for information, send them my way. I'll be wandering around here looking for another thief."

"Town's full of thieves! It's the Feast of Rûkley the Defthanded, patron of pickpockets, housebreakers, and robbers. Stealing's legal all day long till sunset."

"What happens at sunset?"

"You don't want to know."

This was true enough. Morlock shrugged his crooked shoulders. "Then." He turned away.

"Wait a moment."

Morlock did not wait but walked on through the plaza. The bleeding thief scurried to catch up with him. "How much money are we talking about?" she asked in an undertone.

"How much is enough?"

She looked at him warily. He looked at her patiently. He'd known many thieves in his long life and he could read expressions of her face like the turning pages of a book. Her eyes widened: she'd thought of a number. Her face hardened: she'd doubled it. Her eyes looked away from his: did she have the nerve to say it aloud? At last, still looking aside, she said defiantly, "Twenty silver croaks."

"I don't have that much silver. I have a gold coin somewhere."

"I'll take that," she said hastily.

Morlock drew a gold coin from his pocket and tossed it to the thief. She was about to run off laughing when she was transfixed by the sight of another gold coin in Morlock's hands.

"Keep that one," said Morlock. "I'll give you this one when I meet your fence, if they're the person I want."

"And if not?"

"That's your problem."

Now she shrugged, accepting the situation. "It's a deal, crook-back. Unless you're a keep?"

He recognized the local slang for the Keepers of the Peace Imperial Guards detailed to enforcing the law. "I paid you in gold," he pointed out.

"And no keep ever would," the thief agreed. "I get you. Let's go."

They went: west to Hammer Street, past the Avenue of Mortal Saints. This was full of strange hooded figures wearing bulbous black spectacles over their eyes; a tall bronze tower closed their street at the far end. They were headed, the thief said, to Physician's Court.

"My fence is a medic," the thief said confidently. "Sets a broken limb now and then to keep up a front, but makes his money

through the black market. There's a lot of us who sell just to him." She rattled on for a while, mentioning many things that a prudent thief would not, including her name, which was Vilya.

Morlock said nothing to any of this, because he usually said nothing when he had the option. Eventually Vilya seemed to realize she'd been talking pretty freely and switched to questions.

"Say, what do you want a fence for, anyway?"

Morlock thought about not answering. It was strictly speaking none of her business. But she was feeling unprotected because she had talked too much; if she became truculent and defensive, it would be inconvenient for him.

"Somebody stole my phoenix," he said at last.

She looked at him sideways. "Is that some kind of metaphor or figure of speech? I don't like those. They were always shrieking about them at school, so I stopped going."

"No. I had a phoenix. Someone stole it. I want it back."

"Why do you think my fence can help you?"

"He deals in magical goods. Only some kind of maker would be interested in a phoenix."

"How do you know...?"

"You stole from me. I'm a maker."

"But what if I didn't know...?"

Morlock shrugged. "I watched you case me. You saw me do three things which, strictly speaking, are impossible. You knew I was a maker. That's why you picked my pocket."

"Hey, you're smarter than you look!"

She was not, but he forbore from saying so.

Thieves were certainly running riot all through the city of Lopodysia. Two thugs were breaking into a shuttered shop with axes. One thief robbed another at knifepoint, and then had to surrender his earnings to two other thieves armed with swords. A crenelated mansion belched forth clouds of smoke from its windows, vomited forth from its doorway a stream of people carrying off pieces of furniture.

One red-eyed thug, drunk with wine and lawlessness, waved his sword and demanded that Morlock stand and deliver. Morlock took hold of the thug's sword-arm and broke it in two places, then shattered his kneecap with a deft kick. The thug fell groaning to the ground. Morlock waited patiently while Vilya went through the ex-thug's clothes, which sagged with valuables. She stuffed them into a bag she pulled out of her shirt and chortled as they walked on.

"Saint Rûkley be praised," she cried, "and his cold-eyed gods be appeased!"

"Eh," said Morlock, whose religious opinions, such as they were, were quite different.

"Between this guy and you, I won't have to work for a year," Vilya confided. "Maybe I'll go back to school. My mother is always nagging me about that."

"Study math," Morlock suggested. "They won't bother you about figures of speech."

"What is math?"

"They'll tell you. If it's the right kind of school."

Vilya then spoke at length about her mother and her opinions about schools and other matters, and Morlock was spared from having to talk for some time. He became wrapped up in thoughts about rotating certain objects through different dimensions to

alter their nature. He failed to take note of his immediate surroundings, and that was how they got him.

As they turned to enter Physician's Court, a net dropped down on him. Vilya skittered to one side, and before Morlock could shake off the net he was surrounded by thieves brandishing swords and clubs.

"Harzxa, you schlurm!" shouted Vilya at a scar-faced thug. Hands in pockets, he leaned against a nearby pillar and looked on the scene with approval.

"Saint Rûkley's day, juniper," he said calmly. "Your loss is my gain."

"Crimes against people are still illegal on St. Rûkley's Day! You ask any justiciar "

"Call a keep," Harzxa sneered. "Any idea who this guy is? He's Morlock Ambrosius, running around with a death-sentence for treason on his head. Garrison commander over at Stoneby will probably pay fifty gold shields for him, dead or alive."

"Morlock Ambrosius," Vilya mocked. "You superstitious klup! There never was any such person, and if there was he died hundreds of years ago."

They were both wrong, of course Harzxa about the bounty, Vilya about Morlock's identity. But no one here was going to take his word about these matters, so he kept quiet and bided his time. They hadn't come within arm's reach to take his sword away from him, which showed that they were afraid of him. With a little patience and a little luck, he hoped to show them they were right to be afraid.

Vilya was brushed off and a horse-drawn cart brought up to convey Morlock to the Imperial garrison. There were three men with crossbows, bolts already in place and cords cranked back tight.

"They'll have their eyes on you for the whole ride, see," Harzxa explained to Morlock. "You make a move any one of them doesn't like, and we settle for the bounty on your corpse. Get me?"

Morlock did not acknowledge him in any way. He bided his time.

The cart took a circuitous route out of the city. Every now and then, bags of loot were tossed into the cart, some of them landing on Morlock. Morlock did not shift away or object. Each bag of loot was armor against a crossbow bolt. His hands were busy untying the knots of the net binding him. His time was not yet, but it would come soon.

The clouds Morlock could see in the eastern sky were red-gold with late-afternoon light when his time arrived. One of the crossbowmen sitting in the cart fell to his side and started gargling blood: there was an arrow in his neck. Harzxa was standing on the driver's bench; he looked down at the fallen bowman; looked away into the shadows of the west, and shouted a warning to his men. The remaining crossbowmen turned their weapons away from their captive, toward some approaching enemy.

"Morlock take you, Harzxa, you treacherous son-of-a-schnurr!" screamed Vilya's voice.

There wouldn't be a better cue. Morlock emerged from the severed shrouds of the net and leapt up to seize Harzxa by the throat with one hand. With the other he drew Tyrfin; its white-and-black crystalline blade glittered in the late, slanting light.

The cart was being surrounded on all sides by thugs armed with bows and knives. Morlock broke Harzxa's neck and threw him down into the street.

The surviving crossbowmen looked frantically from Morlock to the attackers approaching the cart.

"Drop your weapons and get down," Morlock advised them. "No one cares about you."

They did so and fled into the deepening shadows.

The curtain of thugs in the street parted and through the opening passed a triumphant Vilya and an elderly man, bent nearly double with age, glancing about with clever, covetous eyes.

"Got you!" Vilya called up.

Morlock sheathed his sword and jumped down.

"So," said Vilya, "this is Zlynth, my fence and a few of his boys and girls. He bought your phoenix and sold it on. And are you really Morlock Ambrosius?"

"Yes." Morlock flipped her a gold coin and turned to Zlynth. "Who did you sell the bird to?"

"I will tell you anything you want to know," Zlynth said, "but we must get out of town before sunset. We are near the pome-rium now, but on the wrong side of it. We must hurry, hurry."

"If the phoenix is in town, I'm not leaving."

"But I and my people must. Will you walk with us as we go?"

At Zlynth's direction, the armed thugs took possession of the loot-cart and drove on ahead. Morlock fell in beside the old man, who was spry for his obvious weight of years. "Then."

"I'm sorry to say," Zlynth said, "that I sold your bird to the Mortal Saints of Darkness. I have no idea why they wanted it."

Morlock thought that he did. Many magical spells for rejuvenation required the blood of a phoenix. If the Mortal Saints wanted to resist their mortality, they might well drain the phoenix like a slaughtered pig to do it.

"Where will they take the bird? Somewhere on their street?" He remembered passing it with Vilya, full of gliding hooded figures wearing dark spectacles.

"You can't go after them! They're deep in town, waiting for the darkness. The darkness!"

Morlock seized the old fence by one of his shoulders, even more crooked than Morlock's own. "Answer my question."

"The great bronze tower at the end of their street," Vilya said. "That's their new temple. They've been building it for a couple of years. You can't miss it."

Morlock released Zlynth. "Share your wealth with Vilya, Zlynth. She just saved your life."

"Death and Justice!" shrieked the old man, looking up into the sky. "I can see the moons overhead! Run, run! Wealth is no use to the dead or those buried in darkness!"

Morlock thought it was odd that he would draw this distinction, but there was no point in asking about it. The old man was running frantically up the street past the last paving stone, where he collapsed with evident relief.

"We really should hurry," Vilya said uneasily.

Morlock reached into a pocket in his sleeve and handed her an ivory disk. "My horse is being kept at a farm outside of town; the farmers' names are Leaf and Troth. My backpack is there, too. If I'm not back in a halfmonth, take this to the farmers and show it to them. They'll give you the backpack and let my horse go free."

"What's in the backpack?"

"Sell it to Zlynth. Even if he cheats you, it'll make you rich."

She took the disk, nodded, and ran up the street to the dirt path where Zlynth was sobbing in relief.

The sun slipped down behind the eastern horizon. The major moons, Chariot and Horseman stood luminous at the apex of the sky. The minor moon, Trumpeter, glowed like a sullen coal in the bloody fringe of light left behind when the sun fell from the sky. In the west, the dark blue field of heaven was dense with white stars like flowers.

The earth began to shake beneath Morlock's feet. Beneath Morlock's, but not Vilya's, who was watching him fixedly from the unpaved road, just beyond the limit that Zlynth had called "the pomerium". She stood still, but her and everything on the far side of the pomerium shuddered to the rhythms under Morlock's feet.

There was a breathless moment of vertigo. Vilya disappeared behind a ridge of stone. A sensation of falling: now he saw her standing, moon-bright atop a dark cliff high above him. The vertigo again, not unpleasant, almost like flying. The horizon of Morlock's world now bisected the major moons. Falling, now, falling: the whole city was falling. Morlock caught a last glimpse of Vilya, like a moonlit statue in a graveyard, and then the cliff leapt up, up, up, swallowing the moons, the stars, the sky, the last red trailing remnant of the sun's light.

The world of the living was gone entirely. As the earth under Morlock's feet steadied and he looked around him, he saw that he could see nothing. The city had somehow turned entirely upside down and its new sky was the dark lightless heart of the world.

2. THE FESTIVAL OF DARKNESS

To find yourself suddenly bereft of light can be devastating. But Morlock had grown up under a mountain; the dark ways under the world presented no terrors to him. He was aghast at the power that had been displayed, though, and the fear of falling down (up?) into the dark was almost impossible to escape. He felt his way back up the stone street until he came to a doorway, and sat there until he had designed a fifth-dimensional polytope that could explain how the gravity that kept his feet on the street during the day could still do so, even though the city had flipped on its back.

Why it was happening, who had done this — these and all other questions could wait. Morlock had a phoenix to find (or, if necessary, avenge). He got up and let his memory and his ears guide his feet toward the Street of the Mortal Saints.

As his eyes made friends with the darkness, he saw that the city was not after all completely lightless. There were faint puffs of ghostly light here and there, moving through the city. They weren't bright enough to reveal any surrounding details, or even cast a decent shadow. He found this out when someone tapped him on the lower of his shoulders. He turned to see that someone bearing the ghostly lights had crept right up behind him.

"A happy Feast of Everlasting Darkness to you, ally," said the bearer of the ghostly light, who was holding a spear pointing at Morlock's neck.

"How do you know I'm your ally?" Morlock asked. He was not a conversable man, as a rule, but it seemed less likely that he would be stabbed if he could get the Mortal Saint to talk with him.

He had seen many of the Mortal Saints during the day, gliding here and there in hooded gray robes that went down to the ground, hiding their eyes behind dark, bulbous spectacles. He had never seen one this close, though. At first he thought the Saint was still wearing their spectacles, but then he saw that they hung around the Saint's neck on a cord. The Saint's eyes were enormous — vast convex bubbles of darkness, each one almost as large as a man's fist, all pupil without a ring of iris. The light looked like a giant dandelion, an orb of gently glowing seedlets on a flexible stalk.

"All are allied in the sheltering darkness," said the bug-eyed Saint. "You cannot be here if you are not our ally."

"I am, at least, not your enemy," Morlock said.

"That's not good enough. You must join with our order and be one with us."

Morlock was not what is sometimes called a joiner, but he was willing to hear the Saints' recruitment pitch. "What does this entail?"

"First you must surrender your eyes and accept in their place our superior —"

"No."

"No ally would refuse."

"I thought we were all allies in the sheltering darkness?"

"All are," said the Mortal Saint, "that live." They drew back their spear, obviously intending to stab Morlock.

A really experienced killer would simply have stabbed or slashed, without the drawback. Morlock stepped aside from the spear, seized it away from the Mortal Saint's inexperienced grip, and struck them across the neck with the haft. The Saint slumped to the ground and lay there, breathing heavily.

Morlock availed himself of the Saint's robe, bulbous spectacles and ghostlight. So disguised — mortal, to be sure, but no saint — he made his way toward the bronze tower at the heart of the dark city.

Mortal Saints were crowding their self-named street, twittering like bats, waving their dandelion lights or spears.

"— this time, we'll keep our city dark!"

"Damn those furies, anyway. They beat our forebears but they won't beat us!"

"Or our Shiny Friend."

Many shrill voices tweeted laughter at this remark. "The Friend! The Shiny Friend!"

Morlock nodded and would have passed by, but a Saint caught him by a sleeve and said, "I don't seem to know you."

"All are friends in the friendly darkness," Morlock temporized.

"Of course," said the Saint who still gripped his sleeve. "But we all have names and titles. I am Quurn, Vlade of the Fourth Tintinnabulum. And you are...?"

When drunk, Morlock was a glib and reckless liar. But he had given up drinking some time ago. He struggled to come up with a convincing lie, but in the end became bored and said, "I am Morlock Ambrosius." He braced himself for battle.

The Saint opened her (?) mouth, a black circle in her gray, bug-eyed face that emitted a kind of hooting sound. Others were doing the same all around — dozens or hundreds of the Saints opening their dark mouths and hooting in the darkness. Eventually it occurred to Morlock that they were laughing and he relaxed somewhat.

“Of course you are,” Quurn said indulgently. “And Sharm over there is the lake monster who eats children.”

Morlock was briefly annoyed that they were laughing at him, then decided to capitalize on their good will. “Do you know where the phoenix is?”

“Which one?” asked Quurn. “The last one?”

“I suppose.”

“Somewhere in the Underhalls, I suppose. If it’s still alive; I hear they drained it to the last drop.”

“Why?” Morlock demanded. He was shocked; somehow he’d hoped that the Saints would keep the bird alive as long as possible.

“For shiny Kalx, of course,” Quurn remarked.

“Shiny,” giggled someone nearby. “Shiny, shiny Kalx.”

“Listen,” Quurn said to Morlock, “who are you really?”

There was a sound like a giant hammer striking a giant stone: the ring of metal; shudders through the ground; the buildings about them shaking on their foundations.

Morlock wondered if the city was about to flip over again, but the Saints didn’t seem concerned. They stared eagerly at the skyline with their dark, empty eyes, eager to catch a glimpse of ... something.

“Look at it! Look at it!”

“Up in the sky!”

Morlock thought he saw something, a lesser darkness against the dark. Or — someone? Could that be the profile of a dark face rising over the city?

“Who is it?” Morlock asked Quurn.

“It’s not Morlock Ambrosius,” she replied.

It was a face; its eyes opened and emitted a faint golden light, illuminating a face like bronze. It rose higher, higher: a gigantic bronze figure looming over the city in the darkness.

“It’s Kalx, our shiny ally,” Quurn remarked. “Listen, whoever you were, you are one of us now. It’s your ally, too.”

“How?”

“When the Furies come and attack us, Kalx will defend us. Once, every hundred years, the city turns upside down, toward darkness. Then the Furies come and push it back into the thrice-accursed light. But not this time! Kalx will fight for us. He will defeat the Furies and the city will stay forever in the blessed dark, filled with our eyeless progeny, in accordance with the Sooth of the Dead Saint.”

Morlock thought about the luminous, golden color of the phoenix’s blood, and about the golden glow in the eyes of the giant bronze monster. “You used the phoenix blood to bring that bronze thing to life,” Morlock said. “You didn’t care about rejuvenation spells.”

“Of course not!” Quurn said. “Everything that lives must die. We will survive only in our progeny, our eyeless progeny squirming like maggots in the dark.” She whispered in his ear, “I smell your maleness. Let’s mate here, now, in the street, like animals. Like filthy animals.”

Morlock shook her off impatiently. He had to face the truth, darker than the sky above, that his friend the phoenix was almost certainly dead.

Kalx the bronze giant was striding over the rooftops, his footfalls smashing the city like a giant hammer striking a giant stone. Morlock followed the sound westward, to the edge of the city.

“Wait!” cried Quurn, but Morlock did not wait. If the phoenix was not dead, it would need some of its blood back.

The heart of the world, standing like a dark sky above the city, was no longer wholly lightless. Bright red sparks were swarming in the zenith.

Behind him, the Saints in their street shouted, “The Furies! The Furies! Now is the time of trial!”

3. THE FESTIVAL OF FURIES

KALX, brazen defender of the city, had left a trail of ruins in his wake. Morlock followed the trail until he passed the border of the city — the line that Zlynth had called the pome-rium. By the time Morlock caught up to the brazen monster, Kalx was already outlined in scarlet flames, fighting a cloud of Furies.

Morlock, a well-travelled man, had never seen a Fury before, but he was seeing a lot of them now. They descended from the world’s dark heart in hundreds, thousands. They seemed to wear no clothes but their skin was scaled with overlapping plates like armor. They were armed with flaming swords and whips; they flew about on batlike wings.

But the Saints had built themselves a worthy defender. Kalx smashed the Furies between his brazen palms, like a demented little boy killing flies for sport. He struck them out of the air, moving with shocking speed for a creature of his obvious bulk. He stomped them on the ground with his gigantic feet.

Morlock felt something like despair as he saw the giant twirl and stomp and slap, dancing destruction to the legion of Furies. How was he supposed to tap a brazen vein in a thing like this?

As he stood there pondering the matter, he was beset by Furies. Three dropped down on him from above, shrieking curses and slashing with their whips.

Morlock was not a swearing man, but he felt like shrieking a curse or two himself. Was this day already not bad enough? Didn’t he have enough to contend with? He had no quarrel with these Furies.

Except, of course, they were trying to kill him. And, he realized, when he reached back to draw Tyrfin, he was still wearing the robe of a Mortal Saint.

He couldn’t draw Tyrfin and danger was imminent. He used what he had.

Throwing the ghostlight in the face of the nearest Fury, he dodged past her, snatching the whip from her hands. The grip was as hot as the flames that streamed out of it, but that was not something that would bother an Ambrosius. He wrapped his stolen whip about the neck of a convenient Fury and twisted it until he felt bone snap. His spear he sent through one eye of the Fury whose whip he had stolen. He scooped up the burning blade that had fallen from the hand of one of the fallen Furies and faced the last one of the trio.

"I'm not your enemy," he said to the Fury.

The Fury said something vile and, as far as Morlock knew, untrue about his mother.

"Eh," he replied.

This seemed to madden the Fury and she stabbed at him wildly with her burning sword. Morlock parried the fiery blade with his own, but it passed through the flowing sleeve of his saintly robe, setting the thing on fire.

The Fury stood back to watch him burn, with a look of satisfaction on her scaly face.

Morlock, of course, was not flammable — that was the destiny of his Ambrosial blood. He waited until the robe had burned away and then said, in a conversational tone, "Tyrfing."

His sword flew from the scabbard strapped to his crooked shoulders, over his head, and its grip settled down in his outstretched hand like a bird coming to roost.

The Fury was looking at him with surprise and interest.

"Now," said Morlock, "let's talk. And leave my mother out of it."

They did not, however, talk. Morlock felt a weight in the air, and looked up to see one of Kalx's gigantic bronze feet descending upon them.

"Move!" shouted Morlock and tackled the Fury. They landed on the rough stony ground as the giant foot smashed down next to them. The shockwave blew them further away. Morlock leapt to his feet in the clouds of dust and shattered stone to peer, as best he could, at the peculiar wonder of Kalx's gigantic bronze foot.

It looked like a man's foot in some ways, not in others. Instead of a thumbnail, the big toe had a gold-glass eyeball. It swivelled around to look straight at them. A toothless mouth opened on the upper surface of the foot. "You missed them, you stupid clown!" it shrieked. "They're getting away!"

If Morlock had any sense, he would have gotten away. But he had seen something on the bronze monster's ankle — a round knob or bolt. Glancing over at Kalx's other ankle, Morlock saw that there was no corresponding structure there.

Kalx was built something like a man. And a man would have a vein there — the great vein passing from the shin through the ankle to the foot.

Was it a plug, driven in hastily to close the vein after it had been filled with phoenix blood?

Morlock had nothing better to go on. He circled around as the foot lifted, trying to smash him again. But this time Morlock leapt before the foot landed; the shockwave missed him and he landed atop the foot, next to the lipless foot-mouth.

"Yecch!" it shrieked. "Get this thing away from me!"

Morlock clambered up the ankle and perched on the bolt. It was sealed to Kalx's brazen skin with a crooked gray seam of solder. A sloppy job. A hasty job. He hacked away the solder and tried jumping up and down on the bolt. He thought it gave a little. He sat down on the bolt, put his back to the ankle and lodged his heels on the thin rim running around the edge of the bolt. It moved, just a little. Only a little. He pushed again.

Then: he was not alone. A Fury was with him, mirroring his actions. She called out to her sisters in a language Morlock didn't know, and more came, clawing at the bolt, twisting it, pulling it.

"Hey!" shrieked the foot-mouth. "They're trying to pull our plug!"

They tried and they did. Before Kalx's bronze hand could swoop down to sweep them away, in belated response to the foot-mouth's warning, the bolt popped like a cork out of Kalx's leg vein and a molten flow of hot golden blood burst out.

The Furies flew away, laughing. Morlock could not fly; he fell with the plug, not laughing, and was nearly drowned in the flow of golden blood. He fought his way clear, wiped his eyes and looked around.

The battle was over. The Furies flew away from Kalx and glided at a safe distance, watching the collapse of the giant. He jumped around a little on his unwounded leg, reaching vainly for the open wound that was gushing golden blood. Eventually he fell to one knee and then over on his side.

By then Morlock had stopped watching. Wielding Tyrfing like a precision instrument, he was whittling a vessel out of the bronze vein-plug, small enough to carry but large enough to hold a phoenix-worth of blood. When he had his vessel he sheathed Tyrfing and went to the nearest golden, glowing pool of blood and scooped up enough to fill the vessel.

He looked up to see the Fury (the one he had fought and saved) watching him pensively.

"I'm sorry I killed your sisters," he said.

"Killed," she said slowly. "That is a word for you and yours. For us and ours, there is no 'killed'. But we owe you a debt, stranger, because you helped us defeat the bronze giant. It is a small repayment for so great a debt, but we will not kill you now." She flexed her wings in preparation for flight.

"Where do you go now?"

"To kill the Mortal Saints in the city. It is what we do when the city appears."

"If you owe me a debt, let them live."

"It is not our way."

"Then your debt is unpaid."

She shook her wings irritably and looked at Morlock with annoyance. "Very well," she said at last. "This one time, we will bend our ways and let the Mortal Saints live. But if we meet you again, stranger, we will owe you nothing."

"Then."

The Fury looked at him curiously, shrugged, and flew away. The other Furies flew with her, as if they had all heard what she heard, all said what she said. They shrank to red sparks in the heart of the world and vanished.

Morlock trudged back into the city, using the bowl of golden, glowing blood to light his way.

A crowd of angry Mortal Saints confronted him on the edge of town.

"Who are you?" screamed one, whom he thought might be Quurn.

"I told you," he said.

"Why did you do that to Kalx?"

"I had my reasons."

"We should kill you!"

"I'll kill you," he said, "if you give me a reason."

They looked at him, believed him, and turned away. He walked alone to the center of town, where the tower of the Mortal Saints had been.

Had been and was not. Only then, as he was looking at the bare foundations of the tower, did Morlock realize that the bronze tower had been Kalx, slowly built over the years. A real masterpiece of making, if only they had been able to make it work without slaughtering phoenixes.

He took the open stairs down to the Underhalls, and searched until he found the terrible room where the Saints had drained the phoenixes.

Many, many phoenixes. They lay around the chamber in heaps, discarded with contempt, drained and dry, so that they looked like feathery raisins. Without their fiery, golden blood, they were unable to ignite their dying bodies and be reborn. They had simply died. Whatever they knew from ages past, whatever they were, all of it was simply gone.

Rage built in Morlock as he searched the horrible place. But he kept at his task until at last he heard a feeble croak: "Mrrr-laaak..."

It was the phoenix, his phoenix, still hooked to the macabre machine that had drained most of its blood. Morlock was a man who understood machines, macabre or not, and he soon figured out a way to use the thing to feed blood back into the phoenix's veins. The bird's wrinkled skin slowly lifted up, like a balloon inflating, and soon the phoenix grew able to move and eat. (Morlock raided a nearby refectory for food and drink.)

But it wasn't well. Perhaps it would never be well.

They stayed in the Underhalls until the ground began to shake. Then Morlock picked up the phoenix and climbed the stairs. By the time they reached to surface, the sky was back in its usual place again, gray with approaching dawn.

Who had made this strange place, this city of Lopodysia that died every hundred years? What was its purpose? Why did people live here? Morlock wanted answers to all these questions and more.

But he also wanted to keep the phoenix alive if he could. He made his way into the narrow paths of the hills to the east. He went very slowly, lest he stumble and drop the wounded bird.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Enge lives in northwest Ohio with his wife and a philosophic dog-detective. He teaches Latin and mythology at a medium-sized public university. His stories have appeared in *Black Gate*, in *Apocalyptic* (ZNB, 2020), in *F&SF*, and elsewhere. His first novel, *Blood of Ambrose*, was nominated for the World Fantasy Award, and the French translation was nominated for the Prix Imaginales. He's put together a sizeable collection of Morlock stories under the title of *Evil Honey*; it should be available in hard-copy and e-text by the time you read this. You can reach him through Facebook (as james.enge) or on Twitter (@jamesenge) or, I kid you not, on SoundCloud (as jamesenge). For traditionalists, he also has a website: jamesenge.com.

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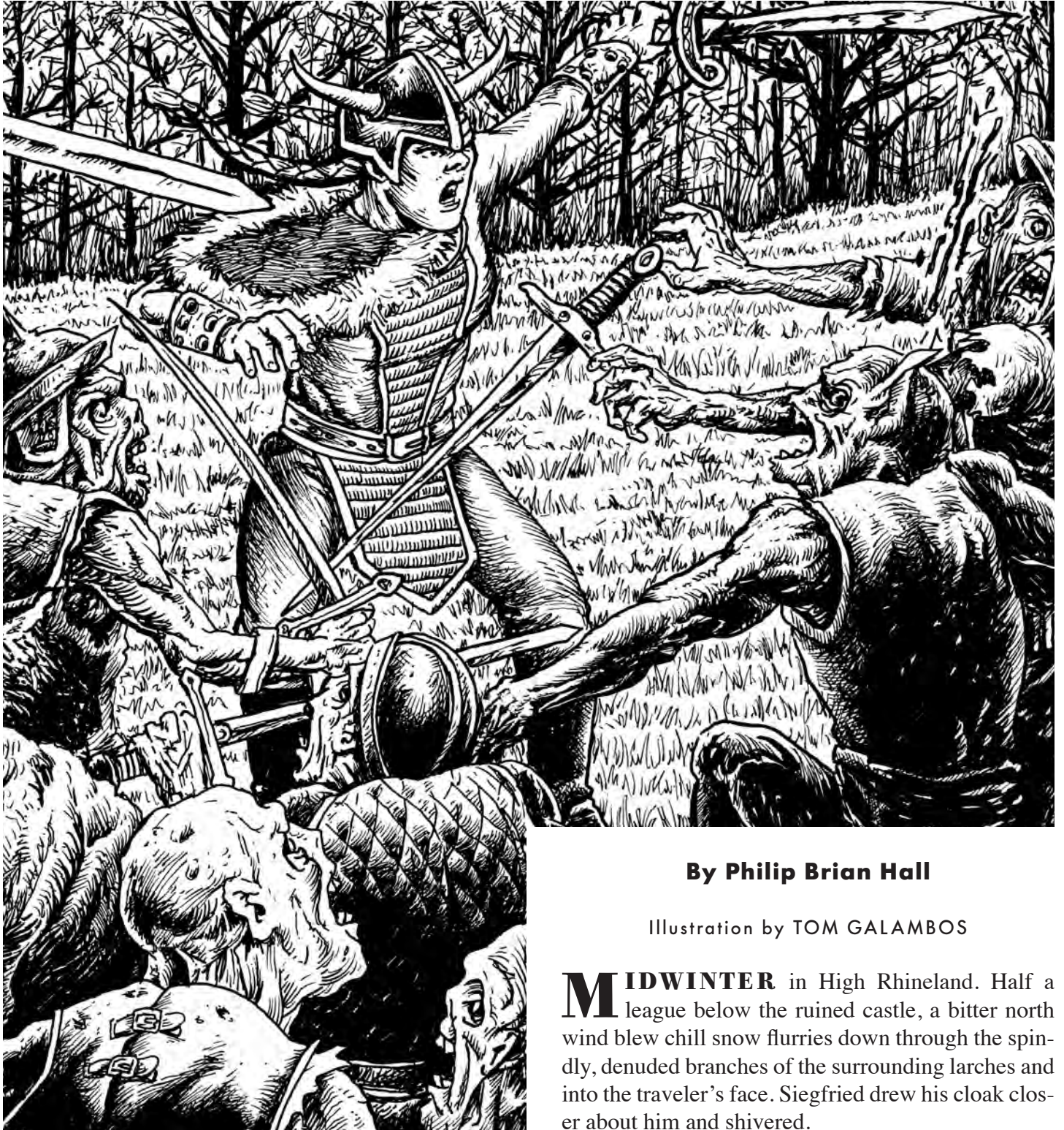
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THE RAVEN—F





FEUER'S TOWER



By Philip Brian Hall

Illustration by TOM GALAMBOS

MIDWINTER in High Rhineland. Half a league below the ruined castle, a bitter north wind blew chill snow flurries down through the spindly, denuded branches of the surrounding larches and into the traveler's face. Siegfried drew his cloak closer about him and shivered.

Dreary half-light barely illumined his path through the forest. Ethereal, cloud-cast shadows drifted like specters across the frozen ground, but a thick carpet of dead needles hushed the sound of his steadily climbing footsteps. The old trees' gnarled bark recalled the wrinkled face of the aged villager who'd foretold disaster for his quest.

"Jarl Harald's Tower was cursed from the day it was built," the old man said, staring at Siegfried out of rheumy, near-colorless eyes. "Rather than take the trouble to throw up a new motte for himself, The Raven-Feeder built his fortress atop a burial mound of the Ancient Ones. For his desecration of their resting place they've haunted him and his heirs ever since."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Siegfried laughed dismissively.

"Draugar are not ghosts and your skepticism won't protect you," the old man snorted. "I've seen other young men like you come here in search of Jarl Harald's treasure. I warned them too but, of course, they wouldn't listen. Ah, the temerity of youth! Five of them I've watched climb up — strong, confident, proud Knights Bachelor all of them. But I never yet saw one come back down."

"You were probably asleep," mocked Siegfried, "or maybe drunk. You Rhinelanders are uncommonly fond of your ale, so I've heard."

"Have it your way," the old man said sadly. "But keep your hand close to your sword hilt. And if you hear the roaring of the wyrm, hold your ground and wait. The beast only walks when it senses danger to the castle. Don't go on until it retires to its lair to sleep again. It's bad enough you should defy the Ancient Ones; no mortal man can defy the wyrm as well and hope to return alive."

"Go back to your inglenook by the fire and blow the froth off your beer, old man," Siegfried instructed the venerable sage. "You'll have better success there than you will frightening me. There are no draugar up on that hill and there's no wyrm. But Jarl Harald's treasure *is* up there and I *will* find it."

"You don't need to say why." The old man shook his head. "A second son lacking the patrimony to marry his beloved?"

"How did you know that?" the young knight gasped.

"It's the same old story. Tell me her name; I'll send her word of your untimely death."

"A pox on you! You won't scare me with your foolish superstitions!" Siegfried swung away angrily. Leaving the old man looking pityingly after him, he set off up the hill towards the castle.

The gusting wind flung yet another handful of stinging, icy particles into Siegfried's face, uncomfortably reminding him of old folk-myths about draugar who controlled the weather. Again he shivered.

All stuff and nonsense, of course. The dead were dead. No power on Earth could summon back a departed spirit into its rotting corpse, much less endow the reanimated with superhuman strength and magical powers.

And the Ancient Ones? Pshaw! They'd been long gone even before the invading Romans first trespassed into the Rhineland a millennium ago. The archaic magic buried with their antique bones would not prevent him from procuring Gudrun's bride-price. He would dare anything for love.

Yet, beneath the shining breastplate of a Christian knight-at-arms there beat a heart descended from countless generations of superstitious pagans. Alone in a perilous place, Siegfried's fertile young brain easily conjured up some long-forgotten an-

cestor's terror of demonic forces beyond man's understanding. His hand dropped nervously to the reassuringly solid hilt of his broadsword.

By his own reckoning, he'd left the village in the valley little more than half an hour ago, allowing plenty of time to reach the castle and return before evening. Yet though the day could scarce be past noon, its light already failed. The heavily overcast sky, glimpsed through an interwoven latticework of branches above his head, lowered leaden gray and chilling. Ice-cold fingers of rime already crept stealthily across the brown, decaying bones of last year's bracken that underlay the trees on either side of the way.

Siegfried could not face ridicule. Returning to the village without even having climbed to the castle, let alone searched it, was unthinkable. Should he find himself benighted in this isolated spot, so be it. In such case, would it be best to set about finding himself a hollow tree or some alternative place of shelter whilst light remained, or should he press on and aim to bivouac within the walls of the castle itself?

Before he could arrive at a definite conclusion to his inner debate, Siegfried was stopped in his tracks. An eerie, green glow lit the woodland ahead. The darker the sky grew, the more visible the unnatural light became. Its low, emerald rays silhouetted the boles of the larches and dimly touched their arching branches above as if a scant half-dozen candles should faintly illuminate the man-made columns and high vaulting of some great cathedral.

A sibilant hiss escaped Siegfried's lips as he drew his sword and crept forward. Skull Cleaver he'd melodramatically named the pristine blade, though it had yet to taste blood for the first time.

Some said that just as draugar could rise from the grave, so it was possible to dispatch them back there. They were not invulnerable, merely mortal for a second time if only human hands could strike them a killing blow.

But of course, everything that anyone said about draugar was nonsense because draugar did not exist.

All the same, best approach silently and let Skull Cleaver lead the way. The young knight crept forward on tiptoe, every sense alert for danger.

When he came upon the source of the light, Siegfried cursed himself for a credulous fool. Foxfire. The innocent fungal growth covered every inch of a fallen forest giant's rotting husk, its attractive luminescence designed to lure spore-spreading flies, not terrify the life out of valiant knights. Nicking his thumb to assuage the thirsty blade's slighted honor, the embarrassed young warrior returned Skull Cleaver to his scabbard and climbed on.

As he rounded a bend in the track a dimly-perceived figure seemed to bar his way. Siegfried stopped short once more. Peering into the gloom, he made out a stocky knight, wearing a breastplate and a helmet whose crested black plumes fluttered in the gusting breeze. The man moved not a muscle and uttered not a sound.

Siegfried considered. The knight's sword was drawn but its point was embedded in the earth rather than extending aggressively toward the newcomer. Chivalry forbade surprise attack; he must first give and receive a defiance. Leaving his own sword sheathed, he called out to the silent sentinel.

"Good day to you, sir knight. I am an honest traveler and mean you no harm. May I pass freely?"

"Cronk!" came the reply.

"Forgive me, sir, I don't understand what you say," Siegfried called again. "I've no blade in my hand. May I step forward so we can talk more easily?" Slowly he advanced along the narrow way, holding his hands well clear of his sides to prove his innocent intent.

"Cronk!" The cry came again. A great black raven flapped noisily up and away from its perch on the knight's helmet, whence it soon vanished among the trees. In the dusk and at a distance Siegfried had taken the living bird for its own dead plumage.

He recoiled in alarm, but, seeing no further movement from the knight, Siegfried at length came on until he stood just a few paces away.

The skeleton was held upright by a tall stake driven deep into the ground, to which support its spine was fixed by leather bonds. The breastplate covered bare white ribs and the helmet's visor protected merely the empty eye-sockets of a morbidly-grinning skull. The dead man's bony fingers clutched the hilt of an old sword, its edge already eaten away by rust.

Siegfried exhaled a long, quivering breath. "So," he said to the knight's remains, "you, I assume, are one of the five the old man saw climb up here and never return."

Making the sign of the cross, Siegfried stepped around the obstacle and continued his climb.

Around the next bend, he came upon a similar roadblock, and around the following one another. The fourth body staked along the way was not yet entirely decomposed and two further ravens squabbled fretfully over its rank remaining pickings.

The fifth knight-at-arms could have been little more than two weeks dead. Bloody wounds streaked his eyeless countenance. Much of his surcoat and padded vest remained intact beneath armor which still showed bright traces of a squire's recent assiduous attention. A whole squadron of the scavenger birds hopped and squawked and struggled round about the pungent corpse.

Somehow the newly-dead was more frightful than the long-deceased. Siegfried's gorge rose. "You, I think, are the most recent of the five who climbed before me," he gulped. "I wish you could tell me what enemy you faced. But since you all seem to have died sword in hand, I congratulate you on your honorable deaths. Should my own quest fail, I hope to be as fortunate."

He now recognized his gross error and discourtesy in scoffing at the old man's warning. Vowing, should he live, his first road would be to the sage's door to apologize and humbly beg forgiveness for his offense, Siegfried climbed on.

It was only natural the old man should credit supernatural forces with such killings as Siegfried had just witnessed. For himself, he was more inclined to suspect the hand of man. True, it would take a sizable band of brigands to overcome an armored knight. Perhaps they were not criminals at all but broken men in service to a robber baron, such as those who'd once hampered the growth of commerce by charging illegal tolls on ships passing up and down the Rhine.

Either way, the corpses of his predecessors had clearly been deliberately set up on the path. Why? To deter those tempted to trespass further? But why would men who controlled a castle erect such a warning? Did they fear being attacked again?

Was it possible the successive assaults of the five knights had gravely weakened the outlaw force, obliging defenders who no longer had confidence in their swords to resort to terror tactics? In such case he, Siegfried, might fall heir to the fruits of his noble forerunners' martial endeavors. Should he succeed

in wresting Jarl Harald's treasure from the gang's clutches, he must seek out each knight's dependents and ensure their needs were met.

This time when the path ahead began to glow with strange green light, Siegfried remembered his discomfiting encounter with the foxfire and did not draw his sword as he pressed on. It was just as well.

For a second time, his naive assumptions were mistaken. Three warriors stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking the path ahead, their decaying flesh shining with eerie phosphorescent light; this it was that cast such dreadful effulgence on the forest floor.

Each wore a tunic of wolf's skin that left uncovered the shoulder of his sword arm. A bear's head protected the other shoulder and the remainder of the bear's skin served the warrior as a cloak. They carried round, bronze-rimmed, wooden targes and short bronze swords; their sandals were cross-laced up the length of what had once been fine muscular calves, now blotched by suppurating sores.

Even at such a distance, the stench of death reached Siegfried's nostrils. He could no longer deny the existence of draugar, for if these warriors were not of the undead, then their attire and arms proclaimed them a thousand years old and more. Yet somehow, frightful demons in the flesh, or such as there was left of it, were less terrifying than those in his mind had been.

"How now, gentlemen?" Siegfried's voice betrayed no evidence of uncertainty to his adversaries, though the churning in his stomach would have done so, could they but have heard it. Fear sharpened his already quick wits and supplied him with a possible means of safe passage.

"My name is Siegfried of Saxony and I am come to rid this place of the defilement left behind by its former occupant, Jarl Harald. I have no quarrel with you, Ancient Ones. Allow me to enter and I shall carry away the obscenity and leave you once again in the peace you desire."

"You lie!" the leading draugar's barely intelligible voice grated in response.

"I promise you on my honor. Allow me to pass and I shall do as I say."

"You bring only more defilement!" the draugar retorted. "Prepare to join the corpses of those who came this way before you, who now feed the ravens Jarl Harald loved so well."

Siegfried had heard it said a draugar's brain was as disordered as his body. "Forgive me, sir," he persisted, greatly daring, "but I believe you've made a mistake."

The three draugar snarled derisively.

"If Jarl Harald brought defilement and Jarl Harald also loved feeding corpses to the ravens," Siegfried continued, "it seems to me that he who feeds the ravens must be the defiler."

The warriors pointed their swords and paced forward.

"Now, if you kill me," Siegfried concluded hastily, "then *you* feed the ravens just as Harald did, whereas, if you let me through, the ravens go unfed and there is no further defilement. Do I not speak the truth?"

The three draugar were nonplussed. They halted and looked one to another for a decision. Drawing aside his colleagues into conclave, the leader engaged them in whispered discussion that soon resolved itself into a rowdy argument conducted in the ancient tongue, the horrid undead voices rasping like rusty saws in seasoned heartwood.

The heated discussion seemed likely to last awhile. Doubting his feeble-minded adversaries' ability to handle two problems at once, Siegfried stepped silently forward across the litter of larch needles, tiptoed past the disputants and pressed on up the hill. By the time hoarse exclamations of surprise and rage echoed behind him, his hastening figure had once again been swallowed up by the darkness.

Raven-Feeder's Tower was well-named. Starkly discordant with the exposed and treeless summit of the hill, an outer stockade of whole larch trunks surrounded the prehistoric grassy mound. On top of this Jarl Harald had erected a gaunt inner tower of stone, two stories high and topped by battlements.

Around the stockade, a dry ditch had been dug to deter the close approach of enemies bearing axes or flaming torches. A single bridge, broad enough for only one man at a time to pass over, spanned the gap between the end of the forest path and the stockade's only gate. The gate itself was tight shut.

Having satisfied himself no watchmen manned the parapet, Siegfried crept softly around the stockade, carefully concealing himself in the shadows of the woodland's edge. He was hoping to find a place where the feet of the old defensive timbers had rotted away and the tree trunks fallen, with a little luck, outwards towards the ditch, thus forming a makeshift bridge and an alternative point of access to the bailey.

For three-quarters of his circuit, he was disappointed. On the point of giving up the stratagem and trying to think of another, he came upon a place where a great mound of earth, like a giant molehill, not only filled the ditch but reared well above it to half the height of the stockade fence. Determined couch grass and wildflowers had already colonized the disturbed soil.

Perhaps a giant wood-ant colony, Siegfried reckoned, or maybe even the remains of the adit by way of which the draugar had left their barrow? In either case, it seemed he might climb the fortuitous mound and, leaping from it, gain a foothold on the parapet. Though divots were scarce and his feet scrabbled to find a purchase on the loose soil, by exerting all his strength he eventually managed to scramble up to the top.

Drawing breath, Siegfried prepared to spring across. At that moment the ground beneath him shook. An earthquake! Siegfried dropped on to all fours. From somewhere far below came a deep, rumbling sound and again the ground shook. Dislodged earth fell away from the top of the mound, exposing a flat, upright stone the size of grave-marker, seemingly embedded firmly in the more solid ground a yard in front of him. Crawling forward, Siegfried grasped tight hold of the stone and hugged himself to it as a louder rumble sounded and the ground shook even more vigorously than before.

All of a sudden, though still sitting, he found himself rising rapidly into the air; soon he was twenty feet above the parapet and looking down inside a deserted fortress. No human shadow moved within, but from the tumbling soil behind him a whole row of gravestones emerged, just like the one to which he already clung.

A mighty roar resounded close to his ear, shattering the silence of the forest with its reverberating echoes. Fearfully looking upward, Siegfried realized with horror that his supposed stone was, in reality, a dorsal plate jutting out from the spine of a huge, lizard-headed creature.

Siegfried's muscles cramped, filling his body with pain. He was positioned astride the beast's shoulders. In front of him an extended, undulating crest crowned a bony plate that protruded



from the monster's brow, providing armor for its upper neck. Three great horns projected forward from its head, and fire and smoke gushed from its open jaws, filling the air with a stink like rotting fish.

The wyrm. Once more the old man had told the truth; once more Siegfried had scoffed, but this time it was too late to heed the sage's wise advice to bide quiescently. Or was it? As yet the wyrm displayed no awareness of his presence; perhaps, like some colossal destrier, it barely noticed the fly-weight of a rider on its back. If he sat tight and remained silent, might it remain in blissful ignorance? Could he remain still with every muscle in his body screaming for relief?

Roaring out a periodic challenge to the world in general, the wyrm began to pace forward heavily on giant hind legs, thumping the ground with each enormous stride, rolling around its involuntary rider like a topmast lookout in a gale at sea. With the claws of its shorter forelegs, it tore up by the roots various small evergreen shrubs that thronged the margin of the woodland, putting to flight the previously-unsuspecting forest creatures they'd concealed.

A startled badger darting from its sett was seized, stuffed into the fetid, gaping maw and devoured in one swallow. A whole roe deer went down the same way, bones crunching between the iron jaws. Grimly, Siegfried clung on.

Tradition held that old Viking wizards sometimes set wyrms to guard their Jarl's treasure, so the presence of a wyrm beside The Raven-Feeder's Tower was most unlikely to be a coincidence. It seemed Siegfried had indeed two foes, just as the old man had prophesied, each opposed to the other yet neither strong enough to prevail outright.

It would be a fine thing for him if the two of them could be enticed to fight each other, allowing him to escape down the hill! But no, though this might save his life, there would be no way of snatching the treasure first. To win Gudrun's hand, he must pass the wyrm and enter the castle.

Pass the wyrm? A dying man might be as like to cheat death itself! Siegfried had no choice but to slay the creature or die in the attempt.

His fortuitous perch did give him a clear sight of a possible weakness in its armor. He would only get one chance. If he failed to kill the beast with his first stroke it would certainly fling him from its back and rend him in pieces.

Holding on with one hand, Siegfried gently slid Skull Cleaver from its scabbard and pushed the blade directly underneath the armored crest before him until it met the junction of plate and neck. One chance, remember. Strike clean! If he were lucky, this was an unprotected route through the soft tissue at the base of the wyrm's skull directly into its brain. Drawing a deep breath, with all his strength Siegfried thrust forward and down.

Up leaped the wyrm, flailing its forelimbs and shrieking in agony, while its unwilling cavalier hung on to the dorsal plate for dear life. Yet, though its death struggles raged on for some time, the mortal blow had been struck. With one final great, flaming sigh the creature collapsed heavily back into the moat and lay still as smoke wreathed all around it.

Trembling in every limb, Siegfried released his hold, rubbed tortured muscles back into usefulness and cautiously stood upright. A twitch of the spiked tail sent him briefly back to all fours, but soon it was clear to him the wyrm had breathed its last.

Gratefully he retrieved Skull Cleaver from its lodgment in the wyrm's head. How wonderfully the keen blade had earned the name he'd so casually, but so prophetically, given to it! With a sucking sound, the point came clear of the wound and a fountain of dark blood gushed after it, splattering Siegfried's face, coating his armor and soaking the front of his surcoat.

"Ugh," he growled, making ineffectual attempts to wipe the gore away, smearing himself all the more, before at length it came back to him what miraculous powers a dragon's blood was said to confer upon its slayer. Well and good. Christian or no, he needed all the help he could get. As well the jump across to the parapet was not a difficult one, for Siegfried's strength was well-nigh spent.

On the far side of the stockade, he found an elevated walkway and steps leading down from it into the castle bailey. Remnants of once-thatched outbuildings, now decayed beyond repair, littered the darkness within the open courtyard.

To calm his pounding heart, Siegfried made perfunctory searches of the ruins, though he never expected to find anything of value there. Jarl Harald's looted treasure was only ever likely to be in one place. The stone keep was the fortress of last resort, the citadel wherein a small garrison could hold out against great odds even when they'd lost the outer defensive works and the enemy controlled the living spaces of the bailey.

Siegfried climbed the revetted steps hacked into the face of the grassy mound, and approached the stone tower with caution. If Harald's wizard had been adept enough to deploy a wyrm outside the castle, what frightful thing might he have set to protect the last redoubt itself?

A flight of stone steps, unprotected by any handrail, ran across the face of the lower story from the bottom right-hand corner up to a doorway in the center of the upper floor. An enemy climbing the steps would find his sword arm obstructed by the proximity of the wall, or else be forced to carry his sword in his left. Either way, a defender retreating back up the steps would have the advantage of both height and a free sword arm, as well as the leverage from the wall needed to thrust his foe over the open edge.

Drawing his own sword, Siegfried slowly mounted the steps, fully expecting at any moment something foul would materialize in front of him. Nothing did. Gaining the landing and extending his hand, he gently pushed against the closed door, without result. Though he expected to find the door locked, he nevertheless grasped the wrought-iron handle and tried to turn it.

With an agonized groaning of long-disused hinges, the door reluctantly swung open. The atmosphere within smelled disgustingly of mold and neglect. The gloom inside was even deeper than outside.

Siegfried stood stock still and listened. From somewhere nearby came the sound of gentle breathing. Did an enemy lie in wait? If so the man was an over-confident fool not to hold his breath. On soundless feet, Siegfried edged slowly into the darkness, Skull Cleaver at the ready, every nerve and sinew primed for danger.

No attack came. The soft breathing continued, regular as before. No assassin could remain so calm. As his eyes adjusted, Siegfried at length made out a sleeping form lying upon a straw palliasse in the center of the room. Though half-covered by a blanket, the recumbent shape, clothed in old-fashioned mail rather than dressed for bed, was clearly female. By her side on the dusty, decaying rushes of the floor lay a two-horned helmet of iron and an iron-tipped spear.

Siegfried crept forward until he stood beside the sleeper, looking down upon a face of ravishing beauty. High cheekbones framed a narrow, slightly upturned nose; finely drawn eyebrows arched over delicate, closed lids; perhaps the lightest of freckles dusted her fair Nordic complexion. Her chin was firm, her lips full, her expression serene.

Yet this young woman was no fragile rose. Her long blonde hair was drawn into two tight plaits which then wound around her head in opposite directions to form a natural cushion for her war-helmet. Her right arm, which lay outside the blanket, was firmly muscled and her shoulders strong. Even in repose, she looked every inch a warrior.

A shield-maiden. He'd heard stories of such mythical beings and laughed. No woman could possibly wield weapons like a man. How could a frail, weak female body withstand the rigors of a campaign or stand toe-to-toe against a huge warrior on the dreadful field of battle, the ground beneath her feet slippery with blood and guts, the very air she breathed reeking like a charnel-house?

Yet, looking at this face, Siegfried knew his former raillery stood refuted for a third time within the space of a single day. Such a woman as this could do all these things and more. Every last thought of Gudrun was driven from his fickle mind. Lost in wondering admiration, he felt an overpowering urge to stoop and bestow a chaste kiss upon that smooth, unlined brow.

No sooner did he touch her than the woman stirred. Clear blue eyes flickered open and regarded him with surprise, but without fear. Moistening her lips, after a few moments she was able to speak. "Are you Sigurd?"

"My name is Siegfried," he responded in surprise.

"Ah, you are Teutonic, not Danish," she said. "It is the same name. Wulfric the wizard prophesied you'd come and awaken me."

"Wizard?" Siegfried drew back. "You were in enchanted sleep? For how long?"

"How can I know?" The woman smiled at him. "What year is this?"

"The year of Our Lord 1056."

"Your Lord maybe, not mine. Do you mean the Christian prophet the Romans executed? I know of him. When we raided Lindisfarne we learned from the monks there that the years since his birth were eight hundred and fifty-one."

"That's more than two hundred years ago!"

"If you say so. The Lindisfarne raid was five years before our last stand."

"Who... who on Earth are you?"

"I am Brynhildr Ragnarsdottir," she announced proudly, "wife to the great Jarl Harald, the mightiest of all warriors; he who fed Odin's ravens with the corpses of his countless slaughtered foes."

"Indeed, Jarl Harald lived two centuries ago. But surely you're jesting with me, Lady? You can't possibly be more than twenty-five years old."

"I'm telling you the truth. How else do you suppose I knew your name?"

Siegfried tried hard to collect his thoughts. "Tell me how it happened," he said.

"The Teuton tribes allied against us. They ambushed us as we returned from a raiding expedition to the south. When they broke our shield-wall, the last few of our war-band left alive retreated to our stronghold here, along with as much of our spoil as we could carry away."

"No primitive tribesmen could possibly have taken this tower," Siegfried objected.

"Since I'm still here, I can only assume they never did," the shield maiden agreed. "However, we'd no way of bringing in food; they starved us out."

"And the defenders left you behind?" Siegfried was appalled.

"I was badly wounded in the first battle and unable to fight again. Wulfric said he could heal me, but only at the price of putting me into a deep sleep. Harald overruled my objections. He bade Wulfric do whatever was necessary."

Siegfried's Christian brain revolted against this magical stuff but, after encountering draugar and wyrms and now in the face of living proof, his pagan heart found her tale only too credible. "Your wizard was powerful," he said. "Not only did he save your life, he protected you from harm long after his own death."

"He said he could conjure up a dragon to protect the castle; to prolong the beast's life, it would sleep like me except when the stockade was threatened. The door to the keep he protected by a spell forbidding it to open save to one with a pure heart."

"The door opened to *me*," Siegfried mused, "after I slew the dragon."

"Of course. You are Sigurd."

"And what became of your husband Jarl Harald, Wulfric, and the others?"

"As I became drowsy, I heard them preparing to sally out and die honorably, sword in hand, rather than starve like rats in a trap. It is the only death acceptable to a Viking."

"That's what they did," Siegfried nodded. "Or so the priests who write our histories would have us believe."

Suddenly he recollected his manners. "But come, I'm indulging my own curiosity and neglecting your needs. Is your wound truly healed? Do you want food or water? I've still a few things in the pockets of my cloak."

"No, Sigurd," her voice was calm, "I want only one thing — the honorable death my wound denied me. I'm ashamed. Too long my husband has waited for me in Valhalla."

"But you're so young," Siegfried objected. "And so beautiful," he added, blushing.

"And another man's wife, young hero."

Siegfried shook his head, ashamed.

"If Wulfric's prophecy was true, you came here for our booty, did you not?" Brynhildr asked.

Siegfried nodded.

"Then come, let me show you where it is. We do not have much time."

"I don't understand. Why not?"

"Did you not say you slew the dragon?" Brynhildr looked at him in some amusement. "What else do you suppose has defensed our treasure these past two centuries?"

Siegfried slapped his forehead in disgust at his stupidity. "The draugar. Of course. Without the wyrm and with the keep door opened, the draugar will come to take away the defilement." He considered. "But there *are* only three of them."

"Only three?" The shield maiden looked puzzled. "You mean you encountered just one war-band?"

Siegfried nodded.

"Ah. They fight in threes. Three was a number of great power in the religion of the Ancient Ones. Unless they've assaulted the castle repeatedly and the dragon's killed all the rest while I slept, there'll be thousands more out there."

"But if there were thousands back in your day, how did you survive here?" Siegfried demanded, his brow wrinkling.

"Simple," she replied. "Their magic was weaker than Wulfric's. He protected us all against them then, just as he's protected me since. But in truth we always knew the gods of this place would avenge themselves upon us one day, and they did. For me too, at long last, that day has now come."

"I will defend you with my life!" Siegfried declared hotly.

"No!" Brynhildr rose angrily to her feet. "It is not your day to die! Wulfric told me all that must be, and I long for it with all my heart. Do as I say and you shall descend this hill with all the treasure you can carry."

"And you, Lady?"

"Me?" Brynhildr smiled proudly. "I shall cross Bifrost, the rainbow bridge to Asgard, head held high and sword in hand as a warrior should, to join my Jarl in the feasting halls of Odin. Come quickly; follow me."

Striking sparks from a flint and lighting a stub of tallow candle from a wall sconce, Brynhildr led Siegfried down a dusty interior spiral staircase to the door-less cellar of the tower. There, in the center of the gloomy room, she showed him four cobweb-covered, brass-bound, oaken chests. Opening each of the first three in turn she showed him their contents.

"Gold coins, silver arm rings, precious stones," she said.

Siegfried marveled. It was nearer a king's ransom than a simple bride price. "And the fourth?" he asked.

"This last one," she said, raising the lid, "contains the magical armor of King Arthur, the legendary hero of the Britons. We took it from Lindisfarne, where the monks revered it as a holy relic. Of course, we thought they lied, but when we brought it home Wulfric told us it really was the once and future king's own panoply. But sadly, though it had the virtue of making its wearer invulnerable in battle, only the pure in heart might put it on." Brynhildr laughed. "I'm afraid we didn't qualify."

"I may have opened your door, but I'm not really pure in heart either," Siegfried admitted, finding her refreshing honesty infectious. "I've scoffed at those who turned out to be telling me the truth. Only this morning I insulted an old man in the village who gave me honest warning of the dangers up here."

"You see?" Brynhildr shook her head in amusement. "That's the difference between a Viking and one who can wear this armor; one of them enjoys remembering the wrongs he's done and the other regrets them."

"You think I *could* wear it then?" Siegfried stuttered, reddening.

"You are Sigurd," she said simply, "and you will not leave here without fighting."

Hesitantly Siegfried took up the helmet. It was made in the old Roman style, with lace-together cheek-pieces and an ornately decorated visor across the brow. The gilded metal showed neither dullness nor decay; the mount of its bright-red-crested, horsehair plume might have been planished yesterday. Of course, it fitted perfectly, as though it had been made for him.

"Now do you believe me?" Brynhildr inquired. "Take off your breastplate; let me help you put on Arthur's. You can wear plenty of silver arm-rings too and stuff the pockets of your cloak with gold and jewels. They'll stop a sword cut as well as bronze can."

By the time the two of them emerged from the keep and crossed the bailey towards the bridge gate, a full moon had risen, shining brightly on the two warriors and throwing their elongated shadows darkly across the silvery ground. The air was crisp

and clear, the visibility considerably improved from when Siegfried arrived at the castle during the so-called day.

Brynhildr wore her fearsome horned helmet and carried her stabbing spear as well as the sword slung at her iron-studded belt. Her eyes glittered in the icy moonlight. She grinned a fierce, warrior's grin as she feigned two or three times to remind her muscles of the weight of her weapons. Siegfried looked on in something approaching awe.

"Listen!" she whispered to him. "Do you hear them?"

"Hear who?"

"The Valkyries! They're singing!"

"Valkyries? What are they?"

"The Choosers of the Slain. They're singing *for me*. It's a sign I shall die honorably in battle and they will conduct my soul to Valhalla. Oh yes! This will be such a marvelous fight! The *skalds* will sing of it for generations to come."

Siegfried did not hear the Valkyries, but he did hear muted voices and footfalls from the woods below the fort. It was surely not the wailing of the wind through the larch branches, yet he certainly heard wailing of a sort. And, carried on the breeze along with these suggestive sounds, came the unmistakable stench of rank corruption. When Brynhildr flung open the great gate, they saw the forest before them shining with myriad jade-tinted lights.

"They're here!" she exulted. "No more need to whisper." Striding to the end of the bridge, she stood with arms thrown wide and, tilting back her head, screamed to the heavens a war cry impossibly loud to issue from so slender a frame. "Odin!" she cried. "*Odin ejer jer alle!* Odin owns you all!"

Unsheathing Skull Cleaver, Siegfried hastened to join his ally as, three by three, the draugar began to emerge from the wood. On and on they came, more and more, until the open ground below the fort was thronged with shambling, armored corpses. Some inflated themselves to great size, twice as tall as a living man; some turned themselves into fire or smoke, some prowled around in the shape of wolves, stamped the earth with enormous feet like gigantic hares, or grew tusks like a wild boar. But most contented themselves with their natural form — primitive warriors like those he'd already seen.

Siegfried studied the serried ranks before him and knew there was no escape. Like the five knights before him, he would know death on this cursed hill. Gudrun would be a widow before ever she became a bride. He hefted the blade in his hand and, with a sinking heart, tried to match Brynhildr's infectious grin.

"It seems," he said, "your Valkyries may be singing for both of us."

Brynhildr turned and looked at him. "Not so!" She growled. "They sing only one song. The draugar cannot enter Valhalla and you, already with a face painted by dragon's blood, now wear Arthur's armor. You cannot possibly be slain."

"But you..."

"I shall die. But before I do, I swear I shall send a hundred of these vile monsters back to their stinking graves for good. Oh Sigurd, the slaughter will be glorious! What are we waiting for? Come on!"

A noble knight should not hesitate when a mere woman flings herself upon the foe as if possessed by all the devils in Hell. Even the front rank of the draugar quailed at the fearsome prospect of the onrushing hellion. Three undead fell in quick succession to Brynhildr's spear, gutted like putrid fish without striking a blow in retaliation.

Barely pausing to draw her sword as she came to close quarters, she began carving her way into the second and then third ranks. A mad berserker! Siegfried had heard of such, but he'd seen nothing remotely like the impassioned shield maiden. Her whirling blade sliced off heads and lopped decomposing limbs as easily as a forester lops diseased branches.

The draugar were strong and they were many, but they were slow. Before their thronging ranks could close the gap which Brynhildr had smashed open and strike her from behind, Siegfried thrust himself into the fray, turning back to back with the death-crazed shield-maiden.

Blow after blow rained vainly down towards his crested helmet and his Roman breastplate. Skull Cleaver flickered left, right, up, down, so fast its flashing movements became invisible to the eye, until draugar corpses, killed for a second and last time, lay in heaps in his wake, and new attackers had to clamber over reeking, slippery walls of slain to come against him.

And all the while Brynhildr steadily drove forward, cutting through row after row, and all the while Siegfried steadily gave ground at her back, never more than a foot behind her.

"Odin!" Brynhildr sang her battle-hymn as she slaughtered the enemy, blood-lust lending superhuman strength to her sword arm. "Odin, send your ravens one last time to feast upon the corpses of your enemies! Harald, my dearly beloved, meet me this day beside the Rainbow Bridge! We'll be reunited soon!"

The further the frenzied shield-maiden hacked her way forward, the more desperate Siegfried's rearguard action ineluctably grew. Rank upon rank of vengeful, howling draugar vied with each other to be the one to bring him down. Axes, spears and stabbing swords battered and crashed against the lightning flashing from his miraculous sword hand, until it seemed he must needs be beaten down by the sheer weight of enemies pressed up against him.

But a warrior with nowhere to run and nothing left to lose is at his most dangerous. In the absence of hope, Siegfried began to laugh. Light-headed, carefree, utterly insane, he derided the prospect of imminent death. He was Siegfried Wurm-Slayer, Siegfried the Invincible, King Arthur reborn. Brynhildr had spoken the truth. For a thousand years, minstrels would sing of this day.

The killing frenzy penetrated every last fiber of his being, incandescent madness setting his soul aflame; once a naive young man, he was transformed into the wrath of God. The Rhineland peaks echoed and re-echoed to his manic laughter as Skull Cleaver slashed and cut and thrust and spilled an ocean of impure blood upon the forest floor.

And then suddenly, unbelievably, they were through the massed ranks, free and clear on the downhill side. As the lumbering draugar briefly hesitated over the best manner of pursuit, ahead of him Siegfried felt Brynhildr stumble and fall.

Quickly he turned and, gathering her up in his arms, he carried her twenty yards and laid her gently against the thickest tree trunk he could find to protect her back. Picking up her fallen sword in his left hand, he turned and stood at bay, madness personified.

"Come, you fiends in barely-human form!" he bellowed at the enemy. "I am Siegfried of Saxony! Here I stand! Not one inch more do I yield! Buy my life at grievous cost if you dare! Do you hear me? I defy you all!"

"No need, Sigurd," a weak, quiet voice spoke behind him. "Odin has answered my prayer. See there, his birds, they come."

It was true. The luminous blackness of the night sky was darkened by an even deeper-sable cloud. Blotting out the moon, covering the trees, filling all the air about the draugar horde, a shrieking, flailing, ghastly swarm of frenzied ravens descended upon the still-animated carrion like locusts upon a field of maize.

Ripping decaying flesh from moldering bones, tearing stinking lumps of muscle loose from undead sinews, the ravenous birds destroyed draugar in their hundreds as the antique host turned and fled in terror across the face of the desolate hillside, desperately seeking the sanctuary of their long-forsaken, unmarked graves. In minutes, only the feasting ravens and the writhing remnants of their banquet remained. The two fugitives were left alone.

Turning to Brynhildr, Siegfried was aghast to see a river of blood running from a gaping wound in her side, pooling in the larch litter beneath her slight form as her life ebbed swiftly away.

"My Lady," he cried in desperation. "What can I do?"

The shield-maiden was too far gone to reply in words, but as Siegfried bent over her, distraught, her right arm stretched out painfully towards his left.

At once he realized his near-catastrophic error. Quickly he pushed the hilt of her sword into her failing grasp and firmly clasped her dying fingers over it. Looking up at her face, he saw her mouth flicker in a last weak smile.

"Odin!" she breathed one last, triumphant paean. "Odin owned them all!" And the fierce light behind her eyes flickered and went out.

The bloodstained warrior who limped into the village in the valley as dawn broke on a new day was not the callow youth who'd begun his perilous climb less than twenty-four hours previously.

The aged villager watched in silent, respectful admiration as the battered figure in obsolete Roman armor turned and looked back towards the heights, where the stark outline of the Raven-Feeder's Tower was just visible against the blood-red streaks of a gradually lightening sky.

For some minutes the warrior stood there, silently waiting, looking on as the dark-blue heavens slowly turned cerulean, as color and life returned to the earth below.

And when the first sliver of golden sun crept above the eastern horizon, gilding the tall, gaunt trees of the high larch wood and painting the uplands in soft roseate hues, the watching knight nodded with satisfaction as a delicate rainbow glimmered into life.

Like a many-colored bridge, it stretched far, far away from the summit of the castle hill, into the infinite distance beyond the boundaries of the mortal world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Brian Hall inhabits the dismal fastnesses of Sliabh Mannan, six hundred feet above sea level in Central Scotland. Buzzards ride the thermals overhead and shriek at him whenever he stops writing. Quite how many years he has been immured in this desolation, nobody now remembers, but he is (probably) still alive, since every now and again he manages to emerge long enough to send another story to one of his various publishers in The UK, USA or Canada. Over thirty of these stories have now reached a resolutely unresponsive public, along with his two novels "The Prophets of Baal" and "The Family Demon." Gluttons for punishment may find his blog at sliabhmannon.blogspot.co.uk.

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An Homage to Clark Ashton Smith

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THE hoarse ululation of fossil conchs echoed through the street, followed by rhythmic clapping. Jadhen stepped hastily aside, retreated into an alcove. A procession of Thasaïdon's priests came marching down the Esplanade of the Nine Strangled Widows, their sandaled feet never touching the marble flagstones but keeping a careful half-inch from the ground. *Show-offs*, he thought. *That is the kind of levitation spell an acolyte masters in the first week after his castration. Still, they could have gone for the Infernal Walk, leaving smoking lava-prints in the marble.*

Jadhen turned left at the fane of Yodlimar, went down the Street of Poison-brewers with their racks of drying snakes, the bubbling vats with sea-scorpions and jumping spiders. Everywhere in the city of Ummaos hung the pervading stink of magic, with ghostly eyes staring from the shadows, sly giggles that needed no ears and whispered directly in your brain.

He deeply hated this place, but as a Claw of the King, he was sworn to protect his own city, fair Zul-Bha-Sair of the Hundred Minarets. The king's astrologers had warned of a dire conjunction in less than three months' time. One that would "leave the streets empty even on a feast day" and "the vultures unfed." A doom so definitive, so encompassing that it wouldn't even leave corpses for the birds to dine upon.

The high-priest had thrown his pointing stones and triangulated Ummaos as the source of that calamity.

Jadhen's companion, Lady Magida, had next walked the dream ways, trailing for ghostly gossip. A name had popped up: Hiram, the archimage and strategos of the city. King Zotulla might rule Ummaos, but Hiram was the one ever whispering in his ears.

• • •

LADY Magida was waiting at the fountain, wearing the green cloak and alpaca wool scarf of a chaste virgin. Jadhen smiled. She hadn't been a virgin since her thirteenth year.

Lady Magida was wearing a glamour: topaz eyes and raven locks, breasts like globes of the purest alabaster. Making her so beautiful in fact that no man dared look her into the eyes.

Jadhen approved: an attractive girl walking these mean streets would be the subject of lewd remarks and wolf whistles. Slavers would eye her, drunkards sidle closer. Unearthly beauty forestalled that, because it might be just that, unearthly, and Magida a jinna or a soul drinker.

"How did it go?" he asked.

She scowled. "He set three mummies with claws the size of scimitars to guard the gate. On the roof, half a dozen basilisks perched, ready to open their eyes and petrify me."

"So Hiram has indeed something to hide. To protect. Basilisks don't come cheap."

She spread her hands. "And now?"

"Killing what is already dead is always a bit of a problem. Batting your lashes is also out: mummies are immune to lust."

"I think it is your turn to stick out your neck." She inspected from top to bottom. "You still look kind of handsome. I might sell you as a slave to Hiram? That's a way to get inside without turning into stone."

"He is a boy-lover?" *Anything for King and City*, Jadhen thought and shuddered. The slogan ran hollow suddenly.

"It wouldn't work. He lies with demons, they say. Six-breasted women with the tongues of vipers. Ladies clad in funeral shrouds with the decay turning their faces a delicate green."

"A seeming then?" he proposed. "You're good at glammers. We could be anyone. Anything."

Lady Magida had slept in the tombs of magicians so feared that their names had never been written down, walking into their death-dreams, leafing through their grimoires that had long ago turned to dust. When she strode through the necropolises the ghûls fled like whimpering hares.

She smiled and for a moment her seeming flickered. She wore the face of a hag, her teeth much too long and her eyes white as bone, without a single pupil.

Jadhen knew it was only another glamour. His cousin wore so many layers he had probably never seen her true face. If she still had one...

"We'll come as alchemists from far Tasuun," Lady Magida said. "He has been asking around for anybody who can do Hadrarin duplications or contagions. There have been no takers after the first three. It is said that he asks for instant proof and if the braggart fails, Hiram's mummies instantly tear off his head and parade it through the streets."

"So he owns something and wants it duplicated?"

"That would seem the case. But he doesn't take it outside. He asked the alchemists to duplicate a simple finger bone. A cursed finger-bone and the idea is that the second bone still wears the same curse."

Jadhen thought for a moment. An alumnus of the Philosophical Madrassa, he usually did the extrapolations and planning, while he left the derring-do and the unspeakable spells to his companion. "So it must be about an amulet. Hiram is the strategos of king Zotulla and the king avidly eyes our city. He hungers for our vineyards, the river harbors filled with colorful sails." He frowned. "Now an amulet can either be a weapon or a shield. If it were a weapon..." He pursed his lips. "It isn't a weapon. If you'd own a very potent weapon you would want to keep it close, to carry it on you. I mean a warrior wouldn't leave his best sword at home."

"Go on," Lady Magida urged.

Jadhen's face had become as slack as the face of an idiot. The opposite was the case: all his life force was now flowing to his brain, his thoughts a whirlpool of pure cogitation.

"It is a shield. A shield against a weapon he doesn't own yet." He looked up at the star Achernar, a dazzling blue point even at noon. It hovered just above the cupolas of the royal palace.

"Achernar," Jadhen whispered. "The baleful star that bears sickness and mad thoughts on its rays."

"The Silver Death," Lady Magida concluded.

"Yes. A thousand years ago it seeped down from Achernar, turned every sufferer into a silver statue. Only the king of Faraad survived because his magician had made him a ring that kept him safe. But he received the ring too late: he was already infected and the ring only kept the sickness dormant.

"After his city died, he fled and ended up at the Island of Uccastrog. They were a cruel people and tortured him and finally took off his ring, which was his last and most precious possession. And the Silver Death leaped forth from his body and killed them all."

"Hiram owns that ring now?" Lady Magida said.

"If his soldiers all wear such a ring they would be immune. The king could take any city he wants. The only inhabitants would be silver statues."

"That is right. But there is more..." His face came up. "He has the ring but the sickness is gone. He'll have to call it down again from Achernar."

Jadhen opened his mouth like a beached salmon and slumped down, suddenly a boneless marionette with his cords cut.

Lady Magida could only just catch him before his head hit the flagstones.

• • •

IT took him three days before he woke again. The human brain and body aren't made to think that hard and deep.

"I'm back, it seems," Jadhen said. A fierce headache throbbed between his eyes and his mouth tasted of bile, with a tongue dry as leather.

"I didn't waste my time," Lady Magida said. She lifted her left hand, drew a spiral that corkscrewed in a direction that made Jadhen's eyes roll in their sockets.

A man of mature age suddenly stood there, the flowing beard mahogany speckled with white, the nose a raptor's beak. On his brow, a blue six-pointed star shone. It had the same baleful hue as Achernar.

"How about this?"

"You look very competent, lady. Just the kind of magus Hiram has been seeking. The star is a nice touch."

She held up a mirror. Jadhen's face duplicated her own.

"We are supposed to be brothers?"

"Twins. Twins are the best, touched by the gods. Many viles strangle them the moment they emerge from the womb."

"Better safe than sorry," Jadhen nodded. He reached up to his chin and the beard felt quite substantial.

"This feels a bit more powerful than a seeming," he said. "I hope you can change me back?"

She laughed. "Why? Afraid virgins will hesitate to kiss the lips of a man perfumed with mummy dust? Whose eyes reflect the light of the moon?"

"Virgins have been known to be picky."

• • •

THE villa of the strategos stood next to the temple of Thaisdon. *A good choice*, Jadhen thought, *the ground must have been dirt cheap. Most citizens don't like to hear screams of mortal agony in the middle of the night or the grating chant of ultraterrene demons. A strategos of course revels in it.*

A row of torn-off heads flanked the garden path. They weren't dead: lips moved in silent pleas, tongues flapped in agony. No flies were in evidence: even they avoided the taint of such virulent magic.

Now don't look up to the roof. He could hear the clicking of nails on the tiles, the rustling of feathers. Basilisks came in many shapes but always an unholy mix of cock and snake.

One of the mummies stepped forward, raised a sickle claw.

"Do you have business with the strategos?" His voice was a weary whisper, yet filled with hate. The dead don't like to be awakened from their sweet sleep.

"We don't have an appointment," Lady Magida said. "But I am quite sure he'll want to see us."

The mummy gestured to one of the impaled heads. "Ludwin the Thrice-born thought so, too." His nail lengthened until it grew long enough to touch the next head. "And the day before Indmar the Walker-between-Worlds walked the same path, quite sure of himself."

Lady Magida folded her arms. "Call him."

"Well, there *are* still two stakes left."

• • •

INSIDE it was the kind of palace storytellers are always raving about, damask curtains, the floors inlaid with jasper and azure false-ice, leviathan-bone pilasters.

A naked lady stepped from the fresco along the wall, smiled at them. It was a smile that rather spoiled her beauty, being shark-toothed. And she cast, of course, the triple shadow of all demon-kind.

"Please hand me your mantles and your caps. You can keep your daggers and throwing darts. No steel, even enchanted, can ever cut the skin of the king's strategos."

"Bathed in dragon's blood, eh?" Lady Magida said.

"Something better and even more painful."

Even more painful. Jadhen shuddered. His own throat and the skin above his heart were protected. The dragon blood had burned like molten lead, blackening his skin until it peeled away to show the patches of baby-pink, but now quite invulnerable dragon hide.

The corridor stretched into the distance, hundreds of doors and alcoves, with the exit no more than a dazzling dot.

"Very imposing," Lady Magida said. "Must be easily nine miles long. But we got exercise enough walking a fortnight through a waterless desert to get here." She lifted her left hand, snapped her fingers.

The corridor instantly retracted until no more than a score of doors were left. It was still a rather long hallway but no longer an impossibly long one.

"Imposing," the girl said. "Perhaps you won't be wasting the time of my master after all?"

"We fully intend to walk out of this villa clutching bags of green gold," Jadhen said. Only sorcerers of the most potent kind would ask for green gold. Any mere mortal who handled it became very mortal indeed, sickening and dying in a matter of hours.

• • •

"HERE it is," the girl said at the seventeenth door. "Open it yourselves. It is ghost-proof and my fingers would recoil." She stepped back in the wall and became once more a motionless fresco.

• • •

HIRAM didn't sit on any kind of throne and didn't look martial, more like a harried accountant with his cuttlefish ink-stained fingers and his sunken cheeks. He was painting hieroglyphs on a map that mostly showed desert.

Jadhen sharpened his eyes with a mumbled word of power, zoomed in. In the center lay Zul-bha-Sair, his own city where walking mummies and followers of Thasaïdon were less than welcome. Their god devoured all the newly dead and that was all he asked of his worshippers.

Merchants set out across the trackless deserts on their three-humped camels, selling the wine and spider-silk cloaks as far as Miraab. Zul-bha-Sair was a prize indeed and the king of Xilac had been eyeing her for ages.

A recently painted hieroglyph showed the twinned spider symbol of Achnar. *We were right. He wants to take our city, turn all we love into silver statues.*

"Ah, there you are." Hiram put his brush down. "You didn't get tricked by the labyrinth. An auspicious start. Some of my visitors are still walking around there if they haven't perished from hunger and thirst."

"Well," Lady Magida said, "we *are* sorcerers after all, not penny-a-spell charlatans."

He sat back. "Prove it."

"We heard something about a cursed finger bone?" Lady Magida said. "You want that spell duplicated and put on another bone?"

"Just to prove you can do it." Two knuckle-bones fell rattling on the wafer-thin onyx table.

"What exactly is the curse?" Lady Magida took the oldest bone in her hand, licked it. "I see, a bad luck conjuration. Whoever touched it becomes accident-prone." Her left foot skidded and she bumped the table, upsetting Hiram's crystal goblet with sweet Tasuun wine.

She snatched it up before a single drop spilled. "Just kidding."

Hiram grinned. "I was expecting something like that, yes. You almost got me there." He pursed his lips. "The bones?"

"I already did them."

Hiram reached for his spectacles. The glasses were polished amber, Jadhen saw. They would make any mana, any spell, visible as a soft glow that pulsed on the rhythm of your own heartbeat.

"Perfectly identical," Hiram concluded after half a dozen heartbeats. "Now this isn't about any knucklebones obviously. I obtained an extremely old talisman, a ring that is still as potent as the day it was forged."

This time there was no grandstanding. Hiram put on gloves made of tanned human hide: any dire magic would infest the skin, choosing the former owner as its victim.

The ring was made of a strange red metal, Jadhen saw, darker than ruddy gold or copper, and was set with a black and oblong gem. It spread a strong, aromatic perfume. He made a furtive gesture and the sound of an invisible hand rifling the pages of the Infinite Grimoire filled his ears.

"The ring came from Mars, forged in fossil volcano fire," a voice whispered in his ear. "The inset jewel was conjured up

from Jupiter's boiling oceans." *Clearly one of a kind and the Martian metal alone was worth a king's ransom. Even better, it will be impossible to replace if we steal it. Once we could fly freely between the heavenly orbs, but those spells are lost.*

Hiram turned to Lady Magida. "Can you duplicate it: the ring and the spell?"

"Possibly. I won't know until we try. We would need several rather rare ingredients. A virgin mirror to start with. Two virgin mirrors." She folded her arms. "And our own alchemical laboratory, demon-warded. Turning platinum into Martian iron and blue phosphorus into Jupiter sea-pearls takes a hundred filtrations and decoctions, the addition of the most furtive starlight."

"And the runes carved in the ring? I wasted three goldsmiths when I ordered them to duplicate them. Their fingernails crumbled and then their fingers turned into black glass and shattered."

"No human hand can draw those runes, yes."

• • •

HALF a day later Lady Magida looked around. "Well, he didn't stint us any. Lead-clad walls, wards in every corner and a whole flask of alkahest." She looked at the container which was made of time-frozen air, the only vessel capable of holding the ultimate solvent. "If we can take that with us." She shook her head. "We will be wealthier than our own king, than the high-priest himself."

• • •

THE ring was easy to duplicate when you own two virgin mirrors. A virgin mirror must be poured and silvered by a blind mirror maker, in complete darkness.

They arrived swaddled in ghost-skin, thick layers that shimmered eerily. Each layer was comprised of at least a score of ghosts, Jadhen knew, caught at the waning of the moon and braided in the Thelaysodan manner by nimble Hands of Glory.

The material felt horribly greasy to the touch as if infused with corpse fat. It made Jadhen's fingertips tingle with revulsion.

Lady Magida set the ring on a pedestal between the two mirrors, intoned a spell in a transmundane tongue, then stepped back and shouted: "Now!"

Jadhen snatched the final cloths away and the mirrors reflected the ring in each other, an endless corridor opening up with every mirror bearing his own rings. A tinkle sounded, followed by a metallic clatter.

The mirrors vanished, sucked into their own reflection.

The pedestal was now covered with a score of rings, the perfect mirror offspring of Lady Magida's conjuration.

She put on her own amber glasses, shook her head. "Got them. I wonder why Hiram didn't do this himself?"

"He calls up demons from the vasty deep," Jadhen said. "He makes corpses walk. Perhaps a duplication spell isn't eerie enough for him? And don't forget: he knows his own limitations. Wizards like that are the most dangerous."

He looked at the veritable heap of glittering rings: the stink of magic was overwhelming and made his eyes water. "And now? We call our master?"

"Success so soon would only make him suspicious. A spell that mighty should take days. And we want to look worth the expense."

Jadhen frowned. "We go to bed then?"

"O yes, deeply tired by our efforts, all the arcane spells we tried to start the duplication of so unique an artifact." She smiled. "Yes, we close our eyes and then I'll pull your soul from your body and send you on your way. Hiram's working room would be a good place to start. I'll remain here and be your anchor. Just speak your secret name and you'll be snatched back and wake in your own body."

"What will I be looking for?"

"His timetable to start with. When he wants to attack our city. Then there is the Silver Death. How is he going to call..."

Jadhen interrupted her. "I think we have a problem." He bent down, took a ring between his shod thumb and index finger. It might fit the finger of an urchin, a very thin and hungry urchin but never the thick and strong ring finger of a soldier. "They got smaller with each reflection. Only a dozen are useful. At most."

Lady Magida smiled. "That is his problem. We got him his rings."

• • •

HE slept the moment his head hit the embroidered pillow. In his dream, he sat up and looked down upon his sleeping body. *O yes, Lady Magida wanted me to explore. To find Hiram's most cherished secrets.*

Jadhen walked through the alchemical laboratory, the athanors and steaming beakers, the container with deadly alkahest. The door only resisted him for a heartbeat and then he passed through, the material yielding like a curtain of thick honey.

The corridor stretched in front of him. To the left, if he remembered well.

A movement in the corner of his eye. The wall bulged, ran with rainbow colors and the girl-shaped demon stepped out on the flagstones.

"So you are in your astral body now." She extended her claws. "No dragon skin there. The same occult stuff I am made of, but so much flimsier. You know, I could shred you like wet paper."

"But you won't. You could kill this ghost and I'd just wake up with a truly bad headache. And then I would come looking for you."

"There is that." She looked him up and down. "You look quite different from before and I don't think it is because astral bodies are often idealized. You are in disguise and the strategos didn't notice." She giggled. "The more fool he!"

"You don't sound very respectful."

The demon, no, the *girl* snorted. "He summoned me, spoke my true name so I had to obey him in all things."

"You are a captive, then. A slave."

"Such is the case and the duty of any slave is to escape and next take vengeance on her captor." She nodded to the door. "He set me to guard your laboratory, to make sure nothing baleful entered to spoil your experiments or hinder your spells. And no doubt to keep you from wandering around and entering places you aren't wanted. He said nothing about astral bodies, though."

She touched his shoulder and a thrill of shuddering blue desire ran through his body. Suddenly she was very beautiful in a sleek, catlike way. *No doubt my body is pursuing his lips back in the laboratory and eagerly reaching up to embrace an invisible lover.* He turned his left thumb to break the spell, reluctantly. "Not now, please. I need my wits."

"Not now? But later?"

"I..."

"You pine for her, you lust after your, what is her name? your Lady Magida, but you can't have her. Not ever. But you *can* have me."

Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned, Jadhen thought, *more so if she was a demon to start with. Also, one can't choose his allies. And she sounded sincere. Demons are known for falling in lust with mortals at first sight.*

"Later," he said. "When we have thwarted Hiram."

"Torn him in a thousand pieces, you mean. Which I'll keep alive for a hundred years. Each bleeding piece with a mouth to scream!" Her eyes glowed like opals.

"Something like that."

"I know a tomb with a silver couch covered with samite. We'll couple and rut while emperors look down on us with empty eye sockets and the albino bats twitter."

"Capital idea. But first his workroom."

• • •

THE door was now covered with runes that darted across the wood like so many centipedes. It hummed in a dozen octaves only Jadhen's astral ears could hear. No doubt the gate was heavily ensorcelled.

"Touch the wood and an astral body pops like a soap-bubble," the girl said. "If you're flesh and blood your bones will turn into porcelain and your blood starts to boil. Very effective spell."

She extended a hand, drew a hieroglyph in the air. The humming instantly stopped.

"I was with him when he cast the spell, standing stock still in that wall painting." She pointed to a tree with ink-black fruit with a dozen demons lounging in the shade. All wore her face. "Rather careless of him."

• • •

THE room was as Jadhen remembered. Bookcases with scrolls and iron-bound grimoires. Skeletons of animals so long extinct even their names were lost.

He strode to the desk. Yes, the map was still unrolled, centered on his home town.

"You should see this," the girl said and pulled a hanging scroll down.

The silk painting was more than man-high and the work of a master painter. The illusion of depth was breathtaking.

It depicted an ancient city, with corkscrewing towers in a style Jadhen had never seen before. They reminded him of the sand-castles he and Lady Magida had been building at Lake Yvresse when they were children. You took a handful of wet sand and let it dribble between your fingers until you ended up with a kind of inverted stalactite.

The painting was full color, showing Achernar in the twilit sky, much brighter than that baleful star shone now.

He peered in the murk, the uncertain light. Something was gleaming in the desert sand. He sharpened his gaze and it became a jackal lying on his side. His fur had a silver sheen and was no doubt solid metal. *The Silver Death has touched him. But who had painted that scene? To stand so close to the city should instantly have infected him.*

A movement: three giant seagulls drifted through the sky, and a moment later a desert breeze blew from the scroll, made the peacock feathers in the vase next to the desk shiver. The gulls crossed some invisible border and turned into solid silver, plummeted down.

"It is a gate," the girl declared. "A portal to the time of the Silver Death, That is the only way to carry the infection to our age."

Jadhen stared at the scroll. "You are solid, much more so than I. You can tear it in pieces, burn it."

"Me and which arch-demon? Hiram traced the activating runes on woven adamant, the toughest material under the stars. No way to destroy it. Now I'll roll it up and then we must be gone. Leave no trace. A dozen alarms went off when we stepped across the threshold but it'll take him another seven heart-beats to arrive here."

"Seven? No way I can get back to the laboratory in ..."

"I'll be a painting on the wall and he'll find no trace of your astral body."

Her claws lengthened, became glittering scimitars. She slashed down and opened him up from sternum to pelvis.

His false body shuddered, dissolving in a rain of blue sparks. She spoke his true name, smiling, and then the silence returned.

• • •

JADHEN shot upright, with the tail end of a scream on his lips and clutched his belly, looked down. No bleeding wound, no bulging intestines, but his headache was something fierce. A pounding of troll hammers, the stamping of red hot iron boots.

Lady Magida rose from her workbench where she had been sorting rings.

"I gather you had a most interesting time?"

"There was a demon, that girl again, and she killed me." He held up his hand. "No matter. She had her reasons."

"What did you find?"

"Hiram is ready, much farther along with his scheme than we feared. He opened a time gate that leads straight to the Silver Death. To the city..." Still groggy, he groped for the name. "Of that tale's king."

"To Faraad, yes." She took a ring and put it on her own finger. She next chose another ring from the bowl on the left. "Catch! That one should fit."

• • •

THEY were standing in front of the unrolled time scroll. Beyond the gate morning had broken: the red sun hovered above the towers, flanked by ruddy sun dogs. Nothing moved on the wide desert.

Hiram looked at his bodyguards, at the two sorcerers. "Only three days. That was fast work. Now we all put on our rings."

One of the guards shook his head. "I'm not putting that ring on my little finger! I'm not a boy-lover, forsooth! They'll think me unnatural, an invert!"

"Your friends are wearing rings, too. But feel free to step through the gate without a ring. You'll do very nicely as a silver statue."

"All right, all right. If you say so." He tugged one of the smaller rings across his knuckles.

"Now this is how it will go," Hiram said. "Those rings look authentic and they glowed reassuringly when I inspected them through my amber glasses. Still, to trust you would be naive and the height of folly." He pointed to Lady Magida. "You'll go in first and touch the nose of that dog. If you stay alive we'll follow."

"Seems prudent." Lady Magida stepped through the portal, walked across the sand.

Sharp sight showed Jadhen every detail: the very grains of sand, the silver bristles surrounding the gleaming nose of the jackal. She touched an ear and her hand remained brown, her skin skin.

"Good," Hiram said. "You did it." He turned to his bodyguards. "We'll all step through the gate now. All but sir Little Finger."

"Eh, me?" the bodyguard said.

"You put your dagger against the second magister's throat and cut his head off the moment something untoward happens. If he tries to close the gate to strand us there, for instance."

"I hear and obey. Gladly."

"Give me your dagger." He spoke a word, pricked the ball of his thumb, and smeared the blood along the blade. "Now it will cut even dragon hide."

• • •

THE dagger traced a thin line of pain just below Jadhen's Adam's apple. *I hope it isn't poisoned.*

Hiram stepped through the gate with nine bodyguards. He was holding a cage with a chattering monkey. The animal would catch the transmundane sickness and bear it back to their home time.

Two steps, three. Hiram stiffened, stared at his hand in consternation. His fingernails were turning white and then the metallic sheen raced up his arms, made his face a gleaming mask.

It worked! The reflection of a ring inverted the runes and made them useless, but the reflection of a reflection put them right again. Only Lady Magida and he had been wearing a ring with the right runes.

"Treachery!" the guard bellowed and he cut down. He never completed the movement: his slashed-off hand dropped away and lay spasming on the glazed tiles. The head followed a moment later.

The girl kneeled next to the dying man, cleaning her bloody claw on his uniform.

She looked up at Jadhen. "You are bleeding, my love. Let me kiss it better."

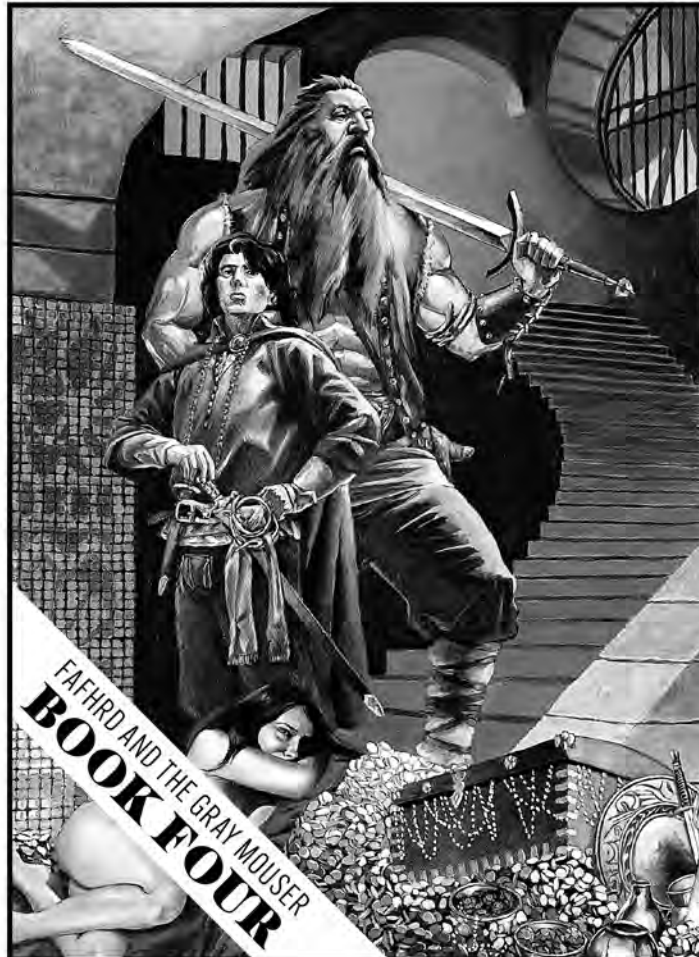
Which she proceeded to do.

Jadhen felt the cut close and when he opened his eyes they were standing in an underground tomb. Tapers of black wax were igniting one after another and the little flames danced in her eyes. She wasn't Lady Magida but surely the next best

thing and the couch covered with black samite looked most inviting...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tais Teng is a Dutch writer, illustrator, sculptor, and, of course, a dabbler in the occult. He owns the sole extant copy of the *Clavis Infernalis*, a grimoire printed on dusty spiderwebs, with dead scorpions and blowflies forming the characters. In his own country Tais Teng is middling famous as a writer of YA dark fantasy and horror. The most satisfying moment came when his nine-year-old son told him his teacher was reading one of Teng's books aloud in the class. His novel *Phaedra: Alastor 824*, set in the universe of Jack Vance, has recently been published by Spatterlight press. He has sold about seventy short stories in the English language, most recently to Daily Science Fiction, Unfit, and Stupefying Stories. As a cover artist, he has drawn anything from talking teapots to rather attractive bat-winged ladies, whom only a gibbering fool would trust. Tais has given up keeping cats or gerbils: his familiar too often devours them, leaving only the tails. While his sword-and-sorcery stories often have an Arabian Nights flavor he is quite satisfied with just one wife. Visit him on taisteng.atspace.com for his stories, and deviantart.com/taisteng for his covers and illustration.



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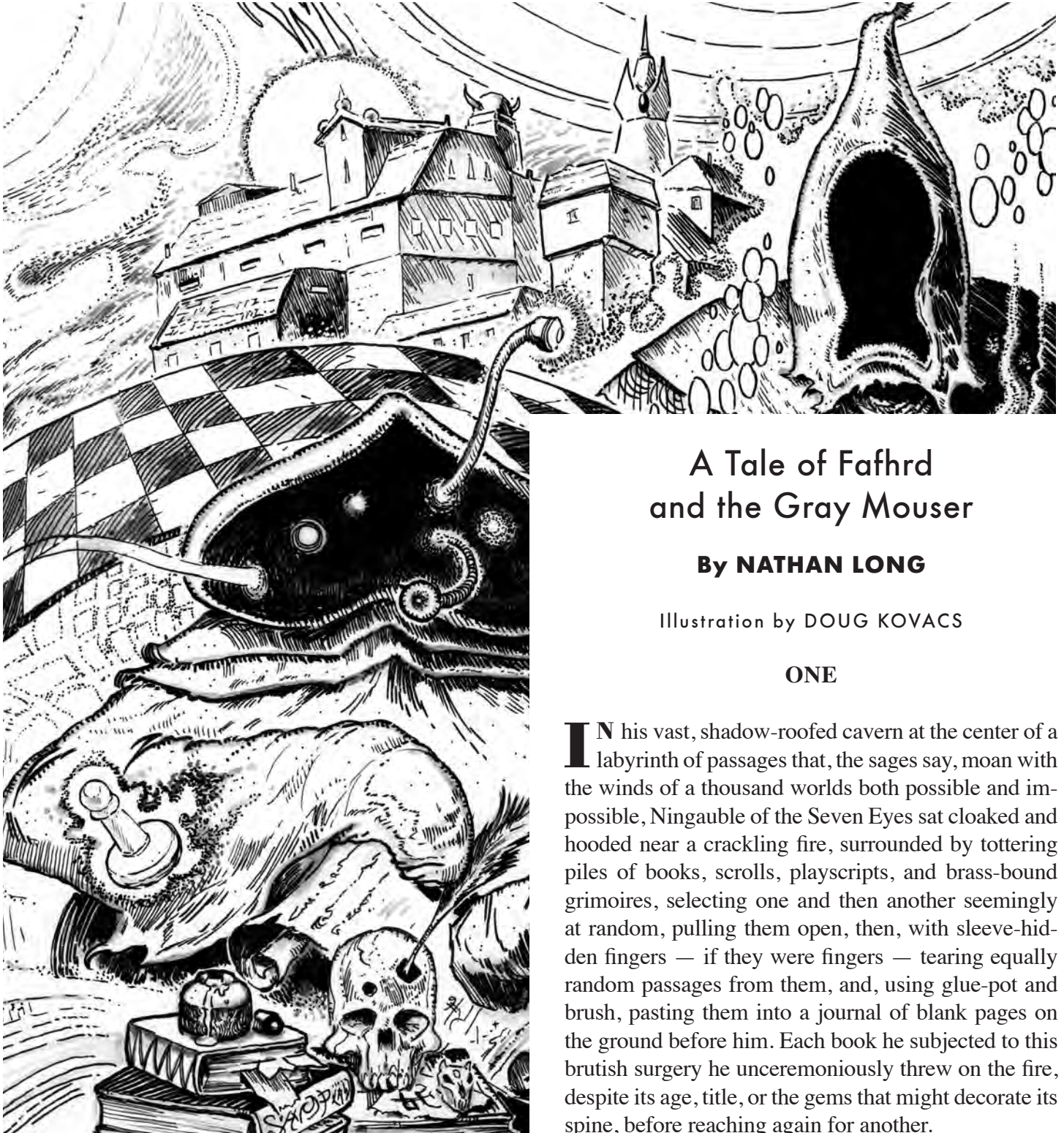
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GAMBIT



A Tale of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser

By **NATHAN LONG**

Illustration by **DOUG KOVACS**

ONE

IN his vast, shadow-roofed cavern at the center of a labyrinth of passages that, the sages say, moan with the winds of a thousand worlds both possible and impossible, Ningauble of the Seven Eyes sat cloaked and hooded near a crackling fire, surrounded by tottering piles of books, scrolls, playscripts, and brass-bound grimoires, selecting one and then another seemingly at random, pulling them open, then, with sleeve-hidden fingers — if they were fingers — tearing equally random passages from them, and, using glue-pot and brush, pasting them into a journal of blank pages on the ground before him. Each book he subjected to this brutish surgery he unceremoniously threw on the fire, despite its age, title, or the gems that might decorate its spine, before reaching again for another.

It was just as he was fitting a last scrap of parchment to his current page before flipping to the next that he glanced at the text written upon it and saw these words.

"... none more heroic than the mouser, who slayeth not but to ..."

With a weary sigh, he turned the scrap over and searched about him for a quill. "I thought we'd resolved this nonsense."

Plucking at last a pen from a trepanned skull, he dipped it in a jade inkwell and wrote on the scrap's back in a loose and over-embellished script.

Esteemed Sheelba, it is a debate you cannot hope to win. Fafhrd, my dutiful and doting son, is thrice the hero your mendacious cutpurse could ever be. Leave off, before you lose face — if that is even possible in your case.

Your devoted colleague, Ningauble

A flap of a sleeve, and a tiny bat flitted to him, then allowed him to fix the rolled-up scrap to its leg. It flitted off again, and Ningauble reached for another book. The first page he turned to started with the line, "... strength of arms does not a hero make, no more than does a ready smile. A true hero is he for whom villainy is first instinct, but who rises above to ..."

"Well, really," said Ningauble. "Do they think I have nothing better to do than argue settled questions?"

He tore the passage out of the book, then wrote in the margin with one hidden extremity as he summoned a second bat with another.

And when has your lascivious assassin ever risen above, o eyeless one? I'll wager even his loftiest-seeming exploits were secretly for his own gain.

Your ever-patient friend, Ningauble

The next book he opened after dismissing the bat was a folio of plays. A line in the middle of the page caught his eye.

BENUCCIO — "A wager, brother? Done! Your hand on it."

With a grunt of annoyance he tore out the page entire, and began to scribble on the obverse in angry strokes.

Very well, dearest Sheelba. If you insist, a wager. I shall wager that my stalwart barbarian will perform more acts of heroism in the next three days than your pernicious pickpocket, even if he performs only one! But we must establish some rules. First, we must find unbiased observers to monitor and report back truthfully the actions of the contestants. Second, we must not bend events to provide artificial opportunities for heroism, and third, we must on no account contact or in any other way attempt to goad our proteges toward goodness. Their actions, heroic or not, must be their own. Agreed?

Your servant in all, Ningauble

Before he could even affix this last missive to the leg of a third bat, a rogue wind whipped up the fire, and a fragment of a burning book flew from the flames and landed, smoldering, on his prodigious, robe-girt belly. It read only,

"... yes ..."

TWO

MOUSER winced as light from a scarlet Ilthmar dawn stabbed through a hole in the curtain that covered the only window in his squalid room. With a grunt he rolled over

and found himself chest to back with the sheet-shrouded form of last night's bed companion — whose name, for the moment, escaped him. The curve of her hip 'neath its cover reminded him of their previous pleasures and he smiled.

"Good morning, er ... darling," he said, stroking her shoulder. "I wouldn't want you to exert yourself at so early an hour, but if you were to stay at that precise angle, I could do all the ..."

His companion sat up and turned toward him, head still hooded in the sheet, but the space 'neath the cloth where her face should have been was empty. Not just empty, but utterly black — a stygian void into which no light penetrated.

Mouser jerked back as if stung, his heart hammering. "Wh ... wha ...?"

"Desist your yammering, fool," came a voice like a golem gargling ground glass. "There is little time."

Mouser's gorge began to rise. "Sh-sh-sheelba? Did we ...?"

"Listen!"

The form in the sheet assumed a familiar cross-legged position and faced him across the width of the bed — a far too narrow space, Mouser thought. He wanted to be yards away from this apparition — leagues!

"A nemesis comes for you," the faceless horror rasped. "A being of pure vengeance, created from the spirits of all you ever wronged. For you to have a hope of defeating it, you must do good deeds, and quickly, for the closer your balance sheet is to even, the weaker this nemesis will be."

"Nemesis?" asked Mouser, still bewildered. "Balance sheet?"

"We both know you will never reach the positive side of the ledger," the voice continued. "But anything that lessens your debt of dishonor will help you in the fight that is to come."

Mouser frowned. "Is this a dream? This is a dream, isn't it?"

"Of course it's a dream. How else could I reach you in time? And listen, when you wake, you must tell your idiot counterpart none of it. Were he to know, all would be lost!"

"What? Why?" Mouser asked. "Why would all be lost?"

The sheet settled to the bed, empty. A last grating utterance echoed in Mouser's ears, as if from far away.

"Say nothing, do you hear? Nothing!"

• • •

FAFHRD ran through snow deeper than his boot tops, panting through a scarf that was wrapped 'round the bottom half of his face. A fire glowed beyond the black trunks of winter trees, and a scream came from the same direction, faint and thin, muffled by falling flakes.

"Mara!" he cried.

He stumbled on hidden roots. His cloak caught on clawed branches. The fire seemed to recede before him, always behind another skein of trees, as the shrieks grew more and more desperate.

Finally, suddenly, he was closer. The fire was just around the bole of a last pine. He slipped sideways as he rounded it, nearly losing his footing, then recovered and reached for the hilt of his longsword.

"Mara?"

"Greetings, my gentle son," said a towering figure sat by the fire. It was paunchy and hooded, and its outlines, under its cloak, appeared human only at first glance.

Fafhrd looked around for the source of the screams. The figure was alone. "Where is Mara?"

"Oh, my child," said Ningauble, for it was none other. "You are fortunate I found you when I did, as the end of that dream would not have pleased you in the least. Terribly depressing. Truly."

"Dream?" asked Fafhrd.

"Of course a dream. How else to swiftly bring you a message of glad tidings? Have you recovered yourself enough to hear it?"

"What happened to Mara?"

Ningauble sighed. "Perhaps I should have sent a bat after all. No. Sheelba might have intercepted ..." He coughed and started again. "Listen, o joy of my heart. I visit to say that I have heard rumor from the higher planes that you are nearing that exalted level of nobility which would allow you to enter the heaven of heroes once you slip this mortal coil. Just a few more deeds of suitable valor, and your place in that rarified paradise is assured."

Fafhrd stopped looking behind trees. "I ... I'm going to die?"

"Of course you are, my son," said Ningauble. "That is what mortals do. But 'tis where you go afterwards that counts, and, as I say, you are just a few good deeds away from going to finest eternity a mortal could hope to attain. Thus ..."

"You want me to do ... good deeds."

"Ah, excellent. It begins to penetrate at last. Yes. I want you, for the sake of your everlasting soul, to do as many good deeds as you can."

Fafhrd frowned. "Have I ever done bad deeds?"

Ningauble paused. "Let us say that the morality of some of your deeds, particularly those done in conjunction with that devious counterpart of yours, could be open to question." He raised a sleeved hand — or perhaps tentacle. "And that reminds me! Do not, on any account, tell that little ne'er do well a word of this. Any attempt at good deeds which included him would be bound to fail. And were he to know the heaven that awaits you should you succeed, he would be sure to ruin your chances just so he could have company in the hell of villains when he dies."

The fire began to fade before Fafhrd's eyes, and Ningauble's dark bulk to blend into the shadows of the trees.

"Awake now, my son, and do good," the wizard's voice echoed. "Your afterlife depends on it."

THREE

MOUSER woke retching, his throat parched. He fumbled about in the litter of crockery and cups that surrounded his pallet for something with something still in it. A jug sloshed. He downed it in one glug, then coughed and made a face. It hadn't been good wine to begin with. A few days on his floor had failed to improve it.

"S-surely naught but a nightmare," he said, wiping his mouth. "A horror brought on by last night's excesses. Sheelba in a bed sheet? A nemesis made of all the souls I've wronged? Ridiculous. Wait until I tell Faf."

He pushed to his feet and looked around for his clothes. After sneaking out of Lankhmar with their tails between their legs due to a less-than-successful attempt to rob the sorcerer's guild there, he and Fafhrd had ended up in Ilthmar, city of the Rat God, trying to right the sinking ship of their finances by getting back to the basics — burglary, brigandage, and bodyguard work. Much to their relief, the jobs were coming in and the coins stacking up, but to keep outlay at an absolute minimum, they were squatting in a long-abandoned school for scribes, which had fallen on hard times during a period of infighting within the Ilthmarian civil service.

Mouser quite liked the room he had chosen. It had been the scroll room of the school, walled with crisscrossed shelves — empty alas — where rolled parchments had been kept. It almost made him want to make the place a permanent home. He could fill it with scrolls and rare books, put in a reading couch, some oil lamps, cover the floor with rugs instead of bottles and half-eaten meals.

The thought reminded him that he was hungry, and he pulled on his hose, breeks, and mouse-skin doublet, strapped on Cat's Claw and Scalpel, and started up narrow steps to the main classroom, which he and Fafhrd had been using as a common area.

He found Fafhrd there, seated at the proctor's desk and staring into a mug of small beer, a plate of cut fruit and black Ilthmarian bread untasted beside him.

"Bit of a morning head, old friend?" asked Mouser.

Fafhrd looked up, his eyes far away. "I've just had the strangest dream."

"H-have you?" Mouser stuttered. "How odd. So have I."

Fafhrd's eyes focused. "Hmmm. What was yours, then?"

Mouser opened his mouth to tell him, then recalled Sheelba's last command of, "Say nothing!" Of course, if it had only been a dream, what matter if he told Fafhrd or not? But if it hadn't? If Mouser's chances of defeating Sheelba's nemesis were ruined because he couldn't keep his mouth shut? Best to stay mum just to be on the safe side. Besides, who liked to listen to other people's dreams, anyway?

"Alas," he said at last. "It fades now. I can remember no more than vague feelings of dread. And yours?"

Fafhrd frowned, then shook his head and took a slice of fruit from his plate. "Mine fades too. Forget it. What of tonight's business?"

Mouser glanced at the red light slanting though the school room's tall, narrow windows. It was sunset, a bit past their normal rising time, and there was much to do. He sat across from Fafhrd and pulled the plate of bread and fruit to the middle of the desk, then took a slice.

"The collector is to meet us under the harbor bridge at midnight, so we must have the sword in hand by then. Unfortunately, the sisters' last round through the wards is only an hour before, so we've but brief time to get in, get out, and get across the city."

"Can we enter earlier and find a place to hide until their last patrol?"

Mouser nodded. "Mmm. When scouting the place the other day, pretending to search for a brother brought low by leprosy,

I saw a surgery on the same floor as the chapel where the sword resides. 'Tis not used at night. Were we to reach it undetected, we'd not be disturbed."

Fafhrd stroked his chin, where the beginnings of a new beard glinted copper in a sun shaft. "The legend of the sword says that, should it be taken from the hospital, the whole place will collapse. D'ye think we'll have masonry dropping on our heads as we run for it? Know we the quickest route out?"

"Oh, that's not a worry. The chapel has a balcony, and 'tis but a short leap to the roof of the doss house next door. Even if we're discovered, we'll escape quick enough. I doubt sisters of charity will put up much of a ..."

He trailed off as his words began to change in his mind from the abstractions of a plan to actual actions that would affect actual people with actual lives. It was unlikely that stealing the sacred sword of Beobalthus the Just would actually cause the destruction of the Hospital of the Sisterhood of the Great God. All the same, stealing anything from a sisterhood that cared for the maimed and the incurably sick seemed suddenly not quite the perfect job it had a few days ago when their anonymous client had approached them with the details.

This was just the sort of thing that would make the vengeful nemesis Sheelba had mentioned in his dream stronger and harder to kill. Not that any such nemesis existed, of course, or that the dream had been anything more a dream, but why take the risk? In fact, maybe doing a few good deeds wasn't the worst idea after all. Even if the rest was just fancy, it still might assuage the snakes of guilt that were suddenly gnawing at his guts.

"Er," he said at last. "I am just remembering that the moon's full tonight. Not a good evening for skulking. I think ... I think I'll just go tell our client we'll need to postpone for a few days."

Fafhrd laughed. "Cold feet, little man? A few days ago you were saying a full moon was perfect for thieving. 'Easier to pick locks,' you said."

"Aye," said Mouser, "But I'm sober now, and have thought again — and thought against it."

Fafhrd chuckled, ready to lob another salvo of mockery at Mouser's weak excuses, but then he paused. He'd lied when he'd told the gray one his strange dream had faded. In reality he could not clear it from his mind. A place in the heaven of heroes, Ningauble had said, but only if he performed deeds of valor, and robbing a convent hospital of its sacred relic did not seem a particularly valorous deed, no matter how one looked at it. Maybe it was wiser to let Mouser make his mealy mouthed excuses and take some time to think.

"Fine," he said. "You go abase yourself to the sword collector. I ... I'll go see if I can find us a job more to your liking."

Mouser hid a relieved sigh. He'd been afraid Fafhrd would come along, which would have forced him to make some excuse why he shouldn't. Now he could escape with ease.

"Good," he said, standing. "Then I'll be going."

"As will I," Fafhrd stood too.

For a moment, however, neither of them moved. Finally Fafhrd downed his beer and started for the temple's front door.

"Right," he said.

Mouser watched him go, then started for the back door. "Right."

FOUR

THE problem with doing good deeds, thought Mouser as he walked through Ilthmar's thronging night market, was that one wasn't sure exactly where to start. Everyone in the world needed help of some kind or another, but you couldn't just barge into their homes and ask them what they needed. They'd call the watch. On the other hand, if you waited around for someone to run by on fire and calling for water, it might be a fortnight or more before the opportunity presented itself.

Heroic deeds so often relied on being at the right place at the right time, or following up on prophecies found in ancient books, or the dire warnings of toothless crones. For instance, had Sheelba pointed him toward a village being harassed by bandits, he would have leapt into action with a will, but finding such a village on one's own was tedium.

A tavern by the name of the Scythe and Sheaf hove into view above the sea of market stalls, and Mouser decided a drink would help him think. He strolled in and stepped to the bar. At this early hour, the place was nearly deserted. Just a few shadowed figures in the corners, and an old man squinting over a parchment at a table nearby. Mouser waved down the barmaid and ordered a skewer of lamb and cup of wine. He almost left her his usual bronze agol tip, but then took it back and made it a silver smerduk instead. There! A good deed already! Though, if he was to rely only on cash to do good, he'd be finished before he began.

Behind him, he heard the old man at the nearby table curse. He turned to see him holding his parchment dangerously close to the table's oil lamp and peering at it from an inch away.

"Trouble, uncle?" Mouser asked.

The man looked up, scowling. "Confound my brother's crabbed hand. I can't tell if this word is 'bother' or 'banter.'"

Mouser crossed to the table. "May I?"

The man handed over the letter. "My eyes aren't what they were, I know. But his writing's gotten worse too. I swear it."

Mouser glanced at the letter. The script seemed perfectly clear to him. His heart leapt. Here was good deed the second, handed to him on a plate. This might be easier than he thought.

"The word is 'brother,'" he said. "Shall I read the whole thing to you?"

"I don't want to trouble you."

"Not at all. It would be my pleasure."

"Very well, then," said the old man. "Please."

Mouser looked at the letter and read ahead a bit. His cheer evaporated. He suddenly wasn't sure reading such a letter would be a good deed after all, but there was no going back now.

"Er, it begins, 'To Menlu, my brother, I have found you out! You thought your embezzling would go unnoticed, but when old Harif delivered the last shipment of amphorae, he said you'd paid him but two hundred rilk, when in the ledger you wrote four hundred. Thief! Where is the missing two hundred? Come not back to Sarheemnar, you jackal! Or I will teach you a lesson in counting you will not soon forget. With a whip! Signed, Milru.'"

The old man snatched the letter back. "Ha ha. Milru, that imp. Always joking. Thank you, stranger. Just a little jest between brothers. Pay it no mind. Here. A rilk for your trouble."

Mouser stepped back, hands up. "Not necessary, uncle. Happy to have been of service. Good evening to you."

He downed his wine and took a bite of his skewer on his way out the door. It was dry and tough so he gave it to a young urchin. There. Three good deeds in the time it took to finish a drink. Not bad. In fact that was probably enough for one night. One didn't want to appear desperate.

A sudden wind picked up, whirling trash from the gutter. A dry fig leaf slapped him in the face. He pulled it off with a grunt of disgust and was about to throw it aside when he noticed writing on it, and this script *was* hard to read, jagged and angry and rushed, but familiar.

Cease this meager charity, fool! A thousand thousand such acts would steal but a hundredth of your nemesis' strength. Are you hero or not! Its only signature was a blank oval.

Mouser sighed.

Not a dream after all.

...

FAFHRD grunted as he held the corner of a cart a few inches off the ground. His knees were shaking, his arms on fire.

"Almost done, friend?" he rasped.

"One moment, one moment," came the reply. "We've got it slotted wrong. Liplach, knock it back an inch."

Fafhrd's fingers stung as the drayman's boy swung his mattock and knocked the wheel they were trying fit onto the axle free. He nearly dropped the cart.

"Good lad. Now, quarter turn and — ah, that's done it. Just let me tap in the pin, and ... All right northman, you can set it down now. And thank you for your patience."

With a groan of relief, Fafhrd let the cart down and massaged his triceps as the drayman drew a few coins from his pouch.

"Here, friend. You've saved us a night of sweat and cursing. Thank you."

Fafhrd held up a hand. "Keep it. 'Tis good for a man to test his strength now and again. Farewell."

He walked away feeling pleased with himself. Between this latest feat, and helping an old woman retrieve a treed cat a while earlier, this might just be the most virtuous night of his life, and 'twas early yet. He wagered he could squeeze in two or three more before —

He flinched and flailed as a bat fluttered around his head.

"Ack! Begone, pest! Leave me —"

The thing clung to his little finger with tiny claws, and as he raised his hand to flick it away he noticed a curl of parchment wrapped around one of its legs.

"Bats," he sighed. "Why is it always bats?"

He tugged the note free and unfurled it.

Oh, noble son, deeds of common virtue are enough for common men, but the deeds of a hero seeking heaven must be heroic even among heroes. Be bolder, my son. Much bolder! It was signed with seven stars in a serpentine pattern.

Fafhrd grunted. "The geas is real. What a pity."

...

AFTER hours of fruitless wandering, eavesdropping, asking leading questions, and snooping, Mouser finally found what he was looking for while resting at a fountain in a neighborhood of dockworkers and fisherfolk by the harbor. The men walking down the street in double file looked no different than any other priests he had ever seen. Solemn robes, cavernous hoods, sigils of uncertain meaning stitched 'pon their breasts, and sandals on their filthy feet. Mouser would not have given them a second look, but for the reaction they inspired as they passed through the crowd. Women shied from them. Parents hid their children. Men glared at them, then spat on their shadows once they'd passed.

Ho ho, thought Mouser. *Here are some villains, and no mistake. Snake worshipers, at the very least. Possibly even a spider cult. Or raisers of the dead.*

He stood from the fountain, stretched, then started after them at a leisurely pace, as if merely enjoying a midnight constitutional.

...

IT was odd, Fafhrd mused, how often in stories the victims of evil were princesses or the daughters of wealthy lords, when in reality, the true victims of evil were usually the poorest of the poor. It stood to reason, of course. Villains were lazy cowards. Why menace someone with the resources and connections to defy them, when they could prey on the vulnerable and powerless instead? Perhaps one might answer that, rich daughters had rich fathers while the poor did not, but in the end, regularly milking one coin from a thousand paupers was a safer and surer way to riches than ransoming or marrying or beglamoring an unwilling princess. For one thing, heroes were far less likely to dash to the rescue of the faceless mob than they were to a damsel with pretty teeth and a substantial dowery.

Well, tonight that would change.

As he'd searched the less salubrious streets of Ilthmar in vain for monsters or masterminds to vanquish, he chanced to follow a rent collector and his bullies, pushing a strong box on wheels from tenement to tenement. And at every one, when the tenants came out to pay, the collector would wave away what they'd brought.

"Not enough," he'd say. "Rent's gone up. Another agol."

And when the tenants wept and pled, and said they had no more to give, his bullies beat them and robbed them of coins they'd meant for food or clothes or remedies. They stole from the old and infirm, from the starving and maimed. They beat men who hadn't shoes on their feet, and tore purses from women with bone-thin babes in their arms. More than once they threw whole families into the street, then took all their belongings in lieu of rent. And if one of these unfortunates begged him for more time to pay before he threw them out, he'd shrug and say, "Why bother when there's a thousand better with fuller wallets waiting to take your place?"

It wasn't as if Fafhrd hadn't seen such ugliness a thousand times before. He'd lived in the blighted neighborhoods of a score of cities, and seen the worst of humanity's inhumanities time and again. It was just that, until now, he'd accepted it as the way things were and not as what it was — evil.

Perhaps this wasn't the sort of evil Ningauble *wanted* him to fight in this quest for heaven, but, if being a hero was measured by the sheer number of people helped, then righting this wrong would be a thousand times the deed rescuing a single damsel would be.

His fingers itched to wring the rent collector's scrawny neck, but of course, the man was but the servant of the true villain — the landlord who owned all these towering hovels. Fafhrd would have to be patient and follow the strong box back to its owner. He slowed his pace so the bullies wouldn't notice him tailing them, and resigned himself to a long night.

FIVE

THE building to which Mouser followed the file of monks was not a purpose-built temple. It looked as if it had been a slaughterhouse at one time, and, once he'd made it inside and seen evidence of their rituals, he wondered if the monks might have chosen it for that very reason.

In the tall square central room, a bloodstained altar sat beneath a crude image of a fanged and gaping mouth, which they had daubed on the wall with more blood. There was blood too, caked in straight grooves cut into the slightly slanting floor that converged on an open hole in the middle of the room, wide enough to accept the skulls, bones, and rib cages of rendered cattle. Human victims as well, Mouser feared, and many of them, for hung at close intervals around the circuit of the walls were what he, peering from the rafters above the grisly abattoir, at first took to be the skins of dead cats. Then he noted a ribbon tied to one, and braids in another. Scalps, at least two score.

He nodded. "If aught can balance my ledger, 'twill be this. Now where have these murderous monks gone?"

A shriek of fear answered him and he turned to see the doors opposite the altar scrape slowly open. Two guards held them wide while a double file of monks — whether those he had seen previously or others he could not tell — shuffled into the chamber, split wide to pass on either side of the open hole, then converged again at the altar and turned to look back from whence they'd come.

A shadow in the door darkened the room as it occluded the torch light behind it, and in strode a man of enormous stature, bare-chested and pot-bellied, heavy of leg and arm, with a thick leather collar around his bulging neck from which dangled pendants made from what looked like shark teeth. He carried flat before him a rectangular iron frame, like the door of a cage, bound to which was a gagged woman whose dark eyes rolled in fear as she struggled 'gainst her fetters.

And a damsel in distress as well, thought Mouser. Even better.

As the giant transported his squirming burden around the hole in the floor and the monks began to chant and light candles and

set them on holders around the altar, the guards who had opened the double doors stepped back out of the room and pulled them shut behind them.

Mouser thought this very considerate of them, as they were the only members of the cult who appeared armed. Still, he wanted to make sure they kept out of it once things got lively, so he slid down one of the posts that held up the rafters and edged along the shadowed walls to the doors. He reached them just as, across the room, the giant set the iron frame on the altar and the monks fixed it in place with heavy wooden pins.

Mouser drew Cat's Claw, his dagger, then cursed. He'd hoped to slip it through the handles of the doors to hold them closed, but it was just a finger's width too short. Scalpel, his sword, would work, but he didn't care to use it, as it put the blade in danger of being bent when the guards tried to force the door. He looked around for something else.

Ah. An iron candle stand, hip high, set on the far side of a wooden post. He crept forward, eyes on the monks in case one should turn. They remained at their chanting, while the giant stood by, staring at nothing, and one of their number disrobed, revealing an emaciated body painted with bloody runes.

Not much time, then.

Mouser plucked the candle stand from the floor and backed again into the shadows. The monks did not turn. Their focus stayed entirely on their naked companion, who spread his arms wide and received from one monk a black knife, and from another what looked like a set of metal false teeth, viciously fanged.

Mouser hurried back to the door and turned the stand to slot it through the two handles. The mount where one would affix the candle was just a little too wide. It would fit, but not without a lot of noise. He glanced back at the altar. The naked monk was stuffing the metal teeth in his mouth and raising the dagger over his head as he turned toward the bound woman.

Perhaps, thought Mouser, a lot of noise was exactly what was needed just now. He rammed the mount of the candle stand through the door handles with a shuddering screech, then whipped Scalpel and Cat's Claw from their sheathes as the monks and the giant all turned at the noise.

"Come, cravens," he called. "Try those teeth on me."

The monks howled at this violation of their sacred place, and Mouser saw he had been incorrect when he'd thought them all unarmed. From every sleeve sprang a dagger, and they held them high as they rushed to encircle him.

Mouser bounded left and put a post between him and the flood, then flicked Scalpel at the first few monks to swarm around it, pinking them in shoulder, wrist, and hand. Two fell aside, clutching their wounds, but the third — the naked one — came on, slashing wildly, the fire of fanaticism burning in his eyes.

Mouser put Cat's Claw through his throat and used it to lever him aside as more monks charged in. A quick hack with Scalpel and a spinning bow under a flailing knife and he was behind them all, his back to the hole and altar while they turned at the wall.

"Come then!" he called. "You have me at a disadvantage! One swift charge will put me in the pit!"

Encouraged, the monks rushed him in a curved line, hands reaching and daggers slashing. With a skip and kick he leapt backwards over the hole at the last second and landed gracefully on the other side. The same could not be said for the monks. The three in the center saw their fate coming, and tried to stop, their sandals skidding, but the monks to their left and right, still converging, drove them on, right into the hole.

One leapt across at the last second, but Mouser punched him backward with a stop thrust to the sternum. He fell after the other two, cracking his head on the lip as he disappeared into the blackness below.

The others swarmed round the hole now from both sides. Mouser dodged back and tripped one coming from the left into those coming from the right, then attacked all as they teetered together on the edge, flailing and claspings at each other.

The monks fell, shrieking in pain, as, one after another, he ran them through. Some toppled into the hole. Others clung to the edge, lubricating the slanted floor with their gouting blood as the weight of their legs dragged at their torsos.

Mouser kicked them in, cried a cheery, "Fear not!" to the bound woman, who was goggling at him from the altar, then spun to meet the last three — but found they were approaching with more caution than those who had charged him before.

Mouser beckoned with Cat's Claw. "What? Have ye no courage when your victim's not tied to a grate?"

They snarled at this, and came more swiftly.

"Ha HA!" Mouser stamped a boot, splashing blood, and they all flinched back, colliding, just as he had hoped. He lunged forward and batted the first into the hole with the flat of his blade. The monk clutched at his friends as he fell and pulled them in after him, and then there were none.

None?

No. There was still the big fellow. Where was he? In all the hubbub he'd lost track of him.

Mouser looked over his shoulder just as a fist the size of a melon swung for his face. But for the blood on the floor he would have dodged it with ease. Instead he slipped when he should have leapt, and the punch slammed him to the ground shoulder first, sending both blades leaping from his hands at the impact. Black spots filled his vision. The room spun like a ship in a whirlpool. Then everything went upside down.

It took a moment to realize the giant had him by the ankle, and was dragging him toward the hole.

"Wait! Stop!" He scrambled for his dropped blades as his face scraped along the floor, and managed to hook Cat's Claw by the cross guard.

As the giant lifted him above the hole, Mouser lashed out with the dagger and cut the tendons of his thick right ankle clean through. The behemoth bellowed, toppling, and Mouser hit head, then neck, then shoulder on the lip of the hole before the rest of his body folded on top of him, then slumped toward the abyss.

With a desperate flail, Mouser caught at the first thing he touched, the giant's tooth-decorated leather collar, in reach because the big man had fallen with head and neck hanging over the hole. Mouser clamped his fingers around it with all his

might. That the jerk on the collar as the full weight of Mouser's body swung down into the pit did not snap the behemoth's neck was testament to his strength, but it did strangle him, and made him clutch over his head, trying to break Mouser's grip.

Mouser let go of the collar and gripped the giant's arms instead, trying to pull himself out of the pit by clambering up his massive body. In this the giant assisted him by grabbing him in a rage and hurling him as far as he could.

Mouser landed ribs first on Scalpel's swept-hilt cross guard and curled up in pain. At the lip of the hole, the giant was clutching his throat and struggling to sit up. He'd never stand again, but if he dragged himself to Mouser, he might still tear him limb from limb. Better to finish him before he got the chance, no matter how much he didn't feel like moving just then.

With a groan, he pushed himself to his knees, then crawled to the giant's feet and heaved.

The big man roared as he started tipping back into the hole, and tried to kick Mouser in the face. Mouser twisted the foot with the severed tendon and his roar turned into a shriek, then a wail as he slid headfirst into the pit. A sickening thud echoed up from the darkness, then silence.

Mouser felt the top of his head. There was a lump there the size of an egg where the giant had hit him, and his hands, knees, and elbows were covered in blood.

"Ugh. Dirty work, this heroing." He sighed and turned to the altar. "Now for the damsel."

SIX

FAFHRD peered over a spike-topped brick wall into the back courtyard of a tall building in Ilthmar's merchant quarter. Most men would have had to climb to see over such a wall, but Fafhrd had only to stand on tip toe.

The men he had been following, the strutting rent collector and his hulking bullies, had just passed through a guarded gate in that wall, and were pushing the cart with the strongbox toward the yellow light of an open door in the back of the building, joining a line of other such collectors and bullies, all waiting to hand their boxes through the door and then wait for their pay. Shifting a little to the left, Fafhrd could see a sliver of what went on inside.

The strongboxes were, one at a time, being upended on a table where swift-fingered men counted the shower of grubby coins into small sacks, noted the amounts in a giant ledger, then put the full sacks into other, smaller but sturdier strongboxes — each about the size of a coffin for an infant. When one of these was full it was locked, wax sealed, and carried by two stout guards to an armored carriage just outside the door.

The entire process was watched with hawkish eye by a tall but hunched northman in rich robes, his braided beard as white as the snows of Fafhrd's youth. Fafhrd sighed in disappointment.

"Ah, grandfather, how could you?" he muttered. "Piracy, theft, brigandage, certainly. These are the ways a man of the north plunders. But rent collection? Where's the glory in that? Where's the risk?"

Then he smiled as a thought occurred to him, and he put a thumb to his broad chest. "Ah! *I* am the risk. Now, how to get in."

It would be an easy hop over the wall, but what then? Nearly a score of armed men waited in the courtyard. He couldn't fight them all. Not, at least, before the landlord stepped into the counting room and locked the door behind him.

He heard rattling from the street and peeked from the shadowed dead end where he hid. A collection crew was trundling along from the left, while another was approaching through an alley almost directly across from him. They would enter the intersection at almost the same time, but the crew in the alley would reach it first. If he could distract them all at just the right moment ...

He reached down and picked up a pebble, then edged as close as he dared to the alley mouth. As the crew on the left saw the lead man of the alley crew enter the intersection, he tossed the pebble so it struck the wall of a building across the street. The heads of both crews swiveled at the noise and he stepped out into the street between them, immediately adopting the sullen slouch common to hired muscle everywhere.

The men of the crew ahead of him looked back. He nodded. They nodded back and kept walking. He looked back at the crew behind him. They nodded. He nodded back and kept walking. Good. Each crew appeared to believe he was with the other. As long as the guards at the gate didn't know every member of every crew by sight, he was safe, and if not? Well, then he would see what fighting could do.

As it happened, the guards at the gate waved the crews through with hardly a glance — only checking that the seal on each strongbox remained intact before turning to the next, and Fafhrd shuffled forward between the two crews to join the line at the counting room door.

After a short wait, the crew ahead of him got to the front of the line and two guards carried their strongbox inside. The gaunt old landlord waved the crew to the side.

"Over there. You'll be paid when it's all in."

The crew started for the men already standing in the center of the courtyard. Fafhrd went with them. No one paid him the slightest attention. They all faced the glowing yellow door, waiting for their coins like dogs for meat, and Fafhrd did too, but by half-step and weight-shift, he edged back until he was behind them all.

To his right was the armored carriage, its horses snuffling, its driver snoring, and on its far side, the pitch dark entrance of a small stable.

"Just going for a piss," said Fafhrd to no one in particular, then crossed to it at a leisurely pace. A glance over his shoulder showed him that the landlord and the others still had eyes only for the strongboxes and the counting room door. He entered the stables unnoticed.

A dull hour of waiting later, the last crew had been paid, the last small strongbox loaded into the armored carriage — nine by Fafhrd's count, with who knew how many more already inside before he'd arrived — the landlord had locked the carriage door, pocketed the key, and climbed up beside

the driver, the four helmed and breast-plated guards from the counting house had fallen in around the carriage fore and aft, the gate guards had unlocked and swung wide the drayage gate, and the horses were straining to get their heavy load moving.

Now was the time. Fafhrd hefted the farrier's hammer he'd found in the stables and padded swiftly after the carriage. Just as it started through the gate he reached the guards behind it and felled them both with quick strikes on the backs of their helms. The gate guards turned at the noise, and one took the side of the hammer over the ear. The other had time to draw his sword before Fafhrd crowned him too. They sank to the cobbles, hissing and clutching their heads, as Fafhrd leapt to the tail of the wagon and climbed atop the carriage.

The landlord leaned out to look behind the carriage's bulk. "What's going on back there?" He motioned to the two guards walking at the front. "Go, fools! See what's amiss!"

They drew their swords and edged along the carriage's flanks, staring at the sight of their fellows writhing on the ground in the shadow of the open gate.

"Vashek!" called one. "What happened?"

Kneeling above, Fafhrd cracked the guard on top of his helm. His legs buckled. The other looked up and Fafhrd threw the hammer at him. It caught him full in the teeth. He went down squealing.

"Daffin! Go!" cried the landlord. "We're under attack!"

But as the driver raised the reins to snap them over the horses' backs, Fafhrd kicked him in the side of the head, shoved him off the buckboard, and plopped into his place.

"Who?" the landlord gasped. "What do you —?"

Fafhrd elbowed him on the bridge of the nose, then took up the reins and flicked them.

"You'll see, miser," he said in the tongue of his childhood. "You'll see."

He put an arm across the old man's chest to keep him on the seat as the horses trotted away down the midnight street.

• • •

"YOUR family lives ... here?" asked Mouser uncertainly, as the girl her name was Hjiana led him into the pitch-dark grounds of one of Ilthmar's many necropolises. "Do they do the weeding? Polish the grave markers?"

"Eh?" asked Hjiana. She was just the sort of girl he liked. Short and slim and angelic of feature, with large dark eyes and ringlets of black hair that tumbled past her suntanned shoulders. "Oh, I didn't mean my birth family. They're vintners in Sarreshi. These are my *real* family. The ones who truly love me."

A tiny frown creased Mouser's brow. "Oh?"

She strode through the darkness with the confidence of long familiarity. Mouser had almost to trot to keep up.

"Oh, yes. Ever since I fled to Ilthmar, they have watched out for me. They've fed me, cared for me, given me purpose, and hope for a better world. Just wait until you meet them. You'll love them."

"Will I?"

The forbidding shapes of obelisks and mausoleums loomed on all sides as they crested a hill and looked down into a bowl-shaped valley where rows of low grave monuments all converged on a massive crypt in the center. Mouser noted, unhappily, that the door of the crypt was open, and a red glow flickered from within.

"Just what does this new family of yours do?" he asked, as she began to hurry down the slope.

"Why, they worship F'd'gryt'j, Mother of Hunger, of course. And fight against the unjust tyranny of the Rat God."

"W-what was that name again, beloved? It sounded like you were eating a glove."

"F'd'gryt'j, Mother of — Oh! Here they are. Sister Sriran! I've returned!"

Stepping out of the crypt were a train of exceedingly skinny young men and women, all with flowing hair and gaunt faces, robes of purple, and beaded bracelets and necklaces of iridescent green. The oldest and tallest, a woman of haughty angular beauty, hurried forward to embrace Hjiana, while the others spread out to her left and right.

"Sister, we were so worried," said the woman. "What became of you? We feared you'd had second thoughts."

"No, sister, never!" cried Hjiana. "I was taken! Those filthy worshipers of Vuthoc. They dragged me to their temple, and had it not been for this brave hero, they would have sacrificed me on their vile altar."

"A blessing you were spared such a profane death," said Sriran. She turned to Mouser, eyes more appraising than grateful. "Thank you, friend."

"The pleasure was mine," said Mouser. He glanced behind him nervously. The rest of Hjiana's "family" were encircling him, cutting off his avenue of escape.

"But, sister," said Hjiana, "am I too late? It was to be tonight, and the moon is already lowering toward the sea."

"You are in good time, sister. As long as your blood feeds F'd'gryt'j's children before the rising of the sun, the compact will be kept, and our power will remain undiminished. But we cannot dawdle. Go, prepare yourself for the altar."

"Altar?" Mouser frowned. "Hjiana, what is this? It almost sounds like they mean to sacrifice you."

"Oh yes!" said Hjiana, turning to him. Her eyes were as bright as stars. "I am to die tonight! To give my strength to F'd'gryt'j's children, so that they, in return, may give strength to our cause. Isn't it wonderful?"

SEVEN

FAFHRD guided the horses of the armored carriage into a square with a dry fountain in the center and towering brick-walled tenements on all sides. A few ragged men and women sat on the coping of the fountain, while a few more lounged in the doors and windows of the tenements. All watched the arrival of the wagon with lazy interest.

The northman peered around, confused. "What is this place? Why do we stop here?"

"You do not recognize it?" asked Fafhrd. "Your men collected rent from all these places earlier this evening. They are yours."

The northman looked around again, more closely this time. "Ah. So they are. What of it?"

"Well, if what I saw earlier was any indication, you've been robbing your tenants of their hard-earned coin for years. Tonight I give you the opportunity to pay it back."

"What? Nonsense. I could get twice as much for these places. It's practically charity what I'm asking for —"

Fafhrd hopped down to the street and yanked the northman after him, then led him around the back of the carriage.

"The key."

"I haven't got —"

Fafhrd pinned him to the tailgate and shoved a hand into the pocket of his robe. He pulled out the key then opened the well-oiled lock.

"Wh-what are you doing?" asked the landlord.

Fafhrd heaved one of the small strongboxes from the carriage and set it on the ground. It had previously taken two guards to lift it, but he handled it with ease. "Now lie down."

"What? On the street? Are you —"

Fafhrd shoved the old man down. His head bounced off the hard packed mud. "Ow! Mauler! What are you —"

Fafhrd picked up the strongbox and set it on the landlord's pelvis.

"What? Get it off! It hurts!"

Fafhrd paid him no mind. One at a time he took two more strongboxes from the carriage and put one on each arm, then two more for each leg.

By now a small crowd had gathered, watching curiously. Fafhrd took a sixth chest from the carriage and set it on the ground beside the man, then leaned in to speak to him in the northern tongue.

"Now, miser. I shall put this one on your chest, then unlock them all, and if you would not be crushed to death, you will call your tenants to come take their money back."

"Please," said the landlord. "I am not well. I have a problem with my heart."

"Indeed you do."

Fafhrd unlocked and lifted the sixth strongbox, placed it on the old man's chest, then began to unlock the rest.

"Now save yourself and call to them."

"Neverrrrrgh," the northman groaned as the weight settled on his ribs. "It is *my* money. I ... earned it."

"Then put it back on the carriage and take it away. I'll not stop you."

"It'ssss too heavy."

"There's plenty here who'll help you lighten the load."

Fafhrd stepped back and waited as the crowd around them grew larger. People were coming out of the tenements now, craning their necks to see what was going on. A tavern on the corner was spilling curious customers.

"N-no," said the landlord. "It's mine. I can't. I ..." A breathy sob escaped him, and he tried to fill his lungs again. Though he was trying to shout, his voice came in a whisper. "Take it, then! Take the coins! Help me!"

"They can't hear you, old man," said Fafhrd. "Louder."

The old man tried again. The veins on his neck bulged. His wan face turned purple. "The chests!" he whispered furiously. "They are filled ... with coins! Take ..."

His remaining breath escaped him in a rattle and Fafhrd heard a crack as the old man's ribs snapped. Blood trickled from his nose. His eyes stared at nothing.

Fafhrd groaned. He hadn't wanted to actually kill the landlord, just force him to recognize that there was more to life than money. Unfortunately it seemed he hadn't been lying about his heart, and now Fafhrd's attempt at physical metaphor had turned into murder. Not that the villainous miser hadn't deserved it — probably — but Fafhrd wasn't in the habit of killing unarmed old men, and it likely wasn't going to do much for his chances of getting into the heaven of heroes either. At least he could still give away the money. That was an act of unalloyed goodness, wasn't it?

He spread his arms and addressed the crowd. "Friends! I brought your landlord here to make amends to you. To pay you back what he stole from you over the years. Unfortunately, his greed was such that he died rather than return it to you."

He threw open the lid of the chest that had crushed the dead man's heart, revealing a mound of small coins.

"But 'tis here, and 'tis yours. Take it, then tell your kin and friends to come for their share. There's enough for everyone. Come. Fortune smiles on you tonight. Come!"

And come they did. Timidly, at first, taking a handful or two and stepping back quickly as if afraid it was all a trick and the city watch were going to jump them for theft the moment they put the coins in their purses, but then more eagerly as nothing happened and Fafhrd just smiled and opened more chests.

Soon people were digging in with both hands, filling aprons and hats, and more started to shove in from behind, afraid they would miss out on the bounty.

"Easy, friends!" called Fafhrd, setting down another chest from the carriage. "No need to fight! There's more here."

But as he rose from opening it, he saw over the heads of the crowd a few of the men from the tavern stopping tenants who'd already taken their share and tearing coins from their hands and purses from their belts.

"Hoy, you rogues!" he bawled, pushing through the crowd. "You want coins, come take your share like everyone else. Now, give that back!"

The men laughed and ran, clutching their bounties to their chests and shouldering aside any in their path. Men and women fell, spilling the coins they carried, and the crowd pounced on the rolling copper like rats on grain.

"Leave off!" cried those who had fallen. "Get your own!"

Fafhrd strode to them. "Forget it! There's more in the chests. Come back and take it." He motioned to those who had been robbed by the tavern thugs. "And you too. Come on."

But as he ushered them back toward the chests the mob around them shoved back at them, snarling.

"You had yours!"

"No cutting the queue!"

"It's our turn now!"

Fafhrd looked at the seething mound of humanity around the chests and saw fists flying and blood spraying, and beyond the squabble, three enterprising fellows were heaving another chest out of the back of the carriage and trying to make off with it.

Fafhrd clambered over the crowd, stepping on hands, shoulders, and heads, and grabbed one of the men by the shoulder. The chest smashed down between them and split, spilling coins.

"What are you doing?" he shouted. "You don't need all that."

The man he'd grabbed pulled a dagger. "Who are you tell us what we need?"

"We've large families," said one of his mates, slipping a cudgel from his sleeve.

"Very large," said the third, drawing a sword. "And very well armed."

Fafhrd drew Greywand from his belt, scabbarded, and cracked the three of them about their heads before they knew what he was about, then kicked their backsides and shoved them away.

"Go tell your family you lost the chance at coins freely given because you wanted to steal some instead, idiot —"

He cut off as a tide of bodies pushed him away from the dropped crate. Men and women even more ragged than the tenants from the tenements were flooding in from all sides, cackling and hooting as they snatched at the scattered coins with clawed hands.

More swarmed over the wagon, practically covering it as they fought to be the first to squeeze through the opening and reach the rest of the crates.

"Filthy beggars!" shouted a tenement dweller. "Didn't you hear? This was meant for us!"

"Says the man with a roof over his head!" squalled a scabby woman. "This is a beggar's bounty!"

Another woman hit her in the mouth, and suddenly the crowd erupted, tenants kicking beggars, beggars biting tenants, thieves fighting both, and stuffing as much coin as they could down their breaches. At the front of the carriage, someone had unhitched the horses and was leading them away.

"Stop!" called Fafhrd. "This isn't what I ... I didn't mean for this to ..."

He trailed off. No one was listening to him. No one was paying him the slightest attention. He stared around at the sea of chaos surrounding him. Bodies were strewn across the ground, battered and bloody, some not moving. There were children wailing, trod underfoot. A bell rang in the distance, and he saw the glint of helmets under torchlight. The city watch.

He sighed. Time to go.

He stepped to one of the chests, plunged a long arm down through the tangle of grasping limbs around it, closed his hand around some coins, pulled it back out, then strode off into the darkness, leaving the chaos to continue behind him, utterly disgusted by humanity.

• • •

"ONE moment," said Mouser to Hjiana as the circle of her gaunt friends tightened around them. "Do you say that I rescued you from one human sacrifice only to deliver you to another?"

"Oh no," she said. "What those clods of Vuthoc meant to do to me could hardly be called sacrifice. A sacrifice must be willing. They were mere murderers."

Mouser took her hand. "Hjiana, beloved. Listen to me. Your comrades here may have smoother tongues and friendlier manner than those brutes in the slaughterhouse, but they are no less murderers, nor do they bear you better will. Your naïveté has been taken advantage of. Come away with me. I beg you. There is no reason for you to die here tonight."

Hjiana pulled her hand away. "You sound like my mother and father. You just want me to be obedient and dull."

"What I want, dearest heart, is for you to live long enough to regret this youthful foolishness."

And with that, he grabbed her again, then whipped her at the worshipers behind him. Surprised, they leapt aside, except one, who'd hesitated, and so took Hjiana amidships and went down with her.

Mouser sped to the jumble and pulled Hjiana up again, then ran for the lip of the valley with his hand firmly around her wrist as the cultists gaped.

"No!" Hjiana dug her heels in and nearly pulled his arm from his socket. "Let me go!"

"Kidnapper!" cried Sister Sriran. "Stop him, children! Save your sister!"

Mouser groaned. "Hjiana, please. I ..." He gave up, knowing no words would convince her. Instead he hoisted her onto his shoulder and fled as she shrieked and pummeled his back.

Had the worshipers of F'd'gryt'j been hale and hearty, he would not have had a chance — not running uphill with a struggling woman over his shoulder. But they appeared to have been taking their goddess's epithet of "Mother of Hunger" to heart, for they were as sickly as they were emaciated, and were wheezing before they had run twenty steps.

Those who did catch up clutched at him with hands as weak as infants', and he shook them off with ease. But as he was elbowing the last of them away, he caught a strange motion in the corner of his eye. The bracelet around the man's wrist was dissolving and running down his fingers like green liquid.

No.

Not liquid.

Insects!

The bracelet had been made of beetles, and they were swarming from the man's fingers onto his arm!

Now Mouser realized that every worshiper who had grabbed at him had deposited upon him a raft of beetles, and they were all biting him. It felt like he was being stung by an entire nest of hornets.

"Gah! Get them off!"

From behind, Sister Sriran's voice rose in supplication. "Mother F'd'gryt'j! Summon your children! Your sacrifice escapes! Let them feed!"

Mouser ran on, nearly at the lip of the bowl now, but suddenly a rustling reached his ears, rising from all sides. He looked around and saw what at first looked like water flowing though the patchy grass — a tide of beetles, pouring from the cracks in the surrounding sepulchers and converging on him.

He ran through them, crunching and slipping, but not without a few climbing his boots with every step. They were starting to bite his legs.

Before him in the path a solid shadow was forming from the ground up, like a woman rising from kneeling, but with outlines seething — a mass of beetles, taking human form. It flowed toward him.

Mouser dodged sideways, along a row of graves, and collided with someone. Sister Sriran, smiling, skull-like.

"Cease your foolish fleeing, friend," she said. "Our mother is inescapable. She takes us all in the end."

"You first," said Mouser.

Spinning, he knocked Sriran sideways with Hjiana's head and shoulders, then shoved her at the advancing beetle thing. Sriran fell against it with a yelp, and tried to push herself upright against its mass. Her hand sunk into it, and then her arm, and then it flowed around her, swallowing her like quicksand swallows an unwary adventurer.

"No!" she shrieked. "Not me, mother! Not yet!"

The beetles on the ground turned to join the crawling mass that consumed Sriran, and Mouser ran on, balancing the now weeping Hjiana awkwardly on his shoulder and still squeaking and hissing at every nip and bite of the beetles that continued to infest him, while behind, Sriran's followers slowed to stare at her demise, then came on again, faster, with murder in their eyes.

EIGHT

IT wasn't humanity he should be disgusted with, thought Fafhrd as he poked at the bubbles in his beer in an ale house far from the chaos of the slum court he had earlier walked away from, it was himself. He should have known that desperate people would do desperate things. That the desperate and strong would prey on the desperate and weak. That the glitter of coin and the fear that it would all vanish before they could get their share would drive them all to greed and frenzy. He hadn't thought it through. He'd been so full of the idea of doing "good" on a grand scale, that finding a way to actually achieve the end he had intended hadn't even occurred to him. Instead he'd been blinded by a vision of grateful paupers kissing his feet with tears in their eyes for the golden blessings he had bestowed upon them in his munificence.

"What an utter fool I am," he said.

Someone behind him chuckled. "Friend, I am inclined to agree."

Fafhrd spun from the bar and found himself surrounded by a pack of very sturdy beggars — ragged as any of their ilk, but with corded arms showing through torn sleeves, and knives and cudgels hanging 'neath patched coats. Their leader was a dandy in rags, grimy doublet slashed apurpose, second-hand slippers sewn over with pierced coins, and a frayed but fringed head scarf drooped artistically over one eye. He smiled at Fafhrd with teeth the color of leather and made a fluttering bow.

"Jika of the beggar's guild, northman," he said. "We've been looking for you."

Fafhrd knocked back the last of his beer, but kept the mug in his fist. The barman was nowhere in sight, and the few patrons were slipping out the doors. "I'm afraid you're too late, friends. I gave away the coins an hour ago."

"Precisely why we're here," said Jika, smoothing an oily little moustache with the back of his finger. "Y'see, we at the guild prosper by taking each day a small percentage of the cash our members make from holding out their hands. Well, so many of our lot were there when you were giving out all that coin, and they got away with so much of it, that they don't think they're beggars anymore, and hardly a one came by the guild tonight to pay their tithe."

He cocked his head and fixed Fafhrd with his one visible eye. "And since you were the cause of this drop in funds, we figure you owe us."

Fafhrd laughed and dug his hand in his pouch, then tossed the few coins he had left on the bar. "Take it, and welcome."

"Oh no, friend. We want far more from you than that. You'll be paying us back for the rest of your life." Jika pointed at Fafhrd's feet. "With your legs cut off at the knee and your eyes burnt out, you'll make the most pitiful sight. A giant brought low, a hero fallen on hard times. The coins will patter like rain around you when we put you on the street. A real moneymaker, eh, my dears?"

His clutch of beggars murmured their agreement. Their hands fell to their knives and head-knockers.

"Now now, beggar-master," said Fafhrd, pressing back against the bar. "You know as well as I your members will spend away that money long before daybreak, and will be back to lifting their palms for you by dusk tomorrow. What's one slow night in the long life of an ancient and august guild such as yours?"

Jika smiled. "You speak truth, flatterer. 'Twill all smooth out in the fullness of time, but you forget that a beggar lives or dies by the day's take, and as we of the guild are all beggars, we all die a little when that take is bad. And as it is you who has killed us today, well ... you understand. It's the principle of the thing. It can't be forgiven."

He drew a stiletto as long as his arm and as thin as his smile. "It just can't be forgiv —"

Fafhrd smashed his mug on Jika's sharp cheekbone, knocking him sideways in a rain of shards, then rolled backward over the bar — an easy feat for one so tall he could practically sit on it without going on tip-toe — and kicked a beggar in the teeth as his feet came up and over.

The others roared, and a thicket of daggers and hand axes stabbed and chopped into the bar as he dropped behind it, missing his head by mere inches. He landed tangled, limbs too long for the narrow space behind, and forehead thudding on the shelving under the bar. There was a scrabbling above him as the beggars mounted it, and he reached woozily for Graywand's hilt. There was no room to draw.

A dagger slashed down at him. He jerked back, then saw, on the shelf in front of him, the barman's club, waiting for unruly customers. Well, the beggars certainly qualified. He snatched it

up and swung it overhand, cracking snarling heads and reaching hands, and sending daggers spinning.

The beggars fell back and he stood, swinging after them. Someone in the crowd threw a dagger. It gashed Fafhrd's neck. With a grunt of anger, he flung the club in return, and shattered the thrower's eye socket with its knobby end.

Finally some room to draw. He whipped Graywand from its scabbard and slashed it back and forth above the bar.

"Come on then, you mewling pluck-sleeves! Who's first?"

Behind the others, Jika staggered to his feet. He put his fingers in his bloody mouth and whistled, a high piercing blast.

"Beggars! Aid us!" he cried. "Your guild needs you!"

As if his words had been an incantation, the place was instantly awash in ragged forms, flooding in from every door, tumbling through the windows, springing from dark corners, and each with cobbles in their hands.

Not even the greatest swordsman in this or any world is proof against a barrage of stones. Cursing, Fafhrd ducked through the door to the scullery and sheathed Graywand as he rushed for the alley door. It burst open before him and more beggars stumbled in, pushed forward by their comrades behind. They bayed like hounds as they sighted him.

Fafhrd swerved for a narrow stair at the far end of the room. It was so tight and low he went up practically on hands and feet. Fingers clutched at his ankles. He kicked like a mule and heard a muffled howl behind.

The steps came out into a store room stacked with dusty benches and tables. Fafhrd threw one of the former down the stairs into the face of the beggar at the head of the swarm, then looked around for a window. None but a skylight, too high to reach, but there was a door in the far wall. He ran for it and shouldered through, only to realize too late it was a loft door, and nothing but air between him and the beggar-thronged street below. He made a desperate grab for the pulley arm that jutted out over the door — used to winch deliveries to the loft — and caught it with three fingers as the rest of him swung wildly beneath it.

A roar of glee rose from the beggars, and they all hurled their cobbles at him. Fortunately, it's not easy to throw a rock straight up with any accuracy; unfortunately, there were a lot of rocks being thrown, and no matter how poorly aimed, some were bound to fly true. Fafhrd winced at the impacts as he caught the stout beam with his other hand and pulled himself onto it by main force.

From there it was — except for the flying rocks — an easy climb to the roof and away, bounding from peak to peak and leaping narrow alleys in a single bound.

If only the beggars weren't thronging after him in the streets below, yelling and pointing, and relaying to their comrades his every move.

NINE

"**M**OUSER!" cried Fafhrd, pushing though the door of their atelier home then slamming it shut. "Ready your blade! I'm in some troub ..."

He paused as he saw Mouser trying to force a closet door closed while someone — female by the pitch of the insults which erupted from behind it — resisted from the other side.

"A hand, old friend," said Mouser. "And I'm in trouble too. We may have to defend our domicile."

"Defend nothing!" said Fafhrd, adding his weight to the door. "It's time to break camp and hie ourselves to calmer climes. Ilthmar is too hot by half — er, now that I've stirred its coals."

"You too, eh?" asked Mouser as he locked the closet door. "I've stirred a literal hive, and I fear the swarm is not far behind."

"I've a swarm on my tail too," said Fafhrd. "A gaggle of beggars, who mean to make me one of their own by bone-saw and glowing poker."

He punched the wall hard enough to crack the plaster. "If only I hadn't listened to that dream of Ningauble!"

Mouser, who had run to the window to scan the street below now turned his head. "Dream? Of Ningauble? Now that's a curious coincidence. I had a dream of Sheelba last night. They begged me to be a hero, for fear of —"

"Of not getting into the heaven of heroes?" asked Fafhrd.

"Erm, no. Of being slain by a nemesis powered by all my misdeeds. They said I had to right the balance by —"

"Performing heroic acts. Aye. As did Ningauble, but told me I mustn't tell you, for fear you would ruin my plans."

"Just so did Sheelba say to me," said Mouser.

"How strange," said Fafhrd.

"Is it, indeed?" asked Mouser. A snarl curled his lips. "To me the evening's events make sense for the first time. Do you not see? This has naught to do with ancient nemesis or heaven of heroes, or any such folderol. This is some wager of wizards. A bet between our patrons over which of us could perform the most heroic deeds in some set period. They toy with us for their own amusement."

"By Kos," said Fafhrd, gaping. "The fiends. And I, for one, see nothing amusing about any of it. In pursuance of these so-called heroic acts I have killed a man — not in the heat of battle where it might be excused — but in cold blood. And caused many more to be beaten, robbed, maimed and worse!"

"While I have kidnapped a woman against her will, slain dozens, and earned the enmity of not one, but two death cults. How dare they, who claim to be our benefactors, treat us as pawns?"

"But hold," said Fafhrd. "If we compete in heroism, who are the judges? Are Ning and Sheel here themselves?"

"And risk getting caught in the moil of our troubles?" said Mouser. "Hardly. And why visit our dreams were they near? They have not been shy of approaching us before. No, they must have sent an observer. No! Two observers, for surely they would not trust one chosen by the other to be non-partial."

"Then, where are they?" asked Fafhrd. "I noticed no tail tonight."

"They're as likely to be bats or rats as anything," said Mouser, continuing to look out the window. "Birds or sprites or — Wait a moment ..."

Suddenly he stepped to the side of the window and peered out from behind the frame. "Fafhrd. Look without, but casualwise. See you yon urchin across the street, begging for coins?"

Fafhrd stayed on the shadowed side of the room, but craned his neck. "Aye?"

"I swear I saw him earlier tonight, more than once now that I think of it."

Fafhrd shrugged. "He could be any urchin. There are a thousand such in this place. But ..." All at once, he crouched. "But that old woman there, feeding a cat. I helped her earlier — on the far side of town — and now I see her here."

Mouser rolled his neck and flexed his fingers. "I think I'd like speech with these two. I have a few choice words for them to relay to their —"

"Hsst!" whispered Fafhrd. "The beggars! They appear!"

Mouser looked left and saw the street flooding with ragged shadows, filling it wall to wall. He glanced in the other direction and saw gaunt robed forms stepping from around a corner, and peering in every window and door. "The death cult too have found us."

"As I said," said Fafhrd. "Time to decamp. I've no stomach for this fight. Villains though they are, these beggars' complaint against me is just."

"As is these cultists' complaint against me — or at least the complaint of she I detained. Aye, let us collect our things and depart through the mews. But once we're in the clear, we will confront our patrons' observers."

He rapped on the locked closet door as Fafhrd started to gather his things. "Hjiana, my love?"

"May F'd'gryt'j devour you, kidnapper!" the imprisoned woman shrieked. "May your corpse be used by sailors!"

"I apologize, Hjiana. I was wrong to abduct you. I had no right to stop you from making foolish decisions."

"Then release me!"

"Your friends will be along presently to do that. Just keep screaming and they'll find you. Now, goodbye, and I wish you well in your future endeavors."

"And I wish you death, jailor!"

Mouser shrugged and hurried to his scroll room sleeping chamber to fill his pack. "In time," he murmured. "In time."

TEN

IN the school for scribes, the beggars and the cultists of F'd'gryt'j were fighting for the honor of searching Fafhrd and Mouser's recently abandoned rooms, and paying not an iota of attention to the two cloaked and hooded forms who converged on an old woman and a sly urchin across the street, both of whom were craning their necks to try and see through the old building's front windows.

"Looking for us, mother?" asked Fafhrd as he took the old woman's wrist.

"Shall we escape this noise, cousin?" said Mouser, as he put an arm around the urchin's shoulders. "We've some heroic deeds to tell you of."

• • •

STILL in his vast, shadow-roofed cavern at the center of his endless labyrinth, Ningauble of the Seven Eyes raised two of them from the tome he had open in his prodigious lap as a one-eared cat circled 'round the fire and sat before him, tail swishing. There was a scrap of curled parchment tucked into its leather collar.

With occluded digits, Ningauble plucked it free and smoothed it flat, then extended three eyes to peruse what was written upon it.

"Ah!" he said, pleased. "My protege's night improves. No more beggardly blundering. A worthy act at last. The defense of a cloistered order stormed by altar thieves. Excellent. I must tell Sheelba."

He took a feathered quill from an inkpot and scratched a new note on the back of the old.

So much for your mannequin's measly murder-cult murdering. Here's true heroism for you.

A bat fluttered to his shoulder and he attached the note to its leg then sent it off. It had barely disappeared into the darkness of a shadowed tunnel before a book sloughed off a pile next to him and fell open to a middle page.

The first words Ningauble laid eyes on were, '... eldritch horrors drowned in the sea from whence they came, as a grateful citizenry looked on ...'

"More honorable than kidnapping, I suppose," sniffed Ningauble. "But hardly a match for —"

Another cat appeared before him, and a third padded toward him out of the shadows. The message from the first read, "Fafhrd's earlier deeds work of evil doppelgänger, whom he has now slain." The second read, "Rescued maiden by winning singing contest with demon."

"Truly, the boy is coming into his own at last," he murmured, as he sent more note-laden bats into the darkness.

Sheelba's replies were not long in coming. A scroll Ningauble opened contained the text, "... tomes of unimaginable value recovered from an evil king who knew not their worth ..." and a wind stirred scrap that flew directly into Ningauble's voluminous cowl, when retrieved and unfolded, read "... defeated the living idol of an evil temple and gave its golden skin to the deserving poor ..."

Ningauble's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "And what evil temple would that be? There is no such idol in Ilthmar that I've heard of. And I've heard of every —"

A fourth parchment-hung cat stepped daintily to him and licked a paw by the others.

"Another? When has any hero performed so many valorous deeds in one night? What a marvel is my son." Ningauble took the note and unrolled it. It read, "Fafhrd has eradicated poverty entirely in all the eight cities."

"Hmmm," said the wizard. "I fear our ruse has been found out. They are tweaking our noses."

He sent a note off to Sheelba saying as much, then opened a book at random from the pile at his side. The first sentence he read was, "Thanks to you, mountebank, we are discovered! I owe you nothing!"

"Bah," said Ningauble, and threw the book into the fire. "Such an exquisite lie wasted. The heaven of heroes is just the sort of thing my dearest Fafhrd would strive for. It must have been the gray one's skepticism poisoned him 'gainst it, curse him!"

• • •

MEANWHILE, in a tavern near Ilthmar's crowded harbor, Fafhrd poured wine for Mouser, the crone, and the urchin. They were all laughing uproariously.

"Now tell them Fafhrd defeated the horror of Thalgath with a toothpick!" said Mouser, as the crone dipped her pen.

"No no," said Fafhrd, raising his mug. "An eyelash!"

"Why not say," said the urchin, smiling slyly, "that you defeated the plans of two evil sorcerers who thought nothing of toying with the lives of hundreds to appease their vanity and pass an idle hour?"

"Now that's a tale!" said the crone, and started to scratch the words on a scrap.

"Perfect!" cried Fafhrd, then gasped as the meaning of the boy's words sank home. "No! No, wait!"

"Don't send that one!" said Mouser.

But as the crone finished writing it, a cat sprang onto the table, took the parchment in its teeth, and bounded away.

"Oh no," said Fafhrd, staring after it.

"Oh gods," said Mouser.

They looked at each other, eyes full of dread, then Fafhrd shrugged and Mouser smirked.

"Telling home truths to those two frauds may be the most heroic deed we do this whole long evening," said Mouser.

"Aye," said Fafhrd, "And, by Issek's jug, there's far more we could tell them too!"

He raised an empty jar over his head. "Landlord, more wine! And more ink! We've a long night ahead of us!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In his thirty years as a Hollywood screenwriter, Nathan made a living at everything except screenwriting. He was a taxi driver, limo driver, delivery driver, and comic store and video store clerk. This isn't to say he never sold any screenplays or made any movies. There were a few. He just never made any money out of it. It wasn't until he started doing the thing his twelve-year-old self loved best that he began making a living. Yep, he's at a computer game company now, writing thrilling adventures for role players. He should have thought of this years ago.

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ORPHAN MAKER

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THE Lord Protector lay supine on the pyre with his sword displayed. Around his burning skeleton, hundreds of children stood evenly apart in concentric rings, clutching their artwork in quivering hands. All held their breath in silence, the crackling of fire the only sound atop the Keep of Looming Cromlechs. It warmed and illuminated the orphans beneath a night-cape that did neither. Their stark shadows trembled on the plaza's cobble as they waited for approval to begin the ceremony.

Doctor Grave guided the ritual from the hearth's edge. His mask and robes of stitched faces appeared as plain, soiled linen since the firelight could not penetrate their thick coatings of soot. "Lord Lysis will protect you, children. You must continue giving or he will not rise again. Then no one can shield you from dyscrasiac beasts or retrieve others like you from beyond the Keep. Give again." The necromancer extended his arms, palms upward. Shadows flooded the folds of his vestments. "Feed the Votive Pyre."

Ragged youths walked toward the fire in a spiral, each bowing when offering their paintings. Fears, realized onto canvas, burned. Afterward, as the artists darted into the tunnel-ridden keep, their creativity lingered within the immolated art.

The Lord Protector consumed these musings which stoked his magic. His body shook with a dozen offerings. Legs kicked ashes after fifty more. Soon his bones gleamed as one with the flames.

Lysis rose to kneel in the Votive Pyre. His hairy scalp had long since transmuted into a crown of horns, arched and deadly as his sword's blade. He leaned on the hilt of *Ferrus Eviscamir*. Pearlescent ichor oozed from his skeleton. With undead vision, he saw his aura boil with haunting memories. Phantoms of his ill brothers kept his consciousness hostage, tormenting him with effigies of his deceased wife Maeve. *I failed you. Can I truly save others?*

He stood on shaky legs while exiting the hearth. Cinders drifted in his wake. *I must save more.*

"Rest, my Lord." Doctor Grave approached. "Recovery takes time. Wait! Where are you going?"

Lysis pushed his vizier out of his way, drawing *Ferrus Eviscamir* on guard. "I hear whimpering."

Doctor Grave backtracked to evade being cut. "Relax, Lord. You hear those you saved already. The orphans just revived you. Some watch from the tunnels."

Lysis stalked the plaza, sword raised, assessing the eyes of those hiding in the shadows.

Grave saw the confusion, so explained, "You are in the Keep of Looming Cromlechs. The danger is not here, but abroad."

The lord contemplated lowering his weapon. Lucidity improved as he surveyed the courtyard. *Those whom I saved fear me. Rightly so. I am a revenant. How desperate are they, to seek refuge with a necromancer and help from an undead warrior? No matter. It is time to seek the real dangers.*

Lysis staggered back to the Votive Pyre to cast a seeing spell. He connected mentally with the alchemical smoke, molding it into semi-sentient plumes and casting the vapors away from the pyre, through the angular cromlechs, to stream like fingers over the countryside.

The skeletal lord read the pyretic pneumas as they returned from the desolated Gravenstynne estate. Swirls curdled into anthropomorphic shapes. A crawling maiden appeared. "*Help,*" the female phantom whispered through the ether. Tresses of dark hair matted against slender shoulders. Dry, pursed lips quivered. She muttered, "*Ingrid. Katja. Valter.*"

Giant mosquitos formed in the smoke, swarming the apparition. She reached with her free hand while sobbing. "*My children.*"

Maeve? Lysis tried to identify her.

Doctor Grave read his master's thoughts. "Lord? Must every woman remind you of Maeve? She is dead."

"I will save this lady. And her children."

"You are not strong enough to venture out."

Lysis strode past the vizier. "Whoever she is, she needs help. Get out of my way."

"Lord, I advise you wait."

The Lord Protector hiked down the keep's sandstone slopes toward Gravenstynne. Lysis commanded telepathically, "*Monitor the keep. Be prepared to welcome whomever I bring back.*"

• • •

THE maiden lay in a heap of trampled grass, her aura smoldered dimly crimson. Lysis analyzed it to learn her name was Astrid, and she was nearly twenty years old. Her corporeal body was as fragile as the smoke depictions of her. Blanched skin matched her gray gown. Patterned cuts on her legs suggested torture.

Mutant mosquitos gathered on her lacerations. Cyanic light emanated from the insects while their human-like fingers dug into the wounds, their proboscises siphoned blood, and their bellies swelled. The vampiric bugs turned to inspect the intruder.

Lord Lysis extended his arms, inviting the mosquitos to feed on his magic. They swarmed. He laughed. Miniature claws scraped his augmented bones. They ate his marrow. Lysis's blood filled the crops of the insects, then crystallized. They fell dead.

The remaining horde attacked.

Ferrus Eviscamir lashed faster than the bugs could dodge. Swollen abdomens split open. Glowing gore reacted with the blade, then rained down as fragments of glass.

All insects had perished.

Lysis loomed over the maiden. Over his shoulder, far behind him, the pyre shone brightly to outline his horned head with a blinding halo. He asked the woman's unconscious mind, "*Who hurt you?*"

Astrid stirred. Her awareness slowly acknowledged Lysis. Three youthful phantoms took shape in her thoughts. Staring back, she communicated, "*Ingrid. Katja. Valter.*" She seemed more worried about her missing children than her assailant's identity.

"*I will reunite you if I can find them. But I need to know what happened to you.*"

Astrid would not respond anymore. Reading the woman's memories clouding her body, Lysis saw her torments: children yelled under glowing orbs; a frantic retreat promised hope; she raced toward the keep's beckoning firelight, seeking sanctuary.

Nothing more to explain? Then I will escort you back to solve this mystery and reunite you with your family. He lifted Astrid and walked toward where her astral trail originated, Gravenstyne's countryside.

• • •

NATURE had invaded Gravenstyne's orchard when the plague ran rampant. Invasive maples overtook the grove. Gleaming, engorged mosquitos hovered over the forest canopy like an eerie constellation. Crude plank walls served as a primitive rampart.

A child watcher spotted the lord's approach, motioned for others to join, and became the center of a mob of coalesced shadows with hundreds of sparkling eyes. They peered at the skeletal warrior carrying the limp woman.

"Halt!" yelled an immature, high-pitched voice. Urchins shifted atop the parapets of the tree fort.

A projectile launched toward him.

He turned to shield Astrid. An apple crashed into his back. Juice splattered. Fruity pith clung to the lord and reacted with his magic, turning gray then crumbling to dust. *Mere children trying to defend themselves. They fear me as everyone else does.*

Several volleys came from behind the ramparts, raining apple missiles and forming a debris field of fruit chunks. Some rinds were tough and meaty, like sinew. *This is not real fruit. It bleeds ichor. Dyscrasia corrupts the orchard.*

Lysis yelled to his juvenile assailants, "Cease this nonsense. I bring Astrid home."

The barrage stopped.

"It is her!" the voice squeaked from the lookout. Celebratory drumming and hollering erupted as adolescent ruffians poured forth to surround Lysis and Astrid. Girls with long, matted hair came in groups while mud-covered boys skipped with toy axes, pushing each other with violent joy. Many carried baskets of

decayed fruit and stick dolls topped with carved-apple heads.

The children bumped against Lysis as they inspected him and Astrid. *These children defended their ground at first, but they do not fear my visage in the slightest. Although the orchard is certainly diseased, the urchins appear healthy. Perhaps I can persuade them all to come to the keep.*

Children ushered Lysis and the maiden toward the commune's center. Lysis tried to inspect their destination but could not see through the vegetation. Bulbous insects ornamented the trees made of actual flesh, veined with ill blood. Lengthy, fine hair grew from under boughs as they split from trunks. Sweat pervaded the air. Viscous sap swelled from cracked bark. Azure icicles dangled from limbs, shattering as Lysis's presence contacted them.

Astrid trembled in her slumber. Perhaps she detected her home's scent, or her approaching daughters.

"Where are this woman's children?" Lord Lysis asked.

"Here we are!" Two girls with cinnamon-hued hair bounded forward. Each smiled. Scarlet, walnut-sized ticks dangled from behind their ears as jewelry. Similar bracelets wrapped their wrists and necks. Dendritic bruises complemented the insidious, decorative bundles.

The younger, Katja, exclaimed, "Ma!" She tugged on Astrid's shift fiercely.

"Come on, smile," said Ingrid. Using her index finger to trace her mother's mouth. Astrid's lips snapped back into a frown.

Lysis looked upon the girls, visualizing his daughters grabbing Maeve's injured form. It was as if he had come home with his beloved, and his children were alive as she.

When he awoke from the spell of the past, Astrid was no longer in his possession. The crowd had taken her.

Ingrid yelled, "Follow us to the Bleeding Trees. Come on. We go to Valter. It's his birthday!"

Many pressed against Lysis, propelling him. Astrid drifted away, held aloft in the parade. Urged forward with the current of bodies, he followed her.

Lysis strode under rickety, roped walkways connecting tree houses. These misshapen bridges served as streets in the canopy. Youths stared down at him while gnawing at apples, spitting out skin-rinds and hispid stems. The rank stench of rotting fruit hardly masked that of human waste.

Youths congested the path to see Astrid and cheer. Behind them, young adults cowered. They reared babies, breastfeeding in the shadows. They peered while avoiding the procession. When they glimpsed Astrid, they turned away.

The forest parted. The trees surrounded a large, circular ravine. Within the depression, wetland encroached an unkempt garden.

Lysis approached the ravine's edge to view the town center and the surrounding rim. Long boughs extended over the pit's circumference. Gnarled, finger-like limbs sprouted from each. Bloated galls appeared as knuckles on these branches that curled at their tips like closed fists. Lacerated feet dangled from within these, bleeding. Ghosts hovered close to the incarcerated corpses. They mouthed: "*We gave.*"

Sitting inside a tree-cage, a living woman pressed against the limb-fingers while swaying her legs. Ticks organized in rows along her ankles as red fluid dripped from her pendant feet. Her lips raised to a crazed smile. She said, "I give."

Astrid is not afraid for her children... she is afraid of them, Lysis realized.

Phantasmal memories of Astrid's escape replayed themselves here. She had broken free from a cage. Lysis peered down to see where she fell and discovered a shrine. A reflecting pond filled the hollow. Swarms of hovering mosquitos circled about a topiary sculpture at the pool's center. The warrior statue held a huge ax before him as if a flagstaff.

That weapon is unmistakable. It is Orphan Maker. And that is my corrupt brother, Brood.

Stalks united Brood's severed head and limbs. Roots formed ligaments to connect bone to bone. The warrior stood erect, his flesh an amalgam of ichor from the orchard and human blood.

Lysis addressed his brother, not expecting a response: "*As a roaming warrior, you sired many but raised none. I slew you years ago after you hurt Maeve. Your contagious muse possesses these people. To save them, I will have to deal with your legacy. To hell with you!*" Lysis nearly charged down the slope, but his reason stayed his anger. *I need to save the innocents first. I can come back to you later.*

Brood did not move, but his aura flickered.

Metallic squeaking pierced the night, demanding attention. *Creak. Squeak. Creak...*

Valter swung into view on a seat supported by two chain ropes. "I got older," he said. Then he swung behind a tree-cage. *Creak.* "Yesterday was my birthday." Coming back into view, he yelled, "I am thirteen now!"

Lysis looked at him.

"Ma is back, thanks to you!" the boy exclaimed.

"I aim to take her away. This is no place for her. Nor you."

Valter seemed to ignore him. While swaying, he replied: "No worries." *Squeak, creak.* "She is due to taste the Axman's cleaver."

"It is her time to sacrifice," Ingrid explained while adjusting her mother's hair. "Ma resisted. She escaped from the Bleeding Tree." She laughed while shrugging. "But her blood is stronger than her faith!"

Valter shot to his feet on the platform, holding the chains while leaning forward. He said, "We remake Axman. You can see his body grow after each offering."

"But he hungers for more," Ingrid explained.

"And you brought Ma back!" Valter beamed while he swung. "You are a friend to us. Where do you come from? You look like our Axman. All bones. But you have a sword. So, Swordsman, were you born from an orchard too?"

Dozens jammed against Lysis, thanking him for returning Astrid to complete her death rite. *I must try saving them without harming them. I need to get them away from Brood's influence.*

Lysis pointed. "I come from the mountain with the fire atop. That light is my Votive Pyre. It welcomes and warms all. We do not bleed, or kill, anyone there. You are all invited to join us."

Valter looked at the distant range, perplexed. A stranger would not sway his mind so easily. Nor would his sisters or the commune be convinced.

Katja said, "We do not need to leave the Bleeding Trees."

"Nor do you," Valter added.

As if obeying the boy, pliant boughs reached from the trunks while vines threaded Lysis's feet, and, having lost any leverage to step out of the bonds, he raised *Ferrus Eviscamir*. Before he could swing, stems knotted its hilt and seized his wrists.

Lysis connected with his mind to his vizier, "*Grave! I need more power. Gather the children and have them craft at once. Stoke the pyre. Make it burn strong.*"

"Aye, Lord."

Lysis wrestled with the tree-cage, desperate to free his hands.

Ingrid and Katja dragged their mother into the pit. Astrid awakened in a stupor. Her children had brought her to Brood's ax. She flailed. Before she could break free, Valter jumped down, splashing in the shallow pond. In an instant, the three siblings heaved their slender mother up and slammed her head into *Orphan Maker*. Blood splashed. Astrid's mouth opened wide, jutting her tongue out.

"Ooh, I love your smile," Ingrid giggled at her pale mother.

Katja beamed with pride. "You bleed, Ma!"

"Give!" Valter exclaimed.

The commune chanted, "Give!"

Madness! I must break free. I cannot wait for Grave for the power I need.

A last attempt to break free failed. The Lord would have to draw upon the limited, spiritual energy within his body in order to surge in power, even if doing so would irreversibly decrement his body and soul, debase his humanity. He had to risk losing his mind. Lysis's aura burned brighter as raw vigor released from his bones ...

Lysis chomped at the limb-fingers as if rabid, his teeth sinking into the sinew of the Bleeding Tree, bloody froth foaming from where he chewed and his ichor reacting with that of his bonds. Limb-fingers crumbled to dust. Finally, his hands were liberated. Lifting *Ferrus Eviscamir*, he chopped at the vines around his legs while eying his brother.

Astrid's offering took effect. Scabs across Brood's chest cracked. Portions flaked off as if he molted. Brilliant sparks emitted from a heart made of astral fire.

Brood's magical ax raised overhead. Astrid's frail body dangled from it, head still stuck. More fresh blood spilled onto his bones. Her corpse spasmed as it emptied. Depleted, she slid off *Orphan Maker*. She landed, splayed and broken, in the mud beside the feet of the waking Brood. The golem flexed his wooden fingers. He lowered and elevated his ax repeatedly, severing the fibrils binding his legs. The damaged roots of the Bleeding Trees snapped and released the reborn warrior.

"Axman moves!" Valter exclaimed, jumping on Brood to ride piggyback. "All rise with him, brothers and sisters. Rise!"

Air rasped from Brood's jaw. Valter bent over his shoulder to listen. Axman's deformed face continued to bellow. Valter interpreted the words, and repeated aloud, "Our god speaks. He says: 'Kill the Swordsman!'"



Votive
Pyre

Keep of Looming
Gromlechs

Injured Mystery Maiden

Gravenstynne
Fortress Ruins

Bleeding
Trees

Gravenstynne
Orchard Commune

Ax-man
Shrine

FCH
'22

Lysis jumped out of the shredded tree-cage, his knees buckling and aura dimming as he landed.

Apples launched from all directions while toy axes bounced off his bone armor and mosquitos swarmed in droves, bit into him, and died. The assault was futile against the undead lord, yet the bombardment overwhelmed his sight and movement.

Lysis sliced the ground with *Ferrus Eviscamir* to create an impromptu barrier, the corrupted earth immediately hemorrhaging ichor and spewing plumes of dirt to swallow the moonlight. The cloud of debris shielded him from being seen, however, the distraction granted him only a moment of rest.

The mob collapsed upon Lysis.

"I am not your enemy!" He could not raise his sword against them. How could he retaliate against those he wanted to rescue? He pushed back with his arms. Sorcery could coerce them had he more power. "*Grave!*"

"*In due time, Lord.*"

I cannot wait for the pyre to be ready. I need to end this. Again, he drew upon his inner strength. Lysis struck out with his fists. He intended not to kill but had to inflict harm to clear a path. He attacked too fast to assess any damage. His desperation only enraged him. Berserk, he advanced.

Ingrid and Katja clambered to join Valter. So broad was the golem's shoulders, all three held on. "Adults, come forth," Valter hailed from Brood's back. "Sacrifice yourselves. Empower the Axman!"

The younger folk grabbed babies from unsure mothers, then dutifully shoved the adults into the pit. *Orphan Maker* chopped again and again to release offerings, the blood from the victims mixing with the ichor from the orchard to energize Brood.

Lysis struggled to penetrate the surge.

Newly formed flesh covered Brood's reanimated body as he stomped through the slurry of offal toward his brother. Speckled with gore and mud, the three siblings smiled, thinking they were safe on the back of their god.

Lysis navigated carcasses to meet them at the edge of the pool. His brother stood a foot taller and tilted his head to lock stares.

Brood reached with his left arm, hastily wrapping his hand around the hair of those on his back. They gasped and yelled in pain. Stretching his massive arm upward, he raised the trio. He held them as a single cluster, a human shield.

Lysis kept a close distance, searching for an opening.

Brood advanced. The children's feet kicked out as they screamed. Scalps seeped. Why would the Axman harm them if they already sacrificed their parents?

Katja called out for her dead mother. In her despair, she had forgotten that Ma was gone.

Valter bellowed, "No!"

Onlookers hid behind the Bleeding Trees to witness the awakening of their god, and to watch it battle another immortal.

Axman pushed the three children closer to Lysis. *Orphan Maker* raised over them, poised to strike.

Ferrus Eviscamir met the attack midair.

Ax and sword scraped.

Brood dropped the children to support his weapon with both hands.

Undead brothers strafed in circles. Feet splashed in the shallow waters.

Lysis feigned left, then struck for the heart.

Brood entered, nullifying the strike with the haft of his ax pressed against that of the sword.

Two magical weapons locked again.

Lysis's empty eye sockets remained on those of his brother's.

The Axman hissed through broken teeth, "You? Returned? Do you think... your blood is purer than mine?"

They rotated.

"Same parents," Brood provoked. "Same ill blood."

Lysis drove forward, gaining no advantage.

"You shall give. As Maeve did."

Lysis burned with hatred, yet his demonic brother held him in check.

Thunder boomed from the distant Keep of Looming Cromlechs. Grave called telepathically to his master, "*The Votive Pyre is ready. Call it.*"

The Swordsman inhaled. The pyretic pneuma raced to its master. It swept across the land like a hurricane.

The firmament blitzed the orchard, the commune fading instantly behind the tumultuous, lightning-infused storm front. The Bleeding Trees curled backward under the pressure, soaked in the eucrasiac magic and petrified via alchemy such that hardened boughs crackled, turned to glass, and crumbled.

Every tree-cage disintegrated.

The pond crystallized.

A haze enveloped Brood and Lysis.

Magical hoarfrost encrusted the Axman's skin. In seconds, the golem froze in place. *Ferrus Eviscamir* struck its burning heart.

A shock wave radiated outward.

Roiling smoke flooded the ground.

Smoking fragments of fleshy bark rained down.

The pneuma dissipated to reveal Lord Lysis holding *Ferrus Eviscamir* aloft with *Orphan Maker* in his opposite hand. He called to any survivors. "The Bleeding Trees and Axman are gone. There will be no more bloodletting. You may follow me to safety."

All vestiges of the orchard lay buried. Only roots breached the upturned earth.

The bodies of Ingrid, Katja, and Valter stirred from under debris. Their auras were weak, but the three lived. At least Lysis could honor Astrid's memory by rescuing them.

He uncovered them. Too disoriented to resist, the three followed him toward the Keep of Looming Cromlechs. A few dozen stragglers appeared from the wreckage to join them. These trailed at a distance. Since Lysis held *Orphan Maker*, many mistook him as their idol. Besides, the charnel orchard had little to offer anyone now.

The pyre's bright beacon was absent, but the column of smoke in its place sparkled in the moonlight to mark the way. Lysis stumbled forth.

"*Doctor, where is the pyre?*"

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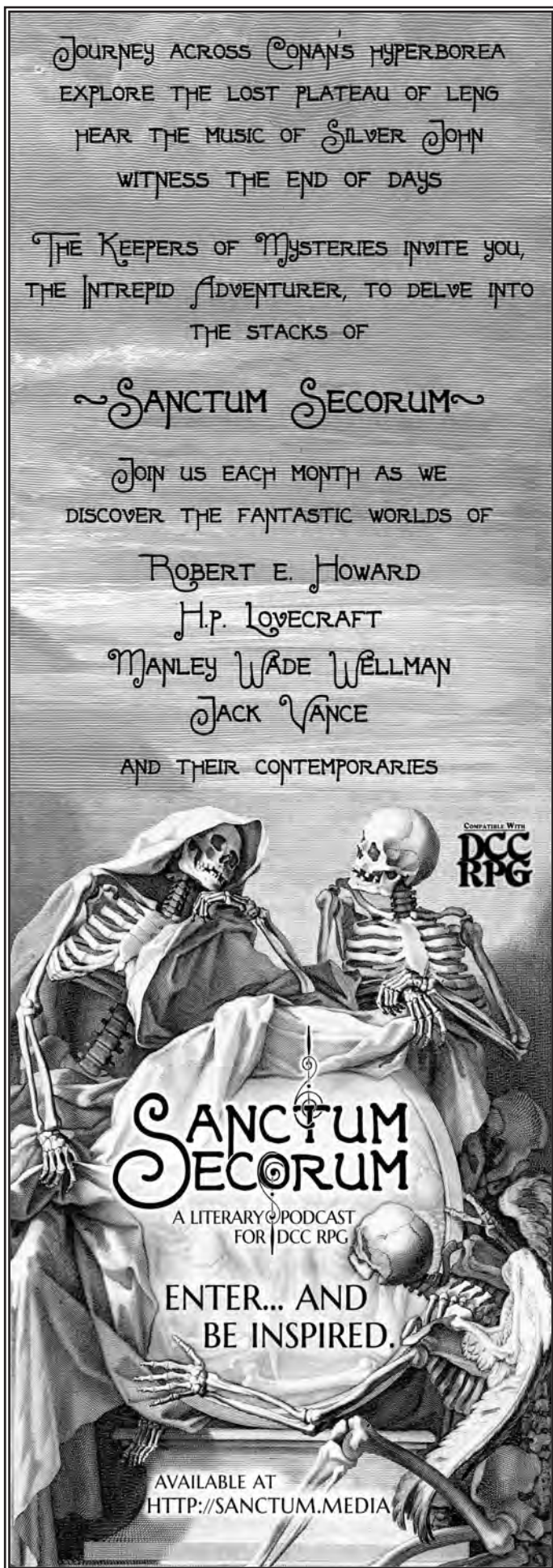
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"It is extinguished. You depleted it. Replenishing it will take weeks. Did you not finish your mission, Lord?" Doctor Grave mindspoke.

He returned, *"I ended Brood. Our old home was too diseased to save. There are few survivors. I had to harm many."*

"So, you succeeded! The keep will be safer now. You have culled the sick."

Lysis disagreed about his success. He contemplated justice, disease, and purpose. Gripping the ax evoked flashbacks of its forging. Its history revealed itself. Grave's creative signature pervaded *Orphan Maker*. The necromancer had forged that ax as he had his sword. *Grave meddles. And keeps secrets. How much can I trust him? No matter. For now, I need him. I am weak. Without Grave's sorcery, I am nothing.*

Dawn came mid-journey to warm the survivors. The keep, and its spent fire, welcomed them under the light of a new day. Citrus-hued sunbeams lit the brick plaza.

Lord Lysis dragged both ax and sword on the cobbles. Scraping blades against bricks, he shuffled to the Votive Pyre. He stopped at the hearth's edge. Lysis peered into it as if it were a lake to drown himself. Maeve's ghost took shape in his mind as a floating corpse. He considered diving in to rescue her, but he knew she was truly dead. He hesitated to embrace a nightmare.

Then the spirits of all those he did not save flooded from behind him, racing from the orchard, rushing en masse through his skeleton as an astral gale, pushing him forward. Astrid's spirit pressed along with countless, nameless ghosts, all clinging on him and pulling his head downward. Lysis braced with his two weapons to resist falling.

Finally, memories of Brood and Lysis's other three brothers sprouted from his body, grappled with his aura, and took him down.

Without powers to stem the overwhelming emotions, the Lord Protector collapsed face first.

His body lay prone on the cold pyre. *Ferrus Eviscamir* and *Orphan Maker* lay to either side. He would not rise until the next ritual. In the meantime, nightmares would plague him.

Doctor Grave walked past his companion to the newcomers trailing in. He bowed slightly in his ashen robes. "Welcome to the keep, where art brings peace of mind," he said to the orphans. He administered healing, introduced them to the residents, and passed out ink and parchment. "Draw your fears and hopes while they are fresh. With your drawings, you will reignite the Votive Pyre and raise the Lord Protector again. The ritual begins at sunset."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.E. Lindberg manages an alchemy laboratory in Southwest Ohio, but he has a long way to mature until he can animate skeletons. His rank of Fourth Order Dread Chymist merely means he knows how to use a microscope, perhaps even make a soap bar from reacting lye with fat. He aims to achieve full Necromancer status by interviewing other artists regarding "Beauty & Art in Weird Fantasy" and by crafting Dyscrasia Fiction. Check out selindberg.com and BlackGate.com to study his grimoires. You can find him lurking in the Goodreads Sword & Sorcery Group, which he moderates. He has successfully survived interning for The Skull for almost a year.

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THE NECROMANCER AND THE FORGOTTEN HERO

By D.M. RITZLIN

Throughout Nilztiria one name is more respected (and feared) above all others: Xaarxool the Necromancer. Yet he did not suddenly appear out of the ether as a paragon of wizardry. He is, in fact, a mortal man, and each bit of arcane knowledge he now possesses was acquired through long and strenuous study. Unbelievable it may be to some, but there was a time (now long past) when Xaarxool was young. Tales abound of the earlier days of Xaarxool's life, before he attained the heights of necromantic power. The following is one such tale. Is it an accurate account of events, or merely a storyteller's wild fabrication? Who can say? In Nilztiria, the truth is difficult to discern.

— From *The Book of Dream-tales* by an anonymous author, but commonly attributed to Sa'ool, the Recounter of Fables

WERE it not for his obligations, Akbu would not have chosen to prowling alone through a necropolis at midnight. But, like many men of Desazu, his occupation necessitated he perform unsavory deeds for the silver *dravs* he needed to fill his belly with meat and wine. And if his employer was correct, he would not be alone long.

Clad in black cloak and breeches, Akbu the assassin blended with the shadows as he silently stalked among the crumbling headstones and ivy-covered monuments. Only the occasional flash of moonlight shimmering on his curved sword gave any indication of his presence. His small, dark eyes darted back and forth, searching the gloom for any movement that would signify another living being in the graveyard. He had not been given a description of his target, so he knew not what to expect. His employer, the magistrate Acclain Dorso, had simply told him he would find his victim inside the tomb of a hero named Hyallbor. Hyallbor had been a warrior of great renown in his time, though today few remembered his name.

Dorso, like many other administrators and lawmakers in Desazu, had acquired a good number of enemies since coming to power. Due to the nature of his area of jurisdiction, many of them were practitioners of mystic and nigromantic arts. Akbu surmised that some petty occultist had earned Dorso's ire, and tonight he would discover such an individual — perhaps a base looter, perhaps someone with more sinister intentions — meddling with the graves.

Akbu had no difficulty locating Hyallbor's tomb. He had committed to memory the precise directions provided by Acclain Dorso. With nothing but the shining moons Uzz and Gluzz to light his way, he easily maneuvered past numerous ancient

graves until he came to a large mausoleum. A name had been etched above the door, but was illegible in the dark of night. Akbu removed a catskin glove and ran his fingers along the inscription. The letters spelled *HYALLBOR*, as he knew they would.

Akbu placed an ear to the door. Hearing nothing, he opened it slowly. The light of the double moons spilled inside, revealing a dusty stone sarcophagus in the center of the chamber. All signs indicated the tomb had not been opened in ages. If any grave robbers intended to pillage it this night, he had preceded them.

The assassin stepped inside. He debated whether to close the door. Akbu was not a superstitious man, yet the idea of being alone with a cadaver in utter darkness held little appeal for him. However, leaving the door open could arouse suspicions in his target. Akbu's professionalism was a matter of personal pride, and he would not allow himself to make such an obvious error. He swung the door shut.

With nothing left to do now except wait, Akbu leaned against a wall. One hand clutched the hilt of his sword, the other pulled on his long, thin mustaches. Silence reigned unchallenged.

Time passed, but not quickly enough for Akbu. His thoughts began to wander, then turned to apprehension. Why had his target not yet appeared? Had he somehow divined that Dorso plotted against him?

A sudden noise split the silence. Akbu, now fully alert, stood perfectly still, trying to pinpoint where the sound came from. After one repetition of the noise, Akbu had no doubt it came from *inside the sarcophagus*.

Akbu leapt to the mausoleum door and jerked it open — not to flee, but to allow light into the chamber so he could behold his adversary. The first guess his mind construed was that Dorso's enemy had gained foreknowledge of the scheme and prepared an ambush.

The sarcophagus lid clattered to the floor. The body inside sat up suddenly. This was no desiccated corpse that had lain dormant for centuries. Instead it appeared to be the well-muscled body of a living man ... were it not for the unhealthy blue tint of its skin.

Akbu gripped his sword tighter. Was he truly witnessing a centuries-gone warrior rising from the grave, or was this some elaborate hoax? For the sake of his sanity, Akbu decided the latter must be correct. Whatever the being before him was, man or revenant, he had been tasked to slay it, and Akbu never left a job unfinished.

The man rose from the sarcophagus with slow, jerky movements, as if he were unaccustomed to using his limbs. He wore a kilt of leather, but no other garment. He seemed to be unaware of the assassin inches away from him.

Akbu struck, aiming for the man's neck. With almost preternatural quickness the mysterious being raised an arm to block the blow. Akbu's blade cut deep into his forearm, but no blood spurted from the wound. The man gasped as if the assault merely startled him.

The nature of Akbu's opponent was apparent now; denial was impossible. This could be no other than the warrior Hyallbor returned from beyond the realms of death. Horrified by this knowledge, Akbu was at a loss as to how to proceed. How does one assassinate the living dead?

The undead warrior examined the fresh scar on his arm with eyes which lacked pupils and irises. Turning his face to the bewildered Akbu, he reached out and clutched the assassin's throat. The fingers grasping Akbu felt like they were made of hardened ice. Gasping for breath, he feebly lifted his sword in an attempt to fend off the revenant. Before he could strike, Hyallbor savagely thrust him against the wall of the chamber.

Unexpectedly, the revenant released his grip on Akbu. The assassin slid to the floor in a daze, wondering what new form of abuse his enemy planned for him. But fortune smiled on Akbu, and, inexplicably, Hyallbor did not push his assault further. Instead, he tilted his head, as a dog would when hearing a high-pitched whistle. The undead warrior took several stumbling steps forward, seemingly searching for some elusive object. After passing the threshold of the mausoleum, his mien became surer, but still with a questing air. In the moonlight he appeared like a finely-sculpted marble statue that had been gifted with life. From the floor of the mausoleum Akbu watched Hyallbor stride through the necropolis. He wondered what exactly had just occurred, and how these strange events would impact the future.

...

AS Hyallbor traversed the graveyard, his mental faculties returned to him, one small portion at a time. The first detail he remembered was his name; next he recalled that at some point in the past he had been hailed as a great fighting man. The rest remained hazy. He was barely cognizant of the scuffle that had occurred moments ago in the mausoleum. Yet each step he took was with a purpose — although he had no notion of what that purpose might be. All he knew was that he heard a distant calling in his mind, beckoning him like the song of a siren.

On he walked through the streets and alleys of Desazu, not knowing where his destination lay, but certain he would find it. The silent song he heard would not lead him astray.

Despite his primitive attire and appearance, Hyallbor did not attract much attention from the citizens of Desazu. At that late hour it was not uncommon for strange, uncouth people to come forth from the hovels where they spent the day slumbering. In a way, those who assumed Hyallbor was one of these wretched folk were correct. Little did they know his period of dormancy

spanned five centuries. Those few who were abroad at that time gave Hyallbor a wide berth. Well it was for them that they did, for if they had bothered to scrutinize him closely, the white void of his eyes would have caused them great distress.

Hyallbor's trail led him through a maze of avenues and narrow alleyways. On passing a plaza containing timeworn statues of gods no longer revered by the Desazuan populace, a sense of familiarity sprang up inside him, and he wondered why. Unbeknownst to him, he had traversed these streets in the past.

Eventually Hyallbor came to a tiny shack which stood a bit apart from the other residences nearby. He knew his journey had come to an end. But why here?

Before he had long to ponder, the door of the shack opened with a creak. Unhesitantly he slipped inside.

The shack's interior consisted of a single cluttered room. In its center stood a bearded man, clad in dark robes, nearing middle age. "Welcome, Hyallbor," he said. "Be seated."

The warrior sat on the floor. His host did likewise. Hyallbor opened his mouth, intending to speak, but coughed up a cloud of dust. He found this quite peculiar. On his second attempt at speech, he succeeded in voicing two questions: "Who are you? Why am I here?"

"Xaarxool is my name. You are here because my magic brought you."

Hyallbor stared at Xaarxool uncomprehendingly. After a moment's pause, he rasped, "Explain further."

"How much of your previous life can you recall?"

Another pause. "Little ..."

"I shall start there, then. Your name is Hyallbor. Five hundred years ago you were a great warrior, a hero admired by all."

"Yes ... I remember now," said Hyallbor. Suddenly jolted into awareness, his eyes widened. "Five hundred years!" he exclaimed. "How — what — " A deluge of memories rushed through Hyallbor's mind. "My wife — my sons — gone?"

"Yes," Xaarxool replied calmly.

Hyallbor looked away, saying nothing. Xaarxool continued speaking, but the warrior was unresponsive. After an uncomfortable length of time, Xaarxool began to wonder if his magic had failed in some way.

Finally Hyallbor broke his silence.

"Why have you brought me back?"

"I need the services of a trustworthy and stalwart fighting man."

"Why me?"

Xaarxool sighed. "Before I can answer that, I must tell you something of myself and my predicament. You see, currently in Desazu, most political officials are avaricious and corrupt. Things may have been different in your day —"

"They were not," put in Hyallbor.

"Ah, then perhaps you will be able to sympathize. There is a particularly loathsome individual by the name of Acclain Dorso. He weaseled his way into the magistrateship of a barely legitimate organization known as the Bureau of Sorcerous Affairs. Since the day he took office he has abused his power, demanding

bribes from every practitioner of spellcraft in Desazu. He and I have butted heads many times, as you can imagine. Of late his antagonization has greatly increased and the situation has grown dire. He has made threats against my person, and I know he has no compunctions about following through on them. I believe he hired an assassin to poison me. The attempt failed, but I have no desire to give him more chances. I wish to leave Desazu this very night, but the risk is too great to travel alone. I require an armed guard as escort."

"I still don't understand," said Hyallbor. "If all you need is a bodyguard, why not hire one?"

"For one thing, my coffers have been drained by Dorso's inordinate extortion," admitted Xaarxool. "More importantly, an ordinary sellsword would not be capable of defending me from Dorso's unholy minions. He has a vast assortment of supramundane tools at his disposal."

"Tools?"

"Spells, runes, servitor spirits ... they are as much tools to him as his human lackeys."

"It seems like you have set a dangerous task for me."

"Then you refuse?" asked Xaarxool, astonished.

"I didn't say that ... but this is so confusing, perplexing ..." he trailed off wistfully.

"Would you prefer to return to your crypt?"

"Of course not. But the enormity of the situation is overwhelming. I have many questions ..."

"No time for questions now," snapped Xaarxool. "Acclain Dorso could be sending his minions against us at this very moment. We can afford no delays."

"But —"

"You were born to be a fighting man, were you not?"

"Undoubtedly! I was one of the greatest who ever lived."

"And now you live again! Will you fight for me, or will you squander this opportunity?"

Xaarxool's arguments were persuasive enough to drive all misgivings from Hyallbor's clouded mind. "I will fight!" he declared proudly.

"Excellent." Xaarxool rummaged through a heap of unwashed clothing and produced a cloak. "Wear this," he said, handing it to Hyallbor. "It will make you less conspicuous. After I gather my essential grimoires, we will leave at once through the western gate."

Xaarxool selected several books from a stack of leather-bound tomes and wrapped them in a bundle. Beside the stack lay a long-bladed dagger, which he gave to Hyallbor. "I managed to procure this. I don't expect you to fight barehanded."

Hyallbor looked over the weapon with fondness. "It has been long since I last used one of these," he said, and began to reminisce.

"Indeed. Now, let us be off!" said Xaarxool.

As the unlikely duo exited the hut, a quiet cackling came from near the structure's sole window. From the shadows a small imp appeared, a grotesque intermixture of man and bat. Its fangs bearing a devilish grin, it propelled itself through the night sky

on leathery wings, eager to deliver a message to its master, Acclain Dorso.

• • •

ONLY two guardsmen had been assigned to preside over Desazu's western gate that night. Rarely would any request entrance to or egress from the city at this late hour. Therefore they were quite surprised when they saw the approach of a tall, thin man accompanied by a burly fellow who was bare-chested beneath his cloak. The guards turned to each other and nodded, silently agreeing that this opportunity to alleviate their boredom should not go to waste.

"You there! Halt!" ordered the first guard, his helmet and brass shield shining in the light of his comrade's torch. "What business do you have?"

"We are two travelers who wish to be on our way," replied Xaarxool.

"A likely story," sneered the second gatekeeper. "Bolto and I have heard that one before. I think you're up to no good. What say you, Bolto?"

"I say open this gate at once!" commanded Hyallbor sternly, boldly approaching the two guardsmen. "We are not intimidated by you."

"Who are you to give us orders?" snarled Bolto.

"I am Hyallbor!" proclaimed the warrior. "The hero of Desazu returned!"

"Never heard of you, hero. You look like you've spent three days in the Tigtig River. You might as well turn around and — urk!" Bolto gasped as Hyallbor's knife tore through his guts. He crumpled, clutching the gaping wound in his stomach.

Xaarxool was no less amazed and startled than the guardsmen were at Hyallbor's unexpected act of aggression. Before Bolto's partner could raise an alarm, Hyallbor thrust his blade into the guard's throat, silencing him for all time. The warrior felt the rush and glory of combat, as he had on the battlefields of yore when he repelled the Tul-Thuran invasion of Desazu.

"That was unnecessary," stated Xaarxool, studying the two fresh corpses.

"I thought you wanted to flee Desazu most urgently, without delay," said Hyallbor.

"We most certainly must now! Let's go!"

"One moment." Hyallbor stripped Bolto of his sword and shield while the wizard pushed open the gate. "Now I am ready," he said, holding his newly-acquired weapon aloft. The pair hurried through the gate and proceeded onward to the western hills with as much speed as they could muster.

• • •

AKBU the assassin staggered into the opulent sanctum of Acclain Dorso. The Desazuan magistrate reclined upon a luxurious couch marred by the stains of spilled wine. Gaudy jewelry and a loose robe adorned his bulky frame. He appeared besotted with vinous drink.

"Akbu!" exclaimed Dorso. "Did you complete the assignment? You don't look well."

Akbu coughed, then answered, "I waited in the tomb you directed me to, but ... its... occupant ... assaulted me."

Dorso immediately sobered upon hearing this news. "Then — you *failed*?"

"You expected me to slay one who returned from the dead?" said Akbu.

"You never failed me before," said Dorso, as if that were sufficient explanation. He grabbed an empty bottle and threw it down in disgust, shattering it. "Now I must conceive a new way to thwart that accursed Xaarxool."

Akbu felt the urge to express his displeasure with his employer, but, if tales of the fate of his predecessors were true, that would lead to unpleasant repercussions. He elected to hold his tongue.

Dorso paced the room, carefully avoiding the shards of the broken wine bottle. He turned toward the room's wide window. Placing his hands on the sill, he looked down upon the spires and domes of the slumbering city, illuminated by the ghostly light of the two full moons. "What to do next," he said, stroking his chin. A shadow passed across the moons, which Dorso quickly recognized as his pet imp winging toward him. He leaned out the window and extended his arm for the imp to alight upon, as a falconer would for his noble birds. The imp's talons encircled Dorso's wrist, and he drew the creature within the room.

"I have news for you, O master," squealed the imp in voice of unparalleled shrillness. "I overheard Xaarxool discussing plans with his revenant. They intend to leave Desazu tonight by way of the western gate."

"Oh ho! He won't escape me that easily!" cried Dorso. "Akbu, wait for them at the gate. Bribe some guards to assist you, if necessary. I expect you to bring me Xaarxool — alive or dead."

...

XAARXOOL and Hyallbor did not progress far along the road out of Desazu before they heard the sound of galloping stallions behind them.

"I knew pursuit would not be far behind," said Xaarxool. "Quick, we must leave the thoroughfare."

The pair dove into the bushes at the side of the road. A mounted patrol charged past, but failed to discover them in the darkness. The horses' hooves kicked up dust as they sped onward.

"They could return at any moment. Follow me," whispered Xaarxool, pointing to the hills in the distance. Hyallbor nodded and obeyed.

A frenzied sprint through tall grasses brought them to the foot of the hills. They continued onward, heading for higher elevations. After an hour of difficult exploration in which the moonlight offered little help, Xaarxool discovered a cave. He led Hyallbor inside.

"What now?" asked the warrior.

"We rest here for the night," said Xaarxool.

"I am not weary."

"No, you wouldn't be."

Hyallbor wondered why that would be the case. Before he could ask, he realized the answer.

Xaarxool groped along the walls of the cave until he found a space far enough from the entrance for his liking. He seated himself and said, "I must meditate now. Stand guard."

"All right."

A moment passed before Xaarxool spoke again. "Hyallbor, I must know: what is it like?"

"What do you mean?"

"The afterlife."

The warrior paused, struggling to find suitable words. At length he replied, "I honestly don't know. I can recollect nothing of it. Imagine a long, long, dreamless sleep; that is how it seems to me now. I feel like there is *something* beyond ... but memories of it are not allowed to me in this world."

"Hmm ... very interesting."

Neither man spoke after that.

...

"TERRIBLE news!" shouted Akbu as he burst into Acclain Dorso's chambers for the second time that night. "The sentries at the western gate have been slain!"

"What!" cried Dorso, angrily rising from his couch. "You mean to tell me Xaarxool escaped?"

"It appears that way," said the assassin.

"This calls for more drastic measures. Follow me." The magistrate led Akbu down a spiral staircase, his imp fluttering behind them. At the stair's bottom was an area which resembled, to Akbu's eyes, a dungeon. Dorso opened a cell door which contained, instead of the human prisoners that Akbu expected, great wooly hounds.

"You must use these dogs to hunt down that wily Xaarxool," said Dorso. He gestured to the imp, who gripped several strands of dark hair in its talons. "That is hair the imp collected from Xaarxool's person. I prudently commanded it to do so while surveilling him because I believed it would be of use in the future."

The imp swooped down and held the hair in front of the dogs' faces. "Now they have his scent," said the magistrate. "One more preparation must be made; then the hunt can begin." From the folds of his robe he produced a triangular vial. He poured its contents into the hounds' water bowls. The canines lapped up the concoction, and a bizarre transformation immediately occurred. They swelled in size, growing nearly as large as lions, and their eyes burned red like flames stoked by devils. The snarling hounds became rambunctious, bounding about the room with wild abandon, ready to seek out their master's enemy and tear him to bloody pieces.

Akbu was not enamored with having such infernal beasts in his charge, but the prospect of facing Dorso's wrath if he disobeyed orders was even less pleasing. "I will not return without Xaarxool's head," declared the assassin. "Have I your leave to go?"

“Yes. Take the imp with you as well.” The imp alighted on Akbu’s shoulder, disconcerting him further.

Dorso led the procession of hellhounds through a hall that opened into a courtyard. The pack of anxious beasts leapt and howled, eager to be set free. Dorso opened the gate and the hounds charged wildly through the streets of Desazu. Akbu, barely able to keep up, grabbed the fur of one and mounted it like he would a horse. The hunting pack, hot for the blood of Xaarxool, burst past the newly-stationed sentries at the western gate and bounded over the wall. The guardsmen could do nothing but watch in wonderment as the bestial procession stormed past them.

• • •

HYALLBOR spent the rest of the night lost in contemplation while Xaarxool meditated. This was his first opportunity since his return to the world of the living to pause and collect his thoughts. It felt strange — not just being alive again, but everything he had seen and heard. He endeavored to make sense of it all, which was no easy task.

He rediscovered lost memories of his past life tucked away in dim corners of his psyche. Days of war, nights of love. Drinking sessions with friends, telling bawdy jokes, things he thought trivial at the time but now, looking back, seemed like precious treasures. He thought of his sons, who grew to become strong and honorable fighting men like him — and then he remembered that he would never see them again, for they were dead now, and had been for centuries.

What of his sons’ children, and their descendants? What great deeds had they accomplished in their lifetimes? Maybe Xaarxool knew. He seemed knowledgeable in history. More so than the sentries he had dispatched, certainly. They did not even recognize the name of Hyallbor.

He reflected on why he had acted so rashly during the encounter at the gate. Obviously, it was a tactical blunder, one he never would have made in his previous life. It would be easy to blame the error on his state of disorientation, but might there be another reason? Perhaps he had been driven to kill because the guard had affronted his honor — by being *ignorant* of him.

Suddenly it struck him how utterly alien the world of the present was to him, and he to it. He felt like he had been abducted and marooned on another planet.

Then his thoughts took a different turn. Rather than feel pity for himself, shouldn’t he instead rejoice? To live again was a miracle. He had not shied away from death when it came for him, for it was inevitable, but neither had he welcomed it. On his deathbed he would have jumped at another chance for life, and now he had it. And his body was strong like it had been in his prime, not his later days. His thews were powerful, hot blood pumped through his veins.

Or did it? He looked down at the scar on his arm. The wound was still fresh, but not a drop of blood escaped from it. Hyallbor wondered what sort of necromantic energies were sustaining him.

After long hours of self-reflection, Hyallbor stepped outside the cave. He had always been a man of action, and never cared for idleness. Stretching his legs for a brief jaunt would do him good.

Hyallbor watched crimson dawn break over the green hills of the Desazuan countryside. It was a splendid sight. Awed by the beauty of nature, Hyallbor eschewed his ambivalence regarding his current state. At this moment, he was glad to be alive.

The warrior roamed among the hills, not intending to stray too far from the cave where Xaarxool sat entranced. He had never explored this area before, and he reveled in the novel experience. But then —

A startling sound rang out; a bestial howling from above. Hyallbor looked up and saw an enormous hound with eyes like flame ready to pounce upon him. There was no time to speculate as to its origins — now was the time for battle!

The beast lunged as soon as Hyallbor laid eyes upon it. Its massive weight drove him to the ground with such impact that his armaments spilled from his hands; his sword landed just out of reach while his shield spun clattering ten feet away. The hound lunged with slavering jaws open, crazed with desire to rip into his throat. He brought up his left arm to protect himself, but the beast sank its fangs into it instead. While it savagely gnawed on his arm, Hyallbor reached for his knife. With a powerful thrust, he pierced the beast’s hide. In agony it howled, allowing him to withdraw his mangled arm from its maw.

Ignoring the pain, Hyallbor rose to his feet and recovered his sword. He struck again, this time at the hound’s throat. Blood spurted from the wound as well as its mouth. It lashed out at him with a lion-like paw, but a downward sweep of the blade severed it cleanly. The beast lay on the grass bleeding out, and the fires of its eyes dimmed.

Before Hyallbor had time to verbally express his consternation with oaths, two more giant hounds appeared, attracted by the commotion. One pounced at Hyallbor, but the warrior dodged and held out his blade, ripping open a long, deep rent in the beast’s hide. This served to infuriate it, for, in spite of the blood and organs spilling from its wound, it clamped its jaws around Hyallbor’s shin, determined to inflict as much harm as possible before its life expired. His mobility thus hindered, the warrior could not evade the rending claws of the other hound as it ferociously tore strips of flesh from his chest. With defense impossible, retaliation was his only option. He swung his sword with such fury the impact broke the beast’s spine. As it howled its death-cries he kicked aside the other giant hound, who had now succumbed to its wound. Hyallbor stumbled away, benumbed with agonizing pain. Were it not for his necromantically-enhanced state, such injuries would have been unbearable, and likely driven him to unconsciousness.

Only three steps Hyallbor took before more barks and howls reverberated throughout the hills. Yet another huge hound with burning eyes came galloping toward him from beyond a curve in the path. In spite of his wounds, Hyallbor had no thoughts of retreating from the unnatural monster. Manfully he stood his

ground. As it approached, he rushed in, gripping his sword with both hands, and struck at the hound's face. When he drew back the weapon, its blade was freshly stained with a new coating of blood. The beast collapsed, half its face missing. Then Hyallbor collapsed as well.

Following on the heels of the hounds was Akbu, sweating from exertion, with Dorso's imp in tow. He had fallen from his uncontrollable steed far back, and had been forced to chase after the pack on foot. The assassin had heard the noise of violent combat, but did not consider that Hyallbor could possibly dispatch the entirety of the pack. Upon witnessing the scene, his mind boggled at the carnage and slaughter.

Akbu assumed Hyallbor was now dead, for the hero from the past lay unmoving, and two of his limbs had been savagely maimed. But Hyallbor began to stir, and slowly regained his feet. Akbu drew his sword, wondering what it would take to return this man to the grave permanently.

The blades of the two fighting men shot sparks as they clashed with an iron resonance that rang through the hills. Hyallbor, for all his suffering, still had spirit within him, and Akbu found him a formidable opponent. Thrust, parry, riposte — the interplay of the swords resembled a deadly metallic whirlwind. Hyallbor's wounds took their toll, however, and his injured leg became a significant hindrance. He could not evade Akbu's striking sword, which created a number of bloodless lacerations upon his body. Hyallbor fought on to the best of his ability, but could feel himself fading.

The end came suddenly. Hyallbor overextended himself for a strike, which Akbu expertly dodged. Before Hyallbor could recover, the imp flew in his face, distracting him. The assassin darted in and with one lightning-quick swing struck off Hyallbor's head. The decapitated body fell upon the grass in a heap, but still no blood oozed from it.

By this point the din of battle had brought Xaarxool out of his trance. Still groggy, he stepped outside the cave to look upon a vista of destruction. He gasped audibly, alerting Akbu to his presence. The assassin, still panting after his hard-fought victory over Hyallbor, stalked toward Xaarxool, eager to complete his mission and return to Desazu.

Xaarxool was not alarmed. Akbu wondered at this, but would not learn the reason why until it was too late. Xaarxool could see what he did not — the headless body of Hyallbor *rising* behind him.

The decapitated warrior's sword tore through the unsuspecting Akbu, cleaving deep into his shoulder. An eruption of blood splattered the imp, who was hovering nearby. Another swing of the blade split the assassin's skull. The bodies of both Akbu and Hyallbor fell, bereft of life.

The imp, aghast at this turn of events, flew away at great speed. "A pox upon thee!" shouted Xaarxool, who then invoked an arcane curse.

A sudden movement caught Xaarxool's eye. Hyallbor's head was rolling back and forth, like an upended turtle struggling to

right itself. Xaarxool, attracted by this phenomenon, rushed to the head and picked it up. Sentience still shown in its face.

"Hyallbor, can you hear me?" asked the wizard. "I will find a way to repair you."

"No ..." rasped the severed head.

"No?" questioned Xaarxool. "But why?"

"This world is not for me," said Hyallbor. "I am a thing of the past. My family, my friends, everything I knew and loved ... all dead and gone. Better for me to remain dead as well. I thank you for the opportunity to fight one last battle, but please, allow me to return to the afterworld, whatever that may be." He paused, then said, "I feel myself slipping away ..."

All semblance of life departed from the head.

Xaarxool lifted Hyallbor's body and carried it into the cave. He placed the head upon it and built a cairn of stones around the corpse. Not even momentarily did he consider using his necromantic powers to reanimate Hyallbor once more. No, he would respect the wishes of the man who sacrificed his second life for him.

Xaarxool felt Hyallbor deserved a eulogy, but could not find any suitable words.

• • •

AFTER Acclain Dorso had given Akbu command of his hellhounds, he returned to his couch, where he spent the remainder of the night in a drunken stupor. Shortly after dawn broke, his imp flew into the chamber and landed on his paunch, shrieking shrilly.

"What! What!" cried the magistrate, startled into wakefulness. His bleary eyes shot open to discover the imp, now horribly disfigured, looming before him. While the imp had never been aesthetically pleasing, now it appeared like a wax likeness of itself that was slowly melting. Not recognizing his creature, Dorso struck it away with his arm. Half of it splattered upon the floor in a puddle of ooze. "*Xaarxool* ..." the imp whispered before expiring.

Dorso felt a sensation in his arm as if a thousand searing hot needles were being pressed into it. He looked upon his limb with absolute horror, watching it liquefy as the imp had.

Although the lesson was lost on him at that moment, Acclain Dorso had learned the folly of crossing Xaarxool.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

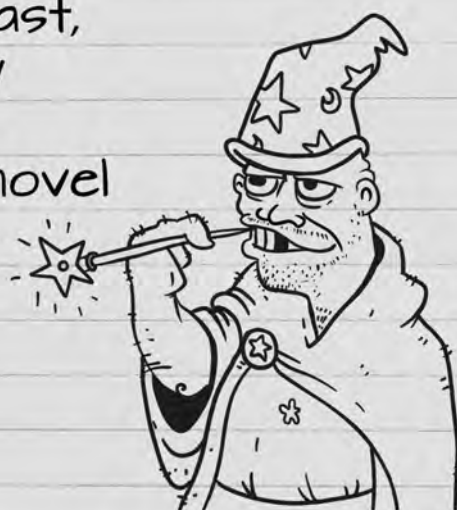
Long ago D.M. Ritzlin worked as an intern/henchman for Kenzer & Co. while they were creating their HackMaster RPG. The experience would serve him well in the future, as he became an author of sword-and-sorcery tales which place the emphasis on sorcery and mix in a touch of gallows humor. A collection of his stories, *Necromancy in Nilztiria*, was released in October 2020. For more information on his projects, visit dmrbooks.com.



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ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

THE GLASS DRAGON

By DAVID GULLEN

WHEN Chimiski the night watchman first saw the dark-haired child she was fighting for her life on the sliding wet shingle in the darkness below the eastern pier.

Big bearded Chimiski was no slouch and no coward either. The moment he heard the desperation in her high, rhythmic gasps he went straight down the iron ladder set into the quayside wall. One big hand gripped the pitted rungs, the other held his lantern. He dropped the final few feet and slogged across the shingle.

As he said later, he expected to make a different kind of rescue, the sort he had made several times before and a kind that made him angry. Instead, his lamp showed him a barefoot girl perhaps nine years old, backed up against one of the great black elm pilings. She slashed at the blind questing heads of a mass of slithering glass worms with nothing but a piece of kelp stem. Chimiski saw her right arm was broken, that one bare foot was glass-burnt and useless. A dozen worms came at her, each three yards long and thick as his arm. Already they were spreading out, flanking her on both sides. The translucent beauty of their segmented bodies only added to Chimiski's frozen horror.

The end of the girl's kelp stick sizzled and hissed, corroding with glass burn. As Chimiski watched, the end crumbled away. She flicked him a glance and returned to her fight. There was no hope in that look, no expectation of help or escape, only a determination to carry the fight as long as she could.

It was a look that reminded Chimiski of the balls he'd been born with. He fumbled his whistle into his mouth and blew three solid blasts. Then he drew his nightman's sword, little more than a long dagger, and leapt across the sliding shingle past the glass worms to stand beside the girl.

A glass worm reared up, its toothless circular mouth bearded with tendrils. Chimiski cut at its body. Glass shards clattered on the shingle but the cheap steel blade sizzled, turned to acid-pocked lace and dropped off the hilt. Worms wove closer, the girl moaned with fear and slashed with her stick. Chimiski flung the useless hilt, which bounced off the worm's hard bodies. Near to panic, he tore off his cloak and flung it over the nearest worm. Fooled by the stink of old leather and fur, the creature threw coils around it and dragged it down to the sea.

Chimiski grabbed the girl around the waist and flung himself out from under the pier. He fetched up hard against the ladder and sat down hard. The girl hissed in pain as she came down on top of him. Chimiski blew his whistle again and again until he heard answering blasts and running feet.

• • •

EVERYONE marvelled at her escape but nobody really wanted her. In the end, Mabs, the ale-wife at *The Mermaid*, gave her a blanket and space by the fire while her broken arm knit. When Chimiski offered her coin in some fit of emotion even he struggled to define, Mabs agreed to feed her too.

Chimiski nursed his black ale. "I thought it was just another ... I thought it was just some lass in trouble." He stared into the fire. Glass worms. Gods. Here already.

Although her bones mended and her glass-burned foot slowly grew opaque and limber again, nobody really wanted some nine-summers child who never spoke or made a single noise beyond soft moans of distress in her sleep. Nobody wanted a girl with dark, close cropped hair, a high pale brow and a face unsettlingly old and haunted by experience. A girl with Guinevere Verdant's glass brand fused to her chest.

• • •

THEY were talking about her when Rhayder, who was in Cadgwith for his monthly supplies, came into *The Mermaid* for a pint before heading back to the old broch beyond the dunes. The pot boy served him, and Rhayder sat unnoticed at a small round table near the door and smoked his pipe — a lean man with sparse back-combed hair, a thin beak of a nose, a flat slash of a mouth. He frowned at the talk of glass worms and his thin mouth became thinner still when somebody said "Guinevere Verdant." And he watched the girl, who sat listening in the corner as she shelled a sack of peas.

Mabs tried to get more silver out of Chimiski, who simply looked across at the girl. "It looks like she's earning her keep."

And she was. She listened well and Mabs worked her all the hours of the day.

"Not halfway near enough," Mabs grumbled. "And she eats like a trooper. I might hang on to her though. In two or three years she can lie on her back and earn enough to pay me back." Mabs smirked. "I just thought you'd like a line of credit."

Some of the men went very still as some men will do, and watched the girl's narrow-shouldered frame. Chimiski's face went hard. "No, Mabs," he said. "I would not."

The clump of Rhayder's sea boots on the boards made everybody turn. "I'll take her," he said. "If she wants."

The girl stopped shelling peas and looked at him.

"Rhayder wards the beacon along the coast," Chimiski told her.

"One of the fire beacons," Rhayder said.

The girl pulled off her apron and went to stand beside him.

Some haggling took place while Mabs, with little to lose, pushed her luck. In the end Rhayder handed over a small but heavy purse, half-filled with copper and half with silver, plus one golden sovereign.

"You're old enough to be her grandfather," Mabs laughed.

"Older than that, probably," Rhayder said.

He finished his ale and took the girl outside. Chimiski, feeling the need for fresher air, came with them.

"Do you have a name?" Rhayder awaited but she said nothing. The corners of his mouth turned down, he walked a few paces then beckoned with his hand. "Come, girl."

He led the way to the floating pontoons where he'd moored *Little Mary*, a single-masted pinnace he'd bought when he first came to the coast. The barrels, boxes and sacks of his supplies were neatly stowed amidships under a heavy oil cloth. Half-decked at the bow, *Little Mary* was an easy and forgiving craft, not too fast but good in a running sea and she cut to windward well.

When the girl saw where they headed, she balked, a high unhappy noise started in her throat.

Rhayder thought about her brand, the sea, and what lay beyond the far coast. "You'll be safe in *Little Mary*, I promise." He pointed to a low rise halfway to the horizon on the coastline beyond the dunes. "Five miles to that headland and the wind behind us all the way."

If his words made any difference it was to make her back away. Chimiski, only half understanding, clucked like a huge black-bearded hen. "It's too soon for her out on the water. Can't you see that? I'll get my mule. Unpack what you need for now and I'll bring *Little Mary* over tomorrow."

Rhayder pulled a face and Chimiski affected indignation. "This port does have watchmen you know."

"I do know, Chimiski. Good ones. Brave ones."

Rhayder unpacked and repacked his supplies, removing a small round of hard cheese, a sack of rolled oats, a dozen eggs, half a ham, and two bottles of beer. Chimiski returned with his mule, a long-eared and sad-eyed beast with grey hair on its face. He had placed a folded blanket on its back and leather panniers hung on each side. Like its owner, the mule was steady and easy going up to a certain point. The girl immediately went to it and lay her arm on its shoulder and her head on her arm. There, she watched Chimiski and Rhayder pack the panniers.

"Are you sure that's enough food? Mabs said she ate more than a regiment."

Rhayder caught the girl's eye. "I think Mabs can tell a lie as well as the rest of us." The girl looked back steadily from brown eyes and if one cheek quirked a hair's breadth it was probably just cloud shadow.

"What are you going to do with her?" In his life Chimiski had travelled far, always west and west again, and always a few steps ahead of the ever expanding border of what free folk called the Empire of Shadows, an empire that now encroached on the coastal kingdoms across the sea. He had been born in a culture where, if you saved a life, you became responsible. It was part of the old ways, and although his homelands were gone, their habits lived in him still.

Now it was Rhayder's turn to feel affronted. "Do with her? I'm not going to *do* anything with her. She'll be my —" He waved his hands, trying to think of the right word, acutely aware of just how attentively the girl listened. "She'll be my apprentice." He jerked his head and walked Chimiski a few paces away. "I just wanted to get her away from *The Mermaid*."

"Yes," Chimiski said. "I know."

Rhayder returned to the girl. "Four hours on foot. If you want to ride —" Rhayder cocked an eye at Chimiski, who shrugged. "You can ride."

But the girl had already started to walk. Twenty feet ahead of the mule she held her hand out behind her and beckoned. The mule's head jerked and he ambled forwards.

"How did she —?" Chimiski looked a little hurt at Rhayder's bark of laughter.

The two men shook hands. "That mule only has one pace but he'll get you there," Chimiski said.

"Tomorrow," Rhayder said, and set off after the mule. Just at the turn onto the coast road he called back. "What's the mule's name?"

Chimiski shouted into the wind. "Rhayder."

"Don't you sink my boat, Chimiski."

• • •

RHAYDER and the girl got along. He rarely needed to show her anything twice and she did what he asked, which was not much. His main duties were to watch the sea and the other coastal beacons, looking for smoke by day and fire at night. It wasn't long before he trusted her enough to keep some of the day watch, freeing him to spend more time on the things he really wanted to do, the real reason he had applied for the post.

In the evenings he wrote and drew in his journal, a large and heavy volume bound in salt-stained leather with a deep cut on the back. Sometimes he walked the tideline, sometimes he drew labyrinthine patterns on the sand and ran through them. The rest of the time he did things most people would have struggled to tell apart from the duties of a beacon-man: stare out to sea; stare at the sky, occasionally mutter incomprehensibly under his breath, and chew his nails.

The day after she arrived the girl ran up to Rhayder and tugged his sleeve. He looked across the water to where she pointed and saw, half-way towards them from Cadgwith, a small single-masted pinnace with dark red sails tacking into a steady headwind: *Little Mary*.

Rhayder fetched his handcart and pushed it down the rough track that ran from the headland down to the short jetty he had built in the lee from driftwood pilings and planks. Chimiski turned *Little Mary*'s bows, dropped the sails and skilfully ran her up alongside the jetty. Rhayder caught the painter and tied her off.

"Took your time."

"That boat's so slow I climbed out three times to push."

"She does me."

"Beats walking along the bottom."

"Thanks for not sinking her."

"You're welcome. My mule still alive?"

"The girl's been fattening him up."

She watched from the top of the track as the two men unloaded *Little Mary* into the cart. As soon as they were off the beach she ran down and added what weight she had to the push up the last steep slope.

Rhayder lived in an ancient broch, a dry-stone circular fort older than memory, older than history. Stairs ran between the double outer walls to the two upper floors, each a single round room and each smaller than the one below. Brochs dotted the coast for a hundred miles in each direction, built on headlands and promontories. Rhayder's broch stood at the back of a solitary upthrust of bedrock separating the dunes from a dreary salt marsh. The fire beacon, a carefully constructed structure of horizontally stacked oil-soaked lumber fifteen feet high, stood at the sea end protected by waxed sailcloth tied down with weighted ropes. This shore had always been guarded.

Chimiski used the opportunity to nose around. Rhayder noticed and gave him the full tour. Chimiski admired the long views from the windows in Rhayder's workroom on the top floor, also the finely made writing desk, the shelf of books and papers, and the sturdy oak bench supporting various instruments, retorts, metal and glass tools, and opaque bottles. He also noted that Rhayder had moved his bed up from the middle floor, where another mattress now lay in the privacy behind an old sail slung from a rope which now divided the room in two.

After a plate of porridge and bacon Chimiski went to collect his mule. He found it standing with the girl beside the beacon, the both of them looking out to sea. Seeing him come, the girl flung her arms around the mule's neck, hung there for a moment, then stood aside.

"Come on, Trousers, let's go home." Chimiski tried the girl's trick of walking on and beckoned with his hand. The mule ignored him until he came back and fed it one of the pieces of apple he kept in his pocket.

"I cannot fault the training." Rhayder leaned with folded arms against the broch wall. "Why 'Trousers'?"

"The first thing he ate when I bought him."

• • •

THE months went by, summer turned and faded. Every few weeks Rhayder took *Little Mary* into Cadgwith for supplies and sometimes Chimiski returned with him.

The girl did in fact eat rather a lot, more or less the same as Rhayder himself. This made Rhayder reassess his opinion of what "eating a lot" actually meant and concluded her appetite was reasonable, possibly even modest. While Rhayder was a full-grown man, she was half-starved and young, and she was growing. That last made Rhayder anxious for a few minutes before he decided to postpone worrying about what that meant until it became a thing he needed to worry about. Meanwhile, he increased the quantities of food he bought on his monthly trips to Cadgwith, and added a few nice things too.

This was the season Rhayder drew his sand patterns at low

tide. Slowly, slowly, the girl lost some of her fear of the sea and accompanied him a little further each time, though never further than the dry sand above the tide line.

"Quiet." Chimiski suggested one time.

"It's a good name, but it's not hers. She'll tell me when she's ready."

"I don't like just calling her 'Girl.'"

"Neither do I, but I'm not going to make up a name."

The three of them walked among the low ruins of the small settlement built behind the broch during that same ancient era. Creeping dunes pushed against and over the walls, sand-grass, sea holly, and silver kale found footholds and century by century prised the drystone walls apart.

Another thing Chimiski didn't like was talking about the girl as if she was not there but he could think of no other way. "Where would a scrap like her come from?"

Rhayder could guess. A thrown-together escape plan, a small fast-moving group fleeing west. One by one her companions had been stripped away by the pursuit. Then, half-starved and alone in a port of one of the allied kingdoms, she stowed away on some trading scow and crossed to Cadgwith. There, the glass worms had finally caught her.

Chimiski, who knew a thing or two about running, about the Empire of Shadows, about glass magic, scowled unhappily. His beard stuck out. "Guinevere —"

"I'd much prefer —!" Rhayder exclaimed so vehemently it seemed his voice shook the sky.

Startled to his bones, Chimiski stared, open-mouthed. Beside him the girl trembled in her shoes. He snagged the girl with his great arm and pulled her against his barrel chest.

"I'm sorry," Rhayder said. "It's just that name... It should not be spoken here."

When Chimiski released the girl Rhayder pointed at his chin. While Chimiski had held her she had woven a short plait into his black beard.

• • •

SOMETIMES the beach required Rhayder's presence at night. The neap tide after equinox Rhayder went far out onto the exposed flats and marked out a labyrinth of seven great turns. Stars glittered hard, bright, and steady. Directly overhead a wide band of stars arched the darkness so densely they were like mist, like milk.

When he was done he looked across the cold sea, up at the boundless sky and finally back to land as if he committed them to memory. As was usual now, the girl watched from tideline. Rhayder raised his hand and she did the same. Then he ran the labyrinth, coat-tails flapping, sharp elbows and knees pumping. Left and right he ran, back and forth, in and out, to and fro, around and back, turning, always turning.

At the center he took a breath then raced back as fast as he'd come. At the mouth, breathing deeply, he walked away without looking back.

Within minutes an offshore wind began to blow. It held steady for a week.

• • •

DEEP in winter came a bright clear day so cold Rhayder thought the sea might freeze. As he crossed the sand flats he caught movement high overhead.

"Girl, look," he called out. "The glass dragons are back."

Terrified, she cast around for cover. Down by the tideline there was nothing. She sank into a tight rocking ball, her arms wrapped over her head.

Cursing himself, Rhayder ran to her. He should have thought, he had been so pleased to see them.

"Girl, it's all right. I'm so sorry." Rhayder dropped to his knees beside her. "They're not our enemy. They escaped, the same as you."

She uncurred a little and lay her hand on her chest across Guinevere Verdant's brand.

"No, not her, one of the others. But listen — when they made the glass dragons they over-reached, the creatures they wrought with their magic were too great, too wild, too wise. When the dragons saw who had created them, they refused them as masters and rebelled. They tried to fight free and the few that escaped — That's them overhead now. Now they circle the world each year. This is their season. And look, they have young."

Long necked and long tailed, their back-swept wings glittered like sunlight on restless water, their bodies by turns shone like brilliants or near invisible. Five adults flew in a V, with three young ones in between.

"They're free," Rhayder said. "Like you."

A green streak leaped out of the eastern skies, its origin far beyond the kingdoms on the distant shore. It burst among the glass dragons in a spray of crystal shards. Two full seconds later a thunderous concussion rolled across the sky. With it came the sound of the dragons screaming like broken bells.

"No." Rhayder was on his feet, fists clenched impotently by his sides. "No."

High overhead the glass dragons wheeled and cried, now only three adults and one young. Of the others there was no sign. Rhayder watched them circle frantically, then rise as one and flee west.

The girl beat Rhayder's chest with her small fists. She reached up and clamped his face between her palms, and turned his head.

A young glass dragon tumbled out of the sky, struggling and coiling and beating one good wing.

They both saw it would come down near the jetty, but into the sea or onto the sand?

The girl took off on the soft sand above the tideline. Rhayder set off after her. He saw the decision in the set of her body before she moved. "No, girl," he yelled, but she had already jumped the tideline onto the harder wet sand below.

By some supreme effort the falling dragon angled itself towards the sea. At the last moment it furled its wings and crashed keel-first into the icy waves.

Rhayder caught up with the girl as she turned seawards. He blocked her so hard she almost fell. "Go to the boat. Do you hear me? Do not go into the water."

She heeded him. Together they ran for *Little Mary* and had her out on the water in moments.

Rhayder tacked slowly back and forth on a scrap of sail. How to find a thing made of glass under the water? Then it was there, erupting in a burst of spray. It was about the size of a swan, beating one crystal wings on the water and trilling in panic from a long pipe-like and apparently eyeless head. Rhayder held out an oar and it floundered against it, unable to get a hold. He pulled the oar back and used it to test the depth. They were still in the shallows, no more than four feet. "Stay in the boat," he told the girl as he pulled off his boots. Then he rolled over the side into an atrociously cold sea.

The chill took his breath, his head burned and ached, for a while all he could do was cling to the gunwales and gasp. Exhausted, the young glass dragon slowly beat its good wing on the water. Perhaps it felt the cold like he did. They would have to be quick, already his body felt slow and clumsy.

He got his hands under its body and felt two clawed feet grip his arm. "All right, all right," he hissed, then clenched his teeth and ducked under the surface and lifted the dragon up. Rhayder kept his head down and his eyes screwed shut so when the dragon, off-balance and scrabbling its way onto the boat, flapped its wing the leading edge only cut his brow to the bone.

"Better my blood in the sea than yours," he said later as the girl stitched the wound. She'd stripped him, his hands too useless with cold to help. Wrapped in blankets he huddled beside the fire she'd built. It burned hot, quick and fast, she'd used his entire stock of driftwood kindling.

"S-s-silver lining," he shuddered, and managed a ghastly leer. "Can't feel a thing."

• • •

LIKE Chimiski, Rhayder was a little in awe of the wounded dragon. Fully grown it would be twice the size of the mule, which Chimiski swore he would never bring again. The two men watched the dragon glittering and flashing and casting reflected firelight across the walls and roof of the girl's room. Its long and jawless head lay in her lap, its crystal tail curved around her feet. As with Chimiski's mule the girl's silence appeared to calm the creature.

Chimiski pulled on his beard, which he now wore in plaits. "How does it see?"

"Don't know."

"What does it eat?"

"I don't know."

"Is it a male or —?"

"Chimiski, *I don't know.*"

"Well, what do you know?"

"Watch out for those wings."

Rhayder explained its arrival and the origin of the glass dragons. It took Chimiski some time to master his fear of all things glass, but he also had a firm opinion of the kind of man he thought he should be. Eventually he went down on one knee and reached out. "All right. Easy now," he breathed. "All right. Easy there."

The dragon didn't move, though the girl looked towards him. Chimiski grimaced and rolled his head. "I'm talking to myself, all right?" He lay his hand on the dragon's back and his eyes went wide. "It's warm."

In fact the dragon was hotter than warm, on the edge of discomfort for bare skin. It was also maimed. Whatever had struck it had ripped its right wing in two places from just behind the strong, flexible, and very sharp leading edge, all the way through to the back.

• • •

THE glass dragon did not eat. Rhayder and the girl tried everything: meat, fish, fowl; vegetables, fruit, leaves and grass; water, ale, wine, milk. One day Rhayder even drew off a minim of his own blood but the glass dragon reacted to it in the same way it did to everything else — complete indifference.

"I don't know, girl," Rhayder said one evening. The dragon followed her wherever she went and watched everything she did. For a creature of such beauty and magic it was a graceless thing when it walked, more so when it broke into a galumphing half-run. At night it slept beside her. He knew the girl was as worried as he. Perhaps it was pining, perhaps its wing caused it too much pain. He touched the torn wing once and the dragon drew back with a harsh tinkling sound that made him shiver.

Briefly it showed interest in Rhayder's beach patterns, scraping a bowl in the wet sand with one clawed foot. What it most loved was the sun. Every bright day through winter and spring brought it to the edge of the low headland. There, it stood motionless in the sunshine with wings half-raised for an hour or more. From behind it was almost invisible, a pencil sketch of itself on the sky.

"Like a cormorant," Rhayder said, and the girl nodded. A glass cormorant.

But it did not eat, and its wing did not heal.

• • •

A WET spring of gales and big seas edged into a cold summer. Chimiski brought news from Cadgwith and rumour from across the channel: a glass army attacked the border of one of the kingdoms; a castle under siege.

"With the five kingdoms in alliance and us at their backs, it's stalemate," Chimiski said.

And so it seemed. Rhayder tamped down his pipe and re-lit it. "For now."

Chimiski was a realist, he had to agree. Look at it any way you liked, the whole alliance was under siege.

Because of his absences Chimiski also saw things Rhayder missed, such as cuffs that no longer covered wrists or ankles. "She's growing."

Now Rhayder saw, he saw. Her head came halfway up his chest, how had he not noticed? She had kept her hair short, he'd let it grow out, but once, when he came back from Cadgwith, she saw he'd had a trim and presented him with scissors, bowl, and mirror. Rhayder revised his estimate of her age upwards. If

she had been undernourished her whole life it would have kept her small. She could easily be twelve or even fourteen. Lost in thought, his pipe went out. What if she wanted to go into town? What if she met ...? He worried for her future, but at night one thought kept him awake: what if she left and once again he was alone?

• • •

A MAN and a woman came on horseback, strangers to the girl. They picked their way across the saltmarsh towards the broch, unerringly finding the path. Both wore travelling clothes: knee boots, trousers of black leather, oil-cloth cloaks lined with fleece. Three willow cages hung from the woman's saddle, in each a grey pigeon.

The woman was tall and dark-eyed with the same thin nose as Rhayder, the same flat slash of a mouth. Straight black hair hung to her hips, a rapier at her waist. The man was huge, intimidating in his height and breadth, though his eyes were gentle and his mouth uncertain. A great sword hung at his hip, beneath his cloak a steel breastplate gleamed.

Rhayder greeted them warmly. They smiled down at the girl and were astonished by the glass dragon, which seemed far more interested in their horses.

"It doesn't eat," Rhayder assured them. "It doesn't even have a mouth."

"This is Robert Inchcombe," Rhayder said to the girl.

"And I'm Rosamunde," the black-haired woman said. "Rhayder's sister."

The three went straight up to Rhayder's room. The girl sat on the stairs with the dragon and listened.

"You can come back, Rhayder," Rosamunde said. "This was never an exile."

"The queen asks that you would." The knight, Robert, spoke in his slow deep way. "It's not a command."

The girl heard the creak and rustle of clothes, the slow clump of Rhayder's boots as he paced. The dragon roused itself, hopped and jumped down the stairs and went outside.

"No," Rhayder finally said. "I cannot. I'm needed here."

"To watch?" Robert exclaimed.

"To protect."

"We need you at court, Rhayder," Rosamunde spoke emphatically. "The Queen needs you. Given time we can —"

"If I leave here you might not have the time," Rhayder walked to the window that looked out over the sea. "That's the real threat, not some ambitious Earl."

• • •

THE girl found the dragon digging a shallow pit in the soft sand under a grass-capped dune, clumsily trying to heap sand aside with a wing. She sat and watched, and thought about what she had heard. Then she jumped down beside it and dug sand with her hands again.

The glass dragon pushed in front of her and lashed its tail. She tried to dig elsewhere and it blocked her again.

"Girl," Rhayder's voice came faint on the wind. "Girl, please come."

The dragon pushed her again, clearly annoyed. She tried to stroke its neck and calm it. It shrugged her off, jumped out of the pit and began to dig a new one a few feet away.

"Girl?" Rhayder called again.

When she walked away from the dragon it did not follow. From behind her came a word like a song from a silver horn. "Girl."

Astonished, she turned. The dragon stood beside a shallow pit. "Girl," it sang again.

Rhayder called. She ran and the glass dragon followed.

The two travellers were about to depart. The girl pulled urgently on Rhayder's arm and ran back to the dragon.

"What's this?" Rhayder smiled, puzzled. The girl knelt beside the dragon, stroking its throat.

"She never speaks?" Rosamunde said.

Rhayder sighed. "Never a word." He took his sister's hand and held out his other to Robert. "I will come, but not yet."

All three embraced. Rhayder stepped back to let the others mount. As they did, the glass dragon jerked as if startled. Its long glass head looked up to the riders, down to the horses, and back again.

"Girl," it sang.

• • •

HIGH summer solstice, long days of big skies and soft winds. Rhayder added grain to his monthly purchases for the three pigeons. They roosted in gaps in the broch's old walls, constrained by a simple pattern Rhayder drew and ran in the sand to stop them flying to far away. Down in the dunes the glass dragon followed them with its long blank head.

Rhayder and the girl shared watch duties more or less equally. Each day the dragon stood with wings half-raised in the sun for the hour each side of noon.

Among the instruments Rhayder owned was a unique item called the Ever-Expanding Eye, a large lens set in an octagonal bronze frame set with two topaz cabochons. One evening, when the dragon lay quiet, he placed the Eye over the tip of its wing and touched both cabochons. The Eye expanded the view of the wing and Rhayder saw it was formed from minute circular scales, each with three equidistant concavities around the edge. Every scale nested with the adjacent three, forming a continuous surface. The girl peered over Rhayder's shoulder. He expanded the view again, hoping to see how the edges connected and therefore how the damaged wing might be repaired. Instead, he saw that each scale was made up of smaller ones. He expanded again and again, then sat back, baffled. Even at the utter limit of its power, where ultimately small objects blurred and vibrated, the Ever-expanding Eye showed scales made of smaller ones.

That evening, as the cosy fire burned, Rhayder took down a book of stories and read one to the girl. This soon became an evening habit. The girl sat on the arm of his chair, Rhayder traced the words as he read, and the girl listened and followed his finger.

• • •

"GIRL." The dragon called her twenty times a day, a sound as beautiful as it was repetitive.

Over the months its excavations had grown precise, each sand bowl shaped by its wing into a shallow smooth and perfectly circular dish, with a quarter-crescent of sand around the back edge, where the sun fell full upon it.

"Girl," the dragon said. "Girl, girl."

She would always come and always watch, and the dragon would, after several minutes intermittently calling her name, stop work and silently stand beside her. A few days later it would begin another one.

A day came when she was very tired. Rhayder's latest pattern had not held the winds. She had stood watch through the night while he read, calculated, and paced his room smoking his pipe. "Something, or rather, *someone*, is blocking me," Rhayder admitted wearily.

"Girl," the glass dragon trilled from the dunes again and again. "Girl, girl."

It became too much. She clapped her hands over her ears and walked away. "Girl." The dragon came after her. "Girl, girl, girl."

She ran up to the broch, where an exhausted Rhayder still slept, then down to the salt marsh, a place she knew the dragon did not like. Rhayder had shown her the safe paths, the domed matts of yellow moss that looked like they would take your weight but would not; the rattling rush banks that could. Water drained back from the last high tide. Heedless, she splashed through it.

Half a mile inland the marsh turned first brackish, then fresh. Stunted willows tilted in the waterlogged ground beside a silent mere. Sunlight glinted on water the same blackish red as the tea Rhayder brewed. Small birds fluttered among the reeds; blue damselflies dipped and danced in the shallows; a yellow and black dragonfly darted, hovered, and swooped away.

She only became aware of the silence when she realized all she could hear was water trickling into her own footprints.

Something large crashed along the path behind her. Alarmed, she turned quickly.

The glass-dragon burst into view. It saw her and froze. Around them deep silence grew profound. The glass dragon slowly backed away. "Girl," it piped quietly. "Girl, girl."

Some sense made her turn. Behind her, a long-faced hag nine feet tall with skin like leather unfolded silently and slowly from the still water of the mere. Rotten hair straggled from her scalp, she peered hungrily down at the girl from eyes of white glass and sighed with dark joy.

The glass dragon plunged away towards the broch screaming madly. "Girl, girl, girl, girl, girl!"

The hag's jaw unhinged like a barn door. Black muck spilled through the gaps between tombstone teeth stained a sick and rotten green. "Found you," she said wetly. "My darling."

Trailing rot and weeds and muck, the hag reached forwards with black fingers as long as the girl's forearm. Lights in the hag's eyes spun like wheels, Guinevere Verdant's glass brand on the girl's chest sank into her body, her heart became glass and she could not move, she could not even breathe —

In a dizzying instant, faster than she could comprehend, time unravelled backwards to the morning, then whirled forwards again. The air opened beside her. Rhayder staggered grey-skinned from the mouth of a labyrinth of seventy-seven turns wielding a felling axe with a head of star-forged iron. He saw the hag, coughed and spat a mouthful of blood.

"Out, out, Guinevere Verdant. You are banished, and I was the one who did it."

"You!" The hag shrieked, smashed the water into a spray of silt and stinking mud and rushed forwards.

Rhayder swung his axe and lopped the hag's hand from her wrist. The hag leaned and snapped at his face with her long teeth. Rhayder deftly swayed aside and buried the blade in her forehead so the hag stood quivering.

"You are banned from this ground,

"Banned from this land,

"Banned under these skies."

Rhayder yanked the axe free, swung overarm and split the hag's head to her teeth.

"Out, now, Jenny Green-teeth. Out, out, out."

"I banish you from these shores. Come no more."

The hag collapsed into the mere, a sodden mass of rotting branches and long twigs draped in black weed. On the girl's chest Verdant's glass brand burned with cold fire, but she could breath again.

Rhayder waded into the mere and retrieved the two white glass spheres from the mass of rotten branches and dropped them into a leather pouch. Using the axe head, he pushed the waterlogged mass into deeper water, where it rolled and sank beneath the surface. Then he slogged back through the water and mud, crawled up the bank and rolled onto his back. His breath rattled in his chest, and he cleared his throat and swallowed. "Didn't know if I could run a pattern that big. Turns out, I can. Just."

The girl sat beside him and took his hand in his. Rhayder tried to squeeze it but fainted instead. When he came to, he sat up and coughed black blood in an exhausting spasm. When it was over he made a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob. He saw the fear in the girl's eyes. "I'll live but I need to rest." He pushed himself to his feet, swayed unsteadily and leaned on the axe. "Now, help me home."

Far in the distance the glass dragon piped frantically. "Girl. Girl."

• • •

RHAYDER fell unconscious in his bed for a day and a night. When he woke he lay for a moment, remembering. Then he dressed and shuffled downstairs, where he blew heat back into the embers of the night fire and made a light breakfast of a boiled egg, a slice of rye bread, and a mug of water. He ate slowly, nibbled at the bread and could not finish the egg. Dimly it occurred to him his clothes had been cleaned, his boots washed and oiled. He knew he needed to eat, he chewed more bread and washed it down with water.

Outside the sky dazzled, overcast with high white cloud. He wandered through the ruins behind the broch and heard splash-

ing from the ancient stone cistern where they bathed. "Girl?" he croaked, then again, louder. The splashing paused, then resumed.

She had her back to him and knelt waist deep in the water. On the side of the cistern lay a rag towel, a block of the rough soap they sold in Cadgwith, and a piece of grey pumice stone. She was shaking with cold and still she rubbed at her chest, hard and slow and methodical. When she reached for the pumice stone Rhayder found his voice.

"Oh, Girl, that's not going to work."

She stopped at his voice. Then, racked with shivers, she took the pumice and began to scrape.

"Stop, please." Rhayder begged. "I — I think I can help you but first, stop ... Then, if you trust me ... I need to see what she did."

The girl sat in the water for a long moment. Then she turned and let him see, her eyes flat and unfocused, her jaw set and rigid. Never had Rhayder seen so much determination among such misery. When he saw the glass marks all across her, and saw what they were, he clamped his mouth to stop himself crying out.

It was the thorn-bush, inverted. An upside-down tree of glass covered her chest. Glass roots rose to her shoulders, the barbed branches spread across her ribs and stomach. The thorn-bush inverted, Guinevere Verdant's great sign, her own sigil.

Rhayder draped a towel over her shoulders. "I cannot remove that, it's beyond my power. What I can — What I *think* I can do is break the bond. To do that I will need your help."

He carried her back to the broch. Now it was his turn to light the fire while she lay blanked-eyed and half dead under furs and blankets. The glass dragon burst in, rushed to her and burrowed under the covers. Its heat, the fire's warmth, and Rhayder's care slowly brought her back to the world.

Later, she sat sipping broth from a bowl cupped in both hands. Rhayder said, "You will need to run this pattern, not me. It will be a very great one and you will only have so much time, so you will need to be fast, and you must not break the walls."

The girl stared into the fire and nodded.

"It will be dangerous. Down on the sand she will see you. For this to work, she *needs* to see you. That means if we fail, she will come. Not like out in the marsh, that was just some sending she flung across the water. I mean she herself. But if ... *when* it works she'll be blind to you and you'll be truly free."

The girl looked up. Her misery was gone, her determination remained.

• • •

SHE kept above the tideline until Rhayder finished the pattern, a labyrinth of fifty-six loops and one hundred and eleven turns. He beckoned her forwards and she stepped barefoot over the flotsam of dried seaweed, driftwood and old feathers onto the wet sand. Rhayder stood away from the mouth of the labyrinth. At his feet lay a flat black stone the size of his hand, his great axe, a pair of stout gloves, and his belt pouch.

"When I say run, run to the center and wait. When I lower my hand, run back. There's only one path, you cannot make a false turn."

She nodded, poised but calm. Tension creased the corners of her eyes.

Rhayder pulled on his gloves and opened the pouch. "Now I'm going to let her see you." He tipped out the two white glass eyes he had taken from Jenny Greenteeth and held them up to the girl's face. Within moments there was movement deep within them, a glimmer and glint as if from far away. The lights shone brighter. Then, first in one eye then the other, the lights began to spin.

"Go now, fast and with care."

The slap and scrape of her bare feet sounded a fast beat as she sped towards the opening of the pattern. At first the path led directly into the center, then turned sharp right and ran a great curve to the far side. Rhayder watched her fly around it.

One path, no false turns, but time, time. Anxiety consumed him. Take too long and we fail. Step out of the pattern and we fail. Break a wall and we fail. And then she will come.

Rhayder gave his full attention to the shining lights in the white glass eyes. He looked to the girl, deep inside the pattern now. The further she ran the more the eye-lights faded. He watched her negotiate an intricate series of sharp turns and curves that folded back on themselves. *She's better at this than me, better than I ever was.*

The lights in the white glass eyes whirled furiously. The deeper she ran into the pattern the more the sigil she carried was hidden from sight.

Then she was in the center, the triple heart, at once destination, beginning, and half-way point. Sometimes it was a trap, a refuge, a pivot, or as it was now, today — the nowhere place.

She stood and raised her arm. Rhayder watched the glass spheres. Inside them the lights sparked, swirled, dimmed, dimmed again, then pulsed hard and bright, spinning furiously. In some power-place deep inside the Empire of Shadows, a mighty will worked its utmost. And failed.

The lights blinked out, the glass eyes turned a blotched and mottled grey, then solid sightless black.

"Now!" Rhayder shouted, dropped his arm and the girl burst into motion.

Rhayder put the black beads onto the flat stone and took up the axe.

She was almost home when she turned her foot in one of her own inbound footprints. Heart in mouth, Rhayder watched her hop, dance on her toes, whirl her arms — then spring forwards and fly for the entrance. On the stone the beads were still dull black and his heart beat again.

As soon as her feet touched the sand outside the pattern he crushed the black beads with the axe head, ground them to shards under star-forged iron, ground them into fragments, into a dust which became smoke that blew away and was gone.

They clung to each other. Rhayder laughed and brushed back her hair. "That's it," he said. "You're rid of the horrid —" He said a word she'd heard Chimiski use, but never before Rhayder. He caught her look and gave a lopsided smile. "Well," he said.

They sat on the sand and watched the incoming tide eat the pattern away so what they had done could never be undone.

• • •

"GIRL." The glass dragon made dishes in the sand again and again. "Girl."

Rhayder sat with her and watched the dragon work. First it scraped out a shallow bowl with its feet then swept it perfectly smooth with the turn and fold of its good wing. Finally, it heaped the excavated sand into a high half-crescent with that same wing.

"Girl," the dragon piped endlessly. "Girl."

"What if I was a dragon and had two good wings?" Rhayder wondered.

The girl stared, then carefully knelt behind the sand bowl and extended the heaped crescent around its edge to the other side. She shaped it with her hand as best she could but it was not perfect. Rhayder silently proffered his kerchief and she lightly swept the crescent smooth.

The dragon watched her work from the sunward side of the bowl, perfectly quiet and utterly still until she was done.

Then dragon raised its wings, its back to the sun, mantling the bowl like a hawk its prey. Two spots of bright light appeared on the crescent of raised sand.

Glass dragons cast no shadows. Light passes through them, and is focused by their wings. Like a lens.

"Of course," Rhayder said, awed by what he was seeing. "They are made of glass."

The dragon flexed its wings but the two brilliant spots would not come together. Flat on her belly the girl crawled behind the dragon and held the torn part of its wing in place. The spots merged, an astonishing dazzle of yellow-white heat and she was forced to look away.

"Girl." The dragon furled its wings and the light was gone. The crescent of sand had slumped and melted, the bowl was filled with a blaze of yellow-white liquid glass.

The dragon dipped the tip of its long mouth into the glass and drank.

Golden-red light flowed down the dragon's throat, new glass radiated in glowing veins through its body. Rhayder and the girl saw its heart and other muscles, its tapered eyes made from a thousand concentric rings. Veins of glowing glass spread down its tail and along the hard sharp leading edge of its wings, and down through them.

The glass-light sank to intense red, faded, and was gone. The dragon raised its wings and with a ripple and shimmer, and a sound of tinkling scales, the tears in the damaged wing healed.

Mesmerised by what he was witnessing, Rhayder still thought of the girl. Her eyes, her face, her whole body glowed with a joy he shared, but without any of his sadness.

The dragon beat its wings, powerful strokes that pulled it onto its toes. It sang a cascade of trilling glass bells, then leapt into the sky and flew, higher and higher in widening circles around the broch. Down on the sand the girl hugged herself, and she laughed, the first real sound she had ever made since Chimiski found her.

In a great gust of wind the dragon came back to them. Today, it came back. Finally the girl realized what the dragon's healing meant, and although she still smiled, her eyes shone and she blinked and blinked again.

• • •

ALL things change. Rhayder finally had to acknowledge the change in himself.

"The thing about maze magic ... Well, first thing they're not mazes, they're —" The girl sat patiently, and Rhayder smiled and shook his head. "All right, you've run one, you know what they are. There's no limit to what can be done running the right pattern; the limit is how far you can run in the time. That day in the salt marsh, the pattern I ran that re-ravelled time was greater than anything I've ever tried before. I took too long and it hurt me; I couldn't do it again, I wouldn't even come close.

"Anyway, what I'm saying is this: I could teach you. If you want to learn."

For a few weeks life at the broch became almost perfect, a long bittersweet moment. Summer passed its peak, evenings grew cooler, the nights longer. A gentle autumn promised.

Rhayder and the girl watched the coast and made the winds blow. During the day he taught her patterns and their running, the intricacies and costs of maze magic. In the evenings they sat beside the fire in candlelight while Rhayder read from his books, and she, at first with many mistakes, wrote down what he said.

They were out on the sand one day and Rhayder saw her anew. *How can I call her girl? She's a woman, a pattern-maker, a maze-witch more fleet and agile than I ever was.*

She danced up to him out of a warding pattern she'd run, "Safety on the Shores," happy and smiling. She had made it look easy.

"You have a name, don't you?" Rhayder said.

She nodded, serious now. Yes.

"Then — don't tell me. And don't write it down." Her writing was near perfect now, she kept her own journal. "You're becoming a power person and real names are power. Keep yours to yourself so it can't be turned against you." He'd raised his voice and calmed down. "Anyway, now you know. When you're ready, it's a choice."

• • •

THE glass dragon flew, and out in the dunes on sunny days a brilliant light shone as it fed and grew. In the beginning the dragon had slept beside the girl; now she slept against it, wrapped by the curls of its tail and blanketed by its wing. Each day it flew higher and further, gaining strength, and each time it came back.

Rhayder thought he would be there when the day came, but new winds blew and Chimiski came across the dunes with his mule, and with news: a glass army marching west, greater than any before.

"We have to help them." Rhayder told Girl. "The five kingdoms are our walls. They need an army, and they need my patterns too."

She knew, she understood. When she fetched him his axe he pressed it back into her hands. "I'm no warrior."

Rhayder wrote on a scrap of paper, rolled it inside a tiny tube he attached to one of the pigeons, and let the bird free. Girl helped him load *Little Mary*, emptying the stores, putting her hand over his mouth when he protested there would be nothing left for her.

"I'll want that mule back, so don't spoil him," Chimiski told her.

Chimiski she hugged, burying her face into the plaits of his beard. With Rhayder she just stood and looked as he stepped down into *Little Mary* and hoisted the sail like it was any normal day. Chimiski pushed out the bow, jumped in as the wind filled the canvas, then sat in the stern and took the tiller.

"I'll come back." Rhayder meant to say it lightly but it came out like a promise he nailed to her heart.

• • •

THE next dawn the dragon woke her with a song. An armada of ships covered the sea to the horizon, a thousand vessels great and small. Girl ran out to the edge of the headland and looked and looked for a small pinnacle with a single mast and two red sails, but the ships sailed east into the rising sun and she could not find her.

They had sailed on the ebb. She hurried down to the beach marked out a labyrinth of seven sweeping turns, the first pattern she had seen Rhayder run, and the first he had taught her.

She smiled when she felt the wind turn offshore and strengthened. This she could do.

Up behind the broch Chimiski's mule was braying.

• • •

SHE kept the broch and kept the watch. Once a month she took the mule to Cadgwith for supplies. The town was quiet, half the fishing fleet laid up. *The Mermaid* was near empty, and Mabs, who did not recognize her, was alone for the pot-boy had gone over the water.

Every three months a black-cloaked rider came to the broch, handed Girl a pouch of gold, and rode away again.

Bitter winter, bitter war. News came when it did, late and equivocal and filled with dread. A great battle fought and lost, massed knights on their chargers encased in glass fog. Then, a counter-thrust deep into the Empire of Shadows — steel and fire against white-eyed horror. And a last wild rumour: a citadel of thorn-glass, a power-place shattered by a single man. One who walked a crooked path.

Deep in the winter the glass dragon began a new song. Sonorous, deep and melodic, it spread across the landscape and filled the sky. It had grown to the size of Chimiski's mule, with a wingspan the width of the broch.

One day three great glass dragons wheeled in a sky of wind-torn cloud. With them flew another, half-grown.

Her dragon went to the edge of the outcrop, where the wind rose. It spread its wings and lofted thirty feet on the updraft, hovered, dipped, swung back and landed.

She had known this day would come. She took a step backwards, then another.

The glass dragon looked at her for a long, long moment. "Girl," it said. Then, in a great crash of wings and air, it was gone.

• • •

GIRL lived alone in the broch, as Rhayder had once lived in his loneliness. By the time the year had gone and winter had returned her clothes were once again too small. She found that some of Rhayder's, with adjustment, could be made to fit.

Then Chimiski was back from across the wild winter sea in *Little Mary*. The boat had suffered, the bow fire-blackened, one of the dark red sails now replaced by some scrap of dirty canvas.

Chimiski had suffered too, still barrel-chested, his beard still plaited, but thin in the face, his shoulder and arm burned by glass war. She'd come to the sound of his fist on the door, and his voice. Chimiski stared white-eyed in the wind and rain before hurrying in. "Gods, for a moment I thought you were him."

When he was warm and fed, Chimiski said what he'd come to say. "Rhayder's alive, but Verdant has him. We went right up against her, toe-to-toe in the heart of her empire. A pattern great enough for horsemen to ride. All year it took him. We rode it round, in from where we were and out again to where *they* were. The shadow palace, the invisible city..." Chimiski's voice trailed away. "That's a place and no arguing. We killed them, Girl. Not all, not enough... And not her, not Guinevere Verdant. She ... Like I said, she has him. It was a raid, a spear-strike at the head, and it almost worked. Almost. Rhayder got us in and out but he — he wasn't strong enough to come back."

"Verdant won't kill him." Chimiski stared into the fire. "She wants to steal his magic."

Girl wrote a note, rolled it into a tube, and sent a pigeon away across the frozen land. While they waited, Chimiski said hello to his old mule, then ran *Little Mary* up out of the water and worked on her seams and sails. Girl studied at Rhayder's desk, drew her designs and made her calculations. And she watched the sky in the east, for the season was coming and she hoped upon hope.

Late on the fourth day Rhayder's sister, Rosamunde, and the knight, Robert rode in across the marsh. The sun had set by the time Robert had put the horses with the mule. Everyone went into the broch, Robert offered Chimiski an awkward salute. "General."

"Don't be daft, Baron." He grinned at Girl. "Me, hah. Imagine it."

That evening Girl made up four travelling packs while Robert and Chimiski cooked a pottage of ham, potatoes, and leeks. Rosamunde wrote a note to be sent with the last pigeon. The beacon needed a warden, and whoever came would care for the animals too.

"So, how are we going to do this?" Robert said.

"*Little Mary's* smart enough," Chimiski said.

Robert shifted uneasily. "That little thing?"

"She's been there and back."

"I prefer something with a saddle."

In the morning, as they readied their packs they heard bells in the sky. Girl clapped her hands and pulled the others outside.

In a crash of wind a full-grown glass dragon thumped down. Two long scars marked one wing. Girl lay her hand on its shoulder and it chimed a soft song.

Three more dragons landed in a storm of wind. A fifth circled above.

"No saddles, but I think I'm in love," Robert beamed.

"Oh no," Chimiski said very definitely. "Oh no."

Girl ran back to the broch and returned with Rhayder's axe of star-forged iron.

The dragon with the scarred wing dipped its long neck. Girl swung her leg over its shoulders and gripped its flanks with her knees.

White showed all around Chimiski's eyes. "You have got to be —"

"If Verdant learns maze-magic, it's over," Rosamunde said. "We need you. We need your experience."

Robert formed his hands into a stirrup. "After you, General."

Rosamunde lightly swung up onto the fourth dragon. She half drew a rapier with a blade of black glass, then sheathed it. "It will be good to fight things that can die."

Girl's dragon rose up, beat its wings three times then subsided. It looked back at her across its shoulder.

"Rhayder," she said.

Four glass dragons leaped into the air and joined their companion. They circled the old stone broch, then turned east and flew across the restless water.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

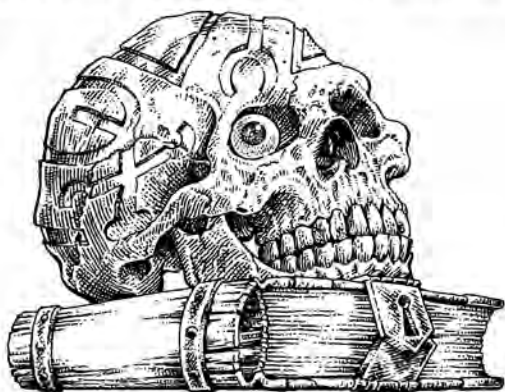
David Gullen was born in Africa and baptised by King Neptune on the ship that took him to England. In a previous century he was a European GENCON AD&D Team Champion, and later on, an avid LARPer. He now lives a quieter life in South London, in a snug house concealed by several tree ferns, with his partner, the fantasy writer Gaie Sebold, and the nicest cat you ever did see. You can find out more about his short stories and other scribblings at davidgullen.com.

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By TERRY OLSON

Enter the monster pit! Down here in the pit, we provide tabletop RPG fans with playable game statistics for the creatures in this issue of *Tales From The Magician's Skull*. These game stats are grounded in the aesthetic of the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game*, or DCC RPG. DCC RPG is heavily inspired by the stories of Appendix N, a collection of fantasy and science fiction works that inspired Gary Gygax to create *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Tales From the Magician's Skull* can be read on its surface as simply great stories, but players of role playing games (DCC RPG or otherwise) may also recognize that these stories are designed to pay homage to Appendix N and its role in providing inspiration to RPG games. Therefore we present this appendix of game statistics for the various creatures described herein. All of these stats are for the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game* system, although you may be able to easily adapt them to other systems as well. Gamers — enjoy!

Three Festivals

Fury: Init +4; Atk sword +3 melee (1d6+3 plus ignite) or whip +3 melee (1d4+3 plus ignite, reach 10'); AC 19; HD 3d8; MV fly 40'; Act 1d20; SP swarming strength (if multiple furies attack the same target, then each gains a bonus to hit and damage equal to the number of furies; e.g., 3 furies attacking the same target each gain an additional +3 bonus to hit and damage), ignite (target makes Reflex save with DC 5+damage inflicted; if failed, target takes 1d6 fire damage; damage occurs each round until save is made), immune to fire, death throes (upon reaching 0 hp a fury's essence returns to elemental plane of fire, reappearing on the material plane in 1 week's time); SV Fort +1, Ref +3, Will +2; AL N.

The heart of the world, standing like a dark sky above the city, was no longer wholly lightless. Bright red sparks were swarming in the zenith ... They descended from the world's dark heart in hundreds, thousands. They seemed to wear no clothes but their skin was scaled with overlapping plates like armor. They were armed with flaming swords and whips; they flew about on batlike wings.

The Raven-Feeder's Tower

Draugar: Init +2; Atk longsword +2 melee (1d8+2); AC 14; HD 2d8; MV 25'; Act 1d20; SP war-band trio (when three draugar fight the same group, each gains +3 to all rolls, +3 to AC, and 3 temporary hp; effects last until one of the trio is destroyed), polymorph (once per day a draugar can change form for 1 hour, though number of HD remains the same), speech, un-dead traits (immune to cold damage, crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +2; AL C.

"They fight in threes. Three was a number of great power in the religion of the Ancient Ones. Unless they've assaulted the castle repeatedly and the dragon's killed all the rest while I slept, there'll be thousands more out there." — Some inflated themselves to great size, twice as tall as a living man; some turned themselves into fire or smoke, some prowled around in the shape of wolves, stamped the earth with enormous feet like gigantic hares, or grew tusks like a wild boar. But most contented themselves with their natural form — primitive warriors like those he'd already seen.

Odin's Vengeance (raven swarm): Init +8; Atk ripping beaks +8 melee (2d8); AC 16; HD 12d8; MV fly 60'; Act d20 special; SP attacks all targets within 200' cube, immune to non-magical weapons, half damage from non-area attacks, immune to mental effects (sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +10, Ref +11, Will +12; AL L.

The luminous blackness of the night sky was darkened by an even deeper-sable cloud. Blotting out the moon, covering the trees, filling all the air about the draugar horde, a shrieking, flailing, ghastly swarm of frenzied ravens descended upon the still-animated carrion like locusts upon a field of maize ... In minutes, only the feasting ravens and the writhing remnants of their banquet remained.

Blue Acherar

Painted-Wall Fiend (type II demon): Init +7; Atk claw +5 melee (1d7+5) and bite +4 melee (2d4); AC 18; HD 6d10; MV 30' and astral flight 60'; Act 2d20; SP illustrative invisibility (blends perfectly into two-dimensional art; revealed with *detect invisible*, but Will save vs. spell check permitted), charming caress (*charm person* with skin-on-skin contact, spell check 10+2d7, costs one action), spell stealer (demon makes Will save vs. spell check when observing a spell being cast; if successful they treat the spell as memorized; can "store" 3 spells this way), astral traveler (can damage astral beings and coexist in astral plane), demon traits (infravision, ESP, immune to non-magical weapons, half damage from fire, acid, cold, electricity, gas); SV Fort +2, Ref +6, Will +8; AL C.

The wall bulged, ran with rainbow colors and the girl-shaped demon stepped out on the flagstones. "So you are in your astral body now." She extended her claws. "No dragon skin there. The same occult stuff I am made of, but so much flimsier. You know, I could shred you like wet paper." ... Her claws lengthened, became glittering scimitars. She slashed down and opened him up from sternum to pelvis. His false body shuddered, dissolving in a rain of blue sparks. She spoke his true name, smiling, and then the silence returned.

Pawns' Gambit

F'd'gryt'j's Avatar (Beetle Golem): Init +3; Atk strike +4 melee (1d6 plus enveloping beetles); AC 15; HD 10d8; MV 30' or climb 30' or waterwalk 30'; Act 1d20; SP enveloping beetles (target must make DC 14 STR check or be partially enveloped with MV reduced to 0; each round, target takes additional 1d6 on avatar's turn until they spend an action to pass the STR check; avatar can simultaneously envelop up to 3 man-sized targets), biting aura (anyone within 10' of avatar must make DC 14 Reflex save each round or suffer 1d3 damage), half damage from non-area attacks, immune to mental effects (sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +8, Ref +5, Will +10; AL C.

He looked around and saw what at first looked like water flowing though the patchy grass — a tide of beetles, pouring from the cracks in the surrounding sepulchers and converging on him. He ran through them, crunching and slipping, but not without a few climbing his boots with every step. They were starting to bite his legs. Before him in the path a solid shadow was forming from the ground up, like a woman rising from kneeling, but with outlines seething — a mass of beetles, taking human form. It flowed toward him.

The Necromancer and the Forgotten Hero

Revenant: Init +3; Atk freezing grasp +4 melee (1d4+4 plus grave chill) or wielded weapon +4 melee (dmg+4); AC 17; HD 5d8; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP grave chill (DC 14 Fort save or suffer -1d to all rolls for 1 hour with cumulative effects on successive chills), life skills (retains class abilities and memories from previous life), un-dead traits (immune to cold damage, crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +3, Ref +5, Will +3; AL N.

This was no desiccated corpse that had lain dormant for centuries. Instead it appeared to be the well-muscled body of a living man ... were it not for the unhealthy blue tint of its skin ... The undead warrior examined the fresh scar on his arm with eyes which lacked pupils and irises. Turning his face to the bewildered Akbu, he reached out and clutched the assassin's throat. The fingers grasping Akbu felt like they were made of hardened ice.

Hellhound: Init +5; Atk bite +6 melee (1d8+2 plus mangle limb) and claw +4 melee (1d4+2); AC 16; HD 6d8; MV 40', jump 20'; Act 1d20 (bite) + 1d16 (claw); SP mangle limb (if hellhound's modified attack roll exceeds target AC by 3 or more, bite inflicts additional 1d8 damage to a random limb, leaving it useless until magically healed), infallible tracker (once exposed to a target's possession, hellhound can track target up to 30 miles away), infernal expiration (once reduced to 0 hp, hellhound continues to fight until it suffers damage from a subsequent attack); SV Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +3; AL C.

From the folds of his robe he produced a triangular vial. He poured its contents into the hounds' water bowls. The canines lapped up the concoction, and a bizarre transformation immediately occurred. They swelled in size, growing nearly as large as lions, and their eyes burned red like flames stoked by devils. The snarling hounds became rambunctious, bounding about the room with wild abandon, ready to seek out their master's enemy and tear him to bloody pieces.

The Glass Dragon

Glass Worm: Init +2; Atk mouth tendrils +2 melee (1d6 plus glass burn); AC 16; HD 1d12; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP glass burn (DC 14 Fortitude save or suffer additional 1d4 damage to both hp and Strength), corroding defense (non-magical weapons suffer a cumulative 2d to damage each time they hit a worm; a weapon with damage die reduced to below 1d2 is useless), immune to acid, immune to fire; SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +0; AL N.

His lamp showed him a barefoot girl perhaps nine years old, backed up against one of the great black elm pilings. She slashed at the blind questing heads of a mass of slithering glass worms with nothing but a piece of kelp stem. Chimiski saw her right arm was broken, that one bare foot was glass-burnt and useless. A dozen worms came at her, each three yards long and thick as his arm. Already they were spreading out, flanking her on both sides. The translucent beauty of their segmented bodies only added to Chimiski's frozen horror.

Muck Hag: Init +2; Atk bite +4 melee (2d6); AC 13; HD 6d8; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP muck spew (2 times per day, 30'x30' cone, acid damage equal to hag's current hp, DC 16 Fort save for half damage), mud aura (each round, those within melee range of the hag must pass a DC 12 Reflex save or suffer -1d to attacks due to sprays of mud obscuring their vision); SV Fort +6, Ref +6, Will +6; AL C.

Behind her, a long-faced hag nine feet tall with skin like leather unfolded silently and slowly from the still water of the mere. Rotten hair straggled from her scalp, she peered hungrily down at the girl from eyes of white glass and sighed with dark joy ... The hag's jaw unhinged like a barn door. Black muck spilled through the gaps between tombstone teeth stained a sick and rotten green.

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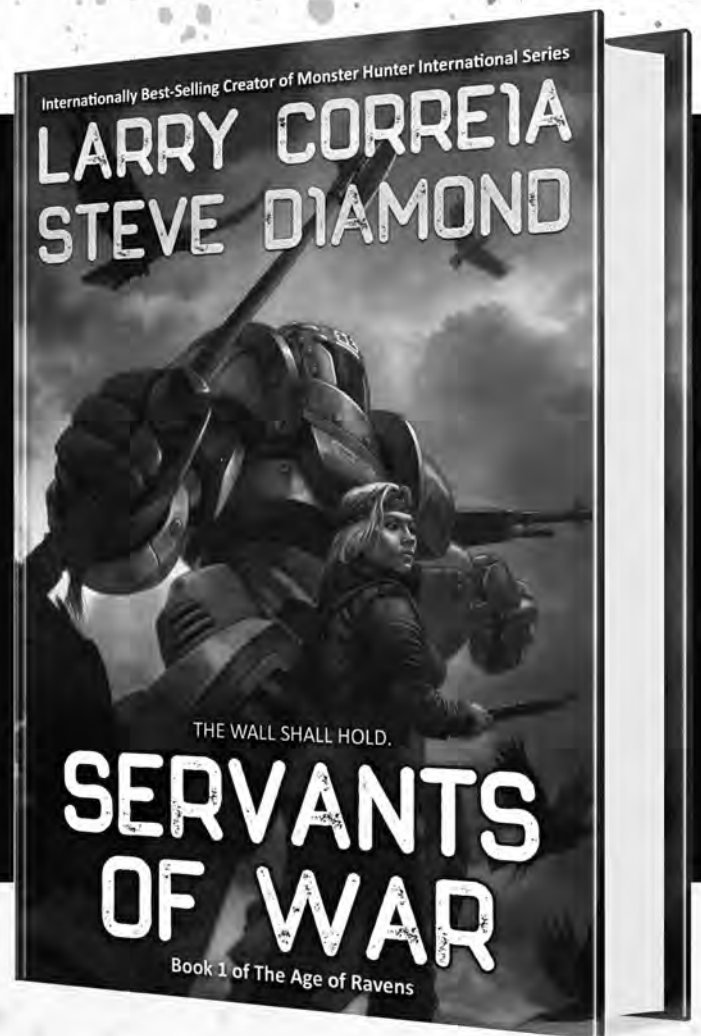
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Three Festivals, by James Enge

A Tale of Morlock Ambrosius: Kalx, brazen defender of the city, had left a trail of ruins in his wake. Morlock followed the trail until he passed the border of the city — the line that Zlynth had called the pomerium. By the time Morlock caught up to the brazen monster, Kalx was already outlined in scarlet flames, fighting a cloud of Furies.

Blue Achernar, by Tais Teng

An Homage to Clark Ashton Smith: Lady Magida had slept in the tombs of magicians so feared that their names had never been written down, walking into their death-dreams, leafing through their grimoires that had long ago turned to dust. When she strode through the necropolises the ghûls fled like whimpering hares.

Pawns' Gambit, by Nathan Long

A Tale of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser: The monks howled at this violation of their sacred place, and Mouser saw he had been incorrect when he had thought them all unarmed. From every sleeve sprang a dagger, and they held them high as they rushed to encircle him.

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