

Tales From The **MAGICIAN'S** **SKULL**

SPECIAL





THE SKULL SPEAKS:

I am in rare good humor as I gaze once more upon these essays. Not so long ago, this grand enterprise was but a dream. They called me mad, to dream it, but they were fools to doubt me. With your aid, my first steps have achieved fruition, and new tales in the sacred genre have been crafted for my pleasure — and for yours!

The essays included here were composed by those first few who heeded my call, writing well on varied topics so that word should spread of our doings, and so that others would learn of the power of sword-and-sorcery fiction.

Read well then, mortals. Heed these words and savor them. This was the beginning. Glories await us in the months and years to come. Glories brought to you by me!

FOREWORD

Greetings, fellow swordsmen and sorcerers!

In October 2017, more than 800 fans backed the Kickstarter that brought life to *The Magician's Skull*. Now you will have the opportunity to hear his Tales!

As part of the Kickstarter, a select few hardy souls committed additional coins in order to join the Legion of the Skull. These backers received many fine gifts from beyond the known lands, including the booklet you hold in your hands.

This collection of wisdom contains the many essays published over the course of the Kickstarter as updates. These essays are written by the contributors to *Tales From The Magician's Skull* and contain many ancient truths of the genre.

Additionally, this booklet contains one bonus story. *The Way of Serpents* is a stand-alone sword-and-sorcery tale by Howard Andrew Jones that was previously published by Goodman Games in our 2016 Gen Con Program Guide. For those of you who run in “fiction paths” rather than “gaming paths,” we think this will be the first time you’ve read it. It features some characters who also appear in *Tales From The Magician's Skull* #1 and is a great complement to that issue.

Enjoy!

– Joseph Goodman, Publisher

THE WAY OF SERPENTS

By **HOWARD ANDREW JONES** • Illustrations By **MICHAEL WILSON**

FROM darkness they led him, where he had lived amongst the rats and the unseen chittering things that sang within the walls. A shirtless, barefoot slave preceded him, lantern dangling from his outthrust hand. Behind marched the guards, grim men identical in turquoise kilts, curved blades, even the tramp of their feet, so clockwork in its precision that Hanuvar left off counting his own paces to number theirs.

The procession wound its way past the cell doors standing silent and gray like so many tombstones and into the storage rooms stacked with wooden barrels and chests. To the left lay the stairs, which led to blessed sunlight and an unpleasant end. Twelve paces lay between him and that first most step, then ten — and then the slave veered right, under a stone archway. Hanuvar counted these paces too. He meant to know the way even without a lantern.

Another turn through another ancient keystone and they arrived at a hall awash with such brilliance that Hanuvar narrowed his eyes to the glare. Three days within the cell had left him vulnerable even to the relatively feeble torchlight flickering in hallway cressets.

The corridor held a mystery greater than the flood of light. Three men, bared to the waist, worked beside a pile of stone and a bucket of mortar. Without a word between them they set the stones and spread the mortar, shaping a low wall across the bottom of an open doorway. On the other side of the wall sat a basket of pearls and a shelf of jeweled goblets, bathed in lantern light. Did the Islanders mean to wall him in with the treasures? That made no sense. The ruler would earn a kingly fee for turning him over to the Dervan Empire. He'd known that was his fate ever since they'd found him half drowned on their beach. Hanuvar had assumed a Dervan ship was already on its way to retrieve him.

Of a sudden the slave set his lantern on the floor and genuflected, for he'd caught sight of the stout man in ochre wearing a jeweled head band.

"On your knees." One of the guards prodded Hanuvar with the butt of his staff.

Hanuvar smirked as he knelt. The stone was cold against his skin.

"I do not like your smile." So saying, Narata's king stopped before him. Hanuvar had not only an excellent vantage point from which to observe the ruler's sandals, flecked with precious stones of jade and onyx, but to choose his target. They'd left him no knife, but obligingly granted him a tarnished spoon to eat with, the handle of which he'd sharpened into a point and tucked into his own kilt.

Yet he did not strike. This meeting did not have the air so much of an execution as an interview. Perhaps things were not so desperate as they seemed.

"You may rise," the king said, as if he was permitting a grand luxury.

"Slow," one of the guards cautioned. Hanuvar obliged him, his eyes fixed upon the king's.

Each could count almost fifty years, but aside from olive-hued skin there were no other similarities. The king was small, balding, his chin and cheeks padded with fat. Hanuvar was a full head taller, his shoulders broad, his scarred arms and legs corded with muscle. He wore a simple gray tunic and a rough island kilt, for they'd stripped him of his own garments. His eyes too were gray, set in a weathered face stubbled with a silvery beard. They had allowed him no blades within his cell.

"I have treated you well, General" the king said. "I hope you will remember that."

He remembered the dark cell with the meager food, the pillowless stone shelf, and the doom he knew they'd summoned for him. He kept his expression bland. "I will remember all you've done for me."

"Circumstances being what they are," the king continued, "I'm willing to offer you an alternative to imprisonment and death at the hands of the Dervan."

Hanuvar said nothing.

"Are you not curious?"

He awaited details. "Speak on, oh king."

"They say you know the ways of the great serpents."

The way of serpents? Whatever he meant, he clearly expected an answer in the affirmative. "I do."

The king motioned Hanuvar's guards back. It would be but a moment's effort to lift the sharpened handle from his belt and press it to the king's throat. Only a few moments ago he would have leapt at the chance. Now he waited. It would be far better to walk free after striking a bargain than attempting to flee with a hostage.

"This morning," the king said, "a kekainen bird brought a message from the western isles. The southerners have swept forth in a great raid. Their ships fill the ocean. They have burned and looted throughout the Leneridines, and they are on their way toward Narata."

That explained only a little. Did the king truly hope to hide his wealth from the merciless southerners behind a false dungeon wall?

"Have you nothing to say?" the king snapped.

"Do you have a question?"

The king scowled. "Can you or can you not summon serpents?"

Of course not. No man alive knew how to summon the great winged serpents. Those who'd never worked with them misunderstood the nature of their relationships with humans. "I know their ways."

"And can you master them?"

Now he lied outright. "Yes."

The king stared hard at him, then nodded once. "In the center



of my island lives a great winged serpent. My grandfather's father made a pact with the creature, so it would protect our island if we protected her from harm. I'm sending a priestess to remind the beast of its duty. And I am sending you to command it should it break its oath."

"And I'm to go free afterward?"

"Of course."

A lie, clearly, but Hanuvar nodded as though he believed. "I'll require the flask I carried."

The king's eyes narrowed. "My wizard tells me it's full only of ashes. Is it some magic unknown to him?"

"How do you think I controlled the serpents?"

The king nodded quickly.

"I'll want a sword," Hanuvar continued.

"When your task is through."

"And passage from the island." The king would never grant Hanuvar that, but it was crucial he think Hanuvar believed him.

The king breezily agreed to the pledge he never meant to honor. "Certainly. Now you must hurry—the kekainen bird arrived hours ago. My priestess tells me that means the southerners will arrive near dawn. These two will lead you where you need to go."

"I'll want food." The lunch hour had come and gone without any meal. "And a shave."

"Fine. Eat quickly."

The king half turned, waving a hand, then halted in mid-motion. "Hold." He considered Hanuvar once more. "You know siege craft, don't you?"

"Somewhat."

The irony of asking this of the general who'd brought the Der-van Empire to its knees didn't register upon the king. "This stone work — will it hold? Given time to dry?"

"Yes. But if you want to fool the southerners you have to do a better job of disguising your entry way."

The king's jowls shook in agitation. "What do you mean?"

Hanuvar advanced to the doorway. Through the opening he saw a couch, wine jars, and a food-laden table set before gold statues and baskets with precious gems. "The southerners are old hands at sniffing out treasure. They'll see the outline of where a doorway used to be. If you want to conceal yourself, you need to rip out the doorway's edges to blend the stone with the existing wall."

The king blinked at him, turned his head to consider the masonry. Two of the workmen looked up while the other troweled mortar. "Idiots," the king said finally, "why didn't YOU point that out? Rip this down and start over! And hurry!"

They blinked in surprise then started pulling down the stones they'd just laid. Hanuvar expected they'd be killed the moment they finished their work so none could reveal the king's hiding place. He couldn't help wondering what measures the king had taken to ensure his way out should his loyal retainers be slain — or forget to open the vault.

But that was the king's concern.

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THE cliff's edge loomed just past his outstretched fingers. Hanuvar shifted his left foot, then froze as a trail of dirt crumbled beneath his sandal. It spilled down onto the upturned face of one of the twin guards—Meshtar, he thought—then plummeted the long distance to the ground below.

Meshtar shook his head like an angry dog. Hanuvar secured his footing, and with a little more leverage, found solid purchase with his fingers. He hauled himself up, dislodging an even larger stream of dirt into the twin. In another moment he had gained the plateau. Bright blue flowers blossomed on green stalks, waving in the warm air.

Hanuvar lay down on his stomach in the tough grasses and offered his hands to Meshtar. The guard grunted his thanks, then flopped down beside him to aid the others.

Next up was dark-haired Rudra, General of Narata, though general was a grand term for the commander of an island force numbering less than a hundred warriors. Hanuvar had seldom seen a man's hair so carefully styled; it was feathered into an upthrust wave. Hanging from his belt, opposite the garish sword sheath, was Hanuvar's flask. The general had insisted on carrying it himself until they reached the serpent, saying he didn't trust Hanuvar not to work sorceries against them.

Following him was the little sea priestess, Lalasa. The silver pendant of her office hung down to the azure bodice that cupped her breasts. Her flounced skirt swirled about her slender legs as they raised her. She stepped away to wipe dirt from her hands.

Finally came Meshtar's brother, Beshkar, his small eyes set and determined. Hanuvar had already decided the general was a soldier only in title. These two were a different matter. Strong, able, silent: they were the real threat.

Once he was up, Hanuvar stood, unstopped his wineskin, and drank.

It had been a long afternoon. Hours before they had advanced past huddled refugees into the jungle's depths. The island's only large settlement was a two-hour hike behind them, lost beyond the waving greenery.

"How much farther?" Rudra asked.

Lalasa answered, her voice high and clear. "We look for a bridge now, to Mount Darata." The sea priestess shook out her hair, gathered it together and tied it more tightly behind her head. She ignored the frank appraisal from the twins.

"Let's keep moving," Rudra ordered.

Lalasa pointed left. This time Rudra led, though the priestess kept close.

There were no man-made trails, but they came to a goat track, and walked it as it veered left. Hanuvar pushed past a brown vine round as his arm and stepped over a fallen tree bole thick with yellow ants.

They reached a clearing. A little round hut and goat pen sat in its center. The rickety bamboo gate stood open, and five goats cropped at the thick green grass that lay between the jungle and the cliff edge thirty paces on. A wooden suspension bridge stretched from it to another cliff side.

Rudra stepped into the clearing without hesitation.

Something crashed violently through the brushes on their right. Hanuvar whirled. A leathery, skeletal thing erupted from the jungle, leapt in front of the bridge, and opened its beak to hiss.

Rudra froze, but the twins drew steel. Lalasa touched her pendant.

The creature was half again the height of a man. Leathery skin flaps stretched between its long bony arms and its waist. It shook its blue feathered head and clacked its beak. "If you would pass, you would pay!" It rasped.

"What would you have us pay?" Hanuvar asked.

It tilted its head and stabbed the sea priestess with sharp eyes. "Give me the soft one!"

"We have fine wine with us," Lalasa countered.

The thing cocked its head, swift and bird-like.

"Yes," she said. "Fine and sweet."

"Drink!"

Lalasa looked to Rudra, who stared back blankly until she pointed at his wineskin and motioned toward the monster.

Rudra fumbled to untie the winesac from his belt. He threw it at the thing's clawed feet.

It bent down, snatched the winesac, fumbled with the stopper for a moment before biting it off. It upended it and guzzled greedily. Dark blue wine trickled down either side of its beak.

Meshtar swore in disgust.

"More!" the thing shook the empty skin at them.

"We will give you more if you let us pass," Hanuvar said.

The bird-thing's gaze shifted between them. "You will each give me the sweet."

"We'll give you one more," the sea priestess promised. "But you must let us pass. We'll leave it for you on the bridge's far side."

"All!" It flapped its arms rapidly.

"One," the priestess said. "Or we will go back into the jungle."

The bird thing hopped once, then scurried to one side. "I will watch. If you trick me, I can eat you."

"Try and we'll kill you," Rudra growled.

Hanuvar led the way onto the bridge.

The bird-thing obviously hadn't spent its spare time in maintenance. Some of the ancient planks pointed skyward, as though heavy weights had been dropped on their far ends. Hanuvar and the others stepped carefully over the gaps, through which they glimpsed a gurgling jungle stream a hundred feet down.

They soon stood on the other side. Lalasa lifted her wineskin high so the monster would see it, then left it on the bridge. The creature was already scampering to retrieve it as Lalasa guided them into the jungle and onto a goat path.

Hanuvar listened carefully for sounds of pursuit, but heard nothing.

Lalasa called a halt a half-hour later, as the sun lowered over the palms. "We'll rest until the moon is high."

"We should keep moving," Rudra said.

"And how will we see," Lalasa asked, "with the dark jungle on every side? Now's the time to rest and eat. We'll move on soon enough."

Rudra grumbled to the twins, who started work on a small cook-fire while he hunkered down on a nearby boulder and slapped at insects.

Hanuvar stepped to the clearing's edge and bent down to touch his toes. More and more each year he felt the aches and pains of old age. "You care for every weapon after use," his father had told him when he was young. "So too should you care for your body." And so Hanuvar had learned how to ease strain from his muscle groups and joints, exercising with his father each morning and night.

He had moved on to his calf muscles when Lalasa drew near. She was a shapely silhouette radiating the mixed scent of fragrant soaps and healthy female sweat. She brushed off a nearby log, sat down, and watched him. For a time there was no sound other than the calls of night animals, one of which let out a repetitious shrieking whoop.

"You are really a master of serpents?" The priestess asked softly.

"I know their ways," Hanuvar answered. He climbed to his feet, widened his stance, and slowly rotated his arms.

"You speak the truth," she said. "There's sadness in your mind when you think of the emerald serpent."

Hanuvar paused, stared at her dark form, strove to blank his mind. He'd underestimated her. "You're a mind reader."

"No. But I sense the feelings of others and sometimes glimpse portions of their thoughts. It's like pressing up against a thin curtain. I can see what lies on the other side if the 'light' is right."

"And what do you read from them?" Hanuvar asked quietly. His head turned toward the twins, now stirring the fire embers. Rudra drank from a wineskin.

"From the general — little," she whispered. "Nervousness. Irritation. The other two... there's darkness there, and I do not wish to venture close."

"They're soldiers."

"They're killers."

"I am a killer," Hanuvar said.

The priestess grew silent. Hanuvar stretched his arms high.

She shook her head. "It's not the same. There was a boatsman in the village where I received my training, renowned far and wide for his skill. Men said he had been blessed by the gods, so wondrous was his talent. His mind felt something like yours."

He laughed lightly. "I'm not blessed."

"I'm sorry they imprisoned you. They had no right. Dervan's no ally of Narata's. You should have been sent on your way."

She was young, but surely she knew the appeal of gold. He wasn't surprised so much that they imprisoned him as he was that they'd recognized him, for he'd discarded his armor during the long swim. His belt crest had given him away, and he wouldn't have thought anyone from a backwater island like Narata would have recognized it.

Hanuvar sat down beside her, his mind returning again to those impossibly long hours. A less stubborn man, so far from land, would have given up and drowned. But he had too much to do, yet. And Eledevar had sacrificed himself to transport him away from the dying city. The little priestess had called him blessed, but a blessed man would have reached his city before the siege engines had burst the wall. A blessed man could have coaxed more of his people to hear his worries.

A blessed man would not have lost his army, his people, his friends, his family.

After the Dervan shot Eledevar, the great serpent had been too wounded to fly, but it had swum on and away for three long days, faster than any Dervan ship could sail. When at last his old friend breathed his last and sank beneath the waves, Hanuvar swam to the island on the horizon.

She interrupted his musing. "Was Volanus truly as lovely as they say?" Her voice was kind. Had she glimpsed the last view of his city etched in his mind? Tendrils of smoke stretching for the sky from the ancient temples and the red-tiled homes? Could she hear the screams of his people?

"It was like any city," Hanuvar answered flatly. "There were criminals and priests, beggars and rich men, performers and warriors and bakers and cobblers. More often than not those who ruled had more money than wisdom."

"You're lying," she said after a moment.

His stare was hard, and here at closer range he could see a glimmer of light reflected in her eyes. He laughed without humor. "Her beauty was peerless, girl. But her silver towers lie shattered by the sea and the blood of her people has run into the water. Dervan crouches like a fat toad amongst the ashes."

The priestess said nothing, but he felt her recoil. Doubtless now she sensed the truth.

"I too am a killer, little priestess," he said softly. "I can recite poetry and the works of Aedara, frame witty quips, trade pleasant-ries with ladies of the court. But the Dervan fear me with reason."

"You will help us, won't you?"

Hanuvar studied her. "Why do you aid a tyrant?"

"I seek the serpent to help the king help his people." She paused. "At the least, the southerners will burn the city. But you know as well as I that they make a sport of hunting the islanders. Sometimes they leave the women after they rape them, but sometimes they take them, or kill them."

"So do the strong among the weak."

"Is that what you did, among the weak?"

She had a strength he hadn't expected. "I sought to crush Dervan before she destroyed us."

"You're a man of oaths, and principals."

"Your king will kill me when the task is done."

"Help me," said Lalasa, "and I'll aid you—"she broke off as Rudra drew close. The small fire backlit the young general.

"What are you two whispering about?"

"Serpents," Hanuvar answered.

"Are you?" he asked. "I'm watching you, old man. Don't trust him, Priestess. They say he's a father of lies."

Lalasa didn't reply, and Rudra shifted under their scrutiny. "How close are we, Priestess?"

"When we see a finger-shaped outcropping at the top of a steep slope, we'll know we're close."

"But how close are we to that?"

Lalasa breathed heavily, almost a sigh. She raised one hand to her pendant, which glowed gently, suffusing her fingers and the swell of her breasts. "I will see." She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Hanuvar watched her chest rise and fall regularly. Until then he had only noticed her beauty abstractly, as a man might consider a painting or a sunrise. Now he found himself contemplating the priestess as a woman. She was thoughtful, lovely, poised. Suddenly Lalasa shook violently and her head shot back. Her eyes opened and she fell limp.

Hanuvar grabbed her as she slumped, called her name to rouse her.

The priestess moaned, blinked, but it was a moment before she focused on Hanuvar.

"Is she alright?" Rudra demanded.

Lalasa stared boldly into Hanuvar's eyes. "We are hours away, still." She sat up under her own power and Hanuvar released her.

"You found the serpent?" Rudra demanded.

"She's there. Her mind brushed mine..." Lalasa shook her head.

"Eat," Hanuvar said. Sorcerers were always weak after working magics, and he smelled the enticing aroma of crisping pork from the cookfire. "It will restore your strength. Come." She took his hand as he stood, and leaned against him for support as they walked toward the fire.

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THE great gold moon rose with its glorious silver ring, bathing the jungle in shadows. The island creatures croaked and gibbered to it as Hanuvar and the others advanced through foliage. The general and the twins wielded rasankas, wide, single-edged swords, to chop the clutching leaves.

Hanuvar walked at the rear. He might have disappeared into the jungle and the others, desperate to find their serpent, wouldn't have time to follow. Yet if he fled he'd have no way off the island, and he had no weapon apart from a spoon with a sharpened handle. And the general still carried his rounded flask.

There might well be better opportunities ahead.

"Halt," Lalassa called, and Hanuvar found himself confronting a large dark mass.

A steep cliff wall shot free of the jungle plants and climbed vertically two hundred feet. At its height the moon shown on a pitted black rock shaped like a finger. It pointed seaward.

They set to work clearing a path, swiping effortlessly with their rasankas, and advanced to the cliff's bottom. The smooth, ancient stone showed few handholds. There was no climbing that way. Hanuvar's eyes searched the cliff side.

"Here," said Lalasa. She had wandered to the right. The others followed.

Thick hairy vines clung to the black stone at the point beside the priestess and stretched to the limit of their sight. Whether or not they climbed to the height of the cliff Hanuvar could not determine, for the detail was lost in the night's blackness.

"You first, old man," the general told him.

Hanuvar smiled thinly. He wrapped his hands around one of the vines and pulled, found the vines dug securely into the stone. He tilted his head back to consider the height again, then began his ascent.

He moved slowly, hand over hand, finding sure purchase along the thick plant fibers. Another man's attention might have wandered, but Hanuvar knew the art of focus. It had carried him far, and it brought him to the height.

Grunting with the final pull to the top, Hanuvar arrived at a circular lake fenced by wide-leafed trees, waving now in a cool breeze that rippled the dark waters. Beyond the lake stood the final crest of the mountain.

He stepped back to the cliff to watch the progress of his companions. He heard the slightest noise, as of a tent-flap in the wind, and turned in a fighter's crouch. It was the bird-thing, on wing and bearing down with outstretched claws.

Hanuvar dropped too late. A clawed hand clipped him in the head. He lay stunned as it circled.

In one thing he was fortunate. The creature was a glider, not a true bird, and thus it struggled in the wind to gain height for its return. Hanuvar was stirring by the time it neared.

The creature hissed. It extended talons for a second strike.

Hanuvar bided his time and leapt as it neared. The bird-thing let out a raspy scream of surprise and pain, for Hanuvar's aim and its own momentum had driven the makeshift knife into its chest. They fell in a jumble of limbs.

The monster clawed at his back and Hanuvar gasped in pain. He withdrew the knife, bashed the clacking beak aside, and thrust the point deep into the thing's throat before rolling away.

He climbed to his feet as the creature thrashed out its life. By the time the others reached the cliff top he had washed out the long slash in his shoulder with wine and rigged a makeshift bandage from his tattered shirt. The twins walked over to prod at the bird-thing while Lalasa examined Hanuvar's bandage.

Rudra seemed more concerned with Hanuvar himself. "How did you kill it?" Somehow his voice betrayed suspicion, fear, and awe all at the same time.

"I've been a warrior for more than twice your lifespan," Hanuvar answered.

"But you had no sword."

"True. I had no sword."

"I think you'll heal fine," Lalasa said behind him, "so long as



you keep the wound clean and change the dressing. It's fairly light." She tightened the bandage as she spoke. He tried to ignore the pleasant tingle on his skin as her fingertips brushed his back.

Rudra frowned. "Where do we go now?"

Lalasa stepped out from behind Hanuvar. "There."

Rudra walked closer to the water and peered in. "What do you mean, 'there?'"

"We swim." Lalasa pointed to the lake's north end. "There's an underwater tunnel that leads to the serpent's lair."

Rudra's teeth showed. "How are we supposed to do that? We can't breathe underwater!"

"The scrolls tell of the old king's journey, General. There's air in the serpent's cave, but you'll have to hold your breath for a long while to reach it."

Rudra mulled this over at the water's edge. Meshtar and Beshkar stepped up beside him.

And then Meshtar's blade flashed as he tore it from his sheath. He caught the general's chin in one hand, slashed the blade across his neck with the other. Rudra collapsed, flailing.

"What are you doing!?" Lalasa cried.

"We have two things the Dervan pay well for," Meshtar said. "We know the dwelling-place of a mighty serpent. One they will gladly kill. And we have their greatest foe. Alive. Although if he proves troublesome, there'll still be some money for his carcass."

"You killed Rudra!" Lalasa's voice shook with rage. "What about the island? Your people?"

"What about you?" Beshkar said. His brother laughed as he advanced on her. "I've wanted a taste of you for years."



"Save some for me," Meshtar said. He came forward, Rudra's blood dark on his weapon.

Lalasa fumbled for the knife on her belt, discovered it gone.

Hanuvar stepped forward, head bowed. "Don't slay me."

"I'm not interested in you right now," Beshkar said, stepping past.

Hanuvar had held Lalasa's knife against his arm. He flicked it up, drove it into Meshtar's throat, released. While the twin reached for his neck, gurgling, Hanuvar grabbed the twin's sword hilt and drew. He stepped away and kicked hard at Meshtar's knee. The dying man fell.

Beshkar screamed in rage and slashed high at Hanuvar's head.

The blow rang off his brother's sword, held stiffly now in Hanuvar's hand.

Hanuvar circled to his right. His sword arm was numb from Meshtar's terrific strike, but there was no knowing it from his expression.

Beshkar lay twitching, his bloody fingers pressed to his ruined throat.

His brother snarled. "You'll die for that!"

This time Hanuvar smashed his sword into Meshtar's before it completed its downward arc. The younger man grunted, his eyes glancing after the blade as it swung wide. Hanuvar struck and sliced half through his chest. Curious horror registered on Meshtar's face as he realized the extent of his injury, then he folded to the ground. Hanuvar drove the point down through his neck. He stepped back, glanced at Beshkar — moving fitfully still — and knelt to wipe the blade on the grass. He hadn't expected that particular develop-

ment, but things had resolved well.

"Adras and Sussura but you're fast," Lalasa breathed. She gave the dying men a wide berth and walked with Hanuvar to Rudra. While she bent to inspect his wound Hanuvar sank to one knee beside him.

"He's dead," she said.

Of course he was. "It was a professional stroke." Hanuvar rolled Rudra over to better undo his belt.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking back my flask."

Lalasa said nothing while Hanuvar shifted the dead general's belt to his own waist and compared swords, in the end choosing the less decorative but better balanced blade he'd taken from Beshkar. He replaced the general's sheath with Beshkar's, but kept his knife. He then moved on to their packs, consolidating the small amount of food and cooking supplies into one.

Lalasa watched silently until he'd finished transferring the money in their coin purses as well. "You don't mean to go on."

"No."

A chill wind blew as they faced each other. Hanuvar didn't usually bother justifying any of his decisions, but something about the priestess's stiff back prompted explanation. "Dealing with a serpent isn't the simple matter your fool king thinks."

"At least give me some of your sorcerous powder," Lalasa said.

Hanuvar patted the cap of the flask at his belt. "I have no sorcery, Lalasa. These are my little brother's ashes. I must bear them to the Isles of the Dead."

He could see little more of her but outline, yet he felt her gaze.

"I felt the truth of your words before." She sounded hurt, confused. Betrayed.

"Eledevar was my friend — an ally of my family from old times. I have no magic other than experience and the loyalty of allies and family. And most of those are dead, now."

"So is your duty to the dead, or the living? Can't you help me with the serpent, Hanuvar? People will die if we don't gain its aid. Women and children."

"This is a wild serpent, Lalasa. It will want a sacrifice to bind our word. A blood sacrifice."

She breathed deeply and he knew then that she understood his meaning.

"Your king was an idiot to think otherwise."

"But what about its agreement with the old king?"

"An unlikely story," Hanuvar said, "and unlikely to be held to the king's descendants, much less a representative that doesn't smell of his bloodline. One or the both of us will perish." He spoke on, though he knew she wouldn't accept his offer. "It was a fool's errand, commanded by a fool. You couldn't know. Come with me and live, Lalasa."

"I thought you were the man who spun victories from defeats, who mastered armies three times greater than the size of his own. Who devoted his life to the protection of his city, and his people. Surely you know some way —"

"There are things I must live to do, Lalasa."

Silence fell over them. She turned her back. "Leave me."

He did not, though, and she must not have cared, for she lifted her bodice over her head and dropped it beside her feet. Did she

know that he admired the feminine lines of her back and the generous curves to hips? The slender ankles and tapering calves as she slid free of her sandals and shimmied out of her skirt? If so, she made no acknowledgment of it. She stood naked save for a white loincloth, vital and fragile and all the more lovely as she undid her hair and shook it free.

She stepped gracefully into the water without looking back and dropped forward with a splash. The moonlight flashed against the water kicked up by her pale feet.

Hanuvar watched from the shore, his world suddenly further diminished, companioned now only by the dead. Sometimes it seemed they were all he had left. The woman too would die if he did nothing. Yet what was her fate compared to that of the remnants of his people, who could have no hope without him? He must live.

Yet he could not let her die.

Hanuvar cursed, tore off belt and gear and clothes, and dove in after her.

• • •

THE clear cold water lent new energy to Hanuvar's tired body and he swam vigorously to the north side of the lake, where Lalasa waited, treading water.

"I thought you said that this was a fool's errand."

"I am a fool," Hanuvar said.

She smiled. "Take a deep breath. According to legend, it's a long swim."

"I hope you know the way."

"Everything I've read so far has proven correct. Breathe deep, and follow."

A difficult thing, Hanuvar thought, beneath the waters in the dark, but then Lalasa closed her eyes and the pendant hung about her neck glowed blue once more, lighting the water and outlining her breasts and slim belly.

The priestess sucked in a deep gulp, then dove, her dark hair streaming behind her like a black ribbon. Hanuvar followed.

There was no missing the wide, jagged cleft in the rocks at the lake edge, large enough indeed for a serpent to pass through with room to spare.

The priestess swam on through the dark cool waters, and Hanuvar swam after, following the light of her pendant as they advanced into the cleft and into a wide tunnel. How far did it stretch, and might they yet be able to escape if they ran low on air?

Hanuvar saw Lalasa swim upward before his lungs were terribly strained. The tunnel roof had fallen away, and then he breached the water, sucking in air tainted with the scent of wet rock and earth — and something else. An animal smell like roasted flesh.

They searched the gloom before striking out for a rocky shoreline. From behind came an immense splash. Something large had sent the water surging. Hanuvar glimpsed a long serpent-like coil spiral into the water and disappear.

"Swim," he ordered. He didn't add that there was no talking to a serpent that had already devoured you.

Hanuvar saw Lalasa pull up on a rocky ledge and turn, her mouth open in astonishment. Hanuvar felt a great wave rising behind him.

He did not know if he was panting from exhaustion or fear, but he reached the slippery rock and threw himself up over the rim on his belly. The injured muscle in his back protested as she grasped his hands and helped him upright.

The pendant bouncing on her chest glowed fiercely. Beyond her a thing of nightmares loomed, suspended on a gleaming, glistening silver neck, wide around as two barrels.

The serpent's skull was fully the size of a long boat, and her flaring nostrils wider than dinner plates. White hair hung from either side of her snout in a parody of a mustache, and further back, two immense slitted eyes glowed like emerald suns. The head rose steadily until it hung ten feet above.

"Name yourself, intruders!" The serpent's voice thundered off the cave walls like the ringing of great gongs, and as she spoke teeth the length of sabers flashed wetly in her mouth.

"I am Hanuvar, son of Hamli, of House Cabera, friend of the asalda known in my tongue as Eledevar. We come in peace."

The serpent head swayed closer. "You are not welcome!" The nostrils widened. "You bear the faint smell of asalda upon you, but that does not grant you entry."

"We have come at the behest of the king of Narata, oh great one," Lalasa said, her head bowed.

"Why does Nara not come himself?"

The priestess hesitated. "Nara is long dead, great one, and his great grandson rules the island."

"Has it been so long? You humans live such meager lives."

"Our lives are all too brief," Hanuvar agreed. "And many of them are threatened even now. The people of Narata seek your aid. A great fleet of raiders nears their shores, and their defense is poor."

"The king," Lalasa said, "would invoke the pact made with you by his grandfather's father."

"The pact?" The serpent sounded almost amused. "You seek my aid, you, who clearly have no knowledge even of my name?"

"It... it was not known by the chronicler. I must ask your forgiveness—"

"You ask much, un-named woman."

"What you say is true," the priestess said, stepping forward. Nearly naked, she yet radiated the dignity of a queen in full regalia. "I am Lalasa, a daughter of the sea. And these folk of Narata are simple and forgetful and do not know the proper words or honors. But they mean you no harm, and their word is good. They still protect you, as you protect them, and they seek to invoke the pact they made with you ages before."

"Protect me?" The serpent's voice rang from the stone, rising shrilly in disbelief. "Do they think I need protection?"

Neither Lalasa nor Hanuvar dared answer.

"It is clear you have forgotten much!" The serpent's head lowered until it was almost level with their bodies. "The pact was simple, humans. I would leave you be if you would leave me to my doings and stay clear of my mountain. These simple things you have done. Your people have kept your word, a rare thing in the history of your kind."

"She would make a new pact with you," Hanuvar said.

"Would she? Where is her tribute? I do not trust the word of humans who bear nothing to seal their promise."



So it was with serpents. The taking of oaths was a weighty matter to them, and they did not trust man save when he had proven faith by sacrifice.

"I am your tribute." Lalasa stepped forward, head held high.

The serpent's head rose.

Hanuvar barred Lalasa's way with an arm and pushed her back.

"Not you — " she cried.

"She means that she brings word of tribute," Hanuvar said. "The king is old and dared not come himself, but he waits for you."

"You would have me go elsewhere for tribute?" The serpent's teeth shown.

Hanuvar spoke quickly. "The king realizes it's much to ask, and so he has made great tribute to you. With him you will find baskets of jewelry and gold. They lie hidden from prying eyes three hundred paces east from the central tower of the palace, in a chamber twelve feet beneath the courtyard."

"How did you — " Lalasa asked, but Hanuvar shot up a finger in warning without looking back at her.

"This is unorthodox," said the serpent. "Yet I see the picture of this place within your mind."

Hanuvar knew that many serpents, like Lalasa, had a sixth sense which they used to help understand the world.

"Why is the tribute hidden?"

"To keep it safe from the raiders. If you stop them, it is yours."

"I shall take your tribute." The serpent's head rose. "And the raiders shall perish utterly. Now leave me."

Hanuvar bowed from the waist, and the priestess echoed his gesture.

"Go! I tire of your intrusion!"

Hanuvar dropped into the water, motioning Lalasa ahead of him. Once more they struck out for the tunnel, the priestess's pendant glowing against her skin. Hanuvar didn't look back, though he felt the great eyes of the serpent burning into the back of his head. He tried not to think of it swimming behind them, its vast mouth opening wide. He didn't think it would, yet the minds of the asalda were unknowable. Who was to say that it might not take them in tribute as well?

The water outside the tunnel seemed lighter, and as they broke the surface a red glow hung in the tree limbs along the shore. Dawn had come. As the two of them swam, a long dark and rippling form with immense black wings exploded from the water and soared effortlessly into the sky.

They treaded water and watched the serpent's sinuous form glide up and eastward, beating its wings almost as an afterthought.

Lalasa didn't pause once they reached the shore, but hurried through a stand of trees. Hanuvar followed her to the cliff's edge. The whole of the island lay spread before them, and they looked down across miles of treetops. There Hanuvar could see the bridge they had crossed. And far to the left, almost hidden by a hillock, was the high brownstone tower of the palace. The serpent dropped suddenly, descending beside it, and disappeared from view.

"You've slain the king," Lalasa said softly.

"Far better him than you. Any good leader should be willing to sacrifice himself to protect his people."

"He has no heirs —"

"Good. Perhaps your people will appoint some worthy person to lead. A wise young woman, perhaps."

Lalasa stared at him. The early light glistened on the water drops beaded on her skin. She shivered. "How did you know the king's hiding place so precisely?"

"I counted my steps."

From her expression he saw she didn't understand, but she didn't press further. "What will you do now?"

"I will inter my brother's ashes upon the Isles of the Dead. Then — " Hanuvar's voice dropped. "Then I have a long journey before me."

"You could rule Narata," Lalasa said, stepping close. She stood but handspans from him now. Her eyes were great dark wells. "You are very wise. You could take on a different identity —"

"If I stayed, the Dervan would find me — and any who shelter me. Come. I'll build you a fire. And then we'll leave this mountain."

One hand reached up to his chin, stroked it, and then he snared that trim waist and pressed her to him. She turned her face up to his and their lips met as the scarlet ball of the sun stained distant waters.

Within days the first of the blackened timbers reached the shores of Narata. They continued to sweep into the eastern beach for weeks after, sometimes in the company of burned and shriveled body parts, bits of cloth, and occasional clothing articles. By then Lalasa had used her risen status to set a triumvirate in the king's place.

And Hanuvar had sailed toward the rising sun.

DEFINING SWORD-AND-SORCERY

By HOWARD ANDREW JONES

The term “sword-and-sorcery” gets bandied around a lot. As far as we’re concerned here at *The Skull*, it’s not just a generic term that can be used interchangeably with fantasy fiction, but a descriptor of a specific sort of fantasy fiction, as intended by Fritz Leiber, the man who coined the phrase. I’ve been working on defining that definition over the years, with a little help from John Hocking, William King, Robert Rhodes, and John “The Gneech” Robey. I see sword-and-sorcery having at least these four characteristics:

- **The Environment:** Sword-and-sorcery fiction takes place in lands different from our own, where technology is relatively primitive, allowing the protagonists to overcome their martial obstacles face-to-face. Magic works, but seldom at the behest of the heroes. More often sorcery is just one more obstacle used against them and is usually wielded by villains or monsters. The landscape is exotic; either a different world, or far corners of our own.
- **The Protagonists:** The heroes live by their cunning or brawn, frequently both. They are usually strangers or outcasts, rebels imposing their own justice on the wilds or the strange and decadent civilizations which they encounter. They are usually commoners or barbarians; should they hail from the higher ranks of society then they are discredited, disinherited, or come from the lower ranks of nobility (the lowest of the high).
- **Obstacles:** Sword-and-sorcery’s protagonists must best fantastic dangers, monstrous horrors, and dark sorcery to earn riches, astonishing treasure, the love of dazzling members of the opposite sex, or the right to live another day.
- **Structure:** Sword-and-sorcery is usually crafted with traditional structure. Stream-of-consciousness, slice-of-life, or any sort of experimental narrative effects, when they appear, are methods used to advance the plot, rather than ends in themselves. A tale of sword-and-sorcery has a beginning, middle, and end; a problem and solution; a climax and resolution. Most important of all, sword-and-sorcery moves at a headlong pace and overflows with action and thrilling adventure.

The protagonists in sword-and-sorcery fiction are most often thieves, mercenaries, or barbarians struggling not for worlds or kingdoms, but for their own gain or mere survival. They are rebels against authority, skeptical of civilization and its rulers and adherents. While the strengths and skills of sword-and-sorcery heroes

are romanticized, their exploits take place on a very different stage from one where lovely princesses, dashing nobles, and prophesied saviors are cast as the leads. Sword-and-sorcery heroes face more immediate problems than those of questing kings. They are cousins of the lone gunslingers of American westerns and the wandering samurai of Japanese folklore, traveling through the wilderness to right wrongs or simply to earn food, shelter, and coin. Unknown or hazardous lands are an essential ingredient of the genre, and if its protagonists should chance upon inhabited lands, they are often strangers to either the culture or civilization itself.

Sword-and-sorcery distances itself further from high or epic fantasy by adopting a gritty, realistic tone that creates an intense, often grim, sense of realism seemingly at odds with a fantasy setting. This vein of hardboiled realism casts the genre’s fantastic elements in an entirely new light, while rendering characters and conflict in a much more immediate fashion. Sword-and-sorcery at times veers into dark, fatalistic territory reminiscent of the grimmer examples of noir-crime fiction. This takes the fantasy genre, the most popular examples of which might be characterized as bucolic fairy tales with pre-ordained happy endings, and transposes a bleak, essentially urban style upon it with often startling effect. While sword-and-sorcery is a relative to high fantasy, it is a different animal. High fantasy, mostly invented by William Morris as an echo of Sir Thomas Mallory and then popularized by J.R.R. Tolkien, moves for the most part at a slow, stately, pace, meandering gently from plot point to plot point, or, as is often the case, from location to location.

While exotic landscape is present, even common, in sword-and-sorcery, it is displayed differently and toward a different effect. Sword-and-sorcery was birthed in an entirely different tradition. Robert E. Howard, its creator, wrote for the pulps. The pulp magazines, the television of their day, were fueled by quick moving action. The stories needed to grab you within the first few sentences so that if you were browsing the magazine at the news stand you’d feel compelled to purchase it to finish. The pulp stories were meant to seize your attention from the opening lines and never let go.

This difference in pacing is crucial and there are hidden difficulties attendant in trying to create it on the page. John Chris Hocking added this to the discussion: “Some sword-and-sorcery authors seem to believe that swift pacing must equal Action. And that Action must equal Violence. Neither of these things are true. All the fighting and running and frenzy you create will grow tiresome unless it is moving the story forward. Sure, Action is great unto itself, but it is the unfolding of the plot that truly captivates.”

SWORD-AND-SORCERY'S GRANDFATHER

By HOWARD ANDREW JONES

Before Stormbringer keened in Elric's hand, before the Gray Mouser prowled Lankhmar's foggy streets — before even Conan trod jeweled thrones under his sandaled feet, Khlit the Cossack rode the steppe. He isn't the earliest serial adventure character, but his adventures are among the earliest that can still be read for sheer pleasure. He was the creation of Harold Lamb, the unsung grandfather of modern sword-and-sorcery.

Lamb's fiction exploded with cinematic pacing. Expect slow spots when you're reading even the best historicals from Lamb's time, but don't look for them in his work. It drove forward at breakneck pace, paused briefly to gather a breath, then plunged the reader back into suspense. It rang with the shouts of battle and the clang of swords. It swam in an atmosphere as heady and exotic to western eyes as Burroughs' Mars.

Consider this passage, composed in 1921. Khlit has sent his friend Chagan to kill a chief riding on the back of a massive war elephant. See if this doesn't sound a little like a famous moment from the *Return of the King* movie:

Chagan had driven his horse at the head of the giant beast, clearing a path for himself with his sword. He swung at the black trunk that swayed above him, missed his stroke, and went down as his horse fell with an arrow in its throat.

"Bid your elephant kneel, cowardly lord," he bellowed, springing to his feet and avoiding the impact of the great tusks, "and fight as a man should!"

His companions being for the most part slain, Chagan seized a fresh mount that went by riderless and rode against the elephant's side. Gripping the canopy that overhung the elephant's back, with teeth and clutching fingers he drew himself up, heedless of blows delivered upon his steel headpiece and mailed chest.

"Ho!" he cried from between set teeth. "I will come to you, Northern Lord!"

An arrow seared his cheek and a knife in the hand of an archer bit into the muscles of a massive arm. Chagan's free hand seized the mahout and jerked him from behind the ears of the elephant as ripe fruit is plucked from a tree. At this the beast swayed and shivered, and for an instant the occupants of the howdah were flung back upon themselves and Chagan was nearly cast to earth.

Kneeling, holding on the howdah edge with a bleeding hand, he smote twice with his heavy sword, smashing the skull of an archer and knocking another to the ground. The remaining native thrust his shield before Paluwan Khan.

But the Northern Lord, no coward, pushed his servant aside and sprang at Chagan, scimitar in hand.

The Tatar sword-bearer, kneeling, wounded, was at a disadvantage. Swiftly he let fall his own weapon and closed with Paluwan Khan, taking the latter's stroke upon his shoulder. A clutching hand gripped the throat of the Northern Lord above the mail and Chagan roared in triumph.

Pulling his foe free of the howdah, the Tatar lifted Paluwan Khan to his shoulder and leaped from the back of the elephant.

The two mailed bodies struck the earth heavily, Paluwan Khan underneath; and it was a long moment before Chagan rose, reeling. In his bleeding hand he clasped the head of the Northern Lord.

Lamb placed his emphasis on conveying the story rather than conveying his scholarship, and he made each tale unique. Even a jaded reader, even one familiar with Lamb's work, is unlikely to anticipate the turns his plots will take. His characters do not remain static — they change, they age, and some of them die.

His most famous hero was a Cossack, one of that breed who lived in picked war camps along the frontier — self appointed protectors who had all the independence and skilled horsemanship of an American cowboy, the camaraderie of *The Three Musketeers*, and a reputation a little like a cross between the famed French Foreign Legion and pirates. Tricksters, daredevils, vagabonds, the Cossacks lived a dangerous and exciting existence.

Khlit, also known as the Wolf, is owner of a curious sword that has earned him the additional sobriquet of Khlit of the curved saber. Contrary to current trends in popular fiction, he's an older man from his first adventure. He is one of a very few Cossacks who has survived into his middle-years. This is no accident, and while we soon see that Khlit is a fine horseman and sword wielder, it is his keen intellect that sees him through so many escapades. Archetypally he is not Achilles, Luke Skywalker, or Superman — he is modeled from wily Odysseus.

Khlit gallops off into the wilds of Asia, China, and India. It's a glorious ride. With him we infiltrate the hidden fortress of assassins, Alamut, track down the tomb of Genghis Khan, flee the vengeance of a dead emperor, lead the Mongol horde against impossible odds, safeguard a stunning Mogul queen through the lands of her enemies, stamp out a cult of stranglers, and much more. His nineteen tales, some of them short novels, are adventure writing at its very finest, awash with ancient tombs, gleaming treasure, and thrilling landscapes. Khlit matches wits with deadly swordsmen, scheming priests, and evil cults; he rescues lovely damsels, rides with bold comrades, and hazards everything on his brains, skill, and luck.

Gruff and taciturn, Khlit is a firm believer in justice. He is the friend and protector of many women, but he leaves romance to his sidekicks and allies. He rides alongside heroes from many different nationalities, with varied beliefs—among them a heroic Afghan swordsman, a Manchu Archer, a Hindu warrior, and daring Mongol horsemen.

Over the course of his journeys Khlit may bear some of his own prejudices with him, but his perceptions grow and change: the Cossack first views Tatars as hereditary enemies, then embraces their culture as his own. And then there is the devoted friendship shared between Khlit and Abdul Dost, who teams up with the Cossack in four stories of the saga; an Eastern Orthodox Christian and a Muslim. Both are devout in faiths that have lost

little love for one another, yet the men are brothers of the sword. Lamb has no theological or philosophical axe to grind — he aims only to present a cracking good story, and he almost always succeeds.

Lamb never wrote overtly of the fantastic or the supernatural like Robert E. Howard, keeping his historical fiction grounded in reality, but he did play around its edges, frequently exposing his characters to the strange and macabre. Some of his villains masquerade as sorcerers and miracle workers of great power.

It's grand stuff. I believed in it so much I devoted several years to getting it back into print. If you're a fan of sword-and-sorcery, you owe it to yourself to read it.

DYNAMIC DUOS OF FICTION

By **BILL WARD**

The classic image of the adventuring hero is that of a lone individual battling man, nature, and possibly even the gods themselves, over everything from the fate of the world to the hand of a maiden. Sure, our hero might have the occasional sidekick, a Moonglum or a Short Round, but the hero's own perspective is always central to the story, the star around which all other characters and concerns orbit. But what about those heroes that always come in twos, those dynamic duos of fiction? Whether they be Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, or Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo, such pairings create unique narrative opportunities through contrast.

Contrast. Take two identical black T-shirts, leave one plain, but stick a white Tales from the Magician's Skull logo on the other. The latter shirt will appear, thanks to the magic of contrast, to be darker than the first. The same is true of characters in fiction, the dissolute rogue is shown to be even more feckless when paired with the upright paladin, the brilliant mind shines brighter in the company of an average intelligence, and the barbarian is far tougher and stronger when contrasted with his good friend and constant companion, the librarian.

This use of contrasting characters as a foil for one another works in everything from a single scene to a saga of connected stories. Even or especially in cases of a larger cast of characters, the reader gets a better sense of who they are reading about when such characters find their foil. Tolkien's hobbits didn't really get a chance to shine until they found themselves paired off for their own separate adventures. And Legolas and Gimli may as well be the poster boys for the contrasting heroic duo — everything from physical appearance and attitude to weapon of choice and fighting style is at odds between the Mirkwood Elf and the Dwarf of the Lonely Mountain. But in contrasting these two characters, and chronicling their unlikely friendship, Tolkien communicates

just as much or more about his elves and dwarves than he does through history, backstory, and song. So strong is this characterization that many writers laboring in Tolkien's shadow populate their stories of elves and dwarves with versions of this classic, contrasting duo.

But such a pairing is a natural fit in short fiction as well. Indeed it offers quite a few tricks to the writer that one lone central figure cannot. The lone hero often has no one to talk to, for a start, and the opportunity to communicate story points through dialog gives a writer a powerful pacing tool, particularly where the real estate is lacking as in short fiction. When it comes to that old writer's maxim of 'show, don't tell,' the duo simply presents unlimited opportunities for 'showing' the nature of a character, because there is always another character around to act as an observer.

The lone character, if he is ever to truly surprise the reader, must keep some thoughts to himself, and the writer needs to play the limited omniscience game, sometimes sharing with us what the character is thinking, and sometimes not. For a pair of characters such limited information games are much easier: simply leaning on the point of view of one particular character can present the other's actions with an air of mystery. Sherlock Holmes is much less interesting when he tells his own story; but when Dr. Watson details Holmes' inscrutable actions over the course of an investigation and then shares with us his amazement at the great detective's brilliant deductive conclusion, we readers find ourselves equally as impressed.

So the difference between that lone hero and the duo is far more than just having another swordarm along for the adventure, it creates a ready-made foil that opens up opportunities for everything from characterization to narrative surprise. That, and it sure beats having your hero forever talking to himself!

FAFHRD AND THE GRAY MOUSER: TWO WHO SOUGHT ADVENTURE

By **BILL WARD**

It's impossible to take a look at sword & sorcery without coming face to face with one of its grandmasters, Fritz Leiber — after all, he invented the very term itself. Of course, Leiber's original coinage was *swords & sorcery*, plural, and I've always suspected the reason for that 's' was because Leiber was father not of one but of two heroes, the dynamic duo of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser.

Unlike the explosive burst of creativity that saw Robert E. Howard shape his Conan cycle over just a few short years, the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser tales were written over a span of half a century. Leiber's changing style over this period can often surprise and confuse readers new to the series, particularly when encountering collections that place stories from different eras next to one another. It can also make it difficult to speak in general terms about the tales. But the best of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, stories like "Bazaar of the Bizarre," "The Sunken Land," "When the Sea-King's Away," and "Lean Times in Lankhmar" all combine beautiful prose and authorial wit with colorful adventure and truly great characterization.

The tall northern barbarian and his diminutive thiefling companion might seem at first blush to be a cliché (and may indeed be the cliché's originators!), but those are just the broad delineating brush strokes that Leiber takes as his starting point. And so we see Fafhrd, savage outlander, weep over a fallen foe, versify extemporaneously while hanging from a cliff face, and undergo sincere religious conversion to the cult of Issek of the Jug. His guileful companion was once so absorbed in a disguise that he almost sabotaged his own plan and, when a literal Cloud of Hate threatened to possess

him, it found the Gray Mouser far too self-absorbed to be anything other than a "source of his own evil." The two once attempted a brief period of domestication, prefaced by the stealing of a house. The source of their most serious falling out was rumored to be an argument over the correct spelling of Fafhrd's name. Fine, funny, strange twists of character and observation litter these tales like spilled jewels marking the path of a hastily retreating thief.

What may be yet more impressive is that Leiber combines this humor seamlessly with high stakes adventure and, amazingly enough, real suspense and horror. Many writers of the weird tale follow the method of simply plopping a Lovecraftian horror athwart the hero's path, but Leiber often incorporates the actual techniques of horror fiction into his adventures. The suspense of exploring a delicate bubble of air at the bottom of the sea, or the terrifying appearance of a half-glimpsed god, share equal space with swashbuckling, roguery, and an overarching playfulness that leaves an indelible impression of Leiber's world and heroes.

And, perhaps most of all, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser enjoy adventure for adventure's sake. It is no surprise that these stories were one of the principle influences for the invention of fantasy role playing games, where the players themselves share motives more akin to Lankhmar's finest than they would with epic heroes upon whom the fate of the world rests. This sense of fun, and the lightness of tone and archness of wit of these highly polished stories that never stray too far into parody or satire but remain sincere adventure at their core, are the reasons why these fantasy classics will continue to be read, and reread, by generations of fantasy fans.

THE DARK TOWER OF JAQUAYS

By **JOHN C. HOCKING**

I was a first wave D&D player, sort of.

I had the white box, pored over the three booklets, scrawled dozens of subterranean labyrinths on graph paper, and spent untold hours trying to explain to my friends why this new game was so mind-blowingly cool.

But I really couldn't play it. The game's possibilities were simply too much to wrap my head around. Countless situations for which there were no rules (yet) tantalized and frustrated me. I wanted to be a game master, had a skull buzzing with ideas for wild adventure, but I didn't know where, or how, to start.

So I messed around for a few months, unable to get things off the ground while my players, who were increasingly ready and willing to throw themselves into a campaign, waited for me to come up with something that worked.

What happened was that a true friend of mine, the fellow who introduced me to RPGs, gave me a couple issues of *The Dungeon*. Everything about the fanzine held my interest, but the little dungeon adventures I found in there were so neat, so tight and small, and yet complete, that I figured I'd try one. It would be a sort of stop-gap measure to give myself some practice and my players some fun.

So we played through *Morkendaine Manor*, which became the flagstone upon which my epic, globe-spanning campaign was built. It would spin out over five years, build my players into heroes of legendary prowess and courage, and climax in a battle with an Elder God on an unknown continent on the far side of the world. But it started in a little ready-to-play adventure created by Jennell Jaquays.

This author/artist's work was quickly recognized by my group as very dependable, and was sought out. When one of my players decided to try gamemastering himself, it was my very good luck that he began with Jaquays' *The Caverns of Thracia*. I built two characters from scratch and, alongside a motley squad of anti-heroes created by my friends, ran them through that adventure from top to bottom. And it only got better, as the GM took us directly from *The Caverns of Thracia* to Jaquays' *The Dark Tower*.

Everyone who has ever played in a campaign and enjoyed it, especially at an impressionable age, will recall a number of "peak experiences" as a player character. For me, *The Dark Tower* packed them in. The entire project was saturated with lush imagination and opportunities for swashbuckling adventure. Jaquays art was such that the DM could hold up an image to show us what we saw (or fought!) and we would gasp in amazement or horror. It was so engaging that I didn't even mind (much) when one of the two characters I'd run since Thracia met a particularly unique and colorful doom.

Fast forward a handful of decades. I'm writing a story that I hope will be placed in an anthology celebrating the authors of Appendix N. The story is selected and I learn it will have an illustration to accompany it. When I finally see the illustration, it is beautiful. And it is by Jennell Jaquays. After all I've written here, I do not think I need to tell you how fine and fitting I find that to be.

THE THREE Ms: WRITING HORROR IN SWORD-AND-SORCERY

By AERYN RUDEL

Although I've written a lot of fantasy, if I'm being honest with myself, it's horror that really gets my writerly blood pumping. The great thing about horror is it can be easily added to almost any other genre. I mean, you got your dark fantasy ala *Game of Thrones*, your *Alien-esque* sci-fi horror, and then there's sword-and-sorcery, a genre that is a close cousin to horror, one that fairly begs an author to take a left turn into the dark.

For the horror author, the best part about sword-and-sorcery is what I call the three Ms: magic, monsters, and mayhem. Each of these genre-defining tropes lends itself to horror with the slightest of tweaking, and here's how I like to spin those dials.

Magic: Maybe the most important trope in sword-and-sorcery, magic is often portrayed as ancient and unknowable, the kind of thing mortals aren't meant to understand and meddle with at their own peril. The hero rarely uses magic himself, and more often than not, it's magic or a magic-user that stands between the hero and his goal.

I think the *source* of magic in sword-and-sorcery is the easiest dial to turn for the horror writer. Magic learned from demons and ancient alien gods instead of something more benign, i.e., human, is a perfect way to add a horrific element. The use of magic, even when it helps the hero, should always have terrible, soul-scarring consequences. And, again because of its otherworldly origin, any human that uses magic on a regular basis ceases being truly human and likely becomes that second M trope: a monster.

Monsters: What's a sword-and-sorcery tale without a good monster? Not one I'm likely to read. Monsters are another common staple of sword-and-sorcery, and like magic, they lend themselves

to the horrific with little coaxing. I tend to take a slightly different tack with monsters when I need to ramp up the horror in my sword-and-sorcery. I find monsters with some human element to be more terrifying than shambling beasts and squishy things in the dark. Men transformed into monsters by the use of magic (remember that first M), either willingly or unwillingly, add a level of psychological horror I really like. For example, take a look at the fractured mind of the protagonist in my story "Beyond the Block." When he realizes he lives beyond the grave, that moment of helpless terror is far more frightening to me than a horde of flesh-eating zombies.

Mayhem: Okay, I stretched this last one to make it fit into my three Ms, but what I mean here is action, and action in sword-and-sorcery is almost always going to be the kind with swords, axes, and other implements of death. So, how do you make that more horrific? Easy, you make it more real. Combat in sword-and-sorcery is often stylized, with the realities of such combat glossed over or ignored entirely. So, don't ignore them. Do some research on wound trauma and learn what happens to the human body when it gets stabbed, crushed, or dismembered. Learn how sword-fighting actually worked in a historical context, how armor worked, and how it could be defeated. All these things add a level of gritty realness to your story that grounds it, makes it more personal, and, in the end, makes it more terrifying when blood is shed, skulls cracked, and entrails spilled.

Of course, this is just scratching the surface of how horror and sword-and-sorcery share literary DNA. The two have had a long and successful partnership that many authors, including the giants in the genre, have explored at length. If you'd like a closer look at how I combine the two, read my story "Beyond the Block" in the first issue of *The Magician's Skull*.

CELEBRATING LEIGH BRACKETT

By HOWARD ANDREW JONES

Today I thought I'd take a look at one of my very favorite writers, the late, great Leigh Brackett, queen of planetary adventure and sword-and-planet. Sword-and-planet is really just sword-and-sorcery with a science fiction veneer. And Leigh Brackett was one of the very, very best sword-and-planet writers.

Only a few generations ago planetary adventure fiction had a few givens. First, it usually took place in our own solar system. Second, our own solar system was stuffed with inhabitable planets. Everyone knew that Mercury baked on one side and froze on the other, but a narrow twilight band existed between the two extremes where life might thrive. Venus was hot and swampy, like prehistoric Earth had been, and Mars was a faded and dying world kept alive by the extensive canals that brought water down from the ice caps.

To enjoy Brackett, you have to get over the fact that none of this is real — which really shouldn't be hard if you enjoy reading about vampires, telepaths, and dragons, but hey, there you go. Yeah, Mars doesn't have a breathable atmosphere, or canals, or ancient races. If you don't read her because you can't get past that, you probably have problems with the special effects in your local stage plays.

A few of Brackett's finest stories were set on Venus, but it was Mars that she made her own, with vivid, crackling prose.

Here. Try this, the opening of one of her best, "The Last Days of Shandakor."

He came alone into the wineshop, wrapped in a dark red cloak, with the cowl drawn over his head. He stood for a moment by the doorway and one of the slim dark predatory women who live in those places went to him, with a silvery chiming from the little bells that were almost all she wore.

I saw her smile up at him. And then, suddenly, the smile became fixed and something happened to her eyes. She was no longer looking at the cloaked man but through him. In the oddest fashion — it was as though he had become invisible.

She went by him. Whether she passed some word along or not I couldn't tell but an empty space widened around the stranger. And no one looked at him. They did not avoid looking at him. They simply refused to see him.

He began to walk slowly across the crowded room. He was very tall and he moved with a fluid, powerful grace that was beautiful to watch. People drifted out of his way, not seeming to, but doing it. The air was thick with nameless smells, shrill with the laughter of women.

Two tall barbarians, far gone in wine, were carrying on some inter-tribal feud and the yelling crowd had made room for them to fight. There was a silver pipe and a drum and a double-banked harp making old wild music. Lithe brown bodies leaped and whirled through the laughter and the shouting and the smoke.

The stranger walked through all this, alone, untouched, unseen. He passed close to where I sat. Perhaps because I, of all the people in that place, not only saw him but stared at him, he gave me a glance of black eyes from under the shadow of his cowl — eyes like brown coals, bright with suffering and rage.

I caught only a glimpse of his muffled face. The merest glimpse — but that was enough. Why did he have to show his face to me in that wineshop in Barrakesh?

He passed on. There was no space in the shadowy corner where he went but space was made, a circle of it, a moat between the stranger and the crowd. He sat down. I saw him lay a coin on the outer edge of the table. Presently a serving wench came up, picked up the coin and set down a cup of wine. But it was as if she waited on an empty table.

I turned to Kardak, my head drover, a Shunni with massive shoulders and uncut hair braided in an intricate tribal knot. "What's that all about?" I asked.

Kardak shrugged. "Who knows." He started to rise. "Come, JonRoss. It is time we got back to the serai."

"We're not leaving for hours yet. And don't lie to me, I've been on Mars a long time. What is that man? Where does he come from?"

Barrakesh is the gateway between north and south. Long ago, when there were oceans in equatorial and southern Mars, when Valkis and Jekkara were proud seats of empire and not thieves' dens, here on the edge of the northern Drylands the great caravans had come and gone to Barrakesh for a thousand thousand years. It is a place of strangers.

In the time-eaten streets of rock you see tall Kesh hillmen, nomads from the high plains of Upper Shun, lean dark men from the south who barter away the loot of forgotten tombs and temples, cosmopolitan sophisticates up from Kahora and the trade cities, where there are spaceports and all the appurtenances of modern civilization.

The red-cloaked stranger was none of these.

Now it's possible that you're a perfectly fine human being if you didn't find that stirring, but my guess is that if it didn't interest you at least a little to find out who that stranger was, you're no fan of adventure fiction. Leigh Brackett was, simply, a master writer. Today she may be best known for having written the first draft of *The Empire Strikes Back*, but she'd never have been chosen to write that if she didn't have decades of great space opera behind her. If you like Han Solo or Mal Reynolds, then you'll find an awful lot of characters that inspired them in her work. Find it, read it, and get swept away.

IT CAME FROM APPENDIX N: ROGER ZELAZNY'S JACK OF SHADOWS

By CHRIS WILLRICH

Although I haven't yet played the *Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG*, I did get a PDF copy when it came out, because I was charmed by its mission of delivering an "Appendix N" experience — a game based on the fantasy works Gary Gygax listed in Appendix N of the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* Dungeon Master's Guide as major influences on that game. And from my browsing of the DCC RPG it really nails that sense of both the bizarre and the unpredictable that I get when reading, say, Fritz Leiber or Michael Moorcock.

I'm not saying Appendix N contains all that is good in fantasy, or even older fantasy (and I haven't even read most of the items on the list!). But I always appreciate book lists, not as stern Thou Shalt Reads, but as tool boxes of inspiration and road maps for further exploration. I really enjoy Gygax's infectious enthusiasm. I'm going to share one of my enthusiasms here. My favorite writer in Appendix N is Roger Zelazny, and one of the books singled out on that list is *Jack of Shadows*. A while back I blogged a bit about that book and what a number it did on my imagination, and most of that post is reprinted here. **Warning: many, many spoilers lie beyond the shadows. If you read to the end you'll have an over-view of the whole plot.**

Jack of Shadows is a short book, and much of the world-building is implied rather than stated, but this is what I *think* is going on: there is a world with one side always facing the sun, one side forever facing the dark. The day side is governed by science, and is protected by a technological shield from the heat of the sun. Meanwhile the dark side is protected by a magical shield.

That's odd enough, but it gets stranger. The daysiders seem like familiar modern humans, but the darksiders are themselves magical beings, who have multiple lives and peculiar powers. (There also seem to be some ordinary mortals in the twilight regions who are tied to the dark realms but not darksiders themselves.) Beyond that — and here we get into ideas that make this possibly the weirdest of Zelazny's settings — we learn that the daysiders and nightsiders inhabit one planet but two contradictory worldviews. For example, day-side science declares the world's core to be a molten zone (which Jack, interpreting this concept in a darkside way, likens to a fiery demon) while night-side magic names it a great Machine. As one character tells Jack,

"It is the same thing that you describe, although neither of you sees it as it really is. Each of you colors reality in keeping with your means of controlling it. For if it is uncontrollable, you fear it. Sometimes then, you color it incomprehensible. In your case, a machine; in theirs, a demon."

How the world got that way, or if it was always so, whether this is our Earth in a forgotten past or a distant future or something else

entirely — these are all moot points. The story is told with such clarity and energy that worries about the setting's background are lost in the imagery. I remember taking this book with me as a kid on a family fishing trip to Eastern Washington State, waking up before dawn with my dad and my sister (Mom rose at a more sensible hour) and stumbling cold into the motorboat, jacket rustling, watching the silvery light slowly sketch in the world. As my eyes adjusted, I'd sometimes think, hey, in the world of *Jack of Shadows*, 5 a.m. light and 6 a.m. light are *regions on a map*, and you'd have to walk between them to see the change. You could make your home in the grey pre-dawn, and live there forever. Thoughts like this are probably half of why I read this stuff.

I remember hearing that *Jack of Shadows* is in part Zelazny's homage to Jack Vance, and if that's true I'd guess the Vance works Zelazny most had in mind were the Dying Earth stories. In that series there's also a strange physical situation (the last days of Earth) with interesting lighting (not coincidentally it's also the dying days of the sun) and the coexistence of science and magic (though in the Vance magic dominates, and science is mostly forgotten.) The rich imagery also makes sense as an echo of Vance. Zelazny is never a slouch in this regard, but this book is particularly thick with interesting brain-pictures. The language is always Zelazny's own, however:

"As he journeyed along, he saw what appeared to be a distant hedge of stones. Drawing nearer, he noted that they were of a lighter color than the others in the vicinity and that they appeared to be regularly spaced. They did not appear to have been shaped by the forces of nature but hand-hewn by some monomaniac whose problem involved pentagons."

Another Vancean nod is the use of a roguish, if not outright amoral, point of view character, and a lack of apparent disapproval of his misdeeds in the narrator's voice. In re-reading *Jack of Shadows* earlier this year, I was struck by something that's hit me a few different times encountering Zelazny's protagonists as an adult, rather than a teenager. Namely, the stars of the show are sometimes pretty nasty customers. If you've met Corwin of Amber, or Hell Tanner, or even Comrad Nomikos, this will not much surprise you — Zelazny excelled at the push-pull appeal of violent characters who take on noble causes. But what surprised me was how much my teenaged self was willing to overlook in cheering on some of Zelazny's "heroes." I suppose in part I was hooked by the power fantasies that are an undeniable part of the appeal of adventure stories, and in part by Zelazny's skill in getting inside his characters' skulls.

Jack of Shadows, aka Shadowjack, aka John Shade, aka Jack of Evil, is probably the worst of the lot... and I think even I was a little leery of him. But we spend his eponymous novel firmly in

his head, and his self-justifications for his quest for vengeance are strongly felt. So I like to think I didn't quite understand just how awful some of that revenge turns out to be. Aspects of it are chillingly understated, and this too may be part of the Vancean mood:

"As time wore on, Jack continued to resolve boundary disputes to his satisfaction; and these grew fewer in number."

Jack begins the story as an underdog, and as a charming rogue with a long list of larcenous and romantic conquests behind him. He has an interesting complaint, having been summarily executed due to the manipulations of an enemy for a crime he had not yet had the opportunity to commit. Reborn, he seeks terrible vengeance, is thwarted and recaptured, and contemplates even worse vengeance. He crosses his world and ventures to the dayside in search of the computing power that can unearth an arcane secret called the Key That Was Lost. In the process he demonstrates just how engaging a revenge plot can be.

Jack is a Power, one of the greatest of darksiders. Unlike the other Powers, he has no fixed locus of strength; instead, shadows everywhere are his friends. Without them, in either total darkness or full light, he's powerless. With them he is among the great. Zelazny makes great use of this evocative idea, and ties Jack's character into it as well. It's when he's dancing his way between the feet of greater powers that he seems most himself. He claims he has a sanctuary called Shadow Guard, but footloose as he is, that seems doubtful. When he gains the Key That Was Lost and settles in as a full-fledged tyrant of the dark side, he loses his tenuous charm.

Yet his actions have also damaged the shield that keeps the dark side from freezing over, and so he must journey to the heart of the world, to do something madder than any prior action. He will cause the earth to spin. As disaster comes upon the world, a tumult ensuring life will endure, he finally begins to have a sense of things larger than his own wants.

"All the evil was upon his head, for he had indeed earned the title he had borne. Yet, out of it, he felt, some other thing would grow. For this, he could take no credit. He could only bear blame. But he felt that he was no longer precluded from seeing what might come now that the order of the world had been altered, from feeling it, delighting in it, perhaps even — No, not that. Not yet, anyhow. But the succession of light and darkness would be a new order of things, and he felt that this would be good."

I think Ursula K. Le Guin once observed that a one-word summary of her themes might be "marriage." It's not really a fair question to put to authors, but it's a fun game for readers. The word I'd pick for Zelazny is "growth." Jack's story is that of an adolescent spirit that needs to mature. The division between light and darkness in his world makes a nice image for stasis, a status quo that needs to be shattered to allow for growth. Many other Zelazny characters, like Corwin, Red Dorakeen, William Blackhorse Singer, and Francis Sandow, seem likewise to be people stuck in a form of stasis, and their various quests help them, to some degree, to break free. None of their universes, however, embody stasis as much as the vivid world of this short book.

CELEBRATING ROBERT E. HOWARD

By HOWARD ANDREW JONES

When I tell people what a great writer Robert E. Howard was, a lot of them don't seem to believe me. If they only know him through depictions of Conan or, worse, rip-offs, then they think Howard's writing is all about a dull guy in a loin cloth fighting monsters and lots of straining bosoms. It's not that Robert E. Howard thought himself above describing a lithesome waist or a wilting beauty, especially if he needed to make a quick buck, it's just that there's a lot more going on in a Conan story than his imitators took away. Here in one of his historical stories, "Lord of Samarcand," the Scotsman Donald MacDeesa rides to the court of Tamarlane the Great. See how swiftly, how easily, Howard conjures the scene in all its splendor with just a few well-chosen words, as though he's panning a camera as MacDeesa rides.

The Frank's wonder grew; the cities of the West were hovels compared to this. Past academies, libraries, and pleasure-pavilions they rode, and Ak Boga turned into a wide gateway, guarded by silver lions. There they gave their steeds into the hands of silk-sashed grooms, and walked along a winding avenue paved with marble and lined with slim green trees. The Scotsman, looking between the slender trunks, saw shimmering expanses of roses, cherry trees and waving exotic blossoms unknown to him, where fountains jetted arches of silver spray. So they came to the palace,

gleaming blue and gold in the sunlight, passed between tall marble columns and entered the chambers with their gilt-worked arched doorways, and walls decorated with delicate paintings of Persian and Cathayan artists, and the gold tissue and silver work of Indian artistry.

Let's turn our attention to Howard's most famous creation, Conan. He is powerful and courageous in "The Tower of the Elephant," but he is new to cities, as these two excerpts show.

The Cimmerian glared about, embarrassed at the roar of mocking laughter that greeted this remark. He saw no particular humor in it, and was too new to civilization to understand its discourtesies. Civilized men are more discourteous than savages because they know they can be impolite without having their skulls split, as a general thing.

He had entered the part of the city reserved for the temples. On all sides of him they glittered white in the starlight — snowy marble pillars and golden domes and silver arches, shrines of Zamora's myriad strange gods. He did not trouble his head about them; he knew that Zamora's religion, like all things of a civilized, long-settled people, was intricate and complex, and had lost most of the

pristine essence in a maze of formula and rituals. He had squatted for hours in the courtyards of the philosophers, listening to the arguments of theologians and teachers, and come away in a haze of bewilderment, sure of only one thing, and that, that they were all touched in the head.

His gods were simple and understandable; Crom was their chief, and he lived on a great mountain, whence he sent forth dooms and death. It was useless to call on Crom, because he was a gloomy, savage god, and he hated weaklings. But he gave a man courage at birth, and the will and might to kill his enemies, which, in the Cimmerian's mind, was all any god should be expected to do.

Conan does not stride forward, unthinking, and hack everything before him. Here he comes upon a chamber where he hoped to find the treasure, and finds instead a frightening, humanoid creature... one that's not what he expected.

...Conan's gaze strayed to the limbs stretched on the marble couch. And he knew the monster would not rise to attack him. He knew the marks of the rack, and the searing brand of the flame, and tough-souled as he was, he stood aghast at the ruined deformities which his reason told him had once been limbs as comely as his own. And suddenly all fear and repulsion went from him, to be replaced by a great pity. What this monster was, Conan could not know, but the evidences of its sufferings were so terrible and pathetic that a strange aching sadness came over the Cimmerian, he knew not why. He only felt that he was looking upon a cosmic tragedy, and he shrank with shame, as if the guilt of a whole race were laid upon him.

Howard seldom failed to entertain, and at his best, he was not just good, he was great — he stands as one of the finest adventure writers we've ever had. There is much to be gleaned from his craft, and much enjoyment to be found in his writing.

BY THE SWORD: ADDING REALISM TO SWORD-AND-SORCERY COMBAT

By AERYN RUDEL

Melee combat is a staple of the sword-and-sorcery genre, but it's fair to say the way it's often portrayed doesn't bear much resemblance to real medieval or renaissance combat. If you wanted to write melee combat more realistically, how would you go about doing it? Dealing with these three issues is a good place to start.

1) Fewer instant kills. In fantasy fiction and movies, it's not uncommon to see the bad guy take a single blow from the hero's sword and fall down stone dead. While sticking someone with a sword is probably going to kill them *eventually*, instant death is unlikely unless you inflict a catastrophic wound (harder than it sounds). That means even a mortal blow leaves the bad guy enough time to do some real damage. It's why historical fencing arts like HEMA teach continued defensive measures *after* a telling blow is struck.

The fix: Your hero should absolutely kill the bad guys in a single blow now and then. I mean, she's the hero, right? That said, a scene where your hero strikes a mortal blow and continues to defend herself as the bad guy slowly bleeds out can go a long way to banishing the notion of the instant kill.

2) Armor works. Yep, and so well that everyone's favorite fantasy weapon, the sword, doesn't stand a chance at defeating good armor unless used in very specific ways. Blades can't generally cut through metal, so someone in chain mail or plate armor was pretty well protected from sword blows. Armor was so good that a bunch of specialized weapons developed to defeat it, mostly polearms that punctured or crushed armor (and the person beneath it) rather than cutting through it.

The fix: Easy, make sure the armor you put on your heroes and bad guys isn't just costume. People wore armor for a very good reason (it kept them alive), so show it working from time to time.

3) Give them a hand . . . and maybe some fingers. Lots of folks think the only way to win a sword fight is to chop the other guy's head off, run him through, or spill his intestines. Sure, those are all effective, but there's a whole bunch of body parts that are easier to hit and nearly as debilitating to lose. Hands and fingers top this list. If you can hit your opponent's hand or wrist with a weapon like a longsword, he's probably gonna lose fingers, maybe even the hand. In other words, you can remove the bad guy's ability to wield his weapon effectively with one stroke that likely didn't put you at much risk.

The fix: Inexperienced swordsmen often push their hands out too far when attacking and defending (he says, counting the bruises on his hands and wrists). Let your hero surprise that low-level mook with a blow that shows he's got the skill and speed for a little hand sniping.

It goes without saying that everything here should be taken as advice on writing melee combat in a very specific way. It is not the ONLY way to write melee combat nor is it the BEST way to write melee combat. It's a stylistic choice, and if it suits you, awesome. If it doesn't suit you, also awesome. And, yes, I've broken every one of these rules in my own writing (plus a bunch more) for various reasons, with "cuz its cool" being at the top of the list.

If you enjoyed this article, there's more like it on my blog at www.rejectomancy.com under the *Fightin' Fiction* category.

STRIKING THE BALANCE

By **BILL WARD**

It's been nearly 40 years since Poul Anderson's essay "On Thud and Blunder," in which the author of such classics as *The Broken Sword* and *The High Crusade* took certain practitioners of heroic fantasy to task for their lack of a realistic approach. In his essay (which you can read for free online), Anderson rightly points out that a horse is not a motorbike, a sword does not weigh fifty pounds, and that the pre-modern age is a dark, dangerous, and very different place from our own familiar world. It's a great, entertaining read, and still surprisingly relevant today — indeed, just when I start thinking fantasy has moved beyond some of Anderson's more elementary pronouncements, I see something like the most recent seasons of *Game of Thrones* and realize that the Thud, well, it just keeps on Blundering.

But there is a trap inherent in this realistic approach, a trap that threatens to dispel the very magic of fantasy in the first place. Somewhat fittingly, Anderson himself fell into this trap in a scene forever burned into my mind in the pastiche novel *Conan the Rebel*. In it an imprisoned Conan, quite realistically, exercises in his prison to stay in shape. Verisimilitude, that thing that Anderson wants to create in fantasy by paying attention to agrarian economies and the speed of sailing vessels, is completely and utterly lost when realism in the form of a barbarian conqueror doing "deep knee bends" comes crashing headfirst into tone, and tone loses.

Because here is the thing with fantasy — it isn't simply history dressed up in fancy clothing, it's actually part of the tradition of mythic storytelling. Fantasy is more Homer than Gibbon, and al-

ways will be. And just as it is vital to avoid silliness like baled hay and indefatigable horses in fantasy, it is equally as important to maintain the tone and resonance of myth.

It is, in many ways, the conflict between intellect and emotion. There are an almost infinite amount of "realistic" details one can include in a story, but stories are not real life. True suspension of disbelief isn't asking a reader to believe that what he is reading is real, it is conspiring with the reader to create an emotionally satisfying story that doesn't provoke doubt or call attention to itself. Completely unrealistic fantasy worlds are one way to provoke this doubt, as Anderson said. But so to is rendering banal that which should be elevated.

King Arthur never complained of toothache, Odysseus didn't clip his nails, and Gilgamesh never once took a bathroom break. We can only believe in these characters when they are tonally consistent with their own nature as heroes in a story. We know it is a story, we never lose sight of that fact, and by having them behave 'more realistically' we paradoxically undermine their own vital nature within the story itself. Hence, it is far easier to believe in a Conan who fights sorcerers and demons than in one who does aerobics.

As authors, all of us stand upon the shoulders of the giants who came before. When it comes to the man who is pretty much inarguably the father of sword-and-sorcery fiction, Robert E. Howard, you are talking not merely of a giant, but a titan whose legacy will always be there to inspire with fire and thunder.

YOUR ILLUSTRIOUS ANCESTORS

By **JAMES ENGE**

Nobody can read everything. But, if you want to write, you should read a lot. Nothing is more insufferable than the person who wants everyone to read their work, but they don't actually bother to read anything themselves. You don't want to be that person. Because their writing always sucks. (They haven't read enough to spot a cliché when they see it, for one thing.)

Finding fantasy to read is a lot easier than it used to be. Let me set myself down here on this cracker-barrel, and adjust my corn-cob pipe in my mouth, and explain how rough we had it in the old days—say, before 1977.

In 1977, Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannarra* was published, inaugurating the golden age of Big Fat Fantasy Novels, which we still presently live in. Whether one is a fan of the novel or not doesn't matter: its enormous enduring success proved that epic fantasy wasn't just the private amusement of some elderly British

philologist that happened to stumble into print. Epic fantasy was a commercial category of fiction that readers were crying out for. Their cries were answered, and we are where we are.

But before Shannarra, fantasy readers had to comb a lot of bookshelves, looking mostly for reprints of older work. Science fiction was what writers like Poul Anderson and Andre Norton and Fritz Leiber mostly made a living at. They wrote fantasy only when the opportunity occasionally arose.

The best of the reprint series was unquestionably the Ballantine Adult Fantasy line edited by Lin Carter. As a writer Lin Carter was, eh, let's say a prisoner of his influences. But as a fantasy editor he really had no peer, turning out volume after volume of classic but sometimes neglected fantasy—early work by Lord Dunsany and James Branch Cabell; lost classics like Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist*; new work by Joy Chant and Katherine Kurtz.

And Carter published a couple of anthologies (*Dragons, Elves, and Heroes* and *Golden Cities Far*) gathering together much older work, some it going back to the earliest literature that survives.

It makes sense. If you like dragons and monsters, why not read the oldest set of those stories in English (i.e. *Beowulf*)? Before there was epic fantasy, it was just epic and it was full of the impossible heroic stuff I loved. I started roistering my way through this stuff as a teenager and I've never really stopped, and never intend to.

For one thing, reading older work can give you a new sense of possibility. Different cultures tell stories in different ways, ways that may be new to us, even if they're very old in the world. Then, too, it's a tremendously rich storehouse of ideas, stories, even names, that you can loot for your own purposes. (The central plot problem of my story "The Red Worm's Way" was stolen shamelessly from Book 2 of Apuleius' *Transformations*, and I lifted a few bits from Homer and Vergil for my *Magician's Skull* story, "The Guild of Silent Men.")

No one could read everything that's out there (new or old). But if I were just going to recommend a few old-to-ancient works for fantasy writers to read, I guess I would certainly name the *Mabinogion*. It's a varied compendium of really weird stories, some of them familiar, some of them not.

Another compendium of folklore is Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, at least the first two parts. It's Old Norse literature at its friendliest

and is at or near the heart of that chilly wonderland that C.S. Lewis called "the Northern Thing."

A great book that used to be better known in English is Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. It's about — it's about practically everything, but the thread weaving all the various episodes into one story is the tale of Charlemagne's greatest knight, Roland, and how he went crazy because of love. There are epic battles, sinister sorceries, love, hate, vile betrayals, heroic deeds, trips to paradise, to hell, and to the moon — pretty much everything you need for a great fantasy novel. Ariosto doesn't take any of it seriously, but he always knows what he's doing and does it well.

Another book (familiar to many, but new to me) is the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, in which the Monkey King travels the wide world to gain wisdom and superpowers and defeat the Monster King. That brings us to chapter 2. A weird and dazzling book.

You can't pick your ancestors, the people whose parts were cobbled together to make you. But you can pick your influences, decide what part of the literary tradition you're going to extend into the future. It could be Bob, your beta-reader in Dubuque who never gets tired of *Firefly* references. But it could also be the Monkey King, or Väinämöinen, or the Deer Woman.

Bob won't mind.

FINDING SWORD-AND-SORCERY

By C. L. WERNER

Given the immense impact his stories have had on my own style and work, I was a rather late comer to Robert E. Howard. Perhaps I should re-phrase that. I didn't devour his actual stories as written by himself for a good long time. The first book I purchased that really got me off and running with Howard (and by extension sword-and-sorcery in general) was the Ace Conan anthology, the first in the seminal line of twelve books that took Howard's works and expanded, revised or flat-out rewrote them courtesy of editors Lin Carter and L. Sprague deCamp.

I distinctly remember that little black-bound tome with its snarling Thak on the cover courtesy of Frank Frazetta's astonishing painting. The year was 1992, I'd just moved to Arizona and squandered some of my meager funds at a little hole-in-the-wall used bookstore. It would be remiss to say that, as edited as the tales my have been, that first proper introduction to Robert E. Howard left an impact that still resonates with me today.

That little Ace tome, however, wasn't my first exposure to the genre of sword-and-sorcery. Of course, growing up in the 1980s, it was impossible not to escape the Arnold Schwarzenegger Conan films or the movies that tried to exploit its popularity. I must have seen "The Beastmaster" a hundred times over the years and a staple of USA Network's Up All Night broadcasts were bargain-basement barbarian movies like the *Deathstalker* and *Barbarian Queen* films.

"The Sword and the Sorcerer" was another big one; a little more attention to the pacing and script, a bit more consistency in its tone and that could have been something of a classic in its own right.

Even farther back, however, were comic books. I never read the *Conan* or *Savage Sword of Conan* publications of the time, but I did have a rather memorable introduction to Robert E. Howard courtesy of an old Marvel title called *Supernatural Thrillers*.

Before the title was given over as a vehicle for the Living Mummy, it presented various tales in each issue. One dealt with "The Return of the Headless Horseman" while another was an adaption of "The Invisible Man." The issue that concerns this topic was devoted to "The Valley of the Worm," adapting Howard's tale of ancient man against still older primordial horrors with gripping art by Gil Kane. It was a thrilling read that really did live up to the comic's title.

From then on, Howard's characters would draw my attention when they showed up in other titles. *Monsters Unleashed*, a big beefy black-and-white magazine published by Marvel's Charleton imprint, provide my first exposure to Solomon Kane, via both adaptations of Howard's stories and original works, such as a tale wherein Kane meets Dracula. Again, the roots laid down by these early influences can't really be overstated when it comes to my own humble efforts.

VALEN THE OUTCAST

By **JOHN C. HOCKING**

Sword-and-sorcery enthusiasts tend to be on the hard edge of enthusiastic. Most of those I know, myself included, tend to take in as much of the genre as they can, and are often close to obsessive about being aware, at the very least, of most everything the genre has produced or is producing.

But back in late 2011 and into 2012, there was a sword-and-sorcery comic that seemed to fly under just about everyone's radar. I'm talking about the Boom! comic, Valen the Outcast. I picked up the first issue just because it looked like Sword & Sorcery, and found myself enjoying it enough that I watched and waited for each of its eight issues to appear. These eight issues form a complete narrative, but I ended up wishing for an ongoing series.

Valen the Outcast was written by Michael Alan Nelson and drawn by Matteo Scalera. Nelson went on to adapt Robert E. Howard's powerful historical adventure, Hawks of Outremer, to comics for Boom! That four issue comic does a spectacular job of bringing REH's fearsome warrior Cormac Fitzgeoffrey to life. I think it's one of the best adaptations of REH to comics format since Marvel's glory days of Roy Thomas and John Buscema. But that's another story.

To make too many comparisons, but hopefully give you an idea of the 'feel' of Valen the Outcast, the story depicts a Conan-influenced hero in a somewhat Tolkien-influenced world, but with the magic dark and grim enough to add a strong, pervasive horror element. The comic leans more on the Sorcery aspect of Sword & Sorcery than the genre often does — there's a Dark Lord threaten-

ing the land, and our hero, the Warrior-King Valen Brand, is pitted against him.

The kicker is that, as the tale begins, the Dark Lord has already utterly defeated and overrun Valen's country, and has turned Valen into his undead servant. Valen escapes captivity and wins back his free will, but not his soul, the result being the world's first zombie sword-and-sorcery hero. Valen starts off about as beat down and discounted as any fantasy hero has ever been. He's lost his kingdom, friends, family and soul, and is now an animated husk that is beginning to rot on its feet. How can he ever hope to win back his kingdom and take a just revenge on the monstrously powerful sorcerer who did all this to him?

This works a good deal better than I expected it would, with our hero fighting the problems inherent in being an animated corpse, notably the instant hate and horror of those he encounters, while racing against time (and the relentless decomposition of his body) to find some way to free his kingdom of magical tyranny and, incidentally, get back his soul. A couple decent supporting characters and, even better, a handful of honestly surprising plot twists, help make this an engaging story and something that I think a good many sword-and-sorcery fans, especially those with a fondness for comics, would enjoy if they only knew it was out there.

Given, there's never enough sword-and-sorcery in the world, in comics or elsewhere, but here's a unique example you might have missed.

HORROR IN SWORD-AND-SORCERY

By **C.L. WERNER**

One of the most distinctive aspects that separates sword-and-sorcery from epic fantasy, and indeed, many of the sub-genres of fantasy, is that of horror. The visceral nastiness of horror has a hard time thriving in high fantasy where there is a sense of mighty forces of benign nature working behind the scenes to support the heroes. It can be done, certainly, as Tolkien himself displays quite nicely with Frodo's journey into Shelob's lair, but such moments are just that — moments. The overall narrative is too grand, too vast to get down to something as personal and sinister as horror.

Monsters in sword-and-sorcery are almost invariably superhuman in their presentation, making short and brutal work of anybody so unfortunate as to not be the hero of the tale.

Whether it is the intelligent rats encountered by Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser or the simian anthropoid Thak who menaces Conan,

these creatures exact a bloodthirsty toll before they're through. They are a credible threat, a violent violation of the natural order rather than a minor inconvenience to be overcome in a few paragraphs before the hero can move on with the main thrust of the story. In sword-and-sorcery tales, the monster is very often the focal point, the great obstacle that must be overcome.

The nature of magic is another arena where sword-and-sorcery strays into the realm of horror. Even benevolent magic has this gruesome atmosphere about it. While he helps Conan, Pelias the sorcerer is clearly a fiend in his own right. The juju practiced by N'Lunga might help Solomon Kane, but it is still presented as an arcane and obscene art. When Jirel of Joiry turns to magic to aid her cause, she soon finds cause to regret her decision. Elak's confederate Dalan the Druid even has an uncanny aura of "dabbling in things beyond" as he tries to steer the prince back to his rightful throne.

Nowhere, for me, does the resonance of horror sound more strongly than in Robert E. Howard's classic "Worms of the Earth." The Pictish king Bran Mak Morn seeks vengeance against a Roman governor. Unable to prevail against the Romans by force of arms, Bran turns to magic, seeking out the half-caste witch of Dagonmoor. Through her, he learns a way to harness the inhuman powers of the titular Worms of the Earth, a troglodyte race driven into the underworld ages ago by Bran's ancestors. Forcing these creatures into action against the Romans, Bran like Jirel of Joiry finds that even when you get what you want, black magic does not give you what you want.

The presentation of the horrors of the title in "Worms of the Earth" is nebulous and unsettling, always hinting at a greater vileness hidden in the shadows wherein these troglodytes lurk. It is left a question which is more abominable, to believe these things were beasts thwarted in their efforts to become men or if they are men who have degenerated to the level of beasts. Everything about the way Howard handles the Worms is disturbing and leaves the reader with a sense of repulsion. That he builds upon this ghastliness by first exposing the reader to the revolting sorceries for the witch-woman only heightens their malignance, employing a lesser fright to magnify the greater terror still to come. Surely a keynote of any good horror story!

THE PLEDGE OF THE SWORD

By **HOWARD ANDREW JONES**

In my late twenties I decided that if I was serious about being a fantasy writer I really needed to understand the roots of fantasy fiction. That's why, while most of the rest of the fantasy readers in North America were losing themselves in *The Wheel of Time*, I was working my way through a whole slew of fantasy classics. A lot of those books were the famed Ballantine Adult Fantasy paperbacks that Lin Carter edited, and thanks to them I got familiar with the work of a number of writers I'd long heard about, and a few of them, like Lord Dunsany, became new favorites.

But mostly I realized that of all fantasy flavors, sword-and-sorcery was my very favorite. It made sense — I'd always loved a big chunk of the Lankhmar stories, and a number of Michael Moorcock's stories, and Roger Zelazny's *Amber*, and, of course Harold Lamb's historical fiction, which, while not strictly sword-and-sorcery, was danged close. I'd just never really paid attention to the fact that those stories were different from the other kinds I'd been reading.

Owing to chance I'd never seen much of Robert E. Howard's fiction, and as I explored more and more of his work I quickly realized that his were some of the finest adventure stories I'd ever read. One of my sisters had introduced me to Leigh Brackett's *Ginger Star* series years before, but I'd never found her earlier short stories, which were a revelation.

I could go on and on about all the great stuff I read during that years-long exploration, but the point I'm after is to make clear that sword-and-sorcery holds a special place in my heart, over and above nearly every other kind of fiction. That's not to say that I like all of it equally, because there are bad examples and good and sometimes it seems that the former far outnumber the latter. But at its best, there's nothing I like better and almost nothing I like as well.

I've thought long and hard about what it is that makes sword-and-sorcery special to me, and that has an awful lot to do with the qualities I outlined while I was attempting to define the genre at the beginning of this Kickstarter. Great sword-and-sorcery is usually moving at a fast clip. It takes you somewhere interesting in the company of fascinating characters, exposing you along the way to scenes of dread and wonder. There are great action set pieces that actually count for something, entertaining side characters and villains, surprises and sometimes twists, and a conclusion that satisfies.

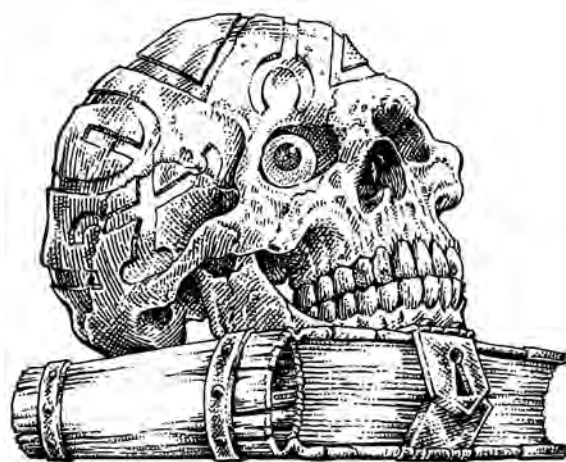
If a sword-and-sorcery tale has a message it doesn't smack you over the head with it. Most times it may seem to lack a message entirely, but that doesn't mean there's nothing redeeming in a story where characters are shown overcoming a terrible challenge with wit and brawn. Sword-and-sorcery is part and parcel of the mythic cycles we've been sharing around the campfire since the earliest days of our species. We'd hear how our ancestors chased down the elusive stag, or fended off the clawed thing in the dark, or guided the tribe to safety through a land of enemies. In listening, we were inspired to emulate courageous action and to not stand idle when times were dark and all hope seemed lost.

Lin Carter once wrote of sword-and-sorcery as "the sacred genre" and while he might have had a half-mocking smile on his face as he did so, he was serious all the same. I, too, can't help but be a little amused and bemused that sword-and-sorcery has meant so much to me over the years, but it's the well to which I constantly return. If you saw my shelves, you'd see that I'm surrounded by history books and hardboiled detective novels and westerns and space opera and other flavors of fantasy, not to mention swashbuckling historicals and a smattering of classics. At different times I'm in the mood for different things. But here's the truth — if someone I trust were to hand me a new sword-and-sorcery novel or collection and tell me that it had the same kind of fire as the best old stuff, I'd set all the rest aside.

I realize that you, the readers of *Tales From the Magician's Skull*, are placing trust in me, its editor, and I don't mean to let you down. When you pick up an issue of our magazine, I want you to know that there are glories ahead that will live long in the halls of your memory. I pledge, with deepest sincerity, to present the finest modern sword-and-sorcery I can lay hands on so that we may together drink deeply and savor it.

It is folly to focus too hard upon the future, for no one may know what it holds. But it is my hope that this is only the beginning, and that I will have the opportunity to work with talented writers and be able to deliver their work into your hands for years to come. I'm heartened by the tremendous success of this Kickstarter, and I have high hopes that with your support we shall go on to attain greater and greater heights in the months and years ahead.

Swords Together!



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