

Tales From The **MAGICIAN'S SKULL**

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

Tales From The MAGICIAN'S SKULL



NO. 5

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Any writer who encountered Adventure magazine between 1917 and the early 1930s would have had Harold Lamb's work readily at hand, because he was one of the magazine's most popular writers and appeared there with great frequency. Probably the most important of those who saw him, though, was a Texan named Robert E. Howard...		
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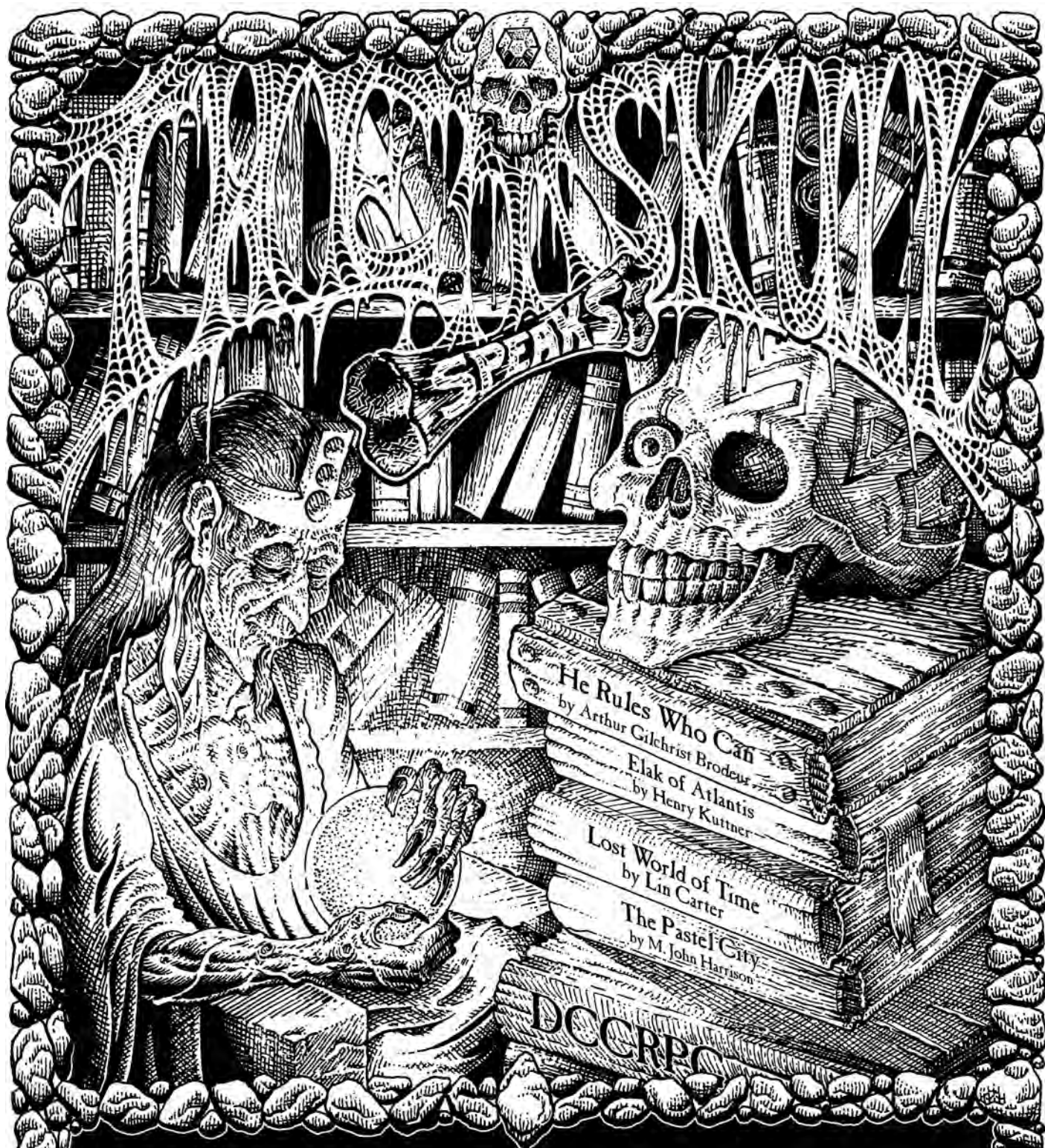
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Rejoice, mortals! Once more I have brought you tales of wonder! In addition to that, by popular demand I have contributed my musings to the contents of this issue, and you shall find them within.

You also may follow my activities upon the Facetweet with this incantation: www.facebook.com/TheMagiciansSkull. If you wish to see my glories upon your glowing screens, cast yourselves through the interweb to the following location: www.goodman-games.com/1fms/.

It has come to my attention that many of you lack messenger ravens. During those moments when you are overcome with awe for my splendid doings, you should contact me promptly via skull@goodman-games.com and send me your praise.

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

WHEN I recently re-read my introduction to issue 4, I was struck by my blithe naiveté. Of course, only a doomsayer could have predicted the dire events that have swept across the globe through 2020, but I still cringe a little thinking about how strange those words must have sounded to those reading them during the first half of this year. Too much changed in the long weeks between their composition and their appearance upon the printed page. We here working under the Skull's banner earnestly hope you and yours are safe and well.

Fortunately our staff is healthy and prosperous. I happen to be writing this editorial during the weekend that Gen Con was scheduled during 2020. Joseph and I had planned to announce the opening of submissions to the magazine as part of the Goodman Games Gen Con events. Instead, I shall do so here. We will throw the gates wide on a trial basis for a limited time beginning next year. The Skull has decreed that we shall accept electronic manuscripts beginning on the anniversary of the birthday of the sacred genre's father, Robert E. Howard, January 22, 2021, and close upon that day sacred to mortal fools, April 1, 2021. Submission details will be released publicly before year's end.

Since we couldn't gather in person at Gen Con to celebrate the Skull's magnificence, we recently held an online gathering. Joseph, Michael Curtis, James Enge, John Chris Hocking and myself sat down to discuss the sword-and-sorcery of Appendix N via some sort of streaming service, probably Instaface. Our two-hour talk is archived on the Goodman Games web site, along with a text bibliography of many of the books and stories we referenced. (You can type in this URL, or search "sword and sorcery of Appendix N" on www.goodman-games.com: <https://goodman-games.com/blog/2020/06/20/dcc-days-online-seminar-sword-sorcery-of-appendix-n/>).

At the Skull's behest we have scoured the world for fantastic new tales of sword-and-sorcery, and are pleased to present them to you. As you've come to expect, the issue is a mix of new and recurring authors and characters. We have other surprises planned behind the scenes, but I dare say nothing more on that score, for I don't wish to provoke the Skull's wrath.

First up you'll find James Enge, who brings us an all-new adventure of the brilliant Morlock, who himself is wrestling with a world he barely recognizes. Chris Hocking's hard-boiled Benhus, King's Blade, ventures into depths that might twist past our own reality in the company of his own secretive monarch. Clint Werner sends

his brave samurai Oba onto the high seas to confront a horrific menace, and Violette Malan's Dhulyn and Parno get wrapped up in one of their strangest and most compelling adventures yet, allied with a wizard who might actually be one of the good guys.

New to us is an author who will be familiar to many, Adrian Simmons, editor of a well-known e-zine after our own

heart, Heroic Fiction Quarterly, and author of a stirring tale of two adventurers thrust into a rescue mission for a young friend.

Adrian Cole rounds out the issue with another adventure of Elak of Atlantis, this time contending with ancient cosmic forces from the ocean depths.

Fear not, for work has already begun on issue 6! Before I sign off, I'd like to announce that the talented Bill Ward has recently joined our staff as Website Editor. By the time you read this, you may already be seeing his work out there on the interweb, or on Facetweet. I hope you'll join us in extending him a warm welcome.

Now I must away, for a mist rises, and I hear the gong of summons...

—Howard Andrew Jones



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

RETAILERS: Interested in stocking Tales From the Magician's Skull? Contact us at skull@goodman-games.com for information!





ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS NICHOLSON

POOL OF MEMORY

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

Your soul must say to the guardians: "I am a child of the Earth and of Starry Heaven, but my nation is the Sky. You yourselves know this! I am withered with thirst; I'm dying. Quickly, give me the cold water flowing from the pool of Memory."

—prophecy of Orpheus

HIS eyes like gray stones lay lifeless in the river of his tears. He stumbled down the cluttered road as if he had forgotten how to walk on his uneven legs. In fact he had forgotten much, including his name. He stood there, at the entrance to the little town, blinking at the blank-eyed, happy people wandering the streets. At last he summoned the awareness to ask someone, "Where is this place?"

The someone answered him in a language he did not know.

He also didn't know enough to be concerned; he just walked on to the next person, a dark-skinned woman with golden eyes and hair. She was sitting on the steps outside a dilapidated house. Had he remembered anything about the world and its people, he would have found her unusually beautiful; at the moment she was just someone to talk to.

"Where is this place?" he asked the darkly golden woman.

"Not sure," she replied, with a dazzling smile. "Don't you know?"

"No."

She laughed at that. "That's stupid," she said. "You just came here and you don't know where here is!"

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Not sure," she said. "They call me Goldie, so that's what I call myself. What's your name?"

He was not prepared for this appalling question, which seemed to him very unfair. He stuttered, "I am—am—Am—Am—Am—" and ground slowly to a halt.

"Well," she said doubtfully, "I'll just call you Am for short."

Am thought this was wrong, but he couldn't think of anything righter. He sat down next to Goldie on the steps of the house. His feet stopped hurting and he was surprised by that. As long as he could remember, his feet had hurt. Now he knew he could fix that by sitting down. He made a mental note to remember it.

"Why are you crying?" Goldie asked.

"I'm not."

"You *were*. Your face is all over tears and snot. Why were you crying?"

"No idea," he admitted cheerfully, wiping off some of the tears etc. "Why do you ask so many questions?" he asked, before she could ask him another.

"I like to know things. I know where I live, and where Burroom lives, and where to get food, and some other things too. I bet you don't know that much."

It was true, and only when she'd said that did he realize it.

"Let's go see Burroom," she said. "Then we'll get some food."

Burroom lived in the corner of a three-floor house that had collapsed in on itself. He was sitting on a dark greasy mat in a place where the shattered timber of the house had formed a tentlike structure. His hair was brown and tangled; his face was pale and vacant; his red eyes looked through them and past them as they approached, focused on nothing at all.

Am's fingers itched with the urge to fix the house somehow... or destroy it. He didn't like to see broken things. He didn't know why.

Goldie was bothered, too, for different reasons. She couldn't get Burroom to notice her at first. At last, after standing in front of him and shouting his name, she got him to look at her and say, "Oh. Hi, Goldie."

"We're going to get some food," Goldie said. "Come with us."

"Oh. I don't eat anymore."

"Don't be dumb. Everybody eats."

With this and other arguments, Goldie tried to sway him, but he just sat there—not disagreeing, not fighting, not anything.

"Okay, we'll bring by some food for you later," Goldie said.

Burroom didn't even shrug. He just sat there as they walked away.

"I don't like to see that," Goldie remarked to Am. "People who do that sometimes don't get better."

"And then?"

"They die."

"And then?"

"The mouths come. The mushrooms grow."

"Will that happen to Burroom?"

"Of course not!"

"Why not?"

Goldie shrugged. "It never has."

Food, it turned out, was mushrooms. Am liked mushrooms; he knew it as soon as he saw them. But he didn't like where these ones were growing: a heap of rotting bodies underneath a canopy of leaves in the town square.

The heap was surrounded by man-high plants with dark spiny stems; from them extended the ivy-like limbs that wove together to provide shade for the mushrooms. At the foot of each stem was a straggly halo of mushy brown leaves. At the top of each stem was a pair of thick petals, very like lips, gleaming in poisonous green. Am didn't find them unusual, since he had nothing in his memory to compare them to, but he didn't like them. And he really didn't like it when some of the mouth-plants turned toward them and opened their lips, revealing the narrow dark gullet within.

"Let's go somewhere else," he said to Goldie.

"There's nowhere else. This is where food is."

"I don't like those things."

"What? The mouths?" Goldie gaped in surprise at the sinister plants, who gaped hungrily back at her. "They won't hurt you."

"How do you know?"

"They never have."

"How do you know?"

Goldie took the question seriously. "I suppose I don't," she said candidly, after a few moments. "But that's where the food is. I've never seen the mouths harm anyone. If you want to look elsewhere for food, go ahead."

Am was reluctant to leave her company, and he was hungry. He followed her through the rows of mouth-plants and they each gathered an armful of mushrooms from the corpse heap. It was pretty horrible, plucking mushrooms up from between the gray meaty fingers of a corpse, but no more horrible than the mouth-plants, or the painful hollow in his brain where his memories should be, the nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something important.

When they had as many mushrooms as they could carry, Goldie led the way to a thin clear stream on the high side of town, coming through the tall thorny hedge that seemed to surround the whole place. They rinsed the mushrooms clean, ate them, and washed them down with more water from the stream.

"You look funny there, a mushroom eating mushrooms," Goldie remarked.

"What?"

"Your skin so pale, like a mushroom, I mean. You're kind of hunched over, too."

Am couldn't deny the fact of his twisted shoulders, but he looked at his arm, burned brown by much exposure to the sun, and then hers. "Compared to you, I guess," he said at last.

Goldie looked confused. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. For a second you looked paler than you are. Younger, too. I don't know why I thought that."

They munched their wet fungus in not-uncomfortable silence.

They went back that night to a house that Goldie said was hers, although there was no furniture or any sign that anyone had lived there for a long time. Goldie wrapped herself around Am, crooked shoulders and all, and afterwards fell asleep on the floor, as if they'd been married for a hundred years—which was true, in a way, although neither of them knew it.

The next few days passed in a golden fog, at least for Am. Maybe I should tell you all about them, but I'm not here to lie to you: they were all pretty much like the first one.

One thing happened, though: Burroom died. Goldie and Am went with a handful of mushrooms to his house and he was sitting there in his tent of ruined timber, his face as gray and cold as the mushrooms who would presently be feeding on it.

There was a mouth-plant already almost fully grown by the dead body. The next day, when they were going to get mushrooms, they saw it bent over, dragging Burroom's corpse to the pile, wriggling the rotten brown leaves at its base like octopus legs to move down the street. Goldie didn't say anything about it, so Am didn't, but he felt strange and sad.

Then a day came when Goldie fell silent. She didn't want to go for a walk by the thorn bush, or wade in the stream, or get food, or sleep together, or anything.

"Are you sad about Burroom?" Am asked.

"What's Burroom?" Goldie said absently, not looking at him.

Am realized that what had happened to Burroom was happening now to Goldie. And he had to wonder if it was also happening to him: he was frightened and upset about losing his only friend, but somehow the feeling was muted, wrapped in fog and cotton.

He ran all the way to the food pile and picked mushrooms for Goldie, but when he returned with them, wet and shining from the stream, she would not speak or listen to him at all.

He was too frightened to eat. He sat down on the step with her, as if he could keep her company as she set out on her long journey. But he couldn't keep her company. She didn't even know he was there.

On the other side of the doorstep, a spiky, green stem was growing. Pierced by an intuition sharper than any thorn, he went to look at it. It was a mouth-plant, just about knee-high. It was growing there so that it could carry her dead body to the corpse heap.

Anger kindled in his mind, a bright fire dispelling the fog, burning the cotton. He grabbed the mouth plant and tried to pull it up from the ground. He succeeded in lifting the scraggly brown leaves off the ground, but there were long, pale stringy roots that would not come loose from the earth.

That was when Am learned that the mouth-plants had teeth: sharp, jagged, greenblack ridges that extruded from the shining green lips. They fastened onto his right forearm, ripping through the cloth to tear into his flesh.

He was too ignorant to be startled or afraid. He pummeled the green lips savagely with his left hand as he continued to try and pull the stem free from its roots with his right.

The jagged teeth broke a vein in his arm and Am's red fire-bright blood sprayed out, setting the mouth-plant on fire. Am shouted with surprise—he had not known blood could do that—and the plant-beast was even more dismayed. It struggled to break free, but its straggling brown leaf-feet couldn't reach the ground and presently it was limp in his hand, smoldering with stinking green smoke.

Am dropped it in the street and put one foot on it, in case it was faking, as he tore a strip from his cloak and quickly bound up his wound with it. His fingers knew what to do without him thinking about it. As he wrapped the makeshift bandage he noticed that his skin was already crisscrossed with scars. The mouth-plant was not the first monster to take a dislike to him, perhaps. Somehow he was pleased. He had survived those other things; maybe he would survive this too.

Through all this, Goldie had not moved. Her eyes were open; she was still breathing. But she stared vacantly at nothing, and nothing he said could make her respond.

That reminded him that he was afraid and angry, and he renewed his attempts to pull the dead mouth-plant away from its roots. He saw at last that the roots were lateralized, pulling in different directions. One string, beet-red, went back uphill toward the city center, and the corpse pile, and the mushrooms. The other, rutabaga-pale, went downhill.

He walked downhill, ripping the stringlike root from the chunky brown earth as he went.

As Am passed the lower edge of the little town, he started to get this funny feeling: as if he shouldn't be there. He almost turned back, but then realized that the increasingly horrible sensation (a weight growing in his head, making him slower, stupider, emptier of everything but the weight itself) was really a good thing. If there was some magic on the town that was stealing people's minds and lives, this might be its way of protecting itself. If it didn't want him here, he wanted to be here. He was angry and afraid: he tried to burn away the weight in his brain with that fear, that anger.

It didn't work. But he didn't stop.

The stringy root was running now next to the stream. The earth here was black and soft, almost muddy, and when Am pulled up the mouth-plant's root he started to see in the shattered earth many other stringy white roots joining together, almost like the nerves of an animal joining together in the spinal column. Am hadn't known that he knew about things like that, and was faintly encouraged. Maybe he somehow still knew all the things he used to know, but the evil magic in the town kept him from getting at them.

The weight in his head was getting worse. Now it was blocking out his sight and hearing. He held onto the thin wiry root as if it were a lifeline and pulled himself forward. The weight was like quicksand, deadening all perceptions and slowing his motion, holding him back, killing him slowly with its slowness. But the only way through was to hang on and pull, so he did.

And then he was through. The light of the cloudy sky was glorious; the ability to breathe was glorious. The scents abounding in the free-flowing air... were not glorious.

In fact, he was ankle-deep in a swamp. It was also a swamp filled with refuse—not garbage, exactly, but stuff that people had thrown away, like baggage and cloaks and things.

As he stood there, someone dumped a box in the water and it nearly landed on his head. He sloshed away from the muddy splash and looked up to shout at the person who had so callously caused it.

That person, a man apparently, was passing by on a bridge over the swampy area. Someone else, a woman, was also crossing; like the man, she dumped what she was carrying off the side of the bridge and passed on.

Am suddenly realized that this was how people entered the town—how he himself must have entered the town. In the grip of the town's evil magic, they threw away whatever they brought with them and entered without possessions or memories.

Maybe there was some clue to his own identity lurking here among the wreckage of people's lives. He scanned the swamp eagerly for something that stood out, something that would tell him who he was.

He didn't find anything like that, but he did find something better. He found a weapon.

Half-hidden in the reedy margin of the swamp was a black scabbard embossed with a silver device: a hawk flying over a branch of flowering thorns. Inside the scabbard was a sword, and such a sword! Its grip and guards were made of some lightless metal; the blade was bright and dark, like polished volcanic glass, black with white veins of crystal in it.

Somehow, Am knew this was the blade of a doomed hero from the old time. He had come here; his mind and life had been devoured here; and now this was all that was left of him.

Did Am dare to pick up the blade and wield it in defense of himself, of Goldie, of all the other victims of the evil town? Swords like this sometimes had curses on them. (How did he know that? The knowledge surfaced briefly in the milky pool of his awareness, and then sank down into blank obscurity again.)

It didn't matter. He had nothing to lose. He took the sword-grip in his right hand and lifted it up, scabbard and all.

And the lost hero was there, with him, all around him. Somehow the original owner had left a part of his ghost in the blade of his lost weapon. The hero himself was the curse on the sword.

There were no words, but Am felt the other's presence, as if he were standing just by, but out of view. He felt the grief and loss of the dead hero like heat on his skin.

"What I do, I do for you as much as for us," Am said to the hero's ghost. He belted the scabbard across his crooked shoulders—it fit best that way—and drew the sword, holding it out in front of him.

The question was: where did he go now? If the evil ruling the town emanated from one particular place, this swamp was not it. On impulse, Am decided to go to the place farthest from it, to the source of the water on the high side of town.

He climbed the slope with no trouble. Either the spell that had bedevilled his descent didn't prevent anyone from going uphill, or the haunted sword defended him.

Am decided not to go back through town, though. If Goldie was dead already, he didn't want to know about it. He followed the narrow stream upslope until he came to the hedge above the town.

He expected an army of mouth-plants there to defy him, but there was nothing. The hedge was there, the hole in the hedge was there, the stream that came through it was there, but nothing else. Deflated, he wondered if he had gone wrong again.

Wrong or right, he would break some things. That was a very satisfying thought.

He grasped the sword with two hands and swung it like an axe, slashing away at the hedge of thorns. The blade was heavy and its edges were sharp but the hedge did not give way easily; it took many strokes to hew off one thorny branch.

That was encouraging. If they didn't want him here, this is where he wanted to be. If he wasn't supposed to be doing this, this was what he had to do.

He was midway through the hedge when it attacked him, suddenly stabbing him with a dozen thorns. He covered his eyes with his left hand and kept slashing blindly with the haunted sword in his right. But his fiery blood fought for him and soon the hedge was smoldering with green stinking smoke and the thorns withdrew, like animals fleeing from a forest fire.

Am laughed and coughed in the smoke. This was just like—some story refused to come clear in his mind—some story about the hero whose sword he bore and a hedge of thorns. The memory was near, perilously near, and he brushed it aside. It wasn't important. His eyes stinging from the bloody green smoke, he slashed and slashed with the haunted sword until he stood, smoldering, bloodstained, and triumphant on the far side of the hedge.

Before him was a rock-edged pool, filled with water as clear as air. Through the glassy transparent water he saw countless beet-red tendrils descending away from the light, deep into the darkness of the pool. They were roots from the mouth-plants. Did the mouth-plants feed on the filth of the swamp? Did the mouth-plants themselves feed something in the pool with memories they stole from the victims in the terrible little town behind the hedge? Was there a third explanation, a fourth?

It didn't matter. Something down there was connected to what was happening up here, and it was hiding. Am sheathed the sword, took a deep breath, and jumped feet-first into the pool.

He sank downwards, weighted by the sword. It seemed to take forever—for part of a day, at least. After a while he was conscious of little beyond the burning necessity to take another breath, and the cold certainty that he would die if he did. Water was leaking in through his nose and his trembling lips when he saw an opening in the rocky wall of the pool, and the thin wiry roots—faintly luminous in the shadows of the mere—passing into it. He struck out toward the cave with clumsy untutored strokes.

Presently he saw colored lights shimmering on a surface of water above him; he arrowed upward to it and broke the surface, spraying out the water that had seeped into his mouth and gasping in the grateful air. An intertwining cable of thin red roots ran up the wall of the pool that he was treading water in; he used them to climb up over the lip of the pool and flopped there on the floor like a netted fish.

He was in a kind of chamber, he saw; there were toolmarks on the unpolished walls, so it was not a wholly natural cavern; it had been enlarged or made on purpose.

On the walls were many shelves, and on the shelves were many glass jars, and in the glass jars... There was *something* in them, but he couldn't tell exactly what.

After he rolled grumbling to his feet and staggered over to look at the jars, he still couldn't tell what was in them. Sometimes it was glowing mist with a different shape or two, but they always dissolved back to misty nothing. Some jars were hot and some were cold, and they were apt to change. Some were vibrating, as if there were voices trapped inside.

Am wondered: were these jars of memory? Was this what happened to the memories that people lost, that Am himself had lost? It seemed likely.

An arched doorway opened up into another chamber. The wiry roots passed in a cable-like mass through the doorway. Am drew the dead hero's blade and followed them.

The roots separated from each other and ran up the wall of the room beyond. Each root ended in a glass jar. There were dozens of these, at least. They seemed somehow emptier than the ones he had seen in the other room—their colors were dimmer, the fog within less opaque.

Am stared open-mouthed at the array for some seconds. Then, as if the dead hero had explained everything to him, he understood. The mouth-plants fed in the swamp; they harvested the memories somehow from the people in town; they pushed the memories up here, through their red roots. All this in a flash, so quick it almost blinded him.

A good thing it was quick. There was something else to see in the larger chamber—something that could see him. It was quite large: an irregular polygon made of crystalline panes that themselves consisted of crystalline panes. There were glassy tendrils extending from the central body where the corners of the panes joined. It was alive, obviously, but somehow it didn't look as if it were alive.

It was observing the slowly filling jars of memory. The monster had palps for gripping at the end of some of its tendrils: several of them gripped styli and were inscribing notes on sheets of glass scattered over the monster's work-table. Other tendrils were adorned with crystalline globes that acted as eyes—even Am could see that because, as he looked at them, they swivelled toward him.

He saw the beast. The beast saw him.

All at once it hurled the styli in its palps at him. His sword lifted up to guard his eyes, startling Am—he felt the presence of the dead hero guiding his hand—and those styli glanced aside. Others pierced his skin on the arms and chest, and his red, fire-shedding blood began to drip from the wounds.

The man and the monster began to circle each other, looking for weaknesses. Am gathered some of the bright burning blood that dripped from his arm into his free hand, and threw it at the thing.

The burning blood splashed on the shining crystal surfaces of the monster's body... and had no effect whatsoever.

Am was embarrassed; somewhere, just over his crooked shoulders, he felt the dead hero judging him harshly.

He also felt a crawling itch on the skin of his right leg, like an army of biting ants. Looking down he saw that red roots were tangling themselves around his leg. He was about to slash at them with his sword—with the dead hero's sword—when a sudden intuition, deeper than words, came from the spirit of the lost hero.

Am lifted his head and his sword and saw that the monster was barrelling down on him, long glassy thorns extruding from its tendrils. He warding them off with the magic sword, slashing and slashing. The sword did no harm to the monster, but at least he kept it from piercing him to the heart. The thorns wounded him deeply, but not fatally, and the blood fell like rain on the red roots entangling him, setting them afire and letting him pull his leg free.

He backed away hastily from the monster. As he edged toward the nearest wall of the chamber, he tripped over something and almost fell. It was a mummified corpse, its dry brown mouth wide-open in a joyous grin. The humped shapes at various spots

on the floor took on new meaning. He was not the first person to dive into the pool and try to stop the plague of amnesia. Others had come here. Others had fought here. And they had died here.

The hero's voice sounded in his ear: *He seeks always to repeat past experience, which has always been in his favor.*

Am glanced about wildly. What could he do that these others had not already done? What did he have that those others, braver and stronger perhaps than him, had not had?

The sword. It was of no use against the monster itself. It was barely a defense against the monster's thorny claws. But perhaps he could defeat the monster even if it killed him...

Am leaped toward the crystal jars of memory. Gripping the doomed hero's blade with both hands, he struck at the nearest jars with all his failing strength.

They shattered! The sword sang, with an almost human voice, and bright shards of crystal flew everywhere. The luminous, image-laden fog of memories billowed forth, around him and through him. He staggered like a drunk, intoxicated by the swift shocking burst of other lives, other hates, other loves. When the mists were gone, he was himself again—whoever that was.

How long he had been bemused by the stolen memories of other people he didn't know, but when he realized what had happened he turned toward the monster. Instead of advancing on him while his head was in other people's clouds, it retreated to the far side of the chamber, and it cowered in a corner there as he raised his sword to guard.

Why?

He could not break the beast's crystalline carapace with the sword; he'd tried that. It hadn't been afraid to rush him as he slashed at it with the dark, accursed blade. But *now* it was afraid.

Am struck again at a line of memory-jars, keeping his eye on the crystalline beast across the room.

Again the blade sang. Again the crystal jars shattered. Again he was carried almost out of himself in dreams of other people's lives. (He remembered how his grandmother held his hand on the night before his marriage and said, "Idhanuik, dhetheloi," and then died. He remembered showing up one day to work at the mill, and the owner turning him away because he was too old. He remembered looking into a mirror and seeing a face not his own.) As much as he could, amid the clouds of unleashed memories, he kept his eyes focused on the crystalline beast across the dim chamber.

When the crystal jars broke and the blade sang, *that* was when it cringed. As if the sounds themselves hurt it... The sounds.

Am struck the crystalline blade of the doomed hero's sword on the dark rock of the cave floor. The blade hummed, rather than sang, and the monster shuddered, rather than cringed. But that was it. That was the power he had against the thing.

If only he could feed the sound like a fire—make it brighter, louder, stronger.

Why not? whispered the hero's ghost who was near him, very near him in the dim chamber.

He struck two more fog-filled jars of memory with the cursed blade. The jars shattered; the sword sang; the monster cringed. He tried to sing along with the blade, keep the song going. To his surprise, it worked. The pale crystalline veins in the dark blade began to glow; the sound reverberated and echoed in the

cave; he raised his voice and something else moved within him, vibrating in synchrony with the blade, the shattered glass, the screaming monster. The song grew brighter, louder, stronger. It was a flame. It was a thunderbolt of sound that struck and stayed, transfixing the echoing air of the cave.

It was death.

The monster's vibrating core shattered and it slumped in glassy fragments to the floor.

The remaining memory jars in the chamber had also shattered and the air was full of words he didn't know, faces he did not remember, events he had never taken part in, lives he had never lived.

Among them was the dead hero of the cursed sword—the sword he had stolen from the swamp—the sword whose song had killed the monster.

The hero wanted his sword back. And something else. Something Am couldn't quite understand.

"Just a moment longer!" Am said to the dead hero, and ran into the other room. He smashed all the jars that remained unbroken there, waded through every life, captured up to and including the moment of death, until they vanished like the foam born away by a receding tide. All were gone—returned to the people who owned them, or to the nothingness that some say follows all life, or to drift ownerless through the world.

All but one. The dark hero still walked in the dark chamber, moving closer to his dark sword with unequal steps.

Am threw the sword away from him. "I don't want it anymore," he said. "I don't need it anymore."

The dark hero was still closer, moving on legs that were uneven, like Am's. Standing there, unseen in the dark, with uneven shoulders, like Am's. Though he was bloodless, still his blood burned in the darkness, like Am's.

"I'm not you!" shrieked Am. "Keep away!"

The hero did not keep away, was closer than ever, as close as he could be.

"I am Am—" said Am.

"I am Am—" said Am.

"I am... Ambrosius," said Morlock Ambrosius.

What he was and had been, what he had never been and could never be, all the pain and joy he had felt, the one a greater burden than the other—all this fell like the weight of the world across his crooked shoulders.

The darkness in the dark cave with the dead monster was no darker than his heart at that moment.

Then he remembered Goldie, and who she really was.

Morlock Ambrosius spoke to the dead monster on the other side of the cave. "If she's dead—if she dies—I'll come back here and find a way to kill you again." Then he called his sword to his hand by saying its name and went on the long cold journey back to the world of air and light and life.

• • •

THE town was almost empty as he passed down through it. The few people he saw were tossing mouth-plants onto a burning heap that had been the mushroom patch and corpse pile. They didn't speak to him or each other, and he didn't speak to them.

Goldie was waiting at the foot of the bridge that led into town (and now led out of it, too, since the evil magic over the town was broken). Dozens of people were scrounging around in the swamp below, trying to recover their possessions or loot other people's. Goldie was watching them with an ironic smile on her dark rose lips.

She turned to fix her golden eyes on him as he approached.

"Aloë Oaij," he said. "Are you yourself again?"

"I am!" she said. "And so are you, I see."

They both knew that was both good and bad. They had indeed been married for over a hundred years, but that was long ago. Now and forever they were enemies, walking on opposite sides of the magic walls that guarded the Wardlands.

"The thing stealing our memories," said Aloë. "What was it?"

"Some kind of scholar, I think," Morlock said. "It was collecting the memories, like specimens—taking notes on them."

"Are there more of them? Could it be a danger to the Wardlands?"

That was not Morlock's problem any more. He indicated this by opening his hands and saying, "Eh."

To keep her from following up the question, he asked one of his own: "How did you come here?"

"Jordel said his brother Baran had been trapped somewhere north of the Whitethorns. Since I was nearest, he asked me to look into it. And so I was trapped."

"And Baran—" A door opened in his memory. "Baran was Burroom."

"Yes. I'll have grim news to bring Jordel in A Thousand Towers. But at least I'll get back there. How did you come to be here?"

He didn't feel like telling her. "A bad dream. A bitter omen." "Bad for you," she said, "but fortunate for me, and for others."

He had nothing to say to that. The silence grew long and awkward, like so many in their marriage. It was strange. She was Goldie, poor half-witted Am's only friend. And she was Aloë, his lost love. Morlock wondered how many other people she was whom he would never know.

"Thanks for my memories," she said at last.

Morlock shrugged, too full of feelings to be able to speak them. She watched him patiently with her golden eyes until he said at last, "If I'd known what I was doing, I'm not sure I would have done it."

"I'm sure," said Aloë Oaij, and walked away without ever looking back.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Enge lives in northwest Ohio with his wife and two crime-fighting, emotionally fragile dogs. He teaches Latin, classics, and mythology at a medium-sized public university. His stories have appeared in *Black Gate*, in the Stabby-Award-winning anthology *Blackguards* (Ragnarok Press, 2015), in *Apocalyptic* (ZNB, 2020), and elsewhere. His first novel, *Blood of Ambrose*, was nominated for the World Fantasy Award, and the French translation was nominated for the Prix Imaginales. You can reach him through Facebook (as james.enge) or on Twitter (@jamesenge) or, if all else fails, via his website, jamesenge.com.

THE SKULL SPEAKS: LIFE LESSONS

Heed Me, Mortal Dogs!

Lest you crave immolation, the following lessons must be absorbed!

First, it has come to my attention that some of you persist in the consumption of water chestnuts. Have you failed to perceive that they possess all the inherent flavor and textural qualities of soggy, extra-dense oat cakes? You are to cease their ingestion at once!

Second, I have lately sensed considerable strife amongst the human horde and it vexes me. It is incomprehensible you cannot

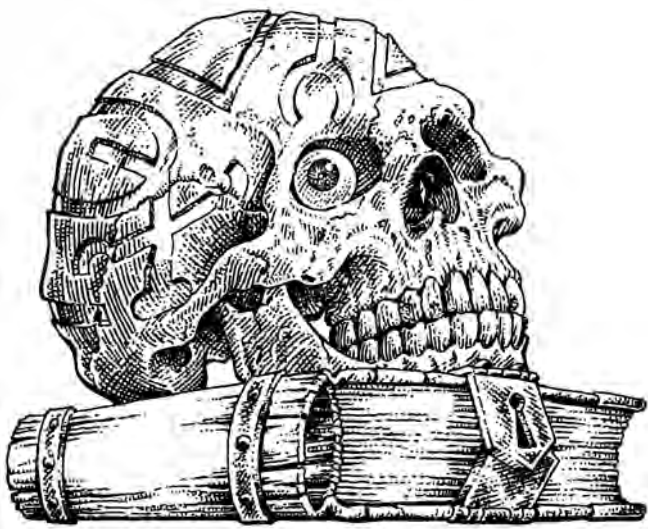
perceive your utter inconsequentiality, and that you persist in spending so much of your short span of years oblivious to your common nature and engage in fruitless conflict over minutia. You should instead address more momentous issues, namely mine own exaltation, and the production, procurement, and enjoyment of the glories of sword-and-sorcery! Each day, once you have done these things, you are permitted to restore yourselves with the appropriate amounts of gruel, and to romp, gambol, and cavort yourselves unto collapse in gratitude for my existence!

Third, I have learned that the lifespan of your fellow mortals will improve if you strap articles of fabric across the lower halves of your faces. This is to be undertaken at once! You are each to live long, so that more time may be spent extolling my virtues! Those of you who whine or whimper of the inconvenience are to be locked away to subsist upon nothing but water chestnuts until you repent!

Fourth, a full week has elapsed since appropriate praise has been transmitted to me from afar by members of my loyal legion. I grow wroth with anger! I expect not only accolades, but report of how you have paraded through the boulevards with your gongs and trumpets, chanting accounts of my magnificence so that more shall flock to my banner! If you lack a messenger raven, my minions inform me that incantations will reach me through the glowing boxes via skull@goodman-games.com, and that you may facetweet me via #magicianskull, the greatest of all hashsnags!

Enough! That your ignorance over fundamentally obvious matters rendered these announcements necessary confounds and enragues me! I leave you now so that I may restore my humor in the heady wine of lustrous sword-and-sorcery adventures!

—So Sayeth the Skull



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THE GUARDIAN OF NALSIR-FEL

By ADRIAN SIMMONS

FOR an enormous man wearing a dress, Penkatel could balance on a chair with an incongruous amount of dexterity. He shrieked a set of girlish wails, hiking up his skirts to show his dark hairy legs and hopped foot to foot. Meanwhile, Ahzlamin flounced in his plainer servant's dress, swinging his broom at stuffed mice and knocking them across the dusty square, some even into the delighted crowd.

The audience in Izem's square roared with laughter, the adults so hard that some bent double, the children shrieked with delight.

"Oh, my lady!" Ahzlamin piped, "Oh! Oh! OH!" And it was harder than it looked, to pipe louder than a drunken prostitute, *and* waggle his veil just so such that the braided tip of his beard would wiggle visibly, *and* flick the stuffed mice. The audience threw the mice back, and the bit had taken on a life of its own. And that meant applause, and *that* meant a showering of gifts and payment!

A wild-haired man on the edge of the crowd began screaming, "The days of the counting are nigh! The fury of Ghunwalid will descend upon this city! Upon fornicators, rebellious slaves, disrespectful children—"

Ahzlamin swore silently. You couldn't get five people together in a square of the city of Nalsir-fel without some dirty barefoot prophet elbowing in on it. The gods-mad would drive away the crowd, meaning less payment for their performance.

Children could be cruel, which was why Ahzlamin and Penkatel paid them in sweets and trinkets to throw rocks and rotten fruit at prophets and hecklers alike. It was almost a part of the act at this point! But little Ilhann, ringleader of their urchin gang, was not to be found in Izem's square that morning and the rest of the kids were lost without her.

Without their twelve-year-old enforcer, Ahzlamin would have to do his own dirty work. So be it; innovation was the soul of street performance, after all. Snatching up one of the mice, he yelped and dropped it onto his cleavage. As the crowd laughed, he shimmied, digging most unladylike at his chest. Ahzlamin covered the distance to the raving prophet and kneeled him right in the balls, ending the admonitions in a yowl and smattering of applause.

Ahzlamin worked his way back to Penkatel for the final pratfall. The large man wheeled his arms crazily and toppled off the chair on top of Ahzlamin and both fell to the ground in a great mess of men dressed as women and flailed there for a moment while the applause grew. They stood and bowed, and with a flourish whipped off their veils to hold them out for offerings and gifts.

"Come again tomorrow!" Penkatel urged, his great black face slick with sweat, the massive amber wheels in his earlobes wobbling in the light.

Penkatel, unlike most Holminas, who were angular and sharp as if they'd been carved from wood, was a man of curves and roundness. A man who did not look out of place squatting by a campfire or being carried on a litter. A natural actor. "Come again and see the final act of Princess Toy-Hawk!"

"More laughs!" Ahzlamin said into the smiling faces. Ahzlamin was tall and had the angular face common for a Kofik and had a braided chin-beard. He had to be careful that he not spook the very people he wanted to pay. What a haul! Dried dates, fresh carrots, a small roll of undyed lowland cotton, and even a loaf of bread. "More action! See the Princess Toy-Hawk duel with the irascible Whazir Khulmis!"

"My daughter!" shouted a woman, one of the Kewllern wrapped head to toe in brown as if the presence of color offended her gods.

"My daughter!" she wailed, as only Kewllern women could, fists against her temples, face to the sky. "My little Ilhann?"

They had never seen Ilhann's mother, and this was the exact wrong circumstance! As if she had bathed in the dung of camels, Ahzlamin saw the crowd, with their money yet to give, moving away from her.

"Come tomorrow!" he urged, nodding and smiling to those who gave coppers.

"My little Ilhann!" she yelled. The woman came close enough that he could make out the sharp tang of the ground olasiq root that was the basis of that lifeless brown dye.

She grabbed at his arm, "Oh, Ahzlamin, you look after her! Have you seen her?"

'Look after her' was not how he would describe it. She ran off hecklers and sometimes he and Penkatel had drafted Ilhann to do the work of collecting the payment—people were much more generous with their gift and payment with children.

He wrapped his veil around the take and put a hand on the woman's shoulder. "She wasn't here today."

He looked around quickly, just to see if the girl might have wandered into the square. Ilhann stuck out, what with the bright green comb in her hair—a gaudily painted trinket that Penkatel had given her for her collection efforts, an old prop from their production of "The Stuttering Queen of Kalamal."

He saw no sign of her. Still, Ahzlamin knew Ilhann to be smart, and the city of Nalsir-fel was safe enough, even in these troubled times. In a moment he was trying to figure out a way to ease over to a pair of wealthy spice merchants. He really needed to get to them before Ilhann's mother or any of the growing number of beggars drove them off.

"Yes, yes," he said, patting her hand. "I will look. We will look for her and ask after her."

"You will? Oh, please help me find my little Ilhann!"

"Yes," he said, stepping away, "yes, on my honor I will."

And he left her to pursue the merchants.

. . .

"THAT spice merchant gave us a Janihan silver coin," Ahzlamin said, holding it up.

The two men, the black Holminas, and the taller brown Kofik, made their way back to the Weaver's Quarter. Penkatel looked at the coin, wry humor animating his thick features. "We should do a play about the uprising. About Prince Lashback. Maybe make a horse costume—"

"Keep your voice down," Ahzlamin snapped. "That history has not been written yet. Let a court poet stick his neck out for it, not us, talented though we are."

"Nothing so grand as that," Penkatel said, "just something quick and fun for the people. We don't even have to mention 'Lashback', we could—"

"And until we know how he is going to jump this slave rebellion business, we could end up swinging from a noose in Izem's square. Or beat up by Boss Guuleed and his thugs."

Speculation and rumor were upon every tongue—the wonder that a rabble of escaped slaves and an up-country band of nomads were blunting the full might of the empire; and the wondering of where the city of Nalsir-fel would stand in it all. The slave trade was strong here, not to mention the outlying plantations, but Prince Lashback had been a slave in his wild youth, and how he felt about it was an endless source of rumor. Guuleed, the head of the city's slaver organization, had already been flexing his muscle and any tongue that dared support the rebels might well be cut out in the night.

"Besides," Ahzlamin said, stroking his braided beard, "we should stick to comedy. In these troubled times the people need that."

"Oh yes, yes," Penkatel said, shaking his head so that his jowls shook and his pendulous earrings swung. "Yes, you are right. But we need to remain topical."

"Topical is a —"

Ahzlamin's word's froze, for around the smooth turn of the street they beheld the fine horses servants and slaves of Boss Guuleed himself. There must have been more than a dozen people and half a dozen horses. Guuleed and his retainers all but shouted their wealth, with fine silks and the gleam of silver and gold.

"Speak a djinn's name," Penkatel whispered, "and he will drop from the sky upon you."

Silence swelled out from around the merchant prince and his van. For a moment Ahzlamin considered turning down another

street, but he was a free man. While they had been talking of the slave rebellion, they had not picked a side and surely Guuleed wouldn't send his men to beat them up in broad daylight even if they had. It was the way of the city of Nalsir-fel that such things were done in the night.

Still, he and Penkatel grew as silent as everyone else as they approached, and by happy luck it was Boss Guuleed's group that turned with a clatter of hooves toward Zemil's square.

"You see?" Ahzlamin whispered fiercely. "Do you see? A wise man wants nothing to do with these things. Let Guuleed and the abolitionists murder each other in the night, each faction hoping to impress or intimidate Prince Lashback. The likes of us should not get involved."

"Oh, I see," Penkatel said, in a tone that told Ahzlamin that his friend had already worked out the play in his head. "And, from what I hear, may the all the gods protect the man who tries to intimidate the Prince of Nalsir-fel."

The dust of Guuleed's passing fell and din of the street rose again as they progressed. From the crowd a foreign man with pale skin and hair the color of wheat approached. "You are Penkatel and Ahzlamin?" he asked, and before either of them could answer he continued, "My lady, the great and serene Cowlanati Palisani would like to hire you for a great *soiree* where she will introduce herself to this city."

"Yes!" they both answered, forgetting the great affairs of the land, and each hoping the other knew what a "*soiree*" was.

"Ah, ah!" the man said, like he was going to sneeze. "Excellent! So excellent! Come, she is here."

The man motioned them to follow, and the Kofik and the Hominas turned into the Alley of Six Horses. Among the people of Nalsir-fel stood more of the pale outlanders: a woman bare-faced and bare headed with her greying hair in a thick braid that hung over her shoulder like a sunning snake. She was dressed richly, if strangely, with a fine fur mantle held with a wide gold clasp bearing the sign of a great star. With the lady and the messenger were two guardsmen who wore armor of chain and their tabards bore the same star-symbol.

It was odd that a noble who had a messenger would be in the street to personally haggle with her entertainers, but they were outlanders, and the Alley of Six Horses was wide and bright, so...

The woman smiled a tight smile. "Tomorrow, when you perform in the square of Izem, there will be a man, a trader in furs with a scarlet and yellow turban watching. You will approach him in your foolishness, and stab him with this." She produced a long thin needle of bone.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Ahzlamin said, feeling like he was arguing with one of the gods-touched.

"We are not murderers!" Penkatel joined.

She ignored them. "The merest prick will be fatal within a day. If you do this you will be richly rewarded."

The messenger drew forth a bag of jingling coins. He pulled several out, letting the dusty sunlight gleam off their golden faces.

The hair on the nape of Ahzlamin's neck pricked at the unreality of the situation. That here an unveiled woman plotted murder with them in broad daylight and around them passed the good people of Nalsir-fel, completely unaware.

Then her voice cracked out like the splitting of stone: "If you do not do this, the girl, Ilhann, will lose more than her bauble and hair."

With that the messenger reached again into the bag and threw a ragged green snarl to the dirt at their feet. A handful of tangled brown hair wrapped around a green leather barrette, and they could see that some of the hair still held clumps of scalp and dried blood.

Ahzlamin's heart clawed in his chest, his brain seemingly made of gravel and hammers. He turned to see a woman, a friend of Ilhann's mother, he was sure, walking within arm's reach, balancing a basket of produce on her head as Kewllern women do. Oblivious.

"Do not look for help," the messenger said. "Do not call out for the guards, they will not hear you! They will not see you! Such is the power of Cowlanati Palisani, the great and serene!"

Between one ragged beat of Ahzlamin's heart and the next, he knew it to be true, that some awful sorcery was upon them, was upon this place. His legs urged him to run, his voice longed to scream out protections from witches and lamia and the djinn of the wilds. Yet he did nothing; could do nothing but stare back down at the pitiable trophy in the dirt.

Then Penkatel shouted, and with the same surprising dexterity that delighted the crowds, he exploded forward, his round face looking more like a Tugaer fighting-hound. The woman started to speak, again that voice of a great tree limb splitting, but her words were cut short as Penkatel's meaty hand clapped around her throat and the two of them sprawled upon the ground.

Ahzlamin saw the bone needle fly away, then one of the guards lifted his spear and drew back to lunge upon Penkatel. In that horrid second, Ahzlamin's hand flew to the knife at the back of his belt. The foreigner, so intent on murder, did not see him until too late, until Ahzlamin had pushed the haft of the spear aside and slashed the knife across his neck.

Hot blood gushed over his hand. The spearman swung a wild fist that crashed into the Kofik's head. The blow sent him reeling while the guard, pressing closed the gaping wound at his neck, fell to his knees. The second guard fumbled, trying to step around his struggling companion. The wild cries of Penkatel drew the man's attention from Ahzlamin, and in duty to his foul sorcerous mistress and he tore his sword free of its scabbard.

By luck, or the will of the gods, as the guard heaved back his blade, his arm struck a Beegsan man across the chest. The guard cursed, the Beegsan shouted in confusion, and Ahzlamin lunged. Stepping upon the back of the dying guard, he crashed hard into the other. He held the sword-arm at the wrist and stabbed and slashed, mad with his knife, blunting the edge against the guard's chain armor. The guard swung an elbow into his gut, then wrenched his sword-arm free. Ahzlamin gasped and fell, his knife clattering from his grip. The sword hefted high in the guard's gloved hand. In their struggles, they had moved too close to the alley wall, and the blade struck the dusty stone with a clang. Panic drove Ahzlamin up and he wrapped his arms around the man's waist, holding fast.

The Kofik entertainer endured a chaos of blows and kicks in a desperate, mindless struggle and then Penkatel surged up beside him like a storm cloud over the desert, the discarded Kofik

knife in his hand. Ahzlamin dug his forehead into his foe's chest, holding onto the stronger man in the struggle and never saw the horrible final thrust from the Holminas, feeling instead the outlander's strength ebb to be replaced by a dull dead weight.

Ahzlamin let him fall to the ground with a crash of metal and flesh, the tabard tearing in his grip. The traffic on the Alley of the Six Horses still passed, oblivious to them, save for the Beegsan man who took a frightened look back, rubbed his chest, and made a sign against evil. Two of the middling merchants of the city walked down the alley, not seeing the horrid aftermath of the melee as they approached: Ilhann's torn hair and treasured comb in the street, the two dead soldiers, and the purple-faced sorceress lying still.

"Where..." panted Penkatel, "where is the messenger?"

Ahzlamin shook his head. Surely, he must have fled, taking his golden coins with him.

As the word "fled" came to his mind he, too, turned to run from that place, but Penkatel, oddly collected for all that had happened, gripped him by arm. "Your hand," he said, lifting it so he could see it still stained crimson. "Hide it!"

The Kofik cast about, then ripped a dead guard's torn tabard free, wrapping his hand with it before thrusting it under his vest.

Together they returned to the main road, and with all the discipline that they could muster, forced themselves not to run, not to draw attention. Long minutes later, Ahzlamin stepped off to the Alley of the Two Hawks and threw up in great wracking heaves. As a gentleman son of a well-to-do merchant, he had practiced the manly arts of sword and bow, but... he had been in fights, even drew his knife once, but... had never fought for his life, had never killed anyone.

Somewhere, back from where they came, they heard the first screams and shouts as the spell finally broke in the Alley of the Six Horses.

• • •

WITHOUT a word, Ahzlamin and Penkatel ransacked their apartment. Those pale-skinned outlanders, they may have been foreigners, but they were *wealthy* foreigners. They were important, and someone would be looking for them. Someone would seek vengeance. Did they have allies in the upper houses of Nalsir-fel? Had Boss Guuleed called in foreign muscle? Or were they allies of high members of Prince Lashback's court?

And in their panic, they had left Penkatel's sack of loot in the alley. It would be nothing, even for the thick-witted city guard, to figure out who had been there, and from that it was a short jump to figuring out where they were.

They had begun making plans for what to sell and what caravan to light out on. Suddenly Penkatel stopped stuffing clothes into his backpack and said, "My friend, the two of us might slip out of the noose, but there are more necks than ours at risk."

It struck Ahzlamin like a blow—how could he have forgotten about Ilhann? And her mother, *he had given his word!* And that was no small thing for a Kofik of good birth.

"Should we tell someone?" Penkatel asked. Remember that guard we bribed to let us perform so close to Temple Row? Should we tell him?"

Ahzlamin barely heard him, lost as he was in the realization that he had forgotten his word, and his third business partner. Then, what anger he felt at himself doubled against the foreigners. An anger so great that he would charge back into the Alley of Six Horses to confront them all over again.

He dug into his backpack, to a small secret compartment, and inside found four silvers, wrapped in cloth. He dropped them on the small table and the coins sat between them. "This is what I have to put toward getting Ilhann back."

Penkatel shook his head. "These foreigners, with their plans already ruined, they may murder her tonight. She could be dead by now!"

"And where will you even begin?" he asked. "Even if you could find them, which you cannot, you are hardly the kind of man who can kick down a door and best the collected might of soldiers and villains. I've never seen such wretched knife-work in all my days!"

"How many knife fights have you seen?" There was much, Ahzlamin realized, he did not know of his partner. A man who would lay violent hands on a woman—a sorceress, yes—and he had been prudent to silence whatever wicked spell she was hurling at them. Still...

Penkatel's great shoulders shrugged. "Three or four."

Ahzlamin said, "Going to the guard is madness! Do you know what they do? You know what they do! They get one night—sunset to sunup—and they'll beat a confession out of you, even if you didn't do it."

"Then what is our plan?" Penkatel asked, "Find the man in the scarlet and yellow turban, and then...?" Penkatel's great heavy hands balled into fists.

"Find the man they wanted us to murder?" Ahzlamin said. "That would just draw us involved in their plots and vendettas. We need to find them, and when we do we will have found Ilhann."

Then Penkatel smiled as if he had thought up a clever bit of dialogue. He pushed the silver coins toward Ahzlamin. "To do that we must visit some very pleasant company first."

• • •

HARD afternoon sun beamed down on the Way of Wayward Women. Ahzlamin followed Penkatel as the Holminas strode confidently past the brothels. Part of the confidence was, no doubt, that they were in disguise—an advantage of their adopted trade. Penkatel with a tall staff, and a kind of inverted goblet-hat favored by those in the middle levels of the city. Ahzlamin wore a turban of yellow and green, cunningly wrapped so all the moth-holes were on the inside, and a long tan cloak. He had unbraided and clipped the end of his beard to square it up.

"This is a fine establishment," Penkatel said. "Act dignified!"

The doorman at the Grand Swan stepped across the door, arms barred across his massive chest. "What is your business?" He growled, eyeing them.

"We seek the hospitality of the Grand Swan," Ahzlamin answered, with the coughing bravado of a temple guard. "Its reputation for finery in all things has stretched from Nalsir-fel across the lands of Arzneb."

The doorman's look remained hard. "And does the reputation of the Grand Swan include that it opens its doors to just any raggedy vagabond?"

That was not part of what Penkatel had said to expect, and Ahzlamin fumbled for a moment. Would a minor noble or wealthy merchant respond reasonably, or with haughtiness?

"We have miles upon our feet," Penkatel said, in a bad Usada accent, "and many coins in our purse."

"Coins is, it?" the man said, his scowl deepening. "Know you that the Grand—" He leaned forward. "Penkatel, is that you?"

Cold fear flooded Ahzlamin and for a moment he wondered if they should both flee.

"Yes, Shuuloz," Penkatel said, "it is me. How do you like my new costume? It is for a play we are calling 'The Merchant Wore Blue', about a wealthy man who, in his great haste, dons a freshly dyed indigo robe and—"

"Bah!" the guard said, clapping Penkatel like an old friend. "Save your talk of costumes and dyes for the women!" He looked at Ahzlamin, "Who is your friend? He looks sinister to me."

"My partner in performance," Penkatel said, "as you would know if you ever came to watch us. I think he is finally ready to experience the finer side of Nalsir-fel."

The guardsman laughed once, then stepped aside.

"Penkatel," Ahzlamin whispered, "if they know you here then the watch or the foreigners could ask—may have already asked."

"Easy, Ahzlamin," he whispered. "Stay in character for Ilhann. Our business here will be short, and if we must make a hasty exit, the Grand Swan is obliging with many doors."

The short hallway opened into a garden, lush with vegetation and a trickling fountain. Several women lounged in a shaded courtyard, strumming and thrumming on a variety of instruments.

"Ah, Penkatel!" cried a woman from the other side of the garden. She was tall and gaunt, and rushed to meet him. "You have been long between visits, my dearest."

She embraced him quickly, and then regarded Ahzlamin with a critical eye. "Who is your friend?"

"Ahzlamin of the far city of Simmoth," the Holminas answered with a bow. "Friend and business partner."

"And what brings you to the Swan in the early afternoon hours, Penkatel?"

"Well!" he said loudly, with a loud rap of his staff on the stone floor, "I was hoping that I might see Pazaloi, if she is free."

The woman shook her head. "A group of holy pilgrims have recently arrived in our fair town, and you know how their Tugaer guards are about such women. She needs her rest."

"I only wish to talk to her."

Ahzlamin pushed down his worries and stood a bit taller, even with her. He held up one of his silver coins. "We wish to talk to her."

The madam's eyes glittered on the coin for a moment before she snatched it up. "Kaala!" she barked, "go fetch Pazaloi!" She ushered them to a small table set with platters of fruits, "Enjoy the hospitality of the Great Swan."

"Now," Penkatel urged to the Kofik, "when she comes in, let me do the talking. You just—"

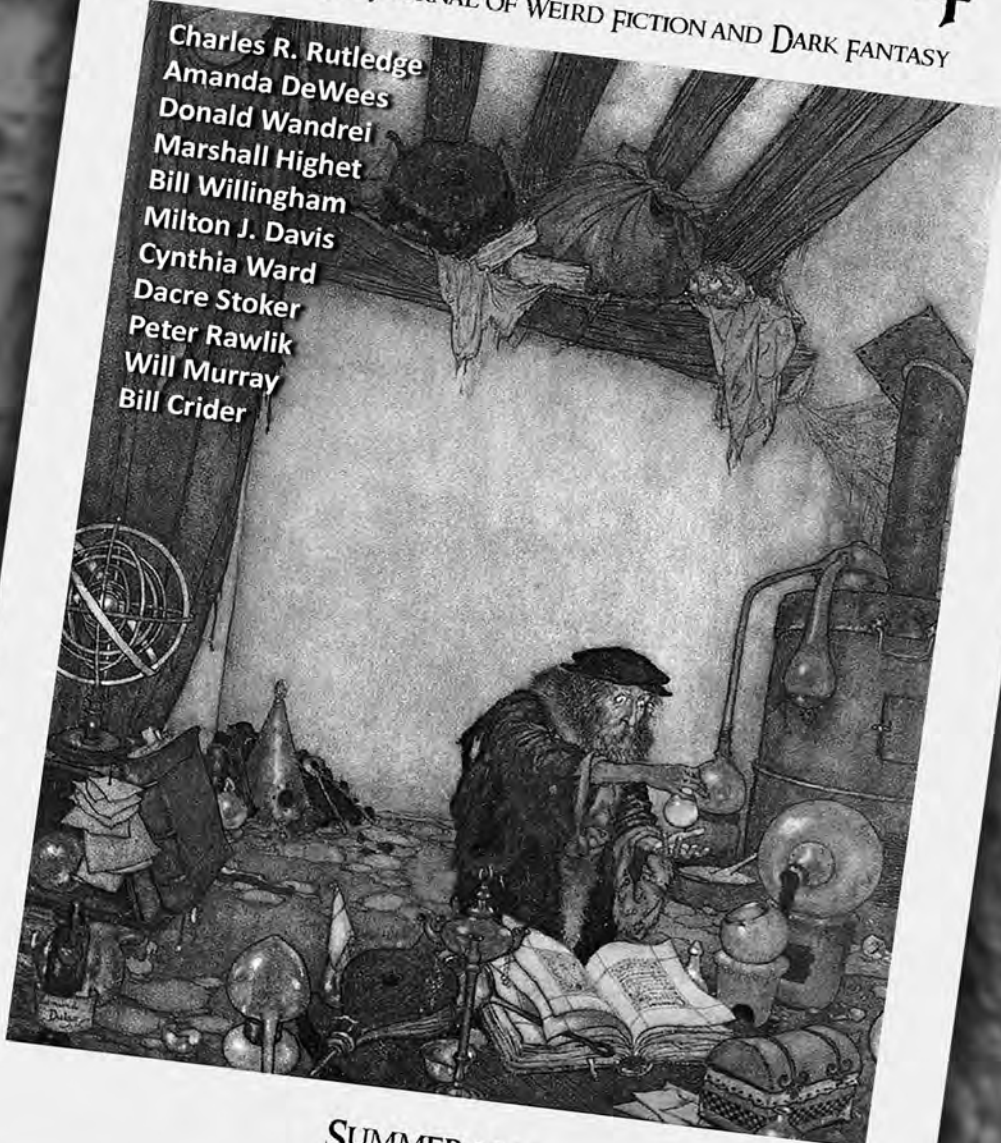
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"Look sinister?"

Penkatel shook his head. "Look for any guards."

It took a few moments, but eventually the one named Kaala came back. And in her wake walked a pale outlander woman.

• • •

"THEY have a symbol," Pazaloi said, in a ruinous lisping accent. "A seven-pointed star."

"Like this?" Penkatel said, unfolding the torn bit of the guard's stained tabard. Ahzlamin had never counted the points on it, but yes, there were seven of them.

Pazaloi made a sign with her hands, then turned and spat, turned to the other side and spat again. "The Palisani," she said. "Extending their filthy grip even to this remote city."

"What do you know about them?" urged Ahzlamin.

"They are a foul family," she said, "who trade in killing and sorcery as easily as others trade in spices and wheat. If they are here, then there is murder afoot."

"And it is murder that we hope to prevent!" Penkatel said. "They have captured a girl and—"

"Then she is practically dead." She shook her head and crossed her arms. "It is best to never get involved with the Palisani, and if you do, it is best to do as they say."

"Bah!" Penkatel stage-laughed. "Too late."

"Then you are marked men. They'll send Cowlanati, the greatest of their witches here." She blanched a bit. "They say that for each person she's killed, one of her hairs turns white, and she puts it in a thick braid that hangs like a snake over her shoulder."

"I do not think you will have to worry about this Cowlanati Palisani," Ahzlamin said. "She and two of her guards are dead."

Pazaloi eyed him warily, then turned to Penkatel. "Who is he to speak so?"

Penkatel shrugged. "My friend has many secrets, and has travelled to many places." He then gave her a look he usually reserved for unruly children in Izem's square. "And he speaks true. The witch Cowlanati is dead, as are her guardsmen."

She leaned in and whispered, "Some of the girls who have come back from the bazaar have said that there is a great disturbance. Bodies in the street! The entire stock of a potter's shop shattered without a sound! An invisible demon, one of the djinn of the anti-slave league, roams this city."

At her words Ahzlamin's stomach tightened. She didn't say it, but there could be a reward... he drew a breath, used it to lie. "There is more work to be done. The serpent's head may be cut off, but an innocent still lies within its coils, and to save her we must find the abode of the witch."

"And how will you do that?" Pazaloi asked.

Ahzlamin held up another silver coin, took a breath and used it speak the truth: "With your help."

• • •

THEY walked straight up to the guardsmen. "You!" Penkatel barked, "Guard! Earn your keep!"

The man, as big as even the Swan's bravos, looked at them both, looked at their finery, looked at Pazaloi's finery.

"We found this one," Ahzlamin said, motioning to the girl, "in Zemil's square. She seems to be lost, and we cannot understand her ugly down-country words. My friend and I have business in the temple district, be quick and—"

Pazaloi began to talk. Ahzlamin wasn't sure if the lisping seagull noises coming out of her mouth were a real language or one she was making up. She gestured wildly, her face somewhere between frightened lost girl and a high lady, angry at the foolish layout of the district.

The guard shook his plumed head. "Watch your purses, friends. 'Lost girl' is the first trick thieves learn."

Penkatel bristled. "You would dare besmirch my judgment? How are you called?"

"J... Jehul," the man said, then added, "Sir." Then added more, "I only wished to ensure that your kind nature was not taken advantage of. I've not seen any of her kind in Nalsir-fel. Perhaps she has come in with the recent pilgrims?"

"Pilgrim?" Penkatel sneered. "Dressed like that?"

Ahzlamin interjected, "Do we look like common merchants, with nothing to do all day but wander this maze of mud huts?"

"W... well," the man said, "I suppose we could take her to Ox Row when our patrol ends, and I could walk her myself to the pilgrims' hostel."

Ahzlamin was stunned. The other two bands of guardsmen they had talked to had wanted as little to do with them as possible. An offer of assistance was the last thing they had expected or wanted! He struggled to come up with an answer.

"Bah!" Penkatel said with a dismissive wave. "You would do this for coin? For a reward? And what will foreigners think of the hospitality of Nalsir-fel? Begone!"

Not waiting for a response Penkatel turned and strode away, and after a moment Ahzlamin and Pazaloi joined him.

"That was close," whispered Ahzlamin.

"Too close!" grunted Penkatel.

"Much too close," Pazaloi said.

This was the third district, the third set of guards; that one of those sets of guards was not already on the hunt for them was a miracle. Ahzlamin felt sick with it, the worry they would be caught, and that this good-natured whore Pazaloi would be ensnared in their problems.

"One more," Ahzlamin said.

"One more," the Holminas said.

"One more and you pay me my other silver," Pazaloi agreed.

In the Six-Hill District they passed the great houses, with fine green trees growing over their garden walls. Some houses had guards of their own, and the three walked brazenly down the lane as if they belonged there.

A clump of city guards stepped around the corner. Six of them, with fine light armor and helms of steel with great long plumes.

Three mouths took one deep breath, then they turned and walked straight up to them. "You!" Penkatel barked, "Guard! Earn your keep!"

The man, perhaps not as big as the last one, but with a scar across his cheek and keen, judgmental eyes gave a bare glance at their finery, an even barer glance at Pazaloi.

"We found this one," Ahzlamin said, motioning to the girl, "in Zamil's square. She seems to be lost, and we cannot understand her ugly down-country words. My friend and I have business in the temple district, have you seen foreigners like her?"

"I've seen outlanders of that sort in this district," the man said, rubbing his chin. "Isula—" he called to one of his fellows. "Was it down the Ivory Road, or the Golden Way that we saw them going into that great house?"

"Corner of the Ivory Road and the Ox Row," said the man.

"Begging a thousand pardon, sir," said another, "but it was the along the Golden Way, across from the house of Yun-Dheeho."

"The Golden Way?" said the captain. "By my beard, I'm certain I saw them going through the gates of a fine mansion on Iron Gate."

"Oh, by my mother who birthed me," said another. "It was on the Square of the Four Springs. The spice merchant stall that sells kallon root faced their very door."

Ahzlamin blessed the layers of his disguise, as they hid the sweat trickling down his neck. His back was soaking with it. There was a falseness about these men, about their words and their too-easy swaggers. And as they had jabbered, they had broken up their knot and were halfway surrounding them. Beside him, Penkatel was stock still.

"Surely!" the captain said easily, "Surely, between us all we can determine where such outlandish visitors to our fair city were seen!"

Ahzlamin swallowed. It was all too smooth, too practiced. As if it were an ... act! He shrugged and forced himself to make an easy laugh. They just wanted a bribe, surely, not to haul them to the garrison for a night of beatings. "Perhaps the sight of a foreign coin would jog your memories of foreigners?"

He held out a silver piece to the captain.

The man laughed, pocketed the coin and shook Ahzlamin's hand. "That has done the trick, friend, I remember it clearly now." The grip tightened suddenly and considerably. "Yonder mansion is her home," he nodded to the great house hulking in front of them. "I'm surprised she hasn't recognized it."

"Hah!" Penkatel burst suddenly and slapped the guard too-good-naturedly and too-hard on the shoulder. "Thank you, friend. A dozen blessings on you!" To Ahzlamin he said, "Come, our good deeds are done for the day!"

The captain's iron-grip held. "They are a shy people, these pallid outlanders. I'm eager to see what they've done with the place." He fixed his hard-eyed gaze on poor Pazaloi.

For a moment she looked as panicked as Ahzlamin felt, but then she brightened and, to his horror, started walking toward the great walled mansion before them. Was she going to turn them over to the Palisani family? Surely not! She stopped suddenly, and then looked into her bag and let out a cry. She started up again with the slithering language; she put her fists to her forehead, she dug deeper into her bag, then walked back to them, snarling at the guards, then walked past all of them as if they had no more value to her than curs in the streets.

For a moment they watched her strut down the Iron Gate Way and out of sight, then they all exchanged looks.

Ahzlamin found his voice after a moment. "I guess the lady forgot something in the bazaar."

"Bah!" Penkatel barked. "Women!"

The captain released Ahzlamin's arm, and they all stood for a moment and laughed.

• • •

"AND here are our kidnappers," Penkatel said. They sipped kallon tea from a vendor at the edge of the Slave-Post Square; a great spreading parasol jutted from the stand shading them.

There had been business at Slave-Post Square that morning. The air still hung with the smell. Ahzlamin had heard that another brawl had broken out, that the anti-slavery agitators had shown up during the bidding, faces masked, and had attempted to shout over the affair. Boss Guuleed's men had fought with them. No weapons were drawn, for such a thing in daylight would put one in a jail cell.

The two of them rested as best they could after a long day. After finding the house of Palisani they had edged back to the Swan. Ahzlamin had darted in and paid Pazaloi the last of his silver coins. The word of a Kofik gentleman was not given lightly, even to whores.

Pazaloi, for her part, had already packed everything she owned into two small bags, intent on leaving the city before the vengeance of the Palisani family was visited upon it.

Over the excruciatingly long afternoon, Ahzlamin and Penkatel made two careful passes. The mansion of the late Cowlanati Palisani was a great brooding mass of dun sandstone, intricately carved with columns and vinery. There was a garden, or some kind of gap, between the main house and the wall that enclosed it all. The wall was not great, as Ahzlamin knew such things. Perhaps twelve feet tall. Two gates pierced it, one large in the front, and one smaller in the back. One wouldn't know that anybody at all lived there. The only signs of life were the occasional whinny of horses and grunting of camels in the one of the buildings beyond the wall.

And there were their kidnappers.

"What do you think?" Ahzlamin asked.

"About the fighting here in the square? A blessing for us! Eyes and tongues are upon that, and perhaps not upon the whereabouts of the killers of foreign witches."

Penkatel shrugged his thick shoulders, took a sip of kallon tea. "No wonder our morning performances were not as well attended of late! Why pay performers when there is such drama to be seen for free?" Then, more serious, "As for Ilhann, what next? Scale the wall? Break down the door? They would raise a call in a heartbeat my friend, sorceress or not. We are entertainers, and this is not our art."

"Yes, what you say is true." He swirled his remaining tea around in the clay mug.

Penkatel thrummed his thick fingers on the table. "We have found their house, we can tell—"

"Tell the guard?" Ahzlamin asked. "Bah! A missing Kewllern girl from a nameless family is nothing to them. And to tell them that she is held in the same mansion owned by the dead foreign sorceress, and told by those who killed her?"

"We could get someone else to tell them. We have friends."

"Friends who would risk a night of beatings for us?"

Ahzlamin sipped. Kallon tea was not his favorite, not by a long stretch, and their vendor did not know how to prepare it in any case. He thought about asking Penkatel his opinion on the slave rebellion but thought better of it.

Ahzlamin was a fairly wealthy son of a fairly wealthy family of the far-away city of Simmoth. Being well off, they had slaves. More house servants, really. He had even thought of taking one with him when he left to walk the pilgrim paths and caravan trails of the world. But no, better to do it himself. No need to worry about providing for two instead of just one. Besides, a few days on the road, in the dust and the heat and master and slave could not so easily be told apart. Both stank the same as any other pilgrim or merchant; enough to bolt a camel after a week.

At that he took another sip of his cooling and mediocre tea. "I suppose it is best if I do it myself," he said.

"Do what?" Penkatel asked.

Ahzlamin shrugged. "Scale the wall and get Ilhann."

"And how will you do that?"

"Scaling a wall is not so hard, if the people on the other side are occupied. And we know there are not many people on the other side. A distraction is called for, just like the scene where Princess Toy-Hawk has to strip down to bathe off the elephant dung."

Penkatel leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "I'm not wearing a dress and haggling with one of the remaining foreign soldiers. I do not believe they will understand the humor of the scene, and they will likely ad lib a blade to my gullet."

"That is always a tricky scene," Ahzlamin agreed and swirled the dregs of his tea around in the mug. "Still, to ad lib is the mark of a great performer. And we are nothing if not great performers."

He stood, poured out his mug and placed it on the table. "If I am to do this thing, I need to do some haggling in Smithey Row and the Beast District."

"Beast District?" Penkatel asked, his eyebrows shooting up. "A rough place." He heaved himself up, downed the last of his kallon tea. "You'll get mugged for certain. I'd best come. And I'd best improve upon whatever scheme you have cooked up."

• • •

NIGHT slid over Nalsir-fel like one hand atop another, and the two of them walked brazenly down the street of Iron Gate Way; Penkatel and Ahzlamin leading Unipashinul, the camel. They discussed their play, loudly, and Unipashinul grunted and brayed, being loaded down with bags on one side, and a barrel on the other. For that was all they were, gaudily attired performers off to entertain at some fine dinner, or perhaps even a *soiree*. There were guards at many of the gates of the fine mansions they passed, and behind the walls of some of the places they heard the frantic barking of dogs, and once, most disconcertingly, the low rumbling growl of a lion.

But the house of Cowlanati Palisani was shrouded in darkness. No torches burned at its gates, or atop its walls. Dim and halting light ebbed out of one of the second story windows, just visible beyond the wall. The two of them argued, loudly, about the way.

"I tell you that it is east," Penkatel said, pointing a meaty hand.

"Fool!" Ahzlamin countered, "that is south! And Smithey Row will take us to the rough part of town."

"Rough?" Penkatel countered. "We certainly don't want tha—"

The camel pulled hard against the lead and let out an almost plaintive grunt, dragging Penkatel nearly off his feet. He reigned the beast back in, set his brightly colored turban back atop his head, and whispered to Ahzlamin:

"You stink so strong that you'll scare every horse and camel between here and the gate of the city!"

"Foolish beast!" Ahzlamin bellowed at the camel. "Must you propose a third way? The night is not long enough for all these debates!" In a quieter voice:

"The Tugaeer I bought it from swore it was sealed! At least we know it works."

"Tugaeer say many things, and let us hope that it is still potent enough to do the job on fiercer beasts than poor Unipashinul, here." Louder he said:

"By the gods! Unipashinul may have found the way!"

Ahzlamin all but shook with nerves, like before a play, like he had at the Alley of Six Horses. He had one last line, and then it was ad lib and in the hands of luck and the gods. "While you debate the way with our camel, I must make a detour. I am about to bust."

He walked into the shadowy lane between the witch Palisani's house and her unfortunate neighbor. He even went so far as to hike up his robe and undo the tie of his trousers. He had no actual need, and as excited as he was, he couldn't make if he had to.

After an appropriate interval, Ahzlamin took three more steps into the shadows, shrugged out of his bright blue cloak and doffed his blazing white turban. He folded the turban into the cloak, turning it all inside out. He moved stiffly, with two lengths of rope wrapped and crossing his chest. Beneath the ropes he wore black shirt and brown trousers and his head was uncovered. He built up his courage then stalked down the alley.

The scent of hay, horse, and camel guided him to the wall near the stable. He could hear no people about, and he took out a parchment tube and broke the cracked wax seal at the end. It contained old linen rags soaked with hyena piss, and the strong sharp tang nearly brought a tear to his eye. He threw it over the wall, heart jumping as it thudded onto the roof of the stable.

He waited. He and Penkatel had agreed, if this did not work, they had done all they could do, and it would be up to whatever the guardsmen could tell.

A horse neighed. Then another. A camel grunted. The noise grew as the animals became more agitated, and stamping and clomping were added to the din. Ahzlamin let himself feel a moment of relief that it was working, and then let the worry of what came next wash over him.

He slipped around the next corner, went halfway down the wall. Uncoiling the first rope from around his chest, he checked the grapple and waited again. The grapple was wrapped and padded. He had padded everything, even the short stout club that hung from the belt next to his knife. Even from this side of the house he could hear the Palisani men burst open the great doors of the house and shout their way to the stable. A brief smile touched his lips. One thing he knew from his travels—men did not try to be silent when dealing with misbehaving horses.

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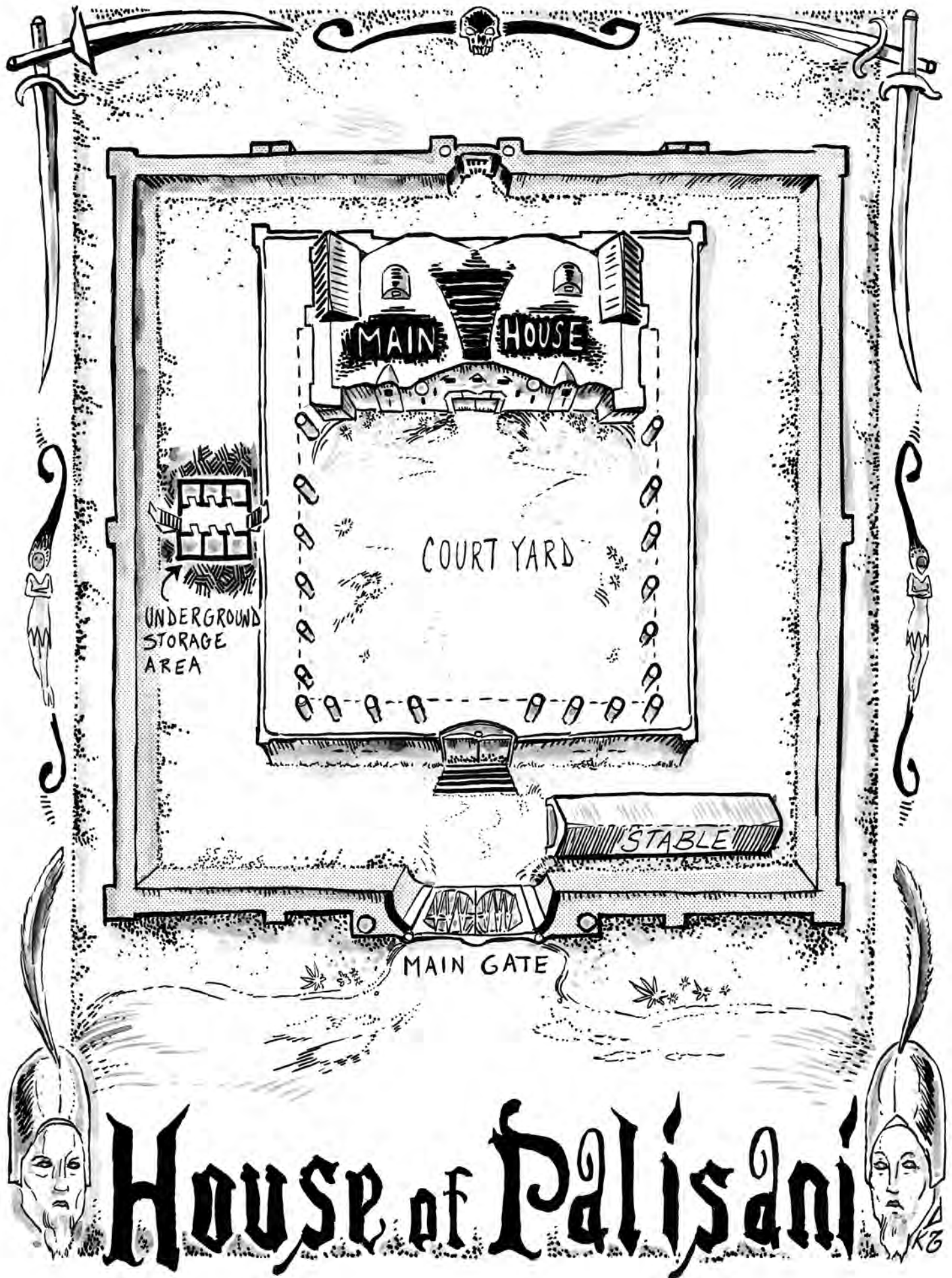
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House of Palisani

Covered by the noise from the stable, Ahzlamin threw the grapple up and over the wall, then eased it back until it caught.

He heard no sound of anyone rushing along the wall, no sound but the foreign jabbering of the men and the whinnies and stamping of the animals.

Ahzlamin turned to climb up the rope and a new sound reached him: horses, but there was the distinct jangle of tack. Among the foreign jabbering new voices were added whose words he could recognize if there wasn't so much noise.

Ahzlamin climbed, surprised at how hard it was and how much his arms protested. At the top he checked—no broken glass or sharpened spears stuck up from the wall. He straddled it, feeling that there could be—must be!—a hundred eyes watching him in the great blackened windows of the house. Ahzlamin pushed down his fear, hooked the second grapple over and dropped the second rope to the ground within the wall.

Climbing up was hard, not falling on the way down was harder. He crouched in the dark for a few moments, listening. Around the corner of the house from the stables came the sounds of agitated horses and the agitated men trying to calm them. Ahzlamin thought he even heard the bleating of goats.

He loosened the knife at the back of his belt, pulled a bit at his beard, and hefted his club.

Ahzlamin peered around the corner. Torchlight spilled from the open door of the stable, casting swirling shadows of men and animals. But to his alarm, he saw four additional horses; these were fully saddled and outfitted, and were outside the stable, close to the closed gate of the wall.

The two men who struggled with them were not foreigners, but locals.

—“you not even keep your animals in check?” A man demanded, as he and two of his hulking bodyguards walked from the main house and down a short set of marble stairs. Behind him came five of the brood of Cowlanati Palisani, four of them clanking in their mail, along with the nervous straw-haired translator from the Alley of Six Horses.

One of the mailed soldiers coughed out something as they came down the stairs, and the translator said, “It is lucky that any animal here can bear it.”

The man at the base of the stairs and wheeled around. “My enemies still walk this city, still flaunt the law, and beat my supporters!”

The foreigners jabbered and then the translator spoke: “You have started a fire that cannot be put out. It is a bow, drawn back, and it cannot be held for long. Figure out who you want the arrow to strike and we will release it.”

The man turned a bit and the struggling light illuminated a lean face, one recognizable even to a street performer. Prince Lashback pulled on his beard and glared at the strangers. “Feed it then, another goat. I will decide how Boss Guuleed is to be murdered tomorrow.”

“It needs more than a goat,” came the response, shouted above the sounds of the panicky animals. “Pick its victims or bring slaves for it.”

“Buy them yourself, while you still can. Or else give it the girl. Thanks to your idiocy she has far outlived her usefulness.”

With that, he swung around and marched with his bodyguards to the skittish horses. In moments, the gates were thrown open and without another word they rode forth into Nalsir-fel's night.

Ahzlamin pressed himself back to the shadows of the corner. In the stable the animals still struggled, and foreigners fought to calm them. He heard the men just around the corner argue among themselves for long moments; one of them ran to the stable. Over the noise of the animals he couldn't hear what the others did, if they were even there or not.

He leaned and looked out. Dim light from the open double doors of the house flowed down the short marble stairs. Nobody was there, and Penkatel could not wander the wealthy streets all night.

The stone's throw run between the corner of the house seemed to take as long as the journey from Simmoth to Nalsir-fel. At the base of the stairs, his heart leapt at a shadow within the doorway, for he feared it was cast by a guard. But no, it was just the sloshing light of torches from further within. He mounted the stairs and passed through the doors into a short wide entry hall, flanked with barrel-shaped columns.

The house of Cowlanati Palisani was built around a dark courtyard bordered by a covered walkway. More of the barrel-shaped columns lined the walkway and among them a few ensconced torches burned, sending stuttering pools of light among the oppressive gloom.

To the left, a short length past the corner, a massive set of stairs stretched down, the twins to those entering the house. Another set, wooden, rose from the dim far corners of the courtyard.

“Up,” Ahzlamin thought out loud. “That is where they would keep their valuables.”

“Down,” he answered himself, with as much finality as he could muster. “That is where they would keep a prisoner.”

He jogged to the left around the corner toward the stairs. Ten steps away from them, he heard the clank of armor and the tramp of boots ascending and saw a growing glow of light.

He slipped between the wide columns, backing his tall frame against the cold stone and facing out into the courtyard. A dozen dark windows looked down at him from the second story. In the fitful light of the torches he could see other ground-level doors in the covered hallway. The guard tramped toward him, passed by Ahzlamin's column, and then paused.

The Kofik held his club in a sweat-slick grip. The guard clomped around Ahzlamin's column, practically following the Kofik's own steps. And with each step Ahzlamin edged away from the man.

For the longest moment of his life he stood, pressed between the two fat-bellied columns. He could smell the oil of the guard's chainmail, the sharp tang of unwashed foreigner. Dry grass crunched as the guard stepped into the wretched courtyard and Ahzlamin took another side-step around, practically back into the hallway. The guard let out a sharp garbled word, its meaning unknown, although it certainly sounded like a curse. He then hefted his lantern and tromped across the courtyard to the door before joining his companions in the stable.

Ahzlamin quick-stepped to the yawning opening of the downward stairs. The smell of dust and sweat and dung wafted up from it—and something else.

"Olasiq!" Ahzlamin whispered. That awful ground root that Kewllern women make that joy-killing dye of brown.

He walked down the stairs. The fine sandstone gave way to a brick-floored hallway, arched above, that stretched into a choking clutter of wooden crates and leather bags. The whole place was chill with cold. From the volume, the wicked Palisani family and their retainers in Nalsir-fel were here to stay. From the clutter and the disorganization of it all, it was also clear that this was a household of people without a leader.

Two guttering torches lit the place, one on each side, lighting between them a small wagon that crowded the center of the hall. Atop it lay a shrouded figure.

The hall stretched away, not quite a spear's throw, with barred wooden doors on either side. Away in the gloom Ahzlamin could barely make out a brick ramp leading to two slanting doors. The hint of decay hung in the air.

On the rough flat boards next to the shrouded body rested several gleaming cups and a wide box with a lock upon it.

The smell came to Ahzlamin on the cold air. Yes, the olasiq was there, barely. There was also the gamey smell of animals, of the horse and camel that had borne all these stores. But it was all a mix, far worse than Izem's square on a windy day. He took a few steps forward. Four doors lined the hall on each side. Each the same.

Before the corpse he saw something else: a strangely made staff. It gleamed, clearly silver, and had three crossbars, and from each of them hung a number of small silver bells; on the first tier of bells gleamed a number of baleful rubies, and on the second tier emeralds shined in the torchlight, and on the third great bright amber. Some kind of instrument for a funeral procession, perhaps? For warning the demons of hell that they'll soon be getting another soul?

"Ilhann!" he barked, because he could think of nothing else.

Ahzlamin moved to the first door on the right, again calling Ilhann's name and getting no response. Fine! He would try each one.

He moved from door to door, calling the Kewllern girl.

At the third door a bare echo. "Yes?" a tiny quavering voice answered.

Before Ahzlamin could even take a step, a small echo sounded from across the hall. "Yes?" the same tiny quavering voice answered.

"Ilhann?" he shouted.

"I am here!" she cried back, and the echo of the same words came back so quickly he could not tell one from the other. Down the hall someone began banging on a door. "Here!" she called.

But across the hall, someone began banging on a door. "Here!" Ilhann called from behind it.

The high vaulted corridor seemed to shrink, to close in on him, to echo with the rattle of the doors and the cries of the girl. He was as frozen as he had been in Alley of Six Horses, then he lunged down the hall, somehow eased past the corpse and ducked beneath the flaming torch, then threw the bar and opened the door. Beyond the threshold waited an inky blackness and out of it on shaking legs stepped Ilhann—miles

away from the girl whose spirit glowed even from the drab brown robes that all the Kewllern wore. And gods, how he wished he had one of those lifeless dreary robes now. She stood there, in a filthy shift, blinking into the dim light, her hair matted, with a chunk missing where she wore that cheap green barrette.

He hesitated for a moment. There were unnatural powers at work in this place. What of the other voice, that so clearly mimicked hers? Or was she, through sorcery, the mimic?

Some instinct, the same experience that enabled him to tell which heckler to ignore and which to heckle back steeled his nerve. He found his voice. "Quickly, Ilhann!" he motioned her forward.

She rushed forward and he grabbed her in a rough quick hug.

"Let us try the outside door," he said, eager to avoid going past the corpse behind him and back to the open courtyard and the yard between the gate and the house.

They picked through the gear and paraphernalia and edged around two crates to get to the brick ramp that ran to the barred double-doors. As they approached, they saw the gleam of a chain and a great lock.

He had a crowbar, a very small one, far too small to break the lock. With a silent curse, he guided Ilhann back around and they threaded back down the corridor, but a sudden noise caused them to stop.

"Yes?" Ilhann's tiny voice sounded from behind a door.

The door, one of the many, began to rattle. "Here!" the girl's small voice cried from behind it.

Ilhann had stopped her flight and stood staring at a door across the hall—one that Ahzlamin could see move as it rattled. "I am here!" called the voice behind.

Sorcery! But he knew Ilhann, she was standing right there!

"Come on!" he said, walking past. But she did not move. He grabbed her shoulder, and the small muscles beneath were hard as stone. A sheen of sweat covered her face. He shook her and she blinked and turned away from the door.

Then Prince Lashback's voice came from behind the same barred window on the door. "It will do. It will do well. Two more days you say?"

Then the spitting voice of Cowlanati Palisani the sorceress.

"Here!" Ilhann's voice called, quiet and small and yet clear above the hammering at the door.

The two of them broke into a run, around the cart with its dead body, and onto the stairs. But from above came the tramp and clink of one of the guards. The thick-limbed foreigner held a lantern high in one hand, his other reaching to his hip to draw his sword.

The man shouted in his ugly language, whether at them or to his companions in the house Ahzlamin couldn't be sure. The sword hissed out of the sheath and the guard stepped down the steps. Guards. There were two of them, then a third, leading a recalcitrant goat by a fraying rope.

Ahzlamin stood frozen, then hefted his club and let loose a yell. "You would face me? I, who slew your foul mistress? Curs! Wretches! Away with—"

"Here," he heard Ilhann say, in a whisper that somehow sounded above his yelling and the clank and clatter of the guards and the pounding hammering at the doors.

Then behind him he heard a great splintering crack. Ilhann gave a cry, a sound of utter woe and terror, and she ran forward straight to the stairs and straight at the guards. He started forward to catch her, but she was already past the first step. Above her the mailed foreigner's booted foot lashed out, kicking her back down the steps, where she fell on her face and then began to struggle up on hand and knees, like a beast driven wild with fear.

The guard gave a fearful shout, and the three of them, these fierce mailed foreigners, began struggling back up the steps, dropping swords and spears on the way.

Ahzlamin turned to grab Ilhann. Around the corpse on the cart loomed a great serpent, its black and green body thick as Ahzlamin's leg, its head in front of the Kewllern's face. Below the great flaring nostrils its jaws slowly stretched open. The other two heads turned to Ahzlamin, their red ear-fins spreading and their long, blunt tongues lolled drooling from their mouths.

"I am here," one of them said in Ilhann's quiet, frightened voice.

• • •

"HERE," said the serpent's head, the middle one, again. Its long, forked tongue lashed the air, and its mouth opened, and the eyes, the great saucer-sized eyes, with their huge pupils calm and brown as those of a cow, sought out his own.

Somewhere far away, he heard the clatter and clank of the guardsmen as they dropped their weapons and ran back up the stairs.

The creature seemed to spring, to vomit from the splintered wreck of the door. It coiled endlessly among the boxes and bags, weaving itself in the spokes of the wagon wheels, caressing the shrouded form of the dead sorceress.

All the vaulted hall, all the world, was the sliding mass of coils and fins. Like a flood, like the cool waters in the fountain of Ahzlamin's family home in Simmoth. It was a shame that he would die here and never return to tell his mother of this, of this great wonder.

He could almost hear the trickling of the fountain, the play of water. Somewhere on the edge of his vision, like the rings of a stone dropped into a pool, waves seemed to ripple through the endless spirals and knots of the serpent.

One of the heads facing Ahzlamin began to speak, and while he did not understand the language, he swore it was in Pazaloi's voice, or maybe his mother's, or was it his poor sister Tamalut, who had died so young?

He should run, but he had the love of the thing, of this wonder, lifted from the deep and hidden places of the earth, like a great polished jewel.

Ahzlamin had to run, knew it in some shrieking corner of his mind; knew that sorcery to dwarf that of the Alley of the Six Horses had ensnared him. That corner of his mind forced a foot up and back, groping for the steps he knew were behind him.

He seemed to float in a sea of coils. What was he running from again? The dull life of a Simmoth merchant's son, surely. He was going to tell Penkatel of it one day.

Ahzlamin had played at being a lone merchant selling spices and baubles, while carrying gold and silver coins worth as much as any goods he could carry. He had done all that even before his acting career. A great joke! He was going to drown in this sea of coils before he could tell the jest. And that would not be so bad.

His back foot found the step. Was it up or down? Down! Yes! They would lead down into this fountain of loops and coils. He fell to the stairs in a heap, their dull edges pressing into him. Above, the snake spread the fins along the top of its head and bit at him, and somehow, he jammed his club it into the thing's mouth. It bit hard and pulled, strong as a horse.

Then it pushed, the strength of the creature drove him hard down to the stairs. He cast wildly about, for he had heard a sword fall. The serpent suddenly released the club and reared back for another strike.

Ilhann struggled and scrambled along the ground, dragging herself to the one part of the world not wrapped in coils and fins, the sad tarnished silver staff with its useless bells and dull gems. She swept it up in her filthy hands and shook it, shook it like she was beating a rug. The tinkling ring of the bells sounded in that dark place like the first drops of a rain in a parched land. The thing, the creature, for in no tale or legend had Ahzlamin ever heard of such a thing, shrank back from it.

All three heads weaved about Ilhann, each flinching and hissing at the strange ringing bells, and each drew closer to the Kewllern girl.

Ahzlamin got on hands and knees on the stairs, reached up for a sword or a spear, and instead he grabbed the hot metal handle of the lantern and hurled it into the center of those endless whirling coils where the three heads separated from the main body.

The oil spread over the creature, over the detritus of the basement, and flames erupted, eager and hot. The endless coils, the great sail of spines, contracted, fell in upon themselves into the flames, like the trailing edge of a storm cloud. The creature roiled, lashing about in the fire.

Somehow Ahzlamin had the good sense to get to his feet and wrap an arm around Ilhann, hauled her to his chest and carried her up the stairs. All thoughts of hiding and sneaking were driven out of his mind, squeezed out by an overwhelming need to get out, to get them away from the burning thing below.

The shabby courtyard was dark and empty. He ran down the column-lined passage, the staff held in Ilhann's white-knuckled grip rang with every step.

Outside the main door of the house, Ahzlimin saw the foreigners struggling to mount horses. One of them caught sight of the two of them and for a moment the Kofik thought he might alert his fellows, but someone threw the bar from the main gate and the men turned and rode out.

Moments later he put Ilhann down, and they ran down the steps, racing to escape. The echoes of the foreigner's flight still sounded when Penkatel, round and gaudy and loyal appeared from one of the adjoining streets, leading Unipashinul. A few

moments later came the clank and thump of guardsmen. Questions were shouted, answers demanded. Ahzlamin's mind was stretched beyond his grasp. Beside him, Ilhann looked like she walked in a dream. What to do, what to say? Would the night go on with a beating in the hall of the judges?

"Thank all the gods you finally got here!" Penkatel shouted to the guards. "Foreign fiends have beaten and robbed these good citizens of Nalsir-fel! They rode on their stolen horses down the Ivory Road!"

Thank all the gods it was not the clever scar-faced guard. These looked at them, then down the Ivory Road where the dust from the riders had yet to settle, then back at the house.

"Is there a fire in that house?" the captain asked.

"Fire?" Penkatel asked, and then turned. His eyes widened and his jowls bounced as he boomed, "FIRE!"

Ahzlamin turned, looked back through the gate, beyond the wide doors of the house he saw the glow and smoke of the blaze lashing the night from that hellish stairway, and for just a moment he thought he saw something, some bit of flame roll and lash out across the courtyard.

The captain put a curled horn to his lips and blew a shrill note. "Fire!" he cried. And down the Ivory Road gates cracked open and the call was taken up. And as the guardsmen and the servants of the wealthy formed a line to fight the blaze, Penkatel, with surprising gentleness, lifted Ilhann to Unipashinul's back and guided them down the Ox Way.

• • •

"THE days of the counting are nigh! The fury of Ghunwalid will descend upon fornicators, rebellious slaves, disrespectful children—"

Izem's square was the haunt of the gods-mad, as always. Ahzlamin considered giving him the knee of silence again, but no, not for this act. The last act of Ahzlamin Khanad in the city of Nalsir-fel.

It had been a long night, and Penkatel had finally insisted that they call in favors and they dragged themselves to their friend Colnas' apartment, who had provided for them as best an out-of-work caravan guard could.

"Do you have a good place to hide it?" he asked Ilhann again.

She looked ridiculous, as the only clothing they had were their various costumes, none of which would fit her anyway, but they had done what they could with the time they had, poorly. Princess Toy-Hawk's blue speckled skirt dragged in the dirt, even after all their attempts to pin it up. The closest thing that her torso was Ahzlamin's black shirt from the night before, and it hung off her like a badly staked tent. The ragged blue turban from "Seven Silvers for Seven Sons" was wrapped around her head—a concession to Illhan's vanity. Ahzlamin had never been so glad to give in to a girl's vanity.

"We've walked past a dozen places to hide the staff, and I've forgotten more hiding places than you'd know," she said, with a bit of the spirit he remembered from just a few short days ago.

He nodded, stroked his smooth-shaven chin—in spite of himself he couldn't stop touching it. He didn't think that her parents' house was a wise place to keep such a thing, but she would not be parted from it. Another concession.

Izem's square was full of traffic, and already, already! there was another group of three performers setting up for some kind of show. There was also talk of the fire in the Merchant District, of wraiths roaring through the streets in the dead of night, and of demons, perhaps the very fury of Ghunwalid that the dirty prophet raved about.

"Are you sure you won't come?" he asked again.

"Are you sure you won't stay?" she asked.

"Oh no, I have stayed too long. There are still questions about Cowlanati Palisani's death in the Alley of Six Horses. The machinery of the law turns dumb as a water wheel. And if a high man is a victim of low murder, a low man will swing high for it."

He hefted his pack, planning out the rest of the morning: a quick trip to the bazaar to meet Penkatel, buy some dense pilgrim's bread to eat and some ground cardoon, which they could take with to the town of Bul-Bataal and sell for a tidy profit. After that... he was not sure.

Off from Izem's square and down the Way of the Loyal Hound he and Ilhann came to the neighborhood of the Kewllern. They stopped across the lane from a dull one-story house.

"Tell your mother and father that Ahzlamin Khanad is true to his word, and to pray for all good Kofiks who cling so strongly to their honor and Holminas who can keep their heads."

She wrapped her arm around him in a quick hug then hefted her own small pack, the one with the silver staff and its bells, all wrapped to keep them quiet. Colnas and Penkatel had wanted to fence it, and only the desperate testament of Ahzlamin and Ilhann convinced them otherwise. The staff was the only thing that could silence the creature, control the terror that Cowlanati Palisani had brought to the city, that she would have unleashed among all her murders and plots.

Why? Speculation and rumor were on every tongue, with the slave rebellion and the raiders and Nalsir-fel and Prince Lashback would stand in it all. It was far more than a well-off Kofik could grasp.

"Watch after your mother and father," he said to Ilhaan, "and the city of Nalsir-fel."

There they parted, and he walked quickly down the Way of the Loyal Hound toward Zamil's Square. Behind him, he heard the loud joyous yells of Ilhann's mother and it brought a smile to his (beardless!) face. For a moment, he forgot his troubles and the long night, and even that Ilhann had sworn that there were three of the horrid creatures behind that door.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian Simmons lairs in an undisclosed location in Central Oklahoma. Back in the day he ran AD&D, Gamma World, and Star Frontiers games. From there the slippery slope to writing was too well lubricated to ever hope to escape. Making the best of it, he edits www.heroicfantasyquarterly.com, and holds forth on many nerdy topics at www.blackgate.com.

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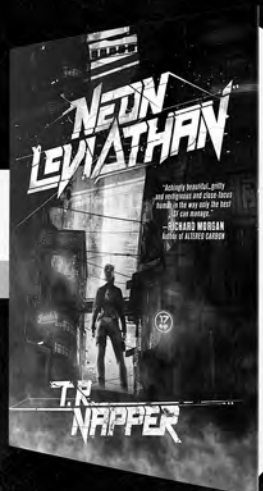
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IN THE CORRIDORS OF THE CROW

A Tale of the King's Blade

By JOHN C. HOCKING

BENHUS had been summoned into the presence of his employer, King Numar Flavius, with no clue as to what was expected of him once he arrived. A horse had been delivered to his home with instructions that he ride directly to the King's refuge, a fortified structure situated amid the palace gardens.

Benhus was still new to his position as an agent and catspaw entrusted with various tasks by Flavius himself, but he thought he'd been effective in the role thus far and took pride that he had, not long ago, actually saved the King's life. The fact that displaying any trace of gratitude seemed outside the King's range of interest was disappointing but, he told himself, probably in character for royalty.

What Benhus found most annoying was that he was consistently expected to be knowledgeable and capable in matters with which he had little to no experience. Like attending a formal ball at the university, locating a missing corpse, or questioning an aged noblewoman who was as uncertain of his identity as she was deaf. Or riding a horse.

Benhus's short tenure in the Legion had been spent in the infantry. He had ridden a horse only a handful of times in his life, knew the raw basics and that was all. When he received the King's message and saw the chestnut gelding tethered on his portico, Benhus had retreated into the villa he had inherited from his teacher, Thratos, and spent much too long preparing himself.

He donned black riding breeches and one of his finest white shirts, over which he wore a light leather cuirass, hoping to look both presentable and ready for anything. Selecting his dependable old short sword, now in a handsome new sheath, he hesitated a moment before deciding to take the preternaturally sharp white dagger. It was such a showpiece he felt it looked awkward on his belt, but had been so useful he had grown certain it brought him good luck. He made a brief attempt to comb his sandy hair, abandoned as he reasoned his locks were likely to be just as tousled after time in the saddle. Benhus dawdled until he realized he could be late to a royal appointment because of a ridiculous and unfounded hope that the meeting might somehow be cancelled so he would be spared the uncomfortable prospect of riding a horse into the presence of the King.

He mounted up, headed for the Royal Gardens, and initially found himself quite pleased. The horse was big, calm and surprisingly easy to control. When he passed through the busy market flanking Cistern Park he drew the eye of more than one young woman and sat as tall in the saddle as he could. The Royal

Gardens lay well across the city, however, and by the time he rode through their gates he found himself growing sore.

Leaving the gate and its guards behind, Benhus rode along a cobblestone path that wound through lush, manicured greenery until he saw the slim tower that rose above the small fortified blockhouse that was the King's refuge, a bolthole protected by both well-trained guards and a variety of magical wards. The top floor's slim windows glittered in the afternoon sun.

Benhus rounded a dense copse of saplings and emerged from the path into the open courtyard before the blockhouse. Brightly flowering bushes were planted along its face, gaudy colors out of place against its grim stone. The heavy door into the blockhouse was closed.

A man Benhus didn't know was standing idly beside a horse in the courtyard. As Benhus approached the man looked to him with interest.

"Hello," the man said. He had dark eyes under dark brows. The top of his head was balding but hair fell in long black ringlets to his shoulders.

"Hello," said Benhus. He tried to dismount casually but his thighs were stiff and he stumbled a little. The man made no attempt to conceal a thin smile.

"I'm Deroth," said the man, "called by some the Swift. I'm here at the summons of the King."

Benhus noted the man's thick, squared off frame and was curious how swift he could be. Deroth wore a deep green tunic with a short sword and dagger belted at his waist. He wore the weapons as if well accustomed to them.

"And you are?" prompted Deroth.

"Benhus, the King's Blade. Also here because the King called."

A fresh and more avid interest kindled in Deroth's eyes.

"Benhus! The King's Blade!" There was something in his tone that Benhus did not like. "I've heard much of you. You were mentored by Thratos, who trained with me for some time in years past. Thratos was a good man and a good friend."

Benhus nodded, not trusting himself to say anything for fear it would ring false. Thratos had been an arrogant hectoring teacher who drew pleasure from belittling his only student. Closing the Tomb of Nervale upon him had seemed a singular opportunity at the time and Benhus had found no substantial reason to regret it since.

"You're terribly young. I hope the mantle of Thratos doesn't weigh too heavily upon you."

"I've done well enough thus far," Benhus managed.

"And you're the King's Blade? Such a title. I recall that Thra-tos was called the King's Hand."

Benhus shrugged and smiled stiffly. He found himself wondering exactly how swift this fellow really was.

Deroth seemed about to speak again when the door to the looming blockhouse was thrown open and a chain of figures emerged from the dimness within.

Benhus was struck by surprise that bordered on shock to see the first man out the door was Praedon, captain of the Royal Guard. The last time Benhus had seen the captain he was being thrown from a hurtling carriage. Benhus had heard nothing of him since and was all but certain he must be dead. Very much alive, Praedon was clad in the elegant half armor of the Royal Guard, tall but so thick through the chest and heavy with muscle in arm and shoulder that he gave the appearance of being stout. Benhus noticed a pronounced limp, but otherwise he appeared unchanged.

"Captain," said Benhus in greeting, touching his brow in salute and deliberately looking away from Deroth. Praedon's only response was a curt nod, which provoked a gentle stab of disappointment in Benhus. Praedon's entire life was devoted to safeguarding the King. Benhus had fought for and protected Numar Flavius, had inarguably saved his life and sustained considerable injury in doing so. Benhus frowned. Clearly, it was foolishness to anticipate any kind of recognition for one's accomplishments in this job.

The King himself followed Praedon, and Benhus was impressed anew by the imposing stature of the ruler of the city of Frekore. Numar Flavius possessed an unnerving presence, standing taller than Praedon with a body built along such exaggerated, muscular lines that he resembled the idealized statue of a hero of old. His big head swiveled to look at Benhus and he favored him with a grin that shone white in his close-trimmed beard.

Benhus grinned back, but the expression tightened as the King advanced directly toward him, making no acknowledgement of Deroth. There was someone trailing the King, someone who was shuffling along, led on a slim leash of chain.

The King's broad hand extended and Benhus found himself reaching out and accepting the end of the chain. He wanted to ask Flavius what this meant but the ruler seemed to radiate an oppressive aura, a nimbus of regal authority that silenced him. His gaze dropped from the King's flatly appraising green eyes, down over his elegant riding garb to the leash in his hand. It ended in a leather loop, thick and discolored from long use.

"This is Zehra," Flavius said.

Bent forward slightly at shoulders and looking down at her sandaled feet, was an elderly Southron woman. She wore a stained and ragged-edged tunic of buckskin. Held back by two combs set over each ear, her thin, grey hair was channeled back between narrow shoulders. Dirty leather mittens covered each hand, fastened by a steel cuff at the wrist. The chain leash Benhus held extended to a collar encircling her gaunt neck. He saw that the collar was metal but lined with some kind of fabric. He had a sudden urge to cast the leash away but smothered it.

"Zehra is a Southron shaman of unique and very useful skills," said Flavius. "Necessary skills. You shall be her caretaker. Do not release her or let her touch you at any time."

The King and Deroth exchanged soft words but Benhus didn't hear them. He squinted sourly at Zehra and wondered how it was that Flavius determined the nature of the tasks assigned to him. This brief and bitter reverie was interrupted by Praedon, who led horses into the courtyard.

The King mounted a powerful black charger, throwing an elegant cloak over his shoulders that covered his face to the eyes, obscuring his identity to the casual glance. Benhus remounted his horse with discomfort he tried to disguise. A pony was brought for Zehra, who mounted it familiarly and without apparent effort. Her pony and his gelding seemed acquainted and moved so closely together that Zehra's leash, now held with concern by Benhus, remained slack.

The party rode out of the garden as the afternoon moved inexorably toward evening. Praedon led, closely followed by King Flavius, then Deroth, with Benhus and his charge Zehra bringing up the rear. Benhus reflected it was for the best that he follow as no one had bothered to tell him where they were going, much less what they intended to do once they arrived. He burned with stifled rancor and with questions, but the only rider near enough to converse with was Deroth, to whom Benhus was unwilling to reveal his ignorance.

They rode through the city's outskirts, edging briefly into the Tiers, where much of the nobility dwelt in tree-shrouded mansions behind garden walls and guarded gates. Passing through an open checkpoint, Benhus saw the sentries there standing in mute attention as they passed. The King's path had been cleared.

Beyond the Tiers they rode into open country, where sprawling estates alternated with the large farms owned either by more prosperous nobles or the city itself. The sun raked the land with long golden light from where it hung, just above the horizon, as they passed through a spur of the greenwood that flanked Lake Sulla. When the riders moved into the forest, sunlight illuminated the trees in a wall of flickering green and flashing yellow, but when they rode back out, onto the long rolling slopes above the lake, the sun had fallen far enough that the forest had become a tangled snare of deep shadows.

With his thighs chafed, his back aching and his mind preoccupied with keeping Zehra's pony close at hand, Benhus still marveled at the sight of Lake Sulla. It was a smooth expanse of deep cobalt, darker than the cloudless sky. He had heard that there were numerous estates and farms abutting the lake but could see none and wondered if the King had deliberately sought a part of lake that was unpopulated.

The party moved along the rocky shoreline, the breeze off the water tugging at their hair and garments. They followed a faded path, not a road as much as a trail, that snaked along through meadow and low brush as the forest's edge drew away from the lake before pushing in close once again. Rounding a sharp curve in the shoreline revealed an inlet across which Benhus could see a small enclosed keep. It looked to be built of fieldstone and seemed so much of a piece with the wild lakeside that it might have grown up from the stony ground there. The King

was trading words with Praedon and although Benhus could not hear what was being said he was suddenly certain that they had arrived at their destination.

The sun was low enough that the sky was darkening, and they rode in heavy shadow as they followed the rim of the inlet around to where the keep sat alone on a low stony promontory overlooking the lake. As they approached Benhus saw it had surprisingly high walls for a structure that covered so little area. The weathered walls, pitted by long exposure to the elements, stood almost three times the height of a man, yet the space they enclosed could be no more than 30 paces across. There was a worn single step to a flat landing before an iron-bound door with a ponderous padlock. As the group dismounted, Benhus wondered if that lock might prove a problem, reflecting that he'd recently used the white dagger to cut through one almost as heavy. He was about to offer his assistance when his gaze swept across the rim of the forest behind them and detected movement there.

"There are Southrons, armed tribesmen, among the trees," he said. He'd spied only two but knew this need be no clue as to their true number.

The King, standing before the door and putting a thick key to its lock, replied.

"They're always here. Watching over the place." The padlock rattled, fell away, and the door came open with a deep protesting moan of corroded hinges.

Benhus looked back at Zehra, clutching her chain absently. She was gazing into the forest, perhaps watching her kinsmen there. Her thin body seemed relaxed and when she turned toward him he saw her face clearly for the first time. Though fissured and worn by age her coppery features remained strong, with sharp cheekbones and arching brows over large, slightly protuberant eyes of an arresting pale grey. She smiled at him, not showing any teeth.

"How old is the King?" she asked in a small, dry voice.

"What?" said Benhus, unbalanced by the question, by her personable tone, and by the fact she had spoken at last and to him alone.

"Come on!" That was Praedon, sounding impatient. "Bring her." But Benhus didn't have to, as she walked, shuffling only a little, up onto the landing, past the King and through the door with Benhus following.

Inside was an almost empty court, weeds growing up between uneven flagstones scattered with moldering leaves. The only feature was a crude hovel constructed entirely of heavy stone slabs. Far more primitive than the little keep that surrounded it, the structure had an air of antiquity, of having sat undisturbed on this spot for uncounted ages. The front of the little building, which could have held no more than a single small room, swam in shadow. This clustered darkness abruptly moved toward Benhus and he saw several large birds, ravens and crows, picking their way across the flags. A number of them flailed black wings and shot straight up out of the keep with raw and ragged cries. One, the largest such bird Benhus had ever seen, stalked directly to where he and Zehra stood inside the doorway.

The raven looked up at Zehra, cocked its head and emitted a low croak. The Southron bent her head and responded.

"*Carrarr-crek-cerekarr...*"

Benhus felt an uncomfortable chill. She sounded little different than the raven. He was given no time to ponder this as the bird immediately flapped aloft, swiftly rising above the walls and departing with a final mournful cry.

Praedon pushed past Benhus and walked toward the primitive structure at the court's center. To Benhus it seemed that the captain had simply been waiting for Zehra to swap a few words with the raven before entering. The chill he'd felt returned. It seemed almost as if she had asked permission to enter.

The birds had been clustered in the dark, open doorway of the hovel. Praedon stood beside it and gestured for them to hurry. They entered in the same order they had ridden and still no one took the time to explain anything to Benhus, who wondered how tightly packed the band of travelers were going to be inside the crude hut.

He needn't have worried. Within there was little but the dark mouth of a tight flight of stone stairs that spiraled downward into a well of absolute blackness. From his backpack Praedon produced torches for everyone except Zehra. By their flickering light the party began their descent.

The stone steps were moist, stained and worn noticeably toward their center, causing Benhus to wonder how long they had been in use and who might have used them often enough or long enough to produce that much wear.

Benhus leaned out a bit and peered down into the stairwell. It was a shaft of darkness in which he could discern no bottom.

"Ah, you won't see the landing until your knees have gone sore from descending stairs," said Deroth. "Just concentrate on taking each step one at a time and listen for any warning from Praedon."

Benhus attempted to look at ease, but he wondered what could be here that Praedon might have to warn them about.

They descended interminably. Around and around as the stairs slowly became dry under their feet. This seemed odd to Benhus, considering they were directly beside Lake Sulla. Somehow the lake did not seem close at all. He felt his knees begin to ache, noticed he was somewhat breathless, and began to wonder how deeply into the earth they had gone and how much farther they could possibly go.

"Hold," came Praedon's voice, curt and commanding. Benhus saw that he and the King were peering at the wall ahead. They muttered darkly back and forth. Praedon produced a fist-sized chunk of greenish chalk from a pouch at his belt and applied it to the wall. He drew a thick line at just below eye-level and Benhus could make out that he was laying it down atop another green chalk line that was much faded.

"Almost missed it," said Deroth. "Chalk managed to fade off the stone in a year. It shouldn't. That's new."

"Why is it there?" asked Benhus. "What does it mean?" Deroth smirked silently in response.

"Heed me!" said Praedon loudly, his voice ringing in the close confines. "Take a few deep breaths with me, then we all proceed quickly down the stairs together. Do not run. Stay close and be careful not to trip each other up. The torches are likely to go out but we will light them again on the other side."

"What?" Benhus was confused. He heard Zehra chuckle softly and the rattle of her chain. He gripped the leather end of the leash tightly.

"Breathe!" shouted Praedon. "Breathe! And we go!"

Benhus caught his breath as the party moved as one down the stairs. The air grew abruptly colder. It seemed to coil around Benhus's arms and slide ice over his skin. He pulled his torch closer and his shoulder brushed the wall. The stone was so chill that it nipped at his flesh like a bee's sting. Startled, Benhus recoiled and gasped. There was nothing to breathe. He felt as if a freezing membrane had been plastered across his face through which no air could penetrate. His chest heaved and his ribs seemed to contract. Benhus forced himself to hold what little air remained in his lungs. His torch had dimmed to a red ember. The party descended with speed, moved around and around the stairwell that corkscrewed into the earth's underbelly. His lungs began to burn.

He was on the verge of slapping a palm to his mouth and nose to prevent an involuntary inhalation when the air seemed suddenly warmer and Praedon called halt. The King's torch had to be re-kindled but Benhus was pleased that his flared back to life of its own accord.

Two more circuits of the stairs brought them to the base of the seemingly endless stairway. It bottomed out into a room scarcely larger than the stairwell and cut so jaggedly out of the living rock it might have been a cave.

Across from the base of the stairs was a door unlike any Benhus had ever seen, wider than his arms could reach and tall enough that he might just stretch to touch the heavy hinges mounted across its top. The door itself looked to be fashioned of smooth black metal and it gleamed with a thick oily sheen that did not invite the touch.

The King and Praedon looked to Zehra, who advanced without comment, trailing Benhus, who held her leash uncertainly. The Southron set herself before the door and lifted both hands to chest level, palms toward the portal. She whistled softly, then uttered a long chain of sounds that mimicked the cry of birds. Benhus heard the language of ravens and crows again, but also that of other birds he recognized but could not name. She ended with a long plaintive note that descended into a tone more suitable for a human bard. Her voice held, sustained, and quavered with what Benhus felt certain was a grief inconsolable. Then she fell silent as the door raised smoothly and soundlessly to the chamber's ceiling.

Flavius stepped forward at once, pushing past the Southron woman and twisting his wide torso to step around her. Presented with the broad expanse of the King's chest, Zehra snatched one of the combs from her hair and drove it toward his body with a fierce stabbing motion. Flavius reacted even as she moved, twisting further so that her thrust met his heavy muscled breast from an angle. He exhaled sharply but did not recoil. The comb stayed where it had been thrust, imbedded in the King's thick pectoral muscle with a thin streamer of scarlet springing from beneath it.

"Majesty!" Praedon exploded. He leapt between the King and the Southron, seizing the woman by her shoulders, lifting and hurling her bodily across the chamber. The leather end of the leash was whipped from Benhus's hand.

The astonishing scene had struck Benhus into immobility, yet now it grew even stranger. The King emitted a roar as bestial as a lion's as his right hand shot out to grip Praedon's throat. He hoisted his guard captain off his feet with horrific ease, lifting the powerful man up to his arm's full extension, then slamming him against the chamber's wall and holding him there while he writhed.

"See to her!" bellowed the King. At first Benhus did not understand and could only stand and gape. When Flavius repeated the command, it became clear and Benhus found himself jostling Deroth as they hastened to attend to Zehra where she had been cast to the rocky floor. She was already standing, rubbing at an elbow and with a line of blood on her brow but otherwise apparently unharmed. Benhus bent and picked up the leash.

"She's well enough, milord," called Deroth.

Zehra's gaze was fixed upon the King. "Damn the luck," she rasped.

There was an ugly choking sound followed by the thud of a body on stone and Benhus turned to see that the King had released Praedon. The captain of the Royal Guard lay in a loose heap at the juncture of wall and floor, gasping raggedly and rubbing his throat with both hands.

"Milord," he croaked. "Milord...I was only concerned for..."

"Be silent. I know full well what concerned you," said Flavius flatly. "And you should know so much better." Thick fingers found the comb, fastened onto it and pulled it from his body. His left hand came up to catch the blood that dribbled from the wound while the right held the comb up for examination. It had once had four long, wide tines, but the center two had been snapped off close to the base while the tine at one end had been shortened and the other had been sharpened until it came to a needle point.

Two long strides brought the King close to Zehra. He loomed over her like a storm cloud, holding the weapon she'd tried to kill him with. She did not cower.

"This," he said, taking his hand from his body he showed her a palm full of blood, "only makes things easier." He held up the comb. "Poisoned?"

"No," said Zehra. She offered her hands, sealed in their leather mittens. "These make such work impossible."

The King bent his head close to Zehra's and spoke softly, as if to a child.

"Any more games like that and I will have you blinded. You have grandchildren, and lately a great grandchild, did you know this? I know it. I know them. You will perform all your duties hereafter with speed and skill, or I shall have them skinned while their mothers watch."

Zehra turned her head to spit, then faced the King and nodded.

Praedon, pale of face and somewhat unsteady on his feet, saw to bandaging the King's wound. Benhus noted that he did good, diligent work. When this was done they moved through the door in a new order. Zehra led, followed by her overseer, Benhus, then Praedon and Flavius, with Deroth bringing up the rear.

If Benhus had any questions as to why the Southron shaman led the way they were dispelled the moment he passed

over the threshold. The atmosphere was close, the air thick and warm and somewhat stale. The corridor beyond was uneven, with corners and edges rounded and softened. All surfaces were as smooth as blown glass except a seam-like indentation that ran along the ceiling's center and emitted a strange dim light. The phantom illumination gave the effect of silvery twilight. The passage ahead widened and narrowed slightly as they advanced. Walls, floor and ceiling were a uniform deep maroon and seemed to Benhus as if they might be made of ceramic. There was a faint but steady sound, a dim background rushing as of a great but remote river or a breeze through distant trees.

The strange hallway expanded into a broad chamber with dim doorways open across and at either side. Praedon collected and extinguished their torches, muttering that it was best if their eyes grew accustomed to the light.

Benhus could make out thin pale cracks, like a lacing of cobweb, spread over all surfaces of the bare room. He thought the entire structure might be slowly collapsing under some sort of pressure.

"The magic grows old," said Zehra, as if in response to his thoughts.

Praedon found a green chalk mark on the hallway entrance to their left and was showing it to the King. Deroth was concerned enough that he went to discuss it with them.

"Numar is older than me, you know," said Zehra softly.

"He is?" Benhus knew he sounded foolish but couldn't help himself. The King's thick black locks were threaded with silver, but his body was that of a strong man in his prime.

"Can you guess how he stays so young? So strong?" Her quiet voice was full of bitter venom.

"Is this the way?" The King's voice rang out in the hollow chamber. Zehra approached corridor's mouth and, without glancing at the faded chalk mark, nodded.

Deroth appeared troubled. "Last time it was directly across."

"The path changes, but not the way," said Zehra.

They proceeded down the marked hall and the fissures in the walls, ceiling and floor grew larger and more numerous. The passage expanded and contracted, leaving Benhus with the impression that they were walking through the gut of some fossilized behemoth.

Zehra stopped and gestured at the floor. There was an open chasm about three paces across stretching from wall to wall. Benhus had to glance at it twice, dropping to one knee to be certain, before he fully grasped there were perhaps two handspans of flooring visible below before utter darkness opened out into a blank void.

"Gods and demons," he whispered.

"Yes," said Deroth too loudly, nudging Benhus from behind so that he recoiled from the chasm's edge. "It's rather like we're ants walking inside a straw or rats in a set of sewer pipes held suspended over a lot of nothing."

"It is not nothing," said Praedon tersely.

"We jump over it?" asked Benhus. He was pleased to find his voice held steady.

"Of course," said Deroth with false heartiness. "Did you want to turn around now?"

Benhus came up off his knees and stared into Deroth's face, finding only a poised casualness there. King Numar stepped around them, set his feet, then vaulted easily across the open expanse. Turning, he extended a hand. "Come ahead. If you falter, I'll pull you in."

Benhus didn't move but neither did Deroth. Praedon came to the rim and gazed uneasily into the fathomless depths below.

"This one isn't as wide as the one we found last time," said Deroth. "The one that Lokos tried to jump first, but slipped on the far ledge and fell in." His conversation seemed to do little to help Praedon initiate his leap. "Thratos was here then. You know? Your old master?" He tapped Benhus hard on the shoulder with two fingers. "Thratos tried to help poor Lokos but he was already gone. Lokos was pretty useless, but I was sad to see him go. The King called us in early that time and Lokos showed up without a blade. I lent him one of my best swords. Had three kills on it and Lokos took it with him into whatever lies below. I miss that weapon."

With a grunt of effort Praedon sprang across the void. Zehra nudged Benhus with a pointed elbow and held up her chain.

"Give me enough slack," she said. Benhus blinked, realizing that she understood he meant to hold on to the end of her leash as she attempted to jump the black chasm.

"No," he said. "Wait." Benhus took the leash and wrapped it around her forearm, placing the leather grip at its end into her hand and closing her leather-mittened grip around it. "So you don't get tangled," he said. "Go."

The Southron hesitated, her gray gaze probing his face for a moment. Then she turned away, gathered herself and jumped. The King caught her carefully on the other side, unwound her leash and impatiently gestured to Deroth and Benhus to follow.

"So you or I..." began Deroth, but Benhus had taken a step back and went at the chasm at a run, throwing himself across the gap and landing beside the King. Flavius laid a wide palm on Benhus's shoulder and it felt almost comradely, until he placed Zehra's leash back into his hand.

The corridor extended in a straight line for some time and as they walked along Benhus noticed that the cracks in walls and floor had become wider and more troubling. A hole in the ceiling the size of his head revealed a blank darkness like that seen in the chasm, and a few steps farther on there was a gash in the left wall that opened on the same emptiness.

Zehra led them into another chamber with hallway openings at all four points of the compass. Praedon was looking for his wayfaring marks of green chalk and Deroth was approaching Benhus, apparently with the intent of saying something, when a strange sound echoed down the corridor to their right. It was a long hollow howl conveying something of both rage and pain. Benhus found himself unable to tell if it was human or animal.

"What in nine hells is that?" snarled the King. He was speaking to Zehra.

"We've never met anything alive in here before," said Praedon. His voice was taut with anger, but his eyes had grown wide with fear.

"The magic grows old," said Zehra again. "Perhaps something found its way in."

Sounds grew in volume from the depths of the right corridor, a rapid series of heavy thumps that had to be footfalls, increasing in speed and drawing nearer.

Stomach clenched in a dizzy surge of fear, Benhus fumbled for the hilt of his short sword. At his side, Deroth drew his own short sword, a slim weapon with a slightly extended blade, and it came free of its sheath with a snap. Even in this nightmarish moment Benhus had a sudden disjointed sense of why Deroth might be known as the Swift.

Another howling roar rang from the passageway and a huge figure burst into the chamber. The little group recoiled before the onslaught of a massive humanoid form who was raging among them in an instant, moving with unnatural speed.

Benhus had a confused impression of an oversized man seemingly clad in awkward and irregular armor mottled brown, black and green. A fist nearly the size of his head, bristling with shards as jagged as broken glass, whistled past his face and he flung himself away, falling flat on his back and releasing Zehra's leash.

Benhus scrambled up as the mace-like fist caught the Southron woman on its return swing. Zehra lifted both hands to block the blow but it blasted her bodily back into him and Benhus was down again, his limbs tangled with hers. He heard the King roaring in protest, that Zehra should be protected, but then the thing howled and that sound eclipsed all others with its deafening peal.

Its head was a faceless hood of warped bone, a carapace with no visible features at all. Benhus struggled to his knees and saw Deroth lunge in ahead of Praedon, his blade like a flicker of light on water. The point darted full into the thing's face and cracked twice, as fast as a man might clap his hands, against its blank visage where eyes should have been. The swift thrusts scarred the hard shield but deterred it not at all.

Deroth flattened himself beneath an arm swung like a battle axe, then rolled as a massive foot tried to stomp him into the floor. Praedon ducked in and cut at the thing's breast, only to have his shoulder seized by one huge hand. He cried out in pain.

Benhus, on all fours, panting for breath, dove low beside the creature, shoulder-rolling to come up behind it and rake his short sword across both heels in an attempt to hamstring the thing. He might have been slashing at the bark of a great tree, but the monster felt the attack. It twisted at the waist to shove Praedon at him. Dodging the captain's reeling body, Benhus didn't see the thing's fist until it struck his side, slamming into his ribs with force enough to half-tear away his leather cuirass and spin him back into the chamber wall.

The King, wielding a wide-bladed short sword, hacked powerfully at the thing's back and Deroth rose to engage it again. Benhus, stunned, looked down at his torso, half bared and striped with bright blood where the thing's barbed and bladed fist had struck him. He also saw, dangling at his belt, the white dagger.

"Fool!" That was Deroth, shouting at him. "Protect your King!"

As the thing turned to reckon with the King's rain of heavy blows at its back, Benhus again dove in low behind it, this time slashing the gleaming edge of the white dagger across both heels. The opalescent blade cut deep above one ankle and all

but severed the other. With another howl, louder and of a different timbre, the demon fell like a toppled statue. As it crashed spread-eagle to the floor, Benhus scrambled over its body and drove the white dagger into its neck. Dark blood sprayed forth and the thing convulsed powerfully, throwing Benhus off and into the wall. His skull struck stone and he dropped the white dagger. Blackness crowded his vision and he clung desperately to consciousness. He pushed himself blindly up the wall, found his sword in its sheath and drew it just as his sight began to clear.

Flavius was straddling the monster and driving his sword into the wound Benhus had cut into its neck. A failing arm knocked the King away, sent him stumbling to where Benhus still leaned dazed and gasping against the wall.

"Twin gods of mercy!" rumbled the King, grinning savagely at Benhus.

The demon tried to rise once, then collapsed and was still. The blade of the King's sword jutted from its neck and had all but severed its head. Blood pooled slowly beneath it. Benhus was surprised to see Zehra approach, holding both leather-mittened hands to her chest. Her grey eyes met his impassively.

"Praedon, are you well?" asked the King. His captain limped forward and nodded.

"Deroth?"

"Well enough, milord."

"You," Flavius gestured at Benhus, "have wounds that need care. Deroth, attend him. The rest come with me. There should be another door for Zehra to contend with not far ahead. We'll deal with that. I've enough of surprises. I would fain do what we came here to do and begone."

Benhus wanted very much to ask him what precisely they had come here to do but found that he was almost too weak to speak. He struggled out of his rent cuirass and tore away the rest of his shirt. His bare torso was lean enough that his muscles seemed twisted tightly around his bones. There were three irregular wounds across his chest, not deep but all bleeding freely. It was clear that these were not among his first as his flesh was laced with an alarming number of scars.

Flavius produced a small silver vial and passed it to Deroth. "Give this to him. Follow us when you're able."

"Gods, look at this!" Praedon stood over the thing's body, which looked somehow shrunken, in death less formidable than awkward and malformed. The captain had pulled the King's sword free and in doing so had torn a section of the monster's bony carapace away. Underneath lay the pale flesh of a man.

The King straddled the thing's misshapen skull, bent and pulled at the bony shield that was its face. It abruptly tore loose, a part of the warped plate breaking free in his hands. Half a human face, pallid, eyeless and open mouthed, was revealed.

"Lokos!" gasped Deroth.

"It is Lokos," muttered the King, dropping the hardened fragment to clatter on the floor. "It appears that this shell grew both over and into him."

"How could he see? How could he live?" Praedon stared at the corpse in horror. "We haven't been back in here for a year! How could he be alive?"

"If this truly was life," said Flavius. "Come, we've work to do."

The King led Zehra away down the corridor marked with a faded smear of green chalk, and Praedon followed, casting wary glances over his shoulder at the transformed body of his former comrade.

Deroth was hewing at the thing's midriff, tearing at the rigid carapace encasing the body of Lokos until he laid bare part of its belly and waist. More pale skin and a few faded rags of clothing were revealed.

Deroth gave a caustic oath, kicked the body scornfully, then picked up the white dagger where it lay. He approached Benhus, with the blade extended, gleaming like frost in the cold twilight of the passage.

"I trust you're well pleased with yourself," he said in a low voice. "Put on a good show for Numar there."

Benhus, still leaning against the wall, said, "Disappointed that Lokos wasn't still carrying your sword?"

Deroth's dark brows knit in a frown. "This is Thratos's dagger. A gift of the King for his long service."

Benhus pushed away from the wall and stood unsteadily facing Deroth, his eyes cold. "It is mine and has served me far better than it ever did Thratos."

The white dagger seemed to hover in the air between them, then Deroth abruptly thrust it home into its sheath on Benhus's belt. His speed was such that Benhus doubted that he could have dodged the blade even if he had known it was coming. Deroth grinned and shook back his black ringlets.

"Here now, let us do as the King decreed," he said and passed the slim silver vial Flavius had given him over to Benhus, who looked at it uncertainly.

"Ah," said Deroth. "You don't know how deeply you are honored. That's King's Balm. The price of that tiny flask would buy the favors of a princess. Nip off the very top and dribble a drop out onto your finger. Careful! Rub a single drop onto each of those ugly chest wounds, then drink the rest. And be grateful."

A soothing warmth sprang from each of wounds introduced to the honey-like King's Balm. Pain dwindled almost instantly, and he thought he could feel the flesh knitting. Intoxicated by the unexpected comfort, he stood still and blinked while Deroth wrapped his chest with a length of bandage, encircling his torso several times and tying the white fabric off with swift skill.

"Ah now, don't forget to drink it," he chided. Benhus sucked the last of the fluid from the little silver vial and it was as if a great warm and shining blossom bloomed in his belly. Strength flooded his limbs and the stale air of the passageways seemed sharp and invigorating in his lungs. He shook himself and said, "Let's find the King and do whatever it is we came here to do."

Deroth laughed. "Not too bad, eh? The King doesn't spare himself any luxuries." He looked into Benhus's eyes. "You don't spare yourself many either, I'm told. Some say you're the youngest ever to serve old Numar as you do."

Benhus found nothing to answer in that and simply shrugged.

"Some say you drank all the wine in Thratos's cellar in the span of a week."

"There's enough left for a few more weeks," replied Benhus sullenly.

"Ah, you're not like Thratos. He had a sense of humor."

"He wasn't laughing the last time I saw him."

Deroth stiffened and took a step back, his gaze intent on Benhus's face.

"Some say that you abandoned Thratos to his death in the tomb of Nervale."

"You spend much time listening to what people say. Do you have time for anything useful?"

Deroth flinched as if slapped, his eyes narrowed and the space between the two men was charged with potential violence. Benhus lowered a hand to his waist, fingers not touching his hilt but drawing near.

Deroth drew steel with astonishing speed, his sword seeming to spring from its sheath of its own accord and its point to appear at Benhus's throat. Benhus didn't move. He felt a strange abstract disappointment, reflecting in an instant how often he had been praised for his speed with a sword and how now, in some godsforsaken magical burrow outside the world, he was going to be slain by a master swordsman much faster than he had ever been or could likely ever be.

"What's this?" That was the King, voice imperious and demanding. He, Praedon and Zehra were coming back down the passage.

Deroth sheathed his blade with a flourish. "Gentleman's disagreement, milord," he said. He bent his head and whispered so that Benhus alone could hear. "We shall take this up another time."

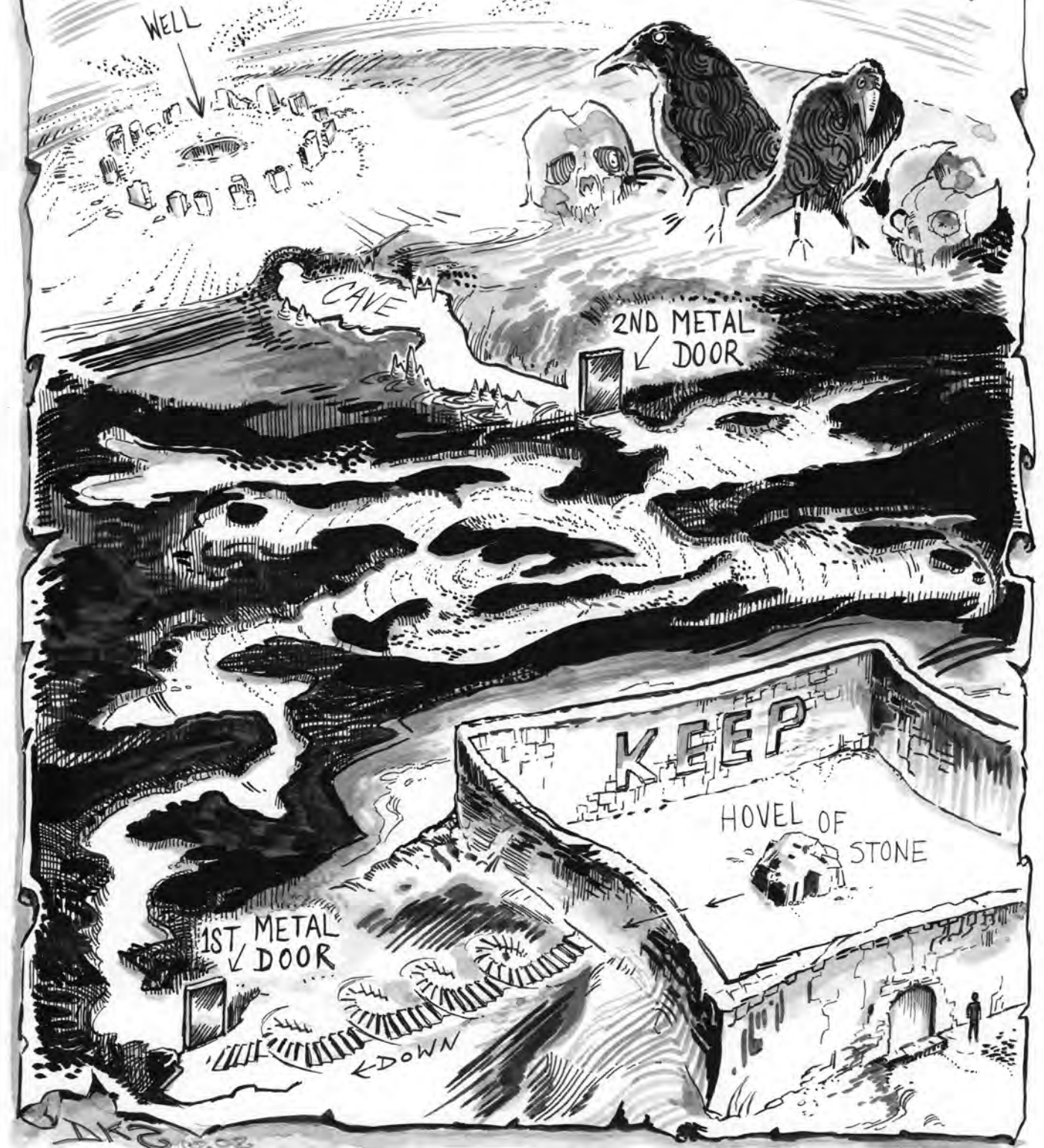
"There is no time for petty squabbling. The gate is open and I need you to accompany me now." The King's words were heavy and his gaze did not shift from Deroth's face.

Benhus took Zehra's leash once again as the party went back along the corridor which stretched into a growing semi-darkness. The ridged seam in the ceiling overhead that bled a soft slivery light had gone dim here, transforming the group into furtive shadows. The corridor ended in another door of the type Benhus recalled from the base of the stairwell, an oily black metal slab that lifted to lay flat against the ceiling. Beyond the open doorway was a continuing passage that resembled a natural cave weathered through tawny sandstone. A few steps within and the floor began to slope steeply upward. The air seemed fresher and carried the faint scent of cedar. A dim red-orange light, like that of a late evening sunset, grew slowly brighter as they advanced. A breeze filtered past Benhus and he was struck with the wonder of it. After having descended so deeply into the earth were they somehow about to emerge onto the surface?

The cavern widened, became lined with yellow sand, and the breeze strengthened until they passed from a wide cave mouth out onto a broad desert landscape unlike anything Benhus had seen or imagined before.

The ground extended in a flatly featureless desert in every direction, treeless and empty of life or movement. The horizon was visible all around them and seemed impossibly close, as if the world had shrunken to a fraction of its size. The entire encircling rim of the horizon was lit up as if the ruddy sun had just dipped below it, as if all directions were west and a great ring of fiery scarlet suns had just set and now sent their last weary rays up to illuminate the world. The sunset light was steady, constant and unchanging. Night was still unready to fall. Perhaps it never would.

IN THE CORRIDORS OF THE CROW



"Gods." Benhus spoke and his voice sounded unseemly here, too loud despite being scarcely above a whisper.

There was a dark well before them, a black shaft perhaps five paces across set into the stony desert floor and encircled by a ring of small boulders. The King advanced until he stood before the well and beckoned to Zehra. "Come, witch. Call your master."

Zehra took the leash from Benhus's unresisting hand. She stood by the well and began, in a cracked but resonant voice, to chant. Her voice filled the air as she sang and crooned and spoke the language of birds.

There was a rustling sound from deep in the well, and a gush of cool air flowed outward from its dark mouth. The unnatural breeze blew over Benhus, stirring his tousled hair, smelling of dust and cedar and dried blood. He cast a quick glance at Praedon and Deroth and saw they both stared unblinkingly at the well, expressions tense and rapt.

Something was rising from the shaft, a tangled bowl of dirty grey that lifted until it filled the opening from rim to rim. His eyes focused on the entwined bank of shadows directly before him and saw a solid mosaic of objects tied and tucked together in a complex aggregation. A nest, thought Benhus, it looks like a nest. Realization struck him like a blow to the belly. It was a nest, a great nest made of bones. He saw the bones of men and animals wound and bound together, forming such a dense fabric that he could not tell where one ended and the other began. He could make out the weathered skulls of men and the antlers of a great stag, all crusted with layers of dust and cobweb, filthy with age and abandonment.

Seated at the nest's center was a great hunched form, cross-legged and so deeply bent over that its head was in its lap. Great arched shoulders and starkly etched ribs were as coated with dust and grime as the nest and seemed all of a piece with it.

Zehra emitted the sharp, stark croak of a raven and the figure slowly lifted its heavy head. The body was that of the tallest man, but the head was that of a bird, a huge raven's skull mounted atop the gaunt and corded neck. Eyes as black as moonless night blinked and the long, curved beak, dirty and cracked with hoary antiquity, opened and spoke.

"Daughter," it said.

"Honored father," Zehra said, "I return with the king of the new empire's city of Frekore, once a satellite of far Janarax. King Numar Flavius again seeks your blessing and divine aid."

The beak opened and emitted a brief, dry coughing sound that might have been a laugh.

"Numar. How long since you were last here?"

"Only a year, great one," said the King.

"Oh, but your hair is now threaded with starlight, little king. And I have grown so hungry."

"You shall hunger no more," said Flavius, and dug a hand under the bandage that covered the wound Zehra had given him with her sharpened comb. He grimaced, probing the incision with insistent fingers, then removed his hand and extended it.

The figure seated in the nest of bones leaned far forward and its beak opened like the splitting of a tarnished sword. Scarlet droplets fell from Numar's hand into the cracked and lusterless beak.

"Ah," it sighed, "King's blood."

The King repeated the process twice more, each time producing a little less blood.

"Enough", said Flavius. "Grant me your blessing. Give me that power."

"Not enough," it rasped. "More. Much more, little King, or you'll have nothing and will draw ever closer to the end you fear so very much."

"But that's always been enough!" burst out Praedon. "The King can't be weakened. We still have to return from this place!"

The being in the nest lifted a long arm languorously. Crooked and black-taloned fingers lifted in a gently dismissive gesture. Praedon screamed in agony and staggered away from the nest with both hands pressed to his face and blood running between his fingers. Benhus felt frozen in place.

"Your puppets vex me, little king. Send them forth. Let us talk of your blood and my blessing."

"Go!" snapped Numar. "Await me at the door."

Praedon took his hands from his face, revealing a ragged gash that raked down across his forehead and between his eyes to split his upper lip. "But milord!"

"Go!" Numar's bellowed command brooked no dissension. The group retreated into the cavern, leaving the King alone beside the nest and its dire occupant.

They gathered, as the King decreed, just inside the passageway, where the black door hung overhead, and the dying light turned them all into dim silhouettes.

Praedon sat propped against the wall, lamenting that he had deserted his lord while Deroth cursed and tried to bandage the captain's ugly facial wound.

Benhus stumbled numbly to a spot across the hall, to where the wall was cleft with a crack wide enough that he might almost step through it into the blank void beyond.

A hand, thin and hard, clasped his forearm and he felt a strange dizzy pulse course through his body. He pulled free and saw it was Zehra. She held up both hands and he could see that the palms of the leather mittens fastened to her wrists were torn and shredded. One was stained with blood. Benhus recalled the encrusted body of Lokos striking the Southron with a jagged fist, and how she had held up both hands to block that blow. Her hands had been exposed ever since and she had concealed it. Don't let her touch you, the King had said.

"You would have your heart be flint," said Zehra.

Benhus laid a hand on the white dagger's hilt. "Work no sorcery on me, witch."

"No," said the Southron. "Not you. I but gazed within. And as I thought, you are as much a pawn as I, perhaps more so as I can make no claim to youth or innocence. I would have you ask me the questions you strive so hard to withhold, even if my answers should damage that innocence. I see these unanswered questions are a wearisome burden. Ask."

"What in nine hells was that thing? What is the king doing with it?" Benhus burst out, the words seemingly torn from his mouth.

"The Father of Crows, a Southron power from olden times. Our gods are fading but still have more substance than the vanished ones of your people. The king visits to retain his youth."

"That thing makes him young?"

"No," whispered Zehra. "It grants him the ability to take life from another and add it to his own. Have you ever heard Numar called the devourer of children?"

Benhus did seem to recall this, though he wasn't certain where. He shook his head, feeling dizzy and constricted. Praedon swore in the dimness behind Zehra and her eyes lifted, her gaze locking with that of Benhus.

"Heed me. All the King does he does to benefit only himself. Never think otherwise. And his underlings are no different. Deroth lent luckless Lokos his sword. He is still wroth about it, but not because he cared for the weapon. The hilt was jeweled, with a large garnet set into its pommel, and this loss still galls his pinched soul. Of all of us, only the captain is pure. His only desire is to aid Numar in all things. You..."

"What the hell are you muttering about?" It was Deroth, standing right behind Zehra. "Her hands are free! Did she touch you?"

"It's nothing," said Benhus. He stepped around Zehra to confront Deroth and was completely unprepared for the man unleashing a driving punch to the side of his head, a hard blow that sent him reeling. Benhus toppled backward, struck the passage wall and slid halfway into the broad opening there. His hands clawed at the crumbling edge and halted his fall as his head and shoulders plunged into the darkness outside.

Icy blackness seemed to congeal around Benhus's skull, to drive itself into his eyes and ears. His involuntary cry was soundless as he went blind and deaf before forcibly thrusting himself back into the passage. Light and sound returned at once. Zehra lay prone, blood shining on her lips, and Deroth stood over her.

"Keep your hands at your sides, witch, or I'll cut them off."

"Gods," gasped Benhus, mind working furiously. "That was incredible."

"Shut up, you half-wit stripling. You can't even handle this old woman. We get out of here and you're mine. We duel. And I think you already know how that'll end."

"Incredible?" said Zehra softly, not moving from where she lay.

"Yes," panted Benhus. "The outside of the passage is covered with armor, helms and weapons. There's a sword out there with a great red gem in its hilt."

"What?" Deroth advanced on Benhus and the younger man cringed away, holding up a hand as if to ward off a blow. Deroth shoved him aside and, placing a hand on either side of the tear in the passage wall, pushed his head into the black void.

Benhus set his feet and, with all the strength in his arms and upper body, drove the heels of both hands into the small of Deroth's back. There was the swift scrabble of Deroth's hands on the edges of the opening, but otherwise he plunged soundlessly out of sight.

Benhus squared himself in front of the gap and drew his white dagger. He breathed slowly and deeply and waited. The black slash in the wall remained mute and unchanging. After a time he sheathed his dagger and looked to Zehra. She had come to one knee and was regarding him uncertainly. He grinned at her.

Praedon was still slumped against the far wall, his face almost obscured by bandages. Benhus approached him, noted that he seemed merely unconscious, then the floor quivered beneath his feet.

A gust of sudden wind blew from the open doorway, funneling down the cavern from where King Flavius conferred with the Southron deity Zehra had called the Father of Crows. A strange, piercing cry followed, and it had a quivering power that Benhus could feel like a frigid fist clenching in his breast.

"What has he done?" asked Zehra, her voice hollow with disbelief.

There was someone staggering along the cavern toward them. It was the King, reeling so that he rebounded from the sandstone walls before lurching to a halt among them.

"Close the door!" he demanded, face ashen. "Close it now!"

Zehra lifted her hands, fingers outthrust through shredded leather, and the door lowered silently. The floor quivered again and Praedon came to his feet with a cry of dismay.

"My King, you're hurt!"

It was true, the King clasped his side with one hand, feverishly clutching the wound that had soaked his shirt with dark blood. The was a thunderous sound as of shifting stone and the entire corridor seemed to drop several handspans. Dust fell from the ceiling in a thick cloud. The gap in the wall that had received Deroth emitted a splintering crack and gaped wider still.

"Haste!" roared the King.

They made a mad scramble through the corridors. Praedon alternately lent a shoulder to support his bloodied King and pointed the way. Benhus was lost, confused in the billowing dust and the now ceaselessly shaking floor and walls. The air was thick with a steady chorus of splintering sounds, the brittle fracturing of the entire fabric of the system of passages.

Benhus spotted the rift in the floor and shouted a warning before he jumped it. Spurred by terror, no one hesitated to hurl themselves across the crevice.

Sections of walls, floor and ceiling began to break away, solid slabs falling off into empty void, visible and tangible one moment and then disappearing utterly into absolute darkness.

At the base of the stairwell, Zehra closed the door and when it swung into place it was as if they had shut out the final agonies of a dying world. There was a deep stillness in the earth that comforted them even as they gasped and coughed and cursed and threw themselves down on the uneven stone floor.

They rested a time, and Benhus saw Flavius quietly take a vial of King's Balm, before they began the long climb to the surface. After they passed through the chill and airless zone the King lost patience with their slow pace and took on a swifter gait, leaving the rest of the group behind despite the protestations of Praedon. Lungs and legs aching, Benhus relished every time Praedon or Zehra called a halt.

Zehra kept up with Benhus who, near the limit of his strength, slowed to a deliberate plod even as Praedon, dismayed at being separated from his King, hastened out of sight.

When Benhus finally emerged from the stone hut he allowed himself to collapse on the keep's flagstones. The sky was growing pale and he realized that it was dawn.

There was a small fire being tended by Praedon who, Benhus noted with wry amazement, was cooking breakfast for the King. The captain stopped long enough to bring Zehra and Benhus water from his saddle bags, before serving Numar a plate of eggs and fried vegetables.

Zehra took a long drink, wiped her mouth with a wrist and fixed her grey-eyed gaze on the King.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

"He took more of my blood and gave me his blessing, so I felt our old bargain completed yet again, but then he insisted on having still more. When I demurred, he seized me and dug one of those ugly talons into the wound I'd been using to feed him. The one you gave me. So, I stabbed him in the breast," said the King with a cold smile.

Zehra's face bore mute witness to her shock.

"I suppose I slew him. In truth I wish I had not," said the King.

"You did not kill him. You cannot kill such as he. He lives."

"Excellent," said the King lazily, spooning eggs into his mouth and chewing. "Then you can find a way for me to meet with him again. I'll need his blessing, or something very similar, inside the next year or two."

"I—," began Zehra, "I don't know if..."

"You have a year to find a way to him once more," said the King evenly. "I'm sure you will succeed."

Benhus stood and the King seemed to notice him for the first time. Flavius rose from his seat and clapped Benhus on his bare shoulder.

"Lost half your clothing below, didn't you?" he grinned. "Can't have you going about wearing only breeches and a bandage." The King took his cloak and spread it over Benhus's shoulders.

The fine fabric slid smoothly over his skin. It was a royal garment and Benhus felt a moment's flattery. The sensation grew

hollow as the King strode out of the little courtyard and headed toward the horses.

"Get some food into you. Do it quickly and we'll be on our way back to the city."

Praedon was cleaning up the cooking gear and passed chunks of buttered bread to Benhus and Zehra. The Southron accepted hers absently, grey eyes unfocused, staring into a world Benhus couldn't fathom.

He bit into the crusty slab of bread and watched the King mount up and call to them, voice ringing out clear and well-pleased in the brightening morning. Flavius had not mentioned the absence of Deroth.

Deroth, who had served him in the same capacity, and for an even longer span, than Thratos, whose role had been taken by Benhus. It was impossible to say if the King had even marked the absence of his servant.

Benhus found his first mouthful of bread unaccountably difficult to swallow and that it seemed to rest in his stomach like a stone. A breeze stirred his new cloak and he heard a distant raucous call.

Looking up, he saw a ring of ravens far above, moving with slow and patient grace against the morning sky.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ROAD OF BONES

A Dhulyn and Parno Adventure

By VIOLETTE MALAN

DHULYN Wolfshead had just turned the last vera tile in the Sleeping God pattern face up when an old man entered the tavern, wrapped up for cold though the day would be considered warm even by those who were not Red Horsemen from the icy south. Hands and wrists showed he'd been a big man before age had leaned him down, though his stoop and his rounded shoulders were better explained by his blue Scholar's tunic than his years.

The old man's eyes searched over all of the tavern's sparsely occupied tables before settling on her. His face brightened, but Dhulyn would not have called it a smile. He crossed the room to her table, stopped short of it, touched the Library crest on the left side of his tunic and inclined his head in a bow. Dhulyn touched her forehead in return.

"I am Horgath, Scholar of Rhonat Library," he said, his voice unexpectedly deep and vibrant. "May I join you?" When she gestured her assent he pushed back his brown hood, pulled out the stool opposite her and sat with the slow care of the aged. He cast a closer look at the pattern of vera tiles and raised his brows in obvious recognition.

"Are you Marked?" she asked him. "You appear to see more here than a game of tiles." Dhulyn knew a Finder who had become a Scholar, but the Seer's Mark was rare outside of her own tribe.

"As it happens," he said, looking up. "I have another source for my knowledge." With one liver-spotted hand he pushed up his left sleeve enough for Dhulyn to see the complex pattern of black tattooing, blurred and faded now, that covered his arm. He must have seen Dhulyn's eyes narrow, because he continued to speak. "Yes, I was once a mage—still am, I suppose, as like the Mark it never leaves you. But these are old." For a moment his eyes focussed on something far away, and his expression grew almost puzzled. "I hardly remember that life, it feels as though it happened to someone else. Then I see the tattoos and I'm reminded." He shook himself and straightened, smiling. "I left that life while still a young man and joined a Library. It transpired that it was the knowledge I loved, not the power."

Dhulyn smiled her wolf's smile, the small scar pulling back on her upper lip, but unlike everyone else she had ever known, Horgath did not react at all. Interesting. Perhaps his eyesight was poor. "I too have spent time in a Library," she said aloud. She and Parno had passed Rhonat on their way into town. She might be willing to overlook his past as a mage, if he were truly a Scholar now. "Have you need then of Mercenary Brothers?"

"Brothers?"

Dhulyn tapped her temple, where the blue and green tattoo of her Mercenary's badge reached to above her ears. "I am Dhulyn Wolfshead," she said. "Called the Scholar and schooled by Dorian the Black. I fight with my Brother, Parno Lionsmane, called the Chanter, schooled by Nerysa of Tourin. This line of black tattooing shows we are Partnered."

"Ah, I didn't know that. I've made no special study of the Mercenary Brotherhood, though I am now in need of the kind of aid the two of you can give me." His smile slowly faded.

Straightening, Dhulyn collected the vera tiles and restored them to their battered box. "You have still to tell me what it is you need."

The old man lifted his coarse linen satchel from the floor and set it on the table, loosening the braided ties that held it shut. He pulled out a bundle the length of Dhulyn's forearm, wrapped in time-softened leather. His hands, the knuckles swollen, shook as he folded back the wrapping. Finally he revealed a narrow wooden box, the hinges and clasp of silver formed into the shape of leaves and engraved with writing Dhulyn did not recognize.

Horgath tapped the hinge closest to him. "We breached a wall to build a new addition to the library and found this mortared into a cavity. I recognized it immediately. The casket contains an artefact stolen some years before you were born, from a temple in Genjar, and it is vital for me to see it returned while I still live. I'm too old to go alone, and none can be spared to go with me. When the youngster who helps in the kitchens told me there was a Mercenary Brother in town, I knew my opportunity had come." He lifted the lid.

Dhulyn tilted her head. For a moment she did not speak. "My Partner must see this."

• • •

"So the old man used to be a mage?" Parno pulled on his right boot and stood to stamp in the heel.

"According to him, and to the tattoos on his arms." The Wolfshead leaned her shoulders against the wall, watching him dress.

"A bone flute's not that unusual." Parno slipped a throwing star into the top of each boot. "Even one as elaborate as you describe." When Dhulyn did not respond he looked up at her. "It's a flute, my soul. Sure it's made out of some valuable ivory or what have you. The old guy stole it himself, probably, and now that he's close to death he feels the need to make reparation—and speaking of which, did he mention how and what he's going to pay us?" Usually Dhulyn took good care that the fees were clear—and occasionally collected in advance. This time she hesitated. "We *are* getting paid?"

"He has a book —"

"Oh my soul, we're going to be paid with a book?" He closed his eyes and fought to keep the smile from his lips. "And what's my share?"

"It's old, it's valuable, a copy he made himself of a rare manuscript. We can easily sell it for more than our usual fee."

"Once you've finished reading it, you mean." She gave him the smile she saved only for him. "It's too bad we can't keep the flute. That's rare enough to be valuable as well."

"Flutes made from human bone may not be as valuable as you think."

Parno paused in the act of securing his extra sword belt. "Human bone? Are you sure? No offense," he added, as her blood-red brows raised. "Well. That makes things interesting. Did you also know there's no city where he says this Genjar is?"

• • •

“W E’VE guarded caravans that moved more quickly,” Parno said, using the breathless whisper of the night-watch voice. The old man riding between them might be napping in the saddle, and he might not. They’d had one or two run-ins with mages before.

"He's old. His bones are fragile. He can only travel so quickly, even on the steadiest horse I could find him."

Though they continued to travel slowly, and both took care that the old man did no more than was necessary, Horgath began to tire more easily, speak more slowly, and show a tendency to fall asleep almost before his eyes could close. One evening when they were perhaps half way to their goal, in an effort to keep the old man awake Dhulyn asked Horgath to speak of his life as a Scholar.

"You have studied so many things in your time," she said. "Surely you must know stories we have never heard."

"Surely, surely. But first I've a funny story about an elderly colleague of mine. It was when I first became a Scholar, this old fellow needed to sell his mule..."

They laughed as the story reached its somewhat inevitable conclusion, stopping when Horgath turned to Dhulyn and with a soft smile said, "I'm so sorry my dear, who are you?"

Dhulyn's own smile never left her face, but Parno felt his heart sink. The man was old, right enough, but until this moment he'd shown no signs of illness. Dhulyn delicately took Horgath's left hand between both of hers.

"I am Dhulyn Wolfshead, Scholar Horgath, and this is my Brother, Parno Lionsmane. We take you to Genjar, to return an artifact robbed from a temple."

"Yes." The old man's voice gained in strength and he patted Dhulyn with his free hand. "Yes, that's right. I left Rhonat Library to bring the bone back."

Ask him, ask him, Parno thought, fighting the need to interrupt.

"Tell me again of the bone," Dhulyn said.

Parno released his breath as quietly as if he was on watch. *The "again" is a nice touch*. If Horgath's behaviour meant what he thought... With some folk the mind failed first, not the body. If a Healer were available, and your family had the fees, a great deal could be done. But the sufferer would eventually reach the point where even the best Healers could do no more.

"You'll not know this my dear," Horgath began, "but when a mage goes bad it happens so slowly, so subtly. By the time it's discovered it's often too late to save him—and it's usually a him you know, no one knows why. No, by then he can only be destroyed." Horgath fell to nodding, as though he had said all he meant to say.

"And this is what you did?"

"Oh, not I alone. There were five of us, working together, though only four at the end—three, eventually, since I left that life. We, we removed his power—it's a complicated and painful procedure, for all parties. Then we cut him to pieces, and burned the pieces. But the bones you know, the bones don't burn." He frowned, casting sharp glances around him before continuing. "Where...?"

"Right here, Horgath." Parno pulled the satchel containing the bone flute in its wooden case closer to the fire and set the old man's hand on it.

"It's dangerous my dears, dangerous and unlucky. It's got to —" his sudden grip on Parno's arm was surprisingly strong. "It has got to go back." His hand dropped away. "To be safe."

• • •

P ARNO waited until Horgath had fallen asleep before asking, "Can we rely on anything he said? *Is* this flute part of a dead mage?"

"It's a human bone, we know that much is so." Dhulyn sorted her bedroll out of her pack and spread it next to the fire. "What is it ails him? You seem to recognize it."

"I do. I saw it in my mother's great aunt. The Healer called it the Sunset Malady, both because it strikes at the twilight of a person's life, and because the symptoms seem to worsen at the closing of the day. Most people are Healed, but occasionally a person becomes so old that Healing no longer works."

"We wouldn't find such a malady among the Brotherhood." She sat back on her heels. "Most of us don't live long enough to die of something that strikes in old age."

Parno glanced down at the old man and straightened his blanket. "Which is a lucky thing, it seems to me."

"I won't argue." Dhulyn drew up her shoulders. A Brother who could not remember who or where she was, nor why she was there, was a liability the Brotherhood could not allow. A person who could not remember being a Mercenary Brother was one no longer. It would be a kindness to receive the final sword.

• • •

T HE following evening's incident was still more disturbing. Parno had unpacked the pot for brewing gange and skewers enough to cook the three pigeons Dhulyn had shot that day, while his Partner finished assembling the sticks and grasses she'd gathered for their cook fire. Horgath lowered himself to the ground at her side. He watched her a few moments, a frown of concentration on his face. She picked up her sparker, but before she could use it Horgath rubbed the tips of his left fingers against his thumb, flicked his fingers at the pile of sticks, and shied away as they caught.

"Careful Hogarth," Dhulyn gently took his arm and sat him back, away from the flames.

"How did that happen?" he said.

"Breeze blew my sparker just at the right moment."

"It wasn't me?"

"How could it be? You're a Scholar."

"Yes. That's right. Of course I am."

After they had eaten, with the old man asleep and the fire banked for the night, Dhulyn sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Parno, each facing in the opposite direction. They could use the nightwatch voice, and keep watch at the same time.

"That was rather unnerving," Parno said.

"I find it more unnerving that I had forgotten the man is still a mage."

"That's the real problem, isn't it? What *he's* forgotten." Parno was silent for a long moment. "Let me take first watch," he said finally, "and you see what your tiles can tell you."

Usually this suggestion annoyed Dhulyn, but this time she made no argument. The vera tile almost always worked now, but all she saw when she had finished laying out the Tarkin pattern was a young man with a familiar grin.

"Perhaps you used the wrong anchor tile," Parno said when she reported her Vision. He knew she was worried when all she did was shrug.

• • •

DHULYN stood balanced on her saddle, her hand shielding her eyes from the sun.

"What have you found?" Horgath asked.

"Do you see how level is this section of land, unnaturally so?" She pointed ahead and to the left.

"Certainly, now that you show me."

"We are travelling on the remains of an old road of the Caid's."

Horgath leaned so far out of his saddle that Dhulyn feared he would fall out, until the horse shifted to prevent it. "Interesting. These reminders of the old ones are found everywhere, even, they say, in the Northern Desert, and the territories of the Great King in the West." He looked up and around. "Now that I think about it. There were remnants of that old civilization near Genjar."

Dhulyn caught Parno's eye, fell silent as he shook his head.

"Genjar is where we're going now," Parno said.

"Are we? Well, that's lucky then isn't it?" Horgath hummed to himself, but Dhulyn heard no tune. "It's been many years, many, since I was last there. Before I went to the Scholar's Library, it must have been."

Dhulyn clicked her tongue at the horses and they moved forward again.

"Why did you leave Genjar?" Parno asked. So far the old man had given them three different answers.

This time what she got first was the now familiar frown. "You know, I'm not actually certain. It wasn't my life anymore, but I'm not sure why."

• • •

EVENTUALLY the road began to climb into what would have been foothills had there been larger mountains beyond them. Here the way was rockier, the remains of the road strewn with boulders, and with trees growing up through cracks in the ancient pavement.

"We'll have to ride single file," Dhulyn said, motioning the mage into line between her and Parno. At one point a rock slide completely obliterated the road, but once they had circled around, they saw how the land spread out in front of them.

"What happened to the road?" Horgath waved his hands in the air. "There's nothing flat here, it's all... lumpy."

"You're not wrong," Parno said. "But observe how the 'lumps' appear regularly spaced, almost in rows. This is a clear sign of ruins under the soil."

Horgath's brow furrowed, drawing all the skin around his eyes into wrinkles. "No," he said as if to himself. "I've never seen this before."

• • •

THAT night they camped just inside the western edge of the ruins. Horgath fell asleep with his bowl and spoon still in his hands. Parno laid the old man down on his side, facing the fire, as Dhulyn pulled out her spare cloak to cover him.

"Do you think he knows?" she asked, tucking an extra fold of cloth under Horgath's cheek.

Parno straightened to his feet and tilted his head back. "The stars are only now clearly visible," he said. "According to them, we're here."

Dhulyn looked around her, frowning. "I don't like the idea of looking for a tomb among all these ruins. The man could be dead before we found it. What?"

Parno shrugged. "The man was a mage. These are Caid ruins. There were mages in the time of the Caid's, you know it as well as I do."

"And he said he remembered Genjar." Dhulyn straightened to her feet and looked down at the sleeping Scholar. The old man began to snore softly.

"Why don't I take the first watch," Parno said. "And you get out your tiles, maybe you can see something useful this time."

Dhulyn smoothed out a patch of dirt with the edge of her hand and covered it with a folded blanket before laying out her tiles, deciding to use the Sleeping God pattern she'd had on the table when Horgath first approached her. She turned the tiles face up one by one, all the while focussing on her questions.

• • •

SHE WALKS DOWN THE CENTRE OF A WIDE AVENUE, BUILDINGS TO EACH SIDE AND MORE BEHIND THEM, NONE SHORTER THAN THREE STOREYS, NONE TALLER THAN TEN. LIGHTS ON TALL POLES LINE ONE SIDE OF THE ROAD, CREATING REGULAR SHADOWS. THE VISION SHIVERS, AND FOR A MOMENT THE IMAGE BEFORE HER BECOMES TRANSPARENT, AND SHE SEES THE RUINS BENEATH, LIKE BONES UNDER THE SKIN. THE RUINS FADE, AND ONLY THE CITY REMAINS.

UNTIL SHE HEARS THE FOOTFALL, SHE HAS NOT NOTICED THE COMPLETE LACK OF SOUNDS. AS SHE TURNS, SHE DRAWS HER SWORD FROM THE SCABBARD ON HER BACK. IT IS HARD TO BE SURE, GIVEN THE ABSENCE OF ALL OTHER SOUNDS, BUT THE FOOTFALL SEEMS FAMILIAR. SO THE APPEARANCE OF PARNO FROM THE SIDE STREET SHE HAS JUST CROSSED SURPRISES BUT DOES NOT STARTLE HER. IT IS UNUSUAL FOR HIM TO APPEAR IN A VISION THAT DOES NOT DIRECTLY CONCERN HIM.

"DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE ASLEEP ON WATCH?"

"No, I'm not."

SHE DOES NOT DOUBT HIM. "TELL ME, WHAT DO *YOU* SEE?"

"A STREET IN A CAID CITY." PARNO EXAMINES THE FRONTS OF THE BUILDINGS WITH NARROWED EYES. "IF THIS IS A VISION..."

"WHICH OF US IS REALLY HERE, IF 'HERE' ACTUALLY EXISTS?" DHULYN SAYS.

"WELL, IT ISN'T THE STRANGEST PLACE WE'VE EVER BEEN."

"IN BATTLE."

"OR IN DEATH."

DHULYN HOLDS UP A FINGER. "LISTEN. A MOMENT AGO I HEARD NOTHING BUT YOUR FOOTSTEPS, AND NOW THERE IS WIND IN THE TREES, AND THE MOVEMENT OF WINGS, THE MURMUR OF WHAT MIGHT BE VOICES. IT IS ALMOST AS THOUGH THE LIFE OF THE CITY SURROUNDS US, UNSEEN BY US, AS WE APPEAR TO BE UNSEEN BY THEM."

"THERE'S THAT." PARNO POINTS UPWARD.

A LIGHT GLOWS FROM A WINDOW ON THE TOP FLOOR OF A FIVE STORY BUILDING ACROSS THE ROAD. AT PARNO'S SIGNAL DHULYN CROSSES OVER, STANDS TO ONE SIDE OF THE STREET DOOR AND EASES IT OPEN. AS SHE EXPECTED, IT MOVES SILENTLY, PERFECTLY FITTED AND BALANCED, LIKE ALL CAID WORK. ON THE LEFT OF A WIDE VESTIBULE TRIMMED IN GRANITE IS A STONE STAIRCASE WITH BANISTERS CARVED TO EASILY FIT THE HAND. THIS LEADS THEM UPWARDS, TOWARDS AN OPEN DOOR, AND A VOICE QUIETLY SINGING.

PARNO POINTS FIRST TO HIMSELF AND THEN AT THE CEILING. DHULYN CROUCHES DOWN TO THE LEFT OF THE DOOR AND THROUGH THE OPENING SHE SEES A YOUNG MAN COOKING A SKEWER OF MEAT OVER A SOFT PURPLE FLAME. HE GLANCES DIRECTLY AT HER AND SMILES BEFORE RETURNING HIS ATTENTION TO HIS COOKING.

"I HOPE YOU'VE EATEN. I'M AFRAID THIS IS ALL I HAVE. THERE'S PLENTY OF WINE THOUGH."

SHE HAS NEVER HEARD HIS VOICE BEFORE, BUT HIS SMILE, YES, THAT SHE HAS SEEN.

"YOU ARE HORGATH." SHE STRAIGHTENS AND PARNO FOLLOWS HER INTO THE ROOM.

"YOU WERE LOOKING FOR ME? HAVE WE MET?"

"WE HAVE NOT, BUT WE WILL." DHULYN GLANCES OUT THE WINDOW AT THE INTACT, SLEEPING CITY.

"INTERESTING." LIFTING HIS SKEWER AWAY FROM THE FLAME HE BLOWS ON THE MEAT. "ALL THE MORE SO SINCE YOU," HE POINTS THE SKEWER AT DHULYN, "ARE ACTUALLY HERE, THOUGH ONLY IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING, WHILE *HE* IS NOT. I CAN SEE THE LINES THAT BIND AND CONNECT YOU, AS IF YOUR AURAS WERE SEWN TOGETHER." THE YOUNG HORGATH TAKES A TENTATIVE BITE OF THE END PIECE OF MEAT AND DRAWS BACK ABRUPTLY, WAVING THE SKEWER IN THE AIR. "NOW TELL ME," HE SAYS IN THE TONE OF SOMEONE GENUINELY INTERESTED, "HOW AND WHY ARE YOU HERE?"

"I AM DHULYN WOLFSEAD, CALLED THE SCHOLAR, AND THIS IS MY PARTNER, PARNO LIONSMANE, CALLED THE CHANTER. WE ARE MERCENARY BROTHERS. I HAVE A SEER'S MARK, WHICH BROUGHT

THIS VISION YOU SHARE. I BELIEVE THE LIONSMANE IS HERE," SHE NODS AT PARNO, "BECAUSE OF THE CONNECTION YOU SEE. IT MAKES US PARTNERS, AND ON OCCASION ENABLES US TO OCCUPY THE SAME SPACE AND TIME, EVEN WHEN THAT SPACE AND TIME DOES NOT EXIST... IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING."

THE YOUNG MAGE HAS MANAGED TO BITE OFF THE FIRST CHUNK OF MEAT, CHEWS AND SWALLOWS. "I SEE. SORT OF. WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT THAT WE'RE ALLOWED TO PASS THE BOUNDS OF TIME AND SPACE? WHY GENJAR?"

"THE SCHOLAR HORGATH—YOU—WISHED TO RETURN AN ARTEFACT THAT WAS STOLEN FROM ITS PLACE IN THIS CITY."

HORGATH STOPS CHEWING, HIS FOOT STOPS SWINGING AND HIS HAND FREEZES WITH THE EMPTY SKEWER HALF-LOWERED TO THE PLATE. HE SWALLOWS. "WHAT ARTEFACT?"

"A BONE FLUTE," PARNO SAYS, "ABOUT THIS LONG, FIVE-HOLED —"

"HUMAN BONE? MAY I SEE IT?" THE MAGE PUTS OUT HIS HAND.

"YES," DHULYN SAYS. "AND NO. HORGATH THE SCHOLAR HOLDS IT."

THE YOUNG MAGE THRUSTS BOTH HANDS INTO HIS HAIR AND CLENCHES THEM, AS THOUGH TO HOLD HIS HEAD IN PLACE. DHULYN CAN SEE SIGNS OF THE OLD MAN HE WILL BECOME.

"THAT IDIOT. THAT MOLD-MINDED, GOOSE-BRAINED, MARROW-ROTTED—COME WITH ME."

DHULYN IS SURPRISED THAT THE YOUNG HORGATH LEADS THEM TO A STONE STAIRCASE CORKSCREWING ITS WAY INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE BUILDING. SHE HAD EXPECTED ONE OF THE LIFTS SHE REMEMBERS FROM OTHER VISIONS OF THE CAIDS. BUT FROM THE BEGINNING THERE HAS BEEN NOTHING NORMAL ABOUT THIS VISION.

"CAN YOU SEE BOTH THE FUTURE AND THE PAST?" YOUNG HORGATH'S VOICE ECHOES AGAINST THE STONES OF THE STAIRWELL.

"YES." DHULYN FROWNS. HER VOICE HAS NO ECHO. "THOUGH I CANNOT ALWAYS TELL WHICH IS WHICH."

"UHUH. WELL, ABOUT A MONTH AGO WE HAD TO KILL A MAGE CALLED—WELL, NEVER MIND HIS NAME. YOU MAY NOT KNOW THIS," HORGATH CONTINUES, "BUT THE HARD PART ISN'T KILLING THE MAGE, THE HARD PART'S KEEPING HIM DEAD."

"DON'T TELL ME," PARNO SAYS FROM A FEW STEPS ABOVE HER. "YOU CUT HIM TO PIECES."

"WE BUTCHERED HIM, YES." HIS VOICE NOW FLAT. "WE BROKE HIM, DRAINED HIS POWER, DILUTED HIS ESSENCE, BURNT HIM, DISPERSED HIS BONES."

"SO YOU'RE TELLING US YOU SENT THE PIECES AWAY, AS FAR FROM HERE AND FROM EACH OTHER AS THEY COULD GET?"

"EXACTLY."

DHULYN LOOKS OVER HER SHOULDER, CATCHES PARNO'S EYE AND ROLLS HERS UPWARD, CALLING ON FATHER MOON TO WITNESS THIS STUPIDITY. "WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE? WHY DOES IT NEVER OCCUR TO YOU THAT THE PIECES WILL COME TOGETHER AGAIN? IT'S IN ALL THE POEMS."

THEY REACH A LANDING, AS WIDE, AS CLEAN, AND AS WELL-LIT AS THE STAIRS. HORGATH LOOKS AT HER, A SLIGHT BLUSH ON HIS CHEEKS.

"WELL, THE INCANTATION DOES SAY NEVER TO COME TOGETHER FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS AND..." HIS VOICE DIES AWAY AT WHAT HE SEES ON DHULYN'S FACE. EVEN PARNO IS ROLLING HIS EYES.

"I KNOW, DON'T TELL ME, THE PERSON WHO WROTE THE INCANTATION WANTED IT TO RHYME, SO INSTEAD OF SAYING NEVER, EVER, OR EVEN 'UNTIL RAIN FALLS UPWARD' OR SOME OTHER NICE POETICAL

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"YES, WELL, I SEE THAT *NOW*, BUT," HE MOVES THE LATCH ON THE HEAVY DOOR AND SWINGS IT OPEN. "TELL ME WHAT—IF ANYTHING—YOUR SIGHT SHOWS YOU IN THIS ROOM."

DHULYN STILL HER BREATHING, USING THE HUNTERS *SHORA*. HER HEART RATES SLOWS. GRADUALLY, SO GRADUALLY THAT AT FIRST SHE THINKS IT IS DUST DISTURBED BY THEIR ENTERING THE ROOM, A SHAPE EMERGES, A LONG TABLE, A BODY, A SHEET HANGING DOWN TO THE FLOOR. THE IMAGE IS TRANSPARENT, SHE CAN SEE THE EMPTY ROOM THROUGH IT. THE BODY ON THE TABLE LIES ONE ARM ON TOP OF THE SHEET. THE OTHER IS COVERED.

SHE TELLS HORGATH WHAT SHE SEES. "THE PIECES ARE COLLECTING, AREN'T THEY?" SHE ASKS. HE OPENS SUDDENLY PALE LIPS BUT SAYS NOTHING.

"WHAT ARE THE ODDS WE'VE BROUGHT THE LAST PIECE NEEDED TO REVIVE THIS THING," PARNO SAYS.

HORGATH ADVANCES INTO THE ROOM. DHULYN STOPS HIM WITH THE FLAT OF HER SWORD, PREVENTING HIM FROM WALKING THROUGH AN IMAGE ONLY SHE CAN SEE.

"WHY WOULD YOU, OR AT LEAST YOUR FUTURE SELF, WANT TO RETURN THE BONE?" SHE DOES NOT TROUBLE TO DISGUISE HER SUSPICION.

"THE SUNSET MALADY," PARNO SAYS BEFORE THE YOUNG MAGE CAN ANSWER. "THE FUTURE HORGATH FINDS THE BONE FLUTE, REMEMBERS THAT SOMETHING IMPORTANT CONNECTS IT TO THIS PLACE, BUT NOT WHAT. HE DOES SOME RESEARCH, THEN, AS SCHOLARS DO, HE COMES TO A LOGICAL CONCLUSION THAT IT'S A RELIC NEEDING TO BE RETURNED TO ITS LAWFUL PLACE."

"DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE MAGIC IN THE BONE ITSELF," THE YOUNG MAGE SAYS. "THE PARTS WANT TO BE WHOLE AGAIN. IT MAY BE THAT VERY THING THAT HAS CLOUDED HIS—*MY* MENTAL PROCESSES."

"WE NEED TO DESTROY THAT BONE," DHULYN SAYS. "HOW?"

HORGATH SHOOK HIS HEAD, UPPER LIP BETWEEN HIS TEETH. "YOU CAN'T."

"BUT *YOU* CAN." DHULYN'S TONE MAKES IT CLEAR SHE IS NOT ASKING HIM.

HORGATH'S EYES ARE STILL FOCUSED AS IF HE COULD SEE THE TABLE, THE BODY. "IMPOSSIBLE," HE SAYS, SHAKING HIS HEAD. "AS I SAID, IT TOOK FIVE OF US TO OVERCOME HIM..."

"YOU'VE THOUGHT OF SOMETHING."

THE MAGE'S VOICE GROWS ANIMATED. "I WOULDN'T HAVE THE POWER TO DESTROY HIM BY MYSELF, BUT I DON'T HAVE TO. I JUST HAVE TO DESTROY ONE PIECE, THE BONE. SO WHEN YOU BRING IT BACK TO ME —"

"IF WE BRING IT BACK, YOU MEAN," PARNO SAYS. "WE DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW WE GOT HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE."

"YOU WILL HAVE TO COME WITH US," DHULYN SAYS. "YOU'RE A MAGE, FIGURE OUT A WAY." *ACT RESPONSIBLY FOR ONCE* SHE DOES NOT SAY ALOUD.

PARNO HOLDS UP HIS HAND. "WAIT, HOGARTH IS ALREADY THERE. IS IT POSSIBLE FOR BOTH OF THEM TO OCCUPY THE SAME SPACE AT THE SAME TIME?"

"I HAVE DONE IT."

"BUT THAT WAS IN A VISION!"

"AS THIS IS."

"AND THAT'S OUR ANSWER," HORGATH SAYS. "PARNO LIONSMANE IS HERE BECAUSE OF HIS CONNECTION WITH YOU. ALL I HAVE TO DO IS MAKE A CONNECTION OF MY OWN."

DHULYN SMILES HER WOLF'S SMILE AND THE YOUNG MAGE GRINS BACK AT HER. PARNO PUTS A STEADYING HAND ON HER FOREARM.

"NOT SO QUICKLY, MY SOUL. LET'S SEE WHAT HE PROPOSES."

"IF I CAN INSERT SOME OF MY AURA INTO THE SPACE WHERE YOURS OVERLAP, I SHOULD BE ABLE TO FOLLOW THAT LINK WHEREVER YOU GO."

DHULYN DRUMS HER FINGERS ON HER BELT. "CAN WE TRUST HIM?"

PARNO NARROWS HIS EYES AS HE CONSIDERS HER QUESTION. "THE OLD HORGATH IS A GOOD MAN, THIS IS JUST A YOUNGER VERSION OF THE PERSON WE KNOW."

"LET'S HOPE SO."

DHULYN JOINS HANDS WITH PARNO, SOMETHING SHE RARELY DOES IN THEIR NORMAL LIVES. HANDS ARE BEST KEPT FREE TO HOLD WEAPONS. HORGATH PLACED THE TIP OF HIS RIGHT INDEX FINGER ON DHULYN'S MERCENARY BADGE, THE TIP OF THE LEFT ON PARNO'S.

"READY," HE SAYS.

• • •

DHULYN blinked, and rolled immediately to her feet, dagger in one hand, knife in the other. Parno signalled to her from the other side of the clearing, making a sound so soft it could have been a bit of charcoal settling in the fire or a careless fox snapping a twig. Near to her left hand the young Horgath rose shakily from his knees, holding his head in his hands.

"Let's not do that again in a hurry."

"Dhulyn." Parno kicked at the old mage's bedroll. "Where's the old man?"

It was not until sunrise that they were able to find the old mage's footprints in the dust.

"I can't see anything on the ground," the young Horgath said. "But there is a residue of his aura in the air. Almost invisible. He must be very old."

Dhulyn looked off in the direction of the prints and did not answer.

Following the angle of her gaze, Parno frowned. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Horgath squinted his eyes against the light. "I don't see anything. I mean, really, there's nothing there," he said, a clear note of uncertainty in his voice. It must be more than strange, Parno thought, to see where your city ought to be, but was not.

"What lies in this direction, in your city?"

Horgath pressed his lips into a thin line.

"I was afraid of that."

Partly using the tracks, partly using Horgath's knowledge of the layout of the city—though he was occasionally led astray by the lack of any buildings or streets—they found themselves at a hollow where the ancient floor had collapsed, exposing the top of a stair case and leaving an opening big enough for a lean man.

"This is recent," Parno said examining clean edges of stone. "But look, a kick here, and here, will expand the opening enough for all of us."

As they descended past ground level Horgath snapped his fingers and a mage light hung over them.

Dhulyn compressed her lips. *Fine, mages are sometimes useful.* “I’ll lead,” she said. “Horgath, you follow, but stay off to my left, don’t block my light.” It gave her a tight feeling between the shoulder blades to have the mage walking behind her, but she didn’t want him to lead.

At first broken and crumbling, the stairs began to improve after the second landing. They followed the old scholar down, and down, the stone and the air around them growing colder and colder, until they finally reached bottom. There was just enough dust to mark the old man’s path.

“We’ve descended too far,” Horgath said. “We must be in the wrong place.”

“We are further from the surface than in your day,” agreed Dhulyn, ignoring the insult to her tracking skills. Mercenary Brothers who did not have an acute sense of space tended not to live through their schooling. “But then, the surface is not where it was.”

Once more Dhulyn regulated her breathing, letting herself fall into the Hunter’s *Shora*. Her sight and her hearing focused, and she felt the force of the mage light against her skin. A regular torch would have burnt out by now, but the flame Horgath had made did not even flicker. The air grew colder still until she expected to see frost on the surface of the dressed stone that made up the walls. Finally they entered the last chamber.

The old mage lay on his side on the floor, as if he had simply fallen asleep after his long walk. Standing over him, looking down at him, was the translucent image of a skeleton. The skull turned toward her, and Dhulyn would have sworn that its grin was deliberate.

“Demons and perverts,” breathed Parno. So this time, at least, she was not the only one to see this.

The young Horgath cleared his throat. “Look at the forearm.”

Dhulyn hadn’t needed this instruction to see that the skeleton was whole. At her signal Parno bounded forward, sword raised, but while he was still in the air, the skeleton turned sideways, and seemed to disappear.

Then the old man’s body on the floor stirred. It was still Horgath the elder, there was still only so much strength in the old muscles, but it pushed itself to its feet much more easily than the old man would have done. It turned to look at her, and every sound in the room died away as if she had suddenly gone deaf.

“I know you, don’t I, my dear?” she read from his lips. The old man smiled, and it was a smile she had never seen on this face before. Again the lips moved, and this time she read the words “This body is too old. I waste my energies.”

While its eyes were still focussed on her, Parno had moved quickly behind it, and thrust his sword through the body. Dhulyn saw the young mage’s lips move, but she could not read what he said from this angle.

Suddenly the old man grabbed the blade in his left hand, and though the flesh was cut, the bones still had strength. It should have been impossible, but he twisted, and took Parno’s wrist in his right hand. The smile Dhulyn had never seen on the old man’s face transferred itself to Parno’s. Sound rushed back into the room.

“Dhulyn!” Horgath called out, but she hadn’t waited for the warning. As the body slipped off the end of Parno’s lowered sword, her Partner turned to her.

“Crag Leap.” She used the tone a teacher uses to call students to attention, and as she hoped Parno’s body immediately responded. She launched herself from her left foot, drawing up her right knee as she leapt. Parno stepped back just enough to clear the space between them and brought up his own sword to parry her strike. She instantly leapt to one side, out of his reach, and called out the next move. His eyes were uncertain, his body reacted by reflex.

She hoped to confuse and even drive out the ancient mage before he could consolidate his hold on Parno’s body. This was the Mountain Sheep *Shora*, developed to be used on uneven ground, or indoors, where furniture could be brought into play. The seventeen individual moves that made up the *shora* included abrupt changes in direction, lateral movements, leaps of varying heights. In using it in a place inappropriate for it, and varying the order of the moves, Dhulyn hoped to force Parno to concentrate on the *shora* itself, to think, and remember his schooling.

Slowly, as his body enacted each move, Parno’s answering parries and attacks became more precise, smoother, more like her Partner, and less like someone wearing her Partner’s body. Dhulyn had lost count of the number of times they had repeated the *shora* before Parno’s eyes cleared, and his smile became his own.

“Quick, cut off his arm,” Horgath said. “Dismember the ancient one again—your friend can be healed.”

Dhulyn hesitated. Horgath, no matter his age, had never called Parno her friend.

“In battle,” she said finally. At first he said nothing in reply, and her heart sank. Then he shook his head, roughly, like a ram shaking away the effects of a head butting.

“Or in death,” he replied. Dhulyn almost relaxed, the relief was so great. The ancient mage had been dust long before any Mercenary Brother had spoken those words. Still, if it had disappeared from Parno, where had it gone?

Horgath, suddenly much nearer to them, reached out a finger to touch Dhulyn’s Mercenary Badge. She dodged, and the mage leaned too far, brought off balance by her unexpected movement. Before he could regain his balance Parno brought his sword down, cutting off Horgath’s arm at the elbow.

The limb fell, but instead of the familiar meaty sound of an arm hitting the ground, the bone flute clattered to the stone floor.

“Play it, quickly.” The young mage spoke through gritted teeth, his hand clamped around the bleeding stump of his arm. “Make it just a flute again.”

Parno snatched up the flute and began to play a simple tune. Dhulyn pulled a beaded thong of knotted leather from her hair, knelt beside Horgath and made a tourniquet on his upper arm. He grabbed her wrist with his remaining hand as though the contact comforted him.

“This won’t last, we must get you to a Healer.” Even though the arm couldn’t be regrown a Healer could at least stop the bleeding without further damage.

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"Dhulyn, he's only got one arm."

"I know." Dhulyn glanced quickly at the body of the older Horgath. The two-armed one.

"He has to have two arms," Parno said. "He had two arms when he hired us."

"My heart, *I know*." Had they tampered with the past in a way which would destroy their present?

"I have to go back." The young mage's breathing steadied. "Fix this."

"You can regrow the arm?" Dhulyn lifted the man to his feet.

"Not just that." Now his grip on her arm help keep him on his feet. "I've got to be there, *then*, otherwise how can we be here, *now*?"

Parno looked from Horgath to the flute and back again. "Can you prevent any of this from happening in the first place? Change the incantation?"

Horgath moved his head from side to side once. "Would be simpler," he said. "But can't be two of me at once." He dragged in a breath. "I'll go back to the moment just after we left, make sure to start this future." He began to sag and Dhulyn and wrapped her arm around his waist. "Always wanted to be a Scholar." His attempt at a smile made Parno grimace.

"We know you were successful because we're here now," he pointed out.

Horgath's nod led to closed eyes, and leaning against Dhulyn he said, "Put the flute in my good hand while it's still just a flute." Once his fingers had closed on the instrument Horgath squeezed his eyes tighter shut and grimaced. At first nothing happened, then the flute flared into a bright purple flame, and Parno smelled the unmistakable odour of burning bone.

As if this bit of magic had drained his last strength, his knees gave under him and Dhulyn braced herself to keep him from the floor.

"Now," Horgath said, his voice the thread of a whisper. "Now."

Dhulyn gathered him more securely into her arms. "Whistle," she said to Parno, closing her eyes. "The Sleeping God tune."

Parno rarely played the tune that had once called the Sleeping God into existence, but it was simple, repetitive, and he knew it would help Dhulyn fall into a trance. There were seven verses in the most common version of the song and Parno sang them to himself as he whistled. When he reached the end, and began the sequence again, Dhulyn began to sway slightly to the tune. Horgath drew in a ragged gasp of air and Dhulyn shifted her feet. Parno started a third repetition of the song and his mouth began to feel dry.

...

SHE STANDS LEANING AGAINST A STONE WALL, HER ARMS AROUND A MAN DRIPPING BLOOD ON A TILED LANDING. SLOWLY. SHE FEELS DIZZY, AND SHAKES HER HEAD TO CLEAR IT.

"Go," SAYS THE MAN IN HER ARMS. "IT'S DANGEROUS FOR YOU TO STAY HERE."

"HOW AM I HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE?" SHE ASKS.

"I DID IT. I WILL DO IT. NEVER MIND. I WON'T REMEMBER, BUT I'LL TAKE CARE OF IT NOW." HE TRIES TO PUSH HER AWAY, BUT SHE BARELY FEELS THE PRESSURE OF HIS HAND.

"I'LL TAKE YOU UP TO YOUR WORKROOM."

HE LEANS ON HER HEAVILY AS SHE WALKS HIM UP THE STAIRS. THE WIDTH OF THE RISERS MAKES IT A LITTLE EASIER. THEY STOP WHEN THEY REACH HIS DOOR.

"THIS IS GOOD," HE SAYS. "YOU CAN LEAVE ME HERE."

"I'LL TAKE YOU IN," SHE SAYS.

"NO. YOU HEAR THOSE VOICES? THAT'S US, EARLIER, TALKING THINGS OVER. I'LL WAIT UNTIL WE GO, WE'VE GONE, WHATEVER." HE SHIVERS. "FIX MY ARM, SET EVERYTHING IN MOTION. TOO BAD I WON'T KNOW YOU WHEN I SEE YOU AGAIN," HE SAYS, "BUT TRUST ME, I'LL BE HAPPY TO SEE YOU. NOW GO."

"SUN, MOON AND STARS GO WITH YOU, HORGATH THE SCHOLAR."

...

SUDDENLY Dhulyn's arms were empty and Parno jumped to catch her before she went down.

"Well?" he said, his hands still on her waist.

"Well," she agreed. "I left him standing outside the door to his workroom. I could hear our voices inside."

"Wouldn't be the first time." Parno's grin was more than half relief. "What do you think happened?" He felt her shrug.

"We're here, aren't we? He'll have waited until his two-armed self left with us and then he'd had regrown his arm." She moved her right hand in slow forward circles. "Then he'd have quit being a mage and become a Scholar. And waited for the bone flute to turn up."

"You sure everything's all right?"

She raised her right eyebrow. "Can you loosen your grip? My hatchet is digging into my ribs."

Parno moved his hands, but his Partner kept a firm hold of his forearm. "What do we do about him?" He indicated the body of the old mage with a tilt of his head.

Still holding his arm Dhulyn crouched down next to the body. "Leave him here, I should think. We couldn't bury him any deeper than this." She touched the fingers of her free hand to her forehead in salute. "It's too bad, really. He's the only mage I ever liked."

"Come on," Parno said, nodding. "Let's get out of this place."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Violette Malan is the author of the Dhulyn and Parno sword-and-sorcery series and *The Mirror Lands* series of primary world fantasies. As VM Escalada, she's the author of the Farman Prophecy, including *Halls of Law*, and *Gift of Griffins*. She's on Facebook, she's on Twitter (@Violette Malan) and website-wise check either www.violetemalan.com or www.vmescalada.com. Not that it's up-to-date, because it isn't. She strongly urges you to remember that no one expects the Spanish Inquisition.

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DREAMS OF A SUNKEN REALM

An Elak of Atlantis Tale

By **ADRIAN COLE**

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ELAK

Henry Kuttner's Elak was first published in 1938 in *Weird Tales Magazine* in the story "Thunder in the Dawn." Subsequently three more Kuttner Elaks saw print in the magazine, before he moved on to other things, becoming a leading SF writer of his time. These four stories are due to be reprinted soon by Pulp Hero Press (US) and deal with Elak's youth as a young prince in one of Atlantis's kingdoms.

The first series of new Elak stories by Adrian Cole, *Elak, King of Atlantis* (published by Pulp Hero Press), takes up the saga after he has won the throne of the whole Atlantean continent. In the meantime, Cole is writing further new stories, set between the two periods, of which *Dreams of a Sunken Realm* is one.

In this adventure, Elak is returning to his capital, Epharra, from his victorious unification campaign in the far south, to claim the overall throne, but his voyage is not to be as straightforward as planned.

CHAPTER 1: CREATURES OF THE SEA STORM

“W E’RE veering well off course,” said Dalan the Druid, standing beside the tall warrior at the ship’s rail. “Something is pulling us north and east, well away from the coast. We should have been in sight of Cyrena’s headlands by now.”

“Is there a storm brewing?” said Elak, the young king, his keen eyes scanning the horizons. “The air seems calm enough.” Clouds drifted over the gently heaving ocean, but there was nothing in them to suggest a break in the weather for the worse.

Dalan scowled, and although he rarely smiled, Elak sensed there was more to his unease than he let on. The Druid’s supernatural senses had forewarned the crew of *Windrider* more than once on this return journey from the far southern shores of the Atlantean continent. Not so many days before Elak and his sailors had averted disaster rounding the notorious Cape of Blood, encountering demonic forces that had almost destroyed them all. He’d hoped their tribulations lay behind them on their run back to Cyrena’s capital, Epharra. Now Elak was not so sure.

“I cannot bring us about,” said Dalan. “The currents of the ocean and its strange tides are too much for my powers. And there is something else, down in those vast depths, something that disturbs me.” Elak thought of the creatures and entities that he and his crew had fought on the long voyage back from the city of Zangarza. Monstrous demi-gods, spawn of other worlds, and servants of old deities from beyond the dimensions of earthly time and space. Perhaps whatever drove these horrors, if such an omniscient power existed, may yet unleash its frustration and fury on the young king. Did it see his ascendancy to the Atlantean crown as a danger to its existence?

“Darkness yet seeks to draw us in,” said Dalan. “We must prepare to defend ourselves.”

He had hardly finished speaking when the lookout shouted from overhead. A sudden gust of wind swept his words away, but Elak and Dalan understood the shout as a cry of alarm. Dalan leaned out over the rail and studied the racing rise and fall of the waves as they grew increasingly powerful, lifting and dropping the ship more erratically by the minute. Elak’s concern about a storm was even more well founded, it seemed. Dalan pointed.

“There!” he cried above another swirling gust of wind.

Elak craned his neck and thought he discerned something in the waves, a number of darting shapes, rising and falling like dolphins at play. Though these were no dolphins. They had faces, blurred in the foam and spray, semi-human faces.

“Water demons!” Dalan gasped.

Another man had come to the prow to stand beside them. It was Lycon, the king’s stocky protector, his face clouded with deep unease. He drew his blade, glaring over the ship’s dipping side. “They’re all around us,” he said. “Circling like underwater vultures.”

Elak turned to the Druid. “What are they? Who has sent them? Could they be minions of Xeraph-Hizer?” he added, referring to the monstrous creature of the ocean depths which they had thwarted at the Cape of Blood.

“I have not seen their like before,” said Dalan. “Though there have been many sightings and legends of similar creatures. Some call them the ghosts of long sunken cities, or sailors drowned by the wild elements of the northern currents.” He raised his staff—its tip glowed brilliantly before projecting a tightly focused lance of light out into the turgid seas. The circling creatures veered from the intense white glow, which revealed their astonishing numbers. They had formed a closely linked living shoal, surrounding the ship, beyond the range of arrows or javelins.

Balazaar, captain of *Windrider*, joined the group. "Our look-out reports that we are completely surrounded by these horrors," he said. "We are at the center of a whirlpool, and it's increasing in size."

Lycon growled with anger. "I can feel the ship turning steadily into its embrace! The creatures are churning the seas with their dark powers."

"Aye," said Balazaar, mirroring the growing fear of the others. "The crew are fighting hard against them, but are making no headway. See! There is a low point in the center of the vortex and we are veering towards it."

"And the fleet?" said Elak. "I cannot see any of our other ships."

"We've been cut off from them," said Balazaar. "I fear whatever devils are at work here have singled us out. If this whirlpool deepens and grows even more powerful, we'll be sucked down into the ocean's depths."

"Use all the oars!" shouted Elak above the growing din. "Fight the pull! Dalan, can you conjure a wind to counter the waters?"

The Druid cursed and shook his head. "A greater force is at work here." Nevertheless, he raised his staff higher, calling out in a strange language that Elak and his companions had heard whenever Dalan invoked the extraordinary power of the staff, a magic from a remote, forgotten age. This time when light speared out at the tossing waves, the sea burst upwards in sprays of foam, as though shuddering against a line of reefs. Those uncanny, man-faced dolphins were tossed to and from among the flume like so many chunks of flotsam, but the turbulent swirl was not broken.

Balazaar had his oarsmen bent double with efforts to pull *Windrider* from the center of the whirlpool and by their superhuman efforts they reached its edge, where Elak saw the massed water beings swimming in a lightning blur along the crest of the swirling chaos. *Windrider* rose up, climbing a huge bank of water, and again Dalan flung bolts of light in an attempt to break through the encircling waters.

Yet it remained a hopeless task. The rowers struggled mightily but could not compete and the ship was drawn inexorably to the center. Round and round the craft circled, and as it did so, the whirlpool opened its maw, its sides closing in, the circular well like a long gut running far down towards the invisible oceanic floor. Elak could only watch in impotent fury as the ship plunged into oblivion.

CHAPTER 2: INTO THE VORTEX

THE roaring of the ocean grew almost deafening, and darkness welled up from below as the inner rim of the spinning water walls carried *Windrider* swirling downwards. The waters resembled a huge column stretching towards distant daylight, filled with countless aquatic faces, quasi-human but contorted into bestial snarls, lamprey-like mouths gaping or snapping.

Elak and his companions drew back from the rail, though the creatures showed no sign of darting inwards and attacking. It was enough that they massed in the whirlpool's thundering sea.

"We'll be drowned!" shouted Lycon above the din, gripping his sword helplessly, frustrated at not having a physical enemy to assail.

"Whatever has brought us here," said Dalan, "has not done so to kill us, not in this vortex. We are being taken below for a reason."

"To be sacrificed, no doubt," retorted Lycon.

Elak laughed bitterly. "One thing is for sure, my friend—we're not being invited to a drinking festival!"

Darkness closed in overhead and the roar of the waters eased. The ship and its crew appeared to be encased in a bubble of air that preserved them from a watery doom. Under the hull, far below, the shadows were slowly dispersed by glittering emerald light.

"Which of the Nine Hells are we entering?" Lycon growled.

"There is no doubt that sorcery is at play," said Dalan. "Terrible powers have been set loose." He used his staff's beacon-like light to probe the deeps, but as yet the ocean floor did not reveal itself. Giant shapes crossed below the ship as it twisted its way ever downwards, huge leviathans from a long lost age of the world, denizens of the primeval oceans that seemed to be castaways in time. As the gloom thickened, *Windrider's* swirling speed slowed, and its crew now massed around its rails, watching the deeps for any sign of the ocean bed. At last they reached it and the ship settled, surprisingly gently, as if set in the layer of ooze by a god-like hand.

Elak looked up to see the waters closing in, sealing them into this weird underwater domain. And then, as though an invisible glass dome had been drawn over them, the sea pulled away like a receding tide. Lights flashed and throbbed, and the leering faces that had massed in the seas dissipated like ghosts. Slowly an intense silence gripped the sodden landscape that had been revealed. It was like no other that Elak or his companions had ever seen.

The sea bed undulated, dipping and rising into the distance. It was covered in high banks of coral and other more unusual growths, mostly green-hued or aquamarine, fronds of weed trailing in the air as if they yet danced in water. Dalan's staff provided immediate light, although the landscape was imbued with bizarre illumination of its own, and by its eerie shades, shapes could be glimpsed, some small, some much larger, slithering or hopping away from the human intruders. The bed was primarily mud and ooze, though not deep, suggesting the ship had come to rest on an expanse of bedrock. Broken slabs led away from it like paths in a zig-zag pattern.

Elak's company gathered around him, all of the men warily scanning the distance. They were the young king's most trusted warriors, sworn to serve him to the death if it came to it and more than once on this chaotic voyage they had proved their worth. Elak was about to comment, when a distant sound caught everyone's attention. It was a horn of some kind, possibly a sea conch, its one, long note rolling out mournfully over the broken plain.

"Something approaches," said Dalan, his mind attuned to the slightest intrusion in the atmosphere here.

The company formed a defensive wedge, backing on to the hull of the ship, every man armed. Lycon growled like an angry bear, eager to unleash his frustrations on something. A battle would be more than welcome. Elak gripped his arm, restraining his burly friend. Lycon could hardly suppress a grin: there had

been a time when Elak would have been even more eager than him for conflict, and no one was more fearless and valorous in battle than the young king. But time was refining him, preparing him, if he survived, for a more subtle life.

From beyond the nearest ridge of undersea outcrops, a group of figures broke silently from the shadows. There were three of them, human in shape, wearing what first appeared to be long cloak-like garments, but as they drew near—apparently floating over the broken slabs—their upper garments could be seen to be thick masses of hair, or more accurately, weed. They were creatures of the sea, undoubtedly human to an extent, but with wide, rounded eyes and long arms with webbed fingers, possibly used for swimming. Indeed, the creatures gleamed as if they had stepped from water, probably being amphibious. They did not appear to be armed.

They came to within a dozen yards of the Atlanteans and hovered, their lower bodies hidden in more of the strange weed.

Dalan stepped forward, waiting. He felt a sudden buzzing inside his head, as if it had been entered, possibly probed. He gripped his staff more tightly.

There is no need to fear us, came a deep whisper in his mind. We are alien to you, of course, and we sense your fear. But we mean you no harm.

Dalan inclined his head in a gentle bow. “Who are you?” he said.

We are the last of those who ruled here. Our race is almost gone from this world. And this is our final retreat. We offer you a gift, a chance to survive the terror that comes.

CHAPTER 3: THE PALACE OF WONDERS

ELAK and the company followed the three strange shapes across the tumbled sea bed, all of them alert and wary. Around them in the silence, small transparent organisms floated like snowflakes, singly or in clouds, hovering out of reach, as if drawn to them but too nervous to approach. Their bodies glowed, pulsing like organs, throwing an even more bizarre radiance over the underwater realm. Some distance from *Windrider*, the three beings guiding them halted on a crest of bedrock, with a sweep of their hands indicating to Elak and his companions the grandeur below.

The young prince gasped as he studied the slope that fell away, a huge, curving dish-like depression. Its steep sides, seemingly sculpted out of the sea bottom by volcanic activity, a giant undersea honeycomb, riddled with caves that gaped like vast windows. Deeper down in the dizzying chasm, partially obscured in shadows, there were unmistakable buildings, houses and larger structures that could only be a city, one that had once existed above the waves. Dalan lifted his staff and its now vivid light threw more areas of the city into perspective. Thick strands of weed partially covered many of the buildings and coral sculptures topped others, as if an aquatic god had lingered here, working his artistry. Shoals of multi-hued fish, drifted in and out of the buildings, although they swam in air, not water.

The whisper in Dalan’s mind returned. *This is our last citadel.* The Druid imparted the words to Elak and the others. *Once it was a proud mistress of the northern shores of this realm, un-*

til at last the terrible magics of our enemies drove us into the deeps, where we have waited through the ages. We must hasten to the palace. Already the darkness gathers beyond our protective barriers.

The words had hardly been uttered when Elak noticed movement outside the invisible force above them, where the blackness of the northern ocean’s depths curdled, deep and infinite as the space between stars. Within it vast shapes shifted as if in preparation for an assault on the sanctuary, an unfurling of monstrous coils, about to wrap themselves around their victims, squeezing and pulping this eerie haven. However, the forces set in place by the inhabitants held and the party moved on into the first of the city streets. The walls loomed around it, huge fists of stone, many broken and collapsed, ruined beyond repair. Elak saw among them the shattered hulks of ships from the upper world that had come to grief here, wrecked and lost forever. He wondered what ghosts were trapped among their wooden bones.

The road into the city was partially choked with fallen masonry, once proud, soaring towers, architectural marvels to rival the glories of today’s Atlantis, but long since overgrown. Here the sea life would inevitably drag the last of the edifices down and smooth them over, returning the remnants of human occupation to the leveled sea bed, all trace of them obliterated, all memory of them dissipated. Elak felt a pang of melancholy as it occurred to him that his own world and its splendid cities would doubtless slide down the same road to oblivion eventually. He , pushed the grim thoughts aside.

At last they came to a wider area, possibly what had been a plaza. Its floor was sunken in places, its great slabs broken and jutting, so the party had to pick its way carefully through them until it reached a wide, low building, topped with a smooth dome. This gleamed as though sunlight reached down from the distant sky, and nothing grew upon it, its surface possessing a mystic quality that preserved it from the intrusion of aquatic life.

Elak and Lycon exchanged a knowing glance, both keenly aware that a powerful sorcery lay behind this and all the other marvels they had seen in this sunken realm.

Shadows yet masked the face of the leader of the three guides, though his eyes gleamed therein. *Our palace, where our ruler sits in waiting.*

Dalan paused, taking a final look around him at the twisted buildings, with their clustered towers and minarets, their trailing growths and black, featureless windows. He nodded to Elak and the company climbed the wide steps. Crabs and other small creatures scuttled aside at their passing until they reached the columns on either side of the tall portal into the palace. The Atlanteans were well armed and made no attempt to sheath or hide their weapons, but their guides simply drifted on through the doorway into the interior.

Within, an amazing site greeted Elak and his companions. The palace had somehow been preserved in all its splendor. The mosaic floor, depicting wonderful scenes of the city as it must once have been, stretched across the open area for many yards, and golden statues lined the walls, warriors and beasts intermingled, the workmanship of the artisans dazzling to the eye. On the walls themselves, rich tapestries and murals were spread like vast windows on a world of the past, scenes of battling armies

fiery chariots racing across sunlit skies. Where the ocean had been painted, the waters teemed with color and life, strange beings rising up from waves that could almost have been real, so brilliantly had they been depicted.

There were great golden bowls, where hot coals burned, the scent of incense strong, wisps of smoke curling up into the vaulted dome like phantoms. Yet in all this sumptuous majesty, no one stirred. There were no soldiers, not even guards, no priests, no populace of any kind. It was though everyone had abruptly abandoned this wondrous place in a moment. Lycon was about to comment on this when something moved in the shadows to one side of the great chamber.

Slowly a new form materialized, a huge figure, very broad, with a massive head, wreathed in thick tangles of jet black hair. The man had no neck. His muscular girth was that of three men, garbed in a white robe woven with golden sigils. His eyes were sunken in that immense face, and they gazed upon the visitors eagerly, though the edges of the man's mouth turned down, almost in a grimace, perhaps of some inner pain.

"You are welcome, Prince of Atlantis, who will be king hereafter. I am Amun Thuul, last sorcerer-king of Valusia. I have been waiting for you. You are the final hope of the world we know."

CHAPTER 4: THE SORCERER-KING SPEAKS

AMUN Thuul moved from the shadows beneath the thick pillars of the palace as softly as a ghost, his long robe trailing behind him, hiding his vast lower body and legs, so that he seemed to glide, hardly disturbing the dust in his abandoned surroundings. There was a raised, wide throne close by and he sat upon it, his huge jaw resting on his chest as he looked down on the Atlanteans, a deep sadness etched on his features.

Elak bowed. "Well met, o king, although the circumstances are strange indeed. Was it your sorcery that brought us here?"

"What is left of it, yes. Once my people had immense power. I will show some of its past glories to you. Today that wondrous nation is gone, sucked into the ocean deeps, and all that is left of that power resides in me, waning with each passing moment." He raised a wide sleeve and a huge hand slid from within and indicated the nearest wall, on which one of the immense tapestries hung. Strangely it was immaculate, free of the dust of time, its colors vivid, its thick material perfectly preserved.

"Behold!" said Amun Thuul. "The wondrous golden city, where the greatest of our kings ruled his empire under his tiger banner. From here his royal Slayers went forth to subjugate the lands around them, and even our fiercest rivals lived in awe of our power!"

Elak and his companions studied the tapestry and its fabulous detail, which depicted a magnificent city, even more splendid and spectacular than Epharra, Elak's capital. Its towers rose impossibly high, as if they could reach the very stars, its roofs gleamed with gold and precious stones, its temples and palaces spoke of incomparable power and beauty. Fabulous statues rose up in gigantic form, warriors, gods and creatures from the long-lost legends of the ages.

Dalan spoke softly to Elak. "This is a city from time on the very edge of living memory. A time of dreams, of forgotten mysteries."

"Atlantis was a majestic empire long before your own small continent rose to power," said Amun Thuul, as though he had heard Dalan's comment. "Yet man is proud and arrogant, and the gods are unforgiving, as you shall see."

The sorcerer-king waved his arm and as the Atlanteans watched the tapestry, it trembled, as though either disturbed by a strong breeze, or it had shifted like the surface of a lake, rippling so that crystal clear sounds could be heard from the myriad streets of the city, both near and far. Beyond its walls, the sea gleamed, sparkling and rising up. Elak could hear the sound of many voices, and beyond the city there was a roar, a surging sound, waves pounding. His men gasped in unison as the tapestry became a live window on the past, where momentous events were unfolding.

"In the eastern ocean, between the continent of Thuria and the Lemurian Islands, the terrible gods of the ocean, monstrous beings that had slept in their deep beds for millennia, woke and stretched their powers, powers that eclipsed those of man as man's eclipsed that of the lesser creatures of the world. The Old Powers fought each other, vying for dominion of the world, and in their colossal struggles, the ocean boiled." Amun Thuul again pointed to the tapestry and beyond the city, which now seethed with thousands of citizens. Huge waves rose up, blotting out the sky, streamers of white foam flying from their crests like supernatural armies.

Elak and his companions watched in horror as the first wave exploded and cascaded over the great buildings of the city. Palaces and temples erupted, smitten by the almighty power of the wave and countless citizens were snatched up and swept away like so many ants in a flood. The noise had become deafening, the walls of Amun Thuul's palace echoing to that shuddering thunder. Another colossal wave rose and fell, crashing down upon the city, flooding every street, every passage, so that Elak and the others drew back, afraid that they, too, would be inundated.

"This was the Cataclysm," said Thuul, his deep voice rising above the boom of destruction. Yet the catastrophe was contained within the tapestry, where the picture soon changed, the water rising ever upwards, dragging down even the loftiest of the towers, leveling every last stone of the capital. "The whole of the Lemurian Islands in the east sank below the waves. Thuria tilted like an immense slab, Grondar in its east plunged into the deeps, lost like Lemuria. Valusia, too, was sucked below, as you can see. A few islands remained. And mighty Atlantis, the forerunner of your own, smaller continent, was inundated, reduced to a crippled, broken parody of its former glory. Far to the western ocean, the Pictish Isles were swamped, but not destroyed. The waters heaved them up and in time their people thrived anew.

"And as time slowly and inexorably re-shaped the world, Atlantis grew again, to what it has become today. Our kingdom, though, was lost. All that remained of our once mighty nation was a small brotherhood of sorcerers, barely able to sustain the survivors here in this forgotten aquatic realm. Now not one of my people remains, and what you see here are merely ghosts, pale shades of what they once were., "

Dalan's face was grim, as though what he had witnessed on the tapestry had long since been a vision from his own personal nightmares. "Tell me, what of the gods that caused the Cataclysm?"

Amun Thuul's face was equally as distraught as Dalan's. "Their efforts cost them dear, and some were destroyed in the culmination of their undersea war. Time means nothing to them. They sleep for millennia, but it is no more than that—sleep, a pause between the renewed fury of their ambitions. And soon they will awaken once more. Your Atlantis, and all its present world, will face their cosmic powers. They will not rest until they have dragged you all beneath the waves!"

CHAPTER 5: SORCERY FROM BEYOND TIME

AMUN Thuul sat back on his throne, arms resting on its sides, his manner one of deep sadness. The great mural was still once more, and its original picture had changed. Now it gave a view of unbroken ocean, waves frozen in movement across the horizon, static foam, dips and swells, but nothing floating there to suggest that a once proud city had been engulfed by the deluge, and no passing ships to observe the flood, or survive it.

"All that is left of this city's sorcery rests within me," said Amun Thuul. "Even the retainers I sent to fetch you were projections of my power. I am alone, but what I have is yours."

Dalan turned from the disturbing seascape. "We have faced the terrors of the deeps already. The sea god, Xeraph-Hizer, the Leviathan Lord, rose up and sought to destroy the southern kingdom of Zangarza. We prevailed. And we thwarted the ambitions of Araccneris, the evil queen of the undersea world, his servant."

"I know of these things. As I know of Xeraph-Hizer's fury. Even now he gathers a new army to send out against Atlantis and your lands of Cyrena. Epharra will suffer the watery fate that drowned my world unless you drive the horrors from the ocean back into oblivion. I have a gift that will help you, for I would see these evil gods wiped from this world, if it can be done."

Dalan felt the marbled floor beneath him shudder like the flank of an immense beast and he stepped back, lifting his staff. Its globular end began to glow as two slabs slid aside. From the revealed darkness, a stone menhir rose like a stripped tree trunk, its surface completely covered in pictographic drawings, etched into the stone in what seemed to be a frenzied effort by whoever had sculpted it. The sigils and strange designs began to glow, pulsing, and Dalan could feel his staff humming in harmony with the risen stone. Presently light crackled between the two and Dalan jolted as fresh energies surged down his staff into his body.

The top of the stone, some eight feet from the ground, opened like a flower, revealing a large jewel, a ruby the size of a watermelon, glowing a deep crimson, which also pulsed, like a living organ. More power swirled within its dazzling depths, a livid and disturbing essence, almost a live thing.

"All that I am, and all that I carry within me, the last magic of this city, is contained within that jewel," said Amun Thuul. "It is my heart. You must take it, Druid. Let your staff absorb it. When you have done that, you must hasten to the royal armory. Elak

and the warriors must arm themselves and each sword must be blessed with the ancient powers. Such weapons will give you all hope to defy the dark armies of Xeraph-Hizer and his dreadful brotherhood."

Dalan hesitated briefly, although he sensed through the transferred powers already running through his veins that Amun Thuul could be trusted. The sorcerer-king's fervid hatred of the dark ocean gods was a palpable thing, livid as pain. The Druid stepped forward and lifted his staff again, touching it to the surface of the crimson jewel. At once it crackled and blazed with bright light.

Elak gasped as Dalan was bathed in crimson, the king momentarily afraid that his companion was in grave danger of his life, but Dalan's face was resolved, his features curved into a mask of determination as he rode the storm of power. On the great throne, the figure of Amun Thuul shuddered, the huge head flung back as the sorcerer-king gave vent to a loud shout, a cry of either exultation or agony. Then the shape slumped down.

Elak ran to him, but already the unleashed power of the stone had taken its frightful course. Not only was Amun Thuul beyond aid, but his corporeal form was shrinking, rapidly mummifying, as if its defiance of the ages was not only over, but reversed. Soon the robe flattened out, covering little more than shrunken bones, and the great head had become a skull, crumbling as Elak watched in horror.

Dalan staggered back, breaking the contact with the crimson stone, which continued to glow, but with gradual declining energy. The Druid turned to Lycon. "Take the jewel. We must carry it with us and keep it safe."

Lycon sheathed his sword and clambered up the side of the menhir, using the chiseled glyphs as footholds. Above him the jewel had contracted, now no bigger than an orange, its bright color dimming. Lycon reached out cautiously and touched the jewel, but felt only a subtle warmth. He snatched it up and slipped it inside his tunic, returning to Dalan's side. Elak also joined them.

"The armory," said the king. "Where is it?"

Dalan seemed to use some sixth sense, like a hound searching for its prey. He pointed to one of the doorways out of the palace. "There," he said. "Follow the corridors."

The company did so, but as the Atlanteans made their way down a long, high passageway, lit by concealed torches, they could hear distant sounds, a roaring, like the renewed fury of the ocean, deep currents and tides pummeling the walls of this retreat, striving to shatter whatever magics Amun Thuul had set in place to preserve it. Time was running out quickly.

CHAPTER 6: CRIMSON STEEL

THEY reached an intersection, where several tunnels ran off from a circular chamber with a low ceiling, and for a moment the Atlanteans were nonplussed, unsure which of the corridors to take. As they stood close together, weapons drawn in expectation of conflict, they heard what sounded like the susurration of the tide, as if it were coming along the tunnels from the darkness beyond, a cold surf pushing forward to engulf them. If they were caught by it, they would be drowned like rats.

"There!" cried Elak, pointing with his rapier to one of the tunnels. Further down it shapes were coalescing like pale blue mist, vague and blurred but human-like, hunched warriors, distorted in the shifting glow. A pack of them were coming, the source of the tide-like sounds.

"We're trapped!" Elak said above the murmuring. "We stand and fight here."

Lycon, who had retained the globe of power, shook his head. "No." He pointed to one of the tunnels. "I can feel the globe being drawn that way—it leads to the armory. It is unrestricted."

"Quickly," urged Dalan, and at once the company ran for the tunnel indicated by Lycon. Behind them they heard the surge of movement as the other tunnels disgorged a horde of wraith-like beings, and the air became bitterly cold, as though the pursuers breathed clouds of misting ice. The tunnel ahead twisted this way and that until it eventually disgorged the Atlanteans into another tall chamber. Here there were many weapons, swords hung singly on the walls, javelins stacked in clusters, and there were shields, axes and maces, as well as other ancient weapons that Elak was not familiar with.

The last of the warriors turned to face the assault from behind them as the blue tinted mist rolled forward. They slashed at the ghost-shapes with their blades, and for a while held them at bay, but it was already obvious that their Atlantean steel would have no physical effect on this enemy. One of the warriors was dragged into the winter-cold embrace of a wraith and his screams of agony echoed loudly round the chamber as his life was sucked from him.

"Pick a weapon from these!" Dalan shouted, and at once the Atlanteans complied. Elak took a long, slim blade, seemingly cast in silver, or an alloy containing it, on which numerous runes had been stamped. Lycon grabbed a long-handled ax, and it gleamed in the torchlight. Within moments everyone had taken a Valusian blade.

"Lycon—use the globe!" shouted Dalan as the wraith army shifted forward inexorably and another two Atlanteans went down in their death agonies.

Lycon held up the crimson globe and again it throbbed with power, an intense glow that bathed all of the warriors in its enigmatic light. At once the wraiths drew back. Crimson rays of light coruscated, darting outwards and striking each and every weapon the Atlanteans had chosen, until all of them also glowed a deep crimson, as though afire.

Elak uttered a war cry, rushed forward and struck the ranks of the churning wraiths. The first of them burst like spume on coastal rocks, exploding and falling back. The creatures were no match for the potent sorcery and it was not long before the Atlanteans were pressing the enemy back down the tunnel, carving them apart easily, the crimson light from their weapons like molten fire searing dried leaves. Elak felt a unique energy, as if he had tapped into something far beyond normal human endeavors. He laughed as he fought, an almost insane cry, and beside him Lycon smote mightily with the ax. In time it was the Druid who called a halt.

"Enough!" he roared above the savage cries of the warriors, and as one they ceased. The wraith-things were scattered, dissolving where they had fallen, like fluid running back into the

drains or bedrock. Soon the air was still, as if the beings had never materialized at all. Lycon had again wrapped the globe inside his tunic, but the swords and weapons of the Atlanteans yet glowed crimson, their steel and silver warm, like living things.

"The weapons of the royal Slayers, the elite guards of the ancient kings," said Dalan, as if he had peered back down the vistas of history, to the time before the great deluge. "These are Amun Thuul's gift, that will aid us in the coming onslaught from the sea gods."

"What now?" said Elak.

"We must get back to the ship and return to the surface. Put our trust in Amun Thuul. The sorcery of his city will protect us," said the Druid.

Elak nodded and at once led the company back along the tunnel. They went warily, but there were no further signs of an assault from the creatures they had fought in the armory. The way through the palace was uncluttered and at its portal only the empty central square of the city remained to be crossed, and the streets beyond. They retraced their steps of earlier and came to the muddy sea bottom beyond the last of the crumbling edifices.

Elak led the way across the slick surface, but it did not hinder them. Some distance across the sea bottom, close to the rising sides of the dish-like depression, they halted briefly to look back for the last time at the forgotten bones of the last Valusian city. *Is this the fate of all great nations?* Elak asked himself. *Do all mighty empires crumble and fall? And is this to be the fate of my Atlantis, though I make of her a queen among empires, mistress of the world?*

There was no further time for reflection, for the sea bottom between the Atlanteans and the ruins was churning, in many places bursting as new shapes took form, creatures seemingly molded from the mud and debris, twisted representations of men, lurching to stunted feet, staggering forward in a fresh wave of menace. A vast number of these horrific sea-things surged like a new tide, rough claws outstretched as Elak and his companions prepared to test their sorcerous blades anew.

CHAPTER 7: UP FROM THE DEEPS

THE first wave of the writhing mud beings crashed against the Atlantean warriors, whose weapons burned with renewed crimson light, searing their opponents, turning them to liquid mud where they struck. It was effective but exhausting work, like trying to hold back the sea itself. Lycon swung about him, releasing his anger and frustration in a roaring, howling fury, while Dalan used his staff to focus several beams of crimson light that sliced into the massed assailants, ripping them apart in a welter of mud and muck from the sea bottom. Elak shouted as he fought, calling out the names of his men who had already fallen, for he hated losing a single soldier, and on this seemingly cursed voyage he had lost too many.

So fierce was the warriors' defense that the mud creatures drew back like an ebbing tide, subsiding until the ocean bed was still. Far away came the roaring, whirling sounds of the sea, and through the blanketing darkness Elak could vaguely make out wild movement, as of great waves swirling, threatening to crush whatever powers held this underground haven intact and pour into it.

“Quickly—to the ship!” the king called, and his companions needed no second bidding. As one, they turned and struggled as speedily as they could over the treacherous terrain. Behind them they heard the renewed amassing of the mud creatures, who prepared to launch a second offensive, this time in greater numbers. Beyond the crest of the ridge, *Windrider* was yet settled on the sea bed, and Balazaar waved to the oncoming warriors. The captain and the men who had remained aboard with him lowered a wide plank from the ship’s side, so that the returning company was able to board swiftly. Dalan, Lycon and Elak insisted on being the last to embark, ahead of the oncoming mud army. The first of the creatures slithered up the plank, but Dalan’s staff spat fire at them, dissolving them, and the plank was withdrawn. Within moments the entire hull of the ship was surrounded by a surge of the creatures, their arms clawing at the timbers, their empty faces staring upwards like souls lost in hell, soundless mouths agape in pain.

“Set the globe at the masthead,” Dalan said to Lycon and the burly warrior did so, swinging up the mast with a dexterity that belied his bulk, and Elak laughed.

Once the globe of power was in place, its eerie light spread out around the ship and immediately the massed creatures around it drew back yet again. Dalan struck at them with his staff, adding to their discomfort, and abruptly *Windrider* gave a shudder, its deck rolling. For a moment Elak thought the ship was foundering in the cloying mud, in danger of veering over and being sucked down, damning the company to its fate here in the ocean deeps. But it righted itself, heaved again, like a great beast ripping free of the sea bed. An abrupt wave crashed alongside, part of it sluicing a vast mass of mud creatures aside like ants being washed down a drain. *Windrider* was caught by the wave and lifted.

The roar of the waters increased until it became almost deafening, and the ship swung around, once again caught in a vortex, only now it began to rise. Elak and his men could see upward where the churning whirlpool’s sides gleamed and where the massed faces of the creatures of the ocean packed together in a solid wall, their dreadful faces pressed against an invisible barrier, threatening to rip it aside and allow the waters to crash together and flood downwards, taking the ship to its grave. However, the vivid crimson light from the globe strengthened and bathed the racing waters in a counterbalancing energy, searing the water beings, many of whom fell back in horror.

“We’re rising to the surface!” shouted Balazaar above the snarling spray. Around and around the vortex the ship raced, and the men gripped its rails, hanging on grimly. Elak studied their faces, seeing the steely determination, the refusal to give way to the endless nightmares that had beset them on this voyage. Every one of them was worthy of commanding a company of warriors, and it may well be that once they had returned to Epharra, they would have to assume that role, given the threat of war Amun Thuul had spoken of. *With men such as these, Elak thought with a grim smile, the darkness that is coming will yet be subdued.* The fate that had befallen ancient Valusia would not overtake his new Atlantis.

Beside him, Dalan studied him quietly, putting a hand on the young king’s shoulder. “The worst is yet to come,” said the Druid, a strange sadness in his eyes.

“We shall prevail!” Elak cried, holding aloft his rapier. “Come, Lycon, grip the rail before you’re flung overboard!”

Lycon spat, almost slipping to his knees. “I enjoy a voyage, Elak, but I really do want to get ashore and sleep for a week. I feel as if every bone in my body has turned to mud.”

Elak laughed again, watching the foaming waters of the vortex, the ship rising closer and closer to daylight. “I’m surprised you’re not used to the sensation, Lycon. I mean, a few bottles of wine —”

“The effects of imbibing a small keg of wine would be infinitely preferable to this madness!”

Dalan shook his head, but even he smiled.

A few days later *Windrider* rounded the last of the headlands that enclosed the wide bay where the city of Epharra awaited the returning king and his exhausted company. They had ridden out the whirlpool and at last entered the calmer waters of Epharra’s Bay of Gold. Several smaller craft came out from the city to meet them, and the rejoicing began as word went back to the capital that Elak had returned.

CHAPTER 8: TIDE OF DREAD

IT was long before dawn when Elak rose from his sumptuous bed, stretched, and walked over to the high balcony. Drenched in vivid moonlight, he leaned on the external parapet, rubbed the sleep from his eyes and gazed out over the bay of his capital. He breathed in the cool night air, which after his long voyage back from the far south of Atlantis was as heady as any perfume. He caught the scent of night plants that wound their way up the high walls of his citadel, and heard overhead the snap of an owl’s wings as it began its dive down into the shadowed gardens, in search of a late meal. It was a blessed calm, for although Elak loved nothing better than the excitement of a sea quest and pitting his wits and sword skills against the denizens of his world, his bones yet ached from the trials of the long journey up from Zangarza. For once, he would enjoy a rest and time spent in the otherwise dull confines of government.

Of course, there was still the tricky problem of negotiating a royal marriage, for the City Council had made the union their priority, determined to wed the young king to one of the city’s breathless beauties. Elak had no preference and remained stubbornly determined not to accede to pressure until he was ready for such a life-changing event. His adventuring away had given him a chance to set such things aside, but he knew he would come under renewed pressure now, especially from Zerrahydris, the Prime Councilor. Elak had to remind himself that Zerrahydris meant well, and had been a loyal servant of the kingdom, and his dependability had been invaluable after the debacle in which Elak had won the throne.

Elak studied the Bay of Gold. It had always been a beautiful sight, with its calm waters on which floated countless ships of all sizes and persuasions. Even as a young child he had loved playing along its quays, dragging his indulgent guardians down there, where he engaged with the captains and sailors, who in turn regaled him with tales of the oceans and their countless mysteries.

He was about to return to his bed, but something about the stillness of the bay this night tugged at him, a faint bell of warning. He craned his neck. The bay was for the most part hidden in shadows, but Elak could see mud flats exposed near the harbor walls. As he studied them, he realized they stretched some distance across the bay, so that the tide must be at an unusually low ebb. Now that he looked closer, he saw that many boats and larger ships were beached, laying to one side on the mud. In the remote distance, out at sea, he heard a strange roaring sound, as though a storm boiled far away on the horizon.

His blood curdled as he thought of the horrors he had seen in the drowned ruins of the ancient city. That undersea realm almost seemed like a dream now, but he knew it was not, having brought back the crimson globe and the weapons of the royal Slayers of the prediluvian Atlantean world. As he listened, he also understood that the moonlight flashing out in the bay was reflected back not from the sea, but from even wider mud. The tide had drawn out—even beyond the Bay of Gold! How was this possible!

Elak went back inside and threw open the door to his chamber. Immediately several guards were before him, weapons drawn to defend their king. “Fetch Dalan the Druid, and wake Zerrahydris, immediately. Bring them to me.”

In a matter of minutes the Druid had materialized, a thick cloak wrapped around him. Elak took him to the balcony and pointed to the bay. “This is not a common thing,” Elak said.

Dalan’s expression betrayed his horror. “By Ishtar, you are right, Elak! This is what Amun Thuul warned us of. The creatures of the great deeps are at work.”

Light footsteps behind them presaged the coming of the Prime Councilor, who rubbed sleep from his eyes and tried not to appear irritable at such an early summons. “What is amiss?”

Elak pointed. “We must prepare ourselves.”

Zerrahydris stared out at the darkness until eventually he realized the truth. The Bay of Gold had emptied. “By the gods, this is unprecedented!” he gasped. “Where is the sea?”

“Gathering itself,” said Dalan. “And when it returns, it will be no ordinary tide, nor slow. The city is in great danger.”

Elak felt a wash of horror. He recalled all too vividly the living mural he had seen in the drowned palace below the ocean, the city in time depicted thereon and the terrible force of the unleashed ocean, the deluge and the ultimate immolation.

“The Cataclysm,” said Dalan, as if seeing the same terrifying vision, the destruction of the city and almost the whole of Atlantean civilization.

“But that was millennia ago,” said Zerrahydris.

“The evil gods that caused it have woken. What is coming to Epharra, and perhaps to all of today’s Atlantis, is a second Cataclysm.”

The Councilor would have dismissed Dalan’s words as a fantasy, an exaggeration, but something about the manner of the Druid, and indeed of the young king, brought him sharply alert. “What must be done?”

“The entire populace must take to the hills above the city, to the highest points,” said Dalan and Elak nodded. “And we must gather the warriors, all those from the voyage who carry

the weapons we brought. We must form a barrier against what comes and link all the weapons. Elak—wake Lycon. Let him bear the globe once more. I will stand with him at the apex of our defense. There may not be much time. The waves will be upon us soon after dawn.”

CHAPTER 9: THE COMING OF THE DEATH TIDE

IT was no easy matter to organize the people of Epharra and send them from the city, every man, woman and child. In the end it was panic and the sight of the water-less harbor that spurred them to leave their homes, mighty or humble, taking with them what few possessions they could carry, some in hand carts, most simply on foot. The hills under which most of Epharra had been built were thronging shortly before the first rays of dawn sunlight rose over the eastern cliffs. To the north, the skies remained dark, the clouds thick and thunderous, the noise of the coming storm already a loud promise of disaster. Boiling banks of sea fog churned ever closer to the city and the dawn light hardly registered in the gloom. Lightning flickered across the heavens and through the fog, crackling and fizzing as though unleashed through the direst sorcery.

Elak had deployed his defenders around the harbor and on the various small islands and islets at the ends of the bay, warriors who carried the weapons taken from the drowned city, so that they formed a crescent that could receive the incoming tide when its waves burst upon them. He, Dalan and Lycon had climbed the winding stairs into the central lighthouse at the center of the harbor, and Lycon set the gleaming crimson jewel at the apex of the building. It pulsed softly, like a slow beating heart, seemingly sensitive to the powers that were coalescing far out beyond the Bay of Gold.

Dalan held aloft his staff and Lycon gripped his weapon, a huge, double-edged sword that already had a soft, crimson glow. Elak had retained his rapier, but in his left hand he held an ax, heavy and gleaming, that took all his strength to wield effectively. The strange figures and sigils of its wide cutting edge danced in the crimson glow, as if the weapon contained live things eager to drink the blood of their enemies. Such an ax would have been used by the monarchs of the lost kingdom.

Elak tried not to think of the terrible deluge that had swept that wondrous place away, as revealed in the tapestry he’d seen—and heard. That crescendo of sound was echoed now as the northern ocean bulged forward, the horizon boiling, the sea racing back to cover the empty sea bed it had revealed during the night. As if in response to the incoming tide, the crystal blazed up, lit by its inner fires, and Dalan’s staff, bathed in the glow, also gleamed, too brightly to be looked upon. Both Elak and Lycon felt the weapons in their hands heating up, though not too fiercely for them to hold.

Abruptly beams of brilliant light shot out from the weapons, along the great arc of warriors set to guard the city harbor along the bay, linking them in a wall of crimson fire. Below them, on the mud flats, the light reflected, so the sea bed seemed to be bathed in blood, right out towards the oncoming tide.

The first waves came racing in. These were not high, but they were fast, a sudden flood, so that the entire expanse of harbor bed was underwater in a matter of minutes. Large ships and smaller boats stirred and were re-floated, bobbing on the sudden swirls.

Dalan watched the rising water uneasily. So far it seemed to be no more than a common race, a flood tide that was often seen in the harbor. The huge waves, heaped up in the coming storm, still posed a colossal threat. Their unfolding darkness rolled to the very mouth of the great bay, the sound of their coming almost deafening.

"See!" shouted Lycon, pointing with his blade. Light speared forward from it and drove down into the waters now curling around the tower's base, and in its bloody glow, shapes gathered. Like small waves at first, they broke apart into individual things, formed apparently of seawater, hundreds of them. They remained blurred, but had assumed the rough forms of beings, sea creatures, the front line of an army, and their intention was clear as they raced forward as one.

Again the crimson crystal blazed, and its fiery light coursed into the weapons of the defenders, all along that curved line. Bolt after bolt tore down into the waters, and where they struck the sea close to the oncoming mass of invaders, it erupted in great gouts of spray. Countless sea-things were blown apart, but many reached the harbor walls, and rose up over them like an overlapping tide. The warriors used their crimson steel to drive them back, slicing into them, creating foam and spray, a bloody mist, as if flesh and bone were being cleaved asunder, rather than simple salt water.

The first wave of sea-things was quickly repulsed, but the tide disgorged a second wave, and again the defenders drove it back, the crimson light's power staggeringly effective.

"They are testing us," shouted Dalan in order to be heard above the raging din. "Those larger waves are closing in. They are the ones we have to repulse, or Epharra sinks forever."

Elak watched in horror as the first of the tidal waves pounded forward, sucking into it and pulping the first line of ships. It was as though these had been swallowed up by a great beast, mere morsels before the real feast it was about to enjoy. The crystal blazed anew and more light arced from it, forming a high defensive beam of ruby light. In the waters, the sea-things had gone, repulsed, and no sign of them—or their corpses—remained. Bolt after bolt of energy poured out into the bay, driving hard at the tidal wave. It had become enormous, well over a hundred feet high.

And in its puissant form, Elak saw faces, vast, gloating things, quasi-human and alien, mouths agape like wells into the Nine Hells. The sea gods, the ancient horrors, bitterest foes of humanity, gloated as they swept in for their merciless kill.

CHAPTER 10: THE GHOST WARRIORS

"HOLD the line!" shouted Dalan above the furious din as the winds tore across the bay and around the Atlantean warriors, reaching near-hurricane force, battering the defenders, threatening to bring them to their knees. Yet they held aloft their Valusian steel. Dalan's staff glowed vividly, an eye-searing light that spread and linked into the blaze from the

crimson jewel, and the dazzling beams spread at an even faster rate than the wind, igniting fresh powers in the many weapons, forming a tall barrier, like a gleaming, fiery curtain.

Elak felt his rapier and ax pulsing as if they would burst with the energies coursing through them. In the bay, the great wave towered higher, an enormous fist about to drop and obliterate everything beneath it. It advanced in a strange, slow curl, unfurling as if it moved in a different time stream, held in check, perhaps, by the numerous bolts of crimson light tearing into it, hurled by the defenders of the city. Light did explode within the wave, distorting the monstrous faces, some of which turned, open maws seared by the heat. The doom of Epharra looked inevitable, though, for nothing could withstand the full fury of the ocean, heaped up so massively.

"We cannot hold it!" Elak cried, feeling his every muscle tensing to the point beyond endurance. *Men against gods*, he thought. *We cannot restrain them.*

As the dark thoughts began to cloud his mind, something tore free from his weapons and he saw twin columns of fire-red light rise, larger than a man, but shaping themselves into the figures of warriors. With a jolt he recognized the armor and livery of the warriors in the great tapestry. The Red Slayers! Ghosts from the past, and now forming a whole line along the harbor, every weapon held by the Atlantean defenders giving life to one of the figures. They, too, held ghost-blades, and in moments they swept upwards and across the mud flats in a dazzling tide of light.

"Our power alone has not been enough," said Dalan. "But with these and the old magics of Valusia, we may yet deal a telling blow!"

His words proved prophetic, for as the ghost-warriors raced forward, they clashed with the great wave, driving their swords and axes, spears and maces, into it, as though cutting into living flesh. The winds howled and screamed and it sounded to Elak and his companions as if these were shrieks of pain, the hint of defeat. For long moments the colossal wall of water hung motionless, as though it belonged not here in the real world, but on a vast tapestry, a frozen panorama painted by an artist, every detail perfectly depicted.

In that long moment, the Atlantean world hung in the balance, powers locked, striving for dominion. Elak roared with anger, frustration, and a wild determination, and used his weapons to direct fresh bolts of scarlet light at the great wave. All along the line of defenders, the warriors followed his example. And the wave trembled with new life as the combined power of the ghost-warriors and that of Elak's line smashed into it.

Trembled—and began to collapse in on itself. The huge faces were torn apart in the churning waters, and the winds bent back upon themselves, increasing the onslaught of the defenders.

Elak laughed, the sound rising above the tumult as Lycon shouted with him, and in no time the cry was taken up by all the Atlanteans, a thunderous victory yell. It crashed upon the waters and the wave fell further back, as though the tide had suddenly sucked everything out beyond the bay. Ships bobbed and danced on the waters, no more than a few of them overturned or broken. The ghost-warriors followed, an army of clouds, their light blazing brighter with every league they covered.

Overhead the thunderheads of the storm evaporated, leaving a clear sky, lit by the rising sun, and the winds blew themselves out. In the Bay of Gold, the water gleamed, settling so that it was gently rising and falling, as if the threat of the tidal wave had been no more than a bad dream.

"Are they beaten?" said Lycon, glad to lower his arms and lean on the haft of his weapon. "I don't think I could hold on much longer. Every ounce of my strength has been sapped."

Elak gazed along the lines of warriors, waving to them. They all looked drained, but they yet managed a shout of triumph. "There's your answer," said the young king.

Dalan was gazing out to sea. His staff flickered, its light winking out, and above him, the crimson jewel likewise dimmed. "They have avenged their race," said the Druid. "I think their mighty king was with them. This is the last of their power. All that remains now lies among the ruins far down on the distant sea bed."

"And the sea gods?" said Lycon. "Destroyed?"

"I think not," said Elak. "We have dealt them a telling blow. I would like to think we have set them back. They will lick their wounds, like so many beaten curs, and cringe away in their dark places. Yet their servants are still out there. We will need to be watchful, always."

"Then let us go back to the palace and drink to the health of those vanished shades, and honor their glorious passing."

Dalan, for once, approved. He masked his unease. Elak was right. The old gods of the night were not destroyed. *We may have bought time, possibly even a millennium*, he thought, *but they will rise again and Atlantis must be ready to defy them, down through the long vistas of time.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

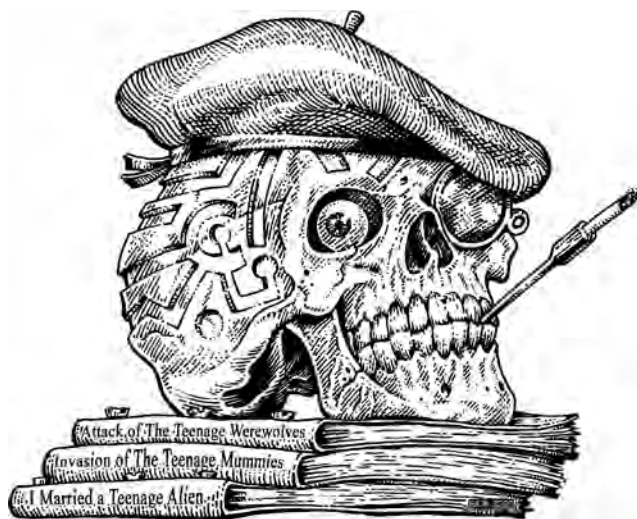
Adrian Cole is a Dumnonian Celt with Irish antecedents living in Solomon Kane country in Devon, UK. He divides his time between writing, plunging into the local Celtic Sea and riding a bike thru the wilds of the surrounding forests. He has recently become a grandfather, which gives him even more opportunities to indulge in a second childhood. He has had over 2 dozen books published, ranging through fantasy, science fiction, sword and sorcery, horror, Mythos and general pulp. His latest book is a reprint of the British Fantasy Award winning *Nick Nightmare Investigates* (Pulp Hero Press, US) and he has two forthcoming collections: *Dark Ships Passing*, S & S from Pulp Hero and *Elak, King of Atlantis*.

THE SKULL SPEAKS: THE SKULL ON FILM

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

The Hulu and the Netflix confound me! The black box with the apple has defied me for the last time! To those of you who remain in thrall to them, I say join me, and exult in the mighty Betamax, the greatest of all cinematic machines!

After my discovery of the magnificent *Beastmaster*, the new intern delivered unto me a trio of what he assured me were even finer movies: *Terms of Endearment*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Mrs. Doubtfire*. As *Beastmaster* was truly wondrous, I await the viewing of these three with awe. How could any actor possibly rival the moving performance of Rip Torn during his tragic fall from power at the conclusion of *Beastmaster*? I have never seen the like!



Now, though, I shall share with you the glories I discovered within a movie you must seek out for yourself. There are foul beasts, and glowing space swords! There is cosmic sorcery, and death defying combats in the nighted void. It was scripted in part by the great Leigh Brackett and is titled "The Empire Strikes Back." I am certain that it will be exalted once other mortals become aware of its existence! Alas, some of the final moments were marred by a lack of realism. A wizard as accomplished as this "Vader" should have summoned Saurian Sentinels, or, at the very least, a legion of gorillas, to accomplish his ends. Overall, though, it pleased me.

Also I saw a movie titled *Dragonslayer*, which proved better than I first thought it to be. The carnage in latter portions of the film proved most satisfactory. There was wizardry and betrayal and many surprises, although not as much sword work as I usually prefer. Still, it is surely worth viewing.

If you sit down before *Footloose*, however, prepare yourselves for crashing disappointment! I sought in vain for a barbarian, or a wizard, or even a sword, but they were nowhere to be found during the duration of the film! Even the title proved deceptive, for all characters within the movie had intact feet, firmly attached. Most of the characters had become obsessed with cavorting for a rite of passage and I assumed that when it began I would finally behold altars and wizardry. This, too, failed to transpire. All those involved in this disaster should be roundly scorned, and then turn their fervor for dancing toward an unfettered celebration of the supreme cause — the glory of mine own name!

Now I shall permit you to suggest to me films worthy of my attentions. Ensure first that they are viewable upon the incomparable Betamax, and then transmit word to me! I shall deliver my peerless analysis unto you for grateful consumption!

—So Sayeth the Skull!

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DEMONS OF THE DEPTHS

From the Tales of Shintaro Oba

By C. L. WERNER

THE sun beat down with fiery intensity upon the *Eiko-maru*. Sweat glistened upon the bare bodies of sailors as they worked the iron-capped paddles, guiding the flat-bottomed ship across the shallow coastline. The crisp breeze that wafted across the decks did little to counter the heat bearing down upon the men. As they strove at their labours, more than one of them whispered an appeal for relief to Toratsu, the god of day, or muttered a curse upon Goj, the dragon of summer.

Seated in such shade as the side of the ship's cabin presented, Shintaro Oba stared out across the sandy beaches and rich fields that reached down to the shore. Here and there the roofs of villages dotted the landscape, sometimes a cluster of fishing boats would be drawn up onto the sand. Faintly he could hear the songs of farmers working their lands, a contented melody that drifted out towards the sea. The Nokoshima Province was a prosperous domain, governed by the even-handed Lord Torogawa of Clan Hoshin. Though Torogawa was a devoted vassal of the Shogun, Oba had to concede that he was a principled and just daimyo. Certainly, among the provinces of Mu-Thulan, there were far worse lords, even among those who held fealty to the Emperor above their obligations to the Shogun.

Lord Yoshinaga, Shogun of Mu-Thulan, had been responsible for wiping out the Sekigahara Clan. Oba was the last of the clan, tasked by his dying master with a terrible and onerous duty. It was the samurai's burden to seek out the demon that laid claim upon his dead master's soul and to free his lord's spirit from that infernal bondage. It was a mission that had seen him wandering the provinces, confronting the monsters that haunted the land. To the difficulty of his quest could be added the ire of the Shogun. It rankled Yoshinaga that the destruction of Clan Sekigahara had been left incomplete. He'd stopped short of an official proclamation, unwilling to dignify Oba with such distinction, but the vassal who made a gift of the samurai's head would certainly earn favour with the Shogun.

Oba lowered his gaze to the sword resting across his lap. Koumakiri, the sacred blade of Sekigahara, a weapon that had endured for centuries and survived countless battles. He'd never had cause to doubt the resilience of the uchigatana. The sword had vanquished many demons in its time, prevailed against foes beyond the imaginings of madmen. It was a test of his own quality to see if his endurance was equal to that of Koumakiri. Tradition held that the weakness of a swordsman flowed back into his blade, but so too did the strength of the sword embolden the man who wielded it.

A slight cough from beside him caused Oba to look upwards. His grip upon Koumakiri relaxed when he saw that it was only a small boy. The child struggled to maintain his hold upon a bamboo bucket with one hand while he extended the other towards the samurai. When Oba was in the cabin below with the other passengers, he'd noted the boy selling water to the travellers. The samurai rolled his shoulders, feeling his kimono cling to his back, plastered to his body with sweat. The hot day had made the crowded cabin stifling, but it wasn't much better in the open—trading fresh air for the unfettered intensity of the sun.

Oba drew the small silk bag out from beneath his kimono. Removing a coin, he started to set it in the boy's hand. The child drew back quickly, shaking his head. He held up two fingers.

'You only charged one mon for a drink before,' Oba scowled.

The boy smiled back at him. 'That was down there,' he said, nodding at the steps leading to the cabin.

Oba thumbed another coin from the pouch. 'So carrying water up to the deck is an added expense?' He grinned at the shrewdness of the boy. When the child came towards him again, he drew the ladle out of the bucket, noting with no little annoyance how empty the pail was. The child was more than shrewd, he was cunning. A few more years and he'd wind up a yakuza with such a calculating mind.

The boy started to go back down into the cabin, but stopped and gave Oba a puzzled look. 'Why are you staying up here? And why aren't you hiding your sword like the other samurai?'

Oba quickly swallowed the water in his mouth. Suspicion flared inside him. The travellers he'd seen had all been merchants, tradesmen and farmers. He hadn't noticed any fighting men among them. 'What do you mean about other samurai?'

The boy perked up at the question, he held out his hand, waiting until Oba gave him another iron coin before answering. 'There are five who I noticed,' he said, pointing at his eye. 'Samurai walk different than other people, I can spot them right away.' He frowned and added, 'Maybe there are more, better at pretending than the others are.'

'Any idea who they are and why they're hiding?' Oba pressed. Though he had Koumakiri and the jewelled short sword that served as its companion, he'd left his armour below in the cabin. The possibility that the samurai were Yoshinaga's agents wasn't a comfortable one.

The boy shook his head, surprised by Oba's question. 'They're men of Clan Hoshin,' he said. 'Every ship travelling the coast has a deputation of samurai on it these days.' It was the boy's turn for suspicion to gleam in his eyes. 'Didn't you know the wako have been preying on Lord Torogawa's ships?'

Oba leaned back against the wall of the cabin. 'I am only newly come to Nokoshima. I didn't know that pirates have been hunting in these waters.'

'Every fourth ship falls prey to them,' the boy said. Oba could see him shudder, slopping water from the bucket. 'When they strike, they leave no survivors. Even the samurai Lord Torogawa has sent to protect the ships haven't been able to stop them.' The boy forced a smile to his face. 'I've been lucky,' he boasted. 'The wako haven't targeted any of the ships I've been on. With luck like that, I'll make a good yakuza when I get older.'

It was on Oba's tongue to scold the boy about the cruel ways of gamblers, but the reprimand was silenced by a howl of alarm from one of the sailors. Oba spun around to see the man pointing wildly away from the shore. Just visible, coming out from behind a rocky outcropping, was an immense atakebune, a wooden warship with twenty oars to a side and a tall tower rising from the foredeck. White flags snapped from poles fastened to the sides of the hull, each banner marked with taunting symbols painted in crimson and black, each promising a more despicable and violent death than the last. A bustling mob of humanity could be seen scrambling about the decks, the shine of steel gleaming among them.

'A lesson for you,' Oba told the boy. 'Eventually the well-spring of luck goes dry. Hurry below and tell the Hoshin samurai that the pirates are here.'

The pirate ship drew steadily nearer. The jeers and threats of the wako rolled across the waves, a litany of the most obscene profanities. A few of the pirates produced bows and loosed arrows at the barge, their comrades mocking them when their shots fell short. A wiry rogue, wearing nothing except a steel hat and a loin clout, scurried out to the very end of the forecastle. He hooked his legs about the railing, his arms filled with the heavy length of a tanegashima. Smoke rose from the matchlock as the marksman aimed the firearm. A moment later there was a loud cracking sound and a flash of flame from the muzzle of the gun. The sailors onboard the barge cried out in terror, ducking down behind the bulwarks and abandoning their paddles.

Contemptuous laughter rose from the pirates. Oba could guess the trick they'd played. The marksman's shot had never been intended to hit anyone—perhaps there hadn't even been a ball loaded into it when it was fired—but simply to scare the sailors and make them forsake their efforts to paddle the barge closer to shore. If the boy's story bore out, then it was clear these pirates took care about allowing any survivors to slip from their clutches. Oba could see it would serve no purpose to explain this to the sailors. Even if he could rally them, the wako would catch them before they could reach the beach.

A sudden rush came from below. The Hoshin samurai emerged from the cabin, each warrior sporting two swords tucked under the belt of whatever disguise he wore. They also carried bows and quivers of arrows, and it was to these weapons that the samurai turned as the pirates came closer. At least five of them did. A sixth, one the boy had missed, stood over Oba with his sword bared.

'Well, ronin dog, are you with those outlaws?' the samurai demanded.

Oba scowled back at his interrogator. 'You have enemies enough. Don't be eager to create more.' He nodded towards the pirate vessel. 'Even were I ronin, I would open my belly before hiring myself to such scum.'

'You serve Lord Torogawa?' the samurai asked, taken aback by the cold authority in Oba's voice. There was a sense of wounded pride on the man's face, a mixture of shame and frustration. His expression hardened, a touch of uncertainty in his eyes. 'My lord entrusted me with this duty. He wouldn't send someone to watch me.'

Oba looked past the young samurai, observing the pirate ship. 'What you need to watch are the people you already know are enemies.' Again he nodded at the warship. 'Ask yourself why they are keeping back.'

The pirates had indeed arrested their speedy approach. Oars had been raised and the big atakebune sat atop the waves several hundred yards from where the barge was. The samurai raised their bows and loosed a volley at the warship. Their effort was answered by ribald jeers, every arrow splashing down just inches from the hull.

The situation seemed to be a stand-off. The pirates keeping out of range, the crew of the barge keeping to cover out of fear of the matchlock. The barge couldn't escape and the wako couldn't close in to board her. At least so things appeared. Oba couldn't shake the impression that the atakebune was waiting for something, like a tiger hidden in the long grass ready to pounce when its prey is most vulnerable.

'Cowards!' the young samurai shouted. 'You have no stomach for your outrages when the victim fights back! Come along you jackals, it is Kawajiri Ujio who will take your heads to Lord Torogawa!'

The taunts rising from the pirates only intensified as Kawajiri threatened them. Some of the villains drew their own swords, mockingly waving at the samurai and inviting him to make good on his bold words. The matchlock was fired once more, the ball this time cracking into the side of the barge.

Oba raised his gaze from the antics of the wako to the wooden tower that rose amidships. On the platform at the top of the structure he could see a corpulent man dressed in yellow robes sitting in a lotus position. How long he'd been there, Oba wasn't certain, neither could he explain the intense sense of unease that gripped him as he watched those fat fingers cutting apart a large fish. The robed man tossed each fragment into the sea, casting them always towards the west. When there was only one piece of flesh remaining, he removed a string of glistening jewels from his neck. Even from such a distance, Oba could see the crimson shine of the stones. The man separated one of the stones from the string and began stroking it with the last bit of fish.

The waters around the pirate ship were now alive with sharks. Thrashing about to snap up the morsels thrown overboard by the robed man, they churned the sea into a white froth. The waves turned red as the feeding frenzy drove the creatures to turn against one another, ripping away at their fellows in the crazed hunger. When this frenzy was at its height, the man on the tower calmly rose and stepped to the edge. Deliberately he dropped the jewel straight down into the midst of the ravenous sharks.

Almost at once a change came over the creatures. Where an instant before there'd been chaos and savagery, now all was placid. The triangular dorsal fins of the sharks could be seen speeding away from the pirate ship, as though they'd suddenly taken fright. The fleeing fins headed back towards the open ocean. All except one. One of those fins was knifing its way towards the shore—and the embattled barge. For an instant, Oba thought it was some trick of the light, but the fin looked to be changing as it drew ever closer.

'It... it is growing,' Kawajiri marvelled. The other samurai muttered among themselves, likewise unsettled by this eerie phenomenon.

Oba watched the fin for only a moment, then leapt to his feet. Kawajiri, surprised by the sudden action, swung around to confront him, but Oba seized hold of the man's sword-arm. 'Move your men back from the rail,' he told the samurai. 'That thing is coming straight for the barge.'

Kawajiri struggled to break free of Oba's grip, seeking to unbalance his antagonist and drop him to the deck of the barge. Denied the leverage needed to sweep Oba's leg out from under him, the samurai strained to pitch him forwards and thereby end his hold. Oba, however, countered Kawajiri's every effort. He made no attempt to press his own attack, but instead called out the other samurai, urging them away from the rail.

The samurai paid no heed to Oba's warnings. Some of them watched the approaching shark with a sort of numb incredulity. Only two of them reacted to the steadily increasing impression of menace the creature evoked. They aimed their bows down at the sea, loosing arrows at the dark body to which the fin was attached. Despite their strength and accuracy, the arrows simply glanced off the creature, floating away on the waves.

A sudden burst of foam and spray erupted from the sea. While still a dozen yards from the barge, the shark leapt from the water, propelling its immense body straight at the ship. As it hurtled at them, the samurai only had a vague awareness of the creature's nature. They could see the sleek grey-black body with its white belly and powerful tail. They noted with dread the long head and massive jaws, the black eyes that glared balefully at them.

When the shark struck the deck the creature didn't flail about in confusion, floundering in the open air. Instead it picked itself up from the planks, rising on two stumpy, frog-like legs. Two powerful arms, each ending in a webbed hand, projected from where the monster's fins should have been. It pawed the air with these limbs, displaying claws like sickles as it advanced menacingly towards the awestruck samurai.

'Samebito,' Oba hissed, recognizing the nature of the fiend closing on the Hoshin samurai. He felt his stomach sicken when the samurai dropped their bows and reached for their swords. 'Kawajiri, tell your men to keep away from it!'

Kawajiri used Oba's distraction to twist free. A kick of his leg sent Oba crashing back against the side of the cabin. Before the young samurai could swing his katana, Koumakiri was flashing out to intercept the blow. The sharp ring of steel against steel echoed across the deck as the two men pressed their swords against each other.

'I'll not fall for your pirate tricks,' Kawajiri snarled.

While Oba struggled with Kawajiri, the grisly samebito met its own attackers. Bearing down on the shark-like beast with their blades, the samurai at first tried to overwhelm the monster by charging it all at once. One of the warriors fell away, his face and chest ripped open by the samebito's claws. A second found the creature's claws hooking into his ribs as it plunged them into his chest. Still managing a defiant shout, the samurai tried to slash at the fiend with his katana even as the shark-beast pulled him to its ghastly jaws.

The samebito was easily twice the height of the men who fought against it, and when the monster's maw snapped close on its victim, his head, shoulders and chest disappeared inside its mouth. Rows of serrated teeth clamped tight and with a vicious sideways twist of not merely its head but the whole of its body, the samebito ripped the samurai in half.

The surviving samurai fell back, circling warily around the monstrous creature. The brutal demise of two of their comrades had impressed on them a wary respect for the samebito's ferocious power. They circled around the beast until they'd surrounded it. Then, with a vengeful shout, one of them sprang at the monster, slashing at it with his sword. The blade glanced from the samebito's hide as though striking solid stone. Not so much as a scratch marked the beast's skin. The creature retaliated with a back-handed swipe of its claw that split the samurai's belly and left him writhing in a pool of his own gore.

'Call your men back,' Oba told Kawajiri. 'That is no mortal beast, but a demon fiend they fight!' He didn't give the young warrior a chance to argue. Suddenly drawing back, he let his opponent press forward. The unexpected absence of resistance caused Kawajiri to stumble and in that moment of adversity, Oba went rushing down the deck, straight towards the hulking shark-beast. At every step he expected to feel Kawajiri's sword cutting into him from behind, but the fatal thrust never came.

'Ordinary steel cannot harm the demon!' Oba shouted to the last pair of Hoshin samurai. To their favour, the two warriors looked resigned to try again despite the evidence that Oba's words were true. However the decision was taken from them when the samebito turned towards Oba. The black eyes in the creature's face flashed malignantly, the unholy fires of its being focusing on the blade Oba held.

Koumakiri was no ordinary sword. The heavy uchigatana had been forged with the most potent enchantments and prayers. Over the centuries many demons had passed from the mortal world through the Kimon Gate. The sword had earned a reputation among the demonic throngs as a fearsome menace to their predations.

The samebito glared at the sword, then at the samurai who held it. The gill slits just behind its shark-like head flared outward, expelling a flush of seawater. Oba knew what it was thinking, weighing its fear of Koumakiri against its contempt for the man who wielded it. He'd encountered enough demons of its sort, murdering fiends who looked upon mankind as mere cattle, to expect what it would decide. He braced himself for the samebito's attack.

The assault came, but not in the manner Oba expected. Displaying surprising cunning, the shark-demon opened its jaws wide, disgorging the badly chewed torso of its victim. The grisly carcass

slammed into Oba, pitching him to the deck. No sooner had he shoved the torso aside than the samebito's powerful tail came slamming down. He rolled aside, letting the brutal blow strike the deck instead. Planks splintered under the tremendous impact.

Oba tried to regain his footing, but the finned tail was whipping around once more, seeking to bludgeon him and sweep him into the sea. He ducked beneath the blow, then was forced to dive across the deck as it came slamming down once more.

'Help him!' Kawajiri shouted. The young warrior charged at the samebito from the rear, slashing at it with his katana. The other Hoshin samurai rushed it from the front, uttering savage war cries as they chopped at the demon with their blades.

The samebito responded to the concentrated assault in a burst of sheer carnage. Kawajiri was swatted aside by the tail, the rough shark-hide raking across his body, shredding both his kimono and the skin underneath. One of the samurai attacking it from the fore had his leg torn away by a lashing claw. The other had his sword-arm and shoulder bitten through by the demon's jaws, the dismembered hand still clutching the weapon as it tumbled across the deck.

The distraction bought by the sacrifice of the Hoshin samurai afforded Oba the time he needed to recover from the demon's trickery. Gripping Koumakiri in both hands, he sprang at the samebito before it could return its attention to him. The uchigatana ripped across the finned tail, cleaving through hide and flesh and cartilage. Greasy blood and stinking ichor gushed from the wound inflicted by the enchanted blade.

The shark-demon threw back its head in a mute spasm of agony. It swung around, dragging its nearly severed tail across the gory deck. One of its clawed hands slashed at Oba, raking the air above his head as the samurai ducked beneath the scythe-like talons. He thrust his sword upwards, tearing into the demon's wrist. Twisting the blade in the grisly wound, Oba severed the member, leaving it to flop into the barge's hold.

The samebito reeled from the mutilating wound, but its savagery wouldn't allow it to relent and retreat. The hulking creature snapped at Oba with its powerful jaws, gouging a great hole in the deck as its sharp teeth closed upon the wooden planks. The samurai, having dodged the beast's bite, now brought his sword cleaving down into the crouched monster's neck. Hewing into the grey hide just ahead of the gill slits, Oba pressed Koumakiri deeper into the cut, working it from side to side as he severed veins and tendons.

Crashing to the deck, the samebito thrashed in pain. It flailed wildly with its remaining claw, but the demon's foe was well away from the reach of those ripping talons. It struggled to bring its jaws close to the samurai, but the effort only caused Koumakiri to cut still deeper into its flesh. The finned tail slapped impotently against the deck, splintering planks and spilling blood but offering no threat to Oba.

Oba could feel the demon's power ebbing away, its vile foothold in the mortal world broken by Koumakiri's enchantments. The samebito's body began to wither, shrivelling right before the samurai's eyes. The long arms and legs drew back into the long body, folding into themselves until they were merely fins. The

humanoid structure of the demon's shape popped and shuddered as it contorted back into the arrow-like sleekness of a shark. The hideous malignance in the creature's black eyes evaporated, leaving behind only the dull gaze of a dead fish.

When the thing sprawled across the *Eiko-maru's* deck was nothing more than the carcass of a four-foot shark, Oba severed its head with a turn of his blade and kicked the grisly thing into the sea. Sheathing Koumakiri, the samurai looked up from the mangled body of the creature the samebito had possessed. He looked across the waves at the atakebune. The pirate ship was in retreat, slinking off towards the open sea. Up on the tower he could see the fat man in the yellow robe glaring back at him. Obviously the sorcerer hadn't been prepared for someone who could fight back against his demon.

'You... you killed it.' The words came in an awed gasp from Kawajiri. The young warrior's chest was soaked in blood from where the samebito's hide had rubbed his skin raw, his kimono hung about his waist in tatters. Kawajiri's excitement was echoed by the sailors as they came creeping out from their hiding places and by the travellers who now timidly emerged from the hold below.

Oba nodded grimly. 'But for the help of you and your men, it would have been different.' He turned and bowed to the slain samurai lying strewn across the deck.

'I am honoured to have rendered such slight assistance,' Kawajiri said. 'I am greatly in your debt. Since these wako started preying on Lord Torogawa's ships, this is the first one to be attacked and escape to tell the tale.' He bowed to Oba, averting his eyes as he apologized to him. 'Forgive my impertinence earlier. I see now that my lord was wise to send you along. He knew this duty was too great to entrust to me.'

'You are still mistaken,' Oba said. 'I do not belong to Clan Hoshin. I do not serve Lord Torogawa.' He waited for Kawajiri to rise from his bow. He wanted to see what expression might be found in the samurai's eyes when he revealed his identity. 'I am Shintaro Oba of Clan Sekigahara.' He waited a moment, but there was no change in Kawajiri's attitude. 'If you are unaware of my name, I am certain to be known to your lord. He would gain favour with the Shogun if he sent my head to Yoshinaga.'

Kawajiri frowned. 'You pay my lord a grave injustice,' he said, a note of offence in his voice. 'This day you have rendered a great service to Clan Hoshin. My lord is not the kind to repay good for ill. He will reward you for driving off these wako and revealing the secret of their crimes. Please accompany me to Nokoshima castle.'

Oba turned, looking away from Kawajiri, watching as the pirate ship receded into the distance. His thoughts were of the sorcerer and the demons he could summon. He thought of what such a magician might know, the profane wisdom that gave him such powers. Among the sorcerer's knowledge might be some clue that could lead Oba to the creature he was hunting. The demon that had claimed his late lord's soul.

'I will go with you,' Oba said. 'But it isn't for any reward. Clan Hoshin will face these wako again. When you do, I intend to be there.'

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IT was dark in the small antechamber Oba had been lead into. Only a single rice-paper lantern was present to oppose the blackness. He sat upon a mat nearly at the centre of the room, Kawajiri seated just behind him on a second mat. Two Hoshin samurai knelt against the white wall, their swords resting on the floor at their side within easy reach of their hands. In front of Oba a wooden platform lifted the final occupants above the level of the samurai. Lord Torogawa, bedecked in a richly embroidered kimono of dark silk, sat with an enormous painting of Clan Hoshin's mon at his back. The daimyo had an energetic quality to him and a shrewdness in his gaze. His features were lean, his moustache cropped close to his lips. He kept his hands folded across his lap, his posture as rigid as a board. Overall he was the very image of regal indifference and authority.

Just ahead of Lord Torogawa, sitting on the platform with him and off to his right, was the elderly chamberlain of Clan Hoshin, Hidetoro Kayama. Unlike his master, Hidetoro wore simple robes of blue adorned with a few whorls and flower blooms embroidered in red. The chamberlain lacked the impression of energy and verve, but in his eyes was the same gleam of perception as those of his lord.

'You appreciate, of course, the complexity of this situation,' Hidetoro told Oba. 'There is no question that you have rendered a great service to my lord. By the testimony of Kawajiri Ujio and the other survivors of the *Eiko-maru*, we know that it is only by your intervention that the ship was not lost as so many others have been.' The chamberlain glanced back at his master, then turned his face back towards Oba. 'At the same time, the disfavour in which Lord Yoshinaga holds you cannot easily be ignored. It begs the question why an enemy of the Shogun would help one of his most loyal vassals?'

Oba bowed his head before addressing Hidetoro, knowing the question truly came from Lord Torogawa. It was a courtly pretence, maintaining the illusion that the daimyo hadn't sullied himself by directly interacting with the landless samurai. 'My life was at risk as much as any,' he said.

'That isn't true,' Kawajiri interjected. 'Oba tried to help myself and my samurai. Had I listened my men might have been saved.'

Hidetoro nodded as he considered Kawajiri's rejection of Oba's claim of selfishness. 'Many stories are told of you. Oba the wandering hero who fights monsters and demons wherever they may be found.'

'A reputation builds upon itself,' Oba said. 'It isn't something I have sought.'

'Your humility stands you in good stead,' Hidetoro nodded. 'But as an adversary of Lord Yoshinaga, I must ask another question. Would you still stand against a demon if it were in service to the Emperor?'

Oba shook his head. 'I cannot accept that the Emperor would have dealings with demons.'

Hidetoro looked aside once more to Lord Torogawa before resuming his conversation with Oba. 'Let us say then that someone loyal to the Emperor is using demons in an effort to serve the Dragon Throne. Would you still raise your sword against them?'

'I have no fellowship with demons, whoever they claim to serve,' Oba answered.

Hidetoro smiled at the response. He leaned towards Lord Torogawa, holding a hushed conversation with his master. The chamberlain turned back towards Oba. 'The samebito you vanquished, the wako and their sorcerer, we have reason to suspect they are acting as agents of the kuge. For many generations there has been strife between the Imperial nobles and the daimyo. Nokoshima has become a battleground in that strife. Clan Hoshin's prestige is threatened by these repeated attacks upon our ships. Lord Torogawa may lose face if they continue. The Shogun may even feel compelled to force Clan Hoshin to quit Nokoshima and adopt a less prosperous domain.'

'Your discovery of the threat and your ability to destroy it has given Lord Torogawa an idea,' Hidetoro stated. 'With your demon-slaying abilities, my master wishes to lay a trap for the wako. The dangers will be severe and, because of your disfavour with the Shogun, we can offer you no reward.'

Oba looked past Hidetoro, daring to gaze directly on Lord Torogawa himself. 'It is my purpose to destroy demons,' he declared. 'Allowing me the opportunity to do so is reward enough.'

For just an instant, Lord Torogawa's regal mask cracked when he heard Oba's words. An approving smile showed on the daimyo's face. He glanced over at Hidetoro and made some sign to his chamberlain to explain their plans to the samurai.

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THE clamour of battle echoed throughout the ship. No, not battle, Oba reflected grimly, but slaughter. Screams of dying men, the crunch of broken bone and shredded flesh, the thunderous impact of a finned tail smashing down upon the deck, all of these were tokens of the ghastly drama unfolding mere inches above his head. Blood trickled through gaps in the planks, the fishy reek of the demon spilled down into the depths of the barge.

Clan Hoshin had sent the *Eiko-maru* out once more and once more the wako had set upon the vessel, the yellow-robed sorcerer setting a second samebito against the ship. It was a departure from their usual practice of attacking only every fourth barge, but Hidetoro had sent rumours flying throughout the province to lure the pirates in. Seemingly drunken samurai and retainers in gambling dens and brothels spread stories of a shipment of gold—a tithe to the Shogun—being sent out on the ship. Whether from greed or devotion to the Emperor, it was certain the wako wouldn't be able to resist the bait.

Oba and a score of samurai waited below decks, concealed in a walled-off section of the hold. Looking around the shadowy compartment, he could see the grim determination on the faces of his companions, none more so than Kawajiri, who had seen for himself what kind of carnage was being wrought upon the crew by the shark-demon.

The men could only listen and wait, however. To rush up on deck now and confront the samebito would end the beast's rampage but would ultimately achieve nothing. The villains who had conjured it from the Kimon Gate would escape, free to continue their outrages. Oba and the others could only bide their time and honour the sacrifice the doomed crew was making. Every man of them had been ready to die for Lord Torogawa, it would be up to the warriors hidden below to make sure that they did not go unavenged.

After what seemed to be hours, the massacre was over. For a brief space the samebito could be heard tromping across the decks searching for more victims. Then, faintly at first, there came the cheers and shouts of many voices. The atakebune was pulling close to the *Eiko-maru*. Now that the demon had seemingly slaughtered everyone on the ship, the wako were coming in to board their catch and claim their plunder.

The Hoshin samurai braced themselves as they felt a tremendous shudder pass through the barge. The voices of the pirates grew louder and more distinct as they pulled their warship close against their victim. The tramp of the boarders' feet as they descended upon the *Eiko-maru* was the final signal for the warriors hidden in the hold to spring into action.

A massive samurai with the bulky build of a sumotori hefted a giant hammer and brought the maul slamming against the false panels that closed off their hiding place. The wooden frame went crashing down. At once the samurai charged out into the hold. Those wako that had already descended into the bowels of the ship were caught utterly off guard. Five of them were cut down by Hoshin swords before they could even reach for their own weapons. A few made a futile scramble back to the ladder. Kawajiri sprang at them, slashing one rogue across the back from shoulder to hip and hewing the left leg from the second just as the wako was on the verge of escape. The maimed pirate tumbled down the ladder where one of the other samurai quickly finished him with a stab to the neck.

Oba pushed past Kawajiri, assuming the role of vanguard as the samurai hurried up onto the deck. The carnage below had been heard by the other pirates, but they'd made the mistake of thinking the sounds emanated from some squabble between their comrades, so confident were they that the samebito had killed any possible opposition. As a result, none of them had thought to have bows or matchlock ready to repel the samurai as they came storming up from the hold.

The wako nearest the hold were cut down almost immediately. Those few who did draw their swords proved unequal to the avengers. Trained from childhood as warriors, disciplined in the art of the sword until it came to them as easily as breathing, the Hoshin samurai had the skill and conviction that made a mockery of the desperate savagery of the pirates. Armoured in steel, the samurai cut a crimson path through their enemies. There was no real threat from the wako. The menace lay with the inhuman demon they'd bound to their purpose.

Towering over the gore-streaked deck, this second samebito was even bigger than the one Oba had vanquished before. Its general appearance was less humanoid and more like the squat,

bloated shape of a gigantic frog. The thing's head was a flattened expanse of white flesh with a pair of grisly eyes at either extremity and a wide maw of fangs gaping from its underside. The shark-demon squatted at the centre of the deck, unmoving and oblivious as the samurai fought the pirates.

The reason for the demon's indifference sat up on the atakebune's tower. The fat sorcerer had a candle in his hands, flame and smoke rising from its wick. He watched the fray between wako and samurai with uncertainty, one hand faltering as he reached to the candle. Then his eyes met Oba's gaze. His face blanched as he recognized the man who'd killed the first samebito. The faltering had lost its hesitance. With a murderous sneer, the sorcerer snuffed out the candle.

The moment the candle was extinguished, the samebito erupted into violence. Only the sorcerer's magic had restrained it, keeping it docile while the pirates plundered the ship. Now that it was free, the grotesque creature lashed out. Its tail swatted the wako marksman as he tried to arm his matchlock, the impact hurling the pirate's battered body into the sea. One mammoth claw snatched up a Hoshin samurai, closing upon him with such force that he was crushed like an orange despite his steel armour. Another wako fell victim to the fiend's snapping jaws, torn in half by the triangular fangs.

Oba brought his uchigatana ripping across the pirate he was fighting, felling the man in a welter of blood. Leaping over the twitching corpse he sprang at the samebito as the demon took another bite of the wako it held. Koumakiri raked across the beast's hand, sending a jumble of fingers dancing across the deck. The huge shark-creature reared back, face twisted in a silent snarl of pain. It flung the butchered pirate from it and swung around to confront Oba.

The enchanted sword licked out once more, slashing deep into the demon's flank and causing it to stumble. Like a hammer, the bleeding stump of the samebito's maimed hand slammed into Oba from the side, knocking him against the cabin. Only the armour he wore prevented the impact from shattering bones. He was left staggered by the attack, his head ringing with the fury of the demon's assault.

Before the samebito could exploit Oba's weakness the demon found itself assailed from every quarter. Kawajiri rallied the Hoshin samurai, leading his warriors in a concentrated effort to fend off the monster's murderous intentions. Unable to harm the demon, the samurai could only try to distract it, darting in to slash at it and then retreating before it could retaliate. Some were able to keep out of its reach. A few weren't so fortunate and were mutilated by the samebito's fury.

The valour of the Hoshin samurai drove Oba back into the fight. His head still pounding, his chest feeling as though a great weight was pressing upon it, his ears ringing with the clamour of a gong, he forced himself to meet the samebito once more. Lunging at the shark-beast as it lowered its head to snap at Kawajiri, Oba brought his sword cleaving down into the monster's skull. The heavy uchigatana sheared through the left-side branch of the demon's head, leaving it to spin across the deck, its black eye staring malignantly back at him.

The hideous wound was a mortal one. The samebito crashed onto its side, blood and ichor jetting from its bisected head. The beast's limbs flailed wildly, its tail drumming against the deck in a spasm of agony. Samurai and wako fled from the demon's seizures, horrified by the savagery of its death throes.

Oba gave scant notice to the vanquished samebito. As soon as the beast dropped, he was in motion. Jumping the narrow span of sea that had started to develop between the two ships, he landed on the deck of the atakebune. Such wako as had retreated back to their warship now fled from the samurai as he charged to the wooden tower. Seizing hold of the ropes hanging from its side, he climbed rapidly for the platform at the top and the fat sorcerer.

The sorcerer was sitting when Oba reached the platform. The conjurer had another fish resting on the folds of his yellow robe and was rapidly dismembering it with a knife. The string of blood-red jewels was on the platform beside him, one of the gems ready to be anointed and cast over the side to call up yet another shark-demon.

'It is over,' Oba declared, pointing Koumakiri at the sorcerer's throat. 'Surrender and I will petition Lord Torogawa to extend mercy to you.'

The sorcerer looked up from his sinister work. He stared with alarm at the blade pointed at him. Fright soon gave way to resignation. 'I should have known it would be that sword,' he said. 'Only Koumakiri could wreck such havoc upon demons like the samebito.' He lifted his gaze to stare at Oba. 'It is a riddle that the sword of Sekigahara should be serving one of the Shogun's vassals.'

'When the choice is to fight against demons, there is no choice,' Oba said.

Slowly, the sorcerer rose to his feet, reaching to retrieve the string of jewels. As he did, the sleeve of his robe drew back. For only an instant the image of a five-clawed dragon could be seen tattooed on his forearm. Oba noted the mark with surprise. The five-clawed dragon was the sign of the Emperor. Only the onmydori, the seers of the Imperial court, had that mark inked into their skin.

The onmydori saw Oba's surprise. 'You understand why I cannot be captured,' he said. Without another word, the sorcerer turned and with astounding speed leapt from the top of the tower. His fat body plummeted like a boulder into the sea beside the atakebune. Drawn by his conjurations, the water was alive with sharks. Their arrow-like bodies knifed down after the onmydori, soon turning the waves red with blood. Not so much as a scrap of yellow robe rose to the surface as the sharks went into their feeding frenzy.

Oba regretted the sorcerer's suicide. He was certain there was much the onmydori could have taught him about the ways of demons and how he might find the one that had claimed his late master's soul. He looked down at the conjurer's paraphernalia scattered about the platform. Among the debris he spotted a single crimson jewel lying amongst the dismembered fish. Not without some misgivings, he picked it up. The jewel, he knew, had acted as a vital component in summoning the samebito. It felt loathsomely cold to his touch, a manifestation of the fell energies bound into it.

He would keep the sinister gemstone, and pray to the gods that they would guide him to one wise enough to understand its secrets. Perhaps, Oba mused, then he would find some of the answers he needed.

When he descended from the tower, Oba saw that the Hoshin samurai had prevailed against the wako. Most of the pirates had been slain, but a half dozen had been taken alive to face the judgement of Lord Torogawa. Two samurai were using the ends of paddles to push the remains of the samebito across the deck. Like the first demon, in death the creature had shrivelled in size and resumed the shape of a natural shark. Such supernatural dissolution had only furthered the warriors' loathing of its carcass.

Kawajiri stood on the deck of the atakebune, a grim expression on his face. Oba braced himself as he dropped off the tower. Now that the crisis was past, would the Hoshin samurai seek his head?

Kawajiri didn't draw his katana. Instead he removed a purse from inside the sleeve of his undercoat. 'Chamberlain Hidetoro said there was no reward our clan could offer you.' The samurai dropped the silk pouch to the deck and pointedly looked away. 'If you happen to find ten koban already stolen by the wako, you would be free to claim it.'

Oba nodded in understanding. As he leaned over to take the purse of gold, Kawajiri continued in a sombre tone. 'Chamberlain Hidetoro has also said that your presence in Nokoshima could embarrass Lord Torogawa. It is desirable that when you reach shore that you will leave the province immediately. Your mission is known. In gratitude for your help, my clan will investigate any demonic activity in our domain. Whatever we learn, it will be sent by messenger to the temple at Mount Odo.'

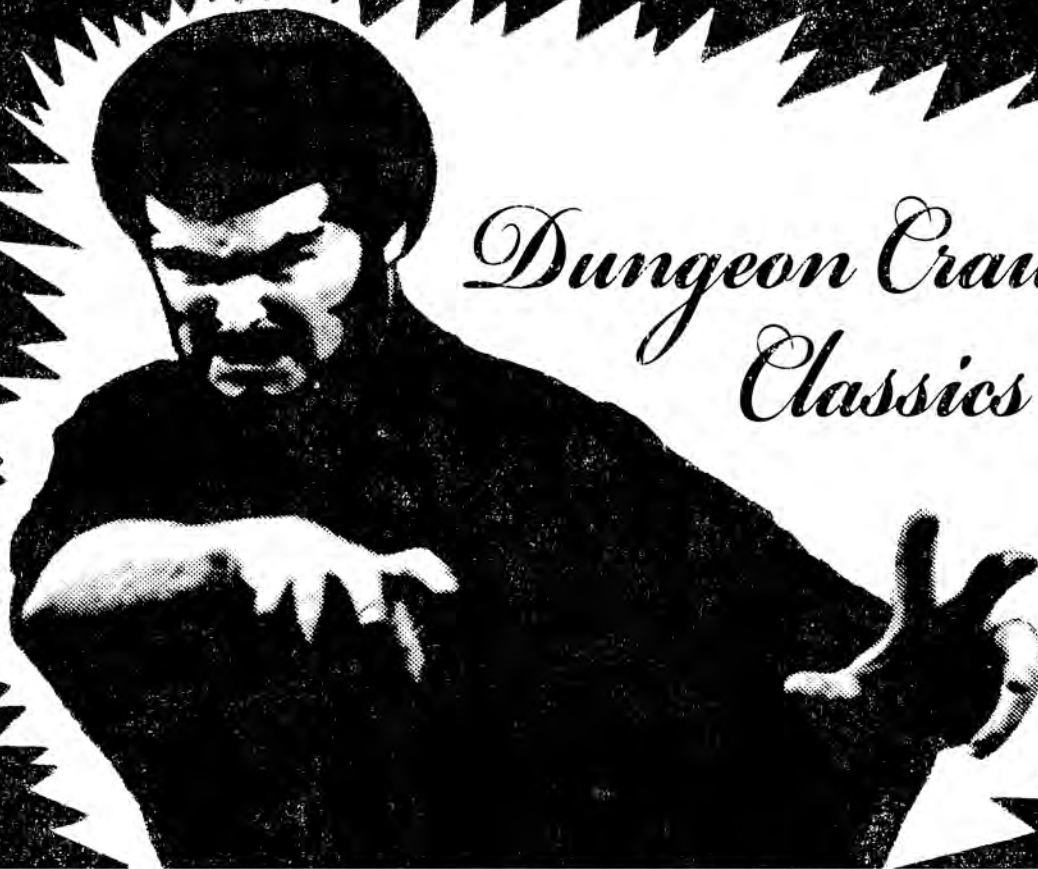
Hefting the koban he'd been given, Oba bowed to Kawajiri. 'Extend my respect to your lord,' he said. 'Tell him that more than anything, it is the help of his clan in my quest that repays such slight service as I have given him.'

Kawajiri returned the bow. 'May the gods keep you safe until your task is accomplished.'

At that moment Oba saw the Hoshin samurai push the dead shark into the sea. How many more demons would he have to face before he uncovered the one he was hunting? How long could even the gods keep a man safe on so perilous a quest?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Exiled to the blazing wastes of Arizona for communing with ghastly Lovecraftian abominations, C L Werner strives to infect others with the grotesque images that infest his mind. He is the author of almost thirty novels and novellas in settings ranging from Warhammer, Age of Sigmar, and Warhammer 40,000 to the Iron Kingdoms and Wild West Exodus. His short fiction has appeared in several anthologies, among them *Rage of the Behemoth*, *Sharkpunk*, *Kaiju Rising*, *A Grimoire of Eldritch Investigations*, *Edge of Sundown*, *Shakespeare vs Cthulhu*, *City of the Gods*, and *Marching Time*.



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OLD LAMB

A PROFILE BY HOWARD ANDREW JONES



IN the early decades of the last century, the pulps were an entertainment mainstay, and vast numbers of periodicals were to be found on the corner newsstands. They were the television of their day, and readers could stop in for the newest collection of whatever genre they most enjoyed, be it detective stories, or romance, or air ace tales, or westerns, or even that Weird Tales thing. Most of the pulp magazines came out at least once a month. Adventure, which usually featured a couple of short novels and a bevy of shorter work, sometimes appeared three times every single month.

Any writer who encountered *Adventure* magazine between 1917 and the early 1930s would have had Harold Lamb's work readily at hand, because he was one of the magazine's most popular writers and appeared there with great frequency. Probably the most important of those who saw him, though, was a Texan named Robert E. Howard, who counted Harold Lamb as one of his favorite authors. Howard used the same depictions of some Mongolian historical characters as Lamb in one of his own stories, and used Lamb's Cossack fiction as a research tool for drafting his own. Through Howard, Lamb cast a very long shadow across the entire sword-and-sorcery genre.

The two writers share a number of overlapping interests. Both wrote of barbarians and outcasts and border regions, and civilization that was usually corrupt. Their prose style is fairly different, for Lamb's work tends to be more spare, but much of their intent and focus is similar. Unlike either the tales of Conan or Lankhmar, however, Lamb's Cossack adventures are written in sequence. They can be enjoyed out of order, but they're even more fun to absorb as they were published, chronologically both for the characters and by date of composition. Some co-stars return for second appearances, and events in one story might build tangentially off of something mentioned in a previous tale.

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 action. 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, from "The Curved Saber." Khlit the Cossack is leading a small army of Tartars into battle against an army of the Mogul's, many of whom ride massive war elephants, raining death from the howdahs perched upon the backs of the mighty beasts:

Khlit pointed to the howdah of the Northern Lord, glittering with its costly trimmings.

"Chagan, take a score of followers and slay me that chief."

By now the arrows from the howdahs were flying among the Tatar riders, and their own arrows were deflected off the armored coverings of the beasts. Khlit rose to a standing position in his saddle and surveyed the masses of fighting men. He rode swiftly from clan to clan, bidding them draw away from the riverbank. In so doing they passed near the elephant of Paluwan Khan.

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. And, reeling, he made his way to Khlit, through the watchers who had halted to view the struggle upon the elephant.

"Kha Khan, look upon your foe!"

And Chagan tossed the head aside, to run, staggering, at Khlit's stirrup as the Tatars swept athwart the Mogul's line, away from the river.

Lamb was born into a family of artists and artisans in 1892, in Alpine, New Jersey. Among close relatives were a famous architect, a presidential portrait painter, and several who designed stunning glassworks. He once described himself as having been born with damaged eyes, ears, and speech, adding that by later adulthood these problems had mostly righted themselves. Whatever ailments Lamb struggled with, they weren't enough to keep him from serving in World War I, although he was lucky to have been drafted into service only a few months before the conflict drew to an end.

He hated school, and while he took refuge on the tennis court, he also took refuge in libraries, both his grandfather's and the library of Columbia, where he first discovered the histories of eastern civilizations that fascinated him for the rest of his life. While Lamb was drawn to accounts of ancient Mongolia and Persia, nearly any border region of Asia intrigued him. It was only natural that when he turned to writing he set his stories in these lands.

He sold early and he sold quickly. By his mid twenties he had cracked the prestigious *Adventure*. After penning a first few forgettable South Seas adventures, while still in the army in 1917 Lamb turned his eye towards the border between Russia and Mongolia and began to craft on one of the finest heroic fiction cycles in English.

Lamb's work was direct and fast-paced, in stark contrast to that of many of his contemporaries. There was nothing slow or plodding about a Lamb tale, which drove forward with the impatience of a freight train at full steam. His stories were impeccably researched, often introducing real historical characters with whom his protagonists interacted. To most of his western readers, these adventures were set in places so unfamiliar and exotic they might as well have been science fiction.

He wasn't so much politically correct as he was even-handed, because villains and heroes could come from any land. He avoided the simplistic depiction of foreign or unfamiliar cultures as evil and many of his heroes were Mongolian, Indian, Russian, or Muslim. Almost all of them were outsiders or outcasts. True supernatural events were very rare within his work, and his settings were real, if uncommon, places, but his fiction otherwise reads very much like the sword-and-sorcery adventure that came after him.

In company with the aforementioned strengths of his prose, his style was clean and direct, although Lamb was perfectly capable of lovely poetic metaphors, and he was never a formula plotter. His stories often turned upon surprising developments that rose from character conflict.

In 1927 Lamb wrote a biography of Genghis Khan that was very well received and has seldom been out of print, and from there on, he wrote for the pulps less and less. By the time the magazines had dried up he had transitioned to writing histories and biographies full-time, along with the occasional script for Cecilie B. DeMille. By the 1950s his expertise in his field of study had been acknowledged by the state department, who used him as an informal advisor, and who had employed him overseas as an OSS operative in World War II.

To research his interests he learned to speak French, Latin, Persian, Arabic, and, as he himself wrote, "a smattering of Manchu-Tartar." Apparently he also spoke some ancient Persian, because L. Sprague de Camp once bumped into him in an elevator (they shared a publisher) and addressed him in that language. Lamb easily replied in kind.

His most sustained cycle of stories is centered upon Cossacks, primarily the Odyssean Khlit of the Curved Saber, who's a central player in eighteen short stories, novellas, and the occasional novel (he makes a brief appearance in a nineteenth and is mentioned in a twentieth). He's no youngster, but a graybearded veteran who chooses to ride off into the wilds of Asia rather than face forced retirement into a Russian monastery.

It's grand stuff. Lamb quickly got his feet under him, and by the second or third Khlit story he was drafting fiction that can stand shoulder to shoulder with later classics like Howard's "The Tower of the Elephant" or Leiber's "Bazaar of the Bizarre." By the eighth adventure Khlit had already infiltrated the hidden fortress of assassins, tracked down the tomb of Genghis Khan, been framed for the murder of a Chinese emperor, and been besieged by hordes of his enemies in a fortress in the middle of a frozen lake. Over the course of his journeys he faces countless skilled bladesmen and scheming priests and reputed wizards, ever journeying into stunning and haunted lands. He bears with him a magnificent curved blade with a secret history, which is gradually unveiled to him as he journeys ever further east.

Sometimes he's paired with his grandson Kirdy, sometimes he joins forces with the swashbuckling Muslim swordsman Abdul Dost (who co-stars in four stories and a novel of his own) and sometimes he's teamed up with the Herculean Ayub and the wily Demid, who have their own small cycle of adventures.

Lamb also wrote several shorter adventure cycles that feature Crusaders, including a trilogy of novellas about a knight who finds and wields the sword Durandal, and the splendid exploits of far-wandering Niall O'Gordon, the last two adventures he ever penned for *Adventure* magazine.

Most of Lamb's best fiction is now readily available in eight volumes I assembled and edited for the University of Nebraska Press, four of which collect his Cossack stories, with the rest of his work loosely organized by theme.

Lamb had less influence upon speculative fiction writers drafting in the seventies and eighties, who would not have been exposed to his fiction. However, at about the time Appendix N appeared in print, a small selection of Lamb's fiction began to trickle out, reintroducing him to a wider audience. As a result, while a generation or two had encountered him only indirectly via his influence upon other authors, writers like James Enge and yours truly found him an inspiration that directly impacts the way we approach our writing. In my case his tales are one of my most important touchstones.

If you've never read outside the fantasy genre, he's just one or two steps sideways, and well worth the short trip. For those who enjoy tales of grand adventure, he left a gleaming hoard of treasures.

Many Harold Lamb books can be found for sale online. We recommend you start with Wolf of the Steppes: The Complete Cossack Adventures, Volume One. It is edited by Howard Andrew Jones and published by Bison Books.



By TERRY OLSON

Enter the monster pit! Down here in the pit, we provide tabletop RPG fans with playable game statistics for the creatures in this issue of *Tales From The Magician's Skull*. These game stats are grounded in the aesthetic of the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game*, or DCC RPG. DCC RPG is heavily inspired by the stories of Appendix N, a collection of fantasy and science fiction works that inspired Gary Gygax to create *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Tales From the Magician's Skull* can be read on its surface as simply great stories, but players of role playing games (DCC RPG or otherwise) may also recognize that these stories are designed to pay homage to Appendix N and its role in providing inspiration to RPG games. Therefore we present this appendix of game statistics for the various creatures described herein. All of these stats are for the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game* system, although you may be able to easily adapt them to other systems as well. Gamers—enjoy!

Pool of Memory

Memory Crystal: Init +6; Atk hurled styli +4 missile fire (1d4+1, range 60') or glassy thorn +4 melee (1d8+1); AC 20; HD 4d8; MV 30'; Act 4d20; SP immune to non-magical weapons, immune to mental effects, sonic vulnerability (takes 1d6 damage from the sound of a crystal glass object shattering, takes 1d10 damage from sounds that can shatter glass), mouth-plants (rooted network to mouth-plants that steal victim's xp and memories and send them through roots to crystal, see below), death throes (restores all mouth-plants' stolen xp and memories); SV Fort +8, Ref +1, Will +4; AL N.

It was quite large: an irregular polygon made of crystalline panes that themselves consisted of crystalline panes. There were glassy tendrils extending from the central body where the corners of the panes joined. It was alive, obviously, but somehow it didn't look as if it were alive.... It was observing the slowly filling jars of memory. The monster had palps for gripping at the end of some of its tendrils: several of them gripped styli and were inscribing notes on sheets of glass scattered over the monster's work-table. Other tendrils were adorned with crystalline globes that acted as eyes—even Am

could see that because, as he looked at them, they swivelled toward him. He saw the beast. The beast saw him.

Mouth-Plant: Init +2; Atk bite +2 melee (1d4 plus memory drain); AC 12; HD 2d8; MV 15'; Act 1d20; SP memory drain (DC 13 Will save or lose 10 xp, and PC loses a chosen memory; both recoverable if memory crystal destroyed), damaged mind (PCs reduced to 0 hp permanently lose 1 point of INT), death throes (release stinking green smoke, DC 11 Fort save or suffer -1d to actions for 1 round), immune to mental effects, vulnerability (if memory crystal destroyed, all connected mouthplants die); SV Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +8; AL N.

The heap was surrounded by man-high plants with dark spiny stems; from them extended the ivy-like limbs that wove together to provide shade for the mushrooms. At the foot of each stem was a straggly halo of mushy brown leaves. At the top of each stem was a pair of thick petals, very like lips, gleaming in poisonous green. Am didn't find them unusual, since he had nothing in his memory to compare them to, but he didn't like them. And he really didn't like it when some of the mouth-plants turned toward them and opened their lips, revealing the narrow dark gullet within.

Guardian of Nalsir-fel

Ventriloserpent: Init +3; Atk bite +3 melee (1d6 plus poison) or mimic lure (special, range 500', line-of-sight not required); AC 14; HD 4d8; MV 35'; Act 3d20; SP poison (DC 12 Fortitude save or paralysis for 2d6 rounds), mimic lure (DC 16 Will save or spend all round's/turn's movement to get closer to mimicry), mental mimicry (if a sentient being comes within 30' and fails a DC 12 Will save, the ventriloserpent can telepathically learn all voices the target has heard; this requires all round's actions and the beast remembers these voices for 24 hours), ventriloquism (can project a learned voice to sound like it's coming from anywhere within 60' of the serpent), center-head vulnerability (inflicting more than 8hp to the center head applies -2d attack penalties to beast and grants +1d to incoming attacks); SV Fort +3, Ref +3 Will +3; AL N.

Around the corpse on the cart loomed a great serpent, its black and green body thick as Ahzlamin's leg, its head in front of the Kewllern's face. Below the great flaring nostrils its jaws slowly stretched open. The other two heads turned to Ahzlamin, their red ear-fins spreading and their long, blunt tongues lolled drooling from their mouths "I am here," one of them said in Ilhann's quiet, frightened voice... "Here," said the serpent's head, the middle one, again. Its long, forked tongue lashed the air, and its mouth opened, and the eyes, the great saucer-sized eyes, with their huge pupils calm and brown as those of a cow, sought out his own... One of the heads facing Ahzlamin began to speak, and while he did not understand the language, he swore it was in Pazaloi's voice, or maybe his mother's, or was it his poor sister Tamalut, who had died so young?

In the Corridors of the Crow

Carapaced Mauler: Init +6; Atk sharded fist +4 melee (1d6+4 plus proneblow) or foot stomp +4 melee (1d8+4, prone targets only); AC 18; HD 4d8; MV 45'; Act 2d20; SP proneblow (Fort save DC 10+fist damage or be knocked prone), knockout damage (when an attack inflicts maximum damage, target makes DC 14 Fort save or loses consciousness for 1d3 rounds), immune to visual effects; SV Fort +2, Ref +6, Will +0; AL C.

Another howling roar rang from the passageway and a huge figure burst into the chamber. The little group recoiled before the onslaught of a massive humanoid form who was raging among them in an instant, moving with unnatural speed... Benhus had a confused impression of an oversized man seemingly clad in awkward and irregular armor mottled brown, black and green. A fist nearly the size of his head, bristling with shards as jagged as broken glass, whistled past his face and he flung himself away.

Dreams of a Sunken Realm

Water Demons (un-dead swarm): Init +3; Atk fluidic tendrils +3 melee (2d3 plus drown) or beckon (special); AC 16; HD 6d12; MV swim 100'; Act d20 special; SP attacks all targets in water encircled by swarm, drown (target makes DC 14 Fort save or suffers 1d5 STA damage; those reduced to 0 stamina die by drowning), wreaking whirlpool (swarm may spend the round's actions to do 2d20 damage to any inanimate object, e.g. a ship, that it's surrounded), beckon (a target within 50' of water's surface must make a DC 14 Will save or jump into the swarm's encircled water), half damage from non-area attacks, double crits (on nat 20, roll single d10 and use results from both crit tables U and M), un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +3, Ref +5, Will +5; AL N.

Elak craned his neck and thought he discerned something in the waves, a number of darting shapes, rising and falling like dolphins at play. Though these were no dolphins. They had faces, blurred in the foam and spray, semi-human faces. "Water demons!" Dalan gasped.... "I have not seen their like before," said Dalan. "Though there have been many sightings and legends of similar creatures. Some call them the ghosts of long sunken cities, or sailors drowned by the wild elements of the northern currents.

Demons of the Depths

Samebito (summoned shark-demon): Init +6; Atk bite +6 melee (1d10+6 plus torso-rip) and claw +5 melee (1d6+5) and tail-smash +4 melee (1d8+4); AC 17; HD 8d8; MV 40' or swim 60' or leap 30'; Act 3d20; SP torso-rip (if bite does maximum damage, target makes DC 18 Fortitude save or is reduced to zero hp as its torso is ripped off at the waist and contained in Samebito's maw), projectile torso (requires 1 action: if Samebito has torso-ripped a victim, it disgorges the body as missile fire +6 to hit, 2d4 dmg, 30' range), shredding miss (if Samebito misses melee attack by 2 or less, intended target must succeed on DC 12 Reflex save or take 1 point of damage from contact with Samebito's sharp skin), immune to non-magical weapons; SV Fort +8, Ref +7, Will +6; AL C.

When the shark struck the deck the creature didn't flail about in confusion, floundering in the open air. Instead it picked itself up from the planks, rising on two stumpy, frog-like legs. Two powerful arms, each ending in a webbed hand, projected from where the monster's fins should have been. It pawed the air with these limbs, displaying claws like sickles as it advanced menacingly towards the awestruck samurai... 'Samebito,' Oba hissed, recognizing the nature of the fiend.



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Mortal dogs, are you brave enough to match quills with the Skull? You may contact him at your peril. Be warned: some correspondents are turned to powder or ash. Yet others receive the blessings of immortal wisdom and maybe even a reply! Here are some missives that the Skull has permitted to interrupt his thoughts in recent months.

Dear Mr. The Skull,

I was quite ecstatic to see the post about an upcoming Kickstarter for more issues to showcase your magicalness. But if I recall correctly, it said more info would be coming in March, and I don't remember seeing anything.

—Black Cavalier

Greetings, Mortal Dog!

I am amused by your reliance on the petty time-units of mere mortals! Your life is but a fortnight to my centuries, maggot! What is a month, a year, an eon to an immortal such as myself? Yet I commend your foresight in predicting my impending return to corporeality. Watch your glowing box, mortal dog! The Skull shall return...and soon!

—So Sayeth the Skull

I'm pumped to read issue #3. I read the Enge story the first day it came in.

I wanted thank you all for doing better packaging with issue #3. Issue #2 got bent up in the soft packaging.

—Gus Bumgartner

Greetings, Mortal Dog!

Your letter has been read to me, and I am pleased. The intern responsible for previous packing efforts has been ground shipped across country to learn the error of his ways and to inspire his successors to greater care.

When you have read each page of my splendid magazine, report your delight to me, and be certain to advise all you meet that it is peerless! Spread word of my glories!

—So Sayeth the Skull

For too many sleepless nights, the Skull's Sendings disturb my restless restorative hours. Silently, he hovers over my prostrate form, my face buried in my pillow, I try to pretend he isn't there. The Skull demands I formally write of my praise and acquiescence. In hopes that my obedience satisfies him enough to allow me sleep, here I sit.

Upon my bulging shelves, I make room for each issue of Tales From the Magician's Skull. I was not wise enough to jump on with issue #1; however, redemption arrived with a wonderful Kickstarter permitting me to receive a subscription of further issues and acquire back issues of those missed. My soul rejoices with the recent sneak peak of issue #5. In anticipation, I lament the ponderously slow postal system.

Each issue contains stories of an ilk I enjoy. I prefer the term swords & sorcery, but even if each individual story within does not conform to my definition thereof, each is a close cousin. I have found no stories lacking to the point of receiving my negative criticism. I do have favorites of each issue so far:

#1: I enjoy the Benhus tales of one John C. Hocking. Benhus is such a delicious bastard. I do hope the Mighty Skull implores—nay The Mighty Skull would not beg—demands further tales from this subject. I weep that it was not seen fit to publish Mr. Hocking's Conan and the Living Plague, and hope to one day study its pages. Also highlighted were "Crypt of Stars" by Howard Andrew Jones, and "There was an Old Fat Spider" by C.L. Werner. Friends in my online S&S group sing the praises of HAJ The Ring Sworn Trilogy, I must make time to read it at some point. I was happy to see Mr. Werner. I have enjoyed a good many of his Warhammer novels.

#2: More John C. Hocking! Violette Malan's "A Soul's Second Skin" was a great read. I enjoyed Stefan Poag's illustrated adaption of A. Merritt's classic "The People of the Pit" and would enjoy seeing more graphic features.

#3: First, that cover by Sanjulian! All of the four covers are top-notch, but #3 mixes Lovecraftian horror with action. Nice. I very much enjoyed William King's "The Face that Fits His Mask" (another favorite Warhammer novelist familiar to me). This issue I give you four favorites as I can not pick only 3, to include the aforementioned Mr. King, add more John C. Hocking, Violette Malan and Howard Andrew Jones.

#4: John C. Hocking is rocking every issue he is included in. My top three favorites include "Guardian of the Broken Gem", "The Witch's Hound" by C.L. Werner and "On Death Seed Island" by Adrian Cole. Mr. Cole's Elak story here is the second of his resurrection of Henry Kuttner's Elak of Atlantis takes I have read. I need to purchase his recent Elak, King of Atlantis. I do not wish to drag the recent politics involved in the cancellation of the Robert Price edited Flashing Swords #6, but Mr. Cole's inclusion was something I was looking forward to.

I hope for more of the same that impart joy to my bartered soul. Please Mighty Skull, stop with the Sendings. Allow me rest so that I might have enough energy to celebrate the stories in issue #5. I include a photo of my lovely wife modeling my proudly owned Tales of the Magician's Skull t-shirt. She enjoys it so much, it is lost to me, and now I must obtain another.

Long Live the Skull. Long Live Tales from the Magician's Skull

—Clint Shulenski

Greetings, Mortal Dog!

Your letter pleases me. I endorse the stylistic choice of your lovely wife. Your desire to procure more t-shirts is to be commended, and I encourage you to purchase not just one for yourself, but for the whole of your kingdom, so that all you pass upon the street wear my visage!

Be warned—if a skull hovers near you during your sleeping hours, it is not me! While I occasionally encounter mortals when I venture from my sanctum, each night this month I have travelled to realms undreamt of only via a device referred to as a “Betamax,” so your visitor is some other entity. Consult a sage or necromancer at once, lest some dire fate befalls you!

Your authorial preference has been noted. I have informed Goodman that the authors in question are to be allotted extra portions of gruel for the coming week.

I leave you now so that you may contemplate the honor of my direct address to you. After an appropriate period of joyous abandon, march forth to shout of my glories to all in your vicinity, so that they will flock to my banner!

—So Sayeth the Skull

Hello,

I discovered Tales from the Magician’s Skull late, at Issue 4. I am currently a subscriber and am eagerly anticipating Issue 5. The cover looks awesome.

I have picked up all the back issues, but have been unable to get my hands on a print copy of issue #2. Is there any chance that this will be reprinted or you all having a few left in a secret stash somewhere I could buy? I have been searching secondary markets and only found one copy on ebay once that was over \$100 which was out of my price range and some online store in Germany that could not ship to the US. I know I can buy the pdf, but I really prefer to have the printed copy as I am a collector

and also a bibliophile. Even if you all could make it POD at DriveThruRPG I would take that.

Thank you very much,

—Jim May

Greetings, Mortal Dog!

Your allegiance has been duly noted, as has your appropriate praise of the artwork gracing the coming issue!

All prior issues have been acquired by my loyal subjects; there are no copies to spare of issue 2, and I have not yet begun to contemplate the re-emergence of any of my earlier work. I shall consider your interest as I ponder my future plans, which may be encouraged if you send jeweled goblets or haikus extolling my supremacy care of The Skull, at Goodman Games.

Now go you forth, and show the cover of issue 5 to all you meet! Sing to them of the wonders of my peerless magazine, and tell them where it may be purchased! Soon, soon, all will know of me! Hahahaha!

—So Sayeth the Skull

Oh Great Skull,

I want old issue 2. I don’t know what to do. I have searched high and low, to Ebay I must go. I lack the wisdom to write a haiku. A reprint would be nice. But a pdf will have to suffice.

Thank you for all that you do.

—Jim May

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?



**Do not despair, Mortal Dogs!
Issue 6 is already well begun.**

...

**Dire Aztec sorceries,
the return of Hanuvar, and much,
much more await – including an
authorized NEW story of Fafhrd
and the Grey Mouser by the
illustrious Nathan Long!**

...

**So Endeth Issue 5. Go forth now
and tell all you see of its glories!**

...

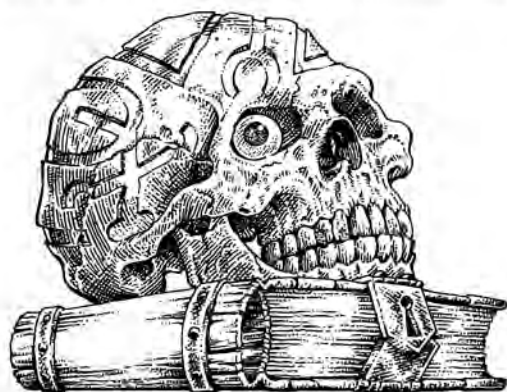
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BY D.M. RITZLIN

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IN THIS ISSUE...

In the Corridors of the Crow, by John C. Hocking

A Tale of the King's Blade: It was a nest, a great nest made of bones. He saw the bones of men and animals wound and bound together, forming such a dense fabric that he could not tell where one ended and the other began. He could make out the weathered skulls of men and the antlers of a great stag, all crusted with layers of dust and cobweb, filthy with age and abandonment.

Pool of Memory, by James Enge

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius: The sword sang, with an almost human voice, and bright shards of crystal flew everywhere. The luminous, image-laden fog of memories billowed forth, around him and through him. He staggered like a drunk, intoxicated by the swift shocking burst of other lives, other hates, other loves. When the mists were gone, he was himself again—whoever that was.

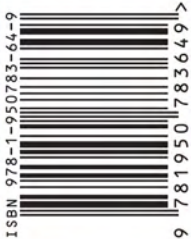
The Guardian of Nalsir-Fel, by Adrian Simmons

"Do not look for help," the messenger said. "Do not call out for the guards, they will not hear you! They will not see you! Such is the power of Cowlanati Palisani, the great and serene!"

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