

Tales From The **MAGICIAN'S SKULL**

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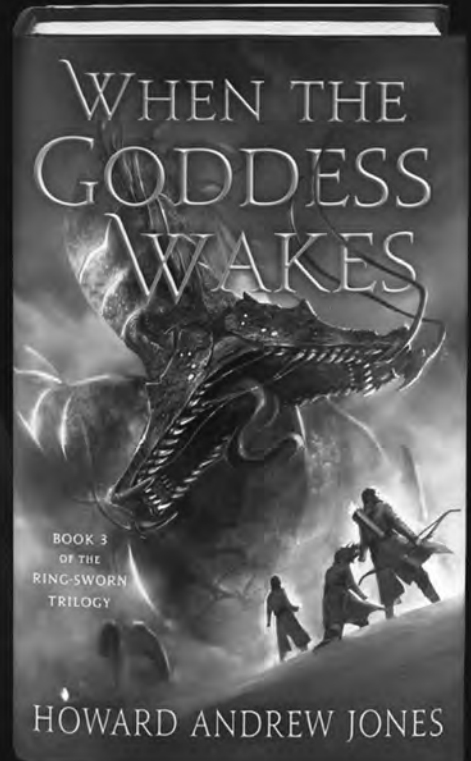
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A gong shivers ... the mists part to reveal a grisly visage lying upon a mound of rubble, dead but for one glowing, malefic eye ... It speaks, in a voice of cold command: *Silence, mortal dogs! It is time now for*

Tales From The **MAGICIAN'S SKULL**



NO. 10

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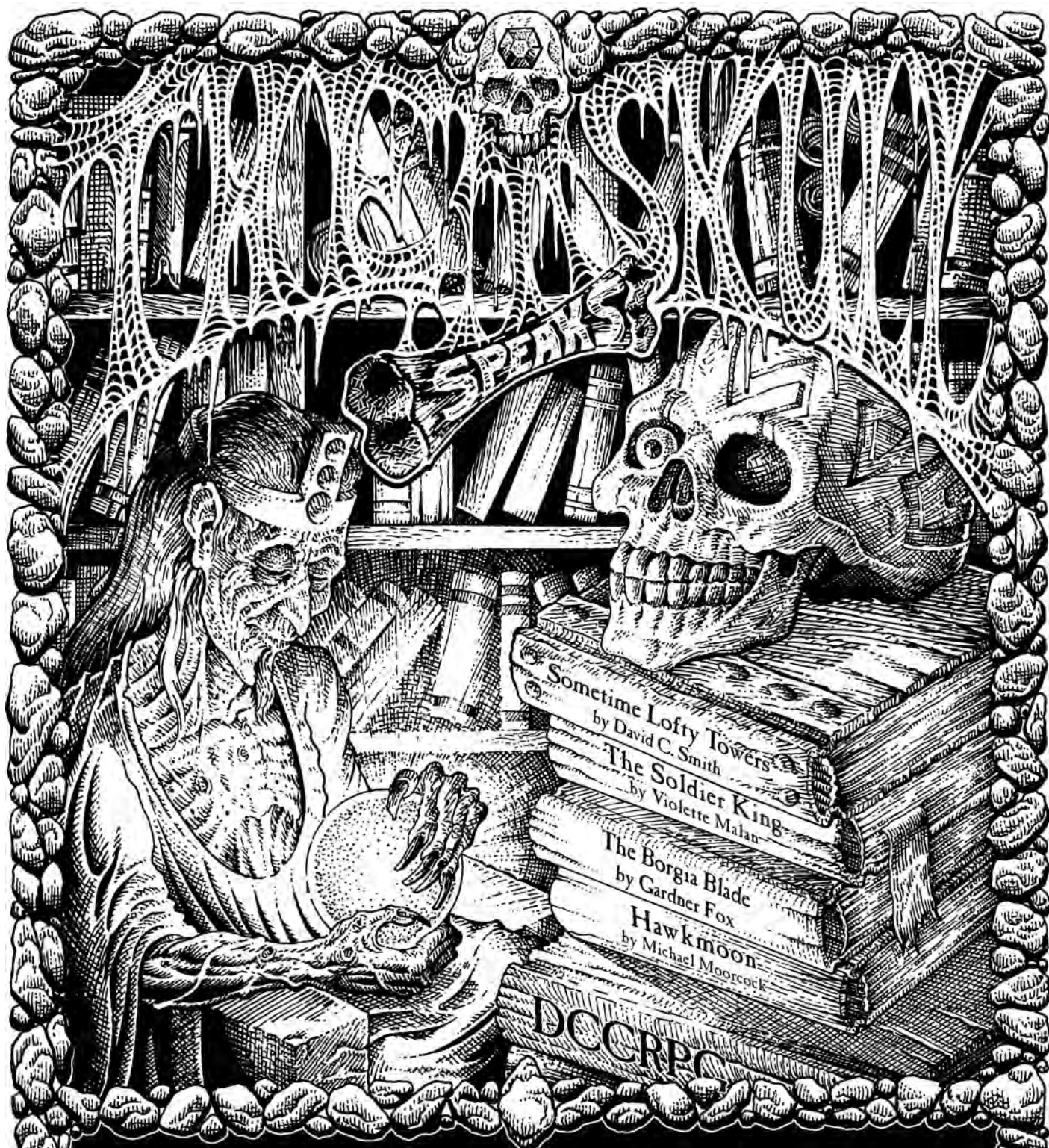
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You are surely delighted once more to hold an issue of my incomparable magazine in your febrile hands! Marvel upon marvel lie before you, so many of them in abundance that you will doubtless caper in wild abandon once you understand the boon I have granted you!

In your glee to reach the delights within you may have failed to note an important milestone. This is the tenth issue of my glorious periodical, and I have contacted the heads of state throughout your mortal realm. Congratulatory missives from the wisest of them are surely winging their way to me at this very moment!

Most of those who doubted my resolve are long since transmogrified into more useful shapes; the others surely rue the day that they wondered aloud if I could sustain a magazine devoted to the greatest of all genres in this modern age. Look on my works, you sluggards, and despair!

In celebration, I acquired a most wondrous device, a small box with a glowing screen that deploys whirling glyphs of doom that must be matched one to the other in rapid succession. It is known as The Tetris, and it is most diverting. I predict that it will be highly regarded by mortals everywhere! Once you finish reading the stories inscribed within these pages you are ordered to try it for yourself!

But I have wasted enough time with you. Go, read what I have found for you, then chant my praises — so sayeth The Skull!

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Though events beyond our own halls are strange and often troubling, we who labor beneath the aegis of The Skull prosper, and have grown used to glories. Last issue we shared the photographs of The Skull's first mortal outing to GenCon. Legal concerns have delayed the release of additional photographs, but I assure that they, too, are inspiring.

To save us the tedium of certain obscure government paperwork we may be forced to insist that The Skull be physically transported rather than teleported to his next appearance. I've been trying to convince him that we don't actually need live minstrels for entertainment during the journey (nor dead ones, which remains a point of confusion) and that many fine taped musical entertainments are possible. We might also have one of our interns simply read sword-and-sorcery stories out loud to him the whole way, although that can be unnerving, because The Skull can recite many of them by heart and bursts into spontaneous laughter at unexpected narrative junctures.

But all that's in the future, and while I can't predict what may happen, I can surely tell you a little about what you'll find in the pages of issue 10. First, I want to savor the fact that we are publishing our 10th issue. Ten issues of a fantasy magazine dedicated to sword-and-sorcery. I have to confess, that feels pretty good, and I remain delighted to be heading the editorial team of this enterprise.

As with issue 9, the majority of our fiction this time out is by newcomers we found in our first open submissions call. That hardly means that they're newcomers to writing. For instance, you've probably seen the work of Cynthia Ward in multiple places, though maybe never an undersea adventure tale like the one she brought to us. And many of our regular readers have probably seen fiction by Whetstone publisher and award winning editor and publisher Jason Carney, but he, too, is new to these pages, this time with a daring rogue who stumbles into a situation that just won't let him go.

Two of our regulars are along. You might have noticed C. L. Werner's Oba on the cover, and sure enough, Oba leads off the issue with another stunning challenge in his quest to find the demon who slew his lord. And W. J. Lewis returns with another blood-drenched tale of Dakagna.

Honestly, this issue is so jam packed I'm running out of room to describe all its treasures. So I'll just summarize and say that you're in for a thrill ride.

And as for that future, well, I hope I get to meet some of you in Indianapolis next year, and that we all have a splendid — and healthy — time. For now, enjoy these pages and, as always,

Swords Together!

— Howard Andrew Jones

THE SKULL CONTACTS THE STAR FLEET AND DISCOVERS MAGIC

Heed me, Mortal Dogs! I wish to speak to you of historical records that will be of intense interest to all right-thinking mortals. I predict that once reports of my viewing are widely disseminated that many shall seek out these same videonic documents. They concern the Star Trek Enterprise and the voyages of the captain, Kirk, his space wizard, his irascible healer, and a sort-of techno man who repairs machineries.

The first installment of the Star Trek I saw featured a most vigorous battle. The captain, Kirk, was trapped upon a rock planet and had to do battle against an upright lizard man of astounding strength. I thought the captain would be outmatched, but he outwitted the gornbeast with his intellect and deployed an explosive cannon that dropped it flat! He then grasped a blade that he had personally fashioned, and would have delivered its death blow, but in a stunning twist, he spared the monster! I found this most dissatisfying until I realized that the alien forces who had trapped him with the beast would have slain him, had he dealt the death blow! This captain, Kirk, I said to myself, is most clever!

I then beheld the captain's war against a giant planet-eating space cone, which was most splendid! He was trapped upon a haunted ship that the techno man ran, and the space wizard had to contend with another sort of captain who had lost his mind! It pleased me mightily! Finally, during another historical record, the Star Trek Enterprise was invaded by tiny balls of fur that devoured everything in their path! Once again the captain, Kirk, survived by his wiles.

I have been told that there are many recorded adventures of the Star Trek, and have informed all those in the break room of this heroic, far seeing captain. He is superior to the officers I have employed to protect my own holdings in the past, for he seems unlikely to drop his guard when presented with roast boar, nor to pry into tomes man was not meant to know, and he is unlikely to be fooled by gorillas, no matter how cunning! I have therefore reached out to the Star Trek Fleet to offer him a position on my staff. I have instructed him to bring as many of his own people as he wishes. The Star Trek Enterprise can be diminished in size so that it will fit within the halls of my domain.

Additionally, while searching the radionic transmitter for elder signals, I came upon something known as an "oldies channel." I was most irritated at first, for there were neither Sumerian chants nor Assyrian threnodies, but just as I was readying an eldritch blast that would have destroyed the transmitter, a song more to my tastes was played.

It serves as an exhortation to lazy apprentices to rise and work for their betters! I encourage my fellow sorcerers to see that it is played for their followers. Look it up under the name "Magic" by a group known as "Pilot." The crucial lyrics are as follows: "Never seen a day break, leaning on my pillow in the morning, lazy day in bed, music in my head." Fools! This is the way of apprentices and interns everywhere! It ably captures their tendencies toward somnolence! They should know that through magic their betters will always be aware of their failings! So Sayeth the Skull!

DO YOU HAVE SUGGESTIONS, QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, OR CONCERNS? DO YOU WISH TO SEND US ACCOLADES, INVITATIONS, OR JEWELLED GOBLET? 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!

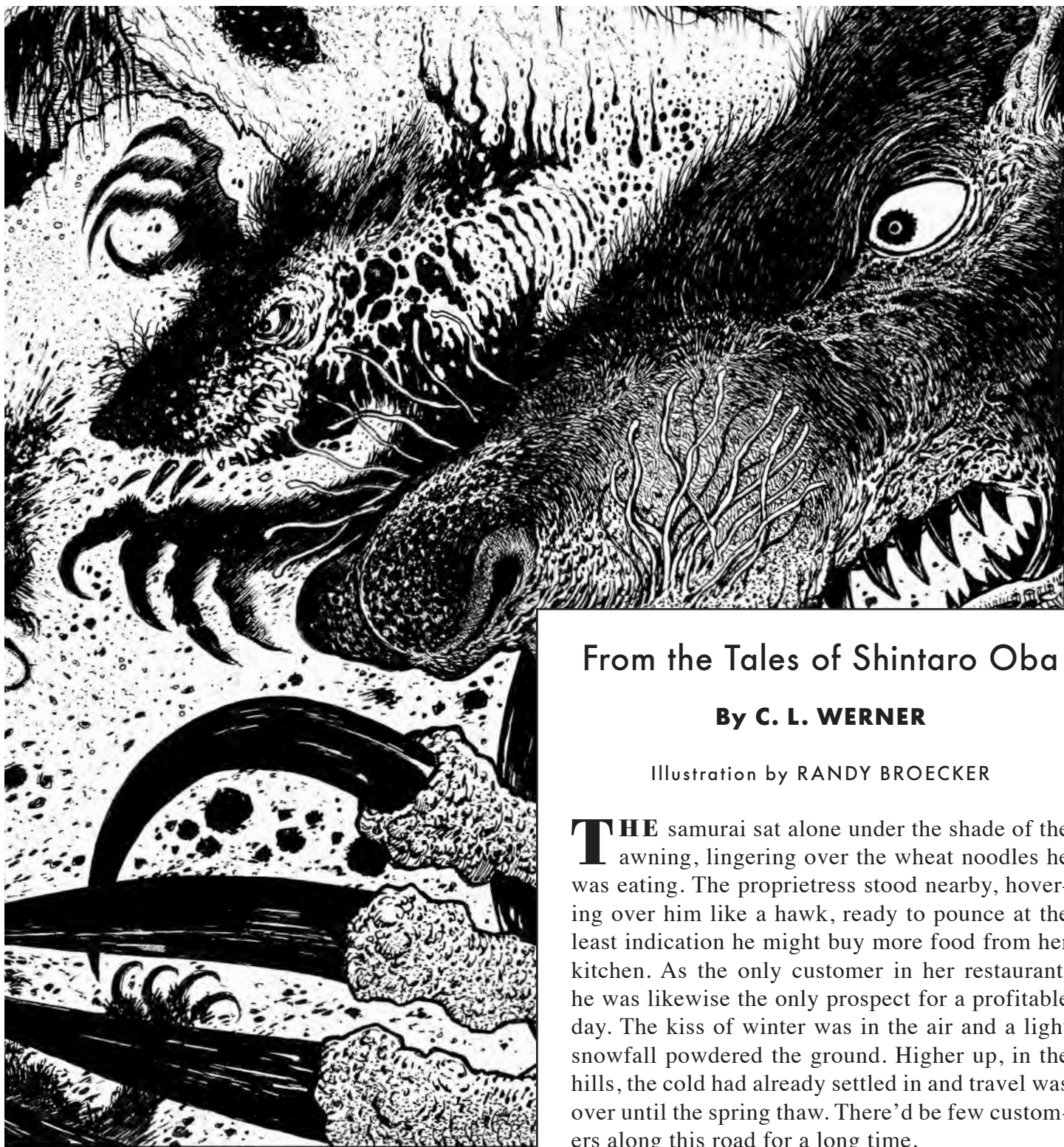


THE DEM





DOWN RATS



From the Tales of Shintaro Oba

By **C. L. WERNER**

Illustration by **RANDY BROECKER**

THE samurai sat alone under the shade of the awning, lingering over the wheat noodles he was eating. The proprietress stood nearby, hovering over him like a hawk, ready to pounce at the least indication he might buy more food from her kitchen. As the only customer in her restaurant, he was likewise the only prospect for a profitable day. The kiss of winter was in the air and a light snowfall powdered the ground. Higher up, in the hills, the cold had already settled in and travel was over until the spring thaw. There'd be few customers along this road for a long time.

Shintaro Oba didn't have the luxury of sitting out the winter. Even if a price hadn't been placed on his head by the Shogun, his obligation to his clan didn't let him remain idle. Somewhere in the lands of Mu-Thulan he would find the demon that had enslaved the spirit of Lord Katakura, last daimyo of the Sekigahara clan. This was the last duty entrusted to him by his dying lord. A task he would not fail to accomplish, however long it might take him.

The sound of swaying chimes drew Oba's attention toward the gate at the front of the covered patio. A woman wearing a bright red kimono trimmed in white entered the restaurant. Despite the chill in the air, she appeared unfazed by the cold. Her face had a robust warmth in it and her eyes were a brilliant blue. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight bun, a bamboo pin holding it in place. To the charm of a visage he already considered beautiful was added a slight, coy little smile when the traveler met his gaze. He felt his pulse quicken when the stranger walked towards his table.

A soft gasp from the proprietress drew Oba's attention away from the traveler. His brow knotted in confusion. His hostess had turned pale and her eyes were wide with what he thought must be fright. Instead of hurrying forward to attend her new guest, the woman drew back and kept close to the kitchen door. She looked like nothing so much as a rabbit ready to bolt into its burrow.

"Forgive my presumption, but may I sit with you?" the stranger asked as she approached Oba's table.

Oba made a closer study of the traveler. He knew that many a demon clothed itself in a mantle of beauty to better lull its prey. The memory of Tsubasa-no-Kumonosu wasn't one he would be quick to forget. He gazed intently at the woman, watching for the least sign that she might be another of the jorogumo's breed. The only unusual feature he could find was a deep red color at the roots of her hair and a strange sense of amusement in her eyes.

The samurai glanced over at his swords lying on the table, the jeweled wakizashi and the heavy uchigatana. If the woman were some demon in disguise, she was taking a perilous risk drawing so near that blade. Koumakiri, the famed Demon-Killer of Sekigahara, had sent many a fiend back beyond the Gate of Kimon. Oba let his hand drop to the bone handle of the sword and motioned the traveler to sit. He watched her face for the least trace of alarm, but she maintained her composure as she gracefully sat down.

"Have no fear, warrior. I won't bite," the woman laughed. In her laugh she displayed her pearly white teeth. They were slim and sharp. When the proprietress saw them, she scurried away into the kitchen, leaving her customers alone on the patio.

Oba kept his fingers on Koumakiri's grip. "You aren't very popular here, it seems. I think you'll have a hard time getting service."

"That's quite alright," the traveler replied. She raised the flowing sleeve of her kimono and patted her rich red lips. "I ate before I came here." She glanced at the door to the kitchen. "Warranted or not, a reputation follows one around and it is prudent to adjust accordingly."

There was a sly undertone to her speech that worried Oba. He looked around to see if the woman had brought any companions

with her. She didn't need to be a demon to be baiting a trap. Shogun Yoshinaga's bounty had drawn mortal hunters after him before. He decided to force the matter into the open and dispense with any pretense. "Do you know me?" he asked.

"By reputation," the woman replied with another coy smile. "Shintaro Oba, the great demon hunter. Someone is looking for you."

Oba gave her a steely stare. "They might have reason to regret finding me," he said.

The woman laughed. "I hope not. They were quite desperate for your help. And you are in the business of hunting demons." She sighed and shook her head. "I think their problem is quite beyond your ability though."

The words stung Oba's pride. "There are many demons who no longer walk this world because of me. Until I've seen the fiend that threatens your village, I won't believe it is beyond my skill to vanquish."

"Oh, it isn't my village," the woman corrected him. "I don't have a village. I prefer a more independent life." She nodded at Oba. "Rather like you, I don't like to linger in one place." She lowered her eyes and stared at Koumakiri. "You also misunderstand the problem. It isn't a question of an enemy too powerful for you, but too numerous. Not one demon, but many." She lifted her eyes and met the samurai's gaze. "You'll need help against them."

"I vanquished Tsubasa-no-Kumonosu and her brood," Oba said. He tried to make his words more confident than he felt. The jorogumo had come very close to killing him. Nor could her foul progeny be reckoned true demons, but rather half-mortal abominations. To confront a pack of monsters with her kind of power was a daunting prospect.

"It seems you'd have liked help with the jorogumo," the woman said, piercing his composure and reading the uneasiness within. "You needn't worry, these enemies lack her strength, but don't discount their numbers. It'll be no easy task."

"What are these enemies?" Oba asked. "And who are you?"

The woman bowed her head. "It isn't my place to explain what is wanted of you. I only presume to ask that you tarry here. The man who can explain is looking for you and will be here by nightfall." She lifted her face and for an instant Oba again saw her sharp teeth. "You may call me Mika-Myobu. There are some who know me by that name."

"What name do others call you?" Oba wondered.

Mika responded with a bark of laughter. "You would find it hard to pronounce. Be content with Mika." With a motion so sudden it caught the samurai off guard, she reached across the table and closed her hand around the one gripping Koumakiri. "If you still have any idea that I'm a demon, this should convince you otherwise. Do you mind if I wait here with you?"

"I don't, but I think the owner would," Oba said. Her fingers felt both cool and smooth against his hand. Gently he withdrew from her touch. If she did mean treachery he wanted his sword-arm free.

"No," Mika agreed. "I don't think she would. But she's too afraid to say anything." The sly amusement was back in her eyes when she posed a question to Oba. "You aren't afraid of me, are you?"

"That would depend on who you want me to wait here for and why they want to see me," Oba answered. He gave her a frank look. "If this is a trick, I promise you won't profit by it."

Mika smiled at him. "It *is* a trick," she said. "But if you'll let me help you, then we'll *both* profit by it."

• • •

THE sun was sinking from the sky when Mika suddenly raised her head and looked toward the road. "He's here," she said.

Oba stared into the gathering darkness but could see no one. He stood and tucked his swords under the sash around his waist. His eyes darted over to Mika. "A last warning," he said. "If this is some plot against me, mine won't be the only blood spilled this night."

Mika leaned back and stretched as she yawned. "Don't you find it tedious to be so suspicious of everyone?" she quipped. Her fingers waved at the gate. "If you don't trust me, then go look for yourself."

"And walk into an ambush?" Oba returned. "I prefer to remain here, where at least I have my eyes on you."

"Oba-san? Is that your voice I hear?" Someone was on the road, his approach hidden by the restaurant's walls. A moment later the samurai saw the glow of a lantern shining across the gate.

Oba relaxed his grip on Koumakiri. The man who called to him from the road wasn't a stranger. "Junchiro-daiguji, is that you?"

"I'm pleased you remember me," Junchiro said as he appeared at the gate. The priest was arrayed in black robes and a wide straw hat covered his head, but otherwise he was much as Oba had last seen him. Many months had passed since he'd met Hirota Junchiro and helped protect the sumotori Sentoryu on his way to challenge the yokozuna at the sacred hill of Kiso. The priest in turn had helped Oba leave the sacred hill and avoid Yoshinaga's retaliation.

The priest sank down on a bench and massaged his foot. "You're a hard man to find, Oba-san. I'd about given up hope of catching up with you."

Oba glanced over at Mika, irked to see the way she smiled at Junchiro's remark. "Fortunately I was detained here," he said. Weary of the woman's sly manner, he decided to call attention directly to her. "The lady here advised I should tarry because someone was coming who was in need of my help. She was evasive about precisely who I should be helping or the exact nature of the problem."

Mika was clearly uncomfortable when Junchiro gave her a wary look. "You seem to know quite a lot about what's been happening at Yoro-gu, but I don't recall any woman visiting the temple since our troubles began." The priest ran his fingers along the prayer beads hanging from his neck as his mind lingered over the puzzle. "I'm at a loss to remember anyone who left the temple from whom you might have heard anything. None of the monks would have confided in you."

"No, they didn't," Mika said, "but they talked about your trouble among themselves when they were bringing supplies back from the village. I overheard them. My hearing is quite sharp."

"And you thought to take a hand?" Junchiro continued to fix her with an uneasy stare. "You must've worn out the men carrying your chair to beat me here. Or did you hire a horse?"

"Is it important?" Mika asked. "I've done you a good service by convincing your samurai to wait for you." She pointed to Oba. "You should really tell him about your trouble. It is, after all, your tale to tell."

Oba could see the tension that existed between Junchiro and Mika. The priest was unsettled by her and the lady was ... frightened? Certainly her evasiveness had taken on a surliness with Junchiro rather than the almost taunting manner she'd taken with him. Whatever the cause, Oba was willing to set it aside for now. At the moment, he wanted to know what had sent the priest looking for him.

"Yoro-gu is beset by demons," Junchiro said when Oba posed the question to him. "For a fortnight the temple has been pillaged by a swarm of tesso."

"Demon rats," Mika explained. "Vermin from Kimon with iron claws and iron fangs."

Junchiro nodded. "The tesso have defied every effort to combat them. Prayers and sutras will not disperse them. Even the shrine's sacred naginta can't destroy them. The severed pieces flow back together and scamper away as though they'd never been struck down. Poison and fire, any mundane means we could think of has been tried, but nothing has worked."

"How many of the monks have these demon rats killed?" Oba was struck by the desperation in Junchiro's voice and dreaded to hear the death toll the tesso had ripped from Yoro-gu.

"None," the priest said, his body trembling. "The tesso don't prey on anything so transitory as mortal flesh. Their defilement is far worse. Each night they slink into the libraries and sanctuaries and gnaw the holy texts. Already they've destroyed a hundred scrolls and tomes!"

It was on Oba's tongue to ask if Junchiro had tried removing Yoro-gu's library to another temple, but on reflection he knew that would be impossible. If word got out that Yoro-gu was afflicted by a demonic invasion, it would be disgraced. After defying the Shogun at Kiso, it would take just such a scandal to justify the abolition of Yoro-gu. Evacuating the library would mean the destruction of the temple. It also might explain why Junchiro was so disturbed by Mika. It meant at least one outsider knew what was happening.

"This could be a ploy by Yoshinaga," Oba suggested.

Junchiro disagreed. "Whatever enmity exists between my temple and the Shogun, I don't believe Yoshinga-kubo would stoop to such blasphemy."

"There's also the question of how demons have been able to enter Yoro-gu so freely," Mika pointed out. Her smile faded and for just a moment Oba saw sadness in her eyes. "The sacred places of the Dominance have many protections against things the priests have declared evil."

"So how are the tesso inside?" Oba mused. "How did they get past the protections?"

Junchiro suddenly sprang to his feet. His hands curled around his lantern's staff as though it were the heft of a spear. He thrust it accusingly towards Mika. "Now I know what you are! Now I know how you overheard my monks and how you got here before me!"

You didn't come by the road, but through forest and fields! Not on two legs, but four! Fox!"

Mika bared her sharp little teeth as the priest decried her. "I've sought only to do a good turn by you," she said. "I've done naught to warrant such scorn." She looked over at Oba. "Would you still have been here if I didn't cause you to tarry? Do you think Junchiro-daiguji would have caught up to you if I didn't?"

Oba was forced to concede Mika's claim. "Woman or fox, she does speak the truth."

"The kitsune speak truth only when it suits their trickery," Junchiro declared. "Their taste for mischief allows no room for honor. Nor do they hesitate when their pranks bring death."

Mika met the priest's glare with one of her own. "Does the huntsman balk at catching a fox in his snare? Does the farmer balk at loosing his dogs against us? Not all kitsune hold human life in contempt, but there are few among your people who feel any kind regard for foxes."

"Peace," Oba enjoined the two, motioning priest and fox alike to ease their tempers. He fixed his attention on Junchiro. "Kitsune aren't demons, so there isn't an innate evil about them." He turned back to Mika. "And you'll acknowledge that too many of your folk play cruel tricks on people, laughing at the pain they cause."

"People take our forests and fields, change them into farms and towns," Mika said. "In their greed they refuse to leave any place for us and resent sharing their bounty with the folk they've dispossessed." The coy smile stole back onto her face. "Of course sometimes humans make themselves useful to us."

"She expects something," Junchiro slammed his palm against the table. "What is it that you expect to gain, fox?"

Mika bared her sharp little teeth in a cheerless grin. "I've offered my help to Oba-san," she explained. "The tesso are too numerous for him to overcome alone. He'll need help. The help only a kitsune can offer." She stretched out her hand. While Oba watched, the smooth pale skin began to shrink and change. Red fur grew across the flesh, the long fingers shortened until the whole of the hand had become a paw. "Wherever the tesso run, I can follow."

Junchiro was aghast. "There's no place in Yoro-gu for a kitsune!"

Mika maintained her smile, but now there was a twinkle of triumph in her eyes. "You'd have to change that if I'm to help. Remove the wards that bar my entry."

"And trade the trespass of rats for that of foxes," Junchiro scoffed.

Oba shook his head. "So this is what you meant by both of us profiting. You seek entry to Yoro-gu."

"It would mean breaking our temple's power over the kitsune," Junchiro said. "Once a fox was allowed inside the temple, no priest from there would have the power to drive them away from the villages they would prey upon."

"You mean the lands stolen from us," Mika corrected him. "We aren't like humans, you know. We take only what we need to fill our bellies, not our pockets. But there's another reason we'd want the freedom to enter Yoro-gu. The temple's libraries are extensive, even after what the tesso have destroyed. I'm interested in the wisdom in those books." She uttered a short bark of laughter. "I'm as keen to save the books as you are."

"So that you might learn ways to defy the sutras and spells that keep the kitsune in check," Junchiro accused.

"To protect my folk from those who would destroy us," Mika replied. She looked down at her paw. As she did, it turned back into a woman's hand. "You've no time to lose. Each moment you delay, the tesso steal even more from your libraries."

Oba bowed to the priest. "It would seem to me, Junchiro-daiguji, that you must choose between the dragon and the storm. Which poses the greater threat to Yoro-gu?"

Junchiro was silent for a moment. He fingered the prayer beads dangling around his neck. Finally, he reached a decision. He looked to Oba, then to Mika and bowed to each in turn. "The temple would be grateful for any help you may render us in destroying these demonic rats and saving both our books and our honor." His expression became weary, his voice burdened with resignation.

"Whatever else may come to pass, saving the wisdom entrusted to Yoro-gu is vital," the priest said. "Not simply for the sake of the temple, but for all Yamajin." Junchiro fixed Oba with his solemn eyes. "To lose that knowledge would put all Mu-Thulan at the mercy of demons."

• • •

THE halls of Yoro-gu were at once somber and grim. The corridors echoed with the desperate prayers of the monks; the air was heavy with the fog of incense. Everywhere pennants painted with the verses of sutras hung from the ceiling, invoking the powers of the gods to deliver the temple from its plight.

At the entrance, Junchiro hesitated. He drifted over to a small bamboo fountain and dipped a gilded ladle into its basin. Holding it in one hand, he gestured over it with the other while hurriedly muttering a prayer. When he was finished, he hurried over to Mika. He paused when he saw her flinch at his approach.

"This is what you asked for," Junchiro told her, "but it will do nothing unless you trust me. Faith is the honor we pay the Dominance. Without faith there can be no help from the gods." A frown pulled at his face. "I wonder if a kitsune is capable of understanding what it means to have faith?"

"Junchiro-daiguji is an honest man," Oba said. "When his word is given, you may depend upon him."

Mika nodded. "Trust doesn't come easily for foxes, but I will trust you." She stood her ground, a resolute look on her face as Junchiro anointed her with the ladle and invoked the blessings of the Dominance upon her. Oba could see her shivering beneath the red kimono.

"It is done," Junchiro declared. He cast the water left in the ladle into the garden beside the temple steps. The priest turned and retraced his steps to the font. Bowing, he restored the ladle to its hook beside the basin. "You may enter Yoro-gu now," he enjoined Mika.

The kitsune hesitated only for a moment, then stepped across the threshold. A broad smile crossed her face and she barked with laughter. When she noted the worried look Oba gave her, she shook her head. "Don't fret so, samurai. The good priest isn't the only one who keeps to an agreement." She flashed her sharp

teeth in a grimace. "I've no love to spare for demons, much less ones as foul as the tesso." Her eyes sparkled when she met Oba's gaze. "It'll be a delight to send these invaders back to Kimon."

"Then let's get started," Oba declared. His hand closed about Koumakiri's bone hilt.

Junchiro led them through the halls of Yoro-gu. They stopped only once, in the great sanctuary where an enormous jade statue of the Dominance rested on a golden throne. The priest went up to the idol and set smoldering prayer sticks in the bowl beneath its feet.

"I pray for victory," Junchiro explained as he led them away from the room and down a connecting hall. Here the teakwood floors had been left bare of bamboo mats and the walls were without silk screens to hide the bare stone. Oba noted the marks of claws and fangs on both. It was clear that the books weren't the only things being despoiled by the rats.

"Someone's fighting," Mika said, her ears perking up, twitching like those of an animal.

Junchiro nodded and pointed to a set of bronze doors at the end of the passageway. "The tesso give us no respite. Day and night they stream into the library. The monks try to fend them off, but with little success."

"We'll see how these demons fare now," Oba said. He quickened his pace, moving swiftly down the hall despite the bulk of his armor. The shouts of men and the crack of striking staves gradually became discernible to the samurai. Another sound reached him as well, a grating noise too shrill to be the snarl of a dog and too deep to be the chittering of a rat. He knew this must be the voice of the tesso.

Junchiro reached the doors first and raised the bar that closed them from the outside. He drew them back to reveal the room beyond. Oba was awed by the scope of the place. The library of Yoro-gu was gargantuan, as big in its dimensions as an entire palace. Seven tiers rose above the main floor, each filled with rack upon rack of shelves. Stairways wound between each level and wooden rails circled the edge of each tier. He could see the huge urns where the monks would burn sanitizing incense to defend against the malice of worms and rot. Light streamed down through an awning of silk that stretched across the central part of the library, configured so that no bleaching rays should reach the shelves and the books they held, instead diffusing illumination throughout the library.

All these details Oba took in at a glance, then his attention was held by the havoc transpiring before him. On every tier, monks in yellow robes were rushing to combat the temple invaders. Disgust welled up inside him at the very sight of the things. They were giant rats, the smallest of them three feet long from its twitching nose to its scaly tail. The vermin were a dull gray in color, like iron filings, and even from a distance he noted their dark claws and black fangs. The tesso swarmed up the stairs in undulating packs while bolder demons climbed the pillars that gave support to each level of the library. They scurried across the railings and along the shelves. When a monk lashed out at them with his bo staff, the rat would be flung aside by the blow, but the rodents were scarcely inconvenienced by the attacks. Wherever they landed, they would soon be back on their feet and scampering back among the shelves. Anywhere the demons

were unmolested, they'd drag a book or scroll from its place and begin tearing at it with their teeth.

Oba drew Koumakiri from its sheath and rushed into the library. It was only a few steps before he found a tesso worrying at a book that had fallen from an upper tier. The thing lifted its head, strips of paper hanging from its iron fangs. Only for a moment did its beady red eyes return the samurai's furious stare. Then the gleaming steel of the sword was flashing towards it.

Unlike the staves of the monks, when the uchigatana struck the rat, the demon didn't scamper away. Koumakiri slashed through the tesso, slicing it in half. Grayish ichor spurted from the rodent as it collapsed. A moment its claws scratched at the floor, then it was still. Oba could sense the change in the frantic atmosphere that had gripped the library. From chaos and mayhem, now there came silence. The rest of the demons turned to glower down at him with their baleful eyes.

Oba stood over the tesso he'd destroyed, its physical shape rapidly disintegrating. He held Koumakiri overhead, letting the rats get a good look at the sword. "This is Koumakiri!" he shouted, his voice echoing through the library. "This is the blade that will send you all beyond the Gate of Kimon!"

The threat brought angry snarls from the tesso. Dozens of the demons rushed to the edge of each tier and leapt down at the samurai. Oba swung his blade in a gleaming arc, slashing many as they dove at him. Any rat cut by the uchigatana was thrown to the floor, ichor draining from it as its life ebbed away. But there were too many of the vermin. Oba felt claws scratch against his armor, winced as a handlike paw clutched at the mask of his helm and a fanged muzzle snapped at his eye. Tesso scurried about his feet and clawed at his legs, seeking to drag him down. Iron claws and iron fangs ripped at the joins between his armor.

Suddenly a dazzling bluish light enveloped the samurai. Bright flashes exploded about his embattled form. Oba was blinded for an instant, but the effect was far worse upon the rats. They fell away from him, squealing in agony and rubbing their faces against the floor. When Oba could see again, he wasted no time attacking his disoriented foes. Briefly he noted Mika, her hands folding together in a series of rapid gestures. Another surge of foxfire crackled through the library as a horde of vermin prepared to leap down from the upper levels. Some fell back, squeaking in pain, while others hurtled downward in a blind plunge.

Koumakiri took a butcher's toll upon the tesso. Each swing of his blade left a half dozen of the rats strewn about the floor. Oba hacked away at the verminous demons, offering the filth no mercy. Their tortured shrieks and angry hisses became a deafening din. The samurai's senses narrowed to the carnage around him. So much so that he almost struck Mika when she suddenly appeared beside him.

"Behind you, Shintaro!" Mika pointed towards the nearby stairs.

Oba felt his gorge rise when he saw that the steps were alive with a tide of squirming bodies. Hundreds of the gray rats were spilling down the stairs, their eyes gleaming with ravenous hate. "Get away," Oba ordered Mika, spinning her behind him with one arm while he held his sword out with the other. "I'll kill as many as I can before they finish me."

"Kill the ones that shine," Mika told him. Oba could feel the air around him grow cold and knew that the kitsune was drawing on her magic again. As the verminous throng rolled down the steps, he saw some of them begin to glow. Lost to their rage, the tesso took no notice of the manifestation, intent only on the samurai who'd dared stand against them.

The snarling wave of rats rushed at Oba. Koumakiri's gleaming edge was there to meet them. Just as Mika'd told him, he targeted the demons suffused with the glowing light. When the sword ripped into the enchanted tesso their bodies weren't merely cut, they exploded in a burst of luminescence that seared those around them.

It took only a few of their exploding comrades to break the horde. Squeaking in terror, the rats dispersed. The routed vermin trampled their fallen as they bolted for gnawholes in the floor and walls. The retreat was as rapid as it was chaotic. In less than a minute, the only tesso left in the whole of the library were those cut down by Oba's blade.

"Stand ready," Mika ordered Oba. She rushed towards the nearest of the gnawholes, pursuing the last of the tesso. With each step, her hands whipped about her clothing, undoing the sash about her waist. The red kimono fell to the floor and the woman fairly danced away from the discarded garment. For just an instant her naked form flitted across the room, then the human figure vanished, replaced by the sleek shape of a red fox with three silver-tipped brushes waving behind it. The fox darted down into the hole in pursuit of the rat.

Vicious snarls sounded from the hole. Oba blinked in amazement when a rat was thrown out, its neck worried by sharp fangs. Soon a second was tumbling after the first. Now the sounds from inside the wall became more panicked. A moment later, tesso began fleeing from the holes, scrambling for any refuge from the kitsune. The samurai was quick to lash out at them, cutting down many of the demons as they tried to run back into the library and driving the others back into their burrows.

For the better part of an hour, the scene was repeated. Junchiro and the monks joined Oba in his vigil. Aware their staves could do no more than inconvenience the demons, when one emerged they'd knock it across the floor toward the samurai where Koumakiri would visit a more permanent destruction on the creature.

At last the sounds of battle from within the walls grew quiet. One of the monks cried out in excitement as he struck at something that poked its head out from a hole. "I'm on your side, idiot!" a sharp voice barked at the man. The monk hung his head in apology and stepped back as the fox squeezed her way through the gnawhole. She gave the man a look of such annoyance that even her vulpine visage couldn't mask the emotion. Making a show of giving the man a wide berth, she trotted across the room toward Oba and Junchiro.

"I see you've been busy with the ones I sent back to you," Mika said. The sight of the fox's jaws moving to make human words, the sound of speech emanating from the animal, made the monks turn pale. Junchiro gripped his prayer beads and made the sign of the Dominance. The gesture brought an amused bark from the kitsune. "Truly humans are a silly folk. Brave enough to fight rats with iron teeth but scared of a fox that talks."

"They might be more comfortable if you resumed your other shape," Oba suggested.

The fox eyed her clothes. While she'd been gone, someone had gathered them up, folded them, and laid them in a neat pile. Another yip of amusement rose from her. "Bring me a screen and I'll change," she said, sitting down on the pile and lashing her tails back and forth. "I'm familiar enough with the ways of humans to know you've quaint notions about modesty and none more so than priests and monks." Her eyes sparkled with humor. "I'd not like to make anyone more uncomfortable than they already are."

When Mika once more stood before them in her red kimono, she explained the battle behind the walls. "The tesso might be demons, but their nature is still that of rats. Only the lowest of demons would choose such miserable bodies for themselves, so perhaps it's unsurprising that their natures should be so similar." She paused and picked at her sharp teeth with a fingernail. "Bold in numbers, brave when they feel invulnerable, but far less courageous when they feel threatened. Shintaro-san's sword was a nasty surprise for them, but when I chased them into their own tunnels, that was even worse. When a fox can't get better food, rat is better than starving and rats are well aware of the fact. That instinctive fear is there in the tesso as well."

Junchiro bowed to Mika. "Then that's an end to them? You've destroyed the demons?"

Oba deduced the reason Mika had a worried look in her eyes. "We killed many of them, but we can't be sure we destroyed all of them," he told the priest.

"There's some guiding power behind the tesso," Mika said. "Something clever and determined enough to get them inside Yoro-gu."

"Either an enemy of the temple," Oba was thinking of the Shogun, "or someone who desires to destroy the knowledge in your library."

"Perhaps both," Junchiro said. "The Daitengu would have the craft to conceive such a revenge against Yoro-gu."

Mika picked one of the abused books from the floor. She leafed through its pages. Her eyes narrowed with concentration. "Perhaps neither," she observed. She held the book open for Oba and Junchiro to see. "Don't you find it curious that the pages eaten by the tesso start and stop with such specificity?" She indicated the concluding words before the vandalism and what followed after. "It's almost like the rats were sent to consume only certain subjects." She nodded to Junchiro. "Inspect the other books they've damaged. See if the pattern holds."

"And if it does?" Oba asked.

"If it does, then it means the tesso were ordered to seek out specific things." Mika picked her teeth again. "Some of the rats I chased were fat from all they'd eaten and it seemed the others tried to block me to keep them safe."

"What could that mean?" Oba wondered, still not understanding the importance of what Mika had observed.

"Demons have many strange powers," Mika said. She smiled and laughed. "As incredible as those of the kitsune, sometimes. Whoever commands the tesso might have sent them because of some magic they possess. Something we don't know about."

Junchiro's face was grim. "If many of the tesso escaped and if there's someone controlling them, then the rats will be back. The library is still in danger."

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Oba scratched his chin and mulled over all that had been said. "In danger there might be opportunity." He looked at Mika. "If you set yourself to following one of these fattened rats, do you think you could trail it back to its master?"

Mika bared her sharp little teeth. "Their tunnels are too narrow for more than two of the tessos to come at me at a time. It would need more of the vermin to be a challenge for a kitsune."

"Then I must presume to ask you if you will agree to the task." Oba turned to Junchiro. "Yoro-gu must act as though the temple is confident the danger is over. Tell everyone to hold a great celebration. We must convince the tessos we've let our guard down and lure them back." He raised his eyes to the shelves on the tiers above them. "Leave only a few monks here. I'm afraid it will mean the rats will destroy more of your books, but if this works then these will be the last that are fouled by their fangs.

"We must draw the tessos back. Create an opportunity for them," Oba said. "When the monks you leave here sound the alarm, we all come rushing back." He looked at Mika. "You'll already be hidden here, ready to follow them when they run. Find out where their master is hiding."

Mika sighed and gave Oba an irritated glower. "A fine thing, asking a fox to play at being a hound," she huffed, then punctuated her words with a mischievous laugh. "Just the sort of trick the tessos deserve."

Junchiro bowed his head. "It is an inspired plan, Oba-san. I pray that the Dominance will smile on your strategy." A tear rolled down his cheek. "If this fails, then it must be the end of Yoro-gu."

Oba's hand closed tight about Koumakiri. "When the demons return, we'll flood the Gate of Kimon with their black spirits."

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STANDING in Yoro-gu's great sanctuary, Oba could only shake his head at what the temple considered a celebration. Almost every monk and priest in the building was in the room, kneeling on the floor and offering up prayers to the accompaniment of a bronze gong. The chanting had been going on for hours, rising and ebbing in waves. Even the hardened samurai was starting to be lulled into a trancelike state by the ceremony. He was beginning to wonder if, when the alarm came, he'd even hear it.

On that score, at least, Oba's fears proved unfounded. When one of the monks from the library rushed into the sanctuary to say the tessos had returned, the effect was instant. As quickly as though someone had blown out a candle, the chanting fell silent. Junchiro stood before the idol and clapped his hands three times. Every monk hastened to retrieve his weapons and hurry to the library.

Rats were everywhere when Oba and Junchiro ran into the library. The demons had returned in even greater numbers than before, savaging the shelves with voracious abandon. Angry snarls rang out when they saw the samurai. Scores of them charged Oba, leaping down from the upper tiers. His sword ripped into their furry bodies, strewing the floor with their mangled corpses, but still more of them came. He wasn't deceived by the viciousness of their attack, however. Unlike in their first encounter, the tessos didn't try to swarm him and pull him down. They came in smaller mobs, seeking only to distract and delay.

Beyond the ones that challenged his mettle, Oba could see other rats fleeing to their gnawholes, demons fat with the pages they'd devoured. Those that attacked the samurai were providing cover for the other vermin, trying to give the bloated monsters time to escape.

Oba smiled when he saw Mika dart out from where she'd hidden herself. The svelte red shape of the fox flew across the library and down one of the holes even faster than any of the rats. Hot upon her pursuit of the demons, Oba could only wish her well. His chance would come later ... if the kitsune was able to get back.

"They're breaking!" Junchiro shouted. By now a company of monks had joined in the fight, adding to the chaos. Rats snapped and tore at the men, but it was a half-hearted effort. The tessos were steadily withdrawing back to their holes as their fattened brethren escaped.

"We expected this!" Oba shouted back as his sword sent three more of the vermin tumbling across the room. His eyes narrowed as the last of the tessos turned tail and scurried away. He stared at the holes in the walls, imagining the cramped tunnels within. "It's all up to Mika now."

The ensuing wait was worse than the mock merriment with which they'd baited their trap. Every man in the library was tense, his every sense keyed to a height of vigilance. Oba wished he could say with confidence what they were waiting for. Would it be Mika's triumphant return or would it be a fresh swarm of tessos announcing her defeat?

"How serious you all look." The jibbing words were punctuated by a bark of laughter. All eyes turned to the railing above the main floor. Despite the vigilance of the men in the library, they'd failed to spot the three-tailed kitsune slip into the room. Perched atop the rail, Mika stretched her furry body and stared down at them.

"You were able to follow the tessos to their master?" Junchiro asked, something very close to panic edging his voice.

Oba had other concerns. He noted that Mika's fur was stained with blood and that she was dripping on the railing. "Ointment! Bandages!" he snapped at the nearest monk. The man bowed and ran off.

"That would be appreciated," Mika nodded at Oba. She turned her head and licked an ugly bite in her shoulder. "It's hard for a fox to admit when she's been a bit too clever. I forgot that a cornered rat becomes dangerous." She turned towards Junchiro. "To allay your worries, I was able to follow the rats. It's no demon who commands the tessos but a human. Some manner of sorcerer. A short, thin man, with a lean face and eyes that look just a bit too big for him. He wore silk robes, black and gold with something like a priest's hat on his head."

The description stirred murmurs among the monks. Junchiro made a regretful sigh. "The man you describe sounds like Kazuo Okuda. Years ago he sought admittance to Yoro-gu under false pretenses. He claimed to be a priest from another temple, but I soon discovered he was a mahotsukai interested only in expanding his arcane knowledge. When his subterfuge was exposed, Kazuo was exiled from the temple."

"A sorcerer's anger is a poisonous thing," Oba observed. "Especially when his magic is unburdened by scruples." He looked up at Mika. "Can you point out the way to this Kazuo?"

The fox smiled back at him. "I'll guide you there," she said, lashing her tails from side to side. "It isn't that I don't trust humans to find their way, but, after all, now I've made an enemy of this sorcerer too." She licked at a wound on her leg. "Get me patched up so I stop leaking, and I'll show the way." Her eyes twinkled as she fixed Oba with a steady stare. "And no carrying me," she warned, tossing her head back. "A fox has her pride, you know."

• • •

OBA held Koumakiri at the ready as he followed Mika through the grounds outside Yoro-gu. Junchiro accompanied them with a score of the temple's best fighters. The fox scowled at the bandages wrapped around her body, but despite the way she limped through the fields she kept a steady pace. Certain of her route, she didn't hesitate until they came close to a small brook.

"The cave is over there, where the bank has collapsed into the stream," Mika told the men. It was still uncanny to Oba to see the fox's jaws shaping words. There was something absurd that he should find the shapeshifter more unsettling than demon rats. At least he could recognize it as old prejudices asserting themselves. Every Yamajin grew up on stories of mischievous kitsune and their capricious tricks. Like most things learned in childhood, the reality was more nuanced and complex.

"We'll have to be fast," Oba said. "It's certain they know you escaped." He gave the monks a grave look. "The sorcerer might be waiting for us."

Junchiro held out the prayer sticks he'd removed from the great sanctuary. "The Dominance will protect us from all black magic," he promised.

Oba wished he could share the priest's confidence, but he'd seen for himself that the ways of the gods, even the Dominance, were beyond the ken of mortals. Sometimes a simple prayer was enough to scare off a mighty oni, at other times the faith of an entire village wasn't enough to keep them safe from a slinking bakemono.

"I'll take the lead from here," Oba told the others.

Mika flashed him a toothy grin and flicked her ears. "Be my guest. The rats have chewed on me enough already."

A verminous stench wafted out from the cave as Oba approached it. The odor was almost overwhelming, but he forced himself onward into the darkness. Behind him two of the monks lit torches throwing light across the gloom. Weird shadows played along the earthen walls. Oba proceeded forward, brushing aside the roots that hung down from the roof. He pressed along a narrow tunnel until it opened into a larger chamber.

Here there was light emanating from a roaring fire. Oba could see that the walls of the chamber were riddled with burrows, dark openings that stabbed deep into the earth. Great heaps of soil were scattered about and dirt trickled down from the ceiling. Across the floor were jagged fissures several inches wide. The entire place looked as though it were as unstable as a ninja's morals.

Seated by the fire was the man Mika had described. Her report had negated the impression the sorcerer made upon Oba. His sharp nose, his protruding teeth, the shape of his ears, all of these lent him a ratlike look. A fitting master for the vile tesso. Vile, too, was the activity in which the sorcerer was engaged. Impaled on sticks and roasting over the fire were several rats. Other tesso, bloated from feeding in the library, sat at the villain's feet as though waiting their turn to enter the flames. While he looked on, the sorcerer took one of the sticks and began gnawing at the cooked rodent.

"It *is* Kazuo," Junchiro gasped, sickened by the sorcerer's meal.

Kazuo turned and glared at the intruders. "So you've found me," he hissed, his voice betraying the same sense of depth and shrillness as that of the demon rats. He smirked at the priest's horror. "It's your own fault. You wouldn't share your library with me, so I had to gather the information I wanted by other means." He tapped the long nail of his greasy finger against the dead rat. "Every word the tesso devour is in there. Consuming them transfers those words here," he pointed to his head. "When I'm finished with Yoro-gu, I'll be the wisest mahotsukai in Mu-Thulan!"

"You're finished now," Oba growled, advancing towards Kazuo.

The sorcerer laughed and clapped his hands. Launching themselves out from burrows in the walls came a tide of iron-fanged tesso. Hundreds of demon rats swarmed across the chamber to attack Oba and his companions.

"You've interrupted my dinner," Kazuo sneered. "Now pay for such impertinence!"

Oba slashed at the first tesso that charged him, his blade cutting it in half and tossing its remains back across the chamber. More were right behind it, however. The monks swatted at them with their staves, but their efforts did little to ease the wave of vermin.

Suddenly a burst of blue light flared through the darkness. Foxfire conjured by Mika blasted the tesso, leaving a score of the rats little more than charred husks. The display of magic pierced Kazuo's bluster. His eyes narrowed with rage and he pointed a trembling finger at the kitsune. Streamers of black sorcery exploded from his hand, whipping through the room to strike Mika. Before they could reach her, Junchiro leapt into their path. The priest screamed as the prayer sticks he held erupted in flame, but he kept hold of them as the malefic spell tried to overwhelm their protection. At last the fire died. Kazuo's sorcery had failed against Junchiro's faith.

"Kill them! Kill them all!" Kazuo shrieked. His words whipped the tesso into a frenzy. Now the demon rats rushed ahead in an amok horde, flinging themselves at the intruders with reckless abandon. Koumakiri grew slick with demonic ichor as Oba cut down his attackers, slashing and striking at every turn. Those that bore through scrabbled at his armor, all craftiness gone as they crazily tried to chew through the steel.

First one, then a second and still a third monk were overwhelmed by the berserk rats. Their anguished screams echoed

through the cave and provoked still more dirt to fall from the ceiling. Oba did his best to try and help the men, but the tesso were too many. All their horrible deaths did was make him more determined to cut his way to the evil wizard who commanded the horde.

Foxfire flared across the chamber again, blasting another dozen tesso. Oba could see Kazuo behind the rat swarm. The sorcerer was in full panic now, but too greedy to run. In a revolting display he was gobbling up the fattened rats, both those already cooked in the fire and the living vermin waiting at his feet! Flesh and ichor dripped down his chin as he gorged himself on the demons.

More disgusting than the sorcerer's actions was the effect they had. Oba had noted Kazuo's ratlike features before. Now he was certain that change had been caused by his obscene use of the tesso. More than the knowledge the demons had stolen was absorbed by the man. He was taking on something of their physicality as well. No doubt he'd been able to mitigate the effect by cooking them, but now, as he glutted himself on raw rodents, a more dramatic change was consuming Kazuo.

Fur bristled across the man's hands, his fingers lengthening into rodent paws. Kazuo's face elongated into a muzzle, his teeth sharpening into fangs. Where his visage had been only ratlike before, now everything human was being erased. The sorcerer was becoming completely bestial. Before his eyes, Oba saw Kazuo transform from a man into a man-sized rat.

It was late in the change before Kazuo noted what was happening to him. He gazed in horror at his furred hands. Tossing aside the tesso he'd been eating, he felt his elongated face. The scream of a damned soul ripped across the cave.

"You! You did this to me!" Kazuo shrieked. He threw out his hands, conjuring blasts of shadowy energy that whipped about the chamber. His target however wasn't the samurai or those with him, but rather the swarm of demon rats. Clutches of tesso exploded as the magic seared into them, sending gory fragments and shards of bone flying through the cave. Over and again, the anguished sorcerer attacked the very demons he'd invoked.

"Out! Out of here quick!" Mika barked. "The cave is collapsing!"

Junchiro and the monks hurried to heed her warning. The fox dashed after them, but as she did several of the tesso sprang on her. She was thrown to the ground, a blur of red fur amid the gray bodies of the rats. The tangle of snarling, snapping animals rolled across the floor.

Oba started toward the embattled kitsune, ignoring the demons that clawed at his armor and scurried up his body. He staggered when a rock fell from the roof and crashed against his helm. His head rang from the impact, his vision swirled. He fought to fend off unconsciousness. He knew if he didn't keep going, if he faltered for even a moment, he was dead.

Mika tore her way free of the tesso, her muzzle foul with their ichor. She stumbled away from the mangled rats. "Hurry, Shintaro-san!" she yipped. Leaning back on her tails, she made weird gestures with her paws. Oba felt his armor grow hot, as though

it had been left out to bake under the summer sun. He knew it was the kitsune's magic at work. The sudden heat agitated the rats clinging to him. Squeaking in fright, they dropped from his body and scurried into the shadows.

The samurai grabbed Mika and tucked the fox under his arm. "Now isn't the time for pride," he said when she yelped in protest. Mustering his waning strength, Oba lunged toward the cave's entrance, a sweep of Koumakiri clearing their path of the demons that tried to block their way.

Oba glanced back at Kazuo. The sorcerer now looked like nothing more than an over-sized rat dressed as a black priest. Only in the eyes did there remain something human, a mixture of terror and rage. His handlike paws continued to send blasts of magic into the swarming tesso, obliterating them in bloody explosions. The roof above was now raining dirt into the chamber, but when the end came for Kazuo, it was from below rather than above. The floor, already cracked and strained, collapsed beneath the rat-sorcerer. A shriek that was both human and rodent echoed through the cave as the once-man and his remaining demon rats pitched into an underground abyss.

"A miserable end for a miserable man," Oba commented as he stepped out into the light.

"The priests of Yoro-gu won't have to worry about the tesso now," Mika said, nodding to where Junchiro and the monks were gathering themselves after the battle. She shifted in his grip and rested her head in the crook of his arm.

"I'm sorry," Oba apologized. "I'll put you down." Returning Koumakiri to its sheath, he started to lean toward the ground.

Three furry brushes flicked at his face in annoyance. "Now isn't the time for pride," Mika laughed, throwing Oba's words back at him. "My things are back at the temple and it's a long walk back."

Oba looked down at the fox as she closed her eyes, a content smile pulling at her face. "It's just as far for me to walk as it is for you." He rapped his knuckles against his armor. "This is a lot heavier than fur."

"I've twice as many legs to tire as you do," Mika retorted. She opened one eye and stared impishly at him. "Argument over. I win," she said before settling down for a snooze.

The samurai shook his head. "I must be mindful in my dealings with the kitsune," he said as he started back down the path to the temple. "Truly there is no limit to their trickery."

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 Zombicide and Marvel's Legends of Asgard. 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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THE EYE





OF KALEET

By **JEFFERY SERGENT**

Illustration by **SAMUEL DILLON**

I

“**A**S mysterious and beautiful as you are, *vhete*, but that is why I am letting it go so ... inexpensively.” The trader’s smile revealed *tylee*-stained teeth. Jade had considered trying the drug once, but she’d always considered her smile one of her better attributes. “What am I to do with it?” he continued. “My wives have all joined Myshekka in paradise — bless their eternal souls — and my daughters-in-law? They would be surpassed by the jewel’s splendor. Only you, *vhete*, could tame its fierce beauty.”

Vhetee meant “darling” or “little one” or some such affectionate name. She really wasn’t sure because the word had no real equivalent in Mariannan, the trade-tongue of the Middle Kingdoms.

She knew the jewel was stolen. He had introduced himself with a name so common in these parts it couldn’t be real, and the price he asked for the jewel was not “inexpensive.” It was dirt cheap, much too cheap for a piece like this. Never in her life had she seen a stone so ... well, mysterious and beautiful.

Before she could lift the stone for a closer look, the man’s corpulent hand quickly and firmly forced hers back to the table. A fresh scar snaked across the back of his hand. As soon as he noticed her looking at the wound, he immediately hid it under the table.

Odd, Jade thought, for someone to be so self-conscious about a scar but not his overall appearance. Besides his stained teeth, his hair was unkempt and his face unshaven. Dark circles hung beneath his eyes.

“One cannot be too careful with thieves about,” he added with a wink, trying to regain his poise. He patted sweat from his forehead with a silk kerchief and smiled.

She let the jewel lay on the table and casually took a long sip from her mug.

This country didn’t have much going for it. It was desert mostly, and the city of Quarmess had offered even less, until she had found this inn. It had to have one of the worst names she had ever come across during her long trek across the realms. Her best translation was *Aramel’s Slop Bucket*. But this drink – made from fermented honey – had to be one of the best. It was a wonder this place wasn’t packed. Up in the Northern Realms, a place like this would be hard pressed to keep any of the stuff around.

And there was this jewel.

The stone was oval, about the size of a small bird egg. She had seen – and had even briefly owned – many stones that were larger and cut more fairly; yet she had never seen anything like this one. It didn’t look natural, but it didn’t look like it could have been manufactured either. In its core was a dark slit from which blue rays burst, much like the eye of a cat.

Jade set a hand on the table and drummed a finger for a few beats then lifted her mug to sip, and the jewel was gone.

In its place was a small velvet purse.

The man showed neither surprise nor fear, which disappointed Jade a bit. That had always been one of her best tricks. Instead, he simply scooped the purse into his scarred hand, which he kept concealed below the table.

He didn’t open it. He didn’t heft it. He didn’t even jingle it. In fact, he didn’t seem to care what was in it. “Peace,” was the only thing he said before he left.

Jade slumped in her chair. She couldn’t help but feel a bit disappointed. His sale’s pitch had been like a seduction, very nice and very entertaining. She had at least expected a few more rounds of flirtatious flattery, but it was as if he was trying to leave before she could change her mind.

Not that she would have. Up north, she could sell the stone for over a hundred times what she had paid. If she decided to sell

it. Keeping it had its appeal. Of course, she would have to wait until she made it far from this place before she could wear it. On a choker would be rather nice, she decided with a very satisfied smile.

After a long celebratory drink, she signaled for another cup.

She had been making preparations to leave anyway. Now, however, she had double the reason to leave. Not only did she want to get the jewel as far away as possible, but she would have to find work soon. As cheap as it had been, the thing had still cost her over half her remaining coins.

During her journey thus far, Jade had sold stories, tutored young nobles, translated texts, and verified and revised maps. She had even served as a bodyguard on occasion. In this country, however, women were not permitted to do much besides breed. Even as a traveler, her presence in the cities was barely tolerated, and she had learned the hard way that she needed to bypass the smaller villages altogether.

She smiled as the new cup was set before her, but it quickly faded as four guardsmen entered the room. They were obviously looking for someone.

“Well, *grud*,” she whispered, trying to think of somewhere to stash the jewel while trying to appear as unconcerned as possible.

She didn’t have much time. Two of the guards headed upstairs, one took position at the entrance to the kitchen, and the last sauntered toward her, the captain she presumed. His helmet was bigger and shinier than the others.

II

JADE lifted her cup with both hands and took a long, slow drink.

Big Helmet stopped in front of her, hand on the hilt of the huge scimitar strapped to his right side. She couldn’t guess his age, but he was at least her father’s age and just as stout and spirited. It was all in his eyes. His face may have been lined with age, but his eyes burned with life. He could probably give any man half his age a good thrashing with that blade and not even break a sweat.

“*Sabit*,” he said with a nod. His moustache drooped past his chin and did not move when he spoke.

She was used to the word by now. It was used as a title for strangers but implied *foreigner* or *outsider*. Depending on how it was used, it could be polite or not. His deep, melodic voice, however, made it sound like an honorific title.

Jade swallowed hard. “Hi,” she said, coughed, then smiled. “Can I help you?”

“Perhaps,” he said matter-of-factly. “We are looking for an item of some importance that was taken from one of our temples three days ago.”

“I’m –” A small hiccup escaped her before she could get her hand to her mouth. She took another swallow, forcing the sweet liquid down. “Sorry. Truly.”

“You are very gracious.” He bowed slightly. “The item vanished in the night, seemingly into thin air.”

“Seemingly?”

“Yes.” When he smiled, his moustache lifted like wings around his mouth.

Jade offered a genuine smirk. “Magical theft?”

“Yes. According to the *yemen* at any rate.”

Jade sat the mug down. “But you don’t think so.”

“Who can say?” the captain responded, losing none of his seriousness. “To dispute the word of a holy man is a serious offense. But we have no evidence, not even rumors.”

Jade knew where this was going. “Until today.”

He smiled politely and bowed slightly again but his eyes never left Jade’s. She knew that behind the polite façade, he was looking for a sign, the tiniest slip that would reveal her guilt.

“Yes, until today. We had a report of it being in this part of the city.”

Jade did not flinch. “One would think the thief would have left the city by now.”

“Who can say?”

Had it been one of the patrons? She recalled a couple had left almost immediately after the seller had. Or had it been the seller himself? Might not he have departed quickly before he was caught with the stone, then tipped the guards to lead suspicion further from himself?

She cursed her own carelessness. “I see. Well, um, captain, is it?”

“Yes, in your tongue you would say captain.” His Mariannan was impeccable.

“Well, captain. I can’t believe someone would commit such a heinous crime against a temple.” She sipped. “Which one, by-the-way?”

“Kaleet, protector of cats.”

Made sense, she thought, having a stone that resembled a cat’s eye. Must have been pretty important. Too damned important. Sweat trickled down the back of her scalp, leaving cold trails. It took every muscle in her body to keep her composure. She imagined he could see the gooseflesh rising on her arms.

She didn’t mind taking something that was taken from someone else. Finders keepers. But this complicated things. A temple. You don’t mess with peoples’ religion. They tend to be most unforgiving and unforgetting. No wonder the bastard had sold it so cheaply! He had been playing her all along, and she had helped him every step of the way.

Grud, grud, grud!

“Please sit.” She motioned to the chair where the trader had been sitting moments earlier.

“No, thank you. It would be ... inappropriate here.”

But not somewhere else, she heard him imply. A moment of awkward silence followed.

“So,” Jade finally said, “I take it you’re not here just to get out of the afternoon sun.”

“True, *Sabit*. We were informed that – ” he paused momentarily as if trying to find the right word – “a foreigner possessed it.”

“In this very establishment, I bet,” Jade said. This kept getting worse by the second.

“That would be true as well.”

She guffawed. “That could be any number of people at an inn.” She looked around as if to prove her point. Except the other guard, the room was completely empty.

“And a female,” the captain added.

“Well, that’s quite a coincidence.”

“Is it not?”

“What was taken, by the way?”

“The Eye of Kaleet. The thief must have taken it for a simple gemstone, resembling the eye of a cat.”

Damnation. But she smiled and said, “I wish I could help more.”

“I am glad you are so cooperative. I am afraid it is my unpleasant duty to follow any trail, wherever it may lead.”

“Ah, duty.” She smiled and took another drink. “Well, you may search my room if you want, but I don’t think you would find anything to interest you there.”

He looked to the stairwell just as the two guards stamped down. One shook his head.

The captain smiled. “I am glad you are so accommodating.”

Jade forced herself to keep smiling but had to take another drink to calm herself. She counted to ten, a trick her mother had taught her after having suffered innumerable slaps on her palm by irate instructors when she was a child. She was still apt to speak too quickly and too frankly.

She stood up and lifted her arms from her side. “Well, captain, that just leaves me.”

She didn’t feel uncomfortable as his eyes went up and down her body. Men, she had learned, could be distracted quite easily, so her riding leathers clung to every curve of her body. It was more than obvious that she didn’t have anything tucked away.

But his inspection was quick and quite professional. The only thing that made her uncomfortable was the absence of her sword. It was punishable by law for *sabit* to carry swords in public and punishable by death for a woman to carry one.

“That will be unnecessary.” He motioned her to sit. “The heretic will be found later, if not now.”

Jade took another sip. Heretic? Heretics tended to die very long, very excruciating deaths.

With a slight tilt of his head, the captain’s men hurried out the door. He offered her a final smile, and this one, she couldn’t help but feel, was genuine.

“Peace be with you,” he said.

“And you,” she said, feeling anything but peaceful.

She took another long, slow drink as the captain strode out of the inn. He definitely knew more than he was letting on. Still, she hadn’t lied to him. The jewel was not anywhere on her body. Nor in her room.

She left a silver on the table and headed to her room to see how much damage had been done by the guards.

Definitely time to leave this place. But now she’d have to wait a day or two more at least. For one thing, she was pretty sure she hadn’t seen the last of the captain and to leave now would make her look guiltier than she already was.

And for another, it would probably take that long to pass the damned thing out of her.

III

“GRUD!” Jade gagged. “What am I supposed to do? Vomit it out?”

The apothecary, a skeleton of a man in a dun-colored robe, clinched his emaciated hands together and smiled.

“Rest assured,” he said, “it will work. Drink once more tonight.”

She gagged again. “Tastes awful.” And smelled worse. She looked around hurriedly. “Got anything to drink around here?”

“Yes.” His eyes widened and seemed to sparkle. They were the only part of him that really looked alive. “Talmack juice.” He moved toward another jar. “Cleanses the spleen.”

Jade shook her head. “Uh, I don’t think so. One cleansing is plenty.”

She paid and tucked the bottle into her satchel.

The streets of Quarmess were never crowded but were always busy. She had worn her regular riding clothes out, but wrapped her hair in the traditional Khamish manner, not so much out of respect for the local customs but for the lashes she would receive for not doing it. It was uncomfortable and hot as hell, but *sabit* were expected to know and follow every law.

She finished buying the last of her supplies and went to the stables, which were just down the street from the *Slop Bucket*. It was something she had to do daily since the folk here were not used to horses. They rode a long-necked thing called a *yakha*. It was a stupid animal and didn’t mind if you forgot to feed it sometimes; Tanis was not so forgiving.

Crossing the street, she noticed a kitten sitting in the middle of the street. A merchant with a wagon of goods was heading straight for it. The little thing had plenty of time to move but didn’t. It just sat there, meowing.

And the driver didn’t seem to care.

Finally, Jade swooped it up as she dashed across the wagon’s path. The driver sent a flurry of curses after her but didn’t bother to slow down.

“Well, little one,” she said, lifting it to look in its big blue eyes. “You need to take more care crossing the road. Make sure you reach the other side before you decide to rest.”

It meowed.

“Time to say bye-bye,” she said.

It meowed again in the way that made kittens so adorable. Its soft tan coat had stripes of white along its back, and its sky-blue eyes seemed to plead for her not to let go.

Jade rubbed it against her face. When she bent down to let it go, it wiggled and squirmed in a mighty effort to be free. When Jade struggled to gain a tighter hold to keep it from falling, it hissed and dug its claws into her flesh to push away.

Jade dropped it, and grabbing her hand, swore an oath that would have done her father’s soldiers proud. One claw had slashed the back of her right hand from knuckle to wrist.

She looked for the kitten, hoping she hadn’t hurt it but ready to kick it back into the middle of the street just the same. Momentarily, she was tempted to go looking for it just to make sure it was okay, but she could already hear Tanis letting her know that she was late with her treats.

She shouldered the gate open as she wrapped a silk kerchief around her hand to staunch the bleeding.

The stables weren’t what she was used to. The ones back home were actually like gigantic barns. Here, they were merely stalls. Sometimes the smithy was covered but most times not. The grain and dried fruit for their animals were stacked beneath a lean-to of sorts.

Jade was digging in her satchel for the piece of fruit she’d brought, reaching across her body awkwardly with her unwounded hand, when Tanis began snorting and snuffing.

“Here you go, girl,” Jade said, smiling.

Looking up, she saw that Tanis wasn’t so pleased to see her. In fact, she wasn’t even looking at her. The big helmeted captain was feeding her sugar cubes and brushing her strong neck.

Tanis snorted again in delight.

Traitor. She thought of quietly exiting the yard before he saw her. But that would look suspicious, which she couldn’t afford right now. Besides, he obviously knew she frequented here. Why else would he be here? She cursed herself for not paying better attention, but, she thought, better to keep up appearances. Not to mention, she was more than a bit jealous.

“You know horses.” Jade walked over next to him and joined in the brushing with her good hand. Tanis was in heaven.

“Yes,” he said. “She is magnificent. What do you call her?”

“Tanis. The splotch of white on her forehead reminded me of a star my father and I used to hunt every morning. You can’t see it here, though.”

“Ah, yes.” It was about as enthusiastic as she had seen him get. “You are not from the Eastern Empire, then?” he asked.

Most people assumed as much because of her almond shaped eyes and dark hair.

“My mother was,” she said, surprised. “My father is a lord of the Northern Realms. Or was.”

“I am sorry.”

“Oh, no. He’s not dead. We just don’t live there anymore. The High King betrayed him, and we ended up in the Middle Kingdoms.”

“Akkadia?” he said with mild surprise. “Still, you are far from home. Very rare for one from those lands to venture this far south.”

“True, and very rare for anyone this far south to know the geography beyond the walls of his own village.”

“In my youth,” he said, “I traveled with caravans to your realms. I have seen your star.” He pointed in the direction it would have been in had they been in the Northlands. “The northern lords pay handsomely for arm and sword. I made and spent many fortunes there.”

“What brought you back?”

“Home,” he said with a faint smile. “The call is strong, stronger than riches or fame.” It was the only time she saw what could be called a smile beneath the thick moustache. “And what brings you, *sabit*, to my home?”

“Oh, just wanted to see all the places I had been reading and hearing about.” But lately she had been hearing the call of home, too. Some nights ended in tears.

"You are injured?" the captain asked with what sounded like genuine concern.

She grabbed her hand self-consciously. "Oh, it was nothing. Just a scratch."

She went back to brushing. Jade knew the captain knew she had the stone. He just didn't have any solid evidence. She hoped.

"Any luck finding your thief, captain?" She asked with all care and concern she could muster, but it felt like she would vomit with all of the fluttering in her stomach. Or was it the medicine already at work?

"No."

He brushed the mare steadily, but Jade could feel his eyes watching her even though they never left the horse.

"The *yemen* believe the thief to be gone or punished already," he added.

Again, Jade detected the bitterness she had noted earlier when he had referred to the temple clerics.

"But you don't."

"No. A good thief would know that tomorrow night is the celebration of the Prophet Taram."

She continued to brush, watching him watch her.

"The whole city will empty just before midnight," he continued as if knowing what she wanted to know. "All will gather at the hill to the south of town, where the Prophet supposedly gave his last sermon before being called to paradise."

"Why didn't the thief wait to take the Eye during the celebration?" Jade wished she had caught herself before she had spoken. If the captain was playing the game she thought he was – and she was pretty sure he was – he was winning. "Surely the temple guards remain?"

He shook his head. "The Caliph believes that even the lowliest of thieves would not miss the pilgrimage to the rocks."

Assuming the thief is from Khamish, she thought. But was that a trace of disgust when he mentioned the Caliph? Of course, as usual, she spoke before she thought. "You don't agree."

"The Caliph," he said, "sent my son to die in one of his crusades. He was only a boy wanting to be a man." His eyes were focused somewhere beyond this time and place. "When my wife spoke against the war, she was charged with treason and put to the sword as well."

He patted Tanis one more time and sat the brush down. Tanis snorted in disappointment.

"*Sabit*," he said with a nod then turned to leave.

Before he went through the gate, Jade called to him. She wanted to ask, why are you telling me all of this? Instead, in a quiet voice she asked, "Why do you stay?"

He stopped and turned.

"Duty," he said. His thin smile returned. "You are too young to understand now, but you will."

When he had closed the gate, Jade went back to brushing an impatient Tanis, unsuccessfully trying to make plans to leave.

"It is cursed."

She jumped and turned. She had thought him gone.

"The stone is cursed." He leaned on the gate. He spoke with the same seriousness he always had, yet his eyes revealed a vital

urgency. "Kaleet herself watches over the Eye and will punish any who disturb her treasure."

"Really," she said, feigning curiosity with a touch of fear. "Why? What will happen?"

"The thief will be marked, hunted, and slain."

"Why ...," Jade stumbled for words. "I thought you didn't believe."

"I never said I did not believe."

"Surely, a man who has seen much of the world cannot believe in curses?"

"It is because I have seen much of the world that I do." Even though Jade did not think it possible the captain's face became more serious. "Take care of your hand, *Sabit*."

He turned and left before she could say anything else.

She stared at the bloody kerchief, and for a second, icy fear stabbed through her.

IV

THE temple of Kaleet was empty, just like the captain had said it would be.

Jade's stomach grumbled. She winced, but there was absolutely nothing left in her to come out. Oh, the apothecary hadn't lied. She had stayed in her room the rest of the day, squatting over the chamber pot. She hadn't been able to take ten steps away from it. The Eye had come out during her second trip, but that had been far from her last.

Then she had made the mistake of taking a drink of water.

She had finally forced herself to pull her clothes on and slip out the window. Several times she had to hide in the shadows to rest because she'd become light-headed, but she had finally made it here.

When she first entered the building, there were two hallways running in opposite directions. A huge mural of a woman loomed on the wall inside the door. Sort of a woman. Her face was like a cat's, and her ears were pointed and toward the top of her head. Gathered around her were thousands and thousands of cats. The giant cat-woman, who Jade presumed was Kaleet, pointed outward, and many of the cats were going, spreading across the world to serve and protect and live free.

That's what it looked like anyway.

She considered leaving the jewel just inside the door, but that didn't seem quite the thing to do. If she was going to sneak into a place to return it, she was going to do it correctly. Besides, somebody could just pick it up, and then the curse might stay with her.

She wondered if selling it had ended the curse for the trader.

Her hand tightened around the pommel of her long sword. She had not left her weapon behind this time, even if getting caught with it meant death. Getting caught without it could very well likely have meant the same.

She chose left on a whim, though she was certain they both led to the inner sanctuary. She hadn't gone three steps when she heard the meow.

It was the kitten again.

She picked it up. "How did you find me all the way out here?" she whispered softly. On any other night, she would have blown it off as coincidence. Every cat in the city probably makes its way through here at one time or the other. They probably fed their cats well here.

Coincidence or not, here she was.

"Well, I hope you are satisfied, little one," she said. "I'm putting it back right now, so you can go tell Kaleet I've been a good girl."

It purred softly. A chorus of purrs and meows followed.

"Why am I not surprised?" she said. This part of the hallway was filled with cats, twenty or thirty at least. "Nice kitties," she said, stepping gingerly around them.

She walked to the opening of the sanctuary. The kitten began to squirm and meow.

"Okay, okay." She sat it down before it clawed her again.

It immediately ran into the sanctuary.

"Hey, wait on me!"

But when Jade entered, it was gone. "Where'd you go?" Things were getting a little too weird for her. She just wanted to get the job done and go back to her room and take a hot bath, and before the sun rose tomorrow, she'd be long gone from this cursed place.

Now, where to put the Eye?

The sanctuary was empty for the most part, except for bowls for cats to eat and drink. On the far wall, however, stood a human-sized statue of the cat-woman, her hands pointing like in the mural. Two more entrances were on either side of her, one closed, one opened.

And one of the statue's eyes was missing.

Well, that answered that question. Easy enough. She walked to the statue.

Should she try to put it back? Or maybe leave it at its feet. But what if they don't see it right off? Would the curse still haunt her? She sighed heavily and told the statue, "You've caused me nothing but grief, Miss Kitty. I hope you're satisfied."

From behind her came a blood curdling growl.

"*Grud*," she whispered.

A hiss followed.

She turned, sword drawn.

Jade was not afraid to face any man. Or woman. She had faced many. She had even fought one of the hill giants of Ghul'ksh. But what she saw now made her blood freeze in her veins, making her arms feel like lead.

It was a presence – a shadow, huge and indistinct except for one cold, blue eye which seemed to glow with an internal fire. It stood about seven feet tall at what looked like the shoulders. It seemed to lean forward on two legs as thick as tree trunks. Whisks of shadow, like dancing flames, bled from its outline. As a rumble like thunder filled the room, which reverberated in her chest, the single eye, its pupil slit down the middle, fixed upon her.

She forced the sword point toward it though ice poured through her veins.

It pounced and swatted the trunk-like leg. A massive paw formed as it fell toward her. She parried. There was a clash of what sounded like steel on steel, but its massive weight knocked her sword point harmlessly to the ground. The tip caught between two floor stones and twisted awkwardly as she lunged forward. The blade snapped three quarters from the hilt.

The shadow creature growled and pounced again. Jade rolled aside and jumped quickly to her feet. The room spun and she fought to maintain her balance. She was just too weak to be doing this. She had to hurry and end this, else she would simply collapse.

She pressed forward, swinging her broken blade down with all her might. The giant thing passed, not by her, but around her, like smoke. There was force enough, however, to drag her off her feet. Before she could stand, a crushing weight pressed her to the floor and what felt like daggers pressed into her chest and shoulders. She screamed and tried to push it off but couldn't.

Luckily, it wasn't finished playing. It just moved away on its own. And she would have sworn a shadowy rope-like tail smacked her in the face as it went. The claw would definitely leave some marks, but she was certain it hadn't broken the skin. This time.

It probably wouldn't matter anyway. She was nearly too weak to lift herself. The lack of fluids was starting to take its toll. She couldn't even sweat.

She struggled up to her feet and backed away. It took both hands to hold the fragment of sword steady.

Suddenly, she heard her father's voice, as she had many times during her sword play back home. "Options," he would say, holding her at bay. "You must always consider your options. And do it quickly, or you will have none." Meaning, she finally figured out all these years later, she'd be dead at that point.

Options.

Run back the way she came? Too far, and it would probably pursue her. No high ground in here either. That left the open door next to the statue of Kaleet. She had no idea where it lead, but that was better than the option that prowled in front of her. Plus, the door was directly behind her at this point. Hopefully, she could shut and bolt it and find another way out. She had never entirely agreed with her father on that the whole kill or be killed mind-set anyway.

The thing seemed to pace back in and forth in front of her as if waiting to see what she decided to do, the single blue eye fixed upon her.

The eye – it looked like – she fumbled in her pouch. The Eye! She stretched her arm out, holding the stone in her open palm for the shadow thing to see. It reflected the light of a torch from somewhere, looking more beautiful than it ever had.

The shadow beast rumbled.

Jade took a tentative step forward, offering the stone.

The thing hissed, and hot, black fog pelted her face. She shut her eyes tightly, waiting for the force of its claw again. Or the clamp of fangs.

Instead, the stone vanished. She looked to see if it had fallen from her hand.

The thing loomed over her. Its rumbling shaking every bone. This time, however, it gazed upon her with two burning eyes, filled with a knowledge and wisdom that could never be shared with any human.

And then it was gone.

The room began to spin, and Jade staggered but caught herself on the statue of Kaleet, sliding slowly to the floor.

V

SHE awoke as someone cleared her throat. A robed figure knelt beside Jade, placing the back of her hand on her forehead. It was soft and warm like a fine glove.

The cleric stood, her hood pulled forward.

Jade waited for the sounds of guards. Nothing. Just this one.

Apparently, not everyone goes to the rocks, she mused. Smirking, she wondered if the captain knew that.

Probably.

“You are unwell.” The voice betrayed no fear or alarm.

The rumbling again. Her head jerked up, scanning the room. She wasn’t so well. Could she have hallucinated everything? The nightmare shadow. The eyes.

“The stone, The Eye,” Jade said. “I brought it back, but –”

But what? What could she say? She gave the Eye to a giant shadow that’d been trying to kill her. Even a devout would think her story crazy.

“The curse –” Jade was almost too embarrassed to ask. She had always considered herself a rational person, but all things considered, she had to ask. “Is it –”

The cleric was silent, standing patiently over her.

“Never mind.”

Blue eyes flashed briefly within the darkness of the hood.

Jade grunted to her feet. The cleric supported her, gently gripping her arm. “I’d better get out of here,” Jade said. “There’s a certain captain of your city guard who would love to find me here.”

After Jade had taken a few tentative steps to check her strength, the cleric spoke again. “Thank you.”

Sighing heavily, she turned back to the cleric. “You’re –” Her words froze.

The cleric held a sword in both hands. The blade was long but slightly curved toward the tip, after the fashion of swords in this region. She could make out markings, a script of some sort but one she could not read, coursing along the blade in the dim light. The hilt was plain silver and wrapped in black leather. The pommel was carved into a cat’s head with two tiny green stones on either side for its eyes; its mane flowed all around the base of the pommel, disappearing into the hilt.

“It’s beautiful,” Jade whispered, but wondered where in the nine hells had she pulled that from? Then she noticed the cleric’s hands, the fine fur, faint and tan, and the manicured nails pointed like claws.

Or was this still a hallucination?

“Take it,” cleric said. “For my sake. To show you are a friend to Kaleet and her children.”

She did.

“Thank you,” Jade said, admiring the sword once more, amazed by its beauty and perfect weight. The hilt seemed made for her hand. She wanted to say more; she felt what she wanted to say in her heart; but words were inadequate. Before Jade could utter a sound, however, the cleric was gone.

And just for an instant – maybe the duration of a single heartbeat – she thought she saw the giant shadow, its blue eyes burning bright.

Then she was alone.

VI

THE sky was still black when Jade emerged from the temple. The streets still empty. The cats, too, were gone.

Coincidence? She couldn’t say. What had happened in there? Did it happen? The sword was real enough. Perhaps she would have to rethink everything she believed. Or rather, everything she had denied. It was much easier – and convenient – to deny what you didn’t want to acknowledge. It tended to shape the world the way you wanted it, not the way it was. Strange, but that was more terrifying than fighting a dozen giant shadow beasts.

In the end, she decided it didn’t matter.

She went to the stable and led Tanis away, downing a full water skin in the process before she had reached the city gates. She didn’t stop to refill it either. Luckily, she’d had the foresight to pack her saddle bags that evening. She couldn’t have gone back if she’d wanted to anyway, despite a deep craving for one more mug of the *Slop Bucket’s* finest. She just wanted away.

Still, it all seemed like some sort of hallucination, even when her hand drifted to the hilt of the sword.

Hmm, she mused. A good sword needs a good name. *Kaleet’s Claw*. Appropriate but a mouthful. Or just *Claw*.

It pulled free from its sheath with a soft whisper instead of the scrape of cold steel. The blade looked the color of a cat’s claw, definitely. Even in this faint light the silver pommel glowed, making the dark recesses flow like a mane of one of the giant cats pounding across the plains of Thuril.

“Kitty.” She smiled, pleased with herself and slid the blade back into place by her side.

The townsfolk should be returning anytime now, so she exited through the north way, opposite their sacred rocks. It was a single large door, black with age, used by locals only.

The stars seemed to shine a little brighter almost immediately.

“Thank heavens,” she said, straining into the saddle.

She studied the sky a bit, looking for something specific, but uncertain as to where to look. She had never actually gotten used to the sky this far from home.

“To the north and east,” a voice said from the shadows behind her. “Between that pass in the ridge.”

Jade smiled and followed the direction without looking behind her.

The captain pulled his mount up beside Tanis. “You will not be able to see it for some time, however, not until you cross into Marianna.”

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His mount slobbered, spit, and farted, then searched for weeds to munch since it was not going anywhere.

"I'm flattered you've come to see me off."

"I would not have missed it," he said, smiling. It made him look years younger. "I have not had this much excitement in ... well, it doesn't matter."

Jade could have laughed. "Glad you enjoyed it."

"You seem ... at ease," he said. "Like a great weight has been lifted from you."

"You could say that," she said.

They sat in an awkward silence for a moment.

"They are returning," he said, listening through the door behind them. "I must leave you now, *Sabit*."

"Jade," she said.

He bowed his head. "Marid."

She knew what he'd given was a powerful gift. One didn't just give a name to a stranger, not here. But for a man to give his name to a woman ... she didn't know what to say or do.

Finally, he said, "Peace be with you, Jade."

He turned his *yakha* toward the gate.

"Wait," she called after him. "Come to Akkadia with me; visit the Northern Realms again. You've sacrificed more than your fair share for the Caliph."

He looked thoughtful for a long moment, staring into the town. He looked to the sky where Jade had been looking and a big grin broke across his face.

"You will need assistance if you plan to go that way," he said. "The Velkal are treacherous and deceitful. I would never be at peace with myself if I let you go alone into their lands." As he reigned up beside her, she could see now that his mount was loaded for a long journey.

She laughed for the first time since – well, a long time. "What about duty and all that?"

"Sometimes what is right is more important than duty. You will learn that, too."

"From you, no doubt." Indeed, both had their reasons for leaving; both had their reasons to move forward. And she had much to discuss with him.

She laughed again and didn't look back.

She, therefore, didn't see the city wall lined with cats, hundreds of cats of all sizes and descriptions. Nor did she see the kitten sitting at the gate licking its paw. It paused to watch the travelers pass beyond the hills, and seemingly satisfied the new companions were safely on their way, resumed its cleaning, the light of the new day sparkling in its bright, blue eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffery Sergent lives with his wife, daughter, a dog, and several feline-folk, tucked away in the mist-shrouded hills of southeastern Kentucky. For over three decades, he has taught literature and composition at the local high school. And on occasion, when the time is just right - and the workload is light — from a secluded chamber upstairs in his residence, through the esoteric melodies of the likes of Hawkwind, Rush, and Jethro Tull, the clicking of the keyboard whispers his dabbling in the dark arts of sword and sorcery tales.

A black and white photograph of a person wearing a skull mask with a single eye and a wide grin, standing in a library with bookshelves in the background. The text "I WANT MY SKULL TV!" is overlaid at the top.

The logo for Skull TV is displayed within a white rounded rectangle. The word "SKULL" is written in a large, bold, black-outlined, blocky font. The letters are white with black outlines. The "TV" part is written in a smaller, black, stylized script font, positioned to the right of the "SKULL" text, overlapping the letter "L".



ILLUSTRATION BY TOM GALAMBOS

GREEN FACE, PURPLE HAZE

By MARC DESANTIS

I WAS deep inside Laos. On the Ho Chi Minh Trail. MACV-SOG sent us to root out the NVA moving supplies south after Tet.

My team was killed.

The supplies were still moving south.

The war without end continued.

I found a temple in the jungle. It was overgrown with vegetation. Looked abandoned. No one was around. I went inside. My pack was heavy and I was tired. I planned to spend the night. It was raining.

I hate the rain.

The rain is like hot glue in Southeast Asia.

The temple walls were engraved with symbols I'd never seen before. Not sure what language it was. Maybe it wasn't a language at all.

In the center of the temple was a statue. It wasn't of a human. Instead, it was a mass of tentacles and eyes and many maws that yawned wide. That thing must have been twenty feet across and ten high.

Behind the statue was a stone circle, standing upright. The circle was covered with engraved symbols just like the ones on the walls. Through the circle I could see the rear wall of the temple.

I walked through the circle. Why? *Why not?*

I felt sick.

The nausea passed.

I was no longer in the temple. I turned around. That was all gone.

Where was I?

It was cold here. I wasn't in a jungle anymore. Tall pine trees were all about. It didn't look like Laos. I walked into a clearing. The stars. There are thousands, maybe millions, of them. I didn't recognize any.

An arrow whizzed by my ear.

An arrow! I ducked.

I saw the guy. He was wearing medieval duds and held a long-bow as tall as I was. I brought up my M-16. I squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

I extracted the round and drove in a new one. I pressed again. *Click. Nothing.*

Click.

Nothing.

Click.

Nothing

Click.

Nothing.

I pulled out my 1911 Colt. I squeezed. *Click.* Same thing. Nothing.

Another arrow flew by. I was lucky he wasn't a good shot with that bow. I hid behind a thick tree. I threw a grenade to give me some time to move off.

It was a dud.

Another arrow hit the tree. I ran at the guy. Full speed. Ka-Bar out. Thought that would work. I found him. He was just a kid. Scared. He had blond hair and blue eyes. He sure wasn't from Laos. He looked like every other farm kid I knew in Iowa.

His eyes widened when he saw me. He dropped his bow and threw up his hands in apology.

I heard another voice and spun around. It was an older man. He was dressed like the kid. They looked enough like each other that I guessed they were father and son.

The older man raised a hand. In the other, he held an axe. It looked like a tool, not a weapon. He wasn't a soldier but a farmer, I supposed. I had to be careful. That could kill me anyway if he landed a solid blow.

He put down the axe. The boy moved to stand with him. They were pointing to their faces. They shook their heads. "Nass urk!" they said together. "Nass urk!"

I understood. Somehow. My face was painted green. Standard Special Forces stuff in 'Nam. Maybe not here.

I rubbed my face, to show them that I wasn't really green. They seemed to understand that I wasn't an "urk," whatever that was. Must be something green they wanted dead.

They beckoned. I followed.

• • •

THERE'S a war here. Not much different from the real world. Just that here it's against the urks. The urks are green. Man-height. Man-shaped. Bestial things with anvil jaws and protruding boar tusks. Cunning. Very strong.

They have a taste for human flesh.

I saw the gnawed bones.

The urks don't seem to care one way or the other whether their meat is raw or cooked.

I became a part of the war. Sudeg and Iolot. Father and son. That's the pair I met first here.

I learned the language. I wanted to help them against the urks. Their village has been raided for years. It's spring. They expected the urks to come again. They knew the urks would come again.

I became a leader. The indigs were willing to fight, but had no training.

I had plenty.

I would have tried to radio for help. Called in an airstrike, if I could have. The radio didn't work.

I figured out the rules of this world soon enough. Bad news. Advanced technology doesn't work at all. Not my rifle. Not my pistol. Not my grenades. Not my radio.

I tested this out. I — very carefully — extracted a bullet from its cartridge case and poured out the gunpowder into a pan. Then, I struck a match.

The match didn't light.

So I got a piece of burning wood from the fire. I dropped it onto the powder.

Nothing. The powder refused to light.

Next, I poured some cooking oil that I begged from Sudeg's wife into the same pan.

I stuck the burning wood in that.

It lit up. Go figure.

Good news. My Ka-Bar worked just fine. So did my tomahawk. The villagers were impressed by the quality of the steel.

It's a medieval world alright. Nothing more sophisticated than a watermill. Dark Ages kind of stuff.

I knew that I was on another planet. I just had no idea where.

Would it have mattered if I did?

Everyone here believed in magic. They thought I was a wizard of some sort because I knew basic field medicine. I am the go-to healer in the town.

I delivered a baby boy last night.

They named it after me. *Kroon Sikta*. Green Face.

I didn't think it was a good name for a baby.

• • •

THE urks came across the river. The spring thaw had opened the mountain passes. The urks live in the mountains. Hundred clicks north. The locals don't ever go there.

We met the urks in the ruins of an old city. There was once a proper civilization here. Sudeg said the people were giants. He pointed to the broken road we'd taken, the parched aqueduct leading into the city, and the high, crumbling walls studded with ivy-choked towers. They had to be giants to have made all this stuff, he insisted.

They weren't giants, I said. *Just more capable than you are now.*

I didn't say that last part.

Always spare the feelings of the indigs. I needed a place to sleep and finding food on my own would be a chore.

The urks had settled in the remains of an arena. It's pretty big. Big enough for a football game. The ancient-types liked their sports.

No football today. This day was for killing.

The baron came with his knights. He'd called out the militia. Sudeg, Iolot, and I answered his summons.

The baron's men liked my uniform. Green with black tiger stripes. They didn't know what a tiger was in these parts. I explained, as best I could, that it's like a lion with stripes; they knew what a lion was.

The urks' booty had been dumped in a huge pile while they argued over how to split it up. The baron waited for a fight to break out. He had experience with the urks. I didn't. I deferred to him.

The urks were scary as all hell, but had no discipline. No one was holding watch. We walked right in.

The VC have discipline. The NVA have discipline. That's why the war in 'Nam has been so hard.

The urks were fighting. It was a brawl, not a battle. The baron ordered us in. He's a good fighter. Past middle age, but as tough as nails. Iron-gray hair. He frightened me. Reminded me of my old drill sergeant.

Not his beard, though. Everyone has a beard here. That's not the U.S. Army way.

A volley of arrows arced through the air. Baron's men; these archers were pros. Not boys with bows like Iolot. The iron shower hit the urks. There were grunts of pain and anger. It took them a while before they realized they were under attack.

The baron's knights dismounted and waded into the urks. I went in with the villagers. I was their leader. I swung my tomahawk at an urk that had an arrow shaft sticking out of its cheek. How the thing was still standing, I couldn't guess.

Urks are tough. Tougher than people.

I brained the urk with a blow to its skull. It would have pulped a man's head no sweat. The urk sank slowly, surprise registering on its face as it realized it was dying. I plunged the Ka-Bar into its throat.

Urks take a lot of killing.

Another urk popped up, spear in hand. He jabbed at me, clumsily. He was weighed down by all the stuff he'd stolen. He transported his haul by putting every bit — rings, torcs, silver arm-bands, and a half-dozen weapons — on his person. I dodged the sticky point, and stepped inside his guard. My tomahawk smacked him in the nose. Blood spurted. The head got stuck.

He wasn't dead yet. He drew back his spear again for another strike. My Ka-Bar was out. This time I stabbed him in his right eye. More blood. He went down for good.

The urks were split apart by our attack. The baron bellowed to his men, urging them forward. A very big urk came up and tried to pull the baron off his horse.

I sprinted across the arena floor. The urk wasn't looking my way. I tackled him, knocking him to the ground. My tomahawk had fallen from my hand. I couldn't reach it. I stabbed my Ka-Bar, but the urk was quick and strong. He slapped the knife from my grip and shoved me off.

I rolled and got to my feet. I snatched up a new weapon; it was an urkish sword, a combination of a cleaver and a butcher's knife

— ugly thing made of black iron. I swung at the urk, catching him on the forearm. He howled in pain. It was animalistic.

He rushed at me. Pummeled my head. It was covered in an iron cap, but it still hurt. Not much padding inside.

I struggled to do more than prevent myself from being brained. My hand-to-hand combat training was good enough for ‘Nam. Not nearly good enough for this world, where all combat is up close and personal.

The pounding stopped. The urk’s body dropped. One of the baron’s knights had lanced the urk in the back. He kept stabbing him many more times than I thought necessary.

I didn’t complain.

There was a small knot of urks left in the corner of the arena. In their middle was another big urk, older looking than the one I had just wrestled. He had a staff. He looked like a shaman and was chanting something.

A cloud of purplish gas spewed from the urk’s mouth and floated toward us. There was no wind. How was it moving?

There was no time to find out. The village men were choking on it.

Poison gas.

The villagers said there was magic in this place they call home, and I thought that maybe, just maybe, they weren’t wrong.

I had a standard Army-issue gas mask in my pack. Never thought I would need to use it, not even in Indochina. I put it on.

The rest of the baron’s men fell back; I moved forward. The urks had retreated, trying to get away from the purple cloud. It must have affected them too.

The shaman stood there, chanting. There was a link between his chant and the gas.

I charged, urkish sword raised high.

The shaman saw me. His mouth stopped moving. I swung my sword.

He blocked the blow with his staff, a gnarled bit of wood. I swung again.

He blocked once more and shoved the butt of the staff into my gut. I twisted, and the force of the blow was limited.

I hacked at the staff, cutting it in two. The head clattered to the arena floor.

The shaman looked at me, red eyes wide. He bared his fangs and roared. He drew a curved sword, and rushed at me.

His blade whooshed, aimed at my head. I raised my sword to stop it. We held there, together, snarling at each other. Spittle flew from his mouth.

The purple mist swirled around us; it was starting to dissipate. My sword hit him, again and again, on the side of the head. He had a helmet on his thick skull. My blows weren’t doing much. He jumped at me. We grappled and fell together in a heap. Rolled. Rolled some more. I was covered in dust and urk sweat. I stabbed the side of his torso with the Ka-Bar. I felt it slide in. He didn’t seem to mind. His meaty paw grabbed me around the throat. I was choking.

The mask slid off my face. I could barely see. My eyes were watering. Tunnel vision. He pulled me close and roared into my face. His breath was mighty bad.

My sword was gone. My knife was gone. I had one weapon left.

I bit his throat. Tasted terrible. He yelped in pain, but I had him.

I felt his hot blood spurt into my mouth. I wanted to retch, but my hatred and anger kept me focused. My jaw clenched. I tasted urk blood. I was a vampire.

His body went slack. I had killed the shaman.

I shoved him aside. He was drenched in his own blood. I was drenched in his blood.

I stood. I felt a sense of triumph that no kill in Vietnam had ever given me.

The baron’s men trapped the last of the urks in a corner of the arena. There were shouts and curses and men died.

The urks died faster.

The battle was over.

The baron came over to me. He was limping, having taken an urkish sword cut to his calf. Even with the limp, he still looked like the toughest man I’d ever seen on two worlds.

He handed me a proper sword as a token of his appreciation. He smiled.

He was even scarier when he smiled.

• • •

I BECAME one of the baron’s knights. I learned to ride a horse. I did battle with a sword and lance. During the day, we fought. At night, we feasted.

We chased the urks back into the mountains. The barony was safe for at least another year.

Sometimes, I thought about leaving. Find a temple that might be a gateway back home. To the world.

Which one was the real world I couldn’t say anymore. I still had no idea where I was.

That didn’t matter. There was a point to this war that the one in Vietnam lacks. I made a difference here.

How many men can say that and mean it?

I now knew these two things to be true: I am Kroon Sikta and I am home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marc DeSantis writes military history, science fiction, and fantasy on a distant world in a seaside castle illuminated only by the wan light of a dying sun and a few scented candles. In addition to authoring *Rome Seizes the Trident*, a history of naval combat during the Punic Wars, and *The Memnon War* series of far future science fiction novels, he creates arcane spells for fun and profit. His best customers are power-mad wizards.



ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

THE SORCERER'S MASK

By JASON RAY CARNEY

O*H, where is that forgotten vault of the sorcerer Lech the cursed, that secret place where his dust, a diaphanous layer of fears, lingers? Formed in a deep place of stacked black stones and iron crudely wrought, in that lonesome tomb where hoarse, throatless screams of somber shades squeak secret stan-zas acclaiming the dark spaces between stars?*

Beneath the ruins of Chel, that onyx crucible.

The Rogue came to Chel on a secret errand. It did not concern Lech, but the Rogue's innocence did not matter either: from the moment the Rogue crossed the threshold of the portcullis into the gatehouse, the sorcerer's spies, unseen as cockroaches, shadowed and scampered after the Rogue.

Lech's spies gazed from the shadows as the Rogue moved through the night; he sought the two-storied inn. They watched as he ordered a hearth fire, a hot bath, a barber, and called for a tailor to mend his travel-worn clothing: a sleeveless doublet of black cloth with fine silver embroidery, black slops, and a gray and high-collared sea-gown. After the Rogue was shaved, cleansed, and dressed, he dined in a private chamber on canal crabs and wastechops soaked in honey, wine, butter, and onions cooked with smallcaps. He drank tepari wine from a clay handpot.

In these things were joy.

Near the end of the night, as dawn painted a mother-of-pearl sky, Lech's spies watched as the Rogue sat in a high-backed armchair, lovingly sharpening his blades, and crossed the pointed toes of his booted feet beneath the table. As he stroked his whetstone over razor edges, the Rogue smoked crackling seeds from a longpipe and inhaled the purple smoke. His eyes blackened with dreams.

By and by the spies knew the Rogue was met by a cloaked and hooded person whose name is irrelevant.

Lech's spies knew something of every denizen of Chel, and the Rogue's guest was no exception; let it suffice to say he was a carver of stone. While the Rogue spoke with the secret agent for some time, Lech's spies gleaned nothing from the whispered discourse. From the dark alleyway, the spies gawked at the meeting through the grimy, small-paned windows of the inn, and thus could not hear the Rogue's conversation. They did, however, see the stonemason press into the Rogue's gloved hands a fist-sized parcel wrapped in roughspun cloth.

What secret was there? This story does not tell.

Later Lech's spies watched from the shadows as the Rogue wandered cloaked through the slanting, sagging streets of Chel, and passed through the market district into the tainted noble's quarters, called *the Bottoms*; here were located the manses of the

eldest, most paupered aristocracy, those most ancient families who had been put to heel by Lech and who only begrudgingly followed his diktats. Several of the sad manses in the Bottoms were thought to be ghost-choked, for they were abandoned and unoccupied because their owners had been murdered in earlier purges.

Lech's spies followed the Rogue as he walked, collar up, through the dark, winding streets and came to a dusty house with doors and windows frowning like a face.

The Rogue entered, his cloak billowing like smoke, vanished for a smallcandle's length, and then he emerged, his eyes silvered with tears. His secret errand was finished. Thus, he began walking to his rented room in the poor district even as the morning birds began to sing away the silence of the steady dark.

But when the Rogue turned into a trash-strewn alley, several of Lech's daggerers confronted him.

"Why are you in Chel, petty spellbinder?" the leader, the "Best-of-Five," whispered, his voice like wind.

"I am no spellbinder," the Rogue replied.

"Then why do you truck with idol-carvers, ash-drinkers, and aristocrats known for forbidden demonolatry?" the Best-of-Five hissed in return.

"My business is my own," the Rogue said through clenched teeth; his knuckles grew white as he made angry fists. His hand touched the sweatworn pommels of his daggers, just so, but then he removed them, the gesture pregnant with death.

"He is suspicious," the Second hissed while he whipped back his greasy hair. "We should escort this *strangeling*" — he spat — "to the interrogation chamber. Let the torturer rub his ribs with sawblades, and then he will give up his secrets." He spoke with a sultry voice that evinced perverse thoughts.

The Rogue betrayed no fear at these foreboding words. "I mean no harm," the Rogue stated, yet he took on a delicate fighting stance, like a viper ready to strike. "My errand in Chel is done. I leave at sunset. I will not be detained."

The Best-of-Five scoffed in disgust. With a snap of his fingers, he called for a henchman; this daggerer bore a staff with a rope noose. Wielding the "mancatcher," he moved to place it around the Rogue's neck. "Stay still, ye blackguard," the anxious daggerer shrieked hysterically. The Rogue tumbled back, avoided the rope, and launched a counterattack; with a flat hand he chopped the neck of the daggerer, who, a flesh sack of bone and meat, groaned and tumbled to the ground, dropping his looped-staff.

"Arrest him!" shouted the Best-of-Five.

Two daggerers pounced forward, wielding cruel blades. They swung for the Rogue's head, snarling rabid warcries. The Rogue grabbed both by their wrists, squeezed their joints just so, and with crackling pops, the daggerers hissed and yodeled in pain. Both men dropped their blades and gurgled. Then, in turn, the Rogue kneed each man in the groin. Both fell groaning, sputtering, and spewing to the flagstones.

"Leave me be, ye fandangles!" the Rogue shouted at the Best-of-Five and his last lieutenant. For an answer, the Best-of-Five howled and swung his sword in a dangerous figure eight. The Rogue backed up and nearly tripped over some cracked pottery littering the alley, but he caught himself as the sword came down, breezing by his cheek. "Now you seek to kill me?" the Rogue panted. "What have I done to merit death?"

By now the other men were standing, sputtering their pain. The Best-of-Five hissed, "You have resisted arrest!"

"The laws of Chel are draconian," the Rogue said through gritted teeth. "I must swallow pride to save your lackeys' lives," the Rogue said, motioning to the rising daggerers. He held out his hands to be bound. "I surrender," he said. "For now."

"Take him!" the Best-of-Five spat. The daggerers went forth hesitantly and bound the Rogue's wrists. As they took his knives, a flash of werelight seemed to blaze in the Rogue's eyes.

Guiltless, they led the Rogue to Lech's many-chambered *underpalace*, a secret labyrinthine vault that thronged with dark joy, and was hidden below the mazy sewers, branching veins beneath Chel. The sorcerer's underpalace was a place of music, meat, motley, and merriment. Lech would sit behind his silver mask, immobile and silent, watching for his distraction, the wet slaughter of Srin slaves fighting with blades dulled to prolong the spectacle. His shadowed eyes would be as voids, yet he gazed on the orgiastic rites of Black-Triangle witch cults. Hidden behind his mask, Lech would not deign to smile, even as his ears drank as sweet wine the discourses of the Black-robed Somite philosophers, who, with their razorish rhetorics and unfathomable calculi, deconstructed every folkish value. And in this cold court of dread, Lech would ponder, trade secrets with shadowy whisperers, collect demon-touched concubines as linens in cages, make foul discoveries, write strange poetries, and linger behind his godpainted visage of silver, polished as a mirror. When Lech spoke, his voice would issue from the mask like a toneless echo vibrating from the deepest pit.

But the Rogue saw none of this, for he was taken to the dungeons. After several flights of downward spiraling stairs and shadow tunnels, he came to a customs chamber and watched as the daggerers were given coins by the jailwardens for bringing him below, like hunters paid for game flesh. The reward for his incarceration: three coppers stamped with Lech's masked face, with eyes lightless as a grotto.

The Rogue was then rudely thrown into a cell of stone and steel bars along with several other unfortunates. Many drowsed as he was tossed in; they barely stirred at his rude treatment. They saw nothing through heavy-lidded, half-shut eyes. They were defeated, dehumanized, malnourished lingerers whose shriveled brains lacked the vigor to joy in novelty.

The cell was crowded with every manner of downtrodden soul, wet with the humidity of bodies and sour with the aroma of fear. The Rogue was not the only victim of Lech's paranoia: prostitutes and lotus dealers, stevedores, drunken sailors, and petty magickers who sold fake juju baubles were also cruelly imprisoned beneath the city of the sorcerer.

Long had Lech ruled Chel from below, like a spider crouched in its web. Hidden in his subterranean labyrinth of profligacy, he sipped wine from half-skulls. Dog-like lawmakers, who were his capering, mewling puppets, licked his fingers and esteemed him a god incarnate. The peasants, merchants, soldiers, and nobles who dwelt in Chel feared Lech, their hidden godling. And so, in his secret vault, Lech grew thin and horned and diademed and as tall as three men and as narrow as a stave of black wood. Yes, Lech grew dry as dust with evil power. His influence waxed, a fungal, moldy growth.

The Rogue saw none of this, only three fungous-sprouted walls of black brick and a panel of iron bars. After the guards locked fast the bars, he was thronged by a cluster of prisoners, shivering, gaunt, malnourished, starving, athirst, and frowning, asking him if, in his newcoming, he had food or water or other nourishments. The Rogue had none, though he parted with his cloak in charity.

He learned, as a rule, that the other prisoners were not unkind folk, being common and unambitious. But in this darkling place of Lech's cruelty, they had become monstrous and animalistic, unsocially quiet, and as sharp-fanged as hissing serpents.

These prisoners had a deeper reason for sorrow beyond their unfreedom. They whispered to the Rogue of a black-hooded torturer; on the pretense of "investigating" a plot to overthrow the state, he came to the dungeons with some regularity to take one or two prisoners to a secret chamber nearby. There he would torture them most cruelly unto death, or so it seemed by their echoing screams. When the torturer had come previously, those he took screamed and spat as they were dragged from their cage by the guards, and all looked on unheroically.

"Is this plot true?" asked the Rogue, eager to understand the nature of his imprisonment.

Who could say? they mused. Perhaps? Lech was afraid, and that was undeniable. And so they told the Rogue the story of the sorcerer's fear, speaking over each other, one another arguing points and details.

It began with a soothsayer named Ishra. Sorcerers are a fearful, anxious lot, who draw their secrets clandestinely from alien dimensions through skullduggery, and in their fear of threats unseen, they seek to control everything, to inoculate themselves from fate. Lech, true to form, gathered to himself soothsayers and prophets to learn and control destiny as a tootlepipe controls the swaying of a serpent.

Recently had Lech acquired Ishra the soothsayer. After smearing several strokes of blood on a white canvas, Ishra told of a dark fate for Lech, the overthrow of the sorcerer's hold on that city, one that would end with his demise. "What should I do to avoid this fate?" asked Lech with his hollow, echoing air. For an answer, Ishra merely shrugged her shoulders and begged

forgiveness. This ambiguity did not please Lech, and Ishra was forced to say she had been mistaken in her reading, and by and by was thrown into the dungeons.

But despite her incarceration, alas, Lech still feared, and so had his agents round up any who were suspicious: newcomers to the city, foreigners, and those who had grumbled against his rule in the past. Lech trusted in Ishra's power, suspected the truth of her reading, and so now saw a million prying eyes in every shadow, and clandestine plotting in every whisper. Now was not a safe time to visit Chel.

"And what happened to this soothsayer, this Ishra?" the Rogue asked as their story was finished. They pointed to a dark woman with lustrous eyes crouched in shadow. She seemed a holy eremite or monastic, for despite her malnourishment, a vitality burned in her eyes like stars.

The Rogue was intrigued by her strange comportment, and when he approached, it was Ishra, not the Rogue, who asked the first questions:

"From where do you fare?" she asked.

"Far away," the Rogue answered.

"Does Lech have reason to fear you?" Ishra asked.

"How can he? He does not know me," the Rogue replied.

Ishra gripped his shoulder firmly. "That is enough," she said, and gazed into nowhere.

The Rogue asked her questions but all Ishra would say is "the stars clarify that Lech's end is nigh. There is no denying it. His rule will end. He will pass."

Later, the Rogue crouched in a corner and kept to himself. He pondered escape and occasionally listened to Ishra, who continued to speak to him as a friend and compeer.

Two guards were posted in the dungeons, near the cell, and they sat at a small, round-topped table where, by the light of a single tallow candle, they played cards and shared a pitcher of rancid wine. Occasionally a swollen rat would scamper by, and one guard would throw a drinking jack and curse. Eventually, one guard threw a wine ewer and cried, "By Greh's veiny stave, I got it!" The ewer crashed and hit home with a wet thump. Squealing like a porker, the guard tossed the twitching corpse through the bars to the prisoners and oinked, "Let it not be said the state skimps on meat for its prisoners!" The Rogue gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes at this, and the wheels of his mind continued to turn.

Hours later Ishra was cooking the rat over a small fire fueled by dried rags. The smell was awful, but the soothsayer licked her lips and asked the Rogue if he would take a bite. The Rogue's patience fluttered. Without answering, he stood and approached the bars.

"What does your master want from us?" the Rogue asked them.

"He wants to know why you are in Chel, plotting evil against him," they said.

"I am not," the Rogue replied. "I came on a private errand. It is finished. Let me go."

They laughed at that. "Fork-tongued witch talk." One guard then stood, grabbed a bucket of slop water, and splashed the

Rogue and others through the bars. "That's for rudeness. We gave you savory meat and still you wag your ingracious tongue!"

Ishra cursed them. "You sorcerer's lapdogs! You thralls of the demon-haunted! Lick-spittle dung beetles!" she said.

"Watch your tongue, star-addled witch!" they said. "Gnaw your ratsnatch and be happy." And Ishra's shoulders bowed and she was quieted.

Thus, the Rogue waited, bedraggled as a foul-smelling canal rat. After a while, he approached Ishra.

"Can you use your arts to help free us?" the Rogue asked, kicking dust impatiently.

"Perhaps I could," Ishra said, "but I lack the necessary blood and canvas."

The Rogue pondered this in silence for a moment, then nodded to Ishra. He returned to his place on the stone floor exuding the patience of a crouching cat on the hunt.

Some time later the guards provided the prisoners with crude provisions: chunks of wormy black bread and pots of smallbeer with a mouldy stench, slid through the bars. The Rogue neither ate nor drank; he gave his allotment to the soothsayer, who ate too swiftly to offer thanks.

It seemed a full day had passed; the guards crouched at the table, spinning a gewgew for a game and cursing and drinking. Soon, when the dark door to the dungeons flew open, the guards laughed, like old donkeys, and saluted the torturer.

The torturer entered sucking marrow from a gnawbone. He stood as the prisoners had described him: tall, round-bellied, with a black hood, and dark eyes like glimmering opals internally lit. He had the largest hands the Rogue had ever seen, callused like leather and stained and grimed black with blood.

"Which one is the fraudulent soothsayer?" he asked, cracking his knuckles. "Our lord's chamberlain wants to hear her squeal." The guards pointed to Ishra. "Well, fetch her out and bind her well," the torturer laughed, his belly jiggling.

Ishra frowned and her shoulders slumped. She made blunted lips and sighed. Placing a hand on the Rogue's shoulder, she thanked him thus: "Your kindness is rare, friend. If you leave this nightmare place alive, I will dream blessings from the shadows for you." She had barely finished her goodbye when the two guards grabbed her by the arms and began hauling her away.

But the Rogue would not let them take the soothsayer. His fist shot over the woman's shoulders and struck one of the unsuspecting guards in the face, crunching his nose; the other guard, gasping and drawing his blade, squealed when the Rogue took his sword. They struggled, the guard hissed, and then gagged and spat as the Rogue slit his stomach, from groin to neck. The other guard, his eyes awash with noseblood, did not see the Rogue as he brought the point of a blade across his neck, severing a jugular, spraying crimson in a horizontal arc.

Ishra howled in horror and backed away from the Rogue, who stood, grim, besmeared in gore, astride the twitching corpses; he booted them cruelly to immobility. The wetwork done, the Rogue crouched and hissed, his eyes bulging, and held his dripping sword as an artist holds a paint-sopped brush.

The torturer had simply observed. He chuckled phlegmatically and nihilistically. He threw aside his gnawbone and wiped his greasy hands on his tunic. He was no coward and casually drew a bloody sawblade that hung from his hip.

"So it goes," he said in a resigned voice. And in an instant, he charged forward. The Rogue dodged his sawblade and the torturer fell against the back stone wall of the cell. He turned and was surprised to find the prisoners clawing at him, trying to hold him. He swung and bashed with his sawblade and punched faces, and was soon free of the prisoners, who cowered away from him. He pointed his blade point at the Rogue. "Come," he said with a sigh. He motioned for the Rogue's attack. "I'm ready for death."

The Rogue twirled the guard's stolen sword in his hand, readying to strike, and pounced. They danced with blades, their weapons clashing, ringing, and whickering like a terrible song of death bells, but the display was not a long one. The torturer was over-aggressive and lost balance after a heavy two-handed cleave from above, and the Rogue stabbed just so, through the armpit, shoulder, neck, and head. The torturer choked and trembled as the Rogue laid him down, almost delicately, to the ground. The torturer's lips and tongue trembled in death and tried to form hate-filled curses as he died.

The Rogue stood tall then, flicking the blood from his blade. The prisoners cowered before him. "Where is the sorcerer?" the Rogue asked, his voice empty of emotion.

The soothsayer, stammering for words, eventually calmed herself. She laved her hands in the torturer's blood. She brought her grimed hands up and beckoned the Rogue forward. The Rogue hesitated but he complied when Ishra told him to kneel. The soothsayer smeared the blood over the Rogue's pale face, painted his gaunt features a glistening red, and looked into his eyes, those black, depthless orbs. There were several beats of silence as Ishra contemplated some mystery, and the surrounding prisoners watched in respectful silence, for they bore witness to some ritual of power.

Finally the Rogue grew impatient, blinked, and stood, saying, "I must find Lech..."

"I must guide you to Lech," interrupted Ishra, who trampled over his words.

With this dark harmony, they moved to leave the cell. The dehumanized, quivering in their opened cage, began to stir to life and probe their new freedom.

Before they exited the dungeon, Ishra warned, "Avaunt! There is an unwholesome darkness in the corridors." She grabbed up a peculiarly formed piece of steel, a firestriker, from the guard's dicing table, and hissed, "Grab two staves from the sconces! They are dipped in pitch and sulfur and will burn brightly."

The Rogue complied, Ishra struck sparks, and soon they each held burning torches that gave foul smoke.

They left the prison cell and issued into a dark corridor, the torchlight throwing their dancing shadows along the walls, floors, and ceiling. "I care not for this flickering light. Our enemies will see us coming," the Rogue spat.

"We have no choice," Ishra said. "The darkness in the labyrinth is impenetrable otherwise."

The Rogue sighed; his hand gripped the sweat-worn handle of his sword, and his eyes bulged from their sockets.

They walked on, alert and fearful. "Where is the sorcerer?" the Rogue asked.

"It depends on the hour," the soothsayer replied. "We must find the *cone of time*, a water clock used by the guards to coordinate their duties. It is not far from here. The hour will help me decide where to take you. Although Lech doesn't sleep, his routine has been somewhat regular since my coming here: at the first hour, he holds his profligate court, and although he does not eat or indulge in carnal delights, he enjoys watching others do so; after several hours of playing spectator to debauchery, he withdraws to his library sanctum, where he studies spellcraft and works rituals."

"What hour is it then?" the Rogue asked impatiently.

"There!" the soothsayer said, pointing. They espied a curious device set deep into a stone alcove, a man-sized, beaten steel cone, its wider end up and lower end down, and from this lower end a steady stream of water issued into a copper-lined pool; the trickling of water could be heard as the pot filled.

Standing against the device, however, was a spearthral of Lech, a three-eyed watchman who wore a conical hat and a shirt of greased mail and who wielded a spear; his ever-watchful eyes, dripping mucus, bulged from their sockets, and a paranoid tension contorted his face.

"*Sleepless three-eyes* jealously guards the hour from Lech's thralls, for in this sunless place all are ignorant of the time. I know not why this is so. But there is a floating disk of cork therein that marks the hour, and the guards use it to order their watches," Ishra quietly reported.

The Rogue nodded. He adjusted his sword grip and moved forward, a shadow secreting across the flagstones, and for a moment he was lost even to the eyes of Ishra. The Rogue made not a sound in approaching the time device, and the three-eyed watchman never knew death was upon him. One moment he was standing, gazing in fierce alertness; the next moment a sword pierced his chest, foaming blood bubbling from his mouth, and he fell, gurgling and shaking, to the ground.

Ishra ran to the time device.

"The hour is clear to me!" she shrieked. "Yes! Lech is at reading!"

The Rogue grunted. "Can you lead me to his sanctum?"

The soothsayer nodded silently. "None dare go for fear of rumored guardians, but I will take you, deathdealer."

The Rogue grinned cruelly.

They went forward, and anger shimmered — reflected torchlight — in their eyes.

They crept forward on whispering feet. At each hallway juncture they peered intently left and right. Occasionally the Rogue knelt to search the ground for evidence of recent traffic. Sometimes, out of the dimness of their sight, they saw a figure moving, and they retreated into alcoves and waited, their grease torches wavering for want of air, but they were not observed.

Eventually they approached a vaulted crossing of hallways, lit by four torches, and decorated with precious gems set into the walls. Ishra dropped closer to the ground, raised two fingers, and said, "We must be on guard here. Such gems would not be left unguarded. Lech's reading vault lies beyond this crossing. There are no guards here, and they avoid this place. Always has Lech parted with his retinue at this boundary."

The Rogue nodded "Although I am not afraid of Lech's sorcery, I respect it. No others pass?"

Ishra pursed her lips. "Perhaps those deeper in the sorcerer's councils. The chamberlain? The torturer? I do not know. Lech's reading sanctum is sacrosanct. None enter there."

The Rogue stepped forward. "Sorcerers cherish their grimoires above gold. We shall see."

The sound of gurgling water could be heard as they entered the vaulted crossing. There was a fountain of purple-stained water foaming in the center of the chamber, scintillant in the light of the torches. It was a strange sight to see, a vibrant tableau of unnatural liquid in a stony, dead place.

"We must have courage," said Ishra.

The Rogue sniffed as a hound would. He snarled and stepped into the vault, his sword gripped firmly. Ishra pointed to the northern hallway, and the Rogue moved there. Ishra hewed close behind him, as a sheep to a shepherd. But then Ishra screamed — for slimy death struck swiftly!

There was a splash and a fleshy, purple tube, scaled and mucus-slicked, shot out of the water and curled gruesomely about Ishra's neck. Ishra's scream caught short as she fell, and the tentacle tightened around her neck; fang-like protrusions grew out of the slimy tentacle and pierced the flesh over and over. All was a chaos of flailing arms and a twirling tentacle; squishing, splashing, and stifled cries of pain echoed in the open-aired chamber.

Ishra clawed at the tentacle and her throat as her feet flailed. Her lips dripped saliva and she retched drily. By and by, she stiffened as the tentacle flexed and undulated. The Rogue acted swiftly and attacked with sword — several hard strokes. He slashed the tentacle with no restraint, hewing the flesh wetly with his blade; purple ichor spurted, spraying his face. Eventually the tentacle spasmed in paroxysms of death, and the Rogue frantically unwound it from the woman's neck. Blood and vibrant-colored puss oozed from the wounds revealed.

"Do you live, Soothsayer? Speak!" he shouted, as if through distant dimensions. Ishra tried to speak but sighed in dying. In her last living moment, she pointed to a door in the tunnel beyond. Her gesture was pregnant with meaning; beyond lay the reading room of Lech, where the Rogue would meet the sorcerer.

The Rogue contemplated the hewn tentacle and Ishra's sad corpse. He arrayed her corpse in a posture of sleeping, and closed her eyes, but thought differently, and opened them again, for her life had been defined by vision. Then the Rogue rose and swiftly glided down the hallway.

He came to an arched door painted with a large serpent's eye; the door was tall, narrow, and made of black wood banded with strange metal. The Rogue pushed it, and it slowly, smoothly, silently glided opened.

What strange sights were revealed! It was a domed room with a ceiling of ovoid polished silver tiles to suggest the form of eyes, and so the floor was mirrored on the ceiling in countless iris orbs. The walls were shelved floor to ceiling, and brimmed with books, librams, scrolls, and hasped quartos in an insane jumble of disarray. There were tables, and on these tables were stacked books and more books, towers of knowledge tilting and dusty. And in the center of the room was a dais, and in the center of the dais was a throne, and on that throne lorded Lech, his silver face shining in the light of a hundred tapers flickering from candelabra.

"*Ishra of Ouon spoke truth,*" Lech said. "*Enter, doombringer.*"

The Rogue stepped cautiously into the room. Aromas of strange incense assaulted his nostrils, for several candles and tapers burned and gave multicolored smokes. For a moment, the Rogue was gripped by a strange vertigo as he saw himself reflected in the ceiling, wandering in, a tiny figure grasping a silver-flash of a blade. Was he spectator unto himself, this creature entering the chamber? He did not know.

Upon the Rogue's approach, Lech stood, tall, diademed, mantled in black, taller than any man the Rogue had known, and he raised his porcelain white hands and made mudras. There was a loud report, and red energy shot swiftly from his hands, blasting to papery bits the books behind the Rogue. The Rogue had anticipated such an attack and dived. Again Lech made mudras and power crackled, screaming from his hands, and a crimson puff of energy snapped and hissed; the Rogue rolled, avoiding it, and came up poised, his glimmering sword ready. Lech hissed; he made a triangle with his thin fingers, and a lance of scarlet miasma, compressed like ice, shot at the Rogue, and the Rogue turned it away, deflecting it into a shelf that exploded into papery madness.

Lech fell to his chair, hissing, wheezing, grasping at his throat for air, for such magic took its toll. Seeing weakness, the Rogue pounced like a tiger. Just before his blade sliced into the weakened sorcerer, Lech threw up his hands, and spectral energy formed a sphere of rose-colored mist that surrounded him. The Rogue hit the sphere and his blade clanged and echoed a strange warbling that whined through the library.

"*You cannot harm me, for this is Ka's Sphere of Unshattering Will.*"

The Rogue continued to clang mechanically. Lech sat, emotionless, inside his mask of mystery, and his black robes seemed to sway in an unearthly wind, for some strange environment cohered within the protected space of the sphere.

"*I could call my soldiers, but I grow weary of this. You would kill them. I cannot deny the stars. You are to be my doom. My Soothsayer said so.*"

The Rogue clanged onward. He did not respond.

"*My spell will not endure. But it will not be broken before the allotted time. Let us discourse while you wait to kill me.*"

The Rogue clanged on. After a moment, he stopped.

Never for a moment did the doombringer remove his dagger gaze from the sorcerer. The Rogue sat on the ground, crossed his legs, and delicately placed his sword on his lap; even in this restful posture the Rogue seemed poised to strike, like a cobra

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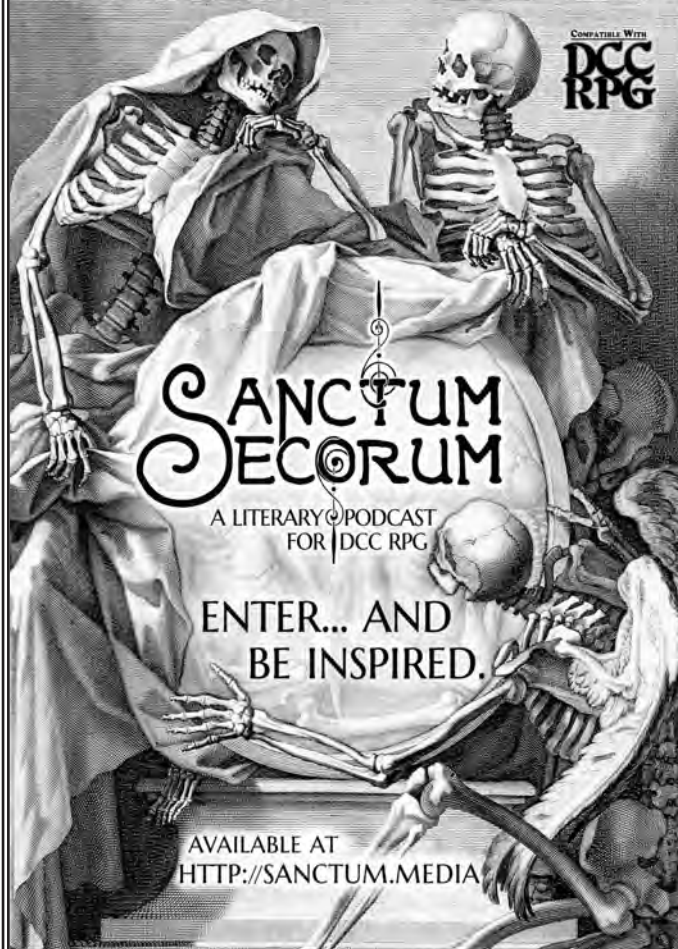
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hypnotizing its prey. Occasionally Lech's sphere would tremble and warble, and smoke would swirl from it, an indication of its weakening state. And the sorcerer still wheezed, lounged in his book-thronged throne, for his waning strength was apparent. The Rogue did not speak; pregnant silence lay over the domed chamber. Sorcerer and Rogue stared at each other as many minutes passed, then Lech spoke.

"Long ago I was born to a man and woman, and grew to a stripling, and one day I saw the true nature of reality, and it burned my soul. My family, my tribe, hitherto objects of affection, were nothing to me then. I was nothing to myself. Even so, I did not understand. So I sought understanding, far away, and I wandered. I wandered even unto the stars. Many decades passed and no understanding came, but something else came: power. But it did not nourish me. No. It accelerated my misery. My very hands became chalk white with power, and my mind wandered to the very edges of the great tree of life, and I saw all. I sought to escape the terrible journey I had inaugurated, and it seemed for a time that escape was to be found in flesh, in pleasure, in cruelty, in the embrace of the profane, but still I was driven on, driven across centuries, to understand, and so spiraled deeper into the maze of life. So very tired, I started to fade, to become a shadow, and so worked magic to extend my journey, and so after a millennium fashioned this mask. As I wear it, I persist in living, such as life is for me any longer. More a dream of the ashes than of the fire that once burned. Perhaps the mask is more alive by now than I am."

With this gesture, Lech touched his face.

Understanding bloomed in the Rogue's mind. He stood then and tossed aside his sword contemptuously. Something passed between Lech and the Rogue, a spark of insight, some understanding. Their stories were not dissimilar, and so they saw through each other. The Rogue licked his lips, and drew a tired hand over his face. "Remove it," he said.

The emotionless silver face of Lech gazed on the Rogue for some time. The sphere of protective energy shimmered and dissipated like smoke from a brazier.

The Rogue no longer seemed poised to attack. He was tired and saw his haggard face distorted across the curves of Lech's silver mask. His slack, wearied posture exhibited someone who had come to the end of their journey. The charged tension of hostility was gone now, replaced by something calmer, truer.

"But I am afraid," said Lech.

The Rogue nodded.

Lech stood, stood tall, and placed aged hands on his silver mask. He removed it, and like the exhalation of breath, the mask clattered to the floor. The robes unwove, and the form of Lech was wisped away, a smear of smoke and dust into nothingness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Ray Carney, the author of *Weird Tales of Modernity* (McFarland, 2019) and *Rakefire and Other Stories* (Pulp Hero Press, 2020) sometimes imagines himself a sorcerer of old, reading and writing treatises, spells, fell codices, and occult grimoires. Fortunately for him, his undergraduate students at Christopher Newport University — firmly planted on terra firma — charitably remind him that he is but a mere mortal. He is thankful for those reminders.

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THE BLACK PEARL OF



THE SUNKEN LANDS



By **CYNTHIA WARD**

Illustration by **RANDY BROECKER**

THE lovers came out of the sea to lie in the soft moss of a wildwood, where neither nereid nor humans would disturb them. There were none but beasts to hear; yet, afterward, the female whispered into the male's ear.

The young nereus shouted aloud, not seeing, in his joy, that his lover winced at the volume. "I will marry you, Ria," he proclaimed, laying webbed fingers on her belly, "and give you many strong sons!"

"I'll be pleased to have son or daughter by you, Bruko," replied the young nereia, Ria, ignoring the prickle of her lover's pointed nails against her sleek hide. "But you're not the marrying sort. You're hardly faithful to me —"

"By Krey's trident!" Bruko reared up from beside her, his coarse hair streaming like seaweed in the shadows. "How can you say —"

"Oh, everyone says it," Ria said. "You're the busiest lover in the tribe, for all you're only eighteen." She was a beautiful young nereia, with generous curves and a thick strong body, well layered with fat. She smiled where she lay on the blanket of her dark hair, which glinted blue where fingers of light touched. "You're good at loving, and handsome, so I'm pleased to lie with you. But you'll never be happy harvesting seaweed and fish, with only bits of battle here and there. You need to take yourself out into the world of empires and armies, and take your lovers from among the warrior females of far seas and lands."

Bruko stood, fisting his webbed fingers 'til the muscles bunched under his tough smooth hide. Like any nereus, he was powerfully built, under the sheath of fat that protected him from the ocean's cold; but he was taller and stronger than most nereis, and his broad shoulders and tapering torso were unusual among the square-built males.

"You're the only nereia for me, Ria," he declared. "I'll take you as wife, and prove you wrong —"

Ria laughed so the gill slits fluttered in the sides of her neck. "Why would I marry a penniless young nereus, when loot-rich warlords and moneyed merchants seek my hand?"

Bruko's brow knotted like rope, and his next words rumbled a challenge. "Can they give you the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands?"

Ria stilled. She looked upon Bruko for a long moment. Then she spoke. "No one can give me the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands."

"I will," Bruko said, and drew on his sharkskin loincloth and the belt of dogfish shagreen that held his stone knife.

"No one has seen the Black Pearl in a thousand years, since the great wizard-nereis sank the island-continent of Attala and were destroyed in the deed. And none who have sought the Black Pearl since that day have returned." Ria rose, reaching for her lover. "Don't go, Bruko! It will be your death —"

"It will make my fortune, and make you my wife," Bruko replied.

"But I'm not going to marry you —"

Ria fell silent. For, with a speed and grace no land-folk would expect of a nereus, Bruko had dived into the sea.

• • •

low waters where his nomadic tribe had set up its encampment. *Wanders Far From His Pod! If you're about, Wanderer, I've a chance for you to live up to your name —*

Always, you nereis bellow, as if mind-speech must be at top volume to carry, Wanders Far From His Pod replied, shooting past Bruko's head. He swam with a suppleness that made the nereus, graceful in water, look slow and clumsy as a human. *If you would mind-call properly —* Wanderer's smile widened — *then harken to the dolphins.* He pointed with his beak. *You have a spear and two knives. And what the deep is it that you carry in your back-sack? Too weighty to be food, I think —*

Curiosity killed the dolphin, Bruko said, but he drifted downward, taking the sharkskin rucksack from his back.

Small fish darted away as he planted his feet on a boulder, oblivious to the rough barnacles beneath his bare soles. Mindful of his gills, he hung his leviathan-bone spear about his neck by its thong, so it rested against his back. His long hair rippled in the current as he opened his rucksack and, carefully, withdrew the heaviest item from within.

Wanderer said, *A container of the hard clearness, with air and some big, lumpy white stone within.*

Bruko smiled. *A glass bottle full of no-air, sealed with land-folk's cork and wax, to hold a magic metal made out of seawater.*

The metal must wish to reunite with the sea, else it would not be sealed away like that.

It wants to rejoin the sea, Bruko said, *as violently as I want to join with Ria.*

That stone is old magic, Wanderer said, *from the days when there were still mighty wizards among the sea peoples. How did you get such a thing?*

I need it to win the hand of the beautiful Ria.

Dolphins could not turn their heads. Wanderer imitated a headshake by moving his upper body from side to side. *You stole it.*

Bruko smiled. His strong teeth were white in the sea-filtered sunlight, his canines more prominent than a human's. *I borrowed it.*

You always carry the stone knife you took in battle from a soldier of the Northern Kingdom, Wanderer said. *But what the deep is that new knife? Its grip is made of shiny metal. And no knife blade is half so long.*

Bruko touched the hilt, which was wrapped in gold wire and set with white pearls and red coral, and had a great clear gem on the pommel. *I borrowed the Sword of Rrrelll, as well.*

The Sword of Rrrelll, nereus hero of the last battle of Attala? You looted your own shrine!

Bruko indicated the sword and bottle. *My people need never know these were away. Perhaps I'll not need to use them, to win the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands —*

That is your goal? Wanderer exclaimed.

Please, Bruko said. *There's no need to bellow like a human.*

Looting a woven-seaweed tent is hardly adequate preparation for knocking over the Great Temple of Cleptas. And knife-fighting skills don't make you a swordsman!

Wanderer, are you coming with me, or not?

What, and die a horrible death far from my people?

WANDERER, Bruko called in mind-speech as he swam deeper into the Northern Ocean, away from the shal-

It would be a glorious and heroic death, Bruko said. But it's not going to happen if the two of us work together.

Wanderer regarded Bruko with one large, mild eye. Wanderer was a young bull of considerable size, who already bore many scars of combat.

I suppose I owe you, he said finally.

I did save you from that hungry shark.

We killed it together, Bruko. Don't think otherwise.

I struck the death-blow.

Such suicidal self-confidence, Wanderer said. If I don't go with you, you'll only get yourself killed.

No, I'll just need more time to reach the temple where the Black Pearl waits. I'm not so fast a swimmer as a dolphin.

Wanderer's laugh rang in Bruko's mind. *Not even close.*

Bruko started to return the bottle to his sharkskin rucksack, then looked sharply at the dolphin. *Look at this, he said, touching the neck of the bottle. It looks like your nose.*

Wanderer looked. *That's absurd.*

The young barbarian fastened his rucksack over the bottle and the rucksack over his back, then swam away from the dolphin at his fastest speed. *Bottlenose, he mind-called to Wanderer. You're a bottlenose!*

Wanderer sped after him. *Where are you going? he said. I thought you wanted a ride.*

I do, Bruko said.

He swam upward as the dolphin surfaced, noisily venting. Reaching air, Bruko settled himself astride the dolphin, between the blowhole and the dorsal fin. His legs gripped the dolphin's scarred gray sides behind the pectoral fins, as a land-nomad's knees grip the shaggy sides of his pony.

Wanderer shot forward, and suddenly stopped.

Bruko flew from Wanderer's back, shooting over the dolphin's beak.

Bruko disappeared with a great splash. When he surfaced, facing Wanderer, he shook the sword. "Are you trying to get us killed?" he demanded wrathfully. "What the deep was that?"

Wanderer's laugh filled Bruko's mind. *What you deserve.*

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AFTER many days, the ocean bottom rose, abrupt as a land-cliff, and Bruko and Wanderer found themselves traveling above a ruined city. They had visited the sunken continent several times before, but had never ventured this far north. They sank beneath the surface for a closer look, though the city was only a few feet below, its marble sun-lit and green where it rose above the rippling fronds of seaweed. Quicksilver fish wove among broken pillars and swam in and out of rooms whose roofs and walls had been shattered by the cataclysmic submergence of Attala. The great marble statues lay smashed on the floors and plazas, and the famed Attalan mosaics were obscured by muck and weed.

Bruko and Wanderer returned to the surface, so the dolphin might take a deep, fresh draught of air before they ventured any farther.

Wanderer leaped into the air for the sheer pleasure of doing so. Then he floated upright in the water, his pectoral fins above the surface, facing Bruko.

Attala was the greatest empire the world has ever seen, said Wanderer. I don't understand the fascination you two-leg peoples have with shiny stones, but I know there must be many of them here, in this sunken Attalan city. Would they not win you Ria?

"There may be a few coins or gems missed by the generations of nereis and mer and human plunderers," responded the nereus, speaking aloud. "But there is no glory here, and no chance of gaining Ria's hand. I will win the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands, or I will win nothing."

Be careful what you ask for, Wanderer said. He made the dolphin head-shake, moving his upper body from side to side. A pearl is naught but a bit of oyster excrescence, a particle of grit coated with fancy nacre. Why should your female care for that?

"It's black, like no pearl born anywhere in all the northern seas," said Bruko. "And it's the size of a grown nereus's head." He took his stabbing-spear into his hand. "Come, we will find the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands."

Quietly, they submerged. They swam side by side above the ruins, and kept enough distance between them that, if Bruko thrust with his spear, he could not strike Wanderer.

No one who has ventured to the Great Temple of Cleptas, seeking the Black Pearl, has ever returned, the dolphin said ruminatively. What do you suppose awaits us there, Bruko?

A great kraken, with many long tentacles to tear us apart, the nereus said. Or a school of sharks, perhaps.

A host of giant, hungry crabs, Wanderer supplied. An army of narwhals, ensorcelled to run us through.

A pod of leviathan, Bruko said. A great sea-serpent!

The sea-serpents were all killed, Wanderer said, in the days when the sea peoples warred with the people of unsunken Attala.

Then, Bruko said, we'll need to watch out for a giant clam, big enough to swallow us both in a gulp.

They laughed. Overhead, a school of mackerel broke, scattering.

Well, we've one bit of luck, at least, said Wanderer. This part of Attala didn't sink too far.

Nereis were more at home under the sea than on land, but they did not like to venture into the ocean depths. If they did, they could leave the deep only with excruciating slowness. Rising too fast would wrack a nereus with crippling, sometimes-deadly pain.

By Krey's trident, I see a hill beyond the city, Bruko said, and it has a fancy building upon it.

A temple in the Attalan style, still intact, said Wanderer. We look upon the Great Temple of Cleptas, Thief-God of Attala.

The Temple of the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands. Bruko removed his rucksack from his back. I've brought something for you, Wanderer.

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THEY approached the temple slowly, nereus and dolphin, swimming at some distance from one another. They engaged in no discussion, for mind-voices carry far in water; and they kept to the middle depths, eschewing the sea-bottom that had once been dry land. The lush seaweeds might hide any number of dangers.

The weeds grew especially thick and tall about the temple, dark kelp streaming up from the hillsides, and from the marble steps and roof. Bruko and Wanderer exchanged a glance of understanding and swam toward the roof. Surely the temple's great entrance, so welcoming with its lack of gates and bars, admitted pillagers only to deadly tricks and traps.

Though the temple looked whole and undamaged, Bruko and Wanderer had speculated that the roof had fallen in. But as they rose above the temple, they saw that they were wrong, for a kelp forest stretched from one side of the vast roof to the other. The broad, ragged sheets of seaweed rose nearly the height of a nereus's chest, and they undulated in the weak current, hiding the roof.

Bruko turned in the water to face Wanderer, and gestured with the old hand-signs, which the nereis had developed to communicate silently with one another and with their dolphin allies, in the days when Attala ruled above the waves.

Go to my left, Bruko gestured, I will scout to the right.

Dolphins couldn't turn their heads, but they could nod; and Wanderer gave his comrade a nod of assent. He swam toward the left side of the roof. And Bruko, gripping the spear of leviathan bone in his hand, swam slowly toward the right side of the temple.

Passing over the roof, Bruko saw that the kelp was plentiful. Its flat dark blades were broader and thicker than those of the kelp his tribe harvested. Too, the ragged edges seemed more uneven; almost jagged, like the teeth of sharks. The frond-forest obscured the roof, so Bruko could not determine if it had any holes or cracks through which he and Wanderer might enter the Temple of Cleptas.

Bruko sank lower. Floating just above the gently waving seaweed, he reached out his empty left hand and swept several sheets of kelp aside.

Finding no damaged place through which they might enter the temple, and no dangers lurking in the seaweed, Bruko raised his arms to resume a swimming stroke.

His left arm was jerked back.

Suppressing an oath, Bruko turned, stabbing with the spear in his right hand. The sharp bone pierced only kelp.

Somehow, kelp had tangled around his arm, and he could not pull or shake it free. He tore at the broad fronds with the edges of his spearhead, seeking to cut himself loose. The edges were sharp. But the thick slick substance parted far more slowly than kelp should.

More streamers wrapped around Bruko's left arm, moving against the current; and a dark liquid swirled into the brine from the slashed strands. Other cold streamers clutched his legs. Despite his tough hide, he felt a stinging all over his bare legs and arm, as if pierced by small thorns wherever the peculiar kelp touched his hide.

Bruko swung his feet deeper into the seaweed, finding solid roof to brace against; then he wrenched his left arm. But the clinging kelp proved tougher than its passive cousin. Bruko could neither slip his arm free, nor tear the entangling kelp, for all his strength.

It's taking revenge for all the kelp we nereis have eaten, he decided, dropping his spear to tear at the kelp with the pointed nails of his free hand. When his claws proved no better than sharp bone against the strange seaweed, he drew his knife. But the tip of the keen stone blade pierced the kelp no more readily than spearhead or claws; and his attempts to slice the jagged-edged strands were slowed by their thickness, as if he sought to saw through blubber with a blunt chunk of coral.

Pain clamped suddenly upon his left calf. Bruko tried to step away, but could not move his foot. He could not see what gripped him, for the seaweed; but, whatever it was, it crushed against muscle and bone like a pair of stones in the grip of a powerful nereus, and it seemed as solidly fixed in place as the temple itself. And Bruko realized his bare left foot, below that grip, was sunk in something unpleasantly soft and yielding.

Then he slammed his useless knife in its sheath and drew the sword. He swept the long blade forcefully down, hoping it wouldn't be snared by the streamers before it struck the unseen thing that had trapped his calf in its bone-hard grip.

The Sword of Rrrelll sliced through the thick broad kelp more easily than a scythe cuts through wheat. Thin strands of Bruko's blood traced the Sword of Rrrelll's wake, and every streamer of kelp touched by its white blade shriveled, as if struck by an uncanny blight. Then the Sword of Rrrelll struck something hidden in the kelp. It gave back a weed-muffled cracking sound, but did not slacken its grip on Bruko's leg.

Now Bruko swung the white blade from side to side, like a land-man wielding his scythe. The Sword of Rrrelll cleared away more of the eerie kelp, cutting everything it touched, withering everything it cut. Finally, Bruko could see that a bivalve had closed its hard, ridged shells like jaws upon his calf.

By Krey's trident, he thought, a clam needn't be nereus-swallowing size to get me killed!

He hacked at the motile seaweed, swinging as rapidly as the hindering water allowed. The long white blade slashed and shriveled the strange kelp. But still the tall broad strands rose to close on Bruko's legs and left arm, more quickly than even the Sword of Rrrelll could kill them.

Then kelp streamers snagged Bruko's sword-arm and wrapped so thickly about it that he could not move the limb.

Clicking furiously, Wanderer the dolphin shot past.

Kelp parted, shriveling, beneath the sharp-edged porcelain strips that Bruko had taken from his people's shrine, along with the bottle-sealed metal and the Sword of Rrrelll. Once, these porcelain weapons been worn by the dolphin Fights More Fiercely Than Sharks, Rrrelll's comrade in the last great war with Attala, and had been forged by the same lost spell as the Sword of Rrrelll. Bruko had carried the dolphin-blades, sharkskin-wrapped and hidden in his rucksack, until he'd strapped them upon the leading edges of Wanderer's dorsal and pectoral fins, before they'd approached the Great Temple of Cleptas.

The tip of one armed fin brushed Bruko's side and blood streamed out; but Bruko did not care, for Wanderer's blow had cut his sword-arm free.

Now, with Wanderer's help, Bruko cut away all the blood-drinking kelp that held him. Then, with a silent oath, he drove his sword-blade between the obdurate shell lips of the great clam that had locked upon his calf, and pried the bivalve open.

Bruko stepped away from the mollusk, slashing at the blood-sucking seaweed which still yearned toward him, undeterred by the fate of those fronds that had already touched him. He put his weight upon his left leg. It held, despite the bone-deep ache and the feeling that his calf muscles had been caught in a human's grindstones.

Bruko realized he'd put his foot down beside a crack in the marble roof.

He gestured. Wanderer executed a body-nod, indicating that he too saw the crack which the violent foundering of Attala had put in the roof of the Great Temple of Cleptas.

Watchful of other dangers, nereus and dolphin turned their magic-forged blades upon the kelp around the opening, cutting it away. They discovered that the crack was wide enough to slip through, and thereby descend into the temple of the Black Pearl.

Bruko and Wanderer studied the narrow opening for a long moment; then they turned and regarded each other.

The Sword of Rrrelll's white blade was streaked red with Bruko's blood, which the seaweed had swallowed. His limbs stung where the bloodthirsty kelp had pierced it, a stinging that ached more than the contact of salt water with raw flesh could explain; and blood continued to seep from the myriad of tiny piercings, though it no longer flowed from the cut that Wanderer's fin-blade had scored in Bruko's side. The scent of blood might attract sharks; but Bruko had no wholesome seaweed with which to bind his wounds. So he shrugged his shoulders with barbarian fatalism at what he could not change, and shook the Sword of Rrrelll so the seawater washed the blood off the porcelain. Then he tilted his head toward the crack, indicating they would enter the temple.

Sheathing the sword, Bruko bent to retrieve his spear. A frenzy of clicks sounded behind him. He snatched up the spear and turned, to see what had raised Wanderer's battle-cry.

Skeletons were emerging from the narrow hole in the roof, a swarm of human skeletons, that clawed their way up from the depths of the temple with fleshless fingers, then strode toward the invaders on fleshless feet. The skeletons bore steel blades that gave no evidence of a thousand years' immersion in the salt sea, and half of them swung at Wanderer while the other half charged at Bruko, all striking with the fury of living warriors.

All missed, because nereus and dolphin swam higher than they could reach, and they did not swim after their intended victims. They stood upon the roof, ignoring the motile seaweed that sucked futilely at their bare bones, and shook their rustless steel blades futilely at the two living creatures drifting above them.

Men can swim, said Bruko in mind-speech. There seemed no need to hold silent now. *Have their brains rotted away, so they forget how?*

Men and women both can swim, when they trouble to learn, Wanderer observed, pointing with his beak to some of the wider-hipped skeletons. *But yon skeletons have neither fat nor air-swollen lungs to make them buoyant.*

We could float up here all day, driving them out of their empty skulls, Bruko said. *But that brings us no closer to the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands.* Gripping his spear near the point, he shook it like a club. *We will scatter the skeletons into their component bones and win our way into the temple!*

Will we? Wanderer asked. *It cannot be so easy to kill the dead. And there must be a hundred skeletal warriors on the roof. Perhaps we should try the front entrance after all.*

We'd find it more difficult than the roof, Bruko said. *I doubt the skeletons are spelled to attack only through a chance hole in the roof. And other threats must ward the portals, where the priests would have expected thieves to enter.*

The priests never expected their entire continent to sink beneath the ocean, Wanderer said. *So you may be right that entering through the roof will rouse fewer defenses against us. But we still haven't figured out how to kill the dead —*

We smash them to splinters! Bruko cried, and swam forward, swinging his bone spear against the closest skull. Its voiceless chattering jaw flew into the undead crowd, catching inside a cage of ribs.

Wanderer sighed, a gentle burst of air-bubbles from his blowhole. Then he dove, driving his great head into a skeleton so its bones flew in every direction.

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SMASHING the skeletons did not work. The bones flew apart, right enough. But they immediately flew back together; and whatever bones had been broken repaired themselves, so they were whole and solid again, where they were resealed in their proper slots in the self-reconstructing skeletons.

Fall back, Bruko, called Wanderer, ascending. *Regroup!*

Bruko, feet planted amid the blood-drinking kelp, swung again with the club of his spear. Several skeletons lunged as if they were one, and locked their yellowed hands on Bruko's spear; and a set of yellowed teeth clamped on Bruko's wrist.

Then the red fury that the humans of the far north called berserker took possession of Bruko. He roared with mind and lungs, shoving violently with his spear and letting go. The skeletons gripping the spear tumbled backwards onto the kelp-grown marble in an explosion of bones, and Bruko brought one fist hammering down on the side of the skull biting his wrist. The bare bone shattered, as if made of thin ice, and teeth flew in every direction.

Bruko ripped the Sword of Rrrelll from its sheath and strode forward, and the battle-madness swelled his strength so that each step ripped the kelp gripping his leg right out of the stone, even as his two hands swung the sword with the full force of his frenzy. With every swing, the blade splintered bone, so none could have guessed the fragments, no bigger than needles or sand-grains, had ever been part of a skeleton. And the fragments did not reassemble, but stayed where they fell among the seaweed.

Now Wanderer swam to Bruko's left and darted to his right, using body and bladed fins to strike skeletons that might grip the nereus and tear him apart even in the fullness of his berserker rage. Always the skeletons reconstructed themselves, when they were struck only by Wanderer's body; but now Wanderer struck some skeletons with his bladed fins, and those splintered and did not reassemble. And Bruko continued furiously to strike, demolishing more skeletons with the Sword of Rrrelll.

Then, suddenly, there were no more skeletons to fight, only drifts and piles of shattered bone. Yet the dolphin shot straight up against the current, leaving the skeletons' inert remains far behind. Wanderer was taking himself out of Bruko's reach, until the nereus should come back to himself. And Bruko, looking about for more foes to fight, and finding none, ceased eventually to roar; and he ceased to wade forward against the tide of the gripping kelp. He stood still for a moment, sword upraised, blood flowing from his limbs and torso where bones and nails and teeth and uncorrupted steel had pierced his tough hide. Then the battle-madness seeped out of his eyes; and he lowered his arms, and set about using the Sword of Rrrelll to cut away the blood-thirsty kelp that had battened upon his legs.

Salt wither these tiresome weeds, he said, his mind-speech a roar, though his fury was ebbing.

Into the temple, Wanderer said, abruptly diving. *Through the roof!*

Bruko looked around.

A dozen huge sharks were speeding toward them, drawn by the scent-taste of Bruko's blood, which had flowed to them on the current. There was no time to retrieve his spear from where it lay among shattered bones. With the Sword of Rrrelll in his fist, Bruko dove after Wanderer.

So the nereus and the dolphin entered the Great Temple of Cleptas, Thief-God of Attala.

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THEY could see nothing. Save for a weak beam of water-diluted sunlight that came through the roof-crack and fell upon the muck-smear'd marble floor, the interior of the Great Temple of Cleptas was black, so the eyes of Bruko and Wanderer strained painfully. Then Wanderer sent out a steady stream of dolphin-clicks that echoed back to him, returning from different distances and thereby painting a sound-image of the interior of the temple. And, as they drifted just below the roof, Bruko laid a hand upon his comrade's side. Mind-speech could not convey what a dolphin "saw" with his clicks, unless there was physical contact between the dolphin and the one who wished to perceive what the dolphin did.

The image painted by the click-echoes was three-dimensional; so Wanderer and Bruko "saw" everything in the temple at once.

They floated in a vast open space, with pillars spaced here and there, to uphold the roof. Most of the pillars were intact, but most of the idols along the temple's eastern and western walls, the statues of godlets and demons and infamous Attalan thieves, had fallen from their altars and niches to shatter upon the marble floor.

Why are there no fish in here? Wanderer asked.

Bruko pointed the sword toward the southern end of the temple, where the greatest statue stood, untoppled. It sat cross-legged, towering above its vast altar: the four-armed image of nimble-fingered Cleptas, God of Thieves.

All four hands were upraised, palms turned toward the ceiling. Three hands were empty. On the palm of the fourth lay a round object, as big as a nereus's head.

By Krey's trident, Bruko swore, *it's the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands. Ria is mine!*

He gestured for Wanderer to swim toward the great idol; for, if he were not in contact with the dolphin, Bruko would be blind in the lightless waters inside the temple.

Wanderer remained in place.

No need to rush. Wanderer's mind-speech was unaffected by his stream of clicks. *The hole we came through may be large enough to admit the sharks. And there must be other dangers here. How else has the Black Pearl remained in plain sight, yet unstolen? Too, this temple seems not so big within as it is without —*

Behold, Bruko exclaimed, raising the Sword of Rrrelll.

A light had begun pouring from the large clear gem set in the pommel, strong enough to touch every corner of the space. Now, gems glittered in the gilded idol's eyes and teeth, and upon its fingers and wrists and breast. And a marvelous black luster shone upon the great pearl upheld in the raised palm.

Laughing, Bruko struck out for the thief-god's idol, his powerful strokes little hampered by the weapon in his hand. *I don't need your click-echoes to fetch the pearl from its perch,* he said. *And, as you have no interest in nacre'd grit or shiny stones, Wanderer, I'll let you watch for other threats.*

I don't need to watch, Wanderer retorted. *I already see sharks coming through the roof.*

Ignoring Wanderer's observation, Bruko swam closer to the great idol.

From the idol's chest shot a net, even as the three empty hands swung toward the gilded breast in a swift and forceful embrace, meant to crush flesh and break bones.

Perhaps he was warned by some barbarous instinct, or by the dents and dark stains which marred the idol's chest and three empty arms. Perhaps he'd noticed the jutting of a few broken bones above the layer of mud before the idol, or seen a gem twitch aside on Cleptas's breast, revealing the small hole through which the compacted net had flown, its metal mesh expanding like the cord net of a human fisherman. But, whatever the reason, Bruko had pulled up abruptly, some three feet short of the idol. So he was not snared by the net; nor was he captured or clubbed by the statue's three mobile arms.

Clever tricks, Bruko observed. Then a movement caught his eye, and he raised his head. *What the deep is that?*

He pointed the Sword of Rrrelll at the peculiar shape that was rising into sight from behind the idol of Cleptas.

Wanderer looked where Bruko pointed. *It cannot be!*

Bruko laughed at Wanderer. *And you said none were left in all the vast salt world!*

What a deeping dreadful time to be wrong, Wanderer said.

It was the head of an enormous sea-serpent they saw: a frilled and horn-bristling head, clad in scales which shimmered through every shade of green and blue, and baring fangs longer than Bruko's arm.

Then, majestically slow in the water, the idol tilted to one side, displaced by the sea-serpent's forward lunge. The monster was emerging from the long-dead priests' private quarters, shooting from the entrance revealed by the falling idol. And as the sea-serpent surged toward Bruko and Wanderer, its great jaws gaped, flickering a long, forked tongue past the immense fangs and wavering barbels.

And, as the idol fell, the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands flew out of Cleptas's palm and sank into the muck upon the temple floor.

The Pearl! Bruko cried wrathfully, and propelled himself toward the sea-serpent, raising the Sword of Rrrelll for a blow.

Going berserk will not defeat a hundred-foot sea-serpent! Wanderer called, swimming toward Bruko to keep distance between himself and the approaching sharks. *Ah, it falls out even as I predicted,* Wanderer said. *A horrible death, far from my people.*

The sea-serpent lunged again, as quickly as if it had many legs propelling its limbless length. Its jaws snapped shut, just missing Bruko. They parted again, tongue flicking to graze him.

Bruko swung the Sword of Rrrelll.

Blood spouted, a startling red in the uncanny pommel-gem's bright glow. The severed tongue sank, writhing like a wounded land-serpent.

The sea-serpent reared back and screamed, deafeningly, with lungs and mind.

Bruko swam forward and thrust, sinking the Sword of Rrrelll deep in the sea-beast's eye.

The sharks caught the coppery red scent-taste of blood. They streaked toward the sea-serpent.

Bruko wrenched the Sword of Rrrelll free and swam to one side, seeking to avoid the writhings of the agonized monster without moving closer to the advancing sharks.

If he had thought that the Sword of Rrrelll, forged by lost magic, would slay the monster in one blow, he was mistaken. The great creature continued to thrash in furious pain, the loops of its long bulk smashing whichever marble godlets and demons had not already been destroyed by Attala's long-ago submergence.

Dodging a flailing coil that was thicker than five nereis, Bruko slammed the Sword of Rrrelll in its scabbard and swam downward, to sink his right hand into the muck.

What are you doing? Wanderer cried. *Get the deep away from that monster, before it flattens you —*

Get out, Wanderer! Bruko responded, reaching his left hand over his shoulder to rip open the flap of his rucksack. *Through the priests' quarters and out!*

You will go with me, the dolphin replied, speeding to Bruko's side.

Bruko pulled the sealed bottle with the white metal ore from his rucksack. *Gods guide my throw!*

He tossed the heavy bottle in the direction of the sea-serpent.

Now, Bruko said, reaching to clasp the dolphin with his left arm. *Get us out of here, faster than you ever swam before!*

As Wanderer shot forward, something closed on Bruko's ankle. He remained where he was. Looking down, he saw one of the idol's hands around his ankle, and the other three reaching for his legs.

By Krey, he thought, *it's the end of me this time, but I'll not go out without a fight.*

With his left hand, he drew the Sword of Rrrelll.

As he awkwardly swung, he saw Wanderer coming about.

Go! Bruko shouted at his comrade. *Get out while you can!*

Wanderer swam toward him at a dolphin's top speed.

The Sword of Rrrelll struck the idol's gripping limb.

The white blade passed through the gilded stone as if it were a sea-cucumber.

Wanderer turned, coming around Bruko.

His four limbs clamped around the dolphin like land-forged steel, and they shot toward the priest's quarters.

The bottle completed its leisurely arc through the water. It passed over the ring of sharks that were testing their fangs on the sea-serpent's iridescent scales. It dropped into the sea-serpent's gaping, gouting mouth.

The sea-serpent snapped its jaws shut.

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THE explosion caught them outside the temple. A great hissing, like the battle-cry of a thousand land-dragons, filled the water. The roof of the temple rose and the pillars and walls flew outward. Smoke boiled up from within. Water surged away from the temple in an immense, bottom-to-surface wave that rushed in every direction and sent nereus and dolphin tumbling end over end, like a pair of seaweed dolls. A great lilac flame, hot almost to whiteness, flared around the sundered walls and pillars of the temple. And a loud, curious popping noise set ears to aching.

Then, as the vast strange flame slowly died, the roof settled in chunks and fragments over the place where the Great Temple of Cleptas had been.

Now, Bruko said, *you know why my people kept the magic sea-born metal sealed away from the sea in airless glass.*

I guess that white rock really did want to reunite with the sea, Wanderer observed from where he and the nereus drifted, unhurt.

Bruko drew the Sword of Rrrelll. *As violently as I want to reunite with Ria.*

He cut the idol's hand from his ankle.

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RIA, Bruko called as he and Wanderer swam into the center of the nereus tribe's temporary encampment. *Ria, I come to claim your hand, so step away from that fat old merchant.*

I say, said the nereus in question, turning away from Ria to face Bruko. I'm not a merchant, only a simple trader —
— who yet has more gold than Cleptas, Bruko retorted, sinking through the water to stand before Ria on the sandy sea-bottom.

She took a step back. Bruko, this isn't a good time —
Behold, Bruko said, reaching into his rucksack with his left hand and drawing it swiftly forth again, I bring you the bride-price I promised. The Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands.

Around them, the nereus gathered to see what Bruko held. The merchant's jaw went slack and he reached forward, almost touching the great pearl before he saw Bruko's eyes.

Ria looked with no expression upon the prize her young suitor had won.

Then she raised her eyes to his.

But, Bruko, she said, I could never be your bride. She gestured at the older nereus beside her. I have just consented to wed Trader Jarrokkot.

Bruko's face twisted. The blue tint of his complexion darkened until it seemed nearly black, and muscles swelled along his body in a topography of wrath.

Ria stepped back, her own face twisting with quite another emotion. Bruko, she whispered, I never said I'd m —

Her mind-voice choked off as Bruko's right hand shot to the hilt of his stone knife.

The muscles rose even higher on his arm, as he forced his fingers to uncurl from his knife-hilt. He straightened from his attack stance. Then, his face smoothing to the impervious flatness of slate, he tossed the pearl to Ria.

Well, he said, I said I would bring you the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands, and I do not break my word.

Ria made no attempt to catch the great black pearl that had come to Attala centuries ago, from far southern seas.

Trader Jarrokkot grabbed for it. He missed. The pearl sank through the water, nestling in the sand at Ria's feet.

Bruko turned and walked out of the nomad camp.

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W*HERE* are you going? Wanderer asked Bruko, when they had traveled some distance from the encampment.

To see the world, Bruko replied. A nomad camp's too small for the nereus who won the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands.

I'm surprised you'd give up that big pearl, Wanderer said where he swam beside Bruko. It is so highly prized among two-leg peoples.

Bruko shrugged. He was walking, though that did not make for swift passage under the sea. I said I would win the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands for Ria. I keep my word, even if she didn't.

Did she say she would marry you if you won her the Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands?

Well, no, Bruko said. But she wanted to. Until she decided to marry that fat old nereus. He looked at Wanderer. How could she be so fickle? He shook his head. There's no understanding females.

What is the difficulty? Wanderer said. Their speech is as clear as ours —

They are not direct, like a male, Bruko declared.

Wanderer decided it would be wise to say no more.

Bruko laughed suddenly. That fat old nereus knows even less about females than I, he said. He doesn't know his heir is already conceived.

Wanderer looked upon Bruko with his deceptively mild eye. Then he opened his beak in a broad grin.

Bruko stopped before a boulder.

Wanderer spoke. Why did you not bring the Sword of Rrrelll back to your people?

They never use it, Bruko said, taking the sword and fin-blades out from beneath the boulder, where he had hidden them before returning to the nomad camp. They just take the Sword of Rrrelll out sometimes, to stare at during rituals. That's no way to treat a fine sword. Or these, either.

He strapped the dolphin-blades on Wanderer's fins.

The sword, at least, must be highly prized among two-legs, Wanderer observed. Will you sell it, then?

Of course not, Bruko said, strapping on the Sword of Rrrelll. A warrior keeps his sword.

Ah, Wanderer said, forbearing to mention that the wild nereus of the north knew nothing of the art of swordplay, and their legendary hero Rrrelll had learned it serving in distant armies. Bruko, he said, do you think to become a mercenary in the Kingdom of the Northern Ocean?

I've a mind to see all the world's seas, and all its lands, as well. Bruko drew something from his rucksack. When I pulled the pearl from the muck, I also found this. He held up a gold chain, thickly set with rubies and emeralds and sapphires. I suppose it once adorned the neck of some Attalan priest. Now, Wanders Far From His Pod, it shall make my fortune. Bruko hung it about his neck. It should suffice to keep a nereus and dolphin both in females, down in the southern sea-cities, he said, looking upon the dolphin. Feel like wandering farther than you ever have before?

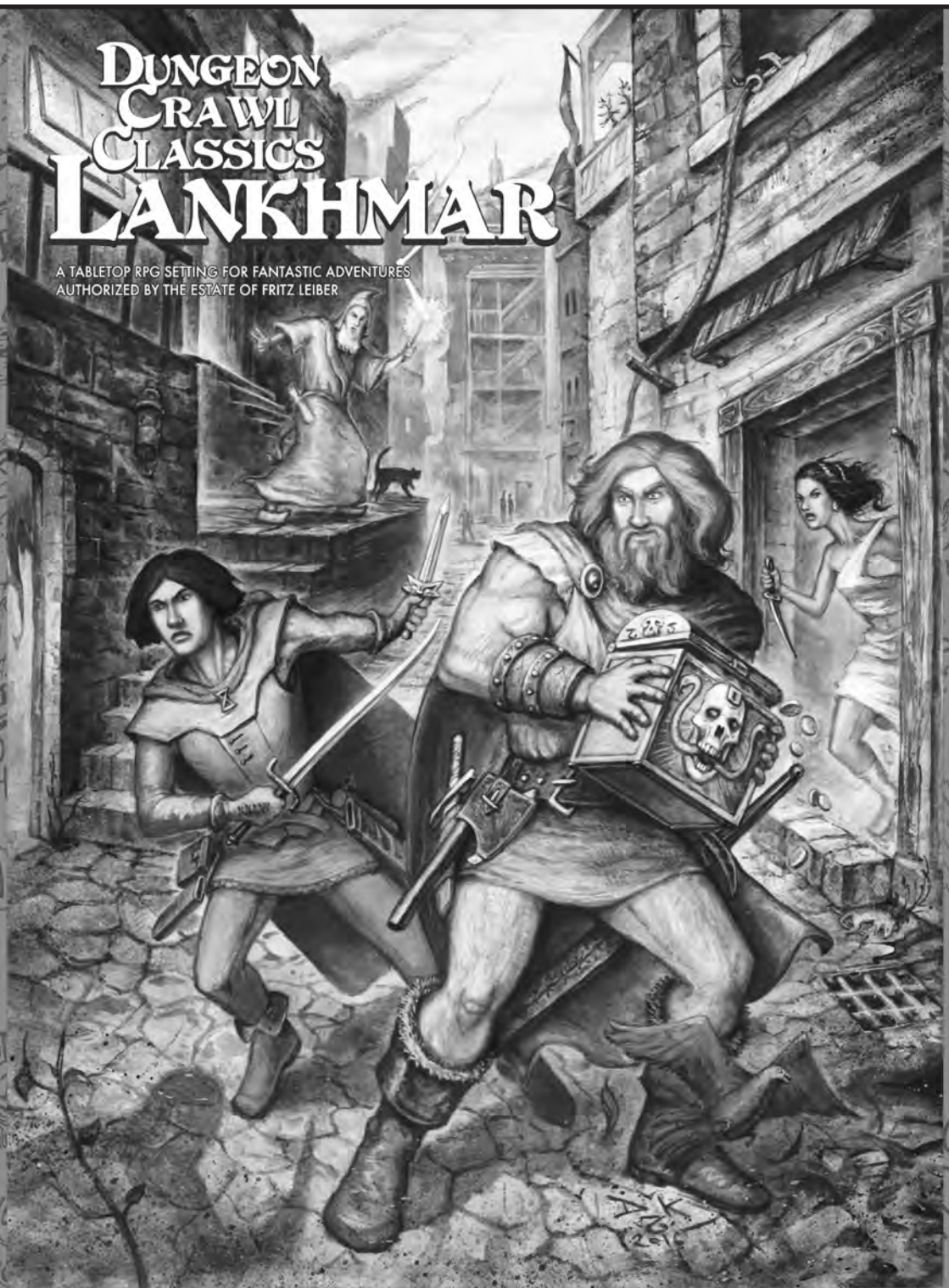
Well, I've already given calves to my pod, Wanderer said. And a dolphin must live up to his name.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born on the Great Plains in the time-lost Sixties, Cynthia Ward explored the exotic climes of Maine, Spain, Germany, the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, and Tucson before alighting in the City of Angels. With Nisi Shawl, she co-authored Locus Award winner *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* (Aqueduct Press). Her latest solo book, *The Adventure of the Golden Woman: Blood-Thirsty Agent Book 4* (Aqueduct), invaded bookstores in September 2021.

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ILLUSTRATION BY JUSTINE JONES

A SIMPLE ERRAND

By MATTHEW JOHN

LACHMANNON awoke in the dark, his head pounding from wine and the fierce blows he'd suffered the previous night. In his drunken rage, it had taken scores of men to bring him down, and during the chaos he'd lost count of the limbs he snapped and skulls he split. He couldn't recall what had started the fight, and he didn't care. Any who threatened to put him in chains — no matter the reason — welcomed his wrath.

But now, locked away as he was, lying on bare, frigid stone and awaiting execution, he was forced to chew on that bit of wisdom. Perhaps, if he managed to escape, he'd take more care the next time he entered a new city — especially if he had coin to spend. *No man's more foolish than a Kael with a heavy purse*, they say.

He flexed his fists and dried blood cracked across his skin. His arms sagged under the weight of heavy chains shackling his wrists. He scanned the room. In the dim light, he could only tell it was a small cell and that, somewhere beyond an iron-barred portcullis, a torch burned. He was in the Pathra dungeons, somewhere in the deepest bowels, if he had to guess. The air was thick, reeking of piss and mildew. The only sounds he heard were dripping moisture and his own haggard breaths.

"Daga's mercy, what have I done?" He posed the rhetorical question to himself, but he hoped some other prisoner might hear.

Only silence answered.

He attempted to stand, but the chains were too short. Giving them a tug, he laughed at their strength. What else could he do? There would be no breaking these bonds.

"Would you like to be free of those chains, Kael?" Lachmannon bristled like a wolf at the disembodied voice. It was a man's voice, throaty and aged, and it seemed to be coming from inside the room.

Suspecting a trap, his wild senses screamed in alarm. But being that he was already in a trap, he chose tact over his usual surliness. "Who's asking?" he said.

"Does it matter?" answered the voice. "Your options are few."

"Ha. You're not wrong. Well, man, if you won't tell me *who* you are, tell me *where* you are." Lachmannon peered into the darkness, raking his eyes over the vague outlines of the cell.

"Here," the voice said. From an inky corner, a pair of eyes materialized — at least he believed they were eyes. Instead of pupils shone specks of light, like stars in a winter sky. A figure stepped forward and Lachmannon could see the man was tall, blade-thin, and bearded — his lean frame swaddled in tattered robes.

Sorcery! Kael's did not abide such things, but Lachmannon was an oddity among his people. That's why he'd left his frozen homeland years ago. He was a practical man, and would seize freedom by whatever means he could. "You're a meddler. You know how Kael's treat meddlers?" he said.

"I do. But I also know how the Four Kingdoms treat drunken Kael's. Tomorrow you will be tortured. There will be an audience. They will cheer and hurl stones while you're led into the court and flayed. Surely, you would avoid such a fate if you could."

"Why, sorcerer, don't you know? A pact with a meddler is the surest road to Hell." Despite the man's uncanny gaze — despite the strange scene and his throbbing head — he couldn't keep the smile from his lips. *Let it be said that Lachmannon can find the humor in any instance.*

"I'm probably already damned just for having this conversation," he continued. The meddler's strange eyes were hard to read, so he couldn't be sure his sardonic tone was clear. *Probably best to get to the point*, he thought. "But let's say I don't believe in all that nonsense — that I'm willing to accept your help — what do you want from me in return?"

"You've a humorous tongue for a Kael. And fortunately you're not lacking the characteristic fortitude of your brethren. What I witnessed last night suggests you may be strong enough for the errand I propose."

Errand. Lachmannon did not like this word. His smile sagged into a scowl. He was no man's servant. He was, however, wise enough to trade an errand — even a foolish one — for his life. "Go on," he said.

"I need a bodyguard. Someone willing to shed blood. A man with nothing to lose. Things being as they are, I believe you are that man."

Lachmannon cleared his throat, tongued the gob it brought up, and spat to the floor.

"I believe you're right."

The two men fell silent for a moment and somewhere beyond the cell, iron hinges groaned. "Seems like we're out of time, meddler. If you've a plan, you best get on with it."

Nodding, the meddler produced an object from his sleeve. Then he snapped his fingers and a puff of flame bloomed in the darkness. Lachmannon could see he held a long pipe, which he raised to his lips and puffed.

What is this fool doing? he wondered. He could now hear footsteps drawing closer to the cell. "Time's fleeting, man. What's your plan?" In the dim light, Lachmannon couldn't be sure, but

it appeared the meddler was ... fading? The pipe produced an inexplicable amount of smoke, great purple plumes spreading throughout the room.

As the meddler took another pull from the pipe, his uncanny eyes brightened. He stepped toward Lachmannon. "If you're coming with me, Kael, take this and breathe deeply."

"And you say *I'm* mad," Lachmannon whispered.

Heavy keys clinked just outside the door.

"You'll have to assist, meddler." Lachmannon raised his hands, rattling the chains binding his wrists. The meddler put the pipe to Lachmannon's lips, and he inhaled. The vapors were unlike anything he'd ever smoked, tasting of earth and sour meat. A wave of euphoria washed over him and, as the cell door shrieked open and a figure peered in, shouting, the meddler was gone.

Lachmannon grinned like a drunkard as darkness claimed him.

• • •

“WHAT is this place?” A humid breeze blew past the Kael, parting the thick veil of fog surrounding him. But perhaps this mist was merely an illusion conjured by his returning consciousness — for what lay beyond the blur of his vision didn't make any sense. All around him, green towers stretched skyward, each of them unique in shape and composition. They looked carved, not built; raised by sculptors rather than masons. Framed by these great monoliths, the sky above was a rainbow smear, speckled with radiant stars. Lachmannon knew little about the Darkness that Rings the World. He was happy to leave such musings to the elders — but he never knew the sky to have two moons. He'd never seen a red sun either — certainly nothing like this ruby disk burning in the distance. He felt a grin split his lips. What else to do when facing a mad vista such as this? Clearly, he was dreaming or hallucinating, or perhaps he'd finally taken one too many blows to the head. Maybe it was all of these things.

"I'll explain later, Kael," answered the meddler, who was just now getting to his feet. "Haste. It isn't safe here. When that red sun falls and the night winds come, we must be off these streets." The meddler stumbled toward the nearest structure, a tower, and dipped beneath a low arch, vanishing. Lachmannon rose on shaking legs, dizzy, but stable enough to follow him.

Inside, a narrow hallway snaked into gloomy depths. Like the exterior structure, the interior made no practical sense. He ran a hand over the shining green wall and rapt his knuckles on its surface. It was solid like mortar, but without pores or grit. As his earthly sensations returned and the dizziness abated, the Kael felt increasingly nervous about his circumstances. It was time he had some answers.

"Alright, meddler, my good humor is fleeting. You will tell me where we are and what we're doing."

"Soon," the sorcerer replied.

The tunnel brightened as it led into a large chamber. Lachmannon could now see the green stone — or whatever it was — was semi-translucent, allowing exterior light to filter through its surface. They found themselves in a wide, high-ceilinged chamber, devoid of furnishings. A stairwell and a series of doors ringed the walls.

The meddler raked his eyes over the room, his head pivoting like a skittish cat's. Seemingly convinced of their safety, he broke his silence. "They should not find us here. Not at this time of day."

"Who? Who won't find us? Speak plainly, sorcerer!" His hands curled into clubs and violent urges flamed in his breast. He would not ask the question again.

"The Shapers — or rather their pets."

"The Shapers? *The* Shapers? Meaning the Ancients? Ha! You are mad!"

"Listen well, Kael. You know nothing. Everything you think you know about the world is wrong. Without me, you will die here, just as you would have died in the Pathra. But if you do as I say and help me get what I need, I will not only grant you life but I'll heap riches upon you — if that's what you desire."

Lachmannon considered the meddler's words. Under normal circumstances, he'd remove the tongue of any man who spoke to him like that, but he was coming to see that his rash temper hadn't gained him much. Pathra had been a new city to him, and he entered it with a fiery temper and burning loins. Where did that get him? Now he was in another new city — a stranger city — and he had no notion of how he got here or how he'd leave. Perhaps it was time to try a different approach.

And if that didn't work, maybe then he'd crack the meddler's skull.

"I suppose riches are better than a public execution," he said. "What must I do?"

The meddler stared at him a moment, then smiled, his uncanny eyes glowing in the gloom. Lachmannon considered himself a good judge of people, and he surmised the meddler's grin was both genuine and rare.

"I suspect you and I are not as different as we seem, Kael. I suppose we shall see. Know this: we are no longer on our world."

The meddler didn't pause for a breath and Lachmannon had no time to process his mad statement.

"Unlike our world, the chains of gravity aren't as strong here."

"Gravity?" Lachmannon managed.

"You can jump higher than you could on our world. See for yourself."

As he swept a hand toward the courtyard, intimating Lachmannon should take a leap, something shimmered in the air above him.

"Meddler, look!"

The sorcerer turned as a huge form materialized above him. Like a giant hand, the mass unfurled itself, reaching out to seize him. The sorcerer leaped away and shouted an incomprehensible word before vanishing in a puff of smoke.

The creature now hovered before Lachmannon. It was a boneless, gutless thing, translucent and blending with its surround-

ings. It faded in and out of the visible spectrum as it drifted through the air like a wind-filled sail. A cluster of roping tendrils quested before it, probing the empty space, reaching toward the Kael.

For a breath, Lachmannon stood like an idiot, unsure of what he beheld. A gust of air surged behind him, and he felt something cold and hard pressed against his sword arm.

“Take this, Kael. Do what you do.” Somehow the meddler had made it behind him and placed a killing tool in his hand. As Lachmannon tightened his grip on the hilt of the sword, a smile returned to his face. He leaped toward the creature.

Just as the meddler had promised, he was light as a leaf on a breeze. His mighty arms delivered a flurry of strokes before he returned to the floor. Three severed tentacles slapped down after him, writhing and spurting black ichor, still reaching for him. He leaped again, straight at the squid-thing, hacking and bellying a war cry. He landed two more strokes, this time slicing deep fissures into the creature’s billowing, sack-like body. Right before he landed, he felt a tug at his foot. The creature yanked him back into the air, then snapped its appendage like a whip, hammering him against the floor.

Darkness threatened to take him. The iron tang of blood filled his mouth.

It raised his limp body, drawing him toward itself — toward its gleaming razor-edged beak.

Lachmannon snapped out of his daze and raised his sword, screaming. He seized the tentacle that held him and slashed, shearing it from its roots. He hit the floor with a thud. Black blood rained down, coating his skin and turning the floor into a reeking, fishy slick.

The creature, evidently believing it had lost the fight, released a gurgling belch of air from its underside and shot skyward. Another spurt of black rain fell, before the beast vanished from sight.

“Daga, Danus, and Crummock! What *was* that? Speak, meddler! Who are you? Where have you taken me?”

“Easy, Kael. You fought well.” The sorcerer raised a placating hand. “I wasn’t sure it was possible to fell one of those things with our simple weapons, but you continue to impress.”

“I’m no dog you can train, sorcerer. Mind your tongue!” Lachmannon’s heart hammered in his chest and a familiar haze crept from the borders of his vision. All pain was suppressed by a killing lust. The meddler couldn’t have known the danger he faced.

“As I’ve said, I offer you freedom and riches, but there is work to be done. I am merely complimenting your efforts. Follow me, and I’ll tell you what you wish to know.”

The meddler turned and strode toward the staircase, all while keeping an eye on the ceiling above. Lachmannon did the same and followed him.

“My name is Maxus,” he said, as he navigated the dim passage. I am One Who Walks on Worlds — one of the few. I’ve brought you with me to ensure my safety on this hostile world —

“No. Stop.” The Kael froze, and after a few steps Maxus did the same. But he did not turn around.

“We must not tarry, Kael —”

“You’re telling me we’re — what — somewhere out there? Among the stars?”

“Yes. A world far from ours.”

Lachmannon didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know what to believe. All that had happened seemed a dream. How else to explain this place? How else to explain floating like a feather through the air? But a dream did not account for the pain in his bones, nor the stink of the creature’s blood coating his flesh. His entire head throbbed from hitting the floor. He clamped a hand to his jaw, and worked his tongue over his aching teeth. One popped free, and he spat it to the ground.

The meddler turned, regarded the bloody speck, and cut a thin smile. “Come. You have my word — I will explain.”

They climbed the staircase for several minutes. It led them up and around the circumference of the tower. As they passed a window, Maxus paused, peering outside.

“We’ve almost reached the top.”

Lachmannon looked over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of an adjacent tower carved of the same green stone.

“Why don’t we just smoke that pipe of yours and forget all these steps?”

“Would that we could, Kael. But my supplies of the stuff are scarce. My whole life I’ve sought for it, finding just enough to serve my modest pursuits. But perhaps, after today, that won’t matter.”

They reached the top and exited onto a narrow balcony. Lachmannon followed Maxus to the railing and the two men gazed out at the great expanse. From this height, he gained a broader view of the sprawling metropolis and it seemed endless. In every direction, crooked green towers stretched skyward, a few of them lost in the clouds, others leaning precariously or crumbling. The eerie red sun burned lower yet, cutting across the western horizon like a knife wound.

“Who built all these structures?” wondered the Kael.

“They did. Look.” Maxus pointed to a distant structure, the top of which jutted out in thin spires, as if left unfinished. Floating around it were more than a dozen tiny forms. From this distance they seemed like lees floating lazily in a cup of wine.

“The same as the one you killed. Millions of these creatures have been hard at work on this world for centuries. They are like worker bees, engineered by the Ancients. All this green stone is some sort of resin they secrete. Some of these structures exist on our world, too. If you’ve walked the streets of Old Pathra, you’ve seen what remains of them. These creatures are the true ‘Shapers’, not the Ancients.

“For whom are they building now?”

“Difficult to say. The Ancients are gone. They left these things to do as they will, and they seem solely focused on building these towers. But more importantly, the Ancients left behind some of their technology. That is why we are here.”

“And I suppose you need me to help steal it.”

“In a way. What I need from you is a task more befitting your talents.”

“It’s more killing you need? Speak plainly, meddler.”

Maxus grinned, exposing his rotten teeth, and looked toward the sinking sun. "Oh, it's a small errand, really. I need you to kill their god."

As their conversation ceased, a whistling breeze filled the silence. What could the Kael say to that? He wanted to laugh, wanted to drink — wanted to strangle the sorcerer and toss his corpse from the tower. Instead he cracked his knuckles and sighed. "A small errand, indeed."

The sorcerer, still smiling, produced a flute from within his robe and pressed it to his lips. "Do you see that spire, topped with the crescent shape?"

Lachmannon nodded.

"We're going to fly over there, climb inside, and finish this errand."

"And how —"

Maxus interrupted by playing a long, low note on the flute before scanning the distance.

"How will we get —"

Again, the meddler interrupted his question, this time with a shorter sharper note.

Over the wind, from some distant place, a louder note — a deep blaring — seemed to answer that of Maxus. The meddler played it again, and he received the same response. This time Lachmannon could tell the sound came from near the crescent spire.

"It is time. The skies should be safe for a short while. Come."

The wizard leaped over the balcony, into open air, and began drifting toward the nearest tower. Reaching it, he pulled himself up and into a window, disappearing inside.

Lachmannon sighed again and leaped after him.

• • •

FOR the better part of an hour the two men navigated the spires, hopping to one, climbing it, and leaping to the next. Upon reaching a tower adjacent to the one marked with a crescent peak, Maxus stopped. He put a finger to his lips and crouched.

Lachmannon's hackles rose. He heard it, too — a low, sloshing sound, followed by rhythmic clicking.

"One of them has found us," Maxus whispered. "Drawn by the scent of blood." The sorcerer placed the flute to his lips. "This will help muddle the creature while you slay it."

A shadow passed overhead. Looking up, Lachmannon watched as the warm tones of the sky retreated from the creature's pale, undulant hide. Its many limbs jutted star-like from its torso, while an orifice on its underside puckered and swelled. It seemed to be drawing in and releasing air, presumably to control its descent.

As Maxus played a quiet melody, drawing the squid-thing's attention, Lachmannon leaped toward it, seizing it by a tentacle. He spiked his sword into its abdomen, and the creature stiffened and shrieked in agony. Black blood fountained from the wound, coating his face, blinding him.

The ground came up slower than he'd expected and he stumbled, near pitching onto his face. A heavy blow hammered

his knees, knocking him backward. Before he hit the ground, something heavy slapped onto his shoulder. Steely barbs slid beneath his skin, into his muscles, pulling him to his feet. Another blow landed on his chest and raked free wisps of fabric and flesh. Blood washed down from the searing wound. He swung wildly. His blade met something stiff, passed through it, and severed the bond that held him.

He was free.

His eyes snapped open and a grin split his lips. Seeing several more of the creatures descending, he broke into a rage — grasping, seizing, hacking. His war cry blared as he ripped and tore rubbery flesh, gnashing his teeth, bringing every weapon to bear against the squid-things.

"Kael, to me!"

Maxus? But where?

As Lachmannon skewered another creature and slapped away a questing tendril, he raked his eyes over the scene. Bodies piled up at his feet. Some of the creatures had grounded themselves and begun feeding upon their fallen brethren. Overhead, smoke billowed from a black smear on the sky.

"Jump, you fool!"

He couldn't see Maxus, but his voice came from somewhere within the smoke.

Lachmannon's feet began to slip on the blood-washed ground, but he managed to leap skyward, slamming into something unseen. Iron coils roped his flesh, squeezing, tearing. He held onto the mass and worked his blade deep into Daga knew what.

Wisps of smoke snaked toward him as the coils tightened. His breath exploded from his lungs. The world dimmed; his limbs relaxed. And darkness claimed him.

• • •

“WAKE up, Kael.” For the second time that day, Lachmannon awoke in the dark, his head throbbing. For a moment, he thought he might be back in the dungeons of Pathra.

Daga's mercy, would that I was.

The prospect excited him until he remembered why he'd been there. He opened his eyes to slits and saw he was in a dim chamber. The sorcerer sat across from him, and a dead squid-thing lay at his feet, his sword jutting from its lifeless body. "Daga and Crummock, meddler. More of your smoke tricks? Where have you taken me now?"

"Hush, Kael. We're not far, but there are now walls between us and the Pralusks."

"The what?" Lachmannon asked, as he leaned forward and wiped his bloody hands on the creature's corpse.

"That's the approximate name of these things — at least as close as you or I could come to pronouncing it." Maxus paused, ran a hand through his beard, and inspected the black blood it left on his finger. "We won't be able to escape them now," he continued, "not while washed in their blood. As you saw, they eat their dead — it's all they eat, as far as I can tell. Perhaps that's why they've gone mad."

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"Mad?" wondered the Kael. "Aren't they just predator-like? Slaying to live?"

"No. I assure you, they could not have always been like this: endlessly building, then killing and eating each other when their energy wanes — all so they may build some more." Maxus' strange eyes bloomed in the darkness as he turned and peered into the depths of the passage. "No. The Ancient's magic was near perfect. They would never have created something so ... flawed." Maxus raised his flute and brushed something from its surface. "I've heard their songs, Kael. Some of the older structures are written of gorgeous melodies — their lilt and harmonies rivaling the best composers of Selsun or Tamar." He waved his hands toward the walls surrounding them. "But the endless maze of monoliths beyond these walls — it's an ugly cacophony, a painful dissonance that smacks of sickness and depravity. I wish never to hear such songs again."

The Kael had no notion of what the meddler meant. *Towers aren't written; they're built.* And the only music he'd heard were the few notes Maxus had played. "You're suggesting these structures are songs written by those creatures? Have you considered your own sanity, meddler? Believe it or not, I was once known as Lachmannon the Mad, on account of I'm always laughing at danger — but I think Maxus the Mad might be the better fit."

Maxus smiled at that. "The music is everything, Kael — an art, a language, a magic. Perhaps it was all an experiment gone awry, but the Ancients committed themselves to this pursuit for over a thousand years. I've learned to read it, to compose it, and with it I've teased out dizzying possibilities. That is why you're here. I'm so close. I just need your help to wrest the instruments from the Conductor."

"The what?" Lachmannon had heard many ominous titles in his day, and he liked this one the least. "Their god?"

"Yes, so to speak. I need you to kill a god — the last of this world. In truth, I don't know what it is. Nor what it can do. I know only that I cannot play the necessary songs to unlock what I need while it remains where it is." The meddler rose to his feet, wincing as his knees crackled. "You don't need to understand any of this, and it won't take much longer. As I have promised, if you do as I ask, I will not only grant you your life and freedom, but I'll heap kingly riches upon you. I have limited use for such baubles anyway. We aren't far now. The Conductor dwells just a few floors below us. Will you hear my plan?"

Lachmannon tongued the cavity where his tooth had been. Doubtless, he'd miss that tooth, but he was enjoying the tangy little pit it left behind. *Let it be said that Lachmannon can always find the sugar in the shite.* He hawked and spat a bloody gob to the floor. "I'm not doing much else, I suppose. And I do believe a fat purse would do me good. What's your plan, meddler?"

• • •

LACHMANNON rested his arms along a balcony overlooking a pit. It was an agreeable pit, as far as pits go, with a smooth ramp circling its walls, leading to the bottom, all carved

of the same green substance as the rest of the city. The Kael still believed he might be dreaming; that all this madness was but a vivid nightmare; that he was still rotting in a dungeon, fevered and crazed, imagining the chains binding his wrists were tentacles; that Pathra was some necropolis on another world. And what he saw at the bottom of the pit did nothing to convince him otherwise.

Tall, black mirrors lined the walls, wreathing the center which contained a ziggurat of polished green stone, stretching up to the height of two men. On top of this was some instrument, almost indescribable, composed of cords, plates of various sizes, and hundreds of jewels which dusted its entire surface like frost. Two adjacent prongs jutted skyward and on the tips of these sat two fist-sized spheres, black and glassy like the mirrors. But the strangest thing in those depths was not the sculpture, nor the instrument, or whatever it was — it was the giant who sat cross-legged before it, an impossibly muscled man, bigger and more impressive than Lachmannon, whose steely thews drew gazes of awe wherever he went. Its flesh was blue-black and shining, again, not unlike the mirrors, and its head was shaped like an exaggerated human skull, hooked and tapered at the back like a scorpion's tail.

The Conductor. Whatever this thing was — whatever power it wielded — it was Lachmannon's charge to kill it. At present, it seemed completely devoid of life. Perhaps it was sleeping or frozen, or maybe fortune favored the Kael and it was already dead. Sadly, he'd never been that lucky, and he knew better than to hope for such things. Besides, Maxus' plan was simple. Before he disappeared, he'd told Lachmannon to get close, wait for his signal, then get to work with his blade. This plan suited the Kael just fine.

He skirted the outer wall all the way down, hewing close to whatever shadows he found. Reaching the bottom, he clamped his sword between his teeth and crept on all fours toward the base of the ziggurat. Both the instrument and the Conductor now seemed much larger than they had from the top of the well. He was struck, too, by its eerie resemblance to the people of his world. It was bigger and stronger and its deep blue flesh and hooked skull implied alien origins, but its musculature and bone structure were unmistakably human. The implications of finding a man-like god on another world were massive, but the Kael hadn't the mind to muse on them — not while he had killing to do.

As he removed the sword from his teeth and crouched on the bottom step of the ziggurat, opposite the Conductor, a shriek pierced the silence. The floor rumbled as the entire structure began to turn.

Is this the meddler's signal? he wondered.

Unsure of his next move, Lachmannon remained where he crouched, moving along with the platform. It stopped after half a rotation, and another metallic shriek followed. An aperture in the ceiling opened and purple light flooded the pit.

At the same instant, beneath each mirror, a small shaft leading into the floor yawned open. Blood red lights shone from their depths, painting the glassy surfaces in hellish tones. The instrument

also blinked into life, many of its gems blooming into radiant colors, while the black stones capping the prongs sparked with blue flames and purred with some unfathomed energy.

As the chamber filled with this artificial life, a great sigh came from the Conductor. The god rose up to its full height — like some colossal sentinel — sweeping the chamber with its black-eyed gaze.

Lachmannon flattened himself like a rat and crept out of its eye line. After a moment, he heard clicks and pops coming from the apparatus and then —

Music. A vibrating note blared from the instrument, reverberating off the walls, rising and escaping the pit. Lachmannon clamped his hands over his ears and set his jaw against the whelming aura. This music was not meant for human ears. A second note, higher and brighter, pealed, before a dour melody took over.

Lachmannon searched the chamber for any sign of Maxus. Below the mirrors, the red shafts brightened and figures rose slowly from their depths. From where he stood, they seemed naught but crimson shadows.

The music stopped abruptly and a deep voiced blared. “Ickzapluuva!”

The god speaks.

Heavy footsteps followed. Tremors shook the ziggurat. Lachmannon hopped to his feet and readied his sword. He crept around the structure where he watched the Conductor descend the steps and approach the glowing shafts. Reaching the bottom, it raised its head skyward and emitted a skirling moan — loud enough that Lachmannon covered his ears again. Then it fell silent, keeping its eyes on the night sky above. After a few seconds, shadows materialized overhead, drifting down like fallen leaves.

Lachmannon counted at least ten of the squid-things, descending.

“Now, Kael!” It was Maxus’ voice, amplified and coming from all directions.

Lachmannon hewed to the plan and leaped up to the top of the ziggurat in a single bound. Ducking beneath the instrument, he felt an electric pulse as he passed. He charged to the other side, raised his sword, and dove toward his oblivious target.

At the same instant, the Conductor froze, seemingly confused by the crimson figures.

Lachmannon’s blade gave it something else to ponder.

He slammed against its shoulders and plunged his sword toward its neck. The blade skated along its hide, shrieking as if it had struck metal. The giant bucked and spun, trying to shake him loose, but he held on like a tick.

Notes blared from the apparatus — thick, brassy blasts, chained together in a dreadful melody. As the Conductor turned to look, Lachmannon saw Maxus standing before the quagmire of plates and cords, his hands a flurry of motion. Above him, the squid-things whirled and spun in place, seemingly hypnotized by the song.

The Conductor lunged backward, slamming against a mirror, mashing Lachmannon between hard flesh and cracking glass.

Hot pain lanced through his torso and the wind exploded from his lungs. Losing his hold, he crumbled to floor, narrowly missing one of the red shafts and the blood-red figure standing before it. The Conductor ignored the Kael and stomped back toward the Ziggurat.

Hot blood poured down in rivulets from Lachmannon’s back. He nearly slipped on the crimson slick as he recovered his sword and rose to his feet, gasping for air.

The music increased in volume and tempo, surging toward a mad crescendo. From the prongs, the black spheres crackled and smoked. As Lachmannon lumbered after the Conductor, he noticed the squid-things curling up, flexing their tendrils like cats’ claws.

The giant reached the ziggurat and leaped to the top, seizing Maxus in its massive fist.

Maxus wriggled in the god’s hands as it pressed him above its head like some prize. Then it pulled his head and feet in opposing directions. With a sickening snap, the meddler split in two. The Conductor seemed to admire the two bloody portions before hurling them at the Kael’s feet where they landed with a wet smack.

The Conductor grinned and stabbed a threatening finger at Lachmannon before a thunderous tremor shook the earth and the entire platform exploded in a blinding flash of light.

The top of the ziggurat shot skyward, propelling debris in every direction. Lachmannon lunged past one of the figures and into the red shaft from whence it came. Peeking over the rim, he waited until the glittering shards stopped falling. Among the wreckage he spotted jewels, cords, stone ...

And the charred limbs of a god.

Lachmannon climbed from the shaft, dripping with some red, slimy fluid and regarded Maxus’ corpse. Perhaps it was due to his own blood loss, but when he considered that his only way home lay dead at his feet, dizziness assailed him. He turned from Maxus and froze as he saw the figures standing stone-still before the mirrors. He’d meant to address these latest foes — right after he slew the squids and the incarnate god. But at this point, even his legendary stamina abated.

He swayed on his feet, raised his sword, but the hilt sagged from his grip and dipped toward the floor. “Who are you lot, eh? You wanna try me, too?”

The cloaked figures said nothing and stared at him with strange luminous eyes. Familiar eyes. Where had he seen eyes like those? Before another thought passed through his throbbing head, he collapsed and oblivion seized him.

• • •

“THAT’S three times you’ve passed out on me, Kael. I’m starting to doubt your fortitude.”

Maxus? How?

His eyes peeled open and he found himself splayed out on the floor of the pit. He got to his feet and assessed the devastation. It was a mess of smoke, shattered instruments, and squid guts. Circling him were the figures that had crawled out from beneath

the mirrors. Lachmannon now recognized them — all of them — as the meddler. Though they lacked his beard and stood stark naked, their frames, faces and — most telling — their eyes were those of Maxus.

"You've done well," one of them said, in the meddler's throaty voice, "and I must now keep my word."

The Kael's thoughts were mazed. A thousand questions warred in his mind, but all he managed was, "how?"

"What, these?" He swept his hands toward his clones. "Ancients' magic, Kael. Though, I believe those we crassly refer to as the Ancients are not a single people, but rather many, from various ages. In any case, these have been growing here for some time. I just needed your help freeing them."

"Why?" was the next half-cooked question to escape his lips.

The meddler raised his hand to where his beard used to be, then smiled and said, "I must persist. Though I've already conquered the challenge of ageing, these shall allow me to exist in multiple places at once. Should I be slain, I have lives to spare." Maxus strode the circle of naked clones, seemingly checking for imperfections.

"My name means death in the old tongue," he continued. "It's hard for me to remember ages back when I was a boy. But it always haunted me, this name. Perhaps it's why I've ever sought to usurp mortality. It's amusing, Kael. As I've said, we really aren't so different, you and I. We both disdain barriers. We won't abide anyone stepping in our paths. And you ... you left your homeland because you wanted to see the world, to not be stifled by an existence of farming and tribal feuds. Am I wrong?"

"No."

"The way I see it, I am afraid of dying, while you are afraid of not living — of suffering under the dour traditions of your people, of never knowing warm climes and the salted surf of the sea, of not lying with women from every kingdom you find. You crave the thrill of risk and lust after the reward, wagering your life without a moment's hesitation. I believe you would have followed me on this errand whether you were awaiting execution or not. Am I wrong?"

"No."

"Then perhaps it's time you get back to that pursuit."

Lachmannon looked behind him, at the meddler's corpse. "I'd assumed you'd used the last of the smoke. How now will we return?"

"I'm not going back, Kael. Not now. I've other worlds to visit." Maxus turned to face the mirrors wreathing the chamber. "Each of these is a doorway, leading to a road. Each road leads to another world. I don't know where they all end — not yet — but I know which will take you back to our world."

Lachmannon nodded. This made as much sense as everything else he'd experienced since smoking from the meddler's pipe. "And what of my fortune, sorcerer? You said I'd be paid in king-ly sums."

"Fear not. I haven't forgotten." Maxus strode toward his own corpse, rifled through the blood-stained robes, pulled out a key and passed it to Lachmannon. "One of my keeps sits atop a hill at the northernmost bend of the Saradune River. My guards will

not stop you. In fact, they are yours now, as is the keep and the surrounding lands. In the cellar, in the southern wall, you will find several loose bricks. Behind them is a chest containing riches to ensure you'll want for nothing."

For a moment Lachmannon stared at the key as if it was an empty flagon he'd expected to find full.

"I know you'd try to kill me if I deceived you, Lachmannon."

Lachmannon looked Maxus in the eyes, surprised to hear him speak his name.

"You'll find no cause to hunt my head, I assure you. In the meantime —"

The clones began spreading out, plucking objects from among the debris. After a few moments they dropped more than a dozen jewels into the Kael's hands.

"These should suffice until you locate my keep."

Lachmannon pocketed the gems and stepped toward Maxus, close enough to cut him down, should he choose. The Kael was weary and dazed and remained incredulous of all that transpired. Despite all that, he couldn't help but split a grin and thrust his hand toward the meddler.

Maxus returned the grin — and the gesture — and the two locked their hands over each other's wrist in a warrior's clasp.

"Well, Maxus, it's been ... strange. I thank you for the key. And I think I shall keep this sword. But now I've a mad thirst and I wish to drink beneath a single moon without the threat of bloody squids. Which of these doors leads me home?"

Maxus smiled and pointed the way.

• • •

FOR nearly three years, Lachmannon roamed the world, drinking, slaying, and sating his more primal lusts. Eventually, when his scars outnumbered his enemies, he returned to his home in the hills where he'd lay down his sword, rest a while, and explore the depths of his wine cellar.

Or so he imagined.

Not a week later, a visitor arrived at his gate — a man dressed in tattered robes and smoking from a long pipe.

A man with luminous eyes and a simple errand to finish.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For over a decade, Matthew John has earned his coin in the classroom by encouraging teenagers to read. Remarkably, he has retained enough mental fortitude to play tabletop games and write in his spare time. To his surprise, Monolith and Modiphilus hired him to contribute to their Conan games, and Nightfall Games invited him to write missions for their Terminator RPG. Though his constitution score ranks slightly below average, he thrives in the harsh Canadian climes of Nova Scotia with his lovely wife, two precious children, and a menagerie of cats and dogs. You can hear him ramble about swords-and-sorcery on the Rogues in the House Podcast and check out his fiction and non-fiction contributions to *Weirdbook*, *Robert E. Howard Changed My Life*, and *Grimdark Magazine*.



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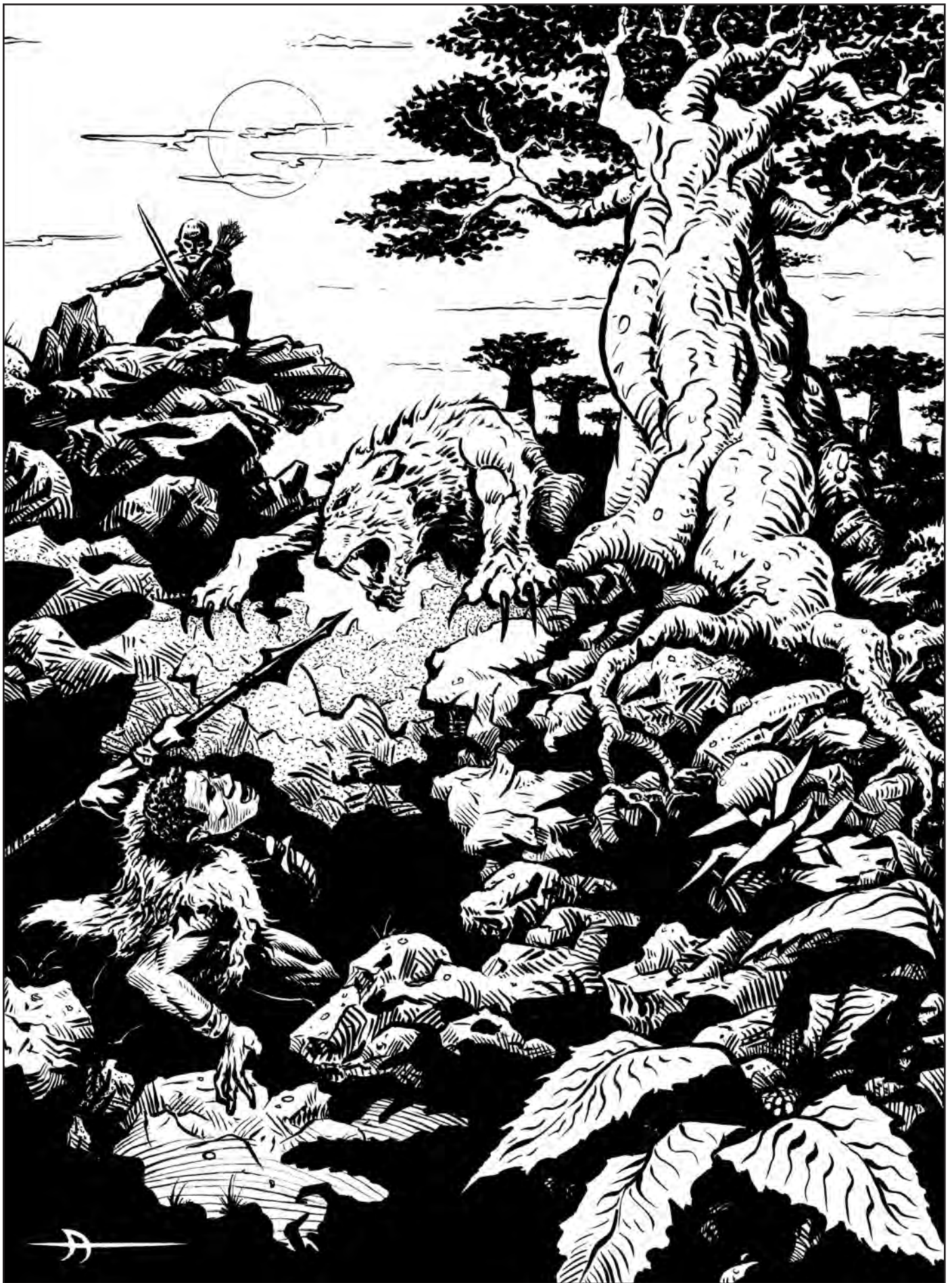


ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS ARNESON

NZARA

BY D. J. TYRER

DUSK was creeping across the veldt. From the shadowed horizon two figures advanced with the easy lope of seasoned travelers, heading towards the low hill upon which sat a musha of six huts, and with a danga of cattle at its base. Their approach excited the attention of the spear-armed men who stood watch, and they called out more of their people from within the huts.

The first figure was a tall man who appeared almost to be a giant beside his diminutive fellow-traveler. As he drew nearer, the men on the hill could see he stood a full head taller than their tallest. The man was wrapped in a kaross of mhofu hide, and carried long-shafted throwing spears, which he held in a non-threatening manner.

The other was short and hunched himself down so that he seemed barely half the height of his companion. He was completely naked and held a bow. His skin was a lighter color and crinkled and weathered in a way that made him look like an old man, although he moved with the vigor of youth. There was no beard upon his chin and the hair of his head was sparse and wiry.

The men upon the hill awaited their approach, spears ready to throw at any sign of aggression, but the pair made none. They slowed as they neared the hill and halted at its base.

The tall man called out a greeting.

"Who are you?" one of the men called down.

"Two weary travelers in search of hospitality."

The men upon the hill looked at one another and conferred quietly. The two travelers looked up with apparent lack of interest, yet their keen eyes clearly took in every nervous movement, every negative gesture. The inhabitants of the musha were ill at ease.

"Come up," called the man who had spoken.

They climbed the hill and approached the men, who, having reached their decision, seemed more welcoming.

"Come in, come in." The men gestured them into the nearest hut.

The interior was dark and smoky, the light of the fire at its center making shadows dance about the walls. A semi-circle of women sat on the far side of the fire.

"Sit," said one of them.

They did, crouching comfortably against the wall. A second woman filled bowls with sadza and boiled meat and handed them to the men. They accepted gratefully and began to scoop up the food.

The man who had greeted them said, "My name is Nunurai, what are you called?"

"Ini-ndoga."

"Ini-ndoga?" The man shook his head: 'I Alone.' "Yet, you are not alone. Who is this?"

"I call him Mbeva because he is small. He is a Mandionerepi and I cannot pronounce his real name; it is all clicks."

Mbeva grinned up at them as if his companion's words were a great joke.

"You are the chief, here?" asked Ini-ndoga.

Nunurai shifted, awkwardly. He didn't answer directly, but said, "These are bad times."

"How so?"

"Our chief is dead. Killed by a lion. As have been many of our best men, including the chief's right-hand son and his mother."

Ini-ndoga chewed a piece of meat as he considered Nunurai's words. Without the chosen heir, the clan would be in turmoil over who should lead it, and if the great wife were dead, there would be no replacement.

"Is it such a fearsome beast? Surely you can hunt and kill it?"

"Our clan is the Shumba."

"Ah." The lion was their totem and inviolate, no matter what its depredations.

They ate in silence for a time. The woman, who had bid them sit, moved closer around the fire. She smiled at Ini-ndoga and he felt a stirring of desire.

"My name is Nzara. I was the wife of the chief."

"I am sorry he died," said Ini-ndoga, although he felt no such thing.

"You are a warrior, a hunter?" she asked.

He nodded. "I have killed many men and many beasts."

She shook her head. "You know what they will ask of you. Do not agree. None can stand against this lion."

He laughed, an incongruous sound within the hut. "It only seems so because none of your clan may raise their hand against it. Even the weakest child could kill a mighty hero if the warrior refused to fight back. I have killed many lions – this one would be no exception."

"You will not return if you take this challenge."

He laughed again and turned to Nunurai. "Would you have me kill this beast for you?"

The man looked into the fire. To request another to kill their totem animal was tantamount to killing it themselves.

"If someone were to encounter it and kill it, we would be grateful to be relieved of it."

Ini-ndoga nodded. "I suspect our journey shall take us in the direction of where it lairs, tomorrow." He glanced at Nzara, who looked sad at his decision. "But, tonight, I would enjoy myself..."

She chewed her lip for a moment, then nodded and they slipped away into the night.

• • •

“CAN you track it?” They were at the site of the lion’s most recent attack.

Mbeva looked up from where he crouched, examining the ground and gave his companion a scathing look.

“This way.” He stood, bow in hand, and stalked off, eyes intent upon the ground.

The country was dry, yearning for rain, and little plumes of dust rose with their every step, yet the little man could easily discern which way the lion had gone, moving swiftly ahead of Ini-ndoga.

The tracks led into a rocky gully thick with thorny bushes. Somehow, Mbeva seemed immune to their stabbing and scratching; Ini-ndoga was glad to be covered by his kaross.

Mbeva paused ahead of him, head cocked, listening. He halted, too.

There was a roar and he felt himself chill, his body freezing in place.

A lion, mane black against its golden fur, appeared on the rocks above them. It prepared to leap.

The primal moment of terror passed, and he readied a spear and threw it. The long tapering head buried itself deeply in the lion’s chest and a flower of blood blossomed. He threw a second spear and it fell from the rock, dead.

He approached it cautiously. Behind him, Mbeva readied an arrow.

Ini-ndoga prodded it with his third spear, but it was dead.

After retrieving his spears, he turned to his companion and laughed. “Hardly worth the effort.” He shook his head. “Skin it; we might as well profit from it.”

Mbeva nodded and took out a small flint knife, finely knapped so as to be as keen as any iron blade, and set to work. The skin could be traded with a chief or turned into a finer kaross than the one Ini-ndoga wore.

Mbeva finished, and rolled up the skin, unconcerned by the blood or smell; it would need to be cleaned later. Then, he settled down and took out a pipe formed from an antelope’s horn and began to puff on it, enjoying the dagga it contained. Ini-ndoga settled beside him and accepted his offer of the pipe. They would relax a while, then return to the musha with the good news.

A sudden shriek startled them out of their reverie.

They looked at one another and stood, weapons in hand.

“This way,” said Mbeva.

They clambered up the wall of the gully and dashed across the rough country in pursuit of the sound.

“There!” Mbeva pointed towards a baobab tree. In a hollow of its trunk crouched a woman, while below a lioness, larger than the male they had killed, paced back and forth.

The woman, Ini-ndoga realized, was the widow, Nzara.

He shook his head and cursed her foolishness in leaving the musha before they returned with news of their success.

“It seems,” he said, “our hunt isn’t quite over.”

Mbeva grinned in reply and readied his bow.

“I can do this,” Ini-ndoga told him.

The lioness turned to glare at them.

Ini-ndoga hefted one of his long-shafted spears and threw it, but the lioness leapt aside. Then, it ran towards them.

His second spear didn’t miss but seemed to have no effect.

He threw the third, but still it kept coming, the shafts snapping away from the heads that were lodged in its flesh.

He barely had time to ready his axe.

The lioness leapt at him. He swung his axe. The long, narrow axe-blade buried itself in its side as the lioness smashed into him, knocking him off his feet. Claws scraped against his kaross, but the thick hide saved him from the initial attack.

Hot breath struck his face and he looked up into the gaping jaws of the lioness as it plunged its mouth towards his face. He thrust his forearm up under its chin and fought to hold it away from him.

Desperately, he tried to free his axe. The lioness yowled as the blade shifted within its flesh.

Then, without warning, it went limp, collapsing upon him.

With a deep breath, Ini-ndoga managed to push it up off of him and roll out from underneath it. One of Mbeva’s arrows extended from its flank; the poison he dipped them in had worked speedily.

Ini-ndoga paused to recover his axe. Even as he pulled it free, the lioness seemed to shudder and he stepped back, thinking it wasn’t dead, after all. But, no; it seemed to shrink.

However, before he could see what was happening to it, there was another scream and he turned towards Nzara, thinking she was menaced by yet another lion, but she had leapt down from the tree and was running towards them, no longer a woman but a wild beast, a lioness.

He barely had time to consider it. Mbeva shot again, but she jumped aside, and the arrow struck the tree. Ini-ndoga raised his axe and swung it as she leapt towards him. The blade bit deeply into her forepaw and she howled in pain and stumbled back.

Mbeva loosed another arrow, but the lioness that had been a widow was already bounding away, dodging so as to make herself a difficult target.

“After her!”

Even Ini-ndoga could follow her trail with ease, spots and splashes of blood marking her passage through the bush.

She was headed for a granite outcrop, upon which were the tumbled remains of a stone wall.

The two men slowed as they drew near, wary, moving apart to make it more difficult to ambush them.

They were almost at the bottom of the outcrop when Mbeva signaled a warning. Two more lionesses appeared from amongst the scrub and bounded towards them.

One fell just short of the little man, an arrow protruding from its eye.

The other charged at Ini-ndoga. He threw his final spear, and it struck its shoulder. The lioness stumbled and smashed down onto that leg, breaking both shaft and bone, and tumbled over itself.

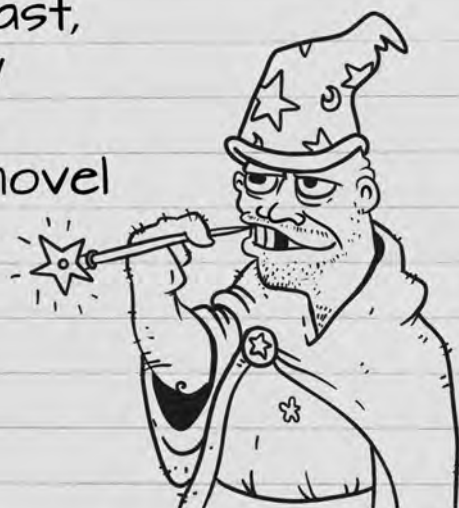
Before it could recover, he ran forward and smashed the axe down, the narrow blade burying itself deep within its skull.

(continued on page 68)



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ILLUSTRATION BY STEFAN POAG

THE SILENT MOUND

By CHARLES D. SHELL

NIHOKNA cursed his foolishness yet again. He never should have followed that buck as long as he did, but he couldn't help but dream of the praise such a prize would bring from his tribe. Instead of giving up, as his fellow hunters had, he had kept on the magnificent animal's trail for the entire day, finally bringing it down with an arrow to the heart as it drank from a spring.

Only afterward had the magnitude of the beast struck him. It took him long hours to clean it and set up a sledge to drag it back home. By then it was too dark to move, and he was forced to hang it up to protect it from scavengers. The day's activities so exhausted him that he fell into an uncharacteristically deep sleep — which is why the white men were able to surprise and overpower him.

Even so, he fought like a wounded bear and knocked two of them senseless before a third brained him with the butt of a musket. Before he could recover, they bound his arms behind his back with sturdy rope.

Fortunately, the white men didn't realize he spoke their language. He heard them talking among themselves as he regained his senses. He also smelled the delicious scent of his prize buck being roasted on a crude spit above a fire. His anger at the theft was nearly as great as his dismay at discovering the sturdy hemp rope securing his arms. He struggled mightily, but even his iron-hard muscles couldn't free him.

Seething, he listened to them and watched them between slit eyes.

There were three. One was a taller, slender, yellow-haired man who nibbled on a pipe. The other two were darker-skinned with black hair. One of the two was short, with a stout build, while the third was large, with a pot belly. Although the larger man had a round middle, the muscles that showed through gave even Nihokna pause. All had shiny metallic breastplates and swords, as well as the muskets. Nihokna had seen enough of those weapons to gain a grudging respect of their deadliness. After listening a while, he realized the yellow-haired man's name was Richard, the shorter man was Giles and the huge man was named Humphrey. Humphrey's impressive belly was only partially contained by his breastplate, as flesh bulged out just below the lower edge of the armor.

"How's your nose, Humphrey?" Richard asked.

"Like it was kicked by a thrice-damned horse!" Humphrey said.

Giles chuckled. "The savage is as strong as a bull! Lucky he didn't break your skull like a melon."

"To Perdition with that, Giles! I could have taken him easily if

he hadn't surprised me!"

"Whatever you say," Giles said with a twinkle in his eye.

"I felt his strength, Humphrey," Richard said, rubbing at a purpling bruise on the side of his head. "And I'm glad Giles brained him when he did."

"Bah!"

"He's already awake," Richard said with a knowing smirk.

Nihokna grunted in surprise.

All three men looked over at where Nihokna was tied to a maple tree. He opened his eyes and scowled. He wondered why he was alive.

"If the brute's stare could kill, I believe Satan would be roasting us on a spit at this moment," Richard said, lighting his slender pipe and breathing out a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"We should cut his throat now," Humphrey said, touching his tender nose.

"Nay, we need a guide," Giles said. "After we find it, we can send him to his maker."

Nihokna's eyes narrowed.

Richard chuckled. "I do believe he can understand us."

"What?" Humphrey said with a growl. He pulled out a shining blade and stalked over beside Nihokna, placing its edge against his ruddy throat. "Do you understand us, savage?"

Nihokna said nothing. He merely gritted his teeth and struggled against his bonds. His massive breadth of muscles played across his naked chest and shoulders.

Humphrey's piggish eyes turned canny. He pulled out a poniard and brandished it near Nihokna's left eye.

"If you don't answer, I'll take out one of your eyes. You don't need both of them to lead us where we intend to go." A gap-toothed grin of malicious glee showed that Humphrey wasn't bluffing.

"I know your speech," Nihokna said in barbarously-accented English.

"Blast my eyes! He does know English!" Humphrey said, taken aback.

Richard laughed. "I told you! Perhaps he learned it from whichever unfortunate soul he got that dagger from."

"I traded two deer hides for that blade," Nihokna said, indicating the steel blade they'd taken from him. "I learned your tongue from your tribe near the coast. I have a way with languages and a roving foot. I have traveled farther than anyone in my tribe has ever dared. What are you white-skinned fools doing here?"

Richard laughed again, as much from his audaciousness as the outraged reaction of Humphrey and Giles. He walked over and gave Nihokna a drink from his waterskin.

"Well, my loquacious friend, we're seeking a buried treasure."
"Treasure?"

"Gold, we believe. Some of our kinsman who came through here before scribbled directions and a crude map before they died of fever. Few have come this deep into your land, but they've discovered some of your secrets."

Nihokna scowled in confusion. He knew of white men's madness over gold. They would slaughter anyone — including one another — for the shiny metal.

"I know of no gold around here. What do you mean?"

"The explorers told of finding gold within mounds. Old burial mounds. We merely find it wasteful for the dead to keep possession of something that does them no good."

Nihokna scowled again. He knew of the mound builders, but there were none within many weeks journey to the northwest. That territory contained many enemies of his tribe, and no friends to the white men. He told them so.

"Then what's this?" Humphrey said, shoving the yellowed map in Nihokna's face.

He squinted at the crude map and tried to make sense of it. After a moment, his eyes widened in shock and horror.

"I see you do know it," Richard said.

"I know of that mound. Every tribe between here and the sea knows of it — and the other ones like it! If you seek it, you are fools!"

"Hah! We'll be the judges of that!" Humphrey said. "Lead us to it, and we'll free you."

Nihokna spat. "You won't let me free. Even if I did believe you, we'll all be dead men if I lead you to that accursed mound."

"Oh, you'll lead us," Giles said, caressing his dagger. "With all your parts or not — it's up to you."

Only Richard looked concerned. He sat down next to Nihokna.

"What do you mean that we'll be dead men?"

"That's the Silent Mound! Only madmen seek what lies within it!"

"What lies within?"

Nihokna shuddered. "A shaman of the Talking Folk."

"Talking Folk? What the devil are you babbling about?" Humphrey asked.

"They are accursed. All tribes know to let them lie quietly in their graves until their bones turn to dust. To do otherwise is to risk blasting your spirit to pieces."

"He speaks nonsense. I know all the tribes north, south, and west of Jamestown. I've never heard of 'The Talking Folk,'" Giles said with a snort of contempt.

"That is because to even call them by their actual names is dangerous. And because we wiped them out many seasons ago, even before your white kind set foot on our soil," Nihokna said.

"Bah!" Humphrey snorted and spat in the fire. "Ghost stories."

But Richard wasn't so dismissive. "Speak on."

Nihokna took a deep breath and began.

"Many generations before now, The Talking Folk came to our land. At first, none of the tribes had many dealings with them. They wanted little from the trading tribes and were powerful enough to keep the warring tribes at bay. In truth, almost no one from other tribes dealt with them at all. So, after some time, they settled where the Nottoway Tribe now lives.

"Eventually, evil rumors started about them. The few traders who went to their villages came back with strange tales. The Talking Folk spoke rarely, but when they did, they spoke *wrong*."

"Wrong? What the devil does that mean?" Richard asked.

"I do not know exactly. It is said that the very words of their language twisted the guts and brought night demons to the minds of everyone who heard it. That they spoke a language no human should ever speak. They also put these evil words down on pieces of cloth and bark with symbols — like your people do."

Richard looked startled. "They had a written language? Impossible!"

Nihokna continued, ignoring him.

"The traders also spoke of strange rites performed by The Talking Folk. They gave sacrifices and tribute to strange spirits and gods — things that dwell deep inside the earth and in the outer darkness. The shamans knew of such terrible beings, but any who were caught worshipping them were flayed alive."

Richard grunted in disgust.

"Now this entire tribe was found worshipping such fiends. This created a stir among all the neighboring tribes, from the Rappahannock to the Chickahominy and the Nansemond. Even those further afield became aware when news of disappearing children began in nearby tribes. No one knew they were responsible at first, but suspicion grew with time.

"Many of the tribes considered warring with them, but The Talking Folk were fearsome warriors, and no one or two tribes could match them. And many feared that weakening their own forces would invite attacks from other enemies. So, the Talking Folk continued, along with the tales of blasphemous rites and missing children.

"Many seasons passed until a stout trader from the Pamunkey Tribe returned with a tale to freeze the blood. Normally, traders with The Talking Folk came in early morning and left before night. The Talking Folk were a sullen people, as well as sinister, and no one wanted to stay overnight in their territory. But this trader's curiosity was greater than his fear, and he pretended to leave, only to double-back and hide until nightfall. When the darkness descended, he heard a great commotion from the center of the village and snuck upon a scene from a nightmare. The Talking Folk practiced a frenzied worship before a great, black idol of a creature born of madness. Worse, he saw them dash the brains out of several infants on its hideous altar. He also spoke of *something* that came out of the darkness to receive the sacrifice."

"Something?" Giles asked. All three men were riveted by the tale and sat around Nihokna. Even the skeptical Humphrey and Giles were shaken.

Nihokna shuddered. "A servant of the outer gods. Best not to speak of it." But the worst part was the *sound*. Their cheering voices worshipped in their nightmare language, which became a thousand times worse to hear. The trader fled from the scene and stumbled into his village days later, half-dead with fatigue and fear. He managed to tell everything he had seen before he fell into a fever and died a few days later, raving.

"But the tale spread throughout all the tribes, and a great meeting was held, even between blood enemies. My own tribe, the Monacan, sat beside the accursed Doeg, our hatreds forgotten. Men can forget their feuds when confronted with such horror.

These Talking Folk, despite their appearance, were not men. They were something wearing the shapes of men."

"A great alliance was forged. All tribes within many days' travel sent as many warriors as they could spare. Once the great host was gathered, they descended on The Talking Folk in a red holocaust of spear and fire. The battle was terrible, because even though they outnumbered The Talking Folk many times over, that accursed people fought like demons — even their women and children.

"Worse, they had terrible allies: demons wrought in shapes that blasted minds; and spirits that fought beside them. Only ancient magicks brought by their shamans allowed them to overcome such creatures — at a terrible cost in lives.

"But fall they did, being scattered like leaves as their villages and fields were put to the torch. In the end, only their greatest shamans escaped." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It is said they could not die like normal men. They had to be bound and sealed away in mounds with their mouths sewn shut, to keep them from speaking their terrible tongue."

Nihokna nodded towards the map. "That is where they sealed one of them, after many days of chase. The warriors bound him, and the shamans sewed his mouth shut before sealing him in the mound with great magicks."

The three white men stared at him for a few moments before Humphrey started laughing contemptuously. He was joined a moment later — albeit less enthusiastically — by Giles.

"Poppycock and fairy tales! Just an old ghost story to keep the superstitious away!" Humphrey said.

Richard wasn't laughing. He'd noted the cold terror in Nihokna's eyes.

"He believes it," Richard said.

"What of it? He's a thick-skulled primitive!" Humphrey said. "Or maybe just a coward."

Nihokna bristled and strained at the cords binding him that his muscles creaked.

"Say that again with my hands free, white dog," Nihokna said.

"It doesn't matter what he believes, it only matters that he can lead us there," Giles said.

"I might as well cut my own throat, you white dogs! I fear no man, but what lies within that mound is no man! Go back to your people and forget this! There is no gold!"

Humphrey backhanded him with stunning force. Nihokna spit blood in Humphrey's face. It took both Richard and Giles to prevent Humphrey from spearing Nihokna like a wild boar. After a few minutes of arguing, the three men calmed down and Richard came and sat down beside Nihokna.

"Look, my savage friend, I hold you no ill-will. My two friends, however, are moments from slitting your throat and finding another guide. If this mound is such doom for us, how will it harm you to take us there? I will release you after we arrive. I give you my word, in the name of Christ."

Nihokna grunted. White people seemed to take such oaths seriously, at least some of the time. It was apparent that the two dark-haired men would slay him, should he refuse. He considered his options and nodded.

"Very well. You are all madmen, but I still value my life. I will lead you there."

Nihokna had trouble navigating through the thick woods with his hands bound behind his back, but the white men wouldn't release them. They also kept a knotted tether around his right ankle, should he try to run. Nihokna wanted to repay this indignity with blood, but kept his tongue and led the white men through the circuitous route to the Silent Mound. The trails were difficult and required several trips up and down rocky escarpments. The woods thickened to the point that the sunlight was barely visible above.

The complaints from Humphrey and Giles increased as they became exhausted by the difficult trek. Finally, after many hours, Humphrey grabbed Nihokna by his throat and pulled him up against a massive oak tree.

"Why kind of fools do you take us for? You're just getting us lost!"

"We are close. Listen."

Humphrey shut his mouth and listened. As he did, they all became aware of just how quiet it was. There were still a few animal sounds, but they were distant and barely audible. Nothing living made any noise nearby. Other than their breathing and the crackle of leaves beneath their feet, it was silent.

"Awfully quiet," Richard said in a whisper. He shuddered.

"We are close. Nothing makes noise near the Silent Mound," Nihokna said.

Even Humphrey paused at this, as a bit of superstitious dread crawled down his spine. But greed and anger shook him out of it.

"Good. I like it quiet," Humphrey said as he shoved Nihokna forward.

After another half hour and a bruising journey over several rocky barriers, they entered a tiny, bowl-shaped valley. In the center of the bowl was a conspicuous mound, covered in sickly yellowish weeds and surrounded by several standing stones. Upon the stones were strange, arcane scratchings.

"The Silent Mound," Nihokna said. He shivered with a primal dread and every instinct he possessed told him to run from here as quickly as possible. Even the oblivious white men felt it. They looked at one another, but their pride and greed kept them from suggesting a retreat. And lust for gold kept them moving towards the sinister mound.

Now, not even distant animals could be heard. Not a single wolf, squirrel, bird or even cricket made the slightest noise. Other than the rustle of leaves in the wind, they might as well have been standing on a plain of barren stone in the middle of winter.

They walked up to stand alongside the mound. It was perhaps fifteen feet across and five feet high at its apex. The earth composing it was hardened and packed. Despite a feeling of great age, very little plant life had taken root in its surface, aside from the sickly weeds and some unhealthy-looking moss. The standing stones around it were only three feet high at the most, and the scratches cut into them were completely alien to everyone, including Nihokna.

An odd, febrile smell became apparent. It was akin to mold or perhaps old rot, but not exactly like either. It wasn't strong, but it was repellent.

"I have taken you where you wanted. Release me," Nihokna said. His voice seemed to echo unnaturally in the small valley, as if a cathedral of stone lay above them, instead of trees.

"I'll release you from life," Humphrey growled, grasping at his sword. Richard interposed himself.

"I gave him my word on Christ's name. He'll go free."

Humphrey seemed to weigh his options. Although for a moment it looked as if he might attack Richard, he eventually took his hand from the weapon's hilt.

"After we're sure this is the right place, we'll let the painted savage go," Humphrey said.

"This is what you sought, dog!" Nihokna said. "Now let me get away from here before you spend your lives."

Humphrey pulled his sword and Richard's blade came out. Richard stood between Humphrey and Nihokna.

"I said he'll go free. I shan't blacken my soul by forswearing against Christ."

The two men faced one another in the silent valley, tension crackling.

"Don't be a fool, Richard! That brute will slit our throats during the night if we don't kill him!"

"I gave my word," Richard said.

Richard was so intent on Humphrey that he didn't notice Giles pull his blade and move behind him. Nihokna shouted a warning too late, as Giles's blade swung towards Richard's head. Richard partially intercepted the blade, and instead of cleaving his skull, it smashed into the side. Blood flew and he fell as if poleaxed. Nihokna didn't hesitate. As Richard fell, he tore his foot from the rope and sprinted away as fast as his lithe muscles could carry him. His gait was dangerous and unsteady with his arms bound behind his back, but he went up the rocks like a deer and disappeared into the woods before the flintlocks could be brought into play. Giles chased halfheartedly for a short time, but gave up, realizing he couldn't possibly catch the lithe Monacan warrior.

Nihokna found a sharp outcropping of rock and cut his bonds. It was awkward and took some time, but eventually the hemp rope frayed enough that he could tear his arms free. After life returned to them, he considered his options.

He could return to the tribe and gather warriors to slay the men. But the village was many days travel to the southwest; it would take too much time. He didn't care about the fate of the white men, but the thing within the mound wouldn't merely slay them; it would seek vengeance against all the tribes — including his.

He swallowed his terror and made a quiet, circuitous route back to the Silent Mound. It took much more time, but he needed to approach from a direction the white men weren't expecting.

As he neared, he heard the ominous sounds of picks striking hardened earth. It spurred him to greater speed, regardless of the noise. He merely hoped the picks would hide any noise he made.

As he rose above the rocky rise, Nihokna saw Humphrey and Giles smashing their picks against the Silent Mound. There was already a large bite taken out of the mound, and they were making alarming progress.

Nihokna's only weapon was a fist-sized, round rock perfect for throwing. A feeble weapon against two men armed with swords and flintlocks, but he had no alternatives. He cursed the gods and spirits as he realized that it didn't matter what direction

he came from. The valley was devoid of any cover larger than ankle-height shrubs and rocks. He had wasted time for nothing. And at the rate they were digging, it wouldn't be long before they had broken into the interior of the mound.

Ominously, the silence became all-pervasive. The pick blows sounded like thunderbolts in comparison. The whole valley held its breath.

Nihokna looked around wildly and his eyes fell on the crumpled form of Richard. The man lay where he had fallen, his sword still clutched in his hand, some distance behind the two men. If Nihokna were swift and silent enough, he might reach the blade before the two men noticed.

He circled around.

"This damn mound is harder than brick!" Giles complained, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Be silent and keep digging! I want this damnable grave open before nightfall. Do you wish to spend the night here?"

Giles shook his head nervously and redoubled his effort. His pick shattered another section of the mound.

"It's a shame about Richard. Three men can carry more gold than two," Giles said.

"Damn fool. I would have made him rich," Humphrey said. "He chose his fate when he pulled a blade on me."

Giles shrugged and his pick made greater progress. The interior of the mound wasn't nearly as hard as the outside. Soon it would open.

Nihokna slid across the ground with as much speed and stealth as he could manage. Without the sounds of the picks, he never would have made it. He reached Richard without either of the men turning to see him. As his hand fell on the blade, he noticed Richard's chest rising and falling. A glance at the wound on his head told Nihokna that the blade had merely cut the scalp and knocked him senseless. The blood from the scalp had made it look far worse than it actually was.

Richard let out a low groan.

Nihokna considered for an instant and made a decision. Then he put his hand across Richard's mouth and shook him awake. When his eyes came open, Nihokna whispered into his ear.

"You saved my life, white man. Your companions have betrayed you. If you help me, we may both survive and have vengeance."

Richard glanced up at him and across the valley at the two men.

"Tell me your decision, but do it quietly," Nihokna said, pulling his hand from Richard's mouth.

"I stand with you, but my head is swimming. You must give me a moment to gather my wits."

Nihokna moved away from him. His head snapped to the left as a dull, hollow crash came from the mound. It was followed by a scream of terror and anguish.

"Gods and spirits preserve us."

Giles's final pick blow caused a rectangular section of the mound to collapse inward, revealing a dark void. A disquieting stench came from within in a foul cloud of dust. Both men nearly gagged.

"That did it, Humphrey!" Giles said, with a smile. "Now we... wait, something's..."

Whatever else Giles might have said was scattered to the winds as he screamed in horror when a shape loomed out of the cloud of dust.

The thing resembled an incredibly aged man, but only superficially. The skin color was a nauseous gray and was emaciated to the point that it appeared as if someone had wrapped parchment around a skeleton. The eye sockets sunk into dark pits where a red, malevolent light gleamed.

The thing was clad in rotten leathers and its jaw was sewn shut with catgut threads, keeping the grinning mouth from opening at all.

A skeletal claw closed on Giles's throat, cutting off his shrill screaming. He struggled mightily to pull the talons from his throat, but the thing was far stronger than its appearance would suggest. The fingers sank into his flesh, crushing his trachea. Blood fountained from his mouth and nose.

"Holy Father preserve us!" Richard said in a voice thick with terror. Spurred by fear, his head cleared, and he stood beside Nihokna, gripping his blade with white knuckle intensity. He handed a poniard to Nihokna. "We must kill it!"

"We must get it back in its mound!" Nihokna said. "The shamans of the Talking Folk don't die like men!"

"But...!"

"Listen! You would not listen before but listen now!" Nihokna grabbed a length of rope and tossed it to Richard. "We must bind it and keep it from speaking before we push it back into the mound!"

A thunderous report froze both men for an instant.

Humphrey was a veteran of several battles, and despite his soul-sick horror, he raised his musket, sighted at the skeletal abomination and fired. The chunk of lead punched a small hole through its torso, but no blood or fluids emerged. It hardly seemed to notice.

Instead, it pulled Giles's blade from his sheath as it dropped the dying man to the earth. Instead of advancing or threatening with the blade, it used it to cut the catgut threads holding its jaw shut. The threads snapped one by one, and its mouth came open, releasing a cloud of dust.

Humphrey fired again, equally ineffectively. "Die! Die! You hellspawn!" Humphrey said, a line of spittle running down his jowls. His eyes revealed a mind breaking to pieces.

The thing dropped the blade and turned towards Humphrey. Its mouth opened and it began to make noises.

Nihokna grabbed wadding from Richard's ammunition pouch and pushed it into Richard's hands.

"Fill your ears! Quickly!" Nihokna shoved some of the wadding into his own ears as if to demonstrate.

Richard opened his mouth to disagree, but instinct told him to follow the Indian's advice. Just as he did, he heard muffled sounds coming from the mound creature. He couldn't understand it, but just enough meaning got through to make his brain reel.

Humphrey stood paralyzed as the thing's speech slithered into his ears. His jaw fell open and he made incoherent sounds.

It walked over to him like a snake slithers towards a bird's nest. The burning coals of its eyes pierced his, even as its horrid speech pierced his mind.

Every instinct told him to run, but he was unable to do anything more than tremble as it came up beside him and whispered terrible secrets into his ear. Blood poured from his nose, mouth, ears and eyes. Humphrey let out a horrible, gargling scream as his brain dissolved into jelly.

He fell to the ground and lay still.

Humphrey's death provided enough distraction that Nihokna and Richard closed the distance and surprised the skeletal horror. Richard used the butt of the musket to smash its knees and send it sprawling. Nihokna grappled its arms and looped the rope around them so quickly, it had little chance to get leverage. As he did, he drove the poniard up through the bottom its jaw, into the bony upper palate, wedging its mouth shut.

Once surprise had faded, the two men found themselves in the battle of their lives. The thing's strength was prodigious, and despite every apparent advantage, the two men could barely hold their own. If Nihokna had been an average man, they would have had no chance, but his arms were like iron bands. His strength was not supernatural, however, and it was all he could do to merely keep their foe on the ground and the ropes around it.

Richard dropped his musket, drew his blade, and with a strength born of desperation, brought the blade down on the creature's right humerus. Despite the tremendous blow and razor-sharp edge, it took three blows to finally sever the arm.

With sick terror, Richard noted that the severed arm moved with a life of its own, hardly slowed by the amputation. Despite that, it gave the two men sufficient advantage that they could hold their one-armed antagonist down as Nihokna wrapped it in the heavy coils of the rope.

Once, the thing nearly managed to pull the poniard from its jaw, but they forced the arm down again and secured it against the torso. They made sure to wrap the poniard and the skull with just as much rope as the rest of it, to prevent the poniard from being removed.

Once satisfied it was helpless, they dragged it back to the mound.

Richard let out a shout of pain and horror as the severed arm wrapped its bony talons around his ankle and sunk them into his flesh. He ripped it off and threw it into the mound, followed by the mummified shaman.

Despite near-exhaustion, the two men threw earth back on top of the mound until it was once again covered and hard-packed. Only then did they both fall to the ground in exhaustion and pull the wadding from their ears.

For several minutes, they both lay quivering in exhaustion, and the only sounds were their labored breathing. When their hearts had slowed to something approaching normalcy, Nihokna sat up and punched Richard in the jaw with a staggering blow.

"When I tell you to leave the Silent Mound alone, you should *listen!*"

Richard held his throbbing jaw in surprise for a moment, and then a low chuckle escaped his lips. After a moment, Nihokna began laughing as well. Soon the silent valley was filled with the laughter of two men who had fought the powers of Hell, and escaped with their lives.

After their last chuckles faded away, Nihokna stood up and helped Richard to his feet.

"Come white man, let's leave this place while there is still sunlight. We have tasted blood together. I will take you back to my village, and after your wounds have been treated, I'll guide you back to your people."

"Thank you."

The two men staggered away from the accursed mound, but Richard couldn't help but wonder what other unknown terrors lay quietly within the New World, just waiting to be uncovered.

NZARA (*continued from page 60*)

Then, as he watched, it, too, shuddered and began to shrink, turning into the corpse of a dead woman, his axe buried in her skull. He turned and looked; the one that Mbeva had shot was now a woman, a fine arrow shaft protruding from her eye.

"Witchcraft," he murmured.

Mbeva shrugged. "The other one went up the hill."

Ini-ndoga pulled his axe free, then drew a dagger, from the sheath that hung from a thong round his neck, with his free hand. Mbeva readied another arrow. Slowly, they began to ascend the hill. Ini-ndoga headed straight for the ruined wall, while his companion drifted around to the rear.

Nzara was crouched amongst the tumbled stones, clutching her injured hand, which hung bloodily from her wrist where he had hacked at it.

She looked up at him with wide, fearful eyes. "Please, don't kill me."

"What are you?"

"My father's clan ruled here before the Shumba came. They killed my people and drove my sisters and me into the wilderness." She sobbed. "Please, I am in pain."

He shook his head.

"An old woman lived here who was a *muroyi* and, in return for us serving her, she taught us the spells to change ourselves into lions. The Shumba could not cause a lion harm, so it was the perfect means to revenge."

She laughed, despite the pain apparent in the tightness of her face.

"I came to the *musha* and the fool chief desired to possess me. I could never be his great wife, but I hoped to have a son with him who, when he and his right-hand son were dead, would become chief. But, the magic made me infertile. He threatened to cast me out if I didn't conceive, so I killed him. I had no son, but that hardly mattered if there was no clan left to lead..."

She put her head back, eyes closed, and bit her lip. Then, she opened her eyes again and looked at him.

"I truly did mean to protect you, when I warned you not to come. Although it seems we were the ones in need of protection... Did last night mean nothing? Will you kill me?"

He didn't move.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles D. Shell has been spotted in the southwestern region of Virginia, perhaps in the limestone caves that dot the region. When he emerges into the light, it is often to dabble in fiendish role-playing games, to pen forbidden short stories and novels, or to indulge in the even blacker arts of politics. Should someone wish to plumb the depths of his depraved mind, they may seek www.charlesdshell.com or www.facebook.com/CharlesDShell as portals into madness.

"If we return to the *musha*, now, I will tell them how you saved me and killed the lions that threatened us. That would be truth, of a sort. They would let me wed you."

He nodded. She was not unattractive.

"Then, I could wreak my final revenge upon them, and we could rule here, together."

He looked at her and she looked back. She could see the decision being made behind his eyes.

Ini-ndoga shook his head and turned away, unable to strike her down in cold blood.

There was a roar and he half-turned.

Nzara had transformed once more into a lioness and was leaping towards him.

He didn't have time to react. He had been a fool to allow her the chance.

There was the twang of a bowstring and an arrow buried itself in her back and she fell to the ground at his feet. She shuddered and began to transform back into a woman. Although the life had fled from them, her eyes continued to stare up at him and he was certain he could see reproach in them.

Mbeva hopped down from atop a pile of stones.

"It is over?" he asked.

Ini-ndoga nodded. Not that he was certain how the Shumba would take the news when they returned to tell them who and what had been behind their predation. He suspected they would not be as happy as could be wished.

He looked down at Nzara one last time and shook his head. Then, he turned and set off down the hill.

"Come, let's go."

Mbeva hopped down the slope after him, grinning at their success, little caring how the news would be taken.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D. J. Tyrer lurks on the mist-shrouded northern shore of the Thames Estuary in a place counter-intuitively known as Southend-on-Sea where they edit a small press, Atlantean Publishing, create conlangs, and write tales of horror and adventure, some of which have appeared in such places as *Tales of the Black Arts* (Hazardous Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), and issues of *Broadswords and Blasters*. You can learn more about their writing at djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk and read reviews and opinion pieces related to writing and publishing at atlanteanpublishing.wordpress.com.

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 10. Additional Skull Staff, except for the HR department
 11. Somewhat hideous octobears
 12. Former *Tales From the Magician's Skull* Intern 331
 13. Collectors of *Tales From the Magician's Skull* Who Do Not Read It (both of them)
 14. Ordinary octobears
 15. Remaining interns (unsure of exact quantity at any given time)
 16. HR department
 17. General populace
- Last (or first). Water chestnut aficionados



Following our most recent Kickstarter, The Skull's most devoted followers pledged additional smerduks to be enshrined upon this, the most glorious of all lists! The Skull has committed to thoroughly examining *this* list and ensuring that the proper order is followed when the day of immolation arrives at last!



ILLUSTRATION BY JENNEL JACQUAYS

DAKAGNA AND THE BLOOD SCOURGE

By W. J. LEWIS

DAKAGNA awoke to the smell of blood. She felt the familiar sting of wounds on her body. Knew they were bad. Didn't move. *Play dead. Until I remember where I am.*

"It wakes," said a deep voice.

Must have moved, she thought. Something heavy slammed into her side. Metal capped boot maybe. She grunted. She opened one eye. The other was sticky with her own blood, gummed shut.

In front of her, a man stood. His furs made him huge, and he bristled with weapons. Knives on his belt, an axe handle and broadsword visible over his shoulders. She would recognize the hilt anywhere. Her sword, Ferro. The man's face was a mass of purpled bruises, his nose a crushed mess.

She remembered.

"You're prettier than before," she said.

He punched her. Her head snapped back. Dakagna hadn't blocked, as her hands were pulled tightly behind her back. Heavy chains wrapped her body, held her up against a wooden pole. She spat a tooth onto the ground. No matter. More where that came from. She never understood why a mouth needed so many teeth.

"You'd do well to stay silent."

Dakagna thought about speaking, but she had nothing to say.

"Good," said the man. "She learns." Behind him, a group of men sniggered. Hyenas all. Jackals. Pack animals. Obeying their alpha. This huge man, in his furs, with his crushed face.

Begaram. The Black Axe, they called him. He ruled the Blood Scourge, a brutal band of mercenaries.

She shivered. They had stripped her of armour, and the chains were cold through her light clothing. They'd taken her boots. Frost beneath her toes. Snow floated down between her and the mercenary leader. Like white ashes in the sky.

She studied the man through her one good eye. Ignored the headache. The blood freezing to her skin.

He was seven foot tall. Broad as a wagon. Skilled with his weapons, she knew that. From the stories. And from their brief fight. Even drugged and unarmed, she'd got under his defenses. Done that to his face. But the poison had been too much, and they were too many. Eventually enough wolves can take down a bear. The stories of Begaram told of the cruel, dark, handsome stranger. Two out of three, maybe. Not handsome anymore. Dakagna looked forward to killing him. Not just for the money she'd been paid. The Queen of Swords hadn't had a challenge for a while. Her fists twitched, itching for a fight.

Begaram was worth the high bounty. Enough to see her across the sea to Telaran, and the famed school of learning there. They would help her with her curse.

Her foot twitched involuntarily.

How long had she been here? She needed to move.

"Bring the others in," roared Begaram. "We're gonna have ourselves a burning."

Then Dakagna saw the pyre.

Five stakes stood up from the mass of branches.

Dakagna heard a scream as the first of the prisoners was dragged through the snow.

She had seen the remains of a village as she hunted the mercenary band. Burnt out buildings. Mutilated bodies. Carcasses left to rot in the sun. The Blood Scourge had not needed supplies. They had wanted pillage. Murder. Fear.

Dakagna tried her bonds again. She flexed her prodigious muscles, but there was no give in the iron chains. She shuffled her feet. Tried to get some circulation. Her limbs were numb.

She closed her eye.

Preserve strength. Be like the eggfish. She had seen them in her travels on the Agate seas. The Peet Islanders worshipped the eggfish as gods. They hid beneath the sand in the water. Then they pounced. Their venom was fatal. Dakagna had no venom. But she had the weapons nature had gifted her. Knuckles, elbows, knees, forehead, teeth. Even bruised, with one functioning eye, Dakagna herself was a weapon forged in the fire of a warrior's life. She would wait.

She ignored the sounds as the female prisoners wept and the mercenaries brayed. She waited.

She heard fire crackle into life. She felt it from here, felt her muscles begin to warm. They would come for her.

She preserved her strength.

She thought back, wondering how she had fallen into Begaram's trap.

As ever, human nature. Not hers. That of others. Familiar betrayal.

• • •

"**C**AN it be?" The innkeeper peered at her from behind the bar. "By the great god Quelta. I had never thought to see the day. The mighty Dakagna! In my humble taphouse. More beautiful than all the jewels of Salan, stronger than the wine of the Elerian Delta. How are you, my old friend? Come in, come in, shut the door, do not bring all the mountain snow with you." The crooked man limped round the bar. "I knew you would come. Across the seas, across the lands, I knew you would one day visit old Altdore!"

"I know no Altidore," said Dakagna. His smile slipped a little. "How are you? And Ferro? I am sure you are both as sharp as ever you were!"

Dakagna studied the excitable man. She had travelled many lands, never stopping in one place. Her curse, to move ever onwards. If she stayed anywhere, a burning fire consumed her flesh from within. The agony was too much, and only abated when she moved on.

So the chances of knowing this man were slim. He knew the name of her sword, true. But anyone who knew of Dakagna knew of Ferro. Had her fame spread so far?

She squinted.

Altidore. The name was not familiar.

"I need a room," she said.

"Ah," he said. "We are full." Dakagna gazed around the empty common room. The man stood still. Then his mouth split into a wide grin and he laughed. "I joke!"

Dakagna did not smile. "I do not do jokes."

"No, no, of course." He cleared his throat and his eyes flicked to the side. "I remember. You are the Blade, the Sea Viper, the Queen of Swords. I shall show you to your room. And for you, a discount. You may not remember me, but Altidore never forgets a face. And he always remembers debts unpaid. This way, this way."

She should have remembered then. The name Sea Viper should have been the clue. But Altidore was very different from the man she once knew.

• • •

SHE sat in the common room of the tavern, eating chewy beef, watery soup, and hard bread, waiting for the man. She was roughly on time, within a couple of days of the appointment. The Inn of The Red Hand, near the summer equinox. A job for you. The sum of money had been eye watering. Enough to charter her own ship, sail to foreign climes. She had seen every wizard, learned man, mountebank, snake oil salesman, and charlatan in this land, and none could help her. Some had not been without power. All had been powerless to lift her curse.

She scanned the room, looking for threats. Nothing unusual. The innkeeper, Altidore, had been solicitous, bringing her the best meal, and the best ale, they had. Not that it was much. And he had still taken her coin.

He had prattled on about his problems. Higher taxes. Rumours of war to the East. A mercenary band, the Blood Scourge, terrorizing the mountain communities. He had asked again if she remembered him, a strange glint in his eye. The siege of Kora? He had fought with her? She didn't remember. He'd looked disappointed and slunk away. Shortly after she had seen him huddled in furs as he slipped from the inn.

Dakagna watched idly as an urchin, stringier than the beef, spilled ale at the bar. A portly barmaid slapped at him with a meaty fist. The urchin cringed, avoiding the blow, then scuttled over to Dakagna's table. As he reached her, he tripped over and landed at her feet. He looked up at her, snot running down his face. Dakagna's fists twitched. She'd seen this trick.

Distract the mark. Someone would sneak up behind, cut away a purse, or, worse, steal away a life with a hidden blade. She waited. Tense. Nothing. She looked into the boy's pale eyes. He looked back at her. His pupils were wide.

"What?"

"Never seen a lady so big," said the boy.

"That my problem?" she said. She eased her hand away from her dagger. In a crowded room like this, Ferro would have been clumsy. Or overkill. She wouldn't hesitate to sweep her out and destroy everyone here. But it was not necessary. This was just a boy.

"Not a problem," said the urchin. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "You must be her then." Dakagna scraped the last heel of hard bread against the tin bowl. She chewed. Swallowed. Watched the room. Could still be a trap. "He told me to find you," said the boy. A voice screeched across the common room.

"Gurt," it screamed. The portly barmaid. "Stop your blather, you're paid to serve, not to annoy the guests. Get over here." The boy rolled his eyes.

"Not paid a sausage, me. Worked to the bone. Not annoying, neither."

Quite annoying, thought Dakagna. "Who?" she said.

"What?"

"He. Told you to find me."

"Oh. Yeah." The urchin slid a small rip of paper from his belt.

"Gurt!" came the screech.

"Coming, coming." He slid the paper onto her table. She looked at the boy. "He's out back in the stables. Says to meet him."

"Why didn't he come in?"

The boy shrugged.

"Gurt!"

"Coming!" And the boy was gone.

Dakagna waited. She looked around the room. Watched to see if anyone had been overly attentive to the interaction. A couple of men played dice in one corner. Merchants. Not good ones, by the look of them. Frayed cuffs, scuffed boots. A scarred veteran drank his way through a bottle of cheap whisky at the bar. A table of warrior women, bodyguards for a caravan maybe, sat in near silence. No one seemed interested in her.

She opened the note.

"D. Apologies. Danger is in the air. Meet me in the stables. I will stay here until you come. If you do not, I shall assume you do not want the commission, and look to spend my coin elsewhere. Z."

Z. Zelein. The name of her contact. The one who bought her here. Why the stables? Why late at night, in darkness? Still. Coin. A commission. And Dakagna was used to walking into danger. She stood and stifled a burp. Felt the cheap weak ale swilling in her stomach. The taste of overcooked, undersalted beef on her tongue. She walked towards the door.

As she passed him, the scarred veteran gave her a nod. On his bare forearm she spotted a familiar tattoo. A small red sword. The sign of the gladiatorial pits of Shenkt. The sword, to signify that the man had fought his fifty fights and won his freedom. A man worthy of respect. She placed a gold coin on the bar.

“For your drink.”

He raised his eyebrows. She pulled up her sleeve. There, on her bare forearm, the tattoo of a small, red sword. He nodded.

“My thanks.”

She inclined her head, and moved to the door. She stepped out into dark. The cold bit at her through her furs, nibbled at the exposed flesh of her face. She walked through the snow, behind the inn. The stables. The door stood open a crack, and she could see light from within. She loosened Ferro in her sheath. Something told her to keep sharp blades close at hand.

She eased the door open. Creak. Dakagna moved forward, ready for anything. A magical bolt. A flurry of arrows. Nothing. She stepped into the stable and slid to one side, back against the wall.

“Unnecessary,” said a voice. Dakagna’s sharp eyes picked out a shape in the shadows. She breathed in. Smelt horses, hay, manure. She listened. A stallion’s whicker. The shuffle of a mare. Maybe only one person. Maybe more. “I appreciate caution, though.” The man stepped from the shadows. She scanned him for weapons. A small dagger on one hip. A tiny one-hand crossbow on the other. He was of average height, average build. Smaller than Dakagna, then, by a fair few handspans. From her vantage point, she saw he had a bald spot atop his head. The rest of his hair was thin, and nondescript brown. An average man. Beware those who blend in.

“I am Zelein.” The man stepped closer, and his eyes flicked behind her to the open door, the night outside. “Best you close that, Begaram has ears everywhere.” Dakagna stood for a beat. Then with the fluid move of long practice, she sheathed Ferro. Knew she could reach her if she had the need. She nudged the door shut with her heel. “I thank you for coming, Dakagna, Queen of Swords. Forgive the odd meeting place. This outpost is a little out of the way, but I do not trust the cities and the villages. And here is where the trail for Begaram can be found.”

“Begaram?”

“You have not heard of him?”

“I am not from these lands. I came, because you called. You offered coin. I need coin.”

“Begaram is the leader of a gang of mercenaries, the Blood Scourge. I would have you hunt them. And kill him.”

“Any others?”

“If you can. They are not important.”

Dakagna rolled her shoulders. “Very well.”

“You do not ask why?”

“I do not care why.”

“You do not ask who he is?”

“All men are killable. Sharp blades, soft necks.”

“True, true. But the rumours are that Begaram is the offspring of a demon. That he has giant’s blood in his veins. That he eats the bones of those he kills.”

“Have you heard the tales they tell of me?”

“Exaggerations?”

“Some.”

“But not all?”

“No.”

“The Red Warrior. Witch Daughter. God Killer. Cursed to Wander.”

Dakagna spat, her eyes unblinking.

“Will you hunt this man?”

“I will.”

Zelein nodded. Threw her a pouch. She felt the weight of gold, heard the clink of coin. “Good enough.”

“The rest after I see his corpse. There is a village, north of here. Recently burned. The Blood Scourge tortured some, took others for slaves. Left nothing alive, only carnage.”

“The snow will have covered the tracks.”

“I trust you will find some sign.”

“You expect me to go now? In the middle of the night?”

“You have my coin in your hand, and a weighty reputation around your neck. The opportunity is now.”

“And how do you know of this recent attack?”

The man smiled. He tapped his nose. “Some things are not for you to know.”

Dakagna slipped the pouch of coins into her belt, and turned. She wanted to move, and she had her task. No time like the present.

• • •

THE village had been as Zelein said. A wasteland. The corpses were frozen. The villagers’ blood spread in iced spatters across the rickety buildings. By torchlight, she searched for signs. She found them. A broken clasp from a saddle strap. A rusted knife. An apple core. And she followed the trail.

It led through the mountains, an ever-narrowing path through gulches and gulleys. She followed the path of a rushing river towards its source. The Blood Scourge were not careful to hide their tracks. Why would they? No one would hunt them in their own domain.

Except Dakagna.

The night wore on, and the sun began to show over the mountains. Snow fell on her furs. Hands cold within their gloves. The hot air she breathed misted in the air before her. The horse beneath her was a welcome warmth.

The trap was well set.

She sensed it a moment before it happened. A slight jolt in the gait of her horse. A wrongness. He was falling. On instinct, Dakagna flung herself to the ground and rolled in the snow. She saw her horse disappear. The floor had been made of brush and twigs, covering a hole. The horse screamed. Spikes, Dakagna imagined. She had Ferro out in her hands before she came to her feet. She struck an arrow from the air, and another. Heard booted feet clump behind her, moved, spun, swung her sword. A scream and a spatter of blood on snow as a hand flew free of an arm.

Another arrow sliced from the air. A roar as a man attacked, with an axe. Dakagna ducked, smelt effluent as she disembowelled him. She held him to her, heard his last bubbling gurgles as one arrow, two, three, thumped into his back. She threw the corpse shield aside and sprang away. Ignored the horse’s screams from the pit. Two warriors came at her, women with one side of their heads shaved. Tribal tattoos spiralled on the exposed skin. They attacked in tandem, quick as adders.

Dakagna was quicker. She beheaded one, neck gouting gore, the warrior braid spinning in the air. Her backswing took the other in the face. Jaw shattered under blade.

Dakagna felt a sting in the back of her thigh. She reached back with one hand, holding Ferro before her with the other. She plucked something from the meat of her leg. A crossbow dart. There were more figures in front of her now, keeping a respectful distance. Like wolves surrounding a bear. She felt something in her legs. A numbness began to flow through her. Her head began to pound. Her vision began to blur. She tasted bile in her throat.

Poison.

She scanned the crowd before her. There. Zelein. She spat on the ground. Next to him stood the innkeeper, Altidore. Another man stepped from the crowd. Huge. Bedecked with furs. He smiled a handsome smile. His long dark hair was coated in snow. Begaram.

"This?" the man roared to his followers. "This is the mighty Dakagna? All it took was an offer of coin, and she came like a lamb to the slaughter. I had expected more, Queen of Swords. This, Altidore? This is the feared pirate queen who left you to rot on the Agate seas?"

She recognized him then, this Altidore. From another life. Couldn't recall his name. But she remembered his crimes, and the punishment she had bestowed. Should have killed him, but her crew had called for mercy. She had had to move on, the curse had pulled her, and she had no time to delay. She left him on an island to die. But he hadn't.

Dakagna was somehow on her knees. Her vision blackened around the edges.

"This?" shouted Begaram. "This, Zelein, is the mighty warrior who bested Ul-Gagroth in the Pits of Tremare? Felled by a poison dart?"

And she knew Zelein then. A man she had never seen. A man who had worked from the shadows in that fell city Tremare. The Whispering Spider. She had ruined his plans. And it seemed he had not forgotten.

She blinked. Wanted to keep her eyes closed. Give in to her tiredness. She growled and snapped her eyes open.

Altidore and Zelein, phantoms from her past. From the years behind. From lands travelled and forgotten. But enemies are like elephants. They never forget. Best to leave them dead. She would not make that mistake again.

"This —" began Begaram, but Dakagna moved. She swung Ferro at him, with all her strength. Begaram drew a sword of his own in a blink, parried easily, but he was not her target. She threw her broadsword, arrow straight, and watched with satisfaction as it cleaved into Altidore's head. One down. She saw the fear on Zelein's face as she charged him.

He fumbled with the crossbow. She heard it sing, felt its sting as it plunged into her cheek. Pain. But not enough to stop her. Legs numb, vision faded, no feeling in her arms. She growled away the poison.

She pounced on Zelein. With one swift move, she pulled his dagger from its sheathe at his belt and plunged it through his eye. Two down.

She felt an explosion in her ribs, as a huge boot hit her in the side. She rolled. She tried to rise. But everything was so dark. She wanted to give up. Let it end. She growled. By force of will, she got to her knees. Begaram loomed over her. She faintly felt as his huge hands dragged her to her unfeeling feet. Looked into his deep brown eyes. Handsome bastard, she tried to say. It came out as a grunt, and a dribble of spit down her chin.

"This? The mighty Dakagna? You are nothing. I will burn you, and add another song to the ballad of Begaram the —" Dakagna's head snapped forward. With the last of her strength she felt her forehead mash into face. Heard the satisfying crunch of bone as she crushed Begaram's nose and cheekbone.

She heard his roar of pain, but barely felt the first blows as he beat her into unconsciousness.

• • •

THE fires raged now. Dakagna tried her bonds again. Nothing. She waited. She felt groggy from the poison, ached from the wounds; the fierce wind pierced her thin clothes and her naked feet were numb on the snow.

She felt a presence behind her. Felt something slipped beneath her fingers. A small sliver of sharp metal.

A mouth pressed close to her ear. She smelled cheap whisky breath.

"A chance, maybe," said a voice. "End yourself, maybe, before Begaram's flames take you. Best I can do."

"Orgar?" shouted Begaram, from his place by the pyres. "What are you about?"

"Just grabbing myself a feel, while she's still female flesh, not burnt skin and bones."

Begaram roared with laughter. "You dirty goat. Leave her. Help with these." He gestured to the shackled slaves. Dakagna felt the man, Orgar, move past her. Watched as he walked towards Begaram. He glanced back once. The scarred man from the tavern. The gladiator with the red sword tattoo.

The prisoners were lined up before the bonfire. And then Begaram turned to her.

"You will all feel the heat of Begaram's flames. But first. The mighty Dakagna. It is said that she was birthed in a volcano, the daughter of a witch defiled by a god. It is fitting then, that we release her from life through fire." His cronies laughed. Dakagna took satisfaction in the mangled cheek, the broken nose, the split lip, on Begaram's face. Begaram gestured, and four mercenaries came for her. They unshackled her chains.

Her foot twitched. She had been here too long. As one mercenary unchained her, two held their swords towards her. One hung back with a bow, arrow drawn. Her hands were free. It would have been easy. Jump back, use the small blade to impale the one who had freed her. His sword from his belt. The one on the left, first, keep the other between her and the archer. Then the archer. Then the last swordsman. But then there would be Begaram, and the others.

Foolish plan. She was frozen, and hungry, and the poison had still not left her. She needed to cut off the head of the snake. If Begaram fell, there would be a moment. A moment where his

followers would be lost. A moment she could seize. She could take control. Or at least, win free. But the timing had to be right. Be like the eggfish. Pretend weakness. She sagged back against the man who had freed her.

"On your feet," he said. His breath was short with the effort of trying to hold her up. "I ain't carrying you."

"Zelein's poisons were effective," said Begaram. "Turk, help Arrad." The right hand swordsman went to Dakagna's side. Together, they dragged her towards the flames. Closer to Begaram. She only needed one chance. She saw the scarred gladiator, Orgar, move behind the archer. Her eyes met his. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

She could feel the fire now. It began to warm her cold flesh. She welcomed it. Her fingers tingled as feeling returned.

She was three feet away from Begaram.

Two.

One.

Now.

She planted her feet. The two mercenaries to either side stepped forward. She reached out, grabbed a head in each mighty hand, and smashed their skulls together. The other swordsman stepped forward and died with a gurgle as the small piece of metal Orgar had slipped her found a new home in his throat. She heard another gurgle and looked around. The archer had died with Orgar's dagger in her back.

"Betrayal," screamed Begaram. He swung his black axe, catching Orgar on the shoulder. Dakagna swept low and seized the fallen swordsman's sword from the snow. For good measure, she grabbed another, from the other dead body.

She stood, two swords readied. Begaram had his axe raised above Orgar for a killing blow. The other mercenaries were gathering their wits, grappling for weapons.

"Begaram," said Dakagna, her voice soft. "Face me."

The man spun towards her. His battered face stretched into a bruised grin. A Bowman began to take aim at her, but Begaram stilled him with a gesture.

"She is mine," he barked. "Stay back."

Begaram came for her then, in a bullrush. Dakagna, barefooted in the snow, danced her familiar dance. She wished she had Ferro, could see her on Begaram's back, but Dakagna had to make do. She was armed with steel, and her body was a weapon. She spun away from his swings. He was quick. Dakagna was quicker. Even tired, and cold, with the remnants of poison in her veins, she was quicker. She knew it. And when she sliced Begaram's face with her right hand blade, he knew it too. When she pierced his thigh with her left hand blade, he roared his frustration.

Big men, used to having their way. Used to using their power to dominate. But there was always someone deadlier. And it was always Dakagna. She danced her deadly dance, and cut at him, once, twice, a third time. His breath came in heaving gasps. Dakagna felt the cold seep through her clothing. She needed to end it. To heat her bones, and hope no lasting damage had been done. Hoped she wouldn't lose toes to frostbite. But then, she had many toes. Never knew why a foot needed so many toes.

She grinned.

"The mighty Begaram. The Black Axe. Can't even kill a frozen half-dead poisoned woman."

Begaram screamed in fury then, put his whole strength into a blow that would have split her crown to crawl. But Dakagna spun to the side. She thrust with both swords, plunging them into Begaram's back. Releasing the blades, she freed Ferro from her sheathe. She stabbed it through Begaram's back, and, using it as a lever, pushed. Pushed him off her blade, and into the burning flames.

Begaram stumbled into the fire, half-falling, and screamed an unholy scream. Somehow, he managed to stay on his feet. He turned, flesh sloughing from his face, hair crisped black, wreathed in flame, and he walked out of the fire towards Dakagna. She did not back away. Begaram took one step. She did not flinch. Two. His face was a melted mess. Three. He sank to his knees. Fell forward onto his face. Dakagna advanced towards him now. Ignored the stench of burning flesh. Welcomed the warmth on her cold skin. Slammed her broadsword into Begaram's skull.

Always make sure.

She turned to the stunned mercenaries.

"One of you get me my armor. And my boots." She looked at the chained villagers. "And free them." She heard a groan from the side. Orgar. "And someone get the bone doctor." The snow fell. The flames crackled. The people were silent. "Now," roared Dakagna, and the mercenaries sprang into motion.

• • •

"YOU won't stay?" said Orgar. He held the reins before him with his remaining arm, the one with the tattoo. Dakagna's foot twitched. A spasm flickered at the base of her spine. She glanced down at her saddlebags. They bulged with coin, taken from the Blood Scourge's misbegotten coffers. Ferro was sheathed on her back. Dakagna looked down the mountain pass. East, towards the lands of the Asamani, and then across the sea to Telaran. Her foot twitched again. Another spasm. A familiar pain. Her eternal curse.

"I won't," she said.

"Then I wish you luck."

"And I to you, Orgar. May you lead the Blood Scourge better than your predecessor."

"Blood Scourge no longer. Fate's People, we're called now. Gonna try to be... better."

Dakagna grunted. She shifted in the saddle and spat. Names held no importance to her. Just words. And words were of no import in a world of steel and magic.

With no further words, she put her heels to her horse and began to ride.

Away, onwards, to adventure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Locked in a basement in a city of fog and grime, W. J. Lewis sits surrounded by quills and vellum. On full moons he is allowed out, and sometimes passersby throw him coins for stories. If you look closely, and are not too loud, you can find him on Twitter @WjlewisA.



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!

The Demon Rats

Tesso (type I demon): Init +3; Atk claw +2 melee (1d3+2) and bite +2 melee (1d4+2); AC 14; HD 2d8; MV 30' or climb 40'; Act 2d20; SP target prioritization (Tesso, if not attacked, first prioritizes magical books and scrolls, then non-magical books, then flesh), scribing sense (can smell magical and non-magical writings up to 1 mile away), demon shredder (a single tesso can consume 1 scribed spell per round, regardless of level, or 1d30 pages of non-magical writing), regeneration (regenerate 1d4 hp per round for all non-magical damage, including mundane acid, poison, and fire), demon traits (infravision, infernal speech); SV Fort +4, Ref +3, Will +3; AL C.

"Demon rats," Mika explained. "Vermin from Kimon with iron claws and iron fangs." Junchiro nodded. "The tesso have defied every effort to combat them. Prayers and sutras will not disperse them. Even the shrine's sacred naginta can't destroy them. The severed pieces flow back together and scamper away as though they'd never been struck down. Poison and fire, any mundane means we could think of has been tried, but nothing has worked." ... Each night they slink into the libraries and sanctuaries and gnaw the holy texts. Already they've destroyed

a hundred scrolls and tomes ... giant rats, the smallest of them three feet long from its twitching nose to its scaly tail ... Anywhere the demons were unmolested, they'd drag a book or scroll from its place and begin tearing at it with their teeth.

The Eye of Kaleet

Kaleet's Shadow: Init +3; Atk smoky claw +5 melee (1d4+5) and shadow bite +3 melee (2d4+3); AC 19; HD 7d14; MV 30' or fly 30' or pounce 40'; Act 2d20; SP smoke form (can become smoky at will), pounce (shadow must use both actions; target within 40' makes DC 19 Reflex save or is pinned, granting shadow +1d to hit on subsequent attacks; DC 19 Strength check allowed each round to escape), mundane weapons only do 1 point of damage per die, feline luck (nine times each day, without spending an action, the shadow can force an opponent to reroll a roll with the reroll replacing the original; DC 19 Will save to resist); SV Fort +6, Ref +6, Will +6; AL N.

It was a presence — a shadow, huge and indistinct except for one cold, blue eye which seemed to glow with an internal fire. It stood about seven feet tall at what looked like the shoulders. It seemed to lean forward on two legs as thick as tree trunks. Whisps of shadow, like dancing flames, bled from its outline. As a rumble like thunder filled the room, which reverberated in her chest, the single eye, its pupil slit down the middle, fixed upon her.

Green Face, Purple Haze

Urk: Init +2; Atk spear +3 melee or missile fire (1d8+3, range 15/30/45) and bite +3 melee (1d4+3); AC 14; HD 2d12; MV 30'; Act 1d20 (spear) + 1d16 (bite); SP ferocious grappler (uses d30 for grappling checks, can bite a grappled opponent with +1d to hit), tough to kill (when first reduced to 0 hp, urk makes DC 11 Fortitude save to fight for one more round; if successful, save can be repeated the next round; urk dies upon failure); SV Fort +3, Ref +2, Will +1; AL C.

The urks are green. Man-height. Man-shaped. Bestial things with anvil jaws and protruding boar tusks. Cunning. Very strong

...I swung my tomahawk at an urk that had an arrow shaft sticking out of its cheek. How the thing was still standing, I couldn't guess ... Urks take a lot of killing.

Urk Shaman: Init +3; Atk staff +3 melee (1d4+3) or curved sword +3 melee (1d7+3) and bite +3 melee (1d4+3); AC 14; HD 4d12; MV 30'; Act 1d20 (weapon) + 1d16 (bite); SP purple haze (poison gas cloud centered on Shaman, those within make DC 12 Fort save each round or take 1d3 damage and helplessly choke for 1 round, gains an additional 10' of radius per round, requires both actions per round and concentration as per DCC RPG rulebook), ferocious grappler (uses d30 for grappling checks, can bite a grappled opponent with +1d to hit), tough to kill (when first reduced to 0 hp, urk makes DC 11 Fortitude save to fight for one more round; if successful, save can be repeated the next round; urk dies upon failure), immune to poison; SV Fort +5, Ref +2, Will +3; AL C.

A cloud of purplish gas spewed from the urk's mouth and floated toward us ... The village men were choking on it. Poison gas ... The shaman saw me. His mouth stopped moving. I swung my sword. He blocked the blow with his staff, a gnarled bit of wood ... We grappled and fell together in a heap. Rolled. Rolled some more. I was covered in dust and urk sweat. I stabbed the side of his torso with the Ka-Bar. I felt it slide in. He didn't seem to mind. His meaty paw grabbed me around the throat. I was choking.

The Sorcerer's Mask

Fountain Choker: Init +6; Atk fanged tentacle +3 melee (1d4+3 plus piercing choke, reach 20'); AC 12; HD 2d8; MV 1'; Act 1d20; SP piercing choke (DC 16 Strength check or take 1d6 Stamina damage and 1d3 hp damage per round; Strength check can be repeated each round to escape; targets reduced to 0 Stamina have suffocated), breathes in air or underwater, half damage from non-magical attacks; SV Fort +1, Ref +3, Will +1; AL N.

There was a splash and a fleshy, purple tube, scaled and mucus-slicked, shot out of the water and curled gruesomely about Ishra's neck. Ishra's scream caught short as she fell ...fang-like protrusions grew out of the slimy tentacle and pierced the flesh over and over. Ishra clawed at the tentacle and her throat as her feet flailed. Her lips dripped saliva and she retched drily. By and by, she stiffened as the tentacle flexed and undulated.

The Black Pearl of the Sunken Lands

Blood-Drinking Kelp (plant swarm): Init +2; Atk thorny strand +2 melee (1d3 plus exsanguinating grapple); AC 10; HD 2d8; MV swim 5'; Act d20 special; SP attacks all targets within 40' diameter, exsanguinating grapple (DC 14 Strength check or immobilized and take 1d3 Strength damage each round; can use action to repeat check each round to break free; targets drained to 0 Strength are dead), immune to non-magical weapons unless silver, half damage from non-area attacks, immune to mental effects (sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +5, Ref +2, Will +1; AL N.

Somehow, kelp had tangled around his arm, and he could not pull or shake it free. He tore at the broad fronds with the edges of his spearhead, seeking to cut himself free. The edges were sharp. But the thick slick substance parted far more slowly than kelp should ... When his claws proved no better than sharp bone against the strange seaweed, he drew his knife. But the tip of the keen stone blade pierced the kelp no more readily than spearhead or claws; and his attempts to slice the jagged-edged strands were slowed by their thickness, as if he sought to saw through blubber with a blunt chunk of coral.

Self-Reconstructing Skeleton: Init +1; Atk claw +1 melee (1d3) and follow-up bite +2 melee (1d4, only if claw hits); AC 10; HD 1d10; MV 30'; Act 1d20 (+1d20 for follow-up bite); SP bone gang (each skeleton gets +1 to hit for every skeleton attacking same target), self-reconstruction (repairs itself 1d5 hp of non-magical damage per round; magic weapons are considered magical damage), half damage from piercing and slashing weapons, un-dead traits (immune to cold damage, crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +0, Ref +0, Will +0; AL C.

Smashing the skeletons did not work. The bones flew apart, right enough. But they immediately flew back together; and whatever bones had been broken repaired themselves, so they were whole and solid again, where they were reseated in their proper slots in the self-reconstructing skeletons ... Several skeletons lunged as if they were one, and locked their yellowed hands on Bruko's spear; and a set of yellowed teeth clamped on Bruko's wrist.

A Simple Errand

Pralusk: Init +4 (+8 with surprise); Atk barbed tentacle +3 melee (1d5+1); AC 14 (body) or AC 18 (tentacle); HD 3d8; MV fly 15'; Act 3d16; SP translucent ambush (PCs must pass a DC 19 Intelligence check or be surprised), disposable tentacles (Pralusk has 3d3 tentacles, each takes 4 hp to sever, excess damage does not count toward Pralusk's hp), automatically hit on natural 16, special crit (on natural 16, instead of rolling on crit table, pralusk slams target into a hard surface doing 1d8 additional damage; DC 12 Fort save or fall unconscious for 1 round, see beak attack), beak attack (pralusk may spend 1 action to make a beak attack on an unconscious target, 1d24+4 to hit, 1d8+2 damage), special fumble (pralusk only fumbles if all its attacks for the round are natural 1s), death throes (slayer has stinky blood on them, DC 14 Fort save or -1d to actions for 1 hour); SV Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +4; AL C.

The creature now hovered before Lachmannon. It was a boneless, gutless thing, translucent and blending with its surroundings. It faded in and out of the visible spectrum as it drifted through the air like a wind-filled sail. A cluster of roping tendrils quested before it, probing the empty space, reaching toward the Kael ... Looking up, Lachmannon watched as the warm tones of the sky retreated from the creature's pale, undulant hide. Its many limbs jutted star-like from its torso, while an orifice on its underside puckered and swelled. It seemed to be drawing in and releasing air, presumably to control its descent.

The Silent Mound

Talking Folk Shaman: Init +2; Atk claw +3 melee (1d6+3) or horrid speech (special); AC 13; HD 5d8; MV 30'; Act 2d20; SP horrid speech (all hearing targets within 100' radius make DC 14 Will save or suffer 3d3 damage with paralysis for 1d3 rounds; talking folk can only use horrid speech once per round), mound bound (a talking folk will rest peacefully in their burial mound while their body is buried their), indestructible (if reduced to 0 hp, a talking folk's body will reconstruct after 1 hour), un-dead traits (immune to cold damage, crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +2; AL C.

The thing resembled an incredibly aged man, but only superficially. The skin color was a nauseous gray and was emaciated to the point that it appeared as if someone had wrapped parchment around a skeleton. The eye sockets sunk into dark pits where a red, malevolent light gleamed. The thing was clad in rotten leathers and its jaw was sewn shut with cat-gut threads, keeping the grinning mouth from opening at all ... Humphrey stood paralyzed as the thing's speech slithered into his ears ... The burning coals of its eyes pierced his, even as its horrid speech pierced his mind Blood poured from his nose, mouth, ears and eyes. Humphrey let out a horrible, gargling scream as his brain dissolved into jelly. He fell to the ground and lay still ... "We must get it back in its mound!" Nihokna said. "The shamans of the Talking Folk don't die like men!"

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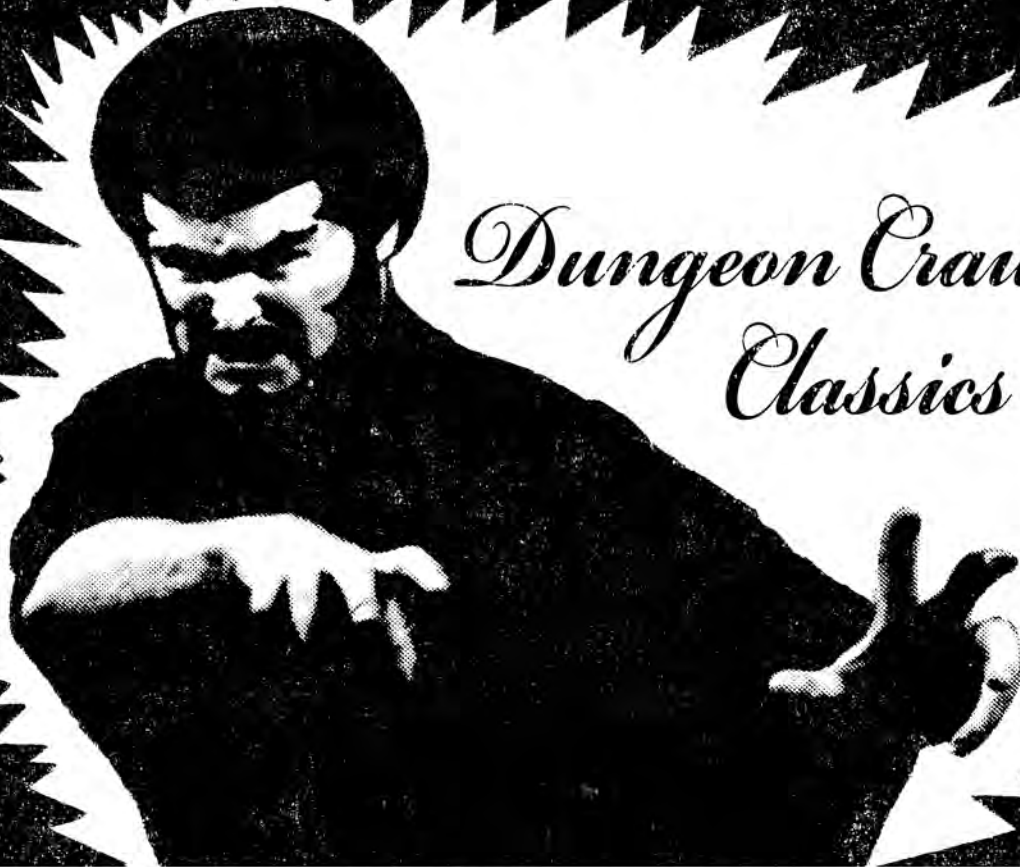
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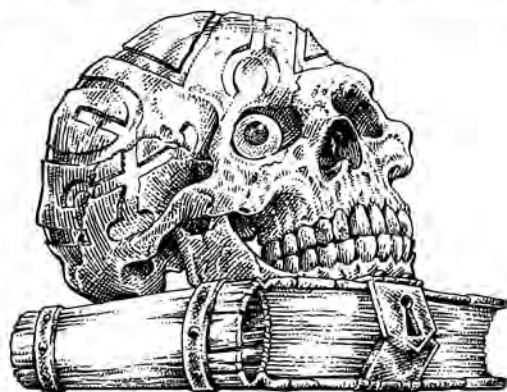
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IN THIS ISSUE...

The Demon Rats, by C. L. Werner

The thing lifted its head, strips of paper hanging from its iron fangs. Only for a moment did its beady red eyes return the samurai's furious stare. Then the gleaming steel of the sword was flashing towards it.

Dakagna and the Blood Scourge, by W. J. Lewis

She held him to her, heard his last bubbling gurgles as one arrow, two, three, thumped into his back. She threw the corpse shield aside and sprang away.

The Sorcerer's Mask, by Jason Ray Carney

The Rogue came to Chel on a secret errand. It did not concern Lech, but the Rogue's innocence did not matter either: from the moment the Rogue crossed the threshold of the portcullis into the gatehouse, the sorcerer's spies, unseen as cockroaches, shadowed and scampered after the Rogue.

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