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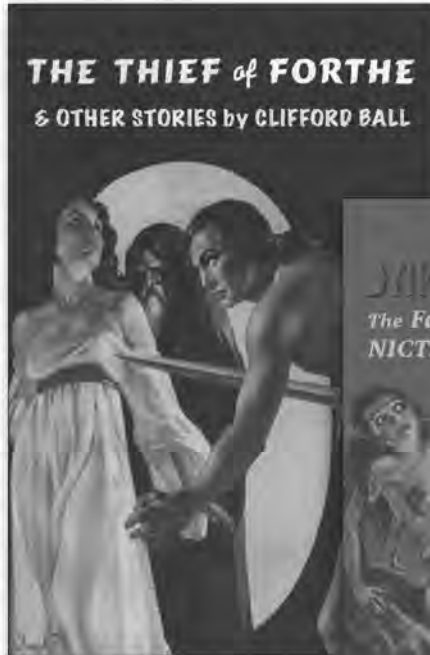
**ISSUE #2
PREVIEW
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After the death of Robert E. Howard, Clifford Ball was the first writer to follow in his footsteps and pen sword and sorcery stories for *Weird Tales*. For the first time ever, all of Ball's stories are collected into one volume.

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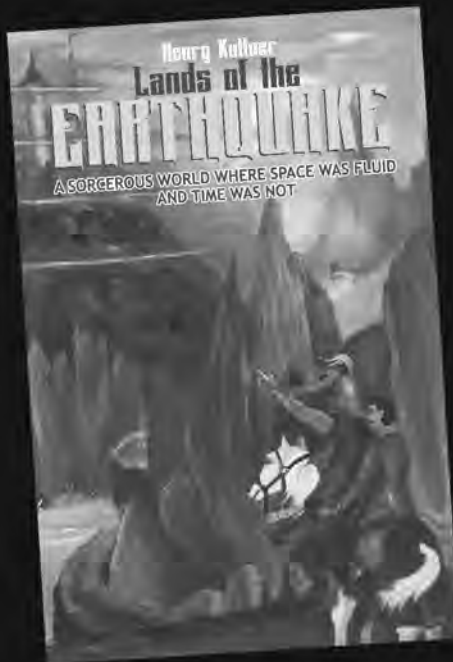
CLIFFORD BALL

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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. 2

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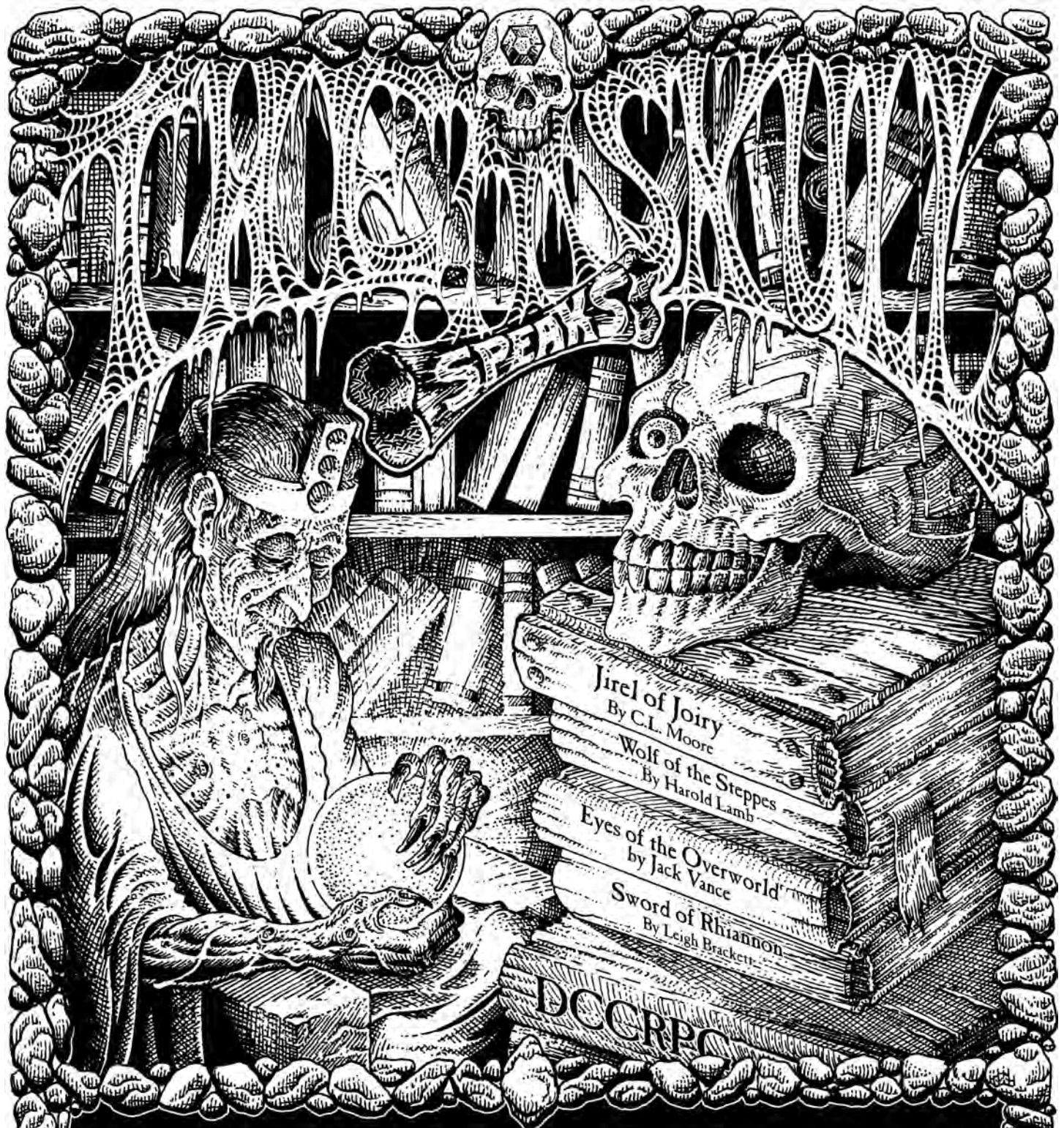
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INTERIOR ILLUSTRATIONS: Samuel Dillon, Jennell Jaquays, Cliff Kurowski,
William McAusland, Brad McDevitt, Russ Nicholson, Stefan Poag, and Chuck Whelon

JOSEPH GOODMAN, Publisher
HOWARD ANDREW JONES, Editor

DIESEL LAFORCE, Cover Illustration
LESTER B. PORTLY, Design & Layout





YOU cannot begin to imagine what lies ahead. Once again I have summoned talented tale weavers to spin spell-binding adventures alive with shining swords, daring deeds, magical mayhem, and stark terror! They please me well, and I offer them to you so you that you too may take pleasure from thrilling work in the sacred genre. I expect your praise!

You will see my efforts, and if you have sense, you will glory in them. When you finish the final page, go forth and tell others what I have done, so that more will join us. I mean to share all the best heroic fiction I find with you for many issues to come, but we cannot do this alone! Summon your friends to my banner. Tell them of my vision! Tell them of these stories! I shall not rest until my glories are known throughout the world!

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION



THIS issue is stuffed to the brim with fantastic sword-and-sorcery. You'll see the return of two characters featured in issue 1, along with entirely new (to the magazine) authors and settings. We plan to provide you with authors old and new every single issue, along with the occasional surprise, like a certain illustrated adaption by the talented Stefan Poag you'll find lurking in the back half of this issue. (I mean the work is lurking, not the artist, although you should always keep your eye out...)

As with last issue, I think our love for the sacred genre burns clear and bright. We want to find the best modern tales around because we figure you love sword-and-sorcery as much as we do, or you wouldn't be buying the magazine.

Shortly after the debut of issue 1 appeared in print I headed to Chicago, where I rendezvoused with the talented John C. Hocking, crafter of mighty tales of sword-and-sorcery, and Goodman Games stalwart and part-time pirate Dieter Zimmerman (pictured above). We were there at the Windy City Pulp and Paper convention for one of the first public appearance for the magazine.

The convention is held in early April every year, and if you love old paperbacks, old magazines, art from the same, and the people who love that stuff, then you definitely need to take it in. When we weren't at the booth in the convention hall, we were wandering around soaking in the treasures brought by other merchants. Before I left on Sunday I took part in a panel on sword-and-sorcery. You can see me on the far left raptly listening to sword-and-sorcery writer and scholar David C. Smith. On his left are writers Andy Fix and Gordon Dymowski.

With two issues under our belt Joseph and Lester and I are getting a sense for what's required and how much time it takes. Judging by the success of the Kickstarter we're more than 90 percent certain to continue the magazine after these initial issues. By the time you're holding this in your hand, that Kickstarter for it may even be underway!

As we look forward, we intend to build on what we've done, although I'm not at all disappointed with what we've managed so far. If there are additional features that you wish to see, we hope you'll let us hear about them. The Skull remains somewhat open to suggestions, so long as they come from a place of love for sword-and-sorcery. Unrelated topics, or those from the uninformed, are met with outrage, consternation, and dire threats, which is why Joseph and I usually send the intern in to read letters to him.

I think the most frequent question I've gotten is whether we'll open for submissions. Until we had a good sense of what we were doing and how much time it took, we wanted to publish stories by invitation only. We're likely to remain that way for a while. Joseph and I are already in contact with professional writers who can keep our readers happy for many years to come.

That said, I was on the other side of an editorial desk for a long, long time, and I empathize with the desire to see one's story between the same covers where you find some of your favorite writers. We'll probably try opening to submissions, eventually, but we'll do it for short intervals at a time. Having read manuscripts for *Black Gate*, I'm well acquainted with the amount of material that washes in, and I don't want to be swept away by it, especially when so much of it ignores guidelines, sometimes wildly. Perhaps we'll be lucky and those future submitters will have paid careful attention to our wants and needs so that I'm not reading gangster fiction or Elizabethan verse or other clearly-not-right-for-the-market texts I used to find in my inbox. Even a sub that's obviously wrong from the cover letter requires time to process, time I'd much rather spend choosing between, say, three great professionally written sword-and-sorcery yarns.

But all of this lies in the distance. For now, turn the pages that lie before you and lose yourselves in splendid tales of wonder, terror, and adventure.

Swords Together!

— Howard Andrew Jones





ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS NICHOLSON

TRIAL BY SCARAB

A Tale of the King's Blade

By JOHN C. HOCKING

BENHUS felt the pillow against his face, and it came to him that his mouth tasted like stale wine. He wasn't certain yet if he was hung-over, but he knew he didn't feel as well as he ought to and had no idea what time it was. Another idea filtered gradually into his emerging awareness; he didn't know what had awakened him.

"Well now, our host appears to be stirring. Good morning, young master." The voice was sharp with mockery and an unpleasant tinge of disdain. Benhus sat up in the big bed and saw, once his tousled head pulled free of the cocoon of pillow and sheets, that the white room was full of brilliant morning light.

There was a tall young man seated in a chair beside the bed, leaning back with his long legs extended before him. He was long jawed and sharp of feature, with thick blond hair tied back by a black ribbon. He wore an elegantly cut tunic of deep crimson with a sword and a long dagger hung on a black leather belt. Benhus was certain he was a noble but didn't need to be fully awake to notice that the fellow wore his blades as if he never took them off.

Benhus squinted sourly at the intruder, swung his feet over the side of the bed and planted them on the cold marble floor. He felt himself coming awake and saw, belatedly, that there was another visitor. A woman in the purple-bordered robes of a noble stood silently at the young man's shoulder. She looked old to Benhus's eyes, but not elderly. Her hair was long, gray and thin, and her cheeks were rouged.

"It seems you have been giving your master's home much hard use. Have you emptied his wine cellar yet?" asked the nobleman.

"I stayed here when I was in my teacher's service," rasped Benhus through a rusty throat. "He's dead."

"Yes," said the young man. "Yes, I read your report, brief though it was. I think it might be a good thing that the King's Hand can't see what you've done to his home."

Benhus stood up and walked naked across the room. His body was lean enough that his muscles seemed twisted tightly around his bones, and though he was of fewer years than the young noble who berated him, his skin was laced with an alarming number of scars. He went to a desk under a sunny window, found a wadded up tunic there and pulled it on. There was a dark wine stain on one shoulder.

"Thratos is dead in the tomb of Nervale. If you disbelieve me you might open the tomb and see for yourself."

"Oh, I believe you, Benhus. Do you know me? I'm Varus Androloc. And the noblewoman is the Lady Bethelanne Thale. Your mentor, Thratos, the King's Hand, took his orders from the King through us."

"He never mentioned that. Or you."

"No," said the woman, speaking for the first time. "He wouldn't have. He was vain."

Benhus looked at her. Her voice was the rich contralto of a much younger woman, and she sounded accustomed to speaking well and being well heeded.

"What do you want?"

Varus Androloc sputtered with laughter. "What do we want? We want to see if you've eaten all of the food in the home of your dead teacher. We want to see how many strumpets you've managed to fit under his roof." He gestured at the bed, and Benhus saw that there was a woman, still deeply asleep, embroiled in a froth of sheets like a body washed by white surf onto a white beach. "We want to learn if you have any of the skills Thratos was supposed to be teaching you. We want to see if you are remotely prepared to do the kind of work he dependably performed for the King for almost fifteen years."

Varus stood up. Benhus was taller than most, but the nobleman was taller still, and leaned into him, radiating contempt.

"I can do anything that Thratos did, and more that he could not." Benhus put as much confidence into his voice as he could, but felt breathless and constricted, dizzy with uncertainty and a growing anger he knew he had to control.

"Indeed? I understand that the King picked you out of the Legion because he saw you fight in a gutter tournament, right? I've seen you fight. You have speed and little else. You don't have your master's final approval. You don't have noble blood. You don't have anything. All you have is arrogance and a little undeserved luck. You're a blade. Just another blade."

Benhus closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. It was true that his parents had been peasants, citizens, but no more than that, and that luck had favored him when the King had plucked him from the Legion to learn at the side of Thratos, the King's Hand. Benhus had adapted swiftly to a better life, one better still now that his haughty and resentful master was dead. He did not want to give this life up, so he did not try to throttle Varus Androloc.

He said, "What do you want me to do?"

The nobleman showed white teeth in a wide grin.

"Do? I want you to..."

"Varus," said the Lady Bethelanne Thale, and his name, softly spoken, lopped the young nobleman's words off completely. "Step back."

Varus shrugged and turned away with a small and rueful smile. He walked to the open doorway and stood beside it while the noblewoman approached Benhus with something in her hand.

"I have a task for you," she said in her low voice. "Will you perform it?"

Benhus looked into her eyes, blue but hazy with age. Her thin body had a poised intensity, and he felt himself being judged.

"I will," he said, "for you."

"Take this." She placed a small cylinder of glass in his hand. It was a little longer than a finger and not much bigger around. It was capped at each end with a heavy wax seal of a deep golden hue. Inside was what appeared to be a tightly rolled piece of old brown parchment. He accepted the vial, closed his hand on it, and continued to stare into the Lady's eyes.

"It is a message from the King himself. I need you to deliver it to an ally of the King, one he cannot be known to have concourse with."

Benhus raised an eyebrow but held back any question.

"Just outside the city walls is the camp of a bandit, one who is authorized by the King to prey upon the caravans of Freehold and Anparar. He is called Paltus the Sly."

At this Benhus could not refrain from speaking. "The King has disavowed using privateers. We are not at war, and if this got out there would be more than scandal..."

"Exactly," said Lady Thale, keen precision in her quiet voice. "So, you can see the extent of the trust that the King places in you."

Varus, leaning on the doorframe, snorted softly.

"It is imperative that this be received by Paltus in secret. He is camped near the wall, between gates and guard towers, beside the culvert that once fed the cistern outside the Beggar's Market."

"Hasn't that run dry? Been walled off?"

"Yes, but you must get in and pass through the culvert, under the wall, without being seen. Get through and deliver the King's message to his servant."

"I can do that," said Benhus with honest confidence.

"And it has to be done before sundown today."

Benhus swallowed hard. "Today?" he echoed, though he hadn't meant to speak aloud.

Varus snorted again. "You don't have to do it. But you don't have to remain in your dead master's fine lodgings either."

"Varus," said Lady Thale, and he fell silent, watching Benhus with relaxed amusement.

"I'll do it."

"Good," said the noblewoman. "I'll be in contact soon. Possibly as soon as tomorrow evening. If you are captured or held up past sundown, cast the vial down and break it. The message will be destroyed."

"I understand," said Benhus, but she was already turning to go and Varus had walked out the door. In moments they were gone from the house. Benhus glanced at his sleeping guest but she hadn't, and did not, stir.

Benhus put on a clean gray shirt and soft leather breeches while brewing a punishingly strong pot of tea. Then he went along a hall lined with sunny windows, and down a curving flight of stairs to his dead master's armory. Like most of the rest of the villa it had white walls and ceiling, which seemed to Benhus unfitting for an armory.

Mounted against the far wall was a set of elegantly lacquered drawers, each lined with lush velvet, which held his master's collection of Nobleman's Comforts. These little wands had been given to Thratos by the King as tools, and each was charged with dire spells. Benhus was still uncertain what most of them did, and decided he couldn't be bothered with their uncertainties. He caught up his own blade, a battered but sturdy and dependable short sword, then hesitated. He thought on Varus Androlloc's long dagger, and how he had heard that it was in fashion for young noblemen to fight with both sword and dagger.

There was a rack full of various fighting knives, but Benhus spurned it, going instead to a drawer on the wall beside the Nobleman's Comforts. Inside, on a silken cushion, rested a long dagger that Benhus knew his master had never used. It had been a gift, a token of recognition from the King to mark ten years of service. Benhus had long wondered about this weapon and found it hard to believe, given the number of grim and violent tasks his master had performed for royalty, that it was simply a showpiece.

It, like so many of his dead master's possessions, was white. The sheath was white leather and the hilt was wrapped with fine white cord. He picked it up, reflexively wondering if his hands were dirty and might smear the sheath's snowy perfection. The hilt seemed to fit his hand unerringly, and when he drew the dagger his eyebrows rose.

It was perfect. The blade was not quite as long as his forearm and had a fogged, opalescent glow, the steel polished almost to luminescence. He tested the edge with a careful thumb and drew back in surprise. It was as sharp as any blade he had ever touched. Probably too sharp for real work, he thought. Still, it felt too fine in his hand to leave behind.

He affixed his dingy old short sword and his spotless new dagger to his belt, tucked his royal message into an inner pocket, finished his tea, and left his dead master's home.

It was earlier than he thought, which was just as well as it took the remainder of the morning to make his way across the city center to the Beggar's Market. The sun quickly grew stronger as it rose, filling the busy streets with oppressive heat. He detoured through Cistern Park, past the Grand Archives, just to walk in the shade of the palms.

The sun was past the meridian when he moved through the bustling Beggar's Market and came out the other side into an area that was a near slum. Old shops and untended tenements baked listlessly in the dusty air. Few people and fewer horses were on the street. He could hear the bustle of the market drawing away behind him as he walked. A few blocks farther and the city wall of Frekore loomed up behind a quiet block of rundown buildings, a barrier of dark stone sixty paces high. Royal law forbade any structure being built against it, so there was an alley between the wall and the commonplace structures dwarfed at its base. Benhus walked along this empty passage for a time, feeling the vast solidity of the wall at his side like a physical embodiment of the power of the House of Flavius.

The disused cistern was easy to spot. The alley seemed to end at a smooth bulwark of brown adobe brick jutting directly from the much larger surface of the city wall. Benhus cut back between buildings to approach it from the front.

A solid, well-crafted wall, probably Legion-built, surrounded the cistern and the little park that had once shaded it. It was as if the area had been enclosed in a lidless box, with the back side of the box being the city's lofty ramparts and the other three sides built against it. There was a pair of tall, steel-bound doors in front, prominently locked with a heavy chain, and bearing an imperial seal declaring the cistern dry, closed, and off limits to any trespassers by decree of the King.

Benhus looked at the gate and rubbed his jaw. While the wall built to fence off the area around the cistern was much shorter than the towering city wall, it was still better than ten paces high. It was smooth, and the only place it seemed to offer admittance was over the locked gate which, he noted, was surmounted by a row

of spikes. He glanced at the chain, noted it was more than sturdy enough for its task, and that a large scarab beetle with a curiously metallic shell sat motionless on the centermost link of the chain.

Benhus cursed softly. There was a tavern beside the sealed cistern, not far from the right wall. The low building was encircled by a broad wooden deck over which hung a faded cloth awning that provided shade. A few customers looked to be eating and drinking there. Benhus abruptly recalled that he'd had nothing for breakfast and that it was surely past time for lunch.

He took a seat at a table at the deck's edge, beside a weathered wooden post holding up the awning, which flapped dully in a gust of warm breeze. This seemed a fine vantage point from which to both study his problem and fill his belly.

A boy in a tattered shirt brought him bread, cheese and tea, and added an appreciative grin when Benhus tossed him a coin and told him to take the tea back and bring him a pot of the strongest he could brew. Benhus leaned back in the hard chair and squinted at the gate and the wall, wondering how he could possibly get inside unseen.

"Been closed for two years," came a rasping voice behind and to his right. Startled, but trying not to show it, Benhus turned his head to see an old man sitting behind a small round table, almost wedged into a corner where the deck met the taverns' wall.

"Used to draw people from all over the quarter. Water was cold and clear. Seemed a shame to close it, but the best wells run dry."

The initial irritation Benhus felt upon having his thoughts interrupted faded a little when he examined the man. His hair was gray and had receded in an unkempt widow's peak over a ruddy face with an old scar splitting the right cheek. The man was very thin and hunched a bit over both the table and the mug he held in his left hand. His right hand lay in his lap, and Benhus understood that the sword stroke that had marked his face had continued downward to hit his shoulder and breast, and had, to some extent at least, crippled his right arm.

"I didn't see you there, old soldier," said Benhus. The man laughed dryly.

"Few see me, but I'm almost always here. Sometimes I even sleep in this chair. They fill my mug and leave me to watch over the place most nights."

The serving boy came back with the tea, and Benhus bade him fill the old man's mug.

"Seems a shame it's so thoroughly sealed off," said Benhus easily. "I understand there was a sweet little park around the cistern, and shade is scarce around here."

"Oh, it's not sealed off that well. There are those who go over that wall as they please."

Benhus turned to the old man with a friendly smile. "Indeed? Who, and how?"

"Late at night, every few weeks. They gather in there for some heathen celebration. Could hear them singing. Damned vermin worshippers. Haven't seen them for some weeks now. Heard constables broke up their church over in old town and tossed a batch of them in prison. Some superstitious Southron devotion, so it's a bunch of copper-skins, but I've seen good people of Janarax, too."

"They go over the wall? Where?"

"Seems to me that those folk might have had as much to do with the closing of the cistern as the lowering of the water."

"How do they get over the wall?" There was an edge in his voice, and the old soldier straightened and looked at Benhus with fresh focus.

"In the alley. Behind the tavern. At the City wall."

Benhus turned away, drank a swallow of pungent, high-scalding tea and wondered if he had found a solution to his problems. He looked up from his mug, and a young woman sat down beside him.

"Hello," she said. Benhus swallowed again. She was lovely.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"You could."

She was tall, maybe as tall as he was. Her long legs slid under the table and brushed his knee. A thick mane of blond hair was restrained, tied back tightly by a black ribbon. Her features were refined, sharp, and attentive. She wore snug leggings and a black shirt buttoned tight at her wrists and neck. The only adornment Benhus could see was a heavy double-looped bracelet.

"You were a tournament fighter, weren't you?"

Benhus grinned. It had been a while since he'd been recognized for the public duels he had excelled at well enough to catch the eye of the King. "For a time, yes."

"You were formidable. You had speed."

Benhus was going to reply that he still did, but was struck by a troubling familiarity in both the woman and her words.

"I've an offer that might interest one such as you," she said.

He knew that he had no time for it, but couldn't see any point in disappointing her. Besides, she smelled like rose petals. "I'm listening."

"My name is Tyria. My mistress has a delicate problem." She fished a small, folded envelope out of a pocket in the side of her black shirt, laid it on the table, and looked at him expectantly. He squinted at the fine, unmarked parchment. "Please read; it's all there."

He drew a folded sheet of paper from the envelope, set it down on the tabletop and unfolded it. The page was blank but he thought, for a fleeting moment, that there was a white, powdery substance crumbling in its creases. Then the powder seemed to go to vapor and Benhus felt his chair dropping off a precipice. His vision dimmed and he slouched over the table with a heavy sigh. The woman was moving somewhere, doing something he couldn't quite see or understand. A surge of rage and panic pulsed through him and his left arm swiped the letter out from under his face and off the table. He threw himself back in the chair and felt his right arm being drawn forward. The woman was holding his hand. That was nice. Black blots pulsed and rotated across his field of vision, and he couldn't see anything. Not that it mattered right then. He was so tired he could hardly hold his head up, so he let it hang.

There was an indeterminate space of dull emptiness, then a savage urgency boiled up again from somewhere inside and Benhus leapt awkwardly to his feet, knocking over his chair. Something dug into his right wrist and wrenched his arm.

"She didn't take your purse," laughed the old soldier. "But she stuck a hand in your shirt. Gods, she was good. Fast as a ferret."

"What?" Benhus said thickly. "What in nine hells?"

"If you hadn't knocked that paper away I wager you'd still be out. Still, you were snoring like a grandfather. Gods, she was fast."

Benhus, mind tangled and vision still blurred, drew his sword left handed and pulled at whatever was holding his right hand.

"Easy, son! Easy!"

His vision cleared and he saw that his right wrist was manacled to the wooden post holding up the awning. There was a shackle around the post, and two links of chain connected it to an identical

shackle fastened around his wrist. With sudden brutal clarity he realized that this was the double looped bracelet the woman had been wearing. He pulled at it hard enough to hurt his wrist, but it didn't come loose and the post didn't budge.

Benhus kicked over his table and pressed his sword's edge against the chain between the manacles, with no result. A frenzy seemed to seize him and he heaved at the deep-set post, and hammered frantically at the unyielding manacle with sword blade and pommel.

"Easy! I can fetch a blacksmith. Calm yourself! You'll just have to wait until..."

Benhus emitted a snarl so inhuman that the man fell silent. He dropped his sword to the deck and drew his master's dagger from its white sheath. He thrust the pearly blade inside the shackle gripping the post, set it firmly between the hardwood and the metal manacle and pulled. The blade cut through the steel cuff as though it were cheese.

"Gods and demons! What manner of blade is that?"

Benhus used the dagger on the other cuff and was free. He swung to face the soldier in his corner.

"Where did she go?"

"Well, you have to give her some credit. She played you like a fish on a short line."

"Where did she go, old man? How long was I out?" The point of the dagger rose, iridescent, until it pointed at the old soldier. Although Benhus held the weapon loosely at his side, this was not easily missed.

"You were out for perhaps a quarter hour," said the veteran quickly. "It was clear that you only slept and I'd have let none trouble you. She went around back, toward the city wall."

Benhus sheathed the dagger, then picked up and sheathed his sword, head throbbing dully. There was nobody on the deck except the serving boy, who was standing by the taverns' doorway and looking at him with something like terror.

He turned his back on the boy and the old soldier, stepped off the deck and walked quickly along the space between the tavern's flank and the cistern wall, in the direction of the alley and the city ramparts. His hand dug in his pocket, sought the vial containing the royal message he had promised to deliver, and found it gone. Benhus spat in the dust.

He turned around the back of the building and leaned, rigid with anger, against the building, beside a boarded window. It was now well into afternoon, and the looming city wall had a broad line of black shadow at its base. The alley stretched away, empty as far as he could see. He figured the only people out in the sun were idiots like himself.

Benhus looked to where the cistern's adobe enclosure met the city's ramparts and saw that a small cart had been dragged into the right-angle corner where the smaller wall met the larger. He squinted at it sourly. Even if he stood on the cart he couldn't hope to leap high enough to grasp the rim and climb over.

Then he saw that there was a tuft of dry brush growing out of the juncture between walls about halfway up, and a second smaller one near the top. He approached the cart with a curious awareness of his pulse working in his throat. The woman, Tyria, had stolen his message and come this way. Had she gone over the wall with it, and done so right here?

Benhus threw a glance down the tavern's flank to the street beyond, saw no one, then jumped up onto the cart. He looked above,

leaned back into the wall, felt the warm stone touch his back, then leapt straight up. His hand went into the brush and struck a concealed metal shaft driven into the adobe wall. Benhus snatched and gripped it, slapped his other hand onto the rod, and dangled. He drew himself up and found a cunning foothold chipped out of the adobe. In seconds he'd grasped a second smaller metal rod hidden in the higher brush, and heaved himself up atop the wall.

Breathless with triumph and vindication, Benhus wormed his way over, staying low and twisting his body to bring his legs over the other side. He hesitated only a moment. There was a strange emblem, a small plaque inlaid with colored stones, no bigger than his hand, affixed to the top of the wall. It depicted a scarab beetle with a metallic shell and an outsized pair of mandibles. He had no time to puzzle over who would have put such a thing in such a place, but lowered himself over the wall, hung there by his fingertips, then let himself drop.

He lit and rolled neatly on the dusty earth, coming up in a crouch with his hand on his sword hilt. The enclosure was about a quarter the size of a city block, and nothing in it stirred except the bedraggled fronds of the handful of weary palms that were all that remained of the grove that once surrounded the cistern. The earth here was dry, with an expanse of brown grass cleft by the wide, flagstone path that led from the sealed gates to the cistern itself.

The cistern was sunk below the base of the city ramparts. It was a broad open well, surrounded by a low fieldstone wall. A pair of tall, disused pumps were mounted to either side but there was obviously a time, long ago, when visitors could simply sit on the little wall and lower jugs and dippers into fresh, cool water. Now Benhus looked into the cistern and saw a dry hole with ragged sides of sandy earth and stone. A scarab beetle, its shell gleaming in the sun, sat motionless on the cistern rim.

He was staring down, trying to gauge the best way to drop into the cistern without breaking an ankle, when he spotted the rope. It was tied to one of the pumps and dangled unobtrusively into the shadowy depths below.

Moving to it quickly, he bent and checked the knots. They were sound, and as he straightened he caught the ghost of a scent, out of place in this parched landscape. Rose petals.

He grabbed the rope, threw a leg over the well's rim, then hesitated. There was another scarab beetle sitting on the wall beside the rope. In size and color it appeared identical to the one he'd just seen and, now that he considered it, the one on the chain securing the cistern's gate. It was as motionless as the others. He prodded it with a finger. It wasn't dead, it was a little figurine, an artful construction of polished metal and wire. Benhus picked it up and, with a curse, immediately dropped it. The mandibles were as sharp as fishhooks. It fell into the open well and Benhus could give it no more thought. He pulled his other leg over the wall and lowered himself into the dark maw of the dry cistern.

The walls of the well were stained and mottled stone. Sunlight angled in from above, and particles of dust drifted lazily in a broad pillar of russet gold. Benhus went down easily, hand over hand, swinging in and out of the light. He dropped to the bottom, a floor of stone ridged and patterned with hardened clay and sculpted sand. A cavern, ragged edged but as fit for passage as a man-made tunnel, opened before him and stretched away beneath the city wall. To right and left full length mirrors, battered and dusty, had been placed beside the cave's entrance, and served to reflect a muted version of the afternoon's light into the shadows ahead.

Benhus walked in slowly, letting his eyes adjust. There was little sound. The cavern, once full of water, had irregular walls generally about six paces apart, and wended away through a series of gentle bends off into greater shadow.

It grew dimmer and he wondered why he hadn't brought a torch. Thratos would have given him a good deal of grief for neglecting something so obvious. The passage floor went to sand, hard packed and shaped by the passage of water. Forming a channel down the floor's center was a shallow strip of thick mud that squelched beneath his sandals.

The shadows thickened, then faded as the walls of the subterranean passage drew apart, and the ceiling lifted, opening into a broad chamber. A great jagged crystal, which looked too big to lift, was mounted high on the wall to his left and cast a cold and eerie illumination over a strange scene. Overhead the ceiling rose still further and flattened until Benhus thought he might be looking at the underside of the great city wall and seemed to sense its tremendous weight suspended over him.

Ahead, and to either side, a narrow beach of packed sand bracketed a smooth little lake of pale mud perhaps twenty paces across. There were dark vertical cracks in the cavern walls, as if the chamber had been forcibly expanded in the bedrock. Benhus thought he saw something pale in the fissure closest on his left, reflecting the chill light of the crystal.

He dropped to one knee, studying the fissure, feeling a deep sense of unease, of trespass in an alien and unfriendly realm. He glanced down at his knee where it pressed into the moist sand, and abruptly noticed that the shore of the mud lake was completely covered with the concave indentations left by knees. There were footprints, too, but the broad expanse of sand bore mute witness to dozens, perhaps even scores, of people coming to this place on their knees.

Benhus got to his feet, choosing action over further consideration of this hidden chamber and what might take place here. He strode across the beach and peered into the fissure that he thought might hold something, or someone.

There was a body stuck upright in the crack in the stone. A man in the plain robes of a merchant, stiff and pallid, face turned away. Benhus could see no wound, no cause of death. He seized the corpse by the sodden shoulder of its garment and dragged it out of the fissure.

It fell to the sand before him, and its terrible face stared up at Benhus. The flesh was withered, but the expression was one of abject terror. The eyes were wide, as dead white as boiled eggs, and the open mouth was packed with mud. The body's midsection was crimped, as though lopped to either side by the blow of an ax or sword. The chest. Benhus bent, doubting his eyes. The chest was distended by four crystalline orbs with a metallic sheen. The fist-sized spheres thrust through the dead man's robes as if they had grown from his breast.

"Gods," whispered Benhus. He took two steps back from the body, then turned forcibly and struck out along the shoreline of the placid mud lake. He hadn't gone more than five paces when he passed another cleft in the rising cavern wall, and from that dark opening came a shriek that jolted him like a blow to the belly.

"No, no, noooooo!"

The short sword leapt into his fist. Benhus felt fear curdle inside him, slide like slivers of black ice in his guts. The realization that it was a person, a woman, sank in. He drew a ragged breath and felt his shock diminish, leaving him ablaze with adrenaline energy. There had to be someone in that crack in the wall. But how was that even possible? It was so narrow, so angled and ragged edged, surely no one could fit into that gap.



But there was someone wedged into that tiny space.

"It's all right," he said hoarsely. "I will not harm you."

"B-Benhush?" Hearing his own name, uttered from a jagged black cleft in a cavern wall sent a fresh thrill of horror through him. A pale hand, and an arm in a black sleeve thrust out of the cleft. "Help. Help me."

In a kind of trance he took the cold hand and pulled, first gently and then with strength. Pulling back on his arm and emitting a pathetic cry of pain and effort, a tall woman dragged herself out of the fissure. She wobbled on her feet and fell to her knees.

Benhus gaped in astonishment. It was Tyria, the woman who had drugged him and taken the message Lady Thale had bade him deliver. She was as battered, scraped and bedraggled as if she'd been dragged behind a horse. Her garments were torn, and the stone of the cleft had scraped her skin bloody at cheek, forearms and knees. Her face was pale as milk. She fixed her eyes on Benhus and tried to speak.

"Pulls you under and gives you its eggs. But I got away. I hid in the wall and it couldn't get me but I couldn't get out. You have... you have..."

"What? Breathe and calm yourself. I'm here now."

She lurched to her feet, staggering back and staring past Benhus at the smooth surface of the mud lake. Her face was a strained mask of terror.

"It comes back. They think it comes back to life. Buries itself then comes back to life. That it could give them immortality, too. But that's not what it gives. It comes back. It comes back. *It's coming back!*"

Her scream boxed his ears with piercing sound. He spun and the pool of pale mud was no longer placid. Bubbles almost the size of his skull rose and popped at its center, and a great curving dome pushed up from beneath the thick liquid.

Tyria fought her way past him, surprising him from behind and knocking him to one knee. He saw her run back the way they had come, toward the cistern and the city and a surcease from madness.

Benhus got up, turned back to the mud lake, and it was almost too late. The dome rising in the liquid had moved toward him with shocking speed. He had enough time to be transfixed with wonder and horror before it lifted itself free of the shallows on six angled legs. Filth sloughed off the thing in sheets, splattering the beach and Benhus's feet as it drove ashore and directly at him.

Its huge body was segmented, with the elongated dome of its back leading into smaller thorax and a blunt ovoid head. Six eyes like onyx knobs gleamed above a quivering palp-encircled maw framed by two huge black mandibles, curved like cruelly serrated scimitars. It was a scarab bigger than a bullock.

Benhus stumbled back, drawing his sword and thinking to spin and run after Tyria, but it was horribly fast and darted on claw tipped legs to intercept him,

He swung at it, and his blade glanced off a mandible as if he'd parried a heavy iron bar. Benhus set his feet in the thick sand and thrust his sword at the closest eye. The point struck below the dark orb, scoring the smooth chitin but not penetrating. Worse still, he had come too close. The black mandibles swung wide as the gates of hell and snapped shut around his waist.

Benhus howled in rage and horror. The sharp edges of the dark arcs that held him scissored tight around his middle, cutting into his sides. The thing's mouth parts squirmed and wiggled against his belly, tasting him. He took the hilt of his short sword in both

fists and rained overhand blows on its head and thorax, cursing frantically. His blade could not damage its armor, could not hurt the horrible predator at all.

The mandibles cut into Benhus, drawing blood, but did not slice him in half, as he could tell they might easily do. He had a mad moment to consider this before it began to retreat. The thing was going back into the pool with him alive in its grip. An image of the dead merchant, mouth full of mud, body full of eggs, flashed across his mind. Helplessly, instinctively, he dug in his heels, but simply plowed twin trenches in the sand as the huge scarab withdrew inexorably back into the shallows. Mud slopped around his calves and scarlet panic surged like madness in him.

He seized the mandibles and tried to pull them apart. It was fruitless, but his left hand fell upon the white dagger of Thratos, the King's Hand.

The cold mud was up to his thighs. He bent back, leaning into the searing edge of the jaws that imprisoned him, drew the gleaming dagger lefthanded and slashed it into the mandible tearing into his right side. The blade sheared clean through the black scimitar, dropping it into the mud and releasing a pulsing gout of dark ichor.

The scarab reared up and Benhus fell away, plunging into the mud, then surfacing immediately, gasping and clawing at his eyes to see. The creature flailed its forelegs at the ceiling and drew away. It turned, slower now as if stunned by the fact it could be hurt. It was retreating into the pool.

"No!" roared Benhus. He rose and hurled himself bodily onto the scarab's back. Sliding on the slippery carapace, he drove the dagger hilt-deep to anchor himself. The creature lifted as if in agony, then began to lower itself into the muck. Benhus wrenched the dagger free, then sank the short sword's blade into the open wound the dagger had punched in the scarab's shell. He clung to the hilt with his right hand, leaned his weight onto it, driving the weapon down and clinging to it with his legs splayed on the slick shell. All the while his left arm rose and fell as he slammed the dagger home again and again and again.

The scarab lowered into the pool, nearly submerging itself, then shuddered beneath him and stopped. It was as if Benhus lay on a low raft, half sunken in the lake of mud. Breathing raggedly, Benhus pushed himself up. The thing's shell was covered with what had to be dozens of punctures, but it wasn't the number of wounds that convinced him it was dead. There was a deep stillness in its body that removed all doubt.

Benhus slid off its shell, floundered through the mud to the lake's edge, cleaned his blades as well as he could with sand, and walked unsteadily along the shore until he came to a flat boulder. He sat, nursed the stinging wound that almost encircled his body, and wished for some water. A queasy weariness billowed through him, and Benhus let himself slump back and lie prone. He passed out.

He woke up cold, wet, filthy, and in pain, but the instant he came awake a desperate energy lifted him to his feet. How long had he been out? Benhus shook himself and walked into the dark passage that opened on the far side of the mud lake. Behind him, the great scarab gradually sank into its mire.

He hadn't gone far when he felt a fresh breeze, smelled water and grass. Ahead was light, and he came to an uneven stone chamber where the passage lowered into a series of smaller tunnels, some still showing standing water. These channels ran away into the blackness below ground. Above these dark gaps was a wide

opening fitted with a metal grate. It was surrounded by enough weeds to almost choke the red-gold sunshine, but errant beams filtered through to pattern the floor like strewn coins. He felt a moment's dismay, as there was no way his body could fit between the grate's vertical bars, but then saw that so much water had passed through the grate that it had worn away the earth to either side so the sunlight gleamed through a fist-sized gap on the left, and shone through a space on the right that looked big enough to wiggle through. Standing on a boulder, he did just that, dragged himself out onto the baked earth of a dry stream bed fringed with weeds that overhung and all but obscured it.

Benhus came to his knees. The sun was just above the horizon, a golden ball going slowly scarlet as it dropped toward the world's edge. Behind him, the mere cast of a stone away, rose the towering buttress of Frekore's city wall. Ahead, in a small grove of trees, stood a tent of green silk, large enough to service a traveling caravan. Rising to a crouch, Benhus approached it cautiously.

He wished he'd had both the time and presence of mind to get his message back from Tyria before she fled back into the city. He harbored certain suspicions about her and about his mission, and he thought he might have a word with Paltus the Sly or whoever might be in that tent.

The embroidered flap of the tent faced the city and hung open slightly. Voices murmured within. Benhus stepped out of the slow-dying sun's rays, pushed his way into the cool emerald tinted interior. There were elegant rugs, a table with wine and goblets, and two chairs in which sat Varus Androloc and the Lady Bethelanne Thale.

"Hello," said Benhus quietly.

"What? By the gods it's the blade himself!" Varus's voice immediately went from amused to angry, perhaps even shocked. "Where is she? How did you get past her? Where is Tyria?"

"She almost stopped me. But our passage was disputed," said Benhus. "We found a foe. Paltus is not here?"

"Paltus was never here, you fool. This was a trial." The nobleman's voice rose with a ragged edge. "But what foe could you have found? The cultists are in prison! What did you do to her?"

The Lady Thale sat quietly in her chair, sipped her wine and watched.

"It wasn't the worshippers we had to worry about, but what they worshipped."

Varus came to his feet with his hand on his sword hilt. "Damn you, she is your better! She has cunning and finesse a blade like yourself can never know! What did you do with Tyria?"

"I fed her to their scarab godling," Benhus lied. "She made an adequate diversion."

Varus went white, tore out his blade and came at Benhus with a cry of raw and bloody rage. Benhus drew and met him in a clash of strident steel. They traded blows, at first with more maddened intent than skill, swords meeting and sliding apart with a sound like a blacksmith's anvil seeing frantic work. They stamped through the tent, past the unperturbed Lady Thale, and then their combat abruptly altered its nature.

Varus drew his left-handed dagger and took a wide stance, leaving Benhus a moment to wonder what he intended, before driving forward in a long, swift thrust with his sword. It seemed meant to startle and skewer him, and Benhus struck it aside with a hard block. A block that left him open to a twisting lunge that drove Varus's dagger point toward his exposed throat.

Benhus hurled himself backward, drawing the white dagger left-handed as he did, slashing upward to open the tent wall as he hit it off balance and stumbled through out onto the grass. Varus came after him, wild eyed with hate.

Red sunlight suffused the grove, casting shadows of midnight black and seeming to set the trees aflame. Varus tried the same maneuver again but Benhus had the white dagger now and when he blocked the nobleman's sword he cleft it in two. Varus staggered, and had just enough time to gape at his impossibly sundered blade before Benhus stepped inside his guard and drove the pommel of his short sword into the side of Varus's head with enough force to hurl him to the grass.

Varus lolled almost senseless on the ground. Benhus stepped over him, bent and laid his sword on one side of the nobleman's throat and his white dagger on the other.

"More than just speed?" whispered Benhus, his voice shaking. "Tell me of my technique now, Varus Androloc." He could sense the Lady Thale hovering off to one side, still silent. She didn't matter. His face twisted in a cruel smile.

Something small bounced on Varus's chest. Benhus blinked, focusing on it with effort. It was the glass tube holding the message he was to deliver. He looked up. There was someone standing beside Lady Thale. Bruised, covered with dried mud, and panting as if from a long run, it was Tyria. In the ruddy light he could see that her features were much like those of Varus.

"It was a test," she said hastily, "and I was to win by proving you inadequate for the task. I too have trained to serve the King. This would help prove me worthy of taking the place of Thratos in your stead. I was to be the King's Hand. Varus helped me. He has always helped me. He is my brother. I beg you, do not slay him."

Benhus stood locked in place, the edges of both of his blades pressed to his foe's throat. With an audible breath he pulled his weapons back, then stepped away.

Tyria dropped to her knees beside her brother. Benhus walked off a few paces and stared at the red blaze sinking in the west. The Lady Thale seemed to materialize beside him.

"So, you slew their vermin god," said Lady Thale, "but you didn't kill her."

"No. There was no need."

"Well then," she said. "Congratulations are in order. You're the new King's Hand."

"Blade," said Benhus. He sheathed his sword but held the white dagger up so that it caught the sunset and burned like a brand in his fist.

"The King's Blade."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Long before JOHN C. HOCKING wrote *Conan & the Emerald Lotus*, back in the mists of antiquity at the dawn of the RPG era, he gamemastered a Dungeons & Dragons saga so epic that the players cannot gather together almost forty years later without arguing about it. One of their primary foes inspired such terror that when he was finally fought and destroyed, the player who dealt the killing blow carried the eight-sided die that slew him in his pocket for months, unsheathing it to flourish before the admiring eyes of his fellow players, and to roll in order to help make critical decisions in life, love and job search.



ILLUSTRATION BY BRAD MCDEVITT

DAY OF THE SHARK

A Tale of Thalassa

By JAMES STODDARD

So sings the poet, Voa, playing on shell and bone:

We lived under the ocean, a great people, and if history has forgotten us and time veiled our existence, this song must set the matter right.

I sing of great evil, monsters of the Deep, battling armies, the love of a woman, and a quest to the bottom of the sea.

I sing of Thalassa.

In the fourth year, the Time of the Descending Stream, in the migration of the bluefins, the beginning of spring...

THEY came in the evening, nineteen weary warriors, to the third mark of the Vercan Rift—ninety fathoms down, much deeper than they had ever been before—far from the land of Ooan-ga in the reefs.

Arc lifted his eyes and gaped up at the translucent expanse of the ocean above, feeling its massive weight upon his chest and shoulders. He turned his head from side to side to draw extra water over his gills as he made a bleak survey of his fellows, who sprawled listless with fatigue on the backs of their manta rays. The waning light at this depth turned the pearl inlay on the hunters' shark-skin armor dull gray.

He glanced at Shartoom, but even his older brother, the best of the company, sat dejected, staring along the haughty lines of his aquiline nose, his usual blue-gray skin ivory-pale with weariness and despair. Still, he caught Arc's gaze and managed a ragged smile. "An hour's rest, brother. Then we will continue the pursuit."

If this had been Geerd or even mighty Iteemon, Arc would not have been discouraged, for Geerd was wise but lazy, and Iteemon loved his sleep, but Shartoom was a moray wedged deep in its hole; he did not relent. If he said rest, then rest they must, though it shook Arc to his soul.

But he nodded and replied, "It's cold here. The mantas can't keep up the pace."

Arc rubbed the cephalic fins of his mount, Whisper, close to the eyes where she liked it best. Her wingspan, the widest in the tribe, spread ten and a half arms. Old Uncle Uyo, now lying dead back at the creche, had given her to him at the boy's coming of age on his thirteenth birthday.

Despite Arc's attention, the manta kept her cephalic fins scrolled close to her head, a sign of agitation. The vast sweep of her wings lifted and fell in strokes ponderous with exhaustion. The parasite-hunting remoras attached to her belly had eeled away, driven back to warmer waters after the company crossed

into the cold layer at seventy fathoms. Under any other circumstances, the hunters would never have driven their mounts so hard or so deep.

"I say ride them till they sink," Shartoom replied, his lips tight.

"They can't go another league," Arc said. "Won't we need them, after?"

Shartoom gave Arc a bitter look, no doubt thinking none would survive the journey, but he replied, "You may be right." He pulled himself from his riding net and unfastened the halter straps from around the shoulders of his mount.

This surprised Arc, for his brother, six years his senior, did not listen to him often; some said he did not listen to anyone at all. Shartoom passed the word to the others, and one by one the Ooan-gans dismounted and released their mantas.

The creatures did not mill around their masters in the normal way, but slid upward in a clump toward Thin Blue, pumping their wings against the pressure, only their long gill-slits and white underbellies visible from below. Arc watched Whisper go, knowing he might never again ride her through the canyons of coral.

Arc's twin sister, Ayita, joined her brothers. Her red locks, which normally glistened in fiery splendor when close to Thin Blue, looked black as Arc's own in the depths. Her face mirrored his distress.

"This day is accursed," she said.

"It is," Shartoom agreed, seating himself on a rock outcropping along the ocean floor. Arc and Ayita slid to the ground at his feet, and the ooze rose around them, momentarily blinding them in its fog.

They sat in silence, all three lost in memory, for this was the fourth anniversary of the death of their father, who had been taken by a Great White. A shark will seldom attack a man, but this one had, and Arc had seen it all. The memory remained cold and clear, the massive jaws, his father's screams. He still could not bear to think of it.

On that day, at the age of eighteen, Shartoom had replaced his father as creche lord. Arc and Ayita had been twelve. Their mother was gone as well, taken by a wasting disease when they were four. Arc remembered her face as soft, misty lines and little else, but Ayita recalled her better and spoke of her often. After their father's death, they were raised by Shartoom and all the aunts, uncles, and cousins of the creche, most of whom, on this anniversary day, had been captured or slain by the bandit, B'tat.

"It's my fault," Shartoom said, his voice low so the others would not hear. Arc looked up in wonder; Shartoom did not usually admit his mistakes, and Arc idolized him too much to want to hear him do so.

"You couldn't have known," Arc said. "We were gone—"

But Shartoom waved away his defense. "You tried to warn me yourself, but I wouldn't listen. B'tat came to us, an outsider, full of stories of foreign waters, flattering me while learning our weaknesses. I knew he was smooth, that his eyes lied, but I took him in anyway. He told me of great kingdoms, said we too could become a great people if we allied ourselves with such as he and followed his foreign gods. Forgetting my duty to the creche, I coveted the wealth and power he offered. I have acted like a gobie, dancing at the grouper's jaws." Shartoom fell silent, staring across the sea. "Why could you see so clearly what I could not?"

Arc shrugged. "He was ingat, alien. It's like father said; we can't trust anyone except our own people. It's always been that way."

Shartoom nodded. "I shouldn't have forgotten."

Throughout their long pursuit, Arc had tried not to think about the women and children in the clutches of the raiders. Outland lords like B'tat had a reputation for cruelty. While Shartoom and his hunters had been away hunting, B'tat's bandits had battered down the creche doors and carried away the men's families, slaughtering those too old to be useful.

The hunters had returned home to find the creche deserted, its four doors waving wide. The guards had laid down their lives in long rows for Shartoom's wife, their creche lady; the hunters had found their bodies drifting in the rooms, their blood floating in the chambers. Shartoom had vowed upon the names of the dead to find their slayers and rescue the captives.

Of all the women, only Ayita, who was with the hunting party, remained free. Arc shuddered, thinking that if she had been in the creche she would have surely fought and died. He did not think he could bear it if anything happened to her.

The dolphins, who are a friend to everyone, had told the Ooangans the whole tale. In their rattling tongue, they spoke of following B'tat, scolding him as they went until he turned and drove them back. The dolphins know only two numbers—one and many, and could not give a count of the enemy.

When the avengers first started their pursuit, the dolphins, between making trips back to Thin Blue for air, followed for a time, chattering about the attack until the party entered the Vercan Rift. As the walls of rough stone covered in sea urchins rose higher around the men, the dolphins fled, for the Dread Ones dwelled in those canyons.

Arc's people feared the rift, but Shartoom inspired them to descend, for despite his vanity he outshone every other man in the tribe. A born leader, he could out-fight and out-think any of his companions. At times he seemed larger than life. Though he and Arc had lived, laughed, and hunted together all their lives, Arc often felt he did not truly know his brother.

Sometimes he thought Shartoom touched by divine hands. Many in the creche might have agreed.

• • •

ONCE tied around rock formations, the hunters' riding nets doubled as sleeping pouches to keep the occupants from drifting. They slept on their backs, floating inches above the sea floor, looking up toward the dim, diffused glow of Thin Blue, taking comfort in its light. They did not post sentries, for no one had the strength to stay awake, and their enemies were still far ahead of them.

Arc's thoughts churned until slumber claimed him. He wondered if they were doing the right thing. The implication of B'tat having passed this way filled him with dread, for none intentionally sought the Dread Ones. Not without design...

Arc woke at Geerd's touch. He looked up at the kind face. Geerd was old, nearly forty, but not too ancient to hunt. Like all the people of Thalassa, his upper body, made for swimming, was amazingly muscular; his waist was thin, his legs strong. He still had many years of life in him.

"How long?" Arc asked.

"Not long." Geerd tied the braided strands of his golden beard along his neck with a kelp cord to keep it from floating into his eyes. Some of the reef people possessed facial hair—others such as Arc and Shartoom did not. "It's hard to judge the time this far from the light, but I think we've slept little more than an hour. Rise quickly. We must be sharks."

Arc nodded and repeated the motto of the hunt: "We must be sharks." The saying arose from the legend that Lord Shark never slept, but sought its prey with endless, precise fury. Because of the way his father had died, Arc seldom used the expression.

The company arose and drifted into the hunting formation, the denary, a four-sided wedge with Iteemon at the point and Shartoom directly behind him. Because so many ocean creatures attack from hiding, the lord's best warrior always led, leaving the master protected on every side by his men. Only during the charge was the leader permitted to slip to the front to make the kill. The custom was old as Arc's people. Arc and Ayita swam side by side above and slightly behind their brother.

Once in position, the hunters quickly fell into a smooth rhythm, arms and webbed feet stroking with the fluid grace of dancers, the whole company moving in instinctive symmetry.

As the denary descended, following the sloping rift floor, the pressure increased. Colors had gradually deserted the hunters throughout their journey: first orange, then yellow, finally green; now the water faded to the midnight blue of the twilight regions. The last vestiges of coral had vanished twenty fathoms before, leaving only barrel and tulip sponges, anemones, and waving clumps of sea pens, emptied of hue, gray shadows in the gloom.

Gone too were the schools of fish, the mollusks and crustaceans, the starfish and sea cucumbers, the thousand inhabitants of the reefs. Arc spied a single squid propelling itself out of the denary's path, ghostly in the dimness. Finger-length hatchet fish drifted by, their faces like wizened men, their eyes clouded with blindness, the bio-luminescent glow of their sides turning their backs silver, their bodies iridescent. Black shrimp sailed by. Nothing broke the silence except for the hunters' muttered conversations, not even distant whale songs, dolphin chirps, or croaker cries.

Grottoes lined the rift walls. Arc shuddered as he looked at them, wondering what creatures might dwell within, species his people did not know. With each stroke, every hunter turned his head

sharply to the side, watching for danger, ready to alert the denary. Darkness was never safe for the people of Thalassa, for the night sea contained too many dangers and waking predators—shark, barracuda, and otherwise—for an unsheltered human. They kept above the ocean floor, for sand creepers lurked at these depths, large enough to snap up a man.

Arc, who had the best eyes of all the hunters, sighted something below him. He slipped between the forms of his fellows, drew beside Shartoom and pointed, and the creche lord called a halt. The hunters floated down to the ocean floor; Iteemon, the first to land, swept the sand with his spear for creepers. Arc's bare feet sank into the ooze.

A bone spear protruded upright from the ground, its flint point driven into the detritus, as if thrust there intentionally. A swirling symbol etched into its end boasted the sign of B'tat's house.

Beyond the blade the rift fell sharply, dropping into an even more oppressive gloom. Above the descent, a shoulder of rock jutted out, carved into the massive head of an octopus, staring with malignant eyes. Runes surrounded the carving. Having no written language, the hunters could not read the words, but they stood like lost children, heads down, not wanting to see, for here began the Fourth Mark, the boundary of the Dread Ones' country.

They had not expected it so soon; perhaps they traveled more quickly than they thought. When Arc saw it and knew how deep they were, a wave of panic swept through him; the pressure of the water against his chest seemed suddenly unbearable.

He glanced at Shartoom. Though his brother was surely as frightened as any, he gave a rough smile that restored Arc's courage. He felt the air filtering through his gills once more.

Yet Geerd's words terrified him anew. "They are lost," the old warrior murmured. "B'tat has taken them to the Dread Ones."

A horror fell upon the whole company. Even Shartoom faltered. They sank to their knees upon the sand, one by one, eying each another in despair.

"What can we do?" Iteemon asked.

"Why would B'tat do this?" Ayita asked. "The Dread Ones would surely seize him and his men." She pulled on the abalone rings of her twelve hair locks with fierce strokes, a habit when she was upset.

"If we want to find out, we have to follow them," Shartoom said softly.

The hunters fell silent. Finally Geerd said, "We will all be killed. Our kin are as good as dead; how will it help for us to die with them?"

"He's right," Iteemon said, his dark eyes hollow sockets in the gloom. "The Dread Ones would destroy us."

"I will not desert my wife and children!" Shartoom said, surging to his feet. "I will go, even if it means death. What do we know about the Dread Ones, anyway? None of us has ever even seen one."

"My father told me they are twice the height of a man," Otoon said, "and dark as morays peering from their holes, with burning, yellow eyes."

"And your father heard those tales from his father, who learned them from your great-grandfather," Shartoom said. "All we really know is that B'tat has given them our kin."

Arc looked at his companions huddled together in a tight circle, their gill slits trembling with excitement, their faces fierce with fright.

"I won't force anyone to go," Shartoom said, "but I am going. Do as your heart tells you."

One by one the older members agreed, even Otoon, who had no children and did not like his wife much; the younger ones, like Belo and Enivir, followed their example. As one, they rose from the bottom, scarcely disturbing the ooze.

"Very well," Shartoom looked down his hatchet nose at each of his followers, meeting their eyes, his own glistening in approval. "Before we go, we must examine the area to insure B'tat isn't leading us into a trap. I don't like that beckoning spear. Perhaps he placed it there to lure us down, then took the captives upward."

The hunters murmured their agreement. They searched the area carefully, Iteemon even passing deeper into the rift, where he found a single footprint in the sand and a piece of a shark-skin jerkin torn by a jagged stone. The hunters discovered no other signs, but by these they believed the bandits really had descended.

Geerd, who had been searching close to a gaping grotto, suddenly moved to its mouth.

"Where are you going?" Arc asked, alarmed. Anything might hide in a cave.

Geerd raised his hand. "A moment. I see something useful."

He disappeared into the opening, while the hunters milled anxiously at its mouth, spears ready. A light bloomed from within, and everyone tensed, thinking something stirred, but Geerd returned, carrying a handful of glowing bio-luminescent algae. "We'll need this for our lamps."

They took their conch lamps from their squid-skin packs and followed Geerd back into the cave. The passage twisted immediately to the right, but a pale orange glow rose from around the corner.

Beyond the bend, the walls were covered with the algae, glistening golden and scarlet. The luminants the hunters had carried with them had long grown dim, so they poured them out, scraped the algae from the wall with bone knives, and refilled their conch-shell lamps, which used polished quartz-crystal prisms placed at the mouth of the conches to amplify the glow. The rays of the luminants shone pink through the shell walls. Such lamps cast only a little light, but it was enough for the Ooangans' large eyes.

They descended deeper into the rift. The ground angled downward for a quarter-league, then abruptly fell away, leaving the hunters swimming into what appeared a bottomless abyss, as if they descended into the Deep, where no man could survive. The canyon walls closed in above them, turning the light of Thin Blue into a faint gash. Scattered finger-size lanternfish appeared, phantoms slipping through the sea, silver in the luminous light emanating in rows along their bellies.

Still the hunters went on, seeking the bottom. Arc craned his neck to keep Thin Blue in sight; he feared losing it, lest he lose his courage as well.

By the time they reached the bare stone of the rift bottom, the pressure bearing down upon them made their blood throb in their veins. Arc could feel his skin tightening against his face and a sharp wedging in his ears like a slow spear thrust. Slender

Thessen, two years younger than Arc's fifteen, seemed most affected. He drifted to the bottom and was unable to rise. The tribe gathered around him, many hands raising him up.

"Leave me, Shartoom; I'll only slow you down," he said, though his eyes shone with the horror of being deserted. "I'll find my way back."

"You wouldn't be able to," Shartoom said, squeezing his shoulder. "Brave Thessen. Any farther and none of us will be able to go on. But we may not need to descend much more. Gather your strength."

They rested a few moments. Arc, who had half-expected the Dread Ones to attack the instant the Ooangans entered their region, took comfort in still being alive. Perhaps Shartoom was right; perhaps they were not the gods men called them. Certainly Arc's people did not worship them as such.

He glanced around.

"What are you thinking?" Ayita asked.

He managed a smile. "Something foolish. If this were a journey for exploration, I would probably enjoy it."

"No one comes here for pleasure."

"No," he shrugged. "But there are fish down here I've never seen before. Aunt Ferocious used to describe them to me. I'm finally seeing them."

"Aunt came this deep?"

"Deeper, once, when she was a girl."

"I didn't know," Ayita's voice caught, for their aunt was a captive with the others.

"She's been where all the fish are luminescent. She said they were beautiful, but terrifying. When I was little, she promised to bring me down someday."

Ayita sighed and took Arc's hand. "I guess she has."

Arc squeezed his sister's fingers. "Other than the pressure, it isn't as bad as I expected. It's almost peaceful." He looked across the ooze toward the bare stone walls. A few crabs grazed along the rocks; otherwise the rift looked deserted. With so much life on the reefs this wasteland seemed strange.

The company continued on. To their surprise, they soon came across a Great White floating dead. Being ever eager to observe any aspect of nature, Arc spied the body first, portions strangely black, bobbing half-hidden beneath the overhanging projections of the rift wall. Tiny crabs and starfish covered the shark, drawn out of whatever deep crevices where they dwelled; hags slithered in and out of the body. Clouds of miniature sand sharks bickered for the remains.

Fire being unknown to the Ooangans, save from the volcanic vents that spewed liquid flame, they stood puzzled until Ayita said, "It was burned by the Devouring Light."

At her words, Arc understood the charring of the body and recognized the searing scent that accompanies lava, an aroma he had smelled only once before. He looked around, but could not find any evidence of a volcanic fissure.

"This shark was unusually far down," he said. "What could have killed it?"

"Only the Dread Ones possess this kind of power," Geerd said.

No one replied, and a new melancholy fell upon them.

Iteemon led them just below the teeming mass of scavengers;

the water surged with the sand sharks' struggles. When they were right beneath the body a strange, wavering voice cried out, "Mommma... Mommma..."

The startled warriors raised their weapons.

The sound rose again, close to the body of the shark.

"What could be crying for its mother in all that?" Ayita asked. "Is there a child?"

"More likely some trick of the Dread Ones," Arc said. "Even if it is a child, it is ingat."

"That's cruel!" Ayita said. "Whether it's of the creche or not, you wouldn't leave a baby to the hags." Breaking from the denary, she shot toward the sound. Arc thrust after, fearing for her safety; in their frenzy sharks do not always care where they strike.

Together the twins stroked to the shelf, Arc with his spear ready, Ayita anxiously seeking the sound. Shartoom and several others hurried after.

"Mommma!" the cry came again.

Arc waved his spear before him, driving the predators away from the mother's left flank. Blood, hunks of flesh, and the smell of death filled the sea.

Spying a wavering fin, Ayita thrust aside a hermit crab to reveal the source of the sound, pressed close between its mother and the shelf.

"Here it is!" she cried, putting one hand to her mouth. "Oh, no!"

"That?" Arc asked. "It can't be!"

As if in answer, the creature cried, "Mommma!"

"Is it really a Great White?" Arc asked.

"A pup. You should kill it," Ayita said, her sympathy draining away.

The shark, less than an arm long, swam back and forth along its mother's flank. Other than its ability to speak, it appeared no different than any other Great White: the white belly, the sharp fins, the black, soulless eyes and cruel, rending jaws.

Shartoom paddled along beside. "I've heard of these," he said, scowling. "From the times of the Old Wars. The Dread Ones bred them, giving them the power of speech."

"Obviously the Dread Ones do not care about their servants once they're usefulness is over," Arc said.

The pup pressed against its mother, emitting a strange whining cry, closer to that of a human than a shark. Arc watched it with a mixture of loathing and fascination.

"Sharks don't nurture their young," Arc said. "Everyone knows that."

"These must be different," Shartoom said.

"Apparently," Arc agreed. "Wait, what's that?" His eyes caught something glistening within the corpse.

"I see nothing," Shartoom replied.

"There!" Arc waded forward, driving the scavengers back. From within the shark's open belly, something silver reflected his conch lamp light. He reached forward, while hags, slithering to escape him, emitted thick mucus over his hand.

Grimacing, he pushed through the dead flesh, seized a heavy handle, and pulled it out of the shark. He lifted it high, and despite the gore, everyone could see it was a small but magnificent sword, little longer than a knife, but made of a substance far stronger than bone. His followers gaped as the conch light danced across its surface.

He traced its edge with his left hand; it was sharp as a surgeon-fish spine. "A sword beyond compare!" he exclaimed. "A sword from the belly of a shark."

He looked at the other hunters, and all but Ayita had floated back from him, overawed.

"What will you do with it?" Geerd asked.

"It is a sea gift," Shartoom said. "You have to keep it."

The hunters drifted closer again, all eyes on the blade until Arc put it in his belt.

"Momma!" the pup whined again, and everyone, having momentarily forgotten it, turned back to the shark.

Geerd raised his spear. "I'll kill it."

"We have no more time," Shartoom said. "Leave it to starve."

They passed beside the carcass, careful to avoid the scavengers, leaving the pup crying for its mother, a death wail that followed them a long time through the darkness.

The cries finally faded, and their spirits rose again when the rift leveled off, ending their descent. The conch lamps revealed stonefish the color and texture of the sea floor, gaping upward like brooding crones. The hunters avoided them, for their dorsal fins were lined with thirteen poisonous spines. Arc had once seen a man die raving in agony from a single sting. Those who survived an attack experienced tremendous swelling and their fingers and toes sometimes turned black and fell off. Because of their camouflage, the stonefish were easily overlooked, so the hunters kept above the ocean floor.

The rift narrowed, siphoning them along. They soon reached a rock wall, the apparent end of the canyon, though narrow caves along its face suggested the possibility of further passage. There they saw the Dread One.

It lay like an octopus in its den, in a craggy hole an arm across, its tentacles curled around it, only the top of its bulbous head and its huge, swollen eyes glaring up at them. Indeed, if not for its eyes, it might have been mistaken for a blue-ringed octopus, but those orbs seethed with intelligence.

It slithered with startling speed from its hole, a single tentacle stretching out, then another, then the saclike head. No one doubted what it was; its evil pulsed over them with a force as tangible as a hand squeezing their throats. For a moment the entire party forgot its hunting skills and froze like gobies, every eye upon the creature. Someone gave a groan of fear. Arc's blood ran cold; only his sense of honor kept him from fleeing.

In form it truly resembled a blue-ring; its brown skin was covered with brilliant navy whorls that gave depth to the ball of a face too long and swollen to be mistaken for a true octopus. Where the blue-ring was small, the Dread One stood upright on its appendages, twice human height. Its eyes glowed yellow, the huge pupils flat and merciless. It wore no clothing. Its mass of tentacles, easily three fathoms long, each ending in hoary, clawed hands, danced down the side of the rock face. Arc shuddered, remembering the blue-ring as the only octopus with a poisonous—and lethal—bite.

The denary finally reacted, raising spears and velos-bows. Seeing how easily the tentacles might flick out to seize them, the whole company save Shartoom swam backward. The creche lord kept his position.

The creature spoke in a hideous voice, like the scraping of bone against bone. "Why do the blue-skins disturb our nest?"

Following Shartoom's example, Arc summoned his courage and paddled forward again, though his whole being revolted against doing so. To his surprise, the others followed.

"I am Shartoom Nyin, Creche Lord of the Tula kin, dwelling in Ooanga." Arc's admiration for his brother rose even higher when he heard his deep, unwavering voice. "The bandit, B'tat, has taken our women and children. We followed him here."

The creature kept silent so long Arc thought it had not heard. Its flowing hands groped along the rift floor, moving serpentine around both sides of the hunters. Finally, it said, "No one came here. Depart from us."

Arc swallowed hard, knowing Shartoom would never leave without a fight. And what man could slay a Dread One? He saw the path of honor stretching before them, ending in all their deaths.

"We saw signs of their passage, not two hundred fathoms past," Shartoom said. "You have them. We want them back."

The arms fanned out, nearly enclosing the Ooangans in a half-circle. One tentacle writhed less than the length of two arms from where Arc floated. It had a strange, oily look that made him shudder. He wondered whether his bone knife could cut the dark sinew.

"We have your kin," the Dread One admitted. "They are ours now, as is the custom. You saw the shark we destroyed. She was an unfaithful servant. We slew her using weapons you cannot comprehend, magic that could kill all of you now, right where you swim. Seek vengeance against B'tat, who is the least of our servants and no longer here, but do not meddle in our affairs."

The hunters shifted uneasily, looking for the source of the terrible weapon, but Shartoom spoke with eerie calmness, taking on the tone of a man bartering with his neighbor. "But you have meddled in our affairs. Come, be reasonable! Surely you see our position. Give us back our kin, and perhaps we can do you some good turn."

Arc thought of what his brother had said before, about his people knowing nothing of the Dread Ones. Perhaps the hunters could survive if they treated the creatures like men.

The Dread One shifted its eyes to Shartoom and gave a wheezing, death-rattle that might have been a laugh. "A bargain? You offer a bargain? How audacious the blue skins become! What can you give us?"

"A hundred shark skins," Shartoom said, "by the next hatching of the great turtles." A few of the hunters gasped. This was a high price, but Arc thought they could meet it if they hunted the sharks through the spring.

The Dread One laughed again. "Shark skins! What are they to us? Do we cover ourselves like you soft ones? We care nothing for shark skins. If we did, we would have taken the hide of the one we slew."

"Ten handfuls of polished chrysolite," Shartoom said. This did not disturb the hunters as much, for they had recently found a vein of that stone in caves near their creche.

"We do not adorn ourselves in gems."

"Twenty spears," Shartoom said.

"We do not use spears."

Shartoom paused. He looked close to losing his temper. "There must be something you desire."

Though the Dread One had no discernible features, Arc sensed it relax, as if the point of the discussion had finally been reached.

"You are the leader of the tribe?"

"I speak for the creche," Shartoom replied.

"The woman and children B'tat gave us are nothing. They will work in our nests until we devour them. They are not as useful as they could be, for those who serve us unwillingly soon perish from our presence. We will free your women and children if you, Shartoom Nyin, and your men, enter our house and promise to serve us faithfully as long as you live. That is something we can use."

"Surely there is something else, some other price."

"That is all we need. Nothing else. But we do not offer mere servitude. The Dread Ones traverse the ocean floor; our emissaries are everywhere. Our servants dwell in great creches, doing our will. If you serve us well, we will make you masters of multitudes."

"We will not give up our freedom."

The Dread One gave an odd, popping sound that might have been a guffaw. "Your freedom! Your freedom to do what? To eke out a life of bare survival? We have watched you, holed up in your little creches, the last of a dying race. We, who live long lives remember when your cities covered the sea floor. Now, everyone hates you; everyone hunts you. Where are humans honored? But if you serve us, we can give you the chance to be more than prey. And if the women decide to remain with you, they can stay as well."

Shartoom turned back to his people, and they pulled together into a knot, enfolding him, keeping their spears poised, their velosbows ready.

"It's a trick," Geerd said.

"Of the worst kind," Shartoom replied. "One we can neither refuse nor accept."

"I'll do it," Ayita said. "Let them take me for your children."

Shartoom cursed under his breath. "I should have known they would want something like this. What do the legends say of those who serve the Dread Ones?"

Thessen dropped his head. "According to Uyo, their spirits are lost, because they grow as wicked as their masters, and they never die, but become like shadows, doomed to wander the darkness of the Abyssal Plain in the service of Leviathan."

"Everything we have heard about the Dread Ones is true," Shartoom said, "They recruit their followers through deceit. Our souls are at stake this day, yet I would risk mine for my Ineera."

Geerd hissed. "What are you saying? Our families are lost, but we, if we willingly give ourselves to evil... We should attack instead. He is only one and we are many."

Shartoom looked around at his followers, catching the eye of each. "No. We cannot fight the Dread Ones and win. Look above us."

They raised their heads and saw the yellow eyes of a dozen Dread Ones staring down upon them from holes in the rocky cliffs, their tentacles swirling in fans behind them.

The Ooangans fell silent in horror.

A desperate, wily look crossed Shartoom's proud features. "But if we barter, we should barter well."

He broke away from the company and approached the Dread One, his strokes resolute.

"What is your answer?" the Dread One asked.

"The price is too high," Shartoom replied. "You ask too much."

The Dread One gave a low rumbling in its throat. "Then depart before we lose our patience."

"Hear me," Shartoom said. "I claim the right of the Trial of the Circle."

The Dread One gave its rattling laugh. "You are unworthy."

"I am a creche lord as my father before me. I led my hunters here, daring the depths to seek you. I have a keen eye, steady arms, and the courage of ten. I have killed the Great White single-handed. I demand the Trial."

The Dread One remained silent a long while until at last it said, "We grant your request."

Shartoom turned back to his followers, his face lit with triumph.

"What is this trial?" Geerd asked. "I know nothing of it."

"Because you did not listen closely to the old stories," Shartoom was not only strong, but wise, and remembered the ancient tales almost as well as the creche chanter. "A trial by combat."

Arc's eyes widened. "Against a Dread One?"

"Against something else, I know not what."

"Come," the Dread One commanded. "The ordeal will be held in the Pit of Confrontation."

The creature moved away, propelling itself by its powerful tentacles, and the humans followed, over a high rise and down into a shell-shaped ravine.

"Your followers will remain there," the Dread One ordered, pointing one of its tentacles at the side of the canyon.

"Shartoom," Arc said, drawing the sword he had pulled from the belly of the shark. "Take this."

Shartoom eyed the blade. "None of us has any experience with this weapon. I will trust to my spear."

"Take this too," Arc urged.

Giving his brother a grim smile, he took the sword and slipped it into his belt.

The Ooangans ranged themselves along the slope, looking down at the declivity, while Shartoom followed the Dread One to the bottom. Other Dread Ones approached, aligning themselves likewise around the circle of the pit. Arc could see a shelf near the bottom, half-concealing a long slit in the rock's side.

Shartoom drifted just above the floor, his spear held at the ready. A Dread One on the rocky slope raised a conch shell to its thin lips and blew, sending a low resonance through the waters.

In answer, thin strands flowered from the slit in the side of the pit, black lacing filaments fanning outward in a half-circle.

At Arc's side, Geerd gave an anguished cry. "Tegula!"

A head poured its way through the opening, followed by a body shaped as a manta, but with four clawed hands stretching from its wings. Brown and white and golden shells covered the creature's form, attached one by one from the time of its hatching and held in place by secretions from its skin. With such a lovely defense did the tegula adorn itself, and its filaments branched forth like cod whiskers, seeking its prey, its eyes being a little blind.

It did not seem to swim, but blossomed toward Shartoom with jellyfish strokes, and if the warrior had not instantly plunged away, he would have perished at once.

The tegula rushed past, the water through its shells chiming whispered tones, the O of its mouth sweetly glistening. The stinger on its tail shone with narcotics made to immobilize its victims.

So quickly did the tegula pass that Shartoom had no time to prepare a stroke. It rolled over in the water, turning to come again. He tried to bring his spear point up, but it was upon him too soon, leaving him only time to grasp his weapon in both hands and use it as a shield, thrusting upward, blocking its double rows of teeth. It passed above him, its wide wings pounding him against the floor.

It doubled back, beating above him, trying to crush him with its full weight. The struggle churned silt from the bottom, and Arc lost sight of him beneath the hammering wings. Precious seconds passed. Just when Shartoom seemed doomed, he shot out from the debris, propelling himself from the bottom with a desperate thrust of his legs. As he rose, he gave a heavy stroke with his spear. It bounced harmlessly off the beast's shell mail.

The tegula, who had lost sight of its prey, whirled in the direction of the blow. Shartoom dove, forced to avoid the monster's grasping claws. The head reached out, catching the spear. With a twist of its jaws, it snapped the shaft in two. While it worried the haft section, Shartoom fumbled after the spear head. He grasped it, and now beneath the monster once more, thrust upward, just beneath the tegula's throat.

Arc gave a half-cheer; it was a well-executed stroke, yet no blood poured forth, and as the tegula shifted to its side, executing a turn, it could be seen that shells protected even the creature's underside.

Shartoom pushed up again, gaining height. The tegula passed beneath him. Its spiny tail shot out, piercing Shartoom's side. The man writhed away. Arc groaned in agony. His brother had little time left before the poisons brought paralysis.

Shartoom twitched twice and suddenly grew still. His arms wavered; his hands fluttered uselessly by his side. The spear head drifted to the floor.

The tegula came round, moving almost leisurely now, coming in for the kill. Its maw opened wide at the last moment, aiming for the body.

At the last instant, Shartoom lifted his legs, coming slightly above the tegula's jaws. The small sword Arc had given him was suddenly in both his hands, taken when he had seemed to be helpless. He cut downward, a cruel thrust into the creature's left eye.

The tegula spun away, writhing, turning in circles in its death throes.

The denary shouted in triumph and fear and stroked to Shartoom's side. They surrounded him, with Arc and Ayita close to his head. Blood dripped from where the stinger had entered. His eyes were already beginning to glaze.

"For the best," he muttered. "For the best." He trembled violently.

Suddenly, a Dread One rose above them, its tentacles waving.

"The man fought well," it said. "He has courage before the kraken, as we say. The tegula is dead. If administered in time, there is an antidote for the poison. Swim back."

Cautiously, the Ooangans moved away from Shartoom. The Dread One slid down and wrapped a coiling member around their fallen leader. Arc held his spear at the ready, but the Dread One took a piece of a plant resembling seaweed and placed it to Shartoom's wound and to his lips. For an instant, there was no response, and then Shartoom moved his arms. Within moments his strength had returned. The Ooangans gave a ragged cheer and crowded close to their leader once more.

"Shartoom, you beat it!" Ayita cried.

"They have to let the others free now," Arc said.

"Yes," Shartoom said, pulling himself vertical. Looking around, he spied the sword Arc had given him. He picked it up and handed it to his brother, his eyes somber. "It was truly a gift of the sea, as I said. May it serve you as well."

Arc took it, grinning.

Shartoom addressed the Dread Ones. "I claim the victory right."

"As you say," the Dread One agreed. "You will serve us willingly?"

"I will follow you to the Abyssal Plain itself," Shartoom said, his eyes cold.

Arc's grin faded. He felt the blood drain from his face.

"My chieftain, no!" Iteemon shouted.

"But Shartoom, you won!" Arc said.

"I won the right to exchange myself for the hostages. That is the meaning of the Trial."

All the Ooangans began talking at once, but Shartoom waved them to silence.

"This happened because of my pride," he said. "The responsibility is mine; the sacrifice must be mine as well. The creche lord gives his life for his creche."

Arc clutched Shartoom's shoulders and looked up into his brother's face. "Shartoom, please! Don't do it. Nothing will ever be right again!"

Shartoom's eyes, always so cold and imperious, softened as he looked upon Arc. "You're right. It won't. But that is the way of the world. Things change, but the creche will survive. It seems you must bear the burden of leadership even earlier than I did." Shartoom took his brother's hand.

He then beckoned to Ayita. "Little sister."

Ayita drew near and Shartoom placed her hand and Arc's together between his own two hands.

"We'll never see you again," Arc gasped. "You can't go."

"You mustn't try to stop me. And if you ever see me again, flee, knowing I am no longer my own master, but the servant of your enemies." Shartoom's voice fell almost to a whisper, and he clutched their hands harder, so tight it hurt. He gave a brave smile, but his voice broke slightly as he said, "You are twins, the blessing of the Sea King. Take care of one another for my sake."

He gripped them once more, then turned, and the hand of every hunter went out as if to restrain him, but only touched his shoulders, his arms, his back.

"I am ready," he told the Dread One.

The Dread One laughed; its scorn swept over the company. "Enter our caves, then."

"Not until you swear by the Olosi to release all the others unharmed."

The Dread One's tentacles swirled as if it had been struck. "That name is forbidden here. What do you know of it?"

"I know when the Dread Ones swear by the Olosi, they keep their word."

The Dread One gave another rumble; its arms beat against the sides of the rock face, sending showers of stones drifting to the bottom, but at last it touched a tentacled hand to its forehead and said, "I swear by the Olosi that your families and these men will swim free. Now enter the home of the Dread Ones, and we will teach you all there is to know of pleasure and pain."

"Our families first," Shartoom said.

The Dread One hissed, but said, "Your kin."

It waved a tentacle and one by one the wives and children of the creche slipped from a cave behind the creature. Once free, they rushed out, whimpering and crying in terror, clutching their men with terrible savagery. Shartoom's wife and children left the cave last, as if the Dread Ones knew exactly whose family they were. Lady Ineera hurried into Shartoom's arms, but he took her by the shoulders, kissed her fiercely, and handed her to Geerd. He hugged his two children, Jessoon and Myrmry, then passed them back as well, where the hunters gripped them, knowing what must come next.

"Welcome," the Dread One said.

Ineera shrieked and Shartoom's children wailed as Arc's brother swam to the Dread One, and it was all the hunters could do to hold them back. The other hostages cried out as well, filling the water with their shrieks. Shartoom's face was gray as the stones beneath his feet, but he held his head high; Arc later swore he swaggered before his new masters as he swam across the rock shelf. A lump blocked Arc's throat; salt flowed from his eyes.

When Shartoom vanished into the depths of the cave the women and children fell silent and ceased their struggles. Then Arc knew how awful the nest must be, for he saw in their faces that they would never return there, not even for the sake of love.

The Dread One raised a shadowed tentacle and pointed along the rift. "Go. We have been merciful."

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THEY made the long trek through the canyon, swimming in formation with the ransomed at the center. Arc sought to take his position at the outer edge, but Geerd said, "No, Arcurian. Now you must swim in the place of honor, for you are the hope of the creche."

Arc floated dumbfounded an instant. Even when he made his way to the middle of the formation, he refused to take his brother's post so soon, but left a gap where Shartoom should have been. He called Ayita to him.

"Sister, will you swim to my right?"

Ayita bowed her head in acknowledgment, a slight flush to her face, the place to the creche lord's right being reserved for his most trusted adviser. They clasped hands, silently sharing their horror and grief, then fell into position. At Arc's hesitant command, the denary moved on.

They quickly came to the shark carcass. The pup still nuzzled against it, crying for its mother.

"Kill that beast," Ayita said bitterly. "Put it out of its misery, so we don't have to hear it."

Arc left the formation, his spear raised. The shark moved in slow circles, an ugly, deadly hunter.

"Mommma!" it mourned.

Arc swam above the pup, taking careful aim. Its cold eyes stared up, unsuspecting.

He lowered the spear, let it drift to the bottom, and drew the sword that had killed the tegula. He stared at its glistening edge. "No," he said, his voice sounding to his own ears as if spoken by another.

Ayita, now by his side, raised her eyebrows, her voice accusing. "Will you spare it?"

Arc looked around at the hunters and back at the sword. "Perhaps it too is a gift from the Sea-King. I will tame it, instead."

"No one can master a shark," Ayita said.

"No one has ever owned one that speaks," Arc replied. "Bind it. We will take it with us."

Ayita looked him full in the eyes. "Are you certain?"

As Arc returned her stare, he realized he did not know the answer. He felt foolish and stubborn and angry. He did not know everything he felt. All he knew was that his brother was gone, an outcast, alone, without tribe or family.

"We have lost Shartoom," he finally said, as if that explained it, his voice barely under control.

"But, father was—"

Arc cut her off. "Geerd, Thessen, find a way to capture it. And don't lose a finger."

"Are you going to name it, too?" Ayita demanded. Her cheeks were dark, her eyes furious, but he met her gaze. For the first time, the burden of leadership fell upon him, sudden as the bite of a sea snake.

"I will call it Mercy."

"Mercy?"

His voice grew so soft Ayita could scarcely hear the words. "Sister, our tribe needs a symbol of hope. Shartoom turned away the wrath of the Dread Ones; I will grant mercy to a beast that has none. And from this time forth, we will celebrate today as a day not of sorrow, but of sacrifice and forgiveness."

Without waiting for her stunned reply, he swam slowly back to the denary. He did not spare the shark's life for pity; he had none for those terrible beasts. Neither would he show mercy for B'tat once he found him. But on the anniversary of his father's death and the day of his brother's loss, the Creche Lord of the Tula kin took a Great White for a pet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Stoddard lives in a mysterious and unexpected canyon on the plains of Texas. When not writing fantasy novels and short stories, he is an audio engineer, fighting a heroic battle against Too Much Kick Drum. He is best known for having once attended a party in the Hollywood hills with the writers of *The Dating Game*. In a moment of passionate insanity, he rewrote William Hope Hodgson's masterpiece, *The Night Land*, in order to bring its difficult prose to a wider audience, an act some have called "an abomination." But he sometimes gazes at the cover of *The Night Land, A Story Retold*, by William Hope Hodgson and James Stoddard, and smiles and smiles. www.james-stoddard.com

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JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS is the best-selling editor of numerous anthologies, plus the magazines *Nightmare* and the Hugo Award-winning *Lightspeed*, and is a producer for *WIRED's The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast.



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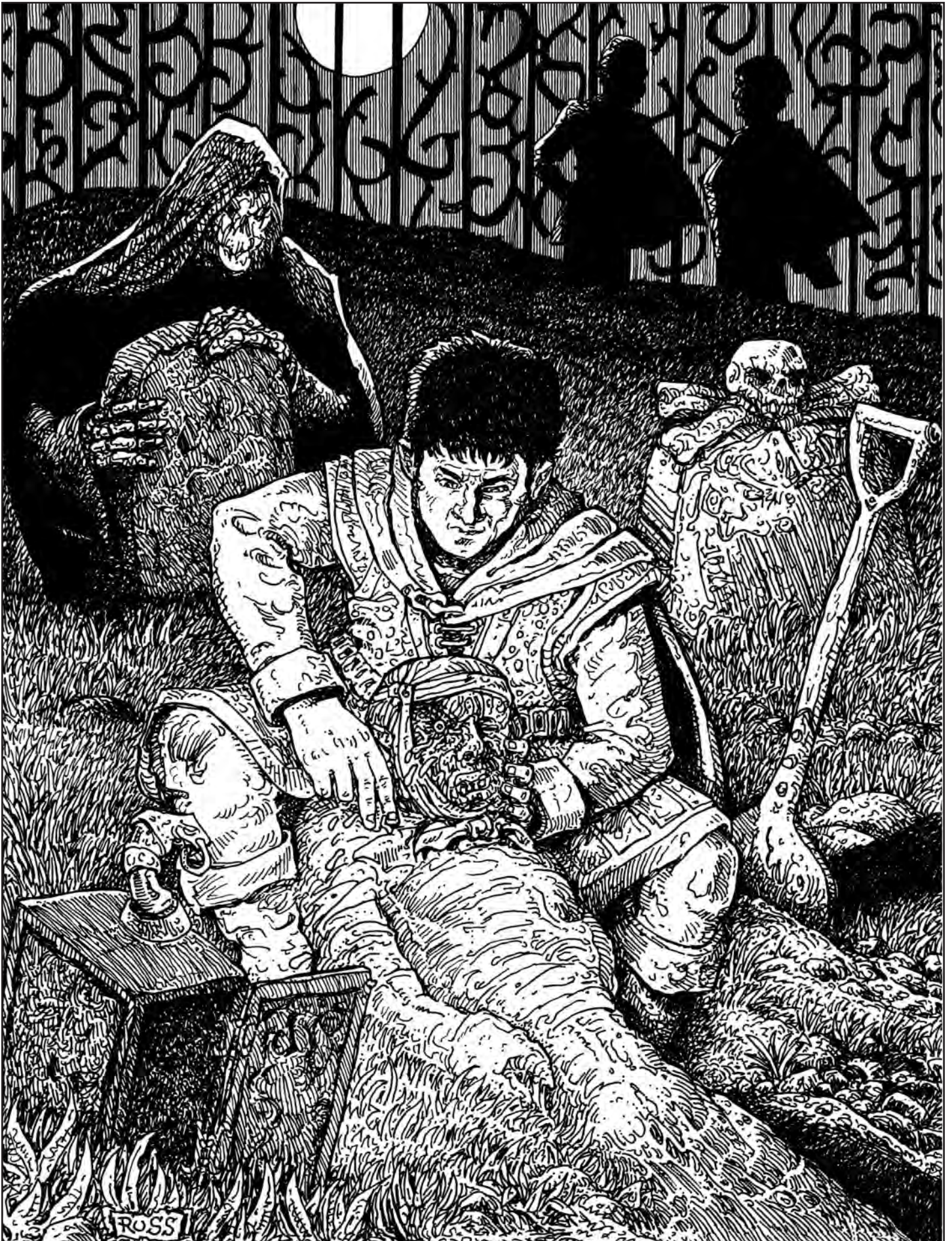


ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS NICHOLSON

STOLEN WITNESS

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

“THEY appear to be dead,” Morlock remarked. “Alive or dead, they were just meat—not even good enough for sausage,” snapped Naevros syr Tol. “Damn it, what else do you see? Or what don’t you see?”

Morlock syr Theorn, also called Ambrosius, moved into the domed chamber, hitching the gray cape up on the lower of his slightly crooked shoulders. He knelt down to examine the prone forms below the empty pedestal of the Stone. They weren’t moving; the eyelids gaped open, and he could see that the sheen was fading from the eyes—they were drying out. He closed the eyes, and perfunctorily covered the lifeless hands with the capes of their former owners.

Those capes were gray like his—they too had been thains, the lowest rank in the Graith of Guardians. He had known them fairly well: Kinian and Stockrey. They had been the keepers of the Witness Stone, a block of ruddy gray marble freighted with an ancient magic: the stone that had been atop this pedestal yesterday evening, when Morlock had last stood beneath this dome—the stone that was now missing.

“It must have happened last night,” he remarked to Naevros, standing impatiently in the broad arched doorway. “The bodies are cold, though not stiff.”

“The stone can’t have gotten far then,” Defender Naevros syr Tol replied ironically. “Shall we check the nearby alleys?”

Morlock grunted. “How fast does a stone move, do you suppose?”

“Faster if it has a bad conscience. We’ll be on the lookout for a nervous stone. What are you doing?”

Morlock had half his body out one of the dome-chamber’s high arched windows. After keenly eyeing the sheer surface of the cliff-wall that fell to the River Ruleijn below, he pulled his head back inside and said, “Well. If the stone did not walk out of here, I don’t think it was lowered from these windows. There’s no sign of the necessary tackle on any of the window-frames, and I believe the stone would have left some mark on the cliff wall; it angles out slightly.”

“Magic may have been used.”

Morlock shrugged his crooked shoulders. “Someone with that much magic at his—”

“Or her.”

“—disposal would have cast a wilderment on the stone and carted it out onto the street.”

“Carted it?”

“Yes. One of the two-wheeled carts the dwarves use. They—”

“I’ve seen wheel-barrows. It would have taken more than one person.”

“More than one thief? No.”

“Explain yourself, Thain Morlock,” Naevros said.

“The stone was stolen because it was unique. Would the thief share it when there was no need?”

“More than one pair of hands would have been needed to heft it down from the pedestal.”

Morlock shrugged his crooked shoulders and gestured at the fallen men.

“You’re suggesting that the thief used the Stone to place a compulsion on the thain-guards?” Naevros asked.

“That is its use,” Morlock pointed out. “In rapport with it, a powerful seer can force his will on one in physical contact with the stone. The Graith uses it to test the truth of witnesses, but—”

“Or her will. Thank you, thain; as I indicated, I know what the stone is for.” Naevros paused. “Then we are looking for a seer, a great one at that. Is it one of your skills?”

Unaccountably, Morlock blushed and looked down at his own hands. “Not especially,” he admitted. “I am—a maker of things.”

“Like your father.”

“Yes,” Morlock replied flatly. His natural father, Merlin Ambrosius, had been exiled for treason before he was born. He had been raised by dwarves in the Northhold. He disliked discussing his father, either father.

Naevros, understanding this, remarked, “I remember when your father gave witness a generation ago. It was not until he put his hands on the Stone that I believed the accusations—that he had tried to destroy the Graith and seize the kingship.”

Morlock listened patiently but said nothing.

“Your father was a traitor—to the Graith and to the realm he swore to guard.”

“Yes.”

“In my opinion, we seek another such. Do you see the logic?”

Morlock’s eyes unfocused in abstraction, then he nodded briskly.

“Then I won’t explain my reasoning. The Graith of Guardians has charged me to investigate this matter. I have chosen you as thain-attendant to assist me. You will find the task difficult. Do you accept it?”

“Yes.”

“Then stand beside me. We have an awkward interview ahead of us.”

• • •

NAEVROS called to a thain standing outside the arched door, and in a few moments four senior Guardians were led into the domed chamber. First came Illion, sometimes called the Wise, with his dark mop of hair and his jester's face, and Noreê, with her ice-blue eyes, ice-white hair, ice-white scar seaming the side of her face. Both of them, like Naevros, wore the red cloaks of defenders. Behind them came the summoners in their white cloaks: Lernaion, his skin dark and wrinkled, his iron-gray hair curling tightly against his head, and Bleys, with no more hair than a turtle, which he resembled somewhat otherwise. His pink triangular face, on its long wrinkled neck, looked like it had just emerged from its shell to assess its surroundings with cold reptilian eyes.

"Guardians," Naevros began, "I wonder if you know why I asked you here."

Illion laughed. "I thought it was to thank me for Morlock's services. You remember I recommended him to you."

Lernaion looked startled and annoyed. "I did, too... with some reservations."

"I didn't," Noreê said flatly. "You all know how I feel about an Ambrosius in the Graith."

Bleys, whose crooked shoulders betrayed him as an Ambrosius, almost as much as Morlock, and who had given Morlock's infamous father his first training in magic, chuckled briefly. In a voice whose warmth contrasted strangely with his reptilian appearance he remarked, "I didn't recommend him either, my dear. All I know about him is what you know, that he is his father's son. Which means I know precisely nothing."

"That aptly describes—"

"A moment, please," Naevros said. He gestured at the thains standing in the doorway; four of them came and carried out the lifeless bodies of their comrades. This solemn act broke the atmosphere of bantering and back-biting, as Naevros had intended.

"It is one of you, my friends," he said. "One of you murdered those men and stole the Stone. One of you is a traitor to the Graith."

"Conceivable," Lernaion conceded, grudgingly. "It would take a seer of considerable talent to use the Stone independently. There are few of us."

"There are four of you. Perhaps you know others outside our Graith. But they would be afraid to steal the Stone, even if they desired it, because of you. And we can discount a seer of such remarkable talent entering from the unguarded lands to steal the Stone."

"It is just barely possible," Noreê disagreed. "And there are other possibilities you are ignoring. But continue with your hypothesis. One of us stole the Stone. And...? What is your purpose in thus warning the culprit?"

Naevros smiled. "I look for the cooperation of the innocent Guardians, of course. I cannot detect the thief and watch all of you. I ask you to watch each other. And watch my back."

"Aren't you neglecting the possibility we are all complicit?" asked Illion.

Naevros returned. "Are you?"

Illion smiled slowly. "If I possessed such power, I might share it with Noreê and, possibly, Jordel. Perhaps even you, Naevros. I would not share it with Lernaion and Bleys."

Lernaion was amused. "And I might share it with Bleys, but not with either of you. You are already too powerful. Yes, I see your point, Naevros. I think you can trust us to distrust each other."

"Then I will ask you to excuse us. My thain and I have work to do."

The four suspect Guardians filed out, Lernaion (at least) clearly irritated at being dismissed. Illion paused at the door and called back, "Morlock, are you going to attend Kinian's funeral?"

Morlock looked at Naevros. "It will be within the next hour or two," he explained to the Thain. "Kinian's people are Earth-Healers."

Naevros made a face. Earth-Healers believed that early burial in bare earth somehow preserved the soul for the afterlife. "I can't spare you," he said. "The trail is cold enough as it stands."

Morlock nodded impassively and shrugged at Illion.

"I'll pay your respects, then," Illion said. "Good hunting, you two." He left.

"You knew Kinian?" Naevros asked.

Morlock nodded. "I trained him on this duty."

"Yes, you were guarding the Stone until a month or so ago, weren't you? I suppose, if the thief's timing had been different, it would have been you carried out of here for burial."

Morlock's eyes narrowed and his expression harshened imperceptibly. He shrugged.

All of which Naevros mentally translated as, Like hell it would. He said aloud, "All right; let's cut the chatter and get to work."

• • •

LATER, around midnight, Naevros was in his house getting ready for sleep. A knock came at his front door. He had no nightwatcher, and his housekeeper had long since gone home. He hesitated, then called out: "I'll be down in a minute." Instead of going to the door, however, he went to a window at the front of his house on the upper floor and looked out. He could not see the door from where he stood; nonetheless, what he did see prompted him to throw on a tunic, seize a nearby sword (there was always one nearby in his house) and climb out a back window with cat-like agility. He crept around to the front of the house and silently approached the person standing on his doorstep. It was Noreê; she was knocking again. And, as she pounded on the door with her left hand, she held a drawn sword in her right.

"Noreê," Naevros said.

She turned on her heel, no surprise twisting her pale clear-cut features. She brought the sword on guard, then thrust. He beat the blade aside and riposted. She barely blocked his sword by bringing it into a bind. He let her. They stood there a moment or two.

"Naevros."

"Noreê."

"Why was this a bad idea?"

Naevros chuckled. "I suppose because there was only one person who could ever keep his feet in a sword-fight with me. And I stabbed him in the back centuries ago."

"Then I should have attacked you, not in your strength, but in your weakness?"

"Unless you thought you could catch me off-guard with a stupid trick. People do try them, you know."

“No. I’m trying to make a point.”

“Isn’t that a little patronizing? I already know I am not your match as a seer. Few, if any, are. That is precisely why the Graith entrusted me with this inquiry—because I am not a suspect.”

“The range of suspects is wider than you suspect.”

“Beautifully phrased. What do you mean by it?”

“Suppose someone stole the Witness Stone not to use it but to destroy it. They might fear its use against themselves or someone they care about.”

“Unlikely.”

“It seems so to me, too, but we cannot know whether the thief might have had reason, or thought he—”

“Or she.”

“—had reason to fear. Or the thief may have stolen the Stone because he hated it—because it had been used to harm someone he cared about.”

“Or she cared about.”

“No. This is not a general accusation. You know who I—”

“I know who you mean. It’s a good one. Tell me another.”

“Morlock may have stolen it for someone else under a compulsion. He guarded the Stone recently. The spell may have been placed then.”

“Hand of God. Noreê, do you check under your bed at night to see if Merlin is hiding there?”

“You never understood how dangerous old Ambrosius is. Nor do you understand his son’s vulnerability.”

“But you do, and you’re prepared to use it to suit yourself. All right, Noreê, since we’re being so frank: you say that Morlock did it. I think you did it, you heartless cwen. I think you swanned into that chamber behind that icy mask of a thousand plausible reasons; I think you possessed the guards, made them load the Stone on a cart and then you killed them.”

“Is there anything that will shake your preconceptions?”

“It is not a preconception; it is the most likely hypothesis. Present me with a better. And, please, no more hand-waving about Morlock. I don’t share your monomania regarding the Ambrosii.”

“He is under a compulsion. That I can show you.”

Naevros looked at her speculatively.

“You asked us to watch your back. Did you set anyone to watch your thain’s?”

“If anything has happened to him, Noreê, I will take it personally.”

“Skip the threats, Defender. Come with me to the graveyard. Morlock is digging up Kinian’s body. And if he is sane then—then I am a horseradish.”

“That would explain your crisp, bitter savor. Excuse me.” He took three steps back without lowering his sword or breaking eye-contact and called out, “Thain Aloê!”

A dark-skinned young woman, dressed in gray, stepped from behind a nearby tree. She walked up to stand next to Naevros. Somewhat shamefacedly, she met Noreê’s astonished blue eyes.

“You’ve heard our conversation,” he stated rather than asked.

“Yes.”

“Is what she says about Morlock true?”

“I don’t know. I followed her from the Stone’s Chamber, as you commanded. She has been in my sight since then. The last hour she

spent at a graveyard, watching somebody scratch in the dirt. Then she came here.”

“Well done. Go now to Illion’s house; tell him what has happened and have him meet us at the graveyard. Hurry.”

Aloê nodded and was gone.

“Naevros,” said Noreê slowly, lowering her sword, “I misjudged you.”

“You think my taste in thains is improving, eh? Aloê is remarkable. She is my real assistant in this matter—I only made a show of picking that Morlock fellow to distract you four. Lernaion and Illion have travelled with him, and Bleys is kin to him, and you hate him. It baffled you all so that none of you, I think, realized that another pair of eyes was watching you.”

“Aloê’s?”

“Aloê watched you. She is my best, and I thought (and still think) you are the likeliest culprit. Others watched the others. Let’s go to your graveyard.”

“Would you put some pants on, first? I don’t relish being seen around town with a half-naked Naevros.”

“All or nothing, eh? I see your point.”

• • •

THE Earth-Shall-Heal Brotherhood kept a graveyard well outside the city’s ancient disused walls. Naevros knew where it was, but he allowed Noreê to lead him. They came at last to the rough stone wall of the graveyard and peered over. Naevros saw Morlock’s crook-shouldered frame perhaps a dozen paces away, crouching down, clawing a hole in a heap of freshly laid earth with both hands. A lantern glowed nearby on a halo of green grass.

“He’s not much of a credit to his dwarvish foster-kin,” Naevros muttered. “He must have been at this for hours, and he hasn’t dug the body out yet.”

“But he doesn’t work constantly. He—Look!”

Morlock threw his head back and pressed the heels of his hands against his forehead, as if he were trying to keep it from blowing apart. Presently he recovered and returned to scraping at the dirt.

“What is happening?” Naevros demanded. “Can you read it with your Sight?”

“He is in contact with something—that’s all I can tell. If I try to impinge upon his contact, both he and whatever is reaching him will become aware of me.”

“Hm. You’re right to refrain, then. We need to know what’s happening here before we expose our hand. Your guess?”

“He is under a compulsion. He is being operated by a powerful seer through the medium of the Stone. Periodically, he resists the compulsion, but in the end must obey.”

“The Stone can control someone from such a distance?”

Noreê shrugged. “Once a spell is placed, while the victim is in physical contact with the Stone, distance is really of no importance. The connection is not material.”

“It could be the other way around, though.”

“What? That he is acting under his own will, but periodically resisting control?”

“Yes.”

Noreê was irritated. "Why would he dig up a dead body?"

"Why would the thief-seer compel him to?" Naevros rejoined.

Noreê shrugged.

They watched in silence as Morlock slowly cleared the upper half of Kinian's body, pausing frequently to clutch his skull or rock back and forth in evident distress. Finally he reached into the grave hole and dragged the body out without trying to free the legs. Then he bent down and plucked at the lifeless body's eyes.

"What—?" Naevros began to ask, then Morlock tossed whatever it was toward his lantern, and Naevros saw the shapeless white form hit the grass. "Ah. Grave worms."

"There will be rats about, also," Noreê said indifferently. "You see how red the side of his face is? He has been gnawed somewhat."

Naevros gulped a few times, then shook his head. After all, it was not as if Kinian were still alive.

Morlock had another attack of shuddering, then hefted the body up across his crooked shoulders. He picked up his lantern and staggered to the cemetery gate. The gate was standing wide; Morlock passed through without looking back, pausing only for his shuddering, wheezing fits. Stealthily, the two Defenders followed him away.

Aloê soon caught up with them, as the crooked, corpse-bearing figure ahead of them stumbled and staggered up the rough country road.

"Illion and Lernaion are not at home," she whispered to Naevros. "The thains you sent to watch them are sleeping on Illion's front steps."

Naevros muttered in irritation. Noreê laughed lightly.

It was not long before the halting, burdened figure they followed led them to a house they all knew: Bleys' redstone-spired mansion, with its great enclosed garden, on the edge of the city. Here Morlock paused, as if assessing how to enter with a corpse over his shoulder. A shadow detached itself from other shadows on the opposite side of the road and approached the deranged thain.

"Morlock," the shadow whispered in Illion's voice, "what are you doing?"

"He," Morlock said thickly. "I. Knew. Touched the stone. They were dying inside. Always dying, never dead. He. They were talking talking talking in the stone. He. Saw. Me. I. I. I. No! I. No! I. No! I. No! No! No!" He hissed suddenly and turned away from Illion, staring at the road, his face twisting horribly in the shadows.

"Illion," said Naevros quietly as they came up.

"Naevros," Illion said with a nod. "Noreê. Aloê."

"What are you doing, Illion?" Naevros asked. "And is Lernaion with you?"

"He was. He and I decided to pool our strength and watch Bleys. We didn't consider each other likely suspects, and we knew you and Noreê would keep tabs on each other."

"How?" Noreê demanded sharply.

"Lucky guess," said Illion the Wise. "We ditched some thains who were watching us (I'm sorry, Naevros—we didn't know if they were yours or Bleys') and came here. Lernaion tried to read the place with his Sight while I stayed apart from the rapport.

Lernaion claimed to read considerable disturbance, then this fellow—" he gestured at Morlock "—climbed out over the garden wall and ran like a rabbit up the road."

"And Lernaion went in," Naevros guessed.

"Yes. Unwisely, I thought. It seemed likely that Morlock had gone for help. I thought we should wait until it arrived. I think we may agree that none of us is a match for Bleys alone?"

"No one is," Noreê said flatly. "Except old Ambrosius, I suppose. These damn Ambrosii."

"Damn Ambrosii!" shouted Morlock, startling the others. "Damn Ambrosii! You. He. Thinks. He. Has. Master word. Secret name. I. I. I. Am. Am. Am. Not. Not. Not." He concluded in a guttural clatter of consonants that might or might not have been Dwarvish words.

"What is he carrying?" Illion asked the other three. "Is it—?"

"It's Kinian's body," Naevros replied. "We watched him dig it up in the Earth-Healers' Yard."

"Poor old Kinian."

"Illion," said Noreê with an air of at last coming into intelligent company (which irritated Naevros very much), "Illion, do you think Morlock may have killed Kinian under a compulsion from Bleys? This strange behavior, it seems to me, might be a mix of magical compulsion and guilt."

"Maybe," Illion said noncommittally. "The Stone's power and Morlock's troubled psyche were bound to be a volatile mix. You know what I would do, Noreê?"

"Not mix them."

"Exactly. I think whoever did so may be regretting it. Where is he going now?"

Morlock had shuffled away from them toward the wrought iron gate set into the ivy-covered redstone wall.

"It's locked, and sealed with a spell," Illion said. "But Lernaion found it fairly easy to—"

Morlock's left hand was at the lock. There were two or three metallic scraping sounds and the gate drifted open, its lock sprung.

"—climb over," Illion finished wryly. "Remind me to have the locks on my house changed. Bleys did them."

They followed the crooked man, bearing a corpse on his back and a light in his hand, into the wizard's garden. Presently they came to two white-cloaked forms lying still in deep grass, gray in the shadows. One, nearer them, lay on its face. It was motionless, not breathing. It had been Lernaion. The other, lying on its back, breathing deeply, was Bleys.

Between them, set into the earth, and half-hidden by the grass, was the Witness Stone.

Illion looked piercingly at Bleys for a moment, then laughed. "Noreê, do you see it?"

"I'm not sure what you see. Nothing here is clear to me."

Naevros nodded in baffled agreement.

"Morlock is not under a compulsion from Bleys. Bleys is under a compulsion from Morlock. Morlock is holding him still—has been doing it all this while."

"That's not funny, Illion," Noreê said impatiently. "Bleys is Bleys. Perhaps Morlock's father could have..." Her voice trailed off thoughtfully.

"Perhaps he is," Naevros said. "Through his son. I'm afraid you were right, Noreê." He moved up to where Morlock was inching toward the Stone.

"Hey!" Illion shouted. "You don't understand! Don't—"

But Naevros had done it, punching Morlock deftly on his left temple. It wasn't intended to knock him out, or even knock him down, simply to disrupt his concentration and allow Bleys to free himself.

Unfortunately, it worked. In the next instant, every living thing in the garden was pervaded by the power of Bleys' mind.

• • •

THE compulsive rapport of the Stone was like the rapture of vision. The material world and its distances fell away. They saw knowledge and will, life and conscious being, with only a thin flickering underlay of preconscious matter.

Bleys was the center of their universe, a green-gold pillar of light that rose into forever above the Witness Stone, a well of terrible darkness, a wound in the world. Naevros was aware of the others' inner selves around him: Illion a web of blue lightning, Noreê a river of icy light, Aloê a keen brightness, like the edge of a blade, Morlock a column of black and white flames. He read their helplessness, as complete as his own before the great seer.

Thank you for freeing me, my dears, Bleys' awareness whispered to theirs with painful directness. *Young Ambrosius proved both more powerful and more hostile than I had anticipated.*

You see how it is with the Stone, Bleys whispered. *It stands hardly used, a truth-teller to the Graith when they suspect a witness of lying. Yet it is so much more—an unparalleled instrument of power, a well of knowledge.*

Naevros' awareness rippled with horror, thinking of the knowledge that might be in the Stone. He heard voices... voices whispering in the Stone.

They went in, Bleys said, *but they could not come out. They were not strong enough. Every generation since it was made, in the earliest days before the Realm, it has eaten a soul or two. They swarm with knowledge of lost worlds, yet they cannot come out. You will enter those dead worlds for me, my dears. You are strong and wise. You will not lose yourself among the dead and forget your mission. And if you do... well, I will find other agents, perhaps. And you will live in the Stone, adding your powers to mine, exulting in my victories and my new understandings, and perhaps that will be a fulfillment for you.*

Naevros felt the horror of the others as poignantly as his own. He felt their own futile struggle to resist.

Except for Morlock. As the others shrank back, or tried to, Morlock willed himself forward. Bleys tried to keep him away, for reasons none of the other four understood. But he could not at once compel Morlock to stop and the other four to advance, not when they were all in the same forced rapport.

Pull away, the thought came from Illion and Noreê simultaneously. *Give Morlock his chance.*

The compulsion weakened. Bleys was spread too thin, trying to master the two great seers and Morlock pulling in separate move-

ments of will. Naevros found that, if he concentrated, he could look past the veil of truth and see the void of matter and energy which was the only world he knew and understood.

He forced his body to take a step—not away from Bleys, but (like Morlock) toward him. Whatever Morlock intended to do, Naevros wanted to reach Bleys and wring his wrinkled, sagging neck. It was not the subtlest possible solution to their predicament. But, if it worked, that would satisfy Naevros.

But it was not going to be easy. At the first step he stumbled and nearly went down. He knew if he did then he would never be able to rise again. So he took all the time he needed to steady himself. Then he took a second step—to one side of the Witness Stone, headed for Bleys. In ten more steps he might be within arm's reach. He clenched his teeth and steadied himself for the third step.

Morlock had meanwhile reached the Witness Stone. Naevros saw the thain drop his dead peer on the Witness Stone, so that the dead man's rat-gnawed face lay on the rough red surface.

Kinian! called spirit-Morlock, like a charcoal drawing of a man on fire, shouting into a well of utter darkness, *Kinian come back!*

The dead man screamed.

Naevros perhaps alone heard it, a harsh, choked keening in the earth-blocked throat. They all felt it, radiating from Kinian's mind: the tickle of maggots wriggling in their flesh, the struggle to breathe through the dirt in their parched mouths, the horror of blind eyes and motionless hands as the earth consumed them...

Then, abruptly, the forced rapport was gone. The spirit-world was gone and the only light came from Morlock's lantern and the stars above the garden wall.

"I have him again," Morlock remarked quietly into the breathing night. "It's easier than before. I think he's in some sort of withdrawal."

"Must be nice," muttered Illion, and gave a weak laugh.

Naevros shook his head in wonder at Illion's resilience. He felt as if he'd never laugh again. He bent down and touched the shoulder of the newly alive Kinian, who was sobbing and coughing up chunks of dirt. Aloê was suddenly at his side, and together they led the weeping man to the garden fountain. They stripped him of the verminous grave clothes and washed him in the fountain. He drank deep of the clean, cold water and at last fell asleep on a pile of cloaks under the clean, cold stars.

• • •

"HOW did you know it was Bleys?" Naevros asked Morlock later. The garden was almost crowded: with thains, and the kin of Kinian and Stockrey, and the newly revived Stockrey and Lernaion, both telling all who would listen (they were many) about the world of ghosts inside the Witness Stone. Morlock had found a place out of the way and was drinking a jar of wine from Bleys' cellar.

Morlock shrugged wearily and said, "I thought you knew. I thought it was obvious. It had to be Bleys, or my father working through me. I thought that's what you meant in the Chamber of the Stone, about my father. I knew it wasn't that, so I worked on the other."

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"Hm." Naevros pondered telling Morlock that he had selected him merely to baffle the various suspects, then thought better of it. "So you came in here..."

"The Stone was under a wilderment, so I had to search the garden by touch. It took a long time, and Bleys must have been watching me. When I touched the Stone he was already in rapport. He... tried to compel me. I resisted."

"You mean you smacked him to the ground."

"I heard the voices in the Stone. I read what had happened in his awareness—how he had sent Kinian and Stockrey into the void within the Stone, how there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of dead souls in it. He said he had done it to explore the dead world, to gain knowledge. But the Stone let me read his heart: in truth, he had tried to use the Stone to wipe their memories, so that they couldn't testify against him, and the Stone had swallowed them whole." He paused, then said flatly, "It made me angry."

"Remind me never to irritate you."

"When Summoner Lernaion entered the garden he touched the Stone. I lost control for a moment. I seized Bleys again as he was sending Lernaion into the void. I was sorry I couldn't prevent it."

"It doesn't seem to have hurt him." Naevros took the jar from Morlock's hands and drank. "Ugh."

"It is pretty bad."

"'Pretty bad,' he says. It's the most repugnant, purple, resinous goo that ever offered itself as wine. And I thought you were saving some for me."

Aloê appeared out of the shadows and said to Naevros, "Bleys wants to see him. At his earliest possible convenience." Clearly him was Morlock, though she did not so much as look his way. "Noreê said it would be all right," she added.

"'All right,' she says," Naevros repeated disapprovingly. "I deplore this meiotic tendency among the rising generation. It's more than 'all right.' It's an unparalleled opportunity to gloat. But make sure that your earliest possible convenience is some time from now."

Morlock stood, and Aloê jumped abruptly to one side. "I want to sleep. You can tell Bleys, if you like," he said to Aloê, "that I will see him tomorrow, my duties permitting."

Naevros saluted him with the jar.

Morlock smiled, and said as he turned away, "You can keep the wine."

"I can. But I won't. Illion is creeping around here somewhere..."

Morlock slipped past the milling crowd and through the open gate, out of the wizard's garden. The road was dark, and he had left his lantern behind. He turned away from the graveyard, toward the lights of the living city. Beyond it, in the western sky, the first faint signs of dawn were showing.

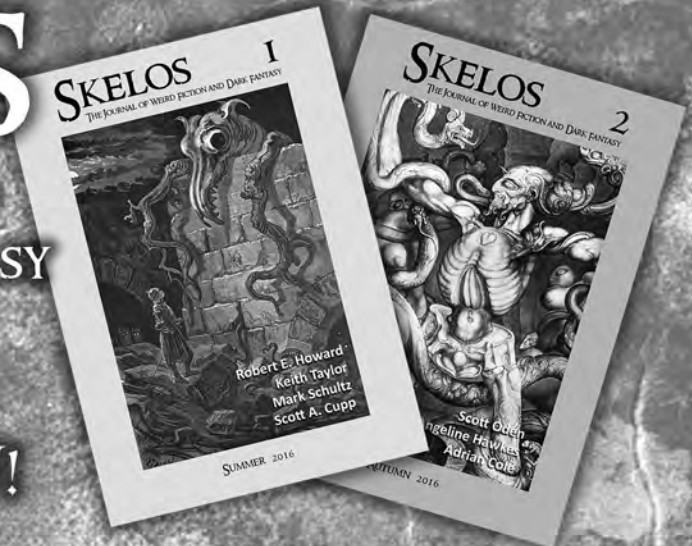
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Enge lives in northwest Ohio with his wife and two crime-fighting dog-detectives. He teaches Latin and classics at a medium-sized public university. He has published six novels and a raft of stories, many of them about Morlock Ambrosius, including the World Fantasy Award nominee *Blood of Ambrose* (Pyr, 2009) and *The Wide World's End* (Pyr, 2015). You can reach him on Twitter (twitter.com/jamesenge) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/james.enge).

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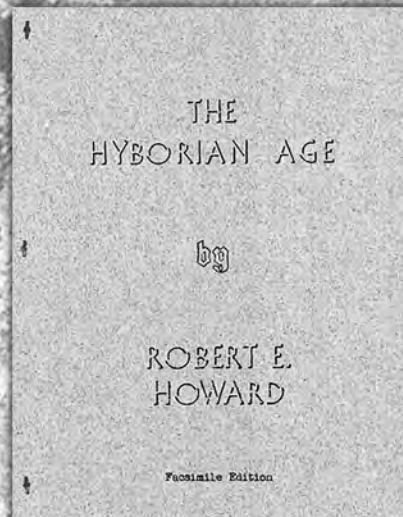
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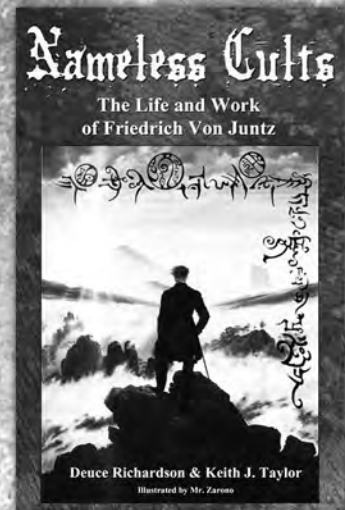
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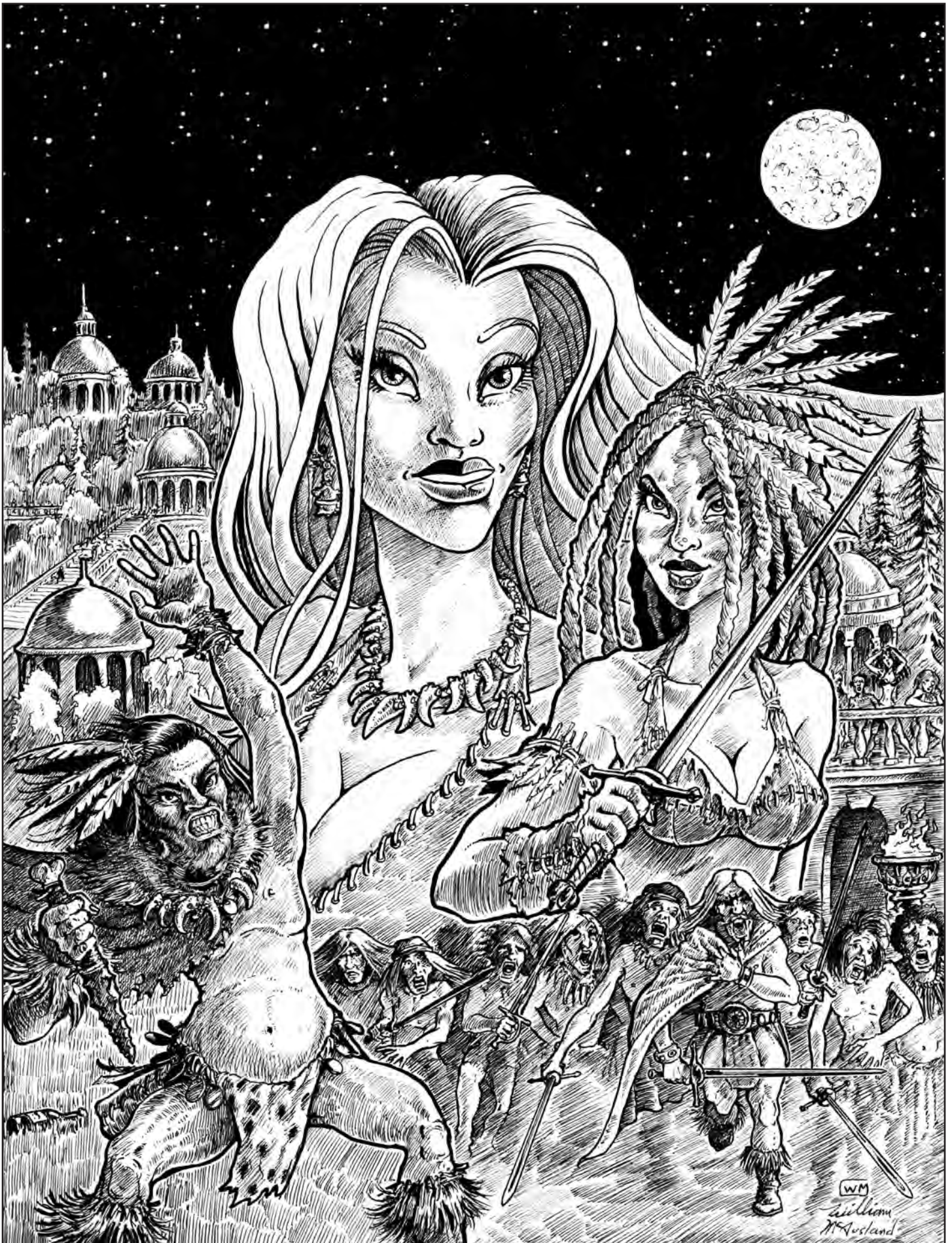


ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM MCAUSLAND

BLOOD OF THE FOREST-BORN

An Anla and Lanci Story

By **NATHAN LONG**

SEGAVIANS believed that the source of the Haatas' mystic powers was their hair. Thus all Haata living in Segavian lands were required by law to shave their heads, and might be jailed or hung if they didn't. Knowing this, Anla felt quite peculiar putting on the heavy dreadlocked wig she'd stolen from the theatre the previous night. Though Haata herself, she had never dared grow locks, never even shown more than the finest of stubble before she took a razor to her scalp.

Now, as she felt the heavy weight of the matted strands hanging down her back, and saw herself in the polished brass mirror propped above the wash basin in Lanci's cramped fifth floor rookery, she wondered if the Segavians were right. It wasn't her hair, but something about wearing it still made her feel powerful.

"Ain't you the proper savage," said Lanci, stuffing her generous bosom into a buckskin halter that was no part of any real Haata dress. "Maybe too proper. We'll be stopped in the street before we get to the hill with you looking like that. You look like your forest dwelling ancestors come to life."

Anla turned reluctantly from the mirror and strapped on her rapier — the sheath of which Lanci had wrapped in vines and leaves to keep to the theme. "Isn't that the point of the ball?"

Lanci sat on her pillow-festooned cot and began lacing up elaborate sandals which were also not-in-the-least Haata. "The point of the ball, ninny, is to give noble young Segavians an excuse to wear as little as possible, drink too much, and tickle each others' fancies. I'm sure a real Haata Yindo isn't a drunken orgy, now is it?"

"Yintu," said Anla. "Yintu Tahil. Singing to the Moon. And I don't know. Mine wasn't. Just a bunch of mumbo-jumbo in the Gramalda Woods at Spring Moon in my sixteenth year. Made me embarrassed is all. Supposed to be... wilder when the tribes do it, but..."

She shrugged. She was a city girl. Never been more than ten leagues from Segavia her whole life. She heard the same stories about her forest brethren as the Segavians did. Who knew if they were true?

"Well, you can't go like that," said Lanci. "We have to make you look more like a stage Haata than a real one. Ah! I know! Feathers!"

She plunged into a trunk full of colorful clothes, scarves, and scraps, tossing things about the tiny room with wild abandon.

"Haata wear furs," said Anla. "Not feathers."

"Ah, but Segavians who dress as Haata do," said Lanci. She came up out clutching a tall if slightly wilted plumed headdress, triumphant. "I knew I still had this! Wore it as a Haata slave girl in some romance of ancient Alva."

Anla groaned. "Next you'll want me to paint my face."

Lanci's eyes lit up. "Yes! The crowning touch!"

• • •

THE host of the Yindo Ball had spared no expense. The house was an enormous palace in the Alvan style with grounds that spilled down the side of the hill in a cascade of terraces, gardens, and cupolas. All of that, however, was currently obscured by a thick forest of potted fir trees, brought in specially to give the place a deep-woods atmosphere. A priest of Sarsen must have been hired too, for though it was mid-summer, snow mantled the boughs and blanketed the garden. There was also a great roaring bonfire in the center of what was usually a bed of roses.

As Anla and Lanci made their way up the sloping cobbled street that flanked the garden, they were passed by hooting hordes of young Segavians, dressed in everything from bedsheets to elaborately fringed and beaded robes to bejeweled headdresses that would have looked more natural on a tropical bird than on the head of a Haata tribesman. A very few wore actual Haata clothing — thick jackets, leather leggings, and pointed fur hats with long earflaps — which their fathers had probably brought back as trophies from their tours of duty on the frontier. More wore what Anla and Lanci were wearing — silly stage costume imaginings of Haata garb, with bared midriffs and tight leather trews for the boys, and revealing buckskin bodices, leaf colored loin cloths, and twigs in their hair for the girls. Anla had never felt more embarrassed in her life.

"Out host is Lord Raibo Lampisi," said Lanci, in a perfect Hillcrest accent. "Who inherited his father's considerable fortune earlier this year, and seems intent on spending the entirety of it before the turn of the next. He's been holding balls of this magnitude every month, and has lavished obscene amounts of gold on clothes, finery, jeweled swords, and assorted shiny bric-a-brac."

"Some of which you hope to relieve him of," said Anla.

Lanci smiled. "I have worn my undergarments with the extra-large pockets for that very reason."

She put a hand on Anla's arm as they neared the graveled drive of the Lampisi palace. "Let us review before we go in. I am Lady Lualla Prina, of Hunas, and if anyone asks, I am a friend of Mistress Marilena's."

"Who's Marilena?" asked Anla.

Lanci laughed. "There are certain to be at least three Marilenas here tonight. Hill folk follow the flock when it comes to naming their children."

"Fine," said Anla. "Lualla Prina and Marilena. I have it. And I am Obri, your Lady of the Sword. Which means I am not your friend, and so must walk three paces behind you."

"Eep, sorry!" squeaked Lanci. She skipped ahead, then whispered over her shoulder. "And don't hesitate to poke me if I forget some other noble nonsense."

Anla smirked as she watched Lanci's full-hipped figure sashay up the street from behind. "Don't worry. No-one will be paying attention to your manners."

• • •

IT was a strange quirk of Segavian society that many poor Haata knew the life and manners of the nobles on the Hill better than most poor Segavians. The Haata served as maids and grooms, footmen and coachmen, nursemaids and gardeners for all the noble houses, and had for generations, while poor Segavians tended to work as apprentices and laborers in the workshops of the craft guilds across the river, and rubbed shoulders with the nobility far less often.

Anla had served on the Hill as a Lady of the Sword, a combination of bodyguard and chaperone for the daughter of a nobleman. The position had not even existed in Segavia seven years ago. Before that, all young nobles, both male and female, had traditionally been protected by male servants known as swordhands, but when King Regnaccio's new Alvan bride, Queen Viora, had brought with her a dashing female protector, Segavia's desperate mania to be current with the trends of a society half a world away sparked a rage for swordswomen among the unmarried young ladies of the Hill.

Anla had been a good Lady of the Sword, one of the few who had been more than an ornament, who could actually perform her duty and use her blade. Naturally, doing so had gotten her fired, nearly imprisoned, and entirely unemployable, thus bringing her to her current life of crime.

She tensed as Lanci fell in at the back of a pack of revelers and breezed between the towering and beetle-browed Galtish footmen at the palace door, but she needn't have worried. The footmen might be tasked with keeping outsiders out, but pretty girls were never turned away. It was policy, and while Anla was too hard of face and body to count as attractive on this side of the river, as a Lady of the Sword, she was invisible, and her "mistress," Lanci, was everything young Segavian men fell over themselves for — tall, blonde, beautiful, buxom, and bright of eye. They walked right in.

"Now," said Lanci as they paused in the tree-girt and pine-needle-strewn grand foyer, letting the mob of shrieking nobles swirl around them. "The less time we're here the better. Less chance of our disguises being seen through, less chance of being grabbed by drunken fools who won't take no for an answer. So... up we go."

She started for the sweeping staircase to the second floor, then paused as she saw two young men on the landing who were about to race each other to the bottom on silver serving tray sleds. With shouts of drunken glee, they tipped forward and rode bumping down the stairs to crash into the foyer's wainscoting and collapse in a laughing pile. Wall, floor, stairs, and trays were all scarred and dented, but not so the rich young men. Nothing seemed to touch them at all.

• • •

THE second floor was a thieves' paradise. Bedrooms, wardrobes, parlors, and galleries were all wide open and displaying their treasures like the most brazen of prostitutes. Certainly there were party-goers and carousers wandering through them in staggering clusters, but Anla and Lanci were professionals, and knew how to cover a jeweled brooch or a silver stick-pin with a casual hand, and how to slip it into a hidden inner pocket while pretending to smooth their dresses.

Within minutes, Anla was so burdened she clanked when she walked.

"This is madness," she whispered as she and Lanci stepped into a gallery where dozens of young people were groping each other on low settees and sipping smoke from bubbling water pipes. "We'll need to make a second trip."

"Indeed," said Lanci. "We should have hired a carriage."

There was a door at the back of the room, but unlike every other door in the house, this one was guarded. A hulking Galter footman stood outside it, looking embarrassed in nothing but a loincloth and a headdress of feathers.

"And what's in there, do you suppose?" murmured Lanci. "Something really valuable?"

"Don't get greedy," said Anla. "We've already got more than enough."

"I know. I know. I just—"

Two bare-chested young men in buckskin breeches pushed past them and approached the footman, giggling and showing him something on ribbons around their necks that Anla couldn't quite see. The footman bowed to them, and they hurried to the door, jostling each other in their eagerness to enter. Neither Anla nor Lanci could help themselves. They slowed their steps so they could peek at what lay in the room beyond.

Like the foyer and the gardens, it was done up with fresh-cut boughs and potted blackberry and rhododendron bushes in imitation of the deep woods, all highlighted in red from a fire somewhere to the right of the door. And hanging upside down in the center of it, his head shoulder-height from the ground, was a naked Haata boy, his arms dangling. Anla couldn't tell whether he was dead or unconscious. A cut across his left wrist bled down his fingers into a wooden Haata bowl set on a table. The boy couldn't have been more than fifteen.

As the door closed behind the two young men, Anla could hear them begin to chant. "Yin-do! Yin-do! Yin-do!"

A cold dread gripped her heart — horror for the tortured boy, yes, but also fear for herself, for she knew that, despite the inevitable repercussions, she was going to act. She turned to Lanci to apologize for what was to come, but saw in Lanci's eyes the same hard rage that filled her.

"Darling," said Lanci. "You don't even have to ask."

Anla swallowed. "Thank you."

She turned toward the footman, hand on her dagger, but Lanci clutched her wrist.

"My way first, eh? Follow me."

Lanci strolled toward the big galter, hips swaying. "All this frolicking going on, and finest cut of meat just standing here. A criminal waste. Don't you think, Obri?"

She put a hand behind the man's neck and looked directly in his eyes. "Care to join me on the pillows, big man?"

The footman held up his hand and edged back. "I'm sorry, mistress. I'm not a guest. I'm just a footman. I—"

As he spoke, Lanci's left hand found the cord that held his loin-cloth in place. She tugged it loose, then danced back, laughing as she waved it about.

"Look, everyone!" she cried. "What a specimen!"

"Mistress!" The naked footman tried to snatch back the loin-cloth, while at the same time covering himself. "Mistress, please!"

By now the whole gallery had looked up from its smoking and snogging, and were laughing along with Lanci as she dodged his clumsy grabs.

"I'm sorry, footman," she said. "I am far too cruel to help you, but perhaps one of these kind souls will be more merciful."

She threw the loincloth to the youths on the settees, and there was much joyful shrieking as they began tossing it among themselves in a drunken game of keep-away.

"Now, beloved," said Lanci, and as the poor footman floundered from couch to couch behind them, they slipped through the door into the bedchamber.

. . .

THE two boys were dipping crude clay cups into the bowl of blood and continuing the Yindo chant, while a third, slightly older, was upending a bottle of brandy into it. They were not the only hill boys in the room. Two more were slumped on chairs, one in a fur hat, one wearing a crumpled crown of red feathers, their eyes glazed as they watched the proceedings. The upside-down Haata boy was tied by the ankles to the chandelier. His eyes were closed, but Anla saw his chest slowly raising and lowering. He was still alive!

"You're not allowed here!" cried the youth with the bottle. "Did Kruet let you in? I'll have his hide!"

"Sorry," said Lanci, putting a hand on one hip. "It's just we saw that all the real men were in here, so—"

The youth waved a dismissive hand as he started toward them. "None of your nightflower blandishments, harlot. We're doing magic here! Now get ouwkk!!"

Anla punched him square on the temple with the knuckle guard of her main gauche, and he dropped like a stone.

The other boys were a bit slow to react.

"I say, she's knapped Ranaldi," said the one with the headdress.

"W-wha wass that in aid of?" asked his behatted friend.

Anla kicked over the table with the bowl of blood on it, then tore a rag from her tattered fake-Haata dress and tied it tight around the wound on the hanging boy's wrist. At the same time, Lanci pulled a dagger from her stocking and waved the two drinkers back toward a settee beside the other two, then shoved them into it.

"Now then," said Lanci. "What is all this? What's this magic that fool was speaking of?"

"Iss th' magic that'll bring women like you t'yer knees," slurred fur hat.

"Eh?" said Lanci.

Anla crossed to the silken rope that raised and lowered the chandelier and began to untie it as fur hat continued.

"Raibo tol' us this was th'true Yindo, for his true friends." He held up the pendant Anla hadn't been able to see before. It was in the shape of pinecone. She scowled. To Haata, the pinecone signified the soul — the seed which could withstand fire and still bring life. It was also illegal for a Haata to wear or own any representation of one.

"He gave us these an' said it made us true Haata, and we could do th'true Yindo and receive true Haata powerss."

"Powers?" Anla lowered the chandelier, then tied it off as the Haata boy's head touched the ground. She crossed to him and started to cut his ankle bonds.

Fur Hat looked embarrassed. "You know wha' they say about Haata men. 'Bout the powers they have over our women. Well, Lord Raibo said if we drank the blood of—"

Lanci laughed in his face. "By the gods, the frailty of the stronger sex never ceases to amaze me. I'd pity you if you weren't all cowardly little murderers. You didn't even have enough courage to kidnap a full grown man. Obri, watch these fools while I tie them up."

The Haata boy groaned as the ropes parted and the blood started to flow back into his feet. Anla lowered him to the ground.

"One minute," she said, then crouched beside him. His eyes opened.

"Can you walk?"

He shook his head.

"Are you alone?"

He looked toward a closet door.

Anla sprung to the closet and threw it open. Another Haata boy lay inside, tied and trembling.

Anla looked over her shoulder. "Lan— er, Lualla."

Lanci groaned.

There was a rattle as someone tried the main door. Then a nobleman's voice shouted through it. "Who's in there! Open up at once!"

"Bugger," said Lanci.

Anla lifted the boy out of the closet, then set him beside the boy under the chandelier.

"We're in here, Raibo!" called one of the Segavian boys. "Help us!"

The noble voice shouted louder. "Kruet, you naked imbecile! Open this door!"

There was a heavy thud as a shoulder hit the door from the far side.

"Up," said Anla, flicking her rapier at the boys in the chairs. "Into the closet."

"You're joking!" said Fur Hat.

Anla sunk the tip of the blade half an inch into his naked chest. He squealed like a piglet.

"Up," she repeated.

He jumped up, and she jabbed the sword at the rest of them. They followed, skipping like crickets on a stove to keep ahead of her point.

"What about this one?" asked Lanci, looking at the youth who Anla had coldcocked. "Oh, he's coming around. Here, darling," she said, taking his arm. "This way. All better now."

He let her help him to his feet then stumbled after her, clutching his head, as she led him to the closet. It was only as he saw the others all crammed inside that he balked.

"What is all this?" he said, turning. "What've you pigs—?"

Anla kicked him in the chest, driving him back into the huddle, then slammed and locked the door.

It sounded like more than one person was attacking the bedroom door now. Anla sprang to the window and yanked open the heavy drapes. Outside, beyond a rank of hedges the garden was filled with light and music and whirling snow, but directly below all was dark and quiet, and just one story down. She threw open the panes then beckoned to Lanci.

"You first."

"In these shoes? Darling you must be mad."

"I'll lower you as much as I can. Come on."

Lanci took a breath then stepped onto the sill.

"Sit. Legs out," said Anla. "Then turn and lower yourself."

Lanci obeyed, her arms shaking as she clung to the sill.

Anla knelt inside the window and lay across it, her chest half in, half out.

"Now my hand," she said.

"I daren't!" whimpered Lanci. "I—"

Anla took her hand, prying it from the sill. Lanci shrieked and dropped, but Anla, strengthened from years of servant's labor and swordwork, held her, though Lanci's weight nearly pulled her shoulder out of its socket.

Anla extended her arm to its full length, then, holding the sill with her other hand, eased further out the window, lowering Lanci another foot or so toward the ground, but that was all there was — and her grip was slipping, and the bedroom door sounded sure to break on the next strike.

"Sorry," she said.

"Sorry? Wha—"

Anla let go of Lanci, who shrieked and plopped into the snow.

"Come on, tsinos," said Anla, pulling herself back into the window and stumbling to the boys.

They stared at her, frightened.

She gathered up the bound boy and hurried back to the window with him, then lowered him toward Lanci, who was just getting up and cursing like a dockhand.

"You flea-bitten round-heels! You might have warned—"

"Catch," said Anla, and dropped the boy.

Lanci yelped, but caught him and only staggered a little as she set him down.

"Damn you, you hoyden! Give me some—"

Anla was already back to the other boy, and taking him into her arms.

"Here," she said as she returned to the window. "Be careful."

Anla lowered him as much as she could, and Lanci waited below her with open arms.

"All right. I'm ready this time."

Just as Anla let go of the boy, the bedroom door finally gave way. Kruet and a handsome young noble, who Anla assumed must be Lord Raibo, stumbled in at the head of a crowd of half-naked young men.

"What in the name of Ebbore is this?" cried Raibo.

Anla wished she had Lanci's facility with the quick quip. She was sure she would have given him a devastating riposte. Instead, all she could muster was a two finger salute, and then she dove out the window to come up rolling on the snow-covered turf below. She ran back and scooped up the tied boy as Lanci shifted the youth from the chandelier around to her hip like he was an oversized infant.

"Right," she said. "Ready."

As they ran around the rank of hedges, Anla heard Raibo shouting from the window.

"After them, you clods! And guard all the exits! Those chits will die for this!"

• • •

"NOW what?" gasped Lanci as they looked around the gardens. "I know I agreed to this, but I didn't know we'd be lugging brats."

"There!" said Anla, and started off toward a veranda's edge, where a trio of Haata serving maids in "Haata" clothing stood behind a trestle table draped in furs and loaded with hams, game fowl, and venison. The servants were there to serve the guests, but just at that moment, all the guests in the vicinity were watching a half-naked Hill girl bobbing for apples in a tub of wine.

"Hsst, behenem!" said Anla, looking over her shoulder as she reached the carvers. "Hide these boys under the table. They're in trouble."

The three women gaped at the boys like they were ghosts and edged back.

"We daren't," said the first. "We daren't!"

Anla blinked as she realized that the fear in their eyes wasn't just the usual servant's fear of disobeying the masters. They recognized the boys.

Anla grabbed the first by the wrist, suddenly hot with fury. "You knew? You knew and you're still down here carving hams when you should be carving necks?"

"Sister, please! We can't lose these jobs!"

An older Haata woman bustled to the trestle carrying another roast. By her outfit she was a cook. She was not dressed for the party.

"Leave off," she snapped. "We'll take them."

She set down the roast and beckoned to Anla to give her the bound boy, then snapped her fingers at two of the servers as she started back to the house. "You two, carry the other one."

"Thank you, nekka!" Anla whispered after her, then glared at the serving girls as they took the other boy. "And she with more to lose than—"

Lanci caught her by the arm before she was finished and dragged her toward the more crowded area of the garden. "No time for scolding, darling. We've got to lose ourselves. Into the scrum."

• • •

THE sky over the garden was nearly hidden behind a screen of reaching branches that rose up from a forest of potted trees, around which swirled a swarm of face-painted Segavians. All hopped and flailed in clumsy mock of Haata dances, as actual Haata drummers slapped out ancient rhythms on their tambors and kept embarrassed eyes on the ground.

There was more food here too, sideboards overflowing with roasted fowl, candied squash, oysters, salmon, cooked apples, and steaming pitchers of mulled wine, while squatting Segavians guzzled and tore at it with their bare hands in "savage" fashion.

The mad whirl threw Anla and Lanci out the other side of the dance and to the edge of the upper garden. There they could peek down through more imported trees into the lower levels. Just below was the bonfire they had seen from the street. Silhouetted figures in next to nothing were dancing around it in wild abandon, then stumbling and falling in the bespoke snow.

"Do you suppose there's a way out at the bottom?" asked Lanci.

"Can you climb a spiked fence?"

"Do I need to? You'll just hurl me over when I'm not ready."

Anla flushed. "I'm sorry. There wasn't time—" "Hush, dearest. I was only—" Lanci squeaked. "They're coming!"

Anla looked over her shoulder. A phalanx of determined looking Hill boys was pushing through the dancers, eyes swiveling left and right, and she could see that they'd added Segavian rapiers to their native costumes and had their swordhands at their backs.

"Come on!" she hissed. "The fence it is."

They ducked to a nearby stair and started down to the next terrace. Below them, colored fire was flashing.

"Gods!" said Lanci. "They've even got a Haata witch priest doing tricks. How did they get dispensation from the temples for that? That's a burning offense, ain't it?"

"If this Raibo is as rich as he seems..." began Anla, but then she faltered as she saw the witch priest Lanci was speaking of; he was a scrawny, pot-bellied old man with eyebrows like owl horns, capering by the fire. She knew the man. Well, knew him to see him. He was Elder Wachgan, the spiritual leader of the Healing Fire, a violent Haata secret society dedicated to driving the Segavians out of the Haathen Peninsula forever.

Her brother was a member and had tried to recruit her into its ranks many times, and always she had refused because of men like Elder Wachgan, who called for wholesale slaughter and outright war against the Segavians. Wachgan was a terrifyingly powerful priest, unafraid to call on the darkest of the Haata gods to work his magic. Yet here he was, grinning like a fool as he turned leaves from green to gold and then to colored fire, and made a troupe of mink and foxes dance like little lords and ladies. What was he doing here?

Then she saw it. The eight-legged circle of Atseska was burned into the ground around Wachgan and untouched by the snow. The young Segavians paid it no mind, likely thinking it just another bit of Haata decoration, but it made Anla's heart freeze. She might know little of the old ways, but any Haata child with a grandfather who told ghost stories knew about the black magic of Atseska the Spider, and the significance of her circle.

"He's going to kill them," she murmured. "He's going to kill everyone in this house."

Lanci goggled. "Who? Him? How?"

"Atseska's curse is the curse of frenzy. Everyone here will go mad and tear each other apart. They'll eat each other's hearts."

Lanci blinked, then shrugged and continued down the stairs. "Couldn't happen to a nicer pack of wolves. Let's leave him to it."

Anla followed her down, but when she reached the bottom, she stopped, frowning.

Lanci looked back and groaned. "Don't tell me."

"I can't. Even if he was just going to kill the Segavians I couldn't, but it'll be everyone. Servants. Those little boys."

Lanci shook her head. "You're going to get us killed too."

Anla glanced up at the terrace above. The boys and their swordhands were questioning party-goers and searching behind the potted bushes and trees. It would be a few moments before they started down to their level.

"His magic won't work if his circle is broken. I can pull up some of that burned sod before he notices." She started toward Wachgan. "Keep going. I'll be back."

"And what's to stop him making another burn?"

Anla slowed. "I... I don't know."

"We'll draw Raibo to him," said Lanci. "Say he has the boys we stole, then slip off while they fight. Come on."

Anla stared at her. "That's even more risky!"

Lanci shrugged, and motioned her on. Together they worked their way to a place at the back of the burned circle where a tent hid them from Wachgan. Anla knelt and began cutting at the black turf with her knife as Lanci kept watch. Fortunately, despite the snow, the ground was still summer soft, and she got down to the roots in seconds, then started prying up the grass with both hands.

Above her, Lanci grunted. "Damn. Some fool's spotted us. No no. Keep digging. I'll handle this."

"What're you naughty things doing behind that tent?" slurred a male voice. "My my."

Anla looked around as she pulled, and saw a plump boy in sagging buckskins and a ridiculous dreadlock wig staggering toward them, leering.

Lanci opened her arms to him. "Would you like to join us, my lord?"

The boy giggled and opened his arms as well. "Where have you been all my life?"

Anla kept digging as Lanci embraced the boy, then swung him around so that he blocked the corner of the tent closest to Wachgan.

But just as Anla was about to saw through the end of her strip of turf, an older voice hissed behind her.

"Foolish girl! What are you doing?"

Anla spun and found herself face to wizened face with Wachgan, spittle on his lips and eyes blazing with rage. He'd come around the other side of the tent!

Anla raised her knife, but the elder was faster. A word and a gesture and she fell back, throwing up an arm to shield her face from the claws of the eagle that was rushing at her.

Lanci and her drunken swain hit the ground beside her, crying out in fear just as she had, but there was no impact, and no bird. It was a Haata trick of the mind, and enough to give Wachgan time to kick Anla's knife away and draw his own — an obsidian blade with an oily iridescent gleam.

"Segavian she-cur," he snarled, grabbing her hair. "Where did you learn the ways of—?" He choked as Anla's wig came away in his hand, then stared at her shaved head in confusion. "A Haata girl? And you're stopping me from—?"

Anla threw herself back and kicked up at him with a booted heel, catching him squarely under the jaw. His teeth clacked shut with a sound like a hand clap, and he fell, clutching his chin. Anla snatched up her dagger, but turned away from him. She had to finish tearing up the turf.

"Hurry," said Lanci, standing. "He's getting up again."

"Iss th'bird gone?" asked the drunk boy.

Wachgan began gargling Haata words around his bloody tongue, and Anla's throat started to close up. She couldn't breathe.

Lanci stepped toward him. "No you don't, you black-hearted old..." She fell, gasping.

Anla turned, the turf still uncut, and threw her knife at Wachgan through blurring pain. It hit his face side on, a terrible throw, but enough to stop him mumbling, and that gave her enough air to crawl toward him.

He tried to speak again. She didn't let him. Anla pounced, stuffing her fingers into his mouth and slamming his head to the ground. He stabbed with his black dagger, but she caught his wrist and held it away.

Wachgan was smaller than her, and skinnier, but terrifyingly strong; he pressed the blade inexorably back toward her breast — until, that is, Lanci recovered and kicked him hard in the ribs. Then he gasped and his arm collapsed under Anla's weight. The blade of the stone knife grazed his temple as she pinned his wrist beside his ear, and the blood that welled from the scrape fizzed and curdled.

"No!" he cried. "Atseska's kiss! I must wash the wound. I—"

It was too late. Already he was stiffening, his mouth pulling back into an impossibly wide grin. "Help... me..." he hissed. "Hlllll... mhhhh..."

Anla flinched away in horror as the shaman's spine began to curl further and further back, as if his head wanted to touch his heels.

Lanci grabbed Anla's arm. "That's enough good deeds for one night, my dear. Let's get out of here before —"

She faltered as they turned and found themselves facing a mob of Hill boys and swordhands, all with rapiers drawn.

"They're the ones!" said the boy Anla had kicked into the closet. "They wrecked the Yindo!"

"And now they've killed your magician," said one of his companions.

"Her head's shaved," said another. "She's a real one!"

Lord Raibo put his hands on his hips. "Come on then, you murdering whores. What have you done with our sacrifices?"

Anla reached for her sword.

"No," hissed Lanci. "They don't fear your blade."

"That has always been to my advantage."

"So, you'll kill the first one. There are ten of them! Think! This whole event is about what they truly fear. Pick up the shaman's knife and start speaking Haata."

"I don't know any!" said Anla.

"Stop that whispering!" shouted Raibo. "Where are our little pigs!"

"Anything!" said Lanci, then shoved her. "A list of Haata names. Anything!"

The black knife lay next to Wachgan's hand, which had bent back on itself so much that its knuckles touched its wrist. Anla picked it up with care, then rose and pointed it at Raibo, still racking her brain to think of anything she knew in the Haata tongue. The only thing she could think of was a lullaby her mother had sung to her when she was a child.

Well, so be it.

"Ana cowna chao huni, ana cowna chao hunar," she intoned, as menacing as she could — though it meant 'go to sleep little girl, go to sleep daughter mine.'

"Segavian stooges!" laughed Lanci, over Anla's chant. "She has killed your sacrifices and your pathetic fraud of a shaman! All to bring the curse of Atseska curse down upon you!"

"Awa wa bukano cani," said Anla, raising her voice a step. "Awa wa bukano canar." Which meant, 'Dream in peace, little boy, dream in peace, son of mine.'

"Soon the frenzy will stir in your hearts," continued Lanci. "Soon you will all go mad and tear at each other like wolves."

"What nonsense," said Raibo, then motioned to his friends. "Get them."

His friends, however, no longer seemed so eager. They edged back as Anla flourished the black knife back and forth and stared into their eyes. "Eyava un bissin, Haata nay," she proclaimed. Which was, 'Forest protect you, Haata child.' "Eyava un bissin, Haata nay."

"Yes!" cried Lanci. "Attack! Every violent thought quickens the madness! Kill us and soon you will be eating each other's hearts!"

Anla didn't know what to say next, so she started the lullaby again, higher and louder. "Ana cowna chao huni, ana cowna chao hunar!"

It was working. In ones and twos, Raibo's friends were backing away and fleeing for the upper terrace, until only three stood with him.

"Walk toward him," said Lanci out of the side of her mouth. "Slow. Like a hunting cat."

Anla swallowed and started the lullaby again as she weighed the odds. Four against one, and if she drew her rapier she ruined the illusion.

Lanci followed behind her, continuing her crafty counterpoint.

"Beware, fools! If your hearts feel fear instead of frenzy, then you shall be the victims of the rest! Rabbits to their wolves! Your true natures revealed in your squealing, kicking death!"

Raibo took a step back, his eyes fixated on the tip of the black knife. One of his friends tugged at his shoulder. That did it. He broke and ran with the others, then shouted over his shoulder as he ascended the stairs.

"You'll pay for this, you witches! You'll hang for it!"

"Back up slow," hissed Lanci. "And keep chanting. We don't run until we get under the trees, aye? Make like you're cursing the whole place."

It was excruciating, taking measured backward step after measured backward step and turning this way and that, all the while expecting the spell to break and all the Hill boys to come charging back down the stairs and chop them to pieces, but incredibly, no one came. They reached the shadows of the potted pines unmolested.

"Now point your blade at all of them and back into the shadows," said Lanci.

Anla raised her eyes and saw the whole party standing at the stone railing of the upper terrace, staring at her. She pointed the knife at them and repeated the lullaby one last time, then retreated until she was completely hidden by pine boughs.

"Now," said Lanci. "Run!"

• • •

BACK in Lanci's room an hour later, Anla took a sip of wine and sighed, staring once again at her reflection in the brass mirror.

"I don't know what you've got to be gloomy about," said Lanci, who was sorting jewelry on her cot. "We're rich!"

Not as rich as they might have been. Though Lanci had all of her ill-gotten gains, Anla had torn her hidden pocket at some point during her various exertions, and all the gold and silver she had collected was gone. That however, was not what was darkening her mood.

"I wish we hadn't done that," she said at last.

"Done what?" asked Lanci. "Heroically rescued two innocent boys? Heroically killed a deranged shaman who was going to kill a house full of people?"

"No. Not that."

"Rob the place?"

"Not that either."

"What then?"

Anla chewed her lip, trying to think how to put it. "You said Raibo and his Hillcrest friends mock and kill Haata because they're afraid of us, and that's what that party was all about."

"Absolutely, beloved," said Lanci, nodding distractedly. "Centuries of jealousy and fear and guilt expressed as an orgy."

"Well then," said Anla. "Didn't we just make that worse?"

Lanci looked up. "Eh?"

Anla shrugged. "When they came for us, we pretended to be everything they hate about the Haata. We made them think I was an evil shaman, that I was going to turn them all into savages with ancient forest magic. They'll leave that party even more afraid of Haata folk than they were when they arrived."

Lanci threw up her hands. "You ninny! We were saving our lives!"

"I know it," said Anla. "Still..."

"Do you want to go back and tell them it was all a big mistake? That you're not an evil shaman after all? Do you think bowing your head and playing the humble Haata will change their minds?"

Anla shook her head. "I don't want to play the humble Haata for them, *or* the evil Haata. I don't want to play *anything* for them. I'm me. I want them to accept me as me. No acting. No disguise. Me."

Lanci laughed and held up a heavy gold ring. "Well, while we're waiting for that to happen, here's a ring with a stone as big as your thumb. Let's take it to Mother Marza and rent us a place with *two* rooms. Then you can use what's left to buy yourself a new sword or something. Put your troubles out of your head for a while."

But Anla had turned back to the mirror, staring into it.

"You didn't hear a word of that, did you?" asked Lanci.

"Hmmm," said Anla.

"Hmmm, what?"

Anla frowned. "I think I'm going to grow my hair."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In his thirty years as a Hollywood screenwriter, Nathan made a living at everything except screenwriting. He was a taxi driver, limo driver, delivery driver, and comic store and video store clerk. This isn't to say he never sold any screenplays or made any movies. There were a few. He just never made any money out of it. It wasn't until he started doing the thing his twelve-year-old self loved best that he began making a living. Yep, he's at a computer game company now, writing thrilling adventures for role players. He should have thought of this years ago.

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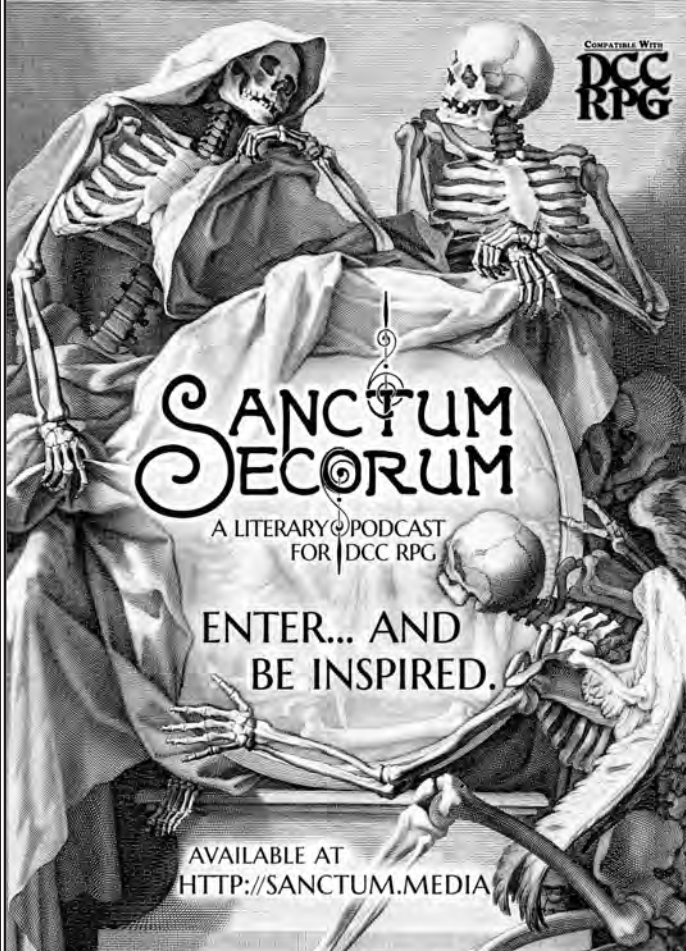
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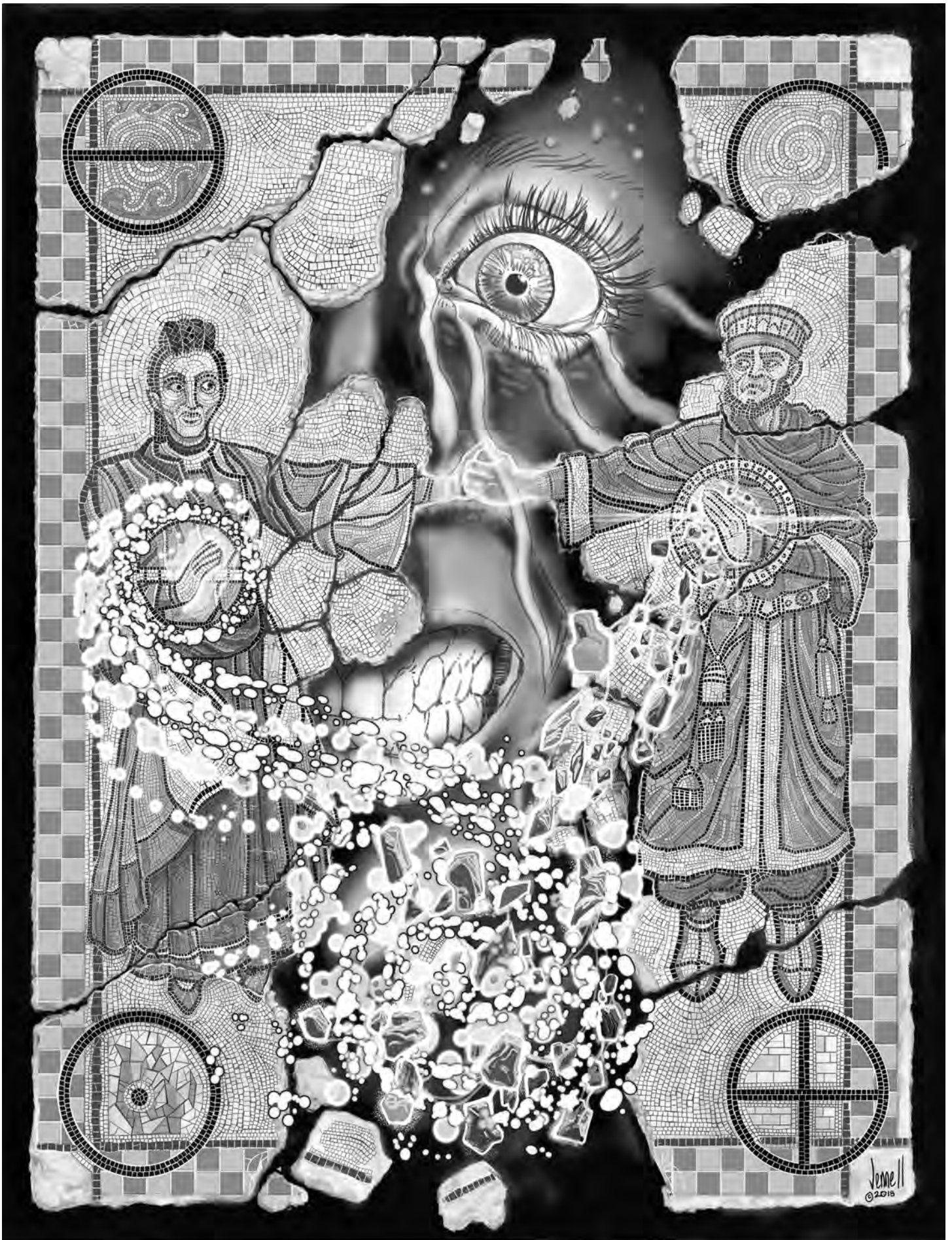


ILLUSTRATION BY JENNEL JAQUAYS

BREAK THEM ON THE DROWNING STONES

By SETSU UZUME

THE blindfold itched, and stank of wet sheep. Gatja raised her hands and leaned forward to scratch her face, but the muting chains rang taut — locking her wrists and neck just beyond reach.

“Easy,” Eyjat purred, his voice a deep, warm calm like a pillow over her mouth.

She balled and released her fists. She could hear the city beyond the carriage walls. “This rag is scalping me.”

Gentle, dry hands cupped her face as Eyjat sought wounds to heal. Gatja recoiled from his touch and his magic, jerking her head to one side. Her chains rattled, and the metal collar bit into her neck.

“Don’t fix me, just take it off!” She said.

Her head was shaved on either side, leaving a multi-braided crest from brow to nape. The sweat from the blindfold cooled her temples when Eyjat removed it. Water was her element, yet her sweat was as silent as the damp air. She was cut off, and would have wept angry tears; but the muting chains kept her numb, and denied her the use of her magic.

The carriage came to a stop, and a hand rapped on the slat.

Eyjat, all hardened bulk despite the soft life they had shared, pushed the slat open, allowing a few inches.

Gatja squinted past Eyjat to the drenched tomboy standing outside the carriage door. The tomboy’s long dark hair was tied back and uncovered. She was perhaps thirteen, and rain drizzled down her squarish face. “Welcome to Affokhar. I am Temel Sathian,” she said. “There’s been a death. Grandmother will want to see you immediately.”

Gatja licked a stray raindrop from the corner of her mouth, tasting for memories.

Silence.

“A moment, Temel. Go and tell her we’ve arrived,” said Eyjat. He closed the slat.

So that was Riad’s daughter. Should Gatja have felt warmth? Resentment?

Gatja set her jaw and surrendered her hands.

Eyjat’s hands swallowed hers, siphoning as much of her magic as he could safely hold. When Gatja traveled on business for the order, muting chains kept her docile during sleep and the journey. Another mage was required to keep her mind and magic in control.

Once Eyjat had drained her into quietude, he trickled a measure of his own magic back into her to release the lock. Gatja grimaced, fever and chills rippling through her. Just as her guts threatened to heave, the metal bands at her neck and wrists opened and fell away.

Gatja ran her nails over her face and rubbed the calloused flesh around her neck, then followed Eyjat into the rain.

Gatja had never been to the city, but Riad had boasted about it since the day he’d become her bonded twin. The perfumes of twelve flowers, the music of twelve flutes, and the languages of twelve tongues mixing in shops and bath halls. The twelve colors weaving a tapestry around marble pillars and pearl-tipped spires. She gazed up. The spires were there, but the supposed pearl inlay was as smoke-stained and rain-slimed as the rest of the damned place.

Riad was the reason for this errand, and his absence the reason for her chains. Now that she was outside the carriage and under the pouring rain, she didn’t want to go back — not to the chains, and not to the order; but they owned her.

All but the slivers she had learned to steal.

• • •

Koray Sathian, Riad’s mother and Temel’s grandmother, was thick and beautiful. Tiny round mirrors glittered at the hems of her dark, knee-length entari, bouncing light from the dozens of silver urns that ringed the room. The resemblance was clear — Koray and Riad had the same twist at the mouth, the same thick, flat brows, the same set of the shoulders that looked adversarial even as she sat at ease by the fire.

Gatja remembered hating Riad and his Sathian features the moment their eyes met. They’d been younger than Temel, then.

Koray glanced up, closed her book and set it on the table beside her, next to a silver carafe and two silver cups. “Temel, show the guardian to his room. I wish to speak to my son’s twin privately.”

Eyjat spoke. “For your safety, and hers, it is inadvisable to —”

“You are welcome in my home and to any material you may require for the sleeping cage.” Koray regarded Gatja. “I do not fear this one.”

Temel inclined her head and gestured toward the door. Eyjat hesitated, but left when Gatja nodded.

Gatja turned back to Koray. “I expected a wealthy house to have staff.”

Koray waved a hand. “Riad’s fraying mind caused them to flee. A few japes are nothing, but a servant’s corpse left on the floor in plain view is somewhat less defensible.”

“Fraying,” the word tasted sweet on Gatja’s tongue. Her tightly-wound twin had fared no better than she after all.

Koray gestured to the chair across from her, the fire roaring between them. “Sit, Gasha. Dry yourself.”

Eyjat’s magic welled within Gatja’s body, easing the rising hate into a dull apathy. “My name is Gatja. *Gaht-tyah*,” she replied, lowering herself into the chair.

Gatja had imagined coming to this house as a trophy, or to burn it to the ground; not to have a polite conversation in the sitting room. The Sathians had always been an enemy house, and Riad was the heir, despite being the second child of the second husband. The order had twinned Gatja and Riad because of that rivalry; their mutual contempt driving them to outmatch each other for nearly two decades.

As much as each sub-family was relegated to its own estate, as much as they hated each other, had he never spoken her name to his mother?

"Gatja," Koray corrected. "How fortunate for both of us that the order decided to keep you."

Gatja rubbed her fingers together, the last remnants of rain drying in the fire's heat. "Too dangerous to release, too much of an investment to kill."

"An unfortunate fact."

"Family can be distracting," Gatja conceded.

"Yes it can," said Koray. "Will that affect your readiness?"

Gatja shook her head. "Eyjat settles me, Aresh settles Eyjat, and the order settles Aresh — a whole daisy-chain of balanced energies. What happens naturally with a well-chosen twin can be forced across a continent if the guardian is strong enough."

Koray rested her hand on her cup. "And is he?"

Gatja crossed one leg over the other, settling back into her chair. The air was too dry and thin from the fire for Gatja to taste Koray's fears, but her questions said enough.

"He could sleep better."

Koray shifted in her chair, her mild expression hardening. "I'm pleased to find you so well adjusted to your circumstances."

Koray poured wine for both of them and handed a cup to her. Eyjat's power held Gatja so numb that she could pretend Koray was someone else; a kind stranger. Not an ancestral rival who had finally managed to dissolve Gatja's house when they were weakened by foreign wars. Not the woman who had pulled Riad out of the order before Gatja could complete her training.

"As am I," said Gatja lightly, taking the cup.

"To business then," Koray said. "Riad has abandoned his responsibilities and run off. More importantly, his inheritance has not quickened in my granddaughter. Since the boy cannot control himself or keep his vows, I would like you to collect the jawbone I am owed."

Gatja sniffed the dark liquid and it battered her senses, suggesting all the memories silenced by the roaring fire. "That's... specific."

Koray's sweeping hand gestured toward the little silver urns. "My father and grandmother were buried with their collections. These are all mine. Broken mouths for broken oaths — each ground to powder. He knows this price. I want you to ensure his power passes to Temel."

Gatja shook her head and drained her cup. Eyjat's magic dulled her vision, but the liquid was rich with some nameless anxiety belonging to the ones who had crushed the berries. Drought, maybe. Or war, if the vintage were old enough. Then, like lightning through a storm, she knew the berries, the curses and blue jokes carried in the vines. Koray might as well have served Gatja the living blood of the land stolen from her family.

Gatja set the cup mouth-down on the table. "I want what you took from me."

"The dead are dead. Don't be petulant."

"To be reinstated. You pay the remainder of my tuition so I can face my final test."

"I have already paid you to come to my city."

"You paid the order for my counsel on a matter concerning magic. To take action on your behalf, I am permitted to name my price."

Koray shrugged. "You're as mad as my son. Even if you could pass the test without a twin, why should I finance my enemy's freedom?"

Gatja ran a finger around the upside-down cup, her fingertip absorbing the few drops of wine that pooled near the rim. The words came as if spoken by someone else. "Then, let me offer an end to the feud between us."

"You'll seek no vengeance on me or my heirs once this is done?" Koray asked.

Gatja held one hand out, flicking her thumb against her fingers; fore, middle, fourth, little. Not a drop lost. "I won't."

The old woman did the same, her fingertips striking little sparks. She had enough magic in her for this. Riad had the rest, a vessel of Sathian power, too precious not to recover.

Koray and Gatja shook hands, grimacing, as each woman's magic stung the other in an oath deeper than blood.

"There. Now I can't even spit on your crest."

Koray finished her cup and set it on the table, stood, and retrieved a short, round jar from a shelf across the room. She held it out to Gatja, and Gatja took it.

"All wealth is debt," said Koray. "For what it's worth, girl, I see the error of my ways. I shouldn't have pulled him out of the order so soon after his trial. I shouldn't have married him off so young. I thought we would be enough to balance him. When the Malakhar were driven out of our city, I saw an opportunity to solidify our power and I took it. "For balancing my son, I owe you this at least."

Gatja quirked a brow at her, then opened the jar. There was nothing within but sand-colored gravel. "I cannot read stone," she said.

"This is your father," said Koray. She pointed to a collection of jars on the shelf, similar in style, but varying in size. "Your mother, your brother, your brother's children, all of them. I have erased your name, but you should know where your family rests."

A test of the vow she'd just made. A test not to send every drop of water in Koray's body into her lungs. A test not to poison Eyjat and run — to not hunt down every last grasping murdering Sathian and make them die in agony.

Gatja closed the jar and gave it back to Koray.

"The silver is dull. You should rub it with lemon."

Gatja left, following Eyjat's wet-wool smell to their rooms. His serenity still coated her mind from their exchanged magic — a pale and degrading impression of what she and Riad had shared.

She wondered if he could hear her screaming.

• • •

AS a guide, Temel was as sullen and unrelenting as the weather. The gently-rolling foothills hinted at the burial kurgans that had served as resting places for honored dead when Affokhar was nothing but a trading crossroads. The land had been disturbed by Riad's quakes, and while the rain and runoff pooled in some

places, rodent holes and sharp stones could easily twist an ankle if they weren't careful. Between Temel's spry steps, and Eyjat's natural feel for stone, the two of them made a path with no trouble. Gatja was not so lucky. Every raindrop that touched her skin whispered to her. It took all her concentration to follow her companions without slipping.

Eyjat adjusted his hood to keep the rain out of his dark eyes. His overcoat creaked, stretching across his broad shoulders. He came up alongside Temel, towering over her, like a silhouetted mountain beyond a summer valley.

"Archer, eh?" said Eyjat.

Temel's hand went to the empty speed-quiver still hanging from her broad belt. "Yes. I used to hunt, but I've had to remain at the estate. Most of our servants left when father got worse." She hopped over a rivulet, her red upturned boots visible below the shortened, pale green entari and leather overcoat. "I can't wait to join the order and escape that place."

"Not everyone is accepted," said Eyjat. "Twinning is a difficult process, and candidates are carefully chosen."

"Are you twinned with her?" said Temel, pointing at Gatja.

"No," Eyjat said quickly. "Gatja and your father are as fixed as winter and summer. My Aresh is at the order's compound on the coast. He is my anchor, and thanks to him I can help Gatja serve the people on behalf of the order."

"Will you lose control the way father has?"

"No. Aresh would never allow that to happen. We each faced our trials and completed the rituals as they were meant to be done. Look." Eyjat pulled a glass pendant from under his shirt and showed it to Temel. It was twisted through with color, warm and bright as a sunset in Eyjat's large palm. "My power is in stone, like your father. Aresh spins fire. The way these elements move together in the glass, wrapping and enhancing the other — we're connected the same way, both through magic and because of who we are. Always."

Temel's gray eyes widened under flat brows. "Did he make that for you?"

"Yes. Just before we departed. We're family. The bond is nothing to be feared."

"It should be," said Gatja. "Don't be so eager to join the order, Temel. They'll chain you and call it compassion. You all talk about my fracturing like a stray hair that won't sit smoothly in a braid. The order toyed with our lives and broke both of us. Temel should have no illusions about that."

Eyjat straightened, slipping his pendant back under his clothes. "You have to relax, Gatja. Hate shatters focus."

Gatja shook her head. She could fight Eyjat's grip on her, or she could save herself for the battle. "Hate *is* focus," she whispered. "No other novitiate would have survived what we put each other through. You and Riad... you're nothing alike."

She stomped on ahead of them.

Of course he didn't understand. She had stolen enough of his magic to know that.

Her boots crushed a dead bird's skull, its flesh clinging to the leather in impotent vengeance. She dipped her foot in a rivulet that rushed through tall drowning grass. The water's memory became hers — from the spires of the city, down to the fields, and the burial chambers below. A good shake might churn up the dead.

The ground rumbled, and water splashed in its puddles.

"Father's awake," said Temel. "There's a cave up ahead that the jewel hunters use. That's the only shelter outside the city."

"The caves underneath us twist around the kurgans," Eyjat called back, squinting through the rain. "They're not stable. If Riad's down there, he's bracing his roof."

"Follow me," Temel called.

They trudged higher, grinding scree under their boots. Each time the ground shivered, Eyjat tamped it down. Riad had to know they were here.

They entered the cave mouth, which was large enough for three horses to enter side-by-side, and shook water from their clothes and hair.

"Can you use the stone to find him by what he's holding up?" Gatja asked.

"You can't feel him through your bond?" Eyjat asked.

Gatja tapped one wrist against the other, still numb from the chains. "Not yet."

Temel cut across them. "Grandmother said you can stop the quakes. See to that, and I can lead us through the caves."

Gatja and Eyjat turned toward her.

Temel closed her mouth.

"Lead us, eh?" Gatja said. "Did your grandmother tell you why you are here?"

"Easy," warned Eyjat.

"Your father will try to save himself, and that includes going through you," said Gatja.

"My father loves me, he would never hurt me!"

"Of course he will," said Gatja. "He killed a servant, did he not? Did you see her? Bones crushed to nothing, skin like an empty boot?"

"How do you...?" Temel began, surprised. Then she rallied. "The servants are there for our use. Eor lost her voice because she spoke out of turn. Father turned Turtha's foot to stone because he was stealing. If father saw fit to kill a servant, they shouldn't have been doing whatever they were doing. Grandmother says we have the right to discipline our people, no matter what mother says. You need me."

"As a vessel, not a shield," Gatja said. "Pedantic, rule-abiding coward. Just like him, just like her. Why do you think Koray summoned me — your enemy — rather than letting the viscount handle this? She hopes I will balance you as I once balanced him, so Sathians can keep their power." She grabbed Temel's shoulders, practically spitting in the girl's face. "He *will* hurt you, Temel. Not because he hates you; but because hate is all that's left."

Searing heat lanced through Gatja's skin. She glanced up at Eyjat, and he winced, the shreds of her magic within him spiking as the vow she made to Koray asserted itself. Hate was all that remained of her, too.

She pushed Temel away, and the burning eased.

Temel stumbled back against the cave wall while Gatja clutched her gently steaming hands.

"Behind you!" Temel shouted.

Gatja peered through the sheeting rain. Dead bodies twitched forward, advancing on uncertain limbs, legs bent at odd angles, arms grasping at tree trunks and clambering over stones. They were poorly-built puppets wrought from the recent dead, with

limbs affixed to hips, rib cages, and the center of the chest; human in everything but construction. Leathery skin still covered them in places, but shreds of organs dragged in the mud. Worms and maggots squirmed deeper into the remaining flesh to escape the rain.

Each corpse, an extension of Riad's will, moved with care in its sheath of skin. They clicked and ground forward, crushing rocks in their fingers and toes as easily as she had crushed the bird.

Gatja swore and closed ranks with Eyjat, setting herself at the cave mouth between Temel and the creatures.

They were hemmed in.

Eyjat rushed back into the rain to take them head-on. Behind him, Gatja held out both hands, the raindrops coalescing into an arc of water that began at her palm, and ended in the eyes of one of the corpses. Each droplet from the runoff above them, and the scant moisture from the dead flesh itself, cascaded its memory into the stream. These were his own ancestors and cousins — Riad's stone could claim no others, and his will ran through each of them. The longer she held the connection, the longer her rib cage, shoulders, and hips ached — failing to harmonize with the corpse's obscene anatomy.

Riad was there but not; the animating heart crumbled to dust, the empty eyes long rotted away — seeing her through a stone toy.

There you are, he whispered to her.

She cried out, shielding her eyes, and the arc of water splattered to the ground. The corpse lunged. Gatja tried to sidestep but it was too fast. It bowled her over. She freed one leg, but the sinewy hands latched onto her calf. She pulled, kicking and scrambling to get away, but its hand caught on her boot, unable to slide down.

"Eyjat!" she shouted. But he didn't come, fully engaged in a wrestling match with two other monstrosities.

She scrabbled and clawed at the creature, trying to push free while searching its sinews for water — blood, synovia, anything — but there was nothing to take hold of. It squeezed, dragging her down the hill. She screamed. She kicked wildly at its shoulder and elbow, trying to disconnect the joints. In moments, its second hand locked onto her wrist, and its third hand reached up toward her neck.

Temel bashed the creature's skull with a rock, shattering it. Gatja covered her face against the spray of putrid flesh as Temel kicked the creature's joints, dislocating its shoulders just enough to disrupt its grip. Gatja twisted to yank her legs free and kicked for all she was worth, her back scraping and bumping on the rocks beneath her. Temel lifted her to her feet and the two of them stomped and kicked the creature until there was no connective tissue left to hold it together.

Loud cracks lashed the air, as the ground split and swallowed one of the corpses. Before Eyjat could turn his stone power onto the remaining monstrosity, it was on top of him — bony fingers piercing his back like arrows. Eyjat held his own, gripping the creature's arms and pulling himself free; but the corpse's third arm grabbed his shoulder and snapped his collarbone.

Riad was so close his raw magic scoured Gatja. He was like a sculptor chipping away at the protective shell built by Eyjat and all the others who had tried, and failed, to balance her.

Eyjat screamed her name.

With Eyjat gone, there would be no one to muffle her. No one to stop her.

She grabbed Temel's wrist and ran into the caves, leaving Eyjat to the dead.

• • •

GATJA followed the winding caves by feeling. Temel begged her to stop, to slow down, but Gatja ignored her. She ran into a curving wall, and unable to feel any egress, paused. The adrenaline waned, and Gatja's walk turned into a slight limp. With shaking fingers, she unlaced the top of one boot and pushed it lower than the bruised and swollen flesh at her calf. If the corpse had grabbed her ankle, she'd have been crippled.

"Are the monsters following us?" Temel asked.

"They're nothing. Only Riad matters." Gatja grunted, testing her footing. Her leg throbbed.

"What about Eyjat?"

A tremor rippled through the cave like the growling stomach of the mountain itself.

Gatja felt lighter, freer. Her spirits soared. "He's dead. And we have work to do. Feel around. Find me a patch of water."

Temel faded into the darkness, only her breath and the swish of her coat giving any indication she was still nearby. Gatja felt along the wall, knobby stone puffing out in lumps between smoother surfaces. "Water can go where we can't. It picks up everything we forget. It's the key."

"Here, follow my voice."

Gatja felt her way toward Temel, and found her shoulder. Temel took Gatja's hand and pressed it to the wall — the tiniest trickle dribbling from the rock face.

Gatja's mind splintered — she was a maggot coming to life in the putrifying flesh of a fox, a starving mother bear eating her cubs, the water alive with memories she could taste. Even the corpse bodies that had threatened to tear them apart — it was the best Riad could muster with only so much sinew available; but it told her enough. He was as scattered as she was caged. They had spent a lifetime honing their skills, driven by pride and competition to deepen their connections to their own power — only to be ripped from each other. Their anchors and freedom, gone.

Riad's final exam had made him stable enough to hide. He hid from his family until they had to hide him. They had been severed mere days before Gatja could take her final exam. The unilateral execution of her family by the Sathians had left her no resources to advance, or to buy her freedom. She became completely dependent on the order for survival.

She had to find him.

She pulled water down from the storm outside, through the dirt, dead, and stone. *Where are you*, she muttered, imbuing the water with magic until she could follow every rivulet. Water pooled around her feet.

"What are you doing?" Temel grabbed Gatja's arm, and Gatja pushed her away.

"Where are you," she growled. Water belched into the chamber, pushing through seams and boring through the rock. Gatja's skin burned. Her head pulsed. Her promise not to harm Koray's heir gripped her, but Riad might know if she were lying.

"Gatja, stop, we'll drown!" Temel cried.

Water soaked them up to their waists. Faster and faster, it poured in, so thick with Gatja's magic that any mage would have heard her much less her twin.

Face me, filth, or I will drown your child.

A ripple, a river, a rupture. The chamber shuddered and then gave way. Gatja grabbed hold of Temel as they tumbled down a chute of rock. She held a liquid shield before her, cracking off any spikes and jutting stones that might score them on the way down. Riad countered with fissures and pores, draining the bulk of her weapon away. The chute spat them out at the bottom of a kurgan. Temel rolled away from Gatja, coughing and sputtering into the slurry. Gatja crawled toward Temel, patting her back.

A sinkhole high above them provided a shaft of hazy, rain-soaked light. The burial altar was empty, and the ancient jewels, tools, clothing and food lay around it in a dilapidated circle. At the outer ring of the altar were several large bulks. As Gatja's eyes adjusted, she could make out the skeletons of horses. The walls were supported by hewn stone, and the yellow light above was far too high to use as a way out.

He moved more like sand than a man. He spoke in a hissing, grinding whisper.

"Come away from her, Temel."

Gatja tightened her grip on the girl. Every beat of her heart sent thrumming pain through her veins, like pins and needles after fifteen years of deadness. The lines of his face had haunted her. The shape of the nose, the thick, flat brows, any feature of his on another person's face had repulsed her immediately. Now he stood before her, his body transformed into a sculpture of himself in flowing sand.

No jawbone to take.

"What is this place?" Gatja asked.

"It is the beginning," Riad stroked his chin, the sand falling to the ground, bouncing back to his toes, and then re-forming on his face. "There was a time when my ancestors honored their animals as family. Now we trade family like animals. I am returning to that time. To that stone."

Gatja advanced, holding Temel just behind her. Each breath of fetid air she choked down, each droplet that seeped into her clothes and hair fed her stories. They pooled with Riad's magic, as familiar to her as her own skin. She saw Temel's birth, and wondered who she would become. She saw Riad's magic grow hungry, pouring out of him and then through him, trying to balance itself on the servants. It broke their bones, killed them, and then it turned inward on his own mind. Family was not enough to keep him balanced, and she felt his desperation and misery at needing anyone; much less her. There was nothing left of him but stone.

Riad snarled, cutting off her intrusion.

"Where is your pride? You would let Koray dictate your fate?"

"Where was yours, when you let them chain you?" He shifted, flowing along the ground, each foot powdering as he walked.

"You coward. You ran, you always run!"

"I served. The truce was a lie. I was twinned to you to block you. Stop you. Keep your family from having your power." He shifted toward her, extending fingers of shadow and sand. "The servants... I thought life's blood could make me whole; but not even a life could replace your water."

Grains of sand pattered against her coat. She despised him even as his presence soothed the jagged edges and broken shards of her being. What the order — what their families had done — was beyond cruelty. Hate had made them the strongest mages of their generation; but Eyjat and Aresh loved each other.

"Koray used us both," he whispered.

Tears stung Gatja's eyes. "Is this how we end? Letting her win?"

"My vow was to erase your name. That's what my jaw means to her. If I speak your name, I die, but my thoughts betray me, and I have become stone to erase the pain. I will return to the stone. Erase the city. Erase myself. Then it will be over."

"What the piss are you talking about? That—" her vow burned the insult from her mouth before it could form. "She's got my whole family in her sitting room."

"All but one. I have cast all water from my body — every trace of you and your magic — and yet I live, and so do you." Riad held out his other hand, sand flowing off him like a robe.

Gatja's jaw set. The same fire Koray set in her veins must have been in Riad's — a spark on a massive, unstable cache of magic. This was the fate that awaited her; to be overwhelmed by her own magic until there was nothing left of her but the will of nature reclaiming itself. She wanted to drown him, his mother, his child, his city; but she'd never live to see it.

Not unless she kept her vow.

Temel took a step toward Riad, her voice bouncing off the walls. "Father, you're stronger than this, come back with us!"

Riad backed away from his daughter, all sand and shadows.

"Enough." Gatja limped forward, and caressed Temel's cheek, her fingers tracing her jaw. "Your magic is killing you. You've done so much for your family, it's time to pass it down."

"I never meant to..." he whispered, flowing toward them.

"I'll make sure your power isn't lost," said Gatja.

Temel reached for her father; Gatja tightened her grip on the girl's shoulder.

"Perhaps Temel will do better than both of us," Riad's magic thrummed through the air, expanding beyond his form.

"Father?" said Temel.

"Don't be afraid," Gatja murmured. Pain lanced through her skin and she shook her head, trying to concentrate. "When mages blend magic, you can sense each other for a time. He'll be there, in your heart. You'll see."

Temel held her arms out toward Riad, and he did the same. Behind Temel, Gatja pressed her hands against her shoulders, her touch suffusing the girl's flesh with magic. Burning, tingling energy throbbed in her legs, her hands, her eyes, and she grimaced. Gatja wove her power through Temel, giving Riad a channel to flow through.

Temel's breath quickened, some of Gatja's vow piercing them both.

Gatja wrapped her arm around Temel to steady her, her hand over her heart. "Stay calm, it won't hurt for long," Gatja said, through gritted teeth. "Trust me."

Riad slithered toward them, holding out his hands. The sand that made up his body stretched and scattered, his gift flowing into the perfectly balanced avenues Gatja had laced from Temel's blood into her bones.

Riad tumbled into both of them, the chaos of his disordered mind hammering the channels Gatja created into crooked path-

ways. Their scraping, clashing fury was a sweeter release than any rest or comfort. Riad pressed in like the earth above them, tremors shaking the walls as the force of his being careened through Temel's untrained mind. Sand scraped against flesh, but neither mage needed eyes to do their work. Stretched apart for so long, they snapped back together — in perfect hatred, the driving eye of the storm.

In their hunger to cut their teeth on one another, their boundaries fell away. Riad's spiking, grating magic crashed over the vow Gatja had made to Koray, weakening its protection. By the time Riad noticed, Gatja had already changed the flow of the pathways.

His power welded to Temel's bones as it had done to the bones of his ancestors. He became a puppet, the strings in Gatja's hands.

Riad realized the betrayal a moment too late. Through Temel's mouth, Riad screamed Gatja's name. He would rather die than let her take Sathian magic for herself.

Gatja's palm rose from Temel's heart to Temel's open mouth.

Riad tried to fight her, but she rose like a flood. The braces holding up the roof of the burial chamber weakened, dropping chunks of stone into the shallows all around them.

Gatja burst the sinew in Temel's face, severing muscles and ligaments. Gripping just under Temel's tongue, she ripped the girl's jaw from her head.

Arcs of blood and magic splattered the sandstorm around them, and Temel fell lifeless to the ground. Holding the gruesome remains of her face in one hand, she smeared her neck and wrists with blood where the muting chains had been. Riad howled with misery and rage, trying to crush her bones, but Gatja was ready.

Arms raised, Gatja pulled every last splinter and grain of Sathian magic into herself — as she had practiced on every guardian that the order had set on her.

Riad called down an avalanche on her. His fury and betrayal blended with her own — his fresh agony all too familiar. She called water, as much water as she could, to protect herself from the falling rocks. Riad's consciousness tried to assert itself within her, wrestling for control, for revenge. Sinkholes yawned, cracking open fault lines that raced along the ground to ease the pressure. The ground beneath them wrenched, dropping Temel's jawless body into the dark, and punched giant slabs of stone upward toward the sky. The earth belched Gatja to the surface in a shower of rock and dirt.

Gatja tumbled and rolled down the hillside. As his mind blended with hers, she could anticipate and shift every attack he made. Every strike and quake he meant for her, she shoved toward Koray and the city. He couldn't touch her. No Sathian would ever harm her again.

She hit a flat plane of mud and lay there, while his magic cascaded from her body and shook the earth.

It took hours to wear him down.

Exhausted, but whole for the first time in nearly twenty years, she smothered Riad with deep, warm calm like a pillow over his mouth.

"Now you know what you took from me," she snarled.

Jaw in hand, they limped down to Affokhar.

• • •

THE city was like a young ruin nature had not yet claimed. Its glorious spires had been shaken loose, cracking and crushing smaller houses. Rain and slime seeped over piles of stone debris and into sitting rooms that had kept it out for years. Water drank and drowned them all.

Gatja stumbled through the wreckage, the only slow-mover among a crush of citizens desperately digging out their loved ones and putting out fires.

He knew where to go.

She clambered over a cart, landing heavily on a horse carcass. Three of the four beasts still hitched to the cart were dead, and the fourth one, legs broken, twitched its head up from the water and shrieked.

The Sathian estate was half-crushed under a fallen spire. Most of the blackened pearl had cracked off, flakes of its pale iridescence floating belly-up like stars in the murk. Gatja didn't recognize the bulky corpse near them, but Riad did. They waded knee-deep into the water, grabbed a hunk of dark hair and lifted.

Koray. Riad had broken his vow by speaking Gatja's name. Gatja had only vowed that *she* wouldn't harm the heirs. And she had not. All she had to do was push Riad hard enough, and provide the channels — and then his magic did her work for her. Willing or not, his magic had freed her in the end.

They had been twinned; now they were one.

Out of the corner of her eye, Gatja caught a glint of silver.

The little trophy jars from Koray's sitting room were scattered — some on the floor, others cracked open, some gently bobbing along the filthy water with no burial chamber to protect them.

She touched her neck and wrists, and beneath the flakes of mud and blood, he noticed the ridged callouses for the first time.

Both lines were finished. The feud was over. It wasn't fair, but it was done.

They placed the jawbone among the little jars, under the broken roof, and the cracked spire.

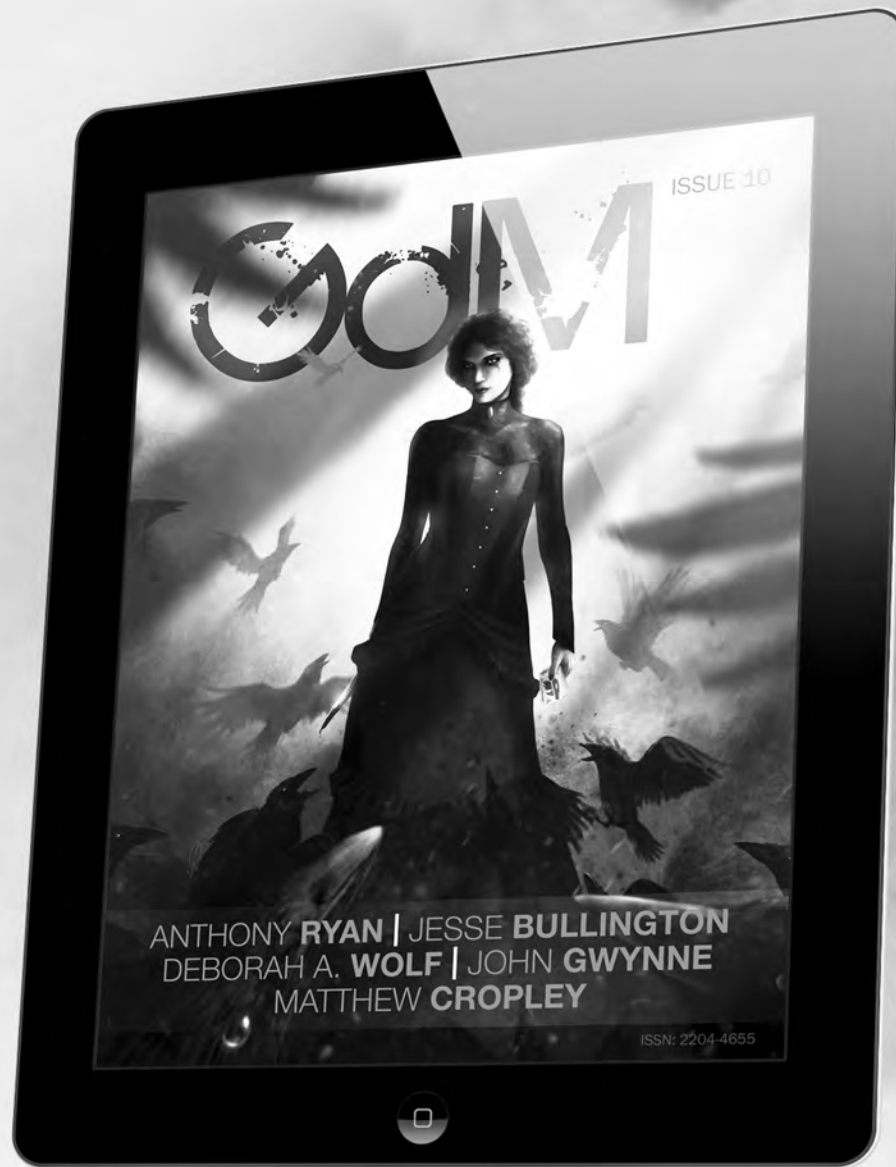
Do you want them back?

No.

Gatja scratched dirt from her scalp, and tucked her braids under her hood. As one, they hobbled away from the city, and the quakes began again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Setsu Uzume is a foul-mouthed vagabond who has long abandoned their native New York. They've studied martial arts and Daoism at a monastery in rural China, and traveled the length of the Western Americas for training in horseback archery and mounted combat. Contracts for writing and narration might or might not have been signed in blood at Escape Pod, Pseudopod, Cast of Wonders, StarShipSofa, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and Grimdark Magazine. Setsu currently lives aboard the flying castle at PodCastle.org as Assistant Editor. If you are brave, invoke and summon Setsu on Twitter @KatanaPen



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ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

A SOUL'S SECOND SKIN

A Dhulyn and Parno Adventure

By VIOLETTE MALAN

“YOUR pardon, lady, but you’re a Mercenary Brother, is that right?”

Dhulyn put down her scroll with a sigh. This was the third interruption since Parno had taken his pipes to join the musicians. But a half moon ago she’d Seen work, and the vision had brought them here to the oasis of Teshebbet. Caid’s knew a paying job would be more than welcome just now.

It wasn’t right for Mercenary Brothers to earn their keep playing music and reciting poetry.

“I am Dhulyn Wolfshead, called the Scholar,” she said. The woman standing in front of her was short, plump and rosy-cheeked, like a baker in a play. Her clothing was simple, but of an excellent quality. “I was Schooled by Dorian the Black Traveller, and I fight with my Brother, Parno Lionsmane. I am not ‘lady,’ I am ‘Wolfshead.’”

“Yes, thank you, uh Wolfshead. I am Azli the Tanner, of Nakheshet. I couldn’t be sure, you see? I mean, you have the tattoos –” the woman flicked her fingers at the Mercenary Badge that reached from Dhulyn’s temples to above her ears – “but there’s few of your kind in Alabar, and... uh, Mercenary Brothers, I mean. No offense meant.”

“None taken.” Dhulyn refrained from rolling her eyes to the Sun and Moon. Anyone would know from her pale skin and blood-red hair that she had once been a Red Horseman, before the Brotherhood became all of her past and all of her future. She indicated the stool across from her and let the scroll roll closed. Perhaps she’d find time to finish the story later.

The woman glanced down at the stool, over to where two servants leaned against the bar, and back again.

“You need have no fear of me. Unless, of course, someone has hired me to kill you, in which case you would already be dead.”

That brought pursed lips, though Azli Tanner did sit down. “I don’t know how to treat you.”

“Treat me as someone you wish to hire – keeping in mind that I am a Mercenary Brother, and not a fry cook.” She smiled, carefully stopping before the small scar could curl her lip into a snarl. “Come, you have a difficulty you wish addressed?”

Azli leaned her left forearm on the table and looked down at the scarred wooden top. “We’ve lost my brother – I’ve lost him. I’m taking him to the Healer in Mesticha. And three days ago, when we camped for the night, we woke up and he was gone.”

“You set no watch?”

The woman hesitated. “There? On the main road?”

Typical of town people, Dhulyn thought. If men built it, they thought they were safe.

“We searched everywhere, even retracing our steps, but saw no

sign of him. There’s no Finder in Nakheshet, so finally we came on here, in hope this town had one, and they do, but she’s off with the herds right now. We didn’t know what to do, then we saw you, and the man behind the bar said that Mercenary Brothers were good trackers. And so I thought, if you weren’t too costly...”

I don’t know, Dhulyn said to herself. *What is your brother worth to you?* “You say you seek a Healer? What ails your brother?”

Again the pursed lips. “He sleeps but gets no rest. He wakes shaking from dreams where he isn’t himself. We thought, what if he’s wandered off while dreaming?”

“So you want my Partner and me to track him?”

• • •

“SHE was lying,” Dhulyn said. They had retired for the night to the cramped room over the stable yard, which was all they could afford.

“There’s no brother?” Parno slipped the last of his pipes into its felted pouch. He repacked them at the end of every night, though he’d had to unpack them again at the start of every evening’s performance. Be ready to run. That was the Common Rule.

“There’s *someone* missing – though brother or not I couldn’t say. Her story had too much detail in some things, too little in others. Plus, she was altogether too anxious that I believe in his illness. It’s clear she’s afraid he left them on purpose.”

“Still, hiring Mercenary Brothers is somewhat extreme, my wolf. They must have some strong reason to want him back.”

“I asked her that myself. ‘But he’s my brother!’ the woman says, with all the indignation she could muster.” Dhulyn looked sideways, eyes sparkling. “So much, that I do not believe a word of it.”

“How do you mean?”

“She was indignant, even angry, but not worried, nor frightened, nor in any way distraught, as one would expect in a woman whose brother was lost. And consider, I had to ask her for his name.”

Parno whistled. “What worried sister fails to mention her brother’s name?” He lay down on the narrow bed and glanced up at her. “What else speaks to you?”

“Hmmm? Oh, the woman’s changeable accent and her soft, clean hands. She’s no tanner.”

“So you refused the job.”

“Not so quickly, my soul. From Azli Tanner’s description, her ‘brother’ Ketzal could be the man I’ve Seen. Besides, we’re running out of money. If this is not *the* job, at the least it is *a* job.”

• • •

THE land around the oasis of Teshebbet was high desert, rough, hard ground marked by drought-resistant plants and grasses, jagged rock, and the occasional stand of stunted trees. Of sand, there was little. According to Azli's story, her brother had gone missing only two days into a five-day journey.

It didn't take long to find where the missing man had left the road. Ketzal had been on foot, and though the marks were soft and shallow, any Mercenary Brother would have found them easy to follow.

"Those aren't boot marks," Parno said, leaning far forward out of his saddle. Warhammer was a wonderful horse, trained by Dhulyn herself, but he was extraordinarily tall.

Dhulyn crouched on her heels, tilted her head to one side to get a different angle on the prints. "He's wearing some kind of soft leather slippers." Bloodbone sidled up behind Dhulyn and hung her long horse's nose over her shoulder. Parno wouldn't be surprised if the spotted mare wanted to examine the footprints for herself. Dhulyn straightened up and swung herself back into the saddle. "He's more than three days ahead of us."

"On foot."

"Tracking will slow us down, horses or no horses."

• • •

THAT night Dhulyn unpacked her vera tiles and laid out the pattern she called The Tarkin's Square. The ancient Seer's tool enhanced what little control she had over her Mark. For the anchor tile she used the Mercenary of Swords, which could stand for either her Partner or herself. She searched out the tiles signifying the four Marks, Finder, Mender, Healer, and Seer, and placed them in a square around the anchor tile. She took the Lens tile out of its small silk bag and set it atop the anchor. The rest of the pattern she made by drawing loose tiles from the box and setting them face down.

She turned over the first tile. The Tarkina of Clubs. A dark-haired, dark-eyed man or woman. That could be the man they were looking for. As she continued turning over the tiles, a pattern began to emerge, colours forming as she reached the last three tiles.

A DARK-HAIRED, DARK-EYED MAN STANDS TO HER LEFT, HIS FISTS CLENCHED, A WRINKLE OF WORRY ON HIS BROW. TO HER RIGHT STANDS A THING OF TOWERING HEIGHT AND POWER, OF ROUND PROTRUDING EYES, OF IRIDESCENT SKIN, VAST JAWS AND WRITHING TENTACLES. IT IS BEAUTIFUL, BUT HER HEART IS COLD.

"NOW?" THE MAN SAYS. HIS EYES ARE CLOSED, BUT HE SMILES.

SHE SEES HERSELF STANDING OFF TO ONE SIDE, BOW AND ARROW AT THE READY. SHE GLANCES UP, AND FOR A MOMENT THEIR EYES MEET. ONE OF THEM SMILES...

HER SWORD IS IN HER LEFT HAND, WITH HER RIGHT SHE PETS THE MONSTER, CROONING TO IT AS THOUGH IT WAS A HORSE. IT QUIETS, AND HER LEFT HAND THRUSTS.

"Same Sight again?" Parno's tone was too studiously light to be real.

"You weren't there this time."

• • •

"ARE those vultures?" Though they were alone, Parno spoke just loud enough to be heard.

"I hope not. I neglected to get a dead-or-alive clause in the bargain."

With a signal to Bloodbone, Dhulyn kicked her feet out of the stirrups, braced her hands on the pommel and vaulted up onto her saddle. Obedient to the signal, the mare slowed and stopped. From the extra elevation, Dhulyn saw a darker shadow on the ground up ahead.

"No birds on the ground, but something is definitely there," she said as she lowered herself down again.

Parno took the right flank, Dhulyn the left. The vultures called insults to them, but approached no closer.

A man sat cross-legged, hands limp in his lap, head hanging down. Keeping her eyes on the seated figure, Dhulyn lifted her leg over Bloodbone's neck and dropped lightly to the ground. Without turning she pulled her sword out of the sheath strapped across her back and approached, knowing that Parno would already have the small crossbow ready. Better cautious than cursing.

Both the man's hands were empty, and if he hid a weapon beneath his body, he could not possibly retrieve it quickly enough to do her harm. His muscles were slack, but she thought she saw his chest move. A whistle told her that her Partner was in position. She squatted down, sword in her left hand, poised to slice through the ribs and into the heart. She pushed two fingers under the jaw and –

DARKNESS. COLD. SHE CANNOT SEE, MOST UNUSUAL FOR A VISION. SHE BREATHES CAREFULLY UNTIL HER HEARTBEAT SLOWS, AND SHE LISTENS. IS SHE OUTSIDE OR IN? SHE SNAPS HER FINGERS, AND LISTENS TO HOW THE SOUND MOVES, BOUNCES, ECHOES. A TUNNEL? A CORRIDOR? A SMELL LIKE CHILL, DUSTY STONE. A GENTLE SLITHERING, A COLD ROPELIKE THING WRAPS ITSELF AROUND HER LEG –

Dhulyn blinked. She was sitting propped against Parno, as if she'd fallen backwards and he had caught her.

"I didn't think you were near enough to your woman's time for random Sights," he said.

"I'm not." She let him help her to her feet and dusted off her leather trousers. "This time the beast touched me. *He's* alive at least." She pointed with her chin. With a squeeze of her shoulder, Parno left her to look more closely at the man.

"Is this his illness?"

"I sincerely hope not. If what I Saw is his nightmare, it's a wonder he's not mad."

"Don't touch him again." Parno retrieved his crossbow, released the string, tucked the bolt away, and slung the weapon itself over the horn of his saddle. He turned back to her, tossing her the water skin before kneeling down and turning the man until the slack head lay back against his shoulder. "Wash the dirt off first."

"Yes mother." She pulled the stopper and let a small amount of water dribble over the lower half of the man's face, as Parno wiped at the dirt and eased the man's mouth open.

"Just enough to moisten," he said.

They ministered to him where they'd found him, unwilling to move the man to one of the horses until he showed more signs of life. Experimentation showed that Dhulyn could touch his clothing without danger of a Sight. The man began to breath more deeply,

his muscles tightened, his eyelids fluttered. His tongue moved. Gripping his sleeves, Dhulyn held Ketzel upright until Parno was mounted and able to hoist him up before him on Warhammer.

"How long would you say he's been without water?"

Dhulyn considered, looking the man over with narrowed eyes, remembering the feel of his skin. "Too long. Perhaps as much as three days, why?"

"He was on the road already, he knew the conditions. Yet he leaves his group without food, without water, and without adequate covering for his head." Even Dhulyn, who normally went bare-headed, had wrapped a spare sash around her head to keep off the worst of the sun. "If he was leaving them deliberately, would he be so ill-prepared? How desperate can he be?"

"If he was on the road," Dhulyn said. "Just because we found his tracks doesn't mean Azli's tale of a journey is the truth. Still," she shrugged, "this is the man of my Vision. We've taken the right job after all."

"Try to look happier about it."

• • •

THEY doubled back on their own trail, stopping where they had camped the night before. A sheer slice of rock, so smooth it must have been some relic of the Caids, thrust up out of the ground, giving some shade during the day, and a wind break at night. Such traces of the ancient civilization were found throughout the world, even across the Long Ocean. Ketzel finally roused enough to be fed the porridge Parno made from water and crumbled travel bread, but otherwise sat still, his gaze turned inward, brows drawn down, forehead creased. He'd responded to his name, but made no effort to speak. Once or twice he looked around like someone trying to make sense of what he saw. They'd given up any expectations when suddenly he spoke.

"You are Mercenary Brothers." His voice was raspy and weak.

"As you see," Parno agreed. "Sent to find you by a woman calling herself your sister."

A curl of lips told its own story. "I have no kin."

"Why does she not fear you telling us this truth?" Dhulyn's rough silk voice was as gentle as Parno had ever heard it.

"Because you will think me insane." The man spoke as if what he said had no importance. Parno caught his Partner's eye. She raised the small finger of her left hand.

"Possibly." Parno was blunt. "But we've seen many things, Ketzel, and there's little we won't at least consider."

Ketzel's shrug was slight, as if he lacked will, or energy, to do more. "It makes no difference whether I will tell you. I am not what you see. This body," he tapped his chest, "this is not mine."

Dhulyn's face hardened, and Parno reached for his belt dagger. "You inhabit someone else's body?"

"Not in the way you mean. This body was empty when I was called to it. I don't know who occupied it originally. I can only tell you he was not here."

"Who, or what, called you? And from where?"

"The mage Azli Cheriot. And from another world."

Dhulyn rolled her eyes. "Blooded mages. I told you she wasn't a tanner."

"So you believe me?" The man closed his eyes, though whether in relief or exhaustion was not clear.

"We have been in Menoin, we are aware that other worlds exist."

"And why would anyone, even a mage, bring you here?" Parno asked.

"To steal the Crystal Eye of Eluuvél."

Dhulyn glanced at him, and Parno shook his head. He'd never heard of it either.

"Why not steal it themselves?" he asked Ketzel. "Or hire human thieves?" Not that mages needed any sensible reason to do something elaborate and dangerous – to others.

"It's under the constant guard of acolytes who sleep in shifts. The Sleeping God himself watches over them, giving them resistance to any drugs or sleeping potions they may be given."

"Well we know *that's* not true," Parno muttered under his breath. "Still, why you? What special skill do you have?"

"I can be invisible."

"Even in this body?" Dhulyn smiled her wolf's smile. "That's something we'd like to see."

Ketzel rubbed his face with his hands, and Dhulyn sat back on her heels. She was expecting, if anything, a slow fade, or the irresistible urge to look elsewhere, or to think of something else – all devices the shaman of her tribe once used. The man's abrupt and sudden disappearance took her completely by surprise.

"Demons and perverts." Parno's voice was full of joy and awe. Dhulyn nudged him and lifted her left thumb. He concentrated, gave a small nod, and turned his head as she did.

"How is it you see me?" The voice came from the spot they both stared at. "Not even the mage could see me."

"Nor can we, but we can smell you." Parno grinned.

"And hear you," Dhulyn added. "Mages are not trained as Mercenary Brothers."

"A lucky thing then, for the mage at least, that there were no Mercenaries in the Shrine of Eluuvél."

"There *were* no? So the Crystal is already stolen?" Parno turned to Dhulyn. "I had hopes we were merely intended to stop the theft." He turned back to the once more visible man. "So why are you still here? Do they plan some other crime?"

"No, they intend to return me to my own place."

Dhulyn rolled her eyes, calling on the Sun and Moon to witness the extent of her patience. "So why are we tracking you into the middle of nowhere?"

"Because I do not wish to go."

"But it is not so simple," Dhulyn guessed.

"No. It is not." Ketzel resumed his place, sitting cross-legged between them. "At first I was completely in this body, at all times. After the theft I began to shift back and forth between worlds and bodies. From the way this alarmed her, I would guess it an unexpected occurrence. While she was distracted, I ran."

"What did you think to accomplish in escaping her?" Parno leaned forward and added another fuel cube to the fire. "Will the shifting stop of itself?"

Ketzel shrugged. "I wish to remain here. Even this changeable existence, however dangerous, is preferable to me. Mine is a cold and empty world. Here there is sunlight, and wind, and things to eat that are not trying to eat me in their turn. I thought I would go to a shrine of the Sleeping God. The Jaldean priests would let me serve there, and would watch over me when this body is empty."

Dhulyn looked away from the sudden grin on Parno's face. "That would be an option, certainly." She paused, drumming her fingers on her knee. "Why did Azli not simply kill you?"

"She cannot. This body, yes, but not me. Does my spirit return to my own place of its own power? Or would the death of this body merely free me to enter somewhere – someone – else." He turned to Dhulyn. "She does not know."

"But killing this body when you are in your own might keep you there?"

"It is certainly logical."

"Therefore killing that body while you are in this one might allow you to stay here."

"I would be willing to attempt it."

"Might be a bit difficult to arrange," Parno said.

"Perhaps you know of another mage? If not, I go to the Sleeping God." He looked around into the darkness as if he meant to go at once. Dhulyn rested her fingers on the man's wrist.

"You say you know the Brotherhood. So you know we must return you to the mage, as we have contracted to do," she pointed out. "Otherwise, we call into question not only our word, but the word of every Mercenary Brother. The Brotherhood comes before all."

"I see." Ketzal pressed his lips together.

Parno got to his feet, stretching. "Don't worry too much. We contracted to bring you back to her. We didn't contract to leave you there."

• • •

"YOU are discharged." Azli Cheriot, or whatever her real name was, dismissed them with dancing eyes. Eyes suddenly too hard for her soft, round face.

Parno bounced the small bag of coins in his hand as the door shut in their faces. "I see what you meant," he said. "That wasn't the smile of a sister happy to see her brother."

Dhulyn followed her Partner down the crooked stair case toward the murmur of laughter and music that rose from the tavern's main room. If they took the corner table, the one east of the fireplace, they'd have a good view of both doors. The mage and her people could not leave without being seen. Bloodbone and Warhammer waited in the empty stable, saddled and ready to follow.

The empty stable...

Parno stopped on the stairs, looked at her over his shoulder as though he'd had the same thought. "Dhulyn...?"

"Quickly." Dhulyn spun on the step and ran back up the stairs, pulling her sword free as she went, cursing under her breath. It had already occurred to her once that the mage was not in fact on her way anywhere – and an empty stable certainly seemed to agree.

When they reached the upper landing Parno kicked the door squarely above the latch, crashing it open and stepping through before it could rebound. Dodging to the right, he knocked aside a crossbow bolt with the knife in his left hand, striking the bowman in the head with the flat of his sword, and kicking the crossbow free as the man went down. Dhulyn had dodged left as she stepped into the room, finishing the other guard with a thrown dagger. Ketzal was on his knees, head tilted up, eyes closed. Azli the mage had one hand on his forehead, and the other raised, drawing on nothing. Glowing lines of colour trailed after her finger as if pulled from the air, travelling down the mage's arm, through her into Ketzal and back again. Dhulyn shoved the man over with a swift foot to his shoulder, breaking the circuit. As Ketzal fell to one side, the mage staggered and the lines of colour broke loose, splashing around the room as they faded.

"You fools," the mage called. "Now the portal is loose."

Dhulyn looked where the mage was pointing, at first unable to see anything. Then, she saw what looked like a heat shimmer in the air where Ketzal had been kneeling a moment before. Dhulyn moved toward it sideways, the fierce concentration of the Crab *Shora* enabling her to see flickering edges, edges that grew father apart even as she approached. The opening was taller than she was, taller than Parno and perhaps twice as wide. It was a rough tear-drop in shape, and the room she could see beyond it rippled and danced as though she saw it under water.

"Dhulyn!" she heard Parno's call at the same moment that she felt hands in the small of her back, pushing her forward. In her fascination with the portal, she had forgotten the mage. Cursing, Dhulyn twisted as she fell, grabbing a fistful of Azli's sleeve. She had almost managed to pull herself upright again, when she felt a smooth ropelike thing circle her leg and pull at her. It felt muscular, like a snake as thick around as her arm, but when she looked, she saw nothing. "Parno!" She raised her sword to strike at where she imagined the limb stretched through the opening. As she brought the weapon down, the world turned black.

Parno hauled Ketzal to his feet, turning just in time to see Dhulyn being dragged into the rift in the air by something he couldn't see. "Demons and perverts." With his hand still wrapped in Ketzal's collar, Parno dove through the opening himself, riding a wash of air.

Utter darkness, utter silence. As Ketzal's hand closed around Parno's upper arm, sound returned, and he could hear the man's breathing, and his own. "Dhulyn!"

"Here, my heart." Parno shut his eyes in relief. Her tone showed curiosity, excitement, but no injury. A moment later her rough fingers touched his cheek. "I hear three people breathing. Did the mage come as well?"

"You're both *idiots*." By her tone, Azli was furious. "Look what you've done! Why did you come after her?"

"I didn't. I came *with* her. We are Partnered."

"How nice for you. And what has all this heroics accomplished? The portal is closed, and I can't draw power from this world to open it again. I must create it myself, and there's only one way to do that.

A killing, Parno thought.

"You thought you were helping this thing? Now you'll have to kill it in order to get home."

"That's not strictly true," Ketzal said.

"Of course he says that –"

"Hush," Dhulyn's tone was such that even the mage fell silent. "Something large breathes ten or twelve paces away from us." Parno felt Dhulyn step away. "It neither attacks nor moves away. What is it?"

"Me." Ketzal said. "I'm afraid it is my real body, the one I would leave here."

"Sun, Moon and Stars."

• • •

"I'M telling you, the disruption of its body is the only way to open the rift." Azli had managed to produce a small light that hung over them, flickering. If anything, it made the blackness around them more opaque.

"Who did you kill to open it from our side?" Dhulyn asked.

Azli shifted her feet. "As I said, there I can draw power from the world itself," she said finally.

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"I wondered what happened to the spirit that belongs in this body," Ketzal said.

Dhulyn and Parno both looked at the mage, and though she looked at them with defiance, she edged back a pace. "Think what you like, there's still only one way to open the rift now, otherwise we're stuck here."

Parno shrugged. "We all have to die somewhere."

Azli shook her head. "No sane person wishes to die."

"It's not that we wish to, it's that we're not afraid to."

"You're not afraid to die?" the mage said. There was something more to her question than the mere sense of the words.

"We're Mercenary Brothers." Parno shrugged. "It's what we expect."

"In Battle," Dhulyn said.

"Or in Death," Parno answered.

"I don't suppose one of you will volunteer to die so the rest of us can leave? No, I didn't think so."

"Oh, we would die for each other," Dhulyn smiled her wolf's smile. "We might even die for him." She tilted her head at Ketzal. "But neither of us will die for *you*, mage. Still, I think we are over-looking another alternative."

"You can't open the rift without me." Azli backed away, but not so far as to step out of the light.

"I wasn't thinking of you," Dhulyn said. "Ketzal, do you think.. Ketzal?" The man's eyes stared into space. "He's gone again." A slithering shifting sliding noise came from behind her. "Or not gone, exactly."

"You're thinking the death of one of his bodies will do the trick?" Parno said. "We'll have to wait 'til he switches back then."

"And if he doesn't?" Azli looked more anxious now than before.

"We'll kill that jackal when we find it," Dhulyn eyed the tremble in the woman's hands. "You're nervous. What is it we do not know?"

"Each moment that passes takes us further from our point of entry, if it shifts too far... We should kill him now before it's too late. You can't even see his real body." She lifted her hand to draw in the air. Parno was suddenly behind her, her wrist in his right hand.

"We'll do any killing that's needed." Parno used his most civilized tone, but he kept his grip. "And Mercenaries don't need eyesight to do it." Parno shifted, the light showing gold streaks in his hair. "Why don't you ready the spell, while one of us kills the beast. Dhulyn, my wolf, I believe I killed the last one?"

"Always complaining." Dhulyn tucked her sword in the sheath on her back and pulled one of her sashes loose.

Parno lowered Azli's arm. "If it kills you, do I have your permission to kill the mage?"

Dhulyn touched her forehead in salute. "Always, my soul."

As she wrapped the sash around her eyes, she heard the wheedling tones of the Mage and paused. "A moment of quiet, please." She did not hear what Parno said to the woman, but whatever it was, it silenced her. Dhulyn drew her sword with her left hand, steadied her breathing and began the soft movements of the Hunter's *Shora*. She blocked her awareness of the sounds of the mage's breathing, Ketzal's breathing, Parno's breathing, and finally her own. In the silence of the *Shora*, she listened for her prey.

Despite what she'd said before, it did not breathe, exactly, but Dhulyn could hear its movements, like the faint hiss of a dry snake along a tiled floor. Now that her eyes were covered, her ears told her that they stood in the tunnel of her Vision. Once

again she felt the tentacle wrap itself around her legs, this time travelling upwards slowly, gently, as she lifted her arms above its embrace, sword still in hand. The hold tightened, and her feet left the ground.

"Is it you, Ketzal? Can you understand me? Parno will tell me when you return to the human body." She stroked with her right hand the cold skin she could not see. "I will do my best."

"What is that?" came the mage's voice from behind her. "Ach! Get it off me!"

"Stay focused woman. Be steady. It's only Ketzal, and he understands what is needed."

"Do you?" Dhulyn murmured. "Do you understand?" The tentacle holding her squeezed with great gentleness, as a large man hugs a small child.

Dhulyn hung in the air long enough that a cramp began in her unsupported leg. Long enough that the mage murmured again, and again was silenced. Dhulyn began counting heartbeats, focussing on the sword in her hand, and the trembling beast under her fingers –

"Now!"

As the sound of the word still echoed in the air, Dhulyn struck, bracing herself for the spasm of muscles she expected. Instead, the tentacles disappeared, and from somewhere far away she heard the mage screaming. Dhulyn fell. Surely she should have hit the floor by now? As she reached up to tear away the blindfold, a familiar hand closed itself around her wrist and, still falling, she relaxed.

The next thing she knew, Parno was unwrapping her eyes, and she was blinking into moonlight that shone unnaturally bright. She squinted, relaxing when she saw familiar stars. Her Partner held a warm cup to her lips, and the smell of ganje made her sit up, only to gasp as a sharp pain stabbed her side.

"I don't suppose there's a Healer nearby?" Her mouth was almost too dry to speak, and she took a swallow of the warm liquid.

"Ribs broken, you think?"

"Let's hope not." Dhulyn made a face. There was the taste of valerian hiding under the ganje. "Ketzal?"

"Here, Wolfshead." She'd never seen the man smile before.

"And the mage?" Dhulyn peered around, but neither saw nor smelled the other woman.

"Ketzal took care of her." Parno tucked a loose braid behind her ear.

"But the beast disappeared and –"

"Ah now, I didn't say the beast, did I? Ketzal felt he had a score to settle, and you know, his hands are remarkably strong. And I must say, his timing is excellent." Parno smiled at the other man, who spread his hands and shrugged. "Come, my wolf, time for sleep. The stars tell me that tomorrow we start a long walk back to the inn at Teshebbet."

"Stars," Dhulyn cursed under her breath as she curled up where she lay, careful of her ribs. Her Partner would take care of things. A long walk he'd said. *I suppose that means a big bill for the stabling of our horses.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Violette Malan uses fabulous hats to distract everyone from noticing that she's taking notes which will inevitably be used against them. She begs you to remember that no one expects the Spanish *inquisition*. If you're very brave, you can find her and her evil twin V.M. Escalada on Facebook, on Twitter @VioletteMalan and at www.violetteimalan.com



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ILLUSTRATION BY CLIFF KUROWSKI

SHUHALLA'S SWORD

By DAVE GROSS

SHE might have been a devil emerging from one of the whirlwinds scouring the mountain path. The winds peeled red streamers off her robes and the shaggy flanks of her steed. She bent low over the pony's mane. A tattered cape shook between twin scabbards on her harness. A sword's grip rose above her right shoulder. A second scabbard, empty, peeked over her left. The design of the harness allowed for more to be added. She was obviously a Flying Sword.

Denkar had hoped an experienced inspector would come. This woman had only one sword. The court sent only a novice!

The woman's lips moved, but Denkar couldn't hear her words over the wind. He could see nothing of her face but a small mouth and a pointed chin. She didn't appear to have seen him. Was she talking to her pony?

Noting the six imperial seals sewn into her straw hat, Denkar stood too fast, head woozy from hunger and dehydration. He staggered out from behind the sentry's rock, somehow managed to hook one foot behind the opposite ankle, and tumbled down the scree. He sheltered the commander's sword in his arms, failing to break his fall as he protected the weapon. The brim of his hat snapped as his face struck the ground. He felt a sharp impact and tasted blood. Dazed, he raised his head to see the pony charging toward him, scant yards away. It made no sign of turning or slowing. He tried to cry out, but the wind packed his mouth with dust.

He tensed for the impact. The instant stretched into an eternity of anticipated pain—which did not come. Instead, Denkar heard a thunderous crash as the pony landed behind him. The animal snorted and danced as the rider turned it about.

Denkar scuttled to face the rider, too weak to rise to his knees. He kowtowed three times, uncertain whether that was too much respect to offer a Flying Sword with a single blade on her back. He kowtowed three more times. Better to seem obsequious than disrespectful, he decided.

The woman dismounted and approached. He fixed his gaze on her slippers, blue leather dulled by travel.

Denkar proffered the commander's sword, laying it on the ground and placing his palms flat on the ground.

"Who are you?" she said.

He coughed out a mouthful of dust. "Denkar bo Lin, Inspector, the commander's adjutant. He ordered me to present you with his sword and my service."

She threw something at him, striking his shoulder. A riding crop. The woman knelt before him, holding the hem of her cape to either side. The unexpected gesture frightened Denkar until she said, "Write, 'Commander Shung Fei of Bulwark Station 4713.'"

In the shelter of her cape, Denkar did as she ordered. The woman withdrew a scroll from a leather case on a belt heavy with pouches, a bound book, and other curious items, compared Denkar's dusty scrawl with the writing on the dispatch, and grunted in satisfaction.

"Very well, Denkar. I am Shuhalla, imperial inspector first rank. Take me to Commander Shung."

"He is dead, Inspector. The mutineers struck the night after he sent the dispatch."

Shuhalla cast a skeptical gaze down at him. "Yet you survived. And this is his sword?" She drew the commander's blade from its scabbard, admiring the engraving and gold filigree. The commander had told Denkar it had been in his family since before the re-unification.

Denkar hadn't noticed her picking up the weapon. "He said it would be proof that I relayed his last words truthfully, Inspector."

"It could also be evidence that you killed him."

Denkar choked. "I see your point, Inspector."

"Stop saying 'Inspector.' It wastes time, and it annoys me."

"Yes, Insp— Yes."

Shuhalla gestured for him to rise. He did so, gaining his first good look at her face.

Her eyes were deep with irises more golden than brown. Her skin looked even darker under the shade of her hat, perhaps wind-burned as well as tanned. Denkar stood a good two inches taller than she, which appeared to surprise them both. She offered him a canteen from the pony's saddle bags. As he tipped it back, he glimpsed the red eye of heaven. He turned away, still drinking, careful not to let his gaze linger on the evil moon.

"You witnessed the commander's murder?" said Shuhalla.

Denkar almost choked again, this time from trying not to spit out the water. She had waited until he was drinking to ask her question. Now she was watching his reaction. Imperial inspectors—Flying Swords—were as renowned for their interrogation techniques as for their martial skill. "I didn't see him die." He blinked, but his body was too dry to produce a tear. Perhaps that was for the best. He didn't wish to seem insincere. But he also didn't wish to seem as if he were intentionally seeming. He had no experience with courtly people, only the commander's advice. "I heard him cry out after the mutineers broke through his door."

"You did not go to his aid?" Shuhalla snatched away the water.

Denkar took a deep breath, knowing he could not conceal his shame but not wishing to exaggerate it, either. "I had already crept out through his window and along the wall, knowing the soldiers were coming for him. The commander forbade me to return no matter what happened. He said I must await the inspector while he and his bodyguard faced the mutineers."

Shuhalla walked around Denkar as he removed his hat, turned it to place the unbroken brim over his eyes, and re-secured it under his chin.

"They did not pursue you?"

"I heard them searching, but I hid farther down the trail. The next day, I returned to the sentry rock, not knowing how long it would take our request to reach you. I've heard no sound of them since that night, and no one has come down from the station. I have waited here since."

Shuhalla checked the date on the dispatch. "Eight days?"

"Yes, Inspector."

"Without leaving your post?" The wind tugged her hat to the side, and Shuhalla arched an eyebrow.

"Yes, Inspector." He winced, realizing he'd twice disobeyed her order not to repeat her title, but she did not correct him. "There was a cask of water, but it was almost empty. I thought about sneaking back to the keep for food. If you hadn't arrived, I might have—"

"How old are you, Denkar?"

"Fourteen, Inspector." He tried not to squirm. He knew he was too young to serve at the bulwark station, much less to serve as the commander's adjutant.

Shuhalla frowned. "Big for your age. You might have told me sixteen."

"That would be a lie."

Shuhalla considered his reply and made a vague grunt. "Show me to the station."

Denkar led the way up the gradual incline. Shuhalla rode behind him, the commander's sword hanging from her harness belt. Before they reached the prominence that sheltered the station from the mountain path, the wind storm began to subside. Shuhalla asked Denkar about the station and its supply camp.

"Forty-seven soldiers at the station," he said. "Twenty-eight women, six men, and fourteen children at the supply camp."

Supply camps were officially forbidden, but the commander had explained they were common and usually overlooked by authorities. Because such arrangements provided bulwark stations with both food and new recruits, the bureaucracy turned a blind eye.

"How many fathered by soldiers?"

Denkar shrugged.

"None by you?"

"Ha!" said Denkar. He saw she was not joking. "No, Inspector. I wouldn't dare. It is forbidden."

"Then where do all those children come from?"

"I—I don't—"

"It was a rhetorical question."

Denkar didn't know what that word meant and started to ask, but he decided it wasn't a good idea and shut his mouth again.

They came to the turn where they would reveal themselves to any sentinels at the station. Denkar crouched low and moved toward a screen of poplars. Shuhalla followed, leading her pony by the bridle.

The main keep was a blocky structure, two stories of quarried stone with a wooden third story crowned with a parapet. To either side, the walls extended southeast to a vertical cliff and

northwest to a cylindrical watch tower two hundred yards away. Beyond the tower, the mountain fell away, rocky cliffs plunging into a valley of firs. The vale declined toward the east, shadows swelling in the deep recesses as the sun eased itself past the horizon.

A small stable and a smithy stood to the right of the keep, a pair of outhouses much farther to the left. Between them lay an expanse of trampled ground bordered by quintains and archery targets. No smoke rose from the chimneys in the forge or keep. The entire place was still. Even the wild mountain winds refused to follow beyond the poplars.

Shuhalla nudged Denkar with her riding crop, and he led the way into the yard. The keep door stood slightly open, but Shuhalla directed him to check the outbuildings first. They found nothing but spiders in the latrines, and the forge had long since gone cold. Shuhalla smelled and tasted the grain they found in the stable before spilling some into a trough and leaving her pony to feast. In the smithy, she ordered Denkar to light a fire and prepare a pair of torches, despite the daylight. He made quick work of it and offered her a torch, but she ignored his gesture. He felt awkward holding two torches, but he had promised to serve the inspector as loyally as he had the commander.

As they entered the fortress, Denkar glanced at the commander's sword hanging from Shuhalla's belt. Noticing his gaze, she shook her head. "Show me the commander's room."

They peered into the kitchen and mess hall on the way to the stairs. Except for an overturned pot of hardened gruel, they saw no signs of the mutiny.

Somewhere upstairs, a shutter banged closed. A few seconds later it banged again.

"It must be the wind come again," said Denkar. He hoped that was true.

They climbed to the second floor, pausing to look in on each of the barracks. One was empty. From the other they smelled decay and heard swarming flies. Inside, they found the bodies of two soldiers, their wounds crawling with maggots. One of the bodies was mutilated beyond recognition.

Denkar nodded at the gambler's tattoos on the other corpse's knuckles. "Wen Sadao," he said. "A bully at games, but loyal to the commander."

"What prompted the insurrection?"

Denkar shrugged as he led her to the commander's quarters. "Everything was in the report."

"Not everything," she said. "How did it begin?"

Denkar hesitated. "I think it started in the supply camp. Those who came back began whispering among themselves."

When he said no more, Shuhalla said, "What had changed at the camp?"

"I don't know. I haven't been back since my mother died."

"You were born in the camp?"

Denkar nodded. He expected another question, but they were distracted by the bloodstains at the door to the commander's chamber.

Shuhalla pushed the broken door open. After a moment's consideration, she stepped inside. Denkar paled, hesitating.

Splinters littered the floor. A cracked wardrobe lay to one side of the opening, pinning the mutilated body of a huge dark-skinned man. The floor beneath him was crusted dark brown.

"Zeroun Derian," said Denkar. "The commander's bodyguard."

Like the soldiers below, Zeroun had been hacked beyond death, his round head tipped back by a near-decapitating wound. The severed hand of a smaller man with lighter skin lay among his ruined parts, testament to Zeroun's defense of the man whose body lay on the bed.

The commander was not mutilated. What they had done to him was far worse.

Strange branches enveloped his body, woven around and into his limbs and torso. Not tree branches, Denkar realized, but something softer, like thick arms of tree fungus. Only the commander's head emerged from the woody cage, his neck stretched back and his mouth open. From it protruded his tongue, darker than blood and—incredibly—as long as his forearm. It stretched from his mouth toward the sunlight like the first tendril of a growing seed.

The sight of the commander's awful tongue prompted Denkar to shut his own mouth, which he hadn't realized was hanging open.

"Touch nothing," Shuhalla said. She cast a hard glance at the commander's face, then at Denkar's. "You are named bo Lin?"

"Yes," he said. "After my mother."

She wrinkled her nose. He supposed after eight days at the sentry rock, he must smell bad. She said only, "Hold the torches high."

Shuhalla retrieved a plain sword from the floor, half-hidden by the commander's bed. The blade was smeared in dried blood. Denkar groaned to see it.

"Yours?" asked Shuhalla.

"I left it for him, so he could..." Denkar ran out of words. The sword had made little difference in the commander's last stand.

Shuhalla inspected a few strands of gray hair still stuck to the blade, comparing them to a wound in the commander's scalp. Between his hissing torches, Denkar shrank from the dreadful scene.

Shuhalla studied the bloody prints on the floor. With her riding crop, she poked through the scattered papers around the commander's desk and peered at the northeastern window, whose shutters hung open. She peered outside at the rough walls. She reached out to feel the stones, gripping one to feel its strength. Tucking the riding crop into her belt, she lifted herself out, climbing from the window sill until she appeared satisfied one could mount the parapet that way.

At last, she returned to Denkar. She knelt and grabbed his leg, lifting it to inspect the sole of his boot. He wobbled, nearly falling when she released the first foot and checked the other before letting him go.

At last, she scrutinized his face and weighed it against the other evidence. Whatever she read on his countenance, she said, "The mutineers disarmed him." She retrieved his sword's scabbard from the floor but did not offer Denkar the weapon.

A shrill whistling emanated from somewhere in the room. At first it was faint, something like the hiss of cooking pea pods venting steam. It changed tone and sputtered, rising and falling by turns. Soon, a pattern emerged, almost like a song.

"Don't listen!" snapped Shuhalla. "Burn the body. Burn the entire room!"

"But—" Denkar felt confused. The eerie song seemed to convey a message—an invitation of some sort.

"Just do it!"

She seized one of the torches from his hand and thrust it into the network of branches surrounding the commander's body. They flared at once, burning with a greasy smoke as the queer whistling grew higher, the pattern repeating faster and faster.

Shuhalla sang, "The vagabond laughs / When he comes to town / Boys catch his shadow... Sing, Denkar!"

Denkar's face contorted in revulsion at what he was about to do. Something about the whistling spoke more clearly than the old folk song ever could, but Shuhalla's voice cut through his uncertainty. Denkar pressed the torch against the commander's bed. The torch singed the sheets and caused the fungus to withdraw like an earthworm squirming away from a ray of sunlight. An instant later, the straw tick caught flame, and Denkar joined her song. "They wring out the luck / Which jangles like coins / The girls strike his shadow / They beat out his luck / Which sighs and falls asleep."

Shuhalla cried out, "Sindel!" She gestured with two fingers together, thumb over the lesser two. A shining blur flew over her head, across the commander's wretched throat, and back again. The sudden movement dizzied Denkar, who focused on Shuhalla only in time to see her sword quivering in its sheath behind her shoulder. He hadn't seen it move, nor had he seen her touch the sword's grip. It was, as far as he could understand, a gesture of pure sorcery.

A nauseating squelch drew his attention back to the commander. The top of the fungal wreath fell away, along with the commander's disfigured head. Purple ichor oozed like sap from the stump of his neck. The dark tongue went flaccid, twitching once before lying dead on the floor. As the tongue died, so did the weird keening. A cloud of purple-black spores rose from the horrid wound. Denkar stared, mouth once again gaping.

"Don't breathe that!" Shuhalla dragged him out of the room. Behind them, the rising fire sizzled and popped whenever it enveloped another moist cavity of the corpse.

She led him down both flights of stairs, along the main hall, and into the kitchen. She lay their torches in the hearth and made him sit. Denkar tried to control his breathing, but he had never been good at physical discipline. Instead, he reminded himself he had been true to the commander's last order. He resolved he would continue to be true, obeying this inspector even if she didn't trust him.

Shuhalla rummaged through the stores and broke the seal on a jar of pickled cabbage. "Here." She offered it to him. "Eat something."

Despite the horrible image still burned into his mind, Denkar wrinkled his nose. "I hate pickled cabbage." Nevertheless, hunger won over preference. He crammed several thick, spicy chunks into his mouth.

"You can't eat anything that wasn't sealed. It could be infected."

Denkar mumbled through a full mouth. "Infected?"

"Finish eating and help me spread kindling throughout the keep."

"Kindling?"

"We have to be sure everything burns," said Shuhalla. "Every scrap."

They found a few more bodies in the other rooms, but within an hour they finished preparing the keep for incineration. Denkar's shoulders sagged as he moved from point to point, igniting each pyre with his torch. At Shuhalla's command, Denkar lit a fresh brand and carried it away with another unlit torch.

Outside, the day was dying. Denkar glimpsed the winking eye of heaven, a blue-white crescent hanging just above the horizon. It was no sin to gaze upon it, but habit made him look away. The red moon followed close so late in the summer, and one's eye was drawn to evil if one lacked noble character, as Denkar often feared he did.

He followed as Shuhalla fetched her pony. The animal's eyes widened at the sight of the rising fire. She led him away before pausing to put a hand on Denkar's shoulder.

"It's the only way to stop the infection."

"What infection?" Denkar clenched his jaw to keep from gaping again. "I don't understand any of this."

Shuhalla furrowed her brow. "Didn't your astronomer explain about heaven's tears?"

"Astronomer?"

The furrow deepened. "Who lives in the tower?"

"No one," shrugged Denkar. "It's always been locked."

"Who stands sky sentinel?"

"Sky sentinel?"

Shuhalla released an exasperated sigh. "Show me this tower."

They fled with the pony toward the lonely watchtower at the end of the bulwark wall. Its onion-shaped roof loomed above the parapet. As they approached the base, they saw that the iron chains on the door were brown with corrosion. Shuhalla looped the pony's reins over a dying ghost tree. The animal nibbled at the scrub grass at its foot.

Turning to the tower doors, Shuhalla once more uttered the word 'Sindel'. Denkar watched her sword leap from her harness, mirroring Shuhalla's strange gesture, sweep through the rusted chains, and return to its sheath. Shuhalla pulled on the heavy door.

"Give me a hand," she said. When Denkar hesitated, she looked back at his awed face. "You've never seen a Flying Sword?"

"No one ever comes here."

Shuhalla frowned. "Not even a supply train?"

Denkar shook his head. "The commander said they used to come, when I was little. I think my father must have gone with one of them."

Shuhalla once more wrinkled her nose. "I knew some of the distant stations had fallen into neglect, but I had no idea it was this bad."

Together they opened the tower door. Denkar cleared the cobwebs with his torches, and they climbed the stairs. They found a long-disused cell with a moldering bed, a room of empty shelves, and above them a chamber surrounded by closed shutters rising almost to the point of the domed ceiling.

Shuhalla began throwing open the shutters. Denkar propped the torches against a wrought-iron chair and helped her. After snapping a faded carpet to chase out the dust, Shuhalla stepped out onto the parapet while the air cleared.

"Which way to the supply camp?"

Denkar oriented himself from the unfamiliar height. Over thirty feet from the ground, even the station yard seemed small and distant. The sunset bloodied the smoke pouring from the burning station even as the growing fire illuminated the smoke from below. He pointed northwest, toward a series of rocky hills. "Just beyond the third hill. Usually you can see smoke."

"Then it's good we don't see any. They won't want any until the ritual."

"What ritual?"

"They will call to the Red Eye of Heaven to send down more poison. If we don't stop them, there will be too much to destroy."

"Too much what?"

Shuhalla shook her head. "You really need to see more of the world," she said. "Or read a book."

"I've read. The commander let me read his books."

"Which books?"

"Both of them, *The Tale of Arkos and Linn*—"

"Two books," scoffed Shuhalla.

"I read one of them twice," Denkar grumbled as she walked away.

Shuhalla pulled canvas sheets from a huge apparatus in the center of the uppermost room. Denkar marveled at its strange construction. From a circular base, curving braces rose like tusks to support a huge brass cylinder. At the lower end, several smaller tubes formed a peculiar knot punctuated with knobs and ending in a small, hollow cup. Shuhalla peered into the dark aperture and clicked her tongue. "He took the lenses," she said. "This station was abandoned."

"Lenses?" said Denkar. "They are forbidden, aren't they?"

"To all but the astronomers." Shuhalla reached under her cape and withdrew an octagonal leather case. She opened its flap and removed a mirror, its edges inscribed with arcane sigils. She stepped out onto the balcony, turning until she found the desired angle. She beckoned Denkar to stand beside her. "Look here."

Reluctant, Denkar obeyed. In the mirror he saw a reflection of the sunset-tinged clouds against a darkening sky. Shuhalla took his elbow and repositioned him until he saw both the winking and angry eyes of heaven reflected in the mirror. He hissed and drew away.

"It's safe," she assured him. "Reflected, the red eye cannot draw your spirit to heaven."

Denkar tried to stop himself from shivering. "Can that be true?"

"The astronomers are jealous of their secrets," said Shuhalla. "People teach their children the sight of the moons is poisonous to prevent them from going skyblind or becoming sorcerers. The mirror reveals the image but rejects the poison. Astronomers study the paths of the moons and warn of the weeping time."

Denkar looked where she pointed on the mirror. A faint halo surrounded the red moon.

"And here." She tilted the mirror.

In the reflection of the sky, Denkar saw pink streaks. "The stars are falling!"

Shuhalla smiled. "The astronomers call them exactly that, falling stars. But they are the tears of the red moon. When they fall within the bulwark, they infect the land."

Denkar considered the implication. "One fell on the supply camp?"

"Or near to it. A person or animal crossed the site and brought the infection back. By now, everyone will have had contact."

"Then everyone must...?" Denkar couldn't utter the rest of his thought.

"Everyone," said Shuhalla.

Denkar wrestled with that idea. "There will be no one left to mourn me when I die. No one else knows me. I won't have a grave or any prayers."

"Will you help me, Denkar bo Lin?"

"The commander ordered me to obey you."

"And you always obeyed the commander?"

Denkar sensed formality in her question. He straightened his back. "Always, Inspector."

"We must rest a while," said Shuhalla. She peered at her mirror again, comparing the position of the moons with the symbols surrounding them. "They will be distracted when the eyes are at their full height."

They brought the pony inside the tower and barred the door. Shuhalla removed his saddle and brushed his coat. Denkar replaced all but the easternmost shutters and lit a fire within the astronomer's chamber, extinguishing the torches.

There was no salvaging the rotten bed, but Shuhalla retrieved a thick blanket from the pony's saddlebags. Denkar shook out the canvas that had covered the sky-gazing apparatus and folded it into a thick mattress. He lay down and closed his eyes, thinking to rest for only a few moments. He woke alone, the fire dying. For an instant he feared the inspector had abandoned him, but then he spied her silhouette sitting outside on the parapet. He went toward her. As his eyes adjusted, he saw she was meditating, legs crossed beneath her.

Her sword floated above her head. It rotated slowly, the metal gleaming blue-white on one side, red on the other, as it absorbed the light of both moons.

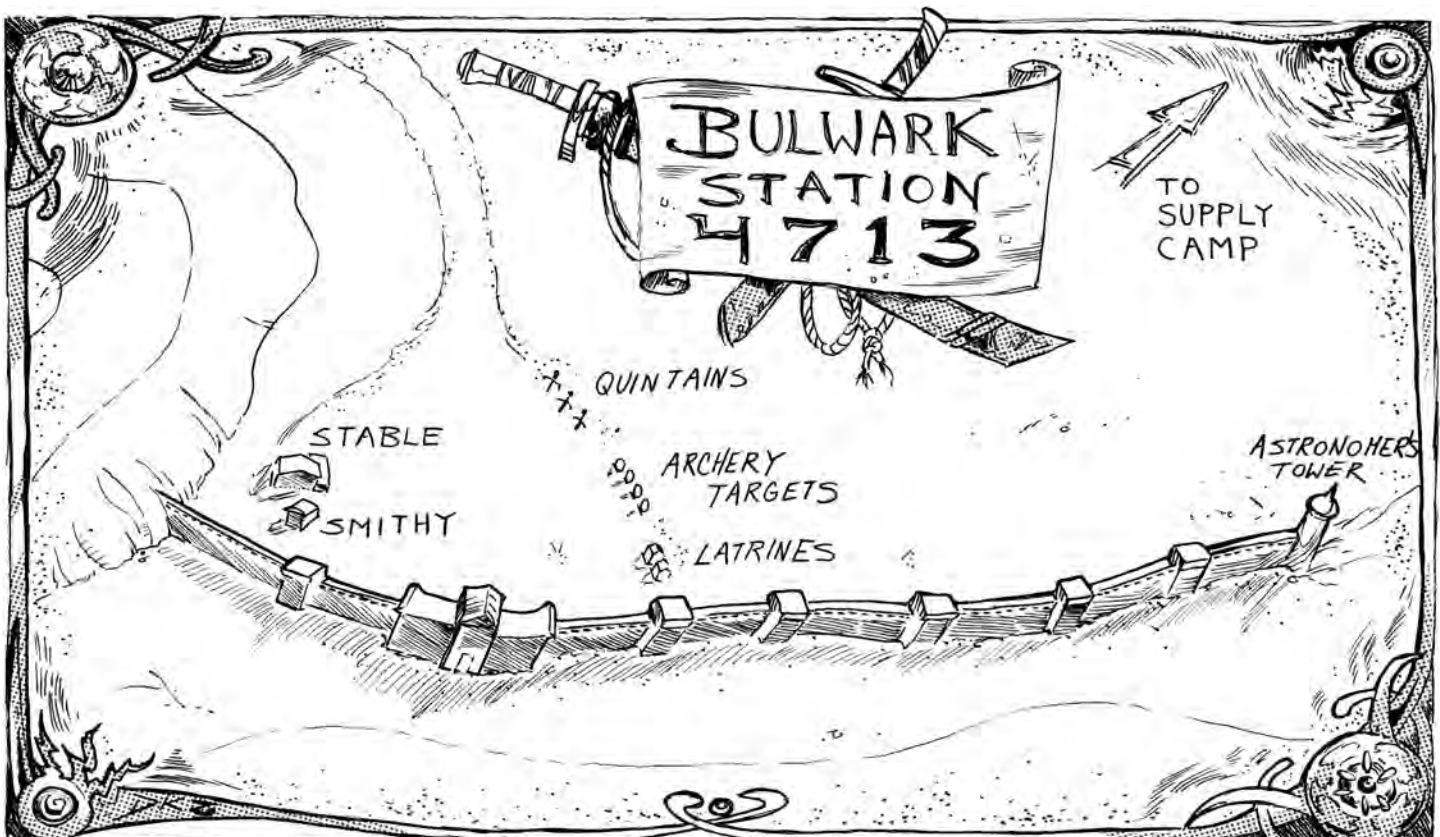
"What does that word you say to it mean?" said Denkar. "Sindel?"

Shuhalla did not respond for so long that Denkar began to think she was sleeping. At last she spoke, eyes still closed.

"Imperial inspectors come from all over the empire. Once, only true-born Tsang were accepted. As you can see, that is no longer true. I was not even born in the city. My mother traveled with a security train. She taught me and my sister to read, write, and make sums. When she died, we were left orphans in Celaeno. The owner of the security company gave us our mother's wages and her sword before leaving us to fend for ourselves."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve and ten," she said. "The money was enough to bribe an official to let us take the imperial exam. He must have thought there was no way I would pass, but my mother's work had taken us through many cities. I had learned words from many Shore tongues as well as ancient Tsang. In every town we heard the stories. On every road we met other travelers who shared the news."



"You passed the exam."

"More than that. I was among the year's ninety-nine, those chosen to study for the superior exams. We learned from astronomers and tacticians, scholars of every Tsang house and Shore tribe, even a captured sorcerer before he was executed. Those who pass each winter's exam continue. After nine years, those who remain face a final trial. Those who succeed become imperial inspectors."

Denkar marveled at the prospect of so much study. Sometimes he felt pride in his ability to read and write for the commander, but such meager skill paled compared to what Shuhalla described. But at least she had not been alone. "What of your sister?"

Shuhalla raised a hand. The sword glided into her grip. She kissed the blade. "Her name is Sindel."

Denkar's mind reeled with a hundred questions, none of which he dared ask the inspector. Whether sensing his discomfort or oblivious to it, Shuhalla sent Sindel back to her scabbard with a gesture, rose in a graceful spiral motion, and rolled up her blanket. "It's time. Light a torch."

Shuhalla saddled the pony but led him by the bridle while walking beside Denkar. Although the moons were high, their light cast shadows to the south. Denkar's torch illuminated the path winding between the hills. As they passed the second hill, they saw the light of a huge fire aglow in the trees.

"They have already begun," said Shuhalla.

"Should I douse—?"

"No," said Shuhalla. She dropped the pony's lead but left the saddle and bags in place. "You will need the flame. Just keep it low, and be ready to light the second torch once they see us. Stay close, but not too close. Burn the bodies as soon as they fall."

"Yes."

Shuhalla gave him back his sword. "If I fall, you must defend yourself."

"I won't let you fall," he said, immediately regretting his ridiculous words. Who was he to say such a thing to an imperial inspector? She would laugh at him.

Instead, Shuhalla's expression grew even more serious. She drew the commander's sword and admired it. "This is an ancient blade," she said. "The commander must have come from a noble family."

"I don't know much about his family," said Denkar. "He always behaved nobly. He taught me that I must try to do the same."

"Did he take other boys from the camp to serve at the bulwark?"

"Some," he said. "When they turned sixteen."

"He must have seen something special in you," she said. "Perhaps something of himself."

Denkar started to ask what she meant by that, but she was already moving. "Don't listen to their song," she said. "Don't let the red moon draw your spirit to heaven."

She moved quickly, low to the ground. They headed toward an enormous bonfire at the center of the supply camp. Denkar could barely recognize the place.

Where there had been yurts, the mutineers had cleared the ground. The remains of the structures lay piled at the base of the central storehouse, all burning. Even the posts of the animal pens

had been pulled up and added to the flames. The animals themselves were nowhere to be seen, unless, as Denkar suspected, some of those blackened fragments in the fire were bones.

The villagers had transformed even more profoundly than the camp. At first glance, Denkar might have mistaken them for deformed trees, their bodies twisted, limbs extenuated, dark tongues rising out of mouths like overgrown flower stamens.

There were many more than Denkar had expected. He assumed more soldiers had fought against the mutineers, but here there were dozens of men and women, all disfigured, all now mutineers. There were children, too, judging by the size of the things that capered about the fire, whistling and singing to the sky.

Shuhalla dashed ahead, shouting, "The vagabond laughs / When he comes to town!" She ran past the first mutineer, cutting its legs with the commander's sword as she swept two fingers to the other side. Sindel flashed through the air, blazing in the fire's glow. The edge of her blade severed a throat and flew past, plunging into the breast of another twisted figure.

"Boys catch his shadow!" sang Denkar. He shoved the head of one torch into the hamstring figure's chest. Its woody body shrieked in discordant harmony with its vile tongue until the flames covered them both in crackling. "They wring out the luck!"

Shuhalla cut down two more with the commander's sword before guiding Sindel to leap out of the corpse she pinned to the ground. The sword swooped around the bonfire, impaling one and then another monster before driving them into the flames.

"Keep up!" cried Shuhalla before resuming her song.

Haltingly, Denkar did the same. It was difficult to keep up the tune while focusing on Shuhalla's kills. So swift her blades! Both the commander's sword in her hand and the magic blade that emerged from the bonfire, gore still flaming on its steel.

Denkar beat the fallen mutineers with his torches, pausing once to go back when a body rose to follow him.

As he turned to follow Shuhalla's trail of corpses, an infected hand clamped down on his arm. Denkar shouted as he saw the hideous face leering down at him, tongue extended like an accusing finger. He recognized nothing human in that visage, but he knew the wooden necklace. It had belonged to the eldest woman in the supply camp.

"Jarrah?!"

The hideous mouth opened wider than Denkar's head. The thing's breath sickened him to retching. He froze in revulsion. Before it could engulf his face, it exploded in a shower of fetid pulp. Even through the warm wetness on his face, Denkar felt a whoosh of air as Sindel flew past, blade shedding the remains of Jarrah's head. The body fell against his, lighter than he would have imagined, but moist and soft. Denkar pushed it away.

"Burn it!" called Shuhalla. Two of the monsters dragged at her legs. Sindel soared back to sever an arm. With the commander's sword, Shuhalla cut away the others as two more creatures lunged for her.

Denkar slapped a torch at Jarrah's corpse. Without looking to see whether the flames had caught, he ran to the inspector, beating her attackers with both flames. He tried joining in her song but a

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thick film covered his tongue. The inside of his mouth felt fuzzy, and a sick feeling filled his lungs. He coughed to clear his throat, but only a nasal whistling came out.

He felt the weight of his doom settle on him.

"Shuhalla!" he wheezed. "I failed!"

She looked to him, and for the first time he saw disappointment on her face. More than that, he saw pain. In an instant he understood that it was more than the fear of losing his help. She would mourn him.

Denkar staggered toward the latest corpse Shuhalla had made. He regretted that it would be the last he could burn for her. He drew his plain soldier's sword from its scabbard. It felt awkward in his hand, heavier than he remembered. His strength was fading. There was nothing he could do with the blade. He let it drop.

The mutineers would overwhelm Shuhalla, and there was nothing more he could do. Twin fears wrestled in his heart: a cold dread of death and a hot panic of failure. The heat prevailed, and he realized there was one last monster he could burn.

He thrust the torches against the corpse and stood above it, letting the flames crawl up his trousers. He felt only an instant's pain before the whistling song and the infecting spores confounded his senses. He felt some intangible part of himself rising, like the spores, toward the red eye of heaven.

"Do you serve me, Denkar?" Shuhalla called out over the din.

He felt his lips moving, but his lungs gave no breath.

"Will you help me, Denkar?!"

As the flames withered his legs, Denkar pounded a fist against his chest. Something inside gave way. He saw Shuhalla standing among the mutineers, Sindel slashing at their heads while Shuhalla beat back their arms with the commander's sword. It was a nobler sight than he had any right to expect in his dying moment. He swore to her, "I... will, Inspector!"

Shuhalla shoved a mutineer to the ground, kicked back another, and slashed a third across the face before raising the commander's sword above her head. "This is your legacy, Denkar bo Lin, son of Shung Fei." She hurled it at him. It flew straight as an arrow on a windless day. The blade pierced his heart and severed that inflexible part he felt drawn toward heaven.

He died, or he was dying. He was leaving his body but not yet entering a new place. Rising, he feared where he must go.

Instead of soaring toward the red moon, he felt himself pulled toward Shuhalla. Her hand grasped him, firm and gentle. Her lips whispered against his blade. "This is you, Denkar." She covered her forefinger with her thumb and extended the other fingers. "And this is your sign."

She released him and he flew, but not toward heaven. An incandescent pride brought with it certainty of where to go. He plunged into the bonfire. He felt no pain, only purpose. He leaped out again, burning white, trailing golden flames as he soared with Sindel.

He saw it all, but not with eyes. Half the mutineers lay smoldering on the ground. Near the pyre, Shuhalla fought empty-handed. With one hand she made Sindel's sign and sent her sister-sword

slashing across the faces of two foes. With the other she extended three fingers, thumb closed over forefinger.

Denkar felt her gesture as the pony must feel the tug of the reins. With joy, he obeyed, diving, slashing, piercing. It was a pleasure to burn the abominations. It was his service and his calling.

He could no longer utter the words, but he sang—not as the inspector did, but as a blade. His voice joined with Sindel's in a chorus of slashing and piercing. When they repelled the monsters nearest Shuhalla, she retrieved Denkar's sword from his burning body and raised her human voice with theirs. Their melodies wound in harmony until all their foes had fallen and Shuhalla exchanged Denkar's sword for a torch.

They sang the song of burning until the dawn. Sindel flew to her scabbard, but Denkar leaped from corpse to corpse, his edge blazing white hot as fire licked along the filigree on his sides. Denkar felt no triumph from Shuhalla, only a swelling gratitude and a sinking remorse. At last she found the blackened remains of his old body and sat beside it, not weeping but singing.

• • •

SHUHALLA spent two days searching the area for further signs of infection. She confirmed that none had survived the fire at Bulwark Station 4713. She wrote notes in her mission journal while the events were still fresh in mind, and then she rode back down the mountain.

"I regret we had so little time to talk," she said. "It was enough for me to think you would enjoy seeing the world beyond the bulwark station. I'll show you all I can, as our mother showed Sindel and me.

"I wonder that the commander did not admit you were his son. He sent you away because he loved you, and he made you take his sword because it belonged to you when he died. One look at his face told me the truth. How could you never see it? Even without a mirror, you must have seen your face in the surface of a pool. Someone must have teased you about it—or perhaps they feared your father too greatly. I don't know.

"Sindel feels I talk too much. I hope you don't agree. Sometimes I feel her laughing at me. Big sisters do that sometimes.

"Soon, I'll be able to sense more of what you're feeling. In the meantime, let me tell you about a book I once enjoyed. Let's hope it's not the other one you've read."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

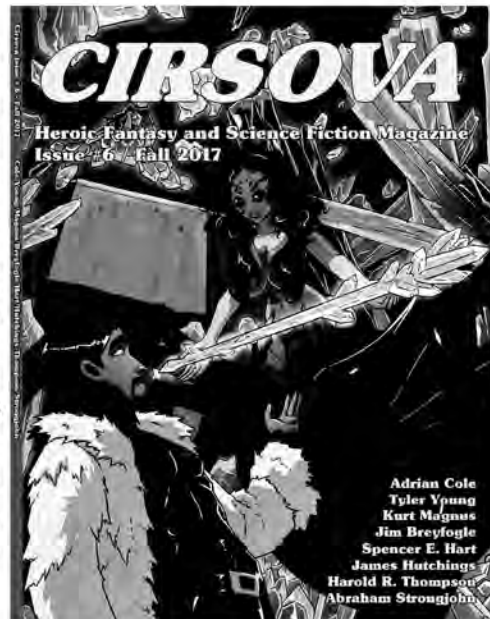
In the vast and distant north, Dave Gross lies dreaming. Or he dreams lies. The sorcerers have never been able to agree on this point. Nonetheless, his visions found their way into ten or eleven novels and assorted shorter works, many featuring Radovan and the Count. On cloudless nights, the reckless may trace the patterns of his hallucinations against the Twitter moon @frabjousdave.

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Gentlebeings all,

What an incredible issue! Every one of the stories was an attention grabber, right from the very first sentence. Pacing was superb, word choice excellent, characterization apt, adventures exciting, events believable in the context of the story — where did you get so many great authors?!?

I enjoyed the maps of the locations as well, and the artwork was superior. I only hope we'll see more of both in future issues.

Layout was very well done; the overall technical quality of the magazine was top of the line.

One suggestion you might consider — over the course of the next dozen or so issues, you might consider slowly revealing the story behind the Magician's Skull himself...who was he, how did he get to where he is today, what motivates him, what is his ultimate dastardly plot which the magazine facilitates, etc., etc. The format could be just a few paragraphs (with a suitable cliff hanger between issues) at a time, in the old "serial" format; but I think something like that would be of interest to all of us "Skullbearers" out here especially, but also to your regular readers. Just a thought...

—Jeff Vandine

It is high time that someone recognized the brilliance of my vision! You ask how I found my wondrous storytellers, and it was a simple matter for someone with my gifts. I question that others have so much trouble locating excellence when it is so readily at hand, but then there are few who share my profound insight.

You are correct! I rejoiced in my map makers and artisans as well, and you can be assured that they will continue to labor upon my behalf. I have had the one known as "intern" pass your compliments along to the layout man, Lester, and decreed that he be allotted extra gruel.

I shall consider revealing portions of my past, but the whole truth might blast your very soul! As to my design, it is to reach each and every reader with the finest of sword-and-sorcery! All shall know the glories of the sacred genre and sing its praise. And mine!

When next you wish to report your pleasure with my work, contact me at once!

— So Sayeth the Skull

Dear Skull,

I assume that I am to refer to you as skull? I mean, something mundane such as Bob, or Rick doesn't have quite the ring does it?

I am writing you because I am really enjoying this magazine and want to give a little feedback. I'll try to be brief, as I am sure that any skull lacking a full body, with hands, etc. is at a disadvantage when following up with the mountain of feedback you're likely to acquire. Although... since you're probably of the undead sort, you don't require sleep, and don't require a day job to save for that 401k nest egg that us lowly mortals stress about, so maybe things even out?

1. I just have to get this off my chest. I am so bummed that I didn't know about this Kickstarter. I would have loved to have supported this. But that is history.
2. Will there be a subscription? Like, an annual subscription? And may I suggest an annual subscription price with an additional benefit, like adding on the PDF version free for the cost of 1 year worth?
3. I believe that the page count is perfect. It's going to take me quite some time to get through 80+ pages and I definitely feel that I'm getting my \$15 worth here.
4. I can't say enough how much I like the Chapters of the Skull and Bookstores of Wonder sections. I also appreciated your pertinent ads. These sections are going to give me a ton of resources that I didn't know existed. Who knew there is an Owlbear Watching Society right here in Indiana! I am now on a quest to figure out what the heck that is... and if I should be worried...
5. The artwork is inspiring. As expected from GG products. On the subject of artwork (related to another point below), I like how there are a few pieces that could directly be used within games. Essentially little maps, or diagrams that are illustrative.
6. I have recently been running DCC exclusively. So, I like the appendix on game statistics. I hope you keep that up. Even, if for some reason you have to take it out for some reason, please keep this going at least online somehow.
7. It would be fun to see a letters to the editor section, assuming you get fan letters. Not rambling things like this one. But hopefully a few people will write something more reasonable worth publishing.
8. Another fun thing, would be adding the Dear Archmage Abby section. You have a true hit with that one. She deserves a raise.
9. As for the stories themselves. Well, I'm still reading them! I'm sure that some will be good, some OK, some not so interesting. All that is subjective. So far, I've liked what I've read and I'll keep reading!

— Kevin Swartz

I sent minions far and wide to proclaim the glories of my vision, but my army is small, yet, and they could not find all the lands where dwell the true believers of sword-and-sorcery. If you like what you see — and I am certain you will — then do your best to further spread tales of my quest, and help me bring sword-and-sorcery to even more readers!

To your points, yes, we will open to subscriptions when the stars are right. A conjunction will soon occur. Any additional benefits will be of MY choosing, for I am supreme!

It pleases me that you enjoy both the page count and the resources my minions included in the front. That you also enjoyed the artwork gratifies me, and I shall speak of this to those who labor for me, so that they may have additional bread crusts.

(SKULL SCROLLS CONTINUED ON PAGE 94)

THE LEGION OF THE SKULL

Isoni; A Mutated Puma Named Grrr; A. Walter Abrao ; Adam “Grotonomus the Gruesome” Grotjohn; Adam Alexander; Alan J Clark; Alexander Macris; Allen Denison; Allen Westenbarger; Alvin Helms; Andrew “The Black Hood” Thompson; Andrew Hintz; Andrew James McDole; Andrew Kluessendorf; Andrew M. Morris; Andrew O. Johnson; Andrija Popovic; Andy Action; Andy Frielink; Arbogast von Frankenstein; Arin Komins; Asher Green, Warlord; Banks Wilson; Baragoon; Baron Von Swodeck; Bart Scott; Ben Rosenberg; Bob & Jen Brinkman; BoBwire Fouts; Brad L. Kicklighter; Brandish Gilhelm; Brent Tomlonovic; Bret D. Hammitt; Breton Kabor Winters; Brian Marchetti; Bruce Wesley; Bryan Chamchoum; Bryant T. S. Biek; C. C. 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Hall; Terry Olson; Thaddeus Moore; The Disgruntled Poet; The Gibbs Family; The Naris Lords; The Peccant Paynim of Pestilence, Jim Skach; The Sandhorse; Thorin ‘Son ov Thrain’ Thompson; Timothy Ryan Deschene; Tobias Loc; Todd Stephens; Tomodeus Naught; Tony Hogard; Trevor Stamper; Troy Chrisman; Turjun the Panthan; Valerie Emerson; Vidal Bairos; Vincent Darlage, Ph.D.; Vincent E. Hoffman; Wade Harrison III; William DeGeest, Some guy who sometimes does things. Enjoys cottage cheese.; William Duckett; William E Craig Jr; William McGrath; YorkusRex; Zach Roberts; Zach Van Stanley; Zoë Himmah

Thank you to all the Legion of the Skull members who backed our initial Kickstarter!



A PROFILE OF ABRAHAM GRACE MERRITT (1884-1943)

By **STEFAN POAG**

Abraham Grace Merritt worked as a journalist, magazine editor and author of fantastic fiction. As an author, he was a major influence on H.P. Lovecraft, Michael Moorcock and Karl Edward Wagner. Gary Gygax, co-creator of the Dungeons & Dragons game, considered Merritt one of his favorite authors and listed him in the "Appendix N" section of the 1979 Dungeon Master's Guide.

Most of Merritt's fiction featured strong and decisive heroes exploring lost worlds and rescuing beautiful princesses – themes that were well received in the pulp fiction magazines of the era. "The People of the Pit," published in 1918, is a bit of a departure for Merritt. Rather than a heroic story of derring-do, "The People of the Pit" deals with a defeated protagonist helpless against a dreadful, alien power. The hero does not triumph; he merely escapes. The narrator of the tale simply recounts the hero's deathbed story of events and never travels further to confirm the mystery.

I adapted this story to a graphic novel format in 2017, almost 100 years from the year that Merritt first published the tale. I've tried to be as faithful to the spirit of the original as I could, but some aspects of the story needed to be condensed and sometimes pictures just can't replace words. If the reader finds this graphic version of the story interesting, please do yourself a favor by taking the time to read the original in Merritt's excellent prose.

SBP 2017

THE PEOPLE OF THE PIT

Story by
Abraham
Merritt
1918

Adapted
and drawn by
Stefan Poag
2017

The Yukon Territories, 1918. Anderson and I were prospecting for gold, just south of a series of five mountains that rose from the earth like fingers of a giant hand. We had made camp for the night, when suddenly a burst of light emerged from behind the peaks.

The shining beam held steady for a moment; then broke into myriads of little luminous globes that swung to and fro and dropped gently. They seemed to be searching.

It makes me think something is being hunted up there... an unholy sort of hunt - it's well for us to be out of range.

GOOD LORD!

Wait... something is coming!

I saw something break through the bushes. It walked on all fours gasping in pain.

GASP-GASP-GASP-GASP ①



I used a file to cut off the band about his waist.



It was gold, but it was like no gold I had ever handled.

It had an unclean,
viscid life of its own.



After I cut it away, I
hurled it far off. It was
loathsome!



All that day
he slept.



That night there was no shaft of
light, no questing globe, no
whispering. Some spell of horror
seemed lifted from the land.

It was noon when the crawling man awoke...



"How long have I slept?" he asked.
"A night-and almost two days," I said.

"Was there any light up there last night?" He indicated the hand-like mountain.



No.

They've given up!

Who has given up?
What happened to you?

"The people of the pit," he said.
"Things that the Devil made before the Flood and that somehow have escaped God's vengeance. You weren't in any danger from them unless you had followed the light. They can't get any further than the mountain. I... I was their prisoner," he added simply.
"They were trying to lure me back to them!"

"I'm not insane. I'm going to die soon, but I want you to take me as far south as you can before I die, and afterwards I want you to build a big fire and burn me. I don't want any spell of theirs to drag my body back to them.

My name is Stanton.

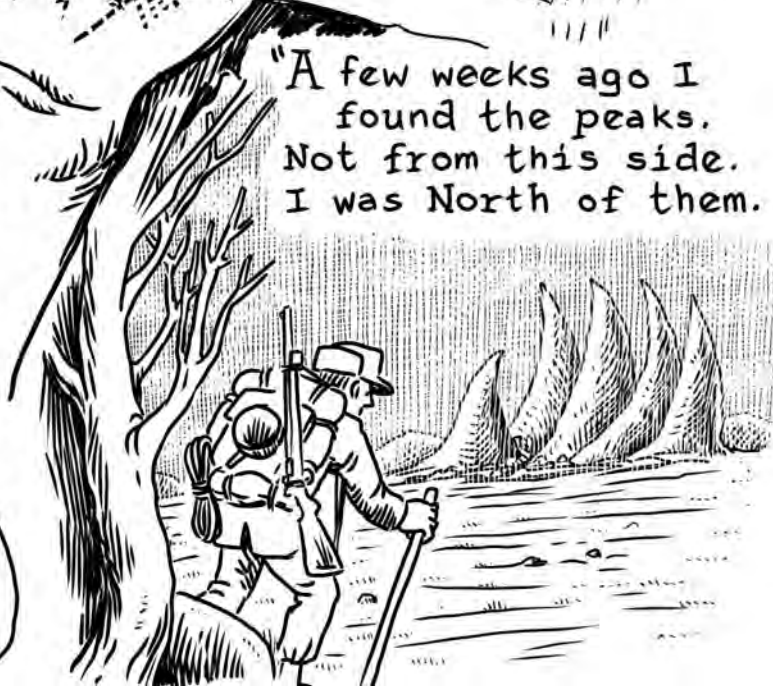
I heard a rumor of a mountain shaped like the fingers of a hand... rich deposits of gold. So I went to find it..."

?



"My companions got sick, gave up, went back to civilization... but I kept on. I was determined... always have been..."

"A few weeks ago I found the peaks. Not from this side. I was North of them.



Stretching miles in front of me was a level plain. It was as worn and ancient looking as the desert around the ruins of Babylon."

"Then, I found the road! A fine, smooth, stone road. It ran straight on to the mountain. It was as worn as though millions and millions of feet had passed over it for thousands of years. On each side of it were sand and heaps of stones... the remains of what had been houses."



"And now I saw that what I had thought to be the low rock range at the base of the peaks was a thicker litter of ruins. The Hand Mountain was really much farther off."



"The peaks grew closer. The heaps of ruins grew thicker. Something inexpressibly desolate hovered over them; something reached from them that struck my heart like the touch of ghosts so old that they could be only the ghosts of ghosts...
I went on.

The road passed between two high rocks that raised themselves like a gateway."

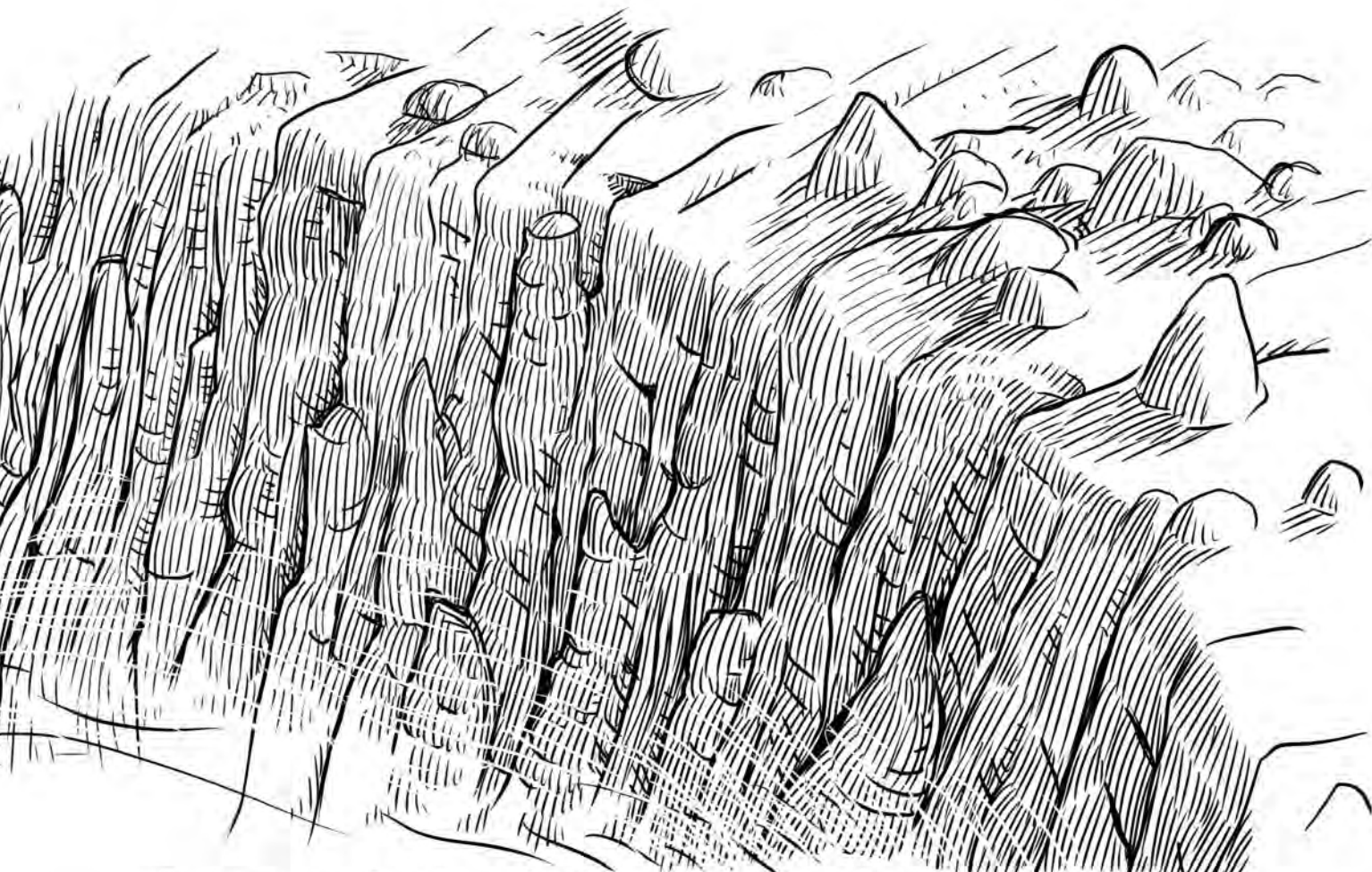
"They were a gateway," he said. "I reached them. I went between them. And then I stopped in sheer awe at what the ruins had hidden from my sight.

...Nothing had prepared me for this... nothing..."

"I was on a broad stone platform. Before me was-sheer space! Imagine the Grand Canyon five times as wide and with the bottom dropped out. That is what I was looking into. It was like peeping over the edge of a cleft world down into the infinity where the planets roll! On the far side stood the five peaks. They looked like a gigantic warning hand stretched up to the sky.

The Pit was vast and filled with an azure mist... I could not see the bottom...

The lip of the abyss curved away on each side of me.



I examined one of the pillars of the gateway. There was carving upon it. It bore in still sharp outlines the heroic figure of a man. His back was turned. His arms were outstretched. There was an odd peaked headdress upon him. I looked at the opposite pillar. It bore a figure exactly similar. The pillars were triangular and the carvings were on the side away from the pit. The figures seemed to be holding something back. I looked closer. Behind the outstretched hands, I seemed to see other shapes."



"I traced them out vaguely. Suddenly I felt unaccountably sick. There had come to me an impression of enormous, upright slugs. Their swollen bodies were faintly cut-all except the heads which were well marked globes. They were unutterably loathsome. I turned from the gates back to the void."




"A stairway led down into the pit!"

"A stairway!" we cried.


"A stairway," repeated the crawling man as patiently as before, "It vanished into the blue haze."



Driven by a compulsion I did not understand, I began to descend that horrible stairway into the pit..."



"By noon I had lost sight of the five peaks and the lip of the abyss. Above me, below me, was nothing but the blue haze. Beside me, too, was nothingness. I felt no dizziness, and any trace of fear was swallowed in a vast curiosity. What was I to discover? Some ancient and wonderful civilization that had ruled when the Poles were tropical gardens? Nothing living, I felt sure—all was too old for life. Still, a stairway so wonderful must lead to something quite as wonderful I knew. What was it? I went on. Wind carried away my hat, still I went on..."



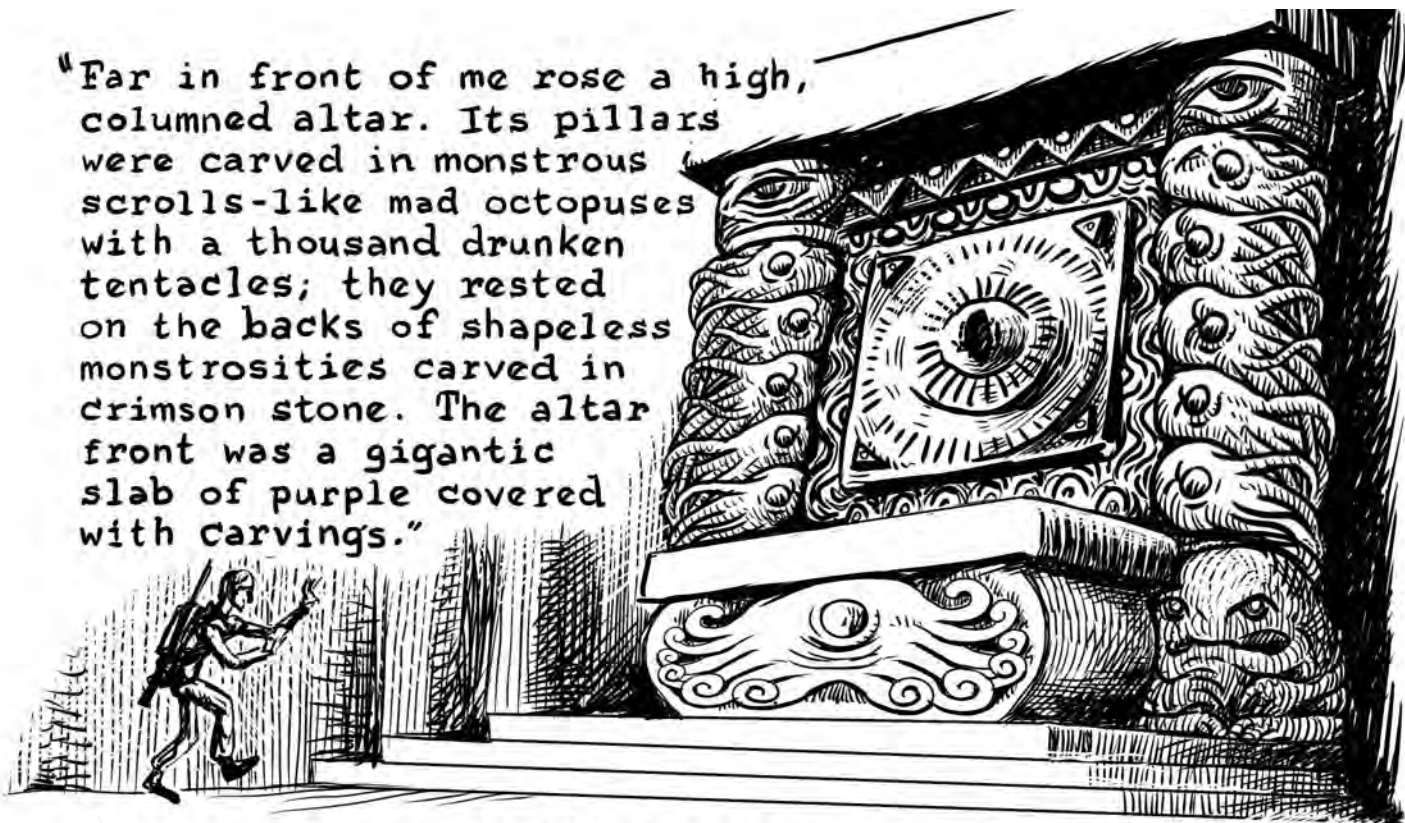
"It was late that day when I first saw the city.

There is a city... but not such a city as you have ever seen—nor any other man who has lived to tell of it..."

"A few feet beneath me, the stairway jutted out into a Titanic arch, unearthly as the span that bridges Hell and leads to Asgard. It curved out and down straight through the top of the highest building. I followed it."



"Far in front of me rose a high, columned altar. Its pillars were carved in monstrous scrolls-like mad octopuses with a thousand drunken tentacles; they rested on the backs of shapeless monstrosities carved in crimson stone. The altar front was a gigantic slab of purple covered with carvings."



"Something evil lurked in that room, I was certain of it."

"I wanted to turn back, to climb the stairs and get away, but fear had control of me."



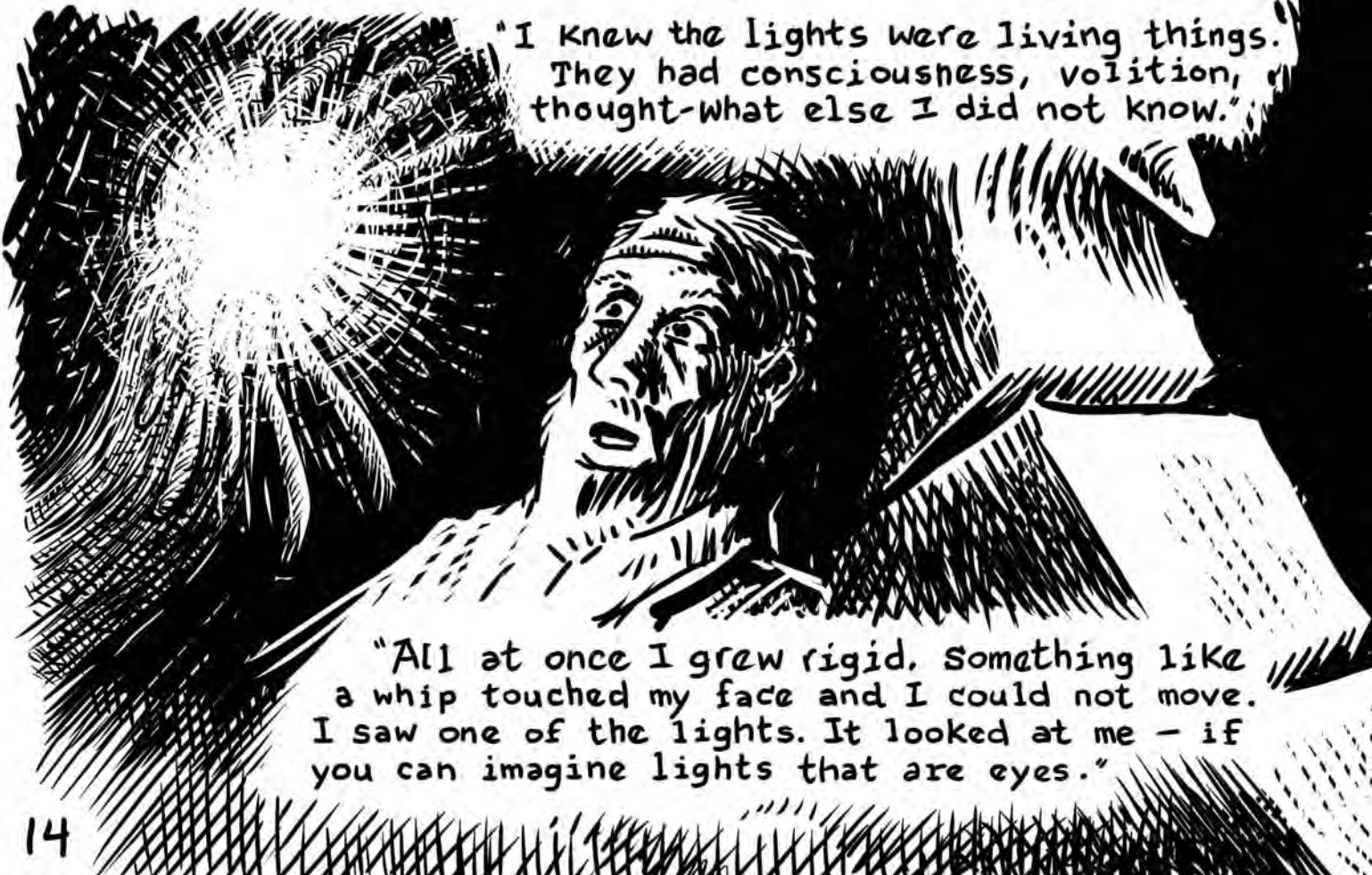
"Without thinking, I fled into the city..."

"Then the haze began to thicken. I saw that it was dusk in the world above and I felt my time of peril had come. This was the time of the awakening of whatever things lived in this pit."



"There began to grow around me a murmur. I saw lights passing and repassing. More and more lights-they swam out of the doorways and they thronged the street, making that murmuring sound."

"I knew the lights were living things. They had consciousness, volition, thought-what else I did not know."



"All at once I grew rigid. Something like a whip touched my face and I could not move. I saw one of the lights. It looked at me - if you can imagine lights that are eyes."

"Abruptly the murmuring in the street ceased. I dragged my eyes from the pale blue globe that held them and looked out-the lights in the streets were rising by myriads to the level of where I stood! There they stopped and peered at me."



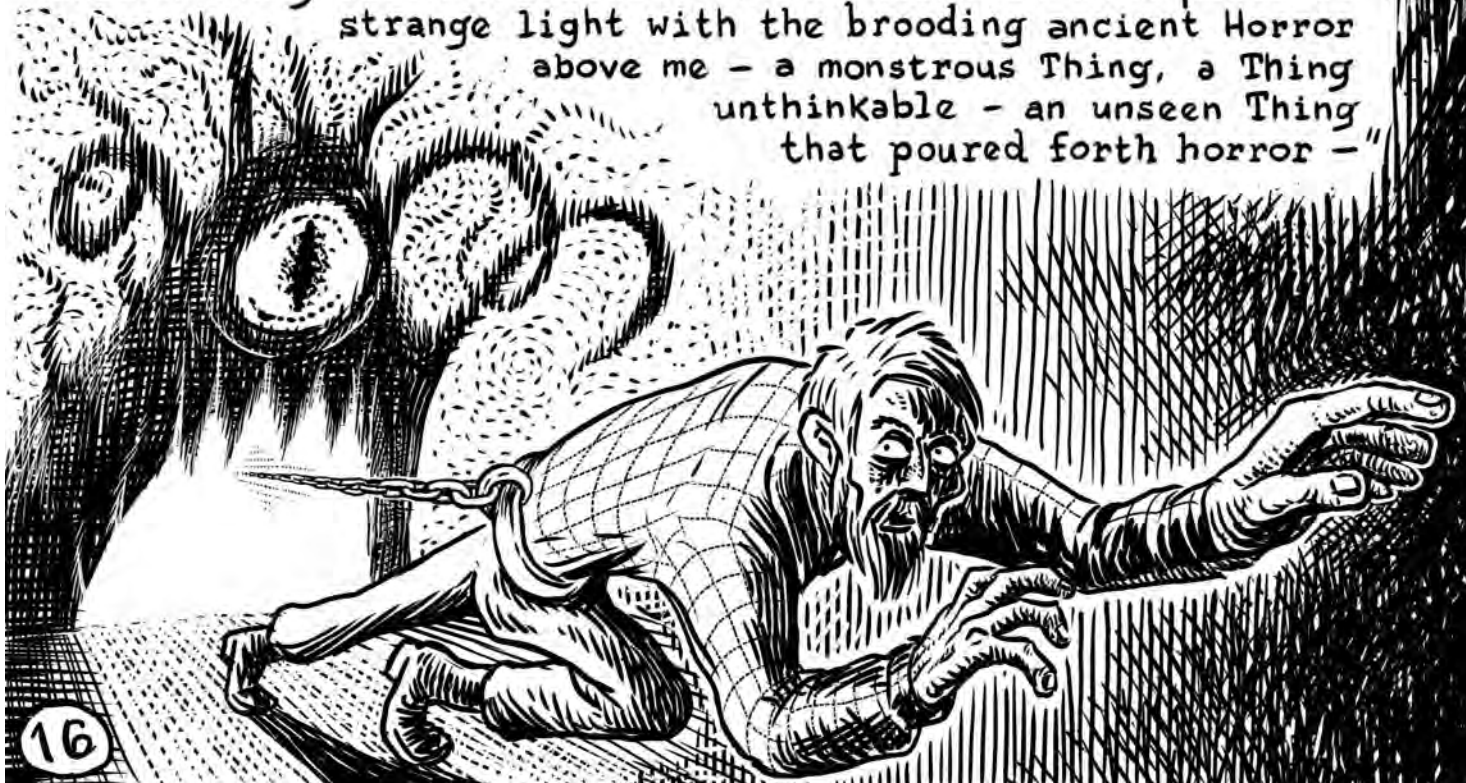
"They crowded and jostled as though they were a crowd of curious people on Broadway. I felt a score of the lashes touch me - I blacked out!"

"When I came to myself, I was again in the place with the altar. All was silent. There were no lights. I was chained to the altar with a chain and band of gold around my waist. My pack, weapons and tools were all missing. They even took my coat.

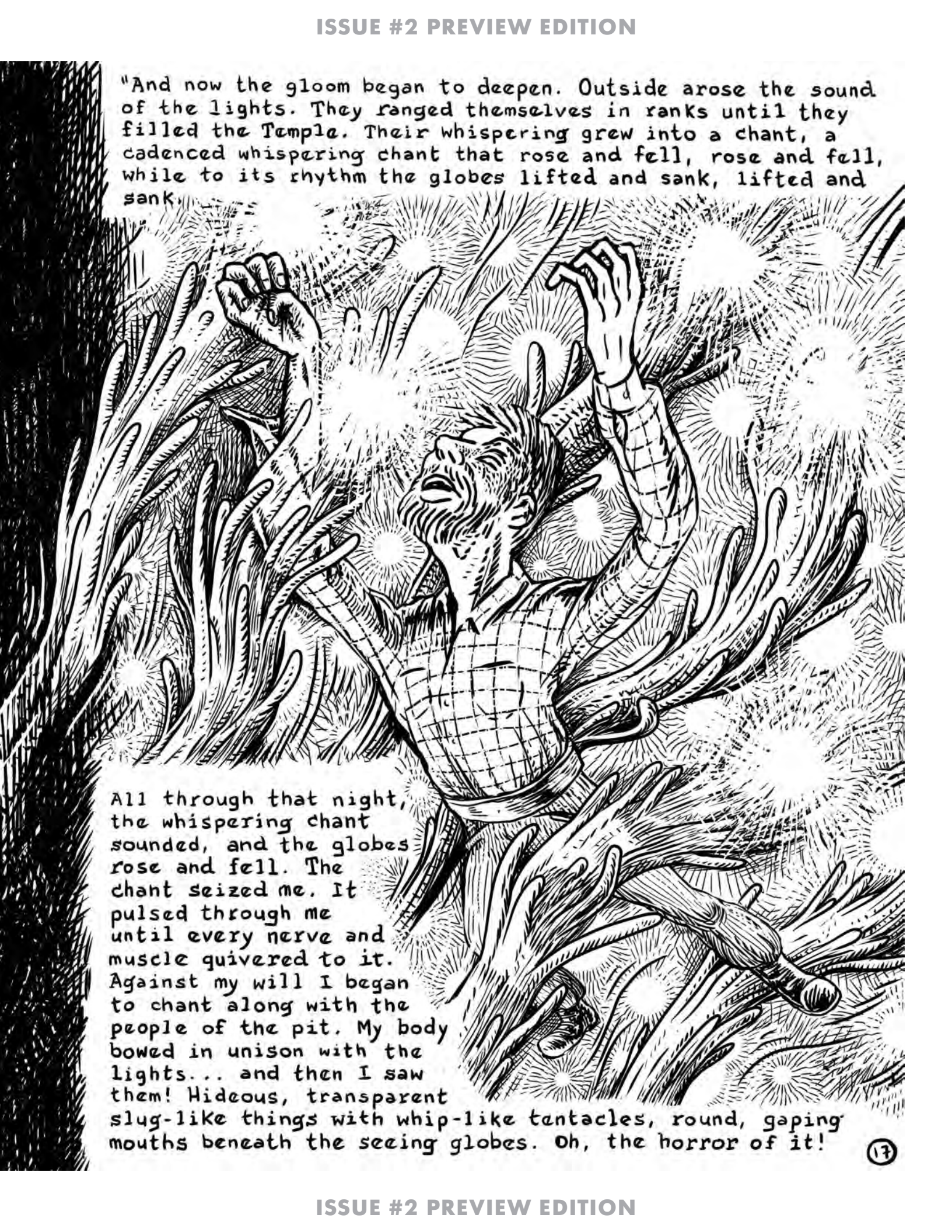
"I was utterly helpless!"



"I tried to break the band around my waist. It seemed alive and it drew itself closer around me! I pulled at the chain. It was immovable. There came to me the consciousness of the unseen Thing above the altar. I was alone in that place of strange light with the brooding ancient Horror above me - a monstrous Thing, a Thing unthinkable - an unseen Thing that poured forth horror -"

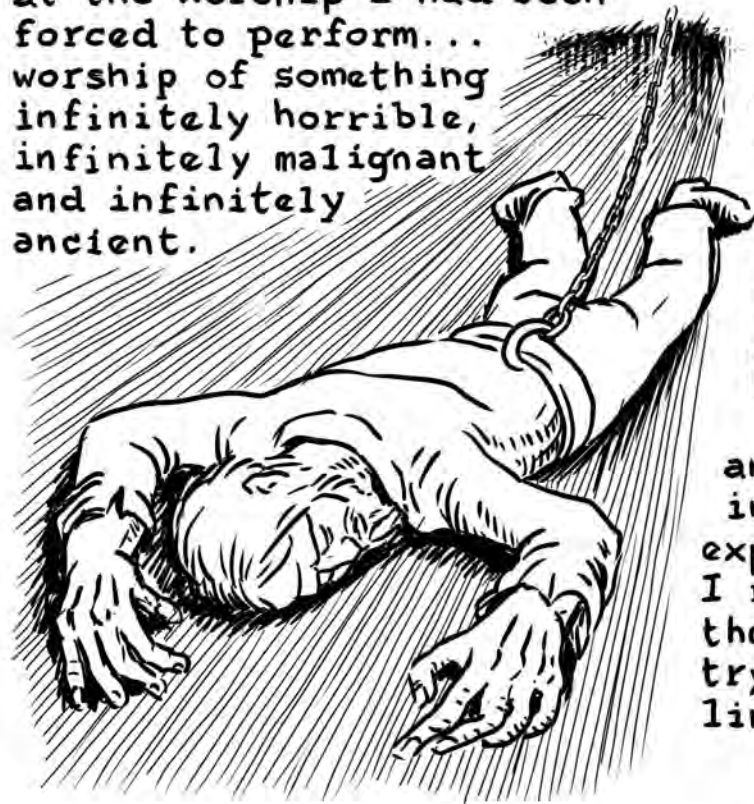


"And now the gloom began to deepen. Outside arose the sound of the lights. They ranged themselves in ranks until they filled the Temple. Their whispering grew into a chant, a cadenced whispering chant that rose and fell, rose and fell, while to its rhythm the globes lifted and sank, lifted and sank.



All through that night, the whispering chant sounded, and the globes rose and fell. The chant seized me. It pulsed through me until every nerve and muscle quivered to it. Against my will I began to chant along with the people of the pit. My body bowed in unison with the lights... and then I saw them! Hideous, transparent slug-like things with whip-like tentacles, round, gaping mouths beneath the seeing globes. Oh, the horror of it!

When I awoke, it was again daytime. I was alone in the temple, wracked with horror at the worship I had been forced to perform... worship of something infinitely horrible, infinitely malignant and infinitely ancient.



I knew the people of the pit would return every night and force me to worship in their temple until I expired from the effort. I rubbed the chain against the hard stone of the steps, trying to wear through the links...

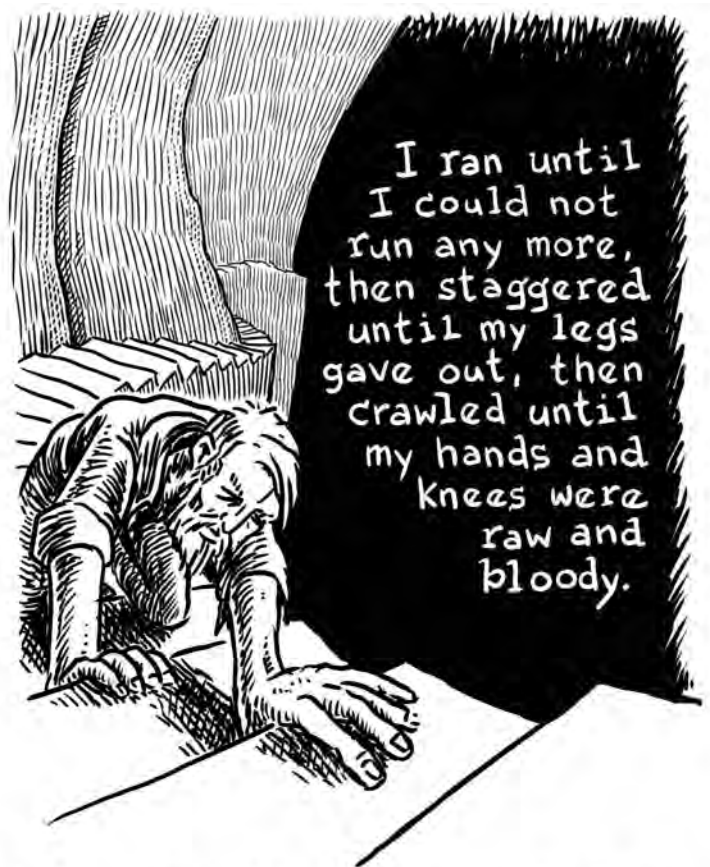
Every evening, the people of the pit returned and forced me to perform their awful chant.



Each day, rather than sleep, I worked on the chain. After five days, the soft gold of the chain broke.



I was free!
I WAS FREE!!



Can you think what it is to climb straight up the Verge of a cleft world with hell behind you? As I crawled I heard the murmuring voices of the people in the pit. They had discovered my escape and were in pursuit. Lights began to appear in the air above the pit and terror rode me. I climbed up, out of the pit, each step an agony. The lights hunted me, and, with the chant, they tried to lure me back.



I climbed, mechanically, knowing if I dared to stop it would be the end of me.

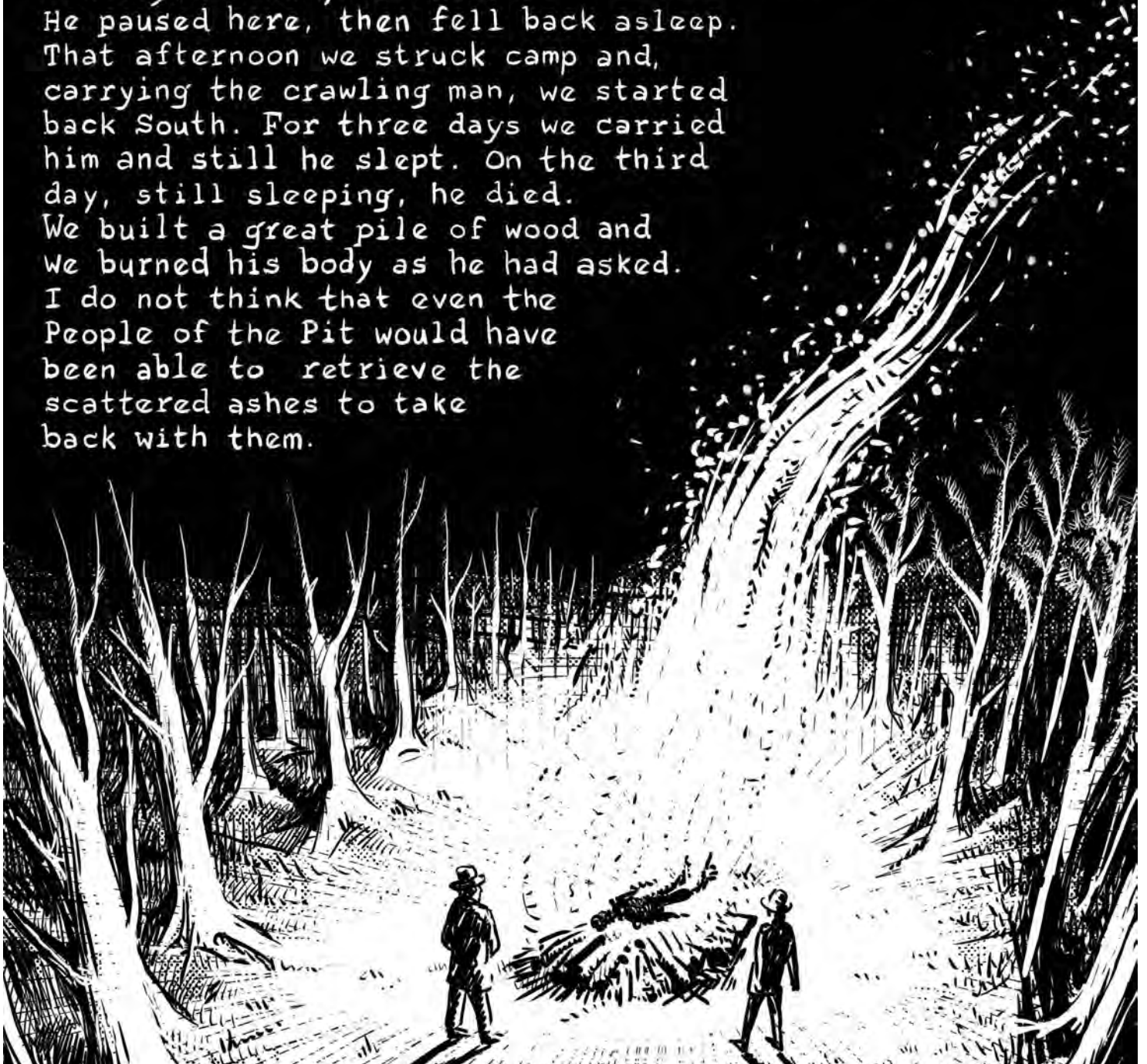
"At last the clear sky was above me, the lip of the pit before me - I understood the ancient priests, carved on the pillars with strange peaked crowns, had built some sort of a ward that the people of the pit could not pass. I knew I would die... but at least I would not die down in the pit. I crawled over the mountain, onward and onward, and thought of the ancients who still held back those who sought to draw me back to the pit. I drank from wild streams and ate what I could find. I slept during the day, and, at night, crawled painfully onward as the people of the pit murmured and called to me and danced in the sky. Finally, I saw your fire,"

He paused here, then fell back asleep.

That afternoon we struck camp and, carrying the crawling man, we started back South. For three days we carried him and still he slept. On the third day, still sleeping, he died.

We built a great pile of wood and we burned his body as he had asked.

I do not think that even the People of the Pit would have been able to retrieve the scattered ashes to take back with them.





But we did not return
to the five finger peaks to see.

THE
END

APPENDIX: GAME STATISTICS

By TERRY OLSON

Publisher's Note: While this is a magazine of fantasy fiction, it is 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, spells, and items 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!

Trial by Scarab

Great Mud Scarab: Init +3; Atk mandibles +6 melee (1d10+2 plus bleeding restraint); AC 20; HD 7d8; MV 40' or swim 20' or climb 30'; Act 1d20; SP bleeding restraint (victim bleeds 1d3 hp/round and is held fast, DC 18 Strength check to escape, 1 check/round), ovoviviparous injection (on the third consecutive round a victim is restrained, the scarab injects 2d4 eggs which hatch in 1d3 rounds), larval eruption (larvae hatching from eggs each do 1d6 damage); SV Fort +5, Ref +7, Will +3; AL N.

Its huge body was segmented, with the elongated dome of its back leading into smaller thorax and a blunt ovoid head. Six eyes like onyx knobs gleamed above a quivering palp-encircled maw framed by two huge black mandibles, curved like cruelly serrated scimitars. It was a scarab bigger than a bullock.

Knock-Out Powder: This fluffy white powder changes to toxic vapor when exposed to light. When this occurs, those within 2' of the powder/vapor must pass a DC 18 Fortitude save or fall into a nearly-comatose sleep for 2d4 turns. A thief may use their handle poison skill if that is more advantageous than the Fortitude save. Many erroneously assume that the powder is magical, but it is a mundane, albeit carefully crafted, poison. The only ways to prematurely awaken a victim are to use some magical form of poison neutralization, or to apply the antidote (crusted salt scraped off the back of a sea lizard) within the victim's nostrils. The alchemical processes to create the powder are complicated; necessary ingredients include a ground-up nachara cane stalk, un-dead skin flakes, and the breath of a sleeping beast.

Then the powder seemed to go to vapor and Benhus felt his chair dropping off a precipice. His vision dimmed and he slouched over the table with a heavy sigh... He was so tired he could hardly hold his head up, so he let it hang.

Message Vial: A message vial is a glass cylinder roughly the size of an adult's index finger, with wax seals capping each end. It has a mild enchantment which ensures that if the glass is broken, or

the seals are removed clumsily, then any paper stored within disintegrates. Consequently, those wishing clandestine communications send written notes in message vials, which the carriers may destroy easily if necessary. One must pass a DC 8 Reflex save to remove a seal without triggering the enchantment, thus safely attaining the contents. A thief may use their pick pocket skill if that improves their chance of success. The magical fabrication of message vials is a closely guarded secret, though most agree that the sealing wax is scraped from the leaves of a particular palm tree that blooms in moonlight. A master swindler is rumored to have perfected creating a vial that can only be opened by a single individual, though nobody claims to have actually seen the device.

If you are captured or held up past sundown, cast the vial down and break it. The message will be destroyed.

Day of the Shark

Tegula: Init +5; Atk bite +8 melee (1d10+2) and claws +6 melee (1d6+2) and tail sting +3 melee (1d8+2 plus poison); AC 18; HD 12d8; MV swim 50'; Act 2d20 (bite and tail sting) + 4d16 (claws) or 1d20 (swim-by, special); SP swim-by (Tegula can spend all actions as MV+attack+MV, with the attack being a bite or tail sting; the withdrawal move that follows the attack does not incur any free attack from the target), poison (DC 16 Fort save or permanent paralysis within 1d3 rounds; for successful save, target suffers -1d to all actions for 2d3 turns), blinding buffet (twice per encounter, Tegula churns the water's debris, silt, etc., to make a blinding cloud; all within 30' must pass DC 15 Fort save or be blinded for 1d3 rounds), body crush (once per encounter, Tegula uses entire body to crush a victim against a suitable surface, e.g. the ocean floor; DC 16 Ref save or take 3d6 damage); SV Fort +6, Ref +8, Will +4; AL N.

A head poured its way through the opening, followed by a body shaped as a manta, but with four clawed hands stretching from its wings. Brown and white and golden shells covered the creature's form, attached one by one from the time of its hatching and held in place by secretions from its skin...The tegula rushed past, the water through its shells chiming whispered tones, the O of its mouth sweetly glistening. The stinger on its tail shone with narcotics made to immobilize its victims.

PATRON: DREAD ONE

It lay like an octopus in its den, in a craggy hole an arm across, its tentacles curled around it, only the top of its bulbous head and its huge, swollen eyes glaring up at them. Indeed, if not for its eyes, it might have been mistaken for a blue-ringed octopus, but those orbs seethed with intelligence. It slithered with startling speed from its hole, a single tentacle stretching out, then another, then the saclike head. No one doubted what it was; its evil pulsed over them with a force as tangible as a hand squeezing their throats... Someone gave a groan of fear.

The Dread Ones are those who haunt the nightmares of all sea creatures. Shrouded in time, none claim to predate them, and many ascribe some of the ocean's diverse lifeforms to ancient experiments of the Dread Ones. They are rumored to be progenitors of all cephalopods, and even responsible for giving sharks the power of speech. Their superior intelligence and ingenuity are only diminished by their cruelty, as they've been known to enslave and devour entire communities. They rule the ocean from the shadows, with a vast network of emissaries and servants. Many believe their origins to be cosmic rather than terrestrial. Despite their eight 18'-long tentacles (each ending in a clawed hand) and their 12' tall bulbous heads with kraken-slaying venomous bites, Dread Ones kill with magic incomprehensible to most other beings. It is for this power that wizards risk their lives seeking patronage.

To bond to a Dread One, one must travel to its domain (typically demarcated with carvings of its likeness) and perform the *patron bond* ritual there. While some supernatural patrons are willing to share supplicants, this is not the case with Dread Ones. If one obtains the patronage of a Dread One, the arrangement is permanent (unless terminated by the Dread One) and exclusive; although the Dread One may have many supplicants, each supplicant must exclusively serve the Dread One. No other arrangements are tolerated. Supplicants who are disloyal or disobedient are swiftly killed. Nonetheless, such an arrangement with a Dread One promises power and influence. A Dread One appreciates signs of worthiness, like an offering of a few households' worth of people, or a victory in the Trial of the Circle. Such demonstrations grant a +1d bonus to the *patron bond* ritual. Dread Ones will go so far as to grant the *invoke patron* spell to subjects that have been bonded to them by another, although non-casters use a d16 for the spell check and may only invoke once per week. Indeed, the most feared of all the Dread One's servants is neither a necromancer, an elemental, nor a sorcerer; she is an assassin. It is prudent to note that the spirits of those who die in a Dread One's service are cursed to wander the Abyssal Plane as morsels for the Leviathan.

Invoke Patron check results:

1	Lost, failure, and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (3 or less) corruption + patron taint; (4-5) corruption; (6+) patron taint. Additionally, the caster must make a Luck check. If he rolls over his Luck, the Dread One inflicts hp damage equal to the caster's level (5 hp for a level 5 caster); if the roll is a natural 20 (the worst possible result), then the Dread One strikes him dead.
2-11	Failure. Unlike other spells, <i>invoke patron</i> may not be lost for the day. Depending on the results of <i>patron bond</i> , the wizard may still be able to cast it.
12-13	The Dread One kisses the caster's weapon with venom. For 1d3+CL rounds, the weapon inflicts an extra 2d4 damage, and those hit must pass a DC 12 Fortitude save or be paralyzed for 1d3 rounds.

14-17 Answering the caster's call, the Dread One uses the caster as a conduit to channel psychic energies. All enemies within 30' of the caster take 2d4 damage per round, and each round of exposure must pass a DC 14 Will save or suffer a -1d penalty to all rolls. The effect lasts for 1d3+CL rounds.

18-19 The caster is instilled with the Dread One's influence and countenance. For 1d3+CL turns, she may speak and understand the language of any sea creature, which responds truthfully and fearfully to any question posed. Morale checks against the caster are made with a d10 rather than d20.

20-23 The Dread One lends the caster some of its arcane knowledge, granting the caster 2d6+CL points to her next spell check, and restoring her memory with any spells that have been lost for that day.

24-27 The caster's physical form is enhanced by the Dread One's magic. For 1d3+CL hours, the caster's Strength, Agility, and Stamina are increased to 18, with any spellburn taken from the temporary ability points first. The caster's skin transforms to a brown hide with brilliant navy whorls; her natural armor class increases by 4, she gains 3d4 temporary hp, and her movement rate doubles. Finally she does not require oxygen, and may cease breathing without harm.

28-29 The caster gains a Dread One's power to create a thrall-familiar. The target must be a creature within 60' of the caster and is allowed a DC 28 Will save to resist servitude. Up to a range of CLx100', the caster can utilize any of the thrall-familiar's senses as if they were his own, and also use the thrall-familiar as a point of origin for spells. The caster communicates telepathically with his servant, who attempts to follow any command, reasonable or not. If the thrall-familiar dies in service, the caster takes 1 hp damage for every HD of the servant (e.g., 10 hp of damage for a 10 HD thrall-familiar's death). The servitude lasts for 4d6+CL hours, and the servant has no memory of its service when the effect expires.

30-31 The Dread One sends an unseen emissary to remove a single threat. The caster may designate a single target within 200'. The target must make a DC 30 Will save or be taken by the emissary to a random location CLd100 miles distant. If the target passes the saving throw, the emissary inflicts 6d6+CL damage instead.

32+ A Tegula (see stat block above) is dispatched by the Dread One to aid the caster for 2d4+CL rounds. This Tegula does not require oxygen, and may fly outside of water as well as it swims within it. The caster may issue mental commands to the creature, which it obeys until the spell expires or the creature dies.

Stolen Witness

Witness Stone: A witness stone is a piece of rock, 10 cubic feet or more, which has been infused by the powers of Law. It may be a stone from a lawful plane, or it may be a terrestrial rock transformed by a lawful ritual or supernatural being. Such stones are rare and carefully guarded, not only because of their power, but because they are often sought by agents of Chaos. Although they impose honesty through physical contact, they have lesser-known powers that are quite formidable. A witness stone has the following abilities:

- Anyone in contact with the stone must make a DC 30 Will save or irresistibly tell the truth.
- A wizard who touches the stone senses a wellspring of power within, and must pass a DC 15 Will save or be compelled to enter "rapport" with it.
- A wizard attempting rapport with a stone must make a spell check of 20 or more. If he succeeds, he is in rapport (detailed below). If he fails, his soul is absorbed into the stone and his body dies.
- A wizard in rapport need no longer touch the stone. The rapport lasts as long as the wizard maintains concentration (as per DCC rulebook p. 106), only temporarily breaking concentration for one of the abilities listed below.
- A wizard in rapport may gain knowledge from the stone's trapped souls, who must answer truthfully. He must spellburn 1 point for every round (10 seconds) spent in conversation with a trapped soul. This damage heals at the natural rate of 1 per day.
- A wizard in rapport may use the stone as a focal point. If a spell's target is touching the stone, the wizard gains +1d to the spell check.
- A wizard in rapport may compel others within CL*5' of the stone to enter rapport. He must make a spell check of 12 or more, which serves as the DC for a Will save by each of the targets. If the caster's spell check is less than 12, his rapport is broken. If the check is a natural 1, then the caster's soul is stolen instead. Those that fail the Will save must make a spell check of 20 or more (see above) to avoid having their souls stolen; those that pass are also in rapport. Note that non-casters use a d10 for spell checks.
- Multiple wizards in rapport with the same stone can expel each other via a spell duel.

You see how it is with the Stone, Bleys whispered. It stands hardly used, a truth-teller to the Graith when they suspect a witness of lying. Yet it is so much more—an unparalleled instrument of power, a well of knowledge.

Blood of the Forest-Born

Curse of Frenzy: This curse is used by powerful witch priests, dark fae, and arcane leaders of persecuted minorities. It is invoked by burning an octagon into the ground within the intended targets' domain, and eating the heart of a recently killed victim from the same region. After eating the heart, the invoker says the following:

*I burn the circle of legged eight,
The spider's curse to seal your fate.
You seek to kill our ways, our arts;
Instead now feast on your own hearts.
Blind frenzy comes to end your life,
Lest one takes eye with golden knife.*

Up to a maximum range equal to 100' per invoker's HD, everyone outside the octagon (which must remain intact during the invocation) loses 4 points of Luck, suffers a -4 penalty to Will saves, and is filled with a frenzied hunger for the beating hearts of kith and kin. Entire households, even small communities, have been decimated by this curse; the last victim alive typically tries to remove their own heart for consumption. The only remedy is for a victim to remove an eye, their own or another's, with a blade made of gold.

"Atseska's curse is the curse of frenzy. Everyone here will go mad and tear each other apart. They'll eat each other's hearts."

Atseska's Kiss: Minimum *make potion* spell check: 16

Special ingredients: venom gland from a neck-to-heel spider and claw from a servitor of the Chaos Lords.

Effects: Atseska's kiss is an iridescent blade oil of lethal toxicity. If successfully hit by a coated weapon, the victim must make a DC 16 Fortitude save. If successful, the victim is paralyzed for 1d3 hours, and suffers 2d8 damage. Upon failure, the victim dies in 1d3 rounds as muscles unnaturally contort the body into positions normally reserved for the double-jointed or boneless. The poison may be counteracted by a cleric's 3 HD lay on hands or a *neutralize poison or disease* spell. The oil's potency remains 1d3 hours after application (rolled secretly by the judge) and is effective for only one successful hit, after which it must be reapplied.

"No!" he cried. "Atseska's kiss! I must wash the wound. I—" It was too late. Already he was stiffening, his mouth pulling back into an impossibly wide grin... Anla flinched away in horror as the shaman's spine began to curl further and further back, as if his head wanted to touch his heels.

Break Them on the Drowning Stones

"Twinning is a difficult process, and candidates are carefully chosen... My power is in stone... Aresh spins fire. The way these elements move together in the glass, wrapping and enhancing the other — we're connected the same way, both through magic and because of who we are... The bond is nothing to be feared."

"It should be," said Gatja. "Don't be so eager to join the order, Temel. They'll chain you and call it compassion. You all talk about my fracturing like a stray hair that won't sit smoothly in a braid. The order toyed with our lives and broke both of us."

Create Arcane Twins

Level: 3 (Ritual Spell)

Range: Selves (Twins Only)

Duration: Permanent

Casting Time: 24 hours

Save: Will vs. spell check
(moderator only)

General: This ritual spell requires three arcane casters: the moderator and the two to be twinned. Because it permanently alters two willing subjects, the casting time is a grueling 24 hours during which there can be no interruptions for any of the participants.

The ritual requires significant sacrifice. One twin-to-be must spellburn 3 points by flaying the skin off their left palm, while the other twin-to-be must flay the skin off their right, also spellburning 3 points. These points power the ritual but do not add to the spellcheck, and as the duration of the spell is permanent, so too is the loss of these three ability points (each twin may choose the combination of Strength, Agility, and Stamina). This loss is permanent regardless of the spell check result. Additional points may be burned for increasing the spell check, and these heal at the natural rate of 1/day. The two must bind flayed palm to flayed palm for the duration of the 24 hour casting

The phlogistic flow between the twins is shaped and contained by the moderator, whose life is jeopardized with the ritual's climax. At the end of the casting, all three participants make spell checks. The result of the spell is determined by the *lowest* spell check of the three. At this point, a phlogistic pulse simultaneously bonds the twins but expels the moderator, who must make a Will save vs. DC equal to the spell check's result; if she fails she takes damage equal to the DC. Thus, a moderator who fails a DC 25 Will save suffers 25 points of damage.

Arcane twins have significantly enhanced power, with the effects of lesser spell checks adding cumulatively to the spell check rolled. However, they suffer extreme debilitation if they become fractured, with each twin losing 1d6 points of Personality permanently, and suffering 5d4 points of damage. Fracturing occurs either by the death of one twin, or by a twin's willful severance of the magical bond. This latter condition requires the attempting twin to pass a Will save equal to the ritual's original spell check, and may only be tried during the rise of a new moon. If failed, the bond remains, though the other twin knows of the attempt. If successful, the bond is permanently severed.

Manifestation: Varies

Corruption: Roll 1d8: (1) All three participants are identical triplets, resembling the caster responsible for the spellcheck; (2) the souls of the twins permanently swap bodies, and the moderator suffers minor corruption; (3-5) the twins' bound palms become inseparably fused together, and the moderator suffers major corruption; (6) all three participants suffer minor corruption; (7) all three participants suffer major corruption; (8) all three participants suffer greater corruption.

Misfire: Roll 1d4: (1) The magical forces seek to deconstruct rather than bind; all three participants must make a DC 18 Will save or die; (2) all three participants are magically repelled with great force and suffer 5d6 impact damage, DC 18 Reflex save for half; (3) the binding magic pulls the moderator forcibly into the twins, with all three participants suffering 3d6 impact damage; (4) the caster whose spellcheck is responsible for the misfire must pass a DC 14 Will save or fall victim to a phlogistic vortex; this siphons away the magical talent of the caster, who suffers -1d to all spell checks for 1 year or until attaining a new level (whichever takes longer).

1 Failure, cannot be re-attempted for one year, and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; (1-3) corruption; (4) patron taint (or corruption if no patron); (5+) misfire.

2-11 Failure. Cannot be re-attempted for 1 year

12-15 Failure. Cannot be re-attempted for 1 month

16-17 The twins can communicate telepathically within 100 miles of each other

18-21 In addition to the above result, the twins are mutual conduits, each able to use the other as a point of origin for their spells. This effect requires them to be within 1 mile of each other.

22-23 In addition to the above results, each twin knows the other's spells without counting against their maximum number of known spells. This advantage persists as twins level up.

24-26 In addition to the above results, each twin may add half of the other's maximum hp total (rounding up) to their own. Thus twins with hp of 12 and 15 change their hp to 20 (12+8) and 21 (15+6). This advantage persists as twins level up.

27-31 In addition to the above results, each twin must choose an area of elemental specialty different from the other (fire, water, earth, air). They may choose one spell related to this specialty to be cast with a +1d spell check bonus. With the judge's approval, they may transform a non-elemental spell (e.g. *magic missile*) to an elemental manifestation for this purpose. All saving throws vs. their chosen element are made with a d30.

32-33 In addition to the above results, each twin may add half the other's saving throw bonuses (rounding up) to their own. This advantage persists as twins level up.

34-35 In addition to the above results, a twin may transmit any of their sensory perceptions (sight, sound, smell, etc.) to the other, within a distance of 1 mile.

36+ In addition to the above results, the twins gain further mastery in their elemental specialties. They may choose three more spells of the appropriate element to be cast with a +1d bonus. With the judge's approval, they may transform a non-elemental spell (e.g. *magic missile*) to an elemental manifestation for this purpose. All saving throws vs. their chosen element are made with a d100.

A Soul's Second Skin

Dhuly'n's face hardened, and Parno reached for his belt dagger. "You inhabit someone else's body?" "Not in the way you mean. This body was empty when I was called to it. I don't know who occupied it originally. I can only tell you he was not here."

Soul Transference	Level: 2
Range: Varies	Duration: Varies
Casting Time: 1 round	Save: Will vs. spell check

General: The Soul Transference ensorcelment began with a wizard's attempt to transfer the soul of her dying familiar into another body. Since that successful casting, the spell has evolved such that either a soul can move into a recently dead body, or two souls can interchange bodies.

If one of the souls is unwilling to be transferred, then it must pass a Will save with DC equal to the spell check to stop the transfer from taking place.

Because of the spell's potency, the caster must spellburn 1 point to cast it, and may add the point to their spell check. Casters may choose a result equal to or less than their spell check, although the saving throw DC reduces as well (maximum value for a given range). For example, a caster achieves a spell check of 25, but he wants to transfer a soul to dead body, so chooses the next lowest result (20-21). The target saves with DC 21, rather than DC 25.

What abilities a soul has in a new body requires some consideration by the judge. Generally speaking, a soul should be able to use special or class abilities unless physically prohibited by the new body. A body without arms may not be able to swing a weapon, for example. The new body confers its physical capabilities (for example, Strength, Agility, and Stamina), but mental capabilities come from the soul.

If a soul is transferred to a dead body, the empty vessel remains comatose while the soul is somewhere else. If the temporary body dies before the spell's duration expires, the prematurely ejected soul must pass a Will save to avoid returning to its original body. If successful, the soul can choose a new empty vessel. If the soul's original body is killed, and the soul fails its save to choose a new one, then it becomes a ghost and pursues the caster for vengeance. It may only be permanently put to rest if the caster dies.

Un-dead, being soulless, cannot be affected by this spell, nor can "killed" un-dead bodies.

Manifestation: Roll 1d4: (1) glowing pulses of light stream between target bodies; (2) each target body flickers with the appearance of the incoming soul's body; (3) scintillating portals open in the chest of each target body; (4) a spectral eagle flies from each source body to the target, carrying the transferred soul in its talons.

Corruption: Roll 1d8: (1) Once a minute the caster's face flickers to appear as a soul's face he tried to transfer; (2) caster's voice permanently changes to one of the soul's voices; (3) for five minutes of every hour, the caster's soul leaves his body, which becomes comatose during that time; (4-5) minor; (6-7) major; (8) greater.

Misfire: Roll 1d3: (1) the caster's own soul is damaged by the failed casting, and the caster permanently loses 1 point from his maximum hp; (2) the ally nearest the caster has a temporarily weakened soul, and falls comatose for 1d3 turns (DC 18 Will save); (3) the caster transfers a bit of his own soul power to the targets, he loses 2d4 hp which are given to the transferred soul (or split evenly if there are two).

1	Lost, failure, and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; (1-3) corruption; (4) patron taint (or corruption if no patron); (5+) misfire.
2-11	Lost. Failure.
12-13	Failure, but spell is not lost.
14-15	The caster may transfer an animal's soul to a body killed within 1d3+CL rounds. The soul remains for 1d3+CL rounds before returning to its body. Both vessels must be within line-of-sight 5' of the caster.
16-19	The caster may interchange two animals' souls with their respective bodies. The souls remain for 1d3+CL rounds before returning to their own bodies. Both vessels must be within line-of-sight 5' of the caster.
20-21	The caster may transfer an animal's or a person's soul to a body killed within 1d3+CL turns. The soul remains for 1d3+CL turns before returning to its body. Both vessels must be within line-of-sight 50' of the caster. Moving a soul into an unnatural body (e.g., animal's soul into person's body) grants a +1d bonus to the saving throw.
22-25	The caster may interchange two souls, animal or person, with their respective bodies. The souls remain for 1d3+CL turns before returning to their own bodies. Both vessels must be within line-of-sight 50' of the caster. Moving a soul into an unnatural body (e.g., animal's soul into person's body) grants a +1d bonus to the saving throw.
26-29	The caster may transfer an animal's, person's, or monster's soul to a body killed within 1d3+CL hours. The soul remains for 1d3+CL hours before returning to its body. Both vessels must be within line-of-sight 500' of the caster. Moving a soul into an unnatural body grants a +1d bonus to the saving throw, unless the transfer involves person and monster, for which the bonus is +2d.

30-31 The caster may interchange two souls, animal, person, or monster, with their respective bodies. The souls remain for 1d3+CL hours before returning to their own bodies. Both vessels must be within line-of-sight 500' of the caster. Moving a soul into an unnatural body grants a +1d bonus to the saving throw, unless the transfer involves person and monster, for which the bonus is +2d.

32-33 The caster may transfer an animal's, person's, or monster's soul to a body killed within 1d3+CL days, or may interchange two of these souls with their respective bodies. The transfer remains for 1d3+CL days before returning to its body. Both vessels must be within one mile of the caster, who must either see the bodies (e.g., via scrying) or have a piece of each (e.g., a hair). Moving a soul into an unnatural body grants a +1d bonus to the saving throw, unless the transfer involves person and monster, for which the bonus is +2d. If the duration's number of days is less than the number of HD of either target, then the targets' souls occasionally flicker back and forth, allowing them to make a new saving throw each day to return to their bodies.

34+ The caster may transfer an animal's, person's, or monster's soul to a body killed within 3d3+CL days, or may interchange two of these souls with their respective bodies. The transfer remains for 3d3+CL days before returning to its body. The vessels may be anywhere, even on a different plane than the caster, who must either see the bodies (e.g., via scrying) or have a piece of each (e.g., a hair). Moving a soul into an unnatural body grants a +1d bonus to the saving throw, unless the transfer involves person and monster, for which the bonus is +2d. If the duration's number of days is less than the number of HD of either target, then the targets' souls occasionally flicker back and forth, allowing them to make a new saving throw each day to return to their bodies.

Shuhalla's Sword

Heaven's Tears: Sages debate the true nature of Heaven's Tears, whether they are a natural event or a vile curse uttered by some supernatural being. Regardless, it is an event somewhat predictable by learned astronomers, but may be exacerbated by forbidden rituals. Heaven's Tears manifest as pink meteors falling from the sky. Within 100' of its point of impact, a single tear infects the land with an extraterrestrial fungus and fungal spores; this corruption persists for half a lunar cycle unless the entire area is burned to the ground. Any creature entering an infected area is subject to breathing the alien spores or absorbing them through the skin. The victim must pass a DC 16 Fortitude save or transform into a spore singer within 2d3 rounds. During this brief time, the transformation can be stopped with a 3 HD lay on hands or a *neutralize poison or disease* spell with a spell check of 20 or more.

Spore singers' bodies become hybridized with the rapid growth of alien flora from the spores. They have long stamen-like dark tongues and soft branches growing out of and into their bodies. They do not die, per se, although their souls are irrevocably lost. One cannot "recover the body" of a spore singer. Their primary drive becomes infecting any non-infected creature they encounter. Once enough are infected, they are able to perform a ritual to draw additional Tears to their location. Even if a spore singer's body is "killed," its plant portion may still emit spores as a spore corpse. The only way to completely eliminate a spore singer or spore corpse is by burning its body. Missile weapons and fire-based attacks are the best defenses against these horrors.

Spore Singer: Init +2; Atk bash +2 melee (1d3+1) or bite +2 melee (1d6 plus infection) or beckoning shrill; AC 13; HD 2d8; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP beckoning shrill (DC 12 Will save or defenselessly approach spore singer and stand helpless and actionless for the following 1d3 rounds, range 30'), infection (DC 16 Fort save or transform into a spore singer within 2d3 rounds), death throe (spores erupt in 5' radius, imposing infection on all within), summon Heaven's Tear (12 hour nocturnal ritual requiring at least 10 singers, DC 14 spell check required to have Tear fall on region, +1 to check for every 10 singers), suffers triple damage from fire-based attacks; SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +1; AL C.

Spore Corpse: Init +0; Atk spore burst +2 missile fire (1 plus infection, range 30') or beckoning shrill; AC 10; HD 1d6; MV 0' (immobile); Act 1d16; SP beckoning shrill (DC 12 Will save or defenselessly approach spore singer and stand helpless and actionless for the following 1d3 rounds, range 30'), infection (DC 16 Fort save or transform into a spore singer within 2d3 rounds), death throe (spores erupt in 5' radius, imposing infection on all within), suffers triple damage from fire-based attacks; SV Fort +0, Ref +0, Will +0; AL C.

The villagers had transformed even more profoundly than the camp. At first glance, Denkar might have mistaken them for deformed trees, their bodies twisted, limbs extenuated, dark tongues rising out of mouths like overgrown flower stamens...here there were dozens of men and women, all disfigured...There were children, too, judging by the size of the things that capered about the fire, whistling and singing to the sky.

Flying Sword: A flying sword is a special variant of a magical sword. Whereas a "typical" magical sword gains its intelligence and personality from its *sword magic* spell check, creators, and material, a flying sword has the intelligence and personality of the soul willfully given to it. To create such a weapon, one must achieve a spell check of 32 or more for their *sword magic* spell. At the culmination of the forging ritual, when the spell check is applied, the caster must state whether the sword will be a flying sword or not. If not, then the sword's properties are determined as described in the *sword magic* spell and magic item sections of the DCC rulebook. Otherwise, the flying sword is dormant until the caster finds a being willing to die and yield their soul to the weapon. Before this happens, the blade is magical with its "plus" as determined by the spell check, but has no other properties.

Only when one yields their soul to the sword are the blade's properties determined; this is done as described in the DCC rulebook, with the following exceptions:

- The sword's name is that of its soul, and a specific hand sign (configuration of fingers) is assigned to it.
- Its alignment is that of its soul's, regardless of DCC Tables 8-2 and 8-3.
- It has one less power than the number determined by DCC Table 8-4, and one of the remaining powers must be the Type II combat power "Throwing Blade" (result 97-99), except that its range is doubled to 40', and it need not be wielded to be thrown. The bearer may cause the sword to fly from its scabbard by invoking its name and hand sign.

- When applying banes and special purposes, the judge should use the donated soul's history as a guide and either create banes and special purposes consistent with the soul's personality, or choose ones from DCC tables 8-5 and 8-6 that are most appropriate. Only as an absolute last resort should these be chosen randomly.

Instead of soaring toward the red moon, he felt himself pulled toward Shuhalla. Her hand grasped him, firm and gentle. Her lips whispered against his blade. "This is you, Denkar." She covered her forefinger with her thumb and extended the other fingers. "And this is your sign." She released him, and he flew...Denkar felt her gesture as the pony must feel the tug of the reins. With joy, he obeyed, diving, slashing, piercing.

(SKULL SCROLLS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 64)

I have mulled over your suggestion concerning Dear Archmage Abby, it is not without merit, but I have reached no decision.

Once you have read the stories, report your high satisfaction to me at once! I weary of this. Go now, and spread my vision!

– So Sayeth the Skull

Hi,

I've been checking your online store daily in hopes the #1 pdf will be available, but alas, not yet. I noticed in the most recent update that you're about half way through shipping out the backers' rewards. Will the pdf become available only after all the rewards have shipped? Makes sense if so, just wanted to gauge how much longer I have to wait with fetid breath.

– Nils Hedglin

The one known as "intern" has read your letter aloud to me, and explained the acronym P D F. The issue shall be available through the magic glowing box once the proper incantations are complete, sometime in mid April.

– So Sayeth the Skull

Hello,

I backed the Kickstarter for the PDF of Tales from the Magician's Skull #1. How can I get a PDF of issue #2 ? I was not able

to give you money when previously directed to your webpage to pre-order the issue

Why don't you want my money? Please allow me to order #2 in PDF form.

– Robert Coleman

Patience, mortal! There will be no PDF or any other sorcerous anagrams until issue 2 itself is complete! My minions labor yet upon the contents. The planets will reach their proper conjunction in June, and it is then your dreams shall be realized.

– So Sayeth the Skull

Hi there!

I was a backer on the Tales from the Magician's Skull Kickstarter, and I love the bookmark that was included with it. Is there any way to order some extras of that bookmark, or similar ones? Please let me know, and thank you for your time.

—Jonathan Pickens

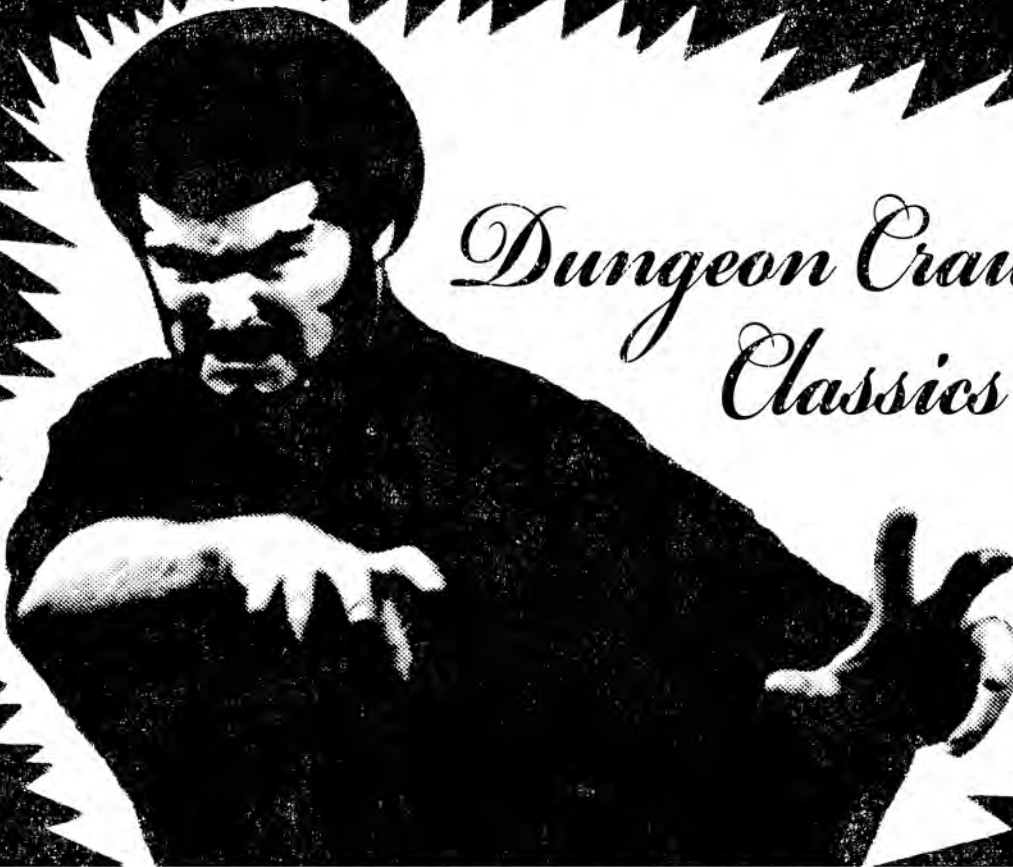
Your appropriate enthusiasm pleases me! Of course there are more to be had. One of my minions shall inform you of the bothersome details.

– So Sayeth the Skull

(Minion here. Check www.goodman-games.com for info on all your Skull-related swag needs!)

Old Skule





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