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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. 4

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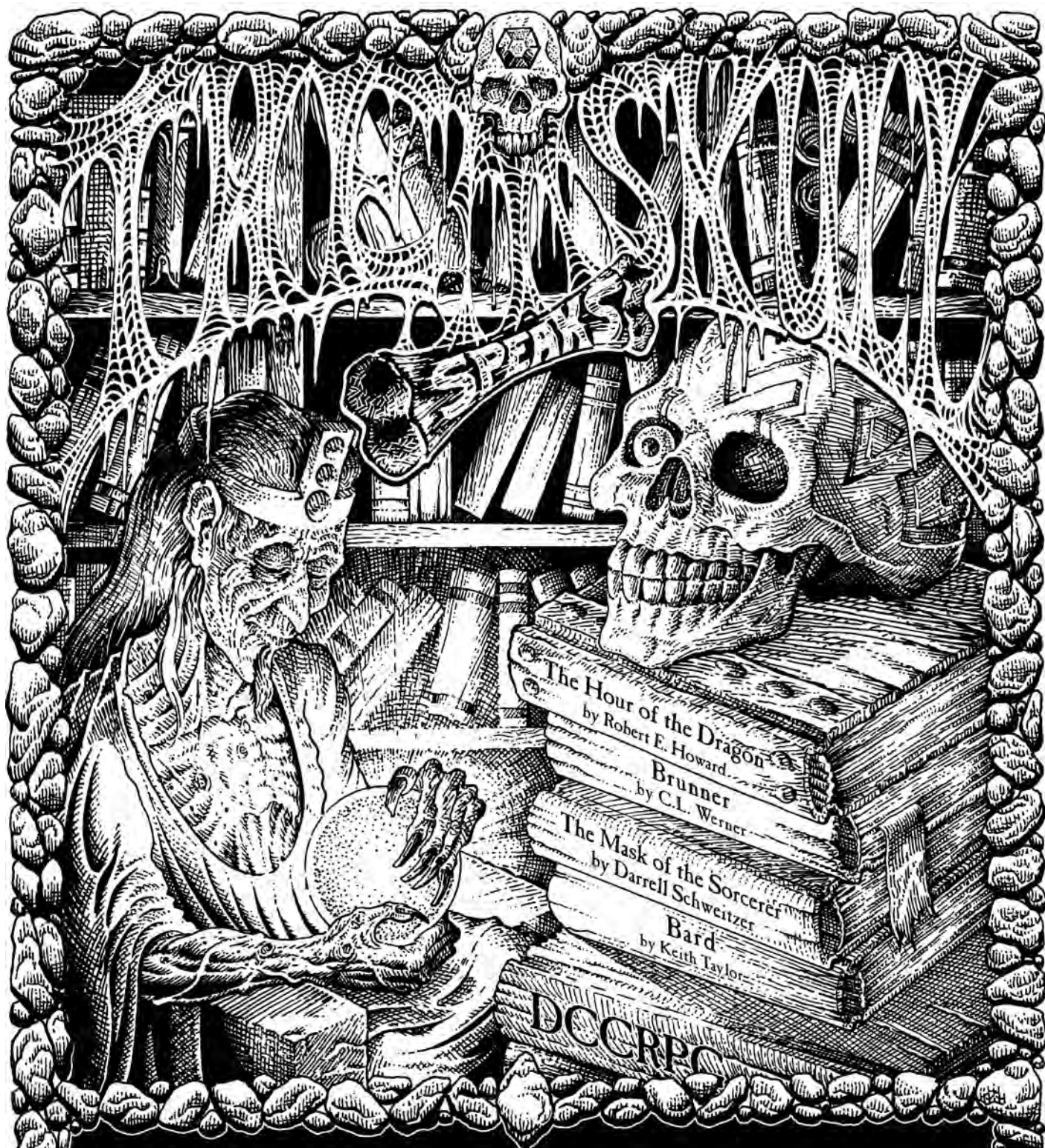
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JOSEPH GOODMAN, Publisher
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DOUG KOVACS, Cover Illustration
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Before you marvel over the splendors I present, pause a moment to reflect upon your fortune. Because I woke from my deathless sleep, I command the powers to bring you these tales of wonder!

You shall never fully comprehend the challenges overcome to bring you this magazine. There were late deliveries, and mislabeled boxes. There were evil dwarves, and ordinary gorillas. There was even an attempt to usurp my authority and rebrand the magazine! All these attempts failed utterly, and I continue to reign supreme! Once again I give to you, my loyal followers, tales of grand adventure.

Go now and savor them, and then spread word of your jubilation. Summon your trombonists and gong players and lead parades through the street with my banner. Tell all of my magazine, and lead them in hymns of praise!

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

AS I write this, it's early November of 2019, and we've just about wrapped up the fiction selections for this issue, pending the Skull's final approval. We were already at work on the contents before issue 3 hit the stands, and it won't be long now until all of issue 4's tales are going through proofreading and layout.

I've had a few questions now about how the entire preparatory process works, and I'll describe it for you. Although by the time you read this note, that will have changed a little (more on that in a bit).

In the editorial for issue 1, I discussed how the first issue grew organically, almost by accident. For issue 2 I reached out to previous authors as well as new ones, and I followed this same process for 3 and 4. Once the tales begin to come in from our invited submitters, Joseph and I evaluate them. Some we turn back because they have plenty of adventure but not enough swash-buckling, or because they aren't quite right genre-wise. Sometimes Joseph and I have suggestions, apart from finding typos and the like, and then there are some exchanges with the writer until we're all happy, after which a contract is issued. When the writer turns over that final version of the story and a signed contract, they also provide a bio, suggest some pull quotes (for the table of contents) and, if they have any ideas about a feature that might provide a map, we ask them to sketch one for us, no matter their own artistic skills.

From there the story goes to proofreading, and after proofreading comes the layout process. Joseph, meanwhile, is contacting various artists for the included stories and maps and other pieces (like the cool table of contents art), and I'm reaching out to our advertisers and doing my best to decide what the best reading order is. At some point we even shoot ideas back and forth about what the titles will be on the spines of the book the Skull is resting on across from the editorial page. Have you noticed? They're different every time!

Once the stories are all in, Terry combs through them and devises the best ways to implement features as monsters or tools or spells. At the same time, Lester begins to layout the magazine. I'm almost as in the dark about what he does as the Skull is himself. We give these plain documents to Lester and then they're transformed into something lovely.

The whole process is hardly routine yet, but as we ready for the fourth go-round we've begun to iron out the rough patches and learned more efficient ways to handle the work. We're ready for a new challenge. At least we think we are.

By the time you're reading this, we will be preparing to open the magazine to submissions for a short period. Joseph and I were a little alarmed when the Skull declared his desire for new blood,

and then understood that for once he wasn't being literal. He quite likes the voices he's heard in the magazine so far, but he is ever greedy for more, and so we're going to experiment with accepting unsolicited submissions for the magazine after the first of the year. If it goes well, we plan to do it annually. I hope that we will be inundated with scores of talented writers with fresh new takes on our favorite themes, not just because we want to share them with you, but because we want to read them ourselves! We wouldn't be doing this if we didn't all love sword-and-sorcery.

I know the Skull would love to have awakened into the pulp era so that a new issue of his magazine would have appeared on the newsstands two or three times every month. Can you imagine? Me, I still dream of taking us quarterly some day, something that might be possible if we continue to grow carefully and expand our reach. I'm not sure how I'd find the time to do it, but you make time for the things you love.

What I really need are some minions of my own. I have a stack of short story outlines I haven't had time to convert into actual tales, not to mention a novel that I'll hopefully have finished writing by the time you've read this, as well as rough concept outlines for five new heroic fiction book series and a space opera. I'd be a lot further along with all of them if someone else could fix my horse fence and clean my kitchen and the like. Sometimes I even have these mad dreams that I might find more time for solitaire wargaming or even for weekly roleplaying games, a delight that I seem once to have taken completely for granted.

As difficult as it is to dream of a time when great magazines chock full of fiction could be had multiple times a month from the newsstand, I sometimes reflect upon how amazed some of those readers would be that we have genre entertainment beamed into our televisions (pure science fiction, really) or that a magazine staff like ours could be scattered across the country and still work together. Except, of course, when we gather in the corporate offices or are summoned to the Skull's inner sanctum. My guess is that if we were all based out of the same city, we'd have an instant role-playing group, schedules be damned. Now, if only I could get a movie deal from one of my books, I could hire a mad inventor to fashion robots to fix my horse fence, muck the stalls, and walk the dogs. With that aid it might be a far simpler matter to find the time to sit in my lonely spire, fashioning tales of mighty deeds and flashing swords, or stride, lost in thought over a plot problem, along my tower balcony overlooking the waves from the Sea of Monsters as they crash against the rocky beach.

— Howard Andrew Jones

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

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



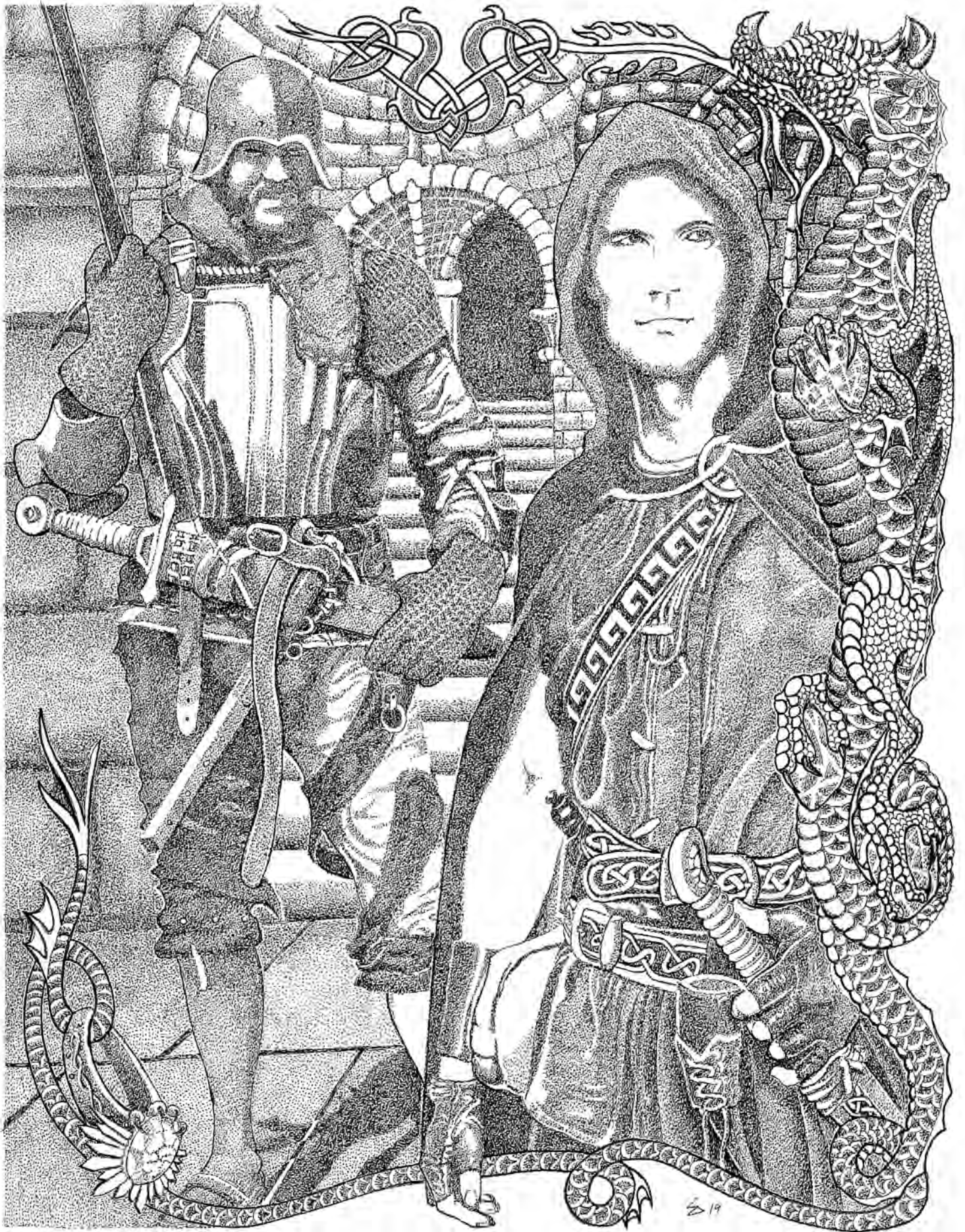


ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

GUARDIAN OF THE BROKEN GEM

A Tale of the King's Blade

By JOHN C. HOCKING

BENHUS was waiting in an alley with six people he didn't know. The alley was narrow, choked with heavy shadows held minimally at bay by a small oil lamp fixed to a wall. A strip of star-flecked night sky was visible above. Although the alley was in one of the better parts of the city, Benhus noted that it was still dingy and smelled of garbage. The little group clustered around the dull glow of the oil lamp and waited in silence. Nobody looked too closely at one another or spoke any pleasantries. Benhus measured the muffled tension in the air and surreptitiously scanned his companions.

There was a young noblewoman with her long hair held back by an array of small combs. She wore a fashionably cut robe edged with purple, and though she held her hands together, Benhus could see they trembled. Her eyes burned fitfully in hollow sockets and Benhus deemed her overly devoted to one or more of the more potent joy potions.

There was a tall man with a scarred face wearing an elegant scarlet cloak over a black tunic who Benhus knew for the bodyguard and advisor of one of the city's most accomplished crime bosses. There were two rather ordinary looking merchants who traded unfriendly glances but no words. Rivals, thought Benhus. There was a solidly built woman with white hair wearing a crafter's apron who he speculated might be a jeweler. There was a lean soldier in worn leathers, grey at the temples and relaxed in manner, who leaned on the wall beside the oil lamp and wore a bemused grin. And there was Benhus, who was pretending he was someone he was not. He was surprised at how much he enjoyed it.

"A fine night for such a gathering of rogues," said the soldier to Benhus, his voice low. Benhus nodded, but before he could answer an armored man appeared out of the shadows and beckoned.

"Come along. Quickly now."

At the alley's far end was a wooden fence with an open door flanked by two more men in unadorned cuirasses and plain steel caps. The pair did a quick, cursory search of each member of the little group as they filed past and took from each a square of white silk the size of a small handkerchief and emblazoned with a golden number.

When Benhus approached the guard on the left laid the hard edge of a hand against his chest while the guard on the right patted him down in a desultory fashion. Benhus was grateful that the guard didn't dig fingers behind his belt buckle and find the Nobleman's Comfort lodged there. The little wand was the only

one in his dead master's collection that he felt comfortable using and bringing it along had seemed more of an indulgence than a necessity. Having to explain it would be bothersome.

From the pocket of his fine white shirt, open at the throat and cut along elegant lines, Benhus produced his silken ticket, which wasn't his at all, and handed it wordlessly to the man still pressing a hand against his chest.

The shirt hung loosely past a silver buckled belt from which dangled a white hilted dagger in a sleek white sheath. The guard paused at it a moment, then sniffed and stepped back. The dagger looked like an ornament, a fashion accessory, and in part it was. A token of esteem presented to Benhus's dead teacher by the King to honor ten years of dedicated and unscrupulous service. The dagger appeared to be nothing more than a showpiece, but it was the finest blade Benhus had ever held, with a preternaturally sharp edge that had been of such use to him he had begun to consider the weapon something of a good luck charm. His teacher had kept the white dagger in a drawer on a velvet cushion and had never drawn blade from sheath. Benhus felt differently about it.

He also felt unexpectedly at home in the garments chosen for this night. The flowing shirt hung easily on his lean torso, his black breeches were sleek and cut closer than he was accustomed to in accordance with current fashion among the nobility. His boots were polished to an ebon gloss and more comfortable on his feet than his best sandals.

"This is Therzon Baticlian's pass," said the one with his hand on Benhus's chest. "And you are not Therzon Baticlian."

"No, I am not, thank the Gods," said Benhus. He could feel his heart beating faster but was pleased at how relaxed he felt, how easy this seemed to be now that he was actually doing it. "The silly sot is home with a crippling hangover. I'm to do business in his stead."

The guards exchanged quick glances. The one on the left removed his hand from Benhus's chest and gave him a lopsided grin.

"Lord Baticlian does favor the wine. Last time he was here we wondered if we were going to have to carry him home." Benhus nodded, trying to make it look a little rueful, and they let him pass.

Therzon Baticlian was not home with any kind of hangover but rather in the King's dungeon, having told the royal inquisitors everything they asked of him, often in extraordinary and unprecedented detail.

The group filtered into an open yard where a long coach awaited them. Benhus sat beside the noblewoman with the elaborate coiffure and hollow eyes. She did not look at or speak to him. The two merchants were seated side by side and made a show of facing away from one another.

The coach's doors were shut and the windows draped over before they set off along the nighted street. The soldier hummed a quiet tune but otherwise the trip was made in silence. The journey wasn't long but the coach passed around enough corners that Benhus couldn't have said where they arrived in relation to the alleyway they'd left behind.

When the doors were thrown open the passengers found themselves in another alley beside the tall and featureless wall of a large building. Benhus thought it resembled one of the warehouses in which the city stored materials for building and roadwork but didn't think the coach had travelled the distance needed to take them to that district. There was a single door upon which the coachman rapped six times.

Another guard in unmarked cuirass and helm opened the door from within and ushered the group up a narrow flight of worn wooden steps. The pinched and dim stairway led into a well-lit antechamber that opened into a much larger room, elegantly appointed and with a lofty ceiling. Benhus grinned at the contrast between the building's interior and exterior. No one examining the bland and dreary outside of the building would ever imagine the elegance that lay within.

There were three long tables at the other end of the room, each covered by a white cloth. Displayed upon the spotless fabric was an array of various objects. The table on the left was covered with folded garments and bolts of fine cloth. The table at center held an assortment of weapons, short swords and daggers mostly, as well as a few emblems of respectable trades and family status, small scepters, gavels and badges of office, generally in gold or silver. The table on the right was the most densely covered, spread thickly with jewelry, rings, bracelets, armbands, necklaces, belts and more, almost all in gold and almost all glittering with gems in multicolored profusion. A small treasure trove had been carefully laid out for perusal.

The air was thick with the sweet smell of aromatic wood and Benhus noted a small standing brazier in each corner of the room. Thin streams of smoke rose from each brazier's open bowl to spread and fade into the air of the high-ceilinged room. The effect was just shy of cloying but, Benhus recognized, covered any remaining stench of death. The objects on the tables had obviously been cleaned as well as possible, but no amount of washing would be likely to completely remove the taint from such a large gathering of grave goods.

A tall, slender man in white robes welcomed them with a bow and a sweeping gesture that beckoned them to the tables.

"As ever, the Lord Crentius offers the finest collection of goods from the most elite sources. Some price negotiation is allowed but please keep your offers reasonable. Our noble host offers these treasures at grave personal risk and you are privileged to peruse them by the good graces of the Lord."

The soldier in leathers suppressed a low chuckle and leaned in toward Benhus.

"It seems that if the city's grave-robbers use you to fence enough stolen loot you get elevated to the nobility and become a Lord."

Benhus covered his smile with a hand and nodded. The soldier's breath carried the scent of wine.

The party split apart with Benhus, the white-haired jeweler and the two merchants heading toward the third table. The greying soldier and the scarlet-caped bodyguard attended the weapons while the noblewoman went to the table on the left to examine the clothing there.

In front of each table were two low, well cushioned seats, backless and suitable for kneeling upon if one wanted to lean well out over the table to survey the gleaming goods. Behind each of the tables stood two attendants, women both well dressed and attentive, prepared to discuss individual items, name prices and perhaps consider bargaining.

Benhus approached the woman to the far right, nudged aside one of the chairs and leaned a hip against the table's edge. His grey eyes flicked down to regard the tabletop for a moment before looking up to focus on the woman.

She had a dense mane of auburn hair that fell just past her shoulders. Her eyes were wide-set, deep brown and quizzical when they fell upon Benhus. She wore ivory robes and the bodice that cinched in tight to her narrow waist was a deep red. Benhus noted that her lips were stained a similar red, that she smelled like rain, and that he was unaccustomed to women like her. It occurred to him that he seemed to deal only with tavern wenches who were primarily concerned with the contents of his purse or with noblewomen who, when introduced to him at formal functions, at once wanted to speak to virtually anyone else in the room. Benhus felt a sudden certainty that here was an example of the kind of woman he ought to be spending more time with.

"And you are?" she asked, smiling. Benhus thought her voice sounded like a flute.

"Standing in for Therzon Baticlian," he replied. He met her gaze and held it.

"Ah, I heard he was indisposed. Will you be wanting to examine his usual array of military insignia and ceremonial weaponry?"

Benhus blinked, but otherwise thought he concealed his surprise. Therzon Baticlian did not collect military relics. He had told the King's inquisitors that he was primarily interested in jewelry, notably that with gems he could remove and sell without any chance of them being suspected of having been looted from the illegally exhumed corpse of a lamented member of the nobility. There was very little about himself and his relation to this monthly gathering that he had not eagerly told the king's inquisitors.

Benhus did not break eye contact; he found it easy to peer into those dark eyes. He felt sure he was being tested.

"You must be confusing Therzon with another wine-skin. He sent me to look at jewelry." He noted that she didn't flinch either, so she was either very good or perhaps she wasn't testing him at all and had made an honest mistake.

"Oh yes," she looked down at the table as if embarrassed by her error. "Any particular style or provenance?"

"Rings," said Benhus. "And he had hopes of finding one in particular."

"Oh yes?" She seemed hesitant. Benhus had been blunt, as he was in most things. He knew there had been more than one noble family who, having suffered the looting of an ancestral grave, had sought both the items taken and vengeance upon the thieves. He reasoned that she was being cautious.

"Perhaps the family is seeking this item for... sentimental reasons?" she continued.

"Therzon Baticlian wants it, so I hope to find it. He may have some idea of selling it back to the family, but he doesn't inform me of such things, so I wouldn't know." Benhus thought he sounded quite convincing and had to restrain a smile.

"Could you describe the ring?" He thought she was leaning forward just a little, bringing their faces closer together across the table's expanse, so he leaned forward too.

"I'm told it has a simple white stone centered in a cluster of thin rays of alternate gold and silver, forming a kind of stylized sun. The rays are quite long and would make the ring somewhat awkward to wear." He'd memorized this and hoped the details didn't sound as prepared as they were.

"Well, that's certainly not here on the table," said the woman, "but it sounds familiar. Please see if there is anything else here that appeals to you. I'll be back in a moment."

Benhus nodded and wished he'd had the presence of mind to ask her name. He looked down at the seat beside him and decided not to sit. He didn't anticipate the ring would be here. If it wasn't he was supposed to discretely ask his fellow customers if they knew of other covert markets for grave goods. That was likely to be awkward, but he had already decided to approach the cheerful soldier in leathers.

The family of the long-dead nobleman whose grave had been robbed, whose heirloom ring had been plucked from his mold-ered finger, had asked the King for help tracking it down and for some reason the King had agreed. Therzon Baticlian had blithered drunkenly to one too many people he regarded as friends about this market for superior grave goods and word had gotten back to the authorities. Now Therzon was chained to a dank wall in one of his majesty's dungeons and Benhus was using his name to look for the ring. He wasn't sure why the king would be interested enough to send him looking for it and this was quite unlike any other task he'd been assigned. Benhus was not intimate with King Numar Flavius but he knew the monarch well enough to doubt he sought the ring out of any depth of concern for the bereft family. Benhus reflected that it wasn't his job to wonder about such things.

More prospective customers had been ushered into the room and were milling about the tables. A low murmur of voices told of steady commerce taking place all around. A woman laughed. Benhus scanned the tabletop and tried not to think of how each bauble had looked when it was affixed to a corpse, but once the idea came to him he found it difficult to discard.

He looked up to see the white-robed fellow who had greeted the group hurrying to the other side of the table, where he stopped and regarded Benhus thoughtfully. The auburn-haired woman stood behind him and Benhus thought she looked a little unhappy.

"Greetings, sir. I understand you are looking for a ring of very particular design."

The man's thin gray hair was cut very short and had receded well back above his brow, making his long face appear even longer. Benhus disliked him immediately.

"I described it to the lady..." He gestured at her, hoping the man would tell him her name, but he was disappointed.

"What do you know about this ring?"

"Mainly that Therzon Baticlian wants it and I'm to find it if it's here. I understand that it's old."

"It has history. It belonged to Quintuz Verran, a Lord whose lineage extends back to the nobility of Janarax. He was a notable fellow, a scholar who advised warriors and generals, although he himself was of small stature and bookish habits."

"Fascinating," said Benhus, who did not find it so at all. "Do you have it?"

"Despite his role as a strategist, he is remembered best for a single incident." The man went on as if Benhus had not spoken. "It's said that while travelling with his niece, then a very small child, they were accosted by bandits on an empty stretch of road. Another group of travelers came upon them and found all the bandits dead, shorn to bits, and our nobleman scholar covered with their blood. Much was made of the meek military advisor who, when his family was threatened, was actually a great slayer of men. That niece is no longer young."

The man bent forward, placing his hands flat on the table. "Tell me, is she the one seeking this ring?"

Benhus felt a surge of uneasiness, sensing for the first time that he could be moving out of his depth. "I don't know."

The man dug into a sleeve, then set something on the table before Benhus. It was the ring as he had described it, but the central white stone was broken, a piece of its core missing so that the setting beneath was visible while the edges of the stone still cling to the fastenings. The nimbus of gold and silver rays was somewhat bent and darkened as if by heat.

"It has been said that Quintuz Verran received this ring as a gift from a sorcerer of Anparar. We have been trying to understand it and have had but little success. What can you tell me about it?"

"I only know that if the ring was available here I was to purchase it." His uneasiness grew into discomfort. Conversation in the room seemed farther away.

"Indeed." The man in white robes stepped back from the table. "Please take a seat." He turned to the woman with auburn hair, "Attend to our guest. I'm certain that Lord Crentius will wish to speak with him." He began to walk away then glanced back over his shoulder at Benhus.

"I said sit. Runners sent to the manse of Therzon Baticlian have returned saying he is not at home. Rumor has it he is being held in irons by the king."

He stalked off but Benhus continued to stand. He looked to the woman but she glanced away.

A thick and heavy hand dropped onto Benhus's shoulder from behind.

"Sit," said a deep voice. "We should speak."

The hand pressed him down into the lushly cushioned seat with a kind of relentless strength that put Benhus into the chair before he could consider resisting.

The man pulled a second chair up and sat down. He was imposingly large and wore a broad belt with wide, bronze-studded leather straps that crisscrossed his bare chest. He ran a slab-like palm over his big head, smoothing back his close-cut black hair.

"Don't touch me again," said Benhus. Dull red flickered at the rim of his vision.

"You're starting off wrong," said the big man. "Now's the time for you to be nice and agreeable." He held both hands before him, palms up. "Either one of these hands could snap your neck like a dry twig."

Benhus blinked at the man. A dropping sensation in his belly brought sudden vertigo and a swift jab of something he was unable to decide was fear or rage. Both maybe. He made himself draw a slow breath.

The man, dressed like a wrestler in a carnival show, frowned at him. His face was wide, with a heavy shelf of brow that his black eyebrows made look like a dark bar. His nose was heavy too, but crooked from having been broken at least once. Above the shovel-like jaw the mouth seemed thin-lipped and small.

"Need me?" The was another man standing beside the wrestler. Shorter than Benhus and not much older, with a shock of hair so blond it was almost white. Cestis, armored gloves, glittered metallically on his hands.

"Hell, look at him," rumbled the wrestler. "This cub would take one hand."

The other man nodded, flashed a quick smile. "As you say, Ortis." He faded back into the room, where dealers at the other tables were talking louder to distract their customers from what was happening with Benhus.

"The Lord should be here in a few moments," said Ortis. "He stays upstairs mostly. It's even nicer up there, but he'll probably want to take you downstairs, where it's not so nice. He doesn't usually like to speak with customers, but I think he'll be interested in what you have to say. So prepare yourself to be talkative."

"I'm not in the mood," said Benhus. He put both palms on the table and pushed himself to his feet. Ortis stood quickly, his hip striking the table and jostling it, rattling its jeweled contents. His right hand moved to catch Benhus's extended left wrist, seized it and squeezed. His eyes were hard and his thin lips twisted in anger.

"You're what? You'll sit, cub!"

The pressure on his wrist was instantaneous and terrific, Benhus felt bones grinding and bit his lip to keep from crying out. His right hand leapt across his body, snatched the white dagger from its sheath, then whipped it back in a swift vertical slash. The opalescent blade passed through the wrestler's wrist as if it were pastry.

Benhus stepped back, pushing his chair aside as the wrestler's hand fell from his wrist, struck the table's edge, then slapped open-palmed on the floor.

"The cub takes one hand," smiled Benhus, eyes wide and aflame with savagery. "Want to try the other one?"

Ortis took an unsteady step backward and, clutching himself, slumped stiffly into his chair as if overwhelmingly weary. Clamping his left hand onto the stump of his right wrist did little to quell the sudden burst of scarlet that filled his lap and splattered the floor.

Benhus moved quickly away from the table, blade held straight down at his side, and looked to the stairs. He heard a

voice cry out, but most seemed oblivious to the abrupt violence. There was no one between him and the door, but he felt movement behind, swift and angled to be just outside his line of sight.

He turned to see the wrestler's smaller companion moving in close with alarming speed. Benhus got his guard up but that hardly mattered at all. His opponent, bobbing his tow head, knocked his blade aside with the back of one cestis-protected hand and drove the other into Benhus's jaw, ribs and thigh with such speed that the three blows seemed to blur into one. Benhus had seen cestis used in duels but never like this. Impact snapped his head around and his body bent involuntarily over the blow that drove much of the breath from his lungs, but the worst was the blow to his thigh. Scarlet pain tore through his flesh and his leg was instantly rendered all but useless.

Benhus staggered sideways, trying to keep his balance, flourishing the white dagger wildly to keep his foe at a distance. The boxer dodged backward, evading his blade, both cestis up and ready to find their way through his guard again.

Benhus reeled into the jewelry table with a crash. His free hand came down on the tabletop to steady himself and landed as precisely upon the ring as if he'd taken aim at it. Sliding along the table's edge he snatched the ring up and thrust it into a shirt pocket while the tow-headed boxer skipped from side to side looking for an opening. Benhus dug his hand behind his belt buckle and drew out the Nobleman's Comfort. He didn't even aim, simply pointed the little wand at the back wall and triggered it.

Something that glistened like dirty ice flew from his fist, shot across the room and hit the back wall with a hollow gulping sound, like a great weight dropping into deep water. Instantly a dense carpet of gray vapor rolled out to cover the wall, then expanded rapidly into the room. The fog blew past Benhus and it was as if he, and everyone else in the room, had been suddenly enveloped by a storm cloud. There were shouts and cries of panic, but the fog softened them, made them vague and distant.

Benhus turned, and saw a dully gleaming, cestis-clad fist flying toward his face. The boxer must have hurled himself toward his enemy even as the cloud surged to obscure all vision. Benhus lurched to the side but the metal-sheathed fist clipped the side of his skull, sharpened knuckles raking his temple. He almost fell and lunged away through the swirling cloud.

There was indiscernible movement all around as he stumbled, dizzy from the blow to his head and trying to get his bearings. Hot blood ran out of his hair, trickled a stripe down his cheek and dripped from his jaw. He wiped at it and found that the Nobleman's Comfort was no longer in his hand. Someone passed close enough to embrace, a shadow that appeared and disappeared like a lost ghost in the dense vapor.

Voices grew louder and Benhus glimpsed the shine of steel, a sword cutting through the fog. He hurled himself away, head ringing, and his shoulder struck a doorframe with force enough to spin him around. Then his back hit a wall, the stone cold through his sweat dampened shirt. There was a hallway ahead and its outlines were growing clearer. The fog was dissipating and he had not made his escape.

Benhus limped down the hallway, clutching the white dagger, and slapped his pocket to be sure that the ring was still there. It wasn't. He drew up short, looked down at his shirt-front, hand still digging fruitlessly into his pocket. The ring was on his finger.

There was no time to wonder about that now. An open doorway on his right revealed a stairway and he leapt toward it, taking two steps at a time. He felt a dreamlike sense of dislocation. Why hadn't he gone back to the entrance? More unfathomable still, why was he going downstairs and into the unknown depths of Lord Crentius's sanctuary?

The stairwell opened onto an empty hallway and he made himself stand still. He could hear outcry above. Benhus tried to focus his thoughts.

The ring on his hand throbbed warmly. He felt a sourceless push on his left shoulder, propelling him easily to the right and down the empty hall. Half in disbelief, he took several steps to where the corridor bent and ended in a heavy door closed with a lock the size of his fist. The ring flared warm, then cooled.

Benhus heard movement behind, boots scuffing on steps, and felt a surge of panic, an understanding that he had cornered himself in an enemy's stronghold. He lifted the white dagger, its lustrous length gleaming in the dimness. He placed the blade on the lock and leaned his weight against the door. The dagger's edge pushed through the metal and the lock fell, cleft, to the floor. He shoved the door open, stepped into the room and closed it behind him.

He grinned mirthlessly as his madness was confirmed. The room was square, perhaps 15 paces across, and lit by a small lantern that revealed there were no other exits. There was a long table along the left wall, covered with a scattering of papers, but otherwise the room was devoid of furnishing.

The floor was bare stone, much of it deeply etched with an arcane spiral design, whorls within dizzying whorls. At the strange pattern's core a black shaft of metal almost as tall as Benhus was driven into the floor. Although it looked to taper to a point where it pierced the stone the haft was too big around for the thing to be a spear. Fluted ridges ran down its length, extending a bit above the flattened end in sharp tips like the fletching on an oversized metal arrow. Its smooth symmetry was broken only by three white stones, each a little bigger than a knuckle, affixed to the shaft in a row just below eye level. The stones, smooth but not polished, throbbed with a pale luminescence.

There was a commotion outside the door and Benhus's attention snapped away from the strange shaft. He dragged the table across the doorway and flipped it on its side to block the door.

"Come out!" A voice shouted from the other side of the door. "You're trapped!"

Benhus knew that all too well. "Try to enter and I'll blast you with hellfire!" he yelled, but this was hollow bluster. Even if he still had the Nobleman's Comfort all it could produce was fog and that couldn't save him now.

A chorus of angry exclamations erupted beyond the door and Benhus wondered what he could expect if they took him alive. Torture and interrogation, probably. They'd pry the fact that he worked for the King from him and that would seal his death warrant. He squeezed the hilt of the white dagger and wondered how many of them he could kill before they took him down.

"Let me out." It was a child's voice, small and plaintive.

Benhus spun but there was no one there. The three pale stones mounted on the black spear pulsed with soft, faintly yellow, illumination.

"You wear the ring. You can let me out."

It wasn't a child's voice. It wasn't even a voice. It was words, impressions, an intrusive secondary presence forced into his consciousness. As if he had mentally considered a question and had another internal voice, unsuspected and unknown, speak somehow in answer.

Benhus lifted the hand with the ring on it and saw that its broken gem bore a close resemblance to the three stones on the black shaft. And now the riven stone set in the ring throbbed with its own soft yellowish glow.

"They drew me from the ring and seek to tap my strength, my life, for their ends. They cannot do as they wish. They do not understand. They do not know me or my kind."

"What?" Benhus feared he was hallucinating, that the boxer's blow to his head had addled him. "Who are you?"

"Their crafters pulled me from the ring and prisoned me here. I broke them for it but I cannot get free and you can let me out."

"We're coming in!" bellowed the voice on the other side of the door. "Give yourself up or it will go hard for you!"

Benhus looked from the door to the black shaft. "If I can let you out, can you help me?"

He sensed a hesitation, a confusion. *"You wear the ring. It is on your hand. The stone is broken but not the bond."*

"You will help me? What must I do?"

Heavy boots crashed against the door and the long table was pushed a handspan from the wall. Gloved fingers appeared in the gap between door and frame. Benhus kicked the table back against the door and was rewarded by a screech of protest as the hand was jerked back out of sight.

"Tear the leech-stones from the quill. Let me out, wearer of the ring."

"What?" Benhus spoke but somehow knew what he had to do. He sprang away from the door. Sheathing the white dagger, he used both hands to wrench the white stones off the smooth surface of the dark metal shaft. They clung like magnets, but he pulled them loose and hurled them across the room.

Blows hammered the door behind him and voices bellowed for his surrender.

"What?" he burst out. "What now?"

"Call me. Let me out. Call me to your aid and I am bound to answer."

"Come out! Come to my aid!"

There was a raggedly keening note and the black shaft split, broke and splintered like a desiccated sapling struck through with dry rot. There was a puff of wind and the scent of torn copper.

A blackness bloomed in mid-air, an ebon ribbon that stretched until it reached from just below the ceiling to just above the floor. It twisted, expanding and contracting and breaking apart until it was a winding funnel full of flying tatters of darkness. A constricted cyclone of black velvet rags that whirled and spun and tore themselves to bits.

Benhus couldn't move. His knees had gone weak and his breath seemed stopped in his lungs. What had he done? The simple sight of the thing sickened him and whatever it was, it was alive. He had felt the presence of sorcery before but nothing like this. His eyes smarted and his jaw ached from clenching his teeth.

Sparks of brilliant white flashed among the clots of darkness racing and swirling along the phantasm's narrow swaying length. Flaring and burning out like lost stars in some mad black

nebula. Incandescently bright, they left searing afterimages on his retina. Benhus felt a growing pressure in his skull, in his ears, as if he had dived into deep water and was being pulled deeper still.

"Look away..."

Benhus turned just in time to see the door burst open and his foes lunge into the room. Armored men crowded the doorway, kicked aside the table, brandished weapons, then stopped dead in horrified disbelief.

Benhus felt a jolt through every nerve and his limbs went rigid. His feet lifted from the floor and he was suspended in the air like a hanged man. Tendrils of what looked like black fire flared out around him in an eldritch nimbus. A hellish chill gripped his body and he heard himself crying out helplessly and without thought.

"Your enemies shall not harm you, wearer of the ring. We are One now and I shall break all of those who would harm you."

Ebon arcs of energy whirled around Benhus in slashing orbits, great black scimitars that lashed into the men in the doorway. The sound of thunder filled his ears but he could still hear their screams. He was hanging suspended in the center of a maelstrom and floating forward, out the doorway. Dark tongues of ravening energy seared the air and scarred the walls, carving slashes in the stone that sprayed dust as he passed.

There were more men on the steps and those not torn asunder, shredded like autumn leaves, tried to flee. Benhus rose along the stairwell in pursuit, black razor whips wheeling in a blur around him. None escaped.

Benhus felt spattered with warmth and sealed in ice. He couldn't close his eyes and clung to consciousness through sheer will, certain he was possessed or mad. His dark protector pushed him through another doorway, splintering the frame, and he was back in the room where the grave goods were being sold.

The laden tables exploded, glittering baubles mingled with the whirling debris of wood, plaster and flesh. Benhus heard screams again, saw figures fleeing and one other, forced into a corner, falling, cowering and lifting pale arms to cover her head of auburn hair.

"Stop! Enough! Stop!" screamed Benhus. The black fire faded, the storm was silenced, and he was dropped gently to his feet before the woman who had assisted him at the table what now seemed like days ago. She was curled into the corner, soundless and with her eyes clenched shut.

Benhus turned, staggering drunkenly, to see the room all but destroyed, walls and ceiling torn and much of the floor covered by scattered wreckage. Gold and gems gleamed in the rubbish and, near the wall beside him, he saw a shining metal gauntlet. A cecis, not empty, sitting in a crimson pool.

Benhus lifted a hand to his face and saw it, too, was crimson. Looking down at himself, he was painted with blood from head to foot, a scarlet scarecrow in tattered rags. A choked and bitter chuckle escaped him. He felt he had a clearer idea why the king was interested in finding this particular ring.

"It," he turned to speak to the woman, now blinking up at him, eyes blank with stunned horror. "It's over." His voice was hoarse and hurt his throat. He coughed.

"It's over. Go. You're whole. Go." He coughed again, wiped at his dry eyes, and when he took his hand away she was gone.

He heard her feet on the stairs but didn't look after her.

"What," he croaked, "what now?"

"That is for you to say, wearer of the ring. There are still others in this house."

"No," said Benhus, suddenly so weary he felt he might fall. "Go. You can go. You're free."

"I'm free?"

The ring warmed on his finger. He pulled it off, dropped it to the floor and stomped on it. He did this again and again until the fragments of the white stone were dislodged and crushed.

The black phantasm rippled to life in the air before him, like a grim pennant flown to celebrate some grisly victory. The white stars burned more softly now.

"I'm free?"

"Yes. You saved me and I thank you for it, but go. I can't look upon you," said Benhus.

"I have been bound to the ring and this world for almost 500 years, and you would free me?"

"Yes, please go. Please."

The moving twist of darkness stretched, bent and there was something in Benhus's hand. He lifted it quickly and stared. In his stained palm sat a pale stone like that which had been set into the ring. It might have been one of those that had been fixed to the black spear.

"Keep this safe. Spill a few drops of your blood on it, think of me and I will come to you. I will do this once because you broke my bond to this world. I will give you protection again when you need it."

"Gods, I'll never need it. Go. Please."

"Yes, Benhus," came the voice in his mind and he found fresh horror in the fact that it called him by name. *"Yes, Benhus, I see that you will need it. And if you wish you may call for it."*

Benhus turned the stone over in his fingers, and when he looked up again the phantasm was gone. He met no one on his way out of the house of Lord Crentius.

Benhus took the broken ring to King Numar Flavius and told him almost everything. He said that the darkling demon had used him to affect an escape and then disappeared, neglecting to add that he had set it free to return to whatever unimaginable realm it knew as home.

But he never told anyone about the softly radiant stone the demon had given him. He took it, smooth and pulsing with persistent warmth, down to his armory and wedged it undetectably beneath the lining of the drawer where he stored the white dagger.

Benhus found that he couldn't bear to think of either using or disposing of the demon's gift, so he strived to forget it. For a long while thereafter he had vivid dreams in which he seemed to awaken in his bed and find the stone glowing poison yellow on the pillow beside him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John C. Hocking is a nigh obsessed reader and writer of lurid pulp fiction, the author of *Conan and the Emerald Lotus* and its time-lost companion, *Conan and the Living Plague*, and an obedient thrall of the Magician's Skull.

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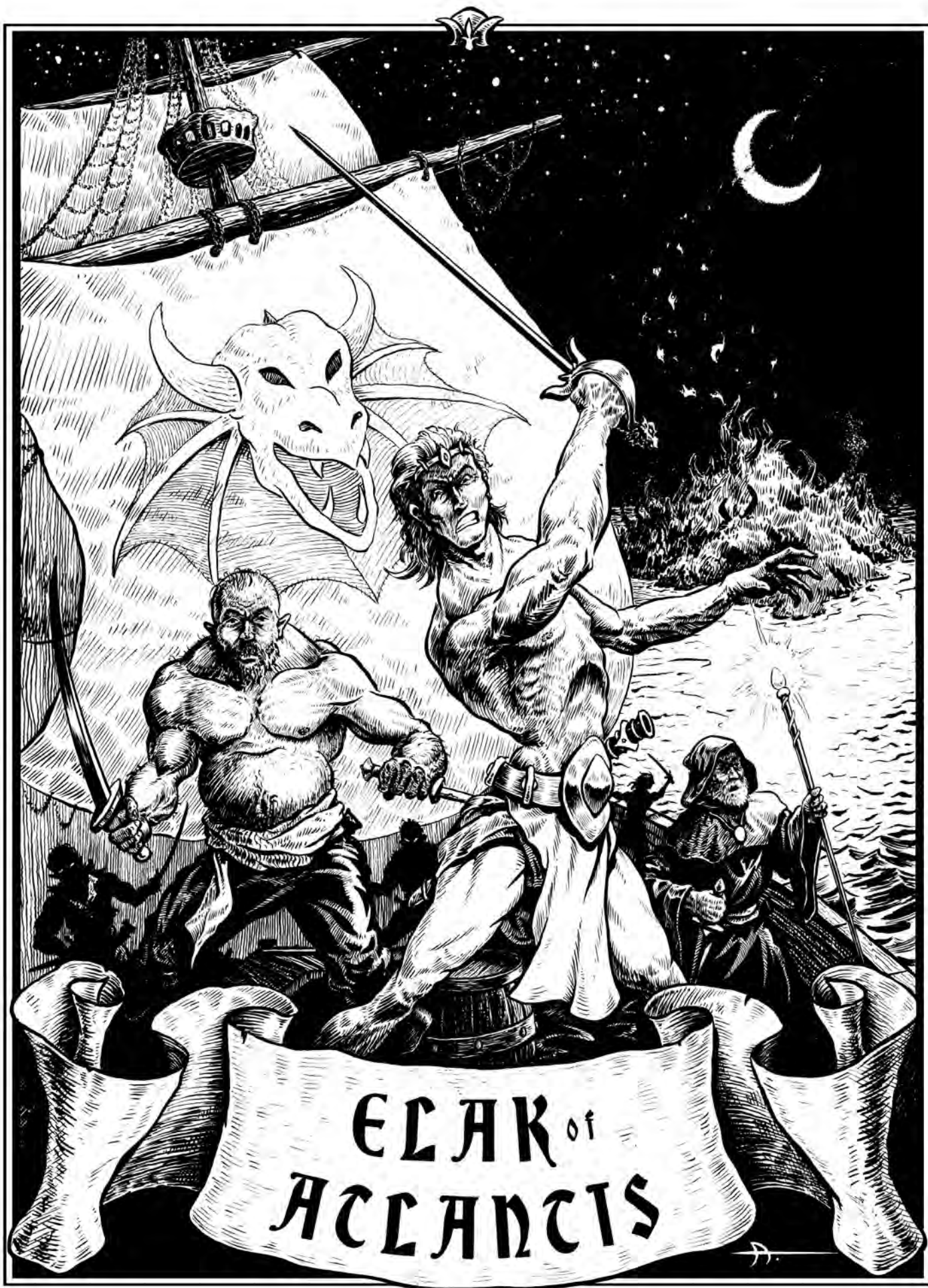


ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS ARNESON

ON DEATH SEED ISLAND

An Elak of Atlantis story

By ADRIAN COLE

In Atlantis, Elak has won the Dragon Throne in the northern city state of Cyrena and is expanding his empire. The unification of the continent is almost complete, following Elak's triumph in the south. His voyage home should be free from danger, but these are uncharted waters, lit by hostile stars.

PROLOGUE

MELSHASSAR tossed and turned in his bunk, twisting the thin sheets around himself like a shroud, his body bathed in sweat. The sea captain had retired late, deep into the airless night, satisfied his voyage had brought a welcome bounty, trading metal with the city states of the eastern seaboard. Yet for some reason his sleep was plagued with bad dreams, though his ship moved slickly across calm ocean waters. The skies gleamed above the lone craft, and moonlight shivered on the gentle swell.

The captain's dreaming eyes studied those stars, a veritable blizzard of them. In his dreams they were unfamiliar, their lights blurring into yellow and then a dull crimson glow. They swirled, clouds of them drifting down to the surface of the world, and with them came the sounds, a dreadful wind, presaging horror. The sudden grip of the nightmare intensified as Melshassar felt himself snared by the stellar current, drawn from his body on an astral tide where the stars were like seeds released by a burgeoning jungle.

Sea and stars mingled in a frantic vortex until the captain saw beneath his suspended body an island, a conglomerate of the stars, packed together and lit from within by hellish fires. Something was alive at the island's heart, a being of power, and that power, redolent with sorcery, dragged at Melshassar, pulling him to the core of his nightmare. In the air around it, all over the island, seeds whirled and danced, suddenly bursting and giving birth to repulsive, floating shapes, creatures of the ocean, bell-shaped, trailing long fronds, poisonous and deadly.

Melshassar saw men stumbling through the deep shadows of the island, mouths open in silent screams as the seed-creatures floated down and attached themselves to heads and shoulders, glowing intensely before collapsing the seamen into the undergrowth. At the heart of the island that monstrous creature opened its own maw, drawing in its servants and giving vent to a horrible, unearthly laughter. Blackness swamped Melshassar, his senses snuffed out like candles in that sudden emptiness: he plunged into a deep, alien sleep.

Well after dawn, he woke to the sound of his cabin door being thumped by one of his sailors. He rose, still partially numbed by his profound slumber, and went with the seaman up on to the deck.

"Land, sire," said the man with a grin. "We didn't want to disturb you. See, we've already sent a party ashore."

Melshassar stood at the rail of the anchored ship and gasped. The island before him may have been bathed in brilliant sunlight, its verdant shore, so close, enticing to men who had spent so long at sea, but it was the island of his nightmare. Already the party that had gone ashore had been swallowed by the trees.

CHAPTER ONE: INFESTATION

"EVERY single accursed cask!" Ormaluc, Master of Provisions for the small fleet, spat the words out angrily to his captain, Balazaar, referring to the several large barrels of clean drinking water down in the ship's hold. "Full of worm and leaking copiously."

Balazaar grimaced. "All of them? So how much water do we have?"

"I estimate we've salvaged enough for two days at most."

"Barely enough to make landfall." Balazaar looked at their western horizon, where there was no sign of the Atlantean continent's coastline. The fleet, a dozen ships in all, had set sail from the southernmost port of Zangarza five days since, at the command of young Elak, king of the northern city-state, Cyrena, but now speeding homeward to cement the greatest alliance the continent had yet seen. Once the niceties had been finalized, there would be a union of all states, with Elak its king. This following his latest triumph in Zangarza, where the despotic Numenedzer had been deposed and replaced by his daughter, Hamniri, a strong supporter of the young monarch.

Balazaar's ship, *Windrider*, had been a gift from Hamniri to Elak after their successful alliance. She had supplied the ships that would take Elak back to his capital. Balazaar was loath to wake his king, sleeping in his quarters. The young monarch and his aide, Lycon, were both fond of the revels, and last night had quaffed more wine between them than most men could handle in a week. And why not? Balazaar thought. They'd fought so heroically at Zangarza and earned their respite from the horrors of this world. And back in Cyrena, the young king would find his new role would give him little time for the dubious pleasures of the flesh.

The Druid, Dalan, mentor and adviser to the king, was berthed on another of the ships, which was just as well, Balazaar thought, smiling. The Druid was typically stoic and would not have approved of Elak's behavior. The young king's wild days would have to end soon, once he took up the new office of supreme command. The Council in Cyrena would never tolerate his exuberance.

"We'll have to take casks from some of the other ships," said Balazaar. "Enough to get us further north."

Ormaluc nodded, relieved that the situation would seem to be under control. To be serving Elak himself was a great honor and the last thing he wanted was to be held responsible for this disaster. It would mean demotion to some third-rate galley in a remote part of the new empire. However, the solution was not to be so simple. Even before Balazaar was ready to send messages to his closest ships, he received several himself.

"Fires of Ishtar!" he growled angrily.

Ormaluc had not yet left the deck. He waited anxiously to hear his captain's news.

"Evidently our water casks are not the only ones affected by this worm plague. The other ships are all sending messages declaring themselves in the same predicament as us. Where were the casks from, Ormaluc? You provided them all for us at Zangarza?"

"Yes, sire. Every cask was clean, unmarked. I checked them myself, for every ship. There was no reason to suppose treachery."

"Very well. Go below and salvage what you can. I'll turn the fleet westward. We'll have to find a port and take on new supplies." Balazaar left the deck and went below. Two armed sailors stood outside the door to Elak's cabin.

"I need to see the king," said Balazaar, handing over his sword and dirk to one of the men, though he was well known to them. The king's aide, Lycon, however, had insisted that no arms were brought into the cabin, other than his own and the king's.

Lycon was buried in the linen of one of the bunks within, his snores stertorous. Elak, however, was awake and washing in a bowl of cold water, attempting to sluice away a hangover that would have downed a large bull.

"Your pardon, Elak." Balazaar explained the fleet's dilemma. "I'm about to take us west, as we'll not make it home with what water we have left."

Elak dried himself. He was tall and lithe, his muscles bronzed by the southern sun, his chest and abdomen scarred already with the cuts of battle. He was famed among his men for leading by example, almost to the point of recklessness. "What has caused this worm plague? Has Dalan been informed?"

"I've sent word. As for the casks, our Master of Provisions is no slouch. He's clearly surprised by their condition. I know he's a man who takes pains over his work. If those casks had been rotten before we sailed, he'd have flung them out."

"Is it only the casks? What about the ship? No other wood is infected?"

Balazaar stiffened. "I'll have an immediate inspection undertaken." As he went back up on deck and sent men to carry out the inspection, the captain was met by another of the sailors, who pointed up at the tall mast and its lookout.

"Word from the perch, sir. There's an island to the east, no more than a few hours' sail away."

Balazaar went to the rail and gazed eastwards, but saw only water. He was not familiar with this part of the ocean, it being off the usual sea lanes used by the ships of Cyrena. However, with the new empire growing and expanding, there would be more time for exploration.

Shortly afterwards, Elak came on deck, followed by the surly Lycon, who had clearly not recovered from his drinking bout as sweetly as the monarch. He was not as tall as Elak, and was round-shouldered and of significant girth. Unshaven and with his thinning hair tangled about his bear-like head, he looked pale and shaky on his feet. Yet Balazaar knew him for a ferocious fighter, a good man to have beside you in battle, at which time he drew on remarkable reserves of energy.

"An island, sir," said the captain. "Not charted, but perhaps worth sending a small landing party."

"And water," said Elak. "Hold the fleet in these waters. It's calm enough and I don't smell any storms abroad. Take *Windrider* closer in and send a boat across to the island."

Not long after, Dalan had been ferried across from his ship and joined his king on *Windrider's* deck. "I've seen the worm plague," the Druid told Elak. "It's virulent, but so far has only attacked the casks. Their wood is not the same as the planking of the ships, which might explain it."

Elak studied the Druid's lined face. Dalan was far older and well versed in sorcery, with an understanding of high magic and its dubious qualities; they had marked him. Cool and somber, he rarely smiled, seeing danger in every shadow.

"You think sorcery is at work?" said Elak.

"Until I know otherwise."

CHAPTER TWO: LANDFALL

ONCE the scouts had completed an initial survey of the island's nearest bay, Elak prepared to head a party of explorers, although Dalan was uneasy about the king leaving his ship. However, the Druid knew well enough the young man's predilection for adventure and stubborn determination never to send his men into a situation he would not himself enter. Dalan had been studying the island from *Windrider's* rail. It seemed typical of islands in this eastern ocean: many were volcanic cones, with a central mountain, lushly covered in dense green jungle, probably no more than a few miles in diameter. That mountain implied there would be running water. The chances were good that it would also yield fruit and large gourds, which could be cut and used to carry enough water to suit their needs.

The fleet anchored within a bay, and Elak's party of fifty went ashore, landing their small craft on the beach. It was not the expected expanse of hot sand. What seemed at first to be flattish, abrasive rock was identified by Dalan as hard, knotted roots, packed tightly together like an immense mat, interwoven with deep green weed. The men were glad to cross it and enter the fringe of the jungle. Its trees were unfamiliar, even to the most traveled of the sailors. Their trunks were almost hidden by the ivy-like growths that festooned them, and overhead the upper leaves of the trees fanned out in a vivid green canopy. The air was humid, clear but heavy as sea fog.

Elak, Lycon and Dalan stood together, studying the dense undergrowth. There was a narrow stream emerging from it into the bay, its banks wide enough to serve as a crude path to the interior.

Lycon squinted in the brilliant sunlight, his head still throbbing from the night's debauch. "A strange place," he grunted. "I can't say why. The island noises aren't right. Making my headache worse."

Elak grinned. "Perhaps your head is contorting the sounds. You should go and duck it in that stream and clear it."

Dalan, who held his staff tightly, shook his head. "No. Not until we understand this place better."

They moved inland, watching the trees, alert for signs of movement. There were occasional aerial sounds, and the muffled growl of something beyond vision, the drone of insects. Elak marveled at their clarity. This place had a unique, mysterious air to it, an atmosphere that was vibrant, pulsing with energy. He felt himself attuning to it, a not unpleasant experience. He sensed his men relaxing, shaking off the initial tension that always accompanied the first steps on new land, though he knew he could rely on them in a time of crisis.

Dalan, Elak could see, was less comfortable. "You sense danger?" Elak asked him.

"This place is soporific. The air is well perfumed. I know of many plants that drug their victims before absorbing them. We should take what water we need and go back. Find gourds."

Elak dispatched several groups of his men, who entered the jungle. It was soon apparent that there were entire groves of trees with sizable gourds, and the work began to cut and prepare them. The sailors worked cheerfully, though they kept their attention focused on the surrounding walls of jungle, ready to defend themselves at once if need arose.

Dalan's expression remained grim. He had thrust the butt of his staff into the ground, where there was no soil, just an extension of the thick, root matting of the beach. The Druid felt the ground under him shifting slowly, aware of its tremors as the men cut the gourds from the trees and chopped away some of the undergrowth to widen their working area. It had the same effect as that of dropping a large stone into a pond. Ripples spread outward from the grove, along the roots and fibers of the plants. The jungle was focused on the grove, seemingly crowding in.

When each of the sailors had cut and prepared a gourd, the party readied to return to the stream, but as Dalan made to lead them, he realized the way back had shifted, closed. There was a path, but the Druid felt certain it led in another direction. The jungle was playing tricks.

"Cut through there," he told the first group of sailors, indicating what he felt sure was the correct way. They obliged at once, several of them hacking at the thicket, chopping aside the tangled vegetation. However, they made little impact, for all their muscular efforts, the jungle closing up even more tightly. Some of their companions taunted them, but Dalan's withering gaze silenced the banter.

"What is it?" said Elak.

"The way we came has been closed. There is another path, but I think it leads inland, away from the bay."

Lycon heard the Druid's words and snorted irritably. "Surely we're not going to let a vegetable mass bar our way! Step aside. I need exercise." He used his sword energetically, cutting and chopping furiously, and for a while the path he was making opened up, its leaves and branches tossed this way and that by the ferocious efforts of the big man. Even so, it was in vain, for the more effort Lycon put in to the work, the resistance of the jungle grew stronger. Lycon stood back, chest heaving, face dropping.

"By the Nine Hells!" he cursed. "What is this weed?"

"There is an intelligence here," said Dalan. "We may have angered it."

Lycon's eyes widened incredulously.

"Perhaps we'd better take the path as offered," said Elak.

"Yes, we cannot remain here. Let me lead," said Dalan. "Have the men close ranks behind us." They formed a line of pairs, all swords drawn. Above them the sun rose. It was yet mid-morning. Dalan said nothing, but he feared being caught on this island at night, where sleep would for certain be a dangerous threat.

CHAPTER THREE: THE THINGS IN THE GROVE

As they wove their way along the path, Dalan felt something stir within his staff, a negative reaction to the jungle and the crowding trees. Above the men, huge branches bent over them, hung with lianas and other thick vines, though they were strange and unfamiliar, like the thick weed of an underwater kingdom. Dalan paused to study the trees, realizing they were not all what they seemed. He commented on this to Elak and Lycon.

"There is a geometrical shape to them," said the young king. "Almost as if they were —"

"Beams!" said Lycon. "By the stars! Are they from *ships*?"

"Wrecks," said Dalan, nodding. "See, there's another." It had become apparent that there were many of these strange beams, curved and poking upward like the broken ribs of ships' skeletons. Closer examination revealed other carved wooden shapes, smaller beams, spars, thick planks, all tangled together incredibly to form the dense matted jungle floor. It was also evident that most of the wreckage was very old, worm-ridden and blackened by time.

"They are beneath our feet," said Dalan. "They go so deep I cannot count them. This island must have been a trap for ships for years without number. And the wrecks are packed, far inland."

"We must go back," said Elak. "We will have to burn our way through."

"Too dangerous," said Dalan. "We'd not survive the conflagration. Something wants us here. Whatever it is, it will show itself."

Lycon held up his sword. "Then we'll give it a taste of honest steel!"

Dalan frowned uneasily. It was unusual to see him so uncomfortable. "I fear steel will be of no use. I sense something beyond. Life, of a kind unfamiliar to us."

The party moved further into the bizarre complex of tree and beam. Some of the wrecked ships must have been huge, hewn from monstrous arboreal giants, from an age long gone and in a

style of craft unknown to the Atlanteans. They spoke of a remote history, a dark period of ancient sorcery and legend, and with each step, the men shuddered at the oppressive atmosphere. In time they came to a grove: the trees and beams curved away from it, as if it could be a shrine, or a place of sanctuary. Fat logs were lying, tumbled and rotting, at its heart, like fallen menhirs, though no one had yet seen stone – or earth – on this island. If this was once a shrine, it had been pulled apart.

Elak's company fanned out around him along one curve of the grove, their swords readied, in spite of Dalan's earlier comment. Dalan pointed with his staff to the great logs. "These are the source of immediate power."

His staff again stirred in his hand like a live thing, reacting to the logs. As the company watched, a thin cloud rose from the central log, pale green, like a disturbed swarm of tiny insects. However, the cloud writhed gently, as if shifting in a breeze, though the air in the grove was very still. In a moment it had formed itself into a distinctive shape and the men drew back in alarm. It was a human figure, hunched, its face a blur, save for the eyes and mouth.

It whispered and every man present heard the voice in his head, clear, its words spoken in their own language.

"Men of Atlantis," said the voice, "you are in danger. You must leave this island with all haste. The dark god of the island will absorb you, as it has done so many times before. The wrecks of the ages lie all about you. Flee, before you join them!"

"Who are you?" demanded Dalan, his staff thrust forward, its humming power apparently binding the ghost to its will.

"I am Melshassar, once of northern lands, an adventurer who sailed into these eastern waters. My ships and my men all succumbed to the horror that lies on this island, the god from the stars, he who feasts on our kind, and who would expand his empire through others like me." Around him, rising from the crumbling logs, other shapes rose up, pale and insubstantial, a small retinue, former sailors perhaps, the last men of Melshassar's company.

"Where is this god?" said Elak. "What form does he take?"

"On the mountainside, there is a way into his sanctuary. His shape can shift, though he is bound by his surroundings. He is the energy that threads through the island and gives it its life. He takes the life of mortals and uses it to fuel himself, as he will drain the life from you and all who have come here with you. When night comes, the starlight bathes him and nothing can withstand him. You must leave this island before the sun sinks into the western waters."

"And by day?" said Dalan.

"He stays out of the sunlight. Its heat and energy are the only thing he avoids. For you it is an opportunity to escape, though the jungle will deceive you, and try to lead you to his lair. The paths will inevitably twist you back that way."

Elak leaned close to Dalan. "If we are to meet this accursed god, perhaps we can confuse his plans. I'll hear more of him and his nature."

"Can you lead us to the god's sanctuary?" Dalan asked the wraith.

It nodded, though its smear of a face contorted in pain that spoke of hopelessness.

CHAPTER FOUR: SEEDS FROM THE STARS

THE company climbed the gradual incline of the low mountain, the path narrow but passable. On either side, life of a kind stirred, but never showed itself, as though the trees were filled with hidden serpents, the air with invisible flocking jungle birds. Dalan watched and listened, his body taut as a bowstring, his mental defenses drawn up: he knew he dare not let them slip. Elak and Lycon, usually buoyant and cheery on such ventures, were subdued, almost solemn. Something in the atmosphere of this place weighed heavily on them like a pall.

Melshassar and the other ghostly figures, rose up above a gnarled tangle of branches resembling a huge knuckle of stone and the men climbed up on to it. From this vantage point, much of the island's jungle terrain could be surveyed below the party, deep green and packed, resembling a sea bottom more than a landscape. Dalan and the others studied the view and now they could see the true nature of time's damage to the countless ships that had foundered here. The entire island seemed to be composed not of land but of ships, mangled together, their beams poking skyward like huge claws, snapped and rotted. The growths that bound them were like a vast raft of kelp, the product of the ocean, heaped up by swirling tides and storms over the ages.

"Man was at his most primitive when Xumatoq drifted down from the stars and gave himself physical form," said Melshassar, his voice a whisper on the still air, though every man there heard it clearly. "Time is nothing to Xumatoq and the terrible masters he serves. His star seeds drifted with him and began their frightful work, drawing together their victims here, using the body of the god to mould and shape this island out of his flesh and bones. Ship after ship has been woven into it, and all their crews over the long ages absorbed, fuel for Xumatoq."

"The worm infestation!" said Elak. "Our ship's water barrels – the seeds came from the island."

"No sailors can go long without water," said Melshassar. "Thus were you lured here by the powers of Xumatoq."

"What is his purpose?" said Dalan.

"Conquest! Soon it will begin. The island will cross the remaining ocean between itself and Atlantis. Once close to the shores of the continent, all the seeds will erupt. A vast cloud of them will drift over the ports and cities, travelling up the rivers and over the land, until everything is infected. Man will be enslaved, and at the end, Xumatoq will open the gate and bring his masters through. A new age will begin, and mankind will become a memory, as you see us now – ghosts!"

"How far to the secret place of this god?" said Elak. "I've a mind to test his powers before night falls."

"It is close," said Melshassar. "You must avoid shadow and darkness. They are allies of the star god."

"Let us take fire with us," said Lycon.

"No man has ever raised fire on this island," came the voice of the ghost. "The wood has been poisoned by the star seeds, just as your ship's barrels were infected."

Dalan held up his staff. It glowed faintly with an inner light. "It may be true that no ordinary fire will burn here, but what I bring has a unique power. Lycon, bring me a branch."

Lycon used his blade to hack through a narrow twist of wood. It resisted the heavy strokes but eventually Lycon cut through it and gave the severed branch to the Druid.

Dalan held it close to his staff, which had begun to glow more vividly. The severed branch squirmed like a live thing, twisting away from the staff, as if in pain. Dalan's face gleamed with sweat as he forced his staff closer to the branch. After a long moment, he succeeded in igniting it and held it aloft, a blazing torch, its heat fierce. Black plumes of smoke rose from it, and the company guessed that to inhale these fumes would poison them. Melshassar and the ghosts wafted back, as though the heat seared what was left of them, a threat of evaporation.

The climb went on, slow and laborious, though not steep. It became more evident here there were no trees, no undergrowth, only the mangled carcasses of old, old ships woven together like giant briars, their sharp edges dangerous as any thorn. As the company moved upward, the beams rose higher, forming a canopy that slowly blotted out the sky and sunlight, thickening the shadows, making the way underfoot even more treacherous.

"My senses tell me this roof is closing over us," said Lycon to Elak. "Should we trust this mariner and his slinking followers? Perhaps they serve the island god."

Elak nodded. "Our course is set. I doubt we'd flee the place without a fight. Yet I'd rather conduct it in good, clean daylight. This place is becoming like a tomb."

The king's words proved prophetic, for soon thereafter the way ahead became a deep declivity, a gash in the piled debris, and the highest of the beams met and formed a series of twisted arches that became a roof. To go on meant to go underground, into a space that opened out like a cavern. Light of a kind seeped in from high above, a sickly yellow glow, with no warmth, like the phosphorescence of deep subterranean fungi. Only the faint glow of Dalan's staff provided better light and a nimbus of heat. By its glow the company could see the path run out like a gallery on both sides of the vast space, overlooking its depths.

Melshassar and his fellow spirits floated out over the chasm. "The god sleeps," came his whisper. "But when the day ends, he will wake and you will quit the mortal world. I must leave you here. For me to go beyond would be to court oblivion."

Elak followed Dalan out on to the lofty gallery. The two men looked down into the blackness as Dalan lifted his staff. By its light the secrets of those hidden depths were gradually revealed like the slow onset of utter madness.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WAKING GOD

THEY saw a vague central mass some distance below them, its details fogged in shadows. It appeared to be suspended over the fathomless vault, held in place by countless strands of varying thickness, all resembling either cables or roots, or a combination of both, stretching from the shapeless mass to the walls of the chamber, where they were attached like hungry vines to the jutting beams and wooden outcrops. A ferocious stench arose, that of rotting vegetation, combined with something else, like carrion left to decay: the company reeled back.

Elak gripped Dalan's arm. "That thing is alive," he said through gritted teeth. "I can feel its power."

The Druid's doubt and uncertainty were easily readable, rare emotions for one usually so resolute and dependable. He shook his head, as if to clear it of pain and confusion. "Though it is dormant, this power is beyond anything I have yet faced in this world. I think you should take flight, Elak. Save yourselves. Let me hold this monstrous presence here."

Elak's grin was wolf-like. "Fool's talk, Dalan. We'll—"

His words were cut short as a sudden surge of energy, a mental bolt, cuffed him like a strong wind. Everyone in the company also felt the change in the atmosphere. To a man they knew what had caused it. The god stirred in his slumber.

They fell back against the slick walls of the gallery, momentarily snared by its dark wood. Elak heard a rushing sound inside his head and closed his eyes against a blast of cold air. Immediately the visions began and he sagged down, along with his fellows, to endure the revelations.

On his inner eye he saw the limitless expanse of space, initially nothing more than an impenetrable void, starless and frozen, but slowly lights emerged from its depths, stars like clouds of dust, embers from cosmic explosions far out beyond the rim of the universe, the hot breath of gods outside the narrow bounds of human comprehension. These stars were live things, fueled with energy, voyaging across the void, envoys of something far more terrible, a great shadow across the light of seething nebulae. Xumatoq, servant of the omnipotent powers.

Earth was young, little more than a molten ember whirling around its star when the space-born stars burst and released their rain, their spawn. Breath of Xumatoq, they drifted down and sank into the primal seas, making a place for the seeking god. He fed on darkness and shadow, far from the light, consuming it and with it, potentially all the life force of the world, the energy alien to his own nature and that of the cosmic powers that had brought him into being. He was at war with the sun of this world, for the sun created more life, accelerated its growth and expansion. Xumatoq hungered for its extinction, and worked to drain it and make of it a cold, sterile stone. It was to be the work of millennia.

Countless centuries after the god's aquatic entombment, it shaped itself into a life form capable of floating in the churning soup of primal oceans and sent out spores that sought landfall and things that crawled or walked upon it. Early cities, primitive arrangements of stone, partially underwater, where early hominids struggled to become human, were infected by these spores, their hybrid progeny colonizing a few isolated coastal regions. These were hunted by more powerful beings, as Man raised himself from the slime, until they slithered back into the sea, spiraling back down a retrogressive evolutionary path.

Elak saw their remnants cluster around the oceanic god, who had become a floating mass, a drifting entity, dragging to itself the passing ships and sailors of the emerging nations, bound to a rudderless existence by its own monumental patience. The spores fed on the men whose ships they plundered to create the vast, artificial body of the god. Their ghosts became sirens, chained by the will of Xumatoq.

Elak exerted every fiber of energy within him, mentally tearing at the chains that threatened to bind him too thoroughly for him to move. He knew if he could not break free, the will of the god would enter him and make him its fodder, as it would his

companions. The young king staggered groggily to his feet and shouted, his voice echoing around the cavern.

"Free yourselves! Wake! Dalan! Lycon! All of you! Stir yourselves. Take arms!"

The company tore itself free of the nightmare visions and stood as one. Dalan held high his staff and it blazed, light reflected vividly from the swords around it. Somewhere deep down in the gulf, a thunderous roar of pain and frustration rolled upwards like a noxious cloud. Xumatoq's fury was palpable.

Elak turned and drove his rapier like a searing needle into the wooden wall and at once it smoked, glowing as the light from Dalan's staff, deflected to the sword, ignited the wood that had resisted fire since first it had come to the island. Others followed Elak's example, and soon a whole section of the wall was ablaze. From overhead, long, snaking tendrils unfurled, slick as tongues, as the island defended itself against the utter horror of flame. The writhing things slapped at the blaze, while Elak and Lycon led the assault on them, hacking at them as they would vines, severing great lengths, which fell, some igniting.

"Elak!" cried Dalan, his staff yet held high like a banner of light. "If we could open this cavern to the sunlight, we'd end this hellish god."

Elak understood. There was no time to discuss a strategy. Instead he grabbed one of the trailing vine-like things and, gripping his rapier in his teeth, nimble as any deep sea pirate, swung upwards. Dalan and Lycon gasped, afraid for the safety of their king, but Elak used his strength to work his way up the strand as if he were shinning up a tall mast. He'd done it many times at sea, and often challenged any man to beat him at such a venture. Dalan frequently despaired of controlling the king, but for once he was glad of Elak's determination. The Druid watched as the king was swallowed by the darkness of the cavern's upper vaults, and silence closed in overhead.

CHAPTER SIX: LIGHT AND FIRE

ELAK wrapped his legs around the trailing growth, held on firmly with one hand, and used his free hand to wield his sword, cutting into the upper shadows overhead. He did this blindly, hoping to create an opening. It was dangerous work, swinging so high over the vault. A slip now would plummet him to almost certain doom. He thought of all that he and his warriors had been through in recent times, the furious battles they'd fought and the triumph at Zangarza. It made him more determined to break free of the god of this warped island. Small chunks of something fleshy fell around him as his weapon did its work, until at last, with the king on the point of exhaustion, a chink of light shone through from above.

He swapped hands and redoubled his effort, enlarging the opening he'd made to the outer world. Light bathed the edges of the hole, which began to smolder, diffusing wisps of white smoke. Elak again gripped the sword in his teeth and eased himself downwards on the vine, his arms aching painfully, his muscles threatening to betray him. He almost lost his grip, one hand swinging free, but his legs were wrapped around the vine as tightly as a serpent's grip on a victim. More light spilled in, and the small fire spread quickly, as though fueled by oil.

Almost upside down, Elak could see beneath him more clearly as light picked out details hidden by shadows until now. What he saw far down below made him gasp, again almost losing his grip. Whatever the god-thing, Xumatoq, was, its current shape was visible: a huge dome, like the cup of an enormous mushroom, its curved surface a bilious yellow, blotched with greens and scarlet veins. As the growing light struck it, it pulsed, its surface becoming increasingly transparent. For a moment those weird patterns resembled a giant's face, contorted with pain and fury. Elak gasped in horror as he realized what was happening to the monstrous being.

Under its thin skin, countless spores were heaving like an immense bed of maggots, writhing and frothing, stretching the skin of the god, threatening to rip it open and free themselves. If that happened, Elak knew, the danger to his world would be absolute. Desperately he lowered himself, more than once coming within an inch of losing his grip and plunging into the hellish things far beneath him.

Overhead the daylight streamed in, the sun at its zenith, and flames spread voraciously, widening the hole, exposing the great ship's beams that held up this twisted architectural nightmare. They, too, succumbed to the flames, whatever protection they had burned away, turning the beams to ash. The great structure creaked and groaned like a ship in a tropical storm.

Elak's companions reached out for him and pulled him to them. Many of the upper vines were falling like rain, incinerated.

Dalan's staff blazed on, too brilliant to look at, seemingly drawing the natural sunlight to it and deflecting it in numerous shafts around the gallery. The men used their blades to catch the light, their weapons no longer ineffective as they hewed and cut their way across the gallery and, with Elak and Lycon, chopped at the thicker strands that acted like mooring ropes for the god. They saw the fleshy dome lurch to one side as if wounded. Still its surface twisted and writhed, the spores yet contained, though the sunlight would surely burn through to them soon.

"We must go!" shouted Elak, knowing that a cloudburst of the creatures would likely be fatal. Quickly the company began the withdrawal, Dalan at their rear, though the work of his staff was done. Just as they reached the exit to the chamber, a roaring sound made them turn. They saw the skin of the mushroom-thing ripped asunder as a thick cloud of spores, miniature versions of the god, erupted upwards. The first wave was scorched by the sunlight, exploding like hot embers, but the cloud was so vast, thousands strong, that countless spores broke away.

Elak knew they would pursue him and his men. They ran as fast as they could back the way they had come. Behind them they heard another sound, a rush of air. Elak and Lycon, bringing up the rear of the company, heard the voice of Melshassar.

"Flee, flee!" it shrieked. "We will hold back the host as long as we can." The sounds intensified and became the maddened screams of a fierce wind, like the blasts of a hurricane across ocean waves.

The pathway ahead of the fleeing company had opened, falling downward towards the coast. Xumatoq's power was focused momentarily on the conflict inside the cavern. The weird terrain he had created in this outside world had fallen silent and

stagnant, no longer resistant to the swords of the men rushing through it. They came to the place of the logs, where Melshassar had first appeared, but everything there had turned to dust, the jutting beams and fallen logs rotted away.

"To the ship!" cried Elak. He dare not spare time now to collect gourds and water.

Behind him there was a new sound. The horrors of the cavern, the howling, shrieking winds, had followed them, filled with menace, a new and terrifying threat.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE GHOST STORM

DALAN'S voice rose above the roar of the aerial horrors. "Xumatoq has overcome Melshassar's resistance. He has forged them into a new, hostile force. See, the ghosts have swarmed into a cloud! Defend yourselves!" Once more his staff blazed, light spreading from it in shafts that seared the ghost-cloud, igniting sections of it. The warriors ducked as wave after wave of wraiths dived at them like huge hornets, buffeting and tearing at them, a force as powerful as a storm-swollen sea.

Elak and Lycon stood back to back, swords flashing, though their weapons had almost no effect on thin air. Ironically, the ghosts were substantial as assailants and men began to fall, their heads torn, their bodies ripped by the claws of the flying monsters, whose faces were warped into screaming skulls, eyes ablaze with a madness from some other realm, a place of utter dread. Elak felt his mind invaded as the swarm of ghosts circled him, some from recent times, others from the remote past, and in their hunger, insanity threatened, offering a view of twisted futures yet to come for mankind, enslaved by the star-spawned gods of deepest space. Something buried far inside Elak would not be subdued, an intense, animal energy that revolted at this prospect of this alien domination. It welled up like molten lava and fueled his resistance.

"Stand together!" he yelled, and his men closed ranks, forming a tight band around Dalan's central figure. The light from his staff bathed them and gave them a degree of protection. Around them the hurricane whirl of ghost shapes span faster, creating a vortex of power that threatened to drag every man into it and shred them. The sound of the ghost storm became louder, threatening to burst the eardrums of the crowded warriors.

Dalan swung his staff to and fro, all the time shouting out the words of ancient power, almost afraid to use their blasphemous phrases and couplets, some of which summoned up energies as dark and shunned as the things boiling in the air. Bolts of vivid light clashed with the ghost shapes, and thunder roared within their cloud. Where shapes were torn from it, dipping lower, Elak and Lycon struck at them with dramatic effect, shattering them explosively. The warriors, heartened by this success, redoubled their efforts and hit back.

For a long time the battle raged intensely, the men slowly feeling their energies drained, in danger of being sucked into that blanketing mass of demonic power.

"At least we'll die fighting," Elak shouted at Lycon, whose face was dripping with sweat, his chest heaving, close to exhaustion.

"Aye, by Ishtar! Better that than on a divan in Cyrena, surrounded by pompous Councilors who wouldn't know one end of a sword from another."

Elak laughed and forced himself to launch one more attack. As he did so, Dalan's staff dropped, its energy apparently failing. A dreadful silence closed in and the air became still. The ghost cloud remained, but its revolutions eased, slowly and more slowly, until they ceased. Faces, blurred and faint, stared down at the surviving warriors.

"What is it?" said Elak.

Dalan, dragging breath into his tortured lungs, almost sagged to his knees. "The sun," he gasped. "Up on the mountain, it has fully breached Xumatoq's chamber. The fires have consumed the upper dome. The god is no longer protected. Light has been his undoing. And as he falls, his links with the island melting away, so he perishes. Even the gods are vulnerable."

Elak watched the ghosts overhead. They were beginning to dissipate like mist, shriveling up, the sunlight blazing through them, revealing cloudless azure skies beyond. Elak thought he caught a final glimpse of Melshassar, a last contorted grimace, that might have been a smile.

"Is it over?" said Lycon. "I can hardly lift my blade."

Dalan managed to straighten up. "Aye. They are gone. Let us get back to the fleet."

None of them needed any second bidding, and they wound their way to the river bank and on to the shore, pausing there to draw breath. Half the company had died, and Elak cursed. He hated to lose a single man, and he'd known all of the warriors. It was, though, part of the unspoken pact they all made when they took up arms, part of the price they paid for adventuring.

A boat from one of the ships was pulling up on to the beach and the familiar figure of Balazaar stepped ashore. He studied the survivors, horrified by their disheveled condition. He knew how many had been lost, but a glance from the king told him that whatever hell they had faced appeared to be over.

"I fear we have no fresh water with us," said Elak.

Balazaar indicated the men who had followed him ashore. "Shall I send these fellows to collect some?"

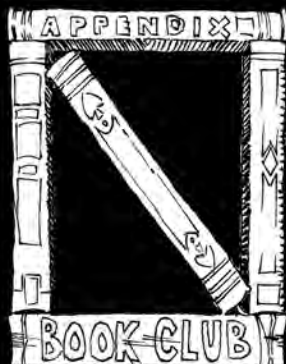
Dalan had recovered his poise, but his face was deeply troubled. "No!" he said. "I can feel the island beneath me. It moves like a great beast in pain. We must leave these seas with all haste!" No sooner had he spoken than a ripple of movement across the beach, like the shiver of a horse's flank, made every man there gasp. It was the only spur they needed to obey the Druid's instruction. They took to the boats with all haste, every man, including the exhausted survivors of the battle, using oars to good effect.

They quit the beach none too soon, for again it rippled, as if a minor quake shook it. Balazaar hailed the first of the ships, calling out for them to make ready to haul anchor. Elak and the company swarmed up on to the deck and with accustomed efficiency, *Windrider* turned for the open sea.

At its stern, Elak, Lycon and Dalan studied the island as it fell behind them. Its central mountain was smothered in dark smoke, as if volcanic ash had spewed out of it in a billowing, mile-high cloud.

"The seeds!" said Elak, a sudden flush of horror suffusing his face.

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Dalan shook his head. "No more than embers now," he said. "See." He held out his hand. Something drifted down into it on the sea breeze, a gray flake. It was indeed an ember, a seed turned to cooling ash. "Xumatoq dies, and with him his spores from hell."

EPILOGUE

ELAK and Lycon sprawled on the rough bedding in their cabin, *Windrider* well away from the dying strictures of the island. Sleep dragged at them and they had no will left to resist.

"When we wake, days from now, we'll be close to a friendlier shore," said Lycon. Somehow he'd managed to find a bottle of wine, most of which he'd imbibed in a single gulp, much to Elak's amusement. "Word of our success at Zangarza will surely have gone before us. Your new life awaits you, Elak. No more wild adventures. You will be waited on, hand and foot."

"And you'll have all the wine you can drink. You'll float in a barrel of it."

"I'd swap all that for the life of a pirate. Bring on another mad god."

"Well, perhaps. Not too soon, I pray."

There was a knock on the door. Elak frowned. He'd not expected to be disturbed again until they'd safely made port. But it was Dalan who eased the door open. For once he was smiling.

"There is something you should see on deck," said the Druid.

Elak guessed from his manner that it was not some new horror, sprung from the ocean depths. The king rose, every bone protesting, Lycon likewise. Together they shuffled up on to the deck like a pair of old men.

Night had fallen, and by the ship's lanterns Elak and Lycon looked heavenwards and saw the falling rain, a steady drizzle. Already the crew were collecting as much of it as they could. Elak and Dalan opened their mouths and let the cool rain fill them. For once Lycon appreciated it as much as any wine.

"Our own gods favor us," said Dalan. "It bodes well for our return to Cyrena."

Lycon swung an arm around Elak's shoulders. "And you, my friend, will be crowned king of all Atlantis."

This story is set shortly after the events described in Adrian Cole's Demons from the Deep. Elak's further adventures, as King of Atlantis, are soon to be collected in a book of that name, to be published by Pulp Hero Press (US).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian Cole is a Dumnonian Celt with Irish antecedents living in Solomon Kane country in Devon, UK. He divides his time between writing, plunging into the local Celtic Sea and riding a bike thru the wilds of the surrounding forests. He has recently become a grandfather, which gives him even more opportunities to indulge in a second childhood. He has had over 2 dozen books published, ranging through fantasy, science fiction, sword and sorcery, horror, Mythos and general pulp. His latest book is a reprint of the British Fantasy Award winning *Nick Nightmare Investigates* (Pulp Hero Press, US) and he has 2 forthcoming collections. *Dark Ships Passing*, S & S from Pulp Hero and *Elak, King Of Atlantis*, adventurers following on from "Death Seed Island."

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MASKS OF SILENCE

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

Then I became angry and cursed, with the curse of *silence*, the river, and the lilies, and the wind, and the forest, and the heaven, and the thunder, and the sighs of the water lilies. And they became accursed and *were still*.

—Poe, “Silence: A Fable”

THE rose-red towers of New Moorhope are half as old as time. Old Moorhope is older, of course, but harder to get a look at.

Deor syr Theorn didn't like the towers when he saw them, “poking up from the mountainside like God's mistakes,” as he put it to his travelling companion.

“I'll be sure to tell the Archapts of the Studium about your disapproval,” replied his companion, Illion (called the Wise). “They can make whatever changes seem necessary.”

“Yes! Do that!” The irritated dwarf waved his hand at the offending towers. “Look at them! You can't improve on a mountain, Illion. Look at the peaks beyond them in the west: the high Hrithaens, the Roof of the World, tallest mountains in Laent. How can the works of you Other Ilk or even dwarves compare to them?”

“What makes you think they're meant to?”

The dwarf grumbled incoherently for a while in answer. Finally he said, “They must be well-founded, though. I'd've thought some of those spires would have toppled before now.”

“They aren't anchored in the ground, Deor,” Illion replied. “Those towers must not fall. There is Old Moorhope underneath, you know.”

“Oh. I suppose so.” Deor knew a little about Old Moorhope and wished he didn't.

They climbed the steep slope leading to New Moorhope in silence. Deor was more talkative than many a dwarf, and Illion was more comfortable with silence than many a man; they made good travelling companions. But the end of their journey was in sight, and both of them were a little worried by it.

Out of his dark thoughts, Deor said, “You say Morlock is healthy, otherwise? Apart from his hands, I mean.”

“That was the last report from the Skein of Healers.”

“Then why can't they fix him?”

“I have an idea. But I want to see if you get the same idea.”

Morlock Ambrosius, also called syr Theorn, had lost his hands fighting a demon in the Northhold some months ago. Under Thrymhaia, where he had been raised by dwarves, he was al-

ready being mourned as dead. A maker, they said, was nothing without his hands. Deor had used his own hands to punch a few people's stupid faces in, and they stopped talking that way within his earshot. Deor didn't feel the way the rest of the dwarves did for a couple of reasons. One, he knew that Morlock had been taken, still alive, to New Moorhope, the greatest center of learning and healing in the known worlds. Two, Deor didn't really give two rips in a rat's carcass about Morlock's skills as a maker; he loved the man, as a friend and more-than-brother.

“This Morlock fellow,” Deor said to Illion, “has always been an annoyance to me. Did I ever tell you what he was like when we ran Thrymhaia's trading station on the Broken Coast?”

Deor had, but Illion listened without objecting. Illion was Morlock's senior and, in some sense, sponsor in the Graith of Guardians, the small band of seers and warriors who defended the borders of the Wardlands. No doubt he had an interest in knowing as much as possible about his problematic junior colleague.

One story led to another, and soon they were in New Moorhope proper. They passed by many a rose-red tower, by many a scholar (gathered in schools or wandering alone, weighed down only by their thoughts).

They paused for a moment in front of a sheer rock whose slate-gray face was broken by a rust-red iron door. It was inscribed with uncountable and illegible (to Deor) symbols, and secured by a lock of fascinating complexity. Deor paused for a moment to examine the thing. “Only the archapts can open it,” Illion told him. “It's one of the entrances to Old Moorhope.”

Deor had no interest in visiting any place where the wild magic of the ancients had ripped holes in the world, but he shook his head skeptically. “Never met a lock I couldn't open,” he said, and passed on.

Presently they had reached the base of a rose-red tower, outside of which was a well. Next to the well sat a Healer in a saffron-colored robe.

“Hail, Defender Illion,” said the well-keeper agreeably. It wasn't clear to Deor what gender the keeper was, or even if the term applied, but they looked benignly on him and said, “I've seen your likeness. You must be Deor, I think.”

“I am that merry wanderer of the night,” Deor acknowledged.

“I'm Tarm,” the Healer said. “Go on in! Your friend is waiting.”

They went in and proceeded to climb the spiralling, thorn-black stairs of the rose-red tower. They hadn't been at it long before someone in a red cloak came tumbling down at them.

Reflexively, Deor helped Illion grab and hold onto the falling person. When he saw who it was, he wished he had let her bounce all the way to the bottom of the stairs.

The woman's hair was pale as ice; her pale skin was veined with ice-white scars; her eyes were blue as icy pools in winter twilight. Her composure was almost equally cool as she said, "Thank you, gentlemen."

"I am not a man, Defender Noreê," Deor pointed out.

"Thanks, anyway."

"None are due, madam. If I'd recognized you, I'd've let you fall."

"And so you should!" cried a newcomer in a saffron robe. "I was hoping she'd break her skull along the way and a little common humanity might leak in."

Deor was no special fan of humanity, but he was surprised to hear such militant words from someone wearing the robe of a Healer. "May I know your name, madam?" he said. "I'm sure we will be friends."

"I am Phanê, Archapt of the Skein of Healers."

"And sister to me," Noreê added, straightening her red cloak.

"That won't save you if you come back here interfering with my people," Phanê said briskly. "I'm not a pacifist, Noreê. I've been studying the ways of the body and mind longer than you've been alive. I can stop you without killing you, I think, but I won't hesitate to kill you if necessary. Remember it."

"You're the one with the rotten memory. If I come back here in a month, you'll have forgotten we had this conversation."

"That's as may be. So long as you remember it. Are you going to stop by the old house before you go back to A Thousand Towers?"

"I may."

"Give my love to mother. Be well, my dear, and stay away from this Well of Healing or I'll kill you."

It was hard for Deor to read human faces, and Noreê's especially. But she didn't seem at all flustered; she nodded agreeably to her homicidal sister, Illion, and Deor himself, then walked down the stairs out of sight.

"And you two," Phanê said, as they mounted the stairs toward her. "I hope you are not here to kill or otherwise harm my favorite patient?"

"You can't be referring to Morlock," Deor said.

"I am!" cried ancient Phanê, with every sign of sincerity. She fell into step alongside Deor, with Illion following a step or two behind. "He's misshapen," Phanê explained. "He's uncooperative. Therapies which should be effective are useless. He ignores me. He *grunts*. He's almost completely horrible. Honestly, if I were only four or five hundred years younger I would be trying to get him to marry me. He's so awkwardly, fascinatingly difficult."

Deor didn't understand the mating habits of the Other Ilk at all, so most of this didn't interest him enough to disturb him. But there was one nugget of news in there.

"The therapies aren't working?" he asked.

"They are and they aren't. Let's turn in here."

They passed from the stairway through an open arch into a windowless corridor. To their left and their right were doorways opening onto rooms bright with sunlight. Phanê went to a door

that wasn't open, pulled it open and entered without ceremony.

"What in the dark union of the sacred and profane are *you* doing here?" she shrieked as soon as she entered.

Deor, following her in, saw that Morlock was in the room and at first assumed she was screaming at him. It was a thing people often did, in Deor's experience. But in fact her wrath was being poured out on a tall, quivering fellow in a steel-gray robe.

Morlock stepped between Phanê and the trembling man. Deor's *harven* kin looked much the same as when Deor had last seen him—middling height, sallow skin, dark tangly hair, luminous gray eyes, a green stone hanging from a graysteel chain about his neck. But his forearms ended in stumps. The stumps were not covered with skin, as was usual in Deor's experience of amputated limbs. There was some pale glassy sheath that encased the ends of the wounded forearms. Through it you could clearly see the cross-section of the arm: pale circlet of skin at the edges, the raw meaty red of muscles, the irregular ivory rings of the forearm bones with their dark cores of marrow. It was fascinating and horrifying.

"I invited him here, Archapt," Morlock was saying coldly to Phanê. "I did not invite you."

"I'm your healer. This is my house."

"Then I will leave it, if my guest may not stay."

"Stop!" Phanê said. "I'm sorry. You're a difficult patient, young man, and I'm no longer as patient as a healer should be. Of course you can have any guest you like in your room. You, there, young—what's your name?"

"Arzandofilankworn."

"What?" Phanê glared at him briefly, but it was obvious he had no intent to deceive or mock. "Oh, very well. Please stay. I was worried that you were making matters worse, but they couldn't be much worse, could they? How are those disgusting things you are working on, young Ambrosius?"

Morlock was about to say something (nothing irritated him as much as being called "young Ambrosius") when he looked past her and met Deor's eye. His expression changed to astonishment, delight—then shifted again to shame.

Deor didn't need anyone to explain to him what that was all about. Morlock was a maker without hands. Many a dwarf in his position would have killed himself by now. Deor wasn't taking any risks of coddling that sort of feeling. He shouldered roughly past Phanê and grabbed his friend and kin around the waist before he could dodge out of the way. "*Harven* Morlock," he said, his face muffled by Morlock's abdomen.

Morlock froze for a moment, and then embraced Deor with his handless truncated arms. "*Harven* Deor," he said at last, as if he'd had to nerve himself up to it.

Deor stepped back to look Morlock in his face. "I see you are well," he said. "Well enough to cause dissension, frustration, and rage all around you."

Morlock's icy face relaxed into a half smile. "All around, Deortheorn?"

"All around! With my own eyes I have seen one sister throw another down a flight of stairs and heard her threaten to kill her."

"With your eyes you heard all this?"

"Well, they—now you're doing it to me! What's this project you have going on here?" Between Arzandofilankworn and

Morlock were two brightly colored, strangely horrible objects, apparently the objects of Phanê's scorn.

"Hands," Morlock said, tightening up again.

"So I see." Deor stepped forward to look at the objects next to the quivering fellow in the steel-gray robe. There was something strangely familiar about him, even though Deor had never seen him before. What was his name? "Master Arzandofilankworn: good day. I am Deor syr Theorn."

There were two of the things, hand-shaped, hanging in the air. They were made of glass strands in a dark rainbow of colors. It was not clear what was causing the strands to adhere, but a silent vibration in the air made Deor suspect that the things were dense with force-wefts.

"These are beautifully made, Master Arzandofilankworn," Deor remarked.

"Huh?" said the gray-robed one. "Oh, Morlock made them, really. I just consulted on design. I'm a—a—a—"

"Necrophile," muttered Phanê.

"A necrophor," Morlock corrected.

Necrophors: they were the order that buried the dead and sometimes investigated suspicious deaths. Deor had never met one before, and he wondered if they were all as nervous around living people as Arzandofilankworn was.

"Yes, that's what I am," Arzandofilankworn said, as if he hadn't been sure before. "I have dissected many a dead body, and I've been helping with, well, anatomy or—or—or pseudo-anatomy for the—the—the—devices."

"Oh." Deor looked at the hands themselves. They were life-size, remarkably like Morlock's hands as Deor remembered them. "*These* are your new hands? They aren't models?"

Morlock nodded.

"Nothing stops you, does it?"

"Death will."

"Shut your face. Come here and show me."

Morlock went down on one knee and explained all about them. The transparent surface was a skin analogue. The dark-red bands were muscle analogues. There were blue-black stems of glass at the heart of the structure: bone analogues. And throughout there were thin wires of coppery and golden glass: nerve analogues. Arzandofilankworn had, in fact, been extremely helpful in placing the strands, he said, but Morlock had fixed them in place while in visionary rapture, working through his focus of power. Deor remembered it well: an intricate green gemstone that Morlock had grown under the Firehills west of Kirach Starn.

"Impressive," Deor said, unable to look away from the glass hands. "Somehow beautiful, yet perfectly hideous."

"They can be that, or anything else, if they work," Morlock said.

"Then they don't work yet?" Deor said.

Morlock's face fell, as Deor had been afraid it would. But he and his *harven*-kin were unaccustomed to lie to one another, and neither wanted to start now.

"No," said Morlock. "They don't. And I don't know why. Something is preventing the talic *stranj*—the sympathetic association that should allow my muscles and nerves to control the simulacra."

"*Hurs krakna*," Deor remarked, and Morlock nodded solemnly.

"Of course, in a way, they can never work," Phanê said, standing behind Deor.

Morlock looked up challengingly to meet her eye. "How so?"

"They won't feel anything," Phanê said.

A powerful emotion twisted Morlock's face. Deor found it hard to read faces of the Other Ilk in general, but he had known Morlock a long time. He was surprised and saddened to read fear in his *harven*-kin's face. Then it was gone and Morlock said, "That's true. I'll have to do without that."

They talked more about this and that, and Arzandofilankworn managed to say a few more words without stuttering too much, but when the conversation turned back to the simulacra of hands, Phanê said it was time to get Deor and Illion to their quarters. "We'll meet in the Long Hall for dinner and discuss your stupid glass hands," she said to Morlock.

Morlock looked reluctant to let his visitors go, and Deor was reluctant to go, but Illion, speaking for almost the first time since they had entered the room, expressed his weariness from the road, and that settled the matter.

Once the door was closed behind them and they were back in the stairwell, Phanê said, "Thank God Sustainer I got you two out of there before you helped him get those fake hands working."

"Not likely, madam," Deor said. "I'm not any kind of maker, really. Not like Morlock, or the Elder Tyr."

"And I would not," Illion said.

They both looked at him then, Deor with surprise, Phanê with gratification.

"You understand, I see," Phanê said. "Those horrible simulacra! If he ever gets them to work, he'll never accept his real hands."

"I understood that his real hands were burnt to ash in the Kwelmhaiar, madam," Deor said.

"Don't call me madam," snapped Phanê. "I'm not your mother's employer. No. Wait a moment. I'm sorry. Please excuse me. I'm a little hot-tempered these days."

Deor nodded placidly; the sexual insults that drove the Other Ilk to madness could not offend him. But the comment lowered Phanê seriously in his esteem. A person who could not keep their temper in ordinary conversation was a person lacking in integrity; that was Deor's view.

"Let me show you the problem, or at least part of the problem, before I lose any more of your respect," Phanê said, stinging Deor a little. (He thought he wore the mask fairly well, but apparently not well enough to fool Phanê.)

They passed from the stairway through another open arch into a windowless room brightly lit with coldlights. The room was full of glass cages and people in purple robes. The glass cages were full of... things. Not people, but parts of people. They were moving—they were alive: meaty throbbing hearts, shiny pulsating strips of liver, fingers crawling like inchworms, feet flopping like fish.

"There is a part of hell that's supposed to be like this," Deor remarked.

"I'm not interested in the afterlife," Phanê said dismissively. "Now have a look at these!"

These were Morlock's hands, lying restlessly in a glass cage with no purple-robed attendant. Deor knew them at once: the

right hand even had a scar under its forefinger knuckle. Morlock had gotten that in a fight with a surfclaw on the Broken Coast. The crustacean was long dead; the hand itself had burned to ash. But the scar remained on the new hand. It was strange.

The fingers were drumming in an irregular pattern. But if you waited long enough it repeated. Deor listened, shook his head, said nothing.

"Remarkable," Illion noted at last. "The drumming."

"Yes," Phanê said. "That's new. But it shows what I've suspected: Morlock is already linked to these new hands. But his arm-wounds will not knit together with the hand-wounds. We've tried a dozen times—lost two pairs of hands and had to start over each time, growing new hands from seeds of his flesh. The hands are perfect. The arms are ready to receive them. The problem is elsewhere."

"He's afraid," Deor said. "Afraid of the pain, maybe. It must have hurt a lot—when the lightning killed his hands. Or maybe it was the shock—a maker waking up without hands. He can't—he can't—"

"Very insightful for someone without the Sight," Phanê said approvingly, and somewhat condescendingly. "Yes, his mind refuses to complete the link. He has been hurt, but that is over. If he accepts the new hands he may be hurt again—*will* be hurt again. Quite reasonably, he prefers alternatives—alternatives that will keep him from ever truly healing."

"And how will you get him to accept the new hands?" Deor asked.

"I'm not going to. If anything is clear at this point, that is. Maybe you can help. That's why Illion went to fetch you here, I assume."

"*Hurs krakna.*"

"Morlock says that all the time. What does it mean?"

Deor mulled it over. "If you went fishing and caught something you didn't expect, you might say it."

"Ah. But I never fish."

"Don't say it, then," Deor looked at Illion.

"We've been on the road a long time," said Illion the Wise. "Maybe we should go now to our room, to rest before supper."

Phanê threw up her hands. "Have your conversation without me, then! I have other fish to fry, as it were. You're in the same place, Illion—unless you would prefer separate rooms?"

Illion shook his head, and Phanê walked off before Deor could thank her for her hospitality.

"She read it in your mind, anyway," Illion said consolingly and disturbingly.

"Do *you* read minds?" Deor wondered.

"I've known enough dwarves to know what was bothering you. And you've known me long enough to know what question I'm about to ask you."

"You want to know what the hands are saying?"

"Aha. I thought they were saying something, yes. It's a code?"

"A tapping code we use in the mines."

"And they are saying?"

"The silence is coming. The silence is coming.' Over and over again."

Illion, silent himself, led the way down the stairs, to another tower, another room, another long wait.

• • •

THEY didn't have to wait very long, though. That night at supper, the silence struck.

To Deor, it was like drowning. Once, while fishing in the Coriam lakes, he fell off a ledge and sank through the water. He heard his friends talking to each other on the ledge—they hadn't noticed him missing yet. Then he didn't hear them, and there was only the silence and the dark. When he hit the muddy floor of the shallow lake he struggled across it to shore, just in time to not die from the water seeping into his lungs. But he never forgot that silence, that separation from others whom he knew to be near at hand.

And so it was at supper in the refectory of the Healers. Deor was sitting on a bench at a long table, with Morlock on one side and Arzandofilankworn on the other. He was trying to get Arzandofilankworn to talk a little: the man seemed terrified of everyone at the table. The conversation had long silences, but Deor was used to that: he was by far the most talkative dwarf among the Seven Clans under Thrymhaia.

The time came, though, when he had that sensation of water filling his ears, blocking out all sound. There were people all around him, but it was as if they were a dozen paces away, then a hundred, then a thousand. Arzandofilankworn was staring at his plateful of lentils and bread, a mask of shame covering his face. But beyond him were two young healers in robes striped red and white. They were talking frantically at each other, both their mouths moving at the same time. Deor could barely hear the gibberish of their clashing words. Then: he could not hear them, only the slow reluctant beating of his own heart. In time, too, that faded, as if he were dying. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the vanishing sound. At last it was gone. Had his life gone with it? Was he dead?

He opened his eyes. If this was the afterlife, it was nothing like the one his oldfather had promised him, for good or ill. He was still in the refectory. Healers were on their feet talking hysterically all around him. Nothing could be heard.

Both Illion and Morlock were on their feet. Illion was gesturing with his left hand in a circle—indicating, Deor guessed, that he was going to take a look around the area. Morlock nodded and made as if to come with him. Illion put his right hand flat against Morlock's chest, stopping him. He pointed with his left hand at the stump of Morlock's right arm.

Deor was furious on Morlock's behalf. With hands or without, Morlock was twice the man Illion was, the equal of any dwarf: that was how Deor saw it. He anticipated eagerly his *harven*-kin's blistering response. With words or without, with hands or without, Deor was sure Morlock could put Illion in his place.

Instead his *harven* kin sat down and watched emptily as Illion walked away.

This giving up, this emptiness, this silence of the spirit was worse, in Deor's mind, than death. He leapt to his feet and would have run after Illion—whether to strike him or assist him, Deor never knew—when he felt someone grab his arm. He turned to vent his fury on this newer, nearer target, and found he was looking up at the Archapt Phanê. Her glance was cool, her free hand open. She was ready for a fight, for anything. Further, she had

grabbed him for some purpose. That lessened the offence. (It wasn't as if she could have said something, through the waters of silence that were drowning them all.)

She gestured with her free hand at Morlock, and then Deor understood. Now, if ever, Morlock might be persuaded to accept his new hands. Deor turned to his *harven* kin and pounded on the nearer and higher of the crooked man's shoulders. Morlock turned his blank empty gaze toward Deor. The dwarf grabbed his *harven* kin's arm, as Phanê was grabbing his. Deor yanked his head toward the door. *Come with us*, he meant, and hoped that Morlock understood.

Morlock did. His gray eyes blazed suddenly with purpose. He stood and, foolishly, spoke. Deor thought that, perhaps, he was saying *Arzandofilankworn*.

Deor looked around but the necrophor was gone. That was odd, but maybe the fellow had preferred to be with his own order during this crisis, or the end of the wide world, or whatever this was.

Phanê led the way from the refectory to her Well of Healing, and they climbed the winding stairs to the chamber of horrors where the parts of people huddled in glass cages.

The chamber they found when they arrived was even more horrible than when they had last seen it. The glass domes over all the cages had retracted, and the floor was littered with segments of people wandering around, seeking their hosts. Deor saw a finger crawling like an inchworm, stepped back to narrowly avoid stepping on someone's foot—whose, he never knew, as the body was not attached. He looked around wildly and met a forlorn orange eye rolling back and forth on the rim of its open cage.

It was all too much like a nightmare he'd once had about the second death—body parts of the dead kept growing out of the ground and chasing him.

But Deor bit back his panic and thought. He had never seen an explosion of chaos like this without Morlock being somehow involved. Ergo, Morlock was involved somehow. Morlock had been in the refectory when the chaos was unleashed. Ergo, Morlock's hands had unleashed the chaos. Q.E.D!

Why was not hard to say: the hands had wanted to get out. The crisis they had foreseen was upon them. It was harder to say why they'd needed to open all the domes to release their own, but Deor didn't worry about that. The real question was: where were they now?

The dwarf stood still as a stone to keep from stumbling over someone's wandering pancreas. From where he stood he could see that the cage for Morlock's hands was empty. Phanê was on her hands and knees crawling around on the floor, maybe looking for the hands, maybe just taking in the sights. Morlock was scanning the room from where he stood.

The answer struck Deor like a drop of rain. He leapt backward past the threshold and ran up the stair to Morlock's room.

The hands were lying on Morlock's bed, tapping their forefingers together.

Deor wanted to say, *Don't move!* to the hands, which was absurd, because hands don't have ears, and he couldn't have been heard anyway. He turned around, intending to fetch Phanê and Morlock, but he found them right behind him. Morlock pounded his forearms on Deor's shoulders in compliment.

Then came the horrible moment of joining the hands with the arms. Morlock and Phanê were quite offhand, as it were, about it: they'd been through the mess several times before. Phanê tugged at the amputated end of Morlock's left hand and something came off, like a cuff made of glass. Fiery blood started spraying instantly into the room... but the blood didn't burn the floor: there was some sort of fire-quell magic there. She did the same to the bloody end of the left arm and then she simply held them together, bloody end to bloody end until they joined. And it was the same for the right hand.

Morlock stood there in the fumes of his own Ambrosial blood and tapped each of his fingers against each other. He clenched both hands, unclenched them. He was whole again, and it wasn't just his hands. There had been something troubling about his face, a hesitance, a lack of recklessness, that worried Deor. It was gone now. He was as crazy as he had ever been.

Deor would have shouted savage dwarvish syllables of triumph, but had to settle for punching his *harven* kin in the mid-section and following him as he ran down the stairs three at a time. There was danger out there, something that threatened them all; he would not wait any longer to meet it.

• • •

THEY didn't have to go far: the danger was there, confronting them as soon as they stepped into the strange silent daylight.

Illion lay motionless on the green earth before the rust-red iron door to Old Moorhope. His face was swollen and bruised on one side; he had clearly been knocked unconscious. The door itself gaped wide, a mouth of darkness, screaming silence into the world. Deor felt rather than understood that the silence was coming from there, from the darkness of Old Moorhope.

Standing over Illion was Arzandofilankworn. But the modest young necrophor was strangely changed. His face was a mask of crazed triumph: eyes glittering, grin wide and gaping. In his hands was a strange sword: its blade glittered like volcanic glass, black and white veins of crystal tangled together, the white veins pulsing unpleasantly with light and life. He didn't seem to have any feet: his body stood in the air without support.

Illion had been armed with nothing more than an ordinary walking stick; it still lay in his nerveless hand. Morlock stooped to snatch it up.

Arzandofilankworn stabbed at Morlock, slashing him on the left side of his face; bright burning blood seeped out of the wound into the silent air, fell smoking to the green silent earth.

Deor didn't have to stand around while some footless stranger sliced up his *harven* kin. He scooped up a couple of nearby rocks. Deor was lacking in many a dwarvish virtue (e.g. patience, punctuality, the ability to craft beautiful or useful things), but he could throw rocks with the best of them. He hurled these with deadly accuracy at Arzandofilankworn's head and did not miss.

But it did no good. The rocks passed through Arzandofilankworn as if he weren't there... because he wasn't, Deor realized belatedly. This was a fetch, a projection of Arzandofilankworn's self. Everyone has them, but they are rarely visible outside of

dreams. Sorcerers, though, could send out fetches of a more dangerous and effective kind. This one was strong enough to wield that sword—that, at least, was no illusion, or it could not have cut Morlock's face.

Arzandofilankworn's fetch slashed again at Morlock, but rather clumsily. Morlock managed to deflect it with the walking stick. Morlock circled warily around the fetch, trying to draw it away from the doorway and Illion's fallen body, but it grinned crazily at him, turned always to face him, but did not otherwise move.

This was something worse than a stalemate, Deor realized. Possibly they could ward off the deadly but ill-handled sword. But the silence was still pouring into the world, and somehow it was getting worse. Deor's ability to think in words seemed to be vanishing. He had no idea what to do.

Morlock usually had ideas, if only crazy ones, and his sallow, bleeding face was thoughtful as he watched the fetch who was watching him.

With his free hand he reached into a pocket and drew out his focus, the intricate green stone that he had grown himself in the Firehills west of Kirach Starn. Deor thought he was going to go into the rapture of vision and fight against the fetch in the tal-realm. He moved forward to guard his *harven*-kin while he was in the visionary trance.

But Morlock did not go into a trance. He dipped the green stone into the blood running down his face, as if he were dipping a pen into ink. Then he began to write blood-bright burning letters in the empty air, as if it were paper.

He began on the fetch's left and edged over to his right, leaving a semicircle of strange fiery letters in the air:

NROWKNALIFODNAZRA

The fetch vanished like a dream on waking, erased by the palindrome of its own name.

The sword fell like a shining stone to the green ground.

Then: something happened. Deor felt it without understanding it. It was like a bubble in the silence, a brief blast of meaning and intent in the soul-eating silence drowning the world.

The sword leapt up, like a hawk who hears the call of her austringer, and flew through the iron door, down to the darkness of Old Moorhope.

Morlock and Deor jumped after it. They ran side-by-side down the winding stairs to the forbidden world of Old Moorhope.

They came out at last into a cavern that seemed to have no end: in every direction, wherever they looked, there were no walls, only the foundations of the many towers of New Moorhope, glowing faintly in rose-red light, sinking like the roots of many trees through the rocky ceiling of the cave.

But that wasn't the weirdest part. There were silvery reflective pools scattered across the cave floor, as far as the eye could see. But each pool seemed to reflect a different world, and none of them was the world they saw around them.

This was where the wild magic of the ancients had broken the world, opening up countless gates of wonder and terror that must be guarded with eternal vigilance.

And here Arzandofilankworn was—not the fetch, but the man, working feverishly at a device made out of many strands of glowing glass. It was ugly and beautiful at once; it reminded

Deor of those hideous glass hands that Morlock had been making, except that it didn't look like a hand. It was in the form of a screaming mouth. The garish red lips gaped wide; the luminous yellow teeth ringed a dark empty maw with no tongue and no light and no end.

Deor knew somehow that the glass mouth was the weapon being used against them, that it was screaming silence into the world. But he didn't know what to do about it. He turned to Morlock who, as so often, was about to do something crazy.

Morlock was holding his focus, the intricate green stone that he had grown in the Firehills west of Kirach Starn. He lifted it over his shoulder. He threw it with deadly accuracy, almost as well as Deor could have, right at the glass mouth.

The magical device shattered with a satisfyingly audible crash. Arzandofilankworn screamed and lifted his arm before his face to shield it from the glowing glass fragments. He lost his footing at the edge of the pool where he stood and fell out of sight.

They rushed to the verge, but he was gone beyond recovery. There was a distant form that might have been him falling or flying among mountain peaks lit by two purplish suns. Then the form was gone and only the peaks remained.

The device was gone as well: the glass had melted like ice and was disappearing into the green-gray stones of the cavern floor. Only Morlock's green focus-gem was left. He scooped it up, examined it for harm, dusted it off, and slipped it into a pocket in his sleeve.

"So much for Arzandofilankworn!" shouted Deor, a little too loudly, luxuriating in the echoing resonance of his completely hearable voice. "If that is his real name." He didn't know, at the time, why he said that. Perhaps he had already begun to suspect.

Morlock shrugged, nodded, smiled with his bloodstained face.

Deor found himself grabbing his *harven* kin's hands and weeping over them. Other things happened: questions were asked, explanations were given. None of it seemed important. Something did seem important, but he couldn't seem to put it into words, as if a bit of the deadly silence was lingering deep within his skull.

• • •

THAT night Deor awoke in the room he was sharing with Illion and, now, Morlock. (As someone who was no longer in need of healing, Morlock had moved out of Phanê's Well.)

Morlock slept, still as death, on a cot under the open window. But Illion was gone.

And that was it, Deor realized: Illion. Here he was, one of the great seers and warriors in the history of the Graith, he who had walked with Noreê and Jordel against the Dark Seven in Kaen. Was he a man to be taken unawares by another sorcerer's fetch? Morlock had not been. Even Deor had spotted it. Why not Illion?

And where was he now?

Deor carried his boots in his hand, so as not to wake Morlock, and snuck off to find the answers to his questions.

Deor was a pretty good tracker, although he never bragged about the fact. Hunting was, after all, work for unmated females in the Seven Clans. But he had spent an unusual amount of time with his mother during his childhood, due to his oldfather's untimely death, and she'd taught him a few things.

Illion's footprints were still practically warm on the dark dewy earth. The major moons, Chariot and Horseman, were high in the sky overhead. It was easy enough to follow the trail westward, out of New Moorhope, deeper into the mountains.

He had not gone far when he realized he was not travelling alone. He looked around to see the dread sisters, Archapt Phanê and Defender Noreê, following companionably in his wake.

"Lead on, friend Deor," Phanê whispered. "I think we're all asking the same question."

They could have followed Illion with their powers, no doubt. But then Illion would have become aware of them. This was best: that Deor follow the trail with eye, ear, and nose, and they follow him.

They came at last to a hollow in the side of a mountain. There was a fire in it: Deor could smell it; he could feel its heat on his face and fingertips. But it was cloaked from their eyes.

He nodded sideways with his head, meaning, *Here, I think.*

He expected that the ladies would wait and they would all confer on their next move. Phanê and Noreê did not wait: as one they strode forward into the screen of unnatural darkness, and Deor had to scramble not to be left behind.

On the other side of the occlusion, Illion was seated by a fire in close conference with... with... with someone else. Deor did not know him. Yet... he knew him instantly. The man was familiar, yet he was a stranger. His garments were faded with much sun, stained with much travel. His sun-darkened face was terribly scarred, and more scars could be seen on his neck and forearms. As he stood to greet the newcomers, it was clear that he was lame in one leg, accentuating the crookedness in his shoulders. There was some gray in his dark tangly hair and his eyes were gray, almost luminous in the dim light.

"Archapt Phanê. Defender Noreê," said the stranger. "I am glad to see you well." His eyes dropped down and widened in surprise, but at last he said tentatively, "*Harven* Deor."

Deor didn't understand what was happening, or why the other had spoken his name in hesitation. Nor did he care. He shouldered roughly past Phanê and grabbed his friend and kin around the waist before he could dodge out of the way. "*Harven* Morlock," he said, his face muffled by Morlock's abdomen.

"Illion," Noreê demanded tensely, "what is this?"

"*This* is my *harven* kin Morlock," Deor said, turning toward the others. "Though I don't know how he can be. Morlock, you seem—years older than the man I left sleeping under the window tonight."

"Many years," agreed the stranger that Deor knew so well.

"It was you!" shouted Phanê at Illion. "You opened the iron door! You went down into Old Moorhope and summoned forth this... this..."

"It was your idea," Illion said patiently.

"Was it?" Phanê said. "How reckless of me. I mean, how unorthodox and brilliant. What was my plan, if you happen to remember?"

"Our plan," Illion corrected gently, "was to lure Merlin Ambrosius through the gateways of Old Moorhope. We knew he was abroad somewhere on the Sea of Worlds. We thought that the threat of Morlock's father—"

"My *ruthen* father," old Morlock corrected, with a trace of ancient resentment. It was the term used by dwarves for blood kin, as opposed to kin-by-choice—*harven* kin.

"—his *ruthen* father," Illion continued with a smile, "might cause young Morlock to accept the graft of new hands. But when we summoned Merlin we got—well—this awkward fellow."

Old Morlock said, "I was also abroad on the Sea of World, apparently nearer at hand than Merlin. And I suppose you used the blood of my younger self for your summoning spell: that drew me more strongly than it would my father. My *ruthen* father."

Deor knew that travellers on the Sea of Worlds passed through time as well as space on their journeys; there were tales of ships that had returned to their home ports before their departure and other inconveniences. But he had never encountered anything like this himself.

"Why did you hesitate when you saw me, *harven*?" Deor asked. "Am I dead, back there when you come from?"

"I had my reasons," Morlock said, with a harshness that was strange to Deor—a pain from years that Deor did not yet know.

"Don't ask him anything!" Noreê said, an edge of panic in her voice. "This is how he will destroy us—by deploying secrets from our future! It will send our lives askew, trap us all in causal loops!"

"It's not like I'm likely to remember any secrets," Phanê said, "and I can offer you all a similar balm of forgetfulness. But perhaps you shouldn't say much about the future, Morlock."

Old Morlock shrugged, opened his hands, closed them. He had not yet said anything about the future, and he obviously didn't intend to—that was how Deor read the gestures. The stranger was very like, yet unlike, his favorite kin.

"But where did you get that Arzandofilankworn fellow, and where did he go to?" Phanê asked.

"*He's* Arzandofilankworn," Deor said, stabbing an accusatory finger into old Morlock's ribs. "Am I right?"

"Thou speak'st aright: I am that merry wanderer of the night," old Morlock quoted.

"Hey, that's my line! Anyway, I'd like to know how you managed the disguise. And how did you fall down into that other world, but we see you now here?"

Morlock's ravaged face twisted in a half-smile. "Arzandofilankworn was a simulacrum made of light and other substances. When I went into the Towers of Healing, I wore it like a glove. Its task in Old Moorhope was simpler, though, and I sent it on its way by itself."

Deor pressed on. "And the glass mouth—the glass hands. They were so beautifully and horribly made. How did you think of them?"

"I didn't think of them. I remembered them from when I was young."

"Sure but when Arzandofilankworn taught you—I mean when you—wait a second—"

"A causal loop," Noreê whispered. "God Avenger, we are all in terrible danger."

"There is truth in that," old Morlock said. "I did not come to harm, and I should not linger."

"Where will you go?" Illion asked.

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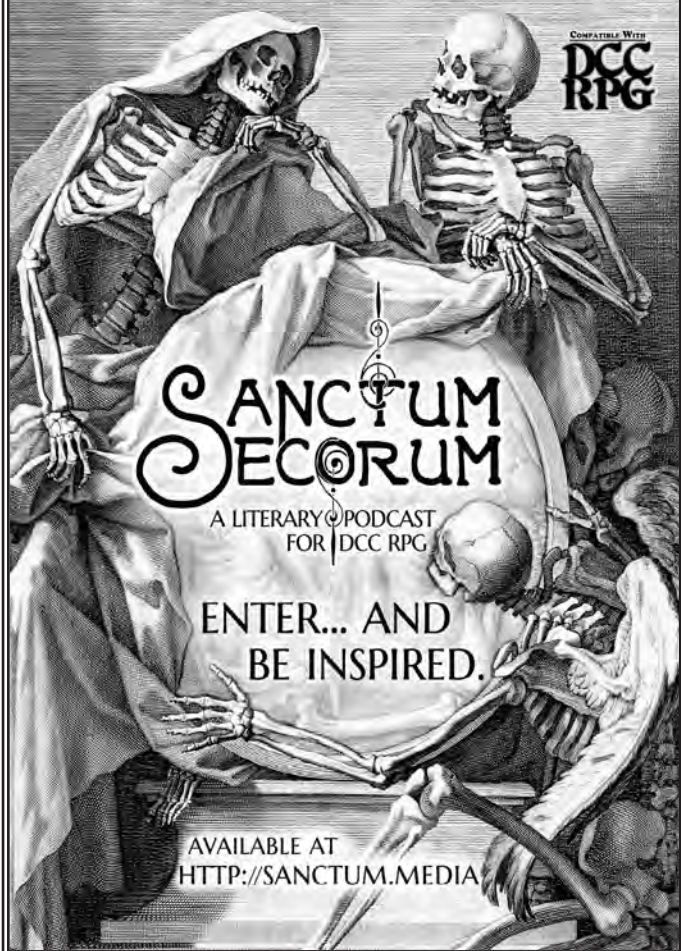
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AND THEIR CONTEMPORARIES



Morlock's dark face bent in a half-smile. "The Sea of Worlds, beyond the western edge of the world. Even that mushroom-pale lad you call Morlock knows enough multi-dimensional geometry to plot a course back to my time and place, and I know more than he does. Building a suitable craft out of materials that will not be missed in this timeline might be a little trickier, but I have an idea how it might be done."

"Good bye, then," Illion said, slapping old Morlock on the lower of his shoulders. He ruefully traced the bruise darkening the side of his face. "Thanks for, um, helping out."

"It was the least I could do," old Morlock replied with his wicked half-smile, "for an old friend."

He turned to embrace Deor again.

"*Harven*," said Deor, "I feel like this is the last time I'll see you."

"It's not. We'll see each other many times."

"But I am dead in your time, aren't I?"

"No. That's not the problem. Be always well, *harven* Deor."

Morlock turned to Phanê and Noreê. "You can say whatever you want to me," Phanê said. "My memory's so bad it won't matter, and anyway I think it might be interesting to be caught in a causal loop. I quite envy you."

"Shut up!" Noreê said savagely. "Morlock, if you say anything to her or me I swear I'll cut your throat and take my chances with damage to the timeline."

"Calm yourself," Morlock said, shouldering a large and unwieldy backpack. "I didn't come here to bring you the news from nowhere. But I can promise you all a great future. Yes, I can say that. A great future."

His crowlike rasping laughter disfigured the night as he walked upslope toward the crooked high horizon.

Deor waited until he was out of sight, over the line of the near-est ridge. Then he waited a while longer, in case the old fellow had forgotten anything and came back for it. Then he waited a little longer, to make sure that the sisters had left: he found them both unpleasant companions in different ways.

When he finally turned away to go back downslope, he saw that Illion was still standing there, waiting for him, more silent than the moonlit mountainside.

"You!" said Deor accusingly.

"Me?"

"You, sir. This was all your doing, but you never let on. You even let my *harven* kin whack you on the side of the head to keep the secret. Do you always know more than you say?"

"Yes," said Illion the Wise.

They walked downslope toward the rose-red towers of New Moorhope in not-unfriendly silence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Enge lives in northwest Ohio with his wife and two crime-fighting, emotionally fragile dogs. He teaches Latin, classical civilization, and mythology at a medium-sized public university. His stories have appeared in *Black Gate*, in the Stabby-Award-winning anthology *Blackguards* (Ragnarok Press, 2015), in *Portals* (ZNB, 2019), and elsewhere. His first novel, *Blood of Ambrose*, was nominated for the World Fantasy Award, and the French translation was nominated for the Prix Imaginales. You can reach him through Facebook (as james.enge) or on Twitter (@jamesenge) or, if all else fails, via his website, jamesenge.com.

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ILLUSTRATION BY JENNEL JAQUAYS

CAGE OF HONOR

By JAMES STODDARD

FOR four days Tanager had wandered across the Desert of Sonora, following the remnants of US 80 from Gila Bend toward the Yuma Sea. There was nothing to eat in the wasteland, even the fruit of the gnarl-cacti having failed this year; he had drunk his last sip of water by late afternoon.

Normally he would have flown on his black avian wings. He *had* flown during most of the trip, until weariness and the breathless air kept him from remaining aloft. Now he trudged over brown sand that scorched his feet through his boots, despite the sun having set three hours before.

Topping a hill, he found a town stretching below him. Though the place lay dark beneath the rising moon, he gave a grim smile. These were surely the ruins of Tacna, a prosperous suburb before the Great Blackout. The Gila River had vanished with the catastrophe, but with any luck he might find a cistern or working well. He ran reassuring hands over the hilt of his sword before descending the hill.

He passed low, silent buildings disintegrating beneath the elements. Cracks lined the *metaphalt* surface of the sand-strewn streets; traffic signals lay broken and rusting. Scattered clumps of petrol-barrel bushes, the genetically-engineered wonders that had once brought prosperity to the region, grew wild in abandoned lots. No more would fashionable Americans wear their shadow-mantles here, their biomed tech caressing their skin; never again would they visit their virtch playrooms and gyms, or laugh and toast in holoed restaurants.

Tanager strode grimly on, injured yet never wholly unmoved by such sights.

By the light of the moon, he searched for signs of water, but found only sand and stone. He began to despair until he stepped past the edge of a building onto the town square. A fountain stood in an open courtyard, its spray reflecting the frail moonlight in piercing swords of silver brilliance. He wondered why he hadn't heard its splashing before, for it cascaded from a height of three meters.

Beside the fountain stood a woman wearing trousers and a tunic the same blue as the waters, with long hair flowing to her waist. But her eyes, strangely visible in the moonlight, were all he truly saw, their color shifting from emerald to iron gray to frost blue.

He gave a low, graceful bow, for though weak from thirst, he was still one whose DNA had been programmed, and whose nature could not change, so he was always polite. "Good evening. I am Tanager, a traveler in need of water, if you would kindly share?"

"I am Rapunzel," she said. "Do you see my long locks? Come to me, that I may use them to climb down the tower into your arms."

He gave a slow, cautious smile. "There is no tower, lady."

But suddenly there was, smooth and white, in a forest of towering trees. A witch rushed from beneath the boughs toward him, screeching and casting bolts of power from her fingertips. The fountain had disappeared, while the woman who had stood beside it now descended from the tower's height on a rope braided from strands of hair.

Without hesitation, he sent his knife whistling through the air, striking the witch full in the throat. She clutched at the bleeding wound, tried to speak, and fell writhing to the ground.

Ignoring her, he turned to the woman. She dropped the last few feet; he caught her in his arms, and she was everything to him all at once, everything he ever wanted. Her clothes had changed to silk soft as her skin. He kissed her full red lips.

He stood upon the flagstones once more, and she, several paces from him. The fountain sang its soft song. The witch and tower—if they had ever been—were gone.

"Rapunzel," he said, shaking himself from his desire and retrieving his knife. "A fairy tale told by my old nurse."

"What brings you to this desert place?"

Bewildered, he could but answer. "The ruler of Gila Bend demanded to know my opinion of his court. Taking umbrage at my honesty, his soldiers drove me into the desert. I was lucky to escape alive."

"You should have lied."

"Unfortunately, I cannot tell a lie."

A smile touched her lips. "Pure as George Washington! Until I saw you, I thought the stories of the gene-dabblers only legends. You're one of the Nobles." She laughed in delight. "An admirable experiment. Humans bred like pedigreed dogs with all the best traits. You're surely the last of your kind. A collector's item, I suppose."

"Some have tried to add me to their collection."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I'm not certain knowing would be advantageous. I would rather know *what* you are, and how you caused the holo of the witch."

"She would have killed you if you'd let her. And I am Helen, who launched a thousand ships."

He stood on the rolling deck of a wooden vessel, blue sky and blue sea surrounding him, before a warrior tanned by the Aegean, his fiery crest rising gold as the comb of a fighting cock, his

bronze blade glittering with reflected light. From the corner of his eye Tanager saw the woman, golden-eyed and golden-haired, standing behind him to his right. Though he knew she was impossibly beautiful, he dared not look upon her, for the Greek's blade was close and sharp.

She whispered in his ear, her breath sweet as roses, the enchantment full upon him. "Only you stand between me and death."

She was the rising sun, the newborn moon; he would have suffered a hundred torments for her. Shield upraised, the Greek warrior unleashed a furious assault. Despite being hollow, Tanager's bones were strong, but it was not his way to stand toe to toe. He dodged skillfully, parrying a handful of times before arching his back, his angular wings rising on the sea breeze. From above his foe, he struck downward, a killing stroke to the side of the neck.

She rushed into his arms, her blonde hair covering his eyes. Their lips touched.

They stood once more before the fountain, the sea and corpse gone. Tanager recovered himself and backed away.

The woman stepped toward him. "Please stay. We've only begun our conversation. I want to know more about you."

He continued his slow retreat. Weak from his trek through the desert, he could not survive extended combat. "I no longer desire to speak, good lady." As he stepped backward, his foot crushed the dried bones of a human forearm.

"Don't you want to know who I am?"

"Whether you are real or otherwise, you're part of a powerful enchantment. I prefer to withdraw."

"A fraction of electricity remains in this place," she said, "and the old magics have returned, augmented by the drapings of science: pheromones, holos, sonic stimulators. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to know the love of the women of legend? To walk with those whose beauty and goodness surpasses all others? A man such as you, bred to nobility? Haven't you longed for one of your own kind?"

Tanager glanced around, searching for something to aid him. He needed to get to the water without triggering whatever caused his loss of reason. Perhaps he could persuade her. "Because I am whom I was made to be, there is no room in my heart for dalliance. I cannot be fickle. My engineered genes make me a creature of high honor. Those I love, I love with all my heart. Some have called this a weakness. I see now they were right. My lady, spare me from too much passion."

She smiled sweetly, but shook her head. "Do you know who I am?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm Sleeping Beauty."

He stood before a great castle guarded by three soldiers. They came at him one at a time, else they would have surely overwhelmed him. Lunging, he took the first in the chest. The second was a better swordsman, and for several long seconds they parried and thrust, moving back and forth before the gates of the castle. With a twisting motion, Tanager entangled his opponent's sword, locking it against his own and tearing it from the man's grasp. A final thrust ended his life.

Before the remaining soldier could engage, Tanager pulled his sling from the holder at his back, chose a smooth stone from the

pouch at his belt, and sent the projectile flying in one smooth motion. It struck the man in the forehead, sending him to the ground, dying beneath the summer sun.

Panting for breath, Tanager rushed into the upper chambers of the castle, where lay a woman pale but lovely. He kissed her lips. Her eyes opened. He lost himself in her arms.

They faced one another upon the flagstones, he on his knees, too breathless to stand, sweat pouring from his brow, his limbs like water. His throat burned; his breath came in gasps. His retreat had been stymied; in his delirium he had returned to his previous position. He could not bear another such battle without crumbling into unconsciousness. Nor would he ever awaken from that sleep. His bones would bleach under the morning sun, his thirst unslaked before the mocking fountain.

Yet, the enchantment came and went, perhaps as a failsafe to provide its designers a means of escape. There had to be a way to bring an end to it. The woman was either an illusion or the one controlling the enchantment. Either way, she was assaulting him, giving his innate code of conduct permission to strike back.

He drew his long knife and cast it at her, but though his aim was true, it missed her and fell to the flagstones. Her sweet voice echoed around the courtyard, her tone puzzled, reproachful. "Why do you seek to harm one who offers you the gift of love?"

A new thought struck him, and with it a faint hope. *If all that I do fails, I must try something else. If I'm wrong at least I won't live long to regret it.*

Taking his sword and sling, he cast them as far as he could, his blade clattering in the stillness against the side of a building.

"I am all that is Woman," she said. "And that is more than any man can bear. Call me Guinevere."

A warrior stood between him and a lady bright and lovely as the sun, a regal man a head taller than Tanager, with the branches of a rowen tree for a crown and the sword Excalibur in his hand—Arthur himself, filled with rage; and beside the king, five other men.

Again he wanted only her, again he raised his arm to fight his way to his beloved, but his blade was gone. He sought another weapon but found none. His attackers approached, their swords glistening, their cruel eyes victorious.

He raised his bare hands to defend himself, but no blade struck. The warriors stood uncertain, their swords pointed at his heart.

He took a step toward them, so close a sword-tip touched his chest. The warriors retreated, backing toward the woman.

He pursued them, still under the spell, an unarmed man, shouting, threatening stout men with his fists, and as they retreated, so too did she. At last he backed them against the fountain. She sat at its lip, beckoning.

He leapt at his foes, parting them like rows of ripe wheat, and fell into her arms.

The spell ended, and he found he had crawled to the edge of the well. The woman, now holding him, brought a cup of water to his lips. Tears glistened in her eyes. "So brave," she murmured.

After he had drunk a long time, she asked, "How did you know?"

"Because I am Tanager, whose nature cannot change, I understand my own limitations. I knew I couldn't have defeated that many men in my diminished state, so I assumed they were allowing me the victory. The trap is cunning. What man is willing to throw away his weapons? Yet, only through surrender can one reach the fountain."

She kissed him, a long kiss, her mouth hot on his. "Two years I've waited, a prisoner here. A woman is required to maintain the fountain. A score of men have perished seeking the water."

"Why is it guarded?"

"It is controlled by merchants from Tombstone. An underground spring feeds it, but the supply is limited. Unless the waters are protected, other traders will establish a caravan route between Tucson and Yuma, disrupting the merchants' profits. They kidnapped me and left me here."

"How have you survived?"

"The merchants bring food and supplies."

"Why didn't you flee? Scattered among the victims' bones, I see containers you could have used for water."

She shuddered. "A woman traveling alone would find herself in low estate. But I'm glad you are the one who survived. I hoped you would." She spread her hands at the field of bones. "Unlike yourself, most of these were men of common, vulgar blood."

"And if I had been of vulgar blood as well?"

"Then you would still have the fountain, but I wouldn't accompany you."

"If you had truly wanted me to survive, you could have told me how to escape the trap."

"But if you failed and the merchants learned what I had done, they would have punished me. They have ways of knowing."

He stared at her until she grew uncomfortable. "What's wrong?"

"You came here willingly, didn't you?"

Her eyes grew wide. "Of course not! How can you think that? You don't know how lonely it's been. I—"

"How much do they pay you? Enough to live comfortably for the rest of your life?"

She shook her head in denial, then, as if struck by a realization, her expression changed, her voice grew smooth. "All right, my noble friend, I admit it, but you don't understand the circumstances. I am the daughter of a wealthy house left destitute by mischance. If I hadn't accepted, the merchants would have found someone else, and it was either this or common labor. It's been horrible watching men suffer and die. I'm just glad it's over."

Tanager shuddered. "The men who brought you here read your passions well."

She stepped away, beautiful but angry, tears springing from her eyes; and he saw she knew how to use her anger. "So you think poorly of me? And I, so long in the desert! Have you no pity?"

"I can always pity."

"Then pity me. Take me with you. Half the wealth I earned can be yours, if you want it."

"The desire for opulence is not within my nature."

"Then what of the desire for desire?" She parted her lips. She was very lovely.

He turned away. "You don't understand what you've done to me. You are indeed beautiful, and as I told you, when I give my heart the giving is total. I am Tanager, whose nature cannot change."

She laughed haughtily, her eyes filled with scorn. "I thought you a hawk; I see you're a parrot, mouthing the same speech over and over. For the sake of the treasure, anyone else would have pretended to befriend me until we reached the cities. Will you take me with you?"

"I won't take you. Assuming you don't try to kill me yourself, your orders are undoubtedly to bring anyone who survives the trap to the merchants, who would silence me lest I inform others how to escape the snare."

She studied him a moment, then shrugged. "Too bad. We could have had some fun along the way, and at least I knew you wouldn't steal from me. Get your water and go! My contract ends in six months. The merchants will free me then."

"Yet, if I leave you, you will only entrap others."

Her eyes became mirthful. "And earn that much more wealth. But don't look so! You can't frighten me. I know the stories about your kind. Poor bird-man! Yes, I've done what I had to in order to survive, but you're a prisoner of your own genetics, incapable of harming an unarmed woman, your virtue bred into you like loyalty into a sheepdog. Pathetic creature! A bird in a cage! Fly away then. Take your honor and leave." She shooed him as if he were a bothersome insect, then turned and swaggered toward the fountain.

Tanager watched her go, his expression bleak. And because he was who he was, he did what he had to do swiftly, before she even knew what happened.

• • •

HE buried her with the bones of those she had slain, crooning a soft dirge above her grave. In his song was his sorrow for being one whose nature could not change, who because he had once felt love for her, would love her forever despite her wickedness. Sorrow that the word branded foremost on his genetic code cursed him to roam the earth. Sorrow that the word was not *Virtue* as she had supposed, but *Justice*.

Weeping, he filled his water bags and left the town behind.

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. His new novel, *The Back of the Beyond*, due to appear in January 2020, tells the story of a band of heroes who enter a world where everything—cups, swords, fields of grain, trees and clouds—is sentient, and where every animal has a voice. After writing the book, Stoddard now frequently talks to inanimate objects. www.james-stoddard.com



ILLUSTRATION BY STEFAN POAG

THE WITCH'S HOUND

By C. L. WERNER

THE sun beat down on the dry, sandy patch of earth behind the small thatch-roofed hut. Such shade as the building cast didn't quite reach the barren splotch of ground. Lying in the dirt was a bowl of water, sunbeams dancing across its surface in a shimmering display. Beside the bowl rested a platter of fresh meat, a few flies buzzing about the morsels.

Away from the food and water, a dull brown head poked up from the dirt. A long grey tongue lolled from the corner of a stubby muzzle. Sharp ears pointed up from the sides of a squat skull. Keen eyes stared out from a furred face, their gaze locked upon the bowl and platter. Ragged whines wheezed from the buried creature as it struggled to free itself from the hole in which it was entombed. Legs bound together with stout ropes, the animal's labours were fruitless.

Wrinkled hands reached down to stroke the dog's forehead. Soothing words filled its ears. 'Such a good boy,' the aged voice creaked. 'Such a sweet boy.' The old hands continued to pet the animal, evoking a pathetic whimper. It tried to turn its head around, to lick the caressing fingers. Buried in the ground, the dog's tail made a feeble wagging motion.

Old and wizened by the hardships of field and family, the woman sat down beside the dog. It had been buried at the very centre of the barren ground, only its head protruding from the earth. The bowl of water and platter of food lay just out of reach of the animal's jaws. The dirt around it was thrown about by the dog's struggles to reach the sustenance it could smell so close, that it could see lying so near.

The woman's caressing touch and encouraging voice confused the trapped animal, utterly at odds with the torment afflicting its starved body were the comfort of human approval. The whine that it uttered was of both happiness and agony. Again it tried to lick the old hands. This time the effort ended in a shudder. The dog's head lolled to one side, its eyes losing their lustre as the dullness of death closed upon them.

A grim smile was on the old woman's face as she rose from beside the dead dog. For almost two weeks the torture had persisted, ten days for starvation to still the animal's heart. She took no pleasure from doing what she'd done. It was necessity that had driven her to such cruelty. The black magic of hebitsuki was devoid of sentimentality, a cold and reptilian breed of witchcraft.

She looked to the edges of the barren ground, glancing across the intricate rings and patterns she'd scratched into the dirt. Like the tracks of snakes, the lines writhed across the earth, intersecting to form the arcane patterns demanded by the ritual. At each of the cardinal directions there stood a stick with the shed casting of a viper pinned upon it. Arrayed at regular intervals

were bowls containing an offering to the five mystic elements. Each day at dawn, she'd smashed an egg against a cow skull in sacrifice to the snake god.

Now the rite was complete. The dog's death was the last and most important part of the spell. The witch looked down at the dead animal. Hastily she drew a small mirror from beneath her kimono. Nervously she stared into the glass. A vicious gleam came into her gaze when she saw her reflection. Just behind her, over her shoulder, was the image of the dog she'd killed.

The tortuous agony and the tireless sympathy she'd shown the dog during that lingering death had bound its spirit to her. It was her servant now, even more loyal to her as a ghost than it had been as a living creature. An ugly laugh shook the witch's withered frame.

Now she had the instrument of her revenge.

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THE streets of Nobase were dusty, the very air in the town afflicted with a gritty feel. Most of the shops were shuttered, the stalls of vendors closed off by cords of rope and old sheets. Even the temple had a feeling of desolation, only a few birds skipping about the many outdoor shrines in its broad courtyard.

The summer had been especially severe in Banho Prefecture, drying out rice fields and withering crops of wheat and millet. The farmers had been hard hit, forced to send the headmen of each village to petition their daimyo for an extension of their feudal obligations. Merchants and traders had seen their custom shaken, entertainers performed for miniscule audiences, craftsmen found themselves without buyers for their goods. Across the province, towns like Nobase struggled to survive. Only the holy festivals held any promise of relief, when the spirit of celebration would drive even the most cautious farmer to stray from his fields to spend some of his carefully hoarded money.

In other towns, the Dance of Mid-Year did act as a lifeline to their people, but not in Nobase. Here the town remained in a dreary and derelict state.

Shintaro Oba pondered the situation as he strode down the deserted street. His clothes were dusty from the trail, his armour bound together in a bundle slung over his shoulder. The jewelled wakizashi was tucked under the silken sash that circled his waist, but the bone-hilted uchigatana that was the short sword's companion he wore tied low with its pommel resting against his hip. It wasn't the best position for a quick draw, but Oba hadn't

chosen Koumakiri for the speed with which the blade could be handled. It was a weapon of other specialities, the demon sword of Sekigahara.

As he walked down the dusty streets, the few townsfolk he passed stared at Oba and then quickened their pace. To the mystery of why Nobase was deserted during the festival he now added another one – why were the inhabitants afraid of him?

The samurai had his answer when he turned the corner. Instead of an empty street, Oba found the path ahead of him entirely blocked by men. Armed men with short swords stuffed beneath the sashes and belts they wore. It needed less than a glance for Oba to recognize that these were no samurai entitled to bear the noble katana. Their leering visages, rangy builds, and undisciplined demeanour weren't marks of the warrior caste. The tattooed arms and partly shaven heads with their abbreviated topknots were more telling qualifiers of who they were. The men standing before him were yakuza.

The sound of rushing feet in the lane behind him told Oba that more yakuza were closing in, cutting off any possibility of retreat. Slowly he unfastened the cord holding Koumakiri across his back. He let the bundle holding his armour fall to the street as he swung the uchigatana around and closed his fingers around the hilt.

'What is your quarrel with me?' Oba called out to the gang. Though he doubted he could prevail against so many enemies, there was no trace of that uncertainty in his voice.

One of the yakuza stepped away from the pack, a hawk-faced villain with a scar across the back of his hand. 'We ask only a moment of your time,' he said. 'Then you can be on your way again with no harm done.'

Oba bristled at the sneering impertinence of the man. 'When is it that yakuza can interfere with samurai?'

The yakuza spokesman laughed, glancing back at his fellow gamblers. 'When we outnumber the samurai twenty to his one.'

'Trifle with me, and there will be a lot less than twenty when you're finished,' Oba warned. The severity of his tone made the spokesman take a step back and finger his sword nervously.

'Only a few moments,' the gambler said, his tone almost apologetic. 'After that you can be on your way.'

The samurai cast his gaze across the yakuza around the spokesman, staring into their eyes, noticing the uneasiness growing there. These men were thugs and bullies, unaccustomed to opposition. 'I can be on my way now,' Oba threatened. He shifted his leg back, assuming one of the ten combat stances of the Sho-ryu school. It was a position designed to react to foes from before and behind.

The yakuza whispered among themselves. The spokesman, who was also the leader of these men, began to turn red. 'Fools,' he snapped at his underlings. 'He's only one man, even if he is samurai.' The reprimand silenced the whispers but didn't lessen the nervousness in their eyes.

Before Oba could force the issue, there was a commotion from behind the yakuza ranks. Pushing their way through the gang was a young gambler and an old man who had the look of a merchant about him. The moment they forced their way to the front of the mob the spokesman spun around and grabbed the merchant by the front of his kimono.

'Is that him?' the yakuza demanded. 'Is that the samurai?'

The old merchant looked in Oba's direction, then quickly turned and nodded to the yakuza leader. 'Yes, Genji, that is the man.' Pulling free from the gangster's grip, the merchant took a few steps towards Oba and fell to his knees. He bowed his head as he addressed the samurai. 'I wouldn't expect you to remember a lowly worm as myself, but I am Doriyama Wataru. I was in Arari when you saved the village from the jorogumo Tsubasa-no-Kumonosu. I saw you slay the demon-spider with your mighty sword.' He raised a trembling hand and pointed at the massive uchigatana.

True to Wataru's claim, Oba couldn't recall the merchant, though he certainly remembered the vicious fight against the crafty Tsubasa-no-Kumonosu. Why that should be of interest to a yakuza gang was of more immediate concern to him. He didn't think the Shogun would debase himself by setting such low-caste villains as the yakuza to dispose of the last member of Clan Sekigahara, but what other reason would they have to confront him?

Instead of drawing their swords and attacking the samurai, the moment Oba was identified by Wataru, the yakuza bowed to him. Genji dismissed Wataru with a wave of his hand and slowly walked towards the samurai.

'Forgive our impertinence, noble master,' Genji said, lowering his eyes. 'The only excuse I can offer is that we were desperate to seek your aid. Do forgive our audacity.' He ended his brief speech with a deep bow.

Oba motioned for Genji to rise. If these men were genuine in their claim of wanting help then there was only one reason he could see for them seeking him in particular. There were many ronin abroad in Mu-Thulan they could have hired if they simply needed a swordsman. Oba's practice was more unique. He was a demon hunter, ranging across the prefectures to give battle to the supernatural beasts that plagued the land. Always wondering if the next demon he vanquished would be the one he sought, the fiend that had enslaved his late lord's soul.

'You're beset by a demon,' Oba stated. The frightened nod that Genji made was his only answer. 'What sort of beast is it? Where is its lair?'

Genji held up his hand. 'My orders are to bring you to our oyabun, Boss Sojiro. Whatever questions you have, the boss will answer.'

Oba retrieved his bundled armour from the ground and motioned for Genji to lead the way. The other yakuza parted before them, waiting for a respectful distance before falling in behind their leader and the samurai. The show of deference from criminals like the yakuza impressed Oba more than anything about the severity of their circumstances. It was a hard thing for gamblers to show respect to a member of the very warrior caste that ruled the land and forced them into an existence on the fringes of society.

When he'd entered Nobase Oba was simply looking for a place to rest. Now he wondered if there would be any rest for him here.

Or if the rest he would find would be that of the grave.

BOSS Sojiro's house was a lavish estate in the middle of Nobase. A high stone wall surrounded what constituted an entire compound of buildings and gardens. Each hallway Oba was led down sported rich paintings. Every room they passed through boasted fresh tatami, the mats woven from a gold-coloured rice straw. He saw one room where a set of brilliantly coloured pottery was on display, old pieces with their cracks filled with gold in the time-honoured art of kintsukuroi. In another he passed a shrine raised in the style of a samurai clan, a suit of armour seated on a pedestal. Instead of the traditional katana and war fan, the steel fingers of the armour held a pair of dice and a gambler's cup. Oba wasn't certain if the display was meant as emulation or mockery, but whatever its purpose he found it to be arrogant.

Servants slid aside a final partition and conducted Oba into a large room with a raised wooden platform at its rear. Tea tools had been assembled and a small table laid out on the raised section of the floor. Pillows had been set at either side of the table. Oba set the bundle of armour down and walked towards the platform. He was aware of Genji following behind him.

'I can take your swords,' the gangster offered.

Oba's look made Genji step back. 'You could try,' he said. The yakuza decided not to press the point, but bowed him to one of the pillows. Oba removed his swords and laid them on the floor beside him as he sat. Genji withdrew a respectful distance, careful to do nothing to agitate the samurai.

There were certain customs when it came to receiving guests. The longer a host made his visitor wait, the more he enforced the difference in their social positions. After the audacious display of armour, Oba braced himself for a long wait. He was surprised when, after only a few minutes, one of the partitions slid open and a trio of expensively-dressed yakuza came into the room. They bowed and genuflected to Oba, then stepped aside to admit their oyabun.

Boss Sojiro was a short, heavy-set man. He was well into middle-age, wrinkles spreading away from the corners of his eyes and grey stealing into his hair. The top-knot he wore was slightly off-centre after the fashion of the yakuza. His kimono was black trimmed with gold thread and upon either breast was an emblem evocative of the mon of a samurai clan or merchant house. It took Oba a moment to appreciate that a trick of perspective made the flower petals in the emblem take on the aspect of a rolling die.

The yakuza chief sat down and bowed his head. 'You do me honour by accepting my invitation. Please forgive any inconvenience my request has caused you.' He waved his hand and a young woman entered the room and started to pour their tea.

'Your need must be dire if you need to waylay strangers in the street,' Oba said. He glanced over at Genji. 'I have seen for myself that your gang is well armed.'

The condescension in Oba's words brought angry flushes to the faces of Boss Sojiro's men. They would have rushed him, except that their oyabun waved them back. 'This is true. We are a strong house and as you have tested, my men are quite ready to fight if they are provoked.'

Oba took a slow sip of tea. 'Then your enemy is such that your men cannot fight it.'

'A monster,' Boss Sojiro sighed. 'A fiend that sets upon this house night after night. It kills at will, seeking out its prey. Always it seems to have a specific victim it is hunting, but it readily slaughters anyone who gets in its way.'

'What kind of creature is it?' Oba asked.

'A demon from Kimon,' Genji hissed. 'A nightmare that cannot be killed with swords.'

Boss Sojiro motioned his underling to be quiet. 'When it first came, it looked like a brown dog. It came trotting into the main house right in the middle of dinner. One of my men went to shoo it outside and the thing snapped off his leg with one bite. Before any of us could recover from our shock, it lunged across the room and tore out the throat of my underboss.'

'Since then it has attacked us six times. Each time the dog is bigger than before. Stronger and more vicious.' Boss Sojiro shook his head. 'No, more than that. It is changing, becoming... different.'

'I saw it when it attacked three nights ago,' one of the other yakuza declared. 'Its front paws were like hands. Before it would tear its way through a wall to reach who it was hunting. This time it opened the door.'

'With each attack the thing has become more like a man,' Genji added. 'Not just in size and appearance, but in how it thinks. How it stalks its prey.'

Boss Sojiro nodded. 'We have been unable to stop these attacks. Steel, fire, prayers, nothing has been able to keep it from coming here and killing my men.'

Oba was silent as he pondered what he had been told. 'Have you seen where it comes from, or where it goes after the attacks?'

'There is no place to follow it to,' Boss Sojiro stated. 'The dog just appears before an attack already inside the grounds. When it is finished killing, it vanishes.'

Oba shook his head. 'If this is a demon, then it is a powerful one. When a demon emerges from the Gate of Kimon, it takes on a physical presence. It can hide itself in the body of another, but there must be a material anchor to hold it in our world. This hound that torments you appears to be bound by no such law.'

'Then you say you will not fight this monster?' Boss Sojiro asked. His hand trembled and tea sloshed from his cup. 'I will pay you one hundred ryo if you can rid us of this fiend.'

'Two ryo will be enough,' Oba said. 'The rest you will donate to the people of Nobase to help them through this famine. On your honour, you will do this?'

Boss Sojiro was emphatic in his assurances that the money would be used to help the famine-stricken village. 'Riches are worthless to a dead man,' he reasoned. 'But can you destroy this demon?'

'I have faced many before and sent their foul spirits back to Kimon,' Oba said. He laid his hand on Koumakiri's blade. 'None has yet prevailed against me. I will accept this task.'

The oyabun had a relieved smile when he stood up and bowed to Oba. 'A room will be prepared for you. I fear it would be advisable if you slept during the day. We don't know when the demon will come again, but when it does, it always comes at night.'

THREE nights passed uneventfully. It was on the fourth night of being the guest of Boss Sojiro that screams from the courtyard told Oba his waiting was at an end. The samurai threw aside the door of his roof and sprang across the wooden walkway that circled the garden in the middle of the compound. He saw servants racing away from the far side of the yard. A few armed yakuza roamed about the periphery, but none of them made a move towards the sinister form taking shape near the garden wall.

With each heartbeat, the apparition became more distinct. Oba thought the figure more resembled that of a large ape than a dog. The body was hairy, the forelimbs longer and more defined than the hind ones. A stub of tail projected from its rear. It was only when a head appeared atop the broad shoulders that he found a reason to describe the entity as any kind of hound. The long face with its fanged muzzle was that of a dog, but the forehead was higher than that of a mere animal and the eyes gleamed with a feral intelligence beyond a simple brute.

'Why do you hesitate?' one of the yakuza shouted at Oba. 'There is the demon! Kill it!'

Oba shook his head. 'I must wait for it to fully materialize. To attack now would be like fighting mist.' He kept a steady grip on his uchigatana while he waited for the fiend to become fully corporeal.

The dog-creature appeared to understand Oba's words. It fixed its hostile gaze upon him and its lips peeled back to expose its glistening fangs. A low snarl rattled up from its throat. The thing was taking on colour now as it finished materializing, assuming a brindle shading with white throat and belly. The eyes were red embers and shone with infernal intensity. It raised one of its long forelimbs. What was at the end of the arm was more like a hand than a paw, with four stumpy fingers each tipped with a sharp claw.

'Kill it!' the yakuza cried out. More of them had dashed out into the courtyard, but none of them made a move towards the creature. 'Kill it before it murders us all!'

Oba did not need the antagonizing shouts of the yakuza to move him to action. He waited only for that instant when he could no longer see the wall beyond the hound-like manifestation. When that moment came, he charged across the garden, Koumakiri clenched in both hands. He brought the blade whipping down at the creature in a blow intended to cleave it from shoulder to hip.

The strike never landed. In a burst of supernatural speed, the dog-ape lunged at Oba. It drove its hairy body beneath the sweep of his sword and drove its shoulder into his midriff in a manoeuvre that was more tackle than pounce. The samurai was knocked back, sent sprawling on the ground. His attacker leapt upon him and brought its claws raking across his chest. They scraped against his steel armour and marred its lacquer coating. A strangely human look of confusion came upon the canine face when its failed to rend Oba's flesh.

Heaving upwards, Oba drove the unyielding steel of his helm into the beast's muzzle. A yelp of pain rang out and the dog jumped away, one hand clutching at its injured nose. Oba pulled himself back to his feet and closed upon his foe once more.

The dog lowered its hand and growled at the samurai. Oba paused, surprised to find that the injury he'd inflicted had already vanished. Certainly there were demons he'd encountered that boasted a terrible vitality that could heal even the most crippling wounds, but never had he seen one that recovered this quickly. He would have to do more than merely crack its nose to work any harm against this enemy.

Throwing back its head to utter a ghoulish howl, the dog came back to the attack. It charged at Oba, slashing at him with its claws. He noted that it now tried for his face rather than his body, seeking to assault a part of him that wasn't protected by armour. He gave ground before the attack, drawing the creature with him as he back-pedalled.

From the corner of his eye, Oba could see Genji watching the fight from the walkway. The scarred gambler's face twitched with fear. Though he had a half-dozen yakuza around him, he trembled like a hare in the presence of a fox.

The dog-creature noticed Genji too. It turned its head towards him and its eyes blazed with new fury. For a moment it paid no attention to the samurai.

Oba seized that moment. He dashed in and struck at the distracted monster. Koumakiri came chopping down. The dog's left arm was lopped off, sent tumbling along the ground to twitch in the grass. He struck again when the beast turned back towards him and tried to bury its fangs in his throat. The long muzzle was sliced in half by the uchigatana and the mutilated dog staggered back with blood streaming from its wounds.

Cheers went up from the spectating yakuza, and none cheered so riotously as Genji. He jumped down into the garden, a wide grin on his face. An instant later, horror replaced glee and he was scrambling for the shelter of the walkway.

The dog-creature was whole again. In the blink of an eye, its severed pieces vanished from the ground and were restored to its ape-like body. Where a mangled, dying monster had stood a moment before, now the thing was as whole and intact as when it had first manifested.

Oba felt grim dread seize him. No demon had such awful powers of restoration. Not against the enchanted steel of Koumakiri. What he faced was not a demon from Kimon. It was something else. An angry god or a murderous ghost. 'Get back!' he shouted to the yakuza. 'I cannot stop the fiend!'

The dog-creature swung its head around and stared at Oba. The lips curled back in hideous imitation of a human smile. Before he could react, it lunged at the walkway. Claws raked the yakuza who stood in its way, spilling their bodies down into the garden. Swords stabbed ineffectually at the monster as it barrelled through the gangsters to reach Genji. The scarred gambler screamed as the hound seized him in its hand and spun him around.

Oba charged after the beast, but when he reached the walkway, it was already mauling Genji with its claws and fangs. The shrieking gambler hung limp in its grip as the dog ripped his flesh, his lifeblood spraying across the paper wall behind him.

Koumakiri struck the dog-creature from behind, biting so deeply into the monster's back that its spine was severed. Genji fell from the creature's grip and slopped to the floor in a gory heap. His killer started to fade away, the colour draining out of it.

When Oba thrust at it a second time, his sword passed through it completely and gouged the walkway. The creature turned towards him, a triumphant gleam in its eyes. Already it was whole again. More than whole, it seemed to Oba that it stood straighter than it had before and its arms were not nearly so long and apish as they had been. Whatever change had occurred in the vanishing fiend, it threw back its head and a victorious howl echoed through the courtyard.

An instant later and it was gone completely. The only evidence of its presence were the dead and injured it left behind.

One of the partitions overlooking the courtyard slid open and Boss Sojiro emerged. His face was grey and his expression grim. He looked across the carnage and then his gaze settled upon Oba. 'Even your renowned sword couldn't stop the demon,' he sighed. 'Our last hope has failed.'

'If it is a demon,' Oba said. He bowed to the oyabun. 'It is not arrogance that makes me suggest this, but I don't believe your tormentor is a demon at all. Never have I seen one of their ilk that could defy Koumakiri or recover from the sword so swiftly. It is some other horror that preys on your men.'

'Demon or no, it will be our doom now,' Boss Sojiro stated. 'We have done all we can to fight it. The priest of Jodo-gu was unwilling to exorcise this murderer no matter how much we offered to his temple. He told us he would pray, but that it would be an impure act to do more.'

'The ways of priests are not those of other men,' Oba agreed. 'They strive for balance and to fulfil the designs of the gods. A righteous priest cannot be bought. It is his righteousness not his greed that must be courted.' He scratched his chin as he considered the problem. 'I would speak with this priest,' he decided.

Boss Sojiro gave the samurai a despondent shake of his head. 'It will do no good. Katamune-negi has refused to intervene.'

'Perhaps the reason the priest will not act is because he knows more than you do,' Oba suggested. 'It is no demon. Now I would know what this monster is and I think Katamune-negi holds the answer.'

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SOMEWHERE within Jodo-gu a bell was tolling. Oba could feel it as well as hear it, the vibrations pulsing through his body. There was a curiously comforting aspect to the sensation, pacifying some of the samurai's doubts and fears.

The smell of incense drifted through the many-pillared shrine and the tapestries fluttered from the influence of an unfelt breeze. Oba looked towards the altar before him with its seated statues of the kami representing the Divine Empress and her Phoenix Court. Candles burned before each golden sculpture while joss sticks smouldered in sand-filled bowls. Even in the midst of famine, the people of Nobase paid homage to their gods with what little they had to offer.

A hanging to the left of the altar rippled outwards and from behind it emerged Katamune-negi. The priest wore a crimson sash over his yellow robes and a long string of prayer beads hung from his neck. He was an old man, his face lean and wrinkled, the stubble on his shaven head faded and grey. His expression struck Oba as somehow both kindly and stern.

'You have come from Boss Sojiro,' Katamune-negi said. 'Whatever errand he has sent you upon, I am afraid he has wasted your time.'

Oba bowed to the priest. 'I came here by my own choice. Sojiro said you would not help him. I came to learn for myself if this was true. If you would sit idle while a demon...'

The priest curled his fingers around the prayer beads. 'It is not a demon,' Katamune-negi told Oba. 'Though certainly Boss Sojiro and his gang have been villains enough to earn the notice of the worst oni.' A sad smile appeared on his face. 'Even in the seclusion of Jodo-gu, I have heard of you, Shintaro Oba. Your battles with the demons that infest the empire are to be praised. Your sword has been valiant in the cause of good. Can you not comfort yourself that it is no demon that preys upon the yakuza?'

'If you are certain it isn't a demon, then you must know what the beast is,' Oba said. His eyes were hard when he looked at the priest. 'Today it kills the yakuza, but can you be certain tomorrow it won't seek innocent victims?'

Katamune-negi looked troubled by the last question. It was clear to Oba that such doubt had occurred to him before. 'The creature is a ghost, an inugami called up to mete out vengeance.'

Oba glanced down at Koumakiri. The famed demon-slaying sword's ineffectual performance was explained. Though it could visit destruction on the foul spirits of Kimon, it had no such potency against the ghosts of mortals.

The priest continued. 'The inugami is the spectre of a dog sacrificed in an obscene ritual. Like a living hound, it can be set upon prey. Whatever prey its master desires.'

'Then there is someone who chooses this ghost's victims,' Oba said. 'A moment ago you spoke of vengeance. You must know who has conjured the inugami and why they send it to kill.'

A deep frown worked itself onto Katamune-negi's visage. 'I will not reveal this. The yakuza would seek to murder their enemy.'

'Is it better to let their enemy murder them?'

'That is not my responsibility,' the priest stated, though his look was less confident than his words. 'If I named the person who has targetted them, I would be as guilty as they of whatever followed.'

Oba shook his head. 'I am no yakuza. You know of my reputation. If you believe what you have heard about me, then believe I would never break my word once given.'

Katamune-negi considered the samurai's speech. After a few minutes, he reached a decision. 'Remain here. I will bring the inugami's master to speak with you.' He raised his hand in warning. 'All you may do is speak with her. Upon your honour you will lay neither hand nor blade upon her or make any move to restrain her when she wishes to leave. Agree to this, or I cannot help you.'

Oba drew Koumakiri an inch from its scabbard and then pushed it back with such speed that the click of guard meeting sheath echoed through the shrine. 'You have my word.'

The priest nodded to Oba before withdrawing. The samurai was left alone with the gold gods and his uncertain thoughts. If he couldn't reach some compromise with the woman coming to the temple it would mean more lives. Lives that *he* would be responsible for.

It was a little more than an hour before Katamune-negi returned. With him he brought an old woman dressed in the rough kimono of a farmer. Long white hair spilled down around her shoulders and back, but was kept from falling into her face by a serpent-shaped comb. Her skin was dark from the sun, her hands calloused from working her fields. Her face was withered by her many years, but upon it was etched a great sorrow. Only in the intensity of her eyes did that sadness surrender to hate. A wrath of such ferocity that even Oba hesitated to meet her gaze.

'This is Tsukame,' the priest introduced the woman. 'She has agreed to speak with you.' Katamune-negi stepped aside so that the two could talk.

'You are the witch who has set this ghost against Boss Sojiro?' Oba asked. If not for her eyes, he wouldn't believe such a frail and elderly woman could bring harm to anyone. But he had seen her eyes and he knew they told a different story.

'I have some talent for the black arts,' Tsukame replied and displayed her few teeth in a grisly smile. 'But I should think you've seen for yourself the potency of my spells.' She glanced at the priest and cackled. 'I am told even your famous demon-sword couldn't thwart my revenge.'

'The inugami killed four men last night.' Oba clenched his fist when he saw that the witch only broadened her smile at the news. 'The ghost was sent to kill Honda Genji. It did so, but only after slaying three others and wounding two more.'

Katamune-negi turned to Tsukame. 'You hear? The man you wanted is dead. Is this not enough to satisfy your vengeance?'

The witch glared at the priest. 'They killed my son!' she yelled. 'My only son! They cheated him and they killed him and they left his body in the gutter for the rats to gnaw! What matter if it was Genji's sword? All of them are responsible! All of them will suffer!'

The witch's rage whipped through the temple like a lash of fire. Oba, who had heard the threats of demons and sorcerers, was stunned by Tsukame's fury. Here was a hate such as he had never seen. A hate that had blazed up inside the witch until everything else was consumed. Without her hate, she would have nothing left. She would *be* nothing.

'And when you have murdered all the yakuza, will even that be enough to satiate you?' Oba challenged her. 'Or will you find others to destroy?'

Tsukame laughed at the samurai. 'There isn't enough blood in hell to quench my thirst. Boss Sojiro and his scum will die. They will die in agony and horror. They will...'

'But after the yakuza, what happens then?' Oba pressed her. He saw the hate burn brighter in her eyes.

'Then the people of Nobase will learn to fear the night,' Tsukame vowed. 'None of them lifted a hand to help my son. None of them dared lift his body from the gutter where the gangsters left him.' A murderous cackle shook her aged frame. 'They will suffer as I have suffered. They will feel all the pleasures of life drain out of them as they wait for death.'

Katamune-negi tried to appeal to Tsukame. 'You cannot do this! You must not! Can your vengeance not be satisfied now? How many do you think you can murder to ease the hurt in your heart?'

'As many as I need to,' the witch sneered at him. She trained a mocking smile on Oba. 'Try to stop me and you will earn a horrible death, samurai. It would be best for you if you left Nobase while you can.'

Oba saw a change in Katamune-negi's expression. 'It would be best for you if you agreed that the blood-debt owed you has been paid,' he warned. 'Otherwise it is you who will come to a horrible end.'

Tsukame laughed and turned from the men. 'Cling to your delusions, samurai. You cannot stop me and if you try you will die.'

Samurai and priest watched as the old witch walked away. True to his word, Oba made no move to restrain her or strike her. Even if he was of a mind to, he wasn't certain that would end the inugami's attacks.

'Will you still hold yourself above the fray?' Oba asked Katamune-negi. 'You have heard. She will never be content. She will send the ghost to kill until Nobase is utterly desolate.' He looked into the priest's eyes. 'Tsukame is right, I can't defeat the inugami. I don't know how. But I think that you do.'

Katamune-negi rubbed his fingers across his prayer beads. 'There is a way,' he finally said. 'Listen to what I tell you, and the next time the inugami appears...'

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OBA maintained a vigil in the courtyard. From the moment the sun set, he found a place in the garden and awaited the ghostly manifestation. Koumakiri lay on the ground beside him, but it wasn't the sword that would be his weapon this night. He had a deadlier armament now. The instruction Katamune-negi had given him.

As Oba watched the stars grow bright in the darkening sky, he considered the revelation the priest made to him. The secret of the inugami and how Tsukame's revenge could be ended. It was a secret that would be useful only if the witch refused to relent. Only if she insisted on glutting her hate.

Some yakuza prowled about the periphery of the courtyard. The gangsters were more anxious now than on the previous night. They'd lost their faith in Oba's ability to defeat the monster. Boss Sojiro had put his last hope in the samurai. Now he sat in his room and awaited the witch's spectral assassin.

Oba glanced down at the little golden charm he'd been given at Jodo-gu. It would, he was assured, provide some slight protection from the ghost. Enough to guard him while he did what he needed to do.

A sudden chill in the air was his first warning of the ghost's presence. There was nothing that could be seen, only a clammy sensation that slithered across his skin. Oba felt his gaze drawn to a spot near the fountain. While he watched, a hazy image began to appear. At first he thought it was a man, for he distinctly noted the outline of a kimono, but as more detail began to make itself distinct, he saw this was the ghost of nothing human.

The apparition was more manlike in build, and as Oba had noted, it was clothed. The arms were more proportionate than the apelike limbs of the last visitation, but the hands that hung from the sleeves were hairy and clawed. The head that rose from the shoulders was canine, with the long, fanged muzzle

and sharp, pointed ears. The eyes, as they became clear, had a cunning and intelligence that Oba hadn't seen in its prior form.

With each appearance, the inugami had become more human in shape, acquiring the aspect of its victims. This much the witch may have understood, but what she hadn't anticipated was the change occurring within the ghost. After each attack its intelligence was growing. Its capacity to reason and comprehend was also growing more human.

Oba stared at the inugami as it made the transition from misty shape to complete materialization. The moment was coming. The moment when he could send Tsukame's curse back upon her vengeful head.

'It has come again,' Boss Sojiro cried out from the walkway. Oba darted a look in the oyabun's direction. He'd emerged from his room to face the ghost's attack rather than cower in hiding and wait for it to find him. Gangster though he was, his courage impressed Oba.

The inugami turned towards Boss Sojiro. Before it could move, however, Oba stood before it with his bared sword. The dog's lips peeled back in an expression of contempt. It knew already that Koumakiri couldn't harm it.

Oba hesitated only for a moment. He considered the consequences of what he was about to do. He also thought of what would happen if he didn't and the witch was allowed to continue.

'Seiji,' Oba spoke the name the priest had revealed to him. It was the name of Tsukame's dog, the animal she'd so cruelly sacrificed to accomplish her revenge.

The inugami stood transfixed. Confusion filled its eyes when it heard its own name.

'Seiji,' Oba repeated. 'Remember. Remember what was done to you... and by whom.'

The ghost peered at Oba, but the expression on its canine face had become pensive. Its almost human mind was hearkening to the samurai. It was reaching back into the dim corridors of memory and dredging up images from its animal past. Things beyond the understanding of a brutish dog were laid bare to the inugami. Oba could see shock flicker across its expression, then its face curled back in a vicious snarl. It threw its head back and uttered a wolfish howl.

There was no gradual fading away as in the previous attacks. The echoes of that last howl still reverberated through the courtyard when the inugami vanished before the eyes of Oba and the yakuza.

'The... the ghost... it is gone!' Boss Sojiro stuttered, unable to believe his own eyes.

Oba faced the oyabun. 'The inugami will not come here again. It has gone away on its own mission of vengeance. It will repay the ruthless cruelty inflicted upon it by one who it loved and trusted when it was alive. When it is finished your enemy will be gone.'

Boss Sojiro smiled and wiped his hand across his sweating brow. 'You have earned your fee, samurai! You have saved my household and my territory! I will use the ninety-eight ryo to help the people of Nobase through this famine.'

'There is one other thing you can do,' Oba said as he took his two ryo from one of the oyabun's henchmen. He looked across the other yakuza, at villainous faces little improved by the relief they felt at their reprieve. 'A word of warning you would do well

to heed. It was someone you wronged who sent this murdering ghost. You have no more to fear from her, but the spell one has cast another might learn. Be careful in how you conduct yourselves.

'Because the next time a witch sends an inugami against your gang, you might not find anyone to save you from its wrath.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Exiled to the blazing wastes of Arizona for communing with ghastly Lovecraftian abominations, C L Werner strives to infect others with the grotesque images that infest his mind. He is the author of almost thirty novels and novellas in settings ranging from Warhammer, Age of Sigmar, and Warhammer 40,000 to the Iron Kingdoms and Wild West Exodus. His short fiction has appeared in several anthologies, among them *Rage of the Behemoth*, *Sharkpunk*, *Kaiju Rising*, *A Grimoire of Eldritch Investigations*, *Edge of Sundown*, *Shakespeare vs Cthulhu*, *City of the Gods*, and *Marching Time*.

LEGION OF THE SKULL

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ILLUSTRATION BY RANDY BROECKER

DEAD QUEEN'S TRIUMPH

By RYAN HARVEY

FROM the high balcony, Andraz could make out the spectral black mark in Rurik Bay. The port of the city was under a layer of mist, but even with the added cover of dusk, the strange ship stood out. It dropped anchor ten days ago and had not moved since. The harbor sentries reported seeing no one leave or board it.

It was an insignificant thing to worry about. Andraz had enough struggles running the city, haggling with the other magistrates, and preparing for his new family, to weigh himself down with small business like the black ship. But something about it beset Andraz's Sorrow, like a reminder of the tyrannies the city of Durvill had driven back.

Andraz might have stared at the mystery ship until it was too dark to see, but Mateja called him away.

"Come quickly! Your children are kicking again!" His wife's palms pressed over the circle of her belly under the gown. Andraz ran from the mansion porch to the divan and slipped his hand over the velvety eight-month swell. He felt nothing. He never came in time to feel these "kicks" Mateja always rejoiced over.

"Can't you feel that? Your son is already a freedom fighter, like his father. Your daughter is much sweeter."

He kissed her. "Like her mother."

Mateja had settled on the twins as a boy and girl. She had no proof, but her will was so strong that Andraz had no doubt she would make it so.

Mateja sank into the cushions, enjoying the life inside her. But her husband's distraction was too great to escape notice. "Andraz, what is troubling you?"

"Nothing. Truly, it's nothing."

She laid her head in the cradle of a pillow. "Then it's nothing you should worry about now. You cannot be 'Andraz the Inspirer' every hour of your life."

After more kisses and the feel of Mateja's black hair against his chest, Andraz started to push away the Sorrow that came from thinking about the black ship.

The rude clang of the porch bell interrupted his thoughts.

Andraz walked down the foyer staircase, adjusting his tunic and flattening the hair Mateja had tousled. The steward of his household waited at the bottom of the stairs with a careworn look.

"Master, there are pilgrims in the orchard court."

"From what temple?"

"They wear the robes of the Handless God, but I—I feel uncertain of them, master."

"Go back to my lady and watch over her."

"Should I send a messenger to the city guard?"

"No, we're in no danger." To the citizens, he was Durvill's

savior, "Andraz the Inspirer." The grandiose title made him blush, but it also made his house inviolate.

He passed under an arch carved with entwined sea serpents and a crown of saurian's teeth. It was a remnant of the Old Palace of the long-vanished royal family. The grateful citizens had given the palace ruins to Andraz, and he built his mansion of gentle sweet-smelling wood within the brooding stone walls. But as Andraz walked beyond the arch into the garden of rowan trees, he felt the ghost of the Old Palace stronger than he ever had before.

Several robed and hooded figures stood on the path as if they hadn't moved since the steward greeted them.

"I am Andraz. What do you wish? Business of the city should be taken to the council during open audiences."

The tallest of the figures stepped forward. A taint of decay rolled from him. "Your queen demands your presence. You will come immediately."

Andraz tried to peer into the shadows of the hood, but could make out nothing in the uncanny blackness. "There are no longer any queens or kings in Durvill."

The man raised a hand. "Your queen has returned. You will go to her."

A realization came to Andraz. He stepped backwards off the pebbled path. "You aren't pilgrims of the Handless God. You come from the black ship in the harbor."

The hooded head bowed. "That ship has brought your queen home. She has heard that among her servants you are the highest. Queen Klavda demands to see you."

"Queen Klavda is dead," Andraz said. "She vanished five centuries ago, when the Shapers conquered all the lands."

"And now the Shapers are gone, and the queen is alive. Does this not make sense?"

Andraz felt a distant danger. Not distant enough. The five false pilgrims did not seem ready to pounce on him and drag him off. But whoever they were beneath the pious fakery, they *believed* what they were saying.

"I cannot come now. If you tell me where I may find—Queen Klavda—at my convenience, I'll—"

The tall figure reached into a pouch about his neck and drew out a finger-sized scroll. He dropped it onto the path. "Tomorrow. Come alone. Otherwise..."

Nothing more than that: *Otherwise*. Andraz had heard no stronger threat, not even from a raving Jalask warrior.

The false pilgrims turned around as if an unseen hand controlled them. Andraz waited until the gloom of dusk devoured them before he reached for the scroll.

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ANDRAZ slipped off in the morning, dressed in a gray tunic and hood. To be certain to draw no attention, he picked a draft hadro from the stable, a strong but simple beast with no ornamental crest. He drove the saurian around the edge of the Ancient Quarter, where it was impossible to escape the sight of the black spire rising like a tumor from the heart of Durvill.

One day he must urge the council to destroy that monster. It was one of the few reminders left of the five centuries the Shapers had ruled Durvill and most of the continent of Ahn-Tarqa. But those vile masked sorcerers made their buildings to endure, and funds were better spent rebuilding the citizens' lives than unbuilding the tyrants' symbols.

Andraz turned his saurian away from the Ancient Quarter and descended into the perpetual fog of the Damp.

He had grown up among these dripping hovels that clutched like barnacles to the cliffs of Rurik Bay. All of his family died of a coughing sickness soon after he volunteered for the army, and he had not returned to the Damp since. But his memory of its Sorrow was strong, so he had no difficulty following the directions on the scroll.

Andraz counted off the buildings until he found "the seventh house after turning the corner onto the Way of Wavering." Crowded between the other moss-crusting buildings was a three-tiered home. A haze burned from the topmost window, the only light on the whole street.

Andraz dismounted and stepped through the open doorway. The lowest tier was empty, not even a twig of furniture. But it was also clear of saurian dung, something an abandoned house normally had.

He took the stairs to the second tier. The false pilgrims were waiting for him at the top. Standing behind them were men and women carrying weapons, from crude axes to blackpowder guns and other tools of the Art. To Andraz, the magic of the Art always brought fears of the Shapers. He preferred to fight barbarians armed with weapons no more tricky than clubs and bows.

But this was an unfamiliar Art unlike the craft of the Shapers. The tools of those sorcerers had dark, austere beauty. It horrified, but it had symmetry. Here was chaos, not only in the weapons, but in the people. The pilgrims had removed their hoods, revealing skin that was a crude quilt of their own flesh and the flesh of others—human and beast. The guards ringing them had more twisted changes to them, with arms and legs made from tentacles and saurian claws tethered to human meat.

"You have come later than expected," said a familiar voice. It was the tall figure who brought the summons yesterday. He had more human pieces than the others, but pustules covered his bald head and crept down the side of his face to make him look lopsided.

Andraz pulled off his hood. "I had to be careful who saw—" "Explanations are wasteful. You are here."

Andraz tried to examine closer the abominations around him, but their appearance was too revolting. Looking at one was like looking at three: human, saurian, and something pulped between.

"Who are you? I've never seen—people such as you before."

"The Art of the Flesh," the tall creature announced. "The Shapers practice it, but not so others can see. They prefer to twist saurians."

"Why do you practice it? This is the Free City of Durvill. We have no use for diseased Art. We use as much of the Art as we need to survive: glow globes, heat, a few blackpowder weapons. All that our Sorrow will allow."

"Your queen has come to change this. You will go to her now."

The quasi-human things behind Andraz pressed toward him, and he started forward. Another staircase climbed to the top tier, and Andraz walked behind the tall pilgrim, aware of the blades and blastguns at his back.

Purple curtains draped the top chamber. A wood throne with a metal crown hammered atop it stood against the wall. The thing seated on it needed no gauze of royalty to seize attention.

The pustule-headed servant bowed toward the throne. "Queen Klavda of Durvill, last and eternal descendant of the House of Slijav."

Andraz at first mistook what sat on the chair for a mannikin, a freak metal sculpture meant to adorn the halls of an insane aristocrat. But at the motion from the bowing servitor, the bronze contraption moved: a shift in the jaw, a twist of the neck. The movement made a few links of flesh and muscle visible. A flatworm of a tongue slithered behind the metal jaws.

"You—are not—bowing."

The Sorrow, the hopelessness that curses all people of Ahn-Tarqa, afflicted Andraz less than most. He had fought through it in the chaos of the Shapers' withdrawal and the war against the invading Jalask tribes that followed. He had seen Shaper war machines powered by steam and lightning and he had not gone mad. But this puppet of bronze and flesh made his gorge rise and his mind scream. He dropped to his knees in fear, not obeisance.

"Better," spat the thing.

Two hooded servants stepped from behind the curtains. They reached for rods extending from the bronze thing's arms. The figure on the throne came to life, moving under the power of the slaves who manipulated the metal joints to make its arms gesture toward Andraz. Bits of flesh at the junctures moved as well, flexing fingers and moving the jaw. Behind glass orbs Andraz saw staring white eyes without lids.

"You—don't yet believe—that I am your queen." The tongue moved freer as the abomination became used to speaking. "For long, I forgot that I was as well. But I am royal blood still. See?"

One of the manipulated arms placed its hand over a flap on the chest cylinder. Fingers gripped the sides and pulled it open. Andraz was fixed with horror at the sight of a heart beating behind a glass shield.

"The blood flows—and I live. An Art even the Shapers never mastered. But the rest of me—" The metal fingers curled and uncurled. "—festers away. And I will not do to myself what my servants do and attach limbs of others onto me. I am royal. Only royal bodies may join mine. And I think this metal that replaces it is beautiful. Do you not agree, Andraz?"

He gulped. "How do you know of me? How did you find where I live?"

To give the queen time to regain her strength, the tall servant spoke in her stead: "We have watched your city for ten days, moving among you unseen. There are passages and tunnels known only to the queen that the royal family built for their spies. The man most beloved among the people—as the queen once was—could not escape our notice. You have even made your home inside the ruins of her palace."

"How did you come to be—this?" Andraz said, but did not gesture at the bronze creature.

The jaw muscles worked. "I fled when the Shapers massacred my house. I escaped in a ship, but in the Sea of Loss I was wrecked on the island of Orkimogg. There were—*devices*—there, and a man who used them. He infused me with a fire to make my heart beat forever. He intended to torment me for his knowledge and pleasure, letting me linger with life from a heart that would never stop beating. But he was a fool, and I tricked him and slew him. My blood was stronger than his, and his creatures bowed to me. And so I ruled his island of slaves. More slaves washed onto the rocks. I collected them, some who knew the Art, and for years uncountable I oversaw a colony of flesh molded and shaped to the thoughts wriggling through my head.

"Then—I awoke. A boat foundered on our shore, and the men we seized were from Durvill. Traitors! They had joined the Shapers, and now that the Shapers were no longer masters, they were escaping justice."

For a moment, all the remains of sinew and muscles came to life, and the bronze queen jerked forward as if she could stand up and walk. "I learned my city was free again. *My city!* In the fever of the drug that made my heart immortal I had forgotten it. Now my mind stirred with memories: my palaces, cushions and silks, spices over sweetmeats, colored ribbons to chase away the Sorrow. And my many slaves."

Andraz could not stop himself from speaking. "There are no longer slaves in Durvill. The city struggles, and all the people must work together in freedom for us to survive."

The bronze head bent forward. Lidless eyes flashed through the glass. "Then I have returned at the right time. Tell me, how came my city to this horrid state?"

Andraz spoke with caution and all the modesty he possessed. "When the Shapers abandoned their conquests, they left the city with nothing. The generals fled. The Jalask tribes of the plains gathered to drive south and loot Durvill. Some of the soldiers resisted. I was one of them. I rallied the people, freed the slaves, and together we turned back the barbarians at the city walls. The citizens chose to make me and my fellow soldiers into the leaders of a Council of Magistrates."

"Why did they not proclaim you king?"

Because they wanted no more tyrants, Andraz almost shouted. When the Shapers left, no one wanted them replaced—even with human despots. And history remembered the House of Slijav as a line of maniacs and sybarites.

But Andraz restrained himself. "The people named me High Magistrate."

The bronze body stayed at rest. "It matters not if they made you king. It is your *queen* who has returned, and my blood is royal. I have come back to save you, for I now see that Durvill is sick. My servants have told me of the toil and beggary in the streets. You are too weak to hold slaves. Too deep in the trenches with shovels, your hands tainted with mud. This was once a city of pleasures."

Not for all, Andraz thought, and again restrained himself from saying.

"I will make it so again." An arm stretched out. Bronze fingers commanded Andraz to rise. "Go to your council tomorrow and inform them that in two days Queen Klavda will take back the city for the House of Slijav in a pageant in the Square of the Leg-

less Conqueror. Do not tell the people yet, only the magistrates. I will surprise them all when I return and lift their Sorrow. The city will rise again."

Andraz thought about the twisted half-humans with their weapons waiting at the landing below. He had no choice of answer if he wanted to leave the Damp alive. He could decide later what to do about this insurrection from five hundred years past.

"I shall tell the others, and we shall prepare your way."

The tall servant glanced at Andraz, then nodded at his bronze queen.

"I know you lie," Klavda said. "But I have more servitors than you see here. They have spread throughout the city. And I have brought some of the mysteries of my island back with me. Poisons and tortures from an Art older than even Shapers. One in particular—"

The queen shifted forward, creating a queasy mix of grinding bronze and wet flesh. The hand picked up a vial filled with amber liquid from the arm of the throne. "This starts the corruption of the flesh at a young age, when the baby slumbers in the mother's womb. Younger subjects are much better, the changes so much more—pleasing."

Andraz felt the Sorrow swell around him. He had never felt fear when he rode into battle, mounted on a tri-horn war-charger. But this threat was enough to make his joints come apart.

"Do you understand me?" asked the bronze queen.

Andraz nodded.

"Then go!" Queen Klavda threw out her arm at the guidance of her puppeteers. A finger of tarnished metal pointed Andraz the way out.

• • •

MATEJA'S arms were wrapped around his shoulders, but Andraz was afraid to return the hold. Sometimes that was the way with the Sorrow.

"I don't like having the soldiers inside our home," she said again.

Andraz combed his fingers through her hair. "It's only for a few days, my love."

"Can't you at least tell me what has frightened you so much?"

Andraz felt a soft pressure against his body. It was the first time he had felt one of his children kick.

But instead of embracing his wife and placing his head beside hers so he could tell her, he pushed away. He couldn't have Mateja and his children on his mind, not with that *thing* threatening them all. He had to make a choice for the good of the city, not for the good of Andraz the Inspirer and his family.

"Be well," he said as he turned his back on Mateja and started toward the entrance of the house. The company of guards standing sentry at the entrances nodded to him as he passed, but they knew better than to disturb a man who was struggling with his own Sorrow.

Unlike the morning before, Andraz rode openly into the city, dressed in the red robes of state and mounted on a hadro with a crest painted with his household sigil. Around him came the chants of his name as the people recognized him: "Andraz the Inspirer." They had cheered his name at a roar in the days when the army came back with trophies of the defeated Jalasks. The cheers were fewer now, and filled with desperation.

Over the roofs and steeples of the city, Andraz imagined he saw a vapor of the Sorrow. Beneath it were the crawling poor and the struggling merchants, but this Sorrow was not theirs. Perhaps it belonged to the city. Perhaps it was not only people who suffered from the hopeless fear that life was of no use.

Queen Klavda's thralls lurked among the crowd, probably hidden under beggars' tatters. There was enough skin-rot diseases in Durvill to make it difficult to tell if scaly skin was an illness or one of the bronze queen's twisted servants. If any were following or spying on him, they escaped his wary eyes.

Andraz stopped his mount at the steps of the Council Dome and handed the reins to a footman. As he was about to dismount, a woman pushed through the crowd to him. She clutched two children at her breast.

"Inspirer, touch me and maybe I shall have milk for my babies again!"

The Sorrow and starvation had so worn the woman that she looked as if she were the children's grandmother. It would be a mercy if her infants starved, and she with them. But Andraz remembered Mateja at home, and his coming twins. He let his fingers brush across the woman's cheek. Another person's Sorrow, lightened for a day or an hour.

The other magistrates waited in the antechamber of the dome. Lacklo approached Andraz first. He was the fattest man in Durvill, quite a feat in those lean days. As the Magistrate of the Seas, he had first pick of any catch the fishing ships brought in. But he ran the harbor well, and it was the city's best source of food and trade until the routes with the other cities were repaired.

"You're late," Lacklo said. "I was afraid we might have to begin without you."

"I had to see to a few citizens' needs."

"You're not the last to arrive. Stazio is missing. We've sent runners to see why."

Andraz nodded. Stazio, Magistrate of the Laws, was never late. "Have you found out anything more about the black ship?"

The waddles of fat on Lacklo's chin quivered. "No one has come ashore from it yet."

"You are certain?"

"Of course. I have the harbor sentries watching it day and night."

With ale tankards at their side. Andraz had stood watch at the chilly harbor his first year of service, and he knew how the sentries kept warm.

Lacklo continued: "Perhaps we should send soldiers aboard if we hear nothing else in a few days."

"I doubt you will find much there." Andraz looked at the guards flanking the doors to the council hall. He recognized their faces, so Klavda's spies were not inside. But he did not know if he could confide in Lacklo or any of the council about the threat over his head. Klavda had some way of knowing what occurred in their circle, or she would not have spoken with such confidence that Andraz would make the announcement.

"We can't wait for Stazio. There are urgent matters." Andraz clapped his hands, and the ten other magistrates in the antechamber turned to look toward the highest among them. "Leaders of Durvill, let us assemble!"

Inside the hall, the eleven magistrates sat at a table cobbled together from driftwood and polished to hide its humble origin. Andraz struck a nautical bell on the table to start the meeting.

The magistrates turned to look at him. He was only their leader in title and had power equal to the rest of them, as he preferred it. But he still possessed the title, and he was the city's hero.

"Magistrates, I bring—strange news. Yesterday, word was brought to my mansion about a visitor to our city. A visitor from the past."

The attention on Andraz suddenly sharpened.

"The Shapers?" asked two magistrates at once.

Andraz did not know how to respond. The dead Queen of Durvill spoke of having great resources. She knew the long forgotten royal tunnels. Her spies might lurk anywhere, even within the Council Dome. If Andraz spoke against Klavda, or ignored her, how fast would the bronze queen's fury come?

He answered slowly: "It is nothing to do with the Shapers. It is a deeper past."

Tvonja, the oldest magistrate, spoke: "The past is carrion. Tell your visitor to leave. Durvill may not be the shining city it once was, but our Sorrow is the Sorrow of the free."

"Yes," Andraz said, and answered with an equally strong "yes" in his head. The bronze lich could not be permitted to hold power over them. They were free—they had fought to become so. Klavda was powerless and only boasting. Andraz would tell them what he had seen, and call on the citizen guards to ride down into the Damp and break apart the joints of that metal abomination.

But then a signal came, as if a power of the Art had reached into his thoughts. Soldiers shouted from the antechamber, not in warning but in horror.

The magistrates were on their feet before Stazio, their missing number, stumbled in. Two guards came behind, afraid to touch him. As he groped forward, everyone in the hall drew back from the table, repulsed by whatever Stazio had become.

They only recognized him because the brooch holding his tunic had on it his family's crest. A horror had chewed up all of him that mattered.

"*Ahhndrazzzzhhhh*," slurred from the dripping remains of the mouth. "*Ahhndrazzzzh!*"

Andraz knew the sound of his name even through the strangling noise. He moved straight toward the mass that seemed only muscles without a flesh-covering, pieces dripping away each second. When he came closer, Andraz saw it wasn't muscles at all: the crimson, drooling mess of Stazio had changed into clumps of sea creatures, a spongy mass of writhing worm-ends.

Stazio slumped into Andraz's arms. The suckers of the things grafted onto the man were sickening against Andraz's bare skin, but he held on. He had to know what had happened.

"Stazio, who did this? Who?"

"*Shheee. Th-he mhetal bhi-tch ...*"

Stazio's legs crumpled and his neck began to twist with agony. Andraz grabbed at the man's head and forced him to look into his eyes. They, at least, were still human.

"Stazio, did she say anything to you?"

Stazio jerked involuntarily against Andraz's hold. There was a wet *crack*, then Stazio's body dropped to the chamber floor—all except the neck and the head. That remained behind, gripped in Andraz's hands.

He blocked out the shouts around him and checked his revulsion as he looked at the remains. One thing among the mass of repulsion was solid: a tin canister in Stazio's fist. Andraz laid

down the head of the once proud council member on the floor, then slid the canister from the hand of the corpse. He unscrewed the top. Inside was a slip of parchment, on which were scratched uneven letters:

"YOUR CHILDREN WILL BE EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN THIS."

Lacklo tugged at his shoulder, and the other magistrates shouted at him to get away from the horror on the floor. But Andraz stood up and raised his hand. He was, momentarily, the warrior-leader once again. The others stopped and waited for his command.

"Magistrates of Durvill, our queen has returned. We must ... welcome her."

• • •

THE soldiers in the mansion didn't have a chance. Klavda's twisted murderers had climbed up a hidden passage that opened under a circular stone marked with the old gods of the House of Slijav. They struck from within the house and slaughtered every guard, losing only one of their own.

Mateja was gone. She would still be alive, because that was how the bronze queen wanted it. Klavda had thrown terror into the magistrates with what she did to Stazio, but it was their most respected member whose limbs she most needed to control with her puppet rods.

Andraz looked at the bloody ruins spread across his home. His own blood felt thin as water. Where was "Andraz the Inspirer"? The man who had stood up in the stirrups of a war-charging hadro and called his soldiers to turn the Sorrow into rage and defend their new freedom. That man must have died. Andraz had become a husband, soon to be a father, and was no longer the fighter he had once been. Even before finding his wife had been kidnapped, he had told the council all that had happened and urged they surrender.

It was for Mateja, he told himself. She kept away his Sorrow now, not battle. Anything to save her, and his children, he would do. The terrified men who looked up to him would follow his advice. A few, such a Tvonja, suggested resistance, but only for a moment. The Sorrow Andraz had seen gathering over the city was too heavy. How easily the dread from the years of Shaper cruelty returned!

The people of Durvill would fall too. The years of hardships, tight rations, weakening trade, and pestilences had rubbed them raw. When Queen Klavda stood before them in her metal glory, they would cringe and obey. She was a Sorrow they knew, the Sorrow of tyranny. They would abandon freedom to embrace that certainty.

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CRIERS spread word throughout the city, from the high mansions to the sewer alleys: "The Council of Magistrates calls all citizens to the Square of the Legless Conqueror tomorrow after sunrise. All the city must hear the news!"

The population able to fit into the square jammed it and spilled into the spokes of the street. The only spots left empty were near the base of the Shaper's spire—people still would not press near it—and the pedestal in the middle of the plaza where the eleven

Magistrates sat on stools, waiting for the long-dead queen to arrive.

"I hope nobody is counting," Lacklo said to Andraz. "They'll wonder what happened to our twelfth member."

"No one will care about us," Andraz answered. "In an hour, Klavda will likely have the crowd rip us into strips of mutton for her victory banquet."

"Does she have teeth left to chew?"

"I only know her heart still beats."

Lacklo laughed without meaning to. "She is all heart, eh? A wonderful joke. Even the Shapers might have cackled at it."

Andraz pushed with his foot against something beneath his stool, which he had hidden under a drop cloth. It was a touch of hope. The merest of one.

Klavda's servants no longer bothered to disguise themselves. They wore the Handless God's robes and rode powerful hadros. Each one must have orders: should the magistrates object in any way to the triumph, they would ride to the magistrates' homes, or burrow through the tunnels, and use the queen's poisons to turn their families into monstrosities.

Andraz knew somewhere among those ranks was the slave who had the task to ride into the Damp and kill Mateja and end the lives of her two children before they even began.

A rumble started along the widest road into the square. It mixed with the shouts of the crowd and then screams as people were crushed under the weight of the juggernaut pulling up the street.

"By the Handless God," Lacklo said. "Andraz, you never told us she had such power—"

Klavda's slaves had been busy with more than spying. Their secret tunnels must have led them to vaults beneath the city filled with Shapers' tools and other wicked devices of the Art. Using them, they had cobbled together the wagon rolling into the square. Underneath the welded iron plates was no doubt a simple palanquin, but the queen's slaves had built it up into a beast. It had a madness that fit Klavda's patchwork slaves.

A team of tri-horns lugged the wagon, trampling people who could not get out of their path. Two servants marched before the team and blew menacing calls through seashell horns.

The iron coach rolled toward the center of the square, and rumbled to the edge of the pedestal where it halted. Sound in the Square of the Legless Conqueror stopped. All eyes watched the crimson curtains shrouding the carriage.

A bronze hand parted the silk. Queen Klavda stepped down onto the flagstones.

She had changed in the two days since Andraz had last seen her. The materials stolen from vaults across the city had added to her false body, building her into a seven-span metal tower. She no longer needed puppeteers: steam hissed from the joints as she moved, and a pack across her back whirled with power and spit flashes of blue light.

The queen clanged up the steps to the pedestal, and the herald's horns shouted her arrival. The horns were the only sound in the square. The astonishment of the citizens of Durvill was silent and horrible.

Queen Klavda gave no notice to the eleven men frozen on their stools. She faced the crowd. The bronze mouth opened, and a sound channeled through a funnel boomed out. "Subjects of Durvill! The House of Slijav has returned. I am your queen, Klavda the Bewitching!"

No cheers. No hisses. Nothing—except the Sorrow.

"You have waited five centuries for freedom. I have heard your cries and have come to you!"

One man clapped his hands. An old woman muttered a prayer.

"You are poor, exhausted. You no longer love the pleasures of life that ease the Sorrow! You did not even have the strength to pull down this black scar on our city's face—" Steam powered a bronze arm to point at the tower. "Do you have no pride in what Durvill once was?"

The first shout came: "And what was it?"

A score of Klavda's slaves moved around the wagon, armed with swords and blackpowder guns. They pushed through the crowd to find the speaker.

Klavda ignored the outburst. "Durvill was a city of pleasure. I lived in a palace of silk and velvet, attended by slaves who did work no high citizen of Durvill could be forced to do. My people were proud that I lived this way."

"What have you got for us now?" A different voice this time.

The metal queen ground to a halt. Andraz saw the difference in her stance, felt a tilt in the square from fear to something different. He had hoped this would happen, but it was still a chance thinner than a spider strand.

Klavda had not expected heckling. She had never heard anyone speak back to her when she was swaddled in silk and the flesh of her male slaves. The living muscles tightened, and the bronze thing seemed ready to leap into the crowd and pulp those in its way.

Instead, she shouted: "Here is what I can give you now!"

Screams erupted from the crowd. The spears of the slaves pierced through three men. Maybe they were among those who had shouted. It made no difference. The queen had given out death.

"There is more!" Klavda shouted.

Blackpowder weapons fired. Three more citizens dropped to the ground.

The balance of the crowd teetered. Andraz saw the moment he needed and reached to seize it—fragile though it was.

His foot pushed against the heavy object beneath his stool and edged it forward. He shifted his eyes, without moving his head, to see the other magistrates. They were frozen with Sorrow-terror, like everyone else.

Andraz stood up. On the edge of the square, he noticed one of Klavda's mounted servants twitch. This must be the one with the orders to kill his family. But Andraz remained on his feet. He marched up beside the towering queen.

"Citizens of Durvill, my friends, hear me!"

The crowd remained frozen, except for the eyes that turned toward the Inspirer's voice. Klavda's waist grated as she swiveled to face Andraz.

"You must heed your queen! She speaks the truth. Her reign was a time of splendor inside these walls. Don't you want splendor again?"

"Speak to us, Inspirer!" The old cry, but now it wavered between despair and joy, unable to decide which way to fall.

"Do you want luxury again? Do you want the pleasures of slaves in your beds? Do you wish Durvill as it was before the Shapers conquered it?"

"Who remembers such a time?" a man shouted. "All rulers are liars!"

"Liars! Liars!" came another yell, and others echoed it.

"But I am a ruler," Andraz shouted. "Am I a liar?"

A metal hand fell on his shoulder. "What are you doing, my servant?"

Andraz looked up into the glass ovals that covered the remains of Klavda's eyes. "I am letting you see the people you rule, my queen. Do you think they are ready for your kingdom of pleasure? Are they worthy?"

Klavda raised her arm and clenched her hand in a fist. Blue light crackled between her knuckles. At her signal, the blackpowder guns fired again. More died.

The people wavered. They did not rush the platform, but they pushed against each other, and their Sorrow exploded into chaos. The queen's slaves raised their weapons again, but the crush caught them like rocks clashing together in a quake, and they vanished in the mob.

"Weak, weak," Andraz spoke, but only so the queen could hear him.

"They are!" Klavda spoke in the hiss. "They do not deserve me! They are nothing but filthy beggars! There is no Durvill! Let it—let it all die!"

She raised her hands and shouted with a voice that could shake the foundations of the Shaper's tower. "All Durvill must die! It is no longer fit to live! Let it all die!"

The crowd reached a level of madness Andraz had never seen before, even when they had feared Jalasks would sweep into the city and grind it under their mounts. He looked for the queen's slaves at the edge of the crowd, but couldn't see them. Would they understand what was happening, and did they know to follow her orders when she was in madness?

"Burn it all! Raze every house to the ground!" the bronze thing screamed, its arms raised toward the beetling tower and its joints giving off sparks like a winter storm.

The magistrates huddled behind Andraz. "In the name of the Handless God, do something," Lacklo yelled. "Get the crowd to listen to you, or they'll rip the city apart and us with it."

Andraz pushed them back, and reached for the handle of the tool under the cloth.

"My Queen," he shouted up at the crackling figure. "Let us start the purge!"

She swiveled to look at him. Her glass eye-shields turned red-blue with the power inside her. "Maybe I kill you first, spineless one? You are the one who turned my people to drudges."

"Don't start so small. Kill all in the square. Only the heart of the city matters."

"Yes. The heart, the heart! And tell me, slave, who is the heart of Durvill?"

He pointed toward her. "The House of Slijav. None other!"

And then he drew back. He flinched, and let his hand quiver. Just enough. Just enough that the eyes behind the glass noticed the hesitation. Even in her growing madness, Klavda was ever peering at him for signs that his belief in her royalty, her eternal right to rule, had turned watery.

"Why do you waver, slave? Do you speak only flattery because you doubt I am the heart of Durvill?"

It was now. The one moment in her insanity where he could twist her.

"I doubt not your heart is the heart of the city. But—does that heart still beat? Or have you replaced all of you—" He gestured

to her enhanced metal shape. “—with bronze and gears? Did you at last throw that heart away and hide the hole it left?” His finger jabbed at her again, this time at the hinged cover on her chestplate.

“You die for this apostasy!” the metal creature said, and she lunged forward. But Klavda wasn’t reaching out to seize Andraz. Her metal fingers instead reached toward the chest-plate. “This heart *never* stops beating!”

She pulled open the shielding cover. Beneath, the heart throbbed behind thin glass, sparking with the power of the Art that coursed through all of the unnatural woman.

Andraz raised the hammer as the hatch swung open. “Then let it beat forever—far away from you!”

He let the hammer fall. The glass of the chest-plate shattered, and the flash of the power of Art pulsed through the hammer. He dropped it before the burning reached him.

The stunned bronze queen swayed toward him, close enough to touch ...

Andraz reached up, clutched the hot moist core of Queen Klavda ...

And ripped it out.

The metal shell froze, the remains of steam and electricity still keeping it upright. But without the human motor to guide its last remnants of flesh, the metal casing quivered and tumbled forward. Andraz stepped back far enough that the head hit the stones at his feet. It shattered into a mess of gears and glass.

Andraz held aloft the heart of Queen Klavda, last of the House of Slijav. The crowd had watched the slaying, and was fixed on the sight of the man who had brought them to freedom holding aloft a red trophy.

They began to chant: “Inspirer! Inspirer! Inspirer!”

His arm was covered with the blood that had burst from the arteries as he tore it away. Raised in his hand, it continued to beat. The dark power of the Art would make it beat forever—but not in Durvill, he swore.

He spoke to his people. Later, he remembered only fragments of what he said. Words of hope and triumph, things he had spoken before. But in past times it was to keep away the Sorrow of the citizens. Now it lifted the haze of the Sorrow from all of Durvill. The Sorrow would remain for the people, but the city that had lived through centuries of cruelty felt fear burn off it. Eyes raised toward the tower of the Shapers, and they were no longer afraid.

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THE crowds cleared to let the magistrates race to their homes. Andraz called guards to him and they mounted hadrosaurs to make for the Damp. He did not know if Klavda’s rider who carried the message that would condemn Mateja had left already or had died in the mad crowd. Andraz took no chances.

They met no one on the ride down into the slippery lower streets. The whole city was still gathered in the square, trapped in a mad celebration. Andraz and his guard reached the seventh house of the Way of Wavering, and he leaped from the hadro’s back and charged inside.

He lunged up the stairs, a blastgun in his hands. The men behind could not keep up as he charged up two flights to the top.

He entered the curtained room, and there was Mateja lying on a cot in the corner, her wrists and ankles tied. Two slaves stood over her, patiently waiting for the message that had never arrived. One held a long needle attached to a bulb of amber liquid, ready to plunge it into the swell of Mateja’s belly.

Andraz the Inspirer had fired a blastgun many times on the field, cutting down barbarian riders from a distance, then closing with pike or sword to finish the task. He never made two better shots in his life.

There was no need to close in, except to press his face against his wife’s breast and listen for her heart.

It was beating. There was a whisper in his ear: “My love, your son and daughter are coming ...”

Andraz shouted at the men to fetch a physician.

• • •

AUTUMN was dying. Soon the sun would drop below the Rahss Sea for an entire month, starting the time when the Sorrow was harshest for the people of Durvill.

But as Andraz the Inspirer, the Grand High Magistrate of Durvill—a title he felt even more ostentatious than his first—stood on the porch of his mansion with his two children in the crooks of his arms and watched the sun dip into Rurik Bay, he felt certain this would be the easiest winter in many centuries.

The black spire had come down days after the second fall of the House of Slijav. All the citizens had taken part in ripping it apart block by block. At night, people would still huddle in the dark with their own Sorrow, but Durvill did not have it. It would live, and the Council of Magistrates would guide it.

There was only one reminder of the old tyrannies left: the mansion where Andraz lived, the mansion of Slijav and its last queen. He would not let its shell be torn down, however. He had made a home here with Mateja. Two more had come to live here as well—but Mateja had gone.

Andraz felt his daughter’s tiny hand clutch at the fabric of his tunic. His sleeping son’s foot kicked. How much like their mother they looked! They had fought so hard to be born, and the fight had taken their mother, leaving Andraz with his own special Sorrow even as the city lost its.

A boy and a girl, as Mateja had willed. The boy he named Krestimir, after his grandfather. The girl he named after her mother. That way the heart of Mateja would go on beating—a heart in a real body, alive and warm in a way the hideous pulsing heart he had dropped into the ocean’s depths never could be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Harvey is a professional marketing writer who dwells in the sun-drenched decadence of Southern California with his black cat familiar. He won the Writers of the Future Contest in 2011 and has written numerous essays for www.blackgate.com on his wide-ranging fascinations: Godzilla, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and any movie starring Peter Cushing. When he isn’t writing he is—for some unfathomable reason—an improvisational comedy performer with a local theater. Find if he has anything interesting to say at www.RyanHarveyAuthor.com.



ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS NICHOLSON

THIEVES OF THE FALLEN WORLD

By TOM DOYLE

THANK the protecting gods, I was alone when the king's guards came for me. They found me passed out drunk, naked except for the chain about my neck, chasing a sleep with no blood dreams. I'd vowed never to let my companions of an evening stay the whole night, and not out of concern for my own skin or scant possessions. Maybe a lover would try something silly, and I'd have to stop her—despite my reputation, I didn't enjoy hurting people. Or maybe she'd be murdered along with me as an afterthought when the king finally grew weary of my continued breathing.

Royal murder is my most likely fate, I thought muzzily, as the guards hauled me out of bed, bundled me in my own ragged blanket, and pulled a coarse sack down over my head. Then they threw me over one of their horses. Could be the river for me this time, where I'd wind up another anonymous corpse downstream. *An appropriate end for one of Atlantean blood.*

But then I heard the clomp of our horses on paving stones. We'd arrived at the palace. That wasn't necessarily better news; it only meant that the king was interested in dealing with me personally.

I was dismounted and unbundled. Someone threw a robe over me to cover my nakedness, and the guards marched me down the hall and up the stairs toward the candlelight of the king's private audience chamber. Unlike the great hall of the king's seat with its captured swords of mortal peoples, this room had his darker trophies. Some were really my prizes, but I didn't covet them back. We'd taken these unearthly glowing gems and blades of cold flame from beings who (at best) weren't quite human. These trophies were still puissant for ill, and a captured battle lance twitched at me like a living bug impaled on a pin. *You shouldn't be keeping such things, sire.*

At the far end of the chamber, the king sat on the plain folding seat from his days as commander of the horse. Giving me the full barbarian dumbshow, he glared at me as balefully as when he'd slain the Serpent of the Depths. They called him Crombhili, the "friend of the god" now, but that wasn't his name then.

"Leave us," he said, and the guards efficiently obeyed. Still not a good omen. He was strong enough to quarter me with his bare hands, and his famous blade was at his side. But gods, the lines on his iron face and the steel gray of his hair and beard betrayed how much his rule had aged him.

"You're drunk again," he said. "Tell me, what use are you to me like this?" Meaning, *why shouldn't I kill you now?*

"No use," I said. "No use at all. *Sire.*"

At my snarl of "sire," unfeigned rage flashed in his eyes, and his hand went to his hilt. But then he paused. That was what had always made him different: the damned barbarian thought before he slew. And my tone had tipped him off—that, or the gold of the chain I wore in memory. His eyes went up in thought, and his fingers moved in some silent tally. "It's the day," he said flatly.

"Yes," I said, matching his tone. "The anniversary, as my people used to reckon it." *At least he didn't say her name.* I was stupidly grateful for that.

"Still no excuse," he said. "Your king needs you, old friend."

Shit. *Old friend* was the worst omen of all. My old friend the king had a job for me.

• • •

IT took seven nights to find my quarry. I hunted in every tavern and inn in the city and on the near road, where all knew me as a heavy drinker of wine and nothing more. You'd think I'd normally favor the last inn I searched, but you'd be wrong for the right reasons. This particular inn's walls were made of seamless stone, making it a way station of long-drowned Atlantis, though these rubes wouldn't recognize its provenance any more than they knew who'd made the road it stood on. Using this small marvel as an inn was like wild dogs taking over a deserted castle, and that didn't help my mood.

I wouldn't inform the innkeepers of its value, because they'd try to kill me before asking how I knew. Atlantean blood and the knowledge passed along with it were considered dangerous.

The inn's interior was oak wood fitted to cover the disturbing stone and provide additional seats along the walls. The hearth sent its smoke up through an appalling hole that someone had managed to carve through the Atlantean stone. Not far from the fire stood my probable quarry. She stood as tall as me (which wasn't saying much) and dressed in traveling garb, so she could've passed as a young man if she tried, but here she wasn't bothering to hide her figure or her smooth olive face framed by long raven-black hair.

Facing the fire, I stood close enough to hear her. Yes, she was likely the one. She was trying to sell an adventure to a mercenary, and that was going as well as you'd expect. Oh, she had sufficient smiles and charm, a mischievous twinkle in her eye promising criminal fun in pursuit of ill-gotten gains. But the mercenary wasn't buying it. Her target punctuated her discreet patter with increasingly voluble and incredulous questions: "The older cities?" "A lower realm?" "The utter depths?"

With that last, the sensible mercenary was out, no deal. I made the mistake letting my gaze follow his departure—a mistake, because in a flash a blade was at my neck. *Very fast, and a good strong grip on my head from behind. Yes, she's definitely the one.*

The inn's few other patrons only seemed mildly annoyed that my sliced throat might interrupt their drinking, so I used one of my remaining heartbeats to glance down toward the blade and guard of my quarry's short sword. "A very fine weapon," I said. "I won't even feel it before it kills me."

Perhaps her grip loosened slightly, but her low voice in my ear still had my murder in it. "You're trying to steal my prize," she said.

"I was thinking of a more cooperative venture," I said.

"Hmm." She let the blade drop, and with a light shift of her feet she was in front me, eying me like a horse in the market. "You have the courage for it. But..."

But I knew what she saw: a slight, no longer young man, nose broken where it had stuck into something bad. "I have something else you'll want. Experience." I lowered my voice. "I know the best way down."

We retreated to a quiet corner nook. We weren't just trying to hide from competing bands; we were also planning a capital crime. The king had taken this city as his seat to bar its lower realms from the constant casual raids of others. On the law tablets, such raids fell under poaching on the royal demesne. That the raids often brought about their own punishment was no excuse. Any adventurers that returned with riches would also carry a haunted and tormented look, but more likely they didn't return at all.

My quarry and I made introductions. She went by Loleri, and I went by some other lie. I would avoid any other outright falsehoods because an outlaw could often see through them.

"So, what's the prize?" I asked.

"I had a dream," she whispered. "A great treasure in the utter depths."

"Before the dream, you found something?"

"Yes. In an old cromlech, a star chart carved into the body of a strange idol, but the stars weren't where they're supposed to be. I wasted a torch trying to work out their changes. How did you...? Oh, you saw something like?"

"Yes. And then the dreams came, starting that very night." Though it'd been years since I'd had dreams like hers, or anything but the blood nightmares.

"I thought I'd found the only clue," she said.

I shook my head. "Others will also be making their moves. We have to get there first." *But not for the reason you think.*

Loleri was now staring at me in fascination, which was never a good sign. She reached out to touch the chain I wore and the small locket that hung from it. "This was a woman's, I think."

I jerked away. "Don't touch it. Ever."

"Not going to steal it. Looks wrong anyway. Cheap."

"You'd be surprised what it cost," I said. A stupid thing to say if I wanted her to keep her hands off it, but she'd startled me.

After making our plans and arranging our next meeting, I went back to my room in the city for the first time in over a week. There, I dreamt again of Rakta, my wife and one true love.

• • •

A DEMON from the depths had returned with Rakta, living inside her, patiently waiting for the birth of our first child. When that time came, the midwives treated me like any other man and ordered me out of my wife's chamber. But I wasn't far from the door when Rakta's screaming changed.

I broke into the now locked chamber. The thing that would've been my daughter had already slain the midwives. With its claws at Rakta's throat as she screamed, it turned its head and looked at me, grinning toothlessly.

It was holding my wife hostage while the blood of the midwives called for others of its kind. If I had known then what I'd feel now, I would've frozen, the weight of future sorrow crushing me, and perhaps my world would have fallen again.

Now, years later, I was returning to the lower realms with another woman of adventure. Dark Loleri looked nothing like my fair and fire-haired Rakta. Yet she reminded me of Rakta in all the ways that mattered.

• • •

THE next night, moonless, I met Loleri below the high walls of the palace, where those walls met the huge foundational boulders of limestone that the ignorant said were left there by giants. We moved through the shattered remains of other boulders to the intact base. We were both well-armed yet lightly armored—we were in a hurry.

I was very thirsty for some strong wine, but I wasn't going to have any until I finished this task, so no use thinking about it. At least my hands weren't shaking.

Loleri carried an empty sack for the treasure. I bore a small yet heavy pack tied to my back. I expected her to ask about it, but she apparently had other concerns.

"A good place to betray me," noted Loleri, hand on the hilt of her longer blade.

"This is the center of the city," I said. "And all the cities below it."

"So, the most direct way?" she said.

"Time is precious below."

"Where's the entrance then?"

After his last expedition beneath the city, the king had ordered this entrance hidden behind a false wall. I didn't ask what he'd done to the workers; his tribe had horrific burial customs. I pulled out a key, one of only two, and waved it in a sweeping arc in front of the boulder wall. In one of the boulders, a keyhole became visible.

"You're some use after all," said Loleri. "Get on with it then."

I pressed the side of the key flat against the stone above the keyhole.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"If I try turning this key in that hole, it will seal the entrance against us." It would also trigger one of the king's eldritch trophy skulls to start howling in alarm, but that seemed more than a poacher should know.

But I'd already gone too far. "Your talisman and lore are im-

pressive,” she said, in the same voice that she’d spoken of betrayal earlier.

“I once had friends in the palace,” I said.

“Revenge?” she said, meaning my motive for this raid.

The stone finally began to creak open. “Survival,” I replied. *I’ve grown too skilled at deceit through truth.*

We entered the downward sloping passage into the lower realms. When we were far enough in not to be seen, we lit the first of our torches. The passage ended in a vast cavern, and Loleri let out a low whistle at the view. Like many of the great cities, ours had been built on top of its buried predecessors. Unlike those other places, some chthonic force here kept the previous settlements mostly separated and whole in their respective levels, with a dark sky of stone a few feet above the deserted dwellings. It was as if, after whatever disaster befell each settlement, a monstrous child had boxed each one in granite as a toy to pull out later and play with some more.

Our footsteps gave short sharp echoes as we moved through the lanes of this empty necropolis with relative ease. The living from above had cleared paths toward the lower depths in the course of their raids.

“This is the first level down.” I spoke as if on my city’s high street, in seeming disregard of what might hear and hunt us.

“The city of heroes?” she asked with a little awe.

“Yes,” I said. “The city they knew.”

The air smelt of dead leaves and dust, and with their odor came a buzzing at the back of my skull. I let out a groan under my breath as the buzz spread over my whole head, like one of my dreams coming on. Aloud, I said, “They’re here.”

“Already?” But she raised her sword.

But what came at us from around the corner didn’t look like demons, but men. They wore the bronze cuirasses and grieves and wielded the bronze weapons of the old songs. Not demons, but not living either. “Ghosts,” I spat.

“No shit,” said Loleri, as our swords and torches passed through them, and we felt the chill of the long dead pass up our arms. As a grave robber, she’d seen the like before. We couldn’t avoid all their swords and spears, but we felt their blows only as light touches or the bites of gnats.

One of the spirits harassing me shouted in his language, “Die, Atlantean bastard!” So, he recognized my origin.

Others were waving their spears at Loleri, but not attacking. They were yelling at her in that same old speech, “Turn back, foolish woman! This man leads you to your doom.”

Gods save me from such noble-hearted barbarians. Fortunately, Loleri didn’t know their tongue, so instead of questioning me, she was mumbling some words of exorcism at her would-be saviors.

I was getting annoyed enough to try a stronger expulsion, but the ghostly heroes were already aging, losing hair and teeth. In a blink of an eye, they metamorphosed into ambient corpses, oozing with decay. These spectres dried down to fighting skeletons, which were actually quite impressive in their continued swordmanship. But even as I approached them for a duel, they whirled away into dust. From the wind came one last cry, “Turn back!” And they were gone.

“What were they saying?” she asked.

“They were warning us to turn back,” I said.

She chuckled grimly. “Sore losers.”

“Leave them be,” I said, though other than their ill-timed words they were indeed harmless, and my fears had been foolish. On this level of ghosts, true demons seldom lingered, for their kind dwelt below, and their prey dwelt above.

We found the ruined palace of the heroes close by and entered through its gate, broken even as in the songs. Just off the main hall, we descended a long flight of stairs that were as steep as a ladder into what should have been the oubliettes for criminals, but which was actually a home on the next level down.

That next level was a smaller town that many missed in their descent if they chose one of the paths farther from the center than the king’s palace. No works of metal remained here, only stone. The statues of their gods were correspondingly crude, but they were still clearly of human work and worship. We didn’t have to walk more than twenty paces to the next passageway down, where we found a ladder whose wood, instead of rotting, had turned to stone.

In the level below, we saw no dwellings of any kind, only the skulls and bones of humans and animals—some of which were unnameably strange with too many limbs and eye sockets. All these were mixed together in middens left by some other predatory creature that must have been enormous and deadly.

Just beyond the middens, the mouth of a cave gaped. Standing at the cave’s threshold, we waved our torches inside it and shouted, but nothing leapt out at us. So, slowly at first, we stepped within and then descended a switchbacked series of passages through the solid rock.

“Who carved these tunnels?” asked Loleri.

“Who keeps them open?” was my retort. *You really should be wondering about that.* But no, the all-consuming hunger for treasure was in her eyes.

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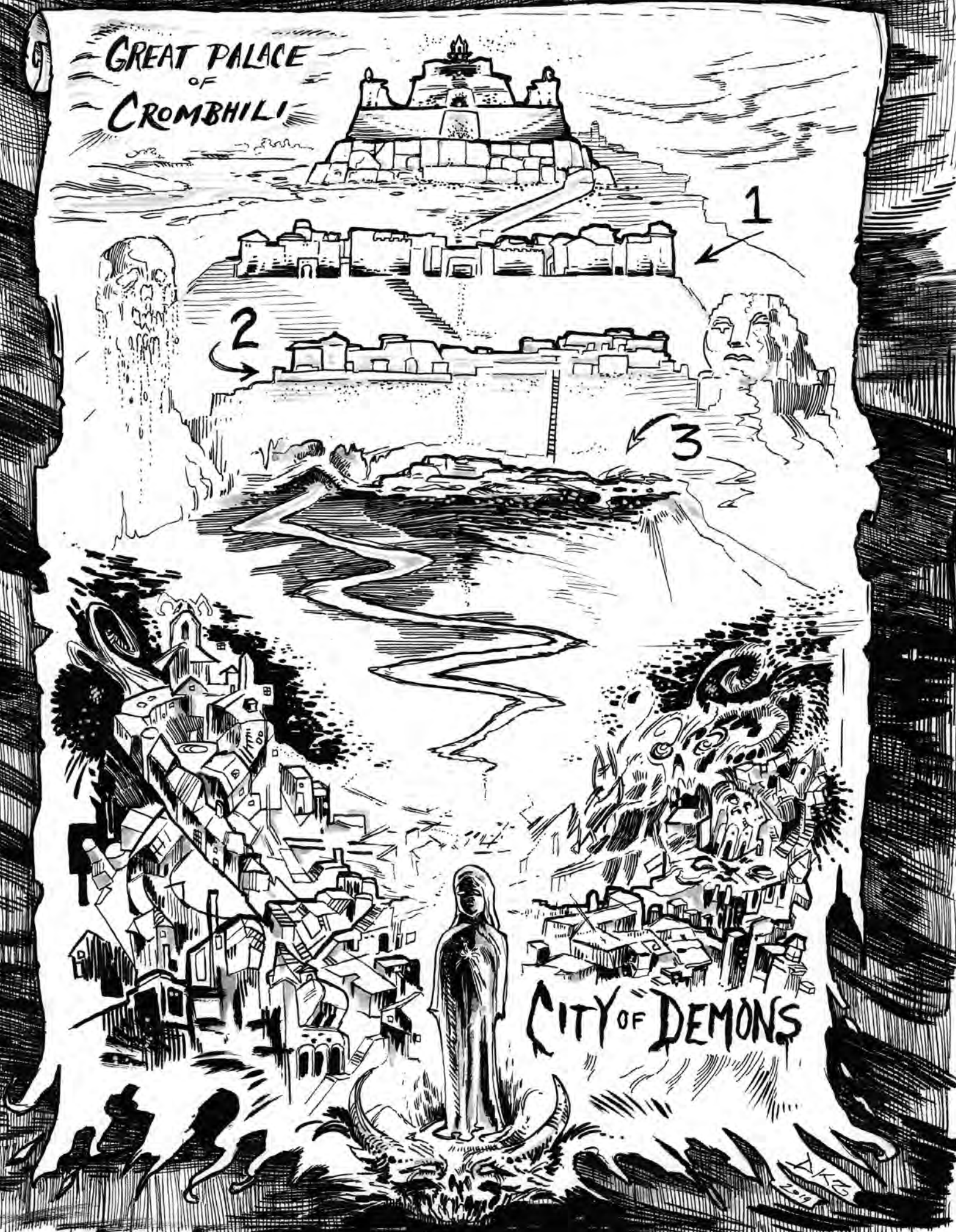
DOWN and down we went, finding nothing, and nothing still. Then, the way finally opened onto a spiral stairway leading from the stone ceiling of the lowest level onto its streets. The city of the uttermost depths was vast, dwarfing any city above. Everything—the ground beneath our feet, the ceiling of rock above, the bizarre structures where no human had ever dwelt, were glowing with sickly, greenish light. We no longer needed torches, though the light troubled our mortal vision.

On the ground near the bottom of the stairway, a pile of human bodies, only a few days old, brought us to a halt. No flies buzzed in this realm, yet the remains stank of rot. Near the corpses was a heap of golden idols of the Old Ones. If they still had any glamour upon them, I was blind to it. Loleri also appeared uninterested in their potential value. So, not the treasure of her dreams then.

Loleri waved a finger at the bodies. “The competition.”

“Called by the same dream,” I said. They apparently hadn’t brought a woman with them, so this place hadn’t suffered them to live.

GREAT PALACE OF CROMBHILI



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CITY OF DEMONS

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Loleri casually spat toward them and strode forward. “Wait,” I said, as my mind caught up to instinct. These bodies were wrong; more than decay had been at work. Whole limbs and other chunks of flesh gone, and exposed bones in the pile. They’d been eaten. That implied eaters.

“Swords up,” I called, but Loleri’s were already raised, and we both turned about.

Just in time—four ambushers were running at us from three directions. We each took two. Their first blows rang hard against our parries, driving us both back, and for a moment I feared the power that impelled these ragged men with burning eyes.

But our greatest danger was in this first feverish rush of unnatural strength. They grew weaker and more awkward with each of their blows, and I nearly pitied them. The demons had kept them in a state of depraved confusion, unable to leave this hellish place. They were still tied to the golden idols that they couldn’t remove from the uttermost depths. Thus bound and soon without food, they’d survived as cannibals.

They also smelled like carrion rats. We dispatched them accordingly.

We walked on through the streets of the city of the demons. They were not the crooked paths of the city above that followed the features of land and paths of animals, nor the brutal straight lines of Atlantean avenues, but curves that wound back and forth and then somehow came back to their starting point. Perhaps these paths had a pattern when seen from another realm, but to mortal eyes they were nothing but madness. My prior journey here was little help in this tangle of ways, but it didn’t matter, as Loleri seemed to cut through all confusion to the goal of her dreams.

Here and there, visible in niches along the streets and through polygonal openings into polyhedral spaces of no human design, were the ancient symbols and statues of the true elder gods, the ones I called demons. Of all the creatures of the world above, they were most like the strange things of the watery depths, but they’d once lived here on land under an open sky. Most were radial things, five pointed or spiky. Others were long centipedal creatures that, instead of scuttling, stood upright on their rear legs—the better to display their enormous spiraling mouths of teeth gaping to swallow whole worlds. A few were many tentacled nightmares with a portion of their limbs jointed like a spider’s.

The demons made their statues of purest gold and of sparkling gems unknown to mortal realms. They’d left treasures and banes strewn about the streets and structures as if they’d suddenly abandoned them in some great calamity. All were precious beyond imagination, but Loleri had eyes for none of the immense riches that surrounded us. *As I expected.*

We followed a curved street to a dead end—a seamless hemisphere that might be one of their shrines, completely covered with their sworls. I had to avert my gaze from those hundreds of sigils; my mind threatened to spiral down into them forever. My skull again began to buzz.

Loleri gasped, then pointed ahead with her blade. “There.”

I willed myself to look. On a short pedestal in the center of the shrine stood the treasure from Loleri’s dream. It wasn’t what I’d

seen years before with Rakta. This one was a golden statue of a little girl, though its expression and pose exuded wrongness, as if made by creatures with only a remote understanding of mortal motion.

The pedestal and idol together only came up to my chest. The gold would make the statue heavy, heavy as a small person, but either of us could carry it back to the surface alone.

Beautiful, until I looked at the details. Its eyes were rubies faceted like an insect’s, and its carnelian mouth seemed stained with blood. Its clawed fingers and its small fangs protruding over the bloody lips were inlaid ivory, though it could not come from any animal known in the mortal world. The radial sworl over its heart betrayed its true soul’s shape.

None of this mattered to me because of one other detail. The idol resembled what my daughter would have looked like if she’d lived. Hers was a bit of mortal flesh with which they were very familiar.

Mustn’t think about that, so I distracted myself with counting coin. Melted down, the idol would bring a fortune. Intact? Priceless. Even with its uncanny inhuman quality, no artisan since the fall of Atlantis could make such a thing, and the demons must’ve taken excruciating years to craft such a physical object. They’d also laid on it a powerful glamour. New cults, new cities had been founded with objects that inspired less sacred awe.

Perhaps also counting coin, Loleri stared at the idol with not so much awe as wide-eyed lust. “It’s real. We’ve found it.” She stretched out her hand toward it.

The buzzing in my head grew. This time I was certain: *they are here*. I could almost hear their inhuman minds at work—focused, waiting, hungry. “Wait. Not with your bare hands.” Rakta had used her bare hands.

“Why so touchy about touching?” said Loleri.

Instead of explaining, I quickly took off my pack and brought out the large iron flask that I’d been carrying.

“What are you doing?” she said. “Help me with the statue.”

“I am helping. This substance will help move it safely.” I unscrewed the stopper. It was all the quicksilver remaining from my family’s alchemical hoard. For this sort of thing people sometimes called me wizard, but I was more useful than one of those. I approached the pedestal.

“Stand back,” I said. But she still was too close, unblinking eyes fixed on her fortune. I moved the iron flask back and forth in her line of sight. “And get the sack for it ready; we still won’t want our fingers directly on it.”

“You’re certain?” she said, blinking as her gaze turned from the idol toward me.

“I brought you this far, didn’t I? It’ll only take a moment.”

But my purpose in coming to this gods-awful place wasn’t hers. This unholy idol was calling out to all the adventurers within a thousand leagues to come for it. Like the deep sea creatures they resembled, the demons hunted with such extensions of themselves, lures that glowed brightly in the mortal mind. Eventually, one person would get through that matched their needs—a gateway to incarnating in our world. Last time, that had been Rakta.

This time, I came prepared. Demons used gold to transmit their essence into our world, and quicksilver ruined that pathway. As Loleri opened up the folded sack to supposedly received the idol, I raised the flask above the idol's head and poured the heavy liquid over it, like a priest blessing with milk or water. *Have a little drink on me.*

As they fell on the idol, the small heavy drops sizzled in unnatural reaction with its spiritual force. They rolled down over the head and body and left dull silver trails that seemed to fall like tears from its eyes. With a bit of cloth, I rubbed some drop-lets over the head, which I hoped was the key. Loleri would soon realize what I was doing, so I streaked some quick Atlantean glyphs on the statue while there was time. How much would be enough to break the connection?

Not yet enough. Though its mouth didn't move, the idol began wailing like a terrified child. My time was up. Even as I flicked some more quicksilver on the idol's face and mouth, I drew out my long blade.

The idol was still bawling as a furious Loleri came at me with both her long and short sword drawn. The demons didn't have to push her hard, the blood rage in her snarling face was mostly her own.

I blocked her first blow with the nearly empty iron flask. It rang like a gong as I toss it at her, which threw her off balance for just a moment while I drew my shorter blade to match her pair. Loleri was younger, faster, and quite prepared to kill me. I had the better weapons: balanced steel and sharp, not Atlantean survivals, but my own make. I also had years of cunning, so I might stand a chance, if only I'd been convinced I should kill her.

She was pressing at me close with both her swords against mine, her hot breath in my face grotesquely intimate. *Please don't try to head butt me, I really hate that.* Straining every sinew, she ground out her words through her teeth. "You won't steal my prize! It's mine!"

A moment of silence—the childlike screaming had ceased. I gave way a bit before Loleri's pressure, shuffling back and to the side to align her sight with the idol's face. "Look at it! Look at what I've done to your damned prize."

Maybe this seeming threat to the idol was enough to draw her mania back toward it, because against a fighter's every instinct, she spared it a glance, and the horror at the damage gave way to wonder at her own aggression. The silence of the dully quicksilvered head meant that the demons' connection to her was broken. "What's happening..."

I couldn't risk the demons finding another hook into her still susceptible mind. "Sorry." With a precision born from years of practice, I clouted her on her skull, knocking her out.

• • •

BEFORE I dragged Loleri back to the surface, I tended to our hurts. She'd cut me several times, and I may have scratched her once or twice. I bound our wounds enough to slow the bleeding. If I made it back up, I could do other things.

The other problem with blood was that it was the part of us that demons could smell, and it encouraged them. They surrounded us, readying an attack to feed on our minds and infest our bodies. Even without the idol, they might manage that here, in the heart of their domain, if they worked together. I had a remedy for their assault that was only slightly poisonous.

But before I could do apply that remedy, the worst of them appeared before me. In a diaphanous robe, like the weave of drowned Atlantis, she stood blocking my way.

My throat dry with horror, I managed to croak out two words. "Greetings, Rakta."

"Oh my husband, oh my love!" she cried. "Why so cold to me? Come to me, embrace me. All is forgiven."

This demon had made my Rakta appear a little older in her beauty. A nice touch, and dangerous—it meant at least this one was learning more about how we thought. I would hurt them especially for that.

I found my voice again. "But I forgive nothing!"

But even as I spoke, she drew closer. My hand went to my throat as if trying to stop myself, but I was irresistibly moving toward her. I knew that she'd consume my spirit, and I wanted, needed to be consumed. As if hearing this song of my inmost heart, she smiled, and her mouth was voracious.

Then, her smile abruptly ceased. She cocked her head at me, at my hand on my throat, considering it like a raptor. "My love, is something wrong?"

"No," I said. *This time nothing is wrong. This time I'm ready for you.* In one smooth motion, I lifted the chain off my neck and, my fist closed around it, I punched it through the demon's manifestation.

Pain lit my very bones as the demon tried to swallow me or drive out my fist. But I spoke the inhuman clicks, whines, and screeches of three demonic commands: *snare, confine, bind*. And then I said its name, a thing like an alchemical formula, with the name of Rakta at its end providing the last link in the spell.

Its screams changed from mere mortal rage into infernal knives that could rip a soul apart. For you see, the golden chain was the one my wife had worn, and its small locket held tiny mummified bits of the hearts I'd torn out of my wife and child. I'd done this all for the day when I could take my puny revenge—but I'd always assumed they'd come for me above rather than wait for me here.

In the eternal moment before binding, the demon's true form burst through its disguise. I saw far more than its strange sea creature ugliness. No, my soul comprehended the mind-breaking enormity of it beyond our world and time—all of it. It would have driven a saner man mad.

But not me. I was laughing, laughing at the chain in my fist. I'd bound a demon, just like my bloody stupid Atlantean ancestors before me. I put the chain back around my neck. I'd study it and hurt it later. *Gods, I need a drink.*

For the moment, the other demons had fled, so I didn't need to apply the remedy to Loleri or myself. All this horror and pain, because the cosmos had changed, and the demons that had once ruled our world had been trapped beyond its edges. They needed a body to escape. So, as they had last time with Rakta and me,

they created a treasure as bait and sent out their dreams through their remaining artifacts in our world, all to summon another human for their incarnation.

Between this attempt and the last, it had taken them many years, so it would take them many years more to try again. By then, they'd be someone else's problem.

• • •

I HAD to get Loleri up and away from at least this lowest level before she awoke and the demons returned. I quickly stripped her of her armor and strapped her wrists together so I could put her arms around my neck and carry her on my back toward to the surface. Her feet sometimes dragged against the ground. My spine would pay for this tomorrow. By the time we reached the level of the stone ladder she'd come to from the knock I'd given her, and with some guidance and care could climb on her own. At the surface, I guided her to my rooms and sat her on my chair while I further tended our hurts and prepared certain other items.

The rising sun seemed to return her fully to herself. "You used me as bait," she said.

"Yes."

"I thought you were going to leave me," she said.

Never. But it was pointless to say so. "You should go. Far away—another city, another land. Someplace not so easily reached by those below. They may come for you. The king... may not protect you."

She saw it then. "You were doing this for him."

"But not the way he wanted. Take this," I said. I threw her a bag of coin. "And this too. Hold still."

I took out my last jar of quicksilver-rich cinnabar paste and applied a dot of it to her forehead. She didn't react. *Good, no demon.* I handed her the jar. "Keep a fresh dot like that on your forehead to drive away any pursuing demons." Like pure quicksilver, this was a poisonous substance, but a mote of it was necessary for her immediate protection. "Now go."

"Thank you," she said, rising to embrace me in farewell. "I'll repay you, I swear upon..."

I held up a hand to halt an oath that I'd never allow her to keep. "If you come back here, I will kill you."

Because if you ever come back, it means they still have their claws in your mind.

• • •

OUTSIDE the king's audience chamber, his torturer and executioner both awaited my exit like dogs silently begging for their master's scraps. Within the chamber, my old friend the king was raging at me again. "You were supposed to appease them! Bring one of them here to talk! We could have made a covenant."

He would have been happier if he knew what I'd brought back from the depths in the chain about my neck, but that would be like letting a toddler play with an axe. Instead of saying anything, this time I kept my mouth shut and stared at him stupidly

in a way that I knew would feed his rage. Maybe this time he'd finally kill me. *Please, please kill me. I'm so tired of this.*

But again he stopped himself. "You had a reason. You always have a reason."

Damn. Well, if I had to live, I was going to hurt him the best way I knew—with the truth. "You wanted to make a bargain with demons?" I laughed mirthlessly at him. "You spent too much time with them down there, and with their things here." I gestured at his trophies. "You should know better."

He opened his mouth to protest, and I held up a finger to silence him. "The gods made us like them, but demons are from the time before. We forget—they aren't human. We describe them like us—patient, or angry, or hungry—but they aren't. I've heard their thoughts buzzing in my skull. They think of us as insects! Do you negotiate treaties with ants? We can't make a bargain and expect them to keep it."

At this, I could swear I saw something like remorse soften the king's merciless face. That told me he'd guessed what the demons might bargain for besides another woman for incarnation. They might want me, the insect that had stung them in Ratka's name (twice now), for a very long revenge of their own. I'd been part of the king's bargain too.

The guilty king again started to object, but I'd really had enough of him and life both, so I held up another finger to shush his barbarian majesty. "Sure, we could try. But then there's the other reason, *sire*. Kings don't throw away the lives of their subjects. For that matter, in a war with demons, human beings don't throw away lives to the enemy. It's stupid and it offends the gods, oh Crombhili."

I'd hoped to restoke his fury with my mockery and atavistic Atlantean philosophy, but it was useless. He sat back down with the weight of all his years. "The usual payment?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, with sullen gracelessness. Some he'd keep for me—a store of gold that I hoped never to draw upon. Some I'd take for Rakta's family, a donation. The rest was for my expenses, like the bag of coin I'd thrown at Loleri, and my tavern bills, which in the coming days would be legendary.

And since you asked, my adventurous new friend, that's why I'm here, drinking myself blind and telling you this tale. Who am I? I'm the fixer for the king, doing the chores that his oh-so high and mighty warriors and wizards look down on—the jobs that matter most. And I'm oh-so politely warning you that if you try to go down below in this city, your head is going to end up on the palace wall with its eyes pecked out—if you're very lucky and the demons don't devour you first in the uttermost depths. Because I'll find and kill you rather than let one of those things up here ever again. Now piss off, I'm very busy with this wine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Doyle writes his uncanny tales in the upper floor of a stone turret in Washington, DC. His thinly veiled true account of the world's secret magician-soldiers and psychic spies appears in his American Craftsmen trilogy from Tor Books. Tom's other chronicles of science and magic can be found at www.tomdoyleauthor.com.

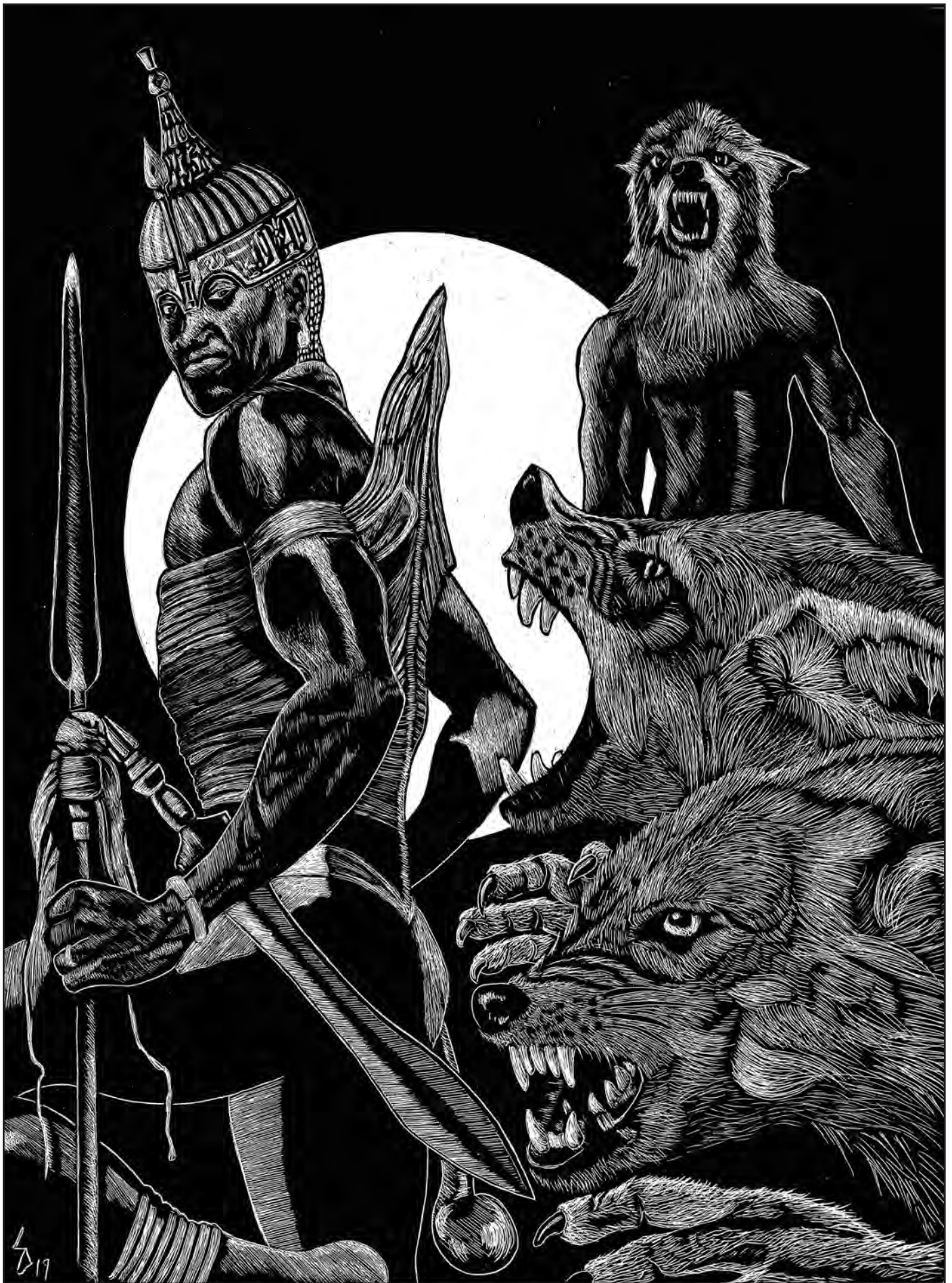


ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

APEDAMAK'S ARMY

By MILTON J. DAVIS

THE Nubian sun emerged from the eastern horizon, shining its light on the walls of Dongola, the capital city of the kingdom of Makuria. Three soldiers exited the city as the day began, one on foot, the others riding horses. The trio were on a mission bestowed upon them by the king, charged to follow the retreating Sasanians who had suffered defeat at the gates, making sure they had no intentions of returning. Markos and Shekanda, the two on horseback, were Nuba archers. They rode bare-chested, their lower body covered by cotton knee length kilts and leopard skin. Garang, the man who walked, wore a conical helmet, blue quilted armor and sand colored cotton pants, the uniform of the Makurian army. His tall lithe frame distinguished him from his companions, signifying him as a Jieng, the cattle herders inhabiting the lands south of the city. His ebony skin was obscured by ash, applied for protection from the sun; scarification adorned his forehead. A short sword and war club graced his waist; he carried a broad-leaf bladed spear in his right hand. He fingered an amulet hanging from his neck, an ivory piece carved in the shape of a lion. Together they followed a road long familiar to this land, a route used by invaders from long ago; the Greeks, the Romans and now the Sasanians.

After eight days they reached the Third Cataract of the Nile. Green shrubs and trees crowded the banks near the rapids, fed by the life-giving Nile waters. Garang paused and took a long stretch. He sauntered toward the river with his water bag, filling it with fresh water. He opened his provisions bag, took out a strip of dried goat meat and dipped it into the water before eating it. The Nubans dismounted and did the same. Both men were city dwellers, Markos a stocky copper skinned fellow with narrow eyes and Shekanda a well-built man almost as tall as Garang. They watered their horses as they enjoyed their provisions.

"We could have made better time if you rode a horse," Markos said to Garang.

"It is not the way of my people," Garang replied. "Such beasts are too valuable to be used in such a way."

Shekanda exchanged a glance with Markos. "Our time is valuable," he said. "I have a family waiting for me."

"Do you own cattle?" Garang asked.

"Of course, I do" Shekanda replied.

"Then your family is well. The cattle are worth much more to them than you."

Markos laughed at his friend. "It seems the giant does have a sense of humor."

Garang looked puzzled. "That was not a joke. I was serious."

Markos took a strip of smoked goat meat from his bag, bit into it, then grimaced before spitting it out.

"This is spoiled," Markos said. "We need to find a village to replenish our supplies."

Shekanda looked at Markos then threw his meat into the river without tasting it. Garang glanced at them both and continued to eat. Yes, the meat was somewhat spoiled, but it was still edible. His companions were used to a softer way of life, coming from the capital. Garang had eaten much worse.

"There is a village nearby," he said. "But it would take us far off our way."

"We need food now," Shekanda said. "The Sasanians are gone. There is no hurry."

"And what if while we waste time indulging ourselves, our enemies decide to circle about and attack Dongola again? Do you want the fall of the city on your heads?"

"We're not the only scouts," Markos said. "And if that were to happen, at least we wouldn't be there to witness it. It would be a blessing from God."

Garang shook his head. Both Shekanda and Markos were selfish men, but their archery skills were legendary, even among Makurians. He had watched with awe during the battle with the Sasanians as they'd shot the eyes of their foes, each arrow finding its mark without error. Their skill was why he'd asked for them to come with him, much to their chagrin. Garang's bow skills were adequate, but it was with the spear, shield and sword that he excelled. The stories of him towering over the other warriors, Arabs and Makurians alike, bashing heads and spearing bodies had led to his commanders recommending him to the king for this duty. He would rather have been back in his homeland with his cattle, but that was not to be. At least not yet.

Garang finished his goat and looked to the sky, shielding his eyes as he compared the sun's position to the western horizon.

"We should reach the village by nightfall," he said.

"I hope we get there sooner," Shekanda said. "I'm hungry."

Garang led the trio to the village, trudging between rocky sand hills peppered with clumps of grass and shrubs. Halfway through the journey he regretted eating the dried goat. His stomach convulsed, and twice he had to stop to relieve himself.

"We told you it was bad," Markos said.

"Be quiet," Garang replied. "You whine like children."

"We apologize, baba," Markos said. "Please don't beat us!"

Garang laughed despite himself. The Nuba warriors were good companions when they weren't complaining.

They reached the village at dusk. A swath of grass formed a green band between the hills and the mud brick homes clustered about a small lake. Date palms grew near the homes, cultivated fields occupied the land on either side. Goat and cattle pens lay just beyond the fields, shaded by the cloud-

like acacia tree canopies. The animals were skittish, jumping away from the fences as they passed. Shekanda and Markos urged their horses forward, eager for fresh food and water. Garang continued at a leisurely pace, grateful for the waning sun and cooling temperature. When he caught up with the Nuba they waited at the edge of the village, concerned looks on their faces.

"Where is everyone?" Markos said.

"Maybe the Sasanians killed them all or took them as slaves."

"No." Garang walked into the village, removing his spear from his back. "They are still here," he said. "They are hiding."

"How do you know?" Markos asked.

"If the Sasanians had been here, they would have taken the livestock," Garang replied.

Shekanda and Markos led their horses to a nearby palm trees and secured them. Garang kept walking until he was in the village center.

"Come out!" he shouted. "We do not wish you harm. We are warriors sent by the king. We only wish food and lodging for the night. We will pay."

"No, we won't," Shekanda said.

"Shut up," Garang replied.

They stood silent waiting for a response. None came. Garang cupped his hands around his mouth, ready to repeat his words when the door to a nearby home opened. A bearded middle-aged man wearing a dingy white kilt with a frightened face gestured at them.

"Come inside quickly!" he shouted. "Now!"

Garang sauntered toward the house while Shekanda and Markos dismounted. The man stomped his foot.

"I said quickly! They are coming!"

Garang looked about, his spear lowered.

"Who are they?"

He was answered by a wail from the nearby hills that made him shudder. He ran, Shekanda and Markos close behind. They heard the shriek again, sounding much closer than before.

"Hurry! Hurry!" the old man said. The warriors ran into the hut and their host slammed the door shut then dropped a sturdy wooden plank across the door to secure it. Garang grasped the man's shoulders then spun him about.

"What is making that noise?" he asked.

"The demons," the man replied with a quaking voice.

The shriek cut through the thin wall of the cabin. Garang and the man flinched at the sound, and then Garang's eyes went wide.

"The horses!" he said. "We left the horses!"

"Better than us," Shekanda said. "Maybe they will . . ."

Garang didn't hear Shekanda's last words. He lifted the door bolt then threw it aside. As a person whose people valued livestock above all other things, he couldn't allow the horses to be slaughtered by whatever approached. He was almost to the animals when the creatures crested the hill. Garang stopped, fear locking his legs. The beasts resembled humans, except their bodies were covered with short haired red fur. Jackal-like heads with long fanged mouths sat on their shoulders. Although built like humans, they galloped toward the horses like the old men of the forests, their rear paws and front knuckles pounding the sand as they hurried to claim their kill.

Garang had made a mistake. He crouched as he walked backwards to the hut, hoping the beasts did not see him. He was half-

way to the hut when the last beast spotted him and changed directions, shrieking at him as it attacked. As the creature neared, Garang's amulet grew warm against his chest. He smirked as he drew back his spear, taking a few steps before throwing it at the beast. The spear flew from his hand, hitting the beast's abdomen then tearing through it. It stopped, then crumpled where it stood. Garang gaped; the amulet's power had always enhanced his abilities, but never like this.

The other beasts were closing and Garang had no time to reclaim his spear. He took out his sword then raised his shield, waiting for the attack. The charm burned like fire, yet his skin did not blister. The heat dispersed through his body, and Garang felt his body relax. He was ready.

Arrows flew by him, striking the beasts in the shoulders and eyes. Garang attacked as the beasts flailed about, pulling at the arrows with their paws. He yelled, decapitating both beasts with his sword. Their jaws snapped and bodies writhed in the sand as life slowly seeped out with their blood.

"You fool!"

Markos stood on his left side, seething.

"You could have been killed!"

"We could have been killed!" Shekanda added.

"We weren't," Garang replied. The feeling that emboldened him dissipated. He stabbed the creatures' bodies and heads a few more times before going to his spear. When he tried to pull it free it didn't budge. He gripped the staff tighter then jerked again. The spear didn't move.

"By God," he whispered.

He turned to his companions.

"Help me."

Shekanda laughed. "To pull a spear from the ground?"

The Nuba sauntered up, grabbed the spear then jerked it. He almost fell forward.

"Markos!" he shouted.

Markos grabbed the spear and they pulled together. It barely moved, so deep had the spear penetrated the sand. Garang joined them and together they finally freed the weapon.

"How did you manage to do that?"

Garang's hand absently touched his amulet.

"I don't know," he said.

The old man who'd tried to hide them in his house ran out to them.

"Praise be to God!" he shouted. "He has sent us his warriors!"

The man fell to his knees, his hands raised in supplication.

"Get up," Garang said.

"No, don't interrupt his praise," Markos said. "We deserve it."

The man stood, then kissed their fingers. "You have freed us from the devil's wrath."

Garang took his hand from the man. "We have done no such thing."

"Yes, we have," Shekanda said with a wink.

The man turned to the village.

"Everyone! You can come out! We have been rescued by God's fighters!"

The doors to the modest homes opened and the villagers emerged, many of them holding crosses, their eyes darting about as if expecting the worst to happen. The man ran to the demons' bodies and pointed.

"See? They are dead!"

The people cried out in unison then surged forward. They danced and shouted as they spit and kicked the carcasses. The man then ran to Garang, Markos and Shekanda.

"These are the ones who did it. They have set us free!"

The people rushed them, touching their garments, kissing their hands and saying prayers. Markos and Shekanda reveled in the attention but Garang was uncomfortable. His eyes kept drifting back to the dead demons.

The man who'd shielded them pushed through the celebrants and stopped before Garang. "I am Daroua, headman of this village," he said. "Who are you?"

"I am Garang of the Jieng. These two are Markos and Shekanda."

Daroua surprised Garang with a hug.

"You have saved us, Garang. We must celebrate!"

Garang pried himself from Daroua's embrace.

"We thank you, but we are on a mission for King Qalidurut. If you can share a few provisions with us we will be on our way."

"No," Shekanda said. "If these grateful people wish to honor us with a feast, it would be rude for us to refuse."

"Please, let us do this," Daroua pleaded. "We must thank you. Once you have eaten and rested, we will provide you with everything we can spare for your journey."

Garang cut a mean glance at Shekanda.

"We will stay, but only for one night," he finally said.

Daroua bowed to Garang.

"Excellent! Come, you can rest in my home until everything is prepared."

Once again, the warriors followed Daroua to his home. Dozens of villagers danced, clapped and ululated; their voices still strong long after Daroua pulled his door closed. He offered them bread and water which they consumed eagerly. Garang savored the fresh food after so long eating provisions on the verge of spoiling during Dongola's siege.

"I will be back soon," Daroua said. "I must help butcher a bull for the celebration."

Garang frowned while Shekanda and Markos grinned like children.

"A bull!" Markos said.

He gave Garang a friendly shove. "And you didn't want to stop."

"This is a waste of time," Garang said. "If other warriors found us here, they would take us to the ajjaji for punishment."

"Damn you, Garang!" Shekanda said. "Don't you ever relax? We are here; let us enjoy ourselves. We saved these people's lives and they're grateful."

"Aren't you curious about where those things came from?" Garang said. "There may be more."

"I doubt if they were demons," Shekanda added. "The world holds many curiosities."

"I'm curious about how that bull will taste," Markos said.

"This is ridiculous," Garang snapped. "We must go!"

"Then go by yourself," Markos said. "I'm resting until Daroua comes for us. Then I'm going to drink and eat until my stomach threatens to burst. And in the morning, if I feel like it, I'll set off to catch up with you and find Sasanians."

"That sounds like a good plan," Shekanda agreed.

The two finished their bread and water then found spaces on the floor to rest. In minutes they were asleep. Garang stared at them in anger, but there was nothing he could do. They were

determined to stay and he could not go ahead without them. He found a clear corner then sat up against the wall, sleep finally taking him.

Garang dreamed of home. He walked nude among his cattle, the sun strong against his ash covered skin. In the distance children played by the river and the chatter of women made him smile. An unusually cool wind shook him; he turned in the direction of the breeze. The darkening sky harkened an approaching storm, but Garang sensed it was much more. There was something moving in the gray clouds, a form that took shape as the clouds grew closer. It was a lion . . .

A firm hand shook him awake. Garang looked into Daroua's eager eyes.

"All is ready," he said. "Come!"

The headman shook Markos and Shekanda wake as well. Drumming entered the house and Markos danced.

"Our celebration begins!"

Garang huffed as he followed Daroua out the home. The dim light of the setting sun covered the landscape, long shadows reaching from the western hills. The villagers cheered upon seeing their saviors and the drummers' cadence increased. A large bull rotated over an open fire as dancers pranced before it. The aroma touched Garang's nose and his mouth watered despite his foul mood. Markos and Shekanda pushed by him to be first in line. The servers took the bull from the spit then placed it on large table. The villagers made way for their heroes so they could claim the choicest parts of the bull. Garang took his reluctantly; to his people cattle were sacred and were only killed for important reasons. He said a small prayer before eating, hoping his gesture would appease his ancestors. A young woman brought him a bowl of millet and a gourd of the local beer.

"Thank you," he said.

"Bless you," she replied.

The villagers gathered around them as they ate, sharing their horror stories about the demons. Many villagers had fallen to them, as well as much livestock. As they listened, the three warriors realized how important their arrival had been.

Their stories were interrupted by a loud angry voice.

"You ignorant fools!" the gruff deep voice shouted.

The villagers looked in the direction of the speaker. A stout man stood at the edge of the flames, his rotund upper body bare, his lower body covered by a white cotton kanga held in by a belt of red beads. His sweaty bald head reflected the flames, his frown conveying his mood.

"How can you celebrate when death clutches this village in its fangs?" the man asked.

Daroua marched toward the man, coming so close their noses almost touched.

"No one asked you here, Piye," he said.

"Is this how you treat your protector?" Piye replied. "If not for me the demons . . ."

"The demons are dead," Daroua said.

"You lie!" Piye said.

Daroua grabbed Piye's arm then dragged him into the darkness. The other villagers followed. Garang, Shekanda and Markos remained seated, continuing to eat. A shout came from the distance; moment later Piye emerged from the darkness, his face twisted with confusion. He opened his mouth then froze; his eyes locked on Garang.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

It took Garang a moment to realize Piye asked about his amulet. He grasped it between his fingers and lifted it from his chest.

"It was given to me by my father, who received it from his father," he said.

The man approached Garang slowly. He sat before Garang then reached for the amulet. Garang pushed his hand away.

"I think not," he said.

"Leave our saviors alone," Daroua said. "The one true God sent our saviors. Your old spirits did nothing."

Piye grinned. "On the contrary. My gods answered my prayers."

"You can stay if you wish," Daroua said. "But none of your nonsense. If you cause any trouble for our guests, we'll stone you to death."

Piye ignored Daroua, continuing to stare at Garang's amulet.

"Do you know what you wear?" he asked.

"It is a lion," Garang replied.

Piye chuckled. "You possess the amulet of Apedamak, the God of War. I see now why you were able to kill the demons."

"He didn't do it by himself," Markos said. "Shekanda and I blinded them with our arrows."

Piye dismissed them with a wave of his hand. "Your efforts were no more than a distraction. I'm sure he is the one who delivered the death blows."

"I am," Garang said.

"Excellent," Piye said. "You must come with me now."

"No," Garang said. "We don't know who you are or where you want to take us. For all we know you could be behind the demon attacks."

"I can assure you that I am not," Piye said. "I can also assure you that if you do not come with me, there will be more attacks."

"Why?" Markos asked, his mouth full.

"Because there are more demons, more than you can imagine."

Garang placed his bowl on the ground then stood. The Jieng warrior towered over the priest. "Your words make me suspicious. Maybe if I were to kill you, the attacks will stop."

Piye did not waver. "If you kill me, Makuria will run red. The demons will do what the Sasanians could not."

Garang sat. "We are on a mission for the king. In the morning we will leave to complete our mission."

"You can't!" Piye said. "Do you think you are here by chance? You were summoned by my prayers. Your amulet is proof of this. Only you can prevent what is soon to occur!"

"Go away, fool," Markos said. "You're bothering our friend and ruining our celebration."

"Yes. Go," Shekanda said.

Piye stood. "I see more must suffer before you realize your calling," he said. "So be it."

Piye's eyes narrowed as he scanned the celebration. He looked at Garang one more time then hurried away, melding into the darkness.

The celebration lasted well into the night. Markos and Shekanda joined in the dancing, to the amusement of the villagers. Garang continued to watch from a distance. He was gracious to those who approached him, but his mind was elsewhere. Piye's words stirred something inside him. He remembered his initiation rites, the day he received his marks and his cow name. At

the end of the ceremony his father had given him the amulet, draping it over his head and resting it on his shoulders.

"You will be called to do great things," his father had said.

Garang took the words lightly that day. All fathers told their sons such things after initiation. Other memories emerged; sour images of a life lost to him. Garang blinked them away. He observed the villagers surrounding his cohorts, enjoying their awkward dancing. He stood, then ambled over to them.

"You call that dancing?" Garang said.

Markos looked at Garang.

"And you think you can move that lanky body better?"

Garang danced and the villagers gasped. He had always been known as a good dancer, often called on to perform for important ceremonies. Markos and Shekanda took their place in the crowd, clapping and laughing. But this was not a dance of joy. It was a dance to the memory of his family, his village, and his home. It was a dance of mourning.

• • •

THE Makurian warriors woke with the rising sun. As they gathered their belongings, Daroua entered the home.

"We are thankful for you," he said. "Please come."

They followed Daroua outside. The villages stood around a camel.

"It was left behind by the Sasanians as they fled," he said. "It was wounded, but we nursed it back to health. It is yours."

Garang took the reins.

"Thank you," he said. "You have been most gracious."

"You saved our lives," Daroua replied. "We wish we could give you more."

"This is enough."

"I would like more beer," Shekanda said.

"And a few more loaves of bread," Markos added.

Garang glared at his friends. "We have enough."

The villagers heeded the words of the Nubians and added more provisions. They loaded the packs on the camel and wished the warriors well as they departed.

"We must make up for lost time," Garang said.

The Nubians didn't protest. They rode the entire day, taking breaks only to eat or relieve themselves. The next five days were more of the same. It was on the sixth day that they spotted signs of the retreating Sasanian army. Garang knelt before the hoof-prints near the river.

"They are not far ahead of us," he said. "A day, maybe two. We must be cautious. We must prepare."

They donned their helmets, chain mail, and quilted armor then inspected each other.

"We're ready," Markos said.

Shekanda stretched out his arms. "Good! We can confirm they are fleeing and go back to Dongola. This mission was becoming boring."

Garang was about to answer when he felt the vibrations under his feet. He jumped to his feet then ran to the camel.

"They are coming!" he shouted.

He clambered onto the camel and they galloped back down the road.

Garang dared to glance behind. Thirty Sasanian horsemen pursued them, the sun glinting off their conical helmets and

drawn scimitars, their robes waving like flags. They were most likely a rear-guard patrolling for groups like them. It was possible they could outrun them, or that the Sasanians would be content in chasing them off. Miles later he realized that the Sasanians meant to run them down.

Garang's amulet warmed against his chest. He looked about, fearing that he would see the demons pursuing them as well. Instead he saw a structure in the distance.

"This way!" he shouted. He pulled the reins hard, turning the camel toward the structure. As they neared the amulet grew hotter, just as it did when he'd confronted the demons. The details of the structure became visible; two wide walls flanked an entrance flanked by two lion statues. The building seemed familiar to Garang although he'd never seen its like. If they could only reach it . . ."

A familiar yet ominous cry pulled Garang's head around. He gawked in terror when he saw the demons running for the Sasanians from both sides. It was then he realized the Sasanians weren't pursuing them; they were fleeing the demons. The beasts loped toward the horsemen, their feet and knuckles pounding the sand, bearing their fangs as they screeched. Riders lost control of their steeds, the horses scattering to avoid the onslaught. Shekanda and Markos slowed, their attention drawn to the massacre that was about to take place.

"Keep going!" Garang shouted. "Don't stop until we reach the building!"

They rode hard, spurred by the screams of the hapless Sasanians. When they finally reached the edifice, they dismounted and fled toward the temple for sanctuary. Their hope became dismay. The entrance was blocked, the massive stones barring their entry hidden by the shadow of the doorway's stone canopy. Garang looked toward the battle. Slaughter was a better word. The demons ripped the Sasanians and their horses apart. Cries for Allah's mercy went unheeded as men and beasts were disemboweled and decapitated by fangs and claws. The demons spared nothing, picking through the bodies to ensure their work was complete. One by one, their attention turned to the trio and the temple. Garang chased the camel and horses away as Shekanda and Markos hammered at the stones with their fists and feet to no avail. The heat from the amulet spread throughout Garang's body as it did before, but this time the intensity was tenfold. He strode to the building entrance.

"Stand aside," he said.

Garang raised his foot then kicked the stones. They crumbled on impact. Garang had no time to wonder at his enhanced strength; he ran through the dust into the temple, his senses guiding him to a stack of weapons against the wall. He grabbed a spear similar to his, except the shaft was made of metal. He took a sword as well, two bows and two quivers filled with arrows. When he emerged from the building Shekanda and Markos were in full panic.

"We must barricade ourselves inside!" Markos said.

"No," Garang said. He handed them the quivers. "Aim for the eyes."

Markos and Shekanda inspected the weapons he'd given them. The bows were strung and in remarkable shape, as were the arrows. Their faces transformed from fear to confidence.

"These are good bows," Shekanda said.

"And arrows," Markos agreed.

Shekanda looked at Garang. "This should not be."

It was true. They might have been sitting untended in that temple for decades. Garang looked them both then smiled.

"Don't miss," he said.

Markos nodded. "We never do."

The demons ran for the temple. Garang strode toward them with his spear, his body covered in chain mail and kapok armor, his conical helmet on his head. His walk turned into a trot then into a full out run. As he neared, arrows flew by him. The Nubians were true to their word; they did not miss. Every arrow found a demon's eye and plunged into their brains. The beasts were dead before they tumbled into the sand. Garang leaped over the first line of demons and landed in their midst. He wielded the spear like a viper, stabbing the creatures in their eyes and throats while spinning through them like a deadly dancer. When he could not stab, he struck them with the metal shaft, crushing their skulls and breaking their limbs. If they'd been men, they would have seen the fruitlessness of their efforts and fled, but these were not humans. They attacked as if they wished to die, and Garang fought hard to grant their wish.

A single demon managed to slip past. It ran for Shekanda and Markos, its mouth wide as it howled. Garang threw his spear and it pierced the creature's back as the Nubians riddled it with arrows. It fell face first, its head propped up from five arrows in its face.

Garang sauntered to his companions. Shekanda and Markos looked at him in wonder. Markos hugged him and beat his back with his fists.

"I don't know what possessed you, but I'm glad it did!"

Garang didn't answer, his mood subdued as the amulet's power ebbed.

They worked their way through the bodies. The Nubians collected their arrows while Garang cut off the heads of the demons. Then they moved to the hapless Sasanians, checking to make sure they were dead and collecting what useable provisions remained. The sun was setting; they gathered wood from the Arab lances and shreds of their clothing and made torches. Garang lit them with his flint and they entered the building for the night.

Garang had not paid any attention to the innards of the building earlier; what the torchlight revealed filled him with awe. Carvings covered the walls, images created by skillful hands of an empire long dead, the empire of Kush. Whatever colors the carvings possessed had succumbed to the passage of time. In each image a lion-headed warrior wreaked havoc among its Kemetic adversaries. Garang looked closer at the image; it resembled the amulet around his neck. Seeing the amulet made his blood cold.

"This is no simple building," he said.

"It is a temple. The temple of Apedamak."

Garang, Shekanda and Markos turned toward the voice. Piye stood in the doorway, holding a torch.

"What are you doing here?" Garang asked.

"I followed you," he said. "And I saw the battle. Do you still deny it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Garang said.

"Do you still think this is all coincidence? You have the amulet, the same amulet Apedamak wears. Twice you have found the demons, and twice you have defeated them. And now you stand

in the temple of Apedamak, in thrall of his full power. If you tell me you do not feel it, you are a liar."

Shekanda and Markos stared at Garang, waiting for him to answer.

"We will stay the night, and then we'll begin our journey back to Dongola," Garang said. "The Sasanians are retreating, and I don't believe they intend to come back. Neither do I."

"What about the demons?" Piye demanded.

"We had a mission," Garang said. "And we have completed it. We did not come to fight demons."

"But you are chosen by Apedamak!" Piye shouted.

"I am not subject to a god I don't believe in," Garang said.

"But you must . . ."

Garang threw his spear. Piye yelled as the weapon struck the ground before him and stood quivering.

"Enough from you," Garang said. "We will rest tonight. Tomorrow we head back."

They settled in for the night. Garang decided to sleep outside the temple, wrapping heavy for the cool night. Sleep did not come easy, for Piye's words worried him. He could not deny the power he felt, but he did not wish to be the disciple of a so-called god. The Makurians were Christians and he respected their beliefs, but the Jieng worshipped their own gods. Yet he could not deny the power of the amulet, which drew its power from older gods. But did that obligate him to do their bidding? Garang shook his head clear. He had honored his pledge to the Makurians. He would return to Dongola, make his report, then go home.

The journey back was subdued. Garang was annoyed Piye continued to accompany them, although Shekanda and Markos didn't seem to mind; they had a new audience for their outrageous stories. Weeks later they found themselves just beyond the hills outside the village.

"I have something to show you," Piye said.

Garang looked at the others. Shekanda and Markos nodded.

"Lead us," Garang said.

They followed Piye. A few lengths away the stench reached them.

"Hut hut!" Garang shouted.

His camel galloped by Piye. When he finally reached the village, his heart fell into his stomach. The village was destroyed. Wood from the cattle and goat pens was strewn about the grasses and ruined fields. Although the homes still stood, the remains of the people who had celebrated them lay scattered among the buildings festering in the sun.

"They came back," Garang whispered.

"They did," Piye replied.

Garang jumped off his camel then rushed Piye, dragging the man off his mount.

"This is your doing!" he shouted.

"No, it's not!" Piye said. "I swear!"

"How did you know this would happen? How?"

"I didn't. The demons attacked while I was away, not long after you left. When I returned I found them all dead. That is when I set out to find you."

Garang let Piye go. Old memories returned, a similar scene playing out in his mind. Except then, the dead were his family and his clan, and the perpetrators had died by his hands.

"What are they?" Shekanda asked.

"They are the guardian of the tombs," Piye said. "They were once the most loyal warriors of the Nubian kings. They volunteered to be entombed in order to serve in the next life. Each drank the elixir that transformed them into what they are now. It was their task to protect the tombs."

"Why are they here?" Garang asked. "Why are they killing everyone?"

"The Sasanians raided the tombs, hoping to find wealth. What they found instead was death."

Piye mounted his camel.

"Now you know. We must hunt them down and kill them all."

"We can't do that on our own," Garang said. "If there are as many as you claim, we'll need an army."

Piye smiled. "We have an army. Apedamak's army."

Piye moved closer to Garang.

"You have Apedamak's strength. You know it. You can no longer deny it."

Garang looked away.

Piye turned his attention to Shekanda and Markos.

"The blood of Ta-Seti flows in your veins. Your people served both Nubian and Kemet. They helped the Kandakes defeat the Romans, and you drowned the Sasanians with your arrows. The bows and arrows you carry were crafted by Apedamak himself."

The Nubians looked to Garang.

"This is not our task," Markos said. "We have done what the king asked."

"These people gave us comfort," Garang said.

"In exchange for saving their lives!" Shekanda replied.

"If what Piye says is true, these demons will not stop here," Garang said. "They will continue to kill until they reach Dongola. Leaving will not make you safe. Either we deal with them now, or we will deal with them later."

"We have families, unlike you," Markos said.

Markos's words were meant to hurt him, which meant he was undecided.

"It is for your families that we much do this," he said.

Markos looked to Shekanda. Shekanda shrugged.

"Fight now or fight later," he said. "Not much of a choice."

"We will follow you, if you decide to do this," Markos said.

Garang turned to face Piye. "We will do it. But not for your god. We do this for these people. They did not deserve this."

"It doesn't matter why," Piye said. "Apedamak is with you, whether you accept him or not."

"Where do we begin?" Shekanda asked.

"I will show you," Piye said.

Piye rode away. Garang and the others followed. Together they passed through the village then slowly faded into the hills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Milton Davis toils away during the day in his secret identity as a technical director and research chemist. But at night he becomes The Griot, his fingers flashing across the keyboard as he spins tales of heroic deeds and sprawling empires based on African/African Diaspora cultures. Protecting his true identity are his wife and two grown children (an oxymoron?), who also aid him during conventions and presentations. You find his stories and novels at MVmedia, LLC (www.mvmediaatl.com) or follow him on Instagram at @obadoro.

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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!

Guardian of the Broken Gem

Nobleman's Comfort: The Nobleman's Comfort is a tiny magic wand, about 4 to 6 inches in length. Unlike a "typical" wand, this may be operated by anyone. No arcane knowledge or command word is necessary; all one must do is press a tiny button, or so most believe. Actually, a PC using the device must make a spell check, though the minimum check for success is much smaller than required to cast a spell of equivalent power. Non-spell casters make the check with a d10, though thieves can use their *cast spell from scroll* die. Failure deactivates the device for 2d4 hours. A natural one on the check results in minor corruption. The nobleman's comfort's ease of use and concealability make it highly desired. Any given wand has 1d6 + Luck modifier charges when found. See *Tales from the Magician's Skull* vol. 1 and vol. 3 for more examples.

- **Fog** (Min Spell Check 3): This cylinder is made from a dull gray metal and leaves skin slightly moist when touched with bare flesh. When the device is activated, an icy projectile flies two hundred feet and then evaporates. The ice is repelled by living targets, but if it strikes an inanimate object within range, then the object exudes a dense fog for 2d6 rounds at the rate of 100,000 cubic feet (e.g., 100' by 100' by 10') per round. The fog limits sight (including infravision) and sound to a 5' range. Beyond that, shapes, noises, and their direction of origin are indiscernible.

Something that glistened like dirty ice flew from his fist, shot across the room and hit the back wall with a hollow gulping sound, like a great weight dropping into deep water. Instantly a dense carpet of gray vapor rolled out to cover the wall, then expanded rapidly into the room. The fog blew past Benhus and it was as if he, and everyone else in the room, had been suddenly enveloped by a storm cloud. There were shouts and cries of panic, but the fog softened them, made them vague and distant.

Scimitar Nemesis: Init +6; Atk phantasmal scimitar +8 melee (2d6); AC 14; HD 8d8; MV fly 40'; Act 6d20; SP incapacitating chill (at the start of each round, all within 10' must make DC 16 Will save or be helplessly unable to move or act), telekinesis (requires 1 action: the nemesis can move a person or object less than 500 lbs up to a distance of 30', DC 16 Will save to resist), telepathy (only with whom it is bound to), immune to non-magical weapons, un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +8; AL N.

Ebon arcs of energy whirled around Benhus in slashing orbits, great black scimitars that lashed into the men in the doorway. The sound of thunder filled his ears but he could still hear their screams. He was hanging suspended in the center of a maelstrom and floating forward, out the doorway. Dark tongues of ravening energy seared the air and scarred the walls, carving slashes in the stone that sprayed dust as he passed.

On Death Seed Island

Xumatoq Wraith Swarm: Init +6; Atk swarming claw +4 melee (1d6+1); AC 12; HD 8d8; MV fly 60'; Act special; SP wraith-nado action dice (round 1: d16 attack on all targets within 30'x30'x30'; round 2: d20 attack on all targets within 40'x40'x40'; round 3: d24 attack on all targets within 60'x60'x60'; rounds 4+: d30 attack on all targets within 120'x120'x120'), immune to non-magical weapons, half damage from non-area attacks, double-damage from fire-based attacks, un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +4, Ref +8, Will +6; AL C.

The warriors ducked as wave after wave of wraiths dived at them like huge hornets, buffeting and tearing at them, a force as powerful as a storm-swollen sea... Ironically, the ghosts were substantial as assailants and men began to fall, their heads torn, their bodies ripped by the claws of the flying monsters, whose faces were warped into screaming skulls, eyes ablaze with a madness from some other realm, a place of utter dread... Around them the hurricane whirl of ghost shapes span faster, creating a vortex of power that threatened to drag every man into it and shred them.

Masks of Silence

Fetch: Init +4; Atk fetchblade +2 melee (1d8); AC 18; HD 4d8; MV fly 30'; Act 1d16; SP physical invulnerability (all items, mundane and magical, pass through a fetch, but a fetch can choose to touch them), limited spell immunity (immune to spells and spell effects that do physical damage), mental vulnerability (d16 for saving throws vs. mental effects), supernatural vulnerability (affected by *binding* and *banish*), emordnilap vulnerability

(immediately banished if exposed to its owner's name spelled backwards); SV Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +4; AL C.

The rocks passed through Arzandofilankworn as if he weren't there... because he wasn't, Deor realized belatedly. This was a fetch, a projection of Arzandofilankworn's self. Everyone has them, but they are rarely visible outside of dreams. Sorcerers, though, could send out fetches of a more dangerous and effective kind. This one was strong enough to wield that sword—that, at least, was no illusion, or it could not have cut Morlock's face.

The Witch's Hound

Ritual of Vengeance: A vengeance ghost is created from a dark ritual in which the caster slowly kills their beloved pet over 17 days, during which the caster lovingly says the pet's name repeatedly. Upon the animal's death, it becomes a ghost and the caster must make DC 12 spell check; spellburn is not allowed and the caster may only burn their own luck. If successful, the specter is bound in vengeance to the caster. Otherwise it consumes the caster's soul (recovering the body is not possible). Once per day, the caster can designate a single target and the ghost will teleport to the target's location for the kill. The creature attacks anyone defending its target, but upon the target's death the ghost teleports back to the caster. If it is ever reminded of its *true name* (its former name as a pet), the specter is permanently put to rest, although it first attempts to kill the caster in retribution.

With each target slain, the vengeance ghost becomes more powerful as indicated below. The judge is encouraged to also describe the creature as becoming more human with each target killed.

Vengeance Ghost: Init +4; Atk see table below; AC see table below; HD see table below; MV 40'; Act see table below; SP regeneration 1d6 hp per round, teleportation (to and from bound caster), immune to non-magical weapons, immune to fire, undead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.), vulnerability (put to rest if reminded of its former name as a pet); SV see table below; AL L.

While he watched, a hazy image began to appear. At first he thought it was a man, for he distinctly noted the outline of a kimono, but as more detail began to make itself distinct, he saw this was the ghost of nothing human...The apparition was more manlike in build, and as Oba had noted, it was clothed. The arms were more proportionate than the apelike limbs of the last visitation, but the hands that hung from the sleeves were hairy and clawed. The head that rose from the shoulders was canine, with the long, fanged muzzle and sharp, pointed ears. The eyes, as they became clear, had a cunning and intelligence that Oba hadn't seen in its prior form.

[Author's Note: Although C. L. Werner's story focuses on an inugami, a dog spirit, I've generalized the vengeance ghost for any pet. Judges that wish to dig deeper should do a web search for "inugami" for further inspiration.]

Thieves of the Fallen World

Demonic Dream Idol: A dream idol is crafted by a demon to lure a potential human host. The fiend enchants the statue to target individuals with particular traits (e.g., adventurer, nobleman, wizard, etc.) then has minions place the idol in a secret location where demonic possession can occur unobserved and uninterrupted. Within 100 miles of the idol, any PC who

VENGEANCE GHOST TABLE

Targets Killed	Attack	Armor Class	Hit Dice	Action Dice	Reflex	Fortitude	Willpower
0	Bite +2 melee (1d6)	12	2d8	1d20	+2	+2	+2
1	Bite +3 melee (1d8) Claw +1 melee (1d4)	14	3d8	2d20	+3	+3	+3
2	Bite +4 melee (1d10) Claw +2 melee (1d6)	16	4d8	2d20	+4	+4	+4
3	Bite +4 melee (1d10) 2x Claw +2 melee (1d6)	18	5d8	3d20	+5	+5	+5
4	Bite +5 melee (1d12) 2x Claw +3 melee (1d8)	20	6d8	3d20, crit 19-20	+6	+6	+6
5+	Bite +5 melee (1d12) 2x Claw +3 melee (1d8)	22	7d8	3d24, crit 20-24	+7	+7	+7

matches the idol's programming has dreams of the idol along with a vague sense of where it is. As long as they stay within the 100-mile radius, they have the same dream. If the PC follows the dream's directions and moves within 10 miles of the idol's location, they dream of it again and must make a DC 15 Will save. Upon failure, they are compelled to retrieve the idol, which guides them subconsciously to it. Even if they succeed on the save, they must continue to make it each night they stay within the 10-mile radius.

A dream idol is incredibly valuable and is placed in an area guarded by the demon's minions, who attack dreamers to test their strength as potential hosts for their master. When a dreamer manages to defeat the guardians and reach the idol, they must make a DC 20 Will save. If they fail, they're compelled to touch the statue with bare skin, which bridges the planar gap to the demon and grants possession. Under this compulsion, they'll attack any who prevent them from doing so. Once possessed, ridding the PC of the demon without killing them requires supernatural aid.

Dousing the idol with holy water grants a compelled dreamer an additional saving throw for one round. Covering the idol with quicksilver destroys the idol and breaks all compulsions.

On a short pedestal in the center of the shrine stood the treasure from Loleri's dream... This one was a golden statue of a little girl, though its expression and pose exuded wrongness, as if made by creatures with only a remote understanding of mortal motion... Its eyes were rubies faceted like an insect's, and its carnelian mouth seemed stained with blood. Its clawed fingers and its small fangs protruding over the bloody lips were inlaid ivory, though it could not come from any animal known in the mortal world. The radial swirl over its heart betrayed its true soul's shape... the demons hunted with such extensions of themselves, lures that glowed brightly in the mortal mind. Eventually, one person would get through that matched their needs—a gateway to incarnating in our world.

Apedamak's Army

Jackal "Demon": Init +4; Atk bite +6 melee (1d8+2) and claw +3 melee (1d4); AC 16; HD 3d8; MV 50'; Act 3d20 (bite, 2 claws); SP disembowel (if all 3 attacks hit a single target in the same round, target makes DC 18 Reflex save or is disemboweled for 3d6 damage), fearsome screech (requires all 3 actions: DC 12 Will save or all within 30' are panic stricken for 1d3 rounds, targets suffer -1d on all actions), death throes (after reduced to 0 or less hp, regenerates 1 hp per hour unless beheaded); SV Fort +3, Ref +4, Will +3; AL L.

The beasts resembled humans, except their bodies were covered with short haired red fur. Jackal-like heads with long fanged mouths sat on their shoulders. Although built like humans, they galloped toward the horses like the old men of the forests, their rear paws and front knuckles pounding the sand as they hurried to claim their kill.

Amulet of Apedamak: This ivory amulet is crudely carved in the shape of a maned lion. By radiating heat, it warns its bearer of enemies within 100'. Furthermore, the amulet adds one to its bearer's critical hit range (thus 20 becomes 19-20, 19-20 becomes 18-20, etc.) and upon a successful critical hit, the wearer can choose to add their deed die result to their crit die after it is rolled, if applicable. Unfortunately, each night the amulet disturbs its bearer's sleep with dreams of Apedamak's will. A DC 13 Will save is required to gain the healing benefits of a night's sleep.

Piye ignored Daroua, continuing to stare at Garang's amulet.

"Do you know what you wear?" he asked.

"It is a lion," Garang replied.

Piye chuckled. "You possess the amulet of Apedamak, the God of War. I see now why you were able to kill the demons."





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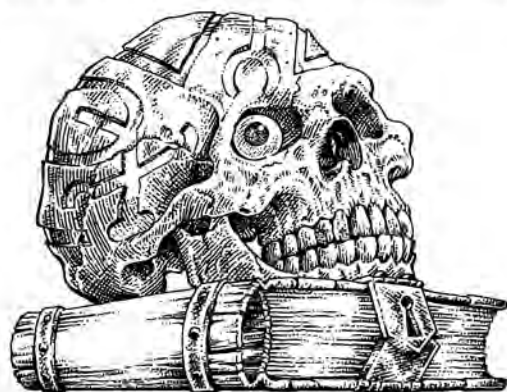
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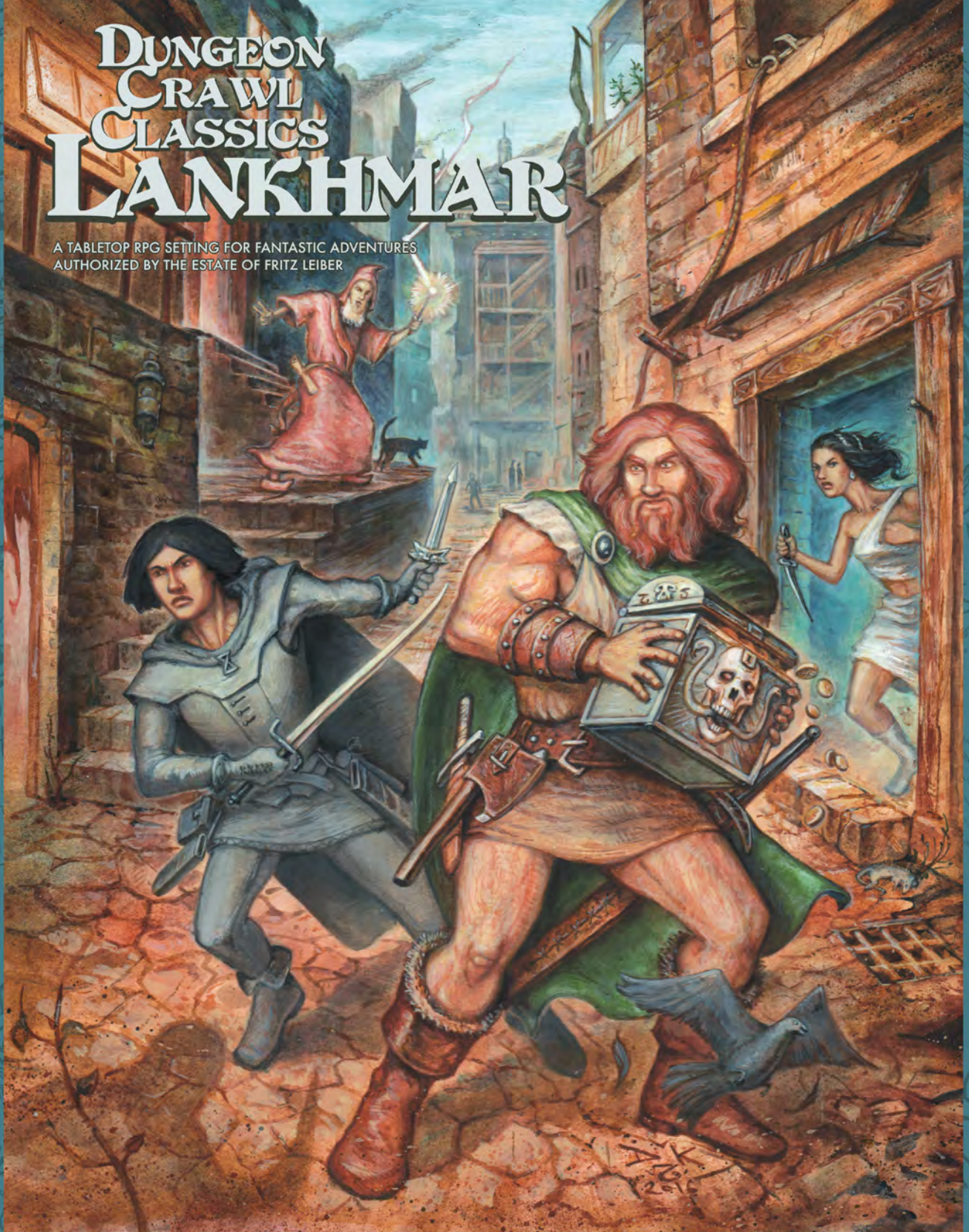


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