

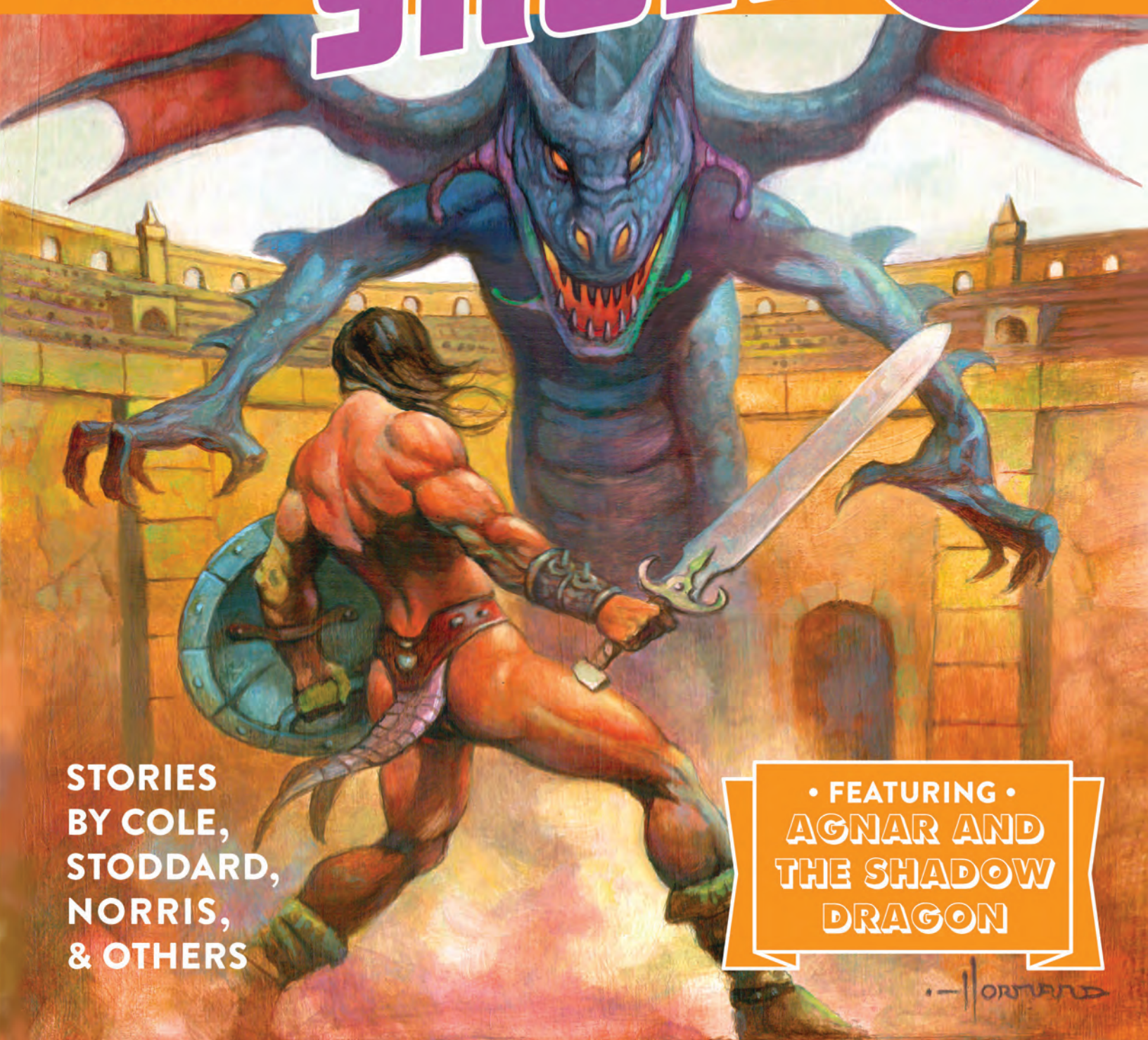
# *Tales From The* **MAGICIAN'S SKULL**

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**STORIES  
BY COLE,  
STODDARD,  
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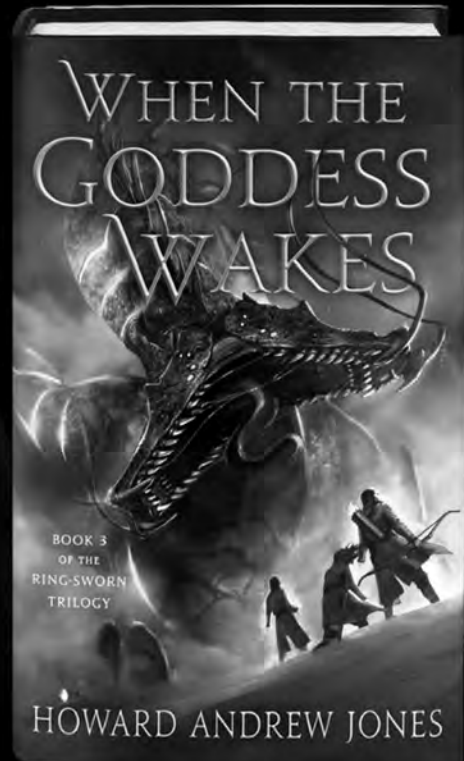
**• FEATURING •  
AGNAR AND  
THE SHADOW  
DRAGON**



—HARRARD



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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



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*Agnar threw himself into a dive, attempting to roll clear. The beast caught him effortlessly, pinning him under one of its claws. Distantly, Agnar was aware of the seething roar of the crowd as they demanded blood.*

**The Secret of the Heart Eater** . . . . . by P. J. Atwater 13

*Kasmir fought doggedly on. His mail had saved him a dozen times, though his frame shuddered under each new shock. He turned his guard on the newest opponent, and immediately knew he had made a grave mistake.*

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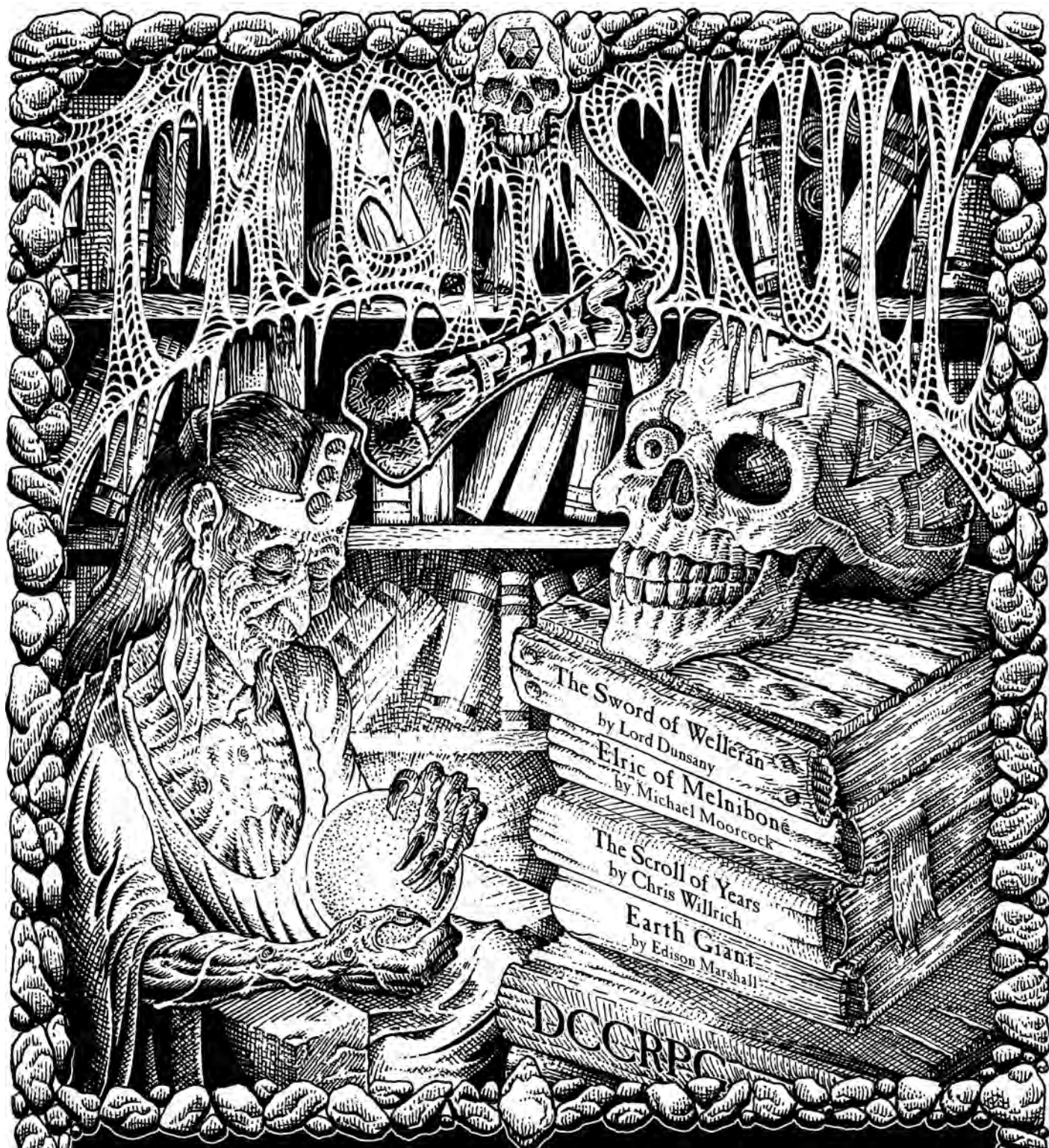
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HOWARD ANDREW JONES, Editor

DIDIER NORMAND, Cover Illustration  
LESTER B. PORTLY, Design & Layout





Rejoice, mortal dogs, for you now possess the legendary second special issue. Only the most devoted of my followers had original access to its contents. You may be one of them, or it might be that you have obtained this issue by other means. Be warned if so, for it is protected with mighty enchantments against those who would plunder its treasures without first rendering proper thanks unto me!

You may ask what makes it special when every issue of my peerless periodical is already marvelous. After all, what could be more special than my magazine, dedicated to the glories of sword-and-sorcery?! But this issue exists because it was brought to life upon Goodman's interweb kicking start, as a reward to those who sent me the greatest amount of smerduks.

One reader wondered if this issue was somehow themed. This amuses me! One of our previous interns once proposed that we should have themed issues. Foolish miscreant! Every issue of my glorious magazine is already themed, and it is sword-and-sorcery! What other theme is required? There are so many brilliant flavors of the greatest genre available already. Sometimes there is more sword, and sometimes there is more sorcery, and sometimes there are equal helpings. Sometimes there might even be scientific elements, or trombones! Sometimes there is more horror and sometimes there is more light than dark, and vice versa. Occasionally there are even moments of humor, for variety's sake!

Enough! Go now, read the tales, then send me thanks and praise! So Sayeth the Skull!

# TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this, the second special issue of the Skull's favorite magazine. What, you may ask, was the first special issue? While it is marked with the word SPECIAL on its masthead in place of a number, it is known in some circles as Issue 0, and it contained all the essays written for the first Kickstarter of *Tales From the Magician's Skull* as well as the first tale of Hanuvar, reprinted from its appearance in the Goodman Games GenCon 2016 Programming Guide. Physical copies today are extremely rare, as this one is likely to be. Cherish its contents!

Our entire team, from The Skull on down, was absolutely thrilled with the response we had from the most recent Kickstarter. Between the enthusiasm for The Skull's magazine and the rise of sister publications (and the continuance of many other long-running venues, like *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly* and *Weirdbook*) it truly seems like a sword-and-sorcery renaissance is under way! We couldn't be more delighted to be a part of it, and to be working with so many fantastic writers and artists. We are honestly grateful for your continued support.

This special issue contains work from two of our returning authors, James Stoddard, who first drew my attention with one of my favorite modern fantasy novels, *The High House*, and who has continued to delight me with his additional works, including this, the third for The Skull and the second featuring his character Tanager. And of course Adrian Cole is well-known by many, both for his many authorized Elak

tales, some of which we've been fortunate to publish, and as the creator of The Voidal and Nick Nightmare, and The Dream Lords. This time he gives us some new adventurers wandering Elak's world.

The cover features the start to the climactic scene from Simon Kewin's "Agnar and the Shadow Dragon," one of the exciting works from authors new to our magazine. Other writers we met during our submission period are here as well, crafting in settings as diverse as Ken Lizzi's "Bronze Helm," with its Renaissance Italy feel, to one seemingly analogous to a south Asian seacoast in Gregory Norris's "The Fisherman's Wife." What these and the rest of this issue's contents have in common is that they are some flavor of The Skull's favorite kind of tale, sword-and-sorcery, and I think you'll be heartily pleased with every single one of them.

As always, we at *Tales From the Magician's Skull* welcome your letters, comments, and suggestions. We all look forward to hearing from you, especially The Skull himself. Speaking of which, I once again hear the summons of the gong, and must finish this note and head for the weekly meeting. Enjoy your time among these pages, and, as always ...

Swords Together!

— Howard Andrew Jones

## • THE SKULL IMPROVES THE CLASSICS •

Heed me, Mortal Dogs!

Truly these are glorious days to be an undead publisher of a sword-and-sorcery magazine! Not only does my magazine prosper, but accolades and wonders reach me nearly on a daily basis! Further, upon assuming control over the carcass of Intern 64 I have begun to walk once more among mortals, and to learn their simple ways. With fingers under my control I have begun experimenting with modern musical forms, and to learn the secrets of the keyboard and the "rock and roll" guitar. So far the power of thrash metal guitar has eluded me, but I will master it yet, for the only thing mightier than metal guitar is the trombone, grandest of all instruments upon the mortal realm!

As always, I have sought diversion during my time here on Earth by turning to the pages of so called "classics" of literature and watching the movies on my Betamax and Blue Raybeam player. This being a special issue, I wish to devote space to spectacular ideas that have occurred to me to improve various forms of media!

First, the works of William Shakespeare are not without merit, for they frequently present great carnage, swordplay, and even magic. All the majority require for true excellence are a few small tweaks. The presence of barbarians, for instance, as well as battles with monsters. *A Winter's Tale* features a most excellent bear assault, which is a fine

idea, and one that Shakespeare could have stood to emulate more often, particularly if he was to use octobears. Some talented scribe should assay these changes at once.

Second, I wish to commend Jones' theory that every movie with The Indelible Hulk as a secondary character is immeasurably improved. I henceforth command that The Hulk is to be added to a variety of otherwise bland or tiresome spectacles. Allow me to demonstrate. Let us consider that ponderous film about singing do-gooders and a grumpy sea-captain known as *Sounds of The Music*. Imagine how glorious this film would be if the plodding nun songs were removed and replaced with songs about The Hulk. Is it not obvious that "Smash Every Nazi" is a superior song title to "Climb Every Mountain?" Imagine how much more exciting the grand finale would be if the do-gooders escaped while The Hulk collapsed a cliff upon the fascist stooges!

Of course, even better would be if the airwaves were to be flooded with tales of sword-and-sorcery and if bookstore stalls overflowed with examples of the same! Soon, soon, this may well transpire, but only if you place your faith in me, and tell all you meet of the glories of the sacred fiction!

— So Sayeth the Skull!

**DO YOU HAVE SUGGESTIONS, QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, OR CONCERNS? DO YOU WISH TO SEND US ACCOLADES, INVITATIONS, OR JEWELLED GOBLET? IF YOU DARE TO CONTACT THE SKULL, REACH OUT TO US AT: [skull@goodman-games.com](mailto:skull@goodman-games.com) WHEN THE STARS ARE RIGHT, SOMEONE SHALL RESPOND.**

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# AGNAR AND THE







# SHADOW DRAGON



By **SIMON KEWIN**

Illustration by **RANDY BROECKER**

**A**GNAR went back to sharpening his sword on the rutted whetstone, ignoring the fighting that raged around him. There would be bloodshed among the other slaves, bruises and broken bones, but the scuffles would die out soon enough. They always did. They were fools, terrified at what they would have to face in the arena and taking out their fears on the only targets available: each other. They were only weakening themselves, reducing their odds of survival, but they wouldn't listen.

A Bregenian fighter, her armour crafted from the scales of the ironfish that swam in the waters of her distant home, staggered into him, nearly knocking over the pale of thin oil the guards provided for the honing of the slaves' blades. Agnar lifted his sword clear of the stone, holding it at an angle in the air towards her. At so close a range, a single forward thrust at the right spot could find its way through those tightly-knitted scales into the soft flesh beneath. He made no other movement apart from raising a single eyebrow.

The Bregenian did not raise her battle-trident to meet his sword as she regained her balance. Her voice was muffled beneath her helm, her accent strange to Agnar's ears.

"Forgive me, Wildsman. I meant you no harm."

Agnar nodded, then turned away, back to the whetstone, studiously ignoring her. It wasn't worth making the effort to befriend any of them; the chances were they'd all be dead in a week. Occasionally, a group was sent out to battle some huge or brutal beast brought roaring and lashing into the arena, and he'd tried, at first, to see who might make a good ally in such a fight. It had proved futile: the only other who'd combined some physical skill with the wisdom to know when to attack and when to defend had been a Grey Monk from the distant Thunderhead Hills. He'd died four days previously, his body ripped into chunks of meat by a creature from Agnar's nightmares: a Fangbeast from Dunland. He'd heard tales of the creatures. This one had prowled and leapt like a tame cat playing with a mouse, yet it was fully the size of a plains stallion. Agnar had watched the brief battle through the iron grating high up in the cell wall and had understood, in that moment, what he really already knew. He was alone.

Alone, and doomed. If you won a battle, they pitched you against stronger opposition — and kept doing so until you no longer won. The good people of Medenwar loved a hero and they especially loved a battle against impossible odds. They also loved to bet on the arena battles, the bigger and bloodier the better. It was said that the last time someone had fought the Shadow Dragon itself over a million gold crowns had been wagered. Lord Amseb, the fabled Knight of the Flame, captured from Akesia and offered the chance to win back his freedom, had been the crowd's darling. The noble hero, trained to ride a horse and wield a sword from the age of two, a man who probably slept in his armour, had lasted a full four minutes before being cut in half.

The story amused Agnar. He had little time for knights and their pretences. The story also spelled out very clearly how grim a prospect a meeting in the arena with the Shadow Dragon was. Especially *this* Shadow Dragon, raging with its fury and resentments. He knew for a fact that five had so far attempted the combat, and precisely five had died. And yet, to become the next to try, he'd walked out of the wilds to the walls of Medenwar, allowing himself to be captured by the civilised barbarians of the city.

At least the other slaves knew to leave him alone. It wasn't just his size and strength; he'd gone out of his way to let them see how capable he was with a blade. He'd done all he could to live up to everyone's easy assumptions about Wildsfolk. Let them think he was stupid and brutal, it didn't matter. Let them think he had no heart, no soul, just because his muscles were large.

He'd met two creatures in the arena so far. The decrepit Ice Tiger had been no contest, and sinking his sword into her wheezing chest had been a mercy.

His second foe, a titansnake, had been an altogether different prospect. Agnar had barely survived, and he still woke up in the night sweating with fear, imagining the beast slithering through the tunnels after him. He'd had no idea there were such horrors to be found in the world. The sandserpents from his boyhood could give you a painful bite, but little more. Even the biggest of them had been three, perhaps four paces long. The titansnake had been fifty, its body as broad as a tree trunk. It had moved with dazzling speed, striking down at Agnar again and again, and all he could do at first was to flee and roll and dodge. It had taken him the best part of an hour to learn the serpent's movements, the way it coiled a moment before it struck. Eventually, with the last reserves of his strength, he'd glimpsed an opening and leapt for a killing head blow. It had been gruelling work, distasteful. He'd had no argument with the beast, but he'd also had no choice if he was to meet his ultimate nemesis and find redemption.

A heavy drop of water fell from the rough stone roof of the underground cell, landing with a *splut* in the oil. No wonder it was so thin. The guards didn't care; it was no concern of theirs that the slaves' weapons dulled and their armour rusted. All they wanted was the spectacle. All that mattered was that the slaves put up some sort of fight against the beasts unleashed against them, that there was entertainment for the crowd. The fairness of the fight, the tally of bodies dragged from the arena at the end of the day — these were things of no account. There were always more fighters and more beasts to entertain the cheering freefolk. The conquering armies of glorious Medenwar ensured there was no shortage of either.

The familiar lump of hardness inside his stomach moved, as if in answer to these thoughts. He sometimes wondered if he just imagined it; that it was nothing more than the dead weight of his own dread moving within him. It was possible. He did not claim to be without fear. Only a fool or a liar did. He did not want to die, certainly not by the claws of a Shadow Dragon. Given the choice, he'd have preferred to fall asleep with his wife beside him at some suitably old age and simply not wake up: no hero's death, perhaps, but an appealing one.

He knew it was not going to be.

The roar of the crowds was a distant thunder in the stone walls, but the sound blared suddenly loud as the doors to the cell were pushed open by the guards. They dragged the limp form of a spearsman called Galiad between them. Galiad had been sent out to face a creature that was something like a huge bear with dagger-like claws and the miraculous ability to disappear and reappear in different places. The day before, Fain, commander of the guards, had laughed at Agnar as the Wildsman studied the creature through the grating.

"You're admiring our Vanishing Griffinbear, Wildsman?"

Agnar had tried to keep the edge of fear out of his voice. What use was a blade against a creature that could turn into air? "Is this beast enchanted or are they all capable of this ... leap?"

Perhaps Fain hadn't known. "It makes no difference. You fight what I give you to fight."

Galiad, though, had never had a chance. He'd landed a single spear thrust but after that had been defenceless. He wasn't

---



dead, or the guards wouldn't have dragged him back, but it was surely only a matter of time. His abdomen was a bloody mess of red and purple. Worse, the creature's raking claws were toxic. The poison would already be pumping around Galiad's body.

Fain stood over the unmoving slave. He spoke to the whole room, as if he considered none of them individuals. "Bind his wounds. He'll fight again tomorrow if he survives the night."

Fain wore the outlandish helmet sported by all guards, bristling with sharp spikes. Another thing that quietly amused Agnar. Did they not cut themselves to shreds in the simple action of removing their head coverings at the end of the day? He'd never seen Fain's face, but if he had the chance, he would kill the guard. Perhaps Fain was only a step or two above the slaves, but he enjoyed making them suffer too much for Agnar's liking.

Fain spoke again, his tiny eyes peering out through the slits in his helmet until his gaze settled upon Agnar. "Wildsman, it is time to see what you can do against the Griffingbear."

Again, Agnar felt the pang of disgust at fighting for no reason. To kill to defend the clan or for food — that was one thing. But to kill for sport, for the entertainment of others — it sent a shiver of revulsion through him.

He ignored it. "How badly did Galiad injure the beast?" he asked, eyeing up the edge of his sword.

Fain laughed a throaty chuckle. "Enough to make it angry, not enough to slow it down. What's wrong, Wildsman, are you afraid?"

"A wise fighter learns all he can of his foe."

"Then by all means step into the arena and take a good, long look for yourself. Hurry, the crowd grow restless. They want a proper end to this fight, one way or another."

"And if I win?"

Fain stepped across to stand over Agnar. "If you win, then you come back here until I call you again."

"I wish to face the Shadow Dragon."

A murmur of amusement rippled around the slaves and guards alike. He always said the same thing when called to fight.

Fain's laugh bubbled as if he'd been struck in the throat by a sword blow. "Are you so desperate to escape your life?"

"It is my destiny to fight the beast." They did not need to know the full truth of it; it was better to plant a simple idea in their heads. People responded to that. "Once, that dragon killed many of my people. I wish to repay it."

"Let me tell you your destiny, Wildsman. You sit here, and then you go out there to fight whatever beast I put you up against. You live or you die. *I* am your destiny, do you understand?" Fain seemed very pleased with his remark, looking around at the other guards as if to soak up their amusement.

Agnar nodded. He stood, towering head and shoulders over the Captain. "I understand. I will fight your bear."

They led him out of the cell, the iron doors squealing shut behind him, the chains rattling as the guards locked the other slaves back in. Oily smoke drifted from the line of braziers set at intervals down the wide passageway. The floor was sand, good for soaking up blood and gore. Its surface was a patchwork of footprints and hoofprints and claw marks. It was edged to one side by the line of cages holding the beasts. Roars and snarls

came at him, talons and tendrils reaching through the iron bars. He paid them no attention. The undercroft had been carefully arranged so that the slaves had to walk past the monsters to reach the ramp to the arena floor. The stench of rotting meat was rank. The roar of the crowd swelled, as if it were the voice of some beast waiting for him.

He stopped only once, at the largest gateway, opposite the foot of the ramp. Within there lurked the Shadow Dragon. He knew the name of the creature: Exinor. Knew well the creature's name and history. He had to survive this fight, and the next, and the next, and keep going until, finally, they let him face the creature who, even now, watched him from the gloom of its prison. That was what mattered.

"Ready, Wildsman? Give the crowd good sport out there. Don't die right away."

"I will not die."

Fain laughed and hit him hard on the shoulder. "Excellent, then I will see you again. Perhaps."

Agnar spoke no more. He climbed the ramp into the glaring sunlight to face the Vanishing Griffingbear.

The bear leaped and, just as Agnar knew it would, vanished a blink before crashing into him. He'd studied the beast's dance steps carefully, watching how it timed its attacks. He stood for a heartbeat, allowing his own deception to unfold. The roar of the crowd around him was like the wind raging through the forests of his home.

*Now.*

He dropped to the ground and rolled. The sand was hot beneath his back. He thrust upwards with his sword, bracing it with his free hand. The leaping bear would pass over him, too late to stop its onward rush, and his blade would slice open its soft underbelly.

His raised sword found only air to cleave. Confused, already scrambling to one side, he cast around to find the creature. Was it bad luck, or had he misjudged the beast?

No time to worry about it now: the creature materialised suddenly to his side, already leaping, jaws and claws huge. Had it known that Agnar had watched it? Was it that intelligent? Agnar tried to regain his feet, using his sword as a counterweight rather than a weapon for a moment. He was an instant too slow. The Griffingbear barrelled into him, one claw raking across Agnar's belly. He heard the combined gasp from the crowd even as the sickening pain from the ragged wound hit him.

At least he knew where the creature was now: the beast couldn't repeat its leap through the aether immediately; it had to regain its strength. That was how the sorcery in it worked. It relied on delivering a surprise kill, and it had failed.

Agnar brought his great sword down in an arc, putting all his strength into the scything blow, screaming through the pain of his own wound. The Griffingbear was quick, but not quick enough. Agnar felt his sword bite into flesh and sinew.

There was an agonized howl, a cry of pain and rage, and the beast slumped to the arena floor. Red blood soaked into the yellow sand.

The roar of the crowd washed over Agnar again, suddenly loud. His name was in their massed call. They knew him. He stood, clutching his belly with one hand while he raised his sword high with the other.



It was no use. He felt the sting of the bear's poison in his wound. He tried to fight it, banish the venom from his body by force of will alone, but it was useless. The shamans of his tribe knew incantations and could brew potions that would help, but they were far away.

The world lurched around him, the yellow sand and the red heat of the sun blurring into a smear of colour. He thumped into the ground, and grit filled his mouth.

When he woke he was in the cell, cold stone beneath his back. He burned as if his insides were on fire, and yet he shivered uncontrollably.

Fain was there, crouched by his side like a concerned mother. "I thought you weren't going to die, Wildsman."

Agnar's voice was a croak. "Let me sleep."

Fain's spiked helmet blurred as the guard moved away, then returned. "I *should* let you die and save the cost of feeding you."

"Do it then."

"Oh, I would, truly, but the crowd wouldn't like it. Seems they've all heard of your desire to face the Shadow Dragon, and now they clamour for it. They've seen you fight three times and they want more, which means I have to go to the trouble of keeping you alive."

Agnar felt a bitter liquid trickling between his lips. He spluttered and fought, but he was too weak. The syrupy liquid crept down his throat. "What have you given me?"

"Heal, Wildsman. I need you strong enough to stand on your feet."

"I don't ..."

But the world twisted again and became a fog of greyness.

He was a boy again, back in the wilds, the evening everything had changed. It was midsummer, the night of the gathering at the Muster Hill when the tribes met to settle scores and celebrate the turning of the year. The night when his people's guardian spirit, the dragon Exinor, was summoned and given sacrifice: one tribute from each of the seventeen families. Agnar watched from a distance, the dancing lights of the fires filling his eyes. The summoning cries of the shamans rang out, reaching a crescendo to the beat of huge, horse-skin drums, and then suddenly the beast was there in the sky over the hill, blotting out the stars as it roared its voice of flame. It landed with an earth-shaking boom upon the hill. In flight, it was as formless as a storm cloud or the fast-billowing smoke from a volcano, a glimpse of fang or eye as it streamed overhead. When it chose to, it became solid. That was its magic. And that was what it did now, to receive the tributes being offered.

There was suddenly shouting, fighting. Grunts of effort and cries of anguish: the familiar music of the battle. The shamans worked further magic of their own, sorcery that tasted acrid in the air. Black bonds of smoke that became as strong as steel materialised all across Exinor's body, pinning its wings to its side. His people were suddenly battling against the great beast.

Roaring and lashing, Exinor swung its tail around, sending ten or twenty warriors to their deaths. Flame roared from its mouth, and thirty or forty more died, their screams agonized but brief. Some tried to hack at Exinor with their swords, but the creature simply shifted its weight, crushing them.

The shamans, working from behind the horde, continued their spellweaving. More black lines of smoke arrowed through

the air, binding the creature tighter and tighter. Before long, Exinor was held immobile. It was as if a tornado had been caught and tethered to the ground.

Exinor could surely not be held for long. But, long enough. A Wildsman that Agnar didn't know stepped up to the beast, sword held forward. The sword became a surgeon's trepanning knife, skewering the great beast's skull, burrowing into its flesh. Exinor raged and bellowed, but the smoke-bonds held it.

A small object, covered in gore, was pulled from the ragged wound at the creature's forehead and held up for the cheering crowds to see. Exinor's mindstone, the source of its magic. Maddened by agony and loss, Exinor roared and struggled, but the bonds held it firm.

Agnar's mother returned from the fight, her chest heaving. A spray of blood painted her face, blood that was not her own. She placed a hand upon Agnar's shoulder. Her voice was low, all emotion washed from it. "Come, we will leave."

"But, the fighting. The dragon."

"We must leave now if we are to survive this."

Agnar closed his eyes, and a welcome oblivion washed the images away.

A week later, able to stand again, he was made to fight a squabbling gaggle of harpies. The stench from the creatures made him gag, their raucous shrieks filling his ears. They were half-starved, turning them vicious. He made it through barely, his muscles heavy, but the closeness of the fight only made the crowd roar more loudly.

Next came a Roc, a bird like a mountain eagle from his home, but enormously bigger, its talons big enough to carry off a struggling child. It was a creature from fireside sagas. Its wings were clipped but its great beak was vicious as it lunged at him again and again, its yellow eye peering down. A handful of sand thrown from the arena floor briefly blinded the bird, and Agnar took his chance, piercing the bird's breast. The squawks of agony were terrible to hear.

Next came a monster that Fain described to him with relish. "You will face a Fury from the forests of Xend."

"I do not know what this is," Agnar said. He'd never glimpsed such a beast from his grating, nor heard of it in tales.

"Our newest monster, kept especially for you. You'll see what it is like soon enough."

The creature was something like a large lion, perhaps, but three-headed, and filled with a rage that sent it swirling in a cloud of claw and tooth. It charged at Agnar without hesitation. Agnar, his reactions and strength improving all the time, leapt aside, stabbing at the raging beast with his blade. The dance continued for long minutes, Agnar never taking his gaze off the beast, never standing still for more than a moment. Slowly, the balance tipped: the creature weakened, and more blood spattered the ground. Once more, Agnar triumphed.

Finally came a demon of black flame summoned, according to Fain, by Medenwar's court necromancers. It was intelligent, rasping in its incomprehensible tongue as Agnar approached, firing off goutts of seething fire that he dodged, barely. For once, he felt no remorse as he struck at the foul creature. It had no place in Agnar's world. It was also arrogant, unable to believe, perhaps, that Agnar was a serious threat. That was its undoing. Its blood was purple and sluggish when Agnar finally struck home.

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Throughout all the battles, he understood what was happening: Fain was building him up for the finale of the celebrations that were to mark the Emperor's birthday. Agnar and the Shadow Dragon. It was working; Agnar became stronger each passing day. The date for the celebration was, again, to be midsummer. Agnar didn't comment upon the grim irony of that. Instead, he played his part, getting himself ready.

The day came, and Agnar spent an hour sharpening his blade. There was no fighting among the slaves around him. After three days of celebrations, there were very few of them left, the slaughter terrible. The Bregenian had died the day before, crushed beneath the coils of a sea serpent in the arena's flooded pool. Agnar didn't know the names of any of those he now shared the cell with. He had chosen not to find out.

When the time was ready, he was led for one final time through the undercroft, past the line of cages. As he marched onto the burning sands of the arena, the crowd's voice filled his ears. Some of them loved him, some of them hated him. Fain had gleefully told him that two million crowns had been wagered on the contest, the great majority of it going on the dragon. Most of the crowd wanted him to die.

At some unseen sign, a hush settled upon the arena. The shadow dragon was coming. A moment of silence, and then the great beast lumbered up the ramp, thirty guards prodding at it with pikes to encourage it into the light. There was something ungainly in the way it moved, as if bones within it were broken, disconnected. It wasn't supposed to be locked into its physical form for so long; that wasn't its nature. Agnar picked out the wounds in the creature's sides, running freely with blood.

None of it was going to make any difference: the creature was even larger than he recalled. It towered over him, a hill of muscles and claws and hate, and he was a mouse standing before it.

Agnar circled the dragon, watching for the slightest twitch of a muscle that might tell him it was about to strike. His only hope was to get near. He held his sword close, a stance more of defence than attack. He needed to preserve his strength if this was to continue for more than a few moments. A deep rumble came from the beast, but Agnar didn't know if it was preparing to incinerate him or if the creature was laughing.

Agnar shouted his words to the creature. "I have come to right a wrong, Exinor."

The vast beast's eyes narrowed as Agnar used its name. Its voice was a gentle hiss, hot on Agnar's face. "You were there that night."

"I was only a boy, but I know what happened. I know who and what you are. You were our guardian spirit. My people we never had need of gods, but we did have you."

"Betrayers. You tricked me."

The leap was astoundingly rapid for such a bulk of muscle. Agnar threw himself into a dive, attempting to roll clear. The beast caught him effortlessly, pinning him under one of its claws. Distantly, Agnar was aware of the seething roar of the crowd as they demanded blood. His or the dragon's. Exinor tightened its grip and Agnar felt the life being squeezed out of him. His sword was still in his hand, but even he wasn't strong enough to move his arm to attack.

He'd planned a whole speech, but instead the words came out in a breathless jumble. "Not all of us. My tribe, we remained true.

The others ... a madness had come over them. They forgot who they were. We are scattered and lost, and so I have come."

"You bound me, cut the mindstone from my head. For that you will die."

"It was a terrible thing. We tried to stop them, but they wouldn't listen. You must remember. There was fighting; my clan against the others."

Exinor paid him no attention. "You made me into this wild beast, and it is this wild beast that will kill you now."

"No! Hear me. I have come to make amends. I retrieved the mindstone. The tribes sold it to the Emperors of Medenwar for a fortune. They thought to buy themselves luxuries, horses and slaves uncounted, but instead they sold their souls. They lost everything. We lost everything."

The beast's claws tightened further still, and Agnar knew it would only be a moment before his skeleton was crushed. He gasped out the rest of his story. "Six months ago, I climbed into the Emperor's desert palace and stole the mindstone."

How he had achieved that feat was another story. The stone had been set in the Imperial Crown of Medenwar but, so far as he knew, no one had even noticed the substitution.

There was the faintest, slightest relaxation to Exinor's grip. "Where is it? Tell me."

"In the one place I could put it to bring you."

"Where?"

"I swallowed it."

Exinor released Agnar from its claw, took a step backwards as if to look at him properly for the first time.

"You *swallowed* it? *You* swallowed it?"

"It was the only way. I came to this city of high walls and strong doors to right a wrong, and now my quest is complete. You must devour me and by doing so consume the stone. The shadow magic within it ... it will still work. I feel it fizzing as it yearns for you. Devour me, and you will be whole again. Fly from this place and be free. Become the air and the storm once more, and my people will be released from the curse and the shame of these years."

Exinor laughed, billowing flame, blasting it into the sky, loud enough to drown out the cries of the crowd. Cries and jeers: the crowd wanted blood, not a conversation.

"Consume me now," said Agnar, "before they come for me. It is the only way."

"A sacrifice," said Exinor.

"Always we made sacrifices to you. The willing, the sick, the dying. I am in payment for all those we have missed." The crowd around them were growing restless. Somewhere up in those stands, the Emperor would be watching, and doubtless there would be a frown on that painted and perfumed face. A phalanx of guards emerged from the undercroft, weapons held ready.

"You must hurry."

Exinor lowered its vast head and put it to Agnar's belly. Its breath was searing hot on his skin as it snuffled at him.

"Take it," said Agnar. "Take me. Be free again. Free my people."

The rumble in Exinor's cavernous bulk became something like a laugh. "I refuse your sacrifice, little Wildsman."

"No. You cannot."



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"I can, and I do."

"Why?"

"You do not deserve to die this day."

The creature worked some magic then, or perhaps it was the mindstone yearning for its true owner, but Agnar felt the weight move within him again, pulling, tearing at his tissues. The agony mounted, but he let it come. He had come to face his death. He would not turn back now.

The stone ripped its way from his flesh to fly into Exinor's mouth, and Agnar could not stop himself from screaming in agony. He slumped to his knees, clutching his ruined belly. His blood was warm between his fingers.

There was a moment when the universe paused, and then the Shadow Dragon roared its exultation. A circle of flame lashed the arena, sending the crowds into panic. Agnar, slumped beneath that great head, watched as Fain and the other guards were caught by the flame and died.

Agnar croaked, "Fly free, Exinor. My clan ... we have given you this. Remember what we have done. Do not make them suffer, I beg. The wrong has been righted."

The laugh rumbled again from the beast. "Tell them yourself, little Wildsman."

"This wound ... it is too much."

"No. The mindstone was within you all this time. All your fights ... did you think it was your skill and strength alone? The stone has changed you. There is something of me in you, now."

To his surprise, Agnar found he could stand. When he took his hand away from his belly, the blood had ceased to well from him.

There was more: Exinor's words had appeared in his mind without passing through the air between them. It was true; he and the beast had become ... connected.

"Climb onto my back and we will escape this cursed place."

"You wish me to ride you like a ... a horse?"

"To your clan and no farther. You have earned that much."

Agnar climbed the creature's black flanks. Arrows and spears rained down from the edges of the arena. Agnar ignored them. Desperately, he clung on with his heels as the great beast lurched skywards, the rush of air threatening to pluck him off. He tried to move in time with the beast's great wingbeats, flow with them through the air as he might the gallop of any plains steed.

For a moment he couldn't breathe, then he finally found his voice. He roared with laughter and exhilaration of his own. Beneath him, the arena, the entire city, was a shrinking dot upon a wide, wide land.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Kewin is a pseudonym used by an infinite number of monkeys who operate from a secret location deep in the English countryside. Every now and then they produce a manuscript that reads as a complete story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Sometimes even in that order. The Simon Kewin persona devised by the monkeys was born on the misty Isle of Man in the middle of the Irish Sea. He moved to the UK as a teenager, where he still resides. He is the author of over a hundred published short stories and poems, as well as a growing number of novels. In addition to fiction, he also writes computer software. The key thing, he finds, is not to get the two mixed up.

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# THE SECRET OF



# THE HEART EATER



By P. J. ATWATER

Illustration by CHRIS ARNESON

**L**ORD Slavik slumped over the council table, massaging his head to keep it from swimming. To his left sat his steward, Ony, and Jarimir, quartermaster of the city garrison; to his right was a scribe, his stylus scratching the clay slate in economic strokes.



"Barley: seven-hundred and three bushels," Ony was saying. The scribe took note. "Salt pork: three-hundred and fourteen pounds. Baked bread ..." the steward sifted through a stack before him. "Let's see ... only eighty-five loaves. And ale is at nine-hundred barrels."

"My men don't need the drink," said Jarimir, leaning back stiffly. "Send it all to the commons. But we must have dry goods."

"I agree with the quartermaster, your Lordship," Ony said faintly.

Slavik craned his neck and looked out the window. The frame was bare; all panes in the city and keep had been removed, that the iron might be melted into arrowheads and nails. A bird was calling from its nest in the eaves. Slavik caught sight of its red breast as it darted into the gray sky beyond sight. His belly rumbled.

"Your Lordship," Ony was saying. Slavik turned to him.

"Yes, Master Steward?" he said.

"How much pork and grain should be allotted to the garrison, Your Lordship? I can repeat the figures if you ..."

"I heard the figures. Delegate forty percent of all dry goods to the garrison, for the quartermaster to ration as he sees fit. The soldiers must be fed, first and foremost. And ..." he turned to the scribe. "Read back the number on soap."

The scribe scanned his tablet. "Ten-hundred and seventy-seven bars, not counting His Lordship's household ..."

"Count it, damn you."

"Very good, Your Lordship. That gives Twelve-hundred. Approximately."

Slavik turned to the counselors. "Send all soap to the barracks. Melt it into oil for their gruel."

"Most wise, my lord," said Ony, and Jarimir nodded approvingly. Then a messenger came to the chamber.

The messenger let himself in, opening the broad oak door. The doors in the castle had not been torn down to construct barricades and siege weapons — not yet. "His Lordship is called to the north wall," he said. "Sir Kasmir sends, urgently."

Lord Slavik gestured the page away as he rose, grateful to get on his feet, where his mind was less on his stomach. He hitched his loose trousers high above his waist and said "I think you gentlemen can handle the rest of the rationing. Ony, see that Jarimir gets what his men need, above all else."

"Very good, my lord."

"Now, I go see what the knight-emissary wants."

• • •

**L**ORD Slavik walked into the street without an escort. Any thought to his own security seemed absurd and empty — not only ludicrous, but an affront of sorts; he would not be seen to guard his person against his own people who went in starvation and fear with a dastardly enemy beyond the wall. He scarcely fancied himself a "common touch" sort of lord, though his grandfather had been low-born; still, it might buoy the commons to see him walking alone, bearing with them. His thoughts were fuzzy, but he feared no betrayal. Even a less-loved leader would be safe from daggers among his flock, with such an enemy outside the gates. Any dissidents or opportunists would have fled at

the first word of siege; the Riavs always announced themselves and offered terms before moving against a stronghold. Though unpredictable on the field, their nature could not change these human monsters.

Those still within the walls knew what cruelties would befall them if the city fell, and not even sending Slavik's head on a platter would save them now.

As Slavik trudged along a dusty avenue he passed a bard dressed in grubby linens strumming his lyre on a corner, sitting between bare doorframes and performing before an empty street. It was a beautiful song, though marred by the odd falter or sour note, and Slavik lingered to admire it.

The bard looked up suddenly, alarmed. "My Lord Slavik!" he cried, bowing.

"What are you doing out here, playing the lyre alone?"

"I beg forgiveness, Lord. I never meant to be idle! There is no work to be done, with every shop and alehouse closed. Has my playing offended you?"

Slavik shook his head. "Play, bard. Your lord commands it."

The player nodded vigorously, placing his hands to the strings, when the lord spoke again.

"And can you not sing?"

"I can sing well enough, Lord."

"Then do. Your people need song. And go where they may hear, not languish alone in this alley."

"I will go, Master," said the bard, and taking up his lyre he went away. Lord Slavik stood desolate and watched him go. An eddy of dust rose from the stones about his feet. The pregnant sky blackened, agitated by frigid winds. "Will it not rain?" Slavik said to himself, and continued north.

• • •

**I**N front of the north barracks Sir Kasmir awaited among some low officials. The knight greeted him with an officious bow and salute. Above them, the rampart was lined with a congregation of armsmen and laborers. "What are those men doing?" Slavik asked Kasmir.

"They watch the Riavs," said the knight, his sallet slung under his arm, his cropped black mane and mighty beard unstirred in the stale breeze.

"Oh, and what are the invaders doing, that these men forget their duty?"

"They are building a dam."

"What? Damming the Yylt? What for? They must know we have wells."

"The Riavs are always unguessable. Perhaps they will burst the dam to wash us away; perhaps they foresee victory, and think a lake will suit them."

"Is this why you have summoned urgently, to shew me idle men and Riavaan enigma? Where are the captains? The foremen?"

"Gazing at the Riavs and their dam, I suppose. These men are yours; I sent my own to Cideffrid at the first rumor of siege. In time, my king may send liberation — of course, had you sooner sent a messenger, the army of Great Valta could have arrived long ago."

"Whatever country your king rules," said Slavik, "If the man sitting over her calls himself king, she is not Valta. We here are Valtans, ruling as our ancestors did."

Kasmir remained impassive. "How did I inherit your position, Sir Lord?"

"Do you see a crown on my head? My father nominated his heir, and the chancellors, appointed by the commons, approved my ascension. This is a land of laws, not of monarchs."

"And yet the chancellors have fled, leaving their constituents under a Lord, and to the tender graces of foreign barbarians."

"Enough," said Slavik peevishly. "We have had this talk a dozen times. I would extend alliance, but nothing short of fealty would satisfy your king. Now he will ride to the rescue, just in time, I suppose, for the commons to beg to join the serfdom of their liberator. And you have lingered with us, the Face of the Kingdom, to be seen suffering in solidarity."

"I am not quite so cynical, Your Lordship. It does good for the commons to see nobles bearing common burdens in times of trouble. I am lowborn — as you know there are many infant houses in Cideffrid's realm — but it remains a matter of common cause. As I stand beside you, so shall the king stand by you. This I know you understand."

"I understand the sentiment, but have already mentioned I tire of this talk." Then squaring toward the rampart, Lord Slavik barked out a great "Oi!" The men blanched as they turned to look down on their lord and master. "You carpenters! What have the Riavs taught you today in the ways of building? You masons, what have you learned from their bricklaying? You soldiers, do you see the enemy standing idle? Go on, patrol the rampart; you masons, follow with them and fill every crack along the way! Pay no mind to what the enemy does, for they do nothing in the open which they do not wish you to see. Turn your minds to what can be done, without wringing your hands, and do your duty! Go now, ere damnation fall upon us!"

Lord Slavik watched the men go sullenly off, his eyes like arrows. A low rumble of unease, even discontent, did not escape his notice, eliciting in him a sudden twinge of alarm and helplessness. Had he fooled himself into believing the laborers would shoulder their burden with the same resolve as he? Down in his heart, a host of doubts wormed their tiny way through the self-assurances with which Slavik had covered them. Kasmir watched him inscrutably. When the lord's attention at last fell on him, he raised a hand, beckoning forth the two lessers who stood by.

The first of the two men was Dieter, Kasmir's cousin and squire. Slavik disliked him acutely, with his greasy coif, pointed moustache and appraising eyes. Some low-born men, such as Kasmir, at least understood the onus of leadership; but to a waif like Dieter, prestige and privilege were ends all their own, and such a man, Slavik thought, could never hold a place among the nobles. The squire and lord made no acknowledgement of one another, beyond a curt meeting of the eyes.

The second man Slavik did not recognize, but his brown and green robe and young age proclaimed him an acolyte of the

temple, which was nearby. His face was bloodless, his dark hair hanging in soiled strands, and his deep eyes bore the haunted cast of sleeplessness.

"Come, youth," said Kasmir to him. "Tell your lord what you have revealed to me."

After a sideways glance at the foreign knight, Slavik stood forth and listened.

"My Lord Slavik," said the haggard youth. He did not forget his manners when addressing the lord, and gave a proper bow, for which Slavik pitied him. "I am Kerzei, guardian of Knarus's sacred altar."

"You have attained an honorable station, for one so young," Slavik remarked. "You must be proud."

"Thank you, Lordship, but ..." the priest trembled. "I have failed." Now he was nearly bawling. "This day at sunrise, I arrived at the temple ..."

"By the gods, keep your voice down, man!" The squire Dieter rebuked him.

"Invoke not the gods in the presence of their servant," Slavik reprimanded.

Kasmir said, "Forgive my squire, but he is correct; this news is not meet for the commons."

The young priest's gaze darted from one speaker to the next, overwrought and unsure.

"If that is true," said Slavik, "Then we should not hold this council in the street. Take me to the temple, and show me what you found."

• • •

A PALL of silence hung over the temple grounds like the drooping, reticent curtains of gray which loomed citywide. A patrol of soldiers held vigil, ushering away any laborers who approached. Somewhere beyond the walls of a pallid tenement, the wail of a babe did no detriment to the air of dread. The solemn and ominous atmosphere was violated only by the gay singing of a red-breasted bird who darted overhead, a snatch of grass in her talons as she winged onward toward the castle hill.

"Someone ought to shoot that bird down," Dieter said sullenly. "Though lean, the meat would do good."

"No," was all Slavik said, his eyes on the temple, and on the armsmen.

Turning to Kasmir, Slavik said "Who ordered these soldiers to stay here?"

Kasmir replied, "Forgive the presumption, but I thought it prudent for you to lay eyes on this atrocity before the commons find out. You ought to have that chance. It was what I would want done, were I in your circumstance."

Slavik was a little perturbed, not merely by the presumptive order, but the fact it was obeyed; but on his great belief in the knight-emissary's honor, he let it pass. He turned his eyes again to the temple gate, his mind filled with wild and loathsome dreams of what he would find within her sanctum. He bade the escort take him inside. The soldiers cast their pale faces toward the dust as they passed. Kerzei the priest looked as though he would be ill.



• • •

**T**HE high priest lay slain at the foot of the altar, its surface festooned in blackening gore. The old man's limbs were splayed across the dais and steps as if in crucifixion, and his chest was a mangled mess of violet tissue and blood. The young priest gave a shuddering moan at the sight; even Dieter was transported enough to turn away and mutter a brief oath. Only Kasmir and Slavik remained unflinching. At Kasmir's bidding, Kerzei began relating the circumstances leading to his discovery of the violent scene, but lurching suddenly against a wall he cried, "Lord, forgive me, I cannot — I beg your permission to — " he was gone before Slavik could dismiss him.

"He is the only one slain," said the knight. Slavik did not look at him. "He must have been found alone in the midst of preparing for the day's rites. After midnight, I judge, for that candle" — Slavik saw a congealed puddle of grey-maroon wax on the stone floor — "was yet alight when the youth arrived."

Slavik dared a step toward the cadaver, whose face was covered under a gold-hemmed napkin. His knees were stiff as he knelt, as if rebelling against the act of lowering their lord to the carnage. He peered into the great wound in the priest's chest.

"His heart was torn free," Kasmir said gravely. "It is gone."

"What did this?" Slavik was breathless. He lifted the cloth to peer at the priest's face, then replaced it distastefully.

"The youth is sure it was a devil, or ghost. We have yet to question any neighboring houses, but the temple is remote enough; it may be that no soul heard it happen."

Slavik rose and regarded Kasmir. "Do you think men did this? In my city?"

Striding forth, the squire interjected. "Look no further than the filth outside your gate! The Riavs have done this — only to show you that they can, and to panic your subjects, for that is their way. This is why we are needed. Had Cideffrid's might been summoned in a timely — "

Dieter faltered under the withering scowl offered by the lord he brashly addressed. Slavik turned back to Kasmir. "You were right to keep this discrete. I thank you," he said. Kasmir nodded. "I prefer to keep up the discretion. You and the men outside are the only ones who know of this?" Kasmir nodded again. Slavik continued. "The murder of a high priest cannot be kept secret, but we may delay the news, at least until we have answers."

Slavik was halted by the distant calling of trumpets and bells, and the cries of men's voices.

"A foray," said the lord. "I must go to the wall and give command."

"You are without a sword," Kasmir reminded him. "Dieter, give him yours."

With a sneer Dieter unbelted his sword and handed it over.

"Kasmir, I entrust this to you. Find the way this man was killed. Do me this service."

Kasmir bowed. "I will honor your command, Lord Slavik."

"The men outside are yours to order." Saying this, Slavik left in haste.

Kasmir paced the room, examining each article about the altar for the second, then third time. Standing at the doors, Dieter

looked out over the city, toward the sounds of crashing stone and singing steel. When Slavik was out of sight, he snorted. "That fool shall lead this city to ruin," he said.

"Mind how you speak of your betters, cousin," said Kasmir, turning a chalice over in his hands.

"He is a stubborn idealist," Dieter argued.

"Qualities shared by our own king."

Again the squire snorted. "Nay, Cideffrid plays the part well, but inside he is practical and cunning. That is how wars are won."

"Perhaps," said the knight. "Yet sometimes, perhaps not. Slavik leads well because he believes in his people. And they in turn believe in him."

Dieter turned once more toward the distant clash. "See where it's gotten them," he said.

Kasmir ignored him — he was weary of the squire's impetuosity — and knelt once more beside the priest. "Dieter, look." He pulled a dagger from his hip, aligned the blade beside the cavity through which the heart had been torn. Dieter sidled above him, craning his neck and squinting down the bridge of his wrinkling nose.

"This wound was wrought by no edge of steel," Kasmir explained. "His ribs were cracked, pulled out. The flesh is torn and bruised, not cleft neatly."

"It looks like he was disemboweled with bare fingers," Dieter said. "Could a man be capable of such a thing?"

"No one man," Kasmir answered. "I know I could not do this, nor could any man I've met. Now see his throat." He pulled back the cloth, just a bit, and held the blade parallel. A razor-thin line bifurcated the windpipe from ear to ear. "A dagger did not strike this cut, either."

"A group of men, then?"

Kasmir rose, resheathing the dagger. He drew a small cloth and wiped his mouth and nose. "I don't know. The attacker left no tracks that I can see."

Dieter motioned toward dark red footprints heading from the altar to the door. "I see one trail there," he said.

Kasmir shook his head. "Left by the young priest this morning, when he discovered the crime." His gaze was on the altar, and then a high window across the room. "Look here," he said at last.

The two gathered before the wall. Kasmir stooped and brushed the stone floor with a finger. "There is no dust. A runner likely belongs here, leading from the altar to the window. The glass has been stripped, like every window in the city. And look, I spot a smudge on the wall. The murderer may have walked across a rug, rolling it up behind him, and with the aid of a rope, escaped with it through the window."

"Or a devil may have floated through on leather wings," said Dieter, "back to his masters in Riav. And you have yet to explain how a single man burst the priest's chest without a blade, or why his heart was taken."

"This is true," Kasmir said. He barely stifled a shudder. He was a learned man in some corners of devil and demon-lore, and knew of beings said to feast on human hearts — yet even his heart was not steely enough to acknowledge aloud such

abominable theories until such a one became irrefutable; he clung desperately to the theory that the murderer was a man. Clearing his breast of such vile considerations, he said "Either way, if the trail continues, it shall be beyond this wall."

• • •

**THEY** circled the wall; Kasmir sent two groups of soldiers to seek witnesses, and they tried to find a trail. Dieter found it surreal, poking through the brush and alleys for tiny clues to a monster's passing, while the battlements not far off still rang with the shouts and clangor of skirmish. At one point, as the two examined a shoe print at the edge of a sewage puddle, an arrow fell from the sky and clattered across the flags at Dieter's feet. With a shriek the squire fell behind some barrels, scanning the charcoal sky for the bat-winged ghast that would gnash at him from above. Kasmir stepped into the shadow of some eavements and strapped on his sallet.

• • •

**WITH** the sun shewing white like a blind eye at its zenith, and no trace found in the rambling alleys, it was time to speak with the soldiers. At Kasmir's bidding, only two of the half-dozen had remained at the temple to turn away any trespassers; the remaining four had split into pairs to pound on doors and question the housewives. Incrementally the men-at-arms congregated around Kasmir and Dieter. They were sweating and agitated, clearly desperate to be at the wall, despite the import of their clandestine errand.

The reports were disappointing; few souls were in the home, even wives and mothers, and those few homebodies who could be found reported no midnight disturbance. "And the altar guardian, named Kerzei?" Kasmir demanded. "Has any sign been found of him?"

"None," the soldiers replied. "No soul has seen him, and no trail has he left."

Dieter had that look that told Kasmir he was about to say something dispiriting about goblins and wraiths, about priests being snatched into the sky in jet-and-crimson talons, and Kasmir silenced him preemptively with a hand to his arm. The guardsmen took no notice. Then, as suddenly as the blaring of the horns an hour ago, the distant roar of battle was silenced.

The din had become such a drone in the minds of the men that each reeled in its sudden absence. "The Riavs are driven off the wall," said Dieter. "Yet I hear no victory cheer. Kasmir, what does it mean?"

Kasmir glowered at him. "It means they have wounded us." The soldiers hung their heads.

Yet the silence did not long prevail, for to their ears came the strains of lyre music. Strumming a melancholy tune, the player grew nearer, until he came round a corner into view. He looked pitiful with his grimy skin and tattered clothes, plucking morosely with grubby fingers. The bard passed them by, not singing, but playing dolefully a song which stirred Kasmir's heart.

"Oi, bard," Dieter called to him. "What do you mean with

your dirges? Give us a cheerful tune, why don't you? For if our bards cannot lift our spirits in times of despair, what good are they?"

The bard paused in his walk, but continued to pluck the strings. "I beg your pardon, master," said he in a velveteen voice, "My hands find only the chords that are in my heart." He resumed his procession, until Kasmir stood to obstruct him.

"Friend," said the knight, "I wonder if you can help us. We seek anyone who may have overheard a disturbance in this area last night."

Now the bard halted his feet as well as his fingers. An inscrutable expression crossed his face like the shadow of a dragonfly's wing. He glanced involuntarily to the desolate temple, and his face grew dark. "You are that knight-emissary from the West, are you not?" he asked in a hush. "Of what disturbance do you speak?"

"Any disturbance will do, if someone heard it," the knight replied.

"I am sorry," said the bard. "At my Lord Slavik's bidding, I have gone all round the neighborhood playing songs for the laborers, and nobody I spoke to has complained of disrupted sleep; not so much as a mouse crossing a pillow. But if I may help in any other way ..."

"There is one other thing. Since you have rambled the day long, perhaps you occasioned to spot a priest belonging to that temple; a youth, ashen-faced, with long hair unbraided."

"I did see such a priest!" the bard exclaimed. Then he leaned in and lowered his voice, as though to share some dreadful secret. "He gave a terrible fright. At first I supposed him a drunkard, staggering violently as he was — then I saw his eyes, wide like a stallion's hunted by wolves."

"Where was he going?" Dieter pressed eagerly.

"When did you see him?" Kasmir added.

"It was not half an hour ago, up past yonder houses," said the bard. "A number of tenements and workshops lie derelict there, the inhabitants having flown west. Just beyond is the west wall."

"The wall?" said Dieter. "Might he try to flee the city, sneak past the blockade, and escape what devil hunts him?"

"Show us exactly where you saw him," Kasmir ordered, and the bard obeyed. Ordering the four guards to return to the temple, and taking with him the two who were fresh, Kasmir led the party off.

• • •

**NOT** owing to the sunlight, which passed as it descended behind thickening clouds, nor to any tangible sign of urban decay unique to this corner of the city, the derelict block was shuddersome. Oppressive silence was a common feature on every avenue, but the three-storied tenements and gaping shop windows rang with emptiness like tubular bells. Here the bard hesitated. He reached for his lyre, which till now had hung silent by a thong from his shoulder.

Dieter began to berate him, but held his tongue. The two soldiers sheepishly scanned the upper eaves and window frames. "Beg pardon," said the plaintive bard. "I play as I walk. The motion of the hands reminds the feet."



Dieter scoffed; Kasmir nodded. "Play on."

Impatiently Dieter snarled. "Must it be that same dour tune?"

The bard gave no regard as he began to play. It was a melody sweet, anguished and forlorn, laced within broken chords both dissonant and sonorous. It bestirred Kasmir's heart, even as it sent him reeling with foreboding. Though resounding through the hollows of the derelicted flats, it failed to make the emptiness of the streets seem full, but rather rendered the sense of desolation complete.

They continued to walk, the bard leading with a confidence hitherto unseen, as though by the power of his own playing some spirit had possessed him. "You need a new string or two," Dieter derided. "See? That note was flat. Your strings are over-stretched." The bard continued to ignore him, playing as he walked as if in a trance. Kasmir thought the music was both awful and brilliant. The two soldiers huddled close to one another, staring all around.

One of the soldiers jumped, startling the rest. "What is it? What's wrong?" Dieter demanded.

"I heard something — over there!" The soldier pointed into a yawning doorway, bereft of door and hinges.

"I saw somebody move behind that window," the other soldier agreed.

"There are bound to be a few souls living here still," Dieter dismissed, but his eyes too were wide. His hand drifted to his side, where his sword was customarily belted, and he cursed when his fingers brushed his linen tunic, only then

remembering he had given his sword to Lord Slavik. Instead he pulled a slender dagger.

Only the bard remained impassive, and Kasmir followed on, queerly entranced by the dolorous tones of the harp. The player hummed lowly, and his tune changed. The tempo increased, and he launched into a wild folk dance, strumming raucously. The music reverberated and the walls seemed to pulse like the inside of a drum. Now seized with savage excitement, Dieter brushed past Kasmir and laid a hand on the bard's shoulder. The bard shirked away and continued his song, lost in his frenzied playing. Dieter began to shout something, but was interrupted by a terrible cry.

The soldier who had screamed reeled into his companion, and soon both were scrambling backward across the flags. The first warrior raised a quivering finger toward the lofty peak of a nearby tenement roof, and all eyes flowed to the spot where he pointed.

There was a shaggy, man-like beast, massive though squatting, its bearlike claws dangling between gangly legs. A haze hung down from the low clouds, overshadowing the creature, but they could see clearly enough the features of its scowling, doglike head, crowned in twisting horns. Its eyes glittered like opal, and a ponderous bulk about its torso gave the suggestion of furred wings in the gloom.

At this commotion at last did the bard stop playing; and when he gazed upon the devil on the roof he blanched, threw his hands to his face, and shrieked. With the lyre trailing taillike by its



cord, he fled across a nearby court and down a winding alley. Without issuing a sound the goblin sprang into a crawl, running apelike up the short distance to the peak of the roof, and vanished to the other side.

"Steel out! After me!" Kasmir cried, and ran to the corner of the looming tenement. Skidding round into an abutting alley, he paused a moment, processing the sounds. The thrum of a pounding drum he surmised to be his own heartbeat; the squire and soldiers were several paces behind. He listened for the scratch of jet talons, the crack of brittle shingles; yet it seemed there were scraping footfalls all about him. Howling sockets gazed down from grey daub walls that towered forest like, amid a blackening canopy of grasping, willowy tendrils. The party caught him, all as one the myriad distracting sounds receded, and Kasmir faltered. As silent as a ghost the beast had slipped into the derelicts.

Dieter was questioning the two soldiers. "Where are we?" he huffed. "Take us back — back to the temple. To Slavik." He came over to Kasmir. "We must return. We have found the truth, as promised. Let Slavik send a force to hunt the demon. We haven't a single lamp to see in this fog, none of us have eaten since dawn ..."

"Truth?" Kasmir questioned blankly.

"Aye," Dieter nodded rapidly. "The cursed Riavs have summoned a devil, just as I thought. And that bard — that cursed wretch — he is their spy. He summoned it with his witch's music, didn't you see?" He was pacing, gesturing with each syllable. "I'll string him up by the ears — I'll do it myself!" he ranted.

"How can you say we have found the truth?" said Kasmir. His senses were collecting. He was keenly aware of his own biting hunger. Gathering their breath, the two soldiers looked on tensely. "We saw a beast. We don't know where it came from."

In a fury Dieter tore off his own sallet. "Damn it, man," he cried in Kasmir's face. "We haven't eaten since dawn! Let us go back!"

Kasmir reached out and struck Dieter's face with his palm.

Dieter recoiled, stroking his sore cheek. Kasmir stood erect, bringing his superior height to bear. "What did I tell you about addressing your betters?" He demanded.

"Cousin ..." Dieter looked wounded — small — and Kasmir cursed himself for the pity that look stirred in him. Cheeks and ears livid, Dieter glowered to the soldiers, who pointedly avoided his gaze. The lad had brought on his own shame, Kasmir told himself. Yet he was momentarily at a loss, mulling over what he would say next, when the air was rent afresh by a man's affrighted scream. Just as they heard it, a shadow passed from the sun, giving them a shade of light that was sufficient to see by. The voice was not far off, and by the echo Kasmir felt an instinctive sense of precisely where it had come from. This time he knew it.

He looked to the guardsmen and said, "Well men, what say you? Have you mettle left? Then after me!" Even as the breathless guardsmen nodded, hefting their swords and plugging behind, Kasmir knew that Dieter, impertinent as he was, was right; he had pushed them all too hard. But with a monster prowling the city, a cry of distress could not be ignored.

They followed the sound of the continuing shouts, screams that vacillated between cries of "Help! Help!" and incoherent ramblings. Anon they came to an alley, and saw the bard, crouched on their side of some high, musty boxes. He was the source of the yells. The lyre rested in the dust by his side, forgotten.

"The devil!" cried he. "It was here! Long fangs, like a viper's, and a forked tongue, eyes blazing with violet fire!"

His speech was cut short as Dieter, with a cry of "Scoundrel! Liar!" lunged forth and fell upon him. Kasmir thrust out his arms to impede him, but the squire wrenched free of his grasp and he fell into the dust. Brandishing the dagger, Dieter struck the bard across the face with the guard; then, casting the weapon away, he gripped him about the neck and shoulders and throttled him like a dove.

Coming to his feet, Kasmir ordered him to stop. The exhausted soldiers stood gaping.

The two scuffled in the alley floor for a bit, but Dieter was easily the stronger of the two. At last the bard angled a boot upward and thrust it into Dieter's groin. The squire fell back, but with an animal yell he lunged again. A second kick connected with his stomach, and by the time he had recovered, Kasmir was at his side. Wrapping him up in great steeled arms, pinning his arms to his sides, Kasmir lifted him from his feet and tossed him aside. The bard scrambled against the side of a building and onto his feet, wheezing and huffing like a hunted fox, with a scarlet trickle rolling along the swollen side of his face. Dieter regarded them both balefully, but composed himself. The lyre lay nearby, its tether having been torn loose in the struggle. Dieter kicked it. Kasmir watched it skid against a wall, and he saw something that made him ponder. Had the harp had seven strings, or six? Just then a soldier gave a gasp. "Look yonder!"

The building beside them was a massive storehouse, its goods gutted and doors salvaged. A tacky red pool oozed through a door into the alley. Kasmir could see the toe of a leather shoe.

"Keep your swords on him," he commanded the soldiers. "Dieter, with me."

Forgetting his dagger, Dieter followed obediently. They rounded on the door, the bard cautiously in tow with his white fists at his sides and the swords of the guards poised at his back.

It was the corpse of Kerzei, the young altar guardian, who lay mangled beyond the doorway. His wounds were fresh; the blood no longer flowed from the crater in his breast but yet spread across the dusty floor. His neck was bent unnaturally, casting his terrified rictus across the cavernous chamber toward the far loft and plainly revealing the razor-thin line across his neck.

Kasmir stood directly over the corpse, with Dieter a cautious pace behind. Near his back and to the left stood the bard and his escort. "I saw it happen," the bard croaked. "I saw the beast strike him down, tear through his breast with obsidian claws!"

Dieter opened his mouth to speak, when the devil stepped from a stall into the open space across the great room. Kasmir had his sword in hand, stepping past the body to face it. It was just as dreadful as it had been before, and now that it had come



from hiding, Kasmir was aware that the warehouse was riddled all round with partitions, shadows and recesses prime for hiding and ambush. The beast's visage was masklike, unchanging, as it issued a bellow from brazen lungs that sundered the air like a horn. Back in the alley, the two soldiers edged away, their resolve all but broken. Dieter turned to urge them, and it was this movement that saved him for a moment; for as he turned, an arrow, aimed for his breast from a high window across the alley, instead glanced off the steep crown of his sallet. He staggered to his knees, cutting his palms on the nearby rubble, and the helmet was jarred from his head to tumble into a gutter. The two soldiers gave another cry; one raised the lid of a barrel, too rotten for salvage, to shield himself. The arrow meant for him sank through the planks down to the fletching; the other soldier, caught totally by surprise, fell to his face with three shafts piercing the mail on his back, one of which narrowly missed his spine and ribs to transfix his heart. Forsaking the lost sallet, Dieter sprinted for the shelter of the warehouse; he was just over the threshold when the bard leapt upon his back. The bard had a length of catgut — the missing string from the lyre — with one end wound around each fist; this he wrapped around Dieter's neck, and began to pull.

Dieter staggered forth, but managed to stay on his feet, for his attacker was much lighter than he. As he sensed the cord being looped over his head, his mind's eye flashed with the sights of the two priests with their thin-line neck wounds, and before he was aware of his own reaction or of anything else, he had the first two fingers of his right hand between himself and the garrote. The bard heaved back, pulling his weight against the ligature. His hands bled, and so did the two fingers against Dieter's throat.

• • •

**T**HERE remained many yards between Kasmir and the monster when he turned his head at the sounds of ambush. He saw Dieter struggle for his life against the bard, saw the one guardsman fall, even as the other took refuge through the doors. As soon as his eyes were away from the beast, something swung at Kasmir's head from behind.

The strike glanced upward off his right pauldron and skipped against the side of his sallet. He reeled, not from the force of the blow, but for tactical space, correcting his helmet even as he stepped. How quick the beast had moved! he thought. But the knight's training did not fail him; he rounded with agility into a stance and held his weapon ready against the next attack.

It had not been the devil that struck him, but a man — or a mannish devil — gaunt and soiled, dressed in plain linen, wielding a club fashioned from a chair leg. The dog-headed beast stood back, braying in its voice like brass as the first club-wielder was joined by others, who snarled and gnashed their yellow teeth and flared their jaundiced eyes as they rushed as one with cudgels high.

• • •

**D**IETER gasped. His eyes watered. Blood ran into his collar from his neck and fingers. He tasted blood; it flew from his lips in a fine spray. Vainly he tried to wriggle his left hand under the cincture. There was no space; the catgut bit his flesh all round. Instead he reached over his back, felt the bard's hair in his fingers, grabbed it in a fist and tugged forth. The bard grunted; Dieter gasped afresh as a minute relief in pressure came. Then he tossed himself back, slamming the bard against a pillar. Desperation crept in as he felt his senses dim.

• • •

**K**ASMIR was battling a mob of slaving devil-men. He ducked a swinging club, and severed the wrist which held it; took a stout blow to his shoulder from a second as he thrust his point into a third's eye; struck a charging lunatic in the navel with his heel, then pivoted to parry aside a falling blow. The knight's eye fell on Dieter, and he made steps toward him whenever he could. He looked to the door, and shadowy shapes were in the alley. The soldier was holding his ground against a rushing mob.

• • •

**A**GAIN Dieter slammed his back against the post; the bard shuddered and groaned. The third time, the bard kicked his feet behind in defense, bending his knees to brace against the wood. Dieter sensed his advantage. With his hand still tangled in the bard's hair, he pitched his full weight forward, and the bard rolled over his shoulders to land face-up on the floor. He scrambled to get his feet under him, but Dieter found his footing quicker, and while he was still bent double, Dieter kicked him in the face with force enough to tumble him backward. Seething, the squire fell upon his chest, grinding a hand under his knee. He beat the bard twice about the face and, seeing the scoundrel was not moving, went after a cudgel that rolled nearby.

• • •

**K**ASMIR fought doggedly on. His mail had saved him a dozen times, though his frame shuddered under each new shock. He turned his guard on the newest opponent, and immediately knew he had made a grave mistake. He felt a tug at his elbow, checking his swing, as a ghoulish creep latched on with a spindly hand. A foe at his other flank took the opportunity and threw his arms around Kasmir's neck. Soon they would pile upon him and drag him down.

Then a sharp crack sounded from behind, and one of the thugs snapped his neck forth, spittle flying from his chalky lips. He went limp and Kasmir shirked him off. There was Dieter, beating back the wildmen with a knobbed length of polished firewood in his wrong hand. Together, squire and knight, cousin and cousin, pressed down on the horde, until the last of the shrieking fiends was cut down. The wolf-headed beast, till now standing with paws raised exultant, went sprinting off by itself.

“Catch it!” Kasmir cried. Just then the guardsman at the door was overwhelmed, and a band of emaciated archers came trampling over him. They loosed their volley across the chamber, just as Kasmir and Dieter vanished down a corridor on the trail of the archfiend.

• • •

**K**ASMI<sup>R</sup> overtook the fleeing beast at the upper landing of a precipitous stair. The thing had descended a half-dozen steps by a single leap when Kasmir threw his body against it, and together they tumbled into the depths. They careened one over the other, till at last they came to a sudden rest in a basement full of dull orange light from flickering braziers.

Kasmir was atop the beast’s back when they landed, and from the force of the impact its entire head popped off, toppled across the floor with a wooden clatter. The knight sprang to his feet, drawing the bloody length of his sword from the unmoving form, for in the chaos of the tumble, it had become transfixed through the monster’s breast. Wrenching the fiend’s arms mercilessly, he turned it over to look upon it. He felt no resistance.

Dieter lagged behind, rasping with each step and grasping his flayed fingers, which were becoming sorely inflamed. He came to the top of the stair in time to see Kasmir throw himself from the form of the beast with a strangled yelp of revulsion. Calling his master’s name he flew down to his side.

Kasmir was trembling. The fiend lay in a heap at their feet, its neck twisted askew. Dieter gasped, unbelieving, at what he saw.

“It is a man,” Kasmir uttered, wiping his parched and pallid mouth. “A man, wearing the skins of beasts. The hands of a bear; the skull of a wolf, the horns of a ram, a coat of raven’s feathers.” He ran his hands across the length of his dewy face. “Men did this, all of this. We were fighting men in the skins of ghouls.”

“Spies from Riav?” Dieter asked, perhaps hopefully.

“This is a Valtan man. I know his face, though I don’t recall where.”

The braziers that lit the room flanked a wooden altar arrayed with thirteen platters, two of which held lumps of flesh Kasmir knew to be human hearts. There were worship mats, and cages in a corner, with a rolled-up rug nearby. Overlooking all was a great, primitive idol of a sneering, wolf-headed man. In the folds of the devil’s disguise were found a small brass horn, and a long, stout pair of grimy calipers.

“Here is how he pulled loose the priests’ hearts,” Kasmir said, showing Dieter the calipers. “And this horn produced the call we took for the braying of a demon.”

“Why?” Dieter said. “What is all this for?”

• • •

**I**N the chamber above, the bard was just coming to. Kasmir and Dieter found him crawling into the blood-washed alley, peering about with one half-shut eye. The knight and squire took hold of his tunic, hoisted him up, and put him to questioning.

“We are harbingers of the dread lord Khaz,” he explained. “The Wolf King strikes down tyrants, and brings liberation to the oppressed.

“To summon him, our priest — the one dressed in devilish guise — proclaimed we were to offer up the hearts of thirteen priests, a feast that is acceptable to him. After gorging on the offering, he would have rid our lands of the Riavs, of our complacent lord ... and of the emissaries of the false king Cideffrid.

“I myself ambushed the high priest in the small hours, strangled him with a gut from my harp, and opened his chest with large pliers to pull free his warm heart.

“We faithful of Khaz took refuge in these abandoned buildings, creating our own hidden village within the husk of the city. The temple guardian, after fleeing the temple, blundered through our domain. I think he meant to climb the west wall and flee the city. We took him, put him in a cage in the cellar.

“While walking through the city, I played my lyre as a signal to my brothers. The songs were a code, telling them when to hide, when a lord was near, or when prey was in sight. As my priest showed himself to us on the roof, the altar guardian broke free of his cage. I happened upon him, and strangled him there, and together we took his heart. Then I cried as if in fear, while my brothers scrambled into position to ambush you. That is all.”

“How many are your numbers?” Kasmir demanded.

The bard surveyed the battlefield. “You slew nearly all, and I surmise our priest is fallen too. All is lost; what few remain of my cult will scatter — perhaps flee the city. They will trouble you no more.”

Kasmir stepped back, seething. Dieter was aghast and fascinated, for never had he witnessed his cousin so indignant. Even when he’d struck him for impertinence, he had seemed collected, not passionate but cold.

“You wicked fools,” Kasmir growled. “Khaz was driven from our land a thousand years ago by the gods of our people. This is the basis for the creation of our land, and the establishment of our race. To invite such a demon back into this land is to blaspheme against the gods of creation.” In a passion he pulled loose his sword, and slew the bard.

• • •

**I**T was nearly dusk and they trudged through ghostly streets castleward. “Why did you kill the bard?” Dieter asked. “Why not take him to give his account at the gaol?”

“I am not sure,” said Kasmir. He had said nothing on the way from the bloody warehouse, his mind racing with all he had learned.

“Cousin,” said Dieter. “This development could be very important for us.”

Kasmir stopped to look at him. “What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“Think what this means for Lord Slavik. He thinks he knows his people. He thinks he has their love. Yet his home has been infected with conspiracy and devil-worship, right under his nose.”



Kasmir turned away, kept walking.

Dieter jogged until they were even, and continued. "This is why he thinks he doesn't need Cideffrid. His deluded belief in the cohesion of tribal loyalty — it spares him the need for unity with the true Valta. Kasmir, we can use this, if we are wise. When he learns how he has failed to keep order — to even maintain faith in the gods — then he will see he is unfit for autonomy. We can do what we came to do."

"I understand," said Kasmir. Then, "Please be sure to address me by my title from now on."

Dieter stood, perplexed. Kasmir broke not his stride. At length Dieter ran after him. They spoke nothing else until they announced themselves at the keep.

• • •

**S**LAVIK had them sent to his bedchamber near the council room. He lay in his bed under a thin sheet, by a bare window overlooking the blockade and the river. The Riavs were on their dam, hammering by lamplight under the black evening sky.

"An arrow struck my thigh at the wall today," Slavik explained. "The men are disheartened by it, though I will recover, with the gods' help" — he added gloomily, "and I am far from the only one we lost. But the ladders were repelled, and the wound is well worth fighting beside my people."

Slavik took their appearance in. They were bruised, pale, caked in grimy dust. "You have seen battle as well," he said seriously. "May I take it you wear the blood of my priest-killer?"

"We found your murderer, and dealt with him," Kasmir left it at that.

"Then tell me the truth," Slavik said. "What or who killed my high priest?"

Kasmir hesitated, weighing the events of the day in his heart. Dieter waited tensely, stroking the bandage on his wounded hand, but held his peace in deference. At last Kasmir spoke.

"I was sure the murder was the work of men, though I could not imagine why. Yet my squire was right in his every guess; a devil was haunting your city, summoned by the Riavs. We found it — too late to save the life of Kerzei and a score of your loyal subjects. Two soldiers were lost as well, but Dieter and I did prevail at last. When we slew it, its blood turned to sulfur and hissed away, and its flesh and bones burned to ashes."

Slavik went ashen. "By the gods and ancestors, by Tomis the Tribefather. What end to the evil and wizardry of these dire foes? I thank you, Kasmir. Do not think this service will go forgotten ... though nor does it bring me nearer to bowing before Cideffrid."

Kasmir bowed stiffly. "I understand. When you remember our deeds today, recall that they were done in faithful friendship."

Slavik managed to smile at that. Then he dismissed them, saying "You have given me much to think about. Please, go and get yourselves some food."

• • •

**O**UT in the hall, Dieter clutched his groaning belly. "I had nearly forgotten I was starving, until his lordship went and mentioned food." Kasmir was quiet. "Tell me, Kas — Sir Kasmir — why not tell him the truth? You heard what he said. What advantage in telling that lie to cover the sedition in his city?"

"Dieter," said Kasmir, "Have you never seen a man for what he is? That is what lies in there — no less a man than the thousand he rules."

Dieter was mystified. Kasmir went on.

"We are frail beings, we often forget. Slavik puts on a persuasive display of resolve, but imagine enduring his plights and trials. While in that room, it suddenly occurred to me what a terrible thing the truth might prove — for his people, and for our cause; and yes, for the man himself. I was hoping from the start that the fiend would be human, but when I heard the bard tell their ungodly plot, I would have given my own heart to say I had crushed a true devil.

"Sometimes, to preserve what we have, we are asked to sacrifice that which is worth preserving. Not today. There was too much cruelty in the truth. The heart of this city hangs on a thread — on the resolve of one good man, who lies wounded in his bed. Maybe it would have been to our benefit to let him know the truth — maybe even to his. Maybe it would have been justice. I cannot say it would not have been *all* those things. Yet I fear it would only bring disaster."

"I think I understand," said Dieter, unsure. "Perhaps, when all this is done, and the Riavs are gone, it would behoove us to tell the truth."

"Maybe," Kasmir admitted. "Yet even then, I do not know if I would be able to do it."

• • •

**I**N his convalescent bed Slavik lay, his leg bound and already beginning to itch. He had mistaken one thing: it was not yet dusk; the clouds were thinning and he could see the horizon was only touched by violet. Yet he was weary. He could do naught but gaze out the window, at the bluing sky, at the camps that stretched around his settlement, at the dry bed of the once-mighty river, at the half-constructed dam. Without conscientiousness he bent his ear, seeking the roar of a charging army, come from the west to break the siege.

What he heard were the first living chirps of a nest of hatchlings. Fine droplets of rain came through the bare window to land on Slavik's bedsheets. The red-breasted mother bird winged off from the eavements to search for food.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P. J. Atwater is an educator and parent who devotes his days to civilizing barbarians. Yet by dark of night the ancient skalds sing in his dreams, and the Muses teach him tales of the Old Ways, which he dutifully pens to the best of his ability. This is his first time in publication.

# • THE SKULL'S ACTIVITY PAGE •

## ACROSS

3. Traitorous Goblin.
4. Beloved by interns everywhere.
5. Elak's friend.
7. The greatest Great Old One.
9. You better hope his swine things don't get you.
14. \_\_\_\_ of the curved saber.
16. The Mask of the \_\_\_\_.
17. He wasn't the wrong man for Weird Tales, he was the \_\_\_\_ one.
21. First drew Conan on magazine covers.
25. O'Brien's axe.
26. Yellow-eyed slayer of Guilleme.
28. Immortal red-haired schemer.
29. Fossilized sap or eternal city?
32. A sad satellite for an albino prince.
34. Bohu's enemy.
36. Merlin's crookbacked son.
37. This Baron of the Imagination lived in a castle and wrote with a quill pen.
39. Atlantis, Lemuria, and \_\_\_\_.
40. The most serious disagreement the Twain ever had was over the spelling of this.

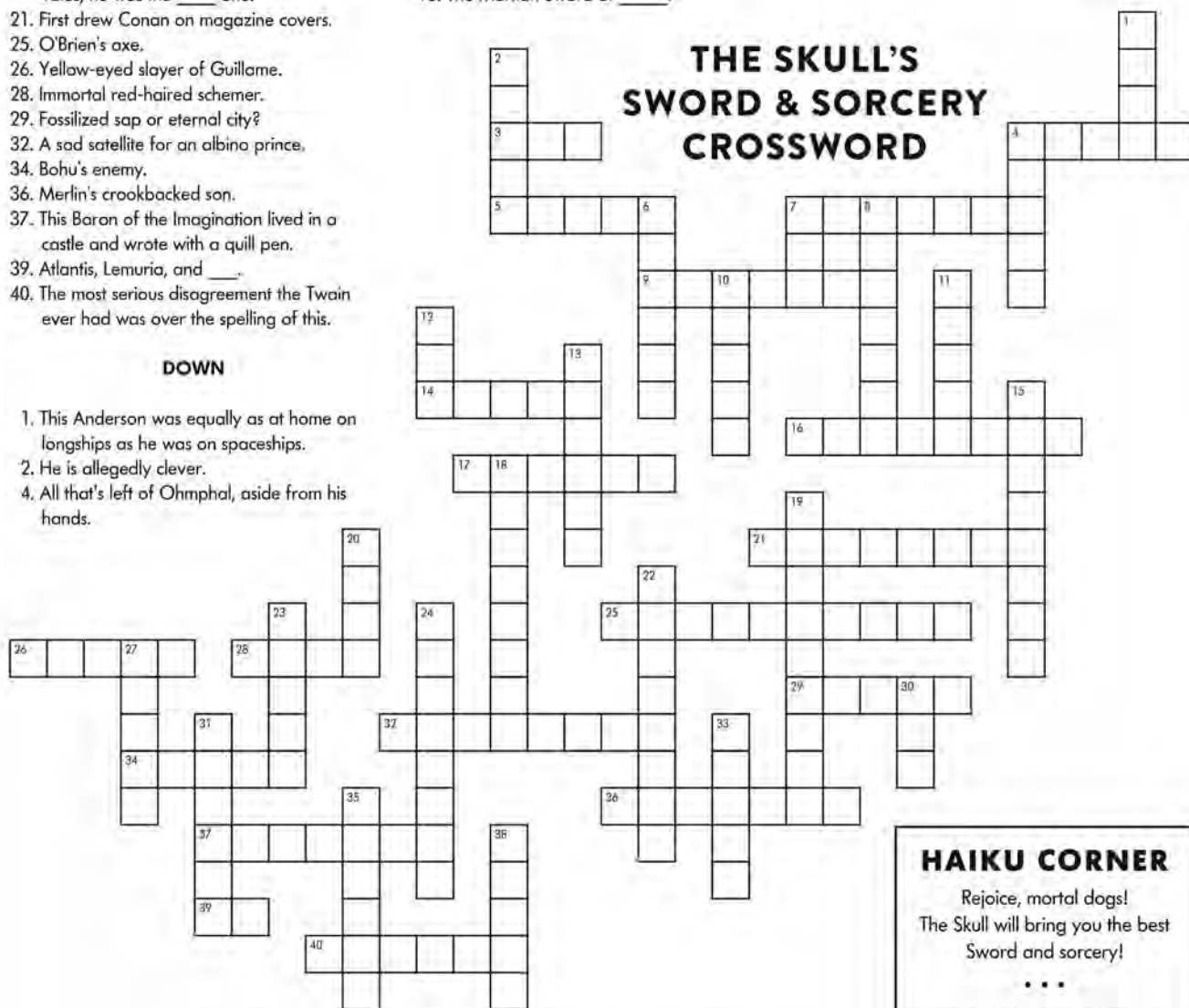
## DOWN

1. This Anderson was equally as at home on longships as he was on spaceships.
2. He is allegedly clever.
4. All that's left of Ohmphal, aside from his hands.

6. Eric John Stark — or just Stark's — first name.
7. The Emperor of Dreams.
8. He fought the Dervans.
10. Incomparable Princess of Helium.
11. This Jack invented a magic system beneath a dying red sun.
12. REH agent and sword-and-planet author.
13. The snake-filled, evil version of Ancient Egypt.
15. Rold carried his sword.
18. The Martian Sword of \_\_\_\_.

19. Excellent \_\_\_\_ Spray.
20. Pistol-wise puritan adventurer.
22. He has a rock in his head.
23. Dhuly and \_\_\_\_.
24. The Atlantis of Nehwon.
27. That middle E is for \_\_\_\_.
30. Silver, and the Golden Lamprey's rival.
31. Corwin's unpredictable brother.
33. Female monarch of the dark shore.
35. Chronider of Callisto.
38. Not the King's Hand, but the King's \_\_\_\_.

## THE SKULL'S SWORD & SORCERY CROSSWORD



## STORY PROBLEMS WITH THE SKULL

1. Five interns had stacks of manuscripts. The first intern has  $\frac{1}{10}$  of the manuscripts, the second has 12 more manuscripts than the first, the third one more manuscript than what the first intern has and the fourth intern was immolated, so the fifth intern took his and now has double the third. How many manuscripts are there? And where is my coffee?
2. The Skull is coming for you. He is levitating against the wind from Saskatchewan to your home in 8 hours. He will return from your home to Saskatchewan, in the same direction as the wind, in 7 hours. Find the ratio of the Skull's speed (in still air) to the speed of the wind. Also, flee for your life!

## HAIKU CORNER

Rejoice, mortal dogs!  
The Skull will bring you the best  
Sword and sorcery!

...

The ape wears a cape  
as he stalks the silent halls.  
He thinks he's a man.

...

Man and phoenix sit,  
One is crooked, one has wings.  
Silent together.

**SOLUTIONS ON PAGE 67**





ILLUSTRATION BY BRAD MCDEVITT



# THE GREMLINS OF LAS VEGAS

By JAMES STODDARD

**“AND** so I had to kill her,” Tanager said, staring down at his empty clay cup.

“Your DNA gave you no other choice?” Sheriff Tom Blackburn asked.

Tanager shrugged one gray wing. “When the gene-dabblers made the Nobles, they gave us certain unalterable traits intended to make superior humans. Some of the consequences were unforeseen. I am driven by the need to mete out justice wherever injustice is found. I cannot tell a lie. Those I love, I love with my whole heart for my lifetime.”

“No childhood crushes for you?”

“Oh yes, and I do not forget.”

“A tough break.” The sheriff was in his late forties, powerfully built, gray accenting his short, brown hair. He had watery-pale eyes and a face people tended to like. “So ... your parents were the ones who decided to experiment with your genetics?”

Tanager’s mouth twisted a little. “Sometimes the wealthy believe they can control anything.”

The sheriff leaned back in the ceramic chair. “And then the Great Blackout on top of that. I understand your people had it pretty good until then.”

Tanager brushed back his dark locks. “We were the elite, the future of humankind, but when everything fell apart people looked for someone to blame. The geneticists and their creations became the scapegoats. Most of the Nobles I grew up with are dead.”

“I saw some of that myself, early on.”

A silence fell between them.

“I appreciate you withholding judgment,” Tanager said. “The locals aren’t always kind to a stranger.”

The sheriff shrugged. “I’m here to keep the rule of law.”

“I’m curious about your uniform.”

The sheriff glanced at the football helmet lying on the table, a twenty-five-year-old Las Vegas Raider’s helmet. “I was a black-jack dealer at the casinos through my early twenties. Made a lot of money. Saw a lot of people ruin their lives, too, so I decided to join the police force, do something to serve society. I was a motorcycle cop when the Blackout came. Without electricity, the infrastructure failed. The earthquakes destroyed most of the city. We lost control of the streets. We needed someplace defensible, so a bunch of us gathered inside the old Allegiant Stadium. It was condemned years before, but its high walls made a good fortress. We armed ourselves with machetes, shovels, and hoes until we could revive the blacksmith trade. Football equipment makes pretty good armor.” He tapped the dark, padded pants and the plastic shoulder pads fastened outside his black shirt. A wide, leather waistband protected his abdomen. “It’s saved my life more than once.”

Tanager laughed for the first time since leaving Tacna. “Ironical.”

The sheriff’s eyes glistened, appreciating the humor. “I don’t get paid what the heroes who wore this gear did back in the day, but I appreciate their contribution to keeping me alive.” His eyes grew serious. “By coincidence, you’ve come at an interesting time. I’ve got a question for you. Would you recognize other Nobles if you met them?”

Tanager caught his breath. “I’ve been searching for others of my kind. Have you encountered any?”

“None like you, but I understand they might look different. Short, powerful, a pale yellow color. Ugly things. They hate machinery and destroy anything that looks like technology, equipment that hasn’t worked since the Blackout — rusting cars, pump-jacks, charging stations. That’s not a problem, but they also attack carts and wagons and have killed three people. We can’t find a reason for their behavior. Interested?”

“If they’re Nobles, it sounds like a degenerate form,” Tanager said. “There were some of those too — failed experiments. Still, I’d like to meet them.”

“I don’t know about meeting, but you can at least see where they live. Come on.”

They rose from the battered table and left the cafe. Like everything else since the Great Blackout, the surviving buildings of Las Vegas were run-down, the streets gradually turning to wilderness. Tanager had been here once when he was ten, before the Blackout, but he recognized nothing. Whatever hotels had stood along the Strip were gone. The northern half of the city had been swallowed when the earth rose up; the suburbs to the west now lay beneath the Yuma Sea.

Most of the nearby buildings were abandoned. Weeds thrust their way through cracks in the *metaphalt* street. A few scattered villagers moved along the sidewalks, wearing battered hats or bonnets against the sun. A garden grew in one or two vacant lots.

“How many people live here?” Tanager asked.

“Two hundred thirty-seven. We’re the largest population this side of Tucson. They’ve got almost six hundred.”

“You’ve been fortunate. I’ve been through entire states left empty.”

They passed down the street to the Sheriff’s Office and stables. Tom saddled a pair of Bay mustangs. “It’s a mile or two down the road. No sense walking.”

They traveled north along the broken street. To the east, wooden fishing boats plied the Yuma Sea. The air lay thick with humidity, the former desert covered with wild grasses and scattered trees seeded by winds and seabirds’ wings. Killdeer and orange mocking-robins hopped and goose-stepped over the ground.

Passing through a narrow valley, they topped a rise, facing a band of forest at least a mile square. As they drew closer, Tanager perceived tremendous variety among the vegetation: oaks,



elms, locust, golden rain-trees, maple, larch, aspens and cedars, trees not normally found growing together; flowers of every kind, weeds of every sort, but none of the genetically-altered trees so common in most of the country. He wasn't a botanist, but it seemed a natural impossibility.

"The forest appeared three months ago," Tom said. "One day it wasn't there, the next it was. We don't know how or why. A week later nearby farmers reported their implements vandalized, plows taken apart, carts smashed, a bicycle beat to pieces. Some townsfolk and I set a stakeout resulting in a skirmish with a dozen of the creatures. They carry swords and axes — I lost two good men."

"Has anyone tried entering the woods?"

"Four men went in last week. I tried to talk them out of it. They haven't been seen since." The sheriff blew a ragged breath. "The creatures are ranging farther and farther from the woods. If it keeps up, they'll overrun Vegas. We don't want to move; we've put down roots here in the ruins."

"That would be ... unjust," Tanager said. "Perhaps I could fly above the forest, reconnoiter."

"Any help would be appreciated, though I know you're not under any obligation."

Tanager shook his head. "I have but one nature, Sheriff, and that nature does not allow me to ignore injustice if there is anything I can do to rectify it."

"Well, I guess I've put you in a bad position. I didn't know."

"No one ever does."

Tanager dismounted and unfurled his gray wings. The light breeze would help lift him. He flapped several times, took two quick hops, and rose in the air, making the horses shy and whinny. With a wave of farewell, he aimed toward the forest.

"Godspeed!" the sheriff called, awe audible in his voice.

Tanager propelled upward to get above the tallest trees, quickly covering the distance. The woods lay below him, verdant beyond belief, the trees and vegetation seemingly glowing with a light of their own, unfathomable coruscations reminding him of the wonder of long-gone childhood Christmases. To his surprise, tears sprang to his eyes for the world that once had been. He wiped them away with the backs of his hands and began a wide circle above the forest. He spied shadowy figures, some man-shaped, some monstrously large, all vanishing beneath the vegetation before he could see them clearly, as if something blocked his sight. This amazed him, for his eyes were those of a falcon.

He landed atop a massive, many-branched oak, surely hundreds of years old despite the forest having only recently appeared. He drew a deep breath. The woods smelled more than ancient; its scent was primeval. So the American forests must have been when the first nomads appeared — untouched from their prehistoric beginnings — the deep woods of Appalachia, the endless tracts of Maine, the towering splendor of the California Redwoods.

"Ho, winged one!" a voice called from below. A giant of a man strode from beneath the trees, easily eight feet tall, shoulders broad as a doorway, his brawny arms hefting a double-bladed axe.

"Are you a Noble?" Tanager asked, thinking it the only answer.

The titan grinned. "I am the Forthright Giant. You may call me Nilimon. Who are you?"

"I am Tanager. What is this place?"

Nilimon looked puzzled. "The Black Forest, of course. Come down and let us speak together. I mean you no harm."

After a moment's hesitation, Tanager drifted to the ground, safely out of reach of Nilimon's axe.

"I'm from Las Vegas," Tanager said.

"I am unfamiliar with that land."

"It's outside the forest. There are creatures attacking the town from here, short in stature but powerful."

Nilimon nodded. "That would be the gremlins, the servants of the Deathlord."

"Perhaps I could speak to him and see if we can establish a treaty." Tanager spoke numbly, disappointed. Whatever this place was, it seemed unlikely he would find any of his own kind.

"I don't understand your meaning," Nilimon said. "If you seek the Lord of Death, he will torture you until you perish, which is just and true. For a Creature of Evil to do anything else would be as wrong as asking the Greedy Boy to be generous." The giant's eyes sharpened with suspicion. "Are you some kind of mountebank? A Honey-Tongued Deceiver?" He ran his hand along the top of his axe.

"I am Tanager, who has but one nature, and that nature demands justice."

Nilimon's expression instantly changed. "Ah! You should have said so at once."

Tanager paused, trying to comprehend why the giant would suspect him of deception, then take him at his word.

"You must surely speak to the Just King," the giant suggested. "Come along with me. I will show you the way."

Nilimon strode through the forest, forcing Tanager to occasionally glide to keep pace. From the ground level the trees seemed immeasurably tall, monstrous boles stretching into the sky, a true fairy forest.

"Is it far?" Tanager asked.

"If we look for it, it will be there."

They soon came to a wall of thorns. Nilimon cut through them with a single swipe of his great axe, and they stepped into a clearing. A log building stretched between rows of trees, one side open on the end facing them. Tanager drew a sharp breath at the sight of a detachment of what looked like elves, their faces long and wise, standing guard along the inner walls. Upon a golden throne, on a raised dais at the far end, sat a figure dressed in white, crowned with a golden crown.

Nilimon strode boldly into the midst of the court without anyone moving to stop him. Tanager glanced uneasily at the golden armor of the elves, the bronze shafts of their spears, the quiet vigilance of their eyes.

A robed, wizened ancient stepped between the travelers and the throne.

"Who comes to see Gilgama Sigurd, the Just King?"

"I bring you a stranger from beyond the woods," Nilimon said. "He seeks aid against the gremlins."

The king placed an elbow on the throne and leaned forward, hand to beard. "What have we to do with the outer world, whose people know not predetermined fates, but live reckless, chaotic lives, choosing both good and evil?"

Tanager struggled to recall how one addressed a king, a memory from old holos before the Blackout. "Your Majesty, if you are truly just, how can you allow the gremlins to wantonly destroy?"

"I *am* the Just King. Only an interloper would suggest otherwise. Therein lies the rub." He turned to his councilor. "Bring forth the other mortals."

Four men appeared, clearly the ones the sheriff had mentioned, for they wore football helmets, shoulder pads, and padded pants, but their gear had changed, the face guard elongated to cover all but their mouth and eyes, the shoulder pads extending down to protect their stomachs and backs. They bowed before the king, who pointed toward Tanager. "This man too comes from mortal lands."

The men eyed Tanager warily.

"Sheriff Blackburn sent me," Tanager said.

One of the men stepped forward, his beard and hair unkempt. "I'm Gip Stevens. Can you get us out of here? We keep falling into Stories before we can leave the woods."

"This Tanager comes a'questing to thwart the gremlins," Gilgama Sigurd said.

"Oh, no," Gip groaned. "Not again."

"There is but one way," Gilgama Sigurd continued.

With agonized cries, Gip and the other men backed away, their hands over their ears, stopping only when they brushed against the elven guards at the wall.

"You must seek the Wise Woman of the Tor," the king said. "Only she can tell thee the way to Mommur, the hidden land of shadow and mist where dwells the Lord of Death."

A buzzing filled Tanager's mind. He staggered as if struck. Everything changed, a flowering within him, an enveloping flood. If his DNA had driven him to pursue justice before, the enchantment of the Black Forest enlarged that to a singular purpose. All other thoughts deserted him; nothing mattered but the Quest.

He unfurled his wings, no longer gray, but golden, each feather gleaming sharp as the point of a sword. His chest and biceps were doubled in size, his shoulders nearly as wide as Nilimon's.

"I go, my liege, to defeat this lord of darkness," Tanager said.

"And we shall go with thee," Gip the Brave cried, pulling his football helmet tight about his head.

Turning, Tanager departed the presence of the king, Nilimon by his side, the warriors of Las Vegas marching behind him.

For three days they journeyed through the forest until they came to the tor, a high hill overlooking a narrow village where the young men are tall and strong, the women always beautiful, and the ancient never sick nor lame. They climbed the tor and found a little cottage there, and within it a woman neither old nor young, with eyes of deepest amethyst. She fed them good soup and buttered bread, and when they told her what they wished, she said, "This is a hard thing you ask, Tanager of the Golden Wings, for I perceive you are not of our world, so I cannot see your way clearly. Yet, I tell you this: if you follow the way to the Deathlord, you will surely die and there is no help for it."

"Now that cannot be," Tanager said, "for I travel in the name of justice, which must always prevail. For me to die in vain would be unjust."

"Yet, it is so, for the justice of Faerie *will* be done, but you shall surely die, nonetheless. More than that, I cannot tell thee."

"So must it be then," Tanager said, "for mine is a single nature and I must perform its will."

Then the Wise Woman sighed and said, "Two paths lead to the Deathlord, and the first will take forty days and forty nights, but will offer no danger. The other is shorter, being only seven days, but I counsel you not to go that way, for there, in the land of Pan-

thea you will encounter the enchanter, Elfinor, greatly skilled in magic, who by his arts built upon the glassy sea a bridge of brass. He will hail you, and so wonderful is his face, so gracious his demeanor, you will desire to answer him kindly, yet if you speak a word to him, you will be trapped in his enchantment and will wander Panthea forever by his side, lost in discourse until your life be done. But if you do not speak to him, he will assail you with hail and wind, lightning and tornado, and all his arts."

But Tanager answered, "Our time is short. The people of Vegas suffer beneath the gremlins' ire. Despite the peril, we will go the quicker way."

And Tanager's followers stamped their boots upon the earth and said they would do the same.

Then the Wise Woman told Tanager the way he must go, and they set out, unafraid despite her dire warnings, singing as they went a song of hearty valor, Nilimon's voice so deep the trees shook, and Tanager happiest of all to set out on such a noble venture.

Through the woods they went, coming at last to a high waterfall; and following the Wise Woman's instructions, they slipped into a grotto behind it, a shelf the waters could not reach. An opening lay within it, a crack wide enough for even Nilimon to pass. Beyond that, they found themselves in the open once more, following a gray road.

A figure appeared at once, thin and sly. "Greetings, travelers. Welcome to Panthea. I am Elfinor, its lord."

Tanager gripped Nilimon's wrist in warning, for here was the one the Wise Woman had warned them of. So, keeping silent, they passed the enchanter without a word. But Elfinor fell in stride beside them.

"What, will you not answer with civil tongue?" Elfinor asked. "Surely you are not such rogues as to ignore a ruler in his own country!"

Yet still they made no reply.

"Very well then, since you will not have my friendship, you will face my wrath."

Then Elfinor raised an arm high and the heavens answered with thunder. The enchanter vanished, but clouds arose and hail fell upon the earth, bouncing off the football helmets and shoulder pads of the warriors. Tanager and Nilimon had no such protection, so the Forthright Giant lifted his great axe, whirling it in the air at such speeds that the hail could not pass through its wake, protecting himself and the whole company.

Seeing the hail had failed, Elfinor spoke a word, and out of the forest charged a score of screaming, sallow-skinned gremlins, with oversized, pointed ears and noses, protruding fangs rotten with decay, and heavy, flat feet, wearing leather armor ornamented with parts of machinery that clattered as they ran, trophies of victories against the creations of men. Though less than three feet tall, they were broad and stout.

Tanager and his followers fought back to back, being sorely outnumbered, and the dead piled up around them, a ring of the slain. Yet still more gremlins came, until even Nilimon grew weak from his wounds, his arm slowing in weariness. Tanager's blade grew heavy. If he had been alone, he would have cast himself into the sky to escape, but he would not desert his companions.

Just when it seemed they would be overwhelmed, a cry arose behind the foes, and Sheriff Tom Blackburn appeared, leading seventeen men arrayed in armor. Taken unawares, the enemies fled gibbering.



Tanager fell to his knees, gasping from weariness. "Well met, Sheriff!"

"We came looking for you," Tom said.

No sooner had he spoken than a shadow seemed to pass over Tanager. He realized he had been under an enchantment, his mind not his own. "We've got to get out of here."

"We'll go back the way we came as soon as you're strong enough to travel," Tom said.

"What nonsense do you babble?" Nilimon demanded. "Surely you are not such dastards as to abandon the Quest?"

The moment he spoke, Tanager felt himself sliding back into Story.

"Ne'er would I suggest so base a treachery," Good Thomas, Sheriff of Vegas said. "We came but to succor thee, Tanager Golden Wing, and will accompany thee to thy goal."

So they rose and bound the wounds of their companions, and to their wonder no man had died or taken mortal hurt, so bravely had they fought. They passed through the land of Elfinor, who, fearing their might, dared assault them no more. The gray road dwindled and vanished, leaving hard black stones leading to an ebony castle, its tower stretching to the sky like a claw.

So they came to the Dark Tower, Tanager Golden Wing, Nilimon, and the Sheriff of Vegas and his twenty-one warriors arrayed in helmets of football and armor of pads. Up the winding path they strode to the gates of the tower, and to their wonder, they found it open and unguarded. Passing cautiously into the shadowy interior, they ascended a snaking stairs. Higher and higher they went, until they reached a throne room at the top, lit by ensconced torches. No sooner had they entered than the doors slammed shut behind them.

Upon the throne, half-hidden in shadow, sat a figure tall as Nilimon, with thews of brass and the head of a wolf, his tongue blood-red, his eyes golden, his teeth, knife sharp. "I am Anubis," he said, in a voice booming like thunder across the chamber. "Here you have come; here you will never depart."

Even the hearts of the valiant warriors quailed at so mighty a foe, yet Tanager stepped boldly forth. "Why do your gremlins attack the people of Las Vegas? What harm have they done you?"

Anubis sat silent a time, and when he spoke, his voice was sad. "Poor mortals. What strange creatures you are, who inhabit this perverse universe, where you can *choose* acts of either good or evil. We, the children of Faerie, cast from our natural place, cannot wholly comprehend you."

At these words, so alien to the Black Forest, the enchantment fell away and Tanager knew who he was once more. He glanced at the sheriff and his men, who stood shaking their heads to clear them.

Anubis chuckled. "Now that the Story is no longer upon you, do you like where it has led?"

"Where are you from?" Tanager demanded. "How did you come here?"

Anubis sat back on his ebony throne. "That is a question I have long pondered. The witch, Gothel, believes it began long ago, when a few gremlins were snatched from our world into your air ships during your wars, caused by an imbalance between magic and the arcane mystery you call *science*. The gremlins have hated machinery ever since. Why this particular portion of the Black Forest was suddenly ferried into this despicable land, where nothing is pure, I do not know. I suspect it is related to this Great Blackout I have heard about."

"But why should our peoples fight against one another, when we can form a treaty and work together to find a way to return you to your proper place?"

Anubis threw back his head and laughed, its sound echoing through the chamber. "You comprehend *nothing* about us. I am the Master of Evil and the Lord of the Dead. Any who come to me know I will do my duty; I will defeat them through deception and treachery; I will torture them in a thousand ways until they beg for death. And only when they have nothing left but despair will I end their lives. This is my part and my place, as surely as the Good Prince will always defeat me, he who is pure of thought and noble of deeds, so that in the end I will perish without regret, cursing the one who slew me. That is the way of it, for in Faerie, we each have our place and none may avert their destiny."

Anubis licked his tongue over his ivory teeth, his voice rising, triumphant. "Yet, with our coming here, all is changed, and I have no intention of returning to my own world. The Good Prince was not in this part of the Black Forest when it entered your land. Thus, there is no one pure of heart to defeat me. I am indestructible in this country. Through magic, I will enlarge the borders of Faerie until it overruns the whole Earth. Fight me if you will, you cannot win."

Anubis rose from his throne, brandishing a black sword. "Now come! Let us make war, for I long for the slaughter."

"Now hold on a second," the sheriff said. "You just challenged us. I say that gives us the right to choose our weapons."

Anubis tilted his head. "There is truth in that."

From his back pocket, Tom drew a deck of playing cards. "Combat's all well and good, but I propose a game of chance called Blackjack instead. The player who gets closest to 21 without going over wins the hand. Best two out of three claims the victory. You win and our people will clear out of Las Vegas and leave it to you. I win, you keep your gremlins inside the forest, leave us alone, and don't expand your borders. What do you say?"

Anubis scowled. "A wager cannot be rejected in Faerie. I agree with one exception: If I win, all of you swear to serve me willingly for the rest of your lives."

Tom's face turned pale, but he returned a confident smile and murmured to Tanager. "No different than dealing at the casinos."

"Tell me how this Blackjack is played," the Deathlord said.

While the sheriff explained the rules, grinning gremlins set an ebony table and chair before the throne.

"I'll be the dealer," Tom said, shuffling the cards. "Your cut."

Anubis cut the cards with his massive hands.

The sheriff gave Anubis his first card, a ten of hearts. Serving as the house, Tom drew a card, looked at it, and laid it face down. Anubis's next card was an ace of clubs, counting as either eleven or one.

"Twenty-one," the Lord of the Dead rumbled.

The sheriff dealt his next card face up, a seven of spades. His expression remained impassive, but Tanager saw his left leg give the slightest twitch. Tom turned over his other card, another seven of spades. "That's impossible."

"You're using some kind of magic," Tanager said.

"The deck of cards is yours," Anubis sneered. "The best two out of three you said."

The sheriff sat back in his chair, eyeing the deck a long moment, then swept the first cards aside and laid another one down for Anubis. Again it was a ten of hearts. Tom's lips moved softly;

he drew his own card and put it face down, his countenance a mask of concentration.

Anubis's next card was a three of diamonds.

It was the Deathlord's turn to be surprised. He gave a low growl, gripping the wooden table so hard he crushed its lip.

Tom dealt his next card, a nine of hearts, and asked, "What will you do?"

"Hit ... me!" Anubis spat, his brow furrowed. He received a nine of hearts, making his total eighteen.

"I will stand," Anubis said.

Tom turned his card over, a ten of diamonds, adding to his nine of hearts. "Nineteen. The house wins."

Anubis rose and stamped across the chamber, making the room shake. He turned back toward the men, his face a portrait of hate.

"We're tied," the sheriff said. "This is the last round."

Snarling, Anubis seated himself again.

To Tanager, the sheer concentration on the faces of the two opponents suggested not a game of chance, but a contest of wills. The sheriff muttered softly, words the Noble could not quite catch. Anubis's fingers moved as if casting a spell.

Tom laid down Anubis's first card, a king. Ten points. Tom dealt his own card and placed the Lord of the Dead's next card down, another king. Twenty points, an impressive hand.

The sheriff put down his second card, an eight.

"I will stand," Anubis said.

The sheriff drew another card. By the rules of the game, that meant his first two cards added up to less than seventeen. The new card was a five.

He reached for another card. The more he took, the more likely he was to go bust.

If the two foes had concentrated before, their actions became a frenzy of wills, Anubis's hands moving frantically, an incantation rolling from his mouth, harsh and guttural. The sheriff spoke in numbers, adding and dividing, repeating the same phrase over and over.

With trembling fingers Tom turned over another card, again a five. He gave a ragged breath; a wild grin broke across his face. He turned over his hidden card, a three of hearts. His voice broke. "Twenty-one. The house wins."

Anubis swept the table aside, sending it shattering against a wall. "You deviants! You beguiled me! Coming hence on a noble quest, claiming to be a Force of Good! You cheated!"

"So did you," the sheriff said.

"I," Anubis screamed, "am a Force of Evil! I always cheat! You sicken me!"

Rising, the Lord of the Dead stalked across the chamber, shouting in rage, striking his own gremlin servants, sending them flying across the room.

"What happened?" Tanager asked.

"I didn't expect it to be difficult," Tom said, behind his hand. "I know every card trick in the book, including how to palm cards, but when I tried it, Anubis used magic to change them. I didn't know what to do, so I tried counting cards."

"I don't understand."

"Card counting doesn't really work in this situation. It's a method of calculating how much to bet on each hand. But I figured from what Anubis said about magic and science maybe mathematics might counter magic. I just kept repeating it over and over. It was all I knew to try and it worked."

Anubis turned to them, his frenzy over, leaving cold fury in his eyes.

"We've won the wager," Tanager said. "You must fulfill your part."

A smirk twisted the Deathlord's features. "Don't you understand that I *never* keep my word?" He made a sign and gremlin soldiers came chittering from a door behind the throne.

"Positions!" the sheriff bawled, scrambling back to his men.

Tom's twenty-one soldiers formed a rough square, the sheriff commanding from its middle. Nilimon raised his mighty axe.

Tanager beat his wings, rising in the air above his enemies while Anubis's laughter reverberated through the chamber.

The gremlins came on, an endless stream. The men, armed with swords and spears, took the initial charge without faltering, their football gear turning aside the blows.

Nilimon, swinging his axe like a scythe, cut through the gremlin lines, parting them like ripe corn until he reached Anubis. The Lord of the Dead drew an ebony sword and a shimmering shield. They met in the center of the chamber, and Nilimon unleashed a furious blow. Anubis caught it on his shield, and so mighty was the power of that strike that its force knocked men and gremlins off their feet and sent Tanager reeling through the air. For an instant, the battle ceased, everyone in the room turning their eyes toward the two titans.

Toe to toe they fought, Nilimon deflecting Anubis's sword-thrusts with his axe handle, sparks showering where the blades met. Back Nilimon drove the Deathlord, and back again, until Anubis was nearly pressed against his throne.

"Take that, you rogue!" Nilimon cried, giving a blow that split Anubis's shield. The giant drew back to strike again.

Anubis, off balance, struck sideways with his sword-hilt, catching Nilimon a hammering blow to the temple. The titan fell to his knees, stunned, his axe falling from his hands, rattling on the floor.

"I am the Lord of Evil, Master of the Dead!" Anubis cried. "No ordinary creature can defeat me, no matter how strong!" He drew back his sword, aiming for Nilimon's neck.

In an instant Tanager shot forward. Before Anubis could complete his stroke, the Noble drove his blade into the Deathlord's chest.

Anubis dropped his weapon, his eyes fastened in disbelief on Tanager's sword. "Impossible. No mortal could ..."

"I am Tanager, who has but one nature, and that nature is Justice."

Horror filled Anubis's face. "You are ... like us." He tumbled to the floor, gasping for breath. His eyes found Tanager's. "So, even in this mortal world, I cannot escape my fate. There is always a Good Prince. I am content. I die in my appointed way. But take my hand and pledge you will not punish these poor gremlins, who were only under my command."

His nature drew Tanager to stretch forth his arm. But as he took Anubis's hand, he felt a pinprick of pain.

Anubis gave a low chuckle. "Poor mortal. Evil is unceasing. Deception is my virtue. And being trusting is yours." With those words, the Lord of the Dead perished, a happy smile on his face.

A tiny needle projected from the ring on Anubis's hand. A drop of blood fell from Tanager's finger. Dizziness took him; the room began to fade.

• • •



**W**ITH the Deathlord's passing the gremlins fled, scuttling through a door hidden behind the throne. Seeing Tanager stumble and collapse, the sheriff rushed to his side.

"Poison," Tanager murmured. "He played his role to the end."

Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, Tom wrapped it around Tanager's wrist as a tourniquet and began squeezing at the wound to bleed out the poison. But it was already too late. Tanager's eyes rolled back. The sheriff attempted CPR compressions to no avail.

After a time, one of his men said, "He's gone, Sheriff. There's nothing you can do."

"I don't understand it," Tom said. "It doesn't make sense. In a fairy tale, the hero never dies."

"The Wise Woman told us it would happen," Gip said.

Tom rose to his feet, shaking his head. "Still, it doesn't add up." He blew a ragged breath. "Let's get out of this psych ward."

"I'll take Tanager's body," Nilimon said. "We'll bury him on a hill." But when he sought to lift the bird-man, he drew back in pain and surprise. "His form is hot as fire!"

Tom turned back to the corpse. Even as he watched, Tanager's body began to glow, red at first, then white hot, finally so bright the men had to shield their eyes.

Power erupted from his frame, shooting to the top of the chamber. Tom saw a brief outline, pinions and beak, claws and feathers, coalescing into a massive bird of a thousand colors, its eyes jewels, its wings spanning the chamber.

The phoenix eyed the men, a merciless gaze, but it lowered itself to a roosting position and spoke in a harsh, cawing voice. "Ride upon my back."

Heart pounding, the sheriff and his men obeyed. And though it appeared the phoenix could not possibly hold them all, it grew longer as each man mounted, until every one of them was aboard. With a loud *huzzah!* Nilimon swept his axe through the air, tearing a hole in the ceiling with a single swipe.

"Fly well, great bird!" the giant cried.

• • •

**T**ANAGER had never felt such power, his mind filled with the thoughts of the ages, his wings rippling with majestic energy. He understood so much, comprehended things both in this universe and in the heavens beyond. He knew how the Great Blackout had occurred and how it related to the appearance of the Black Forest, the relationship between magic and science, the natural and the supernatural.

Into the air he rose, wanting to rise forever, rocketing up and up, feeling the air upon his face, reveling in the ecstasy of flight. But gradually, as he flew still higher, he recognized the voices of the men on his back.

"Tanager!" Tom called. "It's too high! We can't breathe!"

For a moment he could not comprehend the words of these mortal creatures, so small, so finite. But then he remembered; and though he wanted to fly forever, he knew he must take them home.

Down he plunged, sweeping over the Black Forest, making all those below hide from his terrible mien. He landed with a rush of wings just beyond the woods.

And he was Tanager once more, a mere man, and Tom and his soldiers stood all around him.

Tears streamed down Tanager's face. He fell to his knees. "All gone! I knew so much, but I couldn't hold it! My mind was too small."

• • •

**T**ANAGER and Sheriff Blackburn sat in the cafe the next day, talking things over. The forest was gone; the streets of Las Vegas were safe again.

"Was it real?" Tanager asked. "I've faced illusions before this, created by holos and forgotten science."

"It was real," the sheriff said. "People died in Las Vegas from the gremlin attacks. What I can't figure is if these creatures were from some other world, why were they myths from ours?"

"Perhaps they weren't from another world. Perhaps they were created by our unconscious minds. Or perhaps our thoughts somehow shaped their form when they appeared here."

"Maybe," the sheriff said. "But why did the Black Forest disappear after you killed Anubis?"

"When I was the phoenix, I understood it all. I lost most of it, but still retain a glimmer. It concerns a Balance. We were on a quest to end the gremlin attacks, a mission only people from outside the forest would undertake. In the old stories, a quest always succeeds. The only way for that to happen was for the Black Forest to return to its proper place."

"It's pretty coincidental, if you think about it," Tom said, "you showing up right around the time the forest appears, the one man who could defeat Anubis."

Tanager looked away. "I hope you're not blaming me for the forest being here."

"Nothing of the sort. I just wonder if it didn't call to you somehow, draw you here. And I wonder — given the way things were in the woods — whether it was even possible for us to lose that fight. Against all odds, we did everything right — my using math with my card tricks, you attacking Anubis when you did. As you say, we were on a quest."

Tanager shivered. "Brought here against my will, as destined as the people of Faerie? That's a dreadful thought. My genetics have controlled me since my birth."

The two men fell silent, thoughtful.

"I'm sorry you didn't find more of your kind," Tom said. "You know, you're a hero here now. You could stay, become my deputy or do whatever you want."

Tanager smiled ruefully. "Perhaps I will for a time. But I think whatever draws me on will draw me still. That, I fear, must be my fate."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Stoddard lives in a mysterious and unexpected canyon on the plains of Texas. When not writing, he is a songwriter who has recently released an album of pop/rock songs based on his novel, *The High House*. The version of Faerie in the above story can also be seen in his new novel, *The Back of the Beyond*, which tells of 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](http://www.james-stoddard.com)

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# JEWELS OF THE SEA HAG

By ADRIAN COLE

*King Elak has completed his unification of the Atlantean continent and now enjoys a period of rebuilding and peace, having settled for a time in his magnificent new palace in Epharra, capital of Cyrena. With his bride, the former pirate Shiveeri, at his side, Elak maintains control of the sea lanes, while the pirate islands have become for the most part outreaches of the new Empire, developing legitimate trading and exploring the more distant shores of their world. Even the fierce Pictish tribes of the north west are no longer hostile, though they keep to themselves and their remote domains. It is a time of new prosperity, though the men of Atlantis are watchful, knowing their world will never be entirely free of danger and creatures of darkness, who crave their own empires.*

## CHAPTER ONE: THE SECRET OF THE CLIFFS

**T**HE small fishing port of Tarrenus nestled among weathered bays on Cyrena's northern coast, fifty miles east of Epharra. Its buildings fitted jaggedly under the brow of tall cliffs, its jetty running out in a curve, following a sweep of shoreline to Seafire Island. Warehouses, boat yards and a solitary inn cluttered the jetty's end. Once this had been a notorious meeting place for various pirates and brigands from far and wide, but in these peaceful days, its custom centered on less dubious activities. The new king had promised to reward adventurers flying the Atlantean flag, and paid handsomely for their trade, even advancing them resources to set themselves up in their ventures. Most sailors had set aside old quarrels, and in many cases ships leaving here were crewed by those who once would have been at one another's throats. There were still rivalries and disputes, but less mysterious deaths and mayhem, and generally a goodly supply of ale steadied things.

For young men, eager to learn the skills of seamanship and launch out across the great, wild ocean in search of treasure and fabulous realms, Tarrenus offered an exciting starting point. Experienced captains, both those dedicated to Elak's regime and those who remained on its rim, were always on the lookout for fresh crewmen they could mold to their own persuasion. The less scrupulous captains took to their company many a rogue and rascal, secretly mourning the passing of the old days, when freebooters served private flags. They knew, however, the king had set up an efficient spy ring. Very little got past its eyes and ears. When a captain overstepped the new boundaries set by Elak, punishment was swift and effective.

Artugol and Volnus, two youngsters in the final months of their teens, had spent the day on the northern, seaward side of Seafire Island. It had been a gray, drizzly day, the crags and overhangs

of the coast slick and shiny, a danger to all but the flocking sea birds nesting here. The two youths had climbed numerous demanding ascents, testing themselves fully, rejoicing in the sheer exuberance of their endeavors. More than once they had felt the cold breath of death on their necks, but they worked as one, their extraordinary sharing of skills the blend that made them almost unique among islanders who thrived on such challenges. Artugol was tall and wiry, able to find the narrowest of channels, clinging to the rock faces like a gangling spider, while Volnus was stocky and muscular, his strength invaluable, swinging his companion across dizzy drops, or preventing Artugol from a fatal fall whenever he overreached himself, which was too often for Volnus's comfort.

Artugol sat on a narrow shelf, high above the boiling foam of the ocean smashing against the rocks far below. He produced a thickly woven bag. "Let's find something to eat." Around him, wings beating the air in a frenzy of anger, sea birds massed in clouds, shrieking raucously, beaks snapping, as they protected their nests from these hated intruders. The youths edged along the precarious ledge and found several nests, from which they took a few eggs, always making sure they left more than they took. The bag was half full, the eggs carefully wrapped and packed in thick strips of material against breakage, when they left the shelf and entered a narrow cleft which led like a chimney to the cliff top. Inside its shadows they were safe from the jabbing, frenzied beaks.

Volnus called to his companion, already several feet above him. "Hold, Artugol. Don't be in such a hurry to leave. You missed something."

Artugol swung round, laughter masking his impatience. "Enough is enough. We've eggs here to keep us fed for a week."

Volnus was probing a small crack, using a snapped-off root. "Forget your belly for a moment. I saw light strike something." He dug earth and a handful of rocky shards from the widening crack, leaning back with a gasp. Carefully he reached in and pulled out a sparkling object. It was the size of a small egg, glistening and shimmering strangely.

Artugol dropped beside him. "Gods of the deep, is it a diamond?"

Volnus held it up. "Look at the light reflecting! I think it must be."

Artugol pointed to the crack. "There are more! Get them out!"

"Gently! I don't want to lose them." Again Volnus used the root, painstakingly excavating a dozen more objects. They were perfectly circular, seemingly artificially shaped and polished.

"Must be worth a kingdom!" said Artugol. "Here — slip them in the bag. Cover them with the eggs. We'll have to think how we're going to pass them on. My friend, we'll live like princes!"



Having satisfactorily bagged their plunder, the youths scrambled to the daylight, laughing as they returned to Tarrenus. Had they taken a final look at the wave-blasted rocks under the crags, they would have seen figures rising from the spume, wraiths shaped from it: twisted, bloated things, their forms writhing like troubled fog, features blurred, the black orifices of mouths wide in silent screams.

## CHAPTER TWO: TERROR FROM THE SEA FOG

**A**S the two youths traversed the narrow jetty to Tarrenus, they felt a sudden coldness in the sea air. Evening was closing in quickly, a damp fist. Fog swirled around the shifting waters. A powerful wind whipped up abruptly and the youths exchanged glances of deep unease. They understood well the ways of the ocean currents, tides and dramatic changes in the weather along this exposed shore, but tonight there was something indefinable in the air, a brooding otherness, a hint of the unnatural. They quickened their pace, crossing the half-way point of the stones as a gust slapped a wave against the jetty's base. Water erupted and a cloud of salty mist enveloped them.

They looked back, gasping. The fog, a churning gray mass, contorted itself violently, and from its coils a number of shapes emerged, bloated figures with swollen heads, black pits for eyes, and wide, gaping mouths filled with utter darkness. The youths broke into a sprint, Volnus clinging tightly to the bag and priceless contents. Both knew instinctively it was the latter which had attracted these ocean horrors.

Overhead the roiling banks of cloud sank, about to obliterate all vision, but the youths accelerated, fueled by seething terror: they felt the potential icy grasp of spectral claws, molded from the fog. Something screamed at their shoulders, a nest of disturbed aerial fiends. Volnus might have tossed aside the bag, hoping to deter the malign pursuit, but some atavistic urge forced him not to do so. Instead he gripped it tighter and roared defiance.

To their relief and amazement, the youths crashed through the doorway of a small harbor store, kicking it shut and barring it behind them. A huge force battered itself against the outer wall of the building, shaking its foundations. The low roof beams quivered, releasing thick clouds of dust. Fortunately there were no windows, yet the horrors outside intensified their efforts to demolish the walls. The store was temporarily disused and the youths knew if it had not been, that door would have been securely locked. When the place was used, amphorae of rare, southern wines lined the walls and chests of likewise valuable goods were stacked here. The place had been designed to keep thieves out and its considerable resistance to any such cemented the youths' safety now. They could hear, through thick stone and heavily slated roof, the wild efforts of the fog creatures to batter their way in. There was barely enough light to see by.

"What are they?" said Volnus.

Artugol shook his head. "Some kind of guardians, maybe. Of these jewels. Dare we keep them? Should we just toss them out?"

Volnus shook his head, and Artugol recognized the obstinacy.

"Will this store hold through the night?" Artugol went on breathlessly. "No one will venture to our aid in this storm.

There's no other exit. The store is partly built into the cliff behind." They'd escaped death but only to trap themselves. "Put the bag by the door. If they break in, they can take it and hopefully ignore us."

Volnus gripped the bag even more tightly, a determined expression on his face. "No! Our future depends on these stones. We'll never get another opportunity like this. It's the gods' way of telling us. Nothing is won without a price."

Artugol groaned at the familiar obduracy. "If they get to us, Volnus, we'll be —"

"Listen!"

They froze, ears straining. The din outside had died down. Strangely there was not even a hint of the storm, no breath of wind.

Artugol frowned. "They're like huge hounds, sniffing around us in silence, waiting, trying to trick us. If we open the door, they'll be on us. If we're to frustrate them, we must remain here until daylight disperses them."

Somewhere above in the heaving night sky, a tremendous crash of thunder reverberated, and again the walls of the store shook. It was followed by another, the sounds intensified by the renewed shrieks and screams from the gathered demonic forces. A tumultuous battle was raging between natural and supernatural elements. The youths shrank down, fully expecting the building to be smashed, stone by stone, as the ferocity of the conflict rose to a crescendo.

"How could we possibly have unleashed this!" gasped Volnus, although his fingers yet gripped the bag. It would take a sharp blade to pry them loose.

When the chaos ended and silence fell again, the youths remained on their haunches among a few rejected pots, their ears ringing. Finally Artugol rose, suspicious of the silence.

"The door!" said Volnus, his voice a harsh whisper.

Artugol focused his gaze in the dimness. To his horror the door had swung inwards, its thick wooden bar snapped in two. Torchlight streamed toward them, flickering in sudden gusts of wind.

Two figures stepped into the room, not ethereal creatures shaped from fog, but warriors, fully armed and protected, wearing rounded helms. One raised a lantern.

"Ho! Who cowers there? Come out in the name of the King!"

Artugol whispered. "Elak's men. See, their insignia."

Volnus thrust the bag surreptitiously behind the largest of the amphorae. He and Artugol went before the warriors, hands held out, demonstrating they were unarmed.

Several warriors had entered; they stood in an intimidating line. Another figure, garbed in thick robes and bearing a tall staff, pushed gently past, sizing up the youths.

"The game is over," he said in a cold voice. "Deliver to me what you have found."

## CHAPTER THREE: THE SEA HAG'S CURSE

**"FOUND?"** said Volnus. "We're sheltering from the storm. There's nothing here but broken pottery."

Artugol looked at his friend in puzzlement. Volnus was never this assertive in the face of authority. His fists were clenched, his whole manner one of rebellion.

"He's a Druid," Artugol whispered.

"I am Dalan, the King's Druid!" said the robed figure, his staff faintly glowing, as if alive. "Do not waste time. Bring me what you've found!"

Volnus drew back at the power in that voice. Reluctantly he went to the hidden bag and brought it, handing it to Dalan.

"Come with me," Dalan went on. "Quickly, before the next wave of attack."

The youths had no choice, seeing the grim faces of the armed men, whose blades looked all too ready for use. Silently they trooped out behind the Druid into the early dawn light. The tempest had abated, but a heavy white mist clung to the town, jetty, and sea, corralling the group. Dalan held his staff aloft. The air fizzed, reeking as though a fire had recently been extinguished. Out in the mist, vague shapes pulsed, imprisoned within it, striving angrily to shred their way free.

The Druid watched the aerial horrors keenly. A halo of light surrounded his staff and by its glow the party made for the jetty's edge. A large sailing ship loomed from a bank of mist, oars and belling sail proclaiming it to be the King's vessel.

Dalan led the way down a narrow set of steps on to the craft. As they followed him, the youths heard distant shrieks and screams of protest as the mist creatures attempted to renew their assault. The staff, however, held them at bay as the company boarded. Artugol and Volnus were taken below to the Druid's private quarters and presently the youths felt the ship shudder as the crew cast off.

"Where are you taking us?" said Artugol.

Dalan bid them sit and dropped into a tall seat, setting his staff aside. His hood fell back to reveal flowing, gray hair and a lined, alert face that spoke of great age and wisdom, so typical of his kind. He did not smile, but his expression softened.

"You are safe on this vessel," he said. "If you'd remained in Tarrenus, those demons would have sucked the life from you. Where did you find the jewels?"

Artugol explained and as he did so, Dalan nodded. "The King sent me on this mission. I have seen such jewels before." He pointed to the unopened bag, which he had dropped lightly on a small table. "There are believed to be many such clusters along these shores, and on some of the remote north eastern islands."

"What are they?" said Volnus.

"They were spawned by a creature from the myths of Atlantis's far past, a corrupt queen, who ruled her island kingdom like a goddess, worshiped by a primitive tribe. She may have been an outcast from the continent, or a renegade from the mysterious islands that throng the north eastern ocean. The ancient Druids knew her as Barzangis, the Sea Hag. After a violent conflict and terrible clash of powers, she was drowned, her corpse sent to the deeps. It was said she drew on cosmic forces from beyond the earthly plane and at the end, used the last of them to shield herself from death, although she took upon herself another form, something that has survived the eons and which lives yet, deep in her subterranean lair."

"The Sea Hag," said Artugol, suppressing a shudder. "All sea folk know the legends. Our mothers told us such tales to scare us and keep us from roaming far from the shore. She is real?"

"The jewels are like eggs. The Sea Hag secreted them along the boundaries of her kingdom, promising one day she would

hatch them and unleash her vengeance on Atlantis and whoever ruled it. Some were found nearer Epharra, in another cliff. The aerial demons fed on them and were transformed. It took particularly deep magic to destroy them." Dalan looked away for a moment, as if seeing something dire in his mind's eye. "Many good men were lost, but the demons were snuffed out."

The youths studied the bag with fresh unease. "Those jewels — eggs —" said Artugol. "Are they *alive*?"

Dalan nodded. "If the demons had taken them, a fresh transformation would have occurred. For certain the Sea Hag intends to use every jewel she secreted, simultaneously. There may be thousands. If she does, it will require all of the King's power to withstand the invasion."

"How many clutches are there?" said Volnus.

Dalan's face clouded. "We cannot say. Nor where they are. In time, we would find them all. But there is no time. Soon the Sea Hag will attack. We may not contain her. Unless —" He let the word hang between them like a spell.

Artugol and Volnus stared at one another, mouths dry.

"Unless we find the Sea Hag and deal with her in her ocean lair," said Dalan. "Which is where you can help."

Artugol gulped. "Us? Take on the Sea Hag? Your pardon, master, but we'd be little better than sand flies! We have no powers."

"You're adventurous, cunning, athletic, and you know the seas and how to sail them. The King needs spies. Men who can join a reaver's crew and keep a sharp lookout without being conspicuous. I need eyes across the ocean. And reports. No more than that. Find where the Sea Hag is buried. For King Elak."

#### CHAPTER FOUR: SHE-WOLF OF THE SEAS

**T**HE *Arrow* was a sleek and swift craft, carried across the waves at speeds few could match. Crewed by fifty, who either bent their backs in harmony, pulling at the oars, or rested and let the many winds of the ocean bell the single sail and plunge the craft through the swells like a knife. The steersman, Zendullo, swore loudly as he piloted the ship, cajoling the winds as if he could shape them to his will: in response, the *Arrow* rose and dipped, a match for all but the heaviest seas.

Among the crew were Artugol and Volnus. Dalan had negotiated their places with the craft's mistress, Eskarra. She was a daughter of a pirate clan that had sailed these tempestuous northern waters for decades, inheriting her role as mistress of the *Arrow* from her mother, whose reputation for ferocity and determination to better the efforts of any male rogue was well known across all seas, until a sudden illness had ended her illustrious life. Eskarra, barely out of her teens, was already developing into a she-wolf no less formidable than her mother. Artugol and Volnus found that out very early on and over the following weeks at sea.

"She drives her men hard," Artugol said softly to his companion as they bent their backs at the oars. "If we don't strike land soon, I swear I'll pass out."

Volnus grinned, though the efforts he made at the oar were evidently taxing even his strength. "She reserves her toughest demands for you and I. It's a test. She never wanted us on her ship."

"She fears Dalan. He has the power to impound the *Arrow* and curtail her wandering."



Both were conscious of the figure standing on the deck at the *Arrow's* prow, its back to them. Eskarra was not tall, a slender young woman, whose arms and legs were bared to all weathers, deeply bronzed, muscled, though not excessively. She wore her raven hair tightly bound, her ears exposed to reveal two golden earrings. Although the ship rose and fell as it sliced the waves, spume flying over it, Eskarra remained unmoved, the men beside her waiting for orders, which they carried out without hesitation. The word was Eskarra could match anyone with a rapier, her favored blade, something she had in common with the legendary Elak. It was said that she only smiled when she was fighting.

"I doubt if she fears anything," said Artugol. "I wouldn't want to be the subject of her displeasure."

"Then you might want to be wary of your gaze." Volnus's grin widened.

Artugol almost lose the rhythm of the oar. "Meaning?"

"The way you look at her."

"Silence!" roared the oars master, Ormullah, a swarthy giant with a face like thunder and enough scars for a regiment. "You're not on a fishing trip now! Less mouth and more effort. Pull, you scum!" It was a tribute to the man's vocal chords that he was heard over the blasts of the wind.

Artugol bowed his head as if he had been caught in an embarrassing act, and was horrified to see that Eskarra had swung round, hearing Ormullah's roar. Her eyes fixed on the two youths, an eagle eyeing its prey. Lithe as a cat she swung down from the deck and moved among the rowers, stopping beside Artugol and Volnus.

"Come with me. Ormullah! Have these two replaced for an hour." She strode down the deck to her quarters at the rear of the vessel, a low, narrow cabin, and disappeared inside. The youths followed, watched by the amused eyes of the rowers, some of whom blew them mocking kisses. Artugol was furious, but Volnus laughed.

Inside the cabin, Eskarra faced them brazenly. Volnus closed the door, shutting out the blasting wind.

"There's an island ahead, not three leagues away. We'll shelter there for the night," said Eskarra. "It may not be safe. We believe it's uninhabited. There are ruins, once a pirate stronghold, long before Elak's time. Now there are only ghosts." She said it without fear and equally without skepticism.

"Legends?" said Artugol. "Or actual ghosts?"

Eskarrra grimaced. She was a harsh mistress of the seas, and though young, to Artugol her responsibilities and seriousness augmented her wild beauty. Fierceness and possibly anger gleamed in those golden eyes. "We'll find out," she said. "If this is a place where yet more jewels are buried, we'll dig them up."

"Won't that invite the demons of the sea fog?" asked Artugol.

"Probably," she snorted. "Now — show me what Dalan gave you. This jewel he said would lead us to the Sea Hag's trail. The one she will want to recover."

Volnus was momentarily taken aback by the girl's bluntness, but he nodded and carefully slid a leather sheath from his belt. As he flipped open its top end, a dirk's haft was revealed, gray metal with a dull brass pommel. Volnus laid the long weapon on the table, tapping the pommel. "Disguised," he said. "That's gold, enclosing the jewel. Dalan destroyed all the others we

found. The gold has been impregnated with spells cast by the Druid. Otherwise the fog demons would have found us."

"When we go ashore," said Eskarra, "we'll need to make use of it. Will you bear it against the demons, or shall I?"

Volnus picked the dirk up possessively and wrapped it in the leather. "It has fallen to me to do this."

Artugol barely concealed a grin. His friend took his responsibilities very seriously and no one, not even the belligerent she-wolf of the seas, was going to change that.

"Very well. But don't disappoint us. You make good spies, tucked away like mice in a barn, but what will you be like when the blades are out and the blood flows?"

Artugol wanted to retort, but he knew Eskarra was right to question their skills. In fairness, neither he nor Volnus had ever been tested in battle. A few skirmishes with other youths, and any amount of exercise with weapons would count as nothing in the murderous cut and thrust of a sea fight.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE ISLAND OF TERRORS

**T**HE storm had abated as the *Arrow* slipped into the small bay. Clouds churned away eastward, leaving the night sky revealed like a vast, star-pitted dome. A thick slice of moon cast a rich glow over the island's jungle terrain. Nestling deep down under the foliage the twisted shapes of an old fortress poked up like grasping fingers. Silence clung to everything, the more potent since the passing of the storm. There was a single, crumbing jetty, sand heaped up along half its length, but there was enough depth in the waters that lapped it to provide a safe berth for the *Arrow*, whose crew tied her up.

Eskarrra led a party ashore, the two youths beside her. All weapons were drawn, save the dirk that Volnus carried. However, once he had stepped on to the crumbling paving slabs of the jetty, he felt a growing warmth in the concealed blade. There were broken buildings, crammed together in their ruination, the narrow streets choked with fallen bricks and lintels, as the tiny port straggled the steep slopes behind the shore, in places obliterated by the mass of encroaching verdure.

"There's a central temple overlooking the place," said Eskarra. "We'll make for there." Undaunted by the hostile feel of the terrain, she led the way over the rubble and the crew followed her, two of them bearing lanterns which threw the humped masonry into even weirder, tormented relief.

Artugol shuddered. This place felt as though it had poked through from another realm, a world far removed from his own. Shadows shifted within its bleak confines and an alien coldness plucked at his neck and scalp. He almost welcomed a human attack, flesh and blood enemies he could lock swords with. The climb was awkward, and several times men stumbled. Eskarra was undeterred, face drawn in a grim visage of effort. They reached the broken-down temple, where thick trunks bored into it, pushing it to one side, dislodging one of its walls and dragging down much of its elaborate roof.

"What unspeakable gods were worshiped here?" Volnus whispered.

Artugol was about to reply, but saw Eskarra's withering glare, admonishing them to silence. They went under the overhanging arch where once twin massive wooden doors had sealed the

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place. They now hung to one side, moldering and worm-infested, their hideous carvings made even more ghastly by their decay. Inside, lit up by the guttering lanterns, the floor stretched away, oddly smooth and free of detritus, as if freshly swept. Broken columns and collapsed beams cluttered the walls, and starlight gleamed from great gaps in the ceiling, picking out the smashed ruins of two statues, gods long abandoned, headless and forgotten. Long creepers trailed from above like great roots, or weed at the bottom of a lagoon.

Eskarra had her men search the interior, setting two to guard the entrance. It did not take long to establish there was no sign of recent habitation. "We camp here for the night," said Eskarra. "We can defend this place readily enough." Word was sent back to the ship and soon afterwards the remainder of the company came to the temple, leaving a skeleton crew aboard the *Arrow*.

"This is the island of Noomakis," Eskarra told Artugol and Volnus. "Once part of a pirate alliance, it was brought to ruin in a battle with creatures from the deeps. These were destroyed, but they left their curse here, as you can see. Neither man nor monster has returned since."

"You think there are Sea Hag jewels here?" said Artugol.

She nodded. "Dalan said so." She watched as her men pitched their rudimentary camp, checking to see that everything was done to her satisfaction. "In the battle fought here, many of the men who died fell victim to the fog demons. They come from some other realm and, through the power of the jewels, possess those they destroy, sucking the life from them and replacing it, thus taking on physical form. But it is their weakness, for as such, they can be destroyed, cut by steel, or burned."

"Will they attack us?" said Volnus.

She showed her teeth in a wolf's grin. "I hope so. The Sea Hag will send them, and when we dispatch them, their spectral remnants will lead us back to her lair. That jewel you carry will be a beacon to them. She'll want to recover it. So — reveal it. Let the night feel its power."

Volnus almost demurred, fearing what might come upon them from out of the pulsing darkness beyond, yet he knew if he did not obey, Eskarra would likely take the dirk by force and use it herself. Gently he pulled out the leather scabbard and revealed the dirk. Its pommel shone like bright new gold, dazzling. He gripped its haft and raised it like another lantern. Beams of light danced from it, flinging up grotesque shadows around the hall's rim. As one, the men leapt to their feet, weapons drawn, waiting.

Eskarra's grin was almost demonic in that light, transfixing Artugol. "The jungle never sleeps," she said. "And it is wide awake now. Can you hear?"

He gasped. The listless night breeze had become a swirl of sound, a rush of wings, a horribly familiar wind. Presently the two guards at the temple's entrance gave a shout, pointing into the jungle. Something moved down in the pitch darkness. Creatures were climbing up the jagged streets and over the ruins. Man shapes, physical beings, not the demons of the air that Artugol and Volnus were expecting.

"Hah!" laughed Eskarra, brandishing her rapier in eager anticipation. "Just as was promised. They've come for a fight for the blade and the lost jewel within it. Well, you sea rats, let's see what you're made of!"

## CHAPTER SIX: FIENDS FROM THE SEA

**T**HE mingled moonlight, glow from lamps, and Volnus's beaming weapon washed the jungle in garish light, revealing the things that stumbled from the trees, vaguely human, glistening like fat slugs, dripping with salt water. Evidently risen from the ocean, their weed-like hair was plastered to faces and necks, where gills pulsed: their webbed fingers were spatulate and grasping. Their misshapen heads, leached white and rounded with fish-like eyes, bobbed to and fro, like those of aquatic reptiles. Eskarra and her crew stared in horror as they realized the men who had been left behind to secure the *Arrow* were among these oncoming horrors. Their transformations were not yet complete, but already they were morphing into something alien.

First among them was the huge bulk of the oars master, Ormullah, whose mouth opened in a shout as he raved, either against being possessed, or in the drive to force an assault upon Eskarra and the others. She and her men were appalled at having to defend themselves against their changing fellows, desperately avoiding killing them or cutting them down, but what little humanity remained in the former sailors was riven by their transformation, fueled horribly by a dreadful blood-lust as the battle was joined. There was no alternative — former friend or foe, these creatures had to die.

Artugol and Volnus were in the thick of it. Claws groped for the shining dirk that Volnus swept this way and that in cutting swathes, and where it tore into the flesh of the attackers, they blazed and dripped hot, fatty blood. The battle was fierce, but the sea denizens and converted seamen were a poor match for the barbaric energy of the crew, who, spurred on by panic in the face of such monstrous opponents, doubled their usual efforts. Eskarra had chosen them well, for they were as deadly with their blades as any cut-throat wanderers of the sea lanes. The mangled corpses of the sea fiends mounted, many cut to ribbons, others charred to smoldering hulks by the dazzling light from the dirk that Volnus wove so effectively among them. Eskarra's warriors fought back tears of sorrow and utter frustration as they cut down former friends, in some cases men who had once saved their lives.

Artugol shared no such misery and found himself strangely reveling in the fight, his rapier darting before him, swift as a serpent's tongue, ripping into the eyes of the enemy. How many swarmed up from the deeps and the path to the temple was impossible to say, and the *Arrow's* crew was forced inside. They withdrew in a carefully coordinated movement, but ultimately their experience was too much for the wild stumbling of their opponents. As suddenly as it had begun, the insane battle ended. The remainder of the ragged assault died away and the beaten sea creatures slithered or hopped down through the darkness to the waters that had spawned them.

The crew, exhausted, were sullen in victory. Eskarra allowed them a moment of subdued celebration. She studied some of the fallen around her, piled outside the smashed doors of the temple. The look of cold fury on her face made Artugol start. She saw his reaction, lowering her slick blade.

"Some of these were our brothers," she said. "Not just those we left on the *Arrow*. The jewels of the Sea Hag must be here, working their foul sorcery. You see now what our lands face, and why Dalan was so appalled."

Artugol nodded and would have answered, when a cry from among the crewmen alerted him and Eskarra.

"What is it?" said Eskarra

Two of the crew were standing over a victim. It was the unmistakable figure of Ormullah, who had fallen in the skirmish, a deep gash at his side, which he yet struggled to staunch. He gazed up at Eskarra, his eyes wild, tears of blood on his cheeks and in his thick beard. He was fighting whatever monstrous energy sought to bend him to its will. The retreat of the sea creatures had weakened its grip and something of the man remained, its fires yet blazing.

"They overpowered us," he said through bloodied teeth. "They crawl into your flesh and bones —"

Eskarrra bent to him, thrusting a small jar of water at him. He drank thirstily. "We'll have you stitched up yet," she told him.

"It burns!" gasped Ormullah, yet fighting an inner battle. "Yet I'll speak of what I know."

"Rest first," said Eskarra, gripping his shoulder. "I'll not abandon you, old friend."

Ormullah shook his head, spraying more drops of blood. "They use us, but in so doing, we see their minds. I understand things. I can see."

Artugol and Volnus were also kneeling, ready to support the fallen man, whose eyes widened as though something vivid had opened up in the skies, a vision of something beyond them all. Ormullah raised an arm that was already a deathly gray. "Up there!" he gasped. "The path leads to the island's peak."

Eskarrra turned and looked upwards, but there were only the suffocating black banks of jungle and high in the lurid moonlight, a blunted cone. "The volcano," she said. "It has slept for centuries."

"Hollow!" said Ormullah. "It leads far down into the earth."

Artugol and Volnus stared at each other. Was the wounded man suggesting they go up there and — *descend*? Eskarra may have thought the same. Artugol caught the flash of horror on her face. Warriors of the sea were not fond of delving below the earth.

"Why should that concern us?" Volnus asked Ormullah.

"The Sea Hag's lair!" he growled. "I have seen it! Far below the island and out to sea, under deep caves and grottoes. It could never be reached by ocean divers. But up there! There is a way. It will take us to her palace, and the heart of her treasures. The mountain sleeps, its fires gone, its ancient lava solid."

"Rest," Eskarra told him again. "By the first rays of dawn, we'll ascend. What of the *Arrow*? Did those horrors destroy it?"

"No. She rides the waters, neglected but secure. The Sea Hag's vermin assumed they would absorb us all." He laughed in defiance. "I am not done with them."

## CHAPTER SEVEN: FROM THE EARTH'S MOUTH

**A**S dawn broke, Eskarra sent a small party back to the *Arrow*. Ormullah's last words before unconsciousness claimed him were that the sea horrors had subsided once more into the ocean deeps. Eskarra's ship was unmanned and would for now be ignored, its skeleton crew safe from the grim transformation that had been their companions' fate. The Sea Hag, Ormullah warned, would focus all her attention on the raiders

on land. These followed Eskarra through the upper streets of the ruined city and into the jungle. There was a narrow path, almost overgrown, and it was only with Ormullah's insistent guidance that the sea warriors were able to chop through the clinging fronds and ferns that hid it. The sun was high in the east as they broke from the greenery and stepped onto the black loam of the volcano's lower flanks. Steep banks of boulders and scree stretched towards the peak, etched against cloudless, azure skies.

Artugol and Volnus flanked Eskarra, while Ormullah, only partly conscious now, was carried by two of the sturdier seamen. Occasionally he opened his fevered eyes and muttered further instructions, saying there was a way to the lip of the volcano, where the means of descent would await them. His body shook, soaked in sweat, and the pallor of his skin had turned a sickly gray. Even so, his strength had not completely deserted him and he fought desperately against whatever possessed him.

"If the wind rises," he murmured, "be wary. The air demons will be drawn to the jewel. They will try to bend its powers to convert you, but the Druid's power will block them. However, there are other jewels in the volcano, and you will not be so safe from them."

"What does the Sea Hag want?" said Artugol.

Ormullah shuddered. "The jewel you carry. And you — all of you! New warriors to be converted to her massing army. Perhaps she sees in you a fierce potential as fighters. You've shown formidable mettle here."

Eskarrra, her sword gripped tightly, studied the rough terrain. From this height she could see beyond the jungles to the sea. A deep tranquility had settled over the waves and the air remained still, no breeze stirring. "Too perfect," she said.

"What's the plan?" said Artugol. He felt like a rabbit exposed to the claws of eagles, but masked his fears. He had surprised himself in the night's conflict, setting fear aside as he fought, but this deathly silence scratched his nerves. Beside him, Volnus seemed more relaxed, although he carried the dirk with the jewel, and evidently would not release it unless he had his arm cut off.

"If what Ormullah says is right, we go down," said Eskarra. "Does anyone want to go back to the ship? I suspect a small party, sneaking into the Sea Hag's lair, may do better than a noisy company. Speak up! Who is not with me?"

No one said a word.

"What about you two? You've done Dalan's work well. There's no need for you to risk your necks further."

Artugol almost succumbed to the temptation of an easier future, but could not bring himself to step away from the girl and the intensity of her determination. He knew she'd woven a spell over him equally as potent as that of the embedded jewel in the dirk.

Volnus clutched its sheath more tightly. "Dalan meant me to be the carrier of the jewel. I am — linked to its power."

"Very well, let's get moving," said Eskarra, and recommenced the climb.

Artugol looked briefly at his big companion, puzzled by his words, but Volnus looked as stoic and dependable as always. If the jewel was exerting anything more than fascination over him, it did not show.



By mid-afternoon, they had reached the summit. The lip of the volcano's crater was a jagged line of rocks, crumbling and treacherous. Beyond them the inner walls plunged dangerously, dropping hundreds of feet to another rim of stone, giving way to a vast hole, sunk into complete darkness. There were numerous volcanic islands in these seas, most of them smoking, whether gently or with boiling clouds, presaging minor eruptions, when lava spewed forth in great gouts of light and fire. Yet here there was not even a suggestion of smoke.

Ormullah was set down with his back to a blackened rock. He opened tired eyes and gazed down into what seemed an infinity, a night without stars. "That is the way," he said.

"Is there a path?" said Eskarra. "We can't descend these slopes. One slip and we'd plummet into that chasm."

"They'll come," said the oars-master.

Artugol scowled. "He's delirious. And you're right, Eskarra. We can't climb down." He and the others concentrated on searching the crater rim for a clue that might reveal any path, but the scree was unbroken in a perfect circle, slippery as polished glass, with no suggestion of anything to prevent a slide to oblivion.

From behind them, on a higher ridge, a lookout called down. "Clouds approaching!" The panic in the man's voice was clear, and at once everyone had gathered into a defensive formation, swords ready for any attack. Overhead the first wisps of cloud drifted in at speed, followed by an initial thick bank. Artugol knew immediately what it meant. The air demons had found them.

They swooped down like hawks, diving but twisting aside as Volnus held aloft the dirk, thin beams of light scattering from its jewel, drawn by the aerial horrors. These swerved to avoid it, held at bay by whatever sorcery Dalan had locked into the jewel. The bright sunlight dimmed as the massed air creatures created an overhead whirlpool of cloud and shadow, their gaping faces leering through it like ghosts from another realm.

"We cannot stay here!" cried Artugol. "We'll have to fight our way to safer ground."

Eskarri cursed, though she nodded, about to shout instructions when something made her turn. She gasped at what was emerging from the great pit. Artugol and Volnus also gaped, wondering if this was real or a vision triggered by yet more sorcery. It was as if they looked down not into the emptiness of a crater, but to ocean depths, a submarine region where things shifted on invisible tides. Rising from them was a monstrous creature, a rounded dome, trailing thousands of glistening fronds, a protoplasmic mass with the proportions of a whale. Whatever aquatic intelligence powered it appeared to be focused on the group of warriors.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: THE GULF BENEATH THE ISLAND

**S**IMULTANEOUSLY with the huge creature's appearance, there was an abrupt shift in the terrain, as though far down within it something had exploded and torn loose. It caused an immediate slide of rocks, sand and ash, and the entire group tumbled downwards, unable to get a grip or prevent being sucked into the vortex. Artugol's mind reeled, plunged into darkness as though he had been smothered by a dense cloud.

He cried out, but silence also surrounded him. He fell outwards and for long moments drifted like a broken doll in a coldness as if he'd been tossed over the side of a ship, spinning and held by a drifting oceanic current. Something sticky wrapped itself around him, partially crushing him and he felt himself being drawn along, snagged in weed or undersea growths. The darkness intensified.

Gradually his inner eye focused on wafting shapes and gliding forms that moved around like dreams, splitting apart to reveal visions that made him dizzy. He discerned an amazing city, spreading across vast distances, its angular buildings soaring up from the ocean depths, with colossal denizens weaving along impossibly wide streets. Around him in the paradoxical submarine skies, other shapes flapped, some singly, others in massed shoals. He could barely discern Volnus, Eskarra and others of the *Arrow's* crew, spinning gently, floating on this dense current of air, helpless in its whirling course. Slowly they were all sinking down into the fathomless maw of the crater. Bizarrely this was no ocean swell. It was air, somehow thickened, cloying and almost solid, soft as clouds and yet substantial as earth, powered by forces beyond normal understanding, alien sorcery, perhaps.

The darkness eased as, with all sense of time dislocated, Artugol opened his eyes. He was sprawled across a clammy surface. He forced himself to his knees, pulling gelatinous, mucus-like secretions from him in slick strands. Around him, on a gently curved surface, the remainder of his companions also stirred. As they got to their feet, uniformly dazed by their experiences, Artugol saw the curved walls of the crater around them and realized whatever they stood upon was still sinking. Far overhead, the sky receded. A host of smaller shapes floated across, more fish than bird.

Volnus stood groggily beside Artugol, still gripping the dirk. Its light had faded, but he held it poised. Artugol saw the crew had retained their weapons, though as yet they were not under attack.

"That creature," said Volnus. "It gathered us all to it. We descend."

Eskarri was beside them, tensed for any assault. "The work of the Sea Hag. Those aerial demons drove us onto this thing. The air in this crater is almost as thick as the sea. Did you experience visions?"

Volnus shook his head. "Just a blur, vague shapes."

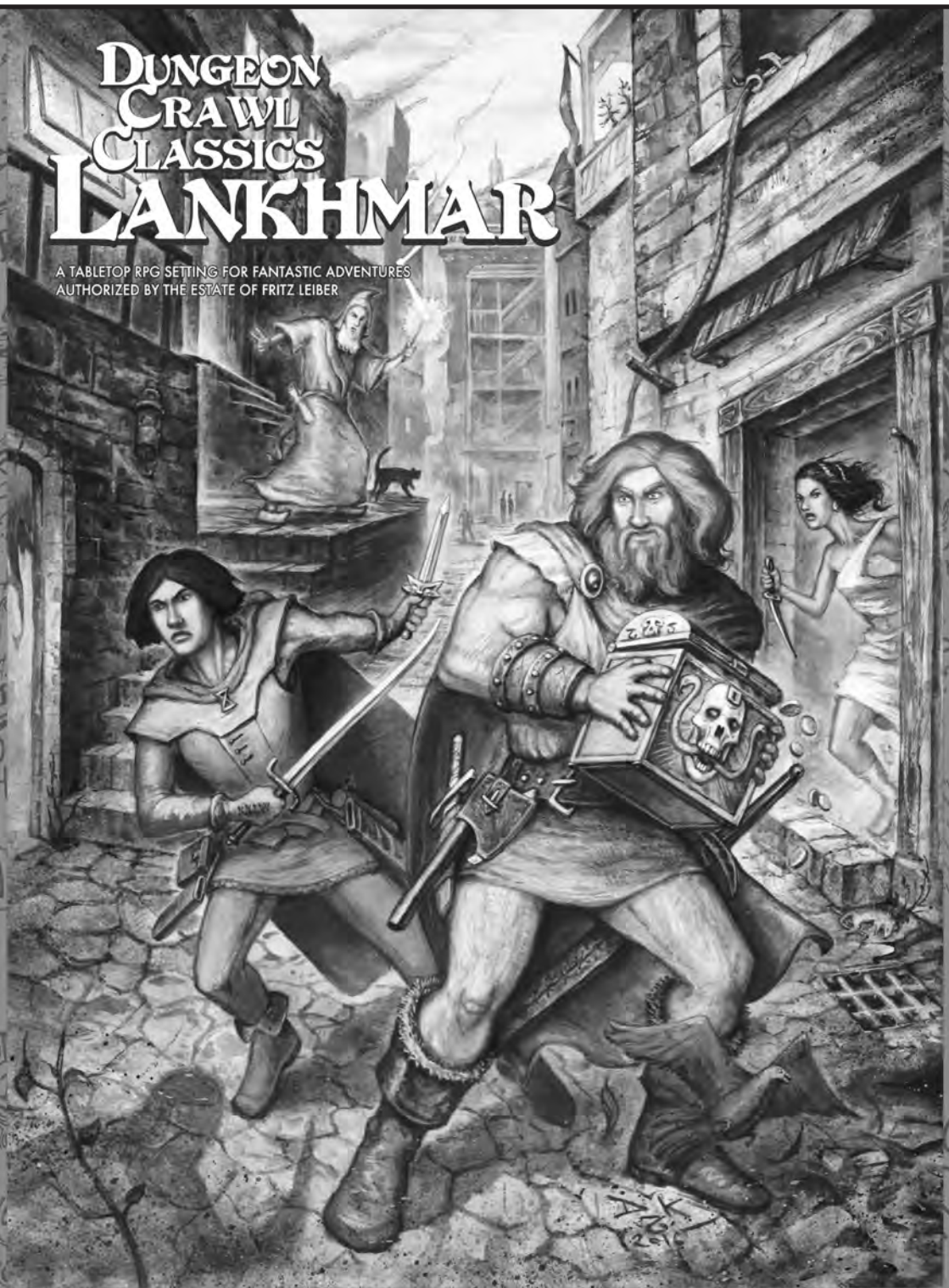
Artugol knew his companion to be less than imaginative than him. "The city?" he said.

"Whoever built it came from another world, spawn of stars beyond any night sky we have seen," Eskarra replied. "I have heard of such legends. Here, time may be ruptured."

Artugol remained dizzy. This was knowledge beyond things he had learned as a stripling among the wilds of his shores. The company could only gaze at the spinning walls as the descent continued for an age. Strange light seeped up from far below, alien to the sunlight of the upper world, an aquamarine glow in which yet more shapes wriggled and squirmed around the falling creature. At last the featureless walls changed, their composition of twisted rocks apparently hewn from the native substrata, unimaginably huge columns, supporting the mass of rock above. The first buildings came into view, and their scale made the travelers reel.

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No earthly creatures could dwell here. No human powers could have carved these monstrous blocks, or set them together. Not all the glorious cities of Atlantis or of all the ages before her could have fitted into this mind-jolting vastness of construction. And yet, there was no sign of habitation within the towers. Such creatures as drifted through windows the size of palaces and along terraces beyond visual assimilation were simple things, like the minor denizens of the oceans known to the Atlanteans.

Ever down into the weird light the great creature sank, dropping between two mountainous banks of carved stone, within whose halls the secrets of eternity were embedded. The creature sank at last to the floor of the crater, gently deflating, spreading wide across the sandy bottom like a thick carpet. Its invisible heart trembled, pulsing softly.

"Come," said Eskarra, impatient to be free of it. She crossed the clinging surface and the company wove between low banks of settled fronds, mindful of their potential to sting, which must surely have brought painful death. Beyond was an opening in the great wall of a building, apparently the only way out. However, the company was wary of being manipulated.

"We've been brought here for a purpose," said Artugol. "We could easily have been destroyed."

Eskarra nodded. She pointed to the opening. "Can you hear anything?"

Two of the seamen went forward and presently called back. "The sea!" one said. "We hear its waves."

"A sea beneath the sea!" said Artugol.

Eskarra wasted no time, leading the company into the opening, a wide chasm within the building that ran in a perfectly straight line through the wall's dimly throbbing light towards the unmistakable sound of waves breaking on a shore. Some distance down the chasm, the walls gave way, opening out on to a pale beach, its pebbles bleached, massed banks of weed tossed up against the edge of the constructions. The inner sea beyond the waves shimmered to a far horizon, lost in pitch darkness. On its turgid waters, close to shore, a single shape waited.

A small, sailing craft, with no sign of a crew.

## CHAPTER NINE: THE POWER OF THE DEEPS

**E**SKARRA gathered the men around her, whispering instructions. "If we allow this craft to bear us across, it will be to the Sea Hag's lair. We'll be caught like rats in a trap. Let's take the ship and find our own way across. Everything depends on surprise."

Moments later they had all waded out and clambered aboard the empty vessel, whose hull was shallow: no enemies were skulking here. The oar banks rested quietly, so the crew sat at the benches and at Eskarra's signal pulled the craft from the shore. It moved swiftly, as if gliding across ice. Once they had left the shore, the rowers turned the craft to a new course parallel with the curving shore, taking advantage of the deep shadows. Overhead the ceiling of this unimaginably vast cavern was lost in darkness, and a low line of surf broke like whispers on the rocks of the sweeping beach. Eskarra stood in the sharp prow, scanning the empty sea, Artugol and Volnus beside her.

They had not traveled far when the first tugging began. Something was beneath the boat's hull, a strong current turning it,

trying to force it, they realized at once, back to its original predetermined course. The rowers put their backs into the work, striving to assert their strength and keep to the plan of a stealthy passage. At first their efforts succeeded, but whatever submarine force gripped them increased, forcing the prow out toward the open sea. Its horizon was distant, obscured, but the waves began to undulate as though a silent wind piled them up. Progress became impossible unless the rowers propelled the craft away from the land.

Volnus again held the dirk high so that light from its single jewel pierced the waters around them. At once he drew back in horror.

"What is it?" said Artugol.

"A sea beast! I saw its eyes, as large as cartwheels! And its many arms grip us."

Eskarra called for a spear and drove it unhesitatingly down in the now churning waters. Three more followed it, the only such weapons they carried, and although something shuddered, causing the boat to veer sideways, it was only momentarily deflected. The waters around it foamed and from them burst a score of quasi-human shapes, mere-beings with extended arms and curved talons, using them like grappling hooks to pull themselves onto the deck.

The sailors dropped oars and took swords to the affray: in moments the clash of steel and claw rang out loud as the first wave of invaders was repulsed. It was, however, impossible to beat back renewed attacks and steer the craft. For a while the ship wallowed in turgid seas as the ferocity of the battle increased, fueled by the sheer numbers of the creatures from the deeps. As the fighting intensified, blood slick on the deck, the ship moved ever more quickly out into the subterranean sea, accelerating as the aquatic monster that impelled it exerted unrelenting power.

Several men were lost before the chaos ended, as suddenly as it had begun. The mere-creatures slid over the side, leaving a score of their dead behind them. Eskarra's crew kicked the corpses overboard, resigned now to the ship's new course. The wounded were tended and fortunately no one was so badly hurt that he could not continue. Fifteen of the company remained, their grim faces set with determination to see this voyage through to its bitter end. Eskarra's mouth was a hard line, her eyes cold as marble, a lava of anger churning inside her.

There was no day or night in this place, just a faint glow from far rocks, possibly the result of sorcery. Time condensed and the ship moved on quickly, covering league after league, until, when almost all of the crew were on sleep's borders, an obscure shoreline pasted itself along the horizon, rising up in a thick, black band, suggesting high cliffs. Cut into them was a small city, a collection of great stone buildings, much like those the company had negotiated originally.

Eventually reaching the narrow harbor fronting this place, the company again saw no life, just partially ruined, decomposing structures, apparently abandoned. There was a quay, with wide ramps leading up to it, but no steps. Whatever dwelt here did not move on human legs. The ship slid on to one ramp, its hull creaking as it ground to a halt.

Eskarra led them ashore, pausing at the quayside, where surprisingly nothing had emerged to meet them. She pointed to a narrow alley leading away into the buildings at one end of the quay. Swiftly they ran, taking shelter within its cold shadows. Artugol watched their rear, but there was still no pursuit.

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"This must be the Sea Hag's lair," said Volnus. "She's somewhere in this citadel."

"Find a way through these streets," said Eskarra. "We must disappear, then study the place without being discovered."

They wound inward like maggots in a vast carcass, climbing upwards along slick passageways that had the feel of drains, not streets. Darkness closed in, but there was enough hint of light to see ahead. They could hear the shifting of large shapes within the engulfing walls, and heard strange susurrations as though water swirled below. They began to feel as though they had, after all, been pursued, but stealthily, and what followed them was itself clinging to secrecy.

Gradually they were rising, moving into a central core. Round- ing a curve, they debouched on to a narrow terrace, creeping into brighter light to peer over its low wall to the circular chamber beyond. This soared upward to a vaulted ceiling, with jet black cylindrical walls dropping to a vast well. Bright phosphorescent light gave this a bizarre, alien look, like the surface of a different world.

From the waters, a wide shape humped upwards, cascades falling from scales and fins alike, and a huge head shook itself, massed tresses of weed-like hair spraying crystal droplets. Two enormous eyes opened, baleful lamps, their gaze hostile and not remotely human.

"The Sea Hag," said Artugol, his breath almost frozen with fear.

## CHAPTER TEN: ACROSS THE VOID OF SPACE

**A**S the small company looked down on the emerging colossus, water pouring from its broad shoulders, they each felt their minds invaded by a deep, commanding voice, opening them to visions as clear as the external world. Gripped by amazing vistas, they could not move, the huge eyes of the Sea Hag pinning them like flies to a board. They gazed upon an alien sky, where countless crimson stars burst like the embers of an interstellar explosion, and beneath which a city of soaring towers groped at the stars, among which shifted the incomprehensible shapes of its denizens. In the coiling shadows, diabolical gods from beyond all human knowledge pulsed with the energies of remote suns.

Artugol watched as numerous creatures poured from the city, flapping skywards on wide, leathery wings, faces burning with a hunger for conquest among the stars. And each face resembled the next, for these were sister beasts, spawn of a single birthing in that blackest of cities. Offspring of some hideous deity, they had been charged with subjugating new worlds, numerous and far-flung. One of them had traversed the gulfs of space and at some point in the dawn of Artugol's world sunk herself deep under its ocean, preparing for her own spawning. In those fathomless grottoes she had found the outlawed Barzangis, the Sea Hag, and occupied the near-dead renegade, a perfect receptacle for her power.

Soon she had sewn the first seeds, the clutches of bright jewels. Where these had hatched, on remote isles, far from Atlantis and other centers of civilization, they had exuded vapors that had poured into their unsuspecting victims, transforming them into aerial demons that Artugol and the others had later seen, as they spread across the ocean realms.

*Creatures of this world, the voice of the Sea Hag told the travelers, you have been tossed and blown by a casual fate, subject to no other plan than simple procreation, the whim of the elements. No longer! Soon my spawn will spread across your world and all its inhabitants will evolve to a new pattern, a rising from the primordial mire in which you wallow, bringing you to the edge of unrealized powers. You will be the fuel which projects me to the fulfillment of my promised godhood and immortality.*

Artugol found his innermost, hidden thoughts probed and exposed, focused by the mental intruder on his family, specifically those he had lost: as a child, two older brothers, killed in wars with the eastern sea raiders, and soon afterwards, his mother in a new childbirth. His life had been a hard one, the people among whom he dwelt often subjected to premature losses or death. This star-born creature seemed to be offering him a haven from that, a new form of life in which he would be absorbed and protected. The voice had become seductive, the possibilities it offered alluring, almost beyond resistance.

A shout beside him snapped him out of the semi-drugged stupor. It was Eskarra, whose own thoughts had been similarly snared. Artugol realized she must have found something within herself to resist, raising her rapier in anger and determination. Volnus, too was coming groggily out of a daze, his stoicism a bastion against this insidious assault on his emotions.

*You will be the first of a new wave of conquest! came the mental voice of the Sea Hag to them all. I have seen how strong you are, a tribute to your nation! I need such warriors to carry my own. You are a fitting choice for the glory awaiting you in the name of the Old Gods. See, my fresh spawning is complete!*

The company as one looked down into the waters boiling around the base of the huge creature, where countless jewels rose up in glittering masses, light as huge bubbles, luminescent and sparkling. Artugol realized there would be as many jewels here as there were grains of sand on the beaches of the continent, more than enough to enslave every man and woman alive. He tore his gaze away from the twin moon eyes of the Sea Hag, who had now risen up on a level with him and his companions.

Volnus had drawn the dagger given him by Dalan. Its embedded jewel, now a rusty color, its light dimmed, seemed a trivial thing, no match for the superhuman powers surging from the waters. Volnus gazed at the faded jewel as if it spoke to him, recalling whispered words of instruction from the Druid. With a sudden shout of realization and glee, Volnus flung the dagger out into the chamber. Both Artugol and Eskarra cried out in alarm, fearing the Sea Hag had commanded this. They watched in horror as the blade spun end over end and struck amidst the jewels.

For long moments nothing happened: the only sound was a sonorous booming of laughter as the Sea Hag lifted her long arms threaded with spines, dripping venom. Her laughter was cut short, however, and those great orbs turned to study her jewel hoard. Where the dagger's jewel had touched those closest to it, they had lost their shine, dimming at once, likewise becoming rust-colored. They burst, the diminishing of bright hues spreading, a virulent plague released, implacable.

The Sea Hag screamed in agony as the waters around her boiled with released poison.

Eskarra leapt up on to the balcony's narrow wall. "Artugol!" she yelled. "The eyes! Take her eyes!"



Volnus would have dragged his impetuous friend back, fearing catastrophe, but Artugol leapt up beside Eskarra, sword poised like the sting of a huge insect. At a nod from her, they both leapt out across the space separating them from the vast face of the Sea Hag. For a fleeting moment that face contorted into something remotely human, a dim memory, perhaps, of the thing that had once been Barzangis. Shutting out a wave of pity, Artugol and Eskarra plunged their blades as one into her eyes, Eskarra to the left and Artugol to the right. The creature screamed like a swarm of banshees, flinging her head this way and that in sheer agony as the fluids of her eyes poured from the ruptures made by the swords. Eskarra and Artugol were tossed aside, each crashing back over the low wall into their dazed companions.

They staggered to their feet, looking over the wall. Already the Sea Hag was sinking back into the water, which fumed and steamed, the jewels turned a dark, lightless shade, the spreading power of Dalan's sorcery within the corrupted jewel having performed its murderous work. As the black waters closed in, the two ruined orbs ran with blood, draining of power and life, the last thing to be sucked under.

### EPILOGUE

**"HOW** did you break that trance?" Artugol asked Eskarra as they re-boarded the ship. There had been no pursuit, and whatever things crawled or slithered through this desolate citadel had returned to their hidden sanctuaries. "I felt myself sinking inevitably into its promises."

Eskarra looked away to the horizon. "Like you, I have lost family. Nothing the Sea Hag offered me could assuage that pain."

Artugol would have said more, but he saw Volnus gently shake his head, as if to say, there will be another time for this.

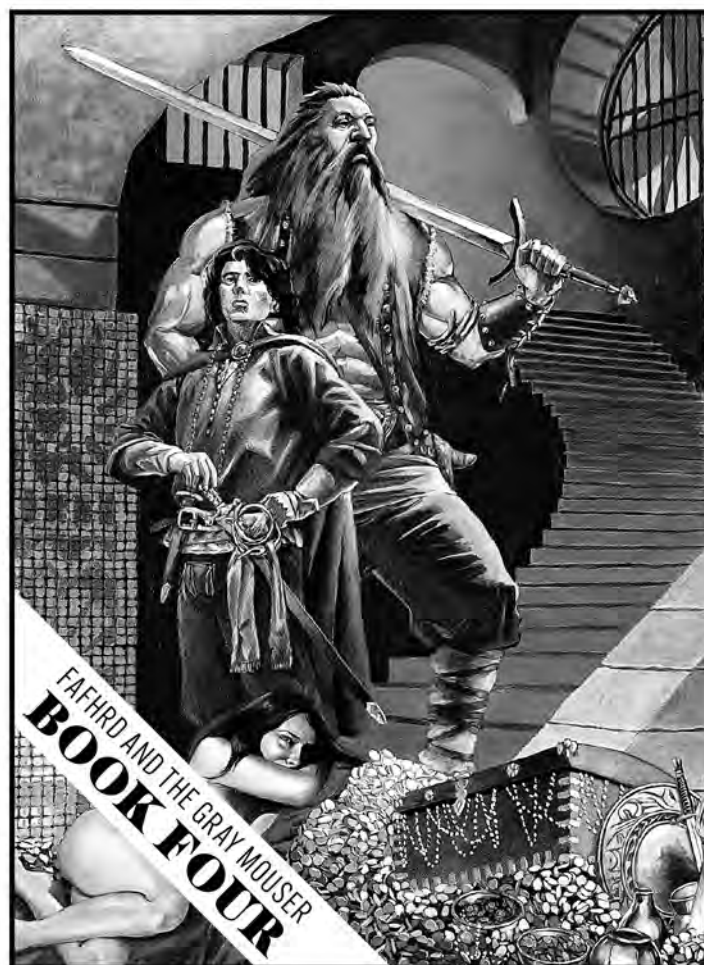
The big man knelt beside the still form of Ornullah. "We've stemmed the flow of his blood. It's clean. Gods willing, he'll rise again to take up his role as oars master."

Eskarra nodded grimly. "Our work has only now begun." Her eyes fell on the two youths, a little of her former ruthlessness gleaming there. "If nothing else, the Sea Hag made men of you."

Artugol gripped the hilt of his blade. The Sea Hag may not have seduced his will, but Eskarra ... well, she he could follow. "So — where next?"

### 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. Recent books include 2 Nick Nightmare collections and *Elak, King of Atlantis* (all from Pulp Hero Press, US) and coming in September 2022, *Arminius, Bane of Eagles*, volume 1 of the *War on Rome* trilogy from DMR Books (US).



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# THE IDOL IN THE WELL

By ALI SHORT

**T**HE battle was won. The crash of spear on shield and the rousing call of the war horn had given way to plaintive moans. The city gates — towers of banded oak and iron — now lay shattered and askew amid the rubble of fallen stones. Ravens spun in the dusky air, riding the stench of spilled offal and pyre-smoke. The time for courage and tactics, the harrowing of the blade, had passed. They had carried the day, but now the day was done.

Prince Adrais rode through the tight streets, closely ringed by his vizier and honor guard, their crimson pennants limp in the dying light.

All about them men thronged in the lawless celebration that must always follow the violent triumph of arms. The free companies, held like hounds at bay during the long siege, vented their passions upon the city. Their wages were paid in sacked spoils and writhing flesh, and the frenzied looting continued apace even as their master passed by.

"Animals," the vizier sneered, his nostrils flaring with disdain. "Mongrels fighting over scraps."

"Let them take their simple pleasures." Adrais removed his sweaty helm and shook out a blond mane. "It costs us nothing."

"And what of yours? The harem awaits." The vizier's long fingers preened like the delicate legs of a spider. "It has been far too long since we have bloodied our own blades."

"We have not come this far, nor fought this hard, for earthly concerns, Master Worm," Adrais laughed. He swung down to the cobbles, and passed the destrier's reins to an attendant.

"Come. Let us shake the pillars of heaven."

• • •

**P**RINCE Adrais and his men-at-arms ducked beneath the worn oak lintel of the abbey and into a dusty courtyard. Shouting warriors leaned out over the high balconies, raining copper and silver down on their laughing fellows below. The watering trough had been upended and filled with wine and liquor. The noxious mix had taken a greater toll on the war band than any of the city's defenders: a dozen mercenaries lay about the courtyard, insensate despite the thunderous carousing.

A handful of warriors clustered about a makeshift table of barrels set in the heart of the courtyard, assigning shares of plunder. The largest of the band, standing a full shoulder above his peers, turned as the prince and his retinue entered.

"Welcome, commander," the giant called. He stilled his comrades with a glance, as hands went to blades. "Forgive the condition of my men. Return in a day or two so we can greet you properly —"

"No need, Captain Corim," Adrais said, his words sharp as a blade. "I come to lay claim."

The courtyard grew silent as the two men faced off.

"This plunder is ours," Corim said, "rightly pledged and fairly won. And too meager by half to merit the attention of a lord like yourself."

The prince surveyed the towering warrior. The mercenary captain was as broad as a bull in his battered breastplate. The armor bore testament to a life of battle, as did the long scar tracing his right cheek and ending at an ashen eye that would never claim sight again.

At the captain's side stood a slender willow of a boy, in oil-black mail and leathers. Scarcely half his master's height, his eyes were no less hard.

Warriors, to be sure. But Adrais had cut down strong men before.

The prince chuckled, and waved one of his soldiers forward. The squire quaked beneath Corim's gaze as he presented a small strongbox.

"Gold," Adrais said with contempt, "for your men. A fair trade for this trifle. Or, if you like, I might simply take what is mine. But I surrender to your whims, captain."

Corim snarled. His men that were still standing were half drunk and exhausted from weeks of grinding battle. By contrast the prince's honor guard were fresh and eager to spill blood. In a back alley or alehouse, he would have given them even odds, but here he would be driving his men to slaughter.

"You are as generous as you are kind, my lord," Corim spat. "We cede god's house."

Adrais smiled broadly.

As Corim and his men collected their gear, the vizier drove a long gray finger toward the moon-faced warrior in the black-oil hauberk. "You, what is your name?"

"Serval." The warrior's voice was almost a whisper.

"It speaks!" The vizier's face twisted in delight. "Serval the Servile. And what is your role in the company?"

Corim stepped between the vizier and the mercenary. "He is our gleaner," the captain answered.

"Of potatoes, cabbage? He picks the fields?"

"A gleaner of men. He scours the battlefield, to insure that downed knights never rise to threaten us again."

"That is a perversion," the prince snapped. Now it was Adrais' turn to snarl. "An affront to tradition, assaulting those above his station."

"We are simple reavers, my prince. We can ill afford the time to ransom noble sons."



"My lord!" the prince's men-at-arms called from the sacked chapel. "We've found something!" Prince Adrais hurried towards the shouts.

"The knave stays," the vizier hissed. "We may have need of his talents."

Corim's eyes narrowed. "If Serval if any of my men stay, I remain."

"As you will, captain," the vizier bowed mockingly before shuffling after the prince.

• • •

**C**ORIM and Serval followed the prince and his retinue into the chapel house. Serval's eyes sought out Corim's but the captain shook his head, and pointed two fingers to the ground, the signal to hold.

The honor guard had sacked the chamber, toppling the heavy altar and hauling back the rug to reveal a door hidden in the floor.

"What is this?" Corim wondered aloud. He had ranged and robbed enough to be wary of priest-secrets.

"These were not the first to worship here," said the vizier. "Chapel-houses and temples are never placed by accident, but always for a purpose."

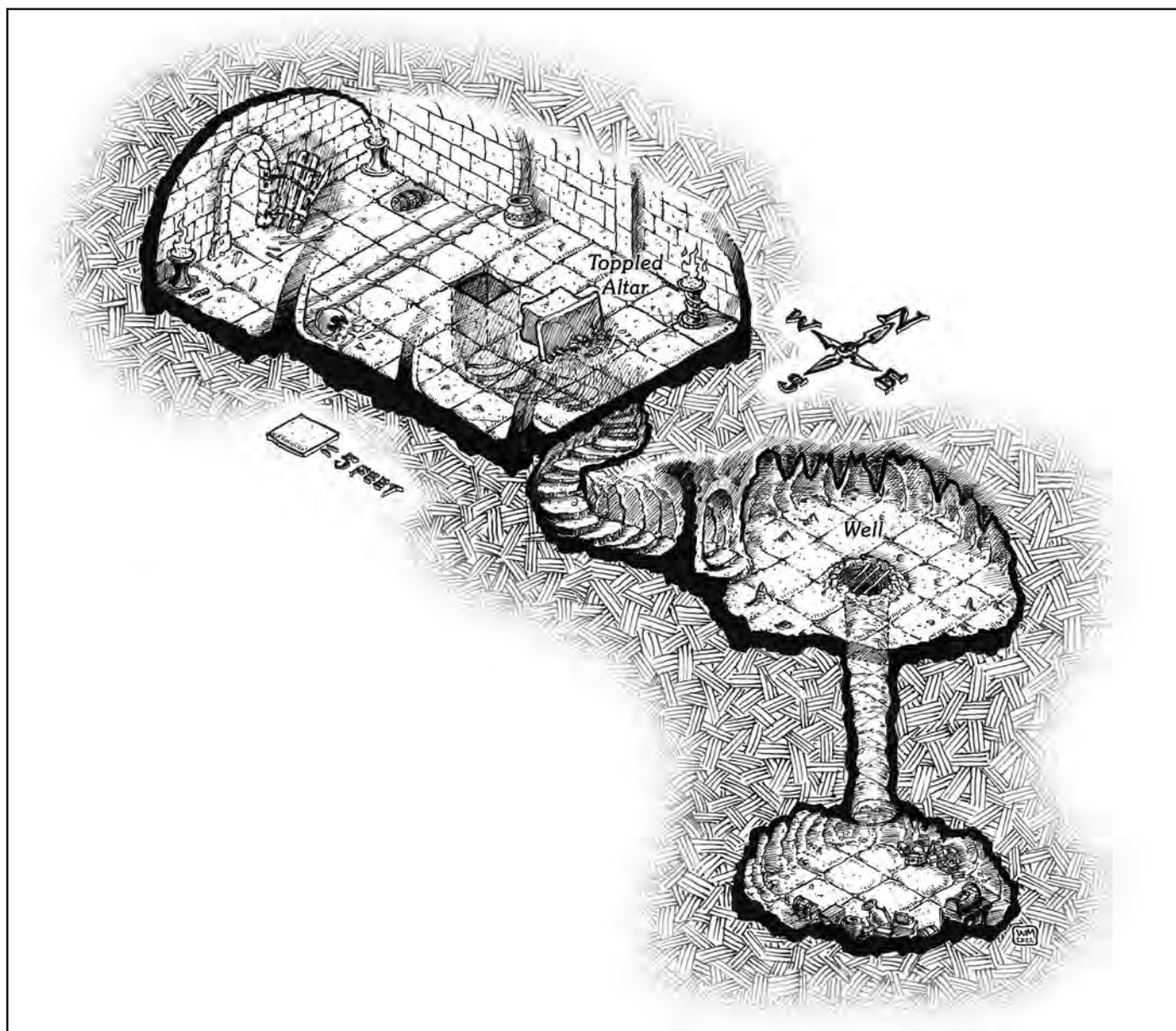
"To stamp out the old ways," Adrais spat. "To lay dead stone pavers over sacred ground. To smother truth, obliterate tradition."

Torches were struck and the prince's red-gilt soldiers shuffled about the steps.

"Mewling lambs build towers in the sky for their false idols. But the First Kings found their deities in the hidden places: in the black forests and high moors; in the wombs of the earth.

"And for the faithful, the old ways persist." Adrais snatched a torch from a man, and impatiently led the band down into the gloom.

Corim descended the slick stone steps cautiously, one hand tracing the worn stone, the other on his greatsword. If they were



ambushed, he would be hard pressed to use the blade as anything other than a heavy club. It was the constant calculus the captain made, and the equation was not in their favor.

Serval, armed with a thin straight blade, was more at ease. The reaver padded lightly down the steps, pausing only to listen and test their air, like a cat.

The stairs led through the foundation of the church, first down cut stone steps, and then into a worked passageway, caked with the soot of a thousand torches, and finally into a rough, natural cave. All his life Corim had played the part of the foreign reaver, but here he felt alien, a man trespassing across time and space.

"Can you feel it?" Adrais demanded. "Can you taste it in the air?"

The prince held the dripping torch to the cave walls, placing his slender hand on the flaking, ochre paintings.

"I have dreamed of this place. She calls to me in my sleep; has driven me a hundred leagues." He inhaled with satisfaction. "Queen to the First Kings. I am coming. Just a little longer."

The passageway opened into a vaulted cavern. Once water would have pooled here, running in cool rivulets down the stalactites. Now the cavern was dry, the formations cracked and dusty, the air itself dead.

In the heart of the gallery a narrow well plunged deeper into darkness. Iron bars had been crudely mortared over the hole, and then set with large stones. As alien as the reavers, their mere presence was a transgression.

Three of the prince's soldiers stood above the crude grate. Working together they slid their spears through the bars and leaned hard against the staves. The grate broke free with a deafening crash that echoed through the gallery. Kneeling over the well the guards pulled aside the cracked mortar. Quickly the work was done, the slender chimney opened.

"Rope! Torches!" the prince commanded. Then with anguish: "The chimney is too small!"

The vizier's long fingers danced toward Serval. "Not for this one. In the hole."

Corim's long blade flashed in the dark as he brought it to bear. The soldiers responded in kind, the sound of blades on scabbards filling the cavern.

"Prince," Corim snarled, facing off with each soldier in turn. "My man's life is his own. Off the field, we are not yours to command —"

Serval silenced Corim with a touch. "I'll go, but then we quit this hateful place."

The vizier clapped with wicked delight.

"Disturb nothing," the prince barked, "but return with the goddess!"

Corim shoved the prince back then helped Serval free of the chainmail. Beneath, the warrior wore a tightly wrapped sarashi, inked with strange runes and blackened with sweat and grime.

"You harbor dissemblers, captain," the vizier said, his eyes fastened on Serval while the others peered into the well.

"We are a free company. Each man's secrets are his own." Corim cinched the rope around Serval's narrow waist, muttering, "Don't make me dig you out of there."

Prince Adrais dropped a lit torch into the well. It spun twice then struck stone in a shower of sparks.

Serval knelt at the edge of the well. It was too narrow to properly stem. Corim stepped forward, brushing the prince's men aside and looped the rope around his waist and corded arms. The giant tested his footing then gave a nod.

Serval slipped straight into the well, dropping a few short feet until the rope caught. Slowly the captain eased the rope through his worn hands, lowering Serval into the gloom.

. . .

**S**ERVAL eased down to the dusty stone floor, and undid the rope around her waist, shaking her head in disbelief.

She had been riding with the free company ever since they had caught her cutting rings off corpses rotting on the battlefield. In the years since the warriors had become like brothers, and Corim, a father. Passing as a page had afforded her the freedom that was even denied to the camp wives. With the free company she had ranged over the course of a dozen campaigns, seen scores of kingdoms and slept under strange stars, and now it all came down to this: trapped in some forgotten treasure hold, bound to the whims of a mad prince.

Serval took up the torch, studying the dripping pitch-flames. The sooty smoke was drawn sharply to her left. There was fresh air, another passage. She had wiggled out of worse as an orphan — but that was before the free company.

Strongboxes laden with dusty gold and silver glowed softly in the light. Glittering rubies and emeralds rested in open coffers, their lids raised as if to invite thieving hands.

But the prince had gold, and was no stranger to jewels. Serval continued her survey of the cave.

At the far reaches chamber was a shadowed corner that even the torchlight refused to penetrate. Serval padded closer. A carved wooden cradle, laden with straw, black with mold. Resting amid the straw was a carven stone idol. The rough statuette depicted a voluptuous woman in repose. Shadows clung to the idol like draped cloth cut from the fabric of night.

Serval reached for the idol and the gloom intensified, even while her torch burned.

*Who shall champion my will?*

Serval drew back, as if bit, and the light returned. The voice was as crisp in her mind as the sound of shattering glass.

Serval took a blade from her boot and sawed free a narrow strip of her sarashi, gently draping it over the idol. Her hand stretched for the idol, eyes straining to discern if the darkness was gathering again, or if it was just a trick of the torchlight. There was no way to be certain other than to try.

Steeling her courage, Serval gently lifted the idol from the straw nest. The torch continued to flicker and spit, and Serval began to breathe again.



Cradling the bundle under her arm, she retreated to the chimney and called up to her captain.

• • •

**C**ORIM'S leathern hands pulled Serval free from the well. The gloom followed after, obscuring the eye like smoke.

Fever-eyed, Adrais scrambled to her side. "Do you have it? Did you fetch it?"

Serval unwrapped the idol and proffered it to the prince.

"Master —" the vizier began, but it was too late. The honor guard surged forward just as the prince's grasping hands snatched the idol from Serval. Shadows flooded the room like ink pouring from the walls, spilling over the floor and washing up to shroud the prince.

Serval scrambled backwards even as Corim cried out, shielding his good eye. She hauled the big man backwards, away from the expanding gloom. All around her the prince's honor guard fell to the ground in pain and terror, and then were still, their lesser minds shattered. The vizier's fate was little better: his screams filled the vault as his dancing fingers dug out his own eyes. Motes of darkness swirled and spun, coalescing into a towering feminine form.

A hard voice, like breaking glass, sounded above the din. "Who shall champion my will?"

The prince fell to his knees, pleading. "Choose me!"

The smoke-black figure swept forward, lightly brushing the prince's forehead with its lips.

Adrais flared with power, rays of darkness searing from every joint in his armor. Back arched, his mouth thrown wide, a ragged, ebon scream tore from his throat. The prince fell to his knees, his chest heaving with every desperate breath.

The being and the pervasive gloom were gone, leaving only the idol and the prince.

Adrais pulled himself up by his sword, his eyes seething black orbs. The prince donned his helm, closing the visor before swiveling towards the captain.

"Do you not adore me, warrior?" the sound of breaking glass escaped the prince's lips. "I am the beauty that you crave and the power you fear. Be my champion, that we might rule together."

Corim roared like a lion, hammering his greatsword down on Adrais. The smaller man easily matched the giant's blows, turning them aside.

Unnoticed, Serval skidded across the floor, booting the idol towards the well. Adrais roared, straining after the idol, but Corim held the prince in place. The idol spun twice, then vanished back into the well.

Black with fury, Adrais spun back on Corim. He caught the captain's wrists in his single fist, and wrenched back his arms until it seemed they must tear free of their sockets. The captain roared in pain, his greatsword clattering to the ground. Adrais smote the captain with his sword, full in the chest.

Corim fell back, clutching at his breastplate.

Adrais knelt and retrieved the captain's greatsword. Corim weakly kicked backwards, but the prince easily kept the pace, raising the greatsword for a final blow.

Corim looked to Serval. She exploded, like a bolt loosed from a crossbow, a blur in the gloom.

The enraged prince roared with guttural delight, and spun towards the reaver, swinging the captain's great blade in a long deadly arc. Serval stumbled, gait faltering, and fell to the greasy stones. The blade passed over her, and she sprang back into a run. The prince's scything blow, ferocious before, now seemed painfully slow, as Adrais struggled to bring it back under control.

Serval pounced, the full force of her small frame catching the prince as he raised his sword for an overhead strike. They toppled backwards, and Serval rode him to the ground, hand on his gorget, knees to his chest. They hit the stones with a crash. The captain's blade was lost, catching the torchlight as it spun away into the rubble. The prince raised his twin mailed fists to crush her to his chest.

Serval struck first — stabbing her long thin blade through the slits in the lord's visor — and bore down with all her weight, punching through flesh and bone, and then grinding into bone once more. She sprang free, a pair of short blades appearing in her hands, but the prince's mailed fists eased to the floor and were still.

Corim stripped free of his dented breastplate and drew a shuddering breath. Serval sat beside him and watched as black mist leaked from the slain prince, siphoning back to the idol far below.

"Another dead prince." Corim worked up the will to spit blood at Adrais' corpse.

"His men will be looking for him."

"It will be days before they are sober enough to even know he is missing." Corim grunted in pain as Serval eased him to his feet. "We'll have quit this place long before then."

"And the idol?"

"Touch nothing. Let sleeping gods lie."

• • •

**T**HE battle was won. The trapdoor had been eased closed, the rug rolled back into place, and the heavy altar set aright. The muffled silence was civilization's veneer, an ashen veil waiting to be torn.

Alone in the dusty and darkness, blood weeping from his ragged eye sockets, the vizier dragged himself over the twisted bodies of the slain honor guard, to the edge of the well.

"I will champion your will."

An answer came from below.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ali Short lives in the shadow of Lonely Mountain with four small but ferocious hellhounds; one towering but gentle frost giant; and a young cambion (at times either ferocious or gentle) with boundless potential.



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ILLUSTRATION BY TOM GALAMBOS



# THE FISHERMAN'S WIFE

By GREGORY L. NORRIS

**O**N the day the fisherman died, his wife Nygea wandered out of their abode, which sat under the vacant stare of the giant statue of the Mourning Woman, and walked along the shore of the Ocean of Sorrows, unaware that she was bewitched. Nygea had sleepwalked before, going back as far as her third year. Now in her twenty-sixth, she treaded the damp sand barely sensing the chill through her soles. She knew the beach well, often combing it for sea grapes, kelp, and shellfish — the colossal, time-eroded statue rising from the stone cliffs at her back, the jetty of black rocks extending far out into the Sorrows ahead. But something was different, and that sense of wrongness walked beside Nygea like an unwelcome second shadow.

*Stop*, her inner voice warned.

The bewitchment controlling her steps exerted its control for several more seconds. Then Nygea spotted the half of a razor clam shell jutting out of the sand directly in her path where the last wave had deposited it, and when she was close, she stepped down. The sharp edge punctured tender flesh. Pain raced up her leg, the jolt freeing her. Nygea gasped and came out of the spell.

Straightening, she turned back in the direction of their home. The fisherman's shack sat nestled among the briars and beach vegetation with the other huts. Above them, the Mourning Woman's stone face gazed out to sea. The statue had been cut from the surrounding stone in a pose with her arms at her sides, those arms suggested from the shoulders but invisible, still encased in rock. One breast hung visibly above the cliff face. She, too, was a fisherman's wife, her eyes always drawn to the ocean, her arms pinned. Centuries and the elements had melted away precise details, but the Mourning Woman had been sculpted with a sad, frantic expression because her fisherman-husband had gone to sea, never to return.

Storm clouds loomed over the statue, their depth past gray, a color almost black. She reached down and pulled the sharp impalement of shell from her sole. More pain flared and blood spattered the wet sand. Nygea had woken and yet the sense of wrongness from the dream persisted at the periphery. When she tried to face it directly, the wrongness played hide-and-seek.

*You've been beguiled*, her inner voice warned.

The wrongness then spoke her name. "*Nygea.*"

She whirled back in the direction of the black rocks. At that instant, the low, briny wind gossiping over the shore died, and she could no longer hear the subdued ebb of the tide, only her own heartbeat as it hammered in her ear.

Nygea walked forward, leaving a trail of bloodied prints in the sand.

**B**EGUILED. The last time she'd given in to the influence of the arcane powers studying her from the shadows they had followed her escape from the Oasis of Thorns in the Far East, after her perilous voyage down the Forbidden River, which ultimately led to the fisherman catching her in his net.

"Who are you?" she hissed beneath her breath.

At first, the beguiler's only answer was a sound that struck Nygea's ear like the last gasp of a drowning victim — wet gurgles, a guttural croak, and then the throaty laughter. She tracked it to a cleft in the barnacle-encrusted black rocks. Peering down into the shadows, Nygea spied nothing more than another black rock, smooth, just above the puddle of stagnant seawater leftover from the last high tide. The air reeked of salt and something of the sea that had died and rotted.

Then the round black rock split in half. The two zigzags parted into a jagged smile, and she understood that the owner of the sinister voice was a Warbleone, the largest of the singing shellfish she'd ever seen.

"Nygea, at last we meet," the thing in the creature said.

Coldness slithered over Nygea's flesh, the chill having little to do with the first drops of an icy rain or the breeze off the ocean, suddenly there once more. She found her voice and demanded, "Tell me your identity!"

"An old friend," the Warbleone said, punctuating the statement with another throaty chuckle.

Nygea considered the thing's words. The oldest, she thought — the apparition that had followed her from the start in the Far Eastern desert and the Oasis, where she'd been promised to the Vizier.

"Yes, you are correct," the Warbleone said, as though reading her mind. "I helped you to escape the palace to the Forbidden River, Nygea. I made it possible for you to travel here safe to the man you took as husband."

She recalled the river, fast moving and angry, the small skiff tipping over, and then falling, falling into darkness. Following the gap in her memory, she was caught in the fisherman's net, struggling for air, and the pressure in her empty chest too great to bear. The urge to inhale — only if she did, her insides would fill with seawater. And then, the glitter of sunlight as he dragged her out of the ocean and onto the deck of his boat, and when he freed her, his face spoke of a kind of miracle; that Pasaros the fisherman was gazing upon the greatest beauty in the world.

He was her age plus ten years, and his life tied to the sea had aged him many times more. Still, her relief at rescue made him equally as magnificent.

"So I know you?" she asked.

• • •



The Warbleone's jagged smile widened. "Yes, from the beginning. Because, Nygea, you are special, fated for future greatness. Which is why I have sent for you."

Rage briefly flickered inside her. Summoned? The very notion cancelled any gratitude over past assistances. "Why?"

"To issue a warning. In the time to follow now, you will be faced with a decision. I view a future in which you will have your revenge against the Vizier, a future that sees you taking power and coming into the full potential of the rare powers you've been blessed with. But only if you forget him and allow fate to unfold."

"Him? You mean Pasaros, my husband?" she asked, her voice hitching with a sob.

"If you go to sea in search of him, you will die, and you will never savor your revenge."

Nygea stared down into the cleft, which drew out into an abyss in the next few, long seconds. A glimpse into the underworld, bottomless in scope, she felt her grip on the barnacles fade. She would spill down, down into the chasm, where unthinkable horrors waited to catch her. But no, those abominations wanted her alive, *here*, to conduct their schemes. Her lightheadedness owed to the suggestion that Pasaros was dead, claimed by the sea that had already stolen so many other fishermen from their wives.

"The oddities you have gathered," the Warbleone said. "I have another for you to add to your collection."

Nygea tightened her grip on the black boulders anchoring her to the beach.

"One more talisman for future use."

The Warbleone opened its jagged smile fully. On the abomination's wet singing muscle, what reminded Nygea of a giant, pink tongue, was a severed hand with six fingers. Even in the rain's gloom, she could tell the hand wasn't human. The fingers each bore one extra knuckle. The nails were coarse, ridged, and ended in sharp points. There was writing inked across the palm in a language of symbols she couldn't decipher.

Revulsion pulsed through Nygea.

"Take it," the voice commanded. "Keep it safe for your return to the Vizier's palace."

Nygea shook her head.

"Take it — I command you!"

She thought of Pasaros and the abyss in the rocks shifted location to her insides.

"Obey me," the horror said. "Do not seek answers at sea!"

Nygea closed her eyes, pinching out the first of what would amount to a deluge of tears. From deep in the abyss inside her, she conjured the powerful words held in reserve from that other life lived far away in the desert.

"*Ana yahd hab!*" she spat — *be gone!*

The thing in the cleft of black rocks shrieked in response. The two halves clamped shut, catching the obscene hand between their jagged edges. The hand flexed its fingers in a display of pain. Nygea's revulsion doubled.

Blood poured from the Warbleone's innards, enough to soak the sand around it. Nygea turned away, fighting the urge to vomit. When she looked again, the thing in the cleft had burrowed deeper and was gone from sight.

• • •

**S**HE paced the small shack that was their home, taking in the details for fear of forgetting them — the crockery they ate from; the curtains she'd sewn from textiles brought back from the Sunlit Archipelago; the bedclothes that smelled of his sweat and their lovemaking. In this place, Pasaros had become a ghost, his image only there between blinks and conjured through her memory.

He was gone, she knew. Even if the abomination from the black rocks hadn't delivered the news, Nygea sensed it in the suffering of her heart. The fisherman had gone to sea and was not coming home.

She ceased pacing and wailed. The walls attempted to contain her sorrow, so Nygea cried out louder, this time with an intensity that carried past the shore and out over the water.

• • •

**P**ASAROS had been a good husband, mindful of her needs and respectful of her wishes. She loved him, yes, but Nygea also supposed that part of her was *in* love with him, and despite the warning issued not to go in search of him, she decided that she would. Pasaros was owed as much.

For hours, she meticulously drew the symbols upon her flesh in henna, following the ancient pattern and suffering the sting of the stylus as it marked her. When the protections were completed, she drew on the black, beaded shawl, her identity as a widow in mourning made clear.

Nygea turned toward the door only to stop. As the rain hammered the roof and the wind howled around the shack, she wandered toward the secret hiding place and drew the decorated reliquary from beneath the loose floorboard. Inside were all the talismans she'd been gifted during past sleepwalking incidents — the pouch filled with ashes, the fat, square ruby gemstone the color of blood, the coil of desiccated serpent skin, and the gray pearl.

Nygea emptied the lacquered box's contents into the pockets of her shawl and sat before the dying fire, aware of the melancholy crackles it made and the moan of the wind. At dawn, the fire had eaten itself down to embers. Steeling herself, she walked out of the shack, knowing she would never again enter, her life there over.

• • •

**S**HE approached the line of wooden planks stretching over the water. The largest of the boats owned by fishermen in the upper echelon were already gone to sea. Pasaros had been offered a place on such craft, which accommodated up to ten rowers, but he'd claimed he liked his independence and the solitude of operating on his own authority.

Nygea cast a look out at the gray water, which stretched on to the very edge of existence, and shuddered. A thousand men were no match for the sea, let alone one.

She wandered along the wooden pathways, convinced the rickety foot bridges over the sea would collapse beneath her slender weight, until she reached a small boat lolling on the ebb

tide waves. A man was curled asleep inside the skiff's confines. Nygea nudged him with her toe. At first, the man didn't respond. She pressed harder. He jolted up, and she caught the noxious stink of alcohol on an exhale laced with expletives.

"What do you want?" the man slurred.

"To hire your boat."

The man snorted. "No one commands my boat but me!"

"Very well. Then I wish to hire you to take me through the Ocean of Sorrows."

The fisherman rolled his eyes and came more out of his stupor. He focused on her, and Nygea studied him in return. He was a young, strong man growing older than his years because of the ocean and drink.

"You're Pasaros' wife," he said.

"Nygea Nadal," she said.

The man shifted. The boat rocked. The knot of worry in Nygea's belly kicked like a pregnancy. Such a small boat, it would become even smaller for two. The Warbleone's warning screamed through her mind.

"Why would you need me, Pasaros' wife?"

"My husband has not returned and I'm worried for his safety. Take me to sea — to where he would have gone to fish — and I will reward you."

The young fisherman laughed. "In Warbleone shells and sea grapes?"

"No, with this."

She reached into her pocket and located the perfectly round gray pearl, aware of its coldness beneath her fingertips and one other sensation, a crackle of energy upon contact, as though something inside it was trying to get out. Of course it was more than only what it seemed. For now, it was her means to booking passage to search for Pasaros.

The young fisherman made old by the sea studied Nygea's offering. "Is this some kind of trick? A lure?"

Nygea tensed, suddenly aware of the henna marks on her hands.

"They say that you are *Magissa*," he spat. "Is that true? Are you a witch?"

"I am a wife seeking to find her missing husband," she answered in a voice not much louder than a whisper.

He turned his back to her, his feet and legs balanced perfectly as he relieved himself over the edge of the boat and into the water. "Pasaros was a good man," he said. Finishing, he swiveled to face her. "Very well. I'll take you to the ocean, though mostly for him."

She started to put away the gray pearl. He took it from her.

"In payment," he said. "Come aboard, Nygea, wife of Pasaros."

• • •

**S**HE studied him as he rowed away from the harbor and out through open water. Handsome, yes, in a way her husband likely was at a similar age. A man who would find a wife, and at first their life together would know a measure of happiness. But the younger fisherman whose name was Eamon had already turned sour and any joy with him was cursed to be brief. Nygea envisioned him selling the pearl and wasting the small fortune on drink.

The cold, gray day engulfed them. At one point, Nygea tipped a glance behind. The land looked as far away as the moon. She could still see the statue of the Mourning Woman, and the greatest sense of despair she'd known since the Oasis in that other life before Pasaros washed over her. She was the Mourning Woman now. Her husband had traveled this very course far from their home and alone. Oh, how she suffered in his memory.

*This is where he went on so many days*, she thought.

Nygea reached for the extra set of oars. "Show me."

Eamon ceased rowing. "You wish to learn?"

"I want to experience my husband's journey."

He sat her properly. She took the oars, dipped their paddles into the water, and rowed. Within minutes, she was exhausted but kept rowing out through the wide expanse where the larger boats lolled and other fishermen had dropped their nets.

Eamon rowed up to a big, wooden fishing vessel with room for ten men to handle oars.

"Pasaros' wife," Eamon called up to the deck. "Her husband hasn't returned."

One of the men said he'd seen Pasaros head west. Eamon's expression darkened.

"Why?" Nygea asked.

"No one ever goes west of here unless the fish aren't schooling."

"What's west?"

He didn't answer.

"Go west," she said.

Eamon fixed her with a look. "No."

"I've paid you."

"Not enough."

"Go to the west or I will swim there on my own!"

Only after Nygea stood, rocking the boat, did Eamon capitulate.

"You must be *Magissa* to get me to agree to such madness," he spat.

Neither of them spoke again after that, not until they'd traveled far west and came into view of the island.

It rose above the water, its barren crags extended upward like massive skeleton fingers. As they neared, the rest surfaced from the surrounding mist. Banks of fog obscured most of the island's other details. Nygea made out sparse vegetation and what appeared to be a high waterfall cascading down from the crags.

Even from the distance, she sensed the island's malevolence. Also that it was where her husband had gone in search of fish.

"That place," she said.

Eamon regarded the island with a darting glance. "You know of it?"

She shook her head. "No, other than that it's our destination. That's where Pasaros went."

Eamon ceased rowing. "No. No one ever goes there."

"Explain."

"It is a place of death. A realm of gods — but no gods who smile on us. Dark gods. Gods that sup on human marrow and suffering."

"That is where you will take me," Nygea said.

"No."

"Then take me as close as you dare and I will swim the rest of the way to shore."



They rowed in silence. The island loomed over them, and in its shadow Nygea sensed the presence of something sinister. Dark gods? She couldn't accept that yet as fact despite her knowledge gleaned through sleepwalking and the waking world, only that she sensed whatever inhabited the island was more than mere superstition. She felt it not in her flesh but a deeper layer — her soul.

Why had Pasaros come to this place?

"The fishing of late has been sparse," Eamon said, as though guessing her question. "Desperation sometimes drives men to places they normally wouldn't go."

Pasaros desperate? She hadn't noticed that more than usual and wondered if she was sleepwalking intentionally as well as under the influence of things lurking in shadows. Perhaps she hadn't been the best possible wife, which Pasaros deserved.

For another moment, Nygea entertained the possibility that he wasn't dead and would return to her, presenting an opportunity to make up for her failings. But then Eamon sighted the boat or what remained of it, submerged ahead of them, its prow alone jutting above the waves like a drowning man's nose, and she knew her husband was gone.

"Is that his boat?" Eamon asked.

Ice filled Nygea's insides. "Yes. And thank you, Eamon."

Nygea stood and dove into the sea. In the long seconds that followed, she was aware of the ocean's warmth but also its strange coldness, and of the large, slow moving fish schooled off the island's rocky shoreline. Also of the skiff at her back which, after a while, turned and headed once more in the direction from which they came.

• • •

**T**HE boat, her husband's, had sunk in a shallow basin. Holding her breath, Nygea plunged under the surface. The boat was still mostly intact. What remained of Pasaros' nets was coiled around the hull like caul. But no body marked this spot as a grave. Fighting the weight of her clothes, she swam ashore and pulled herself onto the tide-smoothed rocks.

The sounds of the island were few — waves slapping stony coastline, the muted hiss of the waterfall as it spilled down from an incredible height, the low breeze. But missing from the island was birdsong or the chatter of animals. Nygea stood, her eyes taking in her surroundings. Apart from her and the green, the expanse appeared lifeless.

She invoked her husband's name. "*Pasaros.*" And then Nygea shouted it, her voice echoing across the rocky beach and out to sea, up above her head, and all the way to the stone crags.

The terrible stillness that followed was brief. A lone voice answered, one deep and inhuman that carried over the island like thunder. Fresh coldness crawled over Nygea's flesh and deeper, into her blood. A shadow cut through the gray day, engulfing her. Nygea looked up and saw its source an instant before it grabbed hold of her, ripping her off her feet and into the air. She didn't think the winged creature was a god or even close to that title. But the horror holding onto her, its claws digging into her muscle, was responsible for her husband's death and, she understood, would be the cause of her own.

• • •

**T**HE exquisite pain blanked out much of Nygea's terror, and for that she was grateful. One moment she was on the ground; the next, she found herself looking down at the tops of the few trees and the beach. Soon, the ocean spread out for untold distances, for she was level with the tallest of the cursed island's crags.

The creature flexed its talons, and Nygea screamed. Before she blacked out, she identified her and her husband's killer — gray, leather-skinned, the reticulated wings of a giant bat, the diamond-shaped tip of its tail, and its fanged, lizard's face were that of a wyvern.

Blood flowed, too much for her to possibly survive. The voice from the Warbleone had been correct in forecasting her death. The wyvern had killed Pasaros, she now knew for certain. As the winged monster soared over the waterfall and into its lair among the crags, her hatred for it intensified, far more than that she harbored for the Vizier, enough to keep her conscious and breathing.

The wyvern maneuvered her through clefts in the rocks to a shelter beneath an overhang of stalactites. Below, the waterfall roared, its ferocity near deafening. The wyvern retracted its claws and Nygea shrieked, the pain white-hot, beyond bearable. She hit the stony ground hard, all the air knocked from her chest.

"I warned you," the voice from the beach said.

In a crumpled, bloodied heap, what remained of Nygea couldn't tell if the voice was real or if she'd imagined it.

"But there is a way. The talismans I gave you."

From the bleary cut of her eye, Nygea saw the wyvern approach. It made a grab at her thigh with its fanged lizard's mouth. Fresh agony exploded over her as it ripped and nipped off flesh. She whirled, intending to raise her hands and the protections drawn into them. One limb refused to cooperate, and she saw why. The arm hung limply at her side, tendons severed by wyvern talons. However, the lone strike worked. The wyvern moved back, gobbling down the chunk of meat torn from her thigh. It hissed, postured. The victory would be short-lived, only time for Nygea to take in her surroundings.

In the gray light oozing in from the lair's entrance, she made out the stone circle and what it contained. Three smaller horrors snapped at the air, their throats extended for supplication. The cries from the hungry young wyvern sent the parent scrambling again toward her, and as it charged, Nygea smelled the charnel odor of decay and saw the remains of skeletons already picked clean, scattered beyond the nest. Some of those bones were Pasaros'.

She drew down her hand and reached into the shawl's pocket. The fabric, soaked through with ocean and congealing blood, attempted to bind her wrist. But as the wyvern grabbed at her, the fat ruby seemed to jump into Nygea's palm. Red light pulsed through the cavern. The wyvern turned back. The young lizards shrieked. The reprieve was enough for the ruby to melt in her grasp and the blood it contained to fill her and patch her wounds.

The arm that was nearly severed reattached, the new flesh red and glistening. Nygea's pain shorted out. She scrambled her

reanimated hand into her pocket. The roll of desiccated serpent skin leapt into her grasp. She tossed it before her. The skin uncoiled, releasing a dusty, desert smell.

The wyvern caught the talisman in its jaws and shook it. The skin swelled, life or an illusion of it coming back to the ancient relic. What the wyvern held between its teeth was tail. The serpent's head snapped around, its hooded face in full display. The serpent spit venom. The wyvern screamed and tossed the serpent aside. It landed in the nest and struck at the young.

In the chaos that ensued, with the parent wyvern scrambling to defend its offspring, Nygea removed her final weapon from concealment. She opened the pouch and dumped its contents on the lair's bloodied floor. The damp ashes spilled out along with fragments of bone. A ruby to heal wounds. A serpent to distract a powerful enemy. What rose from the sanguine ground was a protector.

"I told you not to come here," the thing from the ashes said in Pasaros' voice as it stood and took shape. "I had great plans for you. You would have taken revenge against the hated Vizier. Now, you must begin again."

Inhuman, the thing had four arms. The hands all clasped sabers. Through her misery at its choice to punish her in her husband's voice, she saw that each hand boasted six fingers, the nails ridged and ending in points. In another second, her defender would be whole enough to slay the wyvern. Once that was done, Nygea would heal but she would belong to it and to whatever dark fate it planned for her.

"He was my husband," she spat.

Then, jumping up, she tore one of the sabers from the demon's multitude of cinder hands, turned toward the wyvern, which was stomping the serpent flat, raised her weapon, and charged.

She struck with enough force to drive the saber's blade into the soft meat of the wyvern's throat. The creature expelled a strangled cry, toppled backward taking her with it and, together, they spilled out of the cavern and into the waterfall below.

Her last conscious thought was a prayer to whatever celestial deity was listening, that she would be reunited with her husband, the fisherman, in the afterlife.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before the pandemic, Gregory L. Norris would often spend days at a local coffee shop writing and only speaking German in order to appear mysterious. Raised on a healthy diet of creature double features and classic SF TV, Norris writes for national magazines, fiction anthologies, novels, and the occasional episode for TV and Film. He once worked as a screenwriter on two episodes of Paramount's *Star Trek: Voyager* and has had two feature films optioned by a Hollywood production company. Norris writes the Gerry Anderson's Into Infinity novels for Anderson Entertainment in the U.K. based upon the classic NBC made-for-TV movie, which he watched as an eleven-year-old in the enchanted cottage where he grew up. His M/M time travel paranormal romance, *Ex Marks the Spot*, was released by Woodhall Press in September. Follow his literary adventures on Facebook and at [www.gregorylnorris.blogspot.com](http://www.gregorylnorris.blogspot.com).

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ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON



# THE BRONZE HELM

By KEN LIZZI

**S**PRING traditionally commences the campaign season, with the weather beginning to warm. Warm is relative. I'm accustomed to a more southerly clime. This far north, the spring wasn't much better than a Plenum winter. And the rain hadn't eased significantly since the change of season. The condotta's bivouac, beyond the walls of our employer's castello, was a mire bedecked with mud-splattered canvas tents. While placing some time and distance between myself and certain concerns back home in Plenum, I shared one such overcrowded shelter with three other mercenaries.

At least, I *had* shared. That arrangement might have come to an end. A punctured goatskin of wine had become a point of contention between myself and my three, large Northern tent mates. I'd promised recompense, but my ready funds were insufficient to cover the debt, my purse sagging as empty and flaccid as the goatskin.

I left my arquebus in the tent, not wishing to subject the mechanisms to the rain and damp. I deemed it wise to take along the remainder of the tools of my trade; the time of my return — if ever — remained in doubt. Unless I could somehow scrounge up the requisite coin, I might well find myself taking an unauthorized leave of absence. The rapier hung from a baldric over my shoulder. The main gauche — the parrying dagger with its comfortably broad, hand-covering guard — rode on my right hip. And the broad, sturdy cinquedeia that I preferred if forced to wade into a battle rested at the small of my back, horizontally.

Before I belted and slung the weapons, I briefly debated whether or not to shrug into the padded leather garment that served me as armor. It provided little enough protection in the sort of affray I'd likely face in this campaign. I was still working on wheedling a breastplate and helmet from the condotta's armorer. I concluded that the leather jack was better than nothing, placing something between my skin and the edge of a blade. And, perhaps more importantly, it provided protection that standard steel plate could not: defense against demons.

Some time back, in my more customary role of paid bravo in the city of Plenum, I'd had occasion to scavenge the shattered remnants of a metallic egg fashioned from some hermetic material used to imprison a demon. Under the theory that, if it could keep a demon in, it could keep one out, I'd shaped and flattened the fragments of the strange metal and fitted them into pockets sewn into my leather "armor." It has proved effective. I've pondered, over the years, why the magi of the Collegium do not have this otherworldly, dull gray metal fashioned into armor of a more conventional nature. It took me longer than it should have to divine the answer. Our lords and masters in the Collegium are our lords and masters precisely because they can conjure and

command demons. If the rest of us, the ungifted masses, could furnish ourselves with protection against the more overt, blunt threat to life and limb that demons represent, then the power of the Collegium would diminish. Thus, so far as I know, I'm the only one possessed of armor that can — at least in certain vital spots — withstand a war demon's claws and teeth.

I can't say I approve of the appearance of the armor. My ham-fisted modifications turned a handsome, functional garment into something lumpy and inelegant. I've found, however, that an artfully draped cloak can mitigate the worst of it.

I was glad of the cloak — as well as of my wide brimmed hat — as I slogged away from the tent. The pigeon feather in the hat band drooped in the incessant drizzle, and a chill wind knifed through cloak, jack, and doublet. I directed my booted steps through glutinous mud toward the castello for no other reason than that the walls might shield me from the wind and allow me to scheme in relative comfort.

The extent of the grounds impressed me. As did the castello itself: a fretted, two-story rectangular box set within a triangle of towers, all constructed of contrasting bands of basalt and dolomite. Beautiful, in its way, though insufficient to impress someone inured to the glories of Plenum, used to seeing the ruins of the Ancients, the grand palazzos climbing the Sabatine hill, and the dazzling edifices of the Collegium. Primarily from the outside, admittedly.

The expanse of open space inside the walls could have allowed for all manner of structures. The Prefect had, however, elected to keep it relatively empty, except for a few modest outbuildings. And except for one notable object. As if of their own volition, my feet carried me that way.

Several dozen yards from the entry, tucked into a corner where a guard tower swelled out from the south wall, squatted what appeared to be a massive helmet; a swelling, visored helm, a relic of the type of armor worn a century or two ago. If intended for use, it must have been made for a giant. As I neared, it became clear that the helm was as tall as I. Upon closer examination it appeared to be made of bronze. Perhaps, then, a sculpture of some sort, I guessed, watching drops bead and drip from the eye slit.

"Like the statue, do you lad?"

I turned toward the speaker. A man with a shovel and bucket — both items bearing clear, aromatic evidence of their utility in clearing the grounds of horse dung — sauntered my way. Here was a man content with — or resigned to — his lot and in no particular hurry. He looked to be in his declining years, lined of face and thin of hair, his clothing — a linen smock and woolen trousers, topped with a long coat of ochre-dyed fustian — patched and grubby, yet fundamentally sound.



"Like it? Well, it is unusual," I said. "Hardly in keeping with the classical tradition."

The man snorted. "That's Tranta for you, son. Goes its own way."

"So, tell me, what is this helm supposed to be? Some representation of family history?"

"Some would have you believe that," the man said. He leaned on his shovel, apparently glad of a chance for a break, though he did not appear to have been exerting himself. "If you ask most in the Prefecture, you'll hear that the helmet is a symbol that the Prefect is descended from giants. Some of the fools even believe it."

"Not you, though," I said.

The man spat. "Nonsense. I've lived too long to be that credulous. Long enough, in fact, that I know the truth, from my father. The helmet and the story only go back two or three generations."

"I'm listening," I said.

"The grandfather — or great grandfather — of the current prefect wanted a piece of monumental statuary. Why, I don't know. I'd make up something, if I were telling this properly over a flagon of wine. Don't matter, though. The point is, he had a new magus, sent up by the Collegium, and asked him to conjure up a demon to do the work."

I nodded. The Collegium dispatched a magus to most of the polities of the Faithful, of whatever political makeup. The hierarchical status of the magus sent was tied to the perceived importance of the polity. A minor prefecture like Tranta might warrant, say, a mere catucheman, while a major mercantile city-state might demand a primate, or even a red hat. The local ruler gained the skills and knowledge of the magus, as well as the implied sanction of the Collegium, while the Collegium collected local intelligence and maintained its supremacy and authority. Everyone won.

"Problem was, the new magus wasn't up to the task. Conjured up the demon all right, even got it started on the job." Here the horse shit shoveler paused to nod at the helm. "But after that, he lost control. Couldn't get the demon to finish up. Couldn't dismiss it either. He went back to Plenum in disgrace."

"Couldn't the Collegium have just sent up a more experienced magus to correct the situation?"

"I reckon so. Thing is, the people of Tranta are stiff-necked. No Prefect of Tranta has offered a magus a position in his household since. That's a point of pride to some. Others think it makes us backward; behind the times and out of touch, if you get my meaning."

A new voice joined our conversation. "I see someone who is behind in his work and won't find me backward in correcting his malingering."

I shifted my head to take in the new speaker: Tall, erect, and self-possessed, with bristling black eyebrows above an aquiline nose. I had to give credit to his tailor, though the style would appear outdated on the streets in Plenum. A crimson half-cloak offered the black doublet with its oversized shoulder rolls some protection from the rain, though the knee-breeches and hose were suffering a gradual soaking. An extravagance of gold-thread livened up the somber black of his clothing. He wore no sword, though thick bands of gold adorned the steel of hilt and

pommel of the rondel dagger at his hip. This was clearly a man of wealth and power.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," the man with the shovel and bucket said. He bobbed an obeisance and made to get on with his business with more alacrity than his age suggested possible. He banged the shovel against the bucket, knocking the bucket from his grasp and spilling its steaming contents upon the flagstones. He dropped to his knees, scooping frantically. I couldn't blame him for being nonplussed, caught by the Lord Prefect, spilling prefecture secrets to a stranger.

"Calm yourself, Giovan," the Prefect said. "I am not angry with you. You've divulged nothing vital. And, if I am not mistaken, this man here is in my employ."

"Cesar, arquebusier, fourth squadron," I said, sweeping off my hat. "At your service, my lord." A touch of politeness seldom hurts. And if you later need to employ insolence, the shock of the change in manner from obsequious to contumacious renders it that much more effective.

"The services of your condotta are welcome. And expensive," the Prefect said. "I am Alonz of Tranta, hereditary prefect." He switched his attention to the shit shoveler, dismissing him with a grace and good humor that elevated him in my eyes somewhat above the position to which I inwardly assign prefects, aediles, and other assorted picayune administrators.

"My apologies, arquebusier Cesar, if my retainer soiled your boots," the Prefect said, his face impassive.

I checked. My boots, cuffed fashionably at mid-thigh, remained free of horse dung, though woefully caked with the mud of the encampment. He'd made me look. Another point for Prefect Alonz.

"Is the story true, my lord" I asked, for something to say, and gestured at the gargantuan helm.

"In essentials, yes."

"So Tranta is without a magus," I said. Whatever the local significance of that fact, of more interest to me it meant that the condotta was without the support a magus could provide. That was unsettling information.

"I keep up the family tradition, yes. Though —" and here the Prefect of Tranta relaxed his posture and scratched at the trim goatee on his chin — "I cannot help but feel it would be a comfort to have the Collegium, upon its own initiative, dispatch to us an adept, or even a deacon. That demon, summoned by my great-grandfather's inadequate magus, is still resident in the bowels of the castello, never having been properly dismissed. It would be a relief to have it gone. Once that was done, I'd feel as if I could break from tradition without any loss of face and Tranta could rejoin the modern world. However, I cannot send to the Collegium without it being seen as an affront to my fathers. You see my problem."

I nodded. "You'd like a demon removed, but family tradition won't let you beg the Collegium for the favor. You're hoping to get rid of the pesky thing some other way."

"Somewhat inelegantly put. Accurate enough, however. I would, in fact, pay a tidy sum for the task."

I perked up. "Precisely how much makes a sum tidy? If I like the figure, then I'm your man. You can consider this eyesore gone." I reached out and rapped my gloved knuckles against the brazen helm. It rang dully, sonorously.

Alonz lifted his impressively thick brows. Then he stated a number. It was, indeed, tidy.

"Why would you get rid of it? Adds charm and character, a great bit of local color."

Another voice added to our conversation.

"Cesar, allow me to introduce Severin, the envoy from Vitenza, nobly attempting to prevent our prefectures' dispute from requiring resolution by force of arms."

The envoy gazed at me coolly. He stood nearly as tall as Alonz, possessed of the slender, fencer's build that by rights I ought to have, given my chosen profession. He wore powder blue and silver, and bore a rapier at his side. His gray eyes suggested a touch of the north in his ancestry. Despite my fastidious attire, his long-limbed elegance contrasted markedly with my squat, thick-muscled stevedore's frame. I disliked him at once, primarily since his intrusion endangered my procurement of lucrative employment. I hadn't yet sealed the bargain with the Prefect.

After that single look, Severin appeared to dismiss me as beneath his notice. "Shall we resume negotiations tonight?" he asked, then left upon receiving Alonz's assent.

"Pompous blatherskite," Alonz muttered at Severin's retreating back. "Well, Cesar, consider yourself engaged. I'll let the staff know that you are authorized in the castello. I suggest you begin by searching the chapel. The demon has been known to make an appearance there. Without a resident magus, I'm afraid we've rather neglected the place, so I apologize in advance for any cobwebs you may encounter."

I nodded, already beginning to regret my impulsive offer. I needed an immediate re-inflation of my empty purse, true. But tackling a demon single-handed was foolhardy even by my standards. Having done so in the past, I, of all people, ought to know better.

On the other hand, I did owe a debt — payable in the morning — to a trio of grumpy northern mercenaries with whom I shared a tent. The balance of unpleasantness weighed in favor of doing the job now and getting it over with.

No more dithering. I turned my steps toward the castello, searching for the chapel.

I found the chapel on the east side of the castello. It appeared to be a later addition, a rectangular box of red brick with a clay-tiled roof angling down to the modest ground floor entrance. It was grander inside. The manner in which the ceiling rose toward the altarpiece at the back wall, where chapel met castello, created an illusion of spaciousness. The interior brick walls were faced with creamy marble, veined with green. Probably a rather nice chapel, when not neglected. No lamps or candles flickered within. Only the open door and two high windows in the north and south walls provided any illumination, and that only the half-light of the overcast, sodden day.

After allowing my eyes to adjust to the gloom, I entered. The conditions were not as woeful as Alonz had hinted. Some beadle or sacristan attended to the place often enough that my boots did not kick up a layer of dust, nor did I need to brush aside cobwebs. Still, it clearly had not seen regular use in recent memory. The fraught, foreboding atmosphere of cemeteries and the deserted, ruined fanes of the Ancients suffused the room, seeming to increase in intensity the farther in I went. An eerie place, the chapel.

I reached the elevated altar, eyes darting left and right for any sign of the demon's presence. I saw nothing. I found only the back wall and a door into the castello. I tried the door, discovering it to be locked or barred from the other side. Turning, I faced back the way I'd come. The light from the front door now seemed to flood the chapel. I actually squinted and glanced down to avoid what struck my eyes as an intolerable glare. As I did, I noted that the altar appeared a trifle askew, not set on the dais at precisely right angles to the back wall.

I crouched and examined the base of the altar. It was indeed askew. I could make out a mark in the floor showing where the altar sat when properly oriented. Someone, or some demon, had shifted the blocky rectangle of the altar: an artistic piece in glossy hardwoods and rosy-hued marble slabs. I set a shoulder against the edge of the altar and applied pressure. With only the slightest of grating sounds and minimal resistance, the altar shifted farther, swiveling on a concealed pivot. Below, I could see the top of a stairway dropping down into darkness.

Darkness. I did not intend to grope through some nighted, subterranean passage until I blundered into the waiting arms of a demon. Alonz had said he would alert the staff that I was authorized to roam the castello. It was time to take advantage of my privileges.

I left the chapel, circled around the castello, and announced myself to the first menial I met. Borrowing a lantern required but a few moments. Getting its reservoir topped with oil and the wick lit required an absurdly longer period of heel-drumming and finger-tapping, due to some abstruse law governing the interaction of logistics, people, perceived urgency, and time.

At length I returned to the chapel and the gaping entrance to the mystery beneath. A stairway cut neatly from the bedrock led to a tunnel floor I could just make out at the limit of my lamp-light. Cursing easily punctured wineskins, I began my descent. I noted, as my head crossed the floor level of the chapel, the gleaming metal of the concealed pivot; both the shaft connected to the corner of the altar and the socket sunk into the stone floor appeared formed of solid bronze.

The temperature dropped, seemingly in concert with each step downward. The chill of the grave. A squared off tunnel commenced at the bottom of the stairway, a geometrically precise hallway of naked stone as neat as an architect's ruled lines on paper. I held the lantern high in my left hand and off to one side as I traversed the passageway.

After perhaps fifty strides, an opening yawned to my right. The tunnel seemed to have intersected a natural cavern here. Throwing the light of my lantern within, I could see an irregular, low-roofed chamber containing heaps of rock and soil, dozens of individual mounds. I guessed the tunneler had taken advantage of this space to deposit all the material removed to form the tunnel. What I didn't see was any sign of a demon. I presumed the demon had dug the tunnel, though I could not be sure. It might have been the work of an earlier prefect of Tranta; some hidden escape route, the passage to a treasure vault, or even a secret underground reservoir intended for emergency use during a siege. But it had probably been demon-work.



Seeing nothing therein, I moved on down the tunnel. After only a few steps, I heard a throat-clearing behind me.

"I'm afraid that is as far as I can let you proceed," the Vitenzan envoy, Severin, said. "At least you'll have this convenient, pre-dug grave. A more vast tomb than you'd otherwise merit, I dare say."

A metallic click and a flickering cone of light accompanied these words. I turned about to see the envoy setting down a lantern, the hood of which he'd apparently just lifted. I crouched to set my lantern down as well, keeping my eyes on the envoy as I did so.

"You proceed directly to threats on my life," I said. "Don't you find that more than a trifle undiplomatic for an envoy?"

"I would indeed, if I were treating with anyone of importance, rather than disposing of mercenary scum much as I would scrape dung from my bootheel." Severin smiled as he spoke, as if his words were a joke between friends rather than a calculated insult. Then he let the smile vanish. "Of course, in all honesty, I'm not really here to treat with Alonz in good faith. Vitenza has no interest in a negotiated peace. I'm merely stalling for time while we hire a second condotta."

Severin drew his rapier, the motion casual. He glanced at it, as if surprised to see it there. I shrugged and drew mine.

"What does this have to do with mercenary scum like me?" I asked, matching Severin's disinterested tone.

The envoy placed his left hand behind his back, then tugged free the main gauche he'd sheathed there.

"Unless I miss my guess, Alonz has finally decided to do something about the family demon. I can't have that," Severin said. He planted his right foot, extended his left leg behind, and began rocking back and forth, loosening his muscles. "Should Tranta overcome its intransigence and accept a magus from the Collegium, Vitenza would lose its tactical advantage in the coming campaign. I'm sure I need not explain to a sellsword how useful a war demon is on the battlefield."

I tried not to shudder as memories of exactly that flitted about the back of my mind. I dismissed the unpleasant thought and instead drew my own main gauche.

"I'll try to leave your face unmarked," I said, "as a courtesy to such of your family as might wish to view your body."

The envoy grinned. His eyes sparkled in the lantern light. Then he launched himself at me in a ferociously explosive fleche. His hips and back scraped the right wall of the tunnel as he passed, rapier point darting at my left side and main gauche parrying the cross-body thrust I aimed at his hip. I deflected his rapier with my main gauche, steel ringing from the wide-bellied guard. The tip of his blade scored a shallow furrow through the leather of my jack, leaving the skin beneath unscathed.

I pivoted on my heel, then took a few steps back to regain the center point between the two lanterns. Severin carried on into shadows before slowing, turning around, and returning to our subterranean piste. He raised his sword in salute. I responded. It was not a statement of respect so much as an unconscious gesture drilled into me over endless hours in the salle training with my fencing master, Domenico.

Severin advanced cautiously, his approach more conventional this time. I extended my rapier, crossing blades, and applying tension to test his response. His sword yielded to pressure, so I attempted a sudden glissade, scraping my rapier down the length

of his and forcing it aside before a thrust in octave. The envoy skipped back parrying the thrust with his dagger. His slashing riposte surprised me. I leapt back in turn, catching the blow ringingly on the forte of my dagger.

By unspoken consent, we reset for another passage. I eyed my opponent with a wary respect. He was good. Somewhat unconventional, without the predictability of the purely academic fencer. That suited me. My earliest martial academy was the gutters of Plenum. Fighting dirty was not second nature with me, but first.

I let him press me back, guarding myself from his lashing thrusts and the occasional lunge. I answered with the barest minimum of ripostes necessary to keep him from mounting some elaborate gambit. It was exacting work; he nearly caught me a time or two. The light dimmed as I passed out of the area illumined by both lanterns, our flickering steel catching only the beams of the envoy's lantern.

I continued to give ground. Once even with the lantern, I dropped to a crouch. I slipped the blade of my parrying dagger through the handle of the lantern. I snapped up from the crouch, flinging the lantern from the blade at Severin's face. He was fast, his reflexes sharper than most men I've faced. His rapier moved instinctively, parrying away the missile. In tierce, I believe. But I wasn't paying close attention to his defense. I followed the lantern with a deep lunge. Occupied with the lantern, Severin failed to employ his main gauche in time. My thrust caught him below the sternum and exited at the base of his skull.

His blades dropped from suddenly nerveless hands. His body followed. I stood, letting the weight of the corpse free my rapier. The envoy had failed to stop me. Yet he had served as an agent of delay. With a demon still to face, perhaps he still might succeed in his ultimate purpose. But he'd never know.

I wiped my rapier clean, then sheathed both weapons before retrieving my lantern. The tunnel continued on, regular and unvarying. I followed along for another minute, beginning to wonder if the oil reservoir would hold out.

The hallway took a sharp turn to the left. I peered around the corner. At the limit of my light, I could make out the dark rectangle of an opening, as if the tunnel ended at a doorway. I could see nothing else, but thought I heard a metallic clang. Then another.

I crept along the tunnel, which now began to warm with each step. The opening grew more distinct. I was unable to make out much beyond the opening from this distance other than an impression of space. The sounds grew louder. Worried that the light would announce my presence, I set the lantern down, then continued as noiselessly as possible to the doorway.

Beyond the doorway yawned a cavern. To my uneducated eye, it appeared of natural origin, but seemed to have been excavated to provide additional room: certain of the walls showed tool marks and looked entirely too regular to be natural. The floor had been leveled and sat several feet below the level of the tunnel. A short stone stairway linked the two.

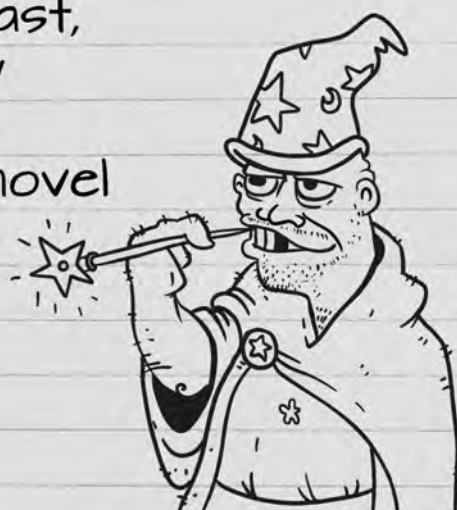
All this was illuminated not by the feeble light of my lantern — that in truth reached little farther than the foot of the stairs — but by the bright, golden refulgence of a blazing furnace standing off-center toward the right of the cavern. A massive stone crucible hung suspended above the red-hot fire. Ingots and irregular metallic chunks formed a pyramid near the fire. Forms

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# SO I'M WRITING A NOVEL...

is a  
behind-the-scenes podcast,  
following the journey  
of writing  
a SWORD & SORCERY novel  
from earliest ideas  
all the way through  
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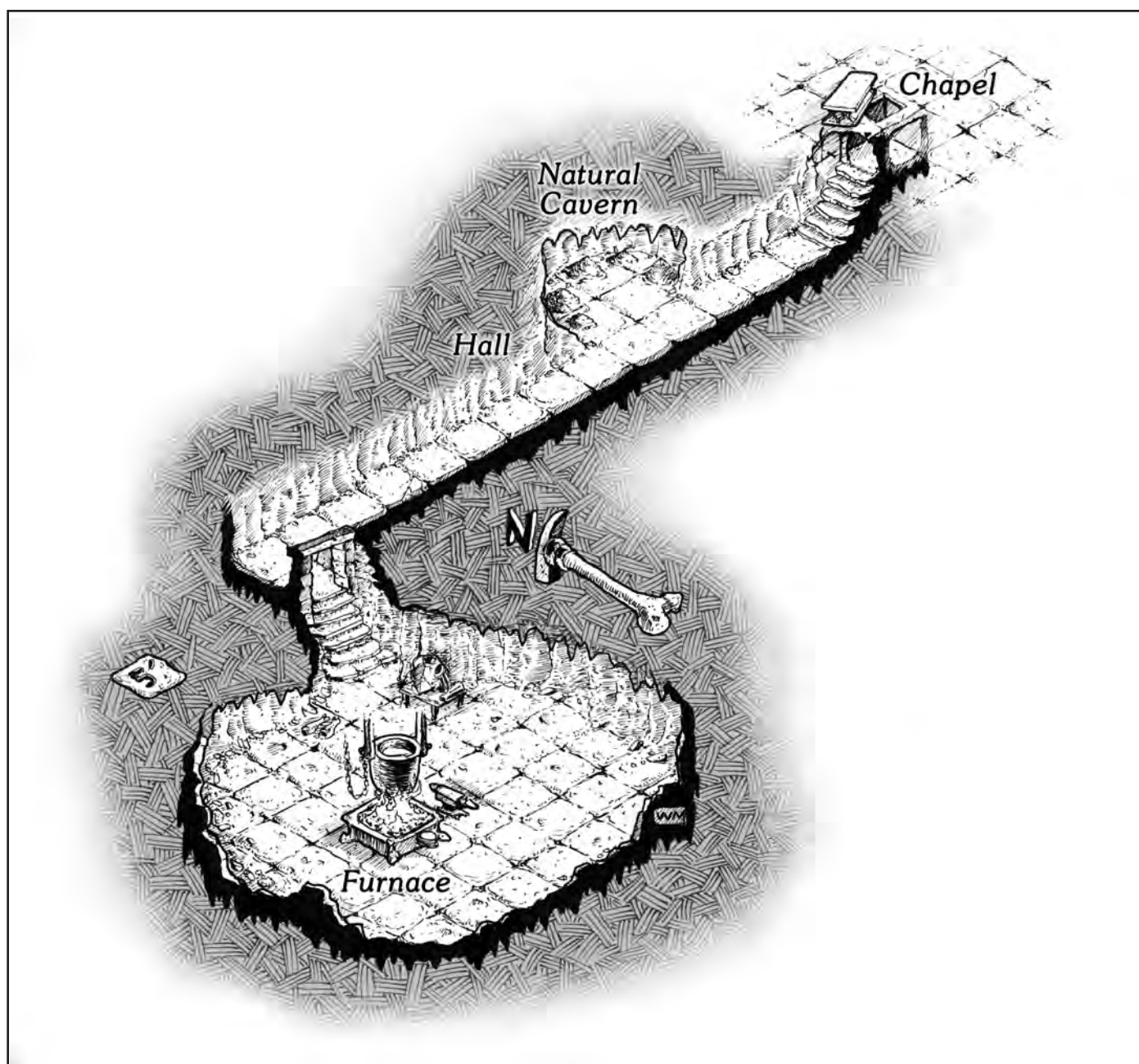
and molds, long-handled dippers, presses and clamps covered a work table on the opposite side. Before the furnace, hammering a block of glowing bronze upon an anvil, stood the demon, its back to me. It appeared squat, though that was illusory. I figured it for about seven-feet tall. Its breadth of shoulder and the thickness of its prodigious, inhuman musculature seemed to diminish its height. I was not fooled. Demons come in a myriad of forms, and few of those forms mimic human proportions. Nothing more than a thick apron and a tool belt covered the demon's mottled red and yellow scales. I figured the apron served more as a convenient place to store additional tools than as any sort of protection. The demon's hide likely provided all the protection against sparks and heat that it truly required.

At widely spaced intervals against the walls of the cavern rested sections of completed work. Here a lower leg, encased in a greave, there an arm, complete with vambrace, rerebrace, and pauldron. All intricate, masterfully detailed casting, sculpting,

and bronze-smithing on a heroic scale. Perhaps two-thirds of the work was complete. The demon remained true to its task. I wondered if the demon had actually finished the statue before, perhaps multiple times, merely to melt it down and begin again, unable to return to the demon world until dismissed, compelled again and again to sculpt the grand figure it was summoned to create.

If it couldn't be dismissed, the only other way to send it home was to destroy it. That is, to cause so much damage to its physical form that it could no longer sustain itself and must involuntarily disincorporate, returning to the demon world. As far as I know, I couldn't actually destroy it in any permanent, mortal sense.

Could I damage it enough? My rapier would prove a poor tool against that scaled hide. Even if a solid thrust could penetrate it, I'd merely annoy it. I kept the blade honed to a fine edge. But the rapier simply wasn't weighted properly to allow me to hack



deeply enough into the demon's body to cause a catastrophic injury. The cinquedea sheathed at my back might do. I'd had some luck with it against demons in the past. But I doubted I could count on more than a single blow, if that. I needed an advantage, some equalizer, or at least some temporarily distracting edge.

I gave the hellish atelier another close examination. An idea began to form, as the demon continued forming the bronze upon the anvil. I fixed in my memory the contents of the cavern and their positions. Then I slipped quietly away and retrieved my lantern. Once beyond any remote chance of being overheard, I trotted through the tunnel, toward the chapel.

The rain had let up. Cloud breaks allowed a few shafts of sunlight to pierce through, brightening my path from the castello back to the condotta's encampment. After a brief stop at the tent to fetch my arquebus and offer a few words of assurance to my tent mates, I made for the magazine. Within that thick-walled dugout powder, shot, coils of slow match, a pair of cumbersome siege guns on limbers, and several score of stone cannon balls were stored at a respectful distance from the mercenaries' tents.

Alonz's authority did not extend to the condotta, and thus I could not rely upon his remit to requisition supplies for my mission. Instead, I relied upon the old soldier's standby: I lied. I pointed to the glimpse of blue sky and told the quartermaster and the pair of halberd-armed guards that I wished to take advantage of the weather window to practice loading and firing the arquebus.

Whether impressed by my zeal, utterly unconcerned whether or not I was stealing powder and shot to sell to the camp followers, or simply wanting to get back to his tankard of mulled ale out of the wind, the quartermaster swallowed my story. I returned to the castello, loaded down not only with my cumbersome firelock, but also a powder horn (and the half-dozen more I'd snatched when the quartermaster turned his back), a cloth bag of leaden balls, and a coil of slowmatch.

The envoy's body remained where I'd left it. The sounds of the demon beating out a brass section of its colossal statue welcomed me back to its infernal workshop. I got to work as well, as quietly as I could, but with the din and clatter of hammer on metal, my fear of being overheard was minimal. Opening the lantern, I set the end of the slow match aglow and clamped it in the serpentine of the loaded arquebus. Then I peered into the cavern.

The demon held a curved plate of brass in a pair of tongs, reheating it over the furnace. Its attention remained fixed. I waited, however, until the metal had reached a temperature high enough to satisfy the demon and it resumed its tapping and banging. I wanted the din to mask any inadvertent noise I might make.

I took a steadying breath. Taking on a demon single-handedly tries the nerves. If I lived through the event, I intended to buy a cask of wine. I might even share it with the other three arquebusiers in my tent once I'd drunk my fill.

I crept down the stairs. The temperature soared as I neared the cavern floor. Sweat instantly began soaking my shirt and hose. The earth had been carefully scraped and pounded smooth, creating an exactly level surface for the artisan to do its work. The monumental sections of the statue rested against the walls, providing concealment and shadows as I slipped along the wall to my right.

That brought me closer to the furnace and the demon than I'd ideally prefer. But my target lay that direction rather than more comfortably off to the left. Moving from shadow to shadow, casting frequent glances at the back of the demon in hopes that it wouldn't turn and notice me, I worked my way toward a towering section of the statue's torso: a swelling breastplate and backplate resting upon faulds and tassets. I couldn't help but admire the detailing of the piece, each over-sized curving band, every enormous rivet exactly detailed. Close up, I could see the hollow between breast and back plate, but there was less space therein than had the demon truly been fabricating a gargantuan set of armor. It had used substantial quantities of bronze in the casting of the piece, the exterior finished with a jeweler's precision, but the interior left unfinished, the inside of the mass of bronze forming the breastplate a mere hand's-breadth from the inside of the backplate. Something this weight would require several men equipped with pulleys and tackle to shift, though doubtless the demon had moved it without assistance.

With enforced patience, I pried the cap from my powder horn, then wedged the powder horn between the section of statue and the rough stone wall of the cavern, placing the mouth of the horn in a concavity of the backplate, and lodging the pointed end securely against a rough section of stone wall. Then I repeated the action with all but one of the remaining powder horns, taking pains to ensure a snug fit. A protruding irregularity of the cavern wall prevented my placing the last powder horn. I emptied the cloth bag of arquebus balls, then refilled it with the powder from the final horn. Before I stuffed this firmly into position, I punctured a hole in it and ran a trickle of powder down a runnel in the cavern wall, linking each horn to the granular trail leading all the way to the floor.

I considered the slowmatch, still gradually eating itself in the serpentine of the arquebus. In addition to fearing that the demon would glance behind itself, I'd been constantly worried that the heavy gun would slip from where I'd leaned it and bang against wall, statue, and floor as it fell. But the ungainly length of iron and wood remained in position. I retrieved it, reviewing my plan. The slowmatch could serve as a fuse, if I removed it from the serpentine and placed it on the ground, resting the far end in the spill of powder. The timing, however, concerned me. I doubted I could rely upon the steady burn rate of the slow match and compliant behavior from the demon to combine for split-second accuracy. I'd have to employ a more direct expedient.

There was nothing more to do. Unless I meant to give this over as a stupid idea and make a run for it, it was time to act.

The demon slipped the hammer into a loop on its belt. It picked up the bronze sheet, which as it turned, I recognized as part of a gorget. As the demon continued to turn, it couldn't help but notice me the instant it raised its eyes from inspecting its handiwork.

I stepped away from the statue torso and off to the right, bringing the thick butt of the arquebus to my shoulder and leaning into it. The demon raised its head, clearly focused on me now. I slipped my fingers around the long trigger lever, pointed the barrel at the demon, and squeezed my hand. The powder flashed, bright and sharp, adding the tang of burnt gunpowder to an atmosphere already redolent of fire and hot metal. A moment later



the arquebus barked, slamming the butt against my shoulder and sending the heavy ball tumbling toward the demon.

The bronze sheet in the demon's hands deformed and leapt free from its grip, a hole punched through the metal. The demon jerked back and sideways. And then it straightened up to face me, its eyes blazing, its thin lips pulled back to expose a serrated rank of fangs. I saw no evidence the arquebus shot had inflicted any damage, other than perhaps a slight discoloration on a single, reptilian scale. Whether the bronze plate had slowed the bullet enough that it no longer possessed sufficient force to penetrate the demon's hide or whether the demonic integument was of such thickness that the bullet would not have punctured it anyway, I'd never know.

The demon emitted a guttural growl. It shuffled toward me, picking up speed. I wanted very much to turn and flee, get to the tunnel and run for my life. Instead, I let it approach. Closer. Then a little closer. I saw more clearly than I ever wanted to the thick, yellow, gnarled claws like aged, filth-encrusted ivory, at the ends of the demon's powerful hands. Claws and hands that were moments away from rending and tearing me to shreds.

Close enough. I turned on my heel, brushing past the breast-and-backplate sculpture. As I passed, I leaned down, setting the glowing end of the slowmatch against the terminus of the trail of powder where it trickled into a ragged fan on the glossily smooth floor. The powder ignited, hissing and snapping as it climbed the trail toward the open powder horns.

I wanted to run. But I needed to keep the demon close on my heels, ensuring it passed before the massive hunk of sculpted bronze. So I fled as sedately as possible, feeling as if the hot breath of the demon was stirring the hairs on the back of my neck.

A narrowly spaced sequence of explosions was followed by the squeal of metal on stone. I spun about to watch the colossal section of statuary topple. The demon's thick neck swiveled as it sensed the danger. Its legs propelled it forward, trying to escape the falling mass. It failed. The bronze struck the demon, a monstrous hammer blow forcing it to the ground.

But the statue did not strike the demon in the head. Neither did the statue crush the demon's chest. The creature's desperate lunge slipped its upper half out of the way, and instead of being smashed beneath a ton of nearly solid bronze, it was pinned at the hips and legs.

And I'd spun about too soon. Too near. A massive fist wrapped about one of my ankles and yanked. The arquebus fell from my hand as I was jerked from my feet. I hopped, staggered, and managed to keep from falling, though I could not fight the arm pulling me inexorably toward the gnashing, snarling mouth. Despite the trauma caused by the battering its lower half had endured, the demon still retained the strength and vitality necessary to pull me toward my doom.

The demon hauled me within reach of its other hand. Clawed fingers slashed at my throat, raking through the tough leather of the jack, the stiff collar of which reached to my jawline. I felt a burning pain as the tips of those ragged, yellow nails gashed through the skin. But none of the bone-hard edges cut through to my carotid or jugular veins, stopped short by the unearthly strips of demon-proof metal sewn within the collar.

The shock of the pain nearly served to freeze me in place. But I'd been through too many close scrapes in the past. Instead, I took advantage of the demon's following moment of hesitancy, the creature either surprised that I remained alive or experiencing some other unpleasant sensation upon contact with the protective metal. I reached behind me, grasped the hilt of the cinquedeia, and tugged it free of the sheath that belted it horizontally at the small of my back. The short blade, not much longer than the distance from my elbow to my fingertips, tapered from a wide base to a gleaming point: a fat-bottomed triangle, strong enough to punch through armor or hack an arm clean off at the shoulder.

The hand on my ankle let go, reaching up for another hold. I shifted my stance, not to get out of the way, but to set my feet. As the arm groped for a grip on my belt, I raised the cinquedeia overhead. The demon's fingers found purchase in my belt, tightened. As I felt the tug hauling me down, toward its gnashing fangs and toward the open, cupped hand readied for another blow, I slashed down, letting the demon's own strength add to the force of the strike.

The edge of the cinquedeia met the demon's neck. The resistance I felt was akin to that encountered hacking into a thick tree branch. I hammered the blade in deep, cleaving halfway through the demon's neck. The fingers at my belt relaxed their grip. A weird soughing noise came from the demon, partially from the half-severed neck, partially from the slack mouth. I could almost imagine the sound was a sigh of relief.

The damage I'd inflicted, it seemed, was too much to allow the demon to sustain its form in our world. It dissolved into a red-tinged mist, redolent of sulfur and cinnamon. And then it was gone.

I won't say it left behind no trace. Its presence was indelibly marked by the grand sections of brass statue lining the cavern walls. An artist's legacy.

I sagged, my legs temporarily incapable of holding me upright. I twisted to lean against the toppled bronze torso and breathed deeply. I'd done it. Commission complete. I had a fat purse of soldi to collect. And I anticipated consuming an inordinate quantity of wine. Yes, I'd share with my tent mates. The money and the wine would assuage any ill-will. In fact, given what I knew of soldiers, this incident could initiate a relationship close to brotherhood by the end of this campaigning season. Assuming we lived that long.

But what then? Then, back to Plenum. Enough hiding. I couldn't live as had the prefects of Tranta, perpetually putting off dealing with a problem, unwilling to take the steps necessary to get on with life beyond circumscribed limits, bound by a combination of fear and pride.

No. Once I'd fulfilled my contract with the condotta, Cesar the Bravo would return to Plenum.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Lizzi is a writer of two-fisted fabulism, a collector of antique weaponry, and a homebrewer. He supports these pastimes working as an attorney. You can find him maundering on about trivialities at [www.kenlizzi.net](http://www.kenlizzi.net).

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# LAST TO BE IMMOLATED

**THE SKULL HAS DECREED THAT HIS MOST DEDICATED FANS BE INSCRIBED IN THE ROLLS OF THE LAST TO BE IMMOLATED. THE SKULL COMMITS TO CHECKING THIS LIST WHEN YOUR TIME FOR IMMOLATION COMES – SO SAYETH THE SKULL!**

Adam "Grotonomus the Gruesome" Grotjohn, Bret Hammitt, Brett Boles, Brick Rockbeef, C. S. Turns, Charles Helm, Chris LaVallee, Christian Lindke, Christopher Hill, @csmithere, David J. Anderson, David Lars Chamberlain, Dennis V. Stanley, Derek R. Boudreaux, Doug Ellis, Douglas A. Rist, Elder Spawn Root, Ernie "Duke of Tanelorn" Batten, Gary McBride, Impact! Miniatures, James Candalino, Jeff Scifert, Jim "paxoniseki" Cox — 591st minion of the First Revelation of His Most Fearsome and Immobile Visage, Jim Dovey, Jim Kitchen, John H. Brown, Kevin A. Swartz MD, Mark A. Woolsey, Masterarcanist, Patrick Garwood, Paul y cod asyn Jarman, Richard Paladino, Rob Cater, Robert J. Hansen, S. E. Lindberg, Scott Bowlus, Scott Oden, Sean Poynter, Tanglebones, The Naris Lords, Thorin "Son ov Thrain" Thompson, and YorkusRex

## STORY PROBLEMS WITH THE THE SKULL

1.  $x$  : the total number of manuscripts

$x/10$  : the number of manuscripts for first intern

$x/10 + 12$  : the number of manuscripts for second intern

$x/10 + 1$  : the number of manuscripts for the third intern

$2(x/10 + 1)$  : the number of manuscripts for the fifth intern

$x/10 + x/10 + 12 + x/10 + 1 + 2(x/10 + 1) = x$

$x = 30$  manuscripts : solve for  $x$

2. Let:  $S$  be the speed of The Skull in still air,  $r$  be the speed of the wind and  $d$  the distance between Saskatchewan and your home.

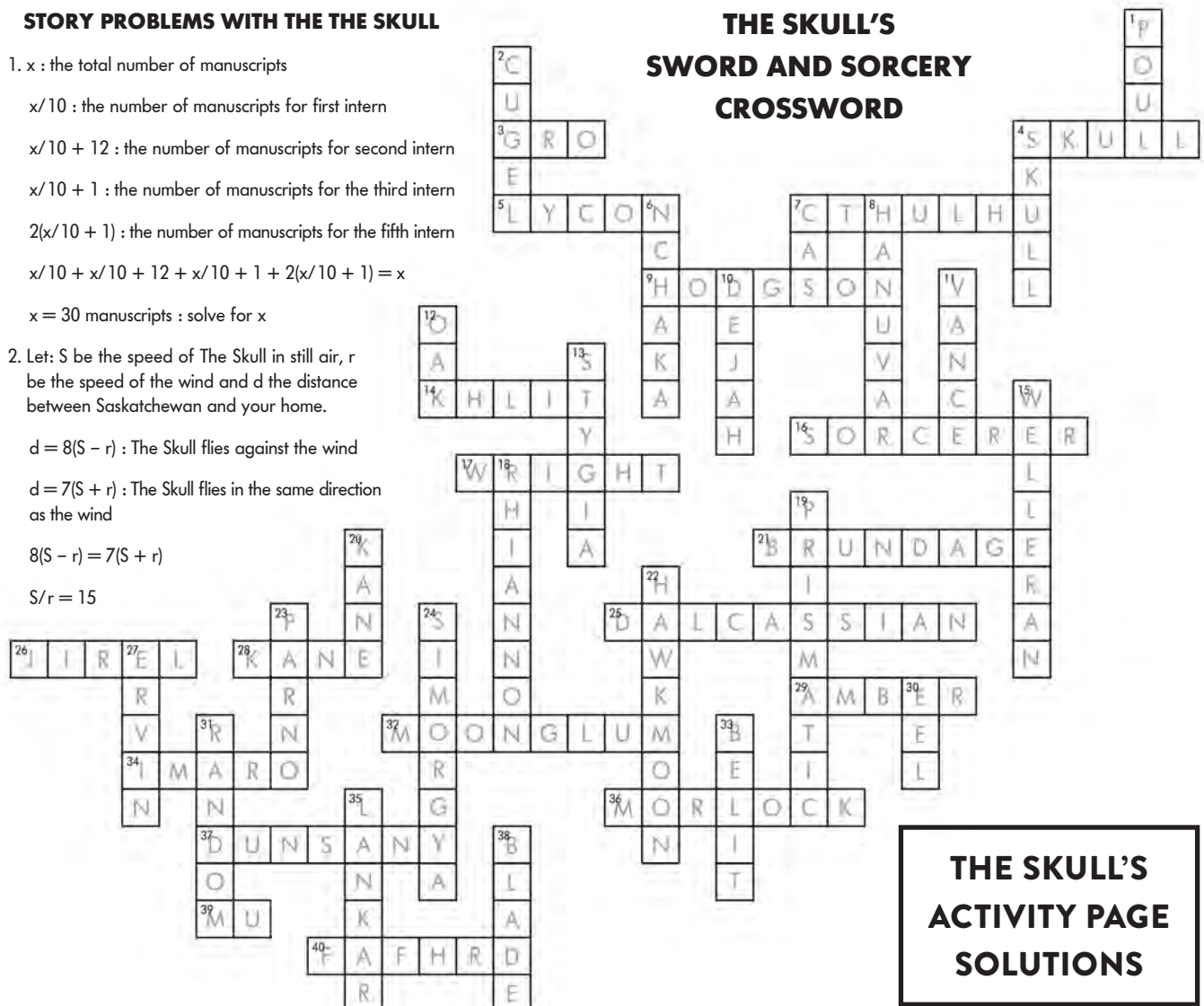
$d = 8(S - r)$  : The Skull flies against the wind

$d = 7(S + r)$  : The Skull flies in the same direction as the wind

$8(S - r) = 7(S + r)$

$S/r = 15$

## THE SKULL'S SWORD AND SORCERY CROSSWORD







By TERRY OLSON

Enter the monster pit! Down here in the pit, we provide tabletop RPG fans with playable game statistics for the creatures in this issue of *Tales From The Magician's Skull*. These game stats are grounded in the aesthetic of the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game*, or DCC RPG. DCC RPG is heavily inspired by the stories of Appendix N, a collection of fantasy and science fiction works that inspired Gary Gygax to create *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Tales From the Magician's Skull* can be read on its surface as simply great stories, but players of role playing games (DCC RPG or otherwise) may also recognize that these stories are designed to pay homage to Appendix N and its role in providing inspiration to RPG games. Therefore we present this appendix of game statistics for the various creatures described herein. All of these stats are for the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game* system, although you may be able to easily adapt them to other systems as well. Gamers — enjoy!

### Agnar and the Shadow Dragon

**Vanishing Griffingbear:** Init +4 (+8 with surprise); Atk claw +5 melee (1d6+1 plus poison) and bite +3 melee (1d4+2); AC 16 (22 on vanishing leap); HD 5d8; MV 30'; Act 2d20; SP poison (DC 15 Fort save; on success, -1d to hit for 1d3 rounds; on failure, -2d on all rolls and 1d6 hp per hour until cured), vanishing leap (every 2d3 rounds, both actions may be used to teleport to target within 30' and make single claw attack with crit on natural 17-20); SV Fort +5, Ref +4, Will +3; AL N.

*Galiad had been sent out to face a creature that was something like a huge bear with dagger-like claws and the miraculous ability to disappear and reappear in different places. The day before, Fain, commander of the guards, had laughed at Agnar as the Wildsman studied the creature through the grating. "You're admiring our Vanishing Griffingbear, Wildsman?" Agnar had tried to keep the edge of fear out of his voice. What use was a blade against a creature that could turn into air?*

**Exinor (Shadow Dragon):** Init +9; Atk claw +11 melee (1d8) and bite +11 melee (1d12) and tail slap +11 melee (1d20) and spells (special) and breath (special); AC 25; HD 9d8 (63 hp); MV fly 50'; Act 4d20 (2 claws, bite, tail slap) +d30 (spell) + breath weapon; SP breath weapon (fire 3x/day, damage equal to current hp, Ref DC 19 for half damage, shape of line with width 10' length 3d6x10'), spells (d30+6 spell check, see below), mindstone (Exinor must have mindstone in body to activate certain powers as noted), regeneration (2d5 hp/round, must have mindstone), shadow-cloud form (vaporous form at will, takes 1 round to activate, immune to non-magical weapons, must have mindstone), shadow breath (breathes cloud of darkness, 30' radius anywhere within 120', duration 3d6 rounds, 3x/day, must have mindstone), shadow vision (sees in magical darkness, sees all things hidden, concealed, and invisible, must have mindstone); SV Fort +9, Ref +9, Will +9; AL L.

Spells, spell check d30+6: (lvl 1) *detect magic*, *magic shield*, *second sight*, *sleep*; (lvl 2) *neutralize poison or death*, *restore vitality*; (lvl 3) *dispel magic*, *haste*, *remove curse*.

*The night when his people's guardian spirit, the dragon Exinor, was summoned and given sacrifice ... In flight, it was as formless as a storm cloud or the fast-billowing smoke from a volcano, a glimpse of fang or eye as it streamed overhead. When it chose to, it became solid. That was its magic. And that was what it did now, to receive the tributes being offered ... Roaring and lashing, Exinor swung its tail around, sending ten or twenty warriors to their deaths. Flame roared from its mouth, and thirty or forty more died, their screams agonized but brief ... A small object, covered in gore, was pulled from the ragged wound at the creature's forehead and held up for the cheering crowds to see. Exinor's mindstone, the source of its magic. Maddened by agony and loss, Exinor roared and struggled, but the bonds held it firm.*

### The Secret of the Heart-Eater

**Harbinger of Khaz:** Init +6; Atk claw +3 melee (2d3+3); AC 16; HD 4d8; MV 30'; Act 2d20; SP caliper attack (if both claws hit the same target in the same round, the harbinger makes an additional attack with calipers, +6 melee (1d6); on the caliper's natural 18-20 attack roll, the target must make a DC 18 Fortitude save or die with their heart ripped from their chest), stealthy (+8 to stealth checks); SV Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +4; AL C.

*There was a shaggy, man-like beast, massive though squatting, its bearlike claws dangling between gangly legs. A haze hung down from the low clouds, overshadowing the creature, but they could see clearly enough the features of its scowling, doglike head, crowned in twisting horns. Its eyes glittered like opal, and a ponderous bulk about its torso gave the suggestion of furred wings in the gloom*

### The Gremlins of Las Vegas

**Gremlin:** Init +1; Atk short sword +2 melee (1d6+2) or handaxe +2 missile fire (1d6+2, range 10/20/30) or bite +2 melee (1d4 plus infection); AC 13; HD 3d8; MV 25'; Act 1d20; SP infection (DC 13 Fort save or disease causing -1d on rolls and -1 hp/day for 2d3 days or until cured), magic resistance (d30 on saves); SV Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +1; AL C.

*Out of the forest charged a score of screaming, sallow-skinned gremlins, with oversized, pointed ears and noses, protruding fangs rotten with decay, and heavy, flat feet, wearing leather armor ornamented with parts of machinery that clattered as they ran, trophies of victories against the creations of men. Though less than three feet tall, they were broad and stout.*

### Jewels of the Sea Hag

**Aerial Fiends (un-dead swarm):** Init +2; Atk spectral claw +4 melee (1d6 plus chill); AC 16; HD 4d8; MV fly 40'; Act d20 special; SP attacks all targets within 60' cube, chill (target makes DC 16 Fort save or suffers additional 1d6 damage and -1d on all actions for 2d4 rounds; -1d penalty is cumulative for stacked chills), star-spawn thrall (targets killed by ariel fiends rise as zombies controlled by the Sea Hag, see below), half damage from non-area attacks, immune to non-magical weapons, un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +3; AL C.

*The fog, a churning gray mass, contorted itself violently, and from its coils a number of shapes emerged, bloated figures with swollen heads, black pits for eyes, and wide, gaping mouths filled with utter darkness ... Overhead the roiling banks of cloud sank, about to obliterate all vision, but the youths accelerated, fueled by seething terror: they felt the potential icy grasp of spectral claws, molded from the fog. Something screamed at their shoulders, a nest of disturbed aerial fiends.*

**Star-spawn thrall:** Init +1; Atk claw +2 melee (2d4); AC 13; HD 2d8; MV 30' swim 30'; Act d20; SP collective consciousness (thralls share awareness with each other and with Sea Hag, who can communicate her will), convert the wounded (if a thrall reduces a target's hp to 3 or less, the target must make a DC 11 Will save or become controlled by the collective consciousness of the thralls), immune to mental effects (sleep, charm, etc.); SV Fort +1, Ref +0, Will +1; AL C.

*Volnus's beaming weapon washed the jungle in garish light, revealing the things that stumbled from the trees, vaguely human, glistening like fat slugs, dripping with salt water. Evidently risen from the ocean, their weed-like hair was plastered to faces and necks, where gills pulsed: their webbed fingers were spatulate and grasping. Their misshapen heads, leached white and rounded with fish-like eyes, bobbed to and fro, like those of aquatic reptiles. Eskarra and her crew stared in horror as they realized the men who had been left behind to secure the Arrow were among these oncoming horrors. Their transformations were not yet complete, but already they were morphing into something alien.*

**Sea Hag (Spawn of the Stars):** Init +4; Atk arm spine +8 melee (1d8 plus poison, reach 20') or psychic dominance; AC 14; HD 12d8; MV 40', swim 50'; Act 6d20; SP poison (DC 18 Fort save or 3d6 damage), trance aura (all within 20' of Sea Hag must make DC 18 Will save or stand helpless in a trance), psychic dominance (costs one action, DC 20 Will save or target's mind is dominated by sea hag, each day a new save is allowed, but at a cumulative -1 penalty), telepathy, read mind (can use one action to mentally read memories or thoughts of any target within 100', no save), magic resistant (saves against all magical effects with 2d30, even if save is normally not allowed), can be wizard's patron; SV Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +8; AL N.

*From the waters, a wide shape humped upwards, cascades falling from scales and fins alike, and a huge head shook itself, massed tresses of weed-like hair spraying crystal droplets. Two enormous eyes opened, baleful lamps, their gaze hostile and not remotely human. "The Sea Hag," said Artugol, his breath almost frozen with fear ... As the small company looked down on the emerging colossus, water pouring from its broad shoulders, they each felt their minds invaded by a deep, commanding voice, opening them to visions as clear as the external world.*

### The Fisherman's Wife

**Warbleone:** Init always last; Atk clamp +8 melee (2d8) or beguiling song; AC 19; HD 2d30; MV 5'; Act 1d20; SP beguiling song (as charm person with spell check 2d6+10), speech, camouflage (at will, requires DC 18 Will save to not mistake the Warbleone for a rock), mind-reading (uses action to mentally read



thoughts of any target within 20', DC 14 Will save to resist), seer sight (can see one aspect of a target's future per 10 minutes of interaction, DC 14 Will save to resist), conjuration (can summon inanimate objects up to 5 lbs in weight, to be delivered via tongue), supernatural origin vulnerable to *banish*; SV Fort +8, Ref +4, Will +2; AL N.

*Then the round black rock split in half. The two zigzags parted into a jagged smile, and she understood that the owner of the sinister voice was a Warbleone, the largest of the singing shell-fish she'd ever seen ... The Warbleone opened its jagged smile fully. On the abomination's wet singing muscle, what reminded Nygea of a giant, pink tongue, was a severed hand with six fingers.*

**Ash Protector:** Init +4; Atk saber +4 melee (1d7+2) or claw +2 melee (1d4+2); AC 15; HD 4d12; MV 40'; Act 4d20; SP slow summon (once summoned, the ash protector takes 1d3 rounds to form, and is helpless and actionless during this time), half damage from non-magical weapons, immune to mental effects (sleep, charm, etc.), immune to poison, immune to disease; SV Fort +3, Ref +6 Will +4; AL N.

*She opened the pouch and dumped its contents on the lair's bloodied floor. The damp ashes spilled out along with fragments of bone. A ruby to heal wounds. A serpent to distract a powerful enemy. What rose from the sanguine ground was a protector ...*

*Inhuman, the thing had four arms. The hands all clasped sabers. Through her misery at its choice to punish her in her husband's voice, she saw that each hand boasted six fingers, the nails ridged and ending in points. In another second, her defender would be whole enough to slay the wyvern. Once that was done, Nygea would heal but she would belong to it and to whatever dark fate it planned for her.*

### The Bronze Helm

**Forge Demon (type I demon):** Init +4; Atk claw +6 melee (1d6+6) and bite +4 melee (2d5); AC 19; HD 5d12; MV 20'; Act d24 (claw) + d20 (bite); SP demon strength (makes all strength checks with d30+6), grappler (gains +4 bonus to Strength check for grappling), craftsman (artisan level metal-worker), demon traits (infravision, speech, half damage from non-magical weapons, immune to fire); SV Fort +8, Ref +6, Will +4; AL C.

*Hammering a block of glowing bronze upon an anvil, stood the demon, its back to me. It appeared squat, though that was illusory. I figured it for about seven-feet tall. Its breadth of shoulder and the thickness of its prodigious, inhuman musculature seemed to diminish its height. I was not fooled. Demons come in a myriad of forms, and few of those forms mimic human proportions. Nothing more than a thick apron and a tool belt covered the demon's mottled red and yellow scales.*

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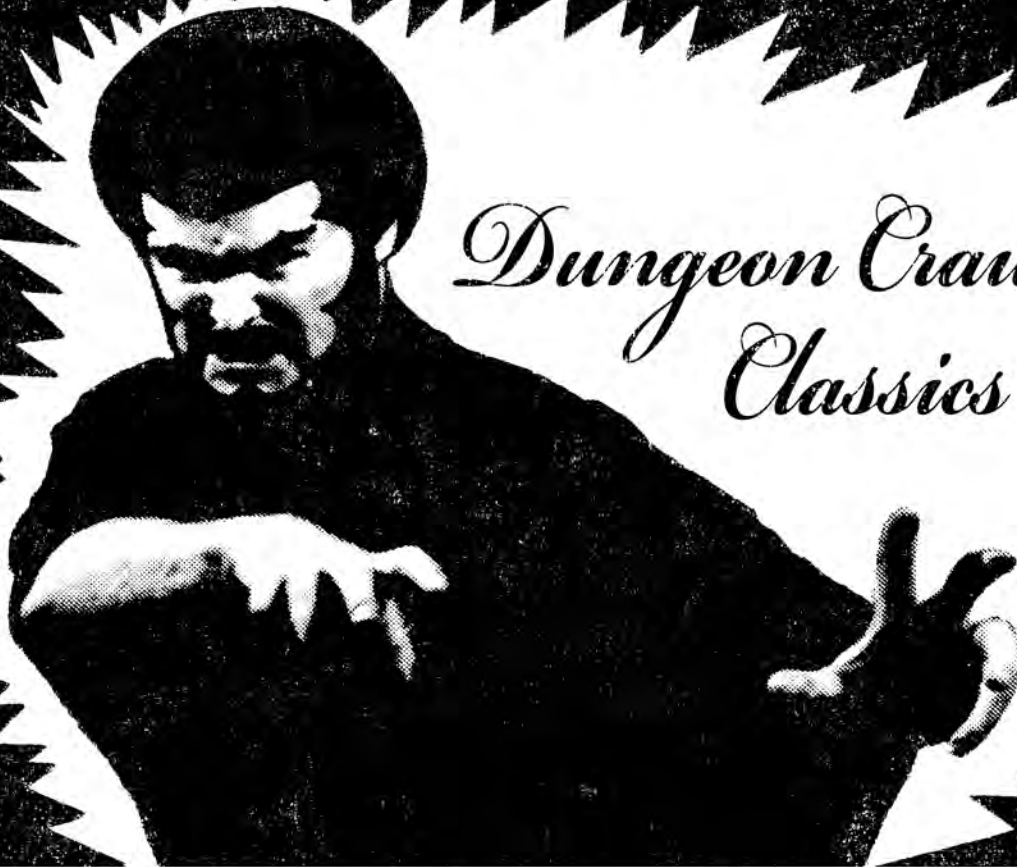
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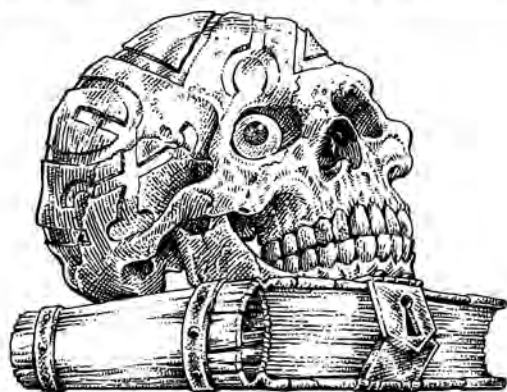


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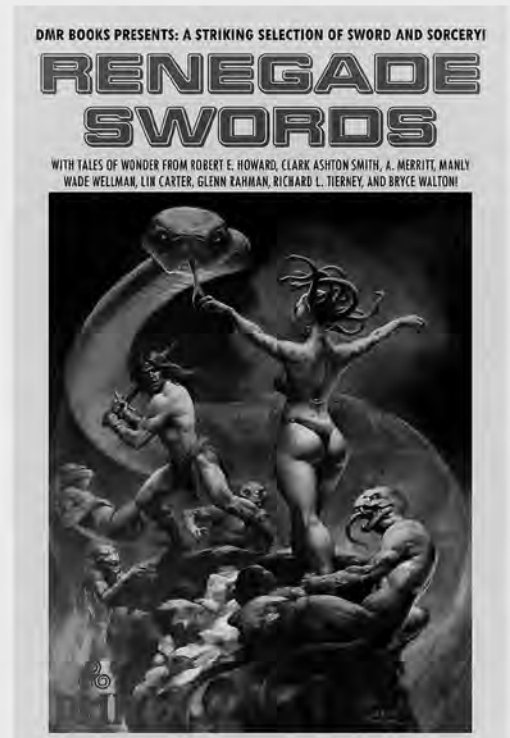
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Agnar threw himself into a dive, attempting to roll clear. The beast caught him effortlessly, pinning him under one of its claws. Distantly, Agnar was aware of the seething roar of the crowd as they demanded blood.

### **The Secret of the Heart Eater, by P. J. Atwater**

Kasmir fought doggedly on. His mail had saved him a dozen times, though his frame shuddered under each new shock. He turned his guard on the newest opponent, and immediately knew he had made a grave mistake.

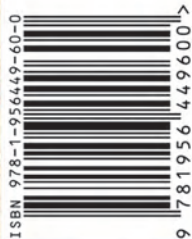
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