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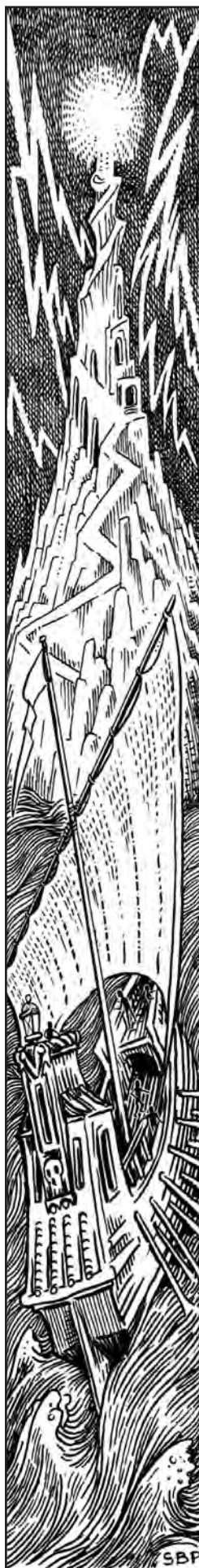
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A gong shivers... the mists part to reveal a grisly visage lying upon a mound of rubble,
dead but for one glowing, malefic eye...

It speaks, in a voice of cold command: *Silence, mortal dogs! It is time now for*

Tales From The **MAGICIAN'S SKULL**



NO. 3

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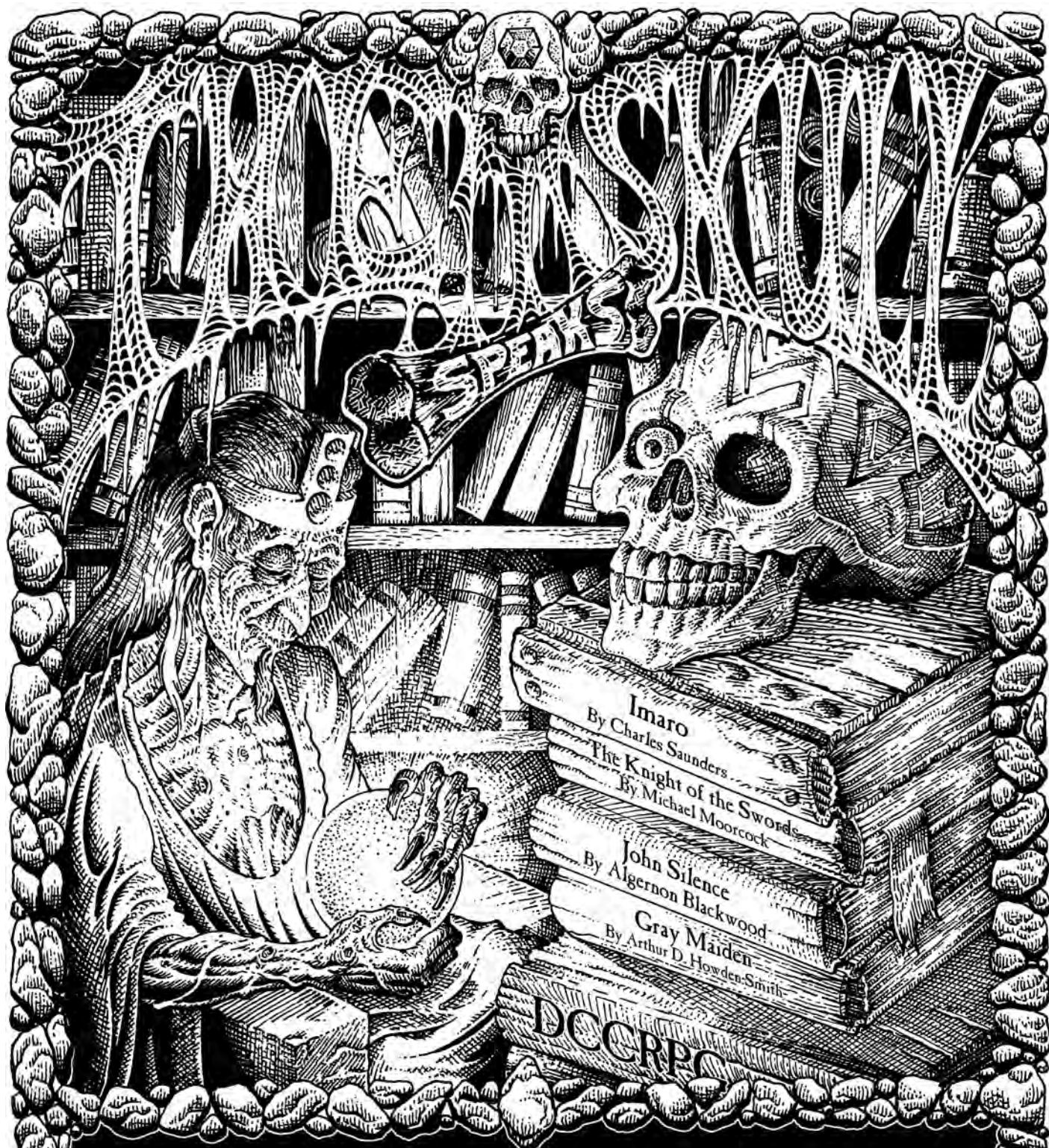
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LESTER B. PORTLY, Design & Layout



I have heard your pleas and returned! Once more my minions have scoured the nether realms for tales of grand adventure, laced with horror and the macabre! Once more I share them with you!

Look you, then, upon these works, and praise me. Where else can you find so much sword-and-sorcery between two covers? What other publication presents you with so many return characters? Is there any other magazine that shares my splendid, singular vision? Nay, for I reign alone!

I have glimpsed the future, and it is bright for me, and for you, if you be a lover of the sacred genre. Already my loyal retainers send back word of further grand adventures that I will share with my loyal followers.

Listen well, mortals. My powers rise as my reach extends. And the greater my powers, the greater shall be the treasures I share with thee! Prepare then, to march forth beneath my banner and tell all of my vision. First, though, I shall grant you a boon. Before you depart, I permit you to savor the marvels contained within these pages. No other but me could have assembled them!

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

AS I write this in December of 2018 I've just turned over the author biographies and the pull quotes for the table-of-contents. The stories have been copyedited, and map sketches have been requested. Joseph and I are already considering the contents of issue 4. Joseph may already have assigned the art, but I don't think any of it has been completed yet. Terry has been crafting some swell spells and monsters and artifacts based upon events he found in this issue's tales.

It's been a busy year, and as I look down from my balcony over the Sea of Monsters there's a lot to reflect upon. Thanksgiving's a few weeks behind me, but I remain grateful. I'm thrilled to be working with Joseph for *The Skull* in tracking down modern sword-and-sorcery yarns. There are so many fine writers out there that we could easily fill 4-6 volumes with stories a year, but we're starting to think that's more sword-and-sorcery than readers could keep up with. So we're sticking with two annual issues, though if we sense demand we might eventually attempt more.

As if working with cool people for a dedicated sword-and-sorcery magazine wasn't nifty enough, about midway through the year I became the Executive Editor of a new book imprint, *Perilous Worlds*, and that, too, has been a thrill ride. The imprint will be publishing new and original fiction, but it's also the new home of Conan and other Howard characters. The very first thing I edited when I came aboard? A new Conan novel by John Chris Hocking. The second things I edited? Some Conan novellas to be serialized in the backs of the new Marvel Conan comic books. So far that's meant another tale from the mighty Hocking, and another from the talented Scott Oden. By the time you're seeing this, I'm sure I'll have edited at least one more.

Truly my cup runneth over, for the new sword-and-sorcery series I've been writing is going to print in February and I'm already seeing some nice buzz about it. The publisher is marketing it as epic fantasy, but it's powered by love of *The Chronicles of Amber* and *The Three Musketeers*. If it's not strictly sword-and-sorcery, it's sure a close relative.

I wonder sometimes how I got to be here, and then I remember all the piles of rejection letters, the long years of hard lessons learned and time spent polishing tales that probably weren't worth the time I put into them, and I try to forget all those years spent editing other things I mostly didn't like even half as well.

Sure, part of success is luck, and talent. But I think a larger part of it is hard work, and getting those 10,000 hours in, and being a pleasant person to work with. I've been extremely fortunate to have had a good support system of family and friends. I think back sometimes to that twenty-year-old Howard who thought he could get a book deal right out of the gate and see everything change and wonder what he would have thought if he'd known he'd be a book and magazine editor and published writer. He'd have been overjoyed, sure. But could he have gotten here faster?

I'm not sure I could have pulled it off. Part of being a good writer comes down to having lived enough life and had enough experiences and met enough people that you can depict it in ways that sound genuine. Another crucial piece is having read enough fiction, and different kinds of fiction, to learn craft secrets, whether it be the seemingly lost art of providing background without infodumping (I swear it can be done, but you'd best not model off of most modern fantasy doorstep authors), or knowing that you should seek a rhythm in the words you're putting down. It wasn't until my late twenties that I decided someone seriously wanting to be a fantasy writer might want to read work by the great fantasy grandmothers and grandfathers and see where it all came from. And it wasn't until my mid forties that I'd read much beyond the realm of science fiction, fantasy, and historicals. Some of the westerns and hard boiled detective novels I've since devoured have been wonderfully instructive about conveying backstory and world building without bringing the narrative to a halt. I keep learning, and don't intend to stop trying to get better at all of this.

In any case, here I am, and I love what I'm doing, and I get to share that love with you. I honestly feel like one of the luckiest people in the world.

We've got a lot of surprises in store for you this issue. Some fan favorites are returning and new authors await with spell-binding worlds and adventures. I hope you enjoy them as much as we do!

Swords Together!

— Howard Andrew Jones

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

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





ILLUSTRATION BY JUSTINE JONES

THE FACE THAT FITS HIS MASK

From the Adventures of Kormak

By WILLIAM KING

IN the kitchen at the back of his shop, Skardus played with his baby, tossing the laughing boy into the air and then hugging him close. He had been inspecting the one-year-old for stigmata and he was a little worried. The lad looked like a perfectly formed human child except for the tiny claws on his feet and his vestigial tail. It was something they would need to keep hidden until he was old enough to control the Change. Still, that was a bridge they would cross when they came to it. The boy gurgled, said da-da and bit at his ear with small sharp teeth. Skardus was very happy until his wife came into the room with that look on her face that meant there was a problem.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"There's a man out there, says he knows you, smells like trouble." Marla wrinkled her nose meaningfully. Skardus rose to his feet and still holding the baby padded over to the doorway. The baby's happy burbling negated the silence of his movement. He slid the door partially open and looked out into the shop. A big man with greying black hair stood there, rain dripping from his sodden clothing, a sword scabbarded on his back. Something about the stillness of his manner indicated that the human knew he was being watched.

Skardus said as quietly as he could, "I'll hold him here for as long as I can. Take the baby and run."

Marla made a movement with her thumb and extruded one of her claws. Any threat to her children brought out the violence that was never far from the surface among their people. She said, "He's only a human and he does not smell like a sorcerer."

She spoke with the confidence of one almost invulnerable to mortal weapons. He touched his lips to the baby's forehead and then handed him to Marla, kissing her as well.

"Go now." Skardus gave her a grim smile. "That human out there could kill us both in two heartbeats then butcher the little one without a qualm. Get out! Quick!"

Marla stared at him for a moment before she headed towards the hidden trapdoor into the cellar and then the tunnels that led to the undercity.

It was the fear in his voice that decided her, he could tell. She had never seen him so afraid in all their years of marriage. The baby, sensing the tension between his parents, started to whimper. The sound of it tore at Skardus's heart. At the trapdoor Marla turned and said, "Why is he here? Why now? Is it to do with our Anton and his bloody friends?"

Skardus shrugged. "Maybe. Doesn't matter. Go!"

He watched her leave and thought of all the things he should have told her and now might never have the chance to. Swiftly he kicked the rug back into place over the trapdoor, took a deep

breath and tried to settle his mind. He fought down the acid bite of fear in his throat and the urge to extrude his own claws and begin the Change. Now was not the time to give in to instinct no matter how much he wanted to. He had not survived for so long by being a slave to the bestial side of his nature.

He opened the door and strode through into the clutter of his shop, looking every inch the fat, successful all-too-human merchant and not in the least like what he truly was. As he got close he caught the scent that had upset his wife. The man smelled of demon blood and ancient darkness, of agony and terror and a lifetime of endless twilit warfare.

"Sir Kormak," Skardus said. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

Eyes cold and grey as a winter sky looked down at him. Very white teeth showed in a scarred, tanned face. "Unexpected, Skardus? That's interesting."

Then and there Skardus knew it was going to be bad. "Can I get you some tea, Sir Kormak? I was just making some for myself."

The big man shook his head. "This is not a social call."

"Business then? I have some particularly fine high-grade wraithstone, all the way from Umbrea. It just arrived recently, and I could let you have it for a very reasonable price. They say it's the pure blood of the Angels themselves although, of course, I make no such claims myself."

"I do not have time to waste, Skardus," said the man. He did not sound impatient, or even particularly menacing and that was what made him so terrifying. He knew what Skardus was, and he was not in the slightest afraid. "The business I have is not of a mercantile nature."

"Very well then," said Skardus doing a good impression of a huffy, fat, middle-aged man. Perhaps too good. Perhaps Anton was right. Perhaps his face had grown to fit his mask. The bell rang and the door opened. A woman stood in the doorway, green hair rain slick, huge-eyed, with that sadness about her that the Lost always got when they had been too long away from the Green. "I am sorry, madam. I am closing up for the day."

"I just wanted some powdered weirdroot," said the woman. No need to ask what she wanted that for. They all took it to dull their pain and their loneliness. Briefly Skardus wondered what small tragedy had driven her from her forest, and then realized that he could not afford to care. Not with this terrible man within killing distance of him.

"I am sorry, madam," he said. "My stock has run out. I am expecting some more next week. In the meantime, I suggest you try Constantine of Vermstadt. He carries weirdroot that is almost as fresh and well-prepared as my own."

The elf woman looked surprised, but she nodded and ducked back out through the door. "One moment," Skardus said. He went outside with Kormak following him, presumably to make sure he did not run away. Skardus closed the shutters of his shop and then stepped inside and chained and bolted the door.

"Now, we shall not be interrupted," Skardus said, rubbing his hands together and then wiping the sweat from his brow. He would have liked to have been able to say that he had produced it by an act of will, to lull the human into a sense of false security but he was too old to lie to himself, and too wise to think that this man would fall for such a simple deception. "What is it you want, Sir Kormak?"

The man ducked into the back of the shop and looked around. He saw the rug Skardus had kicked over the trap door, gave the faintest of smiles. "Your wife came through here a minute ago, and I saw you with a baby."

In his cold voice, the words came out as a threat. *I saw you with a baby*. Children were always hostages to fortune. Why had this man come now? Just when things were going so well, so soon after the birth of the child that he and Marla had tried for so long. "She must have popped out with the little one to get some fresh air."

"Through the window? I see no back door here, only stairs."

"She must have gone upstairs to get changed, knowing we had so distinguished a guest." He wiped his brow and felt some friction there. Bristles were starting to extrude, always a precursor to an uncontrolled change. At least, he had bought Marla and the child precious minutes to get away.

"I don't hear anyone moving up there."

"You wouldn't hear her. You, of all people, should know that."

"I heard the baby."

Had he noticed the secret door or was he referring to the steps to the flat above? Skardus could not help himself. His eyes darted to the rug and he *knew* the man had noticed. Skardus swallowed, took a grip on his courage and said, "Did you come here to threaten my family, Sir Kormak, or do you really have business with me?"

The man smiled as if Skardus had made a joke in poor taste. "It's funny you should mention threatening your family, Skardus. Someone has done exactly the same to your rival, Constantine. Only they have gone further, they have kidnapped his youngest child."

Skardus's mind reeled. This was not what he had been expecting at all.

"That is terrible, Sir Kormak. What is the world coming to?" Skardus was not entirely playacting. Since the birth of his own son, the idea of any child being abducted had affected him much more strongly. It was something he would not have wished on anybody, not even that ruthless bastard Constantine.

"Strange. Your biggest rival's youngest son is kidnapped, and all manner of clues are found at the scene that point to your involvement, and you are telling me you know nothing about it."

There was no acting at all behind Skardus's outrage. "That's because I don't know anything about it!"

"It's just a coincidence then that the boy's guards were found with their throats ripped out and their bones cracked for marrow,

and that there were dead rats crushed beneath several of their bodies."

"Sir Kormak, you know I would never do that." Skardus reminded himself that this man would not fall for the simple lie. "I would not be so stupidly obvious."

Skardus felt his voice deepen and the oily ingratiating manner of the fat merchant he had become fall away as he made the admission. It was a relief. He was what he was, and sometimes it did him good to show it.

"That's what I thought," Kormak said. His tone let Skardus know he had been reconsidering the matter.

"But Constantine thinks different."

"He doesn't think anything at all. My order was called in because he suspects sorcery. Your name came up because your brother-in-law and some of his friends were seen spying on Constantine's mansion before the attack happened."

Damn that Anton. What was he thinking? Was his idiot brother-in-law behind the attacks? It would not have surprised Skardus in the least. "And now you are here asking me questions."

"I was just passing through Alstadt. I saw your name on the watch list. I thought I would talk to you myself."

"So you are doing this for old times' sake."

"I am doing it because even if you are not stupid enough to do this, you know who might be."

"It was the name wasn't it? That gave me away."

"If you're worried that the King's agents might find you, don't be. I am the only one who knows the cover name Skardus."

"And you've never told anyone?"

"I said I wouldn't."

"And you always keep your word, of course," Skardus meant his voice to come out sarcastic, but he knew even as the words left his mouth what the Aquilean would say.

"Yes."

"But if I don't help you, you will give my name to the King's men."

"No. If you are involved in this, I will kill you myself." And there it was again. There was no edge in Kormak's voice, just the utter certainty that he could and would murder Skardus if he had to.

"I would not kidnap Constantine's child. And I would not help anyone who did."

"Oh, it's worse than that."

"Worse? What could be worse?" Panic made Skardus's voice come out as a soft growl. He could almost feel the change coming on him now. His heart beat faster; there was a metallic taste in his mouth. His muscles were starting to cramp. Desperately, he fought to get a grip on himself. The last thing he wanted was to push this man to violence. There had been a time when he would have relished the challenge, but he had been younger then and stupider, and he had not had so much to lose.

"We both know many things that could be. In this case, it's happened before and recently. A child of House Gilmore kidnapped, then returned to his parents one piece at a time. Apparently while the boy was still living. Until the end, of course."

"The kidnappers were showing they meant business about collecting the ransom."

"They never asked for a ransom."

"What?" Skardus said.

"You heard me."

"That's insane. Why kidnap a child, mutilate them and not demand money from their parents?" Kormak nodded as if it were exactly the sort of question he would have expected Skardus to ask.

"To prove a point. That you are capable of doing it to their other children. And will, if those people do not do what you say."

"That's stupid." Skardus could not keep the contempt from his voice. "Word of these things gets out. Servants talk, guards talk. Word always gets around and the authorities always get wind of it and someone like you is always sent for."

"Yes. Someone like me is always sent for. You know what that means and what it leads to. You kill one of ours, we kill two of yours." It surprised Skardus how tired the man sounded. The youth Skardus had known would have shown nothing but fanatic enthusiasm. It seemed the long decades had changed them both.

Skardus considered the words. Kormak was the most lethal fighter he had ever met, armed with a weapon that could kill immortals, but that was not the real threat. He was also a Guardian, a representative of the Order of the Dawn. A small army of similar men stood behind him, along with sorcerers and inquisitors and assassins. If the Order stirred things up, the local nobles and merchants would throw their power behind it. A whole society would be mobilized against the perceived supernatural menace. Holy war was the real threat here.

It would be terrible for Skardus, for his family, for all of his kind. Humans might not individually be much of a challenge, but collectively they were fearsome. They had the numbers. Once the process started it would spiral out of control. All of the Children of the Moon in Alstadt and the surrounding lands would suffer along with countless innocents. Skardus did not give a damn about the innocents but he worried about little Skardus and Marla and the rest of his pack.

"What do you want from me?" Skardus asked.

"You know who is behind this, or you have some suspicions."

Skardus considered his answer but not for long. He did not have a lot of choices. He could kill Kormak, grab Marla and the boy and run as far and as fast as he could. Or he could help the Guardian. The thing that stopped him from trying the first was that he was not sure he was capable of killing the man. And if he were dead there would be no one to look out for his family. "Yes, I have my suspicions. My brother-in-law Anton is dumb enough and arrogant enough to try this."

"Where can I find him?"

"In the undercity with the rest of his pack."

"You sure he's the one?"

Skardus shook his head. "No but I don't think anybody else among Murnath's Folk would be stupid enough to try this. He's your best bet. And if he's not with the Clave then somebody down there will be able to tell you where he and his lads are hanging out."

"They'll be able to tell *us*. You're coming with me."

Skardus just stared at him. "I can't do that. I can't be seen helping you."

Kormak flashed that chilling smile. "You can always say I threatened you, that I made you do it. It will be the truth."

For a moment, Skardus considered pouncing. He could change in mid-spring, tear out the man's throat, feast on his bones, drink his blood. The beast of the change gibbered in the back of his mind, begging to be unleashed. His fingers splayed, his nails began to lengthen. Kormak just stood there, immobile. He did not even reach for his sword. He didn't have to. Skardus knew just how fast he could move.

Everything slowed. Skardus became hyper-aware of his surroundings. The white painted table, chipped where little Skardus had gnawed at it. The wooden dog that also showed signs of his attentions. Why was his mind focusing on these things, Skardus wondered? Was it reminding him of what he had to lose, what Constantine too might already have lost? The thought brought him back from the edge. The shriek of violence in his head died away. The moment passed.

"Very well," Skardus said. "I hope you are ready for a visit to the undercity."

"I've been there before," Kormak said.

Skardus kicked the rug away from atop the trapdoor and lifted it up. The pit yawned beneath him. He caught Marla's scent and the baby's. It was a blessing that the man's nose was not as keen as his. More time purchased for his family to escape, no matter what happened. Skardus jumped into the pit. Kormak produced a sunstone, waited a moment for its glow to kindle then followed.

• • •

KORMAK studied Skardus's back as they followed the tunnels down into the dark beneath Alstadt. Skardus has put on weight, lost some hair but he still walked the same way, hunched forward, weight balanced on the front of his feet, with a certain feral grace. In this dim light, he still passed for the man who had been Taurea's most feared assassin, probably would still have been had not his secret come to the attention of the Order.

Things had gone better than he expected back there. Just for a moment, it looked like he had pushed Skardus too far, and the ratkin was about to attack him. That fight could have gone either way, if Skardus was still as fast as he remembered. Still, it had not, and that was the main thing. And just as well, if he was going to get the kidnapped boy back in anything like one piece.

He offered up a prayer to the Holy Sun for the boy's continued safety and pushed aside the thought that too often in the past such prayers had gone unanswered. He tried to push the image of the lost child out of his head too. He knew what it was like to be eight years old and trapped in the dark with a monster. He had survived. Constantine's boy would too. He had to.

Kormak kept the sunstone half enclosed in his hands. He did not want to damage his night vision too much. They would soon be reaching areas of the undercity that were dimly lit and he did not want his eyes to have to adapt too much.

"What have you been doing these past twenty-odd years?" Skardus asked. His voice sounded human again, not guttural as it had been when he was the edge of the change.

"The same," Kormak said, not wanting to be pulled into a conversation but wanting to keep Skardus on his side. Their tenuous connection was already pushed to breaking point.

"Still keeping your oaths, eh?" Skardus turned to look at him. Just for a moment, his eyes glittered in the sunstone glow, catching the light like those of a dog. His tone was mocking.

"Yes. You?"

"You saw. After our encounter with the Bloody Court, I left Stormbridge in haste, got as far away as I could. Left the old life behind. Thought I had got away clean too. Till I saw you standing in the front of my shop."

"Still pretending to be an alchemist, I see."

Skardus's laughter had no mirth in it. "I am an alchemist. I always was. That's how I got all those fancy poisons that the Red Ascendants died so suddenly of."

"Yes, I remember them. Everyone else thought you were a sorcerer."

"Except you and your master. How is he? Malan, I mean. That was his name, wasn't it?"

"Retired to Mount Aethelas."

"Teaching a new generation of monster killers, eh? I am surprised you are not doing the same. You are about the age for it." Skardus sighed then shook his head. "But no. You are one of those who are going to go out with their swords still clutched in their hands, aren't you."

"If you say so."

They came to a junction. Below them, lights glowed. A massive stone face glared out of a nearby wall. The fingers of a huge stone hand were embedded in the opposite wall. They had come down a long way already, at least into the second layer of the city.

"You've changed though," said Skardus.

"Age will do that to a man."

"Isn't that the truth," said Skardus. He had lost some of the ingratiating tone and cultured accent of the high-grade merchant. He sounded more like the man Kormak remembered. "You never expect it, but it happens all the same. When I was young I never thought I would end up a merchant."

"Are you?"

"You think I am still in the killing business? No. It's easier to be a merchant. More profitable, and the hours are better, healthier too. At least it was until you came along."

"As far as I am concerned, you do this thing and you can go right back to being a merchant."

"There's nothing I would like better, but it won't work that way. I am taking you into pack territory. That's a serious betrayal of trust. Even if bloody Anton has been breaking the Law."

"So what will you do?"

"Let's survive this first then I'll give it some thought." Fires flickered in the darkness ahead. Sunstones gave off trapped daylight. Skardus's eyes narrowed, but his people took no damage from the Holy Sun's light. From up ahead came the sound of voices, chanting, shouting to attract attention. Kormak saw lots of people seething in the deep underground. Light came down in shafts from cracks in the ceiling. Grey beads of rain swirled in the sunbeam columns.

"We're below the Broken Plaza," Skardus said, as if he had guessed Kormak's thoughts. His eyes studied the massive arches holding the stone ceiling in place as if he trying to measure the chances of them falling. Obviously, he decided it would not be today for he pushed on through the crowds.

The architecture was different down here, not the clean lines and Elder Signs of the surface. These buildings crushed beneath the weight of the new city above them showed all the signs of Lunar handiwork. The columns were curved and fluted, the buildings domed. Some were built into the columns that held the ceiling above them. This had been a city of the Old Ones once, and they did not like sunlight.

Not all the people visible were human. There were strangelings and mutants and many different children of the Old Ones. Some had the half-human, half-beast look that Kormak associated with beings created by Eldrim magic. All of them studied Kormak and Skardus as they passed. Not a few weighed them up as potential prey. None stared too long. They obviously did not like what they saw.

The humans present looked almost as feral as the strangelings. Many had the glassy-eyed gaze of the dreamsmoke addict. Here and there he saw the polished mail and bared swords of the professional bodyguards who warded the slumming nobles from the city above. As they passed, he detected the faint odor of the truesilver oil with which the men had coated their weapons. The wealthy came here for the things they could not find above. To consort with those they would not have given the time of day in the light of the Holy Sun.

Skardus led him through the plaza, past a tall silvered statue of a woman too slender and beautiful to be human. Kormak felt as if its metallic eyes watched him as he passed. Water tinkled in the cistern around the statue's feet. It was a wonder of Eldrim architectural magic that the fountain still functioned after all these centuries. The Old Ones had built to last, and why not? They were immortal. They expected to enjoy their possessions and their slaves through all eternity. They would have, too had not the Apostles of the Holy Sun come to set the rest of humanity free, to reveal the truth Kormak had been taught when he was young. He was not so certain of it now. His doubts did not seem like much of a reward for a lifetime of upholding the Law, but what could you do? Things were as they were.

Skardus stopped at what might have once been the door of an ancient abandoned temple. Two monstrous statues armed with long glittering spears guarded the entrance. They had the head of bulls and the bodies of wrestlers. From within came the smell of urine and animal droppings and unwashed bodies. Skardus wrinkled his nose and gestured for Kormak to follow. They passed into the temple, and immediately came to a huge flight of crumbling stairs that appeared to have been made for giants. Skardus skittered down them into the depths and Kormak followed.

The quality of the light changed now. It came not from sunstones or shafts of daylight, but from the silvery glow the Eldrim used to illuminate their palaces. Stones set in the ceiling cast an argent gleam, as they had done for long millennia. Alstadt had been built above the remains of a great city of the Old Ones. It extended a long way beneath the earth. The Eldrim had burrowed deep to get away from the light of their skyborn enemy.

It was darker down here because the Old Ones and their children did not need as much light as humans did. They were adapted for the night. Nonetheless Kormak killed the sunstone's light but kept it concealed in his left hand. There were beings against which its glow would be a formidable weapon and they might encounter such creatures down here. If need be, he could set it to discharge all of its stored sunlight at once. To some of the Old Ones that would prove lethal.

Things waited in the shadows now. Kormak sensed them as they passed down into the gloom. Even Skardus seemed nervous, and he was much more at home in this place than Kormak could ever be.

Rat eyes glowed from the dark, holding a spark of glittering intelligence that belonged in the gaze of no natural animal. Shadows curved away from lights at an unnatural angle and seemed to flicker even when the alien lanterns did not. More statues lined the stair, so detailed that they might have been living things turned to stone in a moment of magic. Perhaps they were.

Water leapt down the steps, in streams and waterfalls that Kormak felt certain were not meant to be there. Some ancient viaduct system had failed, or some fountain burst its banks. The stonework looked frayed and chipped and crumbled. Luminescent fungus clung to the walls, strange molds splayed across the flooring.

They passed a mosaic set in the wall, that appeared to move and change. Kormak never saw it happen but if he looked at away and back again, the figures had changed position. Warriors who had been standing now sprawled with blood coming from their throats. It was disturbing to say the least.

Skardus paused and looked around, his nose twitching. His eyes seemed bigger, his face stubbled. Something about the undercity was changing him. Kormak wondered if there was something in the air down here that did that to the children of the Moon. He had been taught that those who stayed too long in the palaces of the Old Ones always came away altered. He had seen enough evidence to believe it.

"What have you found?" Kormak asked.

"Some of my people have been this way. They had a human child with them."

"How long ago?"

"Hours."

"Not Constantine's son then."

"Maybe some other rich merchant's," said Skardus. "Or some nobleman or Councilor."

"There's more, isn't there?"

"My brother in law was with them. I would know his sour stench anywhere."

"You don't like him?"

"He's a fool, one of those who believe we should take over the city and rule it as the Old Ones once did. You know the type. We are cleverer than the humans, fiercer than the humans and have more magic than the humans. They have grown fat and weak and stupid, and they are our prey." Kormak guessed that Skardus was imitating Anton's tone perfectly. He had always been a skilled mimic.

"You don't agree with him?"

"Humans are my customers. They pay my rent. All I want is a quiet life. I got quite enough excitement when we were young. Anton has never been out of Alstadt, never known anything but its citizens. He thinks you humans are all decadent fops."

"I can see why he might," Kormak said, remembering the sneering aristocrats of the surface. Men who spent more on a cloak that they would never use than most people would see in a lifetime. Of course, it was possible Skardus was lying to him, trying to lull him into a false sense of security. "You think you can follow his scent?"

Skardus considered it for a moment. "We're entering the Warrens. That's pack territory. It depends where he goes. You want to try finding him or do you want to talk to the Clave and get their permission?"

"I don't need their permission. One of your people has broken the Law."

Skardus gave a bark of mirthless laughter. "That's true in theory. In practise, you might find things go somewhat differently."

"In practise, that will mean a lot of dead Children of Mur-nath."

"And that might mean war."

"How do you think that will turn out for you and yours? The Armies of the Morning are vast and terrible. There are only a few score of your people down here."

"We have allies."

"So do we."

"You want to start a war?"

"I want to return a missing child and stop it from happening again."

"But you'll start a war if you have to."

"It won't be me that starts that war. You think this is what your Anton wants?"

Skardus tilted his head to one side. He appeared to be considering things. "It's possible."

"Then let's try and find him and make sure he does not get it."

• • •

SKARDUS sniffed the air once again, wondering if he was doing the right thing. He could catch Anton's stench and that of some human cub. There were other scents that belonged to members of Anton's pack. He most likely could follow the trail and even if he could not, he had a suspicion as to where it would lead. But what then?

The more he thought about this, the more terrifying it became. Kormak was formidable yes, but could he stand against an entire pack roused to killing fury?

And if Anton and his friends slew the Guardian, Kormak's order was vengeful. They always repaid blood with blood. *You kill one of ours, we kill two of yours.* It was the reason the Moon's Children knew not to cross them. The undercity would be flooded with solar warriors bearing terrible weapons and solar sorcerers wielding frightful spells. They would tear the place apart to avenge their fallen and they would not be discriminating about how they went about it.

That would provoke desperate resistance from the Moon's children. The undercity would be torn apart and along with it, Skardus's quiet life with his family. The awful thing was he felt the attraction of bloodshed nonetheless. Anton and his friends spoke truth as his people saw it. They *were* superior to the humans. They had been created that way, to spread fear and terror among the Eldrim's rebellious subjects, to conceal themselves among the masses of their prey until the moment came to reveal their fury. It was their right and their destiny. Surely, if rebellion caught the Courts of the Moon would respond, and send aid.

That was the theory at least, but in practice, Skardus knew it was unlikely. He had spent time at the Courts of the Moon in his youth. Most of the Eldrim were lost in dreams of their days of glory or performing sorcerous experiments with no practical purpose. Those still concerned with taking back their rebel provinces were considered cranks and fanatics.

And, for the Eldrim there was always tomorrow. They were undying. The humans would undo themselves. Why risk an endless life of pleasure when so many of them had already died at the hands of men like Kormak and his brethren. The truth was the Eldrim had grown cowardly when the humans had learned to kill them. There would be no aid from that quarter, but that was not what Anton thought. He believed that the pack had only to prove itself worthy and their old gods would return.

And Skardus was not sure that was even a worthwhile goal. He had seen the places where the Old Ones ruled. He had been for a time their servant, and if truth be told he preferred to be his own master. He pushed the thoughts aside. This was too big for him to grapple with. Right now, he needed to focus on keeping himself alive. And Kormak too, of course, although that was very much a secondary consideration.

The trail led down into a labyrinth of tunnels. The air smelled of his people. He felt a sense of homecoming, the way he always did when he came down here. It reminded him of his own childhood, scampering and playing and fighting with the other children of the pack. There were some close now. He caught their light scents. He hoped they had sense enough to avoid the Guardian. Kormak might start taking hostages himself.

The trail led, as Skardus had suspected it would, right to the Argent Lantern, the pleasure house where Anton and his friends always hung out, with the rest of their kind. Just thinking about it made Skardus shiver. The pack members to be found here would all be like Anton, young, just having mastered the Change, full of a sense of their own power and invulnerability, aggressive, and out to prove themselves. It made Skardus nostalgic for the time when he had felt that way himself. Of course, at that age, he had already been encountering men like Kormak, who were not prey, but predators themselves.

"They'll be in there," Skardus said. He kept his voice low. Young ratkin were coming and going. Not a few glared at them, wondering what such a strange smelling human was doing here in company of one of their despised elders. Skardus had to bare his teeth a few times to remind them that there was a reason their elders were still in charge. "They'll know we're out here very soon, if they don't already."

"We'd best go in then," Kormak said. If he was nervous he gave no sign of it. He must have noticed the way the glowing eyed rats were gathering all around them. Some were big as small dogs. Given time, other things would come. If he chose, Skardus could neutralize some of them, but he doubted he could wrest control of the vermin away from the whole pack inside the Lantern.

The tunnels were dim here, but Skardus's eyes were adapted to the gloom. He wondered at how well the man navigated them. He had yet to unveil his sunstone, not that it would do him much good. The door in the wall was low, and heavy and bound with copper wire. A massive knocker in the shape of a rat's head dominated the middle of it. Skardus scampered forward, fearing that the Guardian might do something dramatic like kick the door open and assault the tavern's occupants. It was what he would have attempted in their youth. This time he simply bent and turned the handle and the door opened.

Inside things were gloomy and smelled of the pack and dreamsmoke and grimstone. Skardus felt his nose twitch at that well-remembered scent. Saliva flooded his mouth.

"Look who it is?" said a voice that Skardus remembered. It was Harel, Anton's idiot friend and lieutenant, who was, if anything, even wilder and more self-assured than Anton. "What brings you to pack territory, old man?"

Old man was an insult. None of the pack liked to admit to the human part of their heritage. The youth lounged on cushions with a human bondslave under each arm. He was partially changed, sleek grey fur, covering his wiry body. One of the humans fed him grimstone droplets, another held a goblet ready to bring it to his lips. Rats skittered around them. More of the pack crouched nearby, half-changed, fangs bared, all set to have some fun intimidating the human.

"Where's Anton?" Skardus asked. "I have to talk to him. Now."

"That's not very polite, manlover," Harel said. "You forgot how to speak nice groveling to the pinkskins upstairs. Maybe you should just turn around and get out of here."

Skardus sighed. "I want to speak to Anton."

"You said. He's busy with his new toys. Some baby pinkskins. This one's a bit old for his liking but we'll butcher him for you if you want. Just leave him here."

"If I leave him here, you're not the ones who will be doing the butchering." Skardus was certain that Kormak could not kill the whole pack, but he would take more than a few with him if it came to bloodshed.

Harel wrinkled his nose and frowned. He was confused by the human's scent. He obviously did not like the fact that Kormak was not groveling. In his view of the world that was not how humans were supposed to behave. He rose smoothly, and the full change happened easily. He was showing off for his friends, Skardus knew. Most of them would still be struggling to master the transformation. He moved around the man, tail held high, claws extended, sniffing ostentatiously.

"What is this pinkskin? He does not smell right."

"Look at his back, idiot boy," Skardus growled. "What do you see?"

"A sword, so what?"

"Who carries a sword on their back?"

"I dunno. You tell me."

"A Guardian of the Dawn," said a voice Skardus recognized. "Is he like the one you were always talking about, Skardus. The one you were so frightened of?"

"He *is* the one I always talked about, Anton," said Skardus.

"He doesn't look so tough," Anton said. He entered the room with two more of the pack at his back. Skardus sighed. This was going about as well as he had expected.

"If you make him show you how tough he is, you'll be dead," Skardus said. He was surprised to discover that much as he disliked Anton, he did not want that. More specifically he did not want to have to explain to Marla what had happened to her baby brother. For all her exasperation with Anton, she still loved him.

"You might be scared of him, old man, but I am not." He strode up to Kormak, head low and glared up into his face. "You don't frighten me, human."

"I could change that," said Kormak. His voice was as toneless as ever. He was not making a threat, just stating a fact. Skardus marveled at his restraint. The youthful Kormak would not have shown any. "You have two human children here. I want them, now."

"Or what?" Anton said. The whole pack had begun to change now. Feral snarls ripped the air. Long pink hairless tails lashed. Low growls told Skardus that some of the giant rats had arrived. The humans scuttled for the corners of the room, fearing what was to come. Anton saw the cracked human bones lying there.

Anton's pack pushed forward, all of them keen to take first bite. Skardus considered trying to talk them out of things but he did not see any way of doing so now.

Kormak shrugged and looked at Skardus, a man pushed to the limits of his patience. Skardus noticed he still had the sunstone in his left hand. "You want to deal with this, or shall I?"

Skardus stepped forward and raised his left hand, palm outward in the warding gesture of a pack member wanting to talk but ready for violence. His claws were visible. When he spoke, the desperation was clear in his voice. "This man is a Guardian of the Order of the Dawn. You cross him, you cross them. You kill him, they kill you. They will never stop hunting until you are dead."

He paused to let the words sink in. His tone compelled their attention. Like Marla they sensed his fear. It was humiliating, but if it kept them all from getting killed, it would be worth it. They were young, and they were stupid but they did not deserve to die. And that was what would happen, one way or another, if he did not get this situation under control.

One or two of the pack started to back off. They were the youngest, only starting to change. Maybe they were nervous. It was one thing to talk about intimidating mere humans, it was another to meet one who felt no reason to be afraid of them. The circle around Kormak widened. Anton did not budge though and

Halel moved closer. Kormak smiled and his head tilted to one side keeping the pair in his field of vision. Violence was mere heartbeats away.

Skardus had a clear shot at Kormak's back. Maybe he could knock the man out but what then? If he could not restrain the pack, it would be holy war.

How had it come to this? This morning the most he'd had to worry about was his depleted stock of weirdroot, and the fact little Skardus had claws. He held his hands up in the air and said, "Wait. All of you, before this goes too far."

From the chamber behind came a whimper and then the sound of a child crying for help. Anton turned his head and growled, "I told you what would happen if you did not keep quiet."

He glanced back at the Guardian, tense and ready to spring. Here was definite proof that he had been breaking the Law. He knew he was going to have to kill Kormak. He growled attack orders at his pack.

Kormak's hand moved. The sunstone in it went into the air. All eyes followed except Skardus's. He knew what was coming but it was too late to shout a warning, even if he had wanted to.

There was a brilliant flash, bright as day. All of the pack's eyes were accustomed to dimness. For a few moments, they were blind. Skardus heard the ring of metal and smelled burning flesh. When he looked up he saw Anton's headless body sprawled on the floor, skin blackened where the killing blade had cut. Halel looked down at the scorched hole in his chest then toppled forward. The rest of the pack stared, appalled. They had thought they were invulnerable. They had just found out that death comes for everyone in the end.

Skardus glared at Kormak, feeling a surge of bitter anger. He considered throwing himself on the man. The beast in the back of his mind screamed for blood and vengeance. Kormak waited, sword in hand, baleful runes glowing along its length. Skardus took in the two corpses on the floor. Two. Reason fought with rage. Kormak could have killed more if he wanted to. Maybe all of them. *You kill one of ours, we kill two of yours.* The heir of House Gilmore was dead. So were the pair responsible for killing him. It could be left at that or it could escalate. *I won't be the one to start a war.*

Skardus forced himself to retract his claws, but he kept his eyes fixed on Kormak. When he spoke, his voice was guttural. "They were just children."

Kormak looked at the haunted eyed boy with the bandaged hand who was peeking terrified round the edge of the door. Behind him, a golden-haired girl of perhaps six years old, garbed in a blood-stained dress, stared in terror at the scene. "So are they," he said.

Skardus looked at the corpses sprawled on the floor, the pack torn between flight and fury and Constantine's terrified son. He wondered if the boy recognized him in the gloom. If he did...

If he did, so what? He was not Anton. He was not going to kill a child to serve his own purposes. Once, perhaps, but things had changed.

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"Go home," Kormak said, softly.

"The boy..." Skardus said.

"The boy hasn't seen your real face yet. Go home."

The pack stared at Skardus now, waiting for his lead. "Get out of here," he told them, his voice harsh. "Before he kills you. If he doesn't, I will."

The pack fled. Skardus turned to see Kormak striding towards the doorway, to gather up the lost children. Skardus looked at Anton and Hael and wished that he could do the same.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a long inglorious career as a world-wandering scribe, William King came to rest in the fabled city of Prague, where he dwells with his beautiful wife and two lovely sons surrounded by hoary tomes about swordsmen and sorcerers and tottering piles of roleplaying games. A former developer at Games Workshop, he is the creator of *Gotrek and Felix* and the author of many books set in the universe of *Warhammer 40K*. His short fiction has appeared in *Best of Interzone* and *Year's Best SF*. He has been an enthusiastic player of RPGs since 1977. Kormak stars in 12 novels, and the first is available for free at Amazon, iTunes and most other online retailers. King's online citadel is williamking.me.

BY THAT MUCH

By JOSEPH A. MCCULLOUGH

NICK Bury tossed his rusty shovel out of the freshly dug grave, and crawled up after it. He chuckled softly as he dusted off his pants and looked around the field with his one green eye. He then glanced skyward, where the sun was already well into its slow descent towards the horizon. Pulling out his old black pipe, Nick sat down on the mound of dirt next to the six-foot hole.

Nearly an hour passed while Nick sat smoking. The first stars became visible in the evening sky. Then lightning flashed, and a thunderclap rolled across the field. A scream came from above. Nick looked up and saw a man plummeting through the air. The man's scream was suddenly cut short as his body crashed into the ground a foot to one side of the open grave and mere inches from where Nick Bury sat. A second later, a black wand covered in silver runes rolled out of the man's hand and into the grave.

A frown formed on the gravedigger's face, but a moment later the corners of his lips curled up into a grin. A wheezing chuckle escaped his throat. Nick slipped a foot under the body and rolled it into the grave.

"That's the problem with magic," Nick said to himself, "so hard to predict."

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TYRANT'S BANE

A Tale of the King's Blade

By JOHN C. HOCKING

THE message arrived in early morning and instructed Benhus to appear at the City Mortuary that afternoon. As this was the first task directly assigned to him by the King, he immediately shaved, bathed, dressed his best, and otherwise attempted to appear professional, seasoned, and thoroughly accustomed to his role as an agent of royalty, all in defiance of being keenly aware that he was none of these things.

Benhus took his worn short sword, albeit in a fine new sheath from his dead master's armory. After a moment's thought he also took the elegant white dagger he'd found there, as its preternaturally keen edge had served him well and he'd come to think of it as something of a good luck charm.

It did seem unlikely he would need either weapon as the royal message informed him that he would be looking into the disappearance of a corpse. A renowned athlete, Viriban, a celebrated runner and caster of the javelin, had become such a favorite of the King that he was to be accepted into the King's personal guard, but was struck down by a sudden malaise. His body had gone missing from the mortuary, and the King was vexed.

Benhus entered his dead mentor's closed bedchamber and squinted grey eyes skeptically at himself in the full-length mirror there. The elegantly cut shirt and breeches hung well on his tall and wiry frame, but he was unaccustomed to finery of any kind and felt he looked a bit of a dandy. He saw his sandy hair was tousled and badly in need of a trim, then turned away from the mirror with a curse. Such concerns were a waste of his time.

Benhus left the white chambers of the villa that had once belonged to Thratos, the King's Hand, and now belonged to him. He was unsure precisely what the King might expect him to do to help locate a dead body, but was somewhat comforted by the message's mention that he was to meet, at the mortuary gates, another also assigned to the task.

The City Mortuary of Frekore was situated at the rim of a complex of dour governmental buildings, and the dusty streets were quiet and empty under the hot sun. The mortuary grounds had trees for shade, and were enclosed by a featureless stone wall, the only ingress a gate of black iron that stood open and unattended. Nobody wants in, thought Benhus, yet they keep coming.

He saw, near the end of the flagstone path to the mortuary's great double doors, a small figure standing in the shadow of a tall palm. As he approached he could see it was a young Southron woman, copper skinned, black haired and so short the top of her head barely reached the middle of his chest.

"You are Benhus?" Her voice was almost a child's, soft, but clear and strong.

"Yes," he said, then added, "you're early," which sounded clumsy to his ears. He had little interest or skill in casual conversation. He squinted at her sourly.

She was clad in dark traveling clothes of rough cloth and leather, with a bag of wolfskin over one small shoulder. The bag was adorned with tatters of cloth, beads and silvery bits of metal. A shaman's bag. At her belt he saw a small curved dagger, its hilt wrapped in wire. Her pointed chin lifted as she fixed black eyes on him, and he saw on her throat the tattoo of a black spider.

"I am Sandril," she said, and turned to knock on the mortuary door.

The door opened almost immediately, emitting a gust of cool, herbally scented air. It was dim within, lit by torches set back from the doorway that now framed a heavysset, balding man in robes of pale blue.

"Greetings," he said, "You are the Lady Sandril?"

"I'm not a noble," said the Southron. "Just Sandril."

"Come in, please. I am Pallos. My partner Mendax and I are the proprietors of these facilities." There was another man behind Pallos, who pushed the larger man aside with ill-concealed impatience.

"I am Mendax, and well able to introduce myself," he said. The second mortician was almost as short as Sandril, with dark hair, a narrow face and sharp eyes that looked Benhus and the Southron up and down. "Our workplace is yours to examine, but I fear you'll not find the remains of Viriban."

"Take me to where the body was kept," said Sandril. Mendax's brows rose.

"Of course," said Pallos. He ran a hand over his pate and turned back into the dimness of the hallway. Benhus followed, blinking to adjust his eyes to the torchlight and realizing, with an unfamiliar discomfort, that he had not been introduced.

"This is a great embarrassment, really," said Pallos. "I wish we had been left to take care of this ourselves. It was an assistant who reported it to the City Guard. Pay no heed to Mendax, I'm certain that it's only a matter of time before the body is found. The only issue might be if Viriban was, um, accidentally cremated."

The group turned into a large, vaulted chamber with grimy skylights providing a dull grey illumination. Some thirty heavy stone tables were evenly spaced across much of the floor so that they had to wend their way between them to cross the room. Most of the tables held a body, some covered by a sheet, some clothed, some stark naked. The herbal scent was stronger here, cloying, almost dizzying, and Benhus realized belatedly that it covered the stench of death.

They moved through a smaller room with walls lined with shelves laden with tools, jars and odd implements, and a single table holding the body of a large man. From there they passed into another room with a conspicuously empty table set against the far wall.

"He lay there," said Pallos unhappily. "I truly wish that word of our misfortune hadn't found its way to the King. I hope he knows how pained we are by all this. Do you... do you know if he is displeased with us?"

Benhus was about to say that he had seen the King only once, when he had chosen Benhus to go into training with Thratos, and that his majesty was not in the habit of confiding in him just yet, but said nothing. He noticed that Mendax no longer accompanied them but could not say when the second mortician had slipped away.

"Has anything else gone missing?" asked Sandril.

"Only the Royal Guard's uniform he was to be buried in."

"I must begin my workings. You are no longer needed, Lord Pallos. Thank you," said Sandril. "Benhus, please stand watch at the door."

Pallos retired, looking more than a little abashed. In truth Benhus felt much the same as it came to him with blunt clarity what his role really was. He was not present as an investigator, or even as hired muscle. He was a custodian here to make certain Sandril was uninterrupted in her shaman's work.

He moved to the doorway, while Sandril, her slim back to him, knelt and removed a variety of objects from her wolf-skin bag. With deft hands she laid out several candles in an arc before the empty table, then began drawing lines between them with a black bit of charcoal. She finished by pouring a series of small piles of multicolored powder, scattered seemingly at random among the candles. Then she sat back on her heels, silent.

Benhus watched in a desultory fashion, preoccupied with trying not to feel disappointed, even humiliated, by the nature of the job he'd been given. Had Thratos started like this?

After a time he wearied of both his own reaction and of Sandril's meditative stillness. He walked softly through the chamber that separated the room where the little shaman worked from the larger chamber. His gaze flickered over the shelves restlessly, then focused on the corpse lying on the table. The body was that of a corpulent man wearing only a white breechclout. He lay on his back with one arm by his side, the other bent at the elbow with the hand resting on his breast. The posture was that of sleep, but the pallid and mottled flesh of the man's torso allowed no doubt that this was a corpse.

Benhus felt a certain morbid curiosity as to who the man had been and how he might have died. The corpse seemed unharmed, so Benhus supposed he had perished of disease or some failure of the body. Looking at the open hand on the still breast, Benhus saw, between pale fingers, what appeared to be a puckered wound. He brushed the hand aside with a quick motion. The elbow was stiff, but shifted enough that he could see that there was a small round puncture, no bigger than a fingertip, right over the corpse's heart.

Benhus raised an eyebrow. Though of less than twenty summers he had seen many wounds and more scars, but this was new to him. It appeared that the fellow had been slain by the single stroke of a very slender blade, perhaps a long stiletto, that took him directly through the heart. Benhus marveled at the ef-

ficiency of this, wondered who the assassin might be and where he had acquired his skill.

A quick glance assured him that Sandril was still sitting in silence, so he proceeded into the large chamber and gazed across the grimly laden tables, dim under the dirty skylights. The body closest to him was covered by a sheet. After a furtive glance around to be certain he was alone, Benhus lifted the sheet's corner and drew it back to expose the body beneath.

He recoiled, the sheet flipping from his shocked hand so that the corpse's awful head and upper torso were laid bare. It was a young man, perhaps not much older than Benhus, but it was hard to be certain as his body bore the grisly signs of prolonged and elaborate torment. His flesh was torn, burnt, twisted and mutilated in such a fashion that Benhus was repelled.

"Gods," he whispered, his voice dry and small in the chamber's silence.

Then he saw, centered over the corpse's heart, a round and puckered wound. A terrible wonder seized Benhus, and he could find no sense in what he saw. Had the youth, after all he had suffered, been finished with a merciful stab to the heart? How was it that his wound was the twin of the one borne by the otherwise unmarked body in the next room?

He turned away from the wretched remains on the table and found himself looking down on the body of an older woman, thin arms crossed over her breast. His eyes found the round puncture immediately.

Then he was moving swiftly from body to body, pulling aside sheets and garments, and finding that identical wound over the heart of every corpse in the chamber.

Benhus walked back toward where Sandril worked her Southron magic. It had to be a sign of the mortician's work. That was the only thing that made sense. Yet what possible use would a wound through the heart of a corpse be? And why did so many of these bodies shows signs of grievous torture? There was something here he could neither fathom nor dismiss.

He came to an awkward stop just inside the doorway, saw that the candles arrayed before Sandril were now alight and flickering, that the small piles of colored powder were smoldering and giving off thin streams of smoke. Sandril hummed softly in a deeper tone than her speaking voice, and held both hands out to the empty table as if imploring it for answers.

Benhus looked on for only a moment before Sandril stood up abruptly. As she turned to face him the candles flickered out as if snuffed by an invisible hand.

"This is unexpected," she said. Benhus was about to ask what she meant when someone approached from behind.

"Have you had any luck?" It was Pallos, hands clasped before him, his broad body filling the doorway. There was someone behind him.

"The body was not moved," said Sandril. Her black eyes fixed on Pallos with probing intensity.

"What?" said Pallos, with a weak laugh, "Of course it's been moved. It's...it's gone."

"When it left here, it was no longer a corpse."

"What? Are you suggesting that Viriban is alive?"

"I didn't say that."

All of this made little sense to Benhus, who broke the strained silence with the question he could not withhold.

"Why are all the bodies in the main chamber stabbed through the heart?"

The mortician swayed a little in the doorway, hands fretting over his belly, lips tight with indecision or something like it. There was more movement behind him and another voice was heard.

"Pallos, bring them out of there and I'll explain what I can."

"Oh, welcome Mendax!" said Pallos, smiling stiffly. "Lady Sandril, please allow my partner to illuminate the situation."

He turned and walked through the next room with an odd halting haste. Benhus followed with Sandril close behind, but Mendax was not in the room with the shelf covered walls and the single corpse.

Benhus and the Southron shaman saw that the body of the big man had been moved into a sitting position, facing them with its back against the wall and legs outstretched on the table. Benhus felt a chill thrust of wariness, the abrupt perception of something false and dangerous. He laid his hand on the hilt of the white dagger.

"What do you..." began Sandril.

Then a voice spoke a word, and although the voice was that of Mendax the word tolled like a hidden gong and dizzied Benhus like a blow to the head from a cloth-wrapped fist.

The body on the table acquired a dull metallic sheen, brightest at its eyes. Wide open, they were orbs of silver-gray illumination and their gaze fell over Benhus like a weighted net. He felt weakness course through his limbs, his breath go sluggish in his lungs and his heart stutter and slow. His sight was held captive by the eyes of the corpse. He stared helplessly into the soft-shining eyes of the dead man and felt his knees bending, quivering under his own weight.

"Necromancy," breathed Sandril in a fading whisper. She'd already slid to the floor and sat limply with her back against the shelves. Benhus struggled to keep his feet and draw the white dagger. Sweat broke from his temples with the strain, but the blade didn't lift a fingerbreadth from its sheath and he went slowly to his knees on the stone floor.

"Yes, necromancy. A final wonder for you to behold before the end." Benhus could sense the man, Mendax, at the edge of his vision, in the doorway. "Relax and make your peace with the gods."

"Was this necessary?" That was Pallos, querulous and indignant. "Did you have to..."

"Yes." Mendax's voice was cold, imperious. "And it is entirely your fault. If you'd kept your man from going to the city guard about Viriban none of this would have happened. We still have time to do what must be done. Take this scalpel and finish them."

"Me? But the spell..."

"The Blindsight would kill them, but slowly, not for hours, and we do not have that time. Slit their throats. Avert your eyes and do not pass between them and the source-light. As soon as

they are dead the spell will fade and you can cremate their corpses yourself. I must finish writing our letter to the King explaining your oversight with the body of his pet athlete."

Steps faded back and away as Mendax departed, and an ominous silence followed. Kneeling between the doorway and Sandril, Benhus fought to move with such desperate resolve that he trembled and sweat darkened his fine shirt, but he could not rise and his weapon did not shift from its sheath. He heard a soft choking sound from Sandril, and could see, at his vision's rim, her head was thrown back, her mouth was open and her throat worked as if she were gripped by a seizure.

"I- I am not accustomed to such acts, Lady Sandril," said Pallos, "but I promise you I will cut cleanly and quickly." The mortician shuffled into the room, hunched over, face turned away from the corpse's eerie, luminous gaze. In one hand he held a mirror-bright scalpel.

Something dark appeared at Sandril's lips, moved there, then dropped onto her breast. Benhus, vision blurred with desperate effort and half mad with frustrated rage, could not tell what it was until it scuttled down her body, crossed the space between them and crouched beside his thigh.

A black spider big enough to fill his palm.

He thought of the tattoo on Sandril's throat and a visceral horror rose in him. Pallos seized his hair with one hand, then extended the hand that clutched the shining scalpel beneath his jaw preparatory to drawing the blade back across Benhus's exposed throat.

The darkling spider pounced onto Pallos's forearm and the mortician jerked back convulsively with a cry, first of revulsion, then of shock and pain as black fangs pierced his flesh. He staggered up, striking frantically at the thing on his arm, and his body passed between the corpse and Benhus, breaking the line of sight.

A great weight seemed to abruptly lift from Benhus and he clamped his eyes shut and stood. He drew the white dagger and flourished it, emitting a snarl as feral as that of a wounded wolf.

He heard Pallos collapse but paid no heed, took three steps forward and blindly brought the white dagger across in a savage horizontal slash. He felt his blade strike the ensorcelled body, and was instantly certain his blow had landed precisely as intended.

Benhus opened his eyes to see Sandril still leaning back against the shelves, but now lifting hands to her face. The corpse, again pallid and devoid of unnatural radiance, was cleft cleanly and levelly through the skull, across the orbits of both eyes. The severed upper portion of the dead man's head had come to rest on the floor by the doorway, where it lay like a discarded bowl of spoiled food.

"That's a hell of a dagger," rasped Sandril.

Benhus looked at her, could find no words, then moved to where Pallos lay panting, face down on the stone. He knelt beside the mortician, grabbed a shoulder and tried to turn him over. The spider was nowhere to be seen.

"What goes on here? Explain or I'll..."

Pallos flopped onto his back, wheezing with pain, froth bubbling from his lips. His body arched in a ghastly rictus and a terrible gurgling cry came from his throat. He was suddenly still.

"Gods," muttered Benhus.

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BENHUS sat on the portico of his dead master's villa in the bright morning sun. He looked out over the small garden, drank punishingly strong tea, and brooded. On the table before him, beside his oversized mug, was a package recently delivered. It was from the King and contained an ornate blue cuirass and an invitation to wear it that evening at the ceremonial swearing in of the new recruits to the King's royal guard.

Benhus felt certain the invitation was connected to the previous night's debacle. He wondered if the King was inviting him in order to drive home how important it was that he find the body of Viriban, or at least learn why the morticians who apparently lost it had decided to kill Sandril and himself as soon as they started asking pointed questions. He wondered where Mendax the mortician had fled. He wondered if the King wanted to upbraid him personally for the necromancer's escape. Perhaps being the King's Blade, a direct servant of royalty, was not as agreeable as Benhus anticipated it would be.

He had been questioned by the City Guard, at length and with considerably less respect than he thought warranted, had returned home late, slept poorly and was now further irritated by this unexpected invitation. It wasn't as though he could simply ignore it.

Benhus leaned back in his chair, took a long swallow of hot tea, then abruptly came to his feet. Someone had entered the gate and was walking swiftly up the garden path to the portico.

It was Sandril, still in the same traveling garb, but without her shaman's bag of wolfskin. She came up the steps and stood beside the table without greeting him. He tried not to look at the tattoo on her throat.

"Surprised to see you," said Benhus tersely. Sandril's black eyes sought the tiles.

"I had to confer with my father and uncle, both better versed in the arts than I. What they told me I knew I had to tell you."

Her earnest tone and manner cooled his indignation somewhat. Benhus sat and motioned for her to do the same, but she remained standing, tense and intent.

"Couldn't you have stayed long enough to say something to the City Guards so that I didn't have to entertain them half the night? And what was that foolishness about the body of Viriban no longer being a corpse? Did Pallos and Mendax cremate him and remove the ashes?"

Sandril ignored the last question. "I don't know what became of Viriban except that when his body left that room it was not the same as when it was laid there. I have my suspicions, but I'm not sure. That's not important."

"And..." Benhus couldn't hold it back, "and what about that damned spider? Where — where did it go?"

Her small mouth framed a small smile. "It is mine when I need it. And it is gone when I do not. None of this is as important as what you found."

"What I found?" Benhus frowned. "I didn't..." Sandril's gaze rose until she stared fiercely into his eyes, imploring his attention with such urgency that he fell silent.

"The wounds in the breast of every lifeless body in the mortuary. My uncle, who has had concourse with the elder shaman, DustDreaming, and who is familiar with the forgotten ways and secret truths, knew of such."

"What did he say about it?"

"In the dawn time, when the Southrons were more than the mesa dwellers we are today, when we had an empire that stretched from horizon to horizon..."

"What did he say?" Benhus snapped. "I need no history lesson."

"When there was a hated ruler, a cruel leader so careless with his power and the lives of his people that rebels rose against him, shamans in those days were said to fashion a weapon. A dagger made of pale bone with a blade like a hollow needle."

"You think the shape of the wounds means that..."

"No," she said doggedly, "more than that. The weapon was used to pierce the heart of a corpse, from which it drew a single drop of heartsblood. When the bone dagger was used to slay the hated ruler, when it pierced his living body, the corpseblood caused the stabbed man to experience the death of each body from which blood was taken. They called it Tyrantsbane. In the dawn times it was used to insure that a deposed tyrant felt the pain and loss of some of those whom he abused, cast down and slew to hold power. But this..." Her voice trailed off.

Benhus, the sun warm on his face, felt something cold move in the pit of his stomach.

"Every corpse in that room had been stabbed with that thing," he said slowly, "and many of them had been tortured to death."

"And how many more might there be that we did not see? That had already been burned or buried? This is a blasphemous use of a terrible weapon, cultivated now to deliver an agony prolonged beyond understanding."

He noticed that his throat had gone somewhat dry. "But why...?"

"Don't you see? It can only be for the King."

"I know there are those who plot against the King, who hold him unjust, but..."

"There are some who hate him enough to deliver him to the worst ending imaginable. You are to be near him soon, are you not?"

"Yes, tonight. How did you...?"

"You must warn him. And arm yourself." Sandril reached out a hand and grasped Benhus's forearm, a gesture so unexpected that he flinched. "Mendax and whoever he's with must surely suspect that their intent has been exposed. They cannot afford to wait long to act. You need a strong weapon. Do you have something more than your blades?"

Benhus thought a moment. 'I inherited a collection of Nobleman's Comforts from my teacher. I'll bring one of those little wands. And I'll tell the King what you suspect.'

Sandril was earnest. "You have to convince him to guard himself more carefully than ever before. He is stalked by an enemy armed with a tool of deepest hatred and seeking a hellish vengeance. My family owes the House of Flavius a debt it can never repay. I will try to stay near enough to come to the King's aid if he needs it. I have little in the way of combat sorcery, but I'll..."

"What are you saying? The King is surrounded by the most highly trained guards in the Triad. No assassin wielding any weapon, even this Tyrantsbane, could get close enough to him to use it. And I will tell him of his danger."

Sandril stepped back from the table. She laid a small hand on the dagger at her belt, and in the morning light Benhus could see that it was wrought of black stone.

"I will fail neither the King nor you. Stay vigilant at all costs." With that she turned and walked off back down the garden path.

Benhus opened his mouth, then closed it, unable to conceive of a response. He looked down at the bright cuirass on the table. He'd already tried it on and found it fit very well. He'd be dressed appropriately for tonight's occasion, but he would have to see that he was armed for it as well. Carrying his still-steaming cup of tea, Benhus went inside and down into his dead master's armory.

There were many Nobleman's Comforts to choose from, but it wasn't difficult to make a selection. He didn't know how many charges any of them had, and only knew what a handful of them actually did, so he chose one he'd seen in action, understood how to trigger, and simply had to hope it held enough charges to serve whatever demands he might make of it.

It wasn't until he tucked the compact little wand into his shirt that he found himself wondering exactly how he might convey his desperate message to the King during a formal initiation ceremony for royal guardsmen. And, even if he was able to do so, just how seriously such a strange and extravagant claim might be taken.

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THE moon was rising and just visible low among the dark trees. Benhus stood beside an unkept dirt road through a forest. Beside him a brazier full of flaming, aromatic wood was mounted atop a heavy shaft thrust into the ground, and added wavering torchlight to the pale and creeping moonlight. On the opposite side of the road a row of young men, all dressed smartly in the uniform of the King's Guard, stood silently at attention.

Ahead, the road proceeded straight for perhaps the length of a city block before dropping below ground, passing through a ceremonial tunnel lined with painted images depicting the heroic history of the Royal Guard. Benhus understood that, once all was ready, they were to pass through the tunnel and emerge into an old temple, open to the sky and blessed by the Gods. There,

under the stars, oaths of loyalty would be given, a ritual goblet of wine would be shared, and the King would make a short speech to welcome the new members of his personal guard.

The King's coach, lacquered glossy white with gold and purple trim, was closed tightly with the four horses that drew it as silent as the driver clutching the reins and slouching in his seat. Between Benhus and the royal carriage stood a formidable looking man.

The fellow was dressed in a more elaborate version of the uniform worn by the recruits. At first glance Benhus had thought him to be quite short, but when the man had drawn near it became clear that he was taller than Benhus, but so thick through the chest and so heavy with muscle in arms and shoulders that his powerful body appeared stout. Benhus was certain that this was Praedon, captain of the Royal Guard. He was also certain that Praedon was markedly unimpressed by anything about him, including his sincerely professed desire to speak personally with the King as soon as possible.

"So you think someone's trying to kill him? With some kind of Southron magic knife?" Benhus started to respond, but Praedon continued as if any answer he might make was immaterial. "And you've taken over for Thratos? You're the King's Hand?"

This last was asked with a note of undisguised incredulity that sparked sharp resentment in Benhus but, before he could answer, the door of the coach swung open and his majesty, King Numar Flavius, stepped out into the cool of evening.

Benhus heard a rustling of leaves, as though they were stirred by a wind he didn't feel, but then the line of recruits all slapped their armored breasts and shouted, as one, "Hail!"

"At attention!" bellowed Praedon in a voice that hammered the ear, and the recruits stood even more rigidly alert than before.

King Flavius advanced and Praedon stood to one side so that the monarch came face to face with his agent, Benhus, who had inherited the position of King's Hand from a master he had slain, who wished to be known as the King's Blade, and who now felt the full force of his royal employer's personality.

The King was a brawny, looming presence, taller even than Praedon and built along such exaggerated, muscular lines that he resembled an outsized statue fashioned to commemorate a martial hero of legend. His head was big and crowned with thick, coiling locks of black shot through with strands of gray. His bull neck descended into a broad chest and heavy shoulders all wrapped in an elegant robe of purest white. His legs were bare and knotted with muscle. Gold fittings gleamed on his sandals.

Benhus, who had seen the king only atop a speaking platform across a wide room, was speechless. Flavius seemed to exude an oppressive aura of dominance, of regal authority that made Benhus wonder what he was doing there and how he hoped to even address such a figure.

"What have we here?" The King's voice was deep and penetrating. His dark, close-cut beard split in a white smile.

"This one says..." began Praedon, but Benhus had had enough of the guard captain and broke in.

"Milord, I am Benhus, once the student of your servant Thra-tos, and now his successor. You sent me, with the shaman Sandril, to find the misplaced corpse of Viriban."

The King's heavy brows rose. "Yes. You are my new King's Hand."

"Blade," said Benhus before he could stop himself. "I am your Blade. You invited me here and I must convey to you what Sandril and I uncovered. There is a plot to kill you, sire. The morticians Pallos and Mendax used necromancy to fashion a Southron weapon for the task." Benhus took an unsteady breath, enraged with himself for his breathless tone, his inadequacy with words, and his awkward youth in the presence of the King.

"Fools have been plotting to slay me for many more years than you have drawn breath," said the King. "We will discuss this after the ceremony, and perhaps you can tell me what became of the body of my friend Viriban." Flavius smiled again, but Benhus saw the green eyes above the grin were curiously still, and gazed upon him with a cold and detached appraisal.

The rustling of leaves came once again to Benhus, followed by a shout. With effort he turned from the King and saw that a tall figure, dressed in the armor of the recruits, was standing some distance from the rest, was moving forward and hefting a spear.

"He came out of the trees!" burst out Praedon. "Milord!"

In the fiery gleam of the brazier's light Benhus saw the figure moving fleetly, running and hurling the spear with ease and grace fearful to behold. And he saw the figure's bare arms had a dull metallic sheen.

"Assassin!" cried Benhus. "Protect the King!"

The broad-headed spear, released and flying with the speed of a diving hawk, shot not toward the King, but directly at Praedon. The Captain of the Guard threw himself flat on his back to avoid it. Passing over his body, the spear hurtled off into the shadowed forest, crashed through brush, and was gone.

The line of recruits leapt into action, intercepting and attempting to encircle the assassin. Benhus had his sword bared before he knew he'd touched the hilt. Flavius was watching the cluster of recruits draw tight around the assassin and Praedon was getting up off the ground.

There came the swift, terrible sound of a blade shearing through armor and the scream of a man grievously wounded. The assassin burst free of encircling foes, leaving two sprawled in his wake, and sprinted for the King. A recruit, with magnificent gallantry, dove headlong and caught the intruder's flying ankle, staggering him long enough for the others to draw in once more. Benhus saw the figure unsheath a Legion short sword and drive it downward to pin the tackler to the earth.

"Go! Into my carriage! Hedross, ready the horses!" roared the King.

Benhus flung the coach's door open with such force it rebounded with a crack from the vehicle's elegantly lacquered side. Numar Flavius lunged into the opening with unkingly haste, and Benhus found himself pushed in behind by the firm hand of Praedon.

"In! We must defend the King!"

Benhus foundered over purple upholstered seats, squinting in the warm candlelit interior. Praedon slid in beside him and slammed the carriage door.

"Hedross, go!" he bellowed, slapping the roof, and the carriage lurched into motion.

Two heavily cushioned benches, scattered with plush pillows, took up most of the carriage's interior, facing one another so that the King could converse with companions as he travelled in luxury. Flavius sprawled on one side, splay-legged, with a hand pressed to his broad chest. Benhus sat with Praedon on the other. The windows were high and narrow, and outside there seemed to be only moving darkness.

The carriage jounced and shook over the uneven road, tilting precariously as the driver, Hedross, took the horses around a corner. Benhus became aware that he still clutched his short sword, and had just sheathed it when something thundered onto the carriage's arched roof. There was a shout from outside. The carriage did not slow, if anything it hurtled along even faster, jolting and shaking as if it might tear itself to bits.

Something smashed a neat hole through the ceiling directly over Praedon's head, throwing splinters. Benhus glimpsed a dully shining fist before it withdrew, only to instantly return, grasp the edge of the punched hole and rip, with a squalling of rent timber, a great section of the carriage roof away.

"Gods!" someone cried. Wind poured in the ragged gap, over which loomed a standing figure in the garb of a Royal Guardsman, effortlessly balanced atop the hurtling coach.

Praedon came to his feet, slapped a hand on his sword hilt, and the shadowed figure above dropped to a knee and reached in with the speed of a panther snaring a rabbit. A silvery hand clamped about Praedon's throat, jerked him up and halfway out of the carriage.

Benhus scrambled from the cushions but the Guard Captain's legs were kicking as wildly as if he were freshly hung on a gallows. A heavy foot slammed dead center on Benhus's chest. The power of the blow hammered Benhus down, crumpled him on the carriage floor with the breath blasted from his body, one leg twisted painfully beneath him and his vision blurred with tears. He fought to gulp air and blinked his vision clear enough to see Praedon lifted easily through the hole in the carriage roof and then cast off, discarded into the rushing night.

Benhus writhed, lying atop his sword and unable to draw it. The figure above lowered its dark head into the carriage, features as expressionless as if cast in cold iron. Thrust through its belt was a slim bladed dagger of a uniformly pale hue, almost white. The color of bone. A long arm reached for Benhus.

"Viriban!" cried the King, and in his voice was both horror and a plea.

Benhus scrabbled at his cuirass, cursing the unfamiliar armor, dug numb fingers beneath the metal and drew out the Nobleman's Comfort.

The silvery hand extended, groping for his throat. Benhus bobbed the little wand, pointed it up, found the trigger and

squeezed. There was a sound like the tearing of parchment magnified to an ear-piercing shriek and Viriban's outstretched arm went bright white almost to the shoulder. A shriveling chill flooded the interior of the carriage and Benhus felt as if he'd been plunged into ice water.

Fingers, now pallid as marble, brushed the back of Benhus's hand, so frigid his skin blistered at the touch. With a strangled cry of rage, Benhus extended the Nobleman's comfort for a second release of its icy power.

But the figure was gone, withdrawing like a plume of smoke struck by a sudden gust of wind. The horses were slowing, the King slapped a great hand onto Benhus's back, but he noticed none of this. He flailed awkwardly to his feet and leapt up into the hole torn out of the carriage's roof. He got his upper body through and hung on, legs dangling inside. His gaze raked the night for his foe.

"Come on!" he screamed. "I have more for you!"

The carriage moved haltingly down a quiet lane, flanked on one side by an empty field and the other by a sparse growth of woods. The tidal surge of rage waned in Benhus as scudding clouds laid bare a moon like a glowing mask, gaunt and haggard against the stars.

Benhus clambered out onto the roof and crouched there. Of the driver, Hedross, there was no sign. He saw that they had come some distance from where the ceremony was to begin and wondered how many of the recruits still lived. The carriage drew to a lazy halt.

"Is he gone? Did your wand kill Viriban?" Aside from sounding a bit breathless, the King seemed undisturbed by recent events.

"Viriban was already dead. The necromancy of those damned morticians brought his body back to kill you with that bone dagger he wore."

"Bone dagger?"

"Southron magic. Get stabbed with it and you die a thousand times." Benhus felt the fierce energy that accompanied combat flicker and dim within him. He drew a ragged breath.

"I have a retreat," said the King from below. "A place, a refuge made to protect me from forces natural and supernatural." He paused a moment. "Do you know how to drive this coach?"

"Milord, I do not," said Benhus with a surge of mortification. "But I can try...wait."

There was a figure jogging toward them from the direction of the interrupted ceremony. Benhus gripped the Nobleman's Comfort tightly, but the figure was too small and too slow to be the animated remains of Viriban. After a few moments of suspense, a voice hailed the coach. It was Sandril.

To the surprise of Benhus, Numar Flavius stepped out of the coach to greet her. She dropped to one knee briefly, a genuflection Benhus hadn't seen before.

"At your service, my liege, as are all of my blood until the Palling."

"Can you drive this damned carriage?" rumbled the King. She could.

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THE King's bolthole turned out to be a slim tower that rose out of a small fortified blockhouse situated in the midst of the palace gardens. Guards were already there and seemed to know what had happened. They ushered the King, Benhus and Sandril from the coach, through the sparsely furnished blockhouse, to a set of stairs behind a sturdy iron door. The king traded terse comments with a trio of attentive captains, gave orders for the apprehension of Viriban, then pulled the door closed and dropped the heavy bar. He led Benhus and the little shaman up a tight spiral stair into the tower, his brawny form moving easily up the five flights to the top.

"Make yourselves at home," said the King, "and tell me what you know of this unpleasant situation."

Sandril immediately began to relay the details of their experiences at the mortuary of Pallos and Mendax, while Benhus tried not to gape at the luxuries surrounding him.

The top floor of the tower was a single large room perhaps thirty paces across. At one side there was a long table with many chairs and a scribe's lectern with scrolls, quills and seals, but most of the chamber appeared to be designed for extravagant leisure. Couches and overstuffed chairs stood about the room in relaxed profusion. The floor was covered with thick rugs and the skins of exotic animals. Pillows were scattered everywhere, as were small round tables, most of which looked to be set with crystal goblets and decanters of wine.

At room's center was a circular dais of a single step surmounted by a high-backed chair upholstered in lush purple velvet. A casual throne from which to preside over whatever revelry the room might host. Golden oil lamps lit the interior now, but rows of tall narrow windows, reaching from just above the floor almost to the arched ceiling, would brighten the room on even a cloudy day.

"So you believe these two morticians to be rogue necromancers who have made the body of Viriban into a weapon expressly to take my life?" asked Flavius when Sandril had finished. Benhus could not hold his tongue.

"Believe? We are sure of it. And what troubles me most is how much hate went into every bit of it. Pallos and Mendax meant to use the body of your good friend to kill you with a dagger ensorcelled to deliver the pain of many deaths. I...' Benhus faltered. "I know you have enemies, but this?"

The King put hands on his hips and smiled slowly, broad white teeth gleaming in his dark beard. "Royalty always has its enemies. And I have cultivated mine with rare skill. This you will come to know in time, my Hand."

"Blade," said Benhus without thinking, then added hastily, "Thratos was your Hand. I would be your Blade."

"Their resourcefulness and determination are not to be underestimated, my liege," broke in Sandril. "How protected are we here?"

Flavius laughed softly. "I spent a prince's ransom on this place. Aside from the guards below and an iron door built to withstand assault by siege engine, the walls here are set with magical wards to blunt and nullify spells cast against me."

"I can't say how effective that will be," said Sandril. "The sorcery we have seen is a strange combination of the necromancy worked by your Empire's wizards and Southron shaman-magic. The Tyrantsbane dagger is a work of Southron high sorcery, unseen for many lifetimes."

"Surely the surviving mortician, this Mendax, would have already cast spells upon me from a distance if he could do so. His use of Viriban failed and my soldiers will find him eventually."

With a splintering crash, bright shards exploded from a window on the room's West side. A dark shaft dangled, then fell from the jagged hole it had burst through the glass. It was a spear, marked with the blue workings of the King's own guard. Benhus thought he heard a commotion from below.

"Name of the Gods!" burst out Flavius. "A fine cast, but to what purpose?"

"Could it get up here?" asked Sandril. Benhus knew she was speaking to him and exactly what she meant.

"The thing came upon us in the wood by moving through the trees. It stood on the roof of the coach as if we weren't moving."

"Milord!" called Sandril urgently. "Do you have a weapon?"

Impossibly, there was a figure at the broken window, pushing through with a clatter of glass and a scraping of steel cuirass on the narrow frame. Viriban, dead but moving on a singular mission, leapt into the room and landed in a crouch. The left arm was missing from just above the elbow, the stump black and jagged. The dead man stood, and drew from its belt the long, pale dagger of bone.

Benhus felt his belly open into a frozen hollow. There were screams from somewhere below, but they seemed far away and barely registered. Viriban must have climbed the outside of the tower like a great spider, and now he was here to kill the King.

The dead man advanced swiftly across the chamber, long limbed and liquidly graceful, with a face like an expressionless mask, betraying no trace of emotion, intent or humanity. Benhus drew the Nobleman's Comfort and lifted it, but Sandril had moved between him and the assassin, blocking its path to the King.

The little shaman lunged forward and cast a handful of yellow powder, finer than sand, into Viriban's face. The dead man moved through the settling cloud without slowing, drew back the dagger-wielding hand and struck Sandril a blow to side of her head that sent her staggering, striking a small table and crashing to the floor with it.

Benhus felt a thrill of dread, before understanding that Sandril had been struck with the dagger's pommel. Viriban was saving the blade for Numar Flavius.

The King dodged back among the couches, trying to put the raised throne between himself and the oncoming dead man. Benhus triggered the Nobleman's Comfort and the terrible tearing sound stabbed at his ears as Viriban's right leg went brilliant white. Cold seemed to curdle the air and the dead man stopped, looking down at its frozen, unresponsive leg.

"Well done!" Flavius moved around the throne to stand at Benhus's side. He'd come up with a broad-bladed short sword

and hefted it eagerly. "We'll see if he lives when lopped limb from limb!"

Benhus saw the dead man draw back its arm with unnatural speed, and with a jolt of numb horror he understood that Viriban was going to throw the bone dagger.

Benhus hooked a foot around the King's ankle and slammed into Flavius with all his strength and weight, sweeping the big man off his feet, riding him down and driving him face first into the floor.

Tyrantsbane passed a handspan over Benhus's neck as he dropped, shot past the falling pair and drove into the back of the throne, burying itself to the quillions with a muffled thump. The blade, rounded and without an edge, tapered to a hollow needle's point, and jutted impotently out over the throne's empty purple seat, between the chair's padded arms.

Benhus, half atop his fallen King, saw Flavius lift his face from the floor with a snarl, blood streaming from his nose. From far below came a roaring crash, and the entire tower shuddered as if sundered at its base. Benhus gritted his teeth, but could pay this no heed.

Viriban lurched forward, dragging the frozen leg. Its remaining arm reached out, the hand like a claw. Benhus cursed savagely, rose up on one knee and triggered the wand again. This time Viriban's entire head and neck went white. The dead man stopped moving and stood rigidly still.

Benhus launched himself at Viriban with an animal roar of triumph. His fists slammed into the dead man's chest as he drove the assassin over backward. Viriban's frozen skull struck the floor and broke into jagged pieces, frosted bright white outside and deepest crimson within. Benhus rose and kicked the corpse in the ribs hard enough to move it across the floor.

"Stay dead, you son of a bitch!"

A low laugh came from the King, who lifted himself to his feet and drew a forearm across his face to wipe away the blood. He spat on the furs at his feet. Scarlet droplets stood out sharply on the white breast of his robes.

"I'm certain that you have broken my nose, but also that you have saved my life," said Flavius. "So I owe you a debt. A favor you may claim at your whim."

The King's words had some warmth but when Benhus met his eyes he found them as chill as ever. He looked away and wondered how desirable a thing it truly was to have King Numar Flavius in your debt.

Sandril was up, unsteady but sitting on a couch, nursing a knot on her head but seemingly little worse for wear. Benhus noticed that the sounds from below had ceased. He walked around the throne, pierced clean through by the bone dagger, and toward the top of the stairs. Someone in the garb of a royal guardsman came out of the stairwell. His blue armor was covered with blood and there was a fist-sized hole in his cuirass through which Benhus could see the wall behind him. There was a sword in each hand and, as he advanced, the dead man lifted both weapons.

"Gods and demons!" Benhus triggered the Nobleman's Comfort yet again. The dead guardsman stopped, face and shoulders struck white with frost, then toppled stiffly to one side.

The stairwell was dark, and out of that darkness came Mendax. The short necromancer's narrow face was pinched with focused rage. In one hand he held a black dagger with a serrated blade encrusted with green, glistening venom. In the other was a slim shaft of grey metal.

Benhus identified this as a Nobleman's Comfort just as Mendax pointed it at the center of his chest and triggered it. He bellowed a warning as he hurled himself to the right, trying to get out of the weapon's path. He felt something strike his upper left arm a glancing blow.

"Flavius!" cried Mendax, "Your time is come at last! Tyrant! Monster! Devourer of children!"

Benhus hit the carpet and rolled, struck the dais step and stopped. The freezing wand was in his hand, but his arm was strangely weak and his upper body was unaccountably warm and wet. He looked down at himself and saw his left arm and chest were covered with blood. It couldn't be real. There was so much of it and it was so very scarlet. Distracted, he managed to point the wand at Mendax, but when he triggered it nothing happened. Out of charges, he thought.

Mendax stepped over Benhus and lowered the poisoned dagger. Benhus heaved his legs up and kicked Mendax with both feet, drove his heels into the mortician's belly with force enough to lift the little man off the ground and hurl him backwards. Mendax was propelled up and onto the throne, where he sat with force enough to tilt the heavy chair back so that it teetered for a moment on its rear legs.

Dizzy, Benhus wobbled to his feet clutching at his upper arm, where three parallel razor slashes had cut all the way to the bone. He thought to flee, to draw his dagger and fight, but then saw that Mendax was not getting off the throne. The necromancer was sitting up straight, wide eyed and open mouthed. A terrible quavering cry came from his lips.

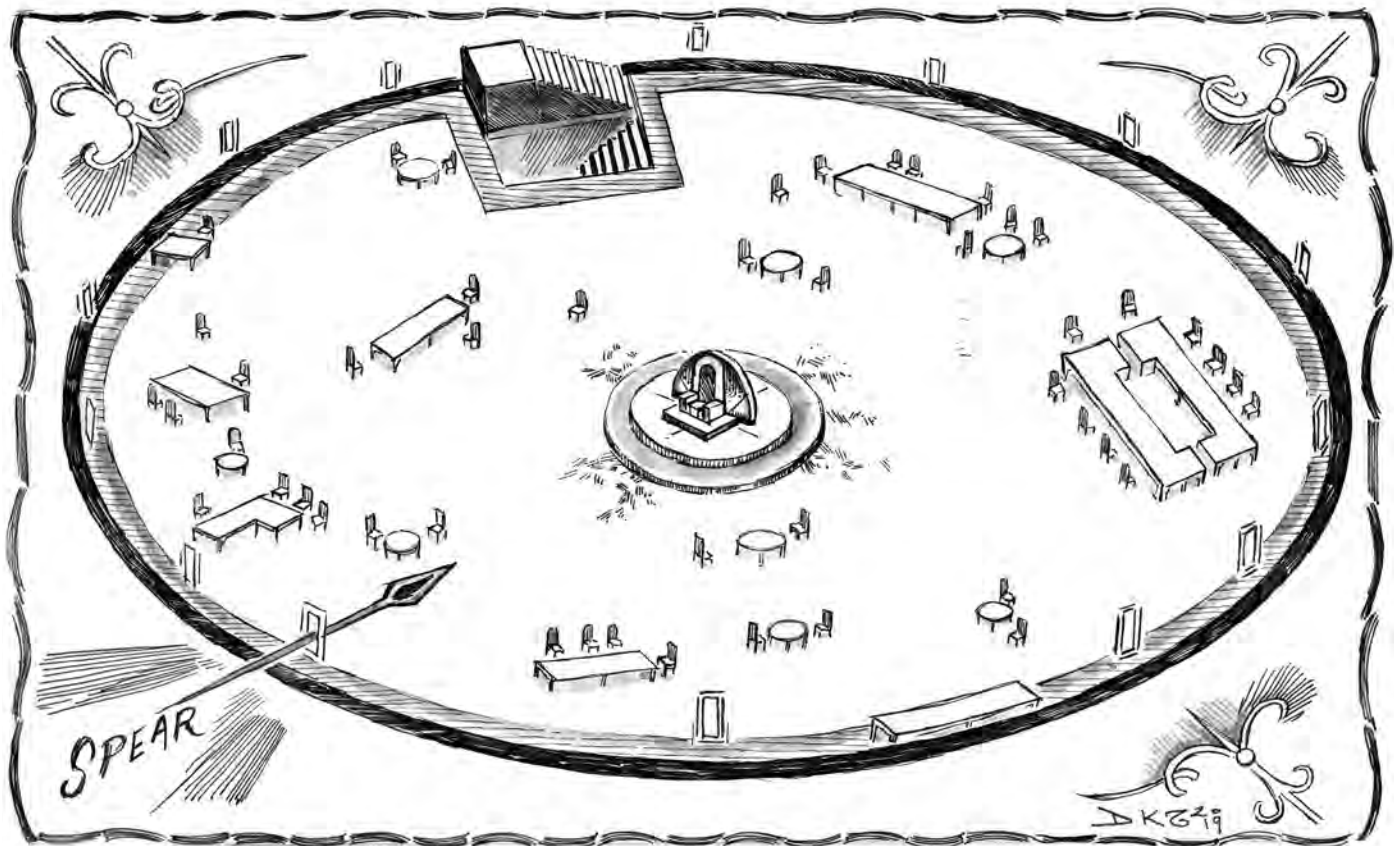
With plunging horror Benhus realized that the Tyrantsbane dagger, driven through the back of the throne by Viriban's cast, had stabbed Mendax. His kick had hurled the mortician onto the blade and now Mendax was pinned, nailed to the throne like a king of the damned.

Sandril was beside Benhus, pressing a moist cloth against his wound until he took it from her and held it in place himself. The King stepped forward, put a foot on the dais and leaned in to gaze directly into Mendax's face.

"Is this what you planned for me?" His voice was thick, almost sensual. "I wonder how you will enjoy it. Tell me, oh tell me, what exactly do you feel?"

Mendax's face had gone pale and sickly. His eyes rolled in delirium as his mouth worked without speaking. A low moan broke from his lips, began to grow, to lift into a shuddering scream. Sandril stepped quickly around Benhus and up onto the dais. She snatched the black stone dagger from her belt and, with one swift motion, slashed Mendax's throat.

The necromancer's face twisted, his gaze locked onto Sandril, wide eyes full of terror and pain and something that might have been gratitude. He choked once, then his head fell forward onto his breast.



DEAD WOOD

By JOSEPH A. MCCULLOUGH

OLD Nick Bury sat against a tree, a long-stemmed pipe clenched between his teeth, and watched a rotten log drift down the sluggish river. As the dead wood slipped from view, he turned his attention back to the perfect rectangular hole in front of him. Three feet wide, eight feet long, six feet deep. Nick smiled in satisfaction.

In the distance, a hunting horn sounded and was answered by another. Dogs yelped, men shouted, and horse hooves pounded the ground. A moment later, a young man stumbled out of the trees and collapsed at the edge of the grave. Blood dripped down his face from numerous small cuts, and his clothes, once beautiful silks and velvet, now flapped in rags about him. He looked up at Nick with pain-dark eyes.

"Do you know me, sir?" asked the young man.

Nick shook his head.

The young man laughed. "Then surely you are the only one for a hundred leagues. Until yesterday this was my land. My kingdom. Now my cousin has the throne, and chases me down with my once-loyal huntsmen."

The horns sounded again, closer now.

"I can run no further," he continued, his fingers sinking into the soft earth beneath him. "Without friendship and loyalty, what good is life?"

The man paused and glanced from Nick to the hole in front of him. He smiled, a grim smile, and got to his feet.

"Soon they will come and take my head. I doubt they have any care for the rest of me." As he spoke, he pulled a small silver ring from his finger. "You claim not to know me, and that is probably best for you, but do me a last service. If you can, gather what remains of my body and give it a suitable place to rest."

Nick Bury extended a hand, catching the silver ring as it dropped, and closed the cracked-leather fingers of his glove around it.

Again the horn called, but different this time, a triple-blast. The young man turned in confusion. "The retreat?"

He spun back and looked at Nick, a glimmer in his eyes. "What can it mean?"

Old Nick smiled and raised a single finger. Then he pushed himself to his feet. He walked slowly down to the river and waded out a few steps, until the brown water lapped just above his knees. A moment later, a dark object floated into view. Nick caught hold of it as it drifted past and pulled it onto the bank.

The young man came and stood beside Nick, staring in shock at the body at his feet. A pair of broken arrowshafts protruded from its back.

"Cousin?" he whispered.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 33

King Flavius stepped onto the dias, curled his left fist around Sandril's slim neck and squeezed. She gasped, dropped the stone dagger, and grabbed her King's wrist with both hands.

"By what right do you deprive me of such an apt revenge?" asked the King, his voice low and hard. He lifted the shaman until she stood on tiptoes, breath whistling through her teeth as she tried to breathe. "I don't believe I can allow that kind of arrogance."

"Stop!" yelled Benhus. The King's head turned heavily to look at him and Benhus felt he was standing on a precipice. "Let her speak."

Flavius lowered Sandril from her tiptoes but did not release her throat.

"My King," she wheezed, "my King, you do not want to watch the Tyrantsbane do its black work. You cannot see such a thing and remain the same."

Flavius grunted. His heavy brows stayed locked in a dark frown.

"No," he said. "No, I believe I make such choices. Not you. Not a servant." He lifted Sandril onto her toes again.

"Stop," burst out Benhus. "You owe me and I claim my debt here. Now. Spare her life. Sandril meant only to protect you."

The King was still a moment, then released the shaman, who fell to her knees panting and clutching at her throat. Benhus, dazed from exertion and loss of blood, took a wary step away from the King, then saw he was smiling broadly at him.

"My debt is paid," said Flavius. "You think swiftly."

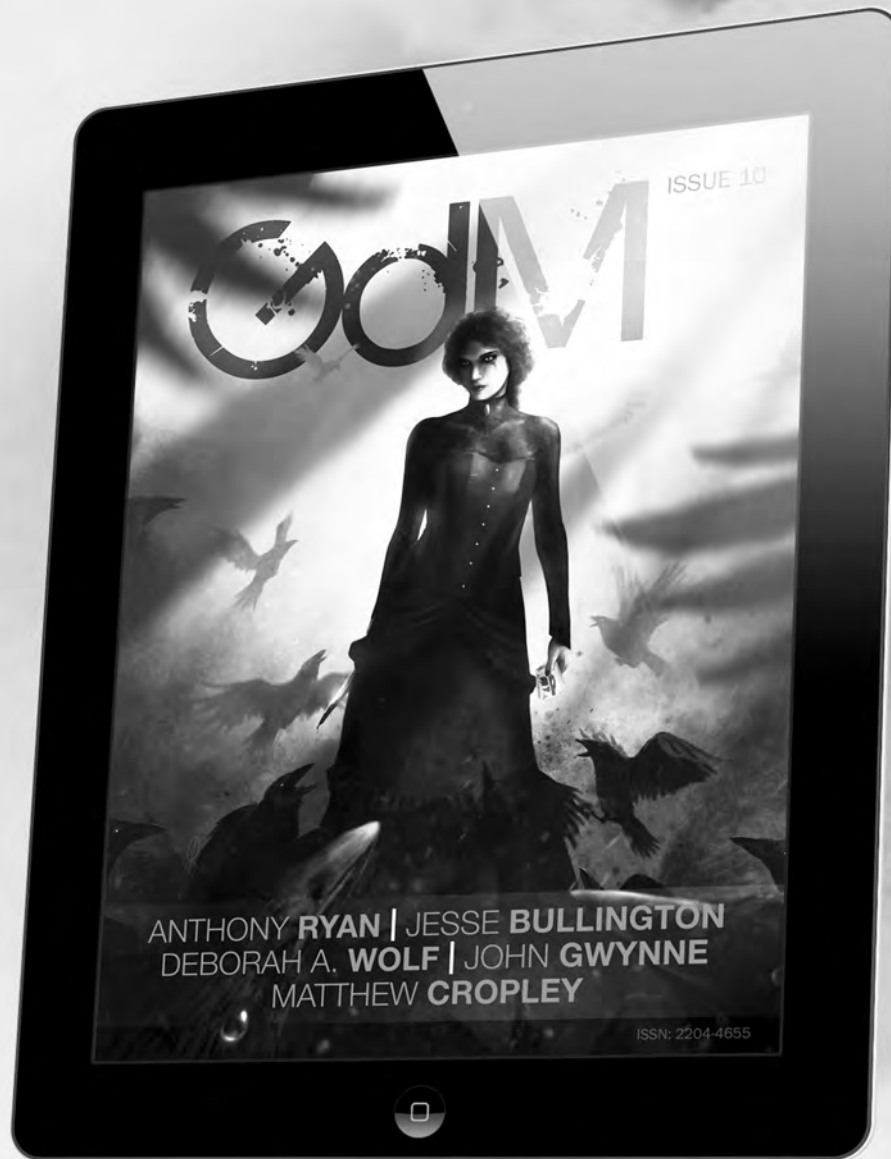
Benhus felt his strength draining, his legs growing weak as relief and exhaustion swept over him in a thick wave. He took an uncertain step backward, wavered, then let himself drop onto a couch.

"We'll have to get you patched up," smiled the King. "I need to keep you in good shape. There is much work to be done by the King's Blade."

Benhus leaned back into a corner of the couch, pressed the cloth against his wounded arm, and closed his eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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



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ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS NICHOLSON

FIVE DEATHS

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

Nature that framed us of four elements,
warring within our breast for regiment,
doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.
— Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*

THE banefires were burning, blue on the wrinkled black horizon behind them, before wry-shouldered Morlock Ambrosius decreed a halt.

“Are you quite certain it is safe?” the Summoner Lernaion asked politely. He was from the southern isles, as his dark skin (now slightly withered with age) proclaimed; these northern terrors did not impress him. But he had not grown gray in the service of the Wardlands by despising the advice of native guides.

“No,” Morlock replied, with the flat unemphatic honesty that was one of his few virtues as a travelling companion, “it is not safe. But if we go farther in the dark we may miss the Kwelmgrind — that is, the gate to the Empty Ways.”

“The gate to the Kwelmhaiar, you mean,” Lernaion remarked, giving the abandoned subterranean realm its dwarvish name.

Morlock looked uncomfortable, but nodded in assent. He seemed to dislike it that an outsider — one of those the dwarves call “the Other Ilk” — should show any knowledge of dwarvish languages and dwarvish ways. This amused Lernaion, because Morlock was not really a dwarf either. Morlock had been raised by dwarves, but his parents were exiles from A Thousand Towers, far to the south from here.

Lernaion was starting to think it had been unwise to admit Morlock into the Graith of Guardians, the small band of seers and warriors who defended the borders of the Wardlands. The young man was clearly troubled, and a troubled Guardian could cause more harm than a thousand enemies from the unguarded lands. Still, he had proven useful in the past, and was proving useful now, though only as a thain (the lowest of the three ranks of Guardian). Recruits from the northern hold of the Wardlands were few, and Morlock’s services would always be in demand by his seniors in the Graith who, like Lernaion, had business in the fire-torn mountains of Northhold.

“Will we find him in the Empty Ways?” asked Morlock, as he crouched down to make a campfire.

“It.” Their quarry was a *harthrang*, a demon living in a human body.

“Will we find it in the Empty Ways?” Morlock repeated patiently. Apart from the subject of his parents, he was a hard man to irritate.

“Yes,” Lernaion said, out of the depths of his private knowledge. “We will encounter it in the Kwelmhaiar.” He had seen that much in a dream, a prophetic dream he had sought with much suffering, and to little result. He knew they would find their quarry in the abandoned, ruinous dwarven halls they presently sought. He knew they would fight. He did not know if they would win — that knowledge the dream had denied him, which meant that the victory or defeat was not in his hands.

• • •

THEY came to the Kwelmgrind the next morning in the gray light before dawn. The gate was a long opening in a hillside, partially filled with stony debris. The cave was like a thousand others in those volcanic mountains, but Morlock, after examining a blank and, to Lernaion, featureless rock outside, declared it to be the gate they sought. He stepped forward and reached inside to pull himself over a heap of stones.

A jet of red flame filled the narrow cave and Morlock drew back an arm blazing like a torch.

“Be more careful, please,” Lernaion remarked, with some irritation, as Morlock extinguished his sleeve and glove on a nearby patch of dewy grass. “Our enemy is aware of our pursuit, is powerful and is utterly ruthless. Had that trap been anything but fire you would have been in a bad way.”

Morlock, looking up, shrugged ruefully. Being set on fire did not distress him — immunity from fire was part of the heritage of Ambrose, along with the slightly crooked shoulders. (Regarding both these things there were unpleasant rumors.) “We know he — it is here, anyway,” the younger man remarked.

Lernaion forbore to remark that they knew that already, and set about counter-inscribing the fire-spell in the cave threshold. “This seems to be a mere trigger,” he commented, probing the spell with his Sight, “part of a larger death-spell. We must proceed cautiously.” He brought out a stylus and began to carve quell-runes into the weathered stone.

“There is a thing you have never explained to me,” Morlock mentioned, as his senior worked. While he stood there his hands, as if by themselves, cut away both the sleeves of his tunic at the elbow with his belt dagger, then began to hem the edges of the sleeves, using a needle from his pocket and thread pulled from the sleeve remnants.

“Only one?” Lernaion asked sourly, as he plied his stylus on the gateway stone. He was not as dexterous as Morlock, and never had been. In fact, Lernaion had never seen anyone whose hands were as unpretentiously skilled as Morlock’s. If the boy had half a brain, he was destined to be a master maker.

“This harthrang — it is the creation of a sorcerer.”

“Is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. The harthrang was given its body by a sorcerer, the one whom we found slain back in Ranganyen. But the demon itself existed before, and may exist after the death of its vessel.”

Morlock took the correction patiently, nodding as he replied, “And this sorcerer gave the body to the demon as part of a contract — a pledge that the demon would do whatever the sorcerer asked, and nothing else.”

“Yes.” Lernaion thought back with deep distress on the *talic stranj*, the quasi-spiritual corona, that had surrounded the sorcerer’s dead body and the demonic contract. Both had been severed, half-burned and buried, but the past could not be unwritten.

"Then why did the harthrang kill the sorcerer?"

Lernaion sighed. He understood perfectly, but he doubted his ability to explain to a man hundreds of years his junior. "Morlock," he said at last, "have you never wished you were dead? Even flippantly?"

"I am not especially flippant."

Lernaion noted the evasiveness of his answer and smiled. "Well, I have. Fortunately, I have never been the master of a harthrang."

"Then the sorcerer died for a flippancy?"

"Why not? Hadn't he made a flippancy of the lives of his kin and neighbors, sending the harthrang out to terrorize, to murder, even to rape at his behest? The harthrang would not make allowances; it would have no sympathy for the master it despised. It heard a command and acted on it."

Morlock was dissatisfied. "Then if the sorcerer had been a little more scrupulous in his speech, his reign of terror might still be going on?"

"No. The local mayor —"

"The Arbiter of the Peace."

"— the local mayor took alarm and sent to the Graith for help, and thus we arrived. His reign of terror, as you tritely put it, would have ended by now anyway. You have not yet asked the relevant question, Thain Morlock."

Morlock's dark-browed fallow face twisted in thought. "Why was he flippant?"

"Why indeed?"

"He knew better than anyone the danger of his position. Nothing could threaten him, as long as he lived, except the harthrang itself. So... what he *must not say* preyed upon his mind until he could say nothing else?"

"Possibly. But there was more to it, Morlock. I think he wanted to die. He had divided the world into two things, the harthrang and its enemies, the predator and the prey. He had preyed in and through the harthrang for a long time, and I think he was sick of it. He wanted to escape his destiny as master of the harthrang, even if meant becoming his own victim. So, at least, I read the corpse's *stranj*."

Morlock nodded meditatively. His sleeves were finished and he put his tools away, pocketing the remnants against some future use. Lernaion gritted his teeth and scraped the stylus on the coarse resisting stone.

• • •

LERNAION watched Morlock's face sink from sight, out of the torchlit circle on the water's surface, and swore violently. It was the third time his guide had managed to nearly kill himself in the space of a day and a half — the fourth, if one counted the fire-trap at the gate of the Empty Ways.

The talic spoor of the harthrang had led them first high into the spirelike halls, carved from mountain peaks, at the height of the Kwelmhaiar. Lernaion's soft southern lungs soon began to trouble him — the air all through the Northhold was thinner than he liked, and here it was often stagnant as well. But he followed Morlock up seemingly endless dark spiralling stairways and kept his mind open to the faint but utterly distinct traces of the harthrang's passing. It was this that kept him going: they had found the beast's trail at last.

All this long while Morlock was ahead of him and above him on the narrow blackstone stairs, holding a torch, pausing occasionally for a rest as he thought the health of his senior required it. He never ventured to consult about the way, simply leading as Lernaion directed, until they reached the top of the endless stair. There was a gray stone door, mirror-smooth, at the top landing and no other way forward.

"There should be no more stairs," Morlock remarked over his crooked shoulders as he tried the door. "The mountains themselves are not much higher, in this part of the North, than we have come already."

Lernaion nodded in response, unable to say a word of vexation or relief. The heavy stone door moved easily upon its hinges; Morlock pulled it open and stepped through cautiously. Lernaion was about to follow when there was a sudden bodiless screaming and the door slammed shut.

Too late the summoner realized they had come to the perfect place for an ambush. The harthrang was probably on the other side of the door, killing his guide as he stood here gasping in the dark...

Lernaion seized the handle of the door, and strove to open it. The screaming sound increased as he forced the door open — then suddenly stopped, and the door flew free under his hands, nearly clipping him across the face.

The thain and his torch were gone. Yet there was light here, cold and dim, and icy air, somewhat tainted by bat-guano. Lernaion drank it in gratefully nonetheless as he glanced around.

The light was moonlight. He could see the minor moons, Trumpeter and Horseman, peering through two roughly circular openings in opposite walls of the vast chamber where he stood. It was a relief to be out of the narrow, stifling stairwell, even if the air was cold as death. Only the faintest shadow of the harthrang fell over Lernaion's insight. The thing was not present; but it had been nearby fairly recently, Lernaion felt. And his thain...

Lernaion caught sight of a human figure in silhouette against the night-blue sky, dangling from the upper rim of one of the ragged stone circles. It was Morlock. As the Summoner watched, the crook-backed younger man swung his legs out to catch a foothold, and began to climb down like a spider, almost sinister in his patient, persistent skill.

"Are you all right?" the summoner called. Echoes seemed to drown his voice. He waited, but the only response was a vague whistling sound. He was about to call again when he recognized the tune — a sailor's shanty, *Blow, Wind, Blow*. Lernaion laughed a wheezy laugh that ended in racking coughs, and wondered if he would be as sanguine as Morlock if their positions were reversed. The wind had roared through this tunnel-like chamber with tremendous force; evidently Morlock had realized what was happening in time to drop the torch and grab at the first solid surface that presented itself. Possibly living among mountains accustomed one to events like this, but Lernaion doubted it. And he was sure that, had it been he who had first stepped through that door, he would have been blown through the tunnel, sent spinning into some mountain chasm beyond, and smashed as flat as a leaf.

There was nothing he could do to assist the younger man. Lernaion turned away and let his eyes wander at will over the rough pavement of the ruined chamber. His insight led him onward, prompting him from below the level of conscious awareness.

The harthrang had passed there, and there, and there. He traced the harthrang to a stairwell on the far side of the ruined chamber. It was a hole leading downward, away from the moons' light and the open air, and the demon was in the depths somewhere, waiting for him. The air in the archway was thick with an unpleasant smell. He couldn't bear the idea of going down there just then.

Anyway, he need not: he had to wait for his guide. Lernaion sat down at the head of the stairwell and braced himself against either wall, lest the terrible wind blow again.

"Come along, come along," he called out mock-impatiently, as Morlock dropped to the ground and walked toward him. "No use hanging around!"

Morlock's sallow face, slick with sweat even in the icy air of the chamber, wore a crooked half-grin as he approached his senior. His hands were dusty from the rocks, trembling with their exertions, but his voice was as steady as ever when he said, "At least from now on I can brag that I nearly passed through the Eye of a Needle."

Lernaion caught the nuance of a proper name. "You know this place? This Needle's Eye?"

"I've heard of it. The Dragons made it, during the Longest War, after their victory over the Kwelm."

Lernaion's increasing respect for his junior dropped several notches. "Then you should have been aware of its dangers. Be more cautious another time, Thain Morlock."

"The —"

"No arguments please. Consider that my life is linked to your own. Do you need rest before we go on?"

Morlock's smile was gone. "No. What's our path?"

"Down there." Lernaion pointed down the stairwell. Morlock

reached back to draw a fresh torch from the bundle under his pack and lit it with a Dwarvish sparkmaker he drew from his pocket. He waited for Lernaion to stand out of his way and then stepped into the stairwell, only to draw back.

"What is it?" the Summoner demanded.

Morlock pointed. On the steps, just below where Lernaion had been sitting, lay a ragged strip of threadbare cloth, stained with some dark, tarry fluid that gleamed in the light and stank like the devil.

"Thain Morlock," Lernaion said, not unkindly, "I have asked you to be more cautious. But that does not mean that you must start back from every scrap of cloth."

"The harthrang must have left it here. No one has dwelt in the Empty Ways for a thousand years."

"That doesn't mean no one has passed through, as we are doing. Nonetheless... yes, I sense you are right; the demon's talic trace is strong on the cloth."

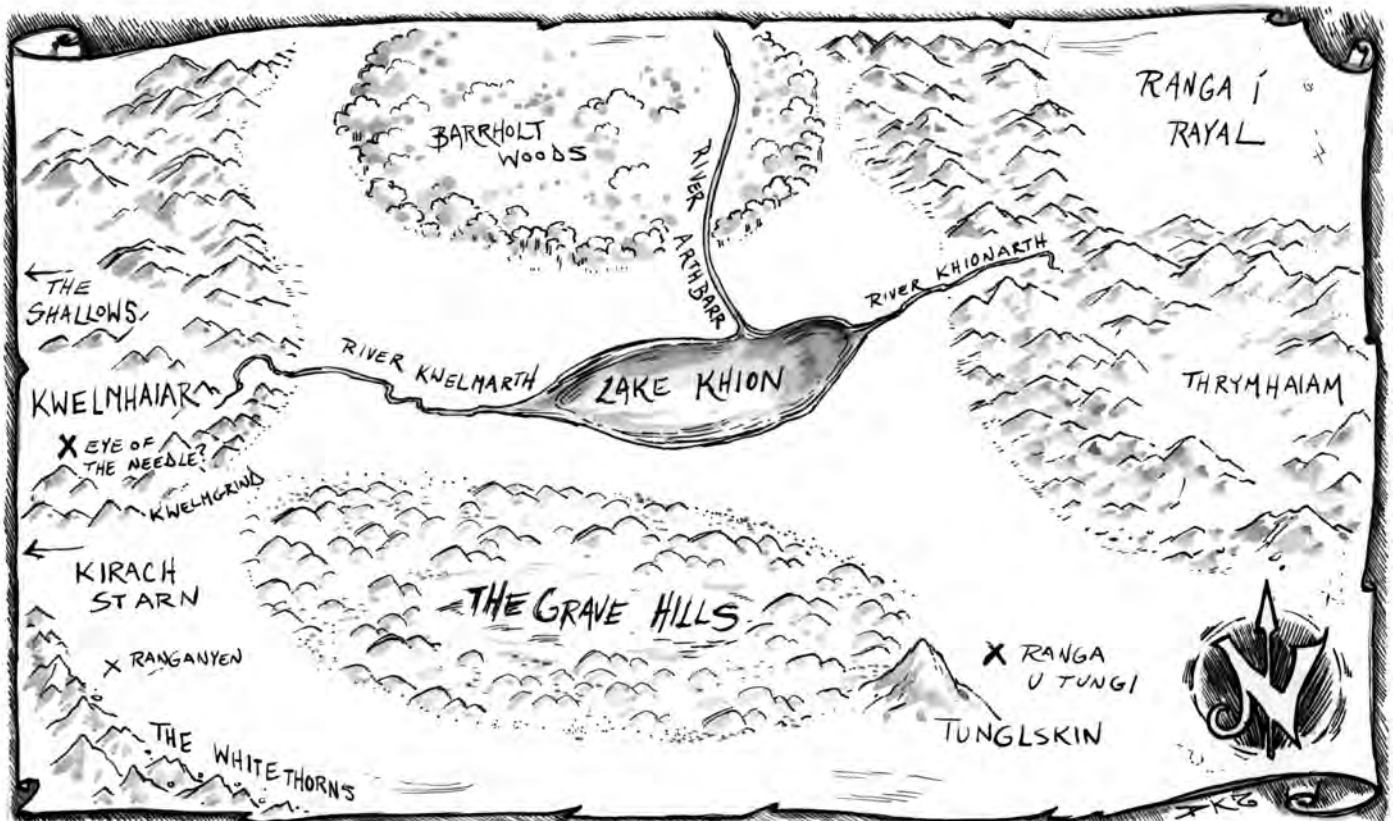
"There was a knot in it. It has been untied."

"Yes?" Lernaion said, less a question than an expression of impatience.

Morlock shrugged his crooked shoulders, stepped over the cloth and led the way down the winding stair.

They camped that night in what appeared to be an audience chamber, halfway down the peak Morlock called the Needle. It was readily defensible, should the harthrang attack them during the night, and it had a window, which relieved Lernaion's sensation of smothering.

The next morning the Summoner bid a rueful goodbye to the sunlight and followed his Thain into the dark corridors again. Soon they were deep under the earth, the weight of mountains increasing above them, and Lernaion felt it deeply.



So deeply that he did not react when Morlock said, near a shadowy tunnel entrance, "I do not like the feel of this stone." Had Lernaion been less preoccupied he might have reflected that Morlock was not given to idle conversation. As it was, he made to shoulder past the thain. His only interest was getting on so that he could leave this dreadful dark hole. The talic spoor of the demon was pungently clear just there: Lernaion felt it was close by, very close.

He was surprised when Morlock took him by the shoulders and hurled him clear of the tunnel entrance. He struck the far wall with some force and the breath went out of him. By the time he had gathered air for a rebuke, he decided to hold his silence, for the tunnel entrance had collapsed on Morlock.

The upper half of the thain's body was clear and before Lernaion had staggered back toward him he had already begun to disinter himself.

"Can I assist you?" the Summoner inquired.

"Best not. I have a sense of where the weight of the slide is." His clever hands moved like white spiders over the dark sweep of earth and stone. There was an almost continuous clon-clop of stones being tossed aside.

"Thank you for throwing me clear," Lernaion said stiffly. "I'm afraid I had no idea what your remark meant."

Morlock grunted. "Forgot you're not a caver."

Lernaion supposed this was a sort of compliment, and decided to carry the subject no further. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

"My right leg will need looking at."

It did, too, though Lernaion's more natural impulse was to look away. The thigh had been broken in two places, and stone and bone had done terrible things to the great leg muscle. Lernaion washed the wound, spliced as much as he could of the muscle and veins, and set the broken bone. Morlock watched impassively, having already contrived a splint for his own leg from the wooden shafts of several torches from his bundle.

Much of the day was consumed by this mishap, and Lernaion's impatience was intensified by the thought that Morlock would no longer be able to move at anything like his former pace.

Still, he found a tunnel that took them to the far side of the one that had collapsed on him. The trail of the harthrang when they got there was cold, but clear.

But Lernaion's fears about Morlock's ability to travel were confirmed: now the elderly summoner set the (none-too-swift) pace while the young thain struggled to keep up. Lernaion held the torch and scouted ahead while his scout lumbered behind, gasping advice and warnings.

"Must we go this way?" he hissed, utterly out of breath, as Lernaion lowered himself into a sunken way.

"The harthrang did, and we must follow him."

"There may be another way —"

"We cannot afford detours," Lernaion said pointedly. Morlock shut his mouth and dropped into the sunken way, landing on his good leg.

"Do not do that again," Lernaion cautioned him. "You may jar the setting of your wounded leg." His feet crunched beneath him, and he lowered the torch to examine the ground. "What is this... sand?"

"I suspect we are in a drain."

"A sewer?"

"A storm drain. We should hurry. I have a feeling it is raining aloft."

Lernaion stared at him. "How can you tell?"

Morlock shrugged his crooked shoulders. "A moistness in the air. I might be wrong. There is a tactical element also."

Lernaion, who had commanded victorious armies, smiled gently on the junior guardian and led the way down the storm drain, then up onto a steep upward path.

"There," he said, turning to Morlock. "We made it."

"Move on, please," Morlock replied.

Lernaion was set to rebuke the discourtesy of this reply when he heard the approaching roar. The horror he had felt as he saw the mountain bite down on Morlock rose up in him (all the more powerful because it had been repressed) and drowned his reason. He stood gaping at Morlock, hearing the roar of the mountain, seeing in his mind's eye a wave of falling stone that would crush them like eggshells. He felt Morlock's hands forcing him up the slope, but he could make no move of his own until a spray of water hit him full in the face.

"Creator! What a fool I am," he gasped. "The storm!" He turned and made as if to lead the way up the steep narrow corridor, but he had not taken a step before he realized Morlock was not following him.

He turned to see his native guide sliding down the steep corridor floor, now slick with moisture. Gray flood water slopped up into the corridor, nipping at Morlock's shoes.

"Hold on!" Lernaion shouted. "I'm coming!"

But there was nothing to hold onto. Morlock slid into the storm drain and his face sank swiftly from sight in the foam-streaked water.

"Pus-rats of Gurdelian!" snarled Lernaion. As a cabin-boy on a Southhold trade-ship he had spent a never-to-be-forgotten summer defending a grain hold from these relentless vermin, and they remained his ultimate curse. Even as he spoke he was shedding his pack and cloak; kicking off his shoes, the old man dropped the torch and dove into the dark flood.

• • •

THE water was lightless and dirty, but he had dived in worse, off the marshy coastland by Corlainin. This water was colder by far, but it was thick with air. The dark gill lines in his neck opened wide as he swam deep in the flood water, his hands trailing the smooth floor of the storm drain. He was utterly blind, so that he must grab violently at whatever he thought might be Morlock. The fourth time it was one of his shoes. The next time it was the man himself.

Lernaion surfaced and spouted. He ascertained that Morlock had wedged himself in a corner of the drain, and was busy contriving a float out of his pack and the remaining torches.

"Never mind that," Lernaion shouted. "We'll wait for the flood to fall and walk back."

Morlock tried groggily to argue (his head seemed to have taken a blow) but Lernaion overrode him. If there was one thing he knew it was water, and he could feel the strength failing in the flood's current. Soon it had dropped to knee-level and he half-dragged, half-carried Morlock back to the point where the flood had swept him away.

Once they were there the trail was still clear, but even colder than before. And they could hardly go farther. Morlock was crippled and half-drowned; Lernaion was worn out from his adven-

ture in the water, and from the effort of supporting the younger man. (He was not what he had been even a century ago, though he hated to admit it.)

They found a small room with two barrable doors not very far from the storm drain. Morlock staggered around the circumference of the cylindrical room, feeling and listening to the walls of living rock. He pronounced them solid, barred the door nearest him, and sprawled unselfconsciously.

Lernaion left the door near him open and lit a small lamp from his pack, dousing the torch. His thoughts were grim. Morlock, never an absolute asset, had become a liability. He must be made to see that, and Lernaion did not relish the prospect of explaining it to him.

"Morlock," he said quietly, "how far do you suppose we came today? Two miles, as the eagle flies?"

Morlock grunted sleepily. "P'rhaps ten, as moles dig. Made good time in the morning."

Before Morlock had broken his leg, in other words. Perhaps his attendant already understood that he must be left behind. "Perhaps we are thinking the same thing?" Lernaion suggested gently.

Morlock's eyes had already closed wearily. Now he opened them again and nodded slowly. "Fire, air, earth, and water."

"Excuse me?"

"Harthrang's death-spell: its nature is now clear. Moved the four terrestrial elements against us: fire at Kwelmgrind, air in the Eye of the Needle, earth in the tunnel that collapsed, and water in the. In the storm drain." His pale unpleasant eyes closed again.

"And it has led us across those points where the elements could do us maximum harm," Lernaion mused. "That was what you meant about tactics! But what reason have you to suppose the wind in the Needle's Eye, the tunnel-fall and the flood were not natural occurrences?"

"No natural wind like that in these mountains," Morlock muttered. "Not in the Eye of the Needle: bats would not nest there, if it were so. Also. And also we saw the trigger for the spell: the rotten cloth that had been knotted. Magical storm may be released by untying a knot."

"Yes, of course," Lernaion said, almost humbly. He remembered, as a sailor, that a captain's last resort in the case of a calm was to untie every knot in the ship's rigging, in the hope that one would release a gale. The principle was a sound, if simple, matter of magical similarity. He had spent so much time on the deeper sorceries of mind and power, light and darkness, that he had let slip this trivial magic that might have killed them both. "It would have been interesting to find the triggers for the cave-fall and the flood," he remarked.

"Buried or swept away," mumbled his weary, wounded guide. "Still. Yes. I'd a. imma. Imagine a directional fractor set in the tunnel ceiling. Water I dunno. I mean. I don't know those magics very well."

"There's one problem with your theory," Lernaion remarked.

Morlock nodded sagely, or perhaps just sleepily. "Yes. It'll lead us into shallow caves tomorrow... maybe right outside. How do we... ? Stay far apart. Maybe. One of us will live. Or stay close to it. So close it can't release. Fifth death."

"I don't follow you," Lernaion said sharply, but there was no answer. Morlock's face was slack with sleep.

Lernaion's thoughts were somber. If Morlock's theory was correct, the harthrang was not, in fact, trying to kill *them*. It was trying to kill Morlock. That much was clear from the Needle's Eye, when it might have tried to kill them both, but had settled for the thain. The summoner thought of his omen-dream and its implications. The meaning was clear to him now: if the harthrang would be defeated, it would not be by him. It would be by the hunchbacked, gray-faced, bleeding child in yonder corner. And the demon knew this, as well — had known it first.

"I'll help you if I can," Lernaion muttered to his sleeping guide. Then he went to set a guard-spell on the open door before going to sleep himself.

• • •

THE last day of the hunt began without elemental disasters. After a brief unpleasant meal from their light rations, they followed the harthrang's trail — upwards, as Morlock had predicted. "It's the Shallows," Morlock said tersely, as one upward tunnel led them definitely northward. (So Morlock claimed. To Lernaion the points of the compass were just ideas underground.)

Morlock's voice was confident enough, but... His feet were bound up in ersatz sandals, cloth from his cape woven into leather strips cut from his pack. He moved like a man twice as old as Lernaion, and the crook in his shoulders seemed even more pronounced this morning. The fever of a healing wound was on him, and his eyes shone out, eerily bright from bruise-dark sockets. The summoner looked on his thain, the Wardlands' champion (it would seem) in the upcoming battle against this demon incarnate, and sighed.

"I feel air moving," said Lernaion suddenly. "And — is that light ahead?"

"We're coming to the Shallows, yes," Morlock said. "Summoner, is the harthrang close by?"

"I can't tell," Lernaion replied. "It has been over this ground."

"Recently?"

"No. Today, perhaps, or late last night."

"Then it might be anywhere beyond..." Morlock mused aloud, and they turned a corner.

Before them stretched a long corridor of black stone, like a hundred others they had seen in the past two days. But the fabric of the mountain was thin here, and erosion or other forces had broken through at many points: there were strips of naked blue sky slashed across the corridor roof. The way before was stippled with gray light, littered with black stone, alive with moving air. Spellbound, Lernaion took a step forward. It was something to be able to breathe, to fill one's eyes with light. But the shadow of the harthrang lay on his heart. It was near. It was very near.

"Remember: your chance will come after I fall," Morlock hissed in his ear. Then he sent his senior sprawling with a push, staggered over his prone form and ran haltingly up the cluttered, half roofless tunnel.

Lernaion rose to his feet and started out after the younger man. If this was the place the harthrang had chosen for the final battle (Tactics! The damned thing could teach Illion the Wise about victorious retreats!) Lernaion felt he should be near Morlock, to lend what assistance he could. He was just asking himself what could possibly justify Morlock's extraordinary actions when the fifth death struck.

The thin corridor roof between Morlock and Lernaion burst inwards under a blaze of crooked light; the thunderclap struck Lernaion to the ground. When he rose gasping to his feet he saw Morlock lying motionless in the corridor beyond. And between them...

Between them, shrouded in wreaths of smoke and pulverized rock, was a crater in the corridor floor. And at its bottom writhed a red-white serpent. It was, Lernaion realized, a cooling lightning-bolt — a vein of the fifth, celestial element, aether, drawn into clouds across the crystalline rim of the world, only to fall as destructive fire from stormclouds. From this rarest of elements were made the deadliest of human weapons, the most powerful of human magics. Its touch was deadly, even when completely cooled.

Lernaion was still staring at it in amazement when the harthrang took him by the neck from behind.

• • •

IT had waited above, on the broken roof of the Shallows. As Lernaion wondered at the radiant shape of the lightning bolt, it dropped down on him, and already its death-heavy fingers were digging into his throat. He broke the hold with his arms and swung around to face his enemy at last.

The harthrang was like a man who had been through a cheese-slicer and carefully put back together. In mockery and hate for the human form, it had carved bone-deep grooves in its stolen face, the skull clearly visible through the flesh. But the features of the face were intact: the staring eyes, the gaping loose lips. The clenched teeth were needle-sharp, digging into dank red gums above and below but drawing no blood. It snatched again at Lernaion's throat with chill, heavy hands.

A great deal of infighting is based on the principle that your opponent is merely human and feels pain. Lernaion wasted time on none of this. He made his effort at causing structural damage: kicking out one of the harthrang's knees, gouging its eyes, breaking the fingers that incautiously clutched at him. But it was a losing battle and he knew it. *He* felt pain, and his opponent counted on that, kept striking him with its heavy, rotting fists. There was a spell Lernaion could have used to separate the demon from its host body... but he could not execute it while fighting for his life. If he could get away he might turn the tables... lure the creature into chasing him, and set a fatal trap for the damned thing.

He didn't get away. His strength faded. The time came when the harthrang had him, its hands clasped behind his neck, its forearms braced against his own chest. It was forcing his head down toward the ground, and Lernaion knew that soon some brittle old bone in his neck would crack and the demon would be victorious.

Then thunder struck a second time, terribly near. The harthrang gave a thick bubbling scream and released its grip. Lernaion looked up to see the mutilated head wreathed in blue fire, the reddish yellow of cooling aether splashed across its face like molten gold.

It clawed at its burning face; it fell to the ground; it ceased to move. The demon spirit had abandoned its body. Days ago, when he set out on this quest, Lernaion had hoped to be able to lay a demon trap, to catch the spirit as it tried to escape the wreck

of its stolen body. There was still time to do that. But something else had to be done first.

Lernaion straightened himself and went over to Morlock. The younger man lay, still motionless, but not where Lernaion had last seen him. Now he sprawled, face first, over the crater formed by the bolt of aether.

Which was now empty. Clearly Morlock had been knocked senseless by the thunderstroke. When he came to himself he had seen the harthrang killing his senior. He had reached into the pit with his deft, daring hands and grabbed a double-handful of the cooling aether. And he had thrown it with deadly accuracy at the harthrang.

Cold silvery aether, like hardened wax, coated the inner surface of Morlock's hands. The flesh was gray and dead looking. When Lernaion tried to peel the aether away, a dreadful shock threw him against the corridor wall. Looking down, he saw that Morlock's hand had fallen apart in lumps, like a log burned nearly to ash. Veins of blue fire were crawling up the younger man's forearms, consuming the living flesh as they went.

Lernaion thought of those hands, and all the things they might have made, the deeds they might have done. Then he took a knife from his pack and cut Morlock's arms off at the elbow.

• • •

THE broken tunnel roared with light and sound! The harthrang clawed at its torn burning face, but it was doomed.

"I've thrown a lightning bolt!" Morlock whispered, and would have laughed. (If his father were here! if his father could have seen!) But darkness was already reaching for him.

The darkness was not death, not yet. It was not even unconsciousness. As he lay on the ground, he felt a rising sensation, even though his body did not move. He found himself standing over his body, as Lernaion fought with steel and fire to save his body's life. Morlock watched with detached interest as Lernaion stitched up the veins that had been severed by the amputation of his forearms.

He was more interested to see that his bodiless body, the talic sheath of his awareness, also had hands that burned with aethereal light. Could it be that aether, like tal itself, was a substance not merely material, that his soul had been infected with light? He would have to ask Lernaion, if he ever awoke.

Then Morlock felt the Other with him and turned.

Behind him was the demon, harthrang no longer as it stood above its discarded human shell. It was a man-shaped emptiness around a heart of flame.

Morlock stepped away from his body and realized he had not moved, although the demon was closer. Nor had the demon moved, although it was fleeing away. In a burst of insight, Morlock realized that in the spirit world, on whose threshold he stood, there was no space. There was only choice, only will.

Morlock chose to reach out with his burning hands. He reached into the demon's shadowy chest and clasped the burning heart. The demon lashed out savagely with its empty hands, but it could not reach him. Nor could he reach it. But the aether could reach the flame that was the demon's life, and Morlock willed it to do so, feeding the aether to the evil heart, killing the fire with light. When both flames faded the demon was gone and Morlock fell back into his broken body and knew nothing for a while.

• • •

HE awoke with a jar that made his stumps and his shattered leg ache. He could do no more than raise his head, for the rest of him was bound to a flat wooden surface... a moving one, he saw. He guessed, from the alarmingly volcanic reek in the air, that they were somewhere in the western passes of Northhold. Craning his neck about he saw that he was tied to a kind of two-wheeled wooden truck, and that its motive power was the Summoner Lernaion, who was dragging it upslope. Sweat gleamed on the back of the summoner's brown neck.

"Where are we going?" Morlock called.

"New Moorhope." If Lernaion felt any surprise at his patient's awakening he did not display it. "They may be able to do something for your hands, there."

"My hands are gone."

"I know it!" Lernaion shouted. "I was there! I remember!" After a pause to master himself he continued more quietly, "They may be able to do something. They have many skills; it was famous as a place of wisdom before history began."

Morlock nodded. Perhaps they could make him mechanical hands. The idea had never occurred to him before; he could see that many problems would have to be solved. Perhaps they would help him design the hands: it would be an interesting project.

"It's the best I can do for you," Lernaion said, and Morlock heard the pain in his voice, the guilt.

He heard it, but didn't understand it. They had accomplished their goal, and the Guard was maintained. But perhaps Lernaion didn't fully realize that. Hoping to make the summoner feel better, he remarked, "The demon is dead. I killed him with my burning hands."

Lernaion groaned and made no other answer.

Morlock passed the time by considering the design problems of artificial limbs. He fell asleep without realizing it, and soon was dreaming of iron hands that blazed with aethereal light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

THE RETURN

By JOSEPH A. MCCULLOUGH

NICK Bury tapped the smouldering ashes from his pipe into the open grave at his feet then settled himself more comfortably on the mound of earth behind him. All around the graveyard air hung cool and calm, while the dying sun cast skeletal shadows across the ground. In one particularly tenebrous corner, Nick could hear regular, heavy breathing, but he paid it no mind. The dead slept easy, even if the living were restless.

The shadows continued to grow, reaching out with their long fingers, until a new sound drifted by, the crunch of footsteps on a gravel path. Nick peered through the gloom with his one green eye and saw a group of pall-bearers coming up the hill, a wooden casket carried on their shoulders. There were six in all, marching like toy soldiers, dressed all in black. They stopped before Nick and laid the casket down by the empty grave.

The man in front, noticeable by his immaculate moustache, opened his mouth to speak, but a crazed laugh stole his words. Several of the pall-bearers turned to look at Nick, but he just grinned and pointed a long, pale finger to a dark corner of the yard. There, in the gloom of a cracked stone obelisk, an emaciated rag-man chuckled over the wide barrel of a blunderbuss.

"You're foolish, Mr. Mead, coming here tonight," said the ragman as he stepped out of the shadows and shuffled to-

ward the group. "You've got no sense. Even being that your brother is dead, you must have known I'd be waiting." The man stopped at the head of the grave, his eyes dancing with the dreams of madness. He levelled the blunderbuss at the moustachioed man. "I've been waiting years to kill you, Mr. Mead. I told you so in all those letters."

"I read them," replied Mr. Mead as the lid flew off the casket. A pistol flashed and thundered and a leaden ball tore through the chest of the ragman. With a look of bewilderment, the ragman dropped his gun and pitched head first into the grave.

A seventh man in black clambered out of the casket, a smoking pistol in his hand.

Mr. Mead helped him to his feet. "Thank you, Bowis." He said.

Bowis nodded. "I hope your family can rest easy now."

"They will," replied Mead, "and my brother will be happy to come home."

Mr. Mead pulled a silver penny from his pocket and tossed it to Nick Bury.

"For your trouble."

Nick caught the coin in the air and tucked it into a pouch. Then he picked up his rusty shovel and got to his feet.

"No trouble," said Nick in his hoarse whisper. "It's all the same to me."

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ILLUSTRATION BY BRAD MCDEVITT

THE FORGER'S ART

A Dhulyn and Parno Adventure

By VIOLETTE MALAN

ALLIT the sculptor turned the piece over in her scarred hands, slowly examining each surface. The late afternoon sun came in through the skylights and illuminated the tools on the workbench, and brought a sparkle to the statue's white surface. Finally Allit tasted the bottom of the piece with her tongue. Parno Lionsmane, leaning at ease against the doorpost of the sculptor's studio, exchanged a glance with his Partner, Dhulyn Wolfshead, perched on a stool nearer the workbench. She raised one eyebrow the colour of old blood and shifted her right shoulder in an almost imperceptible shrug. Allit set the statue of the god Tuluaran down and dusted her hands off on her leather apron.

"Well, to answer your first question, yes, it is a forgery." Allit's voice was a frog's croak.

"You sound sure." Dhulyn leaned forward, and Parno straightened.

"I should be. I'm the one copied it." Allit rested her hips back against the work bench and hooked her thumbs in her apron ties. "When I'm asked to copy something I get a local mage to flavour the materials for me. Works better on metal than stone, but the almond flavour is notable, if you know to look for it."

Dhulyn curled her scarred lip at the word "mage."

"You often get requests to fake art?" Parno softened his question with a smile.

Allit grinned, poking one bent, scarred finger at him. "I don't 'fake art,' my dear. I make legitimate copies, safely marked, as I said. If people choose to use my copies for nefarious purposes, well, that's hardly my fault, is it? Now, as to your second question, I made *this* for the temple of Tuluaran itself. I gathered that the priests of the God of Lost Things occasionally preferred to display this one rather than the original."

"So Tuluaran is a local god?" Dhulyn asked.

Allit wagged one hand in the air. "The main temple — more a shrine really — is in Goranda, but people all over pray to the God of Lost Things."

Parno snorted. "I can remember when I was being Schooled another candidate calling — it seemed like every day — 'Tuluaran! My throwing stars!' And no, before you ask it, he never became a Brother, though his prayer was granted most of the time." He laughed at his Partner's look of exaggerated patience.

"It *is* possible, then," Dhulyn said, "that someone stealing the idol from the temple, thinking it was the original, may have taken this one by mistake?"

"Exactly."

"And a person sent to deliver such an item might bring it to the purchaser in good faith, but be suspected of keeping the original for himself?"

"Is that what happened?"

"We believe so."

"Are you sure this 'person' *didn't* keep the original for himself?"

Parno looked at Dhulyn. She was senior, it was for her to speak. "Renth Greyfoot, called the Chaser, was a Mercenary Brother. The Common Rule forbids lying between Brothers," she said.

"But not to other people?"

Dhulyn smiled her wolf's smile.

Unlike most people, Allit just grinned back at her. "And no Brother breaks these rules?"

Both Parno and Dhulyn looked at her. Eventually Allit nodded, still grinning. "And where is this person now?"

"Our Brother has received the final sword."

• • •

IT had been raining earlier on the day Renth Greyfoot brought them the idol, but the skies were clearing as he rapped out the entry signal on the street door of the Mercenary House in Bundorm. He shook with fever and cold, barely able to stand, so Parno helped him to a cot in the sleeping room. Dhulyn was on the point of fetching the town's Healer when their Brother's rasping voice stopped her.

"Been to Healers already," he said. "Nothing they can do."

"Why not?" Parno pulled up a stool and placed a wet cloth on Renth's forehead. Dhulyn leaned, ankles crossed, against the wall at the foot of the cot. The bright patches of colour on her quilted vest stood out against the starkness of the plastered wall.

"Isn't a sickness, it's a curse." Renth's voice sounded weaker by the minute.

"Who?" Dhulyn's voice was so cold Parno wished he could have used it on Renth's forehead.

Renth fluttered his fingers as if to push her fury away.

"Start at the beginning," Parno said, shooting a warning glance at his Partner.

"Just finished a guarding job in Goranda. Could have stayed on with the merchant, but once he was home the job got boring. Stayed in tavern just off the docks —"

"Less detail," Dhulyn said, more gently.

"Hired by a Lord Danos to pick up and pay for a package. Gave me four thousand silver marks, said Mercenary Brothers might be killers, but we weren't thieves. Swore me to secrecy, travel alone, the whole quiver of arrows. I could tell the man was a mage. Any Brother could." Renth began coughing and Parno pulled him into a sitting position, holding him firmly by the shoulders. His eyes met Dhulyn's over their Brother's head.

"Is it me, or are there more mages lately?" The small scar on Dhulyn's lip pulled her mouth into a snarl.

"It's not you," he told her, and waited until she finished rolling her eyes. "In any case, mages are the sort likely to be purchasing strange objects from odd people in peculiar places. We've been hired by mages ourselves to fetch things. There can be honest pay in it."

"What I thought," Renth said. In answer to Parno's gesture Dhulyn brought their wineskin to the bedside. "So I go where I'm sent, meet the seller, and make the exchange."

"And then?"

Renth cleared a chunk of phlegm out of his throat and spit it onto the floor. There was blood in it. Dhulyn tossed her Partner one of the cloths she used to clean her saddle. Renth took another swallow of the offered wine. "Then I take it back to the mage, and he does some tests on it, tells me it's a fake, and what have I done with the real one?"

"So he accused a Mercenary Brother of theft after all?" This in itself wouldn't worry him. He and Dhulyn had themselves been accused of kidnap and murder once.

Renth's head moved just enough to be a nod. "Wouldn't listen to reason, finally threw me out, threw the idol out after me, barely caught it before it shattered on the stone paving. Stood in his doorway, saying I'd regret this to my dying day, which wouldn't be as far off as I believed. Thought nothing of it, wondered if I could sell the piece somewhere, you can see it's pretty. Then the aches began, and difficulty swallowing, and breathing." His lungs made liquid sounds as he inhaled. "I'm burning up. Won't last much longer. Healer can't help. Came here." His eyes hot, but clear, Renth put out his hand to Dhulyn and she took it in both of her own, kneeling next the bed. Renth's face asked a question.

"Pasillon," she said in answer. His lips formed the word as she spoke, then his face relaxed and he was gone.

Parno met Dhulyn's eyes, knowing the stony look on her face was a match to his own. In the legendary past, a group of Mercenary Brothers had been betrayed in the battle of Pasillon. The few who escaped the massacre took it as a sacred oath to hunt down and kill anyone who had given orders that day. Only Scholars still knew of the curse of Passilon, but even common folk knew that Mercenaries always avenged their own. Always.

• • •

THEY went straight from Allit's studio to Bundorm's best Finder.

"Know anything about the man you seek, do we, other than his name?"

Though Dhulyn had met with blind Finders before, it was still eerie to see the blankness in his eyes. Clearly this man could not work with a scrying bowl, and found with his Mark alone.

She unwrapped the idol and set it down, guiding one of the man's hands to its surface. "He held this in his own hands," she said.

"That will be a help, indeed so."

Parno took her sleeve in his fingers and pulled her back a step. Dhulyn swallowed. She hadn't realized she was so tense. And a Mercenary should never be unaware of her own condition, whether physical or mental.

Finally the man paused, cracked his knuckles. "Sorry it is," he said. "Don't normally have this type of trouble. All I Find is an emptiness."

Dhulyn raised one blood red brow. "I know of this." A glance at Parno brought his nod. "There is an emptiness where you should Find the man we seek?" The Finder nodded. "Can you

tell us where this emptiness is?" Magic and magical things were notoriously hard to Find. Apparently that was also true of mages. She'd wager her second best sword the "nothing" the Finder couldn't see was the mage himself.

"I Find a garden," he said. "But not the man who touched this," he tapped the idol.

"And the garden, where is it?"

"To the north of here. A week? Fetch me that map."

Dhulyn looked at her Partner, he shrugged back at her, and handed her a map from a nearby table. She unrolled it in front of the Finder, who immediately put his finger down on a mark beside a river. "What does it say?"

"Goranda."

The blind man nodded. "The garden is there."

"Can you describe it?" Parno said. Dhulyn nodded her approval. Any detail might narrow their search, help someone recognize the garden.

"Paths made of white stone pebbles and sand. Areas sectioned off by low, clipped hedges. In one section roses grow, in another lilies. Also, lilac bushes in full bloom. Tall spears of colour made from many little flowers. Two fountains."

"Roses and lilacs don't bloom at the same time," Parno said.

Dhulyn shrugged. "That tells us there is magic. And 'where there is much magic' . . ."

"There is little Finding'," Parno finished the quotation.

"Never heard that," the Finder said.

"Lucky for you."

• • •

"I **VISIBLE** to Finders they may be, but mages have a way of making their presence felt," Parno said as they rode through the outskirts of Goranda. Twelve days of dust on the road had dimmed the golden brown of his hair, though the red and gold of his Mercenary Badge still showed jewel-like in the morning sun. "We can go into any tavern and find someone talking about him."

"Or her."

"As you say."

But that turned out not to be the case.

"We need to change our approach." Dhulyn set down two clay mugs of beer on a corner table. This was the third tavern they had gone into listening for gossip and hearing none. "Though I wouldn't recommend that we go about asking questions about a mage's garden,"

Parno took a sip of his beer and wrinkled his nose. "You know how people are always asking us for stories?"

"Especially in bars." Dhulyn nodded.

"We'll supper here, and afterward I'll offer to play my pipes, and while I rest, you'll tell a story about an abandoned house —"

"A place no one speaks of, that some have forgotten, and yet they avoid it." Dhulyn had learned in Tegrian how to make up and tell stories.

"Exactly. If there's anything like that here, folk will be lining up to tell us."

• • •

“WHEN I was first a Mercenary Brother I served in a city far to the west, near the lands of the Great King.” Parno had gathered an audience with his pipes, and now, in the pause until the next round of dancing and singing began, Dhulyn sat cross-legged on table top. “There I saw a house.”

Her pale southern skin glowed like marble in the lamplight, her Mercenary Badge, blue and green, bright against her dark blood red hair.

“A tall house it was,” she continued, nodding her thanks as the innkeeper sent over a mug of scented wine. “A noble House at one time, so the story went. But no one had gone near it in years. Some said the old lord was still in there, wizened away but unable to die because of a wizard’s curse — though some said it was his wife,” she added with a pointed look at some of the women in the audience, who laughed. “Some said he was dead and that his spirit haunted the place. People who were known to have gone in were not seen again.

“Even children stopped daring each other to climb the wall. Finally people stopped talking about it, stopped even thinking about it. Except for one person from far away, who came to the Mercenary House. She had inherited, and thought to sell, but no one would help her. So she asked for Brothers to go in with her.” Dhulyn paused, and took a leisurely swallow of her wine.

“What was there, Wolfshead? What did they find?”

“Nothing,” she finally said. “Not even mice. Not even dust. Nothing but the sound of voices in other rooms, rooms that were always found quite empty.”

“*Cads*,” a woman whispered. “What did she do, this woman from far away?”

“Sold the house to the Brotherhood, of course. *We’re* not frightened away by voices.”

There was laughter, and some groaning, and one brave soul threw a bread roll at her, which Dhulyn caught and bit into.

Later, when the dancing had started again, a young woman came to their table, waiting until a nod gave her permission to sit down. Most people were careful around Mercenaries. “I’m a peddler,” she said. “I travel in sewing and weaving supplies; needles, threads, buttons, fancy dyed laces, and such.

“That story you told,” she said. “There’s something like that here. A house no one talks about — I don’t think they *can* talk about it. No building where there should be one, yet less space than there should be. No, listen, I make my living watching people, figuring out whether they’ll buy. And these townfolk,” she made a small gesture that indicated more than the people in the tavern. “I’ve watched their faces when I’ve asked them about this place, no one knows what I’m talking about. I take them right to it, and they don’t see what I see.” She looked from Dhulyn to where Parno played his pipes and back again. “But I think you will.”

• • •

PARNO stood looking up at the wall, hand resting on his sword hilt, lips pursed in a silent whistle. It was at least the height of three men.

“The peddler was right,” Dhulyn said as she re-joined him. “I walked round twice, and had a different number of paces each time. Only this wall doesn’t change.”

“We go over here then,” Parno narrowed his eyes. They had waited until the moon set, late enough that the streets and alleys around them were deserted. “You first,” he said to his Partner. He didn’t need light to hear the smile in her voice.

“Don’t want to match fingers for the privilege?”

“I know you can boost me,” he said, “but I’d hardly call it a privilege.” She was tall for a woman, almost as tall as Parno himself, but he was more solid. “Come.” She stepped into his cupped hands and he lifted her straight up until she could stand on his shoulders. He heard her take three slow breaths, readying herself for the Sable Monkey *Shora*. Then her weight was gone, and he could just make her out, a darker shadow on the old white wall as she inched her way up, moving sometimes to the right, to the left, and once even backing down and starting off in a new direction.

Parno lost sight of her and only knew she’d reached the top when a thin rope hit him in the face.

“You did that on purpose,” he muttered to himself, then wondered whether he’d actually heard her laugh or only imagined it. He gave the rope a soft tug to signal her, and started walking up the wall. Dhulyn wouldn’t have dropped the rope down to him if she hadn’t found a way to anchor it. The top of the wall was bare when he reached it, but the rope dropped down the other side. He looked over, and saw her braced with her feet against the inner wall, rope wrapped around her forearm.

“You’ve gained weight,” she said, using the nightwatch voice.

“All muscle.” He straddled the wall, braced himself and pulled her up to join him.

“Definitely a courtyard of some size,” she said when they were sitting side by side.

“Dark,” he pointed out. “By nature or by magic?”

“Darker than it should be, either way. Sounds empty, but doesn’t feel so.”

Parno tapped her wrist in a silent nod. He felt nothing unusual, but he trusted Dhulyn’s Outlander instincts before his own.

“I’ll go first,” he said.

She tapped his wrist “no.” “How will I hold you up? Takes both of us, one to anchor the other. I’ll go and find a ladder.”

He took a deep breath and released it. “You’ve gone first already tonight, I’d like to feel I was pulling my own weight.”

He felt rather than heard her gust of laughter. “That’s just what you can’t do, my soul. Don’t worry, I won’t kill anyone until you get there.”

Dhulyn handed herself down the rope as quickly as she could, taking care to make as little noise as possible. The air felt warmer than it had out on the street, with none of the cool night breezes that accompanied the setting of the moon. In fact — she paused a fraction of a second. The moon she now saw over the north side of the courtyard hadn’t set, and it was full.

So, not the same time of night, not even the same time of year.

She smelled earth just in time to save her ankles — the ground level was much higher here than it had been on the street outside. So time of day and year, and the height of the wall. All different.

She froze at the sound of large paws padding closer. She drew her sword from the scabbard at her back as silently as she could — as if the hunter couldn’t smell her already. Quickly the animal came close enough that *she* could smell it. *Large dog*, she

thought, just as it came into sight. Some kind of wolfhound perhaps. Its tail began to wag as soon as it saw her, but she did not lower her sword. At least, not until the dog lowered his forequarters to ground, front feet outstretched, tail wagging madly. The very picture of a pet dog waiting for a stick to be thrown. When she didn't respond, it sat up on its haunches, head to one side.

"Off you go, my brave one," she said in her native tongue, as though she spoke to a horse. "Time to hunt, Go!" The dog dashed off in the direction of her outflung arm as silently as it had come.

She waited a moment, and when it did not return, she pulled the rope taut and tapped out a message on it, like a fiddler striking a string with the bow. A few seconds later she was coiling up the rope as Parno landed next to her.

"You noticed the moon?" he said, helping her attach the rope to her harness.

Before she could answer, they both froze and turned their heads at the same time. *Not the dog*, she thought.

My turn Parno tapped out on her shoulder.

The moon gave just enough light that further down the path they could see the outline of a man carrying a sword. He stopped when he was within ten paces. "Friend or foe?" There was laughter in his voice.

"We are Dhulyn Wolfshead and Parno Lionsmane, of the Mercenary Brotherhood. Why don't you yield, and you can go your way?"

"Two things. First, you won't overcome my master, so I'd still have him to deal with if I let you pass. Second, I don't believe you Mercenaries are anywhere near as good as you think you are. You're so used to people not fighting you because of your reputations that you've probably grown rusty and slow. So —"

His head wore a surprised look when it landed a few feet away. The body slumped to the ground, pumping out blood onto the grass.

"Why do people always talk too much?" Parno wiped his sword clean on the dead stranger's tunic.

"He might have yielded if you'd given him more time."

"Now who's talking too much?"

Smiling, Dhulyn held up her hand, pointed ahead and off to her right, waited for Parno to tap out agreement on her shoulder. He heard it too, a rustling, a movement of bushes on the wrong side for what little wind there was. Not an animal, that much she could tell.

Another swordsman?

"Don't kill me." The whisper came from behind a plant that shouldn't have been blooming at this time of year.

"Come out, youngster. Show yourself."

A young man, perfect match for his voice, stepped gingerly from behind the bush, shoulders hunched, with the look of someone about to run away.

"Tell us where the mage is," Dhulyn said, smiling her wolf's smile.

The young man swallowed, looked at the corpse of the guard on the ground, licked his lips. He stepped to one side and pointed them onward with a shaking hand.

Parno led, three paces ahead and an arm's length to Dhulyn's right. He gave the boy a reassuring pat on the shoulder as he passed and Dhulyn suppressed a grin. You could take the man

out of the noble House, but you never entirely got the noble House out of the man.

True to her own nature, Dhulyn tilted her head to keep the boy in view as she passed him. As she did so, he grew taller, his face older, harder. She called out as he drew a symbol in the air, ducking and rolling through the hedge on her side of the path. For a moment she couldn't breathe, but she knew it for sorcery — she had fallen cleanly. Then air roared back into her lungs, she rolled in another direction and got to her feet. Only to find the path empty. Parno and boy both gone.

"If that was a boy, then I'm a Caid," she said, not bothering to keep her voice down. She took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders, relaxing the muscles in her neck and upper back. From here she could see a building, sharp black against the starry sky. That would be the first place to look for her Partner.

• • •

PARNO woke in a large room that resembled Allit's workshop, except for the lack of light, and the smell. It seemed someone had been burning hair. The Hunter's Shora told him he was alone, and lying on a cold stone table. He could move nothing but his head, though he felt no restraints. His view was limited, but he could see, on a wooden workbench topped with what looked like granite, another one of the statues their Brother had brought them.

"Another copy?" he wondered aloud.

"Not really, no."

He almost bit down on his tongue. Apparently he was *not* alone. How could the *shora* have failed him?

As if hearing his thought, a smallish woman wearing the loose white trousers, short boots, and belted brown tunic of the Berdanian nomads walked into his line of sight. But in the place of the nomads' rolled and folded headscarf, this woman wore an engraved silver helmet, the mail throat covering pushed back and swinging loose over her shoulder. Parno had seen that kind of armour recently.

"You're the god," he said. "Tuluaran."

"I prefer goddess," she said. "After all, we came first." She sat down on the edge of the workbench, pulling her feet up until she could wrap her arms around her knees. "I must say, you don't seem much impressed. I *am* a goddess, after all."

Parno shrugged with his eyebrows. "No offense, Tuluaran, but once you've met the Sleeping God, your sense of wonder gets a bit blunted."

Far from taking offense, the little goddess laughed. "And I'm just a minor household type of goddess, when all's said and done? No, no. Don't apologize. I know what you see. If I were my old powerful self, I'd have impressed you well enough — and I could perhaps have prevented the mage's second thief from finally stealing the real me."

She contemplated him with bright blue eyes. "There's something about you," she said. "You appear incomplete, and yet what part of you could be lost?"

"I'm Parno Lionsmane, of the Mercenary Brotherhood, Partnered with my Brother, Dhulyn Wolfshead," he said. "Partners are a sword with two edges."

"Of course you are. The marks of ritual are plain on you, now that I look." She leaned forward enough that he feared she would fall off the bench and touched the place above his ears where his hair had been removed, and his red and gold Mercenary Badge tattooed. She traced the black line with the tip of a cold finger. "And that explains everything, doesn't it?"

"Not to me."

"The mage spelled you, didn't he? Yet you didn't fall, neither you nor your Partner. He's told me how he'd spelled the other Mercenary, as well as the thief who stole me, with a wasting sickness, but his spell to kill you two didn't work. I see now it's because he thought he was killing two people, and you are not two people."

Parno grinned. "We do swear never to be parted, but most Mercenaries think that bit of the ritual is metaphor. My Partner and I have learned that it isn't."

"I wager that surprised him, which will be good for all of us." She made another gesture and frowned. "You've lost your freedom, haven't you? Would you like to find it?"

"Of course." Whatever it was holding Parno in place disappeared. "If you can free me so easily," he said, sitting up, "why are you still here yourself?"

Tuluaran gestured at the idol. "I'm bound to this rock — once I *was* this rock." She leaned forward and whispered, as if to share a secret. "I annoyed some of my fellow goddesses, they turned me into a marble hillside, and before they could free me, some mortal idiot made that statue, and here I am. And now the idiot mage has me."

"You'll pardon my ignorance, Tuluaran, but why don't you just pick up your statue and go?"

"I have to answer his prayer."

"Gods don't answer all prayers."

"Bite your tongue." Parno moved his tongue quickly from between his teeth. "We gods *do* answer all prayers." She shrugged. "But we don't grant all wishes, so sometimes the answer is 'no'. But that, that goat-faced hyena of a mage has somehow learned the true ritual, and now I'm bound here until he gets what he wants."

"Take long, will it?"

"Take forever, I fear." She didn't look at all afraid. "He's asking for a lost magical artifact called the Ghost Mirror. He thinks it will give him unlimited power."

"I still don't see what the problem is. You're the god — goddess of lost things, aren't you?"

She closed her eyes as if she was losing patience. "The Ghost Mirror isn't lost," she said. "It never existed. It's something from an old tale of the Caid's — and they were gone long before me and my kind came. I can't find something that isn't real."

"But because he used the true ritual —"

"Which I thought was lost."

"Which you thought was lost, you're bound until you find it."

"Or until the mage is dead."

Parno smiled. "We might be able to help you with that."

• • •

DHULYN held perfectly still, hidden in the deep shadow formed where hedgerow met tree. She had no reason to expect the mage couldn't find her using his magic, but it was worth trying — not all mages had the sight.

As apparently this one did not. He came questing down the path, where he once more took on the appearance of the young man, then reverted to the lanky, long-jawed man she had to assume was his own appearance, before he became a rather large dog — a familiar dog — nose to the wind, slowly turning in her direction. Dhulyn wrinkled her own nose. There was more than one way to catch a Mercenary. She braced, expecting the false dog to charge her. Instead Parno appeared in its place. The hairs rose on the back of her neck, the skin on her bare arms shivered. And then she smiled. *Does he think I would not know my own Partner?* Or perhaps he thought her superstitious enough to fear harming Parno's image.

But no. Outlander she might have been, but the Mercenary Brotherhood had no such foolish beliefs. And, like Allit the sculptor, Dhulyn Wolfshead knew a forgery when she saw one.

And a good forgery it was. Anyone else, perhaps even another Brother, would have taken the man walking toward her as Parno Lionsmane. But even if she had not seen the transformation with her own eyes, Dhulyn would have known the truth, and not only because she had been watching Parno walk since they met in the battle of Arcosa. They were Partnered; if he were this close, she would feel the touch of the bond.

So, kill the mage now, or wait until he had led her to the real Parno? On the one hand, following him could take too long, with her Partner the Caid's knew where, disarmed. On the other hand, mages, like most ordinary people, actually believed that taking Mercenaries' weapons away disarmed them.

Her decision made, Dhulyn stepped out of her shadow before the imitation Parno could reach her.

"Where is he?" she asked. "How did you manage to escape the mage?"

The forgery paused, and smiled. Dhulyn responded with her wolf's smile, laughing inwardly when it made the mage hesitate.

"You distracted him, and I managed to dodge off into the trees. It's taken me this long to find my way back here."

She nodded as though it were possible. Mercenary Brothers who could get lost in a garden this size tended not to survive their schooling.

"Which way?" she asked, as if she was taken in completely.

He pointed, right-handed, toward the building. "I saw a light as a door opened and closed."

Though mercenaries were schooled to be ambidextrous with any weapon, Parno was still left-handed, and for mere pointing would never use his right hand.

"Your turn to lead," she said. She wanted this fake Parno in front of her, where she could watch him. He hesitated, but finally set off down the path. Her hands itched with the desire to kill him — with or without a weapon — but only patience would lead her to her Partner. After several turns in the path, they reached the entrance, an iron-reinforced door in the center of a weathered stone wall. Dhulyn flattened her back against the wall to the right of the door and signalled to the mage to take up the same position on the left.

"I'll pick the lock." She did not use the nightwatch voice, as the mage could not hear it. What would he say to this? How long would he keep the charade?

"It could be open," he said after a slight pause.

"Don't be a simpleton." Dhulyn hid her smile. "No mage, however powerful, will leave an open door to his citadel."

"Of course. Go ahead then," was the expected answer.

She felt through her braids and loosened out three lock picks. The longest she slipped into her arm guard, the other two she held at the ready as she crouched down to put herself eye-level to the lock. She'd rarely seen one more simple. It appeared the mage relied so much on his magic he couldn't be bothered having a decent lock. Lazy and over-confident. She inserted the two picks and jiggled them. Another time she might have locked the open door, just to amuse herself at the mage's expense, but Parno would not thank her for additional delay. Some instinct made her roll backward into the mage's shins, knocking him over. She didn't know how she knew he'd been reaching out to touch her, but she knew to trust her feelings.

"Thought I saw something," she said. "Door's open now. After you."

He brushed too close to her going through the door. She noted he didn't smell like Parno, a serious flaw in his forgery. Lazy and over-confident. He didn't hesitate at all, but barged forward, not at all like someone unfamiliar with the building. She would have been insulted, if she'd cared what he thought.

Finally he opened a door and waved her to precede him into a workroom.

The first thing she saw was her Partner — her true Partner — lying on his back on a table only just long enough to hold him. He appeared unable to move, though there were no visible bindings. Even as she took a step toward him, he flashed her a message with the fingers of his right hand, and Dhulyn threw herself forward into a shoulder roll which took her to the bench against the far wall.

As she regained her feet she jostled a statue identical to the one Allit the sculptor had declared a fake. Even as she caught it, Dhulyn could see the object cast an unnaturally large shadow.

"One step closer and I drop it." She held up the statue and shifted to her right. As she expected, the mage followed her, patting the air in front of him with his hands.

"Come now, be reasonable."

"You'll be amazed how reasonable I'll be once my Partner is freed." She shifted a few more inches to her right, as if she were trying to get around him. A step or two more and Parno would be behind the mage, not off to his left. And once out of the mage's sight . . .

As the mage stepped sideways, however, he was also moving closer to her. Parno sat up, lowered his feet to the floor and signalled again, but she couldn't take her eyes off the mage. Shifting her focus would give Parno away. She smiled. If the mage got any closer, she'd brain him with the statue.

If she could move.

"Very careless of you, Mercenary. How do you think I caught your Brother here? Close enough for you to strike me is close enough for me to strike you."

"You should work on getting a longer reach."

He moved his hands again and Dhulyn felt a tug at her back and belt as her sword and dagger left their sheaths and flew into the mage's hands. He tossed them to one side, and took the statue from her numb fingers. She kept her eyes focussed on his face, let him keep his attention on her as Parno snuck up behind him. Let him think them disarmed. Lazy and over-confident.

"You won't get many visitors if this is the way you treat all your guests," she said. He made another gesture and her skin shivered, as though insects were crawling over her. Whatever he expected to happen, however, did not. He scowled and gestured again.

"Am I supposed to be frightened? So far it seems all you can do is freeze people, and imitate their appearances."

"I killed your Brother."

"Ah, but you're not having any luck killing us, are you? And I wouldn't boast of killing Renth Greyclaw. There is a little thing called Pasillon."

"That's what this is? You're here to kill me because your Brother was an ignorant fool who couldn't tell a real goddess from a fake one? I have the goddess now." He hefted the statue. "And when she finds me the Ghost Mirror I'll have all the power and all the strength I need. Though you won't be here to see it."

This time Dhulyn could not stop herself from laughing. "You are an idiot. You think we're afraid to die? You think Renth was? We know the path we walk leads always to the same place. I only wish that my Brother Renth was here to see how *I'm* going to kill *you*."

"Granted."

The temperature in the room dropped precipitously, and suddenly Dhulyn could see her breath — and not just her breath. Behind the mage a shimmering transparent image appeared, no more substantial than the foggy air. An image she recognized. Renth Greyclaw.

"Demons and perverts," Parno whispered.

Their Brother's wraith covered the mage's eyes from behind with its hands, like a child playing. Startled, the mage inhaled abruptly, drawing the wraith into his lungs along with the air. His face froze, his hands scrabbled at his throat, as if the ghost was choking him.

Finding herself suddenly free, Dhulyn tore the lock pick out of her arm guard and plunged it into the mage's left eye, just as the sharp end of a broken broom handle pushed through his chest from behind. The body crumbled, the statue lay smashed on the floor, and Parno caught her by the upper arms as the floor fell out from under them.

Dhulyn was awakened by a dog licking her face. She pushed him away and rolled to her feet. Parno stood silhouetted against the rising sun, and all around them were the remains of the garden they had walked through the night before, grown over with weeds and roses gone wild, the few remaining fruit trees overgrown and shaggy. Here and there, poking up through the strangled growth, she could make out the vestiges of foundation walls.

"Most of it was done with magic," said a voice from behind her. Dhulyn turned and the dog bounded, tail wagging, to fetch a stick thrown by a woman dressed like a Berdanan nomad.

"Tuluaran, I presume," she said, as Parno joined her.

"Indeed I am." She pointed with her chin at the chaos around them. "He must have been using almost all his power to maintain the illusion of his home. Easy enough when he was young,

but to keep that up?" She shook her head. "No wonder he wanted the Ghost Mirror." The dog returned and set the stick down at her feet, sitting itself when she paid it no attention. "I take it you can find your way from here? You haven't lost your path?" she said with a grin.

"No, thank you. What about you? Would you like an escort back to your temple?" Parno said.

"I think I'd like to wander a bit. I don't actually need a temple, you know. I can hear anyone's prayer, if they pray fiercely enough. Now that the statue is broken, I'm free to go where I please. But what about this fine fellow?" She ruffled the dog's ears.

"Take him with you," Dhulyr suggested. "He looks lost."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Violette Malan uses fabulous hats to distract everyone from noticing that she's taking notes which will inevitably be used against them. She begs you to remember that no one expects the Spanish *inquisition*. If you're very brave, you can find her and her evil twin V.M. Escalada on Facebook, on Twitter @Violette-Malan and at www.violette-malan.com.

DUEL'S END

By JOSEPH A. MCCULLOUGH

NICK Bury sat on a pile of earth between two freshly dug graves.

"You presume a lot with your shovel," said one of the Seconds.

Nick just smiled and watched as two young men chose pistols from a case.

The young men stood back to back, their Seconds nearby. Then they marched apart as the Seconds called out steps. On the count of ten, the young men turned and fired. Both of the Seconds collapsed.

"No more will we take their ill advice," said one young man.

"Our houses must stand united," replied the other.

They clasped hands. Then one tossed a coin to Nick.

"For your trouble, Sir."

Nick just smiled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph A. McCullough makes his home on a ridge, high above the English Channel, from where he can walk to Roman ruins, several medieval castles, Napoleonic fortifications, and a crypt full of skulls. While Joe has written numerous books and fantasy short-stories, he is best-known these days as the creator of the multi-award-winning miniatures game Frostgrave: Fantasy Wargames in the Frozen City as well as its numerous supplements and spin-offs. Because of his habit of drifting through all of the different creative aspects of geekdom, he regularly posts on his blog, therenaissancetroll.blogspot.com.

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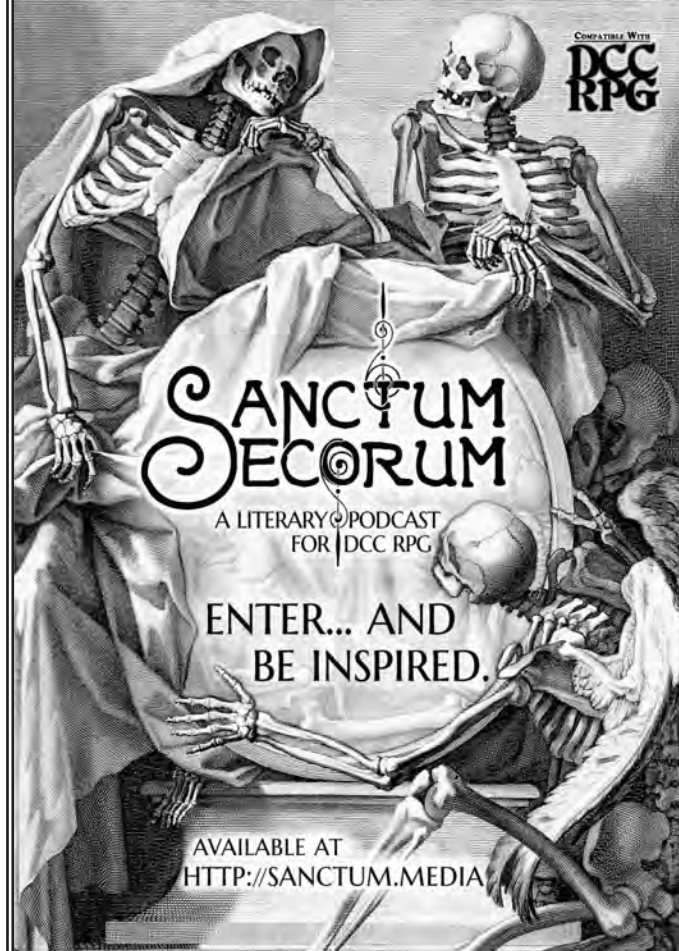
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THE SECOND DEATH OF HANUVAR

From the Chronicles of Hanuvar Cabera

By HOWARD ANDREW JONES

AS the overseer barred the door behind Jerissa, the clack of dulled swords rang through the practice arena. Outside, in the larger compound likewise walled in gray stone, all was quiet apart from the endless, dispirited patter of rain into the sated earth. The dark skies somehow emphasized the decrepit nature of all the structures before her, from the leaning barracks building and sagging mess hall roof, to the moldy mortar of the stones themselves. When off duty, her women barely filled a third of the dilapidated buildings. Apparently the school had once housed far more gladiators. Now it was only them.

"Up the stairs, Eltyr," the overseer said gruffly.

She knew his name was Kerthik, although she'd never called him that, just as he'd never used her real name. At first the generic "woman" was the least offensive term he'd employed, but after the first week the insults had halted altogether and he had referred to her simply by the name of her sacred corps. Whenever he addressed her now, it was as "Eltyr."

She'd never taken the stairs, which led to the wall's height. Earlier today she'd looked up from the practice yard to see the gladiator school owner watching from the wall's jutting balcony with a legionnaire and well-dressed dark-skinned man. Presumably Lurcan wanted a word with her, although why, she couldn't imagine. She was training her charges the best she was able, and their improvement had been remarkable. No one logical could complain. But then it was foolish to look for logic from Dervani, or perhaps, from the world in general.

The stairs creaked under their tread and she noted the red paint on the finely carved balustrade was chipped and fading. As a Volanus native she had little experience with Dervan gladiator schools, but surely they were usually maintained more carefully than this.

Inside the walls of the training area she heard her sergeant shouting at someone to block with the flat, not the edge, and shook her head.

"They're shaping up," Kerthik said behind her. That had sounded almost complimentary. Surprised, she glanced back, but found little to read, for the brute's dark eyes were flat, expressionless. So too was his face, except that an old scar pulled down the left side of his mouth. He was a thick man, broad through the chest, with dusty, sun-bleached hair, knife and whip at his belt. His entire demeanor suggested power coiled for instant release. In middle age or near it, he took pride in his appearance. His face and muscular limbs were always clean, and his simple tunics well mended or new.

They reached the walkway atop the wall. No one now reclined upon the balcony's couch under the old canvas awning, nor did they sit the bench that crowded close to the sturdy rail.

Again she glanced back at Kerthik, but he pointed her forward. The walkway branched off into the second floor of the stone villa attached to the school. This, she knew, was where the guards lived, and she suspected Lurcan, the owner, made his home somewhere within.

She looked down at her charges as she walked, wondering if gladiators here had ever dared rebel, and if guards had fended them off from the height of this very wall.

Her women, each dressed like her in the scratchy, sleeveless gray tunic that stretched to their calves, had laid down their swords, and were now flat on the wet soil, stretching in unison. Sergeant Ceera stalked among them, correcting even this activity. A Dervan physician had carefully tended her, but she limped still, and likely would to her dying day.

Within the practice field's perimeter a half dozen guards leaned on spears, loafing or leering at women they were forbidden to touch — not owing to the Dervan code that would see men lose fingers for daring to grab a senator's daughter, but because the arena battle lay less than a week away, and Lurcan wanted all of his women in peak condition.

She arrived at last at a cedar door banded with dark iron, tucked beneath a slanted wooden awning.

Jerissa stopped, thinking Kerthik expected her to open the door, but knowing better than to assume when in the presence of a superior officer. And for her own peace of mind she'd reluctantly granted him that designation, for she refused still to think of herself as a slave.

The overseer ignored her unvoiced query and motioned her to one of the two sturdy timbers supporting the door's awning. Here, she realized, they were out of sight of the guards.

Kerthik glanced over his shoulder, then spoke in swift, pressured manner. "The master's visitors want to speak with you. They were sent by a consul. They want to know if you're really from the Eltyr Corps."

Why such secrecy discussing something so obvious? "You know I am."

"Yes. But they don't have to know it."

She didn't understand what he was driving at.

He seized her arm and she immediately pulled back, discovered his grip unyielding as iron forceps. She held off her natural instinct to kick the side of his knee.

"Listen, woman. If you fight well, they'll spare you." He loosened his hold, cast a glance back to the practice field, then stepped to the side. In a flash of insight she realized that would block sight of her should anyone come up the stairs behind them.

He continued in little more than a whisper, his voice hoarse. "You've got the skill. You could be a money earner for Lurcan. Serve him well for a few years, then you can buy your freedom." His finger rose in admonishment. "But if you tell that soldier who you really are, you won't be going any place with hope. You need to tell him you and your sergeant are just slaves, like the rest. That you're pretending to be Eltyr. For the games."

After her capture she'd divorced herself from most of her emotions, lest she be driven mad, and it took a moment to understand that Kerthik's words were offered as a sort of kindness. She could not have been more surprised if he'd sprouted feathers and laid an egg. Only a few weeks ago he'd taken a whip to her.

He looked awkwardly down at his sandals, as if troubled by what he found in her eyes.

She shook her head at him, slowly. He had a dream for her, but it was a small and stunted thing. "Don't you see, Kerthik?"

He started a little at her use of his name.

She tapped her chest. "They might as well have thrown me on the pyre with my sisters when Volanus fell. I'm already dead. I'm just a walking ghost."

His brow furrowed, but he had no reply. She turned from him and opened the door.

A cool, wide room lay before her, thick with cushioned couches and chairs that must have looked expensive ten or fifteen years prior. Lurcan, the corpulent owner, sprawled in one corner across from the dark-skinned man she'd seen earlier. Closer at hand a table had been set with jugs of wine, goblets, and various delicacies. A pale slave boy stood beside it, ready to serve and equally ready to consume, judging by the way his eyes roved over the sesame seed rolls.

Lurcan looked up through lidded eyes, his ample cheeks flushed with good humor. "Ah! There you are, Eltyr." He gestured to the man across from him. "You see, Antires, she's fit and trim."

"I see!" The dark man laughed, a goblet full of red wine in one hand. He was handsome, with short curling hair and beard, almost certainly a native of Herrene, judging from the swirling decorative flourishes on the edge of his fine red tunic. There was no sign of the soldier who'd accompanied him.

Kerthik bade her to stop before the master, but she was already doing so.

"She's taken over the instruction," Lurcan continued to Antires, which was mostly true, though Kerthik still demonstrated tactics favored by gladiators. "She trained many of the Eltyr corps soldiers, so she knows all of their strange and fabulous techniques."

"She sounds marvelous." Antires slurped at his wine.

Lurcan beamed, then nodded to Kerthik. "Take her to see the trivon. He's in the old office."

"Yes, Master," Kerthik answered. "Move on, Eltyr."

As they walked past the refreshments she suddenly craved them even more than freedom. Gods, what it would be like to

taste fine wine again! But Lurcan would no more have offered a drink to her than he would have offered one to a horse.

Kerthik motioned her ahead so that he'd never show his back to her. He might accord her respect, but trust was foolish.

As she turned the latch and thrust open the door, she discovered a small room with a dusty desk and a pair of chairs. Apart from the furniture there was only a stack of chipped urns in the far corner, and a man.

He stood with his back to the door, facing a narrow window. He was, unmistakably, a soldier, one of those who would be obvious as such even if he weren't clothed in regulation gear, from the yellow cloak over his broad shoulders to the leather armored skirt and black leggings. A short sword and knife were belted to either side of his waist. While in good repair, every inch of equipment had clearly seen use. This was no barracks room veteran. He was obviously a line officer, and one grown gray in service.

"Trivon, I have the woman," Kerthik said.

He replied curtly, without turning. "Leave us."

Kerthik hesitated, and the man at the window put his hand to the pommel of the short sword, perhaps out of habit.

Shooting her a final warning glance, the overseer backed from the room and closed the door behind him.

Jerissa studied the soldier's stiff back and the nearby urns. It would be the work of a moment to heft one of those and crack his skull. The empire would be out a high ranking officer.

But then she'd be dead, and her charges would be that much closer to their doom.

She listened to Kerthik's receding footsteps and thought about what it would be like to take this officer down, to grasp that sword and slay Lurcan and his minions, and the next thing she knew she was starting forward.

And then the soldier turned and she saw his cool gray eyes and proud hooked nose, and the strong, square jaw. There was an instant of startled recognition, confusion that the man looked so much like someone he couldn't be, then the incredulous realization that this was not mere resemblance. Yes, he had neither beard nor mustache. His hair was silvered and longer. He wore the uniform of the enemy.

"Hanuvar," she whispered, and backed unconsciously away, her blood speeding in fear. She had seen him die.

His voice was soft, his eyes showing a brief flash of regret, or even pain. "I am no spirit."

His presence here was so unexpected, so startling, that she had trouble processing it, and continued to stare. It was him. Hanuvar, who had conjured victories against such impossible odds the Dervani had named him sorcerer. Hanuvar, who for a decade had held the implacable Dervan legions at bay in their own lands. Hanuvar, who had vanished for years, only to return to die with the city he had shielded for so long. She herself had witnessed his plummet into the cobalt waves as the wall first began to crumble. She had thought it fitting he die with Volanus. For so long as he had lived, there had been hope in the city of silver spires.

His voice was soft, but crisp, commanding. "Jerissa. Speak to me." He stepped around the desk and stopped before her. "I mean to buy your freedom. Lurcan claims you're all Eltyr. But

I don't recognize most of you. How many are truly women of the corps?"

This was actually happening. She sucked in a breath, met his eyes, and decided to address him as though this impossible vision really were a superior officer and not some ghost, or delusion. "Two, counting me," she said, and then at his nod, her mind awoke at last.

If this was real, he meant only to free the women who'd served in the famed elite female corps that had guarded the sea gate since time immemorial. "But most of these others are women from Volanus."

At this news he frowned.

"They're not soldiers. They're bakers, shoemakers, even a bookseller and a midwife. I've been working night and day to train them to defend themselves..." her voice faltered, and she realized with a start that if she were to continue she might break down. His appearance had opened the door to a host of emotions she thought she'd buried.

She cleared her throat and pulled herself together. "We're all going to be sent to battle against gladiators dressed as Dervan legionnaires. If Ceera and I aren't there, they'll still send the other women. They'll be slaughtered."

He answered without hesitation. "We'll take them with us."

"But where can we go?" Their homeland lay in ruins. The colonies were Dervan outposts. What destination could there be?

He offered a brief smile "I dare not say, until you're free, and on your way."

"But how can you even... how can you afford —"

"I've raided the tombs of our dead. They can purchase the freedom of the living."

She sensed there was much more to it than this. What she really wanted to know was how he had survived, and how he came to be here, when he should be rotting on the ocean floor. That he could walk the streets of a Dervan frontier port town unrecognized was not so strange, given that few Dervani were likely to recognize the great general, and that most from the inner sea coast shared a similar complexion. And it was not so strange that he spoke Dervan with no accent, for many in the inner sea were fluent in more than a single tongue.

She said nothing more, for she sensed that time was short. In a moment he confirmed it.

"We dare not tarry. I'll make arrangements with Lurcan. Tell no one of my true identity. One wrong word will jeopardize it all."

"Yes, of course, General."

"How many Eltyr truly survived?"

She shook her head. "There couldn't have been more than two dozen of us. Maybe less. And most were wounded. I'm not sure where they ended up. The Dervani made careful note of it all, though," she continued, her mouth twisting in scorn. "I'm sure they have records." The methodical Dervani always had records.

He cleared his throat, and his voice was tentative. "Was my daughter among them?"

She shook her head. "She was charged with Praelyff Meruvar's safety, General. I didn't see her after the assault began."

"And did you hear of her after?"

She shook her head, no. But then as she had been marched in chains from the smoldering ruins of the city by the sea she had passed so many broken bodies in the shadows of the shattered towers. She'd given up looking at their faces.

Hanuvvar nodded once, as if to mark the end of one subject. He began another. "Stand ready, Eltyr. I must arrange transport, so relief may take another day."

She nodded. And then, without thinking, she blurted: "Thank you, General."

"Thank me when we've cleared the obstacles. I may yet need your sword arm."

• • •

Garbed in his blue silk robe, his feet in the finest leather sandals, Theris sat in contemplation of his goddess, round, smooth-skinned face bathed in the perfumed incense he himself had blessed. He was content.

Fate decreed he be reigning high priest in the year of Ariteen's ascendancy. After millennia, her most propitious hour was almost at hand. In but two days all would know her not as some obscure incarnation of the upstart Serima, but as supreme deity, and the empire would transform from one enslaved to greed and bloodshed to one alive with love.

Gradually he grew conscious of a steady knocking. "Enter," he said, opened his eyes, and smiled dreamily at the sturdy young man lingering in the threshold. "Yes, Ortix?"

"There is a visitor, Blessed One." He pressed open palms to his heart and bowed. "He comes from the School of Lurcan. Where the female gladiators are housed."

"Curious." Theris put hands to the black cushioned arms of his chair, and pushed himself upright. "What does he want?" A trace of the breath of the goddess lingered in his nostrils, and brought a twinkle to his eyes.

"He does not say, Blessed One. But he seems troubled."

"Let us see if we can ease his pain."

Theris ducked his head to pass beneath a little stone arch and into a wide, cool chamber beyond, its low ceiling stained from ancient smoke. Ariteen's sacred breath perfumed the vast underground room and roiled like fog through the dim recesses.

The revelry for the most devout and select of his flock had ended for the day. Some on the worn gray flagstones lay entwined and some lay apart, but a rapturous smile stood out upon every upturned face.

Theris and Ortix threaded their way through the recumbent men and women and the mist and the rough hewn pillars. As they neared the exit they passed three flayed bodies shackled to the floor, and Theris smiled sadly. A necessary sacrifice. But these had been loved while they died, and their paramours lay insensate across them, uncaring that their skin and clothes were soaked with blood. The deaths would not be in vain, for soon now all would know the love of Ariteen.

Ortix preceded him up the stairs, the smoky glass dulling the red orb of the lantern he carried. Being a goddess of both love and protection, Ariteen preferred the shielding cloak of night, and her worshippers honored her temples with minimal illumination.

They arrived at the ground floor, and the central hall of the newer temple. Theris had never felt at home among its soaring arches and great open spaces. The chambers carved from the old silver mine tunnels were familiar and sacred after centuries of devoted followers had worshipped within.

The broad-shouldered visitor waited within the antechamber, eying a colorful mosaic of Ariteen in her aspect as lover. Many young men had found the image of great interest, for her assets were rendered with loving detail as she leaned down to bestow a rapturous youth with a kiss.

The visitor turned, and Theris saw that his face was misshapen by a scar that pulled down one side of his mouth.

"Blessed One." The man gave a brief head bob. His voice was low, gruff, but there was no missing a hint of nervousness.

"This is Kirtha," Ortix informed him.

"Kirtha, welcome." Theris glided forward.

"It's Kerthik, Blessed One," the man corrected.

Theris smiled and spread his hands. "Whatever their names, all are welcome here in this chamber, which celebrates our goddess and her many aspects. What has brought you here?" He stood waiting and felt his fine mood abating while the man stared and stared, apparently struggling with whatever it was he'd come to say.

"You have a message?" Theris prompted.

"The women," Kerthik managed at last. And once he began he spoke hurriedly. "It's to be a true contest isn't it? So that those who fight well are spared? It's not to be one of those set pieces where everyone on one side dies, is it?"

Theris spread slim arms in his wide blue sleeves. "What curious questions. Your master is being well compensated so that it shouldn't matter what happens." He eyed the man. "But you haven't come upon your master's behalf, have you, Kerthik?"

He saw the brief light of fear in the man's eyes and put a hand to his shoulder, guiding him to the mosaic of Ariteen as the loving mother. Here she was fully clothed and her eyes were not so lascivious, though under her curling grey-blue locks she was just as lovely. "Our goddess is a protector, and so are we, her speakers. What is it that troubles you, Kerthik?"

"I worry for them. The servant of a consul has come, and he means to buy them."

"What?" Theris heard the snap in his voice and quickly strove to right his anger.

"Consul Ciprion means to buy them and carry them away. For questioning, I think."

Until Consul Caiax's legions had shot Hanuvar from the sky, Ciprion was the only Dervan general who'd ever bested the famed general. Ciprion's star had waned, but he was popular in some circles, still, and was said to hold a modicum of power. If he were here, his interference could jeopardize all that they had worked for. They needed the blood of both men and women for the ritual. "Is the Consul in the city?"

Kirthak shook his ugly head. "Only his man. A trivon."

"I see." Theris cleared his throat and tried not to show his obvious relief. "Your master has been well paid for his portion of the festival, and our expenditure to the amphitheater has been astronomical."

Kirthak shook his head more violently. "This trivon is willing to pay more. Vastly more."

"We had an agreement," Ortix cut in.

Theris shot his thick-browed assistant a warning glance, both for speaking out of turn and for showing inappropriate emotion.

"I will have to speak to this trivon," Theris said, his voice calming. "The combat is intended to honor our goddess in her protective aspect. Were the ceremony to be... altered in any way at this point, it would be of great insult."

"So they're to be spared then? The brave ones?"

Theris favored him with his most melting smile and lied boldly. "But of course, good Kirthak. Don't fear. We'll find this trivon, and straighten things out."

After that assurance, and a few awkward pleasantries, the man excused himself. Theris stood staring after him long after the temple door swung shut.

"You lied to that man," Ortix said. He crossed his arms over his lighter blue acolyte's tunic.

"My son, the signs foretold that there would be a final obstacle in our path, and that great fortitude would be required to overcome it. Our goddess would advise us to be wily."

"What do you plan to do?"

Theris stroked his beardless chin with a beringed finger. "First, I will have you deliver a message to the governor. He'll be wroth to hear anyone's interfering. Much less Consul Ciprion. Then I'm going to have you find out where this trivon is staying."

"What do you want me to do then?"

"The governor will follow my lead," Theris said. The old man was wrapped about his finger tightly, now. He might not be party to the changes that would soon overtake the world, beginning in the provincial capital he ruled, but he recognized the wisdom of Ariteen's practices. "A squad of legionnaires ought to be enough to silence one lone trivon, don't you think?"

• • •

HANUVAR had picked his lodgings in the second floor above the chandler's shop because of its small windows, single entrance, and solid door. Antires had complained that it was dark and reeked of perfumed candlewax, and that the chandler crowded the corners with extra belongings, but being an actor, the Herrene didn't find it so onerous that he minded free food.

That evening the young man joined him there, sitting down to a meal of baked fish rubbed with lemon and pepper and mokra paste, a fresh-baked loaf of dark bread, some fried chartish greens, and even some fruit pastries for dessert. Being a Herrene he'd selected a wine seasoned with citrus. Probably he expected Hanuvar to complain about that, so he didn't.

They ate in companionable silence in the little room, the stools creaking as they shifted from time to time.

"Trivon," the Herrene said, finally, addressing Hanuvar by his assumed Dervan officer title, "if Consul Ciprion sent you here on this mysterious errand, why didn't he send more men with you?"

"Consul Ciprion wasn't sure what I'd find. And his resources aren't entirely unlimited." There'd been no consul, of course.

Hanuvar's explanation for his activities was as fabricated as his identity. But he'd hardly have confided the truth to the actor.

Hanuvar's companion swallowed. "The ship you've picked is nice, but I don't understand your crew. Why are you selecting sailors like them?"

He pretended ignorance. "Like what, Antires?"

"Old men. Slaves." The Herrene paused only for a breath. "Is it because they're Volani? Why so much interest in them?"

"I'm not paying you to ask questions," Hanuvar told him. "I'm paying you because I need someone smart and courteous."

Antires gave a little bow. "If I asked questions every time the Dervani did something mad I should never fall silent. First you wish me to act your servant and entertain fat Lurcan. Then you decide to buy a ship. Then you go out of your way to crew it with reprobates and slaves."

"I make do, Antires. You must use the tools at hand."

"Your navigator seems to have the palsy," Antires pointed out.

"His mind is still sharp."

Moreover, the old navigator was originally Volani, a slave from the first war, only recently freed as he'd grown feeble. Many of the other sailors were men arrested for minor infractions, and most were slaves, seven from the galleys, and five of those were in such sad shape Antires had thought Hanuvar stripped of his senses.

But those five had been sold into slavery from the sack of Volanus.

The actor took a swig from a tin mug he'd brought with the food. "What I can't figure is what Consul Ciprion wants with these Eltyr. I mean, they were slaves already, in Derva itself, right? If there were any questions that needed asking, wouldn't Consul Caiax have done that already?" He snapped his fingers. "But Ciprion and Caiax don't like each other, do they?"

"Not at all."

"So this is all about two rivals, one rising, one waning. But what can Ciprion possibly learn that's of use? Why question anyone about a city that's been sown with salt? I mean, you can't get much more vanquished than that. It's not like the Eltyr can tell him secrets useful to defeat Volanus anymore."

"Different people know different sorts of secrets."

"Like those galley slaves? Or have you confused lice with secrets?"

Hanuvar paused in rubbing the bread heel through the sauce left beneath the fish and shrewdly eyed his companion. "What is it you Herrenes say about curiosity?"

"What is it you Dervani say about practicality? I don't know what your scheme is, but it's not practical."

"If I told you the truth, what would you do with it?"

Antires blinked in surprise. "Why, nothing."

Hanuvar chuckled. "Nothing?"

"Well, not until you'd paid me. But if there's some kind of behind-the-scenes investigation going on, surely you need someone to write up the story once it's time to spread the word. I'm your man for that."

"Yes. I saw the sign in your window. Writer for hire. Right next to the lettering that proclaimed you an actor, translator, and negotiator."

"I am many things," the actor declared with a half-bow over the table.

"So must all successful men be."

After dinner the younger man gave up trying to tease the truth from his elder, then proved so restless Hanuvar suggested he act a few scenes from his favorite plays. He'd rather Antires not wander out drinking to spread gossip about their activities.

The Herrene brightened at the invitation. "Most Dervani don't seem to like anything but broad comedy."

"I've travelled."

Antires spent an hour populating the little room with doomed lovers, brave generals, dying kings, and sword-wielding heroes. Hanuvar appreciated the distraction, for in quiet moments he thought too readily of the city he'd last seen burning, and his daughter's sea-grey eyes. The actor banished these recollections to the shadows.

The words were alternately eloquent and overly formal, often laboring a little too hard to tweak the heart strings, but some of those speeches, like the aging tyrant begging forgiveness of his dying son, awoke his sympathy, and Hanuvar was moved to melancholy even after laughing aloud at the final scenes of the comically brave Dorik readying for battle.

In the end he clapped roundly and praised Antires, who bowed, and gratefully accepted the full goblet Hanuvar passed him. They were on their second bottle, and it was far from the actor's first drink, although apart from a flushed face his imbibing had left his performances unmarred.

"I see I touched the heart of a stony soldier with the words of Herrene playwrights."

Hanuvar studied the grinning younger man. "Tell me, Antires. Why do playwrights always tell of kings and generals? Why not ordinary people?"

"They write about those with the power to do things."

"The world would be better off if we exalted kings and generals less."

"Few living kings and generals seem worth the trouble to write about," Antires agreed. "Except maybe one," he added with a sidelong look. "You Dervani all claimed Hanuvar fled Volanus because he was a coward. But he returned in the end, to die with his city. Even when all hope was lost. How many other kings would do that?"

He was young, and flushed with pride in the heritage of his own people, and a little drunk. Old resentments of a people dominated by the Dervani for less than a generation were easy to rekindle. He probably thought himself daring to praise Derva's greatest enemy before an officer of the legion.

"Volanus had no king. He was a general."

"I know that," Antires said truculently. "I'm just saying, he at least was worthy of a play, though he'll probably never get one."

Hanuvar hid his wry amusement with a disinterested answer. "Maybe you should write one."

"And where, in all the world, would it be staged?"

Hanuvar was saved from having to find a reply when a loud knock sounded upon the door. His hand immediately went to the sheathed sword on the table beside him, a movement noted by Antires.

"You're sure jumpy," the Herrene said.

"Trivon?" A young boy's voice inquired dully from behind the door. "Are you in there?"

He rose, sword still sheathed, but supported in left hand while his right wrapped the hilt. "I am. Who sent you?"

"Master Lurcan, trivon." The boy dropped his voice. "He needs to speak with you privately, this evening."

"Very well. Give me a moment."

He stepped back to the table, sorting his thoughts as he reattached the Dervan sheath to his weapons belt, which he buckled. He found Antires gauging him with rising curiosity.

He addressed the Herrene, pitched his voice low. "How drunk are you?"

"Only a little."

"Then listen well. If something should go amiss, you make sure the ship is readied. Do you understand?"

"Aye —"

Hanuvar cut off whatever question was dawning on the black man's lips. "It's paramount that those gladiators get on that ship." So saying, he placed three thumb-sized rubies in the hands of the actor, rendered silent by stunned regard. "There will be more like that for you, if you follow through. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Antires stammered.

"If something goes awry, use these to make things happen. Be on guard until my return." He fastened his cloak to his shoulders and cast open the door.

There was only a boy there on the wooden landing outthrust from the apartment. He was no more than twelve years of age, barefoot and scrawny, with a shock of dark hair. He was different from the one Hanuvar had seen at Lurcan's school that morning.

He bobbed his head to the trivon. "This way, sir."

Hanuvar followed the boy down the stairs and the street, past a tavern alive with light, laughter, and late evening revelers. The sun was down, and the stormy skies were closed over the stars like a tomb door. The rain dribbled down, more a fine mist than drops, coating his skin in a sheen of moisture.

The child led. Lanterns burned atop high poles every other block, lighting the streets for only a handful of fellow journeyers.

After three blocks the boy diverted into a dark lane and Hanuvar reached out to grab his shoulder. The boy started.

"Where are you leading me?"

"The backside of Tretak's tavern," he said.

"Why there?"

"I don't know," the boy admitted. "But it's supposed to be a secret meeting. And I was told to make sure we weren't followed."

Frowning, Hanuvar released him and bade him on, one hand slipping to his sword hilt.

The boy headed into the lane, helpfully pointing out a pile of wooden boxes. After twenty feet the lane opened into a wide clearing, a courtyard surrounded by the dark shapes of two and three story buildings. Suddenly the boy dashed ahead, and a light flared on the left.

In a single heartbeat Hanuvar understood the lay of the situation. Four legionaries were ranged about him, five if he counted the footfall of the man scuffing the soil behind. A deliberate warning, he thought, to alert him to the man's presence.

The one on the right held a lantern, and stood beside a gaping rectangular pit. Beside it lay a wide, heavy looking wooden plank and a pair of large boulders.

To his left was another legionnaire, a scarred, scowling man. Only a few paces forward was a younger soldier with clear brown eyes and a strong cleft chin, and behind him was the youngest of the lot, a man with a little Herrenic blood, judging by his darker complexion.

The boy hesitated beside the foremost legionnaire. "Go," he barked, then eyed Hanuvar as the youth jogged into the darkness. The legionnaire smote his fist in salute. "Hail, trivon."

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" Hanuvar asked.

The cleft-chinned leader shook his head. "It's no pleasure on my part. But I'm a soldier with orders. And my orders mean that you're going to end up in that old mine shaft."

"It seems a dishonorable end."

The soldier nodded with some sympathy. "Especially for a veteran. This end is beneath you, and beneath me."

"Soon he'll be beneath us all," the legionnaire holding the lantern said. The soldier a few paces behind Hanuvar laughed.

"Shut up, Surin." The leader's lips curled in disgust as his eyes flicked to the lantern holder. They went back to Hanuvar. "I can offer you only one thing."

"Which is?"

He showed his open palm in a conciliatory gesture. "The means to your end. I've a jug of wine here with a quick acting poison. It'll be a little unpleasant, but much better than the alternative."

"A stab in the gut?" Hanuvar suggested.

"If you wish. I was thinking a crack over the head. We might be able to finish you in one blow, which could be easier than stomach poison. But if the attack doesn't end well, it could take several blows. You probably know how these things go."

Hanuvar considered the options before him, heard the creak of sandals from the man to his rear, knowing that he didn't advance, but that he was poised to do so. Mentally he measured the steps between them all, their likely reach, their states of readiness, their probable skill. Only the man behind was an unknown, but this leader was no fool; he would have placed someone both fast and strong to the rear.

"Was the poison your employer's order?"

"My orders were to make you disappear. There are still a few openings to the old mines. A veteran deserves an honored burial. This pains me."

Hanuvar nodded once. "So there are men of honor in the legion, still. I'll take your offer, then, with three questions."

The leader motioned to the younger man behind him, who raised a small clay flask and took a step up beside his leader.

"Ask," the leader said.

"Why does your master need these particular women so much that he would kill? I would have expected a bribe first."

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"The governor's cousin is consul Caiax, and he's been promised women gladiators when the consul shows up to watch the games. The governor can't have the consul disappointed."

Hanuvar had learned Caiax himself would be in attendance, but he'd pushed thoughts of vengeance from his mind. Revenge was rarely practical when you had more pressing duties. "What's your name?"

"I am Septim Masir, First Optar. Why do you ask, Trivon?"

"I would remember the name of an honorable man."

The Optar seemed to like the compliment, but his brow furrowed in puzzlement. "That's a curious thing to say."

Hanuvar shrugged. "I'll take the poison now."

"I thought you had three questions."

"You've told me all I needed."

"Very well." The optar nodded to the man with the flask. "Kibrin?"

Hanuvar extended his hand as Kibrin advanced, presenting the wine container. Then the general exploded forward, snared Kibrin's wrist, and dragged him over his extended foot. Kibrin plunged screaming headfirst into the pit.

Having wrested the flask, Hanuvar sent it hurtling at the lantern holder.

The flask shattered against the lantern, spraying its bearer with glass, oil, and flame. In a heartbeat the frightened legionnaire's arm was completely engulfed in fire that blazed greedily into his yellow cloak. He cried out piteously for help.

Before the flask had even shattered Hanuvar spun to face the foe charging from behind.

The grizzled veteran was almost on him, his sword tucked close by his waist for swift thrusting.

Which is why Hanuvar tackled his legs. He clipped the man at his ankles and the soldier fell over him.

Hanuvar tumbled and rolled to his feet, whirling with sword in one hand and knife in the other. While the angry Optar shouted at his remaining man Hanuvar did the unexpected and charged. Immediately before him was the legionnaire he'd tackled, climbing to his knees. The general kicked him in the thigh and sent him sliding into the pit, where he vanished with a shout. A moment later the former lantern bearer, his cloak completely engulfed in fire, followed him, shrieking the entire way down.

They were a noisy bunch, he thought, for the scarred soldier cursed as he rushed at Hanuvar. A wiser man might have waited to flank with the optar, but this man was enraged.

He also was clearly used, like many a legionnaire, to fighting with a shield on his left arm. His sword form was perfect, but his left arm hung useless. Hanuvar beat a savage thrust aside and drove his knife into the man's neck. He leapt back to defeat a mad series of slashes launched before the soldier's body registered it was dying from blood loss.

The soldier staggered to the side and dropped to one knee, feeling for the wound as he set his sword down. Hanuvar turned to face the rushing optar. He sidestepped the man's cloak, thrown in an attempt to blind, then the officer twisted to follow him.

"Who *are* you?" he demanded.

Only a fool wasted energy with talk in a fight, lest it be to some advantage. Hanuvar saw none.

They exchanged thrust and counter thrust, with only the dim flare of a flaming dead man in the pit below to light their way. The Optar strove to stay turned to offer a smaller target.

The general knew the younger man could outlast him, and so he pressed for advantage, slashing and driving the optar ever back towards the pit.

And then something seized his ankle. The dying man had grasped him. And in came the optar with a savage cry of satisfaction.

Hanuvar twisted, parried a blow that would have caved in his skull, and lost his balance. The dying legionnaire released his flailing left foot. Hanuvar saw the pit yawning, and the flame more than twenty feet below. A weathered wooden ladder hung along the crumbling side.

He sprang off his right foot, hoping to clear the pit. He just missed the far edge and slammed both blades into the side of the hole, scoring it for several feet and slowing his fall. But the earth proved stronger than his grip, and the blades were wrenched from his arms. The knife smacked into his cloaked shoulder as it dropped away. He snatched at the ladder, fearing he'd jam splinters through his skin, but the side was worn smooth by countless hands. That slowed him a little further but his grip was uncertain.

When he dropped at last it was from somewhere between ten and twelve feet. He winced as he landed on powerful legs, for his left knee reminded him of its old injury with the subtly of a dagger thrust. He staggered and fell beside the body of Kibrin, lying with his head and leg twisted at impossible angles. He saw the man's dead mouth parted in a scream of terror by the horrible light of the flaming Silur and body of the other legionnaire, across whom he lay.

The air was polluted by the smell of burning flesh.

Something shined close by on his right and he turned his head to discover his sword lying nearly upright against a mound of dirt only a hair's breadth from his chin. A little further over and it would have been driven through his head.

"I'd meant to honor you," the optar shouted from above. "To ease your way!"

Hanuvar saw the outline of the legionnaire looming in a lighter square of darkness above. The optar continued petulantly: "Now you can starve to death!" And so saying, he disappeared. Hanuvar smiled ruefully that he had thought well of Septim Masir, First Optar. Far easier to be gracious in victory than defeat, though admittedly some didn't manage even that. The Dervani were so certain of their superiority that they thought any victor must surely have cheated them. Clearly the optar believed it unfair of Hanuvar to fight so hard to survive.

As he climbed warily to his feet, he kept his eyes fastened above, so that he saw the moment when the thick board was dragged across the opening.

The living were locked away; now his only company was the twisted corpse and the burning dead men.

HANUVAR didn't return the next morning, or afternoon. At dawn the day after that Jerissa and her soldiers were led into the main building, where they were treated to hot and cool baths in a pleasant lower level. Female masseurs worked over every one of them.

Today, she knew, was the day of the games. Might these be preparations for them, or might Lurcan be pampering them before he released them to the man he thought their new owner?

She thought the latter unlikely. Something had gone wrong.

After she'd exited the masseur's talented ministrations and donned clean clothing, Kerthik bade her follow with a crooked finger. This time he led into a dark corner away from the others. With his broad back blocking the view, none of the other guards, or women, might see his expression, or hers. And in the hall echoing with the low, cautiously relaxed chatter of the women, he might be expected to be unheard by others as well.

The overseer looked as though he meant to speak, for his mien was grimmer than ever. Yet he only stared for a time, then looked away, his chest rising and falling.

"Out with it, man," she urged at last, an officer's snap in her delivery.

He didn't take offense; it seemed to have been the impetus he needed. "I want you to know the truth," he said haltingly. "I didn't know. I didn't mean to lead you on."

"Lead me on?" Could he possibly think that she had room in her heart to consider romance with one of her captors? Even Dervani servants were mad, and sick.

"To give you hope." She saw his sorrow, and knew it was honest. He continued. "I truly believed those who fought well stood a chance. But they're going to kill you. All of you. That's how the governor wants it, to symbolize the fall of Volanus. Lurcan's even sorry about it, the old bastard, but the governor doesn't want Consul Caiax to be disappointed, so he's pushing hard —"

She seized his arm. "Caiax? Caiax is going to be here?"

He nodded slowly, and must have seen the fire that raged within her. He must have known the shape of her thoughts, for he shook his head. "You won't be able to get anywhere near him."

She didn't know that her eyes smoldered, that they'd narrowed like those of a stalking panther. She thought of the tall, hunch-shouldered man she'd seen striding through the ruins, directing columns of soldiers. Caiax had plundered the island temples and crucified the priests and priestesses before the whole of the city. He'd promised peace only if the people promised to march away weaponless to abandon Volanus forever. The Volani to a one had chosen to perish with their city, though that had been denied a few thousand who were carted away in chains.

Caiax was calculating, methodical, emotionless, the Dervani ideal. That he was also a liar, butcher, and exterminator of an entire people seemed to be cause for celebration among the Dervani, who looked upon the aging soldier with the reverence some bestowed upon the gods. For he had destroyed Derva's ancient rival, Volanus. He had been accorded more honors and accolades even than Ciprion, who'd fought Hanuvar's army to stalemate years before, even though Caiax had bested a city with merely a shadow of its former power.

Her intent must have been easy to read. "You won't be able to get close," Kerthik repeated. "And don't think you're the first who believed they could throw a spear into the stands. Before you can even aim the guards will have you pin-cushioned with arrows."

She licked her lips, realized she still held his arm, and released it. "Has there been any word from the trivon who visited?"

"He hasn't been back."

Small wonder. If Caiax was here, in the city, there was a fair chance Hanuvar might have been recognized by him or his. For his own safety, the general might have had to abandon his plans.

"I'm sorry," Kerthik repeated. "I know you would have triumphed in the ring. In a fair fight. These rich bastards don't honor skill anymore. They just want blood."

He was so full of woe that he seemed almost sadder than she did. No, he *was* sadder, she realized, for her complete detachment seemed to have returned. She looked down at her hands, clenching and unclenching them. She would show the blood-mad Dervani that these final Eltyr would stand and fall with honor.

"Lurcan had been planning to host a big feast for you, but since none of you are going to survive, he doesn't want to spend the money." His mouth twisted bitterly. It was the smaller injustices that seemed to rankle him most.

She clapped his shoulder, squeezed it. "It's alright, Kerthik. I was a soldier. I expected to die with my weapon in my hand. Among friends. I'll still get that chance."

His answering nod was tight. "I know you will fight bravely," he said. "I should have liked..." his voice grew halting. "I should have liked to have known you as... a friend."

He meant more than that, of course. Men always did, but it still touched her. He, alone among all of these, recognized her not as a commodity, but an equal. A human being not unlike himself. She offered her arm, and after a moment, he clasped it.

"Why did you tell that trivon who you really were?" he asked as he loosened his grip. "Is it because you didn't think it would matter?"

"He promised he would take us away from here."

"To live?"

She nodded.

"You believe him?"

"I do. But something went wrong."

"I'll find him."

"It's too late." She shook her head.

"No, I'll find him. If there's a way, I'll do it." He nodded once to her, and strode quickly away. "Drebal, you're in charge! I've got an errand to run." He headed for the exit.

Ceera, toweling herself off, limped over to her. "I had my eye on him the whole time. I thought you were going to take him down. What was that all about?"

"You can make friends at odd times."

"Him?"

"He's just a man with a dream," Jerissa said. "You'd think he'd know better, in a place like this."

THE most obvious first step was to secure supplies. From the dead, Hanuvar liberated wine flasks, a little food, and even some oil. With only a little more effort, he fashioned a makeshift torch from articles of their clothing and the hafts of their spears. With broken portions of the ladder and other rotted wood gathered, he moved away from the terrible smell and lit a different fire.

The most obvious tack would be to find a way out through the entrance they'd blocked off, but he suspected the Dervani would be watching that, so he headed into the old mine shafts. According to the locals they were supposed to honeycomb much of the land beneath the city. The mine had been played out centuries ago, and the deepest portions sealed.

He well knew the tale of Peliar and his descent into the underworld, but there were no spirits to converse with. There was only the long corridor, wide enough for a man pushing a cart, perhaps, but either the men from bygone days who'd dug these tunnels were shorter, or they'd always walked with a hunch, for he had to keep his head bent. Ceiling joists were fashioned of wood, reinforced sometimes with stone, and most looked solid still, though a few had begun to bow, and he would not have cared to push very hard against the dry and fragile wood.

The place was alive with cobwebs and millipedes and rats, but none were of gargantuan size, and none looked likely to gather in great masses and pursue him, as they had Peliar. The webs he swept away with a spear, and the black-eyed rats fled at sight of him. Apparently they had enough to eat that something his size was of little interest.

Eventually he arrived at an intersection. It proved easy enough to mark upon the walls with bits of rock, harder to etch into them, should he have to retrace steps once his light faded. But etch he did, ever choosing the corridors that sloped upward, or at least stayed level. Those that stretched steeply downward he avoided.

Hanuvar's was a meticulous yet agile mind, and he was well used to gauging time, feeling its relentless pulse almost like the regimental drummers who kept men marching at a constant pace. Yet with no light to judge but that from his torch, he knew his estimates of the length of his stay could grow flawed. Still, he reckoned that for the first while, at least, his time estimates would be reasonably accurate.

Halfway through his second hour he found his first cave in, and doubled back. Late into the fourth hour, he discovered a sealed door at the top of a ramp, and a trio of men that had, some dark day decades before, laid down here to die. They hadn't given up without a struggle, for he saw that they'd assaulted the rusted metal door and its hinges with rocks, seriously denting the surface. They'd even managed to pry one of the pins out of a hinge. Little good it had done them. Probably a great mass of dirt or debris lay on the other side of the wall blocking their egress, for Hanuvar sensed he was not yet at ground level.

Who they were or how they had gotten here would remain a tragedy he had little time to mourn; of more immediate concern was how he might avoid a similar fate.

He retraced his steps to a stopped up passage he'd earlier cleared of cobwebs; the joists here seemed especially solid. He

set tools aside and performed a solemn and lengthy series of stretches before pillowing one cloak he'd recovered from the dead Dervan legionnaires, deploying his own for a blanket. He set flint and steel to hand, unsheathed his sword, and blew out the torch. As he drifted off his mind turned briefly to tales of the Vanished Ones, which had haunted him when he was a child. Their empty cities still lay intact in remote corners of the world. Some said that they had retreated to the depths of the earth, others that the subterranean entrances found near their dwellings were not mines, but the places where demons had emerged to drag all of them away.

But he had seen enough of men's evils that he worried less about those that were likely imagined.

His dreams were shoddy things, alive with promise but ending in nonsense. He imagined his brothers back to life, but they wanted nothing more than to complain about how many miles they'd had to run. His wife wasn't glad to see him because she worried her dress was the wrong shade of red. And then his men called to him, asking where he'd gone. Their voices rose through the air, his name a mighty three-syllable chant. He emerged from the tunnels to stand before the victorious throngs once more. But then he realized what he'd taken for people was nothing but a forest of stunted trees that disintegrated into dust as the wind came up.

He awoke to darkness, lit the stub of his torch and readied another while he wolfed down some stale bread and some blueberries one of the men had carried. As bad as the dreams had been, he felt a little refreshed. A few moments of stretches cleared the kinks from powerful muscles, and then he resumed his search.

He knew he wasn't yet in danger of running out of light. His food supplies were low, but that didn't worry him, either, not yet. His driving concern was the fate of the Eltyr.

He hadn't been looking for them, but then he'd hardly have expected them here, on the empire's edge. He'd thought only to pass through the little port city, but there'd been no missing the announcements lettered in the forum, advertising the great games and the presence of genuine Eltyr.

Now, as he searched through the endless tunnels, his frustration grew. All might come to naught, their lives, his life, the lives of so many others he meant to help. And the longer he was delayed, the more Volani would perish under the neglect or outright cruelty of their Dervan masters.

Hour after hour he explored the tunnels. His shoulders and arms ached from being hunched for so long. He was on his third torch, and running low on oil. Time sped on, and after he stopped for another meal he began to think that night might already have fallen.

Giving up on the higher tunnels, he ventured deeper, pushing on through fatigue and finally reaching one that stretched on and on. It sagged under ancient beams, the titanic weight of the earth pressing relentlessly down. Long had the supports lasted, and it might be they could hold for decades more, or mere minutes. He slid past places where the cave wall was half sunken and took a left fork, finally glimpsing the end of a shaft in a pale strand of sunbeam shining down from on high.

Hanuvar advanced to the tunnel's end and a tiny squared off room. A pile of dirt and rocks rested against the wall. He swiped his spear to clear a mass of cobwebs overhead.

The shaft stretched fifty or more feet straight up, to where a strand of light slipped down through a narrow gap in wood, or stone.

Hanuvar thrust the torch haft into the dirt pile and paused to straighten his weary back, to shake out his arms, to shift his neck. Until his confinement here he'd never realized that he'd taken the pleasure of standing upright for granted.

He scanned the walls. Once, this shaft too might have housed a ladder. It held none now. At its narrowest point it stretched three feet side-to-side. Hardly ideal. Once, he might have prayed to the gods of his people before attempting such a venture. Now he sneered at thought of them, readied his flint and steel for easy access in his belt pouch, and snuffed the torch in the dirt.

Coughing in the darkness and the smoke, he wrapped the torch's warm end in rags he soaked with the tiny remnant of his oil. Then he shoved it in his belt, braced hands on one side of the wall and feet on the other, and began the long, painstaking climb.

Twenty feet up, the space widened by a half foot, which at least allowed him to stretch out the cramp in his right leg. Ten more feet, and he felt his arms tiring. Twenty more feet, his other leg began to cramp.

But he pressed on, and further on, and as he drew closer and closer to the light he tried not to think about the deadly fall that lay below him, craning instead to look above, deciding that this shaft, too must be blocked with wood.

He bore on to the end, though his muscles burned, and caught his breath while suspended against the cool earth. Then he began the next phase. He jammed his right elbow against the wall, supporting himself by that point and his straining legs. He set the torch haft in his teeth, and then, with flint in one hand and steel in the other, he struck again and again until sparks flew and took hold of the stinking, oil soaked fabric.

The resulting light blinded him and the heat against his face was alarming. He only just kept his teeth gripped about the haft as he struggled to maneuver so he could safely grasp the torch once more.

He despised acting with haste, but he knew his strength could not long hold. Releasing flint and steel to drop into darkness, he thrust out his left hand to steady himself, then stretched the torch up against the wood, and held it.

This flame was his friend. In less than a heartbeat, it took hold, and the wooden barrier blazed up.

Too quickly, he thought. He let go the torch, saw it swinging down even as the fire ate greedily in a rectangle overhead, growing brighter and brighter still. The torch lay a vast distance below, a flickering warning of just how far there was to fall.

And he knew the threat above. He started the long way down as the fire crackled and roared. If the Dervan had dragged rocks across this entrance as they had the other, how long would it hold before they came crashing in?

He hurried, foot, hand, foot hand, as each of his limb's shook with fatigue and the inferno roared above. Almost he forgot

where the shaft narrowed, and slammed knuckles into the brutal rock, drawing blood. He gritted teeth as he teetered there, cursing his gods. "Kill me then," he hissed. They must want all his people dead, he thought, feeling small even as the thoughts crossed his mind. For it was petty to hate the gods, who were disinterested at best.

Finally, only a few feet from the bottom, he could hold himself no more, and dropped. He hit first with his feet but lost balance and caught himself in the rough soil with his palms.

And then from above he heard a terrific crack of timber, and a rumble.

He pushed himself up, took a step, and dived from the chamber and into the tunnel beyond.

A boulder slammed into the shaft only a heartbeat later, spraying out a plume of dirt and dust

Hanuvar knelt, breathing heavily. It looked to him as though the light in the chamber had diminished. But he didn't act yet. He let his body calm, stretched arms and legs once more, flexed fingers, and returned.

At shaft bottom there was just room to crawl over the boulder and remnants of the wooden barrier that lay beneath it, still smoking. Corners of it were alive yet with flame.

And above, far above, lay the gray sky, partly hidden by some other obstacle. Another boulder was wedged across two thirds of the opening.

He shook out his limbs once again, stretched his calves. It would be better to wait, catch his breath. But who could say exactly where this exit was? He sensed it was east of the city, but he could well have been turned around. Dervan soldiers might even now be rushing to investigate what had happened.

And so, for the second time, he started up the shaft. It was easier in one respect because he better knew what lay before him, but a greater challenge with wearied limbs. Still, he knew he had conquered it once before, and he knew he could not fail. Too many would have no chance if he failed.

His arms were shaking with fatigue as he neared the gray sunlight and the remaining boulder, precariously balanced. As he eyed it warily, a stream of dirt trickled down across his forehead. He saw the rock shift, pulled his hand away and thrust himself as far to the right as he could.

The boulder dropped further into the shaft, spraying dirt as it gouged into the clay. He felt the walls vibrate, and studied the dark rock, only fingerspans away, as he would an enemy combatant. He pressed himself as far to the corner as he could, but his arm brushed the rock as he climbed higher, and the thing shifted again, falling another few inches.

But that was the last time it moved, and moments later he pulled himself past, over the verge and into the gray sunlight.

He crawled over a mound of debris, and considered the broken walls of an old cemetery and stunted windblown trees. He was east, as he'd guessed, on a scrubby height a quarter mile from the city's landside walls. He could look down on the little temple district, and the forum, and the long straight lanes of the newer suburbs west of the city, interrupted only by the oval colossus of the amphitheatre, stretching four or five stories higher than all the rest of the buildings. The practical Dervani had stretched a

wide awning all around the amphitheatre's height so that only an oval in its center was left bare. For those in the stands would want to relax in comfort to enjoy their blood sports.

Two things troubled him on the instant. While he was gratified to see that his own ship still rode anchor on the shifting gray water, he was none too pleased to observe a Dervan galley pulled up to the long stone quay. In this weather no flag flew, but it was easy to guess that an imperial presence of importance had arrived. Caiax.

More troubling was the awning above the arena. So far as he knew, there were no other events scheduled until that featuring the Eltyr, and thus no other reason for the rain protection.

As he forced his way down slope through some bushes, he knew his first true stab of fear. For over the steady drizzle of the rain he heard the distant roar of thousands of voices raised as one. He had been trapped within the tunnels even longer than he realized. The games were under way.

In moments, he was dashing for the city at a flat out run.

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THERIS settled into the marble chair, well padded with scarlet cushions. Though he might have taken affront to being seated upon the governor's left in the dignitary box, he was glad not to have to listen to the old man's anile commentary, now being showered upon the lanky, imperious soldier on the governor's right. In a row of seats behind them was the young, bored and beautiful wife of Caiax, looking as serene as a carven statue, and their two daughters, their hushed chatter evincing eagerness for the struggle to begin. Judging by the intricate pile of dark hair crowning each, they'd been tended by an army of slaves for hours.

While the governor doted upon Caiax, Theris was less impressed. To his mind, the famed consul's eyes were beady and acquisitive, as if he measured the worth of everyone and everything he saw on some secret scale, and found all of it wanting. There was sharp intellect there, but it was reserved only for counting and weighing and measuring.

The goddess might find some souls more challenging to awaken with love, but her guidance would see true. Theris considered the walls, where blessed Ariteen's sacred symbols were painted. The arena itself had been sanctified. Owing to the weeks of rituals, the ground and air were saturated with moisture, and the skies were dark. The stars were right; the way was cleared for her arrival. All that was needed now was a little blood.

His gaze swept overhead, to where the vast canvas awning had been drawn over the arena. This left the light muted, which was ideal, though in some places it was brightened by torches, or, in the box where he sat now with honored guests, by elegant lanterns. That light glared on the well-shined shoulder plates of the governor's honor guard, and two grim looking legionnaires from Caiax's army, so resplendent that their yellow capes seemed spun from gold.

Once, when he was quite young, Theris had journeyed to Derva itself and attended a celebration in its amphitheatre. The city of Hidrestus's amphitheatre wasn't on quite as grand a scale, but

as the provincial capital, it still boasted an imposing structure, a large oval seating thousands upon tiered stone benches. Its architect had designed it so that archways opened onto the seats at one ring at ground level and on another higher up, so audiences might quickly and easily be funneled to and from their benches. At least they could be, normally. Soon, of course, his followers would see to the closing and locking of the exit doors.

Theris had toured the underground portions of the arena, where a complex system of pulleys and gears could raise and lower key portions of its floor to permit reinforcements and sudden surprises.

Today a circular stone wall rose about the arena's center, a miniature fortress complete with battlements and metal gates. Directly across from the dignitary box the sea-green flag of Volanus hung limply from the fortress's largest tower.

"That's nothing like the real wall of Volanus," Caiax sourly told the governor. "It was ten spear lengths high in many places, and its battlement wide enough for two chariots to drive side by side."

His cousin nodded patiently. "Well, it *is* theatre. We are expected to imagine."

As Caiax grunted his disapproval there was a fanfare from the musicians in the stands below. An expectant hush fell over the crowd as the trumpeters were joined by a drum roll. Upon a raised platform across from the dignitary box, a mellifluous spokesman addressed the crowd through a speaking trumpet, providing a brief but salutary introduction of the governor, Caiax, and Theris himself. Each stood in turn, and then Theris introduced the games in honor of sacred Ariteen.

As the crowd clapped and whistled and stomped feet, the priest of Ariteen resumed his chair. Almost immediately came a new fanfare, another drumroll, and then an armored figure appeared upon the stage battlement in the arena's center. He was a big, bearded man with a green plumed helm and shining armor. A shield hung on his arm, and he clutched a spear in one fist. The shirt beneath his breastplate was sea-green.

"Is that supposed to be Hanuvar?" Caiax asked, clearly chiding.

He may have doubted, but judging from their catcalls the crowd knew whom the figure represented. The actor milked the moment, marching back and forth in what Theris suspected was supposed to be martial confidence, though it seemed almost a skipping prance. The armor-clad figure stopped and shouted, gesturing dramatically with a sweep of his spear as his deep voice carried out over the crowd.

"Do the Dervani think they can take my city? I was only ever beaten once, and I tricked the coward Ciprion into letting me go!"

Theris saw the governor grin and glance at his cousin, knowing that the line had been inserted to please the consul. But Caiax showed no particular reaction to having his old rival insulted.

The false Hanuvar cried out once more: "These walls will hold against all comers! The Dervani will fall like cringing dogs! You are no match for me and my beautiful but deadly Eltyr!"

This speech was met with more boos. Some even lobbed fruit rinds and other trash, though little cleared the stands. The actor

shouted some more, then a new fanfare sounded and gladiators dressed as legionnaires charged forth from the arena gates. The fortress gates opened to disgorge additional gladiators dressed in sea-green, and as the crowd cheered, the groups broke into tight knots to battle before the wall.

The Hanuvar actor raced back and forth, shouting encouragement and insults as weapons clanged into shields and helms. Limbs were hacked and men fell to bloody ruin. Sometimes he grew wroth with rage and hopped up and down, waving his spear. The crowd shouted with rising excitement, Caiax's daughters among them, squealing in delight.

Determined to be master of the obvious, Consul Caiax leaned toward his cousin, saying huffily: "That's not how it happened at all."

"No?" The governor asked politely.

Caiax's bony finger pointed towards the arena floor. "That man's playing Hanuvar like a fool. He was the most dangerous man the empire ever faced."

"Oh, the crowd loves it," the governor said with a laugh.

"They wouldn't have loved facing his armies," Caiax groused.

Theris leaned just a bit, forcing cheer into his voice. "Well, his armies are dead, and so is his city, thanks to your bravery."

"Yes, quite," the governor agreed. "Your ballista drove him into the sea, and your commands shattered the walls of his backstabbing, mongrel people."

Caiax scowled like a man with constipation. Theris looked away, studying the arena. Ariteen would shy from even the wan sunlight pouring through the center of the awning, for she was a goddess of darkness. But there, in the gloomy pockets on the

arena edge, he saw what he was after, and smiled. The mist had begun to gather.

"Pardon me, Blessed One," a voice at his elbow said, and Theris looked up to find Ortix beside him. "You wished to speak to the Eltyr before they left for the arena floor. They're nearly ready."

• • •

JERISSA and her warriors waited beneath the amphitheater beside one of the elevator platforms. A group of fit slaves huddled to one side. Around them were the ever-present guards, hard-eyed men in armor, warily watching the thirty well-armed women. Voices carried from outside. Occasionally it was a cry of pain, such as Jerissa had heard in the midst of battle. More often, though, it was the shout of the crowd. Their stamps and claps rang off stone walls and set them vibrating.

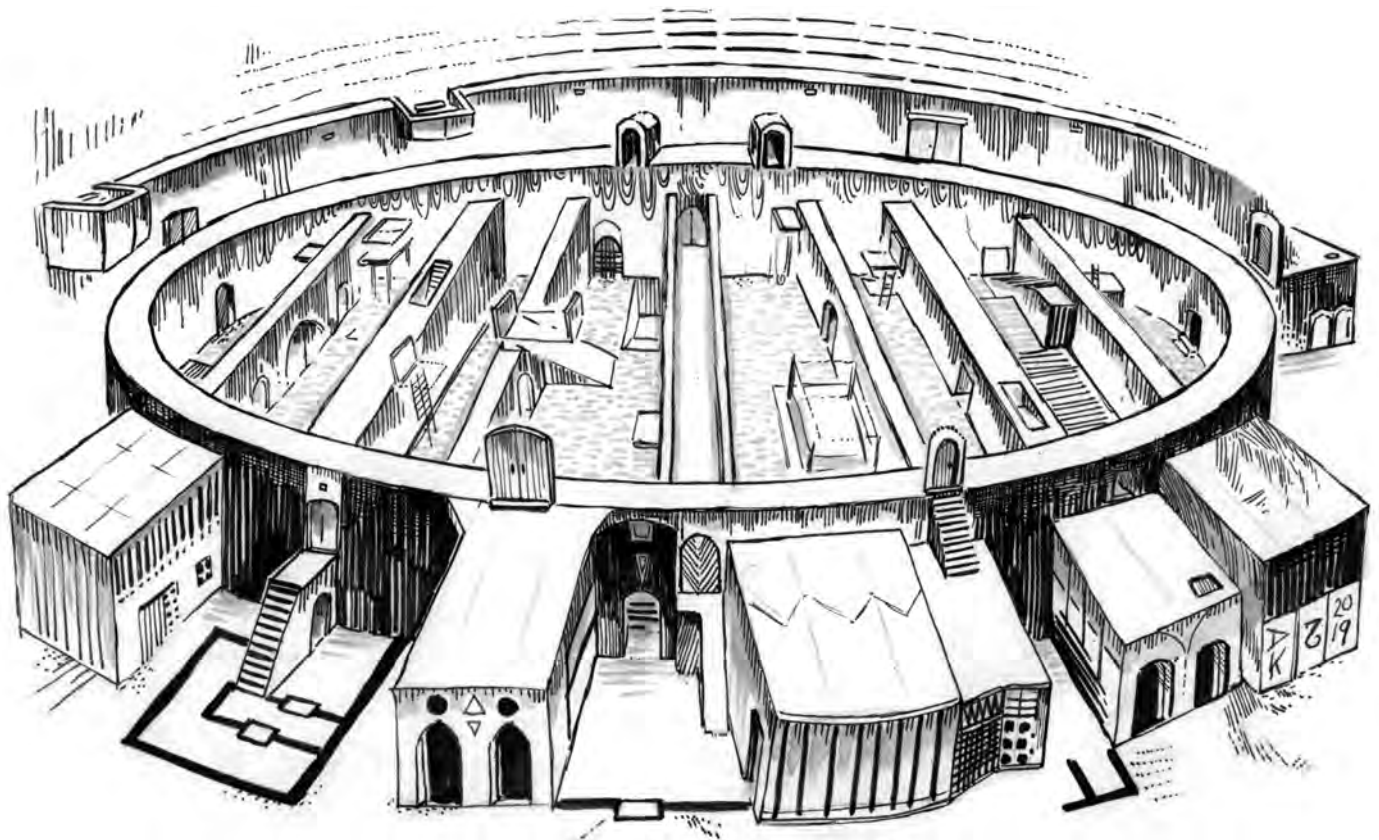
Lurcan was walking up and down in front of them, telling them to be good girls, and that those who fought well would be spared.

Jerissa ground her teeth until she had heard enough. "Don't lie to them," she said.

Lurcan protested. "My dear woman —"

She ignored him. What could he do, now?

The guards moved aside, making way for a tall man in a fine blue robe with flowery edge embroidery. He bestowed a regal nod upon frowning Lurcan, then halted before them, opened his arms, and smiled. Strange, that the Dervani would send a priest to bless them. But then he looked an odd priest, for his eyes were glazed like those of a lotus eater.



"Noble ladies," he said, his voice that of a practiced orator, "you do not know it, but you go forth with great purpose this day. You battle not just for your honor, but for the honor of Blessed Ariteen, a protector who surely smiled down upon your own doings, for she, too, is a guardian." His gaze met hers and she saw that behind that peculiar glint he actually meant what he was saying, though the sorrow in his eyes was of shallow depth. "I am sorry that you have come here, to this place. But your... brave actions here, this day, will have repercussions you could never imagine. And because you go forth to risk your lives on behalf of a goddess I cannot expect you to know, I will share with you a secret none but the most devout have heard. Ariteen arrives, this day. It may even be that some of you will see her as your deity, and it might be that some of you will be chosen for her sacred embrace."

He brought his hands together with a fluttering motion, then bowed his head. Jerissa stared uncomfortably at a bald spot she saw there, wondering what she was expected to do. She had heard the prattle of priests before. This one, at least, seemed to wish them well even if he was Dervani.

Finally he looked up, waved his hands over them, and departed. A puzzled looking Lurcan left with him. The guards, though, remained.

Jerissa turned to consider her Eltyr.

Each carried a sword and shield and spear. Their armor was of fair make and approximated the traditional Eltyr breastplates, and their tunics of sea-green with gold banding were a close match. Her eyes roved over their stern, quiet faces. Some looked numb, others fearful, but more looked angry.

She raised her voice to them. "We go today to face men ordered to slay us. So it was at the sea gate only months ago. And while it fell, we took a toll so high that the sea was stained with Dervani blood!" She saw their eyes light at that, and remembered the bodies strewn along the dockside, the rocks and foaming seawater turned crimson.

"You didn't ask to join our band, but you have worked hard, and studied well. You came to me as bakers, and millers, waitresses and wetnurses. But when we go forth this day, it will be as Eltyr!" She raised her fist and let forth the ululating call of her order.

Ceera lifted her own fist and repeated it, then the women under her command raised their own voices in a cry that set her ears ringing.

They hadn't much longer to wait. The arena manager received a signal from a runner, and then informed them it was time to file onto the lift. Jerissa led the way. Slaves stood ready at each corner, four of them to a rope, readying for the signal to lift the platform while others worked the pulleys that winched an opening aside through which the lift would rise.

As the arena manager motioned the slaves to the elevator platform, Jerissa turned to her charges, snarling at them. "Make me proud. Show these bloodthirsty cowards the strength of Volani women!"

As they let out the cry of the Eltyr they rose towards the open square through which gray light poured. The thin clack of metal on metal, the screams of the dying, and the roar of the crowd echoed in her ears.

Her hand tightened upon the haft of her spear. This, she would hold back, until she had shepherded her warriors through to nearly the end. Then the Dervani would see if their archers could stop her. Caiax had a date with her spear point. The gods owed her that.

• • •

WHEN the trivon presented himself at the ship he left little time for inquiries. Frustrated, Antires realized he wasn't going to get the whole story, but nonetheless came along upon the supply wagon that the officer urged recklessly through the city streets. During the trivon's long absence Antires had tried his best, but no amount of bribery offered had opened Lurcan's doors to him again. There'd been better luck with Kerthik, though, who'd told Antires only an hour before to present himself at the service gate if he found the trivon.

Now that they were there, it took Kerthik a considerable time to arrive at the door when Antires pounded upon it.

The scar-faced overseer opened the door at last and eyed them, crestfallen.

"They've already gone up," Kerthik said. Then, accusatorily, he eyed the trivon. "Where have you been?"

"Take me there," the trivon ordered.

"It will do you no good. They just went up —"

"Take me there," the trivon snapped.

And so they jogged through the underground tunnels, passing barred rooms that reeked of animals and fear and dung, sloping down and further down and past guttering torches in a vast labyrinth of walls and pillars. The crowd roared, a great, hungry beast, and Antires couldn't entirely be sure from where the noise came, because it welled from everywhere around them.

A group of guards eyed them curiously, and Antires heard them hoping that they'd still manage some good seats as they headed up and out to the arena. He and Kerthik and the trivon stopped at last in an area that felt to Antires as though it might be beneath the center of the arena. Nearby was one of the backstage managers, in close conversation with a single guard, holding a manacled bearded man done up in armor with sea-green clothing. Standing beside him, dressed in identical garb, was a stagey Dervan actor known less for his acumen than his loud voice. He was trying to pass over his shield to the slave, but the manacled man was reluctant to take it.

The trivon glanced at them, and the group of slaves ready at the pulleys that would winch up the elevator platform. The square through which the elevator would lift cast an almost blinding light into the darkened space.

"You've gotten him too drunk," the manager was shouting at the guard.

"He's not too drunk to drown, is he?" the guard snarled back.

"How long have the Eltyr been up?" the trivon asked.

"A few minutes," the manager answered distractedly. He jabbed a finger at the guard. "Look. You take him up there. Now. Drag him if you have to —"

The trivon drew his sword and pointed it at the manager. "You and the guard. Into the cell."

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The manager blinked, not in bravery, but in stunned wonder. Antires understood his confusion.

"Now. Or I'll kill you."

"Wait a moment," the guard said, but the trivon had gone entirely mad, for he slammed the man in the temple with the flat of his blade and his knees went loose.

Suddenly Kerthik was on the guard, knife to him. He, too, must have lost his mind.

The trivon was instantly in charge. "Take the manacles off the slave. Throw these three in that cell."

"Hey," the bearded actor objected.

Kerthik's grin had no humor in it. "You heard him."

"I'll take that shield," the trivon said, then snatched the spear the guard had leaned against the nearby wall. "Your helm," he said after a brief hesitation. The actor had been carrying it under one arm.

He had always had the manner of a soldier, but something in the trivon's appearance altered the moment he donned the helmet with raised seabird emblem beneath its green horsehair plume. It was only then Antires paid any attention to the trivon's beard and mustache growth, and the sharp gray eyes. He might not even have noticed them if the man hadn't suddenly hefted the shield with the crest of Volanus upon it.

"You two have to hold this place," the trivon said, even as Antires stared, his mind struggling to keep up with what his eyes had begun to realize. "Until I get them down." The soldier pointed with the spear to where a ladder stretched along a pillar nearby, up toward a sealed exit. "Get that door open. We'll come down there."

It was only when the trivon stepped to the elevator platform, illumined by a shaft of sunlight, that Antires fully admitted to himself who he faced. It was less like meeting a ghost than suddenly beholding Acon, god of war.

Antires paled. He had so many questions, and so much defied his understanding. He was chilled, as though he'd walked through a graveyard at twilight. Most pressing, though, was what this man expected to do if he rode the elevator into the arena. "You can't expect — how are you — why —" He couldn't even mouth a full sentence.

"Because no one gets left behind," Hanuvar said. "Hold the way open, Herrene, and emulate the brave men you so admire! Let none keep you back! I'm bringing all of them out, or dying at their side." He gestured to the slaves, who looked uncertain.

"You heard him!" Antires shouted. "Raise him up! Hurry!"

And at his command, the slaves bent to his wishes, and the scourge of the Dervan legions rose to meet his fate in the arena.

• • •

THE Eltyr line held their formation for long minutes as the legionnaires crashed into them. Shields dented and splintered and swords fell and rose again, painted red with blood. The male soldiers shouted their war cries, but rising above it all was the chilling, ululating call of the Eltyr.

Caiax murmured appreciatively that the women were giving it a good show. Two dropped back, bleeding, but the shield line closed, and held back all attempts at flanking.

The crowd was riveted.

As the actor playing Hanuvar disappeared, Theris noted that the mist stirring in the dark recesses of the amphitheatre had thickened at last. He searched the nearby faces, but to a one they were centered upon the clash of arms as the gladiators dressed in legionnaire armor pushed into the solid line of Eltyr.

Suddenly the arena announcer shouted through his speaking trumpet. "And now Hanuvar himself returns!"

A man dressed in sea-green armor had been raised on an elevator through a hole in the top of the battlement. He was clearly different from the previous actor. But there was no "retainer" behind him that would have pushed him into the artificial "sea," a pit of water that sloshed at the foot of wall, placed so Hanuvar's drowning would be re-enacted before the cheering throngs. This new Hanuvar brandished his spear and tossed it with unerring accuracy into the side of the foremost legionnaire. The line of gladiators in Dervan garb stumbled and the Eltyr moved quickly to seize the moment. Caiax's daughters cried out that it hadn't been fair.

The governor leaned towards Theris. "That doesn't seem sporting, does it? Isn't this the part where he's supposed to drown?"

Theris only nodded distractedly and watched the mist.

"That's a different fellow," Caiax remarked. Then added: "He's a much better likeness."

Then the Hanuvar actor lifted his voice, shouting in a language Theris didn't understand, though he recognized the ringing, bell-like sounds of Volani. Distracted as he was, these commands somehow sounded far more martial, and he clearly heard the word "Eltyr."

Caiax straightened in his seat, then stood, blood draining from his face. "That's him. That's Hanuvar!"

His wife spoke at last. "Don't be absurd, dear."

"It's him!" He pointed a stiffened arm, as though it were somehow unclear who he meant. "He's ordering them to fall back!"

And they were — the Eltyr performed an awkward retreat with their shield wall even as the Hanuvar figure disappeared from view down an inner stair.

Curious as that development was, Theris' attention was pulled away by sudden screams on the darker, south side of the arena, furthest from the booth of the dignitaries. The mist itself had risen up, towering six or seven times the height of a man. Fog streamed away from what resembled a figure draped in a flowing garment.

"Ariteen." Theris reverently pronounced the name of his goddess. Why the people screamed he couldn't imagine, lest it be surprise. Already the great mother extended strangely fluid limbs and mist to bless those nearest in the stands. They appeared stricken with joy as she embraced them. Some even stood and shook with strange, spontaneous spasms of delight.

The screams rose and spread, and as Ariteen glided those behind her shuddered then collapsed in ardor.

The consul barked orders to his guards, but the governor seemed to have noted the confusion on the other side of the arena. "What's going on there?" His voice, normally imperious, quailed a little. "What is that?"

Theris rose and spread his arms, beaming beatifically. "That, Governor, is my goddess, come at last to bring love to all the world."

• • •

BACKSTAGE, at the bottom of the stairs to the false fortress, Hanuvar found another arena manager, screaming at his guard to force Hanuvar into submission. They assumed he was the prisoner intended for drowning. He caught the guard's blow on his shield then smashed his skull with an overhand sword blow, splattering the manager with blood and brains. He finished the gaping manager with a quick thrust then stepped over the bodies and threw the bar on the heavy metal gate. It creaked as he forced it open, and immediately a bloody woman dressed in Eltyr garments staggered back into his arms. He steadied her, ignoring her gaping astonishment, and pointed to the small square panel now opened in the arena floor ten paces behind. "Hurry!"

As she staggered off, Hanuvar watched through the gate as the mass of some forty gladiators strove to break through a shield wall formed by nearly three dozen women warriors.

He was vaguely aware of shouts from the crowd as they caught sight of him once more. They booed him, thinking still he played a role.

The gate was too narrow for more than two of the Eltyr to retreat at once — instead, per his orders, the front rank had formed a solid screen, shields up and spears bristling, while women slipped through. He snagged a spear from a gasping young woman with a broken nose and bruised face, then sent it sailing over the heads of the Eltyr and into the face of a shouting gladiator.

The line faltered as the warriors pressed on. Jerrissa, in the lead, was bowled over by a sudden assault from a tall, powerful man.

Hanuvar elbowed past a swearing woman, all the time shouting for them to fall back. He arrived in time to plant his shield against a strike that would have driven a sword through Jerissa's brain.

He'd faced countless Dervan legionnaires, but few so muscular as the gladiator rearing back to strike again. As he caught the second blow on his shield his arm numbed.

Conscious that the crowd was shouting in alarm, he knew time was growing short. He bashed his shield rim into the fellow's hand. This sent the gladiator off balance and Hanuvar charged in, plunging his sword deep through the man's cuirass. He spun to the left, dropping with raised shield, and its rim rang with a blow from another gladiator that would have gutted him.

Jerissa scrambled to her feet and joined him, her eyes wide in wonder. "You came," she said.

"Yes." The two fell back as the gladiator legionnaires pressed in.

"But you'll be killed," she said.

There were more vital matters to attend than conversation. For some reason, the assault had lessened in intensity. Those to the rear of their foes seemed distracted, and the screams of the

crowd had risen in pitch. Could they be so fearful of him? Were the gladiators holding back because Dervan guards were readying a flight of arrows?

A spear splintered on his shield, and he lopped a thrusting arm off at the wrist. As the gladiator dropped screaming, all opposition ebbed.

Panting for breath, dripping sword still at the ready, Hanuvar looked past a wary gladiator dressed in legionnaire garb, standing half turned to him and half away, staring into the stands, where mist roiled across the gloomy benches and aisles. Something moved within, a form Hanuvar took at first for a gigantic woman in a gauzy dress shaped from vapor.

But as the thing swung wide to avoid a burning torch, he saw it wasn't any kind of woman. It had no true visage, merely a gray faceless orb with black blotches, like the top of a rotting mushroom. Hair-like translucent tentacles swayed from the orb, whipping now and then to touch those nearest. It left its victims lying dead or senseless after it passed.

It must have been wandering among the stands for a good while, for thousands lay motionless, or gravely wounded, judging from their twitching forms. A few hundred were running within the stands, screaming in fear.

The male gladiator nearest Hanuvar cursed in horror. He glanced at the Eltyr, then shouted at his men to fall back. What began as an orderly withdrawal erupted into chaos as they neared the gate that must have admitted them to the arena. They shouted in panic and banged on the door to be opened.

Hanuvar's senses rebelled at the sight of that thing gliding through the stands; he bared his teeth in silent struggle with the atavistic urge to run from the presence of the supernatural. Old training kept him still, verifying the terrain, his placement, the exits, the position of his allies and enemies. A glance over his shoulder showed him all but Jerrisa had vanished through the gate. Like him, she stood staring, but her gaze was to the left of his own.

She cried out in the half second before a sharp blow snapped into Hanuvar and drove him back. An arrow stood out through his armored shoulder. He felt the numbed sting of its edge in his flesh. Instantly his shield went up, and he winced at the pain as the muscle obeyed his will. He saw now what Jerissa had observed, a man in gleaming armor advanced to the edge of the dignitary box, projecting into the arena like the prow of a ship. He was flanked by two soldiers casting anxious glances at the thing to their left.

Caiax. His followers might be concerned with the mist-monster, but he had eyes only for the arena floor. He was a tall man, and with his lean hunched neck and long hooked nose he somewhat resembled a vulture, though one dressed in borrowed plumage, for the edges of his yellow cloak were resplendent with gold thread. He'd procured a bow, probably from one of the arena guards. Normally such would have been posted along the walls at numerous points, but Hanuvar saw none. Probably they were in flight.

To the right of the box, the monstrous, impossible being swept slowly back and forth through the stands, chasing down all those who lived. Some of its quarry thrust themselves into

the hallways that should have emptied from the amphitheatre, but found no exit, and their massed bodies provided easy fare. Others scrambled up and around the dignitary box, where they huddled with the remaining crowd, for a time yet beyond the monster's reach. A few hardy souls had retreated high into the stands where the canvas awning stretched taut over all but the dead center of the arena, and some desperate men climbed into the rigging deployed to raise it. In fear of death, men braved dangers that they'd have otherwise shirked.

Hanuvar tore the arrow from his shoulder with a curse and cast it aside, weighing his options. Above him, black eyes glinting with mad purpose, Caiax put a second arrow to bow and let fly.

• • •

THERIS had stepped to the edge of the dignitary box even as everyone else had fled, and gradually his beaming smile had worn away to slack-jawed horror. He watched his goddess roll on as some contemplated the steady progress of the tides. Mist from Ariteen's greater mass coiled snake-like around the men and women she passed, growing opaque and solidifying as it thrust into mouth, nose, and ears of the fleeing mob. She left her victims quaking and still, though they moved in a fashion, for those left in her wake erupted with mold and mushrooms.

She drew ever closer, now gliding higher into the stands, now lower. His heart thrummed in his chest and his pulse all but burst with the desire to leave. Yet somehow he could not find the will to move. It was as though he watched all of it from some far remove, the terrified cries of the masses, running this way and that, the twitching corpses, the drifting menace, the sickly sweet smell of corrupted fungus. It is no easy thing to acknowledge error, much less understand that your entire life, and those of thousands of your predecessors, had been founded upon such profound misunderstandings of their god's true nature.

Ariteen had come at last, as long foretold. She made all equal in death. She shared her love with all as she met them, leaving life to erupt in their jerking corpses.

Her attention seemed diverted by a trio of men sprinting frantically for the top rows. As she climbed after them, stretching with her transparent limbs, Theris finally found his resolve, and turned to flee towards the other side of the box, thinking to leap the barrier.

But Ariteen must have possessed senses unknown to men. Perhaps it was his sudden movement. She lashed out with one long tentacle-like appendage. Theris let out a horrified gasp as it reached his waist and solidified.

But it was not a restricting hold — it was almost tender, and as he was lifted into the air, he realized he had been wrong to doubt her. Surely he was intended for greater things.

Then a dozen other appendages drove into him, lashed up through his nose, and ears. He screamed in fear and pain, and then a tentacle pushed into his mouth. As his failing body erupt-

ed with new life, hungry and eager for him, he was laid down with infinite care upon a bench beside a purple and white blotchy thing his dying eyes recognized for the governor, blooming with all manner of mushrooms.

• • •

HANUVAR caught the arrow on his shield. "Fool!" he shouted. "The beast's killing your people!"

The guardian soldiers had fled the consul now, for the mist thing drew ever closer, but Caiax, teeth gritted, fitted another arrow to his bow. Before he nocked it, though, Jerissa let fly. At the last moment the consul saw the spear from the side of his eye. And as he swung, arm raised as if to lift a shield that wasn't there, the spear point drove in through his armored breastplate and he sagged, both hands around the haft. He dropped below the stone balcony.

Jerissa's lips parted in a savage smile, and she looked to Hanuvar, who seemed a little stunned.

Jerissa backed toward the gate. "Hurry," she cried.

But the Volani general advanced towards the arena wall. A hesitant Jerissa came after.

"Snatch up that torch!" He cried. "Set it to the rope!"

He pointed at the railing ten feet above, and she understood his meaning. He signed her to climb to his shoulders and he grunted as she set a foot on his injured side. From there she leapt for the railing, caught it, held with one hand near one of the sturdy ratlines that hooked the canvas awning in place.

On her right, the terrible monster advanced past the dignitary box. To her left, only a few handspans off, lay the lantern. Arms shaking with fatigue, she pulled herself to the rim. She felt the eyes of the crowd upon her, hundreds of them, hemmed into the last untouched corner of the arena, withdrawn as high into the stands as they could.

When she turned to the terrifying thing she saw it lay only a spear's toss away.

With a bloody hand she grabbed at the torch, found it hampered in place. Desperate strength tore it free, breaking it along half its length, and she set the fire to the rope.

The fibers must have been treated with resin, for they resisted the flame long moments as the monstrous entity rolled ever nearer and a forest of tentacles quested towards her... and then the fibers caught and she sent the torch sailing into the monster as the fire swept up along the ratline and climbed towards the awning.

The mist god retreated from the sudden flare of light, and Jerissa swung to the edge. It seemed a longer drop than would be comfortable, but she let go and hit the sand of the arena floor with a stumble.

Hanuvar had made a speaking trumpet of his hands and shouted to the crowd. "Get to the arena floor! Hurry! It fears the light!"

That done, they ran at last for the exit, sidestepping the corpses of gladiators and fallen women alike. She stared at her dead warriors as she passed, committing them to memory. Above, the fire reached the point where the ratline terminated. It hesitated

almost like a cautious living thing upon the moist edge of the canvas, then suddenly spread out and the ceiling blazed to red and vibrant life.

Jerissa risked a last glance through the gate of the false fortress before running for a ladder visible through the opening in the arena floor. She saw the terrible monster writhing in upon itself, withdrawing and shrinking towards whatever shadows it could find. Frantic survivors had taken Hanuvar's advice and were now dropping towards the arena floor, away from the flames. The gladiators milled forward with them. Apparently no one on the other side of the door had ever heard their pleas.

She worried that the terrible mist thing might follow, but Hanuvar had deduced correctly — it cared little for light, even that weak gray sunlight streaming through the hole in the flaming awning.

Kerthik waited below, his scarred face lit in a grim smile. "I sent your sergeant and the others out, though she didn't want to go. I hope," he said to Hanuvar, "you've room for one more, wherever you're going."

The Dervan would certainly have no place for him, now, Jerissa thought, but looked to Hanuvar.

"We've always room for a friend." Hanuvar nodded to the wobbly, drunken slave still dressed in the remnants of a Volani uniform. "Take him, too."

Kerthik looked confused at the order, but threw an arm over the fellow's shoulder, and together the four of them hurried through the labyrinth and out through the back gate. Hanuvar heard the crowd coming after.

Antires had more than earned his worth, somehow acquiring a second wagon that the women warriors had piled into.

The slave laborers who'd operated the lifts had come out with them and now watched nervously beside the second cart.

"Come with us," Hanuvar said. "Be free!"

And with that invitation, they clambered into the overflowing conveyances. Hanuvar himself jumped aboard, and in moments, under the cracking whips of Ceera and the Herrene, the carts were rattling over the cobbled streets. Behind them the canvas ceiling of the amphitheatre sent flame and smoke licking toward the clouds. They passed small knots of men and women staring slack jawed at the crown of flame visible above the building heights.

"I saw that... mist thing," Kerthik said to him, hand desperately tight upon the sideboard as the cart rattled on the uneven street. "Do you think you killed it?"

"It doesn't like anything bright, and it's surrounded by it." His eyes sought the fire and smoke pluming into the sky. "It would be hard to survive that."

• • •

THE crew at the dock stood ready, no matter the lashing wind and foam-capped waves, and they received their passengers with mounting surprise. Hanuvar had carefully picked the men. Many were not Volani, but were, like them,

homeless, and friendless. In a way, they were all his people, for they were doomed, and downtrodden, and victims of the Dervani.

He had already spoken to the sailors obliquely of freedom, but he hadn't revealed his true identity. He wished that he'd thought to procure a healer, too, but he hadn't had the time. Likely some of the women warriors he saw helped aboard by their companions, or carried limply onto the decks, wouldn't survive their injuries.

Would that so many things had gone differently, all along.

Jerissa, finished with her initial assessment of the wounded, joined them. He felt the heat of her eyes, though her voice was soft. "Why didn't you come sooner?"

What she really wondered was why so many had perished that should have lived. It was the question he would have asked, in her place. "The Dervani had me, Jerissa. I came as quickly as I could." He touched her shoulder. "I wish I could have gotten all of you out alive."

She shook her head. "No man could have done more."

"What's their condition?"

"We lost eight. Four more probably won't make it, and three will be touch and go. But if they die, they will die free. And none of us would be alive if not for you. Thank you."

He nodded soberly. Pointless to dwell on might-have-beens. There were so many of them.

He called for his people, these few, and Kerthik and Antires and the old white-haired navigator stood with them near the gangway.

"You're free now," he promised. "Dervan no longer holds your bonds. You journey to a land without kings, or slaves. It is but a small settlement, and there are few simple tasks to be had there, but the air is clean and fresh, the fruits are sweet, and the crops grow well. Work in defense of the land, and you'll be welcome."

"All of us?" Kerthik asked.

"My word carries weight," Hanuvar said. "If you don't intend to go, you'd best clear out, because the Dervani will come hunting soon. Though my guess is they'll be too busy trying to figure out what happened here to launch any organized effort for a little while."

"I'm done with them," the gladiator said, "I'm for this new land."

Hanuvar turned to Jerissa. "I place you in command. I've confided the secret of our course to this man, and he will guide you home." He nodded at the navigator.

She blinked, and the confused expression on her face and that of the Herrene was almost comical. "You're not coming with us?"

He shook his head. "There are more yet that I must save. Many more."

"How will you get to them? Many of them won't even be in port cities, or near rivers — you can't possibly..." her voice trailed off. "But you'll think of something, won't you?"

"Yes."

"And maybe it will be easier than wading into a blood soaked arena against a loathsome nightmare god." She drew herself up. "You should take me."

He'd expected that, and shook his head. "No." Her accent, her very carriage, were too obvious. Besides, the ship needed a captain, and New Volanus needed Eltyr. "Shepherd these home. We will need you to guide our armies. We must be ready, should the Dervani ever learn our secret."

Hanuvar's eyes shifted to Antires. "They could stand some actors and playwrights," he said.

"Maybe they could. But I'm coming with you."

Hanuvar laughed. "I travel alone." The last thing he needed was a civilian following him from place to place.

"Travelling alone almost got you killed. I can show you tricks of the trade. Make-up, routines, accents, all kinds of things. I can help you. You can't always pretend to be a soldier."

While Hanuvar was certain his own deceptive skills were far superior to what the young man assumed, he also understood with swift clarity that there was something to what the Herrene said. He also knew that Antires had little concept of the challenges before them. Hanuvar would never be able to share his goals with the Herrene, for fear that if Antires were captured too much might be learned by the Dervani. And his end, not just as an enemy of Derva but as an ally of Hanuvar, would not be pretty. "It will be a harder road than any you've known. Falling in battle will be a painful end, and if we're captured alive we face a grisly death."

"That doesn't frighten me," Antires said.

"It should."

The actor sighed. "Alright, maybe it does, a little. But I mean to come. I have to know what happens next. And someone has to write all of this down. Maybe I'll make it a play some day."

Hanuvar chuckled and shook his head. He raised his hand to them all and wished them safe journeys, then clapped Antires on the shoulder and the two walked away as good wishes rang after.

Hanuvar looked back only once as the ship cast off and rolled out onto the heaving waves, the folk at the gunnels rowing them into deeper waters. And soon he was bandaged and divested of uniform, a nondescript cloaked figure riding into the rain with a companion upon one of the great roads, an artery that wound on toward the heart of the empire, Derva itself.

In mere days, new rumors were added to those already spreading, that Hanuvar had risen from his own tomb, accompanied by a legion of undead warriors. That he had hunted down the man who'd destroyed his city, Caiax, and killed him with a flaming spear. He was said to command ghastly sorceries that had conjured a soul-eating demon formed of mist, and to have magically sealed the gates of an amphitheatre before setting its roof aflame.

None knew where he would next appear, but it was said the emperor had doubled his personal guard, summoned his priests and sorcerers, and dispatched the feared magic hunters known as Rev-enants to track him down. But how could they find a ghost? And even if they could, how might they slay a spirit of vengeance?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard Andrew Jones lurks in a tower beside the Sea of Monsters with a wicked and beautiful sorceress. When not spending time with her or their talented children he can be found hunched over his laptop, mumbling about flashing swords and doom-haunted towers. He has role-played regularly since junior high, long years ago, and game mastered so many adventures that he lost his mind and decided to become a writer. His publications include short stories, Pathfinder novels, the historical fantasies of Dabir and Asim, and his new novel *For the Killing of Kings*. You can find his musings on writing and gaming at www.howardandrewjones.com, on FB at www.facebook.com/howard.andrew.jones.1, or occasionally on Twitter @Howardandrewjon.

HEARTWARMING LESSONS WITH UGON THE WARRIOR

By JONES THE YOUNGER

THIS is a dream I had last night of a television show that doesn't exist, but should. It's called "Heartwarming Lessons with Ugon the Warrior."

Ugon is the host of the show. He interacts with the characters and the audience like Mr. Rogers or Cowboy Bob.

He's of course this huge, ripped, gap-toothed barbarian with bones in his beard and tattoos everywhere and a gigantic sword.

In my dream he opened the show by talking about arts and crafts and respecting others. Then he and his warrior buddies made drawings of their favorite things.

Krim made a drawing of an axe, Yarl drew himself beheading a man, and Ugon drew a strange scribbly picture that no one could recognize.

Yarl asked if it was a goat and, embarrassed, Ugon said it was his horse, Bonecrusher.

But Krim and Yarl made fun of him and told him it sucks. Ugon said that that was unkind and made his heart hurt. Then he took off his shirt, revealing a strange tattoo right on his heart that began to glow with powerful energy and melted Krim and Yarl's faces.

Then Ugon turned to the camera and told the audience that they should always respect other people's feelings and say only nice things because if they don't, Ugon will obliterate them.

I kid you not, with the exception of Krim and Yarl's names, that is exactly how the dream went.

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ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

THE WIZARD OF REMEMBRANCE

By SARAH NEWTON

"In the twentieth millennium after Starfall, the rule of the sorcerers of Ubliax imprisoned the minds of men in eternal forgetfulness."

— From "The First Age of Lies", written by Priestess Saranton for High Warden Drujon, Temple of Memnos the Reborn, New Remembrance, Year 18 NRE.

EVEN during the ages of endless ice, the Earth was old, and many things had already been forgotten. An evil civilisation spread along its antediluvian shores, now long since swallowed by the resurgent seas. Like our own, it thought it would last forever.

Suven the Sorcerous was a murderous man, but not a thoughtless one. His atrocities were measured, and he slew with a wrinkle of distaste on his lips.

"This is my lot in life," he would tell his soul, in the quiet times between the screams. "I was born into this world, like these rude, ill-formed beings that die at my hand. It is the way of things, which it is not for me to change."

His concubines, of whom only the name of Nessa, the most fair, has come down to us, would gaze with compassion at their beloved's furrowed brow, and ease his burden with the arts of their sex. But they grew troubled as their master's gloom deepened, and there seemed no surcease.

"Let us leave the Empire, my lord," they would say. "What matter riches, if misery be our lot? Better to live poor and happy among simple tribes beyond Ubliax's holy crusade."

So Suven would summon the memnovores, as was his duty, and close his doors and stop his ears to the screams as the demons devoured the thoughts of his women in return for terrible gifts. Later, when the sight of their placid faces, cleansed of all care, became too much to bear, he would bow his own head and submit himself, too, to the ministrations of the memory eaters.

The Empire of Ubliax waxed mighty on the strength of its forgetting, and the savage lands of the Men of Mogor grew smaller each year. No one in the Empire knew how long its glory had endured. Some said forever, but Suven had seen the tree-grown ruins in the emptied marches that whispered things had not always been thus. But there were none to remember, and fewer still to care.

One year, Suven wielded the sorcery of the memnovores leading a bright army of killers through the retreating forests of Trokh. In a naked vale of charred and smoking stumps, the Mogor horde had been brought to bay.

"We will raise cities here, my friend!" laughed Krendos, tracing the line of the valley with his sword. "The trollish stench will be gone, and no one will remember they ever were!"

The battle was glorious or, as one might also say, the slaughter terrible. With the lethal dweomers of Ubliax fresh in his mind, Suven feigned the joyous abandon he saw on the faces of his men, and wondered how many of them hid turmoil in their hearts like he. The smoke-swept dusk found him treading the charnel field by a stream of fouled water, dispatching the dying with his blade.

Against a menhir of hideous antiquity slumped a woman of Mogor, clutching a dead infant to her breast. Her tusks were broken, her blood smeared her beard and hair, but light still shone beneath her beetling brow.

"You call yourselves men," the troll maiden rasped as her life ebbed. "You no longer know what that means. Your eyes are cold like the smilodons of the hills. You have sacrificed your humanity for sorcerous domination. I curse your willingness to forget!"

Even as Suven ran the woman through with his sword, she raised a hand uselessly to stay the blade. As she fell to the side, Suven thought he saw the infant in her arms move, as if its life force still remained. He pierced its flesh, too, but it gave no cry, and perhaps was dead after all.

• • •

THAT night's feasting left ashes in Suven's mouth, and everywhere he looked the troll maiden leered from the flickering fires. Unbidden, the faces of his women rose before him, urging him to seek the memory eaters.

His lips curled at his weakness. For the first time, the cycle of atrocity and forgetting filled him with loathing.

Krendos's eyes widened as Suven approached the riverside. In the torchlight, Suven could not meet his gaze.

"I wish to take passage to Ubal-Gathor," he said. "I will undergo the Ultimate Shriving."

For all the carnage of which Krendos was capable, moisture glistened in his eye. He clasped Suven's arm and spoke thickly.

"I will miss you, honoured brother. I will watch for you on the battlefield in the ranks of the Emptied. I will point you out to my comrades and say "There is a paladin of Ubliax that did great deeds!"

"There is no need," Suven said, bitterly. "Forgetfulness is all."

"Forgetfulness is all," intoned the other. But only one of them wished it with all his heart.

• • •

SUVEN boarded a barge from the battlefields of Trokh. At Ra-Elbi he left the military transport for a merchantman carrying temple tribute through the Zari canal. The sea captain scowled when he heard he was bound for Ubal-Gathor, but took his silver nonetheless.

In the cut, the galley furled its lateen sails and switched to oars. The pounding of the drum and the crack of the whip made Suven wince, and he sought refuge in his cabin, hoping the captain had not seen.

On the sixth day, dawn kissed the faceless colossus of Ubliax which straddled the strait into the chopped metal waves of the Gathian Sea.

"I had forgotten how much I had missed the homeward waters," said Suven within earshot of the sea captain and his slaves, and shivered.

Sails billowed before the fresh dawn wind and the ship clove furrowed seas. The western horizon was a leaden whorl that made night of day. Ubal-Gathor, the City of Ebon, took therefrom its name as much as from its pitch black stones.

On the tenth day, the waters narrowed and rain lashed the deck. The whip kept pace with the lightning, punctuated by the cries of slaves, and the captain's yells were barely heard. "The moorings by the Tower of Waiting are impossible in this wind!"

Suven nodded, careless of whether the sea captain saw his reply.

Ubal-Gathor was a mountain raging from the sea. Indeed, there was mountain beneath, though there were none to recall its virgin slopes. A jagged mound of spires like broken basalt pillars reared into the stormswept sky; from its highest, uncanny flashes of purple light — a pharos for seafarers — marked the fires of memories burned clean.

In the harbour the winds abated. The ship coasted to its moorings, oars raised in salute. On the quay, black-cowled monks flashed eyes and teeth as they hauled at hawsers, faces caked with the anointment of forgetting.

Suven stood alone, and raised weary eyes to the gargoyle towers of the Temple of Ubliax. It was almost done.

• • •

"IT is good to forget, indeed..." leered the foul-breathed Gelgeth, his yellowing teeth long like his bony fingers were long. "The temple will welcome another paladin. Confess your darkest memories, and you will be shriven and make us mighty with sorcerous power!"

Seated in the Chamber of Supplication, the high priest licked grey lips in obscene hunger. Suven closed his eyes, feeling the grey stone bench beneath his hands.

"The Tower of Waiting will receive you first. Those who wish to be Emptied must spend the night there in vigil. You will eat before you are absolved. Anything you wish!"

Suven waved away the idea, his gorge rising. "Every memory fills me with anguish. Everything the world holds gives me pain."

Gelgeth's smile froze, and his brow furrowed. "No matter. The demons of Ubliax will burn you clean before sunrise." He stood. "I will leave you to your final thoughts."

Suven had said too much; the priest took his leave with contempt. But he cared not, and knew the priest cared little, either, as long as there were memories to savour and warriors to swell the Emptied's mindless ranks.

Still the troll maiden's face haunted him.

• • •

IN the Hall of the Five Worlds, the memnovores were still distant, Suven's recollections vivid as he passed globe after globe, each more glorious than the last. Except for the Earth, cloaked in white and girdled blue-green, each seemed fanciful; only Bellux the Red, with its endless ochre desert scattered with demon-haunted ruins, struck him as a place that might truly exist. The braids of cerulean Undine and the sea cities of Oceanis were infant fripperies, for all that the cartomancers busied themselves around their gem-encrusted spheres.

After completing the five hundred paces of the great hall, Suven's knowledge of the Fane of Ubal-Gathor was at an end. Beyond lay the unknown; and what he discovered there would soon slip from memory. The guards flanked him as he opened the brassbound valves of the Tower of Waiting and stepped through alone.

A circular chamber awaited him, and a grand table laden with food. "They regale me with sweetmeats..." Suven said to himself. "Who do they think to reward, when I will have no memory of having eaten a day from now? Perhaps it is a cruel jest..." The thought weighed upon him and he fell silent, pursing his lips, and passed by the table to the stair which curved up the far wall.

The lack of handrail disconcerted him. With careful steps he ascended, to a second chamber identical to the first, yet devoid of decoration. Three such storeys followed, each empty but for carvings on the walls, which grew more numerous the further he climbed. Gouged by a myriad hands, they testified to the fall of cities, the terrors of war, the annihilation of the Men of Mogor. A narrative of countless lives, a procession of years, which told a story of which neither he nor his fellow had ever conceived. Here and there he read scratches of battlespeech, perverted to personal ends. "I, Vendibris, slew a hundred infants with these hands." "Forgetfulness is not absolution. I, Yskala, am a murderess of the innocent and defenceless, and Emptied a murderess I shall remain."

At the top of the Tower of Waiting, Suven sat on the floor and held his head in his hands. "How can these be the writings of those mounting vigil before the Ultimate Shriving? What does this tale they tell mean?"

His heart was troubled. Was the weight of his guilt not simply his own weakness, but something common to all men and women? Why had they submitted to the memnovores, if so keen they were for their sins to be remembered? Or were these feverish scratchings a latter realisation, the desperate confusion on their last night of memory of those who would have no tomorrow?

All night Suven mortified his soul, seeking answers as the stars wheeled past the single casement. When the sky paled, he took his sacred amulet with its blade-sharp edge and carved his own sins into the wall. Then, as if that did not suffice, he turned the metal on his flesh, slicing crimson into his arm: "Remember the Tower of Waiting!"

At dawn, the guards returned and escorted him into the Temple of Lethe. He left the tower with reluctance, gazing round at all the other carvings, as if to try to fathom the secret of the fresco that they formed. But the guards would brook no delay, and as he descended the naked stair, he felt the memories of those who were with him evaporate, and all recollection of how he had arrived. The time of his shriving had come.

The vestibule was glorious in the light of the rising sun. The frieze of the west wall had cracked and swung open, and the rays shone into a gilded chamber, rich with ornament: peristyle and iconostasis, thurible and censer, brazier and bell. In the doorway stood a figure which devoured every thought, leaving Suven

giddy on the threshold of an eternal present for which there was no remembered past.

In appearance it was like a worm, or a maggot or lamprey. It stood taller than a man, its flesh glistening. Its head was a nub, smooth and empty except for its eternally moving mouth, like a snail seen through glass. In his mind, Suven felt its pull.

Come and be Emptied, the memnovore compelled.

Like a puppet, his hands at his sides, Suven shuffled forward and gazed up at the featureless membrane which was the memory eater's face. It towered over him, bending downwards, its ever-moving mouth distending into a translucent sleeve of slime, which descended in ribbed ripples over Suven's head, falling cold to his neck, covering his shoulders, pinning his arms like a serpent devouring its prey.

Acid burned Suven's flesh, and he screamed. In the memnovore's larval embrace, he prayed for oblivion.

• • •

A mind became aware of sunlight shafting through columns. The sight meant nothing; no childhood laughter to recall hide and seek, no vibrant summer verdure to speak of green-sward glimpsed through cloisters. Objects had no names, no separation from the undifferentiated world; and thus Suven the Sorcerous, or what was left of him, perceived them not.

Pensively, his hand rubbed the reddened weals on his arm. His flesh, like his memory, was new and raw, unmarked by the past — except for the roseate scars which even now faded as his acid-etched body regained its vim.

His lips moved as he traced the markings, and he frowned as at a melody from a retreating dream. Absently, his fingers fumbled through the folds of his robes, and withdrew an amulet, scratched and caked with blood.

Instead of walking into the sunlit cloister and the immemorial life of the Emptied, the man who had been Suven the Sorcerous followed uncertain steps. All around him shimmered the ghosts of dying memories; were he to leave them here, as he should, they would vanish and never return. But the burning wound in his arm whispered with the insistence of regret.

Musing, he stood before a brassbound door. He raised a hand to its valves, familiar, before pushing through into a circular room beyond. Mouth-watering odours rose from tables bedecked with food; and he fell upon the dishes hungrily. None had names or meaning, yet they murmured in his mind. He ascended the spiral stair.

At the top of the tower, his hands touched the recent carvings. His heart pounded, his breath fled; embers of dying thoughts rekindled. They would be extinguished if he turned from them; but his fingers flexed with the feeling of chalky grit beneath his nails. *He had scratched his testament into these walls.* Brushing his fingertips over the dried blood, he smiled with fondness at his repentant soul. Then he bowed his head and wept, grateful for the remembrance of what he had almost lost.

Hours later, Suven the Sorcerous descended the Tower of Waiting, his red eyes dry and filled with intent. The sun was high, the shadows banished from the cloister, and he turned to leave, to stride into the uncertain future.

At that moment, the wall of the inner sanctum opened, and the memnovore emerged. Perhaps it was not the same as that which had shriven Suven; it mattered not. At the sight of his new pink skin and eyes glowing with memory, the demon took pause, and bent every fibre of its will for Suven to approach.

"I will not!" recoiled Suven, aghast. "This memory eater's embrace will excise even these remaining scars, and I will have nothing to remind me. I must flee! Others will value the insight I have found..."

The memnovore divined his intent. With preternatural swiftness it blocked his exit into the cloister's light. Its maw gaped as it prepared to shrive Suven of the excrescences of his past.

Now came a moment of great danger. In all the dweomers Suven had been gifted by the demons of Ubliax, their animating force had always come in exchange for the sacrifice of memory. A whole civilisation had been raised thereupon, a principle of sorcery so established that it would brook no doubt. Now, facing the demon to fight for the future, Suven found that well of power had run dry.

He stared at his fingers, splayed in eldritch gest before him. "This accursed dependency! How foolish we have been to enslave ourselves for power — as soon as we seek our own destiny, we are undone!"

Slick with mucous, the memnovore's maw stretched in parody of a smile, and it struck away Suven's hands to enfold his skull.

He cried out. No! There was power in memory which must never be surrendered! He would not deny what he and others had done at the behest of the fiends of Ubliax! If the world had been built on blood-let and forgetting, then so be it; if pain and guilt was the price of maturity, then he would pay! He threw himself aside, striking recumbent against stones worn by generations of footfalls in the murderous past.

He gazed up at the vaults. The bold, inhuman reliefs of the Temple of Ubliax, extravagant in their expenditure of human life and labour. Through the open valves the inner sanctum moved with others of Ubliax's spawn.

Suven scrambled to his feet. Inspired by anguish, he flung an acid-eaten gesture of prestidigitation, and wizardly energies surged from within. A white flash, dimming to gold, leapt from his fingers and pierced the memnovore's vermicious pulp. It split like a peach, spurting a purulence of half-digested memory, the acrid gag of bone. An inhuman howl tore from the worm demon's maw.

Suven advanced, thrusting first one hand forward then the other, drawing on the pain of the past to set him free. Finally the memnovore fell, shrivelling to a jellied mess, and Suven ran, robes flapping, into the noontide sun.

• • •

THE flight of Ur-Suven, the First Wizard of Remembrance, from the towers of Ubal-Gathor is the stuff of legend. At every turn he expected to see the long-toothed rictus of Gelgeth the Priest, to feel the blades of his minions at his neck; but fate spared him for the greater future of his kind. A secret as great as fire he bore, that with contrition and acceptance of the past one might prevail to emerge stronger. Thus it was that humankind passed from ignorance to ennobling light.

• • •

THE southern shores of the Abilian Sea were a land of marshes then as they are today. The dour fisherfolk who poled their skiffs through the endless reeds had ever been closed to the outside, so sparse their stilted settlements that the armies of Ubliax little considered the game worth the candle.

Rumours of the Cult of Memory reached the ears of Ubal-Gathor's hierophants slowly. By the time General Krendos knelt before clenched-toothed Gelgeth to announce Suven's refuge had been found, its followers numbered in their thousands.

"Even if they were an army, they could not resist the sorceries of Ubliax!" spat the pontifex, drawing his purple cloak about him like a poisoned cloud. "Whatever trickery Suven used to destroy the memnovore, it will avail him nothing against our might. These wretches will follow the Men of Mogor into nothingness. It will be as if they never were!"

On his knees, Krendos watched the bony claws of the high priest flex, perhaps in anticipation of clutching the traitor's throat. "Yes, holiness," he breathed in sensual submission. "Your will be done!"

"Ubliax's will! Prepare my *eohippoi*! We will take war chariots to the Abilian Wastes, and ride down the traitor's miserable stragglers where they stand!"

• • •

IN the third year of Remembrance, Suven lit candles in the Hall of Recounting. The third of its kind, the first such built in stone. Others would follow.

"Ur-Suven, more people this morning! Five boats have arrived at the jetties," said Nessa from the door.

Suven staid his trembling hand, blinked as his lips fumbled for the words.

"F-for the c-ceremony? Or to s-stay?"

"Perhaps for both," she smiled. "Remembrance grows every time the people practice it."

Suven nodded, looking away, casting around him in confusion.

"My husband?"

"I have lost my staff again. It gets away from me so often these days..."

Nessa entered the hall and shushed across its polished floors to the alcove where the tallows and tapers were piled on shelves.

"It is here, my love. Where you left it. You have too many cares."

Suven took the staff from her hand and leaned heavily against it, tapping his fingers against hers with the gesture of a man many years older.

"Cares are good," he croaked. "And now you remember for me. And the army of Ubliax?"

Her face darkened. "Ten thousand strong, and growing still. It approaches day by day. It will be upon us before the next moon."

Suven nodded. "Time enough. Our numbers grow, too. Have faith, they will come."

He turned to go, his stumbling gait supported by his staff. The light in his wife's eyes was as strong as ever, his body so dry and frail that he feared he would one day catch fire beneath her burning gaze.

• • •

"THEIR chariots will be unable to reach us," said Asculta the War-Woman, highest of the military officers of Ubliax's empire to join their number. "We will meet their footsoldiers in the marshes here. We can resist the army of Ubliax — this is a different kind of war. We are trying something new, and they will be undone by it. Perhaps more than we."

On the beaten earth before the Hall of Recounting, the crowd of assembled Rememberers shifted and murmured. On the northern slopes of the reed-choked valley, the distant ground seethed, black with a forest of pike-armed killers. Before them stood the war-chariots of the *eohippoi* legions, whose growling draught beasts bared their fangs and pawed at the ground. As yet the other side of the valley was clear, vivid in the sunlight with the promise of retreat, and many cast longing glances, aware of the looming death about to fall.

As Asculta stepped down from the low wooden dais, she placed a battle-scarred hand on Suven's shoulder, leaned her mouth to his ear.

"Encourage them, Lord. Tell them tales of your wizardry. Our defence hangs by a thread."

Suven nodded with a smile before mounting the dais. When he raised his eyes to the sea of faces, his beloved Nessa among them, his courage almost failed.

"The magic I teach is irresistible. Yet, itself, it is the magic of resistance. That is our paradox — and our promise of victory. We will not prevail today by slaying our foe, but by preventing them from slaying us. The unknowing soldiery of Ubliax will break against our defences like waves against the shore."

Silence met his words. The sound of distant waters, lapping at the endless marshes. The cry of scouting gulls.

"Ubliax has never known defiance! His priests have always sought to destroy that kernel within us that powers it — our memories. Draw upon them! Do not seek within yourself for experiences you have not had! With the secret I have taught you, your memories will transform themselves into mighty spells.

"Consider all those times you have resisted attack, oppression, danger! How you acted then will determine the magic you will conjure now. Every time you resist will make you stronger! We are not here to slay, but to survive!"

No cheers met Suven's speechmaking. The low wind still blew through the reeds, but the eyes of the congregation had hardened. All thought of flight had stiffened into a grimness of resolve, an embrace of suffering, past and future, which was their promise of another day.

All the more, then, did it pain Suven to see the pride in Nessa's eyes, when he thought how gravely he had lied.

• • •

THE attack began with a false dawn, a lurid glow which swept down the valley from the north, roiling in billows of fume.

"To arms!" cried the guard. "The reed beds are burning!"

Tumult erupted in the camp. Frenzy that the nascent city would be fired before battle was ever closed. But Suven watched as his lieutenants strode stone-faced through the fray, shouting commands to forge the shield to which their leader had exhorted them only hours before. With pride he watched the first dweomer: Nessa, who had lost her home and family in the inferno of Paya-Eel, stood implacable before the flames. She raised her hands and cried out in defiant ululation, and from her fingers radiated a wave of sepulchral chill which extinguished the blazing tongues. She stepped into the breach, and the fire took a knee as before a queen.

"Nessa!" rose a cry from the heartened defenders. "Nessa and Suven! We will prevail!"

But a voice crowed over the battlefield, one which curdled laughter to paste.

"Traitor! We come for you!"

Where the flame-wall threaded through the reeds, dancing light illuminated the horde of Ubliax. Fell warriors caparisoned in funeral ochre, linethoraxes blazoned with unearthly sigils, advanced bearing cruel pikes with blood-hungry pennants. Through open-faced helms, contorted faces of men and women contemplating slaughter roared with hatred, and behind them, over the charred and trampled reeds, rode the charioteers of Ub-al-Gathor, pulled by *eohippi* snarling at the bit. At the centre of the line, the familiar form of Krendos, clad in full regalia as if to meet his doom. His wine-dark helm gaped with smilodon fangs, his breast-plate gleamed with ruddy sheen. A pilum in his hand balanced the reins in his other, and he shook it, and followed his words with a cry of war. The ground thundered with feet and hooves.

Beside him in the chariot, Gelgeth the High Priest, teeth bared, took up the bestial cry. His eyes were two moons, his hand on high bore a singlestick of fetishes and bone. He lowered it at Suven and mouthed eldritch words into a missile of lambent black.

Suven dropped to his knees, proffering his arm in warding, recalling the Mogor shaman that had once survived such a dweomer at his hand. Ebon vitriol splashed against the invisible shield that sprang from Suven's hand, splitting into jets which passed to either side, leaving him unscathed. To his right, the spray splattered the ground, where the flattened reeds hissed and dissolved. But to his left it showered Nessa, sticking like pitch. She screamed, clawing at her face where the flesh tore away, revealing bone, blood-spattered ivory in the dawn. Her scream died, her blackened carcass fell.

"You will not prevail! Traitor!" laughed Gelgeth to the sky. "No one can resist the will of Ubliax!"

Suven's face was cold, and heavy. He stared at the savage glee on Krendos's face as the charge rode down the desperate defenders. His mind was white, echoing with Nessa's scream, the pounding of the *eohippi* hooves, the blood in his temples, the gaping of his jaw. That his former friend would slaughter Suven where he stood, he knew even in his grief. He had seen Krendos wallow in atrocity time and again, only to have his memorious sin washed away. His breath gave out on Suven's cry of anguish: against such bestial innocence, such temptation to costless depravity, how could any man prevail?

He had told Nessa of the fall of Maravlan. Its fused primordial walls, raised in fathomless antiquity that bore no hand of man, had withstood sorcerous temblors that had thrown down the mountains on which they stood. He fell to his knees and lifted her body; her flesh, still warm, burned his skin. He raised her above his head, and felt power surge from within. The ground buckled beneath his feet; it heaved with fury.

The chariots careened. The charging *eohippi* screamed. A set of wheels passed over Suven's head, crashed in thunderous wreckage behind him. Catapulted free, the high priest scrabbled bloody to his knees; but Krendos, with exhilarated perfection, landed on his feet and strode on undaunted, pilum in his right hand, drawing a blade with his left.

"I will kill you, friend!" he cried through the shreds of smoke. "Then I will forget you and your beloved as if you never were! Can you say as much?"

The grim lie Suven had told the Rememberers rose unbidden. He looked into Nessa's lifeless eyes.

"No, I cannot. Nor will I. For there are some deeds which must never be forgotten. Some prices so great, that only in their contemplation can the value of what has been purchased be truly weighed!"

Suven's vision blurred and the lie died within him. The wizard had come not to defend and remember, but to slay.

All the evil they had done, all the innocents he and Krendos had massacred at Ubliax's command, rushed into Suven's mind. Blood-red loathing and self-hate exploded from him like a cleansing fire.

The shockwave billowed outwards, cutting down the Ubliaxian horde. The face of Krendos was cleft by thunder, eyes wide and mouth gaping as a myriad realisations burst forth from a vessel too small to accommodate their might.

The vessel broke. Krendos fell back, blind orbs staring at the pale dawn sky, mouth filling with rosy froth. Screams echoed across the battlefield, the shrieks of dying animals mingled with the howls of murderers, maddened by visions of blood.

When the sun rose and Suven was found, gazing at the emptying field and the smiles of the dazed defenders, it was clear he could not fathom they had won.

• • •

GELGETH the High Priest survived the Battle of Remembrance, the first of many of that name. Nor did the Empire of Ubliax fall that day, nor for many years thereafter. But the tide had turned; memoriousness had seeped back into the world, and with it the realisation that the truth, however painful, could be a weapon against darkness and prevail. The cult of memory spread, scattered pockets uniting over time, until they birthed their greatest legacy, which we call history.

There was a legend in the years which followed that said a secret temple hid in the marshes by the Abilian Sea, where one day the greatest of cities would rise. And that, in that temple, the priests cared for a haunted old man who had lost his mind and his memories long ago. He would spend his days on the road to the temple, greeting every pilgrim and asking their forgiveness. He would look especially hard into the faces of the women, as if searching.

"No, you are not she," he would say, and move on.

Those who wished him peace would ask him what he was seeking. Was it a love that he had lost? Or someone that he had wronged, long ago, in another life? He would never answer, saying only that he was sworn to look, even if he might never find, and that one day he would remember. But many of those who asked already knew the gift of the Wizard of Remembrance, and kept their silence and let the old man search.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Newton dwells in a tumbledown cottage in the wilderness of what was once Dla-Mogor, today called Normandy, France. Surrounded by sheep, cats, and songbirds, she can be found hunched over scrolls, scribing maps and half-remembered incantations and giving in to the voices in her head which whisper prophecies of past and future. She has been roleplaying almost as long as roleplaying games have existed, and is a passionate game master and crafter of worlds and adventures. An award-winning writer, her process of taking dictation from the cosmos has somehow led to the creation of roleplaying games, short stories, and novels, including works such as *Mindjammer*, *Monsters & Magic*, *Legends of Anglerre*, *Achtung! Cthulhu*, and *The Chronicles of Future Earth*. You can find her attempting to upload her brain at sarahnewtonwriter.com, www.mindjammerpress.com, and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ShairaSu.

WORKING WITH SCRATCHBOARD

By **SAMUEL DILLON**

SAMUEL has two illustrations in this issue of *Tales From The Magician's Skull*, on pages 42 and 66. The illustration on page 42 was completed using scratchboard. Scratchboard as a medium was common in the early twentieth century, and many famous pulp illustrators used it. Legendary *Weird Tales* artist Virgil Finlay in particular was notable for his use of scratchboard, as was his contemporary Hannes Bok. Today, in the year 2019, scratchboard as a medium is virtually unknown. As part of our mission in conjuring up the original ambiance of sword and sorcery fiction, Samuel was brave enough to complete an illustration using scratchboard. Scratchboard consists of paper or board covered in dark or colored clay. Unlike traditional ink work where the artist lays down a dark line of ink on a white paper surface, scratchboard is the reverse: the artist scrapes off the light-colored clay to reveal the dark board beneath. It is a physically taxing medium where the artist must use force to scrape, rather than fine motor skills to guide a pen. Here is his description of how Samuel approached his image — Joseph Goodman.

I have always liked the look of scratchboard art but was a bit intimidated by it. The thought of putting in a lot of work and messing it up with one errant stroke was always a thought. As a primarily ink artist over time, I came to not fear mistakes and even embrace them at times. I had done a few small projects with scratchboard that I felt pleased with, and recently picked up some scratchboard pages that were on sale. I'm a bit hooked now as there are certain effects that I believe scratchboard lends itself to very well. Besides anything predominantly dark, furry animals are especially suited to scratchboard.

For tools, I would recommend paper scratch board starting out, as it is way cheaper and doesn't dull the cutting tools quickly. The drawback with paper scratchboard is you can very easily scrape the underlying paper and even pierce it if not careful. I recommend Ampersand clayboard for a big project. It is very expensive at around \$12 for an 8x10 but the results are fantastic and it is impossible to puncture. For tools I purchased a set of plastic handle tools for \$5 at a chain art store and have found the five tools in the set to be great for paper board but dull very quickly with the clayboard. They make a higher quality metal knife that has replaceable tips.

As for technique... I find the most critical part to be transferring a drawing to the scratchboard. My self-invented way around this is to take a piece of paper cut to the measurements of the scratchboard and do a drawing of the major "landmarks" of the scratchboard image. For me that is eyes, nose and mouth depending on the picture — the parts that absolutely have to be in perspective. I then tape the drawing to the board and go over the major parts with a ballpoint pen with medium pressure. This will leave a slight indentation in the scratchboard. I then take a cutting tool and trace very faintly the indentation. From there it is all about shading for me. I try to work all areas of the picture at the same time like a painting using a loose crosshatching technique that eventually highlights the solid white areas. It is also important to leave plenty of black. Contrast is the name of the game.

I hope this helps someone out. Most importantly, don't fear the medium. Dive into it and you will find it as rewarding as you may have thought it intimidating before.

Old Skule

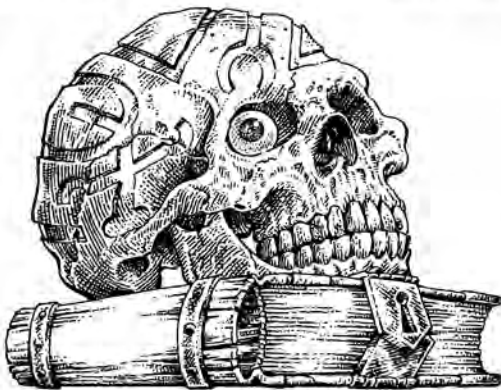


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APPENDIX: GAME STATISTICS

By TERRY OLSON

Publisher's Note: While this is a magazine of fantasy fiction, it is grounded in the aesthetic of the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game*, or DCC RPG. DCC RPG is heavily inspired by the stories of Appendix N, a collection of fantasy and science fiction works that inspired Gary Gygax to create *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Tales From the Magician's Skull* can be read on its surface as simply great stories, but players of role playing games (DCC RPG or otherwise) may also recognize that these stories are designed to pay homage to Appendix N and its role in providing inspiration to RPG games. Therefore we present this appendix of game statistics for the various creatures, spells, and items described herein. All of these stats are for the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game* system, although you may be able to easily adapt them to other systems as well. Gamers — enjoy!

The Face That Fits His Mask

Sunstone: The sunstone is a magical item which appears as an apple-sized gray rock. If the bearer holds it to her mouth and blows as if igniting tinder, the stone glows with bright light that extends 100' in pure darkness. The glowing orb radiates no heat and its illumination is considered to be sunlight for creatures susceptible to it. This light persists for 3d6 hours, after which the sunstone becomes black and discharged. To recharge the stone, one must expose it to natural sunlight for 2d3 consecutive days, after which it assumes its former grayish color. A wizard or elf may extend the life of a waning stone (not one that has already discharged) by spellburning 1 point for each additional hour of light. The stone discharges if more than 1 hour of extended life passes without spellburn. One may force the sunstone to suddenly discharge in a brilliant flash by making a spellcheck of 7 or more (non-casters are untrained and use a d10). If successful, all within 50' of the stone (excluding the bearer) must make a DC 15 Will save or be blinded for 2d3 rounds. If a natural 1 is rolled, then the sunstone is destroyed, exploding for 2d6 damage to all within 10' of the bearer (who is not exempt).

Kormak's hand moved. The sunstone in it went in the air. All eyes followed except Skardus's. He knew what was coming but it was too late to shout a warning, even if he had wanted to. There was a brilliant flash, bright as day. All of the pack's eyes were accustomed to dimness. For a few moments, they were blind.

Ratkin: In DCC RPG, “monsters break the rules.” We encourage the judge to apply this maxim by applying the below stat block modifications in order to give surprising powers to the campaign's everyday NPCs: the peasants, the shopkeepers, the gongfarmers, etc...perhaps even a witch or acolyte. Simply adjust a pre-existing stat block with the following modifications. Ratkin are their own species and produce more ratkin via mating, though they can usually pass for humans unless they've Changed. A Changed ratkin appears like a cross between rodent and human, is dangerously violent, and gains additional attacks

as detailed below. Changing takes 1 action and may be performed at will. However, if a ratkin becomes stressed (emotionally or physically) and is trying to remain in their human-like form, they must make a d20 unmodified skill check against a given DC (see below) or begin the Change.

Moonpup (0-13 yrs old): Init as NPC+1; Atk as NPC or claw +1 melee (1d3, Changed only); AC as NPC+1; HD as NPC+1d3; MV as NPC; Act as NPC; SP as NPC, stressed Change (DC 19), +1d to climb checks, double damage from silver; SV Fort as NPC +1, Ref as NPC +1, Will as NPC +1; AL as NPC.

Child of the Moon (14-20 yrs old): Init as NPC+2; Atk as NPC or claw +2 melee (1d4+1, Changed only) or bite +2 melee (1d3, Changed only); AC as NPC+2; HD as NPC+1d8; MV as NPC; Act as NPC+1d16; SP as NPC, stressed Change (DC 11), +1d to climb checks, infravision 30', enhanced odor detection (where target has been in last 24 hours, what food target carries; target must be within 10', requires 1 turn), double damage from silver; SV Fort as NPC +2, Ref as NPC +2, Will as NPC +2; AL as NPC.

Mischief Member (21-40 yrs old): Init as NPC+4; Atk as NPC or claw +4 melee (2d4+2, Changed only) or bite +4 melee (2d3, Changed only); AC as NPC+4; HD as NPC+3d8; MV 40'; Act as NPC+1d20+1d16; SP as NPC, stressed Change (DC 6), +1d to climb and stealth checks, infravision 60', enhanced odor detection (where target has been in last week, what food target carries, what wealth target carries; target must be within 20', requires 1 round), speak with and command rodents (summon 3 giant rats, once per day, DCC rulebook p. 424), half damage from non-magical weapons, double damage from silver; SV Fort as NPC +3, Ref as NPC +4, Will as NPC +3; AL as NPC.

Elder of Murnath (41 yrs and older): Init as NPC+6; Atk as NPC or claw +6 melee (3d4+2, Changed only) or bite +6 melee (3d3, Changed only); AC as NPC+6; HD as NPC+6d8; MV 50'; Act as NPC+2d20+1d16; SP as NPC, stressed Change (DC 3), +2d to climb and stealth checks, infravision 120', enhanced odor detection (where target has been in last month, everything the target carries; target must be within 40', requires 1 action), speak with and command rodents (summon rat swarm or 6 giant rats, once per hour, DCC rulebook p. 424), natural disguise (change “human” appearance, +10 for disguise self), immune to non-magical weapons, double damage from silver; SV Fort as NPC +4, Ref as NPC +6, Will as NPC +4; AL as NPC.

Panic made Skardus's voice come out as a soft growl. He could almost feel the change coming on him now.... Desperately, he fought to get a grip on himself... He could change in mid-spring, tear out the man's throat, feast on his bones, drink his blood. The beast of the change gibbered in the back of his mind, begging to be unleashed. His fingers splayed, his nails began to lengthen.

By That Much

The Gravedigger's Ritual Level: 1 (Ritual Spell)

Range: Varies

Duration: Varies

Casting Time: 6 hours (digging) Save: None
plus 1 hour (smoking)

General: The Gravedigger's Ritual is a ritualized incantation designed to summon a victim, kill them, and lay them to rest in a recently shoveled grave. Unlike normal spells, this ritual takes seven hours to cast.

One spends the first six hours digging the grave while reciting the spell. The shovel for this phase of the ritual has special requirements. The blade must be forged from adamantite and the shaft's wood harvested from a tree during a full moon. The caster must spend at least 500 gp on materials, labor, etc., to create the ceremonial shovel.

After digging the grave, the caster rests next to their excavation and smokes a ceremonial pipe for one hour, continuing the incantation between puffs. Like the shovel, the pipe has special requirements. Its bowl must be crafted from a tree's wood harvested during a new moon. The spell has no stipulations regarding the leaf smoked. However, smoking rarer, more expensive leaves may impart bonuses to the spell check; see "Sacrifice" and "Rare ingredients" on pg. 124-126 of the DCC rulebook.

The caster makes their spell check after smoking the ceremonial pipe. If successful, a victim appears, dies, and falls into the grave. The deceased is summoned without items of value, except for a single trinket made of silver (judge's choice, see below). Depending on the spell check, the caster may or may not know who will fill their grave. The judge is encouraged to provide consequences for killing an NPC, regardless of whether they are known to the caster. The PC should eventually find out how their spell affected the campaign's world.

The arcane energies for this ritual are difficult to control. Small mistakes have severe consequences. In most cases, a failed casting destroys the ceremonial shovel and pipe, forcing the caster to obtain new ones. Misfires can result in the caster filling their own grave.

For some spell check results, the caster can converse with the victim for a number of rounds while they die. We encourage the judge to time the conversation in real time for the number of 10 second rounds that are appropriate.

Manifestation: Roll 1d4: (1) The victim plummets through the air and crashes next to the open grave; (2) the victim walks through a magical portal appearing next to the grave; (3) a spectral wagon drawn by hellbeasts delivers the victim; (4) the ceremonial pipe's smoke coalesces into the victim.

Corruption: Roll 1d8: (1-2) the caster's hands are perpetually blistered and bloody from digging, causing -1d to all spell checks; (3-4) the caster exudes a sparse smelly cloud of freshly dug soil; (5) harmless carrion feeders, e.g, worms, beetles, crows, vultures, etc., follow the caster wherever he goes; (6) minor; (7) major; (8) greater.

Misfire: Roll 1d4: (1) The caster's body diffuses into the pipe's smoke, killing the caster with no chance of recovering the body; (2) an allied PC dies to fill the grave; (3) a supernatural being who believes that death is its purview is offended by the caster, and sends a type 3 demon (DCC rulebook p. 401) to deal with the upstart; (4) an earth elemental pushes up through the open grave and attacks the caster (DCC rulebook p. 412).

1	Lost, failure, and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; (1-3) corruption+misfire; (4) misfire; (5+) patron taint. Ritual shovel and pipe destroyed regardless of roll.
2-11	Lost. Failure. Ritual shovel and pipe destroyed.
12-13	Failure, but spell is not lost.
14-15	An unknown domestic animal (pet or livestock) appears and dies. Its silver trinket (collar, bell, etc.) is worth 5 sp.
16-19	The caster summons an unknown person from the lower class to their death. She can converse with the victim for up to 1d3+CL rounds as they perish. The victim carries 1d6 sp.
20-21	The wizard summons an unknown person from the middle class to their death. He can converse with the victim for up to 1d6+CL rounds as they perish. The victim carries a silver trinket (nugget, coins, crude jewelry, etc.) worth 1d4 gp.
22-25	The gravedigger summons an unknown person from the upper class to their death. She can converse with the victim for up to 1d10+CL rounds as they perish. The victim carries a silver trinket (jewelry, engraved weapon, etc.) worth 2d6 gp.
26-29	The caster can choose to summon a known domestic animal (pet or livestock) to its death. He must possess some physical remnant (hair, etc.) of the animal or something it has touched. Otherwise, he may choose a lesser spell result. Regardless, the victim carries a silver trinket worth 2d10 gp.
30-31	The wizard can choose to summon a known person from the lower class to their death. She must possess some physical remnant (hair, etc.) of the person or something they have touched. Otherwise, she may choose a lesser spell result. Regardless, the victim carries a silver trinket worth 3d20 gp.

32-33 The gravedigger can choose to summon a known person from the middle class to their death. He must possess some physical remnant (hair, etc.) of the person or something they have touched. Otherwise, he may choose a lesser spell result. Regardless, the victim carries a silver trinket worth 1d4 pp.

34+ The reaper can choose to summon a known person from the upper class to their death. He must possess some physical remnant (hair, etc.) of the person or something they have touched. Otherwise, he may choose a lesser spell result. Regardless, the victim carries a silver trinket worth 2d6 pp, which can be a minor magic item.

Pulling out his old black pipe, Nick sat down on the mound of dirt next to the six-foot hole. Nearly an hour passed while Nick sat smoking... Nick looked up and saw a man plummeting through the air. The man's scream was suddenly cut short as his body crashed into the ground a foot to one side of the open grave and mere inches from where Nick Bury sat.

Tyrant's Bane

Blindsight

Level: 1

Range: Varies

Duration: Varies

Casting Time: 1 action

Save: Will vs. spell check

General: Blindsight affects sighted individuals by narrowing their field of view to see only the caster or her conduit (see below). For lower spell checks, opponents can still act with debilitated vision, but as the spell becomes more powerful its victims are so captivated by their tunnel vision that they can neither move nor act. Creatures without eyes are unaffected.

The spell slowly drains those affected of their physical and mental vitality, starting with Stamina but progressing to Intelligence and Strength as the casting becomes more powerful. Unless otherwise noted, a zero ability score causes extreme debilitation rather than death (refer to the DCC rulebook p. 96). Lost points heal back at the natural rate of one per day. The judge can improvise if the spell is cast on monsters without ability scores listed. Dice chain penalties are appropriate for relevant categories (STR loss affects attacks and damage; INT loss affects special abilities; STA loss affects HD/hp and Fortitude saves).

The more powerful results require that the caster concentrate to maintain the spell's effects into subsequent rounds. Refer to DCC rulebook p. 106. Note that some results further restrict the wizard to take no move actions.

This spell is unusual in that victims may be able to reroll their saving throws. If one affected by blindsight has their vision of the caster or conduit blocked for one round, she may reroll her saving throw with a d100. The save may be rerolled for each round that vision is blocked. Note that a victim cannot help themselves (shutting one's eyes, etc.); one unaffected by the spell must block an affected's sight.

Manifestation: As below.

Corruption: Roll 1d8: (1-2) the caster's eyes appear as silver orbs but still function normally; (3-4) the caster's skin gains an argent radiance, permanently emitting light equivalent to candlelight; (5) the caster has permanent tunnel vision (-1d to all actions involving sight); (6) minor; (7) major; (8) greater.

Misfire: Roll 1d4: (1) The wizard bungles the casting and stands helplessly fixated on her own hands for 2d3 rounds; (2) a stuttered syllable causes the caster to lose 1d3 STA per round for 2d3 rounds; (3) improper intonation causes improved focus among the caster's enemies (within 50'), who gain +1d to attacks against the caster for 2d3 rounds; (4) an erroneously bent finger restores vitality, healing all within 30' of the caster by 1d6+CL hp.

1 Lost, failure, and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; (1) corruption; (2) patron taint (or corruption if no patron); (3+) misfire.

2-11 Lost. Failure.

12-13 The caster's eyes glow with a dull gray radiance. For 1 round, all within a 30' semicircle who are facing the caster's face must save or have tunnel vision, suffering -1d on all attack rolls.

14-17 A silver glow shines from the wizard's eyes. All within a 30' semicircle who are facing the caster's face must save or suffer tunnel vision (-1d on all attack rolls) and vitality drain (1 STA dmg per round) for 1d3+CL rounds.

18-19 Silver rays extend from the caster's eyes to shine on one chosen target within 60'. If the victim fails his save, he stands helplessly fixated upon the caster and loses 1d3 STA per round. The effect lasts up to 1d6+CL rounds, and the caster must concentrate without move actions to maintain it.

20-23 The wizard chooses another being with eyes to be her conduit (Will save required for those unwilling). The conduit must be within 100' of the wizard, though line of sight is unnecessary. Silver rays extend from the conduit's eyes to shine on one chosen target within 60'. If the victim fails his save, he stands helplessly fixated upon the conduit and loses 1d3 STA per round. The effect lasts up to 1d6+CL rounds. The caster must concentrate to maintain it, and the conduit cannot take any actions (movement or otherwise) while fulfilling their role.

24-27	The caster radiates argent magnificence. All within 60' must save or stand helplessly fixated upon the caster and lose 1d3 STA and 1d3 INT per round. The effect lasts up to 1d8+CL rounds, and the caster must concentrate without move actions to maintain it.
28-29	The wizard chooses another being to be her conduit (Will save required for those unwilling). The conduit must be within 100' of the wizard, though line of sight is unnecessary. The conduit radiates argent magnificence. All within 60' must save or stand helplessly fixated upon the conduit and lose 1d3 STA and 1d3 INT per round. The effect lasts up to 1d8+CL rounds; the caster must concentrate to maintain it, and the conduit cannot take any actions (movement or otherwise) while fulfilling their role.
30-31	The caster is an image of silvery resplendence. All within 100' must save or stand helplessly fixated upon the caster and lose 1d3 STA, 1d3 INT, and 1d3 STR per round. The effect lasts up to 1d12+CL rounds, and the caster must concentrate without move actions to maintain it. The caster may designate 1d3+CL beings within 100' to be immune to the effects. If a victim's STA, INT, and STR are all reduced to zero, then the victim dies.
32+	The wizard assumes a deific silvery countenance. All within 150' must save or stand helplessly fixated upon the caster and lose 1d4 STA, 1d4 INT, and 1d4 STR per round. The effect lasts up to 2d10+CL rounds, and the caster must concentrate without move actions to maintain it. The caster may designate 2d3+CL beings within 150' to be immune to the effects. If a victim's STA, INT, and STR are all reduced to zero, then the victim dies.

Its eyes... were orbs of silver-gray illumination and their gaze fell over Benhus like a weighted net. He felt weakness course through his limbs, his breath go sluggish in his lungs and his heart stutter and slow. His sight was held captive by the eyes of the corpse. He stared helplessly into the soft-shining eyes of the dead man and felt his knees bending, quivering under his own weight.

Nobleman's Comfort: The Nobleman's Comfort is a tiny magic wand, about 4 to 6 inches in length. Unlike a "typical" wand, this may be operated by anyone. No arcane knowledge or command word is necessary; all one must do is press a tiny button, or so most believe. Actually, a PC using the device must make a spell check, though the minimum check for success is much smaller than required to cast a spell of equivalent power. Non-spell casters make the check with a d10, though thieves can use their *cast spell from scroll* die. Failure deactivates the device for 2d4 hours. A natural one on the check results in minor corruption. The nobleman's comfort's ease of use and concealability make it highly desired. Any given wand has 1d6 + Luck modifier charges when found. See *Tales from the Magician's Skull* vol. 1 for more examples.

- **Freezing Ray** (Min Spell Check 4): This cylinder has an icy translucence and texture, and feels slightly cool to the touch. It makes a shrieking sound when activated and shoots a ray of freezing cold at a single target within 15'. The blast does 3d6 damage and the target must make a Fortitude save with DC equal to the damage inflicted. If failed, a portion of the target's body (judge's discretion) is uselessly frozen solid and shatters if struck.

Benhus cursed savagely, rose up on one knee and triggered the wand again. This time Viriban's entire head and neck went white... Viriban's frozen skull struck the floor and broke into jagged pieces, frosted bright white outside and deepest crimson within.

Silver Risen: Init +5; Atk choke +5 melee (2d3 plus laryngeal crush) or bash +5 melee (1d6+3) or weapon (muscle memory); AC 18; HD 5d8; MV 40' or climb 40'; Act 2d20; SP laryngeal crush (risen may spend one action die per succeeding round to maintain choke, doing 2d6 temporary STA dmg per round with death at 0 STA, DC 18 STR check to escape), muscle memory (the risen retains any combat-related skills it had prior to undeath), un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.), magical cold does double damage; SV Fort +5, Ref +8, Will +3; AL C.

Benhus saw the figure moving fleetly, running and hurling the spear with ease and grace fearful to behold. And he saw the figure's bare arms had a dull metallic sheen... and reached in with the speed of a panther snaring a rabbit. A silvery hand clamped about Praedon's throat, jerked him up and halfway out of the carriage.

Tyrantsbane Dagger: The tyrantsbane dagger is a variant of a magical sword. Its hollow needle-like blade must be crafted from the bone of an un-dead skeleton and enchanted with the *sword magic* spell. The only exception to the enchantment process is that the blade's special purpose is not determined randomly. Despite the caster's spell check, the blade has a single purpose: to kill with the misery of death, as detailed below.

- Instead of rolling and spellburning on Table 8-6, the caster must spellburn at least 5 points which are permanently lost from his physical ability scores. Call these "memory points."
- When the dagger is thrust into the heart of a corpse less than 3 days dead, it withdraws a drop of heartsblood and stores the memory of the victim's death. A tyrantsbane dagger may store as many death memories as the caster burned memory points, and stores them at a rate of one per day.
- Once the dagger is full of memories, it discharges them into the next living creature it strikes. The creature must make a Will save with DC equal to 10 plus the number of memory points burned. So, if the caster burned 6 points during enchantment (the required 5 plus 1 additional), then the DC is 16 for the Will save. Discharge occurs regardless of the save result.

- Failing the Will save results in a prolonged death which lasts for as many hours as memory points, during which time the victim suffers the stored death memories. The blade cannot be removed for the duration.
- Until a discharged blade is filled again, it behaves in accordance with its other properties.

When the bone dagger was used to slay the hated ruler, when it pierced his living body, the corpseblood caused the stabbed man to experience the death of each body from which blood was taken. They called it Tyrantsbane. In the dawn times it was used to ensure that a deposed tyrant felt the pain and loss of some of those whom he abused, cast down and slew to hold power.

Five Deaths

Harthrang (type II demon): Init +6; Atk crushing grip +9 melee (1d8+2 plus disabling hold) or bite +10 melee (1d12); AC 17; HD 7d8; MV 30' or climb 30'; Act 2d20; SP disabling hold (targets a limb or throat, renders body part useless after 1d3 rounds, DC 17 Strength check per round to escape, costs harthrang 1 action die per round to maintain), traps of five deaths (see below), crits on 19-20, demon traits (p. 401 DCC rulebook), double damage from aether; SV Fort +7, Ref +8, Will +7; AL C.

Traps of five deaths (harthrang ability): Once per day, the harthrang can create five magical traps. The demon must cast them in the order given, fire first and aether last. The traps endure until dispelled (by a prospective victim or the harthrang), triggered, or the harthrang dies. All five must be triggered or dispelled before more can be made. One may find the traps by either making a spell check or a find traps check greater than or equal to the DC below. Due to the traps' magical natures, each can only be disabled with *dispel magic*.

1. Fire: 1 turn to create, DC 14 to find and dispel, 2d6 fire damage in 20' radius, DC 14 Ref save for half.
2. Air: 2 turns to create, DC 16 to find and dispel, 3d6 air damage in 25' radius, DC 16 Ref save for half.
3. Earth: 3 turns to create, DC 18 to find and dispel, 4d6 earth damage in 30' radius, DC 18 Ref save for half.
4. Water: 4 turns to create, DC 20 to find and dispel, 5d6 water damage in 35' radius, DC 20 Ref save for half.
5. Aether: 5 turns to create, DC 22 to find and dispel, 6d6 aether damage in 40' radius, DC 22 Ref save for half. See the *aether bolt* spell (also in this appendix) for more information on aether.

And this sorcerer gave the body to the demon as part of a contract — a pledge that the demon would do whatever the sorcerer asked, and nothing else... The harthrang was like a man who had been through a cheese-slicer and carefully put back together. In mockery and hate for the human form, it had carved bone-deep

grooves in its stolen face, the skull clearly visible through the flesh. But the features of the face were intact: the staring eyes, the gaping loose lips. The clenched teeth were needle-sharp, digging into dank red gums above and below but drawing no blood. It snatched again at Lernaion's throat with chill, heavy hands.

Aether Bolt

Range: 80'

Casting Time: 1 action

Level: 2

Duration: Varies

Save: Fortitude for partial (see below)

General: Aether is a celestial element that is rare on the prime material plane. It's dangerous to manipulate regardless of its three phases: gaseous bluish flame, reddish yellow molten liquid, and cold silvery solid like hardened wax. With this spell, the caster shoots bolts of aether's various phases. Although these bolts automatically hit their targets (as long as the caster sees them), some spell check results have splash damage or areas of effect which can also damage the caster unless otherwise stated.

An aether bolt, with few exceptions, continues to feed on a target for a duration of time until it dissipates. Some of this damage can be mitigated by Fortitude saves as detailed below. Although some effects are described with fire-like descriptors, this is not fire damage; fire is a separate element from aether. Consequently, some hypothesize that aether elementals must surely exist, but no living witnesses can verify the claim.

Due to its celestial origins, aether inflicts double damage on demons and un-dead.

Manifestation: Roll 1d4: bolts are shaped like (1) writhing snakes; (2) amorphous globs; (3) spear-shaped flaming clouds; (4) swarms of sparks. Regardless of the manifestation, a thunderclap occurs whenever a bolt strikes.

Corruption: Roll 1d8: (1-2) the caster's hands radiate a bluish glow and damage anyone they touch for 1d3 aether damage if the caster fails a Luck check; (3-4) the caster's tongue is like molten aetheric gold, which ruins his sense of taste and gives him a perpetual slur; (5) the caster's skin perspires cold waxy aether, and anyone who touches her suffers 1d3 damage if the caster fails a Luck check; (6) minor; (7) major; (8) greater.

Misfire: Roll 1d4: (1) the bolt boomerangs back on the caster, striking him as result 16-19 below; (2) 1d6 aether bolts radiate from the caster to allies as result 14-15, with one bolt per ally and excess bolts striking the caster; (3) everyone in a 10' radius (including the caster) takes 1d4 aether damage; (4) the spell's effects are delayed; the next time the caster or any of his allies rolls a natural one, a molten jet of aether strikes the associated PC with result 22-25.

1	Lost, failure, and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; (1-2) corruption; (3) patron taint (or corruption if no patron); (4+) misfire.		
2-11	Lost. Failure.	32-33	1d3+CL aether bolts rain down from above, striking one or more targets determined by the caster. Each bolt detonates into a 10'-diameter ball of flaming blue gas. Everyone within the detonation suffers 2d10+CL damage. Each subsequent round for 2d3+CL rounds, the victims must pass a DC 20 Fortitude save or take 1d8 damage as the flaming aether feeds on them. A PC that dies from this damage is ineligible for a recover the body check.
12-13	Failure, but spell is not lost.		
14-15	The wizard hurls a missile of cooled aether which unerringly strikes a target for 1d8+CL damage. No save allowed.		
16-19	The caster throws a bolt of waxen aether which unerringly strikes a target for 1d8+CL damage. The aether sticks to the victim, trying to consume them. Each subsequent round for 1d3 rounds, the victim must make a DC 16 Fortitude save or take 1d3 damage.	34+	The caster radiates an aetheric maelstrom of apocalyptic proportions. A near infinitude of celestial bolts radiate outward striking all within 80' of the caster. She may shield herself and an additional 1d3+CL allies from the aether blast. Those not shielded within the 160' diameter inferno suffer 2d20+CL damage. Each subsequent round for 3d3+CL rounds, the victims must pass a DC 22 Fortitude save or take 1d10+CL damage as the flaming aether feeds on them. A PC that dies from this damage is ineligible for a recover the body check.
20-21	1d3+CL bolts of waxen aether radiate from the caster and unerringly strike one or more targets as determined by the caster. A victim takes 1d8+CL damage per bolt. The aether sticks to each victim, trying to consume them. Each subsequent round for 1d3 rounds, the victim must make a single DC 17 Fortitude save or take 1d3 damage for each bolt that hit them.		<i>Cold silvery aether, like hardened wax, coated the inner surface of Morlock's hands. The flesh was gray and dead looking. When Lernaion tried to peel the aether away, a dreadful shock threw him against the corridor wall. Looking down, he saw that Morlock's hand had fallen apart in lumps, like a log burned nearly to ash. Veins of blue fire were crawling up the younger man's forearms, consuming the living flesh as they went.</i>
22-25	A single jet of molten golden aether shoots from the caster to unerringly strike a single target for 1d10+CL damage. The aether sticks to the victim, trying to consume them. Each subsequent round for 1d3+CL rounds, the victim must make a DC 18 Fortitude save or take 1d6 damage. When the target is initially hit, anyone within 5' must make a DC 10 Reflex save or suffer splash damage as result 14-15 above.		
26-29	1d3+CL jets of molten golden aether shoot from the wizard to unerringly strike one or more targets for 1d10+CL damage. The aether sticks to each victim, trying to consume them. Each subsequent round for 1d3+CL rounds, the victim must make a single DC 18 Fortitude save or take 1d6 damage for each bolt that hit them. When a target is initially hit, anyone within 5' must make a DC 10 Reflex save or suffer splash damage as result 14-15 above.		
30-31	The caster flings an aether missile which detonates into a ball of flaming blue gas. Everyone within the 20'-diameter detonation suffers 2d10+CL damage. Each subsequent round for 2d3+CL rounds, the victims must pass a DC 19 Fortitude save or take 1d8 damage as the flaming aether feeds on them. A PC that dies from this damage is ineligible for a recover the body check.		

The Forger's Art

The Hidden Sanctum: This magical artifact looks like a thumb-sized tower carved from translucent crystal. However, the tiny item is quite powerful. With a successful DC 5 spell check (non-casters roll a d10), the owner is able to create an interdimensional sanctum large enough to house 10 people comfortably, along with rooms for study and grounds for training and recuperation; those resting within heal at 2x the normal rate. The sanctum is invisible unless the viewer passes a DC 22 Intelligence check or casts *detect invisible* or *detect magic* with a spell check of 22 or greater. Those who succeed in detecting the sanctum see a small cottage that changes size each time they measure it. Only once they enter do they discover the sanctum's true size. The sanctum may only be used once per month. Each successive day after activation, the bearer must spellburn one ability point to maintain the sanctum; non-casters must burn 2 points rather than 1. If a natural 1 is rolled for the activation spell check, the bearer must burn Strength, Agility, or Stamina (randomly chosen) down to 3 to activate the artifact. Otherwise, the artifact is useless for 1 year. The judge is reminded that ability damage from spellburn does not naturally heal on a day that a caster spellburns. Thus prolonging the sanctum's existence slowly drains the bearer's physical abilities unless there is a magical means to restore them.

A house no one talks about — I don't think they can talk about it. No building where there should be one, yet less space than there should be. No, listen, I make my living watching people, figuring out whether they'll buy. And these townfolk," she made a small gesture that indicated more than the people in the tavern. "I've watched their faces when I've asked them about this place, no one knows what I'm talking about. I take them right to it, and they don't see what I see."

The Second Death of Hanuvar

Entice She of the Dark Level: 1 (Ritual Spell)

Range: Varies Duration: Varies

7 hours per day for 3 consecutive evenings Save: None

General: Entice She of the Dark is an arduous ritual spell with significant cost but powerful results. The dark mistress has many manifestations: goddess of love, god of protection, supernatural darkness, etc. In some regions of the multiverse she's a protective mother, in others a seductress, and in others a manifestation of the death-rebirth cycle. Often she is called "Ariteen."

To entice her to appear, the caster spends 3 consecutive evenings in 7-hour castings. The first session defines a large area (at least a 100' radius) by inscribing sacred runes along the boundaries. The second sanctifies the area for her arrival. The third is the devoted solely to the beckoning. Each session requires 500 gp worth of materials to be sacrificed, which do not count toward enhancing the spell's power. However, the potency may be increased by other means as described in the Ritualized Magic section of the DCC rulebook (p. 124-126). On the evening following the final session, the caster makes a spell check, with results as given below.

Spellburning to increase the spell check is permitted, but the ability loss is permanent and cannot be restored by any means short of a supernatural entity.

Although the dark mistress is power incarnate, potential victims are not without means of defending themselves. She does not affect any target bearing a light source; this applies to both boons and banes. If she is exposed to sunlight, or magical light equivalent to sunlight, she is incapacitated and actionless for each round of exposure. Finally, she may be forcibly removed with *dispel magic* or *banish*, but the dark mistress makes her own rules. Using 2d10+10, she makes an opposed roll to the enemy's spell check. Unless the spell check is greater than her roll, the attempt to remove her fails, regardless of the offending spell's description.

Although this is a wizard spell, the judge can bestow it upon a cleric if appropriate. Most casters are surprised that this ritual is a level 1 spell. This is as She of the Dark intends it; a dedicated beginner should not be denied her love. It should be noted, however, that even experienced warlocks hesitate to invoke her because of the high cost of failure.

Manifestation: See below.

Corruption: Roll 1d8: (1-2) the caster has extreme photophobia and suffers -2d to all rolls when in daylight; (3-4) unless she passes a Luck check, a light source that comes within 20' of the caster extinguishes; (5) the caster's hands perpetually perspire a dark mist, which dampens anything the caster touches; (6) minor; (7) major; (8) greater.

Misfire: Roll 1d4: (1) The dark mistress claims the caster, sending a tentacle to embrace him as in result 32+ below; (2) The dark mistress claims an allied PC (chosen at random), sending a tentacle to embrace them as in result 32+ below; (3) for 1d6 turns, a 60'-radius sphere of absolute supernatural darkness radiates from the caster extinguishing all light and blinding all within; (4) for the next 1d3 days, anyone viewing the caster must make a DC 10 Will save (1/day) or feel seething hate for him.

1	Lost, failure, and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; (1-3) corruption+misfire; (4) misfire; (5+) patron taint.
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2-11	Lost. Failure.
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12-21	The dark mistress appears in her lover aspect and is bound to and affects a 100' radius. Each round, her amorous tendrils bestow 1d3 kisses to targets chosen by the caster (or the judge if the caster is incapacitated). A kissed ally receives +2d to all rolls for 1d3+CL rounds. A kissed enemy must make a DC 16 Will save. If passed, the enemy suffers -1d to all rolls for 1 turn. If failed, the enemy stands in rapture gazing at the mistress and does not attack the caster and his allies for 1 turn (the rapture is dispelled if they attack him). The mistress remains for 1d3 turns.
-------	---

22-31	The dark mistress appears in her raging mother aspect and is bound to and affects a 200' radius. She cloaks the caster and his allies in her maternal protection, granting +4 AC to each. An enemy that enters the mother's protective gloom must make a DC 19 Will save. If passed, the enemy is terrified and flees her radius, unable to return for 2d6+CL turns. If failed, the terror of the dark mother is too much to bear, knocking the enemy unconscious until she departs. The dark mistress remains for 1d4 turns.
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32+	The dark mistress appears in her death-rebirth aspect and is bound to and affects a 300' radius. Her misty visage appears as a black blotched orb with countless translucent tentacles. Each round, her tentacles embrace and penetrate 2d4 targets chosen by the judge rather than the caster. Indeed, neither the caster nor her allies are protected from She of the Dark in this aspect. One embraced must make a DC 22 Will save. If passed, the victim loses 2d6 points of Personality (which heals back at the natural rate) and falls unconscious for 1d6 hours. If failed, the victim dies and variegated mushrooms sprout from their corpse in 2d3 rounds. Recovering the body is not possible if mushrooms have sprouted.
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Something moved within, a form Hanuvar took at first for a gigantic woman in a gauzy dress shaped from vapor. But as the thing swung wide to avoid a burning torch, he saw it wasn't any kind of woman. It had no true visage, merely a gray faceless orb with black blotches, like the top of a rotting mushroom. Hair-like translucent tentacles swayed from the orb, whipping now and then to touch those nearest. It left its victims lying dead or senseless after it passed.

Wizard of Remembrance

Memnovore: Init +5; Atk maw +7 melee (2d6 plus memory drain) or mental blast +5 missile fire (1d8 plus beckoning thoughts, range 60') or acid spittle +6 missile fire (1d10 acid damage, range 20'); AC 15; HD 6d12; MV 20'; Act 2d20; SP gentle shrive (may attack with maw doing memory drain but no physical damage), memory drain (DC 17 Will save or take 1d6 Intelligence and Personality damage; a victim drained to 3 in either Intelligence or Personality irrevocably loses all memories, even as the ability damage heals), beckoning thoughts (DC 14 Will save or approach memnovore and submit to it for 1d3+2 rounds), half damage from mundane weapons, immune to fire, double damage from acid, uses d100 to save against *sleep*, *charm*, *paralysis*, and other mental effects; SV Fort +4, Ref +6, Will +9; AL L.

In appearance it was like a worm, or a maggot or lamprey. It stood taller than a man, its flesh glistening. Its head was a nub, smooth and empty except for its eternally moving mouth, like a snail seen through glass. In his mind, Suven felt its pull. Come and be Emptied, the memnovore compelled.

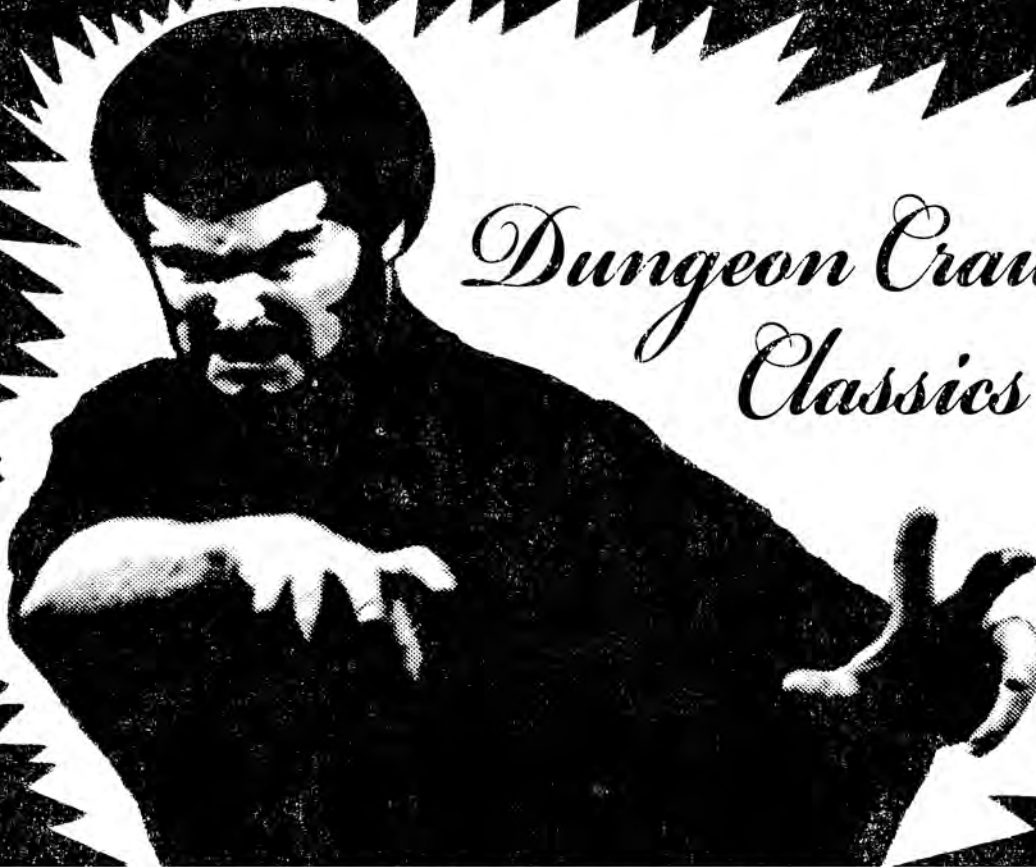
Wand of Ebon Vitriol: This single stick of fetishes and bone is a deadly magical weapon in trained hands. If the wielder succeeds on a spell check, the wand fires a lambent black missile that automatically hits a visible target within 100' and does corrosive damage to its target as well as splashing those nearby. When found, the wand has 4d6 plus Luck modifier charges. The

number of charges expended depends on the spell check; if the wand has insufficient charge for a result, then use the highest result for which it has sufficient charge. The wielder may not choose a lesser result.

- Spell check natural 1 (half of remaining charges or the last remaining charge): wielder takes 2d6 damage plus 1d3 acid damage per round for 1 additional round. Those within 5' of impact must pass a DC 10 Reflex save or suffer 1d6 splash damage.
- Spell check 14-18 (1 charge): 2d6 damage plus 1d3 acid damage per round for 1 additional round. Those within 5' of impact must pass a DC 10 Reflex save or suffer 1d6 splash damage.
- Spell check 19-23 (2 charges): 3d6 damage plus 1d4 acid damage per round for 2 additional rounds. Those within 10' of impact must pass a DC 13 Reflex save or suffer 1d8 splash damage.
- Spell check 24-28 (3 charges): 4d6 damage plus 1d6 acid damage per round for 3 additional rounds. Those within 15' of impact must pass a DC 16 Reflex save or suffer 1d12 splash damage.
- Spell check 28+ (4 charges): 6d6 damage plus 2d6 acid damage per round for 4 additional rounds. Those within 20' of impact must pass a DC 19 Reflex save or suffer 1d16 splash damage.

Ebon vitriol splashed against the invisible shield that sprang from Suven's hand, splitting into jets which passed to either side, leaving him unscathed. To his right, the spray spattered the ground, where the flattened reeds hissed and dissolved. But to his left it showered Nessa, sticking like pitch. She screamed, clawing at her face where the flesh tore away, revealing bone, blood-spattered ivory in the dawn. Her scream died, her blackened carcass fell.





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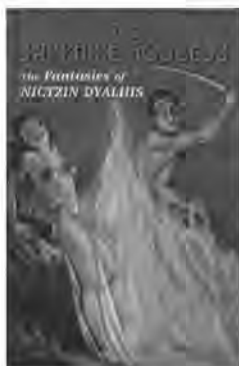


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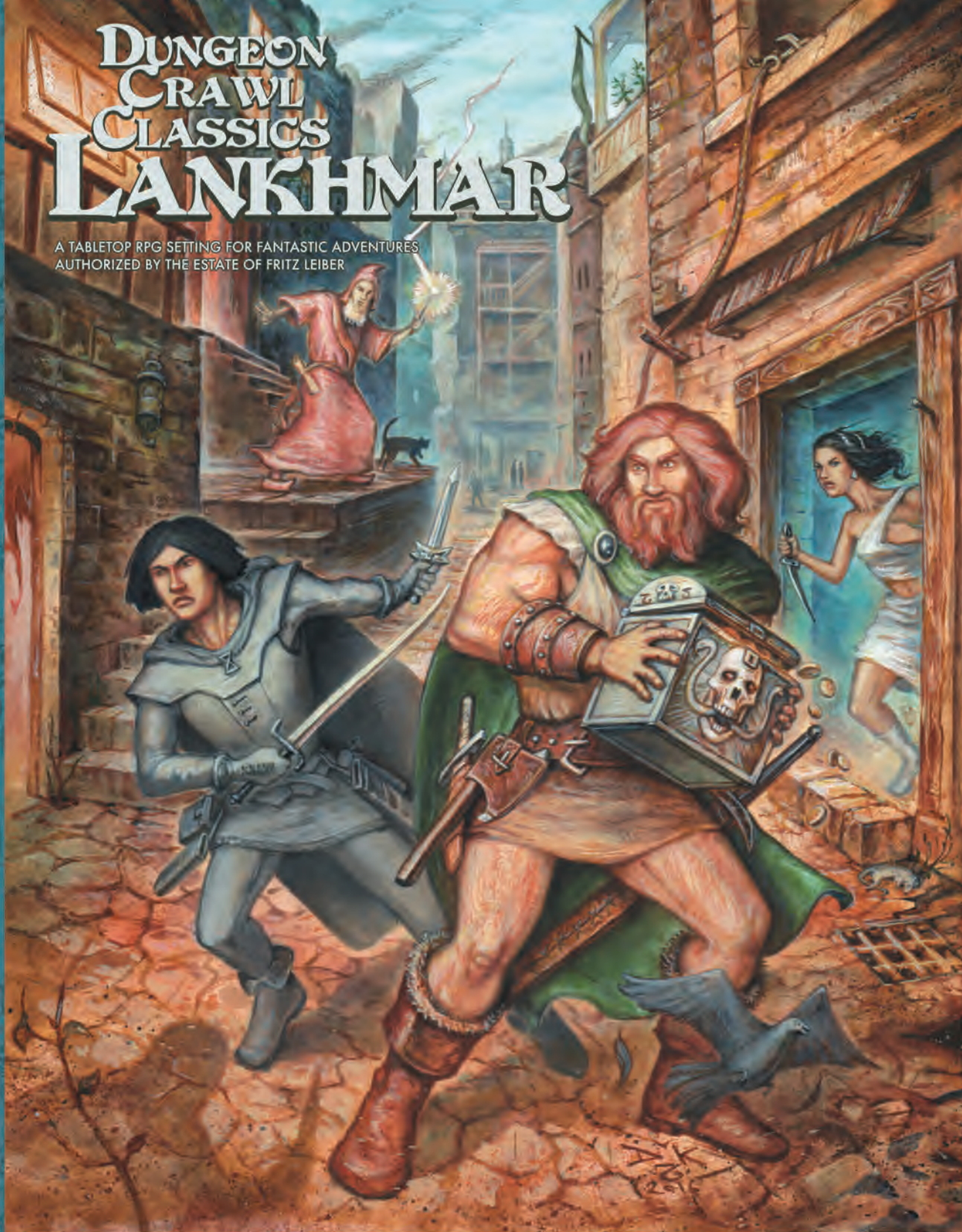


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