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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. 7

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– STORIES –

SNAKE IN THE FOLD by Clint Werner 5

From the Tales of Shintaro Oba • *Osoroshii* slithered lower down the pillars, her face bobbing only a few feet from Oba. There was no fear in the demon's expression, only a look of smug triumph. "What will you offer me in exchange, Sekigahara-san?"

The Gift of a Poisoned Necklace by John C. Hocking 15

A Tale of the King's Blade • "That's her!" roared the massive man clearing space at the doorway. He pointed at their booth with an outthrust arm that appeared considerably thicker than Benhus's leg, then lowered his head like the bull he resembled and charged.

Death Stalks the Night by D. J. Tyrer 27

"We cannot see it. It comes and goes unchallenged, leaving death behind it." "Ah, the nightwalkers. They come from a land south of here, born of jealousy and hatred. Some say they are muroyi of the worst kind, or their twisted children, others say they are spirits who yearn to take physical form. Evil things."

Dara's Tale by Mark Rigney 35

Dahnica ran, pelting toward the stairs, and she knew without looking back that the six-legged things at her heels were faster than she, much faster. She would have to turn and fight.

Interred With the Worm by Scott J. Couturier 45

The tunnel leading down into the necropolis shone smooth and clean in my torchlight, almost as if polished; at turns, a low moaning or gurgling sound came out of that wet darkness, a sloshing and pulsing sound, as abhorrent to my ears as it was unknown.

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The child stretched open its mouth, revealing rotted teeth. Wider and wider its grin stretched, splitting the face. Wailing shrieks blasted forth, filling the vestibule. The noise rushed through Auric, filling the tunnel, filling the ruins, filling the sky.

Beasts of the Bluestone Hills by James Enge 63

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius • Deftly avoiding Morlock's blade, bloody with her stinking orange blood, the beast jumped forward and struck him on the chest with a leonine paw. Morlock was knocked clean off his feet and fell on the unpaved road. Every atom of breath seemed to be knocked out of him; he lost hold of his sword; the world went dark.

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The Monster Pit by Terry Olson 70

Enter the monster pit! Down here in the pit, we provide tabletop RPG fans with playable DCC RPG game statistics for the creatures in this issue of *Tales From The Magician's Skull*.

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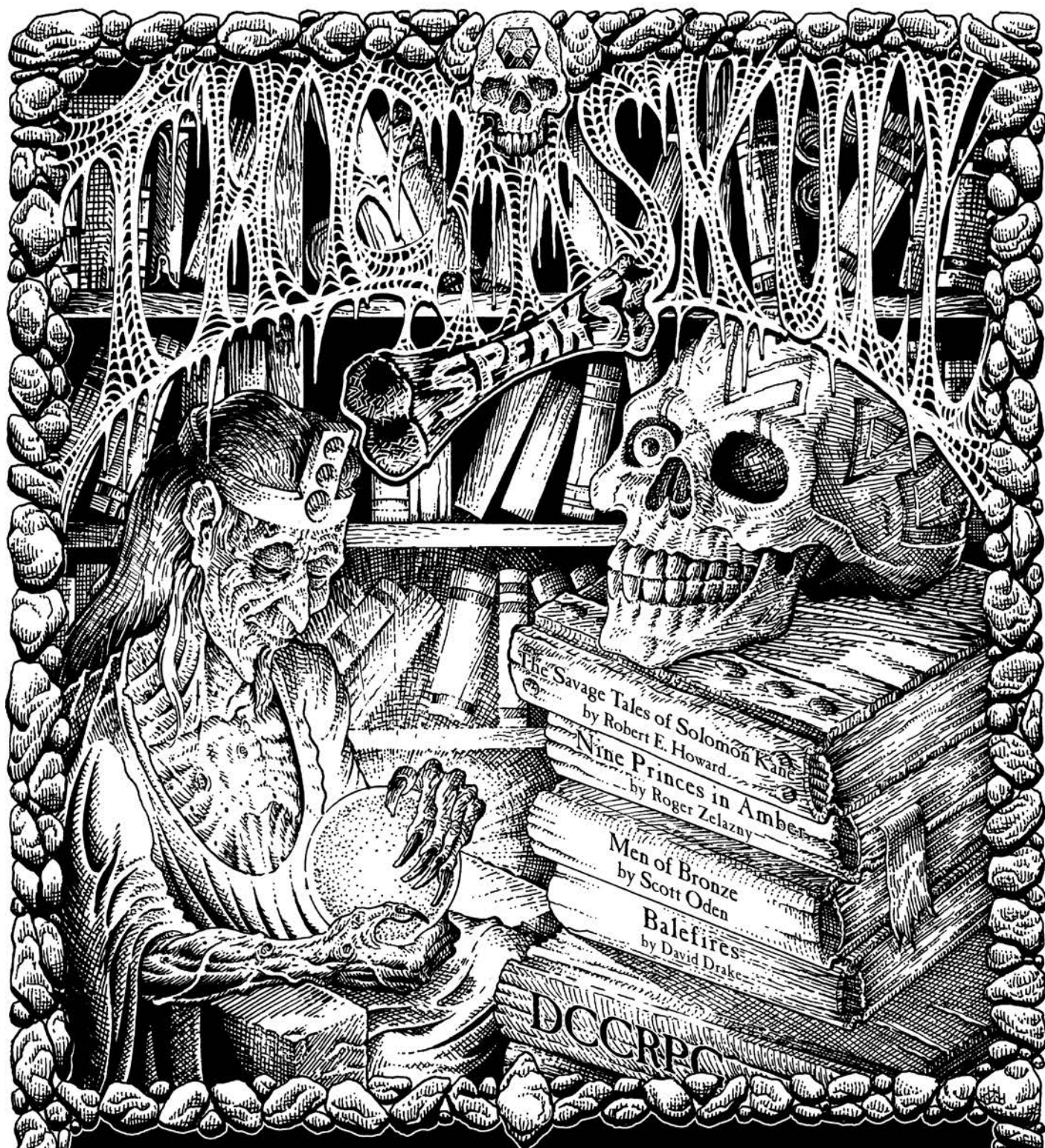
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Praise me, Mortal Dogs, for once again I bring tales to terrify and delight in equal measure! Oh, great was my pleasure when these stories were presented to me, and I only wish I might witness your first reading of the wonders herein. Doubtless you shall spring forth to cavort in glee and windmill your arms in reckless abandon!

Once you understand the splendors I have delivered unto you, neglect not to venture into the Facegram and Instatweet and Blood reads to tell others of my magnificence!

Last, but not least, it has come to my attention that some of you continue in your misapprehension that water chestnuts are food. I have not yet learned the sinister secret behind their manufacture, or the goal of those who hide them amongst flavorful meals that otherwise lack the texture of Styrofoam, but I pledge to unravel the mystery and visit my wrath upon all those involved!

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

As you begin your dive into the seventh fantastic issue of our favorite magazine, I hope you'll spare a few moments to remember the devoted interns who have given their lives in service to The Skull. Our employment contract includes free mummification, but that's of little use if the interns have been reduced to burning, sorcerous fragments after confusing the submissions pile with the scrolls inscribed with secrets man was not meant to know. They will be missed.

Also missed this year was GenCon, attended by Joseph and the merry band at Goodman Games since time immemorial. Alas, this year it was not to be, although we have high hopes for our return come 2022. I still remember when 2022 seemed like the impossibly far future, long ago, before the moon was blown out of orbit and we all had little red corvettes. Or we were going to party like raspberry berets. I'm afraid 1999 is so far back that I've lost track of the specifics. In any case, we hope we will see all of you at GenCon in the summer of 2022. Rumor has it that The Skull himself may even make an appearance, although that may depend upon his mood – and depending upon his mood, you may not want to see him appear, for who knows how you rank on his “last to be immolated” list?

He has been greatly pleased of late, however. Apart from the suspicious absence of high quality paper over the course of 2021, and then the tragic disappearance of the most hideous of his octobears, he has had much to celebrate. It's not every undead sorcerous magazine publisher who gets to invent his own holiday! He made specific mention that I should remind all of you to write your priests and kings to threaten petition them to pass decrees naming the Day of Might as an official holi-

day. Lo, did the people rejoice on that great day, raising flagons of root beer, singing and gamboling, and playing their trombones and gongs and shredding metal guitar.

I'm so so excited for the return of this holiday that I've gotten ahead of myself. For now, let's focus on the immediate future in the pages that lie after his one. In addition to some grand new work by regular favorites like Clint Werner, James Enge and John Hocking, we have some wonderful new writers with thrilling new tales, like that featuring the warriors Ini-ndoga and Mbeva, the grittily determined Auric, and other surprises.

Sometimes we get asked about how it was that The Skull came to become a magazine publisher, but the time to reveal that tale is not yet. Someday, perhaps, but not this day. You may feel free to write us with your own speculations, so long as they are not blasphemous. We would also love to hear your opinions on your favorite tales. For those gamers among you, we'd love to hear from you if you've used any of the monsters or implements detailed in The Monster Pit in your own tabletop games, or if you've used any of the fiction printed here as inspiration for adventures you run.

Now, though, it's time to return to work. It is already time to finalize the contents of issue 8, and our surprising special issue. The Skull clamors for them, and I'm sure most of you do as well.

Swords Together!

— Howard Andrew Jones

• THE SKULL READS THE CLASSICS •

It came to pass that my Betamax failed and had to be transported to distant realms for alchemical reconstitution, and thus I turned to something known as an “audio book.” The new intern had decreed a passionate interest in something known as *The Great Gatsby*, by Fitz Gerald, hailing it a masterpiece. I decided to partake of its mysteries. I was not pleased.

Waste not your time with this book, which should be retitled *The Incredibly Mundane Gatsby*! The main character displayed no greatness, either martial or arcane. At one point in the onerous text he yearned for a great glowing light across the water. I felt certain it emanated from a puissant emerald, and that he would gird his armor, lift a morning star, and board a longship to retrieve the jewel in a welter of blood and fury, but nothing remotely like that ever took place! If there was any magic, it was that wielded by Daisy, although the narrator failed to explain how she employed it. She could only have entranced Gatsby by magic, for there is no other explanation for how such a dull, witless character could inspire such devotion. I have learned that those who teach the study of English are strangely enamored of this text and its shallow, tiresome characters and promote its reading over far finer books like *The Hour of the Dragon* and *The Sword of Rhiannon*. It is no wonder

youth of today are busy with their phone drives and their face tweets and do not know that books contain realms of adventure.

Also I experienced an audio book known as *Bleak House*, by Charles Dickens. Much like Gatsby, it lacked swordplay and sorcery. However, while it was far from my normal fare, it was not without enticements. Indeed, there is tension, and mayhem, and villainy, and spontaneous human combustion! It ended strangely, in mid story, when the speaker's voice grew gradually slower and lower in tone until he stopped altogether, but until that point it proved diverting.

Finally I abandoned audio books and perused a volume I found upon the desk of the editor, Jones, titled *The Complete Tales of the Continental Op*, by Dashiell Hammet. So far it is almost as fine as a sword-and-sorcery book, for it contains dastardly villains and clean, sharp writing, also there is much action, and clever heroes. I have not yet finished the volume, but so far it is marred only by a lack of sorcery. The gunplay is almost as entertaining as sword blows! Jones has since informed me that many fine books lack some elements of sword-and-sorcery, but that one must choose them carefully. I choose this one, and so should you!

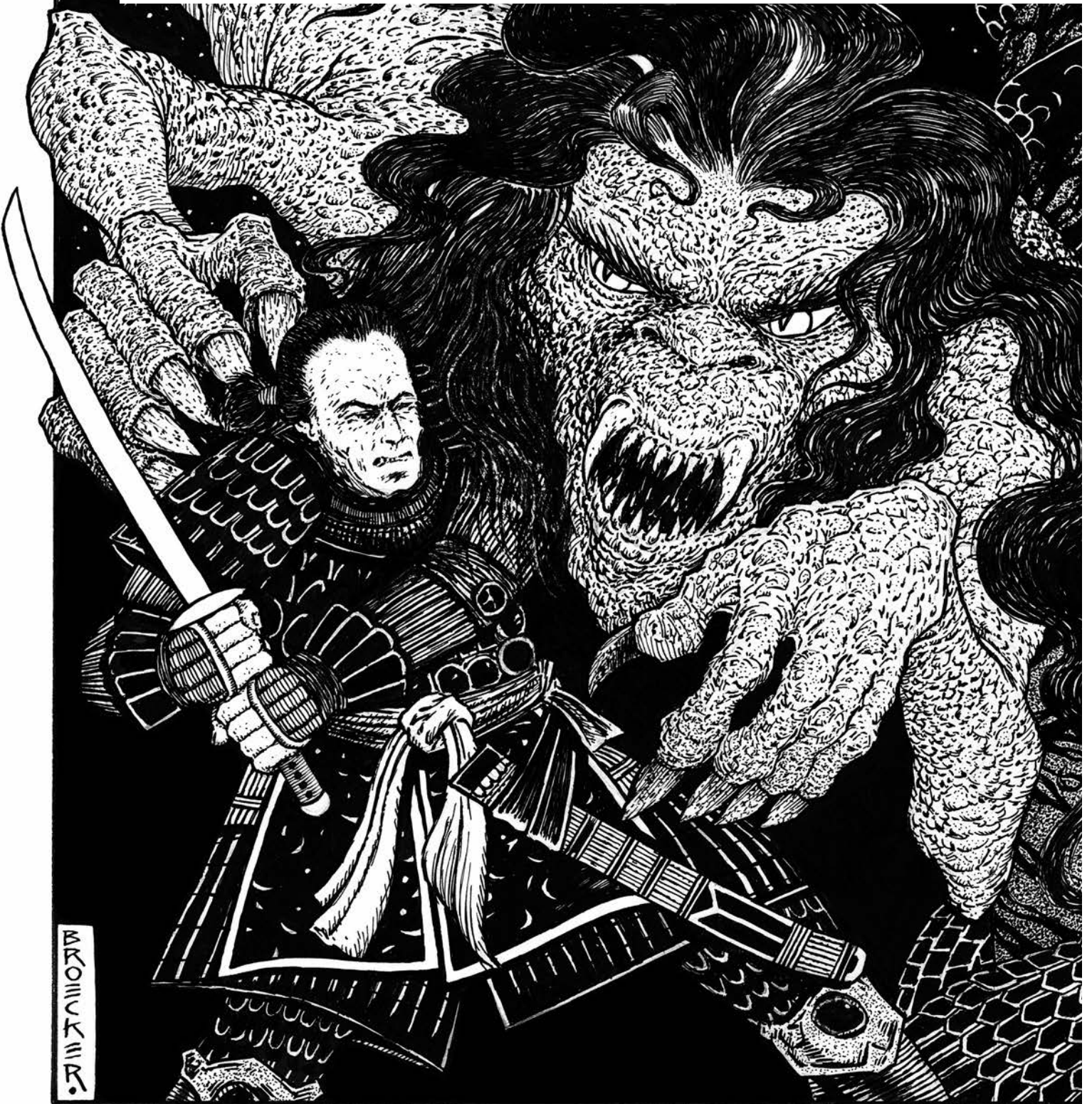
— So Sayeth the Skull!

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



THE SNAKE



MR. O. K. A. R.



IN THE FOLD

From the Tales of Shintaro Oba

By **C. L. WERNER**

Illustration by **RANDY BROECKER**

IN the domain of the daimyo Urakami Hikokuni you will find the village of Shisendo. On the lake beyond the village there is an island. On that island stands Ryuanji temple. It is there the demon Osoroshii lurks, spreading her venomous evil across the land.”

Shintaro Oba read the scroll once more. It had been given to him by Kambei-kai, the mummified priest who had transcended death itself to return as a living sokushinbutso. He'd promised to help Oba in his search for the demon that had enslaved the soul of his late lord, Sekigahara Katakura. Kambei-kai's researches had yet to discover the fiend for which the samurai was searching but he had, sometimes, uncovered other monsters plaguing the people of Mu-Thulan. Evils it would need a hero like Oba to end.

There was one glimmer of hope in Kambei-kai's message. Though Osoroshii wasn't the demon Oba was looking for, she might know the name of the one he was seeking. The undead priest left it to Oba to decide what bargain to strike with the monster to learn what he needed to know. If the words of a demon could be trusted.

The samurai rolled up the scroll again and stuffed it beneath the sash that circled his waist. From the wooded hill he had a vantage of the village below and the castle of the Urakami Clan in the distance. Nearby was the lake and out across its waters was a small, rocky island. It was a wild, forbidding spot, girt by high cliffs overgrown with foliage and rising to a central plateau thick with trees. The temple was visible, but even from a distance there was an impression of decay and abandonment. Oba expected nothing less from a shrine that had become so defiled that a demon could take residence within its walls.

Oba studied the shoreline, his gaze finally settling on a few fishing boats drawn up on the beach. It seemed the fishermen were finished for the day. He observed a half dozen men and women walking across the sand towards Shisendo bearing baskets with the day's catch to their homes. He studied them for a moment, then looked back at the boats. He'd need one to get across to the island, but was too cautious to reveal himself and tell them his purpose. No village enjoyed having a demon in its vicinity, but people were often too afraid of provoking its wrath to allow someone to liberate them from its evil. It would be better for all concerned if Oba struck out for the temple and confronted Osoroshii without anyone knowing.

The samurai started down the hill toward the shore. With the demon's lair so near, he'd donned his armour while in the woods and was soon sweating as the summer sun beat down on the plated steel. Trained to wear armour as soon as he was old enough to swing a wooden sword, its weight was a familiar burden Oba rarely noticed, but the heat was something he'd never be accustomed to. It made his climb down the hill more taxing than it ordinarily should have been, draining his stamina and distracting his mind.

So it was that when Oba reached the shore and the boats, he failed to notice that one of the fishermen had returned. The youth started in surprise to see him. Oba could see the uneasiness on the man's face, could tell he was trying to decide if he recognized him as one of the Urakami samurai. Oddly, it struck Oba that the man's trepidation lessened rather than increased when he failed to number him among Lord Hikokuni's retainers.

"What are you doing near our boats?" the fisherman challenged.

"I need to borrow one of them," Oba replied. He nodded his head to the youth. "I will return it when I am finished."

The fisherman took a few steps towards him. There was a wariness in his attitude, but not, Oba thought, one provoked by fear. It was almost as though the youth were trying to suppress the last embers of a fading hope. His eyes fixated on Koumakiri's bone hilt and the weathered scabbard that held the sword. "There is only the island... and the temple. No one goes to Ryuanji except that Lord Hikokuni sends them there."

Oba heard the tremor in the man's voice when he spoke of the temple. "I will go to Ryuanji," he told the fisherman. "I know of the demon that has preyed on Shisendo these many years. Lord Hikokuni might tolerate its presence. I will not."

The fisherman dropped to his knees and bowed to the samurai. There was a sob in his voice when he spoke. "We dared not hope for this day! You can only be Shintaro Oba, the hero who wields Demon Killer!" He raised his face and there were tears in his eyes. "How long we've prayed to the gods that you would come!"

Clasping the youth by the shoulder, Oba drew him back onto his feet. "I am unworthy of your veneration," he said. "Had my purpose been merely to free your village of the demon, then you might have cause to cheer me. I have my own reasons for seeking the fiend, but I promise you that she will not menace Shisendo once I've finished with her."

"Whatever your reasons, if you free my people from Osoroshii, you have the undying gratitude of Teijiro." The fisherman slapped his chest as he gave his name. His gaze turned to the lake and there was a cold fury in his eyes when they turned towards the island. "The demon has preyed on my people for generations now. She takes the form of a great snake and slithers through the waters to drag men from their boats and snatch children from the shore." His hands curled into fists as he continued. "My brother was taken by her when he was only eight. I can still hear his screams as she wrapped him in her coils and pulled him into the lake to drown." He kicked his foot in the sand. "The wolf and the tiger hunt prey when they are hungry, but Osoroshii kills simply to inflict suffering. She is a wicked, vile horror."

"The manner of demons is ever dominated by malice and evil," Oba said. "But your story troubles me. Kiyohime are usually a cautious and subtle sort of demon. They aren't so brazen as the oni in their methods. How is it that Osoroshii has become so bold?"

Teijiro turned and pointed inland. Just visible in the distance were the tiled rooftops of Danjiki Castle, stronghold of the Urakami clan. "In my grandfather's time, the samurai would hunt Osoroshii, but the demon always eluded them and would sneak inside the castle to wreck her vengeance on the clan. Try as they might, they could never catch her, but at least there was an effort to protect the common people from her evil." The youth's face contorted with bitterness. "It was Lord Hikokuni's father who changed everything. He made an agreement with Osoroshii, giving her Ryuanji and allowing her to claim a certain number of his vassals each year."

"A shameful compact for any man to enter," Oba declared, disgusted that a daimyo would stoop to such measures. He scratched his chin as he pondered the situation. "It may be that good will come from such villainy. From what you say, the kiyohime has grown arrogant and proud. She will be unlikely to flee." His hand dropped to Koumakiri's grip. "Osoroshii will rue such a mistake."

"Let me row you to the island, master," Tejiro said. He hurried to one of the boats and started to push it back into the lake.

Oba stepped into the boat but waved the fisherman away. "It may be that Osoroshii will come out before I ever set foot on the island. You are a brave man, Tejiro, but I have fought demons before. You can best help me by remaining here and offering prayers that I succeed."

Tejiro accepted the rebuff with a bow. "I will pray for your victory," he declared. "Everyone in Shisendo will."

The samurai frowned at the remark. "It would be best if you told no one about me or what I intend to do. It is possible that I might fail. To have their hopes dashed would be cruel. Tell them nothing. When I am triumphant, the deed will speak for itself."

Oba used the oar to push out onto the lake. He felt guilty that he hadn't told the fisherman the entire truth. He was setting out for Ryuanji to confront the demon, but to achieve his own goal he might be forced to compromise with Osoroshii. If the kiyohime told him what he wanted to know then he would be obligated to any agreement he made with her. He rationalized with himself that he'd enter no compact so shameful as that of the Urakami clan, that he wouldn't leave the demon free to prey on Shisendo.

As he rowed across the lake, Oba wondered if even that much was true. To learn the identity of the demon that had captured Lord Katakura's soul was there any limit to what he was willing to do? A samurai's obligation was to fulfil his duty to his lord above all other concerns. Death and suffering were expected of a samurai to maintain his honour. Even when that death and suffering must be inflicted upon others.

A flicker of fear grew inside Oba's mind, becoming stronger the nearer he came to the forsaken island. Not fear of the demon, but rather of himself and what he might be forced to do in the name of duty. As though to echo his fears, a doleful note rang out across the waves.

A bell was sounding from Ryuanji temple.

• • •

THE island was as forbidding a site as Oba had ever seen. There was an atmosphere that surrounded it, an air of menace that exuded from the bleak grey rocks and the wind-racked trees. The bell was silent now and no other sound greeted his approach. The lack of birds about the island lent a sinister aspect to the quiet.

A stone pier projected from the rocks, offering the only access to the interior. Oba tied the boat to one of the pilings and started towards the ancient steps that ascended up through the grey rocks. He noticed that the stairway was greatly decayed, rubbed smooth in places so that he was forced to stretch to bypass a step that simply was no longer there. A pattern emerged as he continued upwards. The worn patches on the stairway suggested a heavy mass dragged across it. Not merely once, but repeatedly, up and down year after year. The effaced sections shifted from one edge of the stairs to the other in a winding fashion that set a chill through the samurai. It was more than merely imagination, a slithering thing had been using these stairs. From the width of the worn patches, he judged the kiyohime's coils must be three

feet in diameter. The breadth of the serpent was only a suggestion of the demon's size, but it was an ominous hint to the nature of the enemy awaiting Oba.

After a few hundred yards, the steps reached the top of the rocks and opened onto the plateau that formed the centre of the island. Trees abounded in profusion, and the ground was overgrown with bamboo and a yellow wild flower unknown to Oba. A path had been cut through the vegetation, plunging deeper into the interior. The tracks of the kiyohime were here as well, dominating the trail to such a degree that they were more easily noticed by the few spots unmarked by the demon's passing than the confused swirl of her slithering travels.

Now the samurai noticed the heavy, musky reek that clung to the island. Below, with wind and wave to counteract it, the reptilian stench hadn't been noticeable, but in the stillness of the interior it engulfed everything like a miasma. The riddle of why birds shunned Ryuanji was explained. No creature would thrive in this ophidian fug.

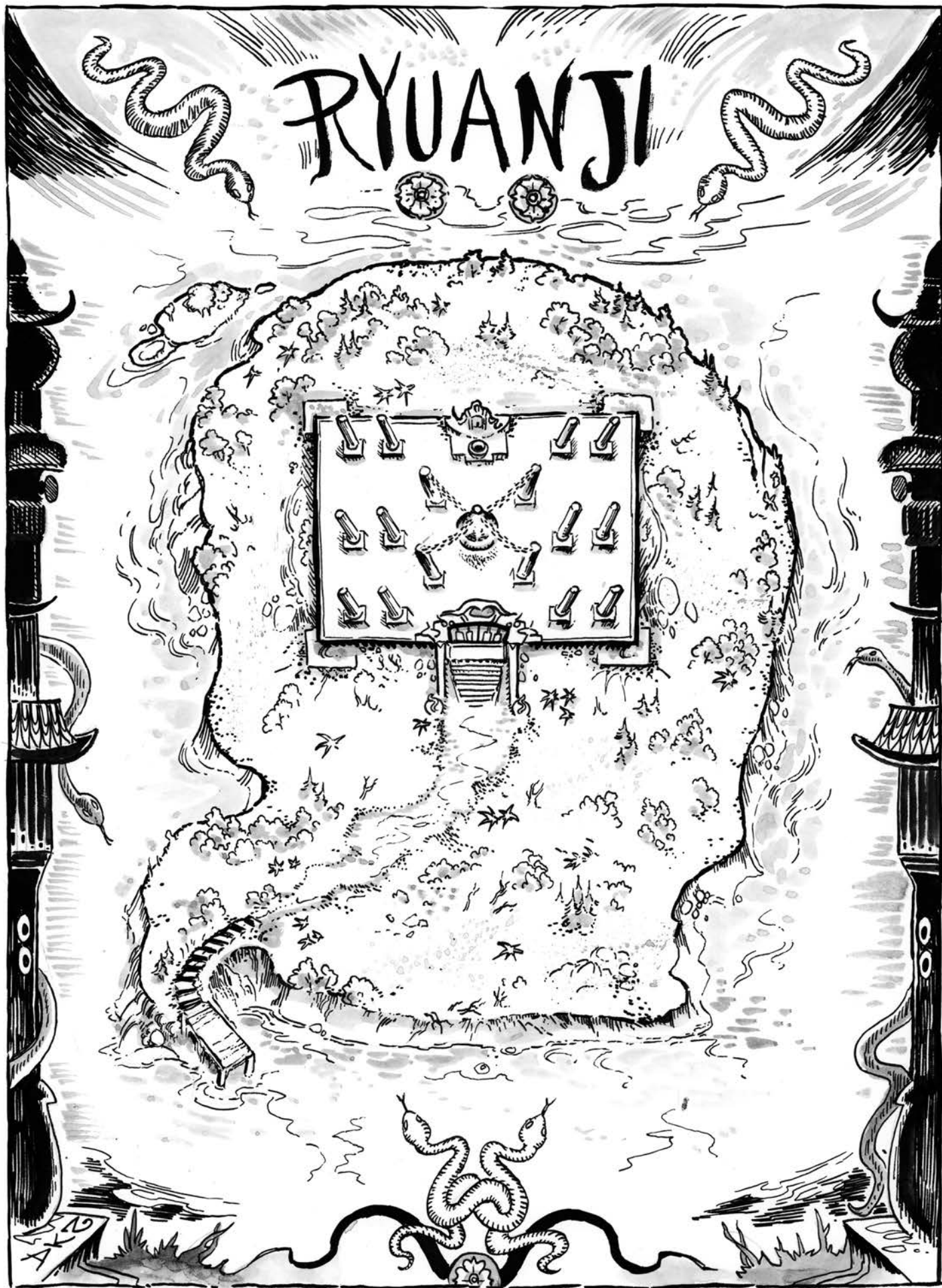
Oba kept his hand on Koumakiri and started down the trail. His flesh was revolted by the overwhelming snake smell, but his determination drove him onward. He'd come here to confront the demon and he'd not leave until his purpose had been accomplished.

Into the oppressive silence there now came a disturbance. For either side of the path, in the weeds and grass, came faint rustling. The sound was suggestive of serpents crawling through the undergrowth. Oba paused in his step and stared into the vegetation, trying to spot whatever was making the noise. All he could determine was that it came from multiple sources on both sides of the trail. The horrible thought came to him that Osoroshii might not be alone, but like the jorogumo Tsubasa-no-Kumonosu have an entire brood of half-demon monsters lurking nearby. With each step he took, he expected to see a fanged head dart out of the grass and set its venom rushing through his veins.

No viper appeared, however, and at last Oba saw an end to the serpent-haunted trail. Ahead was an area of cleared ground with a temple at its centre. The first glance told him it was a very old building, its stone walls deeply pitted by the attentions of wind and rain. The tiles of its roof were of more recent manufacture, coated in shiny black lacquer and their projecting edges painted a vibrant crimson. Statues of snakes coiled around pedestals lined the brick pathway leading up to the broad stairway at the fore of the structure. Oba recognized the symbols of the Snake God, an entity neither benevolent or malevolent towards humans, but simply coldly indifferent to the Yamajin. Places such as this had been built in an effort to placate the reptilian deity and move it to restrain the activities of the animals over which it held dominion. The samurai felt a strange relief to see such a place, for it meant the serpents he'd heard might be of natural rather than demonic provenance.

At the base of the stairs, Oba paused to remove his boots. Again, there came the image of a viper sinking its fangs in his flesh, but the samurai deemed it still more dangerous to offend the Snake God in its own temple. That the roof had been maintained convinced him the place wasn't so abandoned as he'd imagined and it was possible the god's presence yet lingered in the shrine. A samurai knew it was folly to depend on the gods for deliverance, but it was also folly to show them disrespect.

RYUANJI



The shadows hung heavy within the temple. The only light streamed down through gaps beneath the overhanging eaves. When Oba's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw that he was in a large room supported by wide pillars. Between the pillars, suspended by thick chains, was a massive iron bell. There were symbols along its sides, but not in any characters with which he was familiar. Many of the priesthoods of Mu-Thulan had a secret writing all their own, much like the Emperor's court in Yamakyo, with which to protect their sacred texts and prayers. He couldn't be certain, but the doleful notes he'd heard while rowing to Ryuanji could have come from this very bell.

At the back of the chamber stood a statue of the Snake God, a tall man wearing armour, the face hidden behind a snarling helm, one hand gripping a sword of sinuous and ancient pattern, the other with a cobra coiled around it. Though of human form, there was always a disturbing inhumanity in the proportions of the god's statues, an insinuation that what reposed within the armour was no warm-blooded Yamajin. Oba always found the effect disturbingly fascinating. It was an effort to remove his gaze from the statue and look down at the altar set before it. There, lying in a jade bowl, was a large fish so freshly drawn from the lake that water was dripping from its tail.

"Who's there?" Oba called out, fingers tightening about Koumakiri.

"Only who you expected to find." The hissing voice rippled through the temple, echoing from floor and ceiling. Nothing human could produce such tones, at once sizzling like the crackle of flame and as cold as a midnight storm. There was hostile mockery in the words, like an audible sneer.

"Then I am speaking to Osoroshii," Oba stated. He drew the uchigatana from its scabbard, keeping it close at his side. A tactic favoured by kiyohime was to throw their coils around a man and crush him to jelly. The bare sword would make a snake-demon think twice about using that trick.

"So that is the feared Demon-Killer of Sekigahara." The demon's words slithered through the darkness. The echoing effect made it impossible for Oba to decide where Osoroshii was hiding. His eyes scanned the shadows, trying to find the merest hint of her presence, his ears keen for the betraying rustle of scales crawling across stone.

"This blade has sent many of your kind back beyond the Kimon Gate," Oba said. "But I don't need to tell you that. If you recognize Koumakiri then you also know the demons it has vanquished." The last words caught in his throat as his eyes fastened on something just visible near the outer wall. A vague impression of light grey stretched across the dark floor.

"I know many demons," Osoroshii's voice echoed through the temple. A hiss of laughter rang out. "But that is something you know, is it not Sekigahara-san? It is why you'd speak with me rather than use that fearsome sword. What is it you would ask me, samurai, and what are you willing to offer me for it?"

Oba circled around the pillars, trying not to let the demon's mocking words distract him. He kept sight of the grey patch on the floor from the corner of his eye, never looking directly at it lest Osoroshii notice. The greyness had a long, sinuous contour and a scaly texture. He was certain it was part of the kiyohime's tail.

"I offer you your life," Oba said. "I will let you leave Ryuanji to find for yourself some hole far from the domains of the Yam-

ajin. You will be spared Koumakiri's sting and banishment back beyond the Kimon Gate."

"No, I do not think that offer holds much appeal for me, samurai," Osoroshii replied. "You must offer me much more than that."

"Do I?" Oba snarled the words as he circled one of the pillars. In a sudden reversal he shifted direction and leaped towards the grey tail. He brought Koumakiri swinging around, pressing it against the scaly flesh. He could see now that the demon's mass stretched far off into the shadows, bigger than he'd imagined. The serpent's coils were wide enough to easily encompass a man. The moment the uchigatana touched the reptilian mass, the whole enormity shuddered. Oba gazed in disbelief as it flattened and curled up against the ground.

Hissing laughter echoed once more. "A shedding, brave fool. I wanted to look my best for your visit."

A roof tile shattered on the floor near Oba's foot. He spun around, lifting his head to stare at the ceiling. A beam of light shone down through a new hole in the roof, revealing the grotesque creature coiled between the pillars. A huge serpent, her scales a glossy green so dark they could almost pass for black. The belly was a bright yellow speckled with red. Near the head the demon possessed a pair of thin arms with clawed hands. The head itself was a pale white and almost human in its semblance. A great mass of black hair spilled away from the demon's scalp, flowing across her back and hanging down about her grinning visage.

"Up here, Sekigahara-san," Osoroshii teased. "Well away from that cruel sword of yours."

Oba glared back at the demon. "Don't think you can hide from me up there."

Osoroshii's smile widened, stretching farther than any human grin. Her forked tongue licked her pursed lips. "Of course not," she said. Her clawed hand tugged another tile from the roof and sent it crashing to the floor, causing Oba to dodge the resulting debris. "I can just make a bigger opening and slither out. Then I'd have the whole island to hide in. Or the lake. You'd have quite a time finding me again." She shook her head in mock sympathy. "And after all the trouble you had getting here."

"If you were going to hide from me, you'd have done so," Oba retorted.

The kiyohime lowered her head and peered at him with her black eyes. "If your only thought was to thrust that sword into me, you wouldn't be talking. Tell me, Sekigahara-san, what is it that makes you seek Osoroshii?" The long, serpentine body writhed between the pillars. "You're right, of course. I had no intention of hiding. I saw you when you were still crossing the lake and recognized you for the one who carries the Demon-Killer."

The samurai slowly paced about the temple, keeping the pillars between himself and the demon. If the serpent were to suddenly strike, he wanted an obstacle between himself and Osoroshii's fangs. "Each of us wants something of the other," Oba said. "What is it you think to gain from me?"

Osoroshii reared back, her thin arms crossing before her ophidian trunk. "Your reputation precedes you. For a mortal you're quite formidable. I would spare myself the threat of your blade." Her pale face stretched into a inhumanly wide smile. "And I would direct your attentions to where they'd be, should we say, mutually beneficial."

"You'd set me against other demons," Oba sneered, revolted by the kiyohime's treachery and lack of honour. "Use me to strike against rivals that you fear to face on your own."

The serpent lashed her tail, shaking its tip against the ceiling. "Are mortals so noble that they refuse to fight among themselves?" She hissed with laughter. "You revile demons yet you are surprised that we have our own enmities and conflicts? I thought you a cunning man, but for you to be so naive, now I must wonder if your victories were merely due to luck."

Oba brandished Koumakiri, letting the dim light shine across the blade. "I am sworn to fight my battles, not yours."

"Perhaps we share enemies," Osoroshii mused, her forked tongue flickering over her chin.

There was insinuation in the kiyohime's voice that stabbed at the samurai's pride. Oba felt loathing boil inside him. Her suggestion seemed obvious. She was merely toying with him. She knew what it was he'd come to her to learn and was now mocking him with the promise of that knowledge.

"I seek the demon who has enslaved the spirit of Lord Katakura," Oba growled. "It is my sworn duty to free my lord's soul. If you know the fiend I seek, tell me its name."

Osoroshii slithered lower down the pillars, her face bobbing only a few feet from Oba. There was no fear in the demon's expression, only a look of smug triumph. The samurai was shamed that he'd let her hear the eagerness in his voice. "What will you offer me in exchange, Sekigahara-san?"

"Your existence in the world of mortals," Oba snarled, threatening the kiyohime with his sword. "Tell me what I want to know and I'll let you leave Ryuanji unharmed."

The serpent didn't flinch as Oba waved Koumakiri before her face. Her black eyes glittered with oily amusement. "You must offer me more than that. Much more than that. I favour Ryuanji and have found it a pleasant home." She flexed her fingers, displaying the sharp claws that tipped each one. "This place offers me many diversions that I would be hard-pressed to find elsewhere."

Oba stepped forwards, away from the pillars. Fury boiled inside him. He knew too well what manner of 'diversions' the kiyohime enjoyed here. "I'll not let you continue to murder the people of Shishendo."

Despite his efforts at control, there was an edge of fear in his tone. Something the serpent was swift to seize upon. "Won't you?" she hissed. "Won't you leave a rabble of farmers and fishermen to me in exchange for what I know?" Her coils drew her bulk back towards the ceiling so that she loomed above Oba. She thrust a final barb at him as though driving a spear into his breast. "Do you value your lord so little that his spirit is worth less to you than the lives of low-caste strangers? Is this the measure of the oath you swore? Is this the vaunted loyalty of the Sekigahara samurai?"

The pit of Oba's stomach was cold with sickness as the demon's words crawled down inside his soul. He was a samurai and duty was more important than life. Ready to sacrifice his own many times over, the honour that bound him to his clan recognized no limits. Loyalty demanded he stop at nothing to fulfil his obligation to Sekigahara Katakura, to finish the task set to him by his dying lord. Whatever foul compact he must make with Osoroshii, if it freed his lord's spirit then he had no choice but to accept it.

"The demon that has taken my lord's soul, you know its name?" Oba waved his sword at the serpent. "Upon the wrath of the Daitengu, swear you know the demon I seek."

Osoroshii wavered when she heard Oba invoke the terrible Daitengu, lord of the demons of wind and mountain. It was a creature even she hesitated to invoke. "It is no light thing you ask of me, samurai. To call upon that power is to draw its attention. I prefer to remain unnoticed on my island."

"A binding oath, snake, or there can be no agreement between us," Oba told her.

The kiyohime writhed between the pillars, wringing her clawed hands together as she considered his demand. Several times she stopped, her forked tongue flicking in the air. "An answer, demon," Oba snarled. "Swear to me you know the name."

Osoroshii curled beside the bell, her fingers brushing across the engravings. "This is the Bell of Eijido," she said. "Long did the monks labour over it, weaving into it potent sutras that would bring destruction to any kiyohime that heard it toll twelve times." She drew back from the bell. "Wouldn't you be content for me to swear by this dreadful thing?"

"I heard a bell ring while I crossed the lake," Oba scoffed. "For all I know it was this very bell. It doesn't look as though it brought you destruction."

The serpent coiled herself above the bell. "No, it doesn't." Her voice dripped with bitterness. "It was deadly to my kind. Once. Many of my sisters were cast back into Kimon by this horrible instrument." She swatted its side with her tail, causing a doleful note to echo through the building. "Its fangs have been pulled as you can see. Quite harmless now... at least for me." Her eyes gleamed malevolently at Oba. "So you heard the bell tolling while you paddled across my lake?" Her tongue flickered out again, tasting all the smells in the air. A satisfied grin slithered over her features. "Others heard it too..."

Banding words with the kiyohime, Oba realized too late the unnatural fascination Osoroshii had cast upon him. His every sense was keyed to the demon, watching her every motion, listening to every rasp of her scales across the pillars. So fixated was he, that only when they rushed upon him was he aware that a body of men had entered the temple.

Oba lashed out with Koumakiri, spinning around in a deadly arc that severed a man's arm at the elbow. He briefly noted the armour worn by a second antagonist before he was parrying his foe's katana and opening his throat with the edge of his sword. As the rival samurai staggered back, three others surged forwards.

"Alive! He must be taken alive!" The command came from a warrior who stood in the doorway. The silk of his garments and the extravagance of his armour marked him as no mere retainer, but someone of rank in a samurai clan. Oba noted the grisly suggestion of serpentine scales in the etched steel and the reptilian mask that fronted the leader's helm. Everything about him suggested the aspect of a snake.

"You'll find that no easy task," Oba promised as he struck down another foe. As the enemy fell, he noted the mon displayed on the banner affixed to his back. He knew that heraldry. It belonged to the Urakami clan. His eyes narrowed with disgust. "Fight me yourself, if you dare, Urakami Hikokuni!"

The insulted lord drew his katana and started forwards. "I'll teach you to jeer at me, ronin dog!"

Some of the other samurai spread out to clear a path for Hikokuni. Before the daimyo could get close, however, Oba was struck from behind. It felt as though he'd been smashed by a charging warhorse, so mighty was the impact. He crashed to the floor, but as he did, he saw Osoroshii slithering back to the pillars to regain her perch. While his back had been turned, the kiyohime had dove down upon him with the force of a thunderbolt.

Samurai dove upon Oba before he could try to rise. Koumakiri was ripped from his fingers. He was turned over so that Hikokuni could glare down at him as the daimyo raised his katana for the killing blow.

"I want him alive!" Osoroshii snapped, weaving about so that her hand closed upon Hikokuni's sword and plucked it from his grip.

Hikokuni tore away the mask of his helm and glared at the demon. The lord's features were broad, with a blunt nose and almost non-existent chin. His eyes were long and narrow, with black pupils that were slitted like those of a cat. Or a snake.

"He won't live, mother!" Hikokuni snapped, drawing the smaller wakizashi from its scabbard.

"Alive," Osoroshii said, drawing down and setting her hands on the lord's shoulders. She drew him back to her scaly bulk in a maternal embrace. "The ritual won't work if he's dead." Her forked tongue flickered out, weaving over Hikokuni's lips. "You know he must live." She fixed her cold eyes on Oba.

"At least for a little longer," the demon hissed.

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OBA was tied in heavy ropes and set before the Snake God's altar. An old priest in robes woven from snakeskin busied himself burning dried herbs in a stone urn and hissing an arcane litany to the reptilian god. Eight of the Urakami samurai were arrayed about the temple, their attention shifting between the priest and the serpentine demon who now sat coiled on the floor near the Bell of Eijido. Their uneasiness was clear, but Oba didn't delude himself that whatever dislike they harboured for this profane ritual that it was enough to make them defy their daimyo.

Urakami Hikokuni stood over Oba, sneering down at the captive. He held Koumakiri in his hand, waving it under the samurai's nose. "Shintaro Oba, last of the Sekigahara clan," he spat. He tapped his finger against the uchigatana's blade. "The feared Demon-Killer. Well, it has killed its last demon." Hikokuni laughed and looked over at Osoroshii. "My father found a much better way to protect our domain from demons, didn't he mother? If you slay a demon, what do you accomplish, Oba? You banish it back to Kimon where it will strive to return to the mortal world. You leave a land ripe for another demon, perhaps a worse one, to make its lair. My father found a way to ensure neither of these things would happen."

Hikokuni smiled and let his forked tongue flicker between his teeth. His reptilian eyes glared down at Oba. "By joining our clan to Osoroshii he joined the blood of Yamajin and kiyohime." He clenched his fist in a triumphant gesture. "I am the living testament of our alliance. More than either man or demon!"

"You're a monster pretending at nobility," Oba snarled. "Osoroshii merely uses you. Has your alliance stopped her from prey-

ing on your people? She still murders them, drowning them in the lake and crushing them in her coils."

"Peasants are born to serve samurai," Hikokuni snapped. "Don't pretend the Sekigahara didn't understand this truth. Their lives and deaths belong to the Urakami, to be spent in such manner as their lord decrees."

Osoroshii slithered over to join her son, though Oba noticed her eyes linger on Koumakiri and the serpent was careful to circle around Hikokuni so she wasn't close to the blade. "To maintain the strength of a demon, lives must be sacrificed," she said. "When I am strong, so too is the clan." She caressed her son's cheek with her cold hand. "I would do nothing that would endanger my child."

"A demon cares for nothing except itself," Oba warned. "There is no devotion to either parent or child..."

Hikokuni kicked the bound samurai, smacking him against the pillar. Colour rushed into the daimyo's face, but after a moment he regained his composure. "You're wrong. My mother loves me better than any mortal mother could. The demon-blood that flows in my veins protects me from weapons of mundane iron and steel." He nodded at the Bell of Eijido. "Only a weapon crafted to harm demons can hurt me, and even these my mother has taught me to overcome."

"Years ago, the monks brought the Bell of Eijido to Ryuanji to destroy Osoroshii," Hikokuni recalled, a crafty smile on his face. "My father lent his aid to them, helped them across the lake, and then when they were in the temple our samurai caught them just as you were caught." He turned towards the Snake God's altar where the old priest continued to hiss his sutras. "Then, as now, the priest worked his magic. A ritual to render their bell harmless to harm my mother." He slashed Koumakiri through the air in a bold flourish. "Just as your famed sword will now be made harmless."

Oba writhed his body against the pillar until he was sitting upright. "You can't do that!" he shouted. "Kill me, but don't destroy Koumakiri! You would be taking away one of the few weapons in Mu-Thulan that can slay a demon!"

The kiyohime crawled to Oba and set her clawed fingers on his head. "Fool! Koumakiri will become another trophy to be kept in my lair, helpless to bring me harm. But don't fear, you will die. The final part of the ritual is to strike down with his own weapon the one who bore it." She gazed up at the Bell of Eijido. "To nullify the bell's magic, a great fire was lit beneath it and the monks tied to its sides." She laughed as she recalled the scene. "It was heated until its sides glowed red and the grease from the burning monks dripped to the floor."

Hikokuni swung the uchigatana, arresting the blow an inch from Oba's neck. "The gods deserve your gratitude. Your end will be much quicker." The daimyo quickly turned away, unable to look upon the fury he saw blazing in the prisoner's eyes. "Bring me the bowl!" he shouted to his retainers. A samurai hurried to him, a golden vessel held in his hands. Hikokuni thrust Koumakiri under his sash and drew the short wakizashi he carried. In one swift motion, he slashed his palm with the blade. Clenching his fist, he let his blood drip down into the bowl.

"More precious than the blood of mortals or the ichor of demons," Osoroshii hissed, drawing close to Oba. "Hikokuni's blood bears in it the essence of two worlds, a magic that can

weaken any enchantment." She raked one of her claws across Oba's forehead and licked the gore from her finger. "When your sword is turned upon you, its enchantment will be utterly dispelled. I can use it to trim my hair or pry a discoloured scale from my tail without any fear of its power." She paused and grinned at him. Unlike her son, she exulted in the samurai's helpless rage.

"Tell me, Sekigahara-san, which vexes you more?" she teased. "That you've failed or that you let yourself be caught so easily? Did the promise of finding the demon you seek make you blind to all other considerations? Tell me, hero, what would you have given me to redeem your lord's spirit?" Osoroshii looked away suddenly, staring at the altar. "Ah, but there is no time for answers. Now the priest will anoint the Demon-Killer with Hikokuni's blood and then it will be time for your sword to drink the life of its former master."

The demon's words tore into Oba as keenly as any sword. He sank back, stunned by the bitter truth she spoke. Blind devotion, desperate urgency, these had made him incautious. Ambition had driven him to reckless choices and now it wasn't only his own life that would be lost, but the power of Koumakiri as well. The dishonour cast upon him wouldn't end with his own death, but would be compounded through the centuries by the evils of every demon that might have been vanquished had the Demon-Killer been there to fill a hero's hand.

Hikokuni walked towards the altar as the priest turned around. The daimyo handed the bowl to the old man, then drew Koumakiri and held it before him. Still hissing sutras to the Snake God, the priest dipped the preserved tail of a cobra into the bowl. Using the tail like a brush, he began to paint the blade with the half-demon's blood.

Bedlam suddenly erupted within the temple. Oba stirred from his self-recrimination to see Teijiro and a mob of fishermen storm into the building. Each peasant bore a sharpened sickle or a barbed fishing spear, a club or hammer, whatever tool they possessed that might become a weapon in desperate hands. Just as he'd been too fascinated by Osoroshii's mesmerizing voice to notice the approach of the Urakami samurai, so were Hikokuni and his retainers too distracted by the sinister ritual. In the first moments of their initial surprise, the fishermen cut down two warriors and sent a third reeling away with a slashed face.

"Fools! You dare raise arms against your lord!" Hikokuni swung away from the altar. Waving Koumakiri, he led his surviving samurai against the mob. Numbers were with the peasants, but the samurai had the advantage of proper swords and the skill of born warriors. A fisherman's spear might be turned aside by the armour of a samurai while the katanas easily ripped through the simple clothes the peasants wore.

Carnage raged through the temple. The priest cowered beside the altar, his voice raised in howls that might be prayers for protection or pleas for forgiveness. Osoroshii threw her coils about the pillars and drew herself up above the fray. With fiendish malice, she lurked in the shadows, darting down only when she could rake a face with her claws or sink her venomous fangs in a neck.

Oba struggled to free himself from his bonds, frantic to join the fray. Even unarmed, he wanted to render such aid as he could. It would be a better death than what Osoroshii had planned for him. Indeed, if he died by any means but falling to Koumakiri,

the ritual might fail and the sword's power be preserved. A fit of fatalism came upon him. It was his duty to die and thereby protect the uchigatana's enchantment.

A burly fisherman struck one of the samurai with such force that the warrior's neck was broken despite the protection of his helm. The samurai crashed to the floor near Oba, the naked blade of the katana clenched in his dead fingers beckoning to the prisoner. Rolling to his side, Oba threw himself upon the corpse. He ignored the pain as the blade cut his forearm, concentrating only on using it to saw away the ropes that held him.

Hikokuni and his warriors wrought a butcher's toll upon the peasants. A dozen of the villagers lay dead in the temple at a cost of only four samurai. The daimyo plied his stolen sword with vicious fury, mercilessly cutting down any who came against him. His half-human visage was lit with an unholy light, his ophidian eyes staring with unblinking malice. "Die like the traitors you are!" he shouted. "Die and know that the families of all who betrayed their lord will not escape my justice! Root and branch, they'll be brought here to satiate Osoroshii's hunger!"

Straining his muscles, Oba snapped the final threads that held him. He leapt to his feet and caught up the katana that had freed him. The suicidal fatalism of before dissipated when he heard Hikokuni's threats. "Justice! A demon's spawn knows nothing of justice!" he yelled. Oba charged across the temple at the daimyo, determined to thwart him in his purpose.

Osoroshii darted down at Oba. He slashed at her with the katana, but the cut he delivered with the mundane sword simply closed behind the blade, leaving not so much as a scratch in her scaly hide. The reprisal caused the demon to recoil, however, drawing herself back up between the pillars. A sly smile was on her face.

Oba spun around just in time to meet Hikokuni's attack. Koumakiri crashed against the katana he was holding. The heavier blade and the lord's demonic strength drove him back, forcing him to retreat towards the middle of the temple. Fear hammered through Oba's heart. Osoroshii had withdrawn because she was confident her son would kill him, and when he died the uchigatana's power would die with him.

Desperation drove Oba back to the attack. He twisted around and slipped past Hikokuni's guard. The katana raked across the daimyo's armour, scratching the metal but delivering no hurt to the man within. The lord growled and drove the bone hilt into Oba's face, splitting his lip and bloodying his nose.

As Hikokuni drew back, however, Oba noted the way he readjusted his grip on Koumakiri. The hand he'd cut to provide blood for the ritual was still bleeding and was making the uchigatana slippery to hold. An edge, and one that Oba was swift to seize upon. Shouting a fierce war cry, he threw himself at his foe in a frenzy of strikes. None were intended to reach the man, only to crash against Koumakiri and strain the half-demon's hold. So speedy were the attacks that Hikokuni had no time to readjust his hold. Finally came the moment Oba had depended upon, when the sword slipped free.

Oba drove the katana into Hikokuni's throat the instant Koumakiri wasn't there to block his thrust. For anything human, it was a mortal stroke, but the half-demon merely staggered back and clutched at the transfixing blade. Slowly he drew the weapon free, grunting with pain as he wrenched the sword from his flesh.

Oba ignored the daimyo and scrambled across the temple to recover Koumakiri. Osoroshii struck down at him from between the pillars, but failed to catch him in her coils. "He mustn't get to his sword!" she shrieked, but the remaining Urakami samurai were fighting for their lives against the fishermen and the priest was still grovelling before the Snake God. Panicked, the kiyohime surged past Oba and tried to snatch up the sword herself.

Even the most determined man couldn't have matched Osoroshii's speed, but at the last the demon's courage faltered. As she reached to snatch up the sword, fear caused her to flinch away. Oba lunged over the kiyohime's coils and snatched Koumakiri from the floor. Osoroshii wailed in horror and whipped her serpentine length back up among the pillars, rapidly pulling herself beyond Oba's reach. She poised above the bell, shouting commands to Hikokuni and the remaining warriors.

Hikokuni alone responded to the demon's cries. Rushing at Oba with his own sword now, the two warriors rapidly exchanged a series of strikes. Sparks flashed as steel crashed against steel. The half-demon was among the most formidable swordsmen Oba had ever duelled, but the injury that had compromised his skill before continued to do so. Just as with Koumakiri, the blood from his cut made the katana slippery. A particularly telling blow almost knocked it from his grasp. Hikokuni lurched forwards to retain his grip and as he did so he exposed his body to the uchigatana.

Koumakiri crashed down through the daimyo's leg, nearly severing it at the knee. Hikokuni collapsed, his helm rolling away as he struck the floor. He struggled to rise, but as he did, Oba brought his sword slashing down at the half-demon's unprotected neck.

"Hikokuni!" Osoroshii screamed. Oba thought there was more of despair than mourning in the cry. He was certain there was no loss of love when the kiyohime threw her coils across the bell and darted for the ceiling, intent on escape. To her, the half-demon had simply been a tool, a way to neutralize weapons that could destroy her.

A horrible thing happened when the kiyohime's scales touched the Bell of Eijido. What had been an inert instrument now flared into ghastly brilliance. The sides blazed red-hot and the demon's flesh sizzled. A ghostly tolling sounded from the bell, shivering through the temple. Osoroshii shrieked and threw herself to the floor, her body smoking where she'd touched the bell.

With Hikokuni's death, so too had died the magic that nullified the Bell of Eijido. Again it was a weapon against the kiyohime, empowered now by the wrathful spirits of the monks.

Osoroshii tried to rush for the exit, but her charred body wasn't so speedy as before. Even then, she could have battered her way past the fishermen who blocked the doorway. It was Oba who stopped her. Koumakiri clenched in his hands, he stood in the demon's path.

"Let me go, Oba," the serpent pleaded, all mockery vanished from her voice. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

The last of the Urakami samurai cried out as Teijiro gutted him with a spear. The warrior's death made Oba consider all the evils wrought by the kiyohime. She'd preyed not only upon the lives of the peasants, but also the honour of a samurai clan, plunging them into foulness and disgrace. He thought how nearly he'd been drawn into the demon's intrigues.

"There is nothing you could say that I could trust," Oba declared. he used the threat of Koumakiri to herd her back towards the bell. He could feel the heat boiling away from it. Molten drops were pelting to the floor and smouldering against the wood.

Osoroshii looked back at the melting bell and her eyes were wide with horror. "I'll swear upon the Daitengu! Any oath you like! Only let me free!"

Oba continued to back her towards the bell. He deafened himself to the temptation that drew upon him, that urged him to do anything no matter how unsavoury to redeem Lord Katakura's soul. A grim smile worked itself onto his face.

"Finding out the name of the demon is only part of my quest," Oba said. "I must also be pure enough to defeat it and free my lord's spirit. If I entered an agreement with you, I'd be no purer than the demons I fight."

The samurai slashed at Osoroshii with his blade. Recoiling from Koumakiri, the kiyohime put herself beneath the tolling bell. Sounding a final, victorious note, the Bell of Eijido disintegrated into a shower of molten metal, completely engulfing the demon under it. Osoroshii screamed and undulated in agony as she was consumed by the fiery lead. In her tormented thrashings, she spattered blobs of molten metal about the temple. Soon there were dozens of small fires blazing within the building.

"We must hurry from here before we all burn!" Teijiro cried out, grabbing Oba's arm and urging him to the door. The other fishermen had already fled, but Oba could see the serpent priest still praying before the Snake God's altar. He was still there when a burning beam crashed down on him from the ceiling and reduced him to bloodied pulp.

Oba followed Teijiro away from the temple. From the pathway, he watched as the building was devoured by the hungry flames. Embers spread into the surrounding forest. Smoke rose from the tangled underbrush as it ignited.

"When we saw Lord Hikokuni's samurai rowing to Ryuanji, we knew we had to help you," Teijiro told Oba. "You were the only one who could free us from the demon."

The samurai shook his head. "The people of Shishendo freed themselves," he said, thinking of how nearly he'd been tempted by Osoroshii's offer. "The gods merely saw fit to let me help."

"Come along." Oba turned Teijiro away from the burning temple. "We'd all of us better get to your boats," he called out to the other villagers. "The fire's going to devour everything on the island."

Oba took one last look back at the crumbling temple as he followed the fishermen away. "In the morning, all that will be left of Ryuanji are bad memories."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

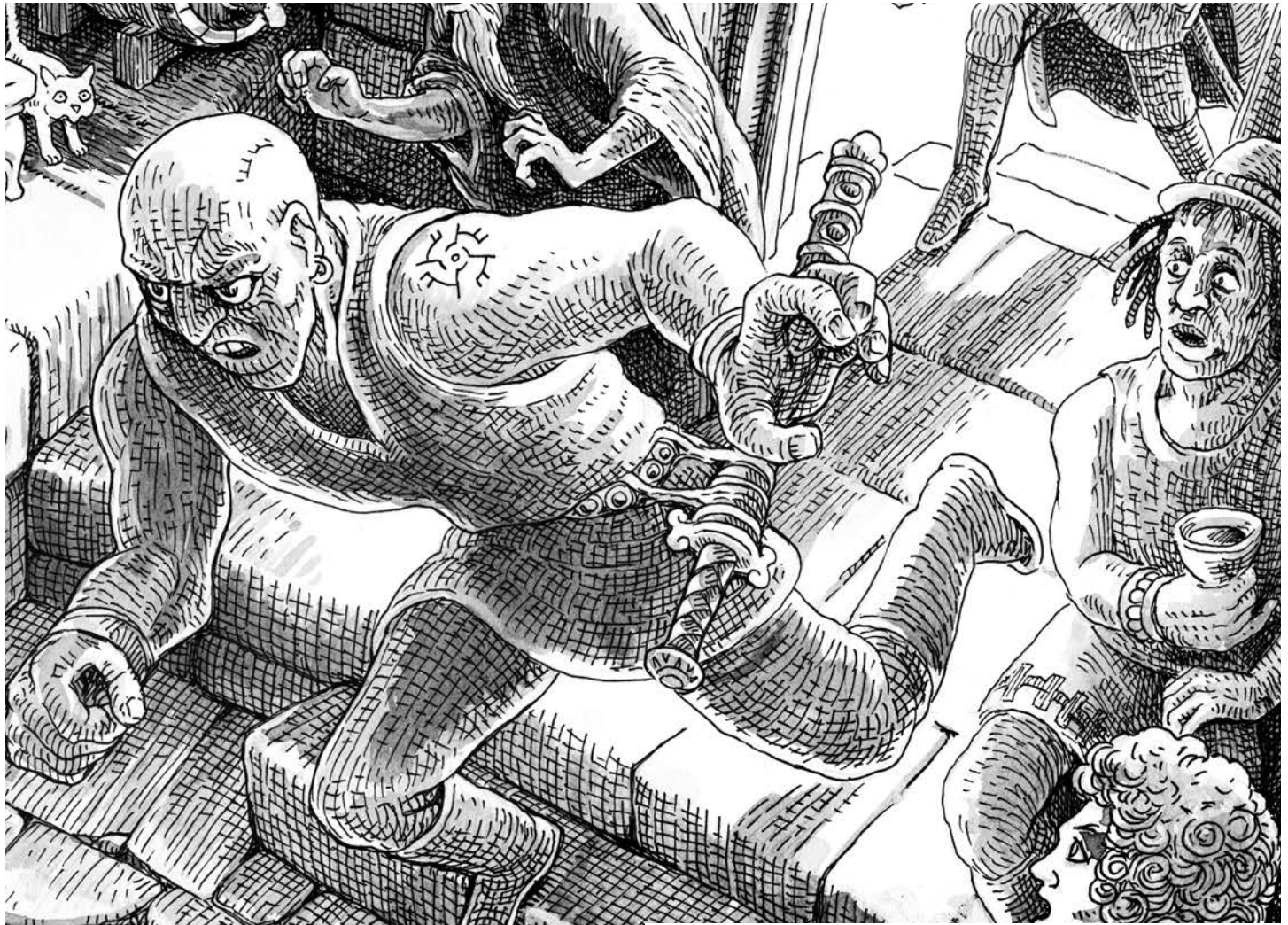
Exiled to the blazing wastes of Arizona for communing with ghastly Lovecraftian abominations, C L Werner strives to infect others with the grotesque images that infest his mind. He is the author of almost thirty novels and novellas in settings ranging from Warhammer, Age of Sigmar, and Warhammer 40,000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

THE GIFT OF A P





VISION NECKLACE



A Tale of the King's Blade

By **JOHN C. HOCKING**

Illustration by **STEFAN POAG**

BENHUS went up the marble stairs, rubbing his eyes in the pre-dawn gloom. There was a small fountain burbling peacefully between him and the mansion's doors and the sight of it, a great luxury in these times of near drought, made him slow his pace and gather his thoughts.



He'd been awakened at what he deemed an ungodly early hour, this opinion reinforced by how late he'd finally found his bed. He'd taken the message relayed by the royal courier at his door, then dressed hastily and been driven in a fine coach to the home of Lady Bethelanne Thale, his overseer and connection to the king.

Benhus, only recently a plain soldier of the Legion, trailed a hand in the fountain, fought a yawn of eye-watering intensity, and tried to take the measure of things. Lady Thale usually appeared at his home, often at extraordinarily awkward moments, carrying instructions for him to perform some task for the king. These ranged from simple errands to challenges that threatened life and limb, so he was never certain what might be asked of him.

This was the first time he had been summoned to her home. The mansion, set on open grounds scattered with well-tended shrubs, was enclosed by a fieldstone wall with a gate that had proved both untended and unlocked.

A breeze, blessedly cool in advance of the day's certain heat, further tousled his sandy and unbarbered hair. He slapped at his tangled mane and lamented his appearance. He belatedly noted he was wearing the same loose grey shirt and set of leather breeches that he'd worn for the past several days, as well as his oldest pair of sandals, scuffed and dirty veterans of his time in the legion. Haste and drowsiness had combined to ensure he would be even less presentable than usual on the occasion of his first visit to the home of his steward.

At least he'd strapped on his short sword and lucky white dagger. He touched at the small pouch fixed to his sword belt and cursed softly. It was empty of coin, holding only a nobleman's comfort. The little wand was a simple illuminator, helpfully throwing sunlight should he find himself in darkness. Benhus had a vague memory of showing off with the thing for a pair of serving wenches at some point during the previous evening. Not long ago an apprentice wizard had examined it and told him the wand held 12 charges. He wondered how many he'd wasted and felt foolish. He considered that the courier had departed with the coach and that he was without money for a ride home and felt worse.

No lights shone in the manse before him. Had some mistake been made? Was he going to awaken Lady Thale and do so looking and feeling like he'd just been thrown out of a tavern? He shrugged and spat. Nothing to do but see what awaited him.

The doors opened easily on an unlit antechamber, high-ceilinged and with a doorway standing open across the polished floor. A tall man stood against the wall to his left, almost invisible in the shadows. Benhus lowered into a crouch and touched hand to hilt before recognizing him.

"It's Mace, Master Benhus," came a low voice. "Milady awaits you within."

Benhus had met Lady Thale's manservant and bodyguard only once, at a crowded social function he had attended only because he was expected to and had yearned to escape the brief time he was there. But there was no mistaking Mace, a supposedly pureblood Southron almost as tall as Benhus, clad in dun riding clothes with his black hair tied back in a long queue. He wore a broad belt over his left shoulder and across his breast. Benhus could see the gleam of the dark discs affixed to it and recognized them as rarely seen Southron weapons of black obsidian.

Mace's grin was palely visible in the dimness. Benhus nodded curtly and didn't smile back.

The next room was round, furnished by a large table surrounded by chairs. The ceiling was lofty, and a square skylight framed a spray of stars just beginning to fade with the coming of day.

He squinted and, across the room, a dim opening was revealed to be the base of a flight of stairs. A figure there beckoned to him.

"Greetings, Benhus. Come this way." He recognized Bethelanne Thale's voice, a smooth contralto that carried an easy assumption of obedience.

He followed her up the stairs, down a short hallway and caught up with her in a large bedchamber with a broad bank of heavily curtained windows. As he watched she tugged the curtains aside and, when the early dawn provided little illumination, produced a small lantern and held it aloft.

Lady Thale, clad in elegant if somewhat rumpled purple-bordered robes, gestured at the floor beside the wide, luxuriously appointed bed.

A man lay there on his left side and Benhus knelt beside him. Short, but with the hard, square build of a fighter, the man wore a black, close-fitting shirt and breeches. His dark hair was grey at the temples. He might have been asleep save for the razor-edged disc of volcanic glass imbedded in the back of his skull.

"Mace's work?" asked Benhus.

"Of course," said Lady Thale

"Yes."

The second answer brought his first cognizance that the Lady's manservant had accompanied him into the room.

"He and one other entered my home a few hours ago," she said. "They awakened me and this one asked questions at sword-point. They were very quiet and quite skilled in their invasion of my home, but Mace intervened."

"The other escaped, to my shame," rumbled Mace.

Benhus saw that the dead man's waist was encircled by a sash with the ends tied off and tucked in at the sides. He considered that such a sash was often worn by soldiers, weapons-men and those who wished to resemble them.

"Can we get his shirt off?"

The request sounded somewhat foolish to Benhus the instant it escaped his lips, but he was gratified when Mace immediately knelt beside him, seized a handful of fabric in each fist and, with little apparent effort, tore the body's shirt up the back. Sun bronzed skin and an old sword scar across the ribs seemed to affirm the man's status as a veteran fighter. Benhus pulled the remains of the shirt from the right shoulder to reveal a crude tattoo. Faded ink depicted a short sword cleaving a buckler almost in half.

Benhus stood.

"What have you learned?" asked Lady Thale drily.

"The tattoo is sign of one of the training halls used by soldiers, duelists and most anyone trying to better their fighting skills. There are many such and most have devoted trainers and followers who mark themselves with this kind of symbol."

"Hmm. The fact that the man had such a tattoo doesn't connect his place of training to his invasion of my home."

"No, but this kind of work might be hired out in such a place."

"Do you recognize the symbol?"

"Yes," said Benhus, "though that's no great feat. I did some training there."

He looked to Lady Bethelanne Thale, whose profile was now lit by the slow-rising sun. An old woman to his eyes, but not overmuch weighted by her years. Her long grey hair was tied back, and she held her thin body rigidly straight.

"What did they want with you?" asked Benhus.

"They were inquiring as to the whereabouts of a piece of jewelry I owned some time ago. More than 15 years gone I incurred the wrath of a prominent noblewoman, not unjustly I'm sad to say. She made me the gift of a poison necklace."

"Poison necklace?" Benhus said before he could stop himself. It seemed odd to imagine envenomed jewelry.

"Yes." Lady Thale smiled ruefully. "I did not realize I had provoked such hatred. When you put it on, and it is so very beautiful, such a slim and delicate strand of glittering pinpoints, that few could put it aside without placing it about their neck. Once you put it on it begins to kill you. Slowly, with creeping malaise and illnesses that multiply and cluster for months until you are little better than a living corpse."

Benhus frowned impatiently, opened his mouth to speak.

"Ah, but if you take it off," she went on, as if anticipating his words, "it kills you immediately and with a great deal of pain. The agony of simply lifting it from your skin might make you lose consciousness. It is a rare enough weapon that only a few instances of its use are known even back unto the time of Janarax, but in most accounts on record the victim tore off the necklace simply to end their torment."

"So, you had the good sense not to put it on," said Benhus, trying to push the story along.

"Not so," said Lady Thale. "I put it on as soon as I took it out of its handsome box."

Benhus could think of no response to that.

"I knew immediately I had made a potentially fatal mistake, but I also knew an extraordinary healer. Julara Shalidandros, a prodigy of the medical arts who was then but little older than you, Benhus. I called upon her, promised extravagant payment and my best recommendation to the royal court, may the gods forgive me. She studied on it and, in a ceremony that took two nights, removed the poison necklace from my throat."

"So these sneak thieves came to you seeking the necklace?"

"Yes, they were convinced that I still had it. More to the point, they sought knowledge of how I managed to survive it."

"Did you keep the necklace? Why do they not call upon this healer, Julara Shalidandros?"

"I haven't seen the necklace since before Julara removed it. And nobody has seen her since she was taken into the King's court on my recommendation. I — I told them that much."

Lady Thale fell silent for a moment before continuing in a voice tainted by bitterness. "I don't know the full story, but the King took an interest in Julara and she spurned him. Those who saw her last said her face had been scarred. She disappeared shortly thereafter. As you are doubtless aware, our King Numar is unaccustomed to having his will thwarted. After the great service she did for me I delivered her to disfigurement and death."

The sun was peering over the horizon and ruddy golden light streamed in the window. Benhus saw the rouge on Lady Thale's cheeks, how it stood out against the pallor of her face. She

seemed fragile, perhaps ill, and it occurred to Benhus that he had never seen her looking otherwise.

"I intended to send you to the King with a request for assistance," she spoke again, her voice now calm and businesslike, "but I believe I'll send Mace instead. Do you think you might learn anything if you visited this training hall?"

"The Cleft Buckler," said Benhus. "I'm known there and should be able to speak to some old acquaintances. It's a place to start."

"Excellent," said Lady Thale.

"Tread carefully," said Mace. "These men were skilled. The second one did not escape me by chance."

Benhus nodded and started for the door, then drew to a halt and turned back to face Lady Thale. He steeled himself — this was awkward but necessary.

"Milady, I — I find myself short of funds."

The noblewoman smiled and raised her eyebrows, which had the odd effect of making Benhus's face grow hot and his tongue grow thick.

"It's true," he added hastily. "I have never been paid since I entered the King's service. I have good credit at the taverns and baths and inherited the funds Thratos left in his home but lately I'm down to a few silvers and I cannot..."

While he stammered these words Lady Thale walked to a low end-table, pulled open a drawer, withdrew something heavy and, with an unladylike grunt of effort, tossed it toward him. A dark cylinder a little longer than an open hand struck his breast solidly before dropping into his hands. It was a stack of coins sealed in a sleeve of fine cloth.

"I've been meaning to give that to you for some time," she said.

After muttering his thanks Benhus made his way out of the house, pausing beside the fountain to examine his bounty. He had to tear the stitching loose at one end of the sealed cylinder, then gasped when he saw it held nothing but gold crowns. He'd never had even one of the thick coins before. Each might pay the full wages of a soldier for several months. His happily fulfilled greed made him exult only a moment before he felt a sudden and unfamiliar vulnerability; one did not walk around the city carrying this kind of money. And even if this many crowns could possibly be crammed into his belt pouch it would have been so heavy and hung so low as to look ridiculous. Tying up the open end of the sleeve, Benhus thrust the coins into the waist of his breeches and tightened his belt over them. It was uncomfortable but the only way he had to conceal the unexpected windfall. He muttered a curse. It seemed that even good fortune could be a burden.

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BENHUS found himself a table beside the raised platform he recalled once served as a setting for boxing matches and, long after hours, unsanctioned duels. It was a little hard to believe it had served those purposes now. The tavern was down the street from The Cleft Buckler and a year or two back, when Benhus was a regular patron, had been at best a canteen for those training in arms and, at worst, a dangerous dive where violence was common and expected. Today it looked quite different.

They'd opened the roof over much of the place, covered it with a thin sheet that shut out the hard rays of the sun but let in light and fresh air. Bouncers, brawny fellows who likely spent a good deal of their off time at The Cleft Buckler, were stationed about trying to look unobtrusive. And there were citizens of all descriptions sitting at tables and at the bar, eating, drinking, and generally making the whole place seem more wholesome and inviting than Benhus had ever seen it. He shook his head. Things kept changing and it was hard for a man to find anything dependable these days.

He'd asked for two jacks of ale, and sipped at his while staring at the second, wondering if he was going to have to drink it himself.

A tall man came in the open doors out of the afternoon sun. He moved among a larger group but was clearly not one of their number. He looked about the room until his eyes fell upon Benhus then, with a wide white grin, moved to join him.

"Benhus!" The man was not only tall but broad with thick shoulders and long muscular arms and legs. His features were extraordinarily regular, with dark eyes under an even shelf of brow and a jaw so square that his chin resembled a small box.

"Archun," said Benhus. He considered that the man appeared unchanged since the last time he'd seen him or even since they had first met. "Thanks for agreeing to meet me."

"Ah, it is nothing," said Archun, taking a seat and glancing furtively at a grim-featured bouncer wearing a faded yellow tunic who was leaning on the bar. "It was good to see you in The Cleft Buckler again. And I still owe you for beating me so soundly."

"Twice," said Benhus, trying not to grin.

"Yes, twice," said Archun, lifting both hands. "I truly thought I had your style sussed out the second time. How in nine hells did you get to be so quick? Are you still that fast?"

"Faster," said Benhus, and meant it. Archun, exceptionally strong and as handsome as an actor in a stage play, had been a crowd favorite but was too slow to attain his aspirations of becoming a famous boxer or duelist. "You said you're working for The Cleft Buckler now?"

Archun nodded, casting another quick glance at the yellow clad bouncer.

"Which would mean that you're working for Maxar? He still owns the Buckler, right?"

"Yes," said Archun, "after a time I realized that I couldn't make a living as a fighter. And Maxar Numenicus is still a power to be reckoned with on this side of Frekore." He hoisted his ale with a bit of a flourish and drank deeply, as if in toast to his employer.

"So, you make a living doing his bidding these days. Do you know if Maxar has taken an interest in the noblewoman Bethelanne Thale?"

Archun frowned ponderously. "Hey now, Benhus. Even if I knew much about his affairs it would hardly be proper for me to carry tales about my boss."

Benhus brought the nobleman's comfort from his pouch and set it on the table. The unprepossessing little illuminator looked like a simple length of wrought iron, but his manner lent it weight and importance. Archun's eyes widened.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Is that...is that one of those wands the rich sometimes carry about for protection?"

"Yes. This one's a blood-molt. I trigger it and you bleed from every pore and die in moments."

"Benhus, what the hell are you..."

"I need you to tell me if you've heard anything about Maxar making moves against Lady Bethelanne Thale."

At that moment a woman clutching a cithara and a stool pushed past Archun's elbow and stepped up onto the platform. Benhus thought her eyes passed over him as she turned. She set her stool down against the wall, sat upon it, and began to pluck at the cithara. The fighting platform was now a stage.

Benhus looked back to Archun and saw the big man's face had taken on a wounded expression. He lifted his hands again, mutely expressive of the injustice being done to him.

"Aw come now, Benhus. That is not how you get things done. It is no way to treat an informant. A bribe works better and then we can stay on good terms and maybe I don't avoid you in the future when you need another word."

Benhus was struck by both Archun's unexpectedly reasonable attitude and an uncomfortable understanding of his own inexperience. He thrust the little wand back into his pouch and dug behind his belt to extract one of the gold coins from its sleeve. He tossed it to Archun who caught it with both hands.

"A crown?" bleated the big man. "Twin gods of mercy, are you a noble now?"

Belatedly Benhus realized that he was dramatically overpaying and, moreover, that asking for change would be ridiculous, so he attempted to appear indifferent and at ease.

"No," he replied, "just well paid." He noticed that Archun was shooting quick glances at the bouncer by the bar again and burst out, "Why do you keep peering over at that fellow?"

"Ah, I'm somewhat behind on my tab and that dog has called me out on it more than once. And now that I have some coin, I'd rather pay other, more pressing, debts than the one I have here."

"But you're working for Maxar now, doesn't the biggest crime-lord on this side of the city pay his employees?"

"Hush," said Archun earnestly, "you've paid me well and I'll speak freely but don't call out his name so loudly."

It seemed to Benhus that Archun was being overcautious as the troubadour on the low stage was now singing a ballad of the heroes of Janarax while accompanying herself on the cithara. She bent over the instrument so that her dark hair hung over her face, but her voice rang clear and impassioned enough that he was sure their conversation was inaudible to anyone nearby. He told Archun as much.

"Look," said the big man finally, "Maxar hasn't been seen for weeks. Nobody gets to speak with him except his counselor, Calthax Redrobe. You know him, right? They say Maxar's really sick, that he can barely get around anymore and is hiding away. He's left Calthax in charge and that stingy bastard isn't paying anybody anything, so I'm broke."

"Not anymore," said Benhus. "Now tell me if Maxar or any of his lieutenants are said to be acting against Bethelanne Thale."

Archun frowned again, a deep cleft appearing between his eyebrows. "Honest Benhus, I've never even heard her name un-

til now. The only women I've heard that Maxar's interested in are an annoyingly honest tax collector among the vintners and some crazy doctor who deals her own joy potions in the student ghetto."

"Doctor?" said Benhus, losing focus while trying to see how any of this might be useful.

"Yeah," said Archun with a grin, "she won't work with Maxar's people or pay him tribute, and the last fellow sent to bring her into the fold turned up dead. I guess she's always been low profile, but she's disappeared since. Calthax thinks he's found a couple low dives where she does business. Nobody seems to know why Maxar is so keen to lay hands on her. I hear she's a scar-faced freak who guzzles her own product."

"Scar-faced," muttered Benhus, remembering.

"Well, we're not talking about your Lady Thale or anyone of noble blood, that's for sure, but if you have any interest in this healer before Calthax Redrobe and his foreign scabs get hold of her you better act fast."

Benhus raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "Your boss is hiring outsiders?"

"It's true!" burst out Archun. "Calthax only works with a handful of locals, all longtime veterans that look down on anyone who hasn't been in the fold for years. And now he's called in a mercenary group from Anparar! It's shameful, really."

"His own soldiers aren't enough?" asked Benhus, trying to add a measure of indignation to his tone, pleased with the way he was now drawing information from his companion.

"It seems not. I heard Calthax Redrobe commands the pack, but they're all the lowest sort of rogues. I was here when Calthax met with them in the back room." Archun gestured toward the rear of the tavern.

"Did you see any of this lot?"

"Oh, I saw them. One huge ox, bigger than you and me together. Couple others, one of them barefoot. I saw them all right. Smelled them, too! I was returning to the table when I bumped into their dog-wizard. Skinny, dried up looking fellow. And not only did he stink like a handful of earth worms left out in the sun, when he bounced off me I could see under his dirty purple hood and he had no nose!"

"What?"

"Just a scar with two holes in it. I wondered if someone's nostrils were so offended by his reek that they took it out in kind, but Calthax's armorer told me the dog-wizard traded his nose for a metal finger that can seek out riches and jewels."

Benhus rolled his eyes. "And this noseless, worm-scented baboon looked to be a rich man? All bedecked with gems?"

Archun looked a little crestfallen. "Well no, but that's what I heard."

"So where is this healer and seller of joy potions supposed to do business?"

Archun brightened somewhat, pleased to have more verifiable information. "Either at The Gambler's Luck or The Scalded Cat. Both of these are the worst sort of dives, but you should be able to find them if you..."

Benhus cut him off, "I know those dens well enough."

"Wish I knew which of them she'd be found in," added Archun wistfully. "Especially if it could win me another crown."

Benhus knew she wasn't going to be in The Gambler's Luck, as he'd slipped out of it the previous night just as a gaming disagreement had erupted into such a bloody brawl that the city guard had to close the place.

"But I was serious about trying to find her quickly," continued Archun. "Calthax Redrobe and his collection of foreign riff-raff are supposed to be hunting her today."

Benhus felt the stirring of urgency just as a big hand fell on the back of his neck and squeezed.

"Well, if it isn't Archun the Penniless," said a grating voice. The yellow clad bouncer had approached their table unseen and now stood directly behind Benhus.

"Yes" the voice continued, "it's old Archun with a new friend."

The hand came off of Benhus's neck and fell upon the haft of a thick bludgeon thrust through the bouncer's belt.

"Now Gantos," said Archun, "there's no need to..."

"You shut your lying hole, Archun. I've warned you too many times already. Your tab has gone unpaid too long and you still think that if you slip in with your little prince here you can..."

A fierce surge of rage all but blanking his thoughts, Benhus planted his feet and stood so suddenly that his chair was thrust from beneath him and clattered against the stage. He rose close enough to Gantos that they could have embraced, but Benhus swung his right elbow up hard under the man's jaw, where it connected with the sound of a hand axe chopping hardwood. The bouncer's head snapped back as if he'd abruptly decided to examine the ceiling. Benhus swiveled his upper body at the waist, driving his left fist into the man's midriff with all the strength of his shoulders. Gantos folded up upon himself and dropped to the floorboards like a discarded bar towel.

"You would lay hands on me?" Benhus asked the man on the floor. His gaze went to Archun, who was staring at him wide-eyed and open mouthed. It came to Benhus that the performer on the little stage had stopped playing and that the room was now very quiet. It seemed that every eye in the house was fixed upon him, and he noticed the bouncers were now making their way toward him with singular purpose.

"I am Benhus, the King's Blade!" he shouted, amazed with himself but strangely elated by the resonance of his voice, the righteous certainty coursing through him, and the way the bouncers seemed to slow in their tracks.

"I am here with this man on important business and I am paying for our drinks." With this Benhus produced a crown from his belt and held it aloft, letting its gold catch the light. On impulse he slammed the coin down on the tabletop where it made a satisfying clack.

"I pay my way and did not come here to be disturbed or laid hands on."

Leaving the crown on the table, Benhus strode toward the door. He sensed rather than saw Archun stand and follow him. The room remained still and the bouncer at the door stepped from his path.

Benhus walked out into the street in the heat of the afternoon sun and kept moving. After several paces he allowed himself a small grin.

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SHE was sitting in a booth, little more than a niche barely wide enough to hold the narrow table and flimsy benches on either side, wedged against the wall in the back corner of the dim tavern. The entire booth was overshadowed by a deep and heavy shelf heaped with a jumble of empty casks and jugs, thick with dust and low enough that Benhus rapped his head on the shelf's rim as he slid onto the bench across from the woman.

She slouched easily against the tavern's rear wall; face lit by the single candle flickering on the tabletop. Built into the wall, beside her, was a small set of shelves with a tattered curtain fitted to cover them, pushed aside now to reveal that the three little shelves were empty but for a single bottle about the size of his fist.

"Do I know you?" she asked. Her voice was low and sleepy. In the vague light of the candle Benhus could see she was long-limbed, less slender than gaunt, clad in dark but faded garments against which her face and hands were almost luminously pallid. She repeated the question.

"No," said Benhus, "but I have important questions to ask you."

"Oh." She leaned over the candle to study him. "A young warrior. Such are always full of important questions and concerns. Did you come seeking this?" She swept the bottle off the shelf beside her, set it on the table and removed its cork in one smooth and practiced motion.

"No," said Benhus. "This is important and might involve danger to your life."

"Are you certain you didn't come for the joy potion?" Her gaze met his. "I make them myself, you know. It is what I am known for. Come now. I'll charge you fairly. Just take in the scent of it."

Her hair was brown, dry, and combed directly back from her face. Her eyes were dark and gave her face a languorous intensity. There was a pale scar splitting her right eyebrow that trailed down her cheek before twisting back and stopping short just before it reached her ear. Seeing this, Benhus felt certain he had found the one he'd sought. He wondered if King Numar Flavius had put that mark on her face.

He held her gaze, leaned forward a bit and sniffed skeptically at the open neck of the bottle. A pleasant heat passed into his nostrils and immediately billowed out to fill his skull. The tavern's outlines softened, and an unaccountably familiar sense of comfort touched at his consciousness. He blinked and thought, for a fleeting instant, that there was a face before him, that violet eyes met his and a mouth opened to speak to him alone.

Benhus pushed away from the bottle with enough force to almost unseat himself. The woman laughed warmly.

"Not for you?"

"No, no, I come looking for information and to warn you..." He shook his head to rid it of what seemed an elusive yet insidious memory.

"Well. Nothing for it then." She snatched up the bottle, drained it at a draught and set it back down on the table with a thump.

"Gods and demons," said Benhus.

"Twins gods of mercy," she smiled and closed her eyes as if to heed and savor a distant melody.

"You are Julara Shalidandros?"

"Hm? I suppose. Nobody calls me that anymore. Not for years."

He could almost see the joy potion sweeping through her system and wanted to get answers swiftly. A mere whiff had shaken him, and he could only imagine what swilling the entire bottle might do.

"Look, you once tended to the Lady Bethelanne Thale, right?"

"Hm." She blinked and smiled at him as if he had said something amusing.

"Gods damn it, this is important. Dangerous people are interested in what you did for her and are looking for you."

"If you're not going buy my wares and insist getting that kind of information, you'll have to pay for it."

"Fine," said Benhus harshly, fumbling at his belt. "Fine then. Perhaps this will do?" He held out a crown, turning it in his fingers so that she could see its thickness and the glint of gold.

Her dark eyes widened, and she reached for it, saying, "Is that real? Haven't seen a gold crown in some time."

Benhus dropped the coin into her open palm, irritated with himself for a twinge of worry that she might simply snatch it and run. The heavy coin sat in her cupped hand for a moment as she seemed to weigh it.

"This is true coin of the realm," she said with a smile. "I accept it."

"Not unless you provide me with the information I seek," snapped Benhus.

The coin sank into Julara's palm as if the flesh there had become a thick liquid, vanishing from view. She gave a low laugh.

"Damn it!" Benhus seized her wrist roughly and, pressing a thumb to her palm, thought he could feel the edges of the coin somehow embedded in her hand.

"Easy, easy! I'll give good value in exchange. No need to strongarm a poor healer."

"More like a poor sorcerer."

"Not truly. A poor healer and a worse sorcerer. I know but a few paltry tricks I learned back in my promising youth."

There came the rattle of a chair being shoved against the wall and the soft twang of a cithara. Benhus looked up to see the minstrel he and Archun had heard earlier in the day. She positioned herself on the tall chair, struck the strings of her instrument and began to sing. She nodded her dark head at Benhus, who turned to face Julara earnestly.

"Listen, years ago you saved Lady Thale from a poison necklace, right? Last night Maxar Numenicus sent men to get the necklace from her and ask her how she survived it. They were not gentle about this. And they know to find you here."

"Maxar wanted her necklace?" Julara Shalidandros smiled lazily. "They didn't find it, did they?"

"No, and the Gods know why they want it, but Maxar is sending a team of very dangerous people to find you, perhaps hoping you know where it is."

"Oh no," murmured Julara. "That's not it at all. You're really rather thick, aren't you?"

"What?" Benhus felt a rising frustration almost strangling his words. "I'm Benhus, the King's Blade! I'm trying to warn you. I know you and Maxar are enemies and now he's sending Calthax

Redrobe with a collection of rogues from Anparar to seek you out..." Flushed with exasperation, he wrenched the nobleman's comfort from his pouch and slapped it onto the table. "Perhaps this will help you be serious. Do you know what it is? It's a blood-molt."

"That's a little wand that makes the weak feel powerful. Why, O King's Blade, do you suppose Maxar, that self-important lout, is so interested in myself, in Lady Thale and in her poison necklace? Tell me, has Maxar removed himself from the public eye? Perhaps he's said to have fallen ill?"

Benhus went silent, swallowed, then said, "Maxar has been given a poison necklace."

She grinned widely, "Or something similar. King Numar gave you a nobleman's comfort that throws blood-molt when what you truly need is the ability to grasp the obvious."

The doors of the tavern burst open and there was a violent commotion there, an outcry followed by protests. Benhus twisted around on the bench to peer across the room. A huge figure was thrusting people roughly aside, making plenty of space for the more stately entrance of a tall man with a scarred face wearing an elegant scarlet cloak over a black tunic.

Calthax Redrobe, thought Benhus. He snatched the nobleman's comfort off the table.

"That's her!" roared the massive man clearing space at the doorway. He pointed at their booth with an outthrust arm that appeared considerably thicker than Benhus's leg, then lowered his head like the bull he resembled and charged.

Benhus leapt to his feet, ducking from beneath the overhanging shelf and noticing distantly that Julara remained seated. She appeared to be adjusting the curtain over the set of shelves built into the back wall.

"Use your blood-molt on him, O King's Blade," she said, barely audible over full-throated roar of the oncoming man-mountain.

Benhus grimaced, thrust the illuminator into his pouch, seized a chair and flung it, as hard as he could, low and across the floor. The chair hit the hurtling giant just below the knees and slammed his legs from beneath him. The man's unstoppable lunging impetus drove him forward and his broad face met the floorboards with resounding impact. His body slid across the floor so that Benhus had to leap over him, tangling his legs with his would-be attacker's and staggering. He lost his balance, reeled, and fell across the lap of the seated troubadour, who lifted her cithara so that he wouldn't crack his head against it.

As he pushed himself up out of her lap his eyes met hers.

"I'm going to write a song about you," she said.

Somewhat stunned, Benhus nodded absently, as if the idea seemed agreeable but might require more consideration. The shock of the big man's fall was fading, and he saw figures moving from the doors. He looked back at Julara, who was putting considerable effort into pulling one of the shelves out. Benhus was about to ask her exactly what she hoped to accomplish when it came free in her hands and a narrow section of wall beside it sprang open on darkness.

"King's Blade! Come!" she called out.

"Halt!" yelled an imperious voice. Benhus ignored it, ducking under the heavy shelf and pushing into the narrow booth. He

tried to thrust the woman out ahead of him, but she twisted to let him pass into an airy, open space. He glanced back and saw two nearly identical figures, a man and woman in dark leathers, approaching quickly and drawing long, slim daggers. Behind them hurried a hunched figure in a purple hood.

Julara, leaning on the frame of the hidden doorway she'd opened, lifted a long leg in a lithe kick that drove her boot against one of the supports holding up the shelf overhanging the booth. The support popped from beneath the shelf, which collapsed with a crash. Benhus had time to see the faces of the two attackers warp into expressions of surprise and dismay as the dusty pile of kegs, crates and jugs tumbled toward them in an avalanche before the shelf fell almost flush with the inner wall, cutting off his sight and held back by only the broken remains of Julara's bench.

Benhus realized he was standing in the open air of dusk, amongst growing shadows in an alley behind the building. He shook his head in pleased amazement.

"Gods and demons!"

"The innkeeper owes me for curing his daughter of the black pox," said Julara distractedly. "Still, he thought I was foolish to ask for a quick loophole as payment." She frowned at Benhus. "Well, I won't be using it again. Not really worth the crown you gave me, to be honest."

Benhus wanted to point out that if he hadn't shown up, crown or no, she would have been taken unawares by Calthax Redrobe, but there were more pressing concerns.

"Shouldn't we be going? It won't take them long to think of coming around the building."

"Yes," said Julara. "Best to follow me."

She led him through a dim maze of alleys, past barred backdoors, middens of trash, down dusty defiles between buildings that at times grew so narrow he had to turn his body sideways to pass. Benhus thought he heard angered shouts, perhaps of pursuit, but they soon fell behind. Julara moved steadily, clearly deeply familiar with each turn of their circuitous path. Twice he heard her speaking, or perhaps singing, to herself.

They finally passed into a wider alley, paved with worn flagstones, lit by the first pale rays of the rising moon. Against a tall, featureless wall was a long low structure, a windowless shack built leaning upon the larger building behind it. Beside this unprepossessing structure a pony was hitched to a small cart. It snorted softly as they approached.

"Many thanks for the crown and the warning, O King's Blade," said Julara. She leaned heavily against the cart and Benhus suddenly understood how weary she was.

"You have seen me safely home and I have seen you safely away from Maxar's pet thug, Calthax Redrobe. I think we are even, and I must retire." She seemed to be making a conscious effort to speak clearly.

"Julara, you have to come with me to speak with Lady Thale. She believes you're dead," said Benhus. "Maxar's thugs aren't going to stop hunting you and she can offer some protection. Can you still remove a poison necklace? What did you do with Lady Thale's? Julara?"

But the strength and intoxication granted by the joy potion had deserted the healer, left her all but asleep on her feet.

"Just get me in the door," she muttered, swaying. "I can make it to my bed from there." She took a step and her leg buckled. Benhus caught her as she fell and hoisted her limp body into the cart's small bed. He could feel the stark lines of her ribs as he lifted her. She was as light as a child.

Impatience roiled him and he was about to snap at her, perhaps shake her, but Julara's breathing rose and fell, soft and regular, and he knew she'd passed out. Her scarred face, somehow guileless in sleep, seemed to regard him despite her closed eyes.

There was a ragged blanket in the little wagon, and when Benhus pulled it over her body it slid off a padded wooden box full of empty bottles like the one from which she'd swilled the joy potion. He surmised that the low building was both home and workshop for the fallen doctor, and the cart was a tool in her work making and selling joy potion.

Benhus took a step back from the cart, squinting sourly at it in indecision. He exhaled harshly between clenched teeth. The pony snorted again, a not unfriendly sound.

"Right," said Benhus, "Nothing for it then."

• • •

UNFAMILIAR with driving a cart, Benhus led the pony through the darkened streets of the city until he began to feel foolish, then tried riding the animal, which was even more awkward. There was no saddle and the roll of crowns under his belt dug into his belly. By the time he drew up to the gate in the wall surrounding Lady Thale's home it was well past midnight and he had promised himself several times over to train with horses and carts until he was as comfortable with them as he was with his legion sandals.

The gate was open, and he led the pony in, with Julara Shaliandros still slumbering obliviously in the cart. Benhus stopped at the base of the marble stairs, checked on the doctor, who was still breathing deeply and evenly, patted the pony's neck, and then went up the stairs, past the fountain, to the mansion's front door.

The door was ajar. Benhus tensed, carefully drew both his sword and the white dagger, then eased his way into the unlit antechamber.

His gaze flickered to where Mace had stood, surprising him just this morning. No one was there. The room felt hollow, empty, and across the polished floor the doorway opening into the house proper was closed.

There came the muffled sound of a masculine voice, insistent, speaking words he couldn't quite understand. Benhus moved carefully toward the door, which was open only wide enough to admit a slim fingerbreadth of dull firelight. He lowered his head, closing his eyes to focus entirely upon listening.

Something cold was laid across his throat.

A thrill of horrified disbelief shot through Benhus. There was a knife at his throat. How could there have been someone in the antechamber unnoticed?

"Hello," said a soft feminine voice. "Put down the sword and dagger unless you'd like me to grant you a second mouth."

Benhus began to squat, to lower his weapons to the floor, but when the blade tightened against his skin, he simply dropped them.

"Now through the door. There is much to talk about."

Benhus pushed the door open. He looked down, saw his captor's leather-leggings and bare feet. This was the female half of the leather clad pair who had pursued he and Julara at The Scalded Cat. Benhus had never encountered anyone who could move with such stealth.

The next room was softly illuminated by lamps. The table and chairs had been shoved to one side, leaving a wide-open space beneath the nighted skylight. In the center of this area was a single chair and tied securely in the chair was the Lady Bethelanne Thale.

There were others standing around her, but his gaze was drawn to and arrested by something else. Beyond Lady Thale and her captors, Mace lay sprawled facedown at the base of the stairs to the second floor, a dagger jutting from his back.

An involuntary hiss of stifled rage passed between Benhus's teeth. In response he was shoved forward, stumbling, the dagger coming away from his throat. He turned, received a quick kick in the knee that jolted pain down his leg and dropped him heavily to the floor. Twisting, he saw the second kick coming but couldn't shield himself in time. The calloused ball of the woman's right foot cracked into his cheekbone, snapping his head to one side, and filling his mouth with salty blood. His senses whirled and consciousness flickered from light to dark and back again.

Benhus felt movement, people walking around him, a hand tugging at his belt pouch, but it took a timeless moment for him to push himself into a sitting position and actually discern what was happening. He blinked, shook his throbbing head, and spat a mouthful of blood.

To his right was the barefoot woman in leathers, long dagger gleaming coldly in her hand.

To his left stood none other than Calthax Redrobe, a tall formidable man in a fashionable black tunic whose wide shoulders were draped in an elegant scarlet cloak. Calthax, the right hand of Maxar Numenicus, turned his grim face to Benhus and smiled without warmth.

"Benhus, right?" he said. "The so-called King's Blade?"

Benhus nodded, aggravating the throbbing in his skull. He could see that Lady Thale was attended by the man in leathers, companion to the barefoot skulker who had taken him unawares. They looked much alike, wore similar leather garb and he saw, as the man flourished a long slim dagger before Lady Thale's face, they favored the same weapons. They might have been twins but were surely brother and sister.

Lady Thale looked even more pallid than usual, rouge standing out on her cheeks like faded patches of dried blood. Her eyes were wide, wild, and focused on Benhus. He saw that her jaw was trembling as if she suffered a great chill.

There was no sign of the wizard in the purple hood, or the huge fellow Benhus had tripped up in The Scalded Cat. His gaze passed over Mace and narrowed. Was he breathing?

"I believe I saw you at the grave market of Lord Crentius, just before it all went to hell." Calthax was speaking to him and he

needed to pay attention. "Glad you survived to be with us today. Many died, and Lord Crentius has fallen out of favor as a result."

Benhus had not only survived but had been instrumental in causing the sorcerous conflagration that had torn the grave market apart. He grinned weakly at Calthax, who he now saw was holding both his white dagger and the short iron length of his nobleman's comfort, the illuminator. The woman must have passed them to Calthax while he was semi-conscious.

"Seems like a superior dagger," said Calthax, casually hefting it. "What is this wand charged with?"

"It's a blood-molt," said Benhus hoarsely. "Be careful with that thing."

"Indeed," said Calthax, impressed. He held the nobleman's comfort a little more gingerly.

"Where's your noseless dog-wizard?" asked Benhus. "And where's that big idiot who can't keep his feet?" He heard the woman skip toward him, bare feet almost silent on the tiles, before she kicked him just below the ribs. Nauseating pain blared through his torso and Benhus curled up, trying not to vomit.

"Vortho broke his neck," snarled the woman. "He was a better man than you'll ever be."

"Slithus is upstairs," said Calthax, still studying the nobleman's comfort, seemingly unaware or unconcerned with Benhus's pain or the woman's anger. "He's using his skills to search through the Lady Thale's jewelry. The poison necklace is here, and he will find it."

"Leave him alone!" The voice of Bethelanne Thales was shrill and tremulous. "He did only as I ordered him to!"

Benhus looked up to see the man in leathers strike Lady Thale across the face with a brutal openhanded slap. An unanticipated but searing rage flared through Benhus and scarlet bloomed at the edges of his vision. Through a reddening haze he thought he saw Mace stir. Benhus blinked, drew a deep breath and tried to calm himself.

"Your scabs from Anparar can't help you find the healer who removed it, so you're trying to find the necklace itself? What good could it do poor old Maxar now?"

Calthax looked down at Banhus thoughtfully. "You're disturbingly well informed. First of all, know that we will find that healer. We've posted a reward and it is only a matter of time before she is delivered into our hands. As for the necklace, Slithus is convinced if he can study one that has had its spell broken then he can duplicate the effect."

"And save your master?" said Benhus.

"Yes," admitted Calthax. "Although the faster we work the better."

"Good," said Benhus savagely. "I imagine he's coming to pieces by now."

Now he was all but certain Mace had shifted, and that his eyes might have blinked, but Calthax was frowning darkly at him and Benhus needed to keep holding his attention.

"So, Maxar's taken to wearing pretty necklaces now? Who gave it to him? A lover?"

"It was a ring. From a rival," said Calthax, bending to fix Benhus with a frozen stare. "You know so much — do you know

where the necklace is? The lady tells us that she hasn't had it since it was removed but Slithus insists that it's here."

Now Benhus was certain that Mace shifted, lifted his body slightly to reveal a flat black circle lying beneath. Benhus realized it was one of the Southron weapons of obsidian Mace had, only this morning, used to slay an intruder with a distinctive tattoo.

There was movement in the dimness at the top of the stairs. The hunched wizard in the purple hood appeared and shuffled down the steps. Benhus felt a clenching in his breast, fearing Mace would be discovered, but the wizard stepped over the Southron's body and approached Lady Thale where she sat tied to her chair.

The wizard held his right hand up even with his shadowed face and the forefinger shone with a dull gleam. It was made of metal, studded with yellowish gems at each knuckle and held to his hand by a web of leather straps. Benhus suddenly recalled what Archun had said about the dog-wizard having a finger that could sense riches and gems.

"There is nothing," said Slithus in a reedy voice, gesturing with his strange hand. "I've gone over every place it might be hidden and I find no reaction." He paused, staring at his hand, where the gems now seemed to take on a mellow uncertain glow. "But here. Here I find that the necklace must be nearby. Why is that?"

"Yes, bitch!" The leather-clad man menacing Thale roared at her, and she cringed in her bonds. "Why is that?" He shook the chair, jolting her head from side to side. "Where is it? Tell us now!"

Slithus stood before the Lady Thale with his right hand held high, its gems flaring with soft and arcane illumination. Thale's tormentor seized her from behind, pulling her hard against him, leaning over her shoulder and pressing his face in tight beside hers. He held the slim-bladed dagger out before her terrified face.

"See this? Can you see this?" He held the point before her right eye. "Would you like to be blinded? Are you ready?" His voice grew ragged with a savage frustration, "Are you ready for it?"

Scarlet crowded Benhus's vision once again and a shuddering rage rose in him, his blood burning for release in violence.

There came the sharp creak of a door behind Benhus. All heads turned to look as the door was pushed open and Julara Shalidandros tottered into the room.

"Where have you taken me, O King's Blade?" she said, rubbing her eyes.

At the base of the stairs Mace came to his knees, face twisting in agony. His right arm rose swiftly and then fell like a headsman's axe. Something black shot from his hand. The razored disc of obsidian met the dog-wizard's upraised forearm and lopped it off in passing. The leather-bound hand with the bejeweled finger leapt into the air on a fountain of dark blood. Slithus screamed, a high thin keening that hardly sounded human.

Benhus leapt to his feet, digging both hands behind his belt. Calthax took a stumbling step away, dropped the white dagger, then leveled the nobleman's comfort at Benhus and triggered it.

Bright sunshine spilled over Benhus as he wrenched the sleeve of crowns from beneath his belt and hurled it into Calthax's face with all his strength. The heavy roll met the bridge of the man's nose with impact that ruptured the sleeve, sprayed blood, and sent him lurching backward in a halo of flying coins. The illuminator, flung from Calthax's hand, skittered across the floor and went out.

Benhus heard a cry of rage behind him, ducked low to scoop up the white dagger and spun swiftly to extend it in a long thrust. The leather-clad woman, her own dagger uplifted to strike, ran full onto the blade, which punched through leather, skin, and sternum to transfix her heart. She gaped into Benhus's face, her expression not of pain or fear but sheer astonishment. He tore his weapon free and she fell back and away.

Benhus had just enough time to register that Calthax was nowhere in sight when a scream filled the room, a frenzied admixture of horror and outrage. The leather-clad man holding the dagger to Lady Thale's face hurled her chair aside and leapt to engage Benhus.

"You bastard you killed her — *you killed her* ..."

Benhus, every nerve still aflame with battle fury, lunged to meet his foe. The man lashed out with his dagger, but his speed was no match for Benhus, who weaved beneath the blow, dodged past and brought the pommel of the white dagger around hard against the back of the man's skull in passing.

Benhus spun as his enemy collapsed, near senseless. Then Benhus was upon him like a spider, looping an arm around the man's throat, kneeling on his spine, bending him backwards and brandishing the white dagger before his eyes.

"Can you see this?" he cried, hoarse with hatred, "Are you ready for it?"

He jerked the blade toward himself, then ripped it free and cast the body away. Benhus rose in a room suddenly heavy with silence.

Lady Thale, bound to her toppled chair, lay still on her side. Mace, at the base of the stairs, held himself up on an elbow, face grey with pain. Slithus, the dog-wizard, sprawled near Lady Thale, a second obsidian disc imbedded in his chest. Mace had proven his worth as a bodyguard. The leather-clad brother and sister lay lifeless, and Calthax Redrobe had disappeared.

Julara Shalidandros stood in the doorway, a mute witness to carnage, swaying a little and blinking uncertainly, looking as if she had awakened into a living nightmare. Benhus stalked toward her, his eyes still shining with unquenched rage. He seized her shoulder.

"Come here." He led her to where the Lady Bethelanne Thale lay, righted the noblewoman's chair, then cut her bonds with the white dagger.

"Look at her, healer," he demanded. "Does she need your aid?"

The Lady, clearly bruised and battered, rubbed a narrow shoulder, and looked at Benhus with something close to fear.

"I am well enough," she managed. "I don't believe I've suffered any dangerous wound. I'm simply sore and... afraid."

"You needn't be afraid any longer," said Benhus. He turned to Julara, who was gazing wordlessly at Lady Thale. "But perhaps you should be."

"Now Benhus," began Lady Thale, "you have found the only person in Frekore, or perhaps the entire Triad, who could have saved me from the poisoned necklace. I thank you for this, but..."

Benhus had walked to where Slithus, the dog-wizard lay in his blood. He caught up the man's arm, severed a handspan below the wrist. He brought it back to where Lady Thale sat and Julara stood, both womens' eyes wide with disbelieving horror.

"Benhus, for the love of the gods," began Lady Thale.

He thrust the dead hand out so that the metallic finger all but touched Lady Thale's neck. She flinched, and the gems embedded in the knuckles blazed up in eerie brilliance.

"This cursed thing can sense gems. They were trying to use it to find the poison necklace, and now I have done so. You are still wearing it."

"What? What?" Lady Thale's voice quavered with disbelief. Her eyes sought Julara's face, but the doctor looked away.

"Like the coin that sank into your hand," said Benhus.

"My only trick," said the healer thickly. "I could never bring myself to learn any more sorcery."

"But why? And why not tell me?" said Lady Thale.

"I wasn't good enough to remove a poison necklace. Maybe no one ever was. But I found a way to make it a part of your body and hoped it would mesh with you, become a part of you, and that you could live with it."

"So it might still have slain me? And you never said..."

"Yes," Julara's voice was weary, telling a story she had told herself countless times. "I didn't want to admit it. Even if it didn't kill you, even if I could fuse the necklace to your body so that it was no longer fatal, it would likely leave you weakened and sickly for the rest of your days."

"And so it was," said Lady Thale, her voice softer now. "You needn't have lied."

"But you were so grateful, and the rewards were so rich," said Julara bitterly. "In all honesty I'm surprised that you've lived so long. You have great strength."

Lady Thale gave a small sad smile. "I do not feel particularly strong at this moment."

Julara shrugged. "You can see what became of me. I am sorry, Bethelanne. I did us both little good."

"Nonsense. I am alive when I should be long dead. And you are here and still a healer, correct?"

Julara nodded wearily. "I still have some healing skills."

"Good. Then go help Mace, he is gravely wounded." Lady Thale gestured to where her bodyguard lay at the base of the stairs.

Julara Shalidandros went to Mace and knelt at his side.

Benhus laid a hand on Lady Thale's shoulder, then went to collect the strewn and scattered crowns, glittering on the floor like lost stars.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

POWER CORRUPTS ALL WHO THIRST FOR IT



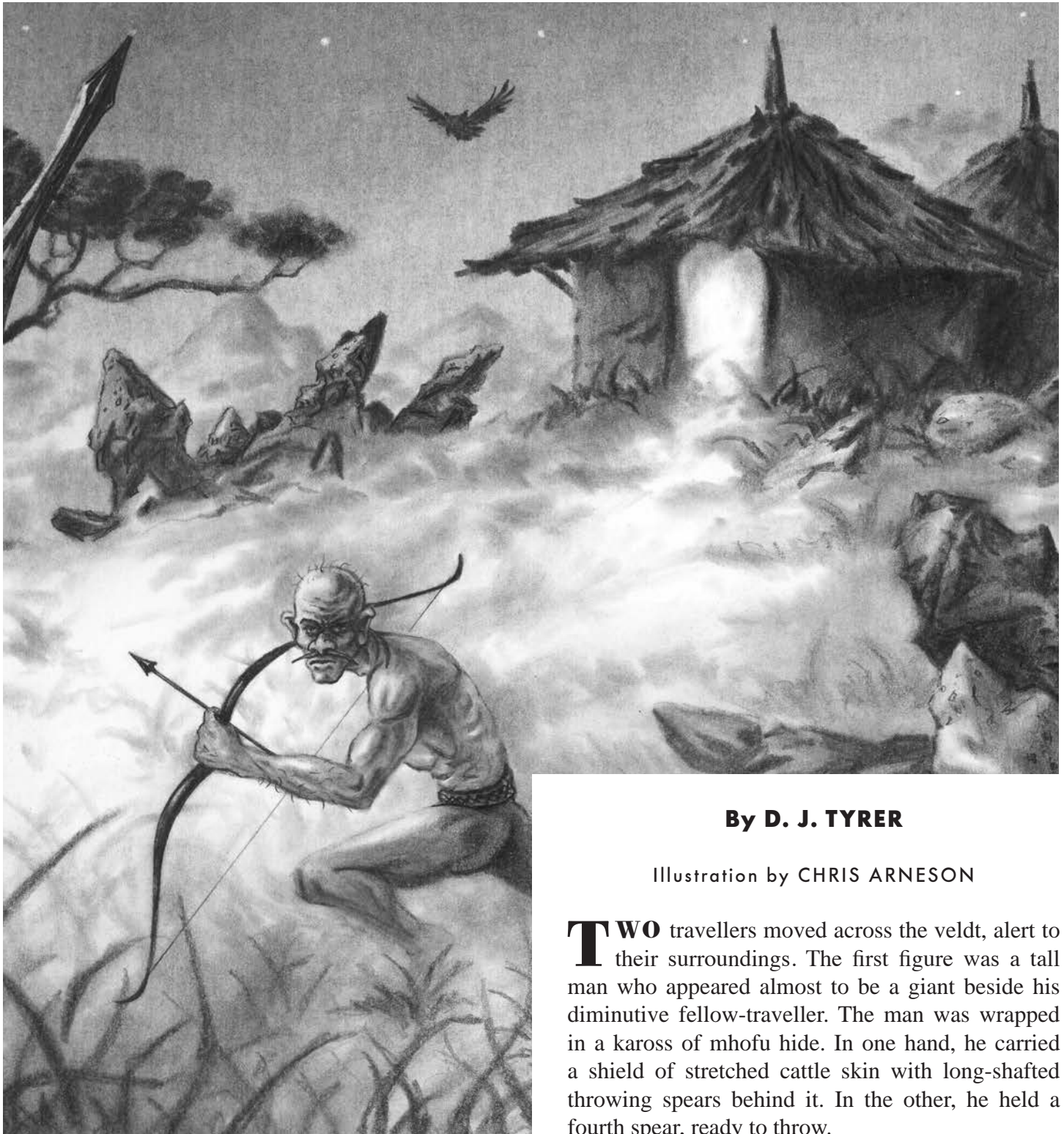
FOURTEEN STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE WHO WILL STOP AT NOTHING TO GAIN POWER OR TOPPLE IT

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DEATH STALK



S THE NIGHT



By D. J. TYRER

Illustration by CHRIS ARNESON

TWO travellers moved across the veldt, alert to their surroundings. The first figure was a tall man who appeared almost to be a giant beside his diminutive fellow-traveller. The man was wrapped in a kaross of mhofu hide. In one hand, he carried a shield of stretched cattle skin with long-shafted throwing spears behind it. In the other, he held a fourth spear, ready to throw.

The other man was short and hunched himself down so that he seemed barely half the height of his companion. He was completely naked, save for the narrow belt tied about his waist and a porcupine quill through his nose, and carried a bow with an arrow ready at the string. His skin was a lighter colour than that of his companion and crinkled and weathered in a way that made him look like an old man, although he moved with the vigour of youth. There was no beard upon his chin and the hair of his head was sparse and wiry.

"I see nothing but gazelle," said the short man, "and, a skulking jackal."

"Nor I," his companion agreed.

"Whatever it was we sensed stalking us last night," the short man continued, "it shuns the light of the sun, like an owl."

"So, not a man, but a beast?"

The little man grinned a bright-white smile. "A coward."

The big man shrugged. "That we will learn tonight. Unless we find a better place to shelter than crouched about a campfire."

There was little Ini-ndoga feared, yet the sensation of being stalked in the night had unnerved him. How he knew, he couldn't say, but he was certain the unseen creature was more than some mere lion or hyena, something he could slay easily with his spear.

No, it was something far, far worse.

The small man paused and jabbed at the horizon with his bow.

"Look — is that a musha or a danga?"

Ini-ndoga thrust his spear into the earth and, then, shielded his eyes with his hand to look where his friend was pointing.

In the distance, he could see the curve of a thorny fence, the edge of an enclosure.

"No smoke, no cattle egrets, no movement." He lowered his hand. "If it is one, it is empty. Still, it's the first sign of people we've seen in some time. Let's take a look."

It was all very well living a life unfettered by others, but, at times, even the most-resourceful man wished for sadza and conversation.

The light was dimming as they neared the enclosure.

"I can see smoke beyond it," the small man said.

"But, could we reach it before nightfall? We don't want to wander in the darkness with that... thing out there. No, we should make camp here and proceed on with the dawn."

"Yes, but what is 'here'?" the little man asked.

"It looks like a burial ground," said Ini-ndoga.

Through the tangle of thorny branches, they could see boulders and piles of smaller stones.

"Each of those is a grave," he said. "They pile the rocks upon them so that scavengers cannot dig them up."

The little man shrugged. "When my people die, we leave them for the scavengers. When the life is gone, what is the body's worth?"

"Unlike you, my kind revere their ancestors."

"Always, you people look to past and future, forgetting the now."

Ini-ndoga started to laugh, then fell silent.

At the entrance to the burial ground, two men lay dead upon the earth in a pool of drying blood. Beetles crawled across the stain and flies buzzed about the bodies, crawling inside their mouths and noses and the ragged gashes torn into their throats.

"Taken by surprise," he said, kneeling beside the bodies. Their spears were scattered on the ground.

"Seized from behind," the little man said, studying them. "They never heard the approach of death. This one began to turn, so... only one attacker, most likely. But, the wounds are ragged. Fangs or claws, I think, not a knife."

Ini-ndoga stood. "What could do this?"

The little man spat. "Whatever has been stalking us, I think."

The big man shivered, but told himself it was just the dying of the light.

"They were guarding this place," he said. "The fence and stones should have been enough, but..."

He paused, then said, "Help me move this."

The thorn-bush barricade that blocked the entrance was askew, but not enough to easily pass through. Although an animal couldn't easily shift it, together they moved it out of the way.

"Look," said the little man, "one of those piles is cast aside."

The heavy rocks had been tossed about like a child might scatter pebbles and the earth below had been torn up to expose the leg of a corpse.

Kneeling beside it, the little man observed, "The big toe is missing. There is flesh discarded there, but the bone is gone."

"Muti of some kind," said Ini-ndoga; "for some wicked purpose." He looked about. "Evil is abroad. Evil that comes in the night."

Night was very nearly upon them.

"Too late to seek safety elsewhere," said the little man. "We must camp here."

Ini-ndoga sighed. "It is an ill-omened place, but you are right, we have no choice. Come, we must put the barricade back, then light a fire."

"Is it worth it?" The little man said as they heaved it back into place. "Whatever attacked them came from within the enclosure."

"Not from a grave, though, it seems."

"But, the thorns couldn't keep it out."

"Maybe not, but those men were unaware, and we shall have a fire. If it can leap with ease over the barrier, that is one thing, but, if it must climb, we may have a chance."

Taking some dry branches from the fence, they got a fire going and sat beside it, sharing some dried meat.

"Is it out there?" Ini-ndoga asked.

"The night is quiet," said his companion. "It is out there, watching. But, it draws no nearer."

He checked his bow and arrow. "It is wary."

Ini-ndoga ran his hand over the sheath of the knife that hung from a thong about his neck.

"It better had be. I will watch for the first half of the night," he glanced about at the thorn fence and hoped it and their small and lonely fire would hold it at bay, "and, you will watch for the second half."

His companion had scraped a shallow furrow in the dry earth, not unlike a grave, in which to settle himself and was soon asleep.

As the flames danced, the night shadows shifted about the burial ground as if they were living things and Ini-ndoga wondered whether the movement concealed a predator.

But, none pounced, and he slept in his turn and woke to the kiss of the rising sun upon his brow.

. . .

THEY covered the distance to the musha of a dozen huts in short order.

Nervous men with spears watched their approach. Although nearly as tall as Ini-ndoga, the men seemed cowed.

"Who are you?" one called.

"My name is Ini-ndoga," he called back.

"I Alone"? A strange name, especially for one who is *not* alone."

"And, yet, it is the one I bear."

The man nodded at his short companion, wrinkling his nose.

"And, the Mandionerepi?"

"I call him Mbeva, for he is so small. The name he calls himself is filled with the sounds of a click beetle."

"What is your business here?" asked the second guard, his tone more aggressive.

"We are but weary travellers seeking somewhere to rest," Ini-ndoga told him.

"Strangers are not welcome here," said the first guard. "Besides," he added with a sigh, "this is not a place you would wish to stay."

"And, why is that?"

"A curse has fallen upon us."

Ini-ndoga looked over his shoulder.

"That burial ground, it is yours?"

"It is where our ancestors are buried."

"The guards are dead," he told them. "Something killed them and defiled a grave."

The second guard began to lower his spear as if he would attack Ini-ndoga, but the first stayed his hand.

"They bear the news, not the guilt."

The guard snorted, but relaxed.

"Something was stalking us in the night," Ini-ndoga said.

"Evil rules the night here, now," the first guard said. "It walks unseen, then chooses a victim and takes their life."

"What does?"

"We don't know."

Mbeva coughed. "I have heard of such things. There are those to the south of here who call it —" He made a series of clicking sounds. "It is the evil that walks the night."

He smacked his lips and grinned.

"That is why the toe bone was taken! The nightwalkers take bones for their muti. Toe bones are the most potent of all, they say."

"The burial was recent," said Ini-ndoga. "Who?"

"Our chief," said the first guard.

Mbeva let out a sharp breath.

"I have heard of this. Now that it has taken the bone, it has power here. Not just silent, but unseen by those who dwell here — unless it wishes itself to be seen."

He sucked on his lip. "It is master here, now."

The first guard groaned. "Then, we can do nothing?"

Ini-ndoga and Mbeva exchanged a glance.

"We don't dwell here," said the tall warrior. "Perhaps we can help?"

The guards looked at each other and the first one grinned.

"You must speak to our chief..."

. . .

THEY were taken to the entrance of the hut of the chief, where he sat upon a low stool, a despairing look upon his face. They squatted before him and explained about the desecration of his father's grave and how it had empowered the evil that threatened his people.

"You must help us," the young man said. "We have cattle in our danga. Ten cattle and this," he held out a blade carved from ivory and covered with images of animals and trees, "if you will rid us of this evil."

"Very well."

"And, of course," added the chief, "you shall enjoy our hospitality."

He waved to his wives. "Bring them food."

They were brought bowls of sadza and a stew of goat meat.

Kneading the sadza into a scoop in their palms, they dipped their hands into the stew and fished out chunks of meat.

"How do we slay it?" Ini-ndoga asked his friend.

Mbeva shrugged. "That I do not know. Poison, perhaps," he nodded at his arrows, which he had laid out before him, "or, maybe force of arms."

Ini-ndoga scooped up some more sadza and stew, but it no longer held much taste for him. Give him something he could fight and he was a happy man, but uncertainty... Uncertainty could sap the will of the strongest man.

"Tonight, we find out," he said.

. . .

GUARDS were posted at the entrance to the musha and one outside each hut. Ini-ndoga and Mbeva patrolled within the barrier of thorns.

There was the screech of an owl and the shriek of a baboon, but otherwise, the night was silent save for the sounds of the men.

Moonlight cast an ivory glow over the musha, but nothing moved, not even a bat nor a spider.

"It is like all life is fled," Ini-ndoga said, softly.

Mbeva grinned up at him, but said nothing.

Even if the nightwalker moved too quietly for him to hear, Ini-ndoga was certain that the keen ears of his companion would catch the sound, or that Mbeva's keen eyes would spot the slightest movement.

But, the night passed without any sign of the horror and the sun rose, driving the shadows away.

Mbeva yawned, widely.

There was a sudden scream from one of the huts and they ran to it.

A woman crouched over the body of a man, one of the guards who had greeted them the morning before. There was a look of bliss upon his face, but his throat had been torn out as if a leopard had borne down upon him.

"I heard nothing," the woman sobbed. "Nothing."

Ini-ndoga cursed. Though they were not of this clan, it seemed that the dark muti of the nightwalker had allowed it to slip past them, nonetheless.

"Truly," Mbeva breathed, "it rules in this place."

The chief joined them, wailing and tearing at his hair.

"What is to be done? What is to be done? My people are as wounded gazelle before the fangs of a lion. My line shall be extinguished. My ancestors shall be forgotten."

Ini-ndoga slapped his chest. "We will find a way."

He looked at Mbeva. "You said you knew of a people who were familiar with such things. Do they know how to defeat them?"

"Perhaps. If anyone does, they would."

"Then, we must go to them and seek their knowledge."

Mbeva threw his head back and laughed. "That would take us a few moons, there and back. Unless this evil has already slaked its thirst, I should think all these people would be dead by the time we return."

Ini-ndoga spat in anger. "Then, what?"

Mbeva twisted his lip in thought.

"Remember, we heard of that woman in the hills of black rock? A muroyi or something, someone with the power to help us."

"The hills of black rock?" said the chief. "That would still take you six days to reach and six days to return."

Ini-ndoga smiled. "A Mandionerepi can travel great distances without rest and they run swiftly; and, I am possessed of speed and stamina myself. We can do it in less time than that."

"Just pray to the ancestors," the chief murmured, "that however long you take, it isn't too long..."

"We'll eat and, then, we will be on our way," Ini-ndoga said.

• • •

"**I**S it following us?" Ini-ndoga asked his little friend on the second morning of their journey. "I thought I sensed it stalking us on the first night, but last night all I heard were animals."

Mbeva lit his pipe of antelope horn and drew deep upon the dagha before answering.

"Me, too. It returned to the musha, I think. Why follow us when it can feast? Likely, it hopes we will not return."

Ini-ndoga sighed. "Still, I hope we gained them some respite."

"Perhaps. But, still, though it did not pursue us, we were still followed: A baboon, I believe."

"The teacher of muroyi," said Ini-ndoga. "Might it serve the nightwalker?"

"I have heard it said they are a sort of muroyi, whilst others say they are the spirits of the dead or something else altogether. Who can say what serves them?"

Ini-ndoga stood. "We must be on our way. Be wary."

• • •

THE veldt grew drier and the grass and trees sparser. Mbeva paused and held up a hand in warning.

"Lions." He pointed.

Two thin males with sparse manes of black were crouched beside a rocky outcrop. Driven away from their pride once they were mature, they wandered the less fertile areas in search of prey and, perhaps, a pride of their own.

They watched the two travellers, eyeing them hungrily.

"They are wary," Ini-ndoga said. "But, if they think they can take us..."

"Pray to the stars that they don't follow us," Mbeva said as they passed by.

The lions slowly rose and began to pad after them.

• • •

THE night was alive with sounds as Ini-ndoga took first watch, poking at the fire with a stick to keep the flames high.

Silence fell with a suddenness that almost made him jump. Across the fire from him, Mbeva stirred.

"Wake up," he shouted throwing the stick at his friend and grabbing the dagger that hung in a sheath about his neck.

There was a cough of a roar in the darkness and a shape leapt towards him.

An arrow spat past him and struck the lion, which roared in anger as it landed before him.

Ini-ndoga threw himself out of the way of its claw and grabbed for his shield.

The lion faltered and collapsed as the poison on the arrowhead took effect and it died.

The second lion lunged out of the darkness towards Ini-ndoga, but he raised his shield to fend off its claws and drove his dagger deep into its neck.

It roared and leapt at him, but he stabbed at it again, and it slumped upon him, knocking him to the earth and winding him.

A moment later, Mbeva helped roll it off of him.

Sitting up, Ini-ndoga coughed and, then, laughed.

"Two lions. They may be scrawny, but still... it is a shame we haven't the time to skin them."

"Life has its little jokes," Mbeva said. Then, he yawned and said, "I have some time left to sleep, yes? Wake me if anything else comes seeking to eat us."

• • •

THEY ran as swiftly as they could until the bare, black rocks of their destination rose before them.

There were few plants growing in the hills of black rock, but there were snakes and lizards of substantial size that sunned themselves upon the rocks, forcing the two men to pick their way carefully to where the lonely smoke of a cooking fire rose.

An old woman was waiting for them, seated upon a rock outside a cave, poking at the fire with a stick. Her face was as creased and lined as Mbeva's and her eyes were two white sightless orbs.

Although she couldn't see, she raised her head, as if looking up at their approach.

"Welcome," she said in a soft, wheezing voice.

"Are you her?" Ini-ndoga called. "Are you she whom we seek? A woman with power?"

"I have knowledge and some little skill. What is it you want?"

Ini-ndoga licked his lips, uncertain. Healing herbs were one thing, but the stranger sorts of muti were beyond his knowledge and he mistrusted them. In his experience, they were more often

twisted and evil, made of horrible things for wicked ends. They might need her help, but what would the cost be?

"Nightwalkers," said Mbeva.

"Do you know of such things?" asked Ini-ndoga.

The woman chuckled, hoarsely. "Yes."

He explained why they had come to her.

"We cannot see it. It comes and goes unchallenged, leaving death behind it."

"Ah, the nightwalkers. They come from a land south of here, born of jealousy and hatred. Some say they are muroyi of the worst kind, or their twisted children, others say they are spirits who yearn to take physical form. Evil things."

"How do we fight them?"

"Not with a sharp blade, for they are immune to such things — not that you could see it to strike it. No, you need muti: Muti to sense it and muti to harm it."

"Can you give it to us?"

She chuckled, again. "Yes, I know the muti you need. But, there is a price."

He took a breath. There always was.

"What?"

"I have an enemy, a warrior who stole a pouch of muti from me many moons ago. The muti makes him strong and would turn back any curse I sent upon him."

"Go on."

"Promise to slay him and the means to destroy the nightwalker shall be yours."

"Very well."

She leaned in close to him and her sightless eyes seemed to lock hold of his.

"Promise, and do not betray me."

"I promise I shall seek this man out and slay him, or die trying. This I promise you."

She chuckled, then told him the warrior's name, before saying, "It's late. Catch me some meat and we shall eat it. Then, I shall prepare the muti and you shall have it in the morning when you leave."

The old woman reached out and ran her hands over his chest and arms.

"You may lay with me, tonight, if you desire," she said, then laughed as he recoiled from her touch.

...

MBEVA'S bow caught them a couple of rock rabbits that the old woman charred upon her fire.

When they had all eaten, the two men found a place on the rocky hillside where they could sit and smoke dagha, whilst she took all manner of noisome ingredients and turned them into a paste. Night fell and they slept peacefully for the first time in over a moon.

"It seems," Ini-ndoga said as they exchanged watches, "the only thing to be wary of around here is the old woman herself."

Mbeva grinned at him, but it was difficult to say if he was amused or not.

...

AS the morning sun rose, they breakfasted and, then, the old woman took out a package and handed it to Ini-ndoga. It was the paste, shaped into a pat and wrapped within a dark-green, waxy leaf.

"This will allow you to detect the nightwalker, no matter how it is disguised, no matter what power it holds over the place."

"How?"

"What you must do is this: Take your knife," she tapped her finger against the blade he wore in a sheath hung from his neck, "and, slash yourself — here, here, and here." She ran her finger sharply down the skin of his chest three times.

"Then, you take this," she tapped at the wrapped salve, "and, rub it into the wounds."

"And, then what?"

"And, then, when the nightwalker draws near, the lacerated flesh will itch. Ha! I know what you are thinking: Irritated skin can itch and wounds can itch as they heal. True, true. But, this itch will only begin when it draws near and will grow stronger the closer it is and lessen when it moves away. You will know, you will know."

Ini-ndoga nodded to himself, then asked, "So, I will know it is near, but how will I slay it?"

"With the muti upon you and a strong will, you might do it with your hands alone. But, I have prepared this..."

She handed him a stoppered gourd. Liquid sloshed within.

"Anoint your dagger and spearheads with this oil and it will be as deadly to the nightwalker as the poison on your friend's arrows is to a man."

"Thank you," he said.

"Do not thank me, just do as you promised and pay the price I asked."

"I will."

Ini-ndoga rose and tapped his friend on the shoulder.

"Come. Time we returned."

The little man nodded and they set off down the hill.

"Will you really kill this warrior?" Mbeva asked.

"Yes. It is the price I must pay. Whether he deserves death or not is beyond my knowledge, but die he must. Or, I in his place. I have sworn it."

Mbeva said nothing.

...

AN owl screeched in the darkness as they made camp. The two men were beginning to grow weary, having pushed themselves hard across difficult country, but one more day's travel would see them back to the beleaguered musha.

"If that thing keeps up its noise," Ini-ndoga said of the owl, "we shall have very little sleep this night."

"That may be what it intends," Mbeva replied. "Owls serve wicked things such as our foe. Perhaps it sends it to plague us?"

Ini-ndoga lay back. "Well, a lack of sleep is probably to be preferred to the nightwalker stalking us once again."

Mbeva glanced at him from his shallow pit.

"Perhaps. But, it could be that it is out there, too."

"Reassuring," murmured the tall warrior as he sat up, once more, and stirred the fire with a stick.

• • •

THERE was little joy in the musha at their return. The guard at its gate had an almost-dazed, defeated look to him as they approached and the men and women within its encircling fence were exhausted and scared.

"It has taken more of us in your absence," the chief told them as they joined him outside his hut. "It kills with impunity."

He looked skyward and let out a moan.

"Last night, it took my son. And," he looked at Ini-ndoga, "do you know what was the worst of it?"

"No."

"The look of ecstasy upon the boy's face."

• • •

THE chief's words returned to Ini-ndoga's mind as the sun dipped low to the horizon and shadows spread swiftly over the land and he and Mbeva went into one of the huts. Just what were they facing that its victims seemed to go willingly to their deaths?

One he would have the means to slay, he hoped, as he took his knife and drew its blade down his chest in three sharp movements as the old woman had indicated.

Blood oozed and trickled lightly from the wounds.

He wiped the blade clean and set it aside.

Fighting the urge to wince, Ini-ndoga unwrapped the paste and rubbed it into his wounds. Other than the pain of his lacerated flesh as he pressed upon it, he felt nothing. No itch.

It might just work.

Then, he laid his dagger and all four of his spears before him and picked up the gourd and unplugged its stopper, before smearing the oil upon the points of each weapon in turn.

Ini-ndoga didn't know who his ancestors were, but he silently prayed that, if they were watching over him, they would ensure the muti would do its job and slay the horror.

He looked across the hut to where his friend squatted, watching him, the light cast by the flames of the fire dancing across his face most hideously. Mbeva grinned at him, appearing even worse.

"Find yourself some place to hide," Ini-ndoga said. "I may need your assistance at some point, but no need offering you up as a snack for the nightwalker."

Mbeva nodded and retreated to a group of large baskets and concealed himself amongst them as a serpent might. The little man was capable of making himself comfortable anywhere, it seemed.

Ini-ndoga lay down and tried to sleep.

How close did the nightwalker need to come for the muti to work? Would he sense it in a neighbouring hut? He had to hope he would. If he patrolled the musha, it might grow suspicious, and he wanted to lure it in.

Sleep claimed him for a time, until a sudden itch tore him back to wakefulness.

For a moment, groggy and uncertain, Ini-ndoga scratched at his chest, at the ragged edges of his wounds, then snapped awake and seized up his nearest spear.

The interior of the hut was almost black, the faint glow of the embers providing the only light.

Although he was certain Mbeva must be near, he felt as if he were alone. He was almost certain the nightwalker wasn't in the hut.

Quietly, he rose and seized up his other spears, then crept to the hut's entrance.

A sliver of the moon lit the musha.

Ini-ndoga paused, watched and listened. The itch was a little stronger. He pulled his kaross tight about himself, just leaving his right arm free to throw his spear.

Nothing...

Movement. A hint of a shadow slipping around a hut.

He followed after it, a spear ready to throw. Yes, the itch was growing stronger. The old woman hadn't lied.

There! A shadowy figure. He ran towards it.

The itch was terrible now.

The figure turned. It was a beautiful woman, naked, save for a necklace and an inviting smile that almost glowed in the moonlight.

Ini-ndoga faltered.

"Oh, brave warrior," she whispered, "how I have longed for one such as you. Such a man. Come to me."

He felt himself begin to lower the spear, take an involuntary step towards her...

Now, he understood. Whatever form its victims desired, the nightwalker would take. The necklace jangled softly: It was, he saw, strung with small bones. Toe and finger bones...

With a cry, Ini-ndoga raised the spear and thrust it at her.

The woman hissed and her face seemed to melt into that of some hideous, fanged beast as she sidestepped the clumsy blow.

She knocked the spear from his hand as he tried to stab her again, but he brought up the three in his offhand and used them to drive her back before she could attack.

The itch was burning at his chest and he felt it inflaming his rage.

The nightwalker turned and ran for the fence, no longer human seeming, save for its general outline, albeit stretched and overlong of limb.

Ini-ndoga raised a spear and threw it, but the nightwalker contorted itself in an unnatural fashion and the spear flew past it harmlessly.

It seized the thorny fence and pulled itself over it with a strangely-fluid motion.

The warrior cursed to see it escaping.

He began to run, moving as fast as he could, and leapt with all the might in his powerful legs, hurling himself in an arc over the barrier.

Landing awkwardly, Ini-ndoga felt his spare spear snap as it caught the ground. It might be serviceable close up, but he only had the one left to throw.

Scrambling back to his feet, he resumed running.

Something swooped at him out of the darkness with a screech that made him feel as if the blood in his heart had chilled — an owl.

He fended it off with his spear, and it flew out of sight.

The nightwalker had almost vanished away into the darkness, the faint light of the moon barely enough to reveal it.

Ini-ndoga kept running. He had to do this.

But, the horror moved with great speed, like a cloud racing across the sky, and he knew he would be hard pressed to catch it.

Still, just get close enough to take aim...

He stumbled to a halt and raised his spear.

Something crashed into him at the moment he released the spear, sending him tumbling to the ground and his spear sailing off into the night.

Long fangs snapped at him and he cried out as they buried themselves deep into the flesh of his shoulder, piercing even the thick mhofu hide of his kaross.

It was a baboon, clawing and biting at him as it squatted upon his chest, scoring lines down his kaross with its clawed fingers.

Ini-ndoga drove the head of the broken spear in his offhand into its body and the baboon howled as it fell limply from atop him.

He hadn't even stood before the owl swooped at him with a screech, but he slashed at it with the broken spear, forcing it to abandon its attack, once again.

He spat. There was blood in his mouth.

A hiss made him turn: The nightwalker was before him.

No pretence, no attempt to seduce, just anger.

Killing its familiar had brought it back to him.

He almost smiled to himself.

Long baboon-like fangs bared, the nightwalker lunged.

Ini-ndoga thrust with the broken spear, but it swept the blow aside with a swipe of its arm and he cried out in pain as the blow travelled through the limb to where the baboon's fangs had penetrated his flesh.

He stumbled backwards, his kaross falling back from his chest, leaving him open to attack.

But, as it seized his shoulders and prepared to drive its fangs into his throat, he managed to draw his dagger from its sheath with his other hand and hold it before him.

Propelled by its rage, the nightwalker fell upon him and the blade drove deep into its chest as they both fell.

It gave a terrible shriek and shuddered atop him. From its mouth poured a black bile like congealing blood as Ini-ndoga forced it off of him.

It continued to shudder and twist and vomit as he watched in horror and disgust.

Then, it fell still.

There was a blush upon the horizon as Ini-ndoga painfully stood and the sun slowly rose.

The black vomit evaporated before the sun's rays like dew and the body of the nightwalker collapsed in upon itself until only horribly-stained bones were all that remained.

Ini-ndoga looked down at them in disgust and spat.

• • •

MBEVA found him and helped him scrape the bones together into a pile and burn them. Black smoke rose from the pyre, thick and stinking, but when it was done, the ashes blew away upon the breeze.

"It is over," the little man said and the warrior nodded.

"Here." Mbeva held out some astringent herbs. "Clean your wounds. Wipe your chest. I know which plants can heal."

The people of the musha had hung back, but there was food waiting for them upon their return.

The chief looked at Ini-ndoga, questioningly.

"I have slain the nightwalker — it will trouble you no more."

Raising his arms, the chief looked to the sky and gave a cry of praise to his ancestors. Then, he looked back at Ini-ndoga.

"You shall have all that I promised — and, more."

"A meal and a place to sleep would please me most, right now."

The chief laughed. "Eat all you wish. You shall sleep in my hut. You have saved us. Thank you. Thank you."

Gratefully, Ini-ndoga sat down and reached for some sadza.

Mbeva squatted opposite him. "And, now?"

Ini-ndoga began to eat.

"I need to rest a few days," he told the little man, "give my wounds a chance to heal."

He yawned. "The only itch I feel now is that of your herbs joining my flesh back together again."

Mbeva grinned. "The scabs will itch maddeningly."

"Most likely. Then, when I am healed, I have a promise to keep. Before too much time has passed, a warrior shall die."

But, he wondered, his prey or him?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DJ Tyrer lurks on the mist-shrouded northern shore of the Thames Estuary in a place counter-intuitively known as Southend-on-Sea where they edit a small press, Atlantean Publishing, create conlangs, and write tales of horror and adventure, some of which have appeared in such places as *Tales of the Black Arts* (Hazardous Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), and issues of *Broadswords and Blasters*. You can learn more about their writing at www.djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk and read reviews and opinion pieces related to writing and publishing at www.atlanteanpublishing.wordpress.com.

WHY HAS THE PAPER STOCK CHANGED?

The Skull himself ordained that our glorious publication be printed on the parchment-like paper we have used since issue #1, for it reminds him of the pulp publications of yore. Oh, how he was wroth when the printing minion explained that such paper was no longer available! "I care not for your chains and supplies!" stated the Skull. "Obtain such paper as pleases me or I shall curse you forevermore!" Unfortunately for the printmonger, he was unable to obtain the correct paper, and he now wanders the Lemurian Pleateau in a beatific state, cursed to never remember the way home. Unfortunately for the Skull, this still did not correct the problem, and our publication now lacks both paper and an experienced printmonger. (The new printmonger is learning fast, though.) As an interim solution during these strange and unprecedented times, we have printed this issue on a heavy paper stock that is comparable in weight to our preferred paper, though lacking the appropriate glorious pigmentation. When the stars return to their proper orbit, and Omicron sinks in the sky to never return, we hope to once more acquire the paper stock we (and the Skull) prefer. Until then, substitution may be necessary, as it is in this issue. We suggest you purchase many copies of this issue and hoard them. Someday they shall no doubt be worth millions of smerduks, like those weird pennies from the '40s that were made out of steel instead of copper.

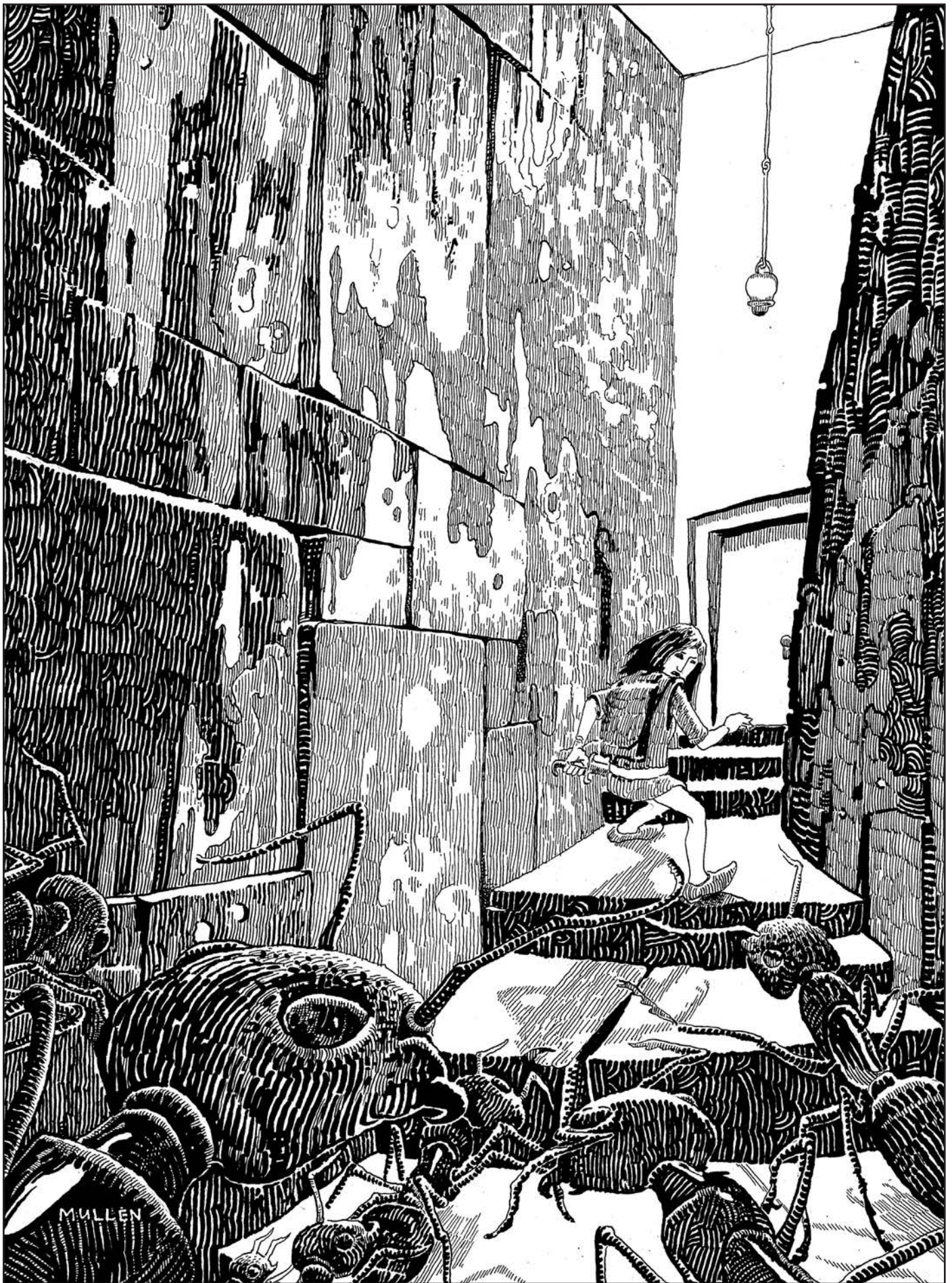


ILLUSTRATION BY PETER MULLEN

DARA'S TALE

By MARK RIGNEY

WHEN the ancient sorcerer had exhausted his supply of village children, he cast his thoughts outward and sought his way deep into the forest, to the caves and gorges where so many locals had fled with their brood, and he called on Dara, just then thirteen years of age, to bend to his will and heed his summons. Come Dara did, even though he'd found her in the sleeping hours, and she rose and left her hut and stumbled toward his tower, arriving at dawn in her torn and ruined shift, her bare arms and legs a landscape of nicks, cuts, and bruises.

"Master," she said, her voice toneless, barely her own. She held her head cocked sideways, as if listening for a tune long since lost. "I am come as you require."

Not six hours later, Dara's parents, having discovered their daughter's absence and suspecting its cause, made their own way through the wildwood forest and charged the tower door, yelling and crying in their grief, but the door had vanished, and they found only smooth, polished stone, and they went away in wonderment, forgetting with every step they took the very existence of the most precious object in their lives, their one and only child. Such was the sorcerer's power. Such was his dominion over those he chose to deflect.

But he did not reckon on skin-and-bones Dara, who had long anticipated that the sorcerer might succeed in searching her out, and had slept every night with wickweed in her ears, to both stopper sound and hold her dreams in place, and she arrived at the sorcerer's tower more mindful than he supposed. Nor did she give him any cause to doubt her, during that first quiet fortnight when she tended his ovens, prepared his meals, and swept the cobwebs from the corners. He watched her, of course, but kept his distance. "My needs run deeper," he said, staring at her with his black, luminous eyes, "and I shall take my fill soon enough."

Without precisely knowing the sorcerer's plan, she knew its outcome, for the other children of the village had been returned from the tower one by one in the year since his arrival, and while they came back sound enough of body, the light behind their eyes had dimmed. It was as if whatever vitality animated their innermost selves had been stripped away, put to other purposes.

After three weeks in her captor's employ, she dared to ask a single question. "Please, sir," she said, her eyes downcast, his chamber pot in hand, "how old *are* you?"

"Ah, girl," he replied, "I am more ancient than the tallest tree you've ever encountered. And mark me, I shall live longer yet. Longer than the hills and rivers. Longer, perhaps, than sense itself. And you, quite soon, shall help me."

But Dara did not wait to see what magics her aged captor would use to slice away her energy and essence. That night, while the sorcerer slept, she plunged a stout steel kitchen knife straight through his heart, and, in a fountain of gushing blood, ended his reign forever.

• • •

BY and large, Dahnica Siljen approved of "Dara's Tale." Indeed, of all the stories she had access to, each one penned by hand on enormous slabs of flatbark, "Dara's Tale" was the one she returned to most often. She thought of Dara's bravery as she picked berries in the meadows; she re-lived Dara's sensible planning while mucking out the horse stalls and pulling slugs off the lettuces, a job she truly loathed. (What in the world was worse than the smell and feel of slugs?) She drifted through "Dara's Tale" at meal times, at dances, and just before sinking, in her own warm attic bed, into well-earned sleep. She adored Dara's pluck, and she reveled in the neat logic of the sorcerer's violent comeuppance. Here was a villain that had thrived on dweomers and charms, but had they been sufficient to guard him against steel, a blade driven home by a hero with right on her side and conviction to spare?

She did wonder, though, what Dara would have done had steel failed to win the day. Had Dara gone to that tower armed with a back-up plan, and if so, what was it? On that score, "Dara's Tale" remained frustratingly mute.

But that was her only serious criticism, and besides, Dahnica was Dara's age exactly, thirteen and growing like a weed. True, she was still as bony as a twig, just like her story-book hero, with not much yet to attract the older boys. She thought perhaps her hair was neither straight enough nor dark enough (her mother's hair was black and very straight), and the mole on her cheek tempted her daily to dig it out (a sharp stick would surely do), and she was quite convinced that she had the knoggiest elbows in the whole of creation. On the other hand, she considered her snub nose to be a decent feature, and she liked the authority she heard in her voice. She often wondered if Dara looked and sounded much the same — if Dara, too, had a hatred of shoes but loved a scarlet ribbon in her hair, and knew, as she herself did, how to handle her father's tough yew bow. That, the boys noticed. Her shooting was a subject of regular gossip, though she doubted that even her closest friends were aware that at the last two traveling fairs, she'd made sure, through subtle, last-minute slip-ups, to let the boys win.

Elbows and all, Dahnica spent most of her days helping her parents, Sudik and Larissa, in managing Outerpost's only inn, and then, when time allowed, soaking up knowledge from anyone who cared to offer it. The village lacked a school, but it was the custom for each adult to teach according to their particular expertise, and so Dahnica had access to the smithy, and to Bornis, who ran it. She shoed her first horse (with stern, muscular supervision) on her eleventh birthday. Likewise, she spent long hours with Rosebriar, the stout, laughing chandler, for Rosebriar had the best collection of books in the region, "Dara's Tale" included. And, of course there was Rindicar, the retired knight who polished his armor once a week without fail and displayed his best sword in the public house, in an honored spot over the hearth. Rindicar taught her the only thing she liked better than reading: sword play.

At first, he'd been reluctant. "You don't have the weight," he'd said, eying her gawkinsess, but she'd made him a berry tart every First Day for five weeks, and he relented. "Knives first," he said. "Something to suit your size. No, give me no frowns and thunderheads. Knives."

Her introductory lesson with Sir Rindicar (a title he eschewed except on feast days, when he was asked to lead toasts) had been in the summer of her tenth year, and now, three years later, she had moved through every weapon in Rindicar's arsenal, leaving out only the three heaviest: a pitted mace with an oversize head, the fat broadsword (notched by the edge of an enemy shield), and a war hammer that even its owner admitted was too huge and clumsy for actual use. Dahnica's failed attempts to lift it were a source of ongoing hilarity for both student and teacher.

Late that winter, the scurriers came, a pox not seen for two generations. At first, they came only in ones and twos, and were axed or pummeled with shovels easily enough, and their lithe, six-legged bodies were a curiosity for all ages. Their gray-and-white pelts, though thick against the cold, were bristly and course, hardly worth the trouble of skinning, and they had a foul smell, as if they'd spent their lives feasting only on offal. A nuisance, according to Elder Krehvin's official proclamation, but nothing more. Seven scurriers in a ten-day span was hardly more remarkable than a gully-washing flood come springtime.

But then, on a lean and bitter day in the Month of the Headwinds, a wave of scurriers swept out of the forest, more than could be counted, a ripple of twisting, furred motion, low to the ground and headed for the storehouses. A shout went up from the fields as the woodcutters and post-setters took to their heels. The alarm bell was rung for the first time since the stable fire, and for the next hour, it was all the villagers could do to form a human barricade around the granary and beat the scurriers back with every weapon that came to hand, from buckets to pitchforks to torches and bricks. Omnivorous and starving, the scurriers bit and clawed and spat, but it was chiefly their accumulated weight — the sheer mass of their writhing, furious charges — that threatened any real harm. In the end, the line held. The stores and seed were saved; the scurriers, numbering in the thousands, were dragged by their bushy tails to a hastily built bonfire at the edge of town. The burning went on for a day and a night, and the stink, even upwind, could not be escaped. As the flames leaped and the fat from the dead scurriers dripped and bubbled, Dahnica overheard Elder Krehvin say to Bornis, "If I didn't know better, I'd say someone was raising the damn things, and then one day, they opened the pens."

"Aye," said Bornis, "but who would farm scurriers?"

Not a half-week later, with the villagers still nursing their wounds, and word not yet back from the distant capital on what could have caused such a sudden infestation, Garellin made his appearance. He arrived in a boxy wagon piled to the skies with massive trunks and parcels, a load so heavy that it required a team of six muscular cart horses. The horses' tack was done up with red blazes and golden studs, and Garellin himself, after halting his wagon by the village well, stood up on the driver's seat, spread out his arms as if he could embrace the cosmos, and called in a booming, stentorian voice, "People of Outerpost, assemble yourselves!"

This should have been met with bemusement at best. A stranger, calling for a meeting, with sleet spitting from low, monotone clouds, and a nipping wind keeping most everyone indoors? Ridiculous. Impertinent, too. How many even heard? This, for weeks, remained a matter of conjecture, as a good many who surely weren't present later insisted that they were. Everyone wanted to claim that they were there from the beginning.

However it was called, a meeting took place, and fully three quarters of the village crammed into the common hall that night. Elder Krehvin made the introductions, but it was Garellin who steered the proceedings from start to finish. Dahnica typically watched meeting-work from the front row, her attention unwavering — "hawk-like," as Krehvin was fond of saying — but when Garellin stood atop the hay bales that served as a stage, Dahnica slipped deeper into the crowd, overcome by a sudden urge not to be noticed, not to be seen. She took up a post in the most distant possible corner, huddled into the join between two cider barrels, and kept her hands from covering her ears only with a concerted effort.

Garellin, dressed in heavy dark woolens that somehow erased his belly and made him look svelte, took in the crowd and said, "In all my travels, I have never heard a bad word said of Outerpost, or indeed, of your entire region. You have done your forbears proud, and my sole purpose in joining you here is to ensure that your legacy continues unblemished into a bright and promising future. But know this: the scurriers are abroad throughout the land this season. If, friends, we wish to survive the winter with skin on our bones and food in our bellies, we must look to our defenses."

Under the joint direction of Elder Krehvin and Garellin, the village divided itself into teams devoted to raising fortifications. The forests began giving up whole trees rather than just limbs, and around the village, up went a stockade wall. Not fool-proof, said Garellin, but a serious impediment to invaders, scurriers included. Tapped by Garellin, Rindicar came out of retirement and began drilling a volunteer militia in the market square, an exercise Dahnica and all her peers attended whenever chores allowed, and she quickly grew proficient in formations, marching, and responding in unison. To her dismay, her parents joined, too (where on earth did they find the time?), and even began signing up for sentry duty.

One week on, the season's final convoy of wagon riders rolled into town, bringing wares from beyond Iceglare Summit. At first, they cracked jokes about how they hoped all this wall-building wasn't to keep out honest traders, but the people of Outerpost weren't smiling. Garellin had it on good authority

that the Valley Lords were shoring up their guard force, smithing new weapons at a pace unheard of for years. Who could say, in times like these, who could really be trusted? Muttering and surly, the wagon riders moved on early, complaining that Outerpost wasn't what it used to be.

In no time, the elders approved Garellin's plan to erect a stone fortress, a proper tower into which the entire village could retreat if danger threatened. It seemed a risible idea at first. Rosebriar pointed out that Outerpost had but one mason, and he had no experience with blocks of the size required to raise a castle. And how, queried Bornis, was Outerpost to pay for such an endeavor? Garellin countered all objections with a wave of his hand. Funds had already been provided, and he would supervise.

Not a day later, ox-pulled sledges arrived from the south, trudging laboriously up the long grade, and on each sledge lay freshly quarried stones mightier than any that Outerpost had ever put to use before. Dahnica, impressed, clambered atop one of these and made fun of the oxen as they struggled along, with her weight now added to their burden — until Rindicar, red-faced and annoyed, ordered her down, down at once! He called her an insolent girl, switched her on the backside with the flat of his sword, and ordered her home to her parents. Dahnica clambered up a tree, instead, the better to watch the foundation being dug for Garellin's fortress.

The visiting quarriers' ready coin made Outerpost bustle. They lodged in hastily erected barracks up by a saddleback knoll just outside of the village proper, but even so, the quarriers and their ox drivers were constantly underfoot, ordering meals and keeping the tradesfolk busy with repairs for trousers and boots, not to mention personals like candles, soap, and a decent shave. Dahnica's chores, which had seemed onerous enough before, now threatened to become never ending. Her parents doubled their chicken flock, and still couldn't keep up with demand for either eggs or meat.

With pulleys and winches and mazes of stout scaffolding, up went the lumpy fortress tower, and encircling that, up went a high stone wall, dark gray, the color of nightfall. In and out went the drivers and their sledges; the cries of the foremen and the ringing of hammers continued late into the night, even in the snow — and the snow blew in early that year, paving the way, said Garellin, for far worse things than scurriers — though nothing, by spring, had come. That was luck, said Garellin, and good planning. That was the stockade wall in action.

Warmer weather brought fresh columns of wagon riders, and when Garellin charged them a toll, they threatened to do no business there at all, but Garellin shrugged and said, "Skip a chance to earn coin, or load up on good Outerpost vegetables and millet? Be my guest." Sure enough, the wagon riders fell in line. Dahnica studied their faces, and she studied, too, the faces of her neighbors. Most seemed pleased. Rosebriar did not.

"I'm leaving," she announced to Dahnica as spring tipped into summer. She stood in the back of her house, hauling her housewares off a shelf and putting them, cloth-wrapped, into a traveling basket.

Assuming she'd misheard, Dahnica leaned closer. "You're doing what?"

"They made off with my books," Rosebriar said, her tone prim, as if this incredible transgression were only a minor offense.

Dahnica demanded to know who had stolen Rosebriar's books.

"Oh, not stolen. 'Impounded.' They're not desirable, not the right sort. Wrong bark, wrong ink, wrong subject." With welling tears, Rosebriar pulled a saucer off the shelf and nearly dropped it. Frustrated, she gave her head a shake and avoided Dahnica's gaze. "Doesn't matter. I don't recognize this place any more. Do you?"

"Outerpost is Outerpost," Dahnica said. "It's just..."

"Changed?"

"I was going to say, busier. More exciting. But who took your books? Tell me, I'll go get 'em back."

"Oh, you'll fetch them from the tower, will you? From Garellin?"

"Garellin's the one that took them?"

Rosebriar fussed with the saucer, wrapping it, unwrapping it, wrapping it again. Her nose was starting to run, and she gave it a quick wipe with her sleeve. "He lives up there now, did you know?"

Dahnica did.

"Moved himself right on in, and those quarriers, the better half don't work with stone. Those are soldiers, girl. Don't know where he gets the money, but that man is setting himself up to be a dandy little king. He's even got dogs, and I don't mean proper dogs, hounds for hunting, I mean guard dogs. And as for my books? He says to my face, 'When people start believing what they read, stories kill.' I could have slapped him for that. Could have spat in his eye."

Dahnica stepped closer. "Rosebriar," she said, "don't go."

"Too old to stay," Rosebriar responded. "Not for this. Got a sister in the lowlands. Maybe things are better there. Now, look here, child." As she said this, Rosebriar set down the saucer and dug into her apron pocket, producing a grimy wooden pen, slightly cracked and barely deserving of the name. It had a nice sharp tip, though; Dahnica had seen it in use more than once. Even so, she backed away when Rosebriar held it out.

"Take it, child. A reminder of better days."

"I don't want it."

But Rosebriar would not take no for an answer. "Oh, take it," she insisted. "A reader like you, you never know when you might have need of a pen."

Not many days after, with Rosebriar long gone, Garellin presided at the next village meeting, held outdoors in the square with the granary rising up behind him, its walls still studded with scurrier pelts. He began with a thunderbolt, announcing in crisp, unassailable tones, "My friends! I am hereby dissolving the village militia."

Rindicar, who stood at Garellin's shoulder, jerked his head around. Clearly, no one had bothered to tell him he was being put out to pasture.

"We shall of course retain the services of our senior and most experienced military man, Sir Rindicar, but from this point forward, day-to-day operations will be carried out by the tower garrison, with an eye toward maximum safety and security for all. The woodcutters working Tumbling Brook caught five scurriers just yesterday — and on an inbound course, I might add. Also, let's take care how we welcome travelers coming south from the Iceglare Summit. The people of the Valley Lords beyond have their ways, as you know. Let's make sure that any strangers among us don't take advantage. Be watchful, friends. Be canny."

Midway through summer, while swimming with a gaggle of friends below Tumbling Brook's falls — which, these days, was about as far as anyone dared go — Dahnica caught a look at herself in a pool of calm, deep water, and decided she was growing. Her elbows didn't bother her quite so much as before. She thought (although she allowed that it might be nothing more than a trick of the water) that her hips were doing all the right things, and as if to prove the point, Omiri (a year older and a head taller, with delightful bangs) came up behind, gently turned her around, and tried to kiss her — and, for a moment, she let him. Omiri had been despondent over losing his prized silver flute, and a kiss had seemed like just the thing to cheer him up. But then, to make sure he knew who was boss, she gave him a hard shove and sent him tumbling from their shared boulder into a deep plunge pool. Omiri came up spluttering and laughing, and when she trotted off to join the others and heard movement in the brush behind her, sticks cracking with every clumsy footfall, she assumed it was Omiri, tracking her down for another kiss. Instead, when she turned to flash a shy, encouraging smile, she was face to face with a crazed-looking snow rover, a shock-headed man with snow-white hair, his skin as pink as a kitten's nose, and his gaunt body half-wrapped in stinking, rotten furs.

Dahnica screamed. So did the rover. Each took a reflexive step back, but Dahnica had nowhere to go besides into the water, and she wasn't sure that would be an advantage, especially not if the rover could swim.

Wild-eyed, the snow rover crouched and sprang at her. Dahnica leaped out of harm's way and sprinted uphill, yelling the alarm. Like a dog on a scent, the rover sped after her. Seconds later, they both burst into the clearing below the falls, but thanks to all that crashing water, no one heard them coming until both Dahnica and her pursuer were right in her friends' midst. The panic was instant, a clamor of feet and flight moving in every direction at once. The rover ploughed into the scattering crowd, yowling and striking out with its fists.

Dahnica had intended to run with the rest, but two of her friends had been knocked flat by the rover, and without thinking, she reversed course. As Omiri and the rest cried out for her to come back, Dahnica plucked up a stout branch, raced into the clearing, and aimed a body blow at the jabbering rover. It saw her coming, dodged, and bared its ruined teeth. When it bounded toward her, Dahnica dropped her branch, rolled, and came up with a rock gripped in her hand. As the rover spun to grab her, she turned with it and landed a tremendous blow to the side of the rover's head. Rock met bone with an audible, lethal crack. The rover let out a claxon wail and crumpled.

The young folk dusted themselves off. No harm done beyond bruises and a sprained finger. Good thing, said one girl, that Dahnica had learned her lessons in Garellin's militia, a notion that left Dahnica cross-eyed with indignation.

The consensus among the rest was that this rover might be a harbinger of future trouble, that the mountain folk might be going mad. Dahnica scoffed at this. True, their ice-white hair and pale eyes could be disconcerting, but they'd always been decent neighbors (distant of course, being nomads, but forever friendly). Rosebriar's best book on mountain lore had been authored by a snow rover.

They agreed they had to bring the body back, if only to prove what had happened, and so the bigger boys, after a great deal of self-important hemming and hawing, tied the snow rover's wrists and ankles to a stout sapling and marched it to Outerpost as if it were a hunter's prize. Once there, Garellin pronounced Dahnica to be the bravest of the brave, and Rindicar, beaming with pride, pinned his best brass medal to her tunic. The story got told six ways nine times, and everybody talked at once, but in answer to the hue and cry about whether the snow folk had turned dangerous, Garellin held up both arms to quiet the agitated crowd and announced that to know the truth, he required two days' time and a host of biting ants.

Nearly every Outposter assumed they'd misheard, but Garellin invited them to watch, and the whole village followed him to his compound. Once inside the outer wall, Garellin found a clear patch in the ongoing chaos of construction and felled trees and proceeded to bark out orders to his personal guard, and they brought forth an urn the height of a tall man. They unstopped the urn, then poured its contents onto the ground. Out tumbled ants, uncountable legions of ants: red, yellow, black, and even ants the color of dead blind grubs. As the assembled villagers murmured their shock, the ants burrowed into the soil with supernatural speed and vanished.

"Stakes!" cried Garellin, and the helmeted guards hammered four stout stakes into the dirt, forming a rough square around the chewed-up soil where the ants had vanished.

"Rope!" cried Garellin, and ropes were brought and tied with strong knots to the stakes.

"Bind me!" cried Garellin, and he lay on the ground spread-eagled in his best finery as his guards bound him to the stakes.

"On pain of death," hissed Garellin, "let no one untie me for two full days, no matter how I cry out. No matter what mercies I beg of you, leave me be."

"Sorcery," muttered Bornis, and others said the same, but Garellin cut them off.

"I perform this foretelling only to grant us the security we need to continue in our great work. Trust me, my friends. Trust me as I trust you."

Then he lay back, as the first of the ants came up from the earth in terrible silence and crawled onto his body and disappeared into the folds of his clothes to nip and bite and chew.

The villagers stared, petrified, until Garellin began crying out in pain — "By the gods, it burns! Get them off! Get them off!" — and then they broke for home, cowed by the implacable, stiff-legged guards who stood round with their spears, and ashamed, too, of their abject passivity.

For two days, Dahnica sneaked into the compound every chance she got. Garellin remained where he was, without food, without water, and his body swelled and his skin turned blotchy and red, and boils erupted on his wrists and neck (and probably, she thought, everywhere else), and he muttered in a fever of delirium. The ants crawled everywhere, across his face, into his mouth, into his eyes. Sorcery, thought Dahnica. This is what real sorcery looks like.

At the end of two days, and with the timorous villagers once again assembled, Garellin's honor guard cut him free. He rolled onto his side, accepted a jug of cool water, and spat. Holding his palms flat on the dirt, panting and clearly ready to collapse, he raised his red-rimmed eyes and glared at the gathered throng.

I WANT MY SKULL TV!

A black and white photograph of a person standing in a library, wearing a skull mask with a single eye and a dark suit. The person has their hands raised in a gesture. The background is filled with bookshelves containing various books.The logo for Skull TV is displayed within a black rounded rectangle. The word "SKULL" is written in a large, bold, white, blocky font with a thick black outline. To the right of "SKULL", the letters "TV" are written in a smaller, stylized, white font with a thick black outline, appearing as if they are attached to the end of the word.

In a low, raspy voice, he said, "A band of snow rovers is three days' distant. They come for our stores, our heads, and our children. We must prepare to meet them blow for blow and blood for blood."

Dahnica, frowning, knew what Bornis and her parents would say to this, for rovers often passed through Outerpost, and had many times been guests at her parents' inn. During especially cold winters, some had even taken up residence, participating fully in the life of the village, teaching new songs and new medicines along the way. But to Dahnica's surprise, her parents were mute, even approving, and as for Bornis, he was gone, departed — and good riddance, muttered some. Bornis, they claimed, was a man who asked more questions than was healthy.

Not long after, on a cool, mist-heavy morning, the snow rovers came just as predicted, but not from cover like clandestine invaders. Instead, they came on the road, marching down from the pass in a long, limping caravan, their carts half-broken, their livestock (what little they had) all ribs and joints and sores. They carried their lives on their backs, and a mix of villagers and Garellin's guards met them from scaffolds set against the stockade walls. As the mist thickened — Dahnica thought she could see it curling right out of the soil — they ordered the snow rovers to turn back, but the column kept on as if the marchers could imagine no other course — as if death itself was at their heels — and then arrows flew, and the snow rovers fell back, raising their arms as if fear alone would protect against archers, and then the good people of Outerpost, led by Garellin's soldiers, poured from the gates and ran down every invader they could find, while the remainder, rag-tag and screaming, fled into the trees.

Dahnica watched from the roof of the granary, where she'd climbed without quite knowing why. The mist hid most of what happened, but she had sharp ears, and it was no trick at all to guess at the nameless, terrible sound that a human skull makes when hit, full force, with the flat of a good metal shovel. Not long after, she watched as the people of Outerpost trickled back inside the gate, looking dazed but triumphant, as if they'd just won a great and lasting victory. She saw her parents, supporting Rindicar between them; he was limping, in need of bandages. She saw the pride with which they hoisted him, as if they not only carried a hero, but were heroes themselves. Later, she heard the endless toasts made to Garellin — his leadership and foresight — and felt only queasy shame. Even after every bell in Outerpost was set to ringing, and the dancing and revelry threatened to outlast the night, Dahnica hung back, crept into her attic bed, and cried herself to sleep.

The next day, beginning with the first bird calls of the still-dark morning, she began her preparations. As Outerpost slept off its collective drunk, she visited the butcher's stores, the vegetable garden, and her parent's kitchen. She stole into Rindicar's tiny armory and made off with his smallest sword, an old friend with a flat, strong blade no longer than her thigh. She allowed herself only a moment to mourn the fact that wickweed, the story-stuff plant that Dara had used to stopper her dreams, wasn't real. If it had been, she supposed she would have harvested all she could carry.

Later, when her neighbors began to waken, she went among them, tending the few wounded, helpful as could be but giving nothing away, and it was only well after sunset, when the village was once again silent and still, that she assembled her supplies, some quite surprising in their randomness, then added the more obvious comforts of her bow and six arrows. Satisfied at last, she set off for Garellin's fortress tower, vowing as she did to leave Dahnica behind for this one night, and become, instead, Dara: worldly-wise, brave beyond measure, wary to a fault, and deadly if need be.

As Garellin had ordained, only two gates, solid and heavy, breached the stockade. Both had been built with inset doors, and these were guarded night and day. Dahnica chose the one on the uphill slope of the village, the one leading to the mountains, and closest to the carnage of the day before. Under a risen moon all but erased by patchwork clouds, two sentries sat to either side of the gate, their legs splayed, their chins nodding on their chests. Neither was a local, but Dahnica rejected killing them, in part because she couldn't see Dara murdering a sleeping man, even if he stood in her way, and because she thought that attacking one might wake the other, and at close quarters, he might be more than she could deal with.

So thinking, she got to work gathering brush, scraps, and kindling, and piled what she found just under the eaves of the cooper's shop, but in full view of the sentries. Then, using a street lantern's borrowed candle, she set the pile alight. Alerted by the sting of smoke, the two sentries roused themselves, and as they leaped into action — "Douse that, quick! It'll catch the roofline!" — Dahnica was already behind them, lifting the wooden bar from the door and slipping out into the night.

She'd gone only a short way along the road when the moon forced its way past the cloud cover. It was as if a curtain had lifted. Shapes arose on all sides, the abandoned flotsam of the battle: broken carts, slain oxen, overturned baskets, smashed trunks, torn packs. Bodies lay sprawled in the ditches, arrows in their backs, hands hacked off, ears missing, entrails spilled. Dahnica stopped, eyes wide. That no one had bothered to clean up, to haul away the dead, to clear the road — it was monstrous. She swallowed, tasted bile, and, in a moment of irrational fear, drew her sword. There — yes — there was no doubt, the nearest corpse, shadowed silver in the moonlight, was moving. It was clawing its way toward the cover of the forest, and now the others were too, but not all were working for escape. Some were turning toward her, moaning and grinding their teeth, rising up on bloody, broken knees. The nearest, still sprawled on its ruined chest, stretched out a hand, reaching for her ankle.

Dahnica wanted to scream. Every instinct demanded she run for home, where the sentries, at the edge of her hearing, were still yelling about the fire — but in the moment before she fell completely to pieces, she reached into a pouch at her belt and withdrew the horrid mass of garden slugs she'd stored there, and without allowing herself to think, she smeared their soft, yielding bodies across her face, her eyelids, everywhere. The slime and oozing stink was revolting — she retched before she could stop herself — but when she looked up, the corpses on the road lay still. The illusion was past. Dahnica stood quivering, her heart racing, and ordered herself to be calm while the moon, as if in mute surrender, ducked back behind the clouds.

From an abandoned basket, Dahnica plucked a rag and cleaned herself as best she could. Her heart was threatening to beat its way out of her chest, but she forgave herself. The idea that Garellin the Sorcerer was already working to deflect her (and at a distance, too) was daunting, terrifying. She'd rescued herself this time not with magic (she had none) but by overwhelming the very senses the sorcerer wanted to prey on. It seemed that even the rising dead were no match for the abhorrent feel, smell, and taste of slugs smushed on her face.

Onward, then. The whole reason to take to the road was to come around the sorcerer's fortress from behind, from above. It was where she would least be looked for, and even if the sorcerer knew she was coming, perhaps his guards would not. She hurried on, and kept herself from so much as glancing at the many dead. They wouldn't move, they couldn't, especially if she did not give her permission.

The trail she wanted was harder to find than she'd expected, and the moon, truly gone now, was no help. She guided herself from trunk to trunk by feel, her arms outstretched, her eyes wide as an owl's. She wanted to hurry, but to go at speed through a wood in darkness would mean a snapped ankle or worse, and she had no time for that. Even so, when the torchlit fortress wall came into view, it arrived too soon. Retreat — still possible — was oh, so tempting.

Shimmying up the wall took skill, but she managed it by going barefoot, with her shoes slung from her neck. At the top, she had to pause to get her bearings. The outer wall surrounded the roughly circular tower and left a moat-like gap between, a gap made of the forest that the sorcerer's builders had hacked down in order to begin construction. The larger trees were stumps, but a few of the smaller ones remained. Broken limbs, underbrush, and creepers littered the ground like pick-up sticks. Dahnica stared across the detritus to the tower beyond, where dark stone stood tall against the black night sky. In its few small windows, dim lights burned.

Dahnica down-climbed the wall, slipped on her shoes, and stood for a moment, listening. What leaves remained shivered as a breeze sprang up, but what caught her ear was something hurrying closer, two or three somethings that ran low to the ground, growling as they came. Quick as a flash, she darted up the nearest sapling, but it bent under her weight, and she found herself right back on the ground. On the far side of a ragged clearing, the sorcerer's guard dogs loped into view.

Given the distance, she thought she could take one, possibly two, with her bow. Not good enough — so instead, she dug a hand into the second satchel at her waist, pulled out the venison strips she'd stolen from the butcher, and tossed them toward the dogs. The effect was immediate. The dogs veered off, surrounded the meat, and began gulping it down. She threw more. As the dogs bit and snapped, Dahnica backed away and made for the tower.

Memory told her there was one door and one only, and she found it easily. In front of it stood a single guard, a wide-awake sentry armed with helmet, breastplate, and spear. In braziers to either side, two small fires danced, and by the light of the wavering flames, Dahnica could see that the sentry had her father's face.

In the same instant that she recognized him, he spotted her. Glaring, he lowered his spear and charged.

Dahnica knew it couldn't be her father. Sudik was home in bed, fast asleep, one arm lolled carelessly over her mother. Sudik would never put himself directly in the service of the sorcerer, and he would never come at her like this, brandishing an actual spear. This was a trick, just like the corpses crawling on the road. It had to be.

Lightning-quick, Dahnica pulled her bow from her shoulder and fitted an arrow. The sentry was all of twenty feet distant and closing fast. No time to think. If he got any nearer, he could run her through even if she hit him straight through the heart. She drew back the string, and felt the bow tense like a muscle.

"Dahnica!" the sentry cried, in her father's voice. "Don't!"

She let fly, and the arrow slammed into the sentry's neck. His eyes flew wide and his mouth formed a mute, bloody scream. His spear, loosed from his fingers, clattered to the ground. His final running steps carried him right to her feet where he collapsed in a sprawl with the arrow protruding like a misplaced finger from his neck. The twin wounds made a sucking sound as his heart continued to pump. He lay so close that she could have prodded him with her toe. She dared not do so. Nor did she have the courage to steal a look at his down-turned face. But why should she? It wasn't Sudik. It couldn't be.

Her breath was still coming in ragged gasps, but she forced her feet toward the iron-bound door. Quickly, quickly, before more guards could come. Was it locked? No. She got hold of the handle and pulled. The door swung open and belched air that smelled ripe, like dirt and loam and compost. A handful of tapers burned in a sconce on the wall, and she seized one as she stepped inside, then pushed the door shut behind her. With the outside air gone, the smell was all but overpowering, and she swallowed hard, working to shut it out — and to shut out, too, her encounter with the sentry, the awful sight of her arrow hitting home.

The taper dripped wax onto the knuckle of her thumb, and she peered around. The half-lit room matched the base of the tower; despite the sorcerer's claims about sheltering the entire village, its circumference was no more than twenty-five feet across. Pillars, really unfinished tree trunks, had been driven into the floor to support the level above. Opposite the door, a spiraling staircase led up along the wall. She started toward it, then hesitated. The floor in the center of the space rose into a mound, like a badly made bread loaf, and she realized that nothing underfoot was solid. It wasn't soil so much as it was pebbly, granular, a litter of uneven pellets the color of fungus.

On impulse, she slipped out of her shoes and allowed her bare feet to rest on the ground (or whatever it was). Sure enough, she could feel vibrations rising through the soles of her feet, furtive little subterranean shivers. Something was burrowing beneath her.

As soundlessly as possible, breath held, she drew Rindicar's sword. The blade made the softest hiss against the leather scabbard as it came free, but to her ears, it sounded like a landslide. She felt fresh vibrations as she squirmed her feet back into her shoes. The question was, should she sneak along the perimeter, keeping close to the wall, or make a dash straight across the middle? She opted for the former; going quietly had served her well so far.

Step by step she proceeded, every sense on high alert, and she'd nearly reached the staircase when the ground to her left flung itself upward, shoved from beneath, and an enormous ant clambered into view, antennae waving, its mandibles scissoring back and forth. Terrified, Dahnica flattened herself against the wall and let out a scream. The ant's head swiveled toward her. Its huge eyes caught the glow of her taper and made flickering pupils in what were otherwise blank, black globes.

Gods above, she thought. The thing was big as a butter churn and it wasn't even half out of the hole.

The ant hauled itself out of its collapsing burrow, while on the far side of the room, another exploded into view, then another. Dahnica ran, pelting toward the stairs, and she knew without looking back that the six-legged things at her heels were faster than she, much faster. She would have to turn and fight. If only she could gain the staircase first and put solid stone under her feet.

She made it by a whisker, whirled around and slashed with her blade. The ant was so close that she couldn't miss, but the swing was wild and it only nicked the thing's face before cutting across and through the tip of one antennae. The ant reared, its front legs rising up like a bucking stallion's even as it propelled itself with its remaining four. Dahnica moved without thinking. She slid underneath her attacker feet-first and cut as hard as she could at the narrow join between the head and the segmented body. The sword swept across, slicing the ant in two, but it kept right on moving, and she had to endure two of its awful feet stepping on her as it veered off course, topped six stairs and then wobbled over the side, directionless and dead.

Across the room, more were coming. Two, now five, now seven, none as large as the first, but more than big enough. In seconds, the whole floor was in motion. Dahnica, her sword arm sticky with purplish fluids that she supposed must have come from the ant, staggered to her feet, then raced up the stairs, heedless of what might lie ahead. From behind, a carpet of chittering, scurrying death swarmed closer.

The stair spiraled its way to a door, and Dahnica all but threw herself at it. The latch gave, and she tumbled through, kicking the door shut behind her. Could ants open a door?

In answer to her unspoken question, a voice sounded from behind her, drowsy and arch. "No," it said, "although they'd like to. They know you're here."

Slowly, eyes momentarily held shut in order to center herself, Dahnica turned around.

Like the room below, this one was the width of the tower itself, and all around its heavy, blocky walls were shelves and hooks and pegs, and displayed on these were objects she recognized: Omiri's lost flute; a pair of iron tongs that she knew at once belonged to Bornis; and a decorative pitcher her own mother used to keep in the kitchen. In a prominent nook, Elder Krehvin's gavel sat side-by-side with an old plumed helmet that could only belong to Rindicar, and there, piled on the floor beneath these lay all of Rosebriar's books — or all, it seemed, but one.

The sorcerer sat in the center of the room, suspended in a vine-like swing that seemed to be woven into the distant ceiling. He held his back straight while his legs dangled, and his eyes were black and as large as hens' eggs. On his lap, he held what could only be "Dara's Tale." Dahnica would have recognized it anywhere.

Staring everywhere and nowhere, the sorcerer said, "I cast my mind outward...and look, you came."

Dahnica got a tight, two-handed grip on her sword. She pointed it at the sorcerer's throat. "Oh, yes," she replied, inching forward. "I came as we both require."

"I am glad," the sorcerer replied. "And look! I have been reading about your friend Dara, this girl who gives you such inspiration. How pathetic that you find comfort in her success."

To keep him talking, to buy time as she inched her way forward, she said, "Outerpost was happy before you arrived, sorcerer, and we will be happy again once you're gone."

His smile was ghastly, unfocused, blank-eyed. "By giving your kith and kin the gift of fear, I've given them purpose."

"No," she said, creeping ever closer, her blade still raised as she sighted along it and imagined driving its tip into his eye. "They believe that now, but only because of you."

"So certain, and so young. Remind me which of us, this very night, put an arrow through her own father."

She blinked, then hissed, "That was an illusion."

The old man's head tilted back as if he would laugh, but his laugh was empty, an echo of a sound that never was. "Dahnica, I have heard so much about you, how you are such a careful reader, such a good study, but where is your wickweed? Don't tell me you left it behind."

She grimaced, refusing to be baited. Three more steps and she could strike — but then the sorcerer held up a hand, and against her will, her feet stopped. Her muscles grew heavy, her body leaden. It was all she could do to take a full breath.

"Dahnica," he said, his voice amused, mellifluous, tired. "I am so sorry that your favorite story didn't warn you, but all weapons of war obey my commands."

He was old, as old as rivers and hills and sense itself, and worse, he was right: there was no such thing as wickweed. But he was wrong, too, wrong to give what she loved so little credence. At least for another few moments, she had herself, with anger and conviction to spare — and she knew for a certainty that even on this night, she could not be reduced to a weapon of war.

Time, then, for her backup plan.

Dahnica dropped her sword, and felt immediately lighter. Next, she shrugged her bow from her shoulders, and as it fell, useless, to the floor, new life surged through her legs. Darting forward, she pulled from her pocket Rosebriar's crude wooden pen — puny, yes, but as sharp-tipped as ever — and with that humble tool clutched in her fist, she flung herself on the sorcerer.

"For Dara!" she cried.

The sorcerer raised his arms to defend himself, but not in time. The tip of the pen lodged deep in his neck, and as it did, the flat-bark copy of "Dara's Tale" slipped from his lap, clattered to the floor, and came, at last, to rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Rigney's novels and stories are mostly either out of print or undiscovered, which is why he hikes deep into deserts without water, collects (hoards, really) very old beer cans, and cultivates a riotous native prairie in what would otherwise be a perfectly ordinary suburban back yard. The neighbors are rightly suspicious, but his family, thankfully, remains adoring. On his days off, he writes plays. When the moon is blue, these plays get produced. His website is www.markrigney.net.

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INTERRED WITH THE WORM

By **SCOTT J. COUTURIER**

NEEED I introduce myself? I suppose so, in this benighted age. Or rather Enlightened, as the proselytes insist. Yet, would my name and deeds have been lost to history's abyss were aught as it should be? I think not.

My name is Hermides Senph. Tomb-robber of old, now a sad lurker in shadows fast-waning before the zealotry of the Lords of the White Brand. But — you have found me, in my shadows, come to me with questions only I can answer. This amulet you speak of; I see such avarice in your gaze. Well I reckon the look from my own eyes, reflected in the funerary breastplates of emperor-mages or gleaming in tarnished mirrors set up to ward the inhumed. The Amulet of Zoz — there is a tale to it, if you would listen. Since I speak at your behest I shan't have to entice you with ale to hear my ramblings, as is ever the case.

I found myself commissioned, alongside thirteen stalwart Soldiers of the Court, to retrieve the Amulet of Zoz from a remote desert tomb, all in a former age even more remote. A local warlord called Hedulus the Ruddy, who fashioned himself a sort of king, was my employer. He reigned from a rude mud-brick palace, an ever-expanding harem of slaves at his beck, treasury overflowing with the spoils of rapine — truly, all the things necessary to make a king. These Soldiers of the Court, capable in their way, were of rude countenance and habits, though I welcomed them on my quest. A tomb-robber can't be too finicky when it comes to choosing his companions; suffice to say I'd worked with far worse in my time.

This amulet, as you may or may not know, was reputed to possess the power of rendering the wearer impervious to all harm. Arrows, sword thrusts, even dark magic: the old texts waxed voluminous in their praises of its efficacy. Hedulus, crude and foolish brute that he was, desired the thing for himself so he could lead his armies to the fray, rather than issuing commands from his pleasure-chambers. Some of his men, as it happens, were beginning to question the stalwartness of a warlord that never rode into battle. It would be a secret thing, his possession of the amulet, allowing him to appear brave in the grip of perils only faced by those fools who followed him. I must confess, I appreciated his perverse sense of cowardice; such twistings of character kept fellows like myself in a job. The thirteen, needless to say, were unaware of the particulars of their mission beyond ferrying me safely to the tomb, then retrieving me once the signal was given.

Everything happened in no small haste. A swift journey by night, riding on camel back, the twin moons painting the desert a blent shade of luminous umber. The amulet, so it happened, had been scried out for Hedulus by a seer of the Desolate Path,

gleaned from a copious gift of leper's entrails. It belonged to a low-caste magus named Reva Phi, who kept his ownership a fast secret. According to Hedulus' scouts, the magus, getting on in years, had recently forgotten to don the amulet before going to his well, dying from a serpent's bite to the heel. Already his body had been embalmed and wrapped by the local peoples, who revered him as something of a Holy Man. The amulet, accordingly, had been placed around his neck out of respect, the local peoples having no knowledge of its power.

The plan — which went according to itself, at least at first — dictated that I imbibe a tincture designed to imitate the state of death. This I did, once we reached an oasis near the necropolis where Reva Phi would be interred. Such practices no doubt seem peculiar, perhaps even blasphemous, to the righteous of this depressing age, when immolation is the commonest funerary rite. These people revered their ancestors, interring them with great pomp and wailings in a subterranean vault untold leagues in breadth. The mortal remains of ten-thousand cycles, stored up moldering in an eternal nitre-stinking night — ah, almost I can inhale and smell that delicious putridness anew! Regional customs prescribed preserving the dead until some hundred were massed, only then launching a torchlit pilgrimage to that chasm of death, depositing all the remains in one ecstatic ceremony.

I took the tincture, laid back and allowed myself to be swathed in the funerary bindings while still aware and breathing. Such a thing, of course, would be unthinkable for an amateur in my trade, but to me the enfolding of grave-cloth had become as familiar and comfortable as a caterpillar weaving itself into a cocoon. I knew I would be reborn in the depths below, life springing aware in the very pit of death's domain. Oh! Even the recounting thrills me. I seem to have developed a flush.

Hmm. Do I see you tapping your fingers in impatience? Such a youthful trait. Come now. You sought me out — and would I leapt right to telling of the amulet and its powers, perhaps even its current whereabouts. I counsel you to heed an old man's rambling, to endure and bide, lest I tire of my efforts to enlighten you.

Now where was I? Ah yes, in the tomb! I awoke in a reeking cedar coffin, my senses returning by gradual degrees as I sucked at air through the funerary bindings. At length, I felt able to stir my limbs and tear through the shroud, then proceeding to the technicality of freeing myself from the coffin. A woman of the local tribes had dressed my body for burial, risking the wrath of her ancestors for a few measly copper; funny, how sacrilege can be bought for almost any price.

Finally, I cut through the lid and extricated myself, sat up and lit a nitrous-torch, throwing a light into darkness both implacable and familiar. Immediately I saw the massive sealing-stone, put in place at ceremony's end, graven with wards to keep the dead at rest and appeased. Stacked around me lay a hundred further coffins, all sealed and dumped about the cavernous room with a surprising lack of ceremony. I frowned at this, feeling my first twinge of unease — and ever must a tomb-robber trust to their instincts. Still, I was not to be deterred, but set about prying open the coffins and rifling through their contents one-by-one. A morbid task, even for one of my mettle, for here were children struck down by fever or accident or sword-blade, women who had died in childbirth clutching the grave-swaddled forms of infants — always did that people slay the child if the mother died in birth, fearing it to be a demon. And youths and old men, and all the panoply of humanity, there mounded together in one heaping pile of disarranged coffins.

My task took some hours. In that time, I felt occasional breaths of cold, moist air from further on in the catacombs, prickling at my nape: this surprised me, as Hedulus' scouts described the place as possessing a singular dryness. Too, I could find no evidence of the untold generations of mummified corpses I had anticipated as companions to my labor. The tunnel leading down into the necropolis shone smooth and clean in my torchlight, almost as if polished; at turns, a low moaning or gurgling sound came out of that wet darkness, a sloshing and pulsing sound, as abhorrent to my ears as it was unknown. Yet, it seemed to draw no nearer, but to pulse out there in the black, a hungry and malign awareness I prayed would remain senescent for the length of my errand.

At last, upon opening and rifling through the seventieth coffin, I found Reva Phi's venom-distorted body. Not even the effects of embalming had served to smooth the rictus of agony from his features, his eyes protruding in sickly bulges beneath two gold coins laid over them. These I left undisturbed; best if one errs on the side of caution when undertaking such grim errands, not allowing greed to overcome common sense. The dead are quite content to stay dead — unless they feel they are being disrespected. At any rate, that's how it was in the age I speak of.

Slitting open the shroud, I found what I sought strung about the corpse's neck. The Amulet of Zoz, gleaming in the greenish glow of my nitrous-torch, a profound ruby set about with fretting of orichalc. I drew it out with a sense of reverence, careful first to don a pair of wyvern-skin gloves to protect me from any baneful eldritch emanation. The corpse, I daresay, did begin to stir, coins slipping from eyes that, for one terrible moment, seemed to stare up at me with a conscious wrath. Then they dimmed and withered inwards, the whole body going slack, collapsing with a rustle as of shifting sand.

I eased back from the magician's corpse and cradled my find, holding it up to glimmer and gleam by the light of my torch. Even then did I hear, from behind in the rank darkness, a sloshing and groaning that drew closer, with a rapidity that made me drop my find to the cold stone. It landed with a damning *clank!*

The thing bore down on me, pools of luminous slime oozing from the far aperture announcing its imminence. Staggering back in awe and horror, I snuffed my torch and scrabbled over to the sealing-block, knocking frantically but in set intervals at the engraved stone. My companions of the Guard, so stalwart-seeming, were meant to hear my poundings and let me out. However, no one answered my scrabbings and cries; it may be they took advantage of a chance to flee a tyrant's service, as I would have done in their place. Regardless, I cannot think too kindly on them, knowing they abandoned me to living interment without a thought or care.

The thing drew closer still, and I turned in the darkness with grit teeth, knowing I must face the peril with my own meager wits and main. At that, I cursed myself for dropping the amulet, insofar as it supposedly protected the wearer from harm. Yet would I have hesitated to put it on save at utmost need, not knowing anything of its effects beyond the anecdotal; that I touched it with protective gloves should say as much.

What then emerged from the dark is blazoned on my memory. Yea, though I have raided ten-thousand charnel houses, slept side-by-side with the dead, even seeing them stir to vengeful animacy at my ministrations; though baneful spirits and bleak gods have I thwarted aplenty, this one thing I remember with perfect vividness. Even as I flushed with eager nostalgia to recall the grave's bouquet, so I now tremble with chill to recount what I witnessed, what befell.

From that cavernous blackness came the groping, slime-exuding mass of a great white Worm. I beheld it by light of its own luminescence, waves of flourescing slime cascading from its gluttonous segments to pave the chamber floor in a sticky seepage. I describe it as a worm, so perhaps you think it moved slow or ponderously, even as an earthworm does; but no. Fast as a lightning-strike it set about devouring the amassed coffins and their contents, a toothless maw gaping open near the head (if, indeed, it possessed such a thing) into which the dead flowed on a river of lubricating slime. Horrible suckling and slurping sounds it made as it supped to the last corpse on that overbountiful offering, my eyes fixed and unblinking all the while, riveted by the throbbing white coils of its body as it swallowed each casket, the bulges proceeding down its interminable length into depthless darkness beyond.

I see, now, I have something of your earnest attention. Forgotten all about the amulet, mayhap? Well, so had I. Lost in the ghoulish spectacle before me, all thought of my mission fled my mind, and I made no effort to locate the amulet. Only when I saw it glinting in the light of that phosphorescent slime, borne on a tide of the stuff *into* that great Worm's craw, did I remember aught of my errand, cursing myself silently for having lost it in so catastrophic a way. I knew now I must confront the Worm if I would succeed in my duty and collect my pay; furthermore, the thing's hunger showed no signs of appeasement, which led me to believe once the corpses were consumed it would come for my sweeter, more vital meat. Trembling at the task suddenly before me, I snicked my shortsword from the sheath at my thigh as I watched the Worm gorge itself, though never to satiety. 'Bottomless as a ghou's gullet,' so the saying once went. I can assure you the bottom fell out of my stomach in that moment.

Wasting no time, knowing the amulet would be quick-digested into the untold depths of the Worm's bowel, I re-lit my torch and charged forward with what could be easily mistaken for a valiant cry. Would you chuckle at such a claim if you knew aught of me, even the daintiest and most diluted whisper! Courage is born of necessity; this philosophy I have embraced since the very beginnings of my career. I will charge to the fray out of need, but risking life and limb for an ideal is as foreign to me as sunlight to those deep-sunk crypts that were once my purview. Only glory, and fame, and the marvelous clinking of coins ever drove my exploits, a sick irony to me in this world where I find myself long-forgotten, wealth and dross now of like value. Nevertheless, what follows cannot help sound like something of a brave exploit simply for bravery's sake. In olden days I would let that delusion stand, but Time has rendered me too bitter to indulge in such fancies, even at risk of disenchanting my audience.

Swinging my blade and howling madly, I charged at the great Worm's foremost part, hewing about myself with frantic swipes and stabs. The thing took immediate notice of my attack, rearing up like some segmented viper, scraping itself against the roof of the cavern to leave a patina of luminous slime. This served to shed further light on the unfolding scene, me struggling through sloughing layers of discharge to hack at the Worm's vast pulpy flanks, it wriggling and groaning as foul gasses vented from its maw. I managed to wound it several times, to little avail, save that streams of muddy fluid flowed from the rents I cut to pollute the lucid ooze-pool. The thing took umbrage at being thus stung, and lunged forward with a quickness I can only liken to an adder's strike. With one huge sucking motion it thrust me halfway down its gullet, the pulsing and trembling of slime-slick segments pressing noisome about my face as I continued to hack about blindly with my blade.

You may think I feared for my life; yet, I wore such charms about me as to hold suffocation at bay, normally useful in staving off the paralyzing effects of grave-fetor. Even so, the prospect of becoming a long-suffering morsel for the Worm to digest at its leisure filled me with so extreme a horror that I started thrashing and squirming impotently, inadvertently thrusting myself further down the Worm's craw. Soon all but my feet were consumed, the pressure of the thing about me like one massive constricting muscle. I kept myself from screaming as even my feet slurped into its crop, and I began the long journey down its tract (endless, for all I knew). Just another delicacy, something to writhe and kick and squirm, a diverting tidbit for this gorged of aeons.

I saw something akin to my life flash before my eyes. A romantic notion, though I confess it ran accurate in all pertinent details. I watched myself at my first exhumation, eagerly prying open a coffin's lid only to stagger back and retch and reel, appalled by the corruption held therein. My companions laughed at me; one picked up the corpse and danced it about, posthumous fluids flowing from its orifices to dapple the disturbed earth. Ah, sweet memories of youth! Later, I saw my first commission — to retrieve a buckler from some necromancer-prince's tomb. Of course the fiend laid an animacy cantrip on himself, so that he came to monstrous life as soon as I broke the seal of his resting

place. A learning experience, we shall call it that. And onward, to riches and glory and putrefaction's profoundest depth — I have hinted this was not, by far, my first voluntary interment. A life of renown, wrested from Death's irresistible grip! I cannot say the irony of being ingested by a colossal worm was lost on me. Always I considered worms my allies, fellow tunnelers of charnel darkness, feeding on death and decay even as myself; never had I thought to be likewise consumed, making assurances by carrying an incendiary charm which would reduce my body, at death, to inanimateable ash. A further irony, given my disdain for present funerary customs, but also a necessity, as I had many enemies in that time capable of calling the dead back to unwilling service.

Then, again, I found myself traversing the Worm's length, my body crushed by its pulsing motions, all darkness and sickly-sweet scent of that slime coupled to an abattoir miasma. Bits of partially crushed bodies surged about me, raking at my flesh, their coffins broken to splinters by the same force my living body now endured. Skulls and limbs and shreds of mummified flush pressed in on me, and I beat against them with a frantic strength born of life's final desperation. Then, thinking perhaps I could find the amulet, I calmed myself and changed tactics, instead thrusting myself forcefully further down the Worm's gorge. A desperate hope; but one shall see I was rewarded. After only a few minutes of grasping in the corrosive muck my fingers closed around the Amulet of Zoz, as though it had heard my call and gravitated towards my hand. I clutched it close, and, with a shiver of dread, slipped the amulet around my neck.

What follows is a tale of little interest, save to the one who endured it. How can I describe in a manner fitting to the experience the long, endless progress through that maggot's corpse-glutted innards? You see, I can attest to the amulet's sovereign power — it did keep me from all harm, and made no other demand upon my flesh or spirit, as I had justifiably feared. But that was all the succor it afforded me. Forced to endure the long process of digestion, subsumed in a froth of decaying flesh and erosive juices, I settled in to wait, this nightmare of mucus-fraught membranes my waking-and-sleeping womb. You may wonder that I didn't persist in hacking about me with my sword, save it had gotten lost, torn from me in the moments after my consumption. My sole option was to 'ride it out,' as the steppes barbarians once said; to meditate through a horror so profound as to stun the spirit and gall the mind.

I note your excitement. Do your fingers always dance and twitch so? I'd not want you as a partner in cards, my friend!

At last — some weeks or months, I never was able to figure the exact reckoning — I found myself disgorged into a tremendous subterranean space. It happened as quick as a foal slipping from its mother, and just like a foal did I gasp and scramble and stagger, my body wasted by its long trial despite the charms that kept starvation at bay. As you may surmise, I found myself at the Worm's anterior end, shit out with the offal of its endless meal of death. Here, in the underground, I saw the generations of its excess in full: mounds of bones high as mountains, towering up into a murky gloom lit only by mires of the glowing slime, which lapped about the mounds in a rank and feculant sea. I

saw the Worm's end, twitching and thrashing and gaping just as had its head; I quickly realized the thing had no proper head or tail, but was exact at both ends. It reared up and made to strike, seeking once more to devour me, but I managed to grab up a splintered bit of shank bone and fend it off, falling back to finally hide myself amid a pile of funerary rubbish.

I crouched there for a protracted time, half-submerged in a noxious pool, body trembling as it readjusted to mobility. I formed many a plan, concocted many a half-baked whimsy of escape, but ultimate realization was fast in coming. I understood I could not slay the worm, nor could I squeeze around its bulk to make my way upwards. The only way *out*, such as it were, was the same way as *in*. You can imagine how fiercely I debated myself over this course; but, my charms were failing, hunger and exhaustion gnawing at me even as the Worm had done. At last, making sure the Amulet of Zoz hung secure around my neck, I stepped back out into the cavern to confront the slavering white thing — to offer myself up to its appetites.

Quickly was I consumed; far less quick was my passage. The Worm's digestion, as I had hoped, carried me forward and up instead of excreting me back into the cavern. Pitiful solace, when one has subjected oneself to an ordeal of such nightmarish proportion. By slow and agonizing degrees this morsel crept back up that white throat of death, even as I forgot the look of true sunlight, or the feeling of fresh air filling my lungs. A sweet oblivion I could have found, I think, in that abyssal gut, had the Worm not at last spit me back up near the tomb's entrance, making a wretched moaning as it did so. Hermides Senph, the indigestible!

Rising, I had to stagger forward through the darkness, dragging my debilitated carcass with muscles atrophied by two long digestions in the dark. The Worm, I suspect, had tired of trying to eat me — again, an irony of which I heartily savor. It let me scrabble on, though I know it could have overtaken and devoured me again in an instant. Coming to the sealing-stone, I beat upon it with my fists like a fool before finally collapsing into exhausted slumber. Waking, I found the Worm had receded further into the depths, leaving only a still pool of cooling slime to testify its presence. I rose, vivified by the last virtue of my charms, and set to dislodging the stone, at last resorting to smearing the Worm's slime all about its edges and at the base. At length this succeeded in lubricating the plug, so that it slid outwards from the necropolis entrance, toppling with a mighty crash. Tottering and excreta-besmeared, my garb reduced to liquifying tatters, I wandered out into the desert night, hoping to come to some kind of aid.

I made for the oasis where I'd taken the tincture and been bound in swathings, the oasis where Hedulus' soldiers were meant to spirit me after hearing my signal, however many moons ago. Once there, I slaked my thirst and washed the worse part of the worm's filth from my body, turning the pool dark with effluence. Stripped naked, still I wore the Amulet of Zoz, afraid that if I removed it I would simply collapse in death. Afterward, I retrieved a modest sack of gold I'd hidden in the sands beyond, just beneath an outlying *freu* palm; my down payment from Hedulus for retrieving the amulet.

Still weak, still reeling, barely able to lift the sack in my emaciated state, I at last stumbled on a nearby caravanserai, where the proprietors took me in at a glance. Never did they

question the putrid stink accompanying me, or the state of my gaunt near-nakedness. Palms were greased, whispered words exchanged, and I found myself with a safe room in the loft, hot baths on the daily, and enough food to choke ten great Worms. I ate and slept and gradually recovered my strength, though my sleep was nightly plagued, forcing me to extend my recovery over three long months. In that time I spoke with elders from the surrounding tribes, learning the priests of the necropolis kept it tightly sealed against all outsiders, and were rumored to appease a horrid power that dwelt beneath. More the fool I, having taken Hedulus' blockheaded scouts at their word.

When finally I felt strong enough to depart, I returned in disguise (a simple thing, considering my lingering leanness) to the court of Hedulus the Ruddy with my spoils, thinking to gauge the king's displeasure and collect — if possible — the remainder of my payment. But, alas, the mud-brick fortress lay toppled and hollowed out by fire, the camps deserted save for a few stragglers and pickers, sifting through the rubble of momentary ambition. Barbarian kingdoms, as they say, “shift like the desert sands.” I then struck out to the west, still wearing the Amulet of Zoz as a protective element. I became aware, in my recuperation, that it did possess a certain unwholesomeness, insofar as it compelled the possessor to wear it at all times. Truly, I think it may have tired of being in Reva Phi's care, making him forget it when he went to the well. Perhaps, even, it had complicity in the snake-strike that killed him; this is all foundless speculation. Still, enough to make me stop wearing it after a short while, and seal it inside a runebox for safekeeping. The runebox where it abides to this day, even still.

Ah! Your fingers clench now, instead of dance. We come to the meat of the tale. Yes, even after all the eliding centuries since I know where the amulet lies hidden. None has made discovery of it, not in tired ages of the world's turning. It is, in fact, the very last of my trove, secreted away alongside a few choice bits of loot and coinage of vanished empires. A full century it's been, since any came to me seeking aught: almost I had forgotten myself in the drudgery of this Enlightened age. Heartening to see there are still those who seek uncouth powers, who yearn for personal gain in spite of the Lords and their haughty, pious teachings.

The very last of my trove, won by Hermides Senph, Conqueror of the Conqueror Worm! Given money is no longer of matter to me, what are you willing to pay, I wonder? I promise a price as extraordinary as the prize.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott J. Couturier is a poet & prose writer of the Weird, grotesque, & darkly fantastic. A lover of high fantasy since childhood, one night he followed a friendly ghoul down a tomb's dank passage, discovering the hidden world & wonder of horror. His work has appeared in numerous venues, including *The Audient Void*, *Spectral Realms*, *The Dark Corner Zine*, *Space & Time Magazine*, & *Weirdbook*; a 2008 graduate of Knox College (BA in Creative Writing & English Lit), he was a co-founder of *Knox Quiver*, a genre magazine that has since become a campus institution. Currently he works as a copy & content editor for Mission Point Press, living an obscure reverie in the wilds of northern Michigan with his partner/live-in editor & two cats.

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BENEATH A SCARLET MOON

By NATHAN MEYER

*All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and
all turn to dust again*

— Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, Verse 20

*When dust has drunk the blood of man, no res-
urrection comes to the dead*

— Aeschylus, the father of Tragedy

THE dying sun set. Twilight arrived. A scarlet moon rose. In splintered ruins, the barbican jutted from a barren landscape. For leagues around the devris stretched a poisoned wilderness. The badlands ran toward horizons of sawtoothed hills below the waxing, gibbous moon.

Arid breezes lifted grit off the waste and flung it into the air. Thermal drafts moaned in the distance like sleeping captives. Among the desiccated stalks and branches of desert scrub night predators slunk.

Across this desolation rode Auric, a marauder. Civilized men called him the dust viper, or worse. Bearded, he was lean, built for endurance, built for the desert. A plain headband held back dreadlocked hair. He wore a light jerkin the color of sandalwood over leather pants tucked into high boots.

He dripped plunder in the manner of barbaric warlords. Beads of topaz, amethyst, and turquoise decorated his beard. He wore a silver nose ring, a match to the silver hoops piercing his ears. Gold glinted at throat and wrists. His hands were garnished with rings once adorning the fingers of opium-princes and merchant-captains.

Yet the sword hanging at his cante was a plain, wide-bladed falchion. A journeyman's tool. In his hand he gripped the haft of a calvary lance, though he served no army. He was a raider. Raiding was life.

Auric pulled his reins, easing the horse to a halt.

The black mare was an ill-tempered beast. The nomads he purchased her from called her the Hellbitch. She kicked or tried to bite if he grew complacent. The nomads, savvy horse traders, hadn't seemed sorry to lose her. Still, she was fast and did not tire.

Swinging from the saddle, he sheathed the lance in the gravel and examined the remains of a cookfire. Light was visible for a hundred miles across the waste. Yet, he'd seen nothing in the dark these last two nights.

Witchcraft.

A simple spell, a cantrip, no more, but effective enough. So, a conjurer then, the one he chased as they fled to their lair in the far ruins. As expected. He looked closer, eager to see some sign of the boy.

Squatting, he felt the embers. Soot stained the tips of his fingers. Holding them to his nose he rubbed thumb and finger, smelling. The ash held no heat. He was little closer this night than the one before.

He tightened the chase, but not enough.

Sensing motion, he reacted instantly. The Hellbitch's teeth snapped together where his backside had been. He whirled on the horse, scowling. The mare regarded him. Her tail flicked.

Auric made a disgusted grunt and continued inspecting the campsite, moving away from the malicious beast. She nickered gruffly. It sounded mocking.

Out of the twilight rose a howl. A chorus of yips from every direction answered the call. A hunting pack responding to the alpha. Desert wolves. Perhaps. Perhaps something worse.

"Mitra," he muttered.

The invocation could have been a curse, could have been a prayer. It was doubtful even he knew if it was one thing or the other. The gods ruled, but he did not trust them.

Deities created man, but made him weak, then seemed bent on feeding that weakness like freezing men fed a fire. His relationship to their pantheons remained tenuous. He'd seen too much. Done too much.

Devils now...*devils* he understood.

He discovered a glyph in the dust.

The charm was drawn no bigger than his palm. Another small magic. Frowning, he traced the shape with a finger, trying to discern if it was older than the fire. His skin tingled as the cuneiform etching released its curse.

A long black centipede burst from the dust, striking Auric's hand as he snatched it away. Moaning through clenched teeth he staggered. The bug scurried away. His hand burned. He well understood this searing kiss meant death.

Dizzy, he went to his knees, shivering as sweat drenched him. Irrational giddiness forced manic laughter from his lips. His jaw stiffened. Grasping his wrist he squeezed, trying to slow the blood flowing back toward his body, toward his heart. This was an act of desperation.

Death would come, he knew, but not for a while. He was strong, and well used to suffering. He calculated he had until dawn before collapsing. After this the end would arrive quickly. His mortality was as inevitable as the wind. As inevitable as the dust.

Struggling to his feet, he looked south. The stone fist of the barbican stood silhouetted in the scarlet sheen of the indifferent moon. He might reach it yet. He called to the Hellbitch.

The mare snorted, uneasy.

She quivered on stiffened legs, baring her teeth in a grimace. He staggered to her. Unconsciously, he reached for his sword. It was a futile effort. His sword hand was already swollen beyond use. The falchion hung from his saddle, how had he forgotten?

What spooked the mare? Wolves, or an adder maybe? A hill cat? Something worse? The desert was tainted by sorcerous curses. *Something worse* was a real fear. Grasping the lance with his good hand, he leaned against it, panting with the effort.

"Easy."

His voice croaked harshly, hardly soothing. The Hellbitch tossed her head and whinnied in distrust. Her eyes rolled, showing white. If she ran off he was dead.

I'll be dead sooner, he silently corrected. *Because, by Mitra's crotch, I am dead anyway.*

"Easy!"

He lunged for the reins.

Catching hold, he held tight as the mare reared in protest. Jerked from his feet, he fell to the ground. Blades of agony knifed through his hand. The hard earth clubbed his breath from his lungs as the sky spun.

Free, the Hellbitch reared once more, hooves gleaming in the red light of the moon. Auric rolled. Her hooves struck where his head had rested and grit peppered his face. He rolled again, coming to all fours.

Neighing, the mare lashed out and a glancing blow caught his chest. The impact flung him.

Hooves drumming the ground, the mare fled. She was nothing if not fleet, and in a heartbeat all that remained of her was the fading sound of her gallop. By tomorrow evening she'd likely reappear at the oasis camp he purchased her from. He wondered how many times the horse traders had played this trick.

How the bastards will laugh, he thought.

He smiled. It was a pretty good joke.

Auric knew only the desert. He'd taken a nomad wife in the old way, by raiding. She bore him a son who'd also known nothing but the desert, like Auric's father, and his father's father. Dying in the desert didn't surprise him. Death didn't surprise him.

The boy still needed him.

Dust choking his throat, he gasped, exhausted. His arm burned with thorns of pain. His chest ached. The back of his head was matted with blood from where he'd struck sharp rocks.

If you are a warrior then stand, man.

His eyes found the red moon. Stark against dry oceans of scarlet dust, black mountains turned the lunar sphere to a skull. This made sense.

Death filled his thoughts.

• • •

AURIC shivered. Venom cooked his veins. Bile dripped from his mouth. His knotted joints ached. Vision blurring, he saw as through dirt-smeared glass. His breath made high pitched wheezes. Throat tightening, his lungs itched in his chest.

Near delirium, he called to the boy. In a moment of clarity he discovered he was crawling. He had no idea for how long. The

fugue returned. Mind elsewhere, he continued dragging himself over the shale and gravel. Later, as the moon reached its zenith, his awareness returned.

The sky was cloudless, offering no protection from the dying sun during the day, but also trapping none of its heat once it set. Now he found himself gripped by bitter chill. The moisture of his breath formed hoarfrost in his beard.

Clip-clop, clip-clop

A rider approached.

Emerging from darkness the noise reverberated, directionless. He tried concentrating. An instinct to stubbornness, bred through generations, pulled his hand to his knife. Fighting the venom's deadly lethargy, he unsheathed the blade.

He'd slit throats with it, honed its edge to take scalps as trophies. Having never given mercy, he expected none.

Clip-clop, clip-clop

The staccato repetition drubbed louder as the rider neared. Auric lifted his head, tight sinews stretched into cables beneath his clenched jaw. He brought the knife up. His hand trembled.

He was too weak to fight. Death was inevitable. Surrender unthinkable.

The woman was gone now, long swallowed by the desert, but there was the boy. If he didn't struggle to his last then he was failing the boy. He couldn't brook the thought.

Darkness took form.

An outline darker than night appeared, souring his stomach. The silhouette was massive; surely an armored warrior on a big horse, both black as ink. Black as witchcraft. His knuckles whitened on the knife hilt.

The rider advanced, approaching as inexorably as the rising of the skullish moon. Auric grinned as the figure loomed, impossibly tall. The shape formed from the night.

Auric gaped. He couldn't comprehend the sight. It was myth.

Clip-clop, clip-clop

The sound of hoof striking gravel swelled loud as thunder in desert canyons. Its crash shook the earth. What came was many things. It was a legend made real. It was a children's fright. A grandfather's story.

It was not a rider and mount.

The creature halted before Auric. Onyx hooves filled his eyes, flowing into colossal forelocks. He flinched backward, feebly raising the knife. Sweat beaded his pale skin.

The body rose in columns of muscle under pitchblack hide. The transformation from equine to demi-human began at the withers where the two forms merged seamlessly. The human torso had skin of near purple ebony.

A centaur, and a female.

Muscles stood etched like living obsidian. From the back great thews swept in thick wings to either side of a sinewy chest. Framed by a warrior's arms, an ankh of gleaming electrum hung between large curves of feminine cleavage. She was primordial.

Mute, he studied the savage beauty illuminating her face. Raven tresses trailed to the coarser hair of her mane. Pitiless eyes gleamed between prominent cheekbones.

Her gaze, the cast of her features, struck him dumb as a blow to the face. The intelligence in her eyes dwarfed his own. She gripped his abandoned lance in strong hands.

The centurine spoke, voice deeply melodious, in trade-cant, the language of the caravans.

"I know you, marauder," she said. "You are Auric, the jackal, a thief and reaver, scourge to civilized men. Is there anything to you but a vicious temperament and murderous blade?"

Sighing, Auric sagged in the dust.

The arm holding the knife dropped. He denied nothing. Raiding was life. His people were never herdsman or farmers or caravan drovers. They were warriors. Raiding was their eternal way. Wolves hunt, this is understood.

Yet he thought there was something else. Something more.

Throat burning, he didn't consider his reply. The answer was there, ready to be shared with any who cared to know. Swallowing, he forced words from his vomit-caked mouth.

"I am."

"Really?" she scoffed, her disbelief palpable. "What then?"

"Father."

She studied him.

For a time there was only the sound of wind as she weighed his life. Her tail twitched. He lay dying as she considered his fate. A nighthawk cried shrilly. Flies droned, drawn by his decay. At last, she made her decision and, having decided, acted. She lifted him as easily as he'd once lifted the boy.

The humiliation stung, but he was too weak to argue. The centaurine bore him into the night, cradled like a child.

. . .

THE journey became a blur of pain and desperate struggles to breathe. He turned his face to the breeze, trying to cool his fever.

The Centaurine, smelling of healthy horseflesh, carried him, never offering to put him astride her back. He thought the folklore true that centaurs would rather die than be ridden. As she carried him she kept hold of the lance.

They entered a twisting arroyo. The ravine walls rose as they continued. Soon they arrived at a large, open cave tucked under the curve of a massive boulder. Protected from the wind, the gully remained eerily quiet. The flames of a cookfire cast shadows across the rock.

Lowering Auric, she placed his lance against a wall. Unable to move, he lay there while she searched chests and leather sacks. An iron pot hung above the fire on a metal tripod. Delirious, his gaze searched the cave but couldn't interpret what he saw.

His fever burned. The will to continue breathing was the whole of his world. Chest rising and falling. Air moving in and out. This was his universe. He watched the flames, mesmerized. He was unaware of time passing.

Suddenly the centaurine lifted him to a sitting position. She pressed a metal cup to his lips. The fluid inside smelled bitter.

"Drink."

He didn't argue. She hadn't carried him miles only to poison him.

Swallowing, he found the potion sour. He drank deeply. Once he finished the cup she eased him down. He realized she'd knelt to help him. With a centaur's weight this was likely difficult. This humbled him.

"The tincture works quickly. You should feel relief in moments."

"Thank you."

His voice was still hoarse, but it hurt less to speak. A euphoric tingle flushed his body, warming his limbs.

"Do not thank me."

"Why?"

"The elixir masks your pain and gives great energy for a short while. I have not cured you. I have only eased your suffering. There is no cure."

Auric grew stronger with each breath. Sitting up, he tested the injured hand. The swelling had receded and there was only minor discomfort when he flexed it. His mood grew exuberant. Knowing that he was still dying didn't frighten him.

His eyes drew to the polished ankh between her breasts. He turned his gaze lest she think him ill-mannered. He knew the symbol. It was the relic of a clergy from the time before the land was cursed. Though centuries dead, their sigil endured, it seemed.

He doubted their religion fared so well. He suspected any gods it represented were as impotent as the rest.

"Still, I thank you," he said. "I must reach the ruin. Now I may continue."

"You seek the Ovate?"

"A boy was taken," he said. "You know of the covenant? The vile witches stole him days ago. I hunt them."

"There is no covenant. There is only the Ovate and a handmaiden, no more. The rest are gone. Perhaps for years."

He needed to stand. Trying, he found he could. Giddiness staggered him, but kept his feet. Expression impassive, the centaurine watched, seeming to consider some thought of her own. After a moment she questioned him.

"You know the centipede's bite?"

"Yes. A clever trap this Ovate left. I might survive until sunrise, likely less. I need to hurry while your potion strengthens me. I am the boy's only hope. You know what witches do to captives?"

She nodded. "Pederasts. Much given to torture and sacrifice."

"Just so."

Studying her, though her skin was utterly smooth, he discerned great age. Her melancholy air spoke not of centuries, but to milleniums. Was this possible?

Auric frowned.

He'd harried the borderlands for decades. When the desert swallowed the woman, he searched for untold leagues. Relentless, he crossed sand and shale and fields of sharp black stone formed by ancient volcanoes. The woman had vanished.

In all that time he discovered no trace or rumor of the fabled centaurs. They were fiction told around campfires. Yet, here one stood. The wasteland was beyond ancient. Epochs old, perhaps. Who knew what else dwelt in secret places?

"Are there more of your kind?"

"Once our remudas ruled the plains, but the sun sets on my kind. I am the last. The last of an older age."

Though moved by her plight, he did not offer condolences. He would not embarrass her by acknowledging her weakness. It was told the centaurs were a warrior-breed. He understood the culture of warriors.

Eyes fixed to the past, her thoughts seemed to drift as she spoke.

"We hunted the great herds and drank from the pools of sap-phire streams. Then the poison-fire of the First Ovate cursed the land. The plains died. The sun burned hotter, dying. Rains gone, the rivers dried. No mare could bring a foal to term. We battled the wyvern and manticore. We fought chimeras in all their variations. Our numbers dwindled. I was young when it began. I watched us die."

"The Ovate is so powerful?"

Still in her memories, she absently shook her head.

"Once they were mighty. This Ovate is like a slow child compared to the elder priests. A pretender, nothing more."

Better a pretender than one strong enough to poison suns, he thought.

Coming back to herself, the centaurine spoke almost too softly to hear.

"I am young no more. I am alone."

She walked from beneath the overhang and galloped into the night. Her hoofbeats faded. Finding water in skins, he drank. Finding stew in the pot, he ate.

Soon she returned with the Hellbitch. He learned her name was Khaista. He drank more of her elixir and prepared to do battle.

. . .

THE Hellbitch was not pleased to see Auric. They eyed each other like ex-lovers. Though relieved to have his mount, he couldn't say he was joyous to see the horse.

"A blessing for returning my horse."

"Of course I found your horse. Did you think to ride me, human?"

"Never," he replied.

The answer pleased her.

The Hellbitch allowed the centaurine to stroke her mane. The demi-human calmed the animal. Nonplussed, he frowned at the mare.

"She's feisty," Khaista said. "I like her."

"Someone should."

She laughed.

"Yes, the mare's greenbroke at best. Her spirit is like fire."

Auric pulled himself into the saddle. Tossing her head, the Hellbitch whinnied in complaint, but made no further protest.

"Again, I thank you."

"I have a request."

"I am in your debt."

"Your lance. It is finely made. I admire it."

Auric didn't need to consider. Inside the ruins the lance would be awkward. It seemed small price to pay for what she'd given. Killing the Ovate would be work for sword and knife.

"It is yours."

Stepping to a peg driven into a crack in the wall, she took down a conical helm with a bronze nose guard and lined with kid-leather. Around the rim, squares of malachite and lapis lazuli gleamed in copper settings. He marvelled to see it.

It is the helm of a prince.

It was old, an artifact of an age when smiths traded their daughters to the jinn for the talent of shaping metal. A time before civilization forced order on a lawless land and then lost it all over again. The helm might be as venerable a relic as the ankh.

"I think this an unfair exchange for you."

Bemused, she presented Auric the helm. It was a treasure of rare craftsmanship. The lance was well-made, but he'd gotten a far better trade.

"This is too valuable."

His protest was embarrassingly half-hearted.

"What it is," Khaista replied, "is gathering dust."

He took the helm. It fit well.

She continued, "as is this."

From a second peg she removed an armor piece consisting of manica and galerus.

Fastened by a leather strap around the torso, the mail was designed to protect the body opposite a warrior's sword arm. A bronze plate covered half the chest, protecting the heart. A half-collar guarded the jugular. *Galerus* was the shoulder armor and *manica* that of the arm.

"A vestige of battle-slaves who entertained now forgotten potentates. They killed and died for amusement, but you'll find it light and more adaptable than a shield."

Auric possessed a fine cuirass of ringmail, but had left it in his haste to give chase. While scant protection compared to heavier armor, he was by nature a skirmisher and raider. He thought the centaurine correct; at close quarters the mail would prove more agile than a shield.

"I thank you, humbly."

Lowering his head he touched sword hand to brow in salute. This was the old way.

"Like everything left from the time before," she said dismissively, "it also only gathers dust."

The demi-human seemed discomfited by his formal courtesy.

Still, he thought, *she seems pleased by the respect.*

He thought of her saying *I am alone* and wondered how long since she'd shared conversation.

As he donned the armor Khaista hefted the lance. Firelight played across the electrum of her ankh. Studying the haft, she spoke.

"I feel like a bit of exercise tonight. I would accompany you, maurader."

He brightened at the idea of such a capable ally. He didn't understand her decision, however. He was no kith to her. The ways of the few remaining demi-human races in the world were mysterious to him. Of centaurs he knew nothing. The Elder Races were unconcerned with mankind.

"I appreciate the company."

"Then let us go."

Auric gave the Hellbitch her lead. The horse followed the centaurine without complaint. Once clear of the arroyo they broke into a canter that quickly covered ground.

The dying sun was gone as if a myth. Night deepened. Scarlet, the moon ruled.

• • •

THE barbican stood black against the rhuborus moon. They made toward it.

Auric asked, "Do you know the ruins?"

"Well enough. It is the remains of a border keep now centuries gone. It fell by treachery when I was young. Decades later the conjurer Hilkiah inhabited the ruins. He summoned the offspring of Baal to frighten the nomads while he delved sorcerous enigmas in the barbican and midden beneath."

Auric listened, impressed by her casual references to stories from so far in the past. Again her incalculable age and solitude struck him.

How must it be to see all you know disappear and the world forget you?

As if hearing those thoughts she spoke.

"It is said, marauder, that all die two deaths. The first when they pass, the second when their name is spoken aloud a final time."

He thought of the woman, consumed by this far-flung desolation. He vowed to say her name to the boy, to have him tell his own children. He nodded to show Khaista he listened, but his thoughts were of the woman.

Despite the elixir's euphoria, melancholy worried at him. He was dying. The moon falling from zenith to nadir was his hourglass. Its descent mirrored his own. He must free the boy.

"What happened to the conjurer?"

"Over two hundred years his studies took blasphemous turns. Then his light no longer shone in the tower. Hungry, his pets stalked the badlands."

"Until the witches were driven to the waste?"

"Of all the miscreants the Fledgling Nations could force here, the covens were the least advised. None but the worshippers of Baal could thrive so readily in the taint of such dark thaumaturgy."

• • •

CRESTING a gravel knoll they entered a thicket of agitated trees.

The petrified snags reflected dully in the moonlight. Amid the fossilized trunks clung thick strands of spiderwebs. By their size he guessed the spiders to be large as cats. At least. Unconsciously, he worried the centipede bite.

Shadows choked the fading scar of an ancient road. The barbican squatted before them, shattered battlements like broken teeth.

"Be wary," Khaista advised. "The ruin's evil sickens the land for leagues, but the Ovate's true defenses begin here." Voice subdued, she added, "I remember when this weald was a verdant garden."

The decrepit road was marked by the faded ruts of cart wheels, the ground flattened by the steps of innumerable men and beasts

all long, long dead. The avenue curved through memory as much as dead forest.

The Hellbitch knickered and Khaista halted.

A branch snapped in the woods. Drawing up, Auric gripped his sword. A great owl exploded from a branch, wildly screeching as it beat wings into flight.

Cursing, he realized the beating wings were leathery, the body featherless, it was no bird. A bat, larger than any he knew. The nightflyer entered a beam of moonlight and was illuminated by reddened brilliance.

"Mitra!"

The horned imp's face contorted as hateful yellow eyes challenged them. Forked tongue flickering, the imp lashed a prehensile tail and vanished in the crooked boles. The Hellbitch tossed her head, snapping her mane. Auric patted her neck, startled to feel the animal trembling.

"Evil is old here," Khaista warned. "That horror crawled from deep cracks long centuries past."

"Sing a song, a finger long, pocket full of lye..."

At the sharp, childish soprano Auric stood in his saddle, drawing the falchion.

"...four and twenty blackbirds baked into a pie."

The girl was a raggamuffin, dressed in motley scraps. Febrile eyes blazed in her dirty face. She stood in the center of the road, hair like filthy straw sticking out in frayed strands. The strings of a bedraggled bonnet knotted beneath a grubby chin. Her ragged nails were stained as her tunic.

"Do you need help, child?" he called.

He was puzzled. How was she here? Was she some escaped captive?

Dazzling light burst out into the night and he looked to Khaista. The silvered ankh on her chest flashed like a comet's tail before dimming to a softer luminescence. She stabbed the lance toward the child.

"Begone little jinn!"

Shifting, he glanced about, suspecting ambush. Her relic clearly warned of evil.

"The Ovate mocks you," the girl intoned.

"Begone," Khaista repeated. "Back to your foul lord with you."

"My father is here."

To one side the underbrush crashed as heavy steps drummed over hard ground. Cueing her with knees, Auric spun the mare. Beneath the helm his eyes darted. A dark form leapt a log and the Hellbitch reared.

"Hello papa," the raggamuffin sang.

"Witchling brat!" Khaista hissed.

Head thrown back, the girl shrieked laughter. Moonlight ignited her in russet halos. Auric glimpsed teeth filed to nails poking from black gums. She pointed.

"Suffer!"

Terror burst forth. Auric saw the bearded face of a man, head larger than a table, its body that of a scorpion-tailed lion. Manticores. Eyes burning with eldritch energy, the beast gnashed its teeth, voice booming.

"INTERLOPERS!"



“Stay back!”

Auric shouted the warning, fighting to rein in his horse. The raggamuffin fled.

The manticore crouched, tensed to spring. Its great stinger whipped forward and back. Focused on the centaurine, the monster dismissed the human.

“Ah! Pretty filly, we meet once more,” it leered. “After so long, at last I find my love again.”

“I be no lover of yours, dung-eater.”

She answered simply, her lance held steady. Auric thought the manticore sneered. Its human face was well-made, handsome except for yellow incisors large as sickle blades.

“If I’d caught you that long ago morning I would have begot such children on you the Gorgons themselves would cower.”

“I tire of your impotent boasts, piss-drinker.”

Bellowing, the manticore sprang.

The centaurine charged.

Enthralled by the brutal pageant, Auric watched them clash. Muscles along Khaista’s back bunched as she thrust the lance. The sharp tip pierced the monster.

The manticore roared, the blade sinking deep. It stumbled, tail lashing, barb striking the centaurine once, twice.

Snik-thwak, snik-thwak.

The sounds of a butcher hacking a carcass.

Crying out, Khaista faltered. Yanking her lance clean in a motion that splashed gore across the dust, she retreated. Blood streamed from twin cavities torn into her abdomen. Syurpy venom soaked her wounds.

“Auric go!”

Auric hesitated, loath to abandon her.

“Go!” she roared. “Take this and go!”

So speaking she snatched the ankh from her neck and threw it. Catching it, he heeled the mare around. Racing, he swung the falchion. The blade carved the manticore’s flesh. The beast lashed a riposte and black claws ripped avulsions across Auric’s leg.

Khaista charged, driving the lance deep. The manticore brayed. Auric shot past the behemoth. In this way he entered the ruins.

. . .

THE lone gatetower was all that remained of the once mighty keep.

Piles of fractured rubble formed uneven mounds. Lightning strikes had scarred blackened pinwheels on the hillocks. Wiry plants clung stubbornly in the alkaline soil. Among the chunky scree fleshless skulls stood impaled on tattered stakes, empty eye sockets bearing silent witness to years of scathing wind and blistering sand.

Here lay Golgotha.

Torso covered only by the mail, Auric drew up. His shirt wrapped his leg wound, staunching the dripping blood. The ankh hung by the strap of his chestplate. The fresh injury strained the elixir’s efficacy to its limit.

Dismounting, his leg nearly folded beneath him.

Khaista claimed the coven was gone. Perhaps. The fortification stood silent and dark. Yet the stillness felt pregnant with danger. In the grim mouth of a crumbling arch moonlight revealed the spikes of a portcullis. The gateway yawned open.

Auric crept forward, sword ready, body aching. Blood seeped from his makeshift bandage. Limping, he ducked beneath the spiked grate. Claustrophobic murk shrouded the entrance. Shuffling on, he inspected the tunnel, noting numerous murder holes and arrow slits. The barbican enveloped him.

His gaze followed lines of time-pitted stone. Faintly, he heard the echo of water dripping in some hidden cistern. The keep was rumored built atop an artesian well, control of the precious water the initial reason for its construction. Who was to say? The keep was rumored to be a lot of things, he knew.

Swallowing against a growing tightness in his throat, Auric pushed forward.

A gibbet dangled from a chain, bars corroded.

The withered husk of a child’s body was crammed inside. Shriveled flesh rotted off the emaciated figure. Wisps of hair clung to a near fleshless skull. Dripping maggots, jaw gaping, holes had been chewed through the small ribcage. Rodents roamed the corpse.

Thinking of the boy, Auric continued.

An opening appeared in the wall. The door had collapsed. Flickering torchlight winked inside. Red fingers of oxidation were all that remained of heavy hinges. Stepping over the threshold, he entered a vestibule. At one end steps led upward. Torches burned weakly in wall brackets. The greasy smoke fouled the chamber.

He hesitated. The ankh burst to life. Brilliance flooded the room.

A child stood motionless.

Neither the boy or the witchling, this child was skeletal thin, fish-belly white. Its stillness unnerved Auric.

“Fare you well, little one?”

The child lifted its head.

He couldn’t tell if he saw boy or girl. The features were too sharp, the body too starved. Curtains of stringy hair framed an androgenous face. Unnatural shadows filled deep set eyes. In the back of Auric’s mind a voice screamed the word *ghul*.

His feet remained rooted to the floor.

The child stretched open its mouth, revealing rotted teeth. Wider and wider its grin stretched, splitting the face. Wailing shrieks blasted forth, filling the vestibule. The noise rushed through Auric, filling the tunnel, filling the ruins, filling the sky. Sharp as jagged glass the piercing scream echoed in his mind.

Auric shouted in pain, the sound lost in the cacophony. He reeled. Grabbing his head in both hands, he dropped to his knees. Gaping at the howling child, his eyes bulged. The apparition’s skin faded to translucence, revealing melanoid bones. The skeleton dissolved to smoke.

Exploding into howling wind the screeching face rushed in, filling his eyes. He slumped. Lungs seizing, he feared his pounding heart might rip free.

SUFFER!

The cry invaded his thoughts and something tore inside him. He tasted blood. His hand found the ankh.

"Begone!"

His ears roared with whooshing silence. All became still.

He heard his labored breath. The ankh shimmered. He pitched to the floor. Face pressed against stone, he retched, cursing all magic.

Stubbornly, he rose, fear fueling his anger. The turning of fear or sorrow to fury was an old trick. It rarely failed. He balked. Something more than hate must drive him now.

The boy.

The day the woman disappeared the boy wandered from the waste unable to speak. Struck mute, he couldn't or wouldn't tell where the woman had gone or why. Auric searched, riding two horses to death before surrendering. The vastness of the waste humiliated him. The boy remained speechless as years passed. Then he was taken and Auric pursued.

Feeling a warmth against his chest he looked down and saw the ankh's glittering dweomer. He blinked the last mists of witch-glamour from his eyes.

Illusion shattered, the witchling crouched before him.

The phantasm had been meant to blind him as she struck. It nearly worked. Red-eyed and giggling, she scurried forward. Twisted in unnatural angles she slithered on all fours, stomach close to the ground. No human moved so effortlessly.

Shouting in disgust, he backed toward the stairs, sword at guard.

"No!"

The witchling grinned her jagged grin. Jade eyes glittered. Auric retreated up the stairs, blade ready. She darted forward, nails scratching cracked stone. Slithering from her lips a serpent tongue flickered, tasting the air. Tasting his apprehension.

"Back, daughter of the manticore," he warned. "You are not so strong as your father."

She snickered.

"You think the manticore my father?"

His flesh crawled as her tongue wiggled. Coiling, she struck, crossing the distance in a blur. He hacked. She ducked, scuttling up the wall. Spinning, he ran up the steps. At the top was a door. Legs driving hard, he bound upward.

He fled. Animal snarls dogged his heels. He made the gloom-haunted landing. Cracked with age, the door hung from a single ruined hinge. Lowering his armored shoulder, he drove into it. Wood splintered and he catapulted through.

The witchling lunged, arm scything. Filthy nails caught his leg and he snarled at the quick, hot pain. Another blow struck his shoulder but the armor turned it aside.

Pummeled by her uncanny strength, he tripped. As he fell she swarmed over him. In the frenzy, her words pried at his thoughts.

You think the manticore is my father?

The floor gave way.

• • •

FLOORBOARDS snapping, Auric plunged into space, falchion spinning away. The witchling clung to him, teeth tearing for his throat. As they dropped the ankh blazed between

them. She screamed at its electrum kiss. Frantic to avoid its touch, she clawed Auric with demonic passion.

You think the manticore is my father?

Auric grappled her as they dropped. Some instinct buried beneath conscious thought provoked him to shield her. Frenzied, she cavorted violently. Legs around her body, he anchored them together as they crashed into the next level.

The impact dazed him, his body reverberating with the force. Thrown clear, he landed in a heap. Head spinning, he tried centering himself.

Where is she?

She slammed into Auric as the floor cracked open under him. "Mitra!"

They dropped.

He held her as she snapped again for his throat.

They collided with the next floor, her astride him. The wound on his leg split apart, blood gushing like water from a culvert. Her fingers strangled his neck. Suffocating, he struck hooking blows to loosen her hands. It was like punching rock.

The floor beneath them groaned.

They tensed, motionless for one long improbable moment.

Boards splintering, they dropped.

Again unconsciously he shielded her body with his. They tumbled through darkness and splashed into stinking water.

The ankh lit up the gloom, scintillating rods of light slicing through the murk. Chest heaving, Auric exploded upwards, breaking the surface of waist deep water. He inhaled fetid air. Finding his feet, he jerked up the witchling.

Epiphany struck.

Crying out, he pushed the ankh into the girl's writhing body. The relic burned flesh until she yowled like some wounded animal. Rank green smoke crawling with horrid shrieking faces gushed from her mouth. The pollution billowed above them, dissipating as her cries turned to whimpers then silenced.

Trembling, the girl hugged him.

The ankh's brilliance winked out.

• • •

THE girl relaxed and Auric released her. He stood awash in bluish gloom to which his eyes easily adjusted. Some unfamiliar species of lichen glowed on the walls and reflected off the ink-black water. The stagnant pool around Auric reeked. Insectile droning filled his ears. Flies crawled across him.

He inspected the girl. There were tales of the jinn-possessed wielding supernatural strength and resisting injuries crippling to normal men. He knew nothing of what happened when jinn were exorcised.

To his surprise, the girl embraced him. He tried reassuring her with friendly pats and she yelped.

"Are you hurt?"

"I do," she admitted, voice soft. "Now that the jinn's left. While possessed my physical form was much protected. Now I hurt."

Impressed by her calm stoicism, he felt bittersweet pride he didn't fully understand.

“Will you let me carry you?”

She nodded in the solemn manner with which she’d answered his questions. Tears streamed her face, but she did not cry out or whimper. There was little time to admire her courage, however. Flies buzzed about them, diseased legs crawling across their faces. Auric waved his hand, trying to drive them off, but the carrion crawlers inundated them. The air was choked with them.

Something bumped his leg. Scrambling, he kicked, striking a limp shape. Bobbing, it drifted away, jostling other lumpy shapes floating in the befouled water. Nothing attacked them. His nose rankled from the stench of death.

“Child, where are we?”

“We’re not safe here.”

“Not safe *where*, girl?”

“The midden. Here the Ovate discards the dead.”

In the lichen’s glow her tears resembled cerulean drops of rain.

Auric narrowed his eyes. He realized the shapes in the filth were corpses. The water ran soupy with rotting flesh. He stood in a stew of spoiling meat. Revulsion turned his stomach. A headless torso floated by, covered in blindly wriggling worms.

Disgusted, he scooped up the girl. Scummy gruel clung to their bodies. The midden offended him. The flooded chamber contained a fortune in water, every drop now poisoned.

He’d ridden among hills of putrid dead, and through pyramids of severed heads, all cooking in the sun days after a slaughter. The Ovate’s midden was worse. They must escape its poisoned air. The girl riding his hip, he waded through the sludge. Bodies and parts of bodies bumped against him. The stone beneath his feet was slick with entrails.

“I search for a boy. Have you seen him?”

“Ahead is a stairtower leading to our temple. The Ovate dwells there. Captives are kept chained to the altar.”

The exertion of picking his way through the rotting sediment tired him. His body ached from his falls. Hopelessly befouled, his leg wound agonized every step. The elixir’s effects continued waning. Time slipped away. He trudged on, beset by flies.

Thinking of Khaista, Auric hoped her safe. He doubted he’d have escaped the mantichore alone. Still, in these halls and rooms the centaurine would have been vulnerable. He hoped she galloped far from this hellish ruin.

Limping, he sloshed through the abattoir. Flies rose up in buzzing clouds. Fleshy rats squeaked from repugnant niches. He feared what other things might also feast on the dead. The waste was a haunted place and like called to like.

Dark, the ankh lay warm against his skin. Considering the relic, an unpleasant possibility struck him.

“Child, could the jinn return?”

“I’ve never seen one of the Marid banished. They serve the Ovate. When you approached I was given to one to house its power.”

Unsure what to make of this knowledge, he continued on. Presently, he noticed the flies had mostly disappeared, the rats grown silent. Dripping water echoed. He missed his sword. The bite-wound on his hand throbbed.

“How many captives are there?”

“Only the boy,” the girl answered.

“And you.”

“I’m not a captive. I’m the Ovate’s handmaiden.”

Her reply striking him odd, he halted to ask the question worrying his thoughts.

“When the mantichore came you said your father was there.”

The girl did not answer.

A soft draft, no heavier than a breath, brushed his face. Unreasoning dread coiled his stomach. He thought he detected faint splashing, but upon listening he heard only the oppressive, sepulchral hush.

Trying to speak, he found his throat swelling tight. He coughed to clear it.

“If not the mantichore, then what did you mean?”

“Oh, Auric, don’t you realize yet?”

Auric couldn’t pinpoint the mocking words, but he recognized the voice at once. There could be no mistake. Stunned, he whispered her name.

“Taja?”

“More or less, husband,” she answered. “More or less.”

• • •

AURIC turned slowly. Feeling like the butt of some joke he didn’t grasp, his mind whirled. The girl trembled in his arms. The reeking water gurgled as it lapped his legs. In the strange light of the lichen torsos and legs and heads and hands drifted like corks. Fetid air filmed his skin.

It was hard to talk, but he needed to speak. He must know.

“The boy?”

“Our son is with me.”

“I thought you dead.” Remembering the sorrow, his voice cracked. “I searched long and far for you, Taja.”

“Not long enough or far enough, it seems. Still, I was only chattel.”

“Never!”

“Looted in a raid, thrown across your saddle like plunder.”

He was baffled by her accusations.

Do all women make so little sense?

Confusion coarsened his voice.

“Raiding is life. My mother, and my father’s mother, came to us in this way. You are of the nomads, you know our traditions.”

“I care nothing for tradition!”

The fury in her voice cut him. Her anger surged with the force of a *haboob* — desert storms capable of burying entire civilizations beneath blowing clouds of sand.

Pinpointing her voice, he advanced. The girl clung to him, face buried in his neck.

“You left our son. He returned mute with shock. Why do this now?”

He fought through the bog of decaying flesh. The centipede bite pulsed, pain clawing his arm. He dragged the wounded leg behind him. Outside the moon surely set. Time was nigh.

“I knew I carried our child when I took the conjurer’s bargain. But she isn’t enough for Hilkiyah. The stars tell us he needs both.”

Hilkiyah? The conjurer Khaista spoke of, now centuries dead?

“Needs for what, Taja?”

He saw flames fulgurating through a lancet-arch. Entering a narrow trough, he felt steps and climbed until the water was calf-level. The aqueduct widened and he stopped. The girl whimpered as the ankh began glowing softly.

Taja stood before him, the boy beside her. Bruises marked his naked body. Lattices of cuts on his chest wept blood. The skin of one cheek was scraped raw from scratches. Lash marks striped his legs.

Taja was as he remembered: striking, willowy, cheekbones sharp as flint, dark hair tumbling down her back, jade eyes bright. The girl had her eyes, he realized. Her full lips smirked.

A horned skull sat her head in a pagan crown of bone. She wore high-strapped sandals. Her *bedlah* costume of sheer leggings and narrow corset were crafted from raw silk. Cinched around her hips ran a belt of golden discs. From it hung a j-bladed khanjar. Rubies sparkled at her ears and in her navel. Diamond pendants dangled between generous breasts.

On one hand she wore a gold ring set with a large, red-veined bloodstone.

She commanded a small dais before an open portcullis. A burning brazier sat at her feet. Dancing flames cast her in dramatic stripes of shifting shadow and fluttering rays of light. Beyond the portcullis climbed a spiraling staircase.

Slowly, Auric lowered the girl. Shaking, she hid behind him.

"Need them for what?" he repeated. "And where be this Hilkiah?" Spreading his arms he shouted, "Show yourself, conjurer!"

Taja's eyes met his. She held up her hand. Firelight danced across the bloodstone. Veins of sanguine red traced filigrees across the oval of the pale-green stone.

"Do you know how old this is?"

"I don't care. Taja. This is all madness!"

"Silence!"

The taunting smirk vanished.

"I am Ovate here, not my husband."

Hoping to soothe her, Auric remained quiet.

He judged the distance between them. Two leaps and he'd have his hands around her lovely throat. But the ankh glowed. Sorcery was present. Jinn-infected, the girl had almost killed him. How much more power resided in Taja?

"This bloodstone is older even than the relic you wear," she continued. "Who can say how long it lay hidden beside the caravan road before the sirocco winds blew it clear of the sand and our son found it?"

Auric looked at the boy. He wanted to assure him everything would be fine, that he would save him. The boy didn't raise his head. Crouched behind Auric, the girl tugged his arm.

"I knew its power. My people, who you stole me from, were a hill tribe. Once, Hilkiah ruled us. The legend of his ring was kept through generations. Gladly, I put it on. I didn't hesitate. As I hoped, Hilkiah's sorcery lived, sleeping inside."

She smiled. The girl tugged his arm again. Auric watched the woman.

"Hilkiah's magic lives in me! No more am I your slave!"

"You are a slave still. Halkiah rides you like a beast. You are his puppet."

"Nay, I command!"

Anger laced his voice.

"I cared for you," he argued. "Raiding is life! We are a family!"

"I was plunder, valued as you would a fine horse. You were never my family. You stole me from my family, marauder."

He made an abrupt cutting gesture with the edge of his hand.

"Go then, oh, great Ovate. Give me the boy and I trouble you no more."

Taja lowered her hand. Again, the girl pulled at him.

"That isn't possible. Carnal gods demand carnal sacrifices. Give me the girl —"

"Our daughter."

"Release her and your death is swift."

The girl yanked his arm.

Turning at last, he saw her concern. A fresh corpse bobbed near them, some unlucky border merchant by the look of his ruined finery.

A chimeric mix of human and centipede slid from the merchant's mouth.

"The eater of the dead," the girl whispered.

• • •

THIS centipede was far larger than the one that bit him. This was the least difference.

Disbelieving, Auric watched it burst forth. Antenna lashing, it slithered through the water in undulating motions and scrambled up the midden wall. Long as his lance, its body was thick as Khaista's arm.

The true horror was its human face.

The great carrion feeder crawled across the ceiling, legs scurrying in hideously rhythmic patterns. The features of the infant's face were grotesquely pinched beneath the questioning antenna. Mandibles thrust from its mouth. It keened and squealed.

Climbing above them, it attacked.

"Flee!"

He shoved the girl clear and lifted his mailed arm as the chimera sprang. It struck him and he staggered. Antennas lashed. The baby voice squealed. Chitinous legs scraped at Auric. Under the monster's weight, his injured leg collapsed.

He went down with the carrion feeder's mandibles clicking in his face. Filthy water rushed over him, filling his nose and mouth. Through the sewage he saw the blurry outline of the chimeric horror backlit by Taja's brazier.

Free hand grasping hold, he squeezed for his life. The segmented carapace resisted his strength. The chimera thrashed. Small human eyes peered into his. He quelled the urge to vomit. Already weakened, his stamina faded. The grip of his injured hand faltered.

The thing writhed and lunged. Twisting antenna stung his face hard enough to flay skin. Heaving the thing to one side, Auric sat up, gasping for air.

Taja had both the children by their hair as she drug them toward the stairtower. Slipping free, the boy darted toward the portcullis winch. Enraged, Taja lunged after him. The girl snatched the khanjar from its sheath and slashed her mother's arm.

The eater of the dead broke free and snapped toward his leg. Shoving the manica between them, he turned the strike. Viper-quick, the centipede struck again, but the helm thwarted

the attack. Corkscrewing, the abomination's mandibles found him.

The first three fingers of Auric's hand ripped away. The chimera's childish face twittered. The bloody mandibles clicked wildly.

In shock, Auric lost his footing. He rammed into the dais and flopped over the lip. Flowing in knifing s-shapes, the carrion feeder swam after him. Rolling across flagstone Auric rose, his blood splashing red puddles across the floor.

The room spun as his body succumbed to the venom. Vertigo clutched him. He staggered, going to a knee. Taja howled and a stupendous crash shook the chamber. The carrion feeder surged toward him.

His working hand found the brazier. Snatching it, he screamed as hot metal seared him. He smelled his own sweetly cooking flesh. Thrusting toward the chimera's too-human face, he drove it back. The infant-head wailed.

Auric risked a backward glance. The boy had released the winch, sending the iron grate smashing down and trapping them in the midden. The girl lay stunned, one eye swollen shut.

Cursing, Taja reclaimed the Khanjar and attacked the boy. The juxtaposition of her screams and his silence would have seemed comical in different circumstances. She slashed ferociously but he slipped clear.

The human-faced horror reared up like a cobra. Desperate, Auric threw the brazier. The carrion feeder swayed, avoiding the burning implement. Hot coals spilled across the floor. The embers sizzled in the pools of Auric's blood.

Taja stumbled as the boy dodged more frenzied strikes.

Auric did not think. Catching the woman in both arms, he seized her. She fought. The khanjar blade sliced through an ear, flaying open his face. Spinning, he flung her at the carrion feeder. Her screams pierced him.

Why does she hate me so?

Strength spent, he collapsed. Face smashing the floor, he bit through his tongue. Blood spilled from his mouth. Sprawling, he fought to breathe through his swelling larynx. Blood flooded his throat. His moans became gurgling, high-pitched wheezes.

Taja's screams continued.

Sinuuous, the carrion feeder's segmented trunk wrapped her struggling body like a rope. She thrashed helplessly. The infant face plunged down, mandibles tearing her neck. She screeched as venom flooded her body.

Taja jerked rigid. The veins beneath her skin turned to foul brown rivers. She fell limp. Her head lolled and Auric sought her eyes in the final moment. He found them empty and death filmed. Taking its prize, the carrion feeder fled into the midden.

The woman was gone.

• • •

HEARTBEAT listless, Auric slumped into the flagstone. He wanted to see the boy and the girl. To say something. He needed to explain that raiding was life and that he cared for them. He was a wolf. They were the progeny of wolves.

He couldn't speak of these things, or of anything. He lay in a pond of his blood. He fought to breathe, drowning.

The boy and the girl working together raised the portcullis. Small, strong hands grasped him and dragged him beneath the fanged grate. Placing his arms across their narrow shoulders they staggered on, struggling to haul him up the steps.

He heard the girl ask the boy something and the boy replied.

The boy spoke?

This pleased him. He focused on the rise and fall of his chest, the working of his lungs. Using a wicket gate, the siblings pulled him outside.

The dying sun rose, a red sphere on the horizon. The moon hung low in the sky, florid as the sun. Mirror images, the twin orbs dominated the horizon. Beneath them dusty waste stretched to sawtoothed hills.

The children lowered him. His eyes blinked sluggishly, unfocused. The boy and the girl were gray shapes to him. He tried recalling their faces, found he could not.

"Easy," Khaista said.

Her voice broke with strain.

She cradled him and he realized she too lay in the dust. Unable to speak, he touched her arm, smearing it with his blood. It was the most he could manage. The boy and the girl were only silhouettes.

She gave the children instructions and they obeyed, perhaps out of wonder she existed at all. To his amazement the Hellbitch allowed them to mount. The mare made gentle sounds, a different beast from the one he'd rode.

"Go," Khaista urged. "It is not safe."

The siblings might have said something as they departed but he no longer understand their language. He thought he didn't need to speak. If he could reach out his hand that would be enough.

Too heavy to lift, his hands twitched then were still.

He no longer saw the shapes of things. His vision darkened and seizures wracked him. Strong once, he was now brought low.

This is how she wanted you to die.

Her anger puzzled him. Raiding was life.

"Are not we a pair, marauder?"

Khaista's voice came to him from a vastness large as the waste.

"Both dying from our wounds." She coughed, a harsh sound.

"Slaying the manticore pleased me. The dust has not seen such combat in many a season."

Auric did not answer. He was past it now.

"We will sit here," Khaista whispered, "and let the sun warm us."

The marauder did not hear.

A dying sun rose. Dawn arrived. The scarlet moon sank.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathan Meyer's been an infantryman in the US Army, worked on Alaskan fishing boats, fought wildland fires on a helicopter-rappel crew, and been both security and EMT on the Las Vegas Strip. During that time he was never able to tell his co-workers that his single greatest achievement was being the only member of his AD&D party to make it out of the original *Tomb of Horrors*. This is because Lawful Evil half-Orc assassins are survivors.



ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

BEASTS OF THE BLUESTONE HILLS

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

“MY nine mothers were made of truth,” said Shouna the spice-dealer. “I can neither lie, nor be deceived. Your bird is sick.”

“Not my bird,” said Morlock Ambrosius. The bird in question nodded its purple-and-gold head approvingly at this. It was four feet tall, almost as wide as it was tall, and in its time it had killed men and women at will, like a wolf killing sheep. In deference to its current travelling companion, it rarely killed men, women, or horses these days. But it didn’t like being taken for a pet.

The spice-dealer, not getting this, asked, “Whose bird is she then, oh most enigmatic of men and avatar of mysteries?”

“Its own.”

“This is truth,” the spice dealer decided. “The bird is your friend, your mother and your father, the purple passion of your fiery heart. She — ”

“It.”

“— is ill. You seek the spice of Selardor to heal the bird. Tragically for my improvident self, it is on sale. This very morning I said to my sister-wives, ‘The spice of Selardor is beautiful to say, and see, and smell, but it is only medicinal for certain exotic purple birds. It is a costly and beautiful burden on the unworthy shelves of our dim and overcrowded shop. I will discount its price immediately for quick sale.’ And so you see on the card I present to you. The old price, a fair and not exorbitant five fingers of gold, has been struck out, and the new price, a modest two fingers of gold, has been written in below, as you see with your brilliantly pale eyes, and can read with your deeply imbued learning. But, if not, I can read it to you again.”

“No.”

“Alas, in my folly and weakness of perception, I have shown you the wrong card. Here is the correct one at last. Instead of two fingers of gold, it reads ‘two fingers of silver’, as you can see with your luminously clear — ”

“No.”

“In your altogether unobtrusive majesty and almost imperceptible prudence, you will have already understood that I can’t sell this precious spice for less than ten fingers of copper. I have responsibilities to my sister-wives.”

“I don’t want your spice of Selardor at all.”

“Then why, oh archetype of wisdom and paradigm of power, did you come into my humble and inconveniently located shop? It is a place of business, and not a place for light conversation,

however delightfully abrupt and free from compliments or even ordinary civility the aforesaid conversation may be.”

“I need to buy some spices.”

“Your oracular wisdom has summed up, with a crystallinely plain and unadorned clarity, the issue that I, as others, had already discerned. It remains only for your celerity of speech and awareness uncluttered with conventional notions of politeness to state in blunt terms the spices you have honored me with the hope of furnishing to you.”

“Cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves, certainly. Possibly others. The phoenix will know.”

Shouna coughed gently. “Before your well-known and widely beloved bird, which I now recognize to be the celebrated phoenix, enters my lowly and valueless establishment, I would ask, in a spirit free from insolence or disdain — ”

“I’ll pay for any damages,” Morlock said, and dropped a leather bag on the table next to the spice-dealer’s counting box.

Shouna didn’t like being interrupted; no one does. But she liked the heft of the bag as she lifted it from the table and the gleam of gold inside. She smiled gently and made a concessive gesture with her free hand.

The phoenix rarely spoke in a way that Morlock understood, but it never had any trouble understanding someone else’s speech (silent or spoken). It advanced on trembling purple-clawed feet into the spice-dealer’s shop as if it were entering the jaws of the underworld.

And, in a way, it was. When a phoenix dies, as this one was dying, it is compelled to make a nest of spices on a high place in the desert where it was born (if phoenixes can be said to be born). Then it crawls into the nest and dies as its internal fires overcome its increasingly frail body. The dead body burns away and as the fire dies down, a feathery black worm crawls out of the ash: the phoenix, reborn.

This phoenix was never going to reach its home across the ocean in Qajqapca before it died. Morlock was hoping that the rebirth could happen anywhere, and they were searching for spices to test that theory. But the sensory music of the spice-shop’s many scents was like the reek of a thousand graves to the dying phoenix.

Still, it came up the aisle and stood at Morlock’s side. The reddish-purple, gold-etched wings, somewhat withered by molt, were trembling, but its stance was firm. Its dark purple eyes stared at Shouna. The spice dealer looked at her two clients, glanced at the gold, and started measuring out cinnamon.

They ended up with a bushel of cinnamon before the phoenix looked up at Morlock and nodded in approval. "Thanks," Morlock said. "As much of the cardamom and cloves." The bird nodded. "And...?" Morlock said, looking at the phoenix. The bird shook its head. "That's all."

"All," repeated Shouna thoughtfully. "And will you, most munificent of men, send your spouses to fetch the spice, or..."

"I have a wheelbarrow outside on the walkway. If you can put them in casks, I'll take them away in that."

Shouna bowed politely, shocked speechless at the thought of a man doing manual labor. She turned to her assistants and gave the necessary orders, rather more curtly than she had spoken to Morlock. She turned back to Morlock and began to weigh out his change, but he shook his head.

"Keep it," he said. "If I need more, I'll make it."

Shouna laughed insincerely, taking this as a joke. After a moment or two of fidgeting in silence, she said, "Oh paragon of purchasers, may I (unworthy as I am of the knowledge) ask what honorable purpose you intend to wreak with these heroic portions of my barely sufficient spices?"

There was no reason not to explain the situation, so Morlock did.

"Your magnanimity will pardon me for seeming to criticize your well-considered plan," Shouna said, after hearing him out. "But has it possibly escaped the alert erudition of my esteemed customer that the nightwardens would cruelly forbid any such, er, ornithological self-immolation?"

"We'll find a high place outside the city."

"No," said Shouna, startled out of her accustomed suavity. "You can't possibly do that. It's too dangerous in the wilds." She put a hand on his arm. "There are monsters in the hills. And women take male babies out into the woods and leave them there to die. The place is full of ghosts. Terrible little ghosts, thirsty for blood."

"They won't want mine," Morlock said, confident from long experience. "Thanks for the warning, though."

Shouna would have continued to dissuade him, but three of her hulking assistants had appeared from the back of her spacious and well-lit shop, each carrying a cask of spice. Morlock loaded them on his wheelbarrow, invited the phoenix to hop onto the casks, bid Shouna and her staff farewell, and trundled away with the phoenix and his burden of spicy death.

Morlock and the phoenix made their way uphill toward the nearest gate on the bluestone footroads of Bhavarna with no more than the usual trouble. There was almost always some.

The Bhavar practiced a kind of polyandry, where five to fifteen women kept a husband in common, feeding him a drug that shrank his brain but stimulated his organ of generation. Traditionally, husbands were confined in a breeding room in the basement but some citizens of advanced opinions believed that air, light, and exercise were good for husbands. So it wasn't unusual to see a female citizen walking with a smiling, vacuous male in tow. But a man walking by himself, wearing pants instead of the gowns considered suitable for males, doing physical work, was almost as rare in the bluestone streets of Bhavarna as a phoenix, and far more annoying to the general public.

Morlock had found most of the Bhavar to be open-minded people, but there were always some lonely and sexually frustrated women who would scream dogcalls or make lewd gestures at him on the street.

"Take your pants off!" shrieked one young woman, staggering out of a bar as he rolled the wheelbarrow past its door.

"Put that down and let your wife handle it, honey," suggested a kindly middle-aged woman, hauling a sled full of bluestone slabs in the opposite direction.

Morlock had grown to manhood among a people that held equally bizarre (though somewhat different) opinions about gender, so he took these incidents in stride.

They passed by a building site where a crew of working women were on break. The idle workers started to chant, "Are you a shower or a grower?" over and over again. Morlock passed by without responding, which further infuriated one of the workers. She followed after them screaming, "Shower or grower? Shower or grower? Tell us, you stuck-up rover! Shower or grower?"

The phoenix was becoming more fiery, temperamentally and physically, as it neared the end of its life. It probably didn't understand the sexual nature of the insult, not having a sexual identity as far as Morlock could tell. But the proud bird certainly recognized the insult, and it was enraged.

The angry old bird leapt down from the wheelbarrow and squawked out a cloud of fire at the harasser. She fled away, screaming, "I'm calling the daywardens! That bird should be on a leash!"

The phoenix ruffled its molting purple-gold wings and started to go after the retreating harasser. "My friend," Morlock said, "do we have time for this?"

The bird halted in its tracks, glared at Morlock with a purple eye, then turned back and laboriously climbed to the top of the casks again.

"We go," said Morlock, and they went: up the paved walkways to the Hillside Gate, and thence up the road leading into the high hills from which the Bhavar quarried their bluestone.

They hadn't gone far before the road crossed a stream, one of the many tributaries of the River Bha. Morlock thought he saw fish in it, and he also saw that the sun was well past the midpoint of its daily journey.

"Lunchtime," he decreed, and the phoenix eagerly hopped down from the wheelbarrow. The fires in its blood and breath needed more and more fuel as they grew hotter, approaching its imminent death.

Morlock set down the wheelbarrow and pulled some fishing lures from his pocket. He had no opinion of fishing as a sport; it was only a source of food for him, so he had devised a set of lures which sang a song that fish found irresistibly irritating: they couldn't refrain from biting the thing that made it; the lure then trapped them in a stasis field. He attached the lures to some lines, set them vibrating, tossed them in the water, and in a short time he had a dozen fish out of the stream. The phoenix ate them whole as they came out of the water, spitting out the lures afterwards.

Morlock was about to reach into a pocket of his coat for his own lunch when he saw that they were being watched: two yellow eyes glared at them from gaps in the interwoven branches of

the dhotwen trees lining the opposite bank. The eyes were more than two handlengths apart: a fairly large beast, it seemed.

"Get out of the way," he said to the phoenix, and the watcher burst into full view shattering the dhotwen branches like dry sticks. The tawny-furred beast was enormous; its body was more than ten feet long, broad in proportion, with shoulders like a giant horse and jaws like a wild boar, but without tusks.

Wishing he had a spear instead, Morlock drew his sword, Tyrfing.

The boar face grinned at him and squealed: "Eeyaleee!" There were two spearlike horns at the top of its head, pointing backwards like the horns of an antelope. These now swivelled forward and hovered in the air, like curved ivory swords. Muscles rippled along its side; it charged across the stream.

"Eh," remarked Morlock. He dodged aside and brought Tyrfing's black-and white crystalline blade down on the beast's horns. They shattered and fell into the underbrush, leaving the beast with two ragged stumps that twitched back and forth in surprise. The eyale, as Morlock had decided to call it, squealed again, this time in panic.

"Get out!" shouted Morlock, whacking the beast's shoulders with the flat of Tyrfing. "Or we'll roast you for lunch!" The phoenix issued a cloud of fire from a safe distance.

The eyale blundered about, scampered back across the stream and stumbled off into the woods on the far side, uttering its cry plaintively, as if it found life to be extremely unfair.

"We should get away before it realizes it could stomp us into jelly," Morlock said to the phoenix, who nodded solemnly. Morlock gathered up the ivory fragments from the eyale's horns (waste not; want not), tossed them into the wheelbarrow, and trundled it away into the woods on the other side of the road. Eventually they came to a clearing surrounded by ancient, deep-rooted oak trees, growing too closely together for the eyale to wriggle through them.

Morlock settled down on a flat slanting slab of bluestone, unpolished except by wind and rain, and prepared to eat. The phoenix was lingering at the edge of the clearing, reluctant to enter for some reason. Morlock shrugged, cracked open his jug of tea, and was about to take a drink.

Then he saw the dead babies all around him.

There was one right at his feet. It looked like a miniature skeleton in a tiny green-fur coat. Which it was, in fact, except that the fur was moss. There were humps, more or less clearly defined as small bodies, all around the clearing. Belatedly, he felt the weight in the air, thick with the impulse clouds of the dead.

Even before Shouna mentioned it to him, Morlock had known that the Bhavar disposed of most the males born in their families, letting perhaps one in five live. (Boys were an economic weight on households: they couldn't work, and needed dowries to be married properly.) He'd assumed that they somehow decently interred the children. But, he realized now, decency could play no role in such a brutal custom. They brought the children here, put them down, and left them. Morlock's hands were not free from blood, but he shook his head in grim bemusement at this callousness. Maybe they plugged their ears with wax so that they wouldn't hear the children crying as they walked off.

Morlock stood up on the stone.

"Apologies, forgotten spirits," he said. "I didn't know this was your place. Sleep well, and know that we'll remember you." He poured out his tea to appease the thirst of the infant ghosts. It should have been wine or mead, according to ancient custom, but he had given up drinking intoxicants some time ago. He pocketed his empty bottle and made his way out of the clearing, striving to avoid stepping on any infant corpses.

Now Morlock had nothing left to drink, and he still hadn't eaten. The afternoon was wearing away and, from the phoenix's twitching and its occasional sparkly squawk, he guessed that time was running out to complete their errand.

"Onward, then," he said, grasping the handles of the wheelbarrow. "Pick your hill. That's where we'll go."

After pausing at the stream to refill his bottle, Morlock continued to push the barrow upslope. He was lost in thoughts of airship designs when the phoenix warbled a harsh warning syllable. Morlock looked up to see that a woman of some size was sitting by the road, between two trees with feathery black leaves.

Or: was it a woman? The body was hard to see, but the head was too large for humankind as he knew it — perhaps a cubit in height. The face was lifelike enough, but so motionless that Morlock thought it might be a painted statue. Then the face turned toward them, its lips upturned, its gray eyes widening with interest, and Morlock saw she was clearly alive. She was wearing some kind of velvety fabric that clung to her skin like fur, rising high on her long and unusually thick neck. Morlock couldn't see her arms.

Then she opened her mouth in a broad, feral grin and he saw the triple-rows of teeth shining in her scarlet mouth. She leaped forward to attack, and Morlock saw that her blood-red body was in the shape of a lioness, but ten or fifteen feet in length. It had a long segmented tail whose sting hovered over her head. The things he had taken for trees were her black-feathered wings. Not a woman, then. A manticore, perhaps: Morlock had read about them, but never seen one. She opened her mouth wider and roared a musical blast, like trumpets mingled with flutes.

Beasts that roar want you to flee, so Morlock didn't. He leapt out in front of the wheelbarrow, drawing Tyrfing as he moved. He was still a few paces from the manticore when he saw or felt something overhead. He looked up to see the blackish-red insectile tail descending toward him, its sting dripping venom. The beast was trying to stab him with the sting in her tail. In irritation more than anything else, he slashed off the stinger; it fell on the side of the road to the music of the manticore's scream (more flute than trumpet now).

Defly avoiding Morlock's blade, bloody with her stinking orange blood, the beast jumped forward and struck him on the chest with a leonine paw. Morlock was knocked clean off his feet and fell on the unpaved road. Every atom of breath seemed to be knocked out of him; he lost hold of his sword; the world went dark.

Death was near and Morlock knew it. He rolled over a few times, just to be in a different place if the beast jumped after him, then struggled to his hands and knees.

As his sight returned, he saw that the manticore was watching him, an intelligent smile gracing her beautiful face. When she saw that he could see her, she moved forward, deliberately, not swiftly, displaying a catlike enjoyment in the game of killing.

That enjoyment was shattered when the phoenix ripped out one of her gigantic eyeballs.

The beast screamed, all trumpets now. She lashed out with her leonine paw and smashed the ailing phoenix aside. Morlock was sure he heard birdbones breaking with the impact. The phoenix flew away, not under its own power, and fell in the brush next to the road on the far side.

Was the phoenix dead? Had this all been for nothing? Morlock struggled to his feet and looked around for his sword. He didn't see it, but he didn't need to. He called out its name: "Tyrfing!"

The blade rose dripping from the stream near the road and flew toward his hand. The manticore had recovered from its strike at the phoenix and leapt towards Morlock: swiftly and less playfully than before. Morlock couldn't dodge out of the way: he had to have his sword back if he was to continue the fight, and the sword would miss him if he moved. He stood, glaring eye-to-eye with the phoenix, and held out his empty hand as she raised her forepaw with claws extended to strike.

The sword settled like a bird in his outstretched hand just as the manticore swung her paw down. Morlock gripped the sword, leapt back, and swung down with all his strength. The gigantic glittering claws were ripping at his chest when his blade struck the beast's foreleg and ground deep into something harder than bone.

Morlock's ambrosial blood sprayed out from his wounds, setting afire sticks and leaves on the road — and doing the manticore no harm whatsoever, it seemed. Tyrfing had bitten her deep, though and she threw herself backward on the road. Her orange blood stank like the dung pits of Glyve.

The manticore's mutilated face was splattered with blood, her own and Morlock's, but her expression was calm and watchful. She was assessing the threat Morlock posed, wondering if it was worth the trouble to pursue the fight.

This was not a decision that Morlock had to make. He and his friend had been attacked and wounded — perhaps killed. There was something broken in his chest, it scraped as he moved, and blood was flowing like fiery water from his wounds. He would have blood for his blood.

"*Khore khorema!*" he shouted in his first language: *Blood for blood*. In the unguarded lands east of the Gap of Lone, it was the only law he recognized.

The manticore may or may not have understood the words, but she understood the challenge. She took to the air, obviously intending to come at him from above.

Morlock sidled away from the wheelbarrow: he didn't want his blood setting it on fire. He waited for the manticore to stoop on him, then he dodged aside and struck her left wing with Tyrfing, shattering the vane. She landed clumsily, groaning like a trollish orchestra from the pain in her wounded leg.

Morlock ran up the shattered wing of the manticore and, standing like a tightrope walker on her spine, stabbed into the back of her head just above the thick leonine neck.

She collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. He descended cautiously to the ground via her unwounded wing. He stabbed the beast once more, deep in her empty eye-socket, but the manticore didn't even twitch. The beast was dead. Time to see if she had killed them, too.

None of his chest wounds were mortal, Morlock decided, after examining them. One or more of his ribs were certainly broken. He'd have to do something about the bleeding soon, but he could afford to check on his friend first.

He found the phoenix, wheezing blood and fire, in the underbrush. He tried to tell if any of its bones were broken but it squawked him away irritably. Whatever harm it had suffered wasn't going to kill it. Time was its only enemy now.

The day was dying before they were moving again. Morlock sewed up his chest wounds with a thread and needle from one of his pockets. But he found that his water bottle had been shredded by the manticore's attack, and his lunch dropped in the road, where it was now covered with stinking manticore blood. The day was dying, and it could die and be buried, as far as Morlock was concerned. He carefully put the wheezing, wounded phoenix atop the casks in the wheelbarrow and pulled the thing off the road behind him, headed toward the nearest hill.

As the sun sank red in the east and the three moons slowly emerged in the darkening sky, Morlock began to hear chuckling or talking in the woods nearby. He couldn't understand what was being said and wasn't interested in trying. He put his back into it and dragged the barrow up to the top of the hill, hoping that it was a good place for his friend to die.

At the top, he gently picked up the phoenix and put it down on the ground. The crown of the hill was bare of soil or trees, a rough unpolished outcrop of bluestone. The bird dragged itself around a bit, inspected the area with its dim purple eyes, then turned to Morlock and nodded decisively. It would do.

Morlock lifted down the casks and broke them open. He stood by to see if he could help in any way, but the bird waved a molty wing at him and he turned away.

The sun was gone now from the sky, and the distant stars provided little light, but all three moons were aloft: mighty Chariot, the major moon, rising blue white in the west, Horseman, the middle moon, standing golden high overhead, and Trumpeter sinking red and somber in the east. There was enough light for Morlock to see something moving in the woods below.

Morlock's body wanted rest, and food, and most urgently water. Losing a lot of blood always made him thirsty. But all that would have to wait. He'd brought along materials to make a Partial Occlusion, in effect an immaterial wall, large enough to enclose the top of the hill. He'd hoped that would be enough to protect them, and he still hoped so as he set about putting the spells into effect. But after his long and difficult afternoon he was no longer as confident.

The thing came out of the woods before Morlock completed the occlusion. It moved fast — fast like a nightmare shadow in a dream when you can't move at all. It left a long trail behind it in the sparse grass of the steep hillside. It was coming straight at them.

"Something coming," Morlock croaked to the phoenix. "I'll try to keep it off you."

The phoenix, intent on its final task, did not reply.

For once in his life Morlock had met someone more taciturn than himself. He didn't know whether to be pleased or dismayed.

The beast came, climbing the steep slope like a goat. It had cloven hooves like a goat or a deer; they struck fire on the stones as the beast raced past. It seemed white and orange in the mingled light of the three moons. Its wedgelike head was dark but streaked with the paler orange color, something like a badger. It was so fast that it seemed to blur when it moved, and it muttered as it came.

Morlock worked as fast as he could with the wefts and the force angles, but the occlusion was not yet established when the beast skittered to a halt at the top of the hill. The beast — evidently a male — did not immediately attack. He paused to glance curiously at what Morlock was doing and remarked in a man's voice, "It's a fair price: take it or leave it."

"Eh," said Morlock, and kept working. This thing, he guessed, was a leucrocota. He'd seen drawings of them in bestiaries. He couldn't remember if they were dangerous or not. The mouth was the most disturbing thing about the beast: it split the badger head all the way back to his ears, and when the narrow lips pulled back he wore a comically fierce grin. But there were no individual teeth, just a continuous, moonbright ridge of bone on each jaw.

"This is my first time in the woods at night," the leucrocota said in a coquettish girl's voice. "Do you think I'll be safe?" He snapped his jaws a couple of times and advanced delicately on goat feet.

Morlock got to his own feet and reached for Tyrfing... then belatedly realized he had unbelted his sword to get on with his work. "Tyrfing," he said, but the sword didn't fly to his hand. He had neglected to renew the talic impulse in its crystalline structure after his fight with the manticore. It was his night for forgetting things.

"Tyrfing," said the leucrocota mockingly in Morlock's own voice. "Tyrfing." The beast charged him, lowering its head to attack the way a goat does.

Morlock tried to dodge out of the way, but the beast turned nimbly and still struck him full on the chest. Morlock saw red with agony and fury and punched the beast in the neck desperately as it knocked him down.

The leucrocota skittered to one side as Morlock rose with his sword in his hand: he had luckily fallen next to his swordbelt.

"Tyrfing," he said, gesturing with the deadly blade at the leucrocota.

The beast fled, clattering away on goaty feet, and Morlock sighed with relief. He was nearly at the end of his rope. He went back to his work and finished establishing the occlusion.

When he was done, nothing had visibly changed: the occlusion was too subtle for the eye to see. But any matter entering the occlusion had the energy of its movement turned back on itself. He pushed on it with his hand; the occlusion pushed his hand back with equal strength. The top of the hill was now surrounded by a ten-foot high invisible wall.

"Nothing's stronger than something that isn't there," Morlock remarked to the phoenix, then turned around to see that his friend was dead.

The spices were swirled like colored sand into some mystic mandala. In the center of the sweet-scented spicy heaps lay the body of the phoenix, motionless. Its purple and gold feathers, gray with molt, were now curling black in the flames of its death.

Morlock sat and watched. The heat became almost unbearable, even for him, but he bore it and sat still at his friend's side, because he could do nothing else. The physical form of the bird disappeared entirely behind a veil of fire. The fire took the shape of the dead phoenix and rose up from the ashes of the utterly consumed body. The fiery phoenix in turn disappeared behind a curtain of smoke from the burning spice.

"What's that noise?" asked a woman's voice. "I think I hear something out there in the woods."

Morlock turned to see that the leucrocota was standing behind him, just on the other side of the occlusion.

Morlock met the beast's slotted goatlike eye and wondered how he managed to speak — why he spoke. The words didn't seem to mean anything, except to mock the act of speaking itself. The beast didn't move his dark narrow tongue or weirdly ridged jaws as he spoke. The words were inside him somehow and just drifted out.

As if he had eaten them. Or the people who had said them.

"Now I see," Morlock whispered, and the beast whispered back in his own voice, "Now I see..."

This thing didn't eat meat or plants. Its jaws weren't fitted for that. It preyed upon the tal of living beings, their lives and minds. As they travelled through the woods at night, it ate them in the dark. As it was eating him now.

Morlock reached out to grasp Tyrfing. It was a focus of power, as well as a weapon. If he could ascend to visionary rapture, perhaps he could strike at the beast on the immaterial plane where it truly lived and fed. But, as he held the black and white blade, he found he could no longer remember the initial steps to summon the rapture. He was already far gone.

Morlock thought about disestablishing the occlusion. If he did, he might strike at the beast, kill the leucrocota with his sword. But the beast was fast, quick as the thoughts he devoured so hungrily. Morlock was slow, and getting slower.

The leucrocota opened his freakish mouth and cried like a baby dying alone in the woods.

Anger swept through Morlock, drove him to his feet. He knew the anger was useless: like everything else he thought or did, it was food for his enemy. But he would die on his feet, defying his enemy, with his sword in his hand, on guard between the fiery death of his friend and the beast who would feed on it.

The leucrocota watched with evident interest, his comically horrific mouth wide open.

The slope beyond the beast seemed to be moving. Morlock wondered at first if his vision was going. But something was really happening: the hillside was alive with moving, gray-green humps.

"Too late," Morlock said.

"Too late," the leucrocota mocked him in his own voice.

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"I meant for you."

The leucrocota looked down suddenly. A gray-green, moss-cloaked, baby-sized skeleton had taken a bite out of his goat-like leg and was sucking greedily at his blood. The leucrocota shouted, "There are no flowers in this grove! Why did you bring me here?" and tried to shake it off. The skeleton sank clawlike bone-fingers deep into his flesh and hung on.

Now others were climbing up the leucrocota. There were hundreds of dead babies around him — thousands — decades or centuries of dead seeds planted in that terrible clearing, a long tidal wave of the undead. He turned his deadly goatlike regard over them; you could see the ripples in the crowd of dead babies, slowing as he fed on their unlife. But there were too many of them; wherever he looked, he had to look away from others who had come to feed on him, and feed they did.

In the end, their hunger was greater than his. They swarmed him like rats swarming a piece of meat in a city sewer. He screamed, "Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other!" and fell among them. They circled around and around him, a tidepool of dead flesh and living hunger, until nothing remained, not even bloodstains on the bluestones that they licked eagerly with their dry, dead tongues.

Morlock looked behind him. A column of black smoke was going up into the cold sky, but the fire at its base was no more than fading embers. His friend was gone. He sat down wearily.

The babies came and sat on the other side of the occlusion. No one said anything. The fire faded away completely and the only light left was in the cold gaze of the distant moons. The stars spun in the sky. At some point, Morlock must have slept, because he found himself lying on his side with the sun in his eyes. The mind-eating beast was gone. The dead babies were gone. The phoenix was gone, and its fire nothing but cold ashes.

Or: was it gone?

Morlock got to his feet and went over to the blackened stones where his friend had died. In the ashes there crawled a small black worm. As Morlock watched, a thin feather — dark iridescent purple, edged in red-gold — extruded from the body and opened like the petal of a flower.

"Good day to you," Morlock said to the newly reborn phoenix. "It's been a long night."

And the way back to their lodgings in Bhavarna: that was long, too, and it would get no shorter by delaying. But, in spite of pain, and hunger, and a thirst in his throat burning hotter than the rising sun, his heart was high inside his wounded chest. The road was all downhill from here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Enge lives in northwest Ohio with his wife (and two dogs who are not nearly as dangerous as they think they are). He teaches Latin and mythology at a medium-sized public university. His stories have appeared in *Black Gate*, in the Stabby-Award-winning anthology *Blackguards* (Ragnarok Press, 2015), in *Apocalyptic* (ZNB, 2020), in *F&SF*, and elsewhere. His first novel, *Blood of Ambrose*, was shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award, and the French translation was a finalist for the Prix Imaginales. You can reach him through Facebook (@james.enge), or on Twitter (@jamesenge), or if all else fails, via his website, www.jamesenge.com.

PROCLAMATIONS FROM THE SKULL

THE SKULL HAS DECREED THAT THE EDITORIAL MINIONS SHALL SHARE HIS NEWS!

465 Submissions Later, The Open Call Concludes

The Skull would like to honor the interns who have been laboriously, er, gloriously toiling away in the submissions cave. The final tally is in: 465 manuscripts were submitted in our recent open call!

Soon we will have a final accounting of the acceptances and rejections. Until then, we give special recognition to interns #56 and #44, who have demonstrated an outstanding ability to discern sword-and-sorcery fiction suitable for The Skull's magazine.

We also would like to recognize interns #17, #32, and #143 (may they rest in peace), whose brains burned out from reading truths not meant to be seen by mortals. In our next open call, we will be clear that submissions should not include unspeakable secrets.

Readers, you will benefit greatly from this open call. Many outstanding stories were selected from the submissions, including some in this very issue!

Skull TV Premieres on Twitch

The peerless Magician's Skull has discovered that in addition to Facetweet and MyTube, there is also another powerful platform in this modern age of wonders: Television! The interns have explained that if The Skull stands in front of the glowing box, all of his loyal readers will see his glorious image reflected worldwide! Such powerful sorcery begs to be put to good use, therefore we are pleased to announce the newest initiative of the immortal Magician's Skull in his tireless quest to proselytize the sword-and-sorcery genre:

The first episode of Skull TV premiered on September 19 on the Goodman Games Twitch channel. Watch for future episodes. Sword-and-sorcery will never be the same!



The Skull Decrees Interns #21 and #44 Joint Recipients of Intern of the Year!

It is rare that peons so distinguish themselves in The Skull's service that they receive as much as a kind word, a crust of bread, or access to a light source outside of business hours. How much more impressive then that two such underlings should be awarded the Intern of the Year for thoroughly adequate service above-and-beyond The Skull's expectations for such lowly worms. Congratulations, worms.

However, it is with the sincerest feigned regret that The Skull must bestow Intern of the Year posthumously upon Interns #21 and #44. An unfortunate and unforeseeable incident occurred in which The Skull's magical defenses against ape invasion (many of you are familiar with just how bad apes can be at this time of year, especially those of the winged variety) interacted unpredictably with the donjon's ensorcelled paper-shredder. Few sages could have even guessed that said shredder would react so strangely to interns carrying large stacks of rejected submission for *Tales From the Magician's Skull* ... but, even so, the rejected submissions *did* need to be shredded.

Both loyal interns did yeoman's service during the magazine's recent open call for submissions, and greatly assisted the other useful thralls likewise engaged: interns #17, #32, #44a, #56 (we are watching you, #56), and that wretched #143. But it is to #21 and #44 that we must doff our caps, valiant toilers both, one of whom's true name most likely started with a 'J,' or perhaps even a 'B' (piddling details that shall no doubt be resolved by HR prior to the interns' sanitary interment): we salute you, for there is no higher honor than to die in service to The Skull's mission to blanket the Earth in the best of new sword-and-sorcery fiction.



By **TERRY OLSON**

Enter the monster pit! Down here in the pit, we provide tabletop RPG fans with playable game statistics for the creatures in this issue of *Tales From The Magician's Skull*. These game stats are grounded in the aesthetic of the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game*, or DCC RPG. DCC RPG is heavily inspired by the stories of Appendix N, a collection of fantasy and science fiction works that inspired Gary Gygax to create *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Tales From the Magician's Skull* can be read on its surface as simply great stories, but players of role playing games (DCC RPG or otherwise) may also recognize that these stories are designed to pay homage to Appendix N and its role in providing inspiration to RPG games. Therefore we present this appendix of game statistics for the various creatures described herein. All of these stats are for the *Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game* system, although you may be able to easily adapt them to other systems as well. Gamers — enjoy!

The Snake in the Fold

Osoroshii (type II demon): Init +6; Atk claw +6 melee (1d6+2) or bite +8 melee (2d4 plus poison, only once per round) or snake slam +7 melee (1d10+2, only once per round) or mesmerize (special, requires both actions); AC 16; HD 7d8; MV 30'; Act 2d20; SP crit range 19-20, poison (DC 16 Fort save or paralysis for 1d6 rounds), mesmerize (DC 18 Will save or target is unaware of everything except Osoroshii; if save is natural 5 or less then target is *charmed* for 1d3 days), demon traits (infravision, speech, immune to non-magical weapons, immune to natural attacks from creatures of 3 HD or less, half-damage from fire, acid, cold, electricity, gas); SV Fort +7, Ref +7, Will +7; AL C.

A beam of light shone down through a new hole in the roof, revealing the grotesque creature coiled between the pillars. A huge serpent, her scales a glossy green so dark they could almost pass for black. The belly was a bright yellow speckled with red. Near the head the demon possessed a pair of thin arms with clawed hands. The head itself was a pale white and almost human in its semblance. A great mass of black hair spilled away

from the demon's scalp, flowing across her back and hanging down about her grinning visage.

Death Stalks the Night

Nightwalker: Init +3 (+6 with surprise); Atk bite +3 melee (1d7) or claw +2 melee (1d5) or ecstasy kill +6 melee (special); AC 15; HD 4d12; MV 50'; Act 2d20 (bite and claw) or 1d20 (ecstasy kill); SP unlucky surprise (if nightwalker is hidden or friend-guised, victim of its first attack must make a d30 Luck check or be surprised), ecstasy kill (only on a surprise attack, 2d5 dmg plus 1d20 on Crit Table II; if target dies, they die smiling), stealthy (+10 to sneak silently and hide in shadows), friend-guise (nightwalker can spend one round to read a target's mind, DC 14 Will save to resist; if successful, nightwalker can spend additional round to polymorph itself into an exact likeness of a friend; range 60', can be done while hidden), immune to non-magical attacks, infravision, mortal vulnerability (disintegrates if exposed to sunlight); SV Fort +3, Ref +4 Will +2; AL C.

"Ah, the nightwalkers. They come from a land south of here, born of jealousy and hatred. Some say they are muroyi of the worst kind, or their twisted children, others say they are spirits who yearn to take physical form. Evil things."

"How do we fight them?"

"Not with a sharp blade, for they are immune to such things — not that you could see it to strike it. No, you need muti: Muti to sense it and muti to harm it."

Dara's Tale

Scurrier Swarm: Init +1; Atk swarming bite +2 melee (1d2); AC 12; HD 3d12; MV 30'; Act d20 special; SP bite all targets within a 30'x30' space, overwhelm (on a natural 19 or 20 attack roll, the swarm forces the target to be prone and gains +1d to hit; DC 13 Strength check and a full round's effort required to stand); SV Fort +1, Ref +2, Will +0; AL N.

Late that winter, the scurriers came, a pox not seen for two generations. At first, they came only in ones and twos, and were axed or pummeled with shovels easily enough, and their lithe, six-legged bodies were a curiosity for all ages. Their gray-and-white pelts, though thick against the cold, were bristly and course, hardly worth the trouble of skinning, and they had a foul smell, as if they'd spent their lives feasting only on offal ... But then ... a wave of scurriers swept out of the forest, more than could be counted, a ripple of twisting, furred motion, low to the ground and headed for the storehouses ... Omnivorous and starving, the scurriers bit and clawed and spat, but it was chiefly their accumulated weight — the sheer mass of their writhing, furious charges — that threatened any real harm.

Interred with the Worm

Great White Worm: Init +6; Atk body slam +6 melee (2d8) or swallow +6 melee (special) or foul breath (DC 16 Fort save or gag helplessly for 1d3 rounds, range 30'); AC 14; HD 8d20; MV writhe and burrow 40'; Act 2d24 (1 attack from each end); SP swallow (victim takes progressive damage per round from constriction and previously swallowed items: 1d3 dmg round 1, 1d4 dmg round 2, 1d5 dmg round 3, etc.), caustic interior (for purposes of cutting an escape, worm's interior is AC 12 with 20hp; however, escapee takes 1d8 acid damage with each blow), caustic exterior (melee attackers who successfully hit must make a DC 14 Reflex save or take 1d4 acid damage), slippery slime (before a melee attack, attacker must make DC 8 Reflex save or fall prone), bioluminescence (body glows providing torch-light equivalent for 120' around the beast), giant crit (on a natural 20 or 24 to hit, rolls 1d5 on Crit Table G); SV Fort +8, Ref +6, Will +4; AL N.

From that cavernous blackness came the groping, slime-exuding mass of a great white Worm. I beheld it by light of its own luminescence, waves of fluorescing slime cascading from its glutinous segments to pave the chamber floor in a sticky seepage. I describe it as a worm, so perhaps you think it moved slow or ponderously, even as an earthworm does; but no. Fast as a lightning-strike it set about devouring the amassed coffins and their contents, a toothless maw gaping open near the head (if, indeed, it possessed such a thing) into which the dead flowed on a river of lubricating slime. Horrible suckling and slurping sounds it made as it supped to the last corpse on that over-bountiful offering, my eyes fixed and unblinking all the while, riveted by the throbbing white coils of its body as it swallowed each casket, the bulges proceeding down its interminable length into depthless darkness beyond.

Beneath A Scarlet Moon

Centaaurine: Init +4; Atk lance +6 melee (1d12+3) or hoof +6 melee (1d6+3); AC 16; HD 4d16; MV 60'; Act 1d20; SP charge (additional +1 to hit, double damage, must be at least 30' from target, cannot move afterwards in same round); "mounted" advantage (additional +1 to hit unmounted man-sized opponents), hit-and-run (Can move before and after attack as long

as total movement < 60' and there is no charge), speech (common, equines, and any additional languages allowed by Intelligence); SV Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +4; AL N.

The creature halted before Auric. Onyx hooves filled his eyes, flowing into colossal forelocks. He flinched backward, feebly raising the knife. Sweat beaded his pale skin. The body rose in columns of muscle under pitchblack hide. The transformation from equine to demi-human began at the withers where the two forms merged seamlessly. The human torso had skin of near purple ebony. A centaur, and a female. Muscles stood etched like living obsidian. From the back great thews swept in thick wings to either side of a sinewy chest ... She was primordial.

Chimeric Centipede: Init +3; Atk mandible +4 melee (1d6 plus poison) or antenna lash +4 melee (1d4) or body wrap (special); AC 15; HD 4d8; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 14 Fort save or paralysis for 1d6 turns; if already paralyzed from poison, subsequent save is DC 18 Fort or death), body wrap (opposed grapple check to immobilize target for further attacks, +5 to grapple check), 100-legged climber (d100 on climb checks); SV Fort +4, Ref +2, Will +2; AL C.

This centipede was far larger ... Antenna lashing, it slithered through the water in undulating motions and scrambled up the midden wall. Long as his lance, its body was thick as Khaista's arm. The true horror was its human face ... The features of the infant's face were grotesquely pinched beneath the questioning antenna. Mandibles thrust from its mouth. It keened and squealed ... The human-faced horror reared up like a cobra.

Nightflyer: Init +2 (+4 with surprise); Atk tail lash +2 melee (1d4) or bite +1 melee (1d3); AC 13; HD 2d8; MV fly 40'; Act 1d16 (special); SP swarming attack (action die increases by +1d for every nightflyer attacking the same target: 1d20 for each of 2 nightflyers, 1d24 for each of 3, and 1d30 for each of 4 or more), avian illusion (can resemble any nocturnal bird, DC 13 Will save to recognize illusion, otherwise increases DC to avoid surprise by +5); SV Fort +1, Ref +3, Will +2; AL C.

Cursing, he realized the beating wings were leathery, the body featherless, it was no bird. A bat, larger than any he knew. The nightflyer entered a beam of moonlight and was illuminated by reddened brilliance ... The horned imp's face contorted as hateful yellow eyes challenged them. Forked tongue flickering, the imp lashed a prehensile tail and vanished in the crooked boles.

Stinging Manticore: Init +4; Atk sting +5 melee (1d5+2 plus poison) or bite +4 melee (2d7) or claw +4 melee (2d4); AC 14; HD 6d8; MV 40'; Act 2d20; SP poison (first save Fort DC 14 or take 1d10 dmg, second save Fort DC 16 or take 2d10 damage, third save Fort DC 18 or take 3d10 damage, etc.); speech (Common and felines), crit range 19-20, half damage from all non-magical missile attacks; SV Fort +6, Ref +5, Will +4 AL C.

Auric saw the bearded face of a man, head larger than a table, its body that of a scorpion-tailed lion. Manticore. Eyes burning with eldritch energy, the beast gnashed its teeth, voice booming ... The manticore crouched, tensed to spring. Its great stinger whipped forward and back. Focused on the centaurine, the monster dismissed the human ... Its human face was well-made, handsome except for yellow incisors large as sickle blades ... Muscles along Khaista's back bunched as she thrust the lance. The sharp tip pierced the monster. The manticore roared, the blade sinking deep. It stumbled, tail lashing, barb striking the centaurine once, twice.

Witchling: Init +4; Atk claw +3 melee (1d6+3) or bite +3 melee (1d4+3); AC 15; HD 6d4; MV 30', climb 40'; Act 1d20; SP illusory distraction (target makes DC 14 Will save or is distracted from witchling for 1 round; witchling auto-crits distracted target on a successful hit), spider climber (can climb any surface at any angle; never needs to make climbing check), overbearing crit (all crits are 1d24 on Crit Table II and additionally knock target prone), jinn-possessed (becomes normal 0-level child if jinn is exorcised), jinn-defense (takes only 1 point of damage from any non-magical attack); SV Fort +3, Ref +6, Will +5; AL C.

The girl was a raggamuffin, dressed in motley scraps. Febrile eyes blazed in her dirty face. She stood in the center of the road, hair like filthy straw sticking out in frayed strands. The strings of a bedraggled bonnet knotted beneath a grubby chin. Her ragged nails were stained as her tunic ... Head thrown back, the girl

shrieked laughter. Moonlight ignited her in russet halos. Auric glimpsed teeth filed to nails poking from black gums ... Red-eyed and giggling, she scurried forward. Twisted in unnatural angles she slithered on all fours, stomach close to the ground. No human moved so effortlessly ... She darted forward, nails scratching cracked stone. Slithering from her lips a serpent tongue flickered, tasting the air. Tasting his apprehension.

Beast of Bluestone Hills

Leucrocota: Init +8; Atk headbutt +3 melee (1d6+2) or devour tal (special); AC 18; HD 3d8; MV 90'; Act 1d20; SP charge (must be at least 30' from target, adds +2 to headbutt attack and damage), celeritous withdrawal (a DC 15 Reflex save is required to attempt a free blow against a leucrocota that exits melee), devour tal (target makes DC 13 Will save or loses 1 point of Intelligence and Fortitude, and dies if both reach 0; range 30'), flawless mimic (perfectly duplicates any speech it hears); SV Fort +2, Ref +6, Will +1; AL N.

The beast came, climbing the steep slope like a goat. It had cloven hooves like a goat or a deer; they struck fire on the stones as the beast raced past. It seemed white and orange in the mingled light of the three moons. Its wedgelike head was dark but streaked with the paler orange color, something like a badger. It was so fast that it seemed to blur when it moved, and it muttered as it came ... and remarked in a man's voice, "It's a fair price: take it or leave it."

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?



**Do not despair, Mortal Dogs!
Issue 8 is already well begun.**

...

**Prepare yourselves for the
debut of Dakagna and the thrilling
exploits of other heroes, as well as
the return of Chris Wilrich's Gaunt
and Bone, James Enge's Morlock,
and Clint Werner's Oba!**

...

**So Endeth Issue 7. Go forth now
and tell all you see of its glories!**

...

So Sayeth the Skull



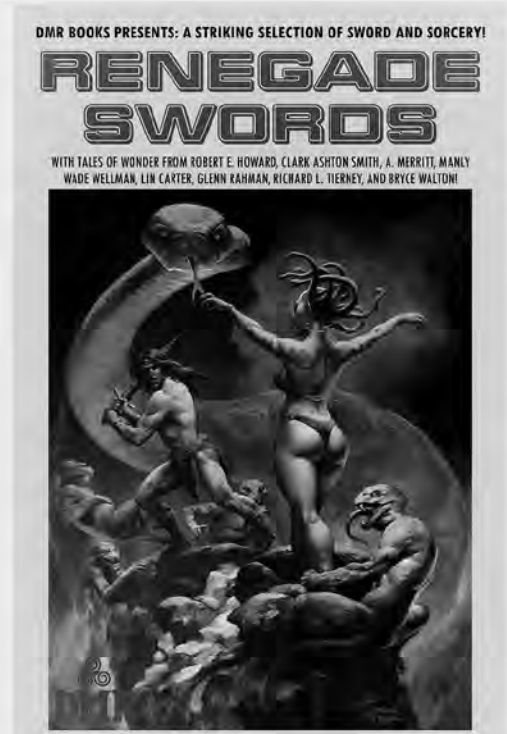
NECROMANCY IN NILZTIRIA

BY D.M. RITZLIN

THE WORLD OF NILZTIRIA IS AN ANCIENT ONE. BENEATH ITS BRILLIANT CRIMSON SUN AND DEMON-HAUNTED MOONS WONDROUS TREASURES LAY BURIED, WAITING TO BE UNCOVERED BY INTREPID ADVENTURERS. YET PERIL ABOUNDS AS WELL, IN THE FORM OF NEFARIOUS SORCERERS, GROTESQUE BEASTS, AND INEXPLICABLE PHENOMENA. IF YOU CRAVE STORIES OF ADVENTURE AND WONDER WITH A TOUCH OF GALLOWS HUMOR, LOOK NO FURTHER THAN THESE THIRTEEN TALES OF NILZTIRIA!

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THIS ANTHOLOGY CONTAINS EIGHT FANTASTIC TALES, EACH OF THEM OBSCURE OR OVERLOOKED IN SOME WAY. INCLUDES STORIES BY ROBERT E. HOWARD, CLARK ASHTON SMITH, A. MERRITT, MANLY WADE WELLMAN, LIN CARTER, AND MORE!



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TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

IN THIS ISSUE...

Beasts of the Bluestone Hills, by James Enge

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius: Deftly avoiding Morlock's blade, bloody with her stinking orange blood, the beast jumped forward and struck him on the chest with a leonine paw. Morlock was knocked clean off his feet and fell on the unpaved road. Every atom of breath seemed to be knocked out of him; he lost hold of his sword; the world went dark.

The Gift of a Poisoned Necklace, by John C. Hocking

A Tale of the King's Blade: "That's her!" roared the massive man clearing space at the doorway. He pointed at their booth with an outthrust arm that appeared considerably thicker than Benhus's leg, then lowered his head like the bull he resembled and charged.

SNAKE in the Fold, by Clint Werner

From the Tales of Shintaro Oba: Osoroshii slithered lower down the pillars, her face bobbing only a few feet from Oba. There was no fear in the demon's expression, only a look of smug triumph. "What will you offer me in exchange, Sekigahara-san?"

AND MORE!



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