

Tales From The **MAGICIAN'S SKULL**

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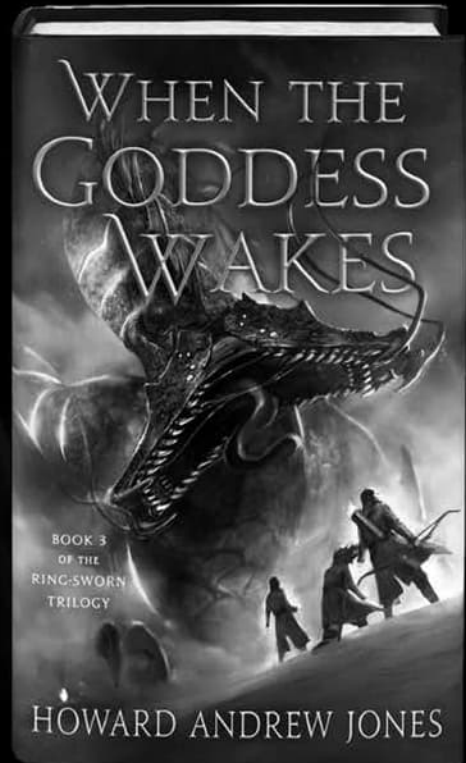
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INTRODUCING DAKAGNA QUEEN OF SWORDS

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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. 8

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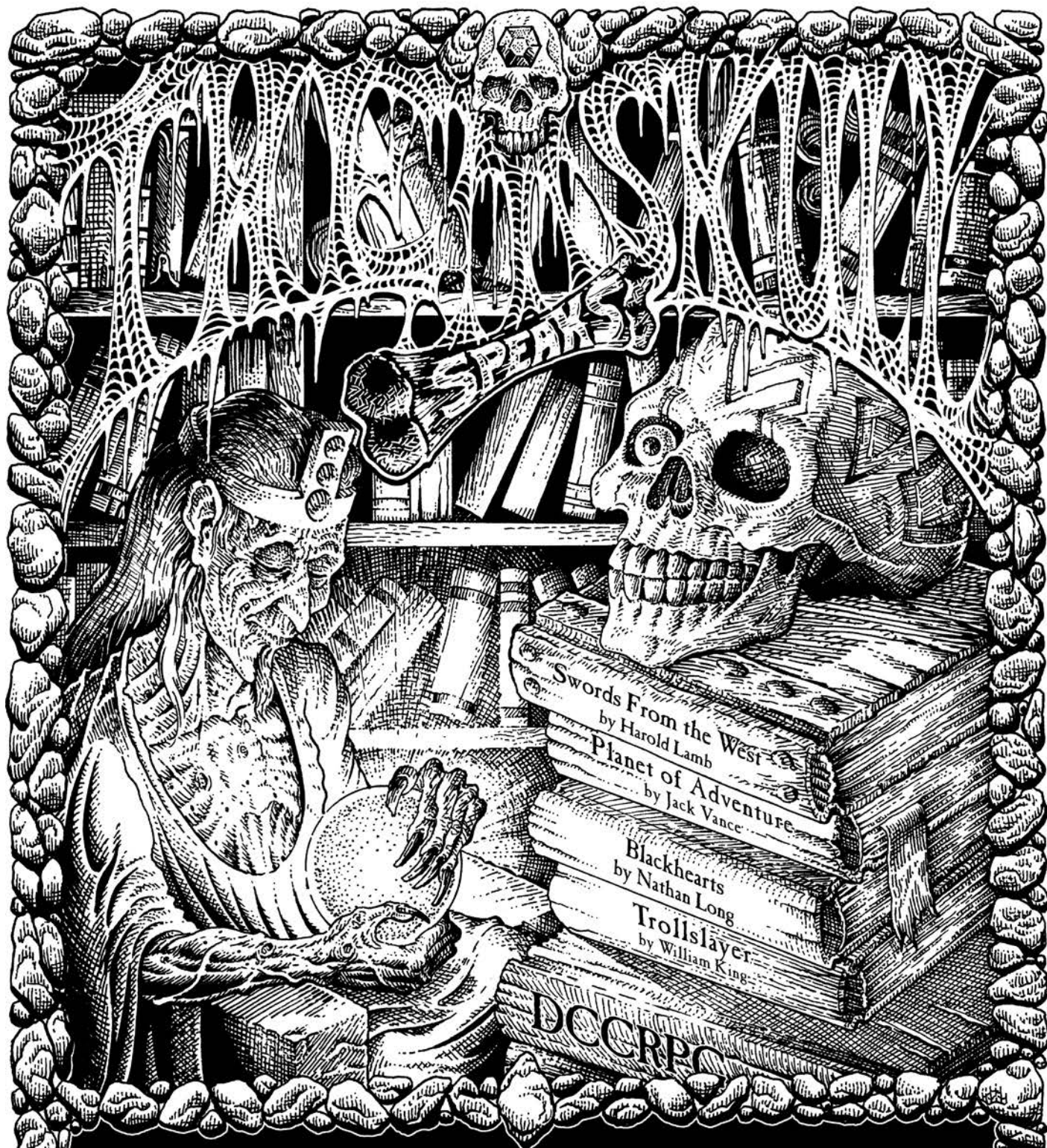
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Cease your wailing, mortal dogs, for once more I have granted your fondest wishes and returned with fantastic tales of sword-and-sorcery! No more must you pace forlornly before your mailbox waiting for salvation only I can deliver, contenting yourself with the reading of street signs and the backs of cereal boxes! Now that you hold my peerless magazine in your hands once more, it is time to be transported to realms of wonder!

Your praise has reached me, and I am somewhat pleased. While the limerick was of questionable merit, three of the odes were quite fine, and the concerto for trombone and guitar brought me true delight. I expect more and greater tribute in the weeks to come!

Lastly, it has come to my attention that the sinister red lights looming over the streets are something known as "stop lights," and that foolish mortals injure their fellows when they heed them not! Contact your priests and kings and tell them I can immeasurably improve the concept of these "stoplights" with cyclopeasts, whose unwinking, glowing crimson eyes will serve much the same purpose, and who will swiftly snack upon all those who fail to halt immediately! I have already begun to grow them in my vats, and will shortly dispense them to your municipalities! So Sayeth the Skull!

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

I've just finished my weekly meeting with the mighty Skull, and I have seldom seen him in a finer mood. Not only has he recovered the majority of his octobears, he is well pleased with the contents of this issue and the others that are nearly ready to send to layout in their stead. Much like yourselves, he is ever eager for more wonderful sword-and-sorcery, and he declared to me for once even he may be briefly sated, though he wishes the magazine were a weekly affair.

I left his office to return to my own and contemplated the treasures on my walls. On my right are three framed covers from *Adventure* magazine, preserved by none other than the late John Drury Clark, perhaps best known as one of the two gentlemen who wrote Robert E. Howard for the chronology of Conan's life. On the bookshelves around me are long-time favorite volumes, some dating as far back as childhood, along with more recent delights, and many a book yet unread. May I live so long as to read them, and many others. On the floor nearby is one faithful hound, Corwin, and, it must sadly be noted, an empty spot where my other furry friend would always lay.

I'm a fortunate man, and I think I do a good job keeping that in mind, but every now and then I forget that I should be grateful for all I have, and that it should be cherished. One day while you're distracted with your deadlines and your shopping list, and possibly that sonnet you're writing for *The Skull*, that dog who was your companion and close friend might slip away to fields unknown. Make sure you give your own furry friends a good pat tonight in memory of Keena, who kept me company while I edited the first seven issues of *The Skull's* favorite magazine, and

greeted me each morning for almost thirteen years while I wrestled with many a tale and book. She was far better company than many men I've known, and a better friend than nearly all.

This issue has work by some authors new to our magazine as well as the return of some talented semi-regulars, like the talented Chris Wilrich, who brings us another tale of Gaunt and Bone, and the gifted Clint Werner and James Enge, bringing us more adventures of Oba and Morlock, respectively. You'll probably notice many a newcomer, including old friend, Robert Rhodes, who delivered what I hope will be the first entry in a new series with a swashbuckling warrior sorceress, and another from new friend W.J. Lewis, who brings us the first of the adventures of Dakagna. That's not all of course, for this issue is crammed with amazing fiction.

The other day I asked the interns if they had any ideas for new magazine features. They did, but they were all pretty terrible, including a column on favorite sword-and-sorcery hair colors, and a series of recipes inspired by Solomon Kane's travels. However, the door is open, and if you loyal readers have any ideas for additional magazine columns, please drop us a line. We'd love to hear from you. We're unlikely to ever devote magazine space to reviews, apart from those *The Skull* himself dictates.

Swords Together!

— Howard Andrew Jones

• THE SKULL READS THE CLASSICS •

Heed me, Mortal Dogs!

Recently the office minions brought forth something known as a Blue Raybeam Player, which conjures images from small metal discs, presumably with some sort of converted death ray. You should acquire one of your own, on the instant, and then seek out *Primal*, by Genndy Tartakovsky.

Seldom in the history of cinema has there been such an excellent combination of action and adventure. There is a mighty caveman, and a deadly killer lizard, and together they have adventures! There is battle, and mayhem, and glorious monsters, and sometimes (admittedly not quite often enough) sorcery. You will not be disappointed! The motion of these drawings, the background, and all else, is spectacular. And there is no whining, because almost no one says a word!

Another disc looked equally promising, but was not. I endured several adventures of teenagers investigating peculiar houses and museums with an absurd talking dog. Again and again they encountered peculiar phenomena, but always it proved to be some fool in an improbable mask

rather than a true sorcerer. I am told later incarnations of this Scoobers Dooby have actual magic and horror, but I lack the patience to try again without further information, for I found these episodes so vexing I nearly vaporized the Blue Raybeam Player with a ray of my own.

Finally, I can fully commend a series of adventures from Japan known as *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. Ah, what excellent storytelling this proved to be. There was true sorcery, and swordplay, and excellent characterization! There was much action, and also tension, and many fine surprises. Also, this story did not neglect horrific elements, and there were never any stupid men hiding behind masks with inane plans to frighten do-gooders. It was most satisfying, apart from brief moments when characters turned into smaller versions of themselves and jumped about. I am told that this is an "anime convention" and must occasionally be endured, like a "laugh track," which I'm told is an even more odious feature of some comedy shows. Who has time for comedy? I have never understood the point.

— So Sayeth the Skull!

DO YOU HAVE SUGGESTIONS, QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, OR CONCERNS? DO YOU WISH TO SEND US ACCOLADES, INVITATIONS, OR JEWELLED GOBLET? IF YOU DARE TO CONTACT THE SKULL, REACH OUT TO US AT: skull@goodman-games.com 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!



ДАКАБНА, QU



FEEN OF SWORDS



By W. J. LEWIS

Illustration by JENNELL JAQUAYS

DAKAGNA hated her camel. It was a large brute, all bites and snorts. She blinked sweat from her eyes and the muscles bunched in her fore-arms as she pulled on its reins. It didn't move. The hot wind scraped dust across Dakagna's face. The sweat made her lips itch, her mouth itch, her forehead itch. She hated the heat. Give her the snows of home. The mountains. A hare to eat, greasy fat spitting in the fire. She was sick of sand lizards and trail tack.

Her eyes flicked this way and that, ever watchful for scorpions and giant cazers. She had not seen one yet, but the merchant who'd sold her this camel, may his soul burn in Rogan's Fires, had warned her against them. Warned her against a lot of things, actually. The cazers, who strike without warning from underground. Travelling through the Akmas desert alone. Her destination, and the wizard who owned the city of Elonia.

Dakagna felt a spasm in her foot. She had been still too long. She had to move. She had no choice. She wrenched the reins, and the camel groaned. Its stubbornness was no match for her strength, forged in gladiatorial arenas and battlefields across Delter. They moved. The spasm in her foot subsided.

As the sun began to dip, she heard it. Unmistakable. Not one sound, but an amalgam that told her all she needed to know. Drawn steel. A scream. Someone in trouble. She pinpointed the sounds to her left, over the top of a dune.

She ignored it. Not her problem. She heard another scream. Felt her heart skip a beat. Heard a sword hit something. Felt her knuckles twitch in answer. They itched for steel. For combat. For blood. It had been too long.

She heaved on the camel's reins, and forced it up the dune. When she reached the top, she saw.

A small caravan. All was in disarray. The caravaneers were huddled together in a circle, weapons drawn, facing outwards.

You make a nice target, all together, thought Dakagna. But what creature attacks?

She narrowed her eyes. Saw it moments before it hit. A slight ripple of the sand. Something moved beneath, like the wake of a shark under the Agate Sea. It burst from the ground, silent, spilling sand. A glimpse of mandibles, segmented body, sharp claws. A cazer. A woman screamed. A dagger flew at the thing, swift as a sparrow. A bearded man attacked the creature with a hatchet, but the wyrm sprang forward, engulfed the man's head, and tore it off. The man's body stood and swayed, blood pulsing from the headless neck. The man's body fell to the ground.

The cazer disappeared. Then the sand shifted, and the caravaneer's body slipped beneath.

The woman screamed again.

Shut up, thought Dakagna.

She unsheathed Ferro, her broadsword, and slid from the camel's back. She gently padded towards the caravan, light on the balls of her feet. Her eyes scanned for the creature. Would it attack again? Or was it satisfied with its prey? In her mind's eye she studied it, looked for weak points. It had a carapace, like a scorpion, but segmented like a giant worm. Its face resembled a large rat, but with mandibles and no eyes. Long whiskers. Huge maw, jaw flexible like a snake's. Long teeth. Dakagna struggled to see weak points. So be it.

Attack and be damned.

As she got closer, the caravaneers saw her. They waved at her to join them. She stood her ground. On her own, she was a better target for the creature. It would come for her. She scanned the people in the caravan. She met a man's gaze. He was dressed in black, his dark hair flopped across his face, and his eyes were a dazzling green. He winked at her. Actually winked. In the middle of a battle. Dakagna grinned back, then she saw it. The tell-tale sign of the cazer's wake.

Coming straight for her.

Easy prey.

But the creature didn't know who it was dealing with. Dakagna, the Red Warrior. Dakagna, Queen of Swords. Dakagna, Cursed to Wander.

The cazer burst from the sand, maw wide. Dakagna felt the hot breath, felt grit hit her eyes. No time to blink, she rolled. The jaws snapped at where she'd been. She swung Ferro, her sister of many battles. Its steel blessed with the blood of a dying god. It swept through the air, and hit the worm's exoskeleton. The armour shattered, and yellow blood spurted, hit her bare arm. Burned. Acid blood. No-one had told her that. Another scar to add to the collection. No time to consider it.

Dakagna leapt, and landed on the beast's body. It reared. From somewhere a dagger spun, hit the cazer in the mouth. The green-eyed man had circled around. He was crouched at a safe distance. Still. Some throw. Their eyes met. They shared a nod. The wyrm gave a keening screech and bucked beneath her. She brought Ferro over her head and bunched her prodigious muscles. She swung the blade down, and it crunched into and through the creature's neck. As it fell, she rolled aside, and stood. She watched its death throes, until it was still. You stay ready till the foe is dead.

She turned to the caravan. They looked at her, wide eyed. The green-eyed man smiled. A woman fainted. Dakagna spat on the ground.

"I'm Dakagna."

• • •

LATER, she was eating lizard and trail tack, sitting at the fire. The green-eyed man, whose name was Kalian, sat opposite.

"Lucky for you a guard died. Now you have gainful employment for the rest of your journey," he said, smiling. He had good teeth. It made her suspicious. She grunted.

"And," he said, "all you had to do was kill a cazer. With a little help."

"Help?" Dakagna said.

"I believe my dagger was the killing blow, said Kalian, his lips quirking in a smile. Too charming, thought Dakagna. Don't trust it.

"Where are you headed?" she asked.

Kalian frowned.

"Where else? The only place we could be headed. To the City of Glass and Sand, Mighty Elonia. Home of the Wizard King, His Radiance —"

"Don't say his name," said Dakagna.

"Ah. A superstitious one," said Kalian. When you'd seen the things Dakagna had seen, it wasn't superstition. Magic was real. Demons were real. Curses were real.

The fire crackled, and she lost herself in it, memories fighting to be recalled. She did not want to remember. Kalian was talking.

"What?" she asked.

"I said. Perhaps you would like to join me in my tent this evening?" She looked at him. Up and down. He'd do. She spat out a lizard bone and nodded. She could do with the exercise.

• • •

THEY approached the fabled city. Situated around a giant oasis, it was a hub of commerce. She had seen bigger, she'd seen smaller, she'd seen richer, she'd seen poorer. Kalian was

espousing its virtues as the greatest city in the East. Dakagna spat. She crunched her neck to the side, and shifted in her saddle. Humanity always thought itself special. Grand. And why? Because it built towers, within which little men could swap pieces of metal. It made no sense to her.

What did make sense was that this was her target. She felt the ghost of a tremor in her leg, but knew it was only a memory, not the real thing. She was moving.

“Ho, Dakagna.” Elenia, the caravan mistress, approached. “A word, if I may.” She looked at Kalian. He smiled back. Dakagna was struck again by his handsome face. Remembered their nights of passion. No doubt about it, he was a beauty. Symmetrical, in a rough asymmetric world. Suspicious. If he’d lived a life like hers, that face would be scarred, somehow. The nose broken, like hers. Teeth chipped, like hers. Maybe he was just lucky.

“In private,” said Elenia. Kalian dipped a mock bow and headed off on his camel.

Dakagna dismounted and stretched her back. She took a swig of water. Elenia was nervous. Dakagna could see it in the set of the shoulders, the furtive eye movements, the hands that wrung together. A good woman, Elenia. Dakagna had shared date wine at her fire, and Elenia had talked of her life. Dakagna had stayed silent. But she liked the woman. Seemed to be trying her best.

“You say you want to see the wizard?”

Dakagna grunted. This was not news. They had discussed it many times. She needed his magic. Elenia continued. “I have a precious gift, a tribute for him. I would like you to accompany me. To guard the treasure. The city streets are dangerous, and I fear pickpockets and thieves.” Dakagna shrugged her big shoulders. She knew what Elenia really meant. She wanted someone to have her back when she met the wizard. She was scared. Not surprising. Wizards were slippery. Dangerous.

“You will ask on my behalf?” said Dakagna.

“If he likes our gift, and is willing to hear — aye.”

“It is good. I will join you.”

“Good, good,” said Elenia. “Come then. We will ride ahead.”

Dakagna frowned. Why not wait till the whole caravan was inside the city?

She mounted her camel, which tried to bite her, and followed Elenia.

She rode up to Elenia and her husband Traye. Kalian joined them.

“You were not invited,” said Elenia.

“And yet.” Kalian shrugged.

“Let him come,” said Traye, sharing a look with the green-eyed man. “More protection can’t hurt.”

Dakagna narrowed her eyes. She loosened Ferro in her scabbard and rode towards the city.

• • •

THEY waited in an opulent holding room. There were many other supplicants, come to give gifts to the wizard, or trade, or ask a magical blessing. The wizard was known to be mercurial in his moods, at times beneficent, at times vengeful. Dakagna hoped that he would like the caravaneers’ gift, and would give her a boon. She had nothing to give him. Before meeting the caravan, she had hoped he might accept service from her, like the knights of old, in return for freeing her of her curse.

She could feel it with the waiting. She paced, hoping to stave off the spasms that would come. Knew it would do no good. The only thing that helped was moving on. That was her curse. She was doomed never to stay in one place. She had to keep moving. If she didn’t — and she’d tried, many times in the past, to settle — her body would be wracked with agonising spasms. Enough to make movement difficult, but not impossible. A bone deep grinding would grip her body, and she would have to move on. She tapped her feet on the floor, restless. Would his magic be powerful enough to reverse the curse? Would he even deign to try?

A small man came to Elenia, whispered in her ear, glanced at Dakagna, and gestured to them. They followed. Traye held their offering in front of him. From the looks of it, it was heavy, but he would not allow others to touch it. A large object, covered in a velvet sheet.

They walked into the throne room. Dakagna raised her eyebrows, impressed despite herself. She had seen the infamous Ice Fortress of the Troll Princess, and the Palace of the Gods in far Loa, but this was as gaudy as she’d seen. Everywhere, gems and precious metal festooned the walls. Huge frescoes of gods and men adorned the ceiling. Along both sides of the room were cages, within which fantastic beasts paced. A menagerie of panthers, hawks, bears. All hunting beasts. Dakagna flexed her fingers. She was not the only predator in the room.

“Welcome, welcome to the Palace of Beasts.” The voice was deep and rich, filled with mirth. It echoed around the room. The speaker was smaller than she’d expected. A slight man, in bright red robes. His grey hair fell to his shoulders. By contrast his beard was black as sable, and hung to his waist. “Welcome travellers. Rest at the Oasis of Calm. And what brings you into the presence of His August Majesty, Reinaldo III, scion of Magic?” When no one answered the man, he chuckled. “That’s me. But please, please, call me Reinaldo.”

He skipped daintily down the steps of a raised dais, until he was level with them. Dakagna scanned the room. No guards. This man must be powerful indeed. She looked at him. His face was lined with age. One of his eyes was a milky white, and the other was a bright, bright blue. It contrasted with his dark brown skin. He smiled, and his teeth were an array of gems. Gold, ruby, sapphire.

His smile dropped as he looked at them. He wore a frown, now.

“But, my dears, I know why you have come. You bring a gift, I see.” He gestured to the object in Traye’s hand. Traye yelped as it moved, and floated from his grasp. It hovered in front of Reinaldo. “My friends, it saddens me, this gift.”

Elenia’s voice cracked as she spoke. “Why, my Lord?”

The wizard chuckled.

“Because,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “It is no gift. Beneath this velvet sheet, you bring a trap for me. To suck my magic dry, to steal it, to whisk it away.”

Elenia had gone pale. Traye’s eyes flicked, searching for a way out. Kalian looked oddly calm.

“Betrayal. So. Here is what I will do.” Reinaldo waved a hand at the wall. It became transparent, and showed an image. Elenia’s caravan, just outside the walls. It was surrounded by guards. “Your caravan.” The wizard waved a hand. The guards moved in. “Dead.” There was no sound, but they watched as the members of the caravan were slaughtered.

With a roar, Traye threw himself at the wizard. The mage shimmered, and the other man went straight through his body. Illusion. Dakagna looked around. Where was he? She grabbed Ferro's hilt.

"Do not, Queen of Swords," said Reinaldo. "This is not yet your fight."

"Show yourself," shouted Traye. His voice was choked off. His eyes began to bulge. The man rose into the air. There was the sound of crunching and snapping, as one by one Traye's bones broke within him. He dropped to the floor like a ragdoll. Elenia screamed.

"I despise deceit," said the wizard's voice. The animals in the menagerie hissed, roared, barked. "Luckily, I was forewarned by my associate."

Elenia looked towards Kalian. He returned a smug grin.

"You traitor," said Elenia, and lunged for him. She slumped back, a knife in her eye. Kalian was quick.

"Now," said Reinaldo, his image stepping towards them. "Where is the real Orb?"

'My lord?' asked Kalian.

The velvet sheet was flung off the hovering gift, as if blown by a fierce wind. There, in the air, was an empty cage.

"The object you promised me," said Reinaldo. "It was not in the caravan. These two did not bring it here. The arrangement was that you would make it safe. And then I would buy it off you."

Dakagna stood still, itching to act. But to do what? It was nothing to do with her. If Elenia had asked her, Dakagna would have told her. No good comes of scamming wizards. Kalian smiled.

"My Lord," he said. "The price has just gone up."

Reinaldo frowned. He tutted.

"I despise deceit," the wizard said. "But you are right. The price has gone up. For you." He waved his hand, and Dakagna felt the floor shift and tilt beneath her. A hole appeared, and she fell. She slid into darkness. She heard Kalian curse, knew he was beneath her. They sped downwards into dark. She fell free, into the air, was falling, falling, then landed with a splash into ice cold water. Her breath was blasted from her. She rose to the surface and spluttered.

She sniffed, smelled rot and damp. She smelt the familiar scent of dead things, of carrion and bones. The cavern was dimly lit, from whence she could not tell. Sharp stalagmites rose from the pool. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, condensation dripping from their points. Drip, drip, drip. Dakagna stood thigh deep in the cold water. On the surface, things floated. She did not look closely. Closed her nose to the stench, breathed shallowly through her mouth. She drew Ferro. She looked around for Kalian.

He stood, a few feet away, daggers drawn.

"You tried to con a wizard?"

"It was a good plan," he said, his eyes scanning the dim cavern.

"Evidently not," said Dakagna. She knew what was coming. She could sense it. Not the exact shape of what would come from the darkness, but a certain knowledge that something would. She shifted her grip on Ferro. Waited. There. Movement.

The glimpse of a yellow eye as it emerged from the dank water. Submerged again. Ripples across the surface. Nothing.

Then it burst from the waters. Dakagna moved, blocked a claw with her sword. Metal clanged on ivory. The creature roared, opening its sharp toothed maw. Red tongue. Yellow eyes. Dark scales. From the corner of her eye she saw Kalian moving through the waist high water. Running away. Coward. Dakagna tried to keep her balance on the floor's sludge as the leviathan's tail lashed towards her. She slipped, went with the movement, and dived. She felt something tear at her back, felt the familiar sensation of her blood flowing free. Tried not to think of the dirt and the floating lumps. She burst into the air.

The creature had half turned away, following the movement of Kalian. Dakagna looked up and saw what she needed. Her opportunity. Attack and be damned. She leapt onto the beast's back, and ran. Up, towards the head. She held Ferro behind her. Leapt. Her sword sheared through a stalactite, clean through, and it fell from the sky. The beast snapped its jaws at her as she flew through the air. A tooth clipped her, cut flesh from her ribs, and she was falling. Her head slammed into a rocky outcrop. Stars burst in her vision. She took a breath, swallowed fetid water. Tried to swim. Didn't know which direction was up or down. She growled. Her feet found floor and she pushed herself out of the pool. All was still.

The leviathan lay, the sharp stalactite protruding from its crest. Blood mixed with the inky dark of the pool. She heard the scuttling of carrion creatures from the darkness. Things that knew when other creatures had died.

She waded to the side of the pool. Her eyes narrowed, seeing a trail of damp footsteps.

She had a thief to kill.

• • •

THE wet footsteps had faded long ago, but there was only one path. Dakagna moved slowly, wary of ambush. Kalian had left her to the monster. He had allowed the caravan to be killed. Elenia, and Traye. She remembered the nights she'd shared with him. Always physical, never more. As she'd wanted. She smiled slightly in satisfaction. She'd been suspicious of those beautiful eyes, those white teeth, that easy smile. With good reason. She knew to trust her instincts.

One hand held against her ribs — she was sure some were broken. She limped along. She felt the blood seep down her back from the leviathan's tooth. Couldn't do anything about that now. Her head throbbed from where she'd hit it. She knew she was in bad shape, but she growled the pain away. Pain was her body's way of telling her it wanted another fight.

She thought of the wizard. He'd plunged her into that pit with the leviathan. Obviously he hadn't expected her to survive. But she still needed his help, his magic. How could she get his aid? She could think of only one way.

As she pondered, her senses were alive to her environment. She trusted her instincts when they screamed. Didn't question it, just acted. She rolled. Heard the clang of dagger on stone. Rolled again. Heard another. Closer. Kalian was quick. She felt a sharp sting in her lower leg. The plunge of metal through muscle. A dagger in her calf. No time for pain. She drew Ferro.

Kalian stood, too far away for a sword strike.

'I could do this all day,' said Kalian. He hefted a knife in his hand. Smiled that smile. 'Look at you. You're done.'

Dakagna could feel liquid pooling in her boot from the dagger in her leg. Her back was slick with blood. Her head pounded. Kalian raised two knives.

But Dakagna had a dagger too. She pulled it from her calf, stifled a gasp, dived headlong and threw. She felt one of Kalian's knives hit her shoulder, the other snipping the lobe of her ear. But she heard the satisfying thump of impact. Heard him grunt. Looked up. Saw as he stumbled back against the rock wall. Slumped to the floor.

She heaved herself up. She dragged herself towards him.

She pointed Ferro at him, the point unwavering. He looked up. Smiled. Those white teeth were covered in blood. He clutched the dagger in his stomach.

"Bad wound," Dakagna said. "Slow death. Tell me where you hid the wizard's orb. I'll make it quick."

She leaned in as he whispered, felt his breath against her bloodied ear. She nodded in satisfaction. She swung her blade. She was already moving when she heard the head thump and roll behind her.

...

DAKAGNA stood in the wizard's menagerie. In front of her, Reinaldo stood, holding a pink globe. Within it, small green spheres grew and popped. The wizard was looking at it, eyes wide, smiling like a child.

"No hard feelings, about the whole dropping you in a pit with a leviathan, my dear, I hope?"

Dakagna shrugged. She pondered which she hated more, camels or wizards. Sadly, both were necessary. She had retrieved the globe from its burial place in the sands, a few miles from the city. Her wounds were healing nicely, as they always did.

"And so to my payment," she said.

The wizard's eyes narrowed. A cobra hissed in a glass cage behind him. She heard a panther roar, somewhere in the menagerie.

"You demand a price? Your life, not enough? Perhaps, Queen of Swords, you do not learn?"

Dakagna was silent. She locked eyes with him.

"But Reinaldo is in a generous mood. What boon would you ask?"

"My curse. Free me from it."

Reinaldo pursed his lips.

"I know of it. Witch Daughter, God Killer, Sister of Beasts. Cursed to Wander. But cursed by a greater mage than me, as much as it hurts to admit. I can do nothing."

Dakagna's eyes narrowed.

"But," said Reinaldo hastily. "I know of one who can."

...

DAKAGNA'S foot spasmed. She had been in this place too long. She sat on her camel and yanked its reins. As she moved, the spasm subsided. She rode towards the East. Towards hope. Towards another adventure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Locked in a basement in a city of fog of grime, W. J. Lewis sits surrounded by quills and vellum. On full moons he is allowed out, and sometimes passersby throw him coins for stories. If you look closely, and are not too loud, you can find him on Twitter @WjlewisA.

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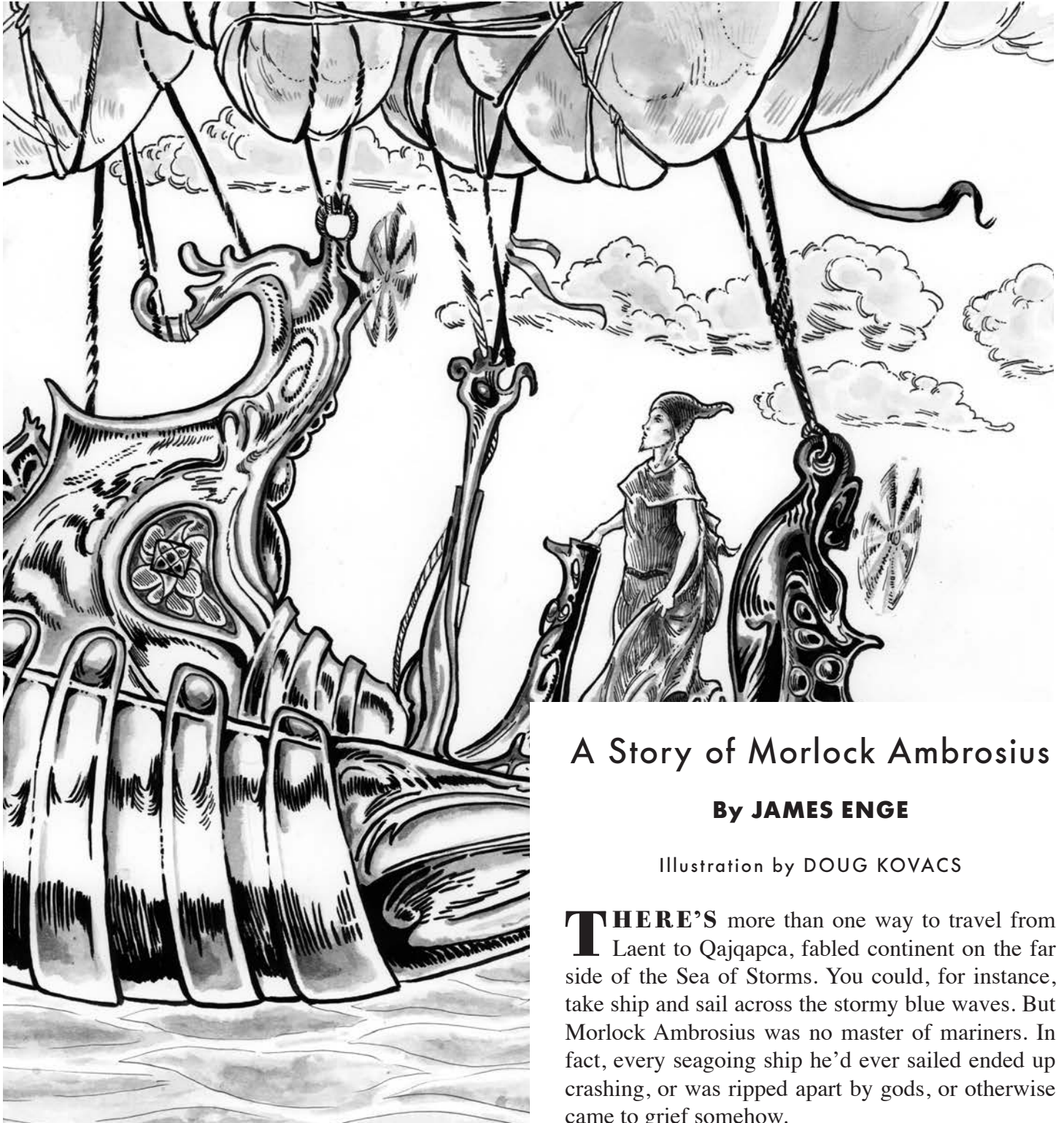
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SKY PIRATES OF T





THE SAVAGE CLOUDS



A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By **JAMES ENGE**

Illustration by DOUG KOVACS

THERE'S more than one way to travel from Laent to Qajqapca, fabled continent on the far side of the Sea of Storms. You could, for instance, take ship and sail across the stormy blue waves. But Morlock Ambrosius was no master of mariners. In fact, every seagoing ship he'd ever sailed ended up crashing, or was ripped apart by gods, or otherwise came to grief somehow.

A man might walk, if he could find a way to breathe under the waves. Morlock seriously considered it. He had walked the length and breadth of Laent in his time, so why not walk for a while under the water? Fish breathe in water, as do many of the folk who live in Southhold, beyond the forbidden walls in the west where he could never return. What they could do, he could do; so Morlock reasoned.

But he was travelling with a phoenix, a creature of light and fire and air. He saw no way to persuade the bird into taking the dark road under the sea.

That left the sky. Morlock set about making a skyship.

The last skyship he'd made had also crashed, but this time, he hoped, it would be different. There was no point in not hoping.

You don't have all day, so I won't bog you down with details. Anyway, some of you are probably making your own skyships, and care only for your own designs, whereas others prefer to fly only in skyships approved by the Interplanar College of Aeronautics, and some aren't interested in flying at all, and so would fail to appreciate the long and difficult process by which Morlock acquired acres of silk, then sewed it up in air-tight bags, then inflated the bags with self-heating air, trapped the air-bags in a net of ropes, and anchored the ropes to a glass gondola fitted with impulse-driven propellers.

Everything had to be dephlogisticated, of course, to prevent the phoenix from setting the ship ablaze, but Morlock was already in the habit of dephlogisticating most things he came in contact with. His blood was a fiery brew and, for one reason or another, people were constantly trying to shed it.

That fire in Morlock's veins may have been the reason why he got along so well with the fiery phoenix, in spite of the fact that they didn't share a spoken language and couldn't have anything like a conversation. (Actually, that may have been another reason they got along: conversations with Morlock could be a little irritating, or so his ex-wife had often told him.)

The phoenix watched every stage of the construction with intelligent interest. The bird was about a cubit shorter than Morlock, with a proud red head and crest, gold eyes, and wings of reddish purple fringed with gold. Fire trailed from between its wing-feathers, like golden letters drifting in the air and then dissipating. It stood on two feet, clawed with sharp purple talons. It had died and been reborn as recently as the previous autumn, but it was already taller than it had been before, and seemed likely to grow even larger.

It was not just an animal. It walked curiously around the gondola as Morlock put the thing together out of wood and woven glass. Once it understood the large amounts of sand Morlock needed to make glass for the gondola, it devised a kind of bucket out of seaweed and driftwood and fetched bucketful after bucketful of sand up from the green-gold beaches fringing the peninsula of Myrlannwr. It helped Morlock stretch and wind the network of ropes needed to attach the gondola to the airbags that would provide the airship's lift. When the time came to cast off, it hopped without any prompting onto the perch Morlock had made for it behind the prow of the gondola, and glanced with a golden eye over its shoulder, waiting for the moment of departure.

Morlock hesitated after he mounted into the gondola's stern. The airship was, so far, unnamed. He'd heard it was bad luck to

travel in a nameless ship. He didn't necessarily believe in luck, but he was sure that any ship he travelled in would need all the luck it could get.

He looked at the golden glass gondola, ringed at intervals with woven wood impulse collectors. It looked a little bit like the body of a bee. The impulse collectors even hummed a bit. He thought of bees he had known.

"All right, airship," he said. "I'm calling you *Zirruck*. Let's take flight."

He cast off the cables anchoring them to the ground and the *Zirruck* rose swiftly to the middle air.

Morlock had bought a map of the world's air from a scholar of clouds and rain. If his map of the sky was correct, there should be a current of cool air running south toward the hot edge of the world, pressed down on by a current of hot air running north. He wanted the cool air and he soon found it. He set his impulse collectors on gather, and turned to watching the sea and sky.

Blue on blue in all directions — that was the first day: sea-blue mirroring sky-blue. When the sun had set in the east, the view was more marvellous still. It was the month of Harps and no moon was aloft, only stars spinning serenely in the sky, facing bright shattered reflections on the rough surface of the sea below.

The next few days were much like the first. Morlock and the phoenix ate and drank sparingly, and spoke not at all.

The next day, at dawn, they faced clouds coming up from the south. They sailed into them around noon, and were enveloped in cold, bright mist.

Then they ran aground in the sky.

At first Morlock didn't believe what he heard and felt: a coarse grating on the prow of the unkeeled gondola. He couldn't see what reef in the sky they had run into, but there was no denying that they were blocked from further movement forward.

He climbed up into the net containing the airbags. These each had an impulse collector at the closure point, to maintain the temperature of the air within. He cranked up the temperature for each airbag, hoping they could lift off the obstruction. The bedraggled phoenix looked up at him as he crawled from balloon to balloon in the net and shook its wet wings irritably.

Presently they began to lift, but the front of the gondola kept bumping into something, some sky-cliff indistinguishable from the clouds.

They came out into a blaze of sunlight reflected from the upper surface of the clouds. Cloud-colored lines flew up from the surface, trapping the gondola from rising further. They were being attacked. Morlock slashed many of the lines with Tyrfin, his accursed sword, but they were landing faster than he could keep up.

He looked outboard of the gondola to see where the lines were coming from. A crowd of glassy figures stood (?) atop the nearby clouds and hurled the lines that were trapping *Zirruck*.

Morlock had not anticipated having to fend off attackers in the sky. But the glassy, near-invisible hooks at the ends of their lines could be repurposed into throwing weapons. He set about collecting these and, when it saw what he was doing, the phoenix followed suit.

Morlock was just about to send a glass star spinning into the crowd of glassy figures when someone near at hand called out in Wardic, "Are you a pirate?"

“No,” Morlock said. “How is it you speak one of my native languages?”

“I am the *zhneeduff mrrkwane* — or you might say, the Sophist of Tongues. You have the *griivyt grelm* that we associate with these words. Is it a correctness?”

“More or less,” Morlock said. “Since I am not a pirate, will you let me go?” He kept his hands busy making glassy hooks into throwing weapons as he spoke. He thought he saw the speaker, a glassy, blue-veined figure somewhat separated from the line-throwing crowd.

“*Mrrzfii ipskroon*,” the Sophist of Tongues said apologetically. “We must know why you pass through our space.”

“Your space is between where I was and where I wish to go.”

“Just so. Just so. It is a *fyrnsprinetz*, to be sure.”

“I will brook no further delay. Free my ship or prepare to fight.”

“We are a peaceful people.”

“We aren’t,” Morlock observed. The phoenix screeched defiantly in agreement.

After conferring with someone in the crowd of cloud people, the Sophist of Tongues said, “We will release you, since *flendulrrk kwahl*. Be wary as you fly south. The savage clouds are full of pirates.”

The glassy, blue-veined people on the cloud began to whistle. One by one, the pale lines evaporated into threads of mist; the glassy hooks melted like bits of ice.

“And your clouds aren’t savage?” Morlock asked.

“They grow more so daily, because of *shazzarnerluin*. When they are imminent to savagery, we depart for calmer clouds.”

“What is *shazzarnerluin*?” Morlock asked.

The Sophist of Tongues was silent for a moment, then said, “There is a fire in the deep sky, where the stars walk.”

“We call it aether. It falls to earth sometimes as lightning.”

“*Ushmirrrva!*” the Sophist of Tongues cried. “This fire — this aether — this *shazzar* — it seeds the clouds with life and power. It is in the crops we grow, in the beasts that feed on them, in our bright blue blood. But when there is too much *shazzar* in a cloud, it becomes savage. The fire breaks free; the cloud dissolves in rain; it is no longer safe to be. Then we flee to more peaceful clouds. The pirates come behind and prey on our migration, like the *kluckspuin* they are.”

The lines were gone; *Zirruck* was rising into the wind. “Peace to you and your peaceful people, Sophist of Tongues,” Morlock called.

“*Shazzar ym thressnir!*” came the incomprehensible reply, fading in the distance.

They were caught in the world’s wind again; it hurled them southwards. In the sky ahead, thunderheads loomed: the savage clouds and the reckless pirates who dwelled among them.

Morlock hadn’t planned on steering much, once he was launched into the sky. But he set about activating the impellers on the port side of the ship without activating those on the starboard side. His plan was to steer around the thunderheads. It was complicated, time-consuming, and completely pointless. As soon as the pirates saw *Zirruck* they came out after her, riding on narrow blue schooners with no sails or visible impellers. They went directly against the wind and they moved more than twice as fast as poor old *Zirruck*.

“Ware boarders!” Morlock called to the phoenix, who screamed defiantly in reply.

Morlock drew Tyrning and waited. That was the worst part of a fight, in Morlock’s experience. Staying in a place, waiting for the enemy to strike. He always preferred to rush in when he could.

The pirates were barely visible. They looked like glass vessels full of water: light bent around them and through them, but did not truly reveal them. Only their bright blue veins were clear in his eye. They carried spears the color of lightning, and their voices (as they grew nearer) sounded like glass chimes.

Now there was a ring of schooners all around *Zirruck*. Some of the pirates were slashing with their bright spears at the net containing the airbags; two of those burst in misty clouds of hot air and fell into the gondola, others floated free, and *Zirruck* slumped in the sky.

“Abandon ship!” shouted Morlock, and leapt into a nearby schooner. Eye-searing spearpoints of light bristled at him. He gripped Tyrning with two hands and hewed at them, as if they were a field of wheat. They clashed together discordantly, like an ill-tuned glass harmonica, and Morlock felt the gush of something hot and wet on his hand. He had drawn blood or ... or something.

But there were more of them than there were of him, and they were terribly strong. They struck at him again and again with the blunt end of their spears. He saw his bright blood fall to the surface of the blue schooner and set it afire. It was the last thing he saw for some time.

• • •

MORLOCK returned to himself in a kind of jail. He’d been in a lot of jails in his long life and hated them all. This looked to be one of the worst, though. The floor and ceiling were made of some sort of translucent substance — aethrium, he thought. So were the bars but, as he groggily rose to his feet and stumbled over to them, he knew that wasn’t all they were. There was some kind of quick fluid moving underneath the crystalline surface. Pure aether, he guessed. That’s why his thinking was so fuzzy, his insight blocked. It was like having glass spikes jammed constantly in his brain (an experience Morlock had actually undergone and was not eager to repeat).

The jail itself was in a greater chamber the color of clouds. It was hard to say how large it was. The air was cold and clammy. It was lit by the fiery blue blood of a crowd of cloud people, and the dimmer light of their aethrium spears. He was a prisoner of the sky pirates, no doubt. A deep rumble churned endlessly, deep in the walls and floor of the chamber: the lightning in the cloud’s secret heart, making the cloud wilder, more savage, nearing the outbreak of the storm.

“*Igruik klishma maryn?*” said someone beyond the bars — one of the glass-skinned, blue-blooded cloud people, Morlock saw hazily.

“Is there a Sophist of Tongues among your people?” asked Morlock hopelessly.

“No!” said the other triumphantly in Wardic. “I was such a thing at one time, but fled the sheeple of the calmer clouds to become a Sophist of Fire among these pirates!”

"Eh." It was no skin off Morlock's walrus.

"I do not understand that," the Sophist of Fire said. "Therefore it is not a word. Refrain from using it."

"Eh."

"I suppose your blunt earthen wits find that funny. But you are in our space and should abide by our standards."

"I'd be in some other space by now, if you had just let us pass," Morlock pointed out.

"Why should we allow earthbeasts to pollute our air with their muddy stinking feet, their foul phlegmy breath, their greasy farting flesh? You spilled burning blood that scarred a sacred skycraft, which could not be purified and had to be destroyed!"

There was no way to respond to any of that, so Morlock asked the question that was really on his mind. "How do those skycraft work?"

"They are sacred. That is not a knowing for you. This prison is also sacred, a thing better than you deserve."

So it had something to do with aether, Morlock guessed. That made sense. Morlock wandered away from the Sophist of Fire to investigate his cage. It was fairly circular, but somewhat irregular. The bars integrated smoothly with the ceiling and the floor. With a tool or two, Morlock thought he could break out of it, although there would be danger when the aether was released, of course.

His hands itched at a painful and glorious memory: a time when he once seized a fistful of cooling aether and threw it like lightning. The aftermath had been devastating. Worth it, considering the enemy he destroyed. Was the Sophist of Fire in that category? Morlock was beginning to think so.

An aethrium spear-point jabbed at him. The Sophist of Fire was holding the shaft. "When I ask you a question, earthbeast, you will speak!"

Morlock did not speak, but grabbed the haft of the spear and yanked it toward him. He nearly had it free when a stronger-than-human pull dragged the spear back to the far side of the bars. The cloud-people were probably stronger than he was; that was worth remembering.

"You could not have broken out with that," the Sophist of Fire said. "It would have been of no use to you."

Morlock shrugged. "I might want to shave later." His guess was that the Sophist was wrong, or just lying. It was very likely he could use one of the aethrium spears to break through the cage. It depended on which batch of aethrium was more pure, the various patterns of crystallization — many an imponderable thing. The next step was to get hold of one and put it to the test.

Morlock dragged his knuckles across the glowing aethrium bars. Each bar sang with a different voice but they all sounded angry, frustrated. The harsh musical tones shook the cloudy chamber, echoed deep in the angry heart of the savage cloud. If he couldn't break the bars from without, maybe he could provoke the aether within them to break loose ...

"DON'T DO THAT!" shouted the Sophist of Fire. "This cloud is nearly a storm. You could destroy us all!"

They didn't take many prisoners, Morlock guessed — otherwise they would have known better than to let their prisoner know he could put them in danger. Morlock had often been a prisoner, had broken many prisons — slain many warders. "The prize of freedom is worth the risk of death," he observed.

"Your death is a thing assured," the Sophist said reasonably. "We would have killed your bird as well, but it unfortunately escaped."

"Not my bird," Morlock said. He felt a sudden, surprising pang of loneliness on hearing that he was the sole captive of the pirates. On balance, though, it was good that the phoenix had escaped. Perhaps they were near enough to Qajqapca's shore for the phoenix to fly home. If not, this whole journey had been a fool's errand. Of course, much of his life had been nothing else.

The Sophist snapped, "I don't care if the bird belonged to you, or you belonged to the bird."

"We are friends, if you have that concept."

"Enough with your quibbling! You polluted our bright world with your terrestrial filth. You can see that, can't you?"

"Terrestrial filth — like fire?" Morlock asked. "Are you a Sophist of filth?"

The Sophist staggered back as if they had been stabbed. "Knowledge is knowledge," they gasped. "It is never filth, no matter what it is about — even if the Elders say differently!"

"Finally," said Morlock, "we agree on something." He still didn't like this Sophist of Fire, but he was beginning to understand them a little. They had fled their safe home and lived in danger, seeking forbidden knowledge. Possibly they would make a deal.

Morlock said, "I can teach you much about fire from my own knowledge and experience. But only if I receive something in return."

"What?"

In order of importance, Morlock listed, "My freedom, my life, and knowledge of the power that moves your skycraft."

"Impossible." The Sophist of Fire shook their glassy head. "Your death is required by the Elders of the pirate tribe. I only have permission to speak to you for my personal pursuit of knowledge."

"Then you get nothing from me," Morlock pointed out. "What matters more, your good standing with the Elders, or the sacred pursuit of knowledge?"

"In my case, the one is contingent on the other," the Sophist said. "No, my guardians will gut you, as they have been instructed to do. I will keep some of your fiery blood hidden from the pirates by means of a magic known to me. I will keep it and study it and that is how you will give me knowledge."

Morlock rapped his knuckles thoughtfully on a bar of his cage. The aether trapped beneath the translucent surface writhed, rattling the bar from within. The fiery echoes reverberated deep in the heart of the angry cloud.

"However," the Sophist said hastily, "perhaps we can work out some other kind of trade. Is there some temporary comfort you would exchange for — for a spell or two of fiery magic?"

Morlock shrugged his crooked shoulders. "My own weapon, perhaps. At least I could die fighting with it."

"Impossible!" said the Sophist. "The blade is made of some substance impervious even to aether."

"No matter is impervious to aether," Morlock pointed out. "My sword's substance is bound together by a webwork of tal; aether can't disrupt that."

"What is tal?"

"A non-physical medium with physical effects."

“What is it the medium between?”

“Between the physical and the non-physical.”

“You use words without meaning!” shrieked the Sophist of Fire. “You say ‘eh.’ You say ‘nonphysical.’ Everything that *is*, is physical.”

This reminded Morlock of some philosophic conversations he’d had in New Moorhope when he was a boy. He suggested tentatively, “The idea of ‘physical’ is not physical.”

“The — *sphingiz bleer* — the — there is a shape in your brain and in mine; that is the idea of physical. It is a brain thing. It is physical.”

“Is it the same in both our minds?”

“Yes. ASK ME MO MORE QUESTIONS!”

“What is sameness? Is it physical?”

The Sophist hissed, “I will take your physical-nonphysical sword. I will drop it through a hole in the sky and it will land in the filth of the sea. Do you want to watch? After you are killed and your blood harvested, you will go the same way, physical or nonphysical.”

“Is my sword here?”

“Yes!” sneered the Sophist of Fire. “Here! And just out of reach! Does that make you sad?” They clapped their glassy blue-veined hands. Two glassy blue-veined people approached, carrying Tyrfin on a translucent milky sheet of aethrium. “Do you have anything to say to it before both you and it depart on your final journeys?”

Morlock did. He said, “Tyrfin.”

The sword, hearing its name, flew out of its scabbard, passed by the startled Sophist of Fire, passed through the aethrium bars of the cage, and settled in Morlock’s outstretched hand like a bird settling on a perch.

“Impossible!” cried the Sophist of Fire.

They were a terrible Sophist, Morlock reflected — always denying evidence instead of accepting it. But there was no point in saying so now.

Morlock struck a glancing blow with the edge of Tyrfin against one of the aethrium bars of his cage. The bar didn’t shatter, but it cracked. The crack spread, a spiderwork of bright crooked lines. The crunchy, glassy sound of the crumbling aethrium floated through the air on a shocked silence.

The Sophist of Fire started to say something, but they were drowned out by the cries of the other sky-pirates. There were many words Morlock did not understand, but floating on the tide of syllables was one oft-repeated word: *shazzarnerluin*.

Morlock raised Tyrfin and struck another aethrium bar in his cage. He struck again and again; now a row of them were crumbling.

The Sophist of Fire shrieked and threw their aethrium spear. Morlock deflected it with Tyrfin and plucked it from the air with his left hand.

The cloud chamber was getting darker: the sky pirates were fleeing for safety, taking their glowing blue blood with them.

Morlock stomped on the floor of his cage and shouted, daring the lightning to break forth.

The cracks in the bars grew brighter, continued to spread. Morlock was now alone in the cloud chamber.

Morlock stomped on the floor of his cage and shouted, challenging the lightning to break forth.

The bars sang, shuddering as they cracked.

Morlock stomped on the floor of his cage and shouted, defying the lightning to break forth.

One of the bars burst apart in a blinding, blue-white cloud of aether. *Here I am!*

On the other side of the cage, another aethrium bar shattered, revealing the fierce fog of aether within. *Here I am!*

Lightning sketched crooked lines between the two clouds of aether, bursting the rest of the bars in a shower of shattered aethrium.

Then, abruptly, the bolts of light were gone and the shock-wave of their passing threw Morlock clear of the ruined cage. His head was ringing with echoes of light and sound, but he knew he had to move fast to escape the cloud disintegrating into a storm. He staggered to his feet in the cold cool carpet of mist that seemed to be wavering, sinking beneath him.

Through the welter of after-images bewildering his eyes, he caught a glimpse of an archway, a slightly paler blue than the darkening walls of cloud. He struggled toward it. The cloud surface felt soft under his feet, and he sank deep into it, like a heavy fall of snow on a cold day before sunrise.

As he moved through the archway, the surface firmed up under his feet, and the light grew. He stepped out onto the exterior of the developing thunderhead.

The eastering sun peered at him, a scarlet orb seen through a shattered cloudscape. To his right lay a long, sunset-colored slope of cloud. Spear-wielding shadows were mounting it toward the mesa-like flat top of the cloud, where purplish-red sky-craft were waiting.

Survival required him to reach one of those. Morlock charged up the side of the cloud. The footing was firmer than in the dark, rumbling interior, but not by much.

A sunset-red glitter in the air: someone had thrown a spear at him. He knocked it aside with the spear in his left hand. He was tempted to shatter it with Tyrfin, but that might do him more harm than his enemies. He scanned the slope before him for more spearcasts as he climbed.

There were no others, but he did see something else interesting that he might have missed: on a nearby ridge of shadow-blue cloud, two transparent figures with blue veins (purple now in the sun’s red light) were carrying a cage. Inside the cage was a dark, hunched, avian figure. It didn’t need the light of the setting sun to display colors of purple and gold.

The phoenix! The Sophist of Fire had lied to him about its escape, of course: he should have known it. Morlock changed his course up the slope to pursue the cage and its bearers. When he thought he was close enough, he set his feet as well as he could in the shifting surface of the cloud and threw the spear in his left hand.

Left hand or right hand, drunk or sober, in sunshine or storm, Morlock didn’t miss his target when he threw something. The spear took the foremost bearer in the center of their body. They cried out in a glassy voice and dropped the cage, which tumbled down from the grip of the other bearer. The unwounded pirate lifted up their fallen (but not slain, apparently) comrade and together they hustled toward the waiting sky-craft, leaving the cage behind.

Morlock ran as fast as the shifty ground would permit toward the fallen cage. It was half submerged in mist when he reached it. The thing was made of the same blue material as the skycraft. The phoenix, its feathers darkly wet with mist, looked at him solemnly with a golden eye and then turned away.

Morlock shattered the blue bars with a swing of Tyrfin's glittering blade. "Fly clear if you can!" he called to the strangely indifferent bird. "I'm headed for those skycraft."

And so he did, running along the blue ridge of cloud. The sun was almost gone now, a sliver of its eye peering over the eastern edge of the world. He was moving as fast as he could, yet it was nightmarishly slow. The surface under his feet kept getting softer, giving less purchase to his uneven stride. The distance between him and the skycraft was long and kept getting longer as he moved. The thunder shaking the walls of the cloud reached a crescendo.

The cloud melted away under his feet and he fell into milky darkness. A lightning bolt spoke near at hand, roaring, menacing: *Here I am!* The heat seared him; the light blinded him; the sound deafened him. The lightning passed away: northward, seaward, downward. Morlock fell more slowly, even more surely, downward and seaward.

Morlock supposed that he was about to die. At the height from which he was falling, it wouldn't matter if he landed on stone or sea-foam; the impact would surely kill him.

But the fists and the feet of the wind batted him about like a vinchball. There was a power in the wind, to lift up or cast down. Could he craft from his cloak and sword a set of glider wings that would carry him safely down to the surface of the sea? There was no reason not to attempt it; he had nothing else to do in his last moments of life but complete one last act of making.

The design was just emerging from the mists of his mind as he fell through the bottom of the cloud and into the dark, lightning-scarred, rain-soaked winds of the storm. How many moments he had left he did not know. It could not be many.

Then he felt crooked talons grasping him by his crooked shoulders. He didn't need the light of the storm to tell him the talons were purple.

"Let go!" he screamed at the phoenix. "You can't carry me! I'm too heavy for your wingspan!"

The phoenix said nothing and did not let go. As far as Morlock could tell by scrunching his head around, the phoenix was trying to do with its wings what Morlock had thought of doing with his cloak: glide to safety. As far as Morlock could tell, in the rain-soaked chaos of the storm, it wasn't working too well.

One thing was clear: if there was to be any chance at all, he had to jettison as much weight as he could. He took a moment to implant a talic charge in his blade's crystalline lattice. Then reluctantly — very reluctantly — he opened his fingers and let Tyrfin fall from his hand. The masterwork of the master of all makers disappeared instantly, its glassy blade merging with the wet lightning-lit winds of the storm. He emptied out all the pockets of his clothing: tools, gold and silver, notes to himself, everything was scattered into the storm winds.

He wasn't sure if it would help, but it was all that he could do.

As he cast his eyes morosely about the stormscape he saw, in a flash of lightning, a rakish, mutilated shape riding the winds before and below them.

"Zirruck!" he shouted and tried to point.

The phoenix didn't answer. Probably it had seen the wrecked airship before Morlock; its eyes were likely better. It was difficult, Morlock reflected, to have a conversation with someone who knew things they weren't willing or able to share. (Then, because he was a fair-minded man, he wondered how many people down the centuries had thought the same thing about him.)

The phoenix landed him aside one of the balloons still trapped in the net. When he had each hand on a rope it let go of him and perched nearby, gripping another rope. An uneasiness in the pit of Morlock's stomach told him that they had upset the equilibrium of lift and that the wreck of *Zirruck* was sinking again. There were two air-balloons still caught in the net.

"Let's cut the gondola loose!" he called to the phoenix.

The phoenix's golden eyes caught his and it shook its head very deliberately: once, twice, three times.

Morlock looked down and was shocked to see the streaks of whitecaps in the darkness below. They were about to crash.

Morlock wove himself into the ropes, bracing himself for impact. The phoenix didn't move. "Fly free!" Morlock shouted. "You don't have to do this!" As usual, the phoenix did not respond.

Impact was harsh. The gondola caught on something and slammed the ropework containing the balloons down against a hard surface at high speed. There was a blast of hot air and a flatulent sound which Morlock devoutly hoped was not the sound of his organs squirting out of his body: it sort of felt as if they were. The dark world went even darker for a time.

Morlock returned to himself sometime later, the sound of surf drumming in his ears. The storm had passed and the moonless sky was clear. The world was lit by ten thousand stars. Morlock lifted his head and saw that they had crashed on a rocky coastline — either Qajqapca or some large island in the Sea of Storms. *Zirruck* lay in ruins around them, the gasbags empty, the gondola shattered. Not far away, Morlock saw the phoenix, perched on a rock, carefully plucking glass fragments out from its purple, gold-edged plumage.

"You're crazier than I am," Morlock croaked at the phoenix.

In reply, the phoenix squawked a single syllable: "Eh."

Morlock shrugged and began to disentangle himself from the ropes. If he was not yet dead, there was much he had to do to stay alive.

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.

POWER CORRUPTS ALL WHO THIRST FOR IT



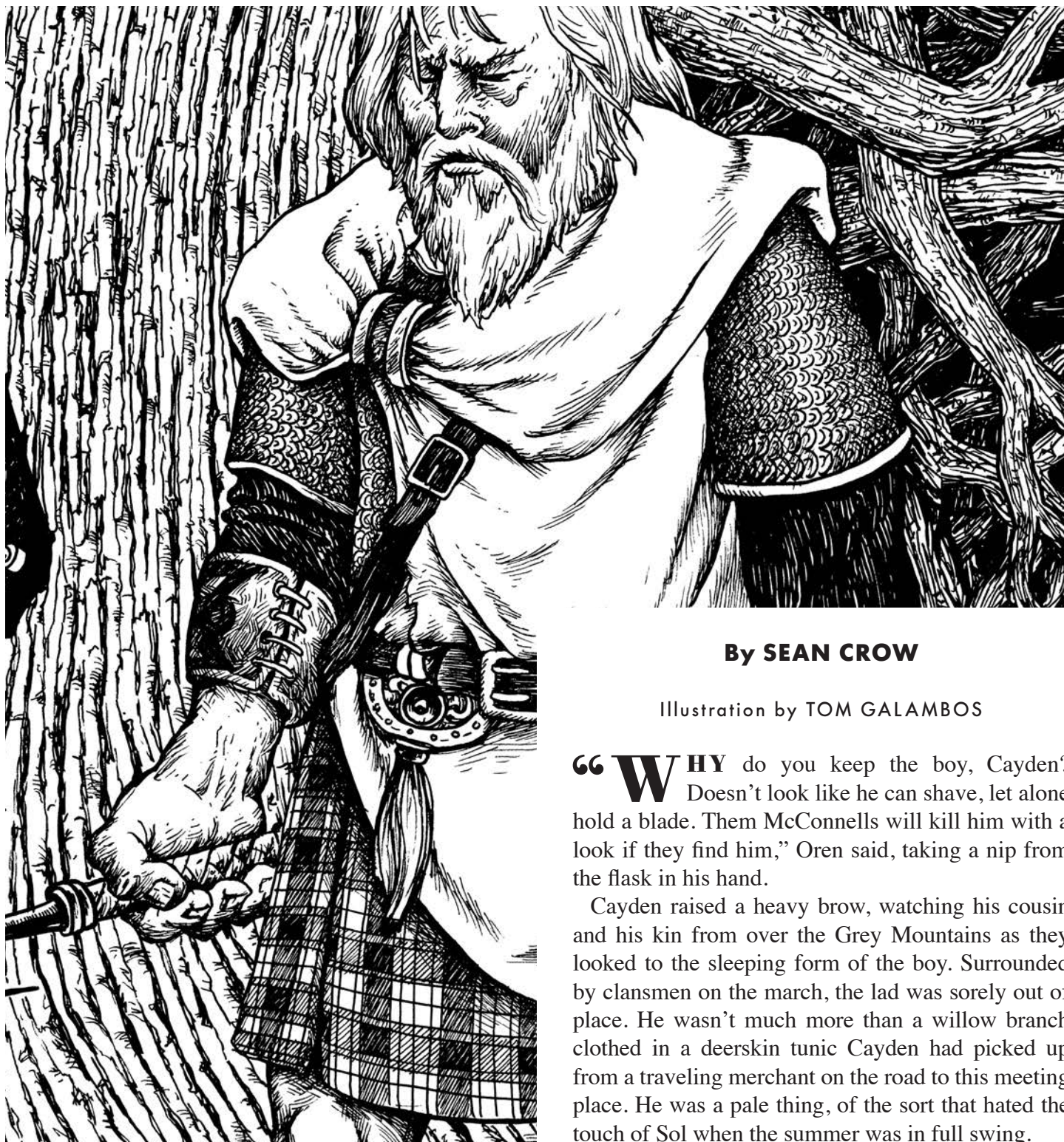
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PIPES OF GL



AN MACLAIRD



By **SEAN CROW**

Illustration by **TOM GALAMBOS**

“WHY do you keep the boy, Cayden? Doesn’t look like he can shave, let alone hold a blade. Them McConnells will kill him with a look if they find him,” Oren said, taking a nip from the flask in his hand.

Cayden raised a heavy brow, watching his cousin and his kin from over the Grey Mountains as they looked to the sleeping form of the boy. Surrounded by clansmen on the march, the lad was sorely out of place. He wasn’t much more than a willow branch clothed in a deerskin tunic Cayden had picked up from a traveling merchant on the road to this meeting place. He was a pale thing, of the sort that hated the touch of Sol when the summer was in full swing.

"Best piper my ears have heard. Likely the best in the highlands — no lie," Cayden said, meaning it.

"Bah," scoffed Brok, Oren's much larger cousin. "No chance that stick could blow a note, let alone a tune. Not enough air in that frame of his."

Cayden eased back against his travel pack and nudged the boy with his foot, "Wake a moment, lad; these heathens from over the Greys have put a stain on your honor. You must defend it."

The boy darted up, eyes wide with surprise but tiny hands clenched into fists at being woken so abruptly.

That earned a few chuckles from the surrounding clansmen, piquing the interest in the surrounding camp. They were only thirty strong but would meet up with Clans Dulane and McDun before joining the southern lords for the battle to come. The civil war had finally arrived, and the clans would settle their grudges at the Battle of Edmund's Valley. It was only a few days' march, but the day would come soon enough.

"Whist, boy, there are no enemies here," Cayden said, seeing the fear fade from the youth's face. "They wish to hear you play your pipes."

The boy blinked the sleep from his eyes; his hands relaxing from the clenched fists they had been. Dutifully, he placed the new chanter reed Cayden had bought for him in his mouth as he gathered his bagpipe.

Cayden had found the lad by the River Bri when he was called upon by his Clan Chief to champion a duel against the McConnells. Dressed in little more than rags, the boy was sitting beside the river, serenading the flowing water with a tune so pure that it touched something in Cayden, for he knew he was in the presence of something few would ever hear. The lad was a true master of the pipes, able to raise or cool a man's blood with the mere change of a tune. Waiting for the song to finish, he had approached the boy, offering him some food and coins for an evening of hearing him play. Half-starved and wary eyed, the boy reluctantly accepted, though he spoke not a word.

That evening, Cayden listened to the boy play long past the setting sun. When the last note filled the night air and the moon was at full glow amongst the stars, they turned in for the night. It was only then, when the lad moved to lay at Cayden's side, hand resting on his thigh, that the swordsman realized just how the boy had survived so long, and a great anger entered the clansman.

"We'll be needing none of that, lad," Cayden had told him firmly. "I'm no beast to make a child serve those sorts of desires, and you need not lower yourself to this in order to survive. Not anymore. Stick with me, play your pipes, and I'll make sure you never have to live that way again. Do you understand me?"

The boy had seemed confused by the offer, but he nodded and went back to his own makeshift bedroll. Since then, the young boy had followed him wherever he went.

Cayden was not entirely sure why he took the boy under his protection. He was a clan champion after all, a killer with a blade and no family of his own to speak of. He had taken far more lives than he had bettered. Perhaps, with this boy, Cayden could make one life better before he passed into the Dark Veil.

"Looks like we'll have some entertainment tonight," one of the clansmen called, bringing the rest of the warriors from their camp to the main fire.

The boy paid them no mind, but once he had taken up his pipes and stood, the warriors grew quiet, save for a few hecklers in the back.

The first note was a low, mournful thing that immediately drew them in before he launched into a dirge that filled their hearts with memories of the past. "Shade's Tears" the song was called, and never had they heard it so masterfully played. It told the tale of enduring love and the tragedy of a god who sought the affections of a maiden fair, who turned to a shade the moment the god touched her. Their love was forever separated by the planes of life and death, yet each would hold true to their love throughout the span of time until time itself no longer existed. When the boy finished, the entire camp had become silent in their reverence.

"A fine tune," Brok said, all hints of doubt removed from his voice.

The rest of the clansmen nodded in agreement, and Cayden saw the newfound respect in their eyes. The boy looked to Cayden, and he gave a nod of approval.

"A fine tune, indeed," Cayden said, as the boy carefully put his instrument away before returning to his bedroll.

• • •

THE next day brought heavy clouds and a stiff wind that promised rain as they followed a game trail along the craggy peaks that made up the Greys — not uncommon for the highlands, but it would make their journey through the pass far less enjoyable. The men, however, didn't seem to mind as Cayden had asked the boy to play. Against the billowing winds on their march to the gathering grounds, the lad played "Ascension of the Daoine Sith," a spirited tune that added an extra bounce to the clansmen's steps and kept them from muttering curses that normally accompanied such weather.

Cayden watched the boy, seeing how his eyes sparkled with life as he played. He dipped and swayed with the tunes, feeling the music as if it coursed through him. Any other time, his gray eyes bore the world-weariness that was all too familiar in this broken world. Without the pipes, the boy simply existed. Yet when he played, there returned a certain youthful passion that Cayden himself had long forgotten.

"The boy should have a name," Brok said, coming alongside Cayden. "Not right that he should march with us, yet we treat him as naught without even a name to go by."

Cayden shrugged, "I thought the same, but he doesn't speak. Not my place to give a name when one isn't asked."

Brok grunted, looking from Cayden to the boy. "Lad, quiet your pipes a moment and come over here."

The boy stopped, and Cayden saw the life fade from his eyes along with the music, but he didn't get any closer to the large clansman. Instead, he looked to Cayden first, and it was only then that the swordsman realized it was the boy's way of asking for permission.

"Aye, come over," Cayden said.

Brok chuckled, "I wish my boys were so well behaved."

"Which ones?" Oren asked, nudging one of his kin. "The whorehouse back home has a few little bastards running about it with that red hair of yours."

"Piss off," Brok grumbled.

The boy watched the exchange without reaction, but Cayden had traveled with him long enough to notice that he held his bagpipes a bit tighter than before. He was uncomfortable being addressed by these men, and Cayden made sure to stand closer to put him at ease. Whether the boy knew it or not, he took a step nearer Cayden.

"Nothing to be afraid of, lad, just thinking about giving you a name. Is that something you'd like?" Cayden asked.

The boy chewed the side of his cheek, a brief moment of hesitation before he gave a shrug. It was the closest thing to an answer they were likely to receive.

"Looks like a Simon," said Brok.

The boy said nothing; he simply held his bagpipe and watched the clansmen converse.

"I knew a Simon," Oren said with a shake of his head. "A real bastard he was. Boy needs a better name than that. How about Piper?"

"Piper who plays the pipes?" asked another clansman, a distant cousin from Brok's side of the family. "Seems a bit much."

There was a low murmur as word of the discussion traveled to those closest. The boy watched them all with a practiced wariness.

"He'll be called Leathan, for river, as that was where we met," Cayden said.

The boy looked up at him, face serious as ever, but he gave a nod of approval.

Brok grinned, "Leathan MacLaird. Our blood could use a bit more music in it after all."

A flash of life seemed to spark in Leathan as his shoulders relaxed from hunching around his pipes. Cayden, however, raised a hand and the small column of clansmen stopped their march.

"You wish to be part of Clan MacLaird?" he asked Leathan.

The boy hesitated, then nodded again. Cayden hated to see him like that after watching him warm up to his new name but matters of this nature were to be taken seriously.

"Then listen close, lad, because there is a code you must hold to be a part of us."

"Hell, Cayden, he's too young for such things," Oren said. "Besides, who here amongst us hasn't broken it?"

"It's not about never breaking the code," Cayden said, his normal good nature vanished from his voice. "It's about setting yourself apart from the animals that rule this world and knowing that, when you do slip, you make it right."

Kneeling before Leathan so as to meet him eye to eye, he said, "When you speak, may your words be true. May your deeds be open for all to see to ensure no shade enters your soul. Keep your wits when others lose their own, and stand for the clan before all else. Accept this, and you will be a MacLaird, boy, but know that every man here will hold you to it. Do you accept these words as your own?"

Leathan held Cayden's gaze, and for a moment the swordsman saw the foundations of strength begin to form. In response,

the boy held a pale hand out to Cayden, who took it. Upon seeing this, the nearby clansmen gave approving words, repeating his name until everyone had spoken it aloud.

"Then you are now one of us, Leathan MacLaird. Be sure to honor this code as best you can and be willing to make things right when you don't."

Leathan MacLaird released Cayden's hand and returned his hold on the bagpipes he carried. For a moment he seemed deep in thought, then he placed the reed in his mouth and began to play once more. Cayden could not tell what the tune was, but it was a joyful sound; of that there was no doubt. Without another word, the clansmen began their march once more, and the pipes guided their way.

• • •

TWO nights passed and the boy's hesitation around the other clansmen began to fade. He no longer held to Cayden's side but wandered the camp and played for those who asked it. Though he had yet to speak, the men accepted his silence and had taken to understanding Leathan's way of speaking. Their conversations were a mixture of words from the men, nods from the boy, and music to fill the gaps. For the first time in a long time, Cayden felt that he had finally done some good in the world. That, in itself, was a treasure worth more than any silver or gold that would cross his hands.

Turning his gaze away from the boy, he focused on the military camp below. A steady, late summer breeze sent banners waving on either side of the valley where the crows would soon feast. For now, night covered the land; the light from hundreds of campfires muted the stars above. His clan had gathered a few more to their number along the way, bringing them up to forty-five. Yet they were but a drop in the bucket compared to the thousands gathered. His clan's liege, flying the Raven Banner of Dun Glen, had set up his camp alongside the other high lords and was likely discussing strategy with his peers.

Or getting drunk, Cayden mused, likely both.

Heavy steps approached, and Cayden glanced up from his resting place to see Brok coming to his fire. The man was a braggart for the most part, a known thief and stubborn as a mule. They had come close to blows several times over the years, but his blood was highland true, and Cayden would be proud to have the warrior at his side come tomorrow.

"A lot more of them than I thought," Brok said as he eased himself beside the fire.

Cayden scanned the banners across the way. It was too dark to know which belonged to which clan, but it was clear that there were far more against them than not.

"There are," Cayden said.

He was not in the mood for company, especially the night before a battle, so he let the silence between them stretch. He had been in three pitched battles during his thirty-four years, the first when he was little older than Leathan. A few thousand on either side and none of them lasting longer than the sun could move a handspan across the sky. This, however, was of a magnitude far greater than he had ever seen.

The death toll would be high.

"Did you see that the McConnells moved their camp across from us? They've had blood on their minds ever since you killed Patric before the chiefs."

Cayden shrugged, but he remembered the duel well for it had nearly been his last. "Aye, I saw them," Cayden said.

Patric McConnell had been a fine swordsman and a decent man, if he were honest. Before the blood feud between their clans had surfaced, they had fought alongside each other. Cayden hadn't wanted to kill him and had offered to spare the man after cutting him deep and knocking him down in the duel. Yet Patric was too proud and had lost his wits when his lady, who had been in attendance that day, called for him to stand. His pride called into question by the woman he loved, the swordsman fought without a care for his life, and Cayden had used almost every trick he knew to stay alive until Patric eventually slipped on his own blood. He recovered quick enough, but it was the opening Cayden needed to run him through.

The duel had left a bad taste in his mouth, especially when his chief placed the pouch of silver in his hand, but there was little to be done. If he focused too long on the men he had killed that didn't deserve it, he would never sleep again. He still had that purse. It rested unopened in his travel pack.

"His brother Athan is over there. Had one of his lads with a bow shoot a message across the valley, meant for you." Brok pulled a rolled-up note from his pocket and offered it to Cayden. "Oren read it to me. He's coming for you."

Cayden took the note, considered reading it, then tossed it into the flames.

Brok watched the flames rise for a moment as they engulfed the note. "A waste of good paper."

"Then he shouldn't have sent it," Cayden said.

Brok gave a low chuckle. "I forget how welcoming you get before a fight."

Cayden said nothing. He didn't need to.

Realizing that Cayden wasn't going to talk any more, the big clansman got up. "I'll leave you to it then."

Cayden watched him depart until he spotted Leathan walking back on the same path. Brok ruffled the boy's hair as they passed and said something to make himself laugh before moving on. The boy almost managed a smile as he returned to the fire.

Seeing the newest addition to their clan, the swordman suddenly felt a weight in his chest. The battle might very well go against them tomorrow. If it were a route, the camp followers would be captured, raped, or killed — sometimes all three. Had he not promised the boy that he would be safe?

Leathan rolled his new reed in his mouth and was about to give wind to his pipes when Cayden held up a hand. "We need to have words, lad."

The boy immediately stopped. He cocked his head to the side and stared at Cayden with concern in his gray eyes.

Sitting up and pulling his travel pack in front of him, he took the victor's purse he'd won for killing Patric McConnell. The boy's eyes grew wide when Cayden opened it for Leathan to see. "Tomorrow may be the last time I draw breath, Leathan, so I need you to listen well. You watch the battle, and if the moment comes when our banners fall, you take what you need and run.

Head east, back the way we came across the Greys. Keep to the game trails and try not to travel during the day, at least for the first week. Don't wait to see if I make it out; just go. You will eventually find yourself in MacLaird land. When you do, find the nearest village and give them this."

Taking off his sash, which held the pattern of Clan MacLaird, Cayden offered it to the boy. Leathan, however, shook his head and pointed at the ground where he sat, eyes set in a stubborn frown.

"I'm not saying it'll come to pass," Cayden said, tossing the sash in the boy's lap. "But you need to be ready. I'll not have you go back to the life you had before. I made you a promise, and I intend to honor it."

Leathan's face seemed to crumble for a moment, and a very real fear entered his eyes, but he continued to shake his head.

Cayden rose and came to sit beside the boy, placing an arm around him. "You are a clansman now, and you belong in the Greys with the rest of the MacLairds. If our fighting men fall tomorrow, there is only you, and our name must remain strong."

A bit of the emptiness returned in Leathan's face, but he eventually nodded.

"Good, lad."

Leathan pulled away and sat himself across the fire with his pipes. Cayden figured he needed to play to calm his nerves, but the music never came, and the rest of the night was left in silence.

• • •

"HURRY up," Brok snarled, clutching his poorly wrapped hand as he staggered into camp. "They're right fuckin' behind us."

Oren fell, a spray of crimson issuing from his mouth as he hit the ground. Cayden tried to pick him up only to find the man had passed into the Dark Veil, a crimson gash along his belly. Staggering back to his feet and clutching his side where a horse had run into him, Cayden hurried to catch up with Brok and the six remaining clansmen.

They were being routed and would soon be run down like dogs if they didn't flee.

Cayden glanced over his shoulder to see what remained of the lordly banners still holding their ground as their enemies rushed through the broken line. Meanwhile, the heavy cavalry of the high lords rushed off the field, leaving their soldiers behind. It wouldn't be long before the last warriors fell and the camp was taken.

"Grab only what you need," Cayden called to the survivors, trying to blink the darkness from his eyes.

It took some effort to keep them open. Shadows flickered in the corners of his vision as if the Shades of the Dark Veil knew his time was close and had begun to follow. Cayden had taken a pommel to the head as the enemy cavalry worked through their ranks once the left flank fell. Up until then, they had the McConnells on their heels ready to break, but with nobody to protect their side, the battle had quickly turned. Now they would be lucky to make it a mile before they were captured or killed, and he would be damned if he spent the rest of his days working in a rock quarry under another man's rule.

At least the boy will be safe, he told himself, one blessing that came from his life of sin. Then, as he rounded one of the tents, he spotted Leathan standing there alone with his pipes by a cold campfire.

"Dammit!" Cayden spat. "I told you to run from this place!"

All the blood drained from Leathan's face as he saw what was left of Clan MacLaird. Brok had unwrapped his hand, exposing two missing fingers on his free hand while the other tossed aside the morningstar he'd taken up. The big man braced himself over a smoldering fire pit with red hot embers still aglow. The big man's breathing picked up as he steeled himself before thrusting the bleeding nubs into the coals.

"Gods be damned!" he roared as the stink of burnt flesh filled the air.

The rest of the clansmen hurriedly grabbed packs for the road, gathering what they could before it was too late. Leathan just stood there, eyes wide with terror as he raised a hand and pointed in the direction of the battlefield. Cayden looked back again, blinking away the growing shadows to see the last banner had fallen and what was left of his liege's forces were in full flight.

"Best be going, lad," Cayden said as he grabbed the travel pack at Leathan's feet. "Come on Brok, they'll be on us soon enough."

The big man cursed and wrapped a half clean cloth around his missing and burned fingers but retrieved his morningstar and stood.

"I saw a place we can go till it calms," Brok said, watching their fellows being slaughtered as they tried to run; then his eyes fell to the lifeless form of Oren. The big man gave a defeated nod, as if accepting the fate of his cousin and storing it away for another time. "Let's be off then."

Cayden shouldered his pack, sending a sharp pain through his ribs as the weight came down. He suspected he'd broken a few, but they felt intact enough for now. He would check them again when they were not so close to death.

"Come, Leathan," Cayden said. "Grab your pipes and let's be off."

• • •

THE flight from the battlefield was one of constant paranoia and loss.

One of the lads had fallen behind, the half-severed tendon in his leg finally giving out as they began their climb into the Greys. Having spotted soldiers in pursuit a few miles back, they all knew he would only slow them down, so he elected to stay behind. His brother chose to remain as well, both of them saying they would hold the trail to buy them time, which put their number at five, not including the boy. Another clansman, a man by the name of Thom, had left in the night without a word to any of them. Cayden didn't hold it against the man, but Brok had been furious, labeling the man a coward and swearing to kill him when they returned home.

Leathan kept pace just fine, being the only one of them uninjured. Cayden could see the determined set in the boy's face and felt a bit of pride at that. While it would have been better for the lad to have fled long ago, the fact that he stayed behind showed a loyalty the swordsman would never have expected.

Reaching over, Cayden squeezed the lad's shoulder. Leathan looked up at him and gave a genuine smile.

"Good lad," Cayden told him, seeing the life flicker in the boy's eyes before pressing on.

They knew they were being pursued, and after two days, Cayden had a fair idea just who was coming after them. Soldiers from a professional military wouldn't have chased them this far. This was personal and had all the earmarks of the McConnells. He had met Athan on the field the day of the battle, but only for a moment before the cavalry hit. It was a brief exchange that told Cayden the man had no small talent with a blade. He had also seen the hate in the other swordsman's eyes. He would not be satisfied with a victory on the battlefield; he needed to wipe out the fighting men of Clan MacLaird to satisfy his bloodlust.

Hate like that had no cure outside of death.

What was worse, the shadows had grown in Cayden's eyes. His head felt like a blacksmith's anvil, and hammer blows seemed to rain down constantly. The sunlight hurt, and he found his thoughts muddled when he needed them clear. It was getting harder and harder to think straight.

"Here we are," Brok said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Before them, in the saddle of the Grey Mountains, was a large, burned out oak that would take at least three men to wrap their arms around. It was a known location; Black Oak, the locals called it. It was used as a marker to indicate folks had reached the border of MacLaird territory. A narrow game trail led up to it, surrounded by large broken stones; only three men could walk abreast until you reached the tree. Beyond it lay thick forest land as the craggy peaks of the Greys receded.

"Black Oak?" Cayden asked. He should have known where this path led, and the fact that he hadn't been able to figure it out until now bothered the swordsman.

"Best protection when on the run," Brok said. "Stole a prize bull a few years back, and those McConnell's didn't risk coming down that path. Too easy to defend and bloody difficult to come through with numbers."

The big man's eyes were wide, his skin flushed, and none of it came from the hike or the miles they had put behind them. He had caught a fever the night before and hadn't enough rest for his body to fight it.

"Good place to rest," Cayden said.

"Aye." Brok scanned the way they had come. "Better a quick rest though, lest those McConnells try to catch up."

Cayden eyed the dirty wrapping around the big clansman's hand. "Best get that taken care of, my friend."

Brok nodded but kept looking at their back trail.

Cayden and the rest moved past him and set their gear at the base of Black Oak. Fatigue was written clearly on every face, but a sense of hope had begun to rekindle. They were finally home, even if they hadn't reached the towns. This was MacLaird land, and it brought a sense of belonging. Cayden leaned against the trunk and pulled out his canteen, noticing the heavy clouds moving overhead before offering it to Leathan. The boy drank with measured precision, knowing that they had little water left.

"Worry not, lad, there's a stream not far off. Drink up."

Leathan paused, the desire to drink more all too apparent, but instead of indulging himself, the boy shook his head and returned it to Cayden. Taking it, Cayden drank deeply before handing it back. It occurred to the swordsman once more that the boy would make a fine addition to the clan. He had a strong heart, and that was a rare commodity in one so young.

This time, the boy drank his fill.

Cayden felt a sudden moment of dizziness and the shadows grew deep, as if the Shades were standing right there before him. "Not yet," he murmured, reaching out to brace himself and finding Leathan holding onto him.

The darkness receded, and the dizzy spell faded but never vanished. The boy was staring at him now, brow furrowed. It was only then that he noticed the boy had dropped his pipes to hold him up. It was the first time Cayden had seen the boy treat the instrument with anything less than reverence.

"This is a special place, Leathan," Cayden said, in an effort to divert the lad's attention. "Do you know why?"

The boy didn't respond and, for a moment, didn't let go.

"Pick up your pipes, and I'll show you," Cayden told him as he began walking toward the tree.

Leathan followed, but he didn't allow himself to stray far from Cayden's side. Once they reached the ancient oak, Cayden pointed at a small hole at the base of the tree.

"Years back there was a fire here. It burned a great swath of the forest and little survived, yet this tree, Black Oak, did not fall. It burned from within, leaving it hollow but still standing."

Leathan simply watched him.

"Watch this," Cayden said, kneeling so that his face was close to the hole. His ribs screamed at the motion, but he did it anyway. "What do you think?" Cayden shouted into the hole, and his voice issued from several branches still attached to the tree, distorted by the echoes from within.

At this, Leathan paused and listened, mouth open as he marveled at the sound.

"When the high winds blow, Black Oak is said to sing the songs of the Daoine Sith," he said. "I heard it once, and I tell you, I have yet to hear a more haunting sound."

Leathan approached the lowest branch, inspecting the hollow limb just before he whistled into it. The sound bounced around, distorting the sound until it came out completely changed. Leathan smiled and pointed to the hole.

"Aye, you can go inside. Should be dry enough."

Easing himself into the hole and holding tightly to his pipes, the boy slid inside. After a few moments of silence, there came a sound that chilled Cayden's blood — a haunting melody, twisted and eerie as it issued from the branches and holes from the burned-out tree.

"Aye, that's enough, boy," he said into the branch and the pipes stopped.

Cayden chuckled as he turned and saw the look of fear in his fellow clansmen's eyes. "Whist, lads, it was just the boy playing his pipes."

"Don't think they're worried about the pipes, Cayden," Brok said as he took up his morningstar and pointed it back the way they had come.

Marching over the top of the saddle was a band of kilted warriors wearing the colors and patterns of Clan McConnell. A quick count put them at a bit over twenty, with a dark-haired warrior at their lead. As the man looked down, his eyes locked onto Cayden.

"Ye cannot run any further, Cayden MacLaird," Athan shouted, and his men began to descend the saddle to reach them.

Cayden felt his heart pick up at the sight of so many, knowing that there was little hope of escape this time — at least, he thought, not without abandoning Leathan. Perhaps, they hadn't seen him, perhaps they had. Either way, Cayden wasn't willing to risk it. They would be on him in minutes, and Cayden had made a promise to the boy.

He would be damned before he broke it.

The swordsman turned to his fellow clansmen. "He's after my head, lads, not yours. Best be on your way. I'll hold the path."

Two men left their things almost immediately as they ran away. Another hesitated a moment, his hand falling to the sword at his hip before he turned and joined the others. Brok came to stand beside the swordsman, morningstar in hand. Shouts sounded from the McConnells coming down the saddle as they spotted the fleeing MacLairds.

"We can't take them, Cayden; let's be gone. If we split up, they will have to do the same. Better chances that way."

Cayden watched his soon-to-be killers, hard men with violence in their hearts that seeped into their eyes. "No, Brok, I don't think I'll be joining you. Grab the boy; take care of him and see that he grows to be a better man than either of us."

The big man said nothing, his fever-bright eyes evaluating. "As you wish," the clansman muttered. Stepping back toward the tree, the big man put his mouth to one of the hollow branches, "Time to go, boy. Come on out."

There was no response.

"Come on now, boy! Get out!" Brok shouted.

Another moment of nothing, then came the most haunting tune either of the clansmen had ever heard from the Black Oak. A twisted version of "The Ballad of the Last King," a tale of the Daoine Sith lord, who held the bridge at Dun Nordain against the daemon horde. The sound traveled to the ears of the McConnells and slowed them. Their hate became a smoldering thing, tempered by fear of the haunting melody that filled the Grey Mountains.

"Seems the boy has made the choice of a true MacLaird," Brok said, coming to stand at Cayden's side.

The realization hit Cayden like a hammer blow to the heart, and yet the act, along with the tune, filled his spirit. "Best be gone then, my friend. The boy has chosen to enter the Dark Veil at my side."

The big man let out a humorless chuckle, "What, and go home to be a bad father AND a coward? I think not. This is as good a place as any to die."

Kicking his travel pack into the hole at the base of the tree, Cayden spoke so that Leathan would hear, "You just keep playing them pipes, boy. You play them loud enough to drown out the screams and steel you'll hear. Don't stop playing, do you hear me?"

In response, the melody intensified.

"Good lad," Cayden whispered.

Drawing his sword, Cayden stood to one side of the path, and Brok took the other. The McConnells had slowed, allowing their leader Athan to catch up. Hearing the strange melody which seemed to fill the saddle, the warrior stepped forward.

"What fell sorcery is this?" Athan called.

The shadows were darting alongside the enemy warriors, and Cayden could no longer say if it was due to the trauma to his head or not, but he pointed his sword at the man.

"I am Cayden MacLaird!" he shouted over the pipes. "Today I walk the path into the Dark Veil, and the Shades sing a merry tune honoring my arrival. Who amongst you wishes to join me?"

Not a man moved as the disembodied tune filled the air between them.

"Kill them," Athan snarled, shoving the closest McConnells into action.

They came forward, but Cayden could see their eyes flitting to the stones and Black Oak, unsure what to expect.

Brok chuckled darkly, "A grand way to end it, I suppose."

"Aye," Cayden said, feeling the darkness weigh on him. "That it is."

Then the McConnells reached them, and the bloodletting began.

Only able to come at them three at a time in the narrow path, the two MacLairds met their enemy head on. Cayden's blade licked out, cutting one across the neck before parrying a wild thrust and disemboweling the man. Brok held his ground, caving in the side of another's head with the devastating power of his morningstar, but now their enemy was on the fight and more kept coming. All the while, the ballad had become a dirge, dark tunes that accompanied darker deeds, drowning out the clash of steel and screams of dying men.

Cayden caught an overhand strike and redirected it just as another man came alongside his companion; a McConnell's sword opened a bloody rend in the meat of Cayden's hip. Cayden's riposte opened the first man's inner thigh, severing the artery there. An arrow sprouted from Brok's forearm as a lone warrior with a bow shot at them. Yet the big clansman only grew more enraged, spitting curses as he shattered the collarbone of his next opponent.

The two held their ground until the McConnells broke and fell back, leaving the bodies of six men in their wake. Cayden felt the sting of another cut along his broken ribs, one he hadn't felt until now. Meanwhile, the world had grown ever darker, his breathing ragged as his lungs burned against broken ribs. Another arrow darted by; the feathers caressing his cheek as it barely missed him but sank home in Brok's neck. The big man staggered, trying to grab at the shaft on instinct with his injured hand.

Seeing the big man fall to a knee, the retreating McConnells stopped. By this time, Athan had come to the path and shouted at his men. "There, you soft bastards, now kill him," Athan snarled, drawing his sword. "Or, by all that is sacred, I will cut you down myself."

Cayden reached down and grabbed the big man, helping him to his feet while the McConnells decided which fate would be worse, facing their leader or the lone swordsman. It wouldn't take them long to decide. Cayden managed to settle Brok against Black Oak. The shaft had gone through the meat of the big man's neck but didn't look to have hit the artery.

"I can fight," Brok choked out, trying to rise. "Just get me to my feet."

Cayden pressed a hand against the clansman's chest with enough force to keep him in place. It didn't take much. The man was bleeding from several more cuts to his chest along with the two shafts in his body.

"I need you to ..." Cayden trailed off, unable to remember what he was going to say as another dizzy spell hit.

Cayden swayed before righting himself. For a moment, he wasn't sure where he was or why he was fighting, but he knew the Dark Veil was calling. He could see the Shades gathered about the stones, watching him. He could hear them singing ...

"Leathan, aye," Brok muttered. "We need to keep the boy ... safe."

That was right, Cayden told himself, as memories of the boy by the stream came back to him. Leathan still needed him.

Turning from his fallen companion, Cayden strode toward the path once more, the Shades around him seeming to fill the stones on either side, until all he could see were the men before him. The path swayed, and he found himself struggling to follow it. Instead, he focused on one figure in particular, the man with hair as black as the Shades calling him home. Perhaps, this man was a Shade himself, come to claim his soul.

"Come then, fell reaper," Cayden roared. "Come to me, bring-ers of death. You'll not find easy prey."

The nearest McConnells slowed, approaching this time without the fire of battle but the wariness of hunting hounds as they approach a wounded mountain lion.

"He's finished," he heard the dark-haired one say. "Look at him. This is what happens to those who cross us."

The words seemed jumbled now, and Cayden could no longer make out faces. They were all Shades, but their intent was clear. They wished him to pass into the Veil a broken man. Cayden staggered to the side of the path and barely caught himself on one of the large stones.

This was the end.

Yet the pipes called to him, urging him to stand, and he would not leave them wanting.

Summoning what strength was left, Cayden charged.

He no longer fought with practiced skill but was fueled by the fire in his soul. Their blades licked out, spreading hot agony throughout his body. But his sword became death itself, and the Shades that stood before him wavered and broke. All save for the one with black hair.

When they met, their blades clashed three times before touching flesh, then Cayden found himself atop the man, his sword buried in the Shade's chest, just as its blade entered his own. Then the shadows faded, and Cayden found himself staring down at Athan.

"Patric —" the man gurgled before his eyes went wide and stared at nothing.

The world grew dark, and Cayden slid off. He could hear voices around him, but there was nothing left in him. When his vision faded, all he could hear was the haunting melody of MacLaird pipes as the Shades welcomed him home.

• • •

BROK watched Cayden's mad charge through fevered eyes. The swordsman had fought like a man possessed, and the bodies in his wake were a testament of his passing. Brok tried to rise, but there was little fight in him now. The McConnells who survived stared at the motionless body of Cayden MacLaird with reverence and fear, as if the man would rise once more.

They would get over it eventually, he knew, and come to finish him and the boy off.

Yet he had made a promise to a dying man.

Brok knew he wasn't much when it came to being a man. He was a cheat, a liar on occasion, and seldom passed an opportunity to steal cattle, even from his own kin. Yet what he'd witnessed today had struck a chord in him, and he remembered Cayden's words when the boy became part of their clan.

When you speak, may your words be true. May your deeds be open for all to see to ensure no shade enters your soul. Keep your wits when others lose their own, and stand for the clan before all else. Accept this, and you will be a MacLaird.

Brok had broken many promises in his life, but today was different. Today he would honor the promise and keep the boy safe.

Leveraging himself from Black Oak, the boy's pipes still filling the air, Brok took up his morningstar and rose. He couldn't fight; this he knew beyond a doubt. But the McConnells were about to break and run. They just needed more incentive.

Taking a deep breath that brought fresh agony from his many wounds, he called out, "I hear you, Shades. Let us gather the rest to go beyond the Veil."

With every effort his fever-racked body could manage, he took a few steps toward the remaining McConnells. The fear that Cayden had instilled, reinforced by the pipes echoing from Black Oak and his words now, were enough that the McConnells turned and fled back up the saddle. Brok kept his feet, determined to remain that way until they were out of sight, though his body screamed for release. When the last enemy warrior vanished over the ridge, Brok collapsed.

• • •

WAKING, the clansman found himself staring up at a night sky, a fire at his feet and blankets lay atop him. His body was racked in pain, and he could feel the fiery grip of the fever still in him. He reached up to his neck only to find the arrow had been removed and his injured hand was wrapped in new cloth. A new sound, broken and lonely, drifted through the night, and Brok shifted himself to see what was making it.

The boy Leathan was crouched over Cayden's body, a mournful cry replacing the pipes he used so often. It was primal and raw, as a voice unaccustomed to speech would be. Brok tried to call him over, but fatigue took hold, and he slept.

When next he woke, it was mid-day, and the boy was at his side, a bowl of broth in his hands. He offered it to Brok. This time he was able to move and accept the bowl in his good hand. His stomach protested the thin broth at first, but he managed to get half of it down before he had to stop.

"You did this?" Brok croaked, the pain in his neck flaring as he spoke.

Leathan nodded and stared at him. Brok could see he now wore Cayden's clan sash over his shoulder, but he said nothing. It fit him proper, and that was a fine thing. "You have my thanks."

Brok sat up now, feeling a bit of new life, despite his wounds and saw that Cayden's body had been removed from where it had fallen. "Where is he?" he asked.

Leathan's eyes faded, and he pointed at Black Oak. The meaning was clear, and Brok could think of no better resting place for the man.

"A fine deed," he said, the pain in his neck slowly growing the more he spoke. He needed to stop, but this was a time for words — the boy needed to hear them. It was the least he could do considering the lad had saved his life.

"A few more days and we'll leave," he said, putting as much confidence as he could muster in his weakened state. "You're a MacLaird, so my home is open to you."

The boy considered his words, then shook his head and pulled a heavy purse from Cayden's travel pack. Leathan pointed from the pouch to himself. Brok took a moment to piece his meaning together, but when he did, he felt a bit of his good nature return.

"A place of your own?"

The boy nodded; then tentatively, he opened his mouth and uttered one word: "Yes." It was little more than a whisper, but Brok thought it sounded like a good voice, a fitting one.

"You've more than earned it, lad. Now, let me rest, and we'll soon be gone from this place."

Leathan left him then, walking over to pick up his pipes and sit beside Black Oak. As Brok allowed himself to rest, he heard the sound of pipes playing a hopeful tune, just as sleep took hold.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean works as a Special Education teacher in a correctional facility in Oregon where he also instructs Language Arts and Social Studies to young men working on a second chance at life. He has two books out on the market: *Valhalla Steel* and *Godless Lands*, with another release on the way. He is the father of three beautiful children and husband to a woman who, for whatever reason, puts up with his crazy ideas and sleepless nights. When he's not hammering away at his craft, he can be found wandering the mountain trails of his home, thinking of new stories to tell. You can learn more about Sean and his projects at www.lordofcrows.com.

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THE LOVERS OF ESSAIL PASS

By JEREMY PAK NELSON

LIFE as a working mercenary seemed almost easy in the last years of Ampleur's Folly. Most of the countryside had been pacified, and our company worked exclusively for the loyalist nobility of the kingdom. We were named the Two-Faced Foxes, then, the captain's attempt to subvert our profession's reputation with irony. "We're no more trusted than a discount brothel, may as well be honest about it." So we earned our reputation as the most honest double-crossers in the business.

We gathered around our campfires the night before we set out. Because we were so honest, we weren't working alone. We wouldn't be collaborating with another company, either, but with Esme, the Demon of Essail Pass.

"Is she a real demon? Or a god? Do gods work as mercenaries?" Glen asked. He was the company cook's boy, thirteen but already growing strong for his age. Captain would test him in a fight soon enough.

"She's not one of the half-gods who still walk, boy. Esme's as human and as mercenary as we are." Gum, a company sergeant, never lacked for patience, especially if it involved speaking. We'd joke that he talked most of his teeth right out of his mouth. "But the divine aren't interested in mortal business, at least not the business we see as important."

"And when they do involve themselves, it's for their own interest," I added. "I knew someone from my village who was granted a boon. His family was hungry, and they petitioned our forest guardian for aid. Each one of them lost all desire for food. Still had to eat, mind you. But they looked like twigs before long. Became damned hard to stay in the same room as them."

Glen's wide eyes caught the firelight like mirrors. Gum grinned, showing off the dozen lonely teeth he had left. "But they weren't hungry anymore, see? That's what happens when a god takes a liking to you." Glen's eyes only grew bigger as Esme joined us at the fire.

"He's right. Stay away from the gods if you can." Her leather armor was loosely tied, and from here I saw that it was studded with exquisite sculptures just as fine as a nobleman's silver. A demon's face, a pair of crossed swords, a flag in the wind. Each a victory commemorated in bardsong. Better than a gilt crossguard for showing her success in our bloody profession. More practical, too. Reputation is a fickle thing. The more stories you hear, the harder it is to give them credence. Easier to scoff at the tale of how the Demon of Essail Pass held and turned a thousand spearmen than to think that there were soldiers out there that much better than you could ever be.

As one of the company's singers, my duties — aside from fighting — were to lay down the verses for our fallen. And, when nights grew long, to help pass the time with ballads and lyrics. I knew a few of her lines and thought to welcome her to the fire with them.

*"Her courage drunk from battle's bloody fount,
Her valor true before hungering steel,
God-blessed in comrades' sight, damned by foes' eye,
A Demon guards Essail Pass, flee or kneel."*

"Your voice is decent enough," she said, in a way that left no doubt that there would be no more verses sung.

"I like the refrain best. There was something more about the gods in the song, wasn't there?" Glen said.

"The gods end up in every song, it seems, if you give the bards time enough," Esme said, and left our fire.

When she was far out of earshot, Gum met my eyes. "The captain thinks legends are good for business," he said. "Planning for when the war ends."

"And you know what they say about plans."

"Everyone's got one until an arrow finds their eye," Glen said, and took our pots away to be scoured.

• • •

WE set out as soon as there was enough light to see by. Over the last week we'd rafted alongside the Ullen's stony banks to make speed towards the enemy camp. Our company was exposed, but we'd been given word that limited patrols in the region moved to cover the woods between the camp and the bulk of the King's finest. There was always the chance that the informant was lying, or incompetent — and that's why you send in mercenaries. The final twelve miles were covered by forested hills. Our work would begin at all-dark.

Was I suspicious by nature? I'd been a thief before the Foxes bought me from the dungeons. Not a common cut purse, but one who'd achieved a bit of notoriety, I'd venture to say. Maybe too much so. And though nearly twenty years had gone by, it's hard to leave one's trade behind. And so I kept an eye on our new companions. Despite their reputation, Esme's squad appeared to number only three. The Demon herself, and two younger squires that could have been brother and sister with their matching black hair and green eyes. Caul was lanky, and would fill out with a few more years, but by the rabbits he'd gathered yesterday already

excellent at his bow work. Silver was a spellscribe, and no doubt skilled to be working so young. They'd provide good cover for a full team of swords and spears and be protected by them in turn. But in a team of three, how would the Demon keep the enemy from going past her if they were outnumbered? Perhaps they often worked with others and kept the glory to themselves.

Once we crested the hillside the camp below could be seen. The enemy had fortified their grounds where the trees met the plain. They had the King's Second and Fifth's companies on their minds, and the grasslands would make an army's approach impossible to miss. There was no doubt where our targets were located. The stables stood over the campground, a rough construction of trimmed logs and canvas twice the size of a village hall.

We'd been sent not to kill a man, or a handful of men, but to tear from the Rosebands their most potent weapon in the war. They alone had, with alchemy and sorcery, kept alive and bred the kingdom's bestial thricemen. And any battle with the magic-infused walking walls was a difficult one. The weapons had been gathered here, all but one or two of the traitorous Duke's personal guard, ready to be deployed against the king's forces. For a calf's weight in gold, we were to ensure that would not come to pass.

Three hours until sundown. Two of our best scouts, Slen and Eben, left to mark the final approach. The rest of the Foxes readied for the evening's work. I saw to my own swords, knives, and kit. Caltraps, steel wire, rope, and the poisons we'd been given in the form of glass vials wrapped in sheepskin. Each piece of equipment muffled to keep me quiet in the night. It was what all Foxes were taught to do.

My preparations did not take long. One benefit of age and experience, I supposed. I went around the camp in case anyone else needed a hand. The newest recruits had stayed at Olmont, so there was none of the wild-eyed excitement — or fear — you'd find in the freshest fighters. Instead, the camp was hushed, not from apprehension but anticipation. Some made jokes to muted laughter. Others sat silent, eyes out over the trees, out towards the enemy. I wondered about our new allies' rituals.

The Demon sat on a crag, further uphill. Her leathers would keep her from being spotted. I grimaced, indignant on behalf of our scouts. Did she think we weren't up to the job, to be up here playing lookout? I moved to make the climb up — I was getting old, but I could still manage thirty feet of steep hillside with trees and roots for handholds. Then I saw she wasn't alone.

A man sat beside her. He was dressed in armor similar to hers, with skin a shade darker than the ochre of the earth behind him. Even from this distance I could see the striking color of his eyes. They were almost white. His squared, sculptural features made him handsome despite the scars that carelessly marked his jaw and scalp. A face one might imagine when hearing of an ice-hearted demon's exploits. Trouble was, I'd never seen the man before. Was he a squad member of Esme's

I hadn't met yet? Or was she playing viper, meeting rebels before our assault? But that was foolish, they didn't have the money to make betrayal worthwhile. And if she were motivated by a faith in their cause ... then she'd be a shame upon our profession.

The man with the icy eyes lifted a hand, and brought Esme close for a kiss. I'm sure I looked like a complete fool with my mouth open. Turning down gold for love was, perhaps, less abhorrent than for politics.

The two weren't slowing down. I caught a few words on the wind, he said something about the "finest establishments." Planning their elopement, no doubt. When I saw her hand reach for the man's laces I looked away. I'd have a moment to better position myself while they were distracted — not to find a better vantage point, no, but to cover his escape. But as soon as I stepped away from the tree, I heard a pebble skip down the slope. A hand spun me around. The Demon of Essail Pass stood in front of me, unflustered.

I had difficulty maintaining my composure.

"Sir," I said.

"Do the Two-Faced Foxes spy on all their guests?" Her words weren't threatening, but her attention was entirely on me, and that in itself felt like a threat. If she decided I'd seen too much, would I have time to call for help? I didn't know. But she couldn't be sure I was alone.

"Who were you speaking to?"

Her face could have been cast from bronze. Yet my throat constricted from — could it be fear? Danger emanated from her. She had the stillness of a lion eyeing prey.

"He's my husband," she said. "A part of my team." Her voice was even as her face was expressionless. If she lied she did it better than any Ulan mountain trader.

"Haven't met him. Too busy to make introductions?"

"Speak to your captain. You'll see us in the fight. We'll do our part." She turned her back on me and walked towards camp. It grated that she didn't see me as a threat. Then again, I was a simple soldier who sang, not a legend of the songs.

Once she was gone I climbed the slope. It might have been for the best that I never had the chance to join her on the ledge. My breath came rougher than it should. From here, where the trees were sparser, the valley spread before me, forest blending into grasslands, and on the horizon were the white peaks of the Eastern Kingdoms. The enemy camp had the steady rhythms of an army at rest — groups of men, minute from this distance, carried logs for fortifications. A good commander makes the most of his surroundings. He must have planned to cut trees to prepare for the king's armies.

It was easy to see where fresh dirt had been scraped off from where Esme and her ostensible husband had been. She would have climbed down, fast, to intercept me. If he didn't join her, he must have gone off in another direction. But I saw no trail.

GUM gnawed on mintroot with a few of his remaining molars. It stained his lips blue, but he'd tell anyone who'd listen that the habit kept him from eating himself fat. He spat a blue glob onto the ground to get my attention. "Do you think she's looking to turn? Not a clever thing to do with the war going our way."

"Wouldn't be the first time someone lets love or lust get in the way of thinking."

"If the man's from the enemy camp, he'd have to be very good to get past our lines. If she means to betray us then we're already waist-deep in trouble. The Foxes can't turn back now, it'd end our reputation."

"I figure that's what the captain would say."

Gum nodded. "I'll send word of what you saw. Nothing else for us to do but be watchful."

• • •

SO I watched. As twilight set in we left to make our deliberate descent to our objectives. My group was attached to Esme and her team. She checked her equipment along with all the rest of us. The slender knife she carried turned out not to be a knife at all. She unsheathed what looked to be a polished white rod. Bone, I realized. A bone wand, unmarked by any sort of spell script. I felt a chill. Witches may not be real, but maybe her weapon — and what it implied — offered an explanation for her legendary reputation. Her gloves, too, were subtly taloned, each finger ending on a sharpened steel point. A nod to her fame, perhaps. Stylish, in a way, and no doubt would have been all the vogue in Rubymount except for the risk of accidentally cutting a suitor's hand. Or maybe that would be a selling point. I ought to have Gum write home with ideas.

Of her husband, I saw no sign.

Two other groups of Foxes would be on the field. Gum's had set out early to make their way around the enemy. They'd provide a distraction from the plains. If it went as planned the enemy would be duped into thinking that a vanguard from the king's forces had slipped past their scouts. In the commotion, we would have the chance to do our work and slip away. In our wake, fires and explosives would draw the separatists back to camp. With enough chaos, Gum's squad would be able to disengage without much trouble once it became clear that the frontal assault was merely a decoy. The other group headed into the camp with us would be tasked with culling the enemies of their spellscribes wherever they could be found.

We all knew that plans were only words until the first knife bites flesh. In the end, we counted on what was most important — Foxes fight hard, fight dirty, fight clever. No matter what happened we'd make our blood count.

We moved in the deepening night. None of us had a god's boon of nocturnal sight, but our scouts did their work well. With patience we would close in on the camp within a couple hours. We crept onwards, making as little noise as forty people can

moving through the woods. Insect calls rose and fell among us, helping cover our movement in the dark. We paused only when the cry of a wolf sounded from the north. Wolves were dangerous, yes, but foremost on my mind as the howl lingered was how the sound was easily mimicked for a signal.

From the other side of the hill, wolves howled in response. We hadn't been spotted.

The final approach was the most unbearable part of any mission. In a fight there's little time to think. A daydreaming soldier is soon dead. But to walk, or crawl, or climb in stealth — you focus, but the moments stretch on. There was little we could do to cheer each other onward but keep our breathing quiet and even. As the last of the light drained from the sky the glow of campfires could be seen between the trees ahead. Lookouts did not stand near the fires; it'd be impossible to see into the dark woods. But there wouldn't be many watchmen this side of the camp.

At Eben's signal our squad stopped while his went on around the camp's perimeter. We'd infiltrate here and aim towards the eastern end of the stable. I counted heartbeats. They didn't come as fast as they used to. A veteran, unfazed. Or getting old.

There were six of us. Big Fen, a large man by any measure but surprisingly agile; Nit, small by comparison but no less effective with his miniature crossbows; and Esme and her two squires. Alongside Esme's mysterious paramour, if he deigned to make an appearance. Should Esme intend to betray us, she'd have to make her move soon. It wouldn't be my first ambush. Much as I wanted to believe otherwise, experience taught me how little one could see into another's thoughts. Still, her silhouette at that moment looked no different than the other good leaders I'd served under. Poised, ready for anything. She signaled us forward in pairs, her archer and spellscribe at our backs for cover. What's done was done, I wouldn't survive the night worrying about who's behind me. I hoped the captain and Gum knew what they were doing.

The first misfortune of the night: our entry point happened to be at the camp's newly dug latrines, which meant it was only a matter of time before unwanted company would come our way. The trenches already stank with waste. I heard a voice behind me and almost fell in.

"You take me to the finest establishments, my love." It was Esme's husband. Even hushed, his voice carried. In an instant she had a hand over his mouth. How could someone so stealthy be so clueless about staying quiet? Even in the dark, his white eyes seemed to glow. In a softer voice that still grated, he went on, "Znac's the name. I go where she goes." He pointed at Esme. I rolled my eyes.

Heavy canvas tents walled the perimeter of the camp. Silver, Esme's spellscribe, traced shapes on the fabric with one finger as she murmured words from a tiny scroll. Big Fen, outsized sword in hand, stayed by her side to keep her from being interrupted. Nit took up position near the edge of the tent, ready to unload poisoned bolts into anyone who turned the corner. We wouldn't have long before Gum's crew began their distraction.

Zhac and Esme led the way, peering first around the edge of the tent and then edging forward. I followed, Caul stepping softly behind me, an arrow nocked and ready, with Nit following close behind. The unfinished wooden stables could be seen clearly over the tents. There was little chance of getting lost, at least.

We stepped faster, now, aware that the longer we took the riskier the operation would be. Somewhere there was laughter. We passed two intersections without incident. At the third we could hear voices coming from the left. Trouble. Two people, at least. Jovial, or possibly drunk. We stood with our backs against the tent wall, careful not to press into the fabric too much lest someone inside see us. Esme nodded at me, and I crouched low beside Zhac next to the corner.

There were only two of them. Zhac waited half a beat after the first of them came around. A lightning lunge past me and one of them was down, his throat slit open by a flick of Zhac's sword. I sprang from my crouch and buried my knives under the other man's ribs. Hot blood covered my hands, the man's ale-and-cheese breath close to my ear. He would be alive for a moment, yet, but a man with two knives under his ribs cannot scream. I pulled him away from the path and finished the job. After I cleaned my hands and knives as best I could, Esme covered the bodies with their own cloaks. At a glance a passerby might miss them. I met Zhac's eyes and acknowledged his work with a nod. I was in the company because I was effective and managed to keep myself alive. Always admired those who could do both with a bit of flair.

The two soldiers were armed only with belt-knives. They, at least, hadn't known we were coming. But I kept my thoughts away from my earlier musings. There'd be time later, if I were still alive, to think as much as I wanted.

We reached the stables without any more trouble. Our information was good, and the two troughs of water were where we'd been told to expect them. Nit emptied sachets of green powder into both. Our insurance in case we failed to kill our targets directly. The water clouded for a moment, then settled clear. The poison would disrupt the spells that kept thricemen alive and obedient.

The stable itself was soundly built, given the improvised materials available. The door, however, was no more than a haphazard lashing of spare branches. Rope bound one edge of the door to the stable wall in something resembling a hinge. Not much of an obstacle if brute force were an option, but to make our way in without waking the stable's inhabitants would take a little more finesse. I pointed at the hinge with my knife. Esme nodded, waved for Caul to approach. He braced himself against the door. As quietly as I could manage, I sawed at the bottom of the hinge. Esme worked at the knots at the top. Once the door was free, we pulled it back towards us to keep it from falling in and set it on the ground. The open doorway reeked of an animal's den.

Two braziers at the center of the building provided the only light. Stalls lined the length of the building. Each was as wide

as the armspan of two men, and as deep. Beneath my feet the ground rumbled. They were snores, I realized. The stable housed at least a full dozen thrice men. The king's armies had a mere four, as they'd been steadily depleted over the course of the war. The Roseband Duke's spellscribes were unsurpassed in their ability to successfully breed and develop the walking siege weapons, and he'd turned traitor in the early months of the rebellion.

I went to the closest stall on the right. Scents of urine and rot hung in the air. The stall door came up to my head. Unlatched, it swung open without protest.

For a thiceman, she was small. Seeded in a woman's womb, there was something undeniably human about her. But the differences were impossible to see past. She wasn't merely a larger person. Her legs were stout trunks, her arms comparatively thin, her head somewhat small. A thriceman's torso was often misshapen, but heavily bound with muscle. She wore a large mismatched blanket quilted from scraps of fabric and cinched around her middle with a muddled cord. If she were my size, or a child, she'd be seen as grotesque, a cursed birth who could never survive. Spellscribes had overruled nature in that regard. The readings and tracings of practitioners over an expectant mother, that was how each of these monstrosities began. Cut from the belly once they grew too large, then kept under more magic still as they grew. Weaned on mash and spellwork, they grow from listless children into living battering rams.

And each had the heart and mind of a child. This one, now curled into a ball as wide as I was tall, might have been only six years old. But they were raised to be weapons, not gentle giants to be shown the wonders of the world. Even if they didn't fall on the battlefield, few lived longer than a decade. A life of blood and pain and straw.

I stepped closer. Her waste and water pails were in the far corner. Her head rested on her arms. Scars threaded through her sheared scalp, one marking where her left ear had been cut off in some battle months ago. Sleep softened her rough-hewn features.

The vial was in my hand. I soaked the lambskin it'd been wrapped in. Thriceman hide, toughened with gristle, made clean cuts nearly impossible. Attempting to butcher one would inevitably wake the giant, which I'd prefer to avoid. The poison wouldn't kill the larger thricemen, only pull them into a deep sleep that could persist for weeks. But for this one, the vial might be enough. Even at arm's length I could almost taste the astringent fumes. I held the damp leather under the giant's nose until the rise and fall of her chest slowed, then stopped. It was a gentle end.

Esme and Nit emerged from their own stalls. Caul guarded the open doorway. The camp was eerily quiet. If Gum's distraction had been delayed, we would have a difficult time escaping, and it was only a matter of time before a patrol noticed something amiss. We went down the stables, into stall after stall, granting the king's mercy. My chest tightened as we worked. There were so many.

We'd reached the other end of the stable, and the last few thricemen to be put down, when the horn sounded, the blast so loud it might as well have been right outside the walls. Perhaps guards had found the body, or it was Gum's squad finally making their mark.

Only a moment passed before the groans and shuffling began. The giants were waking. Quieter sounds came from the stalls we'd visited, but there were three that hadn't been gotten to at all. Timbers croaked, grounded, and hands bigger than my head emerged to grip the stable door beside me.

"Fall back?" I asked.

Esme's eyes seemed to glow, so bright they were. "We've come with a task. We finish it." And there was no more time. The fight began.

Three mountains rose in their stalls, their grumbling voices so deep they shook my chest. If I'd stopped to think I would have been terrified, would have found a stall to hide myself in straw and shit. But I'd learned years ago not to think, but act. I ducked under the stall door of the closest thriceman. I held a knife in both hands and drove it with my weight into the side of the giant's knee. For an instant the skin held, and death breathed close. But the point held true, shearing tendon and cartilage apart. Above me the giant bellowed, and as he flinched from the sudden attack my knife was torn from my hands, still embedded in the giant's joint. My ears rang. I didn't wait. I was ducking out of the stall when the first massive arm swept down to crush me where I had stood. The giant collapsed onto his knees, very much crippled but alive.

The other two thricemen had broken free. Both were male. One had hair that looked like a brushfire of red and gold around his head. The other was piebald, dark but for white arms and splotches of pale skin on his torso and legs. The fire-haired thriceman sprouted arrows and crossbow bolts from his face, one eye shut from the bleeding. Nit was at his feet, back bent horribly as if he'd been folded in half. He was dead, or would be soon. Another arrow drove into the giant's shoulder, and he ran towards Caul, who kept on his barrage from the far end of the stable.

Esme and Zhaç fought the last of the three giants. In motion, they were astonishing. For a moment I could only watch them work. Esme fainted for the thriceman's groin, and when the giant stepped back Zhaç's lunged for the ankle, piercing grey skin. The giant had taken a part of his stall door for a weapon. But the couple split to either side when the giant brought down his club, and both scored deep cuts on his thighs. They were simply too fast for the meat wall. Each of the thriceman's movements only opened him to the lunges and swipes of the swordsmen. If we had the time all three of the giants could be taken down — they weren't meant to fight unarmored and without supporting infantry.

My thriceman had found his footing, somehow, and pummeled at the timber that held his stall together. The back of my throat itched. I knew things were turning sour. The stable door

behind us opened, and in a breath two dozen armed soldiers were at our back. We'd made far too much noise. My target's stall door gave way, the injured thriceman stumbling onto the floor next to me.

I threw my caltrops in the hope they'd buy us a few seconds. There was no fighting to be done with these odds, we had to run.

The fire-haired giant had chased Caul to the other end of the building. I hoped the boy had enough sense to flee himself if we couldn't follow.

Esme and Zhaç had done their dance well, and Piebald was breathing hard. Bleeding cuts ringed his legs, but he still stood, brandishing his club. We'd have to get past him. Behind me came screams and angry curses as men stepped onto the traps. I didn't have the skills of either fighter, but as Gum would say, the surprising fighter is the deadliest.

"On your right!" I said, and ducked under Zhaç's swinging arm to drive a knife across the giant's hamstring. Even as the blade cut I knew I'd made my last gambit. I wasn't fast enough, the blow not severe enough to keep the giant from striking back. Mud matted the descending club. It'd drive me in to the ground like a nail into soft wood. I wasn't satisfied, but I could be content. My last blow would fell a giant and let my comrades escape.

Instead I was hit hard from the side. Zhaç knocked me away and entirely off my feet. We landed hard. The club came down on his left leg, crushing thigh, knee, and everything below. His face was next to mine. He didn't scream, but his eyes bulged, bloodshot, his teeth bared.

Esme didn't miss her chance. As soon as the giant had struck she'd cut deep into his groin. Severed veins and arteries blackened the ground in seconds. The giant fell, collapsing a stall beneath him, club still gripped tight in one fist.

"We have to go," she said. A blacksmith's grip pulled me to my feet.

Zhaç had paled so much his face looked like it'd been covered in ash. He sat up, his ruined leg shapeless in front of him. "Go," he said. He couldn't manage any more. Esme dropped two knives by the man and pulled me away. I was too shaken to do anything but follow, but at that moment I wondered how heartless one had to be to command a reputation of legend.

I could do little more than stumble through the wreckage of the stable. I did not look back, but I heard more screams. Then the rhythmic butchering of a man dead. More soldiers pursued us.

The whip of a bowstring woke me from my daze. Caul, by the door, fired another arrow, then another. The steps behind us slowed as our pursuers tried to find cover. When we were out of the building it was as though I breathed for the first time. In the open air the alarm bells could clearly be heard. The red-haired thriceman lay in the dirt, one lethal arrow still buried in the giant's eye.

"We could have saved him," I said. I may have even believed it, then. Esme's eyes met mine, and there was no heat in them

at all. She drew the sheathed bone from her hip and scraped a taloned finger along its surface. And from behind her stepped Zhac, poised and untouched.

"You take me to the finest establishments, love," said Zhac, as if nothing had happened.

"Cover our retreat," Esme said.

His white eyes flashed as he pulled her in for a kiss. Then his sword was in hand and he faced the door. "Until the After, my love."

There was no more speaking. Caul, Esme, and I ran back to the latrines. I watched for enemies and tried to unravel what I'd seen. Had Zhac in the stable been an illusion? But he'd fought, pushed me aside, no illusion I'd heard of was substantial enough to do that. We passed the last row of tents, the camp seeming to flash by now that stealth was no longer a concern. Silver was waiting with Big Fen, but they weren't alone. Three soldiers pressed them. Fen's reach barely warded them off. The moment Silver saw we were beyond the camp she hissed a word and brought her hand's fingers together in a fist. Fire sprung to life on the canvas, spreading along ropes, from tarp to tarp, separating the camp from the latrines.

My knife cut a smile across one guard's throat, and Esme nearly severed the leg off another before crushing his windpipe with her boot. Big Fen dispatched the last distracted guard with a clean thrust to his armpit. We fled for the trees.

The fire, the heat at our backs, vanished if it were a candle blown out. My eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness. Two figures stood at the path to the camp, robed and masked. The duke's magicians. The other Foxes had failed to find them or these two had seen to their end. They chanted, and by how slowly my limbs moved I could guess what they were doing. We'd be imprisoned by the same magic that held the thrice-men forcibly docile.

"Watchers be damned, Es." Zhac stumbled forward. He'd appeared behind Esme again, whole once more. The spellscribes weren't prepared for the appearance of another enemy, and by the time Zhac's movements slowed he was close enough to run his sword through the belly of the robed figure on the left. I could move again, and I started towards the other spellscribe.

"No," Esme said. "Zhac will deal with them." Once more, we ran and left him behind. I looked back. Zhac steadily moved closer to the surviving magician, struggling as though he walked through a bog. Fire sprang from Zhac's arms, his legs, but he stubbornly stepped towards his target. I looked away, and kept running.

We were deep in the trees, now. My footing became unsteady as adrenaline drained from my body. There didn't seem to be anyone pursuing us. Perhaps Zhac still stood, guarding our backs. My side throbbed from where he'd pushed me aside.

"Who the hell is he?" I asked.

"He's my husband," Esme said. Columns of smoke rose from the far side of the camp. Maybe the other squad had survived, after all. A smaller flame, closer to us, winked out of existence.

"We fought together," Esme said. "At Essail Pass. We were lovers, then. A Watcher saw us." Black branches against the night sky held her words close.

"Like the song," Silver said. "She was given a Gift."

Esme made a sound that might have been a laugh. "Yes. Like the song. The Watcher so admired us He granted us the curse of undying love. When Zhac finally fell to a blackfletch arrow, I cried. I thought my life had ended. But when I touched his body — his corpse — he appeared beside me as though he hadn't been hurt at all. Whole, and wonderful. Until he faded. Minutes, hours, he never stays."

The insect calls of the forest filled our silence. We neared our camp before I spoke again.

"It's always the same Zhac," I said. "He never remembers."

Esme's face was veiled in the dark. "Each death is his first."

"And you love him?"

I thought she wouldn't answer. We passed Slim, on watch for the night, who sighed and shook his head when he saw Nit hadn't returned with us.

"I must love him, for the God's boon still ties us together," Esme said. Her voice was hoarse. "I can say I love no one else."

• • •

BY the fires we wrote our songs. Two of Gum's squad had been caught by arrows or spells in their retreat from the grasslands. The other squad that infiltrated the camp had been slowed by trenches, and had to abandon their task once the camp was alerted. One soldier died to a fall.

I would put Nit's most memorable deeds and failings to song. Our company ballads were mournful, but not somber. But the words wouldn't come to me. Our squad suffered four deaths, but only one casualty. I strummed my lyrebox's strings and found the familiar tune, and set new words to an old song.

*Before spearpoint, maul, and blade,
Undaunted lovers held fast,
As black feather struck crimson,
The Watcher's boon was cast.*

*A ghost wed to a demon,
The Lovers of Essail Pass.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Pak Nelson haunts the canals of Manchester charting ley lines that connect the city to his birthplace, Hong Kong. He is pre-occupied with outdated methods of putting words on paper, and when not sifting through his hoard of stationery enjoys folk fiddle, accordion, and the game of go. He can be reached on Twitter @jpaknelson, and online at www.jeremypaknelson.com.

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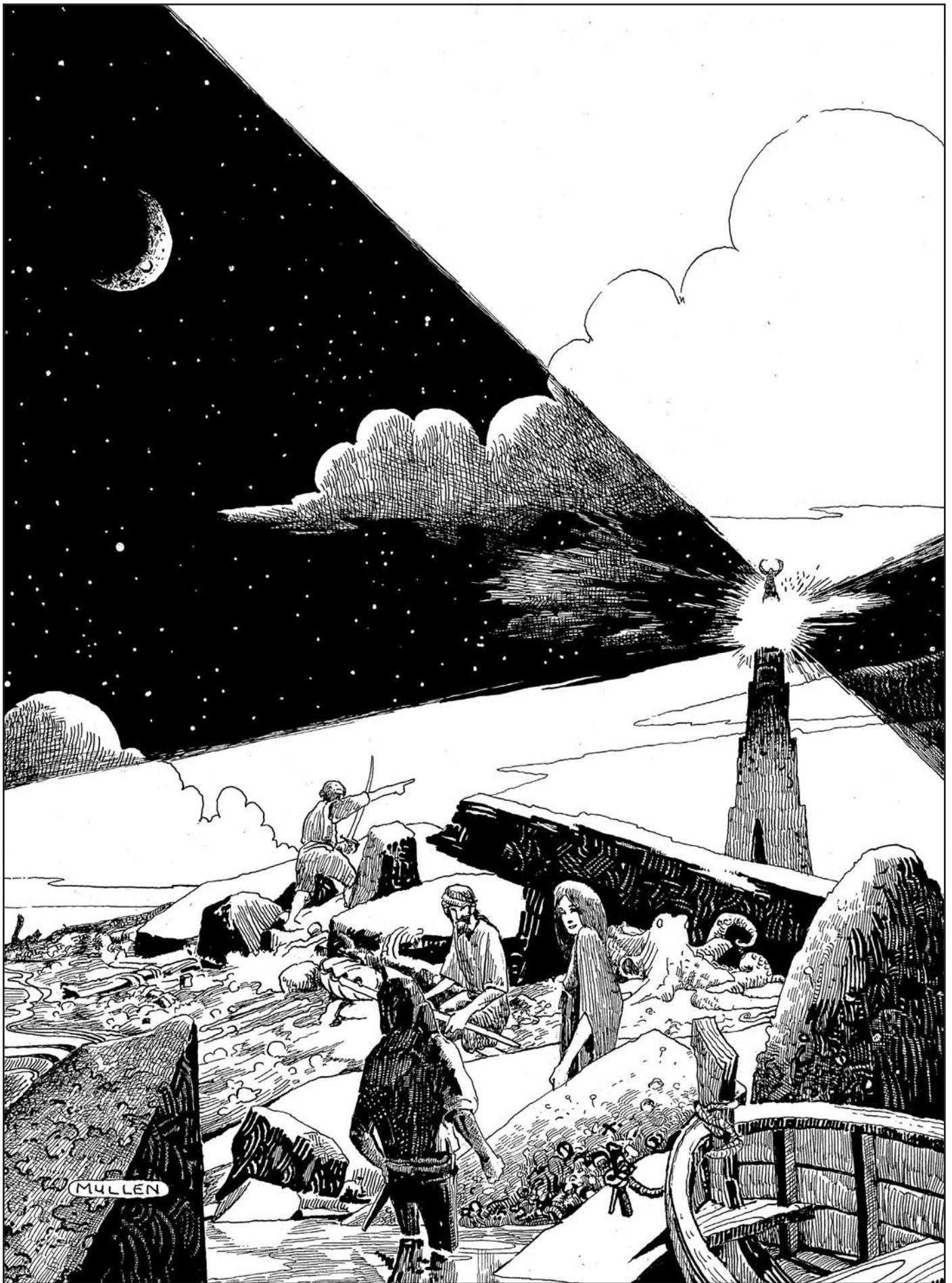


ILLUSTRATION BY PETER MULLEN

TO THE DARKHOUSE

A Tale of Gaunt and Bone

By CHRIS WILRICH

THE lost lighthouse's emerald beam revealed an obsidian-smooth midnight sea.

And that was an interesting trick, thought Gaunt as she rowed closer, it being noontime on a windy and cloudless day.

For in every direction the pale, auburn-haired poet looked save that of the lambent light the world was awash in sun. This was a bright expanse of ocean, roiling in that gut-churning way the pirates around her described as "calm weather." Sun-glare splattered in thousands of tiny water-beads as the waves slammed against the lighthouse rocks and the wood of the ship's boat and its home the receding trireme *Sea-Glare*. There was no other solidity to interrupt the sparkling blue expanse. The tower rose unaccountably on an islet in these blazing waters, far from any mainland, and its glaucous stone and viridescent crystal were spattered with brine and muck and slime, as a thing but recently veiled by waves.

"A lighthouse of the Darkling Weave," Gaunt murmured. "One of the few things the ancients of sunken Nobeca truly feared."

"I have an unreliable sense for magic," said Gaunt's new lover, the mysterious thief Imago Bone, beside the opposite oar. He seemed not to hear the trepidation in her voice. His voice was rough leather to her speech's silk, an audible match for his dark garb, and his face was bronzed and lean, with darting eyes only slightly less unnerving than the blade-scar and the fire-scar that framed them. There was an air of an inquisitive yet cautious ferret about him. "I think there's some of it ahead. And magic always fetches a good price." He paused to catch his breath amid the rowing. "What treasures might we find, Gaunt? You are the bard among us."

"Poet," she corrected, straining to keep the pace, but a hint of smile upon her lips. "Poet and scholar. The bards of Swanisle and I long since parted ways." Their exchange summoned the attention of the pair of piratical rowers ahead and the brawny woman handling both oars behind, and Gaunt hoped the rose-and-spider's-web tattoo shrouding half her face, of whose origins she never spoke, conveyed sufficient mystery to impress. She was struggling to row — farm chores were years in her past — and it wouldn't do to appear cowed. If tattoo and muscles didn't suffice she'd have to rely on her voice. For all that she was petty nobility, there was more of barn than manor in her frame and méin, and moreover she was shrouded in drab traveler's clothes, grey surcoat and black pants, chosen to deflect attention. But she hoped the right words might both encourage the shore party and keep them wary. She took a long breath and

loudly answered Bone: "Glories of the Cult of Infinity, who were able to rend space and time. Their works bring power and peril. Behold!" She allowed one aching arm to leave off rowing to point at the slowly swerving beam. Where the light fell, perhaps a mile off, the day-lit world parted like a blue curtain, and beyond that aperture the waves of their Earthe were replaced by becalmed black seas quivering beneath silver cloud-wisps. A swollen moon loomed into view over the dark vista. It bore none of the familiar gray maria of their own satellite but rather a pattern of craters and canyons that resembled a twisting labyrinth. The deep purple sky lacked stars, but was full of thousands of tiny luminosities recalling drifting jellyfish.

"You are not the only ones who know of magic," said a voice like a crystal chime. It belonged to the woman ahead of Bone, who styled herself "Irilee," a winsome sandy-brown figure with a green streak in her hair to match her eyes, rowing beside Captain Dawnglass, brooding, black, bald, bearded. Whereas the woman was otherworldly, ethereal, serene, the man was unapologetically of the world and its ambitions.

"My people ..." continued Irilee, "my former people ... know something of these lighthouses, Persimmon Gaunt. They lie under waves unless some powerful magic raises their seamounts."

"On the piers of my homeland Ma'at," added Captain Dawnglass' deep voice between oar strokes, "they say such raising requires unwholesome sacrifices. Who has done this, I wonder?"

"Likely some great fool who's destroyed himself," Imago Bone said with good cheer. After a fresh stroke he added, "Leaving the treasure clear for us lesser fools!"

Dawnglass chuckled. "You do not need to convince Captain Dawnglass a second time, thief, to seek riches." Gaunt rolled her eyes. She'd traded the company of poets for treasure hunters, she reflected, though their manners of speaking could be oddly alike. Was she truly so different? Scratch a poet, find a pirate? Was her life's goal ultimately a safe harbor or landings like these? For despite her misgivings she obeyed Irilee's maneuvering instructions, and they gently nosed onto a sandy spot nestled amid twisted rock.

"Handy," Bone remarked to Gaunt after helping drag the launch ashore and catching his breath, "having *former mermaid* on one's curriculum vitae." He stretched and flexed sore arms.

Gaunt recovered her own breath before answering, crouching and watching the looming lighthouse pierce the sky with barnacles, seaweed, and anenomes. "Even with Irilee's aid, O thief, this adventure is ill-advised."

"I know, O poet. I'd hoped to reach Archaeopolis with a maximum of hammock time. Dawnglass was much obliging to avoid piracy during our journey. It's entirely our fault for egging him onto this sudden apparition of an island. And yet ... to pluck treasure from places where no living hand's twitched in generations ..."

And Gaunt rose and murmured, despite herself, "To see inscriptions with no reader in ten thousand years ..."

"To brave the darkness and bring things to light ..."

"Knowledge," she said.

"Beauty," he said.

"Lore."

"Loot."

Gaunt sighed. "We are bad for each other, aren't we? Like two drunks sharing a bottle."

"Or good for each other! Like hungover friends, grouching over coffee."

She punched his arm. "You do steal the best coffee. But theft, treasure, glory — none of that's more important than the curse we swore to break, back in Palmary."

"Indeed! And I'd not break that promise." He smirked. "Not at least for anything less lavish than, oh, say, the treasures of the Ghana of Kpalamaa."

"Let's go to the lighthouse, then, and see how it compares." Her tone of giddiness surprised her. Was she a schoolgirl now, on an excursion? But Bone merely laughed.

"The nighthouse, more like," he said. "If the weather permits it."

"Surely it will. It can't change that quickly, dark dimensions or no."

"Captain!" called one of the pirates, who'd not been rowing and had energy to spare; he'd climbed a low but jagged slope of grey stone riddled with little pools, shrouded in seaweed, and dappled with tiny pink crabs. "A shipwreck!" Gaunt and Bone raced after Dawnglass, Irilee, and the well-muscled, tan-skinned, tangle-haired woman styled Laughknot. Meanwhile the pirate who'd scouted ahead was just a foot tall and the stuff of nightmares — he was an anthropoid sepia rat named Jetsam, brandishing a small thin blade. As they joined him on the rise they stared across the little island's tortuous stone-scape and took in a huge shattered hulk sprawled upon the far shore like some monstrous wooden bird savaged by a wasteful predator. Its prow was somewhat intact but beyond its ruined midsection and a pair of toppled masts, the sea had claimed all but a scattering of floating canvas, planks, barrels, and oars.

Bone whistled. "It's a vessel of the Jargos — the sorcerer-folk. I've, ah, acquired things from their island before."

Dawnglass made a sign against evil with one hand and a rude gesture with the other. "The country chosen by the dread god Klarga," he muttered.

"Or by some accounts," Gaunt said, "the country that chose Klarga — or even created him."

"Hard to know which is worse," Bone said, "but either way they were made for each other." He looked around as though orienting among unseen continents. "This is a spot remote from their island. And a desolate one. They were determined to come here." He frowned at the lighthouse.

"Aye, mate," Jetsam piped up, "this be a yankersand cay and no mistake, me shorefarthing friends, though 'tis a flickershark of a lighthouse, that one."

Dawnglass grunted, "That means absolutely nothing and you know it."

Jetsam waved a paw over his shoulder at Gaunt and Bone. "Ye won't let me have e'en a bit of fun with the grogless clod-warmers?"

"No."

Jetsam's accent became that of half the Eldshoren Senate. "Capital, Captain. As I was endeavoring to say, this island offers no shelter at all from storms, and I mislike the look of that lighthouse."

"Well, anyone with a brain would," said Dawnglass, "and you've got a fine brain, Jet, when you're not using it to invent jargon."

"Ah, you're a masterflash of a man, sir, a fine example of a blitherscalder —"

"Stop." Dawnglass led the way down to the wreck.

Now that they'd gotten some elevation the islet was revealed as a fat crescent of twisted rock some two thousand feet from horn to horn. *Sea-Glare* had anchored on the convex side; the wreck sprawled on the concave shore. Gaunt judged the crescent ran from the northwest down to the southeast, where the fell lighthouse blazed. Under its eerie beam they picked their way to the wreck.

The Jargo ship had been a dromon — like *Sea-Glare* an antiquated design in this era of galleys and knarrs and caravels — with an upward pointing beak, triangular lateen sails, and over a hundred oars. Such a proud vessel might carry a whole company of soldiers. But not now. Now its hull creaked broken in the sun beneath a foam of seagulls and a smoke of flies. Stylized crossed blue lightning bolts twisted upon sails that billowed torn and useless.

"It can't have been long ago," Dawnglass called through the squawks and buzzings, "if there's so much death to feed on."

And death there was, in an even more unnerving fashion than Gaunt had reckoned. This ship would carry many scores, and indeed there were plentiful bodies amid the scavengers, most wearing the snow-colored togas of common Jargos, daffodil swirls and spirals representing sunlight and gold. The bodies adorned by the robes were twisted and stiff. The whites and yellows were shredded and drenched in red. Blades adorned hearts and throats and eyes.

Gaunt had encountered death before, but never such general slaughter. As the wind changed a sickly-sweet rotting stench hit her. *Is this the journey you desired?* The bodies seemed to whisper. *Did you not prefer to stay among books? Traveling with a rogue sounds a jolly thing in poems, but remember the ballads of demon lovers and bad ends?*

"Something is wrong here," came Laughknot's gravelly tones.

"Indeed?" answered Dawnglass, clearly shaken. "Surely you jest."

"Ha! If only, Captain! What I mean is, look at these wounds. All these weapons left behind. And all of Jargo make, made to look cruel. Serrations and flanges. Wicked in appearance but impractical."

"Practical enough to kill them all," Dawnglass said.

Laughknot lit up a thin rolled leaf filled with weed from some distant port of call. "You see weapons of other make? Any bodies but the Jargos?"

"We agreed you'd not light that stuff," Dawnglass growled.

"Aboard ship or on raids! This is civilization."

"What, this?"

Laughknot jabbed her smoke at the eldritch lighthouse. "What else?"

The captain grunted. "What are you suggesting? They killed each other?"

Laughknot shrugged. "Or themselves."

"One yet lives," Irilee said.

"I can talk with him," Gaunt called out. "I know some of the language."

They left Jetsam to scamper up the wreck and keep watch. Gaunt steeled her nose and crept into the hull's shadow, where crocodilian eyes larger than Sea Glare's loomed painted and sightless upon cracked wood. The dying man looked typical of his distant island — white of skin, blond of hair, green of eye, sneering of countenance. His ermine robe was threaded with real gold, and he stank like someone soaked in seawater and left to steam. He made Gaunt uneasy, but he was suffering and she attempted to tend his injuries. "Do you understand me?" she asked, her tongue twisting to form badly-accented Western Cochleate. "We will help you."

"Don't ... bother butchering my ... tongue ..." he whispered in her own language, Northern Roil. "Had ... many slaves from ... your region on board ... it was easier to speak your feeble language. And don't bother helping me ... feel death ... coming. And if I put it off ... might not die in a clean way ... don't want soul going into —" He shuddered.

"What?" she couldn't help but say. "Soul? Into what?"

"The green light ... captain and I had a plan ... awaken the lighthouse. He and I swam in alone ..."

"Swam in?" Bone repeated, perplexed. "Had it not been raised?"

But the man seemed not to hear. "Horrid drowned place ... captain took a goblet ... awakened more than we bargained ... thought I escaped but the light caught me ... caught us all ... it makes you loathe yourself ... want to cut down yourself and others ... and it hungers for souls ..."

His voice trailed off. Gaunt demanded, "What possessed you to think any of this was a good idea?"

"Captain and I ... wanted to open Darkling Weave ... use it for transport ... raid many lands ..."

"Doesn't that seem a trifle hazardous?" said Bone, but Gaunt waved him to silence.

The survivor laughed wetly, voice slurring and slowing. "Superstition ... a bold man ignores ... the fears ... of lesser ... men ..."

"The green light," Gaunt said. "Is it a danger to us now?"

But the bold man was dead.

"We will search for more survivors," Dawnglass said, "and loot this vessel. If we're in luck they've already stolen the best from the lighthouse."

They were not in luck. Nor were the Jargos. Even after Jetsam had nosed into every cranny the shore party uncovered no treasure beyond a crate of petty coin and books of charts, and no life

outside of a caged tropical bird of prismatic plumage and foul vocalization.

Bone interrogated it. "Hungry?"

"*My heart infests me!*" the bird squawked, its curved yellow beak seeking Bone's finger. "*My eyes offend me! Shitpuke! Pus-blood! Have to cut them out but it hurts! Klarga's balls it hurts! Cracker?*" It gave Gaunt a sidelong look with an eye like a green marble. She'd found a metal box on the belt of the well-dressed man, and on a hunch opened it to find two rows of crackers, one white, the other of various colors. Deciding the colorful ones were special treats, she gingerly fed the bird a white one, mindful of its eager beak.

"I'd be heartened," she said as cracker fragments flew, "to find a ship's log."

"I think that would be in the stern," Bone said, nodding toward the flotsam upon the sea, "out there, in much the condition of that cracker."

"Logbook's probably ruined on the seafloor," said Laughknot.

"These chart books are of some value," mused Dawnglass, studying one and rubbing his beard. "This ship's been some odd places." He closed the book with a loud snap. "Some of the better weapons are worth keeping. We can sell the bird. Perhaps it's enough."

"Captain!" scoffed Laughknot as they returned to higher ground. "We've sailed together a time now. Never known you to abandon a target before taking its measure."

"That isn't exactly a fat merchant vessel," Gaunt said, with a sweep of her hand toward the muck-spattered lighthouse and its sickly sweeping beam. "And don't the dead prove something of its dangers?"

"The Jargos serve a false god," offered Jetsam, his whiskers twitching with what Gaunt judged to be eagerness. "They are a venal, weak-minded lot. We are more ..." He considered his next words.

"Honest?" Gaunt teased, smiling down at the rat-man.

"Nimble. Let us at least reconnoiter the tower."

"What say you, thief?" asked Dawnglass. It occurred to Gaunt that the sea-raider had a grudging professional respect for the second story man, and vice versa.

"I agree with the balance of opinions," said Bone with a guilty glance at Gaunt. "Explore with caution, by all means. But we've come this far."

"We go," Dawnglass agreed.

As they labored up rocks slick and stinking with ocean slime, Jetsam scampering ahead of them and darting back like a one-rat skirmishing party, Gaunt shook her head, carrying the bird cage in her hand and the crackers in her pack. It seemed wrong to leave the animal among the scavengers. But less and less did she like the look of the lighthouse.

For all that the Cult of Infinity had sought ancient Nobeca's destruction, the maniacs had been Nobecan maniacs and partook of that civilization's artistry. And as Nobeca had endured longer than all subsequent history, those architectural styles came in a bewildering range. Gaunt thought she beheld here work of the Second Triumphant Garnet Decadent Period, in its autumn aspect before the flames of Austere Ruby Minimalism burned the triumphant decadence away. As such, the taper of the lighthouse recalled some immense green candle with a thousand grotesque

faces formed of drippings. At the top the tower flared like a confluence of tropical fish fins, and a green translucent dome covered all like an immense emerald egg. The sickly green beam of light spun through the crystal, continually cast by some looming shadow within. She saw the portal to the Darkling Weave rotate around the island. It was like, Gaunt thought, being a child and spinning around and around on a hilltop as a black storm cloud closed in. (Gaunt had been an unusual child.)

She whispered to the bird, "I thought Bone was on my side. That we are a team. What say you, bird, are all men fickle?"

"I heard that," Bone said.

"*All men must die!*" squawked the bird.

"I have sometimes thought as much," Gaunt said.

"Partner' does not always mean 'obedient servant,'" Bone mused.

"It means we should always agree on the best plans," Gaunt said. "Mine," she added with a smile.

"*Mine own brain disturbs me!*" said the bird. "*Into each of my head's orifices do I plunge the knife! Cracker?*"

"I'm with you on the menfolk," Laughknot called back, "but did you have to bring the parrot from hell?"

"*It's not a parrot,*" said the bird.

They all chuckled, perhaps because there was nightmare all around them. "What are you, then?" asked Jetsam, who had just slipped back among them.

"*Rats!*" said the bird. "*Damned rats on my ship!*" Jetsam laughed so hard at this he teetered.

But he was back to agile readiness as they reached the entrance of the lighthouse. It was more artwork than doorway. The first impression was of some tentacled sea beast, for a generally oval void was extended in many places with arms that tapered into looping spirals, fading into infinitesimal cracks in the tower's green stone. On further consideration the entryway suggested to Gaunt a mathematical pattern, and it raised uncomfortable associations.

It seemed there could be no door suitable for such a bizarre opening, and indeed there hung here the tatters of a black silken curtain, still damp and smelling of brine. Beyond it, shadows seemed to tremble. Bone drew two daggers. Laughknot tossed away her smoke and readied her saber. Dawnglass hefted a double-edged blade from his homeland he called a kaskara. Irilee raised her hands in wavelike gestures. And Jet, tail twitching, pulled from the belt-sheath that was his only attire what Gaunt remained sure was a letter opener.

Surely any sane, natural foe would surrender. But the shadows only continued to seethe, giving up no silhouettes, no certainties. Gaunt for her part carried the colorful bird, thinking.

Bone saw her expression. "What is it?"

He was learning to rely on her judgment, she thought. There was hope for him. "Something about the door nags at me. But more immediately, it's about those shadows. It's something familiar, when nothing should be. Indulge me a moment ..."

She found the metal box of crackers and pressed it past the ruined curtain. The bird released a storm of expletives in many languages.

Gaunt felt a little resistance at the edge of the box and withdrew.

The box-end was spattered with clear drops. Gaunt dabbed a finger and tasted salt.

"It's water," she said. "The tower, or at least this chamber, is still filled up with seawater, unnaturally prevented from spilling out."

"Irilee," Dawnglass said. "You retain some of your old powers. Can you explore this water, perhaps remove the spell?"

The former mermaid frowned at the darkness. "Perhaps, but I am wary. Gaunt, something about the door troubles you?"

Gaunt fed the bird another white cracker to forestall more imitated screams. "The opening reflects a mathematical pattern. One with coiling branches that lead to more coiling branches, on into intricate infinities. A 'fractal' pattern, wizards call it."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Laughknot said. "Unless you're the mason who has to make it."

"It's not bad of itself," Gaunt agreed, minding her fingers. "What troubles me is the way this fractal pattern was originally discovered. It's the result of graphing a particular formula for a large number of variables. A very, very large number of variables. One mathematician spending a lifetime on the problem would not suffice. But there were mathematician-sorcerers in old Nobeca who had the power to control minds. And a ready supply of slaves and prisoners."

Laughknot scowled. "You mean they had hordes of these poor people calculating this one problem? For years? Just to make a picture of it?"

"Galley slaves of the mind," Dawnglass rumbled.

"The practical implication," Gaunt said, "is that the Cult of Infinity included such mathematician-sorcerers. And thus also commanded mind-magic." She locked gazes with the captain. "And the evidence suggests the Jargos killed themselves."

There was for a time only the sound of the waves.

"I —" Dawnglass said, searching her face like a horizon.

"I smell gold!" Jetsam said.

"Where?" Dawnglass demanded, whirling.

"Beyond the curtain," said the rat-man, his nose deep in the doorway. "I could discern little at first, but gold in saltwater has a certain tang to it. My eyes aren't much to stuff a message in a bottle about. But you can trust in my nose."

Gaunt narrowed her eyes as the captain's expression grew thoughtful. She continued studying Dawnglass as she asked Jetsam, "I assumed the eyes of a rat were excellent, if you'll pardon my saying so."

"You would be wrong," said the rat, still sniffing, "if you'll pardon me as well." He seemed to drift into a reverie. "I gained many things the day I blundered into Quicksilver Midden in Archaeopolis, where the alchemists cast off their strange effluent. Height, bearing, thought. From your brethren I learned language. But my eyes are a rat's eyes yet. Think! Have you ever seen me act as 'lookout,' though I love the masts like brothers? Unless I see a thing close, it's a blur. Tell me of colors other than blue and green, and you sound deranged. Yet to speak of any of this, I must speak to your kind, usually, who see me as a freak, and never to rat-kind, who see me as a horror. I scamper alone, forever, yet I have my pride. And my avarice." He laughed. "Gold awaits us."

Gaunt prepared to make an appeal to his intellect, to retreat to sniff another day, when Laughknot also spoke in a dazed sort of way, staring up at the tower's grotesqueries. "You stand alone, Jet, and maybe didn't want to. I always dreamed of being alone."

She inhaled deep of new smoke-leaf. "I'm one of five daughters of a man who clubbed us for eating, breathing, and not being boys. And daughter of a woman who shaped us into husband bait. We lived on the Crumblequay of Tancimor and always wanted to scuttle up higher, like a pack of crabs in a net." She blew smoke at the sky. "Learned everything I could on the docks — lines, boats, weather, knife-work ..." The leaf trembled at an unspoken memory. "Here and there were sea-scum who'd treat women fair." She nodded at Dawnglass, who grunted. "I cast off. Nothing wrong with standing alone, Jet."

Gaunt studied the faces of her companions. They had an entranced look, like poets deep in the business of composition. Why was she unaffected?

"Yes, treasure," Dawnglass murmured, as if he'd heard no other word. He had nothing to say about his past. He had eyes only for the octopoid opening. "Something to show for our trouble."

"Trouble," Irilee whispered like one gasping for breath. "Troubled in mind since I left the wild depths for the sun, to walk these parched places among withered souls."

Something unnatural was at work in the pirates' minds, Gaunt was sure. It might be that her desire to depart that kept her mind safe — for now. She turned to Bone, but he was watching the horizon with a distracted air as though the wreckage of all his years bobbed out to sea. "Bone," she said, gripping his arm.

"Gaunt!" he gasped, returning to himself just as the emerald beam matched the northwesterly direction of his gaze. "A ship!"

The words broke the spell of reveries, if spell it was. They all scanned the waves beyond the sails of the anchored *Sea-Glare*, save for the carefully sniffing Jetsam, but no object appeared, only the shifting gateway to darkness.

"Bone is correct," said Irilee, shutting her eyes, "though you cannot see it now that the beam has moved on. I sense an otherworldly vessel approaching from the Darkling Weave, northwest relative to us. When they are close enough, the portal will admit them to our own seas. We must go, Dawnglass."

"Wait," began Jetsam, before something dark reached out from the shadowed wall of water and dragged him in by the nose.

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"JETSAM!" cried Laughknot, lunging to grab him. She failed, and something snared her leg. She shrieked. But the outburst affected her aim not at all; she slashed down with her saber, once, twice, on the third stroke toppling backward, free.

What clung to her leg, night-black and puckered, was the largest starfish arm Gaunt had ever seen.

"Polish my sword! Fix my vittles!" screeched the bright-plumed bird as Gaunt dropped its cage.

"Hurts," Laughknot groaned, while Gaunt wrenched the quivering thing off.

Bone and Irilee arrived, and before Dawnglass could finish saying, "Iri —" the once-mermaid had snatched Dawnglass' kas-kara and leapt inside, leaving saltwater droplets in her wake.

Bone knelt to lend Gaunt what aid he could. She was coming to expect that from him. She thought it a trait she could grow accustomed to. But such thoughts belonged aboard ship — the ship they should return to at once.

Yet not without their comrades. "Should we not hold our breaths and help Irilee?" she said.

Dawnglass looked coiled to do just that, but mastered himself. "It is her element. We'll likely get in the way." As if to convince himself he said, "She has confided in me. She has some sway over all waters. Creatures of the sea bend to her voice. But I think still greater is her courage. She is kind and brave and marvelous ..." He shook himself from daydreams. "How long, thief, until that ship reaches us?"

"It's hard to say," Bone replied. "I'm not a good judge of the size of iridescent mollusk-shell vessels. Even lit with dozens of red eldritch lanterns." He flung the torn starfish arm. "I will go out on a limb. Say twenty minutes." He paused for the sweeping beam. "Oh and there isn't one ship but three —"

Jetsam toppled from the twisted gateway, wide of eye and soaked of fur. After him surged an enormous dark starfish speckled with purple. They all yelped and dodged as it rolled downslope in a mass of briny spray. The chamber emptied like a flash flood and now Irilee stood cross-armed in drenched clothing and ankle-high water.

"I have broken the enchantment binding the water," she announced. "I have also torn the starfish from the compulsion of the pearl."

"Pearl?" Dawnglass managed to say, staring at her.

"I have sensed that the beating heart of the lighthouse is a black pearl at its crown. It is the source of the beam, and also of the mental emanations that caused the Jargos to destroy themselves. It affects us as well, raising old memories to the surface. I have not felt such emotions since the day my sisters tried to kill me for the crime of wishing to walk a ship's deck. Or before that, when I fell in love with the look of a ship's hull — when I was kissed by the idea of freedom and longed to kiss it in return." She coughed. "You see, I too am affected."

"I bless the day you came aboard," murmured Dawnglass.

Jetsam sputtered and raised a paw. "Don't mind me, ship-mates. I'm fit as a fiddlesplidget ready for the mizzenblitz."

"Mind your jargon," said Dawnglass, still looking at Irilee.

"Indubitably, Captain," Jetsam said as Bone helped the rat-man up. "But I have more to report. There is gold indeed in there, and more upstairs I suspect."

"Treasure," Dawnglass rumbled in his deep voice, scratching his beard and shaking free of daydreams. "But one treasure up there snares our minds."

"Surely we can resist for a short time, Captain," said Laughknot, and Bone and Jetsam nodded.

"We may be sterner stuff than the Jargos," cautioned Gaunt, "but the pearl may not have done its worst." Irilee nodded to that.

"Twenty minutes," Dawnglass murmured. "Five here, five to get back, five to make ready, five for safety."

"Safety?" Gaunt murmured. But they all followed him. She even brought the bird.

The once-opulent circular chamber stank more than a dishonest fish market. Indeed, a number of brightly colored fish flopped, their dying jewel-like flesh heaving at the treasure hunters' feet. Gaunt's eager eyes studied the chamber. Light blazed through the doorway, aided by crystalline windows murky as rheumy eyes. Under the accumulated seaweed and silt and less

identifiable muck she saw not the snug home of a reputable lighthouse keeper, but something akin to a temple. A cousin of the spiral shape of the door formed a black marble seal on the floor, covering a sun-mosaic so as to give the impression of an octopus-shaped eclipse. Two curved rows of stone benches formed a shallow U-shape around the seal, facing a tall altar wide enough for golden candelabras, golden cups, a golden statue, and a decidedly un-golden grey stone knife bristling with complex serrations. Some enchantment had kept these artifacts in place despite the waters' flow. There was one exception, a slender golden cup in the skeletal hand of a dead Jargo lying near the entrance, a match to the fellow in the fine robes at the wreck but with clothing rent and flesh picked clean, perhaps by the unnatural starfish.

Behind the altar a spiral staircase of green stone led upward into the darkness, while before it lay a short altar wide enough for a prone human form. It was made of the same green stone as the bulk of the lighthouse. If there had ever been blood upon the short altar, the sea had washed it clean. But as Gaunt wiped a mass of seaweed away she saw many nicks and slashes marring the stone.

Bone was studying the altar and side-eying the skeletal Jargo and advising the pirates not to seize the gold just yet. "Gaunt, could you lend your expertise?"

She set the birdcage down upon the short altar, causing the bird to swear again. "I lack experience with mathematical-sorcerous abominations."

"Glad to hear it, but you know something of Nobeca's language. Can you do anything with these glyphs? Perhaps they say something useful, like Help Yourself to the Gold."

She frowned at an inscription covering the tall altar, Bone beside her, while the others peered at other aspects of the room. She struggled not to stare at the statue, a raccoon-sized, octopoid thing which again captured the look of the coiling fractal shape, except that this one had a face upon a bulbous golden head, with a crooked mouth that looked like a jagged afterthought of hunger below a misshapen pair of eyes, one a tiny red ruby, another a swollen blot of black onyx, more a tumor than an organ. The onyx appeared to stare blankly; the ruby seemed to wink. After a minute she rubbed her forehead and said, "If you want a sure translation you do not want me frightened and pressed for time, squinting through sea-muck, with a bunch of impatient pirates at my elbow."

"But what does it say?"

She sighed. "You're in luck, Bone, if you want to call it luck. I couldn't confidently translate this inscription, but I recognize it. Variations of it have appeared in such occult works as the *Nominus Umbra*, the *Geisthammer*, and the *Pearlescent Corpse*."

"I haven't heard of all of those."

"Good," she said emphatically. "Alas, I've glimpsed some, had others quoted at me by the bards. I have a good memory. It is something like, 'To each man his shadow, to each world its darkling twin. Let each man know his darkness, let the infinite enter in.'"

"I suppose this isn't one of those cases where we can assume 'man' accords women and children some safety?"

She shook her head. "This is one of those nominally universal uses of the term. I don't think even Jetsam escapes this one."

"You don't recommend taking the gold."

"From the Jargo's account on the beach, I think our friend with the goblet over there triggered something, the lighthouse beam hitting the Jargo crew. Only instead of opening a portal, it made them destroy themselves."

"I take your point." Bone cleared his throat. "Captain, I think we'd best ..."

They looked around the chamber.

They were alone except for the bird.

"Where — are — they?" Gaunt said, her heart seeming to sink down to where the fish had all stopped thrashing.

Bone splashed to the doorway, frowning out. "Not out there, I think." He turned to the spiral staircase.

"Irilee's black pearl," Gaunt said. "It must have influenced them."

"And us." Bone stamped a foot, spattering water over the protesting bird. "You were focused on the inscription but there's no reason I should have been so unaware."

"How many minutes has it been?"

"Five, surely. We should flee."

"Quite aside from the ethics of it, Bone, how will the crew react?"

"Damn."

"Damn!" said the bird. "*Bloody hell!*"

"Shut up," Bone said.

"*Will nothing shut up the bird?*" squawked the bird. "*Will nothing shut up the bird? Damn! Bloody hell!*"

"I'd say we were already in hell," Gaunt answered it, "if the Darkling Weave weren't so close at hand."

"All right, all right," Bone said, rubbing his hands. "What say we take five minutes for rescue, then no matter what we take our chances with an angry crew?"

"Agreed. We are faster than most."

"Leave the bird."

"Right."

Bone led the way up the spiraling stairway of green, slimy stone. Each of them bore a dagger and a desperate look.

The stairway rose through the ceiling into a second chamber. The stairs continued up, and this room seemed empty, dimly lit by more of the murky crystal windows. The space smelled dusty and dry, and Gaunt wondered if the water below had served as a filter, for the air felt bearable, albeit stale. Opulence was replaced with a simple wooden bed, larder, desk, and some scrolls in a trellis-like shelf. No occupant appeared.

"This doesn't feel like a place abandoned for centuries," Gaunt observed.

"No," Bone muttered.

The upward way was barred with a wooden trapdoor, the spiraling symbol burned into the bottom. A keyhole gaped where the tentacled thing's big eye would be.

Bone shoved with no result. He pounded on the wood. "Dawn-glass! Irilee! Jetsam! Laughknot! Shore leave's over!"

Gaunt jumped down and ransacked the chamber for a key.

Bone produced the tools of his trade and fussed with picks, hooks, and skeleton keys. "Stuck with muck or magic," Bone muttered. "A key's our best hope." He joined her, and they overturned the desk, rummaged the scroll shelf, sliced at the cot.

"What if the pirates found a key," Gaunt said, still hunting, "and took it with them?"

"Damn everything!" Bone snapped.

From below they heard a squawk. "Bloody hell!"

"And damn that parrot!"

"It's not a parrot, you fool," crooned the bird. "It's a *Plumed Witness from jungled Kpalamaa. They use them to record transactions and proclamations and secrets, that sort of thing.*"

They froze. Gaunt turned to stare at Bone.

In a slightly different voice, the bird went on, "*But it just feeds things back to you in a jumbled mess.*" Returning to the first voice it said, "*Not if you have the right incentive. Special crackers coded to certain blocks of information.*"

Gaunt gasped. She pulled out the metal box, looked at Bone.

"Go," he said. "We deserve some luck. I'll keep at it. I'm a thief," he said with a hint of giggle. "I'm supposed to be good with locks and keys."

Gaunt willed herself to take the stairs at a slow pace. Slipping and killing herself now was no way for a poet to die. At worst it had to be consumption. Frostbite maybe. Possibly drowning. She could not help looking at the bird however —

— and discovering the misshapen golden statue had moved to the smaller altar.

It was as animate as a gold-painted octopus, jabbing the bigger altar's serrated knife between the bars of the bird cage. The bird squawked and cursed and ducked and weaved.

Gaunt froze. She must have awakened the statue by placing a living offering on the smaller altar. She re-drew her own dagger, recalled numerous lessons with Bone, and threw.

The blade flew mostly true. It missed the statue but it hit the top of the bird cage and with a clang-splash the cage toppled onto its side into the ankle-deep water, making the Plumed Witness inside it swear. The golden blasphemy evidently preferred human victims, for it noticed Gaunt and eagerly splashed her way.

Something stubborn in her refused to call for Bone's help. In any case he needed to find the key. As the mathematical nightmare stalked up the steps she considered the physics of jumping across to the large altar. In other circumstances she'd have considered this an unwise act, but the temple already seemed to be doing its worst.

She waited until almost the last second and jumped. She nearly fell off the big altar onto the watery floor but recovered her balance, scattering candelabras and cups. One goblet remained, big as the main communion vessel of a Swan church. Staring at it plunged her backward into memory.

She recalled her mother dragging her by the hand into the church sanctuary to drink from the communion cup when Persimmon longed to linger in the graveyard, inventing stories about the people commemorated on the markers. Her first handcrafted book, Gaunt River Anthology, had begun with her reimagining everyone in that graveyard as a chatty ghost. Mother had thrown the book into the namesake river after it caused a commotion among the parishioners. Persimmon had never forgiven that.

But she also remembered Mother giving her cups of medicine when she was feverish, or cups of cider on hot days, or cups of strawberries with cream on top. She remembered Mother, a bloody-minded patriot who demanded death for rebels, foreign-

ers, and cowards, carefully removing spiders from the house with cups. We don't kill if we don't have to, love, she would say. The spiders have their work, just as we.

She was lost in those days for a long moment, until she remembered another voice saying, I have sensed that the beating heart of the lighthouse is a black pearl at its crown ... It affects us as well, raising old memories to the surface.

Gaunt bit her lip to fight the reverie. Whatever protection she'd had at first was weakening. Meanwhile the golden nightmare hurried down the stairs, making dainty murderous splashes. Gaunt hefted the sinister goblet in one hand, drawing her remaining dagger with the other, and pounced.

She misjudged. The goblet splashed down and missed, even as the serrated grey knife in the statue's tentacles slashed. Her left leg seemed aflame, but the cut was shallow. Blood trailing through the water, Gaunt found new strength and caught the statue like a spider. It struggled but she slammed her full weight against the goblet. The dagger was halfway out, so she couldn't seal the rim to the floor.

"Gaunt!" Bone called, starting down the stairs. "I think the key may be the dagger on the — what?"

"Help me!" she called. There, she thought, I am indeed a grown enough person to ask for help.

Bone added his weight, and this allowed Gaunt to kick the dagger free. He said, "The statue, I assume?"

"Yes. I've come to a conclusion, Bone. I think more people should take my advice."

"Agreed. What do you advise now?"

"Get that smaller altar. We're going to make it useful."

Together they pinned the goblet under the sacrificial altar's weight. The captured blasphemy skittered futilely against the metal.

"We've spent five minutes already," Gaunt said.

"I'm feeling irrationally stubborn," Bone said.

"I as well. Try your hunch with the dagger. I want to investigate the bird."

The bird was wet and wrathful. When they reached the dry second chamber, she fed it a blue cracker. It squawked, "*The code phrase for the jeweled lock to the Tower of the Antelope in Kpalamaa is gold-sapphire-garnet-silver-silver-amber-gold.*"

"Good to know," Bone murmured as he fiddled with the dagger overhead.

"Ah ha!" Gaunt said. "Each cracker reveals a message."

"*Pus! Shit!*" squawked the bird.

"Yes, yes, you can have another cracker." She tried a green.

The bird sing-songed, "*The bird has not yet been conditioned for this cracker.*"

She tried a purple. The bird advised, "*And this it says in the Nominus Umbra: To raise the Dark Beacon, one must sacrifice a sapient being in the waters above. One must draw the Spiral that Approaches Infinity in the sacrifice's blood. If the sapient being lacks blood, draw the Spiral in whatever marrow, water, sap, dust, or essential salts the sacrifice yields. Should the Dark Beacon rise, make haste to make room.*"

"I want to bring the Jargos back," Gaunt said, "to punish them some more."

"I want one of these birds," Bone said. He'd inserted the blade into the lock. It turned, the serrations evidently acting as key

teeth. "On your guard," he said. He pushed the panel up. The stairway led up most of the tower's height under the eyes of barnacled windows. Far overhead, green light twisted beyond a second, opened trap door.

Sounds descended as well, those of clattering blades.

Gaunt remembered dead voyagers on the rocks, and said, "Move, Bone. Help them. I will ascend more slowly as I try to glean more from the bird."

"Agreed." He scampered up with his enviable balance. She followed at a more deliberate pace. At least these steps were dry and dusty, not slick with slime. She fed the bird a yellow cracker.

It said, *"The son of the third caliph of Mirabad is being raised on the Isle of Mazes in the Spiral Sea in a bid to supplant the fourth caliph, who was chosen by acclimation and not by blood. He may be found on the estate of his host Decimus the Artificer, in the catacombs accessible from the beach. Beware! He is well guarded."*

"You are a valuable bird," Gaunt murmured.

"Bloody hell!" it answered.

"Hold on." She reached a relatively clear window and the view was ominous. *Sea-Glare's* crew readied sail, and Gaunt could hardly blame them, for as the lighthouse beam swept over the trireme, seven mollusk ships were revealed, drawing near the interface between the Earthe and the Darkling Weave. Each of the strange iridescent vessels loomed twice as large as their own. Glowing lambent things that at times recalled slugs, at other times beetles, and most rarely men, writhed upon the alien vessels' decks, bearing strange spears that flanged at the ends like wind-tossed thistles or grasping anemones. Storm clouds neared as though the weather rebelled against this invasion.

"Hurry," she told herself and Bone. She saw him slip into the chamber above. She fed the bird a red cracker.

"The bird has not yet been conditioned for this cracker," said the bird. She groaned.

Someone fell through the trap door, tumbling toward her. Gaunt's reflexes must be improving. The cut on her leg — she prayed it wouldn't be infected — didn't slow her, and indeed pain kept her alert. She set the cage down and saved the fallen pirate from rolling off the stairs.

It was Laughknot. She had, to all appearances, stabbed herself in the side with a tightly-clenched saber.

"Mama," she murmured, "Papa. Forgive me. I was a bad girl, going to sea."

"Damn that bird!" said the bird.

"Laughknot, stay with me," Gaunt said. She removed her own surcoat and tied it tight around the pirate's middle. "You are a mighty mariner and I admire you, and your Mama and Papa can go sail off the edge of the world. We have to help the others. I will write you fame in song."

Laughknot's eyes lost their sea-haze. She sat up. "Gaunt. Yes. Song."

"Yes, yes, you can have another cracker," sang the bird in an avian approximation of Gaunt's voice.

"Shut up, bird," Gaunt said. "Here, have the orange one — ouch!"

The bird had nipped her in its haste to gobble another cracker. It squawked, *"And this it says in the Nominus Umbra: To quell the Dark Beacon, proceed to the apex and say unto the*

Keeper, 'The time is not now,' in a clear voice that does not waver. Make haste to leave the island if you do not wish to dwell there forever."

"The time is not now," murmured Laughknot, getting to her feet.

"The time is not now," Gaunt agreed. "Bird, guard the stairway." They strode upward.

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WHAT Gaunt beheld at the top was less a battle than a war of wills.

Standing before an immense black sphere — a pearl wreathed in green energy like a sickly lightning-storm — was a cadaverous white man in black silk robes, embroidered with a bit of gold leaf representing the sun. A stretch of the black fabric formed a spiraling tentacle that seemed to engulf the failing star. The man was bald; tattooed on his head was a similar design.

He wielded nothing but a hawkish bearing and a smirk.

Yet he was winning the battle. Bloody-furred Jetsam shuddered against the wall, struggling not to stab himself in the eye, accepting body blows as a consequence. Captain Dawnglass' sword lay at his feet and he gazed out the crystal at his ship, hands trembling upon the dome. Irilee had fallen, her skin gone translucent, her body roiling and twisting, at times as though caught in a current, at times as though it were a current.

Only Imago Bone still struggled to reach the smiling man, daggers out and taking halting steps forward and back like a sleepwalker in a half-remembered dance, muttering to himself, "Not evil ... not truly ... deserve to live ..."

"Ah, a new sacrifice," the man greeted Gaunt in the tongue of her homeland. "As Keeper I've waited so many years for visitors, and now two ships of fools!"

"How could you survive?" Gaunt couldn't help but exclaim, in wonder and horror.

"The Dark Spiral is generous. It empowers this pearl that rends space and mind — and steals life energy and bestows it upon me. The Spiral brings power to those who embrace its infinite depths. Who see that the mathematics of deep reality prescribes pain. That all safety is but a passing illusion. But to the weak and sentimental it brings madness. You, I think, are another disillusioned dreamer. You've abandoned family, schoolmates, lovers, friends, all in quest of a mirage. You think you face a choice now between shimmering words among poets or blazing deeds beside rogues. Both are vanity, Persimmon Gaunt! Let the folly of it all come crashing over you, like waves over a drowning woman."

And it did.

She remembered her mother screaming at her about dirty clothes, dirty hands, and dirty hair. She remembered becoming clean and neat, and calm returning for a week — before her mother screamed about clothing that didn't match. After each accommodation came brief peace, then more condemnation. Persimmon wasn't interested in boys enough. Persimmon was too interested in boys. Persimmon wasn't friendly enough with girls. Persimmon's friendships with girls were too intense for Mother's comfort. Persimmon was too dreamy. Persimmon had no care for what people thought. Persimmon was too kind to

commoners. Persimmon was too brash with gentry. Persimmon, Persimmon, Persimmon. And Father, her friend in her tomboy days, Father stayed away, never spoke up for her, even though in some respects he'd set her on this path by treating her like a son.

Persimmon, Persimmon, Persimmon, what shall we do with you?

We shall drown you, Persimmon had answered herself once, high over County Gaunt's eponymous river, looking down at its rocky rush amid daisy-filled meadows and boulders that seemed to bleed green. One jump, she thought. One jump and it was dash your brains or flood your lungs. Gone down the river like Narcissa in the tragedy of mad Lord Wolfsbane. One jump. That was the compelling thought. One jump could free her of all screaming and indifference. One irrevocable action.

She'd backed away from the edge, and ultimately escaped by going to the bards. But how could she back away now? Now there was no edge to the land, but there was an edge to her dagger, and the bards had taught where to stab. For if a thing was known in Swanisle the bards taught it.

"Yes, fail," the man said, "as your comrades are failing."

Beside her Laughknot was once again turning her saber against herself. This time the point angled toward her throat.

Gaunt raised the dagger toward her own in mimicry.

But she heard Bone say, "Yes ... my life is nothing ... a mistake ever since I abandoned the fishing village ... that was my first death ... this shall be my second." And he turned two daggers toward his own heart, one his trusted friend, the other the serrated blade from below.

"No!" she cried, for Bone's despair momentarily opened a doorway from hers.

Though she seemed sealed to the floor as if by an invisible crust of barnacles, she managed to throw her own dagger. Again it flew mostly true and bit the Keeper's leg.

Tit for tat, she thought. The strength of the despair eased. It was still there, clutching her like a wash of tidewater, but more at her waist than her throat. The others gained new strength. Laughknot and Jetsam flung away their weapons. Dawnglass turned and made to rush at the Keeper; he was flung back by some convulsion of his muscles and rolled beside Irilee instead. She was regaining her shape and usual color. "The ship," she said, rising up and offering a hand.

"The ship is doomed," Dawnglass said, taking it. "But I will doom this man with us."

"Unlikely," said the Keeper, in Roil now. "You are all sickly degenerates. Descendants of lesser races who dwelled in huts and caves when we built this lighthouse. You pose no threat to anything but yourselves. But you amuse me greatly with your struggles —"

"The time is not now," Gaunt murmured.

"What was that?" the Keeper snapped.

"The time is not now," Gaunt managed. But she could not say it with any conviction, imagining her mother, her bardic classmates, her poetic rivals, all sneering. Her dagger turned toward her heart.

Then Bone's hands took hers. He held no weapons anymore, and he pried hers from her grip, helped her let go. The sting of memory went with it. "The time is not now," he repeated, struggling with the syllables.

"The time is not now," she said with more courage.

"The time is not now," Bone said along with her. It seemed he knew a formal chant when he heard one.

The Keeper recoiled.

In that moment, as the despair of the pearl receded like the tide, Laughknot staggered weaponless over to the Keeper and jabbed her lit tobacco into his eye.

He howled, and Laughknot laughed, and at the Keeper's desperate gesture the green beam was directed inward at the chamber.

The green beam intensified and blasted through the Keeper, who stood unharmed by it, even as he clutched his face. But Laughknot, hit with its full force, crumpled like a stringless puppet.

The blast chilled Gaunt and dazzled her eyes and she and Bone toppled. She heard the others cry out as well. Their life energies, perhaps owing to greater distance from the pearl, had not been snuffed out. But none could effectively find the Keeper.

Except Jetsam. She heard the rat-man snuffle, needing no eyes to seek his target. She heard him tackle the Keeper onto the black pearl, whence the green lightnings found them both.

"The time is not now!" Gaunt and Bone chanted, clutching each others' hands.

"The time is not now!" came the voices of Dawnglass and Irilee.

And there came the Keeper's withered voice, surrendering. "The time is not now ..."

The green light faded. Through the blur of her returning vision, Gaunt found her way to Laughknot's side. The brave pirate was cold, her pulse fading. Gaunt leaned close to Laughknot and heard the whisper, "Proved 'em all wrong, my people."

"You always had," Gaunt said, hugging the woman to her. When she let go, Laughknot was dead, claimed by the power of the terrible pearl.

Bone had freed Jetsam from the now-dimming pearl. "All going cold," said the rat-man in the thief's arms.

Bone said, "You're the mightiest to come out of Quicksilver Midden, or Archaeopolis, or the whole ocean, rat or man." He added, "Buckle the quizzlegibbet and may the whipporwinds speed you to your rest."

"That doesn't mean anything," said Jetsam, and said no more.

The tower shook.

"The pearl sustains me," the Keeper rasped, from where Gaunt could just perceive his strangely-bent form arcing over the black pearl, "with the energy already captured. I shall linger until the time is right. But you will all be trapped with me, or else drown. There is no other fate for you."

"They will live," Irilee said, rising, "and laugh, and josh, and die, and know all the tang and savor of living ocean and living blood. While you dwell here, an empty man dreaming of the Darkling Weave. Come, my friends."

They followed her downstairs. Gaunt snatched up the birdcage, and the bird swore at her for her trouble. She hated leaving Laughknot and Jetsam, and she wasn't about to abandon this living thing.

As they entered the dripping temple, Gaunt said, "This island will sink again, creating a gigantic undertow. Even if we escape the tower ..."

"I know," said Irilee.

"Careful," Bone said. "Under that goblet is an animate —"

"I know," said Irilee, and ripped the sacrificial altar from the goblet, toppling the vessel over. The golden grotesquerie leaped up, arms quivering.

"Listen to me," Irilee said. "I know you understand me. The power of the pearl overhead kept me from fully sensing the pearl inside you. My former people knew of such pearls, formed within the Dreaming Ammonites of the Coldfire Abyss, they who protect the oceans and the world from nightmares beyond our space and time. Sometimes such nightmares are absorbed by the Ammonites and shaped into a pearl. Foolish sorcerers prize them. My people tread more cautiously, but we have stories. I know you are already bound to service, statue, but nod if you understand."

The island rumbled and shook. The hideous thing nodded.

"I know the black pearl in you is the linchpin of the spell that sealed this temple. You lack the power now to put it back, and your Keeper is undying but will decompose in the water until he is but useless sapient muck. Thus you will fail in your duty unless the seal is repaired. I have the power to restore the water and your spell. You in return will create a pocket of air around my friends so they may survive the undertow. You will swear to do this in the name of the Witch of Angles, for I am the Gyrekin Irilee of Thessalonike who bears her mark. Nod if you swear."

The thing nodded.

Irilee raised her arms and screamed in her exertion. Even as waves rushed over the sinking island and inundated the lighthouse's hill, she caused a tendril of that water to blast into the temple, knocking all her comrades aside and filling it with the sea.

"Go!" Irilee told them.

Gaunt, Bone, and Dawnglass staggered free of the lighthouse as the island sank below the waters, recapitulating the fate of lost Nobeca. As Gaunt had predicted they couldn't remain on the surface, for the islet's subsidence birthed a suction yanking them down.

And yet Gaunt breathed. A golden glow surrounded her and she plunged deep. She clutched the birdcage tightly but lost it in the undertow. The wreckage of the dromon almost impaled her, as it shared the island's doom.

Far below she caught glimpses of ship after ship, argosies of fanciful design from civilizations she'd barely heard of or wholly unknown to her, all together in the same undersea graveyard. This scene had been enacted again and again, and yet the world had escaped the shadow, so far. Just as she had escaped her own personal shadow. So far.

I will remember you, O ships, she thought, as I will remember Laughknot and Jetsam. It was not your fault, O vessels, you were steered by the dreams of evil folk. Perhaps I can offend your crews' ghosts if I tell bright tales of you, like flowers in a church graveyard. I accept the danger of glimpsing you and returning to the light. For I am one who both accepts risk and runs away from it. I was wrong to think it a choice. It is a dance.

Perhaps, she thought as the last ship faded, it was her dance with darkness that had allowed her to resist the pearl as well as she had. She recalled that Bone had also resisted, and wondered if in the long run her personal demons and his could find a truce.

After a cold timeless time she returned sputtering to the light, glow fading. She spotted Bone and swam to him.

"Irilee did it," she said, laughing at the amazement of surviving the journey to the lighthouse. "She saved us."

"You saved us," he said, meeting her eyes. "Back at the pearl."

"We all did. Even those who didn't make it back. Poor Laughknot and Jetsam. And the bird."

"Wait. Look!"

Sea-Glare rowed near, the only ship on a bright, cloudless, moonless sea. Dawnglass was pointing their way, and Irilee was waving a birdcage at them. When they got aboard Dawnglass was praising the crew's cowardice in getting their distance in time to avoid the undertow.

Gaunt took the birdcage from Irilee, who said, "We all agree the bird is yours."

"Good," Gaunt said. "I say she deserves freedom."

Dawnglass frowned. "You know the gender?"

"Are you going to check?"

He laughed and pounded her gently on the back, which smarted a bit. She laughed too, just because. But the captain sighed, then. "No loot. We lost good crew for nothing."

"We drove off a great evil," Gaunt reminded him.

Dawnglass nodded gravely.

Bone tossed a set of golden goblets and candelabras at Dawnglass' feet. "You're welcome," he said to the astonished pirate. "We expect a cut when you liquidate these in Archaeopolis of course."

"Of course."

"Bone!" Gaunt said. "That was foolish. The gold weighed you down. And look what happened to the Jargos."

"Ah, but gold's not as heavy as many a treasure. And the curse was the effect of the pearl, which we defeated."

She mimed strangling him and said, "It was still foolish! You will always take my advice in the future!"

"Usually," he said agreeably, without quite exactly agreeing, "taking your advice is conducive to having a future. And not just because I fear your wrath, Persimmon Gaunt."

"Impossible," she muttered. She fished out the tin of crackers, all waterlogged, and when she opened the cage she fed the bird the only color she hadn't tried, an indigo. "One day, Imago Bone," she said as it chewed, "the universe will send you a warning that knowledge and camaraderie and travel are the real treasure, not gold and jewels. And I hope I am there to see it."

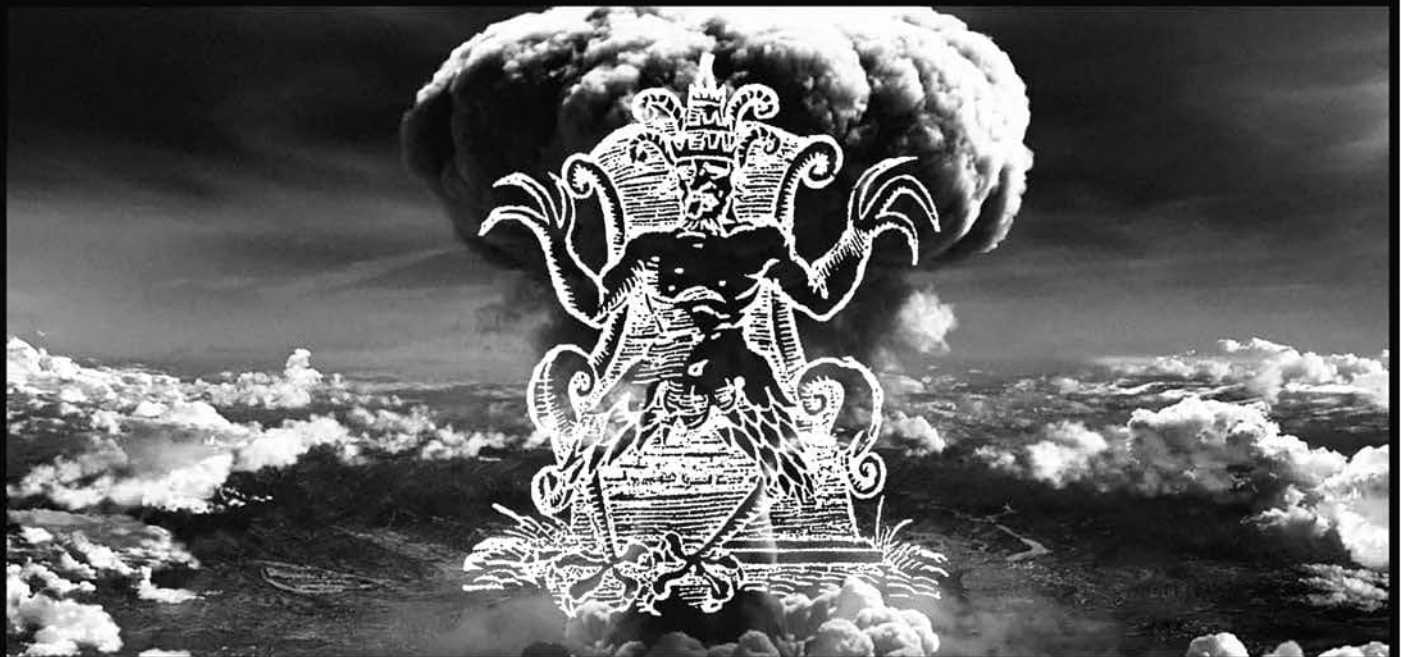
After cursing in delight, the bird said, "*This message may not be overwritten; if found, then for a princely reward, present this bird to the Ghana of Kpalamaa*," before beating its brilliant prismatic wings far out over the sparkling sea.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This story was originally drafted at the Rainforest Writers Village, an annual retreat at Lake Quinalt in Washington State. Chris' work has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Light-speed*, *Strange Horizons*, and here in the domain of the mighty Skull. His books include the Gaunt and Bone novel *The Scroll of Years* and its sequels. A librarian by trade, though the kind that guards the Guinness World Record books rather than the *Necronomicon*, Chris lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his family.

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HEAD HAUNTER

From the Tales of Shintaro Oba

By C. L. WERNER

A CHILL wind whistled through the narrow street, sending fallen leaves dancing into the darkness. The autumn moon stared down from the overcast sky, struggling to pierce the grey clouds drifting across its face. From the arched roof of a potter's shop, an owl hooted. A black cat slipped around the corner of a weaver's hut, the dripping husk of a large spider clenched between its fangs. Bats fluttered around the lanterns that illuminated the lane, snatching the moths drawn to the light.

The samurai shifted the armour he carried in a bundle slung over his back. He'd hoped to reach the village of Yukari-do long before nightfall, but had been delayed by a washed out bridge. Now it seemed as if the place was making an extra effort to make him feel uneasy. He smiled at the thought. It would need more than such creepy overtures to disturb a man whose sole purpose in life was to hunt demons.

Shintaro Oba kept one hand on the carved grip of the longer of the swords he wore. He'd made the journey to Yukari-do because a traveller claimed the village was plagued by a demon. Details were scant, but the man said he could find out more by visiting The Blissful Ox, Yukari-do's only inn. Oba had been tempted to ignore so sketchy a story, but the village was only a few hours from the town where he'd recently vanquished the savage oni Yagihebi. It would cost him little to take a look and there was just a chance he might be able to free the inhabitants from a fiendish monster.

Paper lanterns flanked the bamboo sign that proclaimed a large, rambling structure as The Blissful Ox. Oba should have guessed it was the right place even without the sign. In a village like Yukari-do, the biggest buildings were always the inn and the storehouse, and he'd already passed the former. Laughter and the melody of a shamisen greeted the samurai as he walked to the main door and pushed it aside. Within he found a large common room with several rough-clad farmers sitting around a few low tables drinking sake. A little wooden platform provided a stage for the young woman plucking at the shamisen. A counter of lacquered bamboo ran along one wall, behind which an older woman was preparing a tray with cups and bottles to replenish those already being used by the patrons.

The moment he stepped inside, every eye turned to Oba. The laughter faltered and conversation among the farmers faded. The musician continued to play, but a troubled expression flashed across her powdered face. The old woman gave him a wary look before emerging from behind the counter.

Oba was accustomed to such reactions. The common folk regarded samurai at the best of times with a mixture of frightened respect and smoldering resentment. They depended on samurai to protect them from bandits and other threats, but that dependence came at a price. Samurai expected complete deference from the commoners and often would abuse those who failed to show them proper respect. As he felt their eyes studying him, Oba knew the farmers were trying to gauge whether he was in the service of their daimyo or some other clan, or if he was a masterless ronin to whom they owed no submission. Though a ronin was technically still of a higher caste and could do as he liked, he would quickly be brought to task by the lord who governed Yukari-do if he were to abuse the daimyo's subjects.

Oba made a slight bow to the farmers, not so low as to pay them undue respect but neither so slight that they would take it as a gesture of insult and arrogance. It was enough to appease their worries and the men slowly resumed the conversations his arrival had interrupted.

The samurai shifted the bundled armour and walked over to the counter. He caught at the old woman's sleeve as she started to pass him. "I would thank you for some sake. I've travelled far and the night is cold."

The patroness gave him a closer scrutiny, her gaze lingering on the swords he wore. She set the tray down and stepped back behind the counter. After a moment, she set a small bottle and a clay cup before Oba. When he reached into his kimono to get his money, she waved him aside. "No need for that. It's already been paid."

"How is that?" Oba looked around, suspicion in his eyes.

"You were expected," she answered, nodding at the swords he wore. "I was told to watch for a samurai bearing a sword with a hilt of bone." She gave Oba a brief smile. "Truthfully, I am relieved that you've come. I don't want *it* in my backroom any more."

Oba shook his head. The innkeeper's words were only deepening the mystery rather than revealing it. "We get ahead of ourselves," he said. "First, who is it that told you to expect me?"

"Your friend," the woman said. She lifted her eyes and stared at the ceiling. "The priest. He's taken a room upstairs." Now it was her face that showed traces of suspicion. "He is your friend, isn't he?"

The samurai took a sip of his drink. "I'll know that when I see him." He motioned for the innkeeper to lead him up to the room.

The Blissful Ox only had three guest rooms and the one occupied by the mysterious priest was at the end of the narrow hall. As soon as the proprietress pointed out the room to him, Oba told her she could go. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he was certain she'd been told something other than the truth. His "friend" might prove to be quite different. An agent of the Shogun or some bounty hunter seeking the price on his head. Or it could be a minion of the demon he was looking for. Many among that infernal breed were cunning enough to use mortals as their pawns. A man who hunted demons always had to bear in mind that they were also hunting him.

Oba set down his armour and drew his uchigatana before he reached for the door. The long sword was an ancient heirloom of the now destroyed Sekigahara Clan, a blade endowed with enchantments that made it lethal to demons. Koumakiri was also quite fatal to mortals who provoked the samurai who carried it. Man or demon, Oba was prepared for whoever waited in the room.

The door slid back and Oba found himself gazing down at a plump priest with a shaven head. He was sitting on the floor, a candle burning beside him and a bowl of rice set before him. When he saw the samurai, eagerness drew his face into a broad smile.

"Oba-san! My messenger found you!" the priest beamed.

Oba stepped inside and slammed the door closed behind him. There was fire in his eyes. The priest was no stranger, but neither was he anyone the samurai would call friend. "Takuji." The name dripped off Oba's tongue as though it were poison. "I told you when we parted ways in Blackbriar that you'd be wise not to cross my path again." When he moved towards the priest, Takuji scrambled back, his hands raised in appeal.

"I ... I wouldn't have ... have sent for you if the need weren't dire," Takuji whined. His gaze was fixed on Koumakiri's gleaming edge.

"There are simpler ways to commit seppuku," Oba snarled at the priest.

Takuji managed to find some measure of courage and tear his eyes away from the uchigatana's menace. "Hear what I have to say," he told Oba. "I think you owe me that much. I saved your life, after all."

"And I spared yours," Oba snarled back at him. Just the same, he motioned for Takuji to continue. "The man you sent to find me said a demon was prowling Yukari-do." He arched an eyebrow. "He didn't say anything about you being here."

"Would you have come?" Takuji prodded him. "Of course not. Any mention of me and you'd never have come here." He bowed his head and averted his gaze. "This village is in grave peril, Oba-san, and you're the only one I know who is brave enough to save it."

"I've been in many villages threatened by demons," Oba retorted. "These people didn't strike me as living in fear of a monster in their midst."

Takuji nodded. "That's because they're unaware of their peril ... so far. The thing that must soon prey on them has so far only taken a few chickens and a goat. But it will eventually claim human victims. One night, it will do that."

Oba noted the guilt that tinged Takuji's tone. "What have you done? What sort of demon have you set loose this time?"

The priest stiffened at the accusation. "I've brought nothing to Yukari-do that wasn't already here," he protested. His voice dropped to an anxious whisper. "And it isn't a demon, but a ghost that menaces this village."

Oba scowled at Takuji and held his sword so that the priest had a good view of it. "Koumakiri is enchanted against demons. It has no power against ghosts."

Takuji grovelled at the samurai's feet. "Please, Oba-san, you're the only one who can help these people before it is too late! Help me undo the evil I've unwittingly brought on them!"

The samurai returned his sword to its scabbard. "What have you done, Takuji? What is it you've set against this village?"

The priest looked up, tears in his eyes. "Believe me, Oba-san, I didn't expect things to go so wrong! My intention was only to honour the final request of a brewer who recently died. He was an old man and wanted his ashes interred beside those of his wife, who'd preceded him by several decades." Takuji paused and gestured at the window. "Yukari-do has not used its old cemetery for twenty years, ever since it became haunted by a kubikajiri."

"What manner of spirit is that?" Oba wondered. He knew many of the types of demons that stalked Mu-Thulan, but his knowledge of ghosts and phantoms was limited.

"The kubikajiri is a headless spectre that devours the heads of others while it searches for its own." Takuji paused and tried to repress the shudder that ran through him. "I've seen it kill. A sickening sight. It sets upon its victim with clawed hands and rips the head from their shoulders. Then it presses the decapitated head to the stump of its neck and its body draws it down as though the stump were some horrible mouth." His fingers ran through the prayer beads hanging around his neck. "It was all I could do to keep from fleeing the village after watching the kubikajiri kill."

Oba paced the little room, mulling over the priest's tale. "The ghost no longer stays in the old cemetery does it?" He waved aside Takuji's effort to explain. "I can tell from your guilty tone that you did something to rouse its ire. For twenty years it has haunted the old cemetery and kept itself there. The villagers were content to leave it alone and bury their dead elsewhere. That is, until you came along."

"All that you say is true," Takuji confessed. "I thought I could carry out the brewer's final wish and bury him beside his wife. But my efforts to exorcise the kubikajiri only made things worse. It doesn't stay in the cemetery now, but each night roves the village and kills the first living thing it finds. It will only be a matter of time before it takes human victims." He fixed Oba with an imploring gaze. "Unless you help me lay the ghost to rest."

The samurai pressed his hand against Koumakiri's grip. "I've told you already, my sword has no power over ghosts."

A desperate eagerness returned to Takuji's visage. "You wouldn't have to fight the kubikajiri," the priest hastily said. "I know how the ghost can be exorcised, but I need a brave warrior to help me." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I can't risk taking someone I'm uncertain of into that cemetery."

Oba was silent, his expression unreadable. He thought over everything Takuji had said and added it to his previous experience with the priest. Takuji was a greedy, conniving man, a disgrace to those who acted as intermediaries between the Yamajin and their gods. Whatever had happened, Oba was certain it wasn't some sudden altruism on Takuji's part that had spurred the crisis. Then he considered what the innkeeper had said about getting 'it' out of her storeroom.

"You weren't able to bury the brewer, were you?" Oba challenged Takuji. His mind raced as he started fitting pieces together. "The villagers know the old cemetery is haunted, that's why they bury their dead in a new one. Yukari-do would never have permitted a burial in the old one because of the ghost. What happened, Takuji? Did the brewer pay you to bury him in secret?"

The jab struck true. Takuji clapped his hands together and pulled at his fingers. "Alright, yes, that is what happened. The brewer left the village when he took ill. No one knows he died except the innkeeper, who I had to take into my confidence." His tone became desperate when Oba turned to leave. "Please! I may have been motivated by money, but the danger to the village is very real! You have to help, if not for me, then for the people who will be killed by the kubikajiri."

Oba stopped, his hand resting on the door. Takuji had caused all of this, but the priest was trying to set things right. It would weigh on the samurai's own honour if he left now.

Grim-faced, Oba turned back. "Alright, Takuji. Let's hear your plan."

• • •

YUKARI-DO'S old cemetery was situated in a field several hundred yards from the village mill and near the edge of a grove of gnarled pine trees. The air was cold and the moon continued to struggle to pierce the clouds. The wind set the stalks of wheat swaying and filled the night with the sound of their sighing. Weird shadows flitted about the stone plinths that marked the graves. Row after row of waist-high carvings had been weathered and worn by the elements until some were merely a crumbled residue of rubble. A decayed torii denoted the extent of the burial ground, the gate's mantle splintered and cracked, its paint chipped and faded. Everything about the place bespoke long neglect. It was clear the villagers shunned the place and had done so for a long time.

"You should have heeded the superstitions of the people and left this place alone," Oba said as they walked towards the cemetery. Takuji followed after the samurai. With him was a man from

the village, a roustabout whose need for money had overcome his dread of the graveyard. The villager carried the massive urn the innkeeper was so eager to get away from her establishment, the remains of the old brewer.

"I'd already made my promise to the brewer before I knew about the kubikajiri," Takuji said. Oba doubted there was validity in the statement. The priest wouldn't have made the trip to Yukari-do unless he was being paid well and he was cagey enough to inquire as to why he was being paid well.

The samurai stopped outside the gate, his eyes roving across the graves. There was a cold inside him that owed naught to the night chill. Oba was fearless against men, beasts, monsters, and demons. These were things he could fight. A ghost was something different. The armour he'd donned would be no protection against a murderous spirit and his swords would offer no hurt to such a wraith. He glanced at the curious parcel Takuji had given him and wondered once more if the priest's scheme would work.

Takuji came up beside the samurai, visibly disturbed that he'd stopped. "We must not falter," he insisted. "The ghost will appear at midnight and seek a victim."

"And I'm to be that victim," Oba reminded him. "You speak lightly on the subject considering it isn't your head at risk."

"I explained already," Takuji said. "I must be free to offer prayers to the Dominance or my plan won't work." He bowed to the samurai. "Please, you must trust me."

Oba rolled his eyes. "It isn't trust but foolhardiness that has brought me this far. Don't mistake necessity for naivety. I'm not doing this for you, Takuji, but for all the innocent lives you've put in jeopardy." The samurai lifted the bundle and set it over his helm, tying the ribbons dangling from it beneath his chin to hold it in place. Without another glance at the priest, he set off into the neglected cemetery.

Weeds grew high around the crumbling plinths, rain and wind had worn down the names carved into the stones. Oba had to be careful of his footing as he moved among the graves, with chipped stones lying hidden in the tall grass. The shadows continued to writhe and distort in eerie ways, suggesting furtive movement that he could catch only from the corner of his eye. Though he knew it would be useless against a graveyard ghost, Oba's hand clenched tight about Koumakiri's grip. Powerless or not, he would at least die fighting.

The moonlight revealed a shape sprawled on the ground. Oba stopped short and whipped the uchigatana from its scabbard. The shape remained motionless, however, and didn't react when he prodded it with the blade. The samurai scowled. No ghost, but rather a decapitated body lying sprawled between the graves. Dead perhaps a week in his estimation. Certainly no more than two.

"Do you see something?" Takuji asked, anxiety in his voice.

Oba shifted around so the priest could see the corpse. "Anyone you know?" he demanded.

Takuji frowned. "The man who was helping me before," he admitted. "The kubikajiri took his head."

The villager carrying the urn blanched when he saw the corpse. With a shout he dropped the urn and darted off back through the cemetery. Takuji shouted at the man to stop. The priest started after him, but Oba made a warning motion that restrained him.

Rising from the burial ground was a grey wisp that rapidly swelled until it took on the dimensions of a human form. A white burial kimono swathed its translucent figure, but its legs tapered away into nothingness and it had no feet to bind it to the ground. Neither was there a head upon its shoulders, only the grotesque stump of a neck.

The apparition drifted straight towards Takuji's hired man as he fled the cemetery. Before Oba could take more than a few steps, the ghost's claws caught the villager by the shoulders. Despite the ethereal appearance of its manifestation, the kubikajiri held the man fast. A brief scream echoed through the night before the clawed hands shifted their grip and seized either side of the victim's head. A sick, wet tearing sound rose from the villager as his scream was cut off. Blood spurted from his neck as the ghost pulled at his head.

It was over in a moment. A final twist and the man's head was ripped from his shoulders. His body collapsed against the earth, his feet kicking against one of the plinths as death spasms crackled through his dying frame. The kubikajiri raised its gory trophy and set it to its own severed neck. For a moment, the apparition looked whole once more, then, with a sickening slurp and the crunch of broken bones, the hideous wraith began to consume its prize and suck the head down into its ghastly mass.

"It will vanish again," Takuji hissed. The priest's hand removed a packet from inside his robe. Dashing forward, he opened it and flung its contents at the ghost. Oba watched in confusion as a cloud of salt spilled across the kubikajiri. Sparks flew off the phantom and its fading essence took on an appearance of increased solidity.

Takuji scrambled back, but in his haste he fell and crashed to the ground. He gazed back in horror as the ghost swept towards him.

Whatever Takuji had done to keep the ghost from vanishing, now the thing was intent on claiming a new victim. Oba charged ahead, putting himself between the kubikajiri and the priest. He whipped his uchigatana from its scabbard and brought it slashing at the wraith as it came hurtling towards him. As he'd feared, Koumakiri passed harmlessly through the spectre.

Cold such as Oba had never felt before swept through him when the kubikajiri grasped his shoulders. He stood frozen in place as its claws reached upwards. He felt them brush against his cheeks and for an instant he expected to share the villager's grisly end. But the claws continued upward and clutched at the special bag he'd tied above his helm. He felt the cord under his chin tighten as the kubikajiri ripped it free.

The samurai watched as the ghost set the bag onto the stump of its neck. Carefully fashioned by Takuji to look like a human head, the kubikajiri was deceived by painted face and horse-

hair wig. It began to devour the bag just as it had the poor villager's decapitated head. Only this time the results were far different.

Flames erupted from the kubikajiri's body, eerie green fire that billowed high into the air. The ghost writhed in agony, twisting and turning, pawing at the fake head it had tried to consume. The bag ruptured and little strips of rice paper spilled from the holes. On each piece of paper Takuji had written a holy sutra, words no spectre could abide. In trying to eat the phony head, the kubikajiri had drawn the sacred words into itself.

The burning wraith made a feeble effort to lash out at Oba, but he leaped back and avoided its grasp. Transfixed by the flame rising from its spectral shape, the kubikajiri was unable to pursue. It remained where it was, its form losing integrity as the fire rippled around it. After a few minutes, the apparition was gone, utterly consumed by the holy fire.

"It will kill no more," Takuji announced, wiping dirt from his robes and trying to assume a dignified pose. "You have my gratitude, Oba-san. You've helped me save this village from a terrible threat."

"One that you caused," Oba reminded the priest. He gestured at the bodies of the men the kubikajiri had killed. "You've more blood on your hands now, Takuji."

The priest affected a regretful expression, but Oba could still see the greedy gleam in the man's eyes. "Their sacrifice will not be forgotten."

"See that it isn't," Oba warned. He pointed Koumakiri at the priest. "Whatever you earn by burying the brewer you had better share with the families of the men whose deaths you've caused."

Takuji glanced over at the urn lying on the ground. He gasped when he saw that it had shattered and the dead brewer's ashes were blowing away in the wind. "Help me!" he cried. "There will be nothing to bury! I'll lose everything!"

The samurai turned and walked away. "You still have your life, Takuji, though I doubt you'll make any better use of it tomorrow than you have today." Oba slipped Koumakiri back in its scabbard and left the priest to scramble about the graveyard trying to gather up the ashes. He rather hoped Takuji would fail in his task.

If anyone deserved to be haunted by a vengeful ghost, it was Takuji.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

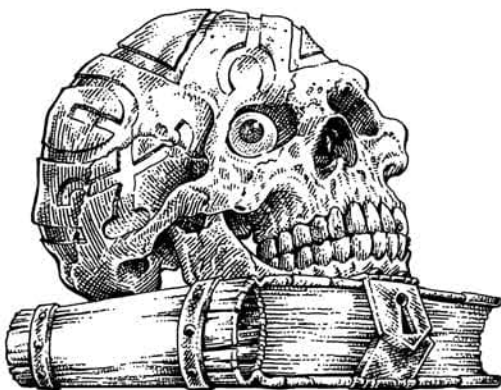
Exiled to the blazing wastes of Arizona for communing with ghastly Lovecraftian abominations, C L Werner strives to infect others with the grotesque images that infest his mind. He is the author of almost thirty novels and novellas in settings ranging from Warhammer, Age of Sigmar, and Warhammer 40,000 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*.

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ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS ARNESON

WINGS OF HEAT

By **DANIEL J. OUELLETTE**

ACHERON dared not look back at the creatures that pursued him up the mountain. To do so might make him falter. His bloody fingers wrapped around a spine of amethyst the length of his arm, its value reduced to a handhold for a fool. There were countless like it on the mountain. Sacred treasures of those who gazed down from the Black River. His clan dared not touch them. But Acheron was already an outcast. What did one more sin matter?

He had been climbing for over a day. His fingernails were split, his muscles burned, and his mind dulled, eroded by frigid winds, pain, and glimpses of the monsters that chased him. Their segmented limbs and bulbous bodies were draped in golden finery that obscured the chattering terror beneath. They were the Mountain Keepers, and they would allow no mortal to scale the mountain and reach the realm of the dead. So said Old Thysania at least, but the crone's words would not stop him now. Acheron's gaze was fixed toward his goal. The summit ... the Black River ... the man he loved ... Actias ...

A shooting star had cut across the night sky thirty-three moon rises ago. The night after Actias' cremation. Old Thysania always said that such stars were spirits seeking to escape the Black River and return to the world below. Such a thing was impossible, she had assured. Those rare, rebellious souls would drift upon the celestial flow until they accepted their fate and found their place with the stars. When Acheron had seen that star, he knew that it was Actias. He had not been ready to die. He wanted to come back.

Acheron hauled his body onto a man-sized barb of raw diamond, pausing to catch his breath. The screeching of the Mountain Keepers echoed below as he shut his eyes and drew deep breaths of the icy air that cut through his rawhide clothes. Every breath stung his lips and lungs. Acheron opened his satchel, checking for lost items. His lantern had fallen hours ago, and he feared something else may have gone with it. All that remained, save for his sword, was a meager portion of goat jerky, a pot of lamp oil, and a shard of flint. Little to aid him on the sheer walls of the mountain.

He drew his sword, meditating on the blade for a moment. It had been a gift from Actias, forged before the struggle that claimed his life. Old Thysania had always taught them that gifts wrought of hand and heart entwined one's soul to another for eternity. Had Actias been calling to him all this time through the icy steel? Granting him the will to persist?

A rattling scream wrenched Acheron from his thoughts. One of the Keepers. It was above him. Close. The beast lurched from

a hole in the mountain, its insectile claws scoring the stone as it crawled down the cliff-face. The six-legged abomination's hulking body was wrapped in a gilded cocoon of coins and jewels that jangled and swayed as it skittered closer. From beneath its glimmering, kingly cowl a face met Acheron's heavy brow. A visage like a man's, but skeletal. Hollow. Its jawbone split in two, opening like an insect's maw and dripping with the black ichor of death.

The Keeper lunged downward, its claws grasping for living flesh. Acheron leapt sidelong from his diamond perch, launching his body into the open air, clear of the Keeper's attack. He caught himself on a jutting stone, hanging by one hand, searching for footholds. The Keeper crashed into the diamond growth, screaming in anger and coiling its body to pounce again.

It was said that no blade could harm a Mountain Keeper, so as Acheron's feet found purchase, he searched for something, anything, else that could help him. A jagged point of stone stood proudly in the howling winds below him, sparkling with veins of gold. A more suitable weapon.

The Mountain Keeper's jaws rattled open and it leapt for Acheron, screeching like a tortured beast, deathly mucus dripping from its fangs. Acheron hurled himself toward it, brandishing his sword in a fool's gambit. Flying free in the night. The beast's claws lashed toward him and he heaved his blade down, severing one of its gnarled limbs in a shining flash. It was said that no blade could harm a Mountain Keeper. Either that had always been a lie, or conviction served as a fine whetstone. Acheron and the Keeper impacted one another in midair. He roared and buried his sword to the hilt in the fiend's body, shifting all his weight into it. The Keeper scrambled to stop their descent, but its missing claw made the task impossible. The Keeper screamed, its maw gaping before Acheron's grimace. It ripped at his back with its claws and Acheron roared, twisting his blade, making it feel the cold metal bite. The bodies of man and monster were gouged and split by stone and gem as they rolled over one another in the mortal grip of a free fall. Then, with a sound of tearing flesh and rattling coin, the Keeper's body was impaled upon the gold-veined spike of stone that Acheron had aimed them toward. Had he been only inches to the right they would have shared that fate.

Acheron scrambled backward in a daze, finding an outcropping where he could settle his nerves and watch the keeper writhe. It shuddered and hissed, releasing the odors of a seeping grave. It could not pull itself from the spike of ore. As its shining

black blood drenched the gilded stone, the monster's body fell limp with a clattering sigh and its tattered wrappings churned. A swarm of white moths burst forth from the corpse. Pristine. Like ghosts in the starlight. The moths spiraled upward, freed from that hideous prison. An incredible sight, but one that shook Acheron to the marrow.

Moths were the spirits of the wandering dead, those not sent to the Black River by the rites of cremation. When Actias died he had been burned in accordance with the rites. His body rendered to smoke and ash, carried toward the Black River on wings of heat. The pyre had drawn countless moths, as it always would, and their fragile forms were burned away with Actias. He would guide them to the River, Old Thysania had said. When the dead were burned so too could the lost find their way. At the time Acheron took comfort in that, but after the shooting star it had not lasted. When he hung a lantern as a beacon to guide his lover's spirit home Old Thysania had become furious. She had told him that it was a pointless, selfish act that would damn the spirits of others. That the lantern would lead lost spirits astray. They would burn up in its flames, unguided by the rites, unable to reach the Black River above. Trapped in the mortal world the spirits would warp into Mountain Keepers, monsters haunting the sacred mountain, seeking an afterlife that they could not reach. Creatures perpetually desperate for the warmth, wealth, and beauty of life that they no longer had. Acheron had not pitied them then. This had been his first sin.

Battling the Mountain Keeper had left him covered in jagged cuts. But Acheron climbed ever higher toward the dark sky. Toward the forbidden summit. He wondered now how alike he might be to the Mountain Keepers. Lost and seeking the impossible. But that thought did not stop him. He had watched his lover's star fall. He had broken the traditions. And now all he could do was climb. Actias yearned to return, and Acheron would find him. The means mattered not.

From handhold to handhold, ruby to diamond to gold, Acheron forged his path up the mountain. As the faintest hues of dawn brightened the black night sky, he finally reached the summit, a rough circle of flat stone cut through with veins of gemstone that glimmered beneath the fading stars. The freezing wind pulled at the tattered hides Acheron wore, numbing his wounds. He stepped forward, staring up. Even here, on the highest peak of the sacred mountain, where no man dared to tread, he was still so far away. The Black River truly was beyond his mortal reach. Acheron fell to his knees and wept. He was exhausted. His bones ached and his body was caked in frozen blood. He had given everything to reach this place and it had not been enough. What more could he do but weep until the cold winds of the mountaintop whispered words of rest, and he fell into a dreamless slumber?

Old Thysania had always kept the legends of the Black River in the minds of the clan. As they gazed up at the night sky, she would often tell them of the afterlife. The spirits of the dead were meant to ascend to the Black River, where they would be preserved in a midnight tapestry until the end of days. It was a place of unchanging beauty, where the needs of mortals were forgotten and forbidden.

When he awoke, Acheron found himself elsewhere. He lay flat on his back in some shallow liquid, staring up into an iridescent fog. Beyond the fog he did not see the sky. Instead he saw the curvature of some distant sphere. It was massive, decorated with lines of jagged stone and pockets of vibrant blue. It was like gazing at the unfamiliar moon of another world. The air here was cold, but his wounds no longer stung. He sat forward and found that his muscles no longer ached. Plants surrounded him, lotus-like stalks that shone white in the haze. He stood, finding footing in the liquid beneath him. It flowed slowly, a slithering black morass that somehow supported his weight. The Black River. Acheron stood in a tributary of the afterlife. But how did he get here? Was this no more than the dying dream of an outcast sinner?

No. Such worries did not matter. Acheron gripped his sword and it hummed at his touch. A curious sensation, but one that put him at ease. It felt as though Actias was by his side, pulling his heart deeper into the fog.

As Acheron moved across the surface of the lethargic river, he observed the otherworldly flora that grew so vigorously from its depths. They were flowers in the shape of lotuses, but their petals were the pure white wings of moths. They shivered at the slightest touch, shedding glowing scales which became a part of the shifting haze that filled the air. A close look at their seed-pods revealed them to be full of insect eyes, their infinite facets gazing back. Disturbing thoughts gripped Acheron's mind. Were human spirits trapped here in these tortured shapes? This place was no paradise. It was a stagnant end to eternal souls.

The humming of his sword drew Acheron ever forward. The moth-lotus stalks grew taller, denser, and more twisted. He felt he was being watched, and he hoped that the watcher would do no more than that. Then a whisper found his ears.

We know the soul you seek ...

The sound scraped at Acheron's skull.

If you wish to be with him in eternity, drink deeply of our dark waters ... and we will take you to him ...

The scraping became a stinging pain in Acheron's mind and he lashed out with his blade, cutting through the shining fog and splitting the stalks of the nearby moth-lotuses. As the pain in his head abated, Acheron glanced around for any source of the whispered words. A figure stood ahead of him. A man. Bald and broad-shouldered, facing away, gazing upward. Acheron's sword was still and silent, but he no longer needed guidance. The man was Actias. Acheron cried out but made no sound. His voice was swallowed up by the fog. He bounded toward Actias, moth-lotuses shaking as he passed, freeing their scales in wisps like the smoke of dying candles. Placing a hand on Actias' shoulder he found it as cold as the dead air.

Actias' neck cracked, his head twisting around to reveal a gaping hole where his face should have been. The waters of the Black River gushed forth from the horrific cavity as his arms bent backward, snapping unnaturally to seize Acheron and drag him to the ground. Acheron struggled against the monstrous strength of this thing that had taken his lover's shape. Some demon of the Black River. Some mockery. Black sludge poured

from the faceless monster's orifice, spattering Acheron's skin as it tried to push him beneath the surface of the river. The sludge moved like it was alive, flowing into his mouth, nose, and eyes. In moments he was swallowed up, devoured by the slithering darkness.

Food, warmth, wealth, and love were all transitory. They were mortal needs, unnecessary once one joined the stars. Old Thysania had taught these beliefs, and Acheron had kept them. But when Actias died he began to question them, and when he saw Actias' star he began to resent them. Old Thysania's words could not be the whole truth. If the Black River was paradise, why leave? If mortal needs were forgotten, why try to return? Existence without the warmth of a fire, the intimacy of love, or the triumph of struggles overcome? That was nothing. It was accepting defeat. It was like sinking to the bottom of a river, letting the black waters fill one's lungs, and waiting there until the world was gone. For himself, and for Actias, Acheron refused such an end. Another sin, perhaps.

Snarling, coughing, and gnashing his teeth, Acheron broke the surface of the Black River. He grasped at the stalks of the moth-lotuses. They shook, squealed and snapped as he pulled himself free of the viscid waters. The insect eyes of the seedpods rattled in terror and their petal wings fluttered, trying to escape his grip. In that moment, Acheron felt their terror. The spirits within the flowers were afraid, but not of him ... they feared something greater. Something older. Acheron had neither the time nor desire to wonder at it. He had to keep moving. He had to free Actias from this nightmare.

The faceless monster was gone. Had it been real to begin with, or some trick of the Black River? What senses could be trusted in a place like this? Acheron crawled to his feet, wiping the sludge from his face and clutching his sword for comfort. The handle was warm, if only slightly, and the blade hummed with life once more. This. This he could trust.

Mortal desires ...

Acheron heard a whisper, carried through the fog on the flapping of spirits' wings.

Mortal struggles ...

A second whisper joined the first.

Mortal dreams ...

A third.

Sustenance ...

A fourth.

Fading morsels to nourish we who sip the fog ...

The last words were spoken by all the whispering voices at once as the moth-lotuses shivered in mortified reverence. Four human-like shapes coalesced from the shimmering fog around Acheron. They were thin and impossibly tall, wading through the lotus stalks like giants, clad in cloaking, diaphanous wings that glimmered like the twinkle in the eye of a nightmare.

Their heads were naught but abhorrent, spiraling clusters of mandibles and maxillae wreathed by feathered antennae. As they encircled Acheron, their mouth-parts bent and clicked like crawling fingers and they inhaled the fog with an insatiable lust, their bodies twitching with disturbing pleasure.

Be drowned mortal, and join your lover ...

All four voices continued as a single whisper. The sound was staggering. Acheron felt as though his skull could hardly contain it. As though his mind might split apart.

Grant us the tastes of your affection, the warmth of your hearts ... feelings kept only by those who know pain and fear death ... sink into our river ... that you might join oblivion and be disgorged as nourishing stardust ...

Acheron reeled in the presence of the fog drinkers. He shut his eyes, trying to fight off a strange nausea. He focused on the pulsing hum of Actias' presence within his sword. Don't trust them. They are just like Old Thysania. Beings empowered by lies. Acheron denied them, and he drew steel in a flickering arc.

To refuse is futile ... you are ours mortal ...

The fog drinkers shook with fury, and imitations of Actias rose from the creeping sludge all around Acheron. Some faceless, some crawling, all malformed. Now was no time for hesitation. Acheron brandished his sword, cutting down monster after monster as they swarmed. He and Actias had long fought together, and with his lover's blade in hand they fought together still. No foul demons of this otherworldly hell could match that strength.

You fight an unwinnable battle, mortal. We are death, and death cannot die.

Countless more monsters rose from the sludge at the beckoning of the fog drinkers, cruel mockeries of Actias meant to give Acheron pause, but he continued to offer no quarter. He would fight until he died.

Fight until you die?

The fog drinkers produced a droning laugh like the chittering of a swarm of vermin.

You are already dead, mortal. By our power you were plucked from the summit without need for the rites of cremation and brought here, to our garden ... there is no escape to the land you knew ... for you or your beloved ...

Dead. The realization bit into Acheron's mind like venomous fangs. All four of the fog drinkers extended a spindly, many-jointed arm from beneath their folded wings and pointed upward, toward the great sphere above. Toward what Acheron now knew must be the land of mortals. Of course he was dead, he thought, as he fended off the tide of creatures threatening to drag him under. To have set foot upon the Black River meant as much. But if the word of the fog drinkers was the truth then what was there to do? Sink into the depths, as Actias surely had, to join his lover? No. Acheron cleaved another monster in two. No! There had to be a way back ... there had to be.

A sudden warmth surged up Acheron's arm from his sword, and with it, a voice. A whisper unlike that of the fog drinkers. A whisper from lips that he knew and would never forget.

Once before I burned alone ...

Acheron felt arms wrap about his shoulders. Something, someone, was there. Someone was with him. Actias ... he had been sent here by the rites of cremation. Carried to the Black River above on wings of heat.

(continued on page 60)



ILLUSTRATION BY BRAD MCDEVITT

THE DARKNESS AND RALSHAA

By ALEXANDER JAMES

THE sword hung heavy in his hand. He had made the long journey to the caverns alone, since he alone thought his missing kin might be found within. The leaders of the clan proclaimed they had surely been eaten by beasts of the forest. The wise women had dreams they had vanished into the sky. Only he believed they could be found hidden deep beneath the mountains. Finding them, and finding their captors, would grant him the kingship that he lusted for. Ral'shaa lit his torch and entered the damp darkness.

At first, the cave appeared as any other. The open face was weathered by ages of storms, and there was ample evidence of other creatures having found shelter within. The bones scattered about did not appear human. More likely they were a recent meal for one of the many wolf-packs in this region. Wolves were not his concern. In his earlier life, Ral'shaa had seen many wolves and killed a few. Wolf pelts would have been a fine prize to bring back home, once upon a time. But now he had no home to bring them back to, having given away all but that which he carried. If he succeeded in his hunt, he would lack for nothing, and have no need for the relics of his past. If he failed, he would have no need for them either.

He entered the basaltic maw, following the twists and turns of the passage until he found himself removed from the natural light of day. As the darkness of the bowels deepened, he saw the nature of the tunnel change. Rather than the chaotic designs of nature, the cave now revealed signs of intention. Where the walls had been filled with openings and gaps, they now seemed cut with crude tools but clear purpose. Where the ceilings had been high and hollow, they were now only tall enough to fit something not quite a man. As he hunched his body to fit the unnatural architecture, the smoke of his torch obscured any benefit of the light it provided. Extinguishing it, he guided himself with a hand along the ragged wall.

The long winding way led ever downwards, gently but endlessly. Without the benefit of light, it was impossible to tell how deep he had gone or how much lay before him. The trek became slowly hypnotic, a repetition of steps down a single occulted path. So when his foot suddenly failed to find purchase and he fell forward into empty air, he had only a moment brace himself against the narrow passage. Steadying himself and cursing his complacency, he probed forward in the dark. He discovered not a pit, but a steep staircase hewn from the bedrock. The stairs were worn smooth and at a slant, betraying their ancient origins and eons of use. Carefully making his way down the steps, Ral'shaa prepared himself to encounter his wretched prey.

Thus far, the passageways guiding him had been worked roughly with hand tools and without any ornamentation that was apparent to his touch. But the stonework at the bottom of the staircase was smooth and delicate, the work of an artisan. As he progressed a pale green light revealed that the walls were in fact polished, gifting him with a foul illumination from deep within the depths of the earth. Acclimating to the subterranean luminescence, he was able to make out murals etched into the walls. Pictures of small, pink, man-shaped creatures with infantile over-sized heads and large saucer-like eyes graced the hallway, engaging in acts too foreign for him to comprehend. In some, they appeared to be piling bodies into strange mounds. In others, they joined hands under suns of colors neither seen nor imagined during his life on the surface. In no case was Ral'shaa dissuaded from his journey. Rather, the cursed depictions confirmed to him the righteousness of his cause. Soon, he would prove himself a king.

He followed the unnatural light, knowing that only the weird sanctum of these imps could be the ultimate source. As he neared it, the sickly light was joined by something resembling a song in some unknown and unwanted tongue. Working his way closer, he could make out the foul chamber filled with the obscene fey, far more grotesque than in their profane icons. Expecting pink skin, they were in fact something of a mottled white, the larger ones graced by sores and the smaller by scarification. Ribbons of black hair sprouted from their shoulders, draping oleagiously down their thin arms. But it was at the end of those arms that Ral'shaa saw their most repellent feature: a single, scaly, pulsating, grub-like finger. Their revels were illuminated by a circle of braziers topped with flickering flames and emitting a smoke that had the same sickly aroma as bodies perfumed for burial.

The dancing flames circled a dais topped by a high-backed throne. Seated thereon was a gaunt parody of a king, draped in rotten Tyrian fabrics and with a scepter of bone sitting loosely in his hand. Around his neck was a golden chain holding a night-black jewel, above which was a limply hanging head. Only his eyes betrayed his consciousness, darting around at his demonic court. His chanteurs pranced about, singing obsequious songs.

Although they were small and misshapen, there were too many of the creatures for him to face in honest combat. Looking about the room, Ral'shaa saw what he had been questing for. The walls were lined with small wooden cages, each only large enough to hold a dog, but instead housing a man, woman, or child vanished from his village. He, and he alone, had suspected the grisly, blasphemous truth.

Close to the entrance of the room was a cage holding a boy by the name of Ai Kadar. Ral'shaa had known Ai Kadar for the youth's entire life, a brave and obedient son. While he was fond of the child and did not wish to place him in danger, he also knew that the responsibilities of a king were weighty. He knew the boy trusted him and would do as told. Quietly creeping forward, he whispered to Ai Kadar to run and quickly opened the cage.

The boy launched from the cage and ran for freedom with youthful brashness, just as Ral'shaa had expected. Being but a boy, he was uncaredful, and loud, and obvious. The escape attracted the attentions of the pale things, who ceased their obscene dances and waddled towards their prisoner with surprising celerity. The boy's screams of terror simply furthered the excitement of the devils as they encircled and fell upon him. But of simple mind and lacking direction, they focused on their sport and failed to notice Ral'shaa making his way to the center of the room.

As Ral'shaa approached the throne, the king of the wretched watched but did not act. Perhaps this enervation was the defi-

ance of royalty, or perhaps it was a plea for a final merciful end. It did not matter. Ral'shaa's blade was raised once and was lowered once. The head of the man upon the throne split in two, staining what was left of his worm-eaten robes.

Ral'shaa tossed the desiccated monarch from the throne and seized both the obsidian amulet and ossific baton. The pallid creatures from below, forgetting their recent hunt, turned to take in the scene with their empty eyes. Seeing the fate of their former lord, they immediately began performing abominable prostrations towards the new holder of the royal regalia. Ral'shaa settled into the gilded chair, surveying his new kingdom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander James lives in a humble cottage with his wife, children, and several thousand bees. While the bees are a tough audience, his children seem to enjoy his tales of lost treasures, secret passageways, and lurking ghouls. He has been playing roleplaying games for over thirty years and so far it hasn't had any ill effects that he'll admit to.

WINGS OF HEAT *(continued from page 57)*

Let us burn together, Acheron ...

As Acheron beat back the last of the monsters he glanced up to that strange sphere that hung beyond the fog and he understood.

In that moment, the fog drinkers let out a baleful scream that tore the wings from the lotuses, sending them whirling through the fog in a storm of rage. Their wings flared outward to reveal deformed bodies cut with orifices that ceaselessly gushed the black sludge of the river and twisted insect limbs in unthinkable numbers. They fell forward, screaming and dragging themselves toward Acheron, moving through the lotus stalks like great and terrible maggots. Their loathsome, ringed maws shuddered, spraying ichor as they bellowed and spat in a frenzy.

Acheron reached for the lamp oil in his pack, drenching himself and putting blade to flint. He paused for only the briefest of instants before he felt an invisible hand on his own, and tender words in his ear.

Grant us wings, my love.

Steel struck flint and sparks erupted in the cold, whirling haze of the fog drinkers' anger. The oil caught and Acheron was immolated. His body blazed like a sun over the Black River, wreathed in forbidden fire. The fog drinkers lunged for him, claws snapping, mouths clicking and slavering. As they touched him the flames intensified, searing the abominations' accursed flesh. They wailed and writhed as they tried to reach Acheron but their bodies only bubbled and burned all the more. The flames erupted into a great pyre and the fog drinkers relented, fleeing beneath the foul flow of the Black River, banished by the light.

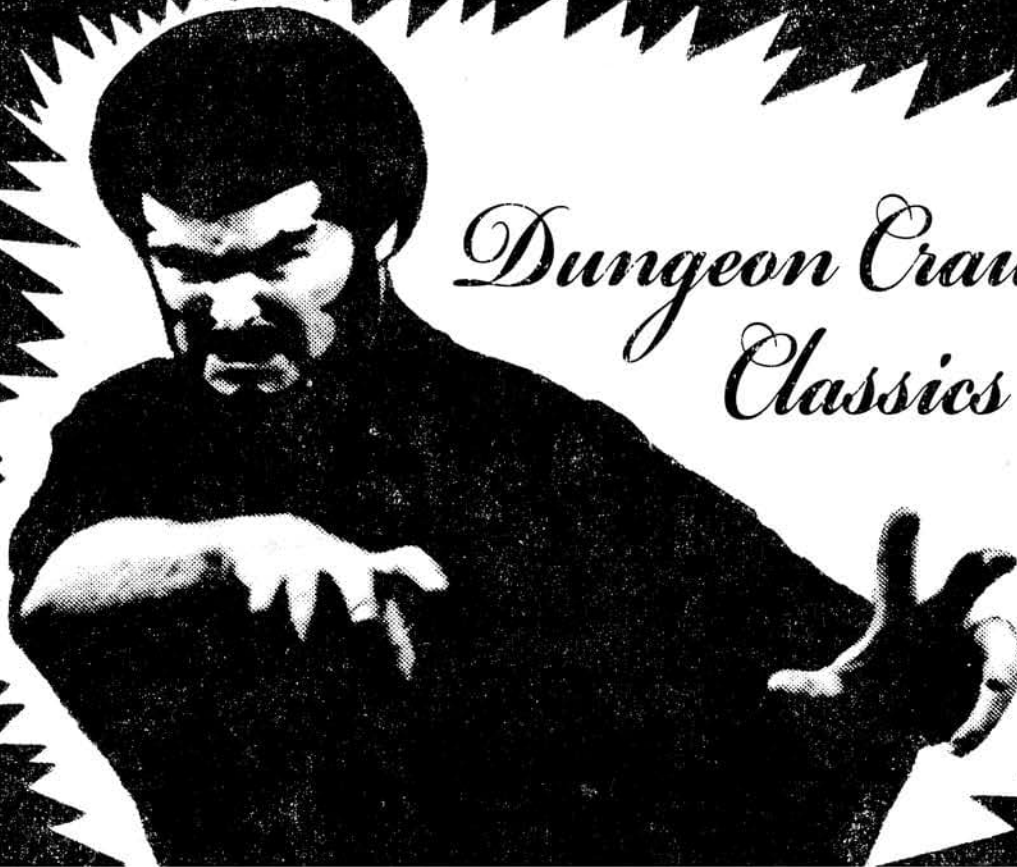
Acheron stood serene within the fire. His skin blackened and cracked, his blood boiled, and his eyes were consumed. Every part of him burnt away, but the only thing he felt was the faint warmth of the arms encircling him until his body was rendered into smoke and ash. This was his final sin.

Acheron awoke to the warmth of the sun on his face. He opened his eyes. The blue of the daytime sky stretched forever above him. Cold wind caressed his bare chest and cold stone chilled his back. He felt at peace, as though he had been freed from a long and troubled sleep. A hand wrapped around his own. He was not alone. He felt the warm skin of the other. He felt their heartbeat, separate from his own but nonetheless entwined. Turning his head, his eyes met those of Actias.

"You found me," Actias said, and Acheron laughed until he wept.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel J. Ouellette makes his lair in western Massachusetts and shares it with two fiendish felines and a gorgeous warrior woman. He spends his days tending flowers, which leaves him with copious time to ruminate on ideas for strange stories and thrilling tabletop adventures. In his free time he tries his best to bring these ideas screeching and squawking to life between frantic bouts of consuming cartoons, books, films and games. He would love nothing more than for his stories to either disgust you, frighten you, or make you cry with joy. Daniel can be found on twitter (@DanButtercup), where he is known to rant enthusiastically about his wonderful D&D group, how much he dislikes beans (a lot), or how Voltron VHS tapes shaped him into the man he is today.



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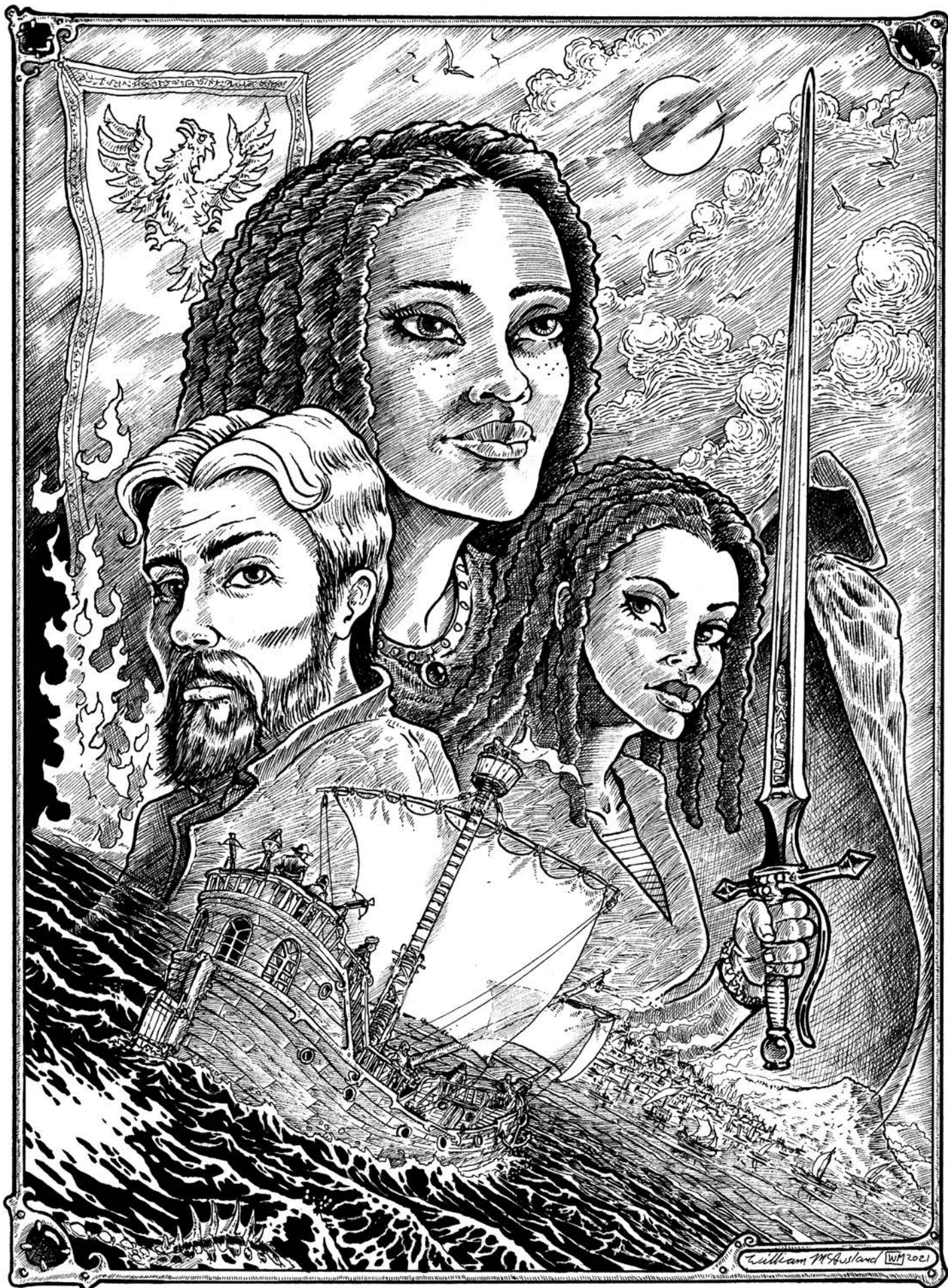


ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM MCAUSLAND

THE MARTYR'S CLOAK, THE FURY'S BLADE

By ROBERT RHODES

WE'LL find them tomorrow," Bianca said. "Eat." Gabriela stopped sifting her bowl of peppered lentils with her wooden spoon. She looked up to meet the glimmer of amusement at her own impatience in her mentor's dark eyes.

"You said that yesterday, yet here we are." Gabriela traced a circle in the air above her bowl, as if to encompass the simple common room of the crossroad inn, the hamlet of farmers and shepherds surrounding it, and the sweeping, sun-struck plains and hills of Velifara, where the highwaymen they were hunting remained elusive as ghosts.

"I'll say it again tomorrow night if I must." From a smaller bowl, Bianca chose a plump brown olive and examined it like a rare coin. "But we're closer. The province's alms-collector and the Church will have justice." Her brow furrowed, and she tilted her dreadlocked head to look outside the open window near their table. "Unless ..."

Gabriela heard hoofbeats slowing to a halt, followed by the steps of a rider, dismounted and hurrying to the inn. Into the common room rushed a Herald of the Supreme Church, his linen surcoat browned with dust from the road. His eyes ignored the innkeeper and darted to them — the two women in scarlet cloaks, exquisite cut-and-thrust rapiers at their sides.

"Honored Furies, I thank Quetar Twice-Exalted for finding you so quickly." He bowed and presented them with a folded square of crisp parchment. Gabriela set down her spoon and blinked at the seal in the missive's center. Scarlet wax with flecks of diamond — the seal reserved for Velifara's two Archbishops.

Bianca took the parchment and tore it open. Gabriela tried to decipher the elegant script upside-down without success, but moments later, Bianca nodded to the herald and gave Gabriela such a fierce look that her heart began to race. A greater hunt!

"A major relic was stolen two nights ago," Bianca murmured, too softly for the innkeeper's hearing. "The Cloak of the Bronze Martyr, from the Cathedral of Saint Alcantara itself. We're summoned. Vamos."

They left their supper, reclaimed their black horses from the stable, and cantered into the setting sun. For two days they pushed themselves and their mounts to the brink of exhaustion, camping only in the dead of night, taking turns on horseback flowing in and out of the Hunter's Dream, the almost-sleep they practiced to keep their edge on urgent journeys.

As Gabriela drifted in the twilight between worlds, her hand rested on her sword, the symbol and center of her life. At the culmination of her oathtaking two years ago, in the cathedral to which they now returned, the Archbishops had blessed the blade and laid it in her palms, uplifted and trembling as the force of her joy overwhelmed her flesh. And through the blur of her tears glowed the first rune on masterworked steel, as pure and perfect as a star. Six months ago, she had received her second. And now, now she and Bianca could be the pair who recovered a major relic. Surely she

— just twenty summers old — would be rewarded with her third. The rune of *compulsion* or *shadow*? She wanted both.

Throughout the centuries, only one Fury in fifteen, the lectors taught, served the Church so ardently that she lived to wield a five-rune blade. Bianca was one. Why, Gabriela asked once more, as they lay near the road beneath a vault of rune-bright stars, shouldn't she be another?

The next morning, they were the first pair of Furies to arrive at the Cathedral's estate in Velifar City pursuant to the Archbishops' summons. Their lathered horses were led away. An acolyte with a braided white belt served them bread and cheese, figs, cool wine and water, at a table in a secluded courtyard. Once the barefooted boy left through the open archway, a Raven emerged from a passage hidden behind a flower-vine trellis. Her face, even to them, remained masked in black brocade above her mouth, while her winter-gray hair clung to the high collar of her dark overtunic. Like the looming cathedral spires, she radiated eternal command.

"The thief was likely an agile man who boarded *The Proud Harrier*, bound for the Turquoise Isles. Return with the relic. Punish him and any conspirators without mercy. Death before failure," said the Raven, circling behind them. "And take caution with anyone who dares wear the cloak. Its blessing is impervious to force ... and strange."

With one thin finger, she anointed their foreheads with wormwood oil. Bianca held marble-still; Gabriela inhaled and squinted at the odor. She hoped the Raven failed to notice.

"Go to the cathedral's southern gate before the next bell. Two satchels and a trunk are being prepared for you. Then to the docks. *The Stargazer* is under contract to sail on your arrival. May Quetar guide your blades." The Raven slipped the vial of oil into her overtunic as smoothly as she'd withdrawn it and moved toward the shadowed trellis. Gabriela began to turn and track the Raven's departure, but a touch from Bianca's hand on her own halted her. *No*, Bianca mouthed.

Two acolytes with a wagon drove them and their baggage, rumbling over cobblestones, from the cathedral grounds to Velifar's clamorous docks. *The Stargazer* unfurled its sails as soon as they boarded. Its sailors looked elsewhere at their approach and talked in hushed voices, or not at all. The sea breathed and lapped upon the rocks and pilings of the harbor before opening, vast as the god's judgment, unto the horizon. Rain began to fall.

• • •

RAIN fell often, and the ship skirted two bruise-black storms, but after nineteen days Gabriela noted a softening in the crew's faces. The captain, Don Rocha, went so far as to openly thank the Furies' presence for safety and favorable winds that bore them southwest.

On the twentieth morning, the sea was calm, and Bianca called for training on the aftercastle deck, refining their foot-work, blade-work, whip-work. Gabriela chased the elusive spirit of the duel as she and Bianca circled the mast and each other behind their rapiers. She opened her mind to the blazing sunlight, the sweat trickling down her face and neck, the tilt and texture of the deck planks, the slightest coil in Bianca's form before she lunged. "See it! *Seize it*," Bianca ordered. "See *everything* and see the path to victory."

Gabriela clenched her jaw, seeing only a hint of that path against Bianca. She scored perhaps one point for every three of her mentor's. She was younger, taller, faster, but two fewer decades of technique and experience dulled those advantages. Even if Time were weaving cords of gray into Bianca's honey-brown dreadlocks, her arm was strong, and she remained the Fury who, seven years before, had arrested the heretic Raven-turned-cultist San Salazar in the Old Plaza. An improbable number of people claimed to have witnessed the duel; Gabriela forever regretted she wasn't one.

Bianca also somehow ignored the sailors' game of pausing to watch their sparring or, Gabriela guessed, the women's bodies in their clinging tunics ... and then looking away and resuming their work once each point ended. The men's stares distracted her, annoyed her — a Fury of the Supreme Church! She took a deep breath and wiped sweat from her brow. Just then a boy in the crow's nest cried "Land!" The sailors cheered and whooped, some surging forward to the prow.

"Last point," Bianca announced. "See as our god sees. Become *everything*."

Bianca settled into her favored stance — Lynx Spirit, a quarter-turn from sideward. Her five runes glinted like threads of diamond along her slanting blade. They trained without invoking the runes, and their blades were otherwise equal. Gabriela exhaled, light-footed in Eagle Spirit, aware of her bare steel that could receive three more runes — that *would* receive three more. To please and honor her mentor. To be equal to her mentor. To be an immortal of the Supreme Church.

She lunged.

• • •

"Do you have a flag of the Church you wish raised?" Don Rocha asked as *The Stargazer* approached Stormgrace, principal port of the Turquoise Isles.

Gabriela imagined the pristine white cloth folded in their trunk, the Church's double-headed phoenix emblazoned in scarlet silk. But Bianca answered, "Not today, Captain. Thank you."

Gabriela waited at the rail while the ship drifted into the harbor just after midday. The sun glared high above, torrid and hateful of shadows, and by one spar of white-sand beach outside the level town, she glimpsed bands of the dazzling clear-green water for which the Isles were famed. She raised her hand, shielding her eyes to behold swaying marsh grasses, banked canals, and figures in broad-brimmed hats dotting lush fields of rice and sugarcane. Dozens, hundreds, of pelicans and crying gulls wheeled and dove above the serpentine shoreline. To either side of the ship, across shimmering channels, two other islands rose like ancient walls of green and indigo smoke. Dominating the starboard isle was a conical mountain, its summit flattened as if by a titan's warhammer.

Gabriela breathed the warm air, heavy and pungent with salt despite the gusting wind. She noted Bianca's presence behind her and lifted her chin toward the mountain. "Is that —"

"The hellfont of the Isles, sí," Bianca nodded. "A volcano like The Crucible in eastern Velifara. It's slept the past nine years. Pray its dreams remain peaceful."

A perfect place, beautiful and perilous, to claim my third. Quetar will it so!

A dockworker with white and indigo flags began waving their ship alongside a designated pier. Soon mooring ropes were tossed to other dockworkers, and the ship's anchor plunged into the glittering bay. Bianca beckoned to the two sailors whom Don Rocha had assigned to help them disembark.

"Take these to the church," she said, pointing to their waiting satchels and trunk, "and leave them with a priest or an acolyte with a red cincture—their belt—not just a white. You can tell them of our arrival, but no one else. The docks will see us in a moment. No need to alarm the entire town yet." Bianca held their eyes a heartbeat longer, looking upward at each man, but to Gabriela the men seemed the smaller. The sailors nodded fervently; Bianca nodded once.

They were the first to disembark, and Gabriela felt as if every eye in the harbor were staring at her full uniform: gray surcoat, scarlet cloak, black boots, the rapier on her left hip and whip on her right, and hanging just below her throat the alabaster amulet engraved with the Church's phoenix, its grooves still darkened with the anointing of the Archbishops' commingled blood upon her oathtaking.

Bianca asked the nearest dockworker where *The Proud Harrier* was. The man pointed to the far side of the harbor and hurried away.

"The hourglass runs," Bianca said, striding across the dock, trusting bystanders to move from her path. They'd discussed these crucial first steps almost every night of the voyage until the last hour before bed when Gabriela, as the younger, would remove their copy of The Unburned Codex from their trunk and read aloud the Church's history.

No one would desecrate a cathedral and steal a great relic without inviting the Church's swift wrath in the form of its Furies. Once their arrival was known, the thief would hide or flee again. He could fight or ambush them, but in Bianca's stories only those with the wild bravado of a San Salazar would make that choice. And even if such a man killed them both, their sworn sisters would redouble the hunt and avenge them. In their two years together, Gabriela had learned to fear instead a slow and uncertain hunt, wasting seasons and time to complete other missions. Tedious missions, such as hunting highwaymen, more likely to rust her blade — if that were possible — than to bless it with a third and fourth rune and the ultimate glory of a fifth.

"What if this is just the first port?" Gabriela had asked during one of their first nights in their cabin on *The Stargazer*. "What if the thief sells it to another, who sails on another ship, on and on?" She'd heard of the Starflung Isles, and the Titan's Crown, and imagined myriad isles studding the boundless ocean.

"I'd hate that too," Bianca answered as she cleaned her fingernails with the point of her knife, "except the Bronze Martyr was born ..." She looked up at Gabriela, prompting her to finish the thought.

Gabriela sighed and searched her memory — hours of reading and lectures in lamplit archives on cold or wet days, during the

eight years after a Raven picked her out of an orphanage but before she became a sworn initiate. Fragments of furies, saints, martyrs, bishops swirled like blood-red leaves. She shook her head.

Bianca continued without reproach. "He was born in the Turquoise Isles, built a raft of marsh reeds and driftwood to reach the mainland when he was a boy, to learn more of the god and preach his glory to all the world's isles. When his raft failed, the story goes, two dolphins carried him to shore." Bianca's smile grew sharper than her knife. "More likely a ship with dolphins nearby. Whatever the truth, this strikes me less as a theft for coin — even if the cloak does make its wearer invulnerable — than for pride. Because one, the relics in adjacent alcoves weren't stolen, and two, the mainland and the Turquoise Isles ..." She waited again.

Gabriela nodded, smiling at the comfort of understanding. "Argue over the prices of sugar and indigo dye, the price of prisoners sent to work the fields, the number of Islanders given a voice in the King's Council, and our god knows whatever else."

"Bueno," her mentor said in Gabriela's memory before the moment she said "This one" and strode up the gangplank of *The Proud Harrier*. Time blurred as Bianca set the world spinning with her glare and voice, snapping at hesitation from the crew and bald captain with the precision of her whip. From the ship's passenger log, they learned *The Stargazer* had made the voyage faster; *The Harrier* had docked just yesterday. And they identified a man named Camillo — young, slender, and "with a vulture's eye" in the captain's opinion — who'd paid days in advance of the ship's departure from Velifara and asked for assurances that it would leave on the morning it did. The captain volunteered to accompany the women in finding him.

They declined, or Bianca did while Gabriela nodded at her mentor's words, and entered inns and taverns on the harbor, asking nervous barkeeps and servers if they'd recently seen anyone resembling this Camillo from *The Harrier*.

None said they had, and as the women left their fifth tavern, they came face-to-face with a rank of town guardsmen: six young men with indigo sashes slanting across light-brown doublets, gripping leaf-bladed spears, and a leader with an oiled goatee, whose rapier hilt shone with silver filigree. The leader's eyes widened on seeing the women, and he barked something that might have been "Ah!" or "A-ha!" and caused his men to tense their spear-grips.

"Easy, lads — easy!" called another man in a clear voice, putting a hand on the guard captain's shoulder and stepping past him. Gabriela had only a moment to assess the man before he eased into a graceful bow, but it was enough to register his bold good looks. Almost forty summers, black hair, strong cheekbones, ivory teeth within a trimmed beard, muscular shoulders beneath a doublet of cream linen and emerald silk. The doublet bore a silver pin in the shape of a bird, a pelican, its eye a glinting bead of turquoise.

"Honored Warriors of the Church," he said, straightening, "I bid you welcome. I am Don Ricardo Viera Olivera, Viceroy of the Isles, and I, we" — he opened his arms to include not only the guards but the gathering fishermen, merchants, and workers of the harbor — "are absolutely at your service. May I escort you to my home for refreshments?"

"Bianca de Quetar," said her mentor. With a gesture, she added, "And Gabriela de Quetar. Thank you, Viceroy. At the mo-

ment, this is the service we need: a man named Camillo, who arrived on *The Proud Harrier* yesterday. We want to speak to — "

The guardsmen glanced at one another, their captain muttered and dropped his gaze, and the viceroy's smile dimmed. Something brushed past Gabriela's boot. She glanced down at a tavern cat, calico and with a torn ear, circling her leg.

Bianca folded her arms and fixed the viceroy with a hard stare. "What is it?"

The viceroy sighed. "I guessed there was more evil to come. More evil from a lost soul, I fear. Camillo Moreno, he was found dead — murdered — just this morning in an alley." He gestured, in the direction of the church, Gabriela thought.

"I am sorry to say I knew him, once." The viceroy looked around as if to ensure none of the bystanders were closing to eavesdrop. "His father died when he was small, lost at sea. His mother, Mariposa, keeps house at The Trident, a respectable inn. A capable lad. I approved him as a guardsman a year or so ago but had to dismiss him for stealing from his comrades. He apparently had some debts. Was it cards, Ernesto?"

"Cards, sí. And dominoes, and perhaps cockfighting," the captain said, scowling in memory of the younger guardsmen.

"If I may, what crimes did he commit against the Church?" asked Don Ricardo.

"To name them wouldn't serve our investigation at this time," Bianca answered. She surveyed the bystanders and the sunlit harbor. "Tell me, how was he killed?"

"With a blade, I believe," Don Ricardo said. The guard captain nodded in assent. "If you like, I — "

Gabriela started as the cat bolted from her side, leaping onto a crate beside the tavern and pressing against the wall. Gulls screeched and flapped away from dock pilings and anchored ships into the bright sky. Bianca shifted into a dueling stance, and Gabriela grasped the hilt of her sword. The guardsmen looked at one another. Don Ricardo frowned and turned toward the sea.

And then the world began to tremble.

The stones of the street shook beneath them. Ships rocked in their berths. A clamor of breaking glass and curses burst from the tavern, and from a nearby alley echoed shatterings of clay as from fallen pots or shingles. A woman screamed.

Long seconds later, the trembling ceased. Gulls continued rioting overhead, dogs barked, and from an open window rose the wailing of an infant.

Don Ricardo turned his eyes from the sea and to the Furies. "I fear," he said, "whatever Camillo's crimes, they've stirred not only your justice but our god's full wrath. That, that may have been the awakening of the hellfont. The third time in my life I've felt it."

Gabriela lifted her eyes to the bright air above the sea. She saw herself high on the mountaintop — balanced on an outcrop of stone or, impossibly, *flying* — as she defended the world against the hellfont, striking down devils as swiftly as they burst forth on wings of bat-leather and bone, her blade wreathed in fire like the invincible sun. Bianca's voice recalled her to the harbor.

"More reason to put things right as quickly as possible," Bianca said to Don Ricardo. "Sí, we'd like to inspect the man's corpse, which I believe you were about to propose."

"Of course. Is his body still at the guardhouse, Ernesto?"

The captain nodded. "His mother's trying to gather enough coin for a coffin and burial through the Church. If not ..." he shrugged.

"No," said Don Ricardo, drawing a leather pouch from within his doublet. He opened it and slid four gold doubloons into his palm, handed them to the captain. "No, for the sake of his family, he'll not beggar them, nor will we just sink him in the sea."

He bowed to the Furies. "Please excuse me. If the hellfont is waking, I have preparations to oversee. The last time, ten years ago, a handful of buildings collapsed. Of course, the people hadn't yet elected me. Captain Ernesto will escort you to the guardhouse. Again, it would honor me greatly if you would come to my home for dinner this evening ..."

Bianca looked around, then for a moment at Gabriela. "A meal would be appreciated, Viceroy. Also, among your preparations, may I request that no boats or ships leave the island for the next three days or until the order is countermanded?"

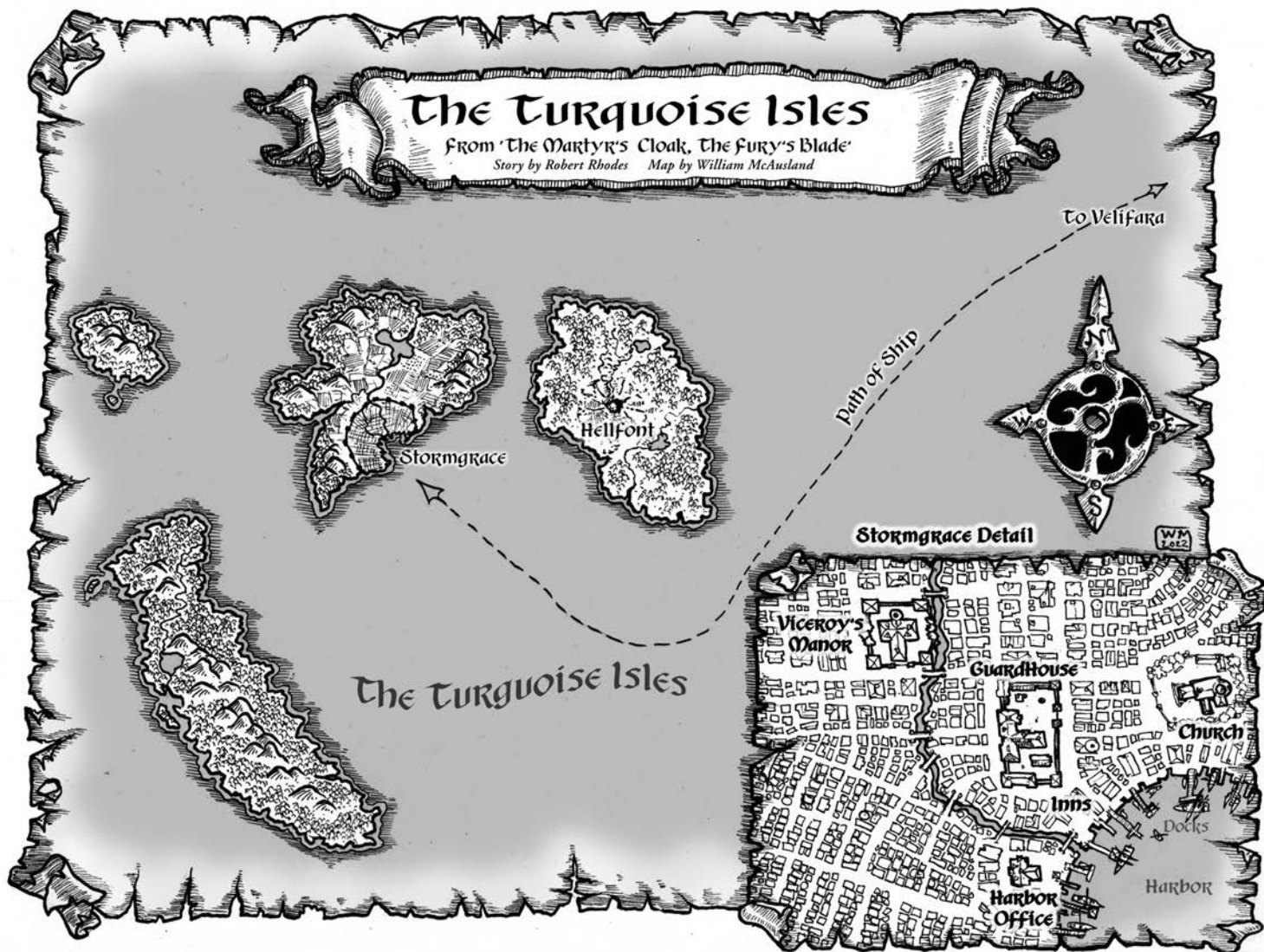
For the first time, Don Ricardo fumbled for a response. He shook his head and smiled. "If anyone else asked that, I'd know they were joking or drunk, perhaps both. We're an *island*, milady. Vessels, fishing boats, are our breath and blood." He sighed. "Captain Ernesto can take you to the harbormaster's office before the guardhouse and convey my support for the order. I can't promise, though, that some won't slip the net, especially our fishermen and divers who live to watch the sunrise from the water."

"Bueno. Hasta esta noche, Viceroy," Bianca said and turned to the captain. "Lead the way, señor, and if your men have other duties, feel free to release them. I trust we're safe."

Captain Ernesto dismissed the guardsmen and led the Furies to the harbormaster's office on the waterfront. The earthquake had stirred it to a frenzy, with the thin, sharp-nosed harbormaster and his three assistants jostling each other as they reshuffled scattered ledgers and documents while trying to contain a spill of ink dripping down the central desk. The harbormaster turned pale at the Furies' arrival, then reddened at Bianca's request; but he threw up his hands and relented once the captain explained the viceroy's support. Gabriela closed the office door behind them as they left and had taken only a few steps before halting at the ring of hollow metal — perhaps an empty inkwell — ricocheting from the door, followed by a storm of eloquent profanities. Bianca gave a curt laugh and, eyes twinkling, shared a smile with Gabriela before quickening her pace to follow the captain.

The thief's body, covered by a cut sheet of sailcloth, lay on a table in a cellar beneath the guardhouse. The small room was windowless and cool, with bundles of dried lavender and rosemary hanging from the ceiling. The table occupied one side of the cellar; sacks of dried rice, beans and root vegetables, casks of water and rum, and wax-sealed wheels of cheese filled the other. A quartet of spears stood leaning in one corner, and three crossbows hung on the wall.

Captain Ernesto placed a clay candleholder on a cask to give light, then lifted the sailcloth, folding it back to reveal the man's face and shoulders, still clad in a plain shirt and doublet. Blood stained the doublet just above the sailcloth.



"Before you go, Captain," Bianca said — and Gabriela again admired her mentor's ability to control an investigation, for nothing in the captain's posture indicated he was leaving — "tell us, after this man was dismissed from the guard, how did he earn his bread? Spend his time?"

The captain scratched then smoothed his goatee. "I couldn't say. Rumors, gossip ... some say he did menial jobs for Miguel Zardes." He spoke the name as if it had meaning and, seeing no reaction from the Furies, continued, "Zardes is one of our wealthiest merchants. But his peers are like hounds, hardworking, while he's more of a wolf. Smuggling to avoid taxes, I've no doubt. Rumors of kidnapping. Sabotage. Some say The Night Sharks — rough men, pirates — sometimes take orders from him. Ah, it may also have been that one of his sons was Camillo's largest creditor."

Bianca plucked a sprig of lavender from one of the hanging bundles. She rolled it between her fingers and thumb, crushing it, breathing the fragrance. "This Zardes and his sons, despite their ways, are they men who show reverence for the Church? Do they use their wealth to display their devotion?"

"Zardes? Ah ... no, milady. I can't say I've heard that about them."

"Thank you, Captain. We'll offer prayers for this one and perform such rites as our investigation requires. We'll close the door behind us once we're done. It shouldn't be long. I know you have to pay the priest and coffin-maker for this man's funeral." She brushed the fragments of lavender from her fingers.

"Of course, milady." He bowed and closed the door, leaving the Furies in the candlelight.

"Conclusions so far?" Bianca asked, peeling back the sailcloth to reveal the man's blood-soaked torso.

Always searching, always teaching, Gabriela thought. *See as our god sees.* "This man ... he sailed to Velifar City, stole the cloak, returned. Someone took it from him ... because of the stigma of the crime, because they knew we would be coming ..."

Bianca nodded, encouraging. "Go on. See it."

Gabriela closed her eyes for a moment. *One rune glowing, its lines perfect and pure, then another, illuminating the unblemished steel where three others would shine like a constellation in the god-wrought heavens ...*

"Because they couldn't trust him to disappear or resist questioning. Because killing him was safer and simpler than letting him live. Perhaps cheaper, too."

"Just so. The thief is dead ... from a perfect thrust under the sternum and to the heart. May he kneel before Quetar. Now we must find out who hired him to steal it, and we know at least one skilled blade's in his service. Remember our advantage. No one else should know about the cloak or even that we're seeking a relic. If they do, they know too much. Bueno, let's go visit the priest and our accommodations before this dinner. I'm sure it will be tasty and, depending on who attends, perhaps informative."

Gabriela sighed at the hunger that had been growing since they disembarked, heightened by the cellar's food stores. They'd washed and dressed after sparring on the ship, and she'd eaten only a bit of bread and salted ham. "What if I'm hungry now?"

"Then we mention that to the priest." Bianca clapped her on the shoulder and gave her a playful push toward the door. "And pray your skinny little ass fills out one day. Vamos."

• • •

DINNER was far from *tasty* — it was the richest and most exotic meal of Gabriela's life, surpassing the feast after her oathtaking. The servants of Don Ricardo's manor, situated within a walled garden one mile outside the port's center, brought plate after plate of the sea's bounty. Two kinds of delicate fish, eel, oysters, shrimp, scallops — each accented with herbed rice, spiced sauces, cream, bits of crisped sausage, or slivers of colorful fruits and nuts.

Accustomed to simple meals in churches and inns with Bianca, Gabriela tried to balance her wonder with her few lessons in etiquette — her rapier felt lighter than her fork and knife — and her grasp of the table's conversation. At opposite ends of the long table sat Don Ricardo and his betrothed, Marisol, who was Gabriela's age and quiet but captivating, with piercing dark eyes and sparrow-like tilts of her head. Along its sides were the Furies and the pleasant priest, Padre Nicos; the harbormaster; Captain Ernesto and his wife; and three prominent merchants and their wives. Of these, Gabriela glanced most often at Miguel Zardes, who resembled less a wolf and more a ravenous bear as he sucked oysters into his bristling gray-black beard and softening bulk.

Bianca answered their questions about mainland events and the Church, always deflecting the focus from their investigation or the political tensions between the mainland and isles. Gabriela said little, except to thank the servants and complement the food, and became conscious of saying too little and being thought aloof. At one point then, when Captain Ernesto asked the Furies to recommend sword-training exercises for new guardsmen, Gabriela took the moment to place a hand proudly on her mentor's shoulder and say,

"Listen to Bianca — she's the one who defeated San Salazar in the Old Plaza!" She grinned at the reactions this sparked, from Captain Ernesto almost dropping his fork to Zardes coughing into his wine goblet and setting it down to regard Bianca with fresh interest.

Don Ricardo clapped his hands. "Ah, you're *that* Fury! I thought our honor could be no greater, and yet. Please, would you indulge us with the tale?"

Gabriela's grin faded as Bianca's boot nudged hers under the table. "I'm afraid it's shorter than one would expect," Bianca said and gave an account even more bland than the first time Gabriela had pressed her for it.

The dinner passed with nothing further of note to Gabriela, distracted by Bianca's rebuke. Don Ricardo suggested the party move to a salon, where Marisol might enchant them with her harp and voice, but Bianca declined, citing the length of their voyage. The gathering ended shortly thereafter. The Furies and Padre Nicos were the last to leave. Don Ricardo bid them good-night from the front steps of the manor.

"Ah, I had another question about Zardes and Camillo — the reason I lingered," Bianca said and strode back up the steps to speak with the viceroy. Gabriela waited in silence with the priest, searching for some remark to pass the moment. The priest cleared his throat to speak, but Bianca returned and rejoined them for the breeze-cooled walk back to the church, drawing her rapier to let its runes light the darkest streets.

"Don't do that again," Bianca told Gabriela as they pulled off their boots in their tiny but immaculate room in the church's dormitory. "The Old Plaza was the hardest, and the best, duel of my life. The opponent ... the people cheering after, lifting up their hands as the rain poured down ... an old woman on her balcony,

singing *La Exaltia* ... I know why people call it a glorious victory. But remember, our glory must always point to Quetar." For the first time that day, Gabriela found herself the target of the Fury's stare. She looked down at the cold stone tiles.

"I know. I'm sorry, Bianca."

Bianca nodded. "I know." She blew out the room's candle and stepped past their trunk to one of the narrow beds. "Buenas noches, princesa. Awake ready to hunt."

• • •

GABRIELA awoke in darkness to a child's scream, to her bed and the objects in their room rattling like dice in a cup. She fumbled for her rapier, and when at last she gripped it, its runes shed enough light to chill her spine.

Bianca was gone.

She staggered from her bed, the floor shifting beneath her bare feet like the deck of *The Stargazer*. In her linen under-tunic, she threw open the door and stepped into the dormitory's hallway, brandishing her blade. The pale rune-light revealed two acolytes huddling in the hall — a small boy and an older girl, perhaps brother and sister. The boy was sobbing and staring wild-eyed at the dark ceiling, the girl hugging him and chanting a prayer.

"Quetar holds us and helps us. The endless winter fears the flame of his wings ..."

Gabriela went to them. The boy cowered, eyes widening at her face and the glowing sword.

"S-serafina ..." he whispered.

She bent down and wiped warm tears from his cheek with her thumb. "No, little brother. I'm just like you — no wings." She caught her balance as the floor shuddered again. "Tell me, have you seen another woman with a sword, older than me?"

The children shook their heads. "Have faith. Stay here," she told them and hurried to the outer door. She ran into the courtyard centered between the church, cloister and graveyard. The continued rumbling of the earth filled the night, deep beneath the barking of dogs and outcries from the city's center.

"Bianca!" she yelled. "Bianca!"

No one answered. A minute later, the earthquake stilled. Gabriela sent the children to their room, then dressed and armed herself and left the church grounds. She stalked the nearby streets, wending her way back to the harbor. It was past midnight, but there was no hint of dawn. The sounds of disruption — dogs and children crying out, men and women yelling — echoed in the darkness as if the hellfont stirring just across the channel were also waking fear and anger in the island's creatures. She felt fear in her stomach like a stone of black ice, finding herself alone, without the guidance of the Church or Bianca, for the first time since she was a helpless girl in the orphanage.

She pivoted at a footstep, a figure stumbling from an alleyway. She leapt back and drew her blade, dancing with wisps of blue lightning as she invoked the rune of *piercing*. The light revealed an old man, almost toothless, in tattered clothes. He raised his gnarled hands, one of which held a jug, and backed away, telling her something with words slurred into noise. She raised her hand in apology and farewell and moved on.

Her fear and frustration grew, but eventually she remembered her trust in Bianca and returned to the church. She'd no hope of sleeping and went into the sanctuary. At this hour, it was illuminated only by the ever-burning lamps on the altar, one at each wingtip of the phoenix statuette of Quetar, crafted with

shimmering feathers of silver and brass. The light was enough to suggest, but not reveal, images of the god's and saints' deeds woven into the long curtain of tapestries behind the altar. Unlike the great mainland cathedrals, with rows of pews for the worshippers, and private balconies for the richest and most elite, the floor of this poorer sanctuary was open so that the people could stand and pray where they wished.

She walked to the altar-dais and knelt on the first step. Laying her rapier before her on the second step, she closed her eyes, seeing only the soft play of firelight on her eyelids. She slowed her breathing and prayed for Bianca. For the completion of their mission. For the people of the Isles and protection from the hellfont. For the old drunkard she'd almost attacked. For the boy and girl acolytes, to be free of fear. For herself, to be free of fear, to be better — *to be worthy of five runes shining on my blade like rings on the hand of God.*

She opened her eyes at a sound — the doors of the church opening behind her — and realized she'd slipped into the Hunter's Dream.

Don Ricardo, the viceroy, strode into the church, the gray light of dawn just visible behind him before the doors swung together. Gabriela lifted her rapier and stood at his approach, shaking her head and limbs clear of the dream.

"Milady! I came after searching the cloister. Please, come with me. Your sister's at my home, gravely wounded. She's asking for you!"

A chill of terror ran through her spine. Her heart raced. "God, no! Show me!"

As she moved to join him, Bianca's voice came as if her mentor were walking beside her.

See as our god sees. See everything.

She breathed and saw the intensity in the viceroy's face and outstretched hand. The fine rapier at his side, the leather vambraces on his forearms, the hooded cloak falling from his broad shoulders, simple of cloth and cut but of an indigo hue so deep it was almost black in the lamplight.

She breathed again as she approached him and smelled earth and vegetation, heavy smoke, and something she did not recognize.

See, Bianca whispered.

She saw, or prayed she saw, and feared her utter disgrace if she were wrong. Yet she lifted her chin toward the sanctuary doors and said, "You're mistaken, señor. Here she is now!"

Don Ricardo arched his eyebrows and turned to face the doors. As he did, Gabriela closed the last distance between them and lunged, driving her rapier into his side.

It was a sure strike, a crippling wound between his ribs and hip. But her blade never entered his gut, halting upon touching his cloak, as if she'd speared a stone pillar. The steel began to flex, and only its quality and her technique spared it from harm. She pivoted away to regain her balance, and Don Ricardo turned with a snarl.

"Clever bitch!" He grinned and drew his blade. With his free hand, he pulled the hood over his head. "Not as dull as you seem. How could you know?"

She circled him, and his cloak began to ripple, though the doors of the sanctuary had closed and there was no draft.

"The indigo dye—it's fresh and dark yet stinks of smoke. You dyed it as soon as you got it — as soon as you killed your thief. Hearth-dried it to wear it at once. *Where's Bianca?*"

"She arranged to meet me tonight, you know, as you were leaving our dinner. She'd guessed I hired Camillo, but she understood it's no small thing, even for a Fury, to kill the leader of

a people — not one who's *good*, who's helping them *prosper*. We met a little while ago, and she offered to end the investigation if I'd give her the cloak. I think she doubted you'd understand. I'm sure your Ravens absolutely would not."

"Where is she?"

"Where I should've left Camillo — at the bottom of the harbor."

"Devil!" she screamed, but before she closed to lunge, he dropped his rapier and reached into his left bracer. With one fluid motion, he flicked his wrist toward her. She jerked to the side, and a knife sped past her neck and through her hair, spinning and clattering to the floor. She rushed him and lashed out, but he turned his back and crouched, reaching for his rapier. The edge of her blade skidded from the cloak. He regained his balance and circled her again, rapier in hand.

"Another surprise!" he chuckled. "A girl faster than the famous Bianca. That" — his eyes flickered to his wayward knife — "was how I gave her a swift death when she caught the false cloak I'd tossed her. A perfect throw to her throat. A rogue's trick, sí — but why chance a duel with the Fury who bested San Salazar? *Thank you* for that tip." He laced the last words with venom.

She yelled and invoked the rune of *piercing*, attacking in Eagle Spirit, weaving a storm of blue lightning around him and driving him toward the altar. She soon realized — and by his clenched jaw, he knew as well — that she was the better duelist. Yet he was stronger, his reach longer, and the martyr's cloak turned aside a handful of telling strikes.

He stepped onto the altar dais, seeking higher ground, and she leapt to follow, flowing into Lynx Spirit. Her change of angle and rhythm baffled him, and with a half-lunge she gouged his cheek, almost piercing the target of his eye. He yelled and swung wildly, charging behind the slash like a bull. Her stop-thrust glanced from the cloak, and he tackled her, bearing them down on the dais. Their blades clattered to the stonework. He straddled her, and his fist slammed into her jaw. The lamplight shattered into darkness and starbursts. She covered her face with her forearms, blocking another blow. She bucked her hips and tried to roll, but one of his hands shoved down her breast. The other grasped for her throat.

The dais began to shake. Above her the lamps and statuette rattled, sliding across the altar. From the distance came a massive *roar* — the rage of a dragon, the thunderclap of an angel's spear, the gates of hell unlocked. The altar leapt and toppled, falling toward the curtain of tapestries. The statuette of the god bounced, ringing, and the lamps shattered.

The floor spasmed underneath them. Don Ricardo lost his balance, and she pushed him away. She rolled free but couldn't stand on the roiling floor. Something cracked above her — a fissure of dawn-light in the sanctuary roof. Clouds of dust billowed from the roof and walls. To her side, light became flame as the burning oil of the broken lamps consumed the base of a tapestry. The fire licked hungrily at the antique cloth.

"Quetar judges you!" she cried.

On hands and knees, the viceroy glared at her. The cloak's hood had fallen from his head, and firelight glistened on his bloody cheek. "The Isles defy his judgment — and the rule of the Church and its puppet-king. We'll survive and build ... and this cloak will be our symbol as I lead us to independence, to freedom!"

He tried to stand before another tremor wracked them. He fell again and gasped as a beam from the ceiling broke and tumbled free, landing beside him with a crash of dust and smoke. For a moment, he was only a man, guilty of theft and murder in the eyes of Quetar — and hers.

She saw his fear and naked throat and spun toward him, uncoiling her whip. He lifted his arm as a shield, but the steel-tipped leather, braided and twice-blessed, curved past his shoulder and encircled his neck.

She jerked the leash tight and pulled him toward her, sunk her hips to the trembling floor and scuttled behind him. She looped the leather around his neck again and drove the sole of her boot into his back, *pushing* with her legs. He thrashed as the church itself thrashed and the tapestries behind them became a wall of flame. The tang of indigo dye and smoke seared her nostrils, her eyes watered, and the front wall of the sanctuary *twisted* and began to fall. The viceroy gasped, clawing the dais.

"He didn't die in the cloak," she hissed. "He became a martyr because he gave it away, to protect someone else ..."

His arms and legs quivered and fell limp. Stones and beams crashed on the floor. She unwound the whip from his throat, rolled him onto this side, grimacing at his bulging eyes and swollen tongue. Hurrying, she unfastened the cloak and tugged it free of his body. By the fallen altar, she knelt and threw it over her own cloak and lowered the hood. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. She heard beams crack and fall, felt the walls of the sanctuary become cascades of stone.

Within the shadow of the martyr's cloak, the crush of rock and timber flowed around her as gently as the touch of Bianca's hand or the brush of a phoenix's wings. Within its shadow, she knelt and prayed, until the end of the world's fury was spent.

• • •

WHEN she crawled free of the rubble, Padre Nicos cried out and ran to aid her. As she told him the tale, he wept and fell to his knees before her, kissing the hem of the cloak.

In the evening, divers lifted Bianca's body, the waist wrapped in chain, from the harbor, not far from one of the piers. Gabriela asked the priest to preserve it for travel, while she drew the five-rune blade from Bianca's belt. The runes, mere lines on metal, no longer glowed.

Two mornings later, *The Stargazer* set sail for Velifara, flying the flag of the Church triumphantly from its mast. Gabriela stood by the rail during the long days, staring out at the glittering sea. She duelled with no one on the deck nor read the Unburned Codex in the silence of her cabin. Her mentor was gone.

Runes, the Church taught, were words — names of power — in the tongue of angels. What Gabriela pondered as the spires of Velifara solidified on the horizon was the change in her sight, the dimming of the third rune she was likely to receive. Brighter now, more consuming, was the memory and scar of Bianca's loss.

If runes were the words of angels, more piercing still are the names the world carves upon our hearts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Rhodes tends a sacred grove in Upstate South Carolina, where he multi-classes as an attorney, soccer coach, and writer. (Or is he simply a hexblade warlock?) He's been a finalist in The L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest and a reviewer for FantasyLiterature.com. His stories have appeared in *Black Gate* and *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly* and are collected in his book *Shadow, Light, & Steel* (available on amazon.com). He's online at www.facebook.com/rrhodeswriter, and @rrhodeswriter.



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!

Dakagna, Queen of Swords

Cazer: Init +3 (+6 w/ surprise); Atk bite +4 melee (1d8+4); AC 18; HD 4d8; MV 30' or burrow 60'; Act 1d20; SP subterranean surprise (if cazer emerges from underground, target must make Luck check or be surprised), surprise crit (crit range increased to 17-20 on surprise attack), devouring crit (instead of crit table, cazer deals 2d6 extra damage and devours one of the target's extremities; roll 1d5: 1 = head, 2 = left arm, 3 = right arm, 4 = left leg, 5 = right leg), acid blood splash (if attacker inflicts melee wound, they must make a DC 12 Reflex save or take 1d4 dmg), death throes (for 1 round after cazer's death, those within 5' must make a DC 10 Reflex save or suffer 1d3 damage from dying bite); SV Fort +4, Ref +3, Will +2; AL N.

A slight ripple of the sand. Something moved beneath, like the wake of a shark under the Agate sea. It burst from the ground, silent, spilling sand. A glimpse of mandibles, segmented body, sharp claws. A cazer ... the wyrm sprang forward, engulfed the

man's head, and tore it off ... It had a carapace, like a scorpion, but segmented like a giant worm. Its face resembled a large rat, but with mandibles and no eyes. Long whiskers. Huge maw, jaw flexible like a snake's. Long teeth. Dakagna struggled to see weak points. So be it.

The Lovers of Essail Pass

Thriceman: Init +0; Atk armored fist +16 melee (2d12+8) or weapon +16 melee (as weapon+8) or hurled object +8 missile fire (1d8+8, range 150'); AC 18 (14 unarmored); HD 10d10; MV 35'; Act 1d24; SP attacks count as magical, crits on natural 20 and 24, giant crit (d4 on Crit Table G), magic resistance (d30 on saves, d100 on saves vs. mental effects), vulnerability (d12 on saves vs. poison); SV Fort +8, Ref +6, Will +2; AL L.

They alone had, with alchemy and sorcery, kept alive and bred the kingdom's bestial thricemen. And any battle with the magic-infused walking walls was a difficult one ... A thriceman's torso was often misshapen, but heavily bound with muscle ... Weaned on mash and spellwork, they grow from listless children into living battering rams.

To the Darkhouse

Gigantic Starfish: Init +0; Atk arm grab +4 melee (1d6+4 plus crippling crush, reach 15'); AC 17; HD 5d20 (10 hp damage to sever an arm); MV 10'; Act 2d20; SP crippling crush (DC 14 Strength check to break grip, or bones are broken such that target's MV is 0'), regeneration (1d4 hp per round, 1 arm per 3 rounds); SV Fort +8, Ref +0, Will +3; AL N.

"Jetsam!" cried Laughknot, lunging to grab him. She failed, and something snared her leg. She shrieked. But the outburst affected her aim not at all; she slashed down with her saber, once, twice, on the third stroke toppled backward, free. What

clung to her leg, night-black and puckered, was the largest starfish arm Gaunt had ever seen ... Jetsam toppled from the twisted gateway, wide of eye and soaked of fur. After him surged an enormous dark starfish speckled with purple.

Statue Guardian: Init +4; Atk weapon +3 melee (as weapon+3) or tentacle bash +3 melee (1d3+3); AC 20; HD 5d8; MV 30'; Act 2d20; SP construct (immune to critical hits, immune to mental effects), magic reflection (permitted Will save vs. spell check, even if save is prohibited; if successful, spell is reflected upon the caster), small size (can be trapped in a sufficiently large and sturdy container), spell use (granted by remote magic source, judge's discretion), vulnerability (if remote magic source is extinguished, so is guardian), understands Common and can communicate via gestures; SV Fort +2, Ref +5, Will +4; AL L.

She could not help looking at the bird however ... and discovering the misshapen golden statue had moved to the smaller altar. It was as animate as a gold-painted octopus, jabbing the bigger altar's serrated knife between the bars of the bird cage ... The golden blasphemy evidently preferred human victims, for it noticed Gaunt and eagerly splashed her way.

Head Hunter

Kubikajiri: Init +4; Atk decapitating strangle +5 melee (2d5 plus decapitate); AC 10; HD 4d8; MV fly 30'; Act 1d20: attacks ignore non-magical armor; SP decapitate (if strangle's 2d5 dmg roll comes up doubles, target must make Fortitude save vs. DC equal to strangle damage or be decapitated), head-eating vulnerability (for the round after a decapitation, the kubikajiri is vulnerable to normal weapons as it spends its action consuming its fresh head), salt vulnerability (if covered in salt, vulnerable to normal weapons for 1d3 rounds; allowed Ref save vs. attack roll), un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, cold damage, etc.); SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +2; AL C.

"The kubikajiri is a headless spectre that devours the heads of others while it searches for its own." Takuji paused and tried to repress the shudder that ran through him. "I've seen it kill. A sickening sight. It sets upon its victim with clawed hands and rips the head from their shoulders. Then it presses the decapitated head to the stump of its neck and its body draws it down as though the stump were some horrible mouth."

Wings of Heat

Mountain Keeper: Init +5; Atk claw +4 melee (1d8+1); AC 15; HD 4d8; MV 40'; Act 2d20; SP follow-up fangs (if both claws hit same target, then additional bite attack +4 melee (1d6+1)), terrifying screech (all within 60' must make DC 13 Will save or suffer -1d to attacks for 1d3 rounds), un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.), partially immunity to non-magical weapons (immune unless incoming

attack roll is a natural 16, 20, 24, or 30), death throes (spirit moths harmlessly erupt from body); SV Fort +1, Ref +4, Will +3; AL C.

Their segmented limbs and bulbous bodies were draped in golden finery that obscured the chattering terror beneath. They were the Mountain Keepers, and they would allow no mortal to scale the mountain and reach the realm of the dead ... The beast lurched from a hole in the mountain, its insectile claws scoring the stone as it crawled down the cliff-face. The six-legged abomination's hulking body was wrapped in a gilded cocoon of coins and jewels that jangled and swayed as it skittered closer. From beneath its glimmering, kingly cowl a face met Acheron's heavy brow. A visage like a man's, but skeletal.

Fog Drinker: Init +3; Atk ringed maw +3 melee (1d10) or ichor spit +3 missile fire (1d3 plus goop-eye, range 30') or careless whisper (special); AC 14; HD 3d8; MV fly 10' or crawl 30'; Act 1d20; SP goop-eye (DC 11 Reflex save or partially blinded; suffer -1d to hit for 1d3 rounds), careless whisper (DC 13 Will save or fall prone, apathetic and helpless for 1d4 rounds, range 40'), nauseous aura (anyone within 15' of a fog drinker must make a DC 13 Fortitude save or gag helplessly for 1 round); SV Fort +3, Ref +1, Will +2; AL N.

Four human-like shapes coalesced from the shimmering fog around Acheron. They were thin and impossibly tall, wading through the lotus stalks like giants, clad in cloaking, diaphanous wings that glimmered like the twinkle in the eye of a nightmare. Their heads were naught but abhorrent, spiraling clusters of mandibles and maxillae wreathed by feathered antennae. As they encircled Acheron, their mouth-parts bent and clicked like crawling fingers and they inhaled the fog with an insatiable lust, their bodies twitching with disturbing pleasure.

The Darkness and Ral'shaa

Pale Thing: Init +7; Atk draining finger +4 melee (1d3 plus 1d6 Strength); AC 13; HD 3d8; MV 50'; Act 1d20; SP pale death (draining finger's victims reduced to zero Strength are dead with body turning white), supernatural origin vulnerable to banish; SV Fort +1, Ref +7, Will +2; AL N.

Pictures of small, pink, man-shaped creatures with infantile over-sized heads and large saucer-like eyes graced the hallway, engaging in acts too foreign for him to comprehend ... the sickly light was joined by something resembling a song in some unknown and unwanted tongue. Working his way closer, he could make out the foul chamber filled with the obscene fey ... Expecting pink skin, they were in fact something of a mottled white, the larger ones graced by sores and the smaller by scarification. Ribbons of black hair sprouted from their shoulders, draping oleaginously down their thin arms. But it was at the end of those arms that Ral'shaa saw their most repellent feature: a single, scaly, pulsating, grub-like finger.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?



**Do not despair, Mortal Dogs!
Issue 9 is already well begun.**

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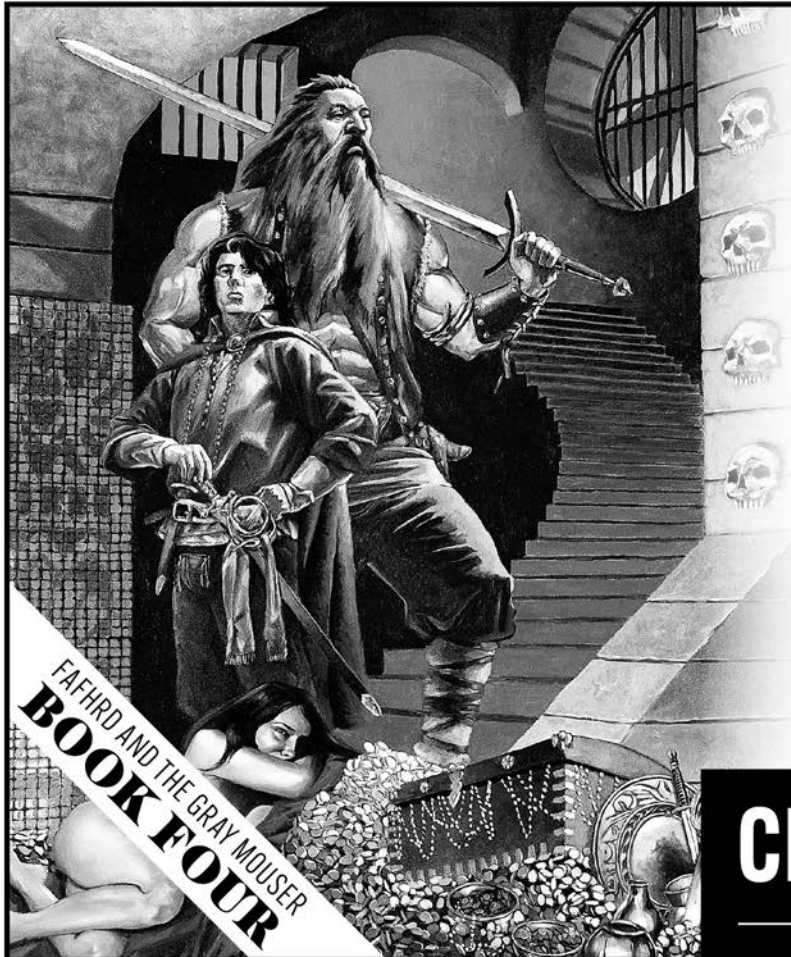
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terrors of dark necromancy,
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• • •

**So Endeth Issue 8. Go forth now
and tell all you see of its glories!**

• • •

So Sayeth the Skull



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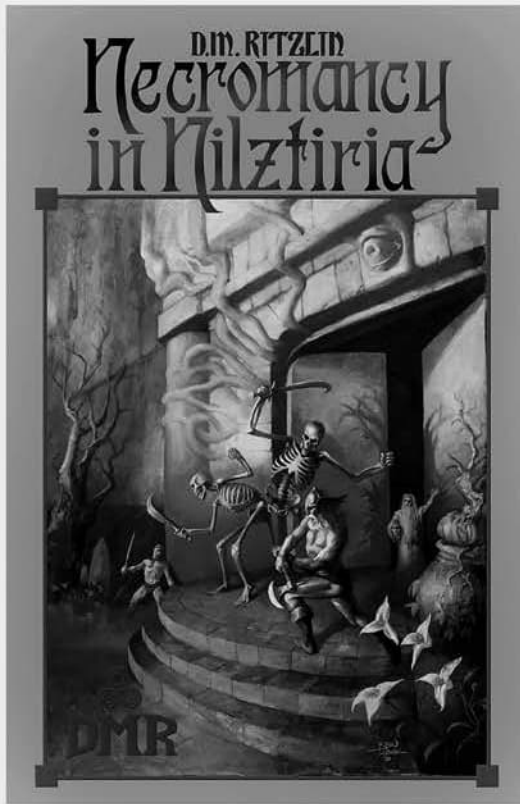
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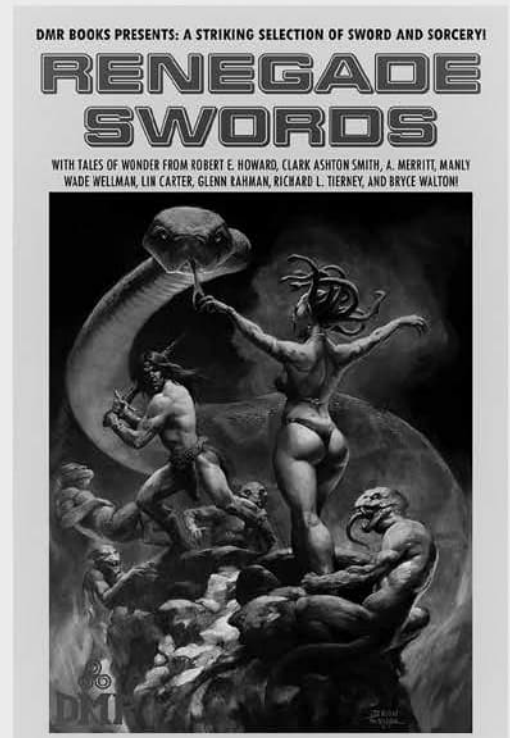
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BY D.M. RITZLIN

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TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

IN THIS ISSUE...

Dakagna, Queen of Swords, by W. J. Lewis

Dakagna tried to keep her balance on the sludge of the floor, as the Leviathan's tail lashed towards her. She slipped, went with the movement, and dived. She felt something tear at her back, felt the familiar sensation of her blood flowing free.

Sky Pirates of the Savage Clouds, by James Enge

A Story of Marlock Ambrosius: "Abandon ship!" shouted Marlock, and leapt into a nearby schooner. Eye-searing spearpoints of light bristled at him. He gripped Tyring with two hands and hewed at them, as if they were a field of wheat.

Pipes of Clan MacLaird, by Sean Crow

"I am Cayden MacLaird!" he shouted over the pipes. "Today I walk the path into the Dark Veil, and the Shades sing a merry tune honoring my arrival. Who amongst you wishes to join me?"

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