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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. 6

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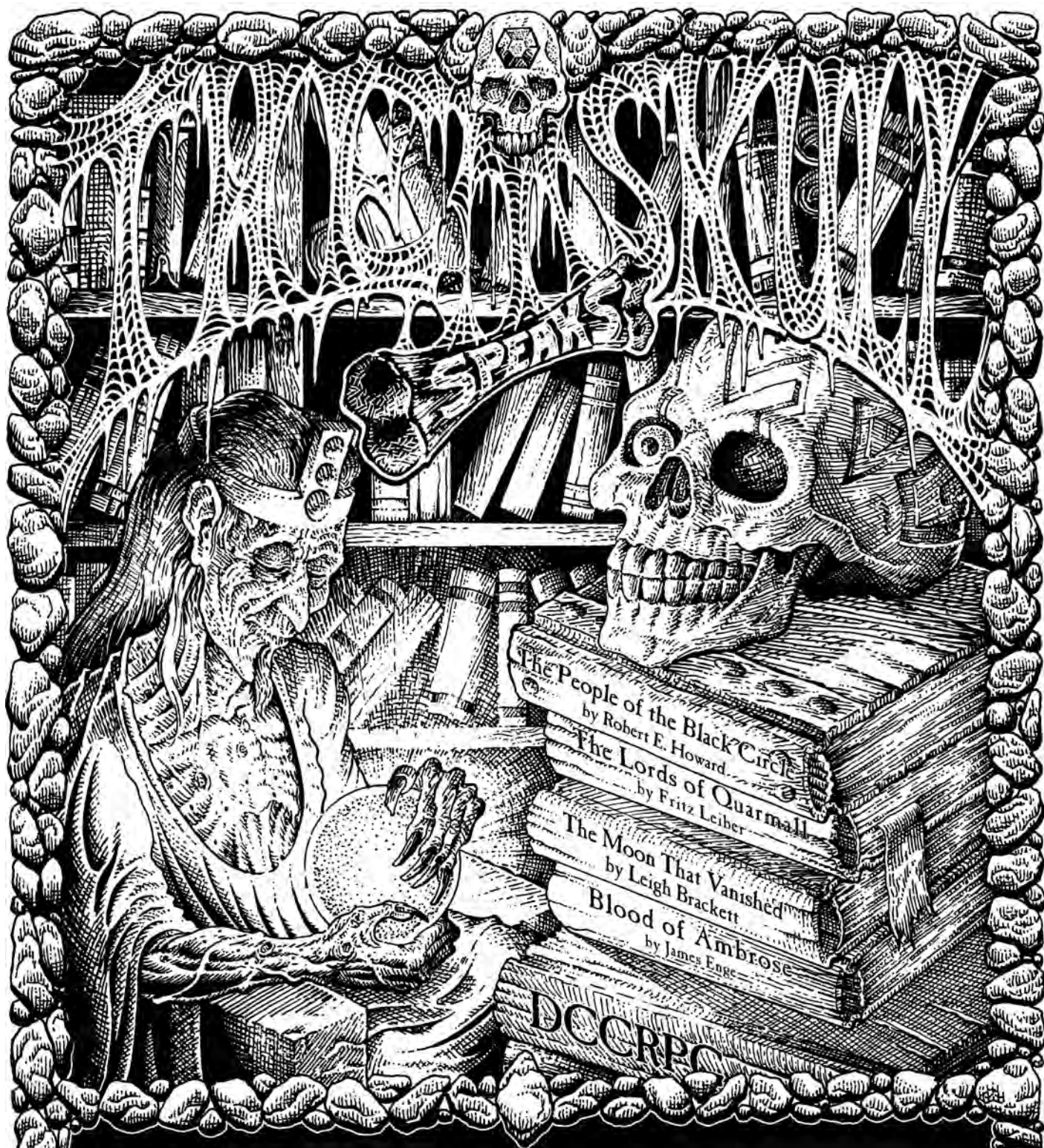
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The Skull and we, his minions, would like to dedicate this issue to the memory of Charles Saunders, creator of Imaro and Sword & Soul. A gifted writer, Saunders died too soon, with only a fraction of the acclaim his creations deserve. He may have passed, but let his works live on.

More information about Charles Saunders and his fiction can be found out there on the interweb, or our own web site at: www.goodman-games.com/tfms/2020/10/04/in-remembrance-of-charles-saunders-1946-2020/ and here: www.goodman-games.com/tfms/2020/12/29/charles-r-saunders-nyumbani-ales/

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Skull's sixth fabulous issue. My fellow minions and I are delighted to present another tome of wonders. In the long weeks since you last held a new issue of the Skull's favorite magazine, we've experienced a variety of changes. First, the illustrious Bill Ward signed on as our Website Editor. Bill's brilliant, well-read, articulate, and organized and is, far-and-away, one of the finest essayists working in this and its related genres. We are delighted to have him on the team. If you haven't seen the fantastic articles he and the rest of our talented team are drafting at www.talesfromtheskull.com get you hence! There's lots of great information there about our favorite genre and writers and their fiction, old and new.

Second, we held our first open submissions period starting in January of 2021. You'll begin to see the treasures we've found in issue 7 onward. As I write this it's early March and we've found some real gems, as well as work from promising writers who we hope will submit again. The Skull has foretold that more treasures await us in the final weeks of this submission period. The team here can hardly wait to share all of it with you in issues to come.

I've already been asked if we will open for submissions again next year, and given the glories we've unearthed, we probably will, although we may shorten the opening time, or have two shorter opening periods, one at either end of the year. We must consult the Skull.

As for this issue, it presents you with favorites old and new. Long-time readers will be delighted to see new adventures of both James Enge's Morlock and J.C. Hocking's Benhus in two of my very favorite adventures from them both. Don't worry if you haven't read anything about either character before—as always, each one can stand alone. Violette Malan and I haven't had our own writing appear in quite as many issues as those two gents, but we're back again with Dhulyn and Parmo and Hanuvar, though not, as yet, in any kind of crossover. Given that the four of us are writing in different worlds I'm not sure how a cross-dimensional adventure would work, but one never knows.

Newest of all is a tale from the talented Greg Mele, who brings us a stirring tale with a Meso-American fantasy feel. And oldest of all, in a sense, is Nathan Long's tale of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser.

Lankmar's two great rogues are some of the best known of all sword-and-sorcery characters, brought to life by one of the slyest, most gifted writers in the genre and the man who first gave a name to the sword-and-sorcery genre we know and love: the late, great Fritz Leiber. His *Swords Against Death* collection was one of the two touchstones that launched my lifelong love of heroic fantasy, and those same adventures (along with other great ones) had an even larger impact upon Nathan Long, who had this to say about the opportunity to draft a new adventure of the mighty twain:

More than any other writer, more than Tolkien, more than Howard, more than Moorcock, Fritz Leiber instilled in me my love of fantasy, and sword-and-sorcery in particular. His delight in wordplay, whimsy, and wit shape my writing to this day, and I consider him one of the true immortals of the field. Thus, it was a great and terrifying honor when Howard Andrew Jones and Joseph Goodman asked me to try my hand at a Fafhrd and Gray Mouser pastiche, and I feel presumptuous even to have accepted. I can only hope that my story is received in the spirit it was written, not as an addition to the canon, but as a tribute to it—a love letter to my first and fondest inspiration, Fritz Leiber.

Joseph and I think he succeeded admirably and are pretty sure you're going to love it. By the time you're reading this he'll probably be working on a third tale; as I'm writing it he's working on a second. We plan on keeping him busy creating new Lankmar adventures for a long while.

As with previous issues, at the back of this one you'll find some of the monsters and other mad creations our writers dreamed up converted into game statistics by the nefarious Terry Olson. I can't tell you what a delight it is to see things that I invented translated so that they can be used at game tables across the world. All of the authors would love to hear if you try any of them out in your own games. Please write and tell us about any of your experiences with them at skull@goodman-games.com.

While we're on the subject of gaming, I wanted to address a misconception that pops up in some reviews of the prose we print. While Goodman Games is justly famed for *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, the game created by Joseph Goodman, these stories aren't "game fiction." By that I mean that Joseph and I don't commission writers to draft prose with any special consideration toward being "gameable." Every single one of our authors makes up whatever they want, and if it seems as though what they've done is a perfect fit at someone's table, well, that's just because monsieur Olson does such a great job.

I had much more I planned to say, but I hear the summons of the gong. It's time for the weekly meeting with The Skull, so I will sign off and leave you to savor the adventures that lie before you.

Swords Together!

—Howard Andrew Jones

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

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



CALIBASK



'S WOMAN



A Tale of the King's Blade

By **JOHN C. HOCKING**

Illustration by **JENNELL JAQUAYS**

THE estate was small and occupied a corner of two outlying streets on the fringe of the student ghetto. Benhus let himself in through the rusty gate and made his way along an overgrown path, across a dry and dreary sward and through a patch of untended garden. The house itself was interesting, all of wood, single storied and square with a low domed roof. Benhus noted that the windows were shuttered despite it being late morning. The hot sun pressed down in silence as his sandals scuffed dust from the path.

Drawing closer to the wide porch, shadowed beneath an extended overhang of roof, Benhus slowed his steps. There was an unused little moat, four paces across, not quite knee deep and made of worn white marble. It formed a sharp cornered square around the house and looked to have been created to add beauty and atmosphere to the landscape, but if it had ever flowed with water and been ornamented by green plants or colorful fish it must have been long ago. Now it was a stained stone trench scattered with dirt and dry leaves. Benhus hesitated on the level little bridge that brought the path across the moat and a stretch of dry lawn to the porch and the house's front door. He flexed his right arm absently, wincing a little, before striding up the steps and knocking on the wide double doors.

Moving into the porch's shade seemed to amplify the hot glare of the sunlit grounds behind him. He waited a long moment, then knocked again. No answer. Swearing under his breath, Benhus laid a hand on the right door and pushed gently. It swung open on semi-darkness. He walked in.

There was a shallow hall, more of an antechamber, opening on the central room beneath the roof's low dome. It was dim and cooler here, with a slight stale smell to the air. The rug just within was laying at an odd angle and the table beside the door was covered with clutter. This did not seem like the home of a sorcerer, even an apprentice.

"Hello?" called Benhus. He thought he heard movement.

There was a figure across the chamber, a spectral silhouette against the far wall.

"Who comes unbidden to my house!" The words were threatening but the voice had a distinct tone of uncertainty.

"I'm Benhus, the King's Blade. I'm supposed to have an appointment."

"What? Oh. Oh yes." The figure tugged a knotted cord dangling down a wall and light abruptly poured in through the ceiling as shutters ground aside in the dome above, exposing dusty skylights. The wide room was revealed to be full of mis-matched furniture including a table along the far wall that was scattered with the remains of several meals, chairs of various designs and degrees of disrepair, and an imposing central table that looked too stout for less than five or six men to lift and carry.

"I am Valkin. I admit I'd forgotten our appointment. I've much on my mind."

Valkin, a thin figure in loose brown robes, advanced to greet Benhus but did not offer his hand. Benhus squinted at him sourly. This man was supposed to be a wizardly adept, an apprentice in the service of one of the King's most respected sorcerers. The fellow could not have been much older than Benhus and had the looks and manner of one younger still. His head was shaved smooth as an egg. Brown eyes that were wide and self-consciously earnest blinked at him. His thin neck jutted out of the slack collar of his robes and gave the apprentice the appearance of a child wearing a costume.

"So you're the King's new agent? Hmm." The moist brown eyes looked him up and down with such casual skepticism that Benhus glanced down at his outfit despite himself. He'd dressed informally but not disrespectfully. He wore one of his better white shirts with leather breeches. At his belt were his favorite short sword in its elegant new scabbard and a white-hilted dagger in a matching sheath. He looked up, annoyed with himself.

"That's right, and you're supposedly an apprentice in Imperial wizardry," he said coldly. "The Lady Bethelanne Thale told me that you might have the ability to answer a few questions for me. Was she mistaken?"

"I am a student in the service of Calicask, who is called the Gray Umbra by his fellows in the Wizard's High Council. There is no sorcerer in the whole of the Triad as skilled or as dreaded as my master. I am certain I can answer any questions you might have. Wait." Valkin hesitated, lifted a finger to his lips, and then broke into an unexpected grin. "This was about a collection of nobleman's comforts, correct?"

"Yes, I inherited a drawer full of the things and was left with no note as to what most of the little wands can do, much less how many charges each might have."

Valkin's reserve seemed to vaporize, for he smiled and brought his hands together like a pleased child.

"Oh yes! You've assumed the role of your dead teacher! I remember now. There were rumors about that, as I'm sure you know."

Benhus shrugged. He knew for a time some wondered if he had deserted his teacher in the tomb of Nervale. As he had deliberately sealed the tomb upon his stern and disdainful mentor, he was untroubled by such gossip.

Valkin turned and made his way toward the huge table near the room's center, stood beside a tall-backed chair, impatiently pushed aside a scattered array of scrolls and pens, then began rifling through a wooden box.

Benhus noticed, sitting beside a squat ivory candle with a thin flickering flame, was a small replica of the house mounted on a flat square of polished wood, complete with the white marble moat clearly inset into the grain. The whole was sealed beneath a dome of crystal which was tinted a rather bilious green. He reached out a hand to touch it but Valkin abruptly pushed it out of his reach and spread a dark roll of heavy cloth on the table's surface. The fabric was black, shot through with bright silvery threads and emblazoned with strange sigils and designs with the same metallic sheen.

"Place the wands on the medium," Valkin said, seating himself in the high-backed chair. Benhus pulled a small pouch from his belt and shook it out onto the cloth. Five short cylindrical objects clattered into the center of the black fabric. The apprentice sorcerer pressed his lips together and frowned gently.

"Interesting. Quite a variety. This isn't all of them of course?"

"No, like I said, I've a drawer-full. More than twenty. I thought you'd want to start with a manageable amount."

"Manageable," said Valkin with a touch of petulance. "I take it you don't have much experience with Imperial sorcery." He gestured at a chair but Benhus remained standing.

"Little, although I've dealt with more than enough Southron magic."

The adept snorted softly in derision. "Southron magic. It can hardly even be called that. Shamans prancing about in fetid animal skins and casting rat bones to predict the weather."

Benhus could have told him otherwise but it hardly seemed worth the effort. He pulled up a chair and sat, his white dagger catching briefly on the table's edge.

"Just a moment," said Valkin. "Can I see that weapon?"

Benhus drew the white dagger and handed it to Valkin, hilt first. The blade shimmered in the diffuse sunlight. The apprentice swept the little wands aside, laid the dagger down on the cloth and then held both hands over it, palms down. He clenched his eyes shut. There was a long silence.

"Interesting. Where did this come from?"

"It was given by the king to my teacher as a gift for his years of service. He put it in a drawer and never used it. I use it. It's very sharp." Benhus smiled slightly at his understatement.

"Hm. The hilt is a relatively recent addition and seems to have a mild enchantment laid upon it to keep it clean. Uncommon spellwork, very utilitarian."

"I'll be damned." The smile Benhus had restrained broke wide on his face. "I wondered how it stayed so white."

"But the blade is very old. Very old. I'd have to work on it for a while to learn anything about its origins. The edge clearly has some manner of sorcerous enhancement. Gods, but that is a keen blade. If you were fast enough, I'd wager you could slash a man to the heart without him even knowing he'd been cut."

"I'm trying to get faster," admitted Benhus. He rubbed his arm, sore from practicing quick draws with the dagger. He'd recently faced someone much swifter than himself and although he'd found a way to avoid a clash of arms the encounter still troubled him.

"If you let me have it for a while, I'd likely be able to tease out more information."

"No," said Benhus, who had come to regard the white dagger as something of a good luck charm. "Maybe another time." He reached across the cloth, took the blade back and sheathed it.

A brief thin tone chimed. On the table the miniature replica of the house suddenly shimmered. White ripples of soft light coursed over its little glass dome.

Valkin started, staring at it.

Benhus heard a methodical tramping that he identified immediately as marching feet. He didn't think he'd ever be long enough out of the Legion to forget that wearisome sound.

"Visitors?" he asked.

Valkin stood up unsteadily. "Oh no. Why would he...?"

The words were apparently not directed at Benhus. The apprentice moved quickly around the table to face the front doors. He clasped his hands before him, his posture formally straight but transparently uncomfortable.

Benhus came to his feet, took a few steps backward, and leaned against the wall, feeling the polished wood cool against his shoulder blades. This was interesting.

The doors were thrust open and a double column of what appeared to be uniformed soldiers marched in. The first four formed a line just inside the room, then stood at rigid attention. Following them was a small man clad from head to foot in gray, and behind him came a woman in a voluminous blue cloak. Four more uniformed men filed in and formed a second line, so that the woman and the gray man stood with eight guards ranked behind them as if this was some kind of assembly.

To Benhus the entire tableau had a sense of unreality. The guards were not in the armor of the city's soldiers. They wore cuirasses, greaves, bracers and visored helms of a uniform deep gray, moved with military precision, and looked so much like one another that Benhus couldn't spot an identifying trait amongst them.

The man, not much larger than a child but clearly in command, wore an odd gray outfit, soft breeches, shirt, gloves and slippers that covered his body completely. A shallow hood mantled his head, and a strange thin veil, a paler gray than the rest, clung to and obscured his face.

Benhus pushed away from the wall, an uncomfortable tension rippling through him. This could be no one but Calicask, the Gray Umbra. He had but a moment to register this before his eyes fell upon the woman.

She was tall, almost as tall as Benhus, and the shimmering blue cloak fell from her shoulders to the floor, enveloping her from the neck down so that her head seemed almost to float, disembodied, on a glimmering pillar of azure. Hair the color of honey was piled atop her head and spilled in a torrent of heavy curls down her back. Her neck was slim and strong and her jawline as hard and straight as the blade of a dagger. Eyes of startling violet gazed ahead and down as if she had little interest or concern as to her whereabouts or companions.

Benhus did not know eyes could be that color. He felt an abrupt and insistent certainty that this was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. With effort Benhus looked away from her and focused on Valkin. The apprentice was trembling visibly and seemed unsteady on his feet.

"Greetings, apprentice," said the man in gray. His voice was soft but filled the ear completely, and his tone was gentle but suffused with a tempered scorn.

"Greetings, master," said Valkin. His voice was small, but he held it steady.

"I imagine you're full of wonder as to why I might visit you in what passes for your home. There are a few things which you need to hear from me directly."

Valkin nodded, tight lipped.

"First of all, your work deciphering the 47th passage of the Journal of Bydroth-Vallakar is coming along better than expected. I do hope you can have it done before the new moon. But I needn't have come here simply to inform you of that."

Valkin stood still, tensed as if awaiting an inevitable and destroying blow.

"No," went on Calicask smoothly. "I came here about these." From the breast of his gray garment the sorcerer pulled three envelopes of creamy parchment. "Do you recognize your work?"

Valkin nodded rapidly, blinking his eyes as if they stung.

"Should I read your love letters to our little gathering? No? Indeed? Oh, I am forced to agree. It would be very much for the best to spare us the discomfort of hearing your cloying idiocies spoken aloud. Thus..."

Calicask extended the letters as if to give them to Valkin and, with a sound like the cracking of a whip, they burst into brilliant white flame. He dropped them but they were tattered ash before they touched the floor.

"But let it not be said that I do not have some understanding of your adolescent foolishness. Damaris..."

He lifted a hand to gesture gracefully at the woman.

Still gazing placidly ahead, she shrugged, and her cloak slipped from her shoulders and dropped to the floor, where it lay in a sapphire pool at her feet. A golden belt encircled her hips and from it depended a strip of blue silk, a handbreadth wide, that reached to just above her knees. She was otherwise naked.

"No more love letters to Damaris, apprentice Valkin," said the sorcerer. "You must understand that your master's will overrides any and all concerns. Damaris is mine. Tell him, my dear."

Damaris's violet gaze rose and fixed on Valkin, who seemed to shrink in his oversized robes. Benhus was staring at her so hard his eyes had begun to smart and he had to make himself blink.

"I cannot be yours, Valkin. I belong to Calicask. I owe him everything." Her voice was low and musical.

Benhus saw that Calicask was pulling back his hood, digging gloved fingers behind his gray veil.

"Besides," the wizard said as he peeled the veil from his face, "I have marked Damaris for another. Someone who will be a valuable ally."

Calicask's head was bald and mottled like a rotting apple. Deep scars crisscrossed his waxen face and each eye was covered with a pale caul like the cooked white of an egg. Benhus thought that the sorcerer had to be blind, but if he was his every action belied it.

"You know me, Valkin," said Calicask, "and now your misguided comrade does, too." His terrible head turned, his blank gaze fell upon Benhus and a grin stretched scarred lips over yellow teeth. "I will forgive your foolishness this time. You are young and such ignorance is part of your nature. Pray be more thoughtful in the future."

The sorcerer gestured at Damaris, who bent swiftly to catch up her cloak and swirl it about her shoulders. He stepped closer to her and held out his hand, which she took in her own. The guards turned as one and began marching out the door.

The two followed and as Damaris stepped out the doorway, the edge of her cloak flaring behind, she turned her long head and looked at Benhus. Her strange eyes met his and he felt the connection all the way down to his toes. Then she was gone.

"Gods and demons!" choked Valkin, stumbling back to lean on the table's rim. "Twin Gods of Mercy! Damn it! Four Gods of Love..." He put a hand to his eyes.

Benhus considered gathering up his nobleman's comforts and slipping away.

"Nine hells," said Valkin, "let's have a drink." He walked stiffly across the room and pulled an oversize jug from beneath the table scattered with the remains of carelessly prepared meals. It appeared to be one of a collection of similar jugs lined up there. Striding toward Benhus the apprentice tilted the heavy vessel back and drank, his narrow throat working as he gulped noisily. He lowered the jug, gasped, and passed it to Benhus.

The wine was of a variety Benhus had not sampled in many months, the kind favored by soldiers with very weak funds and very strong desires to get as drunk as possible. A wincingly strong, fortified beverage that he suspected might bleach the varnish from the table if spilled. He took several deep swallows and felt it burn all the way down.

"That's a drink all right," he said, handing the heavy jug back to Valkin, who guzzled another few gulps before setting it down on the table with a thump.

"So you've met Calicask," said the apprentice. There was a thin quaver of hysteria in his voice. "That's my master. Not one to envy, wouldn't you agree?"

"My teacher, Thratos, took some pleasure in making my life difficult, but yours is..." Benhus let his voice trail off.

Valkin gave a hollow laugh, dragged the jug across the table-top to the high-backed chair and sat down. "He has humiliated me often enough, but this lifted the practice to a polished craft."

"He couples that kindly disposition with good looks, too," said Benhus. The apprentice snorted again with brief laughter.

"His devotion to the Old Gods has led him to sacrifice much of what most men value in life. By all accounts he was once a handsome fellow, as tall as you or I and given to all the usual appetites. Now I doubt he feels much of anything, but I know he misses it. He relishes luxuries like fine food, baths, perfumes and... things of beauty."

"What of those guards? Only the elite of the legion march and move with that kind of precision. And they looked so much alike they reminded me of ants."

"Well, you know that Imperial sorcery often touches upon the mind as well as the body, and Calicask is a master of both disciplines. His guards have had their very engines of thought shaped by him. They are his creatures now, with little will of their own beyond a deep need to do exactly what he desires."

"Gods," said Benhus, taking a seat and reaching for the jug. The idea of someone meddling with his mind to make him something other than what he was filled him with queasy revulsion. "Do they consent to this?"

"Some do and some do not. This is new to you? It is more common than you might think. You know the big fellow who King Flavius always has close at hand? His Captain of the Guard? He's been touched a bit by Calicask to secure his bond to the King. He agreed to it, too."

Benhus shook his head in wonder, felt the pleasant dislocation of the fortified wine coursing through him and asked the question he'd wanted to ask from the start.

"Who's the woman?"

"Damaris," said Valkin and reached for the jug. "One of Calicask's concubines. I am in love with her."

Benhus didn't know what to say to that. To him love had always seemed a luxury of the nobility. He thought it odd that someone like Valkin could see themselves of even momentary interest to someone like Damaris, but he recognized that he had little experience with the ways of sorcerers, or with the ways of people in love for that matter.

"I met her at a royal gathering. She came on Calicask's arm but he left her alone to convene with the king. So, I spoke with her and...and I knew I loved her then. I saw her again at Calicask's manse when he had me in to translate some scrolls. I could tell that she remembered me and that she was unhappy."

"So she slipped out of Calicask's home to meet with you?" asked Benhus, indulging a curiosity he disdained.

"Oh no," said Valkin dejectedly. "That was the last time I saw her. I sent her the letters." He brightened a little and tilted the jug once again. "Worked harder on them than I do transcribing Calicask's most dire spells. I swear, Lord Kelsh himself would be proud of them."

Benhus attacked the jug anew, wishing he had never asked about the woman or at least found some way to learn about her that didn't involve the apprentice embarrassing himself.

Valkin stood up suddenly, swaying a little. "I still have true hope though. I could sense her emotion for me, couldn't you?" Benhus coughed and was grateful when Valkin continued speak-

ing before he could attempt an answer. "The bastard burnt three letters. Three. And I sent her four! She doubtless hoards one, keeping it from her master's sight."

This had gone on long enough for Benhus.

"My wands," he said flatly. "Can you take the time to tell me about the nobleman's comforts I brought to show you?"

Valkin squinted owlishly at him, then nodded and sat back down.

"Yes, of course. A simple task. Shouldn't expect one like yourself to truly understand anyway." This last was muttered and perhaps not meant to be heard.

The apprentice raked the collection of wands back into the center of the black square of cloth. He immediately singled out one that resembled nothing so much as a simple length of wrought iron. It might have once been part of a fence or a fire-place tool.

"An illuminator," said Valkin, "it casts light much like..."

"Sunshine," put in Benhus. "Excellent. I knew Thratos had a wand that did that but not which one it was. Can you tell how many charges?"

"That would take more... more study," Valkin burped. "But this is surely the most common of nobleman's comforts and each is generally good for thirty or so uses."

The apprentice hoisted the jug, drank, then picked up a stouter wand all of shiny black. He passed it from hand to hand thoughtfully.

"Never seen one of these before. It's a killer. Nasty, too. There's anti-life sorcery in its fabric." He grimaced. "Calicask would like this one."

"Really?" Benhus was intrigued. "How does it work? Can you tell how many charges it holds?"

"You'll really have to leave this one. I can't work fast on something like this."

The next was about the size of a man's thumb, covered with silver filigree. It looked more like a noblewoman's perfume bottle than a wand. Valkin held it for a long while before setting it down and looking at Benhus blearily.

"I-I think this one is very rare. Tell me, do you have another like it?"

"I think there was one of the same design but a different color. Is it a weapon?"

"No. I don't believe so. I'll keep this one, too. When you get home please check to see if you have another. It's very unlikely, but it might have a companion."

Benhus was disappointed. He thrust a finger at the smallest wand, a little thing that looked like an oblong lozenge of dark wood. "How about that one? Can't help but be curious about it. I found it in Thratos's bed."

"What?" Valkin grinned and wiggled a little in his seat. "Your teacher's bed?"

"I swear it," said Benhus. "All the others are from the armory and I trust each of those is more important, but I couldn't abide not knowing what this one did."

"Hmm." Valkin, smiling, clutched the little wand between both hands and closed his eyes. After a moment he set it down.

"This one is new to me, too. I can perceive that it evokes a physical effect, but it's muted. Very gentle. I'll study this one, too."

Benhus frowned. He had hoped to receive much more definitive answers, and promptly, but supposed there was nothing to be done about it.

"What about the last one?" He nudged a wand that looked like a piece of jewelry, golden with black inlay. He knew very well what this one did. Apparently, so did Valkin.

"Oh ho, the king used to have these made for some of his assassins, but they proved too costly and dangerous to produce, or so I've been told. They command a tremendous price on the black market."

"Can you tell the charges?" The wand was a grisly weapon that blasted its target into a weathered skeleton. Benhus had used it once and was pleased with the effect.

Valkin made a show of holding the golden wand over the cloth, then switched it to his right hand, leveled it at Benhus and triggered it with a sharp click.

Benhus exploded up out of his chair, knocking it over with a clatter and drawing the white dagger with a flash of steel and a feral snarl. Then he froze, though he couldn't say if it was because he realized that he hadn't been reduced to a skeleton or because of the expression of abject terror that distorted Valkin's face.

"No! No, it's spent, it's empty, it has no more charges! I knew it couldn't harm you!"

"Gods! That was your idea of a joke?" Benhus relaxed but did not sheath the white dagger. The apprentice had dropped the nobleman's comfort and pressed both hands to his face.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I thought you could trust me!"

Benhus lifted the white dagger, glistening like ice, before sheathing it. "How did you know you could trust *me*?"

Valkin placed his hands flat on the table and tried to regain his composure before deciding what he actually needed was another few swallows of wine. Benhus righted his chair and sat, declining when the apprentice offered him the jug.

"That wand is useless now," said Valkin at last. "At least you still have the black one. I'm certain that's a weapon and I promise to determine its nature for you." His words slurred slightly and Benhus saw that drink was starting to get the better of him. "You're lucky your master provided you with such lethal tools. Calicask allows me but a single killing spell."

"So how long until..." began Benhus.

"I hold my hands like so," went on Valkin obliviously, placing both fists over his sternum, "and speak the incantation, *N'karra-Vramgoth-Voss* and any foe standing before me... I mean any foe save Calicask... will be struck dead on the spot."

"Gods," said Benhus. "How many death spells do you plan to cast on me today?"

"Oh no," sputtered Valkin, "Oh no, no. The spell requires that I hold a physical component when I speak it. A little crystal skull, appropriately enough. You were never in any danger."

"Well, I'll take my leave before one of us gets killed. How long will you have to work over my nobleman's comforts before you can tell me more about them?"

"Um, I'll send you notice in no more than seven days," said Valkin, then continued, "It's not much of a death spell. Not much of a real defense for me. Calicask doesn't care. I've had to make my own defenses and I daresay he'd be surprised at them." He pulled the little glass-domed replica of his house away from the

ivory candle and pushed it up against the jug. "I deserve better. I deserve better in so many ways." The apprentice slumped in his chair and laid a hand on the jug.

"I'll be waiting on your word," said Benhus a little more loudly than necessary. He rose from the chair while Valkin stared morosely ahead and took no notice. He was still staring, sullen and unsatisfied, when Benhus slipped out the door and into the bright afternoon.

• • •

The next few days were uneventful for Benhus. The Lady Bethelanne Thale brought him a task for the king that involved locating an outspoken student who had been writing fiery essays decrying the monarch as an unfeeling tyrant and posting them around the city. Apparently, word got around that King Flavius was interested in having a personal conversation with the author as the notices abruptly stopped appearing and everyone Benhus spoke to in connection to the student believed the fellow had fled to Freehold or even Anparar.

In spite of his less than demanding duties, Benhus was troubled by a stealthy species of discontent that he scarcely recognized and did not understand. He would be awakened before dawn by a dream of which all he could recall was a pair of violet eyes. He dined, drank and gambled in the same establishment as usual, but the serving wench who leaned against him when he was winning seemed considerably less appealing than she usually did. Once, when Benhus passed through the Beggar's Market, he saw a woman in a long blue cloak from behind and experienced such a disorientingly vertiginous sensation that discovering the woman was not Damaris was of less issue than trying to explain to himself why he reacted as he did.

Three days later he was awakened, considerably earlier than he planned to rise, by a persistent knocking at his front door. He stumbled out of bed and down the hall to receive a sealed message from a royal courier. After managing to send the man off with a curt word of thanks rather than curses, Benhus broke the seal and laboriously read the message by lamplight. He could read only a little better than he could write and thus was pleased to find the message both simple and short.

Benhus,

Please look among your collection of nobleman's comforts for the companion to the silver wand you left in my hands. If you find it, please bring it to me immediately. This is a matter of life and death.

I will be forever in your debt,

Valkin

First Apprentice to Calicask, the Gray Umbra.

Annoyed but curious, Benhus carried the lamp to his armory and rummaged in the drawer his dead master had used to store the little wands. There, among designs that ranged from sticks of unfinished wood to rods of gleaming crystal, he found one that was thumb-sized and covered with a gilt filigree, in every way save its golden hue the twin of the wand he'd left with the apprentice.

He dressed and armed himself before pocketing the golden wand and setting off toward Valkin's home in the growing light and warmth of the rising sun.

It was early enough that there was little movement in the student ghetto, but Benhus noticed a luxuriously appointed coach sitting quietly in the shadow of some cedars not far down the street from the apprentice's house. As he drew near, he was surprised to see that it was a smaller, less elaborate, version of the royal coach used by the king. What would a member of the royal family be doing here?

The coach was shut up tight and the driver, all in black, hooded and hunched over like a sleeping crow, was silent and motionless. Benhus recalled that the king's first son, Prince Trenchor, had servants who wore black hoods and the memory brought him no comfort.

He glanced back once, as he passed through the gate into Valkin's courtyard, but the coach remained still and silent in the quiet morning air.

Benhus knocked and pushed on the door, thinking to enter at once, but found it locked. He rapped hard on the weathered wood and cursed softly.

"Who's there?" came Valkin's voice from within.

"It's Benhus, you half-wit. Did you summon anyone else this morning?"

The door opened and Valkin, clad in his oversized brown robes, ushered him in.

"Did you find it? Was it there? Did you bring it?"

Benhus didn't answer. The rug in the antechamber still lay at the same odd angle. The skylights in the dome were unshuttered and lit the central room with a mellow glow. Benhus could see the apprentice's cloth medium was spread out on the heavy table and his collection of nobleman's comforts laid out in a neat row upon it. He walked without haste to the table.

"Can you tell me about these now?" he asked, gesturing at the wands.

"Yes, of course, but did you find the silver wand's golden companion? Please, tell me."

"Yes, I found it and I brought it, but let's see what you learned about these. That's why I came to you in the first place."

Valkin joined him at the table. "Oh, very well. The plain metal one..."

"The Illuminator," put in Benhus. "How many charges?"

"Your master must have found many occasions to use it. 12 charges remain and it appears to once have held at least forty."

Benhus picked up the wand and thrust it into a pouch at his belt.

"This one?" He tapped the smallest, a little oblong of dark and polished wood.

"Hah, yes, the one from your teacher's bed! That one took a while to analyze. I suspect you, like myself, might find this disappointing. I suspected it might have an...ah...erotic use."

Benhus grinned despite himself. "That did occur to me."

"It's actually quite extraordinary. A diluted sleep spell. Not a weapon to render an enemy fully unconscious, you understand, but a much-filtered version I suspect he used to make himself drowsy as a preparation for a good night's slumber."

"Thratos used a nobleman's comfort to get to sleep?"

"It's remarkable, perhaps even unique. I imagine the king had it made especially for him."

Benhus thrust it into his pouch with the Illuminator. There was only one other wand on the square of cloth. The thicker one of

glossy black that Valkin had deemed a weapon, a killer imbued with inimical sorcery.

"That's a blood-molt. Very ugly and very lethal. Never heard of that kind of spell being incorporated into a nobleman's comfort," said the apprentice. "Would have thought it all but impossible. It holds two charges now, but I don't think it ever had more than three. Just probing it was hazardous. The spellwork that built it was complex and from a very dark place."

Valkin's hand abruptly reached out and snatched up the black wand. He held it loosely and took a step away from the table.

"Give me the golden wand, Benhus," he said tensely.

"Gods damn it, Valkin," snarled Benhus. "What the hell is this thing that you would rob me of it?"

"I need it. Silver and gold wands, the two together, are very valuable, true, but I'm not taking them to make myself a rich man. I need them..." His voice broke off. "Nine hells, you've already shown you can't understand why I need them. Give it to me. Now!" He thrust the wand at Benhus aggressively, face twisted in passion.

"All right. Don't blast me with the wand you say is the worst thing outside of hell's own latrine. Here it is." Benhus brought the gleaming little wand out of a pocket, moving slowly as he saw Valkin flinch as he did so. He set it on the cloth and stepped back as Valkin picked it up and thrust it into his robes.

A thin and familiar tone seemed to float on the air and Valkin's head snapped to one side, staring at the little replica of his home that sat on the table. White tendrils of delicate illumination rippled across its glass dome.

Valkin lunged bodily onto the broad tabletop; arm extended to slap a hand down on the model. The contents of the table, lit ivory candle and all, bounced with the impact. The instant his palm touched the crystal he spoke a word that sounded like ice breaking between his teeth. The apprentice floundered on the table as Benhus stared in disbelief. The skylights went suddenly dim, as if a cloud had passed before the sun.

"He's here," said Valkin. He rolled off the table and shook out his loose robes. Benhus noted that he'd left the black nobleman's comfort lying on the tabletop but said nothing. The apprentice was clearly preoccupied with something and Benhus felt a sudden stab of grim certainty as to what it was.

"Calicask?"

"Yes, but he can't get in now. Oh, he shall see how he's underestimated me!"

Valkin hurried across the room and out the front door, their disagreement apparently forgotten. Benhus followed him.

Valkin trotted out into the open and spread his arms wide in manifest delight. Benhus took a single step from beneath the roof's overhang, lurched to a halt and gaped in amazement.

There was what appeared to be a wall of foggy green-hued glass now surrounding the house. Its base was fixed in the dry moat of white marble. Benhus looked up and saw it stretched above and over the house, enclosing it like the crystal dome did the little model sitting inside on Valkin's table. Sunlight passing through the overarching barrier tinted the landscape a faded green.

"Hah, hah!" The apprentice shook his fists and danced an awkward little jig of defiance. "Never thought I had the skill, did you?"

Benhus could see shadowy figures outside the wall, on the path to the house, standing massed before the little bridge across the moat. He had no doubt the dim forms were Calicask's dutiful, mind-altered guards and that the Gray Umbra was not far behind them.

Staring through the wall he noticed something else. Benhus stepped down off the porch and drew near the translucent emerald barrier. It was full of movement, blurred and uncertain. Almost hypnotized, he stopped an arm's length away from the eerie rampart.

For a moment he thought he was gazing into the deepest sea, a captured slice of some watery element teeming with aquatic life, but then he saw, if only dimly, what kind of life it was.

Through clouds of bilious vapor, they seemed to swim, vague at first and then suddenly clear in their loathsome outlines. Something like a huge white snake, as thick as his thigh, writhed across his view, the long body segmented and lined with undulating legs. A cluster of black objects darted past like a school of fish, then reversed course to hover directly before him, looking like nothing so much as a cloud of bristling black hornets as big as his fist, proboscises jutting like hungry stilettos. Down in the bottom of the moat, among fleshy fronds that lashed and stretched toward him, scuttled bluish clawed things that might have been crabs.

Benhus recoiled, a visceral horror almost sickening him. Movement inside the wall heightened, creatures less easy to identify swirled nearer and clustered before him. The white segmented thing returned and thrust a head that proved to be a clump of wiggling tendrils at him. In spite of himself, Benhus retreated to the porch.

"What in the name of all the gods?"

"The Wall of Demons!" exulted Valkin. "A spell unseen for 200 years! No one can touch me now!"

"What the hell is it? A barrier Calicask can't pass through?"

"Oh, he could pass into it! But he'd never come out on our side!" Valkin was charged with energy and delighted by his magical feat. "It is a sliver of another world, an element alien to ours in almost every respect and hostile beyond anything you could conceive. You have seen only a few of the most minor of the things that dwell there."

"Horrible," said Benhus.

"And worse than they appear. They wouldn't simply devour your flesh, but your mind, your spirit and even your pain. The great Gray Umbra, for all his dread fame, wouldn't dare enter their realm!"

"But what about us?" demanded Benhus. When the apprentice looked at him uncomprehendingly, he added, "How do we get out of here?"

"Oh," said Valkin, "don't trouble yourself. I stored a great deal of food and water."

"Gods and demons! To last how long? Years? Do you imagine that Calicask is just going to wander off and forget about you?"

"Oh, he is a busy man and cannot linger here so very long. He may not forget me, but I'll find my way past him eventually."

Benhus almost boiled over with the desire to ask what part he played in this masterful strategy but fell silent. There had to be a way out of this situation and keeping Valkin as an ally until he learned all his possible options only seemed sensible.

Turning away in frustration, he saw that the shadowy mass of men on the other side of the Wall of Demons had split, opening a central path that framed a single small figure. An uncomfortable chill filled his belly. There was no mistaking who that was.

"Valkin," he said, but the apprentice had already taken notice and strode confidently to the base of the flat little bridge across the white moat, where he stood directly before the viridescent barrier. The dark little figure approached the wall's far side, four paces and a world of horrors away.

"I wish I could speak to him, but the Wall of Demons won't allow it. I imagine my teacher is unhappy with me, but even he must admit to my talents now!"

Benhus blinked at the surface of the translucent barrier directly before the apprentice. There was a blemish there, a small coil that twisted horizontally through the wall's substance, turning tightly like water spiraling down a drain. A slim silver needle seemed to slowly pierce the Wall of Demons.

"Valkin!" he said again, but the apprentice was staring at an opening, no bigger around than the haft of a broom, that now bored all the way through his sorcerous bulwark.

"Oh my foolish student," came a voice, nauseatingly familiar to Benhus, soft but as clearly audible as if it were spoken directly into his ear.

"M-master?" blurted Valkin, his face abruptly ashen.

"If there is some way you might utterly destroy your body," spoke Calicask. "Reduce it as closely as possible to its component atoms, that would be in your best interest. You have not simply betrayed my trust after I displayed such undeserved tolerance for your stupidities, you have also interrupted an important transaction and made me appear ineffectual before royalty. I will keep you alive, and in the furthest extremes of pain, until I wish to enjoy your death, and I will revive and kill you as many times and in as many ways as pleases me."

Valkin lifted both hands and spoke brittle words of conjuration, fingers clenching in the air as if attempting to squeeze shut the slender funnel that pierced the wall. His body went rigid and sweat gleamed at his temples.

"Oh, Valkin," came the voice of the Gray Umbra. "You are in truth incapable of learning. If you are finally capable of understanding how utterly foolish it was to oppose my will then you will understand how fruitless it would be to beg me for forgiveness and attempt to forestall the miserable and humiliating death you have brought upon yourself and your misguided comrade. I anticipate asking him if he forgives you for leading him to such a prolonged and pathetic conclusion to his short life."

And the twisting channel in the Wall of Demons expanded, gaping like a sewer pipe, widening until it laid bare the floor of the bridge and became a narrow defile beneath an emerald arch that rose to half again the height of a man.

Benhus heard Calicask's dry laughter as his gray guards filed swiftly into the passage through the wall with silent and manifestly deadly intent.

Valkin took several steps back, lifted both palms toward the gap in the Wall of Demons and began to chant. The first gray-clad guard burst out of the passage and hurled a black, weighted net at the apprentice.

Benhus leapt to intercept it, whipping the white dagger from its sheath, drawing a jolt of pain from his strained arm but slashing the flying net down the center so that half fell to Valkin's right and half to his left. He felt a fleeting sense of accomplishment for the hours of practice he'd spent drawing the dagger. Then he was crouching in front of Valkin, in the path of both the adept's sorcery and the guard who'd thrown the net and was now drawing his sword.

"Move!" yelled Valkin, but it was too late; the men met in a clash of steel.

Benhus got his short sword into play fast enough to block the overhead arc of the guard's attack. He thought to parry with his sword and strike with the white dagger, but the sheer force of the blow that met his uplifted blade was shocking. Steel rang on steel like the tolling of a cracked gong. His short sword was driven down forcefully enough that Benhus couldn't fully halt it and his attacker's edge struck the crown of his head hard enough to split the scalp. Pain seared across the top of his skull.

Benhus twisted from beneath the blow, lunged into the guard's body and hammered the white dagger through the center of the man's breast. The iridescent blade punched through the cuirass as if it were a crust of dry bread. The stabbed man did not cry out, but staggered a step back before, incredibly, lifting his sword to attack. For a moment Benhus lost his grip on the white dagger's hilt, then leaned in and snatched it, wrenching the weapon from the warrior's chest while thrusting powerfully with his sword. The point drove through the right eye of the gray guard's visor. Benhus withdrew and kicked the man in the midriff, watched as he folded, fell, and the next servant of Calicask stepped over the body to engage him. There was yet another directly behind, but Benhus pressed them hard enough that they had to emerge from the green passage one at a time.

"Out of my way!" screamed Valkin. "Out of my way! I can hold them back!"

Benhus shuttled to the right and the second guard followed, closing hard with a quick feint to the face followed by a side-long slash at his sword arm. The white dagger blocked the blow and its preternaturally keen edge notched the lesser steel of the sword, lodged there for the frozen instant Benhus needed to whip his own sword around in a lethal whirl that ended with solid finality in the gray guard's neck. Benhus dragged his weapon free from its lodging between helm and gorget and shoved the mortally wounded man away.

Benhus roared wordlessly at Calicask's men, brandishing his bloody blades. A savage exaltation boiled through his veins and he was filled with a terrible fire. The cut across his scalp blazed keenly and a wet warmth spilled onto his forehead.

"Come ahead and die!"

Another guard moved out of the emerald passage, a second stepped out from behind him and, with hard efficiency, cast a small mace at Benhus. The tactic was unexpected, but he ducked and twisted quickly enough that the thrown weapon didn't slam into his forehead but glanced off his shoulder. There was a jolt-impact and his left arm went numb.

"*Rakashar-Rakhanas-Derezath!*" Valkin's voice lifted in an otherworldly howl and a sourceless hum followed, rose and fell. The air seemed to thicken and blur before Valkin. Benhus was

pushed aside by an invisible cushion, a wind that pressed but didn't pass. He saw this had an even stronger effect on the attacking soldiers, forcing them back into the tunnel through the Wall of Demons, jostling one another to avoid contact with the translucent barrier, which was now alive with roiling forms. The wall around the passageway was boiling with hungry life, mercifully reduced to dark and tangled silhouettes.

Benhus approached the apprentice, who continued to hold his arms extended, panting with exertion.

"Can you hold them?"

"Yes," gasped Valkin, "and if I can just break Calicask's concentration I should be able to close his passageway."

Benhus wanted to ask why, even if Calicask was stopped here, he wouldn't simply open another gap though the magical wall. He wanted to ask why this had to be happening and why the hell he had to be here, but just then Valkin cried out.

"No! He's resisting! He's too strong!"

Benhus saw the line of guards inside the passage had stopped retreating and now began to slowly advance. He felt the battle fury dim, leaving his limbs heavy and mind troubled by the grim conviction that the remaining six of Calicask's warriors were all but certain to overwhelm him. And that, if taken alive or even slain, he could expect misery beyond measure to follow at the hands of the Gray Umbra.

Benhus turned his head, spat bitterly, and an idea came to him.

"I can't hold them back for long," gasped the apprentice. His face had gone pallid and sweat dripped from his chin. "Stand by the opening and try to take them one at a time. Perhaps we can... *where are you going?!*"

Benhus had sheathed his weapons and was sprinting back into the house, heedless of Valkin's desperate lamentations behind him. He burst through the doors, hurled himself across the room, slammed bodily into the heavy table and caught up the black nobleman's comfort discarded upon it. He came back out of the doorway just in time to see the apprentice fail.

Valkin's arms dropped limply to his sides as if he'd exhausted every bit of strength in them, and he tottered as if he might collapse. The first three gray guards burst from their containment in the green passage. Weapons out and gleaming, they descended upon the apprentice.

"Down!" roared Benhus, and Valkin fell, though whether at his command or from exhaustion Benhus never knew. He extended the nobleman's comfort at arm's length, over Valkin and toward the soldiers elbowing each other in their haste to hack at the apprentice's prone body. Benhus cursed and triggered the wand.

There was a sound like the bass string of a titanic harp being plucked, so loud and deep it thrummed in the marrow. Benhus choked on a powerful, lurching stab of nausea.

Staggering to a halt, the trio of gray guards wavered, then turned red. A chorus of weirdly harmonious cries rose as they dropped their weapons and clawed savagely at their bodies. Blood, searingly scarlet, burst from their helms, ran in streams from every joint in their armor, splashed down their legs and pattered on the earth. The men reeled, screamed and bumped into one another, then they fell, encrimsoned in every limb, to the sodden ground.

It lasted only a few heartbeats, but each detail was burned into Benhus's brain. Blood-molt, he thought. Valkin called it a blood-molt. He saw the remaining gray guards now stood still in the mouth of the passage and did not advance.

"Back!" he drove forward, over the bodies, and his sandals skidded, slipped on the bloody earth. "Get back or it'll be the same for you!"

They hesitated and he moved toward them, holding the black wand in a hand that trembled, trying to clench down the sickness in his belly. To his horror they did not retreat, they hesitated a moment more, then seemed to straighten as one and began to advance.

"No!" yelled Benhus. "Stop!" But they did not stop and Benhus triggered the nobleman's comfort once again. The effect was the same but this time the blast went straight down the mouth of the narrow passage and swept over all the men he could see. He turned away from the screams and stalked rigidly back toward Valkin, who had come to his feet.

"Two charges?" he asked numbly.

"Yes," said Valkin. "Only two."

The screaming ceased and Benhus cast the wand away from him. It lay in the stained grass like a poison scarab, feeding on the freshly spilled blood.

"Do you suppose that slew Calicask as well?" asked Benhus hoarsely.

"No, the passageway is still open."

When he turned to look, Benhus felt a strange double tug at his belt and saw, unbelieving, his short sword and white dagger leave their sheaths and sail up into the air over his head. He heard them hit the ground some distance behind him.

"Oh no," whispered Valkin. "Oh no, no, no..."

Calicask stepped into mouth of the gap in the wall. He lifted a gray-gloved hand and a cold wind rose before him, blew along the corridor and gusted out over Benhus and Valkin. It barely ruffled the hair on Benhus's head, but it blew the strength from his limbs and dropped both he and the apprentice to the earth.

Benhus tried to get up but his legs didn't work and there was a sick weakness seeping through his body. He groped mindlessly for the white dagger, for his sword, before touching his empty sheaths and remembering they were gone.

"Mercy, master!" screamed Valkin, prone and struggling behind him, to his left and out of sight. "Mercy!"

Calicask walked into the tunnel his sorcery had bored through the Wall of Demons, stepped gingerly around and over his slaughtered guards. He stopped as though to savor the moment, lifted both hands to his face, and dug gloved fingers behind his veil.

Benhus, blinking blood out of his eyes, slapped both hands to his belt, fumbling for a nobleman's comfort. He dug one out of the pouch and tried, with an arm that shook with weakness, to level it at Calicask. His bleary vision focused on the wand and saw it was the Illuminator. He dropped it and groped in his pouch again.

The sorcerer pulled his veil away from his face and lowered it. His curdled white eyes lifted their dead gaze to Benhus and his scarred visage split in a hideous yellow grin.

Benhus tried to steady his trembling arm and saw he now held the small wand of dark wood that he'd found in the bed of Thratos. Cursing savagely, he triggered it.

In the green corridor Calicask hesitated. He tilted his head as if an errant thought had come to him unbidden. His veil slipped from his hands as he stumbled a little to one side. He didn't lose his balance, but he lost his concentration.

The corridor slammed shut with the sound of a great wave crashing on a rocky shore. Benhus sat up, staring, his weakness gone. He could see Calicask thrashing inside the Wall of Demons, a pale form visible as if through fogged glass. Something white and writhing intercepted and wrapped about him. A flurry of smaller black objects shot toward and into the twisting mass and then all was obscured by an expanding scarlet cloud.

Valkin was open-mouthed and mute, gaze fixed on the wall where it had swallowed his master.

"He's dead." His tone was thick with disbelief. "Calicask is dead."

Benhus stood up and fetched his weapons. "Yes, you've lost your teacher. We now have something in common."

Valkin wobbled to his feet. "Come inside," he said, "I've something to show you. And I could use a drink."

Inside, Valkin went directly to the big table and picked up the glassed model of his home. When he laid his hand upon it and spoke a few brittle syllables the skylights lit up brightly. Benhus squinted up at the sky beyond the glass and knew before the apprentice spoke.

"The Wall of Demons is gone. And with it whatever might remain of Calicask."

Valkin found the big jug of fortified wine and tipped it eagerly, then passed it to Benhus, who took a long drink to quench his thirst, then thumped it down on the table.

"I know," said Valkin when he saw his face. "Let me explain. Wait here. It'll only be a moment."

The apprentice scurried out the room and it occurred to Benhus that he should be concerned that Valkin was planning some kind of treachery, but he couldn't make himself believe it. The man's manner was childlike, excited and perhaps a little proud. Benhus frowned.

Valkin came back into the room leading a woman by the hand. Even with the black velvet sack over her head Benhus knew instantly she was Damaris. The hood enclosed her head and neck to the shoulders, but her honey-colored hair spilled out of it behind, and the elegant lines of her body were unmistakable. She wore a simple blue shift that left her shoulders bare.

Benhus felt a sudden urge to cut the hood from her head and offer to cut Valkin's head from his shoulders. The protective impulse was unexpected but startlingly strong, and he stifled it with difficulty.

"Here's a chair," said Valkin softly. "You can sit, my love."

"What have you done?" Benhus grated. Some of his reaction to the sight of the woman in the hood might have been apparent to Valkin, for the apprentice began to speak quickly.

"She is unharmed, I swear it. I could never hurt Damaris. The hood gentles and calms the wearer. I bought it from a master kidnapper and woman stealer in Anparar. It cost me all I'd earned in two years."

"You kidnapped her?" Benhus didn't know whether to be shocked at Valkin's treatment of one he professed to love or admiring of his courage in defying the Gray Umbra.

"Yes, last night when she took her midnight stroll through Calicask's garden. I couldn't have done it without the hood."

"Take that damn thing off her head and let us hear what she has to say about it."

Valkin obliged, his fingers working beneath the hood's edges with exaggerated care as he tugged it gently up over Damaris's head and tossed it onto the table.

The woman blinked as if awakening from an unintended nap and shook her head, moving her torrent of hair over her bare shoulders. Then she lifted her eyes to the men standing before her.

"Calicask is dead," said Valkin. "You are free of him forever."

Her violet gaze moved from the apprentice to Benhus and he felt a strange twisting sensation in his breast. He longed to say something but held his tongue for want of knowing what it was.

"Valkin," said Damaris, her voice was low, and as calm as her features. "You should know by now this changes nothing. I was to be given to Prince Trenchor this morning. I am his now."

"No," said the apprentice, "it doesn't have to be that way. You can stay with me."

"It cannot be," she said simply. Benhus stared into her face and could see there only a tempered weariness.

"I understand now," said the apprentice, his voice firmer, "that you do not feel for me all that I feel for you. Forgive me, my love, for I have found a way to change that. Look at me, Damaris. See the truth in my eyes..."

When she met his gaze Valkin thrust both hands into his robes and withdrew them with a nobleman's comfort in each. He leveled the silver and gold wands he had taken from Benhus at the seated woman.

"Look at me, Damaris! Look into my eyes. I love you, Damaris," he cried and triggered the wands.

A breeze seemed to sigh through the room.

Benhus realized that he had a hand on the hilt of his sword.

"What have you done?" he demanded. He looked from Valkin to Damaris and back again but could see no change in either.

Valkin tossed both wands to the table, smiled as widely as Benhus had seen, and held his hands out to Damaris.

"A love spell, Benhus" he said. "Not a spell of bonding or enslavement, but a spell of honest and enduring love. One of the rarest enchantments in all of sorcery and your master had it worked into two wands. A team of sorcerers must have labored for months, perhaps years, just to the build the spell and even then they couldn't contain it in a single wand. Your two wands together held only one charge, but it was worth a queen's ransom and I know that I can never repay you for it."

Benhus was torn between wonder that Thratos had such a spell at his disposal and a kind of dazed horror at what might have been done to Damaris as he stood by unknowing.

"Once I understood what you had, my friend, I knew I had to have it. I hope you will forgive me." Valkin's hands were still extended to Damaris, but she hadn't moved.

Then she spoke, "This changes nothing. Calicask gave me to Prince Trenchor. Listen, if you can. When I was little more than a girl, I was caught in a tenement fire that killed my mother and father. I was trapped in the blaze, horribly burned and I lost my arm."

Damaris extended her left arm and touched a fine, ring-like scar, scarcely discernable, that encircled her forearm just below the elbow.

"Calicask took interest in me. He remade me in body and mind. Do you understand? I am his creature, made to please him and all those who look upon me. In truth, I am but little different than his guards. Your wands could not affect me. My emotions are tempered, reduced, as Calicask preferred. He made me what he wanted and considered my emotions immaterial, as he had few of his own."

The apprentice had difficulty speaking. "Surely you feel something for me! When we spoke, I..."

"No Valkin," she said, tersely but without malice. "I have been made this way and you feel as Calicask intended those who saw me to feel. Perhaps stronger than some, but little different than anyone." Her gaze lifted briefly to Benhus, who stood watching in bewilderment. "Anyone."

"No," wept Valkin, desolate. "It cannot be so meaningless..."

"Your revolt against your master will be ill regarded by the High Council of Wizards. I cannot feel for you but would not see you tortured and slain. Gather your belongings and flee the city now. Goodbye."

She stood and walked to the door with Valkin following and Benhus trailing behind.

Under the gaze of both men, Damaris walked across the bridge, the afternoon sun bright on her hair, her azure shift and bare shoulders, burning her image into their eyes and memory.

Benhus saw the royal coach he'd noticed earlier draw up to the gate, white lacquered panels gleaming. If its black hooded driver took notice of them or even of Damaris, they couldn't tell. The coach stopped and a door opened. Damaris, moving down the path like a mirage, stepped up into the coach and passed from sight. They watched mutely as the door was closed and the coach pulled away, horses snorting and wheels grinding on the rough earth.

Benhus turned away first, back into the house where the jug sat on the table. He lifted it, watched the apprentice approach, and spoke.

"I wonder what old Thratos was doing with a love spell."

"Perhaps he was in love," said Valkin hoarsely, wiping at his eyes.

"More likely the king made it as a weapon, as a way to coerce a potential ally or enemy."

"Gods," Valkin swore bitterly. "Was there ever a man with luck like mine? Damaris is out of my reach forever. You can't understand, can you? Yet you have provided absolute proof that nothing, absolutely nothing, can win her to me now."

"Will you leave the city?" asked Benhus, hoping to change the subject.

"Leave? Where would I go?" The apprentice's voice quivered with grief and hysteria. "I have no one! This is all I know! It isn't my fault that Calicask is dead."

Valkin took a ragged breath and seemed to come to his senses somewhat.

"I can't really be blamed. You slew him. There were no witnesses and your part in all of this is open to any kind of interpretation." He reached across the table, took hold of the wooden box beside his chair and pulled it toward him. The box struck the wine jug and tipped it over so that it began to empty itself onto the table. Ignoring this and with a quick glance at Benhus, Valkin began to dig in the box with both hands.

A spatter of the fortified wine had struck the ivory candle for yellow flame now flickered on the tabletop and swept swiftly to the scrolls beside the apprentice's chair.

"Valkin!" said Benhus, but he saw that the apprentice was paying no heed to the growing fire. He had drawn something small out of the box and was now holding it between both fists over his sternum. A little crystal skull.

"I'm sorry, my friend," said Valkin. "*N'karra-Vramgoth-V---*"

Benhus's strike was a blur of speed. The white dagger lashed from its sheath and whipped across Valkin's throat in a fractured instant. He stepped back, the shimmering steel unstained in his fist, and watched as the apprentice opened and closed his mouth soundlessly, frowning in confusion, his death-spell unfinished.

Benhus held the white dagger aloft and let the blade catch the burgeoning firelight. Valkin understood at last, dropped the crystal skull to the floorboards and put both hands to his throat. They could not stop the torrent released by their touch.

The apprentice wavered on his feet and Benhus caught him under the arms and seated him in the chair he'd set out for Damaris. Valkin's crimsoned hands left his throat and fumbled at the chair's armrests as if he might rise. After a moment he stopped trying to do that and was still.

Flames covered the table, leapt over Valkin's high-backed chair and had begun to creep across the floor. Benhus moved quickly to the long table covered with the remains of the apprentice's lonely meals, bent and pulled two heavy jugs from beneath it. One he set on Valkin's lap, the other he opened, drank several deep draughts from, then cast it from him. It struck the opposite wall, where it burst open with a flood of dark liquid. The fire began to roar.

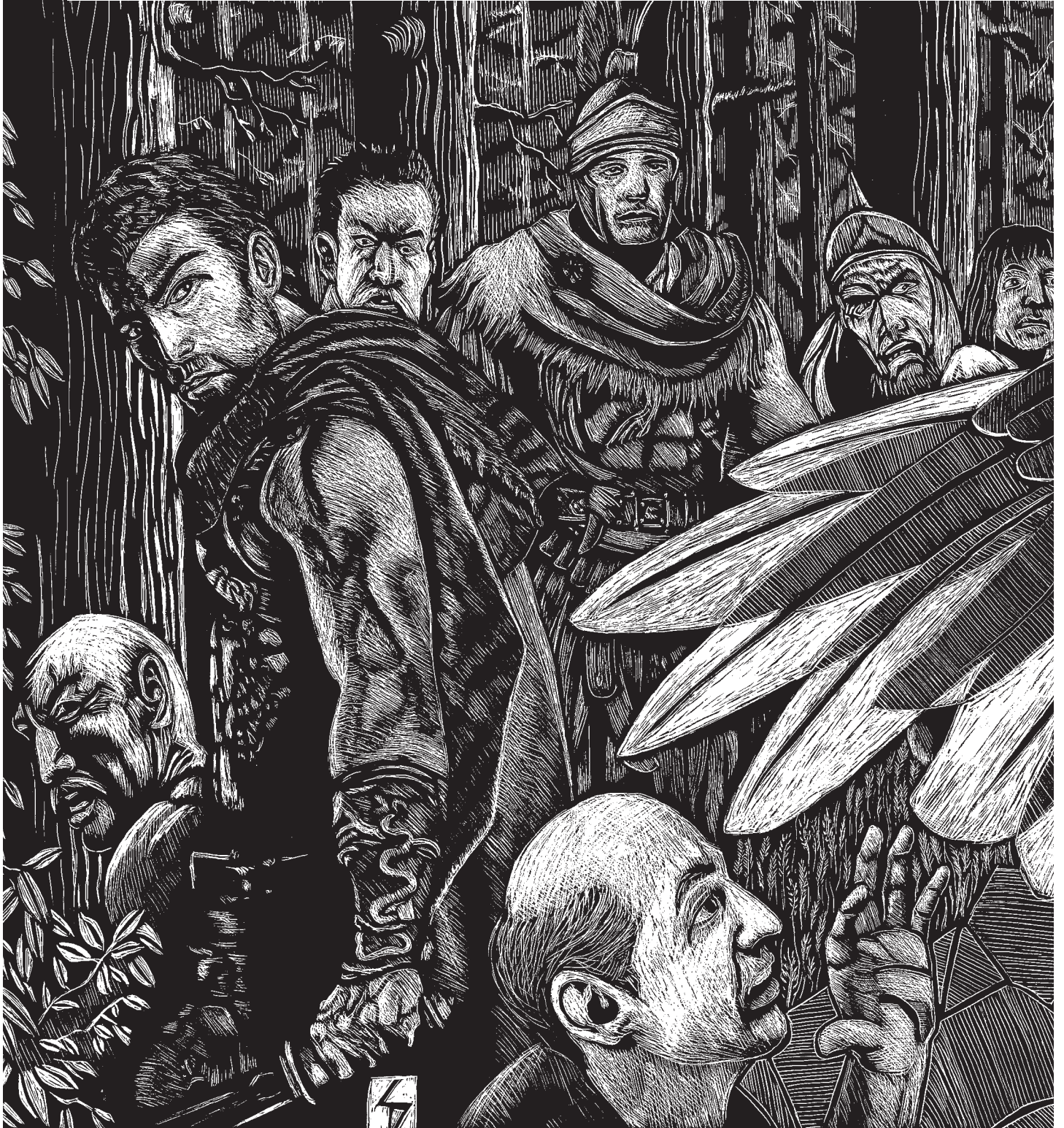
Benhus left the house and walked across the little bridge over the white moat that had held Valkin's Wall of Demons. He stepped through the rusty gate then turned and looked back.

Smoke rose from the house and flames showed in the windows. Before long he was joined by a handful of curious spectators, some of whom asked him questions. He said nothing, simply watched until the domed roof gave way with a roar and great plume of fire rose into the sky. The flames were ruddy orange, but through them Benhus could see a pair of violet eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

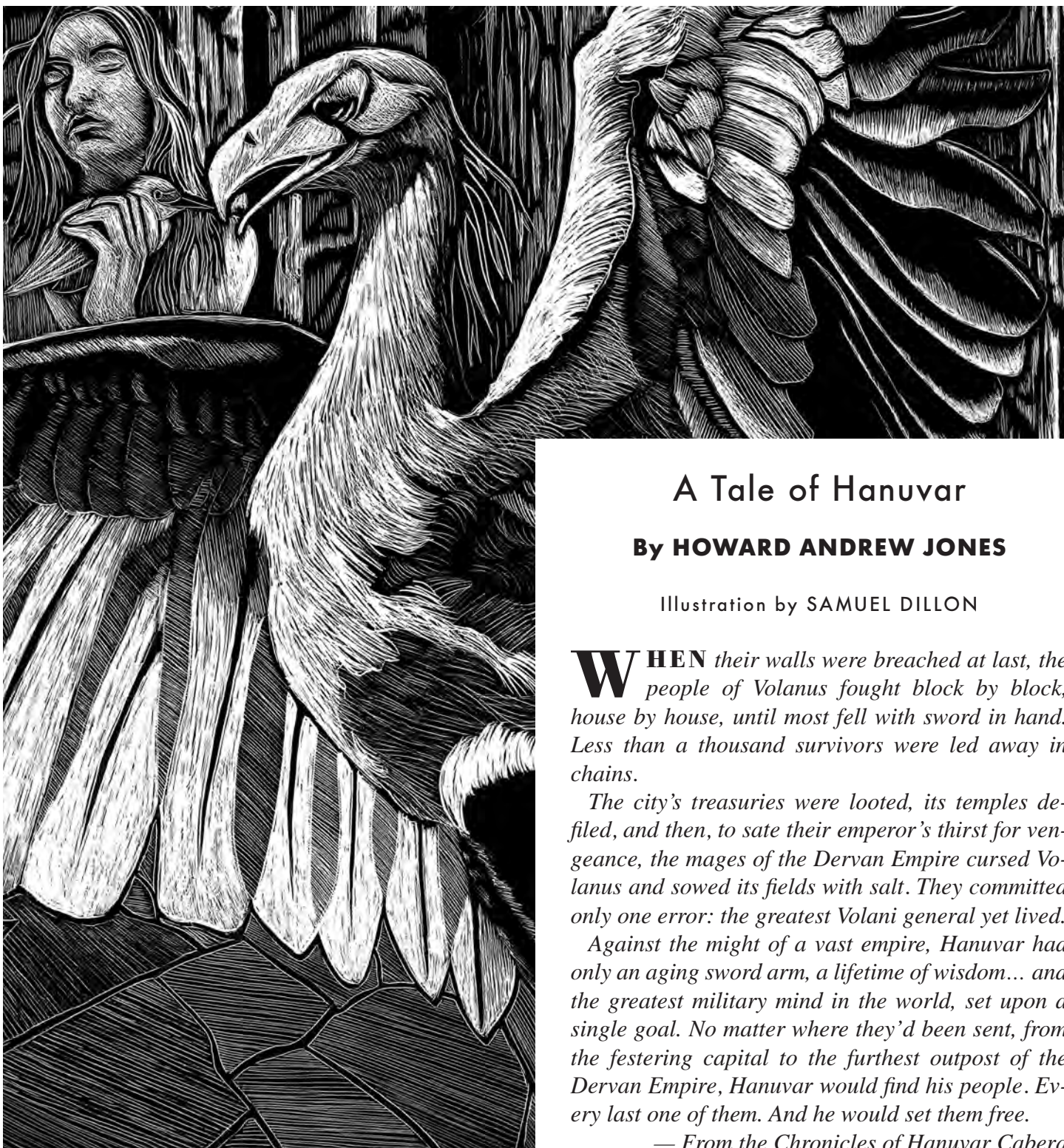
John C. Hocking is a nigh obsessed reader and writer of lurid pulp fiction, the author of *Conan and the Emerald Lotus* and its time-lost companion, *Conan and the Living Plague*, and an obedient thrall of the Magician's Skull.

THE FEATHERS





RED SHROUD



A Tale of Hanuvar

By **HOWARD ANDREW JONES**

Illustration by **SAMUEL DILLON**

WHEN their walls were breached at last, the people of Volanus fought block by block, house by house, until most fell with sword in hand. Less than a thousand survivors were led away in chains.

The city's treasures were looted, its temples defiled, and then, to sate their emperor's thirst for vengeance, the mages of the Dervan Empire cursed Volanus and sowed its fields with salt. They committed only one error: the greatest Volani general yet lived.

Against the might of a vast empire, Hanuvar had only an aging sword arm, a lifetime of wisdom... and the greatest military mind in the world, set upon a single goal. No matter where they'd been sent, from the festering capital to the furthest outpost of the Dervan Empire, Hanuvar would find his people. Every last one of them. And he would set them free.

— From the *Chronicles of Hanuvar Cabera*

Under the shade of a tall cypress, Antires knelt at the cook-fire, stirring the sliced onions and peppers as they sizzled on the black skillet. A woodlark, perched in the branches above, warbled cheerily. For all that it had been a long, warm day of travel, the young playwright was content.

But his older companion glowered as he stomped up beside him.

"I don't believe it," Antires said, and with an old wooden spoon almost as brown as the hand that gripped it, pushed a darkening slice of onion to the skillet's edge. He reached for the flask of olive oil standing at his right hip.

His gray horse, picketed beside Hanuvar's black, looked up from where he was contentedly nibbling grass and snorted, as if expressing his own disfavor.

"No?" The other man straightened, casting off the illusion of fatigue and age like a cloak. Though in late middle-age, Hanuvar was tall and fit, his chest broad and powerfully muscled under his red tunic, his belly flat. Though his dark hair was peppered with gray and his face seamed, age had not enfeebled him. His slate gray eyes were bright with curiosity. "You asked me to look angry."

Antires bobbed his head in agreement, finished dribbling in more olive oil, then set the flask down and stirred the vegetables around. He thought it about time to toss in the dried meat. Finally he looked back at his friend. "You carried yourself like a weak man, but when I asked you to show anger, it was the rage of someone confident. When you play a character, you have to remember what their story is."

A faint smile ticked up the right corner of Hanuvar's mouth. His own folly amused him. Always be ready to learn, his father had told him, no matter your teacher. He had too quickly equated the playwright's youth with lack of knowledge.

Hanuvar sketched a bow. "Shape the clay, oh potter."

"Stick out your lip so you look like you're pouting. You're resentful, not ready to kill."

Hanuvar hunched his shoulders and imitated a lazy soldier turned out from bed for the watch.

"That's better. Maybe too much pouting, though. Don't aim for the back row. Small expressions. You don't want to be challenging in your anger. Oh, yes. That's—" The dark-skinned playwright fell silent as Hanuvar stilled him with a raised palm.

The woodlark had gone silent and the horses had lifted their heads and pricked their ears. Hanuvar turned, hand to the pommel of the gladius at his waist. He heard the scuff of a sandal from the shaded dirt path to the road.

Hanuvar was waiting with bared sword when a trio of men advanced from the encircling trees. The two carrying hunting spears were stocky with middle-age. The third was a lean youth with a bulbous nose, and he brandished a pitchfork.

Two more men crashed through the brush to the south, and three others, lagging slightly, stepped through a screen of cedars to the north.

Antires pulled his skillet off the coals and joined Hanuvar, blade unsheathed. He made a brave figure, and those approaching would be unlikely to guess he only mimicked a bladesman's stance.

A bald man with thick black brows came to the forefront of the intruding band, brandishing his sword as he spoke with a snarl. "Drop the swords if you know what's good for you."

Hanuvar answered without lowering his blade. "If you want them, come and take them."

That didn't seem to be the answer the bald man expected. He shifted uncomfortably.

"What have you done with Tura?" The boy with the pitchfork demanded. His fingers tightened on the weapon's haft.

"We know nothing of her," Hanuvar replied.

"You must have us confused with someone else," Antires suggested in a honeyed tone. "We're just passing through."

The strangers fidgeted and looked to the bald man. He scowled. "You're lying. You've killed her, and kept the bird for yourself."

"We don't have any birds," Antires said. "Or women."

From further down the trail the jingle of reins and the stamp of hooves grew gradually louder. The intruders visibly relaxed and Hanuvar guessed their true leader was almost here. The men facing them looked too uncertain about potential conflict to be experienced warriors, and too well-fed to be bandits.

Hanuvar found a measure of solace in what the men had said so far, for this confrontation apparently had nothing to do with his hidden identity. Rumors about his return to Dervan lands would inevitably spread, but so far he and Antires seemed to have outsped them.

That didn't mean Hanuvar wasn't cautious. The men who'd surrounded them had the wary, nervous manner of a lynch mob. One on one they were hesitant, even cowardly, but the right nudge might launch them into murderous fury. Right now their intent wavered, and Hanuvar sensed their next action would be shaped by the approaching rider.

Only a few moments later a young man reined in on a splendid gray at the clearing's edge. He wore a legionnaire's breastplate and tunic with the lowest ranking non-commissioned officer's brevet. A sword was girded at his waist, and in amongst his saddlebags was a clutch of spears.

Hanuvar felt the brush of the optio's eyes, steady and searching. They didn't light with any particular concern or recognition, further reassurance that this intrusion had nothing to do with Hanuvar. The optio then considered Antires before addressing the mob in a mild voice. "What are you doing, Serka?"

The bald man pointed to them with his free hand. "We found these men here, right in the path. They have to know!"

The optio's mouth turned down in displeasure, and then he faced Hanuvar. "State your names, travelers. Tell me where you're from and where you're bound."

Hanuvar lowered his sword but didn't sheathe it. "I am Artus," he answered, "late of the second maniple, third cohort of the Mighty Fifth."

The optio nodded as if Hanuvar's words had confirmed a suspicion. "What rank did you muster out from, Artus?"

"Centurion."

The optio nodded his head once, in respect. "I am Optio Lucian Silvi." He almost sounded apologetic as he continued: "Do you have your papers?"

"In my pack. I'd share them, if these men weren't ready to skewer me when I lower my sword."

The optio smiled thinly. "There'll be no skewering. Your companion?"

Antires answered easily. "I'm Starik, his nephew. And we're bound for Ostra. We come from Eltri. And we don't know anything about this Tura the boy was shouting about."

"They're lying!" the young man with the pitchfork cried.

One of the men with him muttered his agreement and Serka began to talk. Their voices were drowned out by the optio. "They have horses," the young man said curtly. "Did any of you happen to notice horse tracks before this?"

At mention of this, the men look startled. They traded nervous glances.

Serka frowned, his heavy brows drooping. "They could be hiding her."

"Or," the optio said, "they were travelling on the main road on their horses, like normal men, and stopped off at a camp site to eat, at supper time. Like normal men who have nothing to do with Tura."

Hanuvar was privately impressed; Lucian Silvi had delivered just the right note of dry exasperation. Now the optio put a snap in his voice as he looked to the villagers. "Lower your weapons."

The crowd objected, the pitchfork-laden boy expostulating loudest.

"Now," Lucian said, steel in his voice.

When all five of the men complied, the optio looked wordlessly to Hanuvar, who sheathed his own blade. Antires did the same.

The optio knelt his horse forward. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to see your papers."

Hanuvar stepped to his pack and pulled them from an inside pocket. If need be he could have produced other identity records, but these, complete with an appropriate stamp, showed that he'd mustered out three months before with the rank of centurion, after thirty years of service. Lucian scanned them, surely noting the detailed service record, including two demerits and a commendation for valor.

He returned the papers. "Thank you, Centurion. I serve with the Indomitable Seventh, third maniple."

Much of the Seventh, Hanuvar knew, was scattered along the coast, its individual maniples enforcing law in the smaller settlements. "Where's the rest of your unit?"

"My second's in town nursing a twisted ankle. The rest of my men are hunting sheep rustlers. I've had to lean on these men for aid. We're tracking a missing young woman. We're short on qualified help," he added.

Hanuvar knew what that final statement meant. In moments, Lucian could order him and Antires to assist. But the legionnaire was being polite to someone he had accepted not only as a fellow soldier, but a seasoned veteran of the legion.

"We'll be glad to help, if you'll have us," Hanuvar said. Any other reply would have provoked suspicion. And no matter how much he chafed at delay, suspicion was something he could not afford.

"The legion thanks you for your aid," the optio said formally to them both. One of the members of the mob handed his spear to Serka and wandered away into the brush beyond the campsite.

Antires watched the bearded man's departure, then spoke to the young soldier. "What's happened to the woman? And what's this about a bird?"

"She was abducted," the young man said bitterly. He leaned against his pitchfork, driven into the ground beside him. "And she had the village's lucky bird with her."

Hanuvar had never heard of a village with a lucky bird before, but said nothing as Lucian spoke.

"That's what some of them think," the legionnaire explained. "But there's no sign of a struggle."

"She's lost her mind with grief," Serka asserted, still scowling.

"What do you think, Optio?" Hanuvar asked.

The legionnaire hesitated before offering his own interpretation. "Her mother was the village priestess. She died suddenly this morning. Tura didn't take it well."

The bearded man returned and spoke to them from the campsite edge. "These men had nothing to do with it. It looks as though she passed through here, but she pressed on south. Toward the fens."

The little campsite was clearly a frequent stopover point for travelers, but Hanuvar had seen no recent footprints when they'd arrived a half hour ago, and he had looked carefully. While he supposed it was just possible a skilled tracker could have seen something he'd missed, he was troubled by a significant look passed between the bearded tracker and Serka, because he couldn't tell what it meant.

The optio seemed oblivious to the interplay, his heavy lips turning down. "Surely she has the sense to keep from there."

"Not if she's gone mad with grief," Serka said.

"Let's pray she's not that mad." Lucian turned to Hanuvar with a sad smile. "This may be soggy work, Centurion."

"I'm sure I've seen worse," Hanuvar answered. "Let's go find her."

• • •

AS the dark of evening gathered in the tree boughs they advanced into the muddy fens, and Hanuvar sent Antires back to the camp with the three horses. Twilight was near, but neither the optio nor the men he led seemed inclined to abandon their quarry. The bearded Tibron advanced into the long grasses, the earth squishing beneath his sandaled feet. Beautiful violet flowers drooped on shoulder high stalks.

The fens were both lovely and deceptive, for solid ground was almost indistinguishable from deep sink holes—the grass grew to the same height regardless. Hanuvar thought the young woman's chances for survival slim. They would either find her retreated to some dry piece of land, or she would be gone forever, drowned, or victim to one of the region's deadly predators.

The optio ordered them to advance in two lines just in sight of each other. As the gloom deepened they reached a region thick with bushes and cedar, rising above channels of knee-deep water.

The optio, leading Hanuvar's group, carried a lantern, as did Serka, behind Tibron, the tracker leading the other line. The light slashed through the building darkness, glittering on the dark water.

Hanuvar had noticed while Tibron occasionally peered at the rare patch of muddy high ground or the way the marsh grass bent, more often he touched something hidden in the fold of his vest. Once, Hanuvar heard a cracking noise as Tibron touched his garment inside, just audible above the incessant drone of the fen's countless, unseen insects. Twice he'd spotted small, broken blue feathers left in the tracker's wake. He couldn't identify the kind of feather, or, more importantly, explain Tibron's actions, and he decided not to inquire. Not yet.

Hanuvar's doubt over the tracker's skill flowered fully when they crossed a spur of dry land and Tibron walked blindly past a distinctive mark. Hanuvar bent down to confirm his suspicion, grimly noting the print of claws at the end of a heavy foot pressing down sodden leaves. Something had passed through the mud, dragging a long tail behind it.

The optio doubled back through the cool, waist-deep water to check on him. "What is it?" he asked. Lucian had shed his armor, and without it his youth was more evident. Surely he wasn't much older than twenty-two.

"Saathra," Hanuvar answered. "And the marks are fresh." He stood. "If there are saathra here it's suicide to continue. It's hard enough to spot them in daylight. Your Tura may already be done for."

The optio ran a hand through short, thick hair, his heavy chin outthrust. "She's a smart young woman. She'll keep to the high ground." He sounded as if he spoke more from hope than conviction.

"Then we seek her in the morning," Hanuvar suggested.

The tracker called back to them. "Hurry up!" he called. "We're gaining on her!"

"Just a little longer," the optio said, almost as if begging permission.

"Have you or they waded this deep into the fens before?" Hanuvar asked.

The optio's frown showed he thought he understood Hanuvar's concern. "We'll be careful," he promised.

They pressed on, and Hanuvar went unhappily with them. He wished he carried a spear, or, better, a trident. He instructed the villagers to watch for movement in the water, though in the failing light that would be a challenge.

As they splashed away from one small hill and on for another, they startled a little herd of long-legged fen deer, whose eyes glowed redly in the reflected lantern light. The creatures took stock of the oncoming humans then turned to flee, their hooves kicking up phosphorescent muck as they splashed off, so that a green trail pointed the way after them.

Hanuvar frowned as they advanced into waist-deep water. Something heavy slapped into his leg and only old reflexes kept him from panic. He felt something large surge past him. A heartbeat later the boy with the pitchfork, waist deep in the dark water behind, stiffened and screamed.

The water foamed as the boy tottered, and Hanuvar glimpsed swaths of slick gray skin as a heavy form moved beneath the surface. The boy stabbed wildly with his pitchfork, and the weapon lodged in the muck, standing at a slant. He opened his mouth in another scream, then was jerked under. One man struck at the water with his sword.

Heart racing, Hanuvar seized the pitchfork and searched the churning water, but could see no clear target. He stepped back, scanning both for the boy and the saathra, and for others of its ilk.

Behind him the rest of the band was scrambling up a muddy bank, save for the optio, wading forward with a borrowed spear.

The water behind the soldier erupted, and Hanuvar lunged past him to jam the pitchfork at a shovel-shaped reptilian head. The tines bit deep, and the dark water reddened. The wounded monster flailed in agony, tearing the haft of the weapon from Hanuvar's grasp.

"Go!" Hanuvar cried. For where there was a saathra, and blood, more were likely.

He and the optio lurched toward the bank, and Hanuvar heard the splash of something behind even as the figures on the bank pointed past them and shouting in alarm.

Neither he nor the young soldier turned to look. Three of the men leaned out from tree trunks along the slope, hands outthrust. Hanuvar floundered forward, certain now all his plans would come to naught and he'd be torn to pieces while drowning. But somehow he scrambled up the muddy slope, over a tangling molatus root and into the hands of Tibron, who helped him up slope to dry land. The optio, panting a little, stood beside him. They exchanged a look, then turned down to the frothing water and occasional glimpses of gray forms struggling one against the other.

Hanuvar pointed to a little rise at the center of the high ground. "That's where we'll make camp. Let's hope it stays dry, because we'll need a fire through the night. And watchmen who'll stay alert. Those things might come crawling for dessert."

• • •

ONCE the fire blazed they shared a meal that was an odd mix of flattened, watery meat and half-pulped fruit. All was fresh, but the two men in charge of carrying supplies had accidentally stumbled, soaking and mashing the supplies.

The night was haunted with the calls of unseen animals. Not only did they hear the whine of insects and the croak of frogs, there were stranger sounds, low and mournful, high and chittering, even one that sounded like a cross between a mad dog and a laughing child. All but the last were identified by Hanuvar's companions, and not being able to name its source did nothing to assuage their unease.

After sharing a few words about the dead boy, they had fallen silent, warming their feet and footgear at the fireside.

"The Mighty Fifth," the optio said quietly to Hanuvar. "You must have seen action in the wars against Hanuvar, then."

"I did," Hanuvar said, in a tone that he hoped would discourage further questions. He had chosen the fifth for his cover because he'd interacted so often with its men. Spies and infor-

mants and occasional parleys had given him a fair knowledge of the names and the behaviors, as well as the appearance, of many of its officers and most prominent soldiers.

"Hanuvar," Cerca repeated, and Hanuvar fought from starting at the sound of his own name. He slowly looked over to Cerca, noting a splatter of mud along his bald pate. "I guess he wasn't nearly as much of a tough bastard as they said, huh?" Cerca asked. "I hear he screamed like a little girl when they killed him."

That confirmed what he'd earlier guessed: these men knew only about his supposed death, not his survival. Good.

"Did you ever see him?" One of the other men asked.

"A few times," Hanuvar answered.

"What did he look like?" This question came from Tibron. The bearded tracker sat on a stone beside Cerca.

"He was tall," Hanuvar answered, "with jet black hair and a beard." He traced a finger along the side of his face. "He had a wicked scar that went down one cheek, and an eyepatch. I knew the man that tossed the spear that did that to him."

Sooner or later word of his survival would reach every corner of the empire, and if he could sow confusion about his actual appearance, so much the better.

But he wasn't interested in talking about either real or imagined versions of himself. "I think it's time you men were honest about how you're tracking Tura."

Cerca answered quickly. "What makes you think we're not being honest?"

Beside him, Tibron tensed, and the rest of the villagers stilled, watching closely.

"Because he's not an idiot," the optio answered, then faced Hanuvar. "You've seen him breaking the feathers, haven't you?" "Yes."

Cerca scowled. "He shouldn't be sticking his nose where it doesn't belong."

"The centurion's here of his own free will," the optio said wearily. "He's helping us find Tura, and he risked his life holding off the saathra while you heroes climbed to safety. So I think we owe him the truth."

Cerca's scowl deepened, but he fell silent. The other men looked shamefacedly away.

Tibron turned over a hand. "Life in our village has been tough for years. A lot of men died in the war, so we haven't had enough hands to work the farms."

A long-faced man nodded his agreement. "We got hit by a drought. All spring long. It would rain on villages a half day away, but not us. Things just kept getting worse. Our priestess was growing sicker and sicker. It felt like we were cursed."

The optio got to the point. "Cerca found a blue egret in the fens."

Hanuvar couldn't hold back his surprise. He'd heard legends of the azure birds and their blessed plumage, but he'd never seen one. "I thought those were a myth," he said.

"It was the real thing," Cerca said, for once animated and almost smiling. "I couldn't believe it. Its wing was injured, so I took it back to the village to get it healed. Things turned around on the instant. It started raining that afternoon. In two days our crops were growing."

"I swear, even the sheep have fluffier coats," Tibron said, hand lifted solemnly. "That's why some rustlers nabbed them. All it took was one week. Everything got better."

"Except for the priestess," the optio reminded them.

Tibron's beard waggled as he nodded. "It seemed like she was going to rally. She'd been sick for weeks," he explained to Hanuvar.

"She died," Cerca said. "And when she did, her daughter ran back off into the fens, and took the egret along with her."

"Why?" Hanuvar asked.

"The bird really wasn't getting better," Tibron explained. "It kept losing feathers. And that upset the priestess, who said it belonged in the wild."

"We were taking good care of it," Cerca objected.

"It didn't seem to be getting better," the optio interjected.

"Why didn't you just wish for the bird and the priestess to get well?" Hanuvar asked.

Tibron nodded agreement. "We tried that. The wishes aren't all powerful. It's as if... you can only win one roll of the dice, not an entire game, if you know what I mean. I can tell which way Tura's going, but the feather doesn't keep leading me to her. I have to keep checking to find her."

"And we're short on feathers," Cerca said. "But if we keep the egret, we'll still have general blessings. The rain, the sheep—that happened before we had to break any feathers. Just having it around makes things better. And we can collect any feathers it drops and keep them for emergencies."

"So are you here to bring back the woman, or the bird?" Hanuvar asked.

Scanning their eyes, he thought he saw an obvious dividing line. Some, like Cerca, were desperate for the egret. Others, like Tibron, were concerned about both. Perhaps only the optio was more worried for Tura.

After an uncomfortable silence, they spoke over one another about how much they loved the young lady, whom they'd known since she was an infant, but they knew their lie was exposed, and the conversation was forced and awkward until the optio assigned them shifts and ordered those not on sentry duty to grab sleep.

Late that night Hanuvar had finished his watch and laid down, one of the men's spare shirts rolled under his head for a pillow. He'd wakened the optio after him. By agreement they'd assigned themselves the watches alone in the night depths, trusting their abilities more than those of the other men.

The legionnaire took a brief walk around the perimeter, then sat on a boulder near the camp's edge. The rest of them lay close to the campfire, still burning low, each stretched out in the deep sleep of the physically exhausted. A few of them snored. All was dark beyond them, the deep black of the hidden places of the world, where trees crowded heavily upon one another and lifted leaf and vine heavy limbs to the sky. The night creatures still chirruped. Here and there, moonlight streamed down through breaks in the canopy, silvering the odd branch.

"I can see the moonlight on your eye, Artus," Lucian said quietly to Hanuvar. "You're still awake."

"Yes," Hanuvar admitted. He turned his head to the dark figure seated nearby.

"You're probably thinking we're mercenary," the optio said after a moment's hesitation. "I know they're eager to hold onto that lucky bird, but some of us do care about Tura."

"I was thinking about my daughter," Hanuvar said, surprised by his admission.

"Oh," the other man answered with a mixture of surprise and curiosity. "Where is she?"

Hanuvar didn't know what the Dervan legions had done with her, and whether she was alive or dead. He didn't say that, but he kept his answer truthful. "I'm on my way to find her. Really, I'm heading for a kind of reunion, and I hope she'll be there."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to see you."

"I'm not sure she's still alive," Hanuvar confessed. "My family's scattered now. Because of the war."

"I'm sorry," the optio said with sincerity. "How old is she?"

"Thirty-two. She had a husband, but I think he's dead. So are my grandchildren."

"I'll pray you find her," the optio said. "And the rest of your family."

Hanuvar wondered what the young man would say if he knew he would be offering prayers for the Cabera family, long feared by the Empire's leaders. Regardless of who made religious appeals, they were likely in vain, for Hanuvar thought it likely his family had been exterminated.

Both men heard the faint whisper of movement through the grass to the south. Hanuvar sat up, turning his head at the same time the Dervan officer shifted.

A figure advanced from the gloom and on through the grasses, uncannily passing without disrupting the din of the fen. As she stopped just short of them, Hanuvar discovered her to be a slim, barefoot woman. Her stola was hitched high, revealing muscular calves.

As she licked her lips preparatory to speech Hanuvar saw she had large front teeth, as well as a receding chin, and a long, small-nostriled nose with an upward tilt. At first blush, it seemed unlikely poets would extol her outward attributes. Yet her neck was long and graceful, her almond shaped eyes luminous and large, her carriage self-assured. Hanuvar could not decide if she were homely or strangely beautiful. Perhaps she was somehow both at once, and as he witnessed the optio's silent regard, he understood that here was a face the right person might never tire of gazing upon.

"Don't wake the others," she said softly.

"Thank the gods you're safe, Tura," the optio said, with sincerity suggesting a regard greater than any dutiful servant of the empire held for an ordinary citizen.

Hanuvar thought he detected an answering light in Tura's own eyes, but her expression grew quickly somber. "You must lead them away," she said. "It won't be safe for them if they follow much longer."

"It's not safe out here for anyone, including you." Lucian took a step forward. He stopped when the young woman immediately retreated.

"I'll come back," she promised, "but not until I've returned the egret to his home."

"Can't you just let him go right here?"

Her brow wrinkled in consternation. "In his condition? I'm taking him to sacred land. He's in bad condition and I'm not sure even that will save him. Cerca's been plucking him."

Lucian scowled. "I should have realized," he said darkly.

"The egret's part of the spirit world," Tura said. "And if you abuse a spirit, you invoke the wrath of the natural world. I'm returning him to his home since he can't fly there himself. It's the right thing to do. And I'll pray the spirits will be merciful to the village."

"I've met my share of spirits," Hanuvar said. The two faced him in surprise, as if they'd forgotten he was standing to one side. "Do you know what you're walking into? They may demand a blood price of you."

"A wrong was done by my people," Tura said with quiet dignity. "I am my mother's daughter, and she was their shepherd. First I shall return the egret. Then I will learn what the gods would have me do."

From her left came a surge of movement. Cerca must have been positioning himself carefully for a long while, for he lunged up in a crouch from Tura's left, hands stretched for her. Before he advanced four steps a vine tripped him, and he landed flat on his stomach. His breath left him in an explosive grunt.

The woman gasped and backstepped with a deer's grace.

"Stop her!" Cerca cried. "You can't let her take the bird back!" He struggled to rise.

Lucian reached out too late, for Tura was running at full speed and quickly vanished into the darkness.

Cerca pushed to his feet. Others of their expedition rose groggily.

The bald leader shook his finger at the optio. "You fool, why didn't you do something to stop her?"

Lucian glowered. "I'm trying to think of a good reason I shouldn't beat you to a pulp. And all I can come up with is I don't feel like getting my hands dirty."

"But she's going to take the beast back!" Cerca's outrage rose in a whine "You're the village officer! It's your job to protect us!"

"That's what she's trying to do," Hanuvar said calmly as he stepped up beside the legionnaire. "How many feathers have you plucked?"

Cerca looked startled. "The bird was losing feathers. We didn't pluck any."

"You're a bad liar, Cerca," Lucian told him. "What do you want more? The fame for being savior of the village, or the power the feathers give you?"

"Go easy on him," Tibron said. "You know how it was."

"I know how it is now," Lucian said. "Tura's off there alone in the darkness. The spirits are angry, and she may have to give herself up to save us. Even if they don't kill her, she's got to find her way back through the fens by herself. I'm going after her."

"We're coming with you," Cerca said.

"You're going back." Lucian drew his gladius.

Cerca backstepped swiftly, then puffed out his chest. "We'll report you to the legate!"

"Go right ahead," the optio said.

"I'm going with you," Hanuvar told him.

Lucian shook his head. "You've got your own woman to find."
 "I'd rather walk the marsh with you than keep watch on them."
 At that, the optio nodded. "I'll be glad to have you."

While the rest of the villagers watched in sullen confusion, Hanuvar and the optio grabbed their gear and headed forth. Tura's wake had stirred up the phosphorescent glow, leaving a faint trail stretching out through the water.

"It won't last long," Lucian said.

"Then we'll move fast," Hanuvar glanced over his shoulder. "They can follow us, though."

"They'd be fools if they did," the optio said tightly.

• • •

TURA'S path stayed to shallow water and dry land. So long as they moved quickly she proved easy to track, both by the glow left in her wake and the tread of her narrow feet over the muddy banks, almost visible even without the optio's lantern beam.

They struggled up and over a muddy little rise and then confronted a wide gap of black water, a ribbon of fading green light showing the way across. The optio called to her. "Tura, it's me, Lucian. Just me and the centurion," he added, with a look to Hanuvar. "We don't want you to go on alone. We'll help you return the egret, and help you find your way back! You don't need to keep running!"

His shouted words stilled the call of the nearby night creatures, and both men strained to hear a reply. After only a moment, the cacophony resumed.

Lucian looked to Hanuvar, as if gauging his own interest in crossing the dark water, and then shapes rushed at them from the night. Hanuvar raised his sword as the creatures splashed up glimmering foam that revealed them as fen deer, their upper bodies shrouded in darkness, apart from eyes reflecting the emerald light, and the glistening gleam of wet antlers.

The deer stopped a javelin's throw out and then stood in a long line, eerily still.

"I think we're supposed to follow," Hanuvar said, and started forward through the cool water. Lucian came with him.

The deer turned, one by one, and plodded ahead, seven to the left, eight to the right.

Hanuvar had been a part of many processions in his time, but never one such as this, bounded on either side by animals that under normal circumstances would either have fled before him, or charged with wicked antlers down. Never had he so closely observed deer, alive, and he studied the sleek muscles moving under their furred flanks, and the lift of their proud heads. He, who had seen so many marvels, marveled a little.

Bounded on either side by their stately escort, they continued on through the marshes, walking through shallow water, and across little rises topped with gnarled trees and reaching bushes. If there were saathra near, they kept well away.

Finally, as the dark bulk of another hill rose in the gloom the deer stopped and faced the center of their little column. They lifted their heads high, as an honor guard might raise spears to a ruler. Hanuvar and Lucian passed through them and reached

the side of the little hill. There they discovered the crumbled remnant of a stone pier, and moss-covered steps leading up from the water. He turned and bowed formally to their escort. Lucian must have thought it a good idea, for he imitated the gesture.

The deer were already darting off, as if remembering they had some important engagement.

Hanuvar, turning, noted a faint green radiance upon the stairs that climbed from the ancient pier. Tura had been here before them.

As he and Lucian started up the crumbling, moss covered stone, a cry of fear rose through the night somewhere behind, followed by frantic shouting.

The optio looked at him. "I guess Cercan and some of his friends were trying to follow."

"And the marsh spirits weren't as kind to them," Hanuvar said.

Lucian shook his head. "I told them."

"Some people won't act with good sense even when you order it," Hanuvar said, then resumed his ascent.

Beyond the last stair they found a circle of grand cedars, tall and straight, filling the air with their sharp, clean scent. They passed through them into an inner circle of mossy, vine-wrapped standing stones. The moon shone down into their center upon a squat hillock rising six feet above the clearing. Some fifteen feet across at its base, it tapered to a narrower circle at its apex, though it was wide enough to support a rough stone table with room to spare. The stone supported a little bundle, and the hands of the priestess, who knelt in supplication, head low, hands outspread.

Tura must have heard them as they drew close, but she did not turn. Neither spoke to her, for this seemed a place unused to modern men, and it felt sacrilege to introduce their voices without invitation.

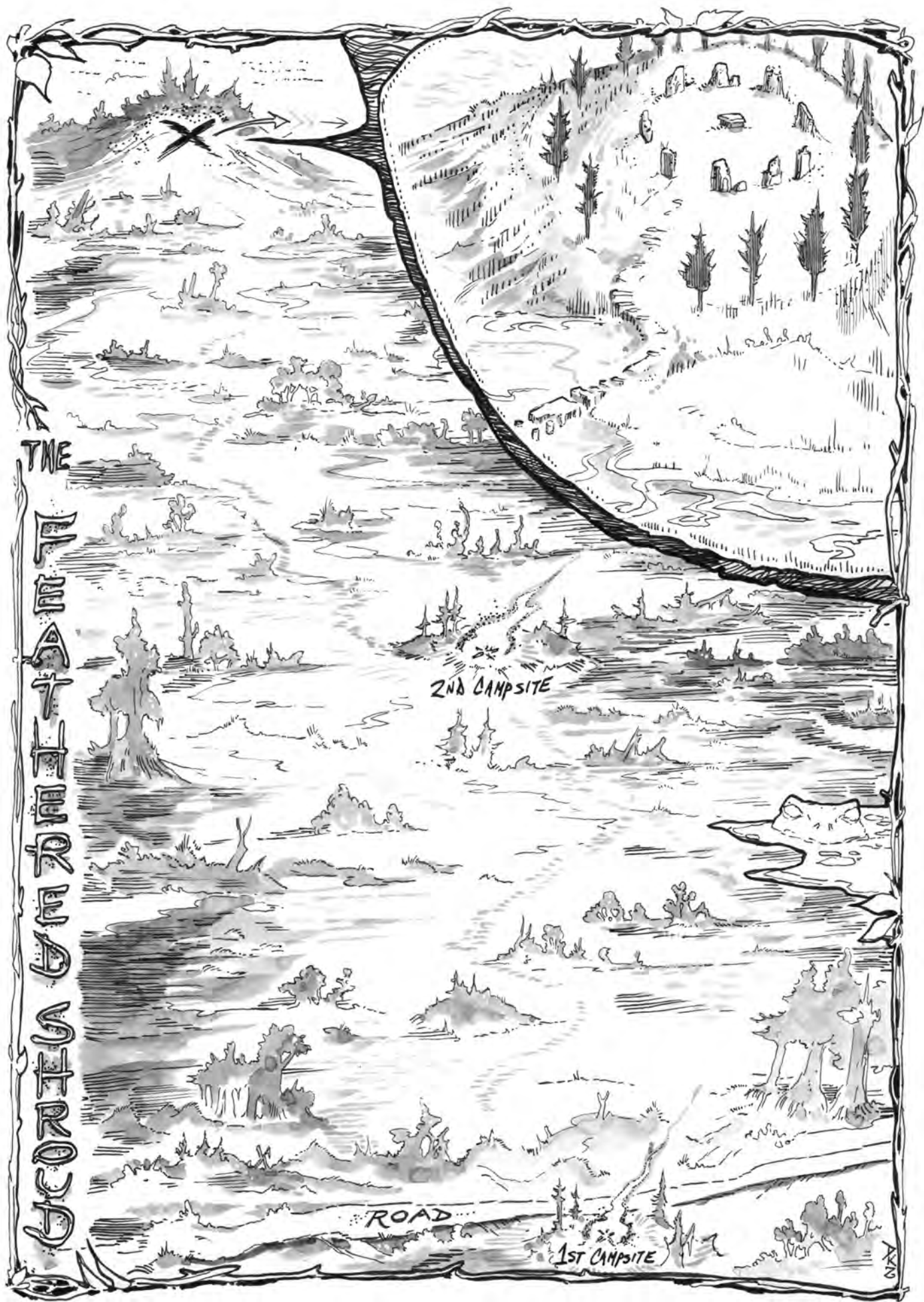
As Hanuvar climbed the short steps built into the hillock's side, he spotted a little wooden cage beside the table, and then, drawing near the young woman, he saw the bundle on the table shift fitfully, and heard a faint ruffle of feathers. This, he realized, was the egret, and as he drew closer the moonlight showed him the tips of feathers.

Hanuvar looked down at the little bird. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but it wasn't a creature that looked little larger than a half-grown chicken. He'd seen the parrots from the Emerald Coast, and the bird resembled them, though its beak was small and hooked. It tipped its head to consider him with one dull eye. A ruff of feathers crowned it and spread down the back of its neck, lighter on the ends than the base.

Probably it would have looked larger if it retained more feathers, but much of the little bird's skin was exposed, so that its back resembled that of the lowest hen in a pecking order.

Tura roused and turned her head to speak softly to Lucian, who'd drawn silently up on her right. She turned her head only slightly. "I'm too late," she said, so softly that her voice barely reached Hanuvar. "It was weakening as we went. It can't even stand now. And my prayers have done nothing."

"Why didn't you say something sooner when you discovered the bird had been plucked?" Lucian asked her.



The young woman climbed to her feet, back stiffening. "You blame me? I walked in to see Cerca lifting a pillow from my mother's face. He came after me! I was lucky to get away with my life, let alone the egret's!"

"That's a lie," said a voice behind them.

Hanuvar pivoted. Too late he and Lucian observed the villagers had crept up from below. He felt honest bewilderment that the untrained men could be so stealthy when they hadn't evidenced such capability in the fens. Eight remained, advancing in two arcs from left and right.

"How did they surprise us?" Hanuvar asked Lucian.

"The feathers," the priestess said softly. "I can feel their power on them."

"We don't want to hurt you," Tibron said. He was leading the group on the left. "We just want the bird."

"The egret's nearly dead." The priestess threw back her shoulders and she spoke to them. "You've done enough already, and the spirits of the fen will take their vengeance."

The men on the left paused. Cerca, though, pressed in from the right, daring to place a foot on the first stone step. "We've got to take the rest of its feathers while it's still alive," he said.

Hanuvar and Lucian drew their weapons at the same moment.

"Choose well," Hanuvar said. "You have magic, but we have the high ground. And training."

"But you might lose your balance," Cerca said, and, pulling a small feather from his sleeve, broke it.

Hanuvar's left foot slid out from beneath him. He thrust out a hand as he dropped, catching himself on his palm.

Once he had been forced to keep a handful of sorcerers on his staff, to better guard against the magic of his enemies. Though dire spells had sometimes been used against him and his forces, he'd never faced such sudden disabling magic. Spells powerful enough to disrupt the natural order required days of preparation, and exhausting ritual. Even as he struggled to prepare for the enemy attack the sorcery's sudden effectiveness impressed and alarmed him.

He hadn't fully regained his feet when the first spearman charged. Against some other man, the advantage his opponent held might have been fatal.

As the point drove down Hanuvar knocked the haft out of line with his sword and rolled through a half somersault to close with his assailant and swing a fist into his groin. The younger man wailed and fell backward into one of the two coming up behind him. They tumbled into a heap at the foot of the hill.

On his feet now, Hanuvar leaned away from a vicious club blow to his head. He stepped sideways, then lashed out with his sword and cut deep through his attacker's neck. His blade was keenly sharp, and pierced skin, muscle, and larynx. The club wielder dropped like a stone, twitching and gurgling. Hanuvar pivoted. His only remaining opponent watched hesitantly from below.

He'd lost sight of Cerca.

"Drop your blade, Centurion," the leader called from behind.

Hanuvar whirled. Lucian he saw groaning on the ground beside the table. Cerca clasped the priestess, sword blade pressed to her side.

"No one has to die," he said. "The feathers can right any damage that's been done."

"You've assaulted an officer of the legion," Hanuvar said.

"Lucian? He'll be fine. He just hit his head on the table when he lost his balance. Now drop your sword."

Hanuvar had backed to the far side of the table, the better to see both his opponents across it, and the assailants at the foot of the hill. The bearded tracker was there at the table, eying Hanuvar, spear aimed loosely at him even as he reached with his free hand for the blue egret.

The bird's head moved mechanically to observe the tracker's descending hand.

One moment there was a flutter of large wings behind Hanuvar. In the next a brilliance bright as the sun filled the little area. Hanuvar, facing away from the source of the glare, saw Tibron throw up his free arm to shield his eyes. Though alarmed by whatever was happening behind, he took advantage of his foe's distraction. He vaulted the table, grabbed Tibron's spear, and brought his sword into the side of the tracker's head. At the last second he decided against a mortal wound and clouted him with the weapon's flat.

The man moaned and doubled over, releasing his grip on the spear to put both hands to his head. The weapon dropped to the ground.

Only then did Hanuvar turn and see the mother bird.

It hung in the air, a great horse-sized avian of iridescent feathers tapering from dark to light. Its wings beat the air far too slowly to suspend it so gracefully above the earth. A golden aura shone in the air behind it, seemingly generated by the stir of its wings, and its eyes burned with the heat of suns.

If its child resembled a parrot more than an egret, this creature was a strange and beautiful cross between an eagle and a peacock, with a long swan-like neck, and a body from which two black claws depended on powerful legs. Black too was its beak, and as it opened, a warm sound, like the sun given voice, spoke to them, though the beak did not rise and fall in time its speech.

"You have brought pain to my hatchling," the voice announced. It was not an accusation, but a statement of fact devoid of anger.

Cerca's hand tightened around the priestess. "You don't want me to harm her, too. All we want is some of the magic you're hoarding."

The mother bird did not answer.

"You keep it for yourself," Cerca cried. "You could share it with any of us! Do you know how grateful we'd be? We would bring you anything you desired. We just want a little help now and then. A gift."

"Here is my gift to you," the mother avian declared.

Cerca looked down at his arm. He laughed, happily, and loosed the priestess to turn to the others in wonder. His entire body began to shimmer with white and gold.

"It's, it's amazing," he said with a gleeful smile. "I've never felt so glorious!" He was still smiling as he and his clothes and

his weapon fell away into golden ashes that trailed down across the stone table like a glowing shroud before it was swept into the night.

The priestess sank to one knee. Hanuvar scanned the faces of his enemies. Three genuflected. Two at the base of the hill were already running for the stairs to the pier. Hanuvar knelt as well, but pressed his fingers to the neck of Lucian before he saw the young man's blinking eyes. He helped the legionnaire to sit, and the optio groaned as he put a hand to his head.

The mother bird warbled a hauntingly sweet string of notes and her child stood on wobbling legs. He spread his wings, and then glided, or, rather, floated, to his mother's stunning wing. He perched upon her shoulder, and the mother leaned her head gently against his body.

Bathed now in his mother's glow, the glorious, vibrant colors of his own blue feathers were obvious, even if they were bedraggled. In five short breaths his feathers shimmered into existence and he was fully restored. His head turned to the mother and Hanuvar felt certain that the egret's eye met his own as the bird twittered a sad little melody.

The mother's head turned to regard them again, staring with its pupilless, glowing eyes.

"The preservers may stay. The rest of you—begone!"

That was enough for Tibron, who rose, backed away, and then fled with his fellows out of the temple and on for the stairs. They left their weapons, and their dead man, behind.

The mother's head swung from side to side as the younger bird sang to her. Finally she let out a single clack, and the egret silenced.

"To you three I will grant blessing," she declared, her beak open and unmoving once more. "First, to the priestess, to the gift of your wisdom and bravery I will add long health and vitality. You shall lead your people well, if they've the intelligence to heed you."

"Thank you," Tura said gravely, and bowed her head.

The bird's head shifted. "To the optio, I grant restored health, and the right to safely walk my lands. Ward them and prosper." Finally her gaze settled upon Hanuvar, who met those eyes unflinching. "For the old soldier, a warning. Your enemies will find you on the sea road. Keep to your old trail, and by it you will find your people."

Hanuvar's brows rose at this information, but the great bird had yet more to say. "Lend aid to the priestess of Erapna. She will tell you more."

Hanuvar bowed his head. From Ostra he had planned to sail for Derva itself. Travelling by land would add months to his journey. Each day's delay was one more his surviving people lived in slavery and privation, under threat of death. His hands tightened into fists even as he recognized he should feel only gratitude. For he would be no help to his people if he were caught and executed by Dervan authorities. While certain that would someday be his fate, he meant to free as many of the Volani survivors as possible before the axe fell.

"Now go," the mother bird declared. "Give thanks to the bounties my land provides, on the high days of every year.

Honor the old ways and take only what you need. Do not fail me." She finished with a fearsome caw, then rose with a beating of great wings, its child still perched upon its shoulder, and it sped shining into the sky. They watched her climb until she was simply one more bright star in the firmament, rising toward the moon.

They slept under the cypress beside the temple, then, come morning, left the body in the fen and started back.

There'd been only a little talk through the morning, especially during the long trip, but at some point the priestesses's hand found its way into the legionnaire's, and sometimes his hand slipped about her waist. They only relinquished their hold upon one another when they stepped into the clearing where Antires sat waiting near the horses.

"What," Hanuvar said, "no breakfast?"

"And well met to you as well," the playwright answered, rising with a glad smile. "I saved you some pan biscuits. I didn't know we'd be having guests."

"Break out the pan," Hanuvar said. "The priestess here hasn't eaten anything for the last day."

Antires bowed to her. "I'm at your service then, young woman. I'll set straight to work. I don't suppose any of you are going to tell me what happened?"

"Maybe in a little while." Hanuvar accepted the wineskin offered by his friend then turned to offer it to Tura and Lucian, but they sat beside one another on a rock, facing away, her head against his shoulder.

"What did I miss?" Antires asked. "Tibron came past earlier but wouldn't talk much. He said he'd seen a spirit in the fens. He refused, even at sword point, to lead me to you, and swore you'd probably be all right."

"We were."

"And there was a spirit?"

"Yes."

"By the gods, man. Do I have to drag it out of you? Was this another monster tale?"

"In a way," Hanuvar answered. "But I think this one is really more of a love story."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard Andrew Jones lurks in a tower beside the Sea of Monsters with a wicked and beautiful sorceress. When not spending time with her or their talented children he can be found hunched over his laptop, mumbling about flashing swords and doom-haunted towers. He has role-played regularly since junior high, long years ago, and game mastered so many adventures that he lost his mind and decided to become a writer. His publications include short stories, Pathfinder novels, the historical fantasies of Dabir and Asim, and his new novel *For the Killing of Kings*. You can find his musings on writing and gaming at www.howardandrewjones.com, on FB at www.facebook.com/howard.andrew.jones.1, or occasionally on Twitter @Howardandrewjon.

POWER CORRUPTS ALL WHO THIRST FOR IT



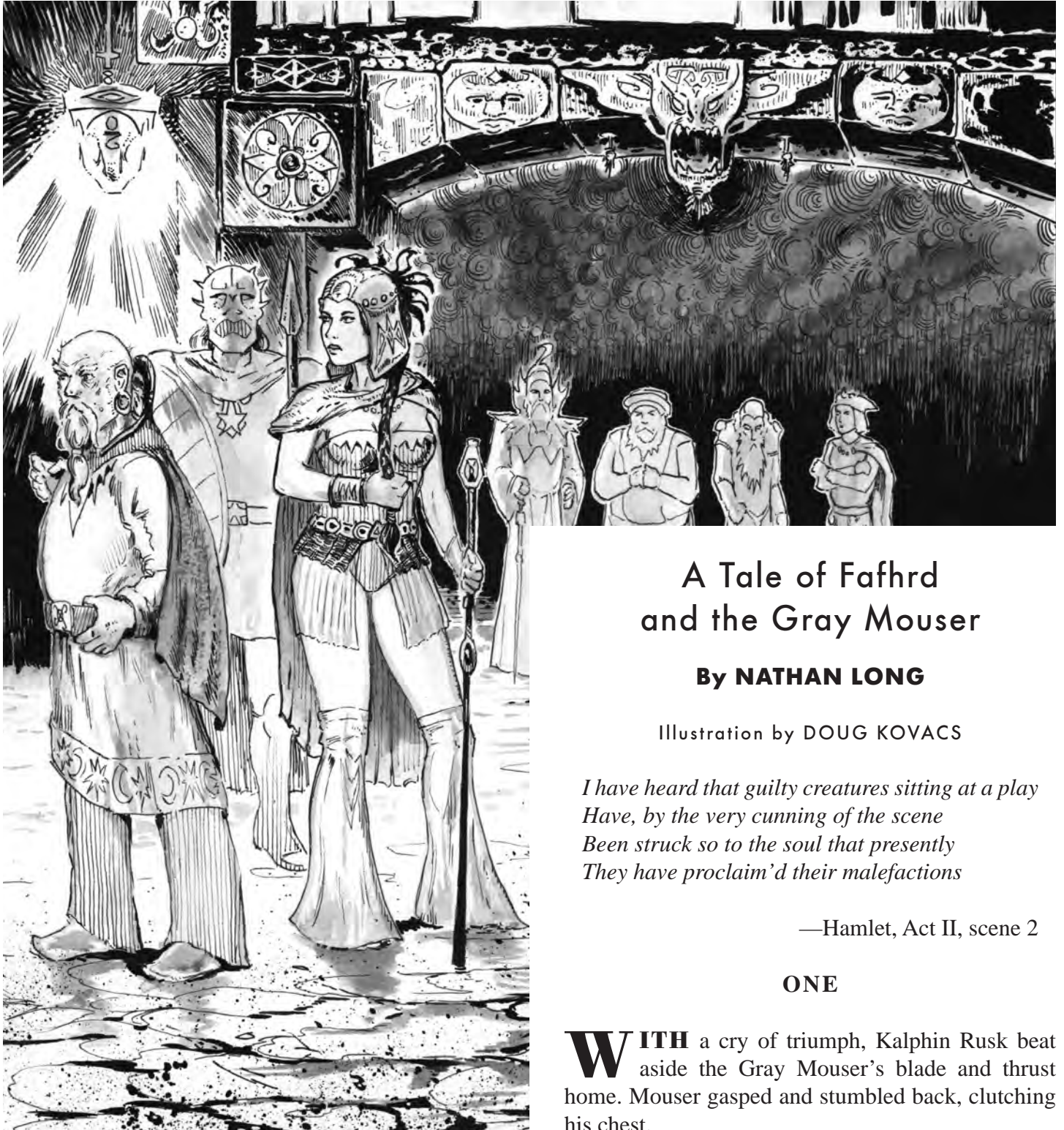
FOURTEEN STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE WHO WILL STOP AT NOTHING TO GAIN POWER OR TOPPLE IT

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GUILTY



FEATURES



A Tale of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser

By **NATHAN LONG**

Illustration by DOUG KOVACS

*I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions*

—Hamlet, Act II, scene 2

ONE

WITH a cry of triumph, Kalphin Rusk beat aside the Gray Mouser's blade and thrust home. Mouser gasped and stumbled back, clutching his chest.

"Touched," he whimpered. "By the gods, I..."

He crumpled to the floor.

"Thank you, dearest Lethoq," said Rusk, standing over him. "The blood now spilling from your black heart has started the very doom you sought to stop."

He raised his sword high, triumphant. "At last, the end begins!"

A moment of silence followed this thunderous pronouncement, then scattered applause, then Mouser opened his eyes and sat up.

"Well done, Master Rusk," he said. "Though perhaps yet another moment's anticipation twist beat and thrust."

Rusk helped Mouser to his feet. He nodded. "Mmmm. Let them want it. Good point."

He was a tall, graceful man, with a wild cloud of graying hair sweeping back from a high forehead, a long aquiline nose, and deep-set, piercing eyes. "And, for your part, swordmaster, a bit less staggering about at the end. The punters should remember how I killed you, not how you died, eh?"

Mouser bowed. "Duly noted, Master Rusk."

"Good, good." Rusk turned away and drew off his gloves. "Give me a moment to quench my thirst and we'll begin again."

As Rusk crossed to a bottle-strewn table on the far side of the musty, angle-roofed garret that served his company of players as a rehearsal space, Mouser sheathed his stage foil and joined short-haired, dark-skinned Hlemnys, who played Insicia, Rusk's treacherous temptress wife, where she sat by a gabled window in a thin silk robe, cleaning stage make-up from her face in the lavender light of a late Lankhmar afternoon. She had the sharp eyes and smirking lips of a woman who knew what pleased her.

"How energetically you wield your blade, swordmaster," she purred.

"The merest hint of my art, dearest Hlemnys, played broad and bold for the cheap seats," said Mouser. "For an audience of one, my sword work is of a more subtle and penetrating nature."

"Ha!" said Hlemnys. "Unlike your innuendo."

Mouser grinned. They had been fencing like this since rehearsals for His Last Wish had begun two weeks ago, and while no touch had yet been made, the parries and ripostes had been almost as arousing, and he was content to let the tension build. "It was not I who first mentioned blade work..."

He trailed off as a towering spectre loomed over them both, red eyes glowing from its grinning skull.

"Well?" it asked. "Does it suit me?"

Mouser laughed. "Given your history, my overall friend, there are few men it would suit better. Indeed, I'd not be a whit surprised if, in his gloaming halls, Death wonders if he shouldn't look a little more like you."

"You look a better death than this play deserves," said Hlemnys. "Heroic, not sad and stillborn."

Fafhrd, for it was he, peeled back a mask with phosphorescent night-beetles pinned into its eye sockets, and let it all hang down the back of his robes, revealing his long red hair and currently gaunt and beardless face. He wasn't quite as skeletal as the death he portrayed, but neither was he at his most robust. Times had been trying of late.

"It is pretty rotten," he sighed. "I wonder if our audience will want their money back."

"Nonsense," said Mouser. "'Tis a fine play. It has everything one could want—swords, blood, curses, betrayals, grand speeches, vengeance, lust!"

"And all in service to Rusk's ego. Or perhaps Mannat's." Hlemnys looked where their playwright, a rotund little man with a receding hairline to match his receding chin, hunched over a playscript, making changes with a scratchy quill, and spattering his plum-hued doublet with black flecks. "Never have I performed in a play which loved its hero better, nor hated its villains more. Purest boo-hiss melodrama."

Mouser laughed and put a hand to his chest. "Well, this villain is looking forward to being hissed and booed."

"No worries about that," drawled Fafhrd.

Hlemnys tucked away her face cloth and mirror and stood, tightening the sash of her clinging robe. "Well, I'm off. See you both tomorrow night for our opening."

"And closing," said Fafhrd.

Mouser bowed and kissed Hlemnys' hand. "Until then, mistress."

He and Fafhrd watched her walk away, for she had a walk well worth the watching, then turned back to the window.

"You know," said Mouser with a contented sigh. "I think, in the theatre, I have found my true calling at last."

"I thought that was sorcery," said Fafhrd, "or brothel management, or the gem trade, or—"

"Bah, those were just whims! This is real! This is... important! The art of it! The thrill of it! The delight in the audience's eyes."

"The heaving of the actresses' bosoms," said Fafhrd.

Mouser smirked. "They are a comely lot, these theatricals. But 'tis more than that. I've been bitten by the bug, Fafhrd. I don't think I shall ever recover."

"Swordmaster," called Kalphin from the center of the garret. "Once more if you please."

"With pleasure, Master Rusk."

As Mouser drew his foil and crossed to his mark, Fafhrd called after him, low enough that only he could hear. "Let me know how you feel after the play breathes its last tomorrow."

TWO

IT came as no surprise to those who knew him best that Mouser had fallen for the theatre. Indeed, many admitted shock it hadn't happened sooner. The world of the stage had everything the gray one liked—illusion, costume, artistry, performance, and most importantly, immediate and continuous praise. Everyone loved you when you were an actor, and there was nothing the Gray Mouser loved more than being loved. Though it wasn't initially a fondness for the theatre that had prompted him and Fafhrd to join Kalphin Rusk's company of players, once they were in, Mouser was so besotted that at times he almost forgot the real reason they had inveigled their way into that drafty garret in the first place.

Fortunately, Fafhrd was there to remind him.

It had all started, as such things so often did, because of a want of funds. Fafhrd and Mouser had limped into Lankhmar's port in a torn-sailed sloop after months away, tails tucked between their legs and their purses empty—indeed, worse than empty. The investors who had put up money for what Mouser had

promised would be a simple expedition to recover an unrivaled yet unguarded trove of ancient treasure, had not been interested, when he and Fafhrd had returned empty-handed, in their excuses of storms and scurvy, pirates and panthers, cut-throats and cannibals, and myriad other misfortunes. Instead they had asked, pointedly and repeatedly, for their money back.

Easy enough of course to steal a pair of horses or slip on another ship and leave Lankhmar behind as they had so many times before, but the afore-mentioned scurvy, pirates, cannibals, and misfortunes had left the pair more than a little homesick for their adopted city's smoky streets and dark delights, and they were reluctant to leave it again so quickly. Thus, knowing that, unless they wanted to spend the whole of their stay looking over their shoulders and changing their addresses as often as they changed their smalls, they would have to do the unheard of, and find a way to pay their creditors back.

Being natural thieves, they naturally decided thievery would be the swiftest and surest way to acquire the requisite funds, but locating a prize of sufficient value which would require neither months of preparation nor significant risk proved harder than expected. The Thieves Guild, as always, snapped up the low-hanging fruit, and it seemed this season Lankhmar's truly priceless treasures were being guarded with unusual competence and ferocity.

"They must know we're in town," said Mouser, staring into his mug one night at the Golden Lamprey after another weary evening of leaping, creeping, spying, and prying had ended again in frustration.

Fafhrd smirked. "Yes. That must be it."

He raised his cup to his lips.

"No you don't," said the barkeep. He dropped the coin Fafhrd had paid with on their table. It hit with a leaden thunk. "If that's silver, I'm a mermaid. Now, if you don't mind..."

And with that, he unceremoniously took back the pair's drinks.

Mouser sighed. "This cannot go on."

Finally, after another week of fruitless hunting, Mouser overheard a rumor that set his heart aflutter and his fingers atingle. It seemed the council of the ancient and august Lankhmar Sorcerer's Guild would soon be celebrating the tenth anniversary of the ascension of Orvaro the Wise to the position of its Grand Master. Now, this in itself was not particularly newsworthy information. The Sorcerer's Guild held many celebrations and ceremonies throughout the year. What caught the Mouser's attention about this one was that, for the first time in as long as anyone could recall, non-members would be admitted to the guild's squat and sulfur-yellow tower.

Mouser had long dreamed of entering the guild and robbing it blind. Their library in particular filled him with an insatiable intellectual lust. It was rumored to hold every book of sorcery, natural philosophy, alchemy, demonology, and arcane ritual known to man—some of the most valuable books in the world—and the most interesting to an inquisitive mind such as his. The difficulty, of course, was that, being the Sorcerer's Guild, the place was protected by sorcery—spells and wards and ethereal shields the least of which would turn a man's brain-matter to slurry and his flesh to dust.

But on this occasion, those wards would be parted, the shields lowered, the curses lifted, so that non-members, the actors from

a troupe of players to be precise, could enter and perform a play before the Guild Council. The instant he heard the news, the Mouser knew that he and Fafhrd must become part of that company.

Unfortunately, careful eavesdropping in the Mask and Slapstick, a drinking house frequented by Lankhmar's close-knit theatrical community, revealed that the sorcerers would be allowing only the actors themselves to enter the guild—no stagehands, roustabouts, or supernumeraries permitted. Worse, all parts had been cast. The company was complete.

Hearing this, Fafhrd was ready to abandon the scheme and find another, but Mouser would not be deterred. Thus, when over the course of two days the company's usually agile fencing master somehow broke his leg falling down a flight of stairs, and their majestic baritone took to his bed with a mysterious illness, Mouser and Fafhrd were first in line for the auditions to replace them, and so menaced the other hopefuls who arrived after them that, when the doors opened, only they remained.

Still, this wouldn't have sufficed had they been terrible, but Mouser, in addition to being one of the two greatest swordsmen on this or any world, had also previously choreographed combats, and Fafhrd, though trained as a high-voiced skald, could also speak and sing deeply and most pleasingly. Thus, with few other options open to him, Kalphin, the leader of the company, had hired them and rehearsals began.

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THE night of the performance, the company shuffled through the scholar's quarter toward the guild's four storey tower with packs on their backs, sacks in their hands, and rolled canvas and curtains upon their shoulders. The sorcerers' ban on stagehands meant that even Kalphin and the portly playwright Mannat struggled along with props, costumes, makeup, and instruments.

Aside from those worthies, who played the noble hero and his villainous eldest brother respectively, there were five in the company—sly Hlemnys as Mannat's treacherous wife, handsome young Taveen as Kalphin's vain youngest brother, a gaunt tragedian, Spandos, as Kalphin's untrustworthy uncle, a fat comedian with the improbable name of Dindandundo as Kalphin's greedy middle brother, Mouser as Kalphin's erstwhile best friend, and Fafhrd as Kalphin's frail and sainted father, who died in the first scene, and returned as a ghost in the last.

"Why does Mannat already have his false beard and eyebrows on?" asked Fafhrd as he watched the playwright struggle forward, perspiration dripping from the sharply defined black goatee glued to his non-existent chin. "I thought we'd have time to prepare when we got there."

"He's also stage-managing tonight," Mouser reminded him. "He'll be busier than the rest of us."

"Hmmm," said Fafhrd. "Well, it's making him sweat."

Two masked guards and a short older man in sober gray awaited them before the tower's arched and gilded doors.

"Welcome, players," said the man as they approached. "I am Lidiq, librarian and historian of the Sorcerer's Guild. Before I allow you entry, I must be assured you carry no arcane items on your person or in your baggage. Please form a line."

Fafhrd shot Mouser an uneasy glance. Mouser swallowed. He did indeed have arcane items on his person—a faintly glowing crystal lens, and a silver bracelet etched with serpentine runes, both stolen days ago in preparation for their visit to the guild. He pulled the trinkets from his purse and cupped them in his left hand, then motioned Fafhrd to stand before him in the line. Fafhrd nodded.

Lidiq chuckled when he peered into Fafhrd's pack and saw his skull mask with its glowing beetle eyes. "It's that sort of play, is it? Excellent. Thank you, my towering friend. Go to the door."

Fafhrd nodded and bowed, putting his right hand behind his back as he did so. Mouser stepped forward at the same time and slipped the bracelet and lens to Fafhrd with his left hand as he held out his pack to Lidiq with his right. The switch was seamless. The librarian noticed nothing.

When all had been searched, Lidiq returned to the front of the line and raised a hand to the doors. They swung open silently, revealing a dark interior.

"Stage magic," muttered Mouser.

"Nothing to it," sneered Fafhrd.

The librarian started through the doors. "This way, players."

Mouser felt giddy walking into so famous—and so famously hard to enter—a place, and congratulated himself on his cleverness. All the thieves who had died or been rebuffed by the guild's wards and locks and guards, and here he was strolling in, invited. Proof that, when it came to thieving, having the intelligence to take advantage of an opportunity was more valuable than nimble fingers and silent feet. Of course, having those as well was best.

Fortunately, he did.

The real difficulty would be making sure he and Fafhrd's thieving wasn't discovered until they were safely outside the wards again, or—preferably—never discovered at all.

Lidiq preceded them up a grand spiral of a staircase, wooden and bow-stepped with age, but spangled upon its balusters with carved and gilded stars, moons, all-seeing eyes, and other arcane sigils. Three flights up, he opened another arched door and waved them into the brazier-lit library of Mouser's dreams. Books of all sizes, colors, and bindings were arrayed on shelves which covered every wall, and reached past a marble balcony all the way to a domed ceiling painted like the sky at night, with the constellations of Newhon's northern hemisphere picked out in glittering gems, and their names written in ancient script around its circumference. All the knowledge of the world must be held in this room, he thought. At least all the knowledge a buyer might pay to possess.

On the far side of the chamber rose a broad, low dais with a lectern at the front and doors at the sides. Before it, the library's carpeted floor was arranged with desks and tables and couches and chairs. Five worthies in rich robes lounged upon these and eyed the players with varying degrees of interest as they filed in.

"Players," said Lidiq, with a flourish. "May I introduce your esteemed audience, the council of the Sorcerer's Guild of Lankhmar. First, Guildmaster Orvaro, whose assumption of that office ten years ago is what we celebrate this e'en."

A man in robes and chasuble of dark green silk inclined his balding head from where he sat. Though somewhat thickened from good living, he was still handsome, with a neat black goatee and piercing green eyes.

"His consort, and principal arbiter of the guild, Illuria of the Crimson Robe."

A saturnine beauty curled beside Orvaro gave the players a sly smile. She had a lush figure and black hair that spilled over her gold-chased red robes like ink into blood.

"Our craft-master, Magister Votk, who instructs and tests our apprentices," continued Lidiq.

An ancient crow of a man in black robes and skullcap grunted from where he sat sunk and glowering in a chair. His skin was so translucent his knotted veins stood out beneath it like long blue worms. "Non-members in the guild," he rasped. "And for the most callow, self-aggrandizing frivolities. Ravishast is spinning in his grave, Orvaro!"

Ignoring this outburst, Lidiq next indicated a haughty man of vast girth in robes of purple and gold, who took an entire couch to himself.

"Master Zhem, our exchequer and alchemist."

Zhem raised a chin like a melon and looked down his nose at them all. "They had better be worth the outlay, Guild Master. Our treasury is not to be raided so that you and Mistress Illuria may amuse yourselves."

"And lastly," Lidiq continued blithely. "Our newest member, who joined the council the same night Orvaro became grand-master, young master Merpalto."

A relatively youthful man in a saffron houppelande waved from where he leaned on the back of a chair. He was a merry-eyed, quirk-mouthed dandy with a silky blond beard. "Don't listen to those old grumps, players," he tittered. "This will be the most fun ever had in this library. I'm certain of it."

Then Lidiq bowed to the sorcerers. "Now, esteemed colleagues, may I present to you the players of the company of Kalphin Rusk, here to entertain us with His Last Wish, an original play in three acts."

Orvaro and Illuria stood and smiled at Kalphin.

"Welcome Master Rusk," said the guildmaster. "Welcome players. We look forward to your performance. Please prepare while we take our dinner. We will rejoin you soon."

As the others rose, Illuria held out a hand to Kalphin. "Dearest Kalphin. So pleased. What a joy it will be to have you to ourselves for once."

Rusk bowed over her hand, simpering. "The joy is ours, madam Illuria. And I promise you, we will prove ourselves worthy of your patronage this night."

She laughed brightly and let Orvaro lead her out to the stairs. Votk and Zhen followed with their noses in the air, refusing to look at the players, but handsome Merpalto giggled and ran his eyes over Hlemnys' charms, then stepped after Zhen, aping his ponderous dignity behind his back.

When all had exited, librarian Lidiq turned and gave the players an embarrassed smile, then gestured about the room. "The dais is yours for your stage, and you may have the studies through the doors to its right and left for your dressing rooms. Feel free to use any of the furniture you see, only..." His smile faded. "Touch not the books. We will know if you have."

Invitation and warning thus uttered, he closed the doors behind him and the players were alone.

"Well," said Hlemnys. "That's sure to be a joyous meal."

"A love fest," agreed Fafhrd.

Spandos, the skeletal tragedian, paled a bit as he surveyed the looming book shelves with sudden unease. "I had, until this moment, only thought what an honor it would be to play here. It had not occurred to me it might be a danger as well."

Dindandundo, the fat comedian, tittered nervously. "The danger is all I've been thinking of. 'Tis a trap of velvet. One I pray we 'scape with our lives."

"Nonsense," said Kalphin. "Master Orvaro and Mistress Illuria have loved our company since first they came to see us at the Net and Trident all those months ago, and they have been the souls of honor since. Tonight, if we please them, their patronage will be ours. Provided we play as I know we can, and none of you do anything stupid, we have nothing to fear, and everything to gain."

Fafhrd heard Mannat snort at that, but he wasn't sure he snorted at Kalphin's sycophancy, or the idea of Orvaro and Illuria's honor, or that they had nothing to fear. Mouser, on the other hand, hadn't heard any of it. He'd been distracted by the fact that one of the council had left a cloak—saffron-clad Merpalto by its ochre hue—draped over the back of a settee. Perfect. He would need that later.

"Now come, comrades," Kalphin continued as he stepped to the dais and lifted the lectern. "Stop nattering and get to work. We've much to do and little time to do it."

Yes, thought Mouser, turning his eyes from cloak to books. Much to do indeed.

THREE

AS Fafhrd and Mouser pulled props from sacks and the actors emerged from the dressing rooms to begin their preparations, a faint echo of recognition 'gan tickling the depths of Fafhrd's mind. There sat Spandos in his black habit, making himself up to look even more gaunt than he already was. Behind him, Dindandundo smoothed his purple and gold surplice over his prominent belly while muttering his lines. Near the dais, young Taveen adjusted the belt of his saffron robes, while Mannat, now wearing a green silk tabard, helped Hlemnys' adjust her long black wig so it lay smoothly down the back of her red gown.

"Hoy," said Mouser, hefting one end of a wide roll of canvas. "Quit ogling my intended. There's work to do."

Fafhrd blinked from his reverie and took up the other end.

"Curious," he said as they walked it to the dais. "We are all dressed in the same colors as the sorcerers of the council. Even you, Mouser, wear Lidiq's gray. Only I and Kalphin have no match."

They set down the canvas and Mouser looked around. It was true. Fafhrd wore the white muslin night-dress of Kalphin's dying father from the first scene of the play, and Kalphin's doublet was a rich plum, but the others were practically dopelgangers of their audience—even down to their style of dress.

"A ploy, no doubt," Mouser said. "To appeal to the vanity of our hosts, which they have in abundance."

"But..." Fafhrd frowned. "In the play they all die."

Hlemnys, who had perched herself on the arm of a nearby chair while applying her make up, chuckled and swung a stock-

inged leg. "Some patrons will pay extra to have their namesakes killed in a play. They find it a thrill."

Mouser held one end of the canvas in place as Fafhrd began to unroll it. He curled his lip. "Frustrated actors. They're all the same."

Hlemnys smirked at that, and might have made an impertinent remark except that Kalphin was crossing to them, clapping officiously.

"Come now, gentles, pull it all the way to the edges. We don't want our swordmaster's 'blood' to stain the council's dais. What sort of guests would be then, eh?"

Fafhrd and Mouser dutifully tugged the canvas this way and that until it fully covered the platform and the sorcerer's circle painted upon it was in the center. This was where Mouser's character would die after his duel with Kalphin, spilling stage blood within the circle and powering the 'curse' that would wreak Kalphin's final vengeance upon his treacherous family.

As they smoothed out the canvas's last creases, Mannat the playwright grunted up on to it, dropped a round rug he'd been carrying over his shoulder, and handed Fafhrd a bulging basket. In it were six small lamps, each with a brass silhouette of a different animal partially obscuring its glass face. When lit, these would cast leaping shadows on the walls to eerie effect.

"Cover the circle with the rug, and set these lamps stage right," he said, then turned to Kalphin. "Remember, Master Rusk, I have painted the glyphs of the animals in the six points of the circle. Be sure to place the right animal at the right point."

Kalphin sighed. "Of course, Mannat. But does it really matter?"

"With the audience so close," said Mannat, "it does. We are in the sorcerer's guild. We don't want them to laugh at our ritual. It will take them right out of the play."

Kalphin pursed his lips, concerned. "Oh dear. That's very true. I hadn't thought of that."

"Aye," Mannat continued. "And for the same reason, I want to go over the words of the curse with you a few times more. Your pronunciation must be absolutely correct. This audience above all others, will know if it is not."

"Very well," said Kalphin, resigned. Then chuckled. "I only hope 'tis not too correct. The last thing I want to do is curse our patrons."

Mannat shared the laugh and put a hand on Rusk's shoulder. "Trust me, dearest Kalphin. 'Twere an actual curse, you would have killed the company a hundred times over during our rehearsals. Now come, help me hang the curtains and we will work through it again."

Fafhrd scowled at the symbols painted on the circle as the playwright and actor walked away. "Do you think, Mouser, that there is such a thing as a play being too authentic? These symbols look very real."

Mouser gave them a glance, then unrolled the rug over them. "Oh, some are, yes. But the rest are rubbish. At least I don't recognize them—and I am well read on these subjects, as you know."

"Mmmm," said Fafhrd, but was somehow not entirely reassured.

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WITH scenery arranged, costumes donned, and curtains hung to either side of the stage and across the back to allow for hidden crossings behind, the actors meandered about the library engaging in their pre-performance rituals. Kalphin continued to practice the words of the curse while Mannat coached, Hlemnys stretched and twisted in distracting ways, Dindandundo grimaced and gaped, seemingly trying to open his mouth in every direction at once, Spandos rolled his neck and repeated over and over a strange cantrip, "The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue. The tip of the tongue, the teeth, the lips," while handsome Taveen just studied his cheekbones in a hand mirror.

Mouser and Fafhrd meandered as well, or at least pretended to, strolling about the perimeter of the room, then pausing now and then as if conversing. In reality they were examining—rather, Mouser was, as it was more his specialty—the wards that protected the books, while Fafhrd kept an eye out.

"Ah ha," Mouser whispered, holding his crystal lens to his eye. "A shimmering curtain, pink as dawn, wafting handsbreadth from the spines of the books. Anyone foolish enough to reach for one would pass fingers through it and, one assumes, alert the sorcerers dining below."

"And will your charm pierce it?" whispered Fafhrd in return.

"Let us discover." The mouser edged his off-hand, with rune-etched silver bracelet worn round the wrist, closer to the books. "Ah, the curtain boils! It parts! Like a stream 'round a rock."

"Then hurry," said Fafhrd, looking around. "With care, of course."

"Patience, barbarian. Patience." Mouser tucked away the lens and resumed his stroll with Fafhrd following. "I am seeking only the smallest, most easily hidden volumes, but also the most expensive. Only such will be enough to—"

He cut off with a gasp and leaned closer to the books. "Asphendar's Compendium of Curses! I know a warlock in Ilthmar who'll pay... No, no. 'Tis the expurgated edition. Lacking the curse of invincible death. Worthless."

He paused as he spotted another small volume, bound in flaking green leather. "Oh, but this. Bhule's Treatise on the Realms of Light and Air, with illustrations that move when observed. This will fetch a fortune. Here now. Elbows out. Put your giantism to good use for once and I'll get to work."

With seeming casualness, Fafhrd stepped between Mouser and the rest of the room and put his hands on his hips, thus making a wide curtain of his shroud-like night-dress. At the same time, Mouser whipped out the lens once more, assuring himself that the wards were indeed parting as he reached for the tiny tome, then gently pulled the book from between its neighbors and passed it to Fafhrd, who slipped it into a hidden pocket in the dress.

"That fish alone has nearly paid off our creditors in one cast," said Mouser, as they continued their leisurely ramble. "Now let's see if we can hook something for ourselves."

FOUR

IN the space of a few minutes, four more small books, each—at least according to the Mouser—worth more than was needed to pay for their failed expedition, had found their way into the lining of Fafhrd's nightshirt.

Mouser was just slipping a fifth of equal value into the inner pocket of the saffron robe that merry Merpalto had left behind, 'to throw the hounds off the trail,' when the library doors swung open and Lidiq stepped in.

Mouser flinched from the robe in panic, then tried to turn the movement into a politely stifled yawn. Fortunately, the librarian had turned to bow to Kalphin and missed the performance altogether.

"The council are just having their cordials, master Rusk," he said. "If your company could please take their places, they will be up very shortly."

"We will be ready," said Kalphin, then turned to the others as Lidiq left again. "Come on. Places, everyone. Taveen and Hlemnys, begin with your harp and flute. Quick now, quick!"

In a flurry, the actors grabbed their various possessions and vanished behind the curtains on either side of the dais like rabbits diving into a hedgerow. It was cramped back there, as the curtains were narrow and Taveen and Hlemnys needed a bit of elbow room to play their instruments, but the whole company had to be on stage in the first scene, so there wasn't much choice.

Crushed in a corner, Mouser watched through a peep hole as the members of the council returned, swaying slightly now, with goblets in their hands and servants following to set trays of sweetmeats by their chosen seats, and even more cheerful or more crabbed—depending on their nature—than they had been previously. Orvaro and Illuria sat together on a couch, laughing and nuzzling each other. Master Zhem glowered as he settled his majestic mass onto his couch. Muttering Votk sank into his chair so deeply his skull-capped head ended level with the arms, and Merpalto perched on a library stool and listed precariously twixt starboard and port, giggling to himself all the while. Only Lidiq was as sober now as he had been before dinner. He leaned 'gainst a pillar at the back, arms crossed, keeping an eye on the rest.

When all were settled, Taveen and Hlemnys ended their tune and Kalphin strode out with chin high to recite the prolog, welcoming the council and setting the scene, the bedchamber of great and learned Magister Ridbeya on the night of his death, with family and friends drawn near to hear his final words.

As this oration continued, the other players took their positions in an opening tableau, Fafhrd in the center, reclining in his nightdress upon a chaise with a long, gray old-man beard trailing down over his blankets, and the others, Mouser included, gathered round him in aspects of grief and mourning. Then, prolog completed to scattered applause, Kalphin slowly circled behind the chaise, and the play began with Fafhrd raising a shaky hand.

"My final wish..." he wheezed. "My final wish is that my family use the riches I have amassed to continue our generations-long quest for greater knowledge and understanding of the arcane and occult, and its use in the betterment of mankind. And to ensure that this wish is carried out, I entrust all my wealth to my youngest, but truest son, Ruon, who has stayed at my side while his brothers have followed other pursuits."

He sank back and looked around blindly. "Ruon, my son. Where are you? The light fades."

"Here, father," said Kalphin, taking his hand. "Always."

"Ruon," Fafhrd moaned. "Keep... the light... aflame..."

And with an extended sigh, he perished.

"Father!" cried Kalphin, then turned to the others. "He is gone. Our beacon. Our north star. But his work must not die with him. Family, friends, I beg you pledge to honor his last wish, and help me to continue his studies. Have I your word?"

And then, of course, for it was that sort of play, each of those gathered demurred, and instead made some plea for a share of Ridreya's inheritance. First was Mannat in his glued-on beard as oily Olvo, Ruon's oldest brother, claiming that, as first son, it should be him who managed the disbursement of the money. Then came Dindandundo as the fat middle brother, Zirak, promising he could double the old man's wealth with alchemy. After that spoke Spandos as Ruon's cadaverous uncle, Vilmos, insisting that sharing Ridreya's studies with "mankind" was out of the question, and that he should have control of the money to ensure it was never spent on the undeserving. Even Hlemnys as Ruon's wife, Insicia, Taveen as his son Mephilil, and Mouser as his best friend, Lethoq, attempted to dissuade Ruon from honoring his father's wish—Insicia and Mephilil demanding that Ruon save them from the "poverty" they lived in, while Lethoq whispered that he was a fool not to appease his family for the sake of peace.

"There will be plenty left over for the old man's dreams when you've sated their greed," Mouser said. Or rather, that's what he should have said. In the heat of the moment what he actually said was, "There will be plenty left over for the old man's greed when you've sated their dreams."

After which he turned bright crimson and did the rest of the scene with his back to the audience. Mercifully it was soon over, for after noble Ruon refused their grasping requests and peevish pleas, the others all leapt upon him, beating him and tearing his clothes, then threw him out a window and into a river—an effect achieved by tossing Kalphin behind the stage left curtains and having him drop a rock into a hidden tub of water.

Center stage, the six murderers placed their hands together in a ring and swore to split Ridreya's wealth between them, and to tell all who asked that Ruon had been unable to accept his father's death and had taken his own life.

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MOUSER cursed as he came off stage, fists balled and teeth bared. "My opening line, and I flubbed it!"

"Shhh, swordmaster!" whispered Spandos. "They can hear you in the front."

Mouser clamped his lips closed and hurried into the left hand study.

Fafhrd followed, taking off his beard. "I wouldn't worry about it, little man. It played well enough. I don't think anyone noticed."

"It was mortifying!" Mouser snarled. "All the more so after you pulled your line off without a hitch. Now where's that script?"

"I've only two speeches in the whole play, so I haven't so much to remember." Fafhrd held up his muslin covered arm. "Also, I wrote it on my sleeve."

Mouser gaped. "You cheat!"

Fafhrd shrugged and began to put on the black robes of the old man's spectre over his night dress. He wasn't on again until

the very end of the play, but there was no reason not to get ready now. "We're here to rob the place, not act."

"You might be," said Mouser. "I am here to do both. Now leave me to read this through again. I will not make a fool of myself twice."

Fafhrd chuckled. "Thrice at least."

He draped his hood and skull mask down his back and went back out to watch the play.

On stage, Kalphin was miming climbing from the river, bloodied, bruised, and heartbroken. On his knees he pledged to the gods that he would have his revenge upon his abusers and recover his stolen inheritance, not for his own sake, but in the name of his fathers' dying wish, and the noble pursuit of knowledge. But first he must become the arch-sorcerer his father had wanted him to be, so that his revenge would be fitting.

Following that scene came briefer scenes that overlapped each other—half showing Kalphin recovering from his wounds while learning magic and plotting his revenge, the other half showing his former family and friends reveling in their newfound riches and doing all they could to tarnish his father's legacy.

During these scenes, Fafhrd saw the members of the council smirking and nudging each other as they recognized the costumes and the characters of the conspirators as those of their companions, though none, strangely, seemed to recognize themselves.

Fafhrd wondered if what Hlemnys had said about patrons of the theatre paying to be killed in a play extended to patrons wanting themselves humiliated on stage? It seemed unlikely, but other explanations seemed even less so. Kalphin was far too eager to have the guild as patron to knowingly insult them like this. Had he not known? Was it after all mere coincidence?

A little later on, in the middle of a scene where Kalphin, as Ruon, takes his first revenge by magicking the deaths of his treacherous uncle Vilmos and dilettante son Mephilil, he heard Mannat curse sotto voce, and looked around to see him leaving the podium where he was following the script and hurry to the left hand study. He came back a second later leading the Mouser by the arm.

"We're on, fool!" he whispered. "Come!"

"Apologies," Mouser murmured. "I was rehearsing and lost track of—"

"Shhh!"

Just as Kalphin left the stage, laughing and triumphant, Mannat led Mouser on, and into a scene where he was to sell his services as bodyguard to Mannat's character Olvo, Kalphin's jealous older brother.

"Tis clear," Mouser said, "With both your uncle and nephew dead, that someone hath grudge 'gainst thy family. And 'tis clear also that, with them dead, there is more treasure for those who yet live. Thus, I see no reason you should not increase my share for guarding the increase in yours."

This time Mouser got his lines off flawlessly, and exited the stage in a far better mood. Even Mannat patted him on the shoulder.

"Well done, swordmaster. But hold, for your next scene please show me you wear your blunted foil and not your rapier."

"Of course," said Mouser, and pulled the blade half from its sheath so Mannat could examine it. "It wouldn't do to kill our lead actor, now would it?"

"Indeed not," said the playwright. "Thank you. And well done again. You did fine out there just now."

Mouser beamed, but then frowned. "All that being said, I'd best go practice the passes again before our duel."

He scurried off and Fafhrd returned to watching the play.

FIVE

SCENE by bloodthirsty scene, the conspirators died. First, hidebound Uncle Vilmos, so desperate to keep knowledge of the arcane from outsiders that he hid all Ridreya's books in his private library, only to have an over-burdened shelf mysteriously topple and crush him, and Mephilil, who laughed himself to death when he started giggling at Vilmos' fate and found he couldn't stop.

Next came Zirak, beaten to death by a golden statue he had made of himself that Ruon magicked into a gilded golem, and then Inscia, Ruon's treacherous wife, who married his brother Olvo upon Ruon's "death." She died when a red bespoke dress she had paid a fortune for turned into red snakes that crushed her in their constrictions.

It was while this scene was coming to its grisly end—which was achieved with wires and Spanos operating a hand puppet snake head, and which had everyone in the audience except Madam Illuria snickering—that Fafhrd happened to glance at Mannat, and saw him uncharacteristically paying no attention to the playscript. Instead, he was wagging his fingers over the animal-silhouetted lamps and seeming to whisper to them. Was he lighting them? No. They were already lit, ready for the big scene where Kalphin, as Ruon, used the sorcerer's circle to prepare the final curse which would kill his oldest brother. It almost looked as if—

"Ah, dearest Fafhrd," said the Mouser, appearing at his side. "Are you ready to witness the finest stage duel ever performed in Lankmar—and perhaps all Nehwon?"

Fafhrd leaned in to whisper in Mouser's ear. "What is Mannat doing with the lamps?"

Mouser glanced in the playwright's direction. "Er... handing them to Kalphin?"

Fafhrd looked up. Mouser was right. In the second he had glanced away, Mannat had stopped whatever he'd been up to, and was now passing the lamps to Kalphin, three in each hand, hung from his fingers by their rings. And now he was strapping Kalphin's rapier around his waist.

"Right," said Mouser. "It's time. Wish me luck."

Fafhrd frowned. He was almost certain Mannat had been saying a spell over the lamps, or perhaps praying over them? Suddenly all the small things he'd observed throughout the course of the evening—the playwright putting on his false beard before entering the guild tower, his insistence on Kalphin performing a real-sounding curse, the unsettlingly authentic looking sigils painted 'round the edge of the sorcerer's circle they had laid on the floor—started to shape themselves into a queasy suspicion. But was a suspicion enough to stop the play and start making accusations? Not when one's robes were stuffed with stolen books. One never knew upon who attention would turn when questions of skullduggery 'gan to fly. If he and Mouser wanted to get out of the tower with their lives and spoils intact, 'twould be wisest to stay mum.

Mouser grunted, annoyed at Fafhrd's silence. "Fine, then. Don't wish me luck. 'Tis a bad omen in the theater anyway. Just watch and be amazed."

And with that, he went to stand by Mannat.

On stage, Kalphin was soliloquizing as he kicked the rug aside to reveal the sorcerer's circle, and began to place the lamps at the six points around its circumference.

"Four of the six have met their end," he declaimed. "Each in manner fitting to their faults, and each losing the inheritance they stole, but now... now is the time to take vengeance upon the architect of it all. He who suborned the rest, who filled my son with dreams of endless indolence, gave my uncle charge of my father's library, transformed my brother Zirak's petty greed into an insatiable lust for gold, convinced my best friend that my vow to honor my father's last wish was false and self-serving piety, and worst... worst of all, turned my wife against me and took her for his own."

He set the last lamp down and spread his hands as he stepped into the circle. "For him, I have saved the greatest punishment. The culmination of my ten years of learning in exile. A curse so perverse, so subtle, he will writhe in its grip like a snake pinned by a spear for all the years of his life."

Mannat put a hand on Mouser's shoulder. "Now, swordmaster. Now."

Mouser took a breath, then strode on stage, crying, "Ruon, old friend. Desist!"

In the circle, Ruon turned and sagged, disheartened. "Ah, Lethoq. Has Olvo sent you to stop me? Convince me to end my vengeance? Please, let me instead convince you, for of all those who conspired against me, yours is the life I least wish to take."

There followed a dialog where both Mouser and Kalphin tried to talk the other into abandoning their course, and Fafhrd had to admit that Mouser played Lethoq's stoicism and quiet dignity—two qualities he could not be said to possess in real life—with astonishing verisimilitude.

In the end, of course—as the script required it—neither friend was able to convince the other, and Mouser, as Lethoq, bound by honor and contract to protect his new master Olvo, was forced to draw his sword and try to stop Ruon from completing his curse. And thus the duel began.

• • •

FROM the first pass, Mouser knew something was wrong. "Master Rusk!" he hissed, while ducking and whirling his cloak in accordance to the choreography. "You have the wrong blade! That is no foil!"

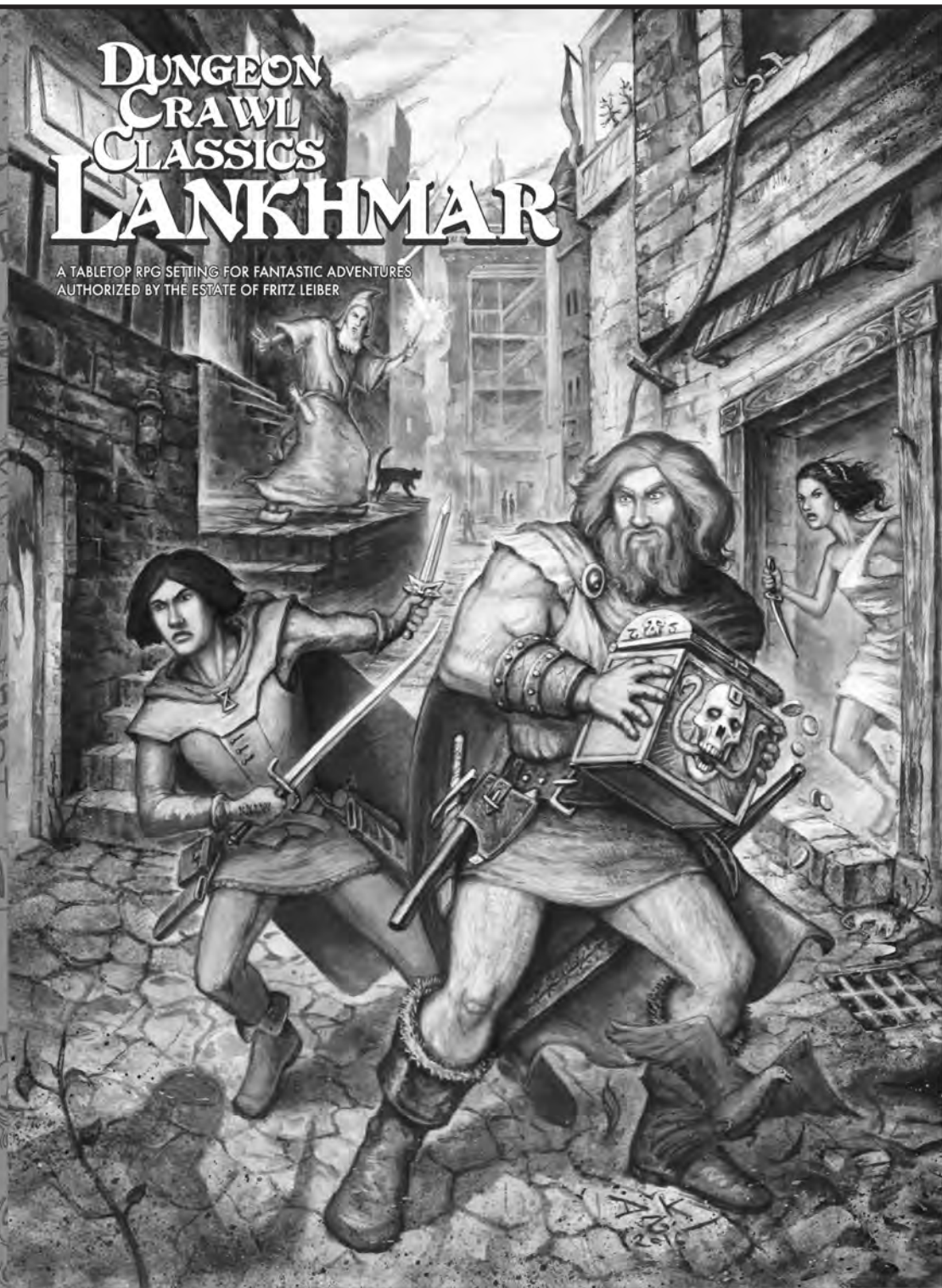
Kalphin looked at his sword, then blinked in surprise as they continued. "Dear me. Mannat gave me the wrong scabbard. Er... I shall be careful."

"Please," said Mouser.

The scene called for Kalphin to recite the curse while simultaneously fighting Mouser, ending each line with a thrust and culminating, of course, with Kalphin running Mouser through in the middle of the circle on the very last word—a brilliant conceit—if Mouser said so himself—that gave the fight rhythm and meter and the satisfying resolution of a song. Very quickly, however, Mouser began to wonder if he would make it to the final line alive, for despite

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Kalphin's assurances, with every couplet he uttered, he became more frenzied, and struck each blow harder than the last. It was all Mouser could do to turn some of them, and more than once he had to squirm ungracefully out of the way to avoid getting pinked.

"Easy, Master Rusk," he rasped at last. "Don't get carried away."

But Kalphin did not now respond, only continued the curse and the fight with equal fervor.

• • •

FROM the side of the stage, Fafhrd too was beginning to sense something amiss. The sound of blade on blade was not the tick-tick of foils but the clash of true steel, and Mouser was either acting with more skill than he had yet shown, or he had turned clumsy as a drunk puppy, tripping over his feet as he fell back before Kalphin's attacks, and twisting away from his thrusts like he was truly terrified.

Their esteemed audience seemed troubled too. The smiles had left the sorcerers' faces and they were gaping at Kalphin, frowning, standing, exchanging looks, as if unsure whether they should intervene.

Fafhrd glanced at Mannat to see if he too thought something was off, but rather than looking uneasy, the playwright stared at the fight with unblinking concentration, while at the same time mouthing the words of the curse and moving his hand and arm to match Kalphin line for line, slash for slash, and thrust for thrust. It was almost as if he were...

Fafhrd's growing sense of wrongness finally congealed into a sickening surety. He didn't know what Mannat was up to, but he was most definitely up to something, and that something seemed likely to get Mouser hurt, or even killed. Only the overriding desire not to alert the sorcerers that anything untoward was happening kept him from sprinting directly across the stage and tackling Mannat. Instead he hurried as quick as he could behind the back curtain, edging around the tables and chairs stacked there and praying he would be in time.

• • •

ON stage, Mouser dripped with sweat. Kalphin was no longer just making his strikes stronger than they should be, he had left the agreed upon choreography far behind, and was attacking as if he intended to kill Mouser in truth. Had Mouser been wielding a rapier 'stead of his blunt and worthless foil, and were he not still trying to keep the play proceeding as it should, he could have bested Kalphin easily—well, perhaps not easily. Though in rehearsal he had shown no great skill as a swordsman beyond the standard theatrical poses and flourishes, Kalphin now fought like a seasoned fencer, with a precision and ferocity Mouser hadn't thought him capable of. Even so, the outcome, had Mouser been on even footing, would not have been in doubt—but he was not. The play weapon he wielded barely had the strength to parry Kalphin's attacks, let alone make any riposte.

Kalphin's eyes were glazed and distant and he fought without seeming to see. His voice, as he intoned the curse, echoed like they fought in the middle of a great temple instead of a lushly upholstered library.

There is sorcery here, thought Mouser, as another thrust from Kalphin tore his doublet—true magic behind the false magic of the play. But of what sort? And to what purpose?

The first question at least was answered when he realized Kalphin was herding him toward the sorcerer's circle, just as called for in the script. Blood sacrifice. And himself as the victim! It was, Mouser decided, time to stop abiding by the theatrical's credo of 'the show must go on.' The show must decidedly not go on!

He skipped back and parried Kalphin's next cut in sixte, but the blow was inhumanly strong. It sheared his foil in two, leaving him with but a stump. The follow-through shot for his eyes. Mouser flinched to avoid it and tripped, landing square in the middle of the circle and cracking his head on one of the lamps set around its perimeter.

Above him, two blurry Kalphins drew back their rapiers in preparation for the killing thrust.

• • •

"MANNAT," said Fafhrd, stepping up behind the shadow-fencing playwright and jarring him hard at hip and arm as he threw a comradely arm round his shoulders. "How goes the play?"

• • •

MOUSER stared cross-eyed at the tip of Kalphin's sword, knowing death was coming to him at last. But then, just as the actor thrust home, his questing blade jerked aside and pierced not Mouser's breast, but the flesh of his left forearm. Not a fatal blow, thank Mog, but a nasty one, and bloody. The gore was already trickling down to his cuff and dripping on the canvas as Kalphin intoned the last line of the curse.

• • •

"YOU fool!" shrieked Mannat, shoving at Fafhrd. "You've ruined it! Ten years of planning, and—"

A noise like a thousand ghosts all whispering at once interrupted him, and light flared from the stage. He and Fafhrd turned and saw the six animal-silhouetted lamps rising and turning above the circle, blazing with crimson light and sending bestial shadows leaping and chasing 'cross the aghast faces of the assembled council.

"Gods of vengeance be praised!" Mannat gasped. "It worked. Despite your clumsy meddling, it worked!"

Laughing, he started for the stage, but Fafhrd caught him round the neck and crushed him close.

"Mouser, here!" Fafhrd called. "The culprit's here!"

With a snarl, Mannat whipped a dagger from his sleeve and stabbed backwards, then tore free as Fafhrd yelped, clutched at his leg, and fell backward over a chair.

In the center of the magical maelstrom, with lights and whispers whirling round and within his head, Mouser fought to retain consciousness while Kalphin, above him, stared in horror at his blooded rapier and the crimson spilling from Mouser's sleeve.

"Wh-what have I done?" he gasped.

"No more than does... a marionette," Mouser mumbled. "But, 'ware the... puppeteer."

Kalphin turned, confused, just in time for Mannat to shove him square in the chest, sending him tumbling off the dais. Mouser tried to rise, but Mannat knocked him flat again with a kick to the face that rattled his already shaken brain. Then, standing dead center in the circle, with the floating lamps making slow pirouettes round his head, the playwright faced the sorcerers and pulled off his false beard.

"Look, fools, I have returned! Ten years to the day!" He smiled. "And I have brought your doom with me."

Whatever response Mouser might have expected to such a declaration—insults, angry retorts, exclamations of shock and surprise—it was not the response the council of the Lankmar Guild of Sorcerers gave. All they seemed capable of at that moment was shrieking and barking and hooting.

SIX

STILL too stunned to move, Mouser rolled his eyes toward the audience, then stared. The members of the council were out of their seats and cowering back from Mannat like cornered animals, and not in any sort of metaphorical way. Each of the councilors was cowering like a specific and particular animal. Skeletal Votk flapped his arms and squawked like a frightened crow, sober Lidiq hid behind a couch on all fours and barked like a dog, young Meralto clung to the rungs of a library ladder and screeched like a monkey, obese Master Zhem backed up on hands and knees, squealing like a pig, smooth Orvaro reared and hissed like a surprised serpent, and seductive Illuria arched her spine and snarled like a cat.

They have become the animals of the lamps, thought Mouser. That was the curse! And the entire purpose of the play was to speak it in front of this precise audience. We have been players in a drama of vengeance, indeed, but not the one we thought!

"Mannat?" came Hlemnys' voice from the side of the stage. "What is this? What have you done to...?"

Mannat spun and spoke a word like a whip. The actress dropped as if poleaxed. The other actors fell with her.

Mouser too felt the sting of that mental lash. The world dimmed at the edges and his brain sizzled like fat on a fire, but, perhaps because it had not been directed at him, it did not render him entirely unconscious. He couldn't yet move, but he could see and hear—and almost think.

• • •

FAFHRD too was paralyzed by the spell. Though fortunately on his back and away from the others when Mannat cast it, and thus spared its brunt, it had still scrambled his wits, and he could do nothing but watch through the legs of the chair he had fallen behind as the playwright turned back to the cringing sorcerers.

"It surpasses understanding how long it took you to guess something was amiss," said Mannat. "How did you not see from the beginning? How did you not notice that the play was the very mirror of your crimes against me after Grandmaster Ravishast died and you crippled and cast me out rather than name me his successor?"

He pointed at Orvaro. "You, you slithering snake, turning the others against me with your hissing lies. Telling them I was unstable, unfit!"

"And you, Lidiq," he snarled as the historian edged further behind his chair. "My so-called friend, loyal as a dog, who, when the tide turned, brought every secret told you in confidence to mine enemies so they might use them against me."

He stabbed a hand toward Votk, who flapped and fell back before it. "I'd have thought a fellow scholar would have supported me, Votk. But no, you feared I would bring new blood into the Guild and railed at me like an angry crow, while you, Zhem..." he said, sneering at the squealing alchemist. "All your greedy mind could think of was the money that could be made from my alchemical advances were I not there to regulate their use. You were happy to see me gone!"

Saffron-clad Meralto, in his fear, shrieked and flung a book. Mannat ducked it, then chuckled. "Ah, my unworthy apprentice, foisted upon me by Orvaro's nepotism, and now promoted to my place by that same mechanism. A performing monkey with less ability and craft than a street corner charlatan. I expected no loyalty from you, and received none but...!"

Here his eyes turned at last to Illuria of the Crimson Robe, who bared her teeth at him. "But you! You, my helpmeet, my love, my soulmate through good times and bad, from you I did expect help. You, I thought, would stay by me when all the others turned their backs. You I believed would speak for me, protect me, help me lead the council as I had helped you join it."

He spat into the pool of blood that had late leaked from Mouser's arm. "But no. The instant Orvaro whispered in your ear of the power the guild could have were its decency and morality left behind, you betrayed me as if our love had never existed, cold and calculating as a street cat. You helped the others rob me of my position, then laughed as they tattooed me with ward and sigil from head to toe so the power I had nurtured within myself could no longer be tapped."

With a cry of rage Mannat tore off his costume and stood bare to his thickset waist. There were no tattoos on his body, only broad strips and squares of scarred tissue where it looked like the skin had been flayed from him—or possibly burned. He was a pudgy patchwork of a man.

"Well, witch, I removed those tattoos, and though my powers are not what they were, my cunning remains. And thus I am here, playing a playwright, performing a play that played upon your egos so I could play you all for fools!"

The cowering councilors stared at him with wide and uncomprehending eyes. He sighed.

"You didn't understand any of that, did you? No matter. 'Twas not for your benefit, but mine. As is what follows."

With one hand, Mannat clutched a heretofore hidden golden necklace at his throat, and stretched the other toward them. "Now you shall play a play for me, betrayers, play and prey for my delight. Fight! Kill! Tear one another apart like the savage animals you are!"

The effect of this command upon the sorcerers was instantaneous. One second they whimpered in fear, the next they roared and clawed at each other as if they were the beasts they mimed. Votk pecked and clawed at Zhem, who charged head-down like a boar and tried to crush the thinner man. Meralto climbed

further up his ladder and flung books at Lidiq, who leapt and nipped at his ankles like a dog. Orvaro shot his head forward and snapped cobra-fashion at Illuria, which looked somewhat ridiculous, given his decidedly un-cobra-like body.

• • •

FROM where he lay at Mannat's feet, however, Mouser saw nothing ridiculous about the wounds the sorcerers inflicted upon each other. Bites tore ears and noses, fingernails ripped cheeks and chests, kicks and knees and headbutts raised lumps and cracked ribs. It was clear it would not be long before they did indeed tear each other apart—unless, that is, Mouser put a stop to it.

Not that he cared overmuch for the welfare of the councilors of the Sorcerer's Guild. He had no doubt they deserved every torture Mannat intended for them and more. But there was little chance the playwright—though perhaps he should now be called sorcerer—would stop there. Mouser and Fafhrd and the rest of Kalphin's company were witnesses to the slaughter. They would be done away with as soon Mannat assured himself his primary victims were dead.

It was time to act—if he could. Still dazed from the kick in the face and the stab in the forearm and the mental mauling of Mannat's magics, which continued to tear at his mind like a storm of madness, he raised himself on weak and buckling arms and looked around. Kalphin and the other actors remained stunned and limp, but by the back curtain, Fafhrd too was quietly rising. His eyes met Mouser's and they exchanged a nod.

As Mannat cackled and clapped his hands and egged the battling councilors on, the two friends crept up behind him and leapt, Mouser at his knees, Fafhrd his shoulders. The sorcerer slammed flat on the carpet before the dais, wind expelling from his lungs, and they piled on top of him, punching and kneeling him in the ribs and the back of the head.

Mannat curled up, gasping for air, then clutched once more his golden necklace and bellowed—or at least tried to bellow—another command.

“Menage—” he managed before he sucked air again.

“The necklace!” cried Mouser. “Get it!”

Fafhrd grabbed for it, but Mannat turned and tucked his chin, and this time got out his command. “Menagerie! Kill my attackers!”

Again, the councilors' obedience was instant. They left off clawing at each other and leapt instead upon Fafhrd and Mouser—quite literally, in Merpalto's case, for he dove from where he had been hanging from the railing of the balcony and struck them amidships. The two friends were slammed back onto the dais by the raucous tide and laid flat.

Ordinarily, a crowd of out of shape scholars with little martial training would not have given the friends any trouble, but there were several things working against them here. In addition to the afore-mentioned wounds and dizziness, there was also the problem of not wanting to cause lasting physical harm to members of the sorcerers guild, who might, did they survive, bear a grudge. That, coupled with the fact that Mannat's curse had given those same sorcerers unnatural strength and savagery made the odds that Fafhrd and Mouser would not only lose, but likely die, perilously high.

By dint of reach and leverage, Fafhrd was at last able to fling Merpalto from him and elbow Orvaro and Illuria aside, while a quick knee to the groin and an eye-poke freed Mouser momentarily from Votk and Zhem. The twain scrambled up and found Lidiq in their way, snarling and snapping on all fours, then ran wide around him on either side and dove behind Fafhrd's erstwhile deathbed divan, scratched and bitten, their costumes in rags.

There was no respite. The councilors scrambled toward the couch on all fours as Mannat urged them on, once again clutching his chain.

“Catch them!” he cried. “Bleed them! Blood will strengthen the curse!”

“We must take that chain,” Mouser panted, peering at him over the cushions.

“Unfortunately, 'tis on the far side of them,” said Fafhrd, nodding toward the oncoming sorcerers.

Mouser looked behind Fafhrd for some sort of weapon, then gasped. “Your mask! Put it on! Speak your speech!”

“My...?” said Fafhrd, then understood. “Oh, yes!”

Just as the councilors began clambering over the couch, a hooded figure rose up behind it, fully seven feet tall, with a face like a skull and eyes that glowed with a reasonable approximation of hellfire.

“Wicked children,” it declaimed as they fell back, mewling and terrified. “Spoiled kin, fair-weather friends, welcome to the hell you have made for yourselves by denying me my legacy!”

This was the speech Kalphin's dead father was meant to give in the last scene of the play, when all the freshly murdered conspirators had arrived in death's shadow lands to find him waiting for them—a dramatic device that gave Mannat one last chance to castigate his audience and pat himself on the back. Though now that Fafhrd thought about it, since the curse scene was where Mannat had intended to take control of the councilors and have them tear each other to pieces, he'd never meant them to see this ending, and thus must have written it purely for the benefit of his own ego.

The next line was meant to praise Ruon for being the good son once again, but Fafhrd changed it on the fly. “And worse than you, the son who could have spent his ten years in exile furthering the study of the arcane arts for the benefit of mankind and encouraging others to do likewise, and instead ignored my wishes and focused on pointless vengeance!”

“You dare?” cried Mannat. He kicked the backsides of the trembling councilors and clutched at his chain. “Fools! 'Tis but a man in a mask! Kill him! Devour him!”

Thus encouraged, the sorcerers bounded forward again overtopping the couch and overwhelming Fafhrd, slamming him to the floor.

Mouser, however, was not there with him, and Mannat froze with unease. “Where is the other? Find the other!”

Like a spear carrier rushing late onstage to a battle scene, the Mouser—who had used Mannat's focus on Fafhrd to slip under the back curtain and run around to the side—now launched himself at the sorcerer from the wings. Mannat flinched and slashed with his dagger, but Mouser ducked it and grabbed for Mannat's throat—not to choke him—but to tear the golden chain from his neck.

It came free with a snap, and Mouser ran for the rolling ladder, then up it like a marmoset. From there he held the necklace aloft—noting at he did that six golden charms dangled from its links, each in the shape of a different animal.

“Councilors!” he called. “Kill your tormentor and be free of his sorcery! Tear him apart!”

Compelled by the curse, the sorcerers looked up from where they swarmed Fafhrd, then focused crazed eyes on Mannat.

“No!” cried the playwright, stepping back. “Not me! I am your master!”

They charged, unheeding. He shrieked and raced for the ladder, stretching a pleading hand toward Mouser as he tried to climb it.

“The chain! Give me the chain!”

The councilors caught him before he reached the third rung, and dragged him back down. From where he perched above them, Mouser thought they attacked him with particular relish. They had certainly been savage with each other, and himself and Fafhrd as well, but there had been fear and confusion mixed in with their fury then. Here, they were whole-hearted in their rage, holding back not a whit. Mannat’s throat was torn out in a second, his eyes gouged and fingers bitten off seconds after that.

A crash drew Mouser’s horrified eyes from the hypnotizing carnage, and he saw the floating animal lamps falling one by one to the dais and smashing ‘gainst the canvas, which quickly caught fire.

Fafhrd, sitting up behind the couch, saw the flames as well and staggered up, most savagely stripped and bloodied, and folded the canvas over itself, snuffing the flames.

Below Mouser, the councilors returned to themselves with groans and whimpers, staring in horror at the corpse they surrounded, and the blood on their hands and each others’ mouths. Mouser dropped the golden necklace in their midst, then made a mocking bow as they all looked up.

“Exeunt company with trumpet flourish as curtain falls. The play ends.”

SEVEN

A SHORT while later, after both the councilors and the players had taken some time to recover themselves, after Mannat’s body had been removed, and after Mouser and Fafhrd had washed and bandaged themselves and donned their street clothes, Guildmaster Orvaro and Mistress Illuria approached Kalphin’s company on the dais as the other sorcerers filled in behind them.

“Friends, we want to thank you—and these two valiant heroes in particular,” said Orvaro, nodding to Fafhrd and Mouser. “For saving us from a brutal and undignified death at the hands of a madman. Ruvixios—or as you knew him, Mannat—was at one time a brilliant practitioner of the craft, and a rising light within our guild, but his inability to compromise, to accept any decision that favored pragmatism or profit over purity of purpose, led us to... part ways with him. It seems he never got over it.”

He sighed. “We do not blame you for bringing him into our sanctum. We are sorcerers. We should have pierced his disguise ourselves, and—”

“And we would have if you’d put me in charge of the vetting,” Zhem sniffed.

“Bah,” croaked Votk. “We shouldn’t have let them in in the first place. Any of them.”

Orvaro tensed at these remarks. Illuria glared daggers over her shoulder. Merpalto tittered.

“And to make up for it,” Orvaro went on through his teeth. “And the harm done to your bodies and minds, we have doubled the amount we were to pay you for your performance. Now...”

He glanced back at the others and cleared his throat. “Please go. We have much to do to put all right here, and much to discuss. Lidiq will pay you and see you out. Good night, good fortune, and I beg you, never speak of this.”

The players hadn’t got halfway down the spiral stair before they heard heated voices echoing from the library above. Lidiq pretended not to notice.

• • •

ON the street again, following the company as they made their way back to their rehearsal garret, Mouser breathed a sigh of relief. “We’re well out of that.”

“Are we?” Fafhrd slowed his pace and leaned in so the others wouldn’t hear. “I fear we were allowed to leave only because Orvaro and Illuria felt a momentary overabundance of gratitude, and that when they and the other councilors finish their “discussion,” more cautious voices will prevail—voices that will regret that witnesses to their infighting and embarrassment were allowed to walk free, and who may wish to silence us with more than a pleading command.”

Mouser frowned and flicked his eyes to Kalphin and the others. “True. And it will not be just we two they come after, but the whole company, and these players are not, like us, inured to the ire of angry sorcerers. They may not survive.”

“No,” said Fafhrd. “And while ‘tis not our fault they are in this predicament, I would feel guilty did we not warn them of our fears.”

Mouser smirked and straightened his shoulders. “I’ll do better than that.”

“A moment, friends,” he called, trotting to catch up to the others, who were also talking as they walked. “Fafhrd and I were just wondering how long ‘til the guild regrets letting go witnesses to their shame, and begins to think of rectifying the situation more... permanently.”

“We’ve been thinking the same thing,” said Hlemnys.

“Ah good,” said Mouser. “Forewarned is forearmed, as the sages say. Thus, I thought perhaps it might be time to take the company on the road. Play our plays in Ilthmar, Sarheenmar, and points north. What say you?”

Kalphin Rusk turned and looked down his spectacular nose at Mouser. The rest of the company stopped around him.

“We will indeed be going on the road, swordmaster. And, as sorcerers and their memories are long-lived, we may never be returning, but you will not be going with us.”

Mouser’s eyebrows rose. “No? Why not?”

“Because we know why you were there,” said Spandos. “Why you joined our company.”

“Eh?” said Mouser, as Fafhrd caught up with him. “But...”

"I saw you," said Hlemnys. "You were stealing books. And it was not some spur of the moment theft. You'd come prepared."

"Secret pockets," hissed Dindandundo.

"I... I assure you..." Mouser stuttered.

Hlemnys went on as if he hadn't spoken. "And when I saw that, it reminded me how strange was your introduction to our company. How, within two days of each other, dear old Yorvik, who was to play Ruon's father, had fallen ill, and our fencing master Clothu had broken his leg."

"And how," said Kalphin, picking up the tale. "When I put out the word for replacements, somehow only you two neophytes came to audition, and old friends we'd hoped would show begged off with uneasy looks and poor excuses."

"It is kind of you," said Spandos. "To want to warn us about the councilors possible retaliation."

"But," added Dindandundo. "Would you have done us the same kindness had Mannat not done his sorcery? Would you have told us you had stolen from the guild, and that the sorcerers might come after us if they discovered the theft? Or would you have left us to face their ire in your stead?"

Fafhrd and Mouser exchanged uncomfortable looks, then stared at the cobbles.

"Er..." said Fafhrd.

"You're charming rogues," said Hlemnys. "Even heroic ones when the occasion arises. I've no doubt you saved our lives tonight with your bravery, and we owe you for that, but you've also the rogue's fault of not caring a finger-snap the ruin you leave in your wake. So ask yourselves, why would we want as companions on the road the men who injured one of our company, sickened another, and would have exposed us to the wrath of the sorcerer's guild without a second thought?"

"We wish you the best of fortune," said Kalphin. "But it won't be with us, and we pray it won't be at the expense of any other innocents whose paths you cross. Now, good night to you both."

And with that, the players turned from the twain and continued down the street alone.

"Well," said Fafhrd, after a long pause. "That was well deserved."

"Nonsense!" said Mouser, perhaps a little louder than necessary. "Our theft won't endanger them. It was perfect! The council will never suspect them—or us!"

"Won't? Was?" asked Fafhrd, then gasped. "But, Mouser! My nightdress! It was stripped from me! It's laying there on the dais, full of hidden books! We're marked men!"

Mouser laughed and patted Fafhrd's arm. "Ease your mind, you northern ninny. I took care of all that while you were dressing. You recall that Merpalto, while possessed by monkey spirit, threw books hither and thither?"

"Er... yes?"

Mouser smiled. "Well, I retrieved the books we'd hid in your nightgown and scattered them 'mongst those he threw. And that, combined with the one I hid in his robes, will cast suspicion on him, and not us, if our theft is discovered."

"Theft?" said Fafhrd. "But you said you scattered them all on the floor."

Mouser reached into his gray, mouse-suede doublet and pulled out a slim volume bound in purple leather. "All but one."

"Ah!" said Fafhrd.

"'Twas not the most valuable, but it was one of two copies they owned, so even more likely not to be missed."

"Valuable enough to pay off our debt?" asked Fafhrd.

Mouser laughed sadly. "Not even enough for the vig. But 'twill buy us packs, canteens, and two stout steeds to carry us across the sunken lands before sunrise. And what man could want more than that?"

"This one," said Fafhrd, with feeling.

He looked around at the stone and plaster walls of the buildings leaning in on either side of him, the red lanterns glowing in shadowed entrances and at the ends of alleys, promising food and drink and other pleasures of the flesh, the gibbous moon and smog-veiled stars riding high in the midnight sky above it all. He inhaled the smells of incense, sour wine, tide marsh, and piss, tasted meat smoke and trash fire on his tongue, and felt homesick for every bit of it even though he hadn't left it yet.

"I was looking forward to a little Lankhmar leisure for a change, but now..."

"Fear not, old friend," said Mouser. "Sorcerers and their memories may be long-lived, but unless I miss my guess, the leadership of the Sorcerer's Guild will be changing in short order, and we will be forgotten amidst the infighting that accompanies it. It won't be long, I think, before we'll be able to return."

"I hope you're right."

"Of course I am!" said Mouser, then started jauntily down the street. "Now for the shop of Sulwald the Scholar to sell our book, then ho for the horse market and the eastern gate!"

"You know," said Fafhrd, as he followed him. "While we shared a drink with the company at the Mask and Slapstick the other night, I overheard another company speaking of touring soon. They were looking for roustabouts and spear-carriers. We could offer our services and continue our theatrical sabbatical."

"Bah!" said Mouser. "Who would be an actor? All that hard craft learning lines, rehearsing, and still you're drenched in fear-sweat when it's your turn to strut and fret upon the stage? And then the queasy feeling after you've taken your bows that any praise you get is just some fool being kind when you were actually awful. Thievery's more honest. You know you've done poorly when the watch-leopard's teeth are in your neck and the lady of the house is calling for her guards. And you know you've done well when you're home safe with the swag in hand. It's simple—cut and dried. That's the life for me." He curled his lip and made a dismissive wave of his hand. "Acting is a sucker's game."

"Ah," said Fafhrd, smiling to himself. "Ah."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In his thirty years as a Hollywood screenwriter, Nathan made a living at everything except screenwriting. He was a taxi driver, limo driver, delivery driver, and comic store and video store clerk. This isn't to say he never sold any screenplays or made any movies. There were a few. He just never made any money out of it. It wasn't until he started doing the thing his twelve-year-old self loved best that he began making a living. Yep, he's at a computer game company now, writing thrilling adventures for role players. He should have thought of this years ago.

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SHADOWS OF A FORGOTTEN QUEEN

A Tale of Azatlán, from the Journals of Ométl Five-Rabbit

By GREG MELE

“**Y**OU understand, of course, I shall wish to make some investigations of my own before committing myself,” a man’s voice, deep and a bit raspy, said. “In the meanwhile, do be careful. We don’t want someone or something killing you before I can get to the bottom of this riddle.”

“I...well...yes, of course, Khalkeos-*tzin*. I am just grateful for the Order’s consideration,” a woman replied apprehensively, sounding less grateful at being dismissed than her words implied.

They stepped out of the long side room that was both meeting and living room in the narrow, two-story townhouse, and into the small antechamber that led back out to the city street that lay beyond. Even as the Naakali measured such things the man was tall—far nearer seven feet than six—but wiry, almost gaunt; his angular face hollow-cheeked, his straight, black hair cut into a short, efficient bowl-cut. He wore a tall, squarish cap of stiffened llama-wool, but little jewelry other than a pair of wide, jade earplugs in the semblance of spoked wheels, and a mirror of polished obsidian that hung over his chest from the end of a heavy, gold chain. His companion was an elegantly-dressed noblewoman with aquiline features and soft, olive skin. If her hair hadn’t been arranged in the complex ringlets and plaits of a Naakali aristocrat, her thick, dark-brown locks would likely have fallen to her hips.

They were met in the hall by—and nearly collided with—a clean-shaven coppery-skinned man, who if not so looming as the first man, was broader of shoulder and chest. A long healed *makawitl*-slash had left a narrow scar that ran from beneath his left eye to nearly his chin. When perplexed, such as after nearly slamming into a beautiful woman far above his station, he scratched that scar self-consciously, for it bothered his vanity far more than he would admit.

I knew that secret, for he, was me.

“—*Siwa*,” I said hoarsely, bowing my head as I opened the heavy teak door. I used the honorific suffix without a name, as I had no idea whom she was. The lady’s sea-green eyes drifting over me in assessment. She must have been satisfied, if unimpressed, for she nodded curtly in return, then drew a light veil over her face. She glanced back to my employer as if to say something more, but he had already turned and was heading upstairs to his private study. Biting her lip, the noblewoman turned and slipped out onto the street to where a pair of slaves and an impressively ugly and burly bodyguard waited with her palanquin. I watched her climb atop, the gossamer curtains closing about her, then they were gone down the narrow street that wound along the city’s northern wall.

Shutting the door, I headed upstairs without waiting for my employer to call for me; I had been in the sorcerer’s service long enough to both know that he would, anyway, and that he’d likely be peevish that I hadn’t anticipated him.

I found Khalkeos seated on a thick *petate*-mat behind his writing table, whatever codex he had been reading clearly ignored, while he distractedly stroked his curled chin-beard, staring at nothing in particular. He hated being interrupted while thinking, so I stood just inside the door, waiting patiently. Eventually, my employer deigned to notice me.

“Ométl, what did you think of our guest?”

I measured my words carefully. “Beautiful. Highborn, clearly, but perhaps not terribly bright. I can’t imagine how she thought a veil and a gossamer-draped palanquin would hide her identity.”

“When one has been bred for conspicuousness, unobtrusiveness is a difficult skill to master.”

“If the Great One says so,” I demurred. I had been a shieldman in the phalanx and was now a bodyguard to a sorcerer; my life had been built around being unobtrusive until circumstances required me to become *highly* conspicuous. “In any case, who was she?”

“Ah! See, her concealment was effective!”

“No Great One, I am just decidedly ignorant of aristocrats.”

He snorted, picked up a thick *sikar*, lit it with the candle perched at the end of his writing table, and puffed on the other end until it began to smoke.

“She is the Lady Layéth, wife to Lord Sennedjem Mnemoani of the Silver Crescent Clan.”

My eyes widened and I whistled. Highborn, indeed.

“Poor dear is convinced she is being haunted, perhaps stalked, by demons.”

“Is she?”

“Possibly. Probably? Anyway, enough of her. What do you say to a housebreaking?”

Coming from Khalkeos of Pnumket, a gentleman of the oldest Tenaakali blood, an inquisitor of the Refulgent Order of the Smoking Mirror and thus, a living agent of the Imperial will, this seemed unusual, to say the least.

“If the Great One sees it as necessary, who am I to question?”

I shrugged, not to be outdone by my employer’s nonchalance. “But whose house do we invade? I assume the Kopan’s guard will join us?”

“No, we are not making our foray as Imperial agents—or rather, not *officially*. It is best that Kodoras-*kopan* knows nothing about this. And as it happens, we invade the villa of the very same Lord Sennedjem Mnemoani,” Khalkeos announced as he puffed on his *sikar*, sighing contentedly as it flared to life.

Gods Below, that caught me off-guard! I gestured behind me to the street.

"But you...she...what of Lord Sennedjem?" The man was known to me—an elder of the Silver Crescent clan, landholders and jade-traders who had dwelt in Na Yxim and influenced its affairs since the first days of the Two Kingdoms. I did not think such a man would care to have us traipsing about uninvited.

"Lady Layéth says he is traveling. She does not expect him to return to Na Yxim anytime soon, and certainly not to their estate."

"But Great One, why the housebreaking? We investigate this lady's fears by breaking into her home?"

"Not on the face of it, though who can say? This is now the *second* matter, concerning the Mnemoani to appear at my door. A lady—one of dignities and genealogy far higher than the one who just departed—has been abducted. I have fair reason to suspect the Lord Sennedjem."

"An abduction? Is that not a task for the Kopan?"

"Not until I am certain. The matter is...complicated."

It always was where the Smoking Mirror was concerned. "Might I ask whom this girl is?"

Khalkeos laughed, never a pleasant sound. "Not a girl, a *woman*. A queen, and the daughter of a great line of kings."

"A queen?" I could not think of any such that had visited the city recently. But Na Yxim was the Empire's great southern capital, rival to glorious and distant Azatlán, and received many guests from the jungle-choked city-states that lay beyond our border. "I can't—"

"She is the Lady Ta'ana Tlalestris, last ruling queen of Na Yxim, dead these, oh... seven hundred years? Thereabouts."

"You are chasing a dead woman. Why not start with her tomb?"

"It seems our noble queen was stolen from her tomb nearly a moon ago. You understand the importance, of course."

I did not. Seeing my face, Khalkeos blew smoke at me in disgust.

"Really, Ométl, I expect my servants to have at least the *rudimentary* education any Naakali learns in *kalmekak*-school. Ta'ana Tlalestris is a romantic figure for Na Yxim separatists, of which the Mnemoani of the Silver Crescent are prominent, and from whom that skittish creature that just departed descends. Thus, we seek her at Lord Sennedjem's villa."

"Surely this is a matter for the priests of Lord Death and their tomb police?"

"Seeing as the queen's mummy is *gone*—the Guardians of Endless Repose have already failed, haven't they? And the Silver Crescent wields great influence in Na Yxim, especially among those clans who still remember the Insurrection with more fondness than is healthy."

"But Lord Death's temple remains aloof of politics."

"Publicly, of course. But all priests are politicians, at some level—they understand the danger of accusing a nobleman of looting the City of the Dead and carrying off a royal mummy. They also understand the danger of drawing in the Kopan, and through him the justice of distant and hated Azatlán. Understanding these difficulties, the high priest has taken me into his confidence and asked me to investigate *unofficially*. Should those investigations bear fruit, well, then things change."

Scowling, I waved the pungent tobacco smoke from my face.

"But what does any of this have to do with the Lady Layéth's visit just now?"

"Nothing of which I can be certain. As I said, the lady is convinced that she is haunted. A spooked horse throws her; an axe falls from the wall in their villa and nearly splits her skull; recurring nightmares in which she is being strangled only to awake with her throat red and sore," he waived his hand as if to say "trifles."

"That seems rather serious to me."

He blinked as if he hadn't considered this.

"Any temple exorcist might deal with such nonsense; hardly worth the Mirror's time. However, it *is* interesting that our haunted matron is married to a man whom I suspect of liberating Ta'ana Tlalestris from her tomb, so it is possible that answering one question might settle the other."

"But why should the Lord Sennedjem steal the queen at all?"

"That, of course, is part of our investigation. The lord is a scholar, a soldier, a man of letters," enumerated Khalkeos, wryly, puffing smoke rings into the air, "an ally of the failed rebellion, almost certainly an acolyte of the Gods Below...he is too talented, too well-read, and too interested in occultic matters to be entirely sane. That's sometimes all the answer one needs."

"The Great One understands these things better than I."

"Meaning I might have just described myself?" asked Khalkeos with a dry smile. "Except I know precious little of soldiering, and do not court 700-year-old corpses. Now, fetch your things."

• • •

IT was shortly past the hour of darkness, and gray-walled Na Yxim slept in the rising moonlight like an aging soldier fargone on *balché*-mead: uneasily and in fits and starts.

Imperial cities shut and barred their gates at night—but such barriers gave way when the guardsmen saw my employer's polished obsidian chest-plate. If they thought it odd that an Imperial inquisitor and his bodyguard were seeking to leave the city at night, a small llama cart in tow, they kept their own counsel. All knew that the Smoking Mirror was an order of sorcerers (only *partly* true) who could have a man hauled before questioners armed with lashes, brands and hooks for even the smallest offense (*very* true), so curiosity usually gave way to self-preservation.

Lord Sennedjem's villa was one of those grand manors that wealthy city-dwellers used as both farm and rural retreat. We passed its sprawling maize-fields long before we came to the narrow, packed earth path that descended down from the raised causeway of the Royal Road, and cut through the soft, rolling fields to the walled house beyond. Finding a place nearby, yet well off into the maize fields, we concealed our llama and his little cart, before proceeding on foot.

The villa sat within a protective wall of adobe-coated mud-brick, perhaps half-again the height of a man. Within would be the main house, an adjoining kitchen, and several separate buildings—a stables, animal pen, servants' quarters, and a well-house. Most of these would lie behind the main house, so if we were quick and clever, we could cross the garden and slip inside

with little risk of being noticed. Of course, nobles who can afford villas often have armed guards, and the gods alone knew where they would be.

"Let us be about it, so we can be safely back in our beds, Tlal-estris our mortuarial houseguest, before dawn."

"But the servants?" I suggested. "Specifically, Great One, the guards?"

"For the size of the estate, they are shockingly few, as the Lady Layéth rather bitterly complained. It seems the Lord Sennedjem has a distinct aversion to *living* women, so there are no female domestics to contend with. As for the guards," he reached into his satchel and drew forth a small clay jar. "Hold still."

Opening the jar, he rubbed some vile smelling salve across my cheeks, my chin, beneath my eyes, on the backs of my hand and atop my feet, his voice a droning chant as he worked:

*"Ermas Far-Traveller, dim the eyes of every man and woman,
When I go forth, let me pace unnoticed, unheard, unremarked,
Until I have achieved the secret things I wish, and I say,
Kouranos, listen to me, You who rules the Universe,
Hear me, Lilaké, Mistress of the Dark Moon, You who rules the night."*

I wrinkled my nose as he drew what felt like a third eye in the center of my brow. "What they may not see, they'll smell before I ever arrive."

"It's the crocodile dung," the sorcerer said irritably.

"Crocodile dung? What—"

"Yes, now shush. Invisibility, true invisibility, is decidedly difficult," he muttered, sealing the jar and putting it away. "It requires True Names, a full horoscope, all sorts of preparation to cajole the gods to turn the world's collective eyes from the caster. But to pass by ignored, that is quite simple, really."

I had learned some inkling of sorcery's potency and limitations in my three years of service. Sorcerers *were* capable of many of the wondrous and terrible things that we common folk ascribed to them. But violating the Middle World's laws was a slow, complicated process, and the more one sought to overtly thwart nature, the more often it involved the evocation and cajoling of spirits, which, in turn, required the spilling of blood. Consequently, "in the field" as it were, Khalkeos usually relied on salves, ointments, amulets and other alchemies and trinkets that he had already invested with power. He rarely explained how such charms were created, and I was not anxious to know. However, with my life depending on his mummeries, I was suddenly keenly interested.

"How exactly does this work?"

"Think of it as inviting those we meet to fail to notice us. In a crowded street, for instance, you become a faceless passerby."

"I was more concerned, Great One, with a half-empty villa in the midst of night."

Khalkeos sighed in annoyance at my interruption. He was proud of his cantrips and charms and liked to reveal them in his own way. "In essence: stay to the shadows, don't walk right into someone, don't trip over a carpet and land at their feet, and they will likely not notice you."

"I see." I didn't, but it would have to suffice.

"You will, as the Eye of Kouranos between your brow will let you see as well as if we had lit candles. Now, quit dallying. Get up over that wall and let me in."

The Obsidian Mirror routinely confronts the terrors of the Underworld and bargains as equals with the gods in Their high Heavens, but balks, you see, at the monstrosity of physical labor.

Feeling about for finger holds and finding none, I tried another tact. Backing up, I kicked off my sandals, ran at the low wall and sprang, my foot striking it a pace above the ground, propelling me up so that my outstretched arms could extend above me, my strong hands catching the lip at the top. I grunted as my weight came down on my shoulders, the never fully-healed joint of my shield arm, threatening to betray me once more. But my bare feet found a grip against the adobe, and after a moment's scrabble I was up and over the low wall, dropping into the court below.

I heard a crunch on the gravel and froze. I spotted a man, clearly a servant, muttering to himself, a satchel slung on one shoulder, seemingly on the way to one of the small outbuildings. Seeing nowhere to hide, I was forced to test my employer's spell. I pressed myself against the wall and stood still, willing the man not to notice me, my hand gripping the small bludgeon that hung at my belt.

The serving man passed not more than a span from me, yet his eyes never turned my way. Wondering how I might convince Khalkeos to bequeath a jar of the ointment to me for future use, I waited until the man had disappeared, then quickly unbarred the gate. He was waiting for me, holding my sandals away from his body as if they were a rattlesnake. Gesturing for the Great One to be quiet, I closed the gate shut and barred it once more behind him. Then we crept to the main house and slipped within.

Sennedjem's home was built to impress. A twin-story house, the antechamber's floor was polished stone, opening onto a long, central hallway with frescoed walls of what was probably some important scene from the Silver Crescent clan's personal mythology. We paid it little heed and pressed in. I noted the rich tapestries, the mosaic tile floors partly masked by brightly woven rugs of brushed llama-wool, but I am still a man of the legions at heart, and it was what hung on the walls that caught and held my attention: Arms of infinite variety; blow-guns and barbed wooden harpoons, such as the Xiapas savages use; Kaketzewáni atlatls and *makawitl* club-swords with obsidian blades; Tzantzuwani star-headed maces and moon-bladed axes of coppery bronze; imperial Azatláni swords, spears and a pair of broad aspis-shields, black as jet with one edge painted in a silver crescent. The weapons were in fine repair, the bronze brightly burnished, even in the dark.

We roamed through a house that was a wonder of antiquities and eccentricities. Khalkeos studied his surroundings, seeming disinterested until...

"Ah...look!" He indicated a small kettledrum whose body was of wood, carved like some grotesque thing neither bat nor toad, the drumhead of a strange, tattooed hide. Strange to me, at least.

"Hideous. But what has it to do with mummies, Great One?"

"Nothing. Possibly, everything." He remarked with a small smile. "But one can picture a man's mind from the house he keeps."

Room by room, we searched the villa, which *was* decidedly under-staffed. Finally, we ascended the stairway to the lord's private apartment. We found a large room of contradictory appearance:

A study, if one judged from its writing table and bookcases; a bedroom, surely, if gauged by the lordly bed; or...a sorcerer's trophy-room, if one drew conclusions from the ornaments.

A dried, mummified human head, wrinkled and shrunk, hung by its hair from a cluster of arrows over a small shrine of strange gods depicted in gold, onyx and basalt. Situated beside the shrine was a thickly bound codex, and as I reached out with a hand to touch its leathery binding, I realized this was neither llama nor deer.

"Gods Below! It's bound in human skin!"

"Gods Below indeed," Khalkeos agreed, as he opened the codex, and scanned its painted, bark-paper pages. "Such figure prominently in this text, which is, indeed, bound in human flesh, much like that drum I showed you earlier. See, the tattooing here? The same...donor...I think."

And then, as if he had not just shown me a book made from our fellow man, he began reading to himself.

I am not squeamish by nature; I have seen many men cut down on the battlefield, or their hearts cut out in offering to Lord Hatûm, that His burning shield may light the sky forevermore. I've seen a maiden's veins opened as she is led through the fields, watering the new crops with her life's blood in honor of Majawl, Our Lady of Maize, and lit my own father's funeral pyre. But what manner of man owned books made of human flesh?

As Khalkeos read and muttered, apparently quite interested, I stumped around the room. I found a bust, decidedly ancient, carved from bloodstone, a deep rich green flecked with scarlet. If taken from life, she had been Naakali, clearly, and beautiful, with large eyes, full, delicately sensuous lips, and a long, aristocratic nose. Her hair flowed about her shoulders from beneath a tall, elaborate crown.

"Mesmerizing, isn't she?" asked a voice, not my employer's.

• • •

I SPUN, hand slipping to the bludgeon at my belt, and saw a man framed in the doorway. Dressed in a kilt of indigo blue and a jaguar-skin cape that ran beneath his left arm and pinned at the right shoulder, he was lean and aquiline-featured, with an aristocrat's courtly bearing. He was unarmed, but held a small oil lamp aloft, its light jarring to my magically-enhanced sight.

"I hope weapons won't be necessary," the newcomer said. "If I find no fault with you breaking into my home, surely you can forgive my startling you?" He stepped deeper into the room, now more clearly revealed by his lamplight. A *fighting man*, I thought, as I watched how he moved and met the unwavering regard of his dark eyes. But I also saw misery and regret painted across the Lord Sennedjem Mnemoani's features—for whom else could this be?

"A clever spell, Khalkeos-*tzin*," the nobleman said with a weak smile, "I confess, even knowing to expect you, I found myself compelled to look elsewhere as I drew nearer. Fortunately, as I suppose you must know, I dabble in thaumaturgy somewhat myself."

"And that *dabbling*, I suppose you must know, is strictly prohibited by the Empire," Khalkeos replied sourly. Closing the codex, he tucked it under his arm, clearly displeased at his

spell-working being thwarted by a self-acknowledged magical dilettante. "Indeed, flushing out such *dabblers* is part of my Order's charge."

His words were met with an indifferent shrug. "Yes, well, such is the least of our concerns just now, hmm?"

"Meaning?"

There was a long pause, as if the Lord Sennedjem was nerving himself for some confession.

"The inquisitor," he finally said, "doubtless already knows what I hint at," Lord Sennedjem continued. His glance was so haunted that I felt my skin prickle.

"Necromancy," Khalekos said sourly, "Necromancy and treason. You evoked the shade of Ta'ana Tlalestris, last ruling queen of Na Yxim, back from the Underworld. I will leave it to Lord Death's priesthood to catalogue and prosecute your theological crimes and tomb-robbing."

The nobleman's olive complexion paled at Khalkeos's words, but he did not deny them.

"I admit my guilt to necromancy and tomb-robbing, Khalkeos-*tzin*, but not to treason. Na Yxim was meant to be free of its Azatláni yoke."

My employer shrugged.

"Politics are not my concern—you can address that with the Kopan and his magistrates. Rather, tell me how it was done. Stealing the mummy for starters, I presume?"

"No! That came...later. Much later."

"Go on."

"You see the bust there? I gathered many more emblems of—" he paused, clearly nervous, "*her*. Frescoes chipped from walls, mortuary statues; writs with her image painted. Some you have seen about this room. All to build a connection, an *impression* of the living woman, necessary for evocation."

"Yes, I am familiar with the process. Tell me about the *blood*, Sennedjem-*tzin*. One never draws a spirit across the Borderlands without blood."

"No...no he doesn't. I assembled seven young women, clan-sisters and true-believers, and taught them to focus the image of our Queen in their minds. Once they had been suitably...conditioned...they would ingest a compound of *tolache*-leaf, slipping to the place between the realms of Lords Dream and Death."

"So, you made your acolytes living, if cataleptic, porters. And the 'palanquin' to carry her across the Border? Where did you obtain the blood?"

Lord Sennedjem looked away. "You have noted a lack of serving women at the villa, I suppose."

"Your wife claimed that one fell to fever, and another you sold. Besides the cook, the remaining two came with her to the city."

"They did! Well, the last two did go on to the city, and I *do* still have a cook."

"But the other two you sacrificed to Ta'ana Tlalestris."

It was not a question. At first the lord looked ashamed, but then defiant. "They were only slaves."

Khalkeos waved his hand dismissively. "Of course."

I winced at my employer's calm detachment. Every day, a life was sacrificed atop the great temple to Lord Hatûm that the sun

might burn on. The gods craved blood, and we Naakali craved order far more than we valued single lives. What the sorcerer himself thought of a slave's life, which was their master's to use as he saw fit, I had found hard to discern.

"So, sacrificing the slaves called Tlalestris across the Border, while your acolyte's dreams let her feed upon their spirits that she might remain."

The nobleman licked dry lips and nodded. "Yes. They dream on, even now. When first she crossed the Border, she was fragile, disoriented, and could not survive beyond the summoning circle, subsisting only on their *tonali*. She rejoiced at her return, was... appreciative and eager to share her knowledge. She told me of ancient days when we Naakali wrested Na Yxim from the Tzoltonek. She told me of caves beneath the city, and the monstrous, subterranean pyramid my ancestors built within them to do homage to Xatanatchoa."

I muttered a small invocation to Lord Hatûm beneath my breath. Among a pantheon of blood-hungry gods, the Dark Grandmother's worship was the most sanguine. Her cult in Na Yxim long predated the Naakali capture of the city, and it had never been truly suppressed.

"She spoke of Naramtzin and Tlalpheonos, the great rulers of Na Yxim before Azatlán forced us beneath its yoke. And she spoke—" Lord Sennedjem shivered though his eyes looked feverish, "of other things. I listened...too long...and believed her. Her promises—"

"This is why one should take care when calling the dead," lectured Khalkeos. "Any spirit with a will strong enough to escape the Underworld has ambitions that will not be thwarted by something as meager and petty as death. But you know this now."

Lord Sennedjem shook his head dourly. "And then Layéth returned from the city. I will not insult your intelligence further by delving into unnecessary detail."

"Then assume Ométi's intelligence would be improved by some explanation."

Sennedjem sighed. "Tlalestris became jealous of Layéth; by now, her... presence... could wander the villa's grounds at will, unseen, but no longer merely a voice. I tried to induce Layéth to return to the city, but I dared not tell her why—whatever you may think, I do love my wife!"

Now I understood.

"And that is when the...accidents began!" They were the first words I had spoken. The lord looked at me as if he had forgotten my presence.

"Yes. 'Accidents'—manifestations of Tlalestris's malevolent will! Nightmares, where she appeared to Layéth and vowed to murder her. Once they were bad enough, I persuaded my wife to return to Na Yxim."

"Only Tlalestris pursued her in dreams."

"Yes. I—" Lord Sennedjem's voice failed.

"Were a fool. I agree," Khalkeos turned and gestured to the bust with its elegant, aristocratic features. "Surely, you noted the similarities between the late queen and your own wife? I am sure that when the astrologers prepared genealogies and charts for your marriage you realized that the Lady Layéth is a direct descendant of Ta'ana Tlalestris through the maternal line?"

The nobleman regarded Khalkeos with a somber, smoldering glare.

"Yes, I knew, but I did not understand! I thought once we had the mummy, she would show me how to reunite her *tonali* to her flesh. But the mummy was just one more tether, another way to strengthen her place here until...she claims a new body."

"Your wife's."

"Yes, damn you! Yes! I'd burn that wretched corpse if it would send her back across the Border, but it won't. Why do you think I put it in my wife's mind to seek your counsel? Why do you think I have sat here, waiting for you, even knowing it was my undoing? *She* mocks me; knows I hesitate from using the remaining way to send her back to the Underworld."

"Which is?" Khalkeos asked softly.

"Killing my clanswomen before she is embodied."

"If she feeds on their dreams, why not just awaken them?" I asked. Lord Sennedjem shook his head sorrowfully.

"At first, yes, I might have, but she has drawn so heavily from them that they are now intertwined; a connection so intense that even were they awakened, she would continue to exist. To feed."

"Sennedjem-*tzin*," said Khalkeos in a low, solemn tone, "you are responsible for the existence of this terrible creature. If you would stop her from murdering Layéth to claim her flesh for her own, then you must send her back to the Obsidian Fields where she belongs. And quickly!"

"But how?" groaned Lord Sennedjem.

"You had little trouble summoning forth the dead for ambitions of overthrowing Azatlán's rule in Na Yxim. We have all lived through one uprising, do not pretend that you thought to wage a bloodless coup."

The lord's narrow mouth drew tight, making the small round jade labrum set beneath his lower lip thrust out like some sort of brilliant, green beetle. "No, of course not."

"Then spare me your squeamishness about murdering your acolytes." There was nothing of pity about Khalkeos's demeanor. I had seen him like this before and knew that if the Lord Sennedjem had hoped for compassionate understanding by waiting for us, he had bargained poorly.

Finally, the nobleman spoke, his face grim with a terrible determination.

"Very well, I will settle it. Now." He strode to the wall with its display of weapons and chose an old-fashioned sword, of a kind long out of fashion with the legions: Its leaf-shaped blade short, wide and with a wicked point. He looked to us, and those feverish eyes glinted with madness. Then he hurried from the room, driven with grim purpose.

I looked to my employer. "We follow?"

"Yes, quickly."

We pursued, as Sennedjem half-ran down the stairs and towards the rear of the villa. In one corner of the walled garden stood a small, white-washed rectangular shrine, set on top five low, red steps—almost a pyramid temple in miniature. Such shrines were common-enough among the wealthy, and usually dedicated to whichever god, or court of gods to which the clan was formally devoted. As we passed up the stairs and into the shrine, we were greeted by the alabaster gaze of Lady Atâna. She stood, one hand resting on her crescent-shaped shield, the

other holding a long spear, her half-smile benevolent and knowing as she watched us from beneath the helm pushed back on her head. I had always found the protectress aspect of Our Lady of the Watchful Moon a comforting one, but I failed to find such in seeing her now.

Without even a nod to Our Lady's idol, Sennedjem knelt beside the altar and pressed an embossed tile at its base. There was an audible click, then a sigh, as the floor tile pivoted and swung down on some invisible hinge. As the slab sank out of sight, our host descended the stairs now revealed. Just before he disappeared below, he looked back to us, his face a mask of anguish.

"Whatever you think of me, these are kinsmen; women who have trusted me to lead them, for the good of both the Silver Moon, and Na Yxim. I would do this alone."

He disappeared into the dim light that flickered up from below. I looked to my employer.

"Is he going to—"

"Yes. All seven of them," Khalkeos affirmed flatly. He looked at me, as if considering some thought or imminent action on my part, guessed it only too well and gripped my sword arm, his long fingers digging into my bare biceps with surprising strength. "Before you get any heroic ideas, consider this: If you stop him, you likely condemn an innocent woman to death. Something more and worse than death: The theft of her flesh."

I thought of the Lady Layéth, young, beautiful, her aristocratic bearing trembling under the stress when I had seen her at my employer's home only hours earlier and held still.

We heard Lord Sennedjem's footsteps ring hollowly in the subterranean vault. There was an awful silence, then at last came a familiar swish, and the impact of bronze being driven home. A heavier, likewise familiar, sound of a body falling.

"Hatûm and Atâna, high in Your Heavens, have mercy," I muttered as the sorcerer counted off each blow. At six there was a long and terrible pause, then we heard a cry of anguish, and a hard thud. Only then did Khalkeos release my arm.

"Seven women have died so that the Lady Layéth may live," he said solemnly, and bowed his head for a moment, whether in mourning or thanks I was uncertain.

But any thanks were short-lived. A rich, melodious laugh came up from that subterranean slaughter-vault, and a voice spoke, its accent curious, its speech antique, its amorous richness making her words all the more mocking.

"Sweet man-child," the voice teased, seeming to come from nowhere and everywhere, "did you plan to drive me back again into unending darkness—me, Ta'ana Tlalestris, your queen?" Her laughter was crystal-clear and poison-sweet.

"Did I not explain that Xatanatchoa is the Mother of Sorcery, and I, Her beloved child? You thought to be rid of me so simply? Foolish man! So long as your harlots lived, they pinioned me between life and death, but in slaying them, well..." the voice trailed away in a low chuckle. "Look at them, dear Sennedjem! Lying in their blood, freeing me from the shadows of time and memory."

"Gods Below be damned," Khalkeos cursed.

"What's happened?" I demanded. Bronze gleamed in the lamplight—I had forgotten all about my cudgel and had reflexively drawn my sword instead.

"She lives now in her own right—a spirit-creature of human malice and superhuman power. All she lacks is a body to house that will and safely hold her on this side of the Border."

The voice was speaking again: "I almost wish you might live to see the end, *loyal* Sennedjem Mnemoani of the Silver Crescent," she mocked. "Alas, O Man, it was not fated. I bid you farewell."

"Quick!" Khalkeos snapped, as he began hurrying down the stairs while withdrawing an amulet from beneath his tunic, the long dagger he wore as his only weapon slipping into his hand. Crossing the room in three great bounds, I charged after Khalkeos, and into the soft glow of the vault below.

I stared in horrified bewilderment as I took in the blood-spattered scene.

The vault was octagonal; as large as the shrine above but made oppressive by the low ceiling and the horrible, blood-stained idol that dominated the far wall. Its subject was an aged and yet pregnant woman, what parts of Her were woman at all. Nearly skeletal limbs, claw-like hands and breasts hanging flaccid from endless birthing. About her swollen belly was a woman wearing a skirt of writhing snakes and a necklace made of human hearts, hands, and skulls. A cadaverous, crone's face, was surmounted on either side, by two facing serpents, and a long, alligator's tail curled around Her clawed feet: Xatanatchoa, the Dark Grandmother, Source of Life and Mother of Nightmares.

I looked into those faceted eyes of madness and rage, the fanged mouths stained from countless blood-lettings in Her name, and recoiled. But there was no time to indulge atavistic fears of what was, after all, only a demon in stone, nor even spare more than a glance for the antique sarcophagus that lay in state before her, its lid lifted aside, for there were real, corporeal, or *nearly* corporeal, horrors present.

A circle of beheaded corpses, all women, lay strewn across the floor, their blood pooling across the flags. Lord Sennedjem, hands, arms and chest spattered red, shrank against the vault's far wall, his eyes staring wide in horror at the luminescent figure of a woman whose long, ornately dressed blue-black hair was crowned with a tall, gold diadem with a large heliotrope blood-stone at its center, surmounted by a fan of white owl-feathers. Her jade and turquoise jewels were the emblems of royalty and her costume, elegant yet scandalous, suggested an antiquity far greater than the memory of any living creature. At the nobleman's feet lay the leaf-bladed sword, its blade stained point to pommel by the red work it had done in vain.

Khalkeos was advancing across the floor, seeking to avoid touching those whose heads and blood had become so terribly intermingled. As he stepped forward, he held the amulet aloft, a lambent, blue-white glow issuing from it, while he gesticulated with his dagger, chanting in High Naakal. Even in the dim brazier light, I could see ripples in the air and tracers of light that followed his gestures' wake. For a moment, the imperious ghost-woman shrank, hissing like a startled cat; but then her amber-gold eyes grew confident, and she smiled wickedly.

"Meddler," she murmured, "you are a little too late for that to work." Her figure seemed to coalesce, thicken and darken—a shadow in woman's form. With a rush of air; the night-mannequin burst outward, writhing tentacles of shimmering shadow-stuff.

Khalkeos, seeing the enemy flowing away in a mist, ceased his chant with a curse, as the luminous vapor-tendrils writhed serpent-like among the dead women spread across the floor. For a moment, all was still, then Tlalestris's horrid power and intent became clear. With an audible, singular sigh, the dead eyes of a severed head came into focus, while the decapitated forms sprawled across the dark, slippery tiles began to stir and rise.

I wondered if my own face was as twisted in a mask of horror as Lord Sennedjem's. The vault had become a swamp of dark blood and darker things which slithered towards us, seeking prey.

I had long since drawn my sword and good thing, for the headless corpses were on their feet now, tottering, but becoming steadier by the moment. Still lying scattered about the vault, seven disembodied sets of eyes scanned the room, and finding their slayer, seemed to guide their headless bodies towards him. Reanimated hands flexed, opening and closing as if to test their newly gained strength. A faint, luminous cloud of mist enveloped the monstrosity animated dead, directing those lifeless hands towards Lord Sennedjem.

"Betrayed," seven mouths moaned, but the voice was Tlalestris' own.

My skin crawled and my testicles shrank into my belly as I witnessed that horror beneath the earth, but hearing the lord's outcry as dead hands sought to tear him limb from limb, my years of warcraft took over. Leaping forward, my mind as blank as the corpse-women's dead eyes, I hacked with my bronze blade, hewing and slashing in a blind, outraged frenzy. I could feel the sword's keen edge bite and shear through flesh and bone; but all in vain. Each limb I sheared free of its body, hit the ground, only to continue in its awful advance, twitching, crawling, and squirming with diabolical determination. The dead paid no heed to good bronze, and although that terrible battle could not have lasted more than a few heartbeats, it seemed to stretch into hours of desperate combat, the memory of which will last me a lifetime.

Feeling my sword-arm restrained, I struck out with the elbow of my left arm, receiving a jarring pain in the poorly-knit bones of that shoulder as I connected with something and heard a pained grunt in response.

"Stand back, damn you!" Khalkeos cried, dragging me back from that doomed melee. "They have him!"

I stared at the churning mass of hacked, bloodless flesh that swarmed over Lord Sennedjem, tearing, ripping, biting and kicking as his screams became first moans, and then silence. Once he was still, a hand relaxed its death-grip and dropped, lifeless, to the floor. One by one the other limbs began falling slack, bodies tumbling to the ground.

"What's happening?" I asked, gut-sick at what I had witnessed. Anyone who has walked fields fresh with battle-dead knows that sword and spear, arrow and atlatl-dart rarely kill "cleanly," but this? This had been something different.

"They were animated by nothing other than Ta'ana Tlalestris's will," Khalkeos said as he walked over to the open sarcophagus. Reaching in, he fussed with something then held up a crown, a wide, golden band with a diamond-shaped front, into which was

set a bloodstone the size of a man's thumb. The crown gleamed as brightly as if it were newly made, though the fan of decayed owl-feathers that hung from it said otherwise. The sorcerer looked thoughtful, as if confused by some missing puzzle-piece.

"But I fear there is worse in the wind. She has destroyed Lord Sennedjem. Now she—"

"Hatûm's Light! Look!" I interrupted. Tendrils of misty darkness were crawling, spiderlike, from the gory butchery of the dead noble and his seven acolytes. The shadows knit and twined, forming back into a whole, then flowed up the stairs to the shrine above.

"Quickly! Find a pair of horses in the stables, while I gather what is necessary from the Lord's study. We must ride back to Na Yxim as though all the Underworld's demons were after us!" Khalkeos exclaimed.

"But why—"

"Because that fiend will be seeking Layéth-siwa. She moves as a mist, and the farther from this," he gestured towards the sarcophagus, "she travels, the slower her materialization will be," explained Khalkeos as he took the steps three at a bound, the crown still clutched in his hand. I was close at his heels. "But she has time enough before the dawn to claim the lady for her own. That was her goal all along. Tlalestris fooled Sennedjem, but she will not fool me."

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"**K**HALKEOS-TZIN, what this is all about!" the Lady Layéth demanded, as she greeted us in her solar, a light, cotton cape wrapped about her diaphanous sleeping-gown. Her long hair was loose and fell about her like a second shawl. Her servants had resisted answering the door to our repeated pounding, but as with the gate guards, few in the Empire—and certainly not slaves—had the fortitude to refuse the Obsidian Mirror for long. "You say Sennedjem was at our villa, but you arrive, in the middle of the night, alone. Where is my husband?"

"He has been...detained," Khalkeos dissembled "For now, what matters is that you were right. Those accidents were nothing of the sort."

The lady's face changed at once from outrage to fear, her mouth shaping a small circle, as her hand went to it, the other clasping the cape more tightly against her throat, as if to shut out a chill. "Not accidents...then..."

"The work of a malignant entity bent on your destruction. And it—she—intends that still. She will strike tonight, before the dawn. We must work, and quickly."

He gestured to me and I upended the two large satchels right there onto her floor, a heap of charts, manuscripts and instruments clattering onto the tiles. Finding a lump of chalk, Khalkeos had me clear the woolen carpet and laid out a pair of circles, one about a man's length, the other half that size, the circumference of which he lined with glyphs and symbols, some drawn from memory, others from consultation with the scrolls we had carried away from Sennedjem's study.

"What is he doing?" Layéth-siwa whispered, watching Khalkeos in fearful wonder.

"Sorcery," I replied hoarsely, not knowing what else to answer. The night's horrors were fresh in my mind, as were my employer's claims that the worst might yet be to come.

"Have a servant bring palm wine, or *balché*-mead, lacking that, and some hot coals," the sorcerer ordered, without looking up from his work. "Then ask them to withdraw and remain below, no matter what they might hear."

Like any of her class, I suppose, the noblewoman's first inclination was to remind us that she was not to be ordered in her own house, certainly not in the darkest hours of night, and to demand explanations. Khalkeos gave them, in direct and uncompromising terms, explaining both the threat she faced and what he intended to do to defend her, and she called for wine, face pale and voice trembling, while he mixed some sort of concoction of powders, leaves and what looked to be dried mushrooms in a pestle. Once the palm wine arrived, he poured it into the goblet, sloshed it all about and thrust it towards Layéth.

"Drink that."

Taking the cup, she chewed her lower lip in apprehension, staring at its contents as if it were alive, then downed it in one long gulp. To her credit, she didn't retch—I might have.

Meanwhile, the sorcerer had taken from the pile of pilfered apparatus a bowl of beaten copper, its rim engraved with archaic glyphs, and was filling it with the lit coals. He then set it at the smaller circle's center and began adding small balls of copal from a pouch at his belt; soon thick, bluish-black clouds started to rise from the censor, filling the air with a stifling, resinous sweetness.

His preparations finished, Khalkeos rose, absently wiped his hands on his kilt and said, "Now, Layéth-siwa, if you would please strip off your clothes and enter the circle."

"What? I will not!" she protested. "I am not some temple-whore, to—"

"We have no time for this, Lady," my employer snarled impatiently, "and I assure you I have neither time nor interest for your charms, clothed or otherwise. Just do as I ask, if you would live. Otherwise, I will impose on Ométl to do so for you."

Thankfully, his threat was effective, for I was not prepared to strip a woman naked in her own solar—especially one whose family could order my death. She let the cape fall, and drew the sleeping gown over her head, so that she wore nothing but the band of clan tattoos that decorated each of her upper arms—as naked and beautiful in the lamplight as the goddess Lilaké Herself. I realized I was staring the same moment she did; she blushed, and I looked away, embarrassed.

Khalkeos, looking disgusted, and gestured to the larger circle. "If you'd please."

Layéth stepped over the barrier and knelt in the circle's center, I helped her lay back on the floor while my employer, using a paste made from that same mixture he'd poured into her drink, began drawing small sigils on her forehead, cheeks, chin, shoulders, breast, belly, hips and thighs, chanting in a low, sing-song voice all the while. Layéth looked up at me, sea-green eyes clearly terrified, but she held still, a true daughter of kings—and at least one queen, which was her current predicament.

By the time the sorcerer had finished, the potion had taken her affect: The noblewoman was breathing slowly, her eyes focused, yet unseeing. I was so busy staring into those wondrous eyes, I did not see the knife appear until Khalkeos had made the cut in her left wrist, and then proceeded to do the same to her right.

"I told you, there must always be blood. We will use it to draw the witch forth and then—"

A low, soft laugh interrupted Khalkeos' remarks. In a dim corner of the room a spot of misty luminescence was elongating, forming a twisting spindle of light and shadow, that expanded and solidified far more rapidly than we had witnessed before. "I prefer, O Sorcerer, to come in my own time, rather than yours."

"Ométl, stay with her inside the circle," Khalkeos barked at me while scrambling to his feet. He held his amulet aloft in his left hand, while he struck the dagger, wet with Layéth's blood against the obsidian mirror that hung about his chest, his voice booming out commands:

"Ta'ana Tlalestris, I see you!

By the power of your name, and the names of the Gods Above, I send you back to Tzatlokan,

Back to the land of eternal midnight!

Go in peace, Queen of Elder Days!

He who evoked you from the shadows of forgotten memories is dead!

Those who loved you are dust long ago!

Go in peace, and trouble no longer the living.

For you there is neither love, nor vengeance nor hope, in the Middle World!

Forgotten Queen! Go back to the shadowlands;

Back across the Obsidian Fields of Regret

Where Lord Xokolatl waits for you upon the Throne of Bones!

Go now and drink once more from the Draughts of Forgetfulness!"

Khalkeos began chanting in a language that I dimly recognized as an archaic form of High Naakal, still striking his dagger against the obsidian mirror for which his Order was named. His voice rolled and thundered like a distant surf crashing against the rocks; it crackled and snapped, and his eyes were flinty as he intently regarded that evil beauty who seemed more a concentration of solidified moonbeams than flesh and blood. The Lady Layéth moaned and stirred.

The sorcerer's sonorous voice commanded the wraith whose body had continued to grow substantial, her now corporeal flesh half shrouded in a shadow-mist that served as her gown. He was answered by that poison-sweet laugh as a tangible Tlalestris stepped forward to meet Khalkeos, blood-red lips curled in a mocking smile, her golden eyes looking back and forth from the sorcerer to the drugged woman lying on the floor behind him.

Khalkeos halted, clearly baffled at his magic's failure. Seeing the phantom's cold stare return to the drugged woman at my feet, I leaped clear of the circle, seeking to intercept the demoniac beauty who stalked towards her like a hunting jaguar. Tlalestris evaded my grasp as easily as if she were made of mist, Khalkeos' magic circle no more protective than the chalk from which it was drawn. In an instant, she had the unconscious Layéth by

the throat, seeking her lips with her own, and I my arms about her as I vainly sought to break her hold. The phantom woman's strength was great; her limbs—seemingly solid flesh and blood, though cold as a mountain stream—were as flexible and elusive as writhing serpents. The phantom snarled in bestial fury, her limbs lashing like a net of river-eels, thwarting my efforts at control, before throwing me off of her to crash hard into the wall.

Stumbling to my feet, I drew my sword, reasoning that if she were solid enough to do us harm with her hands, then I could return the favor with good, Naakali bronze. Crying for Bloody-Handed Tūwas, Lord of War to guide me, I struck a tremendous back-handed blow across her neck. Edge met spirit-flesh, which rippled, and parted, letting my sword pass through and beyond. Tlaestris was unharmed, but a terrible coldness flowed through my blade and lanced my swordarm, the weapon torn from my numb grasp.

"Gods Below!" I gasped, terror filling me as my warcraft failed me for the second time that night. Determined not to let her have my charge, I reached for my blade with my left hand, and found myself checked by Khalkeos, who seized my wrist.

"No! Your blade will go do nothing but pass through her and stab Layéth-siwa." Bewildered, I turned and threw myself at the ghost-queen with bare-hands once more.

Drugged, Layéth never struggled as those slender, deadly fingers sank remorselessly into her throat, scarlet lips twisted in a sneer made more terrible by the wraith's stunning beauty. There was a moment in which Tlaestris was both trying to press her mouth to the young woman's while her and I was strangling Tlaestris, then where there had been two women there was one and I grasped only shadow and mist.

A loud clang rang out and Layéth-Tlaestris screeched, a wail of pain and terror, and the women were separate once more.

I saw Khalkeos brandishing my sword, his lips moving in some soundless spell as he brought it down for a second time upon the gold and heliotrope crown, fracturing the head-band, soft metal curling and splitting beneath sharp bronze. He struck again, cracking the stone's setting.

I turned back to the wailing spirit. The phantom woman was *fading*, becoming shadow and mist.

"Again, Great One! Again!" I shouted.

Smash! Another spattering of fragments as he shattered the bloodstone at the diadem's center. There was a wailing howl, whether of a woman or some terrible wind called up from Tzatlökan I cannot say, but I felt my skin crawl and I shivered and trembled as if I a fever had broken.

Then all was silent and still.

"It worked," Khalkeos said in tired self-satisfaction, handing me my sword, visibly sagging as he did so. He glanced about for a moment as if to reassure himself that Tlaestris's shade had indeed vanished. "Let me give you a hand with our ward. We should get her into bed and covered against a chill. And quit gawking at her—haven't you seen a naked woman before?"

I looked at the sword in my left hand, its edge dulled and bent, and, not for the first time, considered stabbing him.

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LAYÉTH-SIWA regained consciousness shortly after the light of early dawn began spreading across her solar. She sat up among the cushions of her bed, smiled wearily, and took the goblet of warm, spiced *chokatl* Khalkeos offered her.

"My throat's bruised, though otherwise I'm all right," she said. "But now you need to tell me what truly happened here." I and Khalkeos exchanged glances. The lady clearly sensed our thoughts. "I could hear what you said, but muffled, as if from far away. Tell me the rest—I mean, the reasons. Starting with," her eyes misted but she kept her composure, "what has really become of my husband."

My employer loves expounding upon his own brilliance, so he happily indulged. For her part, the young widow listened attentively, eyes wide over her *chokatl* cup, as she learned of the conspiracies that had occurred around her.

"Ta'ana Tlaestris *should* have vanished with the death of Sennedjem-tzin and his witch-women; but whatever he thought he was doing, their deaths only served to let her shade assimilate their *tonali*—their spirit-force—until she was strong enough to materialize in physical form.

"I had *thought* her intent was to inhabit her mummy in some terrible unlife, but she never intended to return to it—why should she when she might acquire a vibrant young form? When she appeared to us in the Dark Grandmother's shrine, I realized her secret for what it was. It was not the mummy, but the *crown* that was the focal point of the sorcerous concentration—it was the only thing that existed not only in each of her depictions Sennedjem had collected, but on her *apparition* as well. Of course, there was no time for me to confirm this by studying Sennedjem's records, so..."

"You guessed!" Layéth gasped, eyes wide. "You drugged me just like my husband did his clan-women, risking my life—more than my life—on a *guess*?"

Khalkeos laughed—I have mentioned before how ill-timed and disharmonic his laughter can be—and used the night lamp to light the *sikar* he had brought along through all the day's misadventures.

"It was a very *educated* guess, however. Once I realized that killing the witch-women had actually made Tlaestris stronger, my plan was to attempt the same ritual with you, assuming that the link would force her spirit to materialize," he waived dismissively with his *sikar*. "At which point she would be trapped in the circle and might be banished like any other spirit."

"But that did not happen!" I protested, appalled at the callous way Khalkeos had gambled with the lady's life.

"No, Ométl, but sometimes victory comes through failure! Tlaestris thwarted me by materializing of her own volition, but that revealed her weakness. Power from the Otherworlds cannot exist in our own, without a focus, a host. Blood for the calling, yes, but it needs a host, be that animal, human or inanimate, to endure. The witch-women were dead, so it was not them. Her mummy was back at the villa, yet she was here, so it was not that. As she had not yet taken possession of Layéth-siwa, it

could not be her. That left the bloodstone crown, which we had brought with us. Destroy the crown, destroy the host; destroy the host and she could not remain. Simple."

Simple. For him.

There is little more to tell. Khalkeos promised the young widow that the Smoking Mirror would assist in providing a suitable, if not entire plausible, explanation to the Silver Crescent clan concerning the Lord Sennedjem's death. Of course, the Order would also wish to make a more thorough examination—and confiscation—of the various artifacts and papers the lord had collected. Layéth dazedly agreed. Poor woman, it was a lot to take in.

Thus, we took our leave of her.

"Goodman Ométl," she called after me as we were departing, "a moment."

"Yes, Layéth-siwa?"

"You fought bravely and selflessly to defend...me...last night," she said, her eyes holding mine, as she chewed her lip thoughtfully. "I will remember that."

"The lady is too kind," I replied with a small bow, my heart skipping a beat at her attention.

"Nevertheless, I shall. Perhaps in future time you might attend me, and tell me how you came by that scar? I am sure there is quite a tale to be told."

I swallowed. "I would be honored."

My employer impatiently took my arm and all-but-pulled me from the solar, muttering about needing his sleep. I paid him little heed, for my heart was racing. The Lady Layéth Mnemoani was beautiful, rich, and now a widow, and as we walked back to the sorcerer's townhouse my mind was inevitably filled with little fantasies. But it was also troubled.

She had smiled at me one last time as we withdrew, looking at me appraisingly beneath her long lashes across the rim of her goblet. And when she had... for just a moment... had those sea-green eyes turned golden?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trapped in the disturbing quietude of suburban Chicago, Gregory D. Mele has built himself an underground refuge, where, surrounded by stacks of moldering books and gleaming blades, he masters ancient weapon arts that lost all relevance four hundred years ago. Well prepared to defend fane and family against ravening hordes of steppe riders, Viking raiders or the undead, he is perplexed they have not yet appeared and so writes about them instead.

THE SKULL SPEAKS: THE DAY OF MIGHT

Greetings, Mortal Dogs!

This winter it was brought to my attention that many of you murder trees, drag them to your home, set them alight, and sing songs celebrating a white-bearded red god who delivers gifts to the obedient and vengeance to the wicked.

I found this fascinating, and when I inquired about other celebratory occasions, I was told about the Day of Hearts, when small images of life sustaining organs are traded and devoured, and Avian Consumption Day, when the folk of this America gather to talk as little as possible while devouring millions of dead birds.

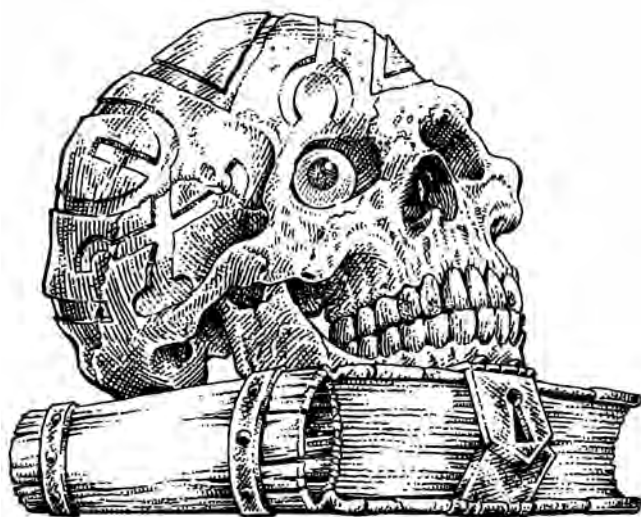
As other "holidays" were described, each more disturbing than the last, it grew obvious to me that none of them celebrated that most glorious of all traditions, sword-and-sorcery! This is to be remedied at once!

I, The Skull, decree that henceforth October 23rd is to be known as The Day of Might. True believers are to assemble with the summons of a gong, light a red candle in remembrance of the the day I revealed myself to the modern world, then read aloud favorite passages from the greatest sword-and-sorcery tales! They are to trade sword-and-sorcery related gifts, such as copies of *The Hour of the Dragon* or *Swords in the Mist* or issues of *Tales From the Magician's Skull*. They are to down mugs of mead or beer of the root, and then sing songs that celebrate the glories of sword-and-sorcery! Finally, they are to render praise unto me, The Skull, for my magnificent vision!

Go forth to your priests and kings and tell them of my plans! Forget not the makers of calendars, who must add this day, for surely if February 2 can be sacred to a groundchuck and May 4 can be sacred to *Star Trek*, October 23rd can be sacred to us!

...I have been informed that there are few if any true paens to sword-and-sorcery. Those who are minstrels among my readers, set to work! Ready stirring music in honor of the greatest of all genres! Do not neglect parts for the trombones and shredding metal guitar!

—So Sayeth the Skull



FRED SABERHAGEN

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ILLUSTRATION BY PETER MULLEN

COLD IN BLOOD

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

The cold in clime are cold in blood; their love can scarce deserve the name.

—Byron, *The Giaour*

THE knife went in and out. A ragged eye opened in the man's neck and poured forth hot red tears that steamed in the frosty air. The man's mouth opened and poured forth pale steam that would have carried his last words, only he died before his mouth could give them shape. His body fell onto the icy pavement and lay there. Whatever there was of him other than meat and bone and blood went wherever dead souls go.

The killer stood over him and sighed. The dreadful work was done. At least, it was almost done.

• • •

WHILE this was going on, not far away in the city of Aflraun, Morlock Ambrosius found his night taking a turn for the worse. It was his habit, in the evenings, to take a quiet snifter in the Faraway, a tavern that he knew—and then another snifter, and then ten or fifteen more. This was also his habit in the mornings and the afternoons.

The place was filthy and small. The bartender was surly and had no conversation. The drink was only one rancid step above actual poison.

All these negatives added up to a positive for Morlock. It meant that he was usually the only person in there and he could go peacefully about the business of drinking himself to death, which was his primary occupation these days.

But tonight, just as dusk was rising from the snow-laden streets into the sky, the tavern began to fill up with people. Many of them seemed to be happy. They were all loud. Morlock hated each one of them the way a man trying to fall asleep hates each awkward noise keeping him awake.

He left his corner table and went to the bar, where the bartender and a couple of assistants were busy pouring ugly foul-smelling mixtures into spotted mugs.

"Hey, Zagr!" Morlock shouted at the bartender. "What's happening?"

Zagr peered through the crowd and said, "It's New Year's Night."

From the heavy snows over the past few days, Morlock had cleverly deduced that winter was imminent or had already begun, but he never bothered to keep track of what day or year it

was anymore. He did vaguely remember that people usually celebrated the end of the old year, or maybe it was the beginning of the new one. He wished he could get them to reconsider through reasoned argument, or punching their stupid faces, if necessary, but (drunk though he was) he realized that this was a futile project. He raised his hand in farewell and turned away.

He was startled to see dismay on Zagr's face. "Don't go!" the bartender shouted. "Stay with us! This is the best night of the year!"

Morlock stood by the door, struggling with the realization that Zagr would miss him and/or was concerned about him, when a woman entered the tavern behind him.

"Excuse me," she said, in a low voice that almost made him feel alive again.

He looked around at her curiously. She was obviously no one in particular, socially speaking—not someone of "steep slope," in the slang of Aflraun's timocracy. Her clothes were the dark color and coarse weave of those who couldn't afford better. The stitching was so lumpy that his fingers itched with the desire to rip up the seams and redo them right.

But the woman herself was someone in a way that social rank could not bestow. She moved with a lithe, muscular dancer's grace as she walked around him to enter the room. Her hair was a waterfall of starless night. Her eyes were the stars, shining with tears. Morlock had seen a more beautiful woman, but not recently.

"Zagr," she said. "Thias. Xan. You know me. I'm begging you for help. My father's lost in the streets and I need to find him."

The faces of the crowd turned toward her and then turned resolutely away.

"Please," she whispered. But no one answered her plea, or even looked at her.

Morlock could stand the piteous spectacle no longer, so he turned away, stepping through the open door and shutting it behind him. The Faraway was on the second floor of a rooming house as vile as itself, too grimy and rat-thick even for Morlock, who had found a convenient cave for himself down in the riverbluff. It was too early to go home, though: he could still walk fairly steadily, and he knew unconsciousness was a long way off.

He made his way down the stairs to the street and stood in the bitter blue twilight, trying to decide what his next stop was. He knew of several other taverns in the area but—the realization struck him like a snowball thrown by a giant—it was New

Year's Night *all over town*. Everyone would be drinking tonight, not just the professionals like Morlock. With all that competition, it was possible that he would not even find another drink that night.

As he stood there, bowed down by the weight of this dry, thirsty thought, he heard someone clattering down the stairs from the Faraway Tavern. It was the young woman who had entered just before he left. She came and stood beside him on the curb; she was close enough that he could feel her warmth on the bare skin of his left hand.

"They threw me out," she remarked to him, as if he had asked her a question.

Morlock looked at her with a certain respect. "Good for you," he said. "I've been drinking and vomiting in that joint for five months, and they never threw me out."

"They wouldn't help me—wouldn't even listen to me." She turned her eyes like stars toward him. "Will you help me?" She put her hand lightly on his left arm, and looked appealingly into his eyes.

"Almost certainly not," he assured her. There was a phrase he used on these occasions, if only he could remember it. "I'm not in the helping business," he added, as memory came to his aid. "I'm in the drinking business."

Morlock was a man like other men; he felt the power of her appeal. But he was also a drunk like other drunks, and the siren call of sex was a mere whisper compared to his howling need for oblivion.

"I suppose you're too busy celebrating to save somebody's life," she said angrily.

"I never celebrate anything," he replied. "I'm just going to finish my day's drinking."

"I can get you a drink," she said quickly. "Faster than at any bar. Tonight, every wineshop in town is full of people pretending to be happy."

This prediction was so much like his own fear that it convinced him instantly. She was probably lying about the drink, but it would really be easy enough to find her father—easier than forcing his way through a city crowd just to get a few dozen bottles of liquor.

"All right," he grumbled. "I'll find your father. But you will face the wrath of Morlock if you're lying about that drink." This was his ham-handed way of introducing himself.

She laughed in his face. "No one believes in that stuff anymore."

"What stuff?" he asked, genuinely bewildered.

"About Morlock Ambrosius, the magical hunchback with the fiery blood, who appears to avenge broken oaths. They told me all that when I was a baby, but that was a long time ago. I'm a woman now." She looked in his eye challengingly.

"Eh," he replied.

"And my name is Neith. What's yours?"

"I told you," he said impatiently. "Let's get to work. I'll need some of your blood."

She finally took her hand off his arm; he immediately felt its lack, almost as if her touch was a drug that he needed. The thought alarmed him, obscurely. He had done away with almost every need but one; this seemed like moving in the wrong direction.

Neith was alarmed, but not in any obscure way. "What do you want my *blood* for?" she demanded.

"The bonds of blood are strong," Morlock explained patiently. "If you want to find someone, kindle the *Pursuer* instrumentality with some of their blood. Next best is the blood from their mate, if they have one, since blood alters blood as two become one."

"I know that's true," Neith said solemnly, with a wisdom beyond her apparent years.

"Failing that, the blood of a close relative. A daughter, for instance."

Neith nodded slowly. "You're not coming at me with any knife," she said grimly. "I've lived in the city all my life. I'm not as innocent or as young as I may look."

She didn't look innocent. Her full dark mouth was bent in a sneer of suspicion. In the blue light of evening, she looked as cruel and cold as a statue in a graveyard.

"I don't have a knife," he observed. Carrying a weapon through Affraun would have been a declaration that he was ready to fight duels, according to the ridiculous *code duello* of the city. An armed society was an impolite society, as Morlock knew, and he didn't have time to wade through the half-witted insults of weapon-waving bravos when there was a lonely bottle awaiting him somewhere, and there was always a lonely bottle awaiting him somewhere. If he had to kill somebody, he just did it; there was no point in making it a game.

"I don't have a knife either," she said, as if that settled the matter.

He reached into one of his sleeve pockets and brought out an aculeus. He handed her the needlelike probe and said, "Don't nick a vein; I don't need much. Just cover the tip of this with your blood."

She accepted the instrument, and looked at him narrowly.

He shrugged his crooked shoulders. "Or not. It's no skin off my walrus." He turned away. There were some taverns down on Ranica Road, just off Whisper Street. If he set fire to one, he could sneak in there as the crowds cleared out and—

"Wait!" shouted Neith.

He waited, somewhat nettled. He had actually forgotten her existence for a moment.

She turned away from him, as if this was a very private business, and stabbed herself with the aculeus. He thought he heard an odd crunch as she did so; he decided it was probably just the scrutch of her shoes moving on the icy surface of the snow.

Neith turned toward him now, holding out the aculeus, the sharp end dark with blood that steamed in the icy air.

Now it was Morlock's turn. He was uneasily aware that all this conversation and activity was sobering him up. Best this were done quickly. He assembled the *Pursuer* from three elements he drew from different pockets, stained it with the blood from the aculeus, lit a flame (causing Neith to jump back in surprise) and set the *Pursuer* on fire. The flame didn't rise up, as flames tend to do, but pointed west, toward the river Nar.

Morlock wiped the aculeus in a bank of snow and tucked it back into his sleeve. He gestured for Neith to come along. She looked at the *Pursuer*, looked at his sleeve, looked at his face. "I didn't know you were a sorcerer," she said.

"Eh."

When it was obvious he wasn't going to say any more, she sighed and gestured at the road. He took it westward; she followed in his wake.

One of Morlock's legs was shorter than the other. (He wasn't born that way. A story for another time.) He'd long ago formed the habit of swinging the longer leg a little to the side as he walked. This made it hard for anyone to walk next to him, not that the matter came up much. Still, Morlock was unpleasantly aware of the woman walking behind him; it felt like heat on his neck, an added weight on his crooked shoulders.

As the deep blue of the wintry evening was darkening to full night, they came to an open square stained with great splashes of frozen blood, black in the light of the somber moons setting in the east.

"Oh, no," whispered Neith and rushed over to the frozen patches of blood. She went down on her hands and knees. Careless of the cold, she rubbed her bare hands on the frozen blood with (as it seemed to Morlock) excessive sentimentality. She looked up with her large luminous eyes at Morlock and said, "Is he... dead?"

"I'm a maker, not a medic," Morlock said testily. Sobriety was creeping on him like the onset of an illness, and that always made him surly. Still, he assessed the aura of *Pursuer* as he approached the bloodstains. "This is his blood," he said at last. He forbore to add, *And there is a lot of it*, because that much was obvious. He did add, "There is a trail of blood leading west, toward the Nar."

Neith gave the frozen blood one last wistful stroke and stood in a single graceful movement. "On we go," she said, and he led the way, as before.

Pursuer soon began to point as much south as west, and presently they were in Riveredge, one of the emptiest districts in the city. In the old days, before the Khroi conquered the Dwarvish empire under the Blackthorn Range, many wealthy folk had built mansions and towers here. But now that trade rarely passed through the Kirach Kund, the city was more thinly peopled and rich people were not as common, or as conspicuous, as they had been. Riveredge emptied out, the buildings fell to pieces, and the few who dwelt among them now were not citizens of high slope.

The ruined buildings were like broken, black teeth in the blue mouth of Night. Morlock and Neith wandered among them until they came at last to the blackened shell of a house. Its ragged walls were crumbling shearstone; it had seen more than one fire. Now frost and snow glazed it, like the ruins of a rich man's feast preserved under glass. *Pursuer* was vibrating so much that it nearly flew from Morlock's hand.

Morlock entered the house through a doorless archway and he found himself in a roofless courtyard. The snow-covered surface was scattered with shearstone memorials quarried from the walls: poor people had been using the courtyard as a burial ground for some time, it seemed.

A shadowy form crouched before a heap that looked like a pyre. There was certainly a dead body atop the heap, anyway. From the scritchings Morlock heard, he guessed that the shadowy person was trying to strike a flame and light the pyre. The corpse was almost certainly Neith's father; his throat had been slashed: the gash was clearly visible in profile.

"Of course," Neith whispered as she entered the place behind him. "Of course she brought him here."

The shadowy person looked up at the sound of Neith's voice. The dim light of *Pursuer* revealed her to be a woman of middle years. "Who are you?" she asked. "What do you—the Strange Gods save us all! It's *her*!"

Abruptly, Neith was atop the pyre, snuffing and licking at the wound in her dead father's neck. The older woman recoiled in horror, stumbling almost into Morlock's arms. He kept her from falling with one hand; with the other he extinguished *Pursuer* in a nearby pile of snow. He crushed the instrument between two fingers and left it there; it would melt into the empty air by morning.

"Why did you bring her?" the older woman was sobbing. "Why ever in the rotting worthless world?"

Morlock had sacrificed a lot to save the world, and he didn't like to hear people badmouthing it. On the other hand, he had brought Neith here in the fading hope of getting a little more drunk. Possibly he was not standing on the high ground.

"She's a vampire?" he asked.

"She wasn't always a vampire," the woman said sadly.

"Eh." Everyone has to start somewhere, Morlock reflected.

"I think she was cursed—maybe by Morlock Ambrosius. He has been seen lurching around the city. You won't believe me, but it's true."

Morlock said he did believe her, but he added, "Why would Morlock want to curse you—Is she your daughter?"

"Stepdaughter," the old woman said quickly. "I married old Bruikko, oh, fifteen years ago. And tonight I killed him, that good old man, and it was all for nothing. There she feeds."

By now Neith had broken open her father's ribcage and was sucking noisily on his exposed heart.

"Why did you kill him?" he asked.

"The curse. She has to devour her own family. It was her husband first; I found her standing over the body. She looked so young and beautiful, younger than I'd ever seen her. And he was as dry as a seedpod in autumn, all shrivelled up and ten-times dead. After that it was her babies: you'd think she'd have spared them. And her brothers and sisters and... and... Only Bruikko was left. I thought—Love and Justice forgive me—I thought that if I killed him first and burned the body, it would stop her somehow. Maybe now she will stop. No one is left that's related to her."

"Everyone is related to everyone else," Morlock observed, "if you go far enough back."

"That is a disgusting observation. I don't think you're a nice man at all. Have you been drinking?"

Neith slid off the pyre, leaving the ruined body of her father steaming beneath the empty sky and began to creep toward them on all fours. She was like a four-legged spider in the snowy darkness, except that Morlock liked spiders.

"Oh, mother, dear," Neith called out in her deep, clear, thrilling voice.

"Stepmother," the older woman said. "I'm your stepmother, dear Neith, kind Neith, pretty Neith. You remember: Madame Lakka. I married old Bruikko after your mother's death."

"My mother," whispered Neith longingly. "Father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh. And so, my *mother*..."

Lakka ran for it, which Morlock thought was probably a good idea, if a tad too late to do any good. Neith gave chase, still on all fours, and she scampered by so close to Morlock that he felt her loathsome heat on his right hand.

A more chivalrous man, or at least a nice one, might have gone to do something for Lakka, but Morlock had a low regard for kinslayers even, or perhaps especially, if they claimed high motives.

Someone had to bury Brukko, though. Neither Neith nor Lakka would return to do it, or so Morlock guessed. He found Lakka's abandoned firemaker at the foot of the pyre but it was missing a flint and its scratching wheel was smooth with long use. He knew many fire magics but didn't feel like using them. Instead he went and pulled stones from the tumbled walls where he could and brought them back, two at a time, to pile atop the ruined body. When the cairn was complete, he fished an engraving tool out of a pocket and wrote, in the syllabic script of Afl-raun, *HERE LIES BRUKKO, KILLED BY HIS LAST WIFE ON THE LAST DAY OF THE YEAR*. He would have added the year, but he had no idea what year it was.

This done, Morlock walked out of the graveyard house. It was nearly midnight: the major moon, Chariot, was sinking behind the eastern horizon and the minor moon, Trumpeter, was already gone. Westward, Horsemen, the middle moon was peering over the horizon.

Grimly but realistically, Morlock decided he was not going to have another drink that night. Perhaps he should pack up his few possessions and find a new place to live. A place without liquor was no place for Morlock. On the other hand, the Faraway would surely be as empty tomorrow as it had been since summer. If only he could get through this night, somehow...

"Stranger," said a warm contralto voice, cutting through the cold midnight air. "I owe you a drink."

Just then, elsewhere in the city, bells began to toll; people began to scream, to laugh, to shout—welcoming in the New Year as noisily as possible. Chariot had set; Horseman was risen. The old year was gone.

"*Khûle, gradara!*" Morlock remarked to the eastern horizon: *Goodbye, moons.* "*Khai, gradara!*" he called out to Horsemen, rising in the west beyond the towers of Narkunden across the river: *Well-met, moon.*

"I don't know what that means," the unseen vampire said.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"Well, what about that drink?"

"Show yourself."

Neith appeared as a silhouette in a doorless doorway between two columns clad in black, frost-edged ivy. She stood like a tripod on her right arm and two legs. Her left arm was raised to the side, and in her hand was what looked like a bottle.

"I thought you were lying about that," he said, gesturing at the bottle.

She moved through the doorway into the fierce white light of the rising moon. Morlock was fascinated by her walk. She stepped forward with her left leg, then her right arm, as a kind of foreleg, and then her right leg. The motion was sinuous and graceful, not like an animal missing a leg, not like a human being—not like anything Morlock had ever seen.

Her face was gray in the moonlight and the expression on her bold symmetrical features was somber and thoughtful. There was no blood on her face or hands, but he could smell it on her clothes.

"Never," she said. "I take my bargains seriously. They're all that I have, now—all that I really am."

Morlock sat down on a broken wall, since there was probably no point in running. She lifted herself up and sat down on the same wall, not very close to him, which he had to admit displayed a certain amount of tact. She handed him the bottle, which was really a kind of flask. He uncorked it and took a swallow. It was brandy—pretty decent brandy, he thought, not that he was a snob about such things.

"This is good," he said.

"Lakka said she took it from one of the abandoned cellars around here. They've been hiding out here for months. She offered to give me all that they'd found, but of course I don't care about such stuff."

"Hm."

He offered her the flask but she waved it off. "I never eat or drink anything but blood, now. The blood is the life. It is all my life is, now."

"Apart from bargains," Morlock observed, and had another pull from the flask.

"They're one and the same, really. Of course, I heard what Lakka said to you—my hearing is excellent, never better. And I don't have much going on in my mind to distract me. Of course, I wasn't cursed by Morlock Ambrosius, if there is such a person. I struck a deal with a wandering sorcerer. I—gave him something, and he gave me the spell that made me what I am."

"A vampire?"

"Ageless and beautiful, stranger. It's true that I'm a vampire, but that's incidental. The sorcerer kept his bargain with me. And now I have to keep my bargain with—"

"Yes?" Morlock prompted her.

"The power that made me so."

A demon, Morlock guessed, one that had taken root inside her and fed on the *tal* of the bodies she killed. "What did you give the sorcerer?" Morlock asked. "One of your children?"

Neith jumped a little as she sat there. She was silent for a long time. At last she said, "Not one of *mine*."

Morlock shrugged and drank.

"You don't know what it was like," Neith said. "It's not so much that my husband, Lutin, never even looked at me. *No one* ever looked at me. I was just a piece of furniture for children to climb on. Some women escape it: they gain power as they grow older until people genuflect before them and worship their wrinkled blue crone-feet. But I wasn't like that. I was fading away and no one cared. Even I hardly cared. I had to do something."

"Was it worth it?" Morlock asked.

Neith was silent for a long time. "I can't seem to think about it like that," she answered at last. "I can't compare life before to life now. There is only life, and it is terribly precious to me. The blood is the life."

Morlock was about halfway done with the brandy. If she kept talking, he thought he could finish it all.

"But you consume it," Morlock observed. "Then it's gone."

“Yes, and I need more—always more. The thirst is terrible and beautiful. To kill Lutin, my babies, everyone I knew, just to cool the fire of that thirst a little, that was nothing, or almost nothing. I didn’t even do it, really: my mind sat by and watched as my body did... what it did. The thirst is a fire in my core, and cooling it for even a moment is so delicious.”

Neith laughed gently, thrillingly, so that even Morlock’s brandy-numbed nerves felt it. “There is a thirst in you, too, stranger. I felt it as soon as I saw you. And you are wiser than you appear: when you said that thing about spouses and blood, it moved me. That was just the way I felt about Lutin, even when I hated him, even when I drank him. And you said something else very beautiful when you were talking to Lakka.”

“Something beautiful? Doesn’t sound like me.”

“But you did; I heard you. You said that everyone is related to everyone else, if you go far enough back. We’re all one family, all blood kin—”

When she jumped at him, he was ready for it. She’d shifted her peculiar beastlike body just a little as she talked, and she was obviously talking herself into the idea. Since he had nothing else, he regretfully hit the vampire with the half-full flask on the side of her neck, just as hard as he could. And he could hit pretty damn hard. The impact had a peculiar scratchy crunching sound—not like bone and tissue, but like an impact on dry parchment or sand. It reminded him of how she had crunched when piercing herself for blood.

The blow did stop her for a moment, but more because she was amused than hurt. The flask broke open on impact and splashed brandy on her, and she laughed. There was a dent in the right side of her neck almost the width of the neck itself: it bulged out on the left side. As Morlock watched with a mixture of horror and technical interest, it slid back to re-form itself into a swanlike beauty.

“That won’t help you,” Neith said. “My insides are all changed.”

“Changed into what?” he asked, partly because he wanted to know, partly to keep her talking.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t matter to you.”

Morlock dropped the flask and tried to hold her off with his hands. But she just fastened onto his right wrist, bit deeply, and sucked greedily.

Neith had at least a mouthful or two of his blood inside her before she let go and started to scream.

Her mouth was a cave of red fire, banishing the midnight darkness with a halo of bloody light. Morlock’s blood would give anyone a terrible poisonous burn. And the dried-up insides of a vampire were apparently very flammable.

She rolled away from him and fell into the snowy gutter. He scooped up the broken flask and splashed her with the remainder of the brandy to accelerate the blaze. She thrashed about in the snow, but the fire had bitten her too deeply to be extinguished. Presently she stopped moving, and he sat down on the broken wall to bandage his bleeding arm with strips torn from his cloak. He waited there until the fire burned itself out.

There didn’t seem to be any bones or organs left inside her at all. It was all that sandy, crunchy parchment stuff, and it burned like sawdust. In the end, as the flames died at last, there weren’t

even ashes left behind, just some mud mingling with other mud in the melted snow of the moonlit street.

But, after the flames faded away, Morlock saw something else where Neith had been, rising from the gutter, a gray cloud with flashes of red inside it. His Sight, dulled by the brandy though it was, told him that this was the demon that had been living like a tapeworm inside Neith, the blood-thirst she had thought a part of herself. It moved toward him threateningly.

“You see me alone, without allies or weapons,” he said. “But I am Morlock Ambrosius. I bound Andhrakar with glass and shameful earth. I drove the beast with many voices off the rough, red edge of the world. Come at me, if you will.”

It would not. It stepped into the sky and fled in a direction that was neither east nor west, neither north nor south, neither up nor down. Off to cause more problems in the world, no doubt, but at least it was not his problem anymore.

Morlock stood slowly. He had lost much blood and that, more than the brandy, made him unsteady on his feet. Without much searching, he found Lakka’s torn body in the ruined house that Neith had emerged from and built a cairn over her where she lay. On her marker he wrote: LAKKA: SLAIN BY HER STEP-DAUGHTER NEITH IN THE LAST HOUR OF THE YEAR.

As he left, he passed by the place where Neith had died. The shallow pool of mud in the gutter was already freezing over. He lingered there a long time, in two minds. At last he shrugged and started pulling apart the wall they had both sat on before. He piled the stones in the street where Neith’s terrible thirst had been slaked at last. He engraved the last stone NEITH: SLAIN BY THE BLOOD OF AMBROSE IN THE FIRST HOUR OF THE YEAR. He left that atop the empty cairn and walked away.

It was not impossible that someone would come looking for them. If so, they could read what they needed to know in the stones.

At last he staggered homeward in the night’s coldest, grayest hours, drained rather than drunk. His cold cave—empty of every comfort except his bedroll—looked like heaven. He shrouded himself in the cold blanket and waited for weariness, like a rising tide of brandy, to drown his mind.

As he slept, he dreamed that he was dead, and everyone he had ever known came by to drop a stone on his cairn. But no one wrote his name on the stones because no one remembered who he was.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS ARNESON

ISLE OF FOG

A Dhulyn and Parno Adventure

By VIOLETTE MALAN

DHULYN Wolfshead curled her lip as she looked around the crowded slave market in Senkar.

"Stop that." Parno Lionsmane used the nightwatch voice and only his Partner could hear him. "You're frightening people."

"Good. I want them to be frightened."

They'd been told they would find the well-known slaver broker Mazulka Farrin here, but they had arrived just as the market opened and the woman was at her work. The wide square and everything about it was a dull grey, the overcast skies, the grey limestone of the buildings, the faces of those about to be sold.

"We could kill all of them," Dhulyn said, her gray eyes focused on the merchants taking their seats before the raised platform. "They couldn't stop us." She indicated the market's guards with a lift of her chin.

"We can't kill everyone associated with the slave trade." Parno knew Dhulyn had her reasons for wishing to do precisely that. The thin scar on her upper lip where the end of the whip had caught her. The wider scars on her back.

"Perhaps not. But we could kill these."

"First let's find out what we came here to learn."

"Fair enough." She relaxed, but there was still something in her face that made those standing near leave a clear space around her.

A little more than three weeks before, someone in Senkar, perhaps Mazulka Farrin herself, had bought a fourteen-year old boy. A boy Dhulyn and Parno had been hired to find. Ben-Eneb Kendaro, son of a High Noble House in Imrion. He had told his parents he was going out to the docks to watch the new ships coming in, but had never returned home. Parno and his Partner had finally traced him to Senkar.

Luckily for those present the market did not last past mid-morning, finally leaving Mazulka Farrin free to answer questions.

"I'm surprised to see Mercenary Brothers here. I thought you people didn't use servants." Short, stout and untidy, the woman bustled around her cluttered office, moving wax tablets and tally sticks from one side of the heavy wooden work table to the other, straightening a pile of re-scraped parchments and clearing off seats for them, though only Parno sat down. Though Dhulyn was Senior, they'd decided that Parno should speak for them. If she was ever likely to act impulsively, this would be the time and the place. She stayed near the open door, arms crossed, shoulders leaning against the wall, fingertips of both hands touching hidden weapons. Even in the dull light her pale skin stood out against the dried-blood red of her hair.

"No, we don't," Parno said. Behind him Dhulyn cleared her throat. Calling them "servants" didn't make them any less slaves.

Finally, Farrin took her seat behind the table, clasped her hands, and rested her elbows in the space she'd cleared for herself. "How can I help you then? I'm afraid I'm not hiring guards or escorts for caravans at this season."

Parno heard Dhulyn shift her feet. "We're looking for information, and we were told you'd be the person who could help us."

A shrewd look passed over the woman's narrow face. "Well, I'll be honest with you, I wouldn't mind having the Mercenary Brotherhood owe me a favour. What is it you want to know?"

Parno smiled politely to disguise his thoughts, as he'd been taught to do as a child in his own High Noble House. Little did the slave broker know that Dhulyn considered not killing her to be favour enough.

"We're looking for someone who passed through Senkar sometime between three and five weeks ago. We were told that as one of the largest houses in town—"

"The largest," Mazulka Farrin interrupted. "Between what I manage on my own account, and what I broker for others, eight out of ten servants in the Tanzen Peninsula pass through my books." She waved at the scrolls and parchments on her table top.

"This would be a young man about fourteen years of age, almost as tall as my Partner, but stockier, olive skin, dark hair and eyes, a bit slanted like. Scar on the left..." Before Parno was finished describing the boy Farrin was already nodding.

"If it's the one I'm thinking of, he did tell us he was of some noble House in Imrion, and that his parents would pay ransom for him. But, they all say that, don't they? Though I suppose, since you're here—I didn't handle his sale personally but let me see..." she moved a ledger on her desk, looked through the one beneath it, frowned and turned to pick up one from the table behind her. "Here we are." Her face paled and grew stiff.

"Well?"

Farrin looked up from the page, shaking her head slowly. "I'm afraid he was sold to the Black Ship."

Parno could hear the capital letters in the woman's tone. "And?"

She sat back in her chair, closing the book. "The Black Ship buys for the Isle of Fog."

Parno raised his eyebrows and smiled, Dhulyn cleared her throat again.

"No one comes back from the Isle of Fog," Farrin said.

Dhulyn spoke from behind him. "We've been told things like that before." From her voice she was smiling her wolf's smile.

• • •

"YOU can't say they got the name wrong." From where she leaned her elbows on the rail Dhulyn Wolfshead squinted at a dense grey cloud that seemed to rest on the surface of the sea, just within sight. A spire of rock rose from the cloud, glinting in the sun, like a steel spike from the centre of the cloth-wrapped helmets of the desert Berdanans. At this distance, the Isle of Fog looked about the size of the three-master they sailed in, but without anything else to give scale ... Dhulyn shrugged.

"Nothing, Not a shadow of a tree, or a rock. Just the fog." Parno handed the telescope back to the captain of the trading vessel they were paying handsomely to take them as close as he would. "Of course, it's not a natural fog."

"They say sometimes you can't see the mountain at all," The captain turned away signalling at two of his crew. "I'm having your boat made ready now," he said. "I'll go no closer, or I'd have no crew." He hesitated and then continued. "I have no special love for the Mercenary Brotherhood, but still, may the Sleeping God go with you. I suppose if anyone can come back from that cursed place, it might be one of your kind."

"We've been in worse places."

"That I doubt, that I doubt very much."

Once their packs had been lowered into the boat the captain had been happy to sell them, they rowed themselves away from the ship and watched as she turned back into the wind. Both captain and crew had been sceptical that Mercenary Brothers could handle a boat of any size, but Dhulyn's schooling had taken place on the ship of Dorian the Black Traveller. There wasn't much about the sea that she didn't know.

Here the water was a dark blue, almost purple, but the waves were gentle, with very little swell.

"It's not as far as it looked from the ship," Parno sat down on the middle thwart. "Rowing might be faster."

After too long a time had passed Dhulyn signalled from her seat at the rudder and Parno shipped his oars, wiping the sweat off his face with his tunic sleeve.

"We are not closer than when we started," she said. "And the current's not against us. We should have reached the shore by now, but we are still in deep water."

"Looks like they don't want people rowing up on them," Parno said.

"So we switch to sail."

Parno lifted the oars from their locks and fitted them into their places along the gunnels. "And if they don't like sailors either?"

"Today's problems today." Dhulyn moved her pack to get at the mast stowed in the bottom of the boat. Once she had stepped the mast, hoisted the sail and come about into the wind, the little boat began to move forward. Dhulyn sat down again at the rudder, but she had little to do. The wind held steady, and the boat seemed to sail itself.

"Strange that the wind will blow us there, but doesn't blow the fog away."

"I think that's why it's called 'unnatural.'"

They entered the bank of fog without slowing. The sunlight dimmed and the temperature dropped, prickling the skin of

Dhulyn's bared arms with cold. The boat continued to move forward, though there should have been no wind. Without speaking, Parno pulled a short sword free of its sheath. Dhulyn mentally reviewed the location of every knife, dagger, throwing disc, throttling wire and hand axe concealed in her clothing. All were within reach and ready to use. She caught her Partner's eye.

"In battle," she said.

"Or in death," Parno replied, as a shiver raced over his skin. He braced himself against the motion of the boat, sword raised, but there was nothing to strike. Instead, as suddenly as they had entered the bank of fog, they passed into the dubious light of an overcast day. Parno looked back, but saw nothing but empty sea. The fog was gone. Dhulyn furled the sail as the prow of the boat ran gently up onto a white sand beach.

Parno was already over the bow and onto the sand, pulling the boat up above the water line as Dhulyn packed away sail and mast.

"A little higher up," she said, leaping onto the sand herself and grabbing hold of the gunnel. When she was satisfied, Parno sorted out two packs from the food they carried with them.

"Leave any weapons?" he asked, hesitating with his hand over a bag of dried apples.

Dhulyn checked the beach. As far as she could see the sand showed no prints at all, neither animal nor human. A gentle dune lay between them and the line of trees perhaps twenty paces away. "Better cautious than cursing," she said. Parno finished and handed Dhulyn her pack.

"Which way, do you think?"

"My vote's for inland, toward that rock spire we saw from the water. If nothing else we'll gain enough elevation to see the whole island at once."

They settled their packs, making sure they didn't interfere with access to weapons. Dhulyn took her short sword in one hand, the other held out for balance. Parno carried his sword in his right hand, a miniature crossbow in his left. The bolts weren't heavy enough to kill, unless they hit an eye, but the tips had been dipped in iocain, and would knock out any living thing they hit.

Dhulyn led the way across the beach to the edge of the trees where she stopped. "Do you hear anything?" She turned her head slowly from side to side. "Other than the sounds we're making ourselves?"

Parno shut his eyes, concentrating. "Waves," he said. He sang a few lines of a favourite ballad. "That doesn't sound right."

"Our voices are muted, as though we were still in the fog." Dhulyn squinted at what she could see of the sky between the canopy of leaves. "Perhaps the fog is still here, but we cannot see it. Look, those clouds move as though a storm is on its way."

"Always cheerful and optimistic, that's what I like about you."

After they had been walking for some time, Parno stopped, looking carefully around them. "These trees aren't right,"

Dhulyn rested the palm of her free hand on the bark of the tree nearest her, and frowned. "In what way?"

"That tree you're leaning on is a date palm and this one here is a chestnut tree, and that one a pomegranate. They shouldn't be growing in the same forest." He waited until the movement of her head brought her eyes to meet his. "I've got a bad feeling about this," he said. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

“Unnatural fog? Unnatural silence? And now you tell me unnatural trees?” She sighed and shook her head. “Mages. Why it is always mages?” She lifted her short sword again and moved forward. “Stay alert.”

“Teach your grandmother.”

• • •

“**A** VERY odd place to put a statue of a rabbit.” Dhulyn tapped the thing with the tip of her sword.

Parno sheathed his sword and squatted down next to it, brushing away the dead leaves that half-concealed it. “Extraordinarily accurate for something that got left out in the woods.”

She shrugged, her eyes already back on the line they had marked out for themselves to follow. “Your turn to lead.”

They had walked for perhaps another hour when Parno stopped, holding up his right hand with the thumb tucked in. He pointed with the crossbow in his left hand. “That’s the same stone rabbit. Either we’ve been walking in a circle, or someone’s put two identical statues of rabbits out in the woods.”

“Can’t be.” Dhulyn stepped to one side and crouched to examine the earth around the small statue. When she looked up her face was not happy. “These are our footprints.”

Parno felt an icy spot form in his stomach. He had not been serious, but Dhulyn was. Mercenary Brothers with poor senses of direction didn’t last long on a battlefield.

Dhulyn pulled a hand axe free of her harness, and struck the rabbit with the blunt edge of the head. The statue fell into two pieces. The stone was whiter, un-weathered, in the centre.

“Let’s see what happens now.”

They set off again, and this time there was no denying that they were walking over the same ground. Only it wasn’t a rabbit statue they found, but the body of a rabbit cut in half. And recently, though the animal itself looked desiccated and long dead.

Parno grunted and squatted down next to the corpse, laying the crossbow to hand on the ground to his left. Dhulyn tapped him on the shoulder with the flat of her sword and he looked up.

“There are no flies,” he said in answer to his Partner’s raised eyebrow. “No insects at all, now that I come to think of it. No bird song, no rustle of leaves in the wind...”

“No wind,” Dhulyn said. “Parno, my soul, how long have we been walking?”

“How long...?”

“How long did we row before we set sail? How long have we been walking? Shouldn’t we be tired? Hungry?”

Parno began to pull a crossbow bolt from its pocket on his belt, remembered the iocaine, and let it stay. Instead he took a dagger from his sleeve and nicked himself on the ball of his thumb. “At least that’s normal,” he said, watching the blood form.

“Don’t do that again. You don’t know what your blood might attract.”

Parno stopped sucking on the tiny wound. “If I attracted something, we might find out what’s going on around here.”

“There’s more than one way to attract attention. Let’s see if unnatural trees will burn like natural ones.” Dhulyn gathered up moss and dried leaves, added loose bits of twigs and broken, dried branches. When she was satisfied, she held out her hand. “Give me your sparker.”

She had clicked the sparker three times when fog rose up from the earth at their feet. “Parno!”

Parno knew what she wanted, and began to sing, a complicated song that Dhulyn would recognize, though she’d have to make an unusual effort not to lose the melody. His voice would tell her where he was, and therefore where she was. When she tapped him lightly on the shoulder, he continued to sing. He was only into the second verse when the fog faded away, taking the forest with it.

Dhulyn examined the wide dirt road they now stood on. It exited naturally from a forest—not, as far as Dhulyn could tell, the forest they had just been in, but a darker one, with massive gnarly old trees. Looking up she could see oaks, and perhaps willows, but nothing else she recognized. The view ahead was in any case more interesting. The construct was huge, easily the size of a High Noble House in the country, which regularly housed the population of a small town. A stone curtain wall surrounded the place, with watch towers and battlements. Banners flew from the tops of towers within the wall, though the wind did not spread them out enough to see the devices. The road led up to a short bridge spanning what looked like a deep but dry moat. The gates stood open.

“Where do you think we are now?” Parno asked.

Dhulyn shook her head. “Not still on the island, surely? What we saw from the water wasn’t large enough for everything that we’ve seen so far.”

Now they could hear bird song, the buzz of insects, and the snap of the banners through clear clean air. But they saw no birds, no insects flew nearby, and no one stood on the battlements.

“Have you ever Seen this?”

Dhulyn shook her head. Her Mark had shown her many things, some she had Seen already, some that were part of their futures, but nothing like this House. Without having to speak they moved further apart before continuing, making it harder for any archer on the wall—if indeed there were any archers on the wall—to hit both of them at once. They continued their approach, using the Stalking Cat *Shora* to extend their senses as far as possible. But though they continued to hear the normal noises of a breezy day, and even, as Parno swore later, the murmuring of people going about their business, they saw nothing.

Finally, they reached the gate and slowed, spreading out even further until they stood one to each side. Each of them had a narrow angle of sight into the courtyard—which was no courtyard, but a formal garden laid out with white gravel paths, short hedges defining beds of roses, and of tulips, fruit trees, trumpet flowers, and, most surprising, fresnoyn bushes.

At Parno’s signal, Dhulyn stepped into the courtyard, dodging immediately to her right. Or she would have, had she been able to move.

She could not feel her feet, a numbness crept upward, until her calves, and then her knees became just something that held her up. “Parno.”

“Don’t look down,” he said. “You are turning into stone.”

By now the numbness had crawled up to her thighs. Dhulyn tapped the lower part of her left leg and heard the unmistakable sound of steel striking stone. There was no pain, and even when the stone reached as far as her torso, she had no trouble breathing. “Go back,” she said, while she still could.

“I don’t think so.” Parno placed his hand firmly on her shoulder.

ISLE of FOG



. . .

DHULYN left the horse line reluctantly, dusting her hands off on her leather trousers. She would much rather be out riding than practicing with her mother and the other women. Training the Sight was terribly important, but it could also be terribly boring. The others never wanted to see anything exciting. They were always saying it would soon be her turn to guide the Seeing, but it never was.

She joined the circle, sitting on her mother's left. Somehow, she looked older than Dhulyn expected, and her smile was sad. Dhulyn smiled back, and then touched her lip and wondered where the scar went. Why would she think her lip was scarred? She examined her hands, and for a moment she saw them overlaid with a different pattern of scars.

Was *this* a sight? Had they already started?

Her mother, sitting beside her, freed her hand and traced an overlapping pattern in the dust with her index finger.

It should have colour, Dhulyn thought. Dark blue and green, or red and gold.

She looked up and they were all watching her. "You're all dead," she said to the women watching her. She looked up into her mother's sad face. "My mother did not live to be this old. You all died when I was a small child."

. . .

PAR-ERAP Tenebro put down the pen he was using to bring the accounts up to date and sighed a deep and passionate sigh. He was certain his sister would say that sighs were just air and couldn't be passionate, but since she wasn't in the room, he could think what he liked. He flexed his stiff fingers and picked up the pen again. Were strawberries really this expensive?

He was almost finished when the younger of his two sisters came in carrying a basket of what smelled like cinnamon rolls in one hand and a pot of gange in the other.

"Isn't that the steward of keys' job?" she asked. She put basket and pot down on the service stand next to the window and joined him at the worktable.

Parno pointed at the plate of rolls with the end of his pen. "Isn't that the kitchen staff's job? Besides, father thinks I should know how to do it myself."

His sister leaned her right hip against the arm of his chair.

"That's a pretty design," she said, pointing to something inked into the margin of a page. "Did you draw it? I've never seen it before."

"No, I... no, I don't think so." Had it been there all along? Unlikely. Traylen Holts was an excellent steward of keys, but he had no drawing talent whatsoever. It looked familiar, though for some reason Parno thought it should have colours.

"You know what it reminds me of? A mercenary's badge, you know, those tattoos they have on their temples?" his sister tapped her head just above her ears. "But they usually have colour, don't they?"

"Yes, they do." A mercenary's badge. Dark red and a yellow almost gold. Or dark blue and green. With a black line running through here, and here. He stroked his fingers over the drawing. Where had he seen it before? He turned to speak to his sister, but she wasn't there.

. . .

FEELING returned all at once. One second nothing, the next she could feel the sword in her hand, muscles in her arms braced and ready, her Partner's hand on her shoulder.

"Dhulyn?" his voice creaked, as though it had been a long time since he'd last spoken.

"How long?" Her voice sounded no better.

He pushed out a breath. "How long were we rowing? Or walking through the forest? 'How long' has no meaning in this place."

"Well the moon is rising now. If we suppose that 'now' has meaning."

"Always a ray of sunshine, aren't you?" Now there was warmth in his voice.

"We will worry about the malleability of time later. Today's problems today." That was the Mercenary Code, as she didn't need to tell him.

Parno squeezed her shoulder before removing his hand. "What did you see?"

He pretended disinterest, but she could tell the question was important. "Myself grown, and still with my tribe. My mother, older than she was when she was killed," she added. "You?"

"Myself older, still with my family. My parents still alive. My sister. And a drawing of my badge, or maybe yours."

"That too." All this time Dhulyn had been scanning the courtyard for movement. Now she glanced at her Partner, and froze. "My soul, look at me." Parno's eyes stopped scanning over the same ground and flicked in her direction.

"Demons and perverts."

"So, I also look like a statue? All white?"

"Except your badge, that has colour. What do you think happened?"

"There is evidently some enchantment to turn anyone entering the courtyard garden to stone. It doesn't kill them, but sends them dreams, perhaps of another life, to keep their minds alive while their bodies sleep."

"The drawings of our badges." Parno touched the red and gold tattoo over his right ear. "Were we awakened because we are Mercenary Brothers?"

"Possibly. And possibly because we are Partnered," Dhulyn said. No one really understood the exact nature of Partnership, not even other Mercenaries. She and Parno knew, from past experiences, that the Partnership formed a spiritual or mental link between them, as though, in some way they couldn't explain, they were one person.

"But we're still statues." Parno began checking his harness for weapons. "Even if we are moving. Maybe we broke free of only part of the enchantment." He glanced at her. "So what next?"

Dhulyn completed her own inventory of weaponry. "We find the boy, and then we find a mage to take this enchantment off completely, and then we kill him."

"Always good to have a plan. And there, if I'm not mistaken, is the front door." He pointed with the crossbow he still held in his left hand.

It felt odd to be walking up to a proper entrance, instead of looking for some more surreptitious access, but nothing was ordinary about this place. The doors pushed open without making any sound. The inside of the building matched the formal gar-

dens. A large reception hall with red-painted walls divided into sections with blond wood, and a black and white tiled floor. Padded chairs with narrow curved legs stood at odd angles around the walls. A large table of some wine-coloured wood sat in the centre of the room, carrying only an empty glass vase.

"I think there are too many statues in this room," Parno said. He leaned over to examine more closely the statue of a tall man with uneven shoulders and a broken nose. "Someone has terrible taste. Are they like us, do you think? Alive inside?" Parno tapped the statue's shoulder with his index finger. "Is there something that would wake them up?"

"That kind of question has only one answer," Dhulyn said curling her lip. "Mages."

Parno nodded. "I suppose so. What do you think, that way?" He pointed with his chin at a door painted with leaves and flowers in north wall.

The painted door opened into another, larger room, which led to another hall, followed by a salon the size of a market square with two fireplaces in each wall, and every fireplace with a grouping of furniture in front of it, and a gold-framed mirror above it. Out of the corner of her eye Dhulyn saw her reflection like a ghost move across the glass. She shivered.

After a while Parno lost count of the number of halls, corridors, passages, and stairs they passed through, up, or down. Some were clean and elegant like the reception room and the salon, others were neglected, with mushrooms growing out of the carpets and mold bubbling the paint on the walls. Then they entered a section where all the rooms were either round or oval. For some time there had been no statues, but in the fifth round room they found a grouping of roughly twenty figures scattered in and around the groupings of chairs and tables.

"Parno." Dhulyn coughed. "I'm stiffening. Can you feel it?"

"Seems like our time to be awake has limits. Quickly, get in among the other statues while we still can." Parno ran to stand with two statues who were posed looking at a glass-covered table. "If you see your mother again, and you remember this life, try for a Vision."

• • •

PARNO knew he wasn't breathing, but it didn't worry him. Given his preference, however, he might have chosen to dream that other life again, rather than waiting in one position for something to free him. To see his mother, and particularly his father. But just as well his wasn't the choice. Mercenary Brothers had no families, and no home but the Brotherhood. That was the Code.

Good thing Dhulyn had taught him the Lizard *Shora*. How to be still and quiet for a long time without going crazy from boredom.

• • •

DHULYN hoped that Parno would remember the Lizard *Shora*. He'd been reluctant to learn it in the first place, as it was used primarily for meditation. Be like a lizard in the cold. Quiet, heart rate slows down. Breathing. Digestion. Not circumstances, unfortunately, under which she could have a Vision. Slow.

• • •

BLINKED awake. Except there was no blinking. Her eyes were open. But not dry. She couldn't move.

"These are new." The voice told her a mature man spoke. Considering, wondering, but curious, not concerned.

"New. Are you sure?" An old voice. Tremulous, faded.

"I've never seen them before."

"I don't like that they got all the way in here. Don't like it at all."

"There's definitely something atypical about them. This one especially." Dhulyn felt something tap her chest. "Ben, what do you know about this?"

Ben? Dhulyn focused her attention.

"Nothing." Definitely a boy's voice. Changed recently and still cracking a bit. "Never seen them before in my life." A lying voice. In a way.

"Well boy, restore them." The old man's voice again. "Go on, try out your lesson."

Lesson? Dhulyn didn't like the sound of that. Still, she could feel the boy hesitate, like the air was heavy, full.

"They look like soldiers," the boy said finally. He managed to sound as though he'd been thinking, not stalling. "What if I mess up and we have soldiers on the loose?"

"Soldiers. That could be. Soldiers would require more preparation." A moment while the younger man thought. "Very well. We'll come back to these when you are more practiced."

Two pairs of footsteps walking away. Just two.

"If you can hear me, I'll come back tonight."

Hours passed. Or perhaps days. Or weeks.

• • •

FROM the inside they could not tell what freed them from the stone again, perhaps the sun setting, or the moon rising. Dhulyn expected her muscles to be stiff, her feet sore, but she felt fine.

"I'll bet my second-best sword that boy is the one we're looking for."

"Since they called him 'Ben' there's no bet," Parno said. From his careful movements he also tested whether his muscles were stiff. "But what's he doing wandering around so free and easy?"

"I don't know that he is free." Dhulyn rubbed at her forehead and found it feeling perfectly normal. "But I'll agree to easy."

"They didn't speak to him as though he were a slave," her Partner pointed out. "He wasn't fetching or carrying anything for them."

"People speak in different ways to their slaves." Dhulyn lifted each foot in turn and tested the movement of her ankles. "However, you may be right. His tone wasn't the tone of slavery."

"Then what *are* they doing with him?"

Before she could answer Parno lifted the index finger of his right hand and then cocked the crossbow in his left. Someone was coming along the passage in the dark, trying very hard not to make any noise, and almost succeeding. A muffled curse told them that whoever it was had bumped into something hard.

Dhulyn eased to one side and let the boy walk into Parno, who caught him in his arms. "There now, it's only us, the ones you were expecting."

“What?” Rapid breathing. Parno had definitely startled the boy. “Who are you? How did you get in here?”

Dhulyn took hold of the boy’s forearm. “You weren’t expecting us? You told us you’d be back.”

“But I was coming back to wake you. How did you wake yourselves?”

“We don’t know. We woke to movement once before, and then we were awake in stone, and now we move again. You are the one who has been getting lessons. You tell us.” Dhulyn did not bother to hide the suspicion in her voice.

“That makes no sense. Wait.” The boy made a complicated sign in the air and a blindingly bright light filled the room with giant shadows. “Oh, sorry. Here, that’s better.”

The light dimmed and Dhulyn stopped wiping her eyes.

The boy stood staring at them, so shocked he could not even back away. “You’re still statues,” he whispered.

“Yes, we’d noticed that.” Parno smiled.

“How? Hang on, your badges, they’re real, I mean, they have colour.”

Parno looked at Dhulyn. She shrugged. “I am Dhulyn Wolf-shead, called the Scholar, I fight with my Partner, Parno Lionsmane, called the Chanter.” she told the boy. “In the past we have found that our Partnership has made a difference in how magic affects us.”

“You *are* mercenary brothers? Can you get me out of here? I’m Ben-Eneb Kendaro, my parents will pay you to get me home.”

“Your parents are already paying us,” Dhulyn said. “That’s why we’re here. Now, you say you can restore us?”

“I’ve done it with animals.” Ben-Eneb tried to sound confident. “I know how.” He opened the satchel attached to his belt, took out a green leather pouch embroidered in gold and set it opened on the closest table. “Hold still.” He took a double pinch of powder from the pouch, and put it carefully in the palm of his other hand. Moving his lips silently, he raised his hand and blew the powder into Parno’s face with one puff of breath. He waited, lower lip between his teeth, until Parno’s normal golden-brown colouring returned.

“Now me.” Dhulyn shut her eyes, opening them only after she felt the light dusting of powder hit her face. When Parno smiled her knew her colouring was back, even though she felt no different from before. She smiled back.

“And now,” she said, turning to Ben-Eneb, “which is the way out?”

The boy pointed in the direction he had come from.

“Good, lead the way.”

“What about the mages?” Parno asked.

“They were asleep when I left the east wing.” Ben-Eneb was already at the doorway.

Dhulyn thought for a moment. “We’ll go,” she said finally. “This won’t be the first time we’ve left mages alive.”

• • •

BEN-ENEb led them away from where they knew the front entrance to be. “The first place they’ll look,” he said when Parno asked him. “The kitchen wing is better, and this is the shortest way.”

They advance in silence until they reached a long stone corridor without doors. “I didn’t know you would wake up,” Ben-Eneb said then. “Nothing else does.”

“What about the other people who were bought with you?” Parno asked “Are they being taught enchantments too, or are they all statues? And how is it you’re not a statue yourself?”

Ben-Eneb looked back over his shoulder and would have tripped on an uneven flagstone if Parno hadn’t caught him from behind. “I don’t know what happened to the others. You have to understand, when we first got here we weren’t afraid of them, the mages, they looked so old and dodderly. And the younger man who looked after them acted like he was everyone’s favourite nephew. Then people started disappearing, one by one, and the mages were looking healthier, stronger. But then the oldest one faded again, after only a few days.”

“His body’s worn out,” Dhulyn said. “They have been feeding on the energy of the people they buy as slaves, but now the older one needs a new body. I wonder how long they’ve been waiting to find a potential mage?” Dhulyn blew a sharp breath out her nose. “They’re teaching you, aren’t they?” Without waiting for an answer she turned to Parno. “They’re keeping him alive because he has some kind of talent. They mean to make a mage of him.” She swallowed to loosen her throat.

“It’s worse than that.” Ben-Eneb stopped, turning to look at them. “The younger man? Dek a he was called, older than me but not anywhere near as old as them. One night the three of them were up and about, so I followed them, thinking they might be going outside. Instead, they all went to a chamber in the south wing, where I’d never been before. It was—” Ben-Eneb shook himself. “There was something about the place that made my skin itchy. Dek a lay down on one of a pair of high beds, like Healers use, all smiling and pleased, like he expected some kind of treat. And he let the old mages fasten him down with velvet ribbons woven with silver wire. For his safety they said.” Ben-Eneb’s voice faded to a hoarse whisper.

“Then the one mage helps the other one—the one who wasn’t doing so well—onto the other bed, and fastens him down too.”

“Let me guess,” Parno said, when it became clear Ben-Eneb could not continue. “The young man got up, and the old one didn’t.”

Ben-Eneb nodded, his mouth twisted to one side. “And Dek a didn’t walk the same way afterward, or talk the same way.”

“And you will be next,” Dhulyn said, sympathy showing for the first time.

“I guess so. As soon as they’ve taught me enough that I—the body—won’t be clumsy. And I think it will be soon. The older one keeps asking when I’ll be ready, saying he doesn’t know how much time he has left.”

“Good thing we’re leaving before they think you’re ready.”

Ben-Eneb nodded and started to turn back in the direction they had been heading, but stopped. “My feet won’t move,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Try coming back in this direction.” Parno took a firm grasp on the boy’s arm, helping him turn back again. Ben-Eneb took two halting steps.

“Looks like we’re already too late,” Parno said. “They’ve noticed you’re missing, and they’re making sure you head south.”

Ben-Eneb took another step, and then another. “I can’t stop.” His voice held panic.

“South,” Dhulyn said. “Two gets you ten I know where they are taking him.”

“Still no bet.”

"Keep going." Ben-Eneb pointed behind him, though he couldn't turn around. "You should find the kitchens easily, and there's a scullery door I've made sure to keep open."

"We have a contract to return you to your parents if you live," Dhulyrn said. "We are Mercenary Brothers, and we fulfil the contract, or we die trying. There is no other option. Otherwise the integrity of the entire Brotherhood would be brought into question."

"And besides," Parno said with a grin. "What if we turn back into statues when we step outside?"

Ben-Eneb reached a stair case they had previously passed by and began mounting the steps. At the top a wide landing floored in a dark wood led in both directions. Ben-Eneb turned left. Parno thought the red and dark green patterns on the carpet running down the centre space formed a familiar shapes, but every time he thought he had it, the image slipped away.

"If it is the ceremonial chamber, we'll let them get you on the table, and tie down the old one. They'll be well distracted, and we can take them from behind." Parno saw Ben-Eneb shoulders rise up.

"They won't expect us," Dhulyrn added. "If all they have had contact with are slaves, they are unlikely to be prepared for physical attacks. Remember, they hesitated to allow the release of soldiers."

They reached the end of the corridor and turned left again, into a narrower space walled and floored in stone blocks that appeared wet, but were dry to the touch. Though they hadn't gone down any stairs Parno smelled the damp earth of a cellar. Finally they saw a square of light ahead of them that became a doorway.

"This is the place," Ben-Eneb whispered. "Please, don't let them—"

"We won't. Remember, keep them looking away from the door."

Backs pressed against the wall of the corridor, Dhulyrn and Parno waited just out of the light. Between them they could see most of the centre of the room, where the two beds were, raised to waist height. The room was hung with tapestries patterned in the same way as the hall carpet, but dark green and rose. If the cloth was something interesting, brocaded velvet say, Dhulyrn might cut a few pieces to add to her patch-work vest.

The older mage already lay on the bed to the right of the door, the side Dhulyrn could see best. The mage's chest rose and fell raggedly, as if it took all his strength to breath. It was painful to watch Ben-Eneb half walk, half stagger across the room. He resisted the compulsion at every step, but couldn't stop himself from walking slowly, if unsteadily toward the empty bed.

"I've thought of a better distraction," Dhulyrn said in the night-watch voice. "Do you remember once discussing rescuing hostages with the Senior Brother in Gotterang?"

Parno grinned. "Shoot the hostage?"

"It should work," she said.

They waited until the mage had Ben's feet restrained. Parno signalled to his Partner and when Dhulyrn nodded he took a silent step into the room. He moved immediately to the left, where the mage didn't block his view of Ben-Eneb. Parno took aim with the dagger in his hand and sank it into the boy's chest.

The old man on the other bed immediately began fighting to sit up, his thin wrists almost pulling free of the restraints that held him. "Save the boy." What might have been a yell in his younger days was now a high-pitched whisper.

The younger mage looked between Ben-Eneb and Parno, indecision clear on his face. It was as Dhulyrn had thought, they were unprepared for physical assaults.

Making up his mind the mage ran to Ben-Eneb's side, at the same time flinging a spell over his shoulder. Parno was lifted off his feet and thrown backward into the wall. *Crap*, he thought as his feet became numb, and his arms heavy. *I wish he'd thought of a different spell.*

As soon as she saw Parno turning white Dhulyrn ran into the room. As long as Ben-Eneb survived, Parno would be safe. Her priorities, therefore, were elsewhere. While the younger mage's focus was still divided between Ben-Eneb and Parno, she ran to the older man on the second bed. His eyes widened and grew round as he saw her coming. His mouth moved as though he would either call to his companion or speak a spell. Dhulyrn judged from the way his hands moved that it was the latter.

The first thing she did was bring her axe down on the hand nearest her, severing it neatly from the arm. The man was so old that his blood didn't spurt out in the usual fashion, but pumped slowly and languidly to the table and from the table dripped to the floor. Dhulyrn judged from the way his mouth moved now that he was screaming. That was easy to fix, she thought, as she brought her sword up and sent the head bouncing and rolling across the tiled floor.

She turned toward the younger mage and saw what she feared she'd see, her Partner in marble, hands bracing himself against the wall. But even as she ran forward Parno moved, tugging his sword free from where it hung on his belt. The mage repeated the hand signals they had seen before, but he had already turned Parno into a statue, and the spell had no further effect. He hadn't known about their ability to move once the sun was down any more than Ben-Enebhadd.

"Come now," Parno said. "Surely you can think of something else? Or is statues the only game you know how to play?"

Don't, Dhulyrn thought. *Don't poke at him.* A quick clean kill, that was the Mercenary code.

As if he had read her thoughts Parno danced in toward the mage, ducking another, different hand signal, and drove his sword through the man's heart. As he hung on Parno's sword, hands grasped around the blade, lips moving as if he spoke under his breath, Dhulyrn swiped off his head from behind.

Suddenly Dhulyrn became aware of a sound she had been ignoring for the last few minutes.

"You hit me! I'm bleeding!" Ben-Eneb seemed torn between fear and outrage.

Dhulyrn wiped her sword off on the velvet draped over Ben's bed and sheathed it before she sat down on the edge next to the boy and started undoing his bonds. "Quit whining," she said. "It's only a flesh wound. Do you think we're amateurs?"

OF all the statues in the mages' house Ben could only restore six. The others were apparently too old. When the boy wasn't with them, Parno broke one of the statues open and they found a desiccated, almost mummified corpse inside.

"We won't tell him," Dhulyln said.

"Agreed."

It took them another week to find the method by which they could summon the black ship.

...

"WHAT do you mean they don't want him back?" Parno rolled to a sitting position and set down the chanter next to his pipes.

"Exactly that. They have had time to hear his story and they don't want any mages in the family, thank you very much. They've spoken to a Healer and she's told them there's nothing she can do." Dhulyln stayed in the doorway of their room, leaning on the jamb.

There wouldn't be, Parno thought. Healers could no more cure the boy of what he was than they could cure Dhulyln of her Mark.

"They have other children, they said. The succession is secure."

"Do they have any suggestions of what should be done with him then?" Dhulyln stayed silent. "No! They can't want us to kill him, the Brotherhood doesn't do that."

"Apparently they think we do. They don't see any difference between this and what we are paid to do on the battlefield."

It was Parno's turn to sit in silence. True, he thought, many people didn't see the difference between war and murder. "I know that look," he said finally. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"Under the circumstances, I had to give them back their money. In order to take the boy," she added when Parno lifted his eyebrows. "Otherwise they would just have hired someone else to kill him." She curled her lip. "I told him to stay down in the common room for now. I thought we could take him to the Cloud People, they know something about magecraft."

"That would certainly be easier than taking him through the Path of the Sun," Parno said. "Cheaper too."

Dhulyln finally came in and sat down on the edge of his bed. "All this because the silly boy was unhappy at home and thought he'd run away to sea." She shook her head.

"Don't be too hard on the boy," Parno said. "When I was his age I wanted to run away too."

"You wanted to go to sea?"

"No, I wanted to be a Mercenary Brother."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Violette Malan is the author of the Dhulyln and Parno sword-and-sorcery series and *The Mirror Lands* series of primary world fantasies. As VM Escalada, she's the author of the Farman Prophecy, including *Halls of Law*, and *Gift of Griffins*. She's on Facebook, she's on Twitter (@Violette Malan) and website-wise check either www.violettemalan.com or www.vmescalada.com. Not that it's up-to-date, because it isn't. She strongly urges you to remember that no one expects the Spanish Inquisition

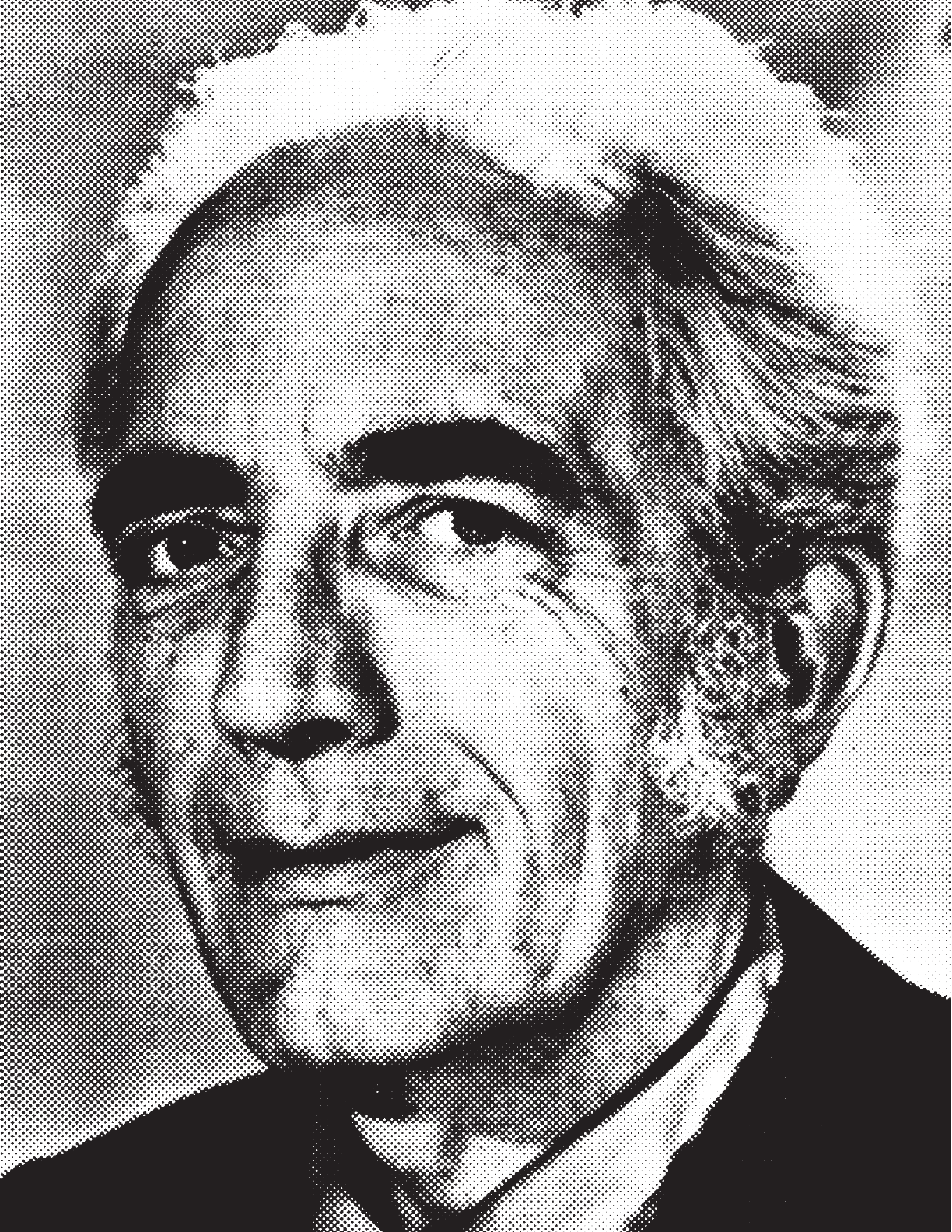
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OF SWORDS AND SCRIVENING

A Profile of Fritz Leiber

By MICHAEL CURTIS

IN 1961, Michael Moorcock, the science fiction and fantasy author, set out to tackle a problem he saw facing the fiction genre. He penned an article in the Conan-inspired fanzine *Amra* entitled "Putting a Tag On It" wherein Moorcock declares "We have two tags, really—SF and 'Fantasy'—but I feel we should have another general name to include the sub-genre of books which deal with Middle Earths and lands and worlds based on this planet, worlds which exist only in some author's vivid imagination. In this sub-genre I would classify books like 'The Worm Ouroboros,' 'Jurgen,' 'The Lord of the Rings,' 'The Once and Future King,' the Gray Mouser/Fafhrd series, the Conan series, 'The Broken Sword,' 'The Well of the Unicorn,' etc." Moorcock proposed labeling these types of stories "Epic Fantasy," but asked readers for other suggestions.

The following issue of *Amra* included a response by the writer Fritz Leiber, whose own Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stories were name-checked in Moorcock's essay. Leiber replied "I feel more certain than ever [that this field] should be called the sword-and-sorcery story." And thus a sub-genre, while not quite newly born, received a name for the first time. This label quickly caught on, and no less than two years later, L. Sprague de Camp published an anthology of stories written by Leiber, Robert E. Howard, Poul Andersen, H.P. Lovecraft, Lord Dunsany, and more entitled *Swords & Sorcery*. It can be safely stated, if not quite correctly, that Fritz Leiber was the father of the sword-and-sorcery genre. But even if Leiber hadn't been the one to suggest the now-common label for that sub-genre of fiction, his writings and the impact they've had on the literary landscape would make a worthy contender for the sword-and-sorcery throne.

Leiber was born on December 24, 1910, the son of two Shakespearean actors, a factor that would influence his writing later in the life. "I do at times tend to fall into a kind of Shakespearean poetry in my writing," Leiber stated in an interview for *Science Fiction Voices #1*, "And also I tend to cast stories in a dramatic form. I visualize scenes in my stories as if they were scenes in a play on stage." Leiber's theatrical upbringing, which included a stint in his parents' acting troupe, is evident in his later sword-and-sorcery stories, both in the characters that inhabit them and the memorable repartee of their dialogue.

Leiber began his writing career by submitting stories to *Weird Tales* and *Unknown Worlds* pulp fiction magazines, the same fertile ground from which the literary legacies of H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and Clark Ashton Smith sprouted. While Leiber's fiction would cover different genres throughout his

life, it was his work in the to-be-named-in-the-future genre of sword-and-sorcery that he became most recognized for. One of his earliest stories was "Two Sought Adventure," published in *Unknown Worlds* in 1939. This story introduced the world to a pair of roguish adventurers with the unlikely names of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. And while they may have strutted onto the stage in 1939, the pair had been waiting in the wings for five years.

Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser were born out of a series of letters exchanged by Leiber and his friend Harry Otto Fischer. After the two friends had written back and forth lamentation about their existential woes during the summer of 1934, Leiber tried to raise the flagging morale of Fischer by reminding him of the "great foreknowledges of ourselves that you call adolescent fancies," Fischer replied to Leiber's remark in a long, sprawling letter that contained these sentences: "For all do fear the one known as the Gray Mouser. He walks with swagger 'mongst the bravos, though he's but the stature of a child. His costume is all gray, from gauntlets to boots to spurs of steel." Fischer went on to described the Gray Mouser's companion, a barbarian named Fafhrd who laughed merrily and was a "full seven feet in height. His eyes wide-set, were proud and of fearless mien. His wrist between gauntlet and mail was white as milk and thick as a hero's ankle." The two hailed from "the walled city of the Tuatha De Danann called Lankhmar, built on the edge of the Great Salt Marsh...and so the saga of the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd was begun."

Anyone familiar with the short statured Fischer and the tall, lean-framed Leiber would have no problem identifying who the two heroes were based upon. Leiber and Fischer further developed the two heroes in their correspondence, mentioning sightings of the two and elaborating on their creations. Two years after the heroes' birth, Fischer attempted to write a novella about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, but abandoned it after 10,000 words. It would be left to Leiber to introduce the two to the world at large in "Two Sought Adventure."

That story, later retitled to "The Jewels in the Forest" give readers their first look at the heroes. The Gray Mouser is a small, lithe man who wields a sword called Scalpel in one hand and a short dirk named Cat's Claw in the other. He is a creature of the city, a cut-purse and a wizard of dubious skill. By contrasts, his companion is a barbarian from the frozen Cold Waste far to the north. A raider and skald, the giant-framed Fafhrd is both a merry soul and a fierce warrior, deadly with the greatsword he calls Graywand. The two make an unlikely pair, but clearly

share a fondness for one another that Leiber conveys with tremendous skill in the oft-times bickering dialogue between them, the kind of exchanges seen only between old couples and lifelong friends. It's Leiber's use of dialogue that makes the pair somewhat unique among other heroes of the sword-and-sorcery genre. Prior to Fafhrd and Mouser, most pulp fantasy heroes had been solo acts, sometimes paired briefly with a sidekick or rescued maiden so they'd have someone to talk to and liven up the writing.

This partnership and snappy dialogue made Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser a memorable pair, bright lights among the other heroes of fantastical worlds being written about in the 1930s and '40s. Readers quickly demanded more tales of "the Twain," as they would become commonly known. Leiber produced another five stories featuring the two over the next decade. Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser fell to the wayside during the 1950s, but the resurgence of the fantasy fiction genre in the 1960s thanks to the publication of the paperback version of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in the United States brought the Twain out of semi-retirement. Leiber wrote most of the remaining Fafhrd and Mouser tales during the 1960s and '70s, including finishing off Fischer's abandoned novella as "The Lords of Quarmall" in 1964 and penning the a full novel featuring the heroes, *The Swords of Lankhmar* in 1968. Leiber published a few more Fafhrd and Mouser stories during the 1980s, but with his death in 1992 it appeared the two rakish heroes' adventures were over. However, it's hard to keep the Twain down as we'll soon see.

It wasn't only the pair's partnership and dialogue that made Fafhrd and Mouser popular heroes. While the sword-and-sorcery genre is one that can succumb easily to stereotypes and self-parody, Leiber constantly broke new ground in the genre and pushed his imagination to the limit when plotting the Twain's exploits.

"Lean Times in Lankhmar," for example, does the unthinkable and breaks up the pair. The Gray Mouser finds himself working for an extortionist who preys upon the various religious faiths in the city of Lankhmar. Fafhrd has someone inconveniently given up his warrior ways to become the disciple of a failing sect devoted to peace, an act that brings the two former friends into conflict. Not only is "Lean Times" a great story, it's also an insightful commentary on both religion and our insatiable desire for fame despite the fact that it inevitably abandons us.

"Stardock" sees the two heroes attempting to scale their world's version of Mount Everest in search of legendary gems. The story draws on Leiber's own experience in climbing and the opening half of the story which details Fafhrd and Mouser's ascent reads like a non-fiction. This isn't to say it gets bogged down in technical details, but it does possess an inherent truthfulness one might otherwise find lacking in a fantasy story. This truthfulness gives way to invisible monsters and flying manta rays before the story reaches its climax, however, so readers more enamored of the fantastic instead of reality need not approach the tale with trepidation.

"Ill Met in Lankhmar" in the origin story of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser's partnership, somewhat surprisingly written more than thirty years after the Twain's debut. In it we learn of the tragedy that forged their bond and more about the devious

Thieves' Guild of Lankhmar. Like most of the Twain's adventures, it includes hilarious spoken exchanges between the two friends, especially during the Mouser's somewhat drunken plan to infiltrate the Guild's headquarters, but this is tempered by true sorrow as the pair both suffer irreplaceable losses.

"Adept's Gambit" is a curious story, both because of its origin and its content. This novella was originally written by Leiber in 1936, the same year Harry Otto Fischer attempted to detail the Twain's adventures outside of his and Leiber's letters. In the tale's original draft, Leiber included a number of references to Howard Phillips Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. Leiber and Lovecraft struck up a literary correspondence around this time and Leiber shared "Adept's Gambit" with him. Lovecraft praised the story, but suggested he remove the Mythos references. Not out of a desire to protect his intellectual creations (anyone who knows the Mythos knows Lovecraft encouraged people to play with his creations), but because he felt their presence detracted from the story Leiber was trying to tell. "Adept's Gambit" is also unusual as it was conceived when the background of the Fafhrd and the Mouser's adventures was still forming. Unlike the rest of their stories, which are set in the imaginary world of Nehwon ("No When" spelled backwards), "Adept's Gambit" takes place on Earth, in Chaldea sometime after the death of Alexander the Great. Leiber would have to write a framing story called "The Wrong Branch" to make sense of this fact when "Adept's Gambit" was incorporated into the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser cycle of tales during the 1960s.

By the late 1970s, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser found themselves growing older, undoubtedly due to Leiber's own aging. The two abandon Lankhmar, settling down in the far-flung, legendary land of Rime Isle, a place inspired by Earth's Iceland. There the two find new loves, became father figures, fended off an incursion of an icy wizard, and fell afoul of the exiled Norse gods Odin and Loki. It is there that Leiber's stories come to an end, the last one being "Slack Lankhmar Afternoon Featuring Hisvet" in 1988 which would later be incorporated in an earlier story "The Mouser Goes Below" when compiled into the final Fafhrd and Gray Mouser collection, *The Knight and Knave of Swords*.

As hinted at earlier, though, reports of the Twain's adventures ending with Leiber's death were greatly exaggerated. In the final year of his life, Leiber was considering allowing others to write Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stories. Although his death precluded a more concrete plan being created at that time, these initial discussions allowed author Robin Wayne Bailey to write *Swords Against the Shadowland*, a new novel featuring the two heroes released in 1998.

The exploits of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser have remained unrecorded since then, but that's about to change. This issue of *Tales from the Magician's Skull* contains a new tale of the heroic duo entitled "Guilty Creatures" by Nathan Long, officially approved by the Fritz Leiber Estate. For the first time in over twenty years, fans of the Twain have a new story awaiting them in these pages. One can only hope further, as yet-untold tales of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser await us, but only their magical mentors, the weird sorcerers Ningauble of the Seven Eyes and Sheelba of the Eyeless Face—and perhaps our editor—might know for sure.

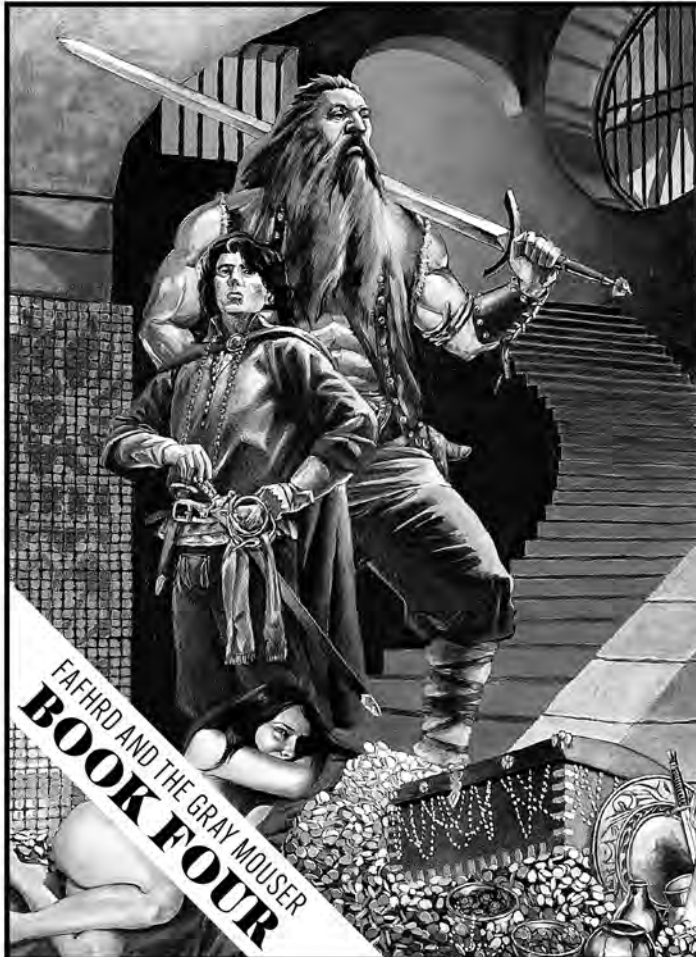
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By TERRY OLSON

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!

Calicask's Woman

Gray Umbra Guardian: Init +3; Atk grayblade +3 melee (2d5+3) or hurled small mace +3 missile fire (1d4+3, range 30') or weighted net +3 missile fire (ensnare); AC 16; HD 3d12; MV 20'; Act 1d20; ensnare (entangled for 1d3 rounds, grants +1d to incoming attacks and suffers -1d to making attacks; net has AC 10 and 10 hp), immune to mental effects, death throes (immediate final attack against slayer); SV Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +6; AL N.

"Well, you know that Imperial sorcery often touches upon the mind as well as the body, and Calicask is a master of both disciplines. His guards have had their very engines of thought shaped by him. They are his creatures now, with little will of their own beyond a deep need to do exactly what he desires."

The Wall of Demons is an inter-dimensional obstacle that can be summoned at great price to the wizard, magician, or foolish amateur. The cost is left to the judge's discretion, but it should depend on the volume required. No wall is smaller than 10' by 10' by 10' cube. Note that the dimensions inside the wall are always changing and are not the same as the fixed dimensions outside, so escaping depends on Luck (see below).

The Wall of Demons: Init always last; Atk devour +4 melee (1d8 plus mental drain); AC 20; HD 6d20; MV 0'; Act 1d24 special; SP simultaneously attacks all targets within wall, restrict movement (DC 17 STR check to move normal rate within wall, otherwise all within wall have MV 5'), Lucky escape (if PC within a moves farther than its external dimension, e.g., moves 30' in a 10' thick wall, they must pass a Luck check to escape), mental drain (DC 15 Will save or lose 1d6 INT and 1d4 PER), devoured body (those devoured within the wall are ineligible for recovering the body), immune to mental effects; SV Fort +12, Ref +0, Will +12; AL N.

Through clouds of bilious vapor, they seemed to swim, vague at first and then suddenly clear in their loathsome outlines. Something like a huge white snake, as thick as his thigh, writhed across his view, the long body segmented and lined with undulating legs..."The Wall of Demons!" exulted Valkin... "It is a sliver of another world, an element alien to ours in almost every respect and hostile beyond anything you could conceive. You have seen only a few of the most minor of the things that dwell there... They wouldn't simply devour your flesh, but your mind, your spirit and even your pain."

The Feathered Shroud

Saathra: Init +0; Atk bite +3 melee (2d5) and claw +3 melee (1d5); AC 16; HD 3d8; MV 20' or swim 40'; Act 2d20; SP wrapping tail (if bite and claw both hit target, saathra wraps tail around victim pulling them to ground or underwater); victim is allowed DC 15 STR check per round to escape; saathra gains +1d to hit tail-wrapped victim), blood summon (if the saathra reduces a PC's hp to zero, that PC must make a Luck check; if failed, another saathra, drawn by the blood, appears the following round), amphibian (breathes in air and water); SV Fort +1, Ref +4, Will +2; AL N.

"Saathra," Hanuvar answered. "And the marks are fresh." He stood. "If there are saathra here it's suicide to continue. It's hard enough to spot them in daylight. Your Tura may already be done for." ... A heartbeat later the boy with the

pitchfork, waist deep in the dark water behind, stiffened and screamed. The water foamed as the boy tottered, and Hanuvar glimpsed swaths of slick gray skin as a heavy form moved beneath the surface. The boy stabbed wildly with his pitchfork, and the weapon lodged in the muck, standing at a slant. He opened his mouth in another scream, then was jerked under.

Blue Egret Matron: Init +8; Atk spearbeak +6 melee (1d14, only once per round) or claw +6 melee (1d7) or searing gaze +8 missile fire (1d10 fire damage, range 400'); AC 18; HD 8d8; MV fly 50'; Act 3d20; SP golden disintegration (requires all 3 action dice, 1 target in line of sight must make DC 22 Will save or become golden ash; recovering the body is impossible); grant blessing (judge's discretion, e.g., bountiful crops, healing, forbidden knowledge, improved abilities, etc.), omniscient domain (matron knows all that occurs in her limited territory), magic resistant (saves against all magical effects with 3d20, even if save is normally not allowed), can be wizard's patron; SV Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +8; AL L.

It hung in the air, a great horse-sized avian of iridescent feathers tapering from dark to light. Its wings beat the air far too slowly to suspend it so gracefully above the earth. A golden aura shone in the air behind it, seemingly generated by the stir of its wings, and its eyes burned with the heat of suns... this creature was a strange and beautiful cross between an eagle and a peacock, with a long swan-like neck, and a body from which two black claws depended on powerful legs. Black too was its beak, and as it opened, a warm sound, like the sun given voice, spoke to them, though the beak did not rise and fall in time its speech.

Guilty Creatures

The marionetted myrmidon and cursed creature performers are people possessed by magic invoked by a "puppeteer" wizard. The victim of a myrmidon spell must make a DC 18 Will save to resist. The spell used to create cursed creature performers is focused via a necklace with up to six charms corresponding to a different animal; consequently, the spell is difficult to resist and requires a DC 22 Will save. To maintain control over a "host" the puppeteer must maintain concentration as described on p. 106 of the DCC RPG rulebook.

Marionetted Myrmidon: Init +2; Atk longsword +4 melee (1d8+4 plus weapon breaker); AC 17; HD 3d12; MV 30'; Act d24; SP crits on natural 20 and 24, weapon breaker (if d24 natural roll equals target's AC or is a crit, then myrmidon breaks target's non-magical weapon in addition to damage), vulnerability (if puppeteer breaks concentration, myrmidon reverts to host and is helpless for 10 minutes); SV Fort +3, Ref +3, Will (use puppeteer bonus); AL N.

Fafhrd glanced at Mannat to see if he too thought something was off, but rather than looking uneasy, the playwright stared at the fight with unblinking concentration, while at the same time mouthing the words of the curse and moving his hand and arm to match Kalphin line for line, slash for slash, and thrust for thrust... Kalphin's eyes were glazed and distant and he fought without seeming to see.

Cursed Creature Performers (1 for each charm): Init +3; Atk as below; AC 12; HD 4d8; MV 40'; Act d20; SP animal-specific traits (see below), circle of life (if all performers surround a single victim, they receive +4 to attack), vulnerability (if puppeteer breaks concentration, performer reverts to host and is helpless for 10 minutes); SV Fort +4, Ref +4, Will (use puppeteer bonus); AL N.

Crow: Atk "peck" bite +2 melee (1d3); SP on a fumble, performer breaks their nose

Boar: Atk "tusk" headbutt +4 melee (1d4); SP on a fumble, performer knocks themselves unconscious for 1d3 rounds.

Monkey: Atk leaping slam +4 melee (1d4) or throw object +3 missile fire (1d3+1, range 30'); SP gains +10 bonus to climb checks.

Snake: Atk "poison" bite +2 melee (1d3) or hypnotic dance; MV slither 20', SP hypnotic dance (target must make DC 10 Will save or suffer -1d to attacks against the performer).

Dog: Atk bite +3 melee (1d3 plus bleeding); SP bleeding (if bite does 3 damage, target bleeds an additional 1 point per round for 1d3 rounds).

Cat: Atk claw +3 melee (1d3); SP never-ending scratch (if performer successfully hits, they get another attack, repeating until a miss).

With one hand, Mannat clutched a heretofore hidden golden necklace at his throat, and stretched the other toward them... One second they whimpered in fear, the next they roared and clawed at each other as if they were the beasts they mimed. Votk pecked and clawed at Zhem, who charged head-down like a boar and tried to crush the thinner man. Merpalto climbed further up his ladder and flung books at Lidiq, who leapt and nipped at his ankles like a dog. Orvaro shot his head forward and snapped cobra-fashion at Illuria, which looked somewhat ridiculous, given his decidedly un-cobra-like body.

Shadows of a Forgotten Queen

Spirit-fleshed Phantom: Init +3; Atk lashing blows +4 melee (1d4+3 plus corporeal propulsion); AC 16; HD 5d8; MV fly 30'; Act 2d20; SP corporeal propulsion (a victim hit by both lashing blow attacks must make a DC 17 STR check or be thrown 20' landing hard on the floor or intermediate object for 1d6 damage), immune to non-magical weapons, un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.), temporary death (when reduced to 0 hp, phantom dissolves only to reform 1 hour later unless focus-host is destroyed), focus-host vulnerability (phantom is bound to a focus-host, animal, human, or inanimate object; if focus-host is destroyed, phantom is destroyed); SV Fort +3, Ref +3, Will +6; AL C.

The phantom woman's strength was great; her limbs—seemingly solid flesh and blood, though cold as a mountain stream—were as flexible and elusive as writhing serpents. The phantom snarled in bestial fury, her limbs lashing like a net of river-eels, thwarting my efforts at control, before throwing me off of her to crash hard

into the wall... I struck a tremendous back-handed blow across her neck. Edge met spirit-flesh, which rippled, and parted, letting my sword pass through and beyond. Tlalestris was unharmed, but a terrible coldness flowed through my blade and lanced my swordarm, the weapon torn from my numb grasp.

Limb Zombie: Init +0; Atk limb +2 melee (1d6+1 plus separate limbs); AC 12 (torso) / AC 14 (limb); HD 2d8 (torso) + 4d6 (4 limbs, see separate limbs); MV 20'; Act 1d20 special; SP separate limbs (successful melee attack on zombie separates one of its limbs, which attacks independently; a separated limb has 1d6 hp and continues to attack until destroyed), limb-sight (separated limbs are guided by zombie's sight, even if zombie is decapitated), un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.); SV Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +0; AL C.

Still lying scattered about the vault, seven disembodied sets of eyes scanned the room, and finding their slayer, seemed to guide their headless bodies towards him. Reanimated hands flexed, opening and closing as if to test their newly gained strength... Each limb I sheared free of its body, hit the ground, only to continue in its awful advance, twitching, crawling, and squirming with diabolical determination.

Cold in Blood

Vampiric Demonhost: Init +6; Atk bite +4 melee (1d4 plus blood drain); AC 15; HD 4d8; MV quadruped creep 30'; Act 1d20; SP blood drain (successful bite drains 1d8 STA), silent

movement, regeneration (1d8 hp/round, halted by fire or holy water), un-dead traits (immune to crits, mental effects, sleep, charm, paralysis, etc.), death on banish (host dies if sanguisuge is banished, see below); SV Fort +3, Ref +6, Will +4; AL C.

Abruptly, Neith was atop the pyre, snuffling and licking at the wound in her dead father's neck... had broken open her father's ribcage and was sucking noisily on his exposed heart. Neith slid off the pyre, leaving the ruined body of her father steaming beneath the empty sky and began to creep toward them on all fours. She was like a four-legged spider in the snowy darkness, except that Morlock liked spiders.

Vaporous Sanguisuge (type II demon): Init +4; Atk envelop +7 melee (2d7); AC 12; HD 5d10; MV fly 40'; Act 2d20; SP crit range 19-20, parasitic binding (after killing a victim, the sanguisuge may bind itself to the corpse; this takes 2 full rounds to accomplish, see vampiric demonhost above), demon traits (can read minds via ESP, immune to non-magical weapons or natural attacks from creatures of 3 HD or less, half-damage from fire, acid, cold, electricity, gas); SV Fort +8, Ref +7, Will +6; AL C.

But, after the flames faded away, Morlock saw something else where Neith had been, rising from the gutter, a gray cloud with flashes of red inside it. His Sight, dulled by the brandy though it was, told him that this was the demon that had been living like a tapeworm inside Neith, the blood-thirst she had thought a part of herself.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?



**Do not despair, Mortal Dogs!
Issue 7 is already well begun.**

...

**Prepare yourselves for the
return of Oba, Morlock, Benhus and
much more – including poisonings,
a devouring worm, and an unseen
monster that stalks the night!**

...

**So Endeth Issue 6. Go forth now
and tell all you see of its glories!**

...

So Sayeth the Skull



CAN YOU MAKE YOUR
WAY THROUGH THE MAZE
AND HELP THE SKULL FIND GREAT
SWORD-AND-SORCERY?



WORD SEARCH

H L C L H N D M M H T O L M Y
A N L E A S Y O F R C L S O N
N J R U W N R L E V U F U O A
U C S L K L K B U K F B H R S
V G W H O S I H S S Z V N E N
A U L C D E S E M C D A E K U
R I K J L T H S K A O O B A D
T M N U B T S J E A R N S F D
B R A C K E T T B L L L A S R
R E N T T U K Y P O R E E N O
L L U K S Y T H G I M E H T L
O R A M I D O N Z Z Q O E M L
C C S F A M O U S E R H X P U
O A K Y Q P U M E V S D I F K
J B S I G H K E K D A X T V C

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|--------------|----------------|------------------|
| The Skull | Imaro | Kuttner |
| Conan | CAS | Lankhmar |
| Benhus | Morlock | Oba |
| REH | Peerless Skull | Khlit |
| Brackett | Dhulyr | Elak |
| Lord Dunsany | Leiber | Kull |
| Mouser | Hanuvar | The Mighty Skull |

HOW MANY OF
THE GREAT NAMES OF
SWORD-AND-SORCERY
CAN YOU FIND?

HAIKU CORNER

Sad elephant god.
Barbarian sets him free.
No treasure today.

Mouser goes shopping.
Interdimensional trap.
Avoid free buffet.

Loincloth, sandals, sword.
Soundless slinking through the dark.
Soon the wizard dies.



Send us your feedback! You can email us at skull@goodman-games.com, or send incantations via messenger raven.

Hello,

Is there any store in Europe where I could buy any of your issues from? Shipping rates from your side of the pond are pretty expensive!

Thanks,

—Javier

The accounting intern tells me there is a "distributor" that can summon my magazine to Europe. It is known to mortals as Ingram. You must enter a book store and speak the distributor's true name three times: Ingram! Ingram! Ingram!

Then repeat the name again, backwards, three times: Marngi! Margni! Margni!

Utter these words in the presence of the bookmonger and observe the results!

Hello,

I was a Kickstarter backer for Tales From the Magician's Skull and have recently moved. I did not see where I could update my current address through the backerkit used. My new shipping address is: [address redacted] for reference/confirmation, my previous mailing address was: [address redacted].

If there is a different contact or location I need to update this address in please let me know.

Thank You,

—Adam

You mortals move so often. It is difficult to keep track of you! Why do you not carve out a mountain fastness? There it would be easy to defend yourself from your enemies and study sword and sorcery in peace, and my minions would not have to update their address lists so often, which they have now done for your Croydon residence. I hereby command you to obtain a permanent lair before the printing wizards have completed issue #7. That should give you sufficient time to employ dwarves and gnomes for the digging.

Good afternoon,

I am interested in submitting some short fiction to The Magician's Skull. Could you tell me: How long the subs window is open for? Whether you accept submissions from the UK? And whether one can submit a second piece if the first is rejected?

Many thanks,

—Fergus Parnaby

Greetings, mortal! All who profess a love of sword and sorcery may make a submission, regardless of physical or astral location. My interns have conjured up an interweb screen with such answers as I decree fit and good: www.goodman-games.com/tfms/2020/10/20/announcing-open-call-for-sword-sorcery-fiction-for-tales-from-the-magicians-skull/

Dearest Skull,

Alas, I only just now saw the ad in issue #5 of your glorious magazine. Is it too late to write my resume in blood upon the of my backs of my enemies and apply for the internship?

Thanks,

—Oliver Brackenbury

Dear Mr. Brackenbury,

Thank you for reaching out to our magazine. I wish I had seen this note after that unfortunate incident at the "pole-vault the bonfire" team building exercise we held in January. There was very little left to mummify of those two poor interns, but we had a couple of replacements lined up within the week. The next time we have an opening I shall keep you in mind.

Warm Regards,

—Howard

I noticed that the latest Tales seems available in pdf?

I pre-ordered a subscription for the next three a while back (when it became available). But the pre-order is always a iffy thing, so...

1) is my pre-order being tracked for fulfillment? Or did something fall through the cracks?

and

2) if "yes" when can I expect my pdf and/or magazine?

Thanks,

—Eric

Greetings, mortal! The Subscription Intern had previously tattooed your name to his left calf. Your subscription is thus recorded. Please do not cancel it because I am told tattoo removal is expensive. Also painful but I do not care about that.

The Shipping Wizard gave me this secret code to ascertain the location of your package in the multiverse: 9449011205255875374188

I am told that a You Ess Pee Ess spider web can be used to make sense of this code.

A P.D. Elf is inscribed upon this missive. You can also find a code for the P.D. Elf on page 1 of the printed magazine.

You may reach the Shipping Wizards directly using info@goodman-games.com. They may speak your mortal tongue better than I. My eye is to the stars, not the earth! Soon Sword & Sorcery shall overtake the cosmos!

Good afternoon,

I am writing to confirm the receipt of short story I submitted on Feb 15th. I did not receive an auto reply. The title of the works is City of the Fire Serpent. I would like to verify receipt before the deadline, in case I need to resubmit, if that's possible.

I appreciate your time.

Thank you,

—Daniel Dickinson

Hi Daniel,

I just verified that your story is in, and slated for reading.

We don't have an auto reply system. We're just a dozen guys and gals in a cave working by the light of a handful of sputtering candles, reading in sixteen hour shifts and getting an occasional break for gruel. Every now and then someone wanders by and tosses in a fresh stack of submissions printed from a dot matrix printer from the 1980s. Every time we finish one, ten more get dropped on our desks.

You'll probably get a reply in the next four weeks.

Thanks for your patience.

From the cave,

—Intern #21



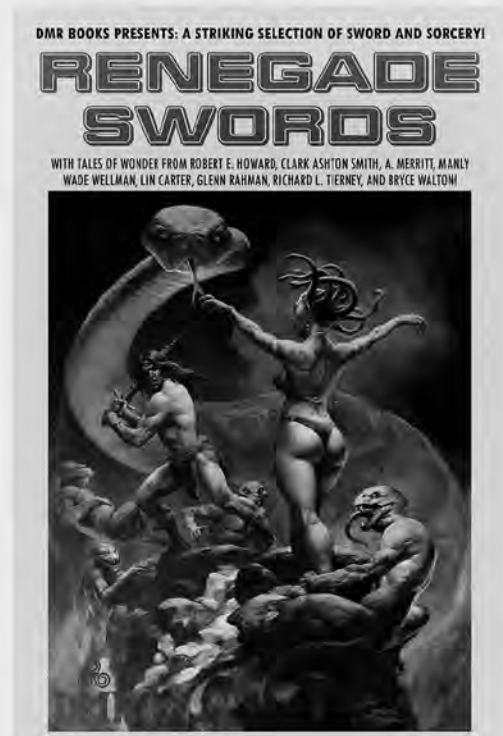
NECROMANCY IN NILZTIRIA

BY D.M. RITZLIN

THE WORLD OF NILZTIRIA IS AN ANCIENT ONE. BENEATH ITS BRILLIANT CRIMSON SUN AND DEMON-HAUNTED MOONS WONDROUS TREASURES LAY BURIED, WAITING TO BE UNCOVERED BY INTREPID ADVENTURERS. YET PERIL ABOUNDS AS WELL, IN THE FORM OF NEFARIOUS SORCERERS, GROTESQUE BEASTS, AND INEXPLICABLE PHENOMENA. IF YOU CRAVE STORIES OF ADVENTURE AND WONDER WITH A TOUCH OF GALLOWS HUMOR, LOOK NO FURTHER THAN THESE THIRTEEN TALES OF NILZTIRIA!

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TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

IN THIS ISSUE...

Calicask's Woman, by John C. Hocking

A Tale of the King's Blade: "I can't hold them back for long," gasped the apprentice. His face had gone pallid and sweat dripped from his chin. "Stand by the opening and try to take them one at a time. Perhaps we can... where are you going?!"

The Feathered Shroud, by Howard Andrew Jones

A Tale of Hanuvar: The water behind the soldier erupted, and Hanuvar lunged past him to jam the pitchfork at a shovel-shaped reptilian head. The tines bit deep, and the dark water reddened.

Guilty Creatures, by Nathan Long

A Tale of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser: In the circle, Mouser stared cross-eyed at the tip of Kalphin's blade, knowing death was coming to him at last.

AND MORE!



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