



# TALES OF THE LOST LANDS



## TALES PACK I

Provine, Shank, Wright

This Tales Pack is released as a companion to  
*The Lost Lands: Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms*



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# DOMINUS EST

BY JEFF PROVINE

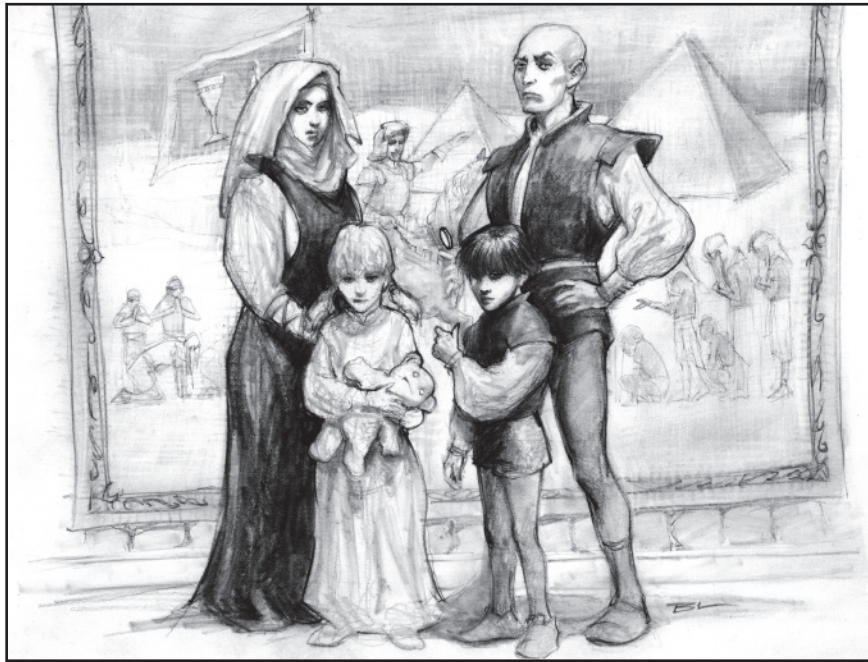
## GM Note

**Spoiler Warning: Heavy**

“Dominus Est” takes place in the village of Malthlyn, shortly before the fall of the House of Mathen more than four centuries ago. The story deals with the ultimate fate of Count Wynston Mathen as recounted in the adventure background of the adventure, *Aberrations* in the *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms Adventure Path*, as well as providing descriptive snippets of his time in Khemit with the Second Great Crusade. Spoilers abound within for players. It is recommended that you not let your players read “Dominus Est” until after they have completed at least *Aberrations* of the adventure path, if not the entire adventure path.

# DOMINUS EST

BY JEFF PROVINE



he mist blinded Sir Godefrey, yet he goaded his horse to run faster. The road had turned to muck, but the path was clear. Liber huffed and planted his hooves, sloshing and slipping through the mud. Instead of the rhythmic drumbeat of a gallop Godefrey had heard so often from the plains of Libynos to the Sacred Table, the sound was the horrid sucking of mud clinging to Liber's hooves. But even in this soup, Godefrey had seen few destriers that could match the strides of his mighty stallion. Liber at a gallop was a thing of beauty, enough to swell the heart of any knight with pride — even in these unsure conditions. It was as if the ground itself was

trying to hold them up with its unseemly turpitude.

It would not.

Nothing stopped a paladin of Muir, especially when a brother-knight was in danger. Count Wynston had acted without them. Despite his comrade's hubris, Godefrey and his knights would be there as soon as Muir's will allowed.

While Liber raced, Godefrey wiped his eyes on the shoulder of the cloak and looked back. It should not have been this dark, but the strange clouds clinging to the treetops in the Mistwood seemed to choke out the lingering dusk. A blurry ring of the bright moon, known as the Pale Sister, shone through the high fog, making strange shadows lurk in the forest beyond the road.

The other knights were trailing along behind him, their own horses struggling. His heart ached, wanting to press forward with all his being and knowing that he had hold back to

allow his brother-knights to keep pace, had to lead them. All men of goodly heart needed a moral compass to guide them. As the senior knight present, he was that compass to these good men. He faced forward again and kept racing, though not at Liber's full stride.

It had been a puzzling day, and his mind wasn't fit for such things. He wished Muir had not laid this day in his path.

Godefrey bit his tongue; he must confess his ungrateful heart later. It was only hours before that Wynston had confessed his own to Godefrey.

Sir Godefrey Pather had come to the village of Malthlyn leading his caravan of priests, the relic-cart, and the paladins who guarded them. It was an honorable position, but a far cry from his days charging against the Huun hordes on crusade upon the Sacred Table of Thyr and Muir — the very cradle of the faiths. He was a younger man then. Now his meals seemed to stick to his ribs more, and his back ached after a day's ride. Nonetheless, he served the will of Muir. *To each man is given his capabilities as Muir decrees; it is but for the man to use them as best he can.*

The caravan had arrived in the fledgling settlement at midday, Brother Natthis leading the procession with his cymbals. Then came the other priests with their censers waving out musky incense pleasing to Muir's nostrils. Old Father Ingar drove the horses of the iron-clad relic-cart, while two more priests walked on either side, chanting the praise-songs. Godefrey and his knights rode behind at a humble distance.

A few townsfolk turned out to watch the little parade. Most of the men and women of the town didn't seem to notice, just went about their busy work. Even the ones who turned their heads glanced for only a moment. They were not of the faithful. They had other work to see to, the work of money — that great blackener of man's heart and soul. The Mathen silver mines were said to be rich, and the folk of this town — in fact the town entire — only existed to pull those riches from the rocky ground. *As Muir blesses her children materially, so she decrees that it is not for man to seek wealth and largess, but to use those gifts to seek peace and charity.*

The one Malthlynian who seemed genuinely eager sat atop a horse of his own near the cathedral, or what might be one someday. Now, it was scarcely more than a ring of cut stones forming the foundation of a church. If Godefrey knew Wynston Mathen, it would sure enough be a great cathedral of Muir someday. The man was elegant. He wore a silk shirt and a long, woven cape. A fine silk cap covered his head and his clothes were cut to the height of fashion, but his piercing black eyes seemed familiar. Godefrey didn't even recognize him until the man stood in his stirrups and waved the salute of a crusader.

"Muir be praised," Godefrey stammered, "Wynston Mathen!"

Wynston rode past the priests and the relic-cart without a glance or nod of obeisance. A couple of the knights behind him grunted at the sacrilege, and Godefrey almost felt like he had been hit in the stomach. *In the eyes of Muir, the greatest honor lies in the greatest humility; none stand higher than the glory of the goddess herself.* Still, Godefrey's hands shook and his eyes seemed to dazzle at the sight of an old friend; he told himself it had been some time since Sir Wynston had ridden in the ranks of the sanctified, surely it was but a momentary lapse of his discipline. Godefrey wanted to pull the reins and lead Liber straight away to meet him, but he waited and stayed in line with the procession until the cart arrived at the entrance to the would-be church.

They dismounted at the same time and practically raced to one another. Wynston threw his arms around Godefrey, and they embraced for a long minute. Even when it was over, they still clasped one another's hands in the grip of sworn brothers.

Godefrey's worn and scaly leather gloves looked nothing like Wynston's soft new doe-skin ones.

"Sir Godefrey Pather, Stormer of the Yellow Keep. Good to see you!" Wynston said at last.

"Sir Wynston Mathen," Godefrey replied. "Count Wynston, that is! Milord!"

Wynston made a laugh. "Come now, we've known each other since I was Wynn timer and clung to my mother's skirts and you were Uncle Gode. Let's get a drink and reminisce."

Godefrey frowned and turned toward the priests. They were all in a circle around the

relic-cart now, chanting. Father Ingar's bony, trembling hands undid the sacred locks on the iron door. "I'm supposed to oversee the unloading."

Wynston caught him by the shoulder and turned him toward the row of wooden buildings that served as the high street for the new town. "You have your knights to do that, Gode!"

The other paladins stood guard nearby, watching while the priests unfolded their tent and began setting up the tables of inlaid cedar. Soon relics like the finger bone of Balthis and Urrick's hammer would be set out on their velvet pillows to embolden the spirits of any pilgrim in town, provided they fed the charity box. It was a ritual Godefrey had watched two hundred times in two hundred villages. What was the harm in missing one? His throat suddenly felt as parched as a Libynosi wind.

"Very well," Godefrey said. He couldn't seem to raise his head. "Lead the way."

Wynston took him to the ale house at the edge of the town. Along the way, he pointed out washhouses, butcheries, liveries, the well-traveled road that led to his manor and the bustling mine. The whole town was fidgeting like an excited child, as it had since the discovery of the silver lode, the count said.

Godefrey walked quietly. It wasn't until they sat down at the private alcove in the tavern, where the walls still smelled of tree sap and the barkeep bowed himself away, that he said at last, "You've been busy."

Wynston sighed through his smile. "True, true. I wasn't even sure if I would make it to town today to see you. When I'd heard that the relic-cart was coming under the guard of Sir Godefrey Pather, I knew I had to ride in and meet you."

Wynston's smile suddenly faded. "Madrana did try to talk me out of it."

"A woman who smiles like she does could talk any man into or out of anything," Godefrey admitted, "though I don't know much about wives myself." *The grace of Muir is sufficient to warm the heart of a man on the coldest night*, he silently quoted to himself.

"They have a way of guiding you," Wynston winked. "'There's too much work to be done,' she said."

"Never too much work to meet with a brother crusader!" Godefrey raised his wooden stein.

Wynston's smile reappeared. "Hear, hear!"

They thumped their cups together and drank deeply. Godefrey coughed on the suds. It had been awhile since he had tasted anything stronger than the sacraments of Muir. *A fire for righteousness in the heart far exceeds the fire of strong drink in the belly.*

When he had cleared his throat, he grinned. "Just like old times."

"Hear, hear," Wynston said again, more softly this time. "More like old times than we realize, perhaps. I'm still managing affairs in some frontier, and you're still on the march in the good work of Muir."

Godefrey laughed. "Oh, this march is nothing like that in the scorching heat of the wastelands and the Sacred Table! There I chased heathens, brought down my axe upon wicked skulls, and ate meat when we had it. Here, I ride in cool forests and lay my bedroll on swept floors most nights. I'm a glorified watchman, so I am."

"...Do you miss them? The old days?" Wynston asked, his voice almost stammering with hesitation.

Godefrey narrowed his eyes to help him see back to the past. "No, I don't think so. We had our day, when we liberated Tircople and danced in our armor, too filled with the joyous spirit to feel our thirst and our wounds. I'll never forget how my heart raced when I heard the thunder of the charge breaking the Huun siege lines, or the grace I felt when I first fell to my knees inside the walls of the sacred city."

He settled back. "But I'm an old man now. Most of my days are spent thinking about what we might have for supper."

Wynston nodded acknowledgement with a quiet *hmm*.

"What about you? Think you'd join up if they called for another crusade?"

"Ha! I was scarcely on the first."

"What are you talking about? We sailed together from Pontus Tinigal! You organized the sweep street by street when we landed at Pyrameses, finding every Huun assassin and obliterating the

desert tribes who refused to recognize the new masters of Khemit! ‘Lyrgoz the Wicked!’ the fearful cried about your blade, ever thirsting for the blood of the unrighteous!”

This Wynston could well recall.

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*As marshal of the advance force, Sir Wynston was charged with subduing the great harbor city. Most of the Huun had retreated inland with the approach of the overwhelming crusader fleet. A thousand thousand ships it was said, enough to allow a man to walk across the sea from Rashid to Pharos without ever wetting a foot. Wynston knew it was closer to 1,800 ships, an unfathomable number as it was, but certainly not enough to bridge the 250 miles between those cities.*

*Rooting out Huun insurgents and desert brigands had been easy enough when the Holy Inquisitors of the Church Militans arrived. Their ability to read the hearts and thoughts of evil men with but a glance proved invaluable in finding the assassins and their co-conspirators. Identifying the local men and women who harbored thoughts of rebellion from crusader governance was more difficult, however. Such folk might not necessarily be of an evil mien, but merely seeking freedom from foreign soldiers or pursuing nationalistic loyalties. Such goals were not easily detected by the eyes and ears of the Inquisitors, so Sir Wynston had to rely on more mundane means.*

*The three hundred Khemitite men lined up on the Boulevard of Foreigners would be forever burned into his memory. All were suspected Huun collaborators — most undoubtedly were — but you could never be one hundred percent certain in such things. At the trumpet’s Rally signal, three hundred men were forced to their knees. At the sounding of Attack, blades descended on outstretched necks. Lyrgoz the Wicked drank deeply that day. The bodies were left in the sun for a month; no one was allowed to collect them for burial. After the prescribed period, they had been picked nearly clean by the vultures, and what was left was dried to a leathery toughness. The city was pacified. It was a lesson not soon forgotten.*

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Shaking away the dark memories, Wynston responded to the older knight, “Truth, but I never went any farther than the Lower Kingdom. While you heroes of faith marched across the wastes, clothed in your righteous fury, I was left behind to guard roads and count grain carts.”

Godefrey slammed a fist on the table. “Stop that talk! If not for those grain carts, the lot of us would’ve starved to death during the march.”

“I know, I know. I did my duty.”

“Then never speak that way again. Besides, look how Muir has blessed you! Land! A title! A town of your own name! Where did you even get silk all the way out here?”

Wynston stared blankly into his stein.

Godefrey felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand. “What is it?”

“What... what if it wasn’t Muir who has blessed me?”

Godefrey stood sharply, kicking his chair over with the backs of his legs. “Stop that heresy this minute!”

Wynston held up his hands. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Slowly, Godefrey leaned down, picked up his chair, and sat again. He never took his eyes off Wynston as he did.

“Have you grown faithless up here in the hills? Too easy of a life?”

Wynston sighed and ran his palms over his bald pate, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hands.

“You’re carrying some burden,” Godefrey said. “I’ll go get one of the priests, and you can have confession.”

One of Wynston’s hands shot out and caught Godefrey’s wrist. The older knight pulled back on instinct, but Wynston’s grip held tight. He still did not look up.

“No, please. My stomach aches when near them.”



Godefrey felt his face twist up with confusion. “You? But you’re one of the most pious men I know, not some boy guilty over sneaking a sugared pear.”

“We all have our sins.”

Godefrey scrunched up his nose even further. “So what are yours?”

Wynston sighed. “I guess you’re going to get my confession one way or another.”

“When a priest isn’t present, you may confess to a brother-knight,” Godefrey recited. “It’s the fifth dominion of the Charter of Crusading.”

Wynston looked up, but he did not meet Godefrey’s eyes. Instead, he rolled his head back and faced the ceiling. “Ugh, this burden!”

“Share it, brother.”

“I’ve carried it too long... it is part of me, now.”

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*Sir Wynston walked the dusty streets of Menefet, appointed Constable of that ancient city by the Grand Marshal himself. The city was his jurisdiction now, to maintain peace, to provide support, and to keep the supply lines to the eastern wastes open and running. In a city said to be over 5,000 years old and with a staggering native population of more than one million — dwarfing the cities of the West — Sir Wynston initially found the appointment to be daunting... overwhelming even, but he soon found that his reputation from Pyrameses served him well. As the Butcher of the Boulevard and the Hand of Lyrgoz the Wicked, the locals had little stomach for a fight, even if they did outnumber his garrison by more than a thousand to one.*

*As word of the crusaders’ stunning victories against the Huun came back from the eastern deserts, he found the honor of his appointment and the power he wielded to be ashes in his mouth. He soon took to wearing a keffiyeh in the native style to protect his prematurely bald pate from the harsh sun — after it had burned bright red in his first week ashore and peeled painfully for a month — and he eschewed his plate-and-mail in favor of the local kaftan, no longer fearing the reprisals of the Khemitites or attempts on his life by Huun assassins. In fact, he welcomed such diversions for their novelty and escape from the malaise of his current station, though Lyrgoz still always hung faithfully at his side.*

*Wynston would walk the wide avenues and cramped alleys of the primeval city at all hours of the night, touring the temples of a thousand foreign gods and seeking the obscure and esoteric among hidden bazaars. He turned to ancient writings and the teachings of an older world, alien to his traditional Foerdewaith upbringing, to assuage the restless impatience and brooding sense of melancholy that filled him. He was no knight; all the knights fought the heathen in the East. The Grand Marshal had decreed it so, so that must have been what he secretly meant when he consigned Wynston to this backwater of drudgery and somnolent existence. If he could not be a knight, then he deemed he would be a scholar and absorb all that there was to learn of philosophies old when the first Hyperboreans stepped foot outside their Boreal realm.*

*One such nightly trek led him down a new alley, one that he had not noticed before, wedged as it was between two old temples, long abandoned and crumbling beneath the weight of countless centuries of neglect. The ancient murals upon the alley walls were still bright in places, as if still fresh, shielded as they were from baking sun and scouring wind. He saw the usual array of animal-headed men and women, the heathen pantheon of a heathen land, when he stopped at one particular image, more faded and worn than the others as if an older painting perhaps. Its dimensions were difficult to discern, and it was somewhat amorphous, its shape perhaps suggesting a bloated toad or a stooped and squat simian creature. He paused to examine it.*

*“Dominus est,” a deep, heavily accented voice spoke from over his shoulder. He had not noticed the arrival of the man who stood there, shrouded in his own heavily embroidered kaftan and deep hood. Despite the other’s apparent stealthy approach, Wynston felt no fear. There was no danger for him in Menefet other than the danger of ceasing to be, dissolved by an uncaring desert wind and scattered without monument or memory in the wake of greater men. He almost wished that the stranger was an assassin.*

*He recognized the words of the man as an archaic form of High Boros, the language of the ancient Hyperboreans, but the closest translation he could manage was, "It is the God."*

*"Another one of your beast-headed godlings, eh?" he quipped, attempting but failing to make light of the sonorous voice of the speaker, and the unseen eyes surely shaded deep within the hood that he could swear were staring directly into his own, even in the darkness of the alley.*

*"No, not one of many. It is the God, the Dominus. His ways are ancient, His word is life, and His voice is death."*

*Strangely, he found himself intrigued by the faceless man's words, though they rang no more true than the arcane mutterings of a hundred charlatans he had already encountered in countless market stalls and tome-filled shops.*

*"Tell me more." He placed his hand on the stranger's sleeve.*

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The ancient axiom quoted by Sir Godefrey brought Wynston's mind back to the present. *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off!"*

Wynston released Godefrey's sleeve as if burned. He coughed again and again, throwing up his shoulders each time. Godefrey realized it was a laugh.

*"This sin is all I have. It is my position, my family, perhaps my whole body...."*

A pit opened in Godefrey's stomach. He was no confessor; this was beyond the catechism he had learned. Still, he was a friend. *"Wynston, I don't understand."*

The choking laugh came again. *"Where even to begin.... This is why Madrana didn't want me to come today. She's going to be so cross with me! I should go."*

As Wynston stood, Godefrey felt himself begin to gasp lightly, unable to get enough air. He dove across the table and grabbed the count by his silk shirt and forced him back down into his seat. Wynston struggled, he even laid a blow on Godefrey's shoulders, but Godefrey wouldn't let go. Finally Wynston fell forward, face onto the smooth wood of the table, and wept.

Godefrey held him. He didn't know what else to do. After a few moments, he let Wynston go and awkwardly patted his shoulder.

Wynston sobbed two more beats, took a deep breath, and looked up with red-ringed eyes.

*"What have you done?" Godefrey's voice was plain and firm.*

*"It happened in Khemit. I was restless. The logistics of the crusade occupied my mind, but I could scarcely concentrate on my books and ledgers with the grand tales trickling back from the desert."*

*"Of course. I don't know how you can stand it, staring at those inky pages all day."*

*"It's different when you can read, Gode; so that's what I did. I began lurking within the broken temples, picking up scrolls of lore from sinister old shopkeepers."*

*"I never had the head for it, you know that." Muir gives talents in accordance with her will and assigns duty to take the measure of men.*

*"I know, and I know Muir gives us our talents in accordance with her will. She also presents us with tests. I failed mine."*

*"What test?"*

*"I became infatuated with the mythology of the Khemitites. Their grand constructs, their epic heroes, their ancient gods...."*

Godefrey scrunched up his face in confusion again. *"Those gods are false...or dead."*

*"They aren't."*

Now he pressed his eyes closed.

*"On my days when work was finished on the road, I went to explore the ruins. I saw the Baswun Dam, which once directed the flow of three rivers, though now it stands among the desert rocks. I climbed the Great Columns, where they say angels once touched their feet. I crawled through the tunnels of the City of the Dead. At first, it was curiosity at their engineering, but, as I collected their learning, I began seeking out living descendants.*

*"They invited me to feasts. A few of my fellows mocked me, saying I was 'turning native,' but no one thought much of it. I was a foreign lord, and amicable relations with locals*

kept down resistance. I fell in with a group of philosophers who taught me esoteric knowledge about the waters beneath all matter. There are bubbles of thought, too, and immortal islands in the ever-flowing waves. All is fluid, and fluid within fluid.”

Godefrey shook his head. “That nonsense is a lie from a demon’s tongue.”

“It’s not nonsense! It’s knowledge!” Wynston protested. He winced and held his head as if it ached. “Dangerous knowledge. Mysteries not meant to be solved.”

“Then forget it. Push it out of your mind with the words of Muir.” *The fogged mind is ripe for the honeyed tongue.*

“I cannot. I know, now, where Muir resides.”

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*The deep places. The deep places beneath the desert, where primordial waters still flow and the life, long lost to the sere lands above, undulates and writhes in unholy fecundity. Wynston Mathen’s new guides showed him these vistas not beheld by man in a hundred thousand years. They let him listen to the blasphemous whispers of the Auger Rock and taste the bitter spring from the Font of Aeristheulas. A New Order of thought, sight, and sound they showed him, hidden in the dark, far from the burning light above. And to an older order of being they made introduction, an order of life that wriggled and crawled and hopped among the slime pools when the gods of the modern world were but infant thoughts in the mind of the Great Creators. He gazed long into the Pit of Ommon and its lightless, fathomless depths, where all things false and mortal eventually are lost — even the gods of the younger races.*

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Godefrey raised a fist, but he didn’t throw it. Wynston’s words confused him. “This... this sounds like heresy.”

“Perhaps it is, but I had an insatiable appetite for all they could teach me, just as I had for the sweetmeats they served during discourse. They invited me into their sect, and I agreed. I could not wait to learn more about worlds of great power.

“But, during the initiation, they did something to me. I drank deeply from their muddy chalice, and then I choked. I felt sick. I vomited, but something still seemed to squirm within me, taking root. I knew I had been betrayed; the revenge of a timeless thing can take a lifetime, and their retaliation had been long in coming. I fled the circle and never returned. *Lyrgoz* drank deeply once again as I sought to root out the blasphemers and heretics. My soldiers burned book shops, and trampled suspicious scribes and scholars as they put them to the question, but the sect I had found — that had found me — was never located. The Inquisitors and physicians could find nothing physically wrong with me when they checked; I thought I was done with it after I left Khemit.”

Wynston made a long deep, sigh. “And then, at the court of the overking, I caught the eye of his niece.”

“Madrana? What does she have to do with this?”

“She bewitched me with her smile, her attention...and her body. My mind, my heart, everything was hers.”

Godefrey shivered. Though he knew only little of women, he said, “A man would be lucky to have such a bewitching wife.” *The grace of Muir is sufficient to warm the heart of a man...*

“No, she is a witch.”

“Come now! Every man says that about a wife on some day or other, so I hear.”

Wynston shook his head. “I mean that she has arcane power. Sometimes I go days without seeing her, yet she always seems to know my whereabouts. Any time I even consider wandering from home, she entices me back to our bedchamber. Something about her, everything about her.... I cannot give up my lust for the woman. She has me do...things....” He cocked an eyebrow at Godefrey. “What she offered me to keep me from coming to town today!”

Godefrey blinked and swallowed. He didn't know what to think.

Wynston went on. "Time and again, I've accomplished any project she proposes. It was her doings that gave us lands here, and I gathered every person she's named for our staff. I've built waterwheels and surveyed tunnels for her. Sometimes I think they're whims, but recently...."

"What?"

"I know we dig for silver, but some of the miners whisper about terrible things deep under the hills. They dig up miscreant worms and frogs, too big and twisted to be anything of Muir's work. We dig other tunnels, too, away from the silver lode, and I don't know why."

Godefrey only shook his head.

"Then... I look at my children, and I see myself in them, I'm sure of it, but it's as if there is something else, too...."

Godefrey took in a deep breath. Finally, he knew the answer. "A succubus! Your wife is a witch and children demon-spawn!"

Wynston stared at him.

"Let me take up my knights, and we'll ride with you. If this is true, we can cut her down as we did the Huun warlocks!"

Wynston shook his head rapidly, like a boy who's been offered bitter medicine. "No!"

"Why not? 'Before the light of Muir, evil must be cleansed!'" he quoted.

His mouth hung open for a long moment, and then Wynston closed it and lowered his head. "No, it is my sin. I must confront it."

Godefrey blew air through his nostrils, bull-like. "Wynnie, don't do this alone."

"I must. I have to know for certain before I take action."

He stood, and he left the tavern.

Godefrey remained several minutes more. His mind felt dammed up with too many thoughts at once. At last, all he could do was go back to his watch as locals adored the relics.

When the criers came into town late in the day, shouting that the mine had collapsed, Godefrey knew that Count Wynston had acted alone. He might be able to rebury the evil underground, but he would need help purging his own house.

Godefrey summoned a pair of his most stalwart knights and ordered them to mount up. There was no time to explain Wynston's testament. They had to ride.

"To the Mathen estate!" Godefrey shouted as he led them up the road.

"Shouldn't we head for the mine with the others?" one of the knights called. "They might need our hands for aid."

Godefrey pressed his spurs into Liber. *Though the body be broken, the spirit is eternal*, he thought. "Sir Wynston needs us for his soul!"

It was only a few minutes later that the sky became dark and the ghostly moon appeared. The mist bathed them, chilling skin where it touched the cold links of their mail and sinking deep to the flesh beneath. The hard-packed earth of the road turned to muck. Still Godefrey pushed on and shouted for his knights to follow.

The trees cleared near the wooden gates to Mathen Manor. It hung open, as if someone had pushed it and not had the mind to close it. No one stood guard.

They came to the huts of groundskeepers. Fires raged in several of them, eating slowly at the walls. The mist stymied the flames. No one was in sight.

Past them, the keep loomed three stories high. Yet it wasn't three stories, but seemed something a little more. Perhaps it was the thick foundation, suggesting cellars and tunnels, or it might have been a hidden floor above the third. It made Godefrey's eyes ache to look and try to interpret what he saw.

No one called out to them. The light from the windows flickered. Godefrey's mind flew back to the windows of the buildings burning in Tircople, how bright they were.

He jumped from Liber, as he had done so many times ten years ago in pursuit of a wicked Huun. Pain bit at his arthritic knees, but Godefrey kept running. Count Wynston might be twenty years his junior, but the aged knight vowed that his faith in Muir would carry him where even Mathen's tread might fail. He charged up the steps and to the double-doors.

Someone had barred them.

Godefrey pounded with his gloved hands. "Wynston!"

A distant scream echoed through the door.

"I'm coming!" Godefrey shouted.

He pulled the axe from its loop at his belt and began hacking at the gap between the doors. He'd done the same at the Yellow Keep near the south wall of Tircople, but those doors were reinforced with iron bands, ready for the knock of a foe. These doors were not meant for war. His blade bit deep in the wood and tore through toward the locks inside. A loud crack rang in his final swing, and the doors swung open.

Inside, the great hall of the keep was filled with corpses, heaped like cord wood. They were the estate's serfs, household servants, and Wynston's guard with their armor blood-spattered like spots of rust. Fresh blood puddled on the stone floor. It was a massacre so thorough no man could have done it but the calculating Wynston Mathen.

Godefrey heard vomiting behind him. The other knights had arrived, and one of them could not stand the sight. He sneered; young untested knights hadn't seen a thing like the horrors of war they had witnessed in Tircople.

"Search the keep!" Godefrey barked.

"Aye!" the knights called. The one attempting to loosen his helmet to get the vomit out was grabbed by his iron collar and dragged in. They shuffled past, their boots thudding on the stone steps to the next level and their armor clinking. Beyond them, tapestries showed Wynston's travels, a great knight becoming entangled in ancient and perverse mysteries.

Godefrey turned to follow the hall. If Wynston meant to cleanse the house himself, he would have barred the door and then started a fire in the upper rooms. In the chaos, he'd come down the stairs, using height to aid his slaughter. The momentum would carry him through the ground floor.

A soft sound, barely heard, caught his attention beyond one door, like the sigh of a nymph. It was the family chapel. The air was cold here. There were the sigils of Muir, yet twisted among them were painted shadows of nebulous black things. Godefrey's stomach tightened at the perversion.

As he marched into the aisle leading to the altar, which seemed dusty and unused, he saw the body of Wynston Mathen lying before it.

Godefrey let out a wail and ran to his brother-knight's side. Blood spilled from Wynston's knee, hands, and belly. The blade of his sword *Lyrgez* was dug deep into the chest from beneath the left arm. The yawning cuts on his dead hands betrayed the story: Wynston had done the deed himself after breaking hilt off.

Godefrey looked up with tear-blurred eyes. More blood was smeared on the walls in symbols Godefrey could not decipher — letters in the Common tongue, he thought. The old regret of having never learned his letters returned for a fleeting instant before being beaten down beneath his iron-hard resolve. Below these unknown words, an achingly beautiful woman cowered with two small children whose faces favored their mother.

He had not seen her in years, not since he stood at the fringes of the court of Overking Yurid stretching to get a view, yet he remembered Madrana. Her face showed a few lines of age, but she was still the most comely woman he'd ever beheld. She looked up at him with those vivid eyes, huge and green, about which the bards of Courghais still sang. The children clung to her bosom and looked up with the same eyes. There was something about them, something beyond human.

Godefrey raised his axe.

"Sir knight!" Madrana called. "Crusader's madness has struck my husband's mind! I feared such action when he saw you men in armor in town today."

"Lies," Godefrey mumbled. He stepped forward with his weapon ready.

Madrana stood slowly, her hands out, not defensive, but beckoning.

"Will you slay a widow? Kill her children, too, after you've made them orphans?"

"I... I will cleanse the world." *In Muir's eyes the greatest mercy is peace from the way of evil.*

"There need be no more bloodshed," Madrana told him. "Please, take us back to my uncle's house. There is nothing for us here now."

She stared at him with her vivid eyes, and he could not look away from them. Godefrey wanted desperately to bring down his axe, but he could not.

“Do you know how the Overking will bless a knight who protects his widowed niece?” Madrana asked him. “Treasure, title, comfort into old age in your own keep.”

Godefrey bit his lip. His back ached, and his shoulder burned. “Muir...Muir provides each according to his portion.”

“But,” Madrana said, her voice becoming so soothing Godefrey wanted to sleep, “there are other gods who can provide so much more.”

Godefrey couldn't breathe. He tried to suck in air, but it was so cold.

“And I,” Madrana said, coming close to him now. Her dress was torn, showing supple flesh beneath. “I would be forever grateful.”

She slipped a hand around the back of his neck. Her touch was warm. Tremors ran through his body. Sweat stood upon his brow.

Godefrey did not know how long he stood there, axe raised. The gasping voices of the other knights roused him. Their heavy boots were like thunder.

“Sir Godefrey!” one of the knights cried. “You found survivors!”

“And words,” another said more softly, looking at the blood-smeared wall. “‘Not of my flesh.’ What does it mean?”

Godefrey looked at the children. He looked at Madrana. She watched him with those vivid, unearthly eyes. Her gaze shifted toward his arm, with its ragged glove and muscles going soft with age. Then she brought her eyes back to his.

*The grace of Muir endures even unto...*

Godefrey lowered his battleaxe. Wynston was dead. He hadn't been able to slay the witch and their spawn. Neither would Godefrey.

After tonight, he would no longer be the guard of a relic-cart.

**THE END**

# THE DOOM THAT CAME TO SARANGANATHA

BY NATHAN SHANK

## GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“The Doom That Came to Saranganatha” takes place in the distant past of the Sundered Kingdoms, some 7,500 years ago. It reveals the fate of one of the last Andovan villages that stood upon the Plains of Sull, and makes reference to the outcome of the War of King-Chieftain Aracor. It gives veiled details regarding the *Obelisks of Chaos* featured within the *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms Adventure Path*, but nothing specific that would spoil any of those adventures. Without the context of the introduction chapter of *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms*, the tale will provide little revealing information about the book. As a result, it is largely safe for players to read at any point before or during a *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms* campaign, and will provide interesting insight after such a campaign has been completed.

# THE DOOM THAT CAME TO SARANGANATHA

BY NATHAN SHANK



ullied and torn, Scorpion-Child crested the low rise at the center of the village and paused before the door of the great lodge. He lifted the three bruised, gnarled knuckles of one of his malformed, clawlike hands, so like in appearance to the pincers of the scorpion for which he was named, and battered them against the rough wood planks. “I have returned!” he bellowed.

Moments before, the Sarnathi guards had revived him with weak ale when he collapsed at the village gates, his sack and staff spilled about him. None had dared touch him before he had seen the Elders, and so they had doused his face with the mordant elixir while they

crouched above him and murmured indecisively.

Saranganatha, the only remaining walled village upon the Plains of Sull, was skittish of any danger, even doubting the trustworthiness of one of their own clansmen. Scorpion-Child didn’t blame them. As his sun-baked face revived with the ale, no doubt fermented from cloudy waters still to be found in the depths of the few ever-shrinking wells, Scorpion-Child had gazed up once again at his home village’s greatest pride: the Sarnathi Walls. From his vantage, supine on the ground, they rose to dizzying heights, great stone blocks cunningly stacked one atop another in a bowing arc. How Those Before had constructed them, not even the wisest of the Elders knew.

Yes, since the Ravages of the Land had come, Scorpion-Child knew these rock walls well — more than a man’s length in thickness and curving inward like the dome of a leather tent to a height of more than three men, overshadowing half the town. They had kept out the dark powers now roaming Sull. Except for the warriors sent to fight the Aracorites — the ones who had never returned — the walls had kept death at bay from the Sarnathi Clan. But now, Saranganatha needed more than material protection. Since Scorpion-Child had seen what he had seen in the hills to the east, he was more certain of this than ever.

Still, the walls might yet be a source of salvation. Scorpion-Child was devout; he could recite the Words of the First Prophecy spoken by Those Before, passed down from shaman to shaman, and remembered by the earth itself:

*In the seasons after skyfall stones  
Holy walls will save these bones  
And leave the world alone.*

Now, those walls would tell the story of Saranganatha. But Scorpion-Child feared the story’s ending.

Scorpion-Child’s painful knock had silenced those within the lodge’s main hall. The door opened, and the village Elders reclining at the feast rock bore stony expressions in the shadows of the flickering firelight, looking more like the carved death masks of men than men themselves. Scorpion-Child crossed the fingers of his deformed hands behind his back to ward off any bad luck from that observation, a chill of foreboding sneaking up his spine.

Women with full-moon gauges in their earlobes lined one side of the hall, while men with the scarring of crescent-moon cicatrices on their chests lined the other side. Haunches of meat and loaves of bread poised frozen in front of faces as they stared at him, their food momentarily forgotten. Filthy children peered silently at Scorpion-Child from the slanting, low-roofed



corners of the hall, pet ferrets winding around their bodies ever in search of a scrap to eat.

A disfigured copper idol stood long-neglected in the farthest corner, its base nailed to a plain wooden block. Its nose was hooked, its wide ears had too many folds, and its mouth, a simple inverted *V* formed from two uncertain lines in the broken cast. Its eyes were not even molded, but were roughly cut out, and light from a chink in the hall's log rafters shone through the eyeholes as two indefinite ovals on the feast stone at the room's center. Scorpion-Child seemed to catch those vacant eyes first and then surveyed the inscrutable faces of the Sarnathi clan heads, considering them one by one.

Finally, his gaze reached the end of the feast stone where a man wearing a scraggly mantle of wolf furs sat, silhouetted by a bulging cauldron hanging above the fire directly behind him. The Chief Elder, Gallaf, bearing a crooked smile and long hair, raised his hand as if to hail the visitor.

"My Elders, our great warrior is home," Gallaf said, half-standing and lifting his tattered robes. "Tell us, Scorpion-Child, have you single-handedly speared the Scarred Beasts who have devoured our farms? Do you bring us their meat that we may roast them, gain their health, and live another moon?" Gallaf's smile spread like a crescent, and his eyes caught a gold glint from the hearth fire as he half-stepped back in mock deference.

On one side of the feast stone, the women snickered, their bronzed shoulders jittering with poorly suppressed mirth. On the other side, the men crossed their arms and stared at Scorpion-Child smugly.

Gallaf leaned threateningly forward on his rangy forearms. "Or perhaps you've raised the great pillars from the sky that saved and spoiled our land? I mean, of course, the ones you told us about before — remember? — the ones that suddenly sunk into the earth." An amused snort escaped his mouth. Gallaf leapt onto the feast stone and quickly paced its length until he reached Scorpion-Child, who stood motionless, unreadable. "You must just need to spill a little blood to get them going. Here, give me your hand." Gallaf seized Scorpion-Child's wrist and made with his belt-knife as if to cut him.

Scorpion-Child jerked back as if he had touched hot coals.

"It's not like that at all!" he protested. "I no more believe that we can perform the ancient rites of the filthy line of Aracor than I doubt that those same sorceries are as real as this food before you now. That sorcery is a danger to us. Look here—" he reached into his rucksack, "See? I found these signs of the fate of our warriors," and opening the pouch he retrieved, he dumped a haunch of charred meat — possibly once a portion of a leg — onto the feast stone in front of Gallaf then stared down the Elders, who hesitated.

Scorpion-Child continued. "They've been killed to a man, pony and ox alike as well. I know what the skyfall stones have done to this land, and I know we are not safe from the fate they have begun."

The air grew muggy with smoke and soot.

Gallaf scoffed. "None of us believe the fairytales you've told us before: that giant, peaked stones hailed from the heavens and wiped out all the armies. You think that the great warriors from this village could all have been killed in a single moment?"

"Of course I do—"

"Hexmod, who could lift a boulder above his head? Trasster, who became a man by taming the venomous worg? Livon the blind, slayer of ten marauders without his sight? And your own brother, Jais?"

"It happened," Scorpion-Child returned. "The whole battlefield is burnt black into ash. I saw it with my own eyes. Here it lies before you now."

Gallaf paced over the untouched victuals back toward his spot. The women licked their lips nervously; the men grew grave. "And would I have died, too, Scorpion-Child, if my leg had not been broken when the Aracorites first invaded our land? Had I fought in the east hills, no doubt I, too, would now be in this mess of ash sullyng our feast?"

"In an instant."

"Ah, yes, tell us again how it all happened. Your story gets better after each time you go off to save fair Saranganatha." Gallaf's expression animated and his hands danced with shadows in front of the fire. "After all, you were meditating on the sunrise atop the ruined temple of Those Before when it happened. You saw it in your mind's eye, not I. How many

shamans do you think it took to call down the great pointed stones? Was it a hundred? A thousand? And when they lit up with fire — we all know how stones can burn — all the men in both armies immediately turned to dust?”

The lodge hall erupted in noise. The women threw their heads back and howled with laughter. The men pounded the stone and tore meat from their feast bones.

Gallaf’s voice rose over the clamor. “And this will happen again, O wise Scorpion-Child?”

Scorpion-Child ground his teeth. “No, not exactly. The stones are gone. But they have created a great force that is coming this way. It will strike us from before, above, and below.” Scorpion-Child searched for allies among the Elders. “I...I saw a great commotion in the distance as I scouted the land. It will arrive soon, and we shall all die!”

“I see, I see!” Gallaf feigned concern. “Commutations are not to be taken lightly. So we need not worry about stones sent from the sky that killed our beloved heroes? But those stones made a new monster? And is it a beast with scary teeth?” Gallaf gestured by poking his long fingernails. “Or a storm? Perhaps it is a beast with lightning arms and a pointy head?”

“No, it’s not like that!” Scorpion-Child cried. “It’s a force that will consume the land. We must go far away where it is safe.”

“Scorpion-Child, Scorpion-Child,” Gallaf’s tone waxed paternal as he stepped down from the stone table, “you are what we call ‘moonstruck,’ a little lost in the head. I think we’ve put up with your antics long enough.”

Scorpion-Child spun from Gallaf and implored the row of men. “Elders, you must think of the lives of the Sarnathi. We must cross the sea, and—”

“You dare say we should leave our village?” Gallaf cut him off. “Leave the sacred ground where our mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers are buried? Leave Saranganatha as a prize to the next passing band of marauders? We should take only what we can carry and swim to the Island of War where our enemies still lurk? And there it will be oh-so-safe for us — is that it?”

“Well, yes, for you see, our enemies are no longer there. They’ve all been killed—”

“Yes, yes, I know, by the pillars from the sky.”

“—and we can build a new village there, and we will live and make it the Fair Island once again.” Scorpion-Child coiled his malformed fingers into misshapen fists and beat the air. “If we just leave now, we can all escape!”

For a moment, no one spoke. The fire coughed. The cauldron boiled furiously. The goblinoid idol in the corner continued with its unchanging scowl. Fate wavered on a knife’s edge. The Elders, the men and women, the silent children, all looked at one another and finally back to Gallaf’s fiery silhouette.

Gallaf bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. He breathed heavily, and his shoulders drooped as if he were carrying a great weight. With sudden quiet desperation, he laced his fingers through his long greasy hair. Then he looked up, face set, eyes drilling across the feast stone at Scorpion-Child. His lips hardened. “Our walls will protect us.”

Scorpion-Child’s face fell. “Well, if you won’t listen to reason, then at least send the people with me to the ruined temple of Those Before just beyond our city walls, upon which hallowed ground this village was founded. There, at least, many of us can survive the worst of it.”

Gallaf’s crescent smile spread wide. “Why of course, Scorpion-Child. The least we can do is follow you there.”

“You will? Well, you should. I have seen more than anyone, and I know—”

“Fool! You think we will follow someone too weak and malformed to even go to war with the Aracorites?”

“But—”

“And you think we will leave Saranganatha empty and unprotected? Ready to be taken by any covetous eye passing by? Because of a ‘commotion?’” Gallaf’s grin disappeared. “You think your clawed hands make you a prophet. But we all know they are your curse.”

The men and women broke into an uproar of laughter, throwing bones and spitting. The children scampered and made exaggerated pinching movements with their fingers in imitation of Scorpion-Child’s own hands.

Gallaf leapt again onto the feast stone and lorded his arms above them all. "Silence!"

The fire coughed and shrank, and Gallaf's shadow grew over the entire hall. The men and women grew calm; the children trembled in fear. Scorpion-Child beheld them all with desperation.

"We have our ways," Gallaf spat at Scorpion-Child. "Ways that worked since time began. None have broken our walls since we claimed them. Saranganatha's walls served my father, and my father's father before. They have served me, and they will save this village. No storm-beast that you dreamt up — when you were feeling sorry for yourself for not having hands that can grip a spear, for never having been able to claim your man-name and put away the name of your youth — is going to breach our walls. You were cursed by the gods on the day of your birth, and you remain cursed to this day. Now get out!" he roared.

"But—"

"Get out! You are not welcome at our feast stone; the table of the clan is closed to you. Come, my Sarnathi kin, let us drink to long life; we have many days left ahead. And let us no longer look upon this wretch. He has no part among us any longer." Gallaf clutched the neck of his clay mug and splashed the warm mead down his throat.

The men slapped the feast stone and bared their teeth. The women screamed in delight and hissed, "Be gone! Be gone!"

"Hold him!" Two arms pinned Scorpion-Child in place. Gallaf dipped his own calloused palm deep into the simmering cauldron, barely grimacing at the pain. He pulled out a hand dripping with scorched blood and fat and buried Scorpion-Child's face beneath it.

Scorpion-Child retreated, tripping backwards out of the lodge. Its doors slammed closed behind him, and he stumbled down the sloped esplanade into the village center, where the shadows of the encircling walls did not reach during high sun.

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The evening was cool after the furnace of the lodge's interior. Something damp had invaded the air. Scorpion-Child got to his knees. He dabbed at his blistered face with his sleeves.

He turned around. The doors of the lodge had reopened and its occupants had emerged. Joining them, the whole village now stood in a semicircle before the doors, stock still and silent. All eyes gazed at him.

"You don't understand!" Scorpion-Child hurled at them savagely. "I know what happened. I have seen our death!"

The Sarnathi regarded Scorpion-Child vacantly. None responded to him. They wore their ceremonial cowls — an old tradition that protected them from the evil spirits on this feast day — which now hooded their faces.

Scorpion-Child feverishly stumbled a poor circle before the lodge, imploring his friends, cousins, uncles, and aunts with broken words. The sun was near to setting, and the bright moon had just peaked the opposite horizon, while the dark moon was still some hours from rising. Half the Sarnathis' eyes blazed like live coals, and the other half glowed silver.

Scorpion-Child came back to the entrance. He had made no impression on the impassive villagers. Face dripping with half-congealed blood, Scorpion-Child's fear fell away, replaced by a burning, internalized rage. His mouth and cheeks grew tight. He stood upright. In two emphatic motions, he raised his disfigured hands defiantly and dug three angular lines into the mead hall door with the nails of each hand. He spoke as if filled by the words of another being. "The Elders said that I was cursed, but it is you who will die this very day. It will happen in three jagged lines: from before, above, and below."

Their silence provoked him further.

"The bright moon has just come up tonight, but its time over our home has fallen. With the rise of the dark moon, you will be no more. The blame be on your own heads." The blood and bruised flesh on his clawed hands swept the curse in an arc over all of Saranganatha.

He couldn't make out their expressions in the dark, but he could feel their glares of anger, their distrust, their belief in his betrayal or cowardice or lunacy. Like an oncoming tide, they drifted in waves toward him. He turned on his heel and strode through them, past the

mighty stone walls from an age past that reached like prayerful hands beseeching the stars, and passed straight out of Saranganatha.

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Day didn't fall for Scorpion-Child as he followed a trail behind the village and capably scaled the giant heap of rocks and slain pillars lying a short distance from Saranganatha's walls. Remains of a temple left by Those Before, these boulders caught the last light of the evening at their peak, but still Scorpion-Child, on mounting the top of his favorite haunt, could not see over the curving arms of Saranganatha's impenetrable walls. He recalled that the walls, mostly buried at the time, were supposed to have been discovered by an old shaman, Gallistill, who had used soul-draining mystical powers to excavate them and saved the clan with his final breath.

Scorpion-Child knew no magic himself, but he had seen its effects. He was sure of it. Why the others didn't admit the power of sorcery, he still couldn't guess.

Vines and lichen had grown up among the temple fragments, and Scorpion-Child tore off the stalk of one of these and began chewing it, though it was far from satisfying. The days since the skyfall pillars had left the land desolate. He spat the bitter, gummy substance out, and watched the town in doubtful vigil. The resin soured his throat like a galling serum.

Worse than his rejection by the village was the weight that pitted in Scorpion-Child's stomach, sinking him into the spot where he'd wedged between two outcroppings. Death was scourging the land, and only exile remained. Exile or utter destruction. Best for him to survive, carry on the memories of his people. He would be the remnant, the only one to tell the terrible story. Gods rewarded a faithful prophet. Annihilation would strike Saranganatha, but not Scorpion-Child. Feeling a mixture of sorrow and justification, he knew he would witness their last breaths.

And he did.

The doom that came to Saranganatha began as a wisp of smoke, just as the dark moon began its ascent above the horizon. The strange wisp lit up the most distant fields, long since ravaged, trampled, and dried. The smoke sent blazing rows of scalped crop stubble ahead of it, but instead of flaring untamed, they seethed back and forth like tentacles. The commotion lumbered across the fields, slowly and quietly consuming husks of trees and abandoned dwellings. Rising up as if on crouching haunches, it reached the vertiginous walls of Saranganatha with billows of ash puffing in all directions. There it paused, the village ensorcelled in streams of smoke and fire.

Scorpion-Child could hear cries of surprise and fear, but it was much too late for escape.

For then there came a flap of wings, sweeping the air above Saranganatha with a thousand beats. Scorpion-Child could see no aerial bodies, but he caught flashes of teeth and distended black and purple veins. The air vibrated, and short, shrill calls sounded. The motion grew to a frenzy, and pneumatic concussions pummeled the great stones of the walls. Their curved posterior surfaces quaked with the impacts. Fissures opened where the ancient stonework inclined most steeply inward over the perimeter of the village. The night erupted in catastrophe as the trusted defense shattered and tumbled on top of the dwellings below, crushing the bones of dozens of villagers who had huddled beneath the shadow of the walls for protection.

Unleashed by the fall of the stone barrier, the fiery juggernaut from the fields drove through Saranganatha with a fury. Screams echoed to the skies, huts burst open, and previously cynical villagers now fled through rents in the crumbled walls toward the fallen temple, but lithe arms of red flame curled around their delicate mortal frames and scorched them into stains on the lifeless turf.

The force heaved, and the great lodge was engulfed in a fiery furnace. The walls fallen away, Scorpion-Child could just make out the tiny figures inside as the hall's skeletal logs vaporized and a blue heat illuminated the Elders' last terrified expressions.

Their Chief Elder, it seemed, was saved for last. The unnatural flames engulfed his body and emerged from his mouth and eyes. Gallaf's thick hair blazed like a bonfire, his skin blackened and cracked, and his strong cheeks and brow shrank and withered to nothing as

the flames devoured him from without and within. At the end, Scorpion-Child thought he could hear the Chief Elder's mocking laughter reduced to an agonized moan.

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After an hour of leaden waiting and watching, the wing beats diminished and could be heard no more. The fires lost their life and cooled to small, flickering tendrils. A haze lingered over the remains of the village, hanging like a limp, damp curtain.

Steeple of ash remained as if a mocking replica of the erased village's towers and halls. Scorpion-Child had been accepted there in his early years. His potential had been certain, a favorite of the Sarnathi shaman, Cormorant, who used to whisper prosperous prophecies in his ear while Scorpion-Child helped him carve the annual village chronicle into the knobbed wooden memory sticks. Scorpion-Child began to descend the temple ruins, nearing the seared earth outside the village walls where, in the days before famine and constant danger, he and the other boys used to imagine they were Those Before who had built the walls and great temple, and would mound up the sandy dirt into temples and fortresses.

Scorpion-Child entered Saranganatha and wandered his former home in darkness, scraping through the piles of ash with only the dim illumination of the second moon lighting his way. He knew many good people had remained, many children innocent of their fathers' mistakes. But hadn't he warned them? No god had talked to him, but he was like the prophets of old: he had preached to the people, they had failed to listen, and so doom had come upon them. Those who fail to listen always come to a well-deserved end.

He scooped up a handful of ash from among the charred remnants of several corpses and filled his pouch. These remains would nurture the ground where he would start a new clan—an entirely new tribe. Scorpion-Child would plant a tree and enrich it with the fertility of the lost Sarnathi. Their memories would live on in that tree after he had passed.

As he bent down, he felt a small tremor in the ash. Was someone still impossibly alive beneath the charred blanket? Scorpion-Child used his clawed fingers to quickly push the ash aside, digging through the weightless remains of his old life so that the old Saranganatha street surface soon appeared. No, no survivor laid beneath the ash. He bent close and kissed the scorched earth to feel for the faintest vibration. Through the sensitive flesh of his lips he could feel the faintest of movements. Something lived beneath the earthen street, but what it could be and how it could have gotten there he couldn't imagine.

As Scorpion-Child searched for the source of the movement, he began to feel a thickness at the back of his throat. He stood up to take a deep breath of air and expel the phlegm. When he rose, he noticed that the air above the ash had become sticky and gray; Scorpion-Child's eyes burned in a stinging miasma. The world seemed to spin. Scorpion-Child took a few faltering steps in the direction of the former walls of Saranganatha, but he overbalanced and pitched forward into the cooked remains of the lost Sarnathi.

Determined to gain control, Scorpion-Child let out a growl as he arrested his confused senses and planted his feet deep in the ashen mounds, coughing out soot and vigorously shaking his limbs and hair. He could just make out the ancient temple through the haze before the vertigo overcame him again. All around him the air pulsed red and purple like an angry drunkard's forehead.

He took off toward what he thought was the ruined temple.

Five steps in, the ground collapsed beneath him. Everything began to seethe and churn. He lurched through a landscape of tumbling hills and valleys. Unsure footing sent him down a rockslide toward the center of Saranganatha. If he could just make it to where the great lodge used to be, he would be at the highest point. Scorpion-Child clambered over the sides of a suddenly formed trench that had just dropped him a man's height. He could see the top of the central hill, and he launched himself toward this promontory until, at last, he caught a brief glimpse of a burnished glint in the moonlight.

The earth convulsed.

Violently hurled above the contracting soil, Scorpion-Child was seized by mountainous arms reaching forth from below and swallowed into their earthen embrace as they drew

him downward. The ground heaved as if in pain or surprise as it engulfed him, and then lay silent where the earthen limbs had once again withdrawn.

Thus, in accordance with the Words of the Seventh Prophecy spoken by Those Before, remembered by few, and passed down by none:

*The fire came and the fire withdrew  
Doom on beating wings and tremors of death  
And nothing followed  
For nothing remained that could move*

The land seemed to let out a sigh, and the world sat motionless. But one pair of eyes still winked and twinkled. The morning sun sent its slants through the two rough ovals fashioned into the misshapen copper head of the idol. Unperturbed and untouched, it stood in the center of what remained of the village in the same spot it had held before, forgotten in the corner of what had been the lodge's main hall.

The wind swept the Sull plains and sent the Sarnathi's ashes towards another land, curled memories carrying but a trace of remembered thought. Saranganatha was no more. Only the motionless idol remained like the axis of an earlier, forgotten time. Its misshapen ears caught the strong winds, causing it to tremble almost imperceptibly; its eyes glowed ablaze with a light not its own, but of sun and moons and sun again; and, after a time, its inverted V-shaped scowl broke into a devilish grin.

# THE HUMBLE FRIAR, OR BETTER THAN ONE

BY KEVIN WRIGHT

## GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Medium

“The Humble Friar” does not deal specifically with any portion of the *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms Adventure Path*. It does, however, provide the history of Lezcano’s Inn featured in **Chapter 1** of the Gazetteer, and reveals the current secret plot of Father Lezcano Bredroga. Therefore, from a strictly adventure path basis, this story has no spoilers, but if you wish to continue your campaign in and around the area of Lowport, it could be somewhat spoilery of the situation there. Though, if the players travel to Lezcano’s Inn and he trusts them, it is likely that Father Lezcano will try to recruit them into his plan anyway.

# THE HUMBLE FIAR,

OR

# BETTER THAN ONE

BY KEVIN WRIGHT



o you want his head now?"

"No, no. Let's take our time with this one."

Two voices — one rasping and harsh, the other chilled as frosted glass — spoke into Lezcano's blackness, and he began the slow crawl to consciousness.

As Lezcano came to painful awareness, he heard the shuffling of feet, the subtle murmur of flames, and the clinking of metal on metal. He opened his eyes and found himself strapped to an upright table, bound tightly with leather and iron. He struggled weakly against his bonds, but soon gave the effort up as useless. He was too beaten and ex-

hausted to put up much of a fight. Groggy, he looked around, trying to understand where he was.

The lantern above his head created a dingy globe of light and, just outside that circle of illumination, a dim figure lounged in an ornate chair and rubbed its chin.

With cold certainty, Lezcano realized suddenly where he was: the torture chamber of Tyrant Baljulias, known to all as Hell's Foyer, a fortified temple to the orc god, Grotaag that stood just outside of Lowport. These pitiless stone walls had absorbed the screams of numberless victims, this cold slate floor was stained with the blood of uncounted multitudes. Brave fighting men, weeping slave girls, children, blameless and innocent — all had suffered horrible torment in this room. The Tyrant did not discriminate. The only exit from this foul chamber lay in the unfeeling embrace of death, but for the captives of the Tyrant, that death was prefaced by hours and days and weeks of scarlet agony and never came soon enough. Never soon enough.

A figure came from behind Lezcano and thrust its face into his. The face was bestial, degraded — its skin the color of a day-old bruise, its bloodshot eyes brimful of impersonal malice, and its jutting teeth like stained and shattered pillars. It was an orc.

Lezcano tried to spit in its face, but an iron band around his throat restricted his movement. His saliva dribbled ineffectually down his chin instead.

As the creature checked the restraints, another orc came from behind the table and began to spread straw on the ground around Lezcano's feet. *Three in all*, he thought. *Even if I wasn't so battered and hog-tied, I'd have no chance of escape.*

"He's ready, Master," the first orc spoke in brutish Common.

"Very good," the seated figure said in a voice bathed in oil. "I was beginning to grow impatient." The figure rose from its chair and stepped into the light, revealing itself to be a tall and slender man. He was richly dressed in a robe of crimson and sable, a crown of chunky gold and uncut gems sat on his brow. The man moved closer to inspect Lezcano.

"Clean away the blood from the shoulder and rip that loincloth from him. He must be vulnerable and pristine before Grotaag." As the orcs scurried to obey, Lezcano noticed the man's mottled gray skin and sloping forehead. A harsh laugh of disgust escaped his lips.

His captor heard the laugh and smiled into his eyes.



“Ah. He is aware. I bid you welcome, meat, to the house of Baljulias, he whose hands break stone and whose throat gluts itself on the blood of his victims. I am called Arrutch. Perhaps you have heard of me?”

Lezcano looked at him with a glance both wary and revolted. “Yes,” he said slowly. “I’ve heard of you. Arrutch the Obscene, half-breed spawn of orc and man. They say your mother lay willingly with an entire tribe of orcs. You’re Baljulias’s pimp and torturer. You find females for that *m’hushwa* to rape, to spread his seed. You are slave to the enemy. They call you ‘the Procurer.’”

Arrutch’s eyes widened and his mouth yawned in a harsh, gagging bark. Lezcano realized he was laughing.

“Yes! An honest man speaks his mind! You speak with the guileless innocence of a humble friar. I appreciate your candor, worm, and look forward to hearing more of it. You see,” the half-human miscreation spoke, “I want to get to know you better. I am going to pry into that soft and twisty soul of yours and discern your heart more deeply than your own pink mother could. I am going to unhinge your brain box and read everything within, front to back. Before I am done, you will be laid bare before me in all your pathetic glory.”

Lezcano almost smiled. “Good luck with that, *nothing*. You’ll get nothing from my lips but curses.”

The half-orc’s eyes narrowed at the insult.

“A hero, eh?” he said. “Do you have any idea how often I hear that kind of thing? Tire-some, tiresome.” The Procurer shook his head and *tsked*.

“Let me tell you how this is going to end. I am going to explore every nook and cranny in your weaking soul and expose everything I want to know about you. Every fact you try to disguise, every secret you hide even from yourself. You will try to hold back, to guard your confidences and maintain your integrity.” He smiled thinly. “You will fail. It is a foregone conclusion. When I have extracted everything from you that I need, wringing you dry like a used dishrag, I will summon our headsman, Stroke, and he will sever your head from your body. Notice that I said ‘Stroke,’ not ‘Strokes.’ Would you like to know why we call him Stroke?”

Lezcano managed to roll his eyes.

“We call him that because that is all it takes for him to kill you. One clean stroke to the neck and your head leaps from your body. One stroke, every time. He’s never failed. He’s famous for it.”

“How creative,” Lezcano drolled, “Did you come up with that by yourself?”

The Procurer went on as if he hadn’t heard.

“We then take your head and place it in that basket,” he said as he pointed toward Lezcano’s feet, “Then we send it to your family.”

The bound man could move his head and eyes just enough to make out a large basket lying on the ground. It was painted white and he could make out a cross woven into it. He looked back at his tormenter.

“That’s an alms basket of noble Thyr. Those are sacred to his clergy. I’d say you’re bordering on blasphemy.”

The half-orc laughed again. “Bordering on it? I’m invading it.” He looked around mockingly. “I don’t suppose those godspeakers will come crashing in here to stop me, do you?” He made another glance about. “No? I didn’t think so. It seems the clerics of Thyr do not guard that which they hold sacred quite as well as they should. More’s the pity; there’s nothing quite as satisfying as a bleating prayer-wailer put to the question.”

One of the orcs pulled a small wheeled table into view. It was covered by a discolored cloth which he whisked off to reveal a horrifyingly varied collection of instruments of torture. Here lay a collection of shiny steel blades, scalpels, and pins; there, a heretic’s fork, a lead sprinkler, and a tongue torturer lay alongside some crocodile’s shears and a rusty hand saw.

“Do you see these?” Arrutch said, fingering the shears. “These tools were used for centuries to inflict and embellish pain upon a body. They rely on cutting, piercing, tearing, sawing, and disjoining the flesh.” He held up the handsaw and lovingly caressed it. “For long years, these served adequately, but they are in the end rubbish; the childish work of

amateurs and fools.” He tossed the saw onto the table with a crash. “We — those favored by Grotaag and initiated into his deep mysteries — know that these crude instruments are...limited, at best. They hurt the flesh to get at the spirit beneath. Now, we have something far superior to these crude tools. Grotaag, Father of the Orcs and giver of true divine power, has gifted them unto us.”

At a snap of his fingers, the orcish servant rolled the nightmare table away as the other brought forth what appeared to be an old, pitted cauldron. It was filled with a dark, frothy liquid. It smelled strongly of newly rotten meat and rusted iron. Something stirred within the brew, sending slow ripples across its quickly clotting surface.

The Procurer pulled up his sleeve and plunged his wiry arm into the cauldron. For a moment he fished around in the sludge. His face suddenly contracted in a grimace of pain, then he pulled something grotesque out of the pot. The half-orc held the thing up to Lezcano for his inspection.

It appeared to be a loathsome fat grubworm, big as a fist and unnaturally pallid. Its long tail bore a stinger which it plunged over and over into Arrutch’s arm. The torturer’s mouth was set in a grim line as he bore the pain stoically.

“This,” he said, shoving the foul thing into Lezcano’s face, “is a *gul-gall* worm. They abound in the Plain of Woe, the eternal battlefield where rules Grotaag. They are carrion feeders, feasting on the flesh of the fallen, heaping shame on those whose weakness led to their defeat. They appear useless, suitable for naught but stomping and crushing. However....”

At this, the half-orc took the disgusting creature in both hands and squeezed. A seam in its back burst revealing a long row of needle-sharp teeth. The *gul-gall* yet lived. It pulsed, then emitted a thin rasping squeal.

The Procurer grinned over his pet.

“This thing has changed my life. No more crude hackings and tearings. No more iron maidens or brazen bulls. This...*this*...has made torture into a clinical art form. Instead of spending hours and days filled with endless questionings, buckets of blood and ceaseless screamings, all I have to do is place this on one of your old wounds and you will immediately relive the pain that caused it.”

The *gul-gall* no longer stung the torturer, but lay serene in his grip, its tail wrapped around his forearm. Lezcano looked from it to Arrutch.

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Well...I survived those pains the first time through. I think I can probably handle them again,” Lezcano vowed, with perhaps just a hint of a smirk on his bruised lips.

Arrutch smiled. “You’d think that, wouldn’t you? But that is not truly the case. When your body feels pain — gets bludgeoned, stabbed, sliced — it compensates. The battle rage comes upon you, you are filled with power and the bloodthirst. Your body forgets the pain in its desire to smash and to gnash and to kill. The *gul-gall* strips all that away, leaving behind the distilled essence of anguish. Not merely the physical pain, no, no. That, we could bear. But the worm unveils the spiritual agony of the wound as well. Shame. Weakness. Helplessness. The curtain of self-deception is thrown aside and we see, in all our hideous glory, just how mewling and pathetic we are.”

The Procurer practically panted in his fervor, his eyes rapt in adoration for the revolting little miracle in his hand. With effort, he controlled himself and looked Lezcano in the eyes.

“But why describe what can so easily be experienced? Let me *show* you.”

His glance flitted across his victim’s face and fixed on Lezcano’s forehead.

“Here. I see an old scar. What could have caused such a grievous wound? Let’s start with that one.” He handed the abhorrent creature to one of the orcs, who then held it before Lezcano’s face.

The Procurer said, “I will ask and you will answer: what is your name?”

Lezcano glared but said nothing.

“So be it.” The Procurer waved a hand, and his orcish servant placed the needle-pointed mouth of the *gul-gall* to the long-sealed edges of Lezcano’s scar. Two score pinpricks

stabbed into his skin and his body went taut with pain, straining his bonds.

He remembered....

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*"Papa, who are those men?" young Lezcano asked.*

*"They are tax-gatherers, son," the older man replied, chewing on the end of his long black moustache. "They represent the suzerain and collect his debts." His brow was furrowed and a dark cloud was over his face. "Let's move along now," he said and tried to guide his son away from the storefront. But the curious young man would not be denied.*

*"Why are they beating that man?" he said.*

*A balding man groveled on the ground, on all fours like a dog. Four soldiers surrounded him, men who smelled of oil and iron, and whose merciless eyes held both contempt and mirth. Their metal harnesses and weapons glinted brightly in the noontime sun. As the boy watched, he saw one of the soldiers place his booted foot on the balding man's neck and smash his face into the earth.*

*"That's not right, Papa! Did you see that?" Young Lezcano pulled away from his father's grip and stood in the middle of the thoroughfare, not noticing that the once-swelling crowd was now swiftly disappearing.*

*"Son! Come here! Don't look."*

*As he spoke, a young woman burst from a nearby doorway and tried to worm her way through the circle of soldiers to reach the man on the ground. "Papa!" she cried as tears coursed from her eyes. One of the soldiers grabbed her by her curly black hair and savagely bent her head back.*

*Lezcano heard neither the soldier's lewd comments nor his father's shouted warning as he ran at the soldier and grabbed his arm. The bully lost his grip on her, and she spilled to the ground in a sobbing heap. He did, however, feel the vicious blow to his head as the soldier punched him with a gauntleted fist. The boy crashed into the dirt, his forehead split open.*

*"Accursed wretch!" the soldier shouted and drew his dagger.*

*Lezcano's father grabbed him up and dragged him away.*

*"He's sorry! He's so sorry! The boy is touched in the head, I swear! Have mercy...."*

*The soldier's face blanched in anger, and he stepped toward them, blade in hand. Then, a piercing shriek sounded as the girl flung herself on the soldier, clawing at his eyes.*

*Lezcano's father pulled him along the street, down two alleys, six more blocks, and down another alleyway before they both fell panting on the ground. The whole time, the boy kept saying, "I'm sorry, Papa. I had to look. I'm sorry Papa, I can't not look."*

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As he came to himself, Lezcano found words pouring from his mouth like blood from a knife wound.

*"Lezcano Bredroga, son of Droga, son of Alatish, son of Jeth, son of Idalo, son of I-don't-know-who. I grew up in Syat by the headwaters of the Odroga River. My mother was Oda. I never knew her family. I always wanted to. She died giving birth to my sister, who also died. My father's family had lived in Syat for forty years before I was born. My brothers work as sailors on the Channel Lakes...."*

He trailed off as he regained control of himself. Blood ran from the reopened wound on his forehead down his face and onto his neck. Pain rang like a bell throughout his whole being and he felt sick to his soul, but he raised his head to see his torturer back in the dimness, back in his chair. Arrutch was looking down at his robe, picking at a stray thread. Barely visible within the folds of his robe hung an iron symbol, its shape obscured.

*"So...Lezcano. Did daddy save his little boy? Even then you weren't smart enough to stay out of harm's way."*

His victim was still gasping for breath. "You heard that, did you?" he sputtered.

“Heard it? I couldn’t stop hearing it. You repeated it five times before you shut up. Maybe these things work a bit too well.” He frowned briefly, chin in hand and lost in thought, then brightened.

“Well, then! Back to it. What else can you tell us?” He tapped his cheek. “How about this, Lezcano? You snuck into the stronghold of Tyrant Baljulias, into the lord’s personal residence. Fortunately for you, the tyrant was not at home. But why did you come? You must have come here to steal something. I imagine that street vermin of your ilk would steal anything, but you didn’t even carry a proper blade, just an old smith’s hammer — stolen, no doubt. You had to know it meant your death. What could possibly be so valuable that you would come here, thief? Why... why did you come here?” He nodded to one of his servants and the orc gathered another *gul-gall* from the pot.

“Where you want it?” the orc grunted, holding the thing and scanning Lezcano’s body.

“That fresh gash across his arm. He must have received it last night when he was captured. Use that one,” Arrutch said.

Without preamble, the bestial creature cracked the worm open to reveal its fangs and placed the *gul-gall* on Lezcano’s skin. Again, a multitude of teeth shredded his flesh. With all his will, he fought against the psychic assault of the worm, but he could not hold the tide of memories at bay....

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*Things had gone well at first. Too well, apparently. Two bribes, some heavy intimidation, and a magical potion had served to get Lezcano through the outer gates and into the walls of the manor house itself, but now he was lost in the twisting hallways of his hated enemy, Baljulias, creeping across the stone-flagged floors and flitting from shadow to shadow. Somewhere along the line he had received some bad information. The room Lezcano sought had not been the one he’d found, but rather than cut his losses and try to escape, he was committed more than ever to finding his prey. His fingers gripped his hammer tightly. He yearned, hungered, to find the source of his hate and smash his head ‘til it shattered.*

*Though he was completely lost in Baljulias’s domain, Lezcano was far too overwrought, far too eager for bloodshed to stop now. The intensity of his emotion was his downfall. His thoughts were too focused on revenge and not focused enough on stealth. He rounded a corner and ran smack into three orc warriors. Both parties were initially surprised. Lezcano stove in one orc-skull with his hammer, then blocked a sword slash with his arm. The sword ripped through cloth and flesh, spattering blood on a nearby wall. Lezcano fell back, but managed to swing his weapon up into the jaw of an advancing orc. The jaw bent, crumpled beneath the blow and the brute crashed the floor. Unfortunately, more orcs came swarming around a corner and Lezcano was buried under a wave of porcine flesh....*

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“Kill! I came to kill! I came to stalk my prey, to find him, to crush him, to *lay waste* to that wretch’s body. I came to gouge out his rotten eyes and choke out his very life. I came to revel — to glory! — as I listen to the last breath rattle from his throat. I came to get bloody, to break bone, to murder, to....”

Again, the words ran unheeded from Lezcano’s lips before he could master himself. Bright blood spurted from the resurrected wound on his arm and he felt weakness sweep darkly through him. He looked up to see his torturer sitting back in his chair, his head turned away. He seemed to be trembling ever so slightly.

“What’s the matter, Arrutch?” Lezcano gasped. “Can’t stand the sight of your own handiwork?”

The two orcs that had been mopping up his blood stopped their work briefly, looked at one another, then went back to their task.

The Procurer grew very still and looked into Lezcano’s ragged, pain-filled eyes.

“Oh, I can stand the sight of it, all right. I appreciate what I inflict upon you human weaklings more than you can imagine. Every time I break one of you, every time I destroy

one of your bodies, every time I take by force one of your miserable lives, I assert the godhood of Grotaag. I rediscover how frail and pathetic you humans are. I repudiate the softness in my own blood..." at this, he looked down on his blotchy, gray flesh with revulsion, "and acknowledge the grandeur of He-Who-Obliterates."

A fanatic's light gleamed in his rheumy eyes. For a moment the iron amulet hanging from his neck swung free to reveal itself as the cast-iron image of a rotting severed head, the symbol of Grotaag.

"So," he said, his voice thick with contempt, "you snuck in to kill your enemy. Foolish endeavor! And so hopeless. Who did you come to kill? I can see that any number of us could give you cause for murderous hate. We dominate your kind so easily, so thoroughly. Was it Gren the Tomb-Robber? I've heard that he's been active lately. It could have been Chieftain Rak. He's made a name for himself under Baljulias's banner."

He stopped and tapped his chin.

"It couldn't have been the tyrant himself. Not even humans are that rash, are they?"

"There is only one way to find out." Then Lezcano smiled. "Bring on the worm."

Not liking this defiant attitude, the Procurer snapped his fingers and one of the orcs plunged his arm yet again into the cauldron and pulled out a *gul-gall*.

"Where you want this one?" it asked, looking to Arrutch.

"I have a suggestion," Lezcano spoke before the torturer could. "My leg. On the left side. Place it there."

The orc looked askance at his master.

"Take a look," Arrutch said.

The servant examined Lezcano's side, but found nothing and shook his head.

"The *other* left," sighed Lezcano.

The creature looked at his other leg and found a large scar like a jagged white nova covering the side of his knee and much of his shin.

"Do it," said Arrutch.

The orc broke open the worm and attached it to Lezcano's leg. He roared incoherently as the memory overwhelmed him.

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*They stood atop the cliff, leaning on the railing and looking over at the moon's reflection on the rolling Sangre Sea beneath them, she with the dark and unfathomable eyes, and he with a newly budded moustache.*

*She looked down shyly as Lezcano spoke fervent words into the perfect curve of her ear:*

*"I love you, my heart. I would die for you. I want to live for you. Please, beauty, be my wife."*

*Her sweet laugh rose above the sound of sweeping waves below, and his heart came alive at the bright and joyful sound of it.*

*"Ha! Oh, the words men will say when they want something. You say you want my hand in marriage, but I suspect you are more interested in other parts I may have."*

*Lezcano's hand flew to his chest and he gasped in mock indignation.*

*"Señorita, you wound me! I could never have any but the noblest intentions toward you. I place you on the loftiest of pedestals. I revere you as I would one of Thyr's holy saints. Do not impugn my poor honor." He went down on his knees before her.*

*She laughed behind her hand at his antics.*

*"Poor, poor Lezcano. Brought low at the words of a mere woman! I am sorry that I have injured your fragile honor. Please, accept my apologies." She took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet.*

*"There is nothing 'mere' about you, heart of my heart. I thank you for your apology." Gently, he kissed each of her palms. "Have no doubt, lady, that more than anything in this life, I want your hand in marriage."*

*She blushed at his candor and looked at her feet.*

*He continued speaking to the top of her head. "...however, if there were any other parts of your body you'd be willing to grant me access to in the meantime, I would not object."*

*“Oaf!” she said, glaring like an angry cougar and striking him in the chest. “The only part of my body you’ll get is the heel of my foot as I’m kicking you off this cliff! How dare you...”*  
*But her hot words were soon smothered by his lips on hers as he swept her into a kiss. They did that for a good while.*

*Finally, she sighed and took his arm in hers, steering him away from the sea and back toward the festival from which they had snuck away. They walked happily into the throng of dancers, merrymakers, and shouters who were celebrating the Feast of Sante Niñoska. Candle-lit lanterns hung from cords above the revelers as they shouted and sang, praised and belched into the night.*

*The girl was just saying, “You know, you’ll have to speak to my father about this. He pretends to hate you, but he doesn’t really. Not overly much. My mother and I will get to work on him as soon as...”* when cries of fear broke the night’s peace.

*“What could that be?” Lezcano said. He tried to look over the top of the crowd to find the source of the screaming. The multitude compressed as people ran toward them. “I think we’d better get you home, love,” he added, just as the orcs burst into the lamplight.*

*With spear and axe, they slew as they came. People panicked, losing their minds in terror as they fled screeching in every direction.*

*“Run!” Lezcano shouted, trying to pull the girl along with him. But brave as he was, they were soon separated by the stampeding mass of humanity. Knocked down, he was caught up in a flurry of knees and elbows. He rose to his feet only to meet the charge of a dozen orcs. One of them struck his leg with a mace, shattering his knee and shin bone. He fell to the ground and was stomped into unconsciousness.*

*He awoke before dawn in a town of the dead. He limped back and forth, sobbing, despondent, searching for her body. It took him awhile to realize that all the bodies were those of men. The women were gone. All the women were gone. They had been taken....*

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Lezcano choked on his own tears as the words spilled like an avalanche of hatred.

“Arrutch! The Procurer! Offspring of Lorgot! Head-torturer of Tyrant Baljulias! Priest of Grotaag! You! I came to kill you! To murder you! To annihilate you! You, you, you, you, you, you!”

Abruptly, he regained control. Silence reigned in Hell’s Foyer. The orc servants looked at him in astonishment, and Arrutch’s jaw hung slack in disbelief.

Finally, Lezcano spoke.

“Sahira. Her name was Sahira. She was my life’s treasure and you took her.”

Unfettered rage grew and swelled in his voice. “You took her. And you gave her to that maggot, that *m’hushwa*...and he took her. He raped her. He put his seed in....” He gagged on the words, and could not get them out.

The next words he spoke were shod with marble and gloved with lead.

“She put a knife to that sweet throat.... She killed herself.”

The Procurer’s mouth worked soundlessly as he found himself overcome with outrage. He coughed once, tried to speak, but failed. Another cough, another attempt to speak, another failure.

Finally, he shouted. “*Me?* You came to kill *me?*”

The torturer was beside himself with fury and confusion. “*You came to kill me?* But you are nothing. A...a boy.... A farmer.... A.... *You came to kill me over a girl?*” He crossed the room in a rush and grasped Lezcano’s sweating, bleeding head in his hands.

“She was nothing, a womb ripe for picking, a body to be used and discarded, naught but common street trash. I have brought scores just like her, *hundreds* of her kind to my master’s breeding chamber. He copulates, grants them the blessing of his sons, then sends them out to birth. She was nothing! And you came to kill me for this? For *this?*” He released his victim and shook his head in disbelief. “Fool. You wasted your life for this nothing. You didn’t even come to the right place. You broke into the house of Baljulias while I was here in the temple of Lord Grotaag.” He wiped his hands on

his robe as he seated himself.

“And yet, here we are. I found you, didn’t I?” Lezcano said.

Arrutch sucked in his breath in a hiss. “What are you saying, meat?”

Lezcano smiled kindly.

“Oh, nothing. I just think it’s very *predictable* of you, that’s all.”

And then it happened. One of the orcs groveling at the torturer’s feet snickered.

The Procurer rose from his seat, his yellow eyes stark with rage. He strode forward, grabbed Lezcano’s chin with one hand, and rammed a sharp-nailed thumb into his eye socket. Lezcano’s eyeball disappeared in a welter of blood and thick fluid. He gritted his teeth, trying to contain the scream that swelled up inside him, but could not do it; it boiled out of his throat and over this tongue and echoed and re-echoed from the stone walls.

The Procurer wrenched his thumb from the socket and whirled away from his victim. Spasmodically, he wiped his thumb on his fine clothes. With effort, he regained control of himself. Smoothing his hair, he spoke. “Release him. Strap him to the block. Call Stroke.”

The orcs quickly unbound Lezcano, and he fell to the floor in a boneless heap. Blood sprang from his head, arm, and leg. The knee and shin were smashed to splinters. Each orc took an arm and pulled him to the headsman’s block. They lay his head on the worn chunk of wood, chained his hands to its sides, and placed the alms basket before him. One of them was rising to summon the executioner when the chamber door swung open.

A large figure filled the doorway, hugely muscled and oozing menace. His head was covered in a burlap sack with two holes cut out for his eyes. He was draped in a blood-red robe from shoulder to floor. A massive, single-bladed axe was propped on his shoulder.

“Ah, Stroke. You read my mind,” the Procurer said. “Come, you have work to do.”

The figure approached slowly as the orc slaves donned burlap masks of their own. They placed a similar sack over Lezcano’s head, then ran a rope through metal rings on the floor on either side of him and over his neck and pulled it taut. As the rope tightened, Lezcano’s head was pressed to the block. He didn’t even bother to struggle.

As Stroke raised his axe, Arrutch clutched the iron amulet and bowed his head in contemplation of the sacrifice he was sending to his god. The Procurer heard the *swish* in the air and the *thunk* as the axe bit through flesh and bone, and his whole body trembled with pleasure. He started to raise his head, when he heard another *swish* and *thunk*.

He laughed. “Well, this is an historic day, Stroke! You must be losing your touch. How could you...?”

His mocking speech broke off when a spherical object rolled to his feet: a burlap-shrouded head.

Arrutch recoiled from the bloody stump that threatened to stain his fine raiment.

“You buffoon! Be more careful with the body parts...!” He shut up again as another masked head rolled into the first one.

“What in Grotaag’s name...?”

He turned to see the headsman unbinding Lezcano from the block. Two headless bodies — orc bodies — lay on the blood-soaked floor. The headsman pulled Lezcano to his knees and dropped a chain around his neck. A silver cross hung from its iron links.

Lezcano prayed. “Noble Thyr, bless your servant. He has walked willingly into this den of wickedness and been wounded for his efforts. Please, make whole what has been broken. Make strong what has been ruined.” He then fell silent.

And in that place of darkness, a light bloomed. It rose from the cross and swaddled Lezcano in an orb of healing light. He stopped bleeding. His broken bones and torn flesh healed. A look of peace suffused his face.

Arrutch stepped backward and tripped. He clutched the arm of his chair for support. He reached out with his own prayers of supplication, calling upon the power of Grotaag and beseeching him for aid, but found only silence.... Some greater power was blocking his ability to call upon the divine powers of his god. Only a truly formidable priest could command such power.

The headsman took off his mask. Underneath, was the face of a hobgoblin — scarred and strong — with great mutton-chop sideburns and a mustache worn in a most human

fashion. He bent down and placed his hand on the praying man's shoulder.

"Are you going to be all right, Father?" he said as he handed Lezcano his battle-worn hammer.

Lezcano smiled and stood up.

"Thank you, Jeux. Yes, everything is fine."

"What do we do now?"

"Well, firstly, we finish securing this hell-hole. Has everything gone according to plan?"

"Yes, as far as I know. Brother Duren's group has secured the gatehouse and cleared the garrison. The others are finishing the clerics of the orc god in their cloisters. With the head priest occupied here with you and inveigled by your shroud of Thyr, we were able to catch them all unawares."

"Then I guess we send the heads of these *nithings* to their master. I have just the container for them," he said and picked up the alms basket.

"This temple was once sacred to Thyr, and Grottaag's filthy name has left its stain upon it for too long. We reconsecrate it and restore it to its former glory. We make it a safe haven for like-minded folk who must travel to and from Lowport, where they can escape the treachery of that city so that it becomes a constant thorn in the Tyrant's side."

"Father Lezcano, I trust your wisdom completely, but you know the Tyrant would kill you for that. He'll send soldiers, assassins...whatever it takes to make a corpse of you."

Thyr's priest smiled. "I'm sure he will. But we'll be ready for them. Eventually, he'll get tired of losing and come for me himself. And that, my friend, is exactly what we want."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of Arrutch's whimpering on the ground.

"O, holy priest of Thyr, and one truly blessed in power!" he whined as he took in the complete absence of wounds from Lezcano's restored body and continued to grope desperately for some trace of a connection to his god. "How could I have known? Have mercy, lords. Have mercy!" He dragged himself across the floor to the door. "Yours is a god of justice, my hands bear no blood. Mine is but the voice of Baljulias, he is the will. I'm not even the instrument; it is the orcs who spill the blood in his name. Justice, I beg it! The messenger is not deserving of death. Have mercy, O great priest."

"Great priest?" Father Lezcano replied. "Why, you have it all wrong, sir; I'm nothing more than a humble friar...too poor even to own a proper blade." He easily hefted the hammer to his shoulder as he said it.

Jeux stepped forward and grabbed the torturer by the heel, dragging him toward the block. He spoke.

"Do you want his head now?"

"No, no. Let's take our time with this one."