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# Black Gate

## Adventures in Fantasy Literature

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**Submissions:** please note we are currently closed to submissions. Please see our website for updates and submission guidelines. When we were your age, Pluto was a planet.

## *Editorial: Solitaire Fantasy Gaming*

*By John O'Neill*

As I write this it's late April, and I've just returned from the Game Manufacturers Association (GAMA) trade show, the annual gathering of hobby game creators and retailers held every spring in Las Vegas. The hobby games industry – by which I mean those games played regularly by adults, such as role playing games (RPGs), collectible miniatures, and board games – is in a bit of a slump. Sales have been particularly dire for RPGs since the collapse of the d20 boom in 2004-05. Of the many dozens of companies that popped up seemingly overnight in the heady days after Wizards of the Coast announced a free license to the core **D&D** ruleset, the so-called d20 license, a bare handful still exist today.

But you wouldn't know it from GAMA. I saw glimpses of a vast array of exciting upcoming products, such as Mongoose Publishing's **Cthulhu-Tech**, a futuristic role playing game of giant robots versus Cthulhu, and Privateer Press' **Monsterpocalypse**, an action-filled game of city-crushing giant monster battles, featuring Cthulhu, skyscraper-sized space aliens, and – yes! – more giant robots. If you're a fan of Cthulhu and giant robots, life is good. Which of course goes without saying. Like, totally.

I wandered the show floor for eight hours with a press pass and a camera, conducting quick interviews with dozens of game companies for a **Black Gate** website article, furiously scribbling quotes in a little notebook and generally feeling, however fleetingly, like a real journalist. Overall it

was an educational and exhilarating trip, a 24-hour total immersion into gaming culture. And just as I came away from the World Fantasy Convention feeling jazzed about the publishing industry, so too did I leave Las Vegas highly optimistic about the future of hobby games.

Normally, that would be it. But fortunately, I was able to capture just a little bit of gaming magic for you this very issue. It's a bit of an experiment, but I think you'll enjoy it.



### **Solitaire Gaming**

One of the great things about gaming is that it's usually a social affair. Exercising your imagination as part of a carefully crafted role playing game is one thing, but taking part in a shared exercise in imagination is something else entirely. Sure, pretending to be piloting a giant robot battling a 200-foot Cthulhoid monster can be fun. But not nearly as much as making

fun of your friends when they do it. Dorks.

Still, while gaming is usually social, it isn't always. Sometimes you can't get together with your friends. Sometimes they just need a little while to cool off. You think they'd be a little less sensitive to some good-natured kidding by now.

Growing up in Ottawa in the late 70s and early 80s, I was part of a large and very active community of gamers with diverse interests. We played a lot of **D&D**, of course – but also **Call of Cthulhu**, **Traveller**, **The Fantasy Trip**, and other RPGs. We enjoyed classic board games like **Ogre**, **Dune**, and



## Black Gate

**Risk**, and loved to play poker too, and it was never difficult to find players to gather around a table on a Friday night, even on short notice.

It wasn't always about group gaming, though. A few solitaire games floated about as well, and the best of them – such as Steve Jackson's **Death Test** and Dwarfstar's **Barbarian Prince** – were highly involved and enormously challenging, which brought a competitive edge to the mix. We'd pass the games around and compare notes to see just who dropped their dice when that nest of spiders burst forth from the first treasure chest in **Death Test**.

But it was more than that, really. Strange as it may seem, some of my most memorable role playing sessions occurred alone. A really good solitaire RPG mixes the immersive power of fiction with gaming's ability to involve you in the action, and when done well that's a potent combination. In those times I was transported to another world, without the distractions that come with of a group of fellow players arguing over what toppings to put on a pizza.

Just a few years later, computer gaming effectively killed the tiny solitaire gaming industry. The first generation of computer fantasy games, beginning for me with Avalon Hill's **Empire of the Overmind** and SSI's brilliant translation of **D&D, Pool of Radiance**, captured much of the magic and also automated all of the record keeping. Solitaire RPGs pretty much went the way of the dinosaur by the middle of the 80s with the demise of Metagaming, the pioneering microgame publisher that had produced **Death Test** and many others.

Nonetheless, I feel very fortunate to have lived through the Golden Age of solitaire fantasy gaming. Some of those games were rich enough to have stayed with me for decades, and with their complex adventure paths and game systems they clearly showed the way for the fledging computer gaming industry, which took many years before it was able to match their artistry and creativity.

## A Barbarian Prince

In some ways, the debate between solitaire pen & paper and computer games is much the same as that between novels and movies. We've all heard purist fans proclaim that no movie will ever truly capture the magic of their favorite novel (and in truth, there's a few novels I feel that way about myself, including **Lord of Light** and **Bridge of Birds**). It's an old argument, and I think it sometimes comes down to whether you prefer to imagine things for yourself, or to let someone do it for you.

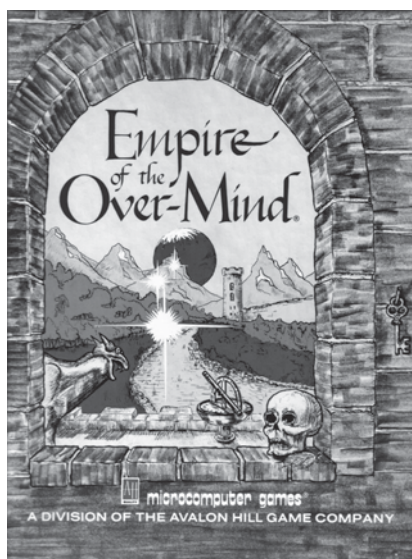
Now, I'm perfectly willing to surrender my imagination to talented computer game creators and moviemakers (especially when they've shown the imagination to sign, say, Keira Knightley or Natalie Portman. Or Jackie Chan in his early period). But that doesn't mean I want to do it all the time. And while there have been truly inspired computer role playing games, I don't think any of them has captured the simplicity and style of, say, **Barbarian Prince**.

### Barbarian Prince

was designed by Andrew Hendrick and produced by legendary microgame publisher Dwarfstar Games in 1981. Dwarfstar produced only eight games in its short history, all of them high-

ly prized today by collectors – partially because the boxes were flimsy and easily crushed, ensuring that few copies survived, but also because the games were both imaginative and splendidly designed, and many were perfect for solitaire play. And of them all, **Barbarian Prince** was the finest.

*Evil events have overtaken the northlands. You – Cal Arath, Barbarian Prince – are in hiding and the usurper who killed your father, the Old King, now sits on his throne. Now you must flee south and raise enough gold by adventuring to equip an army with which to regain your rightful heritage. The way will not be easy, for the men of the south are strange, and some are schooled in the black mysteries. The passes are guarded by*





*monsters, and in the ruined cities lurk foul things never born of this earth...*

Pretty basic box copy for the time. You got an axe, and “foul things never born of this earth” to whack at. What can I say – our needs were simple.

Still, it promised a game of epic scope, at least. Plenty of solitaire games offered dungeons to explore and riches to hoard... but none called upon you to use your blood-stained booty to raise an army, or to win back a kingdom. That was novel.

**Barbarian Prince** delivered on the promise in its ad copy. No two games were remotely alike – you might stumble across a deadly ancient ruin hiding a magic relic in the foothills one time, and search them fruitlessly every attempt thereafter. Even with money, raising an army wasn’t easy. And having an army was no guarantee of winning back your kingdom, either. In fact, in over twenty years of owning this game, I have yet to fully manage it. In later games I just took my Prince south to open a line of taverns, and quietly retire in anonymity.

Winning **Barbarian Prince** is the Mount Everest of solitaire games.

### The Fantasy Trip

Part of the reason my poor **Barbarian Prince** remained frustrated was due to Steve Jackson, the enfant terrible of 80s fantasy gaming. Jackson’s early career began with Metagaming, where his first few games – including **Ogre**, **Melee**, and **Wizard** – were tremendously successful. Jackson had a knack for fun and easy-to-learn games that could be opened and played in minutes, and for creating vivid worlds to set them in. If it weren’t for Jackson’s efforts, I might have found a lot more time to guide my Prince back to his throne. As it was, he had to settle for bartending.

Jackson’s first solitaire game for Metagaming was **Death Test**, a programmed dungeon that called on you to prove yourself before entering service as an elite royal guard. Most programmed adventures at the

time were simplified RPG scenarios: enter a room, kill the monsters, take the treasure, then choose from some basic options. Want to toss back that mysterious potion? Turn to paragraph 61. Search for secret doors? Paragraph 131. Loot the kitchen for fresh vegetables and a light vinaigrette dressing? 98.

Jackson brought his flair for tightly-woven rules and believable world-building to his solitaire games. The system was based on his **The Fantasy Trip**, perhaps the most elegant and simple RPG on the market. Each game was also self-contained, logically consistent, and most of all splendidly written. There were plot twists, unexpected traps, characters you could relate to, monsters you could sink your teeth into, and believable goals to strive for, all in a game you could play in under 45 minutes. Think of it as speed dating, but without having to floss first.

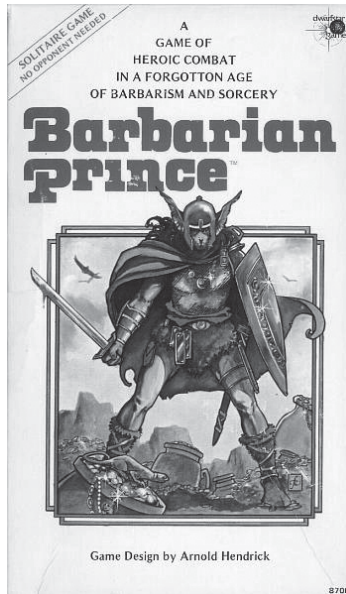
Not surprisingly, they were a big hit with gamers, eventually spawning an entire line of **Fantasy Trip** solitaire games from Metagaming, running the gamut from high fantasy (**Graill Quest**, **Orb Quest**) to science fiction (**Security Station**). And as with Dwarfstar games, collectors have driven their prices to insane heights on eBay. Especially the ones I don’t have. Figures.

### A New Generation

I gave up searching for new solitaire RPGs long ago. Their era had passed. Or so I thought.

At least until Todd McAulty submitted an intriguing review of **The Island of Lost Spells**, a compact little item from Dark City Games, for **BG 10**. It was advertised as part of **Legends of the Lost World**, a new line of solitaire games “fully compatible with **The Fantasy Trip**,” which made them the first of their kind in over two decades.

Todd’s enthusiasm was infectious, and in issue 11 Andrew Zimmerman Jones gave a hearty thumb’s up in his piece on Dark City’s **Wolves on the Rhine**. And last month



**BG's** Managing Editor Howard Andrew Jones jumped on the bandwagon too, calling to tell me he was playing their **Crown of Kings** with his kids. "We love it," he said. "Haven't you ever tried solitaire RPGs? I thought you were a little more hip." Smartass.

Suddenly it felt like 1980 again, when I was surrounded by friends eager to compare notes on how we'd managed to get past that last room with the giant in **Death Test**. I admit I never thought this would happen again. I thought everyone was too busy playing **World of Warcraft**.

Which brings me to why there's a solitaire role-playing game from Dark City Games bound into your copy of **Black Gate 12**.

### Orcs of the High Mountains

**Orcs of the High Mountains** (OtHM) is an introductory adventure from Dark City Games, designed to quickly familiarize you with their **Legends of the Lost World** system and show you just how fresh and exciting it can be. It's fun, easy to pick up, and can be learned and played in under 30 minutes. All you need is a couple of six-sided dice and a pencil. The rules fit into two pages, and anyone who's played an RPG will grasp them in minutes.

**OtHM** is compliments of George Dew, publisher of Dark City Games, who contacted me shortly after I relented to all this peer pressure and finally purchased a bunch of his games on his website. George turned out to be a charming and energetic guy, and I was so impressed with his products that we struck up a lively correspondence. George tried some issues of **BG**, liked what he saw, and wondered if there was some way we could work together. One thing led to another, and eventually George offered us a sample adventure to show our readers just what all the fuss is about.

No real interest in role playing games? **OtHM** is still highly enjoyable as a choose-your-own-adventure story. Just follow the instructions in the paragraphs, and assume

you win all combat. But be sure to choose your path with care... there's more than one way to be killed, and plenty of danger that has nothing to do with swinging a sword.

It's the first time we've ever included a game with **BG**, and I hope you enjoy it. If you do, be sure to let us know. And if you like **Orcs of the High Mountains**, be sure to drop by the Dark City games website and try out their free PDF adventure, **The Sorcerer's Manor** (darkcitygames.com). Or buy one of their full-sized adventures – each comes with a thick 30- to 50-page adventure booklet, a sheet of counters, a full-color map, and a copy of the complete rules for **Legends of the Lost World**. I recommend **The Sewers of Redpoint**.



*You have been traveling for two days through the foothills of the High Mountains. You have stopped in the small village of Leaf's Hill to resupply.*

*An elderly couple approaches, wringing their hands. They explain they're worried about their niece, Graentel, who went out yesterday to pick wildflowers and has not been seen since. The old man tells you he found boot-*

*ed tracks and signs of a struggle, including a torn piece of Graentel's kerchief. He is certain that a tribe of mountain Orcs has taken her.*

*If you choose to help the couple, turn to page 149 to begin the adventure **Orcs of the High Mountains**.*

*If you can no longer resist the lure of the next Tumithak story, turn to **page 193**.*

*If, like everyone else, you read Knights of the Dinner Table first, turn to **page 222**.*

*Otherwise, turn to **This Issue** below.*

### This Issue

Boy, have we got some great stuff for you. James Enge makes his fifth consecutive appearance with "Payment in Full," his second full novella featuring Morlock the Maker... and a guest appearance from a sinister adversary who's crossed paths with Morlock in these pages before.

Todd McAulty finally drags himself away from solitaire role-playing long enough to make a long overdue re-appearance in our

fiction section with “The Soldiers of Serenity,” a tale of corporate horror that may put you off reading contracts for good.

We’re especially pleased to welcome Martha Wells back with a new Giliead and Ilias story, the tale of one of their first true adventures together, “Houses of the Dead,” in which Giliead and Ilias investigate the deadly secret behind a mysteriously abandoned

mountain village. Speaking of origin stories, Howard Andrew Jones treats us to the tale of the very first meeting of the ancient sleuths Dabir and Asim, who find very strange goings on indeed among the ruins of Assyria in “Whispers from the Stone.”

Ed Carmien rejoins us as well, with the sequel to his well-received “Before the Wind” from **BG 10**: “Knives Under the Spring Moon,” in which Paddy and Kris deal with a bizarre kidnapping – and a strange secret from Paddy’s past.

We welcome two new writers to Black Gate this issue: John Fultz, with a dark fantasy of a spider-haunted city and a daring theft with unintended consequences, “Oblivion is the Sweetest Wine;” and Constance Cooper’s surprising tale of an unusual bayou town and an even more unusual object, “The Wily Thing.”

Finally, we are extremely pleased to present, for the first time in magazine form, Charles R. Tanner’s “Tumithak and the Ancient Word,” the fourth and final installment of one of the great early sagas of science fiction. Unpublished for more than three decades following his death, “Tumithak and the Ancient Word” brings to a close the series that first saw light in the January 1932 issue of **Amazing Stories**. Long rumored to exist,

the story was generously offered to Back Gate by Charles’ son James Tanner, and scanned from the original manuscript by his grandson, and edited for **Black Gate** by Howard Andrew Jones.

We hope you enjoy.

### The Return of the Sword

I need to make a quick shout out here for the fine folks at *Flashing Swords*, and particularly editor Jason M. Waltz,

who’ve produced another fine anthology. **Return of the Sword** will be of particular interest to **BG** readers, as it contains work from several of our contributors, including Thomas H. MacKay, EE Knight, SC Bryce, and Robert Rhodes – as well as a new Morlock the Maker tale from James Enge. You can find it at fine bookstores and Amazon.com.

### Our First Nebula Award Nomination!

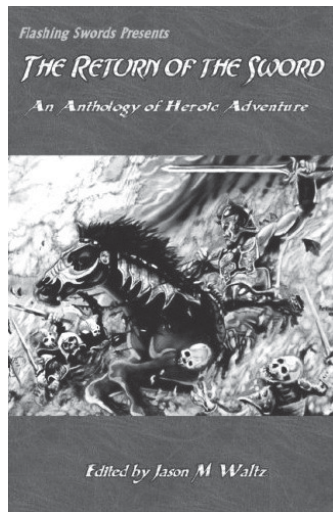
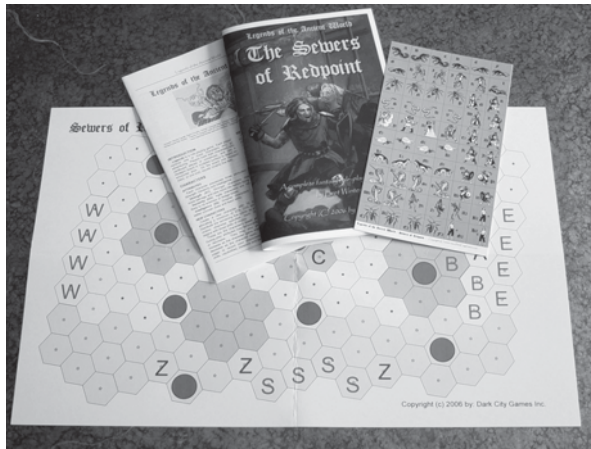
Speaking of shout-outs, I’d like to congratulate Judith Berman on the Nebula Award nomination for her novella “Awakening” in **BG 10**. We’ve had several stories make the long list in the past, but this is the first to make the final ballot. Go Judith!! Now, where’s that sequel you promised?

### Next issue

As promised, issue 13 will contain the third and final installment in Mark Sumner’s epic Naturalist saga, “St. George and the Antriders.” It will also feature the return of Peadar Ó Guilín, David Wesley Hill, and John R. Fultz, plus a host of new names, including John C.

Hocking, Amy V. Tibbetts, Myke Cole, L. Blunt Jackson, and many more.

You know where to find us.





# Letters

## Thoughts from our Readers

John,  
I haven't actually read any of **BG 11** yet but I did want to address your letter to subscribers, where you said female bathroom activities were a mystery. When I go to the bathroom with a pack of female friends, we generally talk about **D&D**.

Megan

*The mystery is solved. You know, if I'd known that in high school, things might have turned out a lot different.*

Just received issue #11. Glad to read in your letter to subscribers that you're doing so well (even deprived, cramped and exhausted). Like the mag; even the stamps on the envelope (like an old *Avengers* episode, with the forced dreams). Year's renewal herewith (\$29.95). Thank you.

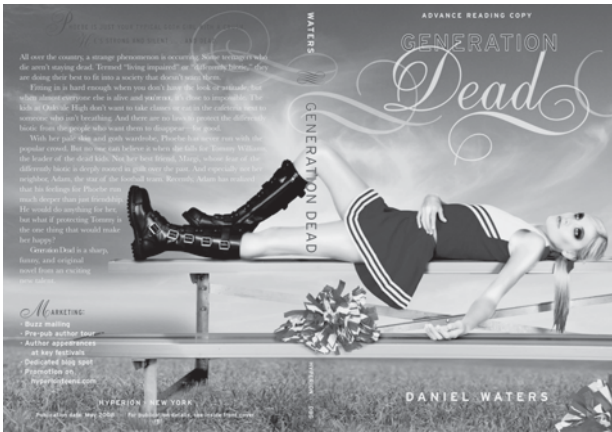
Unlikely as it seems, women (the keepers of the culture, the maintainers of society) have their beginnings in the giggly, gossipy group dash to the loo, where the ever-shifting topic of who's going out with whom, who said what, is discussed and analyzed with an eager thoroughness missing in many seminars. They study a shifting society to define and maintain their own place in it (not mystery, to a girl).

Jeanne T. Beatty

Sounds like **D&D** to me.

I just wanted to send a quick email to let you know I got issues 2 and 10 yesterday. They look AWESOME! They're beautiful! I love the covers and designs, the binding and the way it's formatted. The pages are bright, clear, feel fine against my fingers (I don't like traditional magazine pages since they tear so easily), and they don't tire my eyes. The layout looks great along with the artwork... I just can't compliment you enough on how beautiful the magazines look. Anyway, I'm totally stoked about this magazine and will tell interested friends.

Gabriel Guerrero



I just wanted to drop a quick note of thanks for the complimentary copy of **Black Gate** in the World Fantasy Convention swag bag. I've been enjoying it immensely – so much so that I wish we had more of a chance to talk (I was the guy Tina Jens introduced to you, waving the advance reading copy of my novel **Generation Dead**). So far my favorite bit is actually your editorial, if only because it makes me less alone in a world that does not care about monochrome modules and Grenadier miniatures.

Dan Waters

*It's a cold world, Dan. But you're not alone. Howard and I attend support meetings every Friday, and you're welcome. Bring your copy of **D1: Decent into the Depths**,*

and we'll bring dice.

And frankly, if we'd known your novel featured a cheerleader in combat boots, our conversation would have lasted a lot longer. It's not too late to send us a review copy. Or two.

Issue 11 – good stuff. I see you've included some interesting short items this time. Hope you can keep the improved paper and printing process – looks great.

You saved the best for last, loved Mark Sumner's "Naturalist" story, though it clearly seems to leave the short story format in preference for the serialized novel format – ends with a cliffhanger.

Good work throughout.

Ed Carmien

Just wanted to say the eight issues for \$55 sale is a great idea. With it I am able to catch up with all of **Black Gate** since my recent subscription. Thanks. Keep up the great work.

Henry Wong

I subscribed for the Martha Wells stories, and I'll be re-subscribing as long as you keep publishing Martha, Iain Rowan and James Enge. Great stuff.

Oh, and put me down in the "Black Gate is plenty family-friendly the way it is" side of the list.

Chris Simmons

Glad to hear it, Chris. You'll be happy to know we have big new novellas from both Martha and James this issue – and more on the way. Don't thank us. It's our job.

Dear John,  
My daughter introduced me to Martha Wells' **The Fall of Il-Rien** trilogy and I fell in love with all things Rienish and Syprian. I was perusing her website in search of more tales and was thrilled to find three short stories due in **BG**. On your website I found I could buy a subscription and get them all, plus an extra issue, which I didn't really want (at the time), but, oh well, I still had all that Giliead

and Ilias to enjoy and, you never know. I am a long time fan of the short form and Sci-fi/Fantasy.

I was truly amazed and delighted when I received my first **BG** (#10), even before I opened it up! I laughed heartily at your cover letter and thought to myself, what a find! I love to go through mags when I first get them and see what's up ahead, so I read the *Knights of the Dinner Table* comic first.

It was hilarious, especially for me, as I have a 20-year-old daughter, an aspiring author who loves all things dark and vampiry. I showed this to her and we had a good laugh. Then I laughed again when I read your editorial which mentioned the subscribers who read *KoDT* first. Well, now I was 'one of those'.

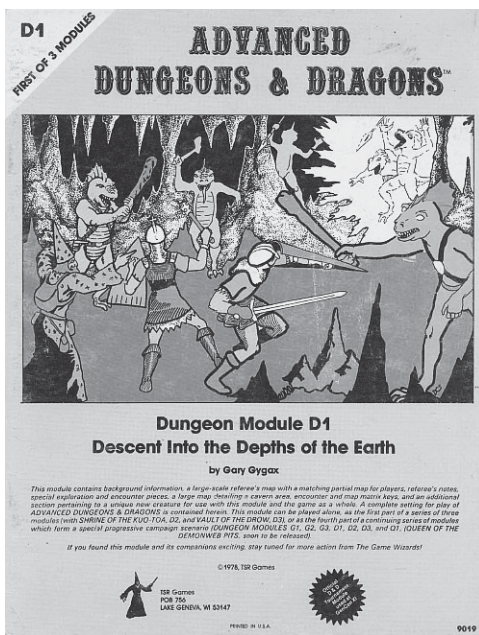
Soooooo, when I got my next **BG** I happily turned to the end to enjoy another laugh and was not as taken with it. I wondered why. I felt it dragged and then was funny in the end. AND THEN, I read your editorial, where you mentioned that some people had been after you for awhile to extend it to four pages. Well, I await further developments, but from my small pool of experience, you really only seemed to need two pages.

Two pages or four, I am sure I will continue, for (hopefully) a long time to come, opening up my **BG**'s and reading *KoDT* first. In fact, when I get all my back issues, which I recently ordered, I will most likely read them ALL first! Keep 'em coming!

Lisa Heinkel

*KoDT* has been squeezed back into two pages, thanks to the sheer volume of fiction in this issue. Will we do more 4-page strips? Only when we have a story that justifies it. Or space to fill at the last minute. Or Howard forgets to shake down publishers for advertising. Todd McAulty's story was so late it almost didn't make the issue, and we were this close to our first 28-page *KoDT* strip.

Publishing. It's not pretty.



*Dungeon Module D1: Descent Into the Depths of the Earth (TSR, 1978). Monochrome is beautiful.*

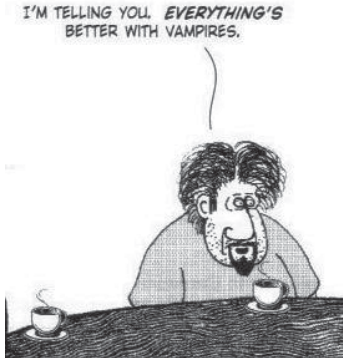
Eddy (KoDT: Java Joint) is my hero.

Ron Gill

*Mine too. He's clearly the voice of reason in that strip.*

I enjoyed meeting Howard and you at Archon, where I bought the first 10 issues of **BG**. I have read them all except for RPG articles which I am not into. I can't wait until you publish the fourth Tumithak story.

My only gripe (a small one) is your definition of a classic. To me a classic is at least fifty years old. Which reminds me. Just think of all of the old space operas (I read when I was young) and thought were out of date because they mentioned only eight planets in the solar system. Now they are back in date again.



*Eddie: Zen master, or just an idiot?*

Brian Finkel

*Brian - your wait is over. The fourth story, "Tumithak and the Ancient Word," which remained unpublished in Charles R. Tanner's lifetime, sees print at last. Turn to page 193 to get started. Enjoy!*

I subscribed to **Asimov's** when it was new, and to **Analog** soon after. I used to love their combination of great stories and artwork. For whatever reason, I let the subscriptions lapse many years ago. Recently, I bought a few and was very disappointed to find little or no artwork. I found I did not enjoy the stories half as much without them.

It gives me a warm feeling to find that combination again in your wonderful publication. Keep up the good work!

Paul Strahan

Which four issues carry the fantastic article on Clark Ashton Smith's fiction? Very interested.

Thank you for your time,

Michael K. Groves

*Actually, Ryan Harvey's CAS articles were exclusive content posted on the **Black Gate** website ([www.blackgate.com](http://www.blackgate.com)). Hope you've enjoyed them. If you're interested in more of Ryan's work, you should be aware that he also writes fiction - and just sold his first*

*short story to us. Stay tuned!*

I am very impressed with your magazine. I'm a major SF / Fantasy reader and I regret to say that I have never read a magazine in which every story interested me from the start - until now. I've only read **BG 11** and have just started on the recently delivered **BG 1**, but I have thoroughly enjoyed each story - especially "Soulthief" and "The Mudslinger."

Thanks for the efforts,  
Tim Rich

Hi John,

Congratulations on another great issue with #11. The cover, although nicely done, is kind of bleak compared to issue 10. I understand the symbolism with regards to the name of the magazine

and all, but I guess I'm just a strange comic-book-like critters with bright colors kinda guy. I must say I'm dying for a cover by Chuck Lukacs, who is by far my favorite illustrator within **BG**. Would it be possible to provide some more background information on the people who create the great illustrations with the stories? Maybe an interview, or a behind the scenes snapshot of how these people work? I feel these artists contribute greatly to the look and feel of the magazine, and definitely deserve some more attention.

The fiction in this issue was great, especially the pieces by Peadar Ó Guilín, James Enge, Ben Wolcott and Mark Sumner. "Soulthief" by Ben Wolcott made me think of the Cugel stories by Jack Vance. Not because of his style of writing, which is entirely different, but mainly because of the mischief and treachery in this story. I had to grin deviously the entire time whilst reading, a very good sign from my point of view. Anyway, I love a good story about thieving any day of the week.

Oh yeah, kudos to Storn Cook, Mark Evans, Matt Hughes, Chuck Lukacs (go Chuck!), Malcolm McClinton, Bernie Mireault and Christoffer Saar for their magnificent art!

Another fine issue and with new stories coming up from Enge, McAulty and Howard Andrew Jones I can hardly wait for number 12.

By the way, the guys from escapepod.org are starting a Fantasy podcast site: castle-



pod. You might want to motivate your contributing authors to start submitting there a couple of weeks after publication in **BG**. Good marketing never hurts!

Cornelis Alderlieste

*Hi Cornelis – good to hear from you again. Your suggestion for an “Artist Showcase” for the great artists who’ve worked on the magazine is something we’ve considered for a while. What would you think if we did it on the website? If we’re going to showcase art, it would be great if we could do it in color.*

I was curious about **Black Gate**’s policy on manuscripts based on existing characters, and what the procedures would be in clearing the way for possible publication. I am in the process of writing a book based on a character that exists in at least two forms of media, and wondered about publishing an original work on it. I would appreciate any information you can provide, as I am new to this environment, writing and attempting to be published. My idea is an original concept based on the existing character(s) and I am creating several characters (both major and minor) in this work.

Thomas Lovelady

*Your letter actually has a few elements, so let’s take them one at a time.*

*First, **Black Gate** publishes pretty much exclusively original, unlicensed fiction, with the exception of licenses owned by people associated with the magazine, (such as Don Bassingthwaite’s **Kingdoms of Kalamar** tale in **BG 7**, set in the world owned by Kenzer & Co,) and even in that case, it was original characters in an established setting.*

*It’s not that we have anything against licensed fiction. But publishing new fiction using existing media characters requires obtaining a license to use those characters from the owner, and that can be very difficult and expensive – and is usually all but impossible for new writers. We’re not set up to negotiate such licenses, so if you’re interested in*

*writing stories featuring (for example) Conan, Elric, or Xena, you’ll need to negotiate a license yourself. Properties owned by large corporations, such as Disney characters and Paramount’s **Star Trek**, are generally off limits at any price.*

*Even after all that work, there’s no guarantee we’ll like the story. Even if we **do** like it, the chance that we’ll pay enough to compensate for the cost of the license is pretty slim... we pay a few hundred dollars for a short story, and a license to any of the properties mentioned above will likely cost you five figures (if you can get one). Sorry to be so negative. Hopefully I managed to shed some light on using licensed media figures, anyway. Good luck with your project!*

Thanks so much sending me for the word totals for the last three issues of **Black Gate**. Added together, your fiction word count comes to 256,540.

Just for the fun of it, and to put things in perspective, the Big 3 [**Asimov’s**, **Analog**, and **F&SF**] totals all run between 500,000 and 600,000 original words of fiction per year. So if you put out 6 issues per year (half what they do) you’d be right in there with the amount of original fiction.

Dave Truesdale

*Six issues a year?? Bite your tongue. We’re still dreaming about four.*

Congrats. It was another great issue. I even read some of the reviews this time and have ordered the first **Dresden Files** book and considered ordering the **Traveller** CD. Still might.

You may have caught some flak for so many continuing stories. Personally, I can’t wait until the next installments and will be disappointed if some have to skip issues. Less so if you can keep up the quarterly releases. Even [Mark Sumner’s] the Naturalist saga is growing on me.

Keep up the awesome work!

Todd Ruthman



*“Soulthief” by Ben Wolcott (BG11). Art by Christoffer Saar*

## *Oblivion Is the Sweetest Wine*

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*John R. Fultz*

When Taizo of Narr approached the remote city of Goth he saw first its thirty-three towers of black basalt. The structures rose like baroque spears on the horizon, piercing the purple clouds of dusk. As the Narrian's steed carried him closer, he surveyed the vast mass of dark webs that linked the towers like hanging bridges, obviously a product of the city's gargantuan spiders. Once he passed through the eastern gate, Taizo found himself immersed in the domain of the holy arachnids. They scuttled along the broad avenues, up and down the sheer sides of the towers, bearing the silk-garbed nobles of Goth to and fro at the direction of grim, tattooed drivers. The common folk of the city greeted Taizo kindly on that day, unaware of his plan to blaspheme against their eight-legged god.

Tonight, halfway up the central spire of the Temple of the Great Mother, the foreigner clung by his fingers and toes to crevices in the dark masonry. Glancing down at the geometrical sprawl of flickering street lamps, Taizo promised himself a third time that this would be his last job.

Even now, when his mind should have been focused on the details of the perilous climb, his thoughts returned to Syyra. Lovely, dark-eyed Syyra, whose skin was the delicious brown of autumn-fired almonds, whose lips were red and sweet as the ripest berries of spring. Taizo had come to Goth two months ago to steal that which the city would never offer in trade or tribute, not even to the mightiest of kings. Yet it was the city that had stolen from him, and the lost object was his own heart, held now like a precious jewel about the slender neck of the Gothian maiden. She was half Taizo's age, a daughter of the city's supreme caste of purebloods.

Taizo had been walking the streets near the great temple a few days after entering the city, when an elephantine arachnid lumbered by, its back-born pagoda crowded full of purebloods on their way to a ceremonial banquet. Taizo withdrew, along with the street's crowd of busy peasants, to let the holy beast pass. Some irregularity in the cobblestones caused the humongous spider to shift its bulk abruptly, spilling Syyra from its overloaded back. If not for Taizo, she'd have hit the ground and been injured or killed. But the stranger caught her in his

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*Illustrated by Mark Evans*



• EVANS 07 •



## Black Gate

strong arms.

Eyes the color of night stared at him from the ruffled folds of her veil. Taizo's hawkish nose, slender mustache and sable hair, worn long in the southern style, invoked distant empires and foreign romance. Unlike the conservative men of Ghoth, he wore golden bangles in his earlobes, a crimson scarf tied about his forehead, and a silver stud pierced his lower lip. He held her slender body a bit too long against his chest, incensed by the jasmine scent of her warm skin.

Taizo realized later that he had fallen in love in that very instant. She offered him only her name and a bow of thanks that day, rushing away to rejoin her pure-blood coterie. But a series of clandestine meetings followed over the next few weeks, Syra arranging through servants to meet with him outside the grounds of her family's estate, and Taizo eager to taste her sweet lips. She became an addiction for him, though the affair had to remain a secret. The purebloods of Ghoth did not have intimate relations with foreigners; their untainted bloodline was a cherished and closely guarded treasure. Yet her ardor for him was undeniable, so they loved one another in the discreet rooms of lesser-known taverns.

"My father would kill me," she'd told him a few nights ago, "were he to know of our love."

"He'd have to kill us both, my dear," Taizo replied. They huddled together beneath a blanket of furs, staring at the sickle moon through a frosted window as the city slept.

"So he would," she said. "But I would risk this and more for you, my lovely Narrian."

He kissed her on the forehead, where the spider-shaped birthmark shared by all the purebloods sat like a dark diadem. He ran his nimble fingers through her silky black hair.

"Come away with me," he said, hardly believing what he was asking. "We'll build our own home together, the king and queen of our own estate. There's choice land to be had in the outer territories of Narr. Close enough to travel into the great city whenever we want, far enough from Ghoth to avoid the wrath of your father. We'll give him a few years to calm down before we return to visit. Then he'll see that you've become a lady of means, that I've given you a good life, and he'll accept us."

She lay her cheek against his pale chest, sighing. "What a lovely dream," she said. "Can it be so? Have you the means to acquire such an estate? I know that you are not truly an importer of silks."

Taizo grinned. The girl knew him so well after only three weeks, she could see through his cover. He must not tell her too much, not yet. "In a short while, I will be one of the richest men on the continent," he confided. "I have certain... business arrangements to take care of here in Ghoth. Then I will take you from here to honeymoon in the decadent splendor of Emeran Thah. From there, we'll travel to Narr and secure our estate."

This pleased her greatly, and she asked for no more details. The tightness of her grip on his skin and the urgent pressing of her lips against his exhibited her total belief in his plan. He might have told her the truth of his purpose in Ghoth if she had asked, but he was glad she did not. The less she knew about the blasphemy he was to commit, the better.

Taizo expected to enjoy a splendid retirement soon. He would raise a big family in an exquisite country estate with his young wife. But before that dream became a reality, there was tonight's duty to attend. Tonight he would steal a grand future for himself and lovely Syra.

Near to the top of the temple's main tower, he climbed now among the scattered remnants of decaying webs, flapping in the night wind like the torn banners

of spectral armies. Dawn was not far away, and this was his window of opportunity. When the sun rose, a swarm of giant spiders would emerge from the portal atop the spire, crawling down into the temple courtyards where handlers would ride them into the city streets. Then, a few hours after sunset, the spiders would re-enter the temple by climbing this tower again, and descending its inside surface toward the underground warrens where they were fed and groomed.

Right now Taizo was the only creature scaling the tower, but he must complete the climb before daybreak or face the onrushing spiders on their way down. His goal lay deep below the temple, in the catacombs where the great arachnids were birthed and housed. This labyrinth could only be reached from within the temple itself, and the only unguarded entrance was the spider-portal at the tower's summit. The irony of entering the temple by the same route as the monsters themselves, climbing up then down, was not lost on Taizo. His hands and feet were daubed in a sticky, black solution distilled from the boiled webs of the beasts, a concoction traded only to select clients on the black market. Simply possessing such a fluid would earn a death penalty here in Ghoth. The city's rulers traded the expensive silks woven from the webs, and produced widely-available ointments and unguents from spider dung, but all other materials related to the holy arachnids were forbidden from commercial uses.

Nevertheless, certain illegal products made their way to Narr along the secret routes. But the object of Taizo's mission on this night was a substance that not even the shadiest black-market merchant would dare to handle. The mere thought of acquiring it would not enter into most men's minds.

However, Taizo's current employer was no normal man, but one whose extravagant appetites knew no prohibition.

Climbing at last onto the lip of the hollow tower's summit, Taizo hesitated a moment, studying the arc of the moon. He would have to be quick. The portal yawned before him like the mouth of a gigantic well, filled to the brim with darkness. The sour-sweet stench of spider flesh wafted up to fill his nostrils. He



**John R. Fultz**

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*Photo by Hoppy Chandler*

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climbed feet-first into the hole, descending quickly yet carefully toward the temple's interior. The dim light of torches soon became visible far below.

The light grew stronger as he descended. At last he emerged above a great domed chamber, set about with thirteen arched entrances, hallways leading to various wings of the temple. A circle of massive basalt pillars held up the lofty dome. In the center of the great chamber, directly below the chimney-like aperture from which he now hung, another circular well-mouth led directly into the dens of the spiders. He imagined the spiders crawling out of that hole and up the pillars toward the hollow tower he had just descended. He'd seen them move at full speed, hauling tons of merchandise, and knew that they could scale the tower and descend its outer wall in a matter of moments. The beasts moved quicker than southern-bred stallions, even when traveling vertically. Soon the sun would rise and the mass of eight-legged giants would pour forth from the pit like a cloud of ink released in water.

Holding tight to the bottom rim of the roof-aperture, he swung toward the nearest pillar and shimmied down, bare feet touching the cold stone of the floor without a sound. The particular subsection of the spider-warrens he sought lay beyond one of these thirteen arches. If he continued down the central tunnel he would find only a legion of full-grown spiders and be caught in their webs, or impaled by the spears of their keepers. He must travel a precise route laid out for him by his contact inside the temple. Drawing his black cloak tightly around his shoulders, he glided toward the seventh arch, past the twin torches that guttered on either side, and into the thick shadows beyond.

At an intersection some ways down the hall he went to a stone low in the western wall, prying it loose with his dagger. Behind in a narrow niche lay the hooded robe of a spider priest, left here for him by his inside man. Though only purebloods could attain the ranks of the priesthood many temple servants were of the lower castes. One of these men, Ingudi by name, was a friend of Taizo's from years past, and had long been his source for prohibited Ghothian products. For a generous sum of gold Ingudi had educated him during the past month on the temple's design, helped plan the details of this unthinkable heist, and left for him this stolen priest raiment. Pulling the hood over his head, Taizo thanked the faithless Ghothian under his breath and headed in the direction of the birthing chambers.

Taizo walked unhurriedly, imitating the manner of the silent priests who often strolled in groups along the city's streets; he'd studied their movements in preparation for this night. A cold dread filled his stomach as he anticipated the truly difficult portion of his mission, that which lay directly ahead. Only a fool would attempt this, so fool he must be. If he were caught, they would feed him alive to the great spiders. He thought again of the vast hoard of gold and jewels that awaited him in Emeran Thah.

Not three months ago he had stood in awe before a roomful of glittering treasures, a goblet of blood-colored wine in his numb hand, listening as the Sultan of Emeran Thah enticed him to accept this challenge.

"All of this wealth will be yours," said the fat Sultan. "Should you complete this single task for me." A shaven-headed servant boy approached carrying an ornate smoking pipe. The Sultan bent to draw the cloying smoke into his overtaxed lungs.

Taizo's eyes glittered as brightly as the hoard he surveyed. Casks of rainbow-colored jewels spilled across the marble flags, silver barrels overflowed with gold coins of ancient mint; diamonds, topazes, emeralds, opals and a hundred other varieties of gemstone glowed like frozen fire in bowls of carven jade, or lay shining in loose mounds. His mouth watered; here was more wealth than he had acquired in twenty years of successful thievery, enough to placate a king, enough to purchase a small kingdom, or fund a war. All this for fulfilling a single contract. The



Sultan was mad, of course, but his madness would make Taizo a very rich man.

“Come,” said the Sultan, exhaling a cloud of drug-smoke, “now that you have seen the price, let us discuss your contract.”

Taizo followed him to the splendor of his private quarters, deep within the aged palace that was the heart of Emeran Thah, city of debauchery and delusion. The entire culture of the Emerans was built on the trade and consumption of mind-altering substances, drugs and elixirs to thrill the mind and deaden the soul. A city of ancient wealth had degenerated into a haven of fantastic indulgences. Even the common folk who kept the city running worked not for gold and silver, but for their share of the opiums, hashish and other drugs that fed their addictions.

The obese Sultan manifested the soul of his antique city well. His eyes were the color of milky crystals, his skin the unhealthy pallor of a nocturnal creature, and his bulk fed on the hour on fine foods prepared unceasingly by carefully drugged servants. Even the wines of Emeran Thah were drugged. Taizo was careful to sip his slowly as the Sultan settled himself amid a pile of fringed cushions. Slave girls with eyes like vacant jewels arranged themselves across his bulk, laying their heads on his thighs like fat pillows. The Sultan stroked them mindlessly, as a bored man might stroke the fur of a housecat, and quaffed another goblet of spiced wine.

The monarch’s head nodded backward on his fat neck, and he gasped in a gout of air, sounding like a drowning man reaching the surface just in time. He motioned to the pipe-boy, who brought him another puff. As the smoke curled from his nostrils, the Sultan became a bloated dragon studying Taizo with wicked eyes, willing to devour him at any moment.

No, that was merely an illusion brought on by the Emeran wine, Taizo realized. A servant refilled his goblet, but he did not drink from it again.

“They say that the venom of a Ghothian spider can kill a man instantly,” mused the Sultan. “You have heard this?”

Taizo nodded. “I have, your grace.”

“Delivered into the flesh from the vicious mandibles of the great insects, it consumes and perverts the blood,” the Sultan continued. “I have seen the swollen corpses of men killed in this manner. It is quite fascinating.”

Taizo grinned, though the subject made him uncomfortable. Servants scurried about the chamber preparing the Sultan’s sixth daily feast.

“The Ghothians guard their spiders fiercely,” said the Sultan. “Though I hear they trade their web-silks to Narringian merchants.” He drank again from his ruby-encrusted goblet. “Yet this venom they would never trade. They worship the foul creatures, though they use them as beasts of burden, nonetheless.”

“You wish to obtain the venom of a Ghothian spider,” Taizo said, attempting to bring the discussion to its point.

The Sultan nodded, and puffed on his drug-pipe. Beads of sweat like tiny diamonds ran down his forehead.

“If you wish to distill a potent poison, great one,” said Taizo, “there are easier ways of —”

The Sultan stopped him by raising a pudgy finger bearing a massively-jeweled ring. “I do not wish the venom for its poisonous properties,” he explained. He leaned forward, lowering his voice in the manner of a youth discussing his recent tryst with a comely girl. “My sages tell me that the Ghothian venom, ingested in miniscule doses, is the most powerful hallucinogen in existence. Its effect is likened to speaking with the gods themselves, or viewing their heavenly vistas from the cradle of the soft earth. This is a pleasure I wish dearly to know...”

Taizo showed no sign of the distaste he felt at that moment. He merely nod-

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ded, thinking of the vast hoard, and the many dangers inherent in such an acquisition.

“I have had my fill of every substance known to thrill the mind, excite the senses, or broaden the perception,” said the Sultan. “I long for a new experience, Taizo. A fresh glimpse of the higher realms. Only the venom holds promise for me, and the hope for a taste of... transcendence. Will you help me to know this rarest of pleasures?”

Taizo accepted the Sultan’s tremendous offer, and the awesome challenge that accompanied it. He hadn’t expected to fall in love while in Goth, but now this new dream fueled his determination.

The stench of spiderflesh filled the black hallways as he drew nearer to the chamber for which he was searching. Ahead stood a pair of guards armored in plates of blackened bronze, heads wrapped in great turbans of spider-silk, each with a left hand resting on the hilt of a sheathed scimitar. They allowed him to pass into the temple’s eastern wing without molestation. His practiced walk and priestly disguise proved effective thus far.

Looming ahead, another great archway carved with Gothian runes and spidery diagrams signified the entrance to the birthing chambers. A stairway wound down into the earth. Taizo descended, ignoring the grotesque frescoes and murals on the walls, spider-headed gods wreaking havoc on the enemies of Goth, armies of mammoth spiders crawling across the carcasses of slain monsters. He did not contemplate the meaning behind those eerie panoramas, if there was any.

The stairwell opened into a great cavern lit by fires burning within volcanic fissures. Stretched among a hanging forest of pointed stalactites, an endless mass of webs held vast clutches of spider-eggs. He walked deeper into the stifling cavern, his eyes scanning its dark recesses. It seemed to go on forever, an entire underworld hung with thousands of unborn behemoth arachnids. Bloated female spiders larger than oxen crouched high among the webs, squeezing out fresh batches of wet, glistening ovoids to be immediately snared by the sticky strands, drying in tight clumps.

Taizo held his breath against the awful stench of the place. He must go deeper into this cavern to find what he sought. Ingudi had instructed him in what had to be done, and how best to do it.

“A spider is not considered full-grown until after its first year,” the Gothian had told him. “After that point, its skin is hard as stone, and it will be impervious to injury from falls, blades, or other piercings. You will need to find a young spider, one whose flesh is still soft, in order to extract the substance you seek. Preferably a newborn.”

Taizo listened closely as his old friend instructed him in the details of arachnid biology, the benefit of twelve years spent feeding, doctoring and administering the holy creatures of the temple. Ingudi explained that the young spiders were not permitted above-ground until several months after their birth, when their training would begin in the temple’s many courtyards. At birth, they were no bigger than large hounds, and easier to handle than their mature counterparts. Yet they were born with venom glands fully formed, and there lay the crux of Taizo’s plan.

He spied a group of priests harvesting from the webs. Twenty-one dark-robed purebloods snatched the heavy eggs from their lofty cradles with hooked poles. Two men manned each pole, depositing the freed eggs into the arms of other priests, who carried them individually toward the hatching dens.

Taizo noticed now that the eggs were dissimilar. Most were yellow-brown, mottled with white or purple splotches, but a few were of the purest white with

no markings at all. Creeping closer to the harvesting crew, hiding himself behind the rough outcroppings of stone and thick stalagmites, Taizo saw the eggs borne in two different directions by the priests, through the arched openings of two man-made corridors – one left, the other right. Which corridor would best serve his purposes, mottled eggs or white? Ingudi had mentioned nothing of this. He decided to take the right-hand passage, only because it lay closer to his present position. As the harvesting crew moved on down the length of the cavern to snare another ripe clutch of eggs, Taizo followed the priest who carried the last of the mottled eggs along the right corridor. After a few winding turns, he saw ahead the light of a great chamber, and heard the clicking sound of spider mandibles. A set of stairs led down into a deep chamber where dozens of newborn spiders scuttled across one another, learning to move themselves about on their eight thin legs. The floor of the chamber was littered with brown sand composed of the crushed and decayed eggshells of centuries. Perhaps fifty mottled eggs lay about, ready to hatch at any moment. The priest deposited the newest of these eggs respectfully among them, and walked back to the chamber's only exit. Taizo clung to the wall of the corridor as he passed, holding his breath, and the priest took no notice of him. Cautiously, he descended the steps into the hatching chamber, watching the black horde of young spiders seethe and crawl along the sandy floor.

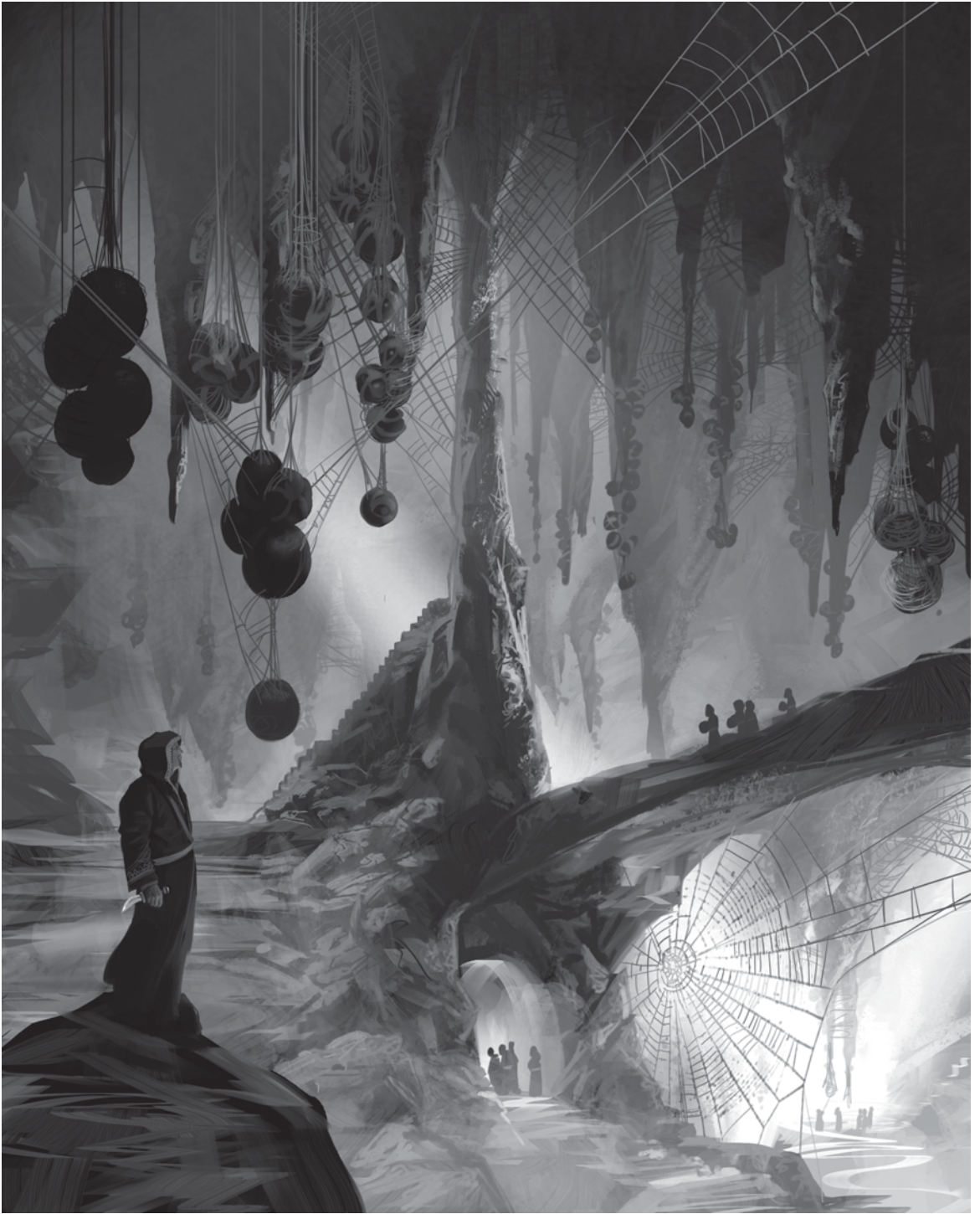
Taizo approached the nearest of the scuttling newborns, pulling a perfumed scarf across his nose and mouth. The spiders, some as large as small calves, seemed not to see him; their eyes were not yet fully formed, nor their other methods of sensory perception. His scarf tied securely across his face, Taizo pulled a small vial from his belt and removed its brass cork. Instantly, a pale mist flowed from the little flask to fill the room. This was the Breath of Sleep, the bottled exhalation of poison orchids that grew only on the distant Red Isle, fertilized by strange sorcery. Trade with the Red Isle was forbidden by the sorcerer kings of Narr, but Taizo knew smugglers who traveled there annually to barter with the reclusive barons who ruled its scarlet shores.

As the mist filled the chamber, the spiders' legs went limp, and they fell to the ground as if dead, only a slight twitching indicating that they were merely paralyzed. Taizo took forth a larger flask, this one of bronze, and approached the nearest of the stilled arachnids. Holding the empty flask directly below the precise spot Ingudi had indicated, near to the roots of its sharp mandibles, Taizo slid the blade of his dagger exactly three inches into the spider's flesh. The metal of the blade smoked as he removed it, as if dipped into acid, and green venom seeped from the wound into the flask. Its sour smell breached Taizo's scarf, and it burned his nostrils even through the mask.

In moments, the flask was half full of the caustic fluid. It would be enough for the Sultan's purposes. Taizo capped it with a plug of gold, jamming it tightly into the neck of the flask, and tucked it into his belt pouch. The spider's legs twitched, buffeting him about the head, and he drew away quickly. The Breath of Sleep would not last much longer, and he must be gone before the next priest brought a fresh egg into this place. Like a swift shadow, he glided up the stairs and along the corridor, hiding himself from the egg bearer walking toward him. Again Taizo went undiscovered, and he slipped through the archway into the egg cavern.

He should have fled for the exit then, taken his prize and sought the secret route out of the temple that Ingudi had described to him. But the yawning blackness of that other corridor called out to him like a naked jewel eager to be snatched from its master's careless hand. He saw a priest carrying one of the rarer white eggs into that passage. A tightness in his belly warned him not to





press his luck, that he didn't need to know any more of the Ghothians' secrets. But the thrill of discovery proved irresistible. Perhaps the Breath of Sleep had seeped through his mask and intoxicated him. Whatever the reason, he refused the prudent choice and followed the white egg's bearer toward a bright chamber at the left corridor's end.

There, two-dozen white eggs lay on velvet cushions. A pair of ornate doors stood open at the far side of the chamber, decorated like the walls in web-like patterns of gold filigree. Constellations of precious jewels gleamed on the ceiling, and the aroma of fresh jasmine filled the room, reminding him of Syyra's delicious fragrance. Taizo watched the priest lower the newest white egg onto a soft pillow, and hid from the man as he departed. No eggshells littered the immaculate floor here, and no spiders, newborn or grown, were present.

Two pureblood ladies entered through the far doors, descending the stairs to walk among the pristine eggs. How like mature versions of sweet Syyra they were, dark of skin and eye, graceful and lithe in their movements. They seemed to be waiting for something that would surely happen soon. Taizo crouched in the shadows, captivated.

A single egg began to jostle on its rich pillow. The women approached, lowering to their knees as hairline cracks grew along the ovoid's surface. The shell shattered, and a strangely familiar cry pierced the room. One of the women lifted something in her arms, while the other gathered the brittle eggshell fragments into a small basket. Then they stood, and Taizo saw clearly the object of their affection.

The first woman held a cooing infant close to her breast, and kissed its little forehead where sat the birthmark of the pureblood caste. Strands of amniotic mucous hung from its tiny body, trailing from its plump little hands. Taizo cried out then, and only the sudden wailing of the infant prevented his discovery. He blinked at the spider-shaped mark above the baby's eyes, identical to the one on the foreheads of the two midwives. The birthmark that all Ghothian purebloods bore.

Even his lovely, sweet-scented Syyra.

And Taizo was running, back the way he came. A priest bearing a fresh white egg halted in the middle of the corridor, and Taizo leaped at him. His knee caught the egg bearer's chin, sending him sprawling. Taizo heard the white egg crack as it hit the floor, but did not stop to see if the being inside was alive or dead. He ran into the great cavern, instinct guiding him toward the upper temple, where he might find escape from this nightmare underworld. The harvesters cried out as he ran among them, slashing and gouging with his envenomed dagger, leaving three dead or dying on the ground as he raced toward the distant stairway. The priests' howling disturbed the great spiders in the webs above, and they began dropping onto the floor, shaking the cavern with the thunder of their impact.

Taizo dodged between the hairy legs of a massive beast, narrowly avoiding mandibles that would have snapped his torso in half, and made it to the bottom of the stairwell with a host of the eight-legged giants swarming behind him. The stairway was too narrow for the big beasts to ascend, or they might have run him down in an instant.

Taizo burst forth into the hallway where the two guards he passed earlier were waiting for him, alerted by the commotion from below. The shock on their bearded faces told him that he was likely the first intruder they had ever seen in the temple. He used their surprise to his advantage, lunging in below their

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curved blades to sink his pitted dagger into one of their necks. The man fell backward, a gout of blood spewing across his breastplate. The other swung his scimitar at Taizo's head.

The tip of the blade kissed his cheek, and Taizo drove his heel into the man's knee. As the second guard crashed to the floor, Taizo brought the dagger swiftly down to lodge between the plates of the black armor, piercing the man's heart. He left the weapon stuck in the dead guard's chest and leapt to his feet.

Resuming his headlong flight, he soon found the concealed passage Ingudi had recommended. Pressing a certain stone set into a grotesque mural opened a small, one-way door. He crawled along a narrow passage that brought him out into the eastern courtyard. He stole quickly to the outer wall while alarm gongs rang within the great temple. As the outer guards' attention turned toward the alarms, he climbed up and over the wall, dropping into an alley that led into a well-trod thoroughfare. He left his priestly robes lying in the filth of the alley.

Insinuating himself into the bustling morning crowds, he headed straight for the city's main gate. He did not pause to look back at the dark temple or the great spiders rushing through the crowded streets. Attaching himself to a southbound trading caravan, he rode across the great purple plains atop a loaded silk wagon.

A few weeks later he delivered the flask of spider venom to the Sultan of Emeran Thah. Immensely pleased, the fat Sultan ordered a caravan train loaded with the wealth promised Taizo, and invited the Narrian to feast with him before departing. Not wishing to be rude, Taizo accepted.

As the senseless courtiers and blank-faced courtesans seated themselves around the Sultan's table, the ruler called for a glass of his best wine. Grinning, he pried loose the golden cork and poured a single, emerald drop of the venom into his drink.

"Now," spoke the sweating Sultan. "Let me know the true delight of transcendence." He toasted Taizo and drank deeply from the venom-tainted cup. His court of bleary-eyed addicts echoed his praise for the man from Narr.

The Sultan leaned back in his lion-headed chair, eyes bulging, and stared at the intricate jade designs on the ceiling. He spoke and moved no more after this.

Taizo excused himself while the rest of the court imitated the Sultan's final act of debauchery. Each Emeran noble tasted the venom, until they all sat dead and dreaming in their golden chairs about the great table.

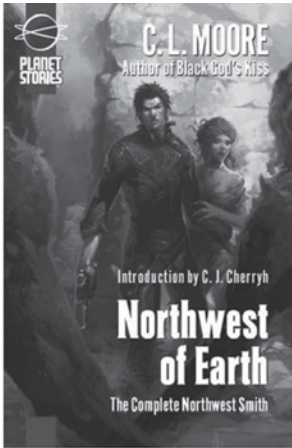
Taizo completed the journey back to Narr aboard a red-sailed riverboat, its hold packed full with his treasure, hidden in sealed fish barrels and crates marked for the transporting of spices. After docking in the Golden City, he hired a troop of laborers and several armed guards to escort him to his humble residence in the south quarter.

Despite his newly acquired status as a man of considerable means, Taizo never purchased an estate in the outer territories. Most nights, his fellow rogues found him drinking alone in the *Drowned Rat*, a lowly wharf-side tavern of dubious patronage. Some said he'd bought the dilapidated inn for his own after returning from a particularly profitable job up north.

But when they asked him about the rumor, and whether he'd truly gotten rich from one sweet job, Taizo gave no answer.

"Bring me more wine," he would say, and someone always did.





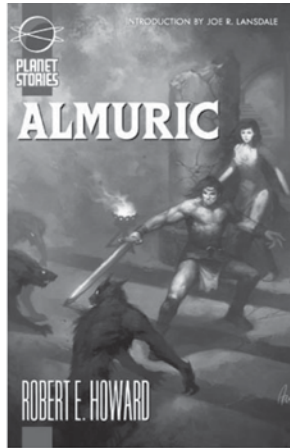
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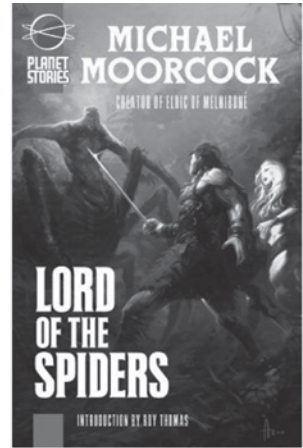
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## *Payment in Full*

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*James Enge*

“**T**he truth is my blood and breath, master: I cannot lie. I could sell either the youth or the maiden for six fingers of silver in Menebacikhukh, that benighted city of the Anhikh Komos where I was born. I will give you three silver fingers for either of them, seven for both.”

We were crossing the marketplace in Sarkunden when the slave-trader put a long corpselike hand on one of Morlock Ambrosius’ slightly uneven shoulders and made his pitch. Before that day I’d never so much as seen the walls of a city this big. From what I’d seen inside those walls, I didn’t think I was going to like big cities much, even before the slaver spoke to Morlock. As the maiden under discussion, I waited for Morlock’s response with real interest.

Morlock shot a cold gray glance at the Anhikh slave-trader and pointed out, “Buying or selling human beings has been illegal in the Ontilian Empire for more than two hundred years.”

“The contract would be unofficial, of course. I would trust to the honor I see in your face, and perhaps, for form’s sake, a guarantee placed in the hands of some mutually reliable person.” He let his eyes linger on me, stroking his lips in an oddly salacious gesture.

“Is he a slaver or a con-man, Thend?” Morlock asked my brother. “What do you say, Fasra?” he added, glancing at me.

“Whatever’s creepier,” I said flatly.

“I might go as high as eight fingers of silver,” the Anhikh continued, “in spite of the unfashionably dark color of their skin and their lack of manners. The latter would soon be mended, yes indeed it would. What do you say, master? What is your response, your (shall we say) wholly unofficial response?”

“I am not your master,” was the first part of Morlock’s unofficial response. The second part left the slave-dealer on all fours, gasping with pain.

“Keeps,” Thend muttered to Morlock. Following his glance, I saw a couple of armored figures approaching.

Morlock nodded, and paused his unofficial responses while the soldiers made their way through the market crowd. They wore gear exactly like the City Guards who stood at the gates, except they had the fist insignia on their shields: Keepers of the Peace.

“No fighting in the Market,” the senior Keep said, as he came up. “You’ll have to come along.”

“This man is a slaver,” Morlock said.

---

*Illustrated by Chuck Lukacs*





### James Enge

James Enge lives in northwest Ohio with his wife, their two children, two cats exhibiting various forms of mental illness, and a plecostomus who is partly squamous and partly rugose. He teaches Latin, Greek and classical civilization at a medium-sized public university. His stories have appeared in **Black Gate**, **Flashing Swords** ([flashingswords.sfreeder.com](http://flashingswords.sfreeder.com)), **Every Day Fiction** ([www.everydayfiction.com](http://www.everydayfiction.com)) and most recently in the anthology **The Return of the Sword**. His novella "The Lawless Hours" (**BG 11**) was selected by Dave Truesdale for his *Best of 2007* list. He can be reached through his webpage ([jamesenge.com](http://jamesenge.com)) or his blog ([jamesenge.livejournal.com](http://jamesenge.livejournal.com)).

His first four stories featuring Morlock the Maker appeared in **Black Gate 8, 9, 10** and **11**.

*Photo by Jessika Pfundstein*

"So?"

"Slavery's illegal."

The Senior Keep scratched his face and stared at Morlock for awhile. "I guess it is," he finally admitted. "Technically. But this guy paid his market-fee just like everyone else. What do you want me to do about it?"

"Let's check his wagon."

The senior Keep shrugged and gestured at the Anhikh. The junior Keep dragged him to his feet and checked the number on his market pass. We all trooped over to the matching wagon. On the outside brightly colored letters said (in two languages I knew, and probably others I didn't) that this was the roving headquarters of the Perambulations of Evanescent Joy and Portable Fun Company. Inside, the wagon was one big cage. When we dropped the back flap of the wagon and let in the light, dozens of eyes gleamed at us hopelessly through the bars. The wagon was half full of children of various ages, sizes, colorations (fashionable and unfashionable).

"They're orphans," the Anhikh slaver said sullenly.

"There's no orphan exception to the slavery law," Morlock pointed out.

As the senior Keep hesitated, Morlock forced the lock on the cage with something he had in his pocket and opened the door. The children, suddenly mobile, streamed out and vanished into the nearby alleys like water into sand.

The Anhikh muttered a few words that sounded like curses.

"Cool it," said the senior Keep. "Thanks to this gentleman you're a law-abiding citizen again. Keep it that way, or the girls'll be calling you 'Stumpy.'"

We left the Anhikh muttering imprecations over his broken lock. "Hey, pal," said the senior Keep to Morlock, "your face is sort of familiar. Didn't I cut your head off once?"

"It seems unlikely."

"It seemed that way at the time, let me tell you. But this guy whose head I cut off, or maybe didn't, he was an Imperial outlaw. You'll still have to come with me; your young friends can go about their business."

Morlock silently handed the guard a piece of paper with a seal of dark blue wax on it.

The senior Keep whistled as he read it. "An immunity. Signed by the Imperial commander at Sarkunden, Vennon himself. Only good for one day, but it must have been expensive."

“An associate acquired it for me.”

“He must like you a lot.”

“Not really.”

The Keep tapped the seal with one finger. “This thing isn’t actually valid, you know. Commander Vennon, may he lick his own elbow, can’t suspend the Emperor’s order of outlawry. I could still bring you in, or kill you on the spot.”

“Could you?” Morlock wondered mildly.

“Uh.” The Keep’s face took on a remembering look. “Maybe not,” he admitted. “Anyway, my skipper wouldn’t half-bless me if I did. It’d bring down the market-value for those temporary immunities, for one thing. My name’s Thrennick — no, don’t tell me yours, not when we’re getting along so well. See you around sometime.”

. . .

We continued across the marketplace until we came to a place that proclaimed itself, in a large banner, as CHARIS’ DISCOUNT EMPORIUM OF DELUXE WONDERS. A smaller and wordier sign said, *No job too large or too small! Satisfaction guaranteed! Charis and his team of expert thaumaturges will not rest until* — The rest was water-damaged and I couldn’t read it, but I doubted I was missing much. A still smaller but more convincing sign said firmly, *No Credit*.

We pushed our way inside. As my eyes were still adjusting to the dimness, the shopkeeper rushed up to us, his blunt pale features stretched to display a somewhat oily professional friendliness.

“Honored sirs, young lady, what can we do for you?”

“You can bring me Charis,” Morlock said.

I could see reasonably well by now — well enough to catch sight of a convincing replica of Morlock’s head staring down at us from a tall, tomblike display case. I turned around to point it out to Thend, but he’d already noticed it.

“I am afraid that Charis sees no one, absolutely no one, unless it is absolutely necessary,” the shopman purred. “It is one of his little ways. I am Stokkvenn, his chief assistant master thaumaturge-in-training, and I can almost certainly meet your needs. In all honesty, you might prefer to deal with me. Charis is a brilliant man, the greatest wonder-worker of our establishment, but his manners are a trifle — Excuse me, sir, but have we not met before? I’m almost sure of it.”

Morlock pointed at the head glaring down at us. Stokkvenn looked at it, back at Morlock, and said, “Charis will be out to see you in a moment.”

Stokkvenn disappeared into an inner room. Presently the same door opened and another man emerged. He was almost the opposite of Stokkvenn — tall, sharp-featured, somewhat distant in his manner. And he was pale — Death and Justice was he pale-skinned! At one time I’d thought Morlock was the whitest man in the world, but next to him this other fellow was practically translucent: ice-white skin, yellow hair and eyebrows, green squinting eyes.

“Morlock Ambrosius,” the newcomer said. “This is indeed a pleasure.” If it really was a pleasure, his face didn’t show it.

“Charis,” Morlock said.

“I hope — At our last meeting — K-k-k-k-k. Or quasi-meeting, rather —” Charis’ face hardly moved as he spoke, but from his strange disjointed speech I gathered he was terrified of Morlock.

“Do you have what I came for?” Morlock asked briskly. “If so, we need not consider the past.”

“Er. K-k-k-k-k. I have. That is, I have some of the information you asked for.”

“Paid for.”

“K-k-k-k-k. Yes. Quite. Indeed, I got it right away. But months have passed since then, and I thought... K-k-k-k-k. Matters may have changed, you see. So I purchased an update, at great expense and for your personal convenience.”

“Then?” Morlock replied, stepping closer and looking intently at Charis’ face.

“The messenger from the guard captain is due. K-k-k-k-k. Is due any moment. Won’t you wait, and — k-k-k-k-k — await him, as it were?”

“Hm,” said Morlock. He reached over and tore out one of Charis’ eyeballs.

All right — I admit it. I screamed. So did Thend, no matter what he says.

But, the funny thing is, Charis *didn’t* scream. No blood poured from the empty eye-socket. He just stood there, squinting with one eye and saying, “K-k-k-k-k. I understand. K-k-k-k-k. Your impatience. K-k-k-k-k. Very understandable, even laudable, impatience. K-k-k-k-k —”

Morlock turned toward us, displaying the eyeball in his hand. Except, now that I brought myself to look at it, it didn’t really look like an eyeball. More like a glassy imitation of one. The black glittering shreds hanging from the back of the eyeball didn’t look like nerves, or anything that had grown inside a human body. Thend, obviously nerving himself up, stepped forward to take the thing and look closer at it.

“It’s glazed clay,” Morlock said with something like contempt in his voice. “The iris is painted on!” Apparently that was bad.

He turned back to the thing he had called Charis and, drawing his knife, split it open from collarbone to belly. I managed to keep from screaming this time, but only barely. It was babbling all the while about “— an investment — k-k-k-k-k — as it were, in time, to pay off royally —” but, increasingly, I couldn’t look on the thing as human. It stopped speaking and moving when Morlock drew something out of the gap in its chest — a scroll of some sort.

“It’s not Charis,” he said. “It’s a golem in Charis’ image. Not Charis’ own work, clearly.”

“You can tell?” I asked faintly.

“I taught Charis how to make a decent eyeball,” Morlock grumbled. He unrolled the sheet in his hand and glanced at it, adding, “The life-scroll isn’t in his handwriting. And the stupid thing couldn’t even speak properly. Not the product of the establishment’s greatest wonder-worker.”

“But maybe,” I guessed, “the chief assistant master thaumaturge-in-training?”

“Exactly,” Morlock approved. “Thend: get him.”

Death and Justice, that annoyed me. Sure, Thend was big and strong for his age (almost fifteen). But I was about to point out that, just because I was twelve years old and a girl, it didn’t mean I couldn’t slap someone like Stokkvenn around and make him like it. Then I looked Morlock in the eye (those flaring gray irises were *not* painted on) and I decided it wasn’t the strategic moment to say so.

“Fasra,” he said to me, “drop the brass shutter over the window, bolt it and stand by the door. Here.” He tossed me the knife in his hand and said, “We may have company soon.”

I was tempted to ask who’d died and made him God. On the other hand, I’d learned the hard way that sometimes it’s smart to listen to someone who knows more than you do. I bit my tongue and did as he asked. He busied himself behind the counter, pulling things out of drawers and looking at them.

Pretty soon Thend appeared, dragging a squealing Stokkvenn behind him. “He was trying to go out the back door,” Thend said to Morlock, and tossed the shopman up against the counter in front of Morlock.

“You bolted it?”

“Yes.”



“We may have guests. Will it hold?”

Thend shrugged. “Not forever.”

Morlock turned to Stokkvenn. “You wrote this,” he said coolly, waving the life-scroll of the dead golem.

“No. I —”

“I’m not asking you; I’m telling you that I know. You keep the register here — the ink is still on your hands — and the life-scroll was written in the same handwriting. You made this golem of your employer. Why?”

Stokkvenn quacked wordlessly for a few moments and finally said, “The Sandboys made me do it.”

If he’d said the Fluffy Puppies I couldn’t have been more surprised. In my mind’s eye I pictured a Sandboy as a friendly little figure made of sand, sitting on a beach somewhere.

“Who are the Sandboys?” Morlock asked.

“The Sandboys! The Sandboys!”

“Yes: them. Who are they?”

“They’re the biggest water-gang in town, that’s all! They wanted to take over Charis’ business, but he wouldn’t sell. It got pretty ugly. Then the big bucket of the Sandboys sent for me and he said they were moving in, whether Charis liked it or not. There was nothing I could do about it. If I went along with them, they’d keep me on to run the business for them. I was supposed to make the golem of Charis to keep up appearances. The gangs can’t own businesses, you know — not legally.”

“Fasra,” said Morlock, “is there anyone outside?”

The shop was on the edge of

## James Enge’s Morlock Tales



### in *Black Gate* 8, 9, 10 & 11

When James Enge’s *Morlock the Maker* strode into the pages of *Black Gate* 8, it was clear that he wasn’t your father’s, or even your grandfather’s, fantasy hero – he was a hunchbacked wizard with wry humor and deadly magical skill, and he faced off against someone foolish enough to want his fame for his own in “Turn up This Crooked Way.” *Morlock’s* first appearance (and Enge’s first published story) was selected by Rich Horton for his Virtual Best of 2005.

Critical praise followed for the sequel, “Payment Deferred” in *Black Gate* 9, wherein *Morlock* encountered Charis the golem master in the ancient and dangerous city of Sarkunden. *Morlock* returned in *Black Gate* 10 to face a reality-warping book in “A Book of Silences,” and joined forces with Roble and his sister Naeli to uncover the secret of *The Boneless One* in “The Lawless Hours” (*Black Gate* 11).

“Roble is a Rider - one of the armed men who sort of keep law during the lawless hours in the Land of the Four Castles, but whose real purpose is to keep people from wandering the woods at night and bring them out dead or alive. Either way, the Boneless One will consume them... I think this is my favorite *Morlock* story yet: the characterizations are so good, the worldbuilding imaginative and complex.”

– Sherwood Smith, *The Fix Short Fiction Review*, on “The Lawless Hours”

Art by Chuck Lukacs

a marketplace of a big city on market day. Of *course* there was someone outside, and I almost said so. But then I figured he meant someone in particular, so I had a look.

“Uh,” I said. “A bunch of guys with metal sticking out of their faces. They’ve got swords and clubs and they’re staring at the shop.”

“The Sandboys,” Stokkvenn said, shrugging. He was a little more at ease, looking Morlock in the eye now. Like he was thinking, *Maybe you have my number, but someone else has yours.*

“Stokkvenn,” said Morlock, “your story doesn’t work.”

Stokkvenn instantly lost whatever ground he’d gained. “It’s all I know!” he cried. “It’s the truth!”

“It may be all you know, but it’s not the truth. I was lured here with an authentic looking message; either Charis or an excellent forger wrote it. It accompanied an immunity-pass that must have taken a great deal of expense or effort to acquire. Why would your Sandboys take the trouble?”

“I don’t know! I can’t tell you what I don’t know!”

“Where is Charis, the real Charis, now?”

“I don’t know. I think the Sandboys took him. He’s probably dead.”

“Unlikely. I think he’s still alive, and someone wants me to lead them to him. Any thoughts, Stokkvenn?”

“None. I’m sorry. I’ve told you all I can.”

“Hm,” Morlock said. He dropped the life-scroll and vaulted over the counter. “Unfortunately, I believe you.”

“Unfortunately?” Stokkvenn repeated faintly, as Morlock took him by the shoulders.

“Unfortunate for me,” Morlock said, “since all my questions are unanswered. Unfortunate for you, because you are now useless to me.”

Morlock nodded at me, and I swung the shop door wide.

“No,” Stokkvenn gasped.

“Coming out!” Morlock shouted, and threw Stokkvenn headfirst, stumbling into the street. There were some shouts, and meaty thumps, and I heard Stokkvenn sobbing. A few moments later, when I peeked past Morlock out the door, Stokkvenn was gone. I never learned whether he lived or died.

“Not fair, Crookback!” someone shouted. “You said you were coming out!”

“I didn’t mean me,” Morlock called back. “Come in, if you like. I am Morlock Ambrosius; I await you.”

There was some audible grumbling at this. They’d have to come through the doorway one at a time, and apparently they’d heard some stories about Morlock that made them reluctant to try it. We’d only been traveling with Morlock a couple months, and I could have told them some stories myself.

“We’ll burn the place down!” someone shouted.

“So what?” Morlock replied easily. “I’ll walk away in the flames, and you will not follow me.”

It was true that he could do that, but Thend and I couldn’t. I hoped he was bluffing and looked anxiously at Thend. He shrugged and grinned nervously.

Morlock shut the shop-door and barred it. He went over to the lifeless golem and ripped its ears off. He did something to them — I couldn’t really see it in the shop’s dim light, and what I saw I couldn’t understand — and then he took one of them and fixed it to the doorpost with a long shining thing like a glass nail.

“Find the roof door,” he said to Thend and me.

“Are you sure there is one?” I asked.

“I hope there is,” he said and turned back to the golem ears, muttering a few words in a language I didn’t know.

We found the roof door pretty quickly: it was a kind of a hatch in the ceiling of the back room. We called Morlock and he came back, one of the ears still in his hand. He handed it to me, thanks a lot, and climbed up the ladder to the roof hatch. He unbolted it quietly and tentatively peeked out. It was sort of funny, or would have been if I hadn't been holding a severed ear.

He lowered the hatch and dropped down to the floor. "Go on up to the roof," he said to us. "Stay low. I'll join you in a moment."

I was going to hand him his nasty ear back, but he'd already turned away. I followed Thend up to the roof and we crouched low, to keep out of sight of the Sandboys in the street before the shop (and, presumably, in the alley behind).

"Shut up," Thend whispered to me.

"I'm not doing anything," I whispered back.

"I heard you move and say something."

I'd heard the same thing, but it wasn't me. I held up the golem ear. Startled, he put his ear against the thing and then gestured that I should do the same from the other side.

We heard Morlock's voice as he moved around in the shop downstairs: — *'blood of Ambrose' — unlikely. This really might be phlogopos-juice, though. Yes. That'll do.* After a few moments the severed ear emitted a crackling sound.

I realized that he had somehow enchanted the golem ears. We were hearing what the ear nailed to the shop door was hearing. This was what I thought, but what I said was, "He talks to himself when he's alone!"

Thend shrugged. "Sure. He's almost completely crazy: hadn't you noticed?"

I told Thend something I'd noticed about *him*, and he was hotly denying it when Morlock appeared through the hatch.

The Crooked Man pinned my brother with a single gray glance and Thend snapped his mouth shut.

"Can you jump across to that roof?" Morlock asked Thend, pointing at nearest building.

Thend nodded.

"Do it, then. If you think anyone on the street saw you leap, keep on going and don't wait for us. We'll meet you back with Roble and Naeli. Got it?"

Thend nodded again.

"Then," said Morlock.

Thend ran, crouching, across the roof of Charis' shop and leapt to the nearest roof. He waited there, crouching. No one called out; no one seemed to have seen him. He gestured that we should follow.

"Go," said Morlock.

"Why are you so sure I can?" I asked.

He looked at me, surprised. "You can run faster and jump farther than any of your brothers — except Stador, perhaps. If Thend can do it, you can do it. Go."

I was mad. "I'm not one of your stupid golems!" I hissed.

He looked at me more carefully. "Fasra, I'm sorry to seem abrupt. I set fire to Charis' shop after I sent you up here, and soon the gangsters will notice and risk breaking in. We should be well away by then. So: go. Now."

"Take your nasty ear!" I whispered furiously, shoving it at him. I ran across the roof and jumped to the next one. Morlock followed, holding the golem ear to one of his own, looking solemn and ridiculous.

We had crossed a few more roofs when Morlock abruptly dropped the golem ear, crushing it under his shoe. "They're breaking into Charis' shop," he said. "We'll try going down to street level here: they'll soon realize we escaped across the roofs."

He pulled up the roof hatch of the building we were on. He did it so casually, I





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thought the thing was unbolted... but then I saw the latch dangling from the undrawn bolt. He dropped down into the hatch and reached up to help us down.

As my eyes were still adjusting to the dimness within a big bulky guy approached us and shouted at Morlock, “Hey! Customers not allowed on roof! Get out of here! You two —” he gestured at Thend and me — get back to rooms.”

I saw now that the walls were covered in red velvet, and there were some pungent odors assaulting my nose — some sweet, some less so. I’d worked as a housekeeper — and that’s all, by the way — at the village cathouse, so it was all pretty familiar.

“Uncle Morlock,” I said, in a high-pitched little-girl falsetto, “what sort of place is this?”

The big bulky guy looked at me, puzzled, and then back to Morlock.

“I beg your pardon for the intrusion, and the damage to your roof door,” Morlock said, presenting the big guy with a gold coin.

“Damage?” The big guy looked at the broken latch and said, “Oh, yeah.”

He didn’t seem too mad, though, and he was even less so when Morlock presented him with a second gold coin.

A third coin made the guy positively beam with welcome. “No problem!” he said. “Drop in any time! Stay as long as you like! What was name again?”

“Morlock Ambrosius. But we’ll have to leave immediately,” Morlock said. “We were escaping from a fire up the street and —”

“Fire?” said the big guy, not so friendly anymore. He shouldered past us and hauled himself halfway through the roof hatch. He must have seen the plume of smoke over Charis’ shop right away because he dropped down and ran up the cor-



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ridor shouting, “Fire! Fire! Fire up street! Everyone out! Fire up street!”

The corridor was suddenly full of screaming people in varying states of undress. Morlock drew me and my brother back against one wall and we waited for the rip-tide of frightened people to pass away.

“Why didn’t you mention the fire before you gave him the money?” I asked Morlock, thinking that he could have saved himself three gold coins.

Morlock looked at me almost pityingly and said, “Then he wouldn’t have waited to take the money.”

Morlock’s back was to Thend, who mouthed the word *crazy* to me. To emphasize the point he crossed his eyes, drew his upper lip above his teeth and, after putting his wrists to either side of his forehead, waggled his hands gently. It was pretty funny, but I didn’t react until Morlock glanced over at Thend and Thend’s face froze in panic. *Then I laughed.*

The hallway was mostly clear by then, and we followed the tail end of the crowd down a rickety flight of stairs and into the street. It was full of people now, some panicking, some laughing, some screaming... and some who were cool and intent, their faces and their hands bristling with metal.

“Sandboys!” I hissed at Morlock.

He followed my gaze and said, “Both of you go. Get back to Naeli and Roble. I’ll meet you.”

Then he drew his dagger and long pointed sword. Somehow he was standing differently, too — sort of sideways, with his feet at right angles to each other. Then his sword flickered out and one of the Sandboys fell to the ground spewing blood. Morlock moved again — it was almost like dancing; I could not believe that crooked ugly man could move so gracefully — and another Sandboy was down, leaking blood onto the cobblestones. His sword and his dagger were dripping red now; several Sandboys were down, but more were approaching through the crowd —

“Come on!” Thend shouted in my ear.

I turned away and ran weeping through the hysterical crowd, heedless of whether Thend was following or not. It had all been sort of funny up to that point — even the worst parts with the golem-Charis and Stokkvonn. But it wasn’t funny now. Those weren’t golem bodies hitting the ground. Real men were trying to kill Morlock, and he would kill as many as he needed to escape. I wondered who would succeed and I wondered why I cared.

. . .

I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about me. I’m not sure why I’m telling you about this at all: maybe because most of these people are lost to me now, and telling you about them almost brings them back. In any case, since I’m telling you about it, I want you to get the right idea.

I wasn’t squeamish. I couldn’t afford to be. From the time I was six until just a few months ago I’d been living in a village where human sacrifice was a daily occurrence. Every night the adults of the village would go out into the woods and onto the Road and capture people to feed to the God in the Ground. I’d been taken that way myself, lost in the woods as a child. I’d only been saved because my mother went and pledged her service to the God in the Ground. In local slang, we became Bargainers, and we stayed in the Bargainer village until I was almost thirteen. Then Roble and Morlock killed the God in the Ground and freed my mother and we had to flee. I’d seen plenty of death, too much for a girl of twelve, too much for a person of any age, and it wasn’t the deaths in the marketplace which disturbed me, exact-

ly.

Part of it was the blood. The God in the Ground preferred to consume his victims alive in his pit under the Hungry Tree, so it was rare that any Bargainer had occasion to shed blood or see it. The sight of the blood sickened me and excited me in a way I can't explain.

Part of it was the thought that Morlock might die. My mother had condemned herself to years of horror for my sake. I loved her for it, and I was grateful, but there was no way I could ever pay her back. If Morlock died covering our escape, there would be another unpayable debt on my conscience, and I wanted no more of them.

All of which I offer as part-explanation for the fact that, as I ran, I sobbed, "Why won't they leave me *alone*?"

"I think they're after Morlock, not us," Thend gasped helpfully as he jogged beside me.

I told him to shut his pie-hole and ran weeping back to mother.

. . .

Our mother, Naeli, was sitting on the front steps of an abandoned house. When she saw us approaching without Morlock she stood and called out, "Roble."

Our uncle Roble and our two older brothers, Stador and Bann, came out of the abandoned house. All of the houses on this street were abandoned; nearly half the buildings within the city walls were empty. The city had once been much wealthier, much more populous. That was before the Khroi came, conquering the mountains and closing the pass to the north: the Kirach Kund, the River of Skulls — the place that was death to enter. (And which, for some reason, *we* were going to enter.) Since the north-south trade had been cut off there's been less money to go around, less reason for anyone to live in Sarkunden, and the city was rotting away from inside. Maybe that was why everyone in Sarkunden was a money-hungry bastard. Or maybe they would have been money-hungry bastards wherever they happened to live.

Roble and Naeli waited until we were within speaking distance and then Naeli said, "Are you all right?"

"We're fine," Thend said.

"What about Morlock?" Roble said.

"Well, there were Sandboys —" I said.

"What's a Sandboy?" Roble and Naeli said, almost together.

I don't know how many people there are in your family. In mine it seemed like there were always twice as many people as there actually were, and every one of them trying to interrupt me whenever I said something. I let Thend do most of the talking, only chiming in when he screwed something up, the way he does sometimes, or when someone was picking on him, the way Stador and Bann always were.

Thend's pretty determined, and he set out to tell the story from the beginning. There were a lot of interruptions, questions and explanations and it took a long time, but he finally did it.

Naeli looked at Roble. "What do you think? Should we go and see what we can do?"

Roble scowled and shrugged. He looked at Thend: "What do you think?"

Thend opened his hands and said, "The fight's over by now. He's away or they caught him. They might have killed him, but Morlock thought they wanted him alive."

"They might have lost their tempers, though," Roble observed dryly. "He can be irritating."

“Tell me about it,” Thend snorted.

Then the topic was whether we ought to go to the Sandboys and bribe them to release Morlock. I didn’t know what we were going to bribe them with, as we’d left our homes with little more than the clothes on our backs, but nobody asked for my opinion anyway. I guess that’s the price of not saying much: people assume you don’t have much to say.

I finally did say something, though. “Hey!” I shouted, and pointed at the open doorway of the house. Morlock was standing there in the shadows of the entry hall.

Naeli and Roble wanted him to come out and tell his part of the story, but he gestured at them without speaking and backed into the house. Then we all realized that it was one thing for us to be standing talking in the street; it was another thing for him: an Imperial outlaw who had a water-gang out after him. And we realized all this without him having to say a word, which was how he liked it. He didn’t like to say two words if one or none would do.

We trooped inside. In the dusty entryway within, empty except for our gear, Roble said, “Well? What happened with the Sandboys?”

“Lost them,” Morlock said. I saw Roble’s face fall when he realized that was all we were going to hear about Morlock’s big fight in the marketplace. Thinking back on those bloody bodies falling to the ground, I was just as pleased, but men look at these things differently, I’ve noticed. “Came in through the back door and heard you out there,” Morlock added, in a burst of eloquence.

He sat down beside his big heavy backpack, a little abruptly.

“Are you wounded?” Naeli said sharply, going and kneeling beside him.

“An old wound in my leg,” he explained. “It aches a little when I fight — or run.”

My mother began to massage his leg.

Stador and Bann looked a little blank. Roble got this grin on his dark face. Like, *Bless you, my children*. Thend looked mad — he didn’t like any of the signs that our mother and Morlock were getting close. Jealousy, I guess: he’d lost her for more than five years, had just gotten her back, and was in no mood to share her with a stranger whose skin made one think of mushrooms and dead fish. Personally, I was happy for her. She was younger then than I am now, a vigorous and beautiful woman in the last summery glory of her youth. But back then I thought of her as quite old, almost as old as Morlock, and I didn’t see why two old people shouldn’t be happy together. I wasn’t surprised that she took to him either: the only other men she’d seen for the last five years had been either sacrifices to the God in the Ground, or the men of the Bargainer village, all of them pretty repulsive types. I actually don’t think she’d been with anyone since my father died, and that was before I was born, thirteen years since.

The only two people who didn’t seem to have any emotional reaction to what was going on were Morlock and Naeli themselves. Naeli was saying, in a matter-of-fact voice, “What are we going to do now?”

Morlock said flatly, “I think you should go to Ontilian, the Imperial capital. I still have some friends there and they can help you find a place to stand. I’ll give you a letter.”

“While you go north alone,” Naeli said icily. “Into the Kirach Kund, without the information Charis was going to get for you.”

That was what Morlock had been expecting from Charis: information from the Imperial scouts on what the Khroic hordes in the mountains were up to. It might make the difference in surviving the trip through the deadly pass. He said he’d already paid for it and all he needed to do was pick it up. (He’d told us the whole story, but I’ve forgotten half of it, and I’m not sure I believe the half that I remember.) That was what had led to the fiasco in the Market today.

Morlock wasn't saying anything, as usual, but it was the way he wasn't saying it.

"Come on, Morlock," said Roble, a little impatiently. "If you're going to dump us here the least you owe us is an explanation."

I didn't see this at all. But apparently it convinced Morlock because he said, "All right. I'm going to try to find Charis. He's probably still alive — he's good at that sort of thing, and his enemies don't seem to have found him yet."

"And he may have your information."

"Um. Yes."

"Morlock! Spit it out!" Roble said it, but it might have been any of us.

The crooked man shrugged. "It's a question of who's really after him. The Guard? He's been a goose laying golden eggs for them for years now. The Sandboys? I expect the same is true: he seemed to be greasing every palm in town when I was last here. No one has any motive to kill him."

"So there's someone else," Roble said. "Is it important who?"

"It might be," Morlock said.

"Why?"

"Charis would have attracted the hostile attention of this person shortly after he was fishing for information about the Kirach Kund — and the Khroi. It may be a mere coincidence, or the Khroi may have a powerful agent in this city. I want to know if this is true."

"Then we'll stay and help you find out," Roble said "Afterwards we can take up the question of who's going where."

"The hell we will!" Naeli said fiercely. "Morlock, you are *not* going to abandon us in this damnable place where everything and everybody is for sale."

"Ontilian isn't like Sarkunden," Morlock said. "Nor do you know what the Kirach Kund is like."

"I know this much —"

"Let's table it," Roble said briskly. "I say we eat and sleep and start looking for Charis tonight when the Sandboys are in their little sandbeds."

Roble was pretty good at breaking up arguments. Maybe it was all those years of living with my mom. Anyway, that was what we did, but it didn't work exactly as he'd planned it.

We always kept watch at night, and we didn't see any reason to change that because we were camping in a house instead of an open field. (We didn't want to wake up and find the house surrounded by Keeps or Sandboys.) With seven of us no one had to stay up long, although it was a pain to stand watch in the middle of the night, so we rotated. That night, Morlock took the first watch and I took the second. Thend was third, and boy was he grumpy when I woke him. We argued about what time it was, and afterwards I was too mad to sleep, so I wandered around the house to find someone awake to talk to. That was how I noticed that Morlock's room, on the second floor of the abandoned house, was empty, the unfastened shutters flapping gently in the night breeze.

It sort of looked like he'd climbed out the window, so I poked my head out and looked around. It took awhile to spot him, but I finally saw a crooked silhouette right up at the end of the alley: Morlock.

I climbed out the window and followed him.

If you'd asked me why at the time, I couldn't have explained it. It certainly wasn't any echo of my mother's romantic feelings: I thought Morlock was repulsive.



But I liked him and was mad at him in a way I didn't try to understand.

Now that I've seen my daughters with their father, I understand a little better. I never knew my father, and I was always latching on to older men in the Bargainer village — some of them pretty creepy. (It was only thanks to Naeli's vigilance that I was still a maiden at twelve.) Morlock was another one of these stand-ins for my father, I think. In lots of ways he was a pretty bad fit, but in some he was a good one. My mother and he seemed to have something going on, or something about to begin, for one thing. For another, he had a wholly disinterested kindness for me and for Thend. In any case, I always felt *safe* with him — I knew he'd always stand between me and danger. The only other person I ever felt that way about was Naeli, and I knew there were some things she couldn't handle. I wasn't sure if that was true about Morlock. (Turns out there was plenty, but I didn't know that then.)

Anyway: I followed him. At first I tried to catch up, and then I realized that might not be too smart — if he noticed me while we were still close to the house, he might take me back and wake Naeli and Roble, and there would be screaming and shouting offensive to my sensitive spirit. So I started to sneak along, just near enough to keep him in sight.

After a while I realized something: I wasn't the only person following him. There was a furtive shadow slinking along among other shadows lining the street between Morlock and me. A Sandboy, I figured: maybe one of them had trailed Morlock to the house, in spite of what he'd thought, and was now following him to find out where Charis was (if Morlock was right about that).

I crept closer to the shadowy figure, very gradually and carefully so as to not give myself away. I wanted a closer look at him and, when I got one, I suddenly realized that I recognized the guy, even though (strictly speaking) I'd never seen him before. He was very dirty and bedraggled, but his greasy hair was a pale yellow and his sickly skin was white as a wax candle in dim ambient moonlight. His eyes, I bet, would be green. Charis — the original master wonder-worker of that nasty little establishment Morlock had burned down this afternoon.

I didn't like this. Maybe Morlock was wrong: maybe Charis himself had lured Morlock into town, hoping to kill him off and cancel his debts that way.

I waited until he had crept a little closer to Morlock and I had crept a little closer to him. Then, when he was crossing from one hiding place to another in the shadow-stitched street, I took him out, or tried to.

My brothers played this game called vinch-ball, and it is so stupid I could burst. I knew more about it than I want to, because I'd watched them play it so much, and because when they weren't playing it they were usually talking about it. Like most boys' games, it involved hitting people and knocking them over for no clearly defined reason. Well, I had a reason and, thanks to vinch-ball (I wish I'd never said that, but it's true) I knew how to tackle someone bigger than me and bring him down.

I hit Charis from behind, about the level of his knees. He gave a thin scream and fell backwards. I scrambled out of the way and pounced on him. All that went according to plan.

Unfortunately I'd underestimated Charis. He was even thinner and weedier than his golem-figure, and his muscles were as soft as mud. But he was a grown man and he fought with the strength of desperation. I was starting to lose the fight when someone else joined the mix.

It was Thend. Between us, we managed to pin Charis' arms behind him as he wriggled, face down on the street beneath us. He was still struggling and gasping, and I didn't know how long we could hold him, when suddenly he went limp.

I looked up. Morlock was standing over us.

“Charis,” he said.

“Master Morlock,” Charis replied, his voice muffled. “Would you please get your servants off me?”

“I am not your master,” Morlock replied coldly, “nor theirs.”

We let him go anyway and even helped him to his feet.

“How did you get here?” I demanded from Thend.

“Good thing I *did* get here,” he sniffed.

“That’s not an answer! Who’s on guard back at —” I realized I shouldn’t say too much in front of Charis “— back there?”

“Roble,” Thend said. “He saw you go and sent me after you.”

“He’s asleep —”

“Roble’s awake, or ought to be,” Morlock said. “We agreed that I would go scout for Charis and he would wait for a message, in case I got into trouble.”

“How are you going to send him a message?” Thend asked.

“If you need to know, I’ll tell you,” Morlock said, not like he was mad. He turned to Charis. “You don’t look well,” he observed.

“Thanks to you!” Charis snapped. “When I acquired your information, the Khroi became... interested in me. They ordered their man in the city to hunt me down.”

“Who is he?” Morlock asked. “Perhaps I can defend you from him.”

“No!” Charis seemed genuinely frightened. “Please don’t... don’t help. I wish no more obligations to you. No more to anyone. I’ll find a way to destroy... the agent, or escape him... somehow. If I can pay you what I already owe, I will gladly close our account.”

“Then?”

“If you’re asking me where your information is —”

“I am.”

“— it is under lock and key, safe in my house.”

“Then we will go to your house.”

“No!” Charis shouted. “I can’t! They’re watching for me there!”

“We will trust to your walls and your golems for the few moments we’ll be there.”

“I don’t have any golems,” Charis sobbed. “They won’t obey me anymore. The Khroi’s agent got to them somehow. I haven’t set foot inside my house for three months. The last time I did the golems tried to kill me. Kill me!”

“Hm,” said Morlock. “Didn’t you write a stop-word into your golems’ life-scrolls? Something that would bring them to a halt if they started to go astray?”

“Of course. What do you take me for?”

Morlock looked like he was about to tell him, then said, “Never mind that.”

“Well, it didn’t work anymore, that’s all.”

“I wrote stop-words into the golems I made for you a few months ago.”

“Oh, I know all about that. I took the scrolls out and changed their safe-words to my own. And now that won’t work. You look like you don’t believe me, but it’s perfectly true.”

Morlock didn’t answer this; he was silent for a moment, obviously thinking. “You obtained the information and secured it in your house?” he asked.

“Yes. I —”

“Was the place well-hidden?”

“Yes. The —”

“Did you tell anyone the location? Did your golems see you hide it?”

“No. Whenever I —”

“Is it in a room with a window?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Charis stared at Morlock for a moment and said, “Yes, there’s a window. But it was shuttered when I hid the information; no one could see in, if that’s what you’re —”

“Then we will go to your house.”

“But I *can’t* —”

Morlock stopped him with a single glance. Oh, how I’ve tried to do that, but it never works, even with my daughters.

We went to Charis’ house: a fortress-like palace of native blue-stone, not far from the western wall of the city. It was surrounded by a dry moat. There was no obvious way to cross the moat, but at one point in the wall there was a great bronze door; maybe that could be lowered like a bridge. Bow slits lined the walls above the moat; every now and then I caught the gleam of watching eyes.

We lurked in the shadows of a half-ruined building across the way from the bronze door while Charis pointed out to Morlock the window of the room where the information was hidden. “But we’ll never reach it,” Charis said despairingly, and I had to agree: the window was halfway up a smooth featureless wall. Even if we could get across the moat without being spotted we could never climb up. And, even if we could get in the front door (which we couldn’t), I didn’t like the thought of trying to sneak through a house of killer golems.

But Morlock, when Charis had made the layout clear to him, just nodded and took something out of a pocket sewn into his cloak. (His clothing was full of weird pockets.) It looked like a big feathery ball; he unfolded two winglike branches, revealing a glassy sphere hanging in the middle. It was like a bird with no head, black wings and a glass body

I had no idea what it was, but Charis did. “No!” he gasped. “Not —”

“Keep him quiet,” Morlock said to us.

We did, enthusiastically.

Morlock held the bird-thing in his right hand. He struck flame with something he was holding in his left hand and applied it to the glass sphere. Nothing happened at first, but then something lit up inside the glass sphere. The wings stretched out and seemed almost to come alive.

Morlock said a couple of words I didn’t understand and tossed the wing-thing into the air. It hovered above us for a moment, the glowing sphere casting a weird red light on our heads. Then it flew away towards the blue stone facing of Charis’ house, its red heart trailing fire through the blue-black darkness. It hit the house exactly on the opposite side of where the information was hidden (if Charis was telling the truth). The wing-thing exploded when it hit the wall and flame splashed out, taking root even in the stone and continuing to burn.

“Wow!” Thend remarked brilliantly.

“Do it again!” I said.

Morlock grinned crookedly at us and gestured that we should let Charis go.

“My house!” he groaned.

“It’s not your house right now,” Morlock pointed out. “If we succeed tonight, it may be your house again.”

“I don’t see how.”

“Then the fire loses you nothing. In any case, I’ll pay you for the damage. We cross to the moat now.”

“What about the watchers?” I asked.

“There won’t be any. All his golems are instructed to fight fires when they occur. I noticed it when I was last here. He’s terrified of fire.”

“And why not?” Charis groaned.

Morlock did the shut-him-up-with-a-look thing again and we all ran across the

open space and jumped down into the dry moat. Morlock led us around until we were just under the window of the room we wanted. He took something that looked like a big bean out of another pocket and, holding it up to his mouth, muttered some words to it. Then he put it down on the ground.

The bean burst like a hatching egg and out of it crawled a vine with broad greenish-black leaves. It crawled straight up the side of the moat and the wall above it.

"Wow!" said Thend. "That'll be handy in the mountains."

Morlock looked rueful. "I'm afraid it's my last one. I had four, but I traded three of them to this boy for his cow."

"That's crazy!"

"Well, I really needed the cow." The vine stopped growing. "I'll go first," Morlock said. "Send Charis after me. Then both of you come up; no one is to wait below."

"Morlock," I whispered, "I'm not sure I can climb all the way up to that window."

Morlock replied quietly, "Just take a firm grip on the vine and hold on." He did so, and vanished. I looked up and saw the vine was carrying him upward to the window. He fiddled with the shutters for a moment, then looked down to us and gestured. He disappeared into the now open window.

"What a thief he could have been!" Thend whispered to me. "Robbery. Lock-picking. House-breaking. He can do it all."

"Tell him sometime," Charis said, with a pale unpleasant leer. "As long as I'm there to watch."

"Up the vine, you," I snapped.

His face got a mutinous look for a moment, but then he looked at ours. He turned and grabbed the vine. It carried him up the wall to the window and he climbed in.

Thend went next; I was last. It was like falling straight upwards, and I nearly lost my grip at the top. But I didn't quite, and scrambled through the casement into the room I thought we'd never reach.

"Close the shutters," Morlock said, still quietly, but not whispering. There was a big commotion coming from other parts of the house; it looked like Morlock's plan was working so far. He struck a light and set it on a nearby table.

"What's that?" I asked in a quavering voice, just before it moved.

It: vaguely manlike, but half again as tall as a man, and broad in proportion, with thick trunklike limbs. Its huge hairless head had big batwing ears dangling on either side and one great blue eye occupying its whole face: no nose or mouth. I thought it was a statue, set with its back against the door to keep it shut, until it stepped forward, clenching one hand and raising a spear in the other.

Morlock's sword was strapped over his back and he drew it just as the creature moved, thanks to my warning, I think. He leaped forward and struck off the thing's head. The head went spinning off and bounced against the door... but there didn't seem to be any effect on the creature at all. It grabbed Morlock with its left hand and threw him like a rag doll against the far wall. Then it threw its spear, pinning Morlock's sword arm to the wall. It strode up to him and grabbed his left arm with its right. It clenched its left hand and began striking Morlock on the head and body with its great stone-like fist: heavy blows, killing blows.

Thend cursed and ran forward to grab the thing's left arm. It was the bravest thing I'd seen since Roble ran off to fight the whole Bargainer village and the God in the Ground with one thin knife (my knife, as it happens, and I never got it back, either, but maybe that's not important).

But it was perfectly useless. The headless thing kept on pummeling Morlock, dragging Thend back and forth with each blow. It didn't even seem to know he was



there.

I looked around for Charis. He was crouched under a table across the room. Useless sack of quivering snot — but what good could he do? What could any of us do? The thing would kill Morlock and then each one of us. Unless I could make it to the window and the vine would take me down...

It was the only course that made any sense. I couldn't help Morlock or Thend. There was no use in my dying, too.

Glancing about wildly, I saw the thing's severed head, sitting on the floor in front of the door. The single blue eye, still alive, was intently watching its former body pummel Morlock. I thought about tossing the head out the window, but that wouldn't do any good; it could kill Morlock without seeing him, now. I shuddered, wondering what sort of monster could kill someone after its head had been cut off.

Then I knew, of course. It had to be a golem. That thing, that golem in Charis' shop today, it had gone on babbling after Morlock ripped its eye out and split open its chest. It had only stopped moving when he... when he...

"Oh, no," I whispered, as the idea struck me. "I can't do it. I *can't*."

But I had to.

"Aaaaa-aaaa-aaaaah!" I screamed, running across the room and leaping onto the golem's back. Its shoulder was surging back and forth as it pounded Morlock, and I almost got thrown off, but it didn't seem to know or care that I was on it, and I managed to hold on with my legs and left arm. I plunged my right arm down into the open neck of the golem.

The inside of the golem was sticky, like wet clay, and the nastiness of it nearly made me let go. But I held on and groped around inside the golem's chest until my right hand closed on something that felt like a scroll. I seized it and pulled it out through the open neck.

The headless golem was just throwing back its fist for another blow. It froze as I brought the scroll triumphantly out.

"Ha!" I shouted as it teetered there, and then added, "Uh oh!"

The dead golem fell back to the floor with me under it.

"Owie," I complained, and passed out.

. . .

When I woke up I wasn't sure I had really been anywhere. It seemed like it was all a weird dream, and I was laying in my own sleeping cloak in the room of the abandoned house where Naeli and I slept.

Then I tried to sit up. "Be still, you stupid moron," said Thend, pushing me back down. I realized my head was in his lap. He bent down and kissed my forehead.

"Hey!" he said. "She's all right!"

I was about to correct him, because I ached all over. But then realized that if I was all right I could sit up. I pointed this out, pushing his ugly face out of my way after patting his cheek, and struggled to my feet.

The room was suddenly full of people who were glad to see me. If you've ever had the experience, you can fill in the blanks here — I'm not going to describe everything that was said and done.

Eventually I noticed Morlock leaning against the doorway with a broad smile on his bruised face, watching me in the bosom of my family.

I glared at him. He was supposed to be invulnerable, protecting me from the bad people. And there he was grinning at me because, through sheer luck, his recklessness and the golem hadn't killed all four of us in Charis' house.

"Thanks for saving my life," he said, when the furor died down a bit.

“Yeah, well,” I said huffily. “Watch your step. I might not be around to do it, next time.”

He shrugged and opened his hands in a *well, you know* kind of gesture. This seemed pretty flippant, under the circumstances, so I clouded up and thundered at him for awhile. I was pretty clear about what I expected from him and how he had so far failed to deliver. At least I tried to be, but the fact that my face was buried against his chest part of the time may have muffled some of my words, that and some of the weeping.

He patted my back awkwardly until I settled down, and then said, “Eh, what are you complaining about? You didn’t even have to walk home.”

Charis was standing nearby in the room beyond and he said, “I must say the young lady has a point. We all owe her a great deal. I would estimate —”

“It’s not a business relationship,” Morlock said. He wasn’t smiling when he said it, but his tone wasn’t really much different than when he’d been talking to me. Still, Charis crumpled like a moth who’d gotten too close to a candleflame.

I stood back and wiped my eyes. “So you got what you need from Charis’ house? Now we go north?”

Charis’ twisted face took on a panicky look, which Morlock ignored, saying, “Yes and no.”

“Ugh. What a stupid thing to say! Which is it?”

“Yes, we got the information from Charis’ house. No, we are not going north, at least not right away.”

“Morlock thinks there’s some threat to the city from outside,” said Roble, coming up beside me. “He may be right.”

“So what?” I said. If all Sarkunden sank into the ground it wouldn’t ruin my day.

“Eh,” Morlock said, “it’s not my favorite city either. But it’s the keystone of the Empire’s defenses in the north. If it broke, the Khroi or the Anhikh could sweep in at will — possibly both.”

“You’re an Imperial outlaw!” I said. “What do you care?”

He shrugged his wry shoulders. “I have friends in the Empire. If it collapses, they’ll be in harm’s way. I’m going to see about this.”

“All right,” I said grudgingly. “What do we have to do?”

“You,” my mother said, with a calm that was just the thin icy coating on a deep dark lake of fury, “will do precisely *nothing*.”

I didn’t feel like arguing with her. First because she obviously was one thumb’s length away from crazy and I didn’t want to push her in the wrong direction; second because I ached all over, especially in my belly. I didn’t want to go anywhere.

“It’s someone else’s turn on the field anyway,” Stador said, apparently thinking I was disappointed. “Come look at the map!”

The map was unrolled on the floor in the next room: a huge map of the city. Looking closely at it, I saw three tiny pieces of gold quivering on the map.

One was not far from the Great Market, where we’d had our run-in with the Sandboys. Another was moving down the twists of an alley toward the South Wall. One was firmly fixed on the citadel, where the Imperial Guards had their headquarters.

I looked at Morlock for an explanation, then decided it would be too much trouble to drag it out of him and turned to Thend.

“You remember those gold pieces Morlock gave the bullyboy in the whorehouse?” Thend asked. “They were ensorcelled. Those gold bits tell us where each one of those gold pieces are right now.”

Well, I’d worked in a cathouse. I thought I could follow the reasoning. The

Sandboys probably had their little sand-paws into every business on that street. The bullyboy had probably passed along what he knew, along with part of his loot. "So who's who?" I asked.

"If I had to guess," Roble said, "I'd guess the coin heading south is in the pocket of your friend from the cathouse. The one still near the cathouse is in the strong-box of the house's pimp or the Sandboys." He crouched down and tapped the gold fleck at the citadel. "This is the interesting one."

"I see," I said. "Someone in the Guards is slurping money from the Sandboys."

"The Commander is my guess," Morlock said. "That immunity was the perfect bait to bring me into the city where the Sandboys are strongest. They're connected, somehow."

"But just because the Commander's doing business with the water-gangs doesn't mean he's a traitor," Naeli objected. "The Sandboys wouldn't want a foreign conqueror in the city."

"Hard to say," Morlock replied. "They might be hoping for a better deal with the new rulers. Or maybe the commander is the agent of a foreign power, corrupting the local gangs. We'll go and find out."

"How?" I wondered.

Morlock shrugged, and I knew that was as much as he was going to say about it. He rolled up the map and stuck it under his arm. He and Roble spoke apart with Naeli for a few moments and then they were gone.

. . .

Then it was time to go back to bed, past time... but no one did. Bann went off to stand watch, and Naeli paced around in the entryway on the first floor, and Stador and Thend were playing a knife-throwing game in the map room. I was sitting on my bed-roll, rocking back and forth, wondering why my gut hurt so much. I was wondering about that, and also wondering why Charis was standing just outside my doorway (as I could tell from his shadow on the floor).

"If you're waiting for me to put the light out," I called to him finally, "I'm not going to."

He appeared in the doorway then. "I'm sorry if I alarmed you," he said. "I'm in a bit of a quandary."

"And you think I can help?"

"I hope not. That is — you've done enough. Too much, I'd say. I owe you a very great debt and I don't see how I can repay it."

"It's on the house."

"Nothing is 'on the house,' if I understand what you mean. Everyone keeps track of these things and debts have to be paid. Those are the principles by which I have lived my life."

"I can see you've made a big thing of it." This was a little icy, I admit, but my belly hurt and I didn't like the game he was playing (to the extent that I understood it).

His face twisted. "I was doing well enough — until I did business with Morlock."

"You shouldn't have tried to cheat him."

Charis sighed. "My troubles only really began when I stopped trying to 'cheat' him, as you put it."

"How would you put it?"

"I would say that no bargain justifies putting a man in danger of his life. No one can be fairly asked to trade away his life, because there is nothing of equal value he can receive for it. A bargain that puts my existence at stake is void." His

voice was getting almost hysterical and he broke off, looking a little embarrassed.

"Then you shouldn't have struck the bargain in the first place."

Charis sighed. "That's true, of course. But I wanted what Morlock had to offer me. Now I've lost that, and nearly everything else as well, and I've contracted a new debt to you. You see my problem."

"Well, I didn't do it for you, if that helps any."

"It does, a little," he said, stepping into the room. "But —"

"That's close enough," I said. I wanted to have time to call out if he tried anything.

He stopped short, apparently not resenting my suspicion. "But I can't be sure," he said, "that you wouldn't have saved my life, even if others you cared about hadn't been in danger. I've learned a little bit about you, I think. And then there is the undoubted fact that you did save my life, at terrible risk to your own."

"I was saving my own life, too. I was in there in that room with the rest of you."

"Oh, no!" Charis said, shaking his head wisely. "Tell that to the others, if you like; I think it's safer for you that way, blunting the sharp edge of their gratitude. Gratitude can be a terrible burden to live with, day after day, and you're wise to give them the illusion that their debt is less than it really is. But *I saw you*. You looked at the window and knew you could escape with your life. Then you did the other thing."

For the first time I was sort of impressed by Charis. He did understand people a little bit. I thought about how I felt about Naeli and all that she'd done for me, and I knew he was right about gratitude, too, although I hoped there was more to it than Charis understood.

What had Morlock said? *It's not a business relationship*. Was there a way to live your life like that, not totaling up a balance sheet of benefits and obligations but instead... What? Morlock hadn't said what it was; he'd just said what it wasn't. Maybe Charis was right after all.

My head hurt, and not only my head. My stomach hurt, deep inside. I bent over myself gasping. My legs and the bedroll were all wet with blood. Glancing up I saw Charis was closer to me now.

"Get away from me!" I shrieked. I didn't want him canceling his debts by getting rid of me.

Charis leaped back to the door. Stador and Thend rushed in, with Naeli and Bann only a few steps behind them.

My brothers pinned Charis to the wall while Naeli came over to me.

"I did nothing to her, Madame Naeli," Charis was babbling. "We were talking and she expressed pain. I'm afraid she is hurt from —"

"Don't call me 'madame,'" Naeli snapped. "I'm not some Coranian bimboherder." She bent over me and investigated briefly. "It's nothing to worry about, baby," she told me after a moment. "Just Aunt Ruby paying a visit."

"What?" asked Bann stupidly.

"It's her time."

"Time for what?" Stador asked.

"Time for her period, you clowns. Will you get the hell out of here so I can take care of her?"

The boys herded Charis out of the room and I started to sob.

"Look," Naeli said after we dealt with some of the practical issues, "it's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I'm not embarrassed," I said, lying a little. I hadn't liked that horrified look all the males had given me before dragging their non-bleeding carcasses out of the room.



“But it *hurts*. Is it always like this?”

“Um. Yes and no.”

“Death and Justice, I hate it when people say that!”

“Calm down, honey. It won’t usually be this bad, and your first one is hardly ever this bad. It’s just that...”

“Mama, are you going to tell me about this or what?”

I hardly ever called Naeli “Mama” and it seemed to steady her a little.

“All right,” she said. “Back in the Bargainer village, girls were always sealed to the service of the God in the Ground when they reached their menarche.”

“Sure. But — Oh. You did something.”

“Yes. There’s a spell you can use to delay a girl’s menarche.”

“I didn’t know you knew any magic.”

“I don’t know much. But every woman in that village knew this one. We all wanted our daughters free as long as possible. I always hoped I’d find a way to get you out before you were sealed to the Boneless One — and that’s how it worked out, thanks to your uncle Roble.”

“And Morlock.”

“Yes. Him.” I got the feeling Naeli wasn’t so pleased with Morlock tonight. “Anyway, after we were freed, I stopped renewing the spell. I didn’t realize that it would make your first period so severe, but that must be what’s happening. I’m sorry, baby: I’m not much of a witch.”

“Oh, you’re all right, I guess.” This was the point to say something mushy, and I was grateful to her. In a way, that was the problem. Did my pain at the moment pay for what she had done? Or had she paid some price I knew nothing of? Probably the latter. So my debt to her was increased by who-knows how much. That depressed me even further.

At some point, in spite of the depression and the pain, I slept. But not nearly long enough.

. . .

“Fasra, get up,” Stador was saying.

I replied in the negative. That was the gist of it, anyway.

“This isn’t a joke. The house is surrounded.”

You know all those times you wonder whether you want to go on living? If something actually threatens you during one of those moments, you make your mind up in a hurry.

I sat up, told him to get out so I could change my rags, and got up before he was out of the door.

All the others were down on the first floor. I didn’t get there much after Stador, with my pack on my back.

“Who’s outside?” I asked Naeli.

“Imperial troops,” she said. “They seem to be waiting for something, but they’re all around the house.”

“They’re waiting for reinforcements,” Charis guessed. “They’re expecting Morlock to be in here. And they have glass lizards. Glass lizards from Kaen. They’re the best tracking animals in the world. We can never get away.”

“So where do we go?” I asked.

“Exactly where they’ll expect,” Naeli said. “Down through the sewers.”

“Why go where they expect us to go?”

“What’s the alternative?” Naeli replied, and I had to admit she had a point.

We went down into the basement. I’d never been down there before; it was sort

of creepy. But not so creepy as the big black hole Naeli uncovered, gesturing that we should go down in.

Thend obviously felt the same way as I did. “How far can we get in the sewer?” he grumbled. “If it’s Charis they’re after, I say we give him to them.”

Charis jumped like a rabbit at that, and he didn’t look very reassured when Naeli said, “We’ll hold that in reserve. If we can get away clean, that’s our first choice.”

“Clean!” said Bann and gulped.

I growled and shouldered past all three of my big brothers. There were grips for hands and feet leading down into the dark pit. I jumped onto them and began climbing downward.

“Well?” said Naeli coldly, and the guys started to follow me, grumbling a little.

It wasn’t really so bad. I mean, don’t kid yourself, it wasn’t like taking a walk in the hills after a spring rain. But I’d kind of expected it to niff like an outhouse that’s been used by a hundred thousand people, and it wasn’t anything like that.

When I got down to the bottom of the climbing grips, I was standing in a tunnel on a pretty wide ledge — wider than any sidewalk I remember in Four Castles. In the middle of the tunnel ran a stream of dark water several times as wide as the ledge, and on the far side of the tunnel there was another ledge. I could see all this because of a luminous green mold that grew in patches on the walls.

The tunnel seemed to go on forever in both directions. Other tunnels joined up with it at intervals, and the whole thing seemed to tilt slightly — so that everything could roll downhill, I realized, just like the proverb said.

“It’s like a whole city under the city!” said Stador, when we were all down on the ledge.

“Yes,” Charis said, with a certain amount of hometown pride, I thought. “The Old Ontilians built it, in ancient days. When Ambrosia rebuilt the city in the days of Lothar the Great, she could do nothing to better the sewers.”

“Who’s Ambrosia?” I asked.

Charis looked at me, his face slack with amazement — as if I’d asked, “What is the sun?” or “What is water?”

“Morlock’s sister,” Naeli answered. “Among other things, I gather.”

“Other things,” said Charis, as if he’d been punched, and shook his head.

“Go north,” Naeli directed us. “Upstream. That’s where Roble and Morlock will be looking for us, if we’re not in the house. If need be, we go all the way to the Kirach Kund.”

“Do the sewers reach all that way?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” Naeli replied, and winked at me just before I exploded.

I turned around and started walking upstream.

. . .

We went as fast as we could; all too soon the clash of metal came echoing up the tunnel behind us. The Imperials were in the sewers.

“Quick and quiet,” whispered Naeli, and led us up a tunnel leading northwest.

“They’ll have glass lizards,” Charis said. “They scent... they’ll scent us.”

He looked at me as he was speaking, and then away. All of a sudden I realized he meant, *They’ll scent Fasra*.

I was furious. He didn’t smell so delightfully fresh himself. And I’d saved his stupid life! Catch me making *that* mistake again.

I fell a little further behind, walking beside Thend at the back of the group. I was steamed at first, too mad to talk even if talking hadn’t been too dangerous. But pret-

ty soon I cooled off and, as I did, I realized something.

Charis, damn him, was right. If the Imperial troops had hunting beasts, and if they had caught a scent in the house that they were trailing in the sewer, it was probably mine. Plus, I was shorter than everyone else. If it had been a matter of a short sprint, I probably could have left them all behind, but on a long walk I was inevitably going to slow the group down, even if I weren't feeling sick, which I was: the cramping had started again, as bad as ever.

I thought and thought and all my thinking came to one conclusion. I probably couldn't get away. But if I led the hunters astray, the others probably could.

It wasn't my first choice, believe me. I was going to bull my way to the front of the pack and argue with Naeli that now was the time to trade Charis for our lives and freedom. The trouble was, I soon realized what Naeli probably had realized back at the house: it wouldn't work.

Why were they after Charis, anyway? Because he knew something, or they thought he did. Probably the Khroic agent wanted him captured, because he was passing information on about the Khroi. Or maybe the Imperials wanted him because they thought he knew something about the Khroic agent. Either way, the trouble is, we had been traveling with Charis and protecting him — and knowledge is contagious. If the Imperials caught us they would take us all prisoner, and the Strange Gods only knew if we'd ever see the light of day again.

That left my fallback plan: i.e. Fasra takes one for the team, like any good vinch-ball player. (I *hate* vinch-ball, but we've been through all that.)

Naeli was leading the group on a zigzag path through the interweaving tunnels: now northwest, now northeast, but always trending north. The ledges were a little narrower and we were going single file. Naeli, at the head of the line, was often out of my sight around a corner. I dropped a little further back, and a little further.

"What are you doing?" Thend whispered, looking over his shoulder at me.

I pointed over my shoulder, pointed at myself and gestured wildly to the west. I hoped he'd get the idea and he did.

"No," he said, almost at his normal voice, and from the front of the line came an imperious whisper, "*Be quiet!*"

In a schoolroom whisper, I explained to Thend why it had to be this way.

He got it. There's nothing wrong with his wits, whatever you say about his manners.

"I'll come with you," he said quietly.

I shook my head. "You have to stay with the group — make like I'm always a little behind you. Otherwise..."

Otherwise Naeli would stop and come back for me. He knew it. His eyes looked tortured, and I hated the thought of the guilt I was inflicting on him. But I'd rather have him guilty and alive than have us all be guilt-free and dead in some Imperial torture chamber. There are some occasions when family togetherness is overrated.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'll catch up if I can," I added.

He shook his head, kissed me on the side of the face and left me standing there. Soon he and the others were out of sight.

. . .

I stood for a moment where I was, and then backtracked a bit. There was an arched stone bridge passing over the stream westward. I reached under my tunic and unbelted the rags that had been absorbing (partially) my flow. I dragged it behind me as I crossed over the bridge. Then I waited at the tunnel junction until it sounded like the pursuers were almost about to come in sight. I left the rags behind on

the ground and fled up the tunnel.

Soon I knew it was working: some, at least, of the pursuers were pursuing me. I couldn't run for very long, and soon I heard them behind me: the tramp of the soldiers' boots, muttered comments or orders (distorted into unintelligibility in the echoing tunnels), the sniffing of beasts (glass lizards?).

I turned northwest or southwest at the junctions, always trending westward. I doubted I'd escape them, but there was always the chance that they'd think I was unimportant to them, nothing to do with Charis, or Morlock, or their damn city. (I wished it were true.) And every moment they chased me was one Naeli and my brothers were using to get away. Or so I hoped.

How long it all lasted I really can't say. I'd had a long day and practically no sleep; a fog of weariness was settling over my mind. I found myself leaning against the entrance to one of these tunnels, my mind a blank, unsure what I was supposed to be doing.

Then, in the tunnel I had come out of, on the far side of the stream, I saw the glass lizards. They were on long leashes; I didn't see any of their keepers, though I could hear them. There were four or five of the lizards, about the size of large dogs or wolves, and, as they came out into the larger tunnel, their transparent forms caught the light from the walls, like jars of clouded glass and they turned bright translucent green. I could see what seemed to be a human hand in one of their stomachs.

I don't think they saw me: their eyes were sort of blank and squinty, and didn't look too useful. But they smelled me. Their heads weaved for a moment in the air as they stood before the bridge crossing the stream, and then they each pointed a blunt serpentine snout right at me.

I spun around and ran up the tunnel, heard them following eagerly as I ran. That jolt of terror lasted for a long time, and I even left them behind for a while. But eventually I was stumbling and staggering again, slowing down, hearing them closing in on me again and unable to remember why I cared.

Presently I found myself staring, open-mouth, at a smooth-faced wall. There was no tunnel to westward: not northwest, not southwest. I couldn't understand it. How had they managed to block me off?

It was the end of the sewer system, of course, but I was too stupid with weariness to understand that. But I had just enough wit left to understand I had to turn right or left. At random I turned left and stumbled as fast as I could, leaning from time to time on the smooth wall running along with me on my right.

Except once, unaccountably, it wasn't there. I fell to my right through a dark hole and face first on a pile of stones.

Too tired even to feel pain, I crawled up the rockslide without thinking. At the top I staggered to my feet and looked blearily around. The place where I stood was much larger and more open than any part of the sewers I had seen; it was still underground, I guessed from the echoes.

Ahead was a dark river, clean and cold. I realized that this must be the river that fed the sewer systems. There was some source of red light across the river, but I couldn't see what it was. My first guess was torches, but that turned out to be wrong. To my right and left were rough walls of stone. Behind me in the sewers were the Imperial soldiers with their glass lizards. If I was going to escape from them, it would be across the river.

I ran down to the bank of the river and was about to plunge in. I don't know why I didn't. I heard the soldiers shouting; I knew they had seen me. I could even hear the glass lizards sniffing behind me. I had every reason to risk leaping into the cold swift water — even if it killed me. But I didn't.



As I stood there, hesitating, a drop of my blood dripped off my shoe into the water. Instantly, a white light appeared in the dark water. Something like a glowing orchid leaped up from the river bottom and snapped at the drip of blood like a dog snapping at a bit of meat.

I stared, rooted with horror, as the glowing flower broke the glittering surface of the water. The skin of its petals was like human flesh, as white as Charis', and they surrounded a dark mouthlike hole full of something like teeth. The hungry flower began to swing back and forth... seeking out the source of the tasty blood, I realized. Which was me, of course. As soon as I sorted this out I unrooted myself from the ground and ran up along the bank of the river.

Soon I heard a great hissing behind me, like a chorus of snakes. I turned my head as I ran and looked back. The glass lizards (their skins now translucently white like Charis') had followed my trail to the edge of the river. There were half a dozen of them there, facing maybe twice as many of the hungry white flowers. The lizards and the flowers both seemed to be trying to eat each other.

I'd have cheered the flowers on, but just then something whacked me in the head as I ran. I bounced away and fell to the rocky ground, looking around groggily for what had hit me. It looked, at first, like a stone doorpost. Then I realized: it was the end of a stone railing for a bridge, covered with the same obscure (Old Ontilian?) carvings as the bridges in the sewer.

Bridge. River. Cross. I had just enough brains left in my head to connect those dots. I leapt to my feet again and raced across the bridge. As I glanced back at the lizards and the flowers, I saw that the soldiers had joined the fight on the side of their glass lizards.

Now, if ever, was my chance to get away. I ran off the far side of the bridge and away from the icy river as fast as I could. I don't know how fast this really was; I was nearly used up. But I kept going; that was the main thing.

But pretty soon I realized I wasn't going to get much farther. Not because I was all used up, though that was nearly true, but because of another obstacle in my path. It was another river, a river of fire. It was the color of blood and a good deal hotter. It was the fiery river's fierce red light that dimly lit the gloomy cave.

The fire was welcome at first: I felt my own blood pick up warmth from the heat, my shivering limbs took strength from it. But then it got hotter as I got closer. Long before I got to the fiery bank I had to turn away and run a parallel course.

I was beginning to think this was the end. I didn't know what was ahead, but if the soldiers and their glass lizards got across the icy river, they could probably trap me between the two streams.

I looked back to see what was happening. The soldiers had gotten away from the flowers and they were now on the bridge. There were a lot of soldiers; more than I remembered. Only one glass lizard seemed to have survived the fight with flowers... but it was on my side of the river and coming up fast. It was the one with the human hand in its belly; it was translucently red, from the light of the blood-bright river.

You want to keep your eyes on the ground when you're running over rough terrain. I knew that, even then, but I was too stupid with weariness to remember it. I tripped and went down, of course, with the glass lizard right behind me. I rolled desperately to my right, toward the fiery river. I latched onto a loose rock and sat up, expecting the thing to be at my throat.

It nearly was, snapping and slavering at me with its glassy fangs. I bounced the rock off its blunt bright snout and it started back. Without getting up (no time for that) I crab-walked away from it toward the fiery river, its heat scorching my back. I reached out with my left hand, scrabbling for another rock.

The glass lizard sort of dodged in toward me... and then slid back to where it had been, hissing. A mist, stinking like poison, came out of the blister-like sacs around its neck and drifted toward me. I scooted out the stuff's way as soon as I caught a whiff of it, found my rock, and waited for the thing to attack again.

It didn't. As I crawled up along the fiery river it kept pace with me, but didn't move in toward me. Like I say, I was stupid with fatigue, so it took me a couple of minutes to figure this out. Then I realized: it was repelled by the heat of the blood-bright river. I could get closer to the fire than the lizard could.

"Hey!" I said. "Don't like the heat, do you?"

Recklessly, I threw my rock at the thing. The lizard wriggled out of its way, but didn't charge me, even though I was unarmed.

I chuckled, maybe a little crazily, and started to crawl closer to the fiery river. I couldn't have gotten to my feet if I'd tried, and I didn't feel like trying. My hazy idea, which looks even hazier as I recall it, was that what worked against the lizard might work against the soldiers — that I might be able to get closer to the fire than they could.

I inched closer to the fiery river. But it wasn't really fire: I could see that now. It was thicker than water, too — more viscous, somehow. It was like the streams of melted rock that come out of the Burning Mountains sometimes: "lava" they called it in Four Castles. It was beautiful and terrible; I felt like my eyes were burning out from staring at it. Hot tears streamed down my face, because I wanted to get nearer to it but I couldn't stand to.

There was life in the burning river. There were fiery flowers carpeting its banks, and little bright things flying from flower to flower, like bees made out of lava. I could see salamanders swimming in the stream. One of them looked at me with such a bright intelligent eye that I almost called out to it for help. But I couldn't speak, either; my throat was raw and choked from breathing in the burning air. I collapsed in a heap. The motion attracted some of the lava-bees. A cloud of them drifted toward me. I wondered what would happen if they landed on me, but there was nothing I could do to prevent it.

It didn't matter anyway. I heard the rapid footfalls of men coming up behind me. If this was the end, I'd just as soon be killed by the lava-bees as taken by the Imperial troops and their glass lizards.

Then Morlock was there, his crooked form a dark silhouette against the bright red cloud of lava-bees. He snapped his cloak at them, scattering the cloud, and snatched one out of the air as they fled. He threw it straight over me and I heard a cracking sound behind me, like a heavy piece of glass breaking. I rolled over to see what had happened: the lava-bee had passed through the glass lizard, shattering its midsection. The glass lizard lay in pieces on the stones, opaque, inflexible and dead.

Beyond it stood my uncle Roble, looking down at the dead lizard with a bemused expression. Behind him an Imperial soldier was approaching. I gestured wildly, tried to speak, but couldn't.

The soldier came up and clapped Roble on the shoulder. "That Morlock!" he said. "Full of surprises! Did I tell you how I cut his head off, once?"

"Only about forty times," Roble replied. "But the day's young." He stepped over the dead lizard and bent down over you. "Fasra! Are you hurt?"

I croaked at him.

"She needs water," said Morlock, master of makers and of the obvious. "Let's get her out of this heat."

They dragged me to a cooler place in the wedge of land between the rivers, and the soldier handed me his water bottle to drink from. I recognized him then: he was Thrennick, the Keep we had met in the marketplace.

I drank, cleared my throat and spat, and drank again.

“How did you find me?” I said when I could speak (sort of).

“By accident,” said Morlock wryly.

“We weren’t looking for you, Fasra,” Roble said. “Or rather, we thought you were with Naeli.”

“I was. Only —”

“You don’t have to explain a thing to me, you crazy little wench; you’re just like your crazy mother. I’m just glad you’re all right and I hope it did some good.”

I drank in more water, and also the idea that I was, indeed, all right.

“Why soldiers our friends now?” I asked, after I caught a little more breath. “If are?”

Roble said, “Morlock showed Thrennick the map, as proof that Guards-commander Vennon had been taking money from the Sandboys. Then Thrennick showed it to the second-in-command, and it was enough to get him to arrest his boss. Then he gave Thrennick a commission to take command of all the parties searching for Charis. He was furious at Vennon.”

“Oh?” I said.

“Well, the poor guy hadn’t been cut in,” Thrennick explained. “Commander Vennon never was very bright that way. And when we searched his quarters we found letters proving he and another man had been acting as the Khroi’s agents in the city.”

“Who’s the other man?”

“Well, the fellow didn’t sign his name, and Vennon claims he doesn’t know it, but Morlock said he recognized the handwriting.”

“Who?”

“It was Charis,” Morlock said.

I felt stupider than ever. Morlock had gone to Charis for information on the Khroi. Charis had tried to cheat him, and when that failed he had gotten the information. This had brought him under the hostile attention of the agent of the Khroi in Sarkunden... who was Charis, apparently.

“Charis is trying to kill *himself*?” I said stupidly.

Morlock shrugged and didn’t otherwise answer.

“Not exactly, miss,” Thrennick said patiently. “You have to understand, Vennon was a spy and a traitor, but an honest one. When Charis bribed him to get information about the Khroi, he sold Charis the information. But then he reported to the Khroi through their agent that Charis was collecting information about them for someone else. The agent told Vennon to pick Charis up and interrogate him and Vennon tried to do it, first with the Sandboys (who’d been in his pocket for years, or *vice versa*) and then with the Imperial troops.”

Something about this explanation didn’t satisfy me, although Roble was nodding sagely as Thrennick spoke. Morlock wasn’t nodding or making any other sign that he agreed, so I asked him, “What do *you* think?”

Reluctantly Morlock said, “Thrennick may be right, as far as he goes. But the writing in the agent’s messages to Vennon *is* Charis’. I think Charis wrote the message that lured us into the city, also. And I read the life-scroll of the watch-golem in Charis’ house, the one you stopped. It was instructed to kill any human who entered the house; there was no exception specified for Charis himself. He wrote that, too.”

“Maybe it was just an accident?”

“Eh. Charis doesn’t make mistakes with golems. If he made that golem, and presumably the other golems in the house, a danger to himself, it must have been deliberate in some way.”

“Why?”

I thought he was just going to shrug again, and if he had I swear I would have gotten up on my feet and beaten the snot out of him. But what he said was, “Charis sold off little bits of himself until there was nothing left but the bargains he had made, and the fear of breaking them.”

“So?”

“Death ends fear. Maybe you can’t understand that.”

I tried to tell him that I did understand, and that I wasn’t sure he was right about Charis, and how Charis had understood how I felt about Naeli and being grateful, and that was why I had done what I’d done, but I wasn’t sure it was enough

—  
“No,” said Morlock interrupting me.

“No?” I asked, a little angry. Who was he to tell me how I felt?

“You owe Naeli nothing. She owes you nothing. That’s not why you risked everything to save her. You are not debts on each other’s balance sheets.”

“What is it then?” Roble asked.

Morlock shrugged. “The bond of blood. Blood has no price! You don’t buy it or sell it. When the need arises you shed your own to protect your own, and you don’t count the cost.”

I was appalled. Charis’ balance sheets of debt and obligation I could understand. The fierce credo of blood-loyalty announced by this cold-eyed white-faced man was too irrational. I couldn’t believe it any more than I could have reached the river of fire running behind us: it was completely impractical. Suppose you didn’t like someone you were related to? What about people you weren’t related to: what did you owe them?

Roble seemed to be thinking along these lines. He said to Morlock, “What about you and us? We’re not your blood.”

“Aren’t you?” Morlock asked.

“Are we?”

Morlock looked away toward the burning river. After a moment he said, “My people — the people that raised me — said there were two kinds of blood: given and chosen. The blood you’re born into is given. The kinship you choose is no less binding.”

“Makes sense,” said Roble casually, and turned to Thrennick, who was standing nearby with a few of his soldiers, all of whom wore rather blank looks. “You’ve caught up with Vennon’s troops and cancelled their orders,” he said, “so what happens next?”

“Officially,” Thrennick said, “I’m to take you all into custody and bring you back for questioning.”

“And unofficially?” Roble asked.

“Unofficially, I’m supposed to slip a knife into Morlock here and bring his head back to the new commander as proof he’s dead.”

“And actually?”

“Oh, I suppose you all will have gotten away while I wasn’t looking. I’d like to bring Charis back, though. It might mean a promotion for me; the new commander would like to know what kind of information he was selling to the Khroi, and for how long.”

“He’ll be with Naeli at our rendezvous point,” Morlock said.

“Let me send my men with these trackers back to their barracks; me and one of my soldiers will tag along with you.”

He must have gone to do that, because the next thing I remember was someone whining with a Sarkunden accent, “Why do I always get picked for these rotten jobs?”



“Because,” Thrennick replied, “I like to know who’s behind me and, whenever there’s a fight, there you are behind me. You and my butt, Tervin.”

I tried to get to my feet, but Roble just picked me up and started to carry me. I tried to tell him I was still bleeding and he’d get stuff all over him, but he just told me to shut my pie-hole. My pie-hole, like the rest of me, was pretty damn tired by then, so I did as he suggested and pretty soon fell asleep.

“I don’t like the sound of it,” Thrennick was saying when I woke up.

We were still underground, not too far from the fiery river; I could tell by the red gloom in the air. We were standing at the foot of a steep black cliff. The men were all staring upward with listening looks, so I tried to listen, too. What I thought I heard, from high above in the red gloom, was the clash of metal on metal.

“If your people are fighting someone,” Thrennick was saying to Roble, “I don’t think they’re our soldiers.”

“Then,” said Morlock, and gestured at either side of the cliff. Following his gesture, I saw there were two narrow paths climbing upward.

“Huh?” said Thrennick and then, “Oh, I get it. We go this way, you go that way. All right, why not?”

“Uncle Roble,” I said, as the two soldiers turned to the left and started scaling the narrow path, “I can walk.”

“Good,” said my uncle grimly. “I think I’m going to have to use my hands.”

He meant he’d need to fight, of course, but we used both hands and feet to scramble that steep crooked rockslide pretending to be a path. I was thinking about asking Roble whether he wanted to give his favorite niece a piggyback ride when I noticed the clashing had gotten a lot louder.

“This is it,” Roble said to Morlock, who nodded. They both looked back at me. “Stay out of this,” Roble said firmly, and Morlock said the same thing without saying anything.

“Hey!” I said. “As if I want to get my head cut off after everything I’ve been through.”

That wasn’t really an answer, of course, but what did they think... that I *wanted* to get my head cut off, after everything I’d been through?

Morlock, who was in the lead, drew his sword. It was weird looking, more like dark glass than metal, with pale veins of lighter crystal running through it. Roble drew his shorter, broader blade and leaped up to stand by Morlock on the narrow ledge. They stood there for a second and I almost caught up with them, poking my head up over the level of the ledge. Between their legs I could just see what was going on, but I didn’t understand it at first.

This is what I saw, or thought I saw: my mother and my brothers and Charis, surrounded by a bunch of little men all wearing the same weird costumes. It was a funny dark purplish color and shiny, like the shell of a beetle. They had knobby armored legs, and each costume had three legs and three arms. And on their heads they wore buglike pyramidal masks with one eye on each face of the pyramids. The ends of their arms were covered by metallic sheaths with long clawlike protrusions. They could stab with the points like foils, or slash with the edges like sabers.

Then I realized the obvious: they weren’t men, and those weren’t costumes. But they were attacking my mother and brothers. There were so many of them — I’m not sure how many, but a lot. Only the narrowness of the ledge was working in my family’s favor. But, Death and Justice, they looked desperate, and my mother and Thend had blood on their faces. They were facing us, with these beasties facing

them. Beyond them Stador and Bann were fighting against another crowd of monsters on the other side of the ledge. In the middle sat Charis, doing nothing for anybody, even himself. It wasn't clear if the bug-things were trying to capture him or rescue him from Naeli & co., but he couldn't have been more indifferent either way.

"Khroi," Morlock muttered to Roble. "Watch out: they have three arms."

"Noticed," Roble replied, obviously pleased to be more taciturn than Morlock for once.

"Eh," Morlock replied wittily, and they charged into the battle.

There were at least five ranks of the buglike Khroi between Roble and Morlock and the rest of my family. The men took out the first two ranks before the Khroi knew they were there.

What, you think they should have announced themselves and cried out a challenge, all orderly and sportsmanlike? Try it when your family's life is at stake. Personally I was glad those sneaky bastards were on our side.

I was glad, but I wanted to do something. The joy on Naeli's wounded face when she saw Roble and Morlock was a beautiful and painful thing to see. I wanted to earn a piece of that, honestly; I was always pretty jealous where my mama was concerned, I guess. But it was more than that: Naeli was fighting for her life, for my brother's lives, and what was I supposed to do, just stand there on a pile of rocks?

Then it occurred to me: *I was standing on a pile of rocks.*

I wasn't reckless about it; I realized that a bunch of ill-thrown missiles could hurt my people more than the buglike Khroi. But some well-thrown ones... they might at least have some surprise effect.

There was a long heavy pointed rock digging into my knee. I grabbed it and lifted myself up onto the ledge. Picking my time, I hurled the stone at the Khroi who was fighting Naeli. The blunt end struck the Khroi on one of its eyes. It swung half around, its three arms waving. Naeli stabbed low, just above its tripod legs and it crumpled.

"Hey!" I shouted, and added a suggestion the Khroi probably would have found impossible, even if their reproductive system was like ours. (It isn't, I found out later.)

Now instead of looking happy Naeli looked worried. That made me mad, and I took it out on some more Khroi. I didn't feel like I could reach the Khroi on the far side of the ledge (not without risking a strike on Stador and Bann) but I kept the rocks flying at the narrowing field of Khroi on the near side of the ledge.

Then Roble hewed one in half, and the fight on our side of the ledge was over: the Khroi had been reduced to severed bug-parts scattered over the stone.

Roble and Morlock charged past Naeli, Thend and Charis without so much as a *Hi, how are you?*

"Bann, give way!" Roble shouted. I knew he wanted to take Bann's place in the front line, probably have Morlock take Stador's. The ledge wasn't wide enough for the men to shoulder past the boys.

But Bann didn't fall back and he didn't answer. Maybe he didn't hear — it was pretty hard to hear anything over the clashing metal. Maybe he felt like he couldn't risk stepping back. Anyway, he wasn't moving. And he was bleeding; so was Stador: I could see it staining their shirts.

Here's where it gets a little weird. Morlock takes his sword and stabs it into the ground. Then he runs up and launches himself over Stador's shoulder, like he's playing leapfrog. In midair he shouts, "Tyrfing!" and the sword flies out of the ground and into his hand as he lands. And he hits like a boulder, takes down a couple of the Khroi as he lands. Then he grips the sword (it is called Tyrfing, but I have no idea how he gets it to come when he calls) with both hands and starts

swinging it like a reaper harvesting wheat.

Stador was on the ground, now, and Bann was slumping beside him. Roble shook his head and jumped over them shouting, "Behind you!" (So, like, Morlock wouldn't cut his head off.) Morlock shifted back to a single grip as Roble took a stand beside him and they settled down to the business of clearing all the Khroi off the other side of the ledge.

There were more Khroi over there than there had been on the near side of the ledge, but pretty soon they had help: the Imperial soldiers, Thrennick and Tervin were attacking the Khroi from the other side.

I cheered them on with a few more obscenities I'd learned while working in the cathouse, and then decided to help out with a few well-thrown rocks. I was bending over, scrabbling for a good missile, when something grabbed me by the ankle.

I was bent over, so I looked through my own bloodstained legs at the thing. It was one of the Khroi who'd been cut almost in half. It had lost the metal sheath from the ends of its arm (it only had one left, and no legs at all). There were six or seven snaky things, like boneless fingers sprouting out of the end of its arm, and it was gripping my ankle with those.

I tried to shake loose, but it was terribly strong. It dragged me down to the ground and started to pull me toward the edge of the cliff.

I screamed, of course. Who wouldn't? The trouble was, my scream wasn't terribly loud. The fall had knocked my breath out of me, and the battle noise was reaching a crescendo just then. I could see Naeli bending over Stador and binding up one of his wounds. Bann and Thend were sitting nearby, gasping for breath and staring at nothing. Nobody seemed to hear me or see me. It was as if my death were taking place in some secret place worlds away from these people who had been my family.

Then somebody landed on top of the Khroi, making its carapace crunch horribly. It was Charis. The Khroi released my ankle to pound feebly at Charis, who rolled with it over to the cliff's edge and pushed it off.

But it had caught hold of him just long enough to keep his momentum going. His feet tumbled over the edge and his body began to follow as he clutched desperately for a hold on the bare dirt and rock of the ledge.

This, I guess, was the moment for a Charis-like calculation of who owed what to whom. Should I have tried to figure out if Charis was still in my debt? (I had, after all, saved his life twice, and he'd only saved mine once — but I hadn't acted *in order* to save his life whereas he...) Well, I didn't. I didn't even think about Thrennick wanting Charis alive. There was a roaring, like a river of fire, in my ears and I rolled over to seize the arm of this evil icy man who was, apparently, one of my blood — chosen, if not given.

He was saying something. I didn't pay any attention; I was trying to dig my feet into the ground. I hoped my weight, pressing down on the rough surface of the ledge, would be enough to anchor his.

The trouble was: it wasn't. In a silence that seemed to fill the whole world I heard the most horrible sound I've ever heard: my body scraping over the stones of the ledge.

"Help here!" I shrieked, into the sudden silence, and slipped a little further toward the gulf. *I really should let go now*, I told myself. *Can't do this, can't go over the edge with him*. But I clung even harder to his arm, so hard that my fingers seemed to sink deep into the flesh. That seemed weird, even then, but I didn't have time to think why.

Then Naeli was there, grabbing onto my feet, arresting my slide toward the cliff. I sobbed gratefully and hung on to Charis' arm.

But he was still sliding away from me. I didn't understand it. I wasn't moving,

but he was still sliding off the edge of the cliff.

Then his arm ripped away from his body. I was left with it and, no doubt, a dopey look on my face. I'll never forget Charis' expression as he slipped, one-armed, away from me into the abyss.

Morlock was abruptly there, one leg thrown forward so that his foot was at the brink, he bent over and seized Charis by the neck. As Charis gasped and choked Morlock lifted him out of the brink and tossed him beside me on the ledge.

I was still gripping the severed arm tensely. When I realized this I let it go, kicked Naeli away hysterically and jumped to my feet. I didn't know what Charis was, but I didn't want to be near him.

Morlock, however, seemed to have no such qualms. He was kneeling down beside Charis. At first I thought that he was holding Charis' one remaining hand: a pretty sentimental act for a man like Morlock, but you never know. Then I realized: he was feeling for a pulse.

And not finding one, apparently. "Remarkable!" he said to Charis' tormented face. "The skin temperature is lifelike. If there were a heartbeat, the likeness would be perfect."

"I was working on that," Charis said sullenly. "It's a minor issue."

"Your still have a heart, though?" Morlock inquired, with an air of polite interest.

"Oh, yes," Charis replied. "I couldn't dispense with it. The entire torso is essentially intact."

"May I?" asked Morlock.

"If — Oh, I suppose it doesn't matter," Charis said gloomily.

Morlock reached into the horrible man's open shirt and felt around a little.

"That's not human skin," he said flatly, withdrawing his hand.

"Well, I decided to venture on a clay integument for my torso," Charis admitted, "but the organs are still functioning. They have less to do now, of course."

"You anticipate an extended lifespan?" Morlock asked. "Less wear and tear on the organs? You may be right. Anyway, this is an admirable achievement. Really remarkable."

That was when I started to laugh quietly to myself. A remarkable achievement! That thing!

"What's wrong?" Bann said to me. "What's happening?"

"Don't you see?" I said, or shrieked, I'm not sure which. "He's turned himself into a golem."

Morlock looked over at me. "Not entirely," he said mildly. "Charis' limbs and skin may be golemic but the rest of him, his core, is as it was. Do you," he said to Charis, "get full sensation from your clay skin?"

Charis shuddered. "No, thank God. Really, Morlock the Maker!" he said, drawing himself up, "I don't think you fully appreciate what you call my achievement."

"Explain it, then," Morlock suggested.

"Do you suppose that I myself did these delicate operations on my own frame? I had to have golems do it. For each operation I created a team of golem-surgeons with careful and elaborately written life-scrolls. The slightest error in any golem's composition and I would not have survived a single operation."

"What makes you think you *did* survive?" I shouted. Then I put my hand over my mouth and sat down. I didn't feel that great; I don't suppose any of us did. Naeli and Thend both came and sat down on either side of me, each one putting an arm around me. That made me feel a little better.

Charis droned on wearily. "My face became so many masks. It wasn't mine anymore. As the Khroi's agent I spied on the city. As your debtor, I spied on the Khroi. As the Khroi's agent, I had to hunt down the man spying on them. If my plans had



succeeded, all my debts would be paid. I would have given you your information, surrendered you to the Khroi, and destroyed the spy in the city. But now all my bargains are broken.”

“You would have destroyed yourself to fulfill a bargain?” Morlock asked.

“My crowning deed as a maker,” Charis replied, smiling faintly. “When this... business interrupted me, I was writing the life-scroll of a golem which could replace my entire face.”

“Oh.”

Charis seemed to think Morlock was insufficiently impressed. “Don’t you see? The delicacy of the operation — the need to inculcate the golem with my every skill so that the new face would be such a masterwork of artifice that no one would realize it was artificial!”

“Why?”

Charis glared at the crooked man as if insulted by so obvious a question. “All of you!” he shouted, waving his remaining arm. “The Khroi. The Guards. Vennon. The water-gangs. *You*. All of you, everywhere, surrounding me with open mouths like baby birds squawking, ‘I want this, I want that, Do this, Don’t do that, Tell me this, Don’t tell him that, Give this to me, Take this from me.’ Everyone screaming *me me me* and none of them *me*.”

Morlock opened his hands and waited: he still didn’t understand.

“It was my chance to escape,” Charis said wearily. “The new face didn’t have to look like my old face. Everyone knew who I was, but if I succeeded no one would know who I was. I wouldn’t owe anybody anything; nobody would owe me anything. I could have been anyone. *Anyone*.”

“Who is it you want to be?” Morlock asked patiently.

Charis thought for a moment. “No one,” he said finally. He pushed himself over with his remaining arm, spun off the edge and was lost in the red gloom. We heard his body make wet solid impact with the cliff several times as he fell.

“There goes my chance at a promotion,” said Thrennick wistfully after a few moments of silence. “Master Morlock —”

“I am not your master.”

“Fine; I just want you to do me a favor.”

“What?”

“If you ever come back to Sarkunden —”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t look me up. I mean, I still have nightmares about the *last time*.”

. . .

The soldiers went back to the city through the sewers, but we took another narrow rocky passage up into the light. I couldn’t believe how good the fresh air tasted and felt in my lungs, and my eyes drank down the light till I could feel it in my toes. Then I looked at the others and I noticed they were all bleeding as much as I was, if not more. This seemed to me very funny and terribly sad, more or less at the same time, but Naeli said a little hysteria under the circumstances wasn’t unreasonable.

We were in a cave facing the north. Outside there were mountains piercing the horizon like pale thorns. Through them led the Kirach Kund, the River of Skulls — as dangerous as its name sounded or more. But as long as there was no one there who would try to buy or sell me or himself, I wouldn’t complain.



## *Houses of the Dead*

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*Martha Wells*

Ilias didn't notice when they stepped over the boundary of the last god's territory.

They were walking over mossy ground in a beech forest, and had come out on a hill that overlooked a meadow. In the distance, tall trees climbed the foothills up toward the peak of the low mountains, and Ilias could see the notch where the pass was, the sharp-etched outline of the cliffs that framed it. The rock was sandy-colored where the trees thinned out, and he thought the country up there would be fairly barren. Scrub and brush maybe, and not much else. Not many places for curselings to hide. *Maybe that was why they thought it would be safe*, he thought, lips twisting. If his foster father Ranior hadn't been cursed in the middle of the city of Cineth, despite the god and the the Chosen Vessels, Ilias might have thought so too.

Giliead came out of the trees behind him and stopped to contemplate the view as well. His expression was resigned. "What do you think we're going to find?" Ilias asked. He had held off asking until now, through the long days and nights of walking, and thought he might as well get it over with.

Giliead took a deep breath. "Dead people. The wizard long gone." He looked down at Ilias, smiling a little. "You know as much as I do."

"That's not comforting. I don't know anything," Ilias commented as he followed Giliead up the hill. But that was the first time he had seen Giliead smile since Ranior's death. Maybe the trip was doing him some good. It was still the work of a Chosen Vessel, even if there was nothing much left to do.

The message asking for help had come for Menander, the Chosen Vessel of the Uplands, but Menander was wounded and still recovering, and had conceded that it was time for Giliead to hunt on his own. Especially a hunt like this, where it sounded as if there wasn't much left to do but assure the survivors that the wizard was gone.

Ilias kept walking, only realizing several steps later that Giliead had stopped.

He turned to face him, taking advantage of the pause to tighten his queue and tie the rest of his braids back. "What?"

Giliead's face had that look of inward concentration. He said, "The Uplands god's territory ends here."

Ilias stopped. A cold sensation settled in his belly and he had the sudden urge to look around for curselings and wizards. He shook it off; he had scanned the meadow from the top of the hill and it was empty. The woods on the far side

were another matter, but there was nothing in the meadow. *Don't be an idiot*, he told himself. *You've been at sea, that's godless territory.*

But somehow the sea was different.

He realized Giliead was regarding him with a lifted brow, as if expecting more of a reaction. Giliead had been gifted at birth by the god that watched over Cineth, the city near the family farm; the gift made him into a Chosen Vessel with the ability to smell curses and see the traces they left in air, earth and water. This was different for him. Ilias glared. "All right, what are you waiting for?"

Giliead's brows quirked, and he stepped over the boundary.

. . .

It was the morning of the next day when they walked into the trader's camp. The traders had put their wagons in a half circle, stretching oiled canvas between them to make a large tent, and had dug a fire pit up at the front. Fur rugs and wool carpets had been spread under the canvas to make a seating area, with a few carved camp stools. Heavy mountain draft horses with shaggy manes and a few mules grazed nearby.

Sentries had seen them approach and had followed them through the trees at a distance, though everyone Ilias saw looked more tired than hostile. A man came out from under the canvas shelter to greet them, his expression understandably wary. Camping in godless country, even for a group this large and this well armed, was still a calculated risk. He asked cautiously, "Travelers?" He was big, his red-brown hair braided with a collection of metal trinkets and beads.

"I'm Giliead of Andrien, Chosen Vessel of Cineth," Giliead corrected him. "This is Ilias, my brother."

"Ah." His brows lifted, but he didn't comment. At seventeen seasons, Giliead looked young to be a Chosen Vessel, and Ilias was only a couple of seasons older. They didn't look like brothers, either. Ilias had been adopted by the Andrien as a boy; he was short, stocky, and blond like the inland Syprians, and Giliead was tall, chestnut-haired, and olive-skinned, like the coastal people. The man said, "I'm Macchus." He turned to call toward the wagons, "Laodice, they're here!" He waved for Ilias and Giliead to follow him, saying, "Come and meet the women, they'll tell you what we found."

More people were coming out of the wagons, men and women of various ages but no children or elders, which was what Ilias had expected. It looked as if there were at least two families here, and they looked like ordinary traders, except they wore a great deal of copper and bronze jewelry with polished stones, earrings, arm-bands, wrist cuffs, hair clasps. They must deal in metal, which explained why they had been associated with the family that had wanted to establish the gold mine. Macchus led them under the canvas, gesturing for them to sit. Giliead took a camp stool, pulling off his baldric and setting aside his bow. Ilias settled on the rug beside him, shedding his main weapons as well. The traders were gathering around, anxious and concerned, and somebody stirred up a brazier and put a jar of wine on it to warm.

A woman took a seat on a camp stool brought by Macchus and one of the other men. "I'm Laodice." She was small, plump and blond, and older than she looked at first glance. "I own the wagons." She looked at Giliead, her expression a little uncertain. "You're the Chosen Vessel from Cineth?"

Giliead nodded, calmly pretending not to notice that it was obvious that everyone thought he was far too young. "Tell me what happened."



Laodice took a deep breath. "You know the story of the Taerae, how they wanted to build a city in the godless section of the pass to mine gold?"

"I do now," Gilead told her. "It wasn't heard of in Cineth until recently."

She nodded. "They kept the word of it close, and only drew settlers from the villages on the far side of the pass. The trading isn't good there, because the routes from the larger city-states are so long, so many were eager to be persuaded. The Taerae's reasoning was that since there were gods on both sides of the pass, it would keep the curselings off and wizards wouldn't dare to come."

"It doesn't work like that." Gilead's face was grim.

There was an uneasy shifting among the other traders, and someone murmured, "That's for certain."

Ignoring the mutters, Laodice continued, "But they drew settlers, probably close to two hundred people, and started to carve a city out of the rock. They hired more people from the villages down in the valleys to help with the building, and of course they had to buy their supplies from the valleys because there's little land for farming in the pass. They did mine the gold, and for the past few years they did a good trade in it, shipping it out of Cirrdon to the Chaeans." She nodded to someone standing behind Ilias, and he glanced back, surprised to see a Chaeian woman. She was dark-skinned as most Chaeians were, her curly hair drawn back in a single braid, with full lips and a nose like a hawk's long profile, and somehow the effect of the whole was that she was beautiful. She wore a short silk jacket over knee-length pants, with a Syprian wool wrap over her shoulders. Laodice said, "This is Tolyi, who negotiates the trade for the Chaeans."

Ilias nodded to her and she gave him a grave nod in return, and he tried to drag his attention back to the story.

Laodice was saying, "At the turn of the moon we went up the pass with our wagons, to pick up the Taerae's shipment and to bring Tolyi to make the trade agreements for the next year. But as we came up the road into the city, we knew something was wrong."

"It was too quiet," Macchus put in, his face hard with the memory. He had taken a seat on the rug next to Laodice's stool. "No one was on the road, and then no one at the gates."

"The gates stood open?" Ilias asked. Some of the people watching twitched and stared at him, and he realized he hadn't spoken until now. *Ilias of Andrien, the Chosen Vessel's deaf-mute spear-bearer*. The irreverent thought made it difficult to keep his expression sober. "It didn't look as if there had been a battle?"

"No, there wasn't a sign of any disturbance," Laodice answered him, recovering first. "The gates were open as if they had seen us coming, but with no one at watch."

"We did look for tracks in the dirt," Macchus added. "But the road was hardened mud, so..." He shrugged helplessly.

"No one came when we called out," Laodice continued. "We knew by this point that something was badly wrong, but thought it might be bandits, or that there had been trouble in the mine or at the river. I left most of the men to guard our wagons, and took Tolyi and a few others to search."

"I thought it was the mine as well," Tolyi said suddenly. Her voice was as beautiful as her face, rich and full. "But as we went through the town, it was too quiet. We saw no one. And of course, we reached the diggings and there was no one there, and no one down by the river panning. There was no hint of anything wrong. Except that there were no people."

"We started to go into the houses." Laodice frowned, rubbing her arms as if she was cold. "We found food laid out on the tables, tools set aside. The animals were

## Martha Wells



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*Photo by Troyce Wilson*

unhurt, if hungry and thirsty. They couldn't have been left untended long. We drove the horses and cattle down to the valleys —"

Ilias had been listening in increasing incredulity. He looked up to meet Giliead's puzzled frown. Giliead said, "But there were bodies? They had all been killed?"

Half a dozen people spoke to correct that and Laodice raised her voice to be heard over them, "No, that was the frightening thing. No bodies, no smell of death, except for goat's milk or meat that had gone bad." She lifted her hands. "They were just gone."

"This isn't what we were expecting," Giliead said later, leaning against a wagon. It was evening and torches were lit in the traders' camp as the darkness crept up through the trees.

From here they could see it was still light on top of the mountain, the peak and the notch of the pass outlined in red. Ilias didn't think it could look more ominous if the rocky cliffs near the pass had been carved into skulls. Curseling skulls with horns and big teeth. "No kidding," he said, his voice dry. "I don't remember anything in the Journals about a whole city's worth of people disappearing."

Giliead grunted, sounding both annoyed and distracted, his eyes still on the mountain. Ilias glanced back at the traders, several of whom were at the fire pit making dinner preparations. He caught the scent of roasting meat and his stomach grumbled.

Wizards created curselings and set them loose to kill people. Even in territory protected by a god and a Chosen Vessel, curselings could still creep in and attack isolated villages or farms, if you weren't careful. People who built a city out of reach of the nearest gods and in such an isolated spot as the pass, frequented only by heavily armed swift-traveling traders, were not being careful. If curselings killed them it was terrible but

not exactly unexpected. This... This was something else.

Giliead shook his head finally. "I wish I could talk to our god. It's not good at answering questions, especially ones that begin with 'why,' but at least it could tell me if it's a bad idea to go up there."

"I can tell you it's a bad idea to go up there, but we still have to go." Ilias scratched his chest absently. Back in the circle of wagons, Tolyi had come out to talk to Laodice. The two women stood near the fire, the light painting Tolyi's dark figure in different shades of bronze and gold. "What about the Uplands god, couldn't you talk to it?"

Giliead let out his breath. "It would take too long. I'd have to travel back down the forest road at least two days, and then get its attention. There's no telling how long that would take with a god that doesn't know me. And it's been too long already. If those people are alive somewhere, trapped or imprisoned, it's been long enough for most to die just from lack of water."

Ilias frowned at him. "Macchus and the others looked for tracks." But Macchus had also said the ground was too hard to leave any. Ilias looked up at the pass again, considering it. He had been deliberately thinking of the inhabitants of Taerae as all adults, avoiding the image of dead children, though it was highly unlikely that the settlers had had none. But Giliead was right, even if the people had been trapped, unless they had had some source of water, it had already been too long.

"If they were taken by curses, I might be able to see the traces of it," Giliead said. He shrugged, his mouth twisting. "Curselings would have left something. Blood, bones, skin, disturbed ground. And they would have killed the goats and horses, too."

"Not guls," Ilias pointed out. Guls only wanted people. They preyed on travelers who were alone, or in small groups. They devoured people whole, leaving no remains, and no way to release the victims' shades.

Giliead shook his head. "Laodice didn't think there were enough guls up there to take all those people. And the settlers knew to be careful of them. Unless they were trapped somewhere, and couldn't get away."

Ilias shifted uncomfortably. He was imagining the hapless settlers lured out and caught in a cave-in somehow, being slowly fed on by guls while he and Giliead and the traders waited and wondered. It made him want to leave for the pass now, this moment, no matter how stupid or suicidal it was. "You really think they could be alive?"

Giliead was silent for a long moment, then he shook his head. "No. Not really." He pushed off from the tree trunk, looking off into the gathering darkness.

There was an old trade road that went up through the pass, and the construction of the city had made it well-traveled. It wound gradually up through the grassy hills, past sparse stands of trees. The morning sun was bright and the day promised to be warm; it still didn't look anything like godless curse-haunted territory and Ilias could understand why the settlers had been lulled into believing all would be well.

Laodice, her husband Macchus, and three other men accompanied them, along with the Chaeon Tolyi.

Giliead was walking at the front with Laodice, and Ilias heard him ask, "Was there any word of strangers visiting the city? Any newcomers moving in?"

"We heard of no one, but then we only saw the Taerae once a year ourselves." Laodice looked up at the cliffs above them, frowning.

Ilias found Tolyi walking beside him, and gave her a brief smile.

She smiled back, and said, "The Chosen Vessel is your brother?"

"Not by blood," he told her, "I've been with the Andrien family since I was a boy."

"I see." They walked a little more, and Ilias kept his eyes on the brush, though it was an effort. Tolyi was far more interesting to look at. Then she said, "It surprises me that you're both so young."

Ilias managed not to throw her a wary look. He suddenly suspected that her walking with him had nothing to do with his personal attractions. He shrugged, tugging on his baldric. "We're older than we look."

"Not that much older." Her voice dry, she added, "I have a son older than you, I expect."

This time he did look at her, but incredulously. "Really?" He had thought she was only a little older than Giliead's sister Irissa, at most. She did have the bearing of an older woman, but he had thought it was because she had an important duty as a trading factor.

"Really." Her look was a little amused, and a little flattered. "And I know Syrians keep their boys close. Especially pretty, marriageable boys."

"Not that close." But Ilias looked away, scanning the scrub off the trail and giving himself a moment to think. "Chosen Vessels don't marry. Not often, anyway."

"But he takes his younger brother —"

"Older," Ilias corrected automatically, then swore silently at himself. *You idiot.*

"Older brother, I see."

"What are you saying, Tolyi?" Ilias was obviously losing the subtle battle, he might as well bring it into the open. "Do you think we're lying about Gil being a Vessel?"

"No!" Startled, she stopped, catching his arm to pull him to a halt. "Not that at all. I can see he's a Vessel." She regarded him seriously. "I don't doubt your word. So I'd like to ask you how long you two have been doing this, how many of these hunts have you been on?"

Ilias took a deep breath, pressing his lips together. It was an honest question, and he wouldn't lie to her. "This is the second. The first was... not long ago."

"Oh." She lifted her brows. They looked at each other for a long moment, and by mutual consent both started to walk again.

"Will you tell the others?" Ilias asked her. His heart was pounding. It was hard enough having this much responsibility. Having this much responsibility but with the added burden of the traders looking at Giliead as if he didn't know what he was doing would be just that much worse.

"No," she said quickly, "No." She threw him a wry glance. "I'm sure some of them have guessed already, but it wouldn't do any good to say it aloud."

Ilias suppressed a wince. They walked along for a time in silence. Or at least Ilias tried to keep silent. But he finally had to ask, "What did you mean when you said that you could see Gil was a Vessel?"

She took a deep breath, and seemed to consider for a long moment before replying. "I've met several Vessels, here and in the Chaeian islands, when they come to make treaties." She looked up, her face set and sad. "He has that look, the fey look. Fated."

Ilias didn't reply to that. He knew what she meant, but he had never seen it. Maybe he had lived with it so long, he couldn't see it. "We're young, and he's never killed a wizard. But he knows what to do. He's been waiting for this all his life."

. . .



They followed the road up through the hills, until the ground grew rocky and the mountain's brown stone shoulders started to rise up on either side. The pass turned into a winding gorge, a few hundred paces wide, with a shallow stream cutting through rock and yellow grass and low scrubby brush.

Walking ahead a few paces, Giliead came to an abrupt halt. "Stop," Ilias said without thinking, shifting the bow off his shoulder. Somewhat to his surprise, everybody did. Laodice and Macchus and the others warily scanned their surroundings, though there was nothing obviously threatening about this section of road. A few tall trees threw some welcome shade on the road and the stream. The ground was sandy and rocky, and mostly bare of scrub or anything that could be used as cover, up to a hundred paces away. On the far side of the road, nearest the gorge wall, boulders and the remains of an old rockfall lay scattered. Ilias couldn't hear anything but sparrows and rainbirds chirping and the hum of insects.

Giliead cocked his head, turning deliberately toward the stream and the stone cliff face far on the other side. Ilias followed his gaze, stepping up beside him. "You see it?" Giliead said softly. "Right below that pointed grayish rock, in the shadow, there's a ledge."

Ilias squinted. The dappled shade of the trees, the shadows, the striations of the rock all made it hard to... There it was. "I see it." Crouched in the crevice, barely visible, was a man-shaped creature. It was a little like a rock monkey, but taller, and too skin-

## Also By Martha Wells



### in *Black Gate 10* & *11*

For her Giliead and Ilias stories for *Black Gate*, Martha Wells returned to the setting of her Nebula Award-nominated novel *The Death of the Necromancer* and the *Fall of Ile-Rien* trilogy (*The Wizard Hunters*, *The Ships of Air*, and *The Gate of Gods*). "Reflections" appeared in *BG 10*, and "Holy Places" in *BG 11*.

"The superb fantasy writer Martha Wells offers a tale from her Ile-Rien world in "Reflections." Ilias and Giliead are wizard-hunters. The reader realizes in short order that Pheneras, the wizard being chased, is definitely worth getting rid of. Giliead is a Chosen Vessel, one whom the gods have gifted to sense curses. And Pheneras's curses are especially lethal... Good action, characterization, imagination, and resolution are part of Wells's toolkit, and this story is no exception."

– Sherwood Smith, *Tangent Online*

"Holy Places" by Martha Wells, the origin story of her heroes Giliead and Ilias, is set in a matriarchal culture where women are in ultimate control... entailing the exposure of young children to cold hilltops and a dose of black magic... Very entertaining."

– Nick Gevers, *Locus* magazine

Art by Storn Cook

ny, and there was something about the way it sat, watching them, that was not at all animal-like.

“That’s a gul.” Laodice spoke quietly, stepping up beside Ilias. “Where there’s one, there’s others. They hunt in packs.”

“One to lure travelers off the road, the others to kill and eat,” Tolyi added, her face grim.

Uneasily fascinated, Ilias reached for an arrow. “Kill it?”

As if it had heard him, the creature faded back into the shadow, vanishing. Ilias grimaced. “It doesn’t matter,” Laodice said, absently giving Ilias’ shoulder a squeeze as she turned away. “They know we’re here, anyway. There’s too many to kill them all.”

Giliead lifted a brow, exchanging a look with Ilias. *Next time I’ll know not to ask*, Ilias promised him silently.

“How did you see it up there?” one of the younger men asked Giliead.

“I didn’t see it. I felt it looking at us,” Giliead told him. He didn’t bother waiting for their reaction, following Laodice as they started down the road again. Ilias moved after him, feeling his back prickle and knowing they were all looking at each other in that way he was growing to hate. *You asked for a Chosen Vessel*, he thought, bitterness settling in his stomach. *What good would it do to be a Vessel who couldn’t tell a gul was looking at him?* Just because Giliead had never done it before...

“If all curselings were created by wizards, what wizard created the guls?” Tolyi asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Giliead glanced over at her. “The Journals don’t say. As far as we know there have always been guls in the godless territories, especially the mountains. As long as there have been gods.” He frowned, facing the trail again.

The sun was nearly straight overhead by the time Ilias had a chance to speak to Giliead in relative privacy. They had reached a point where the stream widened into a pool, fed by a waterfall that broke and tumbled down the rocks of the cliff face. The pool was low now but the channels it had worn showed it was much deeper in the spring when the rains sent water cascading down a much wider section of the cliff. There was a bridge here, built by the Taerae to keep the trade moving when the water covered the old road’s path.

The bridge was wide enough for a big trade wagon, with stone pilings and wide seasoned planks. A ford would have probably worked just as well, but Ilias was beginning to think the Taerae had had more coins than sense. Laodice called a halt there to refill their water skins, and Ilias moved to join Giliead, who was standing on the bridge looking further up the road.

“How did you feel the gul looking at you?” Ilias asked quietly. The rush of water down the rock would cover their voices but he still kept his back to the others.

Giliead shrugged a little helplessly. “I don’t know. It was like it was trying to touch me, from all the way across the gorge.” He shook his head, looking away again. “I think it might have something to do with the way guls shapechange to lure people away. Maybe they see inside our heads, and because I’m a Vessel I could feel it doing that.”

Ilias grimaced. The seeing inside heads thing was not a comfortable thought, but it would explain why the guls were able to take shapes that were familiar to the people they were trying to lure away. But at least Giliead had demonstrated to the traders that he was a Chosen Vessel. A young Chosen Vessel, but a Vessel nonetheless. That was one less thing to worry about.

The sky was at the edge of twilight when they reached the city.

Ilias stopped next to Giliead as the gorge widened out, the sparse trees and scrub brush giving way to rocky ground. There was a natural gap in the gorge wall, the entrance to another canyon that had been closed in with a wall of cut stone blocks, stretching up a whole ship's length. A log gate was set in the wall and the trail signs and Syrnaic characters for "Taerae" were carved into the blocks above it, touched with paint that was already faded a little from the wind and sand.

The old road curved through the open rocky flat, disappearing as the pass wound away. A new branch of it, lined with stone, turned off and led through the open gates.

It would have been a welcoming sight, after the long walk up the pass, except for the silence, and the unattended wall. Cineth's gates stood open, but there were always at least two sentries there, even though there hadn't been a Raider attack on the city for decades. "See anything?" Ilias asked. Uneasy prickles were climbing his spine, and there was something cold and empty about those open gates, the glimpse of painted pavement he could see through them, the silence that hung over the place. The birdsong had stopped when they had left the trees and the stream behind, but the quiet hadn't been oppressive before now.

Giliead frowned absently, studying the ground. "Just a... Huh."

Distracted, he moved away, parallel to the wall, pausing occasionally to kick at a rock or scrape his boot over the dust. Ilias followed at a distance, the others trailing more cautiously behind. He knew Giliead wasn't following tracks, but the invisible traces that a wizard's curses left behind.

After a short distance Giliead found a footpath that ran along the city wall. It led through a scrubby grove of trees, to the edge of a shallow pit carved out of the hillside. Giliead stopped, studying the pit, brows knit.

When Ilias drew even with him he saw why. In the center of the pit was a large stake, driven deep into the dirt. Chains with manacles hung from it. "This is interesting," Giliead said, brows lifted. He turned to regard Laodice and Tolyi. "Did you know about this?"

"No, and I don't understand." Laodice came to stand beside them, her expression incredulous. "It's for punishment, I see that, but..."

"They just left criminals out here to starve?" Macchus asked, dubious. "It's a little mad."

Ilias understood their confusion. They couldn't see what Giliead must be seeing. And he thought it was likely that they hadn't known about it. The trees and tall grass blocked it from the road, and the footpath wasn't well traveled.

"It stinks of guls and curses," Giliead said, watching them carefully. "No one chained out here starved. I doubt they lasted the night."

Macchus swore. Tolyi and Laodice exchanged a look of startled disgust. "Their reasons for secrecy seem more clear now," Tolyi said with a grimace.

Ilias shook his head. No lawgiver worth the name would have permitted this. If one had tried, she or he would have soon found themselves deposed by the town council or the Chosen Vessel. Of course, the Taerae hadn't been burdened with a Chosen Vessel, not having a god to choose one.

"What would happen?" Laodice asked, her face tight and angry. "If this were done inside a god's territory?"

Giliead let his breath out, exchanging a narrow look with Ilias. Ilias could tell he didn't think the traders had known about this either, and that was a relief.

Giliead said, "It would leave." He started back along the path toward the city.

If a god left its territory, the city and the villages around it would lose the protection from curselings, lose the services of the Chosen Vessel to defend against wizards; they would have to disperse.

Ilias lengthened his steps to catch up to Giliead. "Would a god really leave for something like this?" he asked, low-voiced. The only mention in the Journals of a god leaving that he could remember had been when the people of the town had killed its Chosen Vessel.

Giliead threw a look back at the traders. He snorted. "I have no idea. And I'd rather not find out."

They reached the open gates, the others following. On the far side the road opened into a surprisingly large plaza, and the buildings under the looming cliffs were elaborate, with narrow pillared porticos and entablatures carved with rosettes. All the decoration was painted with touches of red, green, purple, yellow. As the traders fanned out in a loose circle, watching the doorways cautiously, Ilias stared; he hadn't been expecting anything so ornate. Then he realized these buildings were only façades, carved and built on the cliff faces, with the doorways leading back into the rock.

"The place was honeycombed with caves already," Laodice explained, seeing his surprise. "That's why they chose it. They camped in them when they first came here to look for the gold."

Ilias shook his head, not sure he had heard right. "They what?"

Giliead lost his air of abstraction, turning to stare incredulously at Laodice. "They camped in caves in godless territory? In a gorge full of guls and curselings?"

"That's what I said," Macchus put in, keeping his gaze on those empty dark doorways. "Bunch of crazy people."

"It was hardly wise," Tolyi admitted. "But they were able to mine the gold, and they came to no harm. At least, so they said."

Ilias glanced back at her, hearing the skepticism in her voice. "You think they lost people before this, and just never told anyone?"

Tolyi shrugged. "They knew to use the guls as a method of execution. And it seems unlikely that of all the people they brought up here, no one fell victim to them, or anything else, before this happened." She lifted a brow at Laodice. "The traders take many precautions, but they lose people."

Laodice nodded, her mouth set in a grim line. "A few a year. If we lost more than that, we'd drop the route and look for trade somewhere else." She added, "We'd argued about this before, Tolyi and I, but now I'm beginning to think she's right; there must have been some warning of this that the Taerae ignored."

*Oh, lovely,* Ilias thought, exasperated. Giliead flung his arms in the air, a silent gesture of frustration at the general stupidity of some people, and crossed the plaza toward the largest façade.

Three steps led up to a narrow portico with columns and a broad square doorway. The painted carving was all very fine, with stylized figures of miners carrying lumps of rock, and the letters for "Taerae" repeated over and over again. Ilias' mouth twisted, though he didn't comment aloud. He was beginning to form an even more cynical picture of the Taerae. He vaguely remembered learning the name of the family who had first settled Cineth from one of the poet Bythia's stories, but he couldn't recall it now. Whoever they had been, they had paid more attention to placing their new city well within a god's territory than to carving their name over every public building.

Thias, one of the younger traders, took down a bowl lamp hanging from the



portico and began working with tinder and flint to light it. Ilias stepped to another lamp, standing on tip-toe to look into it. There was still olive oil – good olive oil, by the smell – in the bottom of the red glazed pot. He went to the dark doorway where Giliead stood.

The daylight only reached far enough to show them the red, black, and white swirls of a mosaic floor and the red walls of the foyer. Past that the blackness was like a solid wall. With no windows, no atrium, nothing to let in light and air, he couldn't imagine living in it. Ilias could see where the portico had been built onto the front of the cave, where stuccoed blocks and mortar joined raw stone. The air inside was cool, carrying a hint of incense, rotted food, and more olive oil.

Thias and Macchus brought the lamps, Giliead took one, and they moved forward into the dark house.

Past the foyer, the rooms were a warren of caves, the walls smoothed with clay, with paint and carving. The pools of lamplight gave them glimpses of fine furniture, carved silverwood and cedar, sheepskin rugs, fine pottery lamps and water jars, a delicate alabaster wineset on a low table inlaid with polished stones. At first it was all sterile, and Ilias had no sense of this having been someone's home. Then they moved from the public rooms to the private, and the lamp caught a loom still warped for a half-completed green and blue blanket. A child's beaded rag doll lay on a cushion, an unrolled scroll on a side-table, someone's sandals with a broken lace at the foot of a couch. A cup of water and a half-eaten seedcake, flies buzzing around it in the stillness. Ilias felt his skin creep. Giliead stopped, looking down at a discarded shirt draped over a stool. It was small enough to belong to a girl or a young boy, and the sleeves were stained with dirt. He asked, "How many houses did you go into?"

"I'm not sure," Laodice said from somewhere behind them. She sounded a little ill; Ilias could sympathize. "We went up and down the streets, going into houses at random. It was all like this. We searched again when we were driving the animals out. We called and called, and no one answered." She took a deep breath, as if steeling herself. Ilias looked back and saw Tolyi squeeze Laodice's shoulder, her face set and still.

Giliead nodded, biting his lip. "Did you go to the mine?"

"Five of us went down into it," Macchus answered. "We thought the bodies might be there. But there was nothing."

"That... must not have been easy," Ilias said. The traders had done things he wasn't sure most Syprians would have been able to do. He was fairly certain most of the population of Cineth would have sensibly fled in terror at the sight of the empty city, and not searched it diligently for survivors.

"It's not very deep. They got most of the gold out of the river." Macchus shrugged uncomfortably. "We had to look; we knew them."

"Show us where you searched," Giliead said.

. . .

The sky was turning dark by the time they finished walking the streets. It was all as Macchus and the others had said: empty houses, undisturbed except for what dust and wind and small scavengers had done. At the far end of the town, they had gone down the short distance into the mine, and to the river shore where the gold-panning had been done.

They came back to the plaza finally and Giliead and Ilias stood together, the others moving off a little to give them privacy to talk. Macchus had lit a couple of

torches and put them into the holders on the portico of the Taerae house, but it only seemed to emphasize the deep shadows. Giliead let out a long frustrated breath. "There's nothing here. Not a hint of a curse. It's as clean of curses as the god's cave at home."

Ilias rubbed his face to conceal his expression, and said, low-voiced, "It's supposed to be easy. You're supposed to show up, follow the curses, kill the wizard, and go home. You're not supposed to have to unravel mysteries that will have poets guessing for generations to come."

Giliead shook his head. "If a wizard had come and cursed them all to follow him, he would have had to take them down the pass into the Uplands or walked straight into the territory of the god of Sareth, and we would have known of it. And one wizard couldn't take upwards of two hundred people. Some of them would have escaped, or the traders would have found bodies littering the road."

"Maybe it was a very powerful wizard. Or two of them working in concert." Though that was very rare. Wizards usually preferred to kill each other or turn each other into slaves rather than work together. "But that doesn't explain where they went. Unless they didn't take the road, and they're still in these mountains somewhere. There's a lot of country to get lost in."

"I know, but... That doesn't feel right." Giliead was staring at the open gates. "Whatever happened, it happened here."

It probably should have turned his blood cold, but Ilias just felt relief. Giliead might not be able to see any curses here, but he was sensing something. He kept quiet until Giliead scratched his head, frowning absently, the moment of abstraction over. Ilias asked, "So what do you want to do?"

"Stay here tonight," Giliead answered immediately. "Look for shades."

They camped in the center of the plaza, collecting wood from the stores near the empty houses to build a large fire. The night was clear, so they wouldn't need the tents the traders had brought, and Ilias found it better to have an unobstructed view of the dark doorways. They had talked over the idea of closing the gates for the night, but Giliead had pointed out, "Anything that's likely to come at us isn't going to be stopped by a gate, locked or not."

Everyone had nodded glumly, and Laodice had added, "I suppose if we have to run for our lives, it would only slow us down."

While Nias and Liad, the other two younger traders, were making a dinner of graincakes and dried travel meat, Giliead and Ilias went to look for shades.

The best place to look was usually in abandoned houses and out of the way corners, places where the shades might linger without being noticed. If they were noticed, someone would always try to find their remains to do the rites, or send for a Chosen Vessel to lay them. With the town being nothing but abandoned houses, it didn't narrow the search.

They decided to start with the most obvious spot, and headed for the rocky flats near the mine and the river, where the Taerae had buried their crematory urns.

The moon was full enough that they didn't need a torch, and the firelight would interfere with Giliead's ability to see curse traces anyway. It was odd, walking through the dark empty town. Ilias was used to dark fields, dark forests, dark beaches, and the limitless sea, but the sensation of walking past houses and wells and stables, without a hint of candlelight or a banked fire under a bread oven, without a murmur of human or animal sound, made his flesh creep in a com-

pletely new way. It made him want to talk, though he knew it was foolish. “If there aren’t shades — never mind.” The people of this town were dead; he shouldn’t imagine they were here to rescue anyone.

Gilead’s eyes were on the dark windows and doorways. “There are guls here.”

“Of course there are,” Ilias said under his breath, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Gilead stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, pointing toward the upper story of a house. “There. See it? It’s making itself look like Irissa.”

“Motherless bastard.” Sighting along Gilead’s arm, Ilias studied the darkness cloaking the house’s eaves. He couldn’t even tell a window from a shadow at this distance, much less see a figure imitating their older sister. “I can’t see it, but that’s just as well, really.”

Gilead began to move on. “They’re all through here now. They must have crept in at dusk.”

Ilias shook his head, trying to distract himself from the fact that the empty buildings all around them were full of shapeshifting curseling guls. “At least the traders know you’re really a Chosen Vessel now.”

“What?” Gilead stopped, staring down at him.

“Oh, they believed it, they just didn’t —” Ilias wished he hadn’t brought it up. “Tolyi thought we were young, and I think the others did too.”

He couldn’t see Gilead’s expression, but he sounded incredulous. “We are young.”

“Too young,” Ilias clarified. “Young enough to be kept at home.”

“Oh, fine.” Gilead rubbed his forehead, annoyed, and started walking again. “That helps.”

The street opened up into the flats, and soon they were facing the burial ground. In the dark it was just an empty rocky field, distinguished from waste ground by the lack of scrub. Moving out over it, Ilias’ boots kept knocking against plates and cups set out with offerings to the dead, long ago rotted away. Gilead stood for a moment near the center of the space, then abruptly veered away toward the hill where the ground dropped away toward the distant rush of the river.

Ilias followed more carefully, wrinkling his nose at the odor as broken crockery and glass grated under his boots. They were drawing near the town’s midden.

The piles of garbage were just low mounds in the dark, and he could hear the buzz of nightflies. Gilead stopped abruptly and Ilias froze in step with him. After a long moment his eyes found movement among the piles of trash.

It was a woman, moving with short disjointed steps. She was pale as milk in the shadows, dark hair ragged against her back, her dress hanging loose, dragging in the dust. Something about the way she moved suggested youth, that she was barely old enough not to be called a child. But when she turned her head toward them, the shadows clung to her, hiding her face.

Gilead paced slowly toward her, his face distant. “She’s looking for her brother,” he said softly.

Ilias felt his skin prickle with a chill that had nothing to do with the cool night air. “A child?” he asked.

Gilead shook his head. “Older brother. She says they meant to do the rites for her, but then they were gone.”

Ilias knew from the journals that shades weren’t the best sources of coherent information. They knew vaguely about things that had happened while they were alive, and even more vaguely about events afterward, but they were wrapped up in their own memories. They didn’t sit around and watch living people, or understand much of what they saw. Gilead moved sideways, slowly pacing her unsteady

progress. He said, "They were travelers, coming up the mountain pass from the other side. They came alone, they were afraid."

"They were running from something?" People usually traveled in traders' caravans for safety, when they couldn't take a ship along the coastline. The girl and her brother must have had a powerful motivation to cross godless territory without even waiting for the next traders' trip. "From what took the Taerae?"

Giliead shook his head slowly. "The Taeraey were here, when she reached the city. I think she died before it happened. Whatever it was." Then he went still, the line of his back conveying a tension that set Ilias' nerves on edge. Giliead stepped back, shaking his head slowly, and as he turned Ilias saw his face in the moonlight. His brows were knit in confusion. "What?" Ilias asked. "What did she say?"

Giliead squeezed his shoulder. "She thinks the Taerae killed her brother, because they thought he was a wizard."

Ilias stared at the girl's figure, growing indistinct as she moved further into the midden. He had the sudden sick feeling the girl's remains hadn't been overlooked, or that the disaster that had befallen the town hadn't delayed the rites. "They killed her too, and threw her body in the midden." In a sick kind of way, it didn't surprise him. People who used guls as a method of execution were capable of anything.

"We'll look for her body tomorrow. I want to get back to the others." Giliead's eyes were on the town, the rock that formed the houses touched with silver in the moonlight. "I think I know what happened, now. Or part of it."

. . .

The traders were waiting in the plaza when they returned, sitting in a close group around the fire. Laodice and Macchus were turned to face the dark caverns of the houses, weapons near at hand, while the others ate. It was a relief; the walk had been just long enough for Ilias to imagine what it would be like to reach the plaza and find them missing.

The traders looked relieved to see them as well, shifting to make room at the fire. "Did you find anything?" Laodice asked, as Nias slid graincakes off the pan for them.

"Yes. There's been a wizard here." Giliead laid his sword across his lap. "As soon as it's light, I want you to go back down the pass. I don't know if he's still here or not, but if he is, we've been lucky so far. There's nothing you can do to help, and being here will just make you targets."

Everyone stared, startled. Tolyi exchanged an expression of blank surprise with Laodice, then asked, "Truly? But how —"

Ilias wrapped the crumbly cake around the dried meat and took a big bite to conceal his expression. The traders might have tried to hide it, but they had really had their doubts. That made it almost a pleasure to deliver this information. Almost.

Giliead nodded briskly. "I found a shade. She was traveling through the pass with her brother; he was a wizard."

"I didn't know wizards had sisters," Liad said tentatively.

"They mostly don't," Ilias told him, brushing crumbs off his shirt. "They leave their families, or kill them."

"This one was young, and running from something." Giliead's eyes turned distant as he sorted over the impressions the girl's shade had given him. "He didn't have many curses, and hadn't been taken as an apprentice by another wizard yet. His sister wasn't certain, but that's what he told her he was running from."



“He didn’t want to learn curses?” Laodice asked, her expression dubious.

“It’s not so much an apprenticeship as it is an enslavement,” Giliead explained. “The younger wizard learns from the elder, but only so he can better do the elder’s bidding. Once he learns too much, the elder usually kills the apprentice. Or tries to.” He added, with a trace of irony, “Many wizards try to avoid it.”

Ilias kept his expression carefully neutral. What Giliead wasn’t saying was that there were people who could be wizards, but had never learned to curse, or at least never used what few curses they did have for ill. This knowledge was kept only by the Chosen Vessels, passed along only to those who needed to know it. As far as they could tell, the gods didn’t mind the existence of these potential wizards, so the Vessels didn’t intentionally seek them out. As long as they weren’t doing harm or using curses, they could live as they wanted. But explaining this to terrified townspeople wasn’t an easy thing to do, so the Vessels kept it as secret as possible. And those potential wizards were still dangerous, still likely to draw stronger wizards who wanted to take them as slaves for their power.

“Someone in the town must have realized what he was, the sister wasn’t sure how or why,” Giliead was saying. “They were short of coins and had little to trade, so he may have tried to use a curse to get them food or shelter or a passage down the pass, and been caught at it. When the Taerae attacked them, the girl was killed.” He looked away with a grimace. “I don’t know how. Shades usually don’t remember the moment of their death very well.”

Laodice was frowning and Tolyi shook her head, her face set in lines of disgust. Tolyi said, “The girl was an innocent.” She looked up, lifting her brows. “At least she would be considered so in my land.”

“Here too,” Laodice said with a wince. “Families aren’t responsible for the crimes of one member, even a wizard’s crimes. I didn’t realize how... beyond the bounds the Taerae had gone.”

“They should have kept quiet and summoned a Vessel,” Macchus pointed out practically. “Then they’d still be alive.”

Giliead nodded grimly. “Exactly. The Taerae brought this on themselves. Unfortunately, they brought it on everyone in the town as well.”

“But if this young wizard had little experience, how did he kill all the townspeople? And how did one man conceal all those bodies?” Laodice asked, making a helpless gesture.

“Perhaps he was deceiving the sister about the depth of his knowledge,” Tolyi said thoughtfully.

“It’s possible,” Ilias said, “but if he was, the Taerae would never have caught him.”

Giliead took a sharp breath. “Yes. She distinctly remembers that the Taerae discovered him, that he was caught by surprise. An experienced wizard wouldn’t have been.” He shook his head. “In trying to save himself, he may have drawn something else.”

“Something else?” Macchus echoed.

“Another wizard or a new kind of curseling,” Giliead said. “Something that could destroy the townspeople. Whatever it is, it may still be here. And the young wizard, the girl’s brother, may be up here somewhere as well. She thinks he was killed, but she didn’t seem to have an image of it happening. That’s why I want you to leave at first light.”

Laodice looked worriedly from Ilias to Giliead. “Your brother will come with us?”

Ilias snorted. “No.”

Giliead regarded him a moment, one brow lifted. Ilias stared back steadily. Giliead smiled faintly, and looked at Laodice. “No.”

They spent the night with three people always on watch, but no one got much sleep. Ilias sensed movement at the corners of his eyes every time he turned his head. He knew the guls clung to the shadows and watched them all night.

Ilias gave up on sleep long before dawn and helped Macchus make breakfast. Then Macchus insisted on dividing up the supplies the traders had brought, leaving Giliead and Ilias enough food for more than twelve days up here. "I don't think it's going to take that long," Ilias told him. If their limited past experience was any guide, it would either be over very quickly or not happen at all.

Macchus just grimaced and pushed another packet of grain at him.

By the time the sky was lightening to gray with dawn, the traders were ready to leave.

"Be careful," Laodice said, watching them worriedly. Earlier, she and Tolyi had gently tried to persuade Ilias to leave again. They were so earnestly tactful, it was impossible to be angry. It was possible to be annoyed and resigned, however. She asked, "How long should we wait?"

She meant, *how long should we wait before accepting the fact that you're dead.* Ilias looked at Giliead, lifting his brows. Giliead just smiled faintly and said, "If we're not back down the pass in three days, send for another Vessel."

The others said their grave farewells, and walked away down the road. Ilias gave them one last wave as they reached the bend of the trail. "They think we're going to die."

"Yes. Yes, they do," Giliead said, rubbing the bridge of his nose wearily. "I was surprised they didn't insist on doing the rites for us before they left. And they were shocked senseless that I actually found traces of a wizard up here. Even if it might not be the right wizard."

"That was a little obvious." Ilias looked up at him. "I guess we'll have to wait until dark to lure him out. You want to search the town some more, so if he is here and watching us, he doesn't suspect that we know about him?"

Giliead nodded absently, turning to look back at the empty plaza. The wind had piled up floating weeds, making a barricade over a few of the doors. "But let's take care of the sister's shade first."

Ilias grimaced agreement. He didn't like to think of her wandering the midden, and if anything happened to them, it might be a long time before another Vessel could get up here. The rites were simple and quick to perform; if a person died near home, you scattered three handfuls of earth on the body. If the death occurred elsewhere, or at sea, or if it was a stranger's body, you used three locks of hair. It was customary to get three people, but you could also use three locks from your own head if you had to. Even very old shades could be sent to rest this way; it didn't matter if the body wasn't intact, even a few bones were enough.

The town seemed even more silent as they walked back through the empty streets toward the river. Ilias had never noticed silence like this before. Even counting time spent in Cineth and other noisy populated cities and villages, he was more used to quiet places than not. There was just something about this silence that felt... as if it was masking the presence of something else. "Something's here," he said.

Giliead wasn't surprised. "I don't think we're going home empty handed."

They reached the midden and Giliead stepped on top of a low pile of broken crockery, animal bones, food waste, and broken furniture. The buzz of flies was intense. "The shade was right around here. And I have the feeling it wasn't long

after she was killed that whatever it was happened —”

“So she’ll be near the top,” Ilias finished, taking the next pile over, wincing at the heavy odor of rot. This was what the Journals didn’t mention about the lives of Chosen Vessels and their companions. Ilias supposed it didn’t make good poetry: *And then the Vessel of Cineth Giliead and his foster brother Ilias spent the afternoon digging in the middens looking for parts of the dead girl, hoping the dogs hadn’t gotten to her and that they could find enough of her to perform the rites on.*

For some time, Ilias kicked aside dirt clods and dried dung, shards of glass and pottery, while Giliead dug in the other pile. Then Ilias hesitated as he spotted a tangle of stained yellow cloth. He crouched down, shoving away at the debris on top. *Yes, there it is.* A hand, still attached to a slender forearm, the flesh discolored and sunken with rot. He grimaced, twisting around to say, “Gil, I found —”

It was dark. Dark as the inside of a black cloth sack, the still air cool and a little damp, no sun, no stars, no moon. Ilias’ throat went dry and his heart squeezed in his chest, skipping a beat. *Oh... no.* “Gil,” he said softly.

Silence. There was no hint of the rush of the river, or the wind scattering dust and grit against the rocks. His eyes were starting to adjust and he could just make out shapes in the darkness. He was facing back toward the town and he could see the rooflines of the houses, black against the lighter darkness of the sky, but they marked a set of structures far taller than they should be, and the shapes were all wrong. *I don’t know where I am.*

“Here.” Giliead’s voice was quiet but tense, maybe only ten paces away. Ilias bit his lip to hold back a sob of relief. “You see this too?”

“Yes,” Ilias managed to say, mostly evenly. “This isn’t — Where are we?”

Maddeningly, Giliead countered with, “What do you see?”

Ilias gritted his teeth. “It’s all dark, the sky is like black water. I can see the town, but it’s all wrong. Everything’s too big, like it grew or I shrunk.” He turned slowly, feeling gritty stone under his boots. He realized the midden pile under his feet was different; it was all black gravel and rock now, the detritus vanished with the odor. And the rest of the world. “The mountains go up forever.” They were like black glass, glinting faintly, high above the canyons. *And that doesn’t make sense,* he thought, sick. There was no light, nothing to make that faint silver reflection. He shouldn’t be able to see at all.

“All right, that’s... good. I’m seeing what you’re seeing.” Giliead sounded a little shaky. “Except I can also see the town, the midden in daylight, just like it was a moment ago.” There was a faint crunch and he heard Giliead swear. “This is like being hit on the head until you see two of everything.”

Ilias turned toward the sound, his heart beating a little easier. If Giliead could still see the real world, than this was just a wizard’s illusion. Which meant there was a wizard nearby and Ilias was as good as blind and Giliead nearly so, but they weren’t dead yet. Squinting, he thought he could see Giliead as a distorted shape in the dark, about where he had been standing before. “Is that you? Can you see me?”

“Uh, no. I can’t. Wait. Move, wave your arms or something.” Ilias waved vigorously, and Giliead said in relief, “I can see you in the dark world.” He added a little worriedly, “But not in the daylit world.”

“Oh, that’s...” That really wasn’t what Ilias wanted to hear. He took a sharp breath, trying to get his pounding heart under control. “What kind of curse is this?”

“It’s not a curse. I don’t feel a curse, I can’t see any traces.” Giliead sounded uneasy and baffled. “It’s as if you’re somewhere else, and I’m caught between.”

*Not a curse and somewhere else.* Ilias tried to think about what that meant and

stay calm. It wasn't easy. "Is this what happened to the Taerae?"

"That's a good guess." Ilias could hear Giliead moving, turning, his boots crunching on the pebbles. "There," Giliead said suddenly.

Ilias turned, following what he thought was Gil's pointing arm, and saw a crumpled bundle on the ground. He started toward it, but his boot slipped and he stumbled sideways, flailing to regain his balance. Giliead said sharply, "You all right?"

"Yes, it's the rock here. It's like glass. Cuts like it, too," he added as he lifted his boot and felt the slit in the leather.

"It cut you?"

"Just my boot." For a moment, Ilias didn't understand the tone of alarm in Giliead's voice. Then cold realization hit. "This isn't some kind of dream, illusion, whatever. Things here can affect me. Maybe both of us."

He heard Giliead take a deep breath. "Just... be careful."

*Careful*, Ilias thought, *if that's the best advice he has...* They moved toward the one thing visible that wasn't black stone. It was a body, a man, dressed in the rough kilt of a laborer. Giliead kept an eye on their surroundings, since he was the only one who could see in both worlds, while Ilias nudged the body cautiously with a boot, then rolled him over. He crouched down to look more closely. The man was young, wearing copper earrings, his face and chest marked with livid blue-black bruises. "He's not breathing, but I don't see a wound," Ilias said. He probed cautiously, wincing as he felt the give under his hand. "His ribs are all caved in. Must have been beaten to death." He looked up at Giliead. "He's cold, but not stiff or rotted. He doesn't stink."

Giliead shook his head, grimacing. "Things must be different in this place."

"Things? The way the world works?" Ilias would have felt a chill in his stomach if he wasn't frozen solid down there already. But it made a weird kind of sense. No sun, no wind, no time, no rot.

"There's another body," Giliead said quietly.

There was a trail of bodies. Ilias followed them across the ground where the middens had been, up into the first street of the weirdly altered town. Men, women, children. Some with open wounds, or crushed skulls, though there wasn't much blood. Ilias lifted a lifeless hand and found bloody skin under the nails. "They did this to each other," he said grimly.

"That was the curse," Giliead said from somewhere behind him.

Ilias had been reluctantly drawing the same conclusion. "A curse, or madness, from being trapped here in the dark for days?"

"That was surely part of it. But they had help." His Giliead's voice hardened. "There."

His skin creeping, Ilias turned to look.

Something was moving in and out of the abstract shapes of the black glass doors and windows. It was amber-colored, shedding drifts of mist. It seemed to turn and look at them, and Ilias caught a half-second impression of a human face. Then it was turning away, drifting into the dark.

"That was a gul," Giliead said, while Ilias was still trying to find his voice.

"How —" Ilias started again, realized it was pointless, and swallowed the words. "It didn't look like a gul, but you could tell it was one?"

"Yes." Giliead's eyes studied the dark intently. "There's more. A lot more. I think... We know what happens when a gul takes someone."

"It eats them. It eats their soul, too, that's why there are never shades." Ilias thought he could see other flickers in the dark now, the black glass throwing colors that didn't come from the sourceless moonlight.



“What happens when a gul takes a wizard?”

“I —” Ilias remembered the stake outside the city’s wall and his fear dissolved in a rush of angry annoyance. “They couldn’t have been that stupid!” If you were going to kill a wizard, you had to do it quickly, no matter how much you wanted to torture the bastard.

“Oh yes, they could have. And that arrogant. If his soul is powerful enough to control the guls...” Giliead was still facing toward the flickers of gul-light. “This happened to us when we were about to find the sister’s body, to free her shade. He must not want it freed.”

“I did find it. Or at least I found somebody in there. But he can’t talk to her, touch her. Can he?”

“I have no idea. I don’t even know if he took the guls or if they took him.” Giliead turned slowly, looking out into the dark. “Let’s go back to the sister’s body and see if there’s anything else there.”

“Uh.” Ilias faced the abstract landscape, all obsidian and silver shadow. “Good luck with that.”

“This way.”

“I know the way, it’s just the midden isn’t here in this —” Something huge moved above them in the dark and Ilias yelled a warning. He dove sideways, landing badly on the sharp stone. Rolling to absorb the shock, he came to his feet, hearing Giliead hit the ground and recover not far away.

He sensed more wild movement in the dark and yelled again to warn Giliead, ducking sideways as a clawed hand swiped for him. He came back to his feet, dodged in and sliced at it with his sword. He felt a satisfyingly meaty connect and the creature whipped away from him with an ear-splitting shriek. He darted forward and out, swinging at it, and felt the breeze as it grabbed for him again and missed.

He heard footsteps and then Giliead was at his back. “Real world or just here?” Ilias asked, breathless.

“Just here,” Giliead said grimly. “I think it’s a curseling, created for this place.”

“Oh, that’s fine,” Ilias muttered. Darkness moved above their heads and the creature made a strange sort of low whistling snarl, giving Ilias a very creepy picture of what its mouth must look like. “Gil, I’ll distract it, you go find her body.”

“Ilias —” Giliead snarled in frustration. But there was no way to argue; Ilias wouldn’t be able to see the corpse, he couldn’t even see the middens. “Just be careful!”

“No, really,” Ilias snapped. As Giliead bolted for the middens, Ilias dodged forward, toward the moving darkness. He thrust the sword upward and felt it bite into flesh. Something whipped around and knocked him sideways, slamming him into the ground. He rolled away, but the dark shape above him seemed to flow past, following Giliead.

Stumbling to his feet, feeling blood trickle down his face, Ilias could just see the outline of Giliead moving frantically in the dark area where the midden should be. “Look out, Gil, it’s after you! It —” He blinked and there was someone standing over Giliead now, vivid and brilliant, like one of the guls.

It was a young man, barely Ilias’ age, with bright blond hair and a sharply handsome face. He said, “Leave her alone. Haven’t you done enough?”

Giliead kept digging, saying over his shoulder, “She’s dead. Don’t you want her to rest?”

“I want her with me! I want her here!” the man shouted.

“You got her killed!” Ilias yelled, hoping to distract him. “You only brought her to make it easier for you to travel. If you loved her, you would have left her behind.”

"Ilias, come here!" Giliead yelled sharply. Ilias didn't argue; he bolted toward Giliead. Something cold snatched at his arm, his hair, the side of his face. He tore through it, twisting and flinging himself past the clawlike hands. He landed hard at Giliead's feet.

"You all right?" Giliead asked tensely, shoving pebbles out of the way.

"Yes. What —"

"We're surrounded by guls in the real world."

"Oh, then it's worse." Ilias pushed himself up, back aching from being slammed into the rock.

"He's afraid." His breath rough as he shoved at the invisible debris, Giliead said, "Ilias, this isn't a girl's body."

"What —" Then Ilias had it, too. The wizard was lying; he wasn't trying to keep the shade of his dead sister, he was trying to keep his own shade. That was his body in a midden. "But guls don't leave bodies."

"I'm betting they left his," Giliead said tightly. "Maybe whatever curse he used to try to fight them kept them from consuming all of his body. It's given him a hold in their world, let him control them somehow. He must need his shade to keep that control."

Ilias shifted, watching wispy shapes move in the darkness. "Laodice said she didn't think the Taerae would desecrate a girl's body like that. Maybe they didn't even kill her."

"Guls!" Giliead yelled.

"I've got them, just do it!" Ilias shoved to his feet, swinging his sword in an arc, feeling it catch at something, as if he was swinging at silk shrouds. The guls kept drawing back, trying to lure him forward and away from Giliead. But that was the first lesson he had had pounded into him as the brother of a Chosen Vessel, by his foster parents, by the older Vessels who had taught Giliead, by the poet Bythia, by the Journals. *Whatever you're fighting, it'll trick you, it'll taunt you, it'll try to get you away so it can use you against him.* He had no intention of falling for that.

Then light exploded and Ilias yelped and flinched back, his eyes dazzled. It was daylight, he realized a moment later, as sensation flooded back. The wind, the rush of the river, the warmth of the sun on his skin, the foul odor of the rotted garbage. The dark city was gone and he was back in the real world, standing on the edge of a midden pile. Giliead was behind him, crouched in the debris, a knife in his hand as he dropped the third lock of hair onto the body in the midden. There were dead gul-bodies strewn around them, small furry lumps; the live guls still looked like beautiful men and women and had drawn back, watching them with wary malice. Ilias couldn't tell which one was the wizard, until one moved forward and he saw its human eyes.

Giliead pushed to his feet. Breathing hard, he said to it, "The Taerae didn't kill your sister, did they? They weren't that lost to reason. They caught you, left you for the guls. They threw what was left of your body here, but you didn't need it anymore. When the gul ate your soul, you took control of it, took control of all the guls here."

The wizard didn't answer, and the wizard-gul was sinking to the ground, its body losing the alluring human form and turning lumpy and misshapen. It looked like the monkey-thing they had seen in the lower pass, except its belly was huge and distended.

The other guls were withdrawing, fading away into the shadows. The wizard didn't answer, and Ilias asked carefully, "Why does he look like that?"

Giliead was watching with a frown of concentration. "He can't control them anymore. Without his shade, all that's left is... whatever part of his soul and body

that one ate.” He shifted his bow off his shoulder, bent it to string, and nocked an arrow.

The misshapen gul was crawling away, twisting in pain. Giliead’s arrow struck it behind the head. It shuddered and collapsed, dissolving into a pool of black fluid.

Ilias sat down on the midden, wanting to collapse as well.

. . .

They burned the dead guls, and Giliead dug the wizard’s head out of the midden and wrapped it in a shawl scavenged from one of the houses. They would take it back to the traders for proof, then to the nearest god’s habitation for burial.

“I thought all the bodies would come back,” Ilias said. “The townspeople. Once the wizard was dead.”

Giliead shook his head wearily. “I think they’re stuck in that other place, with the guls. And even if the bodies did come back, I don’t think it would matter. From what we saw, the guls must not really eat flesh; it just looks that way because they don’t leave any remains in this world. They actually eat... everything. The soul, the shade, the body.”

Giliead was saying that there wouldn’t be any trapped shades to release, even if they had the bodies to do the rites on. Ilias was too tired and sore to be horrified at the moment, but he was sure that would come later. “We know there’s one shade trapped here.” He squinted against the noon sun, looking around the midden. “But where is she? You think she’s actually hidden under one of these piles, or was she just drawn here, to his body?” Ilias wasn’t looking forward to searching the midden and the town again, and there was always the chance her body had ended up in the river and been carried away, or left in the open and so torn apart by scavengers that there was too little left to be found. But they had to find her. Ilias was determined to save something in this cursed town, even if it was just a forsaken shade.

Giliead’s face was lost in thought. “I have an idea.”

. . .

They found her outside the city wall, near the pit with the execution stake, curled up under a tree. A wool wrap had been thrown over her, the colors hidden by wind-blown dirt and detritus. Giliead found a mild curse on the body to keep away scavengers. It didn’t prevent them from doing the rites.

“If she was out here, and wasn’t taken by a gul,” Ilias said, shouldering their waterskin and his pack as they walked toward the road. “He killed her.”

Giliead let his breath out, glancing back toward the town. “She must have come out here to try to release him, but she was too late. His body was dead and his soul had taken over the guls. He was one of them now, and he killed her. I think he killed her to keep her from being taken by a gul. But maybe he thought he could make her into what he was, if he kept her shade here long enough. He would have her with him, then.” He looked down at Ilias, his mouth twisting in irony. “Maybe he loved her.”

Ilias made a rude noise. “She showed us where his body was.”

Giliead smiled ruefully. “Maybe she loved him.”

## *The Wily Thing*

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*Constance Cooper*

Yonetta DuRoy, or Yonie Watereye as she now styled herself, lived under false pretenses in a stuffy garret overhanging the Petty Canal in one of the cheaper districts of Wicked Ford.

Now the Petty could be scenic, up in the high side of town where it slid between steep flowered banks, and the ladies clustered like petals around dainty cafe tables. The Petty could bustle, down near the High Road by the inns and the water market. But where Yonie lived it was not lovely or lively. Dry land never showed even in the midst of summer, and the rickety buildings roosted up on wooden pilings that would have rotted long since but for the water's high concentration of guile.

Yonie's garret was a narrow, slope-shouldered room in which anyone of adult height could stand only immediately below the spine of the roof. (As of late, that had included Yonie, but she made do because the rent was cheap and the landlady asked no questions.) In one of its two vertical walls, the garret had a stingy window that might once have been a vent. It provided a view of the canal through gum tree leaves, and on hot days, a swampy canal-odor like an army's dirty laundry. The opposite wall held another window-vent and a door that opened to a tacked-on balcony barely strong enough to hold the weight of the rain-barrel at one end. Shaky steps led down through several switchbacks to the boat-slips and floating trash behind the building.

Unlike most garrets in that neighborhood, which was neither famous nor infamous enough to have a name of its own, Yonie's had a collection of books. She stood them in the otherwise useless space where the roof angled into the floor, and had so far in two years there filled almost one long side of the room. They ranged from treatises about ancient history (mainly dull with a few useful nuggets) from the cut-price boxes at the water market, to collections of travelers' tales (mostly lurid) splurged on when business was good, to *The Unlucky Prince* (the only one of her childhood favorites to survive, since she had had it with her in the canoe that night.)

Other than that Yonie's furnishings were quite ordinary – a small table, two mismatched chairs, a meager stove, a bed of reed matting behind a curtain. Assorted cheap pans and crockery stood at attention on homemade shelves, and a chamber-pot crouched discreetly out of sight. The only thing a visitor might remark upon would be the profusion of pillows, and perhaps the way a shingle had been loosened and propped open, like a miniature trapdoor, in the roof above.

On that particular late summer afternoon the air in Yonie's garret was humid and still, caged in by the closed door and shuttered windows. Yonie's hair was crawling







## Constance Cooper



Constance Cooper has worked as a linguistic researcher, a website developer, and a software engineer, most recently at a natural language search company. She now divides her time (unevenly) between writing and caring for a lively toddler who loves making crayon drawings on her discarded rough drafts.

Constance's fiction and poetry have appeared in **Asimov's**, **Talebones**, **Thrilling Wonder Stories**, **Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine**, **Abyss & Apex**, and a variety of other magazines and anthologies. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, daughter, and two cats (neither of whom has yet revealed any unusual powers.) The "wily thing" of this story's title is based on a mystifying antique store item which fascinated Constance with its otherworldly ugliness. Her website is [www.constance-cooper.com](http://www.constance-cooper.com).

*Photo by Gann Bierner*

with sweat underneath her head-kerchief. She imagined it soaking all the way down her long brown braid, past the blue wooden beads tied at the end, and dripping off the point like a wet paintbrush. She longed to strip off the kerchief and throw open the windows and the door to catch what breeze there was.

But instead she sat sedately in her chair, sweltering, because she had a customer. The kerchief made her look older, according to LaRue, and she needed every bit of age she could claim. Although she'd already sprouted up to what would probably be her full height, it still took the right clothing and dim lighting and her most imperious high-town accent for her to pass as a grown woman.

Even then she might not pass as a pearly. Not all pearlys had really been pearl divers, true, but most were old. Normally it took a lifetime of soaking in swampwater to acquire that much guile. But there were exceptions, and most of her customers came to her by referral, already assured of her competence. Certainly the man across the table was giving her due respect.

He'd given his name as Andry Gerard from Damnable Swamp, an outlying fishing village Yonie had heard of but never needed to visit. Gerard had a sunburned, stubbled face and muscular shoulders under his faded shirt. He hadn't yet unclenched his jaw since he'd come in, and he kept his fingers pinched tight around the drawstring of a canvas carry-bag.

"It come to me in a fish," he said. His eyes flicked away from hers as he set the bag down on the table. "A Fish

o' Fate, ma'am – you know?"

"Indeed?" Yonie raised one eyebrow. Around Wicked Ford, finding odd objects inside a fish's belly was normally no fairytale event. As in most parts of the Bad Bayous, cemeteries flooded often and stone crypts were only for the rich. Finds ranged from the prosaic (turtles shell buttons, clay bottle-stoppers) to the faintly interesting (old pennies, keys) to the downright disgusting (finger-bones, yellowed human teeth.) The local fish weren't fussy. They were avid for anything that so much as gleamed or twitched in the current.

There were always stories, of course, about fish who swallowed richer fare –

rings for the finger or the ear, gold coins, ivory combs and jeweled silver belt-buckles. These Fish of Fate then sacrificed their treasure on the gutting-knife of a deserving fisherman or the dinner plate of a poor widow. Yonie enjoyed such tales, although LaRue always pointed out that firsthand accounts were rarer than dry feet in Devil's Marsh.

"It must have been quite a large fish, sir," she said in what she hoped was a cool, professional voice. "Did you catch it yourself?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Yonie tried not to stare too obviously at the carry-bag on the table. It was heavy canvas, too stiff to reveal the shape of its contents, with a little blue-glass wily-charm at the end of the drawstring. Yonie's father had had one like it, to keep his lunch dry when he took the fishing boat out on rainy days.

Yonie hated handling business by herself, but LaRue had gone out hunting and there was no knowing when she'd be back. It was too bad – Yonie felt much more confident with her there, even though LaRue couldn't take part in the conversation. Also, LaRue had promised to bring her something, and Yonie hadn't eaten since dinner last night.

"Have you had a Seeing done before, sir? No? Well, I charge ten coppers to examine an object. I can tell you if it's guileful, and in most cases I can determine the nature of its wiles. I also take payment in kind," she added, seeing Gerard's stricken look. "A chicken, for instance, or a string of trout."

"Got a couple o' sand-crabs we been feeding up on the kitchen scraps. My wife'll cook 'em up for you if she's feeling better. She's been 'ere nine years now, but she still knows 'er Northern spices."

Yonie's stomach scraped loudly. She moved her chair to cover the noise, feeling that it might decrease the dignity of her regal nod. Gerard didn't know it, but she would have been happy with a pigeon wing.

Gerard pulled the bag open and lifted out a bulky item shrouded in a cloth. He flipped back the covering with a quick, convulsive motion, to reveal the ugliest ornament Yonie had ever seen. Two black-and-white steer horns had been varnished and inset in a platform of polished bone. They curved up and together to form a steep arch not found on any cattle skull in nature. Suspended from their points by corroded chains was a disc of tarnished brassy metal, indented in a spiral pattern like the cinnamon buns they sold at the Blackmire Inn.

"I'll need some time alone to look at this, m'sir Gerard. Could I ask you to return at, say, the eighth hour tonight?" LaRue should be back by then. She would have to be.

Gerard looked up in alarm. "Eighth? Well, I was 'oping for sooner, ma'am." His big calloused hands kneaded the edge of the carry-bag. "It's my wife, see. When I brought this 'ome today, I thought she'd be pleased, but instead she took all over queer."

"She's not ill, is she?"

"No ma'am, not ill, but not 'appy with me, either, seems like. Well, never you mind. I'm going 'ome to 'er now, but I'll be back tonight with those sand-crabs." He rose hurriedly to his feet. "Just you find out what this thing's about, m'dam Watereye, and I'll be that thankful."

Yonie watched out the window as Gerard unhitched his boat at the canalside below and rowed hastily away. Most pearlies would have done the Seeing while the customer watched, or at least while he waited, and it was too bad that she could not offer that service. Yonie frowned to herself, then turned abruptly and picked the blue jug off the shelf. There was no use in regrets, and LaRue would need water for the Seeing.

There was drinking water in the barrel on the balcony, but Yonie headed down the stairs. The canal inlet which served as a docking area between this building and the one behind was stagnant with floating green scum, and like every body of water in the Bad Bayous, was also thick with guile.

Some argued that Wicked Ford proper was less wily than its outlying areas, but these were mostly city innkeepers eager for trade. The truth was that guile was widespread throughout the whole region that the hightown folk called the Delta, and the villagers called the Devil's Foot. (This appellation made more sense to those who knew that to the locals, the devil had chicken feet.) Guile from the ancients' Northern cities had, over the centuries, dissolved and washed down the River Stride until upstream of the Delta, there were only trace amounts. But where the Stride started to slow and wander and be called the River Skulk, where it widened and divided into the maze of marshes and shallow passages known as the Bad Bayous, the water was clotted with it.

At this time of year, the dock behind Yonie's building reared high out of the water, legs dark with crackly dead algae. Yonie gathered up her skirt with her free hand and stepped down into the bow of the Dragonfly. From inside her canoe she leaned down to scoop up the greenest, murkiest water she could find in the fading daylight.

Back in her attic room, Yonie stood Gerard's knickknack in a dented tin dish. The movement set the round of brass swinging between the horns, and now she saw that it was a sort of gong, like the one outside the Palace of Justice, except small and ugly. Carefully she poured the cloudy water in around its base.

By the time LaRue came in, Yonie had already shut the door and fastened the mosquito cloths over the windows. She had lit a candle and sat at the table paging through **The Everyday Life of the Ancients**. It was a fat, waterstained volume with only a few torn-out pages, and since those were in the chapter about hats, this had not yet been a serious inconvenience. Yonie paused periodically in her reading to examine the odd object before her.

LaRue nosed through under the loose shingle and dropped lightly to the top of the shelf. It always amazed Yonie that she could fit through such a small space, but her body was far smaller than her fur implied. LaRue was carrying something brown and furry in her mouth, which she set down on a plate as elegantly as a waitress in a Grand Canal cafe.

"Oh, LaRue, not another rat?"

"Not at all, my dear – it's a bat! My first. I know you asked for a bird, but this seemed much the same."

Yonie eyed the bony, folded shape lying limp on the plate. "Thank you, LaRue, it was very kind."

LaRue swept her fluffy tail around herself like a full orange skirt. "And every bit of it's for you, Yonie sweet. I've already eaten."

"Well, I hope you saved room for more. A man's coming back later with a sand-crab for each of us. He left this thing to do a Seeing on – isn't it funny? He said he found it in a fish he caught!"

LaRue sprang up to the tabletop and settled down to study the gong, ginger fur lapping around her like petticoats.

"My dear, I must say I'm skeptical. To fit that thing in its belly, a fish would have to be as big around as a hunting dog! And yet you say this man didn't boast about his catch, or even hold up his hands? That doesn't sound like any fisherman I've known. And another thing – he just said 'a fish'? Not a bluegill or a bass or a gar?"

Yonie stared at the varnished horns and the dangling dish of brass. Now that she thought about it, LaRue did make sense. "But people do find treasures in fish



sometimes, don't they? There's talk about that brooch of Lady Orley's –"

"Ah, Yonie, my sweet credulous child. Lady Orley's husband may need to believe she got that from a fish, but you do not."

"So m'sir Gerard was lying?"

"Lying? No. I doubt he would expect even the youngest pearly in Wicked Ford to really believe that story. It was a courtesy to you, no more. Doubtless this is stolen goods, or grave-plunder, or something else unsavory, and this Gerard needs to know its properties before he sells it."

"Oh, LaRue, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have trusted him."

LaRue leapt down into Yonie's lap. "Come now, dear, don't wrinkle up your face like that. If he's honest enough to pay us, that's all I care about. Even thieves and fences sometimes need a Seeing done." She stroked Yonie's arm with one furry cheek. "I'm sure you did a fine job. He wouldn't have left his treasure here, such as it is, if he didn't think you were wily. Word is getting round, Yonie sweet. Soon we'll have customers coming in from all over the Bayous. We'll have chicken and cream and silk pillows."

"I just hate lying to them."

"I know you do, dear, but what choice do we have? I can't exactly set up in business for myself. Every fool in the Bayous would be after me with a hatchet."

Guileful animals, or slybeasts as they were called, were far from common even in the Delta. As with humans, it normally took prolonged exposure to the water before the body accumulated a noticeable amount of guile. It was said that certain alligators, upon reaching a sufficient age, could counterfeit a floating log down to the leafy twigs sprouting from its back. There were also tales, possibly true, of craggy old swamp turtles which could stay underwater for days at a time, withdraw into an invulnerable rock-hard shell, or bite clean through a steel-sheathed oar. Animals with shorter lifespans seldom became cunning, but if they did, they were wise to keep it to themselves.

Even pearlies – less politely known as slyfolk – were not exactly popular. Veteran divers or canal-diggers who developed webs between their fingers and toes tended to wear boots and keep their hands closed in public to avoid cold looks. Members of the gentry, who generally received their guile concentrated in lobster or caviar, ignored any such differences with punctilious silence. Even folk who showed no outward signs of wiliness, but possessed enough guile to be useful, didn't talk about their skills in polite society. They were like physicians who treat embarrassing complaints.

LaRue put her paws up on Yonie's shoulder. The golden flecks in her green eyes glinted like motes turning in sunlit water. "Don't fret, love. So long as the work gets done, our customers have nothing to complain about. Now, what else did m'sir Gerard say?"

As Yonie recounted the visit, the queenly orange cat settled herself on the table before the dish of water, nose almost touching the surface, peering at the swirls of silt and grains of swamp-life that stirred under her breath. She sat sphinxlike long after Yonie had returned to her book, while the candle burned down and insects bumped angrily against the window-cloths.

"Well, my dear, it has wiles and to spare," LaRue said finally, rising and stretching each leg in turn. "It may not have come from a fish, but it's been steeping in swamp-juice for years over years. I couldn't quite see the direction of its guile, but I know now what it is. It's a boat-gong."

"Yes, I just found that out myself." Yonie held up her book. "It says people in those times kept bells or gongs in the stern of their boats to use on foggy days, to keep other boats at a distance so they could get home safe."

“Why didn’t they just sing?”

“It doesn’t say, but I remember reading that a lot of ancients were embarrassed to sing in public.”

“How clever of you, Yonie. I’m afraid I didn’t find out much more than that. This gong is really very uncommunicative. All I got from it was a lonely feeling, as if it’s brooding about something.”

Yonie stared at the gong. It was hard to believe that something so frankly tacky was capable of absorbing guile. Still, a long enough immersion would affect anything, she supposed. She reached forward to touch the gong, and LaRue’s paw lashed out, swatting her hand away.

“You used claws!” Yonie sucked on her scratches indignantly.

“I do apologize, child, but I can’t help my reflexes. I want you to be safe, and from what little I’ve learned, we would be wise not to strike this gong without knowing more about it. In fact, I’d like you to wrap it back up. That’s right, get it good and muffled. Even a mosquito hitting might be enough to stir it. I’ll be glad to see it back with m’sir Gerard.”

. . .

There’s not much meat on a bat. Yonie’s stomach sidled and growled the next morning as she untied the Dragonfly and threaded her through the water-alley out into the open canal. The air was already steamy, rich with the smell of healthy rot. The water was dark jade under the shade of the gum trees which had been left standing along the sides of the Petty. Traffic slid past – rowboats frog-kicking along, slim canoes darting like minnows, low-riding water-carriers and wood-barges nudging in to the banks like king alligators.

“Damnable Swamp joins up with the Foulwater,” Yonie said as she untied the Dragonfly. “We can be over there in an hour.”

LaRue was on her usual padded perch atop the middle thwart. The well-swaddled gong rested on the canoe bottom below her seat.

“Huh! I don’t think well of this man for breaking his appointment. I wish there were some easier way of getting his cursed relic off our hands.”

“You don’t have to come along, LaRue.”

The cat looked regretfully upward into the tree branches. They were her preferred means of crossing water, and together with the interlocking balconies, decks, or near-adjacent roofs of the neighborhood, provided her and the other local cats with aerial roadways to all the best hunting grounds: fruit markets and patisseries, grain warehouses and cheese shops, fishmongers and butchers. Like many water-side towns, Wicked Ford had a large rat population, and depended heavily on cats for its health. So vital had the cats become that shopowners laid narrow bridges to invite their patronage. Yonie, as a cat owner, got a discount on her rent.

“I’d better come, child.” LaRue switched her tail querulously. “There can be some rough characters in the Damnables. Besides, I’m uneasy about that gong. I’d rather not leave you alone with it.”

Yonie started the Dragonfly down the canal with an expert twist of her paddle. Splashes of sunlight fell onto her wiry shoulders as she pulled the canoe under tangles of branches and flowering vines. The Dragonfly had been a gift from her father when she was barely big enough to paddle it. It was small and quite old, and its inkwood sides had the dark polish of a shuttle that’s slipped many thousands of times through the threads of a loom. It had never yet been stolen, though that was probably due more to its aged appearance than any manifestation of guile. It did have one wily behavior, but so far it had never caused her more than embarrass-

ment.

“LaRue,” Yonie said softly, “we’re coming up on the Ford.”

“Oh yes – thank you, dear.” LaRue stepped carefully down to the bottom of the canoe, avoiding the trickle of bilge, and crept toward the stern. She nosed her way behind Yonie’s skirt until she was concealed from casual view. They would have to slow to cross the Ford, and plenty of people thought it was funny to throw water on a cat.

As the water got shallower, the boat traffic thinned. A wide expanse of sky-mirroring water spread out like shiny blue fabric, stitched down the middle with a straggling line of wagons, oxen, horsemen and travelers on foot. Harness jangled and drivers sang. Walkers spattered by wheels or hooves cursed and told passing carts to go to Under Town.

Barefoot peddlers of cool drinks, sugar loaves, and cheap jewelry flocked around the richer carriages like gnats as they slowed to cross the water. The spicy smell of barbeque and skewered crawfish drifted from the roadside booths on the eastern shore.

The Ford was at its midsummer low, and barely reached higher than a knee-bout or a horse’s hock. The sandy bottom was firm and clean. Yet still the slow, waddling ferries did a brisk business upstream in the deeper water. Some foreigners were too wary of swamp-guile to wet their feet in bayou water, or even to risk a splash from a carriage-wheel.

Yonie chose the deepest part of the Ford, and sent the Dragonfly skimming neatly between a brewer’s cart and a mail-coach without once scraping bottom. She dug in her paddle and soon had left the gabble of the Ford behind.

The Damnables was a sleepy, slow-current district out beyond Devil’s Marsh, almost to the Sloughs. Yonie took a detour along Crooked Creek to escape the worst of the reek from the Foulwater passage. She also took a few wrong turns, and had to stop several times to ask directions. Despite her first hopeful estimates, the sun was high in the sky before she reached Damnable Swamp.

The village was a scattering of stilt-houses gathered under the shade of looming cypresses, whose massive trunks flared in wooden folds like curtained pillars. The houses were no more than huts with wide wraparound balconies, much like the one where she and LaRue had grown up. Children scooted around the knobs of cypress knees in coracles, and old folks mended nets under balcony awnings. There were no rough characters in sight.

“Andry Gerard? You’re not the first one to wonder where ‘e’s got to,” said one sun-weathered old woman. “Don’t know where ‘e is exactly, but I’ll tell you one thing, ‘e’s tracking ‘is wife.”

“What do you mean?”

“She left yesterday. Up and left ‘im with a six-year-old to care for! I always told ‘im, you never can trust a Northwoman, but would ‘e listen? ‘E would not. Say what you like about ‘is doings, at least ‘e always took care of ‘is family.”

“I’m sorry, I had no idea. Where does he live? I have a package to deliver, and a message for him.”

The old woman pointed her brown twig of a finger across the inlet toward a cluster of huts that stood high on their pilings like a flock of cranes. “You’ll find ‘is sister there. Michelle Fontaine. She’s got charge of ‘is boy, poor little lamb.”

Gerard’s sister gave Yonie tea on the tiny shaded balcony of her house, and even set down fresh rainwater for LaRue. They sat crosslegged on reed matting, the water lapping faintly below them. Yonie’s room in Wicked Ford seemed very far away.

From inside the house came the stubborn sobbing of a small child. “I’m ‘oping

'e'll settle down and 'ave a nap. I've told 'im 'is folks'll be back soon, but I don't know if 'e believed me. Don't know if I believe it myself." Michelle Fontaine was a tall, grave woman with a streak of gray like a river-current through her hair. Around her eyes were many of the same lines that Yonie remembered on her mother's face.

Fontaine shook her head slowly. "I was the last one to see 'er, you know. She wasn't 'erself, anyone could tell. Norther or not, Rose's been a good friend to me, and she wouldn't just leave like that without a good reason. 'I must to go home,' she kept saying, like something terrible would 'appen if she didn't. 'I can not to wait more.' She didn't 'ave no supplies in the boat, no water, nothing. Barely took the time to drop 'er child off 'ere. I just can't understand it. There was nothing left for 'er in the North after the war, she's told me time and again."

"Let me show you the package." Yonie lifted the gong out of the boat onto the balcony and flipped back the cloth, holding the dished metal so it couldn't ring. "Did your brother ever show you this, or mention it to you?"

"No, I never saw it. But I knew 'e must 'ave 'ad something like. Yesterday afternoon I 'eard a sound ringing out over the water, like what this ought to make." She started to flick it with her fingernail, but Yonie caught her hand. It was calloused and strong.

"Sorry, ma'am, but I think you'd best not." Yonie could feel her voice slipping into the same groove as Fontaine's. She made no effort to stop it. "I don't know what might 'appen. Your brother brought it to me for a Seeing, and I found out it's a very cunning thing."

"Are you a pearly, then? And you so young?"

Yonie nodded heavily, hating to lie to this woman. She stared down at the gong, which was reflecting water-ripples in the brass. "Can you tell me what it sounded like? 'Ow did it make you feel?"

Gerard's sister twisted her hands in her lap. "Well, it was nothing but lovely," she said. "Melancholy, though. Made me glad enough to be 'ere in my own good 'ome, where I was born and raised."

"But your sister-in-law – Rose – she grew up in the North?"

The older woman's hands grew still. "Yes – yes, she did. Up in the Icemounts." She looked down at the gong as if it were a cottonmouth. "I tried to stop 'er," she said. "I tried to stop 'er, but it was like she didn't 'ear me at all."

Softly LaRue crept onto Fontaine's lap, and after a moment the woman began to stroke her, looking out over the marsh with tired eyes.

. . .

"We can't just leave the gong at the Gerards' doorstep," Yonie said. "It's a public danger. That poor family! I say we drop it in the Hellbog, and good riddance."

They drifted among reeds near an empty cottage. The wrapped gong lay in the bottom of the boat, surrounded by green bilgewater. Yonie picked up the dipper and began absently to bail.

"Wait!" LaRue looked down from her padded perch. "The thing's been stewing in that water all day. Leave it a moment, my dear, and let's see what more I can see." Peering over the edge of the thwart, the cat gazed down into the threads and specks of green that floated around the bundle. She was silent a long time.

"I think I understand now, dear," she said. "This gong, as we know, was designed to get people safely home. It must consider that its work."

Yonie had never been able to find any useful books about guile. Although she lived in a fairly permissive era, when such books were not actually banned, it was still not considered a fit subject for respectable research. Her historical volumes,



for instance, went on about the technology and lifestyle and transportation structure of the ancients, but made only the most glancing and veiled references to the chiridou that made it all possible. The writings about guile that did exist were usually designed to appeal to prurient interests, and were scooped up quickly by private collectors. Yonie had tried reading **The Wily Bedknob**, but after three pages had thrown it into the Petty Canal.

From sheer personal experience, though, most bayou residents knew the main characteristic of guile: that it liked to work.

“But that doesn’t make sense, LaRue! The North isn’t that poor woman’s home anymore. Why did it send her there?”

“Child, I’m not saying it did right, but I think it’s trying to work. Give a thing enough guile, and there’s no telling what lengths it’ll go to to do its job. That’s why we get expert swimmers with gills, or that thing that happens sometimes when we cross the Ford.” She gave the Dragonfly a reproving glance.

Or pet cats, thought Yonie, not for the first time, who learn to speak so they can be better companions for lonely little girls. Who learn to act like mothers for girls whose mothers are gone.

“But of course you’re right, dear, there’s more to it than that.” LaRue gave a pink-tongued yawn. “What else does guile do, besides try to work?”

“It lets wily things share their thoughts, a little bit. That’s how you do Seeings.”

“Yes. Well, sweet, I believe I was not quite right before, when I said the gong was lonely. It’s homesick. It wants to go home very badly, and evidently its home is the first place it remembers. I’m afraid it’s sharing that thought rather strongly indeed.”

“Then we’ll take it home!” Yonie gestured excitedly with the dipper, throwing drops of water onto LaRue that made her flick her ears. “Wouldn’t that break the beguilement on m’dam Gerard? We can figure out where the gong came from, and just put it back.”

The cat flexed her claws. “That’s one way to get rid of the wretched thing,” she conceded. “But aren’t you hungry, Yonie love?”

. . .

The sand-crabs were still hanging in their cage outside the Gerards’ kitchen door, and they were large indeed. Michelle Fontaine steamed them and served them with wild marsh-rice. Yonie remembered her own mother preparing the same dish, telling her that no grand high-town house served anything better.

“Your brother never told me where ‘e found the gong. Well, actually, ‘e said ‘e found it in a fish.” Yonie spread her hands.

Fontaine laughed sharply. “‘E would. Andry’s a good enough fisherman, but come midsummer, ‘e just can’t keep away from the marshlands. ‘E’s always ‘oping to find something and strike it rich.”

The trade in ancient artifacts was widespread around Wicked Ford. Most travelers returned home with at least one dinner plate or necklace in the ancient style, some even bearing nicks or dents testifying to their antiquity. These were generally purchased at the water market or the stands at Road-end, and carefully crafted by artisans in the Cloudy Canal manufactories. More discriminating buyers favored the antique shops along the Grand Canal, where the quality of the workmanship was considerably higher.

Genuine relics of the ancients were traded more circumspectly, and fetched a better price. The typical find – a jeweled dagger, say – would pass from its initial discoverer to a slyman with wiles enough to see if its immersion had made it more expert at backstabbing rivals, peeling fruit, or merely looking ornamental. The dag-

ger would then pass to a specialist who judged its value based on the jewels in the hilt, its craftsmanship, state of preservation, and so on. Finally its availability would be discreetly mentioned to interested parties, such as a vengeful nobleman, a Northern apple-grower, or a high-town dandy. By this time the price would have been set based on a combination of all these factors, plus the general state of the market.

Professional relic-hunters knew how to navigate this maze. They were gamblers who won their wealth by accepting risk, since not all artifacts were happy to be found. But there were also amateurs, village folk who spent their spare hours slogging through the ever-changing waterways and boglands that surrounded their homes. They hoped for a lucky find, but were ill-prepared for the dangers it might bring. Andry Gerard, Yonie guessed, was one of these.

Yonie fingered the end of her braid, clicking her thumbnail against the wooden baubles. "I see. Do you 'ave any idea where 'e's been looking lately?"

"If I 'ad to guess, I'd say Vile Bottom. It's not far from 'ere, but it's tricky. I can draw you a map. 'E's been using up my bug-bite salve like a crazy man, and coming 'ome with 'is boat all streaked in white mud. Yes, I'd say Vile Bottom." She gave Yonie a sober look. "M'dam Watereye – if you can do anything to bring them 'ome safe, I'd never forget it."

Yonie swallowed the last bite of crab and rice. She could hear the Gerards' son still whimpering softly inside the hut. Impulsively, she pressed the older woman's hand in hers. "I promise you, ma'am, I'll do what I can."

. . .

Vile Bottom was a fetid body of water blanketed in a dense green slime. Its edges merged gradually into pale, gluey mud. Only the most sluggish of currents eddied through the masses of reeds that blocked it from the watercourse beyond. Clouds of insects droned low over the water. Over everything lay the smell of wet, warm decay.

Yonie guided the canoe around mossy, decomposing logs and through stands of swamp-plants that lured their insect prey with the odor of rotting meat. She felt glad to have LaRue along. In spots like these you never could tell how wily the plants might be, and human skeletons had sometimes been found still stuck to the sundews.

On the far shore she found what she was looking for.

"See here, LaRue. I'm sure this mud has been churned by boots. The reeds are all smashed down." Yonie dragged the paddle through the mud. At times like these she fully appreciated the slight cunning of the Dragonfly. Here, no one would point and curse – or for that matter coldly avert their eyes – if the hull happened at times to lift clear of the water. The Dragonfly did hate to scrape its bottom.

They slid into the shade of great, gnarled inktrees shaggy with moss. Roots and damp earth rose around her until she was paddling through a narrow sunken channel. The mud had given way to deeper water, though clots of green still swirled thickly on the surface and clung to the hull of the canoe. The snarl of insect noise receded to a low hum.

LaRue stared forward along the channel. In the heavy gloom under the trees her pupils were enormous. "Look, child. There's something up ahead." Yonie followed the direction of her gaze. The boulder jutting into the waterway ahead was curiously angular. As she drew level with it, Yonie saw that it was ancient masonry, an arch of fitted stone. It was the top of a doorway leading into wet darkness. The heavy door-slab, bearing the recent marks of a crowbar, leaned against hairy

tree-roots nearby.

“You found it, LaRue!”

“Not so loud, dear. Give respect. This may well be a tomb.”

The entrance was more than half submerged. Barely a head’s height of clearance was left above the water. Yonie rubbed her hand along the layers of blackened grime that striped the doorway’s sides. Under the waterline, strings of soft algae trailed from the stone.

“This must be below water all winter.” Yonie laid down her paddle and slipped off her skirt and blouse, leaving only her sleeveless vest and unmentionables to protect her from leeches. With the help of an overhanging branch, she let herself down into the water. It was tepid and came up to her waist. With slow-motion steps she walked over soft mud and ducked to enter the stone arch. Suddenly she was treading water, spitting swamp-scum out of her mouth. “I’m fine, I’m fine,” she called, splashing back to the canoe. “The bottom drops away under the arch. It must have been a tall doorway.”

“Yes – and only recently opened. Otherwise the floor would be silted up to the level of the channel bottom.” LaRue switched her tail. “It certainly seems like the right place. M’dam Fontaine should be able to find it with no trouble.”

“What do you mean? She won’t need to come out here at all after I put the boat-gong back.”

“Yonie, I just don’t like the idea of you going in there. You’ve done more than enough for these people already. Let someone else take the risks from now on.”

“But LaRue! I promised her I’d help. She can’t do it, she’s got that little boy to look after. And what about m’dam Gerard? She’s beguiled, and she’s all alone! Who knows what could happen to her?”

LaRue sniffed. “Honestly, my dear, I never will understand you humans. The lengths you’ll go to for someone who’s not even family! And from what I’ve seen, you’re worse than most.”

“Come on, LaRue. It’ll be easy for me. I’m a good swimmer, you saw to that.” Yonie waved a wet hand at the stone doorway. “Don’t you want to know what’s inside?”

“Curiosity. Now that’s something I do understand.” LaRue licked a paw. “Huh! Most children your age wouldn’t dare go into a place like that. Just my luck that you don’t have any sense.” She began to wash, as she always did when she was pleased. “All right, dear, you can put the gong back yourself, if you’re not afraid to go in alone.”

Yonie eyed the opening. Now that she thought about it, it was obvious that LaRue couldn’t go in with her. “It should be safe enough, shouldn’t it, LaRue? We know m’sir Gerard went in already.”

“I would think so. That stonework looks wily enough that nothing short of an earthquake could shake it loose. As for snakes – don’t bother them, and they won’t bother you.”

Yonie was silent a moment. “Can you light my way, LaRue?”

“Good idea, dear. That way we’ll know if the air is bad in there. Let me see what I can do.” The big cat closed her eyes, but raised her head alertly. In the shadow of the doorway, the water stirred. A fat bubble wavered up toward the surface, and ignited in a blue flash as it emerged. “There’s not much mud inside, I’m afraid – just what drifted in through the door-cracks. But what there is is thick with guile, and helpful. It should be enough, if we’re sparing. Just let me know when you need a light.”

Calling the bluefire was one of the most useful wiles for swamp-living, but not so common in the city, where pearlies had long since squeezed every sizeable pock-

et of swamp-gas from the mud. Seeing LaRue summon light reminded Yonie of earlier days, sneaking out past her parents' room late at night, paddling with LaRue out behind Evil Island, so the cat could practice her skills in the dark. Yonie had always wondered if, on that last night, her parents had had time to see that she was gone.

Yonie picked up the gong and tied the corners of its wrapping around her waist. More gingerly than before, she waded toward the archway and sank down inside until she was swimming in place. The air was cooler in under the stonework. The water around her kicking legs was still lukewarm, but it was free of the streamers of pondweed that lined the channel. The dank green scent of moss and dead leaves faded as she swam along the passage, leaving only the sterile smell of wet stone.

The gong was heavier than she had remembered, and the sweat on her face began to turn clammy. The light from the doorway penetrated just far enough to show her a greater expanse of darkness where the tunnel opened out.

"Light please, LaRue!" Yonie's voice bounced hollowly between the stone roof and the surface of the water. She could hear the sound spread out in the larger space ahead. A moment later she felt a tickle as a bubble of swamp-gas swept by her. It exploded in a brief blue flare.

In that instant of illumination, Yonie took in the layout of the chamber ahead. It was not much larger than the garret she shared with LaRue, with no openings in the walls besides the entranceway. No furnishings showed above the water except for a curious structure in the center of the room.

"What do you see, dear?"

"I'm in a room," she called back down the passage in a low voice. "There's something in the middle – it looked kind of like a gondola, but with a closed top." She swam forward until her hands rested on the smooth stone surface, and hung there resting her legs.

"I think it's a burial chamber, LaRue. This is probably a coffin-boat. I've read about them – the ancients thought it could help carry the soul to the next world."

Yonie backed away, treading water again. Every tiny splash she made was magnified in the half-drowned room. "Now I just have to figure out where to put the gong."

"Well, it's a boat-gong, dear," the cat's voice came echoing down the stone passage. "I think you've found its boat." Another swamp-bubble flamed blue, and Yonie could see a rectangular indentation on the coffin-boat's stern. She felt her way around the carved side until she reached the place. Yes, it was the right size to hold the base of the gong.

Awkwardly, she felt for the knots that tied the gong around her waist. She couldn't manage them one-handed, and it would be almost as difficult while treading water. And what if she dropped the gong? At the thought of diving blind into the black water under her feet, Yonie found herself clambering up onto the coffin lid.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean any disrespect," she whispered. Her wet braid lay like a dead eel against her neck. Under her bare feet, the stone boat was as warm as the swampwater.

Yonie worked the gong out of its wrapping and slid it ahead of her along the stone deck of the burial ship. It fitted neatly into the hollow in the stonework. Yonie took a deep breath, and smiled shakily to herself. It was done. She could go back out now into the daylight and climb up out of the water into her canoe, and think about how brave she'd been. She didn't have to crouch here anymore, in a lightless room right above the dead body of an ancient, whose coffin-boat might or might not have helped him into the next life.



“Yonie! Are you all right?” Another swamplight burst from the water behind her with a moist gurgle, like a monstrous frog clearing its throat. Startled, Yonie swung her head around. Her braid flicked out like a whip, and the beads at the end clanged into the gong like a tiny mallet.

It wasn't loud at first – just an insignificant tinny sound. But it swelled and deepened into a dolorous note that filled the chamber. It was pure and sad, like a coyote's howl or a distant foghorn along a rocky coast. Yonie fumbled for the gong and held the rim tight to damp out the vibration, but even after the metal lay dead in her hands, the sound continued in her head. Yonie whimpered. Not since her parents' death had she felt so out of place and alone. She had failed. The gong was still grieving for its home.

. . .

Yonie dug her paddle grimly into the currents of Boatman's Bane. They had left Vile Bottom behind them some time ago, but she still pulled until her muscles burned. Her wet vest rasped against her shoulders, and her ankle was purpling from where she had bashed it against the stone coffin in the dark. It hadn't been easy swimming out of there with a heavy weight in one hand, but she wasn't about to leave the gong there. Not when she could still hear its somber cry.

“There could be dozens of those crypts back there,” LaRue growled. Her tail was puffed, and her claws were sunk deep into her cushion. Every so often she shook her head as if her ears were hurting. “Who knows how many our m'sir Gerard plundered before he ran into trouble? I say we leave the sinking gong on his doorstep after all.”

“We'll come back and do that, LaRue, right after we get home.”

“Yes, of course, dear. We must get home.”

The canoe skimmed over the water, heading for the Sloughs.

. . .

The gong-note sang in the dusty corners of Yonie's mind. It sang about a cottage in the Sloughs, with the warm sunset light draped over its log sides and thatched reed roof. A wide fishing boat and a slim green canoe rested at the dock in front, and the smell of bubbling chowder drifted out the open door. Her mama was singing one of the fancy songs that none of the other mothers knew, that she learned back in the Academy when she was studying to be a Proper Young Lady. Her papa was sitting on the balcony whittling and watching Yonie paddle laboriously across the cove and back, with her kitten curled up like a fuzzy apricot on the middle thwart of the Dragonfly.

Yonie's shoulders groaned as she yanked the canoe through the water. Her swamp-slimed clothing had dried now and was crunchy to the touch, and her scalp was matted with sweat.

“Look, LaRue, there's the Lightning Tree. Remember when you climbed it, and I tried to give you a bath to get the char off?”

“I'm not likely to forget it, dear. Luckily, I'm too strong now, and you are too well-mannered, for such an atrocity ever to be repeated. But don't dawdle, Yonie, there's a good girl! We're almost there.”

The Sloughs were a maze of narrow shaded waterways and shallow, open pools where crowds of water-lilies watched the sky. It was a cunning place, more so than many in the Bad Bayous. Now in summer the passages were low and treacherous, and Yonie kept to the wider watercourses while the memories trickled back like

warm swampwater. Off to the left was the marsh where she and LaRue had hunted yellow frogs together, and where LaRue had ventured her first forbidden guileful word. Down that way was the stand of cypress where she could almost always elude her taunting cousins. They were passing a hillock where she had sometimes gone to cry, in the days before she had LaRue.

The ringing of the gong still felt so loud and real, Yonie was surprised it didn't set the moss swaying overhead.

They shot out of the Bitterway, a long tunnel columned with sweetgum trees, and Yonie saw what was left of the cottage. Even after two years, the pain could still bite. Fire-blackened stumps of pilings protruded from the water, already tangled with streamers of swampweed. The naked stone chimney pointed toward the sky like a homely monument. The watermeadow behind showed only remnants of the old kitchen garden – a hint of raised beds and fallen fences.

They floated between the old dock posts, looking down through the tea-dark water. The charred beams were furred with algae now, and minnows swam blithely over and around them.

Yonie slammed the water with her paddle, frightening away the fish. "This gong still won't leave me alone! What does it want, LaRue? This is the closest to home I can get! I don't have any memories earlier than this!" She flung the paddle down into the canoe and hunched over, squeezing her eyes shut and covering them with her hands.

"I still hear it too." Yonie could feel the rocking of the canoe as the cat unfolded her paws and got to her feet. "But that's only to be expected. I should have known, my dear, I should have known. This is not the earliest place that I recall." Through the noise in her head, Yonie dimly wondered what she meant. LaRue had always been with her, always. Purring on her lap by the stove on damp winter evenings, listening intently to every word her parents said. Jumping onto her quilted body in the middle of the night. Riding in her canoe as she went exploring, out to the hidden places where the cat could dare her words and wiles.

Yonie barely heard the splash over the sounding of the gong, and it took her a moment to wipe her eyes. By the time she saw LaRue's wet head bobbing in the water, the cat was already a canoe-length away.

"LaRue, what are you *doing*?" Yonie grabbed up the paddle, skinning her knuckles on the thwart. She backed and turned as swiftly as her tired arms would allow. Cats could swim, she knew, but she had never seen LaRue do it except for the few times she had overturned the Dragonfly. Although LaRue had sternly forced Yonie to practice until she could swim better than any of her superstitious cousins, the cat herself had always refused to go in the water. She always said that she had already come as close to drowning as she ever wanted to go.

Yonie's eyes widened. "No, LaRue!" she screamed. "Come back!" The canoe's side crashed against a tree trunk as she slewed around. LaRue was obviously tiring, barely holding her nose out of the water, but still she struggled forward. She was heading for the Bitterway, Yonie knew. The bottom of the Bitterway. Would it still be there – the torn and rotted sack which held LaRue's earliest memory?

Yonie's mother had always gotten teary when she told the story. "Simply barbaric, my dear, to dispose of a whole litter that way! Our neighbor may not have wanted those kittens, but I did. I only wish I'd gotten there in time to save them all."

Yonie had speculated that it was this early near-drowning that had concentrated so much guile in LaRue's tiny kitten body. But the cat's wiles were no match for those of the boat-gong, which had been soaking for centuries in a flooded tomb.

Yonie stabbed at the water, urging the canoe forward. But she could no longer

see LaRue's head above the water. She cast about wildly, scraping waterlilies off the surface, straining to see through the murky water.

A cry of anguish tore out of her throat. "Sink you!" She glared through reddened eyes at the gong where it lay gleaming in the bilge, still droning its forlorn song. "Drown you! You can just go to, to *Under Town* for all I care!" LaRue would never have permitted her to use such language, but that didn't matter now. The canoe wobbled precariously as Yonie leaned over to drag the gong toward her. She heaved it up onto the stern of the canoe and grasped the horns to tip it over the side.

Then she halted, hands still squeezed tight around the gong. The ringing in her head had stopped.

The bayou shocked her with its silence. There was only the buzz and clack of insects, the plop of diving frogs, and the soft breathing of wind in cypress branches and hanging moss. That, and the sudden sputter and mewling of a terrified, swimming cat.

. . .

Yonie had dried off LaRue as best she could with her shirt and skirt, but the cat's tail still looked skeletal with the fur plastered down, and her body looked scrawny and frail.

"That's quite enough, Yonie! I'm certainly not going to freeze to death in this weather. Now for goodness' sake, cover yourself before someone comes along. This is a public waterway."

"Yes, LaRue." Yonie buttoned up her shirt obediently, a wide grin still lingering on her face.

The cat hopped onto Yonie's lap and examined the boat-gong, which now sat docilely in a small puddle of water on the stern platform of the canoe. "Well, it may have come from that tomb after all, my dear, and then again it may not. But one thing's for sure, this gong's first home was on a real, working boat. It probably belonged to whatever poor soul was buried there."

"I should have guessed," Yonie said. "It's not pretty enough to have been designed as a funeral ornament."

"Well, you'd be surprised what some people like, sweet. I'm sure m'sir Gerard will have no trouble selling it, when he and his wife get back."

Gingerly, Yonie turned and touched the gong with one hand, the other holding the wet tail of her braid in a tight grip. "Can he sell the gong, though, LaRue? Isn't it still dangerous?"

"Maybe not." The cat stared into the rapidly drying pool of water that remained around the gong's base, and cocked her head. "Hmm. I'll need more water to be sure, but I'm hoping that my experience made an impression on it through the guile-link. It should know now that not everybody's first memory is of their home." The cat shuddered. "Certainly not mine. I'm glad you're a competent boatwoman, Yonie dear, so I can look forward to many years without having to swim again."

"I'm just glad the gong felt at home with our little Dragonfly. Its original boat is probably mud by now." Yonie glanced backward at the ruins of the cottage. The sun was low enough now to send rosy bars of light across the scorched pilings. "Come on, LaRue. Let's go home."

## Gaming

### Fantasy Game Reviews

Edited by Howard Andrew Jones

#### Castle Whiterock

Chris Doyle and Adrian Pommier  
Goodman Games, 651 pages, \$99.99 boxed set, \$59.99 PDF, Nov 2007  
Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones

I've conquered **Castle Whiterock**. I don't mean that I've played all the way through – that would probably take more than a year of weekly (probably twice weekly) gaming. I mean I've *read* all the way through (not counting stat blocks). It was a fun read, and the largest single dungeon that I've ever encountered. Merely reading all those pages felt like an achievement in and of itself, even though I was entertained most of the way.

Whiterock was designed to be an entire dungeon campaign, taking **Dungeons and Dragons** players from 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> level, from newbie to top-notch adventurer. The boxed set is three inches thick, and the included booklets nearly reach the brim. On top was a “read this first” kind of pamphlet, the cover page of which introduced you to the box contents. The rest of its 14 pages are an index and glossary that are of more use after you delve into the rest of the booklets:

- A 48 page booklet of dungeon maps, with a cover map showing how the multiple levels – including the 14 hidden mini-levels – interconnect.

- A full-color foldout map of the city of Cillamar (which serves rather like a dungeoneering base camp), the back of which is a map of the final dungeon levels.

- A 56-page gazetteer of the surrounding region, Morrain.

- 6 sample characters and a blank character sheet

- A 26-page handout booklet of clues and images you can show players when they reach various points of the campaign.

- A double-sided poster of all the Goodman Games products

- 4 large dungeon books, the backs of which fit together into another copy of the map of Cillamar:

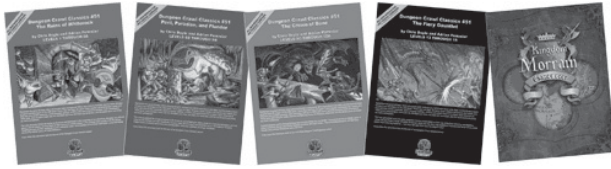
**The Ruins of Whiterock:** 144 pages. Levels 1 through 6A, a historical background and backstory for the dungeon, and an overview of all the dungeon levels.

**Peril, Paradise, and Plunder:** 138 pages. Levels 6B through 9B

**The Crown of Bone:** 166 pages. Levels 9C through 12 A.

**The Fiery Gauntlet:** 143 pages. Levels 13 through 15, a detailed look at the main inn in Cillamar (*The Slumbering Drake*) including a map and encounter key, a section on new skills, classes, and

spells, 23 pages of monsters unique to the setting, 13 pages of new items and gear, a detailed look at a band of mercenaries who might well compete against the player characters, and other items



The Goodman Games *Dungeon Crawl Classics* line is meant to capture that old module feel, where “NPCs were there to be killed, and the finale of every dungeon was the dragon on the 20<sup>th</sup> level... Each adventure is 100% good, solid dungeon crawl, with the monsters you know, the traps you remember, and the secret doors you know are there somewhere.” These words are printed beneath the cover art on every *Dungeon Crawl Classics* module. If you're tired of standardized races like elves, dwarves, gnomes, demons, and the assumptions that come from such tropes, this product isn't for you. If, however, the preceding blurb resonates, you're apt to be mightily pleased with what you find. It emulates those old-style dungeons and goes one better – there



are connective threads between the levels, secrets to be ferreted out, and mysteries to uncover; even recurring adversaries.

The first level of the mighty dungeon is a slaver's camp set up in the surface ruins of Castle Whiterock. The GM is provided with several possible player motivations for going there; once they're in motion, players are bound to discover that there's more to Castle Whiterock than is first apparent. It turns out that some of those slaves are turned over to two different groups of orcs running two different mines. There's a small hidden level left over from when the castle was assaulted by cloud giants and one of their towers crashed to Earth (it's mostly intact, but buried by rubble) and then the adventurers reach a system of natural caverns dominated by troglodytes.

Troglodytes are too stupid to have stumbled upon the secret entrance to what's left of an ancient gnomish clockwork academy, **Castle Whiterock's** next hidden level and one of the more inventive sections of book 1. There adventurers are likely to find some nifty gadgets as well as some deadly, and unique, clockwork guardians. Level 5 takes the players to the section of the castle now submerged in a vast lake, and requires characters capable of breathing water, but by this point they should be 5<sup>th</sup> level and likely to have encountered devices, magic, or even naturally occurring objects that can help. The book closes out with the second half of the troglodyte caves, and a hidden temple to a nasty god.

The deeper adventurers go, the more they begin to gather inklings of what's really going on in the deep underground; they will start to hear stories of a great underground arena where the most combative of the slaves end up, and they're likely to encounter, or at least hear of, some nasty dwarves. I missed the gaming memo on them when I got away from **D & D** some years back, but apparently the duergar are to dwarves what the drow are to elves – nasty offshoots that live underground doing dark deeds (further underground than

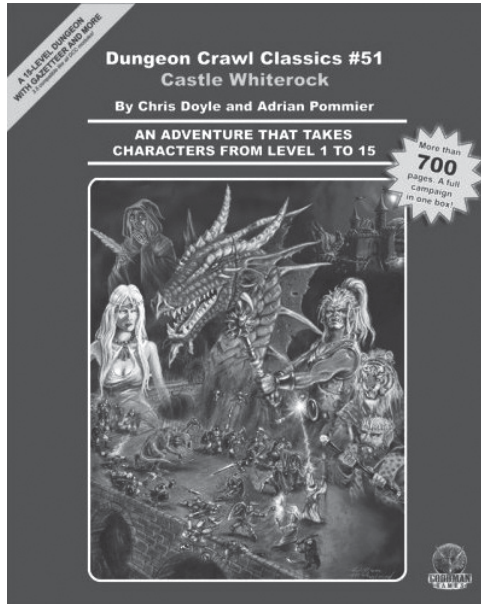
regular dwarves, in the case of duergar) and abhor the sunlight. Clues and subquests are scattered through the levels – for instance, a paladin's bones lie in one corner of one level, and if they're returned to the crypt where his friends lie, the characters will have a powerful sanctuary where they can recuperate and heal. There are other sub-quests that link multiple levels that characters who search thoroughly and pay attention can uncover.

Players who actually think about what they're encountering will be rewarded.

Book 2, *Peril, Paradise, and Plunder*, has some of my favorite sections. The situations might be familiar but they're certainly evocative. There's a lost library tended by an undead monk, a watery maze, a dimensional gate to a forested plane (one in need of heroes) and a huge underground cavern that has both a small drow outpost hidden in a giant stalactite and a pyramid magically transported to the cavern's

floor many years ago – and as pyramid dungeons go, it's both creepy and inventive. Book 3 is mostly concerned with the various levels of the duergar holdings, including their sinister arena, but there's the secret retreat of a mad gnome and two lost tombs. Book 4 covers the big bad guys at the end – the dragons, both living and ghostly, who lair at the bottommost depths, but there's a prison for demons set up by adventurers who used to make Whiterock their home (I still can't quite imagine my players wanting to adventure into *that* particular level, but it may be that I missed some sections on possible motivations). The dragons are bound to be the kind of challenge adventurers delight in – they're brilliant, deadly, and evil, and combat with them is liable to be the talk among your players for years to come.

**Castle Whiterock** doesn't have to be linear – it's possible to jump levels and even explore them out of order. Your players are liable to do plenty of backtracking, both to the occasional safe spots scattered through the dungeon, and out of the dungeon completely,



## Black Gate

to the city of Cillamar. As mentioned before, there are multiple hidden levels as well.

The nicest surprise was the gazetteer. I was familiar enough with Goodman Games to expect a good dungeon, but I had anticipated regional information that was fairly lackluster. I've seen enough dull world settings over the years that I've gotten pretty jaded. Sure, Morrain is a standard fantasy region, but standard can shine when love and care are put into bringing a setting to life. That's what happened here, and authors Jeff LaSala and Harley Stroh are to be commended. History sections in these sorts of booklets are usually a big snore, but this one got me so involved in the story that I was

eagerly turning pages and was actually moved by the events recounted within. The back history explains some of the regional celebrations, tells you who the setting heroes were and why they're still sung about, and incidentally outlines what sounds like a pretty nifty role-playing campaign. Cillamar is described section by section, with notable city locations and interesting people adventurers are likely to interact with described in greater detail. There are even four-to five short little adventure hooks for each of the five city sections so that the characters can have something to do while they're not cleaning out those dungeons.

The cartography throughout is clear and useful. Art is reminiscent of those old *Dungeons and Dragons* modules of yore, meaning that while dynamic it often lacks polish. The internal art comes from a variety of artists, and ranges from decent to occasionally downright cool – and usually creepy.

Final Analysis: the price point may seem steep, but if you were to buy this many dungeon levels separately, you'd probably pay close to twice this amount, and the dungeons wouldn't fit so cohesively together. Obviously, if your players aren't in to dungeoneering it's a poor investment; if, however, they want a long thrill ride into underworld depths, I don't think you could find a dungeon even half as large that was as well designed.

## Pathfinder 4: Fortress of the Stone Giants (Rise of the Runelords)

Wolfgang Baur

Paizo, December 2007, 94 pages, \$19.99

Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones

A few months ago Paizo launched a new idea in gaming adventures: *Pathfinder*. It's a campaign-centric magazine... but it's not really a magazine, even though it arrives monthly, and even though you can subscribe to it (at 30% off the cover price, plus subscribers get an additional 15% discount on most items sold at Paizo.com); it's a glossy four-color book. Each issue contains a lengthy adventure (long enough to entertain game master and players for several weeks of gaming), three or four campaign related articles, and new monsters. Each

book is connected to the last so that the adventures build on one another... and, just in case you don't like the campaign, every six months a new one begins, set in a different location of the Paizo adventure world.

Take Issue 1, *Burnt Offerings*, as an example. There's a foreword that introduces the campaign (and, being the first in the series, the concept behind it) and the contents of the book. The adventure takes up 57 pages, and is followed by a detailed description of the village of Sandpoint, which the players will visit more than once over the course of the campaign (13 pages), an article on the ancient empire at the root of the evils the players will have to fight (which also serves as a partial outline of the campaign – 7 pages), a 6 page ongoing look at the world through the eyes of Pathfinders, a sort of explorer's guild, and 11 pages of detailed information about new monsters unique to the setting. Finally, at the end of each issue there's a page with the stat blocks and personality descriptions of the house characters. The characters go up in levels after each adventure, so these sample characters change from issue to issue.

Glossy and four-color wouldn't matter much if the quality wasn't up to snuff, but Paizo seems to pride itself on lovely product presentation. Interior and exterior art is eye-catching, cartography is colorful and intriguing.



ing (intriguing as in wow, that looks like a neat place to visit) and the dungeon maps are clear and useful. Layout is top notch and professional. My only problem is with the font size. It's probably two points too small and is a tad uncomfortable... on the other hand, I suspect that if the font size were larger there'd have to be more pages, which would mean a higher price point.

So far these Pathfinder books are more than just show ponies for high production values, they're also well-written and entertaining. I've run or played games in a number of pre-existing science fiction settings – **Star Trek**, **Firefly**, **Traveller** – but I've only ever run one fantasy campaign set in someone else's world, *Talislanta*. Maybe it's pride, but I've always preferred to construct my own game world. I'm tempted though, strongly tempted, to try out this campaign run. It looks like it would be fun. It has some standard features, but the writers breathe so much life into the settings, scenarios, and characters that the familiar elements serve merely to ground it.

The centerpiece of issue 4 is an adventure drafted by Wolfgang Baur, who also contributed an 8-page in-depth look at the giants who make up the formidable opposing force the players must confront. As any long-time fantasy role-playing gamer knows (or anyone else who has stared lovingly at the original **Dungeons and Dragons Monster Manual**) stone giants are neutral, neither good and noble nor chaotic evil (prone to random acts of violence), or lawful evil (methodical and organized about their evil, like brownshirts) and they like to throw rocks. They're not as colorful or interesting as the frost giants (who radiate cold and are usually depicted with generic pulp Viking garb) or the fire giants, who are often depicted with flaming hair, or even the brutish hill giants, who find their accoutrements at the caveman oversize store. Stone giants just seemed dull by comparison. Bauer fleshed them out into an interesting and complicat-

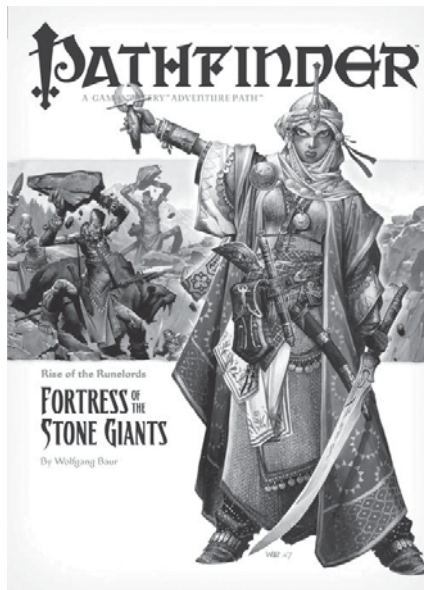
ed stoic society. Once, long ago, they were slaves to the ancient empire of Thassalon – they were so scarred by their contact with civilization that they have sworn to remain tribal and agrarian. There's a surprisingly interesting look at their society, gods, battle tactics, and a few suggestions for working them into adventures.

But the core of the issue is the adventure, *Fortress of the Stone Giants*. The adventurers first meet the stone giants of the title when the giants approach the village of Sandpoint behaving in an uncharacteristically belligerent fashion – they're on a raid. Once the player characters put a stop to them, or chase them down, they must track

their way through the wilderness and assemble the clues to discover that this was just a preliminary raid – a stone giant exile has taught himself sorcery and returned to take over his tribe. Malcontent stone giants, ogres, and other bad guys have flocked to his side, and they'll soon sweep the countryside. What the adventurers won't know until later is that the giant sorcerer is actually in league with – not to mention partly controlled by – one of the ancient runelords of the campaign title. The stone giant sorcerer, Mokmurian, has

erected his fortress on the ruins of an ancient religious compound of Thassalon, little of which remains save for a harpy-haunted tower and a library. Characters will have to use brains rather than brawn to sneak through the plain outside the fortress, studied with stone giant camps, then sneak through the fortress using all their skill and guile to get past both Mokmurian's allies and ancient magical wards. The library itself survives, along with its interesting clockwork librarian, and will be of use to the adventurers in issues to come. Mokmurian lurks in the bowels of the fortress, planning his plans; provided the characters have played their cards right they'll have enough clues to help bring him down.

Summarized like this it sounds like a basic "infiltrate the stronghold, kill the bad guy" adventure, but there's plenty of motiva-





tion, mystery, and exotic color to keep it moving, not to mention the steady unveiling of subplots that will reward and enlighten those who have been reading the campaign series.

The issue concludes with a look at dragons in the campaign world of Golarion, some inventive scenario specific monsters, a short Pathfinder journal entry, and the house character stat block page which, with their increasing levels and abilities and equipment, has enlarged to two pages.

Does the **Pathfinder** series work? Yes. Do I like it? Yes. It's an exciting concept and it's off to a great start. If Paizo can bring this campaign to a smashing close, and continue the quality in their next six-part campaign sequence, they'll have hit a home run. Right now it's a least a triple.

### **Monsternomicon vol. 1: Denizens of the Iron Kingdoms - v3.5**

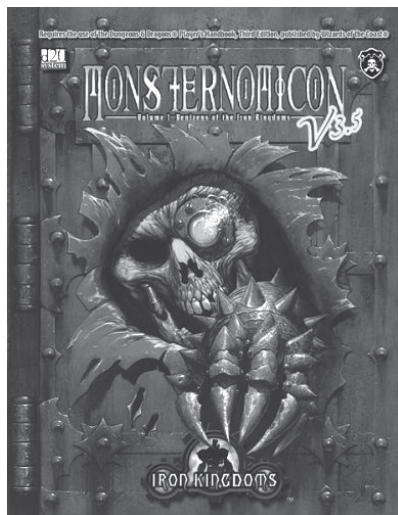
Privateer Press, June 2005, 240 pages, \$29.99

### **Monsternomicon vol. 2: The Iron Kingdoms and Beyond**

Edited by Christopher Bodan and Nathan Letsinger

Privateer Press, May 2007, 237 pages + removable map of Immoren continent, \$39.99

Reviewed by Andrew Zimmerman Jones



With the release of their **Hordes** line of miniatures, Privateer Press has expanded beyond the full-metal fantasy motif that brought so much fame to their **WarMachine** miniature line and **Iron Kingdoms** RPG setting (see review in **Black Gate 10**). The setting has now stretched well beyond the confines of “civilized” Western Immoren and into the Bloodstone Marches to the east and dragon-blighted arctic regions to the north.

In the pages of their bi-monthly magazine, *No Quarter*, Privateer Press has been slowly distributing greater information about the savage creatures from these regions, mostly through “The Pendrake Encounters,” a collection of Professor Victor Pendrake’s adventure narratives. Pendrake is Western Immoren’s version of Indiana Jones, an adventuring scholar whose quest for knowledge frequently leads him into harm’s way.

It was Pendrake who narrated the first **Monsternomicon**, a book that was originally released under the D&D v3.0 OGL but has since been revised to conform to v3.5’s rules. It covers many standard creatures of Western Immoren, including some of those found in the **WarMachine** miniature line, such as the undead Cryxian Pistol Wraiths, Bane Thralls, and Mechanithralls.

Volume 1 of the **Monsternomicon** was entertaining and provided some useful information beyond the standard creature stats. Appendices collected the races that could be adapted for player classes and offered three intriguing prestige classes: the Adventuring Scholar, the Monster Hunter, and the Bone Grinder (an alchemy-based prestige class). Tables at the end of the book also help you find appropriate creatures (of appropriate CR) to use in any given environment.

Still, I felt something was lacking. There were nice little silhouettes showing the shape of a given creature relative to a human ... though no “How to Use this Book” section at the beginning left it to the reader to find these on their own. Also, some of the “hooks” provided were not especially creative, which was one of the greatest failings of the book. Still, overall, the creatures presented made it well worth the money spent.

The sequel has been in the works for some time and provides a much greater bang for your role-playing buck. For several months prior to its release, “The Pendrake Encounters” covered Pendrake’s exploration of the rest of Immoren. Having been captured by the warrior-caste race the Skorne, he was missing for several issues and a valiant rescue effort was mounted by his pupil Lynnus and others. Once again safely ensconced in the security of his Corvis University study, Pendrake went to work penning his collected findings.

The result is a much stronger narrative than the original **Monsternomicon**, as Pendrake relates his encounters with creatures in the Bloodstone Marches and beyond. The most interesting of the accounts is that of the giants, which are treated as unique creatures in **Iron Kingdoms** in the same way dragons are (minus the dragon-blight).



Though only a handful of giants remain, mostly in the hidden city of Bemoth, there is the sense that many potential adventures could be centered on discovering more about them.

In addition to the giants, there are several other new races and creatures introduced, many of which are closely tied to the **Hordes** game. Druidic constructs of the Circle of Orboros, Everblighted creatures, Troll minions, and of course the Skorne litter its pages, as well as more **WarMachine** creatures such as Bloat Thralls and Machine Wraiths.

In fact, more than just an expanded monster guide, this book doubles as an expanded world guide, with extensive information on the regions only briefly described in earlier resources. Most significantly, it goes into a detailed history and geography of the Skorne Empire to the far east of Immoren and provides a color, fold-out map of the entire continent in the back of the book. New Skorne player classes and a prestige class are presented, based around their unique view of pain as a divine force.

Overall, **Monsternomicon Vol. 2** is a grand addition to the ranks of the Iron Kingdoms gaming library and well worth the price. While you're at it, I'd also recommend picking up **Vol. 1** if you get a chance, to round out your group's creature discomforts.

### **Hollow Earth Expedition**

Jeff Combs, et al.

Exile Game Studio, 252 pages, \$39.99, September 2006

### **Colonial Gothic**

Richard Iorio, Monica Valenrinelli, Matt McElroy, James Maliszewski  
Rogue Games, 220 pages, \$24.99, July 2007

Reviewed by E. E. Knight

If Sword-and-Sorcery is no longer tickling your gaming group's fantasy or the space opera's been off-key of late, here are two new single-volume worlds to get your characters somewhere different – yet familiar enough

through pop culture references to inspire even a jaded game master.

**Hollow Earth Expedition** is a beautifully illustrated tome mixing Indiana Jones, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Jules Verne into an exciting cocktail.

Honestly, **HEX** had me when I leafed through and saw dinosaurs, lost cities, zeppelins, and Nazis. Set in the comparatively turbulent year of 1936, characters take the role of a pulp archetype in search of the secrets of the Hollow Earth, which may contain anything from lost Atlantean technology to a fountain of health. Of course, there are malevolent forces also eager to plunge into and plunder this lost world – and even more powerful conspiracies to keep it a secret from the surface.

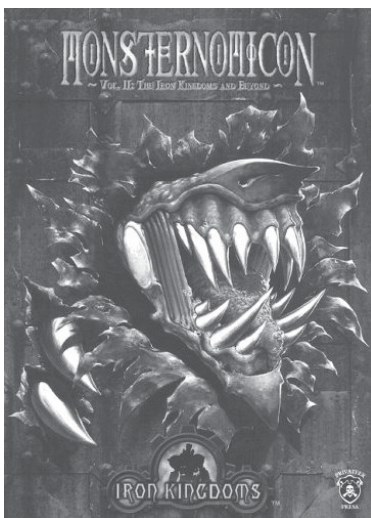
The character generation system has the usual attributes, skills, and “talents/flaws” and emphasizes motivation and zestful roleplay (you can earn yourself a saving reroll via “style,”

anything from your own bit of costuming to bringing treats for the gaming session). Lots of scenery-chewing fun here for enthusiasts of role-playing characterization.

**HEX** uses any kind of dice, with binary success/failure based on odds and evens (the Ubiquity System). The more bit flips you can roll, the better your chance of piling up the successes needed to perform a difficult task or lay low a T-Rex. I was shocked, shocked to find an advertisement for Ubiquity Dice at the back of the book to cut down on the necessity of scattering a dozen or more dice across the table and determining odds and evens. Luckily simple matters can be resolved using diceless averaging.

The game is equally suited to a long campaign, where even getting to the Hollow Earth involves several tense sessions, or one-to-three shot shorts. Suggestions for setting up and running either style are helpful. I would think a *Lost*-style campaign where a cruise-ship of passengers is wrecked and sucked down into the Hollow Earth through the aperture in the Bermuda Triangle would be particularly compelling and challenging. Plus it would provide plenty of NPCs to be shepherded. Or devoured.

The book includes an atmospheric



diary-style introduction, a primer for 1936, complete character generation and roleplay rules, a guide to the Hollow Earth for the game master, sample characters, friends, and of course a bestiary — refreshingly full of dangerous flora to match the fauna. An introductory adventure (a treasure-race featuring a beautiful Nazi fencing expert and a villain with a “von” in his name) gets your character group into the Hollow Earth. But not out...

Aside from some minor quibbles (why no athlete archetype? From Flash Gordon to Crash Corrigan, boxers, football players, and track & field men were heroes in 1936 in the pulps, reflecting real-life adulation; the “Celebrity” archetype is more suited to a glamorous Hollywood starlet than Jesse Owens or a cauliflower-eared pugilist), the fast-paced, pulpy fun of *Hollow Earth Expedition* is as good as it gets in single-volume roleplay.

**Colonial Gothic** takes players to American Revolution-era *Sleepy Hollow* to meet headless horsemen or upstate Maine to deal with French Canadian werewolves, from witch-ridden Salem to South Carolina swamps to meet God-knows-what lurching out of the mists.

Like **Hollow Earth Expedition**, everything you need is in this single volume. Experienced roleplayers will have no trouble understanding the system. **Colonial Gothic**'s system is based on rolling 2d12 and trying to roll below your task number, primarily skill based, though there are modifiers. Cinematic gaming is emphasized over rules-shaving. The magic system seems particularly apt and appropriate for the period; curses and summonings will confound even the toughest character. Players must overcome fear and deal with threats to their sanity, as you'd expect from a horror game.

Strongly written throughout, this game has a section on the creation of horror useful to anyone wishing to inspire paranoia or

dread in their characters. Action is certainly a factor, but I believe the game plays better as an investigation into the unknown (and circa the late 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a lot of unknown) than large-scale battle.

**Colonial Gothic** emphasizes the everyday difficulties and provincialism of colonial life. A good GM will be able to create any number of very long, very lonely, and very bad nights for characters stuck at a cold inn.

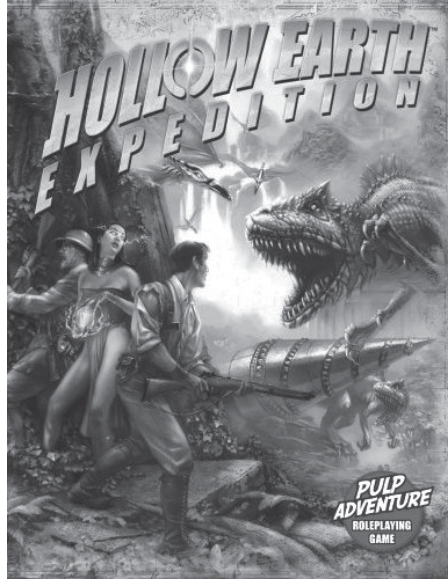
The game master section has a substantial section on creating “secret history” behind the Revolutionary War to provide adventure fodder, though I wish it had been a little more horror-specific. The characters aren't there to re-enact the siege of Boston, but to find out why people keep disappearing in a smuggler's tunnel...

One of the more interesting aspects of the game is the lack of the usual bestiary. Instead there's a section on how to come up with an appropriate threat for your party to overcome, thereby fitting either an action-oriented party or fans of mystery and suspense.

Thanks to the substantial history enclosed, it's possible to travel off the rails a little and set a campaign around or just before the French and Indian war, when colonial powers jostling for supremacy on the continent and the eastern tribes weren't yet broken or co-opted, expanding the mix of characters and challenges. A helpful bibliography offers source material and there's a nice map of the main roads and trails of the eastern half of North America.

Both books are a little weighed down by having to tote their own system along.

Of course the strength is you don't have to be married to the d20 system or pop for a copy of **Savage Words** to explore the environs, but that leaves less space for a Wendigo or the Atlanteans.



**W1: Conquest of Bloodsworn Vale**

Jason Bulmahn

Paizo, 32 pages, \$12.99, July 2007

Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones

I can always tell when an adventure module is really working because my attention wanders while reading it. Naturally, if my attention wanders a lot, it's bad, but it's a *good* thing if I'm imagining how my own players would deal with the situation, or if I'm thinking how to fit the adventure into my own campaign or, best, if I get inspired to start a new one.

I found **Conquest of Bloodsworn Vale** pretty inspiring, one of the best fantasy wilderness modules I've read in a good long while. Like a lot of good stories, it's not that the setting is unique or groundbreaking, it's that the story and setting are handled with finesse.

The premise is pretty simple. The adventurers are low-to-middle level characters who've hired out to help a kingdom colonize a valley. The workers rebuilding the ancient road through the middle of the forested valley are under pretty regular attack, and someone needs to put a stop to it. Enter the characters. What they shortly discover is that someone, or some *thing*, is killing the road workers and stealing their ears. The problem leads back to some eerie fair folk, but it turns out they're merely a link in a chain back to a reclusive wizard who's after fey folk ears. The fey have been replacing those demanded in tithe from the wizard by killing mortals and grafting them on to their heads. Once the supply of fey ears stops reaching the sorcerer, he gets pretty ticked... but I get ahead of myself.

This short little campaign book is mighty meaty, with enough problems and solutions for several weeks of gaming. From the single fort at the vale's edge, the characters will find themselves venturing forth to deal with all manner of issues plaguing the construction of the road, which has to be finished in only a few months. The vale's been wild for many a year now, and there are owlbears and lizard folk and a protective druid, and other nas-

ties, not to mention the angry sorcerer and his minions. It was easy to imagine my players getting used to the area and the non-player characters and feeling some pride in taming the wilderness and making it safe for civilization. Some of the encounters are straightforward action, but many of them require diplomacy and planning. Meeting the lizard folk, for example, can go good or ill depending upon how calm the characters are. What could have been a series of unlinked monster bashes is tied together by the setting, the time pressure to tame the wilderness, and the overriding grisly mystery of the taker of ears.

Like every Paizo project I've seen, the presentation is lovely: the art, both external and internal, is professional and evocative, the pages are glossy, the maps well-drawn and useful. There're even interesting designer notes scattered through the text, providing hints on how to handle encounters and a glimpse into why the adventure was planned the way it is. Forget thumbs – two swords way up on this one. I very much look forward to seeing more in Paizo's wilderness adventure line.

**Entombed with the Pharaohs**

Michael Kortez

Paizo, 32 pages, \$12.99

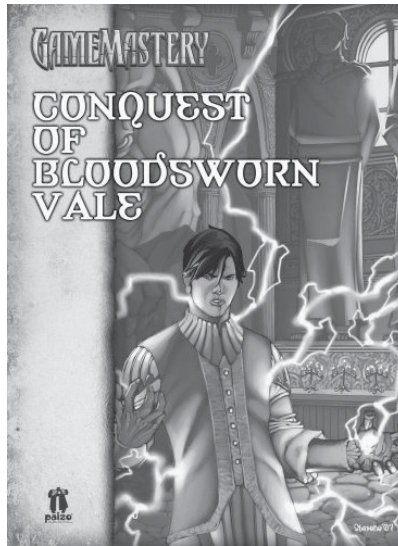
October 2007

Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones

Like all of these new Paizo products, the first thing I noticed about this adventure was the fine artwork. This cover features a linen-wrapped mummy in a Pharaoh death-mask. His eyes glow through it

and he stands in a fighter's crouch, a wicked blade in one dead hand. Before him is a cloaked sorceress whose staff and hand crackle with blue energy. It practically screams "adventure will be found within."

**Entombed with the Pharaohs** doesn't have the same mini-campaign feel to it as **Conquest of Bloodsworn Vale**; instead it's infused with cinematic pacing. Characters who survive the adventure are likely to feel they experienced a good action movie, complete with mystery, horrors, death traps, and villains.





I'm not much of an extra-planar/extra-dimensional fan myself, so it took me a while to grow comfortable with the idea of summoning a lost pyramid from another dimensional plane. That, though, is exactly what the player characters set out to do by tracking down an ancient mask. Working against them is a competing band of adventurers, one of whom may have infiltrated the player characters' party.

It's difficult to plan for recurring villains, as capable players have a tendency to mow them down. This adventure, however, is structured so that the first encounters with the rival adventurers are likely to occur without much bloodshed. The bad guys are thoroughly sneaky and underhanded. Their actions are included in a timeline that changes depending upon the actions of the player characters; should these competitors be the ones who first liberate the mask from its museum display case, they plant clues that frame the player characters for the theft.

Once the characters – or their competitors – recover the ancient mask, and the tomb of the four pharaohs appears, the hunt for ancient treasure is on. The pyramid itself is a good location-based adventure that will keep the players on their toes for a game session or two. They must contend with sinister traps, like a weighted floor system that will require strength and finesse to overcome, and a mummified dragon. Not to mention the more typical pyramid challenges that never really get old: sinister, sorcerous mummies. Worse, unless a curse can be broken, all the characters will be doomed to become mummy guardians themselves if they attempt to depart the pyramid. Then, of course, chances are high that they'll meet up with their competitors, who may or may not be lying about joining forces to survive.

The presentation was on par with Paizo products – meaning outstanding art, cartography, and layout. My only quibbles were minor; for instance I did wonder how some of my

more light-fingered characters would react to being alone in the unguarded museum and imagined more than a few small items going missing, but there's not much said on the subject.

I've read a lot of Egyptian-themed gaming material over the years. ICE's out of print Egyptian campaign guide is the best I saw sourcebook wise, but this is certainly the best pyramid-robbing adventure I've yet encountered. Two swords up.

**101 Cargos** (40 pages, \$10.00)

Andy Lilly and Sarah Lilly

**101 Patrons** (56 pages, \$10.00)

**101 Plots** (39 pages, \$10.00)

Jo and Lesley Grant

British Isles Traveller Support

**Special Supplement 3: Patron Encounters**

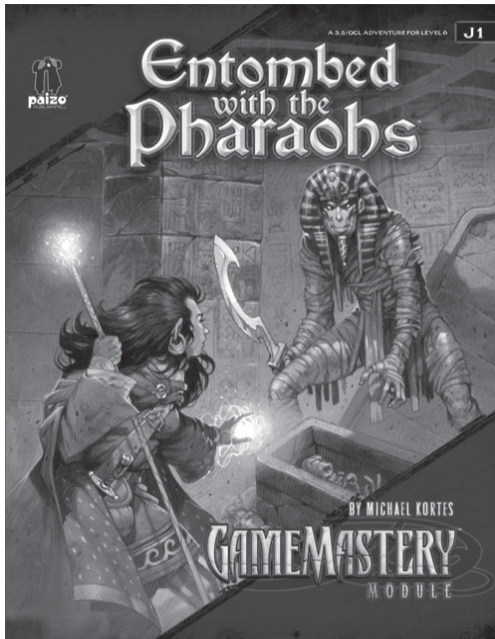
(27 page PDF, \$6.00)

**Special Supplement 5: Short Adventures**

(63 page PDF, \$6.50)

Avenger Enterprises Products

Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones



In *Black Gate 11* I covered the release of the complete *Traveller* canon on CD-Rom, and mentioned that one of my very favorite supplements included on the CD was an old adventure booklet titled *76 Patrons*. Each entry in that booklet had a hook to draw in the characters, a short description of the scenario, and a half-dozen ways for the scenario to resolve. I found the book ideal for an experienced game master to seek inspiration from – enough info to riff on to pull off a night or two of gaming on short notice. I discovered two more companies who

had published similar products and I could hardly wait to read them.

Both Avenger Enterprises and BITS specialize in *Traveller* products, and both have published two scenario books. BITS (British Isles Traveller Support) has produced a large series of little white books – something like the original *Traveller* “little black books” – with 101 in the title: *101 Religions*, *101 Starcrews*, etc. So far it's produced two in the spirit of the original *76 Patrons* supplement. *101 Plots* has



47 short plots, 24 job advertisements that are similar in format but lack scenario outcomes, and shorter sections on job red herrings, job notices, and other ideas to inspire game masters. It's a nice effort, but about half of the patrons and hooks look difficult to play out.

*101 Patrons* was actually designed to replace *101 Plots*, but enough curiosity remains about *101 Plots* that BITS has kept it in print. *101 Patrons* is the superior product from the very start, opening with a random space adventure generator based on the 36 dramatic situations (as defined by George Polti back in the 1920s). That generator is a pretty spiffy way to find adventure inspiration on the fly, and is followed by a list of 48 interesting patrons with compelling adventure hooks. 27 situations – formatted identically but lacking patrons – come on their heels; and is followed by six more elaborate scenarios. There's still more, including ads your characters might see in the space bar and some short paragraphs game masters can use to spice up descriptions of worlds their players might visit. It's a strong product. (I should mention that although *101 Patrons* was intended to replace *101 Plots*, there is no overlap – everything in *101 Patrons* is new.)

The supplements produced by Avenger Enterprises are available only as downloadable PDFs. *Special Supplement 3: Patron Encounters* provides you with a total of 34 inventive encounters, only 10 of which absolutely require a space ship. *Special Supplement 5: Short Adventures*, packs even more material in – for 50 cents more you get almost double the amount of adventure: 30 patron encounters, 10 longer adventure seeds (Amber Zones), 8 “Mercenary Tickets” (meaning scenarios for your space mercenaries), and a final series of 5 linked scenarios. *Special Supplement 3* comes in at 27 pages, and *Special Supplement 5* at 63.

Of all four products, your best money is with *101 Patrons* and *Special Supplement 5*, but *Special Supplement 3* is of equal quality and at 6 dollars is pretty cheap as far as gaming products are concerned. All three offer thumb-nail adventure ideas and oddball, desperate, or sneaky folks in need of the services of your players – or wanting to take advantage

of them. 80 to 90 percent of the scenarios are pretty good. Be warned that these are no frills products – they're not full-color or profusely illustrated, and layout is simple. If you're a stat block gamer, you'll find them frustratingly bare. However, if you're comfortable with whipping up your own stats, or just making them up on the fly, these products are a great place for science fiction game master to turn.

Though it's slightly outside the scope of this article I'll give a thumbs up to BITS *101 Cargos* as an additional source of adventure ideas, or at least as a way to add variety to adventures – the random cargo generator is great in a pinch if you happen to

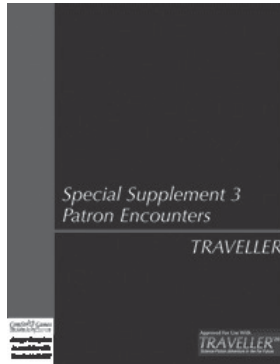
be running a game for interstellar adventurers. The cargo categories are interesting, and entertaining. Other *101* booklets look worth exploring, and if there's enough interest from **Black Gate** readers, I might look into them.

The Avenger Enterprises products can be found at the web site. BITS products are listed on their web site but are sold in the states through Steve Jackson Games' Warehouse 23 – a link can be found on the BITS products page.

### Campaign Cartographer 3

ProFantasy, CD ROM, \$35.00

Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones



I've seen Campaign Cartographer products on shelves of gamestores for at least ten years and was always intrigued. I'd researched the product and its rivals by combing through reviews, but I'd never actually tried Campaign Cartographer until I purchased the latest edition with a holiday gift certificate.

Some reviewers have complained about previous versions of **Campaign Cartographer**, saying that it was too much like a CAD program, and that it was unintuitive. I can't speak to issues with previous editions, but I don't think I could be much more pleased with **Campaign Cartographer 3**. Even someone with little or no artistic skill, like yours truly, can use the program to fashion lovely maps

The manual enclosed with the CD is one of the better ones of its kind, and in the space of some twenty pages guides you through

most of the issues you'll face when designing your own islands, continents, or worlds. Naturally I only skimmed the thing before launching into some detailed world creation, but those of you smart enough to follow instructions will find the process easy to follow (and save yourself some headache). **CC3** is too complex to be intuitive out of the box, but once you begin to use the menus and icons you'll discover that there's a logical layout and interface that quickly becomes second nature.

**Campaign Cartographer** can be as complex as you wish to make it. The default options and settings are more than enough to provide endless variety, but you can make all manner of adjustments to the controls, the colors, the sizes, and the art styles once you dig deeper into the program.

The applications for game masters is obvious – you can produce lovely maps for use in your role-playing worlds, finally rendering them with the style and detail you've always wanted – but the program's options are so varied that they're inspirational. For example, clicking through the structure icons you come upon images that look like a sorcerer's tower, or an ancient ruin, or a temple, or numerous other land forms or buildings or symbols that spur adventure and story ideas. What I found most interesting was how good for story and plot building the program truly was. I always knew that there was a confederation of cities on my game world, but once I actually started laying them down in relation to mountains and rivers and inlets I

saw where roads had to be, where famous landmarks and bridges – requiring names— would stand, and I saw clues to trade routes and economic specialties. And did I mention it looked great?

Plot building and world building as a game master isn't too different from plot and world building as a writer; **Campaign Cartographer 3** is a wonderful tool for this kind of thing whichever hat you're wearing, one I found equally inspiring for fantasy writing. I'm going to have fun with my copy for years to come.

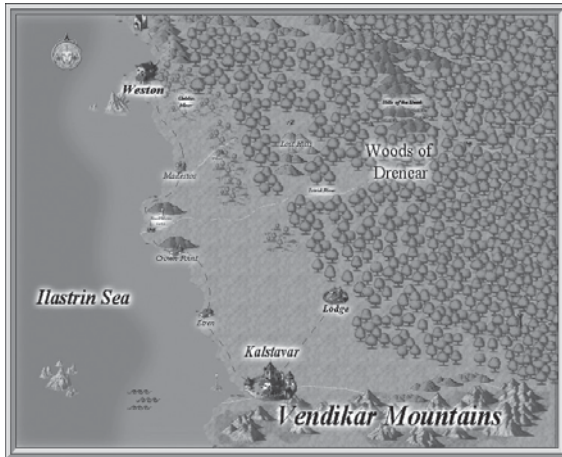
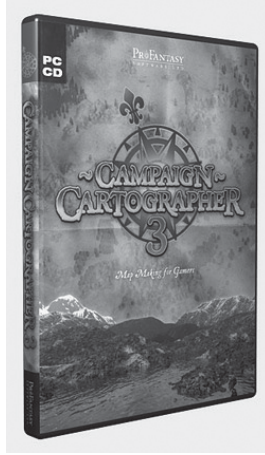
### **Battleground Crossbows & Catapults War Chest**

Moose Enterprise Pty Ltd, War Chest Starter Kit, \$35

Reviewed by Jackson Kuhl

While walking through the toy department of the local Target, my two research assistants and I made an astonishing discovery: After 24 years, **Crossbows and Catapults** had been re-released.

While my assistants were too young to grasp the event's full momentousness, excitement abounded nonetheless. My oldest (age 5) had been a veteran of the **C&C** wars for some months. You see, over the intervening years I had retained possession of my near-mint 1983 **Crossbows and Catapults** set. My assistant and I had been spent many an hour lobbing plastic chips at one another, mercilessly crushing men and architecture alike in an attempt to slake our mutual



*After only a few hours of experimentation I was able to produce a pretty reasonable map of a small corner of my fantasy campaign.*

thirst for conquest.

The Reagan-era **Crossbows and Catapults** posits a conflict between Barbarians and Vikings. Each side is provided with a paper mat and a plastic tower as well as an equal number of plastic banner stands, Army-figure-like soldiers, and large

stackable bricks. Each player arranges the tower, banners, and men on the mat, then constructs a brick wall to protect it all. Most importantly, each force has one crossbow and one catapult, powered by rubber bands, to shoot heavy plastic “caroms” at their foe across the intervening distance (recommended to be about six



feet). The instructions spell out many different ways to play, most of them overly complicated (like landing a carom on the treasure chamber depicted on the paper mats), but for my assistant and I the rules are simply Last Man Standing. Whoever knocks down all of his opponent’s men and banners first, wins. Walls tumble, towers tip, men fly head over heels. It is a game of creation and destruction, the twin happinesses of childhood.

Now reborn with a superfluous prenom and the conjunction swapped for an ampersand, **Battleground Crossbows & Catapults** substitutes the war between Barbarians and Vikings for one of Knights versus Orcs. The War Chest includes eight figures (each in one of two different poses) plus a hero figure for each side, as well as five flagpoles, eight disks, and 12 bricks per team. Each force is also outfitted with a catapult, which launches disks in an airborne arc, and a crossbow, which shoots disks in a straight line across the floor. New to this edition is the cannon, which takes the middle



road by firing a low but straight shot through the air. Finally, each side has its own castle to defend, equipped with a second catapult. Striking the castle gate with a disk causes plastic flames to shoot upwards, dislodging any figures or flags standing on its balcony.

Perhaps taking into consideration a quarter-century of playtesters’ notes, the objective in the 2007 edition has been simplified to knocking over all of your opponent’s men. The rules are precise about setup, stipulating the dimensions of each force’s compound and specifying that every weapon must have one figure within two inches of it (the castle must have someone on its balcony). If there are no standing figures within range,

then the weapon cannot be used. Each player may take two actions per round; choices include firing a weapon, moving a figure or weapon six inches, or moving the hero 12 inches. Knocking over the opponent’s flags allows you to resurrect your own men. Orcs always shoot first.

The art design of **Battleground Crossbows & Catapults** clearly takes its cues from tabletop wargaming. Every piece has been dry brushed to make cracks and crenellations pop and the chunky figures look as if they sprang from a Games Workshop blister pack. This beauty more than offsets the lighter heft of the new-edition disks and the less-versatile bricks. In sessions with my 1983 edition, I often exper-

iment with wall shapes (creating corners, reinforcing to make some spots thicker) in a search for the best impact absorption, but the asymmetrical cut of the new bricks limits their assembly configurations.

Beyond its nostalgia value, the simplicity of **Battleground**

**Crossbows & Catapults** probably holds little appeal to veteran gamers. But those looking to introduce kids to wargaming will not find a more attractive and fun inauguration.

## *The Soldiers of Serenity*

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*Todd McAulty*

“**Y**ou’re late,” Leif said as I climbed out of the car.

Hearing your boss tell you you’re late is rarely the best way to start your work-day. “I know,” I said, casting about for an excuse. “Damn near took out a minivan in downtown Libertyville. Some mother yelling at 300 kids in the back seat cut me off at an intersection.”

“You okay?”

“Fine. Scared the hell outta her, though. She drove off the road, and came within twelve inches of plowing her minivan through the window of a restaurant. Brought traffic to a complete stop for thirty minutes. I had to stick around until the cops showed up.”

“You didn’t scratch your new Lexus?” A note of genuine concern crept into Leif’s voice.

“No, but thanks for asking.” I popped the trunk and grabbed my briefcase, adjusting the volume on my Bluetooth headset. “What’d I miss?”

Leif snorted. “Seeing Crip take my head off.”

My case had come open, and papers had spilled across the trunk. I grabbed them as quickly as I could. “How mad was he?”

“I’ve seen worse. But it wasn’t pretty. Think he played it up a bit because Mike was in the room.”

I stopped grabbing papers. “Mike’s in the meeting?”

“He was. His big powow in Redmond got postponed, or canceled, or God knows what. So he shows up unannounced at Crip’s quarterly review, just to make sure everyone is crystal clear on how serious the corporation’s budget crisis is.”

I swore softly, slamming the trunk and starting the long walk across the parking lot towards Door 10. The lot was packed today; the Libertyville facility employed nearly 3,000 people, and it looked like they’d all shown up before me.

“Should I ask how that went?” I asked.

“Mike wove a tapestry of obscenities that’s still floating over downtown Chicago. Word is the corporation will pre-announce that we’ll miss our numbers for the quarter. You know what *that* will do to the stock. Travel and all discretionary spending are on hold. The pressure from the tower to cut costs is as high as I’ve ever seen it.”

“Any good news?”

“I got to watch Mike tear a six-inch strip of skin off Crip for missing his revenue forecast. That made a change of pace, anyway.”

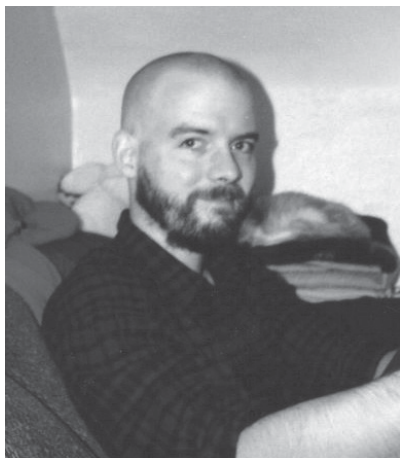
“Enjoy it while you can,” I suggested. “You know that’s gonna roll downhill.”

“Believe me, I know. Everyone in the room knew.”





## Todd McAulty



Todd McAulty's work for **Black Gate** includes "The Haunting of Cold Harbour" (**BG 3**), "There's a Hole in October" (**BG 5**), and "Amnesty" (**BG 7**). He grew up in Nova Scotia and studied English at the University of Ottawa.

"Excellent...McAulty's narrative of a Canadian man trying to import drugs into the US but instead becoming embroiled in ferocious supernatural intrigues – and in as tense a road chase as genre fiction affords – is magnificent storytelling, begging expansion into a novel... McAulty [is] a notable new voice in short fantasy."

– Nick Gevers, *Locus*, on "There's a Hole in October"

"McAulty is **Black Gate's** great discovery."

– Rich Horton, *Locus*

*Photo by Alice Dechene*

"Mike say anything meaningful?"

"Just that he wants his money. Says he funded Crip's division three years ago with the promise of sixty million in revenue by the end of this year."

I winced. Last time I'd seen Doug Crip's forecast, it predicted his division would make barely thirty. Which meant we were thirty million dollars light – and that's *if* we made forecast, which frankly would take a miracle. Mike was the Corporate VP who ran the whole business sector; he reported to the CEO, and was Crip's boss. Mike wasn't known for his patience. Or for making idle threats, either.

"Mike wants a plan," I guessed.

"Mike wants a plan. This week. He wants to see, in excruciating detail, precisely how we make sixty by the end of December. Which, last time I checked, was less than six months away."

"He's dreaming."

"Funny you should say that. Mike's standing in front of a packed room when he says this. Room full of smart guys. Know how many told him he was full of crap?"

"Yeah. Zero. So bottom-line it for me... how much are we on the hook for?"

"Crip says Cronos has to deliver twelve million this year."

"Mother of God." Cronos was still a fledgling business; hardly out of the research stage. We'd brought in barely three million dollars in revenue last year. Since we'd closed the ConnectAll deal, our forecast for this year had jumped to five. A nice bump, but a very long way from twelve. We were healthy, growing quickly, and had a bright future. If we could just survive being strangled to death by an insane parent corporation.

"We got off easy," Leif said. "Lauren's team signed up for fifteen. And the poor bastards in International OEM have to deliver twenty."

"Poor bastards' was right. Ken and his guys in International would be lucky to see five. "He can't be serious," I said.

"Crip spent the last hour of the meeting explaining precisely how serious he was. There was blood on the floor. Our jobs are on the line, Christopher."

"When are they not?" I said, trying to sound light-hearted. But it was an effort. "What do you think – any chance I can land a new job with IBM in six months?"

"Not if I get there first."

I flashed my badge at the security guard at the door, and lifted my case up for

him to poke through. He gave a lazy glance and waved me though. "What do you think will happen if we miss twelve million?" I asked Leif.

"Well, the really good news is we have plenty of things to worry about long before that. That's six months away. Mike made it clear he'll cut Crip's budget if he doesn't like the plan we show him *this week*. We have to survive that first."

"How much?"

"The budget cut? Mike threw around a lot of numbers. My guess, forty percent." My gut went cold. "That's a big number."

"Uh-huh. Unless we convince Mike we'll bring in twelve million – which between you and me, will take a web of lies of monumental proportions – you and I are going to have to make some tough headcount choices in the next thirty days. And that's if we survive at all."

"Aren't you a ray of sunshine."

"How many salesmen you got working for you now, Chris?"

This was a rhetorical question, meant to shut me up. But to give me time to think, I answered it anyway. "Six, counting that dickless loser you saddled me with."

"Unless you're anxious to walk three of them to the door, we need a Plan. A Sales Plan that's a true work of art. Something so beautiful it'll make Crip a believer, and give Mike a hard on."

"Yeah."

"When it comes to a web of lies, you're my man. This is why I hired you. Can you do it?"

The thought of laying off half my staff made me sick to my stomach. Threats to my own job held little terror any more – I'd been in sales for nearly two decades, and faced that particular specter more times than I could count. But I'd hand-picked most of my people, and blown sunshine up a lot of skirts to lure them here. They were the best team I'd ever worked with and, more importantly, they'd put their faith in Cronos. And in me. Even dickless Troy, whom Leif had parked in my sales team while he prepared a real job for him, and who couldn't sell Perrier to a Bedouin.

"Yeah, I can do it," I said.

"I've given this project five years of my life, Chris. I've had five bosses since it started, two of them incompetent, and three who've tried to kill it. Cronos is the finest technology to come out of this company in nearly a decade, and we need just one more year to prove it. I'm not going to let it be killed when we're this close. Not because some idiots in the corporate tower want to improve our bottom line a quarter-cent a share."

"I won't let you down. Where are you?"

"Bellevue conference room. But don't bother coming up."

I adjusted the volume on my earpiece as I entered the engineering bay. Half the people I passed in the hall were talking on their cell phones, and it was harder to hear Leif. "Why not?"

"We're essentially done here, and I need you to take my place in the Unified meeting. Crip's doing some one-on-one meetings with everyone who reports to him, and when my turn comes I want to see if I can staunch the blood loss a little."

"Good luck with that." Doug Cripfen was boss number five for Leif. Leif had worked for him for less than a year, since the Cronos team had been moved into Crip's division in the last re-organization. They didn't get along.

"Thanks. Teddy told me this morning the Unified deal is almost dead. Time to work your magic." Unified was the company providing the back-end server for the Cronos service; without it Cronos didn't have any kind of story, much less one Mike

would believe.

“No problem,” I said.

A man in his early thirties was emerging from the crowd ahead as I hurried down the hall. I was still in the engineering bay, but this guy wasn’t an engineer. His dark green suit fit him perfectly, and his shoes cost as much as many engineers made in a week. His mouth widened in a broad smile as he saw me, and he stretched out his hand. The guy was obviously a salesman, and I liked him immediately.

“Christopher McNamara?” he asked.

“Yes? Hang on a sec,” I told Leif. I shook his hand, but continued walking. “I’m sorry... have we met?”

“No,” he said, moving smoothly to follow. “But I understand you’re the lead negotiator for the Sector.”

“No, no,” I said quickly, wishing Leif hadn’t overheard that. “Nothing like that. Just for the Cronos team.”

“And you’re Victor McNamara’s son.”

That stopped me. I’d gotten used to people talking about my father when I graduated. But that had been twenty years ago; no one knew who he was anymore. “You knew my father?”

“Indeed. I know him well. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Actually, no.” I started backing away. “I’m running to a meeting. But I’d be glad to make some time for you this afternoon...” I looked him over for an ID badge or visitor’s tag with a name, but saw nothing.

“Parker,” he said, slowing his steps. “Parker Catelli. That would be splendid.”

“I’m on the first floor, by the cafeteria. M-112.”

“I know where it is. I’ll see you shortly.” He stood quietly, hands clasped and smiling, watching me recede down the hall.

“Who was that?” asked Leif.

“Dunno. Probably some guy looking for a job. Didn’t have a badge.”

“How’d he get in?”

“Dunno. Security’s gonna cram stuff up his butt until they find out if they stumble across him, though.”

“So you’re lead negotiator for the whole sector, now?”

I grimaced. “I don’t know where he heard that.”

“What is it you tell people when you’re out looking for a job, anyway? Why not just tell them you’re CEO?”

“What makes you think I don’t?”

“I forgot you had a famous father, too. Didn’t he do all the early negotiations with Honeywell in the 70s? I hear most of the Networks business is still based on that technology. So this guy knows your dad?”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Because my dad’s dead.”

. . .

The Unified meeting was a mess.

Teddy intercepted me in the hall, putting her hand on my chest. “I need to talk to you,” she said.

“Sure.” I craned my neck to see who was in the conference room. “Is that Troy? What’s he doing in my meeting?”

“Who knows. Probably has nothing better to do. Do you have a moment?”

“After the meeting. Are you okay?”



"I'm fine," she said.  
 "But I don't think this deal  
 can be saved."

"We need this deal."

"Doesn't mean it can be  
 saved."

I stopped staring over  
 her shoulder and looked at  
 her. Teddy was a natural  
 beauty, and she knew how  
 to dress. She had a close  
 cut business suit on today,  
 and her long brown hair  
 was pulled back in a busi-  
 ness-like bun. She'd  
 worked for me for two  
 years, and was one of the  
 most gifted salesmen I'd  
 ever met – charming, tena-  
 cious, and friendly. A bit  
 too friendly, judging by the  
 comments that followed in  
 her wake.

"Any deal this impor-  
 tant can be saved," I said.  
 "Not like you to be so nega-  
 tive. What else is on your  
 mind?"

She bit her lip.  
 Whatever it was, it was  
 important. "It can wait,"  
 she said, and we entered  
 the meeting.

"My apologies for join-  
 ing late," I said as I put my  
 briefcase on the table. "Had  
 a minor car accident on the  
 way in."

Everyone stared at me.  
 "Anyone hurt?" asked Bob.

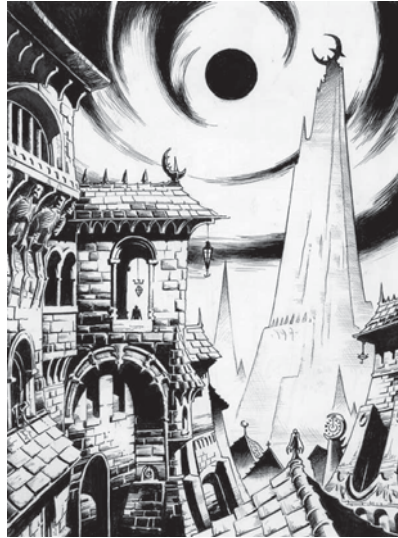
"Not seriously enough  
 to involve lawyers."

"Where's Leif?" asked  
 Farhan, sounding annoyed.

"Leif sends his regrets,  
 but he won't be coming.  
 He's asked me to step in.  
 He's also asked me to make  
 sure we leave this meeting  
 with a deal we can expect  
 Unified to sign."

There were eight people

## Also by Todd McAulty



### "Amnesty" in *Black Gate* 7

"My favorite magazine, *Black Gate*, showed up with the seventh issue – with a spectacularly memorable story by Todd McAulty... [his] talent seems to get exponentially better with every story... an inexorable tale that stays with the reader long after the last line."

– Sherwood Smith, *SF Site*

"A wild romp, both humorous and horrific, across the very landscape of Tartarus. Supported by minor characters including the terrifying (yet strangely compelling) Karla, whose eyelids are sewn shut but nonetheless never misses a thing, and Evil Ed, a damned Artificial Intelligence (in robot form) who has no idea what he's doing in Hell... a real page-turner."

– Bluejack, *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*

"An ambitious, imaginative, sprawling epic... Tartarus has a feeling of vastness about it. There are the mines where demons force humans to dig for the body of God. The furnaces in which souls are harvested for the demons' incomprehensible schemes. Abandoned cities. Dark caverns and crypts. Human settlements. There are ghouls and ghosts and witches and vampire lords, and of course, demons. McAulty's great achievement in "Amnesty" is his superb world-building and the breadth of his ambition... McAulty attempts far more than any of the other contributors to this issue, and he achieves more."

– Patrick Samphire, *Tangent Online*

"McAulty is *Black Gate*'s great discovery."

– Rich Horton, *Locus*

Art by Chris Pepper

crowded into the conference room. Six of them, including Troy and Farhan, the program manager, were with the Cronos team, meaning they worked for Leif. The two huddled over by the coffee machine, looking outnumbered and vaguely out of place, were corporate attorneys.

"I think we should postpone," Farhan said. "At least until Leif can join."

"Leif can't make it," I explained patiently. "He's been pulled into a meeting with Doug Crippen."

"He asked me to fly out from Denver for this. I don't think he intended for these decisions to be made without him." Farhan was already packing up his papers.

Thirty seconds in the room, and already the meeting was about to fall apart. No wonder this damn deal was on life support. Teddy gave me an alarmed look.

But this wasn't too unexpected. We were part of an engineering company, soaked in engineering culture, still a little hostile to salesmen, who were generally considered overhead. And like most engineers, Farhan hated making decisions in the absence of data. Confronted with the unknown, he'd defer as long as humanly possible. The trick was to get him back to his comfort zone. Back to solving the problem.

"Let's do everything we can before we involve Leif," I said smoothly. "To start with, bring me up to speed on the obstacles. What's preventing Unified from signing the deal today?"

"The contract still needs a lot of work," said Lawyer #1. "And frankly, some of the wording they're insisting on is a major stumbling block."

"The biggest problem," said Bob, running his fingers through his white hair, "is delivery dates." Bob was Cronos' lead architect, the senior guy in the room, and the one whose insight I trusted most. He was also one of the smartest guys I'd ever met. If he ever decided to switch careers to sales, the world would tremble at his feet. "Unified says they can't deliver beta server code by Cronos' soft launch date in September."

The "soft launch" was the first trial of Cronos in a commercial environment, though it would be highly limited in scope. "They agreed to that date in April," I said.

"Now they're saying November."

If we launched in November instead of September, it would cut our revenue for the year in half. Mike would pull the plug on Cronos so fast I wouldn't have time to clean out my desk. "Have we explained that without a September launch, we're dead in the water?" I asked. "If we're dead, so is their monthly paycheck."

"Bob tried that," Teddy said. "Phil said they could pull out all the stops to make September, but it would cost us."

"How much?"

Bob stirred. "Phil wasn't specific. But he talked about additional costs close to half a million."

"That's bullshit," Troy said. "Cronos could hire its own server team for half a million."

I was warming to this now. It was a negotiation tactic. Phil was the Unified CEO; he was using the lack of a firm agreement between him and Cronos to position for more money. This I understood. This I could work with.

"My guess," Bob said, "we could negotiate him down to a quarter million."

"We don't have it," I said.

"There's been nearly twenty million dollars invested in this project already," Farhan said, with an air of authority. "The company won't let our launch fail for the sake of a quarter million."

"We don't have it," I said again.

“If we bring this problem to Mike –”

“No one,” I said carefully, “is bringing this problem to Mike.” Only Teddy caught the undertone in my voice, her eyes widening slightly in surprise.

“This is a drop in the bucket to Mike,” said Troy. “His budget for the entire business sector is in the billions. This is just rounding error to him.”

Farhan was smiling, and began to explain patiently to me how corporate management would never be so short-sighted as to starve the Cronos project for a mere quarter million dollars. Troy was nodding along, frowning at my obvious naiveté.

As satisfying as it would have been to give these two a dose of corporate reality, I knew it was wasted effort. More pragmatically, I had to keep the details Leif had shared confidential. Instead, I opted for a more diplomatic course.

“Before I tell Leif that he has to go hat-in-hand to a corporate vice president to beg for money,” I said, cutting Farhan off, “first I have to look him in the eye and tell him we’ve exhausted every other avenue.”

“I don’t see any other options,” Farhan said crisply.

*Two minutes ago you didn’t see this option*, I thought. But Farhan’s opinion wasn’t the one I was looking for. I glanced at Bob. He seemed to be weighing alternatives for a moment, but when he finally raised his eye to mine it was with a weary shrug. “Unless we can get Unified to budge on the price tag, I see no good options.”

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s see what Unified has to say.” I motioned to the speaker-phone on the table. “Troy, can you conference Phil in?”

Troy looked surprised, but recovered quickly. He dug up a business card with Phil’s cell number, and in a moment I heard Phil’s familiar voice booming from the phone.

“Chris,” he said. “Good to hear from you.”

“Phil. Sorry to bother you on your way to the golf course.”

Phil laughed easily. “Wouldn’t that be nice. No, I’m driving to my daughter’s recital.”

“Really? Piano? Strings?”

“No. Believe it or not, she plays the drums.”

“Drums? You poor bastard.”

“Yeah, we had to finish the basement just for her. And then we had to sound-proof it. You have no idea what it’s like trying to get to sleep while your daughter pounds through nine sets of *Smoke on the Water*.”

The room laughed appreciatively. “So Phil,” I said. “My team tells me we’re hung up on some dates.”

“Yes.”

“I’m under the gun here, Phil. Tell me how we can fix this.”

“I think we’ve reviewed the options with my head of engineering and Bob... is Bob on the line?”

“I’m here,” said Bob.

“Okay. Chris, my personal recommendation would be to stay the course. Let’s keep the team we’ve already got on the project, on the project. Less risk that way, and less cost. Of course, Bob tells me the dates we’ve provided for that approach will cause you some difficulty.”

“I can’t make November work, Phil. It’s gotta be September.”

“Yes, Bob raised that issue. And we went through a couple of options, but...” Here Phil unburdened a heavy sigh. “I have to tell you, Chris. I don’t like most of them. We can bring your people onsite to help with deployment, but I find that risky. We could staff up at Unified to meet the date, which would be the low-risk option for you. But that would be a risky investment for us, and will come with a half-million to three-quarter-million price tag. Personally, I don’t recommend it. But

if it has to be September, I think that's what we're left with."

Very smoothly done, I thought. Appropriately sympathetic, and advising against the high-cost route when it was the only avenue left was a nice touch. I still didn't have anything I could work with, though.

"Okay," I said. "I understand. Tell me, Phil – how did we get here? When you and I talked in March, we agreed on September."

"We did. Yes, we did. But we also discussed weekly code drops from you. Frankly Chris, those became bi-monthly code drops, and the last release we received from you was in early June. Without your code, we have nothing to test against."

"I understand," I said evenly.

There was silence in the room. Farhan wouldn't meet my eyes, and Bob would only nod grimly. But again, this was only what I expected. Our engineering team hadn't delivered as promised, and because we had dropped the ball on the contract, we had no way to hold Phil's feet to the fire on the dates. He had all the latitude he needed to negotiate. We were the ones pushing the deadlines, not him, and Phil was an astute enough businessman to know when he had the advantage.

Fortunately, he was still an amateur negotiator. And now I had something to work with.

"So what you're saying," I continued, "is that we've created our own mess."

"I'm not trying to assign blame," Phil said carefully. "This is a partnership, and I think mistakes have been made on both sides."

"I'm sure. But the root of the problem is we haven't delivered. This is our problem."

Farhan was staring at me, mouth open. Even Bob looked uncomfortable. Only Teddy looked thoughtful – doubtless because she was still processing the implications of my careless comment about not bringing this problem to Mike. I would regret letting my guard down in front of her, and probably soon.

"You can look at it that way if you like," Phil said diplomatically. "At this point, we need to focus on the solution."

"Since this is our problem, it'll be our solution. I think we need to sharpen our pencils here, and get back on track with our deliveries to you. Once we've fixed the problem – and it will be fixed – I need to hear exactly what it will take to get your team on board for a September launch."

The phone was silent for a moment. "Chris, there's already been many delays. Even if you get back on schedule –"

"We will."

" – I'm afraid it'll be very difficult to recover from those delays."

"I understand. Let me put it this way. I need every dollar of revenue I can make between now and the end of the year. We are 100% committed to doing whatever it takes to fix our problems for September. That means I need a partner who's willing to do at least the same. If you can't do that, then I need to find another partner." I hoped I wouldn't have to follow through on that threat. It was possible we could find another technology partner – but it wouldn't be easy at this late date. And it most certainly wouldn't be cheap.

"Chris, we have an agreement –" Phil began.

"Which isn't signed yet, I understand. Until that contract is signed, this is all just talk. Now, if I remove your biggest obstacle, and guarantee you accelerated code deliveries of our client software, I need to know that your server will be ready for a September launch."

"There are... there's a few other things we'll need."

"Name 'em."



“We’ll need the contract signed.”

“I’ve already reviewed it,” I said. “If you agree to September, you’ll have a signed deal by the end of the week.”

“You’ll put the accelerated delivery schedule in writing?”

“Yes. Along with the September launch.”

“I think we can agree to that,” Phil said.

. . .

“That’s a pretty tight sequence of miracles you just scheduled,” Teddy commented as we walked. “You really think both our engineering team and Phil’s can recover in time for a September launch?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “All we have to accomplish today is to keep Cronos alive. By September corporate revenues will be back to normal, and we’ll have a few months reprieve.”

“And if the next quarter is as bad as this one?”

“Then maybe Mike will get fired, and my troubles will be over. Stop wasting so much time on long-term planning, Teddy. In sales, all problems are immediate. Mind if we drop by legal on the way to my office? I need to get a copy of that damned Unified contract. I have to read it.”

Lynn, the Cronos office manager, was waiting for me outside my office, wearing a dour look. I knew what that meant. “What have I forgotten?” I asked her.

“You didn’t tell me you double-booked the morning.”

“I didn’t know either.” I unlocked my office, and she and Teddy followed me in. “I don’t know why I bother to put anything on my calendar – Leif always messes it up anyway. So who did I blow off this morning?”

Lynn shushed me, throwing a glance over her shoulder. “He’s over by the copy machines. Came by half an hour ago, said he had an appointment.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t see his badge. Not sure he has one.”

I frowned. “Salesman guy, nice suit? Expensive shoes?”

“Very.”

I stood up and leaned out the door, following Lynn’s gaze. Sure enough, sitting in the empty cube by the copy machines was the salesman I’d run into on the way into the building. “I thought I told him I’d see him this afternoon,” I muttered.

“Well, he’s here now.”

“Alright, alright. Let me talk with Teddy first. Make sure he doesn’t wander off, or Security will write me up for having a visitor without a badge. Oh, and Lawyer #2 will be e-mailing me a big contract. Can you print it for me? Don’t bring it in here without two cups of coffee. And if it’s more than 80 pages, don’t bring it in at all – just shoot me.”

“Stop by when you get a minute, Theodora,” Lynn said. Teddy nodded, and Lynn closed the door as she left.

Teddy eyed me curiously, one leg draped over the arm of her chair. “So were you really in an accident?”

“Hmm? Oh, almost, but not really. That was just a little drama to get the meeting started.”

“Ah. And now you’ve got to review a 94-page contract, because you’ve told everyone you’ve already done it. How do you keep all your lies straight?”

“That,” I admitted with a sigh, “is the real challenge. Everyone around here has a hundred different balls in the air. I have 300, and 200 of them are lies. Is the contract really 94 pages?”

“Uh huh.”

“Crap. I suppose you’ve already read it?”

She nodded. “I wasn’t on the distribution list, but I got a copy from Farhan.”

“Bad?”

“It’s a nightmare. Why did you say you’d read it? Why did you say you’d *fix* it?”

I regarded her with a smile. Teddy was nearly a decade younger than the other Cronos salesmen, and the only woman. She worked harder than the rest of us, and mistook our natural sloth for breezy confidence. She was insecure about almost every aspect of her job, and it had turned her into a relentless overachiever.

“It’s just one more thing that’s got to be done, Teddy,” I said. “Besides, I may suck at contracts, but I do have a little experience with them.” ‘Experience’ was stretching it a little. What I knew about contracts I’d mostly learned from Katie. She’d been a paralegal with Networks three years ago, helping me with deployment contracts for our global customers. She’d worn a lot of short skirts, we’d done a few late nights, and one thing led to another. Now I had an ex-wife in Tampa with my four kids, and Katie and her daughter lived with me in Naperville.

My cell phone rang. I glanced at Teddy and put a finger to my lips. “Leif,” I said, flipping open the phone and leaning back in my chair.

“I hear I have you to thank for rescuing the Unified deal,” Leif said. “This morning everyone told me it was impossible. How’d you do it?”

“Promises and lies. Even I don’t know which was which.”

“How much am I going to have to pay Phil?”

“Nothing.”

“Damn, you *are* a master. If you’re not careful, you’ll end up a legend like your father.”

“Nah, he did the really big deals,” I said. “I’m still stuck here working for you.”

“Farhan tells me you beat him up a little bit.”

“Sorry about that. Made some promises about the schedule, too.”

“You let me worry about that. I’ve arranged a little come-to-Jesus meeting with the engineering leads in Denver. You’ll have your schedule.”

“Good. You need me there?”

“No. I save you for the tough jobs, remember?”

“Thanks. Gotta run.” I hung up.

“What’s going on with Mike?” Teddy asked.

I forced a smile. She wasn’t wasting any time. “Nothing. You know, the usual budget rhetoric.”

“Leif had a big Operations Review with Crip this morning?”

“Yes.”

“And it was bad news.”

“When are those ever good news?”

“Are we losing our jobs?”

There it was. Teddy was the first to put it together, but she wouldn’t be the last. Bob would likely call me before the end of the week. And most of my sales staff would smell the change in the wind soon after – except Troy, of course. That guy rarely put anything together.

All the more reason to rehearse the denials with Teddy first. “Of course not,” I said.

“I can tell when something’s going on, Chris. I lost two sales jobs before coming here. Don’t leave me in the dark.”

“It’s *nothing*. Mike’s just beating his chest in front of his junior vice presidents. You know the drill. He’s got Crip all fired up about getting revenue up by Christmas.”

“How much?”

“I’ve already told you too much, Teddy.”

She looked pained. “A lot, then.”

“Stop worrying. We go through this every single year.”

“We’re not going to meet the sales goals we have *now*, Chris. I’m out there busting my butt – you *know* I am. And I’m still three hundred thousand shy of quota.”

“I know.”

“What does Crip expect from us? You know the product is late – I had to postpone my demo to Cisco. I put everything I had into getting them to agree to that demo.”

“I know, Teddy.”

She seemed about to continue, but stopped herself with an obvious effort. She rested her head on the back of the chair, staring at the ceiling. “If Leif has to make cuts, he’s going to cut me, isn’t he?” she asked after a moment.

“No.”

“He’s still pissed at me for refusing to push a product trial on Cisco. That was the wrong deal for the customer. He would have understood that if he’d just bothered to read any of my e-mail.”

“Teddy, stop. You’re not going to get fired.”

“How do you know?”

*Because I’d lay down my life before I let those blood-sucking weasels hang my team out to dry*, I thought. I took a deep breath. “Because if Mike insists on cuts, Crip’s going to make them to his other groups first. Not to Leif’s group. Not to Cronos.”

“His other groups? They’re making more money than us.”

“Yes. But they think like engineers. They think they’ll survive because all the data supports that conclusion. Their projects are further along than ours, their marketing is better, they’re much more profitable, they have fewer obstacles. All this is true, and most of it is irrelevant.”

“Why?”

“Because this isn’t an engineering problem. All of us, we’re always on the frail edge of failure, and only the projects that can sell their story to Crip will survive.”

“And you know how to do that?”

“Not yet,” I admitted. “It’s a challenge. But it’s a sales challenge. And the truth is, you and I are in a sales competition against a bunch of smart guys who aren’t salesmen. And you and I, Teddy... we’re salesmen.”

I leaned forward. “But you didn’t come see me to talk about all this. Sorry to rush you, but I’ve got a busy morning. What’s on your mind?”

“We can talk about it later.”

“Out with it.”

“Oh, it’s... it’s Troy.”

“I told you, he won’t be part of this team for long. He’s not a salesman. Leif had to offer him a job before the budget for his special project was approved, so he’s just parked in our group for a few months.”

“It’s not that. It’s...” She was biting her nails. She looked genuinely upset.

“Tell me.”

“Look, I wouldn’t even bring this up, except it’s happened twice. I ignored it the first time because he was probably drunk. But this time, he was completely sober. You know me Chris, I don’t overreact to this kind of stuff.”

I stared at her, suddenly sure where this was going. “What did he do? Has he touched you?”

“I told myself I wouldn’t drag you into this unless I couldn’t handle it myself.

Well, I.. I think I need to drag you into it.”

“This sounds serious,” I said carefully, unsure just yet how serious it was. Given Teddy’s naturally flirtatious nature, and especially the way she enjoyed putting her hands on men, I was mildly surprised it hadn’t come up before. I took in her relaxed stance, one long leg stretched over the arm of the chair, the strands of hair she had teased from her bun. *It’s serious*, I thought.

“Yes. Chris, I want him gone. I know what I’m asking, and I wouldn’t ask unless I thought I had no choice.”

“Wow... have you talked to HR?”

“No. Thought about it, but I figured you’d be upset if I didn’t come to you first.”

“Yeah, that’s... I’m glad you did. We’ll need to go to Human Resources with this, if you really want him gone.”

She nodded.

“Let me explain exactly how these complaints proceed,” I said. I had no idea how this kind of thing proceeded, but whatever. “HR needs to file a grievance. They’ll need paperwork from me, and I’ll do everything to back you up. Troy will have a chance to defend himself. You’re going to need to be ready to tell your story several times, and with no equivocation.”

“We don’t need to involve Leif, do we?”

Had no idea about that, either. “No, we don’t,” I said to calm her down. “Though I’m sure he’ll hear about it. This will probably be handled as a violation of corporate professional conduct, which means if there’s nothing else on his record he may get off with a warning.”

“Chris, this isn’t improper conduct. It’s sexual harassment.”

“I doubt it. Sexual harassment is when your boss wants to sleep with you, not a co-worker who has no dick.”

“Chris.”

“Look, just – tell me what he did. You’re not going to be able to be squeamish about this. You need to tell your story, with poise and conviction.”

“We were in his car, just talking...”

*In his car*, I thought. *Probably with your hand on his knee*. “And?” I said.

She looked miserable. After a moment she gestured at her left breast.

“He groped you?”

She nodded. “Then he tried to kiss me.”

“He didn’t even kiss you first? Jesus, he *should* be fired.”

“For the love of God, Chris.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I know you’re all part of the Old Boy’s network, for whom all this is no big deal. But I can’t work with him, Chris. I can’t. One of us needs to leave. If you think it should be me, just say the word.”

“No, Theodora. Absolutely not.”

“Because I am so ready to walk right now.”

“I know.”

“I’ll tell you something else. I won’t go up in front of HR, or Troy’s pal Leif, and have to listen to how I’ve been coming on to him all year, or whatever bullshit story he makes up to excuse his behavior.”

“You won’t.”

“You sit him down in front of Leif with this, or in front of Human Resources, and you know he’ll come up with something. The man has a wife and four kids. I can’t imagine what he’ll say, but by the time he’s done I’ll be labeled a prostitute.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“How can you stop it?”



“He still works for me, even if only temporarily. I’ll talk to him, explain it’s in his best interest if this never goes to HR. He doesn’t want this public, believe me. We’ll just... we’ll call it a layoff. He can quietly resign, no scandal, no fight. He’s just gone. Does that sound okay?”

I had just asked my employee for permission to terminate someone who officially didn’t even work for me. Not sure how I managed to lose control of this situation so thoroughly, and part of me suspected Teddy had played me like a drum. Five minutes ago she was in mortal fear of losing her job; how credible was her threat to quit, anyway?

But I was still enormously relieved to see her nod. “Okay,” she said. “But I hate to think this company will be paying him a fat severance package, just for the privilege of groping me.”

“I’ll take care of the package. Believe me, it won’t be generous.” In all likelihood, the package would be very generous, and I didn’t have a prayer of influencing that one way or the other. Assuming I could talk Troy into resigning at all. But at least it sounded good, and I needed this conversation over before I ended up working for her.

“You’ll talk to him today?”

“I promise.” I walked her to the door.

“Thank you, Chris.” She squeezed my hand, and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

. . .

Lynn dumped a thick stack of papers into my arms. “There’s your contract. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. Know how long it is?”

“94 pages. I’ve already read it, just need to review it one last time.” If I told that lie enough times, maybe it would become true. Worth a shot.

“Plus appendices. And you can get your own damn coffee. Have I reminded you today I’m not a secretary?”

“If you were my secretary, your breasts would be bigger.”

She mouthed an obscenity and punctuated it cheerfully by giving me the finger. “Hey, that guy was looking for you again,” she said in a more normal tone.

“Which guy?”

“The not-really-normal guy with the great suit.” She nodded towards the copy machines.

“Thanks. I’ll get rid of him.”

I left Lynn’s cube and walked past the row of cubes to my office. As I passed my door I saw movement inside. I backed up slowly.

Sitting in my chair was a little boy. He stared at me without changing expression. He looked like he’d just come in out of the wind, but his eyes were calm, almost spooky in their clarity.

“I know you,” I said. “You were at the accident this morning.”

A small smile appeared on his lips.

“Chris,” said a voice.

I jumped. Creepy suit guy was coming down the aisle, his hand stretched again.

“I’m sorry...?” I said, shaking his hand reflexively.

“Parker. Parker Catelli.”

“Parker. Yes, I’m sorry. Weren’t we going to meet this afternoon?”

“We were. I really appreciate it. But I have limited time, and besides, I know you’ll be talking to my competition soon. Just wanted to make sure you and I had a word first.”

“Your competition?”

"I apologize, this is probably confusing. To be honest, I don't usually do these, but I made an exception for Victor McNamara's son. We've been hearing a lot about you, Christopher. I wanted to make sure we made the first offer. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, of course. There's just –" I gestured awkwardly towards my door.

"Yes?"

"There's someone in my office. Could you... could you give me a minute?"

Parker looked at me evenly. I had clearly said something he didn't like. "That's fine, Chris," he said. "You go ahead and talk to them first. I'll be back later." With that he walked off.

I turned back to my office. It was empty.

"What the hell..." I said. I saw Lynn headed towards the copy machines, and signaled her. "Did you see a little kid?"

"A kid?"

"Yeah. Little boy, about so big." I held my hand just above my hips.

"Are you kidding? That's shorter than the cube walls. Someone that height could move around all these cubes like a ghost. I'd never see him."

I nodded. "I guess. Lynn, I swear, he looked just like the boy I saw at the car accident this morning."

"You were in an accident?"

"Almost. Nearly hit a minivan. Driver ran the light."

"You hit your head or something?"

"Maybe I did. Would explain a few things this morning, anyway."

She appeared concerned suddenly. "You know, you don't look so hot. Seriously. You should sit down. Want me to bring you something?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"I'm fine. Just been a crazy day."

I retreated to my office. Before I sat down I checked under the desk and behind my chair. Nothing.

"Creepy little kid," I muttered. I dropped the stack of papers on my desk with a thud.

There was no putting it off any more. I had a 94-page contract to fix. Plus appendices. I dropped into my chair with a sigh.

I picked it up and started reading. I skimmed most of it – the Recitals, Scope, the Representations and Warranties. Our legal team could usually be trusted not to screw those up. But the trouble sections needed more attention. Termination, Support, Deliverables. The Indemnities. I read the wording on Termination first:

This Agreement will commence as of the Effective Date and will remain in effect until terminated as provided herein; the failure of either party to require performance by the other party of any provision of this Agreement will not affect the full right to require such performance at any time thereafter; nor will the waiver by either party of a breach of any provision of this Agreement be taken or held to be a waiver of the provision itself.

I rubbed my eyes. Good Lord, who wrote this stuff? No wonder no one had fixed the contract. Prolonged exposure could kill you.

Termination is a traumatic period. End of life is usually unexpected, even in the unwell. It can even occur in a simple traffic accident on the way to work.

I stared at the page. What the hell?

Death is a period of crucial choice. The first choice is one of acceptance. The client must be willing to accept the inevitability of events. Are you sure you weren't killed by that minivan this morning, Chris?

I dropped the paper. What kind of sick joke was this?

"Lynn!" I found her in her cube, on the phone. She covered the receiver. *What?* she mouthed.

"Did you mess with that contract?"

She shook her head, looking at me like I was crazy. "Hang on a sec," she muttered into the phone. "What the hell is wrong with you now?" she asked me.

"Is that the right contract? The Unified deal, from legal?"

"Of course."

"Did anyone change it? Did you leave it on the printer?"

"No. Is there something wrong with it?"

"Yes. Yes, it's... screwed up, somehow."

"There's an electronic copy in your in box. You can print another one –"

I headed back to my office, closed the door. I opened my laptop, sorting quickly through half a dozen open documents – Troy's performance evaluation, a half-written love-note to Teddy – until I found the e-mail from legal. An electronic copy of the contract was attached; the time stamp said it had last been modified four days ago. I opened it, scanning quickly for Termination.

Panic and disorientation are completely normal. Time, however, is limited. The client is expected to make his destination choice within 24 hours. It's best to accept death as quickly as possible.

I pushed away from the desk.

"This is nuts."

I went to the door, looking over the vast expanse of cubes that spread out before my office. I could hear Donna's voice, complaining about ventilation noise to someone in Building Services. Eddie was by the copy machine. Through the glass wall at the end of the row of cubes I could see people walking to the cafeteria. The blonde from Accounting, what was her name, was escorting two Asian men with visitor badges. Past them, through the floor-to-ceiling windows, I could see the grounds, the reflection of sunlight off the retaining pond, the picnic tables. People lunching under the trees. A bird darted across the grass towards the parking lot.

I couldn't remember the accident this morning.

Something... something had happened. That minivan had cut in front of me at the intersection, turning left in my path. There had been a face in the passenger seat, staring at me, mouth open in a wide O. I'd slammed on the brakes, then –

Nothing.

I turned back to my office. Suddenly standing there was Creepy Parker. "Hello, Chris," he said with a smile. His teeth were perfect. He hadn't been there two seconds ago.

I pushed past him. "Not now," I said, closing the door in his face.

I grabbed for my chair. Ran my hand through my hair. I groped for my chest and found my heart, made sure it was still beating.

I reached for the phone.

Katie answered on the third ring. "This is a surprise," she said. "I was just think-

ing about calling you.”

“Why?” I managed.

“Lisa has a fever, I think. It’s probably not serious. But she’s miserable, poor thing. I didn’t take her to daycare. I think I’m just going to stay home with her.”

I heard banging, the clang of a metal door. She was in the laundry room. I could hear the rustle of sheets as she stuffed the washing machine. “I can’t make it to the grocery store, so I wanted to ask you to stop on your way home and get three salmon fillets for dinner.”

“Katie...”

She stopped stuffing sheets. “Chris? Are you okay? Are you sick, too?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think I’m okay.”

“Do you want to come home?”

“I don’t know. Yeah. Maybe.”

“Listen to me. *Don’t drive*. It’ll take you an hour in the middle of the day. I don’t want you driving all that way if you’re sick. Ask Lynn to take you.”

I was starting to calm down. Just hearing Katie, hearing the normalcy in her voice, was helping. “Katie... is everything okay at home? I mean, is everything normal?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just...”

“Hold on a moment. There’s someone here who wants to talk to you.”

“Katie? I don’t want to talk to —”

She was already gone. A man took her place.

“Hello, Christopher,” said Parker. “I think now is the time for our talk.”

I hung up.

. . .

I got out of my office. I headed down the hall, started the long walk towards Door 10 and the promise of more oxygen.

There was no way Parker could have made it to my house that quickly. Unless, of course, he traveled at the speed of hallucination. Or on little angel wings. Yeah, that would certainly explain it.

Maybe I was lying in an emergency room somewhere with a big tube taped to my face. Would explain a lot. I tried closing my eyes for a moment, tried to *feel*, to really sense the specifics of my body, grope towards the truth.

“Whoa!”

I opened my eyes just in time to avoid running into Laura, Leif’s administrative assistant. “Walking down the hall with your eyes closed?” she asked as she dodged left.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Sleep at your desk like normal people,” she called over her shoulder.

I turned back towards Door 10. Standing dead ahead of me was the kid. The boy from the accident.

“Hello,” he said.

The moment he spoke I experienced a crystal clear memory from the crash. Seeing his face in the crowd, at the side of the road. People were crowded around me, and I was lying down, in the street. Why was I lying down? And the kid, this kid, was staring at me, with exactly the same expression he had now.

“My name is David,” he said serenely. “I’m here to talk to you.”

“Get the hell away from me.” I jerked to the right, walking around him. I stepped quickly down the hall. People were staring; I must have spoken louder than I thought.



But the kid wasn't following. He just stood in the hall, the sunlight from the big windows spilling down around him, a curious expression on his face as he watched me.

I found a door to the engineering bay, and pushed my way in.

My cell phone rang as I made my way through the endless sea of cubes towards the loading docks. I wasn't sure where I was going. Anywhere. Out.

I glanced at the caller ID on the phone display. It read PARKER CREEPY GUY. "Jesus."

The ringing continued. Six rings. Seven. Why wasn't it going to voice mail?

I passed through the big metal fire doors, into the tall corridor leading to Receiving. It was deserted, cold and bare, harsh lighting and no carpeting. It was like a different world back here, the underworld, a place the corporate decorators had never been told about. Normally I liked it, liked the sense of unknown passages running under the very hum of the machine. But now it just added to the alienness of the situation.

I snapped my phone open. "What?"

"I'm sorry this is so unsettling for your, Mr. McNamara."

"Thanks so much for your sympathy. Who are you?"

"I'm a representative for one of two firms who will be contacting you today."

"Where's Katie? Are you still at my house?"

"I think you understand that I'm not with Katie, Mr. McNamara. If you like, I can be there in the hall with you."

I stopped walking, and sagged against a wall. "No. Don't do that."

"As you wish."

I was having trouble getting my breath. I tried hard to keep my voice steady. "Am I... am I dead?"

"I think you know the answer to that as well."

"Oh my God."

"I realize this is upsetting. And I have no wish to upset you further. But I have a proposition for you. An offer. A very good offer, I think. But time is short. Have you spoken to our competition?"

"What?"

"Have you received another offer yet?"

"What other offer? What are you talking about?"

"So you haven't. Good." He positively purred. "That's good. We can do this over the phone, but I really prefer to do it in person. Would you join me by your office?"

"Wait a minute. Just give me a minute."

"Of course."

I let my arm drop, and stared down the hall. The fluorescent light thirty feet ahead flickered with a high, buzzing sound. Was this really happening? I felt a little numb. But I didn't feel dead. I felt... a little cold. There was the hint of a breeze on my face. I could smell the cleaner they used on the floor. I could hear the distant sound of a truck pulling up to the loading dock.

"Chris?" The voice was thin, far away.

I brought the phone to my ear. "Yeah. Okay. I'm coming. I'll be right there."

I hung up, and turned to make my way to my office. I stuck to the back corridors as long as I could. As I passed through the break room I saw Oliver Mann and the technical documentation team eating lunch. Oliver waved, and I waved back. They laughed about something, and I watched Betty Wallace push her long hair back, smiling at Oliver. It all seemed so normal.

My phone rang again. "What?" I snapped.

"Whoa. Is this a bad time?"

“Leif?”

“Yes. Is this Chris? Because if it is, what kind of salesman answers his phone with ‘*What?*’”

“I’m sorry. You wouldn’t... you wouldn’t believe the morning I’m having.”

“Listen, Sparky, if you want to compare mornings, I guarantee I got you beat. *Guarantee* it.”

“I doubt it,” I said.

“Crip hung me up and cut my balls off. I think he’s keeping them in a jar in his office. I no longer have balls.”

“No balls.”

“Are you even listening? What the shit did you do this morning that was so grueling?”

“I think I’m dead.”

“Come on, don’t fall apart on me now. Don’t you dare, you pussy. I need you. Crip’s called a series of budget meetings, *today*. This afternoon.”

“Are you serious?” I asked

“As a heart attack. I think Mike’s pressuring him for budget numbers at the end of the week. That means the decisions on which projects get killed could occur in the next forty-eight hours. Chris, Crip doesn’t believe a word I say any more. But he likes you, Lord knows why. I need you to stand up today and present on behalf of the Cronos team. You need to sell this thing, and sell it hard. Your future is on the line, buddy.”

“Yeah. Lot of that going on today.”

“All Crip’s other projects are pulling in more revenue, and word is he has to kill at least two to make the numbers. If we ever needed a salesman, we need one now. It’s all down to you.”

And I’d been so sure this morning couldn’t get any weirder. “You really need me to do this?” I asked.

“God, what is wrong with you? Did you go out for margaritas with Teddy again?”

“No.” But that sounded like a good idea.

“Swing by my office. Give me twenty minutes to get there.”

“Okay.”

He hung up, and I stared at the phone stupidly. Was this the other offer Parker mentioned? What did that mean? That I could go to work for Leif for all eternity?

None of this was making sense. Just like another day working here, when I thought about it. What if the afterlife was as messed up as my day job? God, *that* was a chilling thought.

As I walked it occurred to me that the rules might be similar, though. Why not? Maybe whatever celestial bureaucracy I was caught up in would be familiar enough for me to navigate. I pondered that as I neared my office and started looking for Parker. I found him in the Philadelphia conference room, sitting comfortably.

“Thank you for coming.” This time he didn’t rise, and didn’t bother to shake my hand.

“I had a few minutes,” I said, glancing at my watch. “I need to keep it short, though. I have to meet Leif in fifteen.”

He stared at me, then summoned a smile. “That’s amusing. Let’s start with your questions. I’m sure you have many.”

“Okay. Am I lying in a ditch somewhere, hallucinating all this?”

“If you think about it, Chris, I think you’ll see that’s not a very useful question. But the answer is no. Of course not.”

I gestured at the room, at the people passing by Philadelphia’s bank of windows. “So is all this real? Is it really happening?”

“Try not to think of it that way. You’ll have a very long time in the eons ahead to come to a better understanding of reality. Don’t try to make sense of it now. The only thing you need to focus on is the choice ahead.”

“What choice?”

“You exist here now only because you have not yet decided where you are going. Your life has been... let’s call it a rich mix of moral contradictions. That’s not too unusual, however. There are now two paths ahead of you, two competing opportunities, and you have very little time left to choose one.”

“I have to choose? About where I go in the afterlife, you mean?”

“Broadly, yes.”

“Is there a brochure, or anything? Can I get one of those heavens with a hundred virgins?”

Parker spread his hands on the table. “I understand that most people find this a disorienting time.”

I nodded glumly. “Yeah. Figured all those would be taken.”

“And to be honest, the ethical nuances of your choice, and its ramifications on how you will spend your new existence, can be quite overwhelming.”

“Fantastic. So how I am supposed to choose? I don’t even understand what the choices *are*.”

“Precisely. We understand that.”

“I’m glad somebody does. How does that help me?”

“You’ve already begun to make your choice. The choices you make today will help shape it. Today will be a day of clarity, of definition. All the little decisions you will be faced with will help point the way.”

“That sounds very Zen.”

“A grasp of Zen Buddhism would doubtless help you, but I suspect that is something you lack.”

“Yeah.” Though I wondered if the company library had an audiotape, or something.

“The process is meant to help you,” Parker said. “Understand that neither side will influence events. The day will unfold exactly as it should have. Like every other day of your life, you’ll be presented with a series of... choices. Live today like a normal day, make the choices you are comfortable making. At the end of the day, only one path will remain. Only one of the offers will remain. Follow your instincts, and I’m confident you and I will find ourselves with a deal.”

“You mentioned a competitor?”

A distasteful look squirmed across his face. “I’m required to tell you only that my competitor will be making you a similar offer. Technically, I suppose I should say an identical offer. He won’t tell you any more than I.”

Here Parker leaned forward. “But he hasn’t watched you these last few years like I have, Chris. We’re very, very interested in you. Believe me, you belong with my organization.”

He stood, brushed his suit. “And now, I’m afraid I must be going. This took rather more time than I expected.”

“Let me see if I can wrap up,” I said. “I’m not alive, but I’m not really dead yet, either. Today is, like, a big test, yes? And depending on the results, I can go to one of two places. For the sake of argument, let’s call them... up, or down.”

Parker put his hand on my shoulder. “Again, try not to think of them in such crude terms. And certainly not in your familiar mythology of Heaven or Hell. We’re simply two competitors, Chris. Divergent realities with radically different philosophies. I can’t tell you more, but believe me when I say I firmly believe you belong with us.”

We walked out of Philadelphia together. “Well, I may not fully understand,” I said. “But I think I know what you are.”

“Yes? What is that?”

“A salesman.”

He looked pleased. “Yes. Exactly, Chris. Like yourself.”

Yeah. That’s what I was afraid of.

. . .

I’d been a salesman for twenty years, and I’d seen some weirdass deals. But this... this was something new. I walked slowly towards Leif’s office, but stopped halfway. I stood there for a moment, then made up my mind and changed directions. Towards Teddy’s cube.

OK. I was dead. But oddly enough, I was still in my Dockers, still in the middle of a deal. And the first thing to know about any deal is that there’s always something the salesman selling it to you doesn’t want you to know. And since I knew virtually nothing, it almost certainly meant I was being kept ignorant for a reason.

Why? That was the crux of it. I had no idea, and that worried me. For now, I had to assume everything around me was real, that I could still make a difference, and that I should tread very, very carefully.

But if I was being judged from above, then it couldn’t hurt to sandbag some easy karma first. And that meant talking to Teddy.

She was talking to Parm, one of the Denver engineers. She had her hand on his shoulder as they looked at a design on her desk. She saw me as she straightened, and her eyes widened. She made her excuses to Parm, giving him a quick hug. “It’s great to see you again!” she said with a smile as he left.

But she was all business as she turned to me. “Did you talk to Troy?” she asked in a low voice.

“Not yet. I wanted to run something past you.”

She instantly looked guarded. “You’re not backing out, Chris.”

“No, but I need to understand something.”

“What?”

“You flirt with everyone. You know that.”

She stared at me, her mouth open.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “You always have kisses and hugs for everyone. You’ve been that way since I met you. But not everyone responds the same way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you ever kiss Troy?”

She seemed stunned for a moment. “Are you saying I *invited* this?” she said.

“I’m just saying our first approach with Troy might be to talk to him. For me to talk to him, I mean. To see if he’s genuinely sorry.”

“What does that matter?”

“I don’t know Teddy, but ...for all we know, the guy may think he’s in love with you.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I’m just suggesting that before we fire him, we should try some forgiveness first. Be more Christian.”

“More Christian? What does that mean?”

“More Muslim, then. Or Jewish. Pick one.”

“I want him fired. Before this gets worse. I can’t even walk to the parking lot alone, Chris.”

“I know.”



“Do you? Then why are you treating this like some kind of joke?”

“I’m not.”

“*Today*. You promised me.”

“Okay. Alright. I’ll take care of it.”

“More Christian,” she said, her eyes flashing. “Jesus. What’s gotten into you?”

. . .

I met Leif on the way back to his office. “I think I’m going to Hell,” I said

“You and me both, buddy. Know who just called me?”

“Lucifer. Was he looking for a reference?”

“Worse. Nigel Calder.”

Nigel was CEO of ConnectAll, our biggest customer. I’d sold him on a deal that would bring in nearly two-thirds of our revenue this year. “What does that weasel want?”

“He wants to pull out of the deal,” Leif said.

“What, again? He threatens that every week.”

“He can threaten all he wants, but he can’t pull out. Not today. We booked that revenue. We told Mike the deal is done. Fix this, Chris.”

“Sure. This is one of those tests to see if I’m a good person or an evil person, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Good versus evil. I think I’m running a slight deficit in good at the moment.”

“Yeah, well, anything evil you can do to Nigel today would be a net positive in my book.”

“Piece of cake then,” I said.

I went back to my office. I drummed my fingers on the desk for a moment, wondering if I should blow off Nigel and instead call the bank and have them wire all my savings to a charity in Africa. Then I toyed with the idea of heading to Elmer’s for a round of shots. That had to be good for something.

Then I called Nigel.

“Christopher McNamara,” he said in his fine English tenor. “I was expecting your call.”

“Nigel, before we get started, I want to tell you that I genuinely love you. Like a brother. I feel the warm bond of human friendship with you, man.”

“That’s... that’s genuinely comforting, Chris. But it won’t fix my problem.”

“That’s what I’m here for, Nigel. Tell me your problem.”

“My *problem* is that I’m unhappy in this partnership.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I want to help, any way I can,” I said, leaning back in my chair and picturing the gates of Heaven opening wide, and Saint Peter handing me a fat cigar. “Tell me how I can start.”

“We’ve had this conversation before, Christopher. I don’t feel you were completely honest with me when you sold me on this deal.”

“You’re right. I know.”

He seemed taken aback. “That’s uncharacteristically honest of you. But it comes rather late in the day.”

“I take full responsibility, and want to do whatever I can to rectify this.”

“You’ve made some effort, surely. But I haven’t seen everything I’ve asked for.”

“We’ve been late to deliver. But we’re fixing that.”

“The schedule is only a minor concern. Far more important is the pricing. It’s simply too high.”

“I’m sorry you think so,” I said. “But you agreed to that pricing when we signed

the Letter of Intent, Nigel. We fulfilled our part of the bargain, and so far we've invested a great deal launching your service for you. We've also done a lot of expensive custom work that wasn't agreed to up front, just to make you happy. So far we haven't been paid a dime. Now that your service is up and running, now that we've proven this entire line of business, and especially now that Cronos has taken a significant risk to get you there, I don't feel it's the appropriate time to re-negotiate pricing."

"It's the perfect time, Christopher."

"Why?" I asked, starting to feel a little irritated.

"Because I have here a letter from your competition, offering to provide the same service for half the price."

"That's a bait and switch, Nigel. Their service isn't ready yet. And it doesn't have the interface you need to talk to your database."

"Perhaps I should find out for myself."

"We had an agreement, Nigel. You agreed to sign a contract with us if we made this investment."

"My responsibility to my company is more important than our agreement, Christopher. Now, I've told Leif I'll certainly consider it if he agrees to match this price. Otherwise, I'll ask you to turn off your software and remove it immediately."

I gripped the phone. Alright, now. Maybe I was dead, but surely that didn't mean I had to roll over while Nigel tried to weasel out of the one decent deal I'd handed Leif. Without ConnectAll, we wouldn't have anything remotely resembling a story for Mike. We'd pulled out all the stops to make sure Nigel's service was a showpiece, and he knew how critical having a success was for us. He'd been blackmailing us for months with threats to pull the plug. Now it was price. In all likelihood there was no letter. I could smell a cheap negotiation tactic, even across three thousand miles of ocean.

"Nigel," I said. "This isn't necessary. You know the profit forecasts for your business show plenty of margin. You'll make a great deal of money at the price we agreed to."

"Yes, of course. But it's still a business necessity for me to find the low-cost supplier, Christopher. You know that."

"Fine. You know what? I'm going to Hell shortly, and when I get there, I'm going to look up your mother."

"Excuse me?"

"Then the two of us are going to find something to haunt your house. Maybe those horned devil things, with pokey bits. One of the big ones."

"If this is intended to be funny..."

"And then I'm going to find something to possess your wife. Something that spits a lot, with a head that spins around. One of them babies. You know the kind I'm talking about."

"Look," Nigel said after a moment. "I didn't know this was going to push you off the deep end."

"It's been a combination of things today, really."

"I think you can appreciate that this conversation is over."

"Oh, perfectly. It's time our legal team took over anyway."

"Legal threats are fairly pointless, I'm afraid."

"Not if you have a legal team that can burn down your house and rape your children."

There was a pause. "Chris, I realize your company has a great many lawyers, but -"

"Forty-eight in the UK alone. You'll be getting to know them all on a first name

basis.”

“It won’t do either of us any good if this degenerates into a legal pissing match.”

“Uh huh.”

I heard Nigel shuffling papers nervously. “I... I recognize that this has put you in a difficult situation. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll tell my CFO that we’re going to make good on the down payment.”

“That’d be swell.”

“After that, I’ll need your guarantee that your company won’t bring any legal weight to bear.”

“You can have my guarantee that my lawyers will be out there next week to pull our hardware out of your pasty British ass.”

“Chris... I really don’t want this to end badly.”

“Don’t take it personally. It’s a business necessity. We can still go golfing ‘n shit.”

“Perhaps it would be best to take a day to cool off.”

I sighed. “Unfortunately I won’t be here tomorrow, because my black soul will have been consigned to the planes of the Inferno.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Forget it. All you need to understand is that I am about to kill your new service, along with four million euros of your projected revenue. You’re not holding a letter from a competitor, Nigel, and even if you were there’s no way you could make it work. You need us, and yet you insist on calling every week to crack the whip and jerk off. Why don’t we just call a truce, Nigel? You stop threatening to pull the plug, and we’ll pick up the tab for a prostitute whenever you need it. What do you say?”

Silence. I watched the clock tick off twenty-four seconds.

“Alright,” said Nigel, an edge in his voice. “We will honor the full terms of the deal. But frankly, I’m appalled. Legal threats, and this kind of crass performance, are not a foundation for a true partnership –”

“Been good talking to you too, Nigel. Love to Denise.” I made kissing noises and hung up.

I went out and put my head in Lynn’s lap. “Am I a bad person?”

After an awkward pause she said, “I’ll have to call you back,” and hung up the phone. “Can I help you?” she asked me.

“I think I just failed an important test of character. But you’ve known me for years. I brought you with me from Networks when Leif hired me. Would you describe me as evil, kind of?”

“This isn’t a prelude to firing me or anything, is it?”

“No.”

“Okay.” She relaxed a bit. “Evil. Let’s see. Well, there was that time you called everyone into your office to secretly listen while you fired that jackass from Texas over the phone.”

I winced. “That’s right. Lance Smothers.”

“Lance. God, that guy was a bite in the ass. He kept blubbering about wanting another chance, and you kept putting the phone on mute while you strutted around the office, imitating a chicken. Remember that? We were *howling*.”

“I’d rather not.”

“That was just about the most thoroughly evil thing I’ve even seen done inside an office.” She suddenly looked thoughtful. “Damn, that was sexy, too. I was hot and bothered all afternoon. I almost called my husband and had him meet me at a hotel on the way home.”

“Perhaps you weren’t the best person to ask.”

She seemed to be warming to the topic. “Then there was the time that little nitwit from corporate came in to interview for the head of international sales job. He looked

like a punk out of high school. My cousin Phyllis had more sales experience than him, and he saunters in expecting a director-level gig. What a pompous ass. God, remember what you did to him?”

“Maybe we could change the subject.”

“You told him he was perfect for the role. You puffed him up so much, I thought his head would explode. Then you put him in front of that Vice Presidential luncheon and told everyone he was going to give an impromptu talk on Global OEM strategies. I thought he was going to pee his pants. He must have hemmed and hawed for five minutes before Doug Cripem told him to sit down. He crawled back to the tower and we never heard from him again.”

I rose, taking a minute to straighten my shirt. “Thank you, Lynn,” I said. “As always, you’ve been very helpful.”

“You know, I didn’t even mention the time you –”

“I’ll be in my office.”

. . .

Halfway there I changed course, heading to Leif’s office instead. I couldn’t be holed up; I needed to stay in motion, keep pressing forward. It was just like closing a deal; if I stopped to dwell on my mistakes I was sunk.

I was getting an appreciation for why my buddy Parker was so confident I’d be wearing his team jersey by the end of the day. And as much as I felt a certain professional kinship with him, I had few doubts about which side he worked for. Parker could spin his firm’s reputation anyway he liked, could paper over the differences with his competition with a lot of language about “differing philosophies,” but at the end of the day, he took the elevator to the bottom floor. Under his suit and expensive shoes, there was a forked tail and cloven hooves.

Leif had hired me as his closer, the man who could save his bright dream from assassins. I wanted to wear that kind of shining armor; I told myself every day that I did good work in support of a good cause. But the truth was that the tools I continually fell back on were deception and intimidation. And if Cronos failed, then there wasn’t even a noble goal to justify it all, and I was just another self-serving liar in a suit.

As I neared Leif’s office, I made the mistake of glancing between two long rows of cubes. Standing at the far end of the corridor was the kid.

I stopped, suddenly wary. But he didn’t come any closer; he simply raised one hand in greeting. Then he waited.

My mouth was suddenly dry. This kid... he was an echo of the accident somehow. One of the victims, maybe. Perhaps this was one of the damn tests. Perhaps meeting him was a way to acknowledge what I’d done, take responsibility for what had happened.

It kept coming back to the accident. It was the key. Why couldn’t I remember it? What had I done?

I was being set up.

My fist was suddenly clenched. I turned my back on the kid, strode in the opposite direction.

Was I at fault for the accident? And what if I was? Did that make me an evil person? These tests – Teddy, Nigel, maybe even Phil, for all I knew – they were rigged. I was being set up for failure, set up to look ineffectual. A loser.

If I lost my confidence now – if I started questioning myself, my instincts – I was lost. Parker and his little demon buddies couldn’t rattle me that easy. I would show them just how hard it was to get me to go off the rails in the middle of a deal.

And I knew just where to start. “Troy! You’re fired, you dickless piece of crap.”



Troy stopped suddenly in the aisle ahead, holding a thin sheet of paper. He'd emerged from the right, from the door leading to the employee credit union. "What?"

"You heard me."

Troy tried to speak, failed. I saw Laura and Farhan coming to a slow stop behind him, watching us with stunned expressions. Troy finally cleared his throat. "What's this about?"

"You want the details now? Because I'm in a hurry."

Troy glanced nervously at the pair behind him. His face was turning red. "Chris, if this is about blowing the Microsoft deal, I was going to tell you. I was coming to explain it to you today."

"You blew the Microsoft deal? I didn't even know about that."

He looked like I'd just kicked him. "What is it then? Are you mad about my stupid *laptop*? What's the big deal? I know I shouldn't have taken it; I just figured if I reported it stolen it would just be simpler. I can pay for it."

"You are making it worse every time you open your mouth. This has nothing to do with stealing a laptop – which I didn't know about either, thank you – or screwing up a sale to Microsoft. This is about Teddy."

There was the sound of an approaching crowd on our left. Oliver and his Tech Doc team, coming back from the break room. They stopped, curious.

But Troy seemed suddenly oblivious to everyone. "Teddy?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

"She's... she's been calling me, Chris. For months. She won't leave me alone. She's scared of losing her job, she's scared about everything."

"Come with me, Troy."

"She's scared of you. She thinks you're infatuated with her. She thinks you're going to leave your wife again."

"Shut up."

He stood there, looking helpless. "I think I love her, Chris."

I took him by the arm, guided him towards his cube. "For the love of God, Troy. What part of being in love made it a good idea to feel her up in the parking lot?"

He stared at me in horror. I turned to the small crowd that had assembled behind us.

"Get back to work," I said.

. . .

I walked Troy to his cube, watched him sag into his chair. His cube had perhaps the least personality of any 8' by 8' space in the whole building. A few OSHA manuals, a dictionary, a cup full of pencils. There weren't even any family photos, or goofy animals rendered in crayon. What kind of father didn't even put up crayon drawings?

"Listen," I said, already feeling a little remorseful. "Take your time. We can schedule a day next week for you to come back and take care of all the paperwork with HR. I'll make sure you stay on the payroll through the end of the month, and you can come back and use the internal job posting system to see if there's any openings –"

"I want to say something," he said.

"Sure," I said, hoping we could avoid the stage where he hyperventilated and his arms started windmilling. I glanced around a bit nervously for possible exit routes.

He swiveled his chair towards me. "You were a bad boss. Don't you realize that?"

"Keep going."

"You never looked after us. We heard from the OEM group that the whole Cronos team may be cut. People are scared. We've been working like crazy, pulling off mir-

acles, trying to turn things around. Or maybe just get noticed, enough to survive this round of layoffs.”

“I looked after you, Troy. I protected my whole team.”

“Protected us? You’ve been so wrapped up with... with *whatever*, you don’t even see people are killing themselves to impress you.”

“I know you’ve been making an effort, Troy –”

“I’m not talking about me.” He reached under his desk and grabbed a box, started dumping the contents of his desk drawers into it. “I’m talking about her.”

“What makes you think...” I trailed off, standing there with my mouth open and my hands in the air.

“I need to pack up,” Troy said quietly to his box.

I stalked back to Leif’s office, running both hands through my hair. This was shaping into a grade-A sucky day. And that’s even if I ignored the fact that I’d probably been decapitated in a traffic accident and was currently lying in two different gutters. Not to mention the potentially heartbreaking damage to my brand new Lexus.

Of all times to discover I was a disaster as a boss, the day my immortal soul was being weighed up by St. Peter like three pounds of roast chuck would not have been my first choice. Was I really that bad? Troy thought so. But then again, I’d been called worse as I’d walked people to the door.

But this wasn’t just about Troy. He had that right, at least. It was also about Teddy. And the fact that in the two years I’d managed her, I’d closely watched everything she did – what she wore, how she walked, where she put her hands – except what she really wanted me to see. Like how she did her job.

I had opened this deal by trying to sandbag some easy karma. I wasn’t exactly sure where I stood at the moment, but it wasn’t looking good.

I didn’t realize where I was walking until I found myself in front of Laura’s desk. I glanced at Leif’s door. Closed. “Is he in?” I asked.

She nodded with a grimace. “Yes. But Mike and Doug just went in there, and he had me cancel his two o’clock. I think they’ll be there a while. Do you want me to call you when they’re done?”

I drummed my fingers on Laura’s countertop, annoyed. “That could take frickin’ forever. I don’t have time to sit around in the cafeteria until these guys decide they’re done. Who’s the dead guy here, anyway?”

Laura’s mouth worked silently for a moment. “Well, I don’t know.”

“I think I’ll sneak in.”

“You can’t do that –”

“Wish me luck.” With that I pushed open the door and entered Leif’s office.

Mike and Doug Cripen were seated in front of Leif’s desk. They looked up as I entered; Crip’s face pinched and suspicious at the sudden interruption, Mike unperturbed and calculating. Only Leif looked pleased to see me – relieved, in fact. “Come in, Chris, come in,” he said. “We were just getting started.”

There were no other chairs, so I sat on the corner of his desk. Crip gave me a final suspicious glance, and turned back to Leif.

“Anyway, Leif, things have accelerated,” he said. “We need to make these decisions before the end of the week.”

Mike cut him off with a gesture. “I’m the one pushing the dates, Leif. Doug’s had nothing but praise for what you’ve done with Cronos.”

Hearing Mike with compliments on his lips frightened me more than any prognostications of doom from Leif. The only time Mike praised something was during the funeral.

“But I have some numbers to make,” he continued. “The CEO is serious about

deep program cuts. And you know my policy – I don't believe in starving all programs equally just to make the numbers. We need to pick our bets and fund them appropriately. We need to decide today if Cronos is one of those bets.”

This was just rhetoric. Mike had already made his decision – you could see it in his face. Cronos was dead. Crip sat to his left like the king's executioner, ready to swing his axe just as soon as his liege gave him leave.

Leif wasn't about to part with his head so easily, God bless him. “I'm glad you said that – that's good,” he began. “Because, based purely on technology alone, Cronos is still the best bet the company has.”

“The technology's great,” Mike conceded easily. Too easily. He was already convinced the tech was solid, and was clearly ready to kill it anyway. Arguing the quality of the technology now wasn't going to win us anything.

But Leif hadn't realized that. Or perhaps he had, but this was simply the only defense he had left, and there was no option now but to plow forward.

And plow forward he did. He started with the beauty of the design. Soon he leaped to the whiteboard, began tracing out an architecture diagram. I watched him draw little cylinders for the databases, a server array, the network cloud. “Here's where the real magic is,” he said, sketching spokes out of the cloud to a series of clumsily drawn mobile devices.

I glanced at Mike. He was looking at his watch, a rare flash of visible irritation on his face. We were losing him, and Leif was too caught up to notice.

“Look, this isn't the right time to get into device specifics,” Mike said, an edge to his voice. Mike's patience was a fragile thing. He was an executive who, day in and day out, dealt with people who Just Didn't Get It. Employees who were so blinded – by love for their new invention, or unwillingness to see beyond their comfort zone, or the excitement of a new project, or simple fear – to really see business reality. Mike's gift, if he had one, was the gift of reality, and he shared it with us daily, and frequently brutally.

“Just – just let me show you how we solved the UI bottleneck,” Leif countered, quickly scrawling a crude approximation of a device display.

He was babbling. Mike looked at Crip, wordlessly communicating a simple message: *he Just Doesn't Get It. Shut him up, or I will.*

“Leif,” said Crip.

“I know, I know,” Leif said, desperately drawing faster. “I'm almost done. I just want to make sure you get this part. This has never been done before. The team has done something extraordinary here –”

“Leif,” Crip said, his voice surprisingly gentle. “I'm afraid we're past all this.”

Leif hovered before the board for a moment, his hand poised over a nearly-complete rendition of a cash register. A pained look crossed his face. Slowly, he capped the marker, and walked back to the chair behind his desk. Though he struggled to hide it, defeat was evident on his face.

“Mike and I have already gone through the options,” Crip continued. “Cronos has solved most of the big pieces of the solution. The tech could be packaged up for a buyer.”

“A firm like Qualcomm or RIMM might snap this up,” Mike offered. “We could recoup most of the investment cost.”

“We want you to put a small team in place to manage the potential tech transfer,” Crip said. “Two to three, no senior guys.”

“The rest,” Mike said, as casually as if he were discussing sports scores, “we'll need off the payroll by the end of the month.”

Leif didn't respond for a moment. He placed the marker down on his desk, held it vertical with one finger. He began to tip it back and forth. Then he nodded.

“We’re thinking of something for you in the Kaleidoscope team,” Crip said. “There’s going to be some changes there, end of the week. Good team, great technology, solid revenue, but lacking real leadership. You need to keep that quiet for now.”

Kaleidoscope was run by Gretchen Vollers, a soft-spoken engineer who had risen through the ranks by virtue of her approachability and integrity. Not virtues that evidently counted for much, as she was apparently about to be fired. She was also one notch higher in the corporate hierarchy than Leif. If he was being offered her job, it meant that he was being promoted. It was a payoff, for selling out his dream.

He didn’t look like someone who was being promoted. He looked like someone who’d just lost five years of his life. “Just tell me what you need done,” he said, his voice flat.

Mike was glancing at his watch again. “We can go into the nitty-gritty later. Doug and I have a few more stops before I need to leave for O’Hare. I’ll have Terri in my HR team call you to assist with the employee separations. But I know you’ve got it covered. She’ll have details on severance packages, scheduling exit interviews, shit like that. I asked her to get started this morning.”

We had now completely discarded the polite fiction that Mike and Crip had entered this room to “discuss” the future of Cronos. It had been decided outside these walls, and far removed from any input from Leif or me. Leif sat silently as Crip reached down for his briefcase. I watched for another moment to make certain he wasn’t going to say anything.

But clutching at straws when the deal was lost wasn’t his nature. For all his business experience, there was still too much of the engineer in Leif. Refusing to give up just because there was no rational reason to continue wasn’t in his job description.

No. That was why he had hired me.

“I’m sorry we took up so much of your time,” I said by way of introduction, rising from the desk.

Mike and Crip turned in tandem to regard me, taking true notice of me for the first time. There was sudden discomfort in Crip’s posture, as he realized someone he’d just laid off was actually in the room. I was one of the newly dead; they hadn’t expected to trip over a corpse quite so soon.

“You know, I don’t really understand half of what Leif just scribbled down here,” I said, looking over the whiteboard. “But I like that cash register. That part I get.”

Crip had recovered quickly. “I think we’ve reviewed all the elements of Cronos we need to, Chris.”

“You know the problem with Kaleidoscope?” I asked. “It’s got everything going for it. The tech is good, sales are good, Marketing has its story together. Even Gretchen – damn, everyone just loves Gretchen, she’s a sweetheart. But that team has no killer instinct, and to be frank, putting Leif in to replace her isn’t going to fix that.”

Now Leif was looking at me, aghast. He’d already had a crappy day, and now I was pissing all over his consolation prize. Least I’d managed to jar him out of that thick funk of his.

“Kaleidoscope’s broken,” I said. “Their level of funding is twice ours – with that kind of money, with all that expensive talent you bought, their revenue should be triple what it is. The project is a dog. I give it six more months. In fact, you want my opinion Doug, you got a whole kennel of dogs. International OEM – that’s a mess. Ken can’t get out of his own friggin’ way. Lauren’s Hosted Solutions Group should have busted open the whole Pacific Rim by now; instead they’re bickering over



scraps in Japan. There's a ton of revenue out there, and no one with the balls to go get it. To my mind, the only business you've got worth a damn is Cronos. We have the smallest funding of all your projects, but we're on fire. Our team has been working overtime as we get closer to launch – I *know* you've noticed that."

I waved at the white board. "We've built this – whatever the hell it is. Our revenue has doubled in two quarters, and in two more it will double again. In eighteen months we'll bring in more cash than any line of business you have, Crip."

Leif paled at my use of Doug's unofficial nickname. But Doug didn't seem to notice.

"How can you confidently predict that kind of revenue growth?" he demanded.

"Because that's my business. And I know my business."

"It's not just about the forecast. Your marketing is almost nonexistent."

I shrugged. "That's a problem I know how to fix. And if I didn't have a marketing plan, I'd steal one from Kaleidoscope. Hell, if that's all standing between me and success, I'll steal the whole marketing team from Kaleidoscope."

"You can't just poach within my own organization."

"You're missing the point, Doug," I said. "The point is that Cronos is the horse you should be betting on. All the hard problems have been solved. Your other businesses are dogs. You have one thoroughbred, and you're about to put a bullet in its head."

"You don't have enough revenue –" Crip began.

"Shut up for a second," Mike told him.

And that's when I saw it. Right on Mike's face, undisguised – anger, a flash of contempt, and that fierce, burning impatience. In the years I'd been in his organization, I'd always mistaken that impatience as the natural prerogative of the ranking executive over those who saw business realities less clearly than he. But in his casual dismissal of Crip I saw the truth: Mike was impatient with everyone. There was no one else who Got It. There was only Mike. It was that impatience that gave him power over others, not the other way around.

"You talk fast," Mike said to me casually, "and you're confident. I can see why Leif hired you. But other than that, you've got nothing. Cronos is late, you lack marketing, your six-month profit forecast is fantasy." He spread his hands. "I see nothing worth saving."

He waited. He hadn't waited when he'd laid reality down for Leif, I thought. It was so unusual to see this impatient man waiting that it briefly drove all other thoughts from my head. He was right, he knew I had nothing. What was he waiting for?

Then I realized what he was waiting for.

I should have said something, then. Mike wasn't going to wait forever. But another thought occurred to me. Was *this* another test, some kind of final exam for the soul? Was this what the whole day had lead to?

It certainly felt like it. Perhaps, just perhaps, if I could manage not to blow this one, I could make up for having screwed every other test put in front of me today. Like Teddy. Nigel. God forgive me, Troy. Especially Troy. For having fired that poor dumb bastard publicly like that.

It wasn't just the day I was trying to redeem, I realized. All the rationalizations I made every day; all the times I played with the truth. This was what it was all for. If I could just do this one thing, if I could just keep Cronos alive, then maybe being a goddamn pathological liar would amount to something after all.

"You're wrong," I said.

Mike smiled, sat back in his chair. I was right. That was what he'd waited for. But guessing what came next wouldn't be so easy.

“Convince me,” Mike said. He looked at his watch again. “You have three minutes.”

I had nothing left. Nothing to say, no truths to share, no lies that meant anything.

“Piece of cake,” I said.

At least the lie made me feel better for a few seconds. All I had to do now was make it true. Hell, no different from what I’d been doing all day long.

Might as well start with that, I thought.

. . .

“Mike, with three minutes, I’m not going to stand here and bullshit you about accelerating our deliverables, pumping up marketing, tripling revenue. Instead, let me give you a quick capsule of my day. I think it’ll be more instructional anyway.”

I settled back against the wall and folded my arms. “This morning Unified decided to pull the plug on our September launch. Know how I took care of it? I lied through my teeth. Told them we’d have deliveries to them faster and more reliably than ever before. Then I went back to my office, where my best salesman asked me if the gig was up. Care to guess what I told her? That she *wouldn’t* lose her job, which was a lie, and that she *would* make quota this quarter. How am I doing so far? That’s three for three, by my count.”

Mike and Doug exchanged glances. Leif was staring at me, his mouth still open.

“Let’s see,” I continued. “Then I took a call from our biggest customer, who was threatening to back out. What’s a day without a few outrageous lies to customers? I can’t even remember what I lied to Nigel about – something about how many lawyers we have in the UK, I think – but that’s not important.”

“What is your point?” asked Crip, clearly unable to remain silent any longer. “All I see is a good liar, and that doesn’t impress me, McNamara.”

“No,” I said quietly. “My point is that now we have a vendor contract, as well as an accelerated schedule. We have a motivated saleswoman, and a customer who will pay their bills. We have all that because I believed it was possible. You called me a good liar, Doug. But looking back at it, I don’t think I told any lies today. All I did was see what the truth needed to be, and chose to believe it. Everything after that – propagating the new truth, getting buy-in, closing doors on all other possibilities one by one – was just about winning consensus. That’s routine, that’s what I do. The hard part is always being the first to honestly believe it.”

“I have another word for it,” Doug said dryly. “I call it being a spin doctor.”

“With all due respect, I think you’re still missing my point. This isn’t just a sales gimmick, Doug. It’s a survival skill. And Cronos is the horse you should bet on because we’re the only business you’ve got that understands it, and the only ones who are any damn good at it.”

“You lost me,” Doug said.

“Growing my business isn’t my problem,” I said. “Survival inside this company, that’s my problem. Specifically, you and Mike are my problem, Doug. Every eighteen months, when this corporation has a lousy quarter, you cut a third of your business lines. We didn’t count on luck to survive – Cronos has been around for five years, and we knew eventually the odds would catch up with us. Who are the survivors? Not the best products. Not the most polished marketing. Not even the big revenue players. The survivors are those, and *only* those, able to create consensus that we are *winners*.”

I pushed away from the wall, started prowling the room. “I’m in a war Doug, with every other business opportunity that wants to steal my daily bread. A war of con-

sensus reality. Whoever can create it, manipulate it, cash in on it – we’re the winners. We’re the only ones who survive. You think stealing the marketing team from one of your other businesses is underhanded? That’s nothing compared to the dirty war you need to wage just to get to the winners’ *table*, Doug. There’s *no* lie too dirty. Not for your employees, not for your customers. Not for your wife, your kid. And then you have to be prepared to do whatever it takes to make the lies true. And when we finally graduate from your little training camp inside the corporation, and Cronos has to stand on its own as a real business instead of a research project? That’s where the game really begins. Because who do you think really wins in the marketplace, Doug? You think it’s the best product? You think people always choose the best tasting beer, irrespective of what the Swedish bikini team tells them during the Superbowl? Or maybe you think it’s the company that hires David Beckham as spokesman. Is that it, Doug? Is that the foolproof recipe for success?”

I stopped pacing. “No. It’s a war of consensus reality all over again, but on a whole new level. The last product standing in the marketplace belongs to the company that convinces its employees, its vendors, its customers, that it’s a *winner*. It means looking your top salesman in the eye and telling her she’s going to make quota. Telling your vendor he’ll have whatever he needs to deliver on time. Your customer that if he pulls the plug, he’ll regret it for the rest of his life. It means having the courage to believe in the outrageous, and then having the balls to make it come true.”

I stuck my hands in my pockets. “So. That’s what I’ve been doing all day. And while I’ve been doing it, I’ve been thinking about your other lines of business. Nice, tidy operations. But the moment they hit a real wall – and they will – they’ll fold like a house of cards. They have no staying power. But Cronos does. We’ve been doing the impossible every day since I got here. This team has pulled out more miracles than I’ve seen in my entire career. So you can try and stop us. It would take a miracle for us to survive. But honestly, what’s one more miracle to this team? We are unstoppable. My advice? Stay out of our way, and watch our smoke.”

. . .

Mike was quiet for a few moments. Finally, his eyes moved to his watch. “That was closer to five minutes,” he said as he rose.

He turned to Leif. “I can fund you through my discretionary budget. It’s not enough to nurse along your whole team indefinitely, but I can carry you the next six months. But let’s be perfectly clear. By Christmas, I damn well better see miracles.”

“You will,” Leif said numbly.

“We’ll talk more about Kaleidoscope. Think you could handle both roles? Frankly, Kaleidoscope could use a little of the fire you have at Cronos.”

“I’m sure I could.”

Mike grunted. Without another word, he and Crip left.

Leif sagged back in his chair as the door closed. His hands covered his face. “Oh my God.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I can’t believe you pulled that out of your ass. *Consensus reality*? Where did *that* come from? Is that how you justify the fact that you can’t tell the truth to save your soul?”

That particular phrasing didn’t sit well with me at the moment. “Just the way I see things. Haven’t really thought it through before.”

“Only you could spin a lifetime of lies as a life-saving business practice. Let me

tell you, I was *this* close to lunging across the desk when you started pissing on me for the Kaleidoscope role.”

“That was just theater. Just getting their attention.”

“You did that, alright. You also bad-mouthed every business Crip has. Jesus, I hope that doesn’t come back to haunt us.”

“It won’t. They’ve forgotten it already.”

“Six months.” Leif leaned forward suddenly, chewing on his nail. “How are we gonna pull off a miracle in six months? A miracle, hell... how are we even going to make *forecast* in six months?”

“Worry about that when we get there.”

“Goddamned salesman! You promise the world, and leave the rest of us holding the bag.” But he was smiling as he said it.

“One miracle at a time, that’s my limit,” I said, rising to go.

“You’re right,” he said, and for the first time I saw a bit of the old fire in his eyes. “What was I thinking? If one miracle in six months is all we need, this’ll be the cushiest time we’ve ever had.”

. . .

I needed to find a quiet place to sit. My office was too public, so I headed to the Philadelphia conference room. It was empty, and I settled into a chair just as it felt like my legs would give out.

The events in Leif’s office had clarified my thinking, brought the entire day into focus. Unfortunately, I didn’t like what I was seeing. This whole opera was nearing the final act. I could feel that. And while I had pinned my hopes on winning a reprieve for Cronos, somehow it felt like a hollow victory. Like I was focused on winning the wrong race.

Was I a good person? What *was* a good person? At the moment I hadn’t a clue, but I knew the fact that I couldn’t even formulate an answer didn’t bode well.

And if I had to guess, I was willing to bet that the way I’d treated Troy didn’t qualify. Even if he had genuinely harassed Teddy, he didn’t deserve to be publicly humiliated like that. I must have been anxious to have an audience; eager to prove myself in control. To close the deal a winner.

And as for saving Cronos... what had I done, really, except to dance like a puppet for Mike? Maybe I didn’t know what it took to be a saint. But even I knew enough to see that valiant efforts, no matter how heroic, in the service of that man and his ideals wasn’t it. I could see Mike clearly for the first time, and it was as a man who had risen to the top with very few ideals worth emulating.

Had I had a single success today? Done a single thing I could point to and say, *There, I am a good person. Get thee behind my righteous ass, Satan.*

No. Parker had been right. Even forewarned, I’d proven incapable of doing the right thing. When I’d followed my instincts, I’d played right into his hands.

I was going down.

I heard a chair squeak to my left, and I felt a sudden sense of foreboding. I really didn’t want to see who had sat in that chair, but I turned to look anyway.

“Hello son,” he said.

“D... Dad?”

He sat in the chair, his hands clasped on the table before him, fingers interlocked, looking exactly as he did eight months before lung cancer had laid waste to that powerful body fifteen years ago. His suit was perfect, his shirt crisply starched, and his hair, just starting to thin, was cut close.

“Dad... is that really you?”

He smiled briefly in response, and in that smile I had my answer. It was him. It



was my father.

He started to reach across the table, suddenly hesitated. “Chris. I don’t have much time.”

“Dad –”

“No, son. Just listen. They don’t know I’m here, but it will only take them a few moments to find out.”

“Dad, you’re dead.”

His face softened. “I know that son. You know what’s happening, don’t you?”

Sudden understanding came then. “You’re with Parker. He has you, doesn’t he?”

He nodded. A look of sorrow, of enormous regret, took hold of him, unfocused his eyes for a moment. But he mastered it with an act of will. “That’s not important, Chris. I’m here for you. To warn you.”

“About what?”

“You need to understand the choice ahead of you. You need to understand why they want you so badly. And – *Christ* – I have no time –”

“Dad, I don’t understand. Help me. Oh my God. Dad. Please. Can you help me?”

“I’m trying, son.” He did reach out then, his hand touching my arm gently, just like he used to. He looked at me, a faint smile on his lips and pride in his eyes, and suddenly I was sobbing.

“Listen, son. *Listen*. I don’t have much time. The thing that calls himself Parker – almost everything he’s told you is a lie. No matter what they tell you, it may not be too late for you.”

“Dad, what’s going on?” I said, struggling to control my voice enough to speak. “This isn’t just about me, is it?”

“No. Preparations for a massive campaign are underway. I wish I could explain it to you. It’s big. They’re almost ready to move. They’ve been preparing for longer than you can imagine.”

“Who?”

“Parker and his masters – Asmogar, and the others. Creatures of unimaginable power. They’re infinitely old, cold, merciless. What they have planned... oh, dear Lord.”

“You’re involved? You’re part of it?”

“Yes. If they knew I was here with you... you have no idea what they’d do to me. There are secrets I carry, things that would ruin everything if our Opponents discovered them. Secrets even Parker doesn’t know I have. If he did...” He jumped suddenly, glancing over his shoulder. He started to rise. “I have to go.”

“But Dad –”

“Listen, son. He has plans for you. Parker’s very important. He wants you on the front lines; he’d do anything to get you. I’m not much use to him anymore; he suspects me now.”

“Why? Why me?”

He glanced over his shoulder again, and his eyes widened in sudden alarm. He grabbed my arm with surprising force.

“You need to *understand*, Chris. This is a battle, and very soon it will be an open war. Between two vastly different, conflicting realities. It’s fought at every level of existence, but the key weapon is *will*. It’s the will to change reality, to create truth, that matters. Parker sees it in you, he thinks you have what he needs. But you can’t come under his control. You can’t. You *mustn’t*.”

I swallowed hard, suddenly afraid. “Dad... you understand what’s going on. Can you stop them?”

He shook his head. “There’s little I can do, and it won’t matter soon anyway.

They're almost ready to make their move. Reality itself will come under siege."

"I don't understand. I don't understand what's happening to me."

"You need to talk to Parker's adversary. His competitor. You've reached an agreement with him, yes?" His voice was suddenly filled with urgency, and his grip on my shoulder tightened.

I knew what was about to happen. I could feel the lie coming. I didn't want it to, but for the life of me, I was powerless to stop it.

"Yeah, Dad," I said. I smiled mechanically. "Of course."

"Good. That's good." Enormous relief slipped across his features. "Don't make my mistake, Chris."

There was a change in the room, almost a sound, something only he could hear, and *something happened* to Dad. He seemed to turn sideways, but not really. But he wasn't quite there, and then he was back. "I have to go," he said.

"But Dad," I said, panic in my voice. "I – I need help. I have so many questions."

He stepped away from the desk. "Chris –"

"Dad, *please*."

He paused, made a decision. The fear left his eyes then, replaced by something else. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Ask. I'll try to answer."

Suddenly, I had absolutely no idea what to ask. I floundered for a moment. "The accident," I said.

"What about it?" There was a flicker in the corner, a tremor in the air. Dad's grip on my shoulder tightened, but he didn't flinch, didn't turn away.

"Why can't I remember the accident, Dad? Am I being set up for failure?"

"You're asking the wrong question. The accident was nothing, it was just an accident. All that matters is the choice. Your choice. What you choose. Everything else is a blind, a distraction they use to hide the truth."

"What truth?"

But something was happening in the room. There was a voice, a legion of voices, almost speaking, *almost* there in the room. Dad closed his eyes, so I wouldn't see the sudden terror there.

"I love you Chris," he said. I moved to grab him, just as he let go of my shoulder.

But he was gone.

. . .

As I walked back to my office, I discovered the building was deserted.

The cubes I passed along the way were all empty. There was a half-finished sketch on John Vance's whiteboard, and a cup of steaming coffee balanced precariously on a cube wall near Lynn's desk. But the halls were silent. No ringing telephones, no distant conversations. Not even, I realized abruptly, the ever-present background hum of the air vents high overhead. The only sound was the dry crunch of my shoes on the carpet.

There was a strange red glow from the bank of north windows. I peered over the sea of cubes, trying to make out what it was. Outside, night seemed to have fallen, though it couldn't be much past two o'clock. Thick shadows hid the grounds. Through the trees I could see patches of a dark red sky, and something like an impossibly large storm system, a glowing purplish mass, slowly undulating over the horizon.

I closed the door to my office, shutting out that alien glow. I rested my head against the cool wood of the door, breathing slowly.

There was someone in the room.

He hadn't moved. But I knew he was there. "I don't suppose you're here to

upgrade my laptop," I said to the door.

There was no reply. I sighed, squared my shoulders, and turned around.

It was the kid. He was standing on my desk, his arms at his sides.

"You," I said. He didn't reply.

"You're the competition, aren't you?" I said. "Parker's opponent. You're from the other side."

Yes, the boy said. At least, he tried to. His lips moved, but he made no sound.

"Are you here to make me a counter offer? Because believe me, I'm ready to listen to anything at this point."

The boy said nothing, looking at me with sad eyes.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry we didn't get to talk before," I said.

The boy's lips moved again. I strained, but could hear nothing. His mouth moved with exaggerated slowness, and if I watched carefully I could read his lips. *You... Can... Still...*

"Oh, it's too late for that," said a voice behind me.

I turned. Parker.

The door to my office was gone. There was no exit from the room now, just four walls. I glanced back at my desk, but the boy was gone too.

"That took even less time than I thought," Parker said, looking satisfied. "I knew your instincts would lead you to me."

"What happened to the boy?" I demanded.

His eyebrows raised. "Is that how you perceived him? A child? Fascinating. That says something about how you view our Opponent, McNamara. You'll soon learn to see them very differently, I assure you. But we can discuss that later." He seemed excited, almost gleeful.

"Where is he?" I asked, turning back to the desk, waving my hands through the air where he had been standing.

"Oh, he's still here. You simply can no longer perceive him."

"Why? Why couldn't I hear him?"

"I think we've covered that." He reached for my chair, spun it around lazily, sat down. "Your choices today narrowed your options until you could hear only one voice, see only one competitor. Until they led you to me."

I stared at him over the clean, vast expanse of my desk. "You told me neither side would influence today's events. But you've been there the whole time, meddling."

"Meddling? I think you know exactly what I've been doing, Chris. I've been closing the deal."

"You lied to me."

"As one liar to another, I'm sure you'll forgive any professional overenthusiasm." He dismissed further arguments with a wave. "You're not looking at the big picture. Understandable, at the moment. But now you're part of the team, I expect you to start putting it together. We're in the end game, and there's no time for a leisurely apprenticeship. You'll need to start immediately."

"Start what?"

"Start figuring it out a little *faster*," he said, his voice rising. He stood, pushing back the chair. "You've joined a team of doers, not thinkers. And we're about to do something magnificent. A campaign of conquest unlike anything the cosmos has ever seen."

"What about your Opposition?"

He very nearly spat. "Those self-righteous Soldiers of Serenity? You'll learn about them shortly. We've hidden in fear, played by their rules, long enough. They'll learn they're not as invincible as they think. They'll learn."

He walked around the desk. “But let’s proceed with the formalities, shall we? There are several ways to do this, but I expect this shall be the easiest for you.”

He placed his hand on the desk. It had been perfectly clean, but beneath his hand now lay a single sheet of paper. He produced a pen.

“Sign it,” he said.

I picked up the paper reluctantly, began to read the first paragraph. It said more or less what I expected, but in language that made my blood run cold.

“Do I have to?” I asked.

He smiled. “In words that you would understand: Yes. The deal is already booked, McNamara. You are mine.”

“I still have questions.”

“The time for that is over. Sign.”

I put the paper down with fingers that trembled slightly. I couldn’t read any more anyway. “I can’t.”

He laughed. “Ah. The last-minute denials. Thought we’d dispense with these, but let’s have them.”

“I... I want more time.”

“You can’t have it.”

“Why?”

“Let’s be clear, McNamara. You brought yourself to this. All the decisions you made today were yours. No one made them for you.”

“You set me up.”

He shrugged. “I sold you. That, at least, you should understand.”

I tried frantically to think. In that brief moment he leaned closer, and as he did the outline of his body shimmered like a heat mirage. I felt a fierce heat coming from him; heat and a terrible *hunger*.

“The deal is done,” he whispered. “I’ve already told my masters, and they’re most anxious to meet you.”

The idea sent a thrill of terror down my spine. My throat clenched, and I couldn’t speak for a moment. Parker leaned back, evidently satisfied with my reaction.

But strangely, it wasn’t a vision of a soul-sucking horned demon I saw then. Instead, I saw Nigel. I thought of our conversation that morning, and how the most dangerous time for a salesman was just before the deal was signed. When, if you’d been especially cocky or desperate, you’d already reported the revenue, even though the customer hadn’t quite signed yet. And how, if you weren’t careful, the customer could demand anything he wanted in that moment to close the deal.

Parker had been clever, but if he’d really just bragged about this deal being done, then he didn’t exactly strike me as careful. Perhaps it was almost done. But there was still a long way between *almost* and *done*.

And, yes. Perhaps my soul was at stake – or what passed for it, in this case. But really, wasn’t this just another negotiation? The kind I did ten times a day. With buyers and sellers a lot less cocky than pitchfork-boy here.

Parker’s smile had started to fade. He seemed to have noticed a change in my demeanor. “It is time to consummate our arrangement,” he said, indicating the contract again.

“Well, what’s the hurry?” I asked. I found a corner of the desk and settled onto it. “I’m thinking I should take my time, think it over.”

“There is nothing to think over.”

“Candidly, I like you, Parker. Maybe we can do business. Now, I understand your Opponent may be out of the picture, but I still owe it to myself to shop around a bit, don’t you think? See if there’s another buyer.”

Parker’s expression was darkening. “What are you talking about?”



"I'm not saying we're done talking. Just that it's not every day you sell your soul."

"There is no other buyer."

"Oh, I'm not expecting you to come clean on that. I know you're busy; I don't expect you to keep tabs on the entire afterlife market. But I keep my ear out. I hear positive things about the Sioux Happy Hunting Grounds. And Olympus. And I hear Nirvana is expanding pretty aggressively into North American markets."

I thought Parker was going to blow steam out his nose. But after a moment he composed himself. "It's good to see your confidence back," he said. "This is exactly why I think you'll perform so well for us. But you're wasting your time, and we have a great deal to do. Sign the document."

I rubbed my chin. "Wish I could."

"What do you mean?"

"You said it yourself, Park. I was too easy. Frankly, I think I sold myself a little short. Be honest – I didn't really get your best offer, did I?"

I wasn't sure how he would react. He seemed to vacillate between a harsh denial, and some kind of arterial combustion. But finally he said, "I'm quite sure you understand this isn't a game, McNamara. I told you there were several ways this could proceed. This is by far the easiest for you. The others are unpleasant, and some are quite excruciating. But I assure you, the end result is inescapable."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. Right there. You have real trouble balancing the carrot and the stick in negotiations, don't you? From where I sit, there's been too much timber, and not enough vegetables."

"You want something."

"Now we're getting somewhere."

The Parker-thing considered for a moment. "I warn you, Mr. McNamara. Treating this like a game will not make it a game. You and I will be spending a great deal of time together. You don't want our relationship to start badly."

"See, now you're back to threats again. Man, you stink at this. Have you ever taken a negotiation course?"

His outline had started to blur again, but now he looked oddly two-dimensional, like a giant paper doll. Occasionally I could glimpse something behind him, bleeding around the edges, something large and squirming and very unpleasant.

"If you prefer we treat this like a game, we shall treat it like a game. I can be patient for a while longer. What is it you want? More time? Perhaps an opportunity for a sexual liaison with the woman? Teddy? Was that her name?"

"I want my father released from Hell."

The little paper doll Parker stopped moving. It looked freakish; his expression simply frozen, his arms cast out in any expansive gesture. Behind him the air darkened, seemed to boil with an ugly intensity.

"You heard me," I said. "I want him set free, allowed to join the other side, if that's what he wants. Then I'll sign whatever you give me."

"Impossible," the thing said. The lips on the Parker image never moved, and the sound seemed to come from something with a pretty serious medical condition.

"What are we talking here?" I said. "Forgive me, but I thought we were talking about the impossible. I thought we were *talking* about re-making reality. About having the daring and the guts to make the universe what we want it to be. Isn't that what you want from me? Because if it is, I better see a little of the same."

"What you ask has never been done."

"I don't give a shit. I know what I have to offer *you*, Parker. I get that. You want impossible deals, and making impossible deals is what I do. But the part I'm hazy on is what's in it for me. You want me, that's my price."

Parker was burning. Or more accurately, melting. Huge holes had appeared in his face, his chest, his legs. Something wet and black and hideous was oozing through, splattering on the floor, collecting into a dark mound.

“That’s really gross,” I said.

“I can crush you,” said a voice. All semblance of humanity was gone. This voice was like melons exploding in an oven. “I can teach you agonies like you have never experienced.”

“And now we’re back to threats and intimidation,” I said. “Could we move this along a little?”

“Let me show you the exquisite agonies that await you –”

“In the interests of time, let’s skip that. Because I’m going to hazard a guess that, until I sign my soul away, you can’t touch me.”

The mound erupted, growing thick tentacles, and lunged at me. The first time I flinched, but not the second. Or the third.

“Okay, we’ve established you can’t do dick,” I said, moving to the chair. I’d been standing for what felt like hours, and my feet were killing me.

“I will send you visions that shall drive you mad –”

“Moving on,” I said, putting my feet on the desk. “I also have a few questions about your offer of a romp with Teddy. Could you fix her up in one of those French maid outfits?”

The Parker thing was still for a moment. It assumed a variety of shapes, each more disquieting than the last. I fixed my gaze on the white board.

“I can leave you here,” the thing said abruptly. “Abandon you in complete solitude for eternity.”

“Mind if I play pool while you think about it? There’s a decent table on the fourth floor rec room.”

“The time for bluffs and games is now over,” said the thing. Its voice was more normal now, but somehow that made it worse. The squirming mound in the middle of the room had assumed a more regular shape, though it was only vaguely human. It had a vast, bloated sack of a stomach that spilled to the ground, and its head – if it had a head – had sunk deep into the sagging mass somewhere at the top.

“However this negotiation ends,” it continued, “you are mine. You belong to me. I will not permit any other outcome. I have important – *crucial* – tasks I need done, but that does not grant you license to mock. You will grovel before me like a maggot, and I will dispense rewards and tortures as I desire.”

“I understand now.”

“At last.”

“You need a skilled negotiator, because you really, really suck.”

The blob flared. “I will –”

“You will shut the hell up for a moment. To save time, I’ll cut to the chase. Now that I understand how things are going to be, my price has gone up. I want my dad out. That little contract of yours, in which I hand over my soul, is a piece of shit. I work for myself, and I’ll contract my services to you until this little war of yours is over.”

“This game has gone on long enough –”

“Shut up. My time is valuable. I’ll do your dirty little deeds, but on my own terms. No torture, no pitchforks. No eternal flames, no Barry Manilow music. Groveling, that’s negotiable.”

The blob trembled in the air before me, but was silent.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I said. “Now, do you want to draft it up, or shall I? Myself, I prefer short agreements, without the usual provisos, but I’m willing to

compromise.”

The silence stretched out for some time. I propped my feet back on the desk and waited.

“We have an agreement,” the thing said at last.

“Great,” I said.

Another piece of paper appeared on the desk. This one looked considerably shorter than the last. A pen appeared beside it.

“Sign,” said the thing.

“Just a moment. I’d like some time to look it over.”

“Sign.”

“Alone,” I said.

The blob trembled again, and I saw tentacles thrashing near the floor. But then the door to my office appeared again. “Leave when you have signed,” said the blob as it vanished.

I picked up the piece of paper, stared at it for a moment. Then I put it down again. I never was any good with contracts. Picking up the pen, I signed it.

“You can come on out,” I said. “I know you’re there.”

And suddenly he was. Standing on my desk, smiling down at me. The kid.

“I suppose you think you’re pretty smart,” I said.

“I do not understand.” His voice was childlike too, playful and innocent at the same time.

“I’m surrounded by neophytes,” I muttered. “Give me a handful of career salesmen, and I could conquer the universe.”

The boy cocked his head, looking at me.

“Look, it may have taken me a while to piece everything together,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean I was born yesterday. I know when I’m being played.”

“Explain.”

“I thought Parker was the one manipulating affairs today, setting me up for failure. But he wasn’t the only one manipulating things, was he? His meddling was just more obvious than yours.”

The boy nodded. “Nigel,” he said.

“Yeah. Nigel. If Parker had been the only one messing with me, he wouldn’t have been stupid enough to create a test that reminded me so bluntly that a deal is never done until the contract is signed. So that had to be you. Parker was careful to box me in; you had to be the one showing me how to avoid his trap. The message was obvious to me, but probably subtle enough that Parker never noticed it.”

“Yes. But we couldn’t be sure you would understand the message, see how the lessons of this morning’s conversation could be applied to your current problem. We were pleased to see you grasp the parallels so easily.”

“Glad to accommodate you. And my father? Did you help bring him to me?”

“Yes.” The boy looked at me oddly. “Not even he knew that, however. How did you?”

“It just figured. Why? Why did you do it?”

“Your father has crucial information, information even his masters do not know he has. He is no longer perceived as useful by our Opponent. They will release him, without understanding that he still has a vital role to play.”

“So you never intended to offer me anything, did you? I was just a useful sacrifice. Parker was right... I never had a chance of escaping him.”

“Your fate was always in your own hands. The only question was your father’s fate. He sacrificed much to have those last few moments with you today. It was that sacrifice that triggered an even greater one from you.”

“You fellows play a risky game.”

## Black Gate

"It has turned out well."

"Says you. The only question to me is how bad that contract I just signed is."

"Far better than you should have expected."

"So," I said. "I guess everyone gets what they wanted. You get Dad, and Parker got me."

"Yes. But we are not without regrets. You have shown resourcefulness, bravery, grace, humor. It would have been good to have you with us."

"Well." I held up the slim sheet of paper. "Maybe I'll look you up when my contract with Parker expires."

"That was a splendid touch. Quite unexpected. We had hoped for one impossible feat this day, and you produced two. What a magnificent Soldier you would have made."

"Thanks."

"You have my sympathies," he said.

"For going where I'm going? Don't worry about me. Sounds like I'll be talking fast and doing deals. It'll be heaven. Of a sort."

"Not merely for that. For being on the losing side in the coming conflict. You will experience great suffering, I fear."

"You think so?" I said. "That's how I like my Opponents in a good negotiation – cocky. You watch your little punk ass, junior. I got your number."

He face split in a wide grin. "Whether it is as allies or opponents, I'm certain I will enjoy our next meeting, Christopher."

"Yeah, me too," I said. And I meant it.

He turned to go. "Hey, little cherub guy," I called.

He glanced back at me. His grin had not faded. "Yes?"

"Take care of my dad."

"He will be welcomed, and cherished."

"He better be."

As he vanished, it occurred to me that I wouldn't meet Dad again. Not for a while, at least. And in the interim, we were going to be on opposite sides in what was shaping up to be one helluva showdown. I might not talk with him again, but perhaps I would finally get to see my old man in action. More than that; if I played my cards right, I might even get to see how well I measured up against the legend.

Pretty exciting, all things considered. "I'll be damned," I thought, with a weird mix of dread and hope. The irony of the expression was not lost on me.

Opening my door, I left to find Parker. And to get the fireworks started.





# *Legends of the Ancient World: Orcs of the High Mountains*

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*A Solo Adventure Game from Dark City Games*

*Orcs of the High Mountains* is an abbreviated adventure developed for GenCon 2006 by Dark City Games. Our regular series of complete adventures offers:

A full-length adventure booklet, running 30-50 pages not including the rules.

A cardstock cover on the adventure booklet.

A full sheet of 40-60 cardboard counters.

An 11"x17" full-color game board on cardstock.

The full Legends Basic Rules.

Note: The full Legends Basic Rules are also downloadable from: [www.DarkCityGames.com](http://www.DarkCityGames.com). You are encouraged to freely distribute Legends Basic Rules as long as you credit the artists and [www.DarkCityGames.com](http://www.DarkCityGames.com).

*Legends of the Ancient World*<sup>™</sup> is compatible with GURPS<sup>®</sup> and The Fantasy Trip<sup>®</sup>.

## INTRODUCTION

*Orcs of the High Mountains* is a role-playing game using the *Legends of the Ancient World* rules system. Each player controls one or more characters who go adventuring. Players mark their characters with cardboard pieces or miniatures, and use a hexagon board or modeled surface to depict an encounter area. On the board one hexagon (hex), or one inch, equals roughly five feet.

## CHARACTERS

Each character possesses three attributes: Strength, Dexterity, and Intelligence.

**Strength (ST):** Strong characters deal greater damage and absorb more hits before dying.

**Dexterity (DX):** Agile characters are more likely to hit enemies or dodge blows.

**Intelligence (IQ):** Smart characters are better able to notice clues and apply skills.

## NEW CHARACTERS

Players start with a party of four 34 point characters, allocating each character a minimum of ST9, DX9, and IQ9. For each character, distribute the remaining five points as desired. These are your character's *basic attributes*. In addition, each character is fully provisioned with food and water, and is equipped with two

weapons of choice (a shield counts as a weapon) and armor up to leather. Record your characters' attributes, skills, capabilities, weapons, and belongings.

Money is denominated into Copper Pennies (cp), Silver Shillings (ss), Gold Crowns (gc) and occasionally, Gold Royals (gr). There are 10 Copper Pennies to a Silver Shilling, 10 Silver Shillings to a Gold Crown, and 20 Gold Crowns to a Gold Royal, which is more of a bar than a coin.

## RESOLVING UNCERTAINTY

A character hits a foe by passing a three-die DX check (**3/DX**). That is, the player rolls three six-sided dice (3D6) and totals the results. If the total is less than or equal to the character's DX, he hits; otherwise he misses. For example: Ajax (DX11) rolls 2, 3 and 6 for a total of 11. This is less than or equal to his DX, so he hits his foe and rolls for damage (see *Damage*).

A ST check (**3/ST**) may be required for a physical feat, or an IQ check (**3/IQ**) for a mental one. A four-die check is abbreviated **4/DX**, **4/ST** or **4/IQ**.

## SEQUENCE OF PLAY

*Legends* is played in rounds. Each round, the side with initiative goes first, taking a turn for each of its characters. When those characters have all taken a turn, the other side takes a turn for its characters that have not yet acted. When all characters from both sides have taken a turn, the round is over and the next round begins.

### INITIATIVE

Decide initiative with a die roll. The side with initiative keeps it until a round passes where none of its characters attack. Initiative then goes to the opponent. Initiative can shift back and forth as often as one side fails to attack.

### CHARACTER'S TURN

A character's turn consists of him moving up to his movement allowance (MA) and executing ONE action. The player must complete one character's turn before continuing to the next. However, a character may pass or move without acting, saving his action to counter an attack or dodge a strike later in the round.

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*Story by Jerry Meyer Jr. Copyright(C) 2006 Dark City Games, Inc. Illustrated for Black Gate by John Woolley*



**MOVEMENT**

Prior to executing an action, a character may move up to his MA in hexes (see game board, page 152-153). A character's MA is half his DX rounded down. For example: Ajax (DX11) can move five hexes and attack.

A character may move around an enemy. However, if he moves adjacent and does not attack, the enemy may immediately use his action to strike the moving character.

**ACTION**

Every character can execute ONE action per round. This can be striking, shooting, grappling, counterattacking, dodging, dragging a character, etc. A character cannot move after an action.

**STRIKE**

An attacker hits an adjacent foe by passing 3/DX. If he

passes, roll for damage; if he fails, he misses. If the defender has not acted in the current round (even if he moved), he may use his action to either dodge or counterattack his attacker. The defender can wait for the outcome of the attacker's 3/DX before deciding his action.

The defender successfully dodges by passing 3/DX. If successful, he retreats one hex away from the attacker. If this is not possible, the attacker hits and rolls for damage.

If the defender instead counterattacks, he must first survive the attacker's blow. If he survives, he hits the attacker by passing 3/DX. If he hits, roll for damage.

**SHOOT/THROW**

An attacker with a missile weapon may shoot or throw a weapon at any unobstructed target. He hits by passing 3/DX. If he hits, roll for damage; if he fails, he misses. If

the target survives and has not yet acted this round, he may immediately counterattack the attacker. A shooter cannot move in the round he shoots, though a character throwing a weapon can.

Missile weapon range exceeds the confines of the playing board. The range of a thrown weapon equals the throwing character's ST in hexes. A character must recover his weapon before throwing it again.

**GRAPPLE**

An attacker enters a defender's hex to grapple. If the defender has not yet acted this round he gets a preemptive attack. The defender hits by passing 3/DX. If he hits, roll for damage adding an additional die. If the attacker survives, he hits the defender by passing 3/DX. If he hits, roll for damage. Both characters drop all but their daggers and are now grappling.

An attacker who begins his turn grappling a defender can hit that defender by passing 3/DX. If he hits, roll for damage. The defender, if he survives and has not yet taken an action this round, may immediately counterattack. He hits by passing 3/DX. If he hits, roll for damage.

A grappler may instead use his action to escape by passing 3/DX. If he succeeds, he moves into any empty adjacent space. If there is no such space, he cannot escape.

Characters sharing a space (with friendly or hostile characters) cannot attack outside the space, though outside characters can attack in.

A grappling character with twice or more the ST of his strongest grappling opponent suffers no mobility impediment nor is he confined to attacking only into the same space. In this case, when the stronger character moves, he carries the other characters along with him.

**COUNTERATTACK**

A defender surviving an attack may immediately counterattack his attacker. He hits by passing 3/DX. If he hits, roll for damage.

**DODGE**

A character dodges a strike by passing 3/DX. If he succeeds, he must retreat one hex away from the attacker. If he fails, he is hit.

**DRAG CHARACTER**

An attacker grappling a defender can drag the defender one hex in any direction by passing 3/ST by a greater margin than the defender.

**DAMAGE**

When an attacker hits a defender, the attacker rolls as many six-sided dice (D6) as indicated by his weapon's rating. Add/subtract plus or minus modifiers from this total. The total is the number of "hits" the defender takes. Hits are cumulative.

When a defender accumulates hits equal to his ST or more, he goes unconscious and will die at the end of the current combat, unless he is healed to a net ST greater than zero. For example: Ajax hits Hector doing 2D6 damage. He rolls a five and a three, inflicting eight hits. If Hector (ST12) suffers four more hits, he goes unconscious and will die unless immediately healed following the current combat.

Each weapon has a ST rating. This is the minimum strength required to use the weapon.

WEAPON	DAMAGE	ST
Unarmed <sup>1,2</sup>	D3	-
Dagger <sup>2,3,4</sup>	D6	-
Club <sup>4</sup>	D6-1	9
Cutlass	2D6-2	10
Short Sword	2D6-1	11
Broad Sword	2D6	12
Morningstar	2D6+1	13
2-Hand Sword <sup>5</sup>	3D6-1	14
Battle Axe <sup>5</sup>	3D6	15
Javelin <sup>4</sup>	D6	9
Spear <sup>4</sup>	D6+2	11
Bow <sup>5</sup>	D6	10
Longbow <sup>5</sup>	D6+2	11
Crossbow <sup>5,6</sup>	2D6	12

<sup>1</sup>Unarmed attacks do a three-sided die (D3) of damage. A stronger character adds an extra hit when attacking unarmed.

<sup>2</sup>Grappling characters can only attack unarmed or with a dagger.

<sup>3</sup>A dagger does D6+2 damage grappling.

<sup>4</sup>This weapon can be thrown.

<sup>5</sup>Two-handed weapon; cannot use a shield.

<sup>6</sup>A crossbow requires one turn to reload.

**ARMOR**

When a character is hit, reduce the hits he takes by the cumulative rating of all the armor he wears. For example: Hector takes eight hits. He wears leather armor (stops two hits) and carries a large shield (stops two hits). Therefore he takes only four hits (8 - 2 - 2 = 4).

Armor restricts mobility. Adjust a character's DX down by the restriction of all his armor. This also affects MA. For example: Hector (DX12), wears leather with a restriction of two, and a large shield has a restriction of one. Therefore, Hector has an adjusted DX9 (12 - 2 - 1 = 9). His MA is half of DX9 or four hexes.

ARMOR	HITS STOPPED/RESTRICTION
Cloth	1/1
Leather	2/2
Chain	3/3
Plate	5/5
Small Shield	1/0
Large Shield	2/1
Tower Shield	3/2

**CAMPAIGNING**

**ADVANCEMENT**

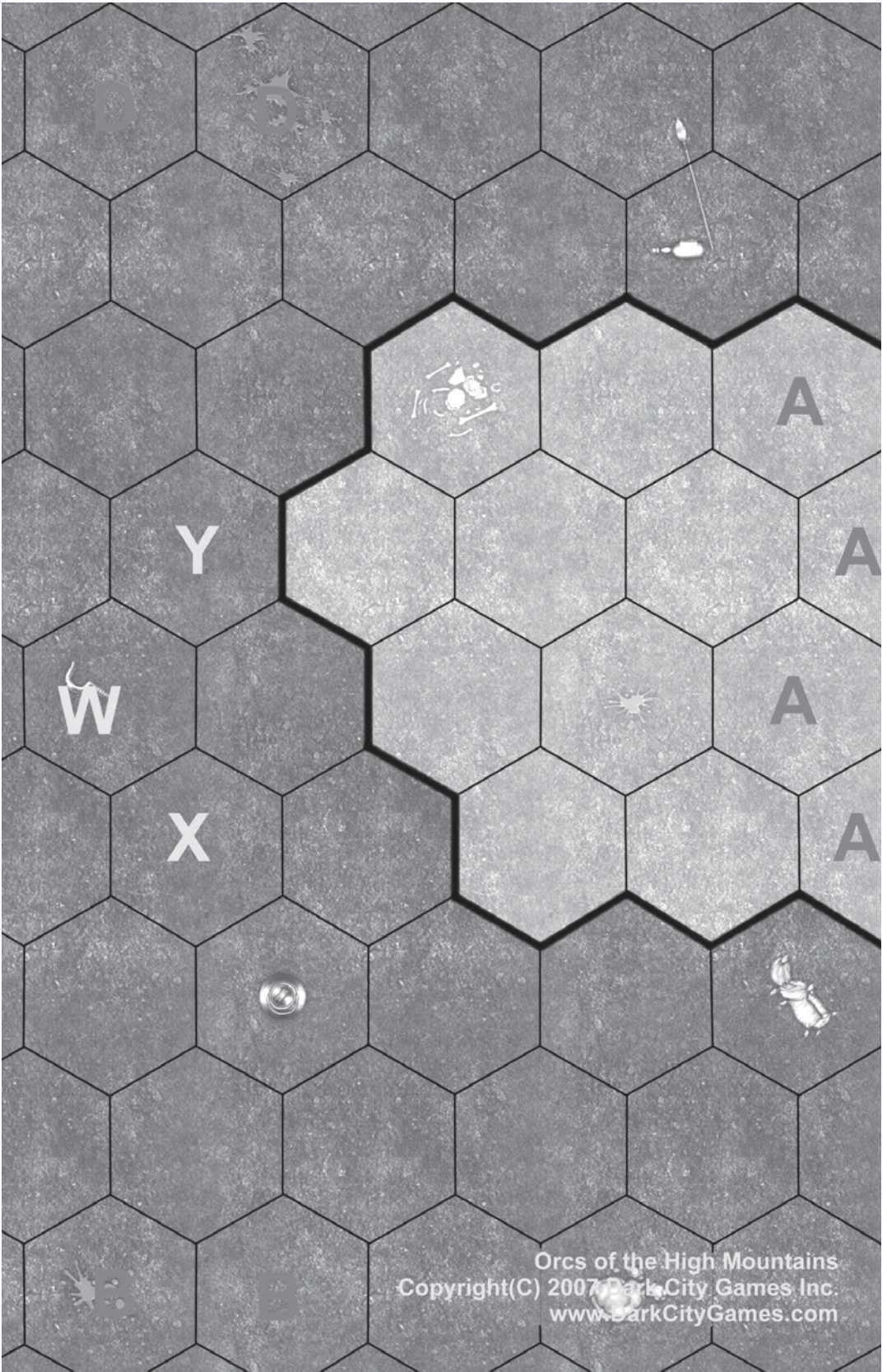
Characters use experience points (XP) to buy skills, magic and attribute points. After each encounter, every character contributing to victory gets one XP if all enemies are killed, captured or routed. Characters get no XP if they flee.

Between adventures, a normal character may cash in 10XP for a skill or 20XP for a spell. A magical character may cash in 10XP for a spell or 20XP for a skill — but only between adventures.









## Black Gate

A character may permanently increase an attribute at any time, provided he spends XPs equal to the next higher level. For example: an IQ13 character can spend 14XP to get IQ14.

### RECOVERY

Between adventures, all characters recover fully. However, during an adventure, every week a character spends resting with warmth, water and food, he checks 3/ST. His margin of success is the number of hits he recovers. A character recovers a minimum of one hit/week.

### KARMA/WISH

A character expends a karma point to re-roll a set of dice. A character expends a wish to fully restore his ST. This includes reviving a character that has just been killed. A wish can be used as a karma point. Both karma and wishes are transferable from adventure to adventure.

### CURSE

A character suffering a curse adds one to *all* his rolls (making it harder to succeed). He only returns to normal when the curse is lifted.

### SKILLS

A character can only use skills he has already learned. A character executes a skill by passing a check modified by his skill level. For example: Ajax has swimming level one. To swim ashore, Ajax (ST13) must roll 14 or less.

### ATHLETICS

- Acrobat:** jump/land without injury (DX).
- Climbing:** scale obstacles (ST).
- Riding:** ride large animals (DX).
- Swimming:** swim (ST).

### SOCIAL

- Charisma:** control non-hostile NPC for the encounter; NPC resists on 3/IQ (IQ).
- Leadership:** replace a character with any non-hostile NPC; NPC resists on 3/IQ (IQ).
- Dwarvish:** speak Dwarvish (IQ).
- Elvish:** speak Elvish (IQ).
- Orcish:** speak Orcish (IQ).
- Sorcerer's Tongue:** speak Sorcerer's Tongue; costs magic users 10XP (IQ).
- Literacy:** literacy in specific language (IQ).

### NAUTICAL

- Navigation:** navigation/piloting (IQ).
- Seaman:** handle waterborne vessels (IQ).

### THIEF

- Locks:** pick locks (IQ).
- Stealth:** evade detection (DX).
- Streetwise:** negate ambushes (IQ).
- Thief:** steal objects (DX).
- Traps:** detect/remove traps (IQ).

### TRADES

- Alchemist:** create potions; costs 10XP for magic characters (IQ).
- Animal Handler:** stop animal attacks; animal resists on 3/IQ (IQ).
- Bard:** gives his party one karma point in the current

adventure, per level of bard. Bard must be alive for this to be effective (IQ).

- Crafts:** carpenter, smith, weaver etc (IQ).
- Herbalist:** use herbs and plants (IQ).
- Jeweler:** craft metals and gems (IQ).
- Scholar:** know history and science (IQ).
- Medic:** heal one hit per medic level for hits sustained in current combat (IQ).
- Merchant:** purchase goods at 10% off list price for each merchant level; merchant resists on 3/IQ (IQ).
- Tactician:** steal initiative (IQ).
- Tracker:** track beings in the wilds (IQ).

### WEAPONS

- Each level adds one point of damage per hit.
- Axe:** +1 damage with an axe, mace or club.
- Bow:** +1 damage with a bow.
- Dagger:** +1 damage with a dagger.
- Pole Arms:** +1 damage with spear/halberd.
- Sword:** +1 damage with a sword.
- Unarmed Combat:** +1 damage unarmed.

### THE ADVENTURE

This is a role-playing adventure for Dark City Games' *Legends of the Ancient world*. The adventure is designed to be played either solitaire or with other players. If played with others, one player should be the Game Master (GM), reading the instructions aloud and keeping close track of the current entry number and game time.

### ENTRIES

The adventure comprises a series of numbered entries. Do not read the entries sequentially, they are intentionally scrambled. As you play, you will be directed to the different numbered entries.

### OPTIONS

While reading an entry, you will find options directly followed by numbers in parentheses. If you decide to take an option, turn immediately to the corresponding entry number. Continue playing from that point.

### PLOT WORDS

Occasionally, an upper case word in parentheses follows a sentence or phrase. This indicates that you have now acquired this plot word. Retain all plot words until specifically instructed to discard them. Plot words have an impact on your fate.

### GAME BOARD

Letters correspond to locations on the game board (see pages 152-153). For example, you might read that "You are at A in a Type III room." Find the Type III room on the game board and place your characters on the hexes marked A. If all A hexes are full, place your characters immediately adjacent.

### MAKING OBSERVATIONS

Any option preceded by a tilde (~) requires that one character in the party attempt a 3/IQ check. If the character passes, turn immediately to the corresponding entry. If the character fails, the option is not available.

### ENCOUNTERS

Whenever the party selects the *attack* option, the party has the initiative. Whenever the party selects the *talk* option, players must decide what they will say before



proceeding. Unless otherwise stated, adversaries fight to the death. Dead adversaries do not rejuvenate upon subsequent visits. Only once all adversaries are defeated can the party loot bodies, search the location or leave through a different entrance than the one used to enter.

**LEAVING CHARACTERS BEHIND**

A party may leave companions behind, but upon returning to that entry, one player rolls one die. On a one or two, the companion is still there in the same condition as before. Otherwise the companion is gone, never to be heard from again.

**BEGIN**

Go to (001) and begin.

**001**

You have been traveling for two days through the foothills of the High Mountains after leaving the city-state of Cretia. You have stopped in the small village of Leaf's Hill to resupply before attempting the long trek through Rockhail Pass.

After you purchase some food and drink for the weeklong journey ahead, an elderly couple approaches. They are wringing their hands and have the look of desperation on their faces. They explain that they're worried about their niece, Graentel, who went out yesterday to pick wild flowers and has not been seen since. Salmanno, the old man, tells you that he went to look for her and found many booted tracks and signs of struggle, including a torn piece of Graentel's kerchief. He is certain that a tribe of mountain Orcs have taken her. They have been kidnapping people, and those taken are never heard from again.

Everyone in town is afraid of the Orcs so no one will go after his niece. He and his wife are not wealthy, but they can muster 50ss if you will rescue their niece. The can afford to pay you 20 up front, and 30 upon the safe return of their niece. You feel compassion for the couple, so you accept. The couple weeps with gratitude and tells you where to find the tracks leading off into the mountains. Unless you have TRACKING (017), you must hire the local tracker, Aspur the Luprian (003).

**002**

You are in a long tunnel that slopes downwards about 20 yards from south to north. The lower north end of the tunnel smells damp, as if water hangs in the air. Even in the darkness you can see long scratch marks along the walls as if someone resisted being dragged off. You can exit north (031) or south (014).

**003**

Though he is reluctant, Aspur the woodsman, a Luprian scout, will agree to track the Orcs for you, though he will insist on 15ss for his service. Deduct the money from reserve and follow the scout to the caves of the Orcs (025).

**004**

You look carefully along the platform. You find a belt pouch with 15cp and 3ss. And, of course, there is the gong. It weighs 12 kg and is not worth much. But then again, some people just like having a gong (031).

**005**

Carefully picking your way around the room, you uncover a secret cubby holding rough notes and a few noteworthy sketches. Some of the sketches are on paper, others on sheepskin—or what appears to be skin, but with a different texture (008).

*If anyone has LITERACY in the Common Tongue, they find a brief tale of how the elder demon Orm-Umbar escaped from imprisonment and captured Pyrus the summoner (008).*

**006**

As you saunter up to the caves, three Orcs stand up from behind the bushes and attack—the Orcs have initiative (021).

**007**

Looking up, you find a faint drawing high on the wall. It depicts a mountain and at the very top, tiny dragons appear to fly about (024).

**008**

You are in the Shaman's room, a large, irregular room with cave entrances on the east and north walls. A large cauldron sits simmering in the center of the room, under a smoke-hole in the ceiling. A stone butcher block sits next to the cauldron, covered in cutting implements, blood, and bits of flesh that are best left unidentified. A small chest sits in the corner, next to a pile of rags and pillows. The shaman Snargfist stands next to the cauldron, stirring some foul brew, while his bodyguard Moak picks an axe up from the butcher block.

You have initiative. You start on or adjacent to the D spaces. Snargfist is at X and Moak is at Z. The cauldron at W and the butcher block at Y give anyone standing behind them +1 point of Armor vs. missile weapons as they use the large objects for cover. If you win, you can examine the spellbook (012), open the chest (015), search the room ~ (005); or exit north (018) or east (014).

*Snargfist (X): ST11 DX14(13) IQ10; staff d6+1; cloth 1/1; 18cp, 3ss, spellbook. Snargfist shoots a "magic fist" spell at one opponent per turn. He hits by passing 3/IQ; if he hits, he does 2D6-4 damage.*

*Moak (Z): ST15 DX12(9) IQ9; battleaxe 3D6; chainmail 3/3; 16cp, 4ss.*

**009**

As you look across the rocky entrance, you see a rough sketch of a fist grabbing a pair of manacles scribbled next to the opening. You seem to recall that this symbol has some sort of significance, but the memory is hazy at best. You have the codeword MANACLE (021).

**010**

The chest yields 30cp, 41ss, 1gc, 3 gems, and a vial of liquid. You decide to pocket the treasure (008).

*If anyone has RECOGNIZE VALUE, they can tell that the gems are worth 60ss each. They may be sold in town when you return. If anyone has READ SORCERER'S TONGUE, they can tell that the vial is a Demeran rejuvenation potion which will heal 1D6+1 ST (008).*

## Black Gate

### 011

You find a gleaming broadsword. As you draw the sword from its scabbard, the magnificent blade glows with an intense blue light. This is a fine blade indeed, and magical one to boot. It does 2D6+2 and requires ST12 to wield (035).

### 012

Snarfist's spellbook contains copies of the 4 spells he knows: *Fire, Mist, Magic Fist, and Drop Weapon*. A magic user with IQ12 or better and Sorcerer's Tongue may cast the spells from this book as if they were scrolls. Casting each spell in this way incurs no fatigue, but the spell is erased from the book once it is cast (008).

### 013

The clean white bones have mysterious runes burned in strange but curious patterns. You do not get a good feeling about the bones (031).

### 014

You are in the entrance cave, a large room of uneven stone. Clay pots filled with lit oil and straw provide just enough light to make out the piles of dirty furs and discarded rags that make up the bedding for the Orc bandits. Dark openings in the cave walls lead to tunnels north, east, and west, while sunlight filters in through the hanging vines covering the exit to the south. As you enter, two Orcs and two goblin archers stand up and prepare to attack.

You begin on or adjacent to A. The Orcs are at V and S. The goblins are at Z and U. You have initiative. If all enemies are defeated, you can exit north (002), south (021), east (024), west (008), search the furs and bedding ~ (026), or search the rest of the room ~ (023).

Orc (V): ST14 DX10(9) IQ8; mace 1D6+2; cloth 1/1; 12cp, 1ss.

Orc (S): ST13 DX11(9) IQ8; shortsword 2D6-1; leather 2/2; 10cp, 4ss.

Goblin (Z): ST10 DX11(10) IQ9; bow D6, dagger D6; cloth 1/1; 22cp, 3ss.

Goblin (U): ST10 DX13 IQ9; bow D6, javelin D6; 12cp, 3ss.

### 015

The chest is locked. If the heroes have the codeword BIGKEY, go to (010). If one hero has Lock Picking, he can open the chest (010). Otherwise, the chest weighs 4 kg and may be carried (008).

### 016

As you approach the caves, you spot movement among the piles of debris. Three Orcs lazily lie about, obviously waiting to ambush anyone approaching the caves. However, they have not yet seen you. You have initiative (021).

### 017

You follow the tracks to a cave located in a ravine at the edge of the High Mountains. Up close, there seems to be a worn path leading to the largest cave opening. Sparse trees, sickly bushes, and piles of rocks and debris surround the largest cave. One character checks 3/IQ. If he passes go to (016), otherwise, approach the caves and go to (006).

### 018

A crude door and lock block the opening. If the party has the codeword BIGKEY, or if anyone has LOCK-PICKING, go to (037). If not, the party can break the door down (029), or give up and go elsewhere (008).

### 019

The entryway opens into a well-furnished cave. Candles and lanterns light the room, and old furs cover the floor. Clothing, backpacks, and other gear are strewn against the walls, and a long chain connects a frightened looking girl to the north wall. A bed rests against the east wall, and a table with 3 mismatched chairs dominates the center of the room, occupied by three figures. As you enter, a rough-looking man rises from his chair, motioning to the other seated figures to do likewise. He smiles and offers you 100ss, and your lives, to leave now and forget about the girl and the Orc bandits.

You can take his offer (032), exit to the west (024), or attack (035).

### 020

In a dark corner, almost unnoticeable, lies an odd-shaped lump. You pick it up, brush off some dirt and grime, and a finely crafted key emerges in the shape of an Oak leaf (024).

If you have the *Dark City Games* adventure **Little Black Book**, you now have the code word "LEAFKEY."

### 021

You are in a field outside of a cave, on or adjacent to the spaces marked A. The cave entrance is at C. The three Orcs are near the cave entrance at E, F, and G. All other lettered spaces are piles of rubble. Moving through them uses an extra MA per hex. Each of the Orcs will shoot/throw missile weapons for one turn before changing weapons and then charging. Although they are guards, they will let you flee. If you defeat the Orcs, you may loot the bodies and enter the cave entrance to the north (014) or search the cave entrance ~ (009).

Orc (E): ST12 DX11(10) IQ10; bow 1D6, mace 1D6+2; cloth 1/1; 6cp, 2ss.

Orc (F): ST14 DX10(9) IQ9; 2 javelins D6, morningstar 2d6+1; cloth 1/1, 4cp, 3ss.

Orc (G): ST11 DX14(12) IQ10; bow 1D6, short sword 2D6-1; leather 2/2; 15cp, 4ss.

### 022

You come across an old beaten map on stained paper. The map portrays a large island off the coast of a village named "Seaside." Next to the large island is a small island, connected with a dotted line (035).

### 023

You find a nicely made silver talisman on a leather neck chain. When you return to town, you can sell it for 5ss (014).

If you have the *Dark City Games* adventure **Crown of Kings**, you now have a talisman that works in the mountain (014).

### 024

You are in a tunnel running east and west. Despite being somewhat dim, it is cleaner than the rest of the caves. You can search the tunnel ~ (020), examine the



walls ~ (007), or you can depart through the opening on the east (019) or west (014).

**025**

The Orc caves are located in a ravine at the edge of the High Mountains. Aspur points in the direction of the largest cave opening, tells you that the tracks lead there, then makes a hasty retreat. Sparse trees, sickly bushes, and piles of rocks and debris surround the largest cave. One character checks 3/IQ. If he passes go to (016), otherwise, approach the caves and go to (006).

**026**

Searching through the assorted rags and piles of disgusting furs, you uncover a leather pouch with two vials of liquid labeled with strange lettering. You pocket the vials for sale when you return to town (014).

*If one of the characters has the ALCHEMY skill or reads SORCERERS TONGUE you discern that the vials are Demeran rejuvenation potions. Each one instantly heals no more than 1D6+1 points ST for one character (014).*

**027**

You look over the edge of the stone platform, peering into the deep black water several feet below. Shards of old and new clothing hang from sharp rocks by the base of the platform, and splatters of black blood stain the rocks. You think you see movement under the surface, but quickly pull yourself back (031).

**028**

Buried under the sacks is Snargfist's treasure hoard. Inside a box are 35cp, 24ss, and 2gc. There are also maps of the surrounding area and several large, feathered hats. While the hats are of no real value (though they are impressive), the maps will be worth something when the heroes return to town (037).

**029**

The door is crude, but sturdy. The heroes can attempt to bash it in by attacking it with weapons. Up to two party members per turn may attack the door. The door has 20 ST and an armor of 3. When the door is out of ST, it cracks and collapses.

This will make a lot of noise. Roll 1D6 each turn. On a 1 or 2, Orc hunters will hear the noise and enter the caves to investigate. To resolve this battle, place your characters adjacent to the C spaces. The 3 Orcs enter on or adjacent to the D spaces. Keep in mind, the cauldron is still at W and the butcher block is at Y. You have initiative. If you survive you may continue to attack the door. If you break it down go to (037), otherwise return to (018).

Orc1 (D): ST12 DX12(10) IQ9; *shortsword 2D6-1; leather 2/2; 12cp, 2ss.*

Orc2 (D): ST13 DX11(9) IQ9; *spear D6+1; leather 2/2; 15cp, 1ss.*

Orc3 (D): ST12 DX11(9) IQ9; *crossbow 2D6; short-sword 2D6-1; leather 2/2; 14cp, 2ss.*

**030**

As you look through the shelves, you suddenly find yourself peering into the vacant stare of empty eye sockets. What sits before you is a human skull. More

unsettling is the fact that the skull seems somewhat fresh. "Cleaned" tissue still clings to it and the odor of death is heavy in the air (037).

**031**

You are on a stone platform in a large, underground chamber. There are only a few lit oil pots directly to either side of the door, but even with that feeble illumination, you can see that the cavern is huge. It stretches out for well over a hundred feet to the north, well beyond the light given off from the pots. The majority of the chamber is filled with water, and only a small, 20' x 15' stone platform extends out into the lake from the entryway. In the distance, water can be heard slowly dripping from the ceiling into the enormous underground lake. Several large ripples can be seen, indicating movement out about 10 feet from the platform. The water is unfathomably deep, and you would never be able to swim to the far side of the lake, if it exists. The only other fixture here is a large gong. You can search the platform (004), look over the edge of the platform (027), ring the gong (036), or exit back up the tunnel (002).

**032**

You agree to his offer. The girl whimpers, then bawls as you leave the room, followed by Grim and his bodyguards. He escorts you to the cave entrance and gives you your money, gleefully smirking. You can re-enter the cave (014) or leave the helpless girl to a hideous doom and return to town (039).

**033**

In the piles of gear and clothing, assorted garments emerge that certainly belonged to different people. They are items that no Orc would ever wear. Some garments betray a splattering of blood, others are torn or appear to have been used to bind a victim (035).

**034**

A sheet of paper on the table catches your eye. At the top of the sheet there is an icon of a fist holding a pair of manacles. You can take the page and sell it in town for 5ss (038).

*If anyone is literate in COMMON TONGUE, you see that the page is some sort of list. The first column is the species; the second column gender; then age; weight; condition, and price (038).*

**035**

You are in or adjacent to the B spaces. Graentel is chained to the wall at C. There is a bed at C and a table at W. Grim the Man is at Z, Throng the Orc is at X, and Gospit the goblin is at Y. You have the initiative. If you win the encounter, you can search the room and free the girl (038), search the table (022), look along the walls (033), do a thorough search ~ (011), exit to the West (024) or return to town (040).

· Grim (Z): ST11 DX13(11) IQ11; *shortsword 2D6-1; leather 2/2; 14cps, 100ss; Big Key (BIGKEY).*

· Throng (X): ST15 DX11(9) IQ9; *battleaxe 3D6, daggers D6; leather 2/2; 40cp, 4ss.*

· Gospit (Y): ST10 DX12(11) IQ11; *4 javelins D6; cloth 1/1; 22cp, 3ss. Gospit will throw 3 javelins, saving the last for melee combat.*

## Black Gate

### 036

Suddenly an enormous tentacle rises out of the water, followed by a hideous, beaked head. An enormous cave kraken attacks anyone on the platform.

You are on or adjacent to the A spaces. Only the shaded hexes extending from the A spaces are solid; all others are water hexes (including B, C and D). The kraken is a monster with a 5 hex reach; its head is in the water at W. The Kraken has initiative. If you survive, you can search the platform (004).

*Characters in the water are in trouble. When a character falls in, he immediately drops everything not attached to his body. Characters with SWIMMING skill can swim one space per turn (or climb one space to shore). Any character wearing armor or clothes who can swim must pass 3/ST minus the restriction of the armor he is wearing. For example, a character with ST12 wearing chainmail must roll nine (12-3=9) or less to successfully swim one space. Each time a character fails, he takes D6 fatigue. A character who can swim can spend one turn taking off his gear (it sinks and is lost forever), but assuring he will not have to take further swim checks. Any character reaching ST0 falls unconscious and drowns, sinking slowly to the bottom of the lake before he is torn apart and eaten by the Kraken.*

*Cave Kraken: ST22 DX11 IQ5; beak 3D6; skin 2/0. The kraken can attack up to 3 targets per turn both on land and in the water. Each tentacle grapples one target, only rather than attacking, the tentacle checks 3/DX to drag the character one space to the head. Ultimately, the Kraken hopes to drag a victim into its head space where the Kraken will attack with its beak and try to eat the victim. If the Kraken gets a meal, he immediately submerges, leaving the party to go on its merry way. The kraken will not be killed until its head is slain. Tentacles can be attacked individually. Each tentacle is protected by rubbery skin 2/0 and is severed after 9 hits. The kraken will retreat if it loses all three attack tentacles. (It has more, but there is easier food to find) (004).*

### 037

With the door no longer blocking the entrance, the party enters a small room filled with sacks and broken boxes. Most of the containers are filled with food of questionable origin, old rags, and torn uniforms. A horrible rotting stench hangs in the air. You can search the shelves ~ (030), the sacks ~ (028), or exit to the south (008).

### 038

Graentel, petrified with fear after just witnessing the killing of Grim and his Orcs, doesn't quite know whether to weep with joy or cringe in fear. However, she quickly figures out that you are here to save her. She cries hysterically for a few minutes, but gets a handle on herself. She tells you that Grim's BIGKEY will open her manacles, and you free her.

Graentel is scared and would like to leave the caves as quickly as possible. However, she clings to her rescuers and will follow where they go. After all, these brave heroes are obviously powerful enough to clear the caves. Graentel will not enter combat under any conditions, though she will defend herself if attacked. In the event that her skills are useful to the party, she will

do her best to aid them.

Under Grim's bed you find a chest with 25cp, 20ss, and 5gc. There are also 4 vials with writing on them. If you have the codeword MANACLE go to (034). You can search the table (022), exit to the west (024) or return to town (040).

*A character with ALCHEMY or SORCERERS' TONGUE realizes that the vials contain Elvish Greensalve. One vial will instantly heal 1D6+1 ST for one character. The other two vials contain Assist Potions. Each potion will allow a character to raise one stat of their choice by +1 for one encounter.*

*Graentel: ST9 DX11 IQ10; Farming+1, Animal Handling+1.*

### 039

You return to town. The farmers wail in agony when they realize that their niece is lost, and of course the characters will not receive the additional 30ss reward. The party quickly packs up its belongings and leaves town before the locals find out what REALLY happened (END).

### 040

The heroes return to Leaf's Hill with Graentel in tow. She runs to her family, who weep with joy. Hugs and kisses are exchanged, and the heroes find themselves hugged if they stand too close. After this emotional reunion, uncle Salmanno turns to the heroes and hands them a small pouch containing 30ss.

For the rest of the week, the characters are treated like the heroes that they are. As word of the defeat of the Orc raiders spreads through town, the heroes are given free food and lodging, and every night they are toasted at the inn. Each character is given a shirt and trousers of fine cotton fabric, and each receives a leather rain cloak as well. After a week of rest and relaxation, the heroes finally decide it is time to leave (END).

## END

Whether you rescue Graentel or not, you can sell any treasure you acquired in the caves to the town merchants. Armor and weapons looted from bodies are worth 10ss each. Unidentified items such as spell books, potions, gongs, and the like may be sold for 5ss each.

The heroes will receive XP as normal. Additionally, if the heroes returned Graentel back to her family alive, they each receive an additional XP.

A note on using Demeran rejuvenation potions: Demeran rejuvenation potions are common throughout the land, though they do have one side effect. After 24 hours the user must sleep for 12 hours for EACH rejuvenation potion imbibed during the previous 24-hour period. As this adventure lasts less than 24 hours, this will not come into play during Orcs of the High Mountains. However, if the characters take the potions into further adventures, then the effects may become important.

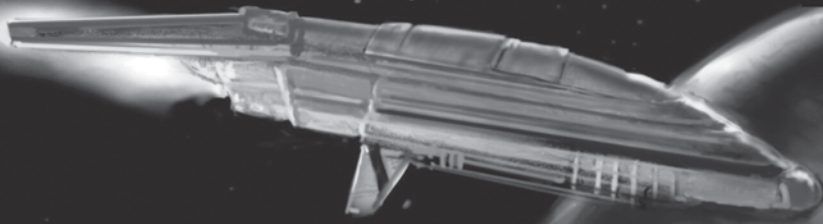
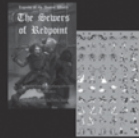
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## *Knives Under the Spring Moon*

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*Ed Carmien*

The last winter moon was old and thin up in the cold morning air. The two's runners whisked against the beaten snow close to wintercamp. The sound turned to a sharp crisp hiss as it hit the pebbled layer of ice over the thinning layer of snow. Rigged for winter, her two sat lower to the ground where the long flat runners met the white-sheathed ground. The elders were looking to her and the other outriders for news — news about nearby herds, news about how long the snow cover would last, news the elders would use to decide when to break wintercamp and begin the first trek of the season, to a meetup planned for the second spring moon.

A wrap of maggie calf wool kept her neck and lower face warm. The scarf had been her mother's, and Kris treasured it, kept it neat and clean. She imagined it still carried her mother's scent, spring blossoms mixed with sweet oil. On early mornings there was nothing better to wear against the bitter wind. Even under half sail her eyes watered from the blasting air. As she whisked along familiar hill-tops, Kris wished she could see through her sail and keep her face in the lee.

The runners of her two made a thwup-thwup sound as it crossed a pattern of imperfections in the ice. Kris dropped sail. Maggie tracks, it had to be maggie tracks, made during the slushy afternoon hours and frozen again overnight. She scanned the horizon but saw no sign of the huge six-legged grass eaters. Her two coasted to a halt. In the gray predawn light she saw a shadow ahead and to the right. Scattered around it were a number of maggie tracks. To Kris's discerning eye it seemed they'd wandered aimlessly. Although she'd planned to look farther out for news to tell the elders, she propped the two on its crutch and pulled a javelin out of the padded tube below the saddle.

Late winter could make sleeks adventurous, and as she remembered her mother telling her, once a sleek got old or sick "all bets are off." A winter-furred sleek would be hard to spot against the snow, and the only warning Kris could expect would be the scrabble of claws that came as they leapt with teeth bared and forelegs extended, nothing at all like the sleek in the story about Red-Sail Sally, the wily beast who ate an elder before being found out by Sally.

Aside from the steady breeze there wasn't a sound to be heard. Kris felt warmth creep back into her face, now that she was out of the wind. The light improved and she walked with a heavy tread, punching her heels down with every

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*Illustrated by John Kaufmann*

## Ed Carmien



Since his bio appeared in **BG 10**, Edward Carmien won not one but two awards for his writing, so now he's an *award-winning author*. He feels just the same as he did before *winning two awards* (during the celebration of Heinlein's centennial, natch). Sure. Exactly the same. You may kiss his ring.

With the sundry odd jobs and skills bio out of the way, let's move on to his two cats. When they were dewey-eyed same-litter kittens fresh from the Franklin Township Animal Shelter, he came up with lots of good brother names from fiction and mythology, even pop culture. As all his suggestions were met with blank looks, the cats ended up Calvin and Hobbes. Hobbes is the bigger brother who spends time sleeping and ambushing his sibling; Calvin is the scaredy-cat who only likes people who hate cats. They would both *love* to *slay* winged things outdoors, but are indoor cats, content to chase mice onto glue traps, then stand proudly by as their puzzled humans say "where did that glue trap come from?" A Kliban moment.

An *award-winning author* needs a new website, so he made a new one: [www.edwardcarmien.com](http://www.edwardcarmien.com). You can see more of his work in the DAW anthology **Catopolis** [December 2008]. And where the **BG 10** blurb coyly said "Before the Wind" might not be the last story featuring Kris, here it can be authoritatively reported that Kris's story *will continue*—already has, in fact, well past this second installment. Stay tuned.

*Photo by Ed Carmien*

step to assure the sharp bone studs on her ice straps bit clean.

It had been a grand winter, after the festival and the race she'd won. There'd been a handful of winter hunts, enough to show everyone that her crazy two, made by Paddy out of the three she'd wrecked on her very first hunt as an outrider, was more than a fluke. Kris had proven it worked just as well with runners as with wheels. She'd made good credit during all the cold months, enough for a new sail and payment to Paddy for wagon room and storage besides. There'd been bloodmead when she'd wanted it, and Nellie had carved her a fine figurine of her two as a keepsake.

As Kris stepped closer to the shadow she'd seen against the snow, all the good feelings of the winter months drained away. The long-forgotten feeling of a stone in the pit of her stomach settled on her like a windless day. She should have known what it was from the first moment she'd seen it, an angular blotch of darkness against the hillside. It was Makk's wagon, broke-backed and weathered to pieces. In the wreckage was the first crutch she'd had for her two, mixed in with the jagged bits of carved and joined bone that had formed the mast of Makk's four.

Blinking, Kris realized she'd shed tears. Stepping hard on the icy snow she returned to her two, kicked the crutch up and into her hand with a practiced motion. The two fell sideways beneath her raised leg and she caught the seat beneath her bottom. Her rig squeaked as she settled onto it, and her hands found the lines without a moment's thought. Unfurling a quarter, Kris kicked forward and hissed away from the wind, away from the awful mess that had killed a man — where *she* had killed a man, truth be told, no matter he'd been bent on doing the same to her if not worse besides — and went on with her run, eager to be back in winter-

camp before the late morning sun softened the snow so much she'd be walking as much as sailing before the wind. Kris didn't give another thought to the maggie tracks she'd found.

Wintercamp's last days were always a hive of activity. Wagons that had sat the winter in one spot were rocked free of ice. There were always leather lacings and cracked or crumbling vertebra bones to renew in the compound wheels, quite a chore especially on the twelves where the wheels were taller than those who worked at fixing them. Kris found herself nagging Paddy to pay closer care to his wagon, an eight that had seen better days. Aside from the bits of cleverness such as the steering harness that kept the wagon in line, Paddy's outfit was clearly the work of a man who lived by himself, who didn't mind letting little things wear to breaking.

There were newly made or at least newly patched sails to haul up masts, rigging to oil, loaned tools to retrieve. On the smaller wagons runners were swapped for wheels, axles polished and greased, worn seats restuffed and sewn plump and new. Every so often the owner of one of the big wagons stopped by to entice Kris into joining a race team. Outriders and hunters were valued crew because they were well practiced with spear and javelin, and hitting the targets was a big part of winning the meetup races. The feeling of a big eight or ten under full sail, deck crammed shoulder-to-shoulder with throwers, was second only to the dancing. Kris grinned, thinking there would be plenty of chances to practice come springparty, which waited only on the spring wind.

The elders strolled the camp to assure that the broken and used up did not collect unduly — such discards were gathered and then strewn lightly upon the plains where the elements and the grass would make them disappear. "No midden here," said Paddy when elder Jon paid a visit. Jon snorted, while Kris looked a question at the old man. "Means trash pile," Paddy said, and Kris added it to the odd store of knowledge she'd gleaned from Paddy over the cold months.

Unlike festival, which began at dawn with the return of the racing wagons, springparty would begin at night. There would be no race to mark the occasion, just the usual crush of last minute chores. Kris cut her dark brown hair in the late afternoon and reveled in the lightness of her head. Paddy took a look and made a face that meant he wanted to trim it, and he did, his deft hands cool and precise on her neck as he turned her this way and that.

"Let's do yours," she said boldly, seeing he'd kept his beaded leather cap atop his head despite the middling warm afternoon air. Around them the plains grasses were sprouting anew, spreading a taste of fresh green in the air that would only last a day or two. Her last early morning run had been the final good wind day of the winter season. For a time the winds would blow this way and that, good enough for a short dash around wintercamp to test wheels and rigging, but worthless for covering ground. Real wind's return meant springparty that night and travel the next day.

"No thanks," Paddy said. Kris had spent enough time in his company to cock her head and give him a thoughtful look. "Oh no," he continued. "I know that look, and that look is questions. Just no thanks for now, Kris, and here's your hair done for springparty." He made a washing motion with his hands, dropping stray hairs into the slight and swirling breeze. She turned to face him.

"What, tonight? Where's the wind, old man?"

"It'll come."

“You’re a caster now, as well as a coot?” Coot was one of his strange words.

“Ha ha,” he said in a plain tone. That meant he took her meaning if not all the joke behind it. “Let’s not make me a coot just yet.”

The inconstant wind fell away. From the far side of the ring of bare-masted wagons came a shout, then another. With a flap and a thrum the leather side of Paddy’s eight shook from the onrush of a steady wind, the spring wind. Kris’s shorn, brown hairs blew away, twirling down to the new grass shoots beside the wagon.

Paddy chucked her on the side of her head and laughed. “Time to feast!” Kris knew he was right: the last of the giant barrels of bloodmead would be breached, the last of the stores from the lean winter hunts cooked and served in a savory stew that was one of Kris’s favorite things in the world. She checked the sun. Not very long to sunset. Time enough to get a wash in at one of the water bags while the late day warmth was still in the air.

When Kris returned, drums announced the start of springparty, though from the rosy cheeks on her old friends Dill and Arla it seemed they’d gotten an early start. Kris hailed the crafters as she stepped down the mid-leg thighbones that were the spokes on Paddy’s wheels. There was a whiff of her favorite stew in the air, and her stomach groaned with anticipation.

“Hello Kris!”

“Springparty!”

Kris nodded and linked arms with Arla. In the center of the great ring of wagons a big fire was kindled, of things no longer needed that would burn, and as always of dried maggie dung. Now that the spring wind had set in, there would be a healthy crescent of clean air upwind. Packed dried sheaths of grass made for a mud-free dancing square, and Kris smiled in anticipation. Dill and Arla’s oldest boy still made eyes at her, but she’d decided she was too old for him. There was a fine young wooler who’d caught her eye. His grandmother, he’d said one cold winter night under a round and aloof mid-season moon, had made the scarf Kris wore, and would she like to learn the pattern of its weaving?

She’d dance with him or she wasn’t an outrider, and if he should offer to show her a pattern of woven wool, well, away from the great fire it was dark beneath the new spring moon, and there were ways other than wool to stay warm, weren’t there?

It was the third skin of bloodmead she should have turned down, Kris decided later. The first had warmed her, the second had inflamed her to feats of dancing she’d never before attempted, but the third darkened her vision and made her stumble. She sat to the side and watched what she realized was the end of springparty, slow dancing pairs in the guttering light of the big fire that was all but spent. The third skin was the wooler’s fault. He’d danced arm in arm with a girl from one of the tanner families, and gone off with her, into the dark. Even though she’d given up on the wooler, Kris found her eyes searching here and there for...

“Quite a dance, I didn’t know you had it in you. But I should have known, your mother kicked her heels just as high.” It was Paddy’s voice, but it wasn’t Paddy, it was... Kris shook her head. Yes, the third skin had been a mistake. She’d never had so much bloodmead before.

“And never again,” she said, and was so amused by the sound of her voice — it was lower, somehow, rougher than Kris imagined herself to sound — that she laughed so loud she saw faces turn to look at her.

“You’re not Paddy,” she managed to say, stopping after each word to make sure she got it right.

Paddy laughed, and it was his laugh all right, but who was this dark-haired



man next to her, the man with Paddy's face and voice but with short black hair oiled and groomed close to his scalp?

He finished laughing and frowned, turned his head to the side. Paddy opened his mouth to shout, and then Kris heard it too — the accelerating syncopation of a maggie's six hooves at a gallop. Then another, and then many more. Paddy's shout near deafened her.

"Stampede! To your wagons!" His clear voice cut the night like a thrown javelin. For a moment afterward all that could be heard were the hooves coming out of the night.

But maggies don't run at night, Kris thought to herself. She shook her head. This was no time to be muddled with bloodmead. There was a big leather bucket of snowmelt nearby; she'd dunk her head in that, clear her thoughts...

Paddy grabbed her arm roughly and pulled her away.

"Let go!" she said crossly, thinking of cold water on her forehead.

He didn't speak. Kris saw his face in profile, lit by the dying embers of the great fire. It was Paddy, she decided. The sound of the maggie's hooves came closer. And there was something else. Shouting. Yelling. From outside the ring of wagons that was wintercamp. And there was something else...

"Not enough," she mumbled as Paddy half dragged, half urged her along. "Not enough."

"You're right, that's not enough for a herd," Paddy said through gritted teeth. Then the first shaggy, winter-maned maggies broke the circled wagons, broke through when they should have shied away from the leather and bone walls the wagon sides made.

And there were riders atop the maggies, riders whooping and yelling and whirling lariats in the shadows of the late night.

## "Before the Wind"



The First Adventures of Kris  
in **Black Gate 10**

*Ed Carmien's first tale of Kris and Paddy appeared in **BG 10**. Expect the next installment, "Broken Bones," in a future issue.*

"Kris is an outrider of a three-wheeled wind-wagon in Edward Carmien's appealing adventure, "Before the Wind." Outriders and hunters use three- and four-wheeled wagons, following the herds of "maggies"... Kris crashes her three-wheeler, to be made fun of by a young hunter named Slew. He offers to fix it, but Kris knows what his offer entails... He uses his influence to make certain that none of the crafters have the time to fix her three-wheeler, so she goes to the tribe crazy, an old guy named Paddy who, she discovers, is only crazy in that he's traveled outside the region and has many wild ideas. He builds her a two-wheeler and teaches her how to use it. She, in turn, is to enter the tribe's great race. The story is exciting even if one can guess where it's going, but the writing is so full of image and verve, it's fun to get there."

– Sherwood Smith, *Tangent Online*

Art by John Kaufmann

All the bloodmead seemed to drain from Kris, replaced by an icy breath of cold night air. She braced herself to shout her lungs out, to raise an alarm, but that was done already. She looked around for a weapon, a club, but there was nothing to hand. The elders had done their job well — all that might have been useful was either packed away or smoldering ashes.

“Wagon, get to my wagon!” Paddy shouted, and Kris realized it was noisy in the camp. Everyone was shouting, and as more of the maggie riders forced their way into the circle of wagons came the sounds of bone crunching and breaking. She shook her head to clear more of the cobwebs, dashing after Paddy who was loping off into the darkness. Three riders swept toward them. The sound of the maggie’s massive hooves beating the packed earth brought Kris’s heart into her throat.

One rider let out a whoop that brought Kris up short. That voice! Part of her said *run! Run!* But the bloodmead in her made it seem reasonable to stop and stare at the rider who was wheeling his maggie in a tight turn. In the faint light from the dying fire she saw his face, knew him though he was bearded and dressed strangely.

“Slew,” she said, a quiet word lost in the bewildering mayhem that wintercamp had become. He didn’t hear her, couldn’t have heard her, and turned his mount for a dash to the far side of the circle. A lariat hissed out of the darkness and settled around her. Kris raised an arm to pull it off but it tightened like a whip in an instant as she was yanked off her feet. A yell of joy from nearby told her what had happened — she’d been roped like a yearling maggie taken for its newborn wool.

Kris fought the bruising pressure of the rope and tried to stay on her feet. She was out of breath when the jerking and yanking stopped. A maggie was close by, too close, and Kris shivered at the thought of one of those giant hooves coming down on her. She’d seen hunters lose limbs that way, crushed so badly they had to be cut off.

Someone turned her over roughly, grabbed her chest.

“Huh, girl enough for me I guess,” said a rough-voiced man, and he heaved her onto his shoulder. The sudden movement brought all she’d had to drink up and out of her in a hot, foul rush.

“Better here than on my mount, girl,” was all he said, and in a thudding blur of jerks and grabs he tossed her atop the maggie’s rump and tied her wrists and ankles to a leather seat the maggie wore. Then they were off, and Kris fought and struggled against the leather straps, but it was too late. She was caught, and there was nothing she could do about it but wait.

And watch. As her captor urged his maggie out into the darkness beyond wintercamp, she turned her head to the sky and marked a few key stars. There was the bull maggie, and the line made by his two raised forelegs led to the trinity, the stars that pointed north. It wasn’t much, hardly an elder’s sextant, but it was enough to tell her which way they were going.

Kris hit the ground with a thud that made her groan. The older bearded man who’d caught her retrieved his straps and curled his lariat with a sneering grin. Most of her people went clean-shaven, but even those who grew a beard kept it neat. His was rough and tangled, and she smelled old food and maggie oil on him when he bent close to undo her ties.

Her throat was parched and her limbs were numb. For now she was thankful — there’d be bruises on her arms where the lariat had held her, she was certain. Still at last, after uncounted hours on the back of a maggie, she closed her eyes. The

ground beneath her seemed to rise and fall of its own accord.

"Here, drink something." Kris knew the voice — it was Nellie. She tried to croak a thanks but nothing came out. The water was cool and sweet and nothing had tasted so good her entire life, Kris was certain. A good, healthy feeling spread down her throat and into her belly.

"You're all over with mess," said Nellie critically, and she splashed some of the water onto her hand and rubbed at Kris's face.

"Oh," Kris coughed, then tried again. "Oh, we're all looking our best. Who — who are these, these —" The enormity of what had happened made her shake. She rose a bit on stiff limbs and realized with a start that the sun was going down. She'd managed to fall asleep after being untied!

"They call themselves Riders," said Nellie. She was a few seasons older than Kris. "Got this camp we're in, and look about, not a wagon in sight."

It was true. Kris stood slowly, wincing as the expected bruises made themselves known. She'd been thrown from her two and hurt less. Though she looked around in a wide circle she saw no wagons. There were round huts of maggie hide over arched rib bones, a collection of maggies scruffing up the ground for bare shoots and winter grass — and men, men everywhere she looked save where she and Nellie and half a dozen familiar faces were penned.

"Where — where are the women?" Kris asked.

"That would be us, we figure," answered Lenora. Arla's younger sister, she had a husband, Kris realized, one of the tanners. "Had some time to talk this over, and best we can measure out is this bunch is out of one of the old stories the elders tell on quiet nights. At least they gave us food and water."

"Like pirates?" Kris took another swig of water and Nellie pressed a dried bit of maggie meat into her hand. Pirates stole wagons, threw spears and javelins at folk that always seemed to miss the hero of the tale. It was hard to imagine there was such a thing as pirates.

"Well, I was always partial to the rebel stories, myself," Lenora joked, but behind her smile was strain and worry. Kris reached out and squeezed her hand.

They had dried meat and water and talk while night fell and the men — the Riders — built up a good-sized fire before leading them out one by one. It was then Kris suddenly remembered.

"Spit! I saw Slew!"

"Yes you did," said Nellie with a grimace. "He's the one roped me, and rough hands he's got. We figure he found some new friends after we exiled him."

Kris rubbed her jaw and remembered rightly that he did indeed have a rough hand, and a hard fist. The maggie prints around Makk's splintered wagon now made sense. They'd found the camp, then waited for springparty...

"And he brought his new friends to us," she mused, half to herself.

"Time for the choosin' up!" one of the men yelled. Kris huddled with the other women in a tight group. A crowd of 20 or 30 men, faces dim in the firelight, stood in a loose arc around the blaze. "Let's see one!"

Watching felt worse, somehow, as one by one they were yanked toward the fire and made to strip. When her time came Kris felt numb inside; even her bruises seemed to hurt less. A few of them had been whipped for holding themselves, or covering up. The sky knew they had been seen by the people uncovered before. Swimming and bathing in the spring ponds was something one did with the men and thought nothing of it.

This was something to think of, and nothing good, Kris thought, while around her in the semi-dark, male voices hooted and called to one another. She knew she wasn't rounded as some, but she was the only outrider among the women, and it

showed in her arms and legs. The voices meant nothing. Kris shut them out, waited beyond anticipation for what might happen next, when a cutting voice reached her, brought her head up and her eyes onto a face.

Slew.

"She's mine, skinny, big-nosed and all. Killed my best friend, fouled his rigging, made him crash. Found him with a bone splinter the size of my arm through his belly, and two broken arms in the bargain. She's mine!" Silence, then a low murmur of agreement ran around the ring of faces.

"Am I right in thinking," came another voice from the far side of the fire, "that if I disagree I can fight Slew for her?"

More silence. Then an older man spoke, his voice low and heavy with authority. "That's true, stranger, but we'll have to find out who you are and where you come from. You ain't of my party, and I never seen you before."

Kris found her hands covering herself, then scrabbling to pick up the pants Nellie threw at her. No one was looking at her in any case, but the sound of that voice made her want to cover up. It was Paddy, though she couldn't trust her ears, and nearly fell down with one leg in and one leg out of her pants when she looked too long across the fire to see if she could spot him.

Slew frowned, gnawed his lip beneath his scraggly beard. "That Paddy I hear?"

Paddy strode around the fire, angling to get between Slew and Kris. He was as she seen him at springparty, dark-haired, which was strange, but dressed strange too, in leathers more like the Riders were wearing. A winter season sharing space on his wagon made the face he made at her plain as day: keep it shut, he meant, and Kris shut her mouth on her glad "Paddy!" Instead, she picked up her shirt and put that on quick as she could.

"What's your name, son?" said Paddy. "For we've never met, and I bet you this... girl here on that."

"No, no bet," Slew said quickly. "But you look — you're —"

"A man named Trik, and I asked your name, boy." Paddy's voice was cool, cutting. Kris stared at him, hard pressed to believe what she was seeing. It wasn't just his hair. He stood straighter, his shoulders seemed broader, and the belly she'd joked he'd put on during the winter season seemed part of this... younger Paddy. She even heard him twanging his words. A week of this and even she wouldn't believe it was Paddy standing there before her.

"Slew. Slew they call me. You really mean to fight me for that big-nosed girl?" Paddy had pulled it off — to Slew, he wasn't Paddy, couldn't be that old man from the wagons, couldn't be the man who'd put Kris on his trail and gotten him exiled as a poacher.

"Sure do," said Paddy. "She looks tough and strong, and that's beauty you're seeing, boy. Eyes like a winter dawn, grace like a pouncing sleek. Give her up walkin' or bleedin', your choice."

Kris clenched her hands into fists. Something wasn't right, it wasn't right for Paddy to... a voice inside of Kris spoke, and she heard the snap of her mother's authority in it. "Now just hold on a minute, if there's any fighting going to happen it'll be me doing it. What's this supposed to be, some kind of story about that elder Arthur and his circle of hunters?"

Kris realized she'd spoken out loud when Paddy turned to face her. The look on his face was worth the shock she felt. Had she really just challenged Slew to a fight? Would these... these Riders even allow it?

"Tack and turn it, Kris!" shouted Nellie, and she decided that yes, she had just challenged Slew to a fight.

"Why should I?" Slew asked in his best trading voice. He sidled forward, keeping



well clear of Paddy. Wise choice, Kris decided, as the old man radiated a palpable menace, the kind of quiet that came on a summer eve just before one of the quick drenching thunderstorms that could tear a sail apart in minutes.

“No reason, unless you’re turning chuckie on me,” Kris said. She knew him, knew him to the bone. “How’s that hand of yours? Still a little stiff, maybe?”

Sure enough, Slew’s face clenched tight and he rubbed the back of his hand.

“Not so much as, after I cut you up, what do I get? Chopped meat is good in the belly, but not on a woman.” Slew grinned at his comeback and half threw the words out to the many faces crowding ever closer to the pair.

“Seems I made the first challenge,” said Paddy, and the crowd settled back on its heels. “She feels like it, she can fight me when I’m done with Slew here, he don’t look like much.”

Kris gritted her teeth, but before she could stick her rudder back in the older man half-yelled to quiet the crowd, now busy muttering their views on the matter. “Hey now! Seems I’ve heard this name Trik before.” A scar on his face showed through his beard. “I’ve been warned about Trik, so whether that’s your name or not you keep that blade put away. Slew here’s gonna fight the woman. Seems cuttin’ is all he wants her for anyway.”

A brief run of laughter circled the fire before the man continued. “And three of you keep an eye on that Trik. You just stand to for now, stranger, ‘till we get this settled out.” Paddy seemed confused by the older man’s words, but he kept his hands peaceful.

From the speed the crowd cleared a space, Kris figured they must have lots of fights. Paddy pulled out a bone knife, which quieted everyone. The three Riders tensed and gripped their knives in turn, but he moved to her side, held the knife high over his head. “I promised my knife a taste of Slew and by the sky and thunder it’ll have it. Here you go, *girl*,” he said flipping the handle toward her. As the crowd laughed at the twist he’d put into his words, he murmured “This blade won’t break, trust me. And dance all night if you have to — make it last.”

Kris almost nodded but held her head erect. Paddy stepped away, and there Slew was with a long sharp bone knife in his hand, longer than hers by twice. Her knife felt oddly heavy and she stepped back and turned it over in her hand. It wasn’t bone, and where the edge was honed it shone in the firelight.

Metal. It was metal! Painted to look like bone, there was no doubt, but metal indeed.

Slew took a shuffling step toward her and Kris gripped her knife and turned sideways toward him. This was just like touch-and-go, except there wasn’t a line between them and it wasn’t a plait of woven grass she held. She felt her heart begin to pound within her chest, and her mouth went dry.

“You sure you want to get cut, Kris?” Slew said, his false, caring words undercut by the sneer on his dirty face. “Wouldn’t you rather take it from this —” he rubbed his crotch with his free hand — “rather than this?” Instead of waving his bone knife as Kris guessed he would, Slew lunged.

She stepped back just enough, but his forward cut was a feint — he slashed sideways with his arm more fully extended. The point raked her ribs, cutting through her shirt and leaving a cold blaze on her left side, a cold that soon stung and felt warm.

Kris didn’t look, knew there would be blood there. She swallowed and forced spit down her throat before she answered, remembering a night when she’d yelled in a weak, tired voice and given away too much.

“Now Slew, we talked about this. Your *axle* just doesn’t have much I need, wear you out in half a night, if *that*.” They circled each other, and Slew’s eyes grew more hateful as the crowd tittered.

She began to relax a bit, to take in more than just the point of Slew's knife. Make it last, Paddy had said. They turned and turned again around each other, until mutters in the crowd drove Slew forward. He stabbed then slashed again, but she'd seen that one and danced easily away.

Then he rushed her, and for a moment the stone was back in the pit of her stomach. There was nothing she could do but watch as Slew, bearded and dirty and dressed in a strange style of leathers, hurtled towards her, knife arm outstretched, teeth bared like a sleek going in for the kill.

Metal. She had metal, and Slew didn't know it. Maggie bone was tough stuff, but it wasn't metal. A metal knife could buy a whole wagon, an eight or maybe even a ten, fully rigged.

She gave a feint of her own, made as if she were stepping back but went to the side half a pace instead. Slew spotted the move, changed his lunge to a slash, and she met him blade to blade. Hers clipped the top third off his clean and quick with a snick. His cut carried him forward and beyond her side. She turned. Her cut met flesh across the rounded part of his shoulder, parting his leather shirt like it was grass. The point grated on bone and Kris clenched her teeth with distaste.

Much as she hated him, hated all that he'd become and the Riders he was with, he was still a man, still the hunter she'd grown up with in the wagons. Wasn't right, to take a knife to another person. It did sometimes happen, she'd heard tell, but she'd never seen it done or ever thought she'd have to herself.

Slew screamed in pain and rage. His rush carried him past her toward the fire. By the time she'd thought of giving him a solid boot on the ass the moment was gone and he'd turned. Blood ran freely down his wounded arm and he staggered, clumsily shifted the knife into his other hand, stared at the sheared end.

"That's —" he started to say, but then the first spears fell out of the dark sky. Paddy was next to Kris and half carrying, half urging her toward the women. Later Kris tried to remember the slaughter, for that's what it was, plain and simple, but in the end she realized her eyes were closed for most of it. After the first spears had fallen, there'd been yelling, then the eights had rolled in out of the dark, silent. Kris saw they were packed with half the grown men and women she knew, each holding a spear or javelin, each standing at twice the height of anyone with their feet in the dirt. She grasped with a shock it was just like a race at meetup, the wagons cleared of household things and the broad decks shoulder to shoulder with men and women holding spears and javelins. And those weapons arced down from a two-meter height, or even higher from folk who'd climbed the rigging.

Kris shut her eyes to the blood and the struggle. The old stories about Riders didn't end like this, no stories she knew of ended like this. In a moment of awful clarity she knew it wasn't an accident she and practically every one of the people had practiced this terrible trick at each and every meetup there'd ever been. This kind of killing, the spearing of twenty, thirty men as if they were maggies, wasn't in the stories — but the elders *knew*. When she couldn't stand to keep her eyes closed or look at the butchery any longer she turned her eyes to the sky, where the dark seemed more absolute, the stars tinier in the vast above than they had ever seemed before. The steady spring wind blew against her neck, and as it passed her she felt as if it were taking something away into the black night.

Come morning, with a small circle of wagons around her giving her a comfort she hadn't realized she'd missed, Kris helped count the dead. Slew was one of them: a javelin had pinned his foot to the ground where he'd stood by the fire, and a thrown spear had caught him through the throat, finishing him.

They'd set all the maggies loose — all but two, on Paddy's order — and taken what leather counted as good off the low round huts. Lenora's man was one of those

who'd followed their track all day. They stood close together now in the lee of an eight, just holding each other.

Kris didn't know what to feel or to say. She sat for a time in one of the wagons, then off by herself as preparations to return to wintercamp progressed.

"Feeling betwixt and between?" said Paddy in a soft voice. He put his hand on her shoulder and let it rest. It felt good there.

"What's that, betwixt, another one of your words?"

Paddy laughed. "Not mine. You can have it. Captures the moment, though." It wasn't a question.

"I... put a knife into Slew."

"No less than what he planned to do to you. And worse, before, during, and after. Needful things can be ugly."

She sighed. "Needful things. Like the races at meetup." Paddy eyed her shrewdly and nodded. "Who... were these men? Wagoners gone... I don't know... wild?"

"You've heard the stories, Kris. This bunch is far from home. You could hear it in their speech, see it in the cut of their leather. Gone wild is about right, I'd say." He plucked a new shoot of grass and placed it between his teeth. Kris knew the brief moment of sweetness that brought, the taste of new green against your tongue.

"Why two?" she said abruptly.

Paddy chuckled and shook his head. "I knew I picked right. Nothing gets past you, Kris. Two?"

She nodded towards the two maggies he'd ordered kept aside. The others, stripped of their leather seats, hadn't wandered far in any case.

"Two because I'm on my way somewhere. You're invited. Now hold onto that —" he wagged a finger at her opened mouth. "Just hold onto that for a second, youngster."

She clapped her mouth shut but opened it again with an accusing look at his rich black hair.

"And keep shut on that, too. Now, saying yes means riding a maggie. Takes some getting used to. You can learn it in a day, I figure. More than that, it means being away from your people —"

"Our people —"

"I said shut it for now. It means being away a year, easy, could be three. It means maybe dying, maybe getting hurt so bad you wished you were dead instead, it means for sure seeing things you've heard stories about and never much believed."

"Like Riders."

"Like Riders. They're not all bad, or at least they didn't used to be." Whistles came from the circled wagons. The eight with the best wind unfurled its sail a quarter and began rolling. "The wind's up on this, you have to choose now." He gestured at the wagons putting up sail.

Kris got a hand into the front of his shirt and pulled him down. Kissed him good. Pushed him backwards so hard he landed on his rump with a thump. "Make a face like that again and see how long it is before I kiss you again. Eyes like a winter dawn, you said."

"Kris," Paddy said with a rueful laugh, "you've looked and smelled better, and though I don't know first hand, I'd say you've tasted better, too." He raised his hand and flashed two fingers at the near wagon. Nellie threw down two bundles, lent a hand to the lines, and that wagon began rolling away. She waved, and Kris waved back.

"There's a slough about a quarter click off," Paddy said.

"What's a sluff?"

"A kind of marshy pond. You should know, you drove a three I built into one

once.”

“You and your words,” she said with a laugh, standing. Somehow all the strangeness of the last day was falling away, but her bruises hurt just as much, and she winced as she stretched.

“Come on, we’ll get you cleaned up. The sleeks will scent this soon. Best spend the late afternoon on the move. There’s an art to being out here wagonless. Part of that is staying away from carrion.”

“You know,” he mused later as the two tame maggies munched the taller grass at the edge of the pond and he bandaged the shallow cut along her ribs. “Could be you have a talent for knife fighting, could be you got lucky. Damn your pride for stepping in like that. Didn’t you figure maybe I’ve been in a fight or two? Did you have to —”

“Yes.” Kris couldn’t say why she’d had to. She just knew she’d had to fight Slew herself.

Paddy sighed, checked the knots on the bandage he’d made. After a moment he said, “There is one strange thing about all this.”

Kris laughed, caught herself as her cut stung. “Ouch! What, only one?”

Paddy nodded, and she saw his face was serious. “That bossman said he’d heard my name. Haven’t used that name since before your grandmother’s time.”

“Say, that reminds me...”

He chuckled and smiled, and Kris could see the years on him, though he looked younger now than he ever had before. “Oh yes. Questions. Well we’ve got a lot of time for talking. And other things.”

“Other things?”

“Other things,” he assured her, and then there wasn’t any talking, not for a good long while.



# Fantasy

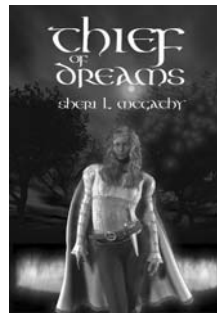
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## *Whispers from the Stone*

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*Howard Andrew Jones*

*There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet! In that time was the valiant Asim el Abbas servant to the right arm of the most righteous Caliph, Harun al-Rashid, upon whom be peace. Crafty in war was Asim and veteran of many battles, yet what is the sharpest sword without a hilt, or the finest harp without its strings? So were Dabir and Asim apart. It is elsewhere told how they gained a thousandfold blessing from the Caliph: herein is told how first they met. Thus said Asim:*

**O**n the third day of the expedition I stopped during my patrol rounds to admire a fresco of a bearded archer in a chariot hunting lions. On the whole the people of Ashur had wrought their art with skill; mounts were carved in mid-gallop with lifelike detail, the armed hosts along the walls with startling ferocity. It was pleasing to contemplate such finely fashioned martial scenes.

I heard the sound of feet swishing through grass blades and turned to find a scholar of Jafar's household standing behind me. He was studying the stone. I recognized him, but did not know him. I was captain of Jafar's guard — who was I to care about the names or duties of the countless hakims, scholars, and courtiers who frequented his palace?

The scholar did not look so different from any others, although he was better groomed. His spade beard and mustache were well trimmed. His eyes held that intensity of purpose of bookish men and were rendered striking by their uncommon color, a bright blue. A sword hung on his left and his stance suggested he could use it.

"Look at the artist's trick," the scholar said, a smile flicking over his lips. "A thousand years ago he fashioned this piece."

I saw no trick, and looked back and forth between him and the art, wondering.

"Now his work pleases us," the scholar continued, "two men he never met. Perhaps it will delight other unknown men in a thousand more, when we two are as forgotten as he."

It was a strange thought to have, but it struck me as a proper one, there amongst the battered remains of the ancient city, and I found myself nodding and studying the stone in more detail. The morning sun warmed our backs from its perch high in the cerulean sky.

Another set of feet whispered through the wild grass. I turned.

This time it was my nephew Mahmoud, also a guard of the vizier's son. He bowed his head to me, yet addressed the scholar.

"Your pardon," Mahmoud said. "You asked to be informed if another goat disappeared. One has been found."

"What do you mean?" the scholar asked.

Why, I wondered, should a scholar concern himself with missing goats?

---

*Illustrated by Storn Cook*



“One of the men found the goat,” Mahmoud said. “And it is... strange.”

“How, strange?” the scholar asked.

“Its head is separate from its body, and it is buried. I do not think it the work of lions.”

“Show it to me.”

“As you wish.” Mahmoud turned his broad back. The scholar followed him. While I did not care a whit for missing goats — which must surely have wandered off to be prey for wild dogs or lions — the whole of the matter puzzled me, particularly the scholar’s involvement.

I had earlier set Mahmoud to deal with the goat matter. Clearly some from our expedition were supplementing their meal before the beasts were scheduled for slaughter, or the herdsman wasn’t keeping a close enough watch on his charges and the goats had simply wandered away. Solving the problem did not require the involvement of a book reader.

We wound our way behind Mahmoud through the heaped mounds of masonry and the remnants of long, high walls with their crumbling towers. What remained of Ashur stretched for many acres. The Greek who’d led us here said that it had lain thus for more than a thousand years.

Eventually my nephew stopped before a shattered waist-high wall and pointed over it to a rectangular pit. Aside from a set of crumbling stairs, the pit — some ten spear lengths deep and three wide — was completely bordered by stone. A pile of blackened earth and ashes rested in its center. To one side the horns of a goat protruded from a mound of loose dirt. A lone hoof poked out of more tightly packed earth nearby.

“Is this as you found it?” the scholar asked.

“It is.”

“Has anyone descended to investigate?”

“My man went down for a closer look,” Mahmoud answered.

The scholar sounded displeased. “It is to be expected, I suppose. Go seek a shovel and return.”

## Howard Andrew Jones



A freelance writer and editor, Jones set up [www.swordandsorcery.org](http://www.swordandsorcery.org) and helmed the first six issues of the *Flashing Swords* e-zine. He assembled and edited the four volume Cossack collection for Bison Books, and recently turned in his master’s thesis about their author, Harold Lamb. When not working the day job or playing with two talented children and his brilliant wife, Jones can be found hunched over a laptop mumbling about gloom-shrouded towers and gleaming blades while muttering snatches of arcane dialogue.

His story “Sight of Vengeance,” featuring the peerless arcane investigators Dabir and Asim, appeared in **BG 10**. Previous Dabir and Asim stories have appeared in **Sages and Swords**, *Paradox*, and multiple other venues, and have received an honorable mention in the 18th **Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror**. He has sold several stories and numerous articles to **Black Gate**, and accepted the position of Managing Editor in November 2006.

*Photo by S. Jones*

Mahmoud bowed his head and left. The scholar, meanwhile, bent to examine the ground at the height of the stairs, then peered down their length. More than half the steps were concealed by dirt and grass gone to seed.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Why do you order my men?”

“I,” he said without looking up, “am Dabir ibn Khalil. I thought you knew me, Captain Asim.”

I grunted. “Are you an expert on goats?”

“No. But I am curious. Your nephew’s tale aroused my interest.”

Dabir started slowly down the stairs, staring at the clinging soil. “A lion, or dog, would merely have eaten one or two goats there in the pen. They would not carry it away and bury it. And three goats in three nights is a very hungry, daring man.”

By the time Mahmoud returned, Dabir had reached the pit below and walked several times about the ground, inspecting it with eye and fingertip. He directed Mahmoud to walk carefully down the stairs, showed him where to step, then ordered him to exhume the goat.

I watched from the bottom stair.

I had smelled worse from the battlefields, so once Mahmoud uncovered the body the goat’s stench did not conquer me. It was not yet as powerful as I knew it would become. The goat was intact except for its stomach, where little worms writhed in a large slash.

Dabir examined both the stiff brown body and the staring head, with its empty sockets, even moving the white worms aside with the shovel’s blade. Mahmoud turned pale at this.

Several times Mahmoud opened his mouth to speak — each time Dabir held up a hand and my nephew was silent. I was a little startled over the respect he showed this man.

“You may bury the body,” Dabir said at last.

“What did you learn?” Mahmoud asked.

“I believe there was only a small group that killed the goat — three or four total.”

“The Greeks,” Mahmoud said.

“Do not rush to judgement,” Dabir cautioned. “We lack information.”

“Filthy Greeks,” Mahmoud said. “So they killed the goat and ate only their favorite parts?”

“Nay.” Dabir shook his head. “Whoever did this worked magic.”

As one, Mahmoud and I made the sign against the evil eye.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“They disemboweled the goat and cut off his head. Also they carved symbols unknown to me along its horns. I do not know what they used the head for,” he admitted, “but they likely read the entrails for portents before they burned them. And look here. Do you see this, in the wall?”

A fierce bearded face looked at us from the nearby stone. Time had worn away portions of some of his curling hair, but his scowl was etched deep.

Dabir stepped to that visage and touched his left hand to first the lips and then one of the eye sockets. He looked at a dark substance he found there, then sniffed it.

“What is it?” Mahmoud asked.

“Blood. I believe it to be the goat’s.”

“Why would they have smeared it there?”

“I am not yet sure.”

Mahmoud stroked his thin beard. I took the shovel from him and threw dirt



over the goat head and its staring eye sockets. It had begun to disturb me.

“If they needed to work magic,” Mahmoud mused, “why didn’t they just ask for the goat?”

“This is not the magic of the souk,” Dabir said. “This is not about health or love potions. They crept about like lizards, staying to the shadows, for their purpose is dark, and they did not wish others to learn of it.”

I finished burying the head and handed the shovel back to Mahmoud. I pointed at the body, and he set to work.

I understood now some of the regard which that my nephew held for Dabir, who had an unscholarly directness about him. Also he spoke with precision, and his words were tempered in truth. Here was no courtier who coated meaning with pretty phrases.

“What is to be done?” I asked.

“It is time to make inquiries, Captain,” he said. “While I do not wish to rush judgement, your nephew is rightly suspicious of the Greeks. There are three of them; there are three sets of tracks. One of them is a small, slippered foot, like the daughter of Corineus.”

“So they did this?”

“It may be.”

“I will wring the truth from them,” I said.

Dabir’s eyes met mine. “Be cautious, Captain. The Greek and especially his daughter wax high in our master’s esteem. If you confront them when he is nearby he will likely excuse the matter and they will be alerted.”

I frowned, but as I thought the matter through I realized Dabir spoke with wisdom.

The Greeks had come to my master, Jafar, son of the vizier and closest friend to that most glorious of Caliphs, Harun al-Rashid, and then had followed a feast to delight. There had been vine leaves sprinkled with lemon lying beside fillet of mutton, and roast fowls, crushed

**Also by Howard Andrew Jones**



**“Sight of Vengeance”  
in *Black Gate 10***

*Called upon by the city’s chief guardsman to help solve a series of gruesome murders, Dabir must enlist the aid of his former wife and rely, as ever, upon the steady swordarm of the loyal Asim to root out the murderer... and a disturbing secret.*

*Dabir and Asim’s adventures have appeared in multiple venues, including Jim Baen’s Universe and the **Sages and Swords** anthology; an earlier story published in Paradox garnered an honorable mention in the eighteenth **Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror** anthology.*

“New Managing Editor Howard Andrew Jones’s “Sight of Vengeance,” [is] set in a historical Islamic context, with Dabir the wily “detective” and Asim his good-hearted and strong but somewhat naïve sidekick. Here Dabir investigates a series of gruesome murders in which the victims’ eyes were taken. Dabir’s personal history adds interest as he turns to an old lover for assistance... a fine historical fantasy.”

– Rich Horton, *Locus*

*Art by Storn Cook*

raisins seasoned with rose, and the finest of sweet pastries dripping with cheese and honey. Also there was wine, from which many partook — though I did not — and sherbet. I was drowsy and pleased and sated when Corineus the Greek spoke to us all about his intent.

It was rare indeed for a Greek to be so honored in the palace of the second mightiest man in Baghdad, but this one seemed not to know it, for he lounged confidently on the cushions. His bald pate gleaming in the lantern light, Corineus spun a tale of a strange, forgotten people, painting pictures with his words so that we saw the great chariots of Ashur sweeping through the plains.

“Ashur was old when Athens was new,” he said, his voice just above a whisper, as though he were confiding secrets. “Before the Caesars reached west, before Iskander walked this land, before even Great Cyrus ruled, the men of Ashur rode out from their citadels. Great was their power, and great was their wealth. From the four corners did precious gifts flow to their capital of Nineveh, Nineveh of the mighty walls. Gold, silver, emeralds, sapphires — these were simple trinkets to the men of Ashur. The Egyptians knew them and feared their power. Today their treasures are scattered, yes, but many are yet hidden in the dark caverns beneath their cities.” He paused for effect and eyed Jafar’s handsome face. “A man who knew where to look would see his coffers brimming with ancient splendor.”

When the scholar I now knew for Dabir had objected that the cities of Ashur had long ago been looted, Corineus shook his head, smiling. “I do not believe everything was found. I have discovered records of great interest in Constantinople, from a historian.”

Jafar had already decided his intent after a previous, private audience with the Greek and his daughter, for the story of gold had been like a siren song. And thus he had come with slaves and soldiers and laborers, Dabir and Mahmoud and I among them, to the dead city. Its shattered towers lay supine amidst the acres of walls like bones lying along a crypt floor.

“Let us call upon Jafar,” Dabir said, “and see if we can pry him from Lydia.” That was the Greek’s daughter, a thin creature who held a strange fascination for the vizier’s son.

Near the mid-day hour I thought to find Jafar dining in his tent, but he too was admiring the art of Nineveh. Naturally two guards were with him. Naturally so too was Lydia and her hulking companion, a large-thewed Greek. His girth made my lieutenants nervous even though he carried no sword. Jafar, typically, was unconcerned.

The guards stood near to Jafar and Lydia, bored but wary of the Greek, who stared sullenly as Dabir and I walked past.

The daughter of Corineus was in mid-sentence. “— not a woman among them.” So saying, she brushed a lock of dark hair from her high forehead and looked up and down a carved relief of bearded figures in chariots.

The Greek was in the flower of her beauty, and the wind against which she struggled blew her long dark hair across her face, shaped soft curves with her green dress. After spring there would be few winds like this and mid-day would be dry and hot, but this morning was lovely.

Jafar’s eyes sparkled whenever he looked upon her. He was a slight man, but striking. Poets had lauded his appearance in verse. After the first morning of the expedition he had plucked the gray hairs from the black of his pointed beard.

Few men were as richly attired as Jafar, but then few men were as generous. He was Haroun-al-Rashid’s right hand and the whole of his family was blessed with success and riches. Though born of fire worshippers, they were proper Muslims, and their generosity and kindness were proverbial. Some said that the caliph could

not bear to be parted from Jafar for longer than an hour. This was not quite true, but described somewhat the esteem with which the caliph held his friend.

“Peace be upon you, Captain Asim, and you as well, Dabir.”

We bent to salaam, but he waved us to stand as he answered Lydia. “They likely valued their women, for it is clear that they did not risk them in war or the hunt.”

“They locked them away,” Lydia said. “Otherwise they would show them on the stone. No, they used their women only for child-rearing and a man’s pleasure.”

“Is that not the use of women?” I asked.

She whirled with a falcon’s speed, so swift that my hand dropped for my sword hilt. Shamed, I shifted it over to my belly and pretended to scratch.

“Doesn’t your book teach you that women are more than that?” She pressed her lips tight.

“I am no Imam,” I said. “But I know what a woman can do.”

“Do you? Was your own mother, then, shaped only for the pleasure of a man and the rearing of children?”

I felt an anger kindle, and lifted a warning finger. “Do not speak of my mother.”

She turned back to Jafar. “You see, honored one, every man thinks his mother is special, even this fool of yours. He sees her working and struggling to provide the best for her children and knows that she is the superior to any man. He may defend her name to his dying breath, but treat his own women like cattle. Or worse.”

“My mother was a queen among women,” I said, but she ignored me.

Jafar bowed his head. “What you say may sometimes be true in the Caliphate,” he said. “But what of Roum?”

“It is true,” she said bitterly, “everywhere.”

“Surely not,” Dabir countered. “A woman rules your people.”

Lydia’s mouth twitched violently, and then she spat out: “Irene has most of a man’s vices, and a woman’s besides. No, scholar, if you seek examples of a culture where women are men’s equals — or better — than you will find little.”

“I beg your pardon, honored one,” Dabir said, bowing his head, “but there is a matter Captain Asim and I feel merits your attention. We need to speak to you alone.”

“Oh?” Jafar’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Very well. Please pardon me, Lydia.”

“But of course.” The girl bowed low with a graceful flourish of her arms. I did not fail to note the suspicious look she cast upon Dabir as she withdrew.

“She,” Jafar said, “is a rare flower.”

“She is lovely,” I said, though to my mind she lacked weight.

“It is more than that,” Jafar said. “Dabir surely sees. She can discuss Aristotle at length and comment upon his works. Do you know how rare a quality that is in a man, let alone a woman?”

I did not. “Master, I do not know that you should trust her.”

As his eyebrows rose I sought quickly to explain the matter of the goats. Somehow my telling failed to convey my concern, for I saw a smile skitter along the corners of Jafar’s mouth.

“You jest, surely. You think she has slain animals and drawn strange pictures upon their horns?”

“Forgive us, honored one.” Dabir bowed his head. “I believe I found her tracks at the site —”

He chuckled. “I cannot believe it. Surely you are mistaken.”

“It may be,” Dabir said, his voice lacking the lightness a proper courtier would immediately have feigned. “But Asim is not a jesting man, nor am I. We urge only that you act with care.”

Jafar’s smile faded. He glanced to where the Greeks stood. Lydia’s back was to

us. Her hair waved like a banner above her shoulders.

"I do not mean to dismiss your concerns," Jafar said at last. "If you are... worried, why not accompany us? Surely Asim will protect me from the girl, or any goats." His voice was teasing, his smile kind, yet I felt a mild anger. I did not show it as I bowed.

"As you wish, Master."

So it was that we spent the next hours wandering about the ruins. Lydia and my master discussed the worth of the art at every hand. Dabir was for the most part silent, though Jafar occasionally asked for his opinion. I am no fool, and sensed that Lydia spurned our company. Clearly we were intruders, rivals for Jafar's attention.

At last the ordeal was over and Jafar invited us to his table. Lydia joined us as well, but her father Corineus sent a slave to beg off, saying that he was hard at work with the excavation and hoped soon to deliver news of interest.

It was later, during evening prayers, that the slaves broke through the rubble and Corineus advanced into the underground passage. Word was sent to Jafar, and Dabir and I hastened with him to see what was found.

Corineus emerged from a dark archway, grinning triumphantly. The rubble through which the slaves had worked to expose the arch was piled high on the left. The whole of this portion of the city was built into a hill, and Corineus had earlier told us he thought it Nineveh's citadel.

"You have found the gold?" Jafar asked.

"No, honored one, but I have found a great library of tablets upon which there is curious writing, and a warren of tunnels. It is doubtless of interest to this scholar here."

Jafar nodded slightly and gestured for Corineus to precede him. Dabir shot me a look that I took as a warning to be on guard, as though I were not already. Jafar was altogether too comfortable with the Greek.

I took a torch thrust at me by a dirty slave and followed Corineus and Jafar into the tunnel. It widened until three men might walk abreast, but it was not so tall. I had to bend forward or the top of my turban brushed against it.

The stone was covered in fading paint, depicting blue water and a great walled city. I would gladly have examined it more closely, but was more concerned with those about me, and my senses stretched taut against sign of betrayal — swift footsteps, a sword pulled from its sheath, whispered words of magic.

I heard none of those things, and there were only three turns of the tunnel before we came upon an opening in the wall. A great stone door had been swung aside. Four sweat-streaked slaves labored at a mound of slabs five paces further down the corridor.

"It is in there, honored one." Corineus halted and wiped sweat from his brow. Foreboding filled me. I wished that I had called Mahmoud or other guards to accompany us.

"Let me look first, Master, lest there be some hazard the infidels have missed." I drew my sword, and its curving length shone with a red tongue of reflected flame. I stepped lightly into the room.

"I too will go," I heard Dabir say.

Almost I lost my balance, for I stood at the height of a narrow stair. There were but four steps descending into a long chamber supported by a forest of square columns. Everywhere were tumbled and broken stacks of clay tablets. I saw nothing else.

I climbed down, and Dabir's feet scuffed the stone on the stairs behind me.

"Asim!" Jafar cried.



I whirled. Corineus wrestled Jafar from the threshold as the great stone door swung in towards me. It shut with a thud as I raced up the stairs. Dabir jumped out of the way.

“Infidel!” I cried. “Unhand him!”

I sheathed my sword and threw my full weight against the door, but it did not yield. Outside I heard the clatter of falling rocks and guessed that the slaves dropped the rubble before the door.

“Infidels!” I shouted. “Traitors!” My voice echoed from the stone. The torch flame shuddered as I thrust again against the door. Only my shoulder felt my efforts, for the door did not budge.

“There’s no getting out that way,” Dabir said calmly.

I scowled, leapt down the stairs, and shoved the torch at him. Then I charged the door a final time.

It did not move.

Rage filled me, but I fought against it, for I knew time was short. The flame from the torch would not last.

“Come,” Dabir said, “let us see where we are.”

“We must rescue Jafar!”

“Your shoulder will yield before the door will. Come.”

I snarled as I remembered the worm-eaten goat and its severed head. Is that what they planned for my master? How could I stop them, trapped as I was behind the stone?

Dabir stepped away from the door and followed the wall. I went with him.

“We can hope there is another exit,” Dabir was saying, “or Nineveh’s future visitors will find our bones in this room amongst the tablets.”

I drew my sword and strode with him into the shadow-strewn chamber. A quick glance at the surface of the tablets showed me only triangles and bird scratches, for the people of Ashur did not know the proper method of writing. I wondered if Dabir could make sense of it.

It took less time than I had feared to make a complete circuit of the walls. Everywhere were the piled tablets and the stone pillars.

“There’s no way out,” I said, and started back to the door. Perhaps there was something there which I had missed.

I felt a hand on my arm and whirled, sword raised.

The scholar pulled, starting, but pointed into the darkness along one wall.

“What?”

“There.” He carried the torch closer to the wall.

“What?” I growled.

And exasperation rang in his voice. “You look, but you do not see! There! An arch!”

Again I saw only the piled tablets and the rough square pillars upholding the flat ceiling, and yet... one mound of the tablets was different from the others. A thin, black crescent-shaped sliver showed at their height, looking very much like the upper mantle of a doorway.

We advanced together. The scholar began to carefully remove the tablets and set them in a pile, but I knocked the tablets to one side. Most shattered into pieces as they struck the ground.

The scholar let out a little gasp. “What are you doing?”

“The infidels have Jafar, fool! There’s no time for your writing!”

The tablets clattered and broke against each other as I worked, and within a short time a dark gap below a doorframe was revealed.

“Now do you see?” Dabir asked.

The torch sputtered.

I scattered the tablets as the opening widened into a tunnel. After a little more effort I had cleared the opening to my waist. That was enough, and with sword in hand, I clambered into the passage. "Come!"

The hall was narrower than the corridor that had led us to the chamber. Also it required me to bend forward. The torch smoked now and Dabir had to hold it slightly behind him.

"Hold," the scholar said. I paused, turned, found him unwrapping his turban. "Give me your head cloth. The torch needs fuel."

"These will not last long."

"It is better than nothing," Dabir said.

And he was right, so I did as he bade before we resumed our exploration.

The dark tunnel curved to left and right, then branched in two, widening slightly. Along the left wall the ancients had stacked some stones and broken bits of columns, blanketed now by dust.

"Which way?" I asked aloud, although I did not expect an answer.

"Left," said the scholar.

"Why?"

When he did not answer I scrutinized him by the light of the smoking, sputtering torch. His eyes met mine and a smile touched his lips. "It seems to veer a little toward the other passage... but I do not know for sure, Captain. We must trust to God."

I nodded. We went left.

The torch gave out fifty paces further. A light is great comfort in a strange dark place peopled with ghosts and I was not pleased to lose this one. Dabir lay the cursed thing along the wall, saying we might find some use for it later, then I moved forward by feeling along the wall. My imagination populated the dark with crawling things and black efreets and vengeful spirits.

I bared my teeth when I saw six points of blood-red light ahead. I put my sword forward, for as I neared them the lights looked uncannily like three sets of crimson eyes.

"What is that?" I hissed.

"They speak," Dabir whispered in astonishment.

My pulse quickened then, for I heard the voices as well. How might I fight unseen things with glowing eyes?

But then I recognized the voice of Lydia, and Corineus in answer, though I could not make out their words.

"Those are no beasts," Dabir said.

I drew close enough to see that the glowing eyes were but six small holes cut in the wall. Light from another room showed through. I chuckled, and put my face to one set as Dabir stepped to another. No doubt ancient spies had used the holes in the exact manner we did now.

Two low fires burned in a square chamber. I saw Jafar, standing as yet unharmed, though Lydia's muscular guard held his collar with one hand and a sword to his neck with the other. Corineus and slender Lydia stood nearby, their faces turned to a square column into which a bearded face was carved. So intent was I on Jafar's welfare that I had to look twice before I saw the horror. The wet, red thing hanging from the lips of the carved stone face was a tongue — the shining orbs in its sockets were goat's eyes. I made the sign against the evil eye, then with my free hand — for I still clutched my sword — felt the wall. Stone, or plaster? I could not tell. I wondered if I might break through thin stone if I ran against it?

"... wealth of your kingdom, Majesty?" Corineus was saying. And then the stone

lips moved and the slithering wet tongue slapped against them. There came a hoarse whisper from the stone. "It shall be yours."

Dabir gasped. I was struck speechless in dread.

"Have I not kept my promises?" the deep voice asked. "But first you must keep yours. Is this the man?" The eyes moved. Somehow this was more awful even than the slapping tongue. "He is not arrayed like a king."

Corineus bowed his head. "As I feared, Majesty, I could not bring the Caliph himself. But this man is his trusted friend —"

"Fool!" hissed the stone face.

"Do not curse me, Majesty. I have not called you here to waste your time. This man has the ear of the Caliph. He is the second most powerful man in the entire caliphate."

"I shall take him, then," the stone said, its tongue waving.

My hands sought vainly for a release in the stone, but found none. Again I pressed against it, searching for weakness. Dabir too was feeling the stone, but was looking back the way we had come.

"Wait —" said Lydia, and I paused to watch again. She brushed back a lock of her dark hair. "You have not yet passed on your secrets. You have not fulfilled your bargain."

The stone lips curled. "You accuse Tigrath-Pileser of deception?"

"No, no, Majesty," Corineus said quickly. "She wishes merely to hear a sampling of your promised wisdom. As do I. It was no easy matter re-contacting you once we came here, or readying this man for you. We have proved our faith. Now show us yours."

There was no prying the stone apart. I pressed at it with my shoulders.

"Very well," the eerie voice continued. "I shall show you the treasures when I have that one's skin — but I will confide some small measure of the secrets you crave."

"Yes," Lydia said fiercely. "Tell me, Majesty. Tell me the secrets of conquest."

"Gather the strongest about you, and arm them well. Give them riches, and women. Send them to take these things from the weak, take a part for yourself, and reward them with the rest. Some will die, but more will come, eager for the treasures. In this way you build your base."

"This is no secret," Lydia said. "Tell me secrets!"

The face said nothing.

"Is there no more?" Lydia demanded.

"Of course there is more," the stone face answered. "As your forces grow, you ride forth, and take more. So long as you gather the strong to your side and reward them, there will always be more!"

Lydia's hands shaped into fists.

"This spirit has no secrets," Dabir whispered to me. "He taught them to the world all too well, alas."

"What can we do?" I asked. The stone would not yield to me.

"Do you think the two of us might lift one of those broken pillars we saw earlier?"

"Why —" I began

"This wall seems thin. If we run at it —"

I clapped him upon the shoulder. "You are the soul of wisdom!"

"We'd best move fast."

"I wish we still had the torch."

"I wish I were in a warm bath waited upon by houris," Dabir countered. "Come!" He moved into the darkness, feeling his way. I peered back, for I had heard

Corineus call to begin the ceremony.

“He has given us nothing, father!” Lydia countered.

“He has treasure yet to share. And likely there are other secrets. A man can learn many things more than Arabic from a thousand years in Hell.”

Lydia muttered something I did not hear, then bent down five paces from the face. For the first time I saw a circle of tiny characters drawn on the stone floor about the stella carved with that awful face.

The woman began to chant. I felt the hairs along the back of my neck rise. I have seen enough to know that circles about such things are to be avoided, and it was clear besides that the ancient king meant to steal Jafar's body.

I sheathed my sword and walked swiftly after Dabir, my fingertips pressed to the wall.

Lydia's chanting rose in volume.

I breathed a prayer as I hurried forward, one hand pressing my scabbard to my side.

In the darkness I struck the fallen pillar's end with my foot. I stumbled, cursing. My toe throbbed mightily.

“Are you alright?” I heard Dabir ask.

“It is nothing.”

“It did not sound like nothing,” Dabir said. He groaned. “These are very heavy.”

Naturally he would think so, being a lean man.

“This is the one,” he said, and guided my hand to the rough stone. “Let us lift on the count of —”

But I was already lifting. After a moment I felt a modicum of aid from him, and that was well, for it was a great weight. I staggered as I lifted it to my waist. The pillar fragment was not quite a small man's height, and thin, sheered almost in half from the length of the others.

With it in my arms I jogged back into the darkness, my sheathed saber slapping my thigh. I hurried both to build speed for ramming and because I feared if I did not move fast I would have to drop the pillar. It taxed me to bear such a heavy thing, and I did not know how long my muscles could hold it. Dabir followed, breathing heavily and supporting the pillar's back end.

This time I saw the burning eyeholes with relief and increased my pace. I grunted against the burden in my arms. My back ached, my arms began to numb.

But I did not slow; I ran. The pillar's end smashed into the stone and through it. Chunks of masonry flew into the darkness and a jagged opening was torn from where the eyes had peered almost to the floor.

The impact jolted the pillar. Something sharp struck my head and then I was through the gap. “Drop it!” I cried. I released the pillar and danced clear. It crashed into three long pieces, throwing stone chips. I drew my sword.

Every eye in the chamber stared at me, even the horrible ones shoved into the stone face, even Lydia's. She paused in her magics.

I called to God and ran forward, whirling my blade over my head.

Corineus yelled something in Greek and the guard shoved Jafar away. He pulled his sword and ran at me. From where it came I do not know, for he had not been trusted with one in Jafar's presence. It did not matter.

I grinned. “Dog!”

Our swords met, throwing sparks.

The Greek was strong and no stranger to blade craft. Each time I swiped, his weapon was there to block mine, be it an overhead cut or a strike to the side.

From the corner of my eye I saw Dabir rush forward. Jafar struggled with Corineus, who'd drawn a fang-shaped knife.



The girl resumed her chant. The tongue slapped the stone as the mouth screamed to hurry.

The Greek blocked expertly as I came on, not realizing my objective as he retreated until he risked a look back. He must have seen that his foot was near the magical circle. He shifted to the right.

I swung from my left, locked his blade, and in a flash stepped in to clout his face. He leapt backward.

The warrior landed in the midst of the circle. Instantly he threw back his head, staggering. His mouth shook, straining against a scream that did not come. The blade fell from twitching fingers and rang against the floor. Whatever dark magics the circle contained were now afflicting him. It was no warrior's death, but I dared not cross the circle to finish him with steel.

I turned to Jafar. Corineus wrestled against him, striving to bring his dagger to bear. Dabir watched, sword poised. Obviously he dared not strike for fear of hitting Jafar.

I had more faith in my arm. My blade cut through the Greek's clothes, and his spine. He collapsed upon Jafar, flopping and bleeding and smelling foully. The girl screamed rage behind me.

"Are you unharmed, honored one?" I bent to assist Jafar.

He pushed the body from his robe and stood. "Rarely have I been more pleased to see — Asim!"

He pointed behind me. Dabir and I whirled as one.

The Greek guard was up. This time he snarled wickedly. His eyes were lit with malignant intelligence. Behind him the tongue hung slackly from the stone lips and the eyes that should never have moved were dull and glazed.

The Greek pointed even as I raised my sword, and he spat words in a dark tongue. My sword's edge blurred and shook and shifted, then reared as a serpent and hissed. I cursed and threw it from me.

The dead king had taken the Greek and chanted his magic. Now he croaked loud, darker words. I motioned for Dabir's sword.

The twisted, ruined body of Corineus shot to its feet and with staring eyes grabbed Jafar. My master cried out to God, struggling in vain against the dead man's grip.

I took Dabir's blade only to see it transform instantly into an ebon serpent with curving fangs. I cursed this time more in anger than surprise and flung it aside.

Dabir joined the struggle against the corpse, which dragged Jafar relentlessly toward the circle, grossly leaking fluids as it strode stiffly ahead. Lydia cried in anguish to her father.

"The circle powers him, Asim!" Dabir cried.

Instantly I divined Dabir's meaning. I sprinted past Jafar and the corpse that pulled him and leapt for the Greek controlled by the dead king. Dabir shouted my name, as though surprised. If I had misunderstood him it was too late.

By the grace of God I came in under the dead king's sword, swung too late. I struck him with shoulder and hand and we fell together, tumbling outside the circle.

My knee hit stone, then my elbow punched the king as we rolled together. He shouted words I did not know. Some ancient curse, I think, from its sound.

Somehow the king was already up on one knee before I righted myself.

"You cannot stop me," he said, utterly confident. He reached for his sword, dropped during our roll.

I struggled to my feet, grabbed for the knife at my waist, and then something shining slid across the stone. I recognized it for my sword and heard Dabir. "Strike

swift!”

I clasped my sword and rose with a thrust, but the king deflected it with an effortless twist of his hand.

The old kings were not the sort who sat upon their thrones while waxing fat and watching dancing girls. This one knew swordcraft. As he swung high and low against me, now feinting, now thrusting, it was all I could do to defend. Mayhap he had learned a trick or two in the nether realms, for I was panting hard in only moments.

He laughed. “You know a coward’s sword dance, don’t you?”

I pressed my attack, but that was just what he wanted. He parried and thrust, slicing through my jubbah and drawing blood along my side. If I had not slid back he would have struck me dead. I leapt away, watching his eyes.

He whispered again in that dark, low tone and the shape of my sword blurred. Once more it was a hissing snake. How might I ignore that? It snapped at my wrist. This time, though, I flung it toward the king.

A curious thing transpired. The snake struck him and stuck out of his chest. Then, in a blink of an eye, the weapon was but a sword again, standing out from his abdomen.

He looked down in bewilderment as blood gushed from him. He staggered slightly to one side, my hilt wobbling. The blood flowed down his tunic and his thighs.

“No matter,” he said weakly. “I will simply take Jafar...” And he stepped toward the circle, only to utter a strangled cry, for Dabir and Jafar had tripped on the corpse of Corineus, which struggled feebly to rise once more.

Lydia shook herself from her reverie and flung herself at Dabir, pulling at him. The king sank to his knees and clawed at the circle’s edge.

I pried his sword from weakened fingers. He looked up at me as I raised it and I saw his gaze had changed. I realized I faced the Greek. Where had the dead king fled? I lowered my sword to finish the Greek even as the light sped from his eyes.

My eyes fastened on the horrible slapping tongue and the fish-like eyes. “If I can not have life,” it hissed hoarsely, “I will give you death!” The stone lips parted and warped as the mouth widened further, and further. Two stick like appendages thrust from the mouth and I heard a chittering noise, as though the grandfather of all crickets lurked deep within that stone throat.

I felt the chill hand of fear upon my shoulder as I had never felt before. “Jafar,” I cried, “Flee while you can!”

Now I overheard the sound, though not the words, of an intense discussion between Dabir and the girl. I spared an eye for Jafar, frozen in horror. Dabir grasped Lydia by the shoulders and shook her as she sobbed, demanding something. I backed toward them, my eye on the head behind the twitching antennas now born of the ever widening mouth. I beheld the unholy marriage of a grasshopper and a man, with staring fish eyes set in a gray face and a great mouth that worked spasmodically. The chin line was human, the razored teeth anything but.

“Flee!” I cried. “I’ll —”

“Keep it busy,” Dabir cried to me, “but don’t cross the circle!” He clasped Lydia by the wrist, and the two raced for the stone.

I had no wish to near that thing shaped from giant grasshoppers and dead men and did not think my fate written that my flesh be shredded by those teeth, and so I looked back to Jafar and above him to a strange light I saw flickering above the stairs where I hoped there would be an exit. What I found was a wall of fire at the stair’s height, lighting the archway it shielded.

I glanced to the wall Dabir and I had smashed, found it too sheathed in flame. Magics had sealed our exit.

“Back!” I called to Jafar, then prayed that God shield me and strode forward.

Dabir and Lydia knelt to one side of the circle, scrubbed vigorously at it with cloth. The front half of the thing had reached the floor. The legs beneath it were spindly, formed like those of a newborn colt. It stamped upon the edge of the circle, clamped its teeth and struggled to pull its back half from the lips which that gave it life.

Dabir had told me not to cross the circle, but he'd said nothing about my blade. I lashed out with my weapon and sliced at one of those stick-like legs.

The head stretched toward me and the jaws snapped but fingerspans from my head. I threw myself backwards.

I clambered to my feet and the thing hopped free. Its back legs were long, like a lion's, and its feet sported great curving claws.

The dead king laughed, a dry, rasping noise as a snake might make, had God granted serpents a sense of humor.

A wise man would have prolonged his life by fleeing. It might be that a few moments of life could be won by staying clear while the monster devoured the others. I charged, my sword before me. The beast shrieked at me, bared its yellow stained teeth.

I struck.

The head pulled back, streaming black fluid from the side of its face.

I swung again.

The head twisted and the teeth clamped upon the edge of the blade. The beast's breath reeked of decayed flesh.

I held to the pommel, grasping it now with both hands while the creature worried the steel like a dog with a stick.

And from the corner of my eye I saw Dabir rushing into the circle and up to the stone, even as the dead king cried out in his dark tongue, even as Lydia spread her hands to the ceiling and chanted.

The creature let go the sword and spun from me. Dabir was scribbling across the surface of the stone. The beast's rear legs hunched down as though it meant to spring, and I fought down every natural urge within me and leapt forward. My blade bit deep behind one knee.

It cried out, twisted, and once more the head came for me, jaws wide. I raised the sword but weakly, for my strength ebbed.

The creature burst into flame. Even as the head struck at me the change transpired, so swiftly that I was showered in black soot as it disintegrated. From the stone came a wail of terror as the dead king's soul fell back to the court of Iblis.

I sat there, panting, and looked up to Dabir, who leaned against the stone. Our eyes locked and he smiled faintly. I saw charcoal in the fingers of one drooping hand, and along the top of the stone, written in black, was the name of God. The king's eyes looked as empty of life as those of a baked fish. Even as I watched, the tongue slid free and struck the stone floor with a moist slap. The flames fell, opening both exits.

In a moment Jafar was at my side, helping me to rise.

"Are you unharmed?"

"My wounds are slight," I said. I dropped the blade. It was twisted and dripping with something foul. "And you?"

"I live, praise be to God and the two of you! That was well done."

I tipped my head to Dabir. "What did you there?"

"Lydia and I broke the circle so that I might write the name of God upon the stone and send his spirit fleeing."

The girl rose to her feet, ineffectually brushing at the dark stains upon her dress. She gave up and regarded me sourly.

"I thank you, Asim," Jafar said soberly. "How did you find me?"

"God willed it," I said. "But he willed that Dabir was born with a brain that sees

more clearly than mine. He led us here.”

“Indeed? I owe both of you my life.” He bowed his head to Dabir.

Lydia, still breathing hard, looked over to my master. Her words were less a question than a challenge. “What will you do with me?”

“I do not know,” Jafar admitted. “You were ready to give over my body to a dead king. You have been party to murder and lies.”

“Your man killed my father.”

“That is regrettable, but all these events are of your making. Were you so desperate for power that you forgot sense?”

“Desperate? Yes. Now you will take me before other men and pronounce a man’s justice upon me. Do so.” A sneer sullied her lovely features. “My only crime is wanting some share in a world ruled by bearded fools.”

Jafar frowned sadly. His voice, when at last he spoke, was soft. “Ride, Lydia. Take one slave and ride, as swift as you dare, and do not darken this land again. I wish never to look upon you.”

She stared at Jafar as though she had not heard him properly. Finally she said, “But my father’s body —”

“Go!” Jafar barked.

She jumped, and with a last dark look at me, hurried up the stairs. In a moment she was gone.

While Dabir helped bandage my side, Jafar considered the bodies, walking between them and around the circle of stone. “Ah, it was not wise to let her go, I think,” he said finally, and tugged on his beard. “But then we stand in a room of fools. Only their guard was born that way. The others were fools from their choices; Corineus to think a spirit would enrich him, the woman to think the spirit would whisper queenly knowledge. The dead king to think he belonged here. And me, to blindly play my part because of a pretty face, to throw caution aside when they offered me a treat like a monkey. Only you two kept your wits.”

I said nothing. I knew it foolish to agree with the Caliph’s best friend when he says such things about himself.

I winced as I stood. The wound was along my side muscle, and hardly fatal, but still it pained.

“If only I had heeded your warnings earlier... I will never doubt your counsel again.” Jafar shook his head. “How was all of this related to the dead goats, Dabir?”

“I cannot say with complete certainty, honored one. I believe the spirit communicated to them through the goats, though I do not know why they slew so many. Corineus mentioned they had trouble re-contacting the spirit — I think they were making final negotiations.”

“Perhaps it is not all a loss, Master,” I said. “About one thing Corineus did not lie — there is a great storehouse of tablets upon which there are many scribbles.”

Dabir chuckled.

We started for the stairs. “I do not know that even Dabir will understand their writing,” I added.

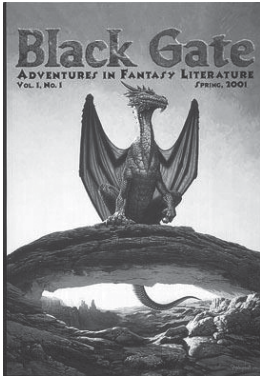
“I would like to look at them more closely,” Dabir said. “It may be that I will understand them; or it may be that the tongues of these tablets are stilled.”

“I sincerely hope that none of them wags as that one did,” I said.



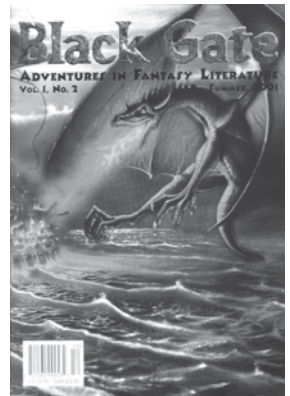
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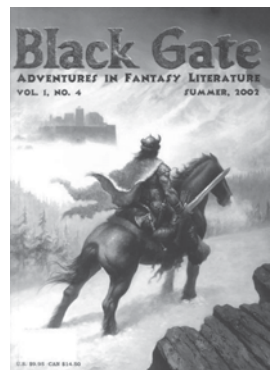
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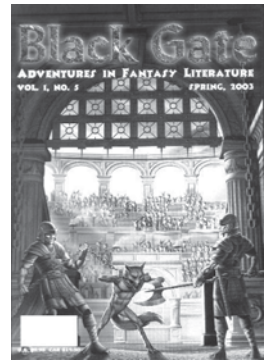
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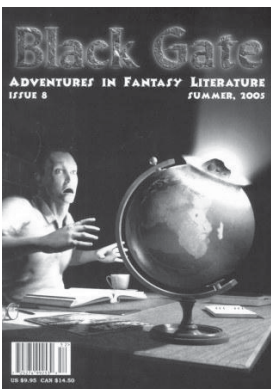


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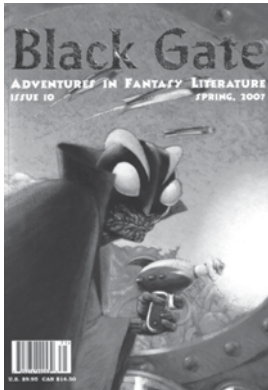
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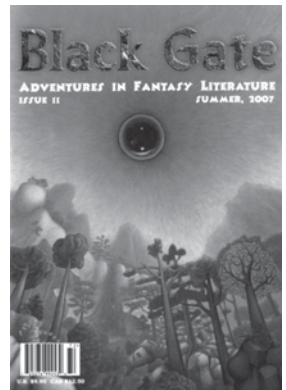
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## *Tumithak and the Ancient Word*

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*Charles R. Tanner*

### **FOREWARD**

*Out of the pits and corridors into which they had burrowed generations before, mankind emerged some three thousand years ago to challenge the dominion of the savage Shelks of Venus, who had for long been the lords of the Surface. The long war between the two species that followed this emergence wrecked what little civilization humans had, as well as the weird, unearthly culture of the Shelks.*

*Today, however, after long, dark ages, science has again risen to a high state, and we can read rightly the story that archeology and legend have combined to tell us of the days when humans first struggled against those who had been for so long their savage masters.*

*Already, many of the readers have read the author's version of the old legend of "Tumithak of the Corridors," the first man known to have challenged the dominion of the Shelks. Of his first journey, of his leading his tribe forth onto the Surface, and of the conquest of Kaymak, the writer has already told.*

*Now a hiatus comes into the story. After the events of the conquest of the great Shelk city of Kaymak, the legends become so full of magic and wonder that the author has thought it best that he omit entirely the story of the conquest of the Six Cities. The early Loorians and their allies did conquer those Six Cities, but as to the how — we can only say that we do not know. More than likely, it was due to their use of the same weapon that enabled them to wipe out Kaymak, cou-*

*pled with the natural element of surprise, a most valuable "weapon" in those early days. Certainly, it was not due to any means remotely like the absurdities of the legends.*

*But following the story of this campaign against the Six Cities, the events in the legends again become conceivably possible. Therefore, let the reader imagine that five years have passed since the conquest of Kaymak, and that Tumithak is now lord of an empire on the Surface about the size of, and not remotely removed from, the ancient land of Minnesota.*

### **CHAPTER ONE Kidnapped**

As far as the eye could see, the strange buildings of a novel city stretched away in all directions. These buildings were not the great stone structures of the Golden Age, not the weird metal towers of the Shelks, nor even the mighty plastic edifices of our present world. No, these buildings were a curious hybrid sort that had never existed before and were doomed to be destroyed and forgotten before the generation that dwelled in them was to pass away.

They were the homes of people, built and adapted from the wrecked and fallen Shelk towers of the city that those people had conquered and destroyed. For centuries, these humans had dwelled in the long, underground corridors, and what was more natural, when they came to live upon the Surface, than that they should simulate, as closely as possible, the way of life that was most familiar to them? So the fall-

---

*Illustrated by John Woolley*

en Shelk towers had been dismantled, their huge, metal walls cut up into plates and rebuilt into long, low buildings, about fifteen feet high and as many wide, and anywhere from a hundred yards to half a mile long, the interiors of which resembled closely the corridors with their attendant side apartments.

Some of the largest even had side branches, and the general tendency of orienting the buildings to secure the best possible lighting had brought back what was practically the equivalent of ancient streets.

The people that walked these streets were far different from the ones who, ten years before, had cowered trembling in their corridors, miles below the Surface. Most of these folk were under forty, for the older people found it hard to endure the vast changes in their way of life that Surface living entailed; most of them still lived in the corridors, though not so far below the surface as they once had. But the younger folk, living in this age of new hopes, and possessing the disrupter, that mighty weapon that made human beings once more superior to the savage things that had for so long been their masters, these younger folk trod confidently about in their city and looked forward with neither fear nor anxiety toward each new campaign against the Shelks.

Now, on a certain day in late winter, one man, heavily clad in gaily colored, quilted jacket and leggings, ran wildly down one of the streets toward the center of the town, evidently in the last stages of hysterical fright. Twice he was stopped by pedestrians, who tried to find out what ailed him, but each time he gabbled something unintelligible, pointing as he did so to a flyer that was rising and sailing away into the west, its huge wings flapping faster and faster as it rose. Each time, he broke away from his questioners and continued his headlong flight into the city.

He came at last to the huge building that housed the administrative bureaus of the city, and at the entrance he was stopped by a guard. He gabbled wildly and tried to push his way past the guard, but the soldier forced him sternly against a wall and belled for his superior. By the time the officer arrived, the winded messenger had gained some control of himself, had managed to explain at least part of his message to the guard, who now became as excited as the messenger. Both guard and messenger now broke into rapid talk, but the officer

silenced the guard and listened to the still excited messenger.

A moment later, all three were speeding down the building's central corridor toward the main office.

They came to a door with a symbol on it — a Shelk's head, with a gold band on the brow. The officer knocked, a secretary answered, and after a moment's delay, they entered.

In the inner room a man sat at a desk littered with the thin, wooden paddles that were the closest humans had come to paper since his emergence. He was a tall, vigorous young man of about thirty, but already there were quite a few gray hairs mingled with the red about his temples. He wore a thin gold band around his head; his quilted jacket was tossed over the back of a chair, showing the blouse of the blue tunic he wore underneath. Vertical lines of worry were just beginning to show in his forehead above his nose, for the responsibilities that he bore were heavy, and he bore them almost alone.

But the messenger, the guard, and the officer paid little attention to his appearance. The officer opened his mouth to speak, but the messenger threw himself across the desk, crying out wildly: "Yofric has fled! Yofric the Stranger has fled in the Thirty-Seven, and has taken our lady! And the lord's son! Even now he flies into the west!"

The man behind the desk looked questioningly at the officer. The messenger had poured out his statements in one breath, almost as one word, and his listener had grasped the purport of little of it. The officer, almost as excited as the other, attempted to elucidate.

"Yofric the Stranger has stolen a flyer, my lord Tumithak, and has kidnapped Tholura and your son! Even now he is fleeing into the west in the flyer that he stole."

For a moment, Tumithak of Loor, whom two hundred thousand men called Lord, stood uncomprehending and dazed. Then, white-faced and trembling with anger and anxiety, he exploded into action. He turned and began barking orders.

"Prepare Flyer number Twenty-One for immediate action, Luramo," he snapped at the officer. "Mount a disruptor and a long-range fire-hose with a needle beam. Find Nikadur and Datto and tell them to come at once. You!" he snapped at the guard, "find me Kiletlok the Mog and bring him here." And lastly, "You, messenger! Return at once

to my home and bring here Domnik, the lady's servant. He'll know most of the wherefore of this."

The three flew out of the door as if on the wings of the wind, and Tumithak paced the floor impatiently for a minute or two. Then he picked up a bell and rang it vigorously. By the time a guard answered it, the Loorian leader had already donned his quilted jacket and was buckling it.

"Get me my arms," he demanded. "A short sword and my fire-hose. Pack three or four knapsacks with pit food and a hospital kit. And send a message to Luramo that the Twenty-One must have extra power rods aboard."

The man darted away, and Tumithak was left to resume his frenzied pacing.

Kiletlok the Mog was the first of the men Tumithak had called for to arrive. A tall, lean man — so tall and lean, indeed, as to suggest that he was of another race. And this was the truth, for Kiletlok had been born into that race of humans whom the Shelks had bred from ancient traitors at the time of the Invasion. These men had been trained to hunt their fellows in the pits and corridors, and two thousand years of intensive breeding had turned them into the equivalent of human greyhounds. Kiletlok himself had been born in Kaymak and was a grown man before events had caused him to cast his lot with Tumithak.

The Loorian glanced up as Kiletlok entered, but he wasted no word of greeting.

"Yofric has kidnapped Tholura and my son," he barked out. "You were right in your suspicions, I am afraid. My desire to weld all men into one union swayed my judgment."

Kiletlok shook his head, and a frown puckered his brow.

"He was too tall," he growled. "I suspected him of being a Mog from the first, you remember."

"I admit it," said Tumithak. "His hair fooled me, but it was obviously dyed. It is easy to realize that, now that we know him guilty. But no man ever looked more grateful and loyal than he did, on that day when I found him, apparently, freezing to death in the

## What Has Gone Before



Charles Tanner's Tumithak saga was one of the great science fiction epics of the early pulp era. Three long installments were published, beginning with "Tumithak of the Corridors" in 1932, "Tumithak in Shawm" in 1933, and "Tumithak of the Towers of Fire" in 1941. All three were reprinted with new artwork in **BG 5, 6** and **7**.

Tumithak is a young lad who discovers an ancient book in the abandoned corridors of his subterranean home of Loor. Incredibly, the book claims that humans once ruled the surface of Earth, and it was only with the coming of the alien shelks that mankind was driven underground. Awed by the book, Tumithak vows to make a pilgrimage to the surface, and to slay a shelk. And so begins a weird and fantastic solo journey upwards through dangerous, darkened corridors inhabited by hostile men and strange, mutated species... until Tumithak becomes the first Loorian in history to set foot on the surface. There he discovers the strange city of the shelks, and manages to slay one. Fleeing back to Loor with its head, he is proclaimed king of the underground cities.

Soon afterwards Tumithak leads a ragged band of humans to the surface to openly assault the city of Shawm. Though they suffer heartbreaking setbacks, the brave band also discovers unexpected allies, and the secrets of the shelk weapons. The battle to free Earth has begun...

*Art by Denis Rodier*

snow.”

“He was sent,” the Mog stated, positively. “No Mog would take an adventure like that on his own shoulders. They sent him here to do the very deed that he has succeeded in doing.”

“You’re right, certainly. My wife and son are probably to be held by the Shelks as hostages. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you, last fall. But that’s past,” Tumithak said. “He flew west. Where to, think you, Kiletlok?”

Kiletlok considered.

“Kuchklak, maybe, Lord Tumithak,” he said. “Possibly Knekhept, but more likely Kuchklak,”

He turned as he spoke, for Tumithak’s lieutenants, Nikadur and Datto, had entered. Their attitudes made it plain that they had already heard the news.

“You two will have to take over the work here,” Tumithak began, without giving them a chance to start the formal phrases with which they usually greeted him. “I’m preparing to leave at once to pursue Yofric. By the High One, I’ll slay that traitor and bring back Tholura and my son if I have to blast half of Shelkdom to do it!”

The soldier who had been sent for Tumithak’s arms returned as he spoke, and the Loorian was silent as he buckled on fire-hose and sword. Then he turned to his two lieutenants.

“As usual, my friends,” he ordered, “You, Nikadur, are supreme in civil matters; you, Datto, in war or defense. I know not how long I shall be gone, but return I shall, some day, and my wife and son with me. I swear it by this band I wear on my brow.”

He strode to the door.

“You, Kiletlok, attend me. I will need your aid and your knowledge of Shelk ways.”

The two hastened out of the building and off in the direction of the airdrome. They had gone but a short distance when they met the messenger who had originally brought Tumithak the fateful message. Now he was bringing the servant whom Tumithak had called for.

This servant was a queer little fellow, a good foot smaller than his tall master, and he was slender almost to the point of emaciation. His skin was a curious slaty blue; and his head was swathed in layer after layer of bandages. For Domnik had been one of the savages of the Dark Corridors, and his ancestors, dwelling in eternal darkness, had gone centuries without seeing the light of

day. So sensitive were their eyes that the light of the Surface, either sunlight or moonlight, was intolerable to them. So, though Domnik lived on the Surface and wore his bandages constantly, yet his bat-like sense of hearing and his sensitivity to temperature change made him almost the equal of one who could use his eyes.

Tumithak ordered Domnik to follow him, and at once hurried on to the airport. The Twenty-One was awaiting them when they arrived, and they boarded it immediately. A moment later, with Kiletlok at the controls, it took off, flapping swiftly into the west.

For over an hour they flew, and while Tumithak quizzed Domnik about the events leading up to the flight of the stranger, Kiletlok’s sharp eyes constantly scoured the horizon for signs of the flyer that the traitorous Mog had escaped in. The possibility that Yofric had altered his direction once he was out of sight came to Kiletlok, and he spoke of it to Tumithak. The Lord of Cities and Corridors pointed out that he would have to traverse at least three times as much territory to arrive at a Shelk city if he flew in another direction, while a short hundred miles would bring him to Kuchklak if he continued due west. So they flew on, and finally Kiletlok gave a savage shout, and pointed to a tiny speck on the horizon ahead.

“It is certainly the Thirty-Seven!” exploded Tumithak. “No other flyer in all the land would dare to be flying west at that speed now. After it, Kiletlok!”

There was little need to try to spur the Mog on, though. Already the flyer was being driven to the utmost; already its nose was pointed directly at the kidnapper. And slowly, inexorably, the distance between the two machines was being lessened.

Tumithak’s and Kiletlok’s eyes were intent on the distant flyer, which would soon be in range of their fire. So intent were they that they failed to notice a rising unrest in little Domnik. Twice the blind little fellow made attempts to speak, but some remark or ejaculation from one of the others would interrupt him, and he would apparently think better of it. At last, however, he overcame his backwardness and spoke up anxiously.

“Look behind, Lord Tumithak, and to the right. I feel the approach of another flyer.”

Tumithak whirled instantly, but his eyes had no sooner fallen on the approaching Shelk flyer than he realized that Domnik’s



warning had come too late. Already the flyer was practically in fire-hose range, and although the Loorian chief sprang instantly to the controls of the mounted disruptor, he was not soon enough.

A beam from the fire-hose of the enemy flyer struck the barrel of the disruptor and the resulting blast of heat radiating from the suddenly heated metal made Tumithak draw instinctively away from it, even as he reached for the controls of his weapon!

## CHAPTER TWO Another Race

Undaunted, Tumithak unlimbered his own fire-hose and sent a stabbing, vicious beam into the nose of the enemy's flyer. He had the satisfaction of seeing the motor explode instantly in the face of its savage driver, but the act came a second too late; for even as his own beam struck, the beam from the Shelk's fire-hose, sweeping away from the damaged disruptor, caught the near wing at the point where it joined the body of the flyer; and, hesitating there for a single second, it welded the wing firmly to the body.

These flyers were ornithopters, which flew, not by the use of propellers, but by the flapping of their wings. With its left wing unable to operate, the Twenty-One began to fly in an erratic, descending circle; and Kiletlok was hard put to keep it from crashing into the failing Shelk flyer.

Fortunately, there was not a better aviator in all of Tumithak's domain than the Mog, Kiletlok. Somehow, he managed to coax his flyer to remain in the air until he found a spot clear of trees. Then he brought it down in an almost graceful glide to what might be described as a reasonably safe landing. All three were shaken up and a little bruised, but there were no sprains or broken bones; and in no time they were out of the flyer and wondering what to do next.

They were in Shelk territory, of that they were certain. Therefore, the destruction of the disruptor must be their first concern. For the disruptor was a human-made weapon, the discovery of the martyred Zar-Emo, priest of the Tains; and it possessed the power of shooting a beam of radiation that caused the instant release of all the power contained in the white and shining rods which Shelks and humans alike used as an energy source. As long as humans alone possessed this secret weapon, he

stood superior to the Shelks. But if people let the Shelks capture it, their future would become as dreadful as the past.

So Tumithak saw to it first that the disruptor was taken apart as completely as possible. He intended to fuse the parts into masses of shapeless metal with his fire-hose, but at Domnik's suggestion, he buried them instead, in spots some dozens of yards apart. There was practically no chance that any Shelk would ever find all the parts and re-assemble them, yet Tumithak might be able to recover and repair them at some future date.

Then, after dismantling the semi-portable fire-hose which had been mounted on the flyer and assembling it into a portable one for Kiletlok to carry, they set out for the fallen Shelk flyer to see if it contained anything of value to them.

It was not far away. They located it almost immediately and drew near it cautiously, uncertain whether its occupants were all dead or not. There was no sign of life around it, and they drew quite near without a challenge from the machine. Presently, Tumithak said, "Listen, Domnik! Do those sharp ears of yours hear aught from the wreck?"

Domnik made a sign for silence, and while the other two held their breath, he cocked his head to one side and stood there, a comical little gray figure, his whole mind concentrated on his ears.

"One breathes," he announced, presently. "A heavy, wheezing sort of breathing. It is not the breathing like that of a Shelk. It breathes like a frightened man."

Tumithak eyed Kiletlok with uncertainty.

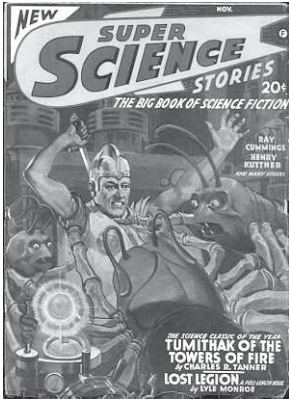
"A prisoner, do you suppose?" he asked.

Kiletlok shrugged. "Perhaps it was best if I looked," he answered, and before Tumithak could order otherwise, he boldly pushed open the door of the flyer's cabin and stepped inside.

Tumithak backed him up immediately, half expecting a blast of heat to burst from the interior of the ship. But they entered the cabin unopposed, and started in surprise at what they found there.

The Shelk who had been handling the controls of the flyer had been literally shattered when Tumithak's beam struck the motor. There had been two more Shelks, farther back in the cabin, and they, too, were dead, burned and crushed, slain either by

## The Saga of Tumithak

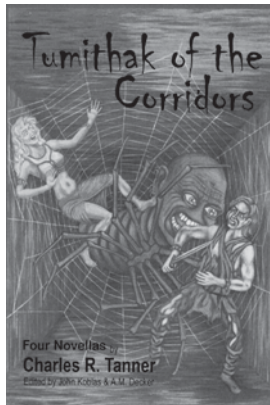


Charles Tanner wrote only 16 stories between 1930-53, but made his mark on the field with the three tales of Tumithak, published between 1932 – 1941. The stories were among the most popular of the pulp era, and influenced a generation of early genre writers. “Tumithak of the Corridors’ was far and away the best and

most exciting story I had ever read,” wrote Isaac Asimov. “Even now, though my hair is graying, I found myself stirred very much as I had been.”

“Tumithak of the Corridors” had a huge popular response when it first appeared in *Amazing Stories* in 1932, and soon enough “Tumithak in Shawm,” in which Tumithak leads a human war party to the surface to confront the shelks – discovering both an ancient cache of powerful human weapons and new shelk horrors – appeared in June 1933. Fans had to wait nearly a decade for the third tale, in which Tumithak lead his rag-tag band of human warriors to victory in “Tumithak of the Towers of Fire” (*Super Science Stories*, Nov 1941).

In early 2003 Charles’ son Jim Tanner confirmed Internet rumors that there was a fourth, unpublished tale, to be included in a collection from North Star Press of St. Cloud, which finally appeared in 2005, edited by John Koblas and A.M. Decker. This is the first magazine appearance of the fourth Tumithak story.



### The Stories:

“Tumithak of the Corridors” (*Amazing Stories*, January 1932)

“Tumithak in Shawm” (*Amazing Stories*, June 1933)

“Tumithak of the Towers of Fire” (*Super Science Stories*, November 1941)

“Tumithak and the Ancient Word” (**Tumithak of the Corridors**, North Star Press, 2005)

the heat beam or in the resulting crash. But still alive, and cowering in the far end of the cabin, bruised and scratched but apparently unhurt otherwise, was a man.

He was a huge, fat fellow, so big and so round that Tumithak knew him at once for an Esthett. His size betrayed his race even before the Loorian noticed his sparse golden hair and beard and his now torn and disheveled robes of silken gauze.

Tumithak had first seen members of the curious race of Esthetts when he had been on that first historic journey from his home corridors of Loor to the Surface, ten years before. Fat and stupid, all their intelligence directed into a useless and decadent art, and lured with hypocritical lies by their savage masters, the Esthetts were nothing more than cattle to the Shelks. The Beasts of Venus bred them for size and full-bloodedness, lulling them into a sense of false security with an absurd belief of great appreciation for their art until the day arrived for their slaughter. Usually they were kept in deserted human-pits, although one or two towns which Tumithak had conquered had had Esthett yards on the Surface.

This Esthett cowered in the far end of the cabin, whimpering to himself in an excess of agony. When he saw Tumithak, he hid his face in his robes and increased his hysterical sobs. Tumithak gave him a scornful kick in the rump and ordered him to arise. His command was unheeded, so Kiletlok seized the fat one by an obese shoulder and, not too gently, assisted him to his feet.

“Where was this flyer going?” demanded Tumithak, tersely. The fat one gave no answer. He was quite obviously in the grip of a powerful hysteria. Tumithak let drive a couple more questions, but the creature was quite unable

to answer. With a gesture of disgust, the Lord of Shawm and Kaymak turned to leave the flyer, beckoning Kiletlok to follow him. The Mog gave the Esthett a shove that almost knocked him from his feet, and strode after his master. The effect on the Esthett was rather surprising. With a squeal of frantic fear, he waddled after them, whining shrilly: "Don't leave me! Oh, don't leave me!"

Tumithak snarled his disgust, as much at the delay as at the Esthett's character, but already his keen mind was analyzing this creature, wondering if, by befriending him, he couldn't make him of some use. Kiletlok, one of Tumithak's most trusted warriors, was a Mog, one of the foulest race of humans that had ever existed. Yet he had been a loyal and valued aid of the Loorian for over five years. And many another had been won to the Shelk slayer's cause who had first been his enemy or scorned as worthless. So he turned to Domnik.

"Bring that creature along," he said. "Lead him, and see if you can't silence his whimperings."

The little man took the Esthett by the arm and, as Tumithak and Kiletlok strode away, he followed after them. Tumithak had been chafing at the delay that the wrecking of his flyer had caused, and now the only thought in his mind was to follow the trail of his wife and son as fast as his legs would carry him. Unmindful of anything behind him, he was only dimly aware of the droning, soothing voice of Domnik as the blind one tried to calm the hysterical Esthett.

The flyer had gone down in late afternoon, and darkness overtook them in a wood several miles west of the crash site. The evening was cold, and the Esthett, in particular, was shivering in his gauzes, and his teeth were chattering before they stopped for the night. Tumithak would have pushed on, had the incident occurred a few years earlier, but his experience as a leader had, by this time, taught him to consider his men's comfort. Though his own men likely were chilled as well, they would never say anything. Regretfully he ordered a halt for the night. They gathered together a pile of sticks and set fire to them with their fire-hose and sat down to eat a few biscuits of the dry, tasteless food concentrate that they had brought with them.

Domnik's droning sympathetic voice had worked wonders with the Esthett. His

attitude was still fearful, and he did a lousy job of disguising the disgust with which all Esthetts habitually regarded the "wild men," as they called the pit-men, but his hysteria had waned. Only occasionally did he choke back a sob.

"My name is Lornathusia," he said in answer to Tumithak's questioning. But when Tumithak tried to find out from whence he came, he found himself up against a wall of ignorance. To the Esthett, the corridors in which he had been born were the whole world for him, and only the legend of the wondrous Surface where the Holy Shelk dwelled made him understand that there could be anywhere else.

"All my life," he whined, "was but a rite of worship of our Holy Masters. I was the son of a sculptor, and he taught me to follow in his footsteps. When the Holy Shelks called him to the Surface, some eight years ago, I vowed that my work should be so fine that I would follow him as soon as possible."

He looked around him fearfully.

"This!" he whispered. "This I don't understand. I was taught, like all the children of my people, that the cities of the Shelks were vast dream palaces of heavenly loveliness. When word came yesterday that I, with six of my companions, was to be taken to the Surface, I was in a transport of happiness. When we emerged from the halls onto the Surface, and saw the strange metal towers of the city, we wondered, but we did not doubt.

"And then — ah!" he almost screamed, and for several moments, Domnik was busy calming him. When he was ready to speak again, Tumithak forestalled him.

"We know well enough what happened, fat one," he said. "The tale has been told before. The Shelk slew your companions and drew off their blood to prepare it for Shelk food. It's an old story. But why did they spare you?"

Lornathusia almost became hysterical again.

"Yes, why?" he moaned. "I do not know. I know nothing, nothing! Where are the glorious palaces of the Surface that I was taught to believe in? Where are my brothers and my father and my ancestors, whom I thought dwelling in happiness in those palaces? Where are the Holy Shelks who honor the works that my brothers toil to prepare for them? Who are these evil Shelk that slay and devour men? And who, who

are you, strange, wild, little men that fight with Shelk and slay them? Oh — my world is gone and destroyed entirely, and I am lost in a corridor of demons and wild men!”

He buried his face in his arms, but Tumithak, with a gesture that was almost gentle, raised his head and commanded his attention.

“Listen,” ordered the Lorian. “I may not be a painter of pictures or a builder of statues, but I am a man and the friend of all humans. And the Shelks who slew your friends lie dead in a wrecked flyer. So listen to me!”

He stood up, his eyes looking not at Lornathusia, nor at his two comrades, but off into the dark, as though he saw there a vision.

“I am Tumithak,” he said. “Tumithak, Lord of Loor, of Nonone, of Yakra and all the Lower Corridors. I am the whelmer of Shawm and the protector of the Tains, and the conqueror of Kaymak and the Six Cities. And eight cities on the Surface, inhabited by men, bow to me and call me master.” Domnik was sitting cross-legged on the cold ground, his head cocked intently as he drank in his master’s words. Kiletlok, who had heard Tumithak’s frantically intense story at least a dozen times before, and almost knew it by heart, nevertheless listened respectfully.

And Tumithak talked. He told of his childhood, cowering deep in the hidden pits and corridors of Loor; and he told of his finding of the ancient book that gave him his first inkling of the fact that humans had once ruled the Surface and fought with the Shelks. He told of his fanatic ambition to slay a Shelk as his ancestors had done and of his long journey up the corridors to the Surface to accomplish that ambition. And he told of how his people had made him their chief, and how he had led them in raid after raid on the savage Lords of the Surface, ever extending his own domain as Shelk town after Shelk town fell before him.

And he boasted of his great weapon, the disruptor, that tore apart by their own energy the white and shining rods that the Shelks used for power, thus making the Shelk’s own weapons the medium by which he slew them.

It is doubtful if Lornathusia grasped much of what the great pit-man said. The language that the two men spoke was the same, but their idea patterns were entirely

different. Dimly, the Esthett did grasp Tumithak’s central idea. And, dimly, too, he felt that Tumithak was right. His beliefs had received such a terrific wrench that he was left with no faith or belief in anything, and he grasped at Tumithak’s exposition of the state of affairs.

And when Tumithak offered to take the Esthett with him, Lornathusia gladly consented to follow the Lorian, if need be, to death. The great fanatic had gained as a follower the representative of one more race.

### CHAPTER THREE Creature in the Night

Tumithak realized that his friends needed rest, and, being too keyed up by his tragic loss to sleep, he ordered the others to lie down and rest while he stood watch. He sat brooding in the dark, thinking of his wife and son, of the treason of Yofric, whom he was certain, by now, could be nothing but a Mog, and wondering if he was acting for the best in continuing in this fashion — making this journey to the Shelk city.

It must have been early dawn when he began to doze. It was not like Tumithak to sleep on watch, but he had gone through much during the preceding twenty-four hours, and he had expended much energy in useless anger and anxiety, so perhaps he may be excused for his nodding. However, the fact remains that he did doze for a few minutes, and that he was awakened with a start.

Something had pulled gently at the pack on his back, either at the fire-hose case or at the bundle of food and medicaments strapped below it. With a sharp exclamation, he snapped to his feet, his hand darting to the fire-hose’s scabbard. The creature that had touched him he could see as a mere shadow, a four-legged shadow that leaped back into the denser shadows immediately, with a sharp, animal yelp of fear.

Tumithak’s cry, combined with the yelp from the animal, was sufficient to bring Kiletlok instantly to his feet. It woke Domnik, too, and caused the little fellow to act most peculiarly. Tumithak was standing, peering into the shadows in an attempt to pierce the darkness so he might blast the unknown attacker with his fire-hose. Kiletlok, too, drew the long nozzle of his own fire-hose and held it at the ready. But Domnik sniffed the air eagerly, listened and



then sniffed again. He sat for a moment, tense, and, it seemed, a little bit puzzled.

Then he began to whine and make queer barking noises. Tumithak had lowered his weapon to stare at him in uncertainty, when the little fellow sprang to his feet and leaped into the shadows in the direction taken by the mysterious creature when it fled.

Kiletlok looked at his master in perplexity.

"Is he bewitched?" he asked. "What has possessed him to flee after that unknown danger?"

Tumithak motioned him to silence and strained his ears in an attempt to hear what was going on in the woods. And Tumithak was remembering —

Long ago, when first he had led his Loorians and Yakrans out of the deepest pits and corridors that had so long been their home, they had found, on their way to the Surface, the blind savage four-legged creatures who were the allies of those savages — dogs they were called — and they had fought with such ferocity that it had been necessary to kill every one before the blind savages could be conquered. And when Tumithak remembered that, he realized that the animal that had approached him in the night might well have been just such an animal.

"They are returning," said Kiletlok, suddenly.

"They?" Tumithak looked sharply at the Mog. He had heard distant movement in the forest, but the Mog's ears were evidently sharper than his. Kiletlok was right. An instant or so later, Domnik appeared in the clearing, with his hand on the head of a huge, tawny beast, scrawny and lean and apparently not a little frightened.

"It is a dog, master," he said, evidently anticipating Tumithak's question. "It is a dog such as my people once possessed, the kind of creature that for ages lived in partnership with us in the dark. He is starving, and only his hunger made him dare to brave our fire in a desperate attempt to gain a meal."

Tumithak looked at the cowering creature contemptuously. It was a sorry looking thing, with tattered ears and a sore on one flank from some recent battle or accident, and ribs that seemed to be almost ready to break through its skin. But when the Loorian lord looked into its eyes, his contempt withered and dwindled away into

nothing. The creature's eyes were big, and dark, and expressive, and he seemed to be pleading, not for life, not for food, but almost — almost he seemed to be pleading for a chance to prove himself worthy of his hire.

Tumithak jerked his eyes away from the dog's and spoke to Domnik.

"This creature speaks with his eyes instead of his tongue," he said, awkwardly. "Think you he would be of any value, Domnik?"

"Take him with us, lord," answered the little gray man. "And I will promise you that he will willingly die for you in exchange for his food and an occasional word of praise. Take him with us, and you will never regret it."

He looked eagerly at the Lord of Loor. It was quite evident that this was the biggest event that had occurred in the life of Domnik for many a year. And when Tumithak gave his consent, the little man fell on his knees and flung his arms about the creature's neck, whining and cooing to it until Tumithak would have almost sworn that he was talking to the beast in its own language.

Then Domnik began fumbling in the pack on his back, and before Tumithak's amazed eyes, he began to feed the creature the food that he had brought with him. He would have given the greater part to the animal, then and there, had not the Loorian stopped, and given up a share of his own and Kiletlok's rations, that Domnik might keep some for himself.

They sat for several hours now, discussing this new addition to the party. Domnik related story after story to illustrate the rare loyalty and intelligence of the creatures. When dawn's first traces appeared, Tumithak started them off, and they again took up their journey into the west.

By mid-afternoon they had traveled some ten miles and were growing very cautious, for they knew that they could not be very far from the Shelk town. But no amount of caution would have availed them, had they known it, for already the Shelks, warned by Yofric on his arrival the day before, had set their trap.

That traitorous Mog, as soon as he arrived in Kuchklak, had reported the battle that he had seen in the distance. Practically the entire available armed forces of the town, Shelk and Mog alike, had set out at once to prepare an ambush several miles

east of the town. And when Tumithak and his party, advancing westward, were still several hundred yards from the line of concealed Shelks, the Shelks to their right and left moved stealthily forward and surrounded them. The first intimation that the Loorian had of his enemies was when, at a given signal, the ring began to close in, and whistling, clacking Shelks and howling Mogs began to pour down on them from all directions.

Tumithak and Kiletlok drew their fire-hoses at once and began a seemingly hopeless defense. The Esthett, as might have been expected, squealed and threw himself to the ground, where he lay cowering and shivering like a huge mass of jelly all during the battle that followed. The dog growled menacingly and started forward, bristling with anger. Without a doubt, he would have hurled himself on the enemy and died uselessly beneath the fire-hose's ray, had not Domnik put his hand on his neck and spoken softly to him, keeping up a constant mumble of cautioning, remonstrative words.

The action of the Shelks was most peculiar, Tumithak thought. He was quite familiar with the Shelks' usual method of attack — the creatures hanging behind and urging their Mogs forward with clacking cries and threats until, if the Mogs were defeated and killed, they would rush their enemy and either die themselves or gain victory at once.

Now, however, for the first time, he saw Shelks, and even Mogs, fighting cautiously. They were not hurling themselves forward, in spite of the fact that they were far superior in numbers to Tumithak's little group. Instead, they were all seeking the protection of the trees and rocks. Still odder, they were apparently seeking to avoid hurting their opponents

But the Shelks' "courtesy," if such it were, availed them little if they expected Tumithak to respond in kind. He and Kiletlok defended themselves and their companions as valiantly as they had ever done in their lives. His old trick — that of picking a tree that a Shelk was hiding behind and playing the fire-hose on it until its moisture burst into steam, shattering the tree and often the Shelk behind it — this trick he used time and again. The Mog and he divided their work, as they so often did — while Tumithak took the offensive, seeking out and attacking individual enemies, Kiletlok kept turning, his eyes alert and his weapon

ready to burn down any Shelk or Mog who exposed themselves in an attempt to attack.

"They do not attempt to slay us, lord," Kiletlok muttered, presently in a puzzled tone. "They plan some weird treachery, I fear."

"It is a weird treachery, indeed, that lets us live when they might slay us," the Loorian answered, smiling. But he was as puzzled as the Mog until presently, turning suddenly in the hope of catching some Shelk by surprise; he caught one in the act of swinging about his head a curious weapon that consisted, apparently, of a ball of metal at the end of a long cord.

He sent a blast of heat at the creature, and had the satisfaction of seeing it fall, charred and smoking, before it could accomplish its purpose, whatever that had been. But before he could lower his hose to see just what that purpose had been, he heard a cry from Kiletlok and, swinging about, saw the Mog entangled in a long cord, the end of which, weighted with a heavy ball, was winding itself around and around him.

And then dozens of Shelks were moving in toward them, all swinging the cords and hurling them at the humans. In the time that it takes to tell of it, Kiletlok was down, and Tumithak, himself, was struggling, with a half dozen cords wrapping themselves about his body.

In vain he tried to sever the bindings with the heat of the fire-hose; the cords seemed to be made of some fiber that resisted the heat as though it were stone. And, indeed, it was, had Tumithak but known it; for these war-bolas of the Shelks were woven of asbestos. The creatures knew full well that no ordinary fiber could withstand the heat of a fire-hose. So, once entangled in them, the entire group soon found themselves helpless and in the hands of the Shelks.

Then the spider-like beasts lost no time in binding the humans in their usual thorough way. Cord after cord was wrapped round and round each of them until they resembled more a quartet of fat cocoons than a group of humans. They bound the dog too, although several Mogs were bitten in the process, and, from the care which they exercised to avoid hurting anyone seriously, it became quite evident that the creatures were acting under orders. Someone had commanded that Tumithak and his companions be brought back unharmed,

and those orders were being carried out to the letter.

When they had been bound until it seemed that there were no more cords left among the Shelks to bind them, the Mogs were ordered to take them up and carry them. Then on through the woods the strange party went, into the west and into Kuchklak.

The town of Kuchklak was a medium-sized city, probably having a population of thirty or forty thousand Shelks. Like most towns of its size or smaller, it rose suddenly out of the forest, a few square miles of metal towers from thirty to two hundred feet high, rising at crazy angles, their tops netted together with innumerable strands and ropes, and the ground beneath them destitute of any signs of vegetation. In the center, rising well above the others, was the tower of the King-Shelk, the governor of the city, and this tower served as a sort of administration building.

To this building, Tumithak and his companions were carried. The governor had been informed of the arrival of the captives and had dropped down from the maze of ropes and cords in which he usually rested and now stood on the dirt floor with certain of his captains around him. Tumithak and the others were brought in and laid down before him.

He gave the orders to unbind them in his clattering Shelk speech, and even waited for a few moments after they were unbound, evidently to allow time for the blood to be restored to their cramped limbs. Tumithak lay for a moment or two, recuperating; then he rose slowly to his feet. At a motion from the Shelk governor, a group of Mogs jerked the others to their feet also.

Then the Shelk chief spoke, and spoke in a clattering attempt at human speech that Tumithak, without much difficulty, understood. "You are Tumithak, the conqueror of Kaymak?" he asked. "You are the human who has overcome the Six Cities?"

Tumithak nodded, curtly. His eyes were sweeping about the room, missing nothing. His body was alert and tense, ready at a moment's notice to take advantage of the least thing that would offer him a possibility of escape.

"I am the leader of men," he admitted. "It has been given to me by the High One to lead the resurgence of humanity. But it is all humanity that rises against you, foul spider,

not merely Tumithak of the Corridors."

The Shelk chief shrugged. "If you are the chief, I am satisfied," he clacked. "Have you heard what has become of your mate and offspring?"

Tumithak's face paled slightly. "It will be well for Shelkdom if little has happened," he said, tensely. "But if it pleases you, tell me what you have done."

The Shelk chief grinned a tight-lipped grin at Tumithak's obvious anxiety. "Fear not, wild man, they have not been hurt — yet," he said. "They were merely brought here to be bait, to lure you into our little ambush. We are not interested in your wife and child. You are the hostage we desired to secure. And — well, here you are. It has been told to me by one Yofric, whom I sent to spy on you, that your people worship you as a living God. So, we will hold you here and threaten your death unless your people give up the domain that they have taken on the Surface and retire again into the corridors from which they came!"

Tumithak snorted. "I have taught my people that the race is all that counts," he exclaimed, "They will tell you to slay me and be damned. They will elect another chief and come here and wipe out this stinking Shelk-hole until no sign of it will tell where it ever was. Do you think humans are Shelks that they should give up because their chief has died?"

He looked at the Shelk chief boldly, but in his heart his boldness was spotted with doubt. He was not sure that his people would do as he had often commanded them; he had never been sure that his people would continue to battle with the Shelks without him there to command them. Yet it would never do to let this creature know that he had those doubts.

So, he faced the Shelk chief, unflinchingly and a little scornfully, in spite of the misgivings in his heart. But the wily old creature was not deceived. He chuckled a clattering Shelk chuckle and, turning, spoke a few words to his group of sycophants. They answered him, and after some moments he evidently reached some conclusion. He addressed Tumithak again. "These strange ones whom my people captured with you," he said. "Are they important ones among your people?"

Tumithak made no answer. Not knowing what the creature intended, he offered no information which might lend any sort of

aid or comfort to the enemy.

The Shelk chief shrugged. "It makes little difference," he said. "There is room for all in the prison we have prepared."

He called a couple of his lieutenants forward and spoke to them in human speech, evidently so that the humans could understand him. "Take this group," he said, "and put them in the pit we have prepared. As for the female wild one and her cub — she will be of no more use to us now. Send her to the kennel of Yofric. He deserves some sort of reward, and he'll probably find some use for both of them."

This last remark, so characteristically Shelk-like in its cruelty, drove all thoughts of restraint from Tumithak's mind. He broke suddenly away from the two Mogs that were holding him, struck savagely at the one which had held him the more firmly, and leaped forward to strike at the savage Shelk chief. Unarmed as he was, he might have inflicted serious damage on the brute in a moment, but the odds were too great. A dozen Mogs and half as many Shelks swarmed over him, and he was trussed up again in thorough Shelk fashion.

They made Kiletlok and Domnik carry him. And with the tall, black-haired Mog carrying his head and the little, bandaged man at his feet, followed closely by the big dog, they made a queer group, indeed. Lornathusia, too, waddled close to the blind savage, and, surrounded by Shelks and Mogs, they left the administration tower. The group wound their way through the streetless maze of the city, and some half mile away, came to the place that had been prepared for their prison.

It was a pit, some fifty feet in diameter and as many deep. Quite obviously it had been prepared for some time, for though its sheer, polished sides bore evidence of the fact that it had been dug with a disintegrator, the clayey soil of the bottom had had time to support the growth of several thorn bushes about five feet high. These thorn bushes, apparently, were going to be all the shelter they would have, as well as their only chance for privacy.

The Mogs unbound Tumithak, fastened a rope under his arms and lowered him into the pit. They tossed the rope in after him and then, one after another, they lowered the other three men and the dog, tossing their ropes in after them, too. A Shelk then ordered them to throw the ropes in a pile.

When they had done so, a fire-hose in the hands of one of the Shelks quickly reduced the ropes to feathery ashes. Quite obviously, these ropes were not made of asbestos, as the others had been.

And now with the entire group of prisoners safely placed in their pit, the crowd of Shelks and Mogs gradually dwindled away, and they were left alone.

### CHAPTER FOUR Prison Pit

Tumithak had no sooner made sure that the last Shelk had disappeared than he arose from the listless, reclining pose that he had taken, and began a careful survey of the pit that was his prison. With Kiletlok, he discussed their predicament and the possibilities of escape. He even drew Domnik and Lornathusia into the conversation in the hope that one of them might be inspired to offer some suggestion.

They had talked for no more than ten minutes when a Shelk stuck his head over the edge of the pit and eyed them critically. His gaze took in the whole pit bottom. He must have stood there for three or four minutes before he was convinced that all was well in the pit. He left at last — but in another twenty minutes he was back, giving the pit another searching inspection. Obviously, they had been assigned a guard.

There seemed little chance, then, for carrying into execution any plan for escape. Indeed, no plan suggested itself, for the prison was a most efficient one, indeed, without bars or roof. The very simplicity of the place precluded escape.

And so days passed.

Tumithak's anger turned to anxiety, his anxiety to worry and his worry to nervousness. He snapped at his companions when they spoke to him, brooded in silence and once broke into a long harangue against Shelkdom that was as inane as it was useless. But the others, with rare judgment, realized the position he was in, and commiserated with him, refraining from anything that would add to his troubles.

On the sixth day their break came. They had racked their brains in vain to find some way out of the pit, and they had reluctantly given up, at last, the idea that they could ever scale the sheer fifty foot wall. Suddenly they were given with the idea that, if they couldn't get up out of the prison, there might



be a possibility of getting down out of it!

It was the dog that showed them how this could be a possibility. They had been fed exceedingly well, considering their status, and at this particular time, the dog had been given more food than he evidently desired. In characteristic, canine fashion, he had carried his surplus to a far corner of the pit and was proceeding to bury it. He had dug a small hole when suddenly he became wildly excited and began to scabble enthusiastically at the soil, whining and barking alternately, and stopping once or twice to turn to the men as if calling to them to help him.

Tumithak and Kiletlok were engaged in conversation at the time, and paid little attention to the beast, but Domnik had been listening to him, and the little fellow, with Lornathusia behind him, hastened over to find what the dog had discovered.

In less than a minute, Domnik was back, as excited as his pet had been. He stood before Tumithak, obviously awaiting permission to speak. Tumithak nodded to him and: "A hole, lord!" he stammered, "Our dog has discovered a deep hole leading down into the ground. I cannot feel any bottom."

Tumithak stood up, excitement rising within him. Was it possible that a mode of escape had been given them? He was about to rush over to where the dog was still working, when he realized that it was almost time for the frequent inspection to occur.

"Get that beast away from the hole at once, Domnik!" he commanded. "If the Shelk guard sees him there, he'll get suspicious at once."

Domnik turned and called, "Kuzco!" The dog recognizing this name as his, raised his head and whined in complaint, but when Domnik called the name commandingly a second time, he responded, leaving the hole and coming to Domnik's side. The blind savage placed a hand on its head, and when the Shelk guard arrived and looked down into the pit, the whole group was lounging about in their usual listless attitudes.

But no sooner were they sure that his inspection was over and the guard gone than they rushed over to the corner to inspect the hole.

It was a small hole, about six or seven inches in diameter, and by good fortune it was under one of the scraggly thorn bushes that were scattered about, and, therefore, more than likely invisible from the top of the pit. Tumithak stuck an arm into the hole

and felt about. The hole was wider, farther down. He dropped a stone down, and failed to hear it hit bottom. A second, larger stone sent back a thud after a second or so. Tumithak frowned.

"It's not very far to the bottom," he said, with some regret. "Let's see if we can widen the opening till one of us can be lowered into it."

They proceeded to work on this idea at once. After taking out a few handfuls of dirt, they found that it was easier to let it slide down into the hole. Evidently there was plenty of empty space down there. They had almost finished enlarging the hole when Tumithak called a halt.

"It's almost time for another inspection," he announced. "We've got to use the utmost care to avoid being caught."

He demanded that Lornathusia, the most elaborately dressed of them, give him a part of the outer robe of his voluminous garments, and tearing this, he made a square cloth covering for the hole. He pegged this down quickly with twigs from the thorn bush, and scattered dirt over it. Then they all hurried back to their usual sitting place, and when the Shelk guard came to inspect them, they were once more engaged in the interminable and innocuous conversation that the Shelk was fast becoming used to.

They finished enlarging the hole during the next interim between inspections. When the guard had come again, and gone, they removed the cover from their hole a final time.

"We shall lower you down by your feet, Kiletlok," announced Tumithak. "You are the tallest and slenderest among us. Feel about, and, if possible, look about, and get all the information you possibly can. I think," and he spoke doubtfully, and yet hopefully, "I think we are breaking into a corridor or a man-pit."

They lowered Kiletlok down, and in less than a minute, he signaled them to draw him back. They pulled him up at once, replaced the cloth, and hurried back to their sitting place.

"It's a corridor, all right," Kiletlok assured them. "It was probably well underground until this pit was dug. What incredible luck that this pit was dug so deep and no deeper!"

"Not luck!" said Tumithak, softly. "Have I not told you of the High One who has called me?"

Kiletlok said nothing. There was little or no religion among the Mogs, and he had never been able to understand the references to the "High One" which he heard in Tumithak's realm. Besides, his mind was now concerned with how they were going to get out, now that the means had apparently been given them.

"We could make our garments into ropes to lower ourselves into the corridor," he said, thoughtfully. "We might even find that this corridor leads to the Surface somewhere. But how, Lord Tumithak, will we prevent the Shelks from following us? Every twenty minutes they come to look at us, and if we leave, it will certainly be but a very few minutes before they are in pursuit, with lights and fire-hoses."

The Shelk slayer scowled. This was a serious objection, indeed. With neither weapons nor light, they certainly could not expect to get far in these corridors, when pursued by large numbers of foes who had both.

"We will have to devise some means to give us a longer start," he admitted. "If there was some way to deceive the Shelks into believing we were still here, after we had left..."

They sat and thought for several minutes. Then, from the most unexpected source, came a plan.

"I think I can help you out, lord of men," said Lornathusia.

The other three looked at him in surprise. It was so seldom that he offered any opinion or made any suggestion that they frequently forgot that he was there.

"You mean you think that you can deceive the Shelks?" asked Tumithak, doubtfully.

"I — I hope so," answered the Esthett, and Tumithak noticed that the doubt which he had half-way expressed had communicated itself to the fat one already. So he simulated a look of interest and hope as the other went on.

"All art, lord of men, is, in a way, a deception. The realists attempt to imitate nature artificially; the impressionists try to simulate emotions and moods by artificial means. I — I have some little skill in the carving and molding of dead matter into the shape and appearance of living things. And perhaps I could build from the dirt around here, certain forms that might deceive a Shelk into believing that he saw us lying

asleep."

At first, Tumithak was dubious. In the long centuries in which his ancestors had lived in their pits and corridors, all concept of art had been forgotten, and at first the idea seemed so strange to him as to be absurd. But then he remembered certain statues that he had seen in the Halls of the Esthetts in the upper part of his own corridors, and he became more interested.

"This evening, after the sun has set," he announced, "we will put your plan into execution, Lornathusia. And we shall all be indebted to your art, if we manage to escape."

There was little to do then, except to wait. The afternoon seemed interminable, but it ended at last, and night fell. As they had done on the other nights, the four men and the dog huddled together for warmth and pretended to sleep. Presently the Shelk guard came to the pit, with a huge light whose beams carried far into the night. He flashed the light about the pit; then, satisfied at last, he turned and left them in the dark.

"Who shall enter the hole first, lord?" queried Lornathusia, and after some little talk, they decided to lower Domnik. Tumithak was fairly sure there was no danger in the corridor, and the blind one was the smallest of the three and therefore could slip through the hole the easiest.

He informed the Esthett of his decision and the fat one told them to attend to the lowering of the little man while he worked on the dummy that was to take his place.

"But it will be necessary to leave at least his outer garments to clothe the dummy with," insisted Lornathusia.

Tumithak and Kiletlok had already begun to tie some of their own garments together to make a line to lower Domnik with. They left the Esthett scabbling together a pile of dirt from the pit's floor and hastened to the hole. A few minutes and they were back, looking in amazement at the remarkable image that was taking place under Lornathusia's pudgy hands. By the time the Shelk guard flashed his light down into the pit, the four men and the dog were, to all appearances, still slumbering soundly where he had seen them before.

They lowered the dog next. Kuzco was decidedly nervous since Domnik had disappeared, and they feared that some unexpected action of his might betray them if they didn't let him go to the little man as quickly

as possible. Kiletlok followed the dog, leaving Lornathusia and Tumithak as the only ones in the pit, although to the eyes of the Shelk the entire group would still be intact.

And then Lornathusia began to work like a demon. It was necessary that both he and Tumithak leave during the next twenty-minute period, and so it was necessary for two images to be made. He did finish them, and finished them in time for Tumithak to lower him into the corridor; but before the lord of Loor could drop down himself, he saw the beam from the Shelk's huge light sweeping along the edge of the pit. He flung himself under the thorn bush, flattened himself to the ground, and prayed silently that the creature wouldn't see him.

The light swept down the side of the wall opposite him, swung back and forth across the floor of the pit a couple of times and settled on the group of images that Lornathusia had molded. For a moment it hesitated — the Shelk was making sure that they were all there — then the light swept on. Carelessly it swung about the pit a few more times, and then it was gone. It had not even struck the thorn bush under which Tumithak crouched. Nevertheless it was a huge sigh of relief that Tumithak gave when the pit was again dark. And he wasted no more time in lowering himself into the hole and joining his companions.

The corridor they were in was entirely dark. Kiletlok and Lornathusia were seated quietly on the floor and called to Tumithak when they heard him drop down, to let him know where they were.

"Where is Domnik?" asked the Loorian, trying vainly to focus his eyes on something in the dense dark.

Kiletlok barked out a sharp laugh.

"Where is he not?" he answered. "He is here, he is there, he is everywhere. He has cast aside his eye-coverings and is sniffing and squinting about and chuckling and talking to his dog like a very madman."

"He is at home here," Tumithak explained. "In such a dark corridor as this, he was born and raised. I think he is probably at ease entirely for the first time in many years."

Just then there was a slight sound to one side of the group, and as Tumithak swung around nervously, the voice of Domnik spoke up.

"This is a wonderful corridor, lord," he announced. "There are many apartments

farther down, and, I think, they are all deserted. I imagine there is light down there, too, although it must be several miles from here. The strangest thing is that the entrance seems to be down the corridor from here!"

"Are you sure of this?" queried Tumithak.

"Indeed, yes, lord. There are many signs that tell me these things are so. Can't you notice the faint current of air that blows up from the lower part of the corridor, for instance?"

Tumithak, after a moment, had to admit that he could notice no current of air blowing from the lower corridor. The little savage shrugged.

"I am at home here, lord," he said.

Tumithak stood for a moment or two, uncertain. Then, yielding to the obviously greater knowledge and instinct of the sightless one, he gave the order to start down the corridor. Domnik suggested that they hold hands so that he might lead them, and acting on this suggestion, they succeeded in making better time than they would have, had the others been alone.

Yet the darkness pressed down on the three whose sight had been taken from them and gave them a curious feeling of futility and depression. Indeed, so rapidly did their spirits fall that it soon became obvious that unless they did discover lights further down the corridor, the little man might before long assume the leadership of the group.

But the possibility of discovering lights farther down the corridor had been suggested by Domnik, and the three peered constantly into the black in the hope of seeing some break in the oppressive darkness, and that Domnik had not abandoned the possibility was made plain by the fact that he still carried his eye bandage over his arm.

And at last, after hours of slow walking, they did behold a glow far down the corridor.

Kiletlok cried out, joyfully: "We're out! I see daylight!" But the others, knowing how uncannily like daylight the light from the great glowing plates that lighted up the corridors was, had none of the hopes that the Mog expressed. They knew that they had merely come, as they had hoped, to a portion of the corridor where the lights still glowed. Domnik regretfully replaced his bandages, and the others hurried forward with a new boldness, their confidence increasing in direct ratio with the increase in the light.

They expected to find people of some kind before long; but, surprisingly, they were disappointed. They walked a mile or more along the lighted corridor without seeing a soul, and then Tumithak began to look in the apartments that lined the hall. He found the apartments lighted, too, and furniture there, furniture that was whole and serviceable, yet that had over it a vague indefinite patina of age that seemed to hint that it had been ages since this furniture had been of use to anyone.

An uneasy feeling took hold of the Loorian, a memory of that feeling that had held him, years before, when first he had set out along the long corridor route that was to lead him to the Surface and to his first Shelk. This feeling increased as he went on, and even communicated itself to the others.

Presently Tumithak noticed an odd fact. In many of the apartments little piles of dust and calcite fragments lay, and after noticing them uneasily for a while, his suspicions regarding them were confirmed. One of the piles disclosed a half dozen human teeth!

"Those piles of dust," he said, pointing. "They are all that remains of the inhabitants of this corridor. Something killed them long ago, so long ago that their bones have crumbled to dust. Something — is it something that is still here?"

It was a cautious group that moved forward, after that discovery. These people had no knowledge of science at that time, in spite of the fact that they had learned to handle Shelk flyers and fire-hoses and had even accidentally discovered the secret of the disruptor. Being ignorant, they were superstitious and believed in magic and in spirits. To them, it was not so strange that some inimical, intelligent force had invaded this corridor and slain all the inhabitants at some indefinite time in the past. The only question in their minds was: was that inimical force, still present, even now lying in wait for them?

They came to a cross corridor after a while, and Tumithak started in surprise at a sign he saw fastened to the wall. To the others it was merely an odd ornament of some kind, but Tumithak could read, and to him it was a sign that said, "The Food Machines."

"This is writing," he cried, astonished. "Writing such as my own people write! How could my people's writing be found in this strange and distant corridor?"

It was a wonder to him, but, after all, it

need not have been. For nearly two hundred years before the coming of the Shelks, the human race had had but a single language and a single form of writing. There was no more cause for wonder over the writing than there was over the fact that every corridor Tumithak had ever explored had had people that spoke the same tongue.

But a real wonder awaited them when they turned up that corridor and came to the rooms where the great food machines stood. For cluttered in front of the machines were literally dozens of the piles of dust that were all that were left of the people that had once inhabited this corridor. Large numbers had evidently come here to die, that was certain. Disregarding the piles of dust for the time being, Tumithak set to work at once to inspect the food machines, for they were already beginning to feel hungry, and they knew not how long they might remain in this corridor. Food was certainly going to be a necessity, and now that the means of providing it had been supplied, the sooner they produced it, the better.

He found the machines well supplied with the fuel they used, he tested the fans that sucked the air into the chambers, and inspected the pulverizers that ground the rock into minerals necessary in the food's preparation. Then he started the machine and clapped his hands in satisfaction when the throb of the motor started, built up, and speeded into the steady pulsation that indicated that the machine was in working order.

But a moment later, the pulsation slowed down and stopped.

Tumithak frowned and began a more thorough examination than he had first given the machine. He thanked his stars that his father had been a food man in his old home, and that he had insisted that Tumithak learn the same profession. He was quite familiar with the construction of these machines (although he was totally ignorant of the chemical theory on which they worked), yet it was some time before he found out what was wrong. In fact, he overlooked the trouble because of its very simplicity.

The machine had stopped because it was unable to get any sulfur. The rocks before it were mostly phosphates, and for some reason, the machine had not been moved from its place, but still stood, trying vainly whenever it was started, to extract sulfur from the



phosphate rocks.

The people of that corridor had probably lost entirely the art of reading. The production of food had become more of a religious rite than an art or a science. Little by little the true scientific facts of food production had been forgotten, until at last people depended entirely on this machine and forgot that the machine depended on them. As long as the machines could get all the elements necessary for the building of food, they ran on and fed the people that worshiped them.

But there came a day when the machines had bored entirely through the sulfide and sulfate rocks and came to a vein of phosphates. Then they slowed and stopped, waiting for the people to move them to a more suitable area. The food supply ran slowly out, and the people died, praying, around a machine that seemingly had betrayed them.

Of this, of course, Tumithak was ignorant. He wondered at the death of those people, even as the machine slowed and stopped. He wondered as he and his companions searched about and found the sulfate rocks in the sides of the corridor and while they dug out the rock and fed it to the machines. He was still wondering when the food cubes began to collect in the discharge chute on the side of the machine.

When the group was well supplied with food, they made bundles of it, and proceeded to start again on their journey in search of the entrance that Domnik still insisted was farther down the corridor. They walked on for several hours, and then the light plates in the ceiling began to dim again. Every now and then, they would run across one that was out entirely. After an hour or two of walking, the dark ones had become so common that they moved in a continual gloom. Then, finally, the gloom became darkness and they were forced to join hands and trust to the leadership of Domnik once again.

They had walked on silently in the dark for some time, when Domnik suddenly tensed and squeezed Tumithak's hand. He stopped and whispered close to Tumithak's ear.

"There is someone or something near us, lord," he said softly. "I can hear breathing just down the corridor."

"What is it?" asked Tumithak. "What can you tell me of it?"

"It huddles closely to the wall," answered the blind one. "And it moves toward us cautiously. It's footsteps — eh! That is odd. It moves on two feet, lord, yet I hear the sound of two breathings."

The group stopped, silent save for a faint whimper of fear from Lornathusia. Their superstitions were aroused again, for certainly this thing that approached them could not be human. And what wonder, what horror would it turn out to be, that walked on two feet and breathed with two mouths? They all listened but it was only Domnik who heard enough to be able to interpret the motions of the thing.

"It has stopped moving toward us," he whispered. "It is aware of us, I think. It has heard us and is taking refuge in one of the apartments."

They stood for a while, uncertain whether to proceed or not. Minutes passed, and to Domnik's straining ears came only the sound of muffled, labored breathing.

"This creature fears us," Tumithak decided at last. "It has fled into that apartment for safety, and it is concealing its breathing in the hope that we will not hear it."

"Let — let us leave it alone and go on," suggested Lornathusia, timorously. And although the others showed their contempt of his cowardice by silently ignoring him, yet they started forward, with the evident intent of following his advice.

They reached the doorway where the mysterious creature was hidden, giving it a wide berth, for they had no intention of letting some weird monster leap out and catch them unawares. But as they passed, no weird creature of the dark came forth from the doorway, but instead the distinct sound of a sob!

Tumithak stopped, frozen in his tracks, Kiletlok, behind him, stopped, too, uncertain, puzzled by some vague familiarity in the sound. Domnik, whose life was based on sounds as much as the other's was based on sight, gave a joyful, incredible cry and wheeled toward the apartment's door. Only Lornathusia was unaffected by the sound, but he stopped as the others did and crouched whimpering against the far wall of the corridor.

Then Domnik and Tumithak were rushing through the door and into the apartment, and a light was suddenly flashed in their faces, while a scream, a very feminine

scream, came from the apartment's occupant.

And Domnik was crying, "Lady! Lady!" and Tumithak was rushing forward to seize his wife in his arms, and Tholura was laughing and crying at the same time, still clinging tightly to the form of her little son, who, waking from the noise, was looking about him and wondering what all the excitement was about.

### CHAPTER FIVE Legacy of the Ancients

A scrambled, tearful conversation ensued during the next fifteen minutes. Gradually, Tholura learned of the adventures that had befallen Tumithak since Yofric had kidnapped her, and, gradually, she informed him of the events that had brought her, so incredibly, to this deep corridor.

Briefly, her tale was as follows: She had been held by the Shelks until the capture of Tumithak, and then she had been sent, as the Shelk chief had ordered, to the kennel of the Mog, Yofric. This Mog was a mongrel of sorts. He was not of the pure Mog race, but had, somehow, the blood of some other race coursing through his veins. It was because of this that he had been able to deceive Tumithak into thinking him a pit-man and because of this, too, he was scorned by the average Mog, for if the Mogs had one virtue, it was pride in their race and their trade. But Yofric had none of this pride nor of any other virtue. He brought Tholura and her son into his kennel and announced to the cringing creature that was his wife that hereafter she was to share his favors with Tholura.

At first, of course, this female was filled with hate toward the Shelk slayer's wife, and Tholura might have been slain in her sleep had she not acquainted the shrewish creature with the true state of affairs at the first opportunity.

When Yofric's mate realized that Tholura's only desire was to escape, she assumed what was at least an apparent friendliness and offered to help her get away. The very next night (Yofric being away on some business for his master) this creature brought a light and a packet of food, and led Tholura to a cavern in a hill, a mile or so beyond the town.

"I must leave you here," she said. "For I must not be missed when Yofric returns in the morning. This is the entrance to a corri-

dor, and it is reputed that there is another entrance at the other end. It will not be safe for you to try to travel these woods, for they are usually full of Shelks and Mogs. Go down into this corridor and seek for the other entrance. If you find it, you can surely make your escape. If not —" She shrugged. "After all, you told me that death was preferable to slavery with Yofric."

So Tholura had taken the light and the pitifully small packet of food and had entered the cavern. It was a short one. In less than a quarter of a mile, she came to a pit with a flight of stairs cut around its sides. She started down these stairs and —

"Never have I seen such an incredible flight of stairs," she told Tumithak. "They wound round and round, dropping down and down. I must have been nearly an hour in descending them. At last I came out into a corridor that was not greatly unlike the corridors of my own home. There were apartments along this corridor, too; but instead of being the homes of people, as I hoped, they were filled with shelves, shelves that covered every wall; and these shelves were filled with books. I could have counted books by the hundreds, Tumithak, yes, by the hundreds of hundreds. But of living people, I found no more than you did, my lord."

Tholura had been eating as she spoke, as had Tumithak's little son. At the mention of books, Tumithak stood up, the light of interest glowing in his eyes.

"Could you lead me to the place where you saw these books?" he asked. "It may be that we can find books of great value. A book is a wonderful thing. It was a book that led me to my great adventure and to the idea that men might slay Shelks."

Tholura assured him that the place where she had found the books was not far away.

"I feared to leave the steps, once I found myself at the bottom of them," she confessed. "They were the only exit I knew. I gradually explored around them, but I have never let myself get very far away. I knew that if I ever got lost down here, I might easily starve to death before I found a way out."

She rose as she spoke, and the rest of the group did also. Lornathusia accompanied his rising with the usual grunts and groans that were characteristic of him. A few minutes later they entered a long hall whose apartments were, as Tholura had said, lined with books.

It took but a glance for Tumithak to

realize that these books were old, incredibly old, and the sort that were used before the Invasion. Their pages were of thin sheets of some durable metal, metal that was made to last for centuries and that, even so, were beginning to corrode on the edges. Such pages as these had never been made by pitmen. No, they had been printed by those wise ancestors who had lived on the Surface and fought with the Shelks, when first the invaders came from Venus.

The irony was that the original dwellers in that corridor, neglecting their books for what was probably some vague, religious reason, had forgotten the art of reading and writing. Eventually, they had gone to their death from starvation with the secret of their salvation literally being stored on the walls around them.

These works, Tumithak was to find out, had been carefully picked by the ancient one who had brought them there. They were works of science, books of knowledge, a careful ground-work in all the stupendous accumulation of facts that had been available to the giant minds of the Golden Age of the Thirtieth century of the pre-invasion era!

Of course, Tumithak did not realize this at once. Indeed, after an hour or more of haphazard investigations, he was almost ready to give up his attempt to find any book that would add to his knowledge. This was due to the fact that he had, unfortunately, run across a shelf of books on higher mathematics, and he was far from able to deal with these yet.

After a while, he heard of cry of pleasure from, of all people, Lornathusia. The Esthett had exclaimed with pleasure once or twice over a few of the more exquisite bindings and had at last begun to listlessly glance through the rest of the books. And now he had found one with illustrations, colored illustrations that had brought his startled gasp of appreciation.

He held up the book to Tumithak, and the latter glanced at the picture and then, interested, began to read the caption. For some moments, he perused the book, looking at the other illustrations and growing more and more interested. The book was a text of the fundamentals of astronomy, and the illustrations were of nebulas and planets and satellites, as seen through the marvelous telescopes of the Golden Age.

Tumithak must have read a third of the book before the increasing complexity of the

ideas caused him to stop in wonder of it all. He raised his head to find Tholura and his son asleep, with Domnik and Kiletlok seated cross-legged on guard at the door and Lornathusia pouring over the illustrations in another book. The Loorian's head was buzzing with immense thoughts, the magnitude of which he could hardly conceive. He had read of galaxies, and he had read of atoms, and of neither of them had he ever suspected. His mind was filled with awe and, more important, with a vast desire to learn more of the fundamentals of the universe.

So the group remained in the corridor of the books for several days, while Tumithak searched and sorted and gradually accumulated a collection of volumes that represented to him the most basic facts available. Then, making a series of bundles, he packed them on the backs of himself and his fellows, and they started out up the almost interminable flight of steps to what they hoped might be freedom.

They rested frequently. The dog was uneasy, and had to be coaxed up the stairs. Lornathusia, with his immense weight, tired easily and had to stop often, and even the leader with his weight of books and his son in his arms found a frequent rest not undesirable.

But they reached the top at last. Reached it with the dog's uneasiness approaching a frenzy and with Domnik himself whispering warnings. The little fellow was certain that Shelks were either in the corridor or recently had been. So the group hesitantly left the steps, moved into the corridor, and down it, their light flashing about to warn them of any danger. They had almost decided that any danger that had been there had withdrawn, when it swooped down on them. Concealed in a short passage beyond the steps, a group of Mogs and Shelks emerged and rushed toward them with howls and clackings, while from closer to the entrance, another group came sweeping down.

The unarmed, laden group could offer little or no resistance. It was Kuzco, the dog, that presented the greatest problem to the enemy, but even he, snarling and snapping, was at last beaten down, smothered with Mogs, and bound in the usual thorough Shelk fashion.

There were but two Shelks, and these, in the usual Shelk style, held back during the fight and encouraged the Mogs with

cries and whistles. Tumithak paid little attention to them, even after he had been captured and bound. His attention was attracted by the Mog that was apparently in charge of the others, for this Mog was Yofric! And it would be hard to say what emotion was uppermost in Tumithak's breast, as he struggled between despair at being again captured and hatred for the creature that had been instrumental in twice leading him into the hands of the Shelks.

The precious books that the group was carrying were carelessly cast aside as the Mogs picked up their opponents and started for the entrance to the cavern, leading up towards the Surface.

Yofric, in an excess of spite that could only have come from the jealousy engendered by his overpowering inferiority complex, walked along beside Tumithak, boasting and threatening as though he, himself, was the supreme Lord of Kuchklak.

"So, the wild one considered himself wise enough to escape from Yofric of Kuchklak, eh?" he sneered. "He thought 'I am Tumithak of the Wild Men and everyone must bow before me.' But I - I, Yofric, brought you out of your hole, I captured you once, and now I have captured you again. I have taken your mate from you once, and I will take her away again. And I shall make her my mate in the end — not from any love I have for her, Tumithak of Loor — but from the hate I have for you!"

He carried on in this vein as they wended their way down the corridor, his eyes seeing nothing but the smoldering glow of anger in Tumithak's eyes. He did not notice the contempt with which even the Shelks watched him, for Yofric had reached a high point in his life, and he was enjoying it to the fullest.

They came to the mouth of the cavern and passed through into daylight. From somewhere off in the trees, Tumithak heard a cry, the cry of a human. He thought little of it at first, then he noticed that the Shelks were uneasy. The full import of their uneasiness was slow in dawning; but he finally realized that it meant that there must be humans in the wood of whom the Shelks were ignorant. The Shelks were made aware of those humans in no small way.

The cry was repeated and answered from an opposite part of the forest.

Someone shouted, "They came from the cave. Concentrate on the cave!"

The Mogs dropped their prisoners and drew from their belts the whips and javelins that were their traditional weapons. The Shelks were drawing their fire-hoses and — and the Shelks were falling, smoking, victims of fire-hoses in the hands of the humans who suddenly materialized from behind rocks and trees by the dozens.

They were black warriors, Tumithak saw with delight, men from the great corridors of the Kraylings, who, under Mutassa and Otarro, swore allegiance to Tumithak and were among his best warriors.

It must be said that the Mogs fought valiantly. One of them even seized the fire-hose from the hand of his dead master and attempted to use it. But he had never held a weapon such as that before, and he did little with it. Within ten minutes after the fight had begun, the Shelks were dead, and such Mogs as were not, had been seized by the big, black warriors and were now securely bound.

The Kraylings who picked up Tumithak and his group were lesser officers who did not know the great Loorian nor any of his companions. In their fear of making a mistake, they left them bound until they took them before the leader of the group, the lord Mutassa. Mutassa, of course, unbound Tumithak and the others at once, with elaborate apologies. Tumithak laughingly silenced him.

"All will be forgiven if you will but answer my questions," he assured the other. "What are you doing here, and how many have you here, and what are your plans? How did you come to rescue me so fortunately?"

"Lord, it was the last thought in our minds that we were going to rescue you. When you left us, in Shawm, we waited for days without news from you. Then came a Mog, unarmed and carrying a white cloth, tied to a stick. This white cloth, he told us, meant that he was not there to fight, but to talk. He told us that the Shelks had captured you, and that they would surely slay you unless we gave up all our land on the Surface and retired to our corridors again. And he told us that they also held your son, and that they would slay him, too, unless we gave them the secret of the disruptor."



“And what answer did you give them, Mutassa?”

“The Mog started back to Kuchklak the next day. I went along to see that no harm befell him, and my men came along to see that no harm befell me!”

Tumithak stared at him, unbelieving.

“Mutassa!” he cried. “You mean that you marched on Kuchklak to defy them?”

The Krayling chief looked uncomfortable. “Forgive me, lord,” he prayed. “If I had known that you were really alive still, I might have acted otherwise. But when could one believe a Shelk or a Mog? I thought they had slain you, and I was thinking only of revenge.”

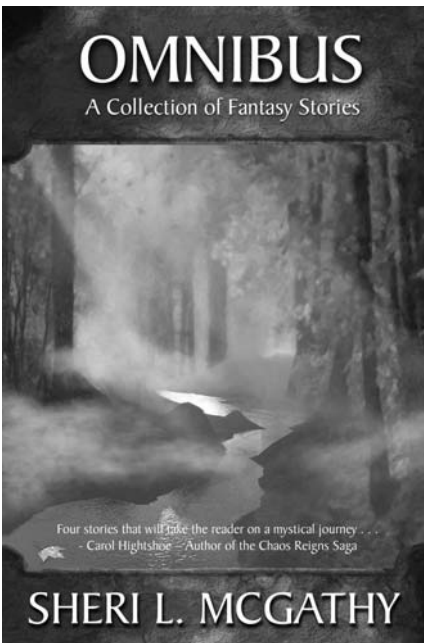
Tumithak laughed a laugh of pure joy. For ten years, yes for many more than that, he had carried a burden, the burden of humankind’s salvation. He had thought — no, he had known — that his people’s destiny rested on his shoulders. He had hoped — yes, he had prayed — that others might, before he died, learn to believe in themselves and to trust to their own might

instead of in their faith in him. And here — here was an army, an efficient, well-ordered army of men, marching against Shelks; in spite of the fact that they believed that Tumithak of the Corridors was dead.

The lord of Loor laughed again.

“Mutassa,” he said. “List me the men that you have with you and their arms. Dispatch a detail to the corridors to bring back some bundles of books they find there. Give an order to advance on Kuchklak, disruptors to the fore. And bring before me the Mog, Yofric. He and I have a little score to settle. We are going to conquer Kuchklak, Mutassa, but first I am going to slay Yofric with my bare hands.”

And he did. With the information in the books of the library Tholura had discovered, he was able to devise more weapons and begin the restoration of human knowledge, science, and, yes, art.



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## Reviews

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### *Thoughts on the Latest Fantasy Books*

#### **The Inferior**

Peadar Ó Guilín

David Fickling Books (448 pages, \$16.99, June 2008)

Reviewed by Kuen Tang

I've enjoyed Peadar O Guilin's stories in **Black Gate**, and was excited to learn he'd written a novel. The synopsis, though, which tells of a "...flesh-trade with those who crave meat of the freshest human kind" didn't sound like my cup of tea, so I approached the book with reluctance. Thirty pages later, Stopmouth was guarding the volunteers in a flesh-trading journey into the Hairbeast district and the Armorbacks were charging! How could I abandon Stopmouth and his fellows now?

Twenty-four hours later (with time off for work and sleep) I had finished the book. I found it fast-paced and gripping from the very start, when Stopmouth and his brother Wallbreaker flee in terror from a herd of armorbacks. Stopmouth risks his life to save his brother, only to be abandoned. Upon returning to his tribe, he discovers that Wallbreaker has once again betrayed him, this time by telling everyone that he risked his own life to save Stopmouth.

**The Inferior's** hero is an unconventional one, and I eventually came to respect him enormously. Compared to other fictional heroes with disabilities, Stopmouth comes up short. No telepathic powers, no heightened senses. What he does have is honor, bravery, decency, and determination.

One of my favorite aspects of the narrative was the character names. Stopmouth, Rockface, Mossheart, Brightteeth: just a

physical or emotional tell, and most of the rest is up to the reader to fill in. The creature names are equally evocative: Diggers, Longtongues, Hairbeasts, Clawfolk. The character of Indrani, then, comes as something of a surprise – her name doesn't describe her, and she's difficult to get a bead on. Indrani is an outsider – there's a language barrier, and she refuses to tell the "savages" anything about herself; her motivations keep you guessing for a long while.

A few things in **The Inferior** didn't work: some of the twists were quite obvious, and some of the characters felt a little bit flat (even ones I came to really care for). Rockface, for instance, began the story as a multifaceted character: a teacher and protector of young hunters. Later, he becomes an almost reckless adventure seeker. Adventures are had, and Rockface plays a part, to be sure, but I felt as if aspects of his story were skipped. Stopmouth's brother Wallbreaker is evil and selfish

from the very beginning, and stayed the same throughout: we all know Wallbreaker will betray Stopmouth every time, yet Stopmouth falls into Wallbreaker's traps again and again.

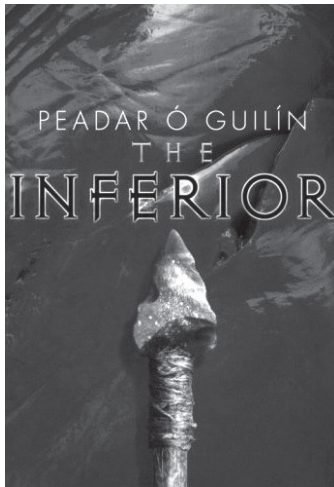
At first glance, **The Inferior** is about natural selection: eat or be eaten. As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that **The Inferior** is also about human nature. In Stopmouth's society self sacrifice is common, and most work to better the whole community. Highly recommended.

#### **Elak of Atlantis**

Henry Kuttner

Paizo Press (220 pages, \$12.99, Dec 2007)

Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones



The works of most of the foundational sword-and-sorcery authors have been available for years: Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, the bastardized or bowdlerized versions at least, were in print through the 60s and 70s and are now in lovely Del Rey editions, and Fritz Leiber's seminal Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stories seem never to be out of print for long. C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry hasn't fared quite as well, but there have been multiple editions over the years and another, from Paizo Publishing, has just hit the shelves. But that leaves one founding hero out — Elak of Atlantis. For some reason, Kuttner's four tales of the wandering Atlantean prince were never collected in any sort of mass market edition, and so Elak and his sidekick Lycon are unknown to most modern fantasy readers. No longer. These stories and the two adventures of Kuttner's Prince Raynor are now collected in a single paperback edition.

When Kuttner drafted these stories in the late 30s, Howard wasn't really recognized as the founder of a new fantasy genre. Kuttner's future wife C.L. Moore had gotten three or four interesting fantasy/horror stories published in *Weird Tales*, but Jirel had a different feel from Conan. Lankmar wouldn't appear for seven or eight more years. In other words, the genre tropes weren't yet codified. There was less baggage, and the writing, as a result, seems less constrained. Sure, there's surface similarity between Howard and Moore and Kuttner's sword-and-sorcery heroes, for they're all damnably competent with those swords they wield, but they're quite different in tone and style. Elak has a tendency to plunge off the map into strange otherworldly regions and dimensions. Extra-planar entities and ghastly horrors lurk around many corners, and gateways to other realms might open at any time. Someone used to Conan and his imitators will be very surprised by Kuttner, who was taking the new genre in a different direction.

At first blush it might seem that Kuttner's branch of adventurous fantasy withered on the vine without descendants.

Look, though, at the banter between Elak and his trusty (and frequently drunken) sidekick Lycon, most especially over the course of "The Spawn of Dagon." Sometimes the amiable bickering sounds remarkably like that we hear between a famous northern barbarian and his sneak-thief friend. And the dialogues between the villain and his supernatural advisor in the first Prince Raynor story in some ways presage the feel of Michael Moorcock, as does the sense of horror throughout.

Elak is so busy fighting to survive that his personality is more often implied than explicit. No matter; Kuttner sends Elak and Lycon into pulse-pounding scenes of action layered with Lovecraftian-tinged supernatural menace. A gifted stylist, Kuttner crammed so much imaginative world-building into even the shortest of these tales that they all come across as mini-epics. They're

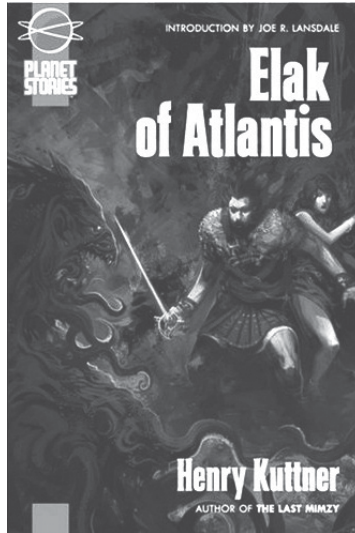
not masterpieces of character development, but they are, as Joe Lansdale says in his introduction, "...pure joy. They are the pudding after the steak and the sides. But they are a wonderful pudding, fine entertainment." I wholeheartedly concur. Anyone who likes their fantasy seasoned with adventure will enjoy this work, and it's a must-have for any connoisseur of sword-and-sorcery.

### Lorelei of the Red Mist

Leigh Brackett

Haffner Press (471 pages, \$40.00, Jan 2008)  
Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones

The incomparable Leigh Brackett is one of my most favorite speculative fiction writers. She's been called the Queen of Space Opera, but to those not in the know, that might imply a level of old-style "gee-whiz" rocket ships and 50s style nationalism that isn't Brackett at all. Conjure instead the feel of the best noir fiction, but in place of the weary city and the disillusioned private eye you have dying planets and the corrupt off-world explorers who scour them for profit, and down-and-out protagonists only a step or two ahead of the law. Han Solo (whom Brackett took a turn at scripting just before her death) and the crew of *Firefly's* Serenity



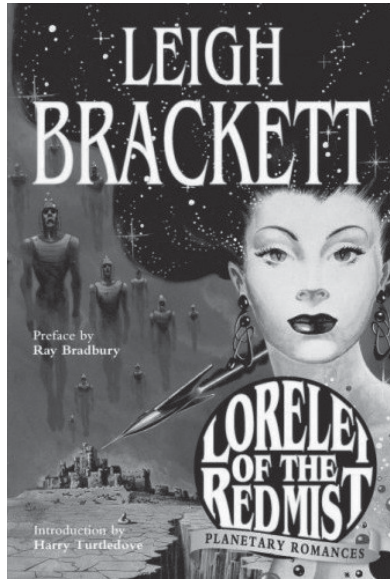
would fit right in to Brackett's seamy planet-sides.

Recently Brackett's been getting four-star treatment from Haffner Press. First came **Martian Quest: the Early Brackett**, then **Stark and the Star Kings**. Now comes **Lorelei of the Red Mist**. Haffner's books are lovingly assembled – they're books for book lovers, with durable bindings and gorgeous covers, and eye-catching internal artwork. Even the typesetting, perhaps the least appreciated book art until it goes horribly

wrong, is top notch. The Stark volume collected all of the short stories of Brackett's most famous character, Eric John Stark (along with two short novels by Brackett's Husband, Edmond Hamilton); **Martian Quest** was the first of a projected three volumes collecting all the rest of Brackett's short science fantasy adventures. **Lorelei** is the second. **Martian Quest** showed us a young writer with great gifts coming in to her own – there was some fine writing in there, but there were rough edges to some of the work, as would be expected. **Lorelei**, on the other hand, is Brackett at the top of her game. Morgan Holmes has written that it reads like a "best of" and he's right; like the greatest *Beatles* albums, you could drop your needle on almost any groove and find a wonderful work. It's not a best of, though, merely a chronological collection of the stories she was writing between 1943 and 1950, most of them brilliant. Even most "best of" collections wouldn't compare. Brackett at her prime rarely hit a sour note.

Over the years I've managed to track down quite a lot of Brackett, but there were stories in here that were new to me. The reading of them was glorious. In these tales, down-on-their-luck pilots, smugglers, and thieves struggle to get ahead. They seldom find treasure, but their adventures are pure gold. Like a lot older science fiction, the text features outmoded concepts; a habitable Mars and Venus with their own humanoid races, or an occasional technological explanation that doesn't quite ring true. But in

world building and fascinating characters; in pacing and style and poetry-laden prose; in sheer adventure, Brackett's work is, and will remain, timeless. You find yourself wishing that you, too, could land at Kahora on Mars and walk the dead sea beds, or blast-off to Venus and soar high over the phosphorescent Sea of Morning Opals. I can hardly wait to get my hands on the upcoming third and final Haffner Brackett volume, **Shannach: The Last**.



**The Secret of Sinharat**

Leigh Brackett  
Paizo Press (237 pages,  
\$12.99, Dec 2007)  
Reviewed by Howard  
Andrew Jones

When it comes to Leigh Brackett, I wear my heart on my sleeve. My sister Allison first introduced me to Brackett when she loaned me her copies of **The Ginger Star** and the other Skaith books featuring Eric John Stark. I loved them. I had no idea that the first draft of *The Empire Strikes Back* — my favorite Star Wars movie — had come from the same typewriter as those Stark adventures, but I remember

being thrilled when I saw that there were two "new" Stark adventures in the late 70s or 80s, packaged in a book titled *Eric John Stark on Mars*, and I made sure I picked up a copy for my sister. That book is long out of print, but its contents, originally printed in slightly different editions in **Planet Stories**, can be found in Paizo's **The Secret of Sinharat**. If you're new to Brackett and want to see why so many readers, writers, and critics speak so highly of her, look no further.

Stark is a gritty loner in trouble with the law. He'd be at home as a high plains drifter riding next to Clint Eastwood, but these are different times. Stark's "backwater" is desert Mars. The title story opens with Stark fleeing from the law. To come out alive, he agrees to help the one man in the solar system to whom he feels loyalty, even though they're often on opposites of the law, and infiltrates a movement building amongst the desert tribe of Mars, one that might destabilize the entire planet. Naturally Stark finds more

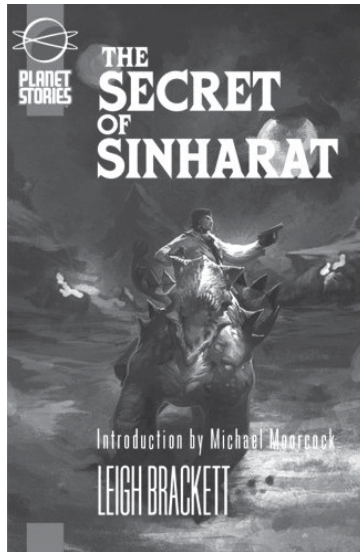


than he bargained for and must hold his own against a suspicious band of outlaws and renegades, fend off a wily priestess (to whom he himself is drawn) who has sinister aims of her own, and somehow avert a war powered by an ancient Martian artifact. A lesser writer might have spun the piece into a lengthier work, but Brackett wraps it economically in about 100 pages, leaving plenty of room for that gritty longing that underpins all of her work. The second tale, “The People of the Talisman,” is just as strong, and opens with a dying comrade entrusting Stark with an ancient secret; the Martian begs Stark to return a talisman to his people who live near one of the Martian poles. Stark is hardly greeted with enthusiasm when he turns up, but he doesn’t have long to rue his situation, for the city comes under siege; Stark must find his way to the polar cap and destroy the ancient evil it hides.

Lesser adventure heroes are often interchangeable ciphers, but Stark’s adventures have a flavor all their own. Everyone makes mention of Brackett’s use of a habitable Venus and Mars for backdrops, but few mention that her most famous lead character, Stark, is a powerful, capable black man, flying in the face of conventional science fiction tropes. He is a survivor, charting his own course, a brave rogue with indomitable will and a simple but inflexible moral code. If you haven’t met him yet, it’s high time you made his acquaintance. Highly recommended.

**Astounding Hero Tales**

Edited by James Lowder  
 Hero Games (304 pages, \$16.99, April 2007)



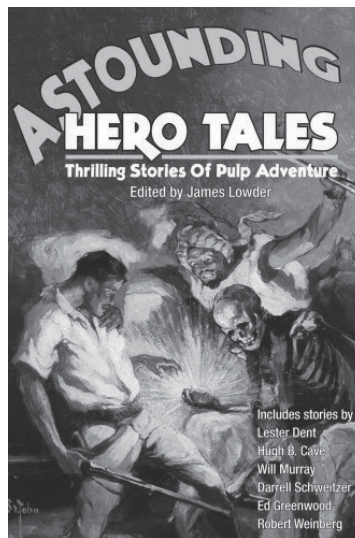
**Lester Dent’s Zeppelin Tales**

Edited by Matthew Goodman  
 Heliograph, Inc. (154 pages, \$29.95, May 2006)  
 Reviewed by Jackson Kuhl

Like almost every other genre of role-playing, pulp gaming has its origins in literature. What was once a cross-genre style of writing in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and ‘30s — always featuring fast-paced action, intrigue, and exotic locales — has since morphed into games stamped with those same motifs set during the interwar time period. Having inspired games like **Justice, Inc.**, **Hollow Earth Expedition**, and **Spirit of the Century**, it is only natural for pulp-RPG makers to come full circle by publishing pulp of their own.

**Astounding Hero Tales**, Hero Games’s anthology supplementing their Pulp Hero line, showcases 16 never-before-published shorts representing the variety of genres that appeared in the original pulp magazines. What is unusual about the

anthology is that the stories by the big names splashed promotionally across its covers are almost universally terrible. Lester Dent raises the curtain with “Death Was Silent,” but it becomes clear why the story never saw print in his lifetime: it’s little more than a prose outline which Dent probably intended to flesh out but never did. Will Murray writes of a near-omnipotent (and therefore boring) superman in “The Mask of Kukulcan,” while Darrell Schweitzer smudges the edges of “A Lost City of the Jungle” to create dreamlike mystery in a story where nothing much happens. In “Kiss Me Deadly,”



Robert Weinberg gives us a detective story with little detection but plenty of exposition. Even Hugh B. Cave, who also wrote the book’s introduction, fails to deliver much

thrill in “House of Shadows,” where the reader can correctly guess the story’s climax by the end of the first scene. Only Ed Greenwood’s spicy weird-menace story “It Came From the Swamp” entertains with its perfect capture of the camp genre.

Meanwhile, several of the contributions to **Astounding Hero Tales** by lesser-known writers (or at least lesser known to this reviewer) are notably good. Steve Melisi KOs his better-known colleagues with “Two-Fisted Crookback,” wherein a Shakespeare-quoting stagehand takes revenge with comedic timing. William Messner-Loebs rides the rails with “Wolf Train West,” an absolutely terrific weird western; Richard Dansky offers the haunted-house shiverer “Missing Pages;” and John Pelan writes a fun little Lovecraftian tale of gangsters running into beings far more Chicago than they are “Out West.” In the end, however, the mediocre outweighs the good.

**Lester Dent’s Zeppelin Tales** has for a publisher a pulp-game company which has yet to actually produce a pulp game. Heliograph, procrastinating publishers of yet-to-appear RPG *The Zeppelin Age*, has worked with Will Murray of Lester Dent’s estate to reprint five of Dent’s stories involving dirigibles. And unlike in **Astounding Hero Tales**, where the defibrillator paddles tried to shock a few more wheezing breaths from Dent’s corpse, all of these are complete “author’s cut” versions painstakingly recreated by comparing Dent’s original manuscripts to their published incarnations. Dent was a premiere pulp writer whose strengths and weaknesses are on full display in the collection. “Zeppelin Bait,” a WWI air thriller, opens on action — an armed standoff — and never lets up, only revealing the identity of the story’s clandestine antagonist in the final two words of text. Sky pirates make off with

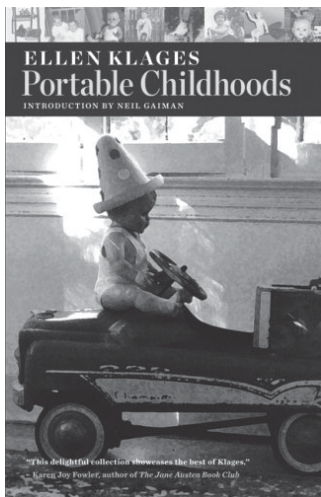
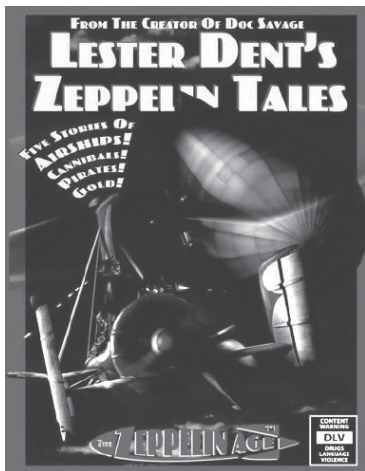
a zep in “Blackbeard’s Spectre,” then do it all over again in the novel-length “A Billion Gold!” In “Peril’s Domain,” one can feel Dent stretching the word count to make a bigger paycheck, even if the story is eventually redeemed by a lost submarine, czarist jewels, and a fur-clad Russian heroine. “Helene Was a Cannibal” features zeppelin sabotage so over-the-top that its absurdity alone recommends it.

*Lester Dent’s Zeppelin Tales* is an attractive little book of pulp scholarship, an amazing example of the print-on-demand revolution. With a few fonts from Adobe and the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society, anyone with a sense of design and a meticulous research ethic can track down old words and make them available again. The original pulp writers were just making a buck, not writing for the ages. Whether through games, tributes, or reissues, readers and writers won’t let them slip through the cracks of history.

**Portable Childhoods**

Ellen Klages  
Tachyon Publications (210 pp, \$14.95, April 2007)  
Reviewed by Charlene Brusso

This is an amazing collection. Klages hasn’t published much yet, not compared to some, but clearly that means she takes her time when she writes, because each of the sixteen stories here is a gem. Some are fantasy, one is science fiction, but all are memorable for the clarity, the simplicity, and the power of their writing. Although the most memorable have child narrators, Neil Gaiman nails it on the head in his introduction: “*These are stories of families, the ones we are born into and the ones we create.*” The collection opens with a Nebula-winning roundhouse called “Basement Magic”, a wake-up call to anyone who has forgotten that much of childhood is about being powerless. “*Mary Louise Whittaker believes in magic. She knows that somewhere, somewhere else, there must be dragons and princes, wands*



and wishes. Especially wishes. And happily ever after. Ever after is not now.” Mary Louise’s father is mostly absent “climbing the corporate ladder”, leaving his new wife Kitty “a former Miss Bloomfield Hills”, stuck home resenting her diminished social life and the fact that Mary Louise exists at all. Fortunately Mary Louise has one ally, Ruby, the cleaning lady, whose homely kitchen magic may protect the girl long enough to find a happily ever after of a sort — but not without a price.

The graceful, elemental swimmers of “Flying Over Water” and the magical chemistry of “A Taste of Summer” (which first appeared in the pages of this magazine) likewise beckon to young protagonists longing to stretch beyond their constricted lives. In “The Green Glass Sea” (from the award-winning YA novel of the same title) Klages bridges the ordinary with the extraordinary through the eyes of the daughter of a Manhattan Project scientist at Los Alamos. “Travel Agency” and “In The House of The Seven Librarians” celebrate the magic of experience and reading.

Klages is most comfortable writing through the eyes of women and girls, though that shouldn’t deter any male from reading these stories. Not when we have “Be Prepared”, a space opera which proves that space pirates and haute cuisine don’t mix well, and “Möbius, Stripped of a Muse”, which puns on that mathematical construct with an increasingly constricted (and funny) series of frustrated authors trapped in the brittle nested loops of a story. And I defy *anyone* to read “Intelligent Design” without giggling maniacally.

Then the clever silliness of “Clip Art”, an imaginary documentary on the history of the paper clip, gives way to “Triangle”, a razor-sharp horror story about memory and the ghosts of the Holocaust. “The Feed Bag” is a haunting story-poem about a diner from childhood, now memory, which serves “the food that I eat at twilight in picnics in my dreams.” Genre is balanced neatly by “Guys Day Out”, a heart-breaking mainstream story about love and aging and terrible choices, and the eponymous title story, about a mom’s relationship with her growing daughter.

“Time Gypsy” is probably the closest thing to a traditional SF time travel story here, at least in structure; then add the fact that it’s also part love story, part mystery, and an eye-opening snap shop of gay culture in the 50s, and be amazed.

There is still a belief among some mainstream readers and critics that stories which tickle our “sense of wonder” are only for children. Klages turns that theory inside out, revealing the continuum of child/adult nature inside us all. “Delight should be a daily occurrence — Cookie! Swingset! Green Socks!” Klages writes. I say, hear, hear!

### Triangulation: End of Time

Edited by Pete Butler

PARSEC Ink (160 pp, \$12.00, July 2007)

Reviewed by Todd Ruthman

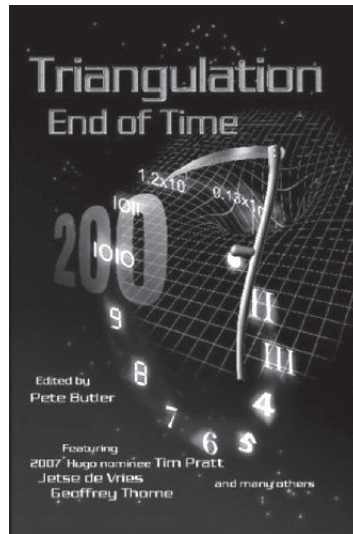
Welcome the end of time as we know it. Or, more accurately, as twenty different authors imagine it. As you might expect, the result is twenty very different interpretations.

This is the 4th edition of the annual PARSEC Triangulation anthology. “And just what is PARSEC?”, I hear you ask. Good question. PARSEC is “Pittsburgh’s Premiere Science Fiction Organization.” You can find out more about them at [www.parsec-sff.org](http://www.parsec-sff.org). “I’m not from Pittsburgh, should I bother reading it?”

Another great question! I’d have to say – hmmm – I’d have to say, yes.

The 4th edition marks two major changes for Triangulation. It is the first themed anthology and the first time submissions were open to non-PARSEC members. Does this mean they published any stories from non-PARSEC members? They don’t say but they certainly don’t all live in Pittsburgh. Is it an improvement? Can’t say as I have not read the first three. I *can* say this collection was an enjoyable read.

You may have noticed from my previous reviews that I like anthologies. The weak stories are usually outnumbered by the strong ones and there are usually one or two standouts that make the bunch of them worth reading. **End of Time** is no different. What is a little different, at least for me, is that I have heard of none of these authors. Not one. Now, Tim





Pratt was a 2007 Hugo nominee so perhaps I should have heard of him. And if I read more small presses or **Star Trek** novels, I may have heard of the others as well. Heck, apparently Matthew Johnson and I live in the same city. With few exceptions, though, these scribes have little published work to their credit and I have not read broadly enough to know them.

Hopefully that will change. We've got some good pieces here about time travel, cosmology, plate tectonics gone wild, and even zombies. The flavors range through science fiction, science fantasy, horror and humor. I may just set a reminder to Google these guys and gals in, oh, ten years to see how they are coming along.

In the past, I have gone on to give mini-summaries of each short story but I think that might give too much away this time. Part of the pleasure in reading **End of Time** is to discover just how each author chose to interpret that phrase. Some underwhelmed me, but most were solidly entertaining and you can never go wrong by including a Kraken in my humble opinion. A few high-fives are warranted though.

Dario Ciriello's "America is Coming!" got the collection of to a rollicking start with a humorous and inventive twist on plate tectonics. "When We Have Time" by my city-mate, Matthew Johnson, is a brief but poignant look at the perils of taking shortcuts in your personal life. Two brave souls, Kurt Kirchmeier and Geoffrey Thorne, take on the origins and fates of our universe. And the closing sentence of Trent Walter's "This Is the Way the World Ends" still coaxes out a warm chuckle.

I wish these and the other authors all the best and hope you check them out.

### Last Dragon

by J. M. McDermott

Wizards of the Coast Discoveries (390 pp, \$14.95, Feb 2008)

Reviewed by Thomas M. MacKay

It's not uncommon for publishers to use words like "groundbreaking" to describe

works by their authors. It is considerably less usual for the adjective to be justified, particularly for a new author's debut novel. McDermott's **Last Dragon** just might be the exception to the rule. It is neither plot nor setting which make this novel unique, but the style and manner in which the story is told which set this book apart and make it a fascinating read.

In an age of the birth of empires, on the eve of her ascension to adulthood, a tribal girl's life is torn apart by the vicious murder of her family. By the laws of her people, Zhan Immur cannot become the warrior she was meant to be, but instead must begin to follow the shaman's path to replace the one that was lost. Before Zhan can learn the shaman's way, though, she and her only surviving uncle must get justice for the slain. But the trail gets confusing when they reach the city, and Zhan and her uncle become separated in the throngs of humanity. She can only search for her uncle and for the murderer while trying her best to survive in her own faltering way. Then one day

Zhan meets Adel, a Lady and a paladin, who is intrigued by her story and by the girl herself. Thus begins the true journey toward justice, which will ultimately result in the death of one emperor, the creation of another, and the rise of a village girl to a great Empress.

What makes **Last Dragon** unique is that the story is told in a non-linear fashion through fragments of scenes, most of which are less than a page long. Each scene fragment is a flash of Empress Zhan's failing memory as told to the phantoms of those she has loved. The next scene inevitably jumps to another point in time, another track of the story. Like glittering shards, each fragment shares one important detail, one impending thought, one fading feeling – and then we're on to the next. These scenelets are so short that the transitions leave the reader almost breathless, dizzied. It's a risky technique; it would be easy for the story to become lost in the confusion, or for the reader to feel it is too much effort to keep up with all the pieces. But McDermott walks the knife edge of his chosen approach with a delicate balance. After a few handfuls of scenelets the reader

J.M. McDERMOTT

LAST DRAGON





becomes aware of a kind of rhythm to the fragments, a structure. There are perhaps four or five narrative streams – timelines in Zhan’s life – carried on at one time, and the fragments regularly feed each of these. The next fragment feeding each timeline adds in a linear fashion to what was read before, even though there might have been several scenelets in between. As a reader, I generally don’t have any patience for jumping back and forth through a story, but that is the brilliance of McDermott’s approach – the individual scene fragments are so small that your consciousness doesn’t cling to them and there’s consequently not that sense of frustration of being pulled out of the story. The human brain is a marvelous device, however, and as the reader continues, the individual fragments are woven into whole story threads, lending a continuity to the story that is the exact opposite of that of the narrative device.

The story deals with loss and identity, deceit and murder, fate and determination. McDermott does a nice job contrasting the myths and mysteries of different cultures, and highlights the contrast between love and power. There’s a dreamlike quality to the work, told as it is from the protagonist’s faltering memories. Magic occurs, but we can’t be completely sure whether it is real, the perception of a tribal primitive, or even just the imaginings of a failing mind. And yet there is a definite sense that the events described are concrete and real. A study in contrasts, a brilliant experiment in non-linear storytelling, a glittering collection of moments; **Last Dragon** is all of these. I would recommend it to any thoughtful, intelligent reader - not least because of what it reveals about the way the reader’s own mind can work.

### **The Vacant Throne**

Joshua Palmatier

Daw (534 pages, \$24.95, Jan 2008)

Reviewed by Charlene Brusso

Palmatier’s “Throne of Amenkor” series has been getting better with each book. The third novel comes with another hearty helping of

intrigue and adventure in a fractal-like setting that grows more fascinating the longer you look at it. Earlier, one-time thief and assassin Varis reluctantly claimed the Skewed Throne, as well as the responsibility of using its magic to protect the city of Amenkor as the piratical Chorl and their powerful sorcery prepared to attack the wealthy port city. Hard-pressed by the invaders, as well as internal treacheries among her own people, Varis was forced to release all the throne’s stored energies to fight back, destroying the Throne in the process.

The gamble worked. Amenkor survived, despite severe damage to the city walls and harbor, and many, many deaths. This volume opens with Varis and her remaining staff hard at work redistributing resources, trying to rebuild. Meanwhile, the Chorl threat continues to hover just out of range. When a ship from the southern port of Venitte arrives, Varis hopes to strike an alliance which will

protect both cities, despite the unenthusiastic response of the diplomats aboard—diplomats who seem to have a much different agenda. With the Chorl on the move at sea and on land, Varis travels south to woo Venitte’s Council of Eight, and to peruse a legend that hidden somewhere in Venitte is a twin to Amenkor’s Throne.

Once in Venitte, however, Varis and her cohort have their work cut out for them. The Council of Eight is riddled with rivalries and old grudges; it’s also housing at least one traitor who is preparing to open the city wide to Chorl attack in the midst of the biggest festival of the year.

Those just discovering the series can jump right in without fear; there’s just enough backstory to fill in the blanks without slowing things down. It’s refreshing to read an epic fantasy with a firm grasp of cultural and urban infrastructure and economics as well as Big Magic and rock’em-sock’em heroics. Palmatier balances world-building and character development nicely, expanding on the previous books in the series in some interesting — and surprising — ways.

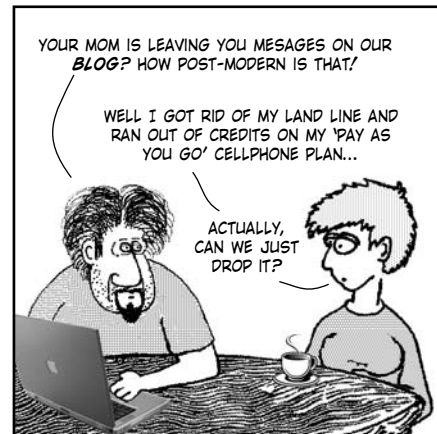
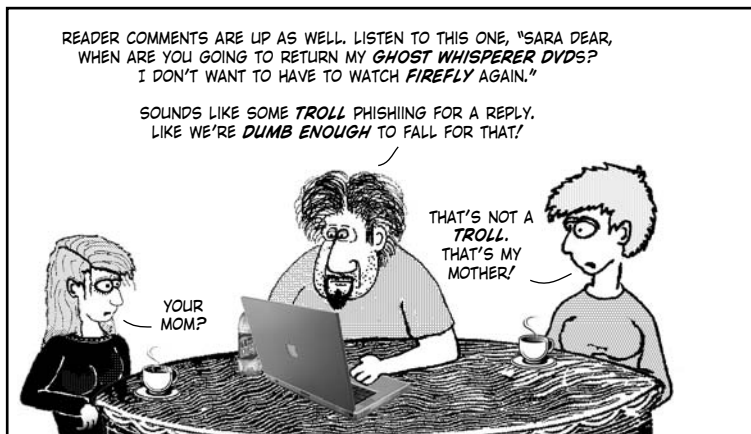
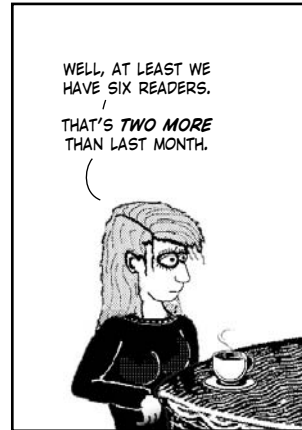
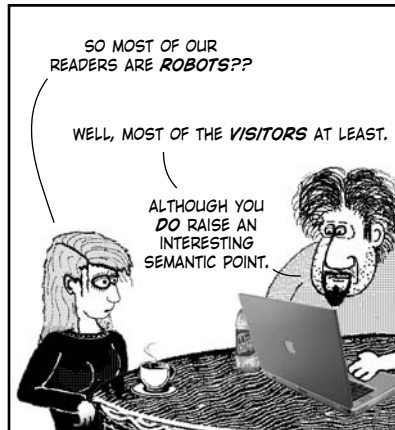
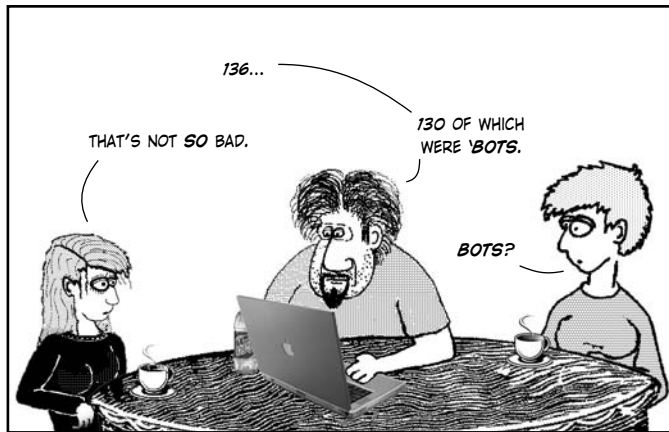
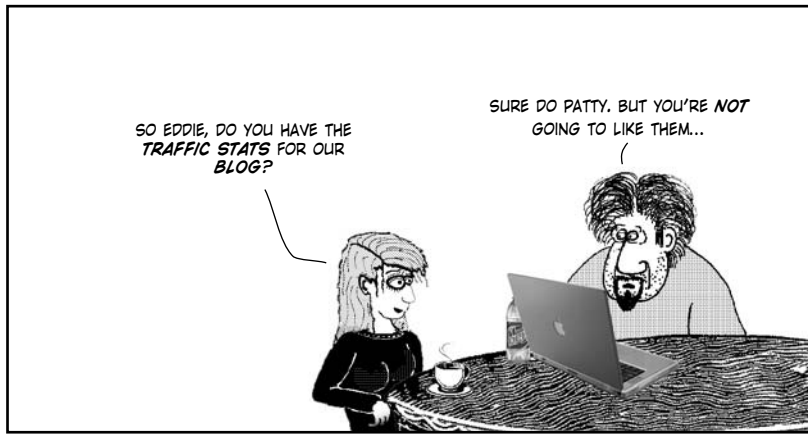


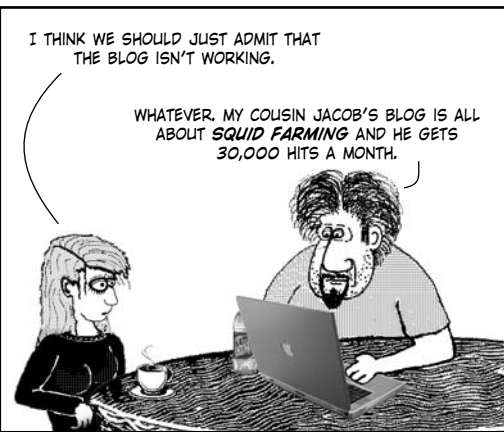
# Knights of the Dinner Table

presents

## the JAWZI DINNER

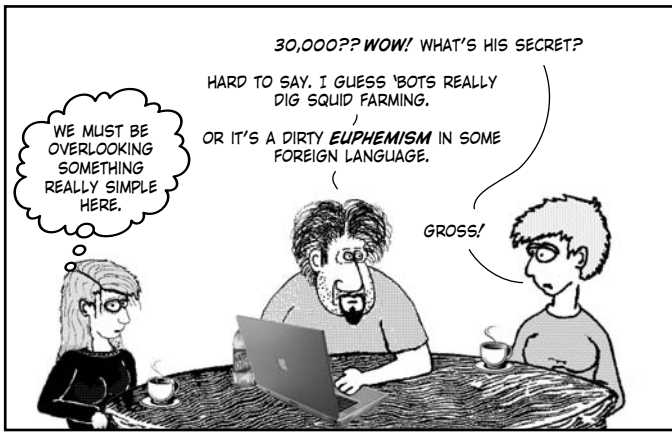
STORY BY JOHN O'NEILL  
AND STEVE JOHANSSON





I THINK WE SHOULD JUST ADMIT THAT THE BLOG ISN'T WORKING.

WHATEVER. MY COUSIN JACOB'S BLOG IS ALL ABOUT **SQUID FARMING** AND HE GETS 30,000 HITS A MONTH.



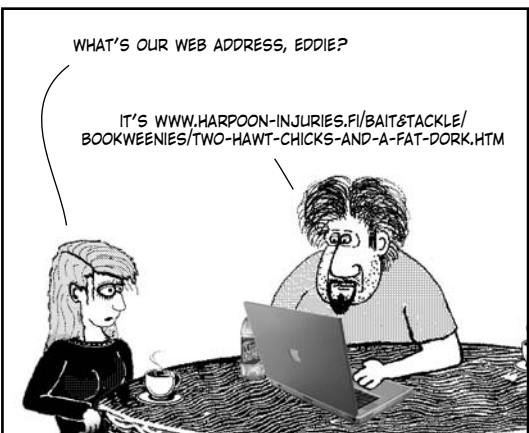
30,000?? WOW! WHAT'S HIS SECRET?

HARD TO SAY. I GUESS 'BOTS REALLY DIG SQUID FARMING.

OR IT'S A DIRTY **EUPHEMISM** IN SOME FOREIGN LANGUAGE.

WE MUST BE OVERLOOKING SOMETHING REALLY SIMPLE HERE.

GROSS!

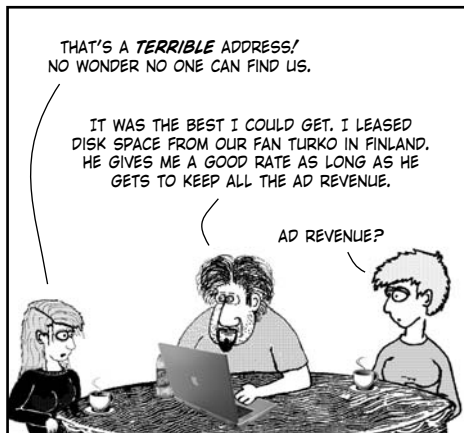


WHAT'S OUR WEB ADDRESS, EDDIE?

IT'S [WWW.HARPOON-INJURIES.FI/BAIT&STACKLE/BOOKWEENIES/TWO-HAWT-CHICKS-AND-A-FAT-DORK.HTM](http://WWW.HARPOON-INJURIES.FI/BAIT&STACKLE/BOOKWEENIES/TWO-HAWT-CHICKS-AND-A-FAT-DORK.HTM)



WHAT??



THAT'S A **TERRIBLE** ADDRESS! NO WONDER NO ONE CAN FIND US.

IT WAS THE BEST I COULD GET. I LEASED DISK SPACE FROM OUR FAN TURKO IN FINLAND. HE GIVES ME A GOOD RATE AS LONG AS HE GETS TO KEEP ALL THE AD REVENUE.

AD REVENUE?



WHY DIDN'T YOU TRY TO REGISTER OUR OWN URL?

CAN'T. THEY'RE ALL TAKEN.



EDDIE, THEY CAN'T ALL BE TAKEN. PEOPLE REGISTER **NEW URLS** ALL THE TIME.

NOT ABOUT BOOKS THEY DON'T. ALL THE BOOK-RELATED ADDRESSES ARE **TAKEN**.



WHAT ABOUT "FANTASY-BOOKLOVERS.COM"

REGISTERED BY RANDOM HOUSE IN 1994.

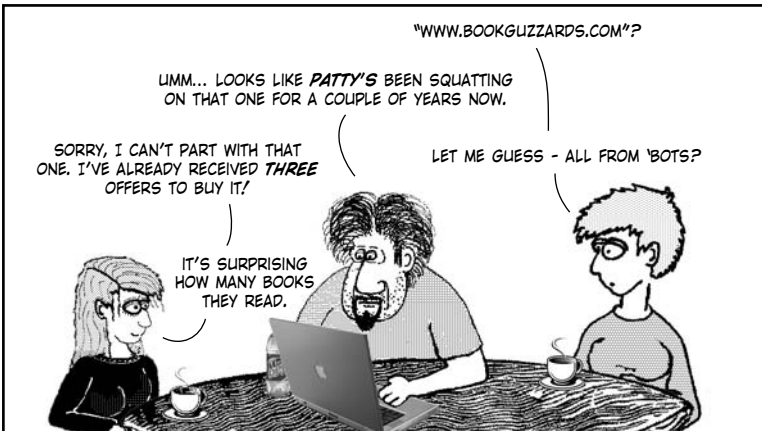


"WE-READ-SUCKY-BOOKS-SO-YOU-DON'T-HAVE-TO"

DOT ORG TAKEN BY **NPR** IN 2003. DOT COM SWIPED BY THE **RNC** IN '04. DOT NET HELD BY SOME SQUATTER.

"SARA-PATTY-AND-EDDIES-BOOK-CLUB.COM"?

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. 1998.



"WWW.BOOKGUZZARDS.COM"?

UMM... LOOKS LIKE **PATTY'S** BEEN SQUATTING ON THAT ONE FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS NOW.

SORRY, I CAN'T PART WITH THAT ONE. I'VE ALREADY RECEIVED **THREE** OFFERS TO BUY IT!

LET ME GUESS - ALL FROM 'BOTS?

IT'S SURPRISING HOW MANY BOOKS THEY READ.

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