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The Sealed City

By ADRIAN COLE

Though humanity has struggled forward since the collapse of their Solar empire, shadows from the evil days still lurk in the dark corners of Earth. Arrul Voruum will root them out at any cost in this all new story in the saga of the Dream Lords!

An hundred years after the fall of the Zurjahn Empire, which had once sprawled across and controlled an entire solar system, Man began the gradual return to his home world of Ur, leaving a few dogged colonists on the outer planets, where they would begin a long, slow journey into oblivion. Ur, damaged and mutilated, became the new focus of Man's rebirth in an uneasy truce between the formerly warring factions. Man concentrated his energies on rebuilding and establishing a new renaissance of knowledge across the shattered landscapes. There was room for all creeds, and old wounds began the steady healing process. The terrible darkness that had permeated Ur seemed to have subsided, the reign of the monstrous Daras Vorta little more than a memory of nightmare.

Yet can such things truly perish? Even in the brightest desert, there will be shadows...

He's here," said the old man, screwing up his eyes against the glare of the desert sun. He pointed at the eastern horizon, where a faint smudge of dust rose in a cloud over the barren landscape. "A single sky craft has landed at the endway station."

Beside him the three men from the village studied the distance. "How will he travel to us?" said Boruk, their leader.

The old man shrugged. "A small air machine, perhaps. Or he may prefer a horse. It depends how seriously the Council views our plea for help. How much they will afford."

Boruk grunted. It had taken the rulers, who might have been as much as half a world away in the city of Karkesh, a long time, and several messages, to acknowledge this remote outpost of civilization.

On the fringes of their new empire, life was harsh and unpredictable. There were other more pressing things for the controllers to attend to as they reconstructed this ravaged world.

Boruk turned to the youngest of his companions, who was barely out of his teens. Kaspel was a typical desert youth, his wiry body bronzed, almost mummified, his dark hair pasted to his gaunt features, though his eyes were alight with enthusiasm. His formative years of carving an existence out of the rocks and dust of this land hadn't yet taken their toll on that.

"Is the place made ready for him, Kaspel?"

"It is, sir. As you instructed. I have a bed for him and food. I can be ready to lead him into the western wilderness whenever he wishes to go."

"Well, it's his business now," said Boruk. "We've done our part. Whatever's out there, it's for him to deal with. I can't say I'm sorry. We've enough hardship to bear without this—intrusion."

The old man nodded. "The Council could have dismissed us. Yet something about this affair must disturb them. Enough to send the hunter."

"Covering their own backs," Boruk said with a snort. "I'm sure we're of little consequence."

It was gone midday when the stranger arrived, riding in to the fringes of the tiny settlement on a sweating stallion, a fine beast that had evidently been provided for him by his masters in the far off endway station. The rider, a tall, sparingly built man, who had the look of a desert warrior about him, pulled up before the small delegation of villagers and announced himself in a cool, clipped voice.

"I am Arrul Voruum, commissioned by the overlords at Karkesh, in answer to a request you sent to them."

Kaspel took the reins of the horse and led it to a nearby pool, soothing it and allowing it to drink, though his eyes never strayed from the warrior.

"You'll want to rest before beginning your work," said Boruk.

"Briefly. If you can provide me with refreshments and information from anyone who needs to speak about what you've found, it will be sufficient. After that, I'll ride west."

There was a large meeting hut in the central area of the village, its interior cool, a relief from the oppressive air of the post midday heat outside. Voruum was fed, though he ate and drank sparingly. To the few villagers gathered here, he seemed little different from them, as if he had been raised in desert lands. The old man whispered to Boruk that the hunter was a creature of the sands, probably a veteran of many investigations here on Ur, though Voruum could have been little more than two score years old.

“I was told your village and other settlements in this region have been disturbed by certain – manifestations,” said Voruum. He chose his words with care.

The old man nodded. It seemed to him that this hunter was no sceptic. To him at least this business had weight, even if his masters might have been dismissive. “We could ignore them no longer. Not when men have been lost.”

“Yes,” said Voruum. “I was told three of your people have disappeared and you fear them dead. According to the report, these men were highly skilled, more than capable of dealing with the desert and its problems. There has been talk of demons, is that right?” Voruum’s eyes swept the small company, his gaze unwavering as he sought out the villagers’ fears.

“It is not an easy thing to put into words,” said the old man. “When I was young, I lived on another world, Gargan, which has even more deserts than this world of Ur. I came here after the fall of the old Empire, along with many of us who were repatriated. On Gargan there were haunted places—places used by the acolytes of the evil Warden of Ur, who I shall not name. Shrines and temples to the darkness he worshipped. I never forgot them. Such things have long since been sundered from Gargan and these lands, but they yet haunt my dreams.”

“I hope you have not brought me here to hunt for shadows,” said Voruum.

“I don’t think so,” said the old man. “The young man, Kaspel, will show you why we are afraid of the night. Let him take you to into the western desert. What he has seen there will convince you we were right to summon help.”

Later the old man and his companions watched as the two figures slowly disappeared into the sun-blasted sands and rocks of the western wastes. Kaspel, though nervous, was eager to lead the strange hunter, already focused on the task ahead.

“What do you think?” Boruk asked the old man.

“The Council have taken us seriously. I am sure the hunter learned his skills on Gargan. He may even have Garganian blood—he has their colouring. The purging of that world has not long ended. It is a place of many deserts. There was much to do there, even after I came here, so many scores of years ago. Arrul Voruum is no ordinary hunter. They have sent us a man of experience. I have seen his like before.”

Boruk nodded. He and his companions had sensed something about the hunter, an aura of power, a rare thing. “If there is evil out there, perhaps he is the one to scotch it.”

The old man made a curious sign, a remnant of his own lost past. “I am sure you are right, Boruk. I thought such men were long gone.”

“Such men?”

“He is a witchfinder.”

The two men rode long in to the day. Night fell quickly in the desert. Kaspel knew the land well and led them to a rock outcrop where there were overhangs that gave them shelter from winds that had abruptly become cold. He tethered the horses in a gulch where there was a small spring of water he knew to be safe. Further out in the deeper west, the land was poisoned by wars even older than the fall of Empire.

Voruum settled among the rocks, pulling his cloak tighter and chewing on the dried meat Kaspel had taken from the saddlebags. They ate by starlight, watching the stunning heavenly display of lights spread across the night sky in dazzling confusion. Voruum had hardly spoken during the desert crossing, and the young man was too nervous to attempt conversation. He sensed a power about the hunter, a palpable strength.

“How much further?” said Voruum, finishing his meal with a brief mouthful of water.

“Two more days. The place we go to is just this side of the Dead Reach. No one goes there. There are bad stories. A cursed region.”

Voruum nodded. Man was re-populating the world slowly, but the worst of the old war zones would be unsafe for generations yet to come. Out here, on the edge of one of them, they would need to be careful what they ate and drank. The youth seemed sensible enough. Voruum admired his curiosity, though. The urge to explore would be strong within him.

“So what is it you have found out here? In your own words,” he said.

Kaspel looked pleased to have been asked. “Ruins,” he said. “Something long disused, although I’m sure they are not entirely abandoned. The sun wolves hunt the area, so there must be life there to attract them.”

“Men?”

Kaspel shrugged. “Flesh and blood. Ghosts too, maybe.”

“Demons?”

Kaspel shuddered.

Voruum’s smiled wryly. “I’ve read the reports, and I’ve heard your people speak. Now you tell me what you know. Never mind how outrageous it sounds.”

Kaspel nodded. He wanted to unburden himself to this hunter, trusting him where he would have been tight-lipped with others. “There were three traders, men of our local tribes, who spent their lives searching the lands for artefacts, relics of the old times. There is always a demand for such things, mainly in the bigger towns to the east and in the city of Karkesh. There’s a good living to be had from such trade. The men were generous and through their work provided the villages with resources that helped us to grow.”

“I know of such people.”

“Now they are gone. Taken by the desert. I found their horses and the last of their supplies, scattered among the sand and rock. Valuable artefacts they had found were also strewn about. And there was—blood. Much blood.”

“Sun wolves could have taken them,” said Voruum bluntly.

“No. I know the work of those beasts. I’ve seen the corpse of a man torn apart by sun wolves. And the beasts do not use human blood as

paint.”

Voruum nodded slowly. “Describe what you saw.”

Kaspel leaned forward and used his finger to draw in a pocket of sand. “It was like this. Writing, I think, but none known to me or my people. Daubed in blood on the rocks. It made me very afraid.”

Voruum studied the strange glyphs for a moment, and then smoothed them away. “A warning,” he said. “You were right to have the Council summon me.”

“Who did this?” said Kaspel, anger barely contained. “Are there really demons?”

Voruum leaned back thoughtfully. “Such things do exist, Kaspel. This may have been men, though. They have claimed these lands and want no one else near. There will be guardians, and I’ll know them. What else did you find?”

“The ruins were half a day beyond the place where the traders died. In a great bowl, rising like a huge dune. It was only when I got near to it I realised it was unnatural. I saw its stones, drawn together, at one time, probably in the far past, curved and sculpted by tools, not the wind. There are streams and pools and plants. The dome is partly buried under sand, partly overgrown with strange trees and roots. There are many packs of sun wolves there.”

“All these things you must show me.”

The following day, Kaspel found the place where he had seen the remains of the traders, but the wind and sand had combined to obliterate their last traces. Voruum knew the desert well enough to understand how it quickly reclaimed everything, ever shifting.

“I will protect us,” he told Kaspel. “You’ll feel the air shimmer as I do it. The mind shield will keep the sun wolves at bay.” From his saddlebags he took a sheath and eased from it a long rod. The sun gleamed on the metal as he wove a few patterns with it in the air, using it like a blade.

“What is it?” said Kaspel, fascinated. It must be a weapon, but one that made those of his own people look clumsy and primitive.

“A star lance,” said Voruum. “Not many of us are given to carry these. They store power from light. It will make the sun wolves wary of us, no matter how many of them there are.”

Kaspel gazed at the weapon in undisguised awe. He had heard of such wonders in the legends of his people.

Evening approached as they came closer to the ruins that Kaspel had first discovered out in these remote wastelands. Throughout the day they had heard the snarls of sun wolves, though the creatures never showed themselves. It was evident they were tracking the two riders on each side, hidden by the low dunes and outcrops of bare, sun-scorched rock. As the sun dropped, smearing the western horizon in a blend of scarlet and purple light, they saw below them a deep-sided valley cut into the bedrock by a stream. By now they only drank from their flasks, not trusting the water of this or any tributary streams.

The valley debouched into a wider one and on its far side the last of the daylight outlined the curve of the ruins Kaspel had found. Sand had been heaped over sections of them by the endless wind storms, and twisted roots and branches jutted from the immense dome, clinging to it like parasites, their leaves silent and oppressively dark in the twilight.

“Is there a way into that place?” Voruum asked.

“I know of one. Towards the eastern end. A small archway at the mouth of a tunnel. I did not have the courage to enter. The air that issued from it was foul.”

“Wise of you to hold back. You must remain out here. You’ll be protected overnight. I will investigate while the moon is out and return before dawn.”

Kaspel was torn about making a plea to go with the hunter, as he’d feel less afraid if he accompanied him, but the terrors of the place argued for him to remain outside.

“What if you do not return?” he said.

“Then you must go back and have a message sent to Karkesh. The Council will have to respond—in force.”

Voruum left the youth with the horses in a declivity off the narrow valley. He would shield him from a distance as best as his powers would allow, although he sensed that Kaspel was well enough versed in survival techniques to get through the night. It was not what lurked in the desert that concerned Voruum. He was far more uneasy about the ruins.

As he wound his way down the valley and then along the deeper one it fed, picking his way carefully among jagged rocks and broken scree lit by the rising moon, he tested his mental powers to the full, listening out for any kind of life. He was conscious of the sun wolves, though they shunned darkness, as though it would freeze their marrow. It was unnaturally cold in this place and Voruum was acutely aware that there were forces bathing the ruins, subtle as moonlight, but far more dangerous. There was life here, but in a bizarre, warped form, almost certainly a residue of the old wars.

He slipped across the wider valley and wound his silent way upwards, towards the lower curve of the vast dome and the things that tangled around its base. He had not gone far when he saw the first of the inscriptions, carved on the flatter surfaces of the rocks, their letters filled with inks flaking with age. He sucked in a deep breath, stunned at their meaning. Beyond them there were other designs, crude drawings.

The Brotherhood of the Goat! His mind cried out to him. The oldest enemy, scourge of the nine worlds. Even here, in this most far-flung of regions. It had been the unholy focus for the powers of Daras Vorta, the vile and satanic one-time master of Ur and would-be ruler of all of the solar Empire. Until Galad Sarian, the Chosen One of Mankind, had dragged him down and destroyed him. Voruum and men like him had spent their lives seeking out and removing the last traces of Vorta's evil, cleansing the outer worlds, such as Gargan.

Voruum continued warily, though his instincts suggested to him that what he had found was an ancient lair, where the acolytes of the monster Vorta had busied themselves long ago. Another slab of rock overlooked the path, and he saw it too had an inscription, with its mocking goat-head design. Moonlight slanted down and highlighted its curved horns. Voruum looked more closely. He felt another stab of horror.

The paint that had been used to sketch this thing was *fresh!* And not paint, but human blood. He touched it delicately with his fingertips and read elements of its history. The missing traders. They had been murdered, sacrificed, by other men, here in the wild lands, their blood used to paint a warning to anyone coming near these forgotten ruins.

Voruum had been approximately following a path mapped out for him by Kaspel, though he knew the youth had not seen these recent inscriptions and drawings. The opening into the dome must be nearby. Voruum had drawn a mental cloud around himself. No normal man would have been able to sense him. But what powers did any occupiers of the ruins have? If they were descended from the original servants of Vorta, through some undiscovered tribe or blood-line, would they have inherited mental powers? He had encountered such things on Gargan, but nothing that had been able to withstand him or his fellow hunters. Voruum had been ruthless in exterminating them.

Further ahead he came to the opening Kaspel had told him about. Framed by a low arch and partially overhung by trailing roots, it angled down into sheer darkness. Foul air wafted from it, like the exhaled breath of a beast that had fed on carrion. Voruum listened and used his mind to probe that darkness, gently sifting it. He used great care in doing so, knowing that by sending out such a search he could be prodding a sleeping beast, one that might sense him.

There was something there, far down in the guts of the ruins. This would be a dangerous way to approach it. For certain there would be guardians set there. He turned, studying the moonlit rocks for a way up on to the upper dome. As he did so, he heard something below him, a clattering of rocks in the darkness of the opening. Something had stirred and was rising, more stones and earth dislodged by its movement. He imagined a serpent as thick around as a human trunk.

Voruum clambered up over thick roots and jutting stone, the curve of the huge structure steep. In the air around him he felt the stirrings of a fresh breeze and—something else. Wings flapped, shapes swooping overhead, obscured by shadows as the moon slid into cloud. He realised these things were not real but projections. Whatever he had disturbed had certain powers, probably occult. It explained the grim inscriptions, the bloody depiction of the horned god. He tightened his own defences, doubly glad that he had not brought Kaspel with him.

It was an awkward climb, but he managed to reach the upper curve of the dome, winding through the gnarled boughs of low trees and tangled ivy, the mutated growths of centuries. This structure had been here long before the rise of the old Empire, and it may have been the

mass of growth that held it together. As he paused to look around, the air trembled again, and this time he found himself under attack.

Night creatures swept in across the surface of the dome, huge, bat-like shadow-shapes, claws extending, slashing at him in a carefully synchronised assault. He swung up the star lance and used its dreadful heat to cut a swathe into the assailants. They fought in eerie silence, the only sound the buzz of the lance's power. It was not difficult to keep them at bay, but he sensed other forces beginning to wake, seeping like mist from the many cracks in the stone surface under him. This miasma shaped itself into vaguely human forms, and they too closed in, but the power of the star lance limited their efforts.

Voruum knew, however, that it was a beacon, singling him out and pin-pointing his location for whatever evil lurked in this dome. He had determined to find it. Accordingly he took the offensive and rushed in at the first group of ethereal figures, shredding them like silk with light and driving them out into the night. He likewise seared the aerial forms in a blur of movement, creating a lull that gave him time to study the dome's immediate surface.

He assumed whatever human servants made obeisance to the powers of darkness in this place would come looking for him, probably in an attempt to snare him. If they came in force, he may find himself suffering the same fate as the three traders. He needed to find a way in quickly.

While the aerial shapes temporarily disappeared, he discovered a larger crack in the stonework, partially prized open by a massive ivy root. He slid the star lance into it and used its energy to enlarge the crevice, the stones grinding, the ivy cracking and splitting. Then he was in, dropping down through the rough shaft he had created. Behind him there was a rush of air as the pursuit looked to follow. He dropped on to a level of wide brickwork and used his weapon to fuse the stones overhead. They glowed, briefly molten, blocking the entry.

Voruum adjusted the light, dimming it as much as possible. He would have to do without it soon, or other forces would be locking on to him. He followed the wide bricks, part of the inner vault and used yet more ivy-like growths to descend. A vast well of darkness opened out below him, filled with trailing roots. Spider-like he clung to the rock

wall, working his way around and down. There was light below at last. He sheathed the star lance.

He came to another ledge and by the dim glow could discern a parapet. He was on the uppermost ledge of a crumbling gallery that ringed the huge gulf, which could have been an immense chamber, a cathedral from the lost ages. Light picked out further details—the countless strands of dangling roots, the interlocked blocks of stone, metal spars, encrusted with rust and wrapped in fungoid growths.

Moving around the gallery, kicking through heaped dust and rubble, he found a narrow stairway and began the precarious descent, made more dangerous by the crumbling natures of the steps. He sensed movement up on the ledge behind him and instinctively drew his mental shield tighter. They had lost him! He felt their frustration like the hot breath of anger. He moved on, as quickly and silently as he could, getting off the stairway and out along another, narrower, gallery. From here he could see better down into the cavernous interior of the dome.

The light came from a dozen or more braziers, where coals glowed and smoke drifted upwards in long spirals. Behind a line of them a massive shape loomed up between two fat columns, a statue that had been cleaned of debris and growth, and polished recently, its limbs and trunk bathed in the glow of the fires. It was a gross human figure, its obesity exaggerated, as though such an attribute was worthy of it – a god or demigod, used to sating itself. The head was massive, the features slightly twisted in a smile that suggested extreme debauchery and licentiousness.

Voruum drew back into the shadows, appalled. He recognised the face. He had seen the records of the past. His apprehensions about the nature of this place had been well-founded.

The statue was of the former Warden of Ur, the malevolent Daras Vorta.

Voruum had uncovered a nest of his worshippers. They were there, gathered in the shifting flame-lit central area, as many as a hundred of them. He studied them for a few moments, but they were too far below him to make out details. Carefully he wormed his way further along the gallery. There was another long twist of root, coming out of the wall like a fat pipe. He clambered on to it and worked his way

down, shielding himself from the pursuit. Half-glimpsed beings went past him higher up, following the gallery.

When he had reached a point low enough to be able to see more closely, Voruum clung to the roof and watched events below. The floor of the chamber had been cleared of rubble and dust, swept clean to reveal a circular design, surrounded by sigils and pictograms that suggested demonic forms and creatures from the pantheon of disgusting gods worshipped by these people. Ruling over all of them would be Shaitan, the Lord of the Pit, Daras Vorta's master, in whose unspeakable name the Warden of Ur had sought to subjugate all of mankind and unleash a nightmare rule.

Voruum studied the acolytes of evil as they danced, writhing and cavorting, naked men and women, painted gaudily, faces masked, their contortions casting lurid shadows across the floor and statue, whose face seemed to grin down in pleasure at the frenzied activity, which grew more depraved with each passing moment. Voruum could sense the atmosphere curdling, as though the ceremonies were pooling the energies of the dancers and shaping them into a palpable force, a potent weapon of terrible menace.

The dancers cleared a space around the central markings on the floor and again Voruum sensed with his own mental power the efforts of the people below as they concentrated them on the markings. The circular lines moved, one set clockwise, the other ante-clockwise. They were opening the floor. Voruum understood that, with their energy so focused, he would have an opportunity to strike at their heart while they were distracted by their ritual, one moment of vulnerability.

As the stone floor groaned, shifting as the great weight of the circular slab turned and rose, the acolytes chanted liturgies in a strange, ancient language, although Voruum recognised in it the name of Shaitan, their god of night. The huge stone, its underside thick with pale grey growths, hovered in the air like an impossible air raft and then glided to one side of the chamber, swallowed by shadows there. It had revealed a large hole some eighty feet across. From his vantage point overhead, Voruum could look down into that darkness.

His head reeled as he studied it, and he shuddered as he felt a blast of freezing air released from below. He was gaping down into, not the earth's bowels, but—a well of stars! It was as though he was seeing beyond a domed ceiling, looking up at the night sky, filled with gleaming stars. Yet such stars! They were faintly coloured, scarlet, mauve, deep orange, like fiery embers, a universe beyond imagining, far, far from the one Voruum knew.

The acolytes had gathered around the very rim of the well, standing precariously on its lip, but their chanting increased, their voices combining like a solid thing. They sent the words of power towards that blasphemous sky, a summoning. Voruum watched as the inverted heavens shimmered like the surface of a wide lake.

And the chanting was answered.

Something shifted in the remote darkness, a thick, black cloud, blotting out the stars. It formed into the head and shoulders of what could have been a demigod. Voruum saw with despair that it was horned. Like a monstrous aerial craft it was moving towards the opening. The acolytes would bring it here and give it form in this temple of madness.

All Voruum's instincts screamed at him to flee, to get back outside the dome and get away. For moments he was torn. Yet he stood his ground and unsheathed the star lance. The acolytes' combined power was stronger than his, but if he struck now—

He swung out the star lance and unleashed a stream of white hot light, aiming not for the oncoming horror in the well, but at the acolytes. A line of them screamed as the searing heat caught them, setting them instantly ablaze as they were catapulted out into the well. A score of blazing bodies tumbled like torches outwards and Voruum caught a glimpse of the huge shape beyond them, its progress temporarily halted by the appearance of the hated light. Again Voruum poured fire on the acolytes, whose chanting had been completely disrupted as they sought to discover the source of their attacker.

Half of them had fallen into the pit, the remainder surging together, trying to form a new barrier, deflecting the power of the star lance. Voruum dropped to the floor of the chamber, standing under the shadow of Vorta's statue, across the gaping floor from the acolytes.

He walked forward, as close to the open well as he dared and prepared to unleash the star lance's incandescent heat down towards the thing that hovered ever closer.

Realising what he intended, the acolytes shrieked their fury and poured their own energies into holding him back. The intensity of their assault forced Voruum to defend himself from wave after wave of their twisted magic. He heard the grinding of stone on stone, and moments later the huge circular lid of the well slid across the floor. They were closing off the well! Rather than risk him pouring the heat of the star lance into it, they were shutting it. At least it would prevent the horned darkness from spilling into the chamber and—what? Possessing them? Filling them with untold power so they could wreak havoc here on Ur, surging out from this sealed city in a wave of destruction in the name of Daras Vorta and Shaitan?

Too late Voruum tried to prevent the lid from closing. It turned again, screwing itself down. He felt himself kick up against the statue of Vorta. He swung round, seeing its gross belly looming over him, as though its obsidian stone was gleaming flesh. Angrily he swung the star lance and directed white heat at it. Immediately the black stone cracked, a web of damage spreading across the torso and arms. It was too late for the acolytes to stop Voruum's sweep of destruction.

He had to dive to one side as the severed head of the statue slid from its lofty place and crashed down into the chamber, shattering in thousands of pieces of debris. The acolytes had drawn back, clouded in dust. Their powers had receded, partly drained by their efforts to seal the well. As the dust shifted, Voruum stood opposite them. He knew that his star lance was running out of energy. But the statue was ruined. An arm cracked free with the sound of thunder, and it, too, exploded on impact with the floor.

A chunk of stone spun end over end and caught Voruum under the elbow, numbing his arm. The star lance was flung from his nerveless fingers, skidding across the chamber. For a moment no one moved. The air abruptly trembled to a deep and evil laughter, as if Daras Vorta himself was jeering Voruum from beyond the grave.

Then, adding his own scornful laughter to the supernatural sounds, the leader of the acolytes, a robed being who appeared to be their

priest, stood over the star lance. “You have offended Shaitan for the last time, intruder!” he snarled.

Voruum attempted to use his mental powers to prevent the priest from picking up the star lance, but he felt the combined anger of the acolytes surge against him, holding his own power back. He watched helplessly as the priest gingerly lifted the weapon. There was a small amount of power left within it—enough to strike a killing blow against Voruum.

And if the acolytes opened the well again, there would be nothing to prevent them from bringing the darkness from the stars through.

Voruum knew he could dive to one side or the other, but he’d not escape the deadly light of the weapon. The priest knew it, too. He stepped forward, preparing to administer the kill. As he did so, something struck him in the chest, smashing him backwards. He staggered, dropping the star lance, fingers plucking at the haft of an arrow. Blood was already welling on his chest. He dropped to his knees as another shaft tore into his throat.

The acolytes drew back in horror and it gave Voruum an opportunity to rush forward and retrieve the star lance. He used its last energy to scorch the acolytes, felling half a dozen of them. They fell, burning like huge torches, the stench of burnt flesh rich in the air. The remainder fled into the darker recesses of the chamber. Voruum saw the life ebb from the priest as he fell to the stone floor, his mask slipping from his face and shattering.

Voruum recognised the face. “Kannol Tuldish,” he said. The man was an administrator in Karkesh, a high ranking official in the service of the Council.

“You cannot avoid him. The grave cannot hold him...” gasped the man, spitting blood and with it his life.

Voruum was distracted by a sound behind him and swung round to see the youth, Kaspel, coming towards him, his bow strung with a third arrow.

“Forgive me, sir,” said the youth nervously. “I disobeyed you and followed. I did not think you would be safe.”

“I owe you my life,” said Voruum. “Not my anger. I would have sensed your coming, but my powers were somewhat diverted, as you can see.”

“Are there many more of them?”

“I think not. They will have fled, back into the desert. You may find, when we examine the dead, that some of them are from familiar villages. The disease that is Daras Vorta’s legacy is far-reaching. More than was realised. There will be work to do among your people.”

“Will I be permitted to help, sire?”

Voruum smiled, the first time the youth had seen him do so. “It will be dangerous.”

Kaspel nodded, lowering the bow.

You’ve taught me something, Voruum thought. My arrogance almost undid me. I may have an element of Dream Lord power in my blood, a secret inheritance, but even so, it is foolhardy to conduct a crusade alone. While I am here at the edge of the Dead Reach, perhaps I’d do better to train a recruit.

“I must return to Karkesh and make my report,” he told Kaspel. “After that, look for me in your village once more.”

Adrian Cole is the author of some two dozen fantasy and sf novels and numerous short stories over four decades. His recent NICK NIGHTMARE INVESTIGATES won the prestigious British Fantasy Award for the best collection of 2014.



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Volume III
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Hoskins' War

By BRIAN K. LOWE

When an ambush goes awry, Continental Army Captain Daniel Hoskins learns that something else—something inhuman—has been stalking the British rear column! He soon finds himself faced with deadly foes in a hidden ancient subterranean city!

Daniel Hoskins held his breath in anticipation of signaling his men to raise their bows. The line of redcoats had almost passed them by now, and his back itched where the sweat had dried in the long wait. With only a dozen followers, he could not attack directly. Timed right, the rest of British would come running back at the painful screams of their rear guard, see the arrows in their dead and blame the Iroquois, their allies, while the Americans retreated unseen. *Harass the enemy and fade away.*

Daniel silently urged the British to move more quickly. The column had run late, and the light was fading—no white man wanted to spend a night in the woods. A less prideful leader, he chided himself, would have called off the attack and gone home.

A shout went up; one of the wagons had hit a soft spot in the road, and its wheel was stuck. There was a brief, angry discussion between a redcoat lieutenant and the civilians, with violent gesticulations toward the wagon, piled high with supplies and several women.

Finally, the lieutenant, throwing a hasty glance over his shoulder, reached a decision.

“Sergeant! Take five men and stand watch while these ladies are debarked then follow us at your best speed. I must stay with the column.”

“Aye, sir!”

And ignoring the renewed shouts, the lieutenant turned to trot after the column. Daniel debated shooting him but decided that the lieutenant was more use to the rebel cause alive.

Amidst more arguing, the women were helped down, the soldiers formed up around them, and half a dozen men tried to free the

wagon. Daniel swallowed an impious remark; he had waited too long. He could not attack the soldiers without risking the women's lives, and he did not war on non-combatants.

Others did not feel the same.

Two black shapes exploded out of the trees on the opposite side of the trail, blurs that looked like dogs, like wolves, like something in between but larger than either. Two redcoats talking to a civilian in buckskins died under their charge before they could raise muskets. A third brought his weapon to bear even as he went down; there was a loud report as he fired point-blank—but the beast did not even hesitate before ripping out his throat with a shower of blood. The women had only now begun to scream, the other men to react, when a band of howling braves, emblazoned as for war, swarmed from the trees on the beasts' heels.

Daniel watched in shock as the braves, supposedly English allies, did his work for him. One moment the trees were empty, the next a score of natives was boiling onto the road, killing every man they could reach. The wolf-dogs had set their eyes on the buckskin-clad civilian, who had separated himself from the crowd and even now leveled his own musket. He fired, and one of the hellhounds yelped, rolling on the ground. Pulling itself to three legs, it limped off with a look back at its fellow. The man dropped his musket and drew a gleaming hunting knife.

By now the other men were dead, and the women, though unharmed, were surrounded. At that moment, Daniel shook off his paralysis, drew his bow, and let fly. If they hit one of the women, it was a better fate than any that lay with the Iroquois.

His men followed his lead, and the Iroquois started to shout as several of their fellows went down. The wolf-thing and the sole remaining white man crouched to one side, alone in the world, each daring the other to attack.

The Iroquois warriors, seeing no sign of their assailants save a new rain of death, slipped back into the woods whence they had come, but at the last instant one grabbed a young woman and pulled her shrieking into the trees. The black beast, with one last growl, followed like a dog. Daniel motioned his men to the edge of the trail.

“Best to put down the knife, friend,” he called.

The white man looked startled. He scanned the trees, plainly unable to see anyone.

“Americans?”

“I asked you to put down your weapon, sir,” Daniel repeated. “You are surrounded and we will not hesitate to shoot.”

“Please, Mr. Lampe,” said one of the remaining women. “Do as he says.” The others added their entreaties.

“I believe they are rebels, ma'am.”

“But they are not Indians!”

The man addressed as Lampe dropped his knife in the road, and Daniel stepped into the open. Lowering his bow, Daniel held up a hand to keep his men back in case the natives should return. Without taking his eyes off Mr. Lampe, he retrieved the knife.

Lampe's eyes flicked over him. “But you're carrying bows like the Iroquois. You were going to attack us and let the army think the Indians had done—but the Iroquois beat you to your own game.”

“The Iroquois were supposed to be protecting you,” Daniel countered. “Why would they attack a British convoy?”

“How should I know? My name is John Lampe. I came from the Philadelphia area. I was moving to Vermont, and this caravan seemed the safest way to proceed.”

“Obviously, Mr. Lampe, you were wrong.” Daniel turned to the women, who shrank into a knot. “Ladies, my name is Captain Hoskins. I am a soldier in the Continental Army. I'm going to have my men escort you to Prattsville. You'll be safe there until something can be arranged. Excuse me for a moment.” He returned to the edge of the trees to address his men. “Coates, take these women back to the village. It's getting dark; the Iroquois will be heading home, so you should be safe.”

“Prattsville?” one of the women repeated. “But that's in rebel hands. How can we be safe there? What if those wolves come back?”

Daniel ignored her.

Coates, his face streaked with mud to mask his chalky complexion, stepped into the open. “She's right, captain. What were those things? That redcoat shot one, and it just ate him.”

Daniel shook his head. “I don't know. Something's going on with the Indians—something ungodly. We've got to find out what it is. If

they've turned on the British, the army has to know. I'll take Matthew and go after them."

"I want to go with you."

Daniel had not even heard Lampe approach. "Why should I let you join us?"

Lampe gestured toward the woods. "The woman the Iroquois kidnapped was my sister, Elizabeth. I was accompanying her to meet her fiancé. You may send me back to Prattsville, but I will not give you my word not to try to escape. Or you may give me leave to accompany you, and I will give you my parole. Then there will be three of us, not merely two."

"Or we could just kill you and leave you here," one of Daniel's men said, pushing forward. He was blond and finely-featured like his captain.

"Matthew." Daniel's quiet word was enough to establish order. "We don't execute prisoners." He leaned in so that only his brother could hear him. "I'm your commanding officer, Matthew. If you can't remember that, I will see you transferred."

Matthew apologized in a voice almost too low to hear, and Daniel turned his attention back to Lampe.

"If the Iroquois have turned on the English, then every white man in New England is in danger, be he royalist or rebel. I will accept your parole, Mr. Lampe. But when this is done, you are still my prisoner."

"When this is done, captain, I will be happy to be *your* prisoner. There are rumors that the Indians are gathering their forces into an army, an army larger than any single tribe," Lampe said. "But I will expect honorable treatment for my sister," he added.

"She will have it. And you may as well call me Daniel." He indicated his brother. "This is my brother, Matthew. The Iroquois have had more than enough time to get ahead of us, and it's getting dark. You'd best pick up your musket. You may need it." *Although if you do, none of us will live to see our truce expire.*

"Thank you, sir. And one more thing." Lampe glanced toward where Daniel's men were starting to herd the frightened women down the road and lowered his voice. "I didn't want to mention it in front of the ladies, but there are rumors that the Iroquois are preparing to initiate

the practice of human sacrifice. My sister's life may be measured in hours."

"Rumors grow thicker than blackberries in these woods, Mr. Lampe, and I've never heard of any of the Five Nations practicing human sacrifice."

"Nevertheless, women have been disappearing from some of the outlying towns. And every rumor contains a grain of truth."

Any worries Daniel might have held regarding John Lampe's ability to hold to their trail were quickly resolved, to be replaced by others. This was not a royalist simply wearing woodsman's gear for show; he was as silent on the Iroquois' trail as Daniel himself. And he had eyes like a cat, lightly hurdling small roots and fallen branches, avoiding even dry leaves that would crackle underfoot—all this, even though the trees blocked the sky and the light was almost gone.

"He's good, Daniel," Matthew whispered, "Good as we are."

"I have to admit, had we not allowed him to accompany, we'd have no way to track the Iroquois now but through divine intervention."

They stopped for a half-minute's rest and for Daniel and Matthew to let their eyes adjust to the gloom.

"I thought I knew all of the woodsmen and trappers in this part of the state," Matthew said to Lampe. "But I don't recognize your name."

Perhaps hoping to make up for their suspended enmity, Lampe did not object to his bluntness. "As I said, I originally settled in Pennsylvania, but it was too civilized for me."

"Too civilized? Is that why you left England in the first place?"

"Yes, in a way. My father and his father and his father were Lincolnshire foresters. But the trees fall every year in the old country." He shook his head. "The King needs lumber for his factories, his ships. An empire eats wood like termites."

"What was that thing that attacked you?" Daniel wondered, hoping to change the subject. Every settler he knew cut down trees to build homes and forts, and as fuel. It was why God had put them there. "I've never seen anything like it before."

Lampe surprised him with a speculative look, seeming to search Daniel's face in the dimness.

“How much do you know about Indian spirits?” he asked, then shook off Daniel's dogmatic reply. “Never mind. It doesn't even matter if you believe me. You will soon enough. Those beasts have many names, but I call them spirit dogs. Wild as a wolf, but they obey their master's commands like a mastiff. They can track a man for a hundred miles then tear him apart on his own doorstep. Indian shamans use them to murder their enemies when they don't want to meet them face-to-face or when they are too far away to reach.”

“Why would he send them after the British?” Matthew interjected.

Daniel made a mental note to lecture him on gullibility and impiety—if they survived the night.

“For now, the allied tribes are using the British to fight the colonists, one white man against another. But that won't stop them from taking advantage when they see it. Obviously they have enlisted a shaman to their cause, and the shaman sent the spirit dogs to help his braves. It didn't really matter who they attacked, as long as no one survived to tell the tale. Like you, they seek only to divide their enemies.”

“We're fighting for our freedom,” Matthew said.

Lampe gazed at him mildly. “And so are they.”

They were quickly on the move again, and the moon hardly seemed to have moved when they pulled up short against a granite escarpment rising for a hundred feet or more. Daniel looked at his brother inquiringly, but Matthew shook his head. This cliff was nothing either had ever heard tell of.

“Don't believe all that you see and hear,” Lampe warned, as though privy to their confusion. “A shaman can make you see things that aren't there—or hide himself in plain sight.”

Daniel weighed these words for a long moment. “You know a lot about them.”

Lampe ignored him and moved on until they came upon a cave mouth, large enough for two men to enter upright.

“All right,” Lampe said urgently. “This is where we split up.”

“Who put you in charge?” Daniel asked. Belatedly, he twisted his head to scan the area, but saw nothing suspicious.

“You have to take it on faith, my friend, that I know more about what is going on than you do.” He drew a small, folded parchment from his

purse. "Matthew, take this paper. There's a British encampment about two miles to the southwest. Give this to the major in charge. He'll know what to do."

Matthew took the paper with a frown, and opened it.

"There's nothing on it."

Lampe pressed the parchment into his hand. "You have to trust me. Daniel and I are going after those braves."

"Go ahead, Matthew. Mr. Lampe has given his parole. There are none of us going to survive the night if we don't trust each other."

Matthew started to say something, then grabbed Daniel in a hard, quick hug. A moment later he was gone, not a leaf stirring in his wake.

Lampe led the way into the tunnel, which quickly went from dim to dark to total blackness, but even as Daniel thought he had lost his way, a light appeared in the distance. In moments the two white men stepped into a tableau from a poet's nightmare.

"This can't be..." Daniel breathed.

Far above their heads, the roof of a cave arched, streaked with sparkling green and blue turquoise so bright as to light the whole cavern like the grey pre-dawn sky. The walls around them stretched for what seemed miles, adding to the glow in hues of silver. But of the furthest extent of walls or ceiling nothing could be seen, blocked as they were by the vast bulk of an entire city under the mountain.

Half a hundred steps in front them, buildings of living rock rose a hundred feet high, tapering to graceful points, studded with balconies and ledges and carvings whose details could not be made out at a distance. There was no wall, but the avenues that led into the city from the downward-sloping path were twisted and narrow, and now that Daniel had had the opportunity to take it all in, he could see that the buildings *curved* inward, as though imitating the arching cave walls, creating an aesthetic that unsettled his human sensibilities.

After a moment's pause, they could hear a soft susurrations, as of many voices echoing and reechoing in the vast space until they were no more than the waves of the ocean. Despite this, they saw no one.

"I am impressed," Lampe admitted. "I had heard that these places might exist in the New World, but I had my doubts."

Daniel turned on him, eyes wide. “You’ve *heard* of this? The Iroquois build wooden huts and lodges. How could they have created all of this?”

Lampe took him by the shoulders. “Listen, Daniel, because I have much to tell you and not much time to do so. The Indians didn’t build this; it was here when they came. Millennia ago, long before any white man or any savage, other beings walked the Earth. They lived in Europe, and in the Orient, and in the black jungles, and plainly they lived here too. No one knows much about them, save that they were an evil race, and when Man came, they began to glory in human sacrifice.

“The earliest Europeans fought with them, and after centuries defeated them. But their science and their sorceries still remain in some deep pockets of the world, and this is one of them. This shaman is trying to resurrect some of those sorceries, and if he succeeds, heaven help us all.”

Daniel had ceased to wonder who John Lampe really was, or the source of his knowledge.

“You’ve come to stop him, then.”

“Aye, but you never would have believed me if I had told you the truth. Now, that building there—” he pointed to a slim tower set a bit apart from its fellows, with only one set of windows, set fifty feet above the ground—“that is the Tower of Sacrifice, where they keep the young maidens until it is time. That is where you must go. Without Elizabeth, there can be no sacrifice. Find her, bring her back here, and take her out through the tunnel.”

“And where will you be?”

“The fact that there is no one around, and no sentries, must mean that the shaman is getting ready for the ceremony. He will want as many witnesses as possible, since he thrives on the power of their fear. I’m going to see if I can put a different kind of fear into them.”

With a quick clap on the shoulder, he darted into a narrow passageway. Daniel belatedly felt the weight of the knife he’d taken from Lampe at his side, but it was too late to call him back.

Daniel saw no one on his trip to the Tower, making him feel almost foolish in his efforts to reach it unseen. Still he could not shake the sense that he was being watched, just as a rabbit knew when he was

on its trail, just as he knew when a panther stalked the woods behind him, seeking to prey on the hunter. Again and again he whirled to look behind him, but no one crept at his back, no alarm was raised.

The Tower entrance had no door, an unnecessary luxury in a land without weather, although strange for a prison. Even here there were no guards to be seen, and Daniel wondered if he were too late, if Elizabeth Lampe had already been dragged screaming toward her unspeakable fate—and if, between himself and her brother, that fate might yet be avoided.

He found nothing but a stairway inside, winding its way upward along the wall. Daniel made certain that his musket was primed; in these stone walls without windows, the sound might well not carry. Still, he would prize stealth as long as it was his to use.

After perhaps thirty steps, he came upon a landing and a stout timbered door, fastened on the outside. Pictographs lined either side of the door in an incomprehensible language, red as fresh blood, but long, long ago dried. Daniel lifted the wooden bar and eased open the portal. He slipped through, seeing nothing but a continuation of the landing, and closed the door behind him, remembering at the last to draw in the wooden bar else he be locked in himself. He turned to continue.

Nausea seized him for the most fleeting instant, a feeling as if his organs had turned inside out, then he was himself again—but the room was not.

Daniel could not move for disbelieving his own eyes. Before, the tower had been no more than twenty paces from wall to interior wall, a drab rock face without decoration or feature. Now stretched before him what could only be a sultan's antechamber from the heathen Orient.

Fully a hundred paces away, walls were covered to the heights with brilliant tapestries boasting panoramas of barbaric splendor, hunts and feasts and indescribable scenes which made him blush and turn away. The floor was layered with carpets and rugs as deep as snow, blazoned with geometric designs and swirls in yellow, crimson, and azure. From lamps set on carven pillars, soft light reflected from a silken rainbow of pillows—and on one of these mounds on the other

side of the room, a woman leaned against a pillar, her dress torn and askew.

It was a sight meant for no man but her husband. Her loose blond hair barely concealed her bare bosom. The muscles of her long white legs, naked nearly to mid-thigh, were tense with the strain of pushing herself backward as she strained to become one with the stone column at her back. Daniel would have looked away, could he but take his eyes off of the slaving black nightmare that crouched over the helpless maid.

The spirit dog stood on two legs like a man, its jaws hanging open to reveal its dripping tongue. The woman was unbound, but it could have torn out her throat in a heartbeat. For now it seemed content to drink in the scent of her wild-eyed terror—but for how long? Thinking of how it had shrugged off his troop's concerted attack on the trail, Daniel breathed a silent prayer. Perhaps, he thought as he shouldered his musket, the girl could escape in the confusion as it rushed him...

But as he tried to steady his aim, the beast's ears perked up, and its attention was drawn away from its sport. Without warning, it bounded away in the opposite direction and through a hanging tapestry without a sound. Even from a distance, Daniel could hear the terrified woman's sobs of relief as she sagged to the floor.

There was no time to be lost. She gasped in fresh horror at his footsteps, and her eyes went wide at the sight of him. She made a trembling attempt to cover her nakedness, but Daniel gave her no time.

"Elizabeth. My name is Daniel Hoskins. I'm an American soldier. We have to get out of here before that hellhound returns."

She took his hand. "I—I don't know how long I've been here—it—"

"It's all right. It's only been a few hours."

"A few hours? It feels like days. How do you know my name?"

Her tangled hair, her frenzied breathing gave her a wild beauty, an unkempt splendor unlike any woman he had known, that made it hard to concentrate on anything else. He tried instead to focus on her words—perhaps time as well as space was distorted here—but he was no philosopher.

“We have to go, Elizabeth. John Lampe is trying to stop the ceremony, but we may not have much time. Can you walk?”

She answered by standing, but with one hand over the ragged edges of the bosom of her dress and one holding the skirt, it took all of her attention. Before Daniel could speak, she let go of the skirt.

“I will trust to your discretion, Master Hoskins,” she said, her voice gaining strength. “I doubt not it is more trustworthy than that of my captors.”

“Did they—harm you?”

“No! No. They did not touch me but to bind me and bring me here. My dress is the result of the sport of that—animal, nothing more.”

“John said they needed a maid for their heathen ceremony. I thank Providence I arrived before they did. Here, through this door—”

Suddenly Daniel threw his weight into Elizabeth a heartbeat before the ghost dog’s body swept by so close to him that he felt the wind of its passage. Only the instinct of a forest-dweller had warned him at the last possible instant.

Pushing her away, Daniel spun, scrabbling for a weapon. The beast hit the stone floor on all fours, its claws skittering without purchase as it spun to face him. Its yellow eyes were evil, and hungry—and aware.

“Your spirit guide frightened my people and interrupted my ceremony,” it rasped, forcing words through a throat never made for speech. “But I still have the sacrifice.” Its eyes flicked to Elizabeth. “And you will serve my hunger until then!”

The fight was too close for the bow, and Daniel had dropped his musket evading the monster’s charge. He made a desperate grab for it, expecting to feel hot breath and fangs, but nothing touched him as he picked up his weapon. He brought to bear on the ghost dog, which merely waited, panting hungrily but unmoving. Daniel fired into its face at point-blank range—to no effect.

The hellbeast laughed roughly, and then it leaped.

It slammed into him, its jaws snapping, pushing Daniel backward, but he held his ground. The ghost dog was strong but curiously light, as if the meat had been spread thin over the bones. Both hands at its throat, Daniel used his thick clothing to ward off its scraping claws, but neither of them could gain an advantage.

“Run, Elizabeth!” Daniel grunted, trying to keep his footing on the slick floor. The ghost dog growled in return and tried to turn its head to seek the girl, but Daniel held fast. The beast twisted back and forth, and Daniel’s hand slipped in its thick fur, sliding toward its muzzle. He jerked back at the last instant to save his fingers, but the momentum caused him to slip and fall backward.

He fell painfully on his bow, agony shooting through his spine and loosening his one-handed grip on the ghost dog’s throat. It shook itself and drove forward, its breath hot and foul on his face—

—and then it screamed!

The hellhound arched its back, howling and thrashing, and past its shoulder Daniel could see Elizabeth with John Lampe’s knife in her hand. Somewhere far away he could hear her screaming as well.

With a sudden twist, the beast threw Elizabeth aside, but the knife remained. Daniel could see the hilt, jerking just out of his reach every time the demon snapped at him. Its coat was too thick for his hands to find purchase and he was reduced to beating its snout with his fists, cutting his hands on its teeth but keeping them away from his neck. Then one of his hands, slick from his own blood, slipped full into the hellhound’s maw and came to rest at the back of its mouth.

It gagged on his arm but could neither dislodge it nor bite down. It stopped struggling and tried to retreat, but in that moment Daniel got a grip on the knife and plunged it in again and again.

All at once the beast went limp, a dead weight on his chest. Withdrawing his arm with some difficulty, Daniel threw the spirit dog off of him. Elizabeth gasped, and he turned to see that the body on the floor was no longer that of an animal, but a man, an Iroquois shaman, his back a bloody ruin.

“What—?” the girl began, but Daniel shushed her questions and urged her toward the door, pausing only to retrieve his weapons. The question pounded at his brain: *Why did only John Lampe’s musket and knife hurt the ghost dogs?* But he had no time to puzzle an answer. Lampe had done something to the Iroquois; they had to get out of the cave at once, and the pain in his back already made walking difficult.

Together they limped out of the door, past the point where it became a simple stone tower once more, and down the winding

steps to the ground.

Elizabeth shrieked.

“I’m truly impressed, Daniel.” John Lampe shook his head in admiration. “I only needed you to hide my approach, and yet you did so much more! You are truly a hero, and believe me, I’ve known a few.”

Elizabeth was hiding behind Daniel, concealing herself from what seemed to Daniel’s eyes an unseemly stare.

“Elizabeth, it’s John, your brother! John, the Iroquois must be right behind you. We have to get Elizabeth out of here.”

Lampe nodded, but made no move to go, or aid them. “I’m sorry, Daniel. I’m afraid you’re on your own with the Indians. My work is done. I’ve disrupted their sacrificial rite, which is what I came to America to do.” His eye lit once again upon Elizabeth, and he sighed. “I apologize, Mistress Lindberg; I told Daniel you were my sister so that he could not refuse my request to accompany him. But I think he deserves the truth. Daniel, you know me as John Lampe, but I prefer Jack of the Lantern, of the court of the Faerie Queen.” He allowed a moment for this to sink in. “The Old World is getting crowded, and we’ve had our eye on the Americas for ever so long, but we couldn’t travel here ourselves, and it wasn’t until recently that we could ride with you. Of course, the locals do not appreciate our presence—as you will come to understand—and they had plans to stop us, plans which I, with Daniel’s help, have now ruined.”

Lampe tilted his head to one side. “And they’re not happy about it, I must admit. They’ll be here in a few moments, and I’m afraid they’ll try to kill everyone they see, so perhaps I should just go. They probably can’t harm me, but why take the chance?”

And he vanished.

“Who was that?” Elizabeth asked breathlessly. “*What* was that?”

Daniel was already moving. “I thought he was your brother. He may have been the devil himself, but he wasn’t lying. If the Iroquois catch us, they’ll do worse than kill us.” He handed her back the knife. “Keep this. I’ll hide just inside the cave mouth, where they can’t come at me all at once. You run for the outside. Perhaps you can escape.”

“And be tracked down, alone, in the woods? No, sir, I am with you. Give me the musket while you unlimber your bow.” After a moment’s

hesitation he did so, and she took up a sentry's post while he strung his bow and laid out his pitiful supply to arrows.

"Here they come!" she cried, but did not fire until the howling was echoing in their ears, and she sent a warrior in the first rank spinning to the ground. Then she took the knife in her fist and got behind Daniel, but even at his best, at point-blank range he could only shoot three or four times before they were overwhelmed. He raised the bow and loosed...

...in a roar of musket fire!

The first volley ripped through the Indian ranks and splintered them, and as they regrouped, a voice behind Daniel shouted "Fire!", and death erupted from the cave.

Trapped in the open against an enemy they could not see, the Iroquois fled down the trail and into the labyrinth of their city. Daniel felt a hand on his shoulder and dimly heard a familiar voice through the ringing in his ears.

"We found you! We found you!" Matthew was saying.

"We need to move everyone back, sir," interrupted another voice, and in the light from the cavern Daniel saw a royalist officer addressing Matthew, who nodded, and herded the British into an orderly retreat. Once out of the tunnel, they quick-marched away, their rear guard alert. Someone had conjured up a blanket for Elizabeth, which she accepted gratefully, but she whispered urgently in Daniel's ear.

"My father sides with the rebels, sir. If they find me out, it may not go well for me."

"Don't worry, my dear. We'll keep our secrets." He clapped Matthew on the back. "And how did you arrange all this?"

"That piece of paper Lampe gave me. I could have sworn an oath there was nothing on it, but when I showed it to the Redcoats' lieutenant, he ushered straight to the major, and when the major saw it, he ordered fifty troops put under my command at once. I don't know who John Lampe is, but he must take orders from George himself." Matthew's brow furrowed. "Where is Lampe? Did he not make it out?"

"Oh, he made it out, all right. And as to who he is, that's a question best left unasked. But do you think your friend the major would lend

us a few men to escort us back to Prattsville?”

“I think he’d give me all of these if I asked—as long as I don’t tell him where we’re really going. Why just a few?”

“Because,” Daniel whispered, his mouth very close to his brother’s ear, “even we can’t march a full fifty soldiers into town and then announce they’re our prisoners, can we?”

Brian K. Lowe is a 20th century man living in the 21st century and writing about people in completely different centuries. Although he rarely visits the present, his work can always be found at www.brianklowe.wordpress.com

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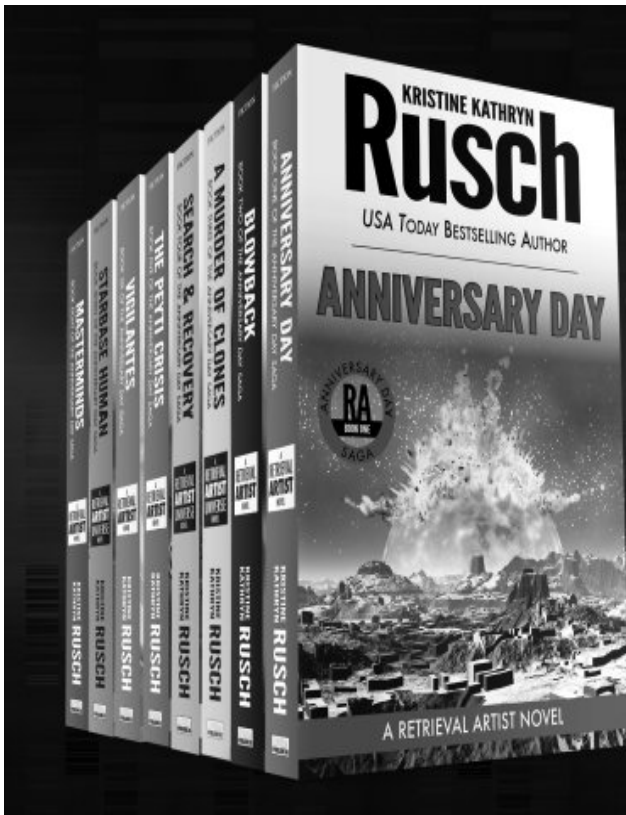
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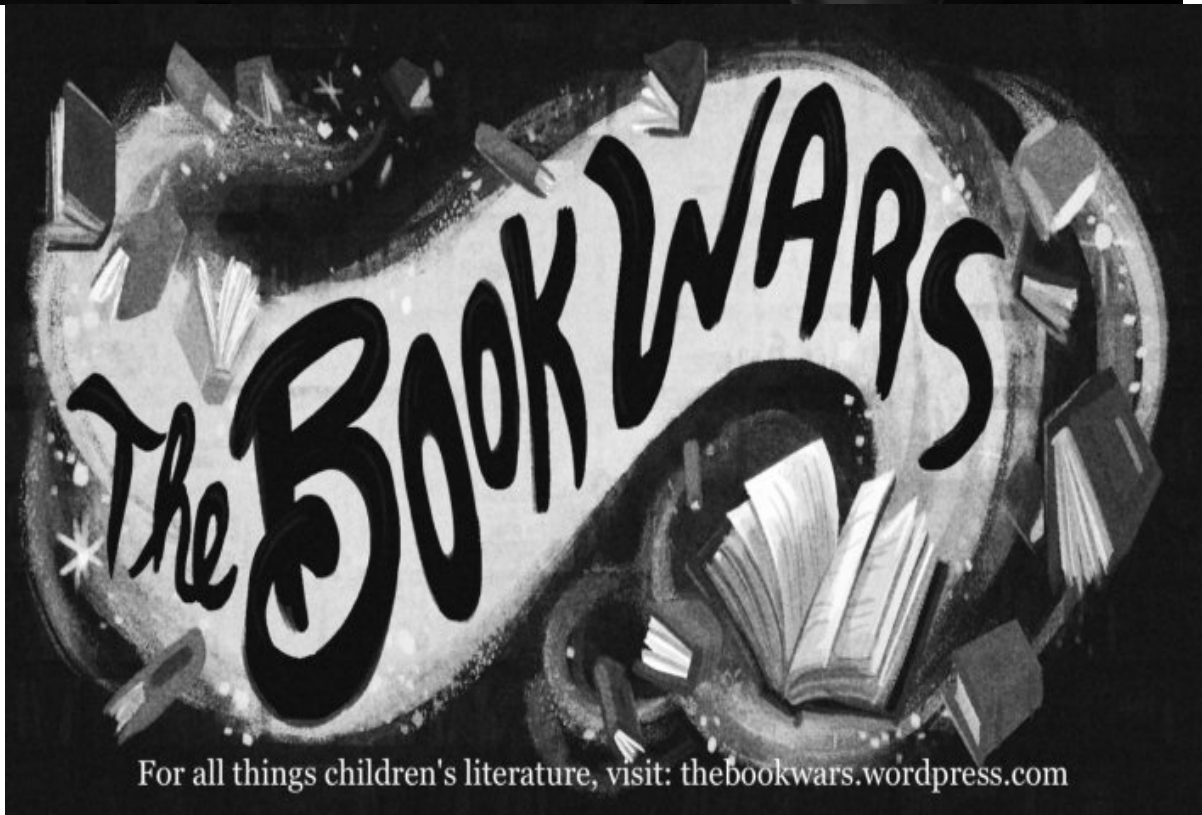
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Squire Errant

By KARL GALLAGHER

Pelanon, a village on the border of the Wild Lands, is plagued by a hideous beast able to quickly devour cattle and man alike! Can Squire Ward rally the beleaguered villagers to make a stand against the creature in the wake of his master's death?!

Sir Yves rode up to the village headman's house. I glanced back to make sure we were still a dignified parade behind him. The groom kept a tight hold on the warhorse's lead. Good. I'd hate to see it kick a child.

Manfred and I flanked Sir Yves as he made his speech to the village elders. The whole village cheered as they gathered into the well-yard to hear. This beast scared them, whatever it was.

Pelanon looked as prosperous as a peasant village could. Clean houses, clothes without patches. The risk of living at the kingdom's border with the Wild Lands had paid off for them until now.

The headman lamented the hundreds of cattle they'd lost. A hunter who'd seen the monster was brought forward to describe it. I listened carefully. Reading bestiaries had helped me pass some long winters. "Five times the height of a man and able to swallow a steer in three bites," alas, did not let me narrow down what kind of monster we faced.

"How did you escape, my good man?" asked Sir Yves.

"Didn't look like good eating, your lordship."

I believed him. He looked made of gristle spit out on the plate.

When Sir Yves laughed the villagers did too. I noticed my knight again didn't correct them for calling him a lord.

I looked back at the groom. He'd placed the pack horses on each side of the warhorse to keep the villagers away. In answer to his anxious look I said, "Good work, Hal."

He smiled. "Thank ye, squire."

I turned back to the conversation. We would be feasted and spend the night in the headman's house. His children were scurried out the

door clutching their dolls. I jumped down to take the bridle of his palfrey as Sir Yves dismounted.

They served us beef, of course. We'd seen several healthy herds riding in. The locals' chatter revealed they'd been about to cull the herds for market until the monster did it for them.

The headman signaled the end of the feast with a toast. "Good people, I give you Sir Yves, our savior."

"Hear! Hear!" shouted the villagers.

I filled Sir Yves' mug after he drank. He stood. "I give you the cattle-eater's head, mounted over your gate!"

They cheered for that even louder.

I laid out my knight's blanket on the cleanest straw pile. Manfred slept on the one by the door. The man-at-arms amazed me with his gift for sleeping instantly. He claimed it came from too many night watches.

I stepped out of the house. "Sir, your bed is ready."

"Thank you, Ward. I'll be in soon." Sir Yves turned back to his warhorse. "Tomorrow, Boulder, you shall have a charge worthy of a true destrier." He kept currying the animal's back. Boulder hardly needed it. He'd made the journey with no burden and the least of harnesses, but Sir Yves brushed him regardless.

I vow I will wed no woman unless I can give her as much love as Yves has for that horse.

In the morning we dressed for battle. I placed each piece of armor on Sir Yves, tying thongs and fastening buckles. When each went in place he stretched his arms and twisted his body, making sure all lay correct. I knew he meant no doubt in me. Sir Yves had fought man and monster enough times to learn the value of doing things properly.

The gristly hunter—Ed, he answered to—watched as we prepared. He might have slept in all but his bow.

I placed the helm on Sir Yves last. He bent his knees almost to a squat, then jumped in the air. The rattle and jingle of steel against steel turned all the villagers' heads. Stretches and bends were next. I watched carefully. No skin showed except around his eyes. Where the plate gapped mail lay underneath.

Manfred tossed aside an apple core. "It lays well, sir."

Hal led over Boulder. He'd put the full harness on the warhorse. We helped our master mount up. Then he said some inspiring words to the villagers while I donned my armor. It's the best I can afford, which is to say not much. But it puts steel between beasts and the places they like most to bite.

When Manfred and I mounted up, Sir Yves waved for the gate to open. The village lads pulled it to as we trotted out. It was merely wood stakes roped together. Boulder could have gone through it without slowing.

Ed led us through the patchy woods. I liked the climate here. Back home a cow walked all day to find enough grass to eat its fill. Here one could eat for a week standing still. The hunter pointed out some bits left from the monster's depredations. The beast was too lazy to eat a leg or head fallen from its maw.

I'd wondered at the herds remaining on the wilderness side of the fields. Then I realized people would want the beast to eat its fill before reaching their houses.

When we passed the last of the cattle Ed began moving from tree to tree, pausing to listen before crossing meadows. We followed patiently.

With the hoof beats and armor jingle and Sir Yves' lance trailing a pennant twenty feet above the ground I felt sure Ed would not be noticed first. But if my knight was content with his guidance I'd say nothing.

Whatever the thing was, it was truly tall. I spotted broken branches. I held two spare lances for Sir Yves. I used one to reach a stub where a branch had snapped clean off. It was almost thirty feet up.

Ed led us toward the East. The trees were more battered here. He held up a hand. We halted our horses. The sound of breaking wood came clearly through the trees. Then some thumps.

"Splendid work, my man," said Sir Yves. "Be off now. You don't want to be between us."

Ed vanished into the trees.

Sir Yves lowered his lance. Boulder walked faster, feeling his master's eagerness. I followed, ready to hand over a new lance after he placed the first one. I glanced back at Manfred. He was looking

about, taking care nothing would come up behind while Sir Yves focused on his prey.

Two trees stood close enough for their branches to weave together. I saw them surge toward us, part, then snap back to their places. The monster stood before us. Ed had not exaggerated.

It reared up, taller than I had feared. The dagger-toothed mouth opened. A cow would fit in there if it went head-first. It stood on two mighty legs. Bits of sun sneaking through the leaves gleamed on its scales. It lacked only wings to be a dragon.

“Roll, Boulder!” The warhorse needed no spurs to charge. Sir Yves canted his lance up to aim at the monster's throat.

I pulled a lance from its rest, ready to hand over, as I watched them fly across the ground.

The monster ducked its head and roared. Boulder arrowed at it, dirt and roots flying from his hooves. Sir Yves lowered his lance, aiming for the shoulder.

Then it hopped to the side, more nimbly than I imagined something that size could move. Sir Yves followed, the lance entered the monster's side. Before he could drive it in, a great three-clawed foot kicked out. Knight and horse catapulted through the air.

Boulder landed hard. The horse voiced its pain, a deeper scream than ever I'd heard on a battlefield. The scream ended as the monster's jaws closed on Boulder's neck.

I spurred my mount, dropping the lance. If I could grab Yves while it ate—it looked up at me and roared.

My mount reared, flinging me into a tree. I hit hard. Landing on the ground felt soft after the tree. Almost I screamed. That I didn't was likely more shock than fortitude.

My horse galloped away but the monster's legs were longer. The whole hindquarters fit in the gaping mouth. The beast rose to its full height to swallow. The front and legs fell to the ground as the jaws closed.

I saw Manfred turn his courser about and gallop off.

The rest of my mount went down its gullet in two bites. It disdained the legs. The monster stepped over to Boulder's remnant. Small forelimbs—small on this monster being a man's length—unfolded. It

scooped up the carcass and walked back into the woods. *Poor Yves, I thought. He'll mourn Boulder forever.*

I pulled myself up the tree trunk. A few minutes of standing let me walk again. Sir Yves was easy to find. His armor gleamed where the sun's rays rested on it. He wasn't in mourning. The monster had hit hard enough to cave in his breastplate. His face stared intently at nothing. He died not knowing he'd failed.

My knife made short work of some saplings. I dragged Yves' body toward the village. Soon I was so exhausted I didn't notice Ed until he started pulling on the frame with me.

Manfred waited by the first cattle herd. Like Ed he said nothing. The three of us placed Yves' body on the back of the courser.

As the shock wore off I grew angry. Angry at the monster. Angry at Sir Yves for dying with the work undone. Angry at myself for not finding a way to prevent his death. I couldn't undo that. But I could kill the monster. Somehow.

One of the village boys kept lookout from a platform over their gate. The headman came out to meet us. No cheers this time. The villagers were shocked and silent.

We laid the body on a table left outside from the feast. We bowed our heads as the priest said a blessing. The crowd pressed in for a closer look.

I heard muttering. "Don't stand a chance now." "We're doomed." "Best flee while we can." "My cousin has a farm near Rockhill, he might take us in."

I pushed my way through the gawkers and stepped up on the bench. "Good people! With his last breath, Sir Yves charged me to defeat the monster. I cannot do so alone, but with your help we can kill it together. He wounded it. I saw the lance tear flesh. I saw red blood pour down the beast's side, red as any wolf's blood. We can kill it."

They all listened. Some with hope, some with disbelief. Manfred's face held contempt.

"What one spear can wound, many spears can kill. I've taught soldiers of His Majesty's army how to wield the long pike. The men of this village, carrying pikes, can face the beast and destroy it. I can teach you. You can kill it."

The young men loved the idea. The older ones were divided. Arguments broke out, fighting versus fleeing versus waiting for another knight-errant to save them. The headman silenced them. "The council will decide. Everyone else, back to work."

The headman led us into the meeting hall. I wished I'd learned his name. Manfred followed after.

A chubby landowner seized the floor. "Simon, we must flee. That thing will eat our herds then us!"

"Flee to where?" said another. "There's no land standing empty that will hold our cattle. We'd have to sell all we have. I'm too old to learn a new trade."

"Enough!" Headman Simon banged a tankard on the table. "We've all heard this from you before. Squire Ward has something new for us. Explain your plan, sir, if you please."

I stepped into the circle. "It is simple. I was a file-closer in the Second Pikes. I trained soft city boys to be hard soldiers. Your crafters can make the pikes—long spears, three times a man's length. A week or two to practice with them and we can tear the monster apart."

"What was a squire doing in the army?" asked one.

I chuckled as if I didn't mind the question. "I'm a third son of a fifth son. My blood's high but no money was left for me. So I took His Majesty's shilling. Sir Yves wanted a squire who'd slept in tents, not manors. So he chose me."

The carpenter and smith whispered to each other. The smith stood and asked, "How do we make those pikes?"

I explained what was needed. Heartwood from a straight tree, a sharp iron point, and a spike on the end to hold it still when braced on the ground.

"How many?"

"Thirty at least. Double that if you can." They didn't like that. "We can train with bare wood. Starting tomorrow."

When no one else had a question Manfred stepped into the silence. "Good men, I'll take my leave now. I'm bringing Sir Yves' body to be buried at his brother's manor."

"I'll help you with that," I said.

Hal brought up the palfrey. She shifted uneasily as we heaved the corpse on and tied it in place.

"You don't have to do this yet," I said. "You have a lot you can teach them."

Manfred mounted his courser. "I don't think I'd change their fate."

"Sir Yves wanted to protect these people. You can help protect them."

He took the palfrey's lead. "Yves was a winner. That's why I took his shilling."

"Stay, and win again."

Manfred leaned down toward my face. "You're no winner. You're every noble-blooded commander who led his men to slaughter because his *honor* wouldn't let him sound retreat." He twitched his reins. His horse began to trot. The palfrey followed on the lead.

I took a drink from the well as I waited for the council to finish arguing. A tall lad, good pike material, came up to me.

"What were you talking to the horseman about?" he asked.

"I charged him with a message for my mother."

Simon came out then. "Squire Ward. You shall have your pikes. And your men. May God have mercy on us all."

My recruiting speech made two promises: the joy they'd take in spilling the monster's blood and the brotherhood they'd feel forever with those they fought beside. I'd convinced the village's prettiest girls to sit a bit to my side where the undecided could see them. Once a few young men stepped forward the rest followed. Some older men volunteered as well.

Half the volunteers couldn't train yet. They were the pike-makers. I assured them they'd be able to catch up. The other half were put to bed in the meeting hall.

I woke before dawn, used the privy and ate some cold beef I'd saved from last night. Then I walked into the meeting hall and began kicking ankles. "On your feet! Get started! Form two lines for the privies!" One fellow tried to swing at me. I knocked him onto another who hadn't risen yet.

At the privy they learned proper spacing in line and standing at attention.

I led them to the village's wall after. They flinched back as I drew my sword. Two swings cut the ropes holding the thin logs together. I yanked one log from the wall and tossed it at the lad in front. "We don't have pikes yet so you'll train with these. Come forward in turn to receive yours."

Once we all held our sticks at the same angle we could march for real. The cattle gazed as we went by. "Never break formation! Put your foot in that cow patty! And the man behind you puts his foot in the same place! When the formation passes there should be one footprint in that cow patty!"

Turning and facing movements confused them. When one knocked his flanker in the head with his stick they found ways to make each other do better.

"Breakfast? Why would you want to eat before working up an appetite?" God bless Petty-Captain Eblen for teaching me an answer for anything a recruit might say.

I marched them back in for lunch. A couple couldn't cut it. Some boys from other villages had come to join in. My formation grew.

The afternoon was more of the same. I let them have a heavy supper and sent them to the meeting hall. Complaints soon turned to snores.

Ed reported another pair of cattle lost. I took him aside. "Can you track the beast?"

"Track? Its footprint is as big as I am," said Ed.

"I want you to find its lair. That's where we'll attack it. Find it, and guide us to it."

"Dangerous work. I have a family to feed."

Sir Yves entrusted me with his purse because he hated bargaining over fodder and rooms. I took a gold crown from it. "Give your wife this."

"Aye, sir, that'll feed them well and long."

By the time the pikes were ready, the boys looked good on the march. I hadn't taught them the maneuvers they'd need on a battlefield or a parade, just enough to win one fight. Two boys, Jerob and Bert, did well enough I gave them turns at calling the march.

Issuing the pikes became a ceremony. In single file they tossed their sticks onto a pile and received their weapon from my hands.

The craftsmen followed them. Their sloppy walk contrasted sharply with the crisp march of my trainees. The older men tried to imitate the others. I smiled.

In the morning Jerob led the youngsters in practicing the basics while I introduced their uncles and older brothers to the same moves. I hid a smile at the precision the youngsters had when they wanted to impress someone. The new group hated being shown up. They worked hard and learned fast.

Three days and another monster raid later I set them marching together. Now we practiced attacks. The town wall became more battered as pikes thrust into it.

Once I felt they were ready to face the beast I took them on a long winding march through the pastures. By dusk half of the men were lost. I would have been if my hired boys hadn't been popping out from behind trees to keep me on course.

As we entered a shady meadow one boy gave me the ready signal. I answered him in kind. We marched straight ahead.

Lights flickered in the trees. An inhuman bellow split the air. A dark shape emerged, trailing sparks, and charged us.

I commanded, "Lower pikes! Brace pikes!" As one my men dropped their pikes from vertical to pointing at eye level. Then they planted the butt spikes in the dirt and stomped hard to hold them there.

The screeching came closer. The shape reached the pikes. Four men fell as the impact shook the pikes from their grasp. The second rank held firm.

"Charge pikes and attack!" At my command the rear ranks lifted their weapons and thrust at the attacker. Front rankers who didn't have something on their pikes joined in.

Jerob stabbed deep, then stepped back. "It's a bleeding kine!"

Two of them, actually. Young black bulls roped together. Burning branches were tied to their tails. Well clear of the pikes stood the herd boys I'd hired to guide them into our formation.

"We're feasting tonight, boys!" I shouted. "Fall out to gather firewood."

My men were laughing and slapping each other on the back. The more serious ones looked at the dead bulls' wounds. One braced

pike had entered the chest and come out through the bull's haunch. Thrusts by the rear-rankers went in two or three hands.

I paid off the herd-boys and sent them home. Tonight would be for the fighters.

The first fire was far too big for cooking. Jerob sent some wood gatherers aside to make a pair of smaller fires so we could eat. As more wood arrived he had them build a second bonfire on the other side of the dead bulls.

When the roughest butchering was done Bert took a few men to work the pikes out of the bodies. Seeing men get important things done without orders made me a happy commander.

Once everyone's belly was full of beef I gathered them round for a talk. "You're ready to kill a monster," I said to cheers. "In a few days we'll do it. The beast eats every few days. The next time it takes some cattle we'll wait to the next day. Then Ed will lead us to its lair."

The hunter nodded. He'd arrived in time for the feast.

"God willing it will be asleep with a full craw. We'll just see it doesn't wake up. I expect it will be awake. Then we'll kill it the hard way."

More cheers.

"We'll keep training in the morning. You'll have afternoons off until we start the hunt. Now let's go to bed!"

Three days later we marched into the woods by dawn's light. Ed brought three other hunters along. He trusted them to keep their head and use their bows well. I carried a pike along with my sword.

The route was winding. I'd asked Ed to avoid woods too thick for us to form up in. There were still places between meadows where we'd be almost helpless if the monster caught us.

The lair was on the far side of a clearing. The beast had knocked down three trees together to use their crowns as cushions. It lay curled up, tail past its nose.

I quietly ordered the pikes to level. We marched.

When we were halfway across the creature opened its eyes. It rolled out of the nest and stood. We kept marching.

It opened its dagger-toothed mouth. The roar was deafening. Some soldiers froze for a moment and had to skip to get back in step.

I ordered "Port pikes." The points rose to even with the monster's chest. We marched.

It scraped at the ground with one three-clawed foot. I was ready to shout "brace pikes" but it just stood there.

We tramped forward. A tall front-ranker jabbed at it. The beast batted the pike aside with a forelimb.

Some of the men shortened their strides. I shouted, "Two big steps then give him a thrust!"

Left. Right. Thrust.

Four pikes hit as one, leaving spots of red on its chest.

The monster gave an odd cough and pivoted on one huge foot. Pikes rattled as the giant tail shoved them aside. A quick rear-ranker caught the tail on his point, ripping a bloody gash as it swept by.

Dirt sprayed over us as the claws ripped the turf. The beast slipped into the woods. The last we saw was waving branches closing over the tail.

"Coward!" yelled Jerob. Then they all laughed and cheered.

I forced a smile on my face. "Well done, men, well done!"

I let them celebrate for a bit. Truly, that they'd held their ranks steady in the monster's face was the greatest victory. I suppose it's harder to be a coward in front of your relatives and neighbors than a bunch of strangers.

Ed led us after it. Anyone could have followed the trail for the first mile. Then the blood sign became scarcer. After the second mile Ed gave up. No blood drops. Ground too rough to follow footprints. No way to tell which broken branches were freshest.

The whole march back to the village I brooded. The monster was fast enough to catch my horse. We'd never be able to chase it on foot. Sneaking up on it had failed. I had to come up with a new plan.

Thinking kept me quiet through the village's "victory" celebration. Not that it was of any use. When Headman Simon took me aside for a private chat I was relieved to be interrupted.

Simon began with stirring praise for how I'd built up the men and led them to victory. Then, "I am concerned by how long this is taking."

"I'd hoped to kill the beast today," I said.

“If its wounds fester, perhaps you did. Can you let the men return to their work? Roofs are leaking, cattle have strayed, fields sprout weeds. A fence broke, it let a herd eat the rye down to the roots. If they keep marching the village will be just as destroyed as if all the herds were eaten.”

At least he was polite enough to not complain about the cattle lost yesterday.

I promised to track the monster down soon, finishing with, “It's easier to repair neglect than the horror of the creature ravaging the village.”

“Perhaps you should fix the hole you tore in the wall then,” said Simon.

“Why? It can step over the wall.”

He grunted and walked back to the feast.

I looked up at the stars. They had no answer for me.

“Your mug's empty, Squire.”

“Thank you, Hal.” The groom poured beer from a pitcher. I drank. Poets found inspiration in wine. Maybe I'd find some in the homebrew.

“The lads say the monster ran away, like that hydra did from Sir Yves.”

“Aye. And there's no box canyon here to trap it in.”

“Luring it into a trap could work, sir.”

“It could,” I said. “I don't know what to use for a lure. It can find food anywhere the cattle graze.”

“We'd have to wave it under his nose. He likes the taste of horse. I could ride up,” he patted the sling in his belt, “thump his nose, and ride off. He'd chase me.”

“Chase, aye, and catch you belike.”

“I picked my horse well. She's faster than you think. If the monster follows me to your pikes you can finish it.”

“Bravely said.”

“Now, I,” he swallowed. “I'd want a promise first.”

“Say on.”

“If you defeat the monster you'll be knighted.”

“I might be.” It would be that or execute me for usurping a knight's prerogatives. Maybe I should have thought more about that before

starting this fight.

“Knights need squires.”

“Hal.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “Squires must be of noble blood.”

He looked at his toes. “She wouldn't tell me his name but Ma swore my father was noble.”

“Oh.” Which met the letter of the law. Though bards made mock of knights who had bastards as squires. I decided if mockery was the price of the beast's head I'd pay it. I held out my hand. “If I am made knight you shall be my squire.”

Hal burst into a smile as he shook it. “Sir!”

“So ride fast or I won't be able to keep that promise.”

We all headed out again in the morning. This time everyone wore a bedroll with some food bundled into it. I intended to not return without the monster's head. Hal rode his horse. I looked closer at the mare than I had before. She was too light to bear an armored man or a saddle pack, but her legs were long and graceful.

We waited in a meadow while Ed and his fellow hunters searched. It was halfway to sunset when one returned with a sighting. The beast had moved on by the time we arrived at the spot. We camped for the night then, hopeful of seeing it on the morrow.

The hunters went out in pairs at first light. Ed returned before noon to guide us. “It's wandering about nosing at stuff,” he said. “I think it's looking for a nesting place.”

I prayed that we could kill it before it bred.

Another hunter met us on the way. “It's moved north, not far.”

When we'd marched to a mile from it I chose a clearing for the battle site. Bedrolls went into a pile at its edge.

I liked Hal enough to want to give him a last chance to change his mind. But he was young enough to consider that an insult. I reached up to slap his shoulder. “Go bring us a monster.”

Hal waved and tensed his legs to put the mare into a trot. The troops, warned to be quiet, waved back.

Then all I had to do was keep my face calm. Harder work than shouting marching commands. The troops knelt in the tall grass, pikes laid flat. One soldier spat on the ground. My mouth was too dry

to even try. The hunters stood at the edge of the woods, hiding behind trees, arrows nocked on their bows.

A distant angry bellow sounded. Hal had found it. We still waited.

Two younger soldiers lifted their heads. Their filemates yanked them back down. Looking around was my privilege right now. I kept my peeks to one a minute.

More bellows, sounding closer. Hoof beats. Hal still lived, if the mare hadn't thrown him. The grating sound of the beast's clawed feet. Breaking branches.

They burst into the clearing. The mare's neck stretched out long. Hal lay flat against it. The beast let loose an angry roar close behind.

I looked up. My timing on the command must be perfect.

Hal rode through the aisle we left through the center of our formation. Dirt sprayed the pikemen.

"Raise pikes!" I commanded.

Each soldier had his heel on the butt of his pike. They lifted them together. A grove of deadly points appeared before the charging beast.

I'd been almost too early. The giant claws tore furrows in the ground as it pivoted and slowed. But not enough.

The monster's flank pressed against the left side of the pike array. Points disappeared into its flesh, some reaching in three hands or more.

The dagger-lined mouth opened to unleash deafening noise. This time the monster bellowed in pain.

"Attack!" I yelled.

Jerob said, "Rear rank, follow me!" He led them to the left to attack the monster's head.

"Right flank, forward!" Bert got them moving just as the tail swept him off his feet.

The monster kicked out with its near leg. Two pikes came loose from its flesh. A man looked at the empty place where his entrails had been and fell over.

The leg had just moved for an instant before returning to hold the heavy monster up. That was my chance. I drew my sword and ran to behind the leg.

The lead man on the left thrust his pike into the open mouth. "No," shouted Jerob, "aim for the neck!"

The monster closed its mouth, snapping the pike. Its wielder dropped the remainder. The head dipped down, bit, and lifted up. The left-behind legs fell over. The beast spit out the body.

Arrows stuck in the flesh around its eye. Others bounced off the skull.

I'd seen tendons moving under the skin of the knee. I hacked with all my strength. When I cut one I shifted my grip to hit the other side.

Hal charged with a pike he'd found and struck the monster's belly. Blood sprayed on me.

Three swings and the other tendon gave way. The knee bent. I backed away as the monster leaned into the pikes in its side. Some bent under the weight. Others forced their way in deeper. Blood spurted from the wounds.

I ran to a man struggling with a bent pike. "Thrust with it!" I said, adding my hands to his.

The monster let loose a scream, telling the forest of its pain and fear.

I pushed harder on the pike. It snapped.

I remember it feeling like when my horse threw me into a tree. I don't remember landing on the ground.

I woke screaming.

"Easy, Squire," said Ed. "We've drawn the leg straight. Hold still while we tie the splints on."

I held my jaw tight as they worked. I hurt everywhere. Only the leg was worth complaining about. Ed seemed to know the business better than some leeches I'd known in the army.

When they were done I asked, "How many?"

"Four dead, a dozen we'll have to carry," said Ed. "I've seen boar hunts with such loss and not bring down near as much meat."

I pushed myself up with an elbow, ignoring the complaint from my sore head. Men were all busy or being tended. The monster lay flat and still. One pike had pushed through without breaking. Someone had tied a banner to the bloody shaft. "I'll leave you to it," I said.

“Rest, Squire. All's well.”

“All's well” was still the most deaths Pelanon village had seen at once in its history. But the villagers no longer feared for their existence. I attended the funerals in a chair.

The herb woman declared I needed rest and sun. The chair held me through long days of watching the villagers bring their lives back to normal. I faced toward the gate. It let me see if the boy on sentry watch stayed awake.

Today's was alert. He called out, “Horsemen! Many horsemen! In armor!”

Simon bustled out of his workshop. “What colors?”

“Different colors. The front knight is green and white,” said the boy.

The local count's arms. Simon set his people to fetching beer and meat for the guests.

The hoofbeats came to a halt outside the gate. None of us were surprised. The monster head mounted above the gate was worth stopping to look at.

The cavalcade ambled in through the gate. Simon and his elders bowed to their count. The three knights were followed by their squires, men at arms, and servants.

A tall knight dismounted and walked across the well yard to me. I recognized him as Sir Yves' brother.

“Well met, Squire Ward.”

“My Lord Francis, I beg your forgiveness for not rising. I share your sorrow on the death of your brother. We have slain his killer.”

Lord Francis bowed to me. “No forgiveness is needed. You have avenged my brother. My gratitude to you is eternal.”

“More gratitude is due to the men of this village than to me, my lord. Four died in the effort.”

He led me on to tell the tale. There was only one interruption. “Did you teach them to fight men?” asked Lord Francis.

“No, my lord. Only to fight the monster.” Forming a militia without their overlord's permission would be treason for every member.

At the end of it he said, “Splendidly done. By the head it was a fearsome beast. I think my brother would be proud.”

From behind me a voice said, "Aye, he would."

I twisted to look. Manfred, Sir Yves' man at arms, stood there. I hadn't noticed him come up as I talked.

Manfred stepped forward to beside my chair. He held out his hand. I shook it.

*Karl Gallagher is an aerospace engineer and former military officer. His novel *Torchship* is a working-class hard science fiction adventure.*



In the second book of the Stolen Future trilogy, Charles Clee returns to the future and the woman he loves--but are either the same as those he left behind? Battling his way across the world, hunted and accused, he finds the astonishing answers--only to discover, on the eve of his greatest triumph, that an ancient foe is about to rise, determined to wipe humanity from the face of the earth! Can one man save a civilization that only wants him dead from the deadly menace that dwells in The Secret City? Available for \$3.99 on Amazon and Smashwords. Read Volume One, *The Invisible City*, at the introductory price of \$0.99! And look for Volume Three, *The Cosmic City*, coming soon.

The Water Walks Tonight

By S. H. MANSOURI

By fate, the seiðr's prophecy, and the Jarl's command, six men sail together to the island of Volva that the sins of Glera Syori might be atoned for! But are any of them prepared for the horror they face when the watery dead bring their wrath to bear?!

The Karvi's dragon-headed prow cut through dark waters toward the island of Volva, eight of thirteen rowing benches vacant. Tarben Usvang bore the brunt of a silent push through scattered glaciers, his body searing in pain. Between strokes, when Vali was not looking, he stole bitter glances at his tribesmen. If they could not muster the *orka* to help him with the rowing, how could he trust that they would raise their weapons when death was upon them?

Vali shouldered Sven, the laziest of the party, Tarben thought, as he took hold of the tiller and pushed. Winds from the south died many moons ago. Vali had warned the men that the ship would need their *orka* to make shore, and they agreed.

Many things they agreed to, thought Tarben. Perhaps they were hibernating, reserving what they could for the moment the Karvi's belly licked on solid ice. Gunter caught the glimmer of a dagger in Tarben's glare and heaved forward in his row, grunting clouds of breath into the chill, still air.

"Push east," whispered Vali to the men. "Hel's realm lies close and wide. Approach from the east and we hang loosely from the rim of her mouth."

Now that Vali's attention was on the men, Bjorn and Asger began their push. Seals in droves surfaced and plunged like night raiders made of ink.

Tarben should not have been on the ship.

The old *seiðr* back home in Glera Syori said the gods willed him here. She drew his lot the day the fish began to wash ashore, black and festering. It was the work of the draugr, she said, and many

were the sins to be atoned for. Einhor, Jarl of Glera Syori, would have sent out one-hundred of his men to bring the fish back to the rocky shores, but the *seiðr* assured him that only five would do.

Tarben could see why the gods chose Sven to atone. Draped in clean furs and skins, Sven took a hands-off approach in all his deeds, though the blood spilled by his whispers in the dark were known to many, save for Jarl Einhor and Vali. Behind a dozen mysterious deaths in the fields of Glera Syori were the pristine and plump hands of Sven the tiller.

Bjorn and Asger were twins, blonde-headed behemoths cut and marred from a hundred raids, across four seas in every direction. But not here. Never had they ventured near the island of Volva where a hundred nameless, faceless victims of their raids could reach up from the depths and swallow them whole. *Their vice is the spray of warm blood across their faces*, thought Tarben. *But what of the man called Gunter?*

The twins tossed hooks into the blunt edge of the ice and pulled the Karvi sideways to shore. Disgruntled gulls scattered and cursed.

“What business do birds have here?” said Gunter.

“They watch us approach,” said Vali. “Volva has a thousand eyes to watch its prey.”

The crackle of untested ice pierced the silence as Bjorn and Asger leapt ashore. Sven stood by the tiller still, inspecting his wares. Gunter watched Vali rise.

“We are not here to plunder, this was agreed to before we took our leave. Our families will soon starve if the fish are not brought back to the shores of Glera Syori. The Jarl has put his trust in the signs that we are the few to remedy this situation. Signs aside, I know what your kinsmen think of you. Greed and lust for blood lives in all of us. But now, we must look back on the treachery we have wrought and undo the curse that plagues our people. We do not leave until that time,” Vali announced.

“To Hel with what our kinsmen think,” Sven bellowed. “Not a drop of blood has fallen by my hands. I am here in support of Glera Syori and her shores, nothing else. I have naught to atone for.”

“If the draugr do not come for you, then you have spoken the truth,” said Tarben. “I have heard they only seek the guilty.”

“Then I have nothing to worry about,” said Sven, an impish grin emerging.

They took their shields and axes and joined the twins on the slick shore. Gunter kept close to the wide swath of Sven’s dark furs, holding his eyes steady on the whitewash of ice that ran for what seemed an eternity.

“Have you seen them before?” said Sven to the twins.

Asger smiled at his brother. “We see them every night in our dreams. We will not leave this place until we dream while we are awake. And then, we will take as many of them as we can back to Hel’s mouth with us.”

“Shame,” sighed Bjorn. “All the lives we took, silver and gold piled up for us higher than the mountains, and we will never see the great halls of Valhalla. My brother and I will camp here tonight. Let death find us sooner than later.”

Vali paused. “I prefer you camp with us, but if you desire a quick death then that is your choice. What do you say Asger?”

Asger thrust his great axe into the ice. “We will die together, here on the shore.”

“Fools,” whispered Sven.

They left the twins to camp on the icy shore of Volva and trudged toward the dark pines.

They have accepted their guilt, thought Tarben. *It would be nice to have two more shields though.*

“How do you know each other?” asked Tarben.

The small fire crackled from the wet wood that Gunter and Tarben had chopped. Nothing alive could be hunted or cooked on Volva. They built the fire for warmth and nothing more. Sven ripped at a piece of dried meat before answering the question.

“Gunter is my hands and feet. Whatever I need, he gets for me.”

“I’ve known Gunter to be a tanner,” said Vali. “That does not make him a servant.”

Tarben nodded.

“What do you owe him that you are so eager to please?” asked Tarben.

Gunter stared into the darkness beyond the trees.

“He owes me nothing, save for the fact that we are both men of Glera Syori. He is a kind soul, nothing more. Tell them Gunter.”

“What do you suppose is out there?” said Gunter, squinting in the light of the fire.

“Blue flesh, black blood...vengeance,” said Vali hoarsely.

Gunter returned his gaze to the fire. “So, we have come here to die? All of us?” he asked.

“I only bring who the Jarl orders me to bring. He puts much faith in what the *seiðr* has to say. Scattered bones and warm blood...of these things I know nothing. It has always been our way.”

“You do not fear for your life?” said Gunter.

“Jarl Einhor trusts the *seiðr*, and I trust Jarl Einhor. He would not send me here to die.”

“Maybe Fenderoth thought the same thing about you, Vali,” said Tarben.

Fenderoth had been the scourge of the sea. As the Jarl’s most trusted friend, he had successfully sailed more raids than any three men of Glera Syori combined. Under his command, Jarl Einhor had become the wealthiest man in four directions. A failed raid in the middle of winter, led strangely by Vali, ended his life.

Blood surfaced on Vali’s cheeks. He swelled and leaned in toward the fire, a frostbitten hand clenching the handle of his axe.

“Back to the sea with you, farmer,” Vali grunted. “What would you know about Fenderoth?”

I’ve hit a nerve, thought Tarben.

“I only know the songs of Fenderoth are many, sung by all. His ability to escape the jaws of defeat is legendary. Even the crows, jealous scavengers, call his name from the rooftops. A raid during winter is unheard of. A legend, whose veins ran cold with salt water, drowning in the sea of his birth is also unheard of,” snapped Tarben.

“Yes, I remember the man,” said Gunter.

“Quiet!” said Vali.

The sharp lines of a smile shot up beneath the furs covering Sven’s mouth. He enjoyed accusation, though not on his account.

“I was there, blast you. Only Sven and I returned from that dreadful voyage. The sea swallowed many that day. While you tilled

the frozen soil for crumbs, we battled the sea. Fenderoth's favor with the gods ran out. There is nothing more to it."

"Beautiful furs he had though," said Sven.

A cat, black as night, crept out from the shadows, rubbing its frosty nose against the trunk of a gnarled pine. Gunter held his hand out and rubbed his fingers together, as if offering a morsel to the mysterious feline. It slunk his way and leapt into his lap.

"See, there *is* life on Volva after all," he said smiling.

The cat perched on Gunter's thigh, swatting at his hanging braids like dangled fish. It scratched his left cheek and Gunter lifted his head. "Bloodthirsty little cur," he exclaimed, and tossed the cat into the fire. Charred wood scattered and Sven laughed into the sky. Gunter rubbed his cheek.

The fire spat and churned, and the burning cat leapt from the flames at Gunter. It grew to the size of a man on fire and throttled him around the neck.

"Draugr!" said Vali, tossing a small hand axe into the draugr's back. It did not waver. Tarben rose and swung his axe over his shoulder.

Gunter's face exploded in shades of red and blue and purple. He grasped at the draugr's face, its fetid skin sloughing off in gobs of black oil that showered down on him. It shoved its thumbs into his eyes and roared a laughter like thunder in the wake of a storm.

"Help him," said Sven, startling back into the cover of the trees.

Tarben came down on the draugr's back, his axe singing in the still air. His stroke went through the draugr and sunk into Gunter's chest. Black water erupted from the draugr's body and it vanished, leaving Gunter soaked in his own blood.

Sven ran to Gunter's twitching body and dug his hands into soiled pockets.

"No plunder," said Vali. "We agreed."

"It was mine to begin with," shot Sven. "He brought his own coin from Glera Syori. This is not plunder, it is what I paid him and I'm taking it back. What need does he have for coin anymore? He is dead—Tarben saw to that."

Sven fumbled a dozen silver coins in his hands.

“Scavenger,” said Tarben. “So he was not merely a kind soul—you paid him. What work did he do for you, Sven the tiller? Did he till the soil for you with the blood of farmers? Did he pave the way for the riches of the dead to fall into your pockets? I’ve seen the bones in my own field. Did you keep the heads, or toss them to the birds?”

“You will die tonight, Tarben, for your false accusations,” said Sven. He picked up his axe and steeled himself against his kinsmen.

The sound of steel on steel clanged in the distance. Southern winds quickened, howling through the pines, carrying the cries of Bjorn and Asger along a tempest wave that squelched the light of the fire. Vali took his axe.

“We will see who dies tonight,” said Tarben, as they rushed through the tree line to the sounds of battle near the shore.

Bjorn heaved his great axe with one hand, blocking the crashing waves with his wooden shield. Asger cringed behind his shield as the wind and water pounded against him. The Karvi bobbed and swayed to the sounds of death approaching. Even now, the anchored hooks the twins had secured to the ice began to strain and jostle in their hold.

“We join you in death!” Vali bellowed to the twins as they approached the shore.

Tarben slowed his charge toward the water. *I cannot let the tiller have my back, he thought. In the midst of battle he might ease his axe into my skull.*

The waves were unnaturally large, like sheets of dark sky tossed down by the gods above.

“I see nothing,” said Asger.

A gull, fighting back the whip of the wind, hovered above the twins. Its wings spread into the slick hands of a draugr wielding a blade. It dropped down on Asger, severing his shield and arm in one fail stroke. His face painted in the familiar warmth of blood, Bjorn pushed his brother aside and cleaved the draugr’s torso, black water freckling the untainted ice.

“Come for me, Odin!” echoed Bjorn to the sea. “Do not close the gates of your hall tonight.”

They came from the water. At least a dozen draugr sloshing through sand and stone, blue and black skin like bruised pools of sap, came upon the shore. Asger swung his axe blindly as the stump of his shoulder rained red. The draugr trampled him in their march. From the water walked a draugr, tall as the Karvi was wide, with furs and skins of seaweed draped over its shoulders and the fletching of sunken arrows jutting from its chest.

Vali's blood boiled.

"I killed you. Back to Hel with you, Fenderoth." Vali crashed his shield into the giant, shards of wood and chips of green paint scattering to the wind. He laughed and hacked a frenzy into Fenderoth's legs, but the giant would not yield. A wave crashed over them. When Tarben looked again, the Karvi's captain was skewered high in the air by a pike, limp and flailing. Fenderoth stretched his gaping maw and bit, removing Vali's head from his shoulders. The remaining draugr fell upon Bjorn; black water crashing as he cursed the gods of the living and the dead.

Sven backed away until he bumped into the front of Tarben's shield.

"They come for you next," whispered Tarben.

Sven fell to the ice and pleaded.

"I've spilled no blood," he said. "They have no rights to me, I am innocent! Go back to the sea. I am blameless."

Tarben's eyes widened as he stared at the waning tide.

Has he spoke the truth? Do the gods see a pure heart where I thought none existed?

The water settled and the draugr withdrew, collapsing on the ice like melted sculptures. Southern winds whistled across calm waters as the Karvi gently kissed the blunted ice. The gulls argued again and the backs of seals could be seen surfacing near the shore. All was as it was before the men arrived.

Sven cackled, tears of joy streaming down his ruddy face.

"They heard me," he said. "I told you my hands were clean, Tarben. It's as you said, 'the draugr only seek the guilty.' "Now what do you have to say?" He stood and brushed the ice off his wares.

"I say the day is not over yet," said Tarben.

Why does he still live? Tarben thought as his shoulders cried out for relief. Sven sat in a bench opposite Tarben. For each stroke Sven took, Tarben took two. *The lazy bastard is too busy counting his coin between strokes.*

“Do you still think I had anything to do with the bones you found in your field?”

“I do.”

“You are not a very godly man then, Tarben Usvang. If you truly believed in the gods then you would not doubt me. My judgement has passed. Though, now that I think about it, maybe *you* put the bones in that field. You were quick to lay blame on all of us, but what about your blame? What have you been accused of that the Jarl saw fit for you to take part in this voyage?”

“Vali killed Fenderoth, which I know to be true. The twins took more than their fill, ignoring their share for the gods. Gunter, by your hands, put those bones in my field: all sons and daughters of Glera Syori. But I am at an impasse as to why you are still alive. Perhaps you have fooled the gods as you have fooled the Jarl.”

“Perhaps you will take matters into your own hands and try to kill *me* before we reach dry land,” Sven scoffed.

“I am not as bold as you, tiller.”

Sven stopped rowing and stood. He opened his furs and exposed his chest.

“Now is your chance, farmer. Maybe you came here to find guilt by murdering an innocent man? Come take your guilt, and may the draugr drag you down to the depths. What will you tell the Jarl when I am absent?”

“The Jarl did not send me here, the *seiðr* did.”

“So you are a holy man now? Why would the *seiðr* send a godless farmer to save the shores of Glera Syori?”

“Someone has to tell the tale of the night the water walked,” said Tarben.

A seal leapt from the sea and, becoming a draugr in mid-air, wrapped its corpse-like arms around Sven the tiller and pulled him into the depths.

S.H. Mansouri is a biologist and writer of all things fiction. He lives with the love of his life, Cymphonee, in sunny California.

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Shark Fighter

By MICHAEL TIERNEY

An underwater photographer finds himself alone in the water, dazed and bereft of his memories, after a trip to a tiger shark breeding ground with a mysterious native guide! Can he survive the fierce predator and mystic forces pitted against him?!

Old Caribe's weathered face was made even darker when silhouetted by the rising sun at his back. His lips twisted in an eerie smile.

"Men today have forgotten the many gods. These gods have not forgotten men. Disrespecting them still brings a price to pay."

"When trouble comes around, I'm the stink that brings the shovel." Despite his confident words, the diver knew he was lying to himself, lost in a jumbled daze of semiconscious dreams where the world tilted at impossible angles. He tried to grip the ground for stability, but the soil sifted through his fingers like water.

A sudden jolt roused him to reality.

Salt stung in his eyes and the taste of ocean permeated his mouth as he gulped a single breath in the abrupt instant before being dragged under water. Instinctively, one hand reached for the dive mask around his neck, while the other...

Hard, slimy sandpaper greeted his touch just before his body collided with something massive. Pulled sideways through the ocean with disconcerting speed that banged his tethered underwater camera against his jaw, he glimpsed the blurred image of muscular shark skin mottled by lines of fading yellow spots.

The nylon tether that was pulling him shredded, and he snapped free, tumbling through the water like a loose gear on a gyroscope. Clenching his eyes from the sting of the salt water in his mask, he kicked his flippers until his hamstrings ached and regained his balance, reminding himself to relax while he methodically found the emergency regulator on his vest. After several desperate breaths, he exhaled through his nose to clear the water out of his mask.

The diver was shocked to discover himself drifting inside a crimson cloud.

"Damn! I'm all over the place!" He thought in a panic, certain that shock kept him from feeling the pain. When he felt about for injuries, there were none.

The cloud of blood parted directly in front of him as a thick-bodied fifteen-foot tiger shark sailed past. The shark made one deliberate move in his direction and then abruptly turned to disappear into the deep blue, wagging its head in a shower of red particles.

His scream spit the regulator out of his mouth.

Carried by his buoyancy control vest, he bobbed back to the surface. He could not remember when he relocated his regulator, only the taste of salt in the back of his throat.

Time, reality, and the universe itself—all stopped as if the world had been reduced to only the sun burning painfully on the nape of his neck and the pounding of his heart, echoing like thunder in his ears. Focusing his eyes below, he breathed slow mechanical breaths until he remembered that his air tank was nearing empty and switched over to the snorkel.

The diver's mind stumbled with all other comprehension. He thought of watching his childhood home on fire and burning in shimmering embers. At the same moment, he accepted the knowledge that this memory never happened. He had forgotten his own identity.

Overwhelmed by terror, the diver expected to be crushed in a viselike grip of razor-sharp teeth at any moment, recalling stories of how tiger sharks terrorized the survivors of capsized boats by taking them one at a time over many days.

Leaking water into his mask to wash the creeping fog from the glass, the man diligently searched the illuminated periphery of his vision, watching for any movement in the shadows.

Eventually, he began having trouble concentrating and his mind wandered. The question of how he happened to be in his present predicament slowly crept into focus.

Just the day before he'd been safely aboard a catamaran dive boat and showing raw footage from his underwater documentary to the crew. That was when the local guide had arrived.

Old Caribe was a native with a small motor boat and a remarkable story about shark hole in the Gingerbread corals, where Tiger Sharks came to breed—an event never before caught on film. He had sun-blackened skin that looked tougher than a hundred-year-old leather coat, and his facial features were completely unrecognizable. Several crew members claimed that Old Caribe was the only living descendent of the ancient cannibal tribes from which the Caribbean originally drew its name.

Old Caribe had arrived right as the diver was showing footage of a crippled turtle being brought on deck to examine its missing right rear flipper. The next sequence had been back underwater and drew many vocal reactions when a tiger shark savagely attacked the turtle at the missing flipper and repeatedly bit deep inside the shell. The shark had darted away with a mouthful of intestines that continued to pull out like a long thread unraveling from a garment.

Old Caribe probably never saw any of the videos. The diver had been introduced to the old man as he had stood with one hand on the railing and the other holding back his shell necklace while vomiting into the sea. Old Caribe cracked a crude smile and complained about bad shellfish, assuring that he would be fine for their early morning excursion to the legendary tiger shark hole.

That was how the day of fear had started. By now, fear had been replaced by apathy.

Desperately fighting the ache in his brain, the diver was confused by a deeply felt instinct that suggested he abandon his fate to the flow of the ocean currents. In contrast to the weightlessness of the water, he felt simultaneously crushed by a burgeoning, ever-increasing mass. He imagined that he could see himself through other eyes that looked down from ever higher above, watching his body become a tiny speck growing smaller and smaller in a vastness of the turquoise blue seas.

He had the impulse to strike out in defiance, but the resistance of the water made his fists useless. That thought gave him an inspiration. He could pack his fists with the squares of lead weights threaded onto his belt.

The touch of emptiness around his waist reminded him that he was diving with his own personal, complete outfit of gear. He had always

traveled with his own regulator assembly and dive computer, plus a bulky buoyancy control vest with an integrated weight system that he usually left behind whenever doing chartered dives. Most tour guides preferred keeping the buoyancy control vests, already heavy with tanks and regulator assembly, separate from the weight belts. They balked at lifting the added weight from integrated bean bags when helping a diver gear up.

However, Old Caribe had encouraged him to bring all his gear along, promising, "Don't worry, Mon. I won't put any fish heads in your vest."

Then the diver remembered what was strapped on the inside of his left ankle and shook his head as he drew the knife, wondering how he could have forgotten. Although keenly sharpened, the six-inch blade was little defense against a tiger shark. But, in terms of confidence, it was a great trade up from a fist full of lead weights.

Other memories stirred. A gravity-like pulse pulled on the blood vessels inside his brain and created the sensation of walking on land, of airport hallways beneath his feet and the sound of footsteps echoing next to his.

Without warning, he almost recalled his name. Then memory failed again.

The pounding in the back of his brain and the beat of his heart synchronized, followed by an anger that roared within his blood like long strands of barbed wires being dragged through the insides of his veins. The diver instinctively knew that there was more stoking his growing rage than just the whole of the universe being against him. He embraced the heated emotion, sawing his teeth across the snorkel mouthpiece and realizing for the first time that he was suffering from starvation and thirst. Anger made his pulse stronger when it should have weakened. Every breath burned in his throat.

Impatient to be attacked, the diver began to splash his arms and legs and then clamped his legs together, inverting himself to dive down into the sea. Returning to the surface with a furious exhale to clear his snorkel, he repeated the move of a diving dolphin, again and again.

Knowing his strength would soon fail completely, the diver considered more drastic options that might attract an ocean predator.

When he positioned the knife to cut his wrist near to the bone, a cold shiver ran down his spine. In the reflection on the flat of the blade, he glimpsed a flash of gray behind him and turned as a specter of doom rose out of the deep blue, slicing through the undulating shafts of sunlight.

The sight of the tiger shark, with its pectoral fins down, back arched and jaws agape, sent a shiver of fear down his back. For some strange reason, he again noticed the hot sun on the back of his neck.

Drawing a deep breath and purging air from his buoyancy control vest, the diver spit the snorkel out and gritted the regulator between his teeth, committing himself to a bizarre dance of nightmare. Rolling backwards, he inverted himself in the water and swam directly towards the shark's teeth, feeling surprisingly calm in the certainty that this would be his last act in life but determined to duel with his killer to the very end. Confused by this aggressive behavior, the tiger shark darted away to circle at a distance.

If he could have spared the breath, he would have laughed. He tightened his grip on the knife and waved it at the shark. With the point of the blade he traced the beast's erratic movements through the water, occasionally motioning for it to come closer.

The shark cruised farther away.

This sight sparked other memories, recollections of other dive encounters with sharks. He recalled once chasing a group of six Caribbean reef sharks, trying for a head-on photo opportunity. Like wild dogs, the sharks scattered whenever he moved toward them. He eventually took his best close-up shots after learning to hang passively in the water.

Tucking his fins with knees bent, the diver tethered his underwater camera to his left wrist, held the knife close to his chest, and began to passively drift with the current. With a quick flip of its caudal fin, the ancient predator broke from circling and changed directions several quick times before accelerating straight at him.

The diver confidently thought fatherless obscenities in the shark's name as he raised the camera and flashed the strobe light into the beast's eyes. The tiger shark veered away no more than an arm's length away, its massive body dwarfing his own. He had been lucky.

Sharks either really liked electrical impulses, or they really hated them.

With negative buoyancy, the diver was continually dropping deeper as each breath of pressurized air became increasingly harder to draw. The tiger shark was a silhouette blocking the surface, intermittent light from the camera's strobe flashing on the carnivore's pale underside.

The beast was right where he wanted it as the air tank rattled dry. Letting the camera dangle, he pulled the emergency cord that unraveled the bottom lining of his vest and released all the weights at once. Suddenly buoyant, he thrust the knife above his head with a double-handed grip and kicked his fins like pistons, launching himself like a missile. He broke both his fin straps and the cardinal rule about exhaling when rising, holding that last gasp of expanding air inside his lungs for extra buoyancy.

His efforts had spectacular results as the knifepoint punched full to the hilt into the soft belly of the shark. Despite his double-handed grip, the startled reaction of the giant predator tore the blade out of his hands, but not until after the resulting cut ripped the belly of the beast open from gill to tail.

Enveloped by another crimson cloud, the sight of the gutted monster pleased him—at first. Then he saw flashes of colorful light bouncing in all directions off a single, multifaceted stone on a ring that spilled from the grisly mass pouring out of the animal's gut. He watched the sparkling lights as the jeweled ring spiraled downward, racing to land near his bean bags weights lying on a coral outcropping, right next to several severed fish heads.

He bobbed to the ocean surface. Without weights, the little air left in his vest was just enough to float him.

This time, his numb brain only noticed the heat on his neck when it was eased by nightfall that slowly engulfed him in total darkness.

...

"We're going down! We're going down! Please! Somebody help!"

The man heard the panicked cries and recognized the emergency radio broadcast as an experience from his past. He knew what would happen next. On cue, the desperate pilot shouted that his ship was

valued at a quarter-of-a-million dollars, as if that information would somehow bring impossible rescue from tricky reefs at low tide.

“Someone’s going to need to do a cleanup on Isle Nine,” joked one crew member of the dive boat.

“Two-Hundred and Fifty-Thousand Dollars is a really cheap boat compared to most luxury ships,” said the captain.

Knowing his wife would be upset by these callous remarks, the man turned to see her suddenly whisked away by an invisible whirlwind force, her outstretched arms imploring for help.

A sudden jolt roused the diver from the daze of semiconscious dreams and nightmares, as a strange sensation of sand dragging across the soles of his bare feet started his faculties turning again. His muscles still flexing from mentally chasing after his wife, the diver’s bleary eyes were confused by the thick fog that covered his face mask. Through streaks cleared by drops of condensation, he could barely discern the dancing rays of sunlight diffused through water.

A surging wave lifted him backwards and landed him sitting groggily in rapidly shifting sand and shallow water. Facing the ocean, he sat for a long while before finally turning around to discover that he was on a beach.

Spitting the snorkel out of a raw mouth, he winced in pain as sea water poured from swollen ear canals. He thought he was ripping flesh from bone while prying the scuba mask loose from the indentations in his skin.

There was a brief reward when a gentle breeze soothed his eyes, which quickly turned into his moment of greatest horror when he remembered— everything.

The dive at the tiger shark hole had been a complete bust. He and his wife had been unable to find the boat anchor afterwards and surfaced to discover all of their possessions floating away with the currents. Having heard no motor and seeing no sign of Old Caribe, they had assumed his boat must have sunk.

Even though they were tragically lost at sea, his wife had never lost faith in him or his confidence of rescue. Believing his promise to keep her safe, she had tethered herself to his side and was subsequently eaten alive.

The enormity of the entire universe fell on his head like a hammer pounding rail spikes into the back of his brain. As swiftly as the spikes had arrived, they were numbed by the thought of her parents. The memory of light reflecting off her wedding ring as it sank to the ocean floor was a pain too great for tears.

The diver gathered his feet and tried to escape the grip of the deep when a wave crashed against his back, and his world once again became small. There was only the shifting sand and ebbing tide that pulled at his legs. Gravity abandoned him when another rolling wave seized his body in a suffocating embrace. He thought of surrendering himself to the sea.

He thought heavenly angels had descended to collect him when avian wings suddenly fluttered above his head. With what felt like the weakest of efforts, his fingers clutched like claws at the foaming, slippery sand, and he slowly crawled free of the sea. Through gritted teeth he gasped what he would remember as the first breath of a new life.

"God!" He shouted so loudly that he thought his vocal cords would break. His tears felt saltier than the water.

"You have evolved," said a weary but familiar voice. Next to his beached motor boat, Old Caribe sat on a sand dune covered with broken egg shells. Around his feet a final clutch of tiny turtle hatchlings erupted from the sand and raced for the sea. He held up his turtle shell necklace. "Your fate was decided by the shark gods."

Even though it had been right in front of him the whole time, the realization that Old Caribe had intentionally stranded them at the shark hole hit as though the universe had turned upside down and the weight of the whole planet now pivoted on top of him. The diver's sudden, pulsing rage doubled with the realization that he had not even strength enough to stand.

The diver's initial instinct was to reply with cocky banter—"*Your shark god is dead, and now it's time for me to do a little cleanup on Isle Nine.*" But he no longer felt the need or the desire for such ostentatiousness. He could not have formed the words even if he wanted to. The only sound he could articulate was a question.

"Why?"

“That turtle you led to slaughter was more than just their mother.” Old Caribe began pushing his boat along behind the hatchlings as they swarmed into the frothing waves, hopping aboard the moment it was seized by the outgoing surf. He turned with a stare as flat and firm as the tone of his voice.

“You killed my God!”

Waving an oar at the hungry seagulls, the grizzled old Caribbean floated away into the distance. The flocking birds were visible for a longer time, but eventually they too faded from sight.

A Master certified scuba diver and amateur underwater photographer, Michael Tierney is best known for his science fiction series of Wild Stars comics and novels.

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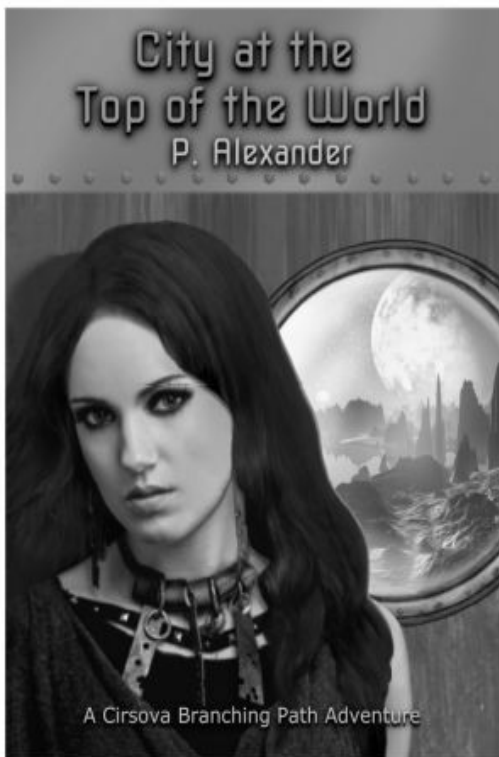


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By JAMES HUTCHINGS

John Carter finds himself in a harsh and desolate land populated by strange and inhuman creatures! He is taken captive by the Green Martians and despairs of ever seeing another like himself again until an airship crashes, shot down by his captors!

I awoke as from sleep in an ungainly heap
and, like Adam, unclothed and alone
yet no Eden was there, but a desert as bare
as the West where I'd fled from my home.

For a moment I thought that delirium brought
the uncanny events of the night
and perhaps I had lain, overwrought and half-sane
and come back to myself at first light.

I could barely suppose I had lost my own clothes
and I somehow obscured Jim's grave
but I saw I was wrong, for the mountains were gone
and my argument couldn't be saved.

I remembered with dread all the things that I'd said
and I wondered if God had declared
that because of my wrong I would have to live on
after no other mortal was spared.

And perhaps a new Flood or a taint in the blood
had wiped out all the Earth while I slept
so that I could atone with a lifetime alone.
And, believing my theory, I wept.

Then it also occurred that God may not have heard
and the truth may have been more mundane:
that I merely was lying unconscious and dying
while fever-dreams flashed through my brain.

Though each subsequent guess caused me greater distress
they were nothing to what I would see
for wherever I'd landed was far from abandoned

yet held not one human but me.

Over bare broken ground they made hardly a sound
as they moved on six powerful limbs.
There was no one at all less than twenty feet tall
and no face was not hateful and grim.

I attempted to flee. They were faster than me
and they ran me to ground in a mile.
They were nimble as hounds as they circled around
and they made not a noise all the while.

I had ranted at God. I had called him a fraud
I had dared him to come from above.
Now I swore to behave like a groveling slave
as I pleaded my loyalty and love.

It is true what they say: when a man is at bay
he remembers the whole of his life.
I remembered the day when I'd put on the gray
and each day of the following strife.

I remembered before the events of the war
and I had a most terrible thought
of the people that we had kept chained and unfree
of the souls we had auctioned and bought.

For the slave, black or brown, kept his eyes to the ground
and he put on humility's veil
but the face underneath, like a sword in its sheath
told who saw it the opposite tale.

There was never a slave, whether craven or brave
whether bonded to mansion or plough
had a face didn't show all the pain that they owe
like the faces that looked at me now.

The unparalleled face of an alien race
with no feature of commonplace kind
but each pupil-less eye, I could scarcely deny
brought an ominous thought to my mind:

That behind those black coals were the newly-housed souls
of black children and women and men
who had suffered and died under folk such as I
and perhaps this was Heaven for them.

But whatever my crime, it was not yet the time
for my soul's heavy debt to be paid
and perhaps each fell face hid a measure of grace
for their fangs and their talons were stayed.

But if they could forgive and allow me to live
they would not let me go on my way.
Not a one of them talked, but a gesture said, "Walk!"
and I saw naught to do but obey.

So they drove me along at the heart of the throng
never stopping for water or sleep
at my front and my back like a vigilant pack
herding one disobedient sheep.

At the end of our trek we arrived at the wreck
of a city, half-drowned by the sand
Though the doorways and stairs were my size and not theirs
it was no more a dwelling of Man.

I was greatly afraid, for now I was displayed
like a mouse in a city of cats.
Huge and silent they came, each exactly the same
as I shook like one facing the axe.

I was led by a score and out crept hundreds more
as the sun travelled low in the sky
and each monster took care to take time out to stare
at the alien beast that was I.

Soon the world blazed with gold, then it grew dark and cold
as the day had been boiling and bright
and the sands seemed serene as the face of a queen
and two crescent moons shone in the night.

As my captors, like me, lay among the debris
of a people unknown and long gone
I remembered the home from which I had been thrown
till I slept, and awoke with the dawn.

I had thought that the souls of our servants of old
lived again in a monstrous guise.
Given time to reflect I began to suspect
there was nothing behind those blank eyes.

For each mother would smile at the pain of her child
and each father, so too at his daughter

and the few that grew old, they were tortured tenfold
and died raving and pleading for water.

It is easily told how so few would grow old.
Though the desert was bitter and bleak
for each one that it claimed dozens more could be blamed
on the strong bringing death to the weak.

Now I still fail to see why these fiends let me be
but I felt small relief at the time
for my house and my bed were among the undead
and the world that I trod wasn't mine.

Thus my banishment went, and I may well have spent
all the rest of my life in this way.
Hope had left me—but then it came calling again
with the name Dejah Thoris one day.

I was watching anew the monotonous view.
vaguely thinking of plans of escape
when a bird met my eyes of such mountainous size
that I gasped and my jaw hung agape.

Then I saw that I erred, for it wasn't a bird
but some manner of ship of the air
and they labor in vain on the banks of the Seine
for no painting was ever as fair.

How a thing of such grace could be found in that place
I have naught of the wisdom to tell.
Are there vultures that nest on the Isle of the Blest?
Do the angels vacation in Hell?

As I hollered and waved and believed I was saved
on she sailed as if deafened and blind.
Shouting out for her pity I ran through the city
and cried, "Please don't leave me behind!"

Now my pleading grew wild and I wept like a child
or a slave who is under the lash
but the creatures who found me were now all around
hoping not to escape, but to smash.

In the hands of each one was some manner of gun
that they shot with an Indian's aim
and these weapons they bore built with alien lore
caused the timber to burst into flame.

So my battered heart broke as the ship bellowed smoke
and she split into two as she dived.
Pretty soon I could see naught but flames and debris
and just one of the crew had survived.

But that one was quite ample to once again trample
on all that I thought that I knew.
Though I'd bleakly resigned to forget my own kind
she was human as me or as you.

James Hutchings lives in Melbourne, Australia. He fights crime as Poetic Justice, but his day job is acting. You might know him by his stage-name 'Brad Pitt.' His work has appeared in Daily Science Fiction, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly and Wisdom Crieth Without among other markets. His ebook 'Ideas and Inspiration For Fantasy and Science Fiction Writers' is now available from Amazon, Smashwords, and DriveThruFiction. James blogs regularly at <http://www.apolitical.info/teleleli>.

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Images of the Goddess

By SCHUYLER HERNSTROM

The Abbot of Krixxis has had a vision of an ancient holy book to be found within the wreckage of a metal ship lost in the deadly Ikkzak Jungles; Plom, a young supplicant, must venture forth to face unimaginable peril in his quest for this priceless relic!

I

Devotees to the Goddess found life among infidels intolerable. The prophet Uniam claimed visions of a monastery in the Krixxis Mountains, high up and away from the pernicious distractions of nubile young village girls and world wise divorcés. The suggestion was well liked, and thus its divine provenance went unchallenged. The monks pooled their meager resources to purchase a load of timbers and secure the services of a guild of craftsmen. A decade later, the monks were well satisfied with their labors, even despite the tragic accident that sent Uniam plummeting to his death some years before. The monastery was a tumble of rectangles clinging to the mountain's face like a stack of books teetering on a crooked shelf. The site was completely inaccessible except by a basket lowered by rope and pulley.

The Devotees realized a fault in their scheme when the first few monks became infirm with old age. The order decided to purchase male infants from passing merchants and the nomads that aimlessly crossed the Plain of Ashes below. To raise capital they extracted blue ink from the piles of serave excrement that dotted the mountain side. The scheme was doubly clever; smeared with waste the monks were left unmolested by the soaring carnivores. The ink was of high quality and in constant demand. With their affairs in order, the senior monks could pursue their sacred iconographies and explore the full use of their minds in the service of the Goddess. The senior monks cultivated the ancient art of astral projection. On weeks-long spirit walks, the faithful searched high and low for representations of the

object of their worship, artifacts from a distant age where the Goddess herself walked the earth in the forms of countless avatars.

Thus it was that Plom, the son of nomads, spent the eighteenth anniversary of his ascension in the basket on the eastern face of the Krixxis, gathering excrement into a container secured to his back. His olive skin was weathered by the sun and wind that lashed the peaks, but his eyes were youthful and devious, a quality undiminished by the shaving of his eyebrows.

He gingerly removed a mountain goat's skull and spine from a fresh pile and shoveled the muck into his pack with the deftness of years of practice. The skull tumbled down the gravel slope, finally disappearing as it went over the cliff's edge. Plom shouted to his basket-brother, Fress.

"My quota is complete. How much more do you need?"

"Goddess' will, one or two more piles perhaps."

With Plom's assistance Fress' basket was filled and the pair made their descent. Below on the distant plains, Plom watched a nomad caravan cresting a line of low hills, gray green in the light of the second moon's rise. Outriders resting wicked bows on narrow hips circled the eight wheeled carts, guarding against predation by serave. The mounts, surly guhn, pecked at the ground as they ambled along. The faint sound of women singing was carried aloft by the chill wind.

Plom and Fress dumped their cargo into a vat then made ablutions under a fount of icy water. Yeelet, two years Plom's senior and assistant to the abbot, burst into the chamber.

"Finally, you two have returned! Hurry now! The abbot has called us to assembly. Great things are afoot!"

Plom and Fress gathered up their robes and sprinted through the gray stone halls after Yeelet.

The pair found a seat at a back pew, shoulder to shoulder with the other supplicants. Across a wide aisle, the senior monks sat in comfort. The abbot, who was paralyzed from the waist down from a fall and half blind, was carried to his chair below the form of the Goddess, sculpted in stone by Uniam's own hands and now shielded from the gaze of the lowly supplicants by a drape of red silk. A gong signaled the beginning of the audience. The congregation went to their knees. Plom stuck his sharp elbow into Fress' ribs. The youth

buckled, suppressing a cry. A searing pain erupted along Plom's shoulders. He turned to see Barefoot, so named for his stealth, brandishing his knotted lash, stern gaze fixed on Plom.

The abbot moved through the litany with a touch more haste than was typical. Prayers concluded, he addressed the gathering in a reedy voice.

"This evening I am happy to announce our collective dreams come to divine fruition. Brother From's soul returned this afternoon from his spirit walk to report the detection of an authentic tome of icons. This work, perfectly preserved through the eons, is the product of man's glorious past, when worship of the Goddess was taken for granted throughout the land."

The abbot raised his gnarled hands to quiet the growing murmurs of excitement. Still standing at the back, Barefoot could not contain himself. Voice trembling, he shouted.

"Blessed abbot, where lies this tome?" He gave himself a lash across the back for talking out of turn and waited breathlessly for the abbot's reply.

"The sacred folio lays 150 leagues to the south, across the Plains of Ash and at the heart of the Ikzak Jungles. It rests deep within the heart of an ancient vessel, a metal monster from the age when man traveled space by bending time. The journey will be long and hazardous. My deepest regret is that I am too old to seek this treasure myself. The robustness of youth is required. A supplicant will be chosen tomorrow. Go now to your dormitories, pray earnestly and rest well! Tomorrow we will see who has the honor of retrieving this article of incalculable value!"

When his fellow supplicants had finally drifted off to troubled sleep, Plom slipped out of his bunk and made for the refectory. He opened the simple lock with a bent fork he had stolen weeks earlier and entered the pantry. With a loaf of black bread stuffed into his robe, he stole back into the dormitory where Fress waited. They consumed their illicit supper sitting on a wide sill beneath the room's sole window, the third moon bathing their backs in cool light. Fress professed his gratitude and inevitably began to ponder the possibilities of the coming day.

“Who will they pick? We are the oldest of the third generation. Perhaps it will be us. The thought is terrifying.”

“I suppose. Though I often do wonder what life is like outside.”

A shiver went through Fress’ wiry frame. He whispered his fears.

“I certainly don’t. Nothing but uncouth, barbaric men and women mocking the Goddess with their profane immodesty. Bandits and hucksters, false priests and mad wizards. I should never like to see it. When I come of age and have mastered the scriptures, I will be initiated by the seniors and see the images of the Goddess with a pure mind and know true wisdom. Then when my soul leaves this world, I will go into her warm embrace for all eternity. None below can say that.”

Plom sighed. “You are right of course. Still...” The creaking hinges of the thick dormitory door sent the pair scurrying into their bunks. Plom feigned sleep for a time before fatigue overtook him. He dreamt he was a nomad, riding a guhn across the barren wastes, stopping to gaze openly at passing women, hazy forms of unknown dimension.

Plom woke late. He pulled on boots of thick felt and his worn coat and sprinted to the courtyard where the supplicants were assembled. Barefoot supervised the proceedings. With groans of disappointment and a few of relief, all the boys shorter than the big man’s shoulders were sent away to their normal duties. Twenty one candidates remained. Fress, the tallest of them all, was already pale with worry. Barefoot puffed out his chest.

“Among you unworthy lot, one will be chosen to seek the tome. The abbot supposes two qualities are needed of potential questers; you must be strong of body and of spirit. We will test your body now. Now! Sprint up the path, up to the overhang yonder! Grab a handful of the weeds that eke out a precariously existence there in the high winds and come back here! Now! Off! The test is begun!”

Tentatively at first, then with determination, the group set off up the slope. Legs and arms pumping, slipping in the treacherous shale, the group made their way up the hill with the best speed possible. Plom knew the slope like the back of his hand. His natural ineptitude in the scriptorium resulted in his assignment to gathering more than any of the other boys. He hung back, staying near the end of the pack as the leaders expended all their reserves pushing themselves toward the

overhang. The first had already disappeared behind a sharp curve in the path when Plom felt a burning pain explode in his calf. He hobbled along, cursing his luck. He rounded the bend as Fress and two other boys were beginning their descent.

There was a splash of blue light, and Plom found himself on his back, witless for a moment. Next to him lay Yun, a lanky, indolent youth, but apparently faster than Plom would have guessed. The boy was unconscious, receiving the worst of their collision. In his limp hand sat a tuft of weeds. Plom snatched up the thin stalks and leapt to his feet, sprinting down the path as best he could. His calf unknotted itself and he made good speed, controlling his slide down patches of loose shale rather than fighting it inefficiently as were the boys he quickly passed. Only Fress stayed ahead of him. Panting, he nearly ran into Barefoot's bulk as he reached the courtyard. Fress leaned against the wall, gasping for air. A few more boys hurled themselves through the open gate to look in disappointment at the growing crowd. The remaining contestants trickled in with much less enthusiasm. Barefoot patted Fress' heaving back.

"Fress is the victor! Plom, a close second." Fress winced. Barefoot corralled the top finishers to one side of the courtyard and dismissed the rest. The leaders refreshed themselves at the fount. Fress whispered, still slightly gasping.

"I was first. Goddess' mercy. Barefoot said to run, I ran! I should have thrown myself down and complained of cramp. But I couldn't."

"Maybe the Goddess favors you for this task."

Fress hissed, "I do not want it!"

"Perhaps the next trial will prove your undoing. There is hope, yet."

"I fear not. If we are tested on the scriptures then I will excel. No supplicant knows them as well as I."

Plom looked over his shoulder. Barefoot was occupied tending to the growing knot on Yun's temple.

"Perhaps you could not perform up to your abilities."

Fress replied in shock, "That would be lying! You would have me spend eternity in the cold fetid bowels of the Demon Maleis?"

Plom shrugged, "Surely you could be forgiven such a small infraction."

The lash found his shoulders, and Plom swallowed a curse. Barefoot laughed.

“Is talking permitted in the courtyard, Plom?”

Plom replied, “Surely not, Older Brother. Thank you for your guidance.”

The group filed into the scriptorium and seated themselves at wooden desks worn smooth with use. Plom felt his ill-defined hopes sinking. Here in this room he had mastered the basic alphabet and two syllabaries, but the rote memorization required of all supplicants had proved elusive. He was confident in the Invocation and the first three rites, but the Aphorisms and the Ministration typically gave him much difficulty. He looked over at Fress. Sweat was beading at his temples.

The supplicants stood as the abbot was carried into the room. Once seated, he dismissed his aides and bade the young men sit.

“Brother Thulo tells me you boys are hale of body. Now we will see how well you know the teachings. We cannot send young men into the wild without ensuring their character first. Whoever is chosen will face dangers and temptations the likes of which you cannot imagine. So, I now require that each of you first write the Ministration from memory, as this will be your single comfort out in the wild. Then I wish you each to compose a paragraph, juxtaposing Rennum’s commentary on the Goddess’ Grace against Milnim’s commentary on the fallen nature of the world.”

Plom’s shoulders sunk. With luck he may recall the Ministration in exactitude, but he had only a foggy memory of either Rennum or Milnim. Parchment, pens and ink were distributed. Plom set to as best he could. Next to him Fress worked feverishly, eyes misting with tears. A gong sounded in the distance. They were missing lunch.

The afternoon wore on. Plom produced what he adjudged a fair copy of the Ministration. His subsequent paragraph was weak, drawing ill-formed conclusions from a hazy memory of the two authors. It would not do. Plom sighed and leaned back. He stole a glance at Fress’ parchment. In a confident hand the youth had filled the long sheet to capacity. With a small moan, Fress answered the abbot’s call to sign the work and pass it forward. Plom watched as his friend’s pen moved slowly from ink jar to the parchment. He glanced

over his shoulder. Barefoot was gone. Had he left for the refectory? To relieve himself? Plom couldn't know. He acted swiftly, seizing the collar of Fress' tunic and head butting his friend violently. Fress' eyes rolled back into his head, and he fell to the floor with a crash. Plom hurriedly signed his name to Fress' parchment and then spoke.

"Benevolent Abbot, call for help! Supplicant Fress is overcome!"

II

Dawn the next day saw Plom sitting in the basket as the rope was played out, bringing him closer and closer to the world below the mountain. Above the cliff's edge, he could just barely make out a line of bald heads. The senior monks peered down, waving fond goodbyes.

The supplicants' duties barred them from watching Plom's descent. They had made their farewells the night before. Fress had barely spoken. Besides his throbbing headache, the relief of not being chosen had rendered him glossy eyed and speechless.

The basket landed gently on the ground. Plom grasped the rim and gingerly climbed over, feeling the hard earth meet his booted feet. His body trembled.

The basket began its ascent, and Plom resisted the urge to leap back inside. He scanned the barren horizon and set off on shaky steps. The monastery receded in the distance. There his teachers and fellow supplicants went about the business of the day. Plom was alone.

He walked for hours, burdened with a heavy sense of unreality. The young supplicant's mind alternated between abject fear and the terrifying ecstasy of complete freedom. The sun and first moon moved in the sky, one sinking, the other rising. Plom's heart began to pound as an irregular chorus of sound grew slowly in volume. From beyond a line of low hills, the clucking of guhn and the snorts of giant mammot could now clearly be heard. As he came closer he could make out an occasional shout or boisterous laugh. Over and over the abbot's warning echoed in his mind. Avoid the nomads at all cost.

Plom stopped at the base of a hill, seeking shelter behind a large smooth boulder. He leaned back, panting, trying desperately to control a growing wave of panic. His mind went through the verses of

the Ministration, cursing as he stumbled over complex stanzas. The exercise seemed to work. As the sun fully set, he wrapped himself in a wool blanket and fell asleep, passing a mercifully dreamless night.

The supplicant woke suddenly. He imagined Fress stood above him, shrieking. When the fog was lifted from his eyes, Plom realized he was mistaken. It was a young nomad woman, screaming in abject terror. He scrambled backwards, steadying himself against the boulder. The woman ran up the hill, the colored tassels of her braids trailing in the wind. Plom realized he had been screaming too. He composed himself, leaning against the cool rock and listening. Only the intermittent sounds of the pack and riding beasts came from over the hill. Plom's curiosity soon triumphed over his fear and disorientation.

He crawled on his belly up the gentle slope. At the crest he peered into the camp. A dozen tents atop gaudily painted carts ringed a fire pit. A few mamots idled, lazily lifting great clots of brown grass into their mouths with nimble trunks. On the other side of the camp, guhn sat sleeping, bound by chains to thick stakes pounded into the dusty ground. At the foot of the hill sat a heavy iron cage on large rubber wheels. Inside, a man stood grasping the bars and looking this way and that. There was no sign of the nomads.

Plom stood and walked down the hill on nervous steps. The man in the cage noticed his approach. His deep voice rang out in the ominous silence. He spoke the imperial tongue with a clipped accent.

"Are you the ghask they fear? Keep your distance! Do not be fooled by my apparent discomfiture! I am a powerful wizard!"

Plom stopped in his tracks. The man sized him up. The fear written on his strong face melted away.

"You are no ghask. But I can't place you. You have a nomad's face but no clan cuts their hair so short. Come here, quickly!"

"I came from the monastery. I am on a quest to recover a book of holy icons depicting the Goddess."

"How interesting! I wish to hear all about this quest. In the meantime though, I need to ask a small favor."

Plom studied the man. His clothes were strange. Perhaps once they had been fine, but now his loose shirt of white silk was stained and torn, and his leather trousers were worn at the knees. Above high

cheekbones, a piercing blue eye stared earnestly. The left socket was completely empty. A touse of dark hair stirred in the light breeze. The man grimaced with impatience.

“Quickly now, boy! We don’t know when the nomads will return. They fled up that hill across the camp, screaming of a ghask, a rootless soul out for vengeance. Soon their courage will return. We must seize the moment!”

“Are you a nomad?”

The man clasped his hands together in supplication. “I am no nomad! Please, you must hurry!”

“What would you have me do?”

“Run to the biggest tent. Somewhere inside you will find a cache of valuables, coins, gems, et cetera. Find me a blue orb, fits in the palm of your hand. Look also for a sword and belt. A thin, straight blade, not like their tulwars—hurry now!”

Plom began walking toward the tent indicated. At the man’s urging he broke into a jog. The tent was dark inside and smelled of incense and sour milk. He stared at an assortment of strange objects; their purpose he could not guess. The light from the open flap shone on a pile of blankets on top of which sat the orb. It was a pretty thing, sky blue shot through with smoky bands of gray and white that moved in slow swirls. He picked it up and jogged back to the cage.

“Yes! That’s it! Hand it here, boy. Excellent work. I knew you were a young man of character.”

The man wiped the orb clean with a handful of his shirt. He craned his neck back and, with obvious discomfort, forced the orb into his empty eye socket.

“Miraculous! Still a bit of charge. Stand back, boy.”

Plom did as instructed. A beam of white heat shot from the blue orb, exploding the crude padlock. The man burst from the cage and ran towards the large tent. He emerged seconds later, a water skin slung on his back and a belt bearing sword and scabbard in his hand.

“With alacrity, my boy! We must make good our escape!”

The camp receded in the distance as morning gave way to noon, the sun reaching its zenith with the shadow of the sixth moon in tow. The pair’s speed was hampered somewhat by Plom’s inability to ride. He wrapped his arms around the guhn’s neck and buried his face in

the rancid feathers. The man brought his mount to heel and turned. He covered his good eye and peered in the distance towards the camp with the apparent aid of the blue orb.

“Ha! Just now they return. If they set off at once they could not likely catch us. We are safe—as safe as anyone can be on the steppe. I must properly thank you, my boy. My name is Drur. I am a fencer and wizard, slayer of Olg Thggop and Bearer of the Blue Orb. I owe you my life.” Drur bowed gracefully in the saddle.

Plom could not return the gesture. He feared at any moment to fall from the guhn. He did not know what to make of the man. Here before him was a specimen from countless lectures at the monastery. The man was loquacious and handsome—no doubt an egomaniac likely to defile innocent women. On the other hand, Plom had been instructed to secure the services of one such as him to aid in his quest. The man already felt himself in Plom’s debt. It seemed the Goddess had ordained their meeting.

“I need your help.”

“Drur is at your service, young man! I swear now on the Blue Orb to render all assistance that I can in the service of your errand. You had mentioned a book, correct?”

Plom nodded.

“Now, where may this book be found? There are expansive libraries in Zantyum, perhaps 50 leagues from here. The bazaars at Tung Sha are said to contain anything a heart could desire, a mere 30 leagues east of here, as luck would have it.”

“The book lies in the heart of the Ikzak Jungle.”

Drur frowned. “Are you sure? The curio shops of Minniepe boast many arcane volumes on their dusty shelves. Perhaps there, nestled amidst the charming cafes?”

“No. It is in the jungle. Brother From found it during a spirit walk.”

The wizard’s shoulders sagged. “Well. As I said, I would be happy to escort you to the edge of the Ikzak and prepare you with sage advice before you enter. A former captain of mine once crossed...” Drur suddenly screamed in pain. He clutched his face and reeled back in the saddle. He continued, voice twisted with pain, “We will go together! I will enter the Ikzak with him! Enough!” As suddenly as it had come, the pain had apparently receded. He smiled weakly.

“The Blue Orb insists on exactitude, especially when an oath has been sworn in its name. It can be somewhat tiresome. How are you called, young man?”

“My name is Plom.”

The steppe seemed to swallow distance. After hours of riding, the sharp peaks of the Krixxis seemed only as far away as when they had started. The pair shared a supper of black bread in the saddle as Drur told the sordid tale of his capture by the nomads. Plom understood little. From what he could make out, the wizard had been tricked by a caravan master and sold to the nomads. Somehow a woman had been involved. Plom whispered the Invocation to himself while Drur went into detail regarding the abundant charms that had caused him to so unwisely drop his guard. The abbot had warned against the frank immorality he would encounter. Plom confessed to himself a secret curiosity regarding such matters at the time. But now that it confronted him he felt uneasy. His reverie was broken by a question from Drur.

“So, tell me about this monastery you call home.”

Plom shrugged. “I am a supplicant at the Retreat of the Devotees of the Goddess. I live there with my basket brothers and gather excrement from the mountainside which we process into indigo. Every third day I spend in study and contemplation.”

“Ah, the odor surrounding your person is explained. So what are the tenants of this creed you and yours follow?”

“The details are forbidden to outsiders.”

“A pity. The sun drops low. I think we best make camp.”

They halted their mounts as the last rays disappeared behind the distant peaks. Plom gingerly lowered himself to the ground, sore and chafed from the day’s riding. At Drur’s instruction he pounded stakes into the ground to tether the guhn. Drur whispered to himself as he drew a wide circle around their makeshift camp with the toe of his boot. Satisfied with his efforts, the wizard removed the tackle from the guhn and unfolded the saddle blankets. The fourth moon, a disc of eerie blue, was rising in the north. Drur was heartened by the view.

“Excellent! The Blue Orb will drink its fill tonight. Gods of Wind and Rain have mercy on any nomad that accosts us tomorrow.”

Plom lay on the hard ground, marveling at the assortment of stars visible in the cloudless night. It was only the second night of his quest and he had seen many wonders—the open steppe, a nomad camp, a woman. And a mad, unintelligible wizard was his ally. Fatigue quieted his mind and he drifted off.

Morning brought a rude surprise. Lined along the circumference of Drur's ward, a party of nomads stood, weapons drawn. Plom nudged the wizard into reluctant wakefulness. Drur rubbed sleep from his eyes and took stock of the situation. The nomad captain stood grinning, arms folded across the lacquered squares of his ochre colored breastplate, fashioned from the rigid plates of a giant centipede.

Drur spat in frustration. "Well, isn't this just fantastic!" He addressed the nomad captain. "Ulker! I was given to believe the children of the steppe do not travel at night."

The wizened nomad answered. "As you can see, exceptions are made in unique circumstances. Be so good as to dissolve your ward so that I may kill you and the ghask quickly and have the rest of the day at my disposal."

"I am afraid I cannot. This life contains too many amusing distractions for me to relinquish it so cavalierly. The ward will be inviolable for days. And when it drops, my orb will incinerate all that come near."

Ulker replied, "We have you completely surrounded. Our shaman will nullify much of your orb. And even if one or two of us fall, the rest will remain to slaughter you." The shaman shook a necklace of human bones and hissed through sharpened teeth to emphasize the point.

Drur knew the nomad leader was largely correct. A change of tack was in order.

"Are you so quick to kill one of your own blood? This harmless monk is of your people. I am sworn to assist him in his quest for a treasure of immense value. Think of the cosmic goodwill you will accrue by sending us on our way! It would atone for the dozens of ill deeds you commit on a weekly basis. I would even consider forgiving you the outrage of kidnapping me in the first place. Such benevolence!"

Ulker opened his mouth to reply when he was interrupted by a lieutenant pulling on his leather sleeve. The pair were joined by other nomads of rank and stepped away from edge of the ward, conversing in the agglutinative tongue of the steppe peoples. The group continued an animated discussion for some time before Ulker turned back to face Drur.

“Firstly, do not speak to me of the strange one. He is a ghask. To speak of him or to him is to risk eternal damnation. Now, tell me what is this treasure you seek?”

Plom started to answer until interrupted by a short kick by Drur. The wizard continued.

“It is a book of inestimable value. This massive tome boasts gilded, gem encrusted covers between which nest countless beatific images of a Goddess! All who look upon the book are forever blessed. City-folk will pay hoards of coin just for a glance!”

Ulker stroked his long goatee. “And you know where this book is to be found?”

“I do indeed.”

“Then I will forestall the pleasure of killing long enough to extract this information. Unless you wish to save us all the time and simply tell me.”

“We have circled back around to our initial positions. What you are forgetting, fell warrior of the barren steppe, is that before any attempt to torture me gets underway, I can simply snuff out my own life with aid of the orb.”

Negotiations began in earnest. All manner of arrangements were proposed, including a marriage between Drur and a member of the tribe in order to rectify the pervasive lack of trust between the two parties. Initially the entire troupe of nomads intended to join Plom’s quest until Drur hinted that the goal lay within the Ikzak jungles. Finally a suitable arrangement was reached. Drur and Plom would be joined in their quest by a solitary nomad representing Ulker’s interests. The trio would bring the tome back to the nomad camp where it would be held until the monks could ransom it with their massive wealth. The nomads believed the devotees to be in possession of a great hoard of coin and gold, and Drur did nothing to convince them otherwise. For a fact he did not know if it was true.

During the heated deliberations, Plom meekly attempted to remonstrate on behalf of the monastery but was studiously ignored by the nomads. He sat sulking on a saddle while Ulker and Drur made dire oaths to seal the pact. The two men parted with wry smiles, each believing himself in possession of the better part of the bargain. The band of nomads kicked their mounts into a run, eliciting squawks of protest and raising a cloud of dust. One nomad remained. She nudged her mount to face Drur.

“I am Sihma. Attempt betrayal at your peril, ridiculous outlander. I can put an arrow into that orb from 200 paces.”

Drur bowed to the young woman. “I am Drur, and charmed to make your acquaintance. This is my associate, Plom, a religious scholar of unknown abilities.”

Plom was silent. His rough hands covered his eyes. He had already seen a woman yesterday, but only for a fleeting moment. But this warrior woman lingered before him. His uncovered eyes could gaze dangerously long. The abbot had warned him that a certain degree of indecency was perhaps inevitable out in the world. He peeked through his fingers. Sihma stared at him with a puzzled expression.

She addressed Drur. “Is something wrong with him?”

The wizard was hitching the saddle to his guhn and did not bother to look up.

“I do not know.”

The trio made good time as Plom’s skill in the saddle improved. Drur angled their course southwest. Sihma protested. Drur explained no trek through the Ikzak was possible without a day or two of rest and refitting in Shkan, a city built on the banks of the winding Monoga. The wide river flowed eventually into the very heart of the jungle. In Shkan exotic lumber from the Ikzak was traded at a premium and goods from upriver were purchased with the spoils. Drur described its tall orange towers and comfortable inns in wistful tones. After confiscating Plom’s purse of coin, Drur declared their budget more than capable of hiring a craft to take them downriver, deep into the Ikzak. Sihma grudgingly accepted Drur’s plan.

They rode on. Drur attempted to enliven the bleak journey across the wastes with anecdotes from his numerous escapades. Sihma

listened in sullen silence, interjecting occasionally with a snort or sharp laugh to call into question the veracity of Drur's tales. The wizard haughtily denied taking any liberties with the truth. Plom did his best to follow the stories. The youth's piqued interest was mollified by an inability to understand most of what was being said. He found himself wondering what was happening at the monastery in his absence. Plom laughed to himself. The routine of the monastery was doubtlessly the same as it was only a few days ago when he left. He looked up at the sky and down across the humbling expanse of the plain. He saw his companions' backs swaying with the rhythm of the guhn's stride as they argued. Here were stimuli of kind not found in the monastery. Sihma's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"And what are you laughing at?"

Plom stiffened, startled at the address. He met her almond eyes for a moment and then reflexively covered his own.

"Oh, there he goes again."

III

The remainder of their time on the steppe fell into a routine. They rode all day, stopping only as the sun began to dip. Plom and Drur would make camp as Sihma hunted. She would return with long centipedes hanging limply in either hand. These would be cooked over a small fire of dried dung and set aside. Overnight, organs liquefied by the fire's heat would congeal into a gelatinous substance that constituted their morning meal. As they ate Drur would wax nostalgic, recounting the most memorable meals of his itinerant life. He had been born into a respectable family of artisans in old Venitio, solid middle class stock, but had known deprivation as a young wizard's apprentice. The rough years of his tutelage fostered an ambition to become intimate with all the finer things life had to offer. Gradually Sihma permitted herself to laugh at Drur's most outlandish comments.

As the Krixxis shrank behind them, the land became less arid. The barren plains became dotted with green grass and low shrubs as the trio neared the end of the steppe. On the afternoon of the fifth day, the towers of Shkan could be seen in the distance. Plom grew pensive. Drur turned in the saddle.

“Does the city frighten you? Despite its many comforts, it is indeed a notoriously cruel place.”

Plom shook his head. “I had not been frightened by it. Now I am. But I am troubled by something else.”

After much cajoling, Plom revealed his aggravation. Hair was sprouting all over his body, concentrating especially in the areas in which sin was incubated. The young man shifted uncomfortably in the saddle.

Drur expounded his theory. “Your body is undergoing changes instigated by simple biology. That curious metallic flavor present in the bread you carried is probably responsible for delaying these changes. I noted a certain listless quality in myself after consuming it those few days. Now that the supply is exhausted, nature is pursuing its normal course without further impediment.”

“To what end?”

Drur raised an eyebrow. “To make you capable of reproduction. So that the human race may continue weaving its rich tapestry long past the time when we are gone to the Realm of Death.”

Plom shook his head angrily. “You speak nonsense.”

“So I am frequently told. But wait and see, young man.”

Up ahead, Sihma waved to the pair. They kicked their mounts to a trot and met her at the top of a long gentle slope. The wide Monaga lay before them, flowing calmly to meet Shkan, now only a day’s ride away. Its towers of baked brick stood silent guard over the end of the steppe and the beginning of civilization. The third and fourth moon, faint discs of green and blue, hung in the clear sky above the sprawling city. In the distance, a blue skinned boatman aboard a two-masted barge waved hello to the strange group.

Plom slept fitfully in their makeshift camp. The light of the third moon found him crawling to lie next to Drur. He nudged the wizard awake.

“I have questions.”

“Gods of wind and rain, why do you wake me at this hour?”

“I can’t sleep.”

Drur sighed. “What is it you wish to know?”

There in the darkness along the river bank, Drur attempted to explain human reproduction to an uneasy and incredulous Plom. The

wizard laid out the facts as simply as he could. Plom countered with arguments gleaned from his studies, wishing for the second time in his life that he had paid closer attention to the senior monks. Drur calmly refuted the young man's assertions before falling back into restful sleep. Plom crawled back to his blankets and lay awake a while before drifting off.

Plom rose with difficulty. Drur was at work with his poniard, freeing their morning meal from its fire-blackened shell.

"I believe Sihma is refreshing herself at the river's edge. Be so good as to let her know our breakfast is ready. With the city close at hand, I am impatient."

Plom made for the river bank, legs heavy with sleep. He passed a thicket of brambles and ducked under low trees to find himself at the muddy bank. He looked right and left, seeing no one. There was movement in the water suddenly. Sihma's head and shoulders rose from underneath the placid water. She walked into the shallows, every step exposing more of her body. Plom watched as her pert breasts broke the surface, round and glistening. Her trim torso followed, and then finally her round hips tapering into muscular thighs. He stared agape at the delicate mound between her legs. Apparently at least part of Drur's information was correct. He felt his heart beating hard in his chest. The water ran from her long black hair, following every curve and niche down to her feet. She stopped and placed her hands on her hips. Plom looked to her face and realized she was staring at him, annoyed.

"See enough, virgin?"

He bolted, sprinting down the bank.

Around and under low trees, through brambles and thickets he ran. Images of Sihma's body competed with the stern face of the abbot in his mind's eye. He felt at any moment Barefoot's lash might rip across his back. But as his legs grew tired a curious calm overtook him.

He ordered his thoughts. The world was larger than the monastery. Many more people, including the world's women, lived outside its craggy fastness. He could not so easily jettison what the monks had taught him. But nor could he deny that the larger world was a reality, one which he now occupied. He was on a quest, burdened with a sacred duty. If accommodating this world and its immodest ways was

necessary he had only one choice. Plom stopped finally, turning resignedly to return to the camp. He permitted himself a smile. If the mad wizard was correct, then Sihma's glorious and confusing nudity was only one small part of the vast, indecent pageant of human existence.

A voice rang out.

"What do we have here?"

The speaker was a burly man dressed in loose trousers and a simple jerkin. A heavy dagger hung from his ample hip. Hoop earrings swung jauntily as he turned to address his comrade emerging from a thicket with an armful of deadfall. The man looked at Plom with a start.

"Dear Jurlo, I do not know. What strange sort of young man is this, wandering the north bank alone?"

The man laid the wood aside and unhooked a club from his belt. He was thin and rangy, sporting identical earrings as his comrade.

The burly man, Jurlo, scratched his chin. "Strange indeed. Where are you from, boy?"

The woods caught in Plom's throat. He stumbled backwards, mumbling inanely.

"Speak up, boy!"

Plom spoke, barely above a whisper, "I am from the monastery."

"The monastery? Where?" Plom pointed weakly to the north.

"In the steppe? Jurlo, have you ever heard of any such thing?"

"Indeed not, Mister Malk. And during my wayward youth I crossed the whole of it with a caravan."

Plom looked over his shoulder, hoping to see Drur or Simha advancing this way.

Malk spoke. "Curious. If I may essay a theory, I believe this young man is a mental defective."

"I believe you are correct. It would be cruel to leave him wandering thus. And I think the hold has room for one more."

"There always is."

With that the rangy man lunged forward. The club caught Plom on the side of his head. The youth collapsed in a heap, the sound of laughter drowned out by the ringing in his ears.

First there was the sound of wood creaking then a sense of gentle motion. Plom's eyes opened to a dim scene. Around him individuals of many descriptions lay in attitudes of exhausted despair. There were six women of varying ages and four men, all bound in chains. In the far corner sat a creature the likes of which Plom had never seen. He stared openly.

A middle aged women chained next to him anticipated his question. She brushed back locks of her unwashed hair.

"Fear not. That is only an insect man from far Dardilis. He is harmless unless affronted."

The sound of his own voice thundered through Plom's injured head. "Where am I?"

"You are on a barge carrying slaves bound for the markets of Shkan." She leaned over him and mopped his forehead with a wet rag.

"I am a slave?"

A broad shouldered man, face spotted with painful bruises, spoke.

"You are indeed, young man. If you have a thought to escape, I recommend more caution than I showed yesterday." He shifted painfully. "It's likely the pits for most of us—myself, most certainly. We will be made to fight each other or torn apart by hungry throk for the amusement of the people of Shkan. You have never heard of the pits?"

Plom shook his head no. He inspected the hold, a narrow space accessible only by a trapdoor to the main deck. Behind the group, crates were stacked from deck to ceiling. Light from the grate illuminated a sad patch of damp wood. Plom leaned back. His mind wrestled with his predicament, finding no way to comprehend this turn of fortune.

After a damp and uncomfortable night, the barge docked at its destination. The sounds of activity along the quays grew in volume as they approached. With a creak the trapdoor was flung open, the light and air of the outside met by the quiet weeping of the slaves. Plom was lifted roughly from the hold and stood on the deck, squinting in the sunlight. The supplicant gasped as his vision adjusted. Around him was an astounding variety of men, women, and strange humanoids from all corners of the globe. Under the intermittent

shadows of the tall towers, all manner of activities, urgent and languid, played out along the quay. Jurlo made fast the slaves' chains to one another, and the group was marched toward the market. Plom was stupefied as his senses fought to process the flood of input. There was the stench of the pier and the savory odor of spices. A group of men in baggy trousers shouldered great sacks of wheat on their tanned backs. Two insect men conversed with a series of loud clicks and chirps. An idol to the river god sat fat and wreathed in orange flowers as a boatman lit a stick of incense at its base.

The group trudged across a wide piazza toward the slavers' market where a few merchants haggled furiously with a score of slavers. The bruised man nudged Plom's shoulder, pointing meekly to a passel of men in black livery. Their tunics bore the standard of a throk rampart on a field of blood red.

"There are the pit masters, buying up the stocks. We shall be dead in a few days. Gods, give me the grace to accept it."

Plom's heart sank.

IV

Drur and Sihma drove the guhn as hard as they dared toward Shkan's looming towers, trailing Plom's mount behind on a tether. The morning had been spent in a fruitless search for the missing supplicant. Sihma finally stumbled across a series of tracks and marks which enabled her to deduce much of what had happened. Drur's knowledge filled in the remaining blanks. The tracks of two men met Plom's. Then drag marks led to where a boat had been pulled up on the bank. Plom had doubtlessly been waylaid and was en route to the slavers' market. By his inexpert calculations Drur figured a barge moving downriver would likely reach the docks several hours before he and Simha would, hampered by the uneven terrain. The wizard cursed himself for letting the young man out of his sight. Simha was furious but sheepishly refused to relate the circumstances that led to Plom's panicked flight. The particulars did not matter. Drur had sworn an oath on the Blue Orb, and the young supplicant must be located. With any luck the barge would be delayed or its business drawn out, and the two seekers would reach the slave markets at the same time as Plom. They rode all night.

Dawn saw the city gates a stone's throw away, manned by two bored sentries. The north gate was used for the irregular caravans or odd travelers from the steppe such as Drur and Sihma. The two were admitted quickly after paying a small fee. Drur made inquiries and was distraught to learn the slavers' market was several districts away, distant from the more desirable neighborhoods bordering the north wall. The pair angled their guhn onto the main thoroughfare, soon teeming with morning traffic. Drur cursed, standing often in the saddle to peer above the throng of porters and carts that jammed the wide road. Chaos reigned; there was no apparent system or rules to guide the meandering users. Sihma kicked out at any individual or beast that came too close. Drur attempted to pacify her.

"My dear, please adjust to these close quarters and accept the inevitable before you eventually strike a person of importance."

"It is unnerving. So many people crammed into such a small place."

Drur tapped nervously on his thigh as they slowly made their way to the slavers' market.

By late afternoon the market was still doing a brisk business. Drur and Sihma hitched their mounts to a post and picked their way through the crowd. Plom was nowhere to be seen. The wizard became increasingly desperate. Sihma scowled, constantly laying a hand on her bow in its case as it brushed up against passersby. Finally the pair sat on one of the benches lining the piazza. The traffic slowed as no more barges were docked. The sun sank low. Drur made his fears known.

"We likely missed him. He will be torn to pieces in the pits."

Sihma shrugged her shoulders. "So much for the treasure. You do not know where it is precisely?"

"No, I do not. And the Blue Orb's limited intellect will only comprehend that my oath goes unfulfilled. Perhaps it will better divine the circumstances and excuse me from my obligation. Or perhaps it will become vexed and boil my brain."

"That's unfortunate. I will have to return empty handed and endure censure from my tribe. This will diminish my standing considerably. To complicate things further, Ulker commanded I return with your head in lieu of treasure."

“I suspected as much. It’s only sporting to warn you that I will endeavor to kill you first. And in a contest where I am aware of your intent, the odds favor me and the orb.”

“If I read things correctly, this setting is inappropriate for open murder, is it not?”

“You are a quick study. Here the forces of the state will come down hard on an open display of violence.”

Simha pushed her dagger back fully into its decorative sheath. She shot the wizard a stern glance. “It occurs to me now what a disappointment you are.”

Drur was wounded. “Indeed? What would you have me do? Young Plom is gone. He is being led right now to a cell where he will spend his last days lonely and confused until his life is snuffed out in the games. We are powerless to do anything about it, short of staging some insane, suicidal stunt to liberate him from captivity.”

“You have quit before even starting! Surely you can think of something! I am too far out of my element, I must admit. But you boasted of a score of adventures against similar odds. Was someone else doing the thinking, the planning that enabled you to survive these escapades?”

Drur swore, striking the bench with his palms. He stood to his full height and tensed.

“Gods of Wind and Rain, you are right. I gave myself over to despair too quickly. It isn’t like me. I blame the neutering chemicals in the boy’s accursed bread. Now, we need intelligence, and quickly. We must find when these barbaric games are to take place. We must find information on the facility in which they are staged. I have visited this city twice before but never had the stomach to attend. And I need new clothes. You need a less conspicuous ensemble as we go about our business.” Drur retrieved Plom’s purse of coin from his belt. “Come, let us outfit ourselves, and then a decent meal, by the gods. This formidable problem will shrink demonstrably with a bellyful of lean steak and a few glasses of wine to sustain us.”

Sihma rose, grinning, and slapped the wizard across his broad shoulders. The two set off toward the markets.

After a short argument Sihma relented and used the provided utensils for the remainder of their meal. The last hours had seen

much accomplished. Drur wore a new silk shirt and trousers of tight velvet in a deep green. The tailor had assured him that within Shkan the ensemble would communicate the cavalier élan that reflected Drur's character. Sihma wore a gown of satin, colored a deep mauve that complemented her olive skin. The effect was alluring despite her obvious discomfort.

"How can I fight in these clothes? My bosom threatens escape at any moment." She talked with her mouth full, punctuating her remark with a tug of her tight bodice."

Drur swallowed the last of his wine, pausing to savor it. "I am sure when the time comes you will perform up to standard. We must blend in with the populace here. Our inquiries revealed only the time of the games, two days hence. Information about the pens is closely guarded. To inquire more seriously might alert suspicions. Thus, our planning is shaped. We will have to strike in public, at great risk, and flee immediately through crowds of confused and possibly enraged spectators. A nomad princess of savage beauty would be too memorable. Now you are just another pretty face."

Sihma belched. She covered her mouth, suppressing laughter.

"I am no princess."

The arena in which the gladiatorial games and executions took place was a wide, three story structure of the same orange brick as the rest of the city. While not in use, the arcing terraces were open to the public. Drur and Sihma strolled the aisles bedecked in their new finery, winding their way around knots of young people lounging and larger groups of old men playing a game with small squares of baked clay embossed with complicated glyphs. Bold stratagems were heralded by the echoing hard clack of the tile against bench.

The tiled stone floor of the arena proper was checkered with empty post holes. Drur made inquiries. A pair of idling lovers explained that modular walls could be brought in for a favorite variation. A maze would be erected, and groups of slaves and hungry throk would be turned loose at either end. Sihma expressed revulsion as they walked.

"And here my people are considered uncivilized for simple, clean murder, while these fops watch such spectacle."

Drur nodded. "It is indeed paradoxical. In most other respects the city is a model of calm. There is little crime, and the high walls and powerful court mages deter invaders. Shkanese are a generally gentle lot. I suppose here all their dark passions are given vent. In my native Venetio such emotions are spent on masterful works of art and illicit affairs. A superior arrangement."

The pair wound their way to the front rows. Drur peered over the waist high stone wall marking the boundary between spectators and the damned.

"The drop is about ten feet. We will need a knotted rope."

"I assume there is more to this scheme than simply throwing a rope over the edge in the middle of the event."

"There is indeed. We must find an apothecary."

Drur purchased the items he required from two different shops to better mask his intentions. He spent a tense afternoon mixing the components in his room at the tavern while Sihma elected to get drunk to pass the time. The next day Drur walked the quays looking for a boat heading into the Ikzak that had room for passengers. He secured the services of one Togun Sideh, skipper of the *Drullok's Bane*, a two-masted barge boasting a motor in the stern and an energy cannon mounted to the bow. The wizard claimed need of a trip to the jungle to secure rare flowers for use in spells.

Drur explained glibly to the skipper that the exact moment of departure was vitally important to his inamorata, a tempestuous woman whose passions were ruled by complex astrological calculations. The vessel would need to depart the morrow, no earlier than the second afternoon bell, coincidentally the moment when the games would be at their peak. Drur anticipated difficulty, but the promise of the last of Plom's coin secured firm guarantees. Togun took half the money upfront, dropping the coins into a pouch hidden beneath his wide belly.

The lanternmen stalked Shkan's wide avenues on tall stilts as dark descended. In their suite Drur rehearsed his spells and Sihma oiled her saber. Presently both lay awake in their respective chambers, contemplating the likely possibility of death as the sound of revelry came from the streets and tavern below. Shkan was becoming

charged with a festival electricity. Tomorrow much wine would be drunk, and much blood would be spilled in the arena.

They rose at dawn after a restless night. Drur gently packed the parcels he had made into his shirtsleeves while Sihma hid her equipment under voluminous skirts. They mounted the guhn and rode at a leisurely pace to the arena. Crowds were already gathering at the early hour. The pair hitched the mounts to a lamp post and walked arm in arm through the milling crowds and up the tall stairs to the terraces. Drur cursed. The best seats were already taken, save the sections across the floor reserved for aristocrats. They found a spot as near as they could manage and sat pensively. The wizard squinted his eyes, scanning the empty floor. The distance was great. He turned to Sihma.

“I shall be relying on your hawk eyes more than I had imagined. I cannot waste the energies of the Blue Orb by peering into the distance. This event will go on for hours. We don’t know which iteration will bring Plom to the floor.”

“I will keep my eyes open.”

The sun rose higher as the seats filled to capacity. Drur tapped his fingers impatiently while Sihma sat still, jaw set firm. Vendors dressed as Pierrot began to ply the crowds with sweets and clay cups of liquor. Drur purchased a packet of candied beetles.

“Save my place.”

Sihma scowled. “I know my duties, wizard. Try not to blow yourself up.”

“If it hasn’t happened yet, then I am likely in the clear.”

Drur stood and affected the meandering gait of a tourist as he wound his way down to the wall. He ate the beetles one by one as he walked, looking this way and that. Finally at the edge, he leaned on his elbow looked out over the floor. Sihma watched as the wizard appeared to toss the packet of sweets casually to the ground where similar flotsam had already begun to gather. He dodged groups of running children as he wandered down the circumference of the wall, repeating his performance periodically.

The crowd was growing increasingly restless as Drur reclaimed his seat. He thought to speak, but the blaring of trumpets interrupted. The crowd shouted in response. A set of wide iron doors burst open

below on the floor. Burly men bearing a gold palanquin bore Shkan's mayor before the riotous crowd. He brought a megaphone to his red lips and addressed the throng.

"Greetings, noble Shkanese! The fifth moon rose high last night. The blood moon! And how do we honor Yunare? How do we honor the sacred blood moon, the benevolent patron of our fair city?"

The crowd responded, screaming for blood, again and again. Drur felt his knees weaken.

Sihma leaned close to be heard over the roar. "It bears saying again; these people are civilized, and they claim the steppe is not?"

"Yes, yes, point taken. Keep a close watch now!"

The palanquin disappeared as an impresario mounted a dais above the aristocrats' seating. The plump man wore robes of crimson trimmed in gold. With a flourish he declared the commencement of the entertainments. The first round was in honor of the Yunare. Six notorious criminals were pitted against Wim Tid, the insect man blademaster, a mercenary of wide fame and an occasional gladiator. Drur marveled at his skill.

"Absolutely stunning. My skill with the foil is not insignificant, but now I feel inadequate. It's hardly fair though. He has four extra arms."

Wim Tid bounded in between the outmatched combatants, landing to strike with the speed of a scorpion before springing away from any counterattack. One by one the criminals were struck down. The blademaster honored the blood moon with strikes to his opponents' arteries. The crowd met every jet of blood with raucous applause. Finally only the insect man remained standing. He tipped the brim of his wide hat and bowed low to an appreciative audience. Slaves in blue tunics threw open the iron doors and dragged the corpses away. Drur and Sihma leaned forward as the next event was announced. To clear the viewers' palette after the display of skill a coarser spectacle was scheduled. A dozen slaves armed with small spears were to be set against a pack of hungry throk. Nervous steps carried the twelve to the center of the floor. Drur frantically scanned the group.

"There! That's him! Is it? Look! Is it him?"

Sihma frowned. "I can't tell! I think it is!"

The sound of a gong signaled the release of the throk. The slaving beasts sprinted from their pen with bounding leaps.

“Gods’ mercy! We have no choice. It is time!”

From under her skirt Sihma produced the rope and hook. Drur closed his eyes and held his hands together. The wizard murmured to himself as his fingers and hands went through a series of motions. The air began to hum.

Great gouts of black smoke exploded from Drur’s parcels along the wall. The crowd reacted in primal terror as screams of fire echoed throughout the arena. Pandemonium erupted as the great throng moved chaotically toward the exits, stumbling, screaming in terrible confusion. The smoke obscured all. Drur and Sihma dodged fleeing spectators as they rushed to the wall. The hook was made fast, and the two leapt over the edge. The smoke billowed up the terraces, leaving the floor largely clear. A barking snarl alerted the two to danger. Sihma buried her saber deep into the muscular neck of a charging throk, deftly sidestepping its careening bulk.

Ahead the slaves were being dragged down, one by one, by the remaining predators. Drur sent a few bolts of energy from the orb into the pack’s flanks. The beasts yelped in agony and fled. The smell of charred fur and flesh was added to the heady miasma of blood and fear. The nomad and wizard ran to the slaves. Two lay in crumpled heaps amidst growing pools of blood. Drur grabbed one roughly by the shoulder, turning him to get a look at his face. He did the same to the other and then looked to the knot of slaves still on their feet. They looked about in total shock as Sihma darted through the lot.

Sihma swore. “He isn’t here!”

“I know!”

The wizard spared a glance at the giant doors. Behind them somewhere Plom waited for his turn in the arena. Drur had played his hand prematurely. The episode was a fiasco.

Sihma put her foot to a throk’s side in order to pull her bloodied saber from its carcass. Drur grabbed her arm and the pair sprinted back to the rope. Before scaling the wall the wizard turned to address the slaves.

“Freedom lies this way, if you desire it!”

The pair scaled the wall quickly and bounded up the terraces toward an exit. Drur lost sight of Sihma in the lingering smoke as he made for the stairs. Before him a figure loomed—a vendor wearing a

tray. The two collided. Sweets rained down as Drur looked at the man. Beneath the whiteface makeup was Plom.

“Gods of Wind and Rain! What are you doing?”

“Drur! I never thought to see you again! Did you come to watch the games?”

The wizard stood and pulled the young supplicant to his feet.

“Watch the games? You stupid boy! We came to rescue you!”

Plom stared, uncomprehending. Drur grabbed his arm, and the pair made for the stairs, still thronged with fleeing spectators.

“Where are we going? The sweets! I have to recover the sweets.”

“Forget the sweets! We are leaving, Plom. Remember the book? I am oathbound to take you into the jungle, and Sihma is sworn to take my head if we don’t succeed. I would like to keep my head and not be forced to endure the inevitable pangs of conscious should I have to incinerate her, mid-attempt. In summary, we are going to get your book. What is the meaning of this costume anyway?”

By way of answer Plom pulled up his shirt, an awkward act in the press of the crowd. Drur read the raised and tender wound, a fresh tattoo centered in the supplicant’s chest.

“This slave is the property of Relallthein Confectionary Company, Shkan. Reward Available if Returned Alive.” Drur shook his head as the crowd poured into the street. Sihma was waiting, already mounted with three pairs of reins in hand.

V

Plom’s frilled collar bobbed in the wake of the *Drullok’s Bane* where Drur had tossed it. The wizard leaned against the aft gunwales while the supplicant bent low, washing off the whiteface with a bucket of river water.

“Now that we are relatively safe I would appreciate an account of your travails since last we met.”

Plom finished his ablutions and stood. He gazed at the receding towers wistfully.

“I was kidnapped at the river’s edge. Then they took us to the slavers’ market where I was about to be sold to the pit masters. A man asked any who were literate to raise their hands. I was the only one. The man bought me and took me to a large building. My duties

were explained. I was to write the company's ledgers and copy sentimental messages onto small cards for inclusion into gift boxes, and on festival days me and the others would sell their wares. I was given the tattoo and then training began. They were largely kind after telling me all the horrible things that would happen if I failed them or fled. They gave me a bowl of delicious stew and then a piece of candy. I had never had anything like it. Did you ever have candy, wizard? It is common, isn't it?"

"It is. Continue."

"It was red and sweet. So sweet. There was a strange taste with the sweetness. It was described as 'tartness' upon my asking. The two tastes seemed to blend together, sometimes competing, sometimes complimenting one another. I savored it as the thing slowly shrank in my mouth. When the candy maker saw how much I had enjoyed it he gave me a piece of green candy. This one was sweet also, but had a slightly sharp taste as well. The man explained they were flavored with fruit harvested from orchards just outside the city. There was green, red, and a purple one, one that had red with streaks of white, one that was blue..."

Drur interjected. "Enough!"

Plom's eyes became enlivened as he continued. "Then I met the other slaves. Most were women. I told them my story, and they took pity on me. They bade me have no fear to look upon them. Then, late in the night..."

"Oh, for the love of all that is good, Plom, spare me."

Sihma emerged from below decks. The nomad had changed back into her old clothes and walked with a light step. She saw the consternation on Drur's face.

"What happened?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing except that we risked life and limb to rescue Plom from the peril of tooth decay and the possibility of contracting a social ailment."

"Ha!" The nomad slapped Plom on the back. She continued. "If it wasn't for the prospect of this treasure I would surely kill you." She turned to Drur. "But as things stand, we can't be overly upset. We escaped without consequence, and we are on our way to the treasure."

Drur sniffed. "Yes, quite."

The *Drullok's Bane* was a large craft, 100 feet from bow to rounded transom and 30 feet wide. Togun and his first mate Leli navigated the wide Monoga with an ease born of many years' experience. The journey into the Ikzak was made under sail. The return trip would be under power, typically trailing as many as a dozen logs of priceless timber.

Several times a day the two crewmen, Hume and Roppen, were interrupted in their duties to tack the vessel back to cross the center of the river. Otherwise they made themselves busy with maintenance. There was an engineer aboard, but the man was never seen, keeping to himself within the cramped confines of the compartment that housed the crystal which powered the vessel's screws. Togun and Leli took turns at the wheel. At night the anchor was dropped, and all but a sole watch slept.

The two loggers signed on for the trip, the horned giants Rep and Vinconzo, settled quickly into their routine. The pair spent all their time fishing, one off the port beam, the other starboard, balanced thusly so their massive bulks would not cause the vessel to list. The pair were wont to doze as the brown water flowed quietly past, the bow wake gently lapping against their booted soles that hung heavy over the gunwales.

The passengers spent their first day aboard in idleness. Plom watched as Shkan's towers disappeared behind the horizon.

He looked to Drur and said, "Do you think there is any candy aboard?"

The wizard did not reply. He inquired about a spare rod and was given one. Drur settled next to Vinconzo and baited the hook from a clay jug packed with pickled beetles. The giant took the cup in his massive hand and gently tapped the base, knocking a beetle into his palm and popping it into his mouth. Drur dipped the line into the water and leaned back.

The setting sun painted a long streak of wavering red on the surface of the water. The streak faded to a dull purple before darkness finally fell. Togun ordered the anchor dropped. The crew and passengers gathered amidships for a meal of bread and cheese underneath a line hung with colored lanterns. The giants kept their

place as they ate their supper, a selection of beasts caught from the river, consumed raw. This night Rep had only a pair of water scorpions while Vinconzo bit into a fat woph fish. Both drank deep from casks of wine.

Togun sipped at a glass of distilled alcohol as he talked in his gruff voice. "So, it's flowers you are after, correct?"

Drur looked up from his meal and replied, "Yes, my captain. The pollen of the Isis yields components for several spells and salves. It is scarce down our way. While there I hope also to cull pedals from the Screaming Yip, and I wouldn't turn up my nose at a quantity of root from a Grappling vine. With sufficient supply I can replenish my stocks and also make a tidy profit back home."

Plom spoke through a mouthful of bread, "We aren't looking for the book anymore?"

Togun set his glass down. "The book?"

Drur shook his head. "Pardon my friend. He is a mental defective. Quite tragic really. His mother was a servant in my father's house. On her deathbed my father swore that we would look after her only son, an act of generosity which has caused me great inconvenience."

Plom cocked his head slightly. "I don't understand. Who are you talking about?"

Sihma sighed. "He is talking about you. Now be quiet."

Togun smiled. "Now, now. This is my vessel, my table, my rules. What do you mean 'looking for the book', young man?"

Plom looked at Drur. The wizard threw up his arms. "Well, you may as well tell him now!"

The supplicant related the story of his life and quest to a rapt Togun while Drur and Sihma sat pensively. The captain whistled through his teeth at the tale's conclusion. Hume and Roppen had edged forward on the bench. Hume toyed with a dagger in his tattooed hands as he and Roppen and the captain exchanged glances.

Togun laughed, "Flowers, indeed! You three are by far the strangest lot I have ever ferried down river. Now, perhaps we should discuss in greater detail the value of this sacred tome."

Drur sniffed. "Gentlemen aren't concerned with such vulgar matters."

"I don't recall laying claim to that particular appellation."

“They use apples to flavor some of the candy.”

Drur’s face reddened. “Plom, please be quiet.” He leaned back on the bench and continued, “Let us all save ourselves some time. The financial particulars are of concern to two parties, the nomads, represented by the lovely Sihma, and the monastery. I am here to only to fulfill a careless oath. I suggest you and Sihma negotiate an arrangement. I warn you, captain, the nomads are notoriously parsimonious, and I can only imagine the attitudes of the monks. I am retiring to my hammock. I expect the dawn will bring me news of a new and mutually beneficial relationship between the two parties. Should the situation be different I will be sorely vexed and prone to intemperate displays. My orb is charged to bursting. I bid you all good evening.”

The two parties began negotiations. Togun started with a series of vague threats, capitalizing on the murky danger of the river and their present distance from civilization. Sihma was utterly unfazed, leveraging the nomads’ renowned fondness for vengeance against the skipper’s ill-defined threats. Should Sihma not return by next winter, the entire clan would investigate her fate. Finally a percentage was agreed upon, 10% of the nomads’ take. For this fee Togun pledged the assistance of the two giants and Hume. The crewman boasted some skill with the knife and was eager for the change in routine. Roppen was openly squeamish at the prospect of danger and declared his intent to stay onboard when the expedition headed inland. The pact was sealed in blood underneath a gibbous Yunare. Hume made a pass at Sihma and was turned down brusquely. Passengers and crew went to their hammocks as Leli stood watch at the cannon.

VI

Wim Tid sat motionless in the darkness, perched on the bow of the skiff. The craft was making good speed down the winding river. Insect men could see in total darkness, an ability the skiff’s captain put to good use. The mysterious insectoid had paid well on the condition that the craft would proceed with as much possible haste. Despite the high fees his purse of coin was still bulging. The errand was a profitable one—a joint contract from Shkan’s guild of entertainers, the

slavers responsible for organizing the bloodsport in the arena, and the Relallthein Confectionary Company. By the insect man's calculations, the skiff would catch up with the river boat in two days.

He had investigated thoroughly the pair responsible for the fracas at the arena and the mental defective skilled in calligraphy that had escaped the confectioners. He had heard snatches of conversation collected by slavers at the market—a waiter, a tailor, and finally a trio of workers at the candy concern. All these threads wove a strange tale, the notion of a book, a tome of great value prized by a sect of secretive fanatics. Wim Tid reckoned he could turn a profitable contract into something much more. With a hoard of wealth he could return to the fourth moon and build a mound the likes of which had never been seen. With such a structure he could entice a queen to nest, a great beauty with shimmering antenna and swollen egg sacks. For her pleasure he would erect mud spires in fanciful combinations around the mound as thousands of larval young crawled underfoot. Such was his dream.

In his halting speech he warned the coxswain of a log floating ahead. The man deftly altered course, and the skiff continued down the river.

VII

The mood on the *Drullok's Bane* darkened as the great trees of the Ikzak came into view. Togun knew the general whereabouts of the derelict ship. His information confirmed the vague directions the monks had given to Plom. Some years ago the skipper had ferried a party of hopeful scavengers to where the river was closest to the ship. The fateful group had been rough men, hardened veterans lured by rumors of the great ship and looking to find pieces of arcane technology to sell to the wizards of Shkan. None had returned. The skipper guided the craft down one of the many tributaries as the trees began to crowd the river's edge. On their great fronds squatted troupes of disinterested monkeys, resplendent in coats of glossy, yellow fur. They watched the boat with haughty disdain as their tiny hands twirled the long tufts of their moustaches absentmindedly.

Togun had doubled the watches. Plom found himself standing at the stern, scanning for trouble along the dark banks. Drur exercised

nearby, working his sword in graceful arcs as he sweat in the growing heat. He had exchanged his ensemble for a sleeveless tunic of gray cotton and baggy trousers of leather, items borrowed from Hume. He finished his exercise and mopped his forehead and neck with a rag.

“Young Plom, Togun tells me we arrive this evening. We will rest and then head out in the morning. Are you excited to be so close to your goal?”

The shadows from the massive trees blocked the sun intermittently as they conversed. Plom shrugged. “Securing the book will make me a hero to the monks. But I fear that I will find life difficult after I return. Also the monks may take exception to some of my experiences.”

Drur laughed. “Take heart, young man. We still have a day’s march through the deadly jungle, the mystery of the ship, and the very real potential of a deadly double cross by either the crew or the nomads. All in all, it is unlikely you will see the monastery again.”

Plom frowned. “Thank you.” The young supplicant peered over Drur’s shoulder. His expression became quizzical. “What is that?”

Drur spun around, scanning the tree line for danger. He squinted, hunting for a glimpse of approaching monsters. Plom kicked hard against the wizard’s rear, sending him plunging into the river. Drur broke the surface sputtering.

Plom looked down at the waterlogged wizard. “That was for calling me a ‘mental defective’.”

Drur laughed heartily. “My boy, I think you are finally gaining the measure of this world. But no more of that, please. Gods know what hunts in these waters.”

Togun guided the craft’s shallow bow to the river’s muddy bank as night fell. At dawn the landing party began preparing in tense silence. The two giants unwound and oiled their great saws, long lengths of bladed chain weighted on either end with heavy handles sized for their massive hands. Vinconzo then ran a stone along the edge of his great, hacking blade as tall as Plom and nicked from past work in the jungle. Rep lifted a barrel to the small of his back while Hume secured the straps to suspend it there. Plom watched the pair.

The supplicant asked, “What is that?”

Rep smiled. “A gift for our hosts, if they bother to pay us a call.”

Vinconzo threw a heavy plank down, bridging bow and bank. The jungle hung over the water's edge. Gnarled vines hung from the branches of the great trees, spotted with blossoms in lurid lavenders and pinks. Unseen creatures heralded their arrival with hoots and barks.

The noise was not welcoming. Plom stared into the murky darkness that extended nearly to the bow. The air was hazy with an oppressive humidity which tired the lungs. Drur checked the edge of his sword and nodded with satisfaction. He cleared his mind until the reassuring presence of the orb filled his consciousness. Plom had armed himself with a spear from the hold. The weathered tan of his face was mismatched atop the paleness of his shoulders and torso that showed through the loose cut of the singlet he wore. Sihma had exchanged her embroidered nomad's garb for a light tunic and cotton trousers. She nocked an arrow to her curved bow and stared into the thick trunks encroaching along the mud bank.

"How I long for the open steppe! One can see an enemy for miles."

All were ready.

Vinconzo addressed the landing party. "Now we enter the jungle. Myself, Rep, and to a lesser degree, Hume, all know the jungle's peril. You three do not. It would take weeks to teach you the fieldcraft needed to survive here. In lieu of that, I will state one rule, one rule above all. Do not touch anything. Not a flower, not a beetle, not so much as a leaf. I will be in the lead. I will make a path. All will follow in this path. No one leaves the path, for any reason whatsoever. Is that understood?"

The party nodded their assent. The giant continued. He ran a finger along the sharp points of his horns as he spoke, a habit. "The skipper tells me the ship you seek lies in a clearing about a half mile west, or so he has heard. A great deal of calamity can befall us in a half mile of the Ikzak. Keep your wits about you. We leave now."

The group left the boat. Rep and Vinconzo simply stepped across onto the bank. The others walked across the plank. The jungle swallowed them all. In minutes sight of the river and the boat were completely obscured by the massive trunks and looping vines which seemed to touch everything in sight. Plom kept one hand on the line which spooled from a cylinder strapped to Hume's back. Drur sipped

water from a leather skin and wiped the sweat from his high forehead with an already soaked cloth. The trail was littered with the vegetation cut by Vinconzo's giant blade. The sound of it assaulting the thick fronds was incongruous—an unnatural rhythm in a world of intermittent hoots and caws.

The group walked in silence past dazzling blooms of orange veined with red, large enough to envelope a person within their fragrant pedals. More spectacular were the displays of iridescent mold that clung to some of the trunks. The jungle was a deadly place where nothing but the largest predators lived long. The colors seemed to revel in this fact, the flora and fauna garishly celebrating their brief life spans. Sihma thought to swing her saber at the fist-sized flies that hovered past only to stay her hand from fear of Vinconzo's warning.

Above came the sound of crashing branches. Plom peered through the thick cover, desperate to see the source of the commotion. Drur was suddenly at his side. The noise grew closer. Plom held the spear firm. A heavy thud rang out behind the pair. Plom spun around, knocking Drur across the head with the spear's blunt end. Before the young man stood a giant ape draped in layers of shaggy hair colored rich ochre. His knees felt weak as he stepped back, keeping the weapon trained on the great beast. The thing roared, revealing a mouth of yellowed fangs. Rep leapt in between the two. The ape ceased his ferocious display and grinned.

"Dear Rep, you spoiled my fun. Another moment and this young man would have perished from fright."

Rep laughed. "Ecguz, you are a wicked creature. How goes things?"

"The same as ever. I am still chieftain. What are you doing in these parts? The good mahogany is down the south fork, as you know."

Plom's heart still beat fast. He helped Drur to his feet and mumbled an apology. Sihma stared in wonder at the jungle chieftain. Giant and ape continued their discussion.

"We are here to see the old ship. It lays yonder, no?"

"The metal mound? Yes, you are on the right track. And my toll?"

Hume undid the straps holding the barrel to Rep's back. The giant lifted the cask with ease and tossed it to Ecguz. "Here you are. It's a

fair white. Unseasonable cold caused the vintners much consternation last year. I fear you won't find much better than this."

"I am sure it is good. My palette is less discerning than yours. How is the wife?"

"She is well. We are expecting our third."

Ecguz shook his head. "Third? Oh, where has all the time gone? We were once young and without responsibility."

"It seems eons ago. Well, I am afraid we must be off soon. What have you seen from the treetops?"

"A pack of throk hunts to the west. To the east a lone drullok stalks a group of horned blues. If you are lucky and quick, neither should cross your path."

Rep smiled. "That is good news. Until next time."

The ape leapt up into the vines, moving his massive bulk with ease. "Best of luck!"

Drur massaged a growing knot on the side of his head. He took the spear from Plom, leaning it against a tree, and handed the young man a dagger. The group continued on their way.

The clearing came suddenly, a wide ring of stunted grass and patches of rain soaked mud. The sun seemed an order brighter after the darkness under the canopy. In the center of the clearing the ship lay, a massive oblong of gray metal streaked and stained with rainwater but free of corrosion. Here and there tufts of vegetation attempted to sprout along its paneled length but without much success. The thing was painted with strange symbols and letters in places. Near its center a tower of antennae jutted from a cluster of cylinders draped in moss. The ship had landed awkwardly, and the array was at angles to the ground. The party idled at the edge of the clearing, marveling at the size of the thing.

Plom spoke in awe, "Just as the monk described..."

Drur shook his head. "Something is wrong. Why is the jungle held at bay?"

Sihma stood with arms folded. "Wrong, indeed. The grass grows in sickly patches. Look around the edge. A clear line demarcates, after which the jungle is as healthy as ever."

The group stepped tentatively into the clearing. Hume was the first to complain.

“I feel somewhat nauseous.”

The rest of the party sounded their agreement. Without further conversation the group walked through the field. Their eyes scanned the irregular surface of the vessel for any sort of door. In the distance an inhuman scream rang out, a plaintive wail of agony.

Rep spoke, “A horned blue cries out. The drullok feeds.”

The shadow of the ship swallowed the group. Drur yelled in triumph. He stood before a recessed panel painted with faded stripes of yellow and black. A smaller panel rose from the bulkhead to the left. The wizard inspected it at length.

“This must be a door. And this here, a lock of sorts.” He told the group to step back. “I regret the use of its power, but I see no keyhole or handle.”

From the orb a beam of white heat bored into the smaller panel. The wizard carefully sliced downward, working slowly to account for the thickness of the ancient metal. There was a snapping sound from within. Something under tension had been released.

Drur shouted. “I believe that has done it! Vinconzo, if you would, please.”

The giant placed his great hands on the door panel and pushed until sweat dripped from his gnarled face. He paused a moment, hands on knees. Rep stepped forward.

“Perhaps it slides open.” He nudged Vinconzo aside and settled his own bulk before the panel. He directed his strength laterally, and the thick door disappeared into the bulkhead.

The group stared through the opening into the crooked interior. A gray chamber stretched before them lit with pale tubes lined along the low ceiling. A stripe of yellow and black lines led to another door ahead. Everywhere were boxes and panels, struts and grate, strange writing and indecipherable symbols. A strip of red lights where wall and ceiling met blinked on and off in apparent alarm. Drur frowned.

“Our ancient ancestors had no sense of style whatsoever. Not a single proper decoration. Not so much an inch of molding or accent, nary an egg or dart.”

Sihma nodded. “The poorest tent on the steppe has at least a small kilim or a bit of weaving.”

Plom pondered. "Perhaps all ornament was reserved for the Goddess."

Drur shrugged. "Perhaps." He puffed out his chest. "Well, my friends, I do not wish to be in this ship or jungle come nightfall. I suggest we get inside and get Plom's book without further delay."

The giants demurred. Rep spoke, "This passage is a bit cramped for our ilk. We will have to wait outside, in the tree line, as a matter of fact. This miasma is woeful. Best of luck to you all."

Sihma entered first. She had replaced her bow in its case on her hip and walked with sword drawn. Drur came next, then Hume and Plom. The four came to the door at the end of the passage. Drur depressed a large red button in the center of the door. A gust of stale air poured forth as the door slid aside. Through the door the passage widened. The four stepped through.

Drur addressed Plom, "This question is regrettably late in the asking, but do you know where the book is within this massive ark?"

"I do, in fact. The monks made me memorize the way. Follow the blue line down two flights of stairs. Follow a green line north. At the end of the green line is a chamber of beds. Hidden there is the tome."

Drur smiled. "That's welcome news. Things are going swimmingly so far."

Hume frowned as he ran a hand over his shaved pate. "Perhaps too much so."

"Come now, you travel with Drur, Bearer of the Blue Orb. Get accustomed to good fortune."

A voice sounded suddenly, an ambient sound, not obviously male or female by its timber or tone. The party stumbled into one another, looking this way and that for the source.

"Can you understand me?"

Anxiety colored Sihma's features. "Where is that coming from?"

"Have no fear, please. But can you understand me?"

Plom spoke meekly, "Yes?"

"You can? Oh wonderful. Pardon my rudeness for not introducing myself earlier, but I required the time to analyze your speech."

Drur spoke, "Show yourself!"

"If you will look to the ceiling, you will see a small grey protuberance. My voice is emanating from that device. My physical

person, such as it is, is located near the core of this vessel.”

Sihma muttered, “Sorcery.”

Drur nodded his head. “Indeed, of the most ancient variety, if I am not mistaken.” The wizard addressed the protuberance. “Are you one of the thinking machines of yore?”

The voice replied in a pleasant tone. “I am a thinking machine, in a manner of speaking. My proper name is Axomco Core Intelligence C-1899450010, though I am commonly addressed simply as Corint. Would one of you be so good as to tell me what year it is? The drive leak has wrought havoc with my chronometer.”

Drur answered first. “It is the 1,239th year of the Empress’ reign.”

Plom chimed in next. “It is the 52nd year since Uniam’s vision.”

Corint replied. “I am afraid I don’t understand those references. By analyzing your speech I can postulate an estimate based on morphophonological data. But rates of change are so variable as to make the exercise nearly worthless. Still, I must reflect on these matters.”

Drur shook his head. “I am afraid you lost me.”

“No matter. Returning to the immediate present, how can Corint serve you today? You have no escort, but given the state of the crew I would not expect one. May I assume you are not interlopers or saboteurs? Should such be revealed I would be forced to remove the oxygen from this passageway, as much it would pain me to be without company again.”

Hume frowned. “Did it just threaten us?” Sihma scowled at the boatman.

Drur addressed Corint. “We are not saboteurs. We merely wish to recover an artifact and then we will be on our way.”

“What is this artifact? All ship property is owned by USNSS Sol Central Command. Although, I must wonder if such a body still exists. I am inclined to think not, based on my estimations. But what is it you seek?”

Plom replied. “A sacred tome containing depictions of the Goddess.”

There was silence for a moment as Corint pondered. “Perhaps such a thing is in the Multi-faith Chapel in the aft of the vessel.”

The supplicant shook his head. "As a matter of fact, I know where the object is." Plom related the monk's instructions.

Corint's voice was tinted with optimism. "You describe the Second Shift Berthing Compartment. Follow the lines, as you said. It is fortunate your goal lays no further forward."

The party walked down the passageway.

Drur's curiosity bubbled over. He asked, "Why is that, Corint? And where is this crew you spoke of earlier? Long dead, no? It must have been sad for you."

"It is difficult to be alone for long periods. Should you linger here, you will note the passage of time is not easy to gauge. I may have sat here one year or one hundred thousand. Even the low end of my estimation means the likelihood of several cycles of civilizational rise and fall, meaning the authority I once served is most probably a facet of history."

Plom spoke, "That sounds sad. Are you unable to leave?"

"As a matter of fact, I can be relocated. But my core unit is located several decks below, and there would be difficulties."

"That's a shame. You could have come with us."

Corint was silent.

Drur looked over his shoulder at Plom, shaking his head and raising a finger to his lips.

The group came to another door. Drur depressed the button but the door held fast.

He looked to the ceiling. "Corint, I don't suppose you are able to open this door, are you?"

"I am."

"Will you?"

"No."

Drur felt blood rushing to his face. He replied, "Why? If I may ask?"

"I must apologize to you all. But after careful consideration, I believe I am safe in assuming my duties are discharged. I wish to leave, and I will require your assistance. I propose that you retrieve me from the compartment where I lie and carry me with you. At such time I will assist you in accomplishing your goal, and then we will all leave together."

Sihma shrugged. "That sounds easy enough. Why the apology?"

“You will have to contend with the crew.”

Echoing through the narrow passageways came a sound—a scream of incoherent agony. Plom felt the hairs on his neck stand on end.

Corint’s voice was apologetic. “It seems they are awake again.”

The group stood with weapons drawn outside the door Corint had indicated. Beyond the gray panel lay the forward compartments, the bridge and forward bays, and Corint’s resting place. Into this area the thinking machine had sealed the crew. The area was furthest from the poisons leaking from the damaged engines. Corint explained the measure had been too little, too late. The crew had suffered horribly under the effects of the leak. The thinking machine was reluctant to explain further. With jaw set, Drur hovered near the door’s switch.

Corint spoke. “I have released the lock. You may enter when ready.”

The wizard addressed the group. “I think our best chance lies in stealth. The machine said down the hall, three ladderwells down, through another set of doors, through an office of sorts, down a long hall, and there we will find the core.”

Corint interrupted. “Correct.”

“If we are quiet, we might completely avoid any of this mysterious crew. “

“I might also add that the bow took most of the damage from the landing. Many of my sensors in the area are inert. Be mindful of your step.”

Hume sneered. “You are too kind.”

Drur looked at each of the group in turn. Plom stood ready next to Sihma. The nomad moved her wicked blade in slow circles, impatient to strike. Hume wore an expression of irritation. His hands shook slightly, a blade in each. The wizard nodded to the three and depressed the button.

A gush of foul air escaped, carrying with it the stench of rotten meat. Drur reeled, silencing an oath. Beyond the door the passageway stretched forward into dimness. The lights above flickered arrhythmically. In the distance another scream sounded. Drur plunged forward at a jog and the group followed. Sihma swore under her breath, reaching back on her hip to still the bow case and quiver

which had bobbed up and down noisily as she set off. The passage seemed to go on forever before a ladderwell appeared.

Drur lay on the floor and peered down, seeing nothing, then descended with care. Sihma started to follow but noticed Plom standing still, staring. She followed his eyes to the bulkhead at their left. A wide smear of blood and caked gore trailed from head height to the deck. She grabbed his arm and the pair went down. Hume followed, sweat beading on the scorpion tattoo that lay across his smooth scalp.

Drur's heart leapt into his mouth as a peel of maniacal laughter rang out from a passageway to the right. He motioned back to the group for more haste. They descended the second ladder, then the third.

They came before the door. Drur pushed the button repeatedly. With a creaking groan the door slid away. The chamber within was a tableau of violence. Furniture and shelves had been smashed to pieces. Upon the walls were indecipherable words written in blood. The group made as much haste as possible amidst the debris. Drur stopped suddenly, causing Sihma to bump into him. In a chair in the corner of the room a man sat, studying a flickering screen. He turned to the group. Plom stifled a scream. The crewman's face was a ruin of wrinkled skin and septic wound. His expression of shock was an illusion due to the absence of eyelids. The man studied the interlopers with incomprehension.

Drur made for the door at the end of the chamber, the others in tow. As he passed the man the wizard said meekly, "Please pay us no mind, sir."

The door slid open, and the group headed down the passageway at a run. Behind them a wailing scream erupted from the occupant of the ruined office.

The narrow passage was unique, painted a bright yellow and bearing even more of the inscrutable signage that decorated the ship's interior. At the end, a thick door opened into a tiny chamber covered floor to ceiling with small, blinking lights and bizarre displays.

Corint spoke, "Ah, you've arrived. Flip those two toggles and grasp the gray handle. Pull hard and I will be free."

Drur did as he was asked. The handle refused to budge until Hume lent his strength to the effort. The object won free, a thin black rectangle, oddly heavy, about the length of Drur's forearm. Blinking lights decorated its paneled front.

Corint spoke again, this time in a small, tinny voice emanating directly from the box. "I am free. I must thank you all. Back the way you came now. I would recommend a measure of haste."

Sihma snorted, and the group set off back down the passageway. Blocking their way to the office stood the crewman without eyelids. He let out a pathetic wail and threw himself at Drur. The wizard leaned back and kicked, sending the man sprawling into the office. Sihma darted forward. Her tulwar rose and fell, singing through the stale air. The man's head fell from his shoulders, landing on a pile of water stained papers. The mouth still moved as the group sprinted past.

Noise erupted from the passageways all around as the group climbed the ladderwells. Silhouettes appeared in adjoining passageways as the group ran. They were twisted parodies of the human form, loping forward with a graceless speed. In the confusion Plom found himself at the rear of the line. He felt hands grasping his ankles as he ascended. He kicked, again and again, finally winning free amidst the sound of screams and mad gibberish. Hume pulled him roughly up to the deck. The boatman pushed the supplicant away and kicked a crewman back down to tumble into his fellows clamoring up the narrow stairs. Their rotted faces were twisted into masks of primal rage as they babbled and screamed.

Drur shouted from the end of the passage, "Hurry now! Almost to safety!"

Plom and Hume came panting down the hall as the crewmen came pouring from the opening. They reached the door, nearly getting stuck as they crossed the threshold abreast. All four now stood on the other side, and Drur pressed the button with a yell of triumph. The door slid shut.

"Ha! Success! Anyone hurt?"

The group answered in the negative.

Corint's voice came from the small box. "I am afraid I am having difficulty accessing my control networks remotely."

Drur replied, "I am sure I have no idea what you mean."

"I am unable to lock the door."

The door flung open again. Crewmen came stumbling out of the opening, reaching with gnarled, bony hands for the party. Plom screamed, stabbing with his dagger. The blade sunk deep into an eye socket. The crewman wrenched away, the blade stuck fast, and Drur bashed a fiend over the head with the box and kicked. Sihma struggled to get her saber into action within the confined space. Hume fled, running down the hallway on desperate strides.

Drur yelled, "Stand back!"

Sihma and Plom disengaged from the melee as best they could as a blast of white heat from the wizard's orb incinerated a trio of crewmen and damaged several others behind. Smoke and the stench of burning flesh filled the compartment. The moment's respite was put to good use. The three raced after Hume. The sound of the door mechanism grinding shut was heard to their rear as the group sprinted to relative safety.

Corint spoke proudly. "I experienced an impact which seems to have restored my uplink. I have sealed the door."

The group rounded a corner and paused to catch their breath.

Hume grinned as he spoke, still panting. "Excellent! We all made it."

Sihma scowled.

VIII

Plom's spirits lifted as they approached the berthing compartment wherein lay the book. The other three still wore harried expressions. The supplicant's hand shook slightly as he reached forward to depress the door's button.

Inside was row after row of three tiered bunk beds flanked by metal cabinets. Sheets and blankets lay in disarray but there was no sign of violence.

Drur shook his head. "Even sleeping chambers are not spared this dreadful utilitarianism. Not a single painting or sculpture to be seen."

Corint responded in its tinny voice, "Regulations."

Plom's legs were shaky as he made his way to the back corner. He squatted down next to a bottom bunk and overturned a thin mattress.

There it was.

It was a thin volume, rendered in delicate pages that showed a glossy sheen in the pale light. On the cover a representation of the Goddess stared provocatively at any that dared look. The supplicant fought an urge to turn away. He reached forward and gingerly took the book in his hands. Plom's eyes traced the smooth lines of the Goddess' bare body. Her voluminous blonde curls swept majestically to the cover's edge and were overlaid by strange letters that formed what must have been a title. The slick pages were imbued with a warm energy that coursed through Plom's fingers and into arms, sending shivers down his spine. Drur and Sihma peered over his shoulder as Hume ransacked the cabinets to the left.

The wizard whistled. "She's a sight." His brow furrowed. "Wait, that's not the sacred book, is it?"

Plom spoke, barely above a whisper. "It is. Behold."

Drur reached forward. "May I?" He took the book in his hands, gently, mindful of Plom's wary stare. He flipped through the pages. Inside were dozens of incarnations of the Goddess, all rendered in bright color by a technique unknown to Drur. He paused in the middle. The center unfolded, revealing a tri-fold leaf depicting the Goddess, this time a wide hipped brunette, lounging on satin cushions, legs spread.

"The realism is staggering. Somehow, though, I am not getting that certain sense of transcendence that one usually associates with a religious artifact."

Sihma stood with arms folded. She spoke, "Your religion is bizarre."

Plom did not hear. His eyes were glazed as he stared and said, "It is just as the monks described. Never before have so realistic and dramatic representations of the Goddess in so many forms have been available to the devotees."

Drur shrugged. "Thematically the book seems somewhat familiar. In the alleys near the docks of my home, peddlers sell small picture books, crude block printed things, to departing sailors. Inside these pamphlets..." He paused, noting Plom's solemn expression. The wizard coughed, then continued, "Forgive me, I have lost the thread of my thoughts."

Sihma stared at the tri-fold with head cocked. "Why would a woman wear shoes and nothing else to bed?"

Drur pondered. "Deadly shoes, no less. The spikes at her heels could kill a man."

"She is the Goddess. Her ways are her own." Plom took the book from Drur's hands and gently folded the portrait back into the center. He closed the book and wrapped it inside a rectangle of leather.

Hume interrupted. He held pillowcases in either hand, stuffed with articles looted from the cabinets. "I am ready to leave."

Drur emerged from the ship with a sigh of relief. Immediately ahead were the giants, lumbering on heavy steps toward the tree line. Drur called out.

Vinconzo turned and spoke, "What is it? Something forgotten?"

Drur puzzled over the question. "No. We return, book in hand. The chore nearly cost us our lives."

"You must be joking. You entered the ship only a moment ago."

Corint said, "I believe I can shed some light on this matter. The drive leak has altered the passage of time."

Rep stared, mouth open. He pointed at the black box Drur carried. "A talking box. There's a novelty. What is it, exactly?"

Sihma answered. "It's the vessel's brain. It wished to accompany us."

Vinconzo shrugged, "That answers that, I suppose."

The group walked toward the tree line. Their spirits lifted with each step closer to the path that would take them back to the waiting boat. Hume whistled a jaunty tune even as he walked hunched, weighed down with his two sacks of loot. Plom's eyes were still glossy with religious fervor. Sihma smiled, entertaining thoughts of her tribe's accolades upon her successful return. Drur stopped in his tracks. Plom followed his gaze, past the giants who still walked unawares.

There at the tree line a gaunt figure stood, long limbs unnaturally still. His features were hidden under a broad brimmed hat. The figure raised its head revealing two rows of faceted eyes above a nest of stirring mandibles. He unfolded the arms he had held at his sides. His rapiers' long blades gleamed in the sunlight.

Drur spoke, voice heavy with awe, "Wim Tid."

Sihma eyed the insect man. "What do you want?"

"Your life. The man's life. The boy in shackles. The book. The giants and the sailor may go."

Relief settled on Hume's wizened features. He looked to Drur and spoke, "This is certainly a sad turn of events. I bid you three fond goodbyes." He ran awkwardly toward the jungle to their left.

Rep and Vinconzo traded looks, disgust written across their heavy features. The pair unwound their chain saws and made themselves ready. Their great arms swung the chains out, straining until centrifugal force took over. The bladed lengths made a whirring noise in the air as they spun overhead.

Drur stepped forward. "Drur, at your service, blademaster. I don't suppose you might be amendable to a..."

The words died on his lips as the bounty hunter bounded upwards, propelling himself into the humid air. Rep stepped forward and swung first. The insect man spun in the air, somersaulting over the whistling blow. He descended, landing feather light on Rep's shoulder and sinking a long rapier deep before springing up again. Rep grunted, eyes wide with pain and anger. Vinconzo advanced, moving to meet the insect man's next plunging attack only to find the fencer behind him. Wim Tid thrust a blade into the giant's back and shot back into the thick air. The giant bellowed in pain but kept his feet.

Drur and Sihma both tried to aim at the bounty hunter, one with orb and other with bow, both confounded by the giants' hulking bodies in between the pair and their target. They ran forward as Wim descended again. Vinconzo, grimacing in pain, threw his chain forward with a whipping motion but succeeding only in opening a tear in the bounty hunter's long cloak. He yelled as the blademaster's rapier raked across his chest and face. Sihma released. The arrow missed its mark. The nomad cursed and readied another arrow. Drur sprinted to the left, angling for a clear shot. Wim Tim bounded away.

Plom ran to Sihma. He took advantage of her preoccupation to reach forward and draw her tulwar from its scabbard. He struck a pose he had seen Drur perform, legs wide, weapon at the ready. A noise at the tree line far to the left drew his attention. From the foliage a towering male drullok emerged, its thick hide decorated in mottled green and gray scales. Muscles rippled across its long body as it

came forward with a speed that belied its great size. Hume was screaming as the beast struck, biting down on his head and shoulders and then throwing its great horned head back. The boatman disappeared down the creature's wide gullet.

"Sihma..."

"Not now!" She cursed as another arrow sailed harmlessly past the insect man.

The insect man struck again at Vinconzo and sprang away. Rep was slowing, suffering from his first wound. He fell to his knees, one hand on his shoulder. Blood oozed from between his thick fingers. Vinconzo fared little better, tunic stained with wide patches of dark red as he swung his chain again and again without effect, unable to cope with the hunter's acrobatics.

Drur ran wide a semi-circle, putting Wim Tid between himself and the ship. He made a noise of triumph. No further obstruction blocked his view. Wim Tid landed again, and Drur shot a wide bolt of white heat toward the hunter. The insect man flattened himself against the soggy ground. The bolt soared high, missing the bounty hunter and detonating against the ship's crumpled bow. There was a moment of stillness as all paused to watch black smoke pouring from point of impact. A chorus of screams sounded.

Corint spoke, "Do I hear the crew? I thought we were outside. My visual acuity is drastically reduced while traveling in this state. At the moment I can only see a hand grasping the box's handle."

Drur stared as the crew emerged. Twisted figures, hunched and loping, poured from the opening in the hull. Their state was even more plainly wretched in the light of day, maddened eyes set in faces wracked with seeping wounds, rotten tongues lolling from slack jaws as they gibbered and slavered.

Sihma cursed, "Oh, wonderful shot, wizard! Superb!"

"We are all doing our best here, Sihma!"

The sight of the crew transfixed Wim Tid. He bent low, preparing to bound again as the horde shambled closer. The crew moved fast, running forward with low strides, hands grasping at the ground.

There was a scream of inchoate rage from behind the hunter. Plom swung the tulwar with all his might, brute force compensating for his ineptness. The blow was low, catching the insect man on his upper

thigh. The heavy blade shattered the stiff chitin and sailed through the flesh underneath, lopping the leg clean off. Wim tumbled to the ground. Sihma grabbed Plom roughly by the shirt and pulled him toward safety. Rep and Vinconzo leaned on each other, making for the tree line. Drur, Sihma, and Plom sprinted behind, soon overtaking the pair. Plom looked back.

There in a sea of tooth and nail, Wim fought frantically, long arms flailing. His gaunt form was pulled down underneath the savage throng. Their eyes were wide with animal rage as they tore the bounty hunter to bits.

Drur marveled at the horror of it as he watched from over his shoulder.

“Gods’ mercy! Were he not engaged to kill me, my heart would be overcome with pity.”

A shadow passed over the group. Drur looked to see the drullok running forward on its squat legs. The thing roared as it bore down on the group.

Sihma moaned, “Gods, what next?”

She loosed an arrow that sunk deep in the creature’s long neck. It shook its head in apparent annoyance and continued forward. Drur sent a bolt of energy that dissipated without reaching its target.

“Out of energy!”

Vinconzo took a step toward the approaching beast and spun his chain again. The effort showed on his face, set with deep lines and streaked with blood and sweat. The blades whistled in the air. The drullok reared on its hind legs and leapt forward. The chain hit its target, and the weighted end spun once then twice around the thick neck. The beast made a gasping sound as Vinconzo pulled the chain taut. He reeled back with all his great strength. The drullok shook its head, the force of it threatening to pull the giant off his feet. Rep stumbled forward, grasping his friend around the waist, lending his weight to anchor his friend.

Vinconzo cried out from the strain of it. Veins bulged across his neck and face as muscles rippled under the scaled hide of the drullok. The creature was winning the tug of war. Its thick skin was holding against the chain’s wicked blades. Vincozo’s great boots made furrows in the soft ground as he was pulled along. He cried out

again, turning, throwing the chain over his shoulder and pushing himself. Rep pushed too, a mountain of muscle straining against the beast. There was a tearing sound. The giants flew forward as the chain went slack. Great gouts of black blood poured from the beast's severed neck. It fell with a wet thud on the soft ground and was still.

The giants lay in a puddle of muck, panting and dazed. The three pulled at them, urging them back on their feet.

Drur implored, "Come! The crew is done with Wim Tid! They advance!"

The once human things swarmed again across the field. The group neared the tree line just as the crew fell upon the drullok's warm carcass. They tore and bit, flinging gore to the sky as they feasted. The five limped into the jungle with awkward haste.

Corint spoke, "What is happening? It all sounds terribly exciting."

IX

The group nursed their wounds on the winding journey back to Shkan. The giants were slow to recover. Sihma, Plom and Drur manned the rods to ensure they had enough to eat.

Corint was hungry for information and asked questions constantly. It was disappointed to find that no one onboard had extensive knowledge of history or science as it knew it. It seemed to grow despondent until viewing Togun and Leli playing chess one afternoon on the table amidships. Corint spent the remainder of the journey in contests with one or both of them.

The afternoon before their arrival Togun held a conference with Sihma and Drur. Shkan was a dicey proposition for the pair and for Plom as well. The skipper suggested that the three camp on the north bank while he would dock and then hire a cart to take the whole group to the monastery.

The three spent two days idling under the low trees until Togun arrived in a long cart pulled by a sole mammot. Garish murals of the god Ashna decorated tasseled side panels above eight wide wheels. The journey across the steppe was spent taking turns playing chess with Corint with the board and pieces that Togun had brought upon the brain's earnest request. Sihma and Plom picked up the game quickly. Sihma favored a romantic style, readily sacrificing pieces to

gain the smallest advantage. Plom played a more conservative, pawn centered defense. Corint adjudged them fair novices. After losing three times in a row, Drur declared the game an ignoble waste of time.

A nomad patrol intercepted the cart and sent riders back to the camp with instructions to send the host to the monastery.

The jagged peaks of the Krixxis loomed ahead. Plom started wistfully at the knot of buildings high in the crags. Beneath, the nomads had made a rough camp in the cliff's long shadow. Sihma rejoined her people as the cart reached its destination. With the sudden stillness Plom felt a wave of anxiety. He was nearly home.

The camp was suffused with a festival atmosphere, colored slightly with worry over how the monks would respond to the party's demands. Ulker, Togun, Sihma, and Drur argued over what figure to quote the monks in their extortion attempt. Drur thought the first proposed figure was too high. Togun favored greater demands, assuming the monks would try to negotiate. Ulker, with a hundred warriors behind him, carried the day. The asking price was to be 10,000 pieces of gold and a dozen gems.

At Drur's urging, Plom stepped forward and pulled the line that rang the bell atop the cliff. After long minutes the basket descended. Inside was a small chalkboard and chalk. Plom read the message aloud.

"What do you want?"

Plom wiped the board clean and wrote:

It is Plom. I have returned with the book. It is now in possession of the nomads. They wish 10,000 gold pieces and a dozen gems for its delivery.

He placed the board into the basket and rang the bell. The basket made its slow ascent. It returned bearing Yeleet, the earnest assistant to the abbot. The young man was covered in nervous sweat as he surveyed the field of nomads. He spoke in a reedy voice, "Where is Plom?"

Plom stepped forward, "Here."

"Plom? You are unrecognizable! What is this?" He reached forward to touch Plom's thin beard.

"It's the bread. It is a long story. What are your instructions?"

"I am to verify the book is genuine."

Plom gently unwrapped the book. Yeleet gasped and immediately turned his eyes away. "Put it away! It is the real thing!" He reached over the edge and pulled the line furiously. The basket ascended.

Ulker paced as they waited. The nomads fingered weapons as Drur sat leaning against one of the cart's great wheels.

The creak of the pulley far above quieted the crowd. The basket descended quickly, landing with a loud thump. Ulker peered over the edge and yelled in triumph. Plom retrieved the chalkboard and read aloud.

"This is half what you have requested. Place Plom and the book in the basket, and the other half will be delivered."

Drur stood and walked to stand next to Plom. Around them was chaos as Ulker and his warriors rifled through the sack of gold, arguing over how best to count it. Sihma looked up from the fray. She joined the pair as Drur placed a hand on Plom's shoulder.

"Well, young Plom. I can scarce believe it, but my oath is fulfilled and I yet live to talk about it. I wish you the best. I hope your order recognizes your heroism."

Sihma spoke next, "Best of luck to you, strange one."

Plom looked to the wizard and then to the Sihma. He looked up to the cliff's edge. He could just barely make out a line of bald heads peering over. Plom took up the chalk. Drur peered over the young man's shoulder as he wrote:

I have tasted candy. I experienced the act by which human beings reproduce with two women, possibly three. I fear I would contaminate the Order, and thus I cannot return to my old life. Say goodbye to Fress for me.

He tossed the board and the sacred book into the empty basket and pulled the line.

Drur spoke, "So that is that. I cannot say I am surprised."

"Do you think the Goddess will forgive me?"

"If she is like the women in the book, then I imagine she is immensely accommodating. I am sure she has forgiven you already."

All watched as the basket descended again, rope taut with weight. The nomads yelled again as it hit the ground. Sihma made sure Togun's interest was paid out as Ulker ordered the treasure parceled

off into smaller sacks for transport. The skipper shook hands warmly with the young woman and stepped aboard the cart.

Drur addressed Ulker as the chieftain supervised the loading of the guhn. "I do not want to seem avaricious, but I have faced much hardship in this quest and I was wondering if you could put me in the way of a few coins. As it so happens I am penniless at the moment. I spent the last of the boy's wealth to secure our passage into the jungle."

"No arrangement was made to that effect beforehand."

"Not as such, no. But I thought it was implied..."

Ulker cut him off with a brusque wave. His lieutenants placed calloused hands on their weapons as Drur came forward a step.

"You should leave well enough alone, wizard, before my pleasant mood evaporates."

Drur threw his hands up. He turned to Togun. The old captain snapped the reins, bringing the mammot around.

"Captain, pardon my presumption but I think I am deserving of at least a small portion of the proceedings."

"Oh? As I recall gentlemen aren't concerned with such vulgar matters! Here, why don't you take this?" Togun reached back and fished Corint from the cart. He tossed the box to Drur.

Ulker called a feast to celebrate Sihma's success. The nomads mounted amid whoops of triumph. The guhns clucked and whistled, infected with their owners' good cheer. Sihma waved fondly to Drur and Plom as she kicked her guhn into a sprint.

The wizard shouted hoarsely, "Sihma, wait! We are destitute!" His cries went unheard. The throng of mounted warriors rode away in cloud of dust and noise.

Drur and Plom stood at the base of the cliff as the horde receded in the distance. Corint was heavy in the wizard's hand, dangling by its handle.

Plom spoke. "What do we do now?"

Corint spoke, "I don't suppose Togun left the game and pieces with us, did he?"

Drur restrained an impulse to throw the box as hard as he could across the dusty waste. He spoke, "As a matter of fact, he didn't."

"Oh, that's a shame."

The third moon was chasing the sun across the sky as they began walking. They were two small figures adrift in an ocean of muted browns, one bearing a small box.

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Rescuing Women

By KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

Whether carried off by the Bug Eyed Monsters on the covers or chasing them down with ray guns, whether reading the pulps or writing for them, women have been a part of SF—will the women of yesteryear vanish to suit the narrative of today?!

Apparently, women working in science fiction today need a hand up. For the past few years, women writers who got their start after the year 2000 have complained that they need to use male pen names and initials to get published. They need Kickstarter help to get into magazines, and they need assistance to sell their fiction to the sf world at large.

Male writers and editors whose careers started this century are more than happy to extend that hand—because, I guess, those men have joined all the other men at the top of the heap, apparently with no effort at all.

Everyone is so busy storming the barricades that they're ignoring the fact that bestselling and award-winning women writers already work in the field. Women—without using pen names or initials—have written about strong women in science fiction *for decades*.

We women—those of us sitting with the men at the top of that mythical heap—have become invisible. The bestsellers, the award winners, the women who have dominated the field since the 1980s and are still active in it, we apparently are beneath the notice of the new generation of writers. Even the women who edit major magazines (a tip of the hat to Sheila Williams at *Asimov's*), edit, run, and *own* major publishing companies (another tip of the hat, this time to Betsy Wolheim of Daw and Toni Weiskopf of Baen) have become invisible.

Ironically, we're perfectly willing to extend a hand to those women who want a start in the field. Heck, we're happy to extend our hands

to the men too—and often do. In fact, we've extended our hands to the LGBT community long before it had an acronym.

Although, to be fair, we probably deserve this mistreatment.

After all, we did the same thing to the women who came before us.

In fact, we might've treated them even worse than the younger generation is treating us. That younger generation is just looking past us as if we don't exist.

We've relegated *our* founding mothers to busty women who were carried off, kicking and screaming, by bug-eyed monsters. We've complained for decades about the art on sf pulp covers, without really looking at it.

Before I go further, let me say categorically, much of that art is breathtakingly racist, particularly with the rendering of Asians before, during, and after the Second World War. A whole lot of the art is eye-popping: women in a state of undress, being whipped or chained by some villain.

The women are busty. The men have muscles on their muscles. Almost everyone is white.

But...if you really look at those covers, you will see the unexpected. You will see that women aren't the only ones being carried off by bug-eyed monsters. Men are too. And who is running after that monster, trying to save the poor he-man who can't extricate himself? A competent woman holding a blaster, demanding that evil alien put the man down.

Men didn't draw that art to subjugate women. Men *and* women drew the art to sell magazines—to men *and* women. One of the most famous female pulp artists, Margaret Brundage, is slowly being rediscovered. Vanguard Productions published a book of her art titled *The Alluring Art of Margaret Brundage* three years ago.

Scroll through some of her covers, and you'll see that she illustrated the work of some of the best writers of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. One of Brundage's most famous covers illustrates one of the most famous stories by C.L. Moore, "Black God's Kiss," first published in *Weird Tales* in 1934. And why is that important?

Because "Black God's Kiss" introduces Jirel of Joiry, one of the most famous fantasy heroines of the mid-twentieth century. Jirel was a sword-and-sorcery fantasy heroine who ruled her own country

(Joiry) and who could have gone toe-to-toe with Conan or any other S&S *male* hero—and beat the crap out of him.

Jirel's creator, C.L. Moore, happened to be a woman as well—perhaps the most influential woman to write science fiction and fantasy in the early period because C.L. Moore—Catherine Lucille Moore—also influenced other writers, including Leigh Brackett (a woman) and someone named Ray Bradbury.

Oh, and let's dispel that myth that constantly follows poor Catherine Moore everywhere she goes. C.L. Moore didn't write under initials because sf was a male-dominated genre and she had to hide her gender. She wrote under initials because, at the time, the pulp magazines were disreputable. She had a real job, in a bank, and she was terrified she'd be fired if anyone knew she was moonlighting as a writer.

You see, there was this little thing called the Depression, and jobs were hard to come by, so Miss Catherine Lucille Moore decided that caution was the better part of valor and put initials on her byline for deniability.

She knew a lot about the magazines she submitted stories to. She knew, for example, that women had been editing sf since the modern sf era began. Miriam Bourne acted as both associate editor and managing editor of *Amazing Stories* in 1928—y'know. The magazine credited with starting modern sf? The one edited by Hugo Gernsback? That magazine? The person who worked side by side with Gernsback, and got credit for it *at the time*, was a woman.

The editor who bought C.L. Moore's first story at *Weird Tales* was a man, but his successor at the magazine was a woman named Dorothy McIlwraith, who edited the magazine for *fourteen years*. She retired before most of the women who wrote sf in the latter half of the twentieth century were born.

Those of us who came of writing age in the 1980s and 1990s also believed we were storming the barricades. I remember asking if I needed to use initials to publish sf. Fortunately, I asked my college buddy, Kevin J. Anderson, who was a student of the field, even at the ripe old age of 19. He laughed at me, and introduced me to my female predecessors.

I've been using my full name ever since.

It's become very clear to me in the past few years that women tend to get lost to history. Some of that has to do with the changes in publishing in the past twenty years. Publishing companies stopped reprinting the award-nominated and award-winning stories in comprehensive volumes every year long about 1992. So all of the women who've won awards for their writing—including two most decorated writers in sf history, Connie Willis and Lois McMaster Bujold—have the record of that particular accomplishment vanish.

The people who compile year's best anthologies do so before the awards get announced, and seem to choose stories by women (including the award-nominees and award-winners) less often than stories by men.

I just completed an entire book for Baen trying to reclaim some of that lost history. Called *Women of Futures Past*, the book showcases some of the best *female* writers of the 20th Century, and has a long introductory essay about the influence of women in the field.

I plan to do more projects like that. Because women do get marginalized—by everyone. And it's time to stop that.

Not only do the writers get marginalized, but so do their female characters. Jirel of Joiry is an *amazing* woman. And she's not alone. Read anything by Leigh Brackett, and watch the strong women parade by. Even if they're minor characters. They're always strong, always interesting.

Leigh Brackett had her fingers in everything and influenced pretty much everyone. She taught Ray Bradbury how to write. (He says this, not me.) She wrote iconic character after iconic character, often standalones, whose strength and power and sass is just plain breathtaking.

She also wrote screenplays. You want to see a representative Brackett woman in film? Pay attention to Angie Dickinson's character Feathers in *Rio Bravo*. Her dialogue crackles and she leaves poor John Wayne flummoxed.

Rather the same reaction that Han Solo has to Princess Leia in *The Empire Strikes Back*—which Brackett wrote the first-draft screenplay of.

But those are easy to point to. What's harder to point to is just one strong female character in her fiction. Because *all* of the women she

wrote about were strong. And while writing these amazing science fiction stories, she managed to inspire writers of the next several generations. Writers who list her as an influence include Michael Moorcock, John Brunner, Jack Vance, Samuel R. Delany, Roger Zelazny, Harlan Ellison, Philip Jose Farmer, Marian Zimmer Bradley, Gene Wolfe, Tanith Lee, and Andre Norton.

Oh, Andre Norton. Another woman. Who wrote about strong women. Who influenced everyone from me to Lois McMaster Bujold to the recipient of this year's Grand Master Award, C.J. Cherryh. Long before I knew that Andre Norton had been born Alice Mary Norton, I knew I loved her fiction. I loved those women who piloted spaceships and explored strange new worlds long before some TV show appropriated that phrase.

Norton's spaceship captains weren't the only female professionals to appear in the pulps and the digests and the sf magazines of the time. Women of all professions dominate sf fiction—from the beginning of that fiction until now. Women do most everything that men do (only backwards and in heels—oops, wait. Different subgenre). And it wasn't just women who created powerful female characters. Men did too.

In fact, one of the most famous women in all of science fiction—Dr. Susan Calvin—came from the brain of none other than Isaac Asimov. As I was researching this article, I found a very stupid essay in a major publication about the fact that there were only three female scientists ever in sf.

Apparently, the person who wrote the essay needed to have the word “scientist” in the story, because he ignored all the female characters who actually *worked* in the sciences. For example, Asimov doesn't describe Calvin as a scientist. She was a “robopsychologist” who happened to have done post-graduate work in cybernetics. But I guess cybernetics only counts as science when someone labels it “science.”

It's that kind of ignorance that has caused women to vanish from the histories of sf—both as writers and as characters. We get ignored or misunderstood.

Even when we're trying to “correct” the problem of the way women are treated in sf.

Over forty years ago, now, Pamela Sargent published seminal volumes of fiction called *Women of Wonder*. Her agenda—and she definitely had one—was to show that women have written sf from the beginning, and that women have written sf *about women*.

Ever since then, anthology editors felt that women could *only* write about gender and women's issues. Look up women in sf, and you'll find anthology after anthology that took *Women of Wonder* as prescriptive rather than as a corrective.

Women who write space opera or sword and sorcery or action adventure, women who have hit bestseller lists with that fiction, women who have huge fandoms in sf, generally don't get included in those anthologies.

Nor do their predecessors, from Pauline Ashwell to Katherine MacLean to Zenna Henderson. Most of the writing by those women is long out of print. I'm hoping at some point to bring back some of their stories, so that readers can encounter the brilliance of Lysistrata "Lizzie" Lee in Ashwell's "Unwillingly To School" or meet Zenna Henderson's People and the humans who help them survive.

But not every female character kicks butt and takes names. Sometimes the female characters in science fiction and fantasy follow the model created by Edgar Rice Burroughs in *Princess of Mars*. Dejah Thoris, the princess of the title, often acts as a damsel in distress in the Mars stories, but just as often she proves that she can rescue a hero with the best of them. If you actually look at these female characters, they get rescued and they rescue in equal measure.

Fans know this. As I started on the book for Baen, which I was initially calling The Women in Science Fiction project, I got letter after letter from fans and readers, recommending their favorite female writers or their favorite female characters. You can find some of this information on the Women in Science Fiction website (<http://www.womeninsciencefiction.com/>) that I started (and keep up when I have time).

It's a great place to search out writers you might never have heard of and discover great science fiction and fantasy.

Yeah, some of the stories listed are dated. Some of the attitudes make me sad because they are so reflective of their time—

particularly when it comes to people of color. But much of the fiction you'll find still holds up. That's the one cool thing about sf and fantasy *adventure* fiction—it doesn't have an agenda besides entertainment. And it entertains so well that it still seems fresh today.

We lose our history—not just in the writing and the fiction, but also in the real world. And we forget that the women of the 1920s had just gotten the vote. They led what's now being called The First Wave of Feminism. They redefined what it meant to be a woman.

Their daughters survived the Depression and became the inspiration for Rosie the Riveter. Their granddaughters led the second wave of feminism, helping women change the laws so that this current generation of women can play professional sports, can sue if they get discriminated against on the job, and can fight sexual harassment through the courts if necessary.

The women in our past were strong and mighty. They wrote about strong and mighty women. So did the men who loved those strong and mighty female writers.

At some point, we all need to stop assuming we know what happened in a previous generation and actually do the research. In this instance, the research—reading sf and fantasy—is fun and enlightening.

There's lots of great lost heroines in our past. Time to revive them.

Or at least acknowledge them.

Or maybe just remember them for what they were.

International bestselling author Kristine Kathryn Rusch has won or been nominated for every single major award in the science fiction community. Her latest novels completed the Anniversary Day saga in her Retrieval Artist universe. The former editor of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, she now edits Fiction River and special projects in sf, writes a weekly blog on the business of publishing, and publishes many books under pen names in other genres.

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Paperback \$11.99, ebook \$4.30

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Notes from the Nest

By P. Alexander (Ed.)

What an issue! We're going all out to make 2016 a huge year for not just Cirsova but science fiction in general! Issue 1 made quite a splash, earning praises wherever it was covered, and I'm sure that Issue 2 will be received just as warmly.

I'd been sitting on *Images of the Goddess* for some time, as Schuyler had first shown it to me last fall, so I'm thrilled to finally be able to share it with you all. In this issue, we welcomed back Cirsova vets Brian K. Lowe and James Hutchings as well as newcomers S.H. Mansouri, Michael Tierney, Adrian Cole and Karl Gallagher.

Getting to feature Adrian Cole's *The Sealed City* in this issue is especially cool for me, as it was almost made to order—how often do you pick up and read an amazing SFF trilogy from decades ago and then have its author send you an all new story in that setting?!

It's probably not a good idea to spend each of these raving about our contributors, especially as we may commit the sin of omission when it comes to the nitty gritty details (so suffice it to say, everyone is amazing and we are happy to have them be a part of this).

For those who haven't been following us online, we're moving to a quarterly publication schedule—largely because we got so many excellent submissions and decided that it was insane to only buy one issue when we had so many top notch stories to choose from.

A few have noted the cliff-hanger ending of *At the Feet of Neptune's Queen* in our last issue; despite our general policy of not buying serial work (though we're obviously making an exception for Hutchings' long-form poem), I can let you know that Ch'Or's adventures ARE continuing; Mr. Strongjohn wants to assure those who enjoyed the story but felt that it left them hanging that he is working on the follow-up, *Magelords of Ruach*; its absence from this and possibly the next couple issues is due to its length and space concerns. Rather than be broken up serially, it will likely appear as a featured Novella in 2017.

Help keep us going! Buy copies for your friends and family, and support our sponsors.

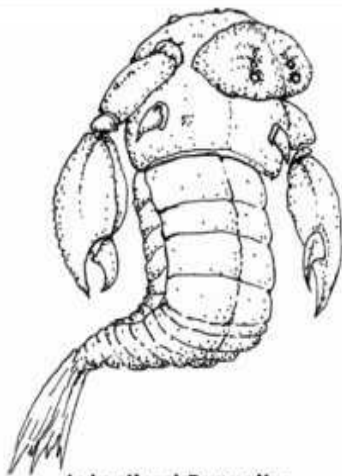
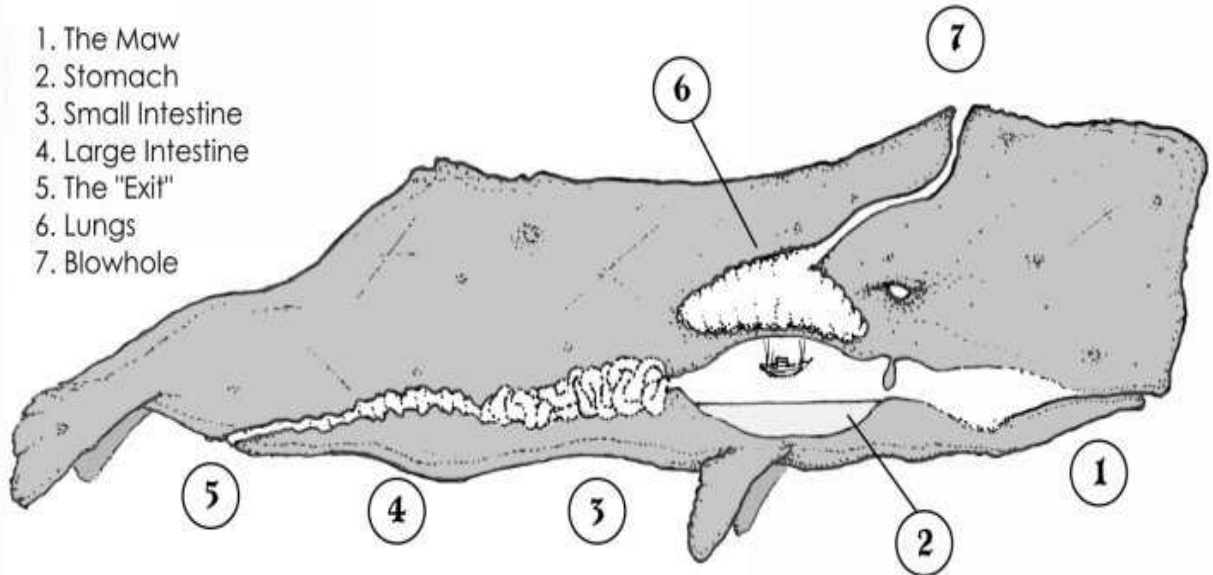
We'll see you in a couple months for our fall Pirates issue. Yarr!

-P.A., Ed.

Get in touch with us and let us know what you think! Visit cirsova.wordpress.com for reviews of old pulp stories, board games, tabletop rpgs, game design and news about the Cirsova magazine. Want to have a letter published in our next issue? Visit us online for details!

In the Belly of the Beast

1. The Maw
2. Stomach
3. Small Intestine
4. Large Intestine
5. The "Exit"
6. Lungs
7. Blowhole



Intestinal Parasite

HD 3+3*

AC 3

ATT: 2 Claws + Special, 1d6/1d6

Move: 20' Land, 80' Water

Save: F3

Morale: 9

If both claw attacks hit, victim must save vs. paralysis or suffer 2d6 drowning damage.

In a gush of seawater and debris the party is swallowed by the maw. They find themselves in the stomach, a lake of weak acid. Bits of bone and shell dot the surface. The PCs are attacked immediately by the whale's intestinal parasites. Hanging above, suspended by lines and grapples, is a lifeboat. Its sole occupant is an elderly man in scholar's robes. Dr. Ferfelwit mistakes the PCs for his students, studying life in the ocean's depths. Fragments of the Captain's log reveal he was a passenger on a vessel sunk two weeks ago. The doctor and several sailors survived. The sailors rigged the boat aloft to preserve it from the acid while they plotted escape. Their fate is unknown though bits of sailor's garb may be found in the small intestine. If the PCs take the doctor with them he can be returned to his family for a small reward. His knowledge of anatomy will be useful if the PCs ask. The party may elect to cut through the fleshy ceiling to exit via the lungs and blowhole. Doing so will trigger earthquake like effects. Exiting through the digestive tract the PCs will be under attack from the parasites, a 25% chance of D6 parasites per turn. While within the large intestine any PC who strikes the flesh walls with a sharp object will trigger a violent evacuation. Between the acid and the parasites nothing can survive long inside the beast, save gems and diamonds. Amidst the bile and filth of the intestines the party has a 20% chance of finding D4 gems per turn of searching.

JOHN E. BOYLE



QUEEN'S
HEIR

A FANTASY SET AMONG
THE HITTITES AT
THE END OF THE BRONZE AGE