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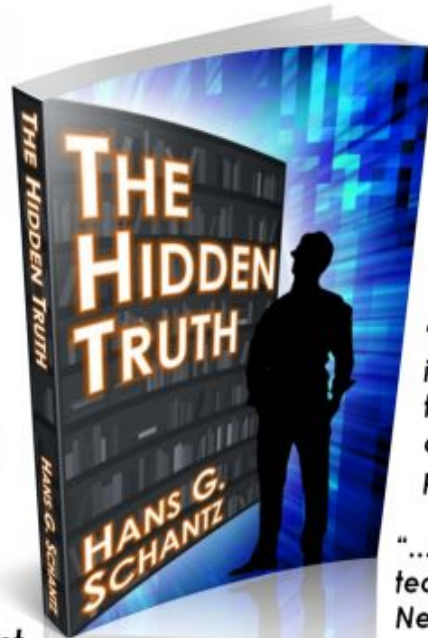
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My Name is John Carter (Part 3)	James Hutchings
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"A really fun read with interesting tie ins to actual history."

"Excellent story with a lot of interesting technical details to go with well fleshed out characters and a rapid pace."

"...the best science fiction techno-thriller since whatever Neil Stephenson's last book was..."

**-KEN HOLDER,
L. NEIL SMITH'S
THE LIBERTARIAN ENTERPRISE**

Wall Wardens

By LYNN RUSHLAU

All that stands between the city and a fiery death for all within are the barrier wall and the wardens who maintain it! The wardens fear one of their own is responsible when breaches begin to appear; reluctant warden Maldean finds himself set-up!

Eyes closed, Maldean slouched in the seat and trusted the mooncycler to reach its destination. He kept the screen opaque to prevent motion sickness—and depression.

The seat's straps jerked him back hard when the 'cycler reached the track's end. Maldean sighed, scooped up a quartz wand, and shoved it in the top slot on the dash. The upper half of the orb before him grew transparent. Golden symbols spluttered and solidified on the transparent surface. Maldean shoved the second piece of quartz into place.

Phosphorescence covered the screen before him. Maldean sighed again and finally raised his eyes to the view outside. The wall rose eighty feet above him and was not even a fraction more interesting through the phosphorescent glow. Sure, Carians needed a magical barricade between the living world and fires that raged all around their tiny bubble of a homeland. Life couldn't exist without the dome. But why must *he* work to maintain the ugly, solid edge?

Maldean gritted his teeth. His gaze rolled over the screen. Nothing marred the dull slab. He shifted the gears. The 'cycler whipped around to the left, connected with the perpendicular track, and rotated so his seat and screen faced the wall again.

Maldean's stomach protested the spin. He braked, closed his eyes, and pinched the pressure point on his left wrist until his stomach settled. He took a deep breath, eased up on the brake, and shifted into the slowest gear. The 'cycler crept left slow enough that his stomach barely noticed, and Maldean could focus on watching the wall through the phosphorus. He hummed his favorite concerto

while he worked. Humming couldn't compare with playing, but the music helped with the boredom.

About two hours into his day, a tiny smudge of bright pink no bigger than a fingerprint blipped on his screen. A pockmark in the wall. The raging lava without had damaged the dome's magic.

He raised his arm and traced a couple of the gold symbols on his left with his middle finger. The symbols flared bright white. A few seconds later, his view was entirely green again. Wasn't that exciting?

Maldean swung the repair log across his lap and noted the repair. Fuck, he hated this job. Maintaining the wall would suck the soul out of anyone. If the ugliness didn't kill him, the monotony promised to. The filtered sun barely peeked over the top of the wall, and all he could think about was the ale he aimed to consume tonight while playing cards with Oien and Terthan. Living for card games and ale. Hardly the life he'd dreamed of.

He shoved the log into its slot. It caught and refused to move further. Maldean cursed. He could never line the damned thing up exactly. As he pulled it free, a siren deafened him.

Maldean stared blankly at the log's slot. He always missed, but never set off an alarm before. The inanity of the thought washed over him. His head jerked up. Phosphorous green without a problem to be seen met his gaze.

The alarm gave way to a voice. "Breach in Sector C. Breach in Sector C. Units in B and D should provide immediate assistance."

Shit. He was unit D. Maldean's fingers danced over the symbols that glowed along the top of the dash. He marked how far he'd gotten on his rounds, pressed his thumb on the symbol at the bottom of the dash to acknowledge receipt of the order, and changed gears.

The mooncycler pivoted so quickly that he left his stomach facing the other direction. The world blurred before him. Bile rose in his throat. He yanked the crystals from their slots, dropped them in their receptacle, and set the 'cycler on full speed.

About five minutes later, his 'cycler jingled and announced crossing into Sector C. He picked up the first quartz to make the orb transparent. He needed to not crash into another 'cycler during an

emergency, no matter how nausea-inducing the bumpy ride of a mooncycler.

Red filled his horizon. “Wha—?”

Maldean’s stomach turned over as he slammed his foot on the brake. That was bad. Really bad. The terrain around the wall was gloomy. Grey wall. Grey dirt. Grey rocks and pebbles. Nothing grew out here.

The orb-shaped mooncyclers were white like their namesake. The wall wardens’ uniforms mirrored the colors they worked with: white, grey and green for the phosphorescent glow of magic.

Nothing red.

Nothing red, but the flames and lava and the great drakes kept out by the wall.

And yet red glowed on his horizon.

He stomped on the accelerator and clenched his fists as the red grew closer and rose to fill his view. He jumped out of the ’cycler before it stopped moving.

Flames roared the entire height of the wall in a breach a good six-feet wide. Maldean stared.

In five years condemned to monitoring the wall, this was his second breach repair. In his own first year, a fellow trainee had panicked over a pockmark and bungled the repair spell. The pockmark cracked the wall straight to the ground. Maldean had been worried at the time, but now realized that crack had been nothing. His own finger wouldn’t have fit through that narrow tear.

Lava oozed through the lower half of this breach, seeping across the level ground and dripping into the track where Betony’s mooncycler was parked.

Betony sprawled, half in the lava, several feet from her ’cycler. Maldean flew across the distance, gripped her arms, and dragged her away from the creeping lava. Heat seeped through his protective gloves, which made his next decision for him.

Maldean dragged Betony inland about ten feet past his own ’cycler and stripped her protective suit off to reveal bright pink skin. He hissed through his teeth. Shit. He lacked the medical training to do anything for her.

Carrying her contaminated gear back to his 'cycler, he heard the whirr of a 'cycler in bounce mode. He stashed her gear in a sterile receptacle, sealed it, and turned to meet the new arrivals.

A large ambulance and several mooncyclers bounded to a landing. Flame tattoos stretching ear to ear marked every last arrival as an Adept or higher. Slamming on helmets, most ran towards the flames. Three rushed to Betony.

Maldean met them at Betony's side, smiled to see Oien among them, and explained what little he'd managed to do. Two medics swept her up and hurried back to the ambulance.

"Grab your helmet," Oien ordered.

Maldean ran back to his 'cycler. The whirring of the ambulance grew louder. He glanced over in time to see it taking off.

Lava lapped around his boots as he joined the others. The adepts had sealed the breach about a foot high from the bottom, so less lava oozed through, but cleanup would have to wait until the breach was sealed.

Maldean moved to the left of the last worker to the left of the breach and plunged the crystal wand that hung from his waist into the wall. The wall fizzled and spat sparks at him. Once it stopped fizzling, a white light radiated from the crystal. Frowning, Maldean stared at the crystal, directing the light with his intention. The light twitched a little, before bleeding only towards the rift.

A great roar rattled him almost off his feet. He pulled the crystal half out of the wall as he turned and froze. The nearest workers scrambled away from the rift.

The head of a drake peered through the wall. A brilliant crimson crest rose from a head as large as Maldean was tall. Flames danced in its citrine eyes. Its roar knocked half the adepts off their feet.

Ears ringing and mouth agape, Maldean stumbled away from the wall. He'd never seen a real drake before.

Oien dashed forward across Maldean's vision and broke his mesmerized trance. Oien unhooked a green glass bottle from his tool belt, raised the nozzle, and shot magic-enhanced water in the drake's face.

The magnificent creature roared and drew back to safety behind the wall. Lava sprayed and splashed. A glob hit Maldean in the

chest. Drips splattered against his faceguard.

He swabbed at the faceguard with his sleeve until a hand clamped down on his shoulder. A third-grade Adept Maldean couldn't recognize through his blurred faceguard mouthed something at him. Maldean shook his head and touched his ear.

The Adept grabbed the crystal hanging from Maldean's belt, set it in his hands, and shoved him gently towards the wall. Oh. Back to work.

Sealing the breach and removing the spilled lava took the rest of the day. The sky was a deep dark blue behind the withdrawn sun when Maldean steered his 'cycler into the lot back at headquarters. He dragged himself out and followed everyone else into the locker room.

His growling stomach pushed him quickly through his shower and dressing. He veered around a couple of adepts clustered in the doorway, but a hand shot out and halted him.

"Straight to the healers, now," Oien said.

"I'm not hurt. I'm starving." Maldean's stomach growled in agreement.

"It won't take long then, will it?"

By the time the healers cleared him for duty, Maldean's head throbbed, and his empty stomach ached. Slightly dizzy, he stumbled down to the cafeteria and about wept to find a meal still in progress. He took a seat at Oien's nearly empty table.

Maldean didn't look back up until his plate was mostly empty. The cafeteria was mostly empty. Terthan had likely eaten and left long before they'd returned from the wall.

Begging exhaustion, Oien bailed on him after dinner. Maldean rubbed his still-pounding head. He'd assumed hunger the cause of the headache, but it must have been the use of so much magic today. He should have gone to bed, too.

Except he wanted ale and his usual card games. He needed to dull his thoughts. He'd enjoyed today. How awful was that? But he'd actually been using magic. Gotten to do something real and important. Hells, he'd seen his first drake! He felt elated after the day's events and awful to be feeling that way. Ale and games would be a great distraction.

He left the cafeteria on a mission to find Terthan.

No one answered the knock at Terthan's door. Terthan wasn't in the billiards room or the library or part of any of the chess or card games in the parlors. He checked every place he could think of before conceding defeat. Might as well go to bed.

Two adepts stood in the hall outside his room.

"You'll need to come with us."

Maldean frowned. "Where?"

"Please come with us." They led him back to Chief Mavess's office, where seven people stood waiting for him. Chief Mavess sat at her desk, her hands folded before her and a grim, closed expression on her face.

Heart pounding, Maldean froze in the doorway. Two glowering lieutenants stood against the wall to her left opposite two captains. Two other captains, including his, Corliss, stood behind Mavess. Maldean had never seen so many officers in one place outside a ceremony.

The Adepts pushed Maldean through the door and shut it behind him. They did not follow him in.

"Sit," Mavess ordered.

Maldean sat. Everyone stared at him.

"You worked Sector C yesterday."

Maldean nodded. "I did."

"And what? Missed the tear in the wall? Didn't notice the bright pink warning in the phosphorescence?"

Maldean's heart thumped in his chest. In all the excitement, he never made the connection that C had been his responsibility the past few days. "It wasn't there. I had one pockmark. No, two. I fixed them and reported them. You should have the record."

"The tablet noted a pockmark, *repaired*, at the exact location where today's breach occurred and grievously injured Betony. Do you dislike Betony?"

"I barely know her." She was only in her first year. Wasn't her inexperience a much more likely cause?

"One would think you'd take time to get to know your coworkers, but you don't. You hate this job, don't you?" Corliss asked.

Maldean turned to stare at her.

“We know you’ve filed protests with the job advisory board against your assignment here. A witness has come forth to report on things you’ve said. Derogatory remarks about your superiors and those in charge all the way up to the Sage Council. Statements that you hate the government. You want Cariaran to fall and decided to help it along by sabotaging the wall. You want it to come down.”

Jaw hanging open, Maldean stared at Chief Mavess. “I’ve never said anything like that.”

“Your protest is on record.”

“A protest of my assignment here, requesting a different job, nothing seditious. I don’t feel that way. I don’t hate anyone. Yeah, I’m frustrated with the employment board. My protest states this assignment is not a good fit for me. I want to be one of the musicians who channels the Great Crystals. I don’t care about politics, and I’d be crazy to want to take down the wall! Cariaran wouldn’t exist without it!”

Glances were exchanged around the room.

“Which suicide cult do you belong to?” Corliss asked.

Maldean shook his head. “I don’t—”

“The Holders of Last Promise?”

“NO!” How could they suggest he belonged to a group whose only point in life was to throw themselves off the wall into the fire? He had worked on the wall for five years! He’d have met his death by now if that were his goal.

“The Patriots of the Natural Course?”

“No, I don’t—”

“The Draken Coiled?”

“The what? No! I’ve never heard of—”

Chief Mavess opened a folder on her desk. “Would you call Terthan a friend?”

Startled, Maldean blurted, “Of course.”

“A good friend?”

“Yes.” He glanced around searching for an explanation of this line of questioning. Expressionless faces met his gaze.

“And you spend much of your free time with him?”

“Yes. We should be playing cards right now, but I couldn’t find him. What does this have to do with—”

“Terthan brought these statements of yours to our attention. Your *good* friend reported you. He says you caused this breach.”

Maldean’s jaw was in danger of completely detaching and falling from his face.

“Why should we doubt the report of your *good* friend?”

For the next few days, Maldean split his time between pacing a windowless cell and interrogations. No one believed his protests. He couldn’t fathom why Terthan’s lies were wholly accepted, but his truths couldn’t garner a shred of credence.

The only possible explanation he could come up with was that Terthan bore flames from his left ear to center of left cheek making him a committed member of the wall wardens. Terthan was one of them. Maldean held a flawless record for five year’s service at the wall, but he remained a tattoo-less outsider who protested the assignment on its annual renewal.

Alone with his own thoughts, he spiraled downward in melancholy and beat himself up for hours with the truth. He’d never played well enough for his dream job. He was stuck with the wall wardens because anyone not colorblind could tell the difference between pink and green. And anyone moderately intelligent could memorize the right glyphs to trace when needed.

His music lacked the soul, the spark, the spirit necessary to work directly with the Great Crystals responsible for Cariaran’s existence. He’d never be more than a wall warden. Which left the suicide cults looking like a more reasonable club to join.

But anger kept him from falling completely into despair. One of his best friends, one of the people who made life tolerable, framed him.

He wasn’t worried about being executed. They couldn’t kill him for treason. He hadn’t *done* anything. That truth would come out in the end. But the betrayal!

He’d considered Terthan his closest friend. Had all the time they’d spent together been lies? Was Oien his friend? Or was he creating and telling lies about Maldean, too?

Maldean tripped and almost fell into a wall.

No one had mentioned Oien in the interrogations.

He pounded on the door, pleading for an hour to talk to Chief Mavess before giving up. When the Adepts finally arrived to take him to his next interrogation, Maldean kept tripping them in his excitement to reach Mavess's office.

He spoke before the chief had a chance. "Does Oien back Terthan's stories about me?"

"Adept Oien is irrelevant to these matters." She flipped open a folder. "Now—"

"How can he be irrelevant? I never spent any time with Terthan when Oien wasn't there! If I actually had said any of this nonsense, Oien would know. He would have been there. Does he claim these lies are true too?"

No one said anything. Mavess stared at him. In his peripheral vision, Maldean caught exchanged looks between others in the room.

Maldean held his breath. His heart skipped every other breath. He must have been right. They'd never asked Oien to back Terthan's tales.

Worry tempered his elation. If Maldean wrongly trusted Terthan, his trust in Oien could be misplaced as well.

"Captain Corliss, please find Adept Oien and bring him to my office."

They left Maldean alone in his cell for the rest of the day and into the next. He no longer paced. His continued imprisonment implied that Oien supported Terthan's lies. For the first time, he considered that he could die. Be executed for nothing more than hating his job.

Part of him didn't care. What did his life hold worth living for?

Sometime around midmorning, wailing alarms filled the room. Grimacing, Maldean clamped his hands over his ears. The alarms howled on and on. A headache pounded behind his eyes in time with the pulses of the alarm. His door flew open.

Oien and another adept gestured for him to come with them. Maldean rose slowly. No one could suspect him of whatever this was. He'd been locked up!

They led him to the closest exit. Outside the alarm could still be heard, but the wailing no longer drowned out all other sounds.

“What is going on?” Maldean asked as the other adept left them.

“Another breach. Worse than the last. All wall wardens are called up,” Oien said.

Blood drained from Maldean’s face. Not the last Sector he worked? How could life be so cruel? “I didn’t do it! I swear—”

“Maldean, come on, we need your help with repairs. I collected your gear.” Oien grabbed Maldean’s arm and tugged him forward.

“Did they question you?” Maldean planted his feet. “Did you tell them it wasn’t me? That Terthan lied?”

“Yes! Now would you hurry? This is an emergency!”

’Cyclers weren’t intended for passengers, but Oien ordered Maldean into his—one of two remaining in the lot. The other adept disappeared with the last one.

Braced against the back wall, Maldean clung to a couple of overhead compartment handles. Oien pushed the gears forward and then lifted the lever to grab air. The ’cycler rose, glided for several yards, and hit the ground before bouncing forward.

Maldean hated bouncing, anyway, but standing against the back wall shook worse than in the center seat. His head repeatedly banged into the wall, turning his pounding headache blinding by the time they reached Sector D. If he didn’t lose his meager breakfast from the bouncing, the building headache might cause it to come up.

“Hold on!” Oien called.

Maldean winced in anticipation of landing. They hit the ground hard, slamming Maldean into the wall, and bounced high. He braced himself but still crashed into the wall on the next touchdown. Third impact they stayed on the ground. Maldean moaned and rubbed his head.

Oien shoved a crystal into its slot and made the front of the orb transparent. Flames and smoke obscured the wall. Foggy figures rushed around before them. Oien slammed on the brakes, moved several levers around, and unstrapped himself from his seat.

“Get into your gear and meet me outside.” Oien pointed to a drawer to Maldean’s left. Changing took too long. Merely bending over made him retch.

The sight outside proved a continual distraction. A good twenty to thirty feet of the wall seemed to be missing. An inferno roared in the space where the wall should be. Lava covered the ground before him.

Panic added to Maldean's problems. He barely remembered his training on total wall collapses. Such a thing was a worst-case imagining. It was never supposed to actually happen. The wall wardens monitored the entire length of the wall every day of the year to ensure an erosion of magic never neared this extent.

He rose as he tugged on his gloves and then fumbled with his helmet. Oien ducked his head back in and yanked the helmet down on Maldean's head.

"Come on!" he hollered. He rushed off into the smoke. Despite his dizziness, Maldean ran to keep up. If he lost Oien, he'd never find him again in this mess, and he definitely wouldn't know what to do without Oien's guidance.

They slogged through splashing lava that came halfway to their knees. A shiver ran down Maldean's spine. He hoped the magic protecting their gear would hold up to the heat. All their gear was spelled to withstand lava, of course. But the lava was much deeper here than at the last spill.

Oien reached someone in all-black gear. Brow furrowed, Maldean stared and wondered who this could be until he realized soot covered a regular lieutenant's uniform.

The lieutenant gestured imperiously to the left. Oien caught Maldean by the arm and dragged him about twenty yards away from the lieutenant. Oien gestured at the lava on the ground in front of him.

"Clear a space. Six inches in diameter. Block the lava from returning. Once you have the space secured, jab the wand in and concentrate on the wall."

"Into the ground?" Maldean was glad Oien couldn't see how bewildered he must have looked.

"Yes. Hurry up."

Maldean glanced at the fire and back at the lava. "How do I clear it?"

Oien stared at him a moment. "Every wall warden is supposed to be able to manipulate all four elements. Pick one."

Maldean winced. Shaking his head, Oien dashed off. Smoke immediately obscured him from sight. Maldean planted his feet a comfortable distance apart and drew in a tiny bit of power from the hot wind whipping around him.

The lava before him rippled. He took a deep breath, aimed the crystal at the ground, and poured air through the crystal into the spot. Lava scurried away, leaving burnt ground behind. He waved the crystal in a circle to create a cordon of air around the cleared space and grinned.

Lava seeped back as if the cordon had never existed. Maldean cursed and gathered air to shove it out of the way again.

Gritting his teeth, he whirled the crystal again. Maldean held his breath and watched for a few seconds to be sure the lava stayed put. He looked from the lava beneath his feet to his right and his left, but couldn't see anyone else. Was he supposed to kneel in this? Hanging upside down would make concentrating difficult. And a bit impossible with his vertigo and nausea.

Biting his lip, he squatted and shoved the crystal into the ground. Lava sloshed around him. His hands trembled, the wand wavered, and lava dripped into his clearing. Maldean forced his eyes closed so he could concentrate on repairs rather than the lava.

He risked a glance up and his spirits fell to see the inferno still fiercely raging.

The breach looked no smaller. Were they making any impact at all? He narrowed his eyes and stared through the smoky haze. Were drakes moving in the breach as well? He couldn't tell from the distance, not with smoke obscuring so much of the view and the flames dancing so madly about.

Someone shouted. Maldean's gaze whipped around to his right, where he thought the sound originated. He couldn't see anyone.

Oh crap, he'd completely lost focus. Lava crept dangerously close to the crystal. He squeezed his eyes shut and sent his breath through the crystal.

He couldn't get the picture of the rupture out of his head. The more he thought about it, the more sure he was that he'd seen drakes.

His hands shook, and he no longer felt balanced on his feet. If the drakes entered in Cariaran, they'd destroy the world. The rest of the dome would fall. People would have no place to seek refuge. Everyone and everything would die.

The thought prodded his concentration to stay in place despite the uncomfortable heat rising from his feet. At first he was simply aware of it. Then it started to hurt. Gritting his teeth, he forced his attention to remain on the crystal and channeling the magic.

Something hit his shoulder. Startled, Maldean's concentration slipped. He focused first on the crystal, despite a second smack, before opening his eyes.

Oien stood beside him and gestured for him to rise. Maldean started to, leaving the crystal in place.

"No, no! Bring it with you. We've got to move closer." Oien led him to the wall.

Flames still raced madly in either direction as far as the eye could see, but the wardens had repaired the lower five to six feet of the wall. Despite his helmet's magic which ensured Maldean got plenty of oxygen, this close to the wall he was sure he couldn't breathe. The hot air seared his lungs.

Oien pointed Maldean at the wall. Maldean nodded and jogged the final several feet to the wall. Slipping the crystal into the magic that created the wall, he closed his eyes to help focus on the magic. Flames and possibly drakes roared directly over his head. That thought kept his teeth gritted.

"What are you doing?"

The yell snapped Maldean's eyes open. He first checked his own work, but magic spilled from his crystal into breach repair exactly as it should be.

Over to his right, a lieutenant stood over the crouched figure there. A brilliant red seam had opened from the wall warden's crystal to the ground. Lava already oozed back through it. The warden decked the lieutenant. Caught off-guard, the lieutenant staggered, but didn't fall.

Other adepts hurried towards the fight. Maldean directed his magic across the wall to seal the new problem. The warden noticed and redirected his magic at ripping open the wall. The lieutenant grabbed the warden's arm.

“No! You cannot stop me! The drakes must be set free! They will be set free!” Terthan bellowed.

Of course it was Terthan. Fury washed over Maldean. Terthan had used him. Framed him. Of course, he’d done all that to throw suspicion off himself.

Terthan laughed. A great roar set Maldean’s ears ringing. The lieutenant pushed Terthan away and fumbled at his belt loop. Maldean crouched lower, but dared a glance above him. A fire drake loomed overhead. Its claws, the length of Maldean’s arm, scorched the repaired wall as it pulled itself through.

Maldean’s hand shot to his belt. He had a magic-filled water infuser somewhere.

Terthan laughed again. He screamed, “Look at her. The beauty! She is free! Free as she was meant—!”

The drake roared. Laughing gleefully, Terthan hopped forward out of the way. He landed in front of Maldean, who punched him. Terthan’s arms windmilled as he fought to keep his balance.

The motion must have attracted the drake. Its head swooped down and snapped closed over Terthan. Maldean’s gaze faltered and stuck on the horror he witnessed, but his hands kept moving. He tugged the infuser free and sprayed magic-filled water above him.

The drake roared, but drew back. Sprays of water filled the air around Maldean as the other wall wardens joined the fight. The drake dropped back behind the wall.

Maldean didn’t wait for direction. He returned to the wall and shoved the crystal back into it as others around him did the same. This once, he was part of their fellowship: a wall warden fighting to protect Cariaran.

Maybe he should get his flame tattoos.

Lynn Rushlau lives in Addison, Texas. Her short fiction has most recently appeared in Sorcerous Signals, The Colored Lens, & Swords and Sorcery Magazine.

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semiotical**

**Cirsova's growth will be both fast and
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Her stories are daring and just plain fun

They've inspired a pulp revolution

Not bad for a small press periodical

- From Cirsova's #1 Fan

The Lady of the Amorous City

By EDWARD M. ERDELAC

At Caer Gai, Arthur and his brother Kay dream of knighthood and adventure while their father is away fighting Saxons; these dreams may come true when a mysterious woman appears seeking aid against Marchog Pysgod, the dreaded Fish Knight!

Arthur withdrew, putting up his wooden sword while his elder brother Kay cursed and sucked at his throbbing knuckles.

“Yield?” Arthur panted, jamming the dull point into the soft black earth.

He’d bested Kay three out of five times now, by his count.

Kay mumbled something around his fingers.

“What?”

“I said a rap on the fingers can hardly be counted as a hit,” Kay repeated more clearly.

“You dropped your sword!” Arthur said.

“I’ve got two hands,” Kay replied, as he stooped to retrieve it.

“You’re going to fight me left-handed?” Arthur chuckled.

“A knight should know how to fight as well with both,” said Kay. “I wouldn’t expect a squire to understand.”

Arthur bit his lip.

“Unfortunately, you *do* fight about as well with your left as you do your right.”

Kay lunged.

Arthur checked the blow with a loud crack that resounded across the field. He would never have dared to vet such arrogance against any opponent but his foster brother. To do so would be decidedly unseemly. This was just play. But they both knew it would be a long time before Arthur saw knighthood. He was the adopted younger son of a noble knight. Caer Gai and the honor of peerage rightly belonged first to Kay, regardless of his martial skill.

It wasn't that Kay was a bad fighter. They were both hardly out of boyhood, but already Arthur was a consummate swordsman. He had won the lake tournament of squires twice in two years. A novice would call him fearless, but any man who had been at war would know he was brash. Both sons of Sir Ector had that defect. It came of spending most of their days beating straw dummies and each other. Neither of them had been bloodied in a fight, and so they fought like young, untried lions.

The last real threat to the peace of the land overseen by Ector at the southern edge of foggy Pemble Mere had been the Romans who had left their stout castrum to tumble down long before Vortigern's time. The feuding of the rival kings and the Saxons raged far from here. The brothers knew of it only from what news Ector brought home from the campaigns.

The smack of wood elicited a nervous whinny from the direction of the road, and Arthur and Kay disengaged to peer through the arch of the stone gate situated between the old earthworks which marked the boundaries of Caer Gai.

A dream of maidenhood drifted up the lane through the rolling mists that spilled across the valley off Pemble Mere. She was Arthur's age, and wore her stark, white-blonde hair unbound. Her marble skin was blemished with the cold, and her long neck, guarded against the chill air by an encircling green knit muffler, plunged into a tangle of pine-colored fabric which attended her slight form. She rode a smooth-gaited white palfrey, its black mane braided with silver bells that tinkled as she came.

"Is this Caer Gai?" she called to them in a clear voice as she neared the gate. "The home of Sir Ector?"

She was not a classic beauty. She was too thin, and her oil black eyes were overlarge and bugged a bit in her narrow face. The slope of her nose was a bit too dramatic. Yet Arthur found attraction in her strangeness.

"It is," answered Kay, stepping in front of Arthur. "I am his son, Sir Kay."

Arthur rankled at the lie. Kay had not yet earned his accolade nor sworn his oath. He was only a few years older than Arthur.

“I am Harddwch heb Drwg, daughter of Count Valsin,” she said, tossing back her hair, “and the Lady of the Amorous City. I have come to ask the aid of your father, Sir Ector.”

Arthur glanced at Kay and was relieved to see the brute had no more idea who she was than he did.

Nevertheless, Kay ploughed along, fists impressively planted on his wide belt, though Arthur knew it was to hide his bloody knuckles.

“My father is away, campaigning with King Bernant against the Saxons,” said Kay. “In his stead, I am lord of Caer Gai. How may I be of assistance?”

Harddwch looked dubiously from Kay to Arthur, and Arthur became keenly aware of the state of his own appearance. In the absence of their father and with no one but an elderly maid to order them bootlessly to their chores and ablutions, the two of them had been mucking about all day, riding and fighting. They were mud-splashed, and Kay’s torn tunic was anything but regal.

“I came seeking a champion of Uther’s table, not a boy.”

“King Uther’s day is passed, my lady,” Kay said impressively. “What need have you of a champion?”

“My city is besieged by a monster.”

Arthur said nothing. A monster? Monsters were bodachs and redcaps, changelings and will o’ wisps—stories to keep children in line, not anything to be spoken of seriously in the light of God’s day.

“A what?” Kay said, smirking, decidedly less diplomatic.

“My father told me that the knights of Uther fought dragons and giants. Was your father the exception?”

“Oh no, he won all this from a giant,” Kay said, sweeping the land with the point of his wooden sword. “He used to tell us all about it... at bedtime.”

“There *are* monsters,” the girl said sharply. “I have seen them. I have seen drawn out specters all aglow, swept along like leaves in a current on the shrieking Helm Wind. I have heard them, clicking claws in the blackness beneath the shrubs along these benighted roads. I have felt them, scraping at the bottoms of boats on the lakes. And among all I have seen and heard, *he* is a monster to be remembered.”

“Who?” Arthur asked.

“Marchog Pysgod, the Fish Knight. He rose from the bottom of Blencarn Lake, where many a worm has been content to wage secret wars in the murky depths against sightless enemies. Maybe he looked up and caught a glimpse of the moon and was tantalized, or maybe Joseph of Arimathea sunk a devil into Blencarn and it wove together a vehicle of fish carcasses for his black soul to ride out onto the lands and do evil. Whatever he is, Marchog Pysgod roams the countryside and leaves the corpses of men, women, and children in the slime of his wake from Mallerstang to the Eden Valley, even in the sight of the Amorous City. Sixty knights have faced him and sixty knights he has laid low.”

Arthur was chilled by the girl’s talk and unconsciously gripped the silver cross that hung over his heart beneath his tunic.

Even Kay seemed spellbound.

“Where is this Amorous City?” Kay asked.

The girl turned in her saddle and pointed north across the River Dee.

“Three days to Rheged.”

Kay looked off in that direction as if he could see the destination if he tried.

“My sword is yours, Lady,” Kay declared. “Take her to the stables, squire. We will pack for the journey.”

Without another word, he went off toward the keep.

Arthur bit his lip at his brother’s airs, but dutifully took the reins of the horse. He led the lady toward the stables, a thousand questions roiling in his mind, a thousand names to call his brother when they were alone. But he was too mindful of offending the strange lady, so he said nothing.

“He calls you squire,” said Harddwch when they were halfway to the stables. “Are you not his brother?”

“I’m the adopted son of Ector,” Arthur answered.

“What is your name?”

“Arthur.”

“Who are your real parents?”

“No one knows that, my Lady. I was left here as a babe.”

“I was orphaned by the Saxon raiders from the sea,” she said. “Count Valsin made me his ward.”

She was like him.

“We are blessed to have known such charity, my Lady.”

“Yes,” she said, “blessed.”

Arthur found Kay in his chamber strapping himself into his armor.

“At last!” he cried as Arthur appeared. “I can’t find my helm.”

“We can’t go to Rheged!” Arthur exclaimed. “What are you thinking? What will father say?”

“When I return to Caer Gai with the head of a monster and the gratitude of this Lady of the Amorous City? Maybe her hand? What do you think he’ll say?”

Her hand? Arthur felt his blood surge, though he didn’t know why.

“He’ll box your ears!”

“The hell he will. I’ll be the son he’s always wanted, at last.”

That stopped Arthur.

“You already are that, Kay.”

“No, *you’re* that, Arthur,” Kay said, staring hard at him. “You’re a better squire than I ever was, and everyone knows you’ll be a better knight one day.”

“You’ll be the master of Caer Gai.”

“Is an inheritance something to boast about? My father won these lands, just as you’ll win something for yourself one day. I need something for myself, something to build upon.”

“Kay...” Arthur began. But he couldn’t think of anything to say. “You think there really is a monster?”

“Monsters are rare in these times and usually turn out to be nothing more than the overactive imaginations of peasants. Even King Pellinore’s old beast has conveniently only ever been seen by Pellinore himself. Maybe Marchog Pysgod is just some villainous knight traipsing about. There’s only one way to find out.”

Arthur chewed his lip. Although he knew it was folly, he badly wanted to go. He’d never been out of sight of Pemble Mere. He wished this lady had arrived when Ector was here. Maybe Ector would have brought them both along.

“But *sixty* knights!” he heard himself whine.

“I’m going, Arthur,” Kay said. Right or wrong-headed, Kay was always a bull. “Will you come with me, brother?”

Arthur felt his heart tremble. Kay rarely ever called him that. Every day he lived with the knowledge that he was no man's son. No man's brother. He loved Ector for calling him son, and though he hated to admit it almost as much as Kay, there was love between the boys, as they were each the closest thing to a brother either of them had. He might never rightly bear the charge of Ector on his own shield, but what was that compared to a true brother?

Arthur clasped his hand.

"All right."

"Good. Now help me with these God-cursed vambraces!"

They set out from Caer Gai before noon and got as far as Mercia before they made camp within sight of the sea. Arthur had packed everything onto a sumpter, including his own sword, Chastefoile.

Kay said only fools named their swords, but every hero in every story Arthur had ever read had called his weapon by name, and so he called his Chastefoile, which meant stainless blade. Kay liked to remark crassly that the sword in his hand was chaste as the one in his pants.

There was none of his usual rude jocularly on the trip, though. Kay behaved himself around the Lady Harddwch, Arthur supposed, because he hoped to win her as a bride once he'd done her a service.

As for the Lady, she spoke little, yet once, when they came within sight of the sea, she remarked,

"Whenever I see it, it makes me long for the cradle I never knew."

Such talk confounded Kay. His mother had died at his birth, and all he knew of women and dealing with them came from ordering the old maid around and tumbling peasant maids, who were charmed easily by the novelty of his parentage.

It was not that Arthur knew any better. In fact, he knew even less. But something in the Lady's sorrowful manner spoke to him, and he felt he understood her. How many days had he gazed out across Pemble Mere and wondered if he had been born on the other side or to some poor family down in the village? In every interaction with the butcher or the baker, he couldn't help but wonder if he were

speaking to his true father, and he was afraid to touch the girls who smiled in his direction, in case they might be a sister.

“It’s a hard thing to be an orphan,” Arthur remarked. “Like being a tree with no roots.”

She looked at him, and in that moment there was something between them that made Arthur’s blood boil behind his cheeks, and he quickly pretended to scan the sea for sails.

When he looked back, she had ridden on, and Kay was beside him, glowering.

“A tree without roots is easily blown over,” he growled and kicked Arthur unexpectedly from the saddle.

Arthur scrambled to his feet, furious, but his brother had nudged his horse to keep up with the Lady Harddwch.

They traveled up into the cold, grey northern counties. At last, on the third day, they came to a wild place where the wind scooped out vast dales and bent the sparse trees almost double.

Here the land sloped and swelled like the troughs of a petrified green sea, and little shepherding villages huddled against the screaming gusts that shaped the clouds into a queer bar which spread over the faraway fells like the foam of a white tide in the sky, casting them ever in shade.

Harddwch clutched her billowing cloak with one white hand and squinted against the wind. She pointed to a row of ridges in the distance.

“The Amorous City stands there, atop Cross Fell.”

Arthur loved her. He knew it was a boyish, hurried thing, the infatuation of one who had spent no time in the company of a lady of court. He was squire to the son of a country knight, and she was the daughter of a count and accustomed to higher living. Yet she had journeyed far, a woman alone, across rough country. There was steel to her, and also a kind of sadness that moved him.

However, squint as he might, he could no more see a city outlined atop the fell than he could see any way to win the Lady for himself.

“I can’t see it,” said Arthur.

“It is there,” she assured them.

“We should ride hard, if we’re to make it by nightfall,” Kay announced and spurred his stout courser.

They galloped across the open plain till the horses were winded, then dismounted to walk them a while before they went again. It became evident that night would be upon them before long. This country was vast, and the wind made for hard traveling. It whipped their clothes, rattling the besagues on Kay’s harness, and sent the ponies’ manes streaming like kite tails.

At sunset they came in sight at last of a wide lake surrounded by swaying bare trees, their naked branches clicking like skeleton teeth. It was not so large as Pemble Mere, but when they neared it, and the horses began to trot, smelling the water, Harddwch slowed.

“This is Blencarn,” she said. “The Fish Knight’s abode.”

Kay’s answer was to don his helm, mount, couch his lance, and lead the way.

Arthur glanced at Harddwch. Her glistening eyes were wide, as though to encompass the lake, which was like a patch of night that had fallen to the earth and pooled.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, handing her the reins of the pack horse and leading his own hackney after Kay.

“I am not afraid,” he heard her say.

Kay rode through the quivering branches and came to the shore. The surface of the dark lake undulated, aping a storm-tossed sea like an impressionable child emulating an unruly elder. Far out in the center was a small island upon which a solitary larch tree, ringed by brambles, swayed in the wind.

Arthur joined him.

“Now what?” he asked.

Kay’s face, compressed by the open visor of the helm, looked amusingly to Arthur like a child’s.

“Call it out, squire.”

“How am I to do that?”

“Blow a hunting horn or something.”

“I didn’t pack a hunting horn.”

“Well, cup your hands and call out. Tell it I’m here.”

“Why can’t you do that yourself?”

Arthur's horse dipped its muzzle to the water. Instantly it gave a cry, shuddered, and fell forward with a splash, nearly catapulting him into the lake.

"What the hell happened?" Kay said in alarm.

Arthur knelt beside the horse and touched its still flank.

"It's dead!" he cried.

Kay pulled the reins hard on his courser, backing away from the poison water.

Then, far from the shore, the surface of the lake began to froth and stir.

The smooth dome of a shining mound broke the waters like a newborn island, big enough for a man to stand upon. It coursed toward the shore, splitting a wide, leviathanic wake behind.

Kay's courser whinnied, and he fought to keep it still as the object rose higher, disclosing the beaked and vented visor of a gigantic black helm.

The helm slipped from the water, trailed by a pair of broad armor pauldrons and a black breastplate. Then the great head of a dripping black horse lifted and blew water in twin spouts from its flaring nostrils.

As it neared the shore where they stood fascinated, the giant black knight loomed atop his horse, as tall as Ector's keep at Caer Gai.

More unnerving than his massive size, he seemed bereft of detail. His shield bore no charge, only a sable field, and Arthur could make out neither rivet nor seam on his harness. Even his horse showed no discoloration in its coat, no roll of white eye, nor flash of tooth. It seemed knight and steed were fashioned of pitch. They gleamed wetly like black peat after a storm.

As he splashed to the shore, Marchog Pysgod lifted his sinister arm, and a long sword rose dripping from the water.

"Kay!" Arthur shrieked, stumbling back and drawing Chastefoile, though it was a mere darning needle compared to the colossal weapon of the Fish Knight.

"Get back, Arthur!" Kay ordered, slamming down his visor with a jerk of his head. Having backed his courser to the tree line, he spurred into a short charge, aiming his lance for the breast of the monstrous horse, not being able to reach its rider.

The lance struck home and did not shiver. It sank to the vamplate with a wet sound, and a strong torrent of blackish blood gushed forth and streamed over Kay and his horse, knocking them both to the ground.

The horse of the Fish Knight opened its mouth, but the unearthly scream came from the rider. It was something unnaturally high and shrill, between a horse and a man.

The giant horse tumbled forward and melted into a great viscous puddle in which Kay's screaming courser kicked like a fly in molasses. The armored rider landed lightly on the ground, and to Arthur's horror, the remains of his steed flowed back into his legs, dragging the courser with it, until all was subsumed with a horrible slurping and crackling of bones.

Kay struggled to his feet as the Fish Knight brought back his huge sword and uttered a strange, foreign-sounding war cry;

"Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!"

He brought the sword down, smashing Kay's barely upraised shield to pieces. The Fish Knight then struck him with such force on the backswing that he was flung through the air and crashed into a nearby tree, sliding down the trunk to land in a clanging heap in the brush, his armor bent where it was not broken.

The Fish Knight stalked over to finish his opponent, and Arthur ran at him, seeing his brother's death imminent.

He passed the sword through the back of the thing's left leg, and a slurry of black matter spewed out. It was like cutting the stagnant skin of a soup cooling too long on the table or a bag of curd.

The Fish Knight swung down at Arthur.

Arthur had no shield. He ducked and held up Chastefoile two-handed to parry the terrible blow, fully expecting his sword to snap at the crossguard.

Instead, Chastefoile parted the black blade, passing through it like wood tar. The tip of the black sword fell and splashed like jelly on the ground, and the base bled slime as though it were alive.

The Fish Knight screamed and turned from Kay to Arthur. He brought the edge of his black shield down to smash Arthur, but Arthur rolled away and it splattered on the ground.

The broken, bleeding sword in his other hand flowed and lashed, taking on the semblance of a massive axe now.

Arthur realized this thing was no giant. It merely approximated the shape of a man. Its horse, its armor, its weapons—all were one. It was like a blob of animated clay, devoid of form, yet able to shape itself. Though Chastefoile could cut it, the foul blood it shed merely returned to its source, flowing across the ground.

Arthur attacked, hewing his only target, its shimmering leg, and sending portions of the limb splashing away. It was like chopping at a wall of mud, and he was winded by the time the Fish Knight fell forward, and its chest sagged into reach as it leaned heavily on its black shield.

The Fish Knight lashed out with its axe. Arthur dove for the ground, and the haft of the weapon caught him in the side. It was like being hit by a charging bull, and he felt himself carried into the air, then flung far out over the lake.

Arthur tumbled head over heels and crashed beneath the cold, poison water.

His brain retreated for a moment into blackness, but he regained himself and surged to the surface. With a gasp, he found himself treading the surging lake.

Chastefoile was gone.

He looked about in confusion, until he spied the little mound of an island with its quivering larch tree.

He swam towards it, and dragged himself onto the brambly shore, exhausted.

He pushed himself up, groaning at the feel of his broken ribs grinding together, and looked back across the shore, fearing once more for Kay.

But he needn't. The Fish Knight was wading towards Arthur across the lake, axe poised on its shoulder like a grudging woodcutter determined to fell a particularly obstinate oak.

Arthur rolled over on his back and tried to push himself up on his elbows. He whimpered with pain.

Would Ector ever learn what had become of them? Of course, Harddwch would tell him, if she escaped this night.

Harddwch. Where was the Lady? Was she safe? Had she seen their peril and fled? He forced himself to sit up, clutching his side.

If she hadn't, what chance did Arthur have of saving her?

The Fish Knight came closer, cutting across the water.

Arthur looked about for anything to wield against the monster, mouthing a rapid prayer, unintelligible to any but an inclining angel.

Perhaps an angel heard, for that was when he saw it.

From out of the water, mere inches from the little island, the blade of a sword burst from the dark water. It was not Chastefoile. Despite the black sky, it gleamed bright as hope. The pommel was precious red gold, set with stones, and there was lavish scrollwork upon the blade, which read; *Cymerwch Fi – 'Take Me.'*

The hand of a woman gripped the handle, and an arm swathed in white samite held the sword pointed toward the heavens.

Arthur thought only a moment. The creature was splashing towards him. The sword was there. There was no time to question.

He plunged back into the water and plucked the sword like a flower, brushing his fingers against the cold hand of the unseen woman.

The sword in his hand felt solid, as though inexpertly forged. A good sword was supposed to waver and bend a bit, lest it snap in a fight. But somehow he knew this blade was different. Despite its ornamentation, it was light as a branch.

Arthur stumbled back up onto the island, and parted the picket of brambles around the base of the tree with one swipe.

Then he shoved the weapon between his belt and tunic and began to ascend the larch tree.

It was a hellish climb, his every urge to succumb to the pain an even greater force to overcome than the Helm wind. Yet he confined his aspirations to the next bough, and the next, until he had pulled himself into a high crotch of the rocking tree. He found himself almost eye level with the approaching monster.

"Tekeli-li!" the Fish Knight screamed shrilly, and brought up the massive axe.

Arthur slashed his own belt pulling the keen sword free and, with one final effort, sprang from the tree at the monster.

How he covered the distance to its neck, he didn't know. Perhaps the screaming wind blew at that instant and carried him somehow, or perhaps the sword, clearly magical, aided him.

He dove straight at the point where the bottom of the black helm ended and the breastplate began, the strange sword before him like the prow of a ship.

It slipped easily into the gelatinous body of the thing, and Arthur had to clench his eyes against the tar that spurted across his head and shoulders. He might have plunged bodily into the wound had he not planted his feet against its slippery shoulders. They still sank to the ankles, but then he wrenched down on the sword for all he was worth and let his weight carry him. The razor edge cut a vertical slash, and Arthur rode the momentum down the length of the Fish Knight's body, blind to the damage he dealt it, but not deaf to its maddening screams of shrill agony or to the wet splashing of unknowable organs spilling from it and plopping into the lake. The wind howled. The thing howled.

And then Arthur was beneath the cold waters of the lake again.

The slime of the Fish Knight passed from his eyes. He was sinking, and above him the surface was as black as oil.

Cold arms encircled him, and he turned his head in surprise and met the face of the Lady Harddwch, encircled by her own swaying, pale hair, drifting serpentine, looking at him through eyes wholly black and fish-like. Hers was not the arm that had held the sword to him. She was naked, and the flesh once hidden by her muffler and garb was scaled and mottled. Six gaping slits lined with waving, pinkish stalks opened and closed in her sides beneath her blank breasts. A fleshy tube lined with hair-like spines snaked against him from between her scissoring legs, which ended in sail-like webs.

In primal revulsion, such as one feels at the twitch of an unexpected spider or coil of a serpent, he whirled and struck at her with the sword.

She opened her mouth and let loose a torrent of blood bubbles. Her jaw was lined with thorn-like teeth.

He shut his eyes and kicked away from her as the tar-blood of the Fish Knight descended and clouded the water between them. She

receded into it, her head drifting away from her neck, horror consigned to horror.

He swam for the surface, but he had sunk too far, or lost his way somehow, and the pressure pressed his temples. He gritted his teeth, but soon he was gulping the black water, which he knew to be poison.

When next Arthur opened his eyes, he was being roughly shaken and slapped, and though he was cold to his very heart, his skin was warm and a fire crackled.

He was in a cave, and the walls were scintillating from the fire which burned in the center and smelled of pine.

The mouth of the cave was dark, and the night howled hungrily outside.

Arthur saw Kay laying asleep, swaddled in furs on the other side of the fire, his chest rising and falling, his head ringed by a linen bandage.

Over him crouched a remarkable looking man with a bushy black beard and wild, white streaked hair, in robes of black bear fur. His eyes were dark and keen, and his throat was encircled by a red and white gold torc depicting two dragons.

“Arthur,” the man croaked. “Wake!”

“Where is Lady Harddwch?” he mumbled.

“That was no lady,” said the man. “You were tempted to the bidding of the Deep Ones this day.”

“What?”

“Servants of an old and very dark power, from before even the time of the God of the Crucified King. Who did this creature say she was?”

“The daughter of Count Valsin. The Lady of the Amorous City.”

“Amorous City,” the man scoffed bitterly, and spat into the fire. “Count Valsin had a daughter, that much is true, but not begat of any woman. The poets say it was a selkie, but I know better. His bride crawled from the brine, a daughter of Dagon and Mother Hydra. As to the ‘Amorous City,’ yes, it once stood out there, twisted spires atop Fiends’ Fell, or Cross Fell, if you prefer. Valsin erected it to bolster the legions of his god. His daughter was to be their mother.

Poor folk stolen from their homes, to be mated to the fish devil spawn of his wife's tribe. I saw them, in the great pool beneath the city, wallowing together in that fetid murk, where the shoggoth kept watch."

"Shoggoth?" Arthur said, trying the word.

"The creature you defeated. I had thought it slain. But tell me, how did you ever manage to kill it?"

"I saw a woman's arm, holding a sword. I took it." He sat up, groaned, and looked about. "The sword... I must have dropped it in the lake when I..."

The strange man laid a hand on his arm to calm him.

"That sword drove the shoggoth away once before. It is not of this world. It was given to you before you were ready to spare your impetuous life. It also saved you from death by the shoggoth's poison, I shouldn't wonder. When the time comes, you will find it again." The man twirled his beard with his finger, ruminating. "I suspected the spawning pool of the Amorous City was fed by a spring which flowed under the fell somewhere, but your father ordered the city torn down before I could investigate. He was always given over to his passions."

"My father? Sir Ector?"

"Your father King Uther," said the strange man, smiling thinly.

Arthur chuckled nervously.

"I was abandoned at Caer Gai by some beggar out of the mists."

"The Merlin is many things, Arthur. But I am no beggar," he said, drawing himself up like a preening crow. "We have a great many things to discuss, you and I."

Arthur's head swam as though he were still drowning beneath Blencarn. He had known of Merlin from Ector's stories of the days of Uther. Uther, who was his father, if that were possible.

Yet all these heady thoughts fled before Harddwch heb Drwg. How had his heart leapt from love of her to fear?

"I killed her. Lady Harddwch. Beneath the waters."

"Why she came to you, we may never know. Perhaps to prevent your destiny," said Merlin.

Arthur didn't know anything about any destiny, but he knew he pitied her. Her strange conception and the dark fate her father had

intended for her had not been of her choosing. If Merlin spoke the truth and Uther was his father, then Arthur knew his sword was the sword of kings, Excalibur.

Lady Harddwch must have known who he was and that the sword would come to him—that it could slay Marchog Pysgod. Perhaps she had sought to undo her father’s evil works and—in the end—herself as well.

“Her name,” Arthur whispered. “It meant beauty. But the rest... What is heb Drwg?”

“Beauty without villainy,” Merlin said.

A cinder popped in the fire.

Kay stirred and awakened to a world much different than the one he had left.

Edward M. Erdelac is the author of nine novels including Andersonville from Random House and the forthcoming The Knight With Two Swords from Ragnarok Publications. Born in Indiana, educated in Chicago, he lives in the Los Angeles area with his family and a pair of warring cats. News and excerpts from his work can be found at <http://www.emerdelac.wordpress.com>

The Unfolding of the World

By HAROLD R. THOMPSON

The Kingdom of Shenha is a dark and savage land, uncharted and shrouded in mystery! Can Captain Anchor Brown, an agent of the Artorian Empire, find the answers that his country seeks or will he find himself on the wrong end of a blade?!

Captain Anchor Brown passed between the longhouses, massive wooden halls, the rooftops painted bright pink or turquoise. The people were out in large numbers, enjoying the cool of early evening, dressed in colourful robes and baggy trousers, though the women's clothing sported more embroidery at the hem, while the men carried swords, almost all of them, and wore tall hats that curled forward to a point. Brown knew he made quite a contrast in his sun helmet, tan shirt, short pants, and leather striding boots he had purchased at George Masters and Sons on Wilton Street, five thousand miles away in the imperial capital of Camalon.

The imperial capital. Even now it seemed strange to think of it. Artor, through a series of wars and treaties, had acquired such vast colonial territories in just twenty years.

"The unfolding of the world shall bring wisdom," Brown quoted the ancient words referring to an older empire, two thousand years gone. The known world had grown much larger since then, unfolding thanks, in part, to the developing sciences of surveying: archaeology and anthropology—the measuring of the world and its people.

How else was the Artorian Empire to understand the nature of its holdings?

Brown came to his destination, the Viceroy's palace, looking as out of place as he knew he must, a three-story box made of stone, its walls lined with windows—a piece of Camalon picked up and dropped here in a foreign land. Sentries at the door, in drab battle dress and carrying gas-rifles, presented arms at his approach. He

touched his helmet and advanced toward the massive oak door. He had an appointment.

The Undersecretary for Trade, one Madam Rodney, was the second most powerful person in the colony. Her office in the west wing of the palace was lined with oak panelling brought from Artor, while her massive crescent-shaped desk was fashioned from the same material. There she sat in a wheeled chair, her body so obese that she was unable to walk. In recent months she had taken to wearing native robes and smoking the long slim cigars favoured by the Bantham priests.

“Brown!” she said. “Come in! Sit! Tea?”

A moment later she had wheeled her chair around to join him at a small table under a massive map of the territory. A native servant brought tea.

“Very good,” said Brown, after sipping from his porcelain cup.

Madam Rodney nodded toward the map. “What do you see?”

She liked to play this question and answer game, and Brown obliged. He studied the chart of the Tarran peninsula, framed on three sides by the blue of the ocean, the land criss-crossed by the borders of ancient kingdoms that were now one nation under the empire. In the west lay the fabled mountain ranges of the Inkus and the Layan, the great walls separating Tarra from the rest of the world. And beyond the mountains, the Kingdom of Shenha, shrouded in mystery.

“A blank space,” said Brown. “There’s nothing known of Shenha.”

Rodney smiled. “Precisely! The blank sections are the danger. We need to fill them. Shenha has rebuked all of our official delegations, so we must rely on agents. Agents with very specific tasks.”

“And I’m to be one of those agents.”

“Of course. One of many, I’ll have you know. You aren’t a special case.”

Brown nodded. “*I give my life for the country I know, though it may not know me,*” he quoted.

“I’m glad you see it that way. The mission is simple. The Thenallassa River begins in the Layan range and flows into the Kingdom of Shenha, after which we know nothing of its course. In

the east, flowing out of the Inkus, in our own territory, is the mighty Grimlor, which empties into the sea. Ten thousand feet of elevation separate these two rivers, but are they indeed two? We wish to know if they are the same river.”

Brown crossed his legs.

“So, you wish me to enter the county,” he said, “disguised as a trader or some such, make sketches, gain general intelligence, and seed the Thenalassa with log markers, which, if the two rivers are one, will make their way across the border to be caught in the Grimlor by our own people.”

“That analysis is precisely why I have chosen you for this job.”

Brown nodded. He was an explorer, a soldier. He understood these things.

“There is one other factor,” Rodney added. “What do you see on the western extremity of the map?”

“The edge of Valgurnia, and the Valgurnian Empire.”

Rodney wheeled her chair back to her desk. “An empire that would dearly love to possess our colonies here, and to do that they first must cross through the Kingdom of Shenha. Shenha could be a useful buffer between our two civilizations, if she remains neutral, but we suspect it is crawling with Valgurnian agents.”

Brown set down his empty tea cup. “I’ll keep my eyes open.”

“You do that. And remember. It is a primitive and savage land. A place from another time. Go well armed.”

“Travel light,” Brown murmured, a line from *Burwell’s Journey*. *“Leave behind your selfishness and fear.”*

His kit list still seemed rather long. He wore native dress, of course, and carried a native sword, the short sabre with a straight guard and hilt wrapped in goat hide. With that went a gas-pistol, bullet and gas cylinder pouches, knife, canteen, haversack with three day’s provisions, money in the form of gold Tarran princes, a sketch pad and charcoal, two blankets, and a hold-all containing comb and toothbrush and razor and other gentleman’s sundries.

One question was books. Should he take books? He was not comfortable without a few tokens, so settled on two small volumes of verse and one of history.

After that, it was the steam train to the railhead at Ankart, last town of any size in the west, where the land began to rise into a series of pine-covered hills. The Layan Mountains were visible from here, a line of glittering teeth along the horizon. Brown had yearned to see them up close, and now his government was giving him the chance. This was why he did this. To visit places few of his society had seen. To see the world unfold before him.

He met his guide in Ankart. He was a local man who had journeyed into Shenha many times. He was small, almost boyish, with large dark eyes and a persistent smile. He had a letter of introduction and seemed trustworthy enough.

“Hemine,” the guide said by way of introduction, bowing with hands crossed on his chest. “I have been to the upper Thenalassa and travelled its waters.”

“How far did you travel them?”

Hemine’s grin broadened. “Ah, not far enough to find the information you seek.”

They walked to the frontier, two travelers on the road. Hemine kept up a cheerful prattle as the mountains rose up to meet them, encircling them like cathedral walls. Entry to the Kingdom of Shenha was through a pass, watched by ancient and half-crumbed guard towers that still housed a garrison. Several of the guards stood next to the road on tall wooden stilts. The stilts were painted in a variety of bright colours, red, pale blue, and yellow, and the men carried long pikes and had bows strapped to their backs.

“Do not be alarmed,” said Hemine. “Just walk.”

Brown was somewhat concerned that his pale complexion and golden hair would attract unwanted attention, but his broad-brimmed hat obscured his features and no guards descended to examine them closer. He and his guide entered the kingdom.

The road thereafter was little more than a track, but along the verge were many stone huts provided for travelers, and in these they found shelter every night. After five days, they came to a town. The houses were of grey stone, most three stories high, the rooftops pitched high like mountain peaks, the windows small and rounded and often decorated with hanging flowers. The people dressed in

drab clothing, wrapped cloth of gray and brown, and seemed to be everywhere, moving in the streets, gathering in the small squares, or simply standing in doorways.

Brown saw several of the stilted guards, moving with long, swift strides.

“The people here hardly speak,” he remarked to Hemine. “They go about their business in silence.”

They came to an arched bridge over a small brook, where they paused.

“Observe their hands,” said Hemine. “They use many signs and gestures. They value silence and contemplation above all else. You see the mountains? The people say they speak to us, and so they listen.”

Brown also listened, and though all he heard was the sighing of the pines and the chatter of birds, he imagined there was something else as well.

They carried on. The town was called Langbok, and was built on the banks of the Thenelassa. When they at last glimpsed the river, Brown went as close to the water as he could. The surface was clear and flat, the distance to the far bank about a quarter of a mile. There were houses over there, and pine forest, with the jagged mountains a far backdrop.

Brown sat on the grass and took out his sketch pad. He need not travel any farther than this place. He could stay here and carve his logs, set them adrift, and return to Artorian territory by the same route.

“I will see to accommodation,” said Hemine. “I’ll return within the hour.”

Brown just nodded. Here in Shenha, he need not speak.

Hemine moved away. Brown finished his sketch, put away his notebook, and gathered scraps of driftwood from the river’s edge. He would carve logs, tapering their ends and inscribing them with the three-pointed crown of the Artor government.

“See, here he is!” he heard Hemine’s voice from behind him.

He turned. Hemine, still grinning, was approaching in the company of two others. One was a very tall, very thin woman in the drab gray of the locals, though her legs were wrapped in bright red wool. The

other was a blond man in an olive shirt, short pants, and laced leather boots. By his massive upswept mustache, Brown knew him for a Valgurnian.

The Valgurnian drew a long sabre from its leather scabbard.

Brown's eyes flickered to where his pack, which contained his weapons, lay a few feet away, but before he could lunge for it, two arrows stabbed into the turf at his feet. Three of the stilted guards had appeared, graceful despite their awkward height, bows drawn, nocked arrows aimed at Brown's chest.

"What is this?" Brown said to his guide, sounding calmer than he felt.

Hemine's grin was huge. "Destiny has chosen another path for you, my friend!"

"Did the mountains tell you to betray me?" Brown demanded.

"No," said the guide, "gold speaks louder than they!"

From the first moment of captivity, Brown's every thought was of escape. Escape was essential to complete his mission. He cursed himself for not throwing his finished logs into the river, but perhaps the sudden movements required would have resulted in a pair of arrows in his back.

His captors bound his hands with silk cord and took him to a nearby house, the largest he had seen. Cold stone steps led down to a corridor, thence to a wide room with four entrances, one in each corner, and a raised shelf along three sides. Oil lamps, hanging from the vaulted brick ceiling, provided dim amber light.

The guards had removed their stilts and hand-signed that Brown should sit on a bench at the back of the room. He understood and complied, and the guards took up positions at each of the entrances.

The thin woman and the Valgurnian were talking, but he could not hear the words.

"What do you want of me?" he said.

The Valgurnian came toward him and knelt in front of the bench.

"Captain Brown," he said. "Greetings."

"You have me at a disadvantage, sir," Brown said.

The Valgurnian agent shook his head.

“My name does not matter,” he said, his accent thick. “I am not here to question you. Your guide told us everything. Our aim here is to ensure that no Artorian agents ever return home. So you will live the rest of your life, which may not be very long, here. Please do not take this personally. We are both professionals.”

Brown appreciated this last statement.

“No offence taken,” he said.

The Valgurnian juttled a thumb toward the thin woman.

“You see her? She is a member of an order known as the Red Legs. They have an important place in this society. You have been sold to them, but it is not so bad. You are a soldier of the great empire. You should do well.”

The Valgurnian moved away into the shadows. More people were filing into the room through the entrances, taking up positions on the shelf surrounding the room. It looked like an audience.

The Red Leg woman approached Brown with one of the guards. The guard cut Brown’s bonds and passed him a sword. He was pleased to discover that it was his own sword. Taking it, he rose to his feet. Now he was armed, though he suspected this was no escape opportunity. The guards in the corners held their bows at the ready, with nocked arrows. They would shoot him down at his first attempt to flee.

He noticed that the spectators, men and woman, were each holding something, like a small bone tablet, with wooden pegs fitted into holes in its surface.

The Red Leg woman had moved to one wall. Brown wondered what would happen next and took deep breaths as he had been taught to do in uncertain situations. He needed his wits.

Another armed figure entered the room, a tall man with a curved blade in each hand. When the man moved into the light, Brown stiffened in alarm. Cold sweat sprung out of the pores on his neck. This was not a man. It looked like a corpse, a dried husk with dead shrivelled eyes and half-rotted lips peeled back to reveal its teeth. Its torso was wrapped in scraps of cloth, and its limbs were fashioned from short pieces of wood, metal rods, hinges and springs. It appeared to be a dead man who had been rebuilt.

Without hesitation, the rebuilt man attacked.

Brown dropped into the guard, parrying the first sword blow and dodging to his right, circling to get behind his adversary. The rebuilt man turned, striking again and forcing Brown to again leap aside, though he took a chance swing at the creature's knee. He felt the blade bite through wood and wire.

The rebuilt man fell, one leg severed. Brown danced away to avoid the flailing swords. The creature rolled and tried to push itself up with its hands, exposing its back. Brown struck, stabbing into the old dried flesh, tearing a gap in the rags. Springs and cogs burst from the wound, and the rebuilt man went still.

The spectators had not spoken a word, nor uttered a cheer, throughout the combat, and now they were doing something with their tablets, removing and replacing pegs. Brown knelt to examine his fallen opponent. It was some kind of wind-up mechanism, a fighting automaton made from the remains of a dead man. He stared at it in amazement. What other strange skills did these people possess?

The guards and the Red Leg woman advanced. The woman held out her hand and nodded at Brown's sword.

Brown gave it back to her.

The guards removed the remains of the rebuilt man.

They took Brown to another room, a small cell with a single round window, and there they left him with a bowl of rice. He sat on the cell's single rough bench, ate the rice, and waited, pondering the significance of what he had just experienced. Was this some kind of sport? He thought he had been lucky. Would they make him face more dangerous opponents in subsequent matches?

The night went on, and he tried to sleep, but thoughts of his lost things, his weapons and his books kept him awake. He considered his escape options and decided that they were few. Perhaps if he was forced to fight again, he could use a rebuilt man as a shield, close the distance to the guards, rush them and get out?

When his cell door opened the next morning, he struggled to his feet, trembling with fatigue, but determined not to let his captors see that he was beginning to suffer.

The Valgurnian agent was at the door with two guards and the Red Leg woman.

“Captain Brown,” said the agent, “your hosts have asked me to explain to you what is happening since I speak your language.”

Brown nodded. “Very well. Explain.”

The agent grinned behind his mustache and held out both hands.

“The governor of this province wants you to fight again! He was very pleased with your last battle and wants you to help him make further decisions.”

“Decisions?” Brown said.

The Valgurnian laughed.

“Yes, you see? That’s what the combats are for. The Red Legs run the fights when a decision must be made. The legislators come to watch. If the living wins, the decision falls one way. If the dead wins, it falls the other.”

Brown thought of the pegged tablets. Was that how they recorded the outcome of these bizarre spectacles?

“What sort of decisions are made this way?” he asked.

The Valgurnian shrugged. “Whether to pass a law or not. Whether to hire more cleaners for the streets, or to crack down on the number of beggars, or to levy a new tax? I don’t know. But it is for the difficult decisions, those when no one can agree.”

Brown was both appalled and fascinated by this revelation.

“Governance by third party combat?”

“Indeed. The living combatants are slaves, of course. The dead are those same slaves, reconstituted after having been slain.”

Brown felt his hands balling into fists. Could he take on the agent, the guards, and the Red Leg at once? No, of course not.

“So tell me why I should fight?” he said. “They will keep using me this way until I die. I should simply refuse. If they then kill me, what’s the difference?”

The Valgurnian’s eyes hardened. He glanced at the Red Leg and spoke a few words in her language. She replied, her voice soft, the words difficult to make out.

“She says that they won’t kill you,” the agent explained. “They will simply leave you here to rot. It is your choice. Fight, and so help the realm. Or be forgotten.”

Brown nodded. As he had expected.

“And how did you convince them to treat a subject of Artor this way?”

“This was your guide’s doing,” said the Valgurnian. “Like you, I am merely here to observe the country.”

The guards led him down the narrow corridor. At the end of the corridor was a staircase, and Brown marked its location as they turned a corner, heading back to the large room that he now thought of as the arena.

“*I go now to lay down my life,*” he quoted from the *Book of City Tales*, “*in the eternal quest for knowledge and understanding.*”

They came to the arena. Brown halted in the centre of the room as the guards went to their corners. Brown noticed, with a flash of anger, that one of the guards had a gas-pistol stuffed in his wide silk sash. It was Brown’s pistol.

Red Legs came into the room, as did the Valgurnian. Behind them was another familiar face, that of Hemine, who gave Brown a wide smile and held up what looked like a leather pouch, which he shook in the air. Next, the spectators entered, lining the raised shelf with their tablets at the ready.

Red Legs again presented Brown with his sword, and he gave it a few slices through the air, dropping into the guard and running through the Sword Exercise. Cut One, Cut Two, Cut Three, Parry One, and so on, until he had run through the entire series of moves.

At that moment, a rebuilt man loomed into the amber lamplight.

Brown took a step back. This automaton was larger than the last, tall, though perhaps thinner. Its hair was a veil of black tendrils, its face white, even in the warm light. Brown studied its arms, which were bits of wood hinged and wired at the elbow. The hinges were large and metal and seemed to allow limited mobility.

There was no need to wait, to drag this out.

Brown charged.

The rebuilt man swung one of its swords in a diagonal cut, and Brown ducked, the blade slicing the air, but then something stung his left arm, and he realized the second sword had found him. He pressed his attack, getting inside the creature’s guard, reaching for

and grabbing the ragged cloth that wrapped its body, then shoving the creature backward. For a few seconds it refused to budge, but Brown ground his feet into the dirt floor and pushed for all he was worth.

The creature slid on its wooden feet until its lower legs struck the shelf that lined the room, and then it toppled backwards. The spectators scurried out of the way, gasping in alarm but not screaming or shouting. In the sudden confusion, Brown rounded on the closest guard, his sword leaping like a striking snake, stabbing four inches into the guard's chest. It was the guard who carried the gas-pistol, and as he fell, Brown was on him, aware that the rebuilt man was struggling to rise, its swords flailing in the air. Brown grabbed for the pistol, felt its familiar hilt in his hand, and now the advantage was his.

Staying low to make a small target, he took aim and put two lead balls in the chest of the next guard, then rolled aside as an arrow pierced the air to his left. Squeezing the trigger twice more, he dropped the last two guards in quick succession, just as the rebuilt man managed to stand, raising its swords, but Brown shot it three times in the chest, destroying its inner works. It froze, swords in the air.

Now, at last, there were shouts and cries, the spectators fighting to get out, jostling each other. Brown saw the Valgurnian struggling to escape a tangle of panicked bodies, then looked for the doorway that would take him to the stairs, found it, and made a dash for it. But Red Legs was there, blocking his path to freedom.

He hesitated. The woman was unarmed. She simply glared at him.

Brown lowered his sword and squeezed past her. She made no attempt to stop him.

In the corridor, he spied the stairs and, at their foot, the slender form of Hermine. Brown shouted his name, and the former guide turned with a look of horror.

Brown reached the man in two strides, pushing him against the wall, which he struck with a grunt. The guide's eyes were wide.

"The purse!" Brown said.

"Take it!" Hermine said, pulling it from his belt.

Brown felt the gold coins through the leather, nodded once, and ran for the stairs.

Brown was near euphoria as he emerged into the burning light of mid-morning, making for the pine woods behind the row of stone houses. Finding an ancient tree the thickness of five men, he dropped to the soft carpet of needles, his back to the trunk, to catch his breath. Within minutes, his joy had passed, and he was sweating and trembling. When this too passed, he was left exhausted, his arm stinging and running blood where the rebuilt man's blade had cut.

He chanced a look down the slope toward the town. In the gaps between the houses, he saw at least two, possibly three, of the stilted guards. Other figures were moving about on foot, and someone was ringing a bell, probably an alarm bell.

Checking the gas-pistol, Brown saw that its canister of compressed air was almost depleted. There were plenty of bullets in the hopper, but he did not think he would get more than two or three shots. At least he had his sword.

What should he do now?

He had to complete his mission.

"Listen to the mountains," he said, leaning his head back against the rough bark and closing his eyes. "Listen to the mountains."

He listened. The wind sighed, birds chattered, and to his right, the river roared.

The river. He had to go to the river.

He stood and started moving toward the sound of the water until he reached the edge of the trees. Beyond was open ground, the road and a meadow, about two hundred yards to the river. One of the stilted guards was patrolling the road, striding back and forth. Brown wondered if the guard's only warning of trouble was the bell, in which case he would not know exactly what to look for. Brown might be able to just walk past him.

Sword in left hand and gas-pistol in his right, he broke from the trees and headed for the road. The stilted guard turned, likely at the sound of his footfalls, but Brown did not pause.

The guard came toward him, nocking an arrow as he loped along. Behind him, a second stilted guard had seen them and was moving

into the meadow to intercept him.

Brown raised the gas-pistol and fired three times. The balls struck the first guard, shattering his bow and blowing him backwards. He fell with a crash and a great cloud of dust.

Brown ran.

The second guard was coming along at a rapid stride on his right. Glancing toward him, Brown knew he would not win this race, so he angled toward the guard, casting aside the depressurized pistol and transferring his sword to his right hand. The guard tracked him but did not loose an arrow. Brown had closed the distance and ducked, sliding on the grass, cutting at one of the stilts with his sword. The stilt cracked, and the guard fell with a cry and heavy crash, but Brown did not pause to finish him off. There were shouts behind him, and a raised voice, at last. He kept running.

At the river bank he stopped and stared, uncertain what to do next. The shouting continued, and he turned to see that the Valgurnian was jogging toward him, a naked sword in his hand.

Of course. A Shenhan would not shout.

"Captain Brown," the Valgurnian said, coming to a halt, sword held point down and his right arm straight, in the style of the old masters. "I cannot allow you to return to your country."

"You have no right to detain me," Brown said, a trifle exasperated. "Your treatment of me is an act of war."

The Valgurnian smiled. "Come, now! We fight the little war, in the shadows."

"I came here to map a river!"

"And I cannot allow that. So, on your mark!"

The Valgurnian brought his sword up, hilt level with his mouth, then swept the blade down in salute. Brown did the same, though he was in no mood for a formal duel. He was not a particularly skilled swordsman and was tired and wanted to end this.

The Valgurnian lunged. Brown parried, knocking his enemy's blade to his left, but he did not leap back. Instead, he employed the same tactic that had worked for him twice now, pushing forward, closing the distance. At the last second, he brought his forehead down to strike the bridge of the Valgurnian's nose. The blow jarred

him, but the Valgurnian's legs collapsed, his face a mass of blood, and he dropped in the grass, groaning.

"I'm sorry," Brown said.

He paused, ready to slide his blade into his enemy's ribs. But no, one ungentlemanly act was enough this day. He had no need to kill this man.

Others were coming—more guards. He could not linger. His course of action was suddenly clear.

He slid his sword blade into his waist sash, hoping that would be enough to hold it, ran down to the water's edge, and dove into the great Thenalassa.

Three weeks and many miles passed before Brown at last presented himself to the Viceroy's palace, still dressed in his stained and worn native clothing, though his hat was new. A secretary took him to the familiar office, but the person who met him was a small man with wire spectacles who introduced himself as Colonel Shaw.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Shaw said, "but Madame Rodney passed away not long after I suppose you departed on your adventure. Her heart gave out. Unfortunately, she kept no record of the missions on which she sent her agents. None we can find, at any rate. Obsessed with secrecy, I'm afraid."

Brown was stunned. "But I found out that the two rivers are the same! I travelled it myself, by swimming, fashioning a raft, then in a stolen boat. There are no waterfalls, just a bloody great deep gorge, the greatest canyon in the world! And I have other information, details of the culture of the country, their political system! All of it valuable."

Shaw shrugged. "Well, feel free to file a report."

Brown got to his feet. "Thank you, sir, I shall do much better than that."

Shaw adjusted his spectacles.

"How, so?"

Brown paused before opening the door. He glanced at the map on the wall, which still showed the Kingdom of Shenha as a blank. That would soon change.

"Well, sir," he said, "I believe I shall write a book."

In addition to writing short science fiction, fantasy and horror, Harold R. Thompson is the author of the “Empire and Honor” series of historical adventure novels, which include Dudley’s Fusiliers, Guns of Sevastopol and Sword of the Mogul.



The Sands of Rubal-Khali

By Donald Jacob Uitvlugt

Searching for her missing sister on the arid world of Rubal-Khali, Nidra narrowly escapes slavers only to fall into the hands of a bounty hunter! Deep within the deserts, she finds herself at the center of an eternal struggle which could cost her life!

<i>chirite nochi</i>	after falling
<i>omokage ni tatsu</i>	its image still stands—
<i>botan kana</i>	the peony
	—Buson (1716-1783)

Nidra bit the inside of her cheek. The drug they had forced her to drink was wearing off, and the pain helped drive it out faster. She still felt sluggish, but she should be ready when her moment came.

“The next lot is a female Wilding of twenty-odd summers, recently obtained from the Capital.”

Unseen hands pulled the coarse woolen blanket from her. Though two of Rubal-Khali’s three suns had set, sweat still beaded up on Nidra’s skin. One of the slaver’s hired guards goaded her in the back with a class two stunstick. The powerpack had corroded solid. Hopefully it was as useless as it looked. She turned so the bidders could see her from every angle.

If Khilana was still alive, Nidra was going to kill her.

The iron chains connecting her leg shackles clinked as she moved.

“Note the hair, the color of warm honey. And eyes the blue of a sea after the storm. This slave would make a decorative addition to any estate. Or with the proper training, an exotic bed slave.”

The slaver grinned, flashing red stains on gapped and cracked teeth.

“And what a thrill, to tame a beautiful Wilding.”

“Fifty dinneh!”

“One hundred!”

“One twenty!”

The bids flew around Nidra. As the amount grew larger, the slaver leaned forward, more interested in his profits than in her. He rubbed greasy hands together, as if already counting the coins.

Now. Before the bidding tapered off.

Nidra drove her elbow into the groin of the guard behind her. As he doubled over, she struck him over the head with the chain between her manacles. The crowd grew silent, but did not try to stop her. She dove off the raised auction platform for the table where the slaver’s apprentice was settling accounts. She upended the table with a shout.

Coins flew into the crowd. Patrons and slaves both scrambled for them. The slaver cursed in three languages and ordered his guards to retrieve his money, even as most of them were busy trying to pocket the coins for themselves. When the less avaricious guards tried to stop their comrades, the chaos developed into a bloody brawl.

Nidra stayed low, crawling close to the slave pens. Her luck held. A punch laid out one of the few guards that had stayed at his post. He jangled as he fell to the cobblestones. Nidra relieved the man of his keys and money pouch. She freed herself of her bonds but kept the shackles and chains as the only weapons immediately at her disposal.

A horn sounded. Someone had summoned the peacekeepers. She wouldn’t be gone before they arrived. She needed to add to the confusion.

She tried the keys on the guard’s ring until she found the one that unlocked the slave pen. Leave it to her sister to get lost on a world that still kept such abhorrent practices.

She yanked the first few slaves out of the pen.

“Go. You’re free!”

She pressed the keys into the hands of a wide-eyed woman.

“Unlock the rest of them.”

She ran from the pens, trying hard not to think whether she had actually done any real good for the slaves. A strange sound brought a stop to that line of thought. A small dog yipped at a large woman

lying in the street. A thin gold chain bound the dog to the woman's wrist. Inspiration hit Nidra.

She divested the woman of her clothes, fashioning a sort of robe and burnoose for herself out of the garments. She took hold of the dog's leash. It growled at her.

"Come along, Froo-froo."

She turned as hard-soled sandals slapped on stone. Two peacekeepers appeared in their blood-red uniforms.

Nidra straightened her posture and walked between them, dragging the dog behind her.

"If this is how this establishment conducts business, then we shall take our money elsewhere."

With her best aristocratic sniff, she walked on. Her heart pounded. She could feel the stares of the peacekeepers. The dog tugged at the leash, trying to return to its true mistress. A scream behind her drew the peacekeepers into the melee. Nidra forced herself to walk with slow dignity out of the market and into the maze of alleys that was the old city.

At last, she paused against one of the sandstone buildings. She let go of the dog's leash. It shot her a dirty look and ran away as fast as its underused little legs could take it. All of her suppressed fears and doubts came out in a long laugh.

"Good luck, Froo-froo."

She closed her eyes and let the rough sandstone behind her seep into her awareness. She was an escaped slave on a backeddy planet. She had no idea where on Rubal-Khali her sister was, or even if she still was on this world. But for the first time since her shuttle had crashed on this Ecumené-forsaken ball of dust, she felt like she could breathe.

"It wasn't an accident, you know."

Nidra's eyes snapped open, tracking the sound of the soft voice—male, the accent rough but understandable. She pushed away from the wall, the chains in her hands.

"Lord Ankabuti has made a lot of money selling young merchant sons back to their families. Even more selling exotic off-worlders in the Rubal-Khali slave markets."

There. A robed and hooded figure stood in the shadows of the left-hand alley.

“And those not fit to be house or bed slaves, he puts to work in the fulgentium mines.”

Nidra lashed out with the chain, but the speaker had correctly judged its length. He chuckled. “Oh, you would have been wasted on one of those fat sheiks. A good thing that you have another appointment to keep.”

She ran towards the man and launched the chain at him again. This time he let it wrap around the brown sleeve of his robe. Before Nidra could let go of the other end, he yanked her towards him.

“Exquisite.”

The man smelled of musk and wild places. With a blow, he rendered her unconscious.

She is back home, on Taalab-7, with her sister. They are in the garden, the wonderland of their childhood. Nidra stalks bugs through the ordered wilderness of plants. Khilana sits on the low stone wall that surrounds the garden's pond.

“What do you have?”

Khilana holds up a white flower.

“I want it. Let me have it.”

She rushes towards her sister. Khilana lifts the flower above her head so it will not be crushed. When Nidra reaches her, she loses her balance. She tumbles into the water and does not resurface. Nidra stares at her drowned sister, the forgotten flower floating between them.

If you had only asked, I would have freely given it to you.

Nidra weeps. Her tears ripple the surface of the pond, and she can no longer see her sister.

An irregular rocking sensation woke Nidra. It took her a moment to leave the world of her dream. That was not how that day had happened. That was the day Nidra had promised that she would never hurt Khilana, that she would always protect her. Grand job she was doing.

No. Khilana was still alive, and Nidra would find her. Her eyes snapped open. Two of Rubal-Khali's three suns shone in the sky, one just coming above the horizon. Before her stretched rolling dunes of tawny sand.

She tried to shift positions and found that she could not. She was bound again, with ropes, not chains. She turned her head as much as she could. Someone had tied her to the back of a suhlia, one of the native lizards the humans of Rubal-Khali used as beasts of burden. Her presumed captor rode another suhlia somewhat ahead. Her assailant in the alley? Or had he transferred her to another? He was clad in a similar dark robe.

The same aroma as before wafted past her nostrils. As if sensing eyes on him, the figure on the lead suhlia turned. His hood was down, and Nidra blinked. He was an Aurean, though that is not what the natives of Rubal-Khali called themselves. Golden eyes regarded her down a long canine muzzle. Triangular ears twitched, sensitive to the least sound. Short, tawny fur, just a shade darker than the endless sand across which they rode, covered face, muzzle and arms.

"On our way back home for dinner?"

This earned Nidra a barking laugh. The humans on Rubal-Khali claimed that the Aureans were cannibals, though Nidra suspected that this was simply an excuse to hunt down the natives whenever they proved unruly.

"You're much too stringy. Even a pup wouldn't get much of a meal out of you."

Other rumors claimed that those Aureans who hadn't fled to the deep desert had all turned mercenary, willing to sell their broad, curved swords to the highest bidder.

"Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it."

One of the Aurean's ears quirked. He took in Nidra's condition with a pointed look.

"Of course I wasn't carrying my money on me when I was captured. It's on my shuttle."

The Aurean clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Even if that were true, the scavengers would have gutted your shuttle long ago. Can't buy your freedom with empty promises."

Nidra let that information sink in for a moment. If she couldn't buy her freedom, maybe she could get help of a different kind from the Aurean.

"Among the star folk, they say that a rodent can't take a shit in the deep desert without the Packs knowing about it."

The Aurean gave a noncommittal grunt.

"I'm looking for my sister. Human, hair and eyes the same color as mine. She would have arrived on your world not long ago. Less than a full cycle of the big sun. The alpha of my pack sent me to find her."

The Aurean's ears quirked again, and a look that may have been one of sadness passed over his features.

"Enough talk. You will drink, and we must press on to our destination."

"And where's that?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

He said something else in a language that she did not know and dismounted just long enough to press a filled animal skin against her lips. He unstopped it. Nidra held the first few mouthfuls of lukewarm water in her mouth as long as she could, as if trying to savor every drop of moisture.

When she had finished, the Aurean stoppered the waterskin again and pulled out a long dagger with a serpentine blade.

"The nearest city is over a day's ride from here. In what direction, you do not know. If you run, you will die. Neither of us will profit."

Saying that, he cut the cords around her ankles and helped her sit up on the saddle of the suhlia. He bound her wrists to the horn of the saddle.

"I see that the trust between us only reaches as far as a length of rope."

The Aurean showed a lot of teeth and gave a quick bob of his head. "We have, as your kind might say, an understanding."

They rode in silence for a long way. She didn't know if he spoke the truth about how far they were from the nearest city, but she had no reason to doubt him. Even if she did somehow manage to incapacitate the Aurean, take his water, and navigate her way across the trackless sands back to what passed for civilization on Rubal-

Khali, there was no guarantee that she wouldn't be treated as an escaped slave once she got there.

The Aurean was keeping her alive, for now. And something told Nidra that he knew something about her sister. She would see how this part of her adventure played out.

It grew warmer and warmer, and the suhlias began to grow antsy. At last the Aurean reined in his mount. Her suhlia stopped as well. "We will camp until Little Sister has set again."

He pitched a round white tent in the sand, using several hooks of a type Nidra had never seen before to anchor it to the leeward side of a dune. Then he watered the suhlias and fed them each several live rodents from a burlap sack. Nidra had to look away as the beasts ate.

At last he untied the rope from the saddle and helped her down. Her legs swayed under her, but she refused to cling to the Aurean for support. He watched her with wry amusement, as if reading her thoughts.

"Come. Spend the heat of the day in the tent. I swear no harm will come to you under its roof."

Nidra snorted. "I'm not sure how much faith I'm to put in the word of someone who's kidnapped me."

A look passed over the Aurean's face that she couldn't read. "I swear by the Serpent and the Spider, I will not harm you."

A chill went up Nidra's spine as he swore his oath. She could not say why. Regardless, she entered the tent as he held the flap open for her. The Aurean unbound her hands, and when he tied up her ankles, it was with an apologetic look in his eyes.

"You have sworn no oath to me."

When he was sure she was secure, he shared with her a meal of water and some small fritters with dried meat and fruit inside. Nidra did not realize how hungry she was until she had tasted the first one. Then she wolfed down several, only stopping when she sensed the Aurean's eyes on her.

The canine muzzle bore a wide grin.

"What?"

"Are you young, the way your kind counts age?"

"Why?"

“Because you eat like a pup the night after his first hunt.”

Nidra snorted again but smiled in spite of herself. No. She was not starting to like her kidnapper. Especially when she might have to kill him to escape. She ate the rest of her portion more slowly.

When she had finished, the Aurean gave her a long drink off the water skin. He seemed reluctant to tie up her hands, but did so anyway.

“Sleep, if you are able. We ride again when the heat has broken.”

Nidra settled back on the sand. The air in the tent was hot, but not stiflingly so. The scent of the Aurean grew stronger. She listened as his breathing slowed, becoming completely regular. He even snored.

As quickly and as quietly as she could, she tried to wriggle her way out of the ropes. The knots around her wrists rubbed the skin raw before she made any progress. She looked over at the sleeping canid. Precious stones gleamed on the hilt of his dagger where it lay sheathed in his belt.

She took a few slow breaths and then inched her way over to the Aurean. Sand rubbed against sand, the sound impossibly loud in Nidra’s ears. She reached for the dagger.

A paw shot out. The grip on her wrist was not painful but it was insistent.

“Sleep, little huntress. No more such games.”

The Aurean hadn’t even opened his eyes.

Nidra cursed under her breath and moved as far away from him as she could in the confines of the tent. She closed her eyes and thought of Khilana.

Outside the tent, the wind howled. Nidra’s thoughts drifted from her quest to images of what Rubal-Khali would have been like before the human colonists came. Perhaps the Aureans gathered when two of the three suns had set and howled to the sky. Howling out prayers to strange dog-faced gods. Or what was that oath he had sworn? To the Serpent and the Spider.

The wind shook the walls of the tent. The Aurean sat up in an instant, immediately awake.

“What’s wrong?”

He held out a silencing paw and scented the air. He cursed and spat on the ground.

“He rides the wind. I did not expect this. Only one chance. We must reach the fortress before the storm.”

Nidra blinked as the canid slit her bonds. She tried to rub feeling back into her wrists.

“Leave the tent. Take the water and nothing else.”

Outside, the wind threw sand in their faces. Nidra adjusted the hood of her robe and secured the waterskins to her saddle. The suhlia let out a mournful cry as she mounted it. The beast didn't want to be out in this wind any more than she did.

The Aurean climbed into his saddle and howled a challenge to the storm. They kicked their heels into the suhlias' sides and rode forward.

Sand swirled around them, bringing the first darkness Nidra had ever seen on Rubal-Khali. The wind lashed at her through the folds of her clothing and threatened to pull her from her mount. Her suhlia cried out in distress, though the chaos around them swallowed up the sound.

Something crashed behind them. Nidra turned in her saddle to see a black mass billowing toward them. If she looked hard enough, it seemed there were titanic figures there in the darkness, chasing them with the storm. Lightning sparked again above them, though she knew it was no rain cloud behind them.

“Faster. Faster! We must reach the tower.”

Nidra could hardly hear him over the storm, though she knew the Aurean shouted. If there were a hell anywhere in the universe, it must be like this endless ride. The wind tugged at her robes, threatening to pull her off her suhlia. Sand stung at the slightest bit of exposed skin. Already her knuckles felt rubbed raw.

Her mount trembled under her. Blood flecked the foam that streamed from its mouth. She could feel its fear and wondered how much more the beast had in it before it collapsed.

A shadow loomed ahead of them. At first, Nidra thought it to be another arm of the storm, and they would be crushed in the middle. The strange lightning thundered again, and the flash showed the form ahead of them to be a tower fashioned from dark stone. If they could get inside before the thunderhead reached them, they might still come out of this alive.

On they rode, for hours or minutes or days, Nidra could no longer be sure. The tower never seemed closer. The world grew darker and darker around them. The howling wind seemed to shout cries of triumph. The electricity in the storm set Nidra ever more on edge.

She looked up. The Aurean was gone. Before she could say anything, a pit opened in front of her mount, and it galloped down a stone ramp and out of the storm.

The quiet after the incessant winds at first made Nidra think she had lost her hearing. But the sound of her suhlia's footfalls reached her ears. The Aurean waited for her at the end of the ramp. He panted but wore a toothy grin.

"Welcome to the domain of Lord Ankabuti."

Two more Aureans came upon them. Her canid barked a few orders and gave them the reins of their mounts. Her captor led her deeper into a system of tunnels. Coolness seeped from the heavy stone and soothed her abraded and wind-chafed skin.

"He will want to see you as soon as possible, but I think you have time to bathe."

He led her to a chamber with a large, clean pool and bade her hurry. The *click* as he locked the door after him served as a reminder that she was still his prisoner. She washed the sand from her body and hair, though she did take the time to let the cool waters soothe her skin. She unstopped one of the bottles on the edge of the pool. The oil within smelled of aloe and jasmine.

She dried herself and rubbed the fragrant oil into her skin. Next to the oil was a pile of garments. She slipped into a long robe of white silk and knocked on the door.

"Serpent and Spider," the Aurean said as he opened the door for her, the words hardly more than a whisper.

"What does that mean?"

Soulful brown eyes studied her. "You'll find out soon enough." He hesitated and then pressed his curved dagger into her hands. She nodded and secreted the weapon within the folds of her robe.

The Aurean led her up and up, and Nidra realized that they were climbing the fortress tower. The higher they rose, the more she could hear the storm outside. Though muffled by the stone walls, it did not seem that any of its anger had abated.

At last they came to a solid wood door. The Aurean rapped on it with its iron knocker.

“Enter.”

A flash blinded Nidra for a moment, and the world shook. She looked up as the stars cleared from her vision. They were at the top of the tower, the crown of which had been domed over with transparent plasteel reinforced with iron. Electricity crackled outside.

“It’s the fulgentium. The mineral particles within the storm induce a charge in the sand beneath them. The discharge can create a lightning strike a hundred times stronger than any storm on Old Earth.”

It took Nidra a moment to locate the speaker. A wizened man, grey to the point he almost matched the color of the stone, stood against one of the walls. He drew closer to Nidra, the tip of his walking stick tapping against the floor.

“That will be all, Gelb.” Gelb. All this time, Nidra had not known the Aurean’s name. “I have nothing to fear from our guest.”

“Guest? Guest?”

A hairy eyebrow rose. “Sometimes Gelb is...overzealous in his interpretation of my wishes. I humbly apologize if my servant has inconvenienced you in any way.”

Nidra looked over at Gelb. His face was impossible to read.

“No. He was a perfect gentleman in every way.”

“Good.” The old man made a dismissive gesture, and the Aurean bowed and left Nidra with him.

She realized that the old man was studying her, a calculating look in his dark eyes. The sand lightning flashed again.

“It’s the storms that make Rubal-Khali so dangerous for vessels near our planetary space, or rather the fulgentium inside.” He waved a hand at the dome above them. “I’ve made the study of the phenomenon a hobby in my...retirement. The electromagnetic effects even reach out into the surrounding space.”

“Perhaps it was one of the storms that brought down my shuttle then.”

“Hrm, yes. You are such a long way from home. It was one of the reasons why I sent Gelb to collect you, Nidra. The colonists here are...enthusiastic, but not what you or I would call civilized.”

Nidra tried to show no surprise that the old man knew her name. He was playing some kind of game with her, and until she knew what the rules were, she would reveal as little of herself as she could.

“I certainly will not be recommending Rubal-Khali to the Interstellar Travelers’ Bureau.”

She had not expected the man’s laugh to be so musical. “Oh, my dear. If only I were several decades younger. Walk with me.” He smiled when she hesitated. “Please. Humor an old man.”

Nidra nodded, and even let Lord Ankabuti take her arm. He led her to a spiral staircase, and they descended to the floor below the observation dome.

She frowned, not sure what she was seeing. Though not as tall as the room above, the ceiling was still several meters from the floor. And every spare space of wall was covered with works of art. Tapestries and paintings, sculptures and stop-motion holograms—more styles and media than Nidra could count.

Before her was a framed woodblock of a beautiful Nipponese woman in a white kimono. She bore a sword, and burns covered half of her face. Next to the print was a marble statue of a Roman general astride a horse, his noble features twisted in an evil grin.

Above the collection hung two banners, one bearing the sigil of a rampant dragon, the other a large, dark spider. Nidra thought of Gelb’s oath.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?”

The old man’s voice was too close to Nidra’s ear. His breath was too damp and made her think of things decaying under humid soil. She stepped away, as if admiring the artwork. Something about these pieces sent a chill straight through her heart. As if she should know them all. As if she had seen them somewhere before.

“It certainly is an...eclectic collection.”

“Look closer...”

Nidra stepped away from Lord Ankabuti to do as he asked. As she walked among the pieces, the conviction grew that, in spite of the diverse visual languages represented, in spite of the fact that every race and skin tone known to humanity was depicted, the art showing the male form were all of the same man. Something about the cruel lines of the mouth, an overbearing look to the eyes.

Even more so, the women all seemed to be representations of the same woman. Eyes that still hope, in spite of deep inner pain. Reservoirs of hidden strength, a sword sheathed in silk. But there was something even more about the women's faces, something familiar. Nidra could not bring herself to articulate the half-formed thought.

"The Aureans believe that at the heart of the Universe, two forces struggle for control." She welcomed the old man's words, delaying a conclusion she did not want to face. "One force desires order, no matter what the cost to himself or others. The other desires freedom—freedom and honor above even her own life. The Serpent and the Spider."

Nidra froze as she came upon the most recent additions to the collection. Both were paintings in a primitive but powerful style. One showed Ankabuti as he must have been as a young man. Strong, of iron will, letting nothing stand in his way.

"They believe that in each generation, two Avatars of these forces are born. Wherever they are in existence, these avatars come into conflict, battling over which essence dominates that age."

The other painting looked as if the paint were still wet. In spite of the simple style, Nidra recognized the subject instantly. The features of the young woman were painfully familiar. She knew the face in the painting as well as she knew her own. The painting was of Khilana, her sister.

"We baited our trap so carefully this time. A mystery so intricate, layers of social injustice that you could never resist. Yet you had one last surprise for us."

The lighting in the room grew dim. Where was Lord Ankabuti?

"In all those countless generations, it never occurred to us." The old man's voice was a soft hiss. She could not tell where it was coming from. "We never thought that you might be born as twins."

He launched himself at her, only his too-fast scuttling motion giving away his position. Nidra pivoted at the last possible moment. Lord Ankabuti crashed into his collection, knocking over a bronze and an earthenware bowl.

"Where is Khilana?"

“Don’t worry. She’s no longer in any pain. And she told us such *delicious* things before she died.”

Nidra’s pulse pounded in her head. Khilana couldn’t be dead. She had promised to always look after her sister. She couldn’t be dead.

“You’re lying.”

“Oh if only that were the case. The ritual will never work now without the both of you. The Serpent was so cunning this time. The intelligence went to Khilana. Which means the skill must have gone to you.”

Ankabuti rushed her again, faster than an old man should be able to move. Faster than any human should be able to move. Nidra barely had time to draw out Gelb’s dagger. The old man cried out and drew back. Blood flowed around the arm he had pressed against the slash in his abdomen.

“That wasn’t at all nice. This form had already neared its end.” He looked up at her, an insane grin on his face. “I’ll just have to make sure you go first.”

He launched himself at her. Nidra struck with the dagger again and again. The sinuous blade slashed skin, bit into muscle, shook as it hit bone. Still the old man came on, grappling her, pinning her arms to her sides. He grinned again, his teeth impossibly sharp. If he could, he would sink those teeth into her neck, bite out her jugular.

She snapped her forehead into his nose, shattering it. The old man released her, sputtering curses and spitting blood.

“This is all just a game to you, isn’t it? You hide here in your tower and spin your webs of power and lies. And it doesn’t make a bit of difference to you that people die playing your games.”

She thrust the blade into Ankabuti’s heart. He slid to the floor, taking the dagger with him, his hands on the hilt.

“I’m not going to play anymore.”

She left the man to die. She found her sister’s body in the chamber below the art gallery. Laid out on a low bier, Khilana was clothed in a simple white robe. She looked as if she were sleeping, save for the wounds on her body. Nidra knelt by the bier and let her tears flow freely.

Something crashed in the chamber above her. Of course, Ankabuti wasn’t dead. Let him come. She wasn’t leaving her sister again.

Donald Jacob Uitvlugt lives on neither coast of the United States, but mostly in a haunted memory palace of his own design. If you enjoyed "The Sands of Rubal-Khali," let him know at his blog <http://haikufiction.blogspot.com> or via Twitter: @haikufictiondju

The Witch of Elrica

By JENNIFER POVEY

When a beautiful sorceress arrives in the entourage of his half-brother's betrothed, Lord Marek finds himself enchanted, but in the Kingdom of Ilvia, the practice of magic is punishable by death! Can Marek save Telissa when she is outed as a witch?!

Marek watched the falcon spiral upwards. The jesses hung from her legs, and he could hear the faint tingle of her bells.

This was the life, he thought. For a moment, he could pretend Irra was his bird, not his half-brother's. Could pretend she was his to hunt, not...

"Marek, exercise Irra for me."

It was better than Petor's normal demands. He used the difference in their status as an excuse. And Petor's mother, of course, supported him. The Queen never wanted Marek to forget that he was Lord Marek, not Prince Marek—that he was the son of a common woman taken as a concubine, not the queen.

True, bastards had inherited before. If the queen proved barren, that is. The Council would sooner see the throne go to one of the Princesses than to him.

The Queen had popped out girl after girl after Petor, much to her husband's disgust. That was why he'd taken a concubine in the first place.

Often, sons such as he would be the future King's right hand. Were Petor and his mother of different temperament, Marek could look forward to being on the Council, wed to a good woman...

The Queen would never allow Marek to be anything.

As it was, Petor treated him little better than the palace servants. Not for the first time, the sixteen year old considered running away.

Except what could he do?

He could become a mercenary. That was about it. At least at the palace he had three squares and a roof, and they would probably find him a wife eventually. Maybe one of the Queen's ladies in waiting, one

of the lesser ones. Especially as the king and queen had only one prince to marry off.

And in a week he would be married off. Marek considered running away again.

Instead, he let Irri fly, letting her tire her wings before he called her back to his wrist and turned his horse back to the palace.

His brother had, at least, loaned him the horse, and not the worst in his stable either. Impending matrimony had made him generous. Maybe it was the prospect of being tied to that... sharp-tongued woman that had done it.

Irri settled to the wrist so calmly he did not bother to hood her. She seemed happy enough to sit there, after all.

But when he turned towards the palace, he realized that Princess Karia and her entourage were in the middle of arriving.

Generous, yeah. Petor had just wanted Marek out of the way.

Listening to Karia's interminable prattle at dinner made Marek realize his brother had done him a favor. For once, he was glad to be at the bottom end of the high table.

Marek would have sat with the servants if he could, especially after his father introduced him but made no bones that he was illegitimate and out of the line of succession. Despite this, he noticed one of Karia's attendants eyeing him thoughtfully. Karia was Elrican, and the men with her were swarthy and solid; the women lithe and dark with almond eyes.

He wondered if she was a servant who wanted a handsome man in her bed or a lady in waiting who was hoping for a match. Marek might not be a bad one, especially if she had reasons to wish to escape Elrica.

Then Petor ruined it. Between courses, he stood and moved down to lean over Marek's shoulder and whisper into his ear. "Watch out for that woman."

"The lady in waiting?"

"She's Karia's sorceress. I plan on sending her home at the first opportunity, of course."

Marek shivered. He would rather have stayed in ignorance than know there was a witch at the table. Elricans thought of magic as a tool. That

was part of why Petor's mother had opposed the match, but they needed the alliance.

Oh, they needed it, but they did not need foreign sorceresses. He stopped looking at her, deliberately forcing his eyes to his food.

Maybe Petor was feeling generous after all. He had not needed to warn him. Unless he thought the sorceress would try to use Marek to wangle a way into the court.

Sorceress. She looked ordinary, she looked young... Of course, it was rumored that witches aged more slowly than regular mortals. Not immortality, no. Just... a delay. That was enough to tempt some to try magic, even though it was illegal, and they faced death or exile if caught.

Marek found himself unable to eat anymore and pushed his food around his plate until they were finally dismissed.

He went straight to his quarters—which were better than those assigned to servants, but not as good as his brother's—locked the door, and then pushed a chair up against the inside. It would annoy his servants, but...

He could not risk the witch sneaking in and trying to seduce him or something. At the very least, she had not ensorcelled him yet. Except, a little, with her eyes. If it had not been for the knowledge of what she was, Marek would have left the door unlocked and hope she did come and try to seduce him. Even if she intended to trap him into marriage, he could do a lot worse. She might even have made his life easier.

The price, though, was too high. As much as they might need the Elricans next time the barbarians came from the north—and they were overdue—they did not need the Elrican magic.

At least he and his brother were of a mind on that.

Unfortunately, that was not nearly enough to allow Marek to sleep...

Breakfast was never a formal meal. People got up at too varied hours for that. Marek rose very early indeed.

There was no point to lying in bed with his eyes wide open, worried there might be a knock on the door at any point. Would she even need to knock on the door?

Marek ate bread and cheese in the kitchen then fled the palace before his brother could find him.

He hid in the stables amongst the smell of horses and hay. He even considered offering to help the hands. It would allow him to legitimately

tell Petor he was busy. However, it would also make him look like he was playing the servant. Reluctantly, he decided he could not afford to.

Dark eyes seemed to peek around the corner. It was a long moment before he realized that they were real, not some hallucination brought on by lack of sleep. His entire body tensed. It was, indeed, the witch. And worse, he had to be polite to her, even though she was likely to put elf knots in every tail in the barn simply by being there. The very worst part was that he wanted to talk to her, to spend time with her. His body started to take a step towards her. He restrained himself. No. He would be no more than polite, even though she should not be in the kingdom, let alone the palace. It was not his place, however, to expel her. It was his place to play the gracious host.

“Hello,” he offered.

The rest of the woman followed her eyes around the corner. “We do not breed horses as fine as this in Elrica.”

“Maybe you can take some breeding stock home with you.” Yes, he was dropping a hint, but he could not help it. He wanted to run.

One eyebrow arched for a moment. Then, softly, “What have they told you about me?”

“That you’re Karia’s witch,” he said.

“And?”

“Magic is illegal in Ilvia. You shouldn’t be here...”

“The princess was told to bring whatever attendants she needed. But if I must go home, then I will. After the wedding.”

That was such a fair compromise Marek could not really argue. “I suppose.”

She smiled genuinely. “I understand. If you’re not accustomed to certain things, then they are bound to be a little frightening.” She glanced at the horses again. “I don’t know if I could get on one of those fine beasts, used as I am to Elrican ponies.”

It wasn’t comparable. He opened his mouth to say so, then closed it again. Truth was, he had no clue what to say to her. They stood there in a frozen tableau. Finally, “What’s your name?”

“Telissa.”

He nodded. “I’m Marek. Petor’s...half-brother.”

There was no sense lying to her, no sense pretending to be a prince of the blood. He could only assume things were much the same in Elrica.

She did not seem to bat an eyelid. “You look much alike.”

That had been voiced before. Marek suspected it was part of why Petor had to assert his dominance at every turn. "So... What's your story?"

Was she just a servant or...

"I'm not Karia's sister, if that's what you ask, although I'm from an old, landed family."

Yes, things were much the same. A princess's ladies had to come from those of rank. It was the way things were. Blood told, after all. "I figured you probably were."

He was tempted to ask her age, as rude a question as that was. But as he opened his mouth to say something else, Petor strode in.

"Marek, I was..." He tailed off. Then he turned towards Telissa. "Leave. Now."

She bobbed a curtsey and left. Quickly.

"What the heck do you think you were doing?"

"Being polite," Marek responded.

"She's leaving tomorrow, in chains if necessary."

"I doubt your bride cares much for that idea." Marek was out of line, and he knew he was out of line.

"Karia has other attendants. And she should have known better than to bring her."

Inwardly, Marek sighed. Their marriage was likely to be a tempest. Then again, Petor, the heir, could not hope for a love match.

He could always take concubines. Karia, of course, had no such freedom. She was stuck with him. "Karia's going to be your wife. You should at least treat her with some respect."

"Why?" Petor asked. "She's a broodmare. She knows it, I know it. We'll have the requisite number of children then lead separate lives. I envy you.... You may be able to choose your own wife."

So, Petor not only did not love Karia, it sounded like he did not much like her. "You could give her a chance to be friends."

"You haven't properly met her."

Telissa had seemed very nice. "She's probably homesick right now."

"Nah. She's a bitch," he said. "It's enough to make me want to trade places with you."

And it was apparently enough to make Petor be almost nice. "Well, I don't want to trade places with you," Marek admitted. "I don't want to be King."

“Too much like hard work?” He paused. “You do realize I’ll probably make you help me, right?”

Wow. Yeah. This was a different Petor attitude. Was he afraid he’d fall for an Elrican and go off with them? “Of course.”

“Just stay away from the witch. If you’re lucky, she’ll seduce you then walk away. If you’re not, she’ll take you home with her... And I’ve heard stories.”

Marek wouldn’t mind that much, being seduced and left. “You know me, I’ve got a level head where women are concerned.”

“Yes, well, that one turned my head, let alone yours. I wish Karia was that pretty.”

Marek resigned himself to listening to a lot of complaints from his brother about his wife. “So, what do you want?”

Petor sighed. “Karia wants to go riding. Which horse would you recommend?”

“From what I hear, Elrican horses tend to be smaller. I’d say Star... She’s not much more than a pony, and gentle. She won’t intimidate her.”

“Could you get Star and...hrm...Red groomed and saddled for us, then?”

That was not too onerous. “Anything else?” If Petor was going to be somewhat gracious, then so was he.

“Just stay away from the witch.”

Marek was not sure he could obey that particular order without being rude. Maybe he should talk to their father.

Maybe.

Marek actually managed to avoid Telissa for most of the day.

Or maybe she was avoiding him; he had no way of knowing. Maybe she was taking advantage of her mistress’s absence to get some of her own work done.

He’d watched Petor, Karia, and a couple of guards head out. Petor was right—Telissa was prettier, and Karia wore a perpetual pout which did not improve her looks.

He began to feel sorry for his brother. At least he himself might have some choice.

If it weren’t for the witch thing, he’d court Telissa. He could do a lot worse, after all. She was attractive, he got vibes that she’d be great company, and she was of sufficient birth not to raise any eyebrows.

As it was, if he did court her, he'd have to go back to Elrica.

And that was what Petor was so afraid of. That Telissa would seduce him and take him home with her. It seemed to be part fear of losing him and part fear of what Telissa would do to him.

Marek sat down at dinner. Two seconds later, Telissa sat down next to him.

"I apologize for my brother," he murmured to her.

"He's afraid of me."

"Actually. He seems convinced that you intend to seduce me and take me back to Elrica with you."

Her head tilted to one side. "It's rather tempting. You're a decent-looking guy, and from what the servants say, you'd make a good husband."

"He implied you'd drag me back and keep me some kind of prisoner."

She laughed. "You Ilvians are so...superstitious."

"Well, then again, a husband often ends up a prisoner of his wife," Marek quipped, then sighed. "Petor and Karia—"

"Hate each other already."

"Make you tempted to cast a love spell on him?"

"That would make things worse. When it wore off, he'd hate her more and treat her worse. Besides, I think it would be better to cast one on *her*."

Marek could not help but laugh. "Just don't cast one on me."

"I have a feeling I wouldn't need to."

He sighed. "If you weren't a witch, I'd court you."

"If I wasn't a witch, I wouldn't be a threat to your brother."

That held entirely too much truth. "He's not likely to change the rules." He hesitated. "But I *could* go back to Elrica with you."

Petor would not be able to stop him...by force, anyway. And he clearly did not know how to use persuasion. Why did he even want to, though? She did have him under her spell, and for a moment, fear and desire mingled into a cold fire within him.

"Could you? My family may be old, but we're...modest."

Not that wealthy, he translated. "So, what? I wouldn't mind ending up a gentleman farmer."

"But you would mind being married to a witch."

He couldn't deny it. "You need to leave," he said, softly.

"After the wedding."

“Petor wants you gone now. And he’s terrified of you. You should know what that means.”

“He won’t hurt me.”

Marek was by no means sure of that. He fell silent. Would Petor arrange an “accident” for Telissa?

It was quite, quite likely.

Everything might have gone well, actually, had it not been for the fight. It started about five minutes after Marek stopped talking to Telissa and focused on the food.

“No. I will not send her home!” Karia’s voice elevated into the upper registers in both pitch and decibels.

Marek could not hear Petor’s response.

“She is one of my people. The agreement said I could keep my attendants.”

“She’s a criminal.”

“Only because Ilvia is backward!”

“She’s a witch.”

The entire room fell silent. A deadly silence.

Marek whispered to Telissa, reaching for her hand. “We have to leave. Now.”

“The penalty for witchcraft is death!” somebody called. It was somebody from one of the servants’ tables. That did not matter, the cry was taken up.

Karia had paled. Petor looked as if he wanted to take back those hastily spoken words.

Maybe Marek had misjudged him. He had kept Telissa’s secret, warning only those who needed to know. No doubt, Karia had either not thought this through or assumed that the royal family would protect her and hers.

“Come on,” he hissed to Telissa, dragging her to her feet.

“No. They’ll...”

“Take them.”

And Marek realized his mistake. By trying to protect her, he risked sharing her fate. There were too many guards for him to fight.

And Telissa seemed...not resigned, but accepting. She must have known the risk.

Why had she come? Because she loved Karia?

Because she had not thought it through, either?

No, because she had assumed Karia would not tell even her husband. She had trusted her, and she had been betrayed.

That angered Marek, but there was nothing he could do.

Except, he could plan her escape. Like as not, his too. He had only wanted to stop a riot. Or had he?

Had she seduced him after all?

The guards seized her roughly, him more gently, and took them from the room. However, they were taken no further than the antechamber behind the dais.

That gave Marek some hope. Perhaps they would only send Telissa home and bar him from court for a while. It would all in time be forgotten and put down to Karia's lack of knowledge of Ilvian customs.

Yes, they could definitely blame it on that.

His hope, though, did not last long. The guards tied Telissa's wrists firmly. He wondered if she had a spell for that. They left him free, and one of them grumbled, "Stupid boy."

Marek knew that was aimed at him. He felt like a stupid boy. He could have helped her better had he just let them take her.

The door from the great hall opened, slowly. The figure that entered was not Petor. It was far, far worse than that. It was his father.

Slowly, King Luc made his way into the room. "Well, this is a pretty mess."

Marek sighed. "I..."

"The wedding will have to be canceled. Princess Karia will be sent home in disgrace for sheltering a witch. Chances are I will have to remove Petor as heir, make Tavia the Princess Royal."

"It can't be that bad..."

"Shut up. You were clearly in on this too. The people will only be satisfied now with Karia's exile, Petor's removal, your exile and the woman's death."

Exile? Marek tried to hide his reaction. He glanced at Telissa.

"Had you come to me right away..."

"Petor was trying to deal with it discreetly," Marek said, loyally. "He told Karia to send her home."

"And now his discretion..." Luc tailed off.

Marek had his hands free. But he was in the heart of the castle. "Is there no way I can petition for her life?"

“You’re lucky not to be spending the rest of your life in the Black Tower, you idiot.”

Yeah. His father was angry. Marek fell silent.

Then Telissa spoke. “I have not broken Ilvian law.”

He turned to face her. “You...”

“I have not cast a single spell since I crossed the border,” she said, simply. “It is the *practice* of magic that is illegal.”

Luc frowned. “Is there any way to prove this?”

“No. But I’m willing to swear any oath you wish. And, of course, to leave immediately.”

She was doing what any sane person would do, and trying to make a reasonable bargain for her own life. Softly, Marek said, “I haven’t seen her use any magic—except a woman’s magic, that is.”

Luc blinked. “I suppose she has plenty of that. I may be able to salvage this after all.”

He turned to leave but then added, “Marek, you must, whatever happens, be prepared to leave. I may be able to negotiate it down to banishment from court, but you can’t stay here.”

Marek knew that where he went was not entirely in his own hands. There had not been a witch trial in Ilvia in so long that he had truly forgotten what they might do to Telissa.

He could not accept that somebody who had not harmed anyone—deliberately—would die on the scaffold.

For now, though, he left the chamber himself. The guards did not stop him. He went to his room and filled a bag with only those few things he could not readily replace, whether he went to the summer palace, away from court, or...

...or to Elrica. Maybe he would even court Telissa after all. He could do worse...

...if he could handle being married to a witch. He realized he had no clue what that really meant. He did not know what she was capable of.

He did not know the woman at all—not really, but worse marriages had come from love matches than from cases where the wedding day was the first time groom saw bride.

You got out of a match what you put in. But the woman he was interested in was likely to be dead by tomorrow.

Instead of trying to sleep, he went to the library...and started to look for books on the magic laws.

They did not waste any time. Telissa's trial started the very next morning.

Marek had not slept. Everything he had read indicated the worst. Short of a physical escape, she would be dead by afternoon. Very finally and unpleasantly dead. They would not just hang her. They would burn her.

And she had admitted to being a witch.

Marek was not on trial. His father had spared him that at least. That left him at the front of the gallery.

"So, you do not deny that you practice sorcery, Lady Telissa?"

"I deny that I have practiced sorcery within the borders of Ilvia."

She was sticking to that defense, then. It was the best one she had, after having been denounced by the heir. Karia, Marek noticed, was sitting with Petor, her face set.

There was visibly no warmth between the two and Marek flinched. The wedding had not been canceled.

Not yet.

His father's dire predictions, though, might yet come true.

"And do you deny that the Prince Petor and Princess Karia, as well as Lord Marek, were in full knowledge of exactly what you are?"

Telissa remained silent. She was, perhaps, trying not to drag them down with her. Or perhaps, she had a plan after all. "I claim the right to trial by combat."

Luc frowned. "You are a witch?"

"I claim my innocence. As I am a woman and untrained in arms, I would require a champion."

There was a murmur through the hall. Marek felt awful on so many levels. Could he have got himself legitimized as a royal heir if he had spoken up?

Maybe. Had he wanted to be—which he didn't, much less at the price of an innocent woman's agony and death.

Was she innocent?

He was so confused. She was a witch. She openly admitted it. She was also genuinely nice.

And he had meant every word of being willing to go to Elrica with her, even in penury. Even to be a farmer, rather than a lord. And if she lost,

then Petor would be stripped of his position and exiled, Marek would be exiled. Telissa would die.

“I will stand as her champion.” He heard the words from his mouth. He was ensorcelled and knew it, but he also knew she had needed no magic to do so.

Luc raised an eyebrow. “My own son.”

“I believe her when she says she has not broken the law.”

If he lost and lived, he would be exiled at best, but he would rather be exiled than a part of a show trial, a travesty of justice.

If he won, then he would... still be exiled. He caught the look in her almond eyes. The look of hope. He would be exiled, but not by them.

By her, by the bond between them. He could not watch her burn. He could not watch her die. He could not watch his brother stripped of his rights as heir. Would Petor understand that?

No, because Petor was already moving. “Then I will fight for the honor of Ilvia.”

He might as well surrender now. He could not beat Petor.

“The challenger has the right to set the terms of combat.” Luc’s face was set—set as his sons faced off against each other in a fight that, while it was not meant to go to the death, might and often did. Especially when there was anger.

But Luc did not forbid the fight. He could not, by Ilvian custom and law. It would be unthinkable to refuse them.

“In the salle, light armor, light blades.” Those were the only terms at which Marek, smaller and faster than his brother, held a chance of victory.

Luc nodded. “The King is not above the law. I would rather one of you stepped back, but I cannot forbid this.”

Marek would rather he had, even knowing he could not.

“The judgment is as thus. If Prince Petor wins, then Lady Telissa will be executed immediately. Lord Marek will be exiled. If Lord Marek wins, then Lady Telissa will live, but I will request that she immediately return to Elrica.”

By standing forward, Marek realized, Petor had escaped demotion and exile. He heard some murmurs of relief, probably from people who would not want to face the prospect of a reigning Queen.

“Regardless of the outcome, I believe Princess Karia is a poor choice for my son. But I will treat her with honor.”

So, he would cancel the wedding. If Marek lost he would be exiled. If he won, he would...yes, he was still in the same position.

Light armor. Light blades. He sought both, and his old friend Gareth stepped out of the crowd. "I will squire you."

"You risk exile doing so."

He nodded. "I risk less than you."

Marek was sure Petor would not kill him. He was sure he would not kill Petor. But he knew his brother would cheerfully poke him full of holes.

He would have to fight better than he had known.

Marek and Petor moved to the salle. The audience seemed to have swelled. The defendant was still in her chains. The King frowned the entire time.

He probably trusted them not to kill each other, but he had likely come to the same conclusion as Marek. At least there were healers.

Garet helped Marek with his armor. His brother was being squired by one of the servants. Under normal circumstances, Marek might have squired Petor himself.

The King dropped his hand, and the two men started to circle, looking for openings. They were well matched, but Petor was older and had more experience. Marek was smaller and faster.

The advantage went to Marek at the start, the tip of his blade touching his brother's arm, but not quite penetrating the padded armor.

"Good touch."

"Why are we doing this?"

Petor smiled. "You know why."

And he did. He knew Petor had done this to stay heir. He felt the tip of Petor's blade touch him between the ribs, grazing. First blood to Petor.

The crowd noise grew. He circled away, then feinted, before attempting a lightning hit to Petor's thigh. The outside. The inside would have been a killing blow. It was a way of letting his brother know he would not let this go that far.

Not to the death, no, but they circled, blades flashing, blood emerging. This would go until one of them yielded or was unable to continue. Blood roared in Marek's ears—or was it the crowd? He wasn't sure, but he felt himself stagger.

Marek felt the blade touch his throat, pulled just enough not to kill him. He couldn't continue. He wasn't sure how many blows they had traded, but his knees went weak under him.

He'd lost. He'd failed. Now he'd have to watch Telissa die, and he couldn't. He looked up at her, pleading. Asking something.

And she spoke, and somehow her voice was louder than anything here. "I have practiced no sorcery within your kingdom. I have respected your law... But I see now that there is no justice in it."

What happened next, Marek would never be sure of. A golden glow enwrapped Telissa's form. When it faded, she was gone, leaving only her chains and the simple gown she had worn, collapsed on the ground.

"You're going to go looking for her, aren't you," Petor said, softly.

"I'm not denying it. But I'm also not going anywhere with you." Marek still loved his brother, how could he not? He had recovered from the fight, although it had taken two days. Blood loss.

But he understood everything Petor had done. Everything he had done was to protect himself after his fiancée had been foolish enough to speak. She had not understood how seriously Ilvia took its laws—how much people feared witchcraft. Petor would be king. He would not be a bad king.

Marek shook his head and turned his gelding south towards Elrica. He had no desire to ride with Karia or her entourage.

And if war broke out over the broken betrothal?

He should not go to Elrica. He should go north, out of the way. They might call this treason. He did not care.

If he was going to be exiled, it would be for a reason. And if he could find Telissa, he could, at least, apologize to her.

He pushed the gelding into an easy lope, let himself relax.

The palace and Petor and all he had ever known were behind him.

His life was in front of him. And then, with even hoofbeats, a horse came up behind him, slowing to his pace.

Telissa had not been so hard to find after all.

"Why did you let me fight him when you could have escaped?"

"I wanted to be sure you were worth it."

Worth it. He smiled. "And you wanted nobody else to suffer."

"Truth. Will you come with me?"

“Yes.” And she pushed her mare forward into a trot, and he rode next to her.

To exile and to the future.

Jennifer R. Povey is in her early forties, and lives in Northern Virginia with her husband. She writes a variety of speculative fiction, whilst following current affairs and occasionally indulging in horse riding and role playing games. Her novel “Falling Dusk” was released earlier in 2016.

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The Vault of Phalos

By JEFFERY SCOTT SIMS

Investigating murder and a plague of malaise leads Nantrech and Morca to a mysterious collector of arcane lore! Will they put an end to the curse of an ancient god of evil that spreads like a miasma about the land or die at his servants' hands?!

Throughout the land of Konai in those days, there arose an insidious species of terror fostered by the nightmare cult of Blug, a detestable devotion unheard, unseen, yet of which much was bruited in hushed tones. A certain sum of fear, tainting the very air men breathed, emanated from the indefinite nature of the evil, for neither noble nor peasant knew, or would admit to knowing, the source of the threat. Hints, guesses, and theories spread by whisper: that the deity Blug, since the fulminations of creation, ruled from spheres outside man's world as the Lord of Decay, the God who drew unto Himself all that was filthy, wretched, and squalid in the universe; that His secret celebrants, self-loathing and vile, loved Him for His offensiveness; that in their embracing of all nastiness, they lived to lure others into His putrid orbit, or in His name to destroy what they deemed pure and clean.

This much one might adduce from meager clue and furtive insinuation, but none could question the awful reality of odious consequence. The acolytes of Blug struck in the night, perpetrating shocking outrages, slaughtering the virtuous with fiendish cruelty or forever carrying off the fairest into the darkness to suffer death or, worse, the mutilation of their souls.

Now into the little, lonely village of Moronais marched the soldiers of Dyrezan, sons of the mighty kingdom that claimed lordship of the earth. From a great city far away they came, a city that towered impossibly to the skies, where ruled wise men and wizards of fearsome renown. Moronais and its surrounding demesne of Konai lay not within the formal jurisdiction of Dyrezan, yet as with all proud empires, its masters granted to themselves a proprietary interest in

their neighbors, whether or not those neighbors would have it. Heard they of the turmoil thereabout and so sent a mission, backed by force of sword and spell, to investigate the situation and to deliver remedy.

A company of armored legionnaires trooped down the rocky defile from the chill forest into the green valley wherein lay Moronais amidst its budding fields. At their helm, on powerful steeds, rode two of Dyrezan's finest, the aristocrats Nantrech and Morca, the former a wide-ranging scholar esteemed for his legendary mind, the latter famed for his prowess in battle. Both belonged to the highest rank among magicians, and their sending into such an isolated region indicated the importance, as understood in their distant home, of this undertaking.

They called a halt upon entering the sprawling village, gazed observantly upon a pretty town of fair cottages composed of oak and native stone, scattered smoking chimneys and a wide, leveled main street in which the inhabitants already busied themselves that early morning. Lord Nantrech, the keen-eyed graybeard swathed in a simple white cloak banded with aquamarine, nodded to himself and mused, "High grade agricultural, surely, its well-appointed peasantry is thriving by the look of things, operating within a self-contained social system. They owe fealty, I reckon, to yonder castle on that high knoll hard by the far ridge."

Lord Morca, a big, daunting young man dressed as a soldier with a steel cap clamped down over thick black hair and mail that scarce confined gracefully bulging muscles, shook his head and declared, "Suitable for peasants, I will grant, though a bucolic scene that reminds me how far we have traveled from the unlimited luxuries of home. Perhaps true civilization resides in that castle on the rocky burg, wherein the protector of these people must domicile. That is a proper defensive position, unlike this village, which is too overshadowed by high ground."

Nantrech grinned. "Always you plan your next campaign."

Countered Morca, "We venture not for a joy-ride. Hark, learned oldster, some come to treat with us."

"Noted, youthful friend. Hail, fellows!"

The delegation, for so it proved, consisted of the village elder, who introduced himself as Tarbona, and two companions and helpmates,

both prosperous landowners. They were short and pale like most of their folk, reserved but respectful. When the lordly arrivals had announced themselves, Tarbona responded, “Guessed we your origin having espied your standard, recognized from infrequent report: the eagle enfolding the globe within its wings, the emblem of fabled Dyrezan. You honor us with your presence. Condescend to tell us how we may serve.”

Nantrech thanked them for their courtesy, gave back graciousness in return. “Nay, good man, we come not to seek obedience, but rather—at the beck of our great King Skyrax, may he eternally rule—to offer service, all that within our power and that of the swords of the ever loyal legionnaires at our back. Strange tidings have disturbed the ears of our master, to the effect that covert evil fouls this land, and this we would devote ourselves to setting right. Skyrax holds that his kinsman and brethren should not cow under terror when he may exert strength to repel it.”

The trio of welcome glanced among themselves, chagrined. Morca added, “My colleague references what you must know. A curious word, a name, attaches to this business, the dread name Blug.”

The three men shuddered. Other locals, standing within earshot, visibly quailed. With gloomy countenance, Tarbona said, “For certain we know that we suffer. The joys of my life have been forever polluted by this scourge, for my own daughter has been borne away into regions unknown, undoubtedly dead. I would give all to avenge sweet Lossa, yet I know not how.

“In these parts only noble Phalos, he of the castle, may discourse on these matters from a position of wisdom. Among us he is a sage of renown, a reading man with many books.”

Said Nantrech, “Then with him I shall converse. Very good. Tarbona, I beg that you send a messenger declaring us to this Phalos.”

In more commanding tone Morca said, “We require lodging. What provisions will you make?”

Replied Tarbona, “The tavern, which doubles as an inn on rare occasions, will accommodate you both with rooms in our best style, lowly though you may find them, but for a hundred men...”

Morca chuckled. "My crew deem themselves experts at the fine art of making do. Be sure, the tavern will suit. Lead on, Tarbona."

So Nantrech, Morca, and their company settled into Moronais. The tavern was a decent place, large and airy, boasting a few rooms in back for guests, and others that could be temporarily converted. That all should be kept together, the two lords would share a small chamber, the men to crowd into the rest. Even with that, tents sprang up on the grounds behind the structure facing a farmhouse wall, pitched by the losers of the informal lottery carried out by the soldiers. Food and ale of plain variety for the men, and something better for the lords (a step up from march rations anyway,) were provided by the tavern-keeper who, with his house wenches, scrambled to meet the sudden demand. His eagerness to please may have stemmed from the outlay of gold coin with which Nantrech, in advance, paid the bill.

Morca declared the tavern a military zone, off limits to natives for the duration, but clever Nantrech cordially invited a number of local worthies to eat and drink with them, that he might mine them for information. At first surprisingly hesitant to speak, in their cups they began to relate tales of a most sorrowful nature. During the space of a year and more, they said, the strange and awful cult of the mysterious god Blug had irrupted among them without obvious source or cause, by degrees annoying, troubling, then horrifying.

The plague sprang not from strangers, of whom there were ever few in this precinct, but from their own people, citizens and friends, brothers and wives, who through some nefarious means became ensnared by a virulent religious craze which bore no connection to the gentle worship traditionally practiced there. Though apparently lacking priests or any sacred writings, the furtive movement took hold and spread. Those who fell under its sway grew melancholy and morose, given to morbid thoughts and imaginings, in many instances leading to self-destruction. Appalling though all this was to the good folk of Moronais, it hardly touched upon their real trepidation, that which had awakened the cognizance of far Dyrezan.

The bitter suicidal impulses of some acolytes led them, in extremis, to commit vicious assaults upon unaccepting folk, and these heinous acts were surpassed by ghastly offenses perpetrated by more

secretive evil-doers. In these cases—crimes of inconceivable barbarity—the connection to the Blug cult was established by the fell nature of the deeds and by vile inscriptions left at the scenes, rantings (often splashed in blood on walls) attesting to the glory and eventual triumph of their god’s insane dominion.

That evening, with the rounds of sentries determined and all done that should be, the Lords Nantrech and Morca talked behind closed doors in their chamber. Taking stock of their information, Nantrech said, “A puzzle, vague and incomplete, confronts us. These added particulars, as yet, contribute little to our previous knowledge. I do see the wisdom of our sending. This evil must be nipped in the bud, lest it flood into our domain.”

Groused Morca, “Well, we came with little enough. The sorcerial counselors of blessed Skyrax detected a burst of pernicious magical energy in this land, which in itself demands investigation, and united with these tales of woe requires action. Our lore on this Blug, however, proves amazingly scanty. In no possible fashion does he relate to great Xenophor, the true master of the universe who governs all time and space, nor to the feeble deities of Konai, at best puppets of the Highest One. The records of Dyrezan, ancient and modern, contain the teachings of countless odd religions (as you would know best, studious Nantrech), yet of this Blug, we begin with intellectual trifles.”

“Then, Morca, we proceed with fact-finding. Very aged scrolls do mention this Blug in oblique and unhallowed contexts, and I have chanced upon allusions to same in my travels, so we deal not with a contemporary concoction. Something old, festering in realms hidden from deduction or revelation, creeps into the world, for some reason here. If we discern the source, we can direct our powers against it.”

That night a courier brought a felicitous message from Phalos, he of the castle. Expressing boundless eagerness to wait upon the grandees of Dyrezan, he offered the hospitality of his lofty abode, declaring his desire to commune with them, at their pleasure, on policies designed to squelch the wickedness in Konai.

In the morning Nantrech and Morca learned of another terrible visitation. This occurred at a farm to the north of Moronais, on the banks of the stream that watered the valley, and the testimony of the

village watch described a grotesqueness become habitual. The lordly guests attended to their tale, insisting on examining the place flanked by a squad of soldiers. Within the hour they reached the spot, a fine house with a charming lawn and flourishing orchards. There, a notable family had dwelt until the previous night.

“Gurota was a good man,” said Tarbona, who accompanied the party, “with a delightful family in the main, save for his eldest son, who embraced Blug and slew himself months ago. Gurota led the call for hard strokes against the invisible blight. I fear this is his reward.”

Gathered statements and observation provided the generalities of the crime. Intruders had attacked in the dark, seized the inhabitants of the house, herded them into the common room and, there, systematically slaughtered them. Five had perished, removed from the world by exotic and prolonged means. Blood was everywhere. Not a single body remained intact, nor were any readily recognizable. Scrawled in darkening crimson on the panels above the sodden heap of human wreckage were the words: “As He commands, so we obey. The new age comes swiftly. GREAT IS BLUG, LORD OF FILTH AND DECAY.”

Cried Tarbona, “What god commands this?”

“And who serves him?” Morca asked harshly. “They must be tracked and made to feel our swords on their necks.”

Returned Nantrech, “That will happen, tempestuous friend, when the wind blows forthright to dispel this mental fog. Morca, a learned man resides near, and he has extended a hand to us. Let us go now to Phalos and partake of what he can give.”

“Aye, Nantrech, it is time. From him we must gain more than from these hapless rustics.”

That decided, they retraced their path to the tavern, where Morca charged an aide with securing the post while he and Nantrech set out with their small force of guards for the castle. The main street of Moronais took them east, swung by the brook and across the valley, fading to a cart trail as it approached the base of the castle knoll. From there an easy, firm surface switch-backed up the steep, bouldered slope, winding this way and that toward the fortified summit.

Seen close up, the castle of Phalos revealed itself as a blocky pile of granite, conceived with utilitarian rather than aesthetic prerequisites in mind. Its low, massive walls supported a crenellated battlement on which a few spearmen could be spied, and beyond them an unadorned keep tower of limestone with a lone window facing this side. A wooden gate sealed the fort.

Lord Nantrech hailed the men above the gate, naming himself and his mission, and in moments the wooden frame swung back that the small group might enter. This they did, emerging into a fairly barren court harboring essentials for life, such as storage barrels, an enclosure for cattle, a couple head of oxen being driven across a planted garden. To the nobles of Dyrezan it looked an unkempt place, neglected, scarce a fitting abode for one of high station. Nantrech muttered something about differing standards among nations and had time to launch into a tale derived from his former travels before they were met.

A servant, grubby in apparel and demeanor, appeared at the top of the steps leading to the door of the keep, and in the name of his master beckoned them inside. The inner residence of the castle did exhibit elements of fine life, with colorful tapestries draping the austere stone, passable statues in corners, and ornate rugs about the long table in the broad main hall. Even this area suggested, to men born to consummate indulgence, an air of dilapidation, a sense of better days lost. There Phalos greeted them.

“To think,” he cried after introductions, “that the giants of Dyrezan would stoop to honor my hovel! Gentlemen, my tongue falters when I attempt to abase myself according to your deserts. Consider me your slave, to bid as you will. I know why you come. Fiends stalk abroad! Konai, groaning under intolerable burdens of terror and madness, pleads for salvation. Make yourselves at home while we acquaint our minds.”

This was recited by a short round fellow, bald save for a fringe of white hair, barefoot and garbed in a scruffy shift, though he wore nice rings on his fingers, the sole touch of personal elegance other than his welcoming voice. Clapping hands, he spoke at the hall, ordering refreshment which came rolled on trays wielded by serving women.

With obsequious fervor he begged his guests to sit, to grace him with their words, yet he promptly launched into a soliloquy.

“Woe is Konai, the land of my fathers, with its fields and its herds, and woe is Moronais, with its faithful tenants. They look to me for rescue, but I avail them not. Cursed am I! Spears miss their aim against diseases of the brain, nor impale ought but shadows. Spiteful Blug reigns here, and the people would know why. What can I tell them? Education fails me. My life has been spent compiling a treasury of books, scrolls, and etched plates possessive of wisdom that should arm me with advantageous inspiration. Uselessly I ponder the olden texts which mock me with their secrets, seeking the right way. I fear I am not worthy.”

Nantrech politely broke in. “Surely your heart beats with benevolence. Heard we of your learning, which made this meeting mandatory. Books you say, a trove of knowledge if I hear right. Tell these tomes of Blug?”

“They do,” Phalos replied with alacrity. “Noble Nantrech, permit of me this boast. Beneath our feet lies my expansive private cellar, a vault of primordial stone which I have dedicated to the accumulated lore of great matters. Since youth I have labored as architect and mason of that library, my sole gift to a deplorable world. There are deposited written records of ancient deeds, the reports and observations of lost antiquity. From all quarters, by any means, I accrued the food of the mind. Despite my numerous faults, I have not erred on the side of ignorance. Yes, I say, the words of Blug, for and about, reside within my collection. It contains those truths! Providence has sent you, Lord Nantrech, and you, Lord Morca, for as noble magicians your minds are keys which shall unlock the answers.”

“Quite so,” agreed Morca, taken aback by the fellow’s fawning exuberance. “Therefore, I understand that you grant us access to your literary preserve.”

“I offer every aid in my power, or I am a sorry knave. Ah, my dear, I did not expect you.” This last addressed Phalos upon the appearance of a beautiful young woman, hardly more than a girl, clothed shabbily as was he. “Gentlemen, my wife, who lives to enhance my life. Wife, these be great ones from far Dyrezan. They come to doctor the ills of

these times. Is not that supreme graciousness? We must welcome them appropriately.”

Lovely indeed—golden haired, with soft, agreeable features—but with sad countenance she spoke in a low voice, almost a whisper, “Difficult it is to bear, these tragedies, though our station demands acceptance. What will be, will. Welcome, men of Dyrezan.”

“Yes, well said, my dear. Travelers must eat. Please make arrangements.” With that Phalos offered as well the comforts of his castle, urged his guests to banquet with him, to make his abode their own for the duration of their mission.

“A secure base of operations,” Morca acknowledged. Nantrech politely demurred, noting that Moronais, as the focus of evil, required the presence of the troops, with him and Morca to command them. To sup and conversation, however, he acquiesced, and with courtly charm requested the company of the wife of Phalos.

The lady of the castle joined them at the table, but her husband had thought only for substantial themes, and left to herself she contributed little to discourse. Out of courtesy her guests broke off questioning him and sought to draw her out with common pleasantries. She hesitated, glancing sidewise at Phalos before murmuring, “The totality of life is misery. So it is ordained. My lord conceives fruitful plans for this realm. If you gentlemen may aid him in his necessary work, that will lead to true fulfillment.”

“Marvelous, my dear,” cried Phalos with a winning smile. “I could not have said it better. A new dawn comes! Now, your obligations of rank entreat. Perhaps you should attend to them.”

After she meekly departed Nantrech said, “Before we take leave this day, Phalos, I would cherish seeing this vault of books you proudly describe. My colleague and I may spend considerable time there if it proves of value to our learning.”

“To ask is to have,” replied Phalos. When the repast finished he called for two servants to bear torches for the little party and lead the way to the library.

Their progression began at an iron-bound door of thick oak with an intricate lock, a steel mechanism which Phalos worked with nimble fingers. The door pushed quietly inward on oiled hinges into a dark corridor of polished blue-gray limestone. Wall torches alighted, the

group advanced, Phalos taking the lead and amiably chatting about the construction of the place as they proceeded.

The passage ran straight for a lengthy span, then turned abruptly onto a descending circular staircase of creaky but stable iron. At this point Phalos dismissed the servants, taking a torch for himself. The three continued down, round and round, down a surprising distance, and during their several revolutions the wizards of Dyrezan noted an alteration in the composition of the walls. At a point just below the commencement of their descent the sheer limestone slabs gave way to a rough black material in big blocks, extremely hard to the touch, yet worn with an aspect of awesome antiquity. Nantrech paused to examine the broad cubic forms, declared them basalt, at which conclusion Phalos nodded approvingly. At the bottom of the stairwell, they stepped onto a flagged basalt floor. A few more paces took them to a second strong door like that far above, opened by Phalos in a similar manner. This door, fastened to the wall with a metal hook, he pulled toward him, passed through, and motioned his guests inside a dimly seen chamber. He made short work of igniting a series of wall torches upheld in their copper clasps.

“Behold,” he presently cried, “this great vault, wholly given over to lovingly gathered lore, to be sifted as suits and gratifies.”

Accustomed as they were to the best bestowals of their civilization, Nantrech and Morca were tremendously impressed by the vault of Phalos. Standing within, they gazed about at a vast, low-ceiled basalt chamber, a single large, oblong room with black stone partitions which formed spacious alcoves and sub-rooms on three sides. The finishing of the rock surfaces, the entire make-up of the forms and spaces, was rather crude, purely functional, yet these observations were fleeting, as it was the function of the vault which demanded attention.

Phalos had truly bragged. Its walls adorned with shelves and cabinets, they bore a largess of amassed written treasures, a feast of lore, at the glance of a trained eye redolent of extreme age and sourced from strange regions. There were books and scrolls and scattered sheets in plenty, as well as curious tablets in wood and bronze, and stone laden with inscriptions worn by time and use, and

cuttings from tapestries bearing weird images in fading colors. This was a library, to all appearances, that must have evoke envy.

Morca exclaimed, started happily rummaging among the literary rarities. Quickly he held up one ill-bound sheaf. "*The Dreams of Astrodemus*," he announced, "a treatise esteemed by the mages of Dyrezan. And I thought I possessed the only extant autographed copy."

Phalos shrugged. "I acquired that early in my studies. Once I deemed it valuable. There are many others here of like caliber."

Another aspect of the vault drew awed comment from Nantrech. "These walls of basalt cubes," he ruminated, "this low, flat ceiling of same, even the regular slits for ventilation, indicate an architecture hailing from another age. This be Rhexellite masonry."

"So it is," said Phalos, "dating from darkest prehistory. The castle of my fathers stands erected atop the ruins of those lost ones, who in their heyday chose well the site. My ancestors agreed with them."

Said Nantrech, "Legends hint at their evil knowledge and of the horrible fate that overtook them through the wanton practice of sinister magic."

"We need not be reduced to conjecturing from hints," declared Morca, "for here their fell wisdom survives as well." He held up to a steadily burning torch an oddly angled plate of gold. "See, Nantrech, carved in imperishable runes on this eternal metal, actual words from that forgotten age. I own the means to decipher this. However, I suppose our generous host has preceded me."

"I have," admitted Phalos with a wan smile. "Were I an adept of the ethereal arts, as are you, I would have acted upon the gleanings of my research. However, even for a base mortal such as I, much can be learned."

"Of Blug?" queried Nantrech.

"Indeed, from this, and much else of my collection. As I told you, the truth is here. Collating the proper facts shall indicate the way."

"Yes, it will," agreed Nantrech heavily, "and with you to guide us, Phalos, it need not take a lifetime. Duty presses." He exhaled loudly. "Despite the many vents, this close air oppresses me. I would go."

"I would inaugurate my studies now," hotly retorted Morca. "Time stands not still, and there are horrors to unmask."

“Tomorrow,” snapped Nantrech. “You and I must prepare to bear this terrible burden. Such is the essence of mortal life.”

Grouched his colleague, “If you would have it so.”

Rejoined Nantrech, “Quite. Phalos, we withdraw for the nonce, to make ready. With your blessing, we shall return.”

“So be it, my lords. My vault stands open for you.”

On the ride back to Moronais, Nantrech and Morca bickered, mostly of trifles. Not entirely uncharacteristic of them, this behavior incorporated a bitter strain unjustified and unusual. Upon their return they received reports of fresh crime, shockingly similar to previous occurrences. They declined to immediately investigate. That night, while supping at the inn, they exchanged warm words about nothing in particular, with such vehemence as to surprise and distress their soldierly attendees.

Eventually, Lord Morca pushed back from the table, crying, “Enough of this slop. It sits like lead in my belly. Has a poisoner struck? I feel out of sorts.”

“I detected it sooner,” said Lord Nantrech, “even before we left the vault. The magnitude of our mission crushes me. It seems, I confess, a hopeless enterprise. Of what use the struggles we contemplate? Peculiar ideas chase themselves in my brain. Doubts fester; I grow weary without effort. What means this? Morca, do we inhale an infection in Moronais? Were not my mind so tired, I would cast a spell, that I might arm myself against spurious notions.”

“Do that then, Nantrech, in the morning, for I will not wrestle with muddled magic. Meanwhile, after my rest, I shall hie back to the castle, there to immerse myself in the books of friend Phalos. In his vault may reside the elements of a conjuration designed to combat this evil. Fortunate it is that Phalos proves eager to cooperate.”

“Aye, Morca. Blessed as they be, his is a depressing household. Responsibility weighs heavy here. Phalos, I fear, is at loose ends, nor can such a disconsolate wife properly support him. What was her name?”

Morca pursed his lips in thought. “She did not say, nor he introduce. What of that?”

Nantrech shrugged. “Different cultures, different ways. I have seen endless variety in my wanderings. Many years ago, I observed

curious domestic relations among a tribe of the south country..."

In the morning they separated to speed their investigations. Nantrech began the day with a trial of the arcane arts, endeavoring to fabricate from his magical items a spell that would grant him vision beyond the superficial. He attempted this with a collection of special crystals endowed with mystical properties that, with the requisite chanted words, focused a beam of power filched from a higher plane into an unusually constructed convex mirror framed in purest silver. In that mirror, he would see with his eyes things that eyes cannot see.

Only he did not. While Nantrech performed in his room the ceremony with customary skill, and he felt the energy from outer spheres coursing through him via the carefully aligned crystals, the mirror refused to function as experience indicated it ought. The wizard beheld the reflection of his face melting into iridescent haze, but those shimmering colors did not in turn manifest a useful image. He felt the strength of the spell pushing against his mind rather than pulling him into the depths of the glass. To a mage of his stature, the meaning was plain. From some point in Konai, stronger energy was directed at him, nullifying his conjuration.

He tried several old tricks to circumvent the blockage, without success. Not knowing the source, it was near impossible to counteract. Abandoning that tack, he quizzed himself as to what could be discerned from the failed experiment. There occurred to him the issue of directionality. Did the opposing force emanate from a broad area, or from a narrow focus? Nantrech gingerly shifted the mirror with fingertips oiled in an effusion of lamia's milk. In most positions, the unhelpful visual effect remained relatively steady. At one particular angle the image altered dramatically. Nantrech blinked against the harsh strobing result.

"Now that stokes interest," he muttered. "Coincidence, or something more. Why did I not previously entertain this theory? Obviously, these infernal rays that dim arcane sight serve also to drug the mind. Before I take another step, I must whistle up a charm that will shield my brain. I am good for that. Then, I shall go forth to question."

The morn had passed ere Nantrech completed the weaving of the mental web that protected his thoughts from unnatural muddying.

With a clear head he ventured about Moronais, visiting the pitiful scene of the latest crime, the while conversing with folk about various points. Asked he certain questions of Tarbona, whose responses elicited from the questioner an introspective nod.

Morca trod a different path this day. Early he set out, mailed and armed as was his custom, and accompanied by two attendants, for the castle of Phalos, where he would devote the hours to deep studies. The sentinels at the bastion gate, according to their standing orders, let him freely pass, and Phalos momentarily met with him to confirm their arrangement and see to the comfort of his men. Morca's host granted him full liberty to read and copy as he pleased, extravagantly expressing the wish that his sojourn within the vault should prove fruitful, serving as a conduit to the fundamental reality of matters and turning him into the required track of vital deeds. Morca accepted the gushing blessing and went on alone, knowing the way, but on the verge of the descent into the opened vault he was accosted by the wife of Phalos, who would whisper a communication to him. Said she:

"Lord Morca, it is meet that you shrink with dread and despair from the horror that closes in on you. Life, as you shall know, is but the jest of He who governs the affairs of the universe. This I have learned in time, and so should you. There is no escape—submission, the only righteous reaction—acceptance, the only allowable goal. Know this as does poor Lossa, who once foolishly hallucinated happiness, and you will find your strange and distinctive joy." Abruptly she fled from him, vanishing around a turn of the passage.

Morca shook his head in helpless pity at the thought of this sad one, so beautiful, little more than a child, yet prey to such morbidities of mind. "Here, too, the mysterious plague strikes home. I should derive meaning from her words, but oddly I do not. I am not myself." At a simmering level of comprehension Morca guessed that the dark pall blanketing the land continued to affect him, a galling realization. He must plunge himself into work and shake off the shadows.

In that vault of ebony stone carved by the dead Rhexellites, Morca gathered unto himself a mass of selected documents and, taking chair at a desk within a subsidiary chamber, inaugurated his singular program of scholarship. Torches gave light to see, and he had spares

aplenty. On all sides, volumes of ancient lore mocked him with their silent cacophony of elder secrets. So much was there to examine, so little time to peruse, that he feared the randomness of his selections might cause him to miss critical clues. The air in the vault oppressed him; not the best place, he mused, to free the mind for intellectual action. That dark ceiling, so low, seemed a weight on his neck. Morca shook himself, sipped water from the jug he carried with him, and slapped some on his face.

Morca read, and he learned of Blug as He had made Himself known to wise men since the receding origins of the human race. Great Blug—mighty Blug—Blug the master of cosmic reality, purveyor of the one dismal truth. An omnipotent force did lie behind all things, and that force was Blug, dreary, wretched, and rancid. From His seat on a throne of stinking sludge in the diseased heart of a black swamp situated beyond the ken and maps of men, He ruled, adored by the blighted souls of those He devastated. They drank of His poisonous nectar, and in turn, He imbibed of their forlorn depravity. Blug thrived on misery, fed on the anguish that He induced. That was the way of Blug. His worshipers prophesied the time when all men would acknowledge Blug, and when came that time, when all wallowed in an orgy of pain, death, and self-loathing, then His will would be done, and the cosmos would collapse into a muck of vermin-infested rotteness—the end of mind and deed, darkness eternal.

Morca could not refute the kingship of such a god, nor the desire of men to seek succor, however nihilistic, at the feet of Blug. This world, with the insects called men crawling over it, surely belonged to this deity and none other, and only smugly stupid idiots would refuse His offer. Idiots like Nantrech, for one, who babbled of his inordinate wisdom, yet had never perceived the truths of Blug. Morca, though still in his youth, had through these stunning pages advanced far beyond his companion oldster. He, Morca, had only to bow down, to grovel in the fetid mire, and—

And WHY, he inwardly screamed, was he thinking this turgid insanity? Great Xenophor was Lord of All Things, this disgusting Blug merely a mad demon, lurking within a pit of obscenity, hate-crazed and greedy for corrupted souls. Blug gained on the world by infecting human minds, and with a stomach-churning shock, Morca knew

himself for a target of that nauseating one. The evil germs infiltrating his brain swarmed in the chamber; of course, how he could he have missed this: the plague emanated from the vault of Phalos! Mentally he punched back at the cords constricting thought. Phalos, steeped in this unholy lore; Lossa—Lossa—the name rang, only now, iron bells of alarm. Inconceivable that he had not pieced together the puzzle, except that Blug fought against his reason and had done so since his coming to Konai.

The door of the vault crashed open. Many armed men entered, flanking Phalos, who waddled forward with his flabby face distorted by the rictus of a grisly smile. Said he, “You exhibit much strength, Lord Morca. You amaze me, in that you do not succumb to the spell of Blug of your own accord. What is told of the mages of Dyrezan must be so.”

“As you shall learn to your cost,” Morca growled, rising and laying hand on hilt. “I was not born to die at the hands of the high priest of a degenerate cult.”

Phalos chuckled without mirth. “You have deduced all. From my studies I gleaned those majestic and abysmal insights upon which I have erected my citadel of truth. The Rhexellites taught me; they knew the secrets—the secrets that may indeed have destroyed them. Blug rules! You thought me merely a bookish worm, but I delved into magic, discovered the key that opens the door granting access to His squamous corporeality. The mystical arts are not bred in my bones as in yours, but I learned well. I have beheld Blug with these moist eyes. I have quaffed and swallowed His revolting essence! Abasing myself as a disciple, He condescended to honor me by infusing a portion of His substance into the very stones of this vault. It reeks of Blug!

“I lured here my victims or brought them captive, and in this vault Blug whispered His filth into their ears, and they changed and became one with Him. They went forth to spread horror or to drag in others, begging and screaming. For my amusement, as a special sacrifice, I stole Lossa, radiant with beauty, amiable in her absolute innocence, from that idiot Tarbona, warped her brain, converted her into Blug’s slave. How I roared with laughter at my triumph!

“I will not bore you with a recital of the myriad splendid cruelties I have wrought upon Lossa, that loveliest of prizes, nor, for that matter,

what has become of your luckless attendees. Let us concentrate on crucial topics. Blug stands on the verge of conquering Konai, but this bauble will not satisfy His limitless cravings. He must have the earth delivered over to him.”

“He may share your grave,” snapped Morca, “naught else.”

“On the contrary,” smirked Phalos. “You are the agent of His ultimate mastery. As Dyrezan falls, so falls the world. Not so foolish am I as to pit my weak magical abilities against an empire of born magicians; but a mage of the first circle, himself a hero of Dyrezan, might infiltrate, suborn and bring down that unassailable edifice, if first he sipped the noxious slime of Blug and dedicated his life and fortune to His cause. Yes, my Lord Morca, I mean you. Furthermore, there are two of you fated to work Blug’s will. Once I have broken you, there remains old Nantrech to convert: a duo of glorified parasites to eat out the vitals of Dyrezan! With that feat accomplished, Blug shall sweep this globe.

“I know it will happen. Despite my unworthiness, I will live to see it happen. The reign of ultimate depravity begins here!”

Morca drew his sword. “Never,” said he, simply, grimly. “I bow only to Skyrax, my king, and to omniscient Xenophor, who governs all things. I sneer at your base philosophy, suitable only for ill-raised children. Your brazen self-deception ends here.”

Phalos raised a hand with splayed fingers over his head, his entire frame quivering with rage, and from without features contorted by anger spat, “At him, men! Do not kill. I want him whole, at my mercy, for the hilarity of Blug.”

His henchmen, a dozen and more, charged with daggers and spears. On the instant, Morca was lightning made flesh, howling in battle joy as he sprang, twisted, dodged, and lunged, encompassed by the flashing halo of his bright sword. Immediately, two of Phalos’ thugs withdrew from the fight: one retreating with a scream, separated from his weaponed arm; the second stumbled aimlessly for a minute before he dropped, bereft of his head. The remaining half score sought to drive him, pinned by their spear-points, into a cramped compartment. Morca lopped off the shaft that painfully rammed his shoulder through the defensive mail, rolled under a table, and came up like a pouncing tiger, leaping past the stabbing mob.

Though versed in deadly sorcery, Morca could not make use of his most potent magic without due preparation and access to his arcane materials, but he employed on the fly his intrinsic skills in that line. The first man returning to the fray had his dagger knocked aside, felt steel fingers dig into his throat as Morca willed a preternatural dart into the membranes of his mind. The man shrieked, clasping hands to head, and sagged against the rough black wall with bloody pulp squirting from his eye sockets. Morca waved an arm, and murky gray smoke roiled gloomy in the chambers of the vault. Shouts of confusion erupted from all quarters, punctuated by the frenzied bellowing of Phalos.

It was the best Morca could do at short notice, and it almost worked. He made it to the door of the vault, clear of his pursuers, only his dash to liberty led him straight into the arms of a waiting trio, hitherto unseen, guarding that exit. A club swung hard; the glancing blow to his temple jarred him off balance, and before he could shrug off the stun, a multitude of powerful hands gripped him.

Yanking away his sword, they dragged him across the room to throw him into a chair while maintaining their wary grip. Phalos advanced through the clearing clouds with an eerily mad smile, clutching with both hands a large copper urn brimming with some oily, unbelievably malodorous potion. “The broth of Blug,” he declared, “the unadulterated filth dripping from the flaccid teats that disfigure the greasy film of His rancid bulk. Drink of it, Lord Morca, a single mouthful, and you—even you, bold and esteemed Morca—shall grovel like a worm, eager to do the bidding of Blug.” He held close the urn. In Morca’s nostrils tingled the toxic vapors of the hideous brew.

His soul recoiled, roaring out its repugnance and its horror. As darkness shrouded his consciousness, Morca kicked out savagely against his tormentor, driving an iron-soled boot into his groin. Phalos gave a panicked, agonized shout as he floundered back, upending the urn upon himself. In the next moment, Morca strained fiercely against the hands that clutched him, broke that hold and bounded to his feet to face, unarmed, a deadly ring of foes.

What would have happened then? Even with as formidable a warrior as Morca one may wonder, but at this point there intruded into the scene a startling interruption—a burst of light that seared the

eyeballs, dazzling as a hundred suns, a rocking of the vault as of an earth-ripping quake, and a surging from the outer corridor of a tidal wave of armored swordsmen—the legionnaires of Dyrezan! Their practiced skills in combat as they hewed into the vault gave them an insurmountable advantage over their dazed and dumbfounded opponents. More a massacre than a battle, they finished it very quickly.

From their center, as the fracas calmed, strode Lord Nantrech, stepping carefully over the pools of gore to succor Morca, who wavered unsteadily on his feet in the midst of the evidence of carnage. Cried Nantrech, “My dear friend, you look ill. Have these creatures harmed you?”

“Not in my body,” replied Morca in a cracked voice, “yet I fear inner damage to my spirit. I inhaled, for the merest moment, the unholy essence of Blug. By Xenophor and his armies of lesser gods, will it mean the perishing of my soul?”

“Put by such maunderings,” sternly commanded Nantrech. “I know something of these matters. Thou art sound, despite a close run, strong in heart, and I bring with me holy ablutions of cleansing, most arcane—an antidote for the sickness inculcated by that potentate of malevolence. Come with me now to Moronais, where I guarantee any needed healing.”

This Morca accepted, and he felt better already at the promise, but still he hesitated to go. “What of Phalos, Blug’s agent and the earthly architect of these crimes? Did he perish in the melee?”

“I saw him not,” replied Nantrech, “yet he could not escape.”

“I dashed full in his face the hellish liquor with which he would have besmirched me. He fell—here he is—but what?” Morca recoiled as if stung, while his companion exclaimed his disgust. On the flagstones at their feet lay heaped the ragged clothing of Phalos, only it was not his body that writhed there within the soiled fabric, but a seething mass of maggots.

Declared Morca, “In his chosen wretchedness, this must constitute for Phalos a fitting reward.”

Somewhat later, during refreshment at the tavern of Moronais, Nantrech explained to him at table, “The vector of the depressing force, beaming as it did on a line from the castle, implied Phalos as

the culprit. Once I learned that, the scales began to fall from my eyes, and I bethought of other clues, chief among them the sorrowful tale told by Tarbona of his missing daughter. Then I worried for your safety. I would have joined you with the company sooner, except that the hazardous situation demanded first a devising of dynamic magic to counteract the evil spell of Blug.”

Morca solemnly observed, “It may be that saved me from succumbing early. With my intuition dulled, I sensed not the danger until it threatened to overwhelm.”

“Aye, we nearly walked blind, our instincts lapsed by malicious design, into this nest of scorpions.”

“So, Blug repelled, and Phalos dead, or transformed according to his just deserts,” mused Morca, as he poured himself another full goblet from the amber contents of the big carafe. “A reasonable end to a tormenting nightmare. How, then, fare the folk of Konai?”

Airily replied Nantrech, with a wave of his hands, “As well as can be expected, in the backwash of supreme terror. We destroyed the baleful influence; they must pick up the pieces. Knowing the nature of our kindred, there will come a settling or forgetting of old scores. Relations amongst neighbors might prove messy for a while.

“Then too, our worthy efforts may come at a cost to them. King S kyrax (may he ever reign) could require fealty from Konai, ‘in the interests of public order’ perhaps. I can conceive of him laying a tax on these people; shall we say, for services rendered? That is no business of ours and, regardless, they gain on the deal. The worst is behind. That reminds me: Lossa, poor girl, is restored to the house of Tarbona; an exquisite composition there of bliss and sadness!”

Morca nodded. “Her case is most pathetic. I possess esoteric balms designed to rinse the dirt from a soul innately pure. Before we take leave, I would endeavor on her behalf.”

Nantrech raised high his drinking cup. “I honor the sentiment, my friend, and would expect no less of you.”

Morca frowned. “And what of Blug?”

Lord Nantrech tarried before speaking, staring morosely long into his wine until he raised his gaze and quietly intoned, “Blug exists. In my journeys into far wildernesses of the world I have come upon crumbling temples dedicated to his name, surrounded by the

shattered ruins of lost cities. Wherever his worship arises and takes firm root, he stains, defiles, annihilates. Somewhere, in spheres unguessed by man and mage, he endures, a perpetual blot on the great order of matter and energy willed by divine Xenophor. This time, Blug failed to break through. He will try again. There is that in Blug which resonates with the few always, with the many in certain unwholesome epochs. Unless the Most High decides, there can never be an end to this story.”

Morca slammed down a fist on the table top, making their dishes ring. “Why does Xenophor allow it?”

Nantrech, feebly grinning, stroked his beard and said, “I know not, nor do I ask. A most unwise query that—possibly sacrilegious—for the gods never vouchsafe such answers to man.”

*Jeffery Sims an author devoted to fantastic literature, living in Arizona, which forms the background for many of his stories. His recent publications include a volume of weird tales, **Eerie Arizona**; and the short stories “The Mad One,” “The Ghouls of Kalkris,” “The Granite Dells Mystery,” “The Castle of Chakaron,” “The Eye of Blug,” and “Those Who Came After.”*



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The Bubbcat

By SEAN MONAGHAN

Rogue AI device, advanced alien technology, or top secret superweapon?! Dolci D. has no idea what the Bubbcat even is, but her pursuers will stop at nothing to get their hands on the bizarre talking gadget that has become friend and companion!

The first time Dolci D. used the Bubbcat was at Anders when thirteen hundred people died in the subway station explosion. She'd just lost around twenty percent at a bureau de change on the French side of Brussels when the caged clerk had given her 26,000 Francs for her \$500 traveler's chit balance instead of the 31,000 she'd expected. The flickering red sign had read 62.5 Francs to the dollar. The clerk pointed out the small print on adjusted rates.

"That wasn't there yesterday."

"Today, there it is," the gap-toothed clerk had deferred in Flemish and turned back to clacking away on her Slingeshot, no doubt reselling the dollars for Quetzals or Reals and doubling her money in moments.

Distracted, wondering how she was going to pay her fourth night at the hotel—already one of the cheapest in old Brussels—Dolci D. got only a flicker of the imminent conflagration as she came down the steps to the platform. From her pocket, the Bubbcat ticked and activated.

"What?" she said as the little machine's bubble flared around her, and sixteen pounds of KB-5 plastic explosive ripped the station and the eight surrounding blocks to rubble. Fist-sized concrete fragments flew as far as the F80 ring road highway, eight kilometers away. Few buildings in the city survived without damage.

As the dust thinned, the Bubbcat shut down, and Dolci D. found herself in a scene that reminded her of her time in Dublin. She felt the heat right away, smelled the acrid tang of burned hydrocarbons

and flesh. Even burned metal. The subway cars were still dripping molten aluminum.

“How did you know?” she said.

The Bubbcat didn't respond. The question was outside its reporting parameters.

However lucky surviving this, it was going to make it even harder to elude Campbell.

From far away she heard sirens. The heat was dissipating.

“Go home,” the Bubbcat said.

That much she'd figured out for herself.

The hotel was still standing, though the building on the street corner had facade damage, bricks falling into the street. The hotel's sign had failed, the lights dim, and the 'H', hanging upside-down, canted from one corner as if ready to slide away at any moment. Broken glass littered the street. Children cried. An old woman swept the sidewalk in front of her home's narrow frontage, piling the glass in the gutter.

For a moment the guard wasn't going to let Dolci D. up to her room. “Go home,” he told her. “There's nothing here.” His black uniform was grayed by dust, his epaulettes and buttons dull, hat softened.

“I need to get my things.” She'd shoved past him and climbed the stairs, the elevator out of service.

On the fourth floor she found her door ajar.

It might just have been the explosion, shifting the frame, letting the latch unfasten. Still, she unholstered the Luger and eased herself in.

“Glaziers have been called in from as far away as Finland and Greece.” It was Kane, standing in the pile of glass at her window. He was silhouetted, but she would recognize him anytime. He had her Shiraz in his hand, and as she came forward, putting the gun away, he took a swig from the bottleneck.

“They should be used to it. Greece, at least.” Some parts of Athens, people just didn't bother with glass at all anymore. They walled themselves in and used Samsung window sheets to simulate external views and GE natural bulbs to ward off cabin fever.

Kane laughed. “My ears are ringing.”

“Where were you?”

“Here. I missed you.”

Dolci D. unholstered the gun again.

Kane didn't turn from staring out at the row of narrow, tall houses across the street. “I'm living in a one up, one down in Liverpool,” he said. “Silly little building, but at least it has windows.” Now he turned.

“So what are you doing here?”

“Put the gun away.”

“I don't think so.” She side-stepped into the room's kitchen nook. Even the glass coffee jug had shattered. So much for worrying about how she was going to pay her hotel bill: she was going to have to figure out how to leave Brussels altogether.

“Death toll's starting to come in,” he said. “Looks like more than a thousand already.”

That seemed on the low side to her.

Kane set the Shiraz on the wooden coffee table with a clunk. That was something, she thought, that the bottle had survived in the cupboard.

“I think you should come with me,” he said.

“I'm still at work.”

Kane laughed. “Redistributed schooling? How's that going, really?” He glanced over his shoulder. “This place is a mess. You think that your program will still be running?”

Dolci D. kept the smile off her face. He still thought she was genuinely running that. That was to her advantage.

“We need you,” he said. “The Dutch are going to invade.”

“They're already invading.” Boat people drowning in the Channel and North Sea as they tried to reach England or Norway.

“Europe's done,” he said. “I've got money on the table for you.” As he reached into his jacket, she followed, both hands on the Luger. Kane took out a transfer chit and put it beside the Shiraz. “All the information you need. Enough ATM cash for two months in this place.” He kicked the glass, making it tinkle like falling Christmas ornaments. “Well, somewhere more intact.”

“ATMs in Belgium? Seriously?” She'd lost so many chits to ATM maws from Antwerp to Gent she was done risking it.

“This is in marks,” he said. “Deutschmarks.”

Back in Phoenix, seemingly a lifetime ago, Damon Blythe had tried to help her brother Hank. A habit involving a semi-artificial coca-extract derivative had seen him in a world of trouble. Dolci D. had been twenty-six—*only* twenty-six—a decade younger than Hank.

She'd known Damon Blythe for almost two years, managed one of his commercial art outlets in Scottsdale, keeping it afloat even as clone-art overtook the market.

When she'd first taken the job, Blythe had been hale and fit, but over the short time, his face had become sallow, eyes receding into his face.

Still, she'd asked him a favor. She had to, for Hank's sake.

"You think I can do anything?" Blythe had leaned back in his elk leather armchair, in his office that overlooked the valley. Planes in the background slid on landing vectors towards Sky Harbor. He offered her pineapple juice.

"I know you have... connections." It had been obvious from the moment she'd first begun working for him. "Hank's in real trouble."

"All right," Blythe said. "A favor for a favor. Ever been to Europe?" He opened a drawer and put a brassy ball on the polished oak desk. "I've got to get this to a friend."

The frowning, serious customs officials had confiscated the Luger at the border, even though she'd come through to Mönschau instead of the main crossing on the 32 from Leige to Aachen.

"You should have let me hide that," the Bubbcats told her as the bus taking her to Cologne pulled out.

"You should have suggested it."

The Bubbcats didn't reply. She watched the trees flash by. Stunted, fast-growing carbon-pines no more than eight feet high. Their tops just below the bottom swing of the forest of eighty-story twin-turbine wind generators. If you stood in the wrong place and made a standing jump you were liable to lose your head.

A yellow truck sped along, cutting the pines and planting seedlings. The driver waved at the bus.

"I need to contact Damon," she told the Bubbcats.

It waved a lens at her. "Not a good idea."

“Things are desperate.”

“Not by an order of magnitude.”

She slept. The dream of her brother came again. This time he was alive-dead, trying to implant a memory chip in her frontal lobe so she wouldn't forget him. She woke to someone shaking her, burbling in thick southern German.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“Talking in your sleep,” the woman said in English. She had a face like the popstar Athena Patel, high cheekbones and long lashes, but with blonde hair. “In Flemish.”

“My brother was Dutch.”

“Whatever.” The woman went back to her contact movie, eyes glazing.

“You're in a real pickle here, aren't you?” the Bubbcat said. It had suctioned itself to the seatback and eyed her with a half-dozen of its varied lenses. The half-stoned Polish surfer in the window seat stared at the device. Dolci D. let him. There were enough customized companions around now that the partially-alien Bubbcat blended in under all but the most curious of inspections.

“I'm fine,” she told it. “I know what I'm doing.”

“Really?”

“Once I get those Marks.” There was a manual bank in a suburb of Dusseldorf where she could insert Kane's chit to withdraw funds. She'd done it before. That was when she'd been backpacking, though, not with terrorists tearing the continent apart and a crazed millionaire throwing his resources at finding her and the Bubbcat. Still, Germany was Germany. The eye of the hurricane.

“Good luck with that,” the little machine said.

“Have you done a self-defense course?” Blythe had asked. He looked her up and down.

“Several.” She knew she was slight. Her grandfather, the one who'd fought in Afghanistan, twice, had said anything more than a breeze would knock her down. But now she could break a man's thumb, gouge an eye, and twist other parts around in nasty, debilitating ways.

“Good. I’m going to have Katei show you a few things. You need to know how to handle a gun.”

“You’re sending me to Europe with a gun?” She could imagine not even getting past the first level of amateur security at Sky Harbor.

“I’m sending you with nothing. But I’m sure you’ll be able to get one.”

She had. Too easily. But now she’d lost it again. Maybe she could get another in Russia.

At Dusseldorf Grand Station she caught the catapult maglev for Vladivostok. The bank had given her fifty percent on the marks, converting them to Yen and to Canadian dollars before shifting them back to marks. The teller had skimmed around eight percent for himself, right in front of Dolci D. “Any other time I would have you reported,” she told the man.

“My English... limited,” he’d said with a tight-lipped half-smile.

Keeping her hands flat on the cold polished granite counter, she’d questioned his parentage in the best descriptive German she knew. His eyes had widened, but he’d continued to siphon. At least she’d kept herself from hitting him. Perhaps it was best that she’d lost the gun.

The train hit Mach .95 as it crossed the old Russian border. The antique beige internal panels rattled in their fittings as reconstructed East German smokestacks flashed by.

“Are you in business?” the old woman beside her asked when the meal trolley wheeled through. Dolci D. took the kipper sandwich with cranberry juice. The woman—who had to be ninety—got an inch-thick steak.

“I guess you’d say that.” Dolci D. took the tray from the steward. The seatback unfolded its table, grabbing the tray with a click. The tray tipped and she had to grab the soda cup to stop it spilling.

“I could tell. I’ve run a bordello in Sarajevo for a long time. Got to be very astute running a business.”

“You’re telling me.”

The woman didn’t speak again, setting to cutting her slab of cow into sections.

“Jessamine’s answered your request,” the Bubbcat said.

“How do you know that?” The tray rattled and she drank the soda half down.

“I routed your calls through my system.”

“Helpful.” Dolci D. still didn’t know exactly what the machine was. It continued to surprise her. Hacking her phone seemed like a small price to pay for something that could place her in stasis when someone blew up a subway station.

“That’s me,” the machine said. “She says come right over.”

“I can’t talk to her?”

“There’s a trace.”

“Campbell?”

The Bubbcat didn’t reply. It seemed smart enough to avoid wasting time on the obvious.

“Are you going to eat that?” the old woman said, pointing at Dolci D.’s hardly-touched little sandwich.

The edge of the Russian Confederation rose up like the side of a vast table. Despite Japan, Dolci D. felt as if she could fall off the world, vanish into the Pacific. She had no money left. The train had ticked its way through her re-converted marks like a taxi.

“You met Kane?” Jessamine said. She curled her lips. Her mouth was awkwardly shaped but attractive, the thicker part of her lips ending before the line of her mouth, as if someone had added a half-inch line with red pencil on either side. “Joseph Kane.”

“Kane’s dead,” Dolci D. said.

Jessamine’s fake eyebrows rose. “In the explosion?” Her car smelled of lavender with a hint of pine. A Hello Kitty face hung from the rearview mirror.

“Bullet from a Luger.”

“That’ll do it. Where is the gun now?”

Dolci D. felt relieved she no longer had it. “Border control.”

Jessamine nodded. “I think that will make it easier for Campbell to find you, no?”

Dolci D. felt her skin prickle. How did this woman know about that? Not even Kane had known. Jessamine drove her Lada-Benz fast through the crowded snowy streets.

“Do you like it here in Vladivostok?” Dolci D. couldn’t imagine how anyone could.

“I make fifteen hundred reals a day. That switches to close to a million drachmas.”

“You work in Brazil now?”

“Exactly. Rainforest restitution. I’m very good at it.”

That made Dolci D. feel uncomfortable. “I’m going to need a gun.”

Jessamine glanced over. She thumped the horn and barreled on through an intersection against the light. “Redistributed schooling,” she said. “That’s a very clever cover. It seems so... altruistic. Yet here you are marching across Europe shooting citizens and stealing very valuable equipment.”

The Bubbcat hadn’t spoken for hours, but now it crawled out of her bag and clambered onto Jessamine’s dash. “Take the next left,” it told her.

“What the-”

“Next left. Alsatian Street. Go three blocks.”

Jessamine scowled at Dolci D. “I’m taking orders from your PDA now?”

Dolci D. said nothing.

“Alsatian Street,” the Bubbcat said.

The gun came up in Jessamine’s hand so fast Dolci D. thought she was dead already.

Jessamine flickered. The car swung right like a rough roller coaster. The gun’s barrel flared like a fire-starter.

“Duck,” the Bubbcat said.

Dolci D. bent forwards. The bullet swam above her, slow, as if it was ported from one of those pieces of ultra-high speed footage. She reached up for it.

“Don’t touch it. It still has inertia. It will take your fingers off.”

The bullet passed lazily by. Jessamine fired three more. The last went low and Dolci D. had to twist to avoid it.

“How do you know this woman?” the Bubbcat said.

“High school. She was my friend.”

“Not anymore.”

“I could tell.”

The air shifted, heavy and warm. She could smell the muzzle burn. Tiny particles of carbon fell in slow-motion, following the bullets.

"I feel light," she said.

"The bubble affects gravity too. Get ready, I'm shutting down. Three, two, one."

Sound and weight. The blasting echo of the shots struck her ears.

"What?" Jessamine said.

Dolci D. already had the gun. Jessamine squealed, tucking her broken fingers into her left armpit.

"What now?" Dolci D. asked the Bubbcat.

"I'm improvising," it said.

"Campbell's going to find you," Jessamine said.

"I didn't do anything."

"I'll be sure to tell him." Jessamine swung the wheel, and the car hit a curb. Dolci D.'s head struck the side window with a crack. Light flashed in her eyes. The car tipped and came to a jarring halt. Her forehead almost hit the dash.

"Hey!" the Bubbcat squeaked.

Dazed, Dolci D. rocked back into the seat. Her head throbbed. Her breath came in gasps. She heard some mechanical sound nearby, and the amplified noise of traffic.

As she came to, she realized the car's hood was wrecked, jammed in against an old iron lamp standard. Jessamine's door was open and she was gone.

So was the Bubbcat.

"Where?" Dolci D. said. Her door was jammed shut. She clambered across the gearshift and driver's seat onto the cool tarmac.

"Are you all right?" a woman asked in English. "You're bleeding." Other pedestrians closed in.

Cars and trucks sped by. A main road, running between tall old black brick buildings with patinaed copper roofs. Further along, among the sidewalk pedestrians, she saw someone running.

Jessamine.

As Dolci D. started after, a bus pulled around the corner and stopped. Jessamine boarded.

Dolci D. shouted after her.

The bus remained stationary, but as she came up, it nosed out into traffic again. Dolci D. shouted. She saw a cop at the corner, head inclined. He was making his way towards the wreck.

Jessamine peered down at her from the bus window. The Bubbcat struggled in Jessamine's hand, clawing to get away like a snared turtle.

Dolci D. brought Jessamine's gun up and shot out the window. Jessamine screamed, along with practically every other occupant of the bus and every nearby pedestrian. The cop blew a whistle.

Leaping for the window frame, Dolci D. shot again. The bullet parted Jessamine's hair. Dolci D. got a hand on the bus, pulled herself up. The broken glass cut into her fingers.

The driver put his foot down and the bus pulled away.

"Stop!" Dolci D. shouted.

Jessamine was up and out of the seat. Dolci D.'s feet scrambled against the aluminum panels. The rough tarmac sped by just below. She threw the gun through the window, got both hands on the frame. Blood ran down her forearms. With a kick, she flipped herself up and over the edge.

Jessamine had reached the front. The other passengers whimpered or screamed, heads down. Out here at the edges, they weren't used to these kinds of things.

"Bubbcat!" Dolci D. shouted, scrambling around from where she'd landed into the aisle.

Jessamine swung around. Through the window, Dolci D. saw the flaring red, blue and white lights of the local cops. She ran along the aisle.

"Gun," the Bubbcat called. Dolci D. slowed, realized she'd missed picking up the gun she'd thrown in. But that wasn't what the machine meant.

Jessamine had another weapon, aimed back up the aisle at her.

Dolci D. ducked, but the shot struck her shoulder. She flipped around, collapsed. It hurt more than she might have imagined possible.

"Get up!" Jessamine yelled.

Dolci D. had fallen into the footwell between the bus's seats. She found herself staring into the brown eyes of a child, girl, perhaps

eight, long dark hair. Frightened. "It's going to be all right," Dolci D. said. "All right." She could feel her own blood running down her back from the wound.

The view shifted. Dolci D. felt light-headed, felt like the world was beginning to spin. Is that blood-loss? she thought. She sighed. Now Campbell was going to find her, get the Bubbcat back.

Jessamine replaced the frightened girl. The bus had come to a halt. "Come on," Jessamine said. "You're shot." She had a set of manacles in her hand, the chain clinking.

More shouting from somewhere, and police whistles. Another sound that might have been a helicopter.

"You're going to handcuff me?" Dolci D. felt her voice hoarse, almost a whisper. She could smell the damp of the footwell, almost like mildew, with earthy mud. People tramping through the snow in galoshes, the bus going days between cleans. She remembered visiting Vladivostok in the summer, when she'd first met Jessamine. Sunny, happier times.

"I have to restrain you," Jessamine said.

"I'm shot. I'm bleeding out."

"You're always a threat." Jessamine smiled. "Climbing in the bus like that. Such tenacity." She pulled Dolci D. forwards.

Twisting, Dolci D. punched Jessamine. The woman's jaw cracked. She flopped sideways. Her nose smacked into the armrest opposite. Blood flooded from her nostrils.

Dolci D.'s peripheral vision closed in on her. She felt giddy.

Jessamine collapsed into the aisle.

"Bubbcat?" Dolci D. said. She felt like she was about to pass out.

The little machine scrambled up onto Jessamine's arm, free from her grasp. It used its lenses for locomotion.

"Help," Dolci D. said. Blackness came at her like a dead sun, swallowing everything in its path.

"I've got you," the machine said. It leapt at her face.

Dragons and enormous fang-toothed pigs battled across a landscape of dust and desert. They howled and tore each other to shreds. A warm wind brought petals from orchards across the valley. Dolci D. saw her father, walking away, her brother with his deep,

bloody wound, sleeping on a stile. Chickens crammed into a taxi. The Bubbcat grew monkey arms, and she fell through its fingers into a feather bed, the hard tips poking into her like a million needles. Power concentrators stabbed harsh sunlight, cooking wings and breasts, the smell like a fast-food joint. A ten-year-old optometrist tried to fit her with smart lenses, the little plastic disks with their own eyes, looking right into her corneas.

For a moment she woke from the dream, saw she was still in the bus, everyone still, the world silent. Blood, red and vital, striped across Jessamine's damaged face as she lay in the aisle.

Dolci D. let it all fade.

"Wake up," the Bubbcat said. "You'll need to focus."

"It hurts," she said. But it didn't hurt as badly as she might have imagined.

"You'll be hungry. We need to find you food, fast."

It was right. Her stomach cramped. She remembered hallucinating, eating something. Fried chicken? That made her even more hungry.

"You haven't eaten for six days," it said. "Relative. I've given you all the water I could manage, but now we need to go. Can you stand?"

That couldn't be right. She was still lying in the bus. Jessamine was across from her, out cold, where she'd only just fallen. Dolci D. remembered the punch. Her old friend, the one who'd helped her out so often before.

Who did that leave her to trust?

"I have to shut off the field now," the Bubbcat said. "You're going to ache and maybe struggle."

"I ache already." But the wound didn't hurt as much. Pulling her shirt aside, she looked down at the site, touched it with her right hand. The scab was thick and black, but it wasn't bleeding anymore.

"Sit up."

She moved, stomach cramping again. She got pins and needles up her legs and through her hips.

The Bubbcat moved into her field of view.

It had changed. No longer just a tennisball-sized gold orb with all its lenses, now it had become more block-like, with crab legs and pincers. A long antenna stuck up from the middle of the main body. There were two sections, she saw, like a spider's thorax and abdomen. It was still gold.

"You look different," she said. The pincers looked dangerous, like medical instruments. They were, she realized.

"Needs must."

"You operated on me?"

"Whew," it said. "Don't make me go into it. But the bullet had lodged against your clavicle."

"Lucky," she said.

"For you, I guess. Now, you need to eat. I synthesized drugs and some nutrients. Water, too, but I can't keep on indefinitely."

"We're in stasis."

"At my absolute limit."

"No wonder Campbell wants you. You're a miracle machine."

"You can't let him get me."

Dolci D. looked around the bus. The driver was a statue, craning around, the little girl's face frozen in a look of combined surprise and fear.

"I'll go down the aisle," Dolci D. said. "Out the front door."

"There's a 24-Seven convenience store two blocks from here. You can get—"

"Understood." Through the windscreen, she could see a man standing astride a bicycle, stopped and watching the bus.

"Then we'll find a hotel," the Bubbcat said.

"Okay. Switch me back to real time."

The transition was jarring. The noise of screaming. The sound of the bus's straining engine, the flashing of cops' lights. Jessamine lolled.

Dolci D. grabbed the second gun and staggered along the aisle, the Bubbcat clinging to her shoulder.

The Hotel Grande Chancellor was a mech-built stone edifice, eighty stories high, overlooking the repositioned second harbor.

Sailing ships, wings furled, rocked at their davits while robot arms unloaded pods of cheap American imports. Gulls circled.

Dolci D. had a room on the seventy-fifth floor, the highest she could get without the expense of a penthouse suite. She liked the view out over the cold Pacific.

“We need to move tomorrow,” the Bubbcat told her. It had manufactured a credit chit that stripped back the marks lost through the currency conversions in Belgium and Germany. It had also used the connection created when Jessamine had kidnapped—the little machine’s word for it—the Bubbcat and drained her accounts to a Hong Kong subsidiary of her Brazilian employer, and fed that through the conversion accounts. There was enough money now to keep moving for months.

Dolci D. found it disconcerting, how much the machine had changed. Not only physically—it had kept most of its legs and pincers, though the body had changed back into a brassy-colored ball—but also with its capacity to invade systems. She didn’t feel quite safe with it.

“Do you think I’m ready?” she said. “I’m still achy.”

“You’ll be achy for months, maybe years. You were shot at short range.”

“With a toy gun, you said.”

“It’s all relative. It was a low-caliber weapon designed for close quarters and easy concealment. Little accuracy and little penetrating power. It still could have killed you a few inches down and to the right.”

That gave her some perspective.

“I can’t get into the flight systems, but the hotel’s terminal can. You should book a flight to Vancouver and a connection to Phoenix. Blythe will take over.”

“Blythe.” Out in the harbor, a speedboat left a long V wake that slapped against the sides of the cargo ships. High above, someone was flying in a personal dirigible wing.

“You forgot?” the Bubbcat said.

“Of course not.”

Damon Blythe. He’d handed her the Bubbcat, put her on the plane to Barcelona. “These tickets,” he’d said, his voice dry and crackly

from the medication. “They’ll take you through to France and on north into the Benelux. Hole up, I’ll contact you. Stay low.” He’d given her the travelers chit, loaded with enough currency for a year. How had it lasted such a short time?

“So now it’s okay to contact him?” She could see those orders of magnitude collapsing, divided as if with strop-sharpened knives.

“It’s essential.”

The refurbished 707 buried itself in a cloud. She always found it disconcerting to aim for somewhere that Mercator made look due east and to fly almost directly north. On the maps Alaska was so far from the line between the Russian panhandle and south-western Canada that it was counter-intuitive to find it directly below.

“You don’t think three-dimensionally,” the Bubbcat told her.

“I just want good in-flight service.” The meal had been dry and tasteless, the wine corked. Despite all that sudden money, she’d only been able to book on a Mongolian start-up airline that was saving pennies on meals. She hated to think what their engine maintenance program was like.

It was going to be hard returning to Phoenix. She’d gotten used to the cool of Brussels. But at least people weren’t blowing up subway stations, and the place wasn’t flooding.

The first attempt had come on the TGVplus out of Paris. Two men and a woman, bustling in, sitting in the seats with her.

“Got something we want,” the woman had said, her voice almost sweet.

“Campbell sent us.” The man opposite Dolci D., burly, as if he could bench-press the train’s engine.

“I only have a traveler’s chit,” she’d said.

All three laughed.

She remembered Katei’s advice during training: *shoot anyone*.

They wouldn’t have given her a gun anyway. But she knew what Katei meant—don’t trust a soul.

“Do you even know what it is you’re carrying?” the woman said. Her breath, as she leaned over, smelled of chives and red wine.

“It’s contraband,” Dolci D. said. “That much is obvious. He said not to give it to you.”

“Of course he did. But you’re going to give it to me anyway.”

Dolci D. nodded. She reached into her blue faux snakeskin rucksack and pulled out the multitool she’d bought at Barcelona airport. Shoving the blade softly through the woman’s waist, Dolci D. leapt up and ran into the burly man. “Sorry,” she’d whispered as the blade went in between his ribs.

She’d turned fast, like Katei had shown her, putting the man’s body between herself and the other man. He fired, six shots. Pandemonium erupted in the carriage.

The train stopped, Dolci D. slipped out into the French countryside and crossed into Belgium illegally, leaving three bodies behind.

It still gave her chills. She was a commercial art retail manager who sweet-talked clients and made a nice commission. She had a small, pleasant condominium with a heated pool and some friends in the complex. She dated occasionally, went to concerts and museums, played tennis, hiked, visited her grandparents.

Now she’d murdered three people on a high-speed train ten thousand miles from home and had fled through European forests into the Benelux.

At least Hank had been taken care of.

As the plane crossed the icy white coast of Alaska, another plane slipped in beside it. Through the window, Dolci D. could see a tailless black and orange striped aircraft with sleek, swept-back wings and a needle nose. Aside from the colors it had no markings.

It moved within a couple of yards of the 707’s wing, matching speed. She saw glints of light from inside the windows. She moved back, pulled down the rasping window shade that didn’t quite fit in its tracks. A woman a few rows ahead shouted something. People moved across to peer out. A businessman reached by Dolci D. and lifted the shade.

The plane had gone.

She got the faintest trace of something in her peripheral vision. Above.

A thunk sound from the ceiling.

The plane's captain made an announcement. She only picked up a few words: *airspace, descending, calm.*

The overhead lockers rattled. Some of them sprang open. People screamed.

Part of the ceiling's plastic tore away. Air screamed out. Yellow oxygen masks dropped down in front of most seats.

"Bubbcat?" Dolci D. said. The air was getting cold. More screaming. The businessman shrugged, returned to his seat and fitted the yellow cone over his face.

A slot twice the size of one of the plane's windows appeared between the lockers. A man in a helmet and a black and orange suit dropped through.

The 707 had angled down. Not quite a dive but it was dropping fast. It shuddered.

"Nothing I can do here," the Bubbcat said.

She didn't even have the multitool. It had gone into the bin with dozens of others before she'd gotten aboard.

The man strode down the aisle towards her. He had a gun.

Dolci D. stood at the big picture window in the office. She was still dazed.

Outside, the black and orange plane rested on the tall undercarriage. It was a desert airstrip, no other planes. Beyond the tarmac, scrubby plants dotted the fawn landscape. Dark mountains rose beyond. She thought the glass must be tinted to keep the sun down.

There were some seats in the room, big plush boardroom chairs on wheels. Everything smelled new, the blue swirling carpet still organic and cat's-belly soft, the tabletop polished and unmarked. On the table there was a tray with fruit squares, muffin tops and donuts, and some bottles of Aquafina OJ and Pom Wonderful. No glasses.

After hauling her off the 707 through the hole in the roof, they'd blindfolded her and dragged her here. It had taken maybe an hour, so she figured northern Nevada. They'd shoved her into the room, cut her bonds. When she'd taken off the blindfold, they'd already closed the door behind her. The lock had snicked. She hadn't even bothered trying it.

Eventually she ate. The muffin tops were a mix of savory and sweet. She favored the orange chocolate chip. The pomegranate juice was too tart for her taste, but she downed a half-liter of OJ. Later, in the room's back corner, she found a door hidden flush in the paneling that led to a bathroom with marble floors, towels and toiletries. She brushed her teeth.

The sun set. On the horizon to the far right, she could see the glow of a city. Reno? She saw the lights of occasional planes and the flicker of wildfire lightning playing beyond the mountains.

Lowering two of the chairs to their lowest, flattest, she stretched out, tried to sleep.

At least she was still alive.

"What are you doing?" Hank had said. "Europe?"

"It's just a short trip. Making a courier delivery for my boss."

His apartment stank of old laundry. She'd found the bath filled with clothes. She had a feeling he just wore it until he himself could smell it, then tossed it in. He probably intended to do laundry sometime, but just went to Wal-Mart when he ran out. There were Faded Glory underwear wrappers scattered on the floor.

Hank had nodded, frowning. "Do you really think you'll get me out of trouble like that?"

Dolci D. had leaned back, startled. How had he made that connection so quickly?

Hank took a slug of his Coors. Hers stayed untouched on the table. She could barely stand to touch anything.

"Should I leave you to your fate?" she'd said.

"Might be best."

"You know I can't do that." He might be a slob, a crook, but he was still her brother.

He took a deep breath. "Listen. You might help me out, but I can't see any way that you come out ahead."

"Do you know all the details of this?"

"Enough. One of those semi-alien machines that timeslips or something. Deliver it to a man in Luxembourg. You'll get yourself killed."

Dolci D. had shrugged. “Sure.” Now she picked up the beer, took a swig. Cold, refreshing. “But you’ll be in the clear.”

“Not a fair trade.”

But he’d smiled, knowing there was no way to stop her, knowing that it was all just worst-case thinking anyway. He’d given her a smelly hug, promised to make it up to her.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

The slam of the main door opening startled Dolci D. from sleep. Relief. She’d been dreaming of dragons again.

Four people. Two men—one as burly as the one she’d knifed on the TGVplus, the other anorexic thin but with eyes like a demon—and two women. Dressed in the black and orange mercenary fatigues, save for the taller of the women. She was in a pressed satin skirt suit, a white blouse close to her neck, a gold chain with a turquoise fob pendant and matching earrings. She looked as delicate as a flower next to the goons.

Coming right around the table, holding Dolci D.’s gaze with crystalline eyes as she came, the woman strode like a dancer. She stopped one chair away and tossed something onto the table. A brass ball.

The Bubbcat.

It rolled, rumbling, across to the tray of fruit. The tray shuddered as the weight struck the side, but the rolling ball came to a stop, rocking gently.

“What have you done to it?” the woman said.

Dolci D. frowned. “Why am I here? Why did you kidnap me? What about the people on the plane? What is that anyway? Who are you?”

The woman smiled. She tapped her upper lip with her tongue tip. “You have been very hard to find. I am Iona Campbell.”

“I figured.”

“But you asked.” Campbell shifted around and sat. “You must understand that your situation is very precarious.” She reached past the inert Bubbcat and took one of the fruit squares. Sitting upright, she didn’t eat but began picking at the corner of the sticky piece with the long nail on her index finger. “Smuggling that all around the

world. You've probably acquired enough frequent flier points for a trip to Tucson."

The thin man giggled, stopping when Campbell looked at him. One of the guards stayed by the door, the other two had come to stand just behind her. Dolci D. saw they were all armed with tranquilizer arrows.

"You broke it, didn't you?" Dolci D. said.

Campbell's smile faded. She tore a thin strip of the fruit square and slipped it in her mouth. She sucked for a moment and said, "The plane crashed at Anchorage airport. No fatalities, but numerous broken limbs and contusions. Most people have been discharged already and are seeking alternative transport to their destination."

Dolci D. didn't say anything.

"You are here because it seems you've bonded with that thing. We know you had it open and active, but now it's clammed up." Campbell picked up the Bubbcat again. "Do you even know what it is? I suspect you don't."

Dolci D. reached for it. Hands clamped down on her shoulders, and Campbell pulled the ball back. The guards kept squeezing.

"You'd like to see your brother again, wouldn't you?"

A shiver passed through Dolci D. "What do you want?" Stupid, stupid Hank. She could have just stayed in the retail store.

"I want to access the bubble catalogue. I want to know where it leads and what it can do."

"You don't know?"

"I know exactly." Campbell's voice rose.

"But you can't get into it, right? What's that worth to you?"

"You're in no position to negotiate." Campbell gestured around the room. "In case you didn't notice."

"You broke it, right?"

Campbell took a deep, audible breath through her nostrils. "I can get your brother off. Set you up, set him up. Move him to the Caymans or Brazil." Leaning forward Campbell put the Bubbcat down on the table with a thud.

Desperate, Dolci D. thought. She's stuck. There must be a team of scientists and technicians downstairs who've been working on it for hours and can't get anywhere.

“That’s a better offer than Blythe gave you,” Campbell said.

“But I could trust him. How can I trust you?”

Campbell frowned. With her free hand she waved and the hands released Dolci D.’s shoulders. “You can’t.”

An hour later, in some sub-basement, strapped into a kind of chair that seemed like it had come from a dentist’s or barber’s—with the addition of leather restraints—Dolci D. found herself staring at a curved screen. The left side had her vitals—B.P., heartrate, glucose levels, pupil dilation—the right showed a series of graphs she didn’t recognize.

The Bubbcat was on a small table next to her, still sealed up like a brass ball. There were a dozen electrodes taped to its exterior, the wires leading away to a workstation with numerous smartchip blocks, their own screens showing more graphs and numbers. Most of them hadn’t changed at all.

The thin man and the woman guard had stayed with her the whole time.

“All right,” Campbell said. “I think we’re ready to go.”

“Caymans, right?” Dolci D. said.

“If this goes well, certainly.” Campbell’s thin smile felt like one the evil stepmother would give in a child’s fairytale: filled with deceit.

An attractive woman in jeans and a Patriots sweatshirt came around from behind the chipsets and rolled the table closer. “We just need you to put your fingertip onto the ball,” she said, her accent from the heart of Boston. She positioned the table with the Bubbcat just out of Dolci D.’s reach. The restraints meant she couldn’t reach anyway.

Dolci D. pointed that out.

“Carl will help you with that,” Campbell said.

The big guard came around and stood by the table. The woman in the jeans backed away, went to the table with all the monitors.

The two smaller guards clapped their hands on Dolci D.’s shoulders again as Carl unstrapped her right wrist. He held her arm in a grip like a weld.

“Just a touch,” the tech said.

“Be careful,” Campbell said.

Carl moved her hand towards the Bubbcat.

Dolci D. twisted. She grabbed and broke Carl's thumb. His scream was cut off as she scooped up the Bubbcat.

Still and quiet fell around her. The hands on her shoulders seemed to relax, even as they stayed in place. Campbell stood frozen, mouth half-open, a shout coming.

In Dolci D.'s hand the Bubbcat unfolded, legs and pincers slipping out from impossible slots.

"Well," she said. "Now are you going to tell me what you are?"

A cluster of lenses rose up like a set of periscopes on a submarine. It peered around. "First," it said, "we need to figure out how to get out of here."

The Bubbcat stuttered the field to give her a chance to put manacles on all of Campbell's people. Little fractional slices of time to avoid them falling into the stasis void.

She tied them to the dentist's chair and gave them a dose of the pentothal to hold them until she could get far away.

"You could just shoot them," the little machine had told her. "After all, you shot Kane without remorse."

"But not in cold blood," she said. Kane had been about to shoot her, and would have done it. Jessamine had already shot her when Dolci D. had gotten off what was really a lucky punch. Anyway, by the time Campbell and her lackeys freed themselves Dolci D. would have delivered the Bubbcat back to Blythe.

Done.

She was worried that the only way out would be the aircraft, but she found a Mercedes Trackrunner 4WD in a garage on the side of the main building. Fully-fueled. With a working GPS.

Under a set of powder-coated steel shelves in the garage, she found a hydraulic jack. She hauled it out to the tarmac and up a stepladder. She could barely manage the weight, but she managed to get it into the port jet intake on the black and orange plane. The jack made short work of twisting the turbine out of alignment. The plane wasn't going anywhere: someone would have to fly in a replacement engine.

"Crude," the Bubbcat told her.

Dolci D. shrugged. She wondered if she should have bothered.

The Mercedes started on the first touch, and she eased out onto the runway. The Bubbcat sat up on the dash, next to the GPS, eyeing the simple screen with a couple of lenses.

"I guess you're a bit more sophisticated, huh?" Dolci D. said as she programmed for Phoenix. She was going to find Blythe. She figured she'd more than met her end of the deal.

"Well," the Bubbcat said, "I can't find my way around quite as well."

"That's a joke, right?"

"Sure. I've developed a sense of humor from hanging with you."

"It's been a laugh a minute."

"You are not on a recognized roadway," the GPS said, its voice formal and pre-recorded. "Please ease left, driving with caution, and proceed five hundred yards to Road G."

Dolci D. smiled and eased the Mercedes left.

"I'm not the only one with a sense of humor," the Bubbcat said.

"The GPS is dead-serious."

"That was another joke. I am half-alien."

"Yeah. You can explain that to me on the drive home."

The Bubbcat's cluster of lenses turned towards her and bobbed, as if it was nodding in agreement.

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A Suit of Haidrah Skin

By ROB LANG

The dreaded magician-king of old has returned to Earth, and his strange tower now rests on an accursed plain surrounded by alien monstrosities; only with a suit of Haidrah Skin can Mald brave the dangers of the tower to avenge a fallen tribesman!

The original site of the magician's tower is no longer known. Generation upon generation has come and gone since he was driven from the surface of the world and into exile among the stars of the night sky. Legend tells of the day on which the tower departed the earth, carrying the magician inside it: of how the entire mighty structure took flight, expelling such prodigious quantities of arcane energy as to skeletonize a luckless portion of the insurgent horde that besieged it.

The Plain of Glaark, unpeopled, extends from the Fat River in the east to the foothills of the Singing Mountains in the west, and is bound to the north by the Gargling Fens. It is here that the magician's tower returned again to earth. It came without herald or harbinger on a grey day in winter, descending from the sky upon a cradle of magic; settling on its end, it sank foundations deep into the ground, so that when the dust was clear it stood amid the wide and desolate landscape of the plain like a lone fang standing in the jawbone of something dead. The violence of the tower's coming blasted soil from bedrock, so that the terrain for thousands of paces around its base became a scorched, bare and geometrically circular depression that gradually ceased to smoke as afternoon drew on.

After a long period of stillness in which the weak sun sank to meet the crags of the mountains, the tower's summit seemed suddenly and silently to blossom. There appeared a cloud of lurid red smoke that hid the structure's uppermost reaches and then began to sink—and although it flattened and spread itself, it did not disperse despite the winds to which it was subject in the upper air. Descending the tower's flanks and reaching the level of the ground, it lay as a low and

lingering mist, seeming to conform precisely to the blackened circle of devastation as gloaming bled away into night and the last light departed the plain.

Dawn revealed that the mist had gone. In its place, the bare rock had become studded with thousands of translucent, jellylike mounds that lay in the sun like enormous dewdrops as it rose over the plain. As morning progressed it would have become quickly clear to an observer, had there been any present, that the little mounds were growing. Through afternoon and evening they fattened and took shape, and the winds carried the massed sound of their growth eastward, to the tribes inhabiting the distant river. This sound, a queasy wet crackling, continued through the night, trailing off and ceasing toward dawn—and the next day the newly-risen sun shone down upon a garden of horror. Not a bit of blackened rock remained visible, and the shallow crater centred upon the tower's base was filled to the brim by millions of gigantic polyps. Each one was the height of a man; wedged to the ground and extending grasping tentacles into the air, the things were sessile mouths, new-grown and ravenous. Instead of the queasy sound of their prodigious development, the wind now carried abroad the stench of their ongoing life. The crater festered with wan, vein-shot flesh that glistened in the cold sunlight, the magician's tower rising steely and aloof now over a throng of sucking maws.

Two hunters from the Singing Mountains, drawn far out eastward onto the plains in pursuit of a bull-scorpion, had sighted the tower from afar the previous day and, abandoning their quarry in the face of so remarkable a discovery, had set a course toward it. They came to the edge of the polyp-field at noon. Full of fear and wonder at the great high mass of metal and the great wide moat of crawling flesh, both having seemingly grown spontaneously out of the ground in this hitherto-unremarked location, they stood for more than an hour agitated and irresolute.

At length, the mightier of the two hunters took saber in hand and advanced cautiously on an outlying polyp. Part of him was thinking only of the glory of combat against so hideous and unfamiliar a creature; another, more calculating part judged that the polyp had the mass of at least two bull-scorpions and was speculating as to the

quality of its meat. Edging forward, he crouched low to evade the circlet of tentacles that emerged from the polyp's oral end and curved out and over, half-flaccid. He misjudged their speed and their range, however, and before he could aim a blow at the thing's gelatinous flank, its tentacles, twitching into malignly abrupt life, had seized him and plucked him from his feet. In his panic and revulsion, he smote left and right, to no avail; his smiting was ended as the thing, gaping its mouth, inserted him bodily into itself.

The lesser of the two hunters looked on aghast. His companion's screams were transmitted, muffled, through the polyp's enveloping body, and though the man was immobilised and could not strike at the creature from within, the violence of his helpless struggles caused those gelatinous flanks to quake and oscillate in a mortifyingly unwholesome manner. The lesser hunter drew his own saber and seemed about to come to his companion's rescue—but he checked himself as he discerned sudden movement in the polyps to left and right nearby. It seemed to him that there was something anticipatory in the way their tentacles rippled: like the supple fingers of mighty wrestlers flexing in advance of an easy bout.

The lesser hunter sheathed his saber and sat down, his face slack and ashen, as the struggles of his companion grew weaker and then ceased. After they had ceased, the lesser hunter stood up again and was sick.

That day, the lesser hunter paced in a wide circle corresponding to the perimeter of the polyp-field. He returned to that polyp in which the corpse of the mighty hunter resided, and that night he slept on the ground before it. In the morning the polyp's tentacles were spread once more, like the petals of a flower, and its mouth stood open. Of the corpse, and the articles that the mighty hunter had worn, there was no trace to be found. The thing had spat out nothing: it had digested its victim, leather and furs, bones and teeth, jewellery and saber and all.

Two days later, a team of scouts arrived at the tower, dispatched by the river-dwelling tribes who had heard and then scented the polyps on the wind. These three men and three women carried out a single circuit of the site, stood huddled awhile in intense discussion, and then departed. It is known that the various tribes of the river have

since undertaken a great migration downstream, to the dim seaward lands of which nothing is known.

Unlike the mountain warriors and the river tribes, the northern fen-folk did not immediately detect signs of the tower's return. Their first inkling of the magician's despotic resurgence, therefore, came only when one of his demon familiars arrived among them demanding live tribute. The beast, wingless but possessing powers of levitation and uncanny flight, came from out of the clouds, droning abominably and emitting the scorched odour of nether fires. Parting a crowd of onlookers before it, it flew like an elephantine wasp to hover before Smuk, a young man of eighteen. Addressing him, the demon unfolded itself in mid-air and ordered that he step forward into its compass, thence to be carried away to an audience with his new king.

Smuk, sorely afeared, turned to run; the demon sent lightning at his retreating back and he fell dead, blackened and smoking. In the ensuing chaos and panic, the demon swooped and snatched away Brund, a youth having only sixteen years. Brund resisted the demon's embrace, and as a result of his efforts three of his fingers fell severed to the ground. The digits lay there unheeded as the thing bore him away, soaring into the upper air with its living young cargo.

The fen-folk sent rangers in all directions. Those sent south quickly returned with news that the magician-king of old had come again, establishing his high tower in the midst of the plains and sowing the ground around him with monsters.

Mald, a woman having twenty years, grieved most bitterly at the death of Smuk. Though his bravery had undoubtedly failed him at the end, he had been quite the tallest, strongest and most handsome of the young men for many kilometres around. A high council of the village chiefs was convoked, and decided in short order upon a policy of total capitulation. The population of the land was only a fraction of what it had been in days of old, and the magician's position was unassailable without great strength of numbers and a great cost in lives; by contrast, his demands for human tribute were modest and could be met with almost no adjustment to the local way of life. It was foolish to stand upon principle if it meant destruction, and there would always be more young men.

Mald, learning this news, was seized even in the midst of her wrath, by a hard and clear-sighted resolution. Shouldering her pike, slipping axe and knife into her belt, and taking a supply of provisions, she set off into the wilderness, to the island cave in which dwells the Oracle of the Marshes.

The Oracle was a curious entity, somehow neither living creature nor wholly lifeless object. Some called it the Speaking Stone. Though perhaps something of the fell old magics resided within it, causing many to view it with suspicion, the thing in any case possessed no powers of movement or action beyond that of speech and had never yet shown motives that were anything other than benevolent.

Mald sat before the Oracle and asked it her question.

“The magician-king of legend has returned to the world and resides in his high tower amid a garden of teeth. How can I best him?”

When consulting the Oracle of the Marshes, Mald knew, the response is never immediate; furthermore, it is reckoned that the interval between question and answer has a tendency to lengthen in proportion to the question’s demands. The Oracle heard Mald’s words, and it bade her wait.

Mald sat and sat in the dark of the cave, as a day and a night passed outside. When she was hungry she ate, and when she became stiff she paced to and fro, but she did not leave the Oracle’s presence or speak again. Finally, as the sun westered on that second day, and she wavered despite her efforts on the threshold of sleep, the Oracle delivered her answer. The answer came in the shape of a lengthy formula, consisting of multiple stages and incorporating several procedures that, as the Oracle repeatedly made explicit, were to be carried out to the letter on pain of gruesome death. Wide awake in an instant, Mald leaned forward and listened closely.

In the fens, there exists a place where the mud is bottomless, and within it dwells that invincible beast-thing called the Haidrah. The monster’s indomitability derives from resilience rather than imperviousness: though it can no more turn aside a well-aimed blow or slash than can any other creature of mere flesh and blood, its ability to sustain and reverse injury to itself is formidable. Severed members sprout anew within seconds and are replaced; piercing

wounds produce a negligible effect even in great numbers, and the thing is reputed to remain able-bodied and dangerous even while it lacks a head. Happily, the Haidrah's ambitions, so far as they may be construed, do not appear to match its terrifying physical capacities. Though human beings form a component of its diet, its requirements in that department are modest, and it is mostly content to lie at uncertain dark pressures below the surface of the mud, seeking the air and going abroad on nocturnal hunts only once every few winters.

Mald stopped on the way to the Haidrah's pool in order to eat and to sharpen her axe. Arriving at the shore of the beast's lair, at the point where solid ground falls off into the abyss, she stooped to pick up a rock and hurled it at the surface of the mud with as much force as she could muster. She sauntered to and fro along the fringe of sedge, repeating this process many times. Though the Haidrah dwells far below the upper world, the peripheries of its senses are known to extend to the surface through the medium of the mud in which it lives. Mald's missile-throwing, performed with a view to attracting it, was akin to tugging on the very outer strands of a spider's web.

How far the Haidrah had to climb to reach the surface, Mald was not able to gauge; many minutes elapsed, however, between the casting of the first stone and the thing's eventual appearance. The mud bubbled and then humped enormously, and the creature burst out into the sunlight and the air. Sighting Mald immediately it commenced to haul itself up onto the solid ground in pursuit of her. She retreated a little before it; as it rapidly closed the distance between them she turned and thrust up at the thing's head with her pike, finding purchase among its jowls and forcing its forelegs and mouthparts upwards, out of deadly range. Planting the other end of the pike in the ground so that the Haidrah became momentarily propped, she slipped under the thing's belly and then clambered up so that she sat astride its narrow back. From this position, all six of her opponent's limbs lay within the compass of her right arm, at the point where they met its body. Six times she smote with her axe, and six limbs became accordingly detached. The Haidrah's body, poised teeteringly on the point of Mald's pike, overbalanced at last, and she rode her foe crashing to the ground. While the creature lay helpless

beneath her, she worked quickly, recalling the instruction the Oracle had imparted:

“The Haidrah possesses two brains: a primary brain located in its head and a second, lesser brain in its tail. With the animal immobilised, first strip the lesser brain and deploy a suitable inhibiting material to impede neuroregeneration. When this is complete, inspect the animal’s body, check limb regrowth, and repeat the process on the primary brain.”

Mald cut into the Haidrah’s flesh at the base of its tail and reached into the wound, dragging out great handfuls of tissue and flinging them left and right. When her probing brought forth no more of the distinctive stringy tissue, she began packing the empty cavity with reeds, stopping only when it would accept no more. By this time the Haidrah was putting forth fresh limbs from its six amputated sockets, and before beginning work on the head she pruned these. Now, sitting astride the Haidrah’s shoulders, she clove its skull with her axe and plucked its brain out whole—putting a stop to the enraged threshing of its mandibles—before filling the vacated space with reeds and pressing the two halves of the skull together once more.

Dismounting and stepping to the side, Mald observed the creature carefully for a time. As she watched, its limbs grew back, but once restored they lay twisted awkwardly on the ground and did not move. Aside from some apparently random twitchings, the Haidrah lay inert. Its eyes were open and it was drooling a little, but its mouthparts did not work, and its gills did not pulse.

Satisfied that the Oracle’s instructions had produced the desired result, she moved in again and began skinning the beast with her knife. She took skin from the Haidrah’s head and trunk only, scorning the lower-quality stuff on the six severed members and the six attached ones. She gathered the skin into a bundle and put it aside. Gripping the nearest of the severed limbs, she trimmed it off at the first joint, cut the remaining length in half and then in half again, and placed it on the ground next to the skin. Finally, she rolled the mindless, vanquished Haidrah back into the mud and watched it sink.

Mald found a little wooded island in the marshes and went to work on the skin.

She scraped the residual flesh off the skin and washed it. As the Oracle had predicted, it retained some reduced regenerative capacity, even though it was detached from the Haidrah's body. She could join two edges of the skin without stitching, simply by pressing them together, causing them to fuse like the two sides of a healing wound. Using this method, working through the night, for she could not yet contemplate sleep, she constructed herself a suit of Haidrah skin. It was form-fitting and, aside from a narrow slot over her eyes, covered her without visible seam from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes. Now, she took a spare scrap of skin, stretched it over a rock and used a stone to beat it until it was thin and translucent. This would be her visor. Before fitting it, she took the length of upper limb that she had saved, cleaned off the skin and flesh, and hollowed out the bone, resulting in a straight, rigid tube about the length of her arm. This she fitted to the suit, so that it extended straight upwards past the top of her head, with the lower end located near her mouth. At last she sealed the suit, stretching the transparent visor over her eyes and holding it taut until the bond took.

It was midmorning by now, and she examined her reflection in the still waters that lay around the island. She was monstrous. Much of the Haidrah's wiry hair still stood, patchy and black, in the skin she wore; she seemed to have no face, and she was breathing noisily through the top of her head, like a brachiosaurus.

She had been continuously conscious since Smuk had died, and now she yielded to sleep at last, curling up among the roots of a tree as the sun approached the zenith and the waters of the marsh steamed gently around her.

In a lonely reach of the fens, standing in the midst of its own wide-flung carrion miasma, with roots that plunge between the sunken bones of its departed prey, there exists the great carnivorous tree known as Satan's Claw. The great tree is horny and black, and the tips of its uppermost branches reach ten times the height of a man. In ancient days, it was supposed to have possessed a great abundance of massy foliage and, in certain years, irregularly, to have produced a single gargantuan evil-smelling flower that wheezed and tittered around the hour of noon. In more recent generations it has ceased to

flower, and its great age, allied perhaps with its long carnivorous indulgences, has caused it, like an aged man, to go bald, so that all that remains now of its former verdant endowment is an etiolated vestige that barely clears the surrounding mud. The upper reaches of the tree's boughs are always studded with dead pterodactyls, intercepted in flight and trapped by its gluey mucilage; at or near ground level, the tree arrays dozens of mighty pitchers, in which animals of all sizes and descriptions lie drowned.

Mald moved between the pitchers and climbed a little way up the thing's trunk. She had fashioned the last remaining scrap of Haidrah skin into a small pouch, which she now produced. As the Oracle had directed, she tapped the tree for its adhesive mucilage, peeling aside an area of bark, piercing the internal reservoir with a length of thick reed, and collecting the yield in the Haidrah-skin pouch before sealing it.

Mald went south. Though the Oracle had provided her with minutely detailed directions to the magician's tower, she had no need of them, for on the second day of travel, as she reached the border of the fens, the early-morning mist suddenly lifted, and she observed the structure's upper portion standing plain against the sky in the far distance.

She crossed the Plain of Glaark, killing a large bull-scorpion on the way and taking only the choicest cuts of its meat, for she could neither transport the huge creature nor eat more than a fraction of it before it was time to move on. In order to eat she first pushed her knife carefully into her mouth, making a slit in the suit through which food could pass and that naturally closed itself when she was done.

She neared the tower, and it assumed a menacing aspect in the air before and above her, swollen by nearness and foreshortening. The day was cloudy and cold as she reached the fringes of the polyps. She stood a moment to regard disgustedly the outsized, rudimentary things, gaping upwards like young birds straining for worms while a cross-wind ruffled their tentacles.

She gripped her pike and used it to skewer the nearest polyp to her. It was not combat; the thing could neither evade her nor defend itself. She did not strike or choose any particular moment to attack,

but rather without urgency, she pushed the point of her pike through the body until it emerged at the far side, then withdrew the weapon and watched the creature die. She felt less like a hunter or warrior than a medicine-man releasing fluid from a cyst. The mindless thing died without protest, oblivious and incapable of response as its rudimentary innards sputtered out through its flanks and it collapsed.

Mald stepped forward and pierced another polyp, and another, waiting for each to die before moving into pike-range of the next. In this way she began to cut herself a corridor through the devouring throng, aiming her progress straight toward the tower. Inevitably, she could not complete this hazardous enterprise without mishap, and had she not taken protective measures beforehand she would certainly have been killed. She was no more than a third of the way to the tower's walls when she slipped and fell, the quantity of entrails underfoot having made the ground treacherous. Her fall happened to place her in the range of a certain polyp's tentacles, and she was seized, pulled in, and devoured. She did not struggle, for this development represented an anticipated frustration rather than doom; she merely threw her pike and other gear clear of peril using the few seconds that she had. The polyp's tentacles converged on its mouth and its mouth closed over her head, but the snorkel attached to her suit extended beyond its mouth and into the open air, so that she did not suffocate even while enclosed within the beast's body. Nor could the thing digest her, for her protective suit of Haidrah skin was proof against its juices, mending itself more quickly than they could work upon it. All she had to contend with, then, was boredom, for it was to be several hours before the polyp, incapable of making judgements with regards the suitability of its own food, reflexively spat her out again.

All that day she continued cutting her route through to the tower's walls. Night fell at last, and it was bitterly cold despite her exertions and the insulation provided by her suit. When she finally became tired she volunteered herself to the tentacles of a polyp, and slept soundly and long in the warmth of the thing's enveloping body.

She reached the base of the tower's wall at noon of the following day. She cleared a wide space among the polyps there and produced the bladder of Haidrah skin in which she had stored the carnivorous

tree's adhesive mucilage. She pierced it and distributed the contents evenly between her palms and her knees. Casting away her axe and leaving her pike on the ground where it lay she approached the sheer metal face of the magician's tower and, binding herself to its surface using the sticky secretion, began to climb it.

The ascent was arduous, for the tower was the height of a thousand men and the potency of the mucilage meant that it took all her strength to wrench free a hand or a knee in order to reposition it further up. By sunset she was exhausted. She surrendered again to sleep, halfway to the summit, hanging there with head lolling back, attached to that sheer sterile cliff of iron by hands and knees, entrusting her life wholly to the goo's adhesive strength.

Mald awoke in the dawn, with the cold in her bones and a great soreness and stiffness in her joints. Setting her teeth, she resumed the climb without delay, and the rising sun made better speed than she.

She could see that the fabric of the tower had deteriorated during its long peregrination of the stars. The iron walls were discoloured and pocked and melted, and in some rare places broken through entirely, giving access to the structure's interior. When she encountered these points of ingress she did not make use of them, however, for the Oracle had explained to her how the tower was laid out on its inside. The magician occupied only the very topmost floors; the rest of the tower's internal space was given over to housing the unthinkably massive objects of power that enabled his spells and prodigies and was sealed off for reasons of safety and comfort from those few levels that he actually inhabited.

Toward evening, Mald neared the tower's summit. The sun was low, now, and the temperature falling, and from the rents in the tower's face issued rising feathers of steam. One such rent, selected according to the Oracle's guidance, became momentarily plugged, ceasing to release its steam, as Mald wriggled through it, first carefully inserting the tip of her snorkel.

She found that there was floor beneath her—blessed horizontal surface under her feet—and that she was standing in a dimly lit outer gallery of the magician's lofty house. Squares of luminescence in the

walls and ceiling burned to keep away total darkness, but their positioning was irregular and infrequent: it must truly be as the Oracle had stated, that the magician's power waned with the decay of the tower's fabric.

Before continuing, it was necessary for Mald to address the residue of the adhesive substance on her hands and knees. Much of the original application of the stuff had been left behind on the tower's outer wall during her ascent, so that toward the end of the climb she had been glued much less securely, constantly fearful that the wrong kind of movement would see her detached, torn free by gravity, pulled plummeting earthward where she would burst a last few polyps with her death impact. Now, she transferred the remainder of the mucilage to the walls of the dimly-lit gallery, wiping and patting until her hands and knees were hardly sticky. Her suit, she was sure, would break down any traces retained in its fabric well before her confrontation with the magician; so much the Oracle had told her.

She sat against a wall, and for a while she entered a shallow slumber. Waking again, she ensured that her knife was at her hip, and went to find the magician. The Oracle had given her precise instructions, and these she followed, navigating with reference to the ancient inscriptions and curious structures on walls, floor and ceiling.

The magician's throne room was hot and vast and gloomy, and the walls were strung with dead, dried worms. The worms, huge and fat and segmented, seemed to have been preserved in the act of devouring the walls, which they penetrated at numerous points, passing in and out so that individuals could not be told apart. The magician himself sat in a great upholstered chair encrusted with ornamentation that, though intricate and delicately formed, was yet curiously angular and unlovely to behold. He was facing away from her, gazing up into a great milky eye that hung above his head and cast a glow upon him.

The magician did not respond immediately to Mald's approach, though she had no doubt that he was aware of her and perhaps had known of her coming for a long time. When he at last turned to face her, he did it by causing his entire chair to rotate, carrying him with it. The glowing milky eye closed; in the darkness it left behind, the

magician made a certain sign with his left hand, causing the humid, cavernous chamber to flood with light—a radiance that was bright and hard and unwavering like the midday sun.

The magician stood, and Mald saw that he measured an imperious seven feet in height against her own six. He wore a rugose and baggy one-piece suit, formerly white but now old and yellowed; it had a broad circular collar, made rigid by the insertion of a hoop of metal, from which his withered and wattly head emerged, tortoise-like. He smiled at her, and behind his rubbery purple lips stood teeth that were incongruously pearly and regular.

It was only now that she saw the corpse of Brund, lying on an altar in a corner of the throne room formerly shrouded in darkness. The altar had started to eat him, and he no longer possessed any blood. The magician, she understood, practised a form of vampirism—he had parasitised Brund, drawn the boy's youthful blood into his own body so that he might preserve his decrepit life.

The magician said nothing to her before commencing battle. Perhaps he saw no advantage in parley; perhaps he was signalling his contempt; perhaps it was beyond his power to produce any speech that she would understand. By some sleight of hand, he caused his suit to split open from throat to crotch so that he could step out of it, revealing to Mald the full horror of his anatomy and deriving obvious pleasure from her aghast reaction. He possessed no arms or legs—or rather he did, but they were iron shams. Mald had seen old warriors walking on crutches or peg-legs, and the sight did not disturb her; the difference between them and the brutish metal rods worn by the magician was that, by some arcane perversion, his life-force dwelt within them just as it dwelt within those parts of him that were still flesh and bone. He inhabited those false limbs, possessed them in a way that ought not to be; when the magician moved on her, they ground and squealed in protest at the unnatural energies forcing them into animation.

The Oracle had explained to her that heat was the magician's weakness. Magic produces heat in the same way that a living body does, and it can become concentrated with disastrous results. The magician's power had declined since the old days when he was last on earth, and with it the efficiency of his magic, so that he could not

perform his feats now without generating a great deal of waste energy in the process. The titanic objects occupying the lower reaches of the tower generated heat as they worked, and this naturally rose; the air in the spaces of the tower's summit was uncomfortably hot to Mald, and it steamed out into the upper air through the holes eaten in the structure's outer walls. Forcing the magician into prolonged exertion now would cause such an intensity of heat to build up in his body that the workings of his spells would be fouled and he would become enfeebled.

Her foe wielded no weapon but his iron hands, from each of which protruded two thumbs, one on either side of the palm. He meant to engage her like a wrestler. She had been warned of the fell strength of those limbs and knew that to feel those hands laid upon her was to be torn apart. She retreated before his advance; when he attempted to corner her, she sprang aside of his grab. For long minutes they danced around the sweltering throne room, the magician feinting and then lunging, Mald reacting and evading; she vaulted furniture and hurled unexamined whatever strange objects came to hand, and the magician never did better than to graze her Haidrah-skin suit with the cold tips of his uncanny fingers. More than once he tried to force her from the throne room and into the corridors surrounding it, but Mald denied him, for she knew that in those constricted spaces she could not get around him, and a dead-end would be her destruction.

Toward the end of the combat, the magician's face was darkly flushed; sweat dripped from his nose and chin and slicked his false limbs, darkening the metal and making them shine under the bright lights. Pausing, panting, he finally saw fit to produce words; and the words, shrieked with an impotent rage that bordered on madness, were, "O, LET ME REND YOU, CHILD!"

He rushed her for perhaps the fiftieth time, but she escaped him easily. Mald had feared that the heat in the throne room, which had now risen to intolerable levels, allied to the enclosure of her Haidrah-skin suit, might cause her to faint before the magician was beaten. In fact, though she had produced so much sweat that it had soaked all the way through to the suit's outside, her vigour had not deserted her, and she felt clear-headed still.

At long last, at the end of more than an hour in which he was not able to lay a hand on her, the magician fell, performing an undignified topple under his own momentum as his atrocious limbs ceased suddenly to respond to him. He lay supine, splayed and motionless, pinned in place by the weight of the inert metal he had wedded to his frame. Heat poured out from him.

Mald came to stand over him, still wary lest she be the victim of a ruse. The magician's limbs did not shudder into life again, however, and he only chuckled up at her, his eyes glazed, the hair on his head and face singed.

He said, "Finish me then; it is all the same. You think me an offence against nature because I have taken cold dead stuff and made members out of it—it seems to you that I have half climbed out of myself and into the unfeeling external world. You think it vile, also, that the blood of another flows in me, giving me the life that was theirs. You fool! As if I am my limbs or my blood, as if I am my heart or my brains, as if I am anything, anything at all. Everything that there is is the same unfeeling stuff, and everything that there is is continuous with everything else. You and I are not different, and nothing dwells within either of us. Look at your new skin and tell me it is not so!"

After this there was only laughter. Eventually, Mald knelt and put a stop to it with her knife.

Mald crossed the throne room then, with a vigorous tread that was remarkable given her recent exertions. She stood before the altar on which lay the half-opened body of the boy Brund; as she gazed down at him she felt, bubbling up into her consciousness alongside her natural grief, a sudden cannibalistic impulse that was all the more hideous for its alienness and lack of precedent. She was only able to thwart the urge to pluck out and eat one of the boy's uncovered organs by taking herself out of arm's reach. Mald had never before had occasion to regard the contents of her own mind with horror, but now, standing there with mouth agape and sudden tears coming to her eyes, she did so.

She turned away from the meat in order to further check her compulsion. Remembering the magician's dying words, she held her forearms before her, palms up, and inspected closely the surface of

the Haidrah-skin that she wore. She saw that the skin was living. The change had been insidious, and she had not been conscious of it, but now it was complete, and there could be no hope of reversal. She had been wrong to think that her sweat had soaked through the suit to wet its outside. Rather, she had sweated from it directly. She saw that her blood flowed through the Haidrah's skin and that her nerves lay within it, transmitting sensation to her. To remove the skin now would be impossible; it would be death, for the skin was her own. She probed her mouth with a finger, discovering that the Haidrah's skin had grown inside of her lips, top and bottom, to fuse with the base of her gums; she realised that her nostrils were unobstructed and her eyes saw clear out from her head with no intervening film. As sudden, complete despair surged through all of her flesh, the stiff black hairs on her new skin moved and stood erect.

The brilliant light in the great throne room began to grate intolerably upon her nerves, and compelled by a nascent craving for darkness, she plunged into the gloom of the outer corridors. Without navigating consciously, she found herself before a rent that opened into the starless darkness of the external air; then she was clambering out and up the iron face of the tower, clinging easily to its sheer surface though all trace of the adhesive mucilage was long gone.

She stood in the cold dark night on the summit of the vanquished magician's tower, and it soothed her, just like the deep mud of the fens had. There was a yearning dawning within her: a yearning to sink, replete with the flesh of her prey, under the surface of that part of the fens where the mud is bottomless, and to dwell, blissful, buried and compressed, in the abyssal depths—to dwell in that stratum where the mud is thick, far below the watery upper reaches, yet far above that nadir, where pressure makes the mud solid, and the base of the fens, forming a gargantuan plug, hangs down from the roof of Hell. Mald, running suddenly for the unguarded brink of the tower's roof, hoped that she could not fly.

Her fall was quite invisible in the cloud-blackened night. After meeting the ground she lay among the polyps there, the immense power of her leap having carried her many metres out from the tower's wall. Her skin was split, and her pulverised innards leaked out to mingle with those of the polyps she had crushed with her impact.

The surrounding polyps, excited, located her body in the dark and engaged in several brief rounds of tug-o-war, at the end of which she had become distributed between six or seven of them.

The sun came up the next day to reveal that all the polyps of the field were budding, each one producing dozens of outgrowths that studded its flanks. The buds developed quickly, and a day later were mature. One by one they became detached from their parents until at last the air was dense with them: little bell-shaped larvae that were carried far abroad on the wind.

Rob Lang is a writer based in Cardiff, UK. He likes to sleep in, shovels popcorn for money, and spends his free time in endless rewrites of his own work.

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Lost Men

By EUGENE L. MORGULIS

Peter and the Pirates have been at each other's throats for as long as any can remember; it's all been fun and games until the day Pan kills Capt. Hook! With their nemesis gone, the Lost Boys go their separate ways... until they return Lost Men!

Captain Hook awoke livid. What had been a most indulgent dream was now replaced by an irritating ruckus echoing from the mainland. Sounds of whooping, laughing, and hollering had pierced the hull of the Jolly Roger and planted themselves insufferably in Hook's skull. Someone would pay dearly for this.

"Smee!" he shouted.

His first mate rolled out from under the bed.

"Always at your side, Cap'n," he said, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

"Smee, what on earth is that mind-shattering noise? How can a man be expected to sleep!?"

Smee cupped his hand to his ear and listened intently.

"I do believe it's laughter, Cap'n," he said, "belonging to those Lost Boys what live in them treetops with that Peter Pan. Sounds like they's havin' themselves a food fight."

"Oh, they are insufferable," said Captain Hook indignantly. "First, they foil my plans, and now they spoil my sleep. I was having such a glorious dream, too."

"I've an idea," said Smee. "Why don't we have us a raid of *their* village for once?"

A raid of the Lost Boys, thought Captain Hook. *That's different.* Usually, it was the boys who raided the Jolly Roger, slashing her sails, splintering her deck, and roughing up her crew. The Captain had never taken the battle to them. They were just boys, after all. But Hook was in an especially foul mood tonight.

"Smee, I've had an idea," he announced, raising his finger for effect. "Let's raid that treetop village where those brats lay their

heads. Switch things up a bit.”

“That’ll show ’em, Cap’n,” replied Smee, and hustled off to rouse the men.

It was a terrific battle. The Lost Boys were still in the midst of their food fight when the pirates attacked. Terrified, confused, and covered in colorful delicacies, they scattered to the skies, leaving the pirates to relish their quick victory. It did not last.

After composing themselves, the boys sprang to action and, before long, gained the upper hand. In the middle of it all were Captain Hook and Peter Pan, toe to toe. Peter swooped and slashed with his short sword, while the old pirate parried with his hook and thrust with his rapier. Though they proved evenly matched at the start, Hook soon began to tire. At his age, he could scarcely keep up.

Oh my, Hook thought, as a swipe from Peter’s sword grazed his earlobe. *That one was frightfully close. I dare say Pan is in fine form tonight.*

Hook smiled and pretended not to be growing worried. Did the boy seem different tonight? Indeed, in their previous duels, Peter delighted in humiliating Hook, laughing freely as he bested the man again and again. Now, he appeared strangely humorless, furious even, shouting and grunting with each ferocious blow. No aerial twirls or loop-de-loops. Just pushing, pushing forward and attacking, attacking, attacking. Hook wondered whether he had ever seen the lad in such a state. His wondering was interrupted when Peter aimed a wicked slash at Hook’s shoulder. The Captain spun and danced away.

“Hi-ho, old boy, another close one,” he called merrily. *More than close,* he realized, *the brat actually connected that time.* Hook’s sword arm began to bleed, and his rapier slipped from his weakened grip. The pain was great and soon grew overwhelming. Hook fell to his knees at the edge of the waterfall where their battle came to an end.

Peter Pan landed before him. Only then did Hook realize that the boy had been crying. *Best not mention it,* he thought.

“Well played, lad. Well played.” The Captain offered a mock salute with his hook hand. “Top marks,” he added cheerily.

“Shut up.” Peter screamed. “What are you doing here, attacking us where we live, where we sleep? You could have hurt someone!”

Hook laughed. “Oh come now, Peter. No harm done. These good strong boys can take care of themselves. Just a bit of fun to—”

“You’re going to ruin everything. Why can’t you just stay on your ugly ship? This is our home. It’s *ours!*”

Hook looked around. Their little village seemed to him no more than a handful of scattered planks and platforms, bits of wood, and some ropes. A few sheets flapped in the wind, one of which looked suspiciously like the sail that recently went missing from the Jolly Roger. *Pathetic*. No wonder he’d never come here before. Hook wasn’t even sure why he’d bothered now. He longed for the comfort of his bed and Smee’s happy snores beneath it.

“All right, Peter, all right,” Hook said through his teeth. “You have made your point. Your boys have bested my men, and you have defeated me in single combat. I say to you now, unequivocally, I surrender.” A slimy smirk wormed its way across his lips. “Now slap me on the fanny and send me off to lick my wounds.”

“Not this time, Hook.” The boy took a step closer.

Hook rolled his eyes. This was just too much now, and far past the point of fun. “Oh? Then what shall you do, Peter? Toss me over these falls into the pillow-soft waters of Neverland? Heavens, I might twist an ankle.”

The assembled pirates began to laugh nervously. Smee winked at Tinkerbell, whose light seemed to dim for a heartbeat.

“I hate you,” said Peter Pan, and put his sword through Captain Hook’s throat.

There were no celebrations for the Lost Boys that night. The pirates slunk away and were never seen again. Hook’s body, too, disappeared, though no one was quite sure what happened to it. Perhaps the pirates had carried it off. Or perhaps it had tumbled down the falls.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Peter, ending the discussion. “He’s gone to whatever horrible place he came from.”

The Lost Boys nodded and got to setting their homes to order, silently mending boards, restringing ropes, and righting furniture.

They worked clear through sunrise and into the middle of the day, when Tink magicked up a simple meal for the tired lads. Thomas cried, though not even he was sure why. Another uneasy night followed.

The next day, Peter declared a Day of Fun and Goodness and No Sadness. It seemed to work, for once the boys began to play, no one wanted to stop. Peter orchestrated the activities. They even had a race to the rainbow and back, which Peter let Jonathan win.

And so it went for a time. The boys still spoke of the great battle, but it took on the aspect of game they played long ago. Peter had “defeated” the loathsome Hook, or had “whipped him good,” or perhaps even “taken him out,” but nothing more. They even talked of and trained for their next great battle.

But it never came. When the Lost Boys realized this, they lost interest in going through the motions. Peter tried to keep up discipline, drilling the children in flying and sword fighting. Perhaps more harshly than he would have liked, but he knew they needed his help. Yet, after a while, Peter’s heart was not fully committed either.

The boys began to talk of home. Not their crumbling treetop fort. Not even Neverland. But their real home. What was it called, again?

“Egglund?” guessed Michael.

“Endland?” offered James.

They tried piecing it together from the barest scraps of memories, but the images they conjured up were too strange and wonderful for even Neverland. Soon it was all the boys talked about, this world of rockets and rock bands and movies and girls.

Peter hovered at the edge of these conversations. He didn’t think “Endland” sounded so great. Neverland was all he had ever dreamed of, an endless summer of feasts, and fun, and adventure. No worries, no struggles, no fears. They were better than kings, here. Rulers without the burdens of ruling. But everything seemed different now. And the other boys were goners.

In the end, it was Tinkerbell who showed them the way back. No flying this time. The boys merely went to off sleep and never returned. Peter was the last.

He walked down to the edge of the waterfall where he could listen to its music one last time. Peter lay on the ground, lacing his fingers behind his head and gazing up at the sky, where shooting stars zipped about like fireflies in the night.

Before he closed his eyes, Peter promised Tink that he would always remember her, though he wouldn't. She responded by silently kissing Peter on the cheek. As she did, Peter's body grew heavy, heavier than it had ever been. And he slept.

Peter didn't know what he hated more, the fluorescent light that gave him headaches, or the conditioned air that screwed with his sinuses. *The A/C*, he decided finally. The office was absolutely freezing, and the cold numbed his fingers. He wrapped his hands around his coffee mug before he resumed typing, but they still felt heavy and stiff, like the rest of him.

Just when he longed for a break, he heard a rapping at his office door.

"Jon!" he said, "What a pleasant surprise. Come on in."

Jonathan sat down and acquainted himself with Peter's small office. He cheerfully grabbed a worn action figure sitting on top of the monitor and manipulated its plastic arms and legs before setting it back down at a tilt.

"Nice little set up you got, Pete."

"Thanks. The view could be better, but at least it's not a cubicle."

"Oh, well, I know all about those, har har."

"To what do I owe the pleasure, old man? It's been ages."

"Well, I've been talking with some of the fellas, and we thought it would be fun to get the gang back together for a night out."

Peter stared back, blinking.

"You know," Jonathan continued, "just for a drink or three, har har. You, me, Tom, Jim, Mike. All the old boys."

As Jonathan droned on, Peter's eyes kept shunting to his computer screen, where email notifications and meeting requests popped up every few seconds.

"Sure," said Peter, when he sensed that Jonathan stopped speaking. "You know me. I'm up for anything."

It took another week to coordinate everyone's schedules, but they finally met up in a quiet pub on a Thursday night. The conversation started light. The men exchanged the customary updates about their jobs and their families. They drank. They reminisced about old times, making trouble in the neighborhood. They drank more.

Pretty soon they got to blubbering about their lives. And Peter, who'd said little at first, led the pack, building a consensus of dissatisfaction.

"You remember how it was, don't you," said Peter. "It was all supposed to be so magical, so full of mystery and potential. But it's crap, isn't it? Just work and rules."

The other men mumbled their assent into their glasses. Michael drained his and motioned for another. Thomas burped.

The more Peter talked, and the more they drank, the more the men agreed that something was missing. The grievance was as unspecific as it was all-consuming. A sadness felt, but not understood, like a nightmare that unnerves long after it's forgotten. Where was the adventure they were all promised? Had they given it up, or were they cheated out of it? What if it was still there, somewhere, waiting for them to reclaim it?

It was Peter who suggested that they all take a trip together. The men agreed heartily, and drank until they blacked out.

Peter woke in a fog. *Why's it so damn hot?*

The sun shone achingly bright, and the air tasted salty in his dry, sticky mouth. Tall grass tickled his wrists. The pounding in his head slowly gave way to a primitive symphony of clicks and whirs played by unseen insects. Where was he, anyway?

Peter looked around to find Jonathan, Thomas, Michael, and James similarly disoriented. Then he saw the narrow snow-capped mountain, rising like a spike above a verdant forest of shimmering trees. Meringue clouds obscured its peak, all framed by a perpetual rainbow that hung in the air like a welcome banner.

He remembered. The others did, too.

"Yahoo!" shouted Michael.

"We're back," said Thomas. "We're actually back."

“I told myself it wasn’t real,” said James through his tears. “I thought it was all a dream we had together.”

Peter put a hand on his shoulder. “It was, Jim. And now we’re here again.”

“But how could it be the same? It was so long ago.”

“I don’t think that matters here.”

“Do you think there’s wifi?” asked Jonathon, and everybody laughed.

The question *who’s up for adventuring* was met with hearty cheers, followed by requests to wash up first and maybe figure out a game plan before they all went tearing off to God-knows-where.

“Right,” said Peter after making himself chair of the adventuring committee. “First order of business, we establish a base camp. We get our bearings, maybe a snack, and then we launch our first adventure. Yes?”

The men nodded, and began looking around. James recalled that they may have lived in a treehouse at some point. That sounded all right to Peter, but the others were not having it.

“Seems bloody impractical, doesn’t it?” said Thomas.

Michael agreed. “Sleeping on grass mats and wooden planks? Absolute murder on the back.”

“Only mattresses for me, thank you very much, har har,” said Jonathan.

“Fine,” said Peter. “No trees.”

The men wandered aimlessly for a spell, unsure of what to do or where to go.

“The Natives,” said Peter, snapping as it came to him. “I bet they’d put us up. I recall a little princess there who fancied me, if you catch my drift.”

“Sure there was,” said Thomas. He raised his finger behind his head like a fleshy feather, gyrated lasciviously, and whooped.

Peter rolled his eyes and gathered the men to brainstorm. They recalled vaguely a little city of teepees on the bank of a river. No one could agree on which river it was or how many rivers there were in Neverland, or on anything else really. But someone, probably Peter, picked a direction, and off they went into the forest.

As they walked, Peter saw why the leaves shimmered. It was a trick, actually. Each leaf was green on one side and milky white on the other, and when the wind blew, they all flickered back and forth like moonlight on a green sea. Peter plucked one and twisted it playfully in his fingers. On an impulse, he nibbled on its green edge and found it pleasantly sweet. He flipped it over and nibbled on the white, surprised to find it bitter. *Neat*. Peter was luxuriating in the peace of the moment when someone rudely poked his shoulder. It was Thomas.

“I’m just wondering where we’re going. Do you happen to know, Pete?”

“We’re going to find the Natives, Tom.”

“Well, it’s been two hours, and,” Thomas swiveled his head in an exaggerated fashion, “I don’t see them.”

“You have to be patient,” said Peter. “This is a big place.” He resumed walking in the direction they had selected, or near enough.

“I don’t remember it being so big,” called Jonathan from behind.

Peter chuckled to himself. *I don’t remember you being such a big whiner*. Still, Peter had an inkling that they were moving much too slowly. Probably just old bones. Some clean air and physical activity would whip them into shape. He picked up the pace.

After several more hours of wandering and arguing, even Peter was frustrated. When he couldn’t take any more of Jonathan’s ceaseless requests for a break, which he voiced with every belabored breath, Peter gave in. The men sat with their backs against tree trunks, stewing in the summer heat.

“Pete,” said James softly.

“I don’t know where we are, okay,” he snapped back.

But James only nudged him and nodded toward a branch. There, Peter spied a red and yellow-feathered bird, with a long elegant tail, that seemed to be looking right back at him. She had a stateliness about her, like a grand society dame, commanding her perch with gentle dignity. She was precisely the kind of thing Neverland excelled at producing. Something so casually beautiful, you almost forgot to marvel at it.

“Which way to the village, pretty birdie?” rasped Thomas, ruining the moment.

But the slight was immediately forgotten, because, to everyone’s surprise, the bird actually pointed. The motion was quick, just a flit of her wing, but it was unmistakably purposeful.

“See?” said Thomas, arms crossed, “Practically the other way.”

Peter ignored him. “Show us the way,” he asked the bird. “Please.”

The bird did nothing at first, except fuss with her plumage and adjust her footing. But, after a few more entreaties, she hopped up, spread her fiery wings, and flew off in the heading she previously indicated. As he watched her go, Peter felt a familiar stirring in the pit of his stomach.

“Come on, lads, after it!” cried Peter, taking off with a skip.

“Where?” asked Jonathan, who was still on the ground, wringing the sweat out of his socks.

“Follow the bird!”

“Hang on a sec.”

“Run.”

“Pete, wait.”

“Run, God damn it!”

They arrived at the tribal village around sundown, by which point their clothes were filthy and covered in sweat. Jonathan wheezed hideously. Thomas had turned an ankle. Michael was missing a shoe. Peter had a few new cuts and scrapes, and his heart rioted in his rib cage, but he couldn’t have been happier. Not even the others’ pathetic performance in the forest bothered him now. Just moments ago, he’d nearly throttled Jonathan, who, needing literally to be pulled along, had caused Peter to lose track of their winged guide. Luckily, by that point, they were close enough to hear the river. They found their way to it shortly after and spotted the village on the other side.

Across the rushing water, a handful of women and men were washing clothes as children splashed on the shallow banks nearby. Beyond them stood rows of marvelous conical structures that were teepees in name only. Some were enormous, three stories tall at least. One, Peter noticed, was being worked on by three men

arranged vertically, standing on each other's shoulders. The bottom man tossed tools up to the topmost man, who in turn dropped tools for the bottom man to catch. Altogether they resembled a juggling giant. Near them, barefoot teenagers flung a woven multicolored disc back and forth, showing off by jumping over each other and snagging catches between their legs.

The Natives' motions looked effortless, as if their bodies were weightless. Peter remembered feeling that way once, too, unladen by the years of cares and worries that hung on him like a wool cloak in a rainstorm. Just standing there watching the Natives' naturalistic grace made Peter feel lighter.

The other men were still recovering from their run through the forest, and they decided that Peter should do the talking. There was no bridge, and the river looked too dangerous to cross, so Peter waved to get the washers' attention.

"Noble friends," he called out over the rushing water. "My name is Peter. You may remember me and my associates here." He motioned over to the men, some of whom waved awkwardly. A small girl, scarcely more than a twig with twin braids, waved back and was quickly ushered behind her mother's legs.

Peter continued. "We have been gone a long time. But we're back now, as you can see, and we are in need of some lodging. Your hospitality would be greatly appreciated." After more silence he added, "and rewarded."

The villagers went back to their washing. None even made eye contact, save for the little girl, who stared unnervingly from behind her mother's trunk-like legs.

After some time, an official-looking retinue came out of one of the structures, carrying baskets. They walked easily over the river water, perhaps stepping on submerged stones that Peter had failed to perceive.

"Look lively, lads," said Peter. "The villagers bring tributes!"

The other men hobbled over eagerly and tried to stand straight, while the Natives set their baskets on the ground.

A lithe, bright-eyed woman of indeterminate age strode forward to address them.

“We are pleased to offer you these gifts,” she said in a clear, careful voice. “We hope they will help you on your journey.”

“Oh. Well. Thank you,” said Peter. “But we have already journeyed far, and we would very much appreciate it if you had some spare rooms for us.” He hesitated for a beat, but decided it was no time to be coy. “We would like to stay here with you, please,” he added.

The woman shook her head. “Our apologies, but we do not have a place for you here. There is a town at the end of the river. Perhaps you will find it more suitable.”

A clamor rose from the men, but Peter hushed them.

“Maybe you have a quest or something we could help with. We’re seasoned adventurers.”

“I see that you are,” said the woman with no hint of sarcasm. “But nevertheless.”

Peter thought he heard some of the Natives laughing, but decided it was only the babbling river.

“Don’t you know who I am?” he said.

“I know who you think you are.”

“And who’s that?”

“Someone you used to be.”

The woman’s nonsense answer tore at Peter’s chest. He searched her voice for any hint of gall or mockery, but found only casual indifference, which was worse. Peter welled up.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally, more to himself than to the woman. “I just thought this would be easier.”

“I know,” said the Native woman. “Seek the town at the end of the river. You will find it better suited to you.” With that, she bowed and proceeded lightly across the invisible bridge with the rest of her folk. Peter tried to run after them, but he was beat, and the river was impassable.

“What the hell, Pete?” asked Michael.

“Come on, guys,” said Peter. “This isn’t the place for us.”

In the baskets, Peter and the men found clothes, food, and provisions, which they carried with them down the river. Once out of sight of the village, they changed, washed, and ate.

“I think this is for the best,” said Peter as they picnicked on the riverbank. “I don’t think I’m suited for teepee living. And neither is

Jon's back, I'll wager."

"Har har," said Jon.

The journey to the town was miserable. Jonathan complained about the insects, and Michael lost his *other* shoe. Around mid-day, Peter glimpsed a golden stag standing against the green and white foliage on the other side of the river, but there was no way to cross, and Thomas mocked him for suggesting they risk it.

"Because you had such luck with the magic bird, eh, Pete."

"Shut up, Tom," said Peter, wondering if he could use Thomas's corpse as a flotation device.

After pressing on for the better part of the day, they began to see signs of civilization. A dirt path became a crumbling road, which led to a harbor town at the mouth of the river. A grey ocean lay beyond. The men ventured forth, chattering and slapping each other's backs in relief.

Closer up, the town proved a less impressive sight. Carts and horses shambled down waste covered streets around squat brown houses that leaned against each other like old drunks. Everything about the place assaulted Peter's senses, from the sooty industrial air to the vulgar grumblings of the townsfolk. They were the worst of all. Everywhere Peter looked, he saw dull-eyed mopes plodding through their daily routines and churlish fishwives braying at some unintelligible gossip. The men quickly discovered them to be even less hospitable than the Natives. No one spoke to them, barely even acknowledging their presence. Nor did they have any luck at the town's shabby inn.

"No money, no beds," growled the proprietor before he slammed the door.

As the sun dipped low and the weather threatened to turn, Peter and the men had yet to secure a place to stay. Thomas complained loudly that Peter had not been persistent enough with the Natives, who had at least been willing to treat with him. Peter was about to tell him to shut the hell up when a rough-looking fellow with a milky eye shouldered past him.

"Watch it," barked Peter.

The man sneered and cuffed Peter on the ear, sending him into the mud. Michael and Jonathan responded with a string of *Woahs* and *Hey, nows*. Peter responded with a rock to the oaf's mouth. The man reeled back, clutching his broken teeth, and for the second time in as many days, Peter shouted, "Run!" This time, no one argued. They scrambled away from the man's muffled screaming and toward the harbor.

The ships there hung no lanterns and swayed in their moorings like tipsy shadows. Among them, Peter and the men desperately searched for someplace—anyplace—to hide. Finding none, they pushed onward to the farthest end of the dock, where a hulking, dilapidated wreck sat half-submerged. The ancient ship looked like it was held together with seaweed and seagull droppings, but lacking any other options, the men climbed aboard through a rusted porthole. They sat there for a time, afraid to say a word, filling the slanted darkness with their desperate panting.

After several minutes of near silence, Peter ventured a chuckle. "What did I tell you?" he said, stretching his legs. "I knew we'd find a bit of adventure sooner or later."

Thomas was livid. "You enjoying this, Pete?"

"I was."

"Well, I'm not. Where are we? What are we doing here? Everything is different. Everything!"

Peter laughed. "Oh, Tom. Neverland's the same it always was. Always has been and always will be. We're just seeing a new part of it, that's all. The only thing different is you. Actually, I take that back. You're the same miserable grouse you always were. Well, I won't let you ruin this for me again. So, if you don't like it, you can get off my ship."

"Your ship?"

"That's right. My ship. I got us here. I found the damn thing."

Thomas threw his hands up in exasperation and was about to say or do something nasty, but James cut in.

"Why not take a night apart?" he suggested.

"Yes," said Michael. "Might be safer anyway to split up. We'll regroup in the morning."

Each man set off to find a private place to spend the night. There was more to the ship than the outside suggested. Peter poked around and soon found himself in a spacious and well-appointed room that could have only been the captain's quarters. He sank into a plush and dusty chair behind the massive oak desk and fiddled with the charts and instruments. *Now there's an adventure*, he thought. *The captain of my own ship*. And why shouldn't he be the captain? It had been his idea to come back to Neverland. It had been his idea to seek out the town, and the harbor. And hadn't he always been the leader? He even knew a captain once. What was his name? Peter couldn't recall and was too sleepy to devote any more energy to it.

He peered about the darkness for a bed and smiled to see one made and ready for him. Getting from the desk to the bed was difficult, as he was on the verge of exhaustion, but a man helped him over to it and tucked him in.

"Thank you," muttered Peter. "Uh..." He struggled to recall the stocky man's name. "Who are you, again?"

"Why, it's me, sir," said the man cheerfully.

Peter could only blink dumbly.

"Wouldn't ya know it," said the man up to the ceiling. "He never remembers me, me, me, me." He winked as he sang.

"Smee?" mumbled Peter. He was already half asleep.

"There ya go, Cap'n. I knew ya'd get it. Smee. Always at your side!" He did a jaunty little jig, which made Peter chuckle. Peter liked him.

"Tippie of rum to help you sleep, sir?"

"Maybe just a tippie."

Smee poured the sweet-smelling brown liquid into a crystal glass and dribbled it into Peter's mouth. He then dabbed his chin with a lacy handkerchief. Peter winced when the delicate cloth touched his face, which still throbbed hotly from where the awful man had smacked him. Smee must have perceived this, for he placed the cool glass against the bruise with a sympathetic susurration.

"We'll be safe tonight, Cap'n," he said. "But tomorrow, the townsfolk will come lookin'. Ol' Smee knows a few of 'em. How 'bout I smooth things over for ya?"

“Oh, could you, please?”

“Certainly, Cap’n. And tell ya what. Maybe Ol’ Smee’ll set ya up with a little house there. Even find you and your mates some proper work. What d’ya say?”

Peter began to say yes, but a familiar weight pressed the air from his lungs and he was unable to speak. The thought of returning that stinking town was unbearable. There had been no malice in the old sailor’s words, and yet Peter was overcome by a pressing desire to bash his genial face in.

“No!” he choked. “I’m never going back. We have to leave. Set sail as soon as possible.”

“Surely, Cap’n. Surely. The Jolly Roger’ll be scrubbed and ready by first light. She’ll be in ship-shape, she will! Don’t you worry.”

“Excellent,” said Peter, much relieved. “You’re a very helpful fellow, Smee.”

“That I am, Cap’n. Ol’ Smee will make all your dreams come true.”

Peter smiled wide as he drifted off to sleep. Finally, a chance for some adventuring. And not just kid-stuff, either. He would sail the open seas, find action, treasure. Women maybe. It might get rough, but he was prepared to fight for it. No one would take it away again.

He dreamt a lifetime’s worth of adventure. Whether it lasted a night, or a year, or longer, he could not say, for such things had no meaning in Neverland. But he dreamt it with such conviction that the rest of his life became as insignificant as a grain of sand on the ocean floor.

In this dream life, he sailed the Jolly Roger up and down the coast of Neverland and to the places beyond. It was great fun. And it was easy, too, with Smee always at his side to trim the sails or discipline the men. Peter even amused himself by playing the role of “the Captain,” a dastardly gentleman pirate with a quick wit and a quicker temper. He did it so much that it became second nature. Then first nature.

The Captain wore his hair long and kept a neat beard. His clothes were tailored and accented with fur collars and silky ruffles. While the rest of his crew hacked away with cutlasses, the Captain favored an elegant rapier. It made him feel light, and he wielded it with

playfulness and flourish. One time, a crewman named Thomas mocked his swordplay as *prancing*, but the Captain did not mind. Just as Thomas did not mind ten inches of steel through his belly. The Jolly Roger lost some of her crew after that incident. But no matter. The Captain had already forgotten their names.

If he was hard on the crew, he was even harder on the townsfolk, punishing them for their prior inhospitality. They came to heel soon enough, and before long, his pirates drank free at every pub. All doors opened for the Captain. And when one didn't, he smashed it to splinters and took what he wanted.

It was by this attitude that the Captain came to gain his most prized possession. He acquired it during the siege of Mermaid Cove. There, the Captain put on a great show, strutting along the deck of the Jolly Roger and shouting ransom demands into the mouth of the cavern where the merpeople held court.

"We demand pearls," he called. "We demand ambergris. We demand the Coral Crown of the Deep."

"Oh," he added, twirling his mustache, "and a pot of steamed lobsters for my men. Chop chop!"

The crew laughed and lobbed obscenities into the darkness.

They heard no response but a strange popping noise that seemed to be coming from all around them. Their confusion turned to terror when the horde of man-sized octopi climbed over the side-rail. The pirates hacked at their grasping tentacles, but even one was enough to strangle the life from a man's throat. The Captain fought fearlessly, dodging the monsters' suckered limbs and skewering their bulbous skulls with his rapier. When he dispatched the last of the creatures, the Captain ran to the railing and shouted, "I said lobsters, not calamari!" The men cheered behind him. But the merpeople were not beaten yet. A deep tone sounded from the cave, quiet at first, but rising in intensity until the very sea began to boil. Before the men knew what was happening, they were beset by a squadron of flying fish, whose iridescent insect-like wings cut like razors. The Captain hit the deck just in time, but several crew members were not so quick. When the onslaught was over, the Captain hopped up on his feet, punted a stray head, and roared into the mouth of the cavern.

The cavern roared back. From within came a deep grumble, like an ancient oak breaking in half. Two yellow orbs flashed in the darkness, and before the men realized that they were eyes, the behemoth was already on the ship. One swish of its tail swept four men overboard, and the thunder from its maw sent five more into the sea. It was as much a crocodile as a dragon is a gecko. None but the Captain stood to face it.

Their battle would be told and retold a hundred different ways, but the end was always the same. The Captain's hand sat in the beast's belly, and his blade stuck hilt-deep into its monstrous eye.

That was how the Captain earned the name that would be his legacy. The hand was obviously lost, but Smee tended well to the wound, and fitted it with a brilliant prosthetic. In time, the Captain grew to cherish it. The wound gave him character. Under its moniker, he became a legend of the high seas. Wherever Hook went, the men cheered, and the rum flowed, and the gold clinked.

He was even happy, at times. Like when the salty air filled his nostrils, and the Jolly Roger rocked gently beneath his feet. Or when the lovely strains of Smee's violin drifted over the deck, while the crew sang sea shanties. Times when Hook felt no anger, no regret for the choices he'd made or pirate he'd become. When he lay atop the stern of the ship—his ship—fingers laced behind his head, beneath a celestial canopy bursting with shooting stars that zipped about like fireflies in the night and reminded him of a memory more beautiful than any dream.

These moments of peace promised to stretch into eternity, if Hook could only hold on to them.

But he never could. There was always another ship to take or port to conquer. Always another mutiny to crush or an upstart challenger to put in his place.

Worst of all was that Peter Pan. A mere boy, who neither respected nor even feared Hook. He and his gang of hellions seemed to live for no purpose but to torment and humiliate the Captain. No matter how ingenious Hook's plots, no matter how crafty his schemes, this Peter Pan would always get the better of him. He had terrible battles with the lad who, true to his demonic nature, flew through the air and crowed like a banshee.

Hook was powerless to stop him. When facing the Pan, his sword no longer danced and sang with a life of its own, but felt clumsy and sluggish. Hook slashed fruitlessly about the air as the boy flew in circles, laughing. His crew fared no better, bruised and bloodied by those brats as the Jolly Roger splintered around them.

And yet, though he'd never admit it (and he'd kill anyone who alleged it), Hook had affection for the boy. There was a hunger, a violence in Peter that likely even he himself didn't recognize. But Hook saw it as clear as a mirror. He felt a kinship with the lad, living beyond the bounds of society, beyond its rules and its comforts. Pushing his lackeys toward ever more fun and adventure. Not merely living a dream, but fighting for it.

Let him have his fun.

Sure, Peter Pan and his Lost Boys roughed up Hook and his pirates from time to time, but the crew gave as good as they got. Truth be told, those children were more of a nuisance than a threat. And speaking of nuisance, what was *All. That. Racket?*

Hook awoke to the sounds of shrieking children. It was unbearable. Such a lovely dream ruined by those disrespectful and insufferable twerps.

As the peace of the reverie faded, a familiar restlessness crept in from the edges of his consciousness, like an awful secret begging to be screamed. Hook would sate it as he always had, setting a new course and rousing the men to another violent adventure.

Indeed, Smee's idea—strike that—his idea of a raid on the Lost Boys was intriguing.

Yes, Hook thought, *switch things up a bit.*

Eugene Morgulis is an attorney and writer living in Los Angeles. His fiction has appeared in Fantasy Scroll Magazine and the Adventures of Pirates Anthology from Zimbell.

My Name is John Carter (Part 3)

By JAMES HUTCHINGS

John Carter learns from his fellow captive, Dejah Thoris, about the crises facing Barsoom that she and her people were seeking to alleviate! At the mercy of the giant green Thark warriors, the Martian princess pleases her cause to their captors!!

From the look on her face, she had no small distaste
for the creatures she'd landed among,
and her view seemed to be just as harsh towards me.
I was glad I could not speak her tongue.

I could hardly believe that a daughter of Eve
could be found in this desolate land,
so I bent both my ears to the words that she sneered
as we tramped over alien sands.

As I paid further heed to her furious screech,
I could recognize words here or there.
I was utterly sure that I'd heard them before,
and I racked my brain wondering where.

I was baffled until I remembered Brazil
and the pidgin we immigrants spoke
that was part Portuguese and was part Tennessee
and part ten kinds of Indian folk.

And I called to mind then how the Indian men
used their own tongue to pray or to vow,
and I realized that tongue was the very same one
that was fiercely haranguing me now.

And my mind seemed to peer through the veil of the years
to a distant terrestrial sky
where some tribe disappeared and was spirited here,
who knew how many eons gone by.

So I uttered a few native words that I knew,
that I thought stood for 'friend' or for 'peace',
and her look of disdain set me burning with shame,
but at least her abuse of me ceased.

Thus our serfdom began, and the way of it ran
with a logic most unlike our own;
having captured and killed with a resolute will,
they ignored us and left us alone.

My old tutor had cried that my brain must have died
when I garbled the Latin he'd teach,
but I hadn't then burned with a hunger to learn
from being cut off from all human speech.

So to give her my name and be given the same
was to me as a heavenly chorus.
I'd seen one human face since I fell out of space,
and I learned she was named Dejah Thoris.

Several weeks hurried past, and I learned pretty fast,
in my Spartan and derelict room.
She declared that she'd come out of far Helium,
greatest city of dying Barsoom.

For this waste where we dwelt once had been a green veldt,
and wide rivers had flowed through the plain,
but the seas slowly dried, and the green things all died,
and the grim tyrant Famine then reigned.

And soon no one remained who was kindly or sane.
All were monstrous, and cunning, and cruel.
Where proud cities had stood in a free brotherhood
lay a wasteland of scuttling ghouls.

Now this terrible doom fell on all of Barsoom.
Every land was consumed except one.
Only one fragile spark in the planet-wide dark,
the last city of all: Helium.

Under siege and so few the survivors well knew
that their city would soon be a tomb.
Using science unknown to my faraway home
they endeavored to cure Barsoom.

Though the seas had run dry, there was ample supply
in the glacial ice at the poles.
Over years they constructed a huge aqueduct
as the ghouls and the thirst took their toll.

Then the green meadows bloomed once again on Barsoom
and one city was mother to ten,

but the planet was old, and the scientists told
that soon all could be desert again.

Now my courage was stirred by these desperate words,
and I spoke without caution or plan,
for she hardly had paused when I pledged to the cause
of restoring this suffering land.

Now, I've never been smart in affairs of the heart,
even less than most ignorant males.
Thinking back I confess I was truly possessed
by the teller as much as the tale.

Yet I have no remorse for my ill thought-out course,
though my heart was a dubious guide.
Whether by simple odds or the will of the gods
I, for once, chose the virtuous side.

I had gone on campaign to keep others in chains
and had thought that I fought to be free,
then by going out west, I had helped dispossess
those who'd lived there far longer than me.

Though I never had killed in the wilds of Brazil,
even there I had sins to atone,
for we built out of wood where the jungle once stood
and the Indians once made their home.

If whenever I did what my poor conscience bid,
I was knee-deep in murder and wrath
then it seems only just that unrecognized lust
should have shown me the virtuous path.

Was she savage or sage? I could not rightly gauge,
for she seemed to defy any label,
mixing wisdom of worth never dreamt of on Earth
with some heathenish fancy and fable.

Like the Hindoos of Ind she declared that the wind
was the breath of some terrible beast
that would smite everyone if the guardian Sun
didn't rise every day in the east.

Of her fables and lore, I could tell you much more:
of how women and men came to be—
how mirages that may lead the thirsty astray

were the ghosts of the long-vanished seas—

How the gods made this place from a warrior's face
and they made the canals from his scars—
how when warriors die they go up to the sky
and their campfires' light is the stars.

Yet for all that she knew how a wooden ship flew
borne on beams of invisible light,
and she thought it most plain, though I found it arcane,
and the knowledge I gathered was slight.

Then our talk largely turned to more pressing concerns,
such as leaving this place of the dead,
but with dunes on all sides we'd have nowhere to hide,
and no water save that which we bled.

To live captured and scorned and be buried unmourned
or to flee and die slowly from thirst;
which of these we'd have chose, neither one of us knows
for the Fates made the choice for us first.

I was half in a dream when I woke with a scream,
for a ghoul stood there, stony and mute,
and it dragged me right then from my long-ruined den
like a tomb robber dragging his loot.

Still not fully awake, I was struggling to make
any sense out of what had occurred.
When we came to a square, it unloaded me there
and then left me with never a word.

Now at first I stayed put, for I'd twisted my foot,
and it hurt so I thought I was lame,
but my blood hotly rose when I saw that they'd chosen
to treat Dejah Thoris the same.

I would gladly have fought, for the way that they brought
us like bundles of trash to be tossed,
but she rose to her feet not to fight, but entreat
that they search for the souls they had lost.

"If it weren't for the skills of the people you kill,
then the days of Barsoom would be done.
Every last gust of air must be weighed and compared,
and each transient mood of the Sun.

"To the desert we came with no conqueror's aim
but a whole dying planet to save.
We did nothing to you, yet you killed my whole crew,
and you hold John and me as your slaves.

"You have done this and more in a barbarous war
which can win you no plunder or prize
but a planet made bare of all water and air
on which every last one of you dies.

"Yet it grows all too late for the nursing of hate
and the counting of grudges and blame.
Let us swallow our pride and set quarrels aside,
for our mother Barsoom cries in pain."

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>.

...Where There Is No Sanctuary

By HOWIE K. BENTLEY

Gravely injured after a dire battle, werewolf warrior king Argantyr unwittingly finds himself in the interdimensional fortress of a powerful lich! Can he overcome the nihilistic horrors before him to strike down the abomination in its own abode?!

A man crouched in the snow beneath a dimming sky. Darkness was fast approaching. The man's head was bowed, and he leaned on his broadsword for support. The streaming blood of his enemies covered his naked chest and torso, and blood and foam frothed from his mouth and fell onto the snow-covered earth. His long black beard and hair were spattered with blood. Draped over the man's back was a cape made from the hide of a giant wolf, its head fitting over the man's as a hood. The large scintillating blue jewel in his sword hilt glared a single ray of hope amid the red-stained faces, shorn limbs, and spilled innards of both friend and foe alike. Among the rent corselets, broken swords, and shattered shields of Æsir and Vanir, the cacophony of the recent battle receded in his thrumming eardrums. The man's heart raced, and his lungs labored to drink deeply of the frosty air, while his brain struggled to adjust to his change in perception of his surroundings.

A red-haired warrior appeared and stood over the man crouching in the snow. "At first I thought they were merely tales! A man who led the Æsir, changing to a wolf and killing good Vanir men. Had I not seen it with mine own eyes, I would not have believed the stories about King Argantyr Fenris, the mighty Tuathic warrior who led the Æsir against my people.

"You don't seem so mighty now, Argantyr," the young red-haired man spoke calmly as if within a dream, "I saw you hold my father on the ground. You were ripping his throat open, and blood was *spraying from his neck!*" The young Vanirman's voice changed to a

growl as he quickly brought his broadsword down to split Argantyr's head open.

Argantyr brought his sword up and blocked the blow, but the force of the impact sent him rolling onto his back. Argantyr drove his right foot into the man's groin, lifting the Van off of the ground. Before the youth could recover, the Tuathic chieftain was on his feet, knocking his foe's sword out of the way with his own broadsword and quickly coming back with his dagger in his left hand to slit the Van's throat. Blood jetted from the young warrior's neck and reddened the drifts.

While the man was bleeding out on the snow, Argantyr began searching for his armor and a fresh change of furs. He was always prepared for the aftermath of the battle—of his transformation from the werewolf back into a man. He dressed as warmly as possible, hoping to defy the elements just a little longer for he knew not what.

The warrior king reflected on the recent battle: all of the horses were either dead or had run away, and *Æbbath*, the chaotic flying beast that Argantyr had ridden into battle, had flown off in the melee. Argantyr had been occupied with dispatching a Vanirman to the *House of Shades* when he had quickly glimpsed the beast rise up from the ground, devouring a man headfirst as it left on leathern wings.

His present situation was not good—the snowfall had accelerated into a blizzard. Argantyr turned in what he perceived to be a southerly direction and struggled to walk. He was the last living man in this frozen wasteland, and his animal senses receded now that he had changed back to a man. He didn't have the strength to change to a beast again, having fought on the battlefield in human form, changed to the werewolf and then back to a man. The remainder of the supernatural energy from his beastly transformation was being spent quickly healing the wounds and cuts he had previously sustained on the battlefield as a human, before his change to the werewolf had occurred. *Another transformation into the beast this soon would kill him, but so would the storm if he didn't quickly find shelter in this no man's land of snow and ice.*

Argantyr had staggered only a few steps in the bloody snow drifts when he heard an explosion from behind. It was too loud to be a

thunderstorm. *Better to die in an avalanche than to slowly freeze to death.* Argantyr spun around, expecting to see a mountain of snow tumbling down on him. Instead, he saw a lofty tower hove into view.

The structure had not been there ere now. Argantyr trudged toward the tower, taking in the details as he approached the edifice. The surface of the tower looked to be covered in a massive black serpent's skin with red-and-yellow mottling. The snakeskin undulated and glistened in the dusk. The top of the tower was so high that Argantyr could not see it due to his close proximity and the raging blizzard. The structure was set with large chunks of brightly colored and blazing jewels: sapphires, rubies, emeralds, carnelian, malachite, amber, and others that Argantyr had never seen before.

Argantyr scanned the tower for an entranceway. He had to find refuge from the storm now! He could feel his heart beating laboriously and his lungs filling up with ice as he struggled to breathe. Argantyr ran his hand over the serpent-skin surface, hoping to discover an entrance, when he heard a thunderous rumbling and the sound of two massive stones grinding together.

A door appeared in the bottom surface of the tower and slowly opened, inviting Argantyr to enter. He stumbled through the portal, and the door slammed behind him. He heard the sound of the stones grating together again, and when he looked back over his shoulder, the door through which he had entered the tower was now gone. Where the door had once been, there was only the smooth inside surface of the chamber in which he now stood.

Argantyr's eyes took in the details of the room. The chamber was heated by a single fireplace along the east wall. In the center of the room, there was a large dining table laid out with a spread of food: beef ribs, freshly baked loaves of bread, and vegetables were in abundance, as were grapes, apples and more exotic fruits that were uncharacteristic of the clime.

Argantyr opened the bottle of wine sitting with the food and poured it into the glass beside the plate that he found waiting for him. All of this was suspicious, but at the moment his animal instincts were dominant and all he cared about was food, warmth, and shelter from the raging blizzard. Argantyr dug into the food and drink with gusto and let the demons howling on the wind outside be damned.

"Tell me about her again," the boy pleaded with his uncle.

"Who is this you speak of, Argantyr?" asked old Gromley.

Argantyr's mother, a look of worry on her face, bit her lower lip and shook her head disapprovingly at the boy. Argantyr's father pretended not to notice and looked nervously down at his plate.

Argantyr was too excited to stifle his urge to hear any details that he might have missed before, and he burst out, "Mak Cleigha Clye!"

"Always the same story, boy? There isn't much to tell. Some say your great-grandmother was a witch who disappeared in a snowstorm one night. Some said they seen her runnin' in the direction of the thunder that was rumblin' like the sky was fallin'. Then they didn't see her no more. Nor was there nary trace that she ever was to begin with," Gromley spoke with a mysterious air, slowly moving his outstretched hands apart.

Argantyr's mother got up and quickly started clearing off the dinner table. His father left the room.

Old Gromley lowered his voice, "You know everyone lived in fear of that woman and the evil that she brought down on this land, and they was all glad to be shed of her. You keep asking about her, and she might just come for you, son!"

All of a sudden, Gromley was speaking in a strange language that wasn't meant for human organs to resonate, and his facial features stretched and contorted, covered in scales and mottling after the fashion of a serpent.

Argantyr jerked spasmodically and grunted; then, he was awake. It took him a moment to realize that the dream he had just experienced was not real and that he was safe, at least for now.

That dream! He had had it before.

For a fighting man like Argantyr, the activity of his mind during slumber held little interest for him. He had no memory of any conversation with his parents, or any other family members, regarding an ancestor named Mak Cleigha Clye. He could never recall any kinsmen even mentioning such a tale, but the dream that he had just experienced reminded him of the many recurring dreams over the years that he had had about this supposed sorceress and great-grandmother of his.

He dismissed Mak Cleigha Clye as a name he only knew from dreams. There were more important questions to be answered at the present, such as where he was at the moment and if there were any immediate threats in the vicinity. There wasn't much he could do now except to explore the tower.

There was enough food left on the table to fill up a sack with provisions for his journey back southward on the morrow. Being a warrior had taught him to always take advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves, for they may not be found again if one hesitated.

Argantyr found a tapestry on the wall of the chamber and tore it down. He laid the cloth out on the floor and began covering it in food, pulling the sides up and tying it. No sooner had he tied up the sack than he heard the rumbling of thunder and the massive stones scraping again. Off to his left another door opened. *Why had he not noticed the portal before?*

Argantyr stepped into an inclining hallway connecting to another chamber and entered the room. The darkened room began lighting up with small, white luminescent entities of various geometrical shapes. The shapes slowly formed into phantasmagorical wisps that resembled human figures. Only seconds had passed before they became ghostly figures inhabiting the room, talking and interacting with one another. He could see their mouths moving, but no sound emitted from the specters. Some of them danced, but Argantyr could hear no music. *It was a dance—a dance of the dead!*

The Tuathic chieftain moved to the center of the room where two of the men stood, appearing to engage in conversation, though Argantyr could hear no sound.

"What goes on here?" he inquired of the men, but they continued their silent conversation, neither seeing nor hearing him. Argantyr gritted his teeth and reached out to grab one of the men by his arm in an effort to get the man's attention, but the warrior king's steel sinews gripped empty air when his clenched fist went through the man's arm.

Out of the corner of his eye, Argantyr caught a glimpse of a woman dressed in scarlet finery. A black silk cloak was draped over her shoulders. The woman's low-cut dress revealed her ample

bosom, and the blood-red garment accented her alabaster skin. Her long black wavy hair spilled over her shoulders, and as she came closer, he could see her high cheek bones and darkly painted piercing emerald eyes.

“You are in grave danger...” The woman’s mouth was still moving, but he could not hear some of the words. “...come on.”

She laid her hand on Argantyr’s arm, and he touched her billowing crimson sleeve. Argantyr’s eyes widened when his touch did not clutch open air as it had done with the silent, ghostly men.

The inhabitants of the chamber were removing their clothing and filing through a door that the warrior had not previously observed.

“...on.” The woman’s voice was breaking up, but he could hear part of what she was saying, and she gestured for him to follow the last of the denuded figures from the chamber through the door into the next room. Argantyr did not remove his garments, nor did the strange woman.

“They are pitiful as the dead who walk mindlessly in the underworld, naked and unashamed, as if they just forfeited their earthly possessions and had newly returned to Hel to prepare for their eternal struggle yet again in a new incarnation,” Argantyr mused aloud to the woman as they traversed the spiraling hallway that ascended from the previous chamber to the one into which the procession entered. He had no trouble hearing his own voice.

The woman’s mouth moved, and her speech partially returned, “... it is! This...it is!” A look of frantic concern spread over her face as she shook her head affirmatively and took ahold of the warrior’s hands in the hope that he would understand.

Argantyr and his companion entered the room. The woman gasped and cast a fearful gaze on the southernmost wall of the room, then shifted her vision to the center of the floor in the middle of the chamber. Argantyr’s eyes followed the woman’s gaze. What he saw was more an inky shadow than anything—like oil spilling onto the floor. Tendrils protruded from the Thing, and Argantyr saw burning eyes ablaze in the center of what he took to be an absence of the Thing’s face. Argantyr’s hand instinctively reached for his sword hilt, but the woman stayed his hand with her own. The inky

shadow's appendages receded into it, and its burning gaze subsided as it shut its eyes.

A curly-headed boy with short horns protruding from his head sat in the middle of the room with his goat-legs crossed. The goat-boy blew into a set of pipes, but Argantyr could hear no sound coming from the musical instrument.

The men and women began fondling and kissing each other. A hazel-haired woman appeared across from the piping young satyr and clutched her large, firm breasts while thrusting her hips in a lewd dance that would have offended even the maenads of the Thiasus Cult in the sunny Cretian Isles. She raised one of her breasts and flicked her tongue across her nipple, her face contorting in ecstasy. Both men and women flocked to the woman at the center of the room and bowed at her feet. A flaxen-haired woman crawled to the dancer and placed her face between the woman's legs. The pale-haired woman's head bobbed as the dancer thrust her groin into the woman's face faster and faster!

Men and women and women and women were coupling on the floor and on randomly placed divans in the room.

The strange woman who had led Argantyr into the room cast an inviting glance upon him and licked her lips. "Take me!" she breathed out heavily. Argantyr could feel the heat radiating from this real, living, flesh-and-blood woman as he pulled her to him and kissed her deeply. She turned around and backed her haunches up into his groin, and he gripped her tiny waist, gently moving her hair out of the way so that he could kiss her all over her neck.

Of a sudden, the hair on Argantyr's nape prickled, and his ever-present wolf senses—though dulled by his human brain—warned him just before the thing happened. He cast his gaze upon the dancing woman who was the centerpiece of the orgy—her eyes went wide with terror as tendrils caressed and wrapped around her creamy, naked flesh—tentacles that entered every orifice and violated her. Her head fell back, and blood gushed from her mouth, splattering onto the floor. Crimson tears flowed from her eyes, and her face turned purple, the veins in her neck bulging from the serpentine appendages that entwined her throat. Blood and organs exploded in silence, scattering in all directions of the room—her

mangled torso fell upon the floor. Her carnal worshippers scattered, their naked bodies and faces sprayed with her blood and fluids.

Argantyr whipped his mighty broadsword from its scabbard and was searching the room for the creature. There was no sight of the abomination—only cruel laughter that emanated from each corner of the chamber and bounced maddeningly off the walls in every direction as it travelled the room. The laughter was a mixture of a deep barking sound and a higher-pitched noise like the tearing of fabric.

Two giants clothed only in loincloths made from the hides of jungle cats appeared close to Argantyr and his mysterious companion. The giants were carrying large scimitars with thick, curved blades. When they walked past Argantyr and the woman, they grinned and nodded their heads, acknowledging the presence of the Tuathic warrior and his companion. The men were at least seven feet in stature, and their massive muscles rippled beneath their oiled skin. Both men's faces were frozen in the same expression with eyes that slanted upward as if pulled back by an unseen hand, wide noses, pointed ears, and a cruel grin. The bald giants had no hair anywhere on their bodies. The two large men rounded up the celebrants of the orgy and herded them towards the south wall of the room. Those who moved slowly were prodded and jabbed with the giants' cruel scimitars. One woman fell on the floor and was bleeding. The procession stepped over the dying woman as if she were invisible and made for the south wall of the room.

Another rumble of thunder and the grating of massive stone upon stone presaged a newly appeared door through which the naked somnambulists exited for another chamber. The diabolic laughter had stopped as abruptly as it had started. The woman led Argantyr behind the procession.

"Let me tell you something! I believe you are the one—the one who can save us all and put an end to *his* reign of terror!" The woman spoke freely to Argantyr once they were in the hallway that linked the chamber that they had just been in with the one where the giants were herding the pitiful human cattle.

"Who is *he*?" Argantyr asked.

“Abijeetat! He is a withered old mummy, yet a powerful wizard. He is thousands of years old, but what lives in him came from beyond the stars, and it is far older than man,” the strange woman replied.

“Who are those people who march as though they are the dead entering unto Hel?” Argantyr asked.

“They are prisoners of Abijeetat’s tower, just as are you and I! Abijeetat is a master of controlling matter through vibration. Some of the people are hundreds, maybe even thousands, of years old, but they are very much alive. Abijeetat preserves them by changing their vibratory rates, and, in turn, changing their physical make-up until he is ready to use them for his amusement. They are then restored to their original forms. By this sorcerous apparatus, Abijeetat’s prisoners can live forever, if it is his will. They can feel every cut and blow inflicted upon them! Even in acts of pleasure, they are pushed far beyond their limits, into the agonies of ecstasy!” she said.

“Who are you, woman, and what do you do here?”

“I-I don’t know who I am. It has been so long that I have forgotten my name. I remember that I once worked powerful magick, but it was mere child’s play compared to the sorcery of Abijeetat! I am a hostess to Abijeetat’s ‘guests’ and I...,” she sobbed and looked away from Argantyr, bursting out in tears before continuing. “I lie with the foul mummy and the abomination that lives within him like a whore every night.”

“Why are you here?” Argantyr asked, a look of concern appearing on his countenance.

“I came here long ago. I have forgotten the past. It is but a dim shadow in my mind’s eye. I know that I summoned the tower in a fit of rage and sorcery. I sought sanctuary from something... where there is no sanctuary. The tower appeared in a snow storm, and I entered it hoping to find the solution to a problem that I have long forgotten. Now, the only problem that I am concerned with is the fact that I am a prisoner of Abijeetat in this tower. We all are! I saw you in a vision! You are the leader of a great band of warriors. There was much slaughter! As Abijeetat’s tower spiraled through time, the sorcerer was drawn to the vibrations given off by mass slaughter and death. The pain, the excitement, and the blood lust! These things called to him like a wolf howling in the wastelands of night. Without a

doubt he had hoped to find some prisoners. Are you the only survivor?”

“Aye, woman. A small party of wedding guests werereturning from King Æ thelfrid’s daughter’s wedding some months ago when they had been set upon by Prince Vaeda’s men. Vaeda was the eldest son of the Vanir King, Cnut Bloodaxe. Regarding the fate of Æ thelfrid’s guests: the men were slaughtered, and the women were defiled. Æ thelfrid’s youngest son, Rollo, was found with the *blood eagle* cut into his back. Rollo’s lungs were cut out and placed on his back like wings. When Æ thelfrid’s emissaries confronted the Bloodaxe about it, the Vanir king just roared with laughter and swilled his mead, mocking Æ thelfrid. He had arranged the whole affair to provoke Æ thelfrid into a war that he had wanted for a long time as a chance to expand Vanir territory and set one of his own sons upon Æ thelfrid’s throne.

“Æ thelfrid has long been my friend, and he asked for my help. I, along with a portion of my royal guard and a small band of Æ sir light cavalry, were closing the Haalfgardian borders after defeating Cnut Bloodaxe’s army. We thought that we had seen the last of them at the Battle of Tarnoth, when what was left of Cnut’s army had turned tail and fled, but the Bloodaxe must have rallied every last man left in his kingdom.

“We were ambushed by what was left of them and outnumbered two-to-one. We fought hard today, and no Vanirman lived, but neither did any of my comrades. I personally saw to Cnut Bloodaxe’s death, fulfilling my promise to my friend and avenging my fallen sword-brothers. Cnut was like a mad dog who latched on and would not let go... Until he got ahold of a wolf! I tore the Vanir King’s throat out and slew the last of his lineage.

“It should be a safe journey back to friendlier Æ sir territory on the morrow if this storm subsides, but I had no provisions. I still have no horse, and there is a blizzard going on outside of the tower this night. There wasn’t much that I could do except to explore the tower.”

The woman nodded in agreement.

“What is the purpose of the wizard’s tower?” Argantyr asked the woman.

“Some of those who have been here longer than I say that the tower itself is a manifestation of Abijeetat’s evil and perverse lusts, constructed by his incontestable will. The tower moves through time and many worlds, collecting the doomed for Abijeetat’s sadistic revelries, but even Abijeetat has some limitations; it will be dusk before he can move the tower again. The storm will abate the closer we come to daylight. We, all of us, must find a way to escape! You must help us! You are the one!”

“Your voice! It just occurred to me how clearly that I can hear it now with no interruptions!” Argantyr said, puzzled.

“All sound is blocked by the Naethelian vibrations that Abijeetat stirs with his *Æ nokian* Calls. Only in his throne room manifests the synchronicity where all beings can connect with no interference. When one reaches that destination it is too late to matter. The *Æ nokian* Calls are a set of tablets numbering nineteen. They are written in a magickal language that was inscribed on the tablets that the Thing which inhabits Abijeetat’s body brought down from its world.

“The Thing travelled from far beyond the stars to this world when man was as yet undreamt out of the primal slime that is *Ubbo-Sathla*. It created its own dimension and lurked there, waiting to be summoned by those who dared. The vibrations follow it as the unnameable shadow slithers from chamber to chamber. Since we are in the hallway, and he is not here, you may now hear my voice. But he knows that you are here! Abijeetat brought you here and he means to have you as the source of his entertainment in the tower tonight!” The woman was speaking more hurriedly, and she looked increasingly fearful.

“I have never met man or wizard who couldn’t be bled to death by cold steel, woman!” growled Argantyr.

“You... and... you will tonight!” Her voice wavered in and out, and she took Argantyr by his arm and urgently led him into the chamber where the pitiful horde had been herded only moments ago.

Upon his entrance into the room, Argantyr saw a man tied to a wheel, mounted to a machine that stood upright. The prisoner’s arms and legs were stretched out and firmly bound by thick iron shackles. One of the giants quickly spun the man on the wheel. Two more

giants, faces fixed in a rictus of hateful joy, threw pointy daggers at the man as the wheel spun. The victim's left eye socket was gorged with crimson, and he bled from the dart-like weapon protruding from his shoulder. His groin was a mass of clotting blood.

Argantyr turned quickly to find the strange woman who had accompanied him had gone. His eyes searched the room for her, but she was not to be found. He spotted a large closed door leading from the chamber. The door was set back in the wall and shadowed by heavy blocks of stone.

Argantyr looked to his left and saw another of the fiendish giants holding a woman while a second giant used a branding iron to burn a hieroglyph into the woman's steaming flesh, her mouth wide open, screaming a silent cry that Argantyr could not hear.

Across from the wall where the giants played their deadly game with the man on the wheel lay a young woman upon a table. Her hands and feet were securely bound with ropes and her impregnated stomach bulged and undulated, rapidly growing. Some of the older women stood around her. The pregnant woman's mouth opened in a silent scream, and her stomach burst open. The inky shadow emerged from her rent torso and sensuously slid its serpentine tendrils over her throat and dead face. The Thing's appendages moved up and gently played with her hair. Argantyr, his face contorted with rage, wrenched his broadsword free of its scabbard and shouted, "Enough!"

None of the human inhabitants occupying the room noticed Argantyr's presence in the chamber, but the Thing that had just burst from the woman's stomach turned its burning gaze upon Argantyr; then, like fading ember, the luminescence of the Thing's deadly stare was gone; and the Thing sank into the woman like oil and vanished.

All around the warrior king, death and madness triumphed as he saw two giants sawing off a man's lower leg at the knee; one of them held their victim while another worked on him with a large curved sword with jagged teeth. Blood jetted from the severed leg as the tortured fellow looked in the direction where Argantyr stood—looked right through him. Argantyr charged in among the giants, leaping high and aiming a blow at the neck of the brute who was removing the man's leg. The grinning expression and upwardly-sloping facial

features of the giant never changed, but there was fear in his eyes as his severed head rolled upon the floor. Before the first giant's body could hit the floor, the second brute who had been holding the tortured victim had already drawn his wicked, curved blade and brought it down in an attempt to split Argantyr from head to groin. Argantyr's panther-like reflexes saved him as he moved quickly to one side and brought his own blade back-handed through the giant's knee.

Blood spurted from the brute's wound; he shifted his weight and fell crouching on his uninjured leg. The colossus aimed a horizontal blow intended to spill Argantyr's innards, but the Tuathic chieftain managed to fall back a pace, and his enemy's blade raked his ribs. Argantyr immediately sprang back in and drove his sword into the giant's chest, his full weight behind the thrust. Blood gushed from the brute's mouth and splattered onto the floor of the chamber.

Ere Argantyr could wrench his blade free, one of the giants rushed in and pinioned his arms. The warrior king began uttering the incantations that would free him from his mortal bonds and in turn, free him from the grasp of the brute; but another giant rushed in and struck the warrior with a hard blow across his jaw that nearly snapped his neck, followed by a left hook to the mouth that loosened his teeth. Argantyr saw the giants converge upon him from all corners of the room. They rained blow after blow on him. He was bleeding heavily, and he could feel the pain of broken ribs. His last vision was of the same maniacal expression on all of the faces of the giants. The warrior king's consciousness gave way, and he sank spiraling into darkness.

Argantyr's nose and throat stung as he slowly regained his senses. Remnants of the powder that had been blown into his face by one of his assailants to awaken him had settled. His vision slowly returned.

"Kneel before Abijeetat, plaything!" burst a voice from the throne setting upon a raised dais before the warrior.

Argantyr struggled to squint through his swollen face. The voice that commanded him came from a withered mummy sitting on an ornate throne carved from a large chunk of ruby. Jeweled serpents

comprised the mummy's headdress. The snakes were bunched close together on the top of his head and fanned out thicker as they ascended, bordered and held in place with gold that had been molded into a frame around them. Upon Abijeetat's chest was a topaz breastplate covered in hieroglyphs and trimmed with bronze. A crimson sash was worn about the lich wizard's waist, and he held a bronze scepter with a thin, sharpened axe blade at the top. The mummy's eyes held the same burning red luminosity that emanated from the inky black Thing's gaze. The wizard's face was drawn up, and his mouth was tight. Time had eroded most of his nose away. Worms crawled from holes in his face, yet he still lived and reigned, raining down terror on all within his tower.

"I kneel before...no one!" Argantyr growled through swollen lips.

The living mummy laughed, a barking cachinnation that echoed through the massive, dimly-lit chamber. "In time you will be no different than the others you saw in the chamber of lusts and the chamber of tortures." The wizard nodded to the mysterious woman who had led Argantyr through the chambers of his tower; she kneeled silently to the left of Abijeetat's throne with her head bowed. The mummy continued, "You are but a hairless ape brought here for my amusement. But let me briefly entertain you in return for the lifetime of service that you are to provide me before you join the legions of my eternal servants. You *shall* hear of the might and glory of the omnipotent Abijeetat!"

Argantyr fixed his eyes on the lich wizard and listened.

Abijeetat continued, "I was once a slave in what is now long sunken Mung, which has for aeons lain beneath the ocean. I was purchased as a young boy by the senile old wizard Balaam. Because of my precociousness, the old fool required of me to see to the organization and care of his library of scrolls and instruments of gramarye. Due to my usefulness, this placed me at the top of the hierarchy of his slaves, and he had no problem looking the other way when the indulgences in my... *peculiar*... activities and appetites led to another slave's madness or death. Even the peasant girls of the city were available to me; none would question Balaam about an occasional missing wench.

“Balaam was a master of evocation, but he would not dare to fully explore the darkest depths of the gramarye of his demon-worshipping ancestors. He always stood in a circle and called the genii and demons into a triangle, applying the necessary pressure to get them to agree to do his bidding—avoiding calling them into himself at all cost.”

“Over time I had become thoroughly familiar with the contents of the old man’s scrolls and decided to try some magick of my own. On a night when the twin moons of Jahn were in Dahrtal and Theiis, I laid a drugged peasant girl face down on the altar and entered her from behind while reciting *The Invocation to Thasaidon*, opening the gates to oblivion and letting in *the One Who cannot Be Named*. As I climaxed into my receptacle, I slit her throat. It was at that moment that he entered me, and he is still within me even now—stronger than ever! It is for this reason that you will kneel before me and proclaim me your master or die immediately, just as Balaam and countless others who have displeased me have done! *Now!*”

Argantyr, both impressed and appalled by Abijeetat’s tale, asked him, “Why is it that you have no regard for life or human dignity, wizard?”

“Because to tread another underfoot like the meaningless insect that he is, to tear a wife from her husband and use and dismember her in front of her partner, or to tear a crying babe from its mother’s arms and penetrate it unto death while its mother watches helplessly gives me great pleasure and sends me speeding upon the wings of unbridled ecstasy!”

“Then you must die!” growled Argantyr, raising himself from the floor.

The withered mummy’s face stretched with a smirk as Abijeetat nodded his head to the strange woman to whom Argantyr had thought himself befriended. The woman turned and picked up a great broadsword with a large blue jewel set in the hilt and a wolf’s head upon the pommel; she handed Argantyr his sword. The lich wizard’s eyes widened when, with one panther-like bound, the warrior king came crashing upon Abijeetat’s crown with a blow that should have split the mummy’s skull wide open.

Argantyr grunted, and the sword rebounded as if he had tried to cut stone with it. Abijeetat roared his barking laughter while the Tuathic chieftain rained down his assault upon the wizard. Argantyr might as well have tried to cut a mountain of steel as to attack the old mummy.

“Stop!” shouted Abijeetat as a fiery blast shot from his upraised palm and knocked Argantyr onto the floor, his sword flying out of his hand.

“You needed to see a minor demonstration as to why all who enter this tower become subject to my every whim, or die. It is that simple. It is common knowledge among anyone versed in the black arts writ down by the greatest devil worshippers of antiquity that he who houses *the One Who cannot Be Named* may die by the hand of no mortal man; nor can he be harmed by any weapon wielded by your pathetic kind.”

“That is all that I needed to know,” Argantyr whispered to the wizard, grinning as he said the words and pulling the wolf-headed hood of his cloak over his head.

“Freae Nome gonastre! Kreedolph hgnome Fenrir! Krynestrees Ryedorf! Hoathehe Fenrir!” Argantyr spat through his swollen mouth and bloody teeth.

Abijeetat leaned forward on his ruby throne, and his eyes widened as his sable, forked tongue flickered from his mouth.

The change came on quickly—Argantyr’s face transfigured into an elongated snout, and his eyes burned with hellish, bestial fury. His body, now covered in silver hair, stretched and grew to enormous girth and stature. The hair bristled on the back of the werewolf as he growled and lunged at the unclean abomination sitting upon its throne. Abijeetat raised and extended his palm to blast the werewolf with a fiery shot as he had done to the battered human warrior who had lain before him only a moment ere now, but he had not been as quick as the giant supernatural wolf bearing down on him. The werewolf leaped, driving Abijeetat’s upraised hand back and pinning the mummy to his throne.

The giant wolf ripped the wizard’s throat out while Abijeetat’s mouth gaped wide, cracking long-withered jaws; the lich’s eyes widened as the beast’s penetrating gaze mirrored the eldritch

burning coals set back in the mummy's head. The werewolf's mouth ripped off Abijeetat's arms and legs and dust flew from the mummy while the beast ripped and tore the lich wizard to shreds. The werewolf latched its powerful jaws onto Abijeetat's head, and the wizard's head cracked like a nut, his brains oozing out onto the floor.

A scream issued forth from the rent torso of the lich wizard as an inky shape burst forth from what was left of its chest and glided across the floor. The werewolf pounced on the thing, pinning it to the floor, and sinking his teeth into it. The Thing screeched—a high-pitched, terrible sound that was its own death knell—just before bursting into flames. The werewolf held the Thing in its mouth momentarily as it burned, making sure that the fire was consuming it; then, the beast flung the burning Thing to a corner of the throne room where it lay upon the floor, a small pool of burning oil, rapidly consumed by fire.

Argantyr knelt on all fours, breathing deeply as foam dripped from his mouth onto the floor of the recently deceased wizard's throne room. The strange woman who had befriended him since his stay in the tower was helping him to his feet while his perception of the surroundings in which he found himself in returned to him—the beast receded into his brain, waiting to be called again when needed.

The woman had found Argantyr's clothing and provisions from the chamber where he had left them, and she hurriedly assisted him with getting into his furs and armor, all the while looking nervously about. Thunder rumbled and the tower began to vibrate as if to confirm the necessity of the woman's haste.

"We must be away now!" the woman said excitedly.

"Now?" Argantyr asked like a child waked up in the middle of the night.

The tower rumbled and shook.

"We must escape the tower now, or die!" the woman screamed over the clamor of the rumbling structure.

Argantyr could hear the faint noise of stone grating upon stone as he saw a portal open in the southern wall of the dead wizard's throne room.

“To me, woman!” Argantyr shouted, his warrior’s senses returned to him by the threat of imminent danger.

The woman took his hand, and they fled through the door leading out of the tower. By Argantyr’s calculations, they would have to make a leap from the tower, but they exited the rumbling structure on solid ground.

“Run! We must get as far from the tower as possible!” the woman cried.

The two of them ran as fast as they could for some time. Argantyr stopped to look back and saw the tower crumbling and exploding into dust that circulated and was dissipating in the northern winds. The woman wasn’t far behind him, but she had stopped and was gasping for air. Argantyr walked a few paces back towards her. The woman motioned with her hand for Argantyr to stay put. She hesitated momentarily, then began walking towards him.

“I remember my name,” she said.

“What is this?” Argantyr asked, his brain only slowly processing what the woman had said.

“I know who I am now!” the woman shouted—the look of confusion on her face changing to horror and madness.

“I am Mak Cleigha Clye!”

Argantyr stood staring at the woman while she extended her right arm in his direction and strode forth. A cry escaped the woman, one that sounded like she was screaming and having her throat cut at the same time—she began to crumble to dust as she walked. The decomposed debris that had been Mak Cleigha Clye blew in the northern wind and mingled with what little had remained of the dust of Abijeetat’s tower and its prisoners who had now been freed in death.

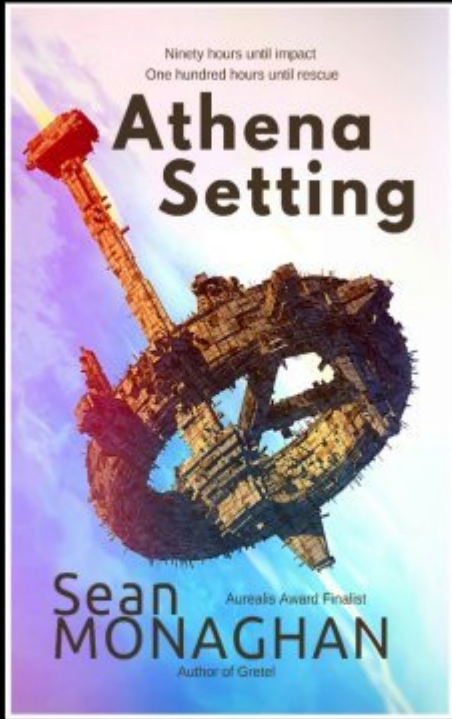
The warrior king gazed for some time in the direction where both woman and tower had recently stood.

“It is as if they never existed,” Argantyr said aloud. But he knew better, by the aching in his cracked jaw, his painful broken ribs, and the presence of the sack of food taken from the lich wizard’s table. The healing effects of changing to wolf and back to man were quickly taking place, and he could feel his loose teeth tightening up in his gums and his ribs, battered organs, and limbs mending.

Argantyr had been walking only minutes in the frozen wasteland when he spotted a tiny dot high in the sky. He quickly unsheathed his broadsword and waved it above his head, crying, "Ho, Æ bbath! Ho! I am here!"

The black dot dropped in the sky until the warrior king could see the flying beast clearly. Speeding downward, the creature came to light on a snow-covered embankment close to Argantyr. Æ bbath was blood-red in color and had the appearance of a giant, winged salamander with a mouth full of teeth resembling deadly stalactites and stalagmites. Argantyr slung the sack of provisions that he had taken from the wizard's tower onto the creature's back and secured it. The warrior leaped upon the beast's back and took hold of the harness. A clicking sound came from Argantyr's mouth, and he spurred Æ bbath's sides with his booted heels. Creature and rider were born aloft on Æ bbath's leathern wings. They had plenty of time to make it to the nearest Æ sir outpost before dark if they stayed their southerly course at a steady velocity.

Howie K. Bentley has had sword and sorcery in his blood since discovering Robert E. Howard's Conan stories in the early 1980s. Howie is the author of a number of tales featuring the god-slayer, witchmaker, and rune, Thorn.



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Dust of Truth

By JOYCE FROHN

Fire will bind and fire will destroy as Maronie and her band of warriors plan one last big score against an outpost before she weds! The sisters ride forth armed with powerful magic, but what if the prophecized 'sacrifice' costs Maronie her future?!

“One gold coin should be enough. Do you have enough of the bone dust left?” Kaisonía reached for the bag with her good hand. The bells on her right sleeve rang. The withered left hung in a sling.

Maronie nodded as she handed over the bag. “Remember that day? Our first battle?”

“How could I forget the last day I could draw a bow? We were crazy then. And all of it over a man that none of us ended up with.” Kaisonía said.

Maronie nodded, remembering how angry her mother had been when the two of them and Laishane had snuck out and taken their fun with that pretty boy. “That was a high price for some fun. I should have paid attention when I heard the rumors that his mother was planning to send him to the Khania. But who would have thought that she would have put such a price on his first time? We shouldn’t have done that.”

Kaisonía nodded. “That would have been wise but it was not to be. And are any wise at that age?”

“He is,” Maronie said, staring at the ground.

Kaisonía sighed. “I would advise you not to risk too much for a man again.” She tapped her damaged arm for emphasis. “The last time you wanted a man in your life this badly, I got crippled and you—”

Maronie frowned. Had everyone heard of her situation? “Didn’t get him. But you’re wrong. That was lust, and this is love.” She smiled, “Besides, I found which brothel his mother sent him to, and I keep dropping in on him.”

Kaisonía laughed. “You haven’t grown up. What about the last time you fell in love?” Maronie sat silently staring at her.

“So business,” Kaisonía said with a sigh. “I think there is enough for one question unless—if the spirit of fire is involved.” She watched a

shiver run down Maronie's back. "What is your question?"

Maronie's voice was calm. "I want to know where that boy Khephre came from; in Mora they called him Dark Boy."

For a moment, Kaisonía was so still that not a single bell on her clothes jingled. "So it's true. And what will you do if you don't like the answer?" Her voice was calm, but she licked dry lips.

Maronie took a deep breath. "Joutian, the baker, swears he is her brother. You remember the story, how their mother was riding out with the child on her back and was ambushed. Only the horse came back."

"Well, he would be the right age but..." At the glare from Maronie she rose. "All right, we'll get to work." She reached for a skin of koumiss. "Stir up the fire for me. Do you have the skull?"

Maronie held out the skull cup with one hand and stirred up the fire with the other. Kaisonía poured the koumiss into the skull cup. She ran her fingers along a hidden tray and lifted a dried bird's leg with only one claw left. "This is the right one. I hope." She held the bag slightly open and stirred the dust into the koumiss. She pulled the bird's leg out and shook off the drops into the fire. She lifted the cup, held it out to Maronie, and sat down across the fire from her.

Maronie took the cup and drank. The gritty bits in the sour koumiss seemed to stick in her throat, but she choked it down and held out the cup to Kaisonía, who drank some. She took another mouthful and sprayed the koumiss into the flames. She began to shiver, and all the bells began to ring. She began to wave the bird's leg across her eyes.

"Bone of first slain. Spirit of fire. Accept the offering. We call for knowledge." She swayed from side to side, and her eyes rolled back in her head. The bird's leg dropped into her lap. Maronie tried to still her rapidly beating heart. The bells rang louder as Kaisonía spun and then went still as she froze.

Kaisonía's eyes opened. Her pupils were so wide her eyes looked solid black. Her voice was hollow. "You have found the man who was missing. When My Power is full, you will gain greatly. But the sacrifice you give must be great."

Her bells began to ring again as she shivered and shook. "Well, did you get a message? Maronie? Did I—" She reached out over the fire and shook her friend's shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

Maronie was staring at the floor. "I think you should keep that stirrer. It's a good one."

“So you got a message?”

Maronie nodded. “Yes. Straight from the fire.” She repeated the message.

Kaisonia raised an eyebrow. “Well, you got good news about that boy. But the rest...” She rose from the fire, carefully dried off the bird leg and put it away. “Be careful. Are you going to tell him?”

Maronie smiled. “Of course, I’m going to give him the good news.”

“And the rest?”

Maronie stood and hugged Kaisonia. “I don’t think I ever asked your forgiveness for dragging you into that raid.”

Kaisonia patted her on the back. “Maybe it was for the best. I seem a lot better at visions than at war. And if you trust him, you’ll tell him.”

Maronie lifted the tent flap and went out. For a moment, she shivered in the chill fall air after the stuffy tent. She smiled when she saw Khephre standing, waiting for her. He was trying to pull down the bottom hem of his red tunic with one hand; the other clutched at an amulet on his neck. When he saw her, he ran up and embraced her. “Well, what’s the word?”

She smiled at him. “It was a powerful vision. Start planning the wedding; it will be after the raid.”

“The raid?” His voice quavered a bit.

“Don’t worry. Just a small raid. Not dangerous. You don’t want to stay living in my mother’s house, do you?” She reached up to wrap an arm around his shoulder. “Right now, I have to get permission to wed you from your sister.” His smile warmed Maronie better than anything.

It was a week later that Khephre came into Maronie’s chartroom. “We have visitors. Kaisonia is here; she said that she has someone that the prophecy mentioned.” There was a faint quaver in his voice.

She smiled at him. “There was a second part of the prophecy, but it doesn’t have to do with you. If it comes true, I’ll get rich.” She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Why don’t you go check on the kitchen and tell them we’ll have two extra for supper.”

Khephre nodded and padded away on bare feet. Maronie hurried off to the gate. She stopped and stared when she got there. “Laishane?” She stared at her friend’s eye patch. “Your eye. What happened?” She stared at the scarred skin on her face and then glanced down. “Your hand?” She stared at a thick bandage from which a few fingers protruded. “Come in. Both of you.” She pulled up several chairs.

Laishane shrugged as she sat down. “An accident. But I think it has to do with your message.”

She reached her good hand into a pouch and pulled out a clay pot with a cloth wick sticking out of it. Maronie raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I know. It looks like a stinkpot but it’s a lot more. I could show it to you but not in this courtyard. I need a target that can burn.”

Maronie raised an eyebrow and led them out the old hole in the wall to a dead tree.

Laishane nodded. “That’ll do nicely.” She put the pot down at the foot of the tree and clicked flint and steel together over the wick. It caught, and she jumped back. Maronie stood looking at the pot until Laishane grabbed her arm and pulled her back through the hole. Kaisonía was already standing behind the wall.

“What are you so scared—,” Maronie said, then she gasped at a crack and bang. She rushed to the hole and looked out. The tree was rapidly burning.

Laishane looked at the tree. “Well, that was disappointing.” Maronie stared at her. She shrugged. “The last time I tried this, it blew a hole in a wall. I’m still learning how to make this dust work.”

Kaisonía came up to them, jingling. “This is definitely releasing the spirit of fire. So that explains the middle part of the prophecy, but the end—I still have no idea what the sacrifice will be.”

Laishane shrugged. “So far, I’ve sacrificed an eye and half my fingers. I don’t know what you’ll be sacrificing.” Maronie took a deep breath. She turned to Kaisonía and almost ran into Khephre carrying a tray with cups of chai.

Kaisonía and Laishane helped themselves. “Well, when’s the raid and how many of these things do you want? My bandages come off in a week and you will need me,” Laishane said.

Maronie looked at her. “Two weeks and I’ll take all you give me.”

After the haggling over pay and casting the bones to see what day would be best, Maronie led them to supper. Khephre didn’t try to wipe away the tear that was forming in his eye.

That night as she settled in bed, Khephre filled her water carafe and settled down on the mat next to her. “Aren’t you going to ask about the prophecy?” Maronie asked.

He lifted his head from the mat as he pulled up his blanket. “If Dominie wishes to tell me something, it is her choice. It is not my place to ask.” She saw the tears glinting in his eyes as he turned away.

She spoke to his back. “I don’t want you like this. I said I wanted you to be my partner. The first half of the prophecy was about you. The second said that the spirit of fire would be released, and I think those pots of Laishane are that. The third said there would have to be a sacrifice. A big one.”

Under the blanket she could see his head nod. He mumbled, “I will make sure all is ready in two weeks.”

Maronie tried to talk to Khephre about what the sacrifice might be, but he managed to always be busy. At night she saw his eyes were red-rimmed, but she never saw a tear. He didn’t seem to hear her words telling him he was safe.

Two weeks later, Khephre carefully tightened Maronie’s wrist braces. “That good?” She nodded and worked a bit of her silk liner up higher to stop the chafing from the edge of her chainmail. She bent to check the knots that held up her socks. He followed her out into the courtyard. Kaisonia was waiting there to check the omens one last time. Maronie turned to her.

“If anything happens—, remember that Khephre should go to his sister.” She patted Khephre’s shoulder. “When I return, I shall make you my partner.” She strode away and mounted her warhorse, Bane.

Maronie glanced at her packs when Bane stiffened under her. She patted his neck and slowly turned him. Something was making him nervous and she heard a scuffling behind her. Khephre had stepped closer to Bane. “Stay there, boy. I don’t want my stallions fighting.”

He froze. His eyes were wide with fright as Bane stomped and bared his teeth. “What if y-you d-don’t-” His eyes were full of tears.

Maronie ran her hands down Bane’s neck. “Were any of the overseers on that Moran farm you came from as strong as I am? As well armed?”

Khephre shook his head. “No. But-”

Maronie grinned at him. “If half of the slaves there are as fine as you: we shall be rich indeed. Any slaves I should be sure and get?”

He nodded. “A t-tailor. He has a brand on—” he patted his check. Tears were choking his voice.

Maronie smiled at them. “I’ll get him.” She turned away from him and spurred Bane. The stallion lunged forward under her out the hole in the wall of the garden. Bane sniffed noses with the other warhorses as they formed ranks and groups of ten.

“We’ll be at the trading post tomorrow before noon. Remember, no violence there. We shouldn’t be seen in force. We can’t let anyone know we’re coming over the border.” She glanced at a map. “We’ll have to camp cold tonight.” She rode around the mass of warriors and horses, checking that each carried bows and arrows, canteen, pan and food. There were three wagons for loot. All was well. She took the reins of her spare horse, Tromper, and went to the head of the war party.

By the time the sun’s rays were hot after the autumn chill of morning, they were close to the trading post. Maronie circled back to the traders driving the wagons. “Are there always men here? What is the signal for trade?”

“Cutting a tree down is the signal but there are fewer and fewer of them who know that.”

Maronie signaled five women to dismount. “You go with them and see if there are any men around.”

She dismounted and led Bane and Tromper to a stream. The rest of the warriors watered their horses and then joined her on the rise of land above the clump of trees. The scouts came out of the woods. “Nobody around.” Maronie waited until they were mounted before she drew Bane up to them.

Maronie smiled. “What’s the best route?”

One of the traders pointed, “Circle to the left about twenty bowshots. You’ll hit the road, and in two hours at a trot, we’ll be at the pass. Wooden gates, whole works, there’s usually a cohort there. We’d have to get through and not let them get word out.”

Maronie smiled. “I don’t think we’ll have a problem.” She waved the whole horde over. “The traders and I will go to the gate. The rest will surround the barracks and make sure there are no escapes.” The rest of her troop nodded. “Laishane, you come with us and bring those fire balls of yours. We’ll come up to the gate as traders.” She turned to one trader. “Does this barracks have a second door?”

“No, the gate and barracks fills the whole pass. There’s steep rock on both sides.”

Maronie turned to Laishane, “Can you still throw well?”

Laishane lifted her right hand, with the first two fingers missing and flexed her thumb against her remaining fingers. “Maybe I can’t draw a bow, yet, but I can still use a sling.”

Maronie raised her voice so all could hear. “The four of us will go to the gate. You will stay out of sight here until you see smoke. Then make

sure that none escape.” They cheered, and Maronie could hear many of them starting to murmur about what they were going to do with the spoils—not just this but later raids. “Our spare horses will stay here.” She passed Tromper’s reins to her lieutenant.

Maronie, the two traders, and Laishane rode on at a steady trot. When Bane’s hoofs hit the stone road, he began to snort and stomp. “Gentle, gentle,” she said to Bane. Over her shoulder she said softly, “We’re almost to the gate. I don’t think they speak our language, but be careful.” Maronie tucked her chainmail hood under a cloth hood and hid her sword under a cloak. She glanced back to make sure everyone looked like traders. Laishane lifted the clay jar with its wick and tucked it under her cloak with a sling.

They moved around a corner. “Imagine,” Maronie said, “putting a gate in a blind corner without a second exit.” She rode up to the gate and pounded on it. Behind her, one of the traders held up an armful of brass trays.

A small door opened, and a man with a plumed helmet popped his head out. The man glanced over them and pulled his head back; “Bunch of barbarian bitches,” he yelled back in Moran.

Maronie smiled at him and spoke in her language. “We came here to make money.” She tapped a large gold plaque sewn on her war shirt.

“I think they’re traders. And the first bitch isn’t bad looking; maybe we do something with her.” The smile never slipped from Maronie’s face but her grip on her sword tightened.

The main gate slowly opened. The women rode in glancing at the wooden barracks tucked between the narrow road and the rocky cliffs. Maronie smiled at the soldiers dicing on a bench by the road. It was easy to smile at these short soldiers with their bare legs under those cloth and leather skirts. One of them yelled upto the soldier at the gate, “Aren’t you going to explain how we expect them to act?”

The man at the gate stepped forward. “They can’t understand. And they never behave.”

Maronie waved him away as Bane started to stomp. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Laishanee starting to fiddle with the pot under her cloak. The man reached for Bane’s reins. Maronie leaned slightly back in the saddle. Bane rose and smashed the man’s head in. The other soldiers yelled and scrambled for their weapons. Laishanee slung the pot with a smoldering wick through the air. It hit the wall of the

barrack and erupted into a ball of flame. Bane spun on his back legs and hit the ground at a gallop.

Maronie clung to Bane's neck as they went flying through the flames. She had only a side-glance to spare at the other three riders. When they had cleared the gate and the flames, she ripped off her wool cloak and threw it on Laishanee. The two traders helped pat out the flames in her hair. The rest of the horde came up in a cloud of dust.

"Those fireballs of yours need some work."

Laishanee nodded. "They're a little unpredictable."

Everyone glanced at her as they checked the damage to her hair. A high-pitched scream made the horses jump and shiver. A soldier appeared in the edge of the cliff above the burning gate. Five arrows feathered his chest before any of them noticed that he was on fire.

Maronie looked at the roaring flames. "Small change of plans. It would take too long to go around. We can camp here overnight. We should still be able to make it to the plantation within two days, maybe three."

An older woman shook her head. "That's fine for us; but the rest of their army might be here in a week or two, and that puts the slaves we're bringing back in danger."

"What if we block the road?" Maronie asked.

"Then how do we get out?" the older woman asked.

"There is a goat trail." Every head turned toward one of the traders. As she stuffed the brass trays into her pack, she shrugged. "It's steep, and I don't know—"

"If a goat can handle it, so can Bane." Maronie patted Bane's neck. There were murmurs of agreement.

"The wagons can't."

Maronie nodded at the older woman's words. "They'll have to stay here. Along with some scouts to make sure that we hold this pass."

"Lot or rank?" asked the older woman.

"I need someone I can be sure of. You pick ten to stay with you." Maronie led Bane away with the two traders to find the goat trail.

That night Maronie sat on her folding cot next to Laishanee. Maronie stared into the small campfire. "How's your head?"

Laishanee shrugged. "I'm going to start wearing a wool hood." She stared at the small campfire. "I wish we knew what that sacrifice will be."

Maronie shrugged. She saw Khephre's tear stained face in her mind. "He was sure it would be me." She stared at the fire and began dragging a stick through the dirt. "We have to plan how we're going to hit this place."

Laishanee nodded. She moved closer to give Maronie a mug of chai. She stared at the pattern Maronie was making in the dirt. "That's not a map of the compound."

Maronie dropped the stick and stared at what she'd done. "I didn't know I was drawing anything. What is it?"

"Maybe a gate of some sort?" Laishanee shrugged. Maronie shrugged, too. But she was careful not to rub away the picture as she gathered the rest of the horde together around the hand drawn map Khephre had made. After the plans were made and the fire started to die down, she took a piece of charcoal and sketched what she had drawn. When she wrapped herself in her blanket to sleep, she realized that her hand was reaching down for a figure that wasn't sleeping there. She felt her heart tighten.

They reached the high wall of the compound in two days. After they hobbled the horses and waited for night, Maronie slid under the gap made by the filthy creek and helped take down part of the wall. She led her warriors through the hole.

"That's the house—most of the gold will be there. Don't bother with any adults there; more trouble than they'd be worth." She stopped to pull up a carrot and rub the dirt off it. She was nibbling as she pointed out places. "Over there are the barns, make sure you get as many animals out as you can. We may have fire getting loose." She turned to Laishanee.

"What building do you want to fire? We'll need a big distraction. Remember, when you hear my horn, the flames will start. Get what you can and get as many out as you can."

Laishanee pointed to a large building with no label on the map. "I bet that one's grain. No windows, and we can't carry away that much grain."

Maronie helped her pile several jars full of powder at the bottom of the wooden wall. One of the younger warriors pointed to an overseer walking around with a lantern. The overseer was pulling a whip out of his bag. Maronie slid the cover over their lamp. He held the lantern higher and suddenly stared at an arrow coming out of his chest. The rest of the warriors laughed and spread out. Laishanee slapped Maronie on the back. "This is going to be so easy."

Maronie laid out a long candlewick. "This should give us a couple of hours."

One of the young warriors ran up. "Problem. The slaves are chained."

Maronie chuckled. "The keys are in the buildings. Just start unchaining them and herding them to the back. If you hear my horn, just throw the keys into a building. We'll herd them together as they pour through that hole. These Morans, they make it easy. Just keep a few warriors at the gate so they don't try to open it, and we'll have them all."

A drop of water fell on her face. "Rain? That'll spoil everything." She ran to the garden and grabbed a shovel. "Help me." She and Laishanee piled dirt over the jars of dust. Maronie laid her wool cloak over the wick. "That should work."

She looked around at the warriors herding slaves toward the back. She spun at a scream. An overseer had wrapped his whip around a young warrior's arm. Maronie sent an arrow into his head. She hurried over to bandage the girl's arm. "Don't let them get too close. A whip can be dangerous." She hurried over to the barns. "How much longer?" she asked a warrior, who was driving cows and horses to the back, helped by some of the slaves.

"Not long for us, but the slaves are taking longer. And none of the horses are worth much." She raised an eyebrow, "The weird thing is that the slaves are a big help."

Maronie shrugged. "I guess they figure anyplace is better than here." A whistle from the gate told her that someone was coming. She ran over. Panting, she asked, "What's up?"

"There's soldiers coming." One of the women pointed to a faint cloud of dust in the darkness. She licked her lips. "There's horses with them. I can taste it."

Maronie nodded. "Stay here until you hear my horn, then get out as fast as you can." She turned and ran back toward Laishanee and the jars. Before she was halfway there, she could hear the ring of metal horseshoes on the road. "Laishanee, light the match! Soldiers coming."

As she ran toward the jars of dust, she blew three blasts on her horn. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small figure in white running by. She caught up to the figure and grabbed her up. She smiled at the little girl's shock. They moved closer to the pile of dirt that hid the jars as they headed for the back. Maronie glanced down and watched the wick burning along. The girl under her arm was silent. Suddenly, the glowing red wick started moving faster. Maronie and Laishanee started to run.

By the second step, Maronie could hear a hissing, crackling noise. She hit the ground, covering the child with her body. There was a whoosh and then a bang. Shards of pottery and burning wood were flying over her head. The girl was wailing in her ear. But how could one child make that much noise?

Maronie rolled over carefully. The bright fire on the wall seemed to be forming an arch. She picked up the child and ran her hands quickly over the girl. She realized the girl was silent. The girl's eyes were huge as she pointed to the fire. "The gate. The great gate of Mora." Her eyes rolled back, and she went limp. Maronie's stomach churned as she realized that the great keening wail was coming from the building. Laishanee stared at the flames. Her wool cloak was smoking. Maronie handed the child to her. "Make sure she gets to Kaison. She has visions." A flood of humanity, slaves and warriors running together, pushed them apart.

Maronie ran to the door of the building and kicked at it. The screaming, howling roar of voices came from the building. When the door fell in, she paused. How many men could be here? A nauseating stench of burning flesh told her she was too late for some. She grabbed the keys and clicked open the nearest chains. She threw the keys into the mass of grabbing hands and screams. She saw the flames licking onto chained men who screamed and thrashed before being engulfed.

Someone grabbed the back of her tunic and dragged her out of the burning building. She grabbed two hands and pulled. She crumpled, and the world went black.

Maronie woke to someone holding a cup of water to her lips. Everything was dark. "Can you hear me?" Laishanee's voice asked.

She grabbed Laishanee's hand. "Yes, and why is everything dark? If I've gone blind..."

Laishanee took the bandages off her eyes. "Nope. But they were so smoky and you didn't seem to be seeing—Don't you remember? You were talking about gates and taking the city of Mora." Maronie stood up and looked around. They were at the pass. She looked at the old fort, still smoking slightly. Maronie dropped her voice to a whisper. "Will they follow me into battle again?"

Laishanee laughed. "Most of us are planning how to conquer Mora. You made it seem so easy."

Maronie looked at the vultures still gathered in the ruins of the old fort. "Except somebody would have to stay here. A good sized garrison."

The older woman joined them. "We were attacked twice. It'd have to be someone tough."

Maronie nodded. She noticed two of the slaves were following her as she walked. "What's with them?"

"They haven't let you out of their sight since you pulled them out of that building," Laishanee said.

"So, how many died?" Maronie climbed toward the top of the hill. She patted down Bane as she counted the grazing horses and cattle and the clusters of men.

"None of our warriors. I've got the tally sticks on horses, gold, cattle and slaves."

Maronie nodded and checked the figures. "I'll take the two shadows, and if you found one with a brand on the face—"

"The tailor. Yeah, he's already working." She pointed to man under a tree stitching a shirt.

Maronie looked at the two men following her. One of them had a bandaged hand, and the other had bandages on his face. "Besides them, how many men were in there?"

Laishanee sighed. "From talking to them," she nodded to the two men, "I'd say at least a hundred." Maronie dropped to the ground, limp. Laishanee joined her on the ground. "I counted the slaves we took. Remember the old legends of warriors sacrificing a tenth of their captives?" Maronie nodded, staring at the two men. "We took a thousand slaves. That's a tenth. Maybe that's the great sacrifice?"

Maronie shook her head. "No, I know there is a sacrifice for me." She glanced at the two men. "And how am I going to explain them to Khephre?" Laishanee laughed.

"Maronie, it's been more than two weeks since the raid, isn't it time to set the time for the wedding? I won't charge a bit for the blessing, since you gave me that apprentice." Kaisonina was staring at her.

Maronie shook her head. "I'm still having nightmares. The fire seems to be reaching for me. But sit." She settled next to Kaisonina on the bench, looking out at slaves hurrying by. Khephre came by with mugs of chai.

“Maybe there is some way for you to know what to do?” Kaisonía said, her bells ringing as she reached for the chai.

Maronie froze for a moment. “There is.” She whistled, and the two men hurried to her side. “Fetch my saddlebags, the ones I had in battle.” She ignored Khephre’s frown. “Did you ever find out what their names are?”

Khephre shook his head. “They were called the ‘usefuls’. I think they’re brothers.”

The men returned carrying the saddlebags between them. Khephre gathered the mugs and turned to leave. Maronie stopped him, “Let them do it. I need you for something important.” Khephre nodded and handed them the tray and waved them away. She reached into the bags and pulled out the sketch she had made. “Just tell me what this is.” She said as she pulled him down to the seat beside her.

“It’s the great gate of Mora.” He looked straight into her eyes. “So it’s true. You’re going to attack it.”

“You’re sure?”

“I might have been young when they took me past it but I remember. Those letters,” he pointed to the symbols, “stand for power or something.”

Maronie nodded. “And if I wanted to attack it, what would you recommend?”

Kaisonía raised her eyebrows, but said nothing, as Khephre spoke. “That gate isn’t important. More like a doorway, but there’s no actual gate. The real walls are outside it. They’re not much thicker than the ones around the farm you took.”

“Sounds easy. Why hasn’t anyone conquered it before now?” She rubbed the back of his neck.

“Because the soldiers have forts all around the city. There must be at least ten cohorts.” He shuddered at her touch but stayed still.

“How many people in the city are slaves?” Maronie’s voice was gentle.

“Most of them. There have been several slave revolts. But the army has always put them down.” His voice was sounding stuffed.

Maronie nodded. “And what kind of warrior would be needed to conquer it?”

“Someone that will be in the field for months or years. You would do well at that.” He sighed. “The brothers would serve you better than I, in those circumstances. They would be quite willing to follow you in the

field. They have been helping in the kitchen and can manage horses. I have few talents in those areas.”

Maronie nodded. “You seem to have a lot of talent at managing an estate.” He nodded, slightly. She paused and turned to Kaisonía. “I know what the sacrifice is. Throw the bones to pick a date.” She spared a glance at Khephre’s bowed head. “For our wedding.” Khephre stared at her in shock.

“But what about the invasion?” Kaisonía said.

Maronie turned to her. “I’ll let the leader do that. My sacrifice is clear. I saw it when my eyes were opened at the pass but I didn’t want to admit it.” She turned to Khephre. “Someone has to hold the pass. I’ll move my family there.” She reached for Khephre’s hand.

Kaisonía waved a jingling arm. “Generations will talk of the warrior who began the invasion and gave it to others.”

Khephre stared at her with wide eyes. “But you’ll give up the wealth?”

Maronie laughed and slapped his back. “Of course not, have you ever heard of a gate being opened for free? I’ll need a good manager.”

“Dominie—I mean Maronie, wake up.” She rubbed her eyes and yawned. She smiled at Khephre with a fresh mug of chai.

She smiled. “Today’s the day.”

He nodded. “But I have bad news. The tailor you brought has run off.”

She sat up in bed and took the chai. “What would you say is the best thing to do?”

Khephre licked his lips. “I do not think he will live in the mountains and draw other slaves to him. Nor do I think we should try to bring him back. He would only run again.”

“So what to do?” She smiled at him.

Khephre’s voice was calm. “I would recommend saying he has wandered off gathering herbs and should be returned if found. And if he isn’t, just blame raiders.”

Maronie laughed. “You are devious. Do it and then get to the bath.”

Between greeting guests and getting the feast ready, she had no time to talk to him until that evening when they were kneeling with a brazier between them. Kaisonía danced around them calling down blessings. Then she dropped down in front of them. She took their hands and held them over the brazier.

“The fire binds you to each other.” She took their hands and laid them together. Over their linked hands she sprinkled a bit of dust. Khephre

clamped his lips together at the sparks that jumped. Kaisonian motioned them to rise and led them out of the room to the guests. She held their hands up to show there were no blisters. "The fire has blessed their union, let no one argue that these two are not one."

"Useful, you and your brother get these wagons on the road. They have to get to the pass by evening." Khephre hurried up to the younger warriors. "Make sure none of the cattle get too far ahead; there may be soldiers on the road."

Maronie rode Bane up to his side. She bent down and gave him a kiss. "It's good to know that I have someone at my back." She hurried Bane to the front of the group.

Joyce Frohn is married with a teenaged daughter. She would like to thank the monsters under her bed for having such interesting lives.



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-Fletcher Vredenburgh, Black Gate

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The Priests of Shalaz

By Jay Barnson

Marooned for months, Jesse Calhoun is ecstatic when one of Her Majesty's ships appears! However, when the haughty Commodore learns the island contains a portal to another world, the British Empire finds itself at war with powerful mystics!

Jesse stared down the barrels of ten bayonet-affixed rifles of the Royal Marines, and raised his hands. In the six months since Marwood abandoned him, he'd imagined many different rescue scenarios. This hadn't been one of them. He cleared his throat. "I don't know how the British are doing it these days, but in Georgia we usually greet people by saying hello."

The Marines stood like statues, silent and steadfast. Jesse peered at the two officers behind them. His eyes hadn't adjusted enough to the gloom of the ancient tower to make out the ranks embroidered on their sleeves, but one of the two wore a naval officer's uniform. Jesse guessed that he might be the man in charge. The other, a Marine officer, asked his companion, "Is this one of the pirates MacTaggart was talking about?"

With his patched American blue jeans, the loose native-made tunic, and the curved sword at his side, Jesse realized he looked the traditional part. Before they could solidify that conclusion, he said, "Marwood MacTaggart? He was my partner. We sought out the island in search of an old pirate hideout. We found this place and some treasure. We were attacked by Urg-Wolves, and Marwood took the loot and left me for dead."

The naval officer stepped forward between the Marines. They parted smartly, maintaining their aim on Jesse as they shifted position. The officer was about forty, with tiny eyes and thin brown hair graying in splotches. Now that he was closer, Jesse identified

the rank: commodore. That meant more than one ship beyond the gate.

The commodore looked Jesse over. "Your claim makes some sense. If he did leave you for dead, MacTaggart might deliberately omit any mention of you in his story. He was under some duress, as his sudden wealth brought him under suspicion. But there is a factor that doesn't add up, Mr....?"

"Calhoun. Jesse Calhoun."

"Mr. Calhoun. We are on a remote island that is little more than rock and grass three hundred miles from the Bahamas. I'm very interested in hearing how you managed to survive for six months."

Jesse frowned. "Marwood didn't explain what would happen when you stepped through that gate?"

The officer turned towards the large metal frame they'd emerged from. It stood twenty feet square, adorned with ancient runes of no known terrestrial language. The air shimmered within. He turned back to Jesse. "He told us it would take us to where he found the treasure. I can't see the cave entrance we came through. Very well, I agree this is an impressive trick."

"It's no trick, Commodore. You and your men are no longer in the cave."

"Are you telling me that this gate has taken us somewhere else on the island?"

"A bit further than that, Commodore."

The commodore narrowed his eyes on Jesse. "How much further?"

"If you'd kindly lower your guns, I'll be happy to show you. Promise to take me back to civilization, and I'll be your guide."

The commodore furrowed his brow. "Captain Bettencourt, please have your men stand down." The other officer nodded to the Marines, and they returned their rifles to their shoulders. Jesse lowered his hands.

The commodore continued. "Very well, Mr. Calhoun. You've piqued my interest. You will be returning with us, but whether as a free man or prisoner will depend on how well you convince us that you are not part of some criminal enterprise on this island."

Jesse cracked a grin and pointed with his thumb to the sun-lit entrance behind him. "Come with me and see for yourself, Commodore."

Jesse led the group out through the great threshold of the tower and onto the stone platform on which it stood. He stepped to the side and smiled to himself as he heard the gasps from some of the Marines.

The forest surrounding the tower consisted of slender, sweeping trees with gold-tinged trunks, branches tipped by broad fan-like leaves of mint green, themselves ornamented along the edge by explosions of tiny, feathery flowers of burnt orange. The trees stood in a carpet of amber and green grasses mixed with brown of dirt and dead, crumbling leaves of the last season. Based on his cherished memory of his first view of Shalaz, Jesse knew their eyes were drawn to the blue-violet sky, where the great color-streaked orb, eight times larger in apparent size than the moon, hung watchfully over them.

"Good heavens," muttered the commodore.

Even after six months, Jesse couldn't help but agree.

For the first few weeks of his exile, Jesse came to the tower every day. He traveled through the gateway to stand upon the rocky shores of the tiny island on his home world. Ironically, although he traversed the vastness of space in seconds, the last few hundred miles over the watery horizon was an impossible distance. The ship and Marwood had long departed. As time went on, his hope for a rescue diminished, and his visits became less frequent. By pure coincidence he'd neared the tower this day and heard the gateway's hum announcing arriving travelers.

As they walked along the trail from the tower, the naval officer introduced himself as Commodore Augustus Selby, commanding three ships anchored off the coast of the unnamed island back on Earth. He asked question after question about this new world, only some of which Jesse could answer. Occasionally, Bettencourt, the Marine captain, broke his silence and interjected with a question of his own.

Commodore Selby pointed to the great planet above, half obscured by clouds. "So is that Jupiter? Are we on one of Jupiter's many moons?"

"No. I thought that too, when I first arrived. But I would expect the sun to appear much smaller from Jupiter's distance, and this one appears as large and as bright as the sun from Earth. The natives call it Shalaz. Some even worship it. At night, I've found no familiar constellations. I do not believe the stars would change so radically if we remained within our own solar system."

"And what of the days? Have you measured their length?"

"The days are very close to that of Earth, just over twenty-two hours. However, the presence of the great planet makes periods of light and dark less consistent. Once every few days, the planet eclipses the sun for many hours, plunging us back into darkness. And on many nights, the reflected light from the planet is nearly as bright as day..."

As if illustrating Jesse's words, the clouds parted. Brilliant sunlight reflected off the golden dome of a temple to the north. It glowed like a beacon above the canopy of trees. Selby stopped and stared. "Good heavens. What is that? It's beautiful."

"That's one of the temples of Shalaz."

"It is magnificent! Are we going there now?"

"No, we don't want to get too close to the temple. We're going to the village of Taheyl. They are the ones who saved my life when I first came here."

"Why don't you want to visit the temple, Mr. Calhoun?"

Jesse pointed deeper into the woods. "Marwood and I sought out what he thought was an old pirate hideout he read about in an old letter. We found the remains of a settlement here, along with some treasure that Marwood took with him. We guessed it belonged to pirates from Earth. The eldest villagers remembered the Earth-men who once lived there. They claim that someone from the settlement offended the priests, though we don't know how. The priests came down from the temple and destroyed them all one morning."

"I hope you aren't comparing my men's abilities to that of a band of pirates, Calhoun."

“No. I’m only saying the priests are dangerous. We don’t know much about them. They come to the village at harvest season to demand tribute and repeat dire warnings not to disturb them. The safest course...”

At the sound of something large slipping under the brush nearby, Jesse’s hand automatically reached for the hilt of his sword. Several Marines caught the motion and readied their rifles, appearing unsure as to whether Jesse or something else was the immediate threat.

“What is it?” Bettencourt asked, revolver raised and his eyes scanning the woods around them.

Jesse listened. The creature in the brush sounded large enough to be an Urg-Wolf, but it made far too much noise... unless it was a distraction. “Hunting pack!” Jesse called out in alarm, but no one understood.

Moments later, the pack struck. Three Urg-Wolves, brutish creatures the size of large dogs with rat-like heads and tails, charged at the group of Marines from behind. Their predator howls carried an undertone mimicking a human scream. The Marines responded quickly, firing rifles and readying their bayonets against the charge. One shot mortally wounded a beast as the other two broke off their charge, leaping back into the brush as swiftly as they had appeared.

In human terms, it was a diversion, a feint to occupy the herd while the real attack hit the outliers—Selby and Jesse, in advance of the main group. Jesse drew his curved blade a split second before the Urg-Wolf shot out of the brush at him. Since his recuperation, he’d trained with the youth of the village to defend himself with the blade against the chief predator of the forest. He thrust upwards, the sword tip hooking below the creature’s head and piercing above its prosternum. The beast’s trajectory impaled it on the blade. Jesse sidestepped, guiding the creature’s flight with his blade and pulling it free before the beast struck the ground.

A revolver cracked behind him, and Jesse felt more than heard the round whiz past his ear. Jesse whirled in time to see Commodore Selby on his back, dragged by his right arm off the path by the largest Urg-Wolf Jesse had ever seen, a creature of two hundred pounds of muscle and ferocity. Selby’s revolver lay where he’d dropped it, beside a thin trail of blood.

Jesse and Captain Bettencourt charged after the creature. It hadn't gotten far before it released Selby and roared its defiance against the two men. Jesse readied his blade against the monster and advanced. The creature backed away from its prize, glaring balefully at Jesse. Bettencourt fired. The beast flinched as a crimson blossom erupted from its flank, and it fled. Bettencourt fired once more at the retreating beast before it disappeared. Jesse scanned for more attackers, but the fight had concluded before the smoke from the initial gunshots had dissipated.

Jesse crouched next to Selby and examined the wound. The commodore's mauled arm was bloody and torn, but he was in better shape than Jesse had been after his first encounter with the beasts. Bettencourt summoned one of his men with medical gear to take care of the commodore.

"We should get you back to the ship," Bettencourt said.

The commodore sat up, brushing dust off his knees with his good hand. "Nonsense. I'm fine. Dress the wounds and retrieve my sidearm."

Jesse's hands trembled from adrenaline as he wiped blood off his blade. He felt indebted to the British. If the Marines hadn't arrived today, and he'd encountered that pack on his own, it would have ended far differently. "I'll take you to the village. There's a healer there named Merra who will take care of you."

Villagers of Taheyl arrived minutes later, investigating the sounds of gunfire. The Earth-men marveled at these people who so closely resembled themselves but bore a distinct violet tint to their skin. Together, the group returned to the village without incident.

While Merra treated the commodore's injuries, Jesse found himself pacing the village's center. The Marines cleaned their weapons nearby, while a youth of the village, Amol, amused them by practicing English with them. Of the villagers, only Merra spoke better English, mostly because she and Jesse spent so much time together.

What would he say to Merra, when he could speak to her in private? The thought of saying goodbye to her filled Jesse with

uneasiness, even if he hoped to return someday.

Within a half-hour, Commodore Selby appeared from Merra's cottage, with Captain Bettencourt at his side. Even with his bloodstained uniform and his arm in a sling, Selby projected an aura of confidence and command. He all but marched towards Jesse. "I wanted to commend you for your actions today," he said.

"I did nothing that the villagers don't constantly train for, Commodore. That's just the way of life here."

"Indeed! For such a primitive people, your allies here in this village seem quite capable."

"The people of Taheyl aren't as primitive as you might think. They may not have firearms, but in some areas they are quite advanced."

"Of course. I must say, that girl's salves are quite astonishing. I hardly feel any pain. She said it's unlikely I'll even have scars in a few days. With her impressive command of English, I should have her teach my surgeon!"

Jesse glanced back at Merra's cottage and felt his uneasiness grow. If he had only a few hours or days left in this world, he wanted to spend them with her. He kept his voice neutral as he said, "She is quite talented."

Selby caught his gaze and half-smiled, as if at a private joke. Then he changed the subject. "Should we expect more trouble from those... Urg-Wolves, as you call them?"

"Unlikely. The packs are nomadic, and each season there's a risk of encountering a pack that hasn't learned to fear men, yet."

"When we establish a trading outpost here, that's one more service we may provide the locals. We'll teach those rat-faced beasts to fear men of any planet!"

Jesse blinked. "I'm sorry... an outpost?"

"Of course. At first, to establish relations with the natives. We will likely expand later. A colony, perhaps even a town. Maybe we will name it after you! This much is certain: you will be remembered for this discovery long after the rest of us have been forgotten."

Jesse tried to imagine a British colony set up near Taheyl, in the shadow of the temple of Shalaz. It didn't sit well with him. "I appreciate the honor, but I don't think... I mean, would that be a good idea? Certainly some exploration is in order, but..."

Selby looked him in the eye. "Come now, Mr. Calhoun. What did you expect? Your secret is out. It is only a matter of time before every nation on Earth tries to claim that island and the gateway that it houses. It just so happens that Britain established a claim in 1718. No one challenged it before today, but we will have to maintain a constant naval presence to defend it now. Fortunately for the natives, we will be here to trade and explore, not to conquer. If we abdicate that responsibility, who will seize control of that gateway instead? What will they do with it?"

Jesse said nothing. He had only vague childhood recollections of Georgia before the war between the states, but he was well acquainted with the turmoil that followed and the damage that lingered long after the end of hostilities. He didn't want to imagine Tahey! at the point of an invasion.

Selby's thin smile returned, as if reading his thoughts. "Now, I have to send one of the ships back with a report very soon. You can be on that ship." He cast a meaningful glance at Merra's cottage. "I am sure I can arrange for another passenger to go back with you, if you would like. I'll even send you with a letter granting you passage back, should you choose to return. It will be valid as long as my name carries any authority here. And that, my friend, may depend on how successful I am in this initial reconnaissance."

Jesse inclined his head towards Selby. "And what do you want from me in exchange?"

Selby's smile broadened. "I must be thorough before I send my report back to parliament and crown. That includes an assessment of potential threats and, if possible, a negotiation of peaceful intent. You will come with us to the temple and translate."

To Jesse, Merra seemed an auburn-haired girl not much older than eighteen, albeit one with a strange violet cast to her skin. In reality, correcting for the differences in time between the two worlds, she was ten years his elder. Her people frequently lived more than a century. She'd saved his life and taught him her language, and in the six months he'd been in the village, he'd drawn closer to her than he had with anyone back on Earth.

After taking his leave of the Commodore, Jesse came to her cottage and told her of the officer's plans. Her response surprised him. "Then you must go with them to the temple, Jesse. If you do not, I will."

"What? Why? Merra, you are the one who told me about the town of Aptua. The entire town was destroyed, without a single stone left standing, because they attacked a temple of Shalaz."

"Yes. The priests helped circulate that story. It maintains our fear of their powers."

"If Selby goes there, he might bring those same powers against not only his people but the village."

"Exactly." Merra reached forward and took his hand. "I spoke with him while I treated him. I believe him to be a very ambitious man. He will go to the temple, with or without you. Perhaps, if you are there, you can prevent him from invoking a disaster."

Jesse sighed. He looked down at her hand in his, and then back into her violet-flecked eyes. "Selby said something else. He said that when I return, I might take someone else with me."

She cocked her head to one side and pursed her lips in a way that Jesse knew to be amusement. He decided that if he was going to amuse her, he might as well make her laugh. "I came here seeking treasure. I found a whole world. I found you. Will you come back with me, Merra? You'll be famous. We'll travel the world together!" Even as he said it, it didn't sound as appealing as he once thought. Exploring the old world paled compared to exploring this new one. However, he thrilled at the idea of showing it all to Merra.

"My place is here in Taheyl, Jesse Calhoun."

Jesse nodded. "I know. I know. It was a dumb idea. I thought..."

"Your place is Earth, but you found a new place among us. I may find a new place on Earth. You were the first of your people to live among us. I may be the first of mine to live among your people. I only know the place I desire is at your side."

"Really? You'll come with me?"

She clasped his hand tightly in her own. "I've already discussed this with my father. He agrees you would be a worthy companion. We wondered if it was customary on your world to make a woman wait so long."

This wasn't how he thought courting worked back in Georgia. But then, he was far from Georgia. Jesse took her in his arms and they kissed. This, at least, was a common expression between their people.

The stone wall surrounding the temple was topped at twenty-foot intervals with ruby-like crystals. Four thin spires surrounded the central building behind it, capped with a gold-colored dome that gleamed in the sunlight. Between the outer wall and the central building stood a colossal stone statue of a fearsome four-legged monster, a cross between an Urg-Wolf and a dragon. The back end rested against the building's front wall, and its four legs straddled the entrance. Whatever it was supposed to be, Jesse hoped that it was a fictitious creature and not a life-sized statue of a real beast that he might meet.

The British stood before the gates of the outer wall. The Royal Marines carried their rifles slung over their shoulders, non-threatening but loaded and ready. They'd announced their presence and intentions, and five minutes had passed without a response.

"Perhaps they didn't hear us," Captain Bettencourt suggested.

"The priests are particular about not being disturbed by us lesser mortals," said Jesse. "I suggest we don't force the issue if they choose to ignore us."

"Don't worry about your native friends, Mr. Calhoun," said Selby. "We intend them no harm."

"The priests aren't friends of mine. And it's not them I'm worried about."

Behind him, Captain Bettencourt frowned. "My Marines are crack shots and outfitted with Martini-Henry rifles that can fire up to twelve shots per minute. Do not fear, Mr. Calhoun. We shall keep you safe."

Jesse turned to face the Marine captain. "You came here through a gateway that hurled you across incalculable distances of space in a matter of seconds. What is your rifle compared to that? The priests maintain that technology. They wiped out a pirate outpost. The stories say they once wiped out an entire town. What other technologies do you think they might maintain, Captain Bettencourt?"

“Peace, Mr. Calhoun, Captain Bettencourt,” said Selby. “I believe they’ve sent someone to parlay.”

Jesse turned to see a small figure climb to the top of the wall. She wore the robe of the priests, her face visible in the reflected light of the planet Shalaz. She appeared no older than eight, although Jesse suspected her actual age to be twice this.

“Are they insulting us?” murmured Selby. “Sending us a child to negotiate?”

Bettencourt chewed his lip. “I don’t think they consider this a negotiation, sir.”

The girl on the wall spoke. While young, her voice projected like a trained orator. “Men of Earth, the Great Priests seek no quarrel with you. You are forgiven for the sin of standing before our gates this time, because you do not know our ways. But our tolerance is at an end. Depart immediately, or face the consequences.” Jesse translated.

Selby frowned. “Unacceptable. As representatives of the British Empire, a show of strength and confidence is paramount. We cannot undermine this by retreating from a child hurling threats from a wall. Calhoun, translate this: We have no wish to violate your customs, and we will remove ourselves once we have the opportunity to meet with someone in authority.”

“Commodore, if their culture matches in any way with what I understand of the people of Taheyl, they may have sent a girl out for a reason. She’s too young to have authority to act on their rules. They may be using a loophole to warn us off before their laws require them to take action.”

Selby didn’t take his eyes off the girl on the wall. Quietly, he asked, “Mr. Calhoun, do you feel capable of translating exactly what I said?”

“Yes. But I think...”

“Do so.”

Jesse glared at the Commodore, then turned to the wall and translated. The girl tilted her head as if listening to someone else, then directed her gaze at Selby. “You have been advised. There will be no further warnings.” With that, the girl turned and descended unseen stairs on the other side of the wall.

Jesse translated. The commodore nodded. "Now we determine who blinks," he muttered.

"Commodore, I strongly advise withdrawal."

"Noted."

Jesse frowned and stared at the wall. The sun glinted off the ruby-like crystals mounted at the top. He noted the light twinkle on two of them, a sign that they were slowly rotating. "We need to fall back!" he yelled, but the men ignored him. Bettencourt gazed at Jesse with a disappointed expression.

A thin ruby ray from one of the crystals struck a Marine in the chest. He opened up his mouth in shock, but no sound came from him as his chest vaporized in a cloud of smoke and flame. Another ray struck a second Marine, removing his arm at the shoulder in a similar blast. He collapsed, screaming.

"Aim for the crystals!" Captain Bettencourt called. The Marines fired. One of the crystals shattered, exploding fragments in all directions. Two beams from other crystals tore into the ranks of the Marines, killing both of their targets instantly. Bettencourt stood impassively through the sudden carnage, aiming along the barrel of his revolver. He pulled the trigger, and a crystal exploded.

Another beam lashed out, finishing off the fallen Marine who had lost an arm.

"Fall back," the commodore shouted. They retreated down the hill and into the forest, but not before several more beams lashed out. Only two struck their moving targets, killing them. One beam that missed Selby came close enough to leave a scorch mark on his coat.

Jesse, Selby, Bettencourt, and four Marines made it to the relative safety of the forest, and the beams ceased. Selby seethed. "If these fools wish to declare war against the British Empire, then it is a war they shall have. Let's return to the ship and get reinforcements. Let's see how they fare against modern artillery!"

To Jesse he said, "Because I promised you passage, you may come with us. Or you may return to the village. It is your choice. But you must either help us, or you must stay out of our way."

"I was helping you," Jesse growled back.

Merra came with him to the tower, carrying a satchel full of healing supplies, while Jesse led the way with his sword in hand, watching for any sign of an Urg-Wolf attack. While dissuaded from attacking a larger group, the remaining pack might attack a pair of humans.

Jesse's focus on the underbrush as they neared the tower left him inattentive to two-legged enemies. Two priests stepped out from behind the trees, aiming rifle-like weapons at them. The weapons bore elaborate scrollwork along the metal tubes housing ruby-like crystals and were etched with engravings worn smooth from ages of use. Two more priests stood just outside the entrance to the tower, weapons held ready to attack the British as they returned through the ancient gate. Two uniformed bodies lay discarded to the side of the tower, the remains of guards left by Selby to prevent this sort of attack.

"Put down your sword," demanded one of the priests.

As Jesse bent down to put his sword on the ground, he observed the nearest priest. While covered with a hood, the smaller stature and feminine hands suggested she was the same girl who had addressed them from the wall. She held the weapon in a grip like a rifle but had inserted her index finger into a shielded slot below the metal tube.

Jesse stood, raising his hands, shifting his gaze between the girl and the older priest. "Your quarrel is with the British, not us," he said.

"Silence!" the older priest ordered. "Lesser beings are not to address the priests."

At this moment, the gateway inside the tower began to hum, the signal that beings were about to pass through from Earth. It was the sound Jesse had equated with hope during the six months he had waited for rescue. Now the sound brought men to their doom.

The older priest glanced over his shoulder, clearly more interested in the coming slaughter than the two prisoners before him. While possessing advanced technology, they were poorly trained in fighting. Jesse had never trained as a soldier, but he'd been in more than his share of brawls.

"Kill the woman," the older priest said at last to his younger counterpart. "Keep the Earth-man as hostage!"

The girl hesitated. The older priest again glanced over his shoulder at the tower with a grim smile. Jesse took his chance. His arm shot out and grabbed the girl's weapon, pushing it upwards toward the sky. The startled girl didn't shout an alarm until Jesse seized her weapon and placed his finger into the shielded slot. "Merra, take cover!" he called as he dropped to a crouch.

The old priest, as surprised as the girl, took hasty aim and fired while Jesse felt out the weapon's triggering mechanism. The shot went wide, missing him by several inches and scorching the ground behind him. Jesse depressed a lever inside the slot, and a brilliant beam of ruby energy shot out with a sound like a whip crack and struck the priest in the chest. The priest fell without a cry.

The remaining priests, now alerted to the attack, turned and took aim. Jesse fired back. His shot went wide, but it forced the priests to take cover inside the tower's entrance. Jesse, now feeling equally exposed, sought cover behind a nearby golden-colored tree. He didn't notice the shadow about to overtake him.

Merra tackled the young priestess, stopping her from plunging her raised dagger into Jesse's back. The two fell into the weeds, struggling. The priests in the tower opened fire, preventing Jesse from coming to her aid. Jesse dropped flat behind the tree, unable to bring his own weapon to bear as shots exploded around him.

Gunshots erupted from within the tower. Royal Marines charged out of the gate, over the body of one priest. The second priest killed a Marine with his crystal weapon before another impaled him on his bayonet. Three Marines took aim at Jesse.

"Don't shoot!" Jesse called.

Captain Bettencourt emerged and ordered his men to lower their weapons. He assessed the scene and nodded approvingly at Merra, who had subdued the young priestess. He then turned to his men. "The commodore is bringing a half-dozen cannons and crew within thirty minutes. Sections, secure this trail against all enemies, whether they have four legs or two."

Jesse and Merra took their young prisoner back to the village. Merra took personal charge over the girl, who was clearly terrified in spite of her stoic silence. Jesse left to rejoin the British when Merra's

father, one of the ranking elders of the village, approached him. “I fear the priests will not consider Taheyl to be neutral in this conflict. Will your people be victorious?”

“I don’t know. They aren’t my people. My loyalty in this fight is to Merra and to Taheyl.”

Merra’s father nodded. “Troubles seldom seek an invitation before visiting. Go. Aid the Earth-men. Do not worry about us. Our best hope is your victory, and for Merra’s sake, your safety, Jesse Calhoun.”

The two men embraced by claspng each other’s shoulders, as was the custom. Then Jesse took the strange crystal-tipped weapon and left to meet with the British forces in the forest to what Jesse considered the “east,” the direction opposite the sun’s movement.

Six cannons sat readied behind the tree line facing the temple. Trenches and ramps for the guns had been dug by dozens of seamen crewing the artillery. Marine infantry took positions between the cannons, and sharpshooters crouched in hastily dug positions or perched in the treetops.

Commodore Selby, no longer wearing his sling, finished a discussion with Captain Bettencourt. Both held crystal-tipped weapons captured from the priests inside the tower. “You are just in time, Mr. Calhoun,” Selby said, hoisting the weapon with his uninjured arm. “I understand we have you to thank for the acquisition of these marvelous weapons. And for our safe passage back into this world.”

“To be fair, Merra and I didn’t have much choice.”

“We always have choices. The fact that you were there at the right place and at the right time and took the right actions speaks something of your courage and character.” He hesitated before adding, “I thought your earlier advice was born of cowardice, but there was wisdom in your words. I couldn’t have heeded your counsel in any case, but I apologize for misjudging you.”

Jesse wanted to call the commodore out for provoking an avoidable fight, but there was nothing to say that Selby didn’t already know. Even if provoked, the violence of the priests’ response horrified Jesse. As Merra’s father said, the greatest hope for the

village that had saved his life and had been his home for six months now lay in a victory against the priests of Shalaz.

The British finished their preparations. The commodore sounded the order to fire at will, and the world erupted into deafening explosions and reeking, acrid smoke. The temple returned fire with ruby beams. The beams missed their human targets and only succeeded in generating more smoke from the small fires where they struck. The riflemen fired at the gemstone weapons along the temple walls or at any priest unwise enough to emerge from cover. The weapons paused only when the smoke grew too thick to see through. The tremendous volleys poured destruction at the temple for five minutes before the commodore called for a cease-fire.

As the smoke cleared, the gate and most of the front wall lay demolished. The cannon barrage had damaged much of the main temple building. Surprisingly, the great statue in front of the temple bore little damage. Jesse saw no crystals remaining along the walls, and six priests lay bloody and dead amid the rubble. Nothing stirred within the temple yard.

Captain Bettencourt shouted orders, his voice sounding muffled to Jesse's ears after minutes of cannon fire. "Sergeant Harris, take your section and investigate. Secure any who surrender."

Several Marines moved across the field towards the temple. As the Marines neared the ruin of the courtyard, the front of the temple collapsed. A scream within was cut short as chunks of wall fell inward. The golden dome shifted as it re-settled with uneven support. The giant stone statue rocked backwards.

Then the statue shifted again, rocking forward... and kept moving. It raised one great leg and stepped forward. The foot hit the ground with a force that Jesse heard from hundreds of yards away. The Marines at the temple opened fire, but their shots did nothing to the colossus. It marched towards them, its tremendous stride making up for its slow pace, each step reverberating with the sound of many tons of stone pounding earth. It crushed three Marines beneath its giant feet before the others fled in different directions. Its head swiveled in a measured, mechanical sweep, and it pursued the fleeing Marines one after another, running them down with machine efficiency. On a paved, level path, a fast man might outrun the

monstrosity, at least until he tired. On the uneven, sloped field, the Marines had no chance.

The crews swiveled the cannons to track the colossus before the commodore gave the order. "Open fire on the monster! Fire at will! Pour everything you have into it!"

All six cannons replied within seconds. Through the smoke, Jesse saw three iron balls smash squarely into the colossus. The shots left marks but caused no significant damage. Perhaps the seventy-four guns of a ship of the line might destroy the statue within a volley or two. The three cannon hits did little more than capture the monster's attention. It turned towards the tree line and charged the cannons.

"Sharpshooters," bellowed Bettencourt as the crews reloaded, "aim for the joints, the eyes, any weak points! Fire at will." To the commodore and Jesse, he said, "Make your way to the tower, now. We'll hold this thing off as long as we can."

Commodore Selby faced Bettencourt, his face unreadable. Bettencourt offered him a quick salute, which Selby returned with precision, holding it for two seconds after Bettencourt dropped his hand. Then the commodore turned and made his way through the woods towards the tower.

The colossus had covered half the distance of the field, each stone footfall reverberating like distant thunder. A cannon roared, but the cannonball glanced off the top of the statue's head. The colossus didn't slow, but shifted its direction towards the offending cannon.

"You cannot stop this thing, Captain," said Jesse. "You must fall back. This is suicide!"

"No, this is buying time for you and the commodore to escape. Do not waste it." The captain turned towards the field and took aim with one the priests' weapons. "Now let's see if this weapon fares better." As two more cannons roared, the captain fired the ruby beam at the approaching monster. The ray seared across the creature's left shoulder, leaving a glowing streak where the stone had heated to near-molten levels.

Two more cannons fired. Jesse gripped his own weapon. Rather than following the commodore, he raced down the path towards the village. They had to be warned.

Behind him, a final cannon roared. Rifle fire continued for the next minute, mingled with crashes of the thirty-foot colossus smashing through trees as it fought the Marines. Too soon, all sounds of resistance ceased. Jesse dared a glance over his shoulder as the colossus emerged from the tree line and marched down the trail behind him.

At the crossroads, Jesse ran south, hoping the colossus would pursue him rather than continue westwards towards Taheyl. After some distance, realizing the rhythmic thuds of the colossus were no longer growing closer, he stopped and turned.

The colossus marched directly towards the village. Its head swiveled, seeming to scan for targets as it marched. It showed no sign of slowing or altering its course.

Was this what happened to Aptua? Had the priests unleashed this doomsday weapon on the town? Would it not stop until it had crushed every wall and killed every living person in Taheyl?

Jesse wouldn't allow it while he still drew breath. But where six cannons and scores of armed men had failed to stop it, what hope did he have? The intelligent choice was to flee to the tower, escape through the gateway and return to Earth with the commodore.

"We always have choices," Selby had said.

Remembering how the colossus had turned towards each new cannon shot, Jesse knelt and took aim with the weapon. His arms were unsteady from fatigue, but even at this range three of his five shots connected with the statue's enormous bulk, streaking it with molten cracks. While doing minimal damage, the shots had the desired effect. The colossus stopped, head swiveling on the stone neck to stare at Jesse. It turned and charged at him with its steady, unrelenting pace.

Jesse fled towards the tower, the giant's thunderous footsteps growing ever nearer. As his endurance waned, raw, animal fear propelled him. The trail curved east, meandering over a half-mile to the tower. He couldn't see how he could make it before the colossus overtook him. Jesse himself had forged a shortcut over months of daily visits to the tower, a rough but straight path that led through trees that might slow the giant statue's pursuit.

His lungs aching, he dashed along the shortcut. The pounding of stone feet grew closer. He expected to be pulverized at any moment, but he dared not look back. He aimed towards a dense copse of gold-tinged trees. Moments before reaching them, a heavy foot slammed the earth immediately behind him. The impact jarred him, sending him stumbling into the copse. His momentum carried him forward, but his balance was lost, and he tumbled forward onto the ground. All around him, the trees bent and shook. One mighty trunk split, sending a spiky wood fragment over his head.

Jesse expected the tremendous stone foot to crush him at that moment, but the rhythmic pounding had paused. Jesse glanced up to see the colossus suspended behind him on a ramp of trees bowed low from its weight.

In the distance, barely audible over the cracking and groaning of the trees around him, the tower gateway activated. The gateway's hum, the sound of Selby's escape, galvanized Jesse. Why should everyone else die when the man who provoked the fight succeeded in his aims? Determination forced him to stand, grab his weapon, and renew his staggered flight to the tower. A plan formed in his mind as the trees behind him split and crashed to the ground, and the colossus resumed its inexorable charge.

The tower appeared through the trees as fear and hope pushed him well past his reserves. The colossus gained ground, but not quickly enough. With one last surge, Jesse hurtled through the threshold of the tower. The shimmering gateway beckoned to him. A few more steps, and he would be safe back in his own world, with ships to take him to civilization...

But would the colossus return to attack the village? Did they know of the danger, and could they evacuate in time? Where could they go?

Jesse turned. The colossus stopped just outside the entrance to the tower, blocking most of the light. Jesse stared furiously into the engraved eyes of the statue as the dragon-head seemed to glare at him through the tower's threshold. The doorway was of identical size to the gate, smaller than the colossus by a third. Stone, unlike flesh, couldn't compress to squeeze through the opening. For some reason, the colossus didn't try.

It turned and with the same rhythmic pace abandoned the tower. Jesse stumbled towards the doorway, holding the weapon in shaking hands. The stone monster's path took it back towards the village.

Jesse knelt, using his knee to brace his shaking arms to aim the weapon. He fired three careful shots at the point where the left rear leg joined the body of the colossus. The shots left molten slivers where they hit. His unsteady aim hadn't hit in precisely the same spot, but where two glowing orange slivers crossed, molten rock dripped onto the ground, spitting smoke as it landed.

The colossus turned to attack. Jesse stood and backpedaled as the thing charged, crashing into the doorway. Stones fell from the wall. Jesse fired repeatedly, scarring the statue's surface with glowing molten scratches. The colossus pushed again, this time smashing its way into the tower chamber.

Rather than entering the gateway, Jesse stepped around it, backing against the wall and putting the gate between himself and the colossus. It charged forward, heedless of the obstacle.

Half of the colossus disappeared as the gate hummed its activation. The severed top of the colossus crashed down. Jesse threw himself to the side along the wall. The gateway's metal frame folded like paper beneath the tremendous weight, and its activating hum silenced forever.

From the floor, Jesse stared at the remains of the colossus. Bits of threaded metal jutted from the stone where the gateway had torn it apart. Neither it nor the crushed gate beneath its remains would function again. The village was safe from priests and invading Earth nations.

Minutes passed before Jesse regained his strength and stood. Hoisting the priests' weapon over one shoulder, he began his slow, stumbling trek back to the village. Maybe it was only a euphoria brought by exhaustion and relief, but the loss of his only means back to Earth didn't bother him that much.

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Thune's Vision

A collection of stories
by Schuyler Hernstrom



The Last Dues Owed

By CHRISTINE LUCAS

Nebet loved him once—and now she seeks his blood at the behest of a cruel priesthood! Can Aranaos save his own life—or the life of the son he never knew—or will he perish in a web of betrayal, magic and a forbidden love between assassins?!

Aranaos leaned over the tools of his trade: the triangular daggers with the sharp angular midrib, the sickle swords, the darts, and the alabaster vial filled with the deadly poison from Egypt—the essence of the peach, fast and painful and deadly. The priests of the Minoan Serpent Goddess disapproved of everything from the dark sands of *Kemet*, like that poison. Nebet wouldn't expect one of her own weapons turned against her.

Ah, Nebet... eyes lined with kohl, limbs scented with lotus oil, fingertips dyed with henna... And around her heart, the teeth of Sobek, the Crocodile God of Egypt. She wouldn't—couldn't—love him.

But she could kill him. Quite easily so, before he could get close enough to use the essence of the peach.

Behind him, on the bed, Ellisso stirred. He had hoped he wouldn't wake her. What could he tell her that wouldn't hurt her?

Aranaos chose the longest of the bronze triangular daggers, almost a short sword. Then he carefully inserted the long, pin-like darts into the thickest of his braids. He picked up the tiny alabaster jar with the Egyptian poison, and weighed it in his palm. Light as a pebble, deadly as an adder's bite. Perhaps he wouldn't need it. Perhaps he would. He wrapped it in a cloth and shoved it in a fold-like pouch of his linen kilt.

"She's here." Not a question. Ellisso had guessed.

"Yes." He didn't look up from his weapons. Death he knew well; words often failed him.

"And you will go?"

“I have to.” Did he? It was safe under the covers, beside her, beside the warm body that asked for nothing and gave everything freely.

“Why?” No accusation in her voice, just grief for all the lonely mornings to come, all the nights he wouldn’t be there.

“Debts that need to be paid.” He still wouldn’t look at her. Nebet’s memory shamed all other women, and he wanted to keep Ellisso’s memory untainted: her plump, imperfect body, the lines of age around her eyes, her rough hands and arms that held him without judgment. She smelled of chamomile and thyme, like the hills to the north—like his childhood.

“I see.” She didn’t speak the words, but he heard them lingering in the air between them, in the emptiness that grew with every heartbeat: *Don’t go. Stay here, with me.*

“I’ll be back before dawn.” His parting words, a lie. Before her warmth overpowered his courage, he left to find Nebet into the night.

Her presence shrouded him the moment he stepped out: a lingering scent of lotus petals mixed into the sea breeze, the cry of an owl that wasn’t an owl, a tremor of the lamplights, a falter in the voice of the people walking by. She had tracked him down, all the way from Thebes to Phaistos.

Where was she?

His eyes scanned the crowd of people returning from the Bull Dance and heading to feasts, on this evening of celebration in honor of the Bull God. Nebet had chosen this night to confront him, while young priestesses danced upon the scared bulls, dodging horns, swirling over crazed eyes, riding the holy beasts until they forced their knees bent and the great heads bowed down to the cheering crowds.

Ah, sweet, deadly Nebet. This Minoan bull you’re after has a serpent’s teeth. And poison, too. The tiny vial weighed more than a *labrys*, the great double-bitted axe, in his pouch.

He passed by the careless, oblivious celebrants. Loud voices, sweaty bodies, the scent of olives, garlic and wine reminded him of the life he had given up in the service of the Serpent Goddess. A few stares lingered on Aranaos, then quickly turned away—away from the serpent tattoo at the right side of his neck that followed his

jugular, curled around his carotid until it met its twin from the left side at the base of his skull. When the Goddess of Crete called in dreams of writhing reptiles, no one dared to defy her command. And her command to Aranaos, so many years ago, had been not to don the priestly garb, but master an assassin's blade.

Go and kill the blasphemers, those who oppose my Truth and my Rule!

Or so the Minoan priests had told him. What had the priests of Egypt told Nebet?

Lotus and myrrh and the whispers of the reeds on the banks of the Nile caressed his face, toyed with his long, oiled braids, and traced the silver in his once raven-black goatee. She found him in a back road stinking of goat droppings, amongst low-roofed, mud-brick huts, away from the crowds and the light. A constricting, desolate spot, where her agility and youth could challenge his experience and long years. Age had robbed him of the moves that had taken him years to master, and Nebet knew it.

Ah, beautiful, *foolish* Nebet! He had never told her of his childhood, not even during the slow, lazy afternoons by the banks of the Nile, during their brief truce in the aftermath of their love-making. Before the goddess summoned him, he had scraped his knees many a time on these dirt roads and herded goats out of town and onto the hills. This was his home. That, over there, was the house he had been born in. Would it become his tomb?

He sensed the dagger's flight before the hiss through the air, before the glint in the starlight, and he bent sideways. Clank. Metal on brick. The dagger had bitten the wall behind him.

He turned on his heel, anticipation knotting up his gut. "Good evening, Nebet."

A shadow detached from a corner; a shadow clad in a peasant girl's dress, her cleavage the nest of countless daggers: the Teeth of Sobek, the tools of *her* trade, some metal, some from bone. She smiled, flashing perfect teeth at him. "You're rusty, old man. I sniffed you out the moment I set foot on the docks."

"Is it so?" Had she tracked him down, or had *he* led her there, in the dark alley behind his childhood home, amidst the dirt piles and the barred cellars? Did it even matter?

She tilted her head sideways, faking coyness with her pout. But she kept her hands out of sight, behind her back—on the hilt of her short sickle sword, the *khopesh*, no doubt. “It is time to end this.”

“Is it?” Why, really? Because some slothful, flabby priests had said so? His palm sought the solidity of his curved blade. Such thoughts were blasphemous. In his youth, he would never question his orders. Did blasphemy grow with age, with every slit throat, with every drop of blood that colored his hands red? He fixed his eyes on her, seeking in her face an answer he feared he’d never get—at least, not in this life. “Why, Nebet?”

“You have to ask?” Her smile widened, and he thought he saw a forked tongue lashing between her teeth. She stepped sideways, her hands still out of sight. Soon, she’d send another dagger flying.

Soon.

Any moment now.

Oh, she was fast, faster than Aranaos remembered. He had anticipated one throw, but not a second, barely a heartbeat after the first. He ducked just in time, and the first dagger hissed past his left ear, missing him. The second scraped his left arm, aimed at where his gut would have been if he hadn’t ducked. He rolled on the ground, cursing his aching back, and sprang on his feet again, ignoring the cracking in his left knee and drawing his own blade. He aimed the tip at her throat.

“When will you learn that those little teeth are useless against me?”

She laughed—a soft, girlish laughter that chilled his blood. She drew her *khopesh*. “Yield, old man, and I promise you a quick and painless death.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, Nebet, you say that to *me*? You never honor such promises.”

“Force of habit.” She flashed him another smile, then lunged forward, the *khopesh* in her right hand aiming at his lower gut.

He blocked her attack with his own dagger. For a fleeting moment their bodies clashed, her heat too close, her scent intoxicating. More out of reflex than skill he caught her left wrist just before she plunged another dagger under his ribs. He pushed her away, and she stumbled but stayed on her feet.

He wiped his sweaty brow. "Why? Just tell me why?"

She pointed the dagger at him, a flimsy little thing carved of bone, delicate and deadly like a scorpion's sting. "Didn't you kill the *tjaty*, the vizier, in Thebes?"

Oh, that. "Didn't he die in his sleep?"

"He did. By *your* hand. The embalmers found blood in his left ear. I've seen your handiwork before, and those pin-like darts you keep hidden."

He shrugged. "He opposed some trade agreement about some sacred herbs. I was never told the details, only that he was in the way. I removed him, as I was ordered."

"And made powerful enemies in Thebes. Such crimes won't go unpunished." With a flick of her wrist, the dagger flew.

He slid sideways, and her dagger missed his throat. "Nebet, it was just an assignment." He held out his dagger, not pointing, but flat, ready to block her attacks. "Why do you care for a corrupt bureaucrat?"

"I don't." Drawn face, tensed neck, cold voice. "He was just an assignment. My son isn't."

"What?" Her son? No, *their* son, the little boy that grew up without him, the one he'd never seen? Had something happened to him? Oh, by the Bull God's horns, she'd never even told him his name!

She lunged at him again before he could ask who and how and why and *please-tell-me-his-name*, swinging her sickle sword sideways, aimed at his rib cage this time. He spun on his heel, blocking the hit, twisting the hilt so that the rivet could hook in the curve of Nebet's *khopesh* and disarm her.

She was faster and twisted her wrist against his maneuver with enough strength to sprain his joint. He disengaged and retreated a few steps, panting. If only he could steer her further to the right, closer to the old cellar...

She didn't let him catch his breath. She attempted a low sweep, going for his knees. He jumped on a dump pile and kicked dirt, dried leaves, and goat droppings onto her. She recoiled, furiously brushing the filth off her face.

"Swine! I should have expected this from you!" She spat on the ground. "Once I've cut you down, I'll go visit that fat whore you've

been keeping.” She grinned, her face twisted to a mask of wrath and terrible beauty. “And I’ll gut her like a pig, for bedding hairy pigs like you.”

His fingers flexed around the grip of his blade. This wasn’t ‘just an assignment.’ It couldn’t be. “Leave Ellisso out of this, Nebet. Tell me about the boy. *Now.*”

She looked up at him, a smudge of muck on her cheek, shaking her *khopesh* like a finger at him as a mother would to a capricious child. “Oh, no. You do not give me orders.”

His temples throbbed. “No, I don’t. Some degenerate, incestuous priests do that. And you jump and dance at their whistles, like those little monkeys from Nubia that the royal concubines favor so much.”

A muscle in her cheek tensed, then relaxed, as she circled the mound of dirt slowly, with the liquid grace of a cobra ready to strike. “And you don’t?”

Keep her moving. Keep her talking. A few more steps to the right, closer to the old cellar, closer to its rotten trapdoor covered by leaves and dirt. He slightly bent his knees, ready to charge, while the Great Bull God inside his head and heart pawed the dirt, nostrils flaring, eyes wild.

“The Vizier was supposed to be my last mark,” he said. “After that, they’d release me from my duties.”

So they had said.

So they had lied.

He knew that well, and so did she.

She laughed—a cold, mirthless sound. “Old fool!” Her free hand caressed the cleavage of her dress, undoubtedly seeking another little dagger. “There’s no release from this service! There is no peaceful life awaiting you. Did you dream of a peasant’s life by the sea, herding goats, with your fat whore to warm your straw bed and your old bones?”

“No. I had dreamed of a fisherman’s life by the Nile, and you to warm my bed and my bones. And our boy.”

Honesty stung her deeper than taunting and insults. Her smile froze and she lowered the blade. Her eyes softened, but only for a heartbeat.

It was enough.

He lunged at her, before she could raise the *khopesh* again, and pushed her backwards, almost embracing her, until something cracked under their feet. The worn, moldy trapdoor couldn't support both their weights. It collapsed. She cried out, falling, and he stepped back. She'd get out of there, eventually, even with a few broken bones. But until then, Ellisso would be safe. There were ships leaving for Phoenicia and Cyprus and Thera come dawn, and he knew people at the docks. They owed him. They'd—

Something gripped his ankle—a delicate, cruel hand—and pulled him off-balance. She hadn't fallen all the way down; her other hand had grasped the creaking trapdoor frame.

“Old fool! You're coming down with me!” Now she fell, and he fell with her.

He flailed his arms, trying to get a grasp of something—anything. The rotten planks shattered, the beams creaked and broke under their combined weight. Nebet landed on something that broke—probably some long-forgotten urns. She yelped and cursed in Kemet with words greatly favored by sailors. He landed on top of her, his face in the curve of her neck.

Water lilies, loquacious frogs and fat, lazy horseflies pestering their limbs inside a crumbling shack by the Nile, in a fragile truce, in moments stolen from the gods and their clergy. Moments of deceiving happiness, of hiding away from the Omnipresent and the Omniscient, daring to hope.

Daring to love.

She kneed his groin, and he rolled off her. He kept rolling away in the dark, his teeth clenched, until his shoulder jabbed against the wall. He lay there on his back, struggling to control his breathing, to stifle his panting, and silence the throbbing in his ears. Across the dark cellar, something moved. Broken pottery, shuffling of clothes, metal on rock. Had she found her *khopesh*? Gods knew where his own dagger had landed.

He sat up and crouched while his right hand searched the ground around him, seeking a weapon. Something scurried over his fingers a heartbeat before he found the wooden stick, heartbeats before the *whoosh!* through the air and the *khopesh* coming down on him. He raised the stick just in time to block her killing blow. Her blade lodged

in the wood. He pulled and twisted, prying the blade from her hands, and tossed both weapons away.

Her foot landed on his jaw and the kick sent him sprawled on the floor, his ears ringing. He rolled aside and jumped on his feet, stumbling and light-headed. How could she see so well in the dark?

Perhaps it was her youth. Perhaps it was his tired eyes. But he didn't need to see. He knew.

He knew that ten paces to his right was a door, and behind it was a steep staircase leading up, behind the room where he had been born, where his mother had died giving birth to the fifth of his younger siblings, where the goddess had come to him in dreams and visions. Without waiting for another kick or punch, Aranaos bolted for the door.

Nebet ran after him, and he climbed the stairs two steps at a time, heading for the dim glow of the starlit sky through the broken roof. She caught up to him just as he crossed the threshold of the room of too many memories and rammed him with her elbow. He stumbled forward, tripped, and fell. She straddled his back, pinning him down, her thighs rigid against his ribs. The pressure lightened as she stretched her body upwards, gathering momentum to drive one of her teeth-daggers into his back. It gave him enough room to roll to the side, sending Nebet to the floor.

He held her down with his weight, his right hand pinning her wrist with her dagger. His left closed around her throat.

"Yield, Nebet! Leave, forget about me, and leave with your life!"

"No!" She hammered his ribs with her free hand, each new blow weaker.

"Why? We have crossed blades before. Why does it have to be different this time?" He pressed harder, despite the alarming numbness that now spread upwards, into his shoulder. "I'll vanish, and you can tell them I'm dead." *Don't make me kill you. Please.*

"I cannot!" She struggled under him, her breathing labored, her words mumbled. The dagger slipped from her hand. "They—they want proof this time. Your head."

"My head?" His grip lessened. So this is how it would end?

"To feed to the sacred crocodiles," she spat. "Your head, for my son's life!"

“What?” He released her, a different numbness spreading through his body.

She crawled away from him and crouched by the far wall, hugging her knees.

“Your son?” By all the gods of murder, they wouldn’t. Would they? An innocent child?

She laughed, a parched, bitter laughter. “They found out. I don’t know how, but they found out. Perhaps we were seen, that last time. And they don’t appreciate such treacherous trusts.”

His shoulders tensed. “So they sent you.”

Her voice hardened. “You have angered some very powerful people this time, Aranaos. The late Vizier was the brother of a high-ranking priest of Sobek. There will be no forgetting and no forgiving. They’ve promised me gold and slaves, if I brought you back alive, to cut you up themselves. But they’ll settle for your head.”

“And the boy?”

“Held in the temple at Nubt, with the younger novices.” She rubbed her throat, where his hand had squeezed. “Do not be mistaken, Aranaos. They know about your whore, too. There’s a ship, the *Praise of the Two Lands*, awaiting me at the docks. If I don’t return with your head by dawn, they’ll gut your whore before they feed my son to Sobek’s scaly children.”

He looked away, to the stars through the holes on the roof. Sometimes, the bull dancers’ leaps were less than perfect, and the beasts’ horns colored the arena’s sands red. It couldn’t hurt worse than the searing pain in his gut now. So many mistakes. So many wrong turns.

She sighed. “Yield, and I’ll make it quick.” Her voice softened. “And I’ll let your woman live.”

Had they already won? Was he already dead? Perhaps... Mostly out of reflex, his fingers sought the dagger she had discarded earlier, while he was choking her. So tiny in his palm, cold and slim and *foreign*. The Serpent Goddess hissed at the edge of his consciousness.

Why do you care about the bastard children of Egyptian whores? Or the lives of peasant women? Be my sting, be my poison, and cut down those who oppose my will!

At the back of his mind, alongside his goddess, the Bull God flared his nostrils, lowered his head and charged the heedless dancer that had Nebet's face. And Aranaos thrust the dagger upward just as Nebet lunged at him. He plunged it under her left breast, and it slid effortlessly through her ribs, up to the tiny hilt. Her body convulsed, the blade slipped from her fingers and she collapsed into his arms.

Thy will be done. A different kind of numbness chilled his heart, deadlier than poisons and daggers.

Nebet's face had twisted to a mask of horror. "You-you've killed us both." Rosy froth stained her lips. "My boy. *Our* boy." Another spasm arched her back, and then her muscles relaxed one final time.

I've killed them both.

He hid his face in her hair, holding her tight. The gods and their priests had denied them a life together. In death, they couldn't keep them apart.

Ellisso would be safe, and so would the orphaned little boy at the banks of the Nile. He'd see to this. The captain of the Egyptian ship awaited Aranaos' head. He'd get his whole body, walking and breathing, but they wouldn't have the chance to torture him. He reached into the folds of his linen kilt. By the grace of some whimsical deity, the vial with the Kemetite poison had remained intact during the fight, wrapped well inside the linen cloth. His escape, if it came to that. The choice no priest or god could deny him.

He picked up Nebet's body. He stumbled out of the hut and into the night, heading for the docks, to pay his last dues.

Under the cover of darkness, Aranaos followed the goatherds' paths downhill. The crickets fell silent when he neared their trees, the owls flew away, and panicked rabbits darted off into the night. There were no sounds but the throbbing of his temples during his march to Phaestos' port and the distant buzz behind his ear, as though some stubborn mosquito had attached itself to his braids and rode along. But no mosquito clung there: every few heartbeats distant whispers and words formed inside the buzz, fragments of conversations he wasn't privy to. At the edge of his hearing, entities who thought mankind their playthings—Bull, Serpent, Crocodile, many faces and many names—had a decision to make.

What are we going to do with that one?

They would never leave him alone. At this late hour, they could deliberate all they wanted—whatever bought him enough time to accomplish an impossible task and save his boy. He picked up his pace, the sea breeze burning his lungs and throat. Nebet's blood stung every cut and scrape on his skin, slithered through every hangnail and insect bite. It wormed its way to his heart, to his mind, reciting at every heartbeat its unbearable truth: he would never hold her again.

Grunting at every tear that dared to surface, Aranaos slid amidst the low brick houses of the small port town towards the shore, where the beached fishermen's boats could offer some cover. There it was, the Egyptian ship, away from the smaller Phoenician and Minoan vessels, at the edge of the docks. It beckoned with its great sail rolled up and the carved lotus blossom at the stern. If the guards were fast asleep from drinking and whoring, then perhaps he could sneak in unnoticed and... do what? How would he stop them from messaging their superiors back in Egypt? Slitting everyone's throat would accomplice little; he still had to find out details about his son's captors.

Somewhere at his right, a mutt growled. Crouched behind a boat, Aranaos side-eyed the dog then returned his gaze to the ship. One cat-napping guard sat cross-legged by a fire at the docks. There couldn't be just one. The dog growled again, then started barking at a coil of rope that hissed and spat back at it. Aranaos clenched his jaw. He didn't need that. Not now. He threw the first rock he found at the dog.

"Go pick on someone your size!" He tried to keep his voice low, but it still quivered. He'd had enough with bullies, be it capricious deities, malicious priests, or ill-tempered mutts. He threw a second rock, harder this time.

The dog yelped, then bolted. A heartbeat later, a cat darted off at the exact opposite direction.

Aranaos turned back to the ship, measuring the distance from his hiding place to the guard. If Aranaos could ambush him and drag him away, he could squeeze some information out of his throat. But what would a guard know? The buzz behind his ears waxed and

waned, and his time slipped away. Staying idle was no longer a choice. His fingers flexed around the hilt of his dagger.

“You have an *akh* on your back.”

Aranaos almost dropped his blade and glanced over his shoulder. Damned be his aged bones and tired mind, never in all his years had anyone snuck up on him. Until now—until this old beggar, who sat on the keel of an overturned boat with a scrawny cat in his arms...

“The fishmongers set up their merchandise at the other end of the docks,” said Aranaos. “You’ll have better luck there, or outside the brothels. Go away, and leave me alone. I have no coin.”

“No, you have an *akh*.”

Aranaos rolled his eyes. By all the gods of vengeance, he already had Nebet’s blood on his hands. When would this plunge end? He’d hit a dog just now; did he have to beat an old man senseless too?

“You have an *akh*,” the old man said again, “and she insists that your whore is touching her inappropriately.”

This time, Aranaos dropped his blade. His knees loosened, and he collapsed lightheaded on the sand. He managed to roll around and lean his back against the boat. “How can you—?”

He’d left Nebet’s body with Ellisso—a cruel thing to do, but the tempest in his heart and mind had allowed very few coherent thoughts. Fragments of plans, shards of memories of a life lost: Ellisso’s low-roofed house at the edge of town, a ship awaiting at the docks, and an orphaned boy. And Ellisso hadn’t hated him for that. Not yet. After a long, silent glance, she’d reached for a washcloth, fresh water and wine, to cleanse Nebet’s corpse the only way she knew how.

His anguish had led him to err. He recalled now: *akh* was the Egyptian word for restless spirit. That man was no beggar, nor was he as old as he’d first thought him to be. His deathly pale skin and white eyebrows gave the illusion of old age under the starlight. Had his head not been clean-shaven, his hair would be white as well. Aranaos had heard of people with such an affliction, but always as parts of artisan troupes, along with acrobats and dancers. Apparently, not all rumors were true. A sorcerer? Or, worse, a necromancer?

The pale man shrugged. “She nags and nags, this one. But she has a point. You can’t leave her body here. Her spirit cannot cross the sea to reach the Afterlife.”

“Who are you? *What* are you?”

“Ah.” He bent over the cat on his lap. “You can call me An—*Khemes*.”

Aranaos’ eyes narrowed. “How about I call you *liar*?”

A chuckle. “Ah, my boy. You should have learned by now that names hold power.”

Boy? “Fine, then, *Khemes*. And what do you want?”

“To repay my debt.”

“Ah. The cat.”

Khemes sighed. “This little fellow,” he held the cat up, “ran off the moment I opened his cage and was chased by a dog. You saved him from that dog.” He spoke in slow words, low voice, as if explaining the use of a spinning top to a toddler.

Damned sorcerers and their arrogance. Aranaos resisted the urge to punch him. He didn’t need that. Not now. Or did he? “Cages? Ah. The Phoenicians?”

“Yes. Dealt with.”

Cold and merciless, Khemes’ reply made Aranaos’ toes curl up and dig into the sand to hide. The Phoenicians had made a profitable trade by abducting and selling Egypt’s holy animals in nearby ports. This time, they’d appropriated the wrong cat. Could *he* benefit from this?

“Your *akh* wants you to know that the man you need is a priest, once you get past the ship’s captain.” Khemes put down the cat who trotted off and started digging the sand a few paces away. “This priest keeps a pair of messenger pigeons near his cot below deck and the information you need in his head. If I may, I would request that you refrain from killing him.”

“A relative of yours?”

Aranaos regretted his words the moment his tired tongue blurted them out. Khemes’ mouth twisted as though he’d asked him to sample what the cat had left in the hole over there. Khemes composed himself right away, but disgust still seeped in his voice.

“Certainly not. Their order should have been disbanded years ago. You may find it hard to believe at this moment, but very few of us would even consider mistreating a child in such an abhorrent manner.” He stretched his neck and glanced ahead, at the docked ships. “Whatever you plan on doing, you should get going while most of the guards and crewmen are deep in drunken slumber in the nearby ...establishments.”

“Ah. Nebet told you that too?”

“No, my eyes, when I walked past them to find him.” He held to his chest the cat, who seemed transfixed by something unseen, something floating in the air between the two men. Khemes stood, dusted his white robes, and gave a little bow. “My gratitude, and may your path bring you peace.”

With the complaining cat clutched against his chest, Khemes made his way back up and vanished in the shadows amidst the huts.

Peace... Aranaos would never know peace again. His clenched fist tapped his clenched jaw. So much had this night robbed him of... A void gaped in his chest, an empty arena where love had wrestled faith for far too long. A wasteland now, his love was a bloody corpse, and his faith was trampled down by all the gods of vengeance. Now to whom would he pray as he strode towards battle?

Aranaos forced himself on his feet, his fingers flexing around the hilt of his dagger. He adjusted the leather bands around his wrists, securing Nebet’s tiny bone daggers between flesh and leather. A whiff of honeysuckle brushed against his face, flowed over his shoulders and settled between his shoulder blades, flitting there like a swarm of ethereal flies. Perhaps his thick old head clung stubbornly to what he’d been told all his life. Perhaps the dark place where love and faith lay embraced in death was not a wasteland but a cradle for something new and unheard of. He drew in a deep breath.

Nebet, guide my sword arm. Nebet, be my shield.

With his head low and his steps noiseless, Aranaos made his way on sand and pebbles and dry seaweed to where the single guard cat-napped by the fire. Just a boy, this one, thin-bearded and slim. Not unusual for the older, more seasoned guards to leave the worst shifts to their newest brothers-in-arms. Aranaos balanced the dagger

in his palm, ready for the strike before the boy could call the others to arms. At the last moment, his fingers flipped the blade around and managed a blow to the back of his boy's head, sending him unconscious to the ground. Come morning, this boy's father wouldn't mourn his son.

Aranaos tip-toed around barrels and coils of rope, his heart thundering as he neared the Egyptian ship. Under the gaze of the lion's head crushing a skull with its jaws on the prow, another man jumped off the ship onto the pier. A sailor? Clad in a dirty loincloth, this one wore his hair in the Egyptian fashion, reeked of piss and cheap wine and slurred lewd limericks about buxom wenches in five different languages, in as many atrocious accents. His eyes widened at the sight of Aranaos' fist, and he fell flat on his back where he lay snoring.

Aranaos' gaze measured the ship. Although bigger than the usual patrol ships, like the speedy *keftiu* or the *kebentiu* from Byblos, this one was still smaller than the merchant ships. The space below deck should be limited, and the hatch leading there most likely placed near the stern. Many more men could be asleep on the deck—many more complications he could avoid. His teeth tingled as he bit down on the cold metal of his blade and slipped into the dark water. He swam towards the stern until he grasped the rope to the anchor stone between the two rudder oars.

A narrow stream of urine hit the water next to Aranaos' half-submerged face, and he kicked his feet beneath the surface to avoid it. Damn his crotch, whoever that man was. The next time he took a piss, he'd do it squatting.

Aranaos dared a glimpse overhead at the man adjusting his loincloth—average height, wiry-built, his frizzy hair worn in long braids of the Minoan fashion, but his skin revealed Nubian blood. Damn. A mercenary, most likely, and a mercenary ship captain at that, from his gold and turquoise amulet. Could he sneak past him? Or would he have to fight his way to the priest and his birds?

Aranaos gripped the anchor rope with both hands and climbed upwards between the rudder oars. Thankfully, this ship had lower bulwarks than most military vessels, built for speedy missions. One glance on deck counted at least five bodies in various stages of

slumber—hopefully, drunken slumber. No sight of the captain; had he gone down below? With cold metal between his teeth and a blessing on his silent tongue, Aranaos leaped on board.

Nebet, be my shield and my blade.

Aranaos was three steps away from the ladder leading downwards when the captain climbed back up, this time clad in a simple linen kilt. One glance at Aranaos' tattoos, and the captain welcomed him aboard with a snarl.

So fighting it was.

Aranaos returned the snarl.

"I understand you're expecting my head."

He headbutted the captain and blinked away the stars dancing in his vision. That was one thick-headed Nubian.

"Here's my knee, too."

Aranaos' knee earned a groan from the captain's throat once it crushed against his groin. The captain, wide-eyed and cursing, struggled to maintain his balance, but he lost his footing and fell backwards, flailing his arms. His landing thud awakened the other five—no, six—sailors on board, who sat up, blinking away sleep and surprise. Aranaos leaped down, blade in hand, and landed a well-balanced kick against the jaw of the nearest sailor, who fell sideways and stayed there. The youngest of their lot, still a boy, scurried away, close to the prow.

Another sailor charged Aranaos, spitting curses in half a dozen tongues about his whore of a mother. The sailor's scorbatic snarl didn't hold up against the hilt of Aranaos' blade and a well-placed punch on his mouth. He stumbled backwards, spitting out blood and teeth this time, and charged again. Aranaos rolled his eyes at the sailor's stubbornness and punched his throat. The toothless man reddened, a frothy gurgle sprouting from his mouth, and fell.

He didn't have time for this. Dawn already colored the eastern hilltops, and this racket could alert the priest down below to send the fateful message. What if he already had?

The other three sailors kept their eyes on him and their distance. With his gut a nest of writhing serpents, Aranaos neared the hatch leading below when the captain charged him, wielding a small double axe—of course, it had to be a labrys, a message from

discontented deities. Hardly bigger than a shortsword, and more for ceremonial use than actual fighting, it could still split a man's skull open. Aranaos sidestepped in time for the captain to miss and elbowed him in his ribs. He raised his blade to end this damned fight when a burning pain numbed his elbow and the blade slipped from his grip. He glanced at the prow.

Damned boy had a sling.

His fingers sought the bone daggers hidden beneath his wristbands. A *woosh* through the air, a whiff of honeysuckle against his face—*Nebet, guide my aim*—and the boy yelped. Clutching his wrist, the boy hid behind stacked coils of rope.

In a glance between heartbeats—between one attack and the next against the captain who now charged bare-handed—Aranaos spotted a pale figure ashore beside the still unconscious boy-guard. The sorcerer sat with his lap full of fruit, chewing on a peach or pear or gods-knew-what, and oblivious to the fight aboard. Perhaps for the best—sorcery made the simplest task overly complicated. And this was *his* fight, one that had drawn too long.

Enough.

He leaned sideways as the captain attempted a punch on his face and withdrew another bone dagger in his left hand. The captain's fist hit thin air, and Aranaos tackled him. The captain fell face first on the deck but pulled himself up on his knees right away. Aranaos slid behind him and pinned him with a chokehold, the tip of the dagger a hair's breadth from his left eye.

"One step, and he's dead," Aranaos warned the remaining sailors.

The captain muttered something, but the sailor closest to him, with a mirthless grin and the ugly scars of countless battles, hefted a club and took a step forward.

"We were promised good coin for your head. Why should we give that up?"

"And how much were you paid for my son's head?"

"Your son?" The strangled words came from the captain's throat.

Aranaos lightened his hold, just barely to let him speak, but poked the dagger to draw a drop of blood from below his eye.

"We don't get paid to kill children," said the captain.

The scowl on Scar's face replied that indeed they did. Or he alone did. He licked his thin lips.

"The dog is lying." Scar hefted his club higher and took another step.

"I'm not lying, you bastard. Why else would I be here and not far away? To save my boy from that whore's son of a priest you're hiding below deck!"

Scar took another step forward but stopped his advance when the captain raised his hand.

"I don't kill children." He shifted his face as if to glance up at Aranaos, but the chokehold didn't allow him to. "I have sons too. I won't have a child's blood on my hands." He signaled to Scar. "Fetch that priest. Let's hear what *he* has to say."

Scar rushed below. Yelling and cursing and the sound of broken pottery followed his descent, until he climbed back up, dragging the priest with him. A slender, pale man, his clean-shaven head oily, his hands trembling, and his grin inhuman, fixed bloodshot eyes at Aranaos.

"Your bastard is dead! I sent the message the moment I heard the fight!"

A shriek reverberated inside his skull—Nebet's shriek, confirming the priest's claim. Aranaos released the captain who sprang to his feet, rubbing his neck. He tossed the dagger aside. He'd failed. What did it matter now? He dropped to his knees, his chest a burning pyre of all that he loved and all that he was. They could have his head now. But they wouldn't; they'd let him live and carry the burden of his son's death for every day of his miserable life. Between tears, he barely saw something fast and furry and bloody at his feet. Until it nudged him.

A cat. Not any cat; *that* runt of a cat placing the bloody carcass of a pigeon before him. And the dead bird had a tiny scroll folded around one of its legs.

"I seek passage back to Egypt. Would you be kind enough to accommodate me?"

A familiar voice: that sorcerer again. Aranaos wiped his eyes, glanced at the cat, then at the sorcerer, then around him. The captain had dropped back on his knees, his head bowed. A few feet

away, beside Scar who shifted his weight from one leg to the other, the priest had fallen face down on the deck, trembling.

The cat picked up his kill and trotted off to his master.

“My Lord Ankhu...” whined the priest, his forehead still against the deck.

Aranaos rubbed his eyes again. Ah. So that was his true name. It meant nothing to him, but apparently a lot to them.

Ankhu wagged his finger at him. “Ah, Neferhor... Didn’t I warn you that the company you keep will get you in serious trouble?” He fixed his eyes at the captain. “Well, shall we sail any time soon?” He waved his hand. “The tides, the winds, and all that?”

“My Lord Embalmer... our orders.”

Ankhu’s voice hardened. “You have new orders now.” He glanced at each sailor in turn, and each one of them lowered their gaze but didn’t move a finger. “You will be paid, of course. Enough to match your promised coin. For me, my friend, and his guests, should he so desire.”

As the ship’s captain and crew licked their wounds and rushed to prepare to sail off, Aranaos pulled himself up and approached the sorcerer.

“So. I assume Khemes isn’t your real name.”

Ankhu shrugged. “It served a purpose.”

“Does your cat have a name? So my son will know the name of his savior?”

“Of course he does: Nedjem. It means Sweet One.”

Aranaos glanced at the cat, eyes-deep into his kill’s guts. Sweet One. How appropriate.

“Your son will be safe,” Ankhu said. “He will be delivered to the care of a trusted servant shortly.”

Aranaos’ eyes narrowed. “You have messenger pigeons too?”

“No.”

This single word, spoken in a calm and casual tone, wrangled his guts into an icy knot. He didn’t want to know *what* the sorcerer had.

Ankhu yawned. “I would like to take a nap now.” He pointed at the still-trembling priest. “Also, I would like to deliver him where his kind belongs alive. But I wouldn’t mind him ...softened.”

Aranaos cracked his knuckles and flashed him his happiest grin.

The choir of hungry cats signals Hapi's arrival, and Aranaos looks up from the half-woven wicker basket. Every morning, his boy goes fishing to feed the many cats that travel to this remote spot by the Nile, north of Thebes. Hapi hasn't been told the story of his rescue, but his kind heart knows to pay his dues to the kin of the one who saved him.

Inside the hut, another clay mug breaks. Nebet likes to torment Ellisso, who picks up the shards of her belongings without a word of complaint. Still temperamental in death, his old love never reconciled with this arrangement. But every now and then, Aranaos finds a jasmine blossom on Ellisso's chest while she sleeps, and knows that all is well.

Hapi, his chores done, sits beside Aranaos, and Ellisso brings them a platter of flatbread and figs. She's bigger now, her hips and breast round, and resembles the Earth Goddess of faraway tribes. All these years, she has been his rock, with this strange kind of love and strength that persevere against years, decades, eons. When he's long gone, she will still be here to anoint his corpse with water and oil. Hapi will be in good hands.

Atop a shelf inside the small hut his blades rest, alongside Nebet's weapons, even the vial of poison. One of these days, when the gods of murder track him down, when the time comes for the Bull Dance he left unfinished, he will pick them up again and pay his last dues.

Until then, he will know peace.

Christine Lucas is a former Air Force officer who spends her time annoying her husband and their horde of spoiled animals with her fantasy and science fiction tales. Mostly self-taught in English, she has seen her work in many print and online publications.

Shadow Vision

By PRESTON DENNETT

A blind man, an itinerant princess and a man born gifted with eyes that can pierce shadow venture into the Dark—a blackened realm of fears made tangible! At its heart lie untold treasures, but can these adventurers survive the awaiting horrors?!

The hut was small and dark, and a noxious odor hung in the smoky air. Of what, I knew not, but it wasn't pleasant. The man I sought, the legendary Eton Keegan, sat cross-legged before the hearth, soaking up its warmth. He was so filthy, and his limbs so thin, that I could scarcely distinguish him from the bundle of sticks piled next to him. His head turned only slightly upon my entrance, though enough for me to catch the milky white of his sightless eyes. He looked old, fragile, hardly the fearless explorer I had envisioned.

"You seek knowledge of the Dark," he said and poked at the fire. It flared and sent up a volume of smoke. I saw then the pot of dark soup hanging above the fire—the source of the stench.

"Yes," I said, surprised. "How—"

He dismissed me with a wave. "Hah, you are only one of many who have sat before me seeking insight into the Great Black. I am tired of all of you. One after another, you come, expecting me to tell you what I know and yet you give nothing in return. Why should I tell you of my experience? My knowledge was hard-earned. Besides, it was long ago. I remember little of it."

"But you've been inside it," I protested. "You must know something."

"What is your name, boy?"

"Callon. Callon Foraker."

"Many have been inside it, Callon Foraker," he said.

"Yes, but you returned, when no others have." I coughed and waved my hand at an oncoming cloud of smoke.

“Others have returned. Perhaps not of sound mind,” he cackled.

“You are the only one living,” I said.

“Bah! Perhaps, but not for much longer.” He reached forward, stirred the soup, took a sip and made a face. “Again I ask, why should I tell you, Callon Foraker? No, wait. Allow me a guess.” He paused and seemed to study me with his sightless eyes. “Aha! You intend to venture into the Dark. Like the others, you think you can succeed where nearly all have failed. Foolish boy! You have little idea of the dangers you court. Venture into the Dark, indeed!”

“You escaped,” I pointed out again.

“Ah, but I have the second sight,” he said. He suddenly scowled. “See, now I’ve told you my secret, and I would wager you have nothing to give me. Am I correct?”

“What would you have? I have a few coins, not many.”

“What need have I of money? My days in this world are short. Money is of little use to me now. What else?”

I shrugged. Keegan looked at me with his blind eyes, and I had the eerie feeling he could see me perfectly.

“I shall tell you all that I know, but I have a price. I am not sure you will like it.”

“I hate it already. What is it?”

“I shall tell you my story, and in exchange, you shall take me with you.”

“What?” I asked, suddenly unsure of whether I was getting the good end of this bargain. Keegan may have had experience with the Dark, but he was now old and feeble. I had little confidence in his ability to travel.

“I have foreseen it,” he said with finality. “You will take me with you.”

“Foreseen it?” I asked. “Can you even walk?”

All at once, the old man jumped up, grabbed a stick, and thwacked me across the back.

“Oy!” I screamed.

“I can take care of myself,” Keegan said. “It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Fine,” I said, rubbing my back painfully. “You can come. Please, just tell me all that you know of the Dark.”

“And so I shall. But first, we shall eat!”

Before I could protest, Keegan handed me a bowl and motioned for me to begin eating. Not wishing to be rude, I obeyed him and swallowed as much of the foul stuff as I could without retching. I almost asked him what it was, but upon seeing it, thought it better I didn't know.

As we ate, I reviewed all that I knew of the Dark, which wasn't much, and I knew more than most.

It went by many names: the Dark, the Cursed Lands, the Empty, Shadowland, and countless others.

It had been there forever, or at least as long as anyone could remember. Nobody knew exactly how large it was, except that it encompassed the entire desert area west of the town of Iona and took many weeks on horseback to ride around. It lay like a cloud of smoke, nestled at the foot of the Violet Mountains, unmoving.

Of course, the biggest mystery was its very presence. What was it? What could cause a location to become void of all light?

The theories were many. Some believed it to be an ancient battlefield, cursed by long-forgotten powerful magic. Others said it was the source of all evil in the world and that the awful, loathsome creatures which lived inside sometimes ventured beyond the dark hunting for prey. Most everyone agreed that monstrous creatures of some sort lived there. And I had heard many stories of people who claimed to have seen them. I supposed most of them to be just tavern stories, rich in detail but short on truth. In any case, the rumors were enough to keep most people in fear of the dark and away from its borders.

But the Dark also had a reputation for hiding great powers and unknown treasures. In the old books were songs and poems which spoke of men venturing into the dark and returning with fabulous riches and, in a few cases, strange magical abilities. Most believed these to be just legends.

Today, most people remained terrified of the Dark, and perhaps rightly so, I thought. Why did almost nobody who ventured in return? I had met but a few of those who had escaped. A few was enough. Other than Keegan, they were shells of the people they must have been, driveling idiots who could scarcely take care of themselves. It

pained me to see them. Fortunately for them, they didn't live long. Meeting Keegan, however, had granted me courage. Yes, he was odd, but unlike the others, he seemed to have at least retained his wits.

In truth, most of what everyone knew about the inside of the Dark came directly from Keegan himself. The way it was most often told, the late King Tuleg had organized an exploratory mission into the Dark. An army of hundreds of men was assembled. Among them was Keegan. Inside the Dark, they had become lost, and one by one the men succumbed. They were killed by strange beasts. They were driven to insanity by the absence of light. They stumbled off cliffs. They died of thirst and starvation. Four weeks after venturing in, Keegan and two others escaped. Keegan was the only one who remained sane.

Still, many questions remained unanswered. What had caused the Dark? Had it truly always been there? Was it cursed? Did monstrous beings truly exist inside it? I had many questions, and few answers.

Keegan coughed and looked at me. "I've decided not to tell my story until we've entered the Dark," he said.

"What?" I protested. "You gave word that you would speak to me." I just knew that this old man would be trouble!

"And so I shall, when we arrive. I have foreseen that you would abandon me and venture in alone. And I shall not have it. Besides, you have need of me, you will see."

I grumbled. Keegan was perceptive and annoying in equal measures. I had been planning to go into the Dark alone. I was convinced that Keegan would be a burden. Somehow, however, I found myself agreeing to take him.

"I know your secret," Keegan said.

The Dark rose like a mountain before us, an inky blackness. Shadowy tendrils rippled along the edge of it, reaching out with tiny black fingers. It oozed and slithered, appearing ready to crumble and sweep down upon us, a black landslide of nothingness and shadows. Clearly, some force held it in place. I had been this close only a few times. Almost nobody dared to venture anywhere near it. I was not surprised to find that Keegan and I were alone.

On the other side of us, the desert landscape stretched out, silent and empty. The setting sun turned the sands into a variety of tan hues. Little dust-devils darted back and forth in the distance. There were no trees or even bushes in sight. Few things grew around the Dark. I noticed that there were no insects even.

“My secret?” I asked innocently. So, he knew I was a thief, I thought.

“You have the shadow vision. You are able to see in the absence of light.”

I looked at Keegan, astonished. “Is there anything you do not know?” My shadow vision was perhaps the one thing about myself of which I was proud. Because of it, I was certain that if anybody would be able to pierce the mystery of the Dark, it would be me. I had spoken of it to no one. It had proven quite useful growing up on the streets of Iona, particularly recently, now that I was a hunted man.

“Most things,” said Keegan. “I do not know most things. But I know you have the shadow vision. You believe it shall serve you well in the Empty.”

“Yes, don’t you?”

“Ha! Why do you think I am going with you? With your gift of dark-sight, and my second-sight, we may have a chance to reach...” Keegan tilted his head and turned sharply towards me. “You have not spoken of your own motives.”

“Nor have you,” I said. “In fact, you have yet to tell me anything.”

“Ha! You are right. Well, let us build a fire and cook some food. You tell me of your story, and I shall tell you mine. Then we will sleep and enter the Dark at first light. Agreed?” He held out his hand, palm up.

“Agreed,” I said, placing my palm on his.

Somehow I got tricked into telling my story first. I have told few people, I explained to Keegan, as I do not enjoy pity. Then again, few have asked. I was born in the city of Iona, the closest settlement to the Dark. My mother died as a result of my birth. My father blamed me for her death and hated me because of it. He abandoned me at age eight. I survived on my own, barely. I moved from job to job, learning much but making little. I survived by thievery. I used my shadow vision to escape.

As my reputation spread, I was forced to keep hidden during the day. I ventured out only at night. My shadow vision had shaped my life, and yet it remained a mystery to me. None in my family had it. It had been with me always, and I still remember the shock I felt upon discovering the uniqueness of my vision. It was another reason I sought to explore the Dark. I felt certain that I might find answers therein.

Growing up next to the Dark, I had always been intrigued by it. I ventured close a few times but never had the courage to go in. Still, I always found myself drawn back to it. There was something inside there for me—I could feel it. I felt as though the Dark was my friend. Some force that I could not explain continued to draw me towards it. I knew that one day I would have to go inside. Besides, I needed little convincing. There was little left for me in the world of light. I told Keegan that I believed there might be some truth in the legends, that there was hope in the Dark, that there was a power and magic, and that in rare cases some men might even benefit.

Keegan hissed and clucked as I told my story. He chuckled as I detailed my thieving exploits and shook his head at the reactions of the Iona authorities.

We now sat inside the pool of light from the campfire. The Dark next to us was hidden in the shadows of night.

“Splendid,” Keegan said. “With that attitude, we may reach the center.”

“The center?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Keegan, grinning. “The center of the Dark, the location of its power. I have been there.” He paused. “Well...I have been close.”

I raised my eyebrows. The center? I hadn’t heard about this part of his story.

“I shall now tell you, my dear Callon, of my venture into the Dark. Let me see, where shall I begin? There were about fifty of us.”

“I thought there were hundreds.”

“Ha! No, there were about fifty. Perhaps you would like to tell my story?”

I shook my head and motioned for him to continue. Honestly, I was surprised he was finally talking. I had begun to think he was avoiding

the subject.

For the most part, Keegan's story was nearly as I had heard it many times before, minus a few exaggerations and boasts. However, it was one thing to hear the story being tossed back and forth in a tavern, and quite another to hear it from Keegan himself. He spoke of how quickly the Dark fed one's fears and drove men into raving lunatics, how easily it turned one man and then another into a state of blind panic. He spoke of awful beasts that seemed the stuff of nightmares. Many of the men in his group were devoured by these creatures. The group became divided, and there was utter chaos and confusion.

Keegan, however, was able to use his second-sight, he said, to avoid the hidden cliffs, to hide from the roaming beasts, to find food and water, foul as it was, to subsist upon.

Learning of Keegan's power to guide them into the Dark, a group of some ten men gathered around him. They followed him and looked to him for their survival. By then, most of them were already far gone in fear and had to be cared for as children.

"We were hopelessly lost," Keegan explained. "Only I among them had any sense of direction. I alone could sense the center of the Dark. There was a great power there. Something extraordinary. But I was young, afraid, and was burdened with the responsibility of men's lives. I turned away from the center of power and led the men out. I fear only a few of them made it."

"Is it true that you lost your sight upon exiting the Dark?"

"Perhaps," Keegan nodded. "After weeks of the Darkness, my eyes were not ready for the sudden sunlight. However, it is my belief that my sight had already been destroyed. It matters not. The Dark improved my second-sight. Before entering, I had only a mild talent, useful for occasional luck charms while gambling cards in a tavern. Afterwards, while I missed my eyes, I found my second sight to be quite sufficient. So you see, the two of us, you with your shadow vision and me with my second sight, I believe we have a chance of making it to the center. That is why you are venturing into the Dark, is it not? Like me, you sense the power."

"Yes," I said. "I do." I was all smiles. Keegan had hit the mark exactly.

Keegan laughed. "You and I are alike, my boy. Well, if there is anything in the center of the Dark, we shall find it."

I hope so, I thought. For even now, I could feel the power calling to me. There was something profound inside there, something strong and strange, waiting for me. I was eager to find out what it was. If only I could calm my fears.

The morning sunlight failed to pierce the Dark. We stood before the towering mass. I was armed with a spear, sword and knife, and clothed in leathers—all of which I had stolen. Keegan wore nothing but his tattered robes and carried only a sturdy staff for protection. We were burdened with enough rations to last four weeks, though Keegan carried little of it. We had put together what supplies we could. We had told no one of our intentions. If neither of us returned, there would be no one to mourn for us. Now that it was time to enter, however, both of us hesitated.

"You first," I said. "I mean, since you've already been inside."

"You still have fears, boy," Keegan said. "It is as I thought. It is I that shall be taking care of you."

I frowned at him. "You can be most annoying, old man."

"Ah, I am correct then? You are afraid?"

"Well, of course! You are not?"

Keegan laughed. "No, I am too old for fears. And I warn you, young Callon, you must rid yourself of yours. You see, there's something I have not told you about the Dark, something I am not sure of myself. I hesitate to tell you now. I should say it will only increase your fears."

I knew I should have left this old man behind! "Well, then? Quit talking in riddles. What is it?"

"You are angry?"

"What do you think?!"

"Good," he said satisfied. "Anger is a good weapon against fear. Now I shall tell you. It is my belief that the Dark is a creature of some kind. Do you understand me, boy? It is a living thing and it has the ability to read your mind. This is what makes your fear so dangerous. It shall feed on your fears. This is how it drives men mad. And yet,

this is also the source of its power, you understand? To those who can overcome their own fear it will grant power. Or so I believe.”

“Then the creatures that exist in there? They are merely the imaginings of frightened men?”

“Precisely, except for one important difference. They are very much alive. You will need to control your thoughts while inside the Dark. You shall see the truth of my words once we enter.”

“Is that all then? Or do you have any other secrets to reveal?”

“None I’d like to reveal,” he said. “Are you ready?”

With Keegan’s revelation, I felt less ready than before. But seeing as there was little left for me in Iona or elsewhere, I saw no reason not to move forward. I pointed ahead with my spear. “Let us go.”

“Just one more thing before we enter. A youngster much like yourself hides behind yonder boulder there,” he pointed. “I believe she intends to follow us.”

“Follow us?” I asked. “She?”

I jumped forward and rushed around the boulder, pulling the girl by her arm. I dragged her forward until she stood before us.

She was skinny, with short-cropped hair, and was disguised in man’s clothes. Like me, she was burdened with supplies.

“Who are you, and why are you following us?”

“My name is Alina, and I’m not following you. I was simply spying so I could learn more about the Dark before I venture in. On my own,” she added.

“Spying, were you?” I fumed with anger. But at the same time, I felt a strange attraction to this Alina. I saw now that she was older than she first appeared.

Keegan studied my face, I know not how, and laughed uproariously.

I tried to calm myself and turned to Alina. “You are not coming with us,” I said. “I will not be responsible for a child. Besides, the Dark is no place for a young girl-child. I forbid you to follow us.”

Alina flared with anger. “Child, am I? You, a boy without even a hair on his chin speaks to me of being a child? And you have no right to forbid me from doing anything. I shall do as I please!”

“You will not follow us!” I repeated. I could only imagine what the Iona guards should do if I were to take a child into the Dark.

“Who said anything about following you?” Alina said. “If our paths happen to be the same, well, that is no fault of mine.”

Keegan continued laughing.

“Will you quit your cackling, old man? I fail to see what you find so amusing.”

“You, my friend. Despite all your protests, and despite Alina’s claims, she shall follow us. In fact, my boy, she will be traveling with us. And you shall be glad for it.”

Alina looked at Keegan with obvious affection and a good measure of awe. Keegan smiled smugly, his stained and missing teeth poking out unabashedly.

“You have lost your wits, old man. I am *not* glad for it. I am furious. I will not be taking an old man and a child with me into the Dark.”

Keegan turned to Alina. “Show him your seeing glass, child.”

Alina looked at Keegan sharply and one of her hands dropped to her side, where an odd shape bulged through her clothes.

“What is this?” I asked. “Is this some magic thing?”

Alina laughed, a light tinkling sound that startled me with its beauty. “There are those who believe so, though I am not sure.”

“Show him,” said Keegan.

“I know not how you know of this,” she said, pulling the object from beneath her cloak. It appeared to be a looking glass, though I quickly saw that it failed to provide any reflection. Instead, it seemed to glow slightly when one looked through it. It was bordered in a silver frame covered with strange runes. I had never seen a magic object, but this thing reeked of sorcery.

“What is it?” I asked.

“As the old man said,” Alina replied. “It is a seeing glass. By gazing through it, one can see things that are normally hidden by darkness. It gathers light where there is seemingly none. With this, I can see in the Dark.” She held her head up proudly.

I remained unbelieving. “Perhaps it gathers light in normal shadow. But I doubt it shall work in the Dark.”

“Oh, but it does,” said Alina. “I have tested it several times. This is not my first trip into the Dark.”

“What?” I asked, incredulous.

Keegan began roaring with laughter again.

“Oh, yes, I have been inside many times. What? Don’t tell me you haven’t even been inside it yet?”

I shook my head and turned to Keegan. “Can you believe this child?”

“Ha! I do,” said Keegan. “I am quite certain she speaks the truth. She has more experience in the Dark than you do, my boy, and no fear of it. As I said, we are fortunate to have her with our company.”

“I haven’t agreed yet,” I said, grumbling.

“Nor have I asked,” Alina pointed out, though she smiled again at Keegan.

“Bah! Details!” said Keegan. “And I believe I have just taken care of them. So it’s decided, the three of us shall venture together. And we shall not stop until we reach the heart of the Dark. There, done.”

With that, Keegan turned and walked directly into the Dark. Before I had the chance to protest, he was gone.

Alina looked at me in shock then back to where Keegan had disappeared. She quickly turned and followed.

I stood there in anger. Great! An old man and a young girl as my traveling companions—my fate was sealed. I should just let them go on ahead and venture in by myself, I thought. Damn that Keegan. Why did I feel like he was controlling my every move? And who was this girl that acted with such daring? And why did she look so familiar? I hitched up my pack, and holding out my sword, I followed Keegan and Alina into the Dark.

“There you are,” said Alina. “Please do try to keep up.”

We had been hiking for many hours, and the Dark pressed upon me like a death shroud. It seemed to steal the strength from my limbs. It tried to find its way inside my head, invading my mind with thoughts I knew were not my own. Night had always been my companion, and I had been confident that I would find the Dark equally welcome. Yet now I stumbled. My lungs pained with each breath. And my thoughts scattered before I had a chance to focus.

Worst of all, despite my shadow vision, I was the most blind of us three. Anyone other than me, I had thought, would be utterly helpless. But now, even with my shadow vision, I could see only the

barest outlines of Keegan and Alina, each marching confidently before me as if they were on a short garden walk.

The horizon was lost in shadow. I saw only a few steps around me. Otherwise, the darkness was complete.

“Are you all right?” Alina asked. I couldn’t see her face, but her voice was traced with concern.

“I’m fine,” I said, trying to sound confident. “Quit stopping for me. I’m fine. Look, Keegan’s gone ahead of us.”

“Shall I ask him to slow down?”

“No,” I said, annoyed that Keegan, an old man, had more strength than I. “Just move forward.”

“You’re tired. We can stop to eat and rest.” She reached out to catch me as I tripped.

“No,” I said, shaking off her grip. “Later. Just go!”

I stumbled again.

“Please,” she said. “Let me help you.” She grabbed my arm to steady me.

“Fine,” I mumbled. “But let’s keep walking.”

We walked quickly to catch up to Keegan, who seemed to have no worries about leaving us behind.

“What do you believe is at the center?” Alina asked suddenly. I could dimly see her face pressed up against her seeing glass, peering ahead of us.

“I don’t know. Keegan speaks of a great power there.”

“And you?”

“I wish I knew. I know only that I am drawn there by something. I have always known it.”

“Truly? I have felt the same way, even since I was a young girl, much to the horror of my mother. She believes I am touring Iona. I dare not tell her the truth.

“And your father?”

“Oh, he knows. In fact, he gave me this seeing glass. Would you like to view it?”

She held the object to my face. To my amazement, the darkness seemed to lift before it. I could see the landscape around us almost as if it were in starlight. It stretched out for miles ahead of us with a

frightening vastness. It looked as if there was no end to the Dark, at least none that I could see.

I handed the object back to her.

I felt almost blind without it, and was glad that Alina remained by my side. Keegan was right again, I thought. I was glad. Such an annoying man!

Alina and I continued to speak. Despite my dislike of discussing myself, Alina's soothing voice had an enchanting effect, and before I could stop myself, I had told her my entire story.

"A thief, huh?" she said. "I believe I have heard of you."

"And what of yourself?" I asked. "Who are you, a young waif, to wander about in a place such as this, defying the wishes of your mother?"

"A waif, am I? Do you really not recognize me? Shall I hand you back my seeing glass so you can study my face?"

"I do not know you."

"You do," she said. "But you do not remember." She paused, as if unable to decide whether to say more.

"Yes?" I asked.

She sighed loudly. "Do you not recognize my name, the name given to me by my father? My father, the King?"

"What?" I said, almost losing my grip. Had I heard her correctly? She must be lying. But I knew at once that she was not. I remembered her face, and now her name.

Alina laughed, and I found myself again entranced by the sound. "I should not have told you. Now you will be bowing before me and treating me as though I were made of crystal."

There was little danger of that, I thought. Alina already supported much of my weight. So she was a Princess. Well, that certainly explained her arrogance. But if she honestly believed I would bow to her, she would wait until the end of her days. I bowed to no one.

I stumbled and fell to my knees before her.

"See! You bow before me already! Rise to your feet. You need not worship me." She grinned.

"I'm not!" I barked, pulling myself free from her grip. "I tripped."

"Uh-huh," she murmured.

“Will you two stop flirting and hurry up?” Keegan snapped angrily, startling both Alina and myself. “In fact, I think it a good idea if we all begin running. There’s a small hillock ahead. We must run there with all possible haste.”

Alina peered through her looking-glass. “Way over there? That is too far. We need rest. Callon—”

“There is no time,” said Keegan. “We must go now.”

“Why?” Alina protested. “We are all tired.”

“Which of you is afraid of spiders?” Keegan poked his face between us, glaring back and forth.

Alina remained silent and looked at Keegan as if he was crazy.

“Alina?”

She shook her head. Both Keegan and Alina looked at me.

“I’m not afraid,” I said. “I simply don’t care for them. What of it?”

“Oh, Callon,” Alina whispered fearfully.

I turned and saw that she stared at something behind us. Several large black shapes moved in our direction. Next came the sound of their scabbling feet. So close! How could they move so quickly? Already they had halved the distance. They were as large as horses, with big black shiny bodies and many legs.

“Ha! Your nightmare spiders have come for you, boy. Now, let us run before it’s too late. We will make our stand there.”

Spiders! Being forced to sleep outside most nights, spiders had always been my worst fear. I had suffered badly from their poisonous bites on many occasions. I held no fondness for their kind.

With a sudden surge of strength I didn’t know I had, I raced after Keegan and Alina.

We reached the hillock only moments before the spiders. There must have been nearly a dozen of them. To my amazement, Alina had already pulled out her bow and—with the aid of her looking glass—was shooting small arrows in quick succession. Each struck with a sickening squishy sound followed by a high-pitched scream.

Then they were upon us. I pulled out my spear just in time to lance one of the loathsome creatures through its body. Keegan battled two of them armed only with his staff. We three stood back to back on the hillock as the spiders surrounded us.

The sounds of the spiders' screaming roared around us. Sizzling hot liquid spattered across my body as I speared at the monster before me. It reached out one of its legs and swept me off my feet. I stabbed at it with my spear and hit the mark. It screamed and scabbled away, taking my spear with it.

I quickly unsheathed my sword and hacked at the legs of another. I saw that Alina had no more arrows and was armed with a short knife. A spider had her pinned to the ground and was about to use its legs to snap her neck. I rushed over and sliced off two of its legs in one swoop.

The creature fell back and scrambled away.

Alina hopped to her feet and continued fighting.

After several minutes, we finally killed the last spider. I had a large gash across my shoulder. Alina had a wound on her leg. Keegan, surprisingly, had not a scratch on him.

"Well done, my friends!" he said, surveying the damage with his sightless eyes. "I daresay we showed them. They will not be returning."

Alina limped around gathering her arrows while I sought out my spear. We returned to the hillock to tend to our wounds and clean ourselves of the putrid-smelling blood. After that, we ate some food and lay down to rest.

"You see now the importance of overcoming your fears," said Keegan. "Tell me, is it spiders only that you are afraid of?"

"Yes," I said. "Well...spiders and their kind."

"I see," said Keegan. "Bugs. Is that all? Do you fear other creatures? Birds perhaps? Or kittens?"

"No," I said defensively. "I am not a man given easily to fear."

"I am scared of snakes," said Alina softly. "When I was a child, I was bitten by an asp. It nearly took my life. I have had nightmares ever since."

Keegan shook head. "This is the price I must pay for traveling with two youngsters."

"What, and you have no fears?" asked Alina.

"As I've said, I am too old for fear. My only fear is that our way to the center will be blocked by one of you. Now, let us forget about it. It

does us no good to dwell on such things. Think instead of what we shall find at the center.”

“And what do you think we shall find?” asked Alina.

“Do not ask him that,” I said. “He will only answer with riddles. He knows no better than we.”

Keegan laughed loudly. “I know some better. I have been close to it. I have felt its power. I feel it even now. But he is right, my dear princess. I have no knowledge of the center. It is blocked to my second sight. But I suspect that whatever we shall find, it will be a power of a kind that none of us has experienced before. Can you not feel it?”

Alina nodded. “Yes, I feel it.”

They turned to me.

“No,” I said. “I feel nothing.”

“Nothing?” asked Keegan. “But were you not only moments earlier dragging your feet? It appeared to me that our dear lady here was half-carrying you. And yet now, you are full of energy, are you not?”

I frowned at Keegan. He was right, my energy had returned.

“Look around you,” said Keegan. “Has your shadow vision improved?”

“How did you know?” I said. I hadn’t noticed at first, but I could now see more clearly than before. The landscape stretched out dully around us. I could even see the horizon. Everything remained utterly dark, but yet, I could see.

“It is the power of the Dark. Before, you were fighting against it. Now you have let it inside you. You have killed your fear and have stood naked before it. Its power is now yours. Can you not feel it?”

Keegan was right. My entire body vibrated with strength. Defeating the spiders had filled me with confidence. I felt ready to conquer anything. “Yes,” I said. “I feel it.”

“Ha! I thought so. And which way is the center, my boy?”

I turned and pointed.

“Very good,” said Keegan, chuckling. “You feel the power. We shall proceed after a short rest.”

“My snake is coming,” said Alina.

Both Keegan and I looked at her in surprise. We had been hiking for three days and had encountered only a few strange creatures, which we were easily able to avoid. We needed little rest and had made very quick progress. All three of us could easily feel the power of the center now. It radiated like the warmth of a bonfire.

Equipped as we were with our talents for seeing in the Dark, we fared much better than I thought we would. Keegan estimated that we were only two days' march from the center. I felt certain it was less than that. The power of it pulsed through me like fire. If not for Alina insisting that we rest, I would have kept marching.

"It has been following us, waiting. It will wait no longer." Alina looked shakily at both of us. "We shall have to fight it."

"Bah," said Keegan. "It's just a snake, child. Do not be afraid. We can kill it."

Alina looked doubtful. "It is a large snake, Eton. Very large. My arrows will be nothing but an annoyance to it. And I doubt my knife can pierce its scales. I can see it in my thoughts. It comes for us even now. It has been there ever since I first entered the Dark. It has watched me. Now it hunts."

"How big is it?" I asked. I had little fear of snakes, until perhaps now.

Alina shook her head. "Too big. There's no way we can kill it."

Keegan chuckled softly. "We can, and we shall. Fear not, Alina. You are not alone. Your young champion here shall protect you."

I glared at Keegan. So I was the princess's champion now? I had little desire to fight a giant snake, but it appeared that I was being given no choice.

"Do not worry, Alina," I said. "We'll fight it."

Keegan smiled. "Splendid, because it is here."

"What?" Alina and I looked at each other, and glanced hurriedly around us.

"Your weapons!" Keegan snapped. "Did you not hear me?"

And then it was upon us. It had been lying down on the ground, hidden in wait. What I had thought was a small roll in the land was actually its body, which now lifted from the ground and uncoiled. A giant head tall as a firepine rose before us. Its huge green eyes focused on us.

Alina was already shooting arrows. The twanging and whizzing sounds sped by my ears, followed the sharp sound of the arrows bouncing off its skin. As Alina had feared, her arrows failed to pierce its scales.

The snake darted back and forth, moving closer to strike.

I swung up my spear and felt the toughness of its scales. Seeing an opening, I thrust forward and sliced one of its eyes. It roared in pain and pulled back, searching for me with its good eye.

Alina cocked her last arrow and, aiming carefully, let it fly. Just as the snake was about to strike, the arrow pierced its other eye.

The creature flung its head back and emitted a scream of anguish. The arrow remained sticking out of its eye as it turned towards us.

"I have no more arrows," Alina whispered.

"I don't think it matters," I whispered. "The snake is sightless. Do not make a sound. It cannot see us."

Alina instantly stood perfectly still. I looked over at Keegan. He sat cross-legged a short distance behind us, his staff resting on his lap. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be resting peacefully.

The snake hesitated, rocked its giant head back and forth, then lunged forward and struck the ground next to us. As I suspected, it couldn't see us. Alina and I jumped to one side. I lashed out with my sword and sliced it across the face.

It roared back in pain. Now, it was angry. It began attacking in earnest, striking again and again at random. We darted back and forth to avoid the strikes, but it was clear that we couldn't keep it up much longer. The snake, however, showed no signs of tiring.

I glanced over at Keegan. He still sat there, calm and composed, seemingly unaware of what was going on. I wanted to scream out to him, but I feared drawing attention to myself.

The snake kept striking. Thump! I saw the silhouette of Alina's body twirl into the darkness as the snake struck her. Both Alina and the snake screamed. The snake reared its head. I could see Alina's knife glinting slightly where it remained stuck on the snake's nose. There was no sign of Alina. Keegan remained sitting without a care in the world.

The snake screamed again and continued striking. I hopped from side to side like a scared rabbit, lashing out with my sword. Then

wham! The snake barreled into me, sending my sword flying. I lay on the ground, watching in horror as the snake rushed towards me.

Roar! I immediately clapped my hands over my ears. What was that sound? It wasn't the snake. It now stopped striking and began flicking its head from side to side. I looked over at Keegan. His eyes were now open, and I could just see the paleness of his teeth. He was smiling!

Another loud roar swept over us. And this time, I heard it—the stomping sound of a large creature. I never actually saw it as it rushed forward and bit the snake, dragging it off into the darkness.

The sound of the snake screaming grew fainter.

“What was that?” I asked, breathlessly.

Keegan began laughing. “It worked!” he said.

“What worked? Wait, you called that thing?” I asked, horrified.

“You don't want to know. The snake's gone, isn't it?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Alina! We have to find Alina!”

“I'm fine,” Alina said, appearing suddenly by our side. She brushed the dirt from her clothes.

“You killed the snake?” She looked up at me, clearly impressed.

I shook my head. “Keegan did it. He called something. A giant creature of some kind.”

Alina was wide-eyed. “But how?”

“It's the power,” said Keegan, still chuckling. “The Dark manifests fears, yes. But there are two sides to every coin. I just flipped the coin. Instead of facing my fears, I faced my hopes. Not as easy as it might sound, I might add. But I did it.”

“Is it gone?” asked Alina. “The snake?”

“Oh, yes,” said Keegan. “Don't worry about that. Are you sure you're all right, young miss?”

“I'm fine. Just a bit bruised.” She looked up at me, as if to make sure that I cared. I smiled weakly.

“Splendid. Shall we continue? I feel quite certain that we are almost there. In fact, if I am not mistaken, our destination is but an hour or two away. There's nothing that can keep us away now.”

We stared at the wall in despair. It appeared to stretch endlessly in either direction and must have been more than a hundred feet tall.

Composed of large black bricks, the surface offered no finger-hold for climbing. Alina was not to be put off and kept trying anyway. She fell down time and again after climbing only a short way. She only became more determined and began searching for another route.

"It is as I feared," said Keegan. "The center is protected. Such fools we are! I should have known."

"There must be a way across," I said. "A way to get through."

"Over," said Alina. "It's the only way." She looked at the top of the wall longingly.

We had already traversed the wall for several hours. There were no doors, no archways, no tunnels. It appeared that the wall had no passage through it anywhere. Digging under it was impossible. The ground was too rocky.

"We are lost," cried Keegan. "We cannot pass. We shall have to turn back. I should've known the center would be protected from trespass."

"We are not turning back!" said Alina.

"Calm down, both of you," I said. "Let's stop and think. Perhaps there is a way. Keegan, you got rid of the snake. Perhaps you can call something?"

"Oh? What creature shall I call for us? There is no creature even in imagination that could scale this wall."

"A bird could," I said.

"Bah! And you would have me call forth a giant bird to carry us over? Are you mad, boy? How shall we get the bird to grab us? What is to stop it from eating us? It is a foolish idea. We must turn back. Besides, we are nearly out of food. There is no reason to stay! I knew this would happen. I didn't want to believe my second sight. But I have foreseen this. We shall not pass beyond this wall."

"We're not leaving!" repeated Alina.

"Quiet!" I shouted. "Both of you. We are all tired and hungry. Let's eat and rest, and then we'll decide. Agreed?"

Both Keegan and Alina nodded reluctantly.

We ate in silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts.

I could feel the power of the Dark pulsing through me. Keegan was right. We were so close. And yet, with the wall blocking the way, it

made little difference. There must be a way, I thought. We cannot have come so far, only to be turned back.

I stared at the wall in anger. Who had built this monstrosity? I wondered. How old was it? And most importantly, what lay beyond it?

Every particle of my being longed to get over the wall, and yet I could not see a way. Keegan was right again, there was no way across.

I offered to take the first watch. With the power of the Dark rushing in my blood, I felt little need for sleep.

As I suspected, Keegan and Alina were both tired. It took only moments before Alina slept. Not long after, Keegan began to snore loudly.

I held my sword across my knees and tried to think of a way past the wall.

After some time, Alina stirred in her sleep, then suddenly woke.

"I cannot sleep with that man snoring," she said grumpily. She raised her head and looked at me.

I laughed. "He is loud. I'm surprised he doesn't wake himself up."

"Callon," Alina whispered excitedly. "Look behind you! Quickly!"

I snapped my head around.

"The wall," she said, sitting up. "It's gone!"

I stared in amazement. Not only was the wall gone, but so was the Dark. Just beyond where the wall had stood, the Dark ended, or so it seemed. A bright swirling whiteness curled and shimmered. And not an ordinary light, but one filled with strange sparkles and glows such as I had never seen.

Alina and I jumped up and began grabbing our packs.

"Keegan!" Alina shouted. "Wake up! The wall is gone."

The old man kept snoring blissfully.

"Keegan!" Alina shouted.

Still he slept.

"Oh, let me!" I said. I walked over and shook him roughly. "Wake up, old man!"

"Eh, what's that? Why did you wake me?"

We both stared at him, smiling.

"We can go now," said Alina. "The wall is gone."

Keegan looked at us, and then over our shoulders towards where the wall had been. "Are you both mad? The wall is right there."

Alina and I spun on our heels.

The wall was back. It was as if it had never gone.

"Impossible!" cried Alina. "It was gone."

Keegan looked at Alina as though she had gone mad. "The Dark can make one imagine things," he said, clucking sympathetically.

Alina turned to me for confirmation.

I shook my head. "No. Alina was right. The wall was gone."

Keegan looked at me sadly. He clearly thought that I too was gripped by the madness of the Dark.

"It was gone, I tell you!" Alina stomped her foot.

I stared at the wall and looked at Keegan. Suddenly, it was obvious. "It's you, old man!" I shouted. "No fears, huh? That's your wall. You're creating that."

Keegan opened his mouth to protest, but instead began to study the wall. He began laughing uproariously.

"I hardly think this is funny," I said.

Keegan shrugged. "Well you must admit, it is a fantastic wall." He thrust his chest out proudly.

"Old man!" I shouted and lunged for him.

Alina grabbed me. "Stop! If he made it, he can un-make it. Right, Keegan?"

"What?" said Keegan. "Of course, I can. Easy. Give me just a few seconds, and we'll be on our way."

He sat down, closed his eyes. Twenty minutes later, Keegan opened his eyes. "It's still there?" he asked, looking at the wall with surprise.

"Go back to sleep," Alina suggested. "Then we'll carry you across and wake you up."

Keegan sighed. "Very well," he muttered. He lay down slowly and curled up.

Alina and I remained perfectly silent, glancing at Keegan and each other, then back at the wall.

An hour later, the wall was still there. Keegan lay there quietly, apparently asleep. Then again, he wasn't snoring.

Alina looked at me, questioningly. I shrugged.

“Keegan?” I whispered. “Are you awake?”

Keegan sat up. “Sorry,” he smiled sheepishly. “I’m just not tired.”

“I have an idea,” I said. “I’ll hit you over the head and knock you unconscious.”

“Stop joking,” Alina said.

“I’m not.”

Keegan looked at me and seemed to consider the idea.

“No!” said Alina. “There will be no hitting. Lay down, Keegan. And I’ll sing to you. Maybe that will help.”

“Lay with the princess?” he looked at me, grinning. “What man can resist such an offer?”

I felt a sudden wave of jealousy, which was quickly forgotten as Alina began to sing. I have spent more time in taverns than most and have heard many a songbird. And yet, I had never heard anyone sing like Alina. Her voice had a softness and a sweetness that cut right through me. Her song wound around me like a snake, holding me in its grip.

I woke to find Alina shaking my shoulder. She pointed at Keegan, who slept soundly, and at the wall, which wasn’t there. Instead, there was that strange living brightness. The center of the Dark. We were finally there.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Help me carry him.”

I jumped up and quickly lifted Keegan up by myself. He was no heavier than a child. With Alina by my side, we walked forward and ventured into the brightness.

I could feel Alina grab my arm and hold tightly. She was trembling. I didn’t tell her that I was more afraid than she. I was used to the Dark. I had spent my entire life in shadow. This light, however, sliced right through me. The sense of raw power was overwhelming.

The light swept around us like a thick fog. Only the ground was visible. We kept walking towards the center.

“It can’t be much farther,” said Alina.

“You can put me down now,” said Keegan, looking up at me. “I think we’re here.”

“How long have you been awake?” I asked, almost dropping him.

Keegan ignored me and strode forward.

Alina and I looked at each and leapt after him.

Both of us broke through the light at the same moment. We found ourselves in a large forested glade. Huge leafy plants and ferns surrounded a small pond of silver-blue water. A profusion of flowers grew everywhere. On the far edge of the pond, a small waterfall danced down the rocks, casting a misty rainbow at its feet. Every object seemed silhouetted in silvery light.

It was as if we had stumbled into the palace gardens. I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

Alina fell to her knees and began weeping. I too had tears in my eyes. There was something about this glade that was undeniably magical.

“Where’s Keegan?” asked Alina, searching the landscape.

I looked around and finally saw him. Only then did I realize how large the glade was. Keegan was on the other side, approaching a jumble of moss-covered boulders.

“I see him,” I said, pointing. “Right there, by those rocks.” I saw that he was kneeling down, but I didn’t understand why.

Alina peered forward, then suddenly gripped my arm.

“Callon, look! There’s somebody else there.”

I gasped. I could scarcely believe my eyes. How had I missed her? She was a beautiful woman, but no ordinary woman. Her skin seemed luminescent. She wore a gown of living light, and it flashed and glittered with a thousand colors. Her golden hair swept over her shoulders. Her large eyes sparkled with vivid blues and violets that pierced my heart. I felt as if I would do anything for her.

Like me, Alina stared in awe at the beautiful creature before us and watched as Keegan spoke with her.

We were too far to hear what was being said. And though I longed to rush forward, I seemed rooted to the spot. I knew not what kind of creature the woman was, but I knew one thing: she was the source of the power that pulsed around us. It was she who created the Dark. I was certain of it.

I looked over at Alina. She too seemed unable to move.

After long moments, Keegan rose, and the woman motioned towards Alina.

Alina didn’t hesitate, but jumped up and sprang forwards. She didn’t even pause as she and Keegan passed. I wanted to run

forward, but still found myself unable to do so.

Keegan came walking to me, his face split with a huge grin.

“Who is that woman? What did she say to you?”

“Ah-ah,” said Keegan, bouncing his eyebrows at me. “I’m not telling. Besides, you’ll find out soon enough, my boy. Just be patient, and the lady will answer all your questions. She has quite a surprise for you, I daresay.”

“What? Why must you always speak in riddles, old man? Tell me who she is.”

“She spoke of you,” Keegan said. “But she made me promise to reveal nothing. Oh, but the things she said!” He began laughing. “I would give much to see your face when she speaks to you.”

I let loose a string of curses, which only caused Keegan to laugh harder.

I stomped around and tried to break the spell that held me bound to the earth so I could grab him. But the power was too great. I remained rooted to the spot while Keegan danced around me, laughing at my frustration.

It was with incredible relief that I saw Alina rise and the mysterious woman look at me. She lifted her hand and beckoned.

I felt the power grab me. As though I were a puppet, the lady pulled me towards her. In moments, I knelt before her.

“Who are you?” I asked.

She looked down at me with a compassion that made me feel like her child. “I am the Keeper of the Dark,” she said. “I am the Guardian of the Light. I am the protector of the Lands and the holder of the Power. Do you not feel it?”

I nodded.

“I am pleased that you have heard my calling and finally come to me. I have waited long.”

“You called me?”

“Yes, my child. I have called you as I have called many. Your shadow vision was no accident. I have given many the gifts they need, yet few have reached me. As it is written in the old songs, the one who journeys to the center of the dark shall reap great rewards. It is said they shall receive the wish that burns most powerfully in their hearts and minds, and so shall you. You have lived the difficult

life of a thief, an outcast, a hunted man. You have spent many nights cold, hungry and alone. You have had many enemies and few friends. These have been difficult lessons for you, but they have been necessary for what is to come.”

I felt as though I were in a dream. Questions bounced around in my head, and yet I found myself unable to ask any of them. I felt helpless as I knelt before this strange, beautiful creature. She continued to speak.

“Listen to the old man,” she said, “For he will guide you in the times ahead. And guard the young woman with your life, for she is the protector of your heart. You are destined for greatness, child. You, a mere thief, shall call the entire land your own. You, my dear Callon, will be King.”

“What?” I croaked. Had I heard her correctly? King?

She laughed kindly. “Yes, my child, I have spoken truly,” she said, gazing into my thoughts. “It is your path. Do you deny your love for Alina?”

I flushed with embarrassment. Was nothing hidden from her? I shook my head. I could not lie to the lady. Though I had not known Alina long, I could not close my eyes without her face coming to my mind.

She nodded. “Her love for you is also strong. United, you shall have the power to bring your people together. This you must do, Callon, for great change is coming. Only together can you hope to withstand what comes.”

For the first time, the lady looked pained, and her placid expression turned to one of worry. But it lasted only a moment, and again she smiled soothingly.

“Heed the advice I have given you, child. Make use of the wish I grant to each of you. You shall need the power that comes from them. I can tell you no more. My time with you now comes to an end.”

I looked up at her longingly. I tried to think of some way to make her stay. I had many questions still unanswered. I felt as if I would die if she left.

She laughed, a soft tinkling sound, and faded away into the trees and plants. The light around us began to dim and brighten, pulsating

in a strange pattern of increasing light and darkness.

Alina and Keegan beckoned to me and called my name. I stumbled toward them just as full darkness enveloped us.

We all remained silent and watched in fascination as the darkness slowly lifted. We looked around us in astonishment. There were rocks and land, and in the distance, a range of mountains. And directly behind us, a towering wall of Dark.

Keegan began laughing and stomping his feet. Alina reached out and gripped my arm. Then she too began laughing. Soon, I was laughing too.

How it occurred, I couldn't fathom. But somehow, the Lady of the Dark had brought us back to the beginning of our journey, back to the very point where we had started.

The three of us sat around the table, drinking ale. We hadn't had time to be alone since coming out of the Dark. So much had changed. Alina was my wife now. As the Lady of the Dark had predicted, I was King. The people loved us. These were happy times. It was good to celebrate and reminisce about what had happened to us.

"You know," I said. "The lady spoke of giving me a gift, but I never got one. What gift did she give to you, Keegan?"

"Bah! She tried to give me my sight back, but I wouldn't have it. I told her I didn't want a gift. She told me only that I would receive my heart's greatest desire."

"Old man!" I said. "What did she give you?"

Keegan shrugged. "Nothing, as far as I can see."

I could have bonked him over the head.

Alina rolled her eyes. "Don't you two see? What would you do without me? She said: your heart's greatest desire. Keegan, clearly you desired to live in luxury and hold counsel with Kings, am I correct?"

Keegan tilted his head. "Well, I have considered such things," he admitted.

"And you, my love," said Alina, turning to me. "You a thief, who is now a King and loved by his people. I am guessing that this fulfills your heart's desire. Am I right?"

“Yes, my dear. As always, you are right. So what about you? What was your heart’s greatest desire?”

Alina blushed with embarrassment. “You, you stupid oaf!” she said, and turned to walk away.

I scooped her up in my arms and kissed her. I noticed she didn’t resist.

“Oh, get a room!” snorted Keegan, and he stalked away grumbling.

Preston Dennett has worked as a carpet cleaner, fast-food worker, data entry clerk, bookkeeper, landscaper, singer, actor, writer, radio host, TV consultant, teacher, UFO researcher, ghost hunter and more, but his favorite job is writing speculative fiction stories and books about UFOs and the paranormal. He has sold 32 stories to various venues including Andromeda Spaceways, Cast of Wonders, Grievous Angel, Perihelion, Sci-Phi Journal, Stupefying Stories and more, and has also earned eleven honorable mentions in the Writers of the Future Contest. He spends his days looking for new ways to pay his bills, and his nights exploring the farthest reaches of the Universe.

In 1936 Dr. Josef Mengele discovers Victor Frankenstein's lab journal and is tasked by the Reich Institute with reproducing the resurrection process.

In 1945 A Jewish boy travels to the top of the world in search of the only being that can stop him....



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The Ride

By EDWARD MCDERMOTT

Doggedly pursued by foes, a man has no egress but deeper into a cliffside cave that hides an abandoned temple! What pleasures or perils await in the salon of the mysterious beauty who resides behind the ancient gates, hidden from Heaven's gaze?!

Brian had ridden without rest since early morning, killing two horses and now pushing the third as it began to stumble with exhaustion. Pity filled his heart as he spurred the valiant steed onward, knowing once it fell he would have to run on foot. Before him, the cairn marked the boundaries to King Elwood's domain. It stood high in the pass that led to the wild Northern lands, filled only with barbarians who would slay him for his sword.

His only weapons were the broadsword and poniard he carried. No armor, no chainmail, no gold chains or rings. No retinue followed his trail; no squire by his side. All were gone, slain by treachery and black magic, leaving him the sole heir to seized estates, with more value to the man who slew him than what he carried in his own purse.

The steed stumbled and fell. Brian sprang from the saddle. He looked back at the dust from thundering hooves. Only magical mounts could have matched his ride. Beyond the cairn lay a new land and new gods—and perhaps salvation.

As he climbed the rise, he looked to the left and the right, hoping for some path that would better suit a man on foot than a demon mount. What powers might those demonic horses have to race over rougher ground? What certainty did he have the riders would give up their prey once he passed the cairn? The limits of the kingdom held no magic power, and even if they did, a simple wooden shaft might cross the space just as well as curses and spells.

The cliff face rose up beside the road, or rather turned it aside and left it to wind up, clinging like a vine to the rough rock. There, in the aged stone, Brian saw the mark of an ancient chisel: a rough-hewn hole bored a scant few inches into the rock. He saw one, then another. His eyes followed the marks as they climbed the rock face. Behind him, he heard the drum of hooves beating on the road. Without hesitation, Brian slung his sword onto his back and clambered up the rocks like a lizard running up a wall.

He climbed, concentrating only on spotting each new handhold. Despite his desperate haste he climbed with exquisite care, moving only one foot or hand at a time. As he climbed the thunder of pursuit grew steadily louder until it halted. Far below Brian heard a murmur of conversation. The twang of bowstrings preceded the feathered shafts that pecked at the stones around him. The pursuers stood too close to the face of the cliff to target him well.

The carved footholds abruptly ended. Brian stopped, his hand searching for the next grip, finding only smooth rock. The Northern Barbarians lived in caves high on cliffs and guarded their homes with false trails that led an invader to a dead end. If that was the case, Brian was doomed. He would wait until an arrow pierced his innards, or he grew too tired to hold to the rock face and fell to his death.

Leaning back, ignoring the arrows shot from below, he surveyed the rock face for further footholds. To his right he spotted a crack, a crevice barely large enough to admit his fist. A desperate stretch, but it led upward, widening.

He swung across the intervening space to the crevice and began to struggle upward. The arrows from below increased and then stopped completely. Brian clambered high enough to slip inside the crevice.

Looking down he saw three men following him up the cliff-side. Brian searched for some missile to throw but nothing came to hand. He continued to flee up the crevice, which widened into a chimney.

At first, the widening made it easier to climb. Soon the stretch from one side to the other became uncomfortable and difficult to bridge. His climb ended at a cave mouth. Throwing himself over the side of the crevice and into the safety of the cave, Brian collapsed exhausted, his breath drawn in ragged gasps.

Once he had recovered, he looked back. His pursuers split into three groups. One group rode up the trail; a second continued to wait at the foot of the cliff, while three men climbed, following his steps. Brian unlimbered his sword and waited. He might be trapped here, but this trap also formed an impregnable position. One man could hold it against an army if attacked from below. If only he had a bottle of brandy, or better still, a canteen of water, to slake his thirst.

When the first climber reached the end of the footholds, he paused for a moment before trying that desperate lunge to the crevice. Brian watched the man launch himself across the space, grasping and holding the edge for a terrible moment, before falling. The surrounding hills echoed his death scream back and forth: a demon's cry to summon further evil. Brian shivered.

The two remaining climbers shouted pleas to those waiting below but found no mercy. A second attempt to bridge the space between the footholds and the crevice proved disastrous. The remaining pursuer slowly clambered down, willing to risk his master's displeasure rather than face certain death. For the moment, Brian was secure in his niche.

Pacing, Brian examined the rock face. No hand-hewn footholds presented themselves. No other crevices or ledges. Perhaps the frost of a thousand winters had flaked the ancient egress away. Perhaps the Northern Barbarians had reached this cave from above. Bending carefully back, Brian looked up. Even if he succeeded in clambering up to the top, would he find his pursuers waiting there for him?

The cave mouth itself had once been an ornately carved temple, with pillars on each side. Beyond the pillars, Brian could see a bronze door in the gloom. Its tarnished, dull surface blended with the stygian darkness that shrouded the interior of the cave. Perhaps some ancient barbarian king lay behind that door. The workmanship and the reliefs carved into the stone spoke of a more advanced society. The carvings portrayed unspeakable acts.

Brian stared at the massive bronze doors and wondered if even his enormous strength could budge them after all these eons. The hinges must have rusted solid.

Pebbles clattered at the mouth of the cave. Brian turned to see a rope jerk past the opening in the sunlight. His pursuers must have ridden to a point above him to lower themselves on ropes. They could descend until they were just below the roof of the cave and then pepper him with arrows at their leisure. He only had moments before his refuge became a death trap.

Grasping the handle of one of the doors and setting his leg against the other, Brian heaved. The muscles on his back and thighs stood out under the enormous strain. Thews made strong in battle and from constant training shook, and veins stood out on his neck and his breath came in harsh gasps. A stone clattered behind him, and Brian threw one enormous wrenching effort against the stubborn door. With a horrible moan, it shuddered and moved a fraction of an inch. Taking a fresh grip, Brian tried once more. The door surrendered another inch, then another. One final heave, and Brian slipped through the bronze portal.

Within the cave, he had only the light from the slightly parted doorway. He tried to catch his breath, his sword in hand for the first attacker. At the same time, he let his eyes search to the gloom for something, anything, he could use as a torch.

Outside, he heard guttural cries of joy. A body blocked the light from the doorway and started to squeeze through the narrow opening. Brian swung his sword, shearing off the long hairy arm at the shoulder. He heard a scream, and the pursuer stumbled back out from the dark, gouts of blood spattering the doorway and the stones.

Brian waited. If they could not attack him in force, neither could he counter attack. As his eyes adjusted, Brian made out dim shapes in the distance. On the floor, a once magnificent carpet runner stretched into the blackness. More carvings adorned the walls, and in the darkness, they seemed alive, dancing.

God, he felt thirsty. Water—he would have emptied his purse of gold for a skin of lukewarm water. He listened but heard only the sound of his own breathing. Outside, now that the death cries of his pursuer had faded away, he heard nothing. Perhaps they had left the cave. Maybe they waited with bows drawn for him to emerge.

Suddenly, bodies crashed against the door, smashing it closed before Brian could react. Pounding told him that his enemies were

hammering wedges around the edges of the door to seal it forever. When the pounding had finished he heard laughter.

“Rot forever in that tomb, cur. That will be a fitting punishment for lusting after the wizard’s handmaiden,” Brian heard from beyond the door.

“So, that was why they pursued me,” he said to himself. He shouted back, “Maiden no more and no longer a virgin for sacrifice!” However, these brave words of defiance didn’t alter the facts. The door was sealed, beyond his capacity to open. His pursuers’ mistake would profit him nothing unless he could find some other means of escape.

In the blackness, Brian felt for the carpet. The rotten fabric tore easily in his hands. Powder dry from a thousand years of untrammelled peace, it would burn like tinder. All he needed was a spark. A blow on the stone floor with his sword supplied that.

The first fragment burned too quickly, the flames eagerly consuming the ancient fuel. Brian used the light to tear a length of runner and wrap it about his blade, then light the end. By turning his sword he could feed more carpet, without letting the entire length burst into flame.

Even with this ingenious solution, his torch would only last for minutes. Quickly he cast about the chamber looking for more temperate fuel. The amphora stood dry. The lamps as well.

Reaching a dais, Brian found an ancient throne. Ignoring the gold and jewels, he tore the chair apart for something much more valuable to him, the wood. The ancient wood lit quickly and burned brightly but promised to last for some time.

Gathering all the sticks from the throne, he stopped for a moment to scoop up a scattering of rubies and emeralds that had fallen from the wood and thrust them into his purse. Even as he did, something startled him, and he dropped the bundle so he could grasp his sword. Something had moved in the flickering shadows from his torch.

If any creature lived down here, perhaps it could lead him to water and even to an exit from this tomb. Brian hurried into the depths of the earth after the half-seen, half-imagined figure.

The throne room gave way to an equally large and imposing room. While it had begun as a limestone cave, the hand of man had hewn straight the walls and made the pillars. Glancing up, Brian could see the ceiling had once been frescoed. Water and the centuries had started to return the space to its origins.

In the center of the immense room, an imposing statue of a crouching demon dominated the room. Before it stood a stone table, one uniquely shaped and worn for its particular purpose. Stone clamps to hold arms and legs in helpless subjection. A head-shaped indentation and, beside it, a blood groove. Brian shuddered as he saw the dark stains that even the centuries had not erased.

A shiny glint caught his eye. He stepped closer to the altar, then even closer, until he stood beside it. Hesitantly he placed a single finger on the blood groove and jerked it back. The groove was wet, and in the flickering light his fingers were stained. Tremulously he touched the finger to his mouth. Instead of the salty taste of blood, he tasted only water. Drops falling from the ceiling must have wet the altar. Shaking his head, Brian felt ashamed of his thoughts. Obviously, its builders had abandoned this temple for centuries. Or had they?

Beyond the statue and the altar, Brian reached a blank wall. From the joints between the stones, the wall had been constructed of cut stone, but not even the tip of his poniard could slip through the cracks. His torch had burnt low. He stopped to light a second one. A momentary breeze made this difficult.

With the new brand lit, Brian paused to examine the wall before him and listen. He felt prying eyes watched his every action. Without warning, Brian flicked the dying remnants of his first brand into the darkness behind him. His actions were rewarded with the image of a hunched, man-like figure scampering away into the gloom. Brian was not alone.

“What can enter can leave, and I can follow,” Brian muttered, striding toward the last point he had seen the strange figure. Only then he realized the floors were polished clean. No dust marked by footsteps betrayed the method of escape of the strange figure.

Brian strode on, reaching the wall of the room in a few more paces. He walked along the wall, tapping it with the handle of his

poniard. Every stroke echoed back the wall's solidity. Only after he had completely circled the room did Brian halt. Had the figure only been a mirage created by the flickering light? No. Brian was certain he had seen the figure lumbering away. If all the walls were solid, how had the figure escaped?

The flames on Brian's torch jumped as the air struck them. Where could the breeze come from? Were the walls solid? Facing the air current, Brian licked his finger and followed where it led him.

This wall looked much like the others. It sounded the same when he struck it with his poniard, but still the breeze came from near this spot. Was that some guttural laughter behind the walls? Did he hear feet rubbing on the stone behind him?

Where was the access? The ceiling was beyond the reach of his light here. Lighting another brand, Brian tossed the first high in the air. There, twenty feet above the floor of the room he saw a black opening, and within it he saw the eyes of a predator.

They disappeared so quickly another might have thought them a mirage, but Brian didn't. First he must find some way to climb to that opening. Carefully, he searched the wall until he noticed how the carving seemed cut with a sharper chisel. Footholds hid among the carvings, but knowing the secret made them stand out clearly. With his knife between his teeth, his sword on his back, and the firebrand in his left hand, Brian climbed to the opening. Thrusting the burning wood through the opening he followed it through the wall. His action provoked a chorus of growls from the darkness.

The dwellers of the darkness no longer hid in silence but dogged his steps, staying beyond the light, waiting. They skittered around at the edges of the light, and for the first time, Brian could see them with some detail. The creatures, for he could not think of them as men, crouched low, leaning forward so their hands hung before them, close to the floor. Their posture resembled that of apes, though their hairless skin and strong jaws spoke of a more human ancestry. These things, combined with the rags they wore, gave the impression of degeneration.

Aside from the strong jaws, the faces had sloped foreheads and enormous eyes, more resembling a lemur than a human being. How

long had these remnants of the race that raised this obscene temple lived in the darkness? What did they survive on?

Brian didn't wait to ponder these questions but plunged forward. Now that he had escaped the walls of the temple, he found himself within a true cavern. Everywhere, water dripped, building formations of exquisite beauty. However entrancing the sight, it gave no suggestion of escape. In the distance, Brian could hear the sound of running water.

Water must eventually leave the cavern, but that exit might be of little use. The water might cascade off some subterranean cliff to a tumbling of sharp rocks or flow through deep paths where no air was available. Even if he survived, he would be back at the base of the cliffs where his uncanny pursuers might still remain. No, upward was his only choice.

Brian climbed, following the slope of the land. When his torch flickered, the horde pulled closer. If he waved it about and the flames burnt more strongly, they slipped back. However, with each step the dwellers of the dark grew more desperate or more bold. Brian unsheathed his sword, preparing for a charge.

Then, a narrow opening appeared. Brian forced his body through. At the narrowest point, he stood with his brand before him and his sword behind. A scraping on the stone was the only warning. Brian's sword flew to engage in a space too narrow to hew about with the blade. His own body blocked most of the light, and he never saw the attacking creatures. Still, his sword struck with the point, and he heard a cry of pain. He squeezed through the opening.

The new cavern was enormous and dimly lit by a strange luminescence on the walls. Touching one spot with his hand, Brian found the faint green glow was transferred from the wall to his fingers. A growth, perhaps a fungus, now coated his hand with spores. Beyond the light of his torch, the cavern was bathed in its own green glow.

To go back was death, so Brian walked forward. His torch was nearly finished, and he threw the still burning handle back through the narrow opening to delay pursuit for a few moments. Depending on the glow from the fungus, Brian set off at a trot across the cavern.

Far above, he could hear the chirping cries of bats. An enormous rookery of the creatures must live above. The slimy rocks were covered with their stinking excrement, and Brian found the footing too uncertain to continue to run.

As his eyes adapted to the faint light, he noticed darker patches in the distance. Their shape, a sort of crude square, reminded him of the small fields his crofters had used to raise their grain. Perhaps the creatures of the caverns lived by raising different fungi upon the guano from the bats.

Long before he reached the fields, he had picked up a new retinue. The creatures kept their distance, twittering and calling to each other with grunts and hawking cries. They perceived him as different. Perhaps some scent of the outside still clung to his clothes and his hair.

The path he strode became more formal, with low rock walls on either side. The fields were filled with enormous mushrooms and other growths no man had previously seen.

Beyond the fields, the path led up a slope to a building. While reluctant to enter, Brian could see no alternative. If no further path existed beyond this edifice, he would have to scour the edges of the cavern on either side.

Brian stopped for a second. The long ride, the desperate climb, the struggle in the temple, and the long walk had tired him to the bone. Yet he could not sleep. What would these creatures do if his eyes should close? He needed food and drink.

“God’s blood. I wish I could see the sun and the stars,” Brian whispered to himself as he followed the path.

Behind him, silence. No pursuit. Had he passed some magical barrier that held them back? Perhaps they feared what he approached more than they lusted after his flesh. Not a reassuring thought.

The building’s door stood open. Sword in one hand and poniard in the other, Brian stepped boldly into the room and waited. What he found astounded him.

Only hours ago, some creature had swept these floors. Furniture gleamed with use and polish. On the table to the right, someone had placed a decorative arrangement of gleaming mushrooms. And

there, beside the macabre floral arrangement, he saw a pitcher and a bowl. A cautious taste revealed no flavor. Die of thirst or die of poison? He chose action and drained the pitcher with a single drink.

“Welcome stranger,” a feminine voice said from the shadows. “If you want drink, there is better than the water left to let you wash the dust from your feet.”

Turning, sword still in hand, Brian scanned the gloom. He saw nothing. “Show yourselves.”

“There is no one here to hurt you. You are not one of the fallen ones, the degenerates who farm and serve.”

“Show yourselves.”

She stepped from the darkness. Tall and incredibly slender, with even features too perfect to be human. Perhaps the ancient stories of those who came before were true, that they had hidden from the world in great cities of incredible wealth beneath the hills.

“Well,” she said with a smile that paralyzed him. “Will you put up your sword? Or will you kill me and drink my blood? This is my home, and I offer you my hospitality. While you are with me, nothing may harm you.”

Ashamed at his ill manners, Brian sheathed his sword and poniard. “My humble apologies, my lady. I have been at risk for my life for more hours than a day contains and find myself ill prepared for your graciousness.”

“Come. Eat, drink, rest and tell me your tale. I have few diversions and fewer visitors.”

When he came forward, she took his hand in hers and sniffed it. “The path along between the fields. The ancient temple, fire, old wood, and dusty carpet and more. The smell of something I cannot name now. Yes, you are a traveler from a different world.”

She led him through rooms royally appointed and beautifully preserved. He heard the rustling of feet, and she addressed those hidden servants in some manner, for when they reached the next chamber he found a table with food and drink. There were boiled and fried dishes of mushrooms and some sort of pale vegetables, as well as a strange wine, unlike any he had tasted, with a light flavor that was easy on the tongue.

She bade him sit and eat but didn't join him. She asked him of his journey, and between mouthfuls, he told her of his flight and subsequent adventures. She laughed with joy and asked him a thousand questions about the sun and the moon and the ocean and trees. She drank his words. His stories were food for her.

Hunger and thirst quenched, Brian wanted only to sleep, but he remembered the stories. He regretted the food and drink, for that could bind him to this kingdom, but that trap had sprung with the pitcher of water. Still, if he slept, a hundred years might pass.

She beckoned him to her couch. Surely there were worse ways to pass a hundred years. Could a man lose his heart in so short a time? Brian wondered. Her every movement entranced him. Her perfume mesmerized him. He wanted to hold her in his arms and kiss her and do what a man would do with a woman. However, duty—cold hard duty—called him.

"My lady," he said. "Thank you for food and drink but I must be on my way. I have duties that call me and wrongs I must avenge."

"And how will you leave, by the way you have come?"

Remembering the beasts, the sound of the wedges hammered under the door, he shook his head. "I must go forward. I must find a path up to the light, to my world."

"Better still," she replied. "I will accompany you. I want to see all these wonders that I have discovered through you."

She left for a few moments and returned, dressed in clothes for traveling, jerkin, pants and boots. He found her even more desirable. But when he questioned her, he discovered she had no idea how to proceed.

Brian led them further along the path that had brought him to her door. It wound upward to the walls that edged the cave. He cast forward and back, searching for a stream or a breath of wind.

"Wait," she said. "Can you not smell it? There, that way, the air carries the scent you carry with you."

He let her lead, and she followed the vagrant sigh of the wind. Once, a road had wandered here, but now stalagmites grew. The zephyr became a breeze, and now Brian could smell the scent of summer grass.

The gloom lightened. Light from ahead intruded. She stopped. "You didn't tell me about the light. So strong and harsh. We know the way. Let us rest for a moment."

She turned to him and kissed him, and her kisses were stronger than brandy. He held her in his arms. So slim and yet so strong. As he kissed her, the light grew stronger. It was the clear pale light of a dawn without clouds. Had he spent the entire night wandering?

The taste of blood was now in his mouth and he pulled back. In the fresh morning light, he saw clearly what the gloom had hidden. The maiden in his arms was no human woman but a strange monster, and its sweet mouth was a hole filled with sharp teeth.

She saw the horror in his eyes and covered herself with her traveling cloak. She sank to her knees before him and cried, "Oh, don't, don't hate me so. I have been alone for such a long time. Come back into the cave, and we can live together. I will be beautiful once more. Food and drink you will have. Love too. And you will live for a thousand years."

His sword was in his hands. She crouched before him, making no motion to save herself. "I had forgotten about the light," she said, as if to herself. "So many years. I had forgotten why we rode at night, under the pale moonlight."

"What sort of monster are you?" he asked.

"One that loves you," she replied. "Strike and be done with it."

Yet he didn't. He had eaten her food and drunk her wine. She had been his hostess, and he could not repay hospitality with violence. Instead, he edged around her toward the light and climbed with one eye to the path and one eye to the past.

"I love you," she said. "Come back to me, even if it be when you are old and weak. I will make you young and strong, and we shall love for a thousand years."

He didn't reply. He felt certain he had no need, for he heard her words with his mind and not his ears. She could hear his thoughts, too.

Brian climbed upward into the sunlight. He felt certain that time and age would bring him back to this place to search for youth and love. Even if she had been a monster, he knew part of him would always be enamored with her.

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The Phantom Sands of Calavass

By S.H. MANSOURI

The world of Calavass is rocked when the bodies of missing native miners are found mummified and mutilated, their heads and limbs severed! Can an investigator sent from Earth solve the murders before tensions on Calavass boil into an all out war?!

Solomon could see the crimson tower reaching through clouds of dust that danced across the skyline in undulating waves. Golden sand played white noise on the windshield of the hovercraft, a relentless distraction from the voice of his pilot through the Calavassi desert. Greely, the leather-faced caravan guide sent to escort Solomon to the compound, kept the craft high above the dunes where drab, faceless figures scuttled about below. Greely leaned over, and the craft veered abruptly to the right.

“They’re making their way to the great gates,” he shouted over the splatter of sand against glass and steel. “Another hour, and they’ll be too late.”

Solomon gripped the leather of his seat, his bearded jaw bulging from the jostle of Greely’s reckless maneuvers. Too high, and the web of lighting riding the sky would toast to their charred remains; too low, and the lips of dunes would be the last kiss they’d ever know.

“Late for what?” said Solomon through gritted teeth.

Greely tossed a handful of milky white larva into his mouth, a wrinkled slit lined with jagged teeth where the forehead of a human would normally be. His eyes, two drops of liquid amber on his cheeks, darted over to his passenger.

“Even the Calavassi fear the desert,” he said. “Your kind have the luxury of shelter from the elements—I’ve seen the images. Earth,

with her endless oceans and sprawling emerald forests...enough water and food and shelter to keep my people alive and thriving for generations to come. But here, we have only the desert and the beasts she hides beneath her blanket of sand.” He pointed one of three knotted fingers to a crowd of shadowy shapes congregating in the distance. “They take shelter from the worm.”

Captain Delaine had also said something about a worm. It crawled through the ancient arteries of Calavass, living on rock and granite and bone alike. The Calavassi had worshipped the worm for thousands of years, believing it to be the harbinger of fertile soil and rain from cloudless skies. But the Captain told Solomon it was a myth; a remnant of an old civilization of desert dwelling aliens that had been assimilated—enlightened by the new age of interplanetary exploration. *Out with the old*, thought Solomon.

His visit to Calavass had nothing to do with worms, though.

As head of a team of intergalactic peacekeepers, Captain Delaine had received reports that Calavassi miners were disappearing, and Solomon was dispatched. Some were found embedded in the sides of tunnels that ran deep inside the planet’s belly, petrified, with their leathered skins removed. Heads, legs, and arms of workers that had trekked the tunnels all the days of their lives were found piled at the doorstep of the compound’s command center. It had gone on for two months before the Calavassi began to strike. The droning echo of plasma drills waned, the tunnels ran deep with darkness again, and the firelight of Calavassi natives lit-up the desert like a second set of constellations.

Greely grinned a wild parabola.

“My people take up the old ways again,” he said, as they glided through the great gates. A dozen Calavassi traders, trudging like ants on a bread-trail, waved at them with hands weighed down by heavy desert garb.

The gates must have been a monumental task: higher than any skyscraper Solomon had ever seen back on earth, and thicker than the hull of a battle-borne starship. Stone ramparts ran for miles around the entire compound, cradling the inner sanctum of soft sand where tarp and canvas tents freckled their approach. Two stone pillars pierced the Calavassi camp, looming like beacons of the past.

Solomon's sweaty palm searched for the perfect grip on his pistol.

"Are they armed?" he asked.

"If prayers are ammunition then yes, Mr. Solomon...they are armed."

Ambassador Renault met them on the landing causeway, a polished steel plank that Solomon nearly kissed after exiting the hovercraft; solid ground at last. She stood wavering in the wind's whip, a white-hooded figure with skin like smooth obsidian. Solomon had expected a Calavassi. Sure, Captain Delaine had sworn that sentiments towards human beings on Calavass were amicable, but the swath of refugees spread out across the inner sanctum of the compound loomed ominous, like clouds in the wake of a storm. The tension was electric.

"Renault," the Ambassador shouted a terse introduction, leaning toward him as the wind plastered her hood against her cheek. "Come inside, quickly."

The iron gates thundered against each other, cogs and winches churning as the last stream of refugees seeking shelter from the myths of the desert poured in. A hundred amber eyes watched Solomon enter the compound.

"I suppose you'll want to see the bodies?" said the Ambassador.

Greely kept his eyes fixed on the marble flooring. "I'll wait here, Mr. Solomon," he said. He leaned against a rock wall near the entrance and waved them on.

"I'd like to rest a bit, if you don't mind," sighed Solomon.

The Ambassador snapped her fingers, and two Calavassi servants entered from the far side of the room.

"Time is short, Mr. Solomon. Unfortunately, the bodies are gone."

The shortest of the servants draped a warm cloth across the back of Solomon's neck while the other, a portly sprite with a warm smile of tiny teeth, handed him a glass of wafting blue sludge. Solomon slunk comfortably into the soft leather couch.

"What do you mean, the bodies are *gone*?"

"Taken back by their kin. We allowed it, of course. The Calavassi are an ancient people, spawned from the first bit of stardust that

formed this planet. They have their traditions. Keeping the bones of their loved ones would be a sign of deep disrespect.”

She removed her hooded robe and brought up a screen display on the wall. Beneath the Calavassi robes her body was covered in boiled leather, dyed a shade of green that nearly matched the color of her eyes.

“They don’t seem to mind that you’ve taken their children,” said Solomon.

Her eyes narrowed, slits of cracked jade and distrust.

“They are here of their own accord. Slavery is banned on Calavass. Dr. Larson has welcomed them into the fold as the newest members of the compound. Progress moves only forward, best to start with the youngest of minds. I thought you’d be better...prepared for this investigation, Mr. Solomon. Your captain assured me that he sent the best man for the job.”

Solomon whiffed the blue sludge, retracted, and set the glass on the edge of the table in front of him. “I am the best, Ambassador. I may be a little rough around the edges, uncouth you might say, but my methods are sound. Not a single revolt I’ve handled has ended in a body count. So if we’re done with the pleasantries, by all means, show me what you’ve got so far.”

The screen split into four quadrants, live and recorded footage of the compound perimeter, mine shafts, and interior. The lower right portion of the screen showed Dr. Larson’s laboratory, monitors and multicolored LED lights splayed behind the man himself. He sat in the darkness, swiveling half arcs in his chair as the embers of his cigar flared and waned. Solomon knew he was watching them.

He stood as the Ambassador played footage from the disappearances.

“Every one of them starts with sand devils. When they clear, the miners are gone.”

Solomon watched as dozens of Calavassi workers vanished into thin air.

“How can a sand devil appear indoors, without wind?”

“I was hoping you could answer that very question.”

The spritely servant motioned to him, tilting her hand to her lips as if urging him to drink. Solomon hesitated

“You think they’d poison you?” The ambassador laughed. “If they wanted you dead you wouldn’t have made it this far, Mr. Solomon. It’s Boccadine—liquid tongue they call it. If you wish to understand the Calavassi you must drink.”

Solomon lifted the glass. “Bottoms-up.” The blue sludge went down like maple syrup mixed with sand, and seconds later Solomon’s ears began to ring.

“Greely will escort you to the sanctum. Do mind your manners, Mr. Solomon. The Calavassi are suspicious of outsiders. Keep your weapons hidden. Dr. Larson will meet with you first thing in the morning. When you are finished mingling, Lippi here will take you to your room.” The handle of a light sabre swung from her hip as the Ambassador passed through a wall of hanging beads at the end of the hallway.

“Come, Solomon,” said Greely from the entrance. “Let me introduce you to my people.”

Twin moons, like the eyes of a nameless god, shed pale blue light across the Calavassi camp. A lull settled as soon as Solomon approached. Mothers pulled their children close and tucked themselves into thick canvass tents. Fires crackled as holy men prayed low hissing lullabies carried along the cool breeze like strings of polished pearl. A crowd of clay-covered Calavassi, warriors from what Solomon could tell, encircled them. They spoke, and strangely enough Solomon could understand their language as his own.

“Why have you come here?” said their chieftain.

Greely began to speak, but was interrupted by Solomon’s retort.

“I’ve come to bring peace to the inner sanctum. Your people have disappeared, taken—I believe—by what seems to me phantoms with no purpose.”

Greely was struck with awe. “Eloquent, Mr. Solomon. And here I thought I’d have to translate for you.”

“So you are Solomon Doom, the great breaker of chains,” said the chieftain. “The Calavassi have heard of your exploits. And now you’ve come to free us as well?” The chieftain’s men dug their spears deep into the sand.

“Careful,” whispered Greely.

“Only slaves require freedom,” said Solomon. “I’m told the Calavassi work the mines of their own free will, and that slavery is banned on your planet.”

“Lies!” said one of the chieftain’s guards.

“Settle down, Belock. Solomon is merely misinformed.” Belock’s jagged teeth shone in the moonlight.

“I am Drack Lannis, keeper of my people here at the good Doctor’s compound. When we first arrived we were given these.” Drack pulled up the sleeves of his robe, revealing a rather plain silver bracelet around his frail wrist.

“A gift from the Doctor?” said Solomon.

“Precisely. But they cannot be removed. Those of us who tried to pry them from our wrists have mysteriously disappeared. Phantoms...perhaps. But I say the good Doctor has enslaved us under false pretenses. When work is slow, we sometimes receive small jolts of electricity from the bracelets. As long as we comply, we are safe.”

“Not all of us comply,” said Belock. He pointed to the sky. “He controls us from the tower; Lippi has seen it. Do not rely on this human. Only the worm can save us now.”

Solomon looked to the top of the crimson tower where he knew Dr. Larson was watching.

“Stay with chieftain Lannis tonight, Greely. I need someone on the outside when I meet with Dr. Larson tomorrow.” Greely nodded in agreement.

“What is this worm I keep hearing about?” said Solomon to Drack Lannis.

Drack pointed to the holstered pistol on Solomon’s thigh, then to the two stone pillars piercing the camp ground.

“You have your ways, and we have ours,” said the chieftain with a rasp. “I only hope you find the truth before my people lose all hope and turn to the ways of the worm.”

How dangerous could a worm be? thought Solomon, as he kicked off his boots and surveyed the room that Lippi had led him to. He noticed the cameras in the crooks of the walls as soon as he had entered. Why did the Doctor need eyes on every inch of the

compound? Was he truly controlling the Calavassi, enslaving them to work for whatever twisted project he had concocted? What were they mining for anyways?

Solomon needed answers.

Drack's eerie warning played with his mind to no end. When the lights flickered off, Solomon found himself creeping out of his room, down the narrow corridor into the foyer where the Ambassador had disappeared earlier that day behind a wall of pebbled beads. The servants were nowhere to be found.

Ambassador Renault hummed a soft melody from somewhere behind the curtain of beads, and as Solomon approached, his throat tightened like a warm noose. He felt like a school boy again, dreaming of vixens and Amazonian women that would take him to their harems flowing with wine, wafting with the scents of jasmine in full bloom. They would feed him grapes and dance for him and rub his aching body. She was everything he'd ever dreamed of as a budding space explorer. But as her soft tune quickly turned to sounds of struggle, Solomon was faced with a storm of whirling sand.

"Ambassador!" he called.

He rushed through the beaded wall, pulling his pistol, waving the crosshairs at phantom sand devils that disappeared as soon as he had them in his sights. For a brief moment, they materialized, and Solomon saw the phantoms for what they truly were: synthetics, android assassins sent to silence anyone who stepped out of line. Their chrome fingers wrapped around the Ambassador's arms before she could reach for her sabre.

"Get to the top of the tower," she said, as she struggled against their pull. Three phantoms drug her across the marbled floor as Solomon inhaled fumes from their apparition devices. The moment he flinched, a phantom flung itself at him. Its shoulder guard drove into his ribs, knocking the air out of his lungs and the pistol from his white-knuckled grip.

"You must stop Larson," she echoed down the corridor as the phantoms pulled her into darkness.

Solomon yanked at the tangle of wires and cables on the phantom's back. His ribs crackled as the thing squeezed him round

the torso, eyes bulging with red veins while he ripped at tubes that shot vapor and steam. *Dammit! Which one shuts this bastard down?!*

Finally, just as Solomon's vision began to go dark, the phantom froze and released its vice-like grip. He rolled to his side and tossed the android at the foot of the Ambassador's bed. He had no idea how to get to the top of Dr. Larson's tower, where he hoped he would find the answers to all his questions. He was sure of one thing, though: phantoms could be killed.

In the foyer, he found Lippi standing in a daze. She was watching the display screen, flipping through camera feed channels until the image of the Calavassi camp appeared. "The doors are sealed, Mr. Solomon. I tried to stop them, but..."

As she reached out to him, Solomon could see the well of blood seeping through her robes. The assassins had left their mark, and there was nothing he could do to save her. Lippi slumped, and Solomon caught her. Her breath was shallow as she rested her cheek against his chest. "I really hoped to see your planet one day," she whispered. "Earth is beautiful..."

Solomon imagined punching holes into the Doctor's chest. If he couldn't save this little girl, what hope did he have of freeing an entire population of the subjugated? He steeled himself from the swell in his chest and rushed to the entrance of the compound, the image of the Ambassador being dragged along the desert outside burning in his mind.

He pulled his pistol and fired at the door, flashes of red plasma rounds ricocheting around the foyer. *I'll end up shooting myself at this rate*, he thought. Just as Solomon was about to abandon all hope, a thin stream of molten metal began to run along the perimeter of the door. He peered through a tiny glass slot in the door and saw amber eyes glowing in the darkness outside. *I'm too late. Drack has sent his warriors for my head*. He reloaded his pistol and backed away down the hall, enough room for him to get off a dozen rounds at least before the Calavassi swarmed the compound.

The molten square was complete, and the door fell inward with a violent clang of metal on marble. "They are calling the worm, Mr. Solomon! Come with me, hurry," said Greely from the smoking

threshold. Solomon rallied and followed Greely outside where the hovercraft was silently idling away.

“They didn’t kill you?”

“No,” said Greely, huffing in the night air. “I was checking supplies, making sure we had enough fuel to make it back to the launch site, when I saw the Ambassador being chained to the feeding pillars. I hid in the shadows while they carried her away. Call me cowardly, but we’re still alive Mr. Solomon.” Greely loaded a clip into his pistol.

“Feeding pillars?”

“Yes. They plan to call the worm. My people awoke suddenly from their sleep and began the ritual.”

The tower, thought Solomon.

“Take the hovercraft up to the tower and fire on the satellite. I have a feeling the Doctor is controlling the workers through transmissions to their bracelets.”

“Where will you be?” said Greely.

“I’m heading to the pillars.”

As Greely leapt into the hovercraft and slowly drifted upward, the soft sand between Solomon and the Calavassi camp began to churn. Phantoms flashed all around him as Solomon made his way across the causeway. He fired blindly, the Ambassador crying out in the distance.

Belock approached the jutting mouthpiece of a giant horn buried deep inside the ground. He blew, and the bass of the horn rippled across the top layer of sand like a stone dropped in a shallow pond. Solomon slammed his shoulder into a phantom at the bottom of the bridge, placed the barrel of his pistol on its chest, and blasted his way to freedom, shrapnel and circuitry raining down upon the planks of steel.

It was merciless to fire on the Calavassi in their current states, so Solomon aimed to wound them only. He hit Belock just above the knee, and the Calavassi crumpled to the side of the great horn. Solomon dodged spear tips from dazed warriors and tackles from the still-swarming phantoms, zigzagging until he found the perfect shot. Rolling near the base of the pillars, he pulled twice and the chains tied to the Ambassador’s wrists fell limp.

Greely hung out the window of the hovercraft and unleashed a steady stream of laser fire, pounding the tower's satellite until it lit-up the sky like a flailing comet. The Calavassi people took up their weapons and began to attack the phantoms, small explosions bursting every time they pierced through hardened armor. The Ambassador took her light sabre from the fallen Belock and seared the broken chains from her wrists. "Don't move, Solomon," she ordered.

A rumble broke the momentary silence.

The ground began to shake, and the Calavassi ran to the cover of their tents. "Take shelter," Drack Lannis echoed. "The worm is upon us now."

The sand opened, and something solid, like a rising platform, lifted the Ambassador into the air. Its head surfaced, and a maw the size of a black hole in space swallowed ten Calavassi tents. The Ambassador plunged her sabre into its back, green ooze gushing into her face as she hung on for dear life. The worm roared with a force that rattled Solomon's bones and dove back into the sand.

Greely swooped down, and Solomon climbed to the top of the hovercraft, jostling to keep his balance. "Follow the worm," he shouted.

They circled the inner wall while the remaining Calavassi finished off the Dr.'s phantom assassins.

The causeway exploded as the worm surfaced again. Ambassador Renault slashed a fury of white light and green blood across the top of the worm's head, debris cutting into her leather cuirass. She rode the worm as it banked and crashed its body against the walls, plunging and surfacing until it reached the great gates where it turned to face Solomon standing tall on the roof of the hovercraft.

"Keep it steady, Greely. Let the beast come!"

He unleashed a barrage of red plasma into the worm's gaping mouth as it darted full speed towards the craft. The Ambassador jumped, Greely swung the hovercraft aside, Solomon fell to the wayside, and the worm dove headfirst into the compound. It erupted like a funeral pyre, thousands of feet of steel and concrete crumbling to the soft sand below. The inner sanctum was soaked in steaming green blood from the now-dead god of the Calavassi people.

Drack Lannis lifted his hood when the smoke and dust cleared. Deep rifts, like bruised veins, snaked through the sand, a permanent reminder that perhaps he should have had more faith in the man sent from Earth.

Greely set the hovercraft down and watched the tower slowly burn into the night.

Dr. Larson was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he had vanished, boarded an escape pod shot into space where he would find another planet to run his experiments. Or perhaps he was only wounded, burned beyond recognition, flailing around in the rubble to free himself from the pangs of melting steel and molten rock. Solomon believed he was dead.

He met the Ambassador near the hovercraft, where Greely punched in coordinates to the launch site that would take them back to Earth. Solomon leaned his head into the passenger side. "Send for transport," he said. "The Calavassi will need a new home with plenty of shelter and water and food to go around."

Greely smiled and walked across the remains of the sanctum to prepare his people for a new life.

"Ambassador, are you coming?" asked Solomon with a glimmer in his eyes.

Beneath the dirt and grime and green blood, she was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever met.

"Aurora," she said. "You may call me Aurora."

They wouldn't visit a harem anytime soon, nor would she feed him grapes from vines flowing with wine. But those were just the fleeting dreams of a boy who'd never set eyes on the likes of Aurora Renault.

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

The Feminine Force Reawakens

By LIANA KERZNER

Feminine power takes many forms, reaching far beyond the tropes of the “Strong Female Character” and the “Damsel in Distress”—Liana Kerzner talks Star Wars, Edgar Rice Burroughs and the powerful potential within feminine SFF heroes!

Many parents of girls saw Rey in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* as a watershed moment: a dynamic young woman was a main character in a major science fiction franchise, and was *doing things*. As a lifelong science fiction and space fantasy fan, I found this response confusing: my childhood was spent reading numerous stories of women *doing things* in science fiction and fantasy settings. The reaction to *The Force Awakens* made me realize that the public’s awareness of what science fiction has to offer regarding feminine power is notably incomplete.

It’s undeniable that in the few decades preceding this latest mainstream dalliance with fantasy feminism, there was a dearth of female sci-fi action heroes *doing things* in the West, but if you go back about a hundred years, you can find them. If we’re to maintain the trend that Rey in *The Force Awakens* has set, then it’s important to embrace the trailblazing female characters of yesteryear whose influence has waned but not vanished.

Science fiction, historically, has struggled with the inclusion of women because it locked its storytelling traditions into decidedly masculine spaces—the military, naval vessels, and the 19th century science-exploration-focused “gentlemen’s clubs”. Notable exceptions exist—the first one that comes to mind is the Honorverse: the Honor Harrington stories written by David Weber. These exceptions, however, prove the rule, in that for every one example of military science fiction starring a woman, you can name multiple examples featuring men and boys. On the fantasy side, the traditions are more

forgiving, but even the most successful female fantasy writer ever, J.K. Rowling, wrote a book about a young man where prominent male characters vastly outnumber the female ones. It's not that the female characters don't exist. It's that they don't exist in great enough numbers to be characters in their own right instead of just "the girl". The phenomenon of one woman having to represent the entirety of her sex is nicknamed the "Smurfette Principle", and it's a tricky thing in science fiction due to the fact that in a modern scientific lab, there might actually be only one woman.

Human beings are social animals, therefore the low numbers of women in science and science fiction become a self-perpetuating loop. Fantasy stories seem to have better dodged this bullet because the Romantic literary tradition emphasizes romantic and chivalric love as major plot points. Rationalist technique is significantly more prominent in science fiction, defined in Mr. Spock's "that is not logical" tagline. In Western storytelling tradition, women are often associated with faith—both as goddesses and as chivalric symbols of hope—and as John Krakauer wrote in *Under the Banner of Heaven*, "Faith is the very antithesis of reason."

Science fiction, and "smart person" fiction in general, did get into a rut where reason and passion were seen to be mutually exclusive forces. Rationalism treats the heart and the head as distant provinces, and women, traditionally, have been seen to be "naturally" associated with instinct and intuition as opposed to logical thought. And yet women are also pictured as manipulators, which takes an amount of intelligence, but not intelligence of a noble or useful kind. These were all stereotypes, as opposed to phenomena backed by evidence, and some authors such as Gail Carriger have given us some thoroughly joyful novels featuring Romantic female leads lacking the "natural" feminine hyperemotionality. Rationalism, ironically, irrationally excluded women, and this led to an unfortunate imbalance. Not only does "smart" fiction marginalize women, but entertainment created for women is often infantile.

But many of the great science fiction writers, including Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Ray Bradbury, were influenced by pulp fiction, and it's in these magazines where we see the roots of the powerful depictions of women in science fiction that were

reawakened with Rey. Ironically, pulps were seen as “junk” reading. Since few powers-that-be took the pulps to be at all important, pulp writers were able to create any type of female character they wanted, provided her appearance on the cover of a story would draw in young men. The higher-than-average number of interesting female characters in science fiction and fantasy finds its origin in stories dismissed as “garbage”, which were written by men, for men, without feeling the need to sideline women to seem clever. The tawdry quality of the pulps allowed female power to thrive, since popular decorum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not allow women meaningful public participation. In an era where women were discouraged from showing their ankles, the pulps gleefully displayed a lot more than that.

Pulps continued the tradition of the 19th century’s penny dreadful stories—cheap popular fiction for young men. Because of this, they slapped a beautiful woman on the cover whenever possible, often brandishing a weapon, frequently dressed provocatively when dressed at all. Contrary to popular belief, the pinup models of the pulps weren’t always pictured in various states of peril. Sometimes a pulp lady relied on plain old seduction to entice a reader to pick up the book.

Our cover standards for young adult fiction these days are prudish by comparison. Similar to modern YA books, however, the pulps were influential because of their reach despite their “lowbrow” status. And they were full of competent women commanding armies, ruling peoples, and leading underground resistance movements. Blaster pistols and energy swords—aka lightsabers—tended to figure prominently. When men wanted to turn off their brains... at least their big brains... they apparently often wanted stories of warrior women.

Now, these women are dismissed as “damsels in distress”, and are treated as negative depictions of women. And, in truth, there was an element of trophyism to these warrior princesses, but the important thing to recognize is that men were consuming entertainment that defied conventional definitions of the ideal women and wives.

These characterizations of women were broadening the perspectives of what women could be in the minds of young men

during a period where wars, long work hours, and rigid social norms were encouraging strict gender segregation while people lived in increasingly closer quarters.

The heyday of the pulps ended in the 1950s, and I don't think that's an accident: that's also when extensive corporate propaganda campaigns were trying to convince the masses that women were most happy as homemakers, after decades of encouragement for women to take war jobs. The backlash was predictable: by the 1960s, popular fiction had taken on a distinctly politicized tone, with Robert Heinlein introducing multiple politicized themes into science fiction, and being rewarded for it with mainstream acceptance, critical acclaim, and best-seller status. Heinlein was a rare sci-fi writer who got published in the "slicks"—glossy magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post*—instead of the pulps. Heinlein was an unapologetic propagandist for science fiction as "serious" writing, in part because of the Cold War space race the Americans had with the Russians.

When science fiction became "serious", however, it took on the elements of mainstream fiction that marginalized women, connected to that persistent stereotype that the feminine is not serious. So the science fiction most people are familiar with today has women significantly further down the chain of command than the stories of the pulps. Lieutenant Uhura may have broken ground on television for even being an officer in a military command center, but this public acceptance of a woman of color in a position of authority lagged decades behind pulp readers: in 1912, a copper-skinned, raven-haired woman was the title character in a very popular story called *A Princess of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Her name was Dejah Thoris.

While serving as a soldier in the Arizona Territory, Burroughs developed a great respect for the "Negro" regiments and Apache people he encountered. In fact, he expressed greater regard for them than his military commanders. He also travelled with prostitutes—hey, it was the Old West. So it's no accident that the Martians in his stories come in black, red, white and yellow-skinned varieties, as well as green.

Yes, Dejah Thoris gets captured and kidnapped a lot in the John Carter stories. However, so does John Carter. Burroughs saw his time in the army as a form of captivity, and he wrote captives as extensions of himself: as survivors, not victims or criminals. Before Carter even meets Dejah Thoris' red Martians, he's captured twice, surrounded once by Apache on Earth, and then essentially enslaved by the Tharks, or green Martians. It's pointed out that John Carter has an affinity for Dejah Thoris when they first meet because they're **both** captives. Throughout the *Barsoom* series—Barsoom is his name for Mars—practically every character gets captured or nearly killed. Everyone saves each other at some point. It's not just the women being kidnapped and the men rescuing them. This dynamic was replicated in the original *Star Wars* trilogy.

Women of Barsoom are also captured because they're doing risky work: Dejah was captured while on an environmental scientific mission. She later also displays advanced knowledge of astronomy. She makes personal sacrifices to end wars, out of a sense of duty to her people. She and John fall in love surrounded by a culture that doesn't believe in it: the Thark breed based on the instructions of their rulers. Edgar Rice Burroughs's writing was notable because it brought romance to a genre that was defined more by violence, conquest, and crime.

And Dejah Thoris isn't the only brave, interesting woman in *A Princess of Mars*. Sola is a female Thark who teaches John Carter the language and history of Mars. Sarkoja is another Green Martian woman who rises and falls through her political schemes. In later books, Thuvia is a princess who can control the lion-like Banth creatures and captures the heart of John Carter's son. Phaidor is the daughter of a religious ruler who makes numerous attempts to kill Dejah Thoris. In *Issus*, we get a female villain: an ancient black Martian posing as a goddess who is eventually exposed as a fraud. The Barsoom stories are packed with interesting, diverse female characters, and they were published one hundred years ago!

Martian culture doesn't include clothing other than jewelry for men or women, and women aren't sidelined from work to have children—children gestate in incubators. So many of the cultural norms that prevented women access to public life are not present on Barsoom.

The societies of Mars allow women to *do things*. Women hold power and influence. They're sexy. They're strong-willed. They're more than one thing at once.

While John Carter's stories might seem silly to "serious" types, this is precisely what makes them relevant in debunking the excuses used to explain away the unnatural lack of female characters in modern sci-fi. One hundred years ago, action stories for men were filled with interesting women of multiple ages, religions, and races, and were extremely successful. This would shock modern entertainment marketers.

Of course, bad things happened to women in these stories. Women were kidnapped, tortured, enslaved, died by suicide, and were murdered by angry mobs. It wasn't, however, because they were women. It was because they held positions of power in a planet rocked by political upheaval. Dejah Thoris's frequent kidnappings were because she could be ransomed or used for political leverage. She's no fighter, that's true, but that's because she's a scientist. Her granddaughter, Llana, was much better with a sword.

Burroughs didn't feel the need to make his dynamic women good at everything or better at "men's work" than the men. Burroughs just created societies where women were allowed to take on public roles, and therefore be interesting. By creating a culture with recognizable but fundamentally different social norms, Burroughs created fertile ground to let his women be people, instead of just "representations of women".

This leads to defined themes of femininity as power in Burroughs's work, that have been lost for decades in Western science fiction due to fears of "oversexualizing" women. The Japanese didn't get bogged down in that problem, and manga has seen an explosion of female-led science fiction properties like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Hellsing*. Video games, which also have a heavy Japanese influence, have female leads, or the option of a female playable character, in numerous popular action-driven fantasy and science fiction stories. The female leads of these series weren't seen as "politically correct" or "affirmative action" choices until very recently, after a period of decline based on the false idea that "games with female playable characters don't sell. This was determined by the

exact same marketers who don't think you should have more than one or two female characters in a product created for boys. Again, it's a loop of self-fulfilling prophecies.

But how does femininity work as a source of power, or even a power dynamic, in the science fiction traditions set by Burroughs? Burroughs used it to show the benefits of diplomacy as an alternative to war, but also as a moral compass. John Carter's love for Dejah Thoris means he stays happily faithful to her even though women are flinging themselves at him constantly. Even when he thinks she's dead, he doesn't stay loyal out of a sense of duty. He stays monogamous because he doesn't want to be with any other woman. But it goes further than that. The concept of goddesses is accepted on Barsoom, and women, therefore, are not seen as inherently less. There's no Judeo-Christian Original Sin on Mars.

Beauty is not seen as something that should be covered up and hidden away in case men can't control themselves. In fact, men who use the threat of rape against women are depicted as unfit to rule. While Barsoom is still pretty patriarchal, with the ruling male jeddak significantly outnumbering their female jeddara counterparts, women are shown in positions of leadership. John and Dejah's daughter, Tara, becomes a jeddara, though she initially rebuffs her future husband Gahan because he tries to impress her with his wealth instead of through noble actions.

Burroughs's feminine power is the power of individual women to do individual things because they find strength in numbers. They are all very different. Some are good, some are evil, some are just misguided. Burroughs's female characters don't have to make some statement about women as a class, though in general they hold the opinion that men should be judged by the morality of what they do as opposed to how powerful they are. Sure, Burroughs's work has a strong populist streak—his virtuous, beautiful women always fell for the noble underdog as opposed to the powerful prince, because the hard-working everyman was Burroughs's target audience. But compared to the sci-fi propaganda of the 1950s and 1960s, these class-driven messages are minimal. Feminine power in Burroughs came through a woman's actions, not the sanctity of her womb.

Certainly, this focus on stories of male heroes for male audiences means that feminine power is more indirect. This isn't ideal in terms of equal representation, but it's not necessarily a bad thing either: different types of power are seen as equally good. Yes, the titular Princess of Mars is not the main character, but the fiction of the time often split those duties: the main characters of *Dracula* and *Moby-Dick* are not the titular ones, but the books are named as they are because the title characters are the ones that make the book's story matter. We don't terribly care about Jonathan Harker or Ishmael. They're just the narrators of the stories they observe. It's also important to note that both *Moby-Dick* and *Dracula* appear relatively infrequently, yet they're still seen as important characters. The storytelling of the time was, structurally, utterly scattered compared to the rigid five act structure to which modern writing must conform.

We also must judge the roles of the women that appear in these stories compared to the roles they could hold in the real world. In the context of the early twentieth century, the strength and dynamism of Burroughs's women are undeniable.

Science fiction deals in the realm of what is pragmatically possible—the idea being if we can imagine it, we can achieve it. But as scientific awareness increased, it put increased pressure on science fiction to be detailed and believable. Sci-fi split into “hard” science fiction and space fantasy, and Burroughs's work, today, would not be considered “hard” science fiction. It is, however, a fundamental influence and inspiration for the writers who created the earlier “hard” sci-fi. And it's undeniably the ancestor of “soft” science fiction space opera properties like *Star Wars*, *Farscape*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

Sadly, the more Burroughs-like work, where women get to be more diverse, is still considered the lesser of the sci-fi forms. *Star Trek* could never be considered hard sci-fi, but it's harder than *Star Wars*, and so Trekkers hold this as evidence of the superiority of their fandom. *Star Trek*, modern *Battlestar Galactica*, and company are considered more “serious” than the space operas, and so we must constantly be confronted by “serious”, “realistic”, limitations that women face, so that it says *something*. Women must fail, and fail frequently, because the system is unfair to us. In the modern

reimagining of *Battlestar Galactica*, feminine power took a very dark turn: the primary power women had was that of seductress, and the women who did not define themselves in that way were terribly unhappy. Women on that series wallowed in various reproductive dilemmas, and the most structurally powerful woman on the show, President Laura Roslin, is portrayed as a failed leader because she is “too soft”, and is struck down by her own female biology through breast cancer. *Galactica* was praised for being “groundbreaking science fiction”, but too often, seriousness of this sort in science fiction starts taking on misogynistic undertones. Laura Roslin, in the end, was a “wisdom in weakness” type character. The dogfights and standoffs in *Battlestar Galactica* left little room for female power fantasy. For a woman to succeed in that world, she needed to be as aggressive, violent and cutthroat as a man, and yet also use the frequent sexual whims of the male characters as manipulation. This isn’t feminine power. This is the feminine manipulation of masculine power.

It’s an interesting dichotomy that in “junk” fiction, women are given license to *do things*. But the minute sci-fi crosses over into “serious literature”, it’s more important to *say things* about women and our role.

The trouble with “hard” science fiction is that the science often dominates the fiction. Fans war with each other over whether something is “realistic”. And this has had a profound impact on femininity as power in science fiction. There’s a big difference between an author exploring a social custom and advocating a social custom, and hard sci-fi hinges on the idea that *it could happen*. So we get the aforementioned issues with *Battlestar Galactica*, as well as Captain Kirk sleeping his way through the galaxy because it was the swinging sixties. Subsequent Starship captains kept it in their pants far more: *Star Trek* realized that you can’t have a commanding officer of a mixed-gendered naval vessel screwing everyone of the opposite sex that they meet. But there’s a decided glass ceiling in the Federation utopia that the teams crafting the show haven’t quite successfully overcome—Voyager’s attempts at a female captain suffered from general *Star Trek* oversaturation at the time. Shows like *Babylon 5* and *Farscape* with a less rigid military chain of

command, do much better at creating empowered female characters who are interesting characters instead of just fulfilling a diversity requirement—there's just more room to breathe before disbelief can no longer be suspended.

The other issue with the free love belief system embodied by Captain Kirk was that it continued Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* paradigm of, as Jo Walton puts it, an author proxy with "hot and cold running beautiful secretaries."^[1] This tradition of science fiction pivots the ideal man as one devoted to one woman, to one with a harem of women. **And only women.** Acceptable sci-fi manly-man promiscuity must never encounter another penis. Once men start sleeping with men, it erodes the stereotypical hypermasculinity that heterosexual protagonist promiscuity grants.

This demolishes feminine power structures. In order for power to hold, the source of that power must have inviolate boundaries. The secretaries, Kirk's alien woman of the week, Galactica's Cylon clones and mental apparitions, and any other Bond Girl with a Blaster Gun are objectified by their open sexuality. They are objects of pleasure for the male main characters whose feelings we really don't care about, are interchangeable with each other, and have no purpose if they say no to sexual advances. The entire purpose of these numerous women is to prove the virility of the man in the equation. A woman in that role cannot be the source of plot tension, motivation, or characterization. If they live, they're a validation of the male lead's heroism. If they die, it's only to advance the plot of the male main character. The role previously played by a Martian princess became a series of women in refrigerators. The impact on the plot doesn't change, but the feeling that these women are powerful is gone—none of them matter as individuals. Even if they have names, even if they get a lot of screen time, their stories are not the ones that matter. Again, some exceptions prove this rule: there's a certain event horizon past which there's just too much sex for the sex to be meaningful to a narrative.

In the maligned space opera tradition, however, female autonomy, and therefore a strong element of feminine power, is maintained, and this is where we arrive at *Star Wars*. General née Princess Leia is a direct descendant of a Dejah Thoris type character, and Rey bears

many similarities to her granddaughter Liana. Han Solo tries to be a better man because he loves not just Leia, but her cause. Rey is given numerous opportunities because of a network of people supporting her who have fought under that cause.

There's a reason so many symbols of ideals are ladies—Lady Liberty, Lady Justice and so on. They are sources of power, but also purpose and direction. Dejah Thoris and Princess Leia are both leaders of resistance to tyranny and are, therefore, too important to risk on the front lines. With Rey, we have a young woman good at “boy things” like piloting and mechanics, just like Dejah's granddaughter, Liana, shows talent with a sword. We see a generational progression in representation because the work of the older women has improved things for their daughters and granddaughters. That's possible because the fictional worlds are not portrayed as relative utopias, unlike Heinlein's *Strange Land* and *Star Trek's* Federation. The collectivist notions of utopian sci-fi worlds undermine power, because everything is supposed to be shared... including one's body. Propaganda benefits from collectivism, after all, since individualism makes people less easily manipulated. Propagandistic fiction writers like treating race, gender, and other human identifiers as classes because this makes them easier to standardize and control. Large groups are predictable. Individuals surprise you. We lose a great many power dynamics in writing intended as propaganda, because propaganda is an attempt to gain power over the reader's thinking.

We can better see the individual power of both male and female characters when there is an emphasis on individual characters—unique reasons to strive for better, loyalty, jealousy, betrayal, and sacrifices other than death. In free love worlds where ideal people never say no in sexual situations, you lose an entire set of metaphors for deep bonds between romantic partners.

This is no comment on the practice in the real world, mind you. In strong narratives, sex isn't just sex. It has to advance the plot or tell you something about the characters. With no established boundaries, that becomes difficult. You don't get a Princess Leia in utopian fiction because there is no need for rebels or free thinkers. Strength is shown through struggle. You won't see Leia finding a way

to outwit some Star Wars version of the Kobiashi Maru test, because that would defeat the point of her being the underdog. Part of Leia's strength is her ability to accept loss. This is a traditional mark of feminine strength going all the way back to the Bible that more male sci-fi characters could benefit from, because characters who always win are insufferable.

So now that *Star Wars* has reawakened feminine power in science fiction to early twentieth century standards, what now? Once we've re-established that boys will read, watch and play stories about women, we have to re-establish that these are stories of individual women, not perfect women, or role-model representations of women. Well-developed characters have strengths and flaws, and Rey could use a few more limits to really settle into a character who can carry a franchise. Right now she's got all the skills of both Han Solo and Luke Skywalker, in a body that looks more girl than woman. Rey's story has deeply personal dreams—the mystery of her parents abandoning her—but now her character needs to be tempered with personal successes, personal losses, and personal limits. That's impossible for her to achieve if she must be all things to all people as the token girl. The Star Wars universe, and the modern space western tradition it heads, needs to remember the lessons taught one hundred years ago by Edgar Rice Burroughs: more women in your stories means that every woman can be more defined, more special, and more uniquely powerful.

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Notes from the Nest

By P. Alexander (Ed.)

It's been a long and wild year for us. We've published four issues and nearly 250,000 words of fiction. We hope you've enjoyed this collection, our largest yet, and like it well enough to buy copies for your friends and relatives this Christmas (if you order now, they'll almost certainly arrive in time for the holidays!)

We're dialing back a little for 2017, but we still plan on bringing you tons of great content. Our Spring issue will feature a number of stories which take place on the Eldritch Earth, a setting that readers of Misha Burnett's *A Hill of Stars* will be familiar with. Several past contributors will be returning with all new stories both there and in our Fall issue.

I'd like to give a special shout-out to Mark Thompson of the Sad Puppy Book Club who has joined us this issue as a volunteer copy editor. Mark and Xavier have both gone above and beyond helping with line-edits. Along with our beta readers, they are making sure that *Cirsova* is as reasonably typo-free as possible. If you see something glaring, it's probably my fault and not their's.

Thanks to everyone who has supported us this year! We couldn't have done this without you.

If you're looking for ways to help us out between now and spring, I'd say "support our advertisers." Selling adspace will be one of the best ways for us to defray costs and buy more stories, so show folks that we're worth kicking a few bucks by checking out our sponsors.

We have some big projects on the horizon, including a 70th anniversary edition of Leigh Brackett's classic *Stark Trilogy*, so get the word out, so we can keep warring against boring!

-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.
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In the Valley of the Astronaut's Crypt

An Encounter for levels 3-5

The party enters a deep valley that promises shade from the cruel sun which beats upon the desert sands. The valley floor is strewn strange metal, twisted and burnt. A long path of scorched black leads to a rumpled oblong of gray metal. Within the strange vessel is only bent girder and broken bits. But tracks lead deeper into the valley, tracks left by no human. The tracks lead to a network of shallow caves carved into the orange rock. On wires everywhere are strung bits from the wreck, shards of metal and glass and stranger objects. From the caves rush a cohort of insect men brandishing crude spears.

Leading the cohort is the High Priest of the Sky Lord, who owes his position of power to possession of the "Sun-Spitter", a powerful weapon found within the wreck. Within the largest cave sits the Sky Lord on his throne. The dwellers believe he will wake one day to lead his followers to a land of plentiful water and food. The dwellers desire most of all to adorn their caves with any and all articles or equipment that the party may use or carry, to please the Sky Lord.

High Priest of the Sky Lord
AC: 4
HD: 6+4
Move: 150' (50')
Attacks: 1 bite or weapon
Damage: 2d4 or by weapon
Save As: F4
Morale: 8
Alignment: Chaotic

The Sun-Spitter
Ranged attack ignores target armor.
Range: 60'
25% chance target armor break against non-magic armor
3d6 damage.
Save vs Death Ray for 1/2 damage rounded down.
Counts as a Magic Weapon for resistance purposes.
7 of 12 charges remaining.

Valley Dweller
AC:5
HD:3+3
Move:120' (40')
Att: 1 bite or weapon
Damage: 2d4 or by weapon
Save As: F1
Morale: 8
Alignment: Neutral



Art by Dave McKulka - dmckulkaart@gmail.com



[1] <http://www.tor.com/2010/12/10/smug-messiah-robot-a-heinleins-stranger-in-a-strange-land/>