

# CIRSOVA

**Heroic Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine**  
**Issue #5 / Spring 2017**



**Adrian Cole**  
**Jay Barnson**  
**Lynn Rushlau**  
**S.H. Mansouri**  
**Brian K. Lowe**  
**Misha Burnett**  
**Michael Tierney**  
**Louise Sorensen**  
**James Hutchings**  
**Schuyler Hernstrom**

Cirsova

P. ALEXANDER, Ed.

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***AN EPIC NOVELLA OF DISTANT  
EONS***

**The First American, Schuyler Hernstrom**

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ELDRITCH EARTH***

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## ***POETRY***

**My Name is John Carter (Part 4), James Hutchings**

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# DENIZENS OF THE ELDRITCH EARTH



## SLAGBORN

The insectile Slagborn are native to the equatorial regions of the Eldritch Earth that are too hot to support human life, hence what little that is known of them comes from the tales of Akadjians who have survived raids. They attack silently, coordinating their movements by some unknown form of communication, perhaps by chemicals extruded from their bodies and perceived by their fellows' sensitive antennae. They use sophisticated weapons of brass and hardened chitin manufactured by an unknown process. They attack at dusk, either dawn or twilight, appearing from the jungle and melting back into it, taking both domesticated animals and human captives. Few humans have ever escaped once captured, those who have speak of vast underground structures of a design that rivals the cities of the Old Ones. Only the warrior caste leave the nests, but it is rumored that inside the nests are far stranger creatures, the huge egg producing queens and the eyeless slaves that attend them. One can only speculate what use they have for the captives they take, all that is known for certain is that humans who are dragged into the nests never return to the upper lands.

STATS: 2HD\*, AC5, Move 40' (160'), Save F3

Att 2 spines 1d4/1d4 or by weapon. ML:10 Special: Characters in Melee dealing damage to a Slagborn must save vs. Poison or take 1d4 damage.

## DRYTH WARRIOR

The cruel Dryth are a race of warriors, laborers, and priests created to serve the old one known as Therizom. They reside in the dry portion of the equatorial band inhospitable to human life. These lizard men are hardy and dim, designed only to serve a master that now sleeps. Their priest class rules their strange city. Little is known of their habits or lifecycle save that they reproduce through artificial means. It is rumored that human wombs, those of their sister race, the Ithra, serve to gestate the clutches of eggs needed to prolong the race. The Dryth are unintelligent and take great pleasure in acts of wanton cruelty. They are able hunters and trackers across the sun blasted wastes that surround their city. Flying north aboard their hovering discs, the Dryth periodically raid Ithra settlements for sport and captives. The strongest and most cruel amongst them rise to lead while the weak and cunning become priests who once served Therizom directly but now scheme and plot in his stead.

STATS - 4HD, AC 6, Move 40' (160'), Save F4

Att 2 claw/1 bite 1d4/1d4/1d8 or by weapon ML:8



art by Dave McKulka, dmckulkaart@gmail.com



# **Notes From the Nest**

P. ALEXANDER, ED.

What's this? A 'Notes From the Nest' at the start of an issue?

As our first 'official' theme issue (pirates in issue 3 notwithstanding), I felt it necessary to preface this with an introduction to the Eldritch Earth.

Those of you who've been with us from the beginning may remember Misha Burnett's novelette "A Hill of Stars." It featured the adventures of former servant of a deceased member of the Great Race and took place on the prehistoric earth of the Lovecraft mythos, still populated with strange aliens and monsters that had yet to vanish or retreat into slumber. Misha decided to throw open the gates to the playground, forming the Eldritch Earth Geophysical Society—a writing group devoted to telling high adventure stories set in the distant Lovecraftian past as described in stories such as "The Shadow Out of Time" and "At the Mountains of Madness." This special issue of Cirsova showcases some of the early results of this shared experiment in bringing the action of heroic fantasy and sword & planet to Lovecraft's prehistory.

I know what some of you are thinking: *"But you hate 'Lovecraftian' fiction! I've seen you rail against it all the time!"* In a sense, you'd be very correct. I have found cause for gripe about a lot of fiction that's labelled "Lovecraftian"—the biggest being that it is not particularly Lovecraftian at all. To a large extent, "Lovecraftian" falls into the same rut as Steampunk, only instead of gluing gears to everything, it's tentacles. Plus, the endless name-dropping of various creatures and places from Lovecraft's work so often comes across as smug and knowing winks, signaling to ::fingerquotes:: "weird fiction fans" that they should love it because they are in-the-know. Often, these stories, if they don't descend into outright Cthululz, fail to do more than paint pale imitations, using tropes and figures from the mythos like reusable vinyl stickers in a 'tell your own Lovecraftian horror' sticker book (I'm sure there's a market for that).

What Misha was doing and wanted to accomplish with his Eldritch Earth project, however, struck me as a new and exciting approach to Lovecraftian fiction—tell Burroughsian stories in a Lovecraftian



setting. Yes, there will be eldritch and squamous horrors, but there will also be plenty of excitement and adventure!

So, please allow me to set the stage for you:

It is the Triassic period, approximately 365 million years ago. The Earth has been colonized by an alien species, the Great Ones, who are beginning to die out. Sub-species of Humans, many of which were engineered by the Great Ones from native mammals to serve as slaves, flourish in small enclaves, living alongside dinosaurs and other pre-historic terrestrial creatures, as well as entirely non-terrestrial life-forms which have been imported by the Great Ones from the distant stars.

The Equatorial region is far too hot for Human habitation, creating an impassible belt of death; here, however, other strange and fell creatures thrive, such as the insectoid Slagborn and the reptilian Dryth.

The Autumn City falls silent as the last Great Ones slumber. In Deodanth, mankind has established some semblance of civilization, living in the shell of an alien city still inhabited by a few members of its builder-race. On the seas, a brood of amphibians have built the flotilla city of Yrowaine from which they conduct raids to steal humans for mates, and serving mysterious masters, the insect and lizard men wreak havoc upon those humans living beyond the cities.

This is the Eldritch Earth—a world filled with peril, death, and high adventure!

I'd like to extend special thanks to Misha Burnett, as well as the rest of the Eldritch Earth Geophysical Society, for allowing Cirsova the opportunity to have a part in bringing this thrilling project to the public. If you wish to join in and take part, get in touch with Misha, who runs the Eldritch Earth Google+ group.



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# **War of the Ruby**

*By* **BRIAN K. LOWE**

*Unbeknownst to Lannic, his new companion Senela has in her possession a powerful stolen artifact. Mystics and monsters converge on the pair for a showdown in fog-choked alleys of Tal Shar Anog to do battle and retrieve the Scepter of Thuylivant!*

The priest's glassy eyes stared at the ceiling portraying the starry sky, though his vision now extended past the ceiling to the firmament itself, following the trail of his soul to the Palace of Night.

Did a shadow move? Or was it just a flicker from one of the sputtering candles lining the walls of the vault? No man could say, but the senses of the vault's other guardian were not those of mortal man. The seven-foot serpent unwound its scaly green length, tongue flickering, catching the warmth of another body despite the shadows. The triangular head withdrew, then darted forward, but there was nothing there for the needle fangs to sink into.

The snake whirled again, its tail whipping through the air with an audible *snap*, but it was too slow—too slow to avoid the silver bolt which reflected the candlelight as it sprang to bury itself in reptilian flesh.

A piece of the shadow separated itself from the rest, still no more than a grey wraith as it replaced some unseen object under its cloak. A hand extended, fingers encircling the only bright spot in the entire chamber, the ruby capping a golden scepter on a black marble stand. The scepter, too, vanished in the folds of the wraith's cloak before the ghost rejoined the shadows.

But the shadows, like the dead, withhold their secrets, and nothing more was forthcoming.

Another tankard here! If I'm going to die tonight it won't be from thirst!"

As she wended her path through the mismatched and unsteady tables of the Red Raptor, fending off searching hands with practiced ease, the yellow-haired serving wench tried to place the speaker's accent. Even here in the sprawling metropolis of Tal Shar Anog, most of her customers were regulars, dirty little men with greasy hair and big-knuckled hands that thought they had the right to squeeze her wherever they could find purchase. Just about the time they learned better, they stopped coming—often as not because they were found

two alleys over with their heads staved in, or they wandered drunkenly into one of the Masters' black tunnels that any sane creature would avoid, and never emerged.

This one, though, was taller and straighter, like a product of the Masters' vats, but dark—just as dark as anyone else. He was lean, and his hands were long-fingered and fine—although, she saw as she set the tankard in front of him, they were also scarred, like the hilt of the sword at his side. This was no common laborer in the Masters' labyrinths. As he looked up to give her gruff thanks, she saw the eyes of a man who had entered those black tunnels—and returned.

A hand seized her wrist, and she shook it off automatically—but the fingers did not release her. She looked down to see her customer's companion press a coin into her hand.

“He's had enough for tonight.” Although the woman's almond eyes were warm and attractive and her voice low, there was no softness, no hesitancy in her tone. Unlike her companion, she was pale and small; she almost seemed lost in her own riding cloak. For a moment, there was something suggestive in her grasp, and the serving wench wondered if the coin was meant to purchase more than drink, but the moment passed and her wrist was set free.

“In fact,” the small woman announced, “he might have had too much already!” She snatched the tankard and drained a healthy draught before the man could react. She slammed it on the table, wiping her lips. “Ah, I think it's time we go up to our room. Drink up, Lannic! Like you said, you might die tonight, but it won't be from thirst.”

Lannic's hard-worn blue tunic and pants contrasted with Senela's black silks where they lay in piles across the room. The couple lay in the tousled bed, entwined in the last throes of a love that had finally exhausted them. With the door blocked and the tiny window shuttered and bolted, caution had given way to passion.

A white fog began to seep through the cracks in the crude shutters, gathering in one corner of the room. At last, it reached the size, and

then the shape, of a man. Short and ascetically thin, his long dark hair was almost hidden by his white cloak, seemingly woven from the fabric of the mist he had been.

With the silence of a breath, the hooded man sifted through Senela's clothes, moving Lannic's aside. At last he turned his attention to those as well, but completed his task with empty hands.

He straightened, approaching the bed—and was sent hurtling backward by Lannic's sudden kick! Before the intruder could right himself, Lannic had a knife to his throat, and Senela, unmindful of her nakedness, crouched on the bed with a slim blade in her hand.

Lannic's mind was racing as he tried to think of what to say, what to do. No ordinary man could have gained entry to their room without waking them, and if this was a priest of the Old Ones—or worse, one of their human-form creations—Lannic was playing with his own life as well as the intruder's. Never letting his eyes leave those of his captive, Lannic knelt slowly, reaching for his sword with his free hand, while his knife travelled downward over the other's body, never far from a vital organ or artery.

The hooded one's lips twitched in what might have been a smile, and then he *changed*. One moment a man, the next he was again a wraith of white smoke, gliding back through the window shutters and gone.

“Devils of the Fifth Order!” Lannic shook his head and stared at Senela. She too was shaking, now the danger was over. “Why was he searching through our clothes? I could have understood if he tried to kill us, but...” He stopped, his eyes narrowing. “You went out last night. What did you steal?”

In the last several seconds, Senela had regained nearly all of her clothes. Now she stopped, her hands falling to her sides in a gesture of defeat.

“I lied. I'm not from around here; I'm from Deodanth. I was a slave; my master was a member of the College. I ran away and paid for my passage in the captain's cabin. When we landed, he didn't want to let

me go, so I stabbed him in the middle of the night. I started thieving so I could sleep alone. I was hired to steal something, a ruby-tipped scepter, from the vault of Thuylivant. It's the most powerful sect in the city. I was hired by a man. He was working for somebody else, but he didn't say who, and I didn't ask. It took me three moons, but last night I managed it. I took it straight to my contact, got paid, and got out."

"Huh. No wonder you offered to buy tonight. Well, obviously they know you stole the scepter. If I weren't such a light sleeper, he might have killed us both when he didn't find it."

Senela shook her head. "That's what disturbs me. Thuylivant's priests don't wear their hair long."

"So who was the employer?" Lannic asked, cinching his belt. Senela started to object, but he cut her off with a reproving look. "You stole for him, you'd steal *from* him. Why not get paid twice for the same piece? He's not the only one who wants it, that's for sure."

Senela bit her lip. "Even assuming I knew who wanted me to steal it in the first place, why would I go there?"

"Because whoever that was, he's not going to quit. You're his only connection to the man who wanted that scepter, and next time he's not going to be so nice about asking about it. We need something to bargain with. I don't want to see your skin used for parchment."

He was barely dressed when she pushed him out the door.

The thick fog that nightly rolled in from the water seemed to muffle even their footsteps. And it well hid the inhuman angles and terraced porches of the old city's buildings, erected a million years gone by architects who neither knew nor cared of human designs.

They had left their horses two streets away, in a secluded courtyard where they might not be stolen. Senela carried a coil of rope, Lannic kept his hand on his sword. At one point they stopped as a pungent odor and a peculiar warbling sound warned them to hug a wall. An oolanth oozed past them, a ten-foot flatworm that filled half the street until the waving tendrils at its head sensed them, and it pulled itself to

one side. Lannic had the distinct feeling it did so reluctantly. Oolanths kept the streets clean; the multiple mouths on their undersides scoured the ground, feeding off of offal and dead animals, leaving scrubbed paths behind them, but he had heard of oolanths abandoning their masters to haunt the outlands, where they ate whatever they could find, reportedly even climbing trees to reach their prey, including the occasional lone traveler. The only way to kill one was to chop it to bits, or with fire. Lannic tightened his grip despite knowing it would do him little good if the oolanth attacked, but it continued without pause.

“Here we are,” Senela whispered. “Give me a boost.”

“Are you sure this is the right place? Every time you think you’ve found it you end up getting lost in the fog.”

Senela gave him a glare he could see even in that light.

“What about guards?”

“On a night like this I could steal your boots, and you’d never see me. Now give me a boost, unless you want me to go ask that oolanth.” Lannic did so, jumped, and clambered to the top himself. A human-built wall would have been higher, and narrow, but this was wide enough for them to stand on. They hung off the other side and dropped to the ground.

The fog was thick here, as if the mist itself had come inside to escape the night. They held hands, Senela leading them to the house, whose scattered lamp-glow seemed a thousand miles away. They heard nothing and saw no one.

Senela stepped carefully onto a patio, chancing a glance through a window. A torch inside showed the room to be empty. She climbed noiselessly through the opening, Lannic close behind.

They found the first body in the third room they traversed, facing a closed door. It appeared to be that of a guard, struck down in mid-step. His sword had been drawn.



Lannic avoided the body as he crossed the carpeted floor, but he noticed in passing that there were no obvious wounds. He slowly pushed the door open with his sword point. Senela held back, but from somewhere on her person she had extracted a small crossbow, to which she had fitted a short bolt.

Sprawled on a double-sized canopy bed in the middle of the next room was a grossly fat bald man, sweat glistening in the folds of his face and neck, staring so intently at something that Lannic could not see that he did not seem to notice anyone standing in the doorway at all. On his far side lay an unmoving nude woman. The thick curtains which had surrounded his bed had literally been torn away and hung in shreds.

For all that the catatonic merchant did not register Lannic's presence, the white-haired priest did, whirling at the sound of the opening door. A great chest set against the wall, several drawers pulled out and their contents flung on the floor, told the tale. Still, he did not speak, but his expression was murderous.

The tableau remained fixed until Senela entered the room behind Lannic. The priest moved his gaze to her, and her indrawn breath was cut short. The priest looked at Lannic again, and his sudden grin held no mirth. He winked.

Another man would have been distracted by that wink—and he would have died. Lannic dropped just as Senela's crossbow loosed. The bolt buried itself in the far wall with a *thunk*. Under the priest's spell, Senela's reflexes were slow; before she could draw her knife, Lannic hit her, catching her as she fell.

"I have no quarrel with you," the priest said in a youthful, dismissive voice. "Take the woman and leave."

Lannic's mouth twitched. Negotiation only followed violence when violence had failed. Still, he avoided staring directly into the priest's eyes.

"We're looking for the same thing. If it isn't returned, my friend is probably going to die. And I don't want that to happen."

The priest straightened. “I could slay you with a thought.”

“If you could, you would,” Lannic answered. Though the priest was plainly afraid he might not win in a fight, he wasn’t leaving. The priest seemed sure that the scepter was in this room, and for that reason Lannic couldn’t leave either. But if he waited much longer, Senela was going to wake up, and the chance that she wasn’t still in the priest’s control was not one Lannic wanted to take.

Nor did the hooded priest. He lunged for the bed, lifted the screaming fat man above his head, and hurled him at Lannic, who barely avoided the fleshy missile which sailed past him and hit the wall with a muffled *crunch*. The merchant slid slowly to the floor, leaving a trail of blood, and lay still. Lannic was already moving forward to catch the priest off-balance, but his quarry was even faster, twisting about and diving for an open window behind him.

The priest disappeared from sight—and *screamed!* Lannic rushed after him, wondering how a man could be terrified of jumping through a ground-story window. The priest lay just outside—dead. As far as Lannic could see, there was not a mark on him.

Standing over the body and trying to puzzle out this latest mystery, Lannic heard the uncanny fluting call of another oolanth, muffled and yet magnified by the fog, so that it seemed at once to come from far away and just outside the garden wall. He had never known that they haunted the city streets in such numbers—or was it the darkness and the fog that brought them forth? He shook himself and stepped quickly back into the better-lit bedchamber.

Senela moaned. Lannic knelt beside her, examining the spot on her jaw which was already starting to purple. She would not thank him for that. The others were not so fortunate: the woman on the bed had been killed without a mark, just like the guard, and the merchant had a broken skull.

“What happened?” Senela touched her jaw. “Ouch.”

“Sorry, it was better than stabbing you.” He ignored her glare. “Now that you’re awake and we’re alone, do you have any idea where he

might have kept the scepter?”

“Alone?” Senela asked. She looked about. “Huh. Well...” She crawled to the bed, lifted the sheets, and peered underneath. She pulled out a small chest, whose lock she opened in a few breaths. Inside was the scepter, its red jeweled cap glowing of its own accord in a deeper red than a natural ruby, a color much more akin to blood.

“How did you know it was there?”

“Our friend had torn down all the hangings, and he was rifling through the drawers, but something like this you keep as close as possible.” She kissed him. “There are people I know in Deodanth who would pay a fortune for this. More than I got for it the first time. Want to help me spend some of it? We could be in and out before anyone knows we’re there.”

Lannic hefted the scepter for a moment, examining it as if weighing the profits of its sale against the chances of living to see it sold.

“You make a tempting offer.”

“As tempting as your life, young man?”

The man in the doorway was old, perhaps ancient. His tanned face held a million wrinkles, yet the hair that poured in a braid down his back was brown with no trace of white. And he radiated strength, the kind of vibrancy that only the Masters were reputed to possess. Although their weapons were close at hand, neither thief thought to draw one.

“You were right to deny the other our property; his master would have used its power unwisely. But his peculiar abilities were better suited than my own to following you here, so I let him live until he proved inconvenient. He would have killed you, had I not warded this place against his power. In the end, I had to kill him myself, but I don’t hold that against you. Please give me the scepter, boy, and then you can go.”

“What about her?”

“The scepter’s recovery is the most important consideration. Once it was recovered, we would be prepared to overlook its temporary disappearance. But she has committed another crime, and punishment is required.”

“What crime?”

“I had to get past a priest who was guarding the vault before I could steal the scepter. I strangled him.”

“Fine time to tell me.”

“You killed *two* temple guardians, child. Two sins in pursuit of a third. A pattern of conduct that needs correction. The scepter, please.”

When Lannic made no move to comply, the priest sighed. Reaching out his hand, he began to close it into a fist. Senela gasped, a yellow glow appeared around her. She seemed paralyzed, but her eyes widened in terror.

“She is dying. Give me the scepter, or she will die much more slowly.”

Lannic jumped back to the bed, brandishing the scepter. “Stop that, or you won’t get this.” The old man moved as if to speak, but Lannic cut him off. “If she dies, I’ll break this. I’m willing to bet you can’t attack me while I’m holding it. That’s why you haven’t tried. Now let us go, or you’re going to be picking up the pieces!”

His words hung in the air for all the thousands of eons that exist in one single instant of time.

“No. Give me the scepter.”

Lannic threw the scepter on the bed, pulled his sword, and described a great arc that ended with his blade buried deep in the bed and the soft gold of the scepter lying in two pieces. There was a soundless explosion of red light. Far away, the old priest was screaming. Then it was over, and Lannic found himself propped up against a wall across the room. He staggered forward, leaning on the

bed for support. Senela was lying where she had stood, the yellow aura gone. Only the old man stood.

“You fool. There are worlds beyond the world, and Things from which Thuylivant defends us! I would have spared you, but now it’s too late!” With the speed of youth, he ran from the room, leaping over Senela’s body.

Lannic wasted no time in trying to wake her. He managed to lift her and stagger for the door, only to be brought up short by the horror that blocked his way.

An oolanth filled nearly the entire outer chamber. Its tendrils were already questing into the bedroom, and Lannic was barely able to halt and fall backward away from them. Somehow maintaining his balance, he shifted direction toward the window—when all hell broke loose.

The ruby pulsed with light, making the body on the bed seem drained of color. Where it painted the walls, they wavered like water, and Things were coming through. A huge feathered toad hopped across the floor, its tongue flicking out to seize the dead merchant and drag him into its maw. A horde of small red balls rolled out of space and began to fight the toad-creature for its prey, and where they touched flesh, it burned. They were fighting to get into this world, squeezing past each other through the dimensional gap, tearing at whatever got in their way.

Something brushed past Lannic, something he could see only sporadically, as though it lacked the proper substance to be witnessed by mortal eyes. It ignored him for the body of the woman, throwing itself over her like an obscene blanket. In a fit of revulsion, he dropped Senela so he could cleave the monster with his sword. It gave under his blow but showed no cut and ignored him as it fed.

Some of the red balls had found Senela and were rolling toward her. Lannic used his sword and boot to sweep them away, but more and more nightmares were crowding into the room, and he could not fight them all. A gnarled hand seized his arm in a vise, and he tried to move his sword to his other hand to bring it to bear...

...until the oolanth reared up and dragged its demon under its body! The beast thrashing all over the room, seizing invading monsters with its exposed mouths like taloned fingers. The toad-thing lunged, but the oolanth slid underneath it, flipped, and the toad was engulfed in seconds.

A pair of armed men of the watch appeared in the doorway, struck dumb at the chaos in the room, but they were soon fighting for their lives. Lannic could see others behind them, fighting to get in.

Lannic turned back to Senela, shaking her awake.

“What the *hell*—?”

“There’s no time to explain! We’ve got to get out of here!”

“*Look out!*”

Something slammed into Lannic, staggering him. A thick grey tentacle with pink suckers the size of a dinner plate was waving blindly over their heads, appearing right out of the wall that held the dimensional doorway. Even as they watched, a second tentacle emerged, plunging in their direction. Lannic took a better grip on his sword and swung at the first tentacle, biting deep but not severing it, and nearly losing his sword to its frenzied shaking.

“Whatever that thing is, when it comes through, we’re finished!” he gasped. “We’ve got to get out of here now!”

“What about *them*?”

“Let the city watch handle them! Come on!” Lannic seized Senela’s arm, but she twisted free, grabbed the ruby-tipped scepter piece from the bed and flung it into the wall from whence the creatures were coming.

The scepter piece, the ruby glow, and the doorway all vanished. The two severed tentacles fell to the floor. One of the surviving watchmen pointed his sword at Lannic and Senela.

“Stay where you are!”

But Lannic and Senela were already backing toward the window, keeping the oolanth between them and the watchmen.

“Stop them! They killed Minister Baru!”

But even as the watchmen tried to find a way around it, the oolanth absorbed the last of the otherworldly red balls. Abruptly the beast began to quiver. Grayish spots appeared, deepening to green, quickly darkening to a gangrenous black. The oolanth’s shaking grew wilder.

“Those things are poisoning it!” Senela guessed.

“Yeah, and it’s going to bring this building down!”

All at once, the oolanth stopped shaking for a heartbeat. Lannic and Senela were closest to it and they watched in horror as its antennae turned toward them.

“Lannic?”

“Yeah?”

*“Run!”*

They spun on their heels and dashed for the open window, the maddened oolanth lurching across the room after them. The watchmen were shouting, but their words were lost in the din. Lannic and Senela tumbled outside, gained their feet, and scaled the wall without stopping. Behind them, they heard the foundations of the house groaning under some enormous pressure, and no sooner had they reached the street than the entire building exploded, masonry rocks smashing against the interior of the garden walls and causing massive cracks on the exterior.

“We’ve got to get out here,” Senela gasped. “There will be more watchmen.”

“Don’t worry, they won’t find you.”

Lannic grabbed for his sword, but the priest of Thuylivant held out a hand in the sign of peace.

“It was not how we would have chosen to deal with the key,” he said, “but it is done. You have paid for your folly in pain, and you accomplished something even the Masters were unsure could be done. As a reward, we will give you until tomorrow’s sunset. Then an acolyte of my house will visit the headquarters of the watch and tell them who you are and how to find you. If you are still in the city, it is on your heads.” And he melted into the fog.

Senela put her hands on her hips. “Well, I like that. We do them a favor, and they throw us out of town. I’ve half a mind to stay.”

From somewhere in the distance, unknowable in the fog, drifted the fatally beautiful call of an oolanth—and from a different direction, another.

“Or perhaps not,” Lannic suggested.

By mutual unspoken agreement, they set off to find their horses. After a few moments, they broke into a run.

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



Maybe they can't look...



But you can:

[www.thewildstars.com](http://www.thewildstars.com)



# **Darla of Deodanth**

*By* LOUISE SORENSEN

*Adventurer for hire, there is no job too big or too small for Darla.... When the trail of a missing pet leads Darla into an Elder One's deathtrap, the professional becomes personal, and she will go to any lengths to dispatch a hungry neighbor!*

I was pretty sure Kellonia, the tall woman with contorted limbs, frog belly skin and small fangs protruding from crimson lips, had a bit of the strange in her. Deodanth is a city of mostly short, unspectacular people, like me. Was her lost dog, Brevert, a beloved pet, or livestock being fattened for the table? Her eyes teared up as she handed me an image of him and a toy bunny he had drooled all over, and I knew it was the former. She might have had a bit of the Sight as well because she insisted our contract to find him contain the clause, 'If he's been tortured, or eaten, kill whoever did it.' As a paid up member of the Assassin's Guild, I had no problem with that.

With my own faithful dog, Rageth, at my side, I asked all the usual questions from all the usual suspects and witnesses and followed the trail of sightings to the lower reaches of Deodanth. There, human-made stone cottages gave way to the huge stone-block dwellings of the Elder Ones. The Elders had been only a legend until Uth the Foolish had unblocked the tunnel to the underseas a century ago. A troop of wriggling giants had slithered out of the darkness and up the ramp to our city and reclaimed their ancient homes. Though they are generally benign and help in the smooth running of Deodanth without interfering too much, their behaviour is sometimes unfathomable. We dwell uneasily in their shadow.

The cobbled streets of the human sector gave way to the seamless granite of the Elder, and the end of my tracking abilities. Rageth's sensitive nose led us to an ancient stone-block dwelling that had been covered over in red tiles that resembled a snake's scales. On the red wooden door was burned a large 'S' in a slithery script. Even looking at it made me nauseous. I slipped around the side to reconnoitre.

"Are you sure this is the place, Rageth?" I held the drool-bunny under her nose. She wrinkled her lips, trotted to the front door and pawed it. No doubt about it. We went back to the side, and I bade her stay. Then I took a running start and scrambled up the wall to the top window, which was open a few inches. Those slippery tiles were no match for bare Deodanthan feet.

I slid through the narrow gap and found myself in a room filled with shelves of leather-bound books, and odd contraptions and instruments. The air was heavy with the smell of mould, and I held my hand over my mouth to smother a cough. I had no sooner tiptoed from that room, into the hall, than I smelled an overpowering stench and was seized by a leathery tentacle and held high. A triumphant, *Ah hah!* echoed in my mind. This place wasn't inhabited by a member of the Snake Clan at all. Worse, it was inhabited by an Elder.

I tried to memorize our path as it bore me in its writhing tentacles through the house, and I glimpsed the red wooden door that led out to the street. Then we entered a narrow ramp that spiralled downwards. The humidity and smell of mould increased until I could scarcely breathe, and the Elder slithered faster and seemed to enjoy tossing me from one tentacle to another. Its mutterings penetrated my brain directly, making my stomach roil. When its thoughts turned to hunger, fear flooded me. The Elders were rumoured, upon occasion, to devour the flesh of Deodanthans. Too late I pounded on its pulpy body for release. It deflected my blows with a shrug of its leathery wings, and we continued our downward flight until it threw me onto the soft floor of a room dimly illumined with a green glow. Its huge body slithered backwards, and it blocked the doorless opening with a large round boulder.

The light did not disappear with the blocking of the doorway, but it reflected like spiders' eyes in beads of moisture on the walls. I heard a whimper, and in the dimness, saw a formless shadow stir. I pressed my back against the slimy wall until I could make out a large shaggy dog crawling on its belly towards me. I held out my hand. It licked me and snuggled close. "Brevert, I assume?" He nudged me and then coughed, a heavy phlegmy sound. He'd been missing only two days. It shouldn't have been long enough to sicken from the damp.

I felt his ears. Warm with fever. His throat had many small soft nodules beneath the skin. Further examination found nodules

covering his whole body. His fur was slick with slime and falling out in tufts. Goosebumps formed on my own clammy skin.

I wished for better light to explore our surroundings, but had no electric torch, only a few matches, which I feared might not burn in the saturated air. Exploring the detritus of our surrounds finally rewarded me with a lumpy stick, which I was able to ignite on the third match. We were in a room infested with a wild assortment of glistening fungi. This was the food the Elder had been contemplating. At the blaze of fire, a spherical fungus exploded, covering us with dust. Not dust. Spores! The dog and I were there to nourish that fungus garden. My heart fell.

And to my horror, closer inspection of my makeshift torch revealed it was covered in remnants of cloth. It was a withered human arm or leg, deformed with blackened fungal growth. I almost dropped it, but my need was extreme, and it burned so well that I held on to it.

I stabbed the torch into a mound of something hideously soft, and tried pushing the boulder that blocked the doorway. It rolled back an inch. I pushed harder, and it rolled back a few more inches, then hit a pebble or rock on the tunnel floor, stopped, and would move no further. The gap looked big enough for me to squeeze through and I shuffled sideways into it. The boulder was round and the opening roughly rectangular, so the gap was wider at the top and bottom than in the middle. I almost made it over, thought I was making it, when I got stuck half way, in a space too narrow for me to catch my breath. In my struggle to either escape or breathe, I lost a few layers of skin and had to pull back into the room. The smell of blood seemed to excite the fungi. They set up an eerie keening and leaned towards me as far as their anchorings would allow. My heart pounded until I saw that, try as they might, they could not pull loose. I calmed myself and watched very carefully where I stepped.

One of us needed to get out and fetch help, and the dog might be able to fit through the gap. He crowded me, almost knocking me down. "Brevert, I want you to go home. Go home, do you understand?" He gazed at me steadily, and I thought he understood. He had better. Rageth would forage, and wait where I bade her stay

'til she grew old and died, but no one else knew where we were. I heaved Brevert up, no small feat for a person of my stature, and set him on the boulder. With a great deal of effort, as he did not seem to want to leave, I shoved him through. "Go home, Brevert. Go home and get help. Lead them here." His reply was laboured panting.

Exploration of the fungus chamber led to a wide crack in the rock at the far end. Beyond was a vast cavern, thankfully devoid of vegetation. Many tunnels branched off, and I followed some that smelled of fresh air, but they all ended in upward climbs too narrow for me. When my torch burned down I hurried back to the garden chamber and lit another. A longer one this time. Someone's leg.

My watch had stopped, whether crushed in my soft landing, or corroded from the thick air and oppressive humidity, I didn't know, but after what seemed like a full day of wandering tunnels again, the torch burned down, and I returned to the garden. The fungi leaned towards me and wriggled almost violently enough to uproot themselves. I brushed my hand over my slippery skin and found the goosebumps had grown bigger. I needed to escape soon.

I lit a third gruesome torch from the dying flames of the second. A whole arm this time. The shrivelled fingers held the flame like witchfire. At the blaze of light, a whimper sounded from behind the blocked doorway. Brevert had not left. I reached through the gap, which seemed larger, and he licked my hand, then moved away. I could hear his claws on the dirt of the tunnel outside, digging, digging, digging. I pushed the boulder again, leaning everything I had into it. It moved an inch. The gap was almost wide enough for me to squeeze through.

My heart jumped at a rustle from behind me. Some of the larger fungi, reaching as high as my waist, had succeeded in uprooting themselves and were edging slowly towards me. They stopped when they saw me looking at them. How they perceived this without eyes, I don't know. I was seized by a deathly chill, turned back and redoubled my efforts. The fungi's unearthly keening made it difficult to concentrate and drained my will. The rustling came nearer, ever

nearer. I feared to look back again and continued trying to squeeze through. Then feather-light caresses touched my legs.

I struggled back from the gap, my egress made easier by my blood greasing the rock, scrambled to the top of the boulder, and squirmed to the side where the gap was widest. Ropey strands whipped my feet, coiling around them. I kicked them off, pushed all the air from my lungs, and squeezed out to the other side. Collapsing onto the floor, I leaned my back on the opposite wall, braced my feet on the boulder and pushed. There was momentary resistance, as though the fungi were pushing back, and then the boulder rolled into its shallow resting place and sealed the doorway.

Now the dog and I had freedom, but no light. The torch, firmly planted in the soil of that hideous garden, had gone out. I caught my breath and closed my eyes to adapt to the dark. When I opened them, I could see. Brevert glowed like a giant firefly. We hurried up that slippery ramp to the main floor and almost knocked the red door down in our haste to escape.

Salt kills fungus. Salt and all manner of horrid tasting electuaries cleanse your insides of it. Brevert and I suffered it all together and were pronounced clean in less than a fortnight.

Then came the question. Was I to kill the Elder for trying to feed us to his garden? The contract stated, 'If he's been tortured, or eaten, kill whoever did it.'

Body parts in the garden were evidence of past kills. Being fed alive to a fungus garden, in my opinion, qualified as torture. The hunt was on.

When I was well enough, I staked out the Elder's home. Turned out it was a respected judge in our community, so I had to be circumspect. I armed myself with a long knife and a light, but very sharp, hand axe and made the journey down-mountain to the town of Nasck, for one of their famed iron-wood short staffs.



Their weapons master, Rore, gave me a lesson in the use of the staff and would have drilled me to proficiency, but I explained my mission and the urgent need to return. He provided a holster for carrying the staff on my back and fastened a leather thong to one end of it, that hung over my right shoulder so I could pull the staff close to my body to squeeze through tight spaces. Rageth saved me twice from wild animal attacks, and I had to rescue her from an overflowed river and breathe life back into her, but otherwise the journey was uneventful.

When we returned to Deodanth, I spent a whole day filing both ends of the staff to sharp points. I hung the knife and axe on either side of my belt and sheathed the staff at my back. These weapons made me feel safer, and though their weight slowed me down, I wanted to be prepared for any eventuality with the beast. Some fools worshipped them, but I had experienced one Elder's thoughts and knew they were not gods.

They were not gods, but were said to be deucedly hard to kill. Legend told of Shoggoths, slaves created by the Elders, that had rebelled against them and were able to easily kill the Elders by cutting open their heads and devouring their brains. I had all the armament necessary to make like a Shoggoth, but would forego the victory feast.

My chance came the first day of the hunt. With regret, I had bidden Rageth, for her own safety, to stay in the market place. I was surveying the Elder's house through a spyglass from a roof top many houses away, when I felt that vile mental presence and a tentacle whipped 'round my throat. The Elder sent mind images of my body, broken and bleeding, being thrown back into the fungus garden. The grip on my throat cut off my air, and my vision flooded with dark sparkles, but I managed to draw the knife and stab the creature until its thoughts changed to disgust and it released me. Then it slithered down the roof of my hideout. I blinked and it disappeared. Counting myself lucky, I withdrew to a room in a house with barred windows and doors and nursed my wounds, more eager than ever to dispatch the thing. Rageth insisted we go out regularly for food and exercise,

but we did so during the day, when the sun was high, and the crowds thick.

A day later, again without my faithful Rageth, I went to the Elder's home. Though the top window I had used before was wide open, I climbed through carefully to accommodate my staff. The Elder seized me the moment my feet touched the floor and tossed me into the air. The slapping of the weapons on my hips jarred me from the spell of lethargy it cast, but before I could fight back, the beast gripped my staff, which was firmly secured to my back, and spun me until I thought I would faint. Then it tossed me into the air. This time, despite the nausea, violent mental images and overpowering stench, I came down swinging the axe, and the creature withdrew its tentacles to its sides. I landed heavily on its body and fancied I heard air escape from its lungs, if lungs it had. It threw me towards the window, and I shot through, flipped around, and slid down the outer wall.

I turned Rageth loose to forage and amuse herself regularly, and paced the floor of my barred room for two days, thinking and planning, wary of underestimating the Elder again. The open window had been a trap. I was stalking it, but apparently it also was stalking me. I decided to lead it a merry chase.

The next morning I crept towards its house, senses keen. When I felt its jangled mental images approach, I sauntered down a narrow street that ended in the ancient ramp to the tunnel Uth the Foolish had unblocked. The streets were strangely empty, as though humans and other animals had sensed the creature's malevolent thoughts and hidden. When the Elder perceived the direction I was taking, I felt it relax and fall back, content to take me at its leisure.

I ambled down the ramp then added a limp to my step, unsheathing my staff and pretending to lean heavily upon it. The iron-hard tip rang on the granite blocks. The Elder's mental images slavered in response as it considered not feeding me to its fungal garden, but instead popping me into its mouth alive. My struggles would add relish to its meal. I broke out in a cold sweat and almost ran. But Elders are as relentless as Assassins. Running would be

futile. Covered in goosebumps, I conquered my tingling nerves and limped on.

The ramp gave way to a gently curving tunnel, and the air turned cool. The walls developed a lambent glow that illumined the plumes of my breath. I heard the rustle of tentacles and the rasp of the heavy body on the stones behind me speed up, and the thing was upon me! I spun and knocked the questing tentacle aside with my staff then used it to vault over the beast onto higher ground.

It whipped its arms at me with amazing speed and sent me flying. Knowing I had few advantages in this conflict, I made a determined effort and landed on my feet. The light was poor, and the creature so strong I had to end it quickly or end up as dinner. I fought its commands to lie down and let it crush me, and hurled the axe towards its eyes. They lit up with a green glow, and it threw a tentacle towards the hurtling blade. Before it could catch the axe and whip it back at me, I used the staff to vault into the air, swing it about, and land with my full weight on the point, to skewer the creature in the centre of its head. For good measure, I stirred the staff around to destroy the creature's brain. Its many tentacles shot straight out and then collapsed.

I searched for the axe, but it was lost in the darkness. There was time only to sever an end of one of the tentacles as proof of the kill when I heard a glutinous bubbling approaching up the ramp. It might have been something as harmless as one of the blind giant penguins that inhabit the undersea. Or it might have been a legendary Shoggoth. I didn't stick around to find out.

Things have quieted down in Deodanth since I slew the Elder. Few people or dogs go missing.

But I'll keep my ear to the ground. It doesn't do to get too comfortable in Deodanth.

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*Most of her life, aside from day jobs and raising a family, Louise painted. Then an Ice Storm left five million people without power—when power was finally restored, she wasn't able to paint anymore, so Louise started writing. Her fiction has appeared in Just a Minor*

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# **In the Gloaming O My Darling**

*By* MISHA BURNETT

*Rumored to be beautiful and terrible beyond knowing, the Deep Queens of Yrrowaine must mate with human males to continue their unnatural breed! Will Tak and Michorn, boys left chained upon the beach, be forced to sate their foul desires?!*

“Hey. Hey, you. You're Akadjan, huh?”

Tak ignored the boy and stared out to sea. They were on a narrow strip of beach, backs against a smooth stone wall. The two youths had been dragged here at midday, and their heavy brass collars had been chained to rings set into the stone. There was enough chain that Tak could have sat down, as the other boy had.

Tak preferred to stand. His people faced death on their feet.

The other boy sighed and said, as if to himself, “Gotta be Akadjan. I always heard they were stupid.”

Tak snapped his head around to glare angrily at the other boy. The other—pale-skinned and plump, a city-bred boy for sure—didn't seem to notice. He, like Tak, was naked except for the brass collar, and his pale skin was already showing signs of sunburn. Not that it really mattered, at this point.

The city boy seemed to be watching the gliding reptiles that drifted over the shoreline. From time to time, one of the winged creatures folded its wings and dove into the surf, emerging with something wet and struggling in its jaws.

“A man's last day on Earth,” the city boy mused absently, “and he hasn't got the sense to get comfortable. Like it's going to make a difference.”

“You would not understand,” Tak spat out angrily.

The boy looked over at him with a grin. “Ah, so you can talk.”

Tak looked back out to sea. “If I have someone worth talking to.”

The boy laughed and then shaded his eyes with his hand and mimed searching the horizon in all directions. “Maybe someone worth talking to will show up, but I'm not holding out much hope of that. Are you?”

Tak resumed his vigilant posture, looking out to sea. The sun was halfway to the sea, directly ahead, and the reflections from the

waves made him squint. "You would not understand," he repeated sullenly.

The boy slapped the sand beside him, inviting Tak to sit. "Well," he said, "you've got the rest of the day to explain it to me. If it takes longer than that..." he let the sentence trail off.

After a moment the boy said, "I'm Michorn."

Tak waited a long moment before replying. "Tak," he said.

Michorn bobbed his head in greeting. "Pleased to meet you, Sir Tak. Ordinarily I'd wish you a long life, but, under the circumstances..."

Tak found Michorn's flippancy grating. A man should face death with dignity. Solemnity. Or at least peace and quiet.

Michorn stretched his legs out onto the sand. "Now, you," he said conversationally, "were probably captured in battle, am I right? A mighty warrior, by the look of you."

Again Tak turned to glare at Michorn. The city boy's eyes were amused. Is that fat slob mocking me? Tak wondered angrily.

"We were raided," Tak said coolly. "Slavers from the north. Slagborn. I held the wall to let the women escape into the jungle."

Michorn nodded gravely, and his expression seemed to be honest respect. "I thought that you had the look of a warrior." He sighed and looked away. "I had the misfortune to be the youngest son. My father needed a handful of coin more than another mouth to feed."

Tak stared, outraged. "Your own father sold you to the Yrowaine?"

"Oh, no," Michorn said quickly. "He was a bastard, but not a monster. He sold me to a coppersmith."

Michorn raised his right hand. Tak was on Michorn's left, and hadn't noticed the boy's right hand before. It was a misshapen knob of flesh, like a lump of melted wax, lacking all but one finger and a thumb.

“Molten copper,” he said and his tone seemed to lack all expression, “is extremely warm. In case you were wondering.”

Not flippancy, Tak realized. Fear. Michorn is terrified. That mocking smile was the mask he wore to hide it.

Tak squatted in the sand, careful not to tangle the chain and strangle himself. “And the coppersmith sold you to Yrrowaine?” he asked gently.

Michorn shrugged. “He put me in the Mayor's auction. I doubt he waited around to see who was the high bidder. The poor man only got two years' work from me before I maimed myself. It's important to keep these things in perspective.”

“The Mayor,” Tak said to himself. “The Mayor of Tal Shar Anog?”

Michorn gave a bark of laughter. “Is there any other? Born and raised in the Silver City, where the Lord Mayor watches over all his subject like a dragoness watches her chicks.”

His voice dropped into a mock conspiratorial tone, as if he were imparting a great secret. “I saw His Benevolence once, you know. Purely by accident, of course. The Entourage was passing through the Fishmarket district on its way to the docks when it became necessary for His Magnificence to evacuate the noble bladder. Ahh, yes, the memory of the sweet stench of that mayoral urine has been a great comfort to me over the years.”

Tak found himself grinning, as much from confusion as humor. Michorn's southern accent was thick, but his words were clear enough. It was the meaning that escaped Tak. The city lad seemed to view even his own life story as a grim jest. Could he take nothing seriously?

To change the subject, Tak looked out to the sea. The tide would be rolling in soon, he knew, although as yet he'd not been able to see the line of breakers advance. “Do you suppose it's true what they say of the Elder Mothers? That those given to them see visions?”



Michorn shrugged. "Why would they lie? It's not as if we were given the option to decline the consummation."

"I suppose they must," Tak said slowly. He felt heat rising to his face, although his dark skin gave no sign of blush. "in order to... collect what they seek."

Michorn saw the other's embarrassment and raised an eyebrow. "Not keen on the deep ones? Now, me, I believe that a mass of writhing tentacles gives a woman a certain exotic appeal, should she possess maturity and grace. Still, we'll not see them as they truly are. They come to us in the seeming of mortal women, and lovely ones. Or so I've heard."

Tak let himself relax until he sat on the sand and stretched his long legs out in front of him. Softly he said, "There is no dignity to this."

Michorn shook his head. "Is there any more dignity to taking a spear in the guts? Shaking from fever? Being run down by a wagon when staggering home drunk from a tavern? There is never any dignity in dying. The world shits us out into a bottomless privy. It's a humiliating matter for all concerned."

The pale boy sighed. "This way, at least if the tales are true, we'll die with some pleasure. Perhaps the Elder Mothers will grant me a vision of my old master bent over his own forge with his tackle in the flames and squealing like a stoat. There's a sight to spur me to passion fit to satisfy a deep queen."

Tak stared at him, open-mouthed, and then almost against his will barked laughter. "You are impossible," he said simply.

Michorn shrugged. "So I've been told. Did you have a sweetheart back in your jungle?"

"My father had been making arrangements," Tak said. "A girl from another village. That is our way."

"Was she pretty?" Michorn asked.

Tak shrugged. "I've not met her."

Michorn frowned at that. "You get married without seeing your bride first?"

"If my father had reached an agreement with the girl's father, we would have been introduced, formally, at a dinner before the wedding," Tak explained. "Things had not progressed that far."

Michorn seemed about to ask another question, then stopped and looked out at the line of surf. "Tide's coming in," he remarked.

Tak looked. The breakers were closer than they had been. Despite the heat of the sun he shivered.

"Tell me about Akadja, Tak," Michorn said suddenly.

Tak frowned at him. "Why?"

"Why?" Michorn repeated. "Because I spent my whole life living in the Fishmarket district, within a short walk of the house where I was born, unless you count the time I spent in the hold of a Yrowaine slave ship, and now—" he tugged on the chain attached to his collar "—it looks like my traveling days are in the past."

"I'm no different," Tak said. "I'm from a simple village. My uncles have traveled to Deodanth, but I never went anywhere. Until now."

"Is it true that your people hunt saurs?" Michorn asked.

Tak nodded. "When we must. Their meat is tasteless. They say that it is because they have such small spirits and that it does not strengthen a man's spirit to eat their flesh, only the body. We prefer the boar and the tapir and the deer."

Michorn considered that. "What about the great saurs, the forest giants? Do your people hunt them?"

Tak looked away, then shook his head. "No. A forest giant pair will kill all of the game for a day's walk in all directions. If they come, we move the village. Otherwise, when all the other game is gone, they will hunt us."

"Did you ever see one?" Michorn asked.

“From a distance,” Tak admitted. “Their heads can reach higher up a tree than a man can climb, and they run faster than even the deer, but they can't run as long.” He gestured at Michorn's legs. “Draw your feet in towards your body.”

Michorn's face was puzzled, but he did it, bending his legs and pulling them in.

“Stop there.” Tak said. “The way you are sitting now, you could fit inside the footprint of a forest giant. In my tongue we call them ‘the thunder that walks’. No man hunts them.”

“The thunder that walks,” Michorn repeated with a grin. “All I saw in the city was rats and ravens.”

“And the Lord Mayor,” Tak added with a sideways grin.

Michorn rolled his eyes. “The thunder that gets carried around in a sedan chair.”

The youths talked, and very slowly the sun went down and the tide came up. Despite Michorn's best efforts, their conversation died away into a waiting silence in the gathering shadows. The surf reached the sand where they sat.

The breeze from the sea had turned cool, and the first stars were winking into sight when Tak heard Michorn say softly, “Maybe they won't see you, next to me.”

Tak started out of his own thoughts. The city boy's pale body was a ghostly shape in the starlight, while Tak's own dark skin was only a shadow among shadows. Maybe they won't see me, he thought, then cursed himself for the cowardly thought. “If that happens,” Tak promised, “I'll attack them from concealment.”

Michorn laughed. “Like bringing down a saur,” he said. “But they forgot to leave you a net.”

Then she walked out of the surf towards them.

The moon must have risen behind them because the sea shimmered like a gray opal. Her head breached the surface silently.

Her hair was dark and clung to her, shedding water. Her face was a pale oval in the moonlight, dark eyes and a shadow of a mouth. She walked slowly forward and rose bit by bit, bare skin shining. She was in the full years of motherhood, Tak saw, breasts full and rounded, hips wide, swaying with sensual grace.

That's only what she appears to be, Tak told himself harshly. The Yrrowaine changed as they grew older, reverted to inhuman aquatic forms. Their blood was tainted, mixed with something alien, something that had no love for the light and air of the surface world. They required fresh infusions of humanity to bear children who could live outside of the sea. The Yrrowaine slavers had to continually provide young men to sate their deep queens' desires.

The deep queens could mask their true forms, but they were not human. I am seeing a lie.

Beside him Michorn sighed a word that might have been a name.

Is this apparition someone that he recognizes, Tak wondered. Did the deep queen put on an illusion of a woman of Michorn's city, to quiet him into acquiescence? The figure emerging from the surf seemed to be focused on the city boy. Tak lay still, as still as any hunter stalking game, and he watched.

The feminine figure swayed and drew closer. Her skin glistened with beads of water, but Tak noticed that her feet weren't covered with sand as they should have been. A lie, he repeated to himself, I am seeing a lie.

Michorn scrambled backwards to press himself against the stone at their backs, shaking his head. Tak could smell a heavy animal odor on the cool breeze, reptilian and strange. The woman reached Michorn and bent down beside him. Her lips were full and curved in a welcoming smile, her eyes bright with desire.

Michorn sat still, staring up at the vision. His lips moved, but no sound emerged. The gleaming figure beside him knelt on the ground—Tak saw that no sand clung to those slim, strong legs—and bent her face to Michorn.

Tak forced himself to relax, released his breath in a long soundless whisper, and tensed his muscles. When he judged the figure's full attention was on the city boy, Tak struck from the shadows.

Weaponless, he brought his fists, clutched tightly together, down against the back of the figure's head. Instead of wet hair his hands struck slick, rubbery skin. The blow struck hard, though, driven by desperation, and Tak felt the creature's head snap forward and heard a heavy, liquid grunt of shock. He pressed his advantage and put his arms around the thing's neck, trying for a stranglehold.

Something heavy and wet struck him in the chest, a blow like the kick of a tapir. Tak was flung back and pain sliced into his neck as he came to the limit of the chain. He hit the wet sand, choking.

He sat up, hands in front of his body, trying to block a blow that he knew he wouldn't see. His neck hurt like fire, but he could breathe. He could move. It hadn't broken his neck.

The figure of the woman had turned towards him. She still smiled gently, and her eyes were bright with desire. Tak flinched back from the sight and felt the chain hanging limply from the heavy brass collar. Without taking his eyes from the woman shape, he felt for the chain. It had been broken loose from the wall. He gathered the length of it in his hand.

The woman shape moved towards him, and he met its advance with a lash from the heavy chain, feeling it strike something soft. The form recoiled, but didn't change her happy expression. Tak pushed himself up and towards her, trying to guess where the creature's real body was under the illusion. He reached her and threw his arm around her in a parody of an embrace, dragging the heavy chain around her neck. It was disorienting. His eyes told him that she had a slim, shapely throat, but the chain barely encircled the massive body under his hands.

Tak felt impacts from the other side of the creature's body and realized that Michorn was following his lead and lashing the thing with his own chain. He leaned back and felt the chain biting into rubbery flesh and some thick greasy fluid covering his hands. Heavy

blows rained down on him, from limbs as flexible as a snake's tail. He tucked his head into his chest to protect his neck and kept hauling on the chain.

And still he saw the voluptuous seductress. He closed his lying eyes. He could feel the work that needed to be done.

Something inside the creature snapped and it lurched, the force of the thing's spasm throwing him back down onto the wet sand. He rolled and then looked back.

What lay on the sand, convulsing, was nothing human. The torso was half again as broad as a man's, then tapered down to a narrow tail like a thick snake. In place of arms it had tentacles, six in total, three on each side of its body. The head was eyeless and dominated by a round mouth studded with needle teeth, like a lamprey.

Tak looked away, sickened. On the far side of the deep queen's body, Michorn was getting to his feet, eyes wide in horror. Then the other boy's eyes flicked to the onrushing tide, and he gasped, pointing.

Three more women's shapes stood in the roiling surf. Each of them seemed to be identical to the first, naked and lush, in water to their thighs, wading to the shore.

Tak looked back to Michorn. The other boy's chain, like his, had broken free.

"Run!" Tak gasped out.

Dragging their heavy chains the boys ran up the beach, headed for the break in the cliffs where they had been brought down here. It's not far, Tak told himself. Those things can't move fast on land. If we get up the path to the top of the cliff they won't be able to follow us.

I call upon the ghost of my grandfather's grandfather, he thought, strengthen and preserve me and guide my steps.

Tak reached the cut in the cliff and a moment later Michorn followed him. They scrambled up the rough slope, heedless of the rocks.

At the top, they collapsed together, breathing heavily, and looked down the steep slope. There was nothing there. Nothing that they could see, anyway.

"If," Michorn gasped, "If they can, ah, make themselves look like, ah, anything. Can they look like nothing?"

Tak slowly got to his feet. "I don't know. Let's keep moving."

He held out his hand for Michorn and helped him up. They walked away from the edge of the cliff, slowly, looking back.

They walked until the moon was nearly down and the sea was a thin line on the horizon. They were in high grasses. Michorn stopped and sank to his knees. "This has got to be far enough," he said. "Let's sleep here. We can go on in the morning."

Tak nodded and sat down beside him.

"That thing," Michorn said softly. "That hideous thing. I almost," he swallowed hard, "I almost kissed it, Tak."

Tak saw that the boy was shaking, nearly hysterical. "You didn't, Michorn. We got away. We got away from the deep queens of Yrrowaine."

Michorn laughed, a ragged noise that was almost a sob. "Yeah. Yeah, we did, didn't we."

Michorn lay back in the grass. "Stay with me, Tak," he said softly. "You'll sleep here, next to me, won't you, Tak? I don't want to be alone. Not now."

"I won't leave you," Tak promised and lay down beside him.

After a moment he heard the other boy sobbing softly in the darkness. Tak knew the fear that came sometimes after a battle or a hunt. During the moment of danger you had no time to think, you

acted. It was only afterwards that you realized what had happened and how close you came to being the one on the sharp end of the spear.

“Hey,” Tak said. “I’m here.” He rolled to the other boy and put his arm around him. “It’s over. We’re alive. We’re here.”

Michorn struggled to control his breathing and reached to pull Tak closer. “You saved my life,” he whispered. “I was going to let that thing...”

“Hush,” Tak said. “You didn’t.”

“You saved me,” Michorn repeated, clinging to Tak.

Tak leaned against the boy’s chest, feeling the other relaxing, sharing the warmth of the embrace. The night was cool and they were both still naked. Sharing warmth was good. It was good to finally be able to relax, to lie down, to drift off to sleep, feeling the other boys hands on his back.

Hands.

Two hands.

Two complete hands.

Tak tried to turn to see Michorn’s right hand, remembering the burned stump that he had seen earlier, but the arms around him were too tight and too strong for him to move. The body against his was suddenly cool and wet, and when he opened his mouth to cry, the sea filled it.

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# **The Queen of Shadows**

By JAY BARNSON

*Jorgan returns to Deodanth after a long absence when he receives a letter from his sister claiming she fears for her life... Jorgan must find her before the trail runs cold! Has Jorgan's sister awakened something far worse than an old family feud!?*

Conversation in Declan's walled garden ceased as Jorgan strode in, followed by the smaller, darker-skinned Tarka. Both men wore clothing of hides and rough-woven fibers, unfit for even the lowliest slave of Deodanth. The clothing was far more inappropriate for this social gathering of the rising stars of the great colleges. Both men were armed, Tarka with a blowgun and a barely-concealed stone knife at his side, and Jorgan with a gleaming, strangely-alloyed short sword of the finest quality to be found in the city-state.

A woman's eyes widened in fear as she stared at Jorgan. "Barbarian!" she whispered to her companion as the two men neared.

Jorgan snapped his gaze at the woman, offered a trace smile, and spoke in her language. "Don't be concerned. He is with me."

Her face registered shock rather than reassurance.

Jorgan scanned the assembled citizens and noteworthy residents of Deodanth. They wore brightly-dyed long tunics and richly embroidered sashes. Most held cups of *kayna*, the fermented juice of the shava berry. The berries did not grow well natively, so the drink was usually imported from distant Tar Shal Anog, at significant expense. Clearly, Declan was doing quite well for himself.

"What is the meaning of this? Where are my guards?" The speaker was an older man whose remaining hair had turned completely silver. That was a privilege even full citizens rarely lived long enough to enjoy. If he feared two armed men inside his walls, it was masked behind a furious glare.

"The two men at the gate are asleep, drugged by darts. They should awaken by the next watch. They failed to understand the urgency of my question to you, Declan Ardro."

The older man approached him. "And what question is that, barbarian?"

"Where is my sister, Sirsa?"

Declan's eyes widened, and he unclenched his fists. "Jorgan?"

"The same. You seem surprised. Did you think your brother's assassins had killed me?"

Declan glanced around the crowd. Eyes stared at him in curiosity or deliberately averted their gaze. Declan smiled reassuringly, raising his hands. "I'm sorry, my guests. I have some unexpected business with an old friend I must attend to. If you will excuse me, this will take but a few minutes." He motioned Jorgan towards the door to his house.

Jorgan spoke to Tarka in the language of the jungle tribes—a delicate language with no hard consonants to snap and pop in whispered communication while stalking prey. "Make sure nobody leaves to alert the watchmen while I am away. The more gently they speak to you, the more you should expect betrayal."

Tarka nodded. "I think that advice applies to this whole city."

Jorgan grinned and followed Declan into the house.

Declan shuttered his windows. A single flameless lamp atop an oaken table illuminated the room, the broad-backed stools casting long shadows against the heavy curtains hanging from the walls. The curtains were dyed in multiple colors to form a simple full-sized portrait.

Against one wall stood a hutch with metal cups and a covered silver decanter. Declan moved to the hutch immediately. "Can I interest you in some filtered water? Or have you become too accustomed to the taste of scum and crocodile piss in your water out in the jungle these days?"

"If I have, whose fault is that?"

"Not mine. Pardon me as I help myself." Declan stood in front of the hutch and wiggled his fingers as if taking great deliberation in his choice of cup. He picked up a cup and decanter with some clumsiness, clanking them together. Jorgan caught the movement of

his foot, kicking at something unseen in the shadow of the table. An alarm mechanism?

Declan filled his cup, his shaky hands belying his casual confidence. He set the decanter down to face Jorgan. "I had nothing to do with my brother's vendetta. Nicos caused my entire family embarrassment."

The sting of the old betrayal still enraged him. Jorgan clenched his fists, willing himself to remain calm. He needed Declan's help, and more importantly, needed to keep his wits about him.

"Embarrassment? He sent assassins to kill me, forcing me into exile in the jungle. My sister had to marry Falco to gain protection from his family. And you complain of embarrassment!"

Declan paced forward, drawing Jorgan's view away from the covered walls behind him. "In the circles of power, family honor can be the difference between power and prosperity and starving in the street. We mourned my brother's accidental passing, but we profited from it. I can assure you that with Nicos gone, none now bear a grudge against you."

"What about my sister? Sirsa sent me a message weeks ago claiming she and Falco feared for their lives. Why? Where is she now?"

"I have no idea, Jorgan. She and Falco left some time ago. I don't know where they are." He took a sip of his water, using both hands to steady the cup.

Declan's voice was convincing. Even knowing that lies were Declan's stock-in-trade, Jorgan felt himself half-believing the man. Then Declan glanced over Jorgan's shoulder, and Jorgan detected the whisper of the wall-hanging parting.

Jorgan ducked low and kicked back at the figure just emerging from a hallway behind the curtain. Jorgan's sandaled foot connected with a hide-armored midsection, knocking both the man and the wall-hanging backwards into the hidden passage.

The guard wore a bronze half-helmet and a layered saurian hide cuirass reinforced with plates. In his right hand he gripped a heavy wooden baton ringed by thick metal bands. The guard advanced and swung an exploratory attack, forcing Jorgan to retreat against the table. Jorgan raised his blade towards the warrior, deliberately drawing a reaction. The warrior batted the blade out of Jorgan's hands with a swift, numbing blow. Before the guard recovered from his swing with the slow, heavy weapon, Jorgan smashed the guard's jaw upwards with the heel of his now-empty hand. He pinned the guard's weapon-arm with the other. The warrior reeled backwards, and Jorgan kept up the pressure to the arm and blows to the throat.

The warrior tripped on the fallen curtain, collapsing backwards. His helmet came partially off as his head hit the ground. Jorgan leaped with both knees upon the man's chest. The warrior struck at Jorgan with the club but couldn't get enough power in his swing from the floor to cause serious injury. Jorgan grabbed the man's helmet in both hands and furiously struck the warrior in the face. On the third blow, the warrior dropped the weapon and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Jorgan seized the club and spun towards Declan. Declan hadn't moved and still held the cup of water, as if he had been merely an observer.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said as Jorgan charged around the table at him. Jorgan pinned Declan against the wall, the metal-ringed baton under his throat. The cup clanged to the floor, splashing water at their feet.

"Now," growled Jorgan, "you will tell me exactly what you know about Sirsa."

Declan whimpered. "I don't know anything."

"Either you do, and are trying to silence me, or you are carrying out your brother's vendetta and mean to kill me. The only way you are getting out of this room alive is if you convince me of the former."

"They were taken by the shadows. Peacefully."

Shadows. Ghouls. Creatures that ate the flesh of gods and were cursed to hide in darkness. Monsters that took away misbehaving children. “Shadows? You are trying to convince me of children’s stories now? How big of a fool do you think me, Declan?”

“They are real,” Declan pleaded. “Those in higher positions of the colleges know this. I have seen them with my own eyes. They bring us artifacts, like that lamp on the table. Rewards for our obedience.”

Jorgan raised the baton against Declan’s throat and applied enough pressure to force Declan to move his head completely back against the wall. “So you obey these monsters, and they give you baubles in return. Even if I were to believe you, what would they want with Sirsa?”

“They wanted Falco. He studies these artifacts. He’s learned how to use some of them. The shadows wanted him for his expertise. Sirsa went with him.”

“Where did they take him?”

“Down into the buried reaches of the city of the Great Ones. Under the mountain.”

“How do I get there?”

“Don’t be a fool. These beings were ancient when our grandparents were born, and they possess twice the strength of a man. Perhaps Falco and your sister will return, perhaps they will not. But there is nothing you or any of us can do about it.”

“Maybe, but I am still going there. How can I get to the old city and find them?”

“I don’t care if you get yourself killed, but I’ll not be the one to reveal that information. I have my own neck to worry about.”

Jorgan scowled, pulled back the club, and took a wide-arc swing at Declan’s face. Declan shrieked, covering his face with his hands. At the last moment, Jorgan arrested and redirected the blow.

The metal-ringed tip tapped the wall next to Declan's head so lightly it barely left a mark.

"If you want anything left on your neck, you'll tell me how to get there. Now."

Declan dropped his hands, glaring at Jorgan with a mixture of terror and fury. "The catacombs, you worthless muck-roach. Go deep into those tunnels, or stay there long enough, and they will find you."

"If you are lying, Declan, I will return and kill you."

Declan sneered. "I am not lying, and you will never return."

Jorgan and Tarka took the side streets towards the catacombs at the high point of the city. Jorgan shuttered the lamp he'd "borrowed" from Declan to avoid drawing attention to their presence in the dwindling twilight. He doubted Declan would summon the city watch, to avoid unwanted attention of his own, and Jorgan still had many friends and allies serving among them. Still, it was better to avoid trouble than to deal with it when it arrived.

Tarka kept glancing at the covered lamp. "How does that work?"

"Old magic from the Great Ones, perhaps. Some of the most wealthy and connected have them. I just assumed they were very expensive when I was young. Declan claims they are gifts from beings that dwell in the remnants of the old city."

"And that is through these tunnels you describe? Where you hide the bodies of your dead?" The tribal tongue had no word for "catacombs."

Jorgan glanced up at the mountainside, the lower slopes making up the oldest part of the city. Deodanth was built in and upon the ruins of a far older city, once inhabited by the godlike Great Ones. When he was a child, he'd heard stories that the greater part of the old city lay buried under the mountain and that some of the old gods still slumbered there. As he reached maturity, he dismissed those tales as fantasies, just like the tales of the shadows that would emerge out of the mountain and eat children who were not in their

beds late at night. Now, after five years of self-imposed exile to escape Nicos Ardros's murderous henchmen, he had returned to Deodanth to learn that there might be truth to some of those childhood fables.

That, or Declan Ardros had played him for a simpleton.

"If these beings exist and are as dangerous as Declan says, then I may have little hope in those tunnels. I cannot hide when I need a lamp to find my way. I release you from your service, Tarka. There is no wall near the catacomb entrance. You should go home from there."

Tarka shook his head. "Stop trying to release me from my service, Jorgan. In my tribe, that would be an insult."

"I intend no insult. But this is my home, and my family. It feels wrong that you should die so far from your own."

"Stop inviting death with your words, foolish city-man! I plan to return home in glorious victory in a few days. I can only do that if you, too, are healthy and victorious. Let us proceed with no more talk of death!"

Tarka grinned. Although his words were half in jest, Jorgan knew that the tribesman took his oaths seriously. Far more seriously than many in the upper castes of the city. Jorgan hid a smile and held his hand up in a sign of surrender, and the two continued their journey. They wound their way through the back-streets to the western edge of the city. Few residents remained in the streets as night descended, and they only hastened away as the two jungle-dwellers passed by.

As Jorgan had hoped, there were no guards at the entrance to the catacombs. Jorgan unshuttered the lamp, and they proceeded into the tunnels, flanked by bone-filled alcoves. After passing through four great chambers, they came to the rear wall of the catacombs, with no visible exit.

"Is this it?" asked Tarka.



“Declan must have lied.”

Tarka scratched his head. “Do you hide all of your dead here?”

“The ones who do not die at sea, yes.”

Tarka moved to an alcove, motioning for Jorgan to bring the lamp closer. He examined the bones in the strange light and said, “These look to be only a few years old, but there is no trace of flesh.” The tribesmen had few taboos about the dead, unlike Deodanthians. He casually handed a femur to Jorgan.

The bone bore subtle bite-marks, as if made by a very large dog. A dog that politely re-stacked the bones when it was done. Jorgan handed the bone back to Tarka. “There are regular burials here, but we saw no bodies as we entered. Just bones. The priests are the only ones who perform the burials.”

“Your priests must know that something is eating your dead.”

“Or they assume it is the magic of the gods. Either way, maybe Declan was telling the truth.”

Jorgan searched the room. The dust and dirt had been frequently disturbed, but one of the deeper alcoves, lightly stacked with bones, seemed clearest of the layers of accumulation. Stepping over the bones and holding the light before him, Jorgan discovered a steeply-sloped low passage in the back. Motioning for Tarka to follow, he crouched low and made his way down the passage.

Sixty feet down, the slope intersected a much larger tunnel. It was round, as if burrowed by an animal, but with smooth, almost polished walls. Eons of dirt had settled to form a flattened floor. An ancient trail traversed both directions, but seemed to be better used heading deeper towards the mountain. Jorgan marked the dirt by the passage so they could find their way out again.

After several minutes of travel, their passage ended at an intersection with a larger tunnel. After marking the dirt, they again followed the most well-worn path. They passed several adjoining side-tunnels along their route. Each one increased Jorgan’s

misgivings, as they meant more routes for an enemy to cut off their escape.

At first, he assumed the stealthy movement behind them was only his paranoid imagination. Over several minutes, Jorgan grew certain they were being followed through the ancient tunnels. He glanced at Tarka, who nodded a silent, grim acknowledgment that he'd heard the same thing. Whatever stalked them stayed beyond the lamp's range.

From ahead came the sound of strange, loping footfalls. Jorgan lowered the lamp onto the floor near the tunnel wall to keep it safe as he drew his blade. Tarka carefully inserted a poison dart into his blowgun. Jorgan stepped forward to meet the oncoming threat, while Tarka scanned behind them for an ambush by their invisible pursuers.

The beast ahead of them slowed as it approached the light. The lantern's glow reflected off black orbs set into the eye sockets of the beastly skull-like head that glared at them.

Jorgan only saw a red blur of Tarka's dart as it shot towards the beast. The creature lunged and snapped at the blur with blinding speed, catching the dart in mid-flight. Two pieces of the dart dropped from the creature's glistening teeth. Jorgan had heard of serpents that could move with such speed, but nothing so large as this.

"I'll distract it so you can shoot it again," Jorgan said. Tarka moved back, smoothly reloading his blowgun as he did. Jorgan advanced towards the beast at an angle away from Tarka, flashing his blade in the glow of the lantern.

The monster crept forward into the nimbus of light, crouched and ready to pounce. It was not quite the size of a man, a squat creature covered with an almost downy fur that shimmered weirdly in the lamplight, concealing the movements of the hard muscles beneath. The front legs were shorter than the hind legs, but all terminated in razor-sharp claws.

Jorgan fainted forward. The creature reacted with unbelievable speed, snapping at his sword-arm and forcing Jorgan backwards. Tarka blew another shot at the beast, and it again responded by twisting and snapping at the envenomed dart, but not quickly enough. The dart hit home, and the beast snarled and advanced on Tarka.

Jorgan lunged forward. The beast turned and caught his blade in its powerful jaws. It yanked its head and body so hard that it wrenched the blade free from Jorgan's hand and sent him staggering backwards. It advanced on him, heedless of the second dart that appeared in its flank.

Jorgan backed against the curved wall. The beast coiled, preparing its pounce, and Jorgan readied himself to meet it with his bare hands. It would be a futile defense against a creature of this speed and power, but Jorgan couldn't conceive of going down without fighting to the last.

Shadowy human-shaped figures darted into the light from behind, distracting the creature. The beast turned towards the new assailants, snarling and hissing, slowly creeping backwards towards Jorgan. Jorgan dodged to the side, earning himself a snarl. The beast began to stagger, its balance unsteady from multiple doses of Tarka's venom.

The creatures, perhaps emboldened by the sign of weakness, rushed in. Jorgan could only see their silhouettes as they darted forward, striking the beast with claws of their own with both savagery and precision. The beast snapped and yowled, but the figures were equally fast in retreat as attack, and their repeated strikes showered the dirt floor with the monster's black blood. Jorgan moved to retrieve his blade, and in those scant seconds, the beast collapsed to the ground.

The figures now turned their attention upon Jorgan and Tarka. They were hunched, horrid figures, creatures that seemed to have merged canine features with a parody of a human body. While the descriptions had been vague, there was no question that these were

the monsters of childhood stories. The shadows. The night-hunters. The ghouls. They began gibbering to each other excitedly.

A woman's voice, familiar yet hauntingly alien in this inhuman place, asked. "Jorgan, is that you?"

Jorgan peered past the ghouls. "Sirsa? Are you safe?"

His sister walked forward into the light. In spite of weeks trapped in these ancient tunnels, she seemed almost radiant. Her clothing was dirty and torn, and her black hair was brown from the dirt and dust, but she appeared even healthier and stronger than when he'd left her years ago. Life with Falco must have agreed with her.

"For the moment. These ghouls are my allies. The venom your friend used—does it ruin the meat?"

Jorgan shook his head. "No. Even with multiple darts, it should be safe to consume." He glanced down at the bloody monstrosity and grimaced. "No less safe, at least."

Sirsa motioned to the ghouls. With brief gibbering noises, they surrounded the corpse and began stripping away hunks of flesh with their claws. They thrust the dripping flesh into almost-canine, almost-human mouths, and tore and slurped at the flesh as they devoured it.

Jorgan tore his gaze from the disturbing sight, and turned back to his sister. "We came as soon as we got your message. Unless the messenger misquoted it, we thought you were in distress and needed rescue."

She gazed at him with glassy eyes. "My message? Oh, yes, I remember. That was... another lifetime. Or so it seems."

"It was nearly a month old by the time we received it at the trading post, and it took us several days to get here."

"You shouldn't have come. I'm in no need of rescue. But you and your companion should leave. Falco will be angry that we destroyed his pet. Take some of the meat with you if you would like, but it may possess a strange taint not of your darts."

“We came to rescue Falco, too.”

His sister’s uncharacteristic throaty laughter unnerved him even more than the appearance of her strange allies. “Only if you would rescue him from me,” she said. “I intend to kill him.”

“I don’t understand, Sirsa. Why?”

“He’s not the Falco you knew. His experiments over the last month have changed him into something else. He’s now a threat to the entire city. That creature was the first of his experiments to survive. Now he and his allies are using the entire city above as test subjects for his experiments.”

“Experiments? How?”

“A device left by the Great Ones. It transforms subjects into... something else. Monsters like that beast. It was once a cave rat. Falco has used it on himself, seeking to claim the power of the Great Ones. It made him a monster.”

Jorgan’s fingers twitched around the hilt of his blade. In spite of his near brush with death, he found himself eager for another battle, especially one with so great a cause. “I will help you stop him.”

“This is not your fight.”

“Like hell. You are my sister. This is still my city. I have fought for it on land and at sea. It may have failed me when Nicos wanted me dead, but I won’t fail it.”

Sirsa hesitated and closed her eyes. “I will accept your aid, but I fear you will die. Falco is more powerful than you can guess. And he has three times as many ghouls as I.”

“I can call upon many of my brothers-at-arms. In a few days, I can have a small army down here.”

“So will he. He can manufacture them now with that dread device. Already, he is sending ghouls to abduct people from the city to transform them. If he can’t control them, he feeds their flesh to his

ghouls. Either way, his power grows. We must strike now. We will destroy him and his machine, or we will die.”

“Then I shall be there to protect you, as I came to do. Tarka?”

Tarka frowned. “Quit asking. You protect her, I protect you.”

The group made their way through a branching maze of tunnels. Sirsa explained that Falco had the bulk of his ghouls hunting them, and the rest guarding the main approach. She hoped to attack behind his defenses, at the moment when he least expected an attack.

As they walked, Jorgan asked, “How did you come to ally with these ghouls? Declan fears them.”

“And well he should. They call themselves the First Tribe—the children of servants of the Great Ones. The world shook and buried most of the city when the Great Ones departed, but the human survivors found these tunnels and found one of the Great Ones, either dead or sleeping. They devoured its flesh, hoping to absorb its powers. The power of even the dead flesh transformed them.”

“They also ate that monster in the tunnel.”

“Falco’s machine infuses the subject with great power. They hope to absorb those powers in their own way.”

“Why not have Falco use the machine on them?”

“Because what emerges is not the same creature. The body may be similar, but the intelligence is of another being entirely. Some of the First Tribe don’t understand or don’t care. Others will content themselves to devour his failures, like table scraps. But some refuse to call him master and joined me.”

“Why you?”

Before she could answer, they stopped before a giant stone door. “We’ve arrived,” she whispered.

Three ghouls took to the task of opening the door, which opened smoothly and silently in spite of its tremendous bulk and the ancient metal hinges as thick as a man's arm. Artificial illumination of a dozen flameless lanterns lit the area beyond. They proceeded cautiously through a short entry hall into a tremendous stateroom.

The room was filled with objects of great size and bizarre shapes, serving functions Jorgan could not fathom. One seemed like nothing so much as the metallic ribcage of a titan. Another was a dark green cylinder twice the height of a man. A crystalline orb hovered above it with no means of support. A rubbery shapeless mass lay on one raised platform, protruding seamless pseudopods dangling to the sides, each terminating in bulbs bearing indentations arranged disturbingly like a skull.

They crept into the chamber. As soundless as the ghouls might be, Jorgan recognized something amiss—a sense from dozens of hunts through the jungles. They were not alone in the chamber, nor were they unexpected.

“Ambush!” he cried out. Sirsa's ghouls looked about, confused, as twice their number emerged from behind the cyclopean machinery filling the room. Jorgan reached for his blade, but two very strong hands gripped his arms like iron manacles. Sirsa stood behind him, holding him with superhuman strength as two ghouls seized Tarka.

“Falco!” Sirsa cried. “I've come bearing prisoners for your experiments. Let us put this conflict behind us.”

“What?” Jorgan looked over his shoulder. “Sirsa, what are you doing?” How could she be so strong?

A man stepped into the light. While he hadn't seen him in years, Jorgan recognized Falco. But while the figure bore Falco's face and voice, it was something else.

Falco's impostor peered across the room at Jorgan, struggling within Sirsa's iron grasp. “Indeed. I recognize this one. Was he a relation of Sirsa's? A brother?”

“Yes, my... her... brother,” Sirsa answered.

Jorgan’s heart froze in his chest. The creature holding him fast was one of Falco’s creations, taking on his sister’s form.

“Take him to the machine,” Falco commanded, waving to the rubbery mass on the platform. As Sirsa forced Jorgan over to the machine, Falco looked at Jorgan with eyes that almost showed pity. “Don’t feel too bad, mortal. Soon, like your sister, you will die, but a glorious deity shall inhabit your shell. Yours shall be the holiest of sacrifices.”

Sirsa forced one of Jorgan’s hands into the bulb end of a pseudopod. The indentation gave away easily, like a mouth opening, but then hardened around his fist like a stone. She did the same to his other hand, fitting it within the bulb of a second pseudopod. Jorgan strained, but the mass felt as if it weighed tons.

“What if he turns against us?” asked Sirsa.

“Then he shall be meat for the First Tribe.”

Still struggling against the rubbery flesh which held him captive, Jorgan glared at Sirsa. “I’ll pull my own arms out of their sockets before you or your kind will have me.”

Sirsa nodded and said something in the gibbering language of the ghouls. One approached her bearing Tarka’s three remaining darts. She took them carefully, holding one between her fingers as she returned her gaze to Jorgan. “I truly believe you would. Sirsa remembered you as being willful and stubborn. Perhaps this will weaken your ability, if not your resolve.”

With a sudden motion she jabbed at his arm with the poison dart.

Jorgan waited for the pinprick of pain followed by sleep or stupefaction. He felt nothing. Sirsa removed her hand with a savage motion, the needle cupped harmlessly within. Jorgan stared at his arm in disbelief and then at the creature who resembled his sister.



She stared significantly at him. “There. We need wait but a few moments. Then, when the time is right, a great thing will happen.” She moved her hand along his wrist and then seemed to caress the pseudopod locked around it. With a sudden, subtle motion, she squeezed the rubbery flesh, and Jorgan felt the bulb loosen around his right hand. She glanced down at his sword in his sheath and then at the pseudopod trapping his other hand.

“I imagine you are feeling rather sleepy right now.”

Jorgan was loathe to play along with the creature, but he lacked a better option. He feigned his knees buckling and lolled his head to the side, his eyes unfocused. He’d seen the effects in his larger prey.

Sirsa moved to the other side of the pedestal and touched the rubbery appendages on her side. After a few moments, she called to Falco. “It’s not working. What did you do to it?”

Falco strode to the pedestal and pushed Sirsa out of the way. “There is nothing wrong with it,” he started, adjusting whatever contours of the appendages were controls. “You just need to...”

Sirsa stabbed him in the shoulder with all three poison darts in her hand. Falco roared, spinning around. “You treacherous worm!” His backhand sent her flying ten feet, but she landed cat-like, ready to spring, with a feral grin on her face.

The ghouls holding Tarka released him and launched themselves at their tribesman aiding Falco.

Jorgan pulled his right hand free of the bulb with one powerful motion. His other hand remained held fast. He unsheathed his sword and severed the pseudopod with two mighty blows. Severed from the main mass, the bulb softened, and Jorgan pulled his remaining hand free.

Sirsa faced Falco and several of his ghouls at once. She moved with inhuman speed, faster than the ghouls, but so did Falco, and the ghouls outnumbered her.

For a moment, Jorgan hesitated. He reminded himself that this was not the sister who cared for him as a very young child and that the threat to his city which she spoke of may have been lies calculated to secure his aid. He need take no sides in this battle of gods and monsters. But in his heart, he knew that she had recognized him—remembered him. Her treachery had been a ruse. Perhaps something of his sister yet lived within her.

With a roar, Jorgan charged forward, only to be met by several of Falco's ghouls. They were faster and stronger than normal men, but Jorgan possessed greater reach with his blade than they did with their claws. The first ghoul to disregard this fact met Jorgan's blade between its ribs. If they possessed hearts, this one was pierced through. The ghoul slumped to the ground as black blood dribbled from its chest and mouth.

The others fell back, exhibiting more caution, but lacked anything beyond the most elementary of pack tactics. Had they possessed half of the cunning and cooperation of a saur pack in the jungle, Jorgan would have been dead moments after dispatching their companion. Instead, they held back, gradually losing ground as Jorgan wounded one and then lunged for another. Tarka joined him, clutching his hunting knife, and the two applied pack tactics of their own. Three more ghouls fell before their blades.

At last, Jorgan came within striking distance of Falco. Sirsa was surrounded by as many dead or broken ghouls as Jorgan, but just as many still stood against her, and she faltered. Jorgan and Tarka struck simultaneously, but Falco spun around to meet their attack. Dodging both strikes, Falco kicked Tarka in the chest and sent him hurtling backwards.

"We are gods, fool. We may be wrapped in this flesh, but we are not the same as you mortals."

Jorgan smiled, which seemed to enrage Falco even more. "Then we have an advantage over you," Jorgan said.

As a noble citizen, the human Falco had never been required to serve in the military. As a newborn monster in Falco's body, he'd

never fought a creature that posed a true threat. Even drugged, Falco was stronger and faster than any mere human. But so were the beasts Jorgan regularly hunted and fought in the jungle. In the field, Jorgan had trained and fought against experienced human warriors, full of hard-won skill and desperate cunning.

Mere mortals had to fight for their very existence in a way that lofty gods could not comprehend.

Jorgan fainted towards Falco, bait that an experienced fighter would rarely take. Falco was no experienced fighter. He dodged the expected blow and leaped at Jorgan, realizing too late that Jorgan had anticipated the move and raised his sword tip to meet Falco's throat. Jorgan staggered from the momentum, but Falco stood impaled upon the blade. Blood washed down onto the floor as Falco's eyes rolled upwards, and he collapsed. God or no, he depended upon his fully mortal body, and it was dying.

Around Jorgan, the sounds of fighting stopped. The ghouls turned, surrounding him. He fought the instinct to tense up, but pulled his blood-soaked blade out of the body and readied it for a renewed attack. However, the ghouls were not looking at him.

Jorgan backed away. As one, the ghouls charged forward, surrounding Falco's body. Once again, the First Tribe devoured the flesh of a dead god. They forgot their war as they united in their feast.

Sirsa, bloodied from innumerable claw marks and abrasions, approached Tarka's prone form. As she bent down, Jorgan noted that some of her wounds appeared hours old, healing at a vastly accelerated rate. He readied his sword and stepped towards her as she touched Tarka, awaiting any hint of a hostile act against his companion.

Sirsa's face twisted in pain. After a few moments, she relaxed, and she stood to face Jorgan, eyeing his blade. "He is weakened and hurt, but he is healing. Swiftly, now."

"You deceived me," Jorgan said.

Sirsa nodded. "I'm sorry. I'd hoped to spare you the pain and send you away believing your sister was alive and safe. When our surprise attack failed, I needed to act quickly. You did not need to take my side, once you learned who I was. Yet... you did. For that, I am indebted to you."

"Is there anything left of Sirsa inside you?"

"I don't know. Not as you may think of her. I possess her memories. I feel the emotions that she once felt. I feel a love for you, her brother. And I feel your same spirit of devotion to this city. I promise you, I will do my part to keep it safe. I will guide and counsel it from the shadows, for I have no wish to become an active part of their mortal affairs. I will see the city rise and grow."

Jorgan wiped his blood-streaked blade on his own dirty, battle-torn clothing. "You would have the power to do such a thing?"

"It is no different from what the First Tribe has already done, but this time, we shall see the city above benefit, from the lowliest slave to the highest citizen. And you! Jorgan, you shall be its king, in name and duty. None deserve it more, and there are none better the city deserves."

Jorgan mulled over Sirsa's offer. It was tempting, leading Deodanth to a glorious future. But for whose glory? And at what price, ruling at the whim of creatures of darkness and their poorly-understood bits of ancient power?

He shook his head. "My sister is dead. You bear her likeness and her memories, and I pray that you will honor those. But I am a simple warrior, not a king. I shall return to the jungle. I'll come to Deodanth's aid only when the city has need of me."

Sirsa said nothing for long moments. A tear appeared, glistening in the mysterious artificial light, but when she spoke, her words were steel. "It is for the best. Go. Your presence stirs up emotions in me that are not my own and may not serve me as the queen of the shadows. I still owe you a great debt, Jorgan. Do not make me wait too long to discharge it."

Guided by one of the ghouls, Jorgan half-carried Tarka back to the surface. They emerged in an abandoned chamber beneath a municipal building. By then, Tarka walked under his own power, marveling at how quickly he had healed.

“You were a fool for turning down her offer, Jorgan.”

“No. I am no king. If I came to that power under her influence, I would be serving her, not the people. And while she shares much with my sister, she is a creature born of the dark powers of the Great Ones. She may not always share my sister’s love of Deodanth. And in that day, I may have to return to Deodanth’s defense against her.”

“And for today, my friend?”

Jorgan smiled. “Today, we return to our home in the jungles. I love Deodanth, but my return has taught me that some things are best loved from afar.”

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*Jay Barnson is a software engineer and video game developer who hails from Utah, which may resemble a strange alien world to some. He is the winner of the 2016 DragonComet short story award.*

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# **Beyond the Great Divide**

*By* S.H. MANSOURI

*Bred to fight and born to die, the insectoid Slagborn are the scourge of all humans who would dare live near the equatorial wilds! What chance do the Kumaali have against fiends who are devoid of emotion, honed entirely on the hunt and the kill?!*



We have looked upon those scattered souls too weary and destitute to meet their betters beyond the Great Divide, where flesh and skin and bone are but vestiges of a terrible mistake made eons ago, and declared them unfit to inherit this planet called Earth. Even the Great Ones, to whom we pay homage for their simple yet ingenious design of we who are called the Slagborn, are capable of fault.

Those created to thrive and proliferate have taken their places already. The Great Ones have all expired, husks reminiscent of our own design; the humans have walled themselves away from the more 'crude' creations, awaiting a time when environmental conditions intersect with their natural tendency to spread and conquer and soften; those of the sea remain of the sea, their vast empires of salt and sand a myth to those who tread on solid ground. They will fall upon us in due time.

The great lizards—dinosaurs—have fractured into groups based solely on their will to cooperate or defy. Those which cooperate have formed bonds with the minds of weaker souls—those souls which we believe should be scattered like ash in the wind. Those great beasts which defy are a danger to us all, thunder made manifold, and we seek to avoid them at all costs. It is those to the south which have willingly displaced themselves from the natural order of things.

The Kumaali have always dwelled near us, their vast rainforests a perfect habitation for those creations which require the expiration of plant life to exist. Therein lies one of many faults that keep them stagnant and unfit. This world and its atmosphere, its oceans, its deserts, its ice, and its fire, rewards those creations most capable of adaptation. It is we Slagborn that deserve to inherit this world. Kumaal must fall, and we will be the first to topple its foundations.

Humans, and those akin to them who call themselves humanoid, are plagued with surges of emotion, coursing through their veins like chemotactic signals that never fail to cause them to err. We possess the same emotions, but we have not become slaves to them. When a Slagborn hatches, its genetic contributors are filled with joy and

wish to lend every resource available for its survival, contingent upon an equal distribution of said resources for the remaining brood. We are born in waves and find it advantageous to welcome quantity over quality in the rearing of our young. For every Kumaali born, five Slagborn hatch. That is how we will eradicate them—sheer numbers.

The emotion called hate has not plagued our kind for many generations; it is a useless motivator that leaves psychic scars behind on those which use it as fuel to do battle. We are far too civilized for such an emotion, though there are hate-fueled members of our hive. They suffer, even when the pangs of war have long subsided. We leave them to their hateful ways, tucked inside the smaller mounds of coral and stone to form their own elite units.

We send them in first, allowing obsolete emotions to collide with one another.

They fear anything beyond the Great Divide; it is uninhabitable to them. There is an area, an invisible border so to speak, that serves as the furthest point to which they can migrate. It is called the flux-zone, where we have found their scouts lolling around as if they had some kind of divine right to exist there. Our mountains have poisoned their skies with ash and sulfur from eruptions that, to us, are celebrations of our beautiful design. They are the blood-red tears of joy shed by the Earth, tears that confirm that we are the only creatures capable of embracing its many faces and mood swings. We thrive where the Earth seeks to balance itself with conditions meant to push those weaker souls into oblivion. We are one with fire and brimstone and lava. We begin at the flux-zone.

Those hateful units—called dead shells—have been activated and sent to the flux-zone. I crouch on a cliffside, overlooking their activities and formations. As a Kumaali sees its companions with its eyes—archaic bundles of nerve and fluid, pocked with rod and cone, I see my brothers and sisters with my tongue. I smell sight and see the colors of the dead shells rise like trails of narrow smoke; each Slagborn emitting a pheromone matching its emotional state. And

the humans believe *they* are the masters of emotion. We do not need to pry, or question, or lie. We plume our hearts for all to see, so to speak.

It is my mission, as only one of thousands, to ensure the success of this campaign. I am not to intervene, but merely observe my fellow hive-mates do what they do best. Dismantle. The dead shells waft black smoke. It is the color of all emotions and obscures the sight of those not designed to see in the dark. That is why the dead shells enter first. Emotions—vestigial or not—still serve a purpose. Three Kumaali exit a small cove tucked in the side of a mountain, pulling their weapons of steel and iron and wood. They will not find our weakness in time.

Bright shades of red and orange and yellow splay across the sweltering terrain, colors associated with the spilled inner fluids of humans and their analogues. It is up to the dead shells to identify them. DS-12 holds up the sacred call of the dinosaurs, a length of tree vine attached to an ivory ball that hums when spun through the arid breeze. They are—were—Kumaali. In time, we will see their colors also. We will improve. Until that time, we track the soles of their covered feet to a clearing where the sights and smells of the Great Divide have waned. I approach.

“How many?” I ask.

“Three. All Kumaali,” says DS-12. The others will not speak until spoken to. I am their command center, an extension of the hive. DS-10 shatters a dull blade between its claws. We do not exist as she or he—we are both, capable of shifting depending on our needs. I believe DS-10 is female at the moment, the more bellicose of our kind. Like the Kumaali, our genders exist as sets of anatomical features and predispositions to certain ranges of the emotional spectrum. DS-10 is driven by hate today, her spawn a recent casualty of those same crude weapons. Tinder for the fire that drives her.

My name, SB-13, will not be spoken today. I am a phantom, and these are my hosts. Yes, spirits exist, but we pay them no mind,

leaving the unseen hands that touch the universe to the wild imaginations of non-Slagborn. They call it myth and legend. We have no time for metaphysical inquiry, for in the span of our short lives we will see the myth of the Slagborn materialize and lay waste to those paralyzed by such fanciful fears. We do not fear, only measure and perambulate the pitfalls of human folly.

DS-8 is leaking, though he does not seem to notice. It was by chance—random lines and arcs drawn with their weapons—that one of the Kumaali penetrated him. It is bound to happen. I only hope they do not take such an occurrence and extrapolate our weakness. But they are not united as we are; their observations are trapped in sovereign minds set free only by way of verbal communication fraught with emotional timbre. I think, and the dead shells advance in the direction of the tree line.

The wretched souls fired on us with thin splinters tipped in steel and dipped in the fluids of lesser beings—amphibious creatures which carry toxins in their physiology. DS-7 was hit in the seam of her shoulder plate, another random occurrence penetrating our chitinous design. She will expire soon and thus cuts a path for us through vine and stem and thicket, leaving a trail of dead Kumaali in her wake. Near one of their many fires, the Kumaali bring her down, prying open her crimson shell, revealing precious pink meat and tendril. She has served her purpose.

They have learned to abstain from ingesting our meat and are leery of our fluid spill. We are the physical manifestations of the Great Divide, extending its poison and acid beyond human-made borders. We will burn them with our fluids and starve them with our indigestible meat. They begin to signal each other from the tops of trees with torches and mimicked sounds of the wildlife. They are imitations of their world, too frail to extend and proliferate of their own accord.

My adrenal glands begin to pump beyond the volume of necessity, an influx of raw emotion, surpassing the standard fight or flight

response. I am angered and wish to join the fray. I cannot. I must survive and pass on what I have observed this night.

DS-1 and DS-2 meet them at the trunks of the trees as they descend, punching through their warm bodies with long spines that jut from their forearms. We do not need tools and weapons, or calls to each other from vibrating cords in the throat region. We were born this way, equipped to dispose of flesh and bone by the blessings of the Great Ones. After Kumaal has fallen, we will pay homage to the Great Ones, setting the bodies of our enemies ablaze atop the highest peaks of the Great Divide. They will smell our victory in every direction.

DS-3 and DS-5 have found where they hide their little ones and aged ones. It is a hovel covered with the colors of the forest, meant to deceive the human eye. The humans would revel if they found such an abode in the Great Divide—they take pleasure in the demise of our young. However, we do not age as they do and have no equivalent comparable to their feeble and sickly populations. Only the Great Ones ripen with age. After seven years, we are useless and are thrown into the mouths of angry mountains, or used as bait to lure flesh and bone. Either is considered an honorable death.

They fight so hard to protect the hovel, but are disposed of eventually. Their shrill cries fade as DS-5 flails her spikes inside the dark hovel, painting the walls bright red as a warning to those not of age to prepare for death much earlier. They take no pleasure in the act; it is necessary to thwart Kumaali progeny from spreading. I believe DS-10 might smile if she were alive. She followed DS-7 into the heart of the camp where the Kumaali force was most concentrated. She has resolved her need to exchange a life for a life.

DS-8 has succumbed to his seepage. Too weak to be of any use, he rips his torso open and leaps into a crowd of armed Kumaali, sizzling their skin as his fluids expel like afterbirth. My spikes urge to unsheathe themselves, hungry to penetrate the softness of the forest. I resist the urge as DS-3 is crushed by a large stone pushed from the top of a well-guarded tree post.

DS-5 makes a fatal mistake by leaving one of the young ones behind. As she exits the hovel, a young one—like a Slagborn martyr—leaps on her back and digs steel into the seam of her neck. They both fall: DS-5 writhing in agony, and the little one screaming as its skin sloughs off. Random occurrence no longer seems valid. They have fought long enough to observe our cracks. Now we number only seven, myself omitted from the count.

When DS-12 falls, I shudder inside my shell. He kept the call of the dinosaurs tied to his waist. That is a human sentiment—hoarding the belongings of the fallen like trophies to display. He broke command by keeping it. It has fallen now, along with his hate-filled carcass. The black mist has thinned out, aiding the Kumaali in their search for the remnants of their loved ones. Love is an emotion we possess, and I feel it slowly wane as our numbers diminish. Perhaps it will force me into action. But for now, I watch from the back of the tree line and hope the call is lost to its makers.

I have lost count of the dead Kumaali. We have underestimated their numbers, as the rainforest seems to spit them out of its burrows and crevices without limit. The entire forest glows with shades of red and orange and yellow, a spectral dance of living fluid that lights up the undergrowth like a second set of constellations. The black smoke has cleared, and DS-1 and DS-2 have fallen, peeled open as the rind of some strange fruit originating in this forsaken kingdom of teeming life.

They have recovered the call of the dinosaurs, and DS-4 and DS-6 claw their way up some behemoth tree whose roots hide Kumaali, endlessly raining splinters on our ranks. That obsolete feeling, the one called fear that I was so bold to proclaim had never taken hold of our kind before, begins to titrate its way into my vasculature. It is uninvited, yet unrelenting. My spikes shoot out, and I make my way to where DS-11 is being held down in a bonfire, her seams slowly melting in the pyre. We have never burned before, albeit we have never stood inside the fire long enough to measure the durability of our shells.

I cut through those heartless sacks of flesh and leave them to add to the rainbow of the forest floor. It is too late by the time I pull DS-11 from the fire. He has cooked inside his own blessed shell. DS-4 and DS-6 have fallen from the great tree, swarmed upon by those hiding in the roots. We must leave. Today, the dead shells have been slaughtered by numbers I was too ignorant to realize existed. I call out to DS-9, my only kin to survive, and she dismembers one last Kumaali, then heads to where I am hiding. Hiding...

We trudge through the moist soil of the forest to the tree line, splinters tipped in steel bouncing off our backs. I hear the call of the dinosaurs from the bowels of the forest, and tell DS-9 she has nothing to fear. We are almost to the flux-zone where our brothers and sisters will be waiting to lend us aid. When I am home, I will divulge the secrets of the rainforest to my brood, and we will fall upon them with more than random occurrences to shed light on their weaknesses. Even flesh and bone have their day; it is inevitable.

The bright white light of churning tar pits and waves of flowing lava, register before my eyes. Next will come the scents of my brothers and sisters, greens and blues wafting as they welcome us back to the Great Divide. I have completed my mission with minimal intervention; love forcing my hand as we dwindled in numbers. They will understand. We are not without empathy. They will see why my forearms are soaked in human blood.

I no longer hear their pattering feet through the forest; no longer feel the pelting of splinters on my back. DS-9 is safe also. The others will not question her; what she has seen, I also have seen. She is only two years old and has not yet mastered the deciphering of sights and smells. If I let her speak her account of the battle tonight will seem a failure, where it is not. I have held their numbers in my mind, many more than I thought possible. We outnumber them, five-to-one. The next time we encounter the Kumaali, our numbers will be much greater.

I leap to the terrain of my birth as a giant shadow, like the fist of a god, comes hovering over us. The cracking sound of DS-9's shell between the jaws of the giant bird—a pterodactyl—gives me warning

enough to accelerate my exodus from the flux-zone. It swoops by the crying mouth of a mountain that I recognize. I am home. I pause and watch the only dead shell left of today's campaign drift away into nothingness; into endless sky where it will feed its own starving brood of lizards. The influx of love has ceased. I feel only anger... and hate.

My account of the happenings of this night have been spread among the Slagborn, and they have punished me. Shame pumps through me as SB-1—a general in our ranks—scolds me for my interference. I do not understand. Had I not intervened...the outcome would remain constant, I understand that now. I explain that DS-9 made it out alive, only to be dismantled by a beast cooperating with the Kumaali. SB-1 wants to know why I allowed DS-12 to keep the call of the dinosaurs. "It was done in secret," I say, but SB-1 dismisses my excuse. "We are united," he says. "Nothing is done in secret." He is justified in his claim.

We do not endure physical pain from our commanders; punishment does not equate to torture or molestation of our external design. The punishment of the mind is a much greater burden than dents or punctures to our shells. That is for the lesser creations to inflict on each other. But their kind of punishment heals; it fades with time and scars and suturing. I will feel the shame brought upon me by the hive for the rest of my years. It is inescapable.

Our memories are passed on by mere thought—synaptic firings lasting eternally, from the dawn of our inception. Every one of them knows I failed, lost the entire dead shell team to an enemy I sorely underestimated. When I smell them, I will see their distaste for me, rising up from each and every one of them regardless of age or ability to decipher our colors. The message is clear. I am exiled.

As I make my way to the small mound of coral and stone, I see the dead shells conversing. They speak of loss and revenge, things I am beginning to empathize with. Many have lost their young, or their brothers, or sisters. The word 'Kumaali' punctuates their every wish



and desire to make what has been lost quickened again. Among the dead shells are the offspring of my team. They mention DS-10 and DS-9, brave souls extinguished by the wiles of the rainforest this day.

Obsolete emotions begin to swell inside of me. I plume black into the night sky. I am one with the dead shells now.

To those beyond the Great Divide, we will have our day of vengeance.

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*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 First American

By SCHUYLER HERNSTROM

*The Ithra are one of the many tribes of wild men plagued and raided for slaves by insectoid Slagborn and reptilian Dryth! Can Tyur the hunter brave the burning wastelands to strike a blow against the Dryth, save his love and avenge his tribe!?*

It is known the gods are cruel. The race of men known to themselves as Ithra, those that dwell at the feet of the old mountains, understood this as well as any other men. They knew whom to curse for the predations of the Slagborn and the Dryth. They knew whom to curse for their hard lives as they eked out a precarious existence at the mountains' feet. But they were an orphan people. The legends and myth so prized by men, those that form the lens through which the world is seen, these had been lost throughout the long centuries of life in the harshest conditions imaginable.

The elders theorized that the Ithra were born of a whim by some Old One driven by a desire to make beauty, an unusual impulse amongst their ilk, though hardly anything may be reckoned unusual when discussing the ancient race. Some Old Ones desire adulation, instructing their servitors to build immense monuments. But others revel in secrecy. Their servants whisper their prayers and trade in forbidden names. Perhaps the one who made the Ithra was such as the latter. Thus, the Ithra knew not whom to thank for their strong backs and fine features, clean limbs and clear eyes. At some time, the ancestors of the Ithra had escaped into the wild. Perhaps the gods had grown disinterested in their creation, as when a child casts aside the carven image of an animal when the onset of maturity turns their attention to other things.

So the Ithra lived and died in ignorance. They hid from the Slagborn and their weapons of iron that came from the southeast. They fled the Dryth and their horrible fire-spitters that came from the southwest. They prayed to their ancestors that the great lizards that came north in the summer to graze in the plains that lay in the shadow of the mountains would arrive in sufficient numbers so that they not starve. During the hot months, the men would paint their bodies with black bands to hide better in the grass sea and match wits with the grass-eaters and the meat-eaters, the warriors' hearts heavy with the knowledge that never did all those that left to hunt return.

One such hunter was Tyur. From the caves which they called home, he led a party to stalk the plains. The grasslands stretched for

miles to the south before giving way to the lands of the sun god, where the heat bore down so cruelly that men could not venture there, only the Dryth who flew back and forth on their discs to raid and pillage when the mood struck them. The great grass eaters came north in the hottest months to feed and grow fat in the relative cool before wandering south again.

Tyur was twenty summers old, and none could remember one so tall or broad as he. Underneath his strong brow, eyes the color of spring grass surveyed the field. His fine nose wrinkled as he took in the wind, searching for the rancid scent of the scaled prey they sought. At his side was Ner, his hunting brother and oldest friend. Ner was the same age as Tyur though both men's faces were hard with long years spent amongst the elements. The pair knelt in the swaying grass. Their eyes met, and they nodded to one another, both having caught the scent of their prey.

Tyur turned to the rest of the party. The strength of the scent indicated a herd was coming from behind the wind, not too far away. The hunters could meet them well before dusk, plenty of time to stalk, kill, butcher, and flee before a meat-eater was drawn by the smell of blood—if they were lucky. Tyur made a series of hand gestures, and the group split in two. Ner went with Tyur, and the others veered east before heading south. The pair ran in long strides, spears at their sides, eyes scanning the ground and sky, wary of ambush by the silent killers that glided above. Quickened by the coming danger, Tyur's heart beat strong in his broad chest. Before a low rise, the pair slowed.

They skulked now, submerged in the grass, spears held low. Finally, the herd came into view. Below them ambled a few dozens of the great beasts, twice as tall as a man at their shoulders. Squat heads bent on thick necks to graze while tails swished idly. The young stayed close to the adults though the beasts cared not for their offspring as did men and women. Older specimens interrupted their meal frequently to scan about, their black eyes wide for danger.

Tyur found his target: a wizened male walked at the herd's edge. Across its wide haunches were deep furrows, the mark of the meat-

eater. Tyur nodded toward the creature, and Ner signaled his understanding. The leader took in the lay of the land. To the southwest was a sloping depression, its southern wall boasting a shale-strewn escarpment topped with grass where waited the rest of the hunters. Tyur and Ner circled north. They cared not for the wind, now; the grass-eaters had a poor sense of smell. When the pair neared the beast, they shared one last look, nodding their readiness. They sprinted forward like hungry wolves, coming upon the old male's flank as he was looking the other way. The spears flew true and sank deep into the beast's scaly neck. A wail of mournful rage echoed across the plain. But only a trickle of red-black blood came from the wounds. It would not be easy today.

The herd reacted swiftly, forming itself into a great circle as the male bellowed, shaking its head and stamping its feet. Tyur and Ner lingered, flint blades in hand, challenge written in their defiant stance. The old male looked to them and looked to the herd. Was there a wisdom in its dull eyes? Tyur could not decide.

It charged, bearing its great mass down on the two small figures that had injured it. Tyur and Ner fled, heading for the depression. The hunters' bodies coursed with that certain energy, the giddy exhilaration given to men who face death. It was surely one of the gods' strangest gifts.

Amongst the Ithra, Tyur and Ner were men in their prime. They ran with animal grace, legs pumping across the field, just barely a match for the loping gait of the great lizard which pursued them. As they passed the escarpment, half a dozen spears were cast down with great force by the rest of the hunters. Some spears struck the neck again while a pair sank into the creature's heaving trunk, aimed for where the ribs showed as the thing took in great gulps of air. Lungs pierced and now profusely bleeding, the old male slowed his gallop, finally stumbling.

Tyur turned and made a circle, moving to get out of the beast's sight to pounce for the killing blow. He realized with a start that Ner was nowhere to be seen. He could not pause to look for his friend. Instead he skulked, coming to stand behind the beast whereupon he

sprang up, hurling himself to land on the old grass-eater's neck, blade plunging downward, striking again and again until his arms were slick with dark blood. The beast was finally still, and Tyur permitted himself the pleasure of giving voice to the release of his emotions, his exultation in victory over the animal, his relief at the coming bounty of flesh that would sustain him and those of his tribe, his brothers and sisters, and his beloved Vara. He yelled until his throat burned, even as his fellow hunters sprinted forward to begin the work of butchering the beast. A shadow passed over his soul, darkening his brow as he remembered.

“Where is Ner?”

Yun, a man near as tall as Tyur but more narrow, a careful hunter whose wisdom Tyur appreciated, replied: “Our brother has fallen. He went under the beast's legs after losing his footing.”

Tyur felt the pain in his stomach. He ran to where his friend lay. A moment ago, his body had been strong, hale with youth and vitality. Now he lay twisted, hip crushed and spine bent.

Ner's eyes stared into the sky. He only noticed Tyur after his friend reached to touch his face.

“Brother...I fell...forgive me. One less back to haul the meat home. Forgive me.”

Tyur shook his head. “No need for forgiveness, my friend. You and I led the beast to where our brothers could make their spears tell. The old grass-eater is down. Much food will go back to the caves. Your ancestors will greet you with open arms.”

Ner nodded nearly imperceptibly. His glassy eyes saw past his friend, peering into the mystery which all men must share. Suddenly the weight of worry brought his soul back for a moment; his eyes were clear as day as he met Tyur's gaze, and he spoke: “Take care of my sister. Let no ill befall her. Take care of Vara....”

Tyur swore an oath to all the ancestors, though none was truly necessary. Vara had the whole of his heart since the time they were children. Ner relaxed, peace settling across his handsome face.

Tyur took his head in his arms, and Ner breathed his last. When Tyur knew his friend was gone, he took his flint blade and beheaded him. He returned to the carcass where the men were working feverishly, racing against the wind which carried the scent of fresh blood across the plains, advertising an easy meal. All worked with heads bowed in mourning for their departed tribesman. Tyur cut a square of hide from the old grass-eater and gently wrapped his terrible burden, bound for the cave where the dead slept. Few warriors slept there whole, as most fell far from home during the hunt. The weight of a body stole nourishment from the living, a debt no man would wish to carry when meeting his fathers in the beyond.

Death was a familiar companion to the Ithra. Thus it was that as the party neared home, the mood had lightened. Ner was remembered by each warrior in turn. Each composed a verse to recall a deed of bravery or amusing incident. Even dim Uth rose to the occasion, recalling when Ner had waited three days perched atop a windswept crag hunting gliders. When one had finally come into range, Ner made use of the opportunity, felling the winged beast with a mighty throw. The kill had been a great boon to the tribe. The tendons of the gliders made the best bowstrings.

Ner's memory was thus enshrined in verse, a ritual which doubtless comforted the dead man's soul as it would rest in the cave with its ancestors. The thought was pleasing to Tyur who hardly felt anymore the heavy weight of the meat he carried, a great hunk of shoulder wrapped in hide and balanced across his back. He walked with head bowed from his burden and thus was the last among the party to notice the smoke rising from the caves.

The lifeless forms of their loved ones greeted them with eyes staring up at the sun, mute witnesses to the horror that had transpired. The cave's wide cavity had sheltered ten families. Only a handful remained among the living. The survivors emerged from the wood line at the sight of the hunters. The party dropped their burdens and sprinted here and there, turning over bodies, shouting prayers to the ancestors that their wife or children were not among the dead. But most were. Those that remained gathered to where the hunters stood weeping. Yun and Uth and the rest comforted each other as best they

could. Tyur stood at the mouth of the cave. Smoke still poured forth, the fires lingering.

Kiom, an elder, laid a hand on his shoulder.

“She was taken.”

“My Vara....”

Kiom cast his eyes downward. “Taken alive, along with Yua and Ra. The Dryth....”

Tyur silenced him with a raised hand. The very word hurt to hear. Dryth. The lizard men. He knew not why, why now, they had decided to raid. The last had been some years before, striking a cave further south, cousins to Tyur. Those of Tyur’s cave had shared their meat with the survivors and helped to take the dead to the caves where they could sleep in peace. But now it was his turn to feel the ache of loss. His Vara was gone far beyond his reach, facing a fate none could fathom amidst the wretched creatures who lived in the lands where the sun god reigned supreme.

As the sun began to set over the foothills Tyur gave his voice again to the wind, this time in agony, a sound to tear at the heart as it echoed from forest to plain and mountain.

The cave had been rendered uninhabitable, so the sullen group made camp amidst the towering ferns that grew in the foothills. A bonfire was built to ward off the night’s many hunters, and those of Tyur’s group took turns watching in the darkness, spears in hand. In the firelight Tyur’s face was a grim mask. Kiom laid a hand on the young man’s shoulder and spoke in calming tones.

“Many died, young man, but enough of us live. The tribe will recover and thrive again.”

Tyur shook his head. “And then someday the Dryth will return to kill and capture again.”



“It is the way of things. The gods showed just enough mercy that the Ithra may continue. You must not be sullen. The others will look to you. When the dawn breaks we must rebuild. Your strength will be needed. We know not her fate, but Vara’s soul is strong. She will find her way to where the ancestors rest.”

“No. I cannot accept this.”

Kiom shook his head. “You must! There is no alternative!”

“I will find her.”

The elder made a noise of derision. “Now you speak madness. No man can cross into the land of the sun god. He beats the earth with his glare, breaking all he sees. None but the Dryth and their beasts can survive there.”

Tyur looked at Kiom with eyes full of the fire’s light. “I will find a way.”

“Young man, please....”

“I will find a way. I will ask the Sorcerer.”

Kiom swore. “Now your madness threatens us all! Communing with the Sorcerer will enrage the Dryth even further. He will tell you only riddles, and when the Dryth find trace of him, they will come back, and this time they will leave none alive. None. Vara was a good woman. You are right to mourn her. But now you jeopardize us all.”

“I will see the Sorcerer. He will give me his secrets, and I will go to the lands of the sun god. I will return with Vara, or I will not return at all.”

The elder balled his fists, stifling a cry of anger. Too much noise at night was dangerous. The saurs, creatures much like the bipedal meat-eater of the plains but much smaller, hunted by hearing. They were most active at dawn and dusk but were known to hunt at night when hunger compelled them.

Tyur stood to his full height and stepped in front of Kiom.

“I will leave now so none are tempted to follow. Guide our people well. If my quest brings the Dryth’s wrath down upon us again, then I beg the people’s forgiveness. But I simply cannot live as before. I would rather be dead than accept this life.” He beat his chest once with his fist, eyes aflame as he looked to the elder and continued, “I am Tyur.” He gathered his meager equipment: flint blade and spear, water skin and a cloak of hide.

With that he disappeared into the gloom.

The full moon aided Tyur’s steps. He traveled along a creek where the trees were thin and he could see much around him. Far in the distance, his goal showed as a jagged silhouette, the peak where legend had it the Sorcerer made his home. It was the tallest of the nearby range, the Gods’ Spine, as the Ithra called it. Tyur ran with the easy grace of the saurs of the forest, jumping from bank to rock and bank again, making good time despite the hunger that gnawed his belly and the fatigue that weighed his limbs. When his pace faltered, he remembered Vara. He saw her sitting before the fire, working her long hair with a bone comb. In some of the visions he heard her laughter as she tossed her head back, reveling in a storyteller’s antics. In others, her green eyes found his, communicating sentiments that no words could capture. He had taken those moments for granted, and now she was gone.

He did not remember stopping. Daylight found him curled atop a granite boulder where he woke wincing from his exertions. His powerful muscles were knotted and tense. Tyur massaged his legs back to life as he gnawed on a bit of jerky from the small pouch at his waist. He drank from the stream and looked up at his next challenge. Above him loomed the Sorcerer’s peak. Several hundred feet of sheer rock shot up at a steep angle. The surface was irregular and difficult to understand; the sunlight seemed to show depressions from one angle, but walk a ways in any direction, and the depression would seem convex instead. Tyur’s brow furrowed in concentration as he planned his route. The northern face may have been easier, but he could not spend another day or two circling the mountain.

He secured his spear to his back with thongs of hide and tied his flint blade next to his thigh, attached to the belt which held up his tattered loincloth. His blue eyes scanned upwards as he took a deep breath. There was nothing left to do but climb.

The sun walked across the sky as he ascended. When it was directly overhead he was near halfway to his goal. His sweat gleamed in the harsh light. The day was unusually hot. Did the sun god cast his glare down upon him, knowing of his quest to journey into his lands? Tyur pondered as his arms and back began to ache. Ahead the slope angled up sharply. His eyes sought handholds with a feverish intensity, moving from detail to detail, searching. Was that dark spot the shadow of a lip? No, merely a discoloration as he neared. He often had to move back to an earlier position when no hold could be found.

Tyur's pace slowed. Near the peak, he came around a vast column of rock and wedged himself into a crevice where he could rest as well as one could upon the unforgiving face of the mountain. His throat burned with thirst. The crevice provided respite, but from its shadowed shelter he found he could not see enough above to adjudge the route. Beneath him the foothills were now small in his view. Spreading before them was the forest of fern and tree, dotted here and there with the shaggy tops of the trees that grew tall but wore their green clustered atop their thin heads. Far to the south, a wisp of smoke denoted the night's camp where he had made his decision. Tyur could not resist a wry smile. To say a thing is not to do a thing. Now that his quest was real he wondered if it was nearly over. Any moment he could slip and fall, shattering his body on the rocks below. He turned away from the vista and leaned his head back on the rock, marshaling his strength. A faint scraping sound drew his attention into the crevice's murky depths. His eyes squinted as he peered into the gloom, body tense.

The spider's attack came sudden as death. Furry limbs flung themselves out of the darkness followed by a thick body striped in gray and black, perfectly matched to its environment. The monster shrieked as it lunged. Tyur scrambled from the crevice, swinging his lean body out of the crack. One hand gripped the lip while his right

sought the flint blade at his side. The creature had underestimated its meal's speed. Its momentum carried it clear from the crevice where it hung for the briefest of moments before its back legs could draw it safely back to the granite wall. The two now regarded each other with wary stares. Tyur was stuck there, nowhere to move, but the spider was wise with many years and knew what the man held in his thick arm, a weapon. The beast walked effortlessly up the wall, looking to put itself on Tyur's unarmed side. Eight red eyes watched the man clinging there, craning his neck to track his foe's path up the rock.

Tyur's body ached from the strain of holding his weight with one arm. His knees and one foot were hard against the rock while his weapon hand hung ready. Eyes scanned desperately for anywhere to shift, anywhere to find better purchase to meet the coming attack. The crevice beckoned, but he could not reach back into its shadows with one hand busy with his blade.

Above him the spider now idled, rocking back and forth, animal brain contemplating distances and angles. Tyur felt anger beginning to cloud his reason. He spat his words up the rock wall.

"Come then, foul thing! Let us fall together!"

The spider's mandibles chattered together as it hurled itself down at the man. Tyur met the attack with his free arm and flint blade. He thrust upward but managed only to nick his enemy, entangling his arm with the forelegs of the spider. Venom glistened from the bared fangs as it sought to bite. Tyur parried the swatting limbs as the rest of his body was awash with the burning pain of his muscles straining to hold his precarious position. Against the whole of his will, Tyur let the blade fall from his grasp. He closed his grip on one of the dancing forelegs and pulled with everything he had left. The strange fur on the leg sent immediate waves of prickling pain down his forearm. The beast shrieked as it was hurled from the wall. Tyur could not see, but he heard the sickening splatter of its impact so far below. The hunter reached back to the relative security of the crevice. He grasped the edge and shifted his weight, only to realize with a start that his hand was completely numb. Then he was falling.

He felt the spear at his back floating slack. With his good hand, he grabbed the length of wood and thrust it underhand into the crevice. He caught the shaft in his armpit, tangled in its leather thongs, awkward and painful, but his descent was arrested.

The remainder of his journey was slow. The peak revealed itself to be a plateau of sheer rock boasting one last spire, a pointed crag which reached up irregularly many times the height of a man before conceding victory to the boundless sky above. Tyur lay at the peak's edge, resting his tired muscles. His body was marked with a dozen scrapes and thirst tore at his throat. But he was alive. A voice interrupted his respite.

"Can I help you?"

Tyur sprang to his feet. Before him stood a man in strange clothes, as tall as he but not as broad. His gray beard was neatly trimmed, and his granite colored hair, though much shorter than Tyur's, stirred in the high wind. Here was the Sorcerer. He could be no other.

Tyur smiled. "I could have used a hand earlier."

The old man smiled back and replied, speech thick with strange accent. "Oh? I apologize. If I have one fault, it is a poor sense of timing." The old man gestured toward the crag. "Come, you need food and water, and you can tell me what brought you here. It has been nearly forty years since I have spoken with any of the Ithra. A long time since I spoke to anyone, come to think of it."

The Sorcerer led the hunter to the crag of rock. They passed through a crevice into a dark chamber. Before Tyur's eyes could adjust, he heard a hissing sound and found himself suddenly awash in white light. The hunter lowered hands raised in surprise to see a doorway before him. The Sorcerer had already entered. The old man turned and beckoned Tyur forward. On tentative steps, the young man went down a flight of stairs. He marveled at the structure. The metal of the rail was cool to his touch, hard as stone but different. Tyur felt a wave of alarm wash over him. The material reminded him of the Dryth's flying discs. Tyur and his fellows had come upon one on the plain when he was but a child. The craft had crashed to the

earth while on some errand beyond the Ithra's comprehension. Another disc had chased them off, spitting fire from tubes at its front, but not before Tyur could marvel at the strange materials. Metal and glass, things alien to the hunters. And now the hunter stood in a chamber of such materials. It bore not the look of the Dryth things, marked with strange sigils and made of odd curves, but it was of the same stuff. The Sorcerer waited patiently at the bottom of the stairs.

Tyur stepped onto the landing as the Sorcerer touched a panel. The door slid open with another hiss, and the hunter found himself inside a long hall, bigger than any of the caves in which his people dwelled, though the ceiling was not so high. The chamber was lit by rows of glowing tubes. Near to them was a garden suspended in containers of white, bank after bank of vegetables. There were the root plants which could be pulped into a tasteless paste that warmed the belly well on cold days. There were the leafy ferns that both men and beast could eat. Under cowls grew thick mushrooms, a rare treat, here in the dozens. Beyond the gardens that lay under the cylindrical suns were long tables of cool metal, piled high with article after article which Tyur could not hope to identify. There were blinking lights and colored threads, shining metal of different kinds, tools, and numberless small objects that twinkled in the harsh light. Tyur's caution relented in the face of a wave of curiosity. He dipped his hand in a box of the objects and brought up a handful. The Sorcerer regarded him with gentle amusement.

"Washers and bolts."

Tyur cocked his head.

The Sorcerer continued. "Your speech will be inadequate to describe much of what you see. I ask patience." Tyur let the objects slip back into the box. His eyes were drawn to a cylinder of dark metal that lay on the table. On closer inspection, it was two cylinders of unequal length that met at the end where a length of smooth, dark wood protruded, fanning out into a wedge shape. A strap hung from its length, fastened on either end. The hunter knew instinctively then that this was something carried, something to bear on a journey. He reached for the article provoking alarm from the Sorcerer.

“A moment!”

He took the cylinder and grasped it, provoking the thing to spit up smaller cylinders of bright red, punctuated by the sound of metal striking metal. Four red cylinders flew from its middle. The Sorcerer handed the article back to the hunter.

“There now, not so dangerous. Went right for the weapon, didn’t you?”

“I did not know.”

“Of course you didn’t. No harm done.” The old man went further into the chamber, and Tyur replaced the cylinder and followed. At the end was a living area. In the furthest corner sat a metal frame, supporting a thin palette overlaid with blankets.

Tyur smiled inwardly. The Sorcerer sleeps. And unless the garden portended some deeper mystery he ate as well. The Sorcerer was a man as he, the hall of mysterious objects notwithstanding. The hunter’s eyes lingered on the rock walls where hung a score of glowing rectangles. Some bore sigils, presumably symbols of great power. Others offered a strange sight, glowing replicas of what his eye would see. Tyur gasped as he recognized the vista from the peak.

“I like to keep watch on the foothills. Someday the Dryth may find my little home, and I wish to be ready.”

Tyur stumbled for words as he regarded all around him. He had forgotten his thirst until the Sorcerer handed him a cup of water. He gulped the water down and turned the cup in his hand, struck by its cleanliness compared to his own flesh darkened with dust and grime.

“Sit down, make yourself comfortable.”

Tyur sat awkwardly on the plane of metal elevated on four small legs. Despite its spindly appearance, the thing took his weight without complaint.

The Sorcerer seated himself on another plane and leaned forward.

“Is it simple curiosity that brought you here? It can’t be that the taboo is lifted. The first dealings I had with the Ithra brought the wrath of the Dryth. It is something I will always regret. I lost two comrades, and the Ithra were punished. I avenged my fellows, but I could not wholly destroy or displace the lizard men, safe as they are in the land of the sun god.”

Tyur blurted his questions, “Where do you come from? What manner of man are you? What is your tribe?”

The Sorcerer cocked his head. “Tribe? I suppose my tribe is American. I am from here, in a manner of speaking. But I am not from ‘now’. I am from a world that will not be for millions and millions of years. But it will happen here, as a matter of fact.”

“Kiom was right. You speak in riddles.”

“So it must seem to you. I apologize. But it is difficult to explain. I am from another time. The sun rises in the morning. It sinks below the horizon and then the moon rises. Imagine a spell, or a curse, or anything in your imagination, sending you from the sunset back into the morning, as you would journey from place to place, as you journeyed here. But instead of space I moved through time.”

Tyur nodded. “The elders sometimes spin wild tales of the Old Ones, those that made this world. They are capable of such things.”

The Sorcerer made a noise of derision as he fingered a charm which hung from his neck, two small rods of yellow metal, crossed. “They did not make this world, rest assured. But you are right. They are capable of wondrous things.” He gestured to his surroundings and continued, “My little home was made possible with articles I stole from their cities. All won at great cost.” He became lost for a moment in reverie as Tyur edged forward.

“Sorcerer, I have come for your help.”

The old man grinned again. “Sorcerer! I suppose that is fair. A better fit is ‘Astronaut’. But please, I am Captain Alan Washensky, United States Air Force. Call me Alan. What do I call you?”



“Tyur.” The hunter reached forward to grasp the old man’s shoulder.

The Sorcerer returned the gesture and continued. “What can I help you with, young man?”

In speech laden with emotion, Tyur related the woeful tale of the Dryth’s last raid. He struggled for words as he spoke of Vara. As he described her, the Sorcerer stood and walked to his bed. From the rock wall he took an object, an image like from the screens but smaller, and this one did not glow. He held the thing with evident reverence. Upon its thin face was the image of a woman. She was fair where Vara was dark, light hair framing a smooth face. The Sorcerer nodded as Tyur finished his tale. The hunter grasped the Sorcerer’s arm with a grip of iron.

“You must help me. You are wise and bear many strange tools. There must be a magic to make me able to cross into the land of the sun god. Grant me such magic!”

Alan shook his head. “I too am separated from my love. And sadly neither you nor I are likely to be reunited. Not in this life, anyway. I would like nothing more than to help you, Tyur, but it is simply not possible. To venture into those lands you would need a vehicle, like one of the coracles your people use in the river, but one that could protect you from the heat. But then what would you do when you reach their city? You would not be able to leave the ship. Your body simply cannot withstand it. The heat and the foul air would kill you within a day.”

Tyur’s fists clenched as he spoke, muscles in his shoulders tensing, “You must know something! The elders tell many strange stories of the Old Ones. Some had boats that floated in the night sky amidst the diamonds in the ceiling of the world. Others could make and unmake creatures at will. Work your magic! Make a spell to make my skin like the granite in the cliffs, make my blood like ice to cool me in the heat! You must!”

The Sorcerer rested his head on his fist and stared at the floor. He seemed to be deep in thought, the kind when the mind argues with

itself. He shook his head again as he addressed the hunter.

“With some surprise, I note that you have actually hit upon an idea. Though framed as it is in your understanding of the world, there is something to what you say. At the time of my journey, some of my tribe had gained the skill of manipulating life at its most basic level. For ethical reasons our scientists, our sorcerers, if you will, were very restrained in what they were willing to attempt. My own life span has been lengthened by their efforts. It was done to make long voyages across the ocean of night more feasible. This ‘spell’ was considered the absolute limit of what our sorcerers were willing to do. Some advocated making people smarter or perhaps stronger. But these ideas were not pursued for the fear that they would lead humanity down a dark path. The Old Ones are much, much more skilled in these things than my people could likely ever hope to be. And they know no restraint. Perhaps their excesses, their evil, is the validation of our caution.”

Tyur stood, “So you could make me able to cross! You can change me!”

Alan slowly nodded as he fixed the young hunter with a grave look.

“Perhaps. I have the tools from my ship, along with the things from the Old Ones. As a matter of fact, I feed myself with plants altered to make them more nutritious. It is possible to change you. But it is likely you will die during the attempt or later, perhaps after only a few days. Something of this nature would take years of preparation to do properly, if indeed it is truly possible.”

“Damn proper! Do it and be quick! Somewhere she waits. Somewhere she thinks of me, and she hopes, I know this!”

Alan shook his head as he stood. “You ask me to murder you on the thinnest of hope that this madness will work. I cannot!”

The two faced each other. Tyur breathed hard. Despite the hospitality of his host, despite his honesty and evident goodness, the young hunter felt anger building within. The Sorcerer eyed him sternly. They were two men of strength and accomplishment, one

from a world of darkness and woe, ruled by fickle death, the other from a world of abstraction and riddle and light so abundant that it was taken for granted. Tyur felt his anger wash away as his eyes were drawn to the picture the Sorcerer yet held. He took it from the old man's grasp, inspecting it closely. He spoke, voice now calm, emotions brought to heel.

"What would you risk to return to her?"

Alan shook his head as a rueful smile came to his weathered face. He laughed.

"You son of a bitch."

"Son of a bitch?"

The sorcerer paced a moment, running a hand through his hair. He walked to the long tables where he leaned finally, looking down. He made a gesture of defeat and turned to face the young man.

He replied, "A phrase in the tongue of my tribe. It means you beat me. You fought a little dirty there, but you won. We will attempt this insanity." The man took an article from the table only to fling it down again. He sighed.

"I should have kept my mouth shut. It is difficult after so long away from people." His expression became grave as he continued. "If this works, you will be changed. If you do not die, then it is very likely you will be unable to rejoin your people. And this is not some spell that can be taken back or reversed. Do you understand?"

The hunter nodded.

The Sorcerer motioned for Tyur to hold out his arm. With a needle the old man took a few drops of blood from the hunter, drawing it into a tiny vial. Then he gestured to his cot.

"Make yourself comfortable. There is some food in that cabinet there. I have to study."

After filling his belly from a bowl of root stew, Tyur found himself drowsy and slipped into a sleep beset by strange dreams. He saw

himself swallowed by a great serpent. He cut his way out only to regard himself, his hands as he saw them, with sudden horror. The cause eluded his conscious mind, lost upon waking, whereupon he would slip back into restless sleep.

He woke to find the Sorcerer still sitting before one of the glowing screens, manipulating the sigils, brow furrowed in concentration. He looked to the hunter.

“You are awake. Excellent. I have had a productive night. Tell me, have you ever witnessed one of your people being ill or sick?”

Tyur stood and stretched, thinking. “At times meat fails to dry properly and becomes rancid. Hunger may drive one to eat of it, and the person becomes sick. Sometimes overeating of the back of the green bark can have a similar effect.”

“But no illness, nothing that seems to come from nowhere? Coughing and fever?”

Tyur shrugged. “I know no such illness. Why do you ask?”

The old man rubbed his temples. “I wish Mitch was here. He was the science officer. I am a mere dilettante next to him. It is difficult to explain, but the stuff of which you are made is slightly different than the stuff of which I am made. There is less of it, and it is more ordered.”

Tyur looked on in puzzlement.

“The origin of that particular mystery notwithstanding, the good news is that it is likely this ‘spell’ is more apt to work on you than it would on me. Right now the computer is running a series of simulations. The first trick is manipulating the proteins in such a way as to not induce immediate organ failure. I have instructed the computer to weave them in with simpler substances that will disintegrate slowly. The computer is creating the ideal combinations, or so I hope. While we wait, I thought of other ways to increase your odds of success.” The Sorcerer stepped to one of the long tables. He grabbed the cylinder and its red children then walked to the stairwell.

“Follow me. We may as well send you along with this.”

The stairwell led down to another chamber. This one was just as long and filled with more bizarre objects. In one corner a net was hung from the ceiling, forming a long rectangle. Another strange device sat in one end. Tyur touched the net.

“Do you fish the river?”

Alan shook his head. “No, it’s a batting cage. For baseball.”

“Baseball?”

The old man laid a hand on the hunter’s shoulder. “I have already attempted to explain the rudiments of ‘genetic engineering’ to you in the tongue of the Ithra. We shall leave ‘baseball’ for another day.”

Near the door were neat bundles of dried reeds, another edible from the wild. Alan instructed Tyur, and the pair stacked the bundles against the rock wall of the far end. He then held the cylinder in both hands and spoke in the tone of an elder.

“Tyur. What you see before you is a powerful weapon. In the tongue of my people it is called a shotgun. Like any weapon, it can be used for good or ill. Its inclusion in my vessel’s inventory was a form of insurance against all sorts of eventualities. None were so farfetched as what came to pass, but that’s life, isn’t it? Inside this cylinder is a small hammer that will strike the shell, causing a sudden chemical reaction to fill the shell with....” The Sorcerer regarded for a moment Tyur’s puzzled expression. He shrugged and continued, “Why don’t we just fire a few shells and you will get the idea.”

He held one of the red children up for Tyur’s inspection. “These are in short supply, so we will only fire one or two, and you will take the rest with you. I can make more, but it is very time-consuming. Now, watch me load it.”

Tyur did as bade. Alan ejected the shell and repeated the operation a few times.

“Now, I need you to cover your ears. The Dryth have their fire-spitters. This one spits thunder.”

The image of the reed bundle bursting in a cloud of shreds stayed with the hunter as the unusual pair ate their noon meal. Despite his dire quest Tyur found himself smiling. For the first time in memory, one of the Ithra had a weapon to match those of the Dryth. He was but one fighter against a horde, yet the “shotgun” represented hope. Hope that the Ithra might be at least in some small measure avenged. He turned to his host.

“How many shotgun do you have? With enough, all the Ithra could be armed. We could lay amidst the ferns and await their discs, then we would rise up and spit our thunder into their foul ranks!”

“It is an appealing image, young man. With the facilities here I could make some more weapons and shells in time. But if the Dryth got wind of it, they would come in numbers again. Your people were nearly wiped from the earth once. I was there. I am to blame. When my ship crashed up north, me and my crew made the perilous journey across the white wastes. After crossing the Gods’ Spine, as you call it, we happened upon the Ithra. They fed us and tended our wounds. We learned your speech and even hunted with you. My crew and I were operating under the false assumption that we had landed on an alien planet. One day I climbed a peak nearby. With these binoculars I saw a city far to the south. My comrades and I were ecstatic. An advanced civilization! Between us and the mysterious city was the desert. The Ithra explained the sun god would permit no men to cross it. So we beamed a radio signal there.”

The Sorcerer’s eyes became sad. He continued, “Death answered. The Dryth came in numbers none had ever seen. They killed with abandon. My two friends died. I nearly died, but Kiom saved my life. I fled east until I came upon another race, this one more congenial. I sailed south from the coast onboard one of their ships. I saw many things. I narrowly escaped the last occupants of an entire city that lay underground, far, far to the south. There I found the secret, the reality of where I was. I also stole the tools I needed to free my ship from the ice. The journey there and back was many years.”

Tyur sat transfixed. Only three beings occupied his world, the Ithra, the Dryth, and the foul Slagborn, things of nightmare, rarely seen. He had thought his long hunts made him well traveled. The Astronaut had shown otherwise.

Alan scratched his beard as he spoke, "Finally, I made a home here. And I vowed I would never endanger the Ithra again."

"Can you not take your ship home the way you came?"

The Sorcerer shook his head. "My ship sits ready in a cave below us. She is battered and bruised a bit, and has donated many bits and pieces to help me get set up here. But the old girl could still fly. However, I cannot replicate the circumstances which brought me here. In fact, I still don't fully understand them. I am trapped."

The hunter nodded. A beeping sound came from the screen.

"Well, let's see what the computer has to say about our idea." The Astronaut looked to the screen, nodding as he did. "This madness can proceed."

Tyur paced the long hall while the Sorcerer worked. The old man was becoming more apprehensive. He occasionally paused to look at his young guest. He shifted to a table near the garden, its surface completely obscured by dozens of articles which mystified the hunter. The Sorcerer worked dials and knobs with deft practice, efficient, though concern clouded his weathered brow. He paused.

"Now I need to add the element that will change you. It is immensely unpleasant. You should see this, young man. You should know, as well as you can, what will happen to you. If you change your mind, I would not think ill of you."

Tyur swallowed, though his face betrayed no emotion. He followed Alan to a far corner where a large metal box stood. A low hum came from its innards. The old man opened the door, and Tyur gave a start as he felt a wave of icy cold wash over his near naked frame.

"A box that holds winter. This must be from the Old Ones."

The old man laughed again. "Actually, it's from General Electric. An old firm, definitely, but not of the Old Ones." He reached in and produced a smaller box. The contents caused Tyur to hiss in anger.

It was the hand of a Dryth.

"Don't think this some grim trophy. I took this for research. But I find I regret it now."

He stuck the thing with a needle, pushing it deep into the cold stump. The needle was dipped into another vial. The box that held it hummed and vibrated.

Alan worked other machines until the humming stopped. He mixed the contents of several of the tubes and placed the article back into the machine. It whirred awhile and became silent. The Astronaut regarded the hunter, sadness written across his granite features.

"It is done." He closed his eyes and seemed to whisper to himself.

Tyur asked, "Do you intone the spell?"

"No. I ask forgiveness for what I am about to do."

The hunter could not say how much time passed as he came in and out of consciousness. Each time, he saw the Astronaut standing over him, scanning his glowing screens, adjusting the tubes and lines which lay across Tyur's body like twisting vines. There was pain then a strange sense of cold which grew with each bout of wakefulness. Tyur felt waves of sickness. Then his head began to throb with a dull ache, settling finally in his eyes. When sleep granted respite, he suffered horrible visions. He saw himself atop a pyramid of black, clothed in fine robes and adorned with gold and jewels, surrounded by ranks of the Ithra. At their feet were throngs of Dryth, singing a droning chant into a sky of swirling red. Their words made no sense, and yet, slowly, he began to understand. Again and again there was a name, "Therizom." The syllables seemed to caress his ears, bequeathing a sense of sinister warmth. He screamed over and over. Was it in the vision or did his voice echo in the low cave? He knew not.



Suddenly he saw himself atop one of the flying discs. A chill wind bit through the thick robes he wore. Thoughts woven from strange words filled his mind.

*Father sleeps. So we fly to slaughter. We will teach a lesson to those that once dwelled in the palace, lounging at his feet, dancing and singing for his pleasure while we toiled under the earth and in the fields. Our brothers and sisters spared not a thought for us. And now we will take our revenge.*

Tyur felt bloodlust bursting from his heart. It was a sickeningly pleasurable sensation, to give one's heart over to murder, and blind rage, to know no guilt or restraint. He saw bodies burning outside a cave's mouth and he knew. He knew he saw the world through Dryth eyes. He understood the joy in destruction, ecstasy in death and subjugation. They had known all along. They knew the Ithra were beings as they, capable of thought, of love and feeling. And to them, it made the slaughter all the more enjoyable. They hated the Ithra with a passion that choked his throat and brought tears to his eyes. Tyur's stomach roiled. Here was knowledge he could barely comprehend, pure evil. The meat-eater that tore apart the unwary hunter, the grass-eater that trampled the same; these were mere beasts, engaged in nothing more than a struggle for survival. The Dryth killed for pleasure. Tyur howled in sadness and anger that his people should suffer under such an impulse. He lashed out with all his strength, striking at his visions. He could hear the Sorcerer's voice but could not understand.

Finally, the veil fell from his eyes. He felt the chill of the metal table on which he laid. He felt the straps with which the Sorcerer had bound him biting into his flesh. He relaxed. The old man looked down on him, face nearly lost in the lights which hung above. The hunter's breath slowed.

"I live."

"I was sure I was going to lose you. By all rights you should be dead, based on the readings I was getting." The old man sank into a chair, fatigue lining his face. He rubbed his eyes. "Yesterday I was sitting here playing chess against the computer and feeling sorry for

myself. Then you show up and demand I try to kill you with this ungodly scheme. I wonder if I am dreaming. Perhaps the life of a hermit has made me mad.”

He undid the straps which held Tyur to the table. The young man stood, rubbing his wrists and chest.

“Well, how do you feel?”

“Cold.”

“I wish I knew if that was normal or not. It will take the proteins about a week to decay completely during which time your cells will be undergoing their changes. Your body will become like a Dryth, to what degree I cannot say. In the best case scenario, you will look much the same as you do now but your body’s chemistry will be adapted to life in the Dryth lands. It is possible the serum will do too little and the heat and radiation of the wasteland will kill you. Or you will simply drop dead. There are worse outcomes, but I do not wish to dwell on them.”

“I saw things. I heard their speech, and I understood it.”

Alan shook his head. “That is not something I can explain. Over the next few days I will be observing you very closely.”

The hunter cocked his head. “But it is done, yes?”

“Yes. We will now—”

Tyur interrupted, “No. If it is done, I leave. Vara waits.”

The old man let the argument die on his lips as he began preparations. He applied small bandages to where the tubes and needles had pierced the young man’s flesh. He filled a bag with silver pouches he retrieved from a drawer and handed it to the hunter.

“Emergency rations. Tear it open and eat. Now let’s get you some shells.”

The pair then went to the lower chamber where the Sorcerer rifled through a few boxes, finally emerging with a large metal box and two black straps of a material unfamiliar to Tyur. The pair filled the strap’s

dozens of loops with the shotgun's red children. He motioned for Tyur to lower his head and he placed the straps over his shoulders so they crossed in the middle of his chest.

"There. 110 shells for you. I wish it was ten thousand."

Tyur's gaze fell upon a garment hanging from a hook on the rough wall. The thing was deep blue and decorated with colorful symbols. The one on the shoulder was a pretty thing, red and white stripes underneath a corner of blue dotted with bits of white.

Tyur gestured to the garment and to the whole of the Astronaut's home.

"Everywhere there are symbols."

"I suppose you are right. In my time we took it all for granted. This is merely my old flight suit. Here is my name, here is a symbol for the vessel, my ship."

"What is that one?"

"The flag? That is the symbol of my tribe."

"Your tribe was powerful. To carry such a thing into battle, it must have brought much luck."

Alan laughed. "I suppose it did. But it was not about power. At its best, it went to battle to fight tyranny." He reflected a moment and then fixed his steel eyes on the hunter as he spoke. "It is good to fight for hearth and home. And I don't turn my nose up at a little revenge now and again. But there are more noble reasons to fight: to free others, to fight to guarantee your liberty and that of your sons and daughters. You fight to free your Vara. But you also strike a blow against the Dryth, those that murder and oppress your people." He took a knife from his belt and cut away the flag with a length of cloth from the sleeve and turned to Tyur. He tied the thing to the hunter's thick arm. Tyur looked down in awe.

"But I am not of your blood..."

"All who fight tyranny are of my tribe."

The young man grasped his host's shoulders, and the old man returned the gesture.

The Sorcerer led the young man down another staircase, this one narrow and cut from the stone. The air became cool and damp as they descended. The lights overhead disappeared. Alan lit the way with another of his wonderful devices; this one a squat cylinder that spat bright light from its mouth. The sound of running water grew in volume. On a rough-hewn landing the Sorcerer had kept a coracle of Ithra make. Tyur lowered himself into the small boat as the old man knelt at the edge. His lined face was set grim though his eyes betrayed sadness and shades of a dilemma. The two men were out of words, parting with only nods. As Tyur pushed off, the old man had one last request.

“If you can, send word of your fate.”

Tyur nodded again, adding, “I thank you for your magic, wise one. May you find peace here in your exile.”

Captain Alan Washensky watched the coracle disappear into the blackness. He turned and began the long climb back to his home.

Tyur lost track of time as the river snaked its way through the mountain's cool bowels. The cold seemed to bite the young man's skin and seep into his bones. A bend finally revealed the brilliance of clean daylight as the current picked up speed. The warrior worked the small paddle to keep the boat centered in the river as it emerged into the warm light. Tyur felt it on his skin and spoke thanks to the ancestors.

Once beyond the foothills, the river flowed peaceably. Tyur let the current take him, paddling only when the coracle drifted underneath the tall fronds that reached from the banks. His mind was unquiet, dwelling on the Sorcerer and the many things he had seen. Though it was the warm season, he felt strangely cold. His skin seemed to keep no heat. Ever at the forefront of his thoughts was the coming change.

The old man had woven threads of the Dryth into the young hunter; the results had yet to be fully realized. When fright took hold of him, the natural revulsion against such a profound violation, he thought of Vara. When hungry, he tore open one of the Sorcerer's "emergency rations", a quantity of thick paste enclosed in the strange skin that shined like rare metal but bent like soft hide.

During the night he huddled in the boat, shivering, beset with more dreams. There was, again and again, the pyramid. But now he toiled at its base, pulling with all his might on lines to move the mighty stones. Around him were those he understood as brothers, though the sight of them was hidden to his waking mind. They suffered together under the snapping whip of a tall man, beautiful in the glaring light, his handsome face fulsome in the joy he took in subjugating those around him. He was a kind of god; this, the young man knew without question. Tyur's heart tore itself apart when a flash of courage enabled his dream-self to look upon the man, to look up from his labors and behold his master even though the whip threatened. He felt love for his creator even as his soul burned with hatred at his cruelty.

In other visions, he and his brothers ranged across the sun-blasted waste, riding atop the saurs. Their heels prodded the beasts to bursts of great speed. They yelled as their mounts sprinted forth, surrounding a monster as long as the trees were tall, a skittering thing moving with sinuous grace across the hot sand. Spears flew and the fire-spitters belched forth their red rays, and the thing fell. The Dryth also hunted, and Tyur chaffed at the similarity, the familiarity of it.

The dawn woke him. Tyur drank the sun's warmth like a man dying of thirst. He realized the coracle had run aground in a bed of smooth rocks. The river had petered out into a stream, and now the craft could go no further. The hunter left the boat where it lay and continued south on foot. Around him, the tall ferns had given way to smaller scrub. Far ahead was the haze that ever hung over the Dryths' lands. In the distance, barely perceptible through a curtain of shimmering heat, stood the city. It was a collection of broad domes overseen by a towering structure, the pyramid of his visions. Somewhere within, Vara waited.

Though only a few days south from the mountains, the sun god was already growing powerful. The warm rays were a joy to Tyur who had suffered so much from the chill of the last days. He felt his skin warming, though now it began to itch.

His steps faltered as he regarded his arms. The smooth bronze of his flesh was now dry and cracked. He squatted in the dry bed, feeling his skin under his hands.

White hot pain came in sudden, searing waves across his back. The hunter reeled. He lurched forward, turning to see his assailant, a scorpion half as long as a man was tall. A wary hunter, the beast skittered back at its prey's movement.

Tyur cursed, screaming as the pain coursed through his body like lightning. How could he be so inattentive? His vision blurred yet he could still see a half dozen more of the creatures skulking, surrounding him. With cruel joy, he remembered the shotgun slung on his back. He pulled it free but lost his step, falling to his knees. His hands went to work the cylinder but they were clumsy, muscles now steeped in the scorpion's venom. The shotgun fell from his grasp. The scorpions closed.

A howl loosed itself from the hunter's throat, unbidden. Through a fog he watched his arms lash out grabbing. The scorpions reeled back before regaining their courage, advancing with tails and claws clattering.

Here was the unexplained; the creature they hunted should have collapsed by now. Instead it lurched forward, swinging out, grasping.

Tyur caught one of the creatures by its knobby tail. His other hand closed around the cephalothorax, and he tore it apart. The act brought savage joy to his pounding heart. He grabbed another and rent again, soiling the dry ground with the thing's vile insides. Again and again, he tore until he saw all were ripped asunder.

The young hunter stood, chest heaving. Though he had been stung a half dozen more times the poison seemed to have worn off with remarkable speed. He stared down at his hands, stained with the

green of the scorpions' blood. Tyur gave a start at the sight of his fingertips. During the melee his fingernails had fallen off. Now from the tips of his fingers lengths of bone protruded, sharp and hard. It was like the hand the Sorcerer had taken from the box of cold. Despite himself Tyur found he was smiling. His blood had been the equal of the poison, and his new claws had made a slick mess of the scorpions. The Sorcerer's spell was a success, so far.

He continued south. Vegetation became more and more sparse as the sun grew in strength. The low hills began to flatten themselves as he proceeded. Far to the north, the mountains stood now in haze. He realized he walked now in the broad boundary between lands suited to Dryth, dry and hot, and lands suited to Ithra, green and cool. But it was not merely a question of comfort. Though none in memory had tried, legend amongst the Ithra said that the air in the land of the sun god would poison a man after too long if the heat did not kill him first.

Tyur's alert ears caught the steps of a saur and he squatted down. The noise came from behind a low rise ahead. He crept silently to the crest.

At a muddy pool shaded by an outcrop three of the creatures drank. This must be one of the last places where rain might gather before the sun god claimed full reign of the land, thought Tyur. He watched them as they lapped water into their fanged mouths. The lizards were the height of a man at their scaly shoulders, perhaps three times as long down to the tip of their whip-like tails. The warrior became aware of a strangeness; the beasts' sharp odor was now pleasant in his nose. He was overcome with the sudden notion that he should walk to them and pat them on their scaly snouts. He began to stand, catching himself with an unspoken curse. As he settled back down his foot slid slightly on the loose gravel underfoot.

The beasts shot up, necks craning as they sampled the air. A moment later their powerful legs propelled them to where the hunter had so ineptly hidden. Tyur reeled, bringing the shotgun from his back and charging the weapon. The metallic clack clack echoed across the waste. As finger squeezed he realized the beasts were cowering.

He let off the trigger before the thunder was released.

Where was the snarling leap, the claws and teeth aimed to tear him asunder? Where was the sinister hunger in their black eyes?

Absent. Where should have been animal rage was meekness.

He lowered his weapon. In the bright warmth of the sun he saw, seemingly for the first time, the hides of the beasts, glossy beige banded by a warm brown the color of bark. The muscles underneath rippled with graceful power, a shimmer that worked its way down nearly to the tip of the wicked tail. They were always in motion, swaying ever so slightly in the hot wind. They were beautiful to behold, beautiful in their murderous grace, beautiful in the elegant fulfillment of their purpose. The thoughts were foreign to the warrior. He pondered but a moment before realization struck. He spoke aloud.

“The spell...”

He slung the weapon and walked forward. The largest of the saurs acquiesced to his touch. Tyur let his new claws glide across the scaled hide, a most pleasant sensation. More inspiration came to the young man.

What a joy it would be to ride the beast as did the hunters of his vision. His hand lay on the saur's back. He tested the creature's patience, pushing it a bit, then pulling it, neither task easy due to the dense muscle packed on the perfectly balanced skeleton of the thing. Yet the saur showed no annoyance.

Tyur spied again the long distance to the city. He looked back to the saur.

“Let's see how congenial you remain as I mimic the Dryth of my visions.” The creature blinked back dumbly. With difficulty, Tyur grabbed a fist full of the taut, scaled hide and leapt atop the beast. He mounted poorly, teetering. The saur took a quick sidestep, whether to help or hinder him Tyur could not know. But his balance was well and truly lost.

He landed painfully, weapon hard against his back, and stood with a muttered curse. The saur made a clicking sound in its throat.



“I am glad one of us is amused.”

His second attempt was successful. He patted the shoulders to no effect before he realized a mere nudge with his leg was enough to cause the beast to turn. A gentle prodding of the heel sent it forward. He guided the beast in the direction of the city, and a kick caused it to break into a loping run. Tyur grabbed the hide with both hands to steady himself. He grinned as the beast glided across the rocky ground. The thing was quick. Underneath its clawed feet, the scrubland was giving way to wider and wider patches of sand and clay baked brittle by the heat. Tyur grinned, feeling the hot wind send warm fingers through his long hair. He shouted encouragement to his mount, reveling in the feeling of motion and travel.

The realization that he was speaking in the tongue of the Dryth brought sudden despair. His narrowed eyes rested on the pyramid as his anger burned.

The saur grew sluggish as the sun dipped to the horizon. Tyur felt listless himself as a chill settled into his tired bones. He found a patch of brittle clay and lay down, enjoying the warmth of the sun that remained trapped in the ground. The saur walked a circle before curling down next to him. Before sleep overtook him, he supped on one of the packets the Sorcerer had provided. The thick paste was not unpalatable, though Tyur could not name the flavor. His belly full, the hunter fell asleep. His eyelids closed upon a vista of the pyramid bathed in moonlight. Its silhouette menaced the domes underneath. Tomorrow, he would face his fate there.

The sun god woke him with warm caresses. The heat brought comfort and clarity to Tyur. He stood and stretched then pondered the sight at his feet. Strewn about his bed of clay were shreds of a thin material, nearly translucent. He knelt and reached to take one in his hand. The gesture provided an answer to the mystery before he had even held one of the shreds. Where had been skin, bronze and unmarked save for the odd scar, was now scales, tan in color, blending into the white that showed on the inner surface. He touched his face and sighed in relief. He still had the face of a man, though the scales reached up to the sides of his neck. The skin on his chest

was also yet normal, but his back was covered in the hide of a saur. Covering his eyes, he peered up at the sun.

“I have paid a hefty price to enter your lands. Grant me at least the sight of my beloved. Surely even one so cruel as you could not refuse such a request after so much had been given.”

He mounted the saur, and it took off toward the city. As the domes slowly neared, the warrior pondered his options. He needed to gain entry to the city. He needed to find Vara and then escape, though she would surely wither in the punishing heat of the waste.... His stomach sank a moment before he dismissed his doubts. One of Kiom’s proverbs came to mind; the hunter who thinks of meat will go to sleep hungry.

Near a jumble of rocks burned nearly black from the sun, he dismounted and turned his attention to the city. As he stared, he could not help but feel awe. Before him was the handiwork of a god. Though black from a distance, the walls and domes were actually colored a dark red. Yet the looming pyramid seemed blacker than even in his vision. He could spy no door or hatch like those that kept the Sorcerer safe, nor even a gaping entrance like the caves of his home. Everywhere were smooth, unbroken surfaces that seemed to drink the brilliant sunlight, a palace made of night.

His thoughts were interrupted by movement in the distance. The foremost dome had become the center of sudden activity. A great square of it had opened with a grinding creak audible even from such a distance. From the opening poured forth half a dozen Dryth astride loping saurs. Their spears shone under the brilliant gaze of the sun god. The party was headed for a cluster of jutting rocks south of the city. Hunting, thought Tyur. The Dryth were as his vision had shown. They were about his height and as broad. Their scales ranged in color from those that were like the tan of his new hide to others more a dark brown. Tyur pulled his long hair into a tight tail; it was the one detail that would give him away at a distance. Some of the Dryth wore headbands of dark fabric whose long ends fluttered in the hot wind. Perhaps his new ponytail would be seen as such.

He jumped onto the saur and jabbed the beast with his heels. From his visions he knew how the Dryth hunted. They hunted for sport, driving their prey, darting here and there, exhorting each other to acts of bravery and cruelty. But foremost in Tyur's mind was the thought that when they were done, the dome would open again.

The hunting party soon disappeared behind the blackened crags of the formation. Tyur pointed the mount toward the rocks. With luck, he could shadow the group and slip in behind them when the city opened to welcome them home. A wind howled across the waste as the saur's long legs sped underneath him. The air was thin and hot, but Tyur found it invigorating.

As he neared the rocks, Tyur heard the voices of the hunters. The jutting slabs of black rock struck up toward the sky with a beauty known only in the wastelands of the world, where barrenness and solitude were as the fecund greens of the forest. The rocks stood against the wind and the heat and thus displayed a defiant sort of beauty. The area formed an oblong shape upon the plain, a jagged shark's fin cutting through the hard-packed sand, a few hundred feet at its longest. Tyur smiled. As he grew closer, he saw a hundred nooks and folds within the dark rocks, places to hide and watch and wait. The yells of the hunting party echoed from somewhere on the other side. Tyur knew they had sighted one of the giant centipedes that called rocks like these home. He knew the Dryth's rasping voice from his visions, indeed he knew their tongue. But as he neared, their voices were lost to his ears, now swallowed by the stone. Indecision gripped him. Safety lay within the rocks, up the scabble and amidst the sharp columns of dark rock. But his mount could not join him. Without the mount he would likely not be able to keep pace with the group.

The saur sidled impatiently. With a muttered curse, Tyur leapt from the mount and ran up the irregular slope towards the rocks. A look over his shoulder revealed his mount jogging away on tentative steps, looking warily in the direction of the formation.

The stone was searing to his touch as Tyur climbed. He found a crevice that looked through to the other side and cautiously peeked

through.

The Dryth were below. They directed their mounts to dart forward and backward while their long spears poked into crack and crevice in an attempt to goad their prey into the open. Only three were visible. Tyur craned his neck. Two more came into view, idling in a position to flank the prey. Where was the other one?

Tyur heard the scrape of a saur's claws against the stones.

"Brother, what are you doing?"

The voice spoke in the tongue of the Dryth. Tyur went rigid.

He crouched, coiling his hard muscles like a serpent before the strike. He turned and leapt from his perch. The Dryth's saur reeled back, nearly pitching its rider who sat stunned in shock. Four long strides and another leap brought Tyur smashing against the lizard man. The two tumbled down the gentle slope, flinging gravel as they rolled. They slid to a halt, and Tyur rolled to sit astride the Dryth.

The Dryth's reptilian eyes showed confusion and despair as its strong hands fought against Tyur's pin, but the hunter had the advantage.

Its strange voice, hoarse yet underlain with an oily sibilance, implored its attacker, "What are you?"

Tyur wrenched his hand free from the scaly grip of his foe, and he unslung the weapon at his back with a deft motion. One hand on either end, he pushed down until the cylinders pressed against his enemy's throat. The thing gasped, straining to push the weapon away. Tyur looked down, deep into the reptilian eyes. For the briefest of moments, he saw himself reflected in the diamond pupils. He saw that his eyes were the same. His rage grew, and he pushed down harder, veins erupting down the length of his arms and neck.

He spoke just above a whisper as the weapon crushed the Dryth's throat.

"Vengeance."

He watched as the ghost left the thing. It grew limp, and Tyur permitted himself to relax. He stared down.

The Dryth wore simple trousers of thick leather and a vest worked with many loops and pockets. At his waist was a long dagger and one of the feared fire-spitters. Tyur took the warm metal in his hands. A lever sat under the body of the thing. He knew from the thunder spitter that the lever was how death was released. He tucked both knife and spitter into his belt and looked frantically around. None of the other hunters were in view. He stripped the vest and trousers from the Dryth and put them on with the awkward movements of one unused to such garments. His foe's mount shifted nervously as he approached. Instinct bade him make a clicking sound in his throat, which seemed to calm the saur.

The beast became still, and he mounted. A voice rang out in the distance. At the far end of the formation, a rider shouted.

“Rukka! Xertu has taken a big one! We fly back lest it go dry! Hurry!”

Tyur sat on his mount. His stomach twisted as his ruse was put to the test.

He waved to the Dryth, a gesture of acknowledgement, and kicked his mount into motion.

The far rider turned and sped away.

Tyur breathed deep. He slowed his mount. Clear of the formation, the other riders were now visible. One dragged a centipede behind him, three times the length of a man.

The once-human hunter frustrated his mount with constant adjustments to its speed. Too fast would bring Tyur face to face with the Dryth before the door was opened. Too slow would draw attention as the lizard men would wait for him and see through his poor disguise before the moment he was among them.

The saurs made good speed across the wastes. Tyur's pulse quickened as he heard the grinding squeal of the door. The party was

nearly there.

The beast underneath him croaked in complaint as he kicked the thing until it sprinted with as good a speed as a saur could make. He narrowed his eyes against the burning air and dust. His legs tightened around his mount as he unslung the thunder spitter and racked a round into the chamber.

The Dryth had nearly halted, mounts ambling into the dark portal which yawned ahead. Tyur was close enough to see the details of their hides and clothes; he realized each bore a slightly different pattern, a whim of nature or, perhaps, one of their dark father. One wore a bronze circlet around his head. He was slightly larger than the others and carried himself with an aura of brutal authority. He was dismounting, as were the others. Their mood was suffused with savage pleasure as they bantered with each other. They had claimed their quarry with skill and speed. One turned to welcome the latecomer.

The shotgun announced Tyur's arrival with an ear-splitting boom. The Dryth collapsed in a heap, eyes wide at the gaping hole in his chest. The others leapt in shock, hands fumbling for weapons, faces betraying their confusion.

Tyur fired again, felling another lizard man before a white-hot blast buried itself into his rearing mount. He tumbled down to the baked earth before the door, rolling to stand before the leader. Before he could fire again Tyur lashed out with the heavy butt of his weapon. His blow struck true, and the leader fell clutching his bloodied forehead. A blast seared close enough to Tyur's shoulder to raise blisters as he spun and fired again, catching his attacker full on the face, now a ruin of dark-green ichor. Tyur sensed motion behind him and ducked instinctively, feeling the heat of the blast over his head. He racked the weapon as he lunged forward, swinging the shotgun to knock aside the Dryth's fire spitter before it could unleash another blast. He came to stand before the lizard man, moving the cylinder to point underneath the Dryth's chin. The ear-shattering thunder erupted again, and the head was reduced to shreds of hide and bone.

Tyur spun again, finding himself suddenly without foes. He peered into the cool darkness of the dome's interior. A groan cut short his investigation.

Sprawled on the ground, the one bearing the bronze circlet stirred. Tyur kicked him, so that he lay on his back, and bent down.

The tongue of the Dryth felt strange on his lips as he spoke.

"Where are the women of the Ithra? Speak!"

The Dryth lay in a daze. His reptile eyes stared up at Tyur in incomprehension.

Tyur placed the cylinder under his chin. "Tell me! Or join your friends in the beyond!"

His rasping voice finally replied, "In Father's old chambers, the cold place, the center level.... Who are you? You have our eyes, yet you bear a face like the Father...."

"Where is this place?"

The Dryth shook his head as he stared up at his attacker. "Down the main hall. Ascend the stairs until you reach the red doors."

Tyur hissed in annoyance. He had not the vocabulary to understand the directions. Yet as he thought, as he heard the Dryth's words echo in his head, images appeared in his mind's eye.

Stairs. Forms shaped to aid ascent. A door. A thing to divide a space, to control access. The sensation was unpleasant. He looked down at the leader, face caked in dark green blood that had already dried in the heat. He felt disgust. The Dryth were a part of him now. Before self-pity weakened him, he again thought of Vara. He would pay this price and indeed much more. He slammed the butt down on the Dryth's head. He held back to avoid killing but would not weep had the blow done so. Tyur did not wait to see. He reloaded the weapon as the Sorcerer had shown him as he entered the dome.

Past the open door, he entered a wide hall filled with a hundred articles of unknown purpose. His bare footfalls echoed across the

wide circumference; the space was bounded only by the gently sloping exterior wall of the dome. Within were bulky things, ladders and moveable stairs, snaking cables and boxes. Tyur was faintly reminded of the Sorcerer's lair, a place of wonder and strangeness where powerful objects could be made or repaired. Yet instead of the sterile cleanliness and delicate angles of the Sorcerer's place, here was an aesthetic of callous menace couched in curves and spirals. Dust and sand covered everything. Nearly snatched from a recollection of his dreams, Tyur could imagine the space from another time, when it was more ordered and clean. An object he recognized came into view as he walked; one of the flying discs, and dozens more behind. The things floated a few feet above the dark red stone of the floor. Some were large, boasting covered compartments in the rear, while others could only accommodate one or two riders. Tyur grimaced at the sight of their weapons, fire-spitters like the one at his belt but larger, barrels burned black with the heat of their hateful blasts.

How many of his people had died from these weapons?

A shout snapped him back to the dire danger of the present. He spun to see a dozen of the Dryth running, emerging from the shadows of the huge chamber and its clutter. With a cry of rage, Tyur fired the shotgun once, twice, then turned and fled in the direction the leader had indicated. Past the banks of discs rose a wide staircase.

Tyur took the steps two at a time, sparing a glance behind to see that others had joined his pursuers' ranks. Atop the stairs, he turned and fired, again and again, until the lever's pull caused no more thunder, only a metallic click. The Dryth at the base of the stairs fell while their brethren darted here and there in confusion, some clambering over dead comrades in their rage, others seeking cover.

Tyur threw open the double doors and burst into a long hallway. He brought the weapon up with a start as he realized figures loomed at either side. But they were still. Tyur saw they were formed of stone, both depicting the same tall man of graceful form, one clothed in a simple robe that hung from one muscular shoulder while the other



wore an elaborate suit of armor wrought with strange designs of beings with no familiar form floating amidst stars and comets.

Footsteps sounded just outside. Tyur's pursuers were nearly at the doors. Tyur stepped behind the statue of the robed figure, slinging his weapon and bracing himself against the cool stone. He pushed with all his might, permitting himself a triumphant grin when the thing began to give way.

With a great creak and deafening crash, the statue fell before the door. While a cloud of dust spread, Tyur pushed the other statue.

The ruin of the two statues blocked the door, eliciting a small noise of relief from the beleaguered hunter.

The Dryth outside hissed in rage as they threw themselves against the obstacle with little effect. It could only be opened a hand's width. A lizard man peeked around the gap to be met with the butt of the thunder spitter.

Tyur sprinted down the hall, brow furrowed as he attempted to make sense of the leader's directions. The passage was long and lit with globes that hung from the ceiling and emitted a warm light. He heard noises up ahead from a side passage, the sound of feet running. Tyur turned down one side passage, then another. Thoughts of direction were pushed out with the sudden realization that his weapon was empty.

His hands fumbled with the red children as he reloaded. One bounced at his feet, and he bent to pick it up.

A blast soared over his head, and he tumbled forward, racking the weapon as he stood firing. His attacker clutched his stomach as he fell back into the side hallway. Tyur cursed his inattention. He leaned against a wall and collected himself a moment. The hallway stretched on a ways before he saw another staircase that led upwards. He saw more passages to either side. Each could contain a potential ambush. Overwhelmed, Tyur realized he was lost. Now, more footfalls sounded, punctuated by barking orders and exclamations of anger and confusion. Surprise had aided his entry, but now he was a hunted

animal, trapped in a maze without sight of sun or moon to guide him. He stood against the wall as he pondered his predicament. Boldness had gotten him this far. But more would likely mean his end.

Tyur's eyes lingered on his surroundings. He noticed the walls were decorated with panels of stone carved with great skill. The figures were nearly flat yet cunningly displayed enough shadow to create the illusion of greater depth. Central to each panel was the figure from his dreams, the beautiful and cruel one. In one panel, the figure led an army of Dryth against a host of bizarre creatures more plant than man. In another, he walked surrounded by simple nature where beasts bowed before him and birds flitted about his head. In the panel across from Tyur, the man sat surrounded by others like him but lesser, beings made for his pleasure perhaps, men and women bearing fine features and graceful bodies, eyes alight with the simple joys of the garden in which they reclined. Tyur felt his chest tighten.

The Ithra. The figures were unmistakably of his kind. Tyur felt numb as he walked, inspecting more panels. One portrayed a trio of Ithra women flanked by Dryth in elaborate robes. Above them loomed the man, arms outstretched, smile beaming on his sculpted face. In the next panel, the women lay prone, swathed with cloth. Above them stood a phalanx of warriors. The one from the dreams presided again, looking down upon the women, his chiseled face softened by sadness.

Tyur shook his head as his primitive mind found only confusion in the images.

Voices down a side hallway sent him flat against the wall. The conversation grew in volume.

"What is it?"

"I do not know! Everyone says something different! Those who saw him in the hangar said he bears the face of an Ithra but the form of a Dryth!"

"Preposterous!"

"Where is he now?"

The high voice croaked in anguished reply, "How would I know? He was chased into the dome proper and could be anywhere! Utakmil is mustering the warriors now."

Two Dryth hove into view. They were slim of build and stooped slightly, clothed in gold robes. The first fell under Tyur's blow as he swung the shotgun like a mighty club. The other shrieked, legs giving way underneath him. His clawed hands shook as he held them up, a pathetic defense. The hunter checked his swing. He pulled the Dryth up by his tall collar.

"The Ithra women, where?"

"Upstairs! Do not hurt me!"

"Show me the way!"

The pair headed toward the stairs as the prisoner meekly pointed. Tyur came behind him, one hand grasping the back of the lizard man's neck, the other holding his thunder spitter to point over the Dryth's shoulder. Awkwardly the pair advanced. The prisoner climbed the stairs with difficulty, stumbling as he hissed and chattered in fear. Tyur's curiosity bubbled over.

"You are no warrior. What are you?"

The Dryth remembered himself. His back straightened and his complaints stopped. He looked over his shoulder as he replied.

"I am a priest of Therizom. I serve the Father."

The name sent a bolt of electricity through Tyur's muscular frame.

"The god from my dreams."

"A god indeed. He made us and all you see. He will wake one day, and things shall be again like the golden age, yet even better, as his true heirs now rule the city."

The top of the stairs opened into a long hall, curving along the circumference of the dome. Here was even more ornate than the floor below. Gold accented the warm red stone carved into graceful arches

that tapered into delicate spiders' webs of interlocking designs. Tyur pushed the barrel into the back of the priest's head.

The Dryth pointed to the left.

"Are they close?"

The Dryth stammered in confusion.

"The Ithra women!"

"Yes, yes, a ways down the hall, then past an antechamber that keeps the cold in. Beyond sits blessed Therizom's throne where he once held court but now sleeps."

A shout sounded ahead, and the air sizzled as a bolt of heat shot past. The priest screamed and collapsed again. Tyur fired at the figure ahead. The thunder peppered his right side with bloody wounds. The guard slumped to the ground. Another round from close range finished him off.

Before Tyur stood tall double doors decorated with images of Therizom. In these, he stood triumphant over a gallery of creatures, strange things without limbs or heads as Tyur understood. He darted back and pulled the priest to his feet.

"In there?"

The lizard man nodded. Tyur thrust him forward. The door swung open, and the priest tumbled into a chamber lined with hooks upon which were hung thick robes, dark red in hue. The chamber was noticeably cooler than elsewhere in the dome. On the far wall was another door.

Tyur repeated his new trick, sending the priest forward through the doors so that the Dryth would spring whatever ambush may lay beyond.

He heard the screams of women. Tyur threw himself through the doorway. His eyes frantically searched. Around him was opulence that overloaded his savage mind. Everywhere was something to stimulate the eye, objects of unknown meaning, figures of strange

things rendered in stone quarried from distant worlds. The walls vaulted upwards in bizarre curves, tapering towards the end where a giant golden throne sat upon a dais of jade.

There he sat. The figure from his dreams, frozen. The god who walked the world in a form to beguile the eye, beautiful and perfect. Yet no form was sufficient to mask his cruel and inscrutable nature. Tyur could only glance at the figure. To look longer brought waves of terror lapping at the shores of a soul unprepared to bear witness to transcendent evil. The hunter collected himself, suddenly aware of the extreme cold of the chamber. A blur out of the corner of his eye caused him to snap his weapon up. It was only the priest. The Dryth disappeared into a side chamber, door nearly invisible.

“Tyur?”

He reeled at the sound of his name. He noticed, now, that below the dais was a ring of cushions flanked by squat tables upon which sat trays of fruit and a censer cunningly wrought in the shape of a lattice of serpents. From its dim interior wafted a sweet smelling smoke.

A pair of Ithra women rose from the silken folds of the cushions. They were tall and fair as he remembered, but they had traded their clothes of hide for garments of gold and gauzy fabric, held by bejeweled clasps resting on graceful shoulders. Tiny golden bells affixed to their ankles and wrists tinkled softly as they stepped forward. No trace of life at the foot of the mountain hung about their lithe bodies. The smell of flowers hung about their dark hair, tumbling down their bare chests and arms. Their red-rimmed eyes displayed a curious expression, like one just awakened from a pleasant dream.

Tyur stared, mouth agape.

“Yua, Ra...”

Yua smiled as she spoke to her former tribesman. “Tyur, it is you! How remarkable! You look like a Dryth, save your handsome face! How is this possible?”

“Where is Vara?”

The pair frowned.

Ra shook her head, "You are a day late, proud warrior."

"She rejected Father's gift, as bestowed by the priests."

"What do you mean?"

"She chose not to be a mother to Therizom's servants."

Tyur's knuckles were near white as he grasped the thunder spitter.

He yelled, "Where is she?"

The pair stepped backwards.

Ra smiled as she spoke, "When our blessed role was made known to us, Vara became enraged. She seized a dagger from one of the servants and plunged it into her womb to spite their aims."

Tyur's scream echoed through the chamber. He pushed past the women and stood before the sleeping god. The shot reverberated in the great hall. Tyur wrung his hands as he realized the sleeping figure was not so much as scratched. Whatever sorcery the thing possessed far outmatched the power of the thunder spitter. He stood a moment, regarding the frozen face. Atop a tumble of fair curls sat a simple crown studded with opals. Though motionless the man seemed alive, eyes glistening and skin glowing. Tyur looked directly into the eyes and was lost for a second before thought of Vara caused a new wave of grief and anger. He looked to the two women.

"Her body. Where is her body?"

"The priests took her, vowing to send her where refuse goes."

Tyur spoke through clenched teeth, "You will follow her there, eventually."

Ra spat her reply, "You are wrong! We are goddesses now! Mothers to the servants. We have all we could ever want. We have food and water, fine clothes, and the smoke brings sweet bliss! No more hunger or fear! My mind traipses through the stars as I once

walked through flowered meadows! And always he is there, watching!”

“Look around, woman! Do you see any other mothers? Do you see any of the Ithra? Where do you think they have gone? To death! He is a god of death, and the Dryth are his servants!”

Yua shrieked and threw the censer at Tyur. The missile clattered across the smooth floor, scattering ashes in its wake.

Tyur felt his heart break as he stood there. He could only take satisfaction in the fact that he had done his utmost. He knew he would die soon. Any moment now, the chamber would be filled with Dryth warriors eager for vengeance, eager to make him atone for the numberless affronts he had committed in the cursed dome.

He thought of Vara’s corpse. Before death, he wished to see her again, perhaps to die and lay alongside her. He ran to the door where the priest had disappeared.

A kick sent it flying open. Within was a chamber hung with more heavy robes, proof against the chill of the throne room. One caught his eye, stuffed with a curious, trembling bulge.

Tyur reached into the folds and pulled the priest from underneath. His hand found the Dryth’s neck. He pulled him close.

“Did you forget about me?”

The priest shook his head no.

“Good. Now tell me where lies the body of my beloved. Tell me this, and I will spare your life.”

The Dryth whimpered. “You will be angry.”

The hunter laughed, “I could not be more angry. I could not be more enraged. If I could, I would bring this dome down upon our heads, and my soul would still cry for Dryth blood. So tell me.”

“Thumre, the high priest, ordered she be thrown into the refuse chute, though she yet lived. He wished her to die of the wound she

herself had inflicted, slowly, as befits one who defies the will of a god.”

Tyur shook. The muscles of his jaw twitched. His hand squeezed the priest’s neck until the reptilian eyes bulged.

He whispered to his prisoner. “It seems I was wrong. But lucky for you, I have more honor than the Dryth.”

Tyur threw the priest down. He lay gasping as the hunter spoke again.

“Where is this chute?”

“Across the throne room is a chamber such as this for the servants who once staffed the kitchen. In the back is a chute for refuse.” He pointed meekly to the back of the room. “There is a passage there that leads all the way around the throne room and into the chamber you seek.”

The thing squealed as Tyur delivered a farewell by way of a short kick.

His bare feet thundered down the corridor as he sprinted. The path was a long curve, a hidden way for servants behind the cavernous throne room in which sat the god they served. Tyur heard a commotion, the noise of shouting and the fall of reptilian feet, through the walls. His pursuers had reached the throne room and would momentarily discover his path of escape. Tyur’s chest heaved as he ran. The curve denied him a long view of the passage ahead. He ran with the shotgun ready.

Ahead, a yell of fear and a flourish of gold robes announced a priest had been coming the other way. The Dryth doubled back, arms and legs flailing. When Tyur’s long strides brought him closer, the Dryth screamed and cowered on the floor, arms raised. Tyur spared only a look of disgust as he ran past.

The chamber door came suddenly to his right. Tyur burst through the door and found himself in a room lined with long tables. Strewn about were the remains of many feasts. Half-eaten fruit sat rotting



next to jumbled piles of gnawed bone. The hunter realized with a start that they were human. He ignored the horrific tableau as he scanned the walls for the chute.

There it was, on the far wall, marked by a lengthwise door hung on swinging hinges. All around it were deep stains, the accumulated trace of centuries of refuse that had been tossed into its dark depths. Tyur stepped forward.

The door leading to the throne room burst open. The Dryth that entered had his fire spitter ready but pointed toward the other half of the room. As the lizard man turned, eyes aflame at the sight of his quarry, Tyur brought the thunder spitter to bear.

The weapon roared and bucked against his shoulder, and the Dryth was brought low, falling to the floor with the awkward gracelessness of the soon dead.

More followed behind. They hissed and shrieked their cruel battle cries as they poured in with fire-spitters and daggers drawn. Tyur felt joy as he fired again and again. Blasts of heat sailed past as the Dryth fired back, making a ruin of the wall behind. Their assault was stymied by the narrow door, soon choked with their comrades' broken bodies, yet they continued their assault. The shotgun made its sad click, so Tyur drew the fire spitter he had stolen outside the city and sent bolt after bolt of white heat toward his foes. The room filled with black smoke heavy with the stench of burning flesh. He howled as he fired, squeezing the lever until the weapon burned his hand. Finally, the thing ceased to fire, and he hurled it at the onrushing Dryth. The chamber was rapidly filling with smoke, set ablaze in a dozen places from the errant blasts of the fire-spitters. The heat seared Tyur's skin as he reeled.

Long strides took him to the chute, and he leapt, slinging the thunder spitter as his powerful legs sent him sailing into blackness.

Down he tumbled, bouncing from wall to wall. The cylinder was steeply sloped, allowing him to gain much momentum before slamming against the slick walls again and again. The angle improved, and soon he found himself sliding feet first. Foul sludge

lined the chute's bottom, aiding his descent. His rear felt the jarring of a sudden upward bend, and his momentum faltered.

The sun was blinding as he stood amidst the piles of waste, though the warmth was pleasant to his skin. Ahead was a field of junk and filth, piled here and there to dry in the cruel light. There were the remains of crashed discs along with objects unknown to the hunter. Bordering the field were the thick walls of a score of buildings. This close, Tyur drank in their strange angles and blood red stones. The pyramid loomed above, slick and menacing. The cityscape stirred bizarre emotions, like distant recollections of unpleasant dreams.

Tyur unslung his weapon and inspected it briefly. The thing had come off much better than he; the hunter was plagued by a dozen bruises and bleeding from a cut on his head.

Eyes adjusted to the bright, he scanned the area for any sign of Vara. He darted from pile to pile, spying under wreckage and peering into pipes.

“May I help you?”

The voice sent Tyur spinning. His finger pulled the lever even as he realized he had not loaded the thing again. With a curse he ran forward, grasping the weapon to swing as a club.

The speaker raised his arms.

“Stay your hand strange one! I have no weapon!”

Tyur paused. The figure before him was another Dryth. Once, perhaps, he had been a warrior, so much was clear from his height. But old age had made him a mere husk compared to the lizard men that had harried Tyur on his quest. His yellow eyes were filmed by a dull white as he inspected the hunter in turn.

“My vision is not what it once was. You look like one of us in form but not in face. What are you?”

Tyur smiled his grim smile as he reloaded. “You are not the first to ask today. I have not the tongue nor the time to explain. I seek the

body of an Ithra woman....” Tyur swallowed, then continued, “She would have passed here only yesterday.”

The old lizard shook his head. “From your set expression I gather grave duty has brought you here. I hate to disappoint, but there is no corpse.”

Tyur looked to the heavens and clenched his fists.

The Dryth continued. “There is no corpse because she is alive.”

Tyur ran to the old warrior and grasped his shoulders, fingers sinking into the patchy hide.

“Easy now! She is in a shelter of my making near the chute’s mouth. You walked right past her in your haste.”

Tyur went to what had seemed a mound of refuse just outside the chute’s mouth. It was a tent of sorts, a wide length of tattered fabric laid over a frame rigged from lengths of rusted pipe and bent bar. She lay within.

Tyur laughed at the joy of seeing her and wept at her condition. Vara lay curled, hands at her belly. Blood caked her garment of gauzy fabric, staining her hands and arms as well. The hunter bent close, brushing locks of dark hair from her face as he whispered to her. She stirred and with bloodless lips pronounced his name.

“Do I dream? Or do I meet you in death?”

Tyur’s tears dried in the heat as they rolled down his face.

“We yet live, though not for long. But it is enough. I prefer this to a lifetime haunted by ignorance of your fate.”

“I knew you would come. I refused the high priest. I will be no vessel for evil. I took his dagger....”

Tyur bade her be calm, and the pair kissed in the dim heat of the shelter. Tyur noticed the old lizard hovered nearby.

“She has lived longer than I thought. Credit must go to me. See how the shelter opens up near the chute? The cool air pours in from

above. The children of the palace need different air than we. Or me, I should say. I do not know what you are.”

Tyur cradled Vara gently as he turned to answer.

“I am neither Dryth nor Ithra. I am a creation of the Sorcerer, sent to wreak vengeance upon the wicked. I have slain many with the aid of his weapon, and I have found my love. We wait now for death.”

“I imagine it will come soon. She can’t have much longer, and the warriors will find you.”

“So be it. Bless the ancestors, the fire up there granted me enough time to find Vara.”

The Dryth scratched at his ragged scales. “It is a shame you are so resigned.”

Tyur looked at him through narrowed eyes, loathe to remove his gaze from the face of his beloved in their last moments together.

“What do you mean?”

The lizard man shrugged. “Down that alley is a door back into the dome, into the hangar.”

“The hangar?”

“The hall where the discs are stored.”

Tyur’s expression was alight with sudden hope. “I could steal one! But how are they operated?”

“Nothing could be simpler. Two levers. The left moves the craft up and down.” The old lizard moved his hand to demonstrate. “The right turns the craft in whatever direction it is pointed. To speed up, push the lever forward. To slow down, pull it back.”

Tyur gathered Vara into his arms. His brow furrowed as he spoke, “But why do you tell me this?”

The Dryth laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

“I was once mightiest amongst the warriors. I marched south with the Father, God-King Therizom, he who made the Dryth and the Ithra. Under his azure banners, we made war against his brothers, the other God-Kings and their armies. I slew countless slagborn, rending their carapaces in twain as the battle-joy brought tears to my eyes. I killed Umidites by the score, listening as they babbled their master’s secret names in the moments before death. We tore down Canannitesh, brick by brick, breaking the starmen’s idols into pebbles underfoot. So many fell under my blade or were incinerated by my spitter. But one day, I sinned. As the sun became hidden by the smoke of a burning village and my ears were full of the cries of the vanquished, there on the field of slaughter I was seized by a curious emotion. I showed mercy to a foe and thus was brought low in the eyes of Therizom. Rather than be given an honorable death, I was deposited here. My task is to keep waste from cluttering the chute’s opening.”

Tyur listened, rapt by the tale. The old lizard continued.

“And so I have remained for many, many years now, even long after Therizom fell into his odd sleep. My mind has had nothing to do but ponder. After a while, I began to wonder that my desire to show mercy might be the worthy part of me, rather than the lust for slaughter which is valued by the Father. Surely, I have gone mad.”

He smiled at Tyur, an expression ill-suited to the Dryth. “When the Ithra came down the chute, I let that small place within my nature gain sway again. I bound her wound and erected the shelter for her so that she should at least die in some measure of comfort.”

Tyur’s heart opened as he regarded the stooped figure of the old warrior.

“Come with us. There is but a tiny chance that we will escape, but you may have a better life elsewhere. You saved Vara’s life, and I am in your debt.”

He shook his head. “I may be mad, but I could not raise a hand against my brothers.”

“I understand.” Tyur shifted his delicate cargo so that he could free his arm. He took up the shotgun and stared deep into the clouded eyes of the old warrior.

“I hope within the realm of the dead you are repaid this debt. I thank you.”

The Dryth nodded.

Tyur ran on heavy steps in the direction indicated. He spared one glance backward. The old lizard had gathered up a pole and began his inglorious work again amidst the refuse of the dome. The view was soon lost behind the jutting heights of rectangles of dark stone. The alleys were deathly quiet as Tyur made his way to the door. The city seemed nearly deserted; surely the place of his visions, full of lounging Ithra and industrious Dryth, was a thing of ages past.

The hunter’s pulse quickened as the door loomed ahead. It was much smaller than the one from which he had entered, marked only by a thick line of recessed stone.

Tyur stared at the rectangle stupidly, realizing now he had no idea how to open it. Vara groaned, and he shifted her weight slightly. He leaned against the wall for a moment to gather his strength only to recoil from the noise of grinding gears. The door opened with a groan.

Tyur walked with weapon leveled as his eyes scanned for foes. It was indeed the same great hall, littered with the stiffening bodies left from his first encounter. He heard shouting in the distance, from up the long stairwell.

Gingerly, he placed Vara atop the first disc in line. The thing’s circumference was twice the reach of his arms. At the rear, a cowl emerged from the bronze surface of the thing, offering Vara a modicum of shelter. The disc bobbed a bit as he climbed aboard awkwardly. When he had placed his weight square on either foot, the disc began to hum underneath him. He gently grasped the levers. A slight push sent the thing drifting forward. It began to bank slightly to the left, eliciting a muffled curse from its inept pilot.

Tyur relaxed his grip on the right lever and gave it more forward pressure. With some difficulty, he angled the craft toward the broad expanse of the large door the hunting party had used. At the disc's approach, the door began to open. Tyur's heart soared. The bright light of the sun spilled in through the widening space. Beyond was desert and finally freedom. The Dryth must be occupied with a fruitless search in the burning chamber. Perhaps they picked through the burnt corpses of Dryth thinking he must lie among them. Tyur smiled to himself.

"Defiler! Halt!"

Tyur spun, causing the disc to list. The Dryth were pouring from the double doors atop the stairs. Eyes wild with rage, they came with such reckless haste that some fell from the rails. Bolts flew from their weapons. At their head was a Dryth built like the warrior-leader but clothed in robes of shimmering gold, even more ornate than the priests Tyur had already encountered.

The hunter pushed the lever forward and the disc sped onward into the bright desert. Under his inexperienced hand, the craft pitched and bucked as it sliced the hot air on its way to freedom. The speed was nearly too much for Tyur. He felt his stomach flip as he watched the ground underneath, a dizzying blur. He frequently made the novice mistake; the disc would inevitably end up pointing in the direction in which he was looking. Then the mistake would be compounded by a tendency to overcorrect when realizing his error. From the sun and his knowledge of the way he bore north the best he could. Far in the distance, the mountains above his home could just barely be seen amidst the shimmering haze. Though the sun beat strong, the wind chilled his skin, recalling to his mind the thick robes he had seen hanging throughout the palace dome. He chanced a look toward Vara, curled under the cowl. She had lost consciousness. Tyur risked more speed. The disc vibrated under his feet. How long would it take? Tyur could not guess.

A glimmer of hope stirred within. Tyur had won free of the dome with his love and rode atop a device that rendered distances small. Tyur could fly directly to the Sorcerer's home and let the wise old man

tend to Vara with his potent magics. But what of the Dryth? The old man was keen to keep his home a secret. And how long could Tyur himself live in the lands better suited to the Ithra? Would the air be too thick? Would he die of the cold come night? His savage mind was engrossed by these questions.

A great flaming bolt sailed past on his right. In his shock, he pitched the craft right. It banked hard as the steep angle sent waves of fear through the hunter. He was near perpendicular to the ground when he banked it back to the left, overcorrecting again and sending the craft into another banking arc. He risked a glance backward and felt anger and bitterness rise at the sight of his pursuers.

Atop a golden disc three times the size of Tyur's rode the high priest. The thing was like Tyur's but more ornate, and gold instead of dark bronze. Its curves wove from bow to stern, fanning into a fine filigree that belied the material's great strength. The Dryth sat on a throne while warriors guided the craft and manned two mounted spitters, large ones, the length of a man. They fired with a horrible noise, the sharp crackle of near lightning. Flanking the priest were another two discs, oblong in shape, longer to accommodate squads of warriors clothed in the heavy robes.

Tyur nearly flipped the disc as he pointed the lever north again. His panicked piloting made the small disc a difficult target. Bolt after bolt sailed past. Tyur bore down on the lever but there was no more speed to be had. With one hand on the lever he turned and fired the thunder spitter one handed. He aimed at the priest but struck the warrior on his right. The Dryth reeled but recovered. Tyur cursed. The thunder spitter was a powerful weapon but not at distance. Before he could solve the puzzle of racking the weapon with one hand on the lever, a bolt struck the rear of his craft. It bucked hard and began to spin. Tyur threw himself down, grasping the edge with one hand and Vara with the other. His stomach lurched as the spin gained momentum and the disc descended.

The craft struck the ground with a bounce that sent Tyur flying, though the spin kept Vara pinned against the cowl. With a jarring crunch, he landed upon the sand. His momentum propelled him along



as his body rolled, finally coming to rest on his back. With a grunt of pain, he came to his knees. He reached for the shotgun only to find it gone. Drawing the dagger at his hip unleashed waves of agony from his right shoulder, causing him to fall again. He took the blade in his left hand and stood. He sought the disc but found himself blinded for a moment as blood coursed down his face from another cut on his head. He wiped it away and spun frantically as he searched for his love.

The disc rested at the end of a long furrow. He could see Vara, a bundle of cloth and dark hair curled against the disc's cowl. He limped toward her.

A shadow descended. Behind him the lead disc came to hover above the sands.

“Kneel before me, defiler. Your escape has come to naught.”

Tyur turned, dropping the dagger. He bent to pick it up, an act that nearly caused him to lose consciousness as the blood rushed from his wound. He stood with the simple weapon at the ready as the flanking discs descended and the warriors leapt to the ground.

The high priest shouted his orders, “I want him alive!” He faced Tyur. “I will torture you with techniques gleaned from the Sleeping Father. I will prolong your agony for years. You will know true remorse. You will understand the great affront which you have committed. And your tribesmen will pay, too.”

Tyur felt deep sadness at the mention of reprisals. His greatest fear would come to pass. He held the dagger limply. The warriors fanned out, walking slowly, enjoying themselves. The hunter's head wound continued to bleed, red-green liquid congealing near instantly in the hot air though it still kept coming.

I will kill at least one of you, thought Tyur, as the warriors advanced. He looked again to the priest, a duly impressive figure amongst the Dryth. The rich gold of the robes was set against the brown of his scales striped with soft black. He sat peering down at Tyur, cruel smile written across his long, lipless mouth.

Everything ceased for the briefest of moments. Tyur looked down to see that he hovered a little above the ground. He heard nothing, then a sudden roar filled his ears and he found himself flat on his back. Where the High Priest had sat a moment ago was now a conflagration. Within the white-hot flames, he could just pick out the robed figure, writhing as his limbs flailed impotently against the consuming fire.

A large shape passed between his gaze and the sun above. In its wake came more noise, a loud hum that was felt as much as heard. The shape sped away then banked to swing around again, and there was another roar as a bolt of heat was sent from its pointed bow. Tyur watched as Dryth flew in the air, limbs blasted, flung here and there. A hunk of the golden disc landed smoldering to his right. All was chaos as the Dryth scrambled to mount their discs. But the shape dived in again and again, blasting the discs and finally strafing the survivors until none were left.

The shadow passed over once more, close this time. The hum hurt Tyur's ears as he brought himself to his elbow. An expanse of dull gray filled his vision. There was a hissing sound as he watched a portal open along the thing's surface. The figure standing within was familiar but strange.

Tyur smiled. There stood the Sorcerer, odd looking as he wore a mask of some kind.

Tyur spoke, "Son of a bitch."

The old man laughed, "That's right, young man! I got you this time. Where is Vara?"

Tyur stood and shuffled to the bundle. The Sorcerer leapt to the desert floor and ran ahead. He gathered Vara in his arms and shouted to the hunter.

"More discs en route! Get in, hurry!"

Tyur stumbled toward the Sorcerer's craft, a long rectangle of gray broken by panels, lines, and forms, the purpose of which the hunter could not guess. The end tapered to a dull point studded with probe

and antennae. A Dryth fire spitter, one of the larger variety, was mounted just below the nose. The contrast between the two technologies could not have been starker. The ship was a model of utilitarian form while the weapon was an ode to cruelty written in dark metal.

Two small windows looked into a cramped interior. Behind stubby wings, a cluster of cylinders sent waves of heat to bake the sand to the rear. With the last of his strength, Tyur flung himself through the portal behind the Sorcerer and Vara. Inside was much like the Sorcerer's home, a dizzying array of blinking light and bright screen around simple furniture and strange objects.

The old man thrust a mask into Tyur's hands and sprinted the short way into the forward chamber as the portal closed with a hiss.

"Get that over her face! And get ready!"

For what, thought Tyur. The answer came in a sickening lurch as the craft lifted into the air. Tyur got the mask over Vara's ashen face with difficulty as the ship banked hard and gained speed and altitude. When the ship was set on a course, the Sorcerer came to Vara's side. He pulled a bench from the wall and gently set her down. A white case produced a series of objects he used to attend to her wound. The old man worked frantically, punctuating his efforts with shouts in his native tongue.

Tyur watched helplessly. He pushed himself to sit next to the bench, grasping Vara's limp hand in his.

The contrast brought sadness to his heart. Her hand was lithe and graceful, his bore scales and claws.

The Sorcerer made a noise of triumph. He fussed over his patient, making her as comfortable as he could. He looked to Tyur and spoke, "I have stabilized her. The wound will heal, and the anti-toxins are undoing the effect of exposure to the foul atmosphere there. She will survive." His expression became suddenly grim and he continued. "She will never bear children, but she will live."

Tyur nodded. He cared not for anything but that she would live. He looked down at his arms, corded sinews sheathed by smooth scales. His own injuries clouded his mind with waves of pain and discomfort while the air inside the vessel felt heavy in his lungs. He spoke with some difficulty.

“I am in no state to start a family, either. I am a monster, after all.”

Vara stirred. Her eyes took in her surroundings, and she showed a moment’s panic before Tyur’s voice calmed her.

“You are safe, my love. I am here, and we are with the Sorcerer. He is a powerful ally and friend.”

She reached out to touch Tyur’s face.

“Your eyes!”

Tyur shook his head. “There is much to explain.”

The Sorcerer set his vessel down in the clearing near the cave. Vara stepped from the portal. Her own formidable strength had been marshaled during the short trip, and she stood tall as she called to her tribesmen. The Ithra, slowly at first, left their hiding places to gather, gaping in wonder at the ship. Kiom led them, eyes squinting as he drank in the most unexpected visitation.

“Vara! You live!”

Captain Alan Washensky stepped from the doorway to stand behind her.

“Alan! Do my old eyes deceive me! My heart swells to see you. But what of the Dryth! They will come! Old friend, have you forgotten the danger?”

The Sorcerer shook his head no.

“Kiom, old friend. Your warrior Tyur found me and beseeched me to help him on his quest to find Vara. I helped him as I could, and sent him on his way. In the days that followed I began to question my

decisions. I sought to do no more harm when I made my mountain hideaway. But in doing so I permitted evil to continue.”

The gray-haired traveler from distant times looked at each Ithra in turn as he continued. “No more. With the help of the Ithra, we will fight the menace of the Dryth once and for all. No more hiding.”

Kiom shook his head. “Alan, though my heart soars at the thought, I am an old man, I am no war leader. And we have not the weapons nor magics.”

Vara stepped forward. “I claim that honor. I know the Dryth. I have faced them. And my mind is keen and my body strong.” She fingered the bandage at her belly as she spoke. “Let me be the mother to all the Ithra, mother to all the warriors. I will lead them.”

Kiom beamed. He turned to the crowd of Ithra.

“I proclaim Vara war leader, fighter of Dryth and Mother of Warriors! Do any dispute?”

Their answer was a cheer, her name again and again as they raised spears in the air. The younger warriors could hardly contain their joy.

Kiom grasped her shoulders in joy. His face darkened suddenly. He looked to her and the Sorcerer.

“But what of Tyur? Did he fall?”

Vara answered, voice dark with grief.

“No. My love lives. But he can never return.”

She looked to where the Sorcerer stood amidst a gaggle of young warriors. In the tone of a learned elder, he addressed the rapt crowd.

“We dealt the Dryth a heavy blow, but they will recover and seek vengeance. We have no time to spare.”

In his hands he held out a weapon for their inspection.

“This is a shotgun...”

The hot wind was soothing against his scales as he stood perched on the jutting black rocks, an island in a sea of sand. His reptilian eyes stared toward the city in the distance, pondering its secrets. The black pyramid stood as ever, menacing, its mysteries as yet unknown.

Tyur took in a lungful of air, letting its acrid flavor soothe a throat still somewhat raw from the cries of battle. Resting on his sore shoulders was the thunder spitter and on his arm the mark of the tribe American. He looked east and west at the sprawling wastes, hazy with the shimmering waves of heat from the sun god's gaze. This was now his home. Here he would wander until his death. Here he would hunt the Dryth, and the Dryth would hunt him. He fingered the small box at his belt. When the thing showed a red light, he would meet the Sorcerer at the appointed place. Otherwise, there was nothing but the wastes before him. And the hunt.

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# **Through the Star-Thorn Maze**

*By* LYNN RUSHLAU

*Corree hopes to escape the Citadel and the clutches of the lecherous Sir Trahan, but the only way out is through the Star-Thorn Maze! Can she free Lark Waymaker, the one man who could find their path through the Citadel's deadly gardens?!*



Corree breathed through her mouth as she held the dipper out to another worker. Sweat, blotchy with dirt, glistened off his body in the dim light of the lava fields. He stank like he hadn't bathed since his capture, which he probably hadn't. The facilities for the men doomed to work the thorny fields made Corree gag, and she'd never done more than walk past them.

The man thrust the dipper back, stretched, and stooped back over a lump. The clink, clink, clink of his toil followed her to the next man in her sector.

She bore drink to three more men before she spotted the tattooed back of the one she sought. Like the others, he wore naught but a filthy loincloth, and his head was kept shaved. A water serpent, a fantastical beast in vivid blues and purples, covered his back from his wide shoulders to mere inches above his waist. Dirt obscured the image's vividness and artistry, but enough remained visible to identify him as Lark Waymaker, former lover of the sorceress Emervine, betrayed to slavery in the Garden of Constellations.

Like the others, he took the proffered dipper without acknowledging Corree's existence and drank slowly.

"I understand that you could find the way through the star-thorn maze," she whispered.

She saw the muscles in his throat move with each swallow. That movement stopped for a long moment. He drank the rest of the dipper down, lowered it slowly, and held it out to her. "So?"

"Will you lead me out?"

His eyes were dead as they met hers for the first time. "No one exits the Gardens."

"We do." Corree repositioned her grip on the jug.

He snorted.

"The water bearers aren't monitored. I could disguise you as one and slip you out amongst us."

He snorted again and stooped to his labor. "Right."

"Please. I am desperate. You're—"

The klaxon signaling the end of the water break sounded. Corree looked up and directly into the gleaming black eyes of one of the Heads on the wall. She whimpered. The Head's mouth moved, but the gaze of the guard from whose hand it dangled remained focused on something in the other direction.

The Head couldn't tell she was speaking. Surely the cloth water bearers wrapped around their mouth and noses prevented that.

Lark followed her gaze and turned ashen under his layer of dirt. He opened his mouth, but the claxon rang out again.

For a heartbeat, Corree mistook the sound for an alarm. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted another water bearer hurrying across the star field.

"Please. Think on it!" She dared say before she fled.

Corree's luck returned once she left the thorny star fields. No guard challenged her exit from the field. Inside the Citadel, she broke away from the other water bearers and fled to the cell in the archives where she'd hidden her own clothes. She shoved the massive jug behind a sarcophagus and stuffed the water bearer clothes inside a chest of books. Not that it mattered.

She could have left both sitting exposed atop the chest. No one ever came into this wing. The archives filled three sub-basements, and each stretched on for miles. No one remembered the people from which the items in this wing came. No one could read their books. But matters were too desperate for her to take the risk.

Corree took every precaution to come and go unseen and to leave no trace of her passage. She couldn't trust her coworkers not to be suborned by Trahan.

She made it back to her current workstation without passing anyone. No notes waited on her chair. She hoped that meant that her new spot remained secret. Not that she trusted that to be true. She'd worked here for three days now. She'd need to move again soon.

Unless she convinced Lark.

Corree dropped her head into her hands. She'd assumed he'd be desperate to escape. That he would leap at the chance she presented. She never imagined he'd scoff.

A chime rang out through the archives. Dammit. Dinner hour. She dropped her hands and stared at the work she'd neglected all afternoon. Would the transcription she'd raced through this morning pass for a whole day's work?

No time to figure it out now. She shoved away from the desk and rushed through the archives to her private cell. The door was locked. She always locked it.

But the lock had not stopped him. Her eyes spotted the intrusion immediately. A creamy piece of parchment sealed with red wax lay on the bed. A note. From Trahan. Corree sighed. She yanked off her shirt and threw it at the note.

Not until she was dressed for dinner and had run a comb through her hair, did she unbury the damned note. Not a note. An invitation. Dinner at Trahan's table.

"Fuck," she muttered under her breath.

The table wasn't actually his, so neither was the invitation. She couldn't ignore it. Or say no. She ranked far below Lady Anyse and hadn't the privileges to decline an invitation from so many tiers above herself.

She flung the parchment on the bed and swooped down on her wardrobe to scramble into a nicer gown. Back to the mirror, she knotted her hair at her neck before draping a cream veil over her head. A bronze chain held the veil in place. The tear-shaped citrine

that hung in the middle of her forehead would have to stand in for the tears she wanted to shed over the day.

“Oh-ho! Not eating with us tonight, I see!” A couple of her coworkers lingered in the main hall that led to all the individual dining rooms.

Corree grimaced. Zanuck touched her wrist. “Are you okay?”

She just looked at him. He knew. They all knew about Trahan. Zanuck at least sympathized. Half the others envied and hated her for being the object of his attention. Corree nodded and moved on. Hundreds of people rushed past. Dinner would begin soon.

She circled around the web of corridors to the right table. The round copper table filled the round, wall-less copper room. Pillars held the ceiling aloft, but where walls would have stood, arches led to other tables in interlocking bubbles that drifted outward from the high table of the Star of Dimmet Citadel. Lady Anyse’s table rested in the fifth tier, reminding Corree things could be worse.

If one of the Shining Pontiffs or Viceroy of Darkness had turned their eyes her way, she would have been in their beds that night whether she willed it or not. And she’d have belonged to them until they decided otherwise.

Sir Trahan possessed nowhere near that sort of power. Thank the stars.

Though he glowered at her as she approached the table, Trahan rose and pulled out her seat. “Who was that?”

“I’m sorry?” Corree’s brow furrowed.

“That man. In the main hall. He touched you.”

“He’s an archivist. We work together.”

“He touched you,” Trahan hissed.

“In a gesture of friendship.” Corree spoke through gritted teeth.

“What is his name?”

Oh, no, Corree was not dumb enough to share that. She turned away and greeted her hostess and the others at the table. She could hear Trahan's teeth grinding as he took his seat beside her.

Conversation at the table moved on. Trahan leaned over to whisper. "Who is he? Why won't you say?"

Corree sighed. "He's just an archivist. We've worked together for years. He's handfasted to another archivist. He's not competition."

Trahan bristled at that. Had they been alone, he might have hit her. One of the men across the table called his name before he could say anything else. His hand, however, slid under the table and encircled her wrist in a crushing grip. Corree was forced to pick at her meal left-handed.

Trahan declared they'd go on a walk in the gardens after dinner. Corree pled work.

"You work all day. The night is our time." Another man might have given her puppy dog eyes and made those words a sweet plea for her company. Trahan's eyes were hard and his words cold.

"I've fallen behind and really need to catch up."

"Then say you'll come by my rooms later."

A shiver ran down her spine. "Trahan, that isn't...fair."

"To ask for your love? That isn't fair?" His grip bruising her arm, he steered her around the corner to an empty corridor.

Corree thought fast. "To make affection a punishment? What is fair about that? Please, can we wait until tomorrow? Tomorrow night I would love to walk with you in the gardens. I promise I'll have all my work done in plenty of time."

After only a few minutes mauling, he acquiesced, and she managed to slip away.

Time had run out.

Corree knew Trahan read more in her promise than she'd meant. If she didn't get out of the Citadel, the cage around her would become inescapable tomorrow night.

She could do nothing tonight. The slaves in the Garden of Constellations would have already eaten and been sent to bed. No way she could infiltrate their barracks unseen or even hope to find Lark Waymaker in the dark amidst hundreds of others. And a lone woman stepping into those dark cages at night? She could imagine the result easily.

She spent the hours until midnight rushing through tomorrow's work. At midnight, she forced herself to quit and go to bed. She needed to be at her sharpest if she truly intended to escape tomorrow.

Her mind refused to cooperate. She lay awake for hours. What if Lark refused? Would she go alone? What if they were caught? Execution wouldn't be so bad. Worse fates awaited her. She could be given to Trahan. She could be downgraded to a slave before being sent to his bed.

Morning came dark and gloomy. Corree rushed through her work and refused to believe that the gloom could be an omen.

All the way to the Garden that afternoon, her hearty reassurances held true. No archivist caught her fleeing the archives in her water bearer attire. Nor did anyone spot her hiding in wait for the actual water bearers.

The water bearers that she'd befriended smiled to see her. They thought she had a lover among the condemned and saw the tragedy as romantic.

Her heart stopped outside the Garden wall. Every Head dangling from the arm of a guard turned to stare at the water bearers. Chills oozed down Corree's spine and her breath caught.

One of the girls nudged her. "Ignore them. They sense movement and think we're new prisoners. When the guards don't pay attention,

they'll turn away.”

A few seconds later, one by one, the Heads rotated back to face the interior of the Garden. The great spiked gates swung open, squealing painfully. Corree entered the Garden, one nameless water bearer among many. She forced herself not to look back to check if any Heads watched her progress through the fields.

It took her half the afternoon to work her way back to Lark Waymaker.

When she reached him, she nearly dropped the jug on his foot. Today, she had made sure to refill it after every couple of men. She needed to ensure she'd have water for Lark to wash with when he left with her, but her muscles shook from hefting the weight around.

He didn't look at her as he took the dipper from her hand.

“I need you to come with me today. At the end of our shift.” Corree spoke as quickly as she could so the Heads wouldn't be alerted to their conversation.

He continued to drink.

“Please. You're my only hope of getting through the star-thorn maze. If you refuse to help, I'll have to try it on my own.”

“No one has ever made it through the maze.”

“You could. Your name has meaning.”

He sighed and held out the dipper. “More water?”

“Do you honestly want to spend the rest of your days *here*, doing this? The gases released from the work here kill. The water bearers wear scarves for a reason.”

“I doubt it's protection enough.” Lark spoke from behind the dipper and immediately went back to drinking.

“Do you want to die?”

“Perhaps.” He lowered the dipper and met her gaze with his dead, broken eyes.

“The star-thorn maze would kill you much quicker. Disintegrating lungs is a painful and slow process.”

He smirked. “Getting hit by a bolt of star energy will hurt too. Believe me.”

“Please. I am begging you. I’ll offer anything for your assistance.”

He just looked at her.

She huffed. “Fine. You want to die. Emervine crushed you.”

Anger flickered in his frozen blue eyes.

“Die on your terms. Piss her off. Do so escaping! Please!”

“I doubt she’d care.”

“Surely others do.”

He sighed.

“Please! I will do anything.”

“I’m not interested in some drab little water bearer.”

“Fine.” Corree turned and located the next man on her route. “I’ll go alone.”

“Wait. How do you plan to get me out?”

At the first alarm signaling the end of shift, Corree headed for the facilities. She skirted around and slipped into a small depression in the wall where she couldn’t see any Heads or guards and hoped none could see her.

And she waited.

Every water bearer headed to the drains out front, and every time she heard footsteps, she thought maybe it was Lark. But the



footsteps gave way to the sound of water being poured into the sewers.

She started counting after the first few pours. At a dozen, all hope spilled out of her. Death then. She couldn't escape on her own. She'd die of star fire or starvation, hopelessly lost in the maze.

Or she could simply slit her wrists when she returned to her rooms.

She wouldn't. She'd dismissed the idea of suicide time after time. She couldn't let go of the hope that she would escape, that she could find her way free of the Citadel and Trahan.

"Quick. The bell's about to ring."

Startled, Corree jumped and sloshed water all over herself. Lark pulled the jug from her hands and hurriedly swabbed most of the soot from his face and arms.

Corree pulled off the extra-large skirt she'd belted around her waist. The shirt and scarves held in place below her skirt fell out. Lark pulled them on silently. Corree tied the scarf around his face.

He looked ridiculous. The skirt barely covered his shins. The scarves hid his baldness and most of the stubble on his face but made him look no more feminine.

The second bell clanged.

He'd have to do. Corree scooped the jug and stared at him in horror. "I only have the one jug."

Lark held up his hand, sighed and reached for the scarves.

"No! You carry it." She thrust it into his arms. Old shattered jug pieces carpeted the ground around the fountain. If questioned, she could claim to have dropped hers. They might discover that she wasn't a water bearer, but at least she was female.

He followed her to the gate. She couldn't stop her eyes from darting to the cratered walls every few seconds. Were any Heads

looking? Were any guards?

Lark and Corree hurried across the worn paths of the star field and caught the tail end of the other water bearers before they reached the gates. The gates remained closed. A guard paced slowly over the gate. Back and forth. Back and forth. The Head dangling from his arm rotated without ceasing.

Corree's heart pounded in her chest. She huddled behind another water bearer so that none would notice her lack of a jug.

The gates squealed open. The ground rumbled beneath their feet with the motion. Panic urged Corree to grab Lark's hand and shove their way through the others. To get away.

She gritted her teeth and walked sedately enough to prevent herself from stepping on the heels of the water bearer ahead of her. No one stopped them from exiting the Garden of Constellations.

The pockmarked stone path never seemed longer, the Citadel never so far away. But no guards followed, and none secured the entrance. What need would there be? All slaves were confined in areas protected by guards, and the star-thorn maze surrounded Dimmit Citadel. Sure there were entrances to that impossible exit all around, but the Maze was impossible. No one could navigate it.

Corree broke away from the other water bearers when they headed down the steps towards the kitchens and servant quarters. She had to grab Lark's arm to steer him the other direction.

"What—?"

"Not now," she snapped.

Corree flew down the stairs. Lark must have caught her urgency, for he stayed on her heels, causing him to slam into her when she stopped abruptly on the bottom step.

The impact sent her sprawling to the floor. He rushed to her side and bent to help her up.

“Are you okay?”

Skin bleached of color, Corree whipped her head both directions. The corridor was deserted. Relief knocked the breath from her lungs. Pushing Lark aside, she scrambled to her feet.

“Hurry. This way.” She limped off to the left.

“Are you okay—?”

“Shh!”

They encountered no one in the silent corridors that led to the cell. She opened the cell’s door, gestured Lark inside, and shut the door after them before turning on a lantern.

“Where are we?”

“In the archives. I stashed clothes for you in that trunk.” She pointed to a battered brown case in the back corner. She ducked behind the sarcophagus and hurriedly changed into her own clothes. His eyebrows raised when she stepped back out.

“Stay here and stay quiet. I’ll be back after dark.” Corree ran her fingers through her hair and twisted the length into a quick braid.

“Wait!”

“What? I have to go.”

“Are these bones? Skeletons?” He gestured at the sarcophagus and the crates surrounding it.

Corree shrugged. “If you can do so quietly, feel free to find out.”

Though he started to say something else, she slipped through the door and flew through the corridors. Her heart beat a million times a minute. This was real. She had Lark Waymaker stashed in a disused cell in the archives. She was actually going to escape from Trahan and the confines of the Citadel.

First, though, she stopped by her desk to gather her work and carried the sheaf of papers to her supervisor’s office. She rapped

softly on the door and drooped as she entered the tiny room.

“Corree? What’s wrong?” Her supervisor looked her up and down and frowned.

“I’m not feeling well at all. Dizzy and a bit nauseous.”

The supervisor frowned. “Go on to the Healers. Is that what you’ve finished for the day?” He held out his hand.

Nodding, Corree handed her work over. “I feel like if I just lay down I’ll feel better. If it gets worse, I’ll seek a healer.”

He nodded, but was already focused on the papers she’d handed him.

Corree made sure to walk slowly and look exhausted on her way back to her cell. She lucked out and ran into three separate coworkers, each of whom told her she looked awful. Word would reach Trahan. One of them would be amongst his spies.

What she didn’t expect was that he’d come to her cell in person to see how she was after dinner. He possessed manners enough to knock, but let himself in without waiting on a response.

“I heard you were ill. What is wrong?”

“I feel a little nauseous. I might be coming down with the flu. You shouldn’t get too close.”

He’d been sauntering forward but stopped and narrowed his eyes at her suggestion.

“I—I wouldn’t want to get you sick.”

His gaze raked over her. “We had a date tonight.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” She lowered her gaze. That apology didn’t sound a bit sincere. Dammit.

He touched her forehead.

She winced and drew away. “You’ll get sick.”

“You don’t feel warm.”

“I know. I haven’t felt feverish at all. I’m just so sleepy and queasy.” Take that hint and go away, she thought.

Of course, he didn’t. He insisted on summoning a servant to bring her soup and crackers though she insisted she couldn’t eat a thing. He wouldn’t leave until she nibbled on a couple of crackers and had a few spoonful of soup.

She pushed the tray away. “I can’t. This is making it worse.”

His expression through it all remained bland, but at last he told her to get some rest, actually picked up the tray, and left the room.

She waited a good hour. He didn’t return. No one else stopped by.

Corree slipped out her door and into the dim corridor. She crept to the corner, turned and waited. She didn’t hear footsteps but peeked back around the corner all the same. No one followed. She remained cautious on her trek through the archives, pausing frequently to check for pursuit.

“Thought you were never coming back.” Lark frowned at her as Corree slipped inside his room. “Did you bring in any food?”

She hadn’t. She couldn’t. How could she steal from the kitchens?

“And how are we to pass days in the maze with nothing to eat?”

“I have ration packs in my bag.” She opened a cracked crate and drew out a small backpack. She’d only packed one change of clothes along with the rations and some items she hoped would fetch a good price. She’d ransacked other cells around this one in the disused section of the archives for bits of jewelry and loose jewels. No one would ever notice.

“Let’s have one now.”

Corree shook her head. “Later. In the maze. We have to cross the grounds *now*.”

“Why?” He asked though he stood and stretched.

“People are out and about now. Trysting. Partying in the pleasure gardens. We won’t look suspicious now.”

“Doesn’t that make the chances of us being seen more likely?”

“No one will care. People wander around the edges of the maze all the time. We’ll look like we belong.”

He raised his eyebrows, but Corree ignored him. What could he know of life in the Citadel? He’d been a visitor for less than a week when he was betrayed. She’d lived here her entire life.

Corree poked her head outside, confirmed the corridor was empty, and beckoned him out. When they approached the final corridor where the stairs were located, voices halted them in their tracks.

“I don’t know! I’ve checked the washrooms. She’s nowhere in the residential portions of the archives.”

“And Lark Waymaker is missing,” Trahan said.

Ice zipped down Corree’s spine and pegged her to the floor.

“Corree couldn’t have anything to do with that,” the other man scoffed. “She was ill. She might have gone to the healers.”

“You wait outside her cell. I’ll go check,” Trahan said.

Lark pulled Corree through the nearest door as footsteps came their way. He waited until the footsteps faded away before he shook her and hissed, “Now is not the time to panic!”

“They know everything!”

“Then we better get in the maze quickly, hadn’t we? Before they find us?”

She took the lead. She had to. As a guest, Lark would never have seen these parts of the Citadel. Corree knew to avoid the parts where Lark might be recognized: the corridors that led to gaming parlors, concert halls, and residences of rank.

They passed one footman in their flight. He greeted them and kept walking, but Corree held her breath until they stood outside under the great nebula that stretched across the sky over the Citadel.

“This way.” Corree grabbed Lark’s hand and dragged him across the pockmarked courtyard to their left.

He pulled free.

“Courting couples are normal out here,” she hissed and clutched his hand again. She heard his sigh, but he allowed her to hold his hand. She stole a glance at him as they crossed the courtyard and wondered if he’d ever recover.

By all accounts, he’d worshipped Emervine. He’d committed gross acts of treason and betrayal at her command and earned the hatred of his family, friends, and country. By the time she betrayed him, none were left who would help him.

Corree had never been in love but could imagine how badly that betrayal must have hurt. No wonder she’d had such a hard time getting him to come with her.

The glance cost Corree her balance. She stepped in a pockmark and would have fallen flat on her face if Lark hadn’t caught her.

She limped on.

“Are you okay?”

“Hurry! We haven’t time.” The courtyard remained empty, but Trahan would have reached the healers by now. She couldn’t predict what he might think or do next. His last love interest had disappeared without a trace. No one said it, but everyone assumed he’d killed her. People of rank murdered lower-caste lovers who outlived their use often enough that the act seldom led to scandal.

Little bursts of light, pink, orange and green illuminated the courtyard ahead of them. They neared an arch, an entry into the maze. It sparked and fizzled.

“How do we get through that thing?” Lark whispered.

Corree shushed him. They halted about three paces from the arch. The entry hissed and flung a jagged blue lightning streak from the right side of the arch to the ground on the left.

Lark raised an eyebrow and looked at Corree.

“It’s patterned.” Corree grimaced. “Really randomly, but there’s always a point when it stops, and then we run through. On my word.”

Not taking his eyes off the arch, Lark nodded. Lightning flashed from the left three times, the right once, and then another six times trading sides. A spark of orange traveled the length of the arch, and all the sparks went out.

“Go!”

Corree ran forward with Lark only a pace behind her. The arch flashed blue behind them. They stood in a long tunnel of thorns. About five feet down on the right a yellow light pulsed from within its cage of purple thorns. The tunnel was about three feet wide, and thorns jabbed into it from all directions. Rumor held that some parts would be open to the vast nebula above and others would wander underground, completely devoid of all light--but hung with the bones of those who tried to traverse the inky black depths.

Corree gestured for Lark to lead the way. He opened his mouth, but turned without a word and led them to a circular chamber at the end of the tunnel. Seven arches sparked in a great semicircle on the far wall.

“I probably should have said something sooner.” Lark stared at the arches. “I need—”

“This.” Corree pulled the worn leather pouch from her bag and held it out for him.

Lark stared at the pouch. He stared at Corree. “How?”

“I’m archivist. I logged them when you were captured.”

He took the bag, untied the drawstrings and peered inside. He looked at Corree. “I wanted out and was willing to risk death.” He



gestured at the entrances.

She shrugged. She'd known all along where his skills lay.

Lark Waymaker shook the bag in his hand and spilled the bones across the ground. Most fell in a jumble right under the bag, but the rest pointed towards the third entrance from the left. Lark pointed to the center arch.

“That way.”

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# **The Bears of 1812**

By MICHAEL TIERNEY

*It is said that to kill a grizzly is to bring a great curse down upon oneself; a pair of cubs taken from their mother may have brought a curse down upon a Nation! Will the angry spirits of nature be appeased or will the fledgling country be destroyed!?*

When every bird and cricket all went silent at once, Captain Meriwether Lewis instinctively whirled in mid-stride and swung his musket to the ready. But even his swift reactions were too slow, as the charging grizzly bear was already on top of him and rearing to strike.

A shot echoed through the trees as the grizzly's head jolted to one side and took the whole body with it.

"I tell you she be a good shot," Toussaint Charbonneau bragged as he rushed past with a blade drawn, but his English was so poor that Lewis had to mentally repeat his words several times to figure that out. Charbonneau went to work cutting on the beast while continuing to chatter in French.

Lieutenant William Clarke came running up with a half dozen men, one of whom was their French interpreter.

"No hat out of this pelt," Private Brancois Labiche translated, "bear meat on the spit tonight."

Lewis shouldered his musket and looked to the turn of the trail where the buckskin-clad Sacagawea stood with a baby on her back and a smoking rifle in her hands.

"Thank you, Juney," he called.

She made no celebration, her attention focused on the sudden squalling of a pair of bear cubs.

"Mama be a good skin, but tough to eat," Labiche explained while Charbonneau drawled on in an old version of French. "Maybe we have us some grizz' veal tonight."

Lewis shook his head in response to the panic he saw in Sacagawea's eyes. She did not appear reassured.

"We'll take them along as a present for Thomas," Lewis pointed at the cubs.

“No.” Sacagawea understood his intent and made her best attempt in English. “Cursed.”

“Nonsense,” said Clarke. “That’s an excellent idea. We’re shooting straight down the Missouri for the Mississippi. We’ll take these little critters right to the president’s doorstep with us, where they’ll be treated like royalty.”

When Sacagawea tried to say more, Toussaint began shouting in another language.

“Private,” Lewis asked Labiche. “What are they saying now?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “That’s not French. Probably Hidatsa, and apparently he’s about as good with it as he is with English.”

“She does seem confused by what he’s telling her,” Clarke added.

“What wrong?” Lewis had the private ask when Sacagawea sulked.

“Ever wonder how an ugly trapper like me get such a pretty *squal*?” Labiche deciphered Toussaint’s words, but the reference to his wife in the native term for a Shoshone squaw needed no translation. “You already know how she was the daughter of a Shoshone Chief. When she was captured by the Hidasta, she was favored by a medicine man, big tribal shaman. After he died, his son took his father’s place and wanted her gone. Felt she believed her medicine stronger than his with the spirit world.”

“Wouldn’t the spirits want us to save these cubs’ lives?”

“She thinks it bad medicine killing mama bear. Wind devils be coming for grizz’ cubs, and maybe us. All red nonsense.” The private turned to face the officers. “His words, not mine.”

As Toussaint walked over to the cubs and shot them both, Clarke turned to Lewis.

“Nonsense is one word for it. That wasn’t the first grizzly we’ve killed.”

That night Sacagawea built a small fire away from the camp in a cluster of extremely tall Shellbark Hickory trees. When she began to chant, Toussaint immediately went over and kicked out the flame, cursing at her superstitious behavior.

Not long after, a tremendous thunderstorm rolled across the sky and knocked down several trees near the camp. Men scattered when a bolt of lightning shattered a pine tree, the bulk of which teetered and fell into the camp fire. Showers of burning embers were sent flying across their tents.

The winds and calamity carried on throughout most of the night, until the next morning broke onto a crystal blue clear sky. All talk about a curse was forgotten.

Toussaint and Sacagawea continued with the Lewis and Clark Expedition as they returned down the Missouri River to where it mingled with the Mississippi River. There they settled in September of 1806.

Five and a half years later, the ground shook so violently that the Mississippi river ran backwards for several hours, taking with it the fully laden boat of one of Toussaint's fellow fur trappers. He blamed Sacagawea for having put "*a redskin curse*" on him, and the resulting falling out with the trapping community left the couple isolated.

Sacagawea had watched her son Jean Baptiste grow and added a daughter, but it was a loveless marriage as Toussaint Charbonneau spent increasingly more time drinking and visiting the penny whores. Sacagawea felt like she was rotting away, trapped in an alien world. Her children were increasingly sickly, and her son adopted his father's belligerent attitude.

Then came a day in the early summer of 1814 when a young man in a military uniform knocked on the door.

“You answer it.” Toussaint looked out the window and motioned Sacagawea to the door. “You English better than me now.”

The young officer announced that he brought an invitation from the residence of the President of the United States.

“How much they pay us this time?” Toussaint grabbed up his tobacco travel pouch and began stuffing it. He chortled when Sacagawea asked:

“You need help recruiting French to fight the British in Canada?”

“I’m sorry, Sir ... Ma’am” said the soldier. “No pay. This has nothing to do with the war against the British. This is a personal invitation.”

“No pay?” Toussaint exploded. “They expect to drag me out of my home for nothing?”

“No, Sir.”

“Good. Now we understand each other, we haggle a little, eh?”

“No, Sir. The invitation is for Mistress Charbonneau only. Just her.”

Toussaint was stunned. “Why the Federals want some *squal*?” He looked back and forth between his wife and the soldier several times.

“The invitation is from the Presidentess, Mrs. Madison,” the soldier addressed Sacagawea. “She would like to ask your advice on a matter concerning the bears encountered during the Lewis and Clarke expedition.”

“Them damn bear cubs again,” Toussaint fumed to his wife in her native tongue. “No pay. No go.”

“I must.” Sacagawea’s face contorted as she looked at her baby girl, crying loudly in the crib.

Silhouetted in the doorway frame, the soldier stood stoically with hands clasped behind his back while a heated conversation ensued for some time in a language he did not understand.

“You run off with this young man,” Toussaint pointed at the soldier and switched back to English, “you be dead to me. You come back, go stay in the house of the dying. You be dead to all of us.”

“Maybe they would be better off without me.” Sacagawea hugged her son so closely that he gasped for air, while her eyes shifted from teary to steeled.

“Ma’am,” said the officer, “time is of the essence. Reports from Europe are that the British have defeated Napoleon.”

Toussaint spat angrily on the floor.

Sacagawea retreated behind a curtain.

“The British will be turning their full attention to our United States,” said the officer. “If you’re going, we should leave right away.”

“She no go *anywhere*, and you in for it now.” Toussaint sat down and lit his pipe, puffing furiously. “You and this Second War of Independence gonna pay for burning that Parliament Building in Canada. Now the redcoats gonna burn you. Now...”

The captain was turning to leave when Sacagawea emerged from behind the curtain, having changed from her threadbare cotton dress into moccasins and a buckskin outfit. Toussaint was shocked to silence when, without picking up a single item, she walked straight past him and the officer and climbed into the carriage.

Toussaint could be heard screaming obscenities as the officer joined her.

“I’m Captain Tollman Payne,” he introduced himself. “Tell me, Miss Charbonneau, were you two speaking in Shoshone earlier?”

“No. And my name is Sacagawea.”

She said nothing more as they boarded the St. Louis ferry to cross the Mississippi River, which was unusually turbulent that day. Not until they reached the other side did she speak again.

“Why was my husband not invited?”

“Sorry, Ma’am,” said Tollman, “but Captain Lewis told Mistress Madison that your husband stopped you from speaking your mind about the bears in the past. She felt that his presence might impede your advice.”

Her melancholy smile confirmed that evaluation.

“Not long after your expedition, a Captain Zebulon Pike did give two grizzly bear cubs as presents to President Jefferson.”

“What happened?” Sacagawea’s hand went to her mouth.

“Didn’t work out, as you predicted. President Jefferson kept them on his front lawn for a few months, but they were growing pretty fast, and there was a political scandal over him having a ‘*bear pit.*’ So he sent them to the Peale Museum in Philadelphia. It didn’t work out so well there, either.”

Sacagawea bowed her head.

“Dangerous animals. Ever since, it seems like the presidential residence has been plagued with bad luck. Captain Lewis told Mistress Madison that you had some ‘*shamanistic knowledge,*’ as he called it. I kinda feel she hopes that there’s something, anything that you could do to alleviate the curse.”

“I would need to lift two curses,” she replied cryptically while looking back as a surge swept down the river.

During the long trip in the open carriage, her mood eventually softened and the two began to talk in a more cordial manner, and then later as friends. They found a common interest in marksmanship, testing their skills with the captain’s rifle during stops when Sacagawea gathered the materials needed for an incantation. The captain was astonished every time he lost a contest.

Three weeks later, Tollman’s words about the danger from the British turned out to be prophetic.



When their carriage arrived on August 24th in the muddy town named after the first President of the United States, the British Royal Navy had already sailed up the Potomac River. The last of a panicked population was streaming northwards.

Escaping soldiers and militiamen repeatedly tried to appropriate their carriage, but each time Captain Payne showed them his orders, and they quickly desisted. From them they learned how Secretary of War George Armstrong had left the city undefended, certain that the British would attack the city of Baltimore. British Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochran instead landed five thousand British troops at Benedict, Maryland, commanded by Major General Robert Ross.

As was his custom, Major General Ross had led his men from the front and easily smashed through all three lines of the local militia. Outmaneuvered and outnumbered ten to one, the citizen soldiers were routed and chased back to Washington. Fearful that Ross might appear on horseback at any moment, when cannons began to sound on the outskirts of town the panicked survivors turned north in the direction of Baltimore.

“I understand why these people are leaving,” said Payne. “Can I ask what it was that your husband said that made you leave?”

“Nothing,” Sacagawea replied. “I left because of things that happened a long time ago.”

The dirt road called Pennsylvania Avenue in northwest Washington was deserted as they cantered onto the lawn of a multiple-storied house constructed with quarry stone and featuring terraced pavilions on both sides. Several clusters of old growth oak trees could be seen towering in the rear.

“Magnificent,” said Sacagawea.

“Yes,” said the captain, “but I agree with the president that the front door needs something grand like a portico to keep the rain off visitor’s heads.”

“A what?”

“A roof elevated by pillars.”

“That would make this grand house look even more impressive.”

There were no guards to be seen, but a heavily laden carriage whose horses were stamping their hooves at the ground stood at the front door steps. Black servants opened the front door as a dark haired woman in her mid-forties struggled with the assistance of four well-dressed gentlemen to carefully carry a very large, but frameless, canvas painting.

“Thank the Lord,” she called when she saw the approaching carriage. “I thought we might have to carry this out of the city by hand.”

“I brought her,” said Captain Payne, “just like you asked.”

“Thank you, Captain.” She looked around for the absent guards. “If only I had more relatives in uniform.”

“If they found another carriage,” said one of the gentlemen, “they left in it.”

“It is an honor to meet you, Lady Presidentress,” Sacagawea addressed the woman.

“Call me Dolley,” said Mrs. Madison as she waved to the servants. “Go. Go. Get out of the city while you can.”

She then stood looking at the painting as it was laid face up on the steps. One of the gentlemen began test rolling it, drawing quick admonishment from one of the others.

“Where are the bears?” Sacagawea asked as the men loaded the painting of a tall man wearing a white wig onto the back of the heavily laden carriage. Two of them were still securing the painting in a flattened position when the Presidentress waved the driver reluctantly on his way. The fourth man waited behind.

“It certainly looks like a there’s a curse on us,” Mrs. Madison nodded to the sound of the approaching drums. “President Jefferson kept those darn bears on the front lawn and did spend some time

with them, while they were little. Then he sent them away,” her voice trembled. “They simply became too dangerous, and after one of them got loose, they were both put down—on the very same day that Congress declared war against Britain.”

Sacagawea started to reach a hand to her mouth but closed her eyes instead.

“If only I’d sent for you earlier.”

“Ma’am, you need to leave,” said Captain Payne.

British drums could be heard when the steady pattern of cannon fire escalated into a frenzied staccato, followed by volley after volley of British rifle fire and then silence, leaving the steady beat of approaching drums as the only sound in a silent city.

“He left to take command of that artillery battery,” Mrs. Madison looked in the direction of the suddenly silent cannons, “my Jimmy. The President of the United States is leading the Capitol’s defense from the back of his horse.” Captain Payne helped her aboard the carriage and handed the reins to the remaining gentleman who was increasingly anxious to leave. “My job is to get you two out of here. Come on now. There’s room.”

Sacagawea shook her head and pulled from the carriage the bundles of materials she had gathered.

“You’ll move faster without us,” said the captain. “Your safety is paramount. With me along, you’ll just become a target.”

“But, good Lord, you’re both here because of me!” Dolley looked her cousin in the eye. “You still have your orders?”

The captain nodded.

“Then get her to safety,” she referred to Sacagawea. “Get her to Baltimore. I know I can count on you.”

As the Presidentress rode away, Sacagawea was already walking around the building.

“The bear cubs were kept on the front lawn.” Captain Payne pointed.

“I need to call on the spirits of the woods,” said Sacagawea as she approached the tallest cluster of trees and began to gather fallen twigs and branches.

“Okay, but there are five thousand reasons to leave—headed right here, right now. How long will this take?”

Captain Payne was surprised when Sacagawea produced her own rocks to build a barricade around the fire that he started with gunpowder and flint. Once the flames began to kick, she started feeding them branches gathered during their trip.

“You should go now,” said Sacagawea. “The drums are getting close.”

“And it’s safe for you?” he retorted. “You’ve heard the same stories that I have about the atrocities the British are committing.”

“I am not like your womenfolk. The spirits of my ancestors will look over me.”

“Maybe not just them.” Captain Payne looked up at the tallest oak that towered over them. “I had this uncle out on the frontier who was sentenced to hang, but got loose and climbed the rope up into the hang tree. It was big and old, much like this one. Both the sheriff and the judge emptied their revolvers trying to shoot him down, but all they hit were tree limbs. So they invited everyone in attendance to have a go. By the time they ran out of ammunition, there wasn’t a leaf left on that tree, but Uncle Bob was still up there, dodging from branch to branch, laughing his head off drunk of course. The judge finally gave up and declared that he’d survived his execution.”

“I do not wish to see your execution,” said Sacagawea. “The spirits might balance the scales with your family. If you’re going to hide in a tree, cover your face with dirt. It will be dark soon, and your clothes are mostly dark blue. No one will see you then.”

The captain did as she suggested and began clambering up the tree while she took a seat by the small fire.

“Ora-nika ora-nay ora-nika ora-nay witchy-tie-tae-toe....”

With eyes closed, Sacagawea began her chant, selecting by touch the flowers and herbs to toss into the fire.

The captain reached the tree’s middle terrace moments before a line of red-coated infantry arrived with an unmistakable horseman riding at the leading edge. Tollman quietly cocked the hammer of his rifle but hesitated out of concern for Sacagawea’s safety. Instead, he kept his sights on target and trigger finger at the ready.

“What have we here?” Major General Robert Ross asked as he reined next to Sacagawea. “And what’s that smell? Hickory?”

He seemed quite surprised to receive no response, as Sacawajea continued her chant seemingly unaware. A pair of soldiers moved to seize her, but the Major General waved them off.

“Watch her do her little show,” he told the men, “but make sure she doesn’t go anywhere. I’ll want to talk with her later.”

Major General Robert Ross and his men promptly moved inside the presidential residence. Darkness fell as they ransacked the building, and the clamor of their noise grew ever louder.

From his high perch, Payne could tell when they broke into the liquor cabinets. He could even make out the words when someone swore a sarcastic toast to President Madison.

Then the building was set afire.

By this time, Sacagawea’s own fire had died down and her chant ended. She continued to sit, watching the tableau unfold before her as the building blazed so fiercely that it could be seen from the neighboring state of Virginia.

Major General Robert Ross approached while sorting through some letters he loudly claimed to be President Madison’s love letters

to his wife. He read a few passages, which drew guffaws from his men.

Then his full attention turned to Sacagawea.

“How disappointing. I’d hoped you were cooking dinner. Who are you, my fine little minx?”

“Sacagawea.”

“Sack of what? What kind of name is that?”

“It means Boat Launcher in Hidasta, but I was named Boinaiv by my father, which means Grass Maiden.”

“Tell me, Grass Maiden, what were you doing with that little show earlier?”

“I made a *‘spirit fire’* to free myself and this place from the curse of the wind spirits.”

“Really?” He sarcastically looked up at the clear night sky. “Guess it worked. So you’re trying to defend your United States?”

“I am not of these United States,” she replied. “I am a child of the very far West. I was born Lehmi Shoshone and captured by the Hidasta, who married me to a French trader. Now I am free to be who I choose.”

“I’m not stopping you.” He spat into the ashes of her fire, which sizzled an unnaturally long time. “But carry a message for me. Tell all your Indian tribes that the British rule this land again. There’s no one who can stop us. Next time we meet, maybe I’ll make you my, what do they call it? Squaw.”

Major General Robert Ross lost all interest and mounted his horse, motioning for his soldiers to follow as he rode away.

Captain Payne clumsily stumbled down the tree with a fair amount of noise and led Sacagawea from shadow to shadow until dawn found them on the outskirts of the city. There the captain again sought the high shelter of trees to hide from the British scouts.

“What is wrong?” Sacagawea inquired about his foul mood.

“I had him in my sights,” the captain fumed, “and I let him go.”

“You did that to keep your promise to save me. Thank you.”

Her words did not lessen his mood as they watched the rising smoke from the smoldering presidential residence.

The British set fire to the Library of Congress building, and later the shipyards. Multiple pillars of billowing smoke gathered into a massive dark cloud above the city. By mid-afternoon, the whole sky darkened and a sudden rush of wind cleared the air.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” said the captain. “I’ve got an unsettling feeling like I’ve never had before. Is this something you did?” As the strong wind picked up with ever increasing impetus, he gave his waist belt for her to tie herself to the tree, doing the same with his saber belt.

The captain and Sacagawea had some difficulty keeping themselves secure when the worst hurricane in recorded history slammed into the nation’s capital. Incredibly powerful winds scattered the British troops and sent them flying dozens of yards.

Then a cyclone funnel dropped straight out of the sky and landed smack in the middle of the British encampment.

Sacagawea turned her head away from the nightmare sight of red-coated men being tossed high into the sky and brutally smashed against trees, buildings, and the ground. The carnage was horrific. When the winds finally slowed, the captain tapped her on the shoulder.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

He indicated the weather.

“All I said was a prayer. You should thank the British.”

“Excuse me?”

“If they had not driven your people away, this storm would have landed on them instead.”

The captain seemed perplexed by the thought, but his sour mood soon mixed with a touch of bemusement.

Once the storm passed, the captain and Sacagawea continued their journey to Baltimore unimpeded. The humbled British likewise left Washington the next day.

Two weeks later the pair found themselves once again surrounded by British troops when Major General Robert Ross landed his four thousand surviving troops at Northpoint and marched on Baltimore. It was the attack that the now former Secretary of War Armstrong had predicted.

By this time Captain Payne had procured provisions and an extra rifle for Sacagawea. His intent was to promptly return her to the St. Louis shore of the Mississippi River.

“No,” she hefted her rifle. “My husband told me to never return to him, and I will not. I have repaid my debt to the wind spirits. Now I will repay my debt to you.”

The captain was having none of it, but when Sacagawea set out walking in the direction of the road out of town, his only choices were to forcibly carry her or join her.

“You know that I’m responsible for your safety?”

“You fulfilled that promise already.” Sacagawea motioned at the city around them. “Where I go now is by my choice. Do not feel guilty because it is the same thing that you *want* to do.”

The captain had no words in response, but his face was tormented as they exited town through a side gate and made their way to the main road. For miles, everyone they met was headed in the other direction, until they heard the rhythmic sounds of military drums.



“Seriously? They’re marching in a straight line down the main road,” said the the captain, “and haven’t sent a single advance scout. They have no fear of us at all!”

Sacagawea quickly found the tallest tree close to the roadway that had decent foliage.

“I’m starting to get good at climbing trees,” said the captain. “Three time’s the charm.”

“Is that how your people call to the spirits?”

“Maybe? Yes.”

Soon the rapidly advancing Major General Robert Ross once again rode his horse beneath the gunsights of Captain Payne.

“If I do this,” he whispered, “we’re both dead. Won’t be able to hide like Uncle Bob from these fellows.”

“Then I will do it.” She leveled her own rifle.

Both shots rang out as one and Major General Robert Ross slumped from his horse, mortally wounded.

The retaliation from the infantry was swift and terrible. Despite the brightness of the day, Sacagawea was able to obscure herself in the branches thanks to her buckskin outfit, but in his blue military jacket Captain Payne was brutally shredded by a hundred lead shots that literally eviscerated him before her eyes. A misty cloud of his blood washed over the branches and further camouflaged her. It was the most terrible thing Sacagawea ever experienced. The distant sight of hundreds of men being tossed about by tornado winds seemed a pale comparison.

Satisfied by the visual evidence of their revenge, the infantry crowded around their dying leader. The march eventually continued at a slower pace after the body of Major General Robert Ross was carted away.

Sacagawea remained in hiding throughout the rest of that day and all the next. So many leaves had been blasted off the central

branches that it was dangerous to move while there was still traffic on the road. On the following day, she was finally able to venture to the ground, barely able to work her severely stiffened joints and muscles.

The provisions stashed below the tree were still there, splattered with the captain's blood and pieces of tissue. Sacagawea gathered what she could of Captain Payne and buried him in a hasty, shallow grave alongside his saber. It was the only piece of equipment that had fallen away before being shattered. She silently chanted the same prayer over him that she had in Washington.

Staying low while hiding from the support troops constantly moving back and forth from the siege on Baltimore, she found a fast running stream and immersed herself.

Surfacing with a swing of the head to throw the water from her hair, she heard the sky explode with a seemingly unending barrage of distant thunder. Yet there were no clouds. Although she would not learn until later how she was a witness to the naval bombardment of Fort McHenry, she knew that somewhere the British had begun their attack in earnest. There was no sleeping throughout that thunderous night as the horizon was brightened by the glare of rockets and dazzling detonations from massive cannon fire. Sacagawea once again intoned the spirit world in prayer for all the poor souls caught beneath that horrific onslaught.

When dawn finally came, a deathly silence fell across the land. Soon the British were marching again, but this time it was in retreat. Sacagawea followed all the way to the Chesapeake Bay. Watching them load back onto their ships and weigh anchors, she heard someone ask:

“Where do you think they’ll attack next?”

A faint whiff of smoke similar to her *‘spirit fire’* brought a true smile to her face, the first she could remember in years, and Sacagawea began walking westward.

It was several months before she crossed back over the Mississippi River. The ice floes were easily avoided and the water surprisingly calm. The ferry crew spontaneously began singing a new song called *The Star Spangled Banner*. Learning the story of Fort McHenry, she asked the head boatman to write a letter to the President's wife, recounting the captain's tragic death. That was when she heard about the horrific fate met by the British in New Orleans at the hands of a man nicknamed 'Old Hickory.'

Throughout the fading of that day's light, she stood in the lengthening shadows and snow drifts across from her former home and watched how a French woman had taken her place. The children seemed happier than she had ever seen. Empathizing with the captain's decision to sacrifice himself for the good of others, Sacagawea made the choice that her children would have a better life in her husband's world and turned her eyes away.

She journeyed alone to the grasslands of her youth.

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

# Thune's Vision

A collection of stories  
by Schuyler Hernstrom





# **A Killing in Karkesh**

By ADRIAN COLE

*Witchfinder Arrul Voruum continues his investigation of the Shaitan-worshiping cultists lurking in the shadows of death-tainted Karkesh! With fell assassins afoot, can Voruum root out and vanquish the Brotherhood cell in the accursed city!?*

Arrul Voruum approached the narrow alleyway with even more than his usual deliberation. He was by nature a cautious man, and his work as an agent made him doubly careful where he set foot. This evening something had put his nerves on edge. It was only his second night in Karkesh, the sprawling city that had once been the centre of the Zurjahn Empire here on Ur, or Earth as it was now named again. A hundred years after the war that had brought the old Empire down, the city had only partially restored itself, its population small, the majority of its people gone out into the world to begin new lives, new discoveries. Most of the place was in ruins, a testament to the grim years of its earlier existence, the terrible yoke of cruel masters.

Voruum had arrived late the previous day and taken cheap lodgings in an area not far from the administrative centre, but even here there was an air of unease, where the inhabitants skulked and scurried, as though all of them were involved in one subversive activity or another. Karkesh would always carry a stain, Voruum mused. Its streets had been soaked in blood once, its walls echoing to the cries of those who had died in the horrific war that had brought its rulers to their knees. The untold years of the enslavement and persecution of humanity that had led to the war had etched its pain and misery into the stones that remained. As long as Man existed, the atmosphere would not change.

The alley led to the building where Voruum had secured his lodgings. He and his companion, the youth Kaspel, had passed an uneventful first night in the squalid but apparently safe rooms. Voruum had spent the day arranging to visit his masters, leaving Kaspel to get to know the city. The youth was from the western desert, lands where people were widely spread, eking out a simple existence, slowly rebuilding a shattered world. Eager to see more of the world, Kaspel had bound himself to Voruum, although the agent knew that it could be no more than a passing alliance. His trade argued for a lonely path, a constant conflict with the darker elements of this world.

Voruum carried a number of weapons, the most dangerous of which was the star lance, but he preferred to keep it sheathed unless an emergency called for its use. A powerful item of technology and a reminder of the old years, it would have been looked upon by many as a sorcerer's tool, the mark of dark, unsavoury powers. For now, Voruum slipped a simpler, rapier-like sword from its scabbard and edged forward into deeper shadows. Rats, some of them mutated to the size of cats, shrank back out of sight.

Voruum used his mental powers to test his surroundings, though he masked them, not wanting to prod anything into life. Stairs led up to the door of his lodgings. He stood at the foot of them and listened. There were voices above, intruders in the rooms. The sun had fallen and lanterns had been lit to supplement the dim light. Whoever was up there was making no effort to disguise the fact. He climbed, making as little noise as he could, and listened at the door. From the muted conversation, he deduced that the three men inside were part of the city watch. He slid his rapier back into its scabbard and slowly entered.

The first man aware of his presence swung round, a short sword in his hand. He looked ready for a fight, partially crouching. "Want something?" he growled.

"I would like to know why there are three watchmen in my lodgings. I paid for privacy."

Another of the men pushed forward. He also held a sword. "I am Marrick Harrad, sergeant of the watch." He tapped his chest, where there was an emblem of a simplified phoenix. "And you are?"

Voruum told him, though the three men stared at him with deeper suspicion.

"You took lodgings for yourself and one other?"

Voruum's unease had deepened. There was blood in this place—he could smell it. He tried to see beyond the men into the second room, where Kaspel should have been waiting. There was death in there. Voruum's heart clenched.



“Show me,” he said.

Harrad made as if to stop him but relented, stepping aside to allow Voruum into the second room. The blood was everywhere, suggesting a fight. What little furniture there was had been overturned and flung aside. There was a body behind the collapsed table. Voruum approached it with trepidation. He let out a sigh of relief. It was not Kaspel. The youth was not here.

“Who is he?” said Harrad.

Voruum bent down and nudged the body over onto its back. He didn't recognise the man, whose face was deeply tanned, his gaunt features suggestive of a desert dweller. An assassin? The man had been carrying at least one blade—it was close by, clean of blood. The man's throat had been opened, probably by a knife. Voruum dabbed at the blood with his fingers. His mind read strange things in that blood. And worse—he knew without pulling aside the soaked shirt that the tattoo on the man's chest was that of a horned goat's head.

“I don't know him,” said Voruum.

“He's not your companion?” Harrad sounded doubtful.

Voruum shook his head. “No.”

“The Commander of the watch will want a full report. You will have to come with us.”

“I work for Kyron Morgath, the Councillor. I've arranged to meet him tomorrow morning. You can accompany me then if you wish. I doubt if the Councillor will thank you for disturbing him tonight.”

“He's bluffing,” said the youngest of the three guards. “Detain him.”

Harrad was considering. Voruum could see his dilemma. Councillor Morgath was known to be quick-tempered and volatile. Not a man to upset.

“Very well,” said Harrad. “I'll come with you tomorrow. In the meantime, we will remove the body. You'd better not leave the city.”

Voruum shook his head again. "I will not be going far." And besides, he thought, you'll doubtless have your men following me.

He was right about that. An hour later, in a nearby inn where he was having a meal, he noticed at least two men watching him, and although they were not clad in the uniform of the watch, their blurred thoughts identified them as Harrad's informers. It was of no matter to Voruum.

While he was eating, the innkeeper brought him a flagon of ale. The man leaned over the table and spoke casually, his voice low. "I was told to inform you that your companion is well, sir."

"Where can I find him?"

The innkeeper collected used plates and murmured brief instructions. Voruum thanked him and made sure that when he paid for the food and drink he more than doubled the requested fee. Once outside, it was an easy matter to evade the watchers. He had spent most of his life trained for such work and had only lived his two score years and more for being skilled at it. When his business for the night was over, he would let Harrad's men find him again.

The address the innkeeper had given him was hidden away in a maze of backstreets and alleys barely wide enough for a dog to pass along. It was ostensibly a private house, with a cellar dug out deep below ground. Voruum was taken to the sanctuary by an elderly man who studied him with more than usual human senses. Voruum could feel a gentle mental probe and carefully deflected it. He knew that telepathy was not as rare as it had once been, and certainly no longer shared only by descendants of the original Dream Lords.

Kaspel was here. He would have been subjected to a rigorous scrutiny before these people protected him. He grinned hugely as he saw Voruum, and the tall agent growled a greeting that was a clear admonition of the youth's escapades, although he was hugely relieved to see Kaspel was unharmed.

"There were three of them," said Kaspel as they sat quietly, and he gave a breathless version of earlier events. "Two waited outside

while the other entered, with one purpose—to kill us both. He wanted to know where you were. I told him I knew nothing. He wasted no time in trying to finish me with his sword.” Kaspel indicated his shoulder and arm, which had been bandaged. “He caught me a few times. I let him get as close as I dared. I had a sword, and he was wary of it. But he didn’t know I had the knife. I picked the right moment and used it.”

Voruum nodded solemnly. “And the others?”

“They must have fled. I decided I’d better get out. I thought they might come back in numbers. I waited, in hiding, so that I could warn you, but then the guards came. I knew you’d be safe then. Gurruck’s men found me and brought me here. They say that anyone the assassins try to kill is a friend of theirs.”

Voruum turned to the man, Gurruck, who had been listening in silence. He was middle-aged, his frame spare, his face gaunt, as if he had lived all his life on his wits. Many of the inhabitants of Karkesh looked this way, old before their time, victims of the grim environment in which they lived.

“Who are these assassins?” Voruum asked.

Gurruck spat. “They serve dark powers. There is a Brotherhood. Devoted to restoring what once reared its head in this city, and ruled it.”

“I know them. And they know me. They have marked me. And I them.”

“Have they followed us from the desert?” said Kaspel.

“I think not. They are everywhere, I suspect. The canker is spreading. I will go back to Marrick Harrad and his guards. Tomorrow I will see the Councillor. Wait for me here until I return from that meeting.”

Kyron Morgath was an unusually tall man, with long, yellowed hair, combed back from his domed forehead and down over his shoulders, tucked behind his ears, from which two elegant, jewelled

earrings hung. His expression seemed to Voruum to be permanently sour, as though nothing pleased him. He sat behind an ornate desk in a huge chamber whose extravagances seemed a trifle desperate, an attempt to recall a more glorious time. The room's far end was a wall of glass that offered a view of Karkesh's broken and twisted skyline.

The Councillor was studying a metallic tablet of some description as Voruum was ushered in by Harrad, who himself quit the chamber. Voruum knew he was still furious that his men had not kept a close watch on Voruum the previous night.

"An interesting report," said Morgath, not looking up. "From the western desert—the ancient city you found there. My men have resealed it, and I doubt if anyone will open it again. They have set appropriate deterrents around its perimeter."

Voruum wondered what such might be—likely a combination of new science and old sorcery. The world was a curious admixture these days.

"Your own report was disturbing," Morgath went on, now looking up. His eyes, an unusual blue, fixed on his agent. "Highly commendable work, Voruum. What you uncovered—the workings of the Brotherhood of the Goat—were far more advanced than we realised. And from what Marrick Harrad has just told me, there were repercussions." He stood up and came around the desk, his bony hands clenching and unclenching, face even grimmer.

"Those assassins," said Voruum, "were from the Brotherhood." He told Morgath what he had found. "Someone sent them for me and the youth."

"Who is this youth?" Morgath said testily. "You're a witchfinder, Voruum, you work alone. You can't compromise your safety by employing servants, even as squires. Our enemies will use them as bait."

"He's looking for a new life. I agreed to bring him here, where he can learn about the world."

“To Karkesh? This cess-pit! The entire city is contaminated. Nothing is safe from its decay. You uncovered the devious work of Kannol Tuldís; a Councillor who many thought would become a guiding force in our attempts to drag this place up into the light, but no! He reveals himself to be an agent of the very filth we are seeking to expunge. How many more of them are there! And what do I have to aid me in my crusade against the crawling evils in this place? A handful of men like you, Voruum. Don’t think I am not grateful. It’s just that we are a small voice in the howling gale around us.”

“Forgive me, sire. I’ve spent most of my life offworld, on Gargan. The size of the problems facing the Council is far greater than I realised.”

Morgath drew himself up and waved Voruum’s apology aside. “Your work does you credit. But we have scratched the surface. If it were incumbent on me to solve Karkesh’s problems, I’d tear the place down, stone by stone—like that city you found—and plough over it! The best of its people left years ago. The new world is out there. That’s where the future lies—where hope lies.”

“What would you have me do, sire?”

Morgath scowled at Voruum for a moment, then turned away. “The assassins—those who turned tail—will probably try for you again. I’ve lost other agents to their murderous cause. I want to find the head of this particular serpent. Someone controls the Brotherhood’s servants in Karkesh. I want them eliminated. It will take a man of your skills—your specific gifts—to uncover them. You can have all the assistance you want. The entire city guard is at your disposal, when you think the moment is right.” Morgath turned back to Voruum, his eyes challenging him. “Well? Are you fit to take on such a role?”

Voruum nodded slowly. “Of course, sire.”

“Listen, Voruum. Our masters are wary of the mental powers such men as you possess. They do not encourage them, thinking them a path to the darkness that almost destroyed Mankind. Yet secretly they direct men like me to utilise whatever forces I can. It is a dirty

war. Every time a witchfinder is sent out, there is a danger that he or she will become tainted and turned. We know that and, I hope, guard against it.”

“I understand.”

“Find these assassins and whoever runs them. Fight fire with fire, but *find them!*”

Voruum had gone back to the lodgings where Kaspel had been attacked and conducted a thorough search, both of the rooms and of the nearby alleys and side streets. It had taken him several hours, but at length he was satisfied he had what he needed to track down the would-be killers. Now, back in the underground retreat of Gurruck and his men, the agent pronounced himself prepared for the hunt.

“The indications are that the assassins came from the eastern part of the city,” he said.

Gurruck was nodding, scowling so that his face creased in a thousand lines. “It is the most broken down sector. The place where the old amphitheatre dominates the skyline. Generations of men died there in its sands, often pitted against terrible creatures, mutations from the jungles. The great hero of the past, Galad Sarian, whose rebellion brought down the Zurjahns a hundred years ago, fought there and broke free of Karkesh. Those ruins are abandoned and are slowly crumbling. Few men go there now. There are wolves and other scavengers.”

“An ideal place, perhaps, for the Brotherhood of the Goat?”

Gurruck growled. “That scum would be at home in such a place.”

“I must go there. With Kaspel, but no one else, initially.” Voruum would rather have been entirely alone, but he knew Kaspel would only follow him, faithful as a hound. The youth had done it before and, as a result, saved his life. Voruum was less than comfortable with it, but Kaspel knew the dangers.

They set out under cover of twilight. The sunset was a bed of glowing coals strewn across an ashen western sky, silhouetting the shattered skyline of the city, a constant reminder of its slow disintegration. Voruum used his mental powers to pick up a spoor that only he could read. It led deeper and deeper into the abandoned ruins of the eastern sector. The buildings may once have been more solid, more salubrious, but the ancient war had ravaged them, and time had added its own cruel blows. Shadows moved among the crowded, crumbled stones, afraid of the light, unwilling to challenge the passage of the two men.

Voruum had drawn his star lance, its soft glow picking out the way ahead like an elongated lantern. Moths, huge things, flapped about it, and a chilling silence fell over everything like a shroud.

“A city of the dead,” Kaspel whispered, clutching a short sword so tightly his knuckles whitened. “It is far worse than anything in the western deserts.”

“Whatever is here can be killed,” said Voruum. He could read the darkness, sending his thoughts, a mental probe, out into it as a fisherman uses his line. He could sense shoals of energy, nameless creatures, possibly human, flickering in and out of the broken maze. Mostly they shrank back from his probe, their fear a sharp stab. Other things were more cautious, cloaking themselves in deeper layers of the night. All of them were damaged.

“Anything?” said Kaspel. His deep unease swirled about him like a cloak.

“There’s an old power here. Very twisted, very deep. I think the Brotherhood is tapping into it. It protects itself, and I have to be wary. If it finds me and focuses on me, we will be sorely tested.”

“Where is it?”

For an answer, Voruum led them up a stone stairway that wrapped itself around a tower and led to the top of a derelict wall. Voruum had switched off the star lance, and for a moment he and Kaspel crouched in the rapidly cooling night air. Gradually their eyes

adjusted to the starlight, and facets of the city showed themselves. The vast, black bulk of the former amphitheatre loomed on the eastern edge of vision, dwarfing the bones of the buildings around it. Cautiously, Voruum studied it, using his eyes and his mental vision. It suddenly seemed to him like a huge, bloated creature, semi-awake, sprawling in its own peculiar darkness.

“Is it there?” said Kaspel, but he had no real need to ask.

“Oh, yes.”

“Why not bring the soldiers? Surround the whole place, even if it takes an army.”

“They would find nothing but ghosts waiting for them. And bones, I daresay. This is a far more sinister power than those you have experienced. It knows how to hide. I have to bring it out. I have to challenge it. It wants me. It has already tried to kill me. I have one advantage.”

“What’s that?”

“It fears me.”

As they penetrated the eastern sector, their surroundings became increasingly silent. There were no birds, and whatever crawled or slithered in the tumbled stones kept well away from them. Even so, Kaspel whispered that he could sense life of some kind. Something dangerous. Voruum told him softly to be ready with his blade.

The derelict amphitheatre rose up high overhead, its upper walls cracked and broken, some partially fallen, now no more than huge heaps of rubble. The two men climbed one such sloping mass of debris and found an opening that must once have been a doorway. It was choked with stone and weed, but there was enough headroom to get into the passage. Darkness closed on them like a fist, and Voruum used his star lance to create a slight glow. It picked out thick spider webs and coiled roots that had broken through the brickwork.

“We are being followed,” said Kaspel, his face a mask of fear.



Voruum closed his eyes and tested the area around them, his highly attuned senses picking out vibrations, ripples, in the darkness. The assassins had come from here; their base must be close by. There were other things, uncoiling like serpents, a gathering of many. Their images crawled in Voruum's mind like bad dreams. He had tested himself against such evil more than once before.

"You must close your mind to the things that will beset us," he told Kaspel. "They cannot harm you—physically. It is your mind they will test."

Beyond the long passage, a broken gateway opened out into the old arena. Even in the blanketing dark it was vast, and the tiers of stone seating that rose up around it in a circle must once have held thousands of spectators. Voruum imagined he heard their cries of enthusiasm, that and the screams of those who had died on the bloodied sands. Somewhere up on the heights, something did stir, the flapping wings of a large bird, perhaps. It faded, to be replaced by other sounds from more than one direction.

"There!" said Kaspel, his voice caught by the acoustics of the deep bowl and amplified, so that it rang back in a series of echoes. He was pointing to the centre of the arena.

Three shapes had materialised, three men, garbed in darkness, each of them holding a long blade, their intent clear.

Voruum knew them as the men he was seeking. Just as he knew this was a very obvious trap. Too obvious, perhaps. They would have known they were no match for him in open combat. They wanted him out in the open, in the centre of the arena. There he would be the target of whatever it was that wanted him destroyed.

Around the edge of the arena, shifting out from a score of tunnels under the stone tiers, more shapes emerged, scores of them, soft as ghosts, limned in the glow from Voruum's star lance as he increased its light. A small army, warriors, but hardly human, as some of them hopped, some crawled, and others slid on their bellies.

“They are not real,” Voruum told Kaspel. “Mental projections. There is someone here who possesses terrible mental powers. You must close your mind. Focus on me. Give your strength to me. It will be hard.”

“I can *smell* them!” said the youth, horrified and trying not to gag as the stench of the pit boiled around him like a fog.

“It is all part of the illusion.” Voruum realised that whoever was at work here was far more powerful than he – or Kyron Morgath – had realised. The Dream Lords had been the absolute masters of illusion, a hundred years gone by. This was close to that level of sorcery, but who could possibly have inherited such power? Voruum was forced to dig deep into his inner reserves and hold on to his reason. He could either accept the challenge and risk defeat, or flee. Until now, he had never turned away from conflict. Nothing was certain in the life of a witchfinder, but he was skilful, more so than most, and invariably the creatures of darkness he had faced had not matched his ability.

That had changed here in Karkesh. The black city harboured things beyond nightmare. Powers from another age, a time of terror. A time when Man had almost slipped down into an abyss from which there would have been no returning.

That abyss was opening again.

Beyond Voruum and Kaspel, the grotesque army set up a unified ululation, the sound piercing the night, both horrible and deeply disturbing. The creatures moved forward as one, tightening the ring around their intended victims. Mutated and warped, some had writhing tentacles for arms, others claws, while yet more of them gripped barbed weapons that gleamed in the star lance’s light. Their faces were nightmarish, features twisted and contorted, teeth bared, thick strands of drool hanging from them in their eagerness to feast on human flesh.

Kaspel did as Voruum had told him and fixed his mind on the warrior, summoning up his inner strength and using it like a firebrand, directing it at Voruum, who strode forward towards the

centre of the arena. As he did so, clouds of half-glimpsed spectators thronged the seating, as though the place had filled with countless ghosts of Karkesh, and they hissed and jeered in unison. Their hatred battered at Voruum like a palpable wave. Whatever controlled these illusions radiated terrible powers.

In the centre of the arena, the figures dissipated, their creator dispensing with them now that their purpose had been fulfilled. Voruum was content to play along. This was to be a straight contest, for him a great risk, but he understood that unless he gambled on victory, nothing else would stand up to whatever had set itself up here. It had to be stopped before it could grow beyond the point at which nothing could destroy it. He glanced at Kaspel—the youth was remarkably strong and had closed his eyes, his attention fixed. As long as he held his concentration, the pulsating illusions around the arena would remain harmless.

Voruum saw movement in the black hole that was the largest of the tunnels serving the arena. Something shifted in the coiling darkness, a monstrous creature, part worm, part spider. Its powers would be real enough, although reality and illusion were blurred by the diabolism worked by its master. It emerged from the tunnel and lifted a vast, bloated head on a distended neck, its face a cruel mockery of a human visage, with two moon-like eyes, a wide gash of a nose and a mouth that opened to reveal teeth the length of swords. They encircled a scarlet maw, eager to engorge itself on its victim. In spite of the twisted features and the maniacal snarls issued by the beast, Voruum recognised a human face, that of his opponent. It was not someone he knew, though it must be a slave to the Brotherhood of the Goat.

The star lance burned brightly as Voruum wove passes in the air ahead of him. The creature scuttled forward on numerous legs, and the mouth drooled, bubbling and steaming. Two enormous arms reached out, heavy with flesh, the hands like talons, ripping at the air as though they would smother the light of Voruum's weapon. For a moment the two adversaries faced each other and around them there was only silence, deep and sepulchral.

“Another fool steps forward to defy me!” roared the voice of the beast, echoing like thunder around the arena, its words almost too distorted to hear. “Karkesh’s pitiful Council thinks its agents can match me. Twice I have spurned them. Now you—witchfinder! I will absorb you and your powers. And grow!”

Voruum shielded his thoughts from the creature, although he could feel its power attempting to tear at his mind’s secrets. He had never experienced anything as ferocious, as determined. It was as though a claw had gripped his skull and was pulling at it, levering it open. The conflict was to be fought on a mental plane, even more than in the sands of the arena.

“Kaspel!” Voruum called, and the youth’s eyes flicked open. “Take this and use it! Prevent the creature from striking me.” He handed the startled Kaspel the star lance, and the youth gripped it in both hands. At once he used it to weave patterns in the air, an instinctive gesture.

Voruum steadied himself, drawing deeply on his mental powers. The creature had revealed that not only had it killed other agents, but it had absorbed them. There was a glimmer of hope in that.

When the creature struck, its mental power was colossal, and Voruum felt himself buffeted by a black wave, a tide of horrors, some of which had been dredged up from the recesses of his own mind. The monster utilised everything it could find, every painful memory, every shred of anguish. Voruum answered it with a stubbornness based on denial, the fervent belief that this was illusion, trickery, deceit.

For a long time, he and the creature faced each other, the air between them buzzing as if with a million insects. Kaspel used the star lance to scythe through them, white light burning through clouds of them, as though incinerating thoughts like locusts. The youth saw nothing but understood his purpose. Light bathed him, armouring him, and he felt the constant assault as though he were caught in a rough sea, the waves of which sought to drag him down into oblivion.

Terror sharpened his resolve and gave him energy that fed on its own defiance.

Voruum had entered a dark place. He yet held the massed attack of the creature's power at bay, although he could sense its grip strengthening. It reached down into somewhere between the living worlds and pulled from it a nightmarish pool of evil power, the strength of which would have blown an ordinary man apart. Voruum was forced to dig as deeply into his own resources. The two frantic energies clashed, the irresistible force and the immovable rock. Voruum could feel his sanity being gradually ripped from its moorings. There was only so much of this he could withstand. Defeat now would damn him for eternity.

Everything around him had become a black mental vacuum. All he saw was pitch darkness. Something stirred within it, and he mentally groped for anything that could come to his aid. The words of the creature came back to him. It had *absorbed* the other agents. He needed to find them, or what was left of their consciousness.

The creature was unaware of Voruum's inner search, not expecting its opponent to probe its mind, itself concentrating fully on the offensive. Voruum split his efforts, partly holding back the assault, partly weaving his way through the labyrinthine corridors of his opponent's mind. Things cowered there, victims perhaps, shattered things. Others groped at him pathetically, more in defence than attack. Voruum was ruthless. He burned his way inwards.

Until he found what he sought. They were here, the two agents, although they were mentally chained, snarled up in darkness, their minds teetering on the brink of madness. Voruum sent a spear of light that shattered the wall of darkness like glass and immediately felt their minds jar awake, linking with his own. The creature staggered, taken by surprise. It poured its livid energy into a fresh assault on Voruum, but Kaspel lunged with the star lance, its own vivid light blazing, a molten heat that tore into the creature, slicing into its physical presence.

It was only then Voruum realised just how much the agents had been twisted and distorted by the dark powers of the enemy. He saw himself in a small area of pale light, the two men opposite him. He would not have recognised them, even had they been as they once were, but now they were so contorted, so misshapen as to be ape-like, their faces bestial, their teeth elongated, their eyes wide and blazing. Both rushed at him, arms distended, claws rending the air; Voruum could feel the intensity of their fury, the darkness that fuelled them. Somehow he forced it aside and reached into those horribly altered minds, using his own power to search for something lost, some shred of their former selves. Like a withering candle glow, it resided at the very last recess of their minds. He encouraged it, pouring new energy into it.

For long moments the conflict wavered on the brink of collapse into the dark, Voruum's mind hanging on by mental threads. He traced elements of the men's pasts, urging them to hold firm, build on the beliefs they had once had, their will to defy the darkness. Slowly, weighed by the colossal strength of the monstrous presence that overrode them all, Voruum dragged the two agents back to his will, burning into the sorcery of the Brotherhood.

He was like a human lens, drawing the energies of the two agents into himself, fuelling the fires of his own fury, gathering strength and determination. The contest was joined, as the creature turned in on itself as though attempting to rip out the parasites that had invaded it. Kaspel drew back, seeing the contortions and the mad writhing accelerating, as though a gigantic worm was twisting itself into knots, wracked with agony. Voruum felt his mind tossed like a log on a foaming ocean, tumbling and rolling into oblivion. He gripped the draining powers of the two agents and dragged them closer until they melted into him.

"It is weakening!" he heard one of them call.

"Persist, Voruum," said the other, and for a few wild moments it was as though the three men stood side by side, now allied and hurling power and destruction at the monster. Its maniacal efforts weakened, and its thick life juices began to run out of it, its limbs

thrashing, one by one lying still. A cloud rose from it, black and seething with malice. Again, Kaspel thrust the star lance toward it, and fire burned, light seeping into that darkness.

Voruum had dropped to his knees, as if wrestling with some deep inner torment. Kaspel dragged him back as the creature made a final effort to crush them, only to shudder in a series of explosive fits before collapsing. More blood poured from its many wounds. From around the arena, there rose a unified scream of agony. Kaspel saw the horrors, a multitude of them now, rush forward. With a detonating crash, they exploded, one rolling blast like thunder circling the arena, numbing the ears.

Kaspel was thrown to the ground but held the star lance above him. He heard a buzzing around it, as if a swarm of wasps attacked it, until gradually the sounds died away. The entire arena had gone silent. Night closed in like a tide, with only the soft glow of the weapon defying its black embrace.

Eventually Voruum stirred, lifting his head. He ignored the final writhings of the thing he had destroyed and concentrated on his inner thoughts. He could feel the presence of the two agents. Whatever remained of their consciousness—their souls?—had lodged within him. He was no longer alone.

Kaspel helped him to his feet. “Are you well?” the youth asked.

Voruum nodded, and they began the slow walk back across the arena. Nothing disturbed its shadows. Kaspel handed his companion the star lance. Voruum took it, staring at its now muted light. Something within him stirred.

“I release you,” he said aloud.

Kaspel thought for a moment the witchfinder had meant him, but he appeared to be speaking to what must be spirits of the air.

“No,” came the reply in Voruum’s mind. “Only your death will free us all now. We sleep—until you need us again.”

“What is it?” said Kaspel.

“Power,” said Voruum. “Dream Lord power. For better or for worse.”

“Are the assassins defeated?”

Voruum studied the night, as though reading something in its depths. “The Brotherhood of the Goat is no small thing. We have removed the greater part of it, here in Karkesh. Enough for the Council to begin cleansing the place. Who knows what lies out in the shattered lands of this world?”

Within him, he felt the essence of the two fallen agents, an echo of his concerns. And he wondered what else might have slipped into his mind and lodged itself there, in its darker corners.

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*Adrian Cole writes science fiction, heroic fantasy, sword & sorcery, horror, pulp fiction, Mythos (amongst other things) and has had two young adult novels published. Cole has been nominated for various awards, and was the recipient of the 2015 British Fantasy Award for best collection for NICK NIGHTMARE INVESTIGATES. His short stories have recently appeared in Weirdbook, Spectral Press Book of Horror 2 & 3, and Skelos. For more information, visit [adriancscole.com](http://adriancscole.com).*



# **My Name is John Carter (Part 4)**

By JAMES HUTCHINGS

*Dejah Thoris's impassioned speech does little to sway the monstrous green Tharks of Barsoom into whose hands they have fallen; seeing Dejah Thoris abused by their captors, John Carter springs quickly into action to defend the Princess of Mars!*

Now this eloquent speech seemed at first to have reached  
to their hearts as they stood still and dumb.  
If those ghouls had been brave as the speech that she gave  
then a new Golden Age might have come.

If those ghouls had been strong and had faced what was wrong  
in their tribal tradition and code—  
but such strength is too rare, and I can't, to be fair,  
claim that I'd ever followed that road.

And this land of the dead may have been what she said:  
loving mother in need of her kin,  
but they hated their mother just like any other  
and counted affection a sin.

So a ghoul bared its fangs, and it silently sprang,  
and she fell from one blow of its hand.  
Then it laughed with a mirth never heard upon Earth,  
like the hideous cries of the damned.

Like Goliath of old, it was huge to behold,  
and its arms were like pillars of iron,  
yet a bullet is small, and the soldier still falls,  
and a viper may bring down a lion.

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As I mentioned before, I was never one for  
learning Latin and Grammar and such,  
but I wasn't as bored with the gun and the sword,  
and I'd practiced those lessons too much.

So I turned to a ghoul, and it looked like a fool  
as I whipped out the knife from its belt,  
and my chances of life seemed as slim as that knife,  
but you play with the hand that you're dealt.

Then I leaped to the sky with a terrible cry,  
loud and fierce as a valkyrie's song,  
and I damn nearly flew, just as if the world knew  
not to hold one who didn't belong.

I did not know what part the fiend used for a heart,  
but I struck home the best that I could,  
and by fate or by luck, it was right where I struck,  
and that laughter was silenced for good.

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Now I turned from my foe to the one it laid low.

She was living, though much worse for wear.  
And I reckon if not, I'd have charged the whole lot,  
and my tale would have ended right there.

Then I turned to the crowd, and I bellowed aloud  
"He who harms Dejah Thoris shall die!"  
Though my words were unclear to those alien ears,  
still they figured it out and complied.

At this time of the day, ghouls would usually stay  
in their homes. I suppose that they slept.  
Well, whatever they did, they were usually hid  
but on this day alone, out they crept.

As a matter of fact, the whole square was as packed  
as the crowd at a medicine show.  
Every ghoul had come down to this part of the town,  
and it seemed they were packing to go.

Dejah Thoris explained that it never once rained  
in this country of desert and drought.  
If a well had gone dry, you were choosing to die  
if you didn't mount up and move out.

---

Hours passed, and we crossed a great ocean of moss  
that grew up where there once was a sea.  
On the world whence I came, who would venture to name  
such a sea, and such sailors as we?

Not so much as a track going forward or back,  
for our steps left no sign we had passed  
and no sound to our tread, like a host of the dead  
through a wasteland unearthly and vast.

By the light of the stars I could spy from afar  
what I thought was a hill. It grew nigh,  
and I wondered what shoulders had carried these boulders  
and piled them up near to the sky.

Yes, I wondered what power could raise such a tower,  
a castle in height and in girth.  
What I'd thought to be stone appeared nearer to bone,  
and the sight set me thinking of Earth.

In my fancy we crept on some long-ago steppe,  
where a red-handed khan of the Huns  
made a mark of his reign with the skulls of the slain  
while the women wailed long for their sons.

But the ghouls wondered naught what one wanderer thought.  
While I mused, they saw work to be doing,  
so they all scurried forward, and with pistol and sword  
brought both musings and tower to ruin.

Like a petulant boy who grows tired of a toy,  
they destroyed what another had built—  
or perhaps like a man who kills all whom he can  
and thinks not on the blood he has spilt.

As each stone cracked and broke, it wept ill-smelling yolk,  
and within was too foul to describe,  
for this towering mound that, by chance, we had found  
was the eggs of some enemy tribe.

---

Dejah Thoris had told of the Martians of old,  
by whose arts the canals were designed,  
and I'd laughed in my sleeve when she seemed to believe  
that they'd been pretty close to divine.

Well, I guess they weren't gods, but I'd give you good odds  
that some powerful force from above  
had been guiding these folk in each angle and stroke  
as a hand guides each move of a glove.

I could truthfully boast that I'd seen more than most,  
yet this life still held more to discover.  
I averted my eyes, like a child when he lies  
or a maiden addressed by her lover,

for it gleamed in the Sun like a well-polished gun,  
till it seemed to be made out of light.  
Took us two days to cross, but I count them no loss,  
and I would have paid years for the sight.

---

Dejah Thoris declared we were just about there  
though she followed no map, she confessed,  
save the Sun and the stars, for there's little on Mars  
to distinguish the east from the west.

For all that she was right, and the sorrowful sight  
of the derelict city we sought  
soon appeared, and it seemed like a thing in a dream,  
as if Mars could give substance to thought.

Spires soared, still as fair as an innocent's prayer,  
though the city stood empty and crumbled.  
*No terrestrial king could have raised such a thing.*  
This I told myself, mournful and humbled.

---

Father Time is a thief, and the minutes too brief  
that I idled in rapt contemplation  
till we came to a stone that had come to be throne  
for the king of this tumbledown nation.

Mighty lord of the ghouls, they had drowned him in jewels  
and the skull of some beast made his crown.  
Yet the city's sad grace made this prince of his race  
seem a tawdry, contemptible clown.

High and clear as a flute—though all others were mute,  
save for laughter like nails on a slate—  
as the night crept to slay the diminishing day,  
he pronounced on our terrible fate.

“Now thy folk have been told that ye live, all their gold  
could be mine—yet this ransom so grand  
when compared to my hate beareth no greater weight  
than one grain to a desert of sand.”

“Lesser value it hath to my red, raging wrath  
than one drop of the blood ye shall bleed.  
When each agonized breath makes thee yearn for thy death  
I shall count myself wealthy indeed.”

Now his gaze turned to me. “None shall ever slay thee.  
Let thy grief be a weight without equal.  
Let thy impotent rage be a staff for my age  
and thy tears be a well for my people.”

---

*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>.*

# **(More) Notes From the Nest**

P. Alexander, Ed

We hope you've enjoyed this special issue of Cirsova! While this represents some of the first output from the Eldritch Earth Geophysical Society, it certainly won't be the last!

We also hope you enjoyed Lynn Rushlau, Michael Tierney, James Hutchings, and Adrian Cole's non-EE contributions to this issue.

Next issue, we'll have a number of returning contributors and returning characters: Adrian Cole continues his new Dream Lords saga with *Tear Down the Stars*. Harold Thompson's adventurer Captain Anchor Brown pursues a mysterious god-monster deep in the wilds in *Temple of the Beast*. Othan is back in Kurt Magnus' *Othan, Vandal*, and Abraham Strongjohn picks up on Triton where *At the Feet of Neptune's Queen* left off with a new installment, *Magelords of Ruach*.

Jim Breyfogle will be launching a new Sword & Sorcery series with us, beginning with *The Battlefield of Keres*. Tyler Young is back with a new sci-fi potboiler, *Last Job on Harz*. Plus, we've got a Raygun Romance from Cirsova first-timer Spencer Hart, *Death on the Moon*.

Before we have to leave you until fall, we've got one last little treat for you. In a story that answers "what happened to the mouse?" we find out just what happened to the serving girl when Lannic and Senela left the bar that night in *Shapes in the Fog*.

# **Shapes in the Fog**

By BRIAN K. LOWE

*As Lannic and Senela disappear into the night fogs of Tal Shar Anog, another hears the siren's call luring victims toward the struggle for Thuylivant's gem! Who is behind the murder and mayhem, and what are those disquieting Shapes in the Fog?!*



“Another tankard here! If I’m going to die tonight it won’t be from thirst!”

As I found a path through the Red Raptor’s cheap and creaky tables, slapping away fingers that wanted more than they were willing to pay for, I tried to place the speaker’s accent. Even here in Tal Shar Anog, most of my customers are regulars, dirty little men with greasy hair and big-knuckled hands that thought they had the right to a squeeze whenever I wasn’t looking. Just about the time they learned better, they stopped coming—often as not because they were found two alleys over with their heads staved in, or they wandered drunkenly into one of the Masters’ black tunnels that any sane creature would avoid, and never emerged.

This one, though, he was taller and straighter, like a product of the Masters’ vats, but dark as anyone else. He was lean, and his hands were long-fingered and fine—the kind I wouldn’t mind letting get friendly if he could wait till I was done with work. They were scarred, though, and so was the hilt of his sword. This was no common laborer in the Masters’ labyrinths. And when he looked up to thank me, I saw the eyes of a man who had entered those black tunnels by choice—and returned.

A hand seized my wrist, and I shook it off—but it didn’t do me any good. I looked down as a woman pressed a coin into my hand.

“He’s had enough for tonight.”

It was strange, and in Tal Shar Anog, strange is bad. I’d known she was there all along—I’d been serving them drinks for an hour—but she sat so quiet I’d forgotten about her. She had almond eyes, warm and attractive, and her voice was low, but there was no softness in it. She talked like a woman who was used to having people listen and do what she said. For a second I wondered if the coin was meant to purchase more than a drink, but the moment passed.

“In fact,” she announced as she let go of my wrist, “he might have had too much already!” She snatched his tankard and drained a healthy draught before the man could react. She slammed it on the

table, wiping her lips. “Ah, I think it’s time we go up to our room. Drink up, Lannic! Like you said, you might die tonight, but it won’t be from thirst.”

The man called Lannic blinked in happy surprise, but he was sober enough to allow his woman to haul him to his feet and lead him like a sacrificial animal to the stairs leading to the guest rooms. I shrugged and started to collect their tankards. Drunk or sober, he was going to have a better time tonight than I was.

On my way back, I had to use a tankard to rap one hand so hard the little bastard howled in pain. Just as I reached the bar, I heard a chair scrape the floor behind me and a slurred babble of protest. I sighed.

I dropped the tankards on the bar with a clatter and spun about. The grubby little maggot I’d hit was coming at me, still shaking his stinging hand, his teeth pulled back in a snarl. I saw a knife at his belt, but it stayed put. Good thing. It was a matter of pride that I’d never had to pull my own knife in the Red Raptor; Gohrm, the owner, wouldn’t have minded, except that he’d have to drag the body out the back—but killing customers, even in self-defense, is bad for tips.

Gohrm was pouring drinks and making no move to interfere. He knew I could take care of myself because I’d showed him in no uncertain terms the first time he tried to get a little more than serving drinks out of me. Since then we’d come to some understanding, but he doesn’t have a hold on me. When I lift my skirts, and to who, is my business.

“Ya damned near broke my hand, ya bitch! How’m I supposed to work the mines when ya—”

I didn’t do anything while he was just yelling, but as soon as he reared back with his good hand, I kicked him hard between the legs. All the air went out of him like a deflated jellyfish, and he sank to the floor, slowly, like he couldn’t remember how to fall. I looked over at his friends, and they didn’t need to be told what to do. They dropped some coins and dragged their purple-faced friend out the door, leaving a bare path in the sawdust.

I picked up their money when they were gone. Just like I figured, they hadn't left a tip.

Gohrm offered to let me stay with him for the night, and I was tempted, because he keeps two rooms that are a lot nicer than the little dungeon I can afford, but in the end I didn't feel like it. I couldn't stop thinking about Lannic and those big, scarred hands. And then I'd think about the woman with him, and how she seemed to disappear from sight even when she was right in front of you, and I realized that even those big hands weren't worth getting in her way. Then I'd think about that maggoty little snot whose hand I *should* have broken, and all I wanted to do was go home and try to sleep.

The fog was awful. In the summer it comes in off the ocean as soon as the sun goes down, and some nights it's like trying to walk through walls—except they're soft and they keep moving, and they muffle sounds so you can't tell who's two streets away and who's right behind you. I took out my knife and held it down at my side. As much as I was proud that I'd never had to use it on a man, there were things that used the streets of Tal Shar Anog on nights like this that didn't come anywhere close to being *men*. One night I'd turned the corner into the alley where I lived and came face-to-face with an oolanth that had just swept the entire passageway clean. I shrieked and ran half a mile screaming at the top of my lungs. No one so much as turned on a lamp.

My room was only three streets away, but with mists this thick... I'd heard men talk about how they walked past their own doors three or four times without knowing it—and them not even drunk. A breeze drove the fog right toward me, and I backed up to stand against the reassuring bulk of the Red Raptor while I could still see it. I couldn't hear a thing except my own breathing. Everybody with any sense knew enough not to be out wandering on a night like this. Why hadn't I taken Gohrm up on his offer? It wouldn't have been the first time, and compared to some I've known, he's a gentleman in the sheets.

I heard something. A clattering sound up above, on the second floor where the sleeping rooms were. Had Gohrm heard me? He

couldn't have—but if that *was* him, if he called my name, I was going to take it as a sign from the Masters, run back and bang on the front door, and we might not even make it back to his room. I'd had enough of it out here tonight.

But then there was a *man* standing in front of me, and all of my thoughts and fears faded away like the fog come morning. I vaguely felt like I should bring up my knife, that a man who appeared out of the fog, out of nowhere, here in the dark with no one around and no one who would come if I screamed anyway...but I didn't. I didn't need my knife. I didn't need to be afraid of the night or the fog or the oolanth that crept through the streets, not as long as *he* was here.

He wasn't tall, and he was thin, with long dark hair. He wore white robes and a kindly smile. It came as no surprise to my sleepy brain that I was in love with him. He was beautiful, and I was in love with him and would gladly do anything he asked.

"Two people will come out of here very soon," he whispered. "They must not see me. Follow them, and I will follow you." Then he broke my heart by melting into the mist.

But he needed me! My heart leapt into my throat at the thought. I heard the front door to the Red Raptor opening. There was no way to lock it from the outside, save with Gohrm's key, which meant that the tavern and everyone in it would be left unprotected from anything that might wander in during the night, but that was their concern. *I* had a mission.

I was a bit surprised to see that the two people coming out were Lannic and his woman. Him, I dismissed; what I had ever seen in him was a mystery. But her—I held my knife tighter. Whatever my man wanted, it had to do with her. I knew it the way a woman always knows her rival. When *he* was done with her, I would kill her. I hoped he would be pleased.

Lannic's woman led the way. For strangers, they moved through the streets quickly. I had to hurry to keep them in sight, but I've been walking these streets at night for a long time, and I know how to keep from being heard. Of course, being two, they had less to fear than I,

but in my heart I knew I, too, was being followed by one who would protect me from harm.

At last they stopped at a wall outside a great house. They spoke for a moment, then the fog rose up and hid them from me, and when it lifted they had disappeared! I almost cried out at the thought of disappointing *him*, but then he was there, beside me, and his smile remained.

“Fear not; you have done well. They have served their purpose, and now the fog will play with them for a while. By the time they find their way back, we will have gone.” Leading me to the great house, he found the gate and let himself in. He entered the little gatehouse before me, and I heard a small sound like a bag of flour being dropped on the floor. When I stepped inside, there was a servant lying there. I took my man’s hand, stepped over the servant, and up to the house.

The front hall was the size of the taproom at the Red Raptor. I was so impressed I hardly noticed the two guards who ran up to us, swords out, but my lover dismissed them with a wave of his hand, and they fell in awe of him. I could barely believe he would bring me to such a place. I had hardly imagined that such rugs and tapestries, so much gleaming gold and marble and other precious stones in red and blue and green even existed! But greater pleasures must have awaited, for I was led by the hand deeper into the house until we stopped at a door.

“The master of the house awaits us inside. Go and introduce yourself. There will be hidden guards and I don’t wish to waste time finding them.”

I opened the door. I saw two people on a bed big enough for six, and still it seemed small in that room. The man was obviously the master of the house; he was enormously fat in the way only the rich can be fat. The woman was just as obviously a whore; I dismissed her and kept my eyes on him. He blinked in surprise at my entrance, probably because I wasn’t dressed in the way of most of his whores, but he didn’t seem unhappy that I was there.

There was a tearing sound, and another man came out of a hidden alcove. I thought he was going to grab me, but my lover appeared behind him, and the man fell to the floor.

“Thank you,” my lover said to me. “Now go wait outside. I’ll come for you soon.”

I did as I was told. As I left, the woman on the bed began to scream, but it didn’t last.

I had noticed a window in the bedchamber, so I worked my way around the house until I reached it. There were shutters, but no one had closed them after the heat of the day. I moved them until I could peek inside and watch *him* at his work. The woman lay still on the bed, but the man next to her was quivering and making short, wet noises. *He* was rifling through drawers and yanking open closet doors. I wished that he had told me what he was looking for so I could have helped him.

Suddenly the door flew open and Lannic and that woman burst in! The fat old man shook in terror, but *he* took the intrusion in stride. I saw him look over at them, and I saw the woman stiffen...

*...and I felt my senses come back to me in a rush.*

My breath came in great shuddering gasps as if I’d been drowning, and I didn’t know if my legs would support me. I fell back from the window, using the wall for support. What was I doing here?

My mind was bouncing back and forth from disgust and loathing at what that *bastard* had done to me, and grief that I had just lost the love of my life. I could remember everything that he’d said, everything he’d made me do—and everybody we had left by the way. I had to fight to keep myself from throwing up. He had taken me to do with as he wished. He had kidnapped me—he had *raped* me, if not in body then in my soul. And he had just done the same thing to Lannic’s woman, but apparently he could only do it to one person at a time.

Noises erupted from the bedroom and something crashed through the shutters. It was *him*. He must have seen the look in my eyes,

because he screamed, but my knife was in his chest before I knew it was in my hand. I instinctively pulled it out, and he fell. I barely had time to put my back to the wall again before someone—Lannic—poked his head out of the window to see what I had done.

What I had done... I, who had never pulled my knife in anger, had just killed a priest of gods-only-knew what temple. For all I knew he served the Masters themselves. *Go*. I had to go, far away, before I was seen. No one knew I was here. I had to run. And that was when I saw the old man.

His face was a field of wrinkles, but his eyes weren't droopy or red like a normal old man's. They were blue and they blazed with strength. I felt my own strength fail. He was here to punish me.

Then he smiled, a small smile. I've seen powerful men smile like a cat about to jump on a rat, but this was more like a grandfather who finds you filching biscuits before dinner, and that put me at my ease.

"You're right, child. You *should* run. These things do not involve you." Then he was gone like the mist—except that there *was* no mist. I didn't wait to find the front gate; I went right over the wall—

—and landed directly in front of an oolanth! I was so frightened I dropped my knife. The oolanth swarmed over it, then *jumped* with a ripple running down its entire body. Its antennae shot straight up, and it turned and scurried over the wall I had just climbed, almost too fast for me to follow. It was all too much. I screamed.

"What's going on? What's happened?" A gang of heavy footfalls sounded in the fog almost at my side, and a burly man in a hardened leather vest ran up to me, followed by a troop of others, all heavily armed. "We're the city watch! What's happened?"

I could only point with a shaking hand. "In there! There's a dead man!"

"In *that* house?"

I nodded frantically.

“Shit! Come on!” And they ran off clumping like a pack of raptors. I guess there are places in Tal Shar Anog where somebody really does come when you scream.

All at once, I was alone, in a strange part of town, without my knife, surrounded by fog. Still, I remembered with a cursed clarity every step I had taken to get here, and how to get home. I squared my shoulders and started walking. Tomorrow I'd go into the Red Raptor and take Gohrm by the collar, and we'd have a long talk about the future. I was tired of walking home in the dark.

But for tonight, I was going back to my own little room, and I was going to lie on my own damned straw pallet, and I was going to sleep like the dead.

And if the Masters themselves got in my way, they'd regret it.

---

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



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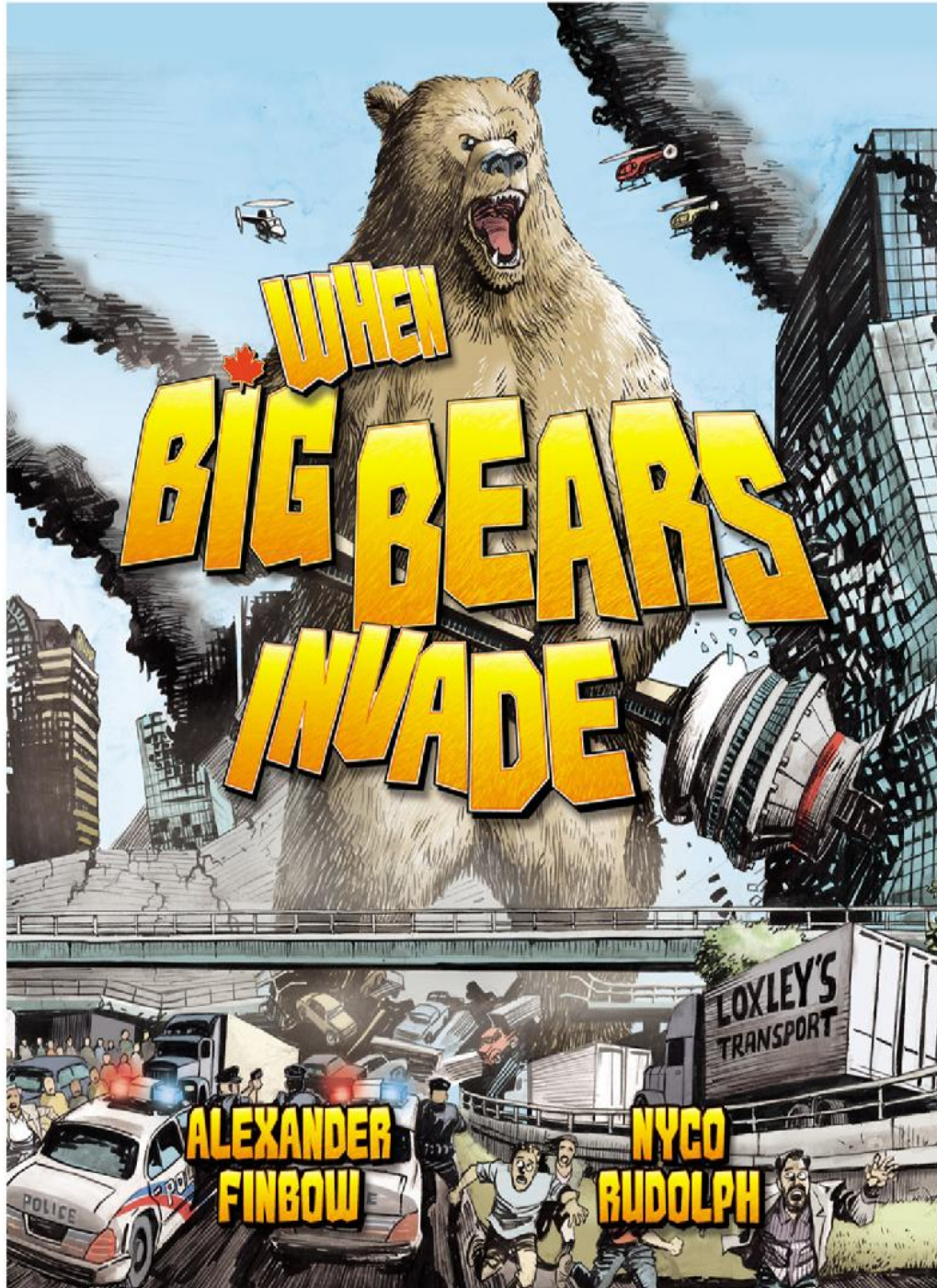
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