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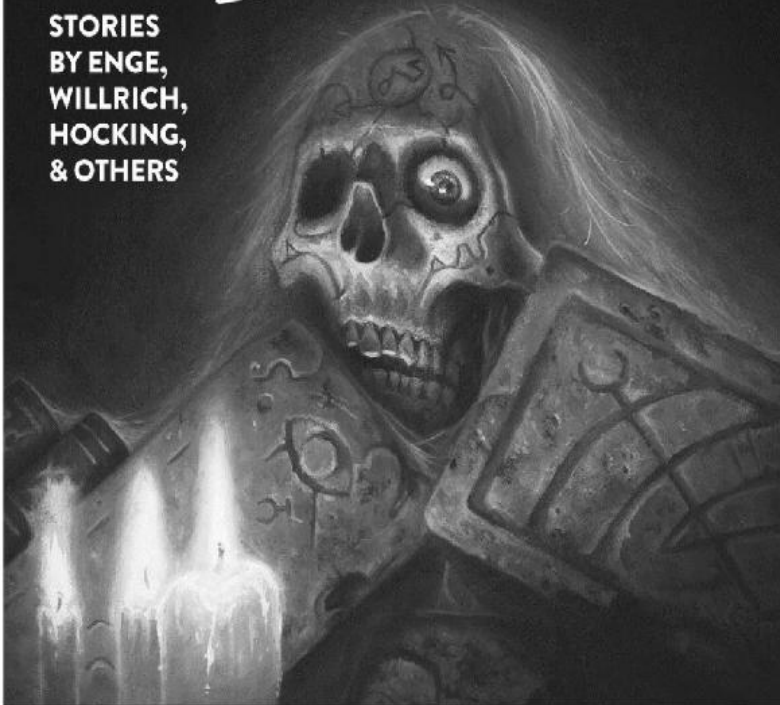
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Tales From The MAGICIAN'S SKULL

NO.1

ALL-NEW
SWORDS &
SORCERY
FICTION

STORIES
BY ENGE,
WILLRICH,
HOCKING,
& OTHERS



ALL-NEW
FICTION:

James Enge

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THE SKULL SPEAKS: *Hear this, mortal dogs. You hold in your hands a magazine the likes of which has not been seen for many suns. Once there were magicians whose weird tales could change the wormy earth. They infiltrated your waking world, bringing wonder and glory and imagination. Fantastic visions you dogs could barely grasp. But mortals they were, all of them. They're dust now. With their passing a Thing was gone, a Secret passed. Well, no more. Magicians of the word, the weird tale-tellers: they may be gone, but their vision lives on. I am the skull and soul of one such word-wizard, and I'll bring you Secrets that haven't walked the earth in this century. Stories they'll be, stories that make you bolt up and hunger for adventure. You'll remember what glory could be, you'll realize how you worms have lost sight of the sun. I am the Magician's Skull. Which magician? One you've never heard of: a peer of Howard and Lovecraft, Burroughs and Derleth, Dunsany and Leiber. A wizard who knew Merritt and St. Clair and Vance and Brackett and Wellman and Weinbaum, and Clark Ashton Smith and even grand Gyax himself. All the word-wizards wove wonder, and it matters not whose bones I rot with today. All you need to know is: I bring tales of great fantasy and wondrous adventure. Get ready, mortal dogs. Enjoy this first issue. Enjoy the adventure!*

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Galactic Gamble

By DOMINIKA LEIN

Spacer Rasmuel has hit a string of bad luck—he's lost the keys to his ship, and the planetary potentate of a world of gamblers has called in his debts! In a life and death contest to rescue his partner, Rasmuel's luck must change if it hasn't run out!

Rasmuel lost his keys on the asteroid Zalima-46. Upon returning to the small planet of Okyri, the swarthy ginger found himself unable to get back into his spaceship.

"I told you to get biometrics," mentioned his friend and business partner, Idya, while she leaned against the crate of spare parts they'd hauled back from Zalima-46.

"I'm not spending money for something that'd end with my thumb cut off or eye plucked out."

The brown-eyed brunette shrugged. "So now what? The shuttle already took off and won't be back for days."

"We'll have to trace our steps, starting here." He turned to do so, scanning the heat-scorched grass.

Over a rolling hill, a familiar vehicle headed in their direction.

Idya had yet to notice. She filed her nails while rambling. "I'm not leaving these parts out here for anyone to find. After all that hard work? No way. Ras? Are you even listening to me?"

"Hide," answered Rasmuel, grabbing her elbow and pulling her along. She dropped her file in the rush, looking up to see the vehicle approaching. They crawled underneath the spaceship. Idya sidled up against him in the shadows, peering past the narrow margin to the sunlit surroundings.

“I thought you said they wouldn’t be able to find us all the way out here,” she whispered, dark brows knit together as she frowned. Moving lower with her stomach against the dried grassland, she scratched at her exposed abs with a quiet noise of discontent. The outfit she wore, while flattering, wasn’t practical for hiding under spaceships.

“Yeah, well, looks like I’m wrong yet again,” muttered Rasmuel, fiddling with the back of his belt and securing his dagger in the leather holster.

The vehicle came to a halt in front of the spaceship. Iron wheels dug into the ground as weight shifted inside. A large, wide boot stomped out, followed by its mate. The shiny, tightly-laced material extended up into a looming built man. He grunted, staying still for a moment before pacing around the modestly sized ship.

Rasmuel’s face scrunched up. He squinted, inhaling shortly. Through blurred vision, he could see Idya aggressively mouthing “*do not*” at him.

It was no use.

The Okyrian grass was too much for his allergies.

He sneezed loudly.

A thick fist grabbed onto his ankle and dragged him out from under the ship. Drawn upwards, Rasmuel hung upside down in the humid air, staring at the henchman.

“Why, Bonesen!” Rasmuel grinned nervously. “You should have knocked. I was making pastries. Uranon truffles too, your favorite.”

The thug grunted, unamused by the wisecrack. He tossed Rasmuel inside the car.

Landing in the leather seat across from the Great Lord of Okyri, Rasmuel quickly righted himself.

With copper cane and gilded teeth, dressed in thinly woven finery that allowed the lord’s dark skin to breathe in the hot atmosphere of

the planet, Lord Oak bared his teeth in greeting. It wasn't a smile or a grin meant to comfort but to menace. His eyes of pure silver had no irises, pupils, or other circular structures to be found and thus, no gaze to be tracked.

Rasmuel knew he was being stared down regardless. He rubbed at his sunburnt skin, scratching at his neck.

"You weren't leaving so soon, were you?" asked the noble.

"Me? No..." lied Rasmuel. He glanced at Bonesen who was blocking the car's door. "Wouldn't dream of leaving without saying farewell. That'd be rude."

Lord Oak's fingers curled around the flat top of his straight cane. "You understand your debts are still outstanding?"

"Those old things? Oh, really?" Rasmuel smiled.

"Don't play cute," snapped the Lord, patience evaporating. He smacked the cane against Rasmuel's shin. "We're taking your ship as payment."

"Ow!" Rasmuel held onto his shin, hazel eyes wide. "You're what?!"

Looking back out, he saw Bonesen attaching hooks and wheels to the spaceship so the terrain vehicle could tow it.

"You can't," defended Rasmuel. "How am I supposed to get anywhere without a ship? This is against galactic law!"

"Galactic law doesn't take precedent over the dominion of Okyri, which I rule, not you and not the forsaken council that keeps attempting to claim it for themselves." He cruelly smashed the cane against Rasmuel's knee in a second strike.

Grimacing from the pain, Rasmuel doubled over while holding onto his knee.

"My lord," spoke Bonesen, "there's a female out here running for it. Should I take chase?"

Lord Oak's silver eyes examined Rasmuel, searching his expression for a hint of what the woman might be worth. He nodded. "Yes, bring her to the castle...." A wry smirk curled his blackened Okyrian lips. "To the royal court."

"She has nothing to do with this," barked Rasmuel, grabbing onto his dagger's hilt. It was a foolish move, but he lunged forward, bringing the blade towards the lord's throat. Held back by the cane, he pushed against the copper with a wild growl.

"What fight," laughed the lord. Light burst forth from the cane, blinding Rasmuel as a shock ran through his nerves. He involuntarily dropped the blade, limbs trembling and consciousness fading while he fell to the floor. "How I've missed your mundane antics, pesky earthling."

Left with only the clothes on his back and dagger on his belt, Rasmuel walked into the castle courtyard. While the curved blade wasn't effective against alien technology, he couldn't bring himself to give it up.

The dagger was the last thing connecting him to the home he'd been wrenched from during the cataclysm. His memories might've already faded to nothing if not for the leather hilt to grip and remind him of a time before he knew of star systems, spaceships, and people who were not human like him. Even the magic of galaxies was different from the quaint traditions of his home, where magic meant incense burned in a bowl while chanting.

Staring at the crystal edifice mounted on top of the castle, he sighed. Looking down at the ground, he entered the planetary capital. It had taken him three days to reach the palace with the limp from his injured knee.

The energetic atmosphere of the royal court immediately slammed into him: ringing machines, loud music playing from a live band, the murmur of a thousand conversations taking place at once. Nobles, tourists, and servants alike intermingled in the sprawling ballroom. The architecture was made from something unlike anything Rasmuel

had ever seen on earth. Not crystal, not stone, but of hard, smooth texture that gleamed with crisscrossed lights set in the high ceiling.

Across the hall, a massive reader board spun overhead. Numbers for various games of chance alternated, lighting up and dinging when results arrived on the display.

In a shallow pit beneath the board, people threw paper tickets and copper coins at servants, shouting numbers and commands. The line of Okyrian bet-takers scrambled to keep track.

The air was musky with sweat and other alien excretions from tourists who were not native to the humid atmosphere, and thick smoke rose from basins beside shadowy alcoves where nobles ate and conversed in private.

Rasmuel took off his jacket and tied it around his waist. Slicking back his ginger bangs, he started down the foyer steps to formally enter the royal court.

Almost instantly, a familiar Okyrian female was at his side—Arbor. Her silver eyes flashed with reflective light, and her lips were painted a deep plum color. Dramatic makeup contoured her face, making it sharper than it naturally was. Wide curls of violet-black hair framed her curvaceous upper body. A short dress of black and white vertical stripes and matching wrist cuffs marked her as a servant. She smiled, revealing predatory teeth, ungilded due to her low station. The dimples in her cheeks made the expression seem pleasant. In one hand, she held a tray of drinks. She caressed Rasmuel's arm with her free hand.

"I thought you were gone," Arbor purred. "Would you like a drink?"

"No." He surveyed the crowd to see if he could find Idya. "I'm not here to play. I'm looking for someone."

Ignoring Arbor's next words, he left her, searching through the crowd. A scrawny Okyrian with a wry mustache and a similarly striped vest blocked his path.

“Care to buy a ticket, earth boy?” He waved a few numbers in front of Rasmuel’s face. A long stick of smoking ash dangled at the corner of his ruby-brown lips. “Half off, a steal by any measure. I’ll add in a set of dice, preloaded by request of great Lady Honeysuckle.”

“I don’t have any money, Moschatel,” muttered Rasmuel, looking around him to keep searching for Idya.

“Your credit is always good with the Elder House,” insisted the sly servant, trying to forcefully hand one of the tickets over.

“Lord Oak seems to disagree.” Reluctantly taking the ticket, Rasmuel glanced up at the board where results were flipping in and out. His gaze stuck on the round that corresponded with his ticket.

“The good Lord Oak is still upset that he lost something important to him in last week’s games,” the Elder House servant raspily chuckled, shuffling the tickets and trying to hand another one to Rasmuel.

“Something important?”

“His son, that is.” Leaning in, Moschatel lowered his voice. “To the Grand Duchess Hemlock.”

“Why would he bet his own son?” Rasmuel groaned as he lost. Tearing up the ticket, he let the paper remnants join the confetti sea already on the floor. With little thought, he grabbed another ticket from the servant. A nearby machine trilled as someone won a handful of coins.

“Ah, because of the prize. You might not understand as an earthling, but if he’d won, Lord Oak would have received Hemlock’s prettiest daughter in turn. Naturally, the stakes had to match in some fashion.”

“I can understand that well enough,” murmured Rasmuel.

“Here are your dice, would you care to partake in a shadow hand? Lady Honeysuckle is looking for table players.”

Rasmuel nearly jumped when he saw the next round's numbers. He grinned. "I won!"

"That you did, would you care for your winnings in tickets?"

"How about that shadow hand, should get me a few deals right?"

"Yes, three."

"Good enough for me, let's go."

Walking into the alcove, Rasmuel sat down at Lady Honeysuckle's table. The noble lady smiled at him, lashes heavy with blue shadow and her silver eyes gleaming. An elaborate display of namesake flowers spun her white hair in twists.

"Earthling, what a wonderful surprise to see you again."

Rasmuel glanced at the other people sitting at the table. Aliens by any measure of their strange colors and attributes compared to his ordinary, neutral body. He picked up three chips from the stack on the table.

"Three," he informed her.

She set five cards in front of him. The back design was of an elder tree. Many earthly plants existed on Okyri, though Rasmuel had no idea how or why. He'd never been one to muse on the sciences; such things had been for his brother. It was his brother who would have studied it all. Rasmuel still didn't understand why he'd been the one to survive, the human led to explore the galaxies. He didn't think any more about it. He focused on the game in front of him.

"Deal," he said, glancing at his cards.

Lady Honeysuckle shuffled two decks at once, her long fingers flicking the edges of the cards. She smiled, dealing a row of six cards face down, three from each deck. "Left or Right?"

The participants at the table each had a disc painted white on one side and blue on the other. Rasmuel thumbed his own disc, then flipped it to blue.

The majority chose blue, and so she drew the last card from the right deck and set it face-up between them.

“Place your bets,” she instructed.

The game went from there, the cards flipping and Rasmuel keeping to the strategy he often used at Lady Honeysuckle’s table. He kept on the low side, not gathering too many cards if he could help it. After some wins, three deals turned into six and then, nine more.

Hours passed, Rasmuel forgot his hunger. The buzz of the royal court beside the alcove became nothing more than a gentle atmosphere. Even the music seemed to soften so that he barely noticed it.

Arbor arrived at his side, setting a drink at the edge of the table for him. He drank it in one go. Rasmuel glanced at her when she continued to hover over his shoulder.

“You can get me another drink,” he said.

“Didn’t you come here looking for someone?” she replied.

Rasmuel blinked, wondering what she was talking about for a short moment before he remembered the very reason he’d arrived in the royal court.

Lady Honeysuckle spoke, “Servants of House Apiaceae shouldn’t linger for long at my table.”

“Apologies, great lady.” Arbor nodded, taking away the empty glasses from the table. She paused, whispering to Moschatel before leaving the alcove.

Looking down at the copper coins he’d gathered over the winning deals, Rasmuel asked, “How much to win a spot at Lord Oak’s den?”

“More than you have,” answered the Lady smoothly.

“Well, I’ll just have to win enough, then. I’ve got to try.”

And try he did. Rasmuel stayed at the table for the next five hours except to quickly take care of bodily needs. He lost some, he won

some, but by the end of that length of time, he found himself betting everything he'd won so far on the illustrious key that allowed entrance into Lord Oak's den, a place where only nobles and the most daring of tourists went.

He flipped the last card, heart racing and sweat dripping from his jaw. Beside him, Moschatel's cigarette ash fell on the table edge as the servant leaned in to count the results. Arbor, having returned with a tray of drinks, hovered to watch.

Lady Honeysuckle placed one finger on the final card.

She turned it over.

"Yes!" Rasmuel leapt up on his chair. He punched the air vigorously. It'd been all or nothing, and he just won all. Exclaiming with glee, he pulled Arbor up onto the chair with him to place a kiss on her plum-colored lips. The alien gal laughed, scrunching her nose at the excited embrace.

"Your key, earthling." Moschatel held up the silver passkey on a square of silken fabric. "You are not allowed to barter it or store it. It must be used within the week."

"Right, right," Rasmuel clapped a hand on the table that caused one of the decks to topple over. He held out his other hand to shake Lady Honeysuckle's in a purely earth gesture. She frowned, then obliged as it wasn't the first time he'd done such a thing with her.

"Congratulations," she drawled. "I do hope to see you at my table again."

"You can count on it," he said, then he leaned in, "Mind if I borrow your servant for the night?"

"Moschatel?" She raised an eyebrow inquisitively. "Hm, yes, I suppose you can include him in your winnings because of the wondrous game you played. You must promise to return him."

"Thanks, Lady Honeysuckle, I won't forget this."

She nodded, returning to shuffling the decks for the next game.

Walking through the royal court, Rasmuel flipped one of the copper coins he'd won. Moschatel kept at his heels, incessantly smoking. An occasional mutter arose from the servant, who seemed reluctant to be at Rasmuel's beck and call. He attempted to guide the earthling to other games.

Arbor followed along as well, neglecting her duties as a hostess. "Perhaps you would like to rest?" she suggested, holding her tray with both hands. "I can find you a quiet room with a comfortable bed."

"No," answered Rasmuel, glancing at her before walking past a row of ringing machines. An alien humanoid with four hands pulled at multiple levers, cursing at the result and kicking the machine with its tentacle legs.

"You need to rest before joining Lord Oak's game. Your mind must be sharp. At the very least, you must clean up," added Moschatel, avoiding the spreading rage of the alien at the machine.

"He's right," said Arbor. "Even with a key, you're not going to be permitted looking like that."

"What's wrong with how I look?" Rasmuel queried, skipping up the steps towards an alcove that harbored a door with two guards, one of whom was Bonesen.

"Your clothes need a wash," sighed Arbor. "Lady Honeysuckle is too kind to turn you away for such transgressions, but Lord Oak is sure to throw you to the muswok if you insult him like that."

Rasmuel looked down at himself. He pulled at his shirt. It was dirty with dust from his travels and stained with sweat. Feeling his jaw, his fingers rubbed against thick stubble.

"Fine," he agreed, "but this can't take very long. By this point, he might've already bet her away."

"Her?" Arbor's silver eyes widened with slight concern.

"Never you mind." He hooked his arm around her elbow. "Why don't you find us a room, and Moschatel," he glanced over at the disinterested servant, "find me some suitable clothes."

“Of course,” answered Moschatel, and the wiry alien was gone with a smoke plume trailing behind him.

Arbor led Rasmuel past the royal court through the back hall where the servants traveled. Through a door, she went out to the corridor leading to sleeping chambers. She placed a hand on each doorknob until she found one that easily turned.

“Shouldn’t we sign in for a room? Are we supposed to be in here?” Rasmuel asked as he followed her into the bedroom.

“Well, no one else is,” Arbor answered simply. She locked the door, then smiled coyly. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s clean you up, earthling.”

Moschatel managed to find them, though Rasmuel didn’t know how. All he knew was that when he awoke, the servant was trying to put pants on him. Hot cigarette ash fell on Rasmuel’s stomach.

“Hey!” Rasmuel brushed off the ash, quickly sitting up and batting the servant’s hands away from him. He looked around the dimly lit room. “Where’s Arbor?”

“I assume she went back to her tasks,” answered the Okyrian, sitting in a chair. “Your new clothes. I did my best to pick correct sizes. Let me know if they don’t fit, and I will return to get something more suitable.”

“How long was I asleep for?”

“I wouldn’t know, but I can tell you that I was gone for about five hours in my quest for clothing that would suit both your pale demeanor and Lord Oak’s preferences.”

Pulling on the tight pants, Rasmuel went to the mirror and exhaled.

“There is a razor on the sink. I took the liberty of assuming you would need one.”

“Yeah, thanks,” muttered Rasmuel. He shaved, then washed quick and finished getting dressed. Moschatel didn’t bother to help until he was requested to tighten the long formal coat of silver fabric.

“Okyrian fashion is so absurd,” said Rasmuel.

“I dare you to wear Yluxia fashion and see if you think the same,” retorted Moschatel, tightening the back straps. “No, you’re not wearing that belt.”

“I am,” snapped Rasmuel, tightening his belt underneath the coat. He practiced grabbing the hilt of his dagger, drawing it once or twice.

“It looks strange,” insisted the servant, leaning back and crossing his arms.

“I’m not going for best dressed. As long as I can get in.”

“Here, at least cover it with a sash.” Taking the silken belt from his own hips, Moschatel layered it over the belt, tucking it behind the dagger’s sheath so the blade wouldn’t be blocked. “Is that suitable, earthling?”

Practicing a draw, Rasmuel nodded and returned his dagger to its familiar spot. “It is. Let’s go. I don’t want to waste any more time.”

They went back to the door where the two guards stood. Rasmuel raised the key. Bonesen looked it over, then shrugged and opened the door. Rasmuel walked inside. Moschatel stayed a step behind him. He looked around the impressive gaming den of the Great Lord.

Regalia and trophies won from games covered the walls, ranging from mantled beast heads to chained alien weapons in showcase displays. Servants lined the perimeter, each holding a tray with drinks or appetizers, staring ahead with neutral expressions and glimmering silver eyes.

In the center of the room was a deep pit about the width of Rasmuel’s spaceship. Around the protective golden railing were lounge chairs where the elite gamblers comfortably sat. They hardly glanced his way when he approached. Lord Oak presided from the only chair on a raised platform, thumbing the head of his cane with a frown on his features.

Two beasts fought inside. Roaring and hissing arose from the different species. Blood stained the pit’s dirt walls and floor. Despite

the brutality taking place, the nobles in the chairs seemed hardly involved with the struggle. Lord Oak glared in silence.

Sitting down in an available chair, Rasmuel loudly cleared his throat. One of the beasts overcame the other. The multi-headed serpent tore apart the feline in a splay of gore.

A noble across the way burst out in degenerate swears.

“Did you think I would have bad luck in my own den?” Lord Oak’s upper lip curled. He turned his gaze. “Have you come to pay what you owe, earthling?”

Rasmuel perked up. The other nobles observed him. Some he’d seen before, others he hadn’t.

“Does he have anything decent to wager?” a lord adorned in silks asked.

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here,” interjected Rasmuel. He stood, going to the railing and watching the hydra eat the remains of the other beast. “Doesn’t my key grant me a beast of some sort?”

Lord Oak leaned back in his throne, nodding. He raised a single finger. “One.”

“I would like the chance to regain my spaceship which was wrongly stolen from me and pay my debts, but there is something I must seek to win first,” Rasmuel told the court. “My friend, Idya. She who you stole as if she was nothing more than the beasts you dispose of. Let me win her, and I wager anything else you might find to take from me.”

“Your Vedoun female?” Lord Oak queried, then smiled. His gilded teeth glinted in the light. “She is no longer mine to wager.”

“Then whose?” demanded Rasmuel, tightly gripping the railing. The apathy of the nobles around him combined with the sadistic glee of the Lord angered him. “Tell me who, so that I might challenge them to a game.”

“It is I,” answered a woman sitting nearby. A wealthy noble, she wore a slinky, sparkling dress with a shoulder mantle made from crystals. Okyrian with dark purplish skin and silver almond eyes, she had long, straight black hair bound by a diamond circlet set over the silken strands. She sat neatly with her legs tightly crossed—tall stiletto heels adorned her delicate feet. “Grand Duchess Hemlock.”

She raised a hand, snapping her long fingers once. A servant appeared at the chair’s side. Not just any servant: Rasmuel recognized Arbor. She ignored him, focusing only on Hemlock.

“Retrieve the earthling’s female,” Hemlock commanded.

Arbor hurried away then shortly returned with Idya collared by the length of a metal chain. Still dressed in the outfit from before, Idya’s clothing had gotten torn in spots. Dust clung to her messy hair, usually kept neat in a ponytail but in wild tangles now. Idya kept her gaze on the ground.

“What would the Grand Duchess wish for me to wager in return for her?”

Idya quickly looked up. “Ras! What are you doing here?”

“You didn’t think I’d abandon you, did you?”

“Actually, that’s exactly what I thought.”

“How would I get anything done without a miner of your skill, huh?”

“Shut up, you idiot!” Idya glanced at the Duchess.

Hemlock smiled. She folded her hands together and smoothly asked, “So she is a miner, is she? I knew she couldn’t simply be a female of little use, even with that outfit.”

“Did I say miner?” Rasmuel forcibly laughed. “I meant scavenger, of course. Earthling humor, that is.”

“Enough,” snapped Lord Oak, slamming the butt of his cane on the platform to gather everyone’s attention. “Make the wager so the next game can begin, or else I’ll have you both banished.”

“Very well, your Vedoun woman for... what is it that you have again?” mocked Grand Duchess Hemlock.

“I wager my luck,” he announced.

Murmurs traveled between the nobles, turning to each other with raised eyebrows. Grand Duchess Hemlock tilted her head, silver alien eyes widening.

“You would submit to an extraction? Truly?” A hesitant smile wound the corners of her lips upwards.

“If you win the game, yes. If I win, Idya is no longer yours.”

Hemlock waved her hand. “Let the earthling draw for his beast, and we shall see if it has the might to beat my vikus.”

A servant approached, holding an obsidian bowl in both hands. Rasmuel reached through the veiled top, feeling around inside and then pulling out a disc with an avian beast’s head etched upon the copper.

“Ah, the bird of the Phymalian marshes!” Lord Oak tapped his cane against the platform in announcement for the beasts to be let into the pit. A few nobles laughed.

An iron gate opened, and a servant ran out to riskily guide the hydra out of the pit with a flank of steak. Once the servant and hydra had left, the next beasts were brought out in cages. Servants anxiously stood beside them, waiting for a cue. Lord Oak waved the cane, and a flurry of lights exploded from it. The servants unlocked the cages and ran out of the pit, gates shutting behind them.

Rasmuel leaned against the railing, watching the large, round bird flap and squawk in its cage. The narrow beak and spiky feathers matched the disc’s engraving. On the other side of the pit, a strange creature with many legs skittered in a circle and then out through the open door. It had many eyes and gleaming pincers.

“Hey, bird, pay attention!” Rasmuel shouted to no avail. The bird flapped awkwardly around, eventually stumbling out of the cage and seeming confused.

The viquis burrowed into the dirt floor. It slithered out of sight, rumbling underneath. When it came back to the surface, it was underneath the bird. Pincers snapped around the bird's leg.

Taking flight, the bird heavily flapped its wings and dragged the viquis along with it. Loudly squawking, honking in confusion, it didn't go far while panicking.

Rasmuel felt cheated. He shouted, "This bird is no predator or beast of combat!"

Beside him, he heard Moschatel. "It's simple marsh wildlife, taken away from its home."

Rasmuel glanced at the smirking Grand Duchess. Her gilded teeth glinted like the pincers of her pet.

"Stop this," he demanded, watching the bird hopelessly peck at the viquis. The attempt only caused the bird to plummet to the ground while the viquis's tail snapped up in a vicious whack against its wings. "I wager myself, body in addition to luck, for another round, but I will fight as beast. If I lose, you may claim me and keep us both... but if I win, we gain our freedom. Choose quickly, Duchess, for this game will not last much longer as is."

Hemlock considered the wager as she watched the viquis predictably snap the bird's wings. She gently scratched her cheek, eyelashes heavy over her silver orbs.

"What is the matter?" Lord Oak spoke up cruelly. "Hemlock, are you afraid to lose your beast?"

"Of course not," she responded swiftly, "It is one of many in that batch. Very well. I accept, earthling."

Rasmuel nodded. Ignoring Idya's comments of his foolishness, he climbed over the railing. Jumping down into the pit, bones crunched underfoot as he landed. He took off his silver coat, balled it up and tossed it over to the struggling bird and viquis. The insectoid coiled away from the fabric, retreating into the earth.

Confused, the hurt bird ran at him. It had no awareness of loyalty or that it was meant to represent his stake in the game. Rasmuel dodged its long beak, skipping away. The bird took chase. He continued to dodge and skip until finally luring the bird back into its cage. Locking it, he stood on top and searched for the vikus.

The creature burst forth from underneath, toppling the cage over. Rasmuel jumped forward, fist jabbing the insect in its midsection. Squirming, legs skittering, the vikus fell on its back and quickly rolled to right itself. It prepared to burrow, head diving into the ground.

Before it could get away, Rasmuel grabbed onto its tail. He wrenched the vikus out of the burrowed hole. Spinning, he slammed its head into the nearby pitwall. He repeated the motion a few times until the vikus was dizzy and nearly unconscious. One of the pincers gave way, dented by the forceful smashing.

Drawing his dagger, Rasmuel straddled the creepy crawly beast and drove the blade through the top of its head. He sliced through, moving down the entire length of the vikus. Blue-black blood gurgled forth, spilling out of the wound.

He raised his hands and looked towards Lord Oak, then the Grand Duchess. Neither looked happy. The Duchess had a sneering pout. She flicked her hand in gesture.

Releasing Idya of the chain, Arbor took hold of the woman's arms and brought her to the golden railing.

"What are you—" Idya began, still registering that she was free. Before she could fully realize what was happening, Arbor tossed her over the railing. Rasmuel sprinted into a slide, catching her in his arms before she hit the ground.

"What is this?" he shouted at the nobles above. "I won our game!"

"Your wager was to reclaim your woman," said Lord Oak, "but it was you who decided to jump into the pit."

"I'm not his woman," snapped Idya, getting back on her feet.

Rasmuel looked over at her, his eyes wide. "I don't think this is the time for that."

She shrugged, turning away from him and crossing her arms.

He grumbled. "How do we get out of here?" He looked around, going to an iron gate and trying to lift it. The walls were too steep and smooth to climb.

A couple nobles laughed at the attempt. Lord Oak twirled his cane, then stood from his throne. The Okyrian bared his gilded teeth. "Shall we make a wager on the first to die?"

"I will wager the female might die first," said the lord in silks from before.

A few more bets were placed, including Grand Duchess Hemlock who wagered, "The earthling shall die first, and if he does, I demand that I get to keep his female before she perishes."

"Very well," agreed Lord Oak. He lifted his cane, a burst of light traveling from it in a ball of energy. The sphere plummeted into the pit and collided with the ground.

At first, nothing seemed to happen. Rasmuel kept ready though.

"What trickery is this?" he asked, still looking for a way out.

Lord Oak sat down, leaned back in his throne, and ran a finger along his blackened lips.

"Ras," whispered Idya, moving closer to him, "do you have any extra weapons on you?"

"Afraid not," he answered, glancing where she was looking. The dirt floor was undulating. "Another viqus?"

The scattered bones quivered, sliding off the muddy waves as the movement grew larger.

"Stay close to me," he said.

The bones rose in a frightening fashion that reminded the earthling of tidal waves. He watched as the osseous matter joined and formed into a patchwork skeletal beast.

“A muswok,” he heard Idya gasp.

Bones continued to fly into place, building higher until the figure was four times their size. A skeletal hand rushed their way, claws made from splintered femurs of slain beasts.

Rasmuel pushed Idya out of the way and dodged the grab. He rolled towards a bony haunch, kicking out. The bones fell apart, but despite the lack of a leg, the creature did not fall. Instead, the bones instantly reformed by magic unknown.

Turning around, Rasmuel jumped onto the muswok’s skeletal back. He climbed as it thrashed, trying to grab him but unable to reach. Holding on, the redheaded rogue clenched his dagger between gritted teeth.

Idya was searching for something to defend herself with, but only bones and gore surrounded them. She gasped in frustration, pointing at Lord Oak. “How dare you defy galactic law. We are not your citizens—this is abuse. You sniveling coward, come down here and fight us yourself!”

Laughter rippled through the nobles. Lord Oak especially snickered as he thumbed his cane with a widening grin. He tapped the cane, and the air shimmered with light.

The muswok’s attention switched from the earthling to the alien woman. It grabbed her and lifted her into the air with a bony fist.

She screamed angrily and pushed at the sharp bones pressing against her. Blood welled from her exposed stomach.

Rasmuel reached the head, pulling at it roughly. Bones fell apart, but the muswok was held together and driven by something other than its physical frame. Frustrated, he searched the air for whatever invisible magic was allowing the beast to continue. He stabbed his

dagger into the muswok's network of bones and shouted upon realization, "It's the cane!"

Lord Oak laughed. He lifted the cane and pointed it towards Rasmuel. Energy shot out, rippling through the atmosphere and slamming into the ginger. Rasmuel fell back, toppling off. His dagger remained stuck between the splintered bones. Landing hard, his breath was knocked out of him, but he hurried to get up in time.

The muswok turned, raising the other fist in preparation to squash the earthling.

A shout sounded.

Bones fell, raining down around Rasmuel. He scurried to his feet, dodging a large bulk as the muswok disassembled. Idya screamed, falling through the air.

Rasmuel hurried to catch her. He wheezed from the impact but smiled when he saw she was all right. Idya hurriedly pointed towards Lord Oak.

The noble was struggling with a servant woman—Arbor. Rasmuel stood, shocked by the sight.

Arbor pushed against the Lord with fury. Her curls wildly danced around her. She struggled, twisting his wrists, and managed to take the copper cane. The Okyrian female held tight but wasn't able to dodge before Lord Oak shoved her over the railing.

She tumbled down, clutching the cane tightly. As she fell, she aimed it at the ground, and a blast of energy followed. Her fall halted. Arbor floated in the middle of the pit. She righted herself, then looked around at the nobles.

"Your time is over," she said, "You've bet too long on the subservience of your people."

Gradually rising out of the pit, she gestured the cane and forced Lord Oak out of his throne and over the railing. "You are nothing without this." She pointed at the other nobles. "Wager upon your loyalty. Oak or I?"

“How dare you claim the power. You are but a servant!” Grand Duchess Hemlock cried out bitterly.

“Not any longer,” Arbor snapped. “It has accepted me and rejected him.” She aimed the cane towards the woman.

The Grand Duchess threw up her hands defensively, then replied, “Very well, you speak the truth! Lord Oak is no more than a dead man to me. I wager my life upon your rise to glory.”

“Anyone else?” she asked.

Arbor then glanced around and nodded as the other nobles quickly wagered their loyalty underneath her rule.

Lord Oak lay upon the bones of the beasts, bruised from the fall. He glowered and found Rasmuel’s dagger amongst the mess. A desperate man, he ran at Rasmuel and Idya, trying to stab at anything he could in blind rage.

Arbor tapped the cane, and an energy burst slammed Lord Oak down. The dagger flew out of Lord Oak’s hands, and Rasmuel expertly caught it by the hilt.

The bones swarmed to cover the lord, drowning him in the bleached carcasses of the fallen beasts of his games. Soon, Lord Oak could be seen no more.

With quick magic, Rasmuel and Idya were brought up and out of the pit. Arbor walked to the throne. She gestured for Rasmuel to come to her.

“Were you planning this?” he asked, returning his dagger to his belt.

“Perhaps,” she answered coyly. With her free hand, she took his hand and smiled. “I will return your spaceship and belongings to you, but I know how you enjoy our planet and our ways. Please, earthling, stay here with me. Be at my side during my reign.”

Rasmuel watched her as she drew closer and kissed him upon the lips. He kissed her back briefly then turned his head away to look at

Idya.

“I can’t,” he answered, “As much as I enjoy this place and your company, I can’t stay here. It’s not my home, and I have commitments to other people elsewhere.”

Arbor sighed, her expression deadening.

“At least not right now,” he added. “Let me finish my business. I will visit.”

“Of course,” she said lightly. “I have plenty of tasks ahead of me anyways.”

He kissed her again then turned to Idya. “It’s about time we got the ship back up in the sky, don’t you think?”

His business partner nodded. “But only after a shower,” she said.

After getting cleaned up, they readied to take off in the spaceship that’d been outfitted with a new lock and keys.

Arbor came to see them off. She’d changed out of her servant wear and into a gown made perfectly for her. The royal court went on as if no power had shifted or changed at all. The other nobles from the pit game kept away, maintaining their own games. Arbor had sealed Lord Oak’s den and Bonesen, Lord Oak’s former muscle, loyally stood at her side. Moschatel had returned to Lady Honeysuckle; both awaited the launch to say farewell to the earthling as well.

At the launchpad, Rasmuel thanked the group for their aid in his troubles. He nudged Bonesen with a small quip about bringing truffles back for his next visit. The bodyguard even smiled a little. Arbor hugged Idya. The Vedoun woman frowned, reluctantly returning the embrace.

“Come back to us soon,” said Arbor, hugging Rasmuel next. “Your credit will always be good here.”

Stepping back, she joined the others a safe distance away from the launch site.

“Thank you,” muttered Idya, walking up the ramp. “You coming, Ras?”

Rasmuel hesitated, glancing at the Great Lady of Okyri before turning to his partner and nodding. He took the keys from Idya, waving farewell while the ship’s door shut behind them.

Inside the spaceship, Rasmuel went to the pilot’s seat and leaned back with a hefty exhale. He jingled the keys, looking out the window to see the small group awaiting their departure. Idya smoothed her new set of clothes, identical to the outfit before but repaired to be brand-new, with an extra layer of silk to fully cover her torso. She sat down in the co-pilot seat and placed her hand on Rasmuel’s wrist.

He looked at her, noticing the gentle smile brightening her expression. Bemused, he asked, “What?”

“Thank you, too, Ras.”

“Oh,” he cleared his throat, shrugging. “It was nothing. I couldn’t lose... the best miner this side of the galaxies, now could I?”

Her long fingers squeezed his wrist. She leaned over, kissing him on the cheek. “No, you couldn’t.”

He grinned, starting up the spaceship and readying for launch. Putting on his seatbelts, he looked to Idya and waited for her to do the same. She lingered with her hand still on him before drawing away. She secured the belts over her torso and nodded with a quiet sigh.

“I’m ready,” she said.

Rasmuel hit the thruster. With a great burst of speed, they launched upwards and out through the atmosphere, entering space on a path of fire.

Dominika Lein is an alien mind trapped in a human body. In her search to escape, she started writing. Available books include “I, the One”, “We, the Two”, and “Reptilian Wanderer”. Find more information at www.dominikalein.com.

The lynx

By MICHAEL REYES

An ancient and accursed object has resurfaced and threatens to usher in the end of the world—the lynx! Finding its way to Coney Island in the hands of a shifty diabolist, the devil mask could herald doom for mankind if Clock fails to stop it in time!

The mask rode to shore face-first. The ocean shook it loose, like an impatient seamstress eager to restitch a terrible mistake. It landed on Coney Island beach dry as desert stone, and no sand would stick to it.

Harjo Jensen was waiting. The mask washed ashore exactly where Susanna said it would. The warlock was alone. The November sun was dim, its pale beams rimed. Dark rain clouds began to smother their icy light. The wind picked up, and the scent of brine flooded his nostrils.

The Tannin lynx glared up at Harjo. Its expression was human, but its features were not. The mask was a winged globe, and the face carved upon it was a strange combination of modern whale and ancient Pakicetus, the cetacean's hyena-like land-based ancestor. It was sculpted from ocean jasper, yet the thin wings that sprouted from the top of the mask were organic. They were frost-covered algae, solid bedrock. The gemstone's shade was a deep blue, with specks of aquamarine. The mask was large, about 15 inches long, with a bronze strap along the back of it.

Harjo took out his dead fiancée's grimoire. It was small and leather-bound, with the image of a winged globe engraved on its cover—the ancient Chaldean symbol of the lynx. He opened it and carefully turned the thick, yellowed pages. Harjo stopped in the middle of the book, staring at a page covered with the beach's geographical coordinates. Today's date lined the page's corner. Susanna had written it twenty-five years ago.

Harjo Jensen had long waited for this exact moment. Susanna had killed herself a month before their wedding, and six months after encountering the mask at Lands End beach in San Francisco. The thing had driven her crazy after indoctrinating her into its hidden order. Harjo Jensen had been her Fetch, and he had finally completed his Priestess's mission.

The warlock stared at the Tannin lynx. Its forehead was large, with flaring nostrils. The teeth in its open mouth, above its canine-like lower jaw, were jagged and fierce. There was a burgundy light flashing out from behind the whale-like eye slits, beneath those algae fashioned wings. The warlock blinked hard, and the light disappeared.

Harjo Jensen was a large man, over 6'4". He was half Muscogee Creek and Scot-Irish, and he looked a fair mix of both. High-boned and handsome, his reddish skin slightly freckled, he looked younger than his 48 years. His long jet-black hair was tied in a ponytail, and it fell to his lower back.

A cold wind brushed across his neck, and he shivered. He flipped up the collar of his deerskin jacket. Harjo took out two heavy leather gloves from the luggage cart at his feet and slid them over his large, callused hands.

The warlock reached down to touch the mask, and it zapped him. Harjo expected as much; the thing was powerful. It would bend to his will, however. He would take the Tannin lynx to his motel room on Stillwell Avenue, and he would do the unthinkable—bring his dead fiancée back to life.

Harjo put the mask in his large Medicine Bag. It was made of rabbit hide, culled from a jet black Hare. The ancient bag's current name was Jackdaw, though it had gone by others over the centuries. There was the image of a Crow's head across it, stitched by Harjo Jensen himself. It represented *nigredo*—in alchemy, the stage of putrefaction. Jackdaw's many inner pockets housed his spell ingredients. It was a powerful object of protection in its own right and, in its own way, alive. Harjo had slain a Cherokee shaman for the ancient thing and then renamed it. Jackdaw was his, completely.

Harjo placed Jackdaw's strap over his shoulder, and he experienced an instant change in vision. It was the mask. The world seemed to shift then ripple. The gray sky and ocean took on a bright, golden glare. He placed Jackdaw on the sand, and the light faded. The lynx were ancient beings, and they had the power to transmit cosmic energy from one plane of existence to another. What Harjo Jensen would soon experience would be nothing short of miraculous. This new sight was just a taste of the wonders to come.

He heard a strange, high-pitched whistle from the Atlantic, but saw nothing. Harjo picked up Jackdaw, and his vision transformed once again. Still, there was nothing visible besides a frantic buoy bobbing along the strengthening tide. Harjo fought against the impulse to put on the mask so that he might see more clearly. The whistling stopped.

A ward of the Tannin lynx would soon follow, he was sure of that. A Plyma Nasha. The Crooked One, the distorted man. The creature would attempt to reclaim the mask and destroy anything that got in its way.

The Tannin lynx's method was to pick its acolytes through Periplus, a voyage around coast lines...a form of progressive initiation from one sacred site to the other. Its strange magic worked along ancient aquatic pathways. It was only meant to leave the ocean for a short time. Harjo Jensen was taking it out of circulation, indefinitely, and that was very dangerous.

Still, the warlock was confident in his abilities, and he would be away from the Atlantic within hours. That was essential. Its guardian would manifest, but only for a short window of time. The Plyma Nasha was compelled by an ancient order of tide. One that it had to obey, like it or not.

Harjo turned to look at the desolate boardwalk. He saw a small man staring out from beneath it. A dwarf, and he wore a coonskin cap. His raincoat, jeans, and heavy steel-toed boots were black, and there was a dagger in his waistband. He was staring directly at Harjo, a severe expression etched across his broad face.

Light and shadow blurred once again, and the man was gone.

Harjo wiped his eyes, and he moved Jackdaw away from his body. One thing at a time, he thought. A mask of the lynx allowed one to see beyond many veils. He might have just been staring at a random apparition. Nothing more. Harjo knew how to handle ghosts.

He placed Jackdaw inside the silver lined luggage cart, and the vision subsided significantly. Only slight traces of that bizarre world remained, like oblique acid trails. The warlock hurried along the beach, away from the section of the boardwalk where he saw the small apparition. The dark shaman was eager to begin his ritual.

Clock, the Chaos Magician, watched the mask carrier rush off the beach. Simply clutching the mask had allowed Harjo Jensen to see Clock. It must be powerful, he thought. The Chaos Magician's pulse quickened. The creature that followed would be powerful as well. Clock didn't relish the thought.

The mask carrier was headed to his motel on Stillwell Avenue. Clock knew this because he had been stalking Harjo Jensen since he took up residence there, three weeks earlier.

Clock turned to face the Atlantic Ocean. He could already feel a presence brewing, quickly gathering enough force to manifest into this dimension. This would be the second lynx he would have to deal with since assuming his watch. The first one's guardian nearly killed him.

The lynx were cosmic entities, named by the ancient Chaldeans of what is now present-day Iraq. Their forms varied, and some chose to inhabit and empower strictly elemental forces. The Tannin (Chaldean for sea monster) lynx were aquatic, antediluvian beings of great power—once-worshiped lifeforms from a lost era. These prehistoric entities, and others like them, had not entirely been cast aside by evolution. Physically perhaps, but not spiritually. The incorporeal essence of this physically extinct species evolved in spiritual dimensions, along bizarre astral planes.

Clock knew how to deal with them, however. The lynx mask he had previously encountered had manifested through a strange brush fire, during a severe blizzard. Its element had been Nura—fire—and its charred features were both human and reptilian. The Nura lynx's follower/poacher had been a deranged pyromaniac named Nielsen. Clock had managed to claim the mask and deliver it back to its element, though not before encountering its Plyma Nasha, a distorted shadow, vaguely humanoid and winged. It had reptilian limbs and a tail shooting off plumes of necrotic smoke, and its face was that of a leering, burnt Neanderthal. It had killed Nielsen, setting him on fire from within. It almost killed Clock, too.

The Chaos Magician cringed then spat on the boardwalk. He would need to take the mask from Harjo Jensen, first and foremost. That would be a danger all unto itself, though Clock doubted the warlock's skill matched his own. Jensen hadn't detected his ongoing surveillance, and it was obvious he didn't have the Sight. Still, Jensen's medicine bag worried him—he had sensed a great deal of spiritual power radiating from the thing.

The Chaos Magician adjusted his coonskin cap and Typhon, his serpent-handled dagger. He patted the Barnet Ghost crossbow on his back and set off after the mask-carrier.

Harjo rushed along Stillwell Avenue to the motel. The 90-year-old building fit in awkwardly between a stretch of row houses and two empty, recently built condos. It was three stories high and rundown. Drugged-out transients, destitute artists, and bedbugs were its primary occupants. It was a part of Coney Island history, at least according to Harjo's occult knowledge. This motel had been the location of many black magic rituals over the decades. It was a major reason why he chose the Dreamland Motel as his base of operations.

Karen was at the small reception desk. She was middle-aged and attractive, with dirty blonde hair and deep blue eyes. Harjo felt the hairs stand up on his neck.... He suddenly felt another presence. It was dangerous—and familiar. He looked around the small, dingy lobby. His eyes focused on the room beyond, next to the elevators—

the bar. He saw and heard nothing, though. Karen smiled at him. Stay composed, thought Harjo.

He smiled back at her. The sorcerer had been living at the motel since he came to Brooklyn, and he'd struck up a casual relationship with the attractive receptionist. It wouldn't be casual for long, however. She would soon have a part to play in his ritual—a pivotal one.

“Another fun day at the beach, Mr. Jensen?”

“The last. I'm checking out tomorrow.”

She frowned.

“Tomorrow?”

Harjo smiled at her.

“Yes. I'm heading back to L.A.”

“I see.”

“What time does your shift end? Do you want to grab a drink? I can finally show you all of the photos I've taken.”

He had lied and said he was an artist working on a Coney Island photography book. Harjo really made his money through various trades of the black market, the most reputable being occult-aided gambling and extortion. He was a wealthy man.

“I'd love to. I'm off at five.”

They smiled at one another, and then he turned left and jogged up the carpeted stairs, carrying the cart across his chest. His heart was pounding, and he didn't want to be anywhere near the bar, so no elevator. Harjo ran to his third-floor motel room. He opened the door slowly and crept inside. It was just as he had left it. Harjo placed the luggage cart down, and then he reached for the duffel bag at the base of his bed. He opened it and pulled out a Glock. Harjo quickly inspected the rest of the room. It was fine. He sat on the edge of the bed.

Harjo hoped it was just paranoia or simply an effect of the Tannin lynx, but he had felt *its* presence in the lobby. The demon that had nearly killed him five years earlier in Arizona had tracked him to Brooklyn. Harjo had never been able to completely banish the thing after conjuring it; he had lost control and botched the ritual. The warlock could smell its brimstone stink, feel it watching him with its thousand eyes.

Now isn't the time to lose it, thought Harjo. He would soon cleanse this space and seal it, and nothing would be able to get through. The warlock inhaled deeply. He put the gun on his bed and took Jackdaw out of the luggage cart, placing it by his lap. The feeling was electric. Harjo lit a cigarette to calm his nerves, and he looked at Susanna's journal/grimoire. He blew a ring of smoke out and thought about her discovery.

They were both living in San Francisco at the time, in their late teens and on an exodus from Oklahoma. Two runaway goth kids with just a casual, if burgeoning, interest in the occult. That changed after she came back from Lands End, transformed.

Susanna had been contacted by a spirit of the Tannin lynx while meditating on the beach. She embraced it, and the creature indoctrinated her into its secret order. The Tannin lynx bestowed its magic upon Susanna over the course of three nights. Harjo's fiancée taught him their ancient sorcery when she returned home. It was much more powerful than the witchcraft they'd previously dabbled in.

This knowledge eventually destroyed Susanna. She cut her own throat after having a terrible vision...one that left her incoherent and manic. Harjo vowed not to let his fiancée's death be in vain, and he made an arduous effort not to repeat her mistakes.

Her descent into lunacy had been due to her lack of temperance—she had delved too obsessively. Harjo's path would be more methodical. Slower, true. But safer, ultimately.

He studied her journal and tracked the mask's voyage over the decades. Harjo had stalked it along mysterious currents, rivers and

inland lakes. It was designed to never touch ground in any of those places. Only here, in Coney Island. On this day.

He had developed his own magical prowess as a sorcerer over that time. He was, in short, a Chaote, though there was a strong strain of shamanism and Western alchemy in his workings. And of course, that reservoir of deep, if inconsistent, magic that the Chaldean lynx provided. Their workings were complicated, so much depended on tides, astrology, and weather. However, it was extremely powerful when it worked.

Harjo had summoned instant storms off tranquil bays, brought down lightning onto the scantest surface of liquid. The sorcery of the Tannin lynx had revealed the mysteries of the moon and tide, and how those forces work in the H₂O-based constitution of man. Harjo had killed several men by altering their hydration levels, leaving them mummified corpses within minutes. The energy of the Tannin lynx was difficult to manifest, but when it worked, it worked.

Harjo took a long drag off his Marlboro. His palms were sweaty, and he was nearly delirious with anticipation. Harjo put Susanna's grimoire away. He opened Jackdaw and began his ritual.

Clock had walked into the motel undetected, as usual. He watched Harjo and Karen flirt. Clock could see that the mask carrier was acting, however. The asshole might use her as a sacrifice, thought Clock. He couldn't allow that to happen.

Clock was about to follow Harjo to his room, but he suddenly stopped himself. He walked past Karen into the bar. He felt something unnatural there. A sinister presence. He looked around and only saw a tired looking bartender. Early forties, thin body and thinning brown hair. Wasn't him. Still, the Chaos Magician felt something; he smelled something. The stink of brimstone. Clock sighed. A demon. Gone now, but here perhaps only moments before.

He hoped he wouldn't encounter it. He didn't need any more complications. Clock took out Typhon, and he traced the Hand Of Fatima above his head. The bottle next to the bartender cracked, and

the mousy man jumped. He looked around nervously, staring straight through Clock. The Chaote sheathed his dagger. He walked back to the lobby and up the staircase to the mask-carrier's floor.

Clock felt an oppressive weight as soon as he stepped onto the landing. It felt like he was walking underwater, and he suddenly had trouble breathing. Harjo Jensen was setting up a magical barrier in his room, and it was getting stronger by the moment.

Clock dug deep and stormed forward. He heard a low chanting on the other side of the heavy mahogany door. Clock grabbed the knob. It scorched his hand, and he was thrown back by an invisible force, slamming him into the wall. His coonskin cap nearly tumbled off his head. Clock readjusted it and caught his breath.

The path was barred, for now. Jensen would step out soon enough to meet the receptionist. Clock stood. He was pretty sure Jensen would keep the mask in his room. Still, he would observe the two while they met. If the Tannin lynx was left behind, then Clock would break the barrier and steal the thing.

Clock suddenly heard a demonic scream. It was high pitched and whale-like, yet still human.

The Plyma Nasha was making landfall.

Clock power-walked through the hallway's oppressive gravity. When he got to the staircase, he bolted down its steps, unencumbered by the mask carrier's spell. He ran onto the street in front of the motel, panting. It was raining heavily now, and the chill wind had gotten stronger.

Clock heard the scream again. No one with normal hearing could, yet. When the Plyma Nasha completely materialized, regular people would be able to both hear and see it, which meant it could kill them. Clock had to stop its full manifestation. For now only Jensen and Clock were in danger.

His mind raced. First, seal the Four Quarters of the Dreamland Motel. Then survey and physically wrestle the mask from Jensen if he carried it. Break his ward and steal it from the room if he didn't, and

return the mask to the ocean so it could continue along its ancient path. Its guardian would be instantly affected and would head straight back into the Atlantic. Clear enough plan, thought Clock.

He turned and began to circle the motel. A spell of the Four Quarters was already on his lips, the presence of the Archangel Uriel quickly being invoked to protect the North.

Clock was in the alleyway ten minutes later, and only Michael, the South's guardian, remained to be invoked. There was no telling how long the seals would hold up against the Plyma Nasha. The lynx's magic was powerful and mainly hidden to all but the most aware adepts. Still, there was something to be said about currency and the strength of using pervasive, if common, spiritual entities. Biblical beings, because of their constant circulation throughout the majority of humanity's faith-based nervous system, were easier to manifest and, in some ways, more solid.

Clock unsheathed Typhon once again, and he invoked Archangel Michael for protection. He heard a loud pop then a screech by the dumpster. He lowered the dagger as the rain beat down on him.

There was a sudden crash and shuffle over his shoulder, once again by the dumpster. He spun around, dagger at the ready. Clock saw a black, spider-shaped creature fade into the muck of the alley wall. The demon went still, camouflaging itself. Clock sheathed Typhon, and he took the crossbow off his back. He began to walk toward it.

"I've seen you. Name yourself."

No response. Only the continuous low whistle of the Tannin lynx's guardian and the pounding rain. He could see the demon shifting along on the wall.

"These arrows are blessed. I can name you myself and send you back to the abyss, the Crimson Emptiness where—"

A deep, mournful wail filled Clock's ears. This noise was the bizarre laughter of Fallen Angels.

The demon leaped off the wall and stood before Clock. A six-foot tall assemblage of strange infernal anatomy, its eyeless face was raw and spiked, and it spoke with a mouth made of blisters and scales. Its spider body was covered in thousands of small, unblinking eyes. Its voice was melodious, however. Feminine and light.

“My quarrel isn’t with you, magician. Step down.”

Clock stood his ground, and he raised the crossbow a bit.

“The Plyma Nasha is ashore. It’ll destroy you if you try and claim it, creature. Its magic is much older than yours. You have no true concept of the lynx.”

The demon blinked its thousand eyes slowly.

“And you do?”

“Yes.”

“Your seal wasn’t enough to stop me. And you expect to stop that which approaches?”

“It hurt you. And I will *destroy* you if you don’t obey.”

The demon cackled.

“Fool! Your ward is harmless! I have already sealed the Four Quarters with Magoa, Egym, Baymon, and Amaymon! The Archangels will not dare tread!”

Clock recoiled at the names of the demonic wardens of the Four Directions. He spat, then shrugged.

“Well, then you’ve sealed your own fate, dumbass. Those wards are notorious malingerers. I stopped using them years ago. They suck. Shouldn’t you know that, being infernal and whatnot? You know, how much they suck?”

The demon snarled wildly, and the dumpster crashed toward Clock. He ducked and rolled out of its way, nearly dropping his crossbow. The demon went shrieking and sliding toward him. Clock fired the

Barnet Ghost, and an arrow slammed right into the demon's iris-covered spider limb.

The demon hissed and fell back, quickly darting out of the alley. Clock stood and shook his head. The whistle was getting closer.

"Asshole," he muttered.

He went back inside the Dreamland Motel.

Fifteen minutes later, Clock was seated at a table by the bar, sipping brandy. He had snatched the bottle while the bartender went to use the bathroom. The bottle and glass were temporarily cloaked in Clock's invisibility.

He checked his watch. Almost five.

Karen walked into the bar and saddled up on a stool, chatting with the bartender as she ordered a drink. Harjo Jensen appeared moments later and sat down next to her. He didn't appear to be carrying the mask. Or his medicine bag.

The Plyma Nasha's call had gotten much lower, which meant it was much closer. Clock stood and made his move. He darted past the bar, unobserved.

Clock reached the third floor moments later, and he was hit with that same weight of spiritual oppression. The Chaos Magician began to whisper words of Breaking, a spell to shatter the seal. The pressure began to lessen dramatically as he uttered the old Ming Dynasty-era spell, Hymn Of The Broken Palace, in Mandarin.

Clock unsheathed Typhon and jabbed it forward. He trudged toward the room. Everything was trying to push him back, and he began hacking at the deterring resonance with Typhon. The energies took the form of thick, oscillating metallic worms...airborne and writhing toward the Chaos Magician. Still, Typhon was making quick work of the ward, slicing through its worm-tentacles like a knife through butter.

Clock's voice reached a feverish pitch, and there was a loud pop in the hallway. He lowered Typhon, and the door swung open. Clock stepped through.

Chaos broke out at the bar moments after Clock left it. It took less than a minute for Harjo to realize Karen wasn't herself. She was, in fact, occupied. Harjo stared at the demon as it stared out of her eyes, and they began to glow red. He leaped back, then forward. This thing was attempting to spoil and circumvent his ritual by possessing the vessel he needed for Susanna. It was time for an impromptu exorcism.

Karen began to laugh demonically as Harjo slammed her off the bar stool.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing!" screamed the bartender. Not needing any distractions as he mounted the possessed, Harjo grabbed his pistol and shot the man point-blank in the chest. He collapsed. Harjo pressed his hand to Karen's forehead, and he began to chant the Muscogee words of exorcism. He finally heard the whistle, and he knew the Plyma Nasha was close. Harjo concentrated and felt the demon leap out of Karen then scurry out of the motel.

He picked up Karen's unconscious body and placed it over his broad shoulder. Harjo ran up to his room; he heard someone scream for the police down in the lobby. Damn the ritual. Harjo needed to grab the mask and get away from this place as soon as possible.

Clock slammed the door shut. The Tannin lynx was on the bed, and Clock instantly bolted toward it. He stopped himself. There was also something else next to the mask. Jensen's medicine bag. The stitched crow on it seemed to move. Clock felt immediate danger. Jackdaw began to glow.

Clock tried to raise Typhon, but the bolt of thick smoke coiled out of the thing so quickly that he had no time to react. Jackdaw's serpent smoke coiled around the Chaos Magician's neck, and it tossed him

across the room. Clock crashed into the TV set, and he dropped Typhon.

Jackdaw was choking him. At that instant, Clock heard a tremendous pop, and he knew that the seals, whether infernal or angelic, had been shattered. The Plyma Nasha was here and close to full manifestation.

The door was suddenly swung open, and Harjo bolted through, carrying his unconscious date. Harjo glanced quickly over his shoulder then slammed the door shut. He turned on the lights and saw Jackdaw, its smoke coiling around a small, barely solid shape in the corner. Harjo's seal had been broken, but Jackdaw had defended the mask.

Clock gagged and writhed on the motel floor. Jackdaw's assault was unrelenting. The Chaos Magician was quickly losing consciousness.

Harjo tossed Karen onto the bed, then he pulled the gun out of his waistband. He pointed it at Clock's barely visible outline and fired.

The Glock jammed. Harjo cursed and tossed it on the bed. He reached for the knife hidden in his boot.

The Dreamland Motel went dark. Louder cries of alarm echoed throughout the building. Harjo bolted upright, and he cursed the darkness. He began to feverishly chant the Resurrection spell he had memorized for Susanna. The warlock grabbed the mask, and he quickly placed it over Karen's unconscious face. He finished the spell with a sharp cry, and Karen's body instantly bolted upright.

Karen stood, and the mask glowed brightly. There was an azure-colored fog rising from it, and Harjo could make out a face in the smoke. Long black hair, parted in the middle, framed a heart-shaped face. Her light brown eyes stared into his, and the wicked smile on Susana's face was exactly how he remembered it. Harjo stared at his dead fiancée and began to sob.

The door was suddenly thrown open. The smell of brine enveloped the room. Jackdaw's reaction was instant. The smoke uncoiled from Clock's neck, and it shot out at the dark shape standing motionless in the doorway.

Clock, wheezing for breath, grabbed Typhon, then his crossbow.

The Plyma Nasha lifted one colossal shadow hand, and Jackdaw's advancing tendril dissipated. Harjo, crying tears of joy as he stared at the spectral image of his dead fiancée, saw nothing else.

The Plyma Nasha stepped out of the shadows. Monstrous, its face was that of a drowned and bloated Paleolithic caveman. An ancient worshiper of the Tannin lynx, given a special duty in the Afterlife, it moved on cloven hooves, and the tail that thrashed behind it was finned. The Plyma Nasha grew more solid by the second, and the fish scales that covered its body were visible even in the dim, azure light. The Plyma Nasha raised its clawed hands then drove them into Harjo's back.

The warlock screamed in horror as it ripped away, cracking his spine. Blood oozed out in buckets, yet no skin was torn.

Clock made his move. He barreled forward and slammed into Karen's legs. She fell; Susanna's phantom image faltered. Clock ripped the mask off her face and placed it on his own. The room went dark—the fog, along with Susanna's spectral face, disappeared.

Clock's vision shifted, and he saw the shadowy monster staring straight at him. There was still time; it wasn't completely material. He had to get to the Atlantic Ocean....

The Plyma Nasha made that horrific whistling noise again. Clock fired his crossbow straight at it. The arrows passed through its torso and made a sizzling noise.

The Plyma Nasha shrieked and fell back a bit. Clock ran low, slicing at the creature's scaled torso with Typhon. The blade struck nothing material, yet there was that sizzling noise again, and the creature wailed. It nearly fell, and Clock darted past it.

Clock reached the door handle and pulled, but he was hurled back. The Plyma Nasha's finned tail wrapped around his leg. Clock screamed in anger, and he sliced at it with Typhon. The monster screeched and let go. Clock ran out of the room. The Plyma Nasha followed after.

Karen woke next to Harjo's corpse, covered in his gore. She screamed and began to sob hysterically in the darkness. After several moments, Jackdaw fell onto the floor, and her hand found it. Her cries stopped, and she stood. She placed the bag's strap around her shoulder and felt a strange sensation. The sound of police sirens was approaching the motel, and there was a deep voice in Karen's head telling her exactly what to say and do. It was also showing her mental images of a dwarf; it told her he was the enemy that caused this calamity.

She sat on the bed, stroking the medicine bag. With some satisfaction Jackdaw, or rather the ancient spirit inside of it, sighed. It had once again ensured its own survival with this passing host, all the while setting its sights on a new prize.

Clock ran past the straggling motel workers and occupants, and though they couldn't see him or the Plyma Nasha, they certainly felt both. They scrambled and screamed, and some were physically knocked around the motel lobby.

Clock raced onto the street under the pouring rain. He could see strange traces of the world behind this one as he pressed on. He had to get to the Atlantic quickly, but the beach was too far. Clock ran across the street to a large chain-linked gate. There was a hill on the other side, leading down to Coney Island Creek. He began to slice a hole in the gate. Clock heard the Plyma Nasha's call, and he glanced over his shoulder. The distorted man was becoming solid, and it was quickly approaching Clock.

"Fuck it—" Clock sheathed Typhon and began to climb the gate. That spider demon was still out there somewhere, and Clock had to move fast.

The Plyma Nasha was in the middle of the street, and there was the sudden sound of oncoming traffic. The police car slammed into the Plyma Nasha and flipped. The creature didn't budge, though it stopped pursuing Clock for a moment. The Chaos Magician took advantage and quickly scaled the gate. He landed on his feet and bounded down the hill to Coney Island Creek.

The Chaos Magician reached the small pebble-strewn creek, and he took off the mask. It was now dark, and the rain continued to fall heavily. He held the mask forward, and the tide instantly swelled.

Clock's arm was yanked back, and he felt a burning sensation around his wrist. The demon!

The spider demon tried to grab the Tannin lynx. Clock dropped the mask and drew Typhon. Clock stabbed upward at the spider's abdomen—his blade found its mark. The spider-thing hissed and jumped away, right into the embrace of the Plyma Nasha.

The Plyma Nasha ripped the demon in half. Iris-covered limbs disappeared before they even hit the ground—the Plyma Nasha had sent it straight back to hell.

Clock didn't skip a beat. He picked up the mask and tossed it into the water. The fierce tide rose, and the Tannin lynx was dragged beneath it. The Plyma Nasha walked past Clock without so much as a glance. It disappeared beneath the waves.

Clock dropped to the sand for several moments. He closed his eyes and calmed his breathing. He stood back up. The tide calmed, but the rain continued to pour. Clock washed Typhon in the creek, then he reloaded his crossbow. The ward began his trek back to the Coney Island boardwalk, ready to resume his stoic watch.

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The Legend of Blade

By JASON SCOTT AIKEN

Civilization has fallen and mankind has reverted to varying degrees of primitive savagery and feudal society—but hand-in-hand with civilization’s demise, the new world has also seen the rebirth of strange and powerful monstrosities...and heroes!

I

Jerak the Blademaster puffed into his calloused hands and rubbed them together before flashing a warm grin at his granddaughter.

“Sasha, be a doll and light the fire for your pappy.” The little redhead returned his smile and snapped her fingers. The kindling in the campfire ignited, and the blaze came to life.

Jerak winked at her. “It’s handy having you around. Now where do you suppose your cousins are? Ah! Here they come.”

The rest of Jerak’s grandchildren arrived and took their places around the fire. Just looking at them made Jerak feel fortunate to be alive. These days the old warrior enjoyed spending time with his grandchildren more than any other activity.

His oldest grandchild, Braun, threw a twig into the fire and looked at Jerak expectantly. “Pap, you going to tell us some stories tonight?”

Jerak’s youngest grandchild, Klif, began bouncing up and down. “Oh! Oh! Tell us about the time you killed that necromancer! No! How about the time you saved the city from those giant lizards? I love that one!”

Sasha grabbed Jerak’s arm and tugged on his sleeve. “Pappy, my favorite’s the one where you explored the underground tunnels. Tell that one!”

As his progeny began to argue among themselves, the old warrior shook his head and let out a deep chuckle. His grandchildren could be quite rambunctious when they got together. Luckily he had a plan to quiet them down.

He coughed and only slightly raised his voice. "Settle down, you little imps. You want a story, eh? Well I've got one that I've just been itching to tell you. I think it's finally time I told you about my friend Blade."

The children fell silent, and their eyes widened. They gathered closer to Jerak and noiselessly waited for him to begin.

"Let's see. I guess I should start at the very beginning, with the fall of Ellae."

II

I was only a boy when the city of Ellae fell. I hadn't seen sixteen summers or even kissed a girl yet. The savage tribes broke through our walls and slaughtered my people like they were cattle. The very streets I used to walk with *my* grandfather were now filled with chaos and coated with blood. I can't even guess how many deaths I saw on that day. I imagine when you see the bodies of your parents butchered in your own house, all others lack the personal connection by comparison. That being said, I was one of the lucky ones.

I escaped that nightmare of death and destruction thanks to the help of two schoolmates of mine, Arn and June. Oh, I wish you kids could have had the chance to meet Arn! He was a great bull of a young man. He was only sixteen but dwarfed grown adults. His ebony arms and legs were nearly as thick as some of the tree trunks we have here in the Central Forest. June, on the other hand, was tall and slender. She had the most beautiful scarlet hair I've ever seen. Oh, and she was pretty, too. Very pretty. June was older than Arn and me. As a matter of fact, she was on the verge of graduation and by all accounts a grown woman. As you can imagine, we both had a crush on her.

After we carefully made our way out of the city, we knew we had to put as much distance between Ellae and ourselves as possible, so we headed east. The three of us sprinted as fast as our pounding feet could take us. Now, us city kids knew next to nothing about life outside the walls. It had always been far too dangerous for anyone to

leave the city in the past. Plus, with our high walls to protect us, there wasn't any reason to leave. Even my own grandparents couldn't remember the last member of our family to be born outside of the safety of Ellae. From what my grandfather told me in stories passed down through the generations, the world was quite different during the time of our ancestors. Back in their time, great cities and towns sprawled out all across the land from ocean to ocean. Men and women traveled them easily by horseless carriages. Not only that, but using man-made birds, they could fly from coast to coast in a matter of hours. But all that would soon change.

One day, the Sun licked the Earth, like a great-toad darting at a fly, and the world was thrown into darkness. Not long after that, the ground began to rumble something fierce. The greatest quake mankind has ever known was unleashed, and it tore the land asunder. Ancient, terrible things opened their eyes and gleefully crept out of the darkness. Creatures that hadn't walked the Earth since primordial times were once again free to roam our world unimpeded. So you see, children, the three of us had more than just other people to fear when we ventured outside the walls.

By our second night in the wilderness, we were wet and starving. After eating whatever wild fruit we could find, we made camp in a secluded glen. Or we thought it was secluded. In the middle of the night, the three of us were ambushed by a group of savages. These were bearded and muscular men, the kind from every child's nightmares. There were five of them and only three of us. We stood no chance against hardened foes who had spent their whole lives outside the comfort of a walled city.

They stripped us of our sopping wet clothes and looked for anything of value that we had, which wasn't much. When they found nothing to their satisfaction, they began striking Arn and me. Pounding big mallet fists into our ribs and shooting booted kicks into the small of our backs.

To his credit, Arn tried to fight back. He was a big lad, but these men were of a stronger and far crueller stock than us. They went after Arn even harder for resisting. I'm ashamed to say I didn't fight back,

children. Back then I wasn't the man you see sitting before you now. I'm afraid the young Jerak was a soft, meek boy. I fell to the ground and curled myself into a ball, covering my head with my arms. By the time I saw what those monsters were planning for June, I was in no position to even try to help her.

Then, out of the shadows came a tall, bronze-skinned man, sporting medium length brown hair and a scruffy beard. He was completely naked, which showed off his superb physique. Now, I did a lot of reading in my younger days in Ellae's library. The city had quite the collection of ancient tomes. Let me tell you, children, this man looked like an ancient statue come to life.

The two savages who had their filthy hands on June were his first targets. The stranger moved toward them like a wolf lunging for its prey, not a motion was wasted. He reached out and broke the neck of the first man as easily as if he were snapping a dry twig. With an open hand, he stabbed his fingers deep into the throat of the other savage, crushing his windpipe. The man dropped his ax and grabbed at his throat in surprise. The look of terror on his face as his complexion turned purple is one I'll never forget. The stranger picked up the fallen ax of the savage and whipped it at one of the men beating on Arn. The ax spun through the air until it was embedded with a sickening crunch in the back of the savage's skull.

This brought the stranger's presence to the attention of the other two brutes who were still in the process of assaulting Arn and myself. Both of them scowled and drew their long, wicked looking blades then charged at the stranger. The stranger bent down and grabbed a long knife from the belt of the man whose neck he had snapped. The two savages attacked him as one, but I have to tell you, children, this man's speed and reflexes once again proved to be unequaled. With smooth, fluid motions, he easily swayed his lean, muscled body out of the paths of their thrusts and slashes.

One of the savages vastly overextended himself, and the stranger made him pay for it with his life. If you blinked, you would have missed it. The stranger reversed his grip on the knife and thrust it into the back of the savage's skull, piercing the brain stem. While doing

so, he side-stepped and kicked the other savage in the side of the knee, breaking it. The injured man fell to one knee, and the stranger spun behind him and slit his throat without a second thought. He delivered a brutal kick to the savage's spine for good measure and turned away from us.

June had taken refuge against a tree, and the stranger calmly strode toward her. He bent down and grabbed her clothes then tossed them to her. "Sorry, I heard you guys crying out and got here as soon as I could. Put those on. It's going to be all right. I'll light a fire and that should help dry them." He had a booming baritone voice.

He grabbed my clothes and threw them at me. "You better get dressed, too. You don't want to catch a cold." Then he shook his head at Arn. "But not you, big guy. Let's see if we can find something of theirs that fits us." He motioned around at the corpses.

The stranger and Arn stripped the savages of their clothes and gear and made use of whatever fit them. The stranger removed the ax from the back of the savage's skull and handed it to Arn. "This one's got your name on it." He then grabbed the two swords and handed them to me pommel first. "I think you'll find these to your liking." The stranger then spun the knife around in his palm and handed it to June. "Hold onto this; I'll craft it into a spear for you later. You're a dancer, right?" June nodded her head.

The stranger smiled. "I can tell. I like to dance too. A spear will be a splendid weapon for you. The three of you should sleep with your weapons tonight. Start making them a part of you. We'll talk more in the morning. For now, get some sleep. I'll hold watch."

The three of us eyed each other with blank stares. Truth be told, we were a bit dumbfounded. None of us had said a word since the stranger rescued us. I figured one of us had better say something, so I stepped forward. "Thank you, stranger. My name is Jerak. These are my friends Arn and June. What's your name?"

With a mischievous grin stretched across his face he replied, "The name's Blade."

III

The next morning I woke up to the sounds of grunting and heavy breathing. I rolled over and saw Blade had already started instructing Arn and June in the use of their weapons. He had even fashioned the dagger into a spear for June. I also noticed Blade was carrying a mace. I imagine he scavenged it from one of the corpses during the night. Evidently, Blade had kept himself busy while we slept, as the bodies of the savages were nowhere to be seen.

Feeling a bit embarrassed at my laziness, I rose to my feet and rubbed the boogers out of my eyes. Blade approached me and gently patted me on the head. "Glad you could join us. I hope you had a good sleep, because today is the start of your new life." He then began instructing me in the basics of the sword.

The four of us stayed in that glen for weeks, if not months. Truth be told, I can't really say how long we stayed there. Training became the most important aspect of our lives, keeping track of the time that passed wasn't a priority.

Blade would put us through some rigorous training and then leave for short periods of time. He'd go off on his own to hunt and gather supplies. After we had a solid grasp on what Blade was teaching us, we later accompanied him on these outings. Blade said that the tracking and killing of animals was a vital step in our training. Eventually, we had built up enough supplies and became adept enough in combat to begin our journey east.

The three of us were originally planning to travel south to the kingdom of Okexala, but Blade cautioned us against this. Okexala was a vast, but isolationist empire. Its empress had constructed a towering, impregnable wall and refused to admit any outsiders. Blade suggested our best bet was the kingdom of N'Yak, which was located on the shore of the eastern ocean.

Blade warned us that the journey would be long and hazardous, but if the four of us stuck together, we'd have a good chance of making it. The three of us agreed with his plan—after all, he hadn't let us down yet.

By the time we left the glen, our fighting skills were formidable. All of us had either filled out or toned up since we began training with Blade. I started noticing muscles I never knew I had before. My two swords, which felt like bricks at the beginning of my training, were now nearly weightless in my hands. Arn had always been big, but now he was chiseled. He turned into quite the physical specimen. It wasn't long before Blade had to find a bigger ax for him. And June, wow, she was quite the woman. The way she danced about and used her spear was an impressive sight.

Blade was an excellent teacher, but he cautioned us that the real test was yet to come. He knew that during our travels we would encounter things other than humans that intended to kill us.

Blade, as always, was right. Within our first week on the road, we came across a pack of vargs near the edge of a pine forest. These were vicious wolf-like creatures, each as large as a horse. Vargs are snarling, carnivorous predators with razor sharp fangs and claws. Oh, children, if you ever come across a varg, you run and get indoors. You hear me?

It was lucky for us that Blade had caught their scent and we had enough time to prepare an ambush.

The four of us took to the trees and waited for their arrival. When the pack stormed onto the scene, we were relieved to see there were only four of the creatures. Blade communicated to us through hand signals, laying out what we were going to do. He always had a plan.

Each of us jumped onto the back of one of the creatures. And yes, let me tell you, children, that doesn't feel good. But, you have to do what you have to do to survive out there. Upon landing, the four of us brought the full force of our weapons down on their necks. The creatures yelped and fell to the ground. But under Blade's orders, we kept slashing and bashing at our targets until they no longer moved. I could barely lift my arms afterward. The vargs smelled horrible, like a mix of wet dog and rotted meat. We couldn't get away from their carcasses fast enough.

Arn asked Blade if they were safe to eat; I guess the big guy worked up quite an appetite. Blade shook his head and let out a little chuckle. "You guys better take another look at those bodies." We turned, and to our amazement all of the vargs had turned into humans! Their battered remains were as naked as the day they were born.

Blade motioned to the corpses. "I'm glad your first kills were vargs. They're not really human. Not anymore, anyway. You guys did good, though. Didn't hesitate when the time came. I hope you'll do the same when it's against a human foe. Now let's go, we're burning daylight."

More time passed. I gave up keeping track after a while. We ran into more people, just as Blade predicted. Many of them tried to kill us, and we defended ourselves. We lived, they didn't. I can still see the face of the first man I ran my sword through, but I don't dwell on it. He had it coming. Anyone who tries to kill another person always does.

Besides, we had to do it to survive. If we hadn't done what we did, then I wouldn't be here today. Your parents wouldn't be here today. Heck, the three of you wouldn't be here either.

I won't bore you children with all the details of our journey. The important thing is the four of us became something of a family out there. Arn and I often slept near each other, while June and Blade stayed particularly close. The two of them even started bathing together. Arn and I thought this was a bit unusual, but it wasn't really our place to say anything. After all, they were both adults.

Besides, Blade was an incredible teacher and the best friend you could ask for. We were alive thanks to him. He molded three weak city kids into hardened warriors. It got to the point where human opponents weren't even a challenge for us anymore. Unless they had a mage on their side.

Mages are deadly, especially when you're unprepared for them. And I'm not talking about the same type of spell-workers as your father's family, Sasha. Wizards in the wild are a whole different sort.

I'll never forget the first time we went up against sorcery. The enemies we faced that day were relatively few, but they were a trained unit. The way they worked together with their mage gave them a significant advantage. I thank the stars every night we had Blade with us.

While Arn, June, and I were in melee with the enemy fighters, Blade dove into the brush in order to locate the magus who concealed himself within. The spellcaster was enveloping the battlefield in a shroud of thick, unnatural fog. Not of the kind that sometimes envelopes the city in summer mornings. This stuff was even thicker and had a distinct dampness to it.

The wizard's comrades were used to fighting under these conditions and were able to locate us by sound alone. They also wore goggles to aid them in their tactics. They would dive in and slash at us, then retreat back into the safety of the mist before we could counter. They were more like ghosts than men.

Their strategy proved to be both annoying and effective. No doubt they had defeated countless foes with it. We suffered a few flesh wounds through the course of the fighting; the three of us knew they would eventually either catch us completely by surprise or slowly wear us down to the point where we couldn't defend ourselves anymore. I'm not going to lie to you, children, I thought that was the end.

Then the great mist suddenly parted, and we saw the enemy standing before us clear as day. With the tables turned, the three of us cut them down without mercy. Your pap's swords sang a deadly song that night, children. With no mist to conceal them, the enemies were like fish out of water. They were easy pickings for the three of us.

Blade arrived shortly afterward with the body of the mage hanging over his shoulder. He nonchalantly threw the robed corpse to the ground. When it landed, its broken neck almost jutted out of the skin.

"Let this be a lesson to you three. Always kill the casters first. Go for their throats or just break their necks. One mage is more

dangerous than any normal man. Take them out fast and take them out hard. Now let's strip these bodies. Make sure you grab anything that looks useful. We have to keep moving."

IV

After what had to be years of traveling over the broken land, we finally arrived at the gates of N'Yak. Unfortunately, children, we weren't the only visitors to the city that day. A great armored warband was at the city gates. The grim, painted men must have been at least one hundred in number. They were an imposing sight, too, with their spiked helmets and shoulder pads, but none was more intimidating than their leader.

He wore no armor; he didn't need it. The man, if you want to call him that, was a giant, standing nearly seven feet tall and muscled like a bull. The sun gleamed off his bronzed shaved head. Sheathed on his back was the biggest sword you'll ever see. To this day, I haven't seen a blade larger than the one the giant wielded on that day.

The four of us didn't engage these invaders immediately, though. Per Blade's order, we stayed out of sight and observed the situation. The war band was using a battering ram to brutally beat the city gates. Kaboom! Kaboom! Kaboom! You could just hear the barrier weakening with every thundering blow.

Sadly, the gate of the city was not particularly defensible back then. There weren't battlements like we have now. Those wouldn't be constructed until later. As a matter of fact, your other grandpap and I helped build them, Braun.

Blade shook his head at the sight of the siege. He knew things weren't looking good. "That gate's going down. It's inevitable. When it falls, the people of N'Yak will be forced to defend themselves. N'Yak has a garrison numbering roughly one hundred soldiers. They're not bad, but a city dweller is no match for a savage. The three of you saw that first hand in Ellae. If they breach the gate and invade the city, it's going to be Ellae all over again. We have to stop them before that happens."

Arn was white-knuckling his ax and grinding his teeth. Let me tell you, children, the big guy had developed a real lust for battle during our time on the road. Arn hardly resembled the kid who left Ellae all those years ago. But to be honest, neither did June or myself.

Arn nodded his head at Blade and smiled. "I'm all for that, Blade. But aren't we a bit outnumbered? Even more than usual? Don't get me wrong, I'm in. But I trust you have a plan?"

Blade grabbed Arn by the shoulder. "I always have a plan." He smiled at the three of us and motioned to June. "Toss me the bow and quivers will you? I think it's time we made use of the arrows we've been stockpiling."

Blade gave us our instructions, and the three of us crept toward the gate. We took refuge behind some broken statues and waited for Blade to begin his attack. We watched him scale a steel pillar with ease and take position at the top. Blade was so far away from the gate, it was hard to believe he could shoot that far, let alone hit anyone. But I'd seen Blade accomplish some remarkable feats. I wasn't about to doubt him.

He didn't disappoint. As with every weapon Blade laid his hands on, he proved to be deadly with a bow. His arrows screamed through the air and pierced their targets with pinpoint accuracy. Blade wisely started with the war band members that were the furthest from the gate. He proficiently picked them off one at a time, working his way closer to the gate as he went. Blade must have dropped nearly two dozen men before the savages even realized they were being fired upon. When the leader finally spotted Blade on top of the pillar, the giant sent a group of his warriors to dispose of him.

Arn, June, and I patiently waited for them. Once they passed the statues, we took them from behind, completely unaware. When you're outnumbered and the fate of a civilization hangs in the balance, survival takes precedence over honor, children. Besides, these men were far too dangerous to be allowed to live and possibly return another day.

The fighting wasn't easy. Their armor gave them plenty of protection, but we had a great teacher. No, the best. Blade had instructed us on typical armor vulnerabilities at the early stages of our training. The areas around the neck, inner thighs, joints, and armpits are all fairly susceptible to bladed weapons. We followed Blade's teachings on the ones we didn't manage to outright kill from behind. Once we finished off a group, the war band's titanic leader would send another after Blade.

After we dealt with an approaching group, we would quickly hide behind the statues again. Then all we had to do was wait for the next group to come after Blade. And boy did they go after him. They wanted a piece of Blade in a bad way for the storm of arrows he was raining down on them.

Blade didn't stop shooting, and he didn't miss. He systematically picked off the savages one at a time, with such accuracy, it forced the giant to send larger groups after him. This brought an end to our ambush strategy. The three of us had to go at them head-on. We had to start fighting multiple opponents at once, too.

This wasn't a problem, though. We had been doing this for years by this point. June and Arn were especially gifted at dealing with multiple opponents. I should also say, by this point we no longer had our original weapons either.

June was now wielding a spear with a blade on each end. She whirled it around and danced a deadly ballet through the enemy ranks. She was grace personified, as if she'd been doing this type of thing her whole life.

Arn now carried a huge black war ax that he effortlessly swung with reckless abandon. Let me tell you, children, it was always a good idea to give the big guy his space in a fight. Otherwise, you might get your skull crushed. Whereas June used her agility and grace during combat, Arn was pure brute force.

As for your pappy, I had switched over to a higher quality set of swords by this point. You've actually seen them. They're the same pair that hangs over my fireplace. Those swords and I have been

through a lot together. I wielded the pair of them like a surgeon wields a scalpel. I'm not saying this to brag, children, but give me a sword in my hand, and to this day I think I could best anyone that stands before me. I'm sorry, pardon your pap for getting fired up, but this is taking me back. Now, back to the siege.

With Blade picking off the enemies from afar, and the three of us cutting them down up close and personal, we made a heavy dent in their numbers. The enemy losses were so heavy, that the group using the battering ram was forced to stop and engage us. There must have been at least twenty of them that joined the fray, along with their leader. That giant of a man went right for Arn, knocking his own warriors out of the way just to get to him. I imagine he must have seen Arn's handiwork from a distance, and wanted to put him in his place.

Arn was a child next to this behemoth. Although he was a more than capable fighter, Arn wasn't used to fighting anyone bigger or stronger than himself. He put up a hell of a fight, but the giant eventually grabbed the shaft of his ax with his bare hand and brought that huge sword down on Arn.

It took all of the strength I had in my body, but I leaped into the air and struck the side of the giant's blade with both of mine. The full force of my blow just barely deflected his cut away from Arn. To this day, my shoulders still ache in the winter as a result of turning that deadly sword stroke.

The brute was surprised and shot a furious glare at me. It was one of the scariest sights I've ever seen, children. The giant was still holding on to the shaft of Arn's ax but seemed to have forgotten about Arn in his rage. He would pay for that mistake. Arn brought his big boot up and kicked the giant squarely in the groin, causing him to bend over in agony, releasing Arn's ax from his grip.

I circled behind the giant and sliced both his Achilles' tendons with my blades, bringing him screaming to his knees. I followed up by stabbing a blade through his right forearm, severing his tendons and causing his giant sword to fall from his grasp. Arn hefted his black ax high into the air then brought down a crushing blow upon the giant's

skull. The ax bit deep, but the giant still reached out and grabbed Arn by the throat with his left hand. The monster of man refused to die.

I quickly stabbed him through the back for good measure, piercing both his kidneys. The giant's left hand fell limply to his side and the brute fell forward. He didn't move again, not even a man of his size could live through those injuries.

The two of us turned away from the fallen juggernaut just in time to see June finish cleaning up the savages she was dealing with. She had amassed a pile of corpses around her. The ones not presently engaged in combat started to run away from her, but they didn't get far. They all ended up with arrows in them courtesy of Blade.

The three of us came together and looked up at our friend. Blade was still standing on the pillar, holding the bow over his head in triumph. He gave us a thumbs-up and then pointed to the gate. It was opening.

The gate opened just enough for two people to come out at a time. Pairs of soldiers came riding out on horseback. The gates closed once thirty of them passed through. They surrounded us and pointed their lances in our direction. We lowered our weapons, but didn't give them up. That was one of Blade's rules. "Never give up your weapons."

The commander, General Alstair, a gray-haired man with a score of scars on his face, seemed amused by us. "I'll be damned. Three kids? Not bad. Not bad at all. You're welcome inside. We can use folks like you."

June stepped forward. "We have to wait for Blade. Then we'll go with you. Blade taught us everything we know, we're alive because of her. Every savage killed by an arrow was her doing."

Arn and I looked at each other confused. He shook his head and rightfully looked at June like she had gone mad. "June, are you sure you didn't get hit on the head? Blade's a guy."

June shot Arn a vicious sideways look for questioning her. She snapped at him. "What are you talking about? Don't try to play tricks

on me, Arn. Blade's a woman, tall, blonde, and toned with fair skin. She's like a sister to me."

Arn put his hand up and shook his head. "We definitely need to get you checked out once we're inside, June. Blade's tall all right, but he's black and has some wicked-looking dreadlocks." Arn turned to me for support. "Isn't that right, Jerak?"

As you can imagine, children, I was speechless. But I eventually found the words. "Blade's a man, but he's not black. He has bronze skin. I'd say he's of an average height and has medium length brown hair."

General Alstair looked back and forth at the three of us. Then put his hand up over his eyes as if to search the area. "I don't see anybody out there. Are you sure you kids are all right? You've obviously been through a lot. Maybe your imaginations are playing tricks on you."

June threw her spear to the ground. "Then how do you explain all the bodies with arrows in them, you old coot? You think the three of us had time to shoot them while we were fighting hand to hand? Explain that!"

The general's head snapped to attention. Then he shrugged his shoulders and exhaled. "When you put it that way...I guess I have no explanation. I'll tell you what, we'll send a handful of scouts to sweep the area. We'll search for... Blade. In the meantime, let's get you kids inside. It's time you see the city that you saved."

The three of us entered N'Yak through the gate. As they closed the doors behind us we continued to look out into the wilderness, hoping to see Blade running to us in the distance. But the three of us never saw Blade again.

V

Jerak looked around the campfire; his grandchildren were silent. The old sword-master could almost see the gears in their heads spinning.

Braun was the first one to speak up. “Pap, I don’t get it. Was Blade a guy or a girl? He had to have been a guy. Right?”

Before Jerak could answer, Sasha interjected. “Weren’t you listening to Pappy’s story? Miss June said Blade was a girl!”

Klif started laughing and slapped his knee. “Oh, Pap, that was good! I can picture Blade being both a guy and a girl now that you mention it. I trust you, though. If you said he was a guy, then he’s a guy.”

Jerak raised his hand and smiled. His grandchildren fell silent and gave him their full attention. “I’m glad you all enjoyed the story, but there’s a lesson to be learned here. Whether Blade was a man or a woman isn’t important. Maybe he was neither. When the world changed, some horrible creatures returned, but perhaps some good things came back, too. I think Blade was one of them.”

The children fell silent once again. Jerak looked up at the star-filled sky and smiled at the heavens.

Jason Scott Aiken was born and raised on Barsoom, but longs for the Hyborian Age. He enjoys exercising, gardening, reading, and writing. He counts H. Rider Haggard, Robert E. Howard, and Philip José Farmer as his greatest influences. Jason has had short stories appear in publications from Paizo Publishing, Black Coat Press, and most recently, Cirsova.. He can be found at jasonscottaiken.com and [@jasonscottaiken](https://twitter.com/jasonscottaiken) on Twitter. Jason also runs a website devoted to classic pulp literature, characters, and themes at pulpcrazy.com

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The Great Culling Emporium

By MARILYN K. MARTIN

Anything you could ever desire might be found in the stalls of the Great Culling Emporium—and it's Jobard's desire to collect the bounty on a wanted criminal he's just tracked down there! Until he runs into an old flame, that is—can he have both?!

The oval craft popped out of the vortex at the coordinates Jobard had been given and spun in small circles for some seconds. He could have stabilized the nano-second he exited, of course, to avoid the spinning. But then why alert the always lurking thieves, raiders, and raptors that a cosmos-savvy craft and pilot had just arrived? In these dangerous hinter-lands, secrecy was paramount.

It was also the standard procedure for exiting from an unknown vortex into a relatively unknown area of space such as here. "Here" was on the very edge of the Milky Way, possibly still under Greater Galactic Law Enforcement. Or maybe it was part of the between-galaxy lawless "territory" claimed by Void Pirates. It depended on who you asked, but the Great Emporium catered to everyone.

Jobard's craft finally rocked gently to a stop then flashed out an invisible, six-meter proximity shield, in case there were criminals, pirates, or remote-control weaponry nearby. On Jobard's frontal main screen was a quarter-kilometer sphere with a blinking neon framework in multiple colors. The lattice of the Great Emporium was startling against the blackness of space.

Fizzing energy screens between the sphere's frame pieces showed lots of shadowy rectangular patches of the Seller stands in gravity-lock all around the inner surface of the massive sphere. Punching in the binoc-upgrade, Jobard saw flitting "shoppers" within, using breathers and some kind of directional-propulsion assist. In curved neon above the huge orb flashed "Welcome to the Great Culling Emporium!"

Jobard just sat and stared at the massive Emporium before him, chuckling with amazement. It was just a chintzy mix of discount store and parking lot swap-meet, only with no air or gravity. But the garish blinking neon reminded him of colorful carnivals from his childhood, hinting at wonderful, fun adventures that awaited inside.

With its snap-together frame, the Great Emporium could be deconstructed and moved within 24 solar-standard hours. It could also be utterly demolished in a coordinated attack with even mid-level weaponry. But it had never been attacked. Everyone loved this place. It was the ultimate Specialty Store: something for absolutely everyone awaited inside. All that was required was enough currency—and courage.

Jobard wore his standard merc uniform, “breathable 3-piece” expandable mesh, neck to ankle under knee-high boots and arm cuff-shields. His “principal” weaponry was lined up down one thigh, “incidental” weaponry and necessary devices down the other thigh. And only Jobard knew which was which.

He pressed a small button under one arm, and a glowing “X” band across his bare chest glowed softly through his breathable-mesh shirt. It would top off the power to his weapons and devices through his suit and run a quick Med Check on his body. It was standard pre-Check anytime he left his craft—whether for business, battle, or pleasure. And he was hoping for a bit of all three in his first visit to the legendary Emporium.

The space-buoy off his right flank suddenly flared. His incoming comm sputtered as a crawl at the bottom of his main screen flashed “Automated Incoming Message. 73 Tags.” Jobard hit the “Delete Tags” button and opened his audio receiver.

“Welcome, Businessman Jobard!” came a cheerful greeting through an electronic translator. “We received your reservation, and everything in your background checks out with our generous approval. Since this is your first visit to our Great Emporium, we will waive any spending limits. But we must insist on you entering with only one hand weapon, set and locked on Non-Fatal-To-Intelligent-Life.”

Jobard swore softly. Although this was standard procedure for public businesses, especially in dangerous galaxy-edge zones, his main concern was which weapon was powerful enough to take down any enemy inside who recognized him—and still pass the Emporium’s Security inspection.

Mercs usually flew deceptively unassuming craft, but their hand weapons were always unique and personalized. In Jobard’s many travels he’d bought, begged, borrowed or made the best niche weapons he could find to assure himself of winning in any confrontation—anywhere, any time. But businesses had “Safety Concerns” and were not fond of random redecoration involving dead bad guys, blood-spray, holes in walls, or flying body parts.

Within minutes Jobard had parked and locked his craft. A parking lot ’Bot was waiting when he turned from lock-arming his craft, and it whisked him toward the round, blinking neon monstrosity that was the Great Culling Emporium. He was deposited at the front door after the PL ’Bot assigned him a transparent air-mix breather suitable for his humanoid species, one that fit over his nose and mouth but allowed audio in and out through a limited-range intercom. It also gave him a thick directional-propulsion belt so he could move around in zero-gravity with an attached complimentary merchandise bag for any purchases.

Within the Emporium, Jobard looked around keenly while he waited in line to present his weapon for inspection and clearance at Security. But he saw neither cephalopods with gang cartel colors nor furry bipeds with blue streaks using elaborate hand signals—both of which had been the “enemy” in his most recent mercenary wars.

Once Jobard’s weapon cleared and was holstered beneath an Alert! sticker (so security would know if he drew it, even if he didn’t fire), Jobard started mingling with the odd assortment of shoppers. There was an incredible array of intelligent species: bipeds to quadrupeds; some clothed, others naked with rough primitive skin. Some he’d never seen before in all his travels.

And everyone was shopping. Singular buyers who'd been there before and only wanted one thing skimmed in cork-screw circles before the Sellers' tables, fingers on the propulsion button on their directional-belts. They were usually in a hurry and had favorite Sellers they'd dealt with before—even if they had to coax that rare item out from under a dubious Seller's table with currency, barter, or threats.

Jobard was looking for several specific Sellers, too, but couldn't spot them among the throng of small Sellers' tables crushed together, lining almost the entire 360 degrees interior of the sphere. There was no listing of Sellers posted or any kind of maps showing where each Seller was located—understandable omissions in a galaxy-edge grand store of constantly changing shady merchants, some undoubtedly criminals with bounties on their heads. But they all had rare and desirable merchandise that could draw in buyers from all over the Milky Way. Or even other galaxies across the dark and dangerous void.

Jobard spotted his quarry in his first, slow visual-inspection past the Sellers' tables in the Specialty Hand Weapons section. The half-Reptilian's head was down, its yellow-slit eyes missing Jobard, who was not yet prepared to face his quarry. Jobard quickly turned and sped toward the clumps of new shoppers, led by chatty older females who were giving tours and cluttering up the middle space of the sphere.

The new shoppers were wide-eyed with amazement but unsure. Families and older folks hung together fearfully, wondering in whispers why most of the Sellers looked like escaped convicts. But the kids all loved the Emporium; they zipped around, testing the speed limits of their directional-propulsion belts—and refining their talents at collision-avoidance.

Also hovering on the edges of the hollow center were dangerous-looking mercs and Void Pirates. They collected in small, snarling groups of three or four, drifting and arguing among themselves. They were pooling their coins, rare mineral rocks, and jewels for a needed item. Or else they'd spotted an occasional Seller who had made a surprise appearance to sell something the shady buyers had wanted

for a long time. And so the loud arguing went on until everyone agreed on which Seller to honor with their “haven’t-quite-got-the-full-price” business.

Bang! One Seller with an over-sized propulsion vest had slammed his table-top traveling case of merchandise closed and, unlatched case under one arm, was speeding toward the closest transparent energy screen between the framework pieces. Close behind him was an angry buyer accusing the Seller of theft as more and more Security 'Bots joined the chase.

Fizzz-Crash! The Seller lasered himself an opening and leaped out of the Emporium and into the void. The offended buyer, still sputtering curses, followed with weapons in all tentacles, and fired madly once he was clear of the Emporium and their one-weapon security rules. The Security 'Bots stopped at the Emporium wall when they saw the disreputable Seller create a vortex in the space beyond and dive in.

Jobard had watched all this with his hand resting lightly on his holstered weapon. But now, except for some terrified newcomers heading speedily for the exit door, both calm and commerce were soon restored. Repair 'Bots swarmed toward the torn transparency where the Seller had just created his own exit.

Jobard eased his hand off his weapon and glanced around for his own quarry. The one-eyed Rep in the Armaments section was entertaining a potential buyer and seemed oblivious to the recent violence. Good.

Jobard then realized, based on everyone’s reaction, that these dangerous incidents must happen on a regular basis, so he needed to drop the leisurely touring and get down to business, in case one of these accidental incidents derailed his own dangerous plans.

Jobard tried the corkscrew maneuver the “regulars” used, systematically spiraling past most of the Seller’s tables in the Time/Space Manipulation area. He finally spotted what he was looking for and lowered to hover before an Insectoid Seller with six sparkling black eyes that watched Jobard keenly—but offered no greetings.

Anchored on his signless Seller's table were dark globs of once-melted metal glinting with half-hidden diamond dials and flint-points sticking up, probably to be attached to an exotic outside power source. There were also some glow-spots on each, which could indicate anything from "Full Power" to a "Firing Portal."

"These look like serviceable Dimension Disrupters," Jobard said matter-of-factly, passing his hand over the various melted globs and feeling the tell-tale buzz of prickly, sparking energy. They were all in working order all right, primed and ready to use. "Got any Atmo 'Rupters?" Jobard asked casually. "Ones that can force a dimension-rupture in a thunderstorm, like near a planet's surface?"

The Insectoid had been angling a few crooked antennae toward Jobard as he spoke, checking him out. Then the Insectoid quickly retracted his antennae and straightened. Bulging black eyes glinted as he studied the merc. "Them are illegal in most of this galaxy," the Insectoid replied in a gravelly voice from a translator at his throat. "I might have one of those Atmos. But you'd have to show me a special permit."

"OK," Jobard agreed, raising his hand. Above his Adam's Apple, he pulled down a small flap of skin with one finger. Just enough to show a small mesh of gold with alien writing that designated Jobard as a "Free-pass Hero" in the entire ancient empire of Tordalko, which still covered one-third of the Milky Way.

The Insectoid showed no signs of being impressed. But he clearly *did* know the importance of that tiny gold mesh implant. "And what do you plan on using the Atmo 'Rupter for, merc?"

"Getting my bounty out of this Emporium alive," answered Jobard in a quiet voice. "If he's in shape to immediately stand trial for the cold-blooded murder of ten colonists, I'll collect triple."

"And on that prosecuting colony," the Seller asked softly, "do they throw out murder cases on technicalities—and go after the illegal equipment some bounty-hunter used to catch that criminal?"

Jobard put his hand on the metal glob he'd determined was an Atmo and looked up to face the Insectoid. "No. You've got to have a real job to live in this colony, and be willing to live within its freedom-laws. Everything is plentiful and affordable. But no homeless, no advisers, no consultants, no lobbyists.

"Every life contributes, and every life is valuable," explained Jobard tensely. "You commit murder there, they'll chase you down, even into other galaxies if they have to. They want their murderers caught and prosecuted. Bad. And they're not the least bit interested in whatever illegal electronics or methods were used to bring that murderer to justice."

The Insectoid nodded stiffly and reached for the glob under Jobard's hand. "Sold."

Jobard knew she was in the Emporium somewhere, he could feel her. He didn't have a lot of time for chit-chat. But he decided to find her before he executed his plan, if only to make sure she was far from any potential danger.

He finally spied her toward the lower part of the sphere, where even smaller Sellers' tables were mashed together in the low-rent Arts and Crafts district. By contrast with the rest of the Sellers in the Emporium, these tables had cute signs and fascinating little items on all the table tops. The Sellers were mostly smiling women and older couples, happy to chat amiably with potential customers as younger kids zoomed excitedly from one table to another.

Jobard's chest tightened as he slowed to stop before her table, which was filled with crystalline figurines and jewelry. She wasn't crafting as much as she once did, it seemed to Jobard. But each piece was of laborious quality, and hopefully her horde of repeat buyers could find her here, in the great, mysterious Emporium. At least it appeared that she was making enough to get by.

She was bent over rearranging trinkets on her magnetic-mirror table-top. "Hey, Half-past Pretty," he said with a crooked smile, wondering if she'd recognize his voice through the breather.

Lomolly looked up to blink with surprise, and then her face flushed. She brushed strands of greying hair out of her face and breather and managed an unsure smile. "I'm sure I'm a little more than half-past pretty by now, merc-man. You look a little half-past something yourself. What's it been?"

"Fourteen and a half solar-standard years," Jobard answered quickly. "Give or take a Colony lunar month."

"Really? I hadn't kept track," she lied, glancing down. She wore a syntho-silk dress that showed her curves in shimmering shades of shifting blue, with filmy three-quarter length sleeves revealing multiple bracelets, metal to crocheted. He recognized the design of a colony flower in her crystalline necklace and earrings, probably of her own creation.

Her long hair, tied with lace at the nape of her neck, was still full and lush. Despite some grey hairs and an extra ten pounds, Lomolly hadn't changed much at all. Jobard wasn't sure he was that happy with her timeless beauty. He'd half-hoped she was dried-up and saggy by now, so he could finally let go of that painful heart-knot...

She looked up with a cautious smile. "You still a battling merc? Leaving blood on half the planets in this galaxy?"

"I'm...easing my way into retirement," he replied. "Mostly chasing bounties these days. Just one angry shooter instead of an army. Yeah, I know, full-cycle. You, uh, still slavishly devoted to...serial monogamy?"

She dropped her smile and sighed. "I was raised an orphan, Joby, you know that. I craved security and loving stability as I bounced from one relative's home to another. You and I had a lot of fun in high school, I even thought I loved you a few times. But then, when we were living together, you were always running off to fight some merc war."

"And I'd come back to find you married. Again," answered Jobard softly, the fury and pain having ebbed away over the years. "Are you, uh, married or involved now?"

Lomolly laughed. “Ah, my merc-man was always direct. The answer is ‘No’, I’ve been divorced for six years. I’m concentrating on my art stuff now.” Her eyes misted as she turned away from him. “All the men I’d married were kind, stable and generous men. But their idea of ‘security and loving support’ meant stuffing me in a big house while they traveled ‘on business’ most of the time. And they all seemed to have a different mistress in every city.”

She looked up sadly. “At least your feelings for me never changed, Jobard. I finally figured out that you just had Adventure and Heroism in your blood; it’s what drives you. So you’re just... not the marrying kind.”

Maybe I am now, Jobard thought to himself as he stared at her intently. He could feel her pain and disappointment over how her life had turned out. And he knew he’d caused a lot of it by refusing to settle down with her in the Colony, with a family and a boring career.

He’d been born restless and curious, and too anxious to battle evil. But she’d never know how much he’d dreamed about her over the years, waking with a start in smoky battlefields or lying bandaged and drugged from wounds. His love for her had sustained him in the darkest of times and had never faded. She was the one woman he could never get out of his head—or heart.

“Actually, I’m, uh, headed back to the Colony with a bounty,” he said, indicating the floating mesh bag with the dimensional device attached to his propulsion belt. “Got a nice little house on a granite shelf out over Critter Lake. Wondered if you might want to come back with me, Lolly. For a visit. You know, to see how the Colony’s changed. Maybe look up old friends or your Art School.”

“Maybe,” she shrugged. “Let me think about it.”

Jobard nodded, a little disappointed, then had an idea. “You, uh, still remember how to fly my ship?” he asked. “Remember how we used to catch criminals and aliens who’d sneaked into the Colony, and were hiding out in the equator caves? I’d fight ‘em, catch ‘em and bag ‘em, and you’d drive my ship in that get-the-hell-outta-here mode, dodging bullets and beams? And then we’d split the bounty.”

“Oh yeah,” she answered vaguely. “And that’s when you decided you wanted to be a mercenary.”

She rolled up her left sleeve to expose her inner elbow. There was a diagram tattoo, with tiny flower tattoos interspersed amid or at the ends of the lines. “See? I had your craft’s flight console turned into a tattoo, after our last argument fourteen years ago, when I thought you were gone for good.”

Jobard could only stare. “That’s my flight controls all right. But what’s with the flowers?”

“I love flowers,” she shrugged. “At least our Colony flowers. So the first letter of each flower corresponds to the first letter of each important part of your flight console. The Landan means Lift-off, the Serpium means the Speed controls, and so on.”

Jobard didn’t know what to say. “I...thought we were over fourteen years ago. So why did you do that?”

“Cause flying your ship to catch bounties was the one intense thing where both our lives intersected, besides sex,” she replied. “We built that ship together from scraps. And that was just...so exciting and fun, tearing off to go catch some alien criminal hiding out in the caves.”

She looked up, blushing again. “I may have married a long string of the wrong men who never really loved me. But you always loved me, Joby. And I vowed that if you ever came back into my life, I was going to be ready and able to once again be the best get-away driver you ever had!”

With only a few orphan molecules inside the air-less Emporium sphere, Jobard knew that he had no “atmo insulation” problems. As planned, all he had to do was find the greatest collection of electrons inside the sphere and use his dimensional-disrupter at its lowest setting to snag his quarry.

Jobard bought some small electron capture-cubes and found the perfect place to hide them in the calm Large Appliance section. He

then entered the spot as a focal point on his tracking device.

Jobard did another quick spiral through the Emporium, starting at the lower Arts and Crafts section. He smiled when he saw that Lomolly's tiny table was empty and she was gone. A Cleaning 'Bot was vigorously rubbing down the table for the next Seller, so she'd terminated her Seller space. His plan was in motion.

While checking out the rest of the Emporium from the center void, his gaze drifting toward the Specialty Hand Weapons section, Jobard put his hand over his holstered weapon and used a finger-nail to scrape off the Alert! sticker. Security 'Bots suddenly appeared around him, meters away. Jobard waved at them with his gun hand, so they could see that his weapon was still holstered.

It was a trade-off: Jobard didn't want the Security 'Bots messing up his plan to catch his bounty by showing up in force like this when he drew his weapon and broke their Alert! tab on his handgun, but now he knew that at least one 'Bot would be following him around the Emporium from that point on. He'd chosen one Security 'Bot at a distance over a sudden horde. Still a problem, but a more manageable problem to his merc way of thinking.

Jobard sped toward his target, the half-blind Reptilian, as soon as there was empty space at his Seller's table in the Specialty Hand Weapons section. Jobard zoomed above and behind the Reptilian since he was fairly certain the Rep would recognize him, so he needed that element of surprise.

Thump! Jobard attached a small bounty-law recorder to the Rep's ear. The killer Reptilian jittered a moment, his one good eye blinking, as the bounty-law recorder temporarily disrupted his brain waves. The device poured all the necessary information in the Rep's ear (in his own language) about how he was under arrest for murder by a duly-authorized bounty hunter, and the few rights his sorry-ass had at this moment.

The Security 'Bot hovering a few meters away did nothing, as a few blinking lights on its head meant it was picking up the same bounty-law recording and forwarding the data to the Emporium's Security

Central computer. Momentarily immobilized, the Rep just hovered as Jobard located and removed the several hand weapons attached to his body. Then Jobard attached a small round disc to the Rep's directional-propulsion belt to maintain the anti-gravity aspect but immobilize the propulsion option.

The Rep began to fight his immobilization with jerky movements as on-lookers drifted toward them. The Security 'Bot kept hovering nearby, undoubtedly under orders to not interfere with a legal bounty arrest.

Jobard grabbed his dimensional-disrupter, floating in the mesh bag attached to his belt, and turned it on to align with where his tracking device was marking the electron cubes. But nothing happened. Jobard swore sharply as the Rep growled, his hands making jerky movements toward the empty holsters where Jobard had just removed his hand weapons.

Jobard grabbed the dimensional-disrupter angrily and noticed that the mesh bag was glowing slightly. Damn! It meant that the Emporium's contributed sale bag was deliberately stifling electronic signals. Probably standard issue for the dangerous electronics and weapons sold inside the Emporium. Jobard quickly tethered the drifting Reptilian criminal to his waist then let go to use both hands to pull his dimensional-disrupter out of its "deadening" bag.

A crowd was beginning to gather to watch. And besides the hovering Security 'Bot now keeping the nosey on-lookers back, another Security 'Bot was approaching Jobard directly. Jobard stayed focused, roughly pulling his dimensional-disrupter out of the mesh bag and aiming it at the section where he'd hidden the electron cubes. *Fizz!* A connection was made, and his DD device glowed and started vibrating.

"*You...are...dead, Merc!*" sputtered the one-eyed Rep, having managed to slowly spin around to face—and recognize—Jobard.

"Not likely," Jobard replied, one hand arming the DD and his other holding the Rep's arm, ready for departure.

“I must put another Alert! sticker on your holstered weapon,” said the approaching Security 'Bot, small sticker out-stretched in one hand.

Frustrated, Jobard drew his “cleared” weapon. “It’s not holstered anymore!” *Blast!* A laser beam zipped through the vacuum and hit the Security 'Bot in the bulls-eye drawn on its torso. It was the non-damaging target for getting away from a Security 'Bot and not facing charges of “destruction of property.” The Great Culling Emporium thought of everything to keep its customers happy and keep them coming back.

Crack! A lightning bolt flashed through the Emporium from the hidden electron cubes to Jobard’s dimensional-disrupter. The brilliant bolt avoided people, repulsed by their directional belts. But Jobard and the one-eyed Reptilian were suddenly gone.

Jobard and the Rep popped back in about a quarter-kilometer from the Emporium, both still wearing their breathers and belts set on hover. Jobard’s ship immediately zoomed toward them as he grappled with tying the Rep’s hands and feet. He’d meant to do that in the Emporium, but conditions had deteriorated too fast.

Lomolly slowed just long enough to scoop up Jobard and his sputtering criminal. Jobard glanced back at the Great Emporium as he wrestled the one-eyed Reptilian aboard his ship. One last little lightning bolt branched and tore through the outer wall, leaving burned patches, as frightened customers streamed out the front door. And a bright glow from the Major Appliance section probably meant the Security 'Bots were destroying his hidden electron cubes.

Lomolly quickly checked her arm tattoo and then the “emergency vortices” list on-screen. Jobard’s boots automatically grav-locked on the floor of his craft as he tugged the still-hovering but now gravity-bound criminal to his on-board Pit. There, Jobard roughly threw the screaming murderer and locked an energy-screen over the opening.

Crinkle-thud! The sound of breaking glass was heard as the Rep landed at the bottom of his storage pit. Jobard realized it was where

Lomolly had stored all the little crystalline crafts she sold. A panting Jobard tossed aside the smoldering dimensional-disrupter glob as he hurriedly sound-locked his storage pit. He swore softly as he ripped the breather off his sweating face.

“We’re just three vortices away from the Colony, Joby!” Lomolly called out from the front console, the craft streaking toward the first vortex. “I figure I’ll stay with you for a week, to see how it goes,” she added over her shoulder.

Jobard glanced at the sealed pit, the Rep now standing and throwing pieces of crystalline figurines with great soundless fury up at the energy screen over the opening. “Uh, I think you’ll be with me a little longer than that,” Jobard replied, moving toward the front of his craft.

Lomolly glanced at him, frowning, but Jobard just smiled and shrugged. “But, hey, you can help me build a quality glass-blower set-up and kiln in my Colony house. For, you know, whenever you come to visit and want to do a little...craft-making.”

Marilyn is a freelance genre author, poet and humorist. In 2016, she had stories appear in the Third Flatiron anthology "Keystones", "Refractions" teen magazine, and "PerihelionSF". She also has about a dozen stories/books on Amazon, from Steampunk Western to Medieval Royal Fantasy to her best seller "The Best Computer Humor On The Web".

ACTION!

EXCITEMENT!

MUD MEN!

On a distant planet, a man must choose between love and hate. And where his choice leads him might not be where he expects...

GREY CAT BLUES

by JD Cowan



The Toads of Machu Hampacchu

By LOUISE SORENSEN

Her battle to the death with one of the Elders of Deodanth has left Darla tormented and in danger for her life should she remain in the city! But will the work that she's found as a guide for a strange group of pilgrims prove to be even more dangerous?!

The Elders came from the stars. They live forever. To kill one is unthinkable, contract or no contract, yet I had done so.

When I ate, I relived the Elder's slimy hunger. My head ached all the time. On the streets, I would hear leathery wings dragging the pavement, see writhing tentacles out of the corner of my eye. When I looked, there was nothing, and it left me trembling. I no longer took Rageth, my faithful dog, hunting or to the Undersea for a swim, or even down to the coast to laze on a beach, but crept out with her during daylight, on small jobs. And more than once, I heard the creak of leathery wings, only to see an Elder, its size diminished by distance, circling overhead. Friend to the one I slew?

All that long winter I was plagued by nightmares and visions. I could eat no meat, for the sadness that the death of animals caused me, so subsisted on plant matter. By the time the weather started to warm, I was thin as a winter hare. I judged it best to leave Deodanth for a time, hoping the Elders' attention would settle elsewhere. And resolving to make no more enemies, I attached myself to the first expedition that arrived.

Deodanth is a gateway to lost civilizations. But the Elders, the tunnels to the Undersea, and life in Deodanth are no business of those from away, so my job was to guide the Strangers down-mountain and north, to a hidden valley of ancient human ruins.

It seemed an easy task, as I had been to those ruins before.

The expedition leader was Kerr, a jovial man I'd met before. But this time, the Strangers he brought were all large people with weighty names, Bronten, Pounder, Zaggen, Fletter. Even the woman, Mayanne, slapped the pavement like a giant penguin with each step. Without light Deodanthan names to gentle their way down mountain

paths, they were apt to tumble off a cliff. As the paths were still icy in places, I guided them on the safest ways, but it was slow going.

Halfway there, we breasted a ridge and sighted the familiar ruins of Machu Hampacchu. Its great blocks of yellow stone nestled in the grassy valley. There were so many carvings of toads covering its walls that people believed the ancient humans there worshipped them. At the sight, Kerr uttered a cry and urged me forward. Someone pushed me, my foot got caught on my staff, and I fell on my face. When I looked up, instead of a winding gravel trail, the path was an icy chute arrowing down-mountain to pierce the heart of the toad. A terrible wind lifted me, yet the Strangers paraded past, unperturbed. I was sucked into the air, higher and higher, until the Strangers were like ants.

Abruptly, the wind died. I dropped, but my stomach remained behind. The path rushed up and I shut my eyes. Only when my hands gripped pebbles did I know that I was lying on the path, that it was rocky and dry, and that I had never been flying. I felt the cold chuckle of an Elder in my mind. *How do you like that, little flea?* The rustle of wings faded as it flew away. Little flea? What had I ever done to incur the wrath of an Elder? Aside from killing one. I would have thought they recognized the justice of my actions.

The Strangers were far ahead, and I had lost sight of them, but I could not move. Every time I imagined getting up, I saw the wind blowing me away, or slipping on the ice all the way down the mountain. "Not so," I muttered. Never was there a wind that strong on these mountains. I could not be blown away. Would not be blown away. Or perhaps I might anyway, but it would at least end the Elder's torment. I grasped my staff and stood. There was no wind. I rubbed my boot on the path and sounded it with my staff. Rock and pebbles.

When I went to follow the Strangers, my path was blocked by an ugly little creature, a companion animal of the Elders—a long-bodied, short-legged sleex. Like the Elders, they're usually solitary. Their hairy, almost humanly embryonic, faces combine with a nasty temperament.

This sleex was raising and lowering itself on its front legs, threatening to attack. My heart lurched. Without thinking, I crushed its head in with my staff and fired it off the mountain.

Running to catch up with the Strangers left me no energy to brood about taking a life, and I did not blow away. But they had taken a wrong turn, and it took me hours to find them. We lost the light, and camped on a ledge.

The whole next day we retraced our steps. In all that long trek, there was no further attack, and by the time we reached Machu Hampacchu, I had regained some peace of mind.

We camped on a rise ten minutes from the ruins, in a cluster of collapsed walls and fallen stones. But we were to be there for weeks, and our supplies were sorely depleted. The strangers glugged like dark fish on our meat, and still their stomachs growled.

On the third day of short rations, as the others fanned out to study the city of toad carvings and runes, I went out to hunt and found my dog Rageth waiting outside the camp. She was well fed and smug. My heart lifted.

“Mountain goat,” I said, and she led me upslope.

We had been a few hours out when we spotted a small herd, white as snowflakes, nibbling early grasses on a cliff. Aside from the sleex, I had abstained from killing and eating meat since I killed the Elder.

The goats took small cautious bites, their heads bobbing up constantly, sniffing the air. We could not get close. Finally, knowing I would get no rest from the Strangers, I loaded my sling and cast a rock at a yearling. It bounced off his hard head and the rest of the flock scattered. I immediately regretted my action and wished he would turn and run, but he shivered and collapsed. Rageth sprang to his side and worried his belly.

“Rageth, hold!” She stopped, disgust writ large upon her. “Patience!” She waited, but not patiently. In matters of her stomach, Rageth is not patient.

The rough rock gave good footing. I scrambled to the kid, and thinking it might still live, poked it. Dead. I dressed it, marvelling that I felt no pain when my knife cut its flesh, and gave Rageth the guts. It took two hours to haul the carcass back to camp, where Mayanne, without thanks, hacked off a haunch to prepare for supper. I butchered the rest and stored it in an icy cairn, and the hide, too, disgusted that the meat wouldn't last long enough to age properly. The head and legs I gave Rageth.

Savoury aromas from the cook tent brought the Strangers back from the ruins for supper. Mayanne was a gifted cook, and for the first time in months, my mouth watered for meat. But when Zaggen arrived, he took one look at Rageth and her bloody bones, screamed, "Monster!" and drew his gun. She dodged, and bullets ricocheted off the stone where she had rested.

"Stop!" I ran to Zaggen and jogged his arm. "That's my dog."

Fletter aimed his gun, and I knocked it from his hand. "That's not a monster, fool, that's my dog." He looked at me in horror and held his arms in front of his face. Zaggen slammed a fist into my chest, which knocked me down. I jumped up, mad enough to kill, but controlled myself and drove them back with my staff.

"Is this how you treat your guide?" I yelled, and pointed to Rageth, who peeked around the stone. "That's my dog. She helped catch your supper. Is this how you say thanks?" They shook themselves and warbled at me in their lilting tongue. I realized then I was speaking Deodanthan, and explained myself in broken stranger-speak, adding that certain flowers in the area give off fumes that cause visions. There are such flowers, but they weren't yet in bloom.

"Okay," they said, "okay," and making signs against evil, hurried to the cook tent. Again I heard the flap of leathery wings and felt that silent chuckle. What visions of Rageth and me had the Elder visited upon them?

Afterwards, Zaggen avoided me, drifting away whenever I drew near, but Fletter ever cast me curious glances and was always lurking, watching, and studying, his pen forever scratching at his

journal. He attempted no conversation but looked innocent whenever I caught him at it. I moved my tent farther from the others and slept lightly, knife and staff within reach, with Rageth on watch.

As the Elder haunted my dreams, it seemed too that a miasma of gloom emanated from the ancient city, as though the toads of Machu Hampacchu were unhappy with the invasion of warmbloods. I was familiar with the ruins from previous expeditions, so to escape the melancholy of the camp, I spent time with Rageth, hunting, practicing with my staff and exploring down-mountain for roots and berries for Mayanne to add to the pot. I was delighted to find a field of snow orchids near camp. The flowers last for weeks after being picked. I put one in my hair, and gave one to Mayanne, to cheer her up. But over the next few days, the Strangers lost all heart, and huddled around the campfire, telling ghost stories and devouring our supplies.

Finally, they wouldn't even leave their sleeping bags, though the atmosphere, in comparison to what I had experienced for months, didn't seem that bad to me. With some effort, I roused them and added a large measure of stim leaves to their morning brew. Thinking a return to routine would help, I chided them into getting dressed, except for Doc Pounder, a crusty old fellow who would never leave his tent. The rest I herded to the ruins. The tea did its work, and they joked a little as we trotted down the path.

I was astonished to see the walls of the ruins crowded, flooded, overrun, with carvings of toads, far more than I recalled. Some seemed to shift slightly and watch us as we passed, yet when I looked back, they were in their original positions. An exceptionally large one, with fangs like tusks and a mouth wide enough to swallow a pony, wore a necklace of skeletal human hands. Kerr, excited about their finds, tried to read some of the runes to me, but the whispers in the air tormented the borders of our hearing and drowned his voice. Finally, he wiped his brow, and pleading a headache, gave everyone the day off.

The next morning I awoke to screams, for once not my own, and the stink of rotten fish. Through the shreds of my tent, I glimpsed Strangers running around half dressed, pursued by giant flesh and

blood toads, brown with orange warts, as unnatural as the ones in the carvings. I tried to rise. A heavy weight pressed me down. I was eye to orb with an Elder. A moss-coloured tentacle, creased like old leather, pressed my throat. *Betrayer*, it sighed. *Breakfast? Or lunch?*

“Beg your pardon?” I gasped.

You’ve made life interesting. Changed me in ways I could never have predicted. But play must end. So. Breakfast? Or lunch?

I pushed the tentacle away and sat up. It coiled round my waist. “Changed you?”

You killed me. Do you not recall? I would have thought such an act would stand out in your memory.

“If I killed you, why aren’t you dead?” I clapped a hand over my mouth, wishing for once I could think before speaking. All around, the Strangers fled toads, but their screams were weakening. Fletter, ever near, looked at me in terror, then tripped. Immediately, a huge toad, fangs flashing, necklace of bony hands clacking, opened its whale-like mouth and swallowed him.

I would have screamed, but the Elder cocked its massive head. They are colder than cold. My breath formed a plume, lassitude claimed me. The membranes of its wings were clear, rainbowed near the edges. I counted nine twitching tentacles before giving up. Was this the Elder that had stolen Brevert and thrown me into the deadly garden? Elders’ laws ensure order, and Deodanthans often go to them for judgement. But I had personally experienced an Elder’s thoughts. Too weary to speak, I cast a thought. *Judgement be damned, you were in the wrong and you know it! I was the one meting out justice, and I’d do it again!* I reached for my staff. But it was . . . it was . . . I couldn’t remember.

The Elder chuckled. *When you stirred my brains, it gave excruciating pain.* It dipped a tentacle into my head. Freezing pain. *And yet, it changed my way of looking at things. After aeons of same.* Zigzags of madness streaked its thoughts.

That's a good thing. Right? I sensed it making up its mind. Breakfast or lunch? *How about neither? How about we call it even?*

It can never be even between us, little flea.

My vision faded. I floated in a sea of gray, but sensed the Elder there still. At the edge of consciousness, Rageth fretted. I groped beside me, grasped something, and swung it at the creature as hard as I could. I felt no impact. The Elder laughed, a sound so deep I thought my ears would bleed. And suddenly my sight cleared. Rageth, all claws and teeth, had seized the imprisoning tentacle. The Elder released me and flew off, still laughing.

The giant toads pursuing the Strangers evaporated into the morning mist. Kerr, Zaggen, and Mayanne stopped running and looked around. Kerr, normally the most polite and cheerful of the group, yelled angrily, "Mayanne! What did you put in that stew?"

Mayanne flung the snow orchid from her hair and fixed me with a murderous stare. "What was that meat you brought us?"

"Any idiot could see it was goat," I croaked, rubbing my throat. Rageth growled low, and Mayanne stepped back. My tent was a shambles, soaked in the fermented fish reek of an Elder. Words entered my mind, and I repeated them, in a voice heavy with disdain. "The toads dwelt here long before your kind walked the planet. Their spirits linger. You were privileged to witness them." With expressions somewhere between astonishment and horror, the Strangers hurried off.

Get out of my head! I slammed my mind shut on the Elder and found my staff by my bedding, right where I'd left it. I shook it. *Come back and fight like a Deodanthan.* More laughter. How do you kill something you've already killed? *If you come back, I'll kill you again.* When something rummages through your mind, its mind opens to you as well—and I knew the Elder's name! I wiped cold sweat from my brow. *Or . . . I'll tell your fellows what you did, SwimsEndlessDark.*

At the mention of its name, the creature radiated dismay. I never considered that it could easily flick me off the mountain before I could

use the knowledge against it, but at that moment, I felt it gone.

Fletter was missing. We searched the camp, the ruins, and the surrounding valley. The Strangers convinced themselves that he must have fallen off a cliff in the morning fog. But in my mind I heard him sobbing, sobbing.

I could not sleep. I knew one place where Fletter might be, but I'd had enough of peculiar entities. But if I didn't go after him, I wasn't much of a guide or a Finder, and I'd better start looking for another job. And maybe he wouldn't be there. Maybe he had fallen off a cliff. It's true that Fletter wasn't my favourite person. His language was weird, he had strange customs, and spying on me was rude and annoying, but he was a fellow human.

One evening, while the others were arguing whether to stay or go home, I hiked to the ruins. Only the faintest of whispers distressed the air. Fletter's blood must have propitiated those old spirits.

It took a while to locate the carving of the huge fanged toad with the necklace of hands. It wasn't where I had first seen it, but following the current of Fletter's sadness, I found it in the heart of the city, deep in a building we called the Temple. I studied the carving for a long time while its whispers crept over my skin like jungle vines. It smelled pleasantly of ancient meadows, grass, and flowers. I held my hand against its stone neck and it startled to awareness. *Darla of Sarnath!*

What a strange and terrible greeting! I froze at the mention of that cursed place. "I beg your pardon. I don't know how you knew my name, but I have never been there . . . I am not from . . . that place. I am Darla of Deodanth!"

Many and many years have passed. But your blood has the scent of doomed Sarnath. In joy, in the name of friend, I, Anxiorax, bid you come dwell within!

I had heard of no joy in the doomed city of Sarnath and steeled myself to remain calm. Fletter was in there, sobbing.

“I have no desire to join you at this time, friend. But I thank you for the invitation. I seek my brother . . . He does not seem happy dwelling within. If you release him, I will give you a drop of my blood.”

Why would I want a drop of your blood when I could reach out and have you whole?

I resisted the urge to protest such treachery or flee, and worked to keep my voice steady. “He is a poor specimen. One drop of my blood freely given is worth ten of him. I am favoured by an Elder.” A small exaggeration.

The toad snorted. *What need have I of blood? I have all the blood in the world.* It shook itself, and the bones of its necklace rattled.

“Plus, I know something you don’t.” The Elder’s name.

What need have I of secrets? I know all the secrets in the world.

Through my touch, it sensed sincerity. I sensed endless hunger. I had nothing left to bargain. I couldn’t think of anything a spirit might want, if not blood or secrets. Or sacrifices, worship. But there were so many gods and spirits howling for worship these days . . . I would give it none. “What then, do you need?” I tightened my grip on my staff, ready to brace myself if Anxiorax tried to draw me in.

It heaved a long sigh, weary as a dying wind. *Sunlight. Breezes. Flowers.*

I plucked the snow orchid from my hair and held it out. “I would give you this.”

It pondered my offering. *Insufficient.*

“I will also plant a garden of them in front of this house. But first, you must release my brother. Unharmred. Whole. Alive.”

The toad considered overlong and slithered its tongue over a fang. I willed it not to harm me. Sweat stung my eyes. I dared not blink but tensed for flight. And then . . . and then it reached out a stone paw, took the flower, and set it on its neck. The sparkling white petals changed, stem to tip, to yellow stone. The creature’s necklace fell to

the floor, the skeletal hands puffing into dust, and a thin chain of sun metal glinted there. I looked at the toad. "For me?"

It inclined its head. *Even so.*

"My thanks." I picked up the necklace, shook off the dust, which scattered into motes of light, and fastened it round my neck. It felt like it belonged.

I release it. Fletter was vomited forth from the carving.

I stood him up. His pupils seemed normal. "What's your name? How many fingers?" I waved three.

"Three." He swayed. "Fletter."

"You've been missing." I put my hand on his shoulder and willed him to believe me. "You have a bump on your head and a bad headache. Are you okay?"

"No." He felt his forehead. "I bumped my head. I've had bad dreams. My head aches."

The Strangers accepted Fletter's confused memories and stayed to continue their studies. They warmed up to me and included me in their friendly meals and campfire talk. I responded the best I could. Socializing is not my strength.

One lazy afternoon, when even the old Doc had tottered down to the city, Rageth and I were alone in camp enjoying the sun. I felt a shadow momentarily block the light. The breeze went cold and Rageth gave an alarmed "Whuf!" I opened my eyes and sat up to the sight of a black mass filling the valley, oozing towards us. As it closed in, I could make out an army of sleex. Teeth chittering, the rat-slaughtering horde was racing towards us.

I had camped too far away from the others to shelter in the stones. The path to the city was cut off, the cliffs too far away. There was nowhere to run. Rageth and I took a stand, and I felt no qualms at slashing and crushing legions of sleex with my staff. Rageth was an angel of death, ripping and tossing, but we were eventually overrun and blanketed in furry vermin. They didn't bite all over, but went for

my throat, their little claws scratching. It is their way, to drain the blood from their victims. I covered my throat, and my hand touched the toad's gift, the necklace. A moment later I smelled ancient meadows and heard a heavy body plop beside me, then another, and another. In no time at all, the sleex smothering Rageth and me were gone, leaving us with only scratches. We sprang up to fight, but no foe was within reach.

Anxiorax, the flower glistening on his neck, and two others, gobbled sleex. Then we saw that hundreds of toads had also joined the feast, their ten-foot-long tongues catching up scores of the vermin at a time. When the last sleex was devoured, Anxiorax gave me an approving nod. *You are a good creature to be around.* With satisfied grumbles, the whole army faded from sight.

Before we left, I planted a garden. Sunlight. Breezes. Flowers.

Louise weaves the reality of her life with fantasy. In the heart of all her stories is a core of truth. She lives in eastern Ontario, Canada, with two dogs, three cats, five horses and ponies, and a terrific spouse.



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In the Land of Hungry Shadows

By ADRIAN COLE

With danger and uncertainty mounting on the old human homeworld, the battle is taken to the Brotherhood of the Goat! But will the inhuman terrors lurking in the cult's darkest and most ancient strongholds overcome Voruum and his companion!?

PART I:

THE CITADEL OF TERROR

Kyron Morgath studied the broken skyline of the ancient city of Karkesh, as though it would divulge secrets hidden for an age. There were many clutched in its forbidding, crumbling streets. The Councillor turned to the man before him, Arrul Voruum, the witchfinder. Voruum was sun-scorched, his skin a deep bronze with a reddened tint, evidence of his blood-line as a Garganian, a man born on Mars, once a major administrative centre for the fallen Zurjahn Empire.

“Are you rested?” said Morgath.

Voruum had been back from the remote east and the Forbidden City for a week. Events there—a dangerous rebellion—had taxed him both physically and mentally, leaving a few scars. A longer break from the dangers of his work would have been welcome, but he had no love for Karkesh. Once known as the Black City, Karkesh had been a bastion of evil forces which yet writhed like serpents in its underworld.

“You have fresh work for me?”

“There is always more,” said Morgath, his lined face sullen. “You and others like you, Voruum, have made Karkesh less of a threat to the peace of the world. Sadly, it has won you enemies here. It would be well for you to leave.”

Voruum was under no illusions: he knew there would be assassins searching for him in this city, potentially lurking behind every shadowed pillar. He waited for the Councillor to elucidate.

Morgath turned again to the view of the city. Garish sunlight gleamed on his hair, which was swept back from a high forehead and down over his shoulders. Two large earrings, the Councillor's sole concession to ornamentation, caught the light.

"It is somewhat ironic," Morgath said. "The more we beat back those who still seek to bring chaos to the world, the deeper they dig themselves into its contaminated heart. We can never sleep."

Voruum waited. The Councillor was one of few men he trusted—a man who genuinely seemed to work against corruption and vice. He was a rare man in these times, when an easier life awaited those who chose deception and capitulation to the forces of darkness.

"Do you know anything of the land of Quumarza? It lies far to the east, in a zone that men rarely visit. Few have journeyed there since the remote days of the old wars, centuries ago."

"I know only that it's said to be damaged beyond hope of reclamation. Even when the Zurjahn Empire ruled the worlds, its servants kept well clear of the place. An inhospitable desert."

"Quite. Yet it is not without life. We sent one of our agents, Ruic Aldaar, there to investigate certain rumours. We have good reason to believe he was murdered. We found his corpse in a shallow grave. His death was covered up, of course, blamed on the hostile environment."

Voruum frowned. Too many of his fellow agents had died on this world. Witchfinders were a solitary breed and communicated rarely with each other, preferring the path of the lone wolf. There was a perverse kind of security in that. Yet when one fell, the death was felt by the others. He'd never met Ruic Aldaar, but he'd known of the man and his work.

"You want me to follow up."

“Yes. We have contacts at the very edge of Quumarza. All I need is for you to learn the facts—who killed Aldaar, and why—and find out if there is good cause to enter that land. I must have irrefutable evidence that will demand action. If you can get me this, I will be commissioned to deploy a small task force. Entry into Quumarza is not work for a single witchfinder, Voruum. Travel even more discreetly. Slip away from Karkesh before your enemies know you’ve gone.”

My enemies, thought Voruum. *In this place, every stone is a potential killer.*

Kaspel pointed to the scarp where the brilliant light of midday gave the rocks a white glow and heat shimmered like fluid glass. He and Voruum had been travelling for several weeks, riding across vast wastelands and open deserts, clinging to the infrequent rivers that filtered down from the high lands to the northeast. They’d slipped away from distant Karkesh, unseen and unmolested, although Voruum had known the city stirred in its sleep like some vast, coiled beast. Perhaps it would never free itself of the evil that had once permeated its very atmosphere.

Kaspel was little more than a score of summers old, and though he had been raised in the scorching deserts of the west, this terrain taxed him almost as much as it did Voruum. Even so, his determination to remain with the witchfinder never wavered, and while Voruum treated no man or youth as a servant, he was glad of the companionship. Kaspel always referred to himself as Voruum’s squire and acted accordingly. For now, the arrangement suited them both.

“A pass,” said the youth.

“We’ll climb it,” said Voruum, “and rest at its upper edge.”

The hybrid desert horses they rode were showing signs of exhaustion. They had been pushed to their limits in these unusually parched and inhospitable lands. It took an hour to reach the upper crags of the pass where the two dismounted. Their steeds, too worn

to wander far from the cooler shadows of the rock overhang, fed on the few shrubs clinging to the otherwise bare rocks.

Voruum studied the land that opened out beyond through the battered binoculars he had owned since he was a child on Gargan. He saw land that fell dramatically away beyond the scarp, so deeply that its far surface was lost in dust clouds. On either side of the pass, the ridge of low mountains ran roughly southeast to northwest in an endless chain of jagged peaks, the slight curve of the scarp offering no obvious way downward. The steeds would certainly be incapable of descending.

“Our outpost, Ul Hudzir, should be further up the scarp,” he said to Kaspel.

“Is that Quumarza?” The youth indicated the deep drop down into the measureless dustbowl.

“Somewhere down there. Our steeds will get us to Ul Hudzir before nightfall. Its keeper will provide us with information.”

“How do you think Ruic Aldaar died?” asked Kaspel, who had been loath to broach the subject.

“It may be that Quumarza was protecting a secret. If Ruic Aldaar unearthed it, he may have paid for the knowledge with his life. Perhaps the keeper at Ul Hudzir will know something.”

It took them a few more hours to wind their way along the minimal path of the scarp. As the sun slowly sank beyond the peaks, the endless land of dust and stone below them was swallowed by shadows that crept out from the ridge, a deep, black tide, obscuring even the dust clouds, creating a fathomless sea, lifeless and silent, like the surface of a moon.

Ul Hudzir suddenly rose up, its angular architecture bleached and cracked, wedged in the crags as if dropped there as an afterthought. The path to its tall gates twisted through spurs of rock, and the steeds increased their pace, sensing water beyond the walls. The two men must have been seen, for the gates swung inward. Voruum sensed

an invisible net around the towers, a mental defence set there by the unseen guardian. It was not hostile.

Voruum followed the two steeds in cautiously. A trap was unlikely, but he was always alert, prepared to fight if need be. Kaspel watched the gates swing shut, looking up at the ramparts above them, but he saw no one. A few birds, hawks perhaps, floated in slow circles in the last of the sunlight. Inside the outpost, there was a cramped square with buildings rising up on either side as if they had been chopped from the stone. Black windows gaped, but there were no visible lights.

The steeds crossed the square to a stone trough and dipped their long necks, drinking thirstily. Voruum led Kaspel to a set of steps which led up to the front of the buildings. They climbed, still prepared for any treachery. The silence enveloped them like a mist. Ul Hudzir appeared to have been abandoned, long since.

“Wait here,” said Voruum at the top of the stair. Kaspel nodded, taking up his place in shadows beside the door. He studied the outpost spread out below, the shaped stones poking from the native rock like bones.

Voruum pushed the wooden door, which gave way easily enough to his touch. There was a low hall beyond, lit by a few flickering lights, an old technology that someone must be keeping effective. Voruum crossed the hall to a smaller stair. It was clear of dust and looked recently used. He climbed it and found another, smaller hall beyond. There was more ancient light and, at last, a figure sitting at a low table. It was a man, robed in simple garb, his face deeply lined with age, his thinning white hair framing a face that seemed familiar with pain.

“Arrul Voruum?” said the old man, lifting a hand in greeting. “I was told you would come.”

Voruum nodded, stepping forward slowly. He slid a parchment across the table, and the old man took it, giving it a cursory study.

“From Karkesh,” he said. “Kyron Morgath sent you. This is his seal. Well, you’ll want to refresh yourself before getting a night’s rest. Is

your squire joining us?”

Voruum nodded again before asking “Are you alone?” It seemed a lifeless and foreboding place to be incarcerated, even for an old man.

“There is one other here. You’ll meet her tomorrow. She’s—hunting. I am Gavannion. This has been my home for most of my life. It wasn’t always a shell. Once it was full of life.” Regret vied with tiredness in his voice. “Bring your squire in. I’ll get food and water. Then we can talk.”

Voruum turned back to the door. He paused as the old man rose and started to quit the chamber. “Was Ruic Aldaar here?” Voruum asked him.

“He was. When he left, in a great hurry, he carried something with him out onto the ridge and down into the westlands. Morgath’s men found his body, but that was all.”

Voruum fetched Kaspel, and they sat at the table. They did not have long to wait before Gavannion joined them, setting down plates of surprisingly rich meat and gravy. The two travellers ate voraciously and drank the icy water their host provided. Kyron Morgath had said Gavannion was to be trusted, a reliable servant of the government, and proud of his position as guardian of Ul Hudzir. Apparently, his family had held the post for generations.

“Before we retire,” said Voruum, “I’d know a little more about Aldaar’s visit. He went down into Quumarza, is that right?”

“Yes,” said Gavannion, his face creasing. “The Land of Hungry Shadows. Men will always be curious about that place. They never understand its dangers.”

“Tell me about Quumarza. Everything you know.”

“Before the old wars that devastated Earth and earned mankind its imprisonment on what became Ur, the lands east of here were very different from what you see today. This part of the world was a temperate zone, much of it lush with forest and vast areas of farmland. At its heart was a great city, whose name is lost in the

madness of the war, turned to rubble and ash by the fire storms. Those ruins are known today as Zenzi-Barang, and they sprawl somewhere in the bottomless pit that is Quumarza. The nature of the weapons that were used in the war was so terrible, their effects so deep-reaching, that nowhere on all Earth is as shunned as Zenzi-Barang.

“After the fall of the Zurjahn Empire, when ravaged Ur again became Earth, Zenzi-Barang remained abandoned and isolated. There were only a few watches, like this place, to survey its outer limits, to warn the new world of anything rising from the hell at the heart of Quumarza. In the hundred years or more since Karkesh fell and the war championed by Galad Sarian ended, no sign of life has stirred in Zenzi-Barang.

“There have been a few surveys, by air, but no one has dared enter the city. It has become a mausoleum, much of it doubtless buried under the ocean of sand that drifts and swirls around the basin of Quumarza. Then, a year ago, I sensed something.

“There was life of a sort in Zenzi-Barang. At first it seemed no more than a sequence of bad dreams, but gradually the sendings coalesced into something much darker, as though a creature was reaching out to the light, slowly and inexorably. What troubled me was the air of menace in whatever was groping its way up from subterranean depths. I alerted my superiors in Karkesh. Kyron Morgath responded to my misgivings by sending me Ruic Aldaar... But you will hear what became of him tomorrow.”

Voruum decided not to press the old man for more information. His own head would be clearer after a night's rest, so he and Kaspel retired to the rooms prepared for them. Exhausted, the youth was soon in a deep sleep. Voruum slept lightly, his mind always partially conscious of his environment. The outpost appeared to be adequately protected, alarmed against hostile intrusion, but Voruum had only survived as long as he had by being cautious.

Sometime in the early hours, Voruum's ears pricked up like a cat's. Something had breached the outer protective web Gavannion had set up. Voruum rose quietly and slipped out into the corridor. He followed a stair upward, entering a storeroom where miscellaneous boxes and trunks had been heaped to one side. A window opened onto a narrow balcony, and it was an easy matter for Voruum to ease his way outside.

A blur of moonlight highlighted several towers and parapets below, and he identified the source of the intrusion easily enough. Some sort of aerial craft had been landed on a flat roof area that ran around one of the wider towers. The craft was little more than a metal raft with a low, curved windshield and twin exhausts that gleamed like blades. It was unusual for such machines to be available outside Karkesh and areas controlled by the Council, and yet it was unlikely this would be a servant of theirs—Kyron Morgath would have forewarned him of such a thing.

Voruum studied the moonlit scene for a while, probing softly with his mental powers, searching for anything that could provide him with a clearer picture. He could find no other presence in the outpost besides Gavannion and Kaspel, both of whom were deep in sleep. He carefully slipped over the side of the balcony and slid down the side of the tower, clinging like a spider to its pitted wall until he had reached the craft. Satisfied that he'd not been seen, Voruum swung up to where he could study the craft in more detail.

It was not a new machine. The tang of old metal and oil, the inner warmth of a cooling engine, the small bank of controls—they all spoke of a bygone age, perhaps of a time closer to the old wars than the recent ones. Yet someone with high technical skill had taken immaculate care of the vehicle.

Voruum froze. At last, he detected another being somewhere among the stone walls behind him. Now that he was aware of them, Voruum could focus his inner power and enhance his image of them. He moved very slowly, turning away, ready for an attack.

"You're from Karkesh," said a soft voice. "One of Ruic Aldaar's kind."

It was a girl. She appeared some twenty years old, yet Voruum sensed she had remarkable powers of mental control. A mutation, perhaps. These lands bred such things commonly enough.

The darkness sheathed much of her, revealing little more than a slight figure dressed in very dark clothing and wearing a mask that fitted her like a second skin. She carried a long, sleek sword, its point to the ground. Voruum had no doubt she would be expert in its use. She had the grace and stealth of a warrior; Voruum could read confidence in her, pulsing with vibrant life. There had also been a degree of contempt for him in her voice.

“I am here to find what killed him,” he said. “Not you, I think.”

She shook her mask-clad head. “No, we had mutual enemies.”

“His enemies are my enemies,” said Voruum.

“You were friends?”

Voruum shook his head. “I never met him, but we served the same masters.”

“Karkesh,” she said. Again, there was more than a hint of disdain in her tone.

“I am Arrul Voruum.”

There was no reason she should have heard of him, but she appeared to be satisfied and her manner became slightly more relaxed. She sheathed her sword and strode to the flying craft to make adjustments to its controls.

“I am Tarriel Ethara. Gavannion is my grandfather. We’re all that’s left of this outpost. You’ve seen him?”

Voruum explained his position and what had occurred earlier.

“Very well,” she said. “We’ll meet after dawn. And plan.” Without another word, her face still hidden by her mask, she walked back to the tower and disappeared. Voruum smiled, wondering if she was to be an ally.

Kaspel was still asleep. Voruum was amazed by the young man's grit. He came from a small community on the edge of another desert land, where its people carved a life from almost nothing. It was that spirit, that determination to raise themselves from the dust that gave Kaspel his backbone. His desire to see more of his world (albeit a shattered and brutalised one), burned brightly, as did his loyalty. He owed Voruum nothing and yet had risked his life for the witchfinder more than once.

Voruum again slept fitfully. During one period of wakefulness, he reached into his inner being and touched the presences that were buried there—the spirits of the two dead witchfinders, Murrath and Vormich. Something of their essences had embedded themselves in his mind, ghosts that could be summoned and directed, thoughts given a degree of substance. He sent them out into the night to study the strange lands beyond the outpost.

As dawn broke, Voruum rose refreshed. While he dressed, Voruum listened to the inner words of the two returned spirits.

“If you go down the escarpment to its bottom and travel across Quumarza, you'll need extra protection,” said Murrath. “You cannot breathe the air of that place. It is contaminated. Everything has been turned to dust, or ash, for hundreds of miles. Nothing lives, nothing grows.”

“And the city?”

“We skirted it. There is life there, though we saw none, merely sensed it. It was hostile. The energy that boiled up from the depths of the city, enraged by our intrusion—for it knew us—was powerful. There are numerous places on the planet where terrible mutation has taken place, but in that city, something beyond horror festers. It is chained, held in place by the lands that surround it. To go there is madness.”

“Yet Ruic Aldaar ventured there. And brought something back.”

“Death,” said Vormich. “The place should be left as it is. You have orders from Kyron Morgath not to go beyond this outpost. Not without a considerable force. We think even that would be insanity.”

Voruum made no further comment and let the spirits subside once more. He and Kaspel went down to the hall where Gavannion awaited them, with food and drink. As they sat together, the girl, Tarriel Ethara, joined them.

She had removed her mask: her face was pretty, though the harshness of her life here had shaped an expression seemingly cut from stone. Her eyes were cold, her hair swept back and tied tightly to her skull. She studied Voruum and Kaspel openly. The youth could not meet her gaze.

“My granddaughter,” said Gavannion.

Voruum nodded politely. Tarriel’s body was tense, as though on a hair-trigger, a defensive stance primed to react to the slightest hint of alien movement in her surroundings. Perhaps, thought Voruum, it is necessary if she is to survive.

“So,” Voruum said, once he had finished eating, “Ruic Aldaar. What became of him? What did he find in Zenzi-Barang? I imagine Tarriel flew him there in her craft.”

Gavannion shot him a glance. The girl had evidently said nothing of her meeting with Voruum. “You know of the craft?”

“I’ve seen it. Probably the only practical way to travel to Zenzi-Barang. The lands below us are poisoned. Aldaar would have known that.”

“Yes, I took him,” said the girl tersely. “We knew something stirred in the city.”

“Tell me about that journey.”

“Crossing the skies above Quumarza is dangerous, but if you follow the air currents and avoid the death winds, you can reach Zenzi-Barang by air. Ruic Aldaar wanted proof that my grandfather

and I had indeed discovered life in the city. He needed to see for himself.”

“What, exactly, had you discovered?”

“Something is alive under the ruins. They are extensive—scores of miles. Initially we sensed life, nothing more than that—energy, if you like. Enough to know that it existed. It shaped itself, probably into something alien to human understanding. A new form of life, perhaps, a result of chemical and biological chaos—a spawning pit.” The girl spoke bluntly, an element of suppressed anger thinly veiled in her expression.

“Is it intelligent?” said Voruum.

“To an extent.”

“Did you establish contact?”

“No, but something else did. Something from outside Zenzi-Barang and beyond Quumarza.”

Voruum stiffened. “Men? From other lands?”

“Yes. Ruic Aldaar spoke of a brotherhood.”

Voruum sat back, his own face suddenly drawn. “The Brotherhood of the Goat? Was that it?”

“You know of it?” said Tarriel.

Voruum rubbed his jaw. Gavannion was watching him, noting the look of deep concern on his guest’s face, and that of the youth, Kaspel. The boy looked afraid.

“Are there men of the Brotherhood in Zenzi-Barang?” said Voruum.

“Yes. Your friend sought proof of that and got it. I took him to Zenzi-Barang. We raided them when they least expected it, and Aldaar found what he wanted. Small arms, artefacts, pieces of armour, and things relating to the Brotherhood. He said that the only way he could convince his masters that the Brotherhood was in Zenzi-Barang was by carrying proof to them.”

“Yes, otherwise the Council would never take action,” said Voruum. *Particularly those, he thought, who are themselves corrupted by the Brotherhood. Morgath often works alone in his crusade.* “What happened to the evidence?”

“It was taken. He’d had it with him in a small bundle when he left. He was making his way back to your lands. I tried to cover him from the air, but we both underestimated the power—and the long reach—of his enemies. They trapped him and killed him.

“They left him out in the open where farmers found him and assumed from his condition that he’d been ravaged by the poisoned shadows of Quumarza. There was nothing to suggest otherwise.”

“Except that my master, Kyron Morgath, knew the truth,” said Voruum.

“Yes. But the evidence was lost.”

“Will you go to Zenzi-Barang and retrieve it?” asked Gavannion.

Voruum didn’t answer. He sat back, deep in thought. There was a long silence. Finally, Voruum said, “If the Brotherhood is in Zenzi-Barang, the consequences will be dire. Something must be done swiftly.”

He turned to the girl. Normally he would have gently probed her mind, but there was a tight barrier there, and he’d not be able to penetrate it without a struggle.

“Will you fly me to Zenzi-Barang?”

Gavannion looked deeply concerned, though the girl nodded. “There’s no alternative,” said Tarriel. She got up, moving in her abrupt manner. “I’ll prepare the craft.”

“You will be attempting the impossible,” said Gavannion.

Voruum read in the old man’s mind a deep-seated terror of Zenzi-Barang. Whatever the ancient city’s secrets, they involved him in some way, a part of his past that, like the city, had been damaged beyond repair.

“You fear for your granddaughter.”

Gavannion shuddered. “She is all I have left. Years ago, when Ul Hudzir was stronger and flourished trading with other outposts, and had a burgeoning population, life was very different. I had a wife, three children and good friends about me. All of us served the new union that followed the fall of the Empire. Our links with Karkesh and other cities were strong. We were building a future that promised a better fate for the people of this world. My wife was a scientist. Her work took her to dangerous places.

“Zenzi-Barang fascinated her. Several expeditions visited Quumarza. Great care was taken, but it was not enough.”

“What killed her?” said Voruum.

“The air itself. It seeps into everything, its poison is irresistible. Too many visits, no matter how well protected. It was the same for the other scientists and all those who set foot in Quumarza regularly. My two sons and my daughter all followed. They were guardians, always patrolling the borderlands. If they had spent more time here in Ul Hudzir, they would have lived longer. I tried to warn them.”

Voruum tasted the man’s welling sorrow. “And Tarriel is the last of your family?”

“Yes. Ironically she has developed a partial resistance to the toxins of Quumarza, and with it powerful mental skills. As a witchfinder, you’ll already know that. Have you tested her?”

Voruum knew better than to lie. “She is strong. That’s good. I have no desire to pry. But out there in the deserts, there’ll be enemies who’ll have no scruples about trying to wrench her sanity from her.”

“Her mother was from a northern tribe, the Cozzarri, who are shunned by some. They eke a hardy existence and have earned a reputation as thieves and privateers. They’ve been ostracised—even branded as mutants. My son, Rannis, was a man of his own mind. He married one of these northern girls and brought her back here. Tarriel has inherited her mother’s powers—her magic, if you like.”

“You never sought to leave this place? Take Tarriel and find a new life beyond the deserts? Your knowledge—”

Gavannion shook his head soberly. “Too late for that. The spirits of the dead bind me. Well, that is my choice. But Tarriel is her own woman. It would not be good for her to stay. I had hoped that Ruic would take her under his wing and win her a place in the service of your masters—” He cut his words short, as though betraying one confidence too many.

Voruum sensed a deeper mystery. There was an unexplained bitterness that shrouded Tarriel’s mind and strengthened the barriers she had set up there. Perhaps her strong will had clashed with Ruic Aldaar’s.

They were interrupted by the reappearance of the girl. She had donned her tight mask and cut a forbidding figure in the thin morning light.

“You’d better come and see this, witchfinder,” she said.

Voruum rose, and Kaspel went to his side. Together they followed Tarriel up a long flight of stairs to one of the high balconies that overlooked Quumarza. Gazing out over its vastness, they saw the huge clouds of dust that swirled hundreds of feet skyward.

Tarriel pointed to the clouds. “An ash storm,” she said. “They come frequently. This one is bad. I dare not take the machine up into it. We will have to wait its passing.”

“How long?” said Voruum.

She shrugged. “Could be days. Weeks even.”

Voruum studied the distant storm and its rapid progress across the huge dust bowl. He used his mind to probe it and was at once repelled by something, some unidentifiable force, thick and noxious, like the miasma of a swamp.

“You feel that?” asked Tarriel.

For once he could sense her fears, her mental barriers shaken by what was coming. Somewhere within that oncoming nightmare were things that undulated, immense, weaving tendrils, as though the desert had formed itself into packed, solid entities, snaking out over the sands and heading directly for the citadel.

“What is it?” he asked her.

“It’s from Zenzi-Barang. The city knows us. It is sending something to destroy us.” She said no more and indicated that Voruum and the youth should take cover back in the citadel. While she left them and went to secure her ship, Voruum and Kaspel re-joined Gavannion.

“We must go deep into the stone,” said the guardian. “Between us, we can create a barrier. We must deflect this attack. It is not the first time Ul Hudzir has been assaulted. We must make it appear that the citadel is no more now than a cemetery.”

The storm crossed Quumarza at a staggering rate. The air blasted the walls, and the wind wrapped around them as though it would rip them stone from stone. Gavannion and the others gathered in a small chamber deep under the central tower, the doors locked, with no more than a single candle to light the gloomy surroundings. They felt the building shudder as the storm buffeted it, the ferocious winds like an ocean tide at work, colossal waves slamming against the cliffs.

“It is like a living beast,” said Kaspel.

Voruum saw again those writhing tendrils, poised like immense fingers to rip and rend. He closed his eyes and sent his thoughts within himself, to where Murrath and Vormich had found a dark place to cloak themselves.

Did you see that thing when you went out into Zenzi-Barang? he asked them.

The storm is just a storm, said Vormich. *Close your minds to the sendings and you will disperse them.*

As the external buffeting worsened, Voruum took his star lance, the weapon carried by all witchfinders, and held it upright in the centre of

the chamber. It began to glow as he released its powers, sending out a blue-tinged aura that formed a skein around the group.

“Each of you—grip the lance,” he said. “It has powers that can deflect whatever evils are sent against us.”

Gavannion, Kaspel, and lastly Tarriel all did as bidden, and the four of them formed a circle around the star lance, bathing in its weird glow. Voruum concentrated his mental energy to reinforce the power of the lance. The veins stood out on his forehead and hands as the terrible powers coursed through him like a current. Outside the walls of the chamber, the buildings shook and roared as the winds swirled and raged with all the fury of a tornado. Dust drifted down from the ceiling, and stones cracked as though it would only be a matter of time before the tower fell in upon itself and buried them alive. The noise became deafening.

“I can’t hold it!” cried Voruum, the light from the star lance flickering like a candle’s flame in a strong draught. If it went out, he knew, they would expire with it.

“Wait!” shouted Tarriel, breaking away and crossing the room, almost lurching to her knees as another huge blast from without rocked the chamber. She grabbed a long bag and dragged from it a bundle of what looked like spears. Coming back to the group, she pulled from this bundle a single weapon. It was another star lance.

“Ruic Aldaar’s,” she said above the din. “I rescued it from his body before the darkness closed in on him.” She switched its power on and moments later the group were holding tight to both star lances, the sudden flare of energy doubled, blazing up and bathing the chamber in brilliant light.

Voruum swore as his vision abruptly reached out through the walls and fixed on the external horrors. “This is no mind-beast that assails us. Those—things—do not lack substance.” He had a view of something thick and muscular, great bands of living tissue, forged into shapes like gigantic worms, probing at the walls, crushing them to dust. He gathered together the energy of the star lances and drove it like a spear at the first of them. Light smashed into coiled darkness

with an explosion like thunder. Flesh and bone burst and disintegrated.

One by one, Voruum sought out the clawing horrors and drove the light into them, doing enough damage to drive back whatever monster pulsed at their heart, enough to earn a respite from the storm. As the moments passed, a gradual silence dropped over UI Hudzir like a smothering cloak.

“We must take the battle to them,” said Voruum. “If we strike now, we’ll clear them from the citadel’s walls—or what remains of them.”

He led the others up the steps and out onto the upper heights of the tower, the top of which had been pulverised. The destruction by the storm, and the things within it, had turned most of UI Hudzir to rubble. Dust rose from it in clouds, obscuring the daylight. The storm itself was pulling away across Quumarza like an ebbing tide, a thick wall of dust and ash, boiling like smog.

Voruum stood on the parapet’s twisted edge and studied that retreating bank of filthy clouds. There were vague shapes within it, immense half-glimpsed coils, being pulled awkwardly back across the cracked bottom of Quumarza. The star lances had wounded the power from beyond, but Voruum knew it would lick its wounds and doubtless redouble its attack.

Gavannion stared around him at the destruction, his face gray with defeat. “It is the end of this place,” he said. “So little of UI Hudzir has survived.”

Tarriel, still holding the star lance, nodded. “You should leave now, grandfather. Go to the north. Go to my mother’s people.”

He shot her a glance. “And you? You cannot stay here.”

She glanced around at the heaped debris. “If my craft has survived, I will have work to do yet.”

“You cannot mean to go—into that,” said Gavannion, staring with undisguised disgust at the subsiding storm.

Tarriel looked at Voruum. “I don’t think there’s much choice,” she said. “Voruum’s master wants evidence. It can only be gathered at Zenzi-Barang.”

Gavannion’s exhaustion clung to him like an illness. He sagged, shaking his head. “None of you will survive. We should all leave before that nightmare claims us.” There was little conviction in his voice. He knew it was pointless arguing with Tarriel.

“Do as she bids you,” said Voruum. “We are a small party. We will find a chink in the armour of this power. I know its arrogance. It will not expect us.”

Gavannion went below. Tarriel followed him, determined to set him on his way. Voruum turned to Kaspel, who had hardly spoken a word since he woke. “We’ve seen terrible things, Kaspel. You know what it is to fight against the deep evils of this world. I have valued your friendship. But I must tell you, it is time for you to go back. Set Gavannion on his new path and then serve Karkesh. I’ll give you something to take to Kyron Morgath.”

Kaspel’s face, normally so difficult to read, was bright with outrage. “Quit your service? No, I can’t do that. I’ve chosen my path. I know I’m a small part of your power, but surely you’re the stronger for me being with you.”

“I mean to disobey Kyron Morgath’s orders. I will enter Quumarza—and its black citadel. There’s no time for delays. With Tarriel’s craft, we can act swiftly.” Voruum could almost feel Kaspel’s flush at the mention of the girl’s name. He didn’t need to read the boy’s mind to know the youth was drawn to her—and why should he not be? It would, however, add another complication to their situation.

“I try not to ask much of you,” said Kaspel. “I ask now that you retain my service.”

Voruum felt the intensity of the boy’s stare, as fierce as the power of the star lance. In spite of his concerns, Voruum smiled. “Very well. You’re a man, Kaspel. Your own man. Come at your peril.”

Kaspel straightened, his resolve unshaken. “You’ll not find me wanting when we face the things at Zenzi-Barang.”

PART II:

THE CITY OF MUTANTS

They left when the rusty evening sky gave them enough cover. The storm had disappeared, sucked back into the east, far across the blasted wastes of Quumarza. Tarriel’s craft was unharmed, and she tended it as she would have a faithful steed. The three figures settled down under its smooth, curved shield as she swooped down off the heights of the crater rim and took them down towards the desert floor. They wore thin masks to filter the toxic air and had to shout to make themselves heard.

“We’ll hug the land,” Tarriel said. “When Ruic Aldaar and I went across before, the landscape cloaked us, making it impossible for anything to track us. We combined our mental shields to protect ourselves. There are many dangers, though.”

The craft dipped and swerved. Tarriel’s unerring and uncanny skill guided it with the speed of a desert bat across the wastes, diving down into mile-deep gullies and along tortuous canyons, some of which chopped far down into the earth, black and poisoned like immense wounds. Voruum had seen the terrible consequences of the old wars before, but in Quumarza they seemed even more horrific—the complete devastation of a world.

Kaspel gripped Voruum’s star lance, which he often carried for him. Tarriel spoke to the witchfinder, the youth unable to catch her words. “Who is he? He has no mental powers to speak of. Is he not a liability to you? Or do you owe him a blood debt?”

“He has fought shoulder to shoulder with me more than once and earned his place here. This world will need more like him if it’s to rise up from its ashes. I remember myself at his age. I was like him in some ways. They took me and moulded me into what I am. Kaspel will do well. He won’t disappoint you when it comes to the reckoning.”

“But you understand how our enemies use our own minds against us when they can? You will have to divert some of your mental powers to shield him. You would risk that?”

Voruum nodded. “Perhaps you underestimate him.”

“I prefer to know my strengths—and weaknesses.”

Voruum was again reluctant to probe her mind, though he sensed the inner turmoil there. He wondered if the girl had picked up on Kaspel’s fascination for her. The youth hid it well and was certainly determined not to let it compromise his resolve to serve this quest honourably.

By the time night had taken over the land, they were a hundred miles into Quumarza, whose broken tracts remained bleak and lifeless, a succession of gorges, fissures, and canyons dropping into infinite darkness, one section indistinguishable from the next. Tarriel had an instinctive understanding of the terrain and guided her craft to a ledge that fronted a huge horizontal crack in a cliff wall which formed a deep cave. She’d been here before and took the craft into its blackness.

Only once they were far in, swallowed as if by a living organism, did she allow light. The air was strangely cleaner, and they were able to remove their masks for short periods.

“We’re unlikely to be discovered here,” Tarriel said. “We’ll rest for the night. Going on now is too dangerous. Things do live out there, possibly with powers beyond ours. They are not all mental projections—they are real. We’ll move on at first light. It will take us several days to reach the city.”

They fed and rested. Kaspel kept to himself, sitting facing the direction of the cave entrance, though slowly his eyes closed and he drifted in and out of sleep. He had returned Voruum’s weapon to him, apparently relaxed enough not to feel a need for it.

“Tell me more of Ruic Aldaar,” said Voruum to the girl.

She hesitated, and Voruum felt her mentally closing up even more tightly. “As a warrior, he was very powerful. If he felt fear, he never showed it. Here in Quumarza, he held back all its terrors almost contemptuously. He inspired courage in others—in me. We cheated the forces of Zenzi-Barang, thanks to his skill.”

“Yet he was killed.”

Tarriel was looking away, into the darkness at the back of the fathomless cave. She nodded, possibly about to say more, when something snagged her attention. Voruum was immediately alert; he had failed to notice that Kaspel had moved up beside him in the deep shadows.

“What do you sense?” he asked the youth.

“There are creatures down there,” whispered Kaspel. “Don’t you hear them?”

“I hear a vague murmur, like a remote stream,” said Voruum. “Tarriel—do you hear it?”

“Something. Unclear, blurred.”

“It’s voices,” said Kaspel. “People, I think. They hear us. They want to contact us.”

“Hostile?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Kaspel went further into the cave. “A long way down, but coming up.”

“We should leave!” said Tarriel. “Nothing in Quumarza can be trusted.”

“I think it’s all right,” said Kaspel.

Voruum studied him. This was an unusual situation: that Kaspel should hear more clearly than he could. The youth was using his own mind, which until now had been no more powerful than most humans. Few could begin to match the witchfinders or those with Dream Lord abilities.

Tarriel had drawn her star lance—Voruum thought of it as hers now, a gift from Ruic Aldaar that compounded the mystery surrounding his death. Its power added to the protection she drew about herself like a cloak.

Kaspel, as if partially mesmerised, walked down the slope deeper into the vast cave. Although the blackness beyond did not exude an atmosphere of hostility, Voruum drew out his own star lance. The three walked slowly down until they reached wide steps leading gently on for as far as the light could reveal.

“There’s a city down there,” said Kaspel. “Carved out of the rock, far down. It’s the people I can hear.”

“You hear their words?” asked Voruum.

“Some of them. They know we are here. They’re coming up to us.”

Voruum sent his mind down into the pitch dark. He encountered movement, but it was vague and shadowed, as though he had disturbed no more than a nest of spiders. He brought Murrath and Vormich fully awake and sent them into the ether. They were not long in returning to him.

“A score of these beings are rising up the stair,” said Vormich. “They are not armed and seem lacking in hostility. We cannot penetrate their minds, though they’re very simple.”

Voruum passed this onto Tarriel, though as yet he’d still not spoken to her about the two inner beings housed in his mind.

Kaspel seemed excited, descending even more quickly.

Tarriel’s face was clouded. Clearly she didn’t trust the situation. In Quumarza she had encountered only violence and horror.

Eventually Voruum called Kaspel to his side. “We must maintain caution,” he told the youth, and Kaspel nodded, pausing.

“See, they’re here,” Voruum pointed.

Rising up from the dark below them, the score of beings identified by Murrath and Vormich climbed the stair, or rather, flowed up it, as

serpents would have. They were half the size of normal humans, a dull grey color, completely naked, but with no visible organs. Their heads were little more than oval blobs on their shoulders, their trunks blurred at the base so it appeared to be one organism rather than many that approached. They were wary of the light of the star lances, although they had no visible eyes.

Kaspel stood before them. Voruum's expression warned Tarriel to hold back, and she nodded gently, as surprised as he was.

"They're from the city of Lunnadarg," said the youth. "It's far below us. It was originally a huge metropolis, on the surface, but was buried in the ancient wars. Some of it has been restored, and more has been hewn from the rocks."

"They *told* you this?" said Tarriel.

"I can hear their voices. Can you not?"

"What do they want with us?" Voruum asked.

"They know we mean them no harm, unlike the other denizens of Quumarza. They live in the deep places because they're hunted for food. Everything that exists in Quumarza, or below it, hunts them. They've been trapped in their subterranean world for an age."

"Mutations," said Tarriel.

"No less deserving of pity," said Voruum.

"They know we are the enemies of Zenzi-Barang."

Tarriel's face clouded again. "What have you told them?"

"Only that we are not from that city and that we're opposed to the things that thrive there."

"Can they understand what we are saying? Or do they just read our minds?" asked Voruum.

"They understand our words, but your minds are closed to them. For some reason, they can communicate mentally with me. Your minds are far too powerful for them. You must be careful. You could

do them much harm with your thoughts. The creatures of Zenzi-Barang have destroyed many of them that way.”

“What do they want?” said Voruum.

“Protection. Lunnadarg is constantly attacked, even though it’s far below the surface.”

“How are we supposed to help?” said Tarriel, now making little attempt to keep the annoyance from her voice.

“Zenzi-Barang’s creatures would be less inclined to raid Lunnadarg if they were beaten back and made to fear Lunnadarg. If we could inflict a heavy defeat on them, Lunnadarg would be a better haven. In return for our aid, Lunnadarg would help us in our own quest. I’ve said little about it, only that we are enemies of Zenzi-Barang.”

“How would they help us?” said Voruum.

“They could show us a way into Zenzi-Barang that would afford us maximum secrecy.”

Voruum turned to Tarriel. “How does that weigh against your own plan to get us in? You’ve flown in before. We know it’ll be more difficult this time.”

“You’d trust these creatures?” Tarriel replied. “How do you know they aren’t really allies of Zenzi-Barang? You can’t read their minds.”

So you know that much, thought Voruum. *Your mental powers are stronger than I realised.* He was about to respond, when Tarriel twisted round as though something had gripped her shoulder.

“The flier!” she said and immediately headed back up the stairs. Voruum focused his mind on the way back and found the source of the girl’s panic. Something in the outer darkness of Quumarza was closing in rapidly on the cave’s entrance—something vast and malefic. As swiftly as he could, Voruum followed Tarriel.

By the time they had reached the place where she had secured the flier, the external presence was closing in fast on the cave mouth. Invisible in the darkness, it heaved and pulsed, powerful as a sea,

rippling and twisting in its immensity. The threat of assault emanated from it like heat as it pressed forward, a protoplasmic mass intent on plunging into the cavern.

“It can’t be stopped,” said Voruum. “It will simply mould its shape to the walls and enter, like water down a sluice. Can you guide the flier down into the earth?”

“I have no choice,” said Tarriel. She eased it from its bed in the rocks and climbed aboard. In moments she had it humming to life. Voruum got in beside her, holding aloft his star lance. By its brilliant rays, he could now see the shimmering mass of the intruder, and its staggering size. Already it had blotted out the entire cavern entrance. It had a mind, but it was little more than a seething, boiling cauldron of dark intentions and fury; it was as though Voruum prodded the mind of a mad, ravenous beast.

Several long tendrils snaked forward into the cave, and Voruum used his star lance to repel them. Light fizzed into fire as he scorched the snake-like appendages. He could feel the screaming anger of the huge beast as it redoubled its efforts to snare the flier before it got airborne. However Tarriel was an adept flier, and she raised the craft and swerved back into the cavern, skimming its surface with unerring skill. Behind them, the monster squeezed its bulk into the cavern and gave pursuit, rolling and bulging forward at an alarming rate.

As the flier dropped deeper down into the cavern’s vastness, Voruum used his mind to search for Kaspel. Initially, there was no trace of the youth. The flier reached the place where they had met with the creatures from Lunnadarg, but both they and Kaspel had gone deeper. Voruum sent Murrath and Vormich on ahead to find them.

“What is that thing?” Voruum asked the girl.

She shook her head. “Quumarza crawls with any number of horrors. They serve no one but kill and absorb anything, including each other.”

“How far will it follow?”

“We’ll outrun it,” she said.

By the glow of their star lances they could see the wide steps dropping lower and lower in an endless procession, but the ceiling of the cavern narrowed until the deep cleft became much smaller. They were, by Voruum’s reckoning, several miles below the surface, and still there was no sign of Kaspel or the creatures from Lunnadarg. Behind them, though, the oncoming flow of the horror had slowed. It appeared to have given up the chase.

Murrath and Vormich returned to Voruum’s mind like twin thoughts lighting up at the same moment. “There’s a city not far below,” said Vormich. “Kaspel is there, apparently not in danger.”

Voruum alerted Tarriel, who simply nodded. She had closed off her mind completely, remaining cold and fixed on piloting the craft. Shortly afterwards, the cave opened out into a much wider cavern, the far side of which was lost in darkness. The ceiling curved away in an immeasurable dome, while the ruins of the city could be seen more clearly spread out on the floor, poking up like vast mausoleums and broken towers, wreathed in shadows, as though a dark and tarry sea washed through them. Voruum scanned the ancient site with his mind and at once picked up resonances of life, though there was nothing he could interpret clearly.

Light pulsed sporadically as the craft slid through the air, and there were sluggish movements below. Some of the ruins were inhabited, though by what, it was impossible to determine. Murrath guided Voruum deeper into the city, and Tarriel followed the witchfinder’s instructions, hovering over one particular block of buildings that surrounded a central complex, rising above its surroundings.

“Kaspel is there,” said Voruum. “It’s safe to land. We’ll not be attacked.”

Tarriel took the craft lower but held her star lance aloft, as though ready to unleash its power at any moment. She brought the craft down on an open area, and the surrounding shadows fled from the light of the weapon. The low buildings clustered about them were not as damaged or derelict as those beyond them, suggesting this might

be a citadel, the last place of order standing against Lunnadarg's collapse.

As Tarriel shut down the engine, a voice hailed Voruum and her from across the flat stone roof. It was Kaspel. The youth looked briefly at Tarriel. Voruum could feel his desire to impress her, to win her praise, but she remained tight-lipped.

"This is a dangerous game," said Voruum, mildly annoyed but glad to see the youth intact.

"The dangers lie outside the city," said Kaspel. "They've told me about them."

Voruum remained uncomfortable about the fact he couldn't read the minds of the citizens. It made him feel partially unclothed. And it was clear Tarriel felt the same. She stood protectively by the craft, as though waiting for the two men to re-board it so they could be on their way.

"Kaspel wants me to enter the building, to meet these people. Will you come or remain here?" Voruum asked the girl.

"I'll stay." She couldn't hide her annoyance at his intention to go below, but Tarriel seemed prepared to wait, at least for a time.

"An hour," he said. "After that, come and find us—or leave, if you'd rather."

She nodded but said no more.

Kaspel led Voruum across the roof to an opening, where steps went down into a pale wash of light. Inside the building were a few empty, dusty rooms, and beyond them what had once been a more salubrious hall. Some attempt had been made to keep it clean and free of debris, but its walls were cracked, its ancient pillars chipped and decayed. At the room's centre was a wide pool with a gray surface, its contents thick and glutinous. Kaspel waited near its edge.

Voruum sensed movement under those muddy waters, and after a moment they parted to allow the upward surge of a wide bulk, a huge creature disturbed from its slumbers. Grey and smooth, it rose like a

bloated bubble, floating in silence. It shuddered and heaved until a small section of its surface bulged outward before giving a parody of birth to a human-like shape, a being which slid across to the stone floor and continued its grotesque birth, parting its form from the parent mass.

Dripping, the thing unbent, its head crudely shaping itself until it had formed partial features, a thin mouth and eyes that seemed more decorative than functional, being white and without irises. They turned to Voruum, who grimaced under their apparent gaze.

“My appearance shocks you,” said the creature, though words did not seem to come naturally from the distorted mouth. “It is no wonder, given the changes that the centuries have wrought on my kind. We were once human, like you, Arrul Voruum. Yes, I know you and what you are. Earth needs your kind now. My own race is dwindling. There is no distant future for us.”

“Who are you?” asked Voruum.

“We are one and we are many. We have changed, adapted. We survive. You may call us Quezinder. Since the great wars of old, our race has wended a difficult path along its evolutionary destiny, as have others on Earth. Our path, sadly for us, will end in oblivion. We would rather reach it peacefully and not prematurely through the machinations of the powers in Zenzi-Barang.”

Voruum could see into part of the creature’s mind for the first time, as if he had been *allowed* to do so. It was offering him its compliance by making itself vulnerable.

“So you evolved into one organism,” said Voruum. “Yet can split into many.”

“Yes. We are forced to defend ourselves, and it is necessary to become the one being when the horrors from Zenzi-Barang beset us.”

“Kaspel tells me you seek help. How is it possible for only three of us to relieve an entire race?”

“Our war cannot be an open one. In a direct contest, we would be slaughtered by the powers of the enemy. We fight a war of attrition, mostly defensively. You are here, I think, to direct a blow at the very heart of Zenzi-Barang. Your companion who waits above—she had already defied the evil city, although it cost her dearly.”

Voruum understood that the creature referred to Ruic Aldaar.

“What was brought out of Zenzi-Barang was evidence of its existence, and of its ambitions, is that not so?” the creature asked.

“Yes.”

“But it was lost before your masters received it.”

“Yes.”

“There are other things there that would serve your purpose. The city is a graveyard, but the powers that have used it to cloak themselves are alive and growing. They are human, or began that way. Like us, they are changing, invested with terrible, twisted powers.”

“The Brotherhood of the Goat.”

“You know them, then. They are controlled by three beings, masters of an unholy army. They have harnessed the unspeakable corruption of that place and are forging it into a force that will roll out from the city like a black tide, its purpose to take back everything that Daras Vorta once controlled, when Earth was the prison world, Ur, under his sway.”

Daras Vorta! thought Voruum. The ultimate tyrant, the monster whose ambition gorged itself on conquest as he planned the subjugation of an entire empire. It had taken a holy war championed by Galad Sarian to topple and destroy him a century ago. Yet Vorta’s spawn remained.

“They have created a creature from the pits of their debased citadel,” said the being opposite Voruum, and the witchfinder felt the tremors of horror within its mind as it spoke. “It is quasi-human, a blasphemy. If you can find it and destroy it, then you will have all you

need to make your masters understand what it is that rises from Zenzi-Barang to threaten the world.”

“This creature will be well protected,” said Voruum. “There are three of us. We have stealth, of course, and a flier.”

“We will help. The last thing they will expect from us is an attack. We have spent our lives secreted away in the stone deeps, fighting only when they attack us—their cattle, as they see us. No one knows better the ways under the world. We can create a diversion for you. In the chaos of battle, you can strike like an arrow. You can bring down the beast they call Raal. It will take careful coordination. You must fly into the city while we will burrow beneath it.”

Voruum considered this. “It will mean our minds must remain bridged. It will be dangerous on enemy territory.”

“Yes. Necessary, however. It is the only way. Without our help, you’ll never get in and win the prize. For us, victory would bring freedom. Our last days in Lunnadarg will be peaceful, whatever the losses we will have to suffer. If we do not do this, our race will know immediate extinction.”

Voruum nodded. “Then we must prepare, and quickly.”

While Voruum and Quezinder began the discussion of how they would execute the raid on Zenzi-Barang, Kaspel went back up to the roof to let Tarriel know what had occurred.

“The girl,” said Quezinder, “will not open her mind to me, I think. She will not trust me as you have.”

“I will not force her.” Voruum would have said more, but Kaspel returned, Tarriel with him. Voruum explained to her what Quezinder had proposed.

“A shield,” he concluded. “For as long as possible.”

Tarriel watched Quezinder as he had contributed to Voruum’s summary of the plan to enter Zenzi-Barang. Her countenance was no less rigid than usual, but Voruum sensed her unease. “Perhaps we

should minimise our contact,” she said. “I can shield Kaspel, while Voruum shares any necessary communication.”

Voruum had become even more convinced she was concealing something, but there seemed little alternative but to agree.

Quezinder directed them to rooms where they could sleep before beginning the journey to Zenzi-Barang. While they had a brief meal, Quezinder returned to the inner city to begin organising his own element of the raid. There was no discernible day or night in Lunnadarg, so Voruum called his companions to him when he'd rested sufficiently. They spoke briefly to Quezinder before ascending to the roof and boarding Tarriel's flier.

Voruum linked his mind to Quezinder's and listened to the instructions. He passed them on to Tarriel so she could navigate the craft back up into the higher reaches of the cavern and across them to another portal, which Quezinder assured them would take them once more out into Quumarza. Both Tarriel and Voruum held their star lances aloft, pushing back the darkness and with it the strange shapes that hung from the curved stone: these were not hostile, merely curious, but now that the final journey had begun, there was no time to delay.

Outside, daylight lit the world, but the sun's rays were thinned down by a smog that curled through the canyons like a sluggish tide, dense and gritty. The three figures in the flier had pulled on their face masks, squinting against the murk. The almost night-dark ravines were deeper cut than before and so narrow in places that the flier barely avoided the rocky blades of the towering walls. Mile upon mile sped by, and occasionally something rose from the deeps, blurred and grotesque, exhaling the breath of hunger, a thirst for food. The craft sped on, elusive on the driving wind.

Eventually they emerged from the deep cut in the rock and saw ahead of them an open plain, sunk deep down into another huge bowl. The clouds of dust and ash thinned briefly, as though curtains had been pulled aside to afford a view of this place.

“Zenzi-Barang is on the other side of this field,” said Tarriel. “It will be cloaked in another shroud of fogs. If we hug the ground, we should be there by nightfall.”

Voruum nodded. He felt Quezinder’s mind, hovering close to him like an invisible creature of the air. “Where are your people?” Voruum asked.

“To the north of you, deep under the earth. There are old lava flows here, from the time of the original wars. So much destruction was wrought by the weapons of Man. Some caused volcanic activity in this region, which had always been prone to such things. The old flows are empty now, so the rock below the surface is riddled, like a vast sponge. We’ll be at Zenzi-Barang before its denizens sense our presence.”

As the flier dipped down into the sprawling basin, brushing aside wisps of smoke and dust, like a ship cruising through spray, Voruum sensed something else in the skies. Like bad dreams, hovering at the periphery of his mind, these things darted to and fro at the limits of vision. He knew from Tarriel’s concentration on the way ahead that she’d not sensed them herself. She was too occupied with twisting and turning the craft to avoid the sudden knuckles of rock that thrust up from the bed of the basin. The craft was little more than a few feet from the surface, but the girl guided it on with extraordinary skill.

“Something’s coming!” said Kaspel. He had been watching the terrain, using his eyes rather than his mind, and his words were proven accurate.

Gliding over the surface of the basin, a huge, balloon-like shape, grey and striated with blood-red veins, bore down on the flier. Its front end opened up to display a cavernous mouth, a dark pink maw that threatened to draw the craft into it as surely as a whirlpool sucks in floating debris. Tarriel swerved the craft but she could feel the inexorable pull of the colossal beast. Voruum stood up and directed the light from his star lance straight into the gaping mouth. It had no effect. They seemed destined to be swallowed down into that awesome hole.

There were other movements on either side of them. The creatures that Voruum had sensed now materialised. They were much smaller than the immense beast, being long and slim, with fins instead of arms and legs, and they pulled themselves through the air like insects on the wing. Their heads were pointed, with long mouths opening to display row upon row of knife-like teeth. Had they torn into the craft, Voruum knew, they would have ripped it and its occupants to shreds in a matter of moments.

Had the larger monster not afforded a more desirable target, the creatures might very well have gone after their craft, Voruum surmised, but they turned their exclusive attention to the leviathan, torpedoing towards the thing. A dozen or more came out of the murk and struck mercilessly. The skin of the huge beast was no match for their teeth, which began to wreak bloody ruin. Tarriel again swerved and now was able to get the craft away from the scene of dreadful conflict. More of the smaller hunters were appearing, and the craft had to dip and dive to avoid them, but they were singularly intent on joining the bloodbath beyond.

Voruum used his star lance to fend off any of the creatures that came too close, but none of them attacked. Tarriel guided the craft further on across the bowl. Behind her, she could hear the strange bellows of the monster as it was savagely torn apart down to its frail bones.

Later, the flier dropped down into a narrow crevice as Tarriel found an overhang and set them down. Voruum broke out some small packs of food, and they ate in silence, none of them eager to comment on the frightful clash of beasts they had witnessed earlier.

“Quezinder is almost in place under Zenzi-Barang,” said Voruum. “When we are ready, he will guide us in through the safest route. You must listen to his mind,” he said to the girl.

She turned to look at him, only her eyes visible through the shield of the mask. “Open my mind?”

“Quezinder will shield it from whatever powers dwell in the city. What passes between you and Quezinder will be private.”

“And you? What will you hear?”

“You’d deny me access? Combined, our minds would effectively block any probes from the city. Our success will probably depend on it. You’d jeopardise that?”

“I know the way into the city. I don’t need Quezinder to guide me.”

Voruum studied her for a long time, but her own gaze was unflinching. *What are you hiding?* The question was not directed at her, but he wondered if the moment had come when it would have to be asked openly.

“Our venture has to be built on trust,” he said. “What happened to Ruic Aldaar?”

He felt something stir within her, a slow emotional current. It did not define itself clearly, but there was no doubting its prime content—guilt.

“I’ll be blunt,” he said. “Did you kill him?”

Her eyes narrowed with anger, and he tensed, wondering if she would risk attacking him.

“What happened? Did he try to force himself upon you? Was that it? You defended yourself—”

She shook her head, and he could see tears in her eyes.

Kaspel had withdrawn into the shadows, sensing the confrontation and its potential consequences. Tarriel’s aggressive stance altered as she slowly lowered herself and sat on a rock beside the flier. She stared into the gathering darkness, though it was the past she was looking at.

Voruum sat opposite her, waiting.

“We’d found what we wanted in Zenzi-Barang,” said Tarriel. “Ruic had a loose pack and bagged up the artefacts and slung them over his shoulder. We were lucky to find things without being discovered. I suppose it was such a completely unexpected raid that our sheer nerve won us our success. While I guided us away, Ruic destroyed

anything that tried to take us, using his mind to sear theirs utterly before they could warn their masters. By the time our act of theft was discovered, we were in the flier and weaving our way back across Quumarza.

“Ruic’s mind powers were tested to the full. For days and nights, he had to exert himself to extreme levels in order to shield us. I could see exhaustion reaching for him. His star lance faltered, as if he were drawing in its heat to strengthen his own resolve. When we came to Ul Hudzir, he collapsed. My grandfather drew up as much power as he could, and I leant my own powers to our defences.

“We were attacked, though not by the full force of Zenzi-Barang’s fury. The city had sent out its agents to all points of Quumarza, hunting us, so those that found us in Ul Hudzir were little more than a vanguard. Grandfather and his remaining followers shielded us while we fled over the rim to the western lands, bound for Karkesh.”

She paused, drawing breath and struggling for a moment to smother her emotions. Voruum understood why. He had read the grim consequences of Gavannion’s actions in the girl’s mind. Everyone at Ul Hudzir had died when the forces of Zenzi-Barang had been unleashed, save for the guardian. Gavannion had successfully cloaked Tarriel and Aldaar as they fled, but at a cost.

“Ruic knew what would happen,” said Tarriel. “He told me to stay and fight with my grandfather, though he could not. He had to deliver the prize to Karkesh. It was the only way to bring retribution and destruction to the things in Zenzi-Barang.”

“You chose to go with Ruic Aldaar,” said Voruum.

“I knew he was right. We dared not sacrifice success for—sentiment. And my grandfather insisted.”

“Was there another reason why you chose to go with Aldaar?” Voruum had slowly been able to read other aspects of the girl’s mind as her story unfolded, and the mists were shifting from her guarded past. *Sentiment*, she had said.

She glanced at him, the familiar anger flaring for a moment. She knew, though, what he had read in her. “Yes.”

Somewhere out in the darkness, things shifted, vast bodies moving across the wilderness, but they were not searching for Voruum and his companions.

“We came down into the lowland deserts and found a place to rest. Ruic had never properly recovered his strength after the ordeal, so he needed to sleep. We had not been followed this far. The desert swallowed us, its dust storms hiding us from any possible pursuit. There was an oasis, perfectly concealed under rock overhangs. We slept and revived ourselves in the cold water.”

“And you became lovers,” said Voruum quietly.

She nodded, as though it was a relief finally to admit it. “It was not a sudden whim, not something prompted by the relief at being temporarily free of Zenzi-Barang’s agents. It had burned like a slow fire within both of us since we had first met. We had pushed it down deep within ourselves. But at the oasis we let it rise.

“It was his undoing. His shields were down, our attention diverted. If we had not given in to our desire for each other, we would have been ready for what came out of the east. Perhaps if Zenzi-Barang’s minions had been carried on the wings of another storm, we would have been alerted in time to prepare. Instead, they must have crawled and slithered toward the oasis like desert serpents. They burst up from the sand on all sides, surrounding us. They closed off our path to the flier.

“We fought them—oh, how we fought them! Ruic’s mind was torn between his anger, his desire to destroy them and his protective feelings towards me. I felt all, like a hot desert blast. I stood with him, using a sword, while he blazed about him with the star lance. He slaughtered many of them, but the result was inevitable.

“They swarmed like ants and eventually dragged us both down. I was pinned to the rock, crushed—knocked senseless. When I came to, Ruic was no more than a bundle of rags, the life sucked out of

him. His star lance burned as low as a candle, with no more heat. One of the creatures—as close to a human as they get, swathed in cloth, face wrapped up against the sunlight—stood over me like a jackal about to feed. He held up the pack with the artefacts, gloating over his victory, then swung it over his shoulder.

“He flung the star lance down at my side and snarled like a beast. He told me to crawl back to my people and warn them away from Quumarza and what waited at its heart. I survived only because they used me as a warning, a deterrent.”

She was looking out at the forbidding landscape as though she could see those creatures of the city again. Voruum was aware of Kaspel close by, sitting in stunned silence. Inwardly the youth was in deep anguish, horrified by Tarriel’s account.

“You did not go to Karkesh,” Voruum said to the girl.

She shook her head. “I am of the Cozzarri. We are a tribe branded as looters. If I had gone there, in a flier, with a star lance, they would not have believed my story. You asked me earlier if I had killed Ruic Aldaar. The men in Karkesh would have assumed as much. So I buried him and marked his grave. I went back to my father, though at the time I would rather have died out there in the desert.”

“I am sorry,” said Voruum.

For a while, they were all silent, listening to the sounds of the devastated lands beyond them.

“Those who rule in Zenzi-Barang must be destroyed,” said Tarriel. “For the good of all. I crave vengeance, but this goes beyond that. I am ready to do my part. Do not pity me. Use me, Voruum. Make me your weapon. If I must open my mind to Lunnadarg’s forces, so be it.”

Voruum nodded in silent acceptance. As they rested, he sent out his mind in search of Quezinder and the forces he led somewhere in the depths of the earth. Voruum used Murrath and Vormich to act as shields for his mental voice, uneasy about the possibility of Zenzi-Barang’s agents listening in. There was nothing yet to signify that they were.

“We are almost ready to begin the last part of our journey,” Voruum told Quezinder.

“Will the girl take instructions for her craft? Does she understand—”

“Yes. She is committed. She will listen to you.”

“Zenzi-Barang rises up from the deep floor of the basin, its towers strewn across a vast area, most of which is in dust-choked ruins, its stones crumble under the weight of ages. You will see little lights there. Bale-fires, we call them—the light of creatures conjured by the witchery of the rulers. They have opened portals into strange places, realms beyond our own. Only a small part of the city is occupied—the rest is of no use and has been left to decay. There is life of a kind in there, things that burrow and fester like worms in a corpse, things distorted by the powers unleashed by the old wars. You must weave through these labyrinths until you reach the heart of the city.”

After their rest, Voruum urged them back into the flier, and Tarriel took the controls, a new determination gripping her that Voruum could feel. He knew he could rely on her, his earlier doubts now dispelled. They left their sanctuary and dropped to within feet of the desert floor, crossing it quickly. Tarriel allowed Quezinder to link with her mind and used him to steer the flier. Shapes rose and slid by, sometimes scores of feet high, blind, almost mindless entities, following whatever strange course drove them on. The air was filled with half seen creatures, diving and swooping like gulls in an ash ocean, though they veered away from the craft and Voruum’s star lance.

Somewhere ahead, a black mass rose up like a sudden mountain range, and they knew it for the boundary of the city. Quezinder took them down to its base, among the scores of huge cracks and ravines, and just when it seemed they must surely crash into the bare rock face, a way opened, and they were travelling down a canyon, where almost all daylight was blotted out. The craft became almost a live thing, weaving and twisting.

Voruum saw the side streets with their crushed buildings, some blocked completely, others curving away into darkness. As promised,

there were few lights and no sign of pursuit. They had been swallowed by Zenzi-Barang, a fly taken by a leviathan.

They dipped down into a cavern under the ancient streets and were now below the city, gliding more slowly. Tarriel was hunched over the controls, listening attentively as Quezinder guided her onward. This was new terrain to her, and far more dangerous than the more open way she had found into the city when she had come with Ruic Aldaar. She knew, however, that those paths were guarded since her first visit.

Voruum heard Quezinder's voice like a whisper. "We are close to the heart, and your craft will soon be above us. Something has awoken. You must be like the air, appearing lifeless and invisible. If the powers here find you before you reach a hiding place, you will be absorbed."

Voruum reduced the light of his weapon down to a minimum. Death in this place would be slow and terrible.

PART III:

UNDER THE HORNS OF HELL

Kaspel gazed in awe at the huge blocks of stone towering up over the flier, which was now like a small insect in a vast canyon. *Buildings*, he thought. *These are buildings*. He had never imagined their like or anything remotely so spectacular. They were partially ruined, long since abandoned, but they had lost none of their grandeur. He glanced at Voruum, but the witchfinder motioned for him to be silent. If any of them spoke, or even whispered, there would be swift repercussions.

Voruum heard Quezinder's mental sendings as they guided Tarriel along the canyon and then up a branch, constantly changing direction. The air was still, but there were distant hints of movement, a fathomless swell of shadows and more substantial forms. Threaded through the atmosphere like an invisible fog, the air streamed, malevolent and questing.

Tarriel turned to Voruum and pointed ahead. There were dim lights clustered around the core of a block that stood out from the buildings around it like a mesa. Quezinder cautioned Tarriel's approach and guided her along another side branch and down into its dark floor, skimming it. There were openings in the stone here, and the flier swung through one into the heart of an ancient building. They had their star lances dimmed to a minimum, almost having to progress entirely by instinct.

You will have to hide the craft and advance on foot, said Quezinder. Find a place within this building.

Voruum knew Tarriel was uncomfortable with the idea, but she needed to understand it was necessary if they were to retain the element of surprise. She found a place near a wall and slid the flier into a recess, switching off the controls and leaving only the locator beacon operating. Its faint pulse was very low, tuned to her receiver.

They left, still guided by Quezinder, whose instructions led them up into the building, which seemed little more than endless stone corridors linked by steps. Whatever had existed here had turned to dust. There were no signs of habitation—they could have been passing along the floors of a dead sea-bottom. The silence gathered about them oppressively, the weight of stone above them like the promise of a landslide.

Eventually, they reached the far side of the building, and pale light beckoned them to a low window. On its balcony, they were able to see across a void to the massive building with the light clusters. In the shadows there, things moved and shifted ponderously, but it was impossible to see them clearly.

Guardians, came Quezinder's mental voice. Mutated creatures, bloated arthropods, they have their webs swung across the chasm on all sides of the central complex. Keep clear of them. You must find an old web. The fresher ones are deadly and will snare you. You'd never cut yourselves free if you got enmeshed. The older strands are dried up but still strong.

Voruum and Tarriel switched off their star lances. They exchanged nods and moved along the balcony. There were several places where the thick strands of the guardians had been secured to the stone with oozing, gelatinous glue, and they were careful to avoid them. Further down the stone face, Voruum saw older strands, hanging like fat vines out over the vault. He indicated to Tarriel and Kaspel. The youth looked stunned but nodded.

They slowly eased their way down the stone face, careful not to touch any of the dripping slime from the fresher web strands. A vague twilight pulsed over the city, and in its sickly glow they could see a number of the guardians moving in stilted fashion over the higher strands, pausing as if scenting the air like hounds. For the moment they did not seem aware of the human intruders.

Voruum edged out onto the old strand. It bore his weight, moving only slightly. Tarriel followed, and then Kaspel, and although they all felt the strand drop a little, it held. Like spiders themselves, they moved out across the void, scuttling on all fours, gripping the web, careful not to rip pieces of it free. Below them, limned in an eerie glow, a criss-cross pattern of webs, old and new, joined the buildings, like immense ships moored to a quay. Among them, the guardians moved to and fro. Voruum imagined their slowness was deceptive: once alerted, he guessed, they would be formidable.

Half way across the chasm, he studied the building ahead. The wall where the web ended was pitch-black, although several storeys lower there were lights, flickering like flames. Silence still reigned, and whenever a guardian passed overhead or below them, it made no sound. Voruum turned to see how his companions were faring. Tarriel was close behind him, but Kaspel had fallen a few yards behind her.

At that moment, on a fresher strand of web just above them, a guardian had stopped and was lowering a long limb, as if tasting the air with it. It unfurled, dripping viscous fluid. Kaspel saw Voruum wave at him and looked up. The youth barely saw the limb in time, ducking down and flattening himself.

The guardian was like a huge beetle, but with a spider's limbs and head. It had twin mandibles, each the size of a man.

Kaspel drew himself along the web strand in time to avoid the groping limb of the guardian, which struck the web and began sliding along it, like a grotesque tongue. Behind it, a monstrous face loomed, its vaguely human features bloated and twisted.

Kaspel reached Tarriel, and the three of them moved on as quickly as they dared to the far wall. There was a narrow ledge onto which they clambered. Several more guardians had come to investigate. It would only be a matter of time before the twisted faces, peering eagerly into the shadows, discovered the intruders.

Voruum led his companions along the precarious ledge until they came to a vertical crevice in the stone large enough to admit them. Voruum slipped inside. Tarriel indicated for Kaspel to go next, then followed, just as another guardian probed for her. It was too bulky to follow, and the three humans squeezed down the narrow passage in darkness. They heard a screech of anger. Voruum paused, listening.

You are above the heart of the complex, came Quezinder's mental voice. We are in place far below you, closer to the ground, not yet discovered.

Voruum had agreed with Tarriel that their mission would be to destroy the beast called Raal and bring part of it out of the city, ideal evidence to show the Councillors at Karkesh.

We will begin an attack when you are ready, said Quezinder.

Voruum sent a mental message, signalling for his companions to keep as still as they could. The air trembled with other forces, invisible fingers probing the darkness. Voruum reached inside himself for Murrath and Vormich. They had been listening to events around the companions, aware of their strange environment through Voruum.

Voruum sent them out to study the labyrinthine passages and halls of the huge edifice. He closed his eyes and waited, rigid as a statue. He knew Tarriel was uneasy about his lack of movement, but he could read her interpretation of it—she knew he was using his own mind to probe. She was, as yet, unaware of the two spirits of the

former witchhunters. Voruum reasoned that the less known about them, the more likely their presence would remain secret.

Murrath and Vormich moved like a soft current of air down through the passages, twisting and turning in the darkness, guided by faint sounds and movements below that reached them like an electric current. They sensed the remote movements of Quezinder and his host as they surged up like a wave under the foundations, flooding the lower regions, inviting an attack, drawing to them as many of the building's inhabitants as the enemy could amass. The spirits could feel the upper building draining of its powers as its defenders fused with the conflict.

They drifted past more of the weird guardians of this place, smaller versions of the horrors outside, and came to huge doors where several of the creatures had gathered to protect whatever was beyond. Murrath and Vormich passed through the thick wooden portal. They were in a huge hall. Its ceiling was criss-crossed with thick beams chiselled from the once-living bones of unimaginably huge creatures. Likewise, the columns supporting the upper beams were cut from bone, the floor a mosaic of chitinous plate, as though this whole structure had been hewn from the inside of a gargantuan living organism.

The purpose of the hall was clear. It was lit by oversized braziers, in which heaped coals blazed with a baleful red light. Row upon row of seats—hundreds of them—fanned back from a raised area and its blasphemous altar at the heart of the hall, and behind this, a gigantic head carved from a cartilaginous mass hovered over the hall with twin horns curling fantastically and eye sockets black and fathomless.

The spirits knew at once they were in the Holy of Holies of the Brotherhood of the Goat, the servants of Shaitan. Their visions were relayed back to Voruum, who held himself rigid with difficulty.

Although the hall seemed empty, there were shapes bowed down before the frightful goat visage, several beings wrapped in black robes with the horns of the dark god embroidered down the spine. These beings appeared to be locked in silent prayer, perhaps seeking aid for their guardians deep below them, where Quezinder's forces

were at work. From deep red curtains on one side of the altar, other figures emerged—three men, two of whom stood directly under the goat visage, bowing their cowled heads to it.

The third figure was not cloaked but wore simple garb, trousers and a shirt, with no accoutrements or weapons. It was a pale-skinned man, his face cold and emotionless, the dull eyes like those of one drugged. The witchfinders felt its alien quality and transmitted it to Voruum. A heart and organs beat within this being, but they were unnatural. Voruum knew at once that this was the created being, Raal.

It turned its head, and the two spirits felt the creature—it was not human—sensing the air as a hound or a big cat detects its prey. The wide, staring eyes gleamed in the scarlet fire-glow, but they did not fix on the spirits, who drew back into the hall.

“What stirs you, Raal?” said one of the two cowled men.

“The air is tainted,” the creature growled, its voice rasping from the larynx of a beast.

“There are enemies in the lower vaults. He smells them, even from here,” said the other cowled figure. “Our servants will deal with them easily enough. We’ll feast well once this senseless insurrection is over.”

The two men returned to their contemplation of the goat-god, and Raal stood dispassionately to one side, apparently waiting for instructions.

Voruum recalled the witchfinder spirits. He drew both Tarriel and Kaspel very close and whispered. “I have seen the way into the heart of this place. The creature, Raal, is down there. While the battle deep below rages, we should strike. Three of us should be enough for our purposes. We kill Raal and take its head.”

“Agreed,” said Tarriel without hesitation.

Kaspel nodded.

“You may have to be the one to strike the blow,” Voruum told him. “Tarriel and I will protect you with our weapons. We should go now. Quezinder is holding the guardians, although the slaughter is not good. We should not waste the time he’s bought for us.”

They left at once, Voruum leading the way, guided again by the witchfinder spirits. In one of the corridors, they were met by a guardian, but Voruum sliced it practically in two with his star lance, leaving it to writhe in a pool of its own vital fluids. Twice more they were discovered, but their attack was so swift and evidently unexpected, they were able to despatch the guardians without raising an alarm.

When they reached the huge doors to the hall of the goat god, they approached even more cautiously, as there were a number of the mutant guardians there, squatting on their toad-like haunches. Voruum and Tarriel crept one on each side of the corridor until Voruum was able to signal Kaspel forward. To his credit, the youth never blanched and strode towards the guardians as though he were just another of the inhabitants of the citadel.

It was only as he came closer that they reacted, but as they hopped forward, tongues snaking out from wet mouths, Voruum and Tarriel drove in from either flank, sweeping their star lances to and fro to deadly effect. In moments, the guardians had been cut to ribbons, with hardly a sound ensuing. Voruum stood over a twitching body and listened. The corridors around them were silent. He pushed the huge doors open and slipped inside, silent as a shadow. Tarriel and Kaspel followed.

Voruum and Tarriel had switched off their star lances. They allowed the darkness behind the pillars to enfold them. Across the vast hall and its empty rows of seats, they saw the altar area. The two cowed figures that the witchfinder spirits had seen were still there, bowed before the huge goat head. In the shadows to one side of them, muffled in semi-darkness, another figure waited motionlessly. Voruum and his companions understood it was the Raal creature.

They used the pillars to conceal themselves as they worked their way towards the heart of the huge chamber. As they drew near to the

last line of seats, a figure rose up, a lone supplicant, and turned its face to the intruders. Before it could shout out a warning, Tarriel drove her weapon into its abdomen, and it sank down between the seats. The figures at the altar sensed nothing.

Voruum used the two witchfinder spirits to strengthen his own mental cloak as he drew ever closer to the silent figures ahead. Raal was utterly motionless, face obscured by shadow, but as Voruum closed in, it turned, the light from the coals suffusing his features. Voruum heard Tarriel's sudden gasp of shock behind him, and to his dismay, she dropped her star lance. The sound of its fall snapped the silence of the chamber.

Kaspel snatched up the star lance as Voruum swung round. Raal and the two cowed figures turned towards the intruders.

Voruum felt the air writhe. He fought off the immediate bolts of malefic energy that were flung at him, as dangerous as any physical weapons. Tarriel had fallen to her knees, her eyes inside her mask wide and filled with horror. Voruum saw through the torn fabric of her own mental barrier.

Ruic! her mind cried, her eyes filled with tears as Raal stepped forward, its own face emotionless, but its manner clearly hostile.

Voruum realized at that moment what had so disturbed the girl. She saw the oncoming figure as Ruic Aldaar. Raal had been made in his image—a simulacrum.

“No!” Voruum shouted. “It is not him, Tarriel. Close Ruic from your mind!”

She was helpless, however, overcome by the grief she had suppressed for so long. Voruum felt it and with it, a threat to his own mental barrier. He turned just as the two cloaked acolytes of Shaitan came for him. Both held twisted metal weapons, blades etched with bizarre images that writhed like live things. Voruum knew if they reached his flesh, they would do far more than cut or kill him. He attacked, his star lance suddenly blazing so that for a moment the two hooded figures hung back.

Raal closed on the fallen Tarriel. She gazed up at him, seemingly unable to move as the being's hands reached down for her throat. Kaspel leapt forward and drove Tarriel's star lance at Raal's chest. There was a burst of light, spilling onto the floor like liquid, and for a moment the simulacrum staggered back.

Voruum got a glimpse of Kaspel's defence of Tarriel, but the witchfinder's attention was focused on his two opponents. Murrath and Vormich wrapped a protective cloak about him, and only its presence spared him from defeat by the hooded assailants. Voruum knew they were using extreme mental energy to snare him, drawing from a deep well of horrors more powerful than any of the evils he'd yet encountered in his time as a witchfinder. Desperately he held them off, determined not to submit to that dark will and whatever horror lurked behind it, the foul heart of Zenzi-Barang.

Raal had recovered from Kaspel's blow and although the youth drove for it again, it took a second strike on its forearm. In the explosion of light, Kaspel and the weapon were flung aside like leaves in a high wind. Tarriel had got to her feet, but her mind was still confused, her concentration shattered by the appearance of the simulacrum. Again, it made for her, clearly having no other aim than to kill her. It clawed at her face, and again she fell back. She drew a small blade from her belt but knew it would be totally ineffective against the monstrous strength of the simulacrum. She could feel its scorn, shaped into a mental spear, hurled at her in contempt of her emotional weakness, the feelings for Ruic Aldaar she had tried to smother. They bled now like an open wound.

Voruum was driven back to the edge of the altar area. Every last ounce of his energy was being drained by the sheer effort of keeping the two cowed beings at bay. He saw, in their less than human faces, their triumph beaming at him, charring him like fire.

Tarriel tried to roll aside and avoid the simulacrum, but it stood over her and made ready to deal a killing blow. Light abruptly burst from its back. Though dazed, Tarriel saw a sudden change in the simulacrum. Its upper torso was leaking light. Kaspel stood behind it. He had used the star lance and brought it crashing down on the creature's spine.

While it was stunned by the blow, Kaspel struck again, this time at the neck.

The star lance fizzed and crackled with power as it ripped into the muscles and fibres of Raal's neck. Tarriel rolled aside again, ready to defend herself from those raking hands, but Kaspel followed with blow upon blow. The youth shrieked like a madman as he swung the star lance over and again.

Raal dropped to all fours, like a beaten dog. Its head hung, the connections to its body all but severed. Kaspel rushed in and made the final cut. Raal's head rolled across the floor, the decapitated body flopping forward, leaking light and fluids.

Voruum felt Kaspel's killing blow as it drew the attention of his two assailants. It was all Voruum needed to redouble his efforts. He drove forward and plunged his star lance into the chest of the first acolyte. It stuck fast, but light poured from the blade in a molten flow, filling the acolyte with an intensity that grew stronger by the second, until the being began to melt. White hot light suffused it and bathed the entire chamber in its dazzling glow. The acolyte's form twisted, pulping, and slid to the ground in a thick, gelatinous mass.

The other acolyte pulled back, glaring at the horrific transformation of his companion. He lifted his head and opened his mouth impossibly wide, letting out a wild shriek, and Voruum knew that it was more than a howl of fury. It was a clarion call to whatever foul nightmares served him and his hellish master. Somewhere in the deeps, a force stirred, responding to the frightful summons.

Tarriel had snapped out of her daze. She took the star lance from Kaspel, came forward a few paces and flung it at the snarling acolyte beyond Voruum. It drove hard into that yawning mouth and stuck fast in flesh and bone. Light blazed again; then there was an explosion that tore the being to shreds, blasting the ripped body across the altar area in a bloody rain.

Voruum retrieved the star lance and tossed it to Tarriel, who caught it deftly. Behind her, Kaspel retrieved the head of the simulacrum.

“We’ll take that back with us,” said Voruum. “Karkesh will have their evidence. Find something to cover it and let’s get away.”

Kaspel nodded and went over to one of the huge velvet curtains. He cut a section from it and wrapped the head.

Tarriel turned from the youth and was about to speak to Voruum when he held up his hand, listening to the air like a hound scenting blood. “It’s Quezinder.”

You must get away from Zenzi-Barang as soon as you are able, said the projected mental voice. The last of the three rulers of the city, Zarrakana, leads his servants against us and we cannot hold him here. We must withdraw now or be destroyed by the terrors he has conjured to aid him. We have lost many.

Voruum quickly explained what had happened in the altar chamber.

Then return to your flier and flee! Zarrakana has summoned something from the deeps. If it finds you, all will be lost.

Voruum felt his link with the mutant ruler break and knew somewhere below the citadel another grim battle was being waged. He urged his companions back through the hall. They paused at the doorway. There was no movement beyond, but the three of them sensed something in the air, as though, not far below them, it coagulated with a promise of worse horror to come.

As they climbed the passages, Tarriel turned to Kaspel. He had swung the wrapped head of Raal across a shoulder, like a stolen treasure.

“I owe you my life,” Tarriel said softly.

“I would gladly give you mine,” he replied.

“Enough talk of dying,” Voruum interjected. “Focus your minds. The guardians will be alert now, and will not want us to pass.”

They approached the upper corridors like ghosts, finding the narrow passage that took them to the outer wall. Voruum’s words proved prophetic—a number of the crawling guardians lay outside on

the web strands. The dark powers that pursued the three intruders had warned them. Voruum knew that Zarrakana led the pursuit himself, for the witchfinder could already feel the intensity of his rage.

“We’ll have to cut our way through them,” he told his companions. As he spoke, the creatures turned as one, their quasi-human faces staring hungrily at the figures emerging from the crevice. More of the spider-like things dropped from higher up, forming a massed defence of the webs.

Tarriel gasped. “It’s impossible,” she said. “There are too many.”

Voruum was surprised by her sudden loss of confidence. Earlier she had been mechanical in her determination to succeed in their quest. He realised, though, that seeing the simulacrum of Ruic Aldaar must have been a terrible blow to her. It had exposed her mind a little further, and Voruum read in it her horror, fired by the thing Kaspel carried. It was not Aldaar’s head, of course, but even so, the thought of it was numbing Tarriel.

She was right about the guardians, however. Voruum dared not lead an attack on them, not here. There could only be one result. Behind and below him, he could feel the darkness heaving. Zarrakana was rising, along with something unspeakable.

Voruum! It was the mental voice of Murrath, deep within him. *There is a way. The flier. You cannot cross the chasm to its hiding place. Yet it can be brought to you, if you can control it psychically.*

Voruum backed his companions into the crevice, avoiding the first attempt of the guardians to dislodge him.

Ask the girl! Have her guide us to the craft. Help us bring it to you.

Voruum turned to Tarriel. Her eyes were moist, her energy visibly draining. “The flier,” Voruum said. “Can it be summoned?”

She seemed confused for a moment, then rallied. “I think so. I’ve never tried to control it that way, though.”

“I will blend my powers with yours,” he said. “We must try and direct them to the flier.”

The idea of mind-sharing appalled her and she hesitated briefly, but with defeat so close to them, she finally accepted.

Voruum released Murrath and Vormich, and at once they entered Tarriel's mind. It came as a shock to her, but they moved so swiftly it was too late to prevent their surge of energy. The two witchfinder spirits arrowed out into the ether, using Tarriel's mental instructions to get them to the far side of the canyon and the place where the flier was hidden.

Tarriel slumped, and Kaspel immediately steadied her while Voruum watched the entrance to the crevice, where an entire swarm of guardians still groped for their prey. Voruum occasionally slashed at their probing tongues with the star lance, repelling them for a few moments, but always they returned to the assault, driven by their dark master.

Voruum was beginning to think they would have to find another way out of the citadel, when there came a burst of sound beyond. The flier was firing on the guardians! Murrath and Vormich had succeeded in raising it and bringing it here. Voruum felt their minds and Tarriel's, linked to the machine. The three of them had merged with the controls.

Light flooded the crevice, and outside, the guardians gave vent to high screeches of agony as the weapons of the flier poured fire into them, scorching and searing, cutting a swathe through their confused ranks, sending dozens of the creatures into the abyss, blazing as they fell. Strands of web were severed and hung burning like torches, lighting up the upper canyon. The flier swerved through the conflagration and hovered close to the ledge beyond the crevice.

Voruum swiftly dashed out onto the ledge while Kaspel guided the still benumbed Tarriel out to join him. Voruum had to use his star lance to cut back a clutch of guardians. The fire from his weapon added to the inferno around them. Kaspel helped Tarriel get aboard the flier, sitting her behind the controls. Voruum made one last lunge, despatching another smouldering monster, and then leapt for the craft.

Tarriel seemed to rise out of a deep mire, sucking in air like a near-drowned swimmer. She grasped the controls and took the craft away in a steep curve that barely avoided scraping the hull on the fangs of rock. As she did so, Murrath and Vormich withdrew, as one again with Voruum. Tarriel criss-crossed the remaining masses of guardians below the craft and repeatedly fired, torching dozens of the creatures, lighting up the entire rim of the buildings around them.

“Get us away from here, Tarriel! The last of the sorcerers will soon be upon us.”

He saw the old look in her eyes, as though the burning of the guardians had assuaged some of her grief. She swung the flier around and guided it like an arrow down into the canyon and along its shadowed bed. Grey shapes lifted themselves up from the darkness, clouds of pure evil, their intensity almost clogging the senses. Tarriel had to make the flier rise and twist to avoid the gathering tendrils.

All three of the companions felt the furnace of Zarrakana’s hatred. He had drawn on every atom of his power. The sides of the canyons shook, and Tarriel realised barely in time that they were closing like the jaws of a leviathan. Up into the night sky she rose. Voruum and Kaspel looked back at the heart of the citadel as they raced from it. Strange lights bloomed there, and something vast heaved itself out of the night, a living thunderhead, a wave of power that rolled onwards in pursuit.

Voruum could hear another mental voice, faint and far away. Quezinder!

Are you free of the city? it called. We are spent. The last of us were almost annihilated, but Zarrakana has withdrawn and is pouring everything into his pursuit. We can do no more.

You’ve done enough. When we return to Zenzi-Barang, we will cut this serpent into pieces. Voruum’s words were the last they exchanged. He prayed that they would not be an empty promise.

Tarriel said nothing, her mind closed tightly, and Voruum made no attempt to penetrate it. He knew, though, she felt abused. Even

though the spirits of the witchfinders had played a vital part in their escape, it had been at a cost to her. Her innermost thoughts and emotions would have been exposed. Anger now fuelled her. Enough, Voruum hoped, to get them back across Quumarza. She concentrated on flying the craft, zig-zagging through the huge cracks of the desert bottom.

“Where will we hide?” Kaspel asked Voruum. “Or do you think we can outrun what’s behind us?”

Voruum knew from Murrath that the craft’s energy cells were replenished by the sun, but so much had been used up that the flier would need a protracted rest. Otherwise, it would simply burn up. Ul Hudzir would be the limit of its journey.

“We will have to make a stand at Ul Hudzir.”

Kaspel merely nodded. He looked back at the pursuing darkness. Voruum realised the youth was not panicking about their safety: he was thinking about Quezinder and the many of its people lost in the dreadful, unseen conflict deep under Zenzi-Barang. Kaspel, of course, had heard them die. Voruum drew back from his exposed feelings. There would be time for grief later, if they survived.

When they finally reached the high scar at Quumarza’s edge, the storm behind them remained at a distance, though it came on remorselessly. Zarrakana must have felt confident, perhaps aware the flier would have to rest. He would certainly know Ul Hudzir would be the place Voruum would choose to make a stand.

The flier, noticeably slowing now, drifted up over the semi-ruined citadel, disturbing a flock of desert birds which had elected to roost there. Tarriel guided the flier down to a flat roof, and the trio disembarked. Kaspel still clutched the makeshift bag. Tarriel never once looked at it.

Gavannion came to meet them, his face haggard. “You have what you need?”

Voruum nodded. “We must bury ourselves. The storm will be far worse than anything you’ve experienced before. Zarrakana himself is

coming.”

Gavannion gasped. “Then we must prepare a trap for him.”

“Can you do that?”

“We must get below—all of us.”

Tarriel stared back at the flier where she had left it exposed to the light. “My flier. I need to secure it.”

“No time!” said Gavannion. “The storm is closing.”

She ignored him and ran across the roof.

Kaspel looked as though he was about to follow, but Voruum gripped his arm. “Give me that! Now—go and help her, but be swift if you both want to live.”

The youth handed over the bag and dashed off after Tarriel. Moments later he and the girl were tying the flier down. Voruum wasted no time in following Gavannion below into the hall.

“I have something that will draw Zarrakana,” said Gavannion, opening an old chest. He pulled out a thin steel box and snapped it open. Within were intricate metal components and Gavannion immediately began fitting them together.

“What is it?” asked Voruum.

“It is very powerful. It was given to me to use as a final resort, should Qumarza unleash the worst of its powers. You must leave at once, Voruum. You must take your evidence to Karkesh. The flier will not be ready, but it would not be safe to go in that. Zarrakana will have an aerial host tracking you. You’d suffer the same fate as Ruic Aldaar.”

Tarriel and Kaspel came rushing down the stairs into the hall. “Soon!” said the girl. “The storm will break very soon.”

Gavannion turned back to Voruum. “You must go under the mountains. There is a path. It will bring you out far beyond the range. There are villages. Get horses—”

“I’m staying with you, grandfather,” said Tarriel. “You can’t hold back the darkness alone.”

Gavannion set the device down on a stone table. “This can. Its power will be enough.”

“Hurry then,” said Voruum. “Take us to the passage.”

“Tarriel—show them. Go on! I have yet to prime this.” The device had grown under his careful construction.

“What does it do?” asked Voruum.

“It is a distorter. It will attract the power of the enemy, draw it like a beacon, and then confuse it by disguising itself. And it will send out a shield that will obscure your escape. Zarrakana will believe we are all in here, trapped like rats. His pride will pull him in. So, hurry up and leave while I program it.”

Tarriel led the others down through a maze of stairwells into a chamber that had almost collapsed. She found a key and unlocked the door. Voruum used his star lance to throw light along the passage beyond, which had been chopped from the heartstone of the mountain.

He had taken a few steps along the tunnel when he realised neither Tarriel nor Kaspel were following him. He turned.

“There’s no time to waste—”

“I’m not coming with you,” said Tarriel. “My place is with my grandfather. He does not deserve to die alone.”

“Die?” said Voruum. “If he’s quick, he won’t need to die —”

“It’s an explosive device,” said the girl coldly. “It will do the things he said, and mask your escape. But when it reaches the full extent of its power, it’ll send out a blast that will obliterate everything within miles. Ul Hudzir will be just another vast crater in a land of craters. So you’d better move.”

Kaspel stared at Voruum, his eyes wide. “I—I should stay,” he blurted.

“Don’t be a fool,” said Tarriel, although there was no contempt in her voice. “It’s death. Your master will need you. You can’t save Gavannion. Or me. Don’t waste your life, Kaspel.”

He would have protested, but she leaned forward and kissed him, briefly on the lips. The youth stood still, momentarily dazed.

Voruum had already started down the tunnel. Tarriel thrust Kaspel after him. “Go! Protect him.” She swung round, intending to return to the upper building, but as she did so, the door slammed, as if smitten by a huge fist. Tarriel let out a scream of protest, realising what had happened.

“Grandfather!” She knew it had been he—his power. She beat at the door, but it would not move. There was no way back in.

Kaspel was beside her again, reaching for her arm. “We have to go,” he said, gently guiding her away.

Out in the desert, the colossal storm front rolled forward like an ocean bursting from its bed, thick darkness swirling around Ul Hudzir, engulfing it and its surrounding peaks. Shapes writhed within its coils, huge, flapping things, and from the floor of Quumarza monstrous serpentine creatures burst up through sand and stone, pulverizing the lower slopes of the escarpment. For a time there was a lull as the storm swirled around its target, as though it concentrated all its black energies on the citadel. The mind of Zarrakana probed down into the last of the buildings—and found what it sought.

He saw them there, the four beings who had rashly set themselves up against him. The old man, who had lived in this crumbling ruin for countless years, his powers drying up, the girl, feisty but no true mental opponent for him, the youth, a mere puppy from the remote desert lands, and the accursed witchfinder, Arrul Voruum. The latter had power, but nothing to compare to what Zarrakana could muster.

The sorcerer gathered his own and prepared to take his revenge, savouring it as he projected himself—physically—into the chamber where the four awaited him. He materialised and solidified, a tall,

robed presence with a nimbus of light dancing around him. He would enjoy demonstrating they were no match for him, even without the forces he could command.

Gavannion stood behind a stone table, on which rested a velvet sack. As if shocked by the sorcerer's appearance, the old man made to pull it away, but it caught on the edge of the stone and tore open, revealing the purloined head of the simulacrum, Raal. A faint light appeared in the glazed, metallic eyes, and the grisly object hummed as though the thieves had attempted to re-imbue it with life.

Zarrakana raised an arm contemptuously, his fingers exposed, and flicked a ball of scarlet fire at Voruum's figure. The witchfinder was engulfed instantly, and moments later, Kaspel suffered the same fate. Their remains, no more than thick pools on the stone flags, fizzed and sparkled briefly.

Gavannion and Tarriel waited. The girl carried a star lance, Zarrakana noticed. Oh yes, she had rescued it from her former lover—the witchfinder Aldaar he'd used as a prototype for Raal. It had so amused him to see her react to the man's apparent reappearance.

Perhaps she read his thought—she pointed the star lance at him, and its fire leapt out, striking his chest. Zarrakana's power deflected it as easily as a mirror bending light, and it burst harmlessly across the floor.

Tarriel snarled—it may have been wild laughter, or the final snapping of her reason. She rushed forward, raising the star lance for what should have been a killing blow. Zarrakana met the weapon with the flat of his right hand and there was a violent crash and a blinding light. The star lance melted in Tarriel's hands.

Gavannion fought with every last vestige of his mental powers to maintain the images. Deceiving Zarrakana was paramount, and the old man ground his teeth in effort. He maintained his guise, watching in horror as the image of Tarriel collapsed. He went to her, bending down to lift her, evincing his horror at her apparent death as he stared up into the looming face of the sorcerer.

“This is just the beginning,” said Zarrakana. “Your world is coming to the end of its days.” Behind him, on the curved wall, a huge shadow stirred, the shape of a goat’s head with twin, curled horns.

Zarrakana went to the simulacrum’s head and lifted it. He felt its throbbing power, and it was only then he realized it was not what he thought. A device, cloaking itself in a false guise! As it unleashed the unimaginable powers housed within it, the sorcerer understood far too late its real purpose.

Deep under the earth, Voruum, Kaspel and Tarriel felt the shaking of the ground, as though a distant earthquake rocked the world. They heard remote thunder within the rocks. The device had detonated.

Tarriel let out a gasp, choking on her grandfather’s name. She knew he could not possibly have survived. Part of her had died with him, and she let her silent tears flow. Kaspel put an arm around her, and she did not shrug him off.

Voruum said nothing, pulling the bag and his trophy closer, continuing up the endless tunnel.

Kyron Morgath stared at the grubby sack that Arrul Voruum had dropped onto the low table between them. The sack was dusty and stained and looked strikingly out of place in this meticulously kept chamber.

“This is the evidence,” said the witchfinder. “The reason you must send whatever force you can muster across the deserts of Quumarza to Zenzi-Barang.”

“Sit,” said Morgath coolly. He waited while Voruum did so. Behind him, Kaspel remained standing, silent as a statue, and beside him, a girl with grief carved in her features.

As Morgath also sat, Voruum began his report. He left out very little of the incidents in the eastern desert lands, though he said nothing of Kaspel’s involvement, other than as his aide. The emotional dramas surrounding Gavannion and his granddaughter, he also dealt with briefly. Morgath would have had some sympathy but otherwise little interest in such things.

When Voruum had concluded the lengthy report, Morgath sat back, nodding slowly as if his eyes could scan the recent past and see all those things the witchfinder had described. “So the sorcerers that ruled Zenzi-Barang are all dead?”

“I sent my mind back to the remains of Ul Hudzir once we had emerged from under the mountains. I probed for Zarrakana, but there was nothing. If he had survived, he would have come for me—and this.” Voruum leaned forward and undid the sack.

The simulacrum’s head was revealed.

“By all the stars!” said Morgath, evidently shocked. “The likeness is absolute. I would have said it was Ruic Aldaar himself....”

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

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Criteria For Joining the Galactic Community

By MICHAEL TIERNEY

While spending a night in the Lincoln Bedroom, the President finds himself in the hands of strange visitors from another world! Can the master of negotiation convince an advanced alien race of Earth's worthiness to join the Galactic Community?

Loneliness was a distraction that the President of the United States could not afford, so whenever his wife was traveling abroad he stayed in the Lincoln Bedroom. This felt more like he too was traveling as opposed to the loneliness he felt sleeping in a bed absent his partner.

One night he awoke suddenly to find that the whole Lincoln Bedroom was bathed in bright, white light. In his groggy state, he wondered for a moment if he had just discovered some long hidden party machine left over from the Clinton era and staggered to his feet, randomly searching for the off switch.

Then the lights blinked and he discovered himself to be standing barefoot on a metallic floor and looking up at a trio of weirdly shaped floating figures that could only be described as aliens from another world.

“You are the one called Potus?”

The words rang in his head like an echo.

“I *am* the President of the United States,” he answered. “Who are *you*.”

“We are representatives from the Galactic Community, and we have come to welcome you into our membership.”

“Where am I?” The President looked around and could see nothing but a seemingly endless room stretching in every direction. “Where is this?”

“You are aboard our starship. We thought it best to meet privately before making a public appearance.”

“Wise,” the President nodded. “Why now?”

“We have been observing you for some time,” a voice echoed from another figure. “We are most impressed with your sensitivity to the world around you.”

“Especially your efforts and concerns for the smaller animals that you share your world with.”

“I’m confused,” the President spoke as honestly as he could. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“The animal highways that your people build everywhere you inhabit, so that the creatures you call squirrels, raccoons, mice, and many other creatures can easily traverse your world.”

“Animal highways?” The President was genuinely confused.

“Yes,” said the second voice. “It is especially impressive in how you have elevated them to keep your animal friends off the ground and give them extra avenues in much the same way that you travel about the world in your own transport vehicles.”

“I am confused about one thing,” said the third voice. “You build your vehicular highways in both squares and curves, but your animal highways have less variation and are mostly in squares, and often excessively high and thin wires . . . suited mostly for avians. Why is this?”

“Animal highways?” The President repeated to himself as he racked his brain. “Are you talking about fences?”

The reply was silence.

“We build fences around everything,” the President continued. “They’re not for the convenience of animals. They’re for keeping them out. Not just animals, but keeping other people out. Fences are how we define our personal space. The thin wires are for the electrical transference of power.”

The aliens turned towards each other and began speaking all at once.

“An affinity with lower lifeforms was one of the main criteria when we evaluated this world.”

“And this predilection for power—we may have made a mistake.”

“Wait. The translator is still on . . .”

The President blinked and found himself once again standing alone in the middle of the darkened Lincoln Bedroom. He looked around, certain that he had just awoken from a dream.

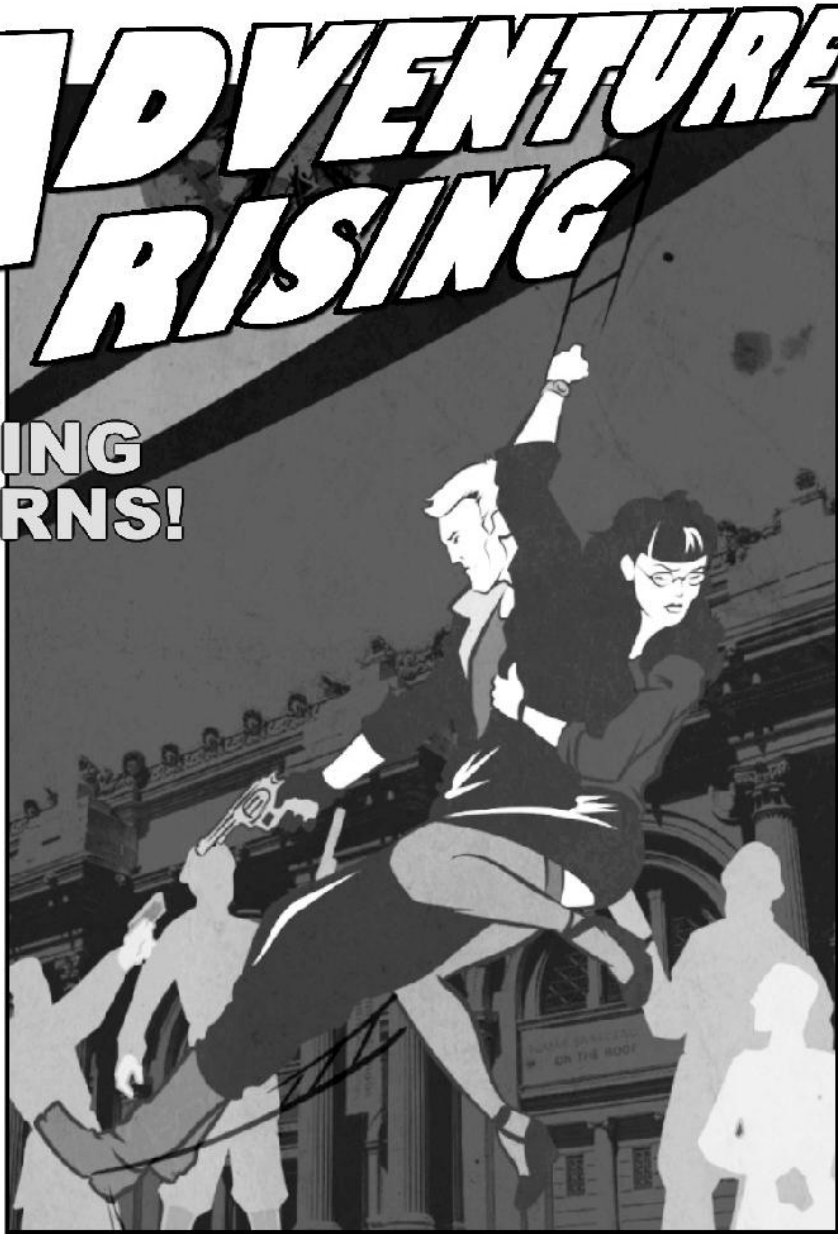
“That’s a real wake up call,” he muttered. “Drastic change needs to be made right away.”

The President of the United States moved to a different bedroom.

*Michael Tierney's previous Cirsova contributions were the psychological horror story *Shark Fighter* and a historical fantasy: *The Bears of 1812*. His other work includes the four-volume *Edgar Rice Burroughs' 100 Year Art Chronology* and his long-running series of *Wild Stars* comics and novels. Discover all things Michael Tierney at www.thewildstars.com*

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Anna and the Thing

By ABRAHAM STRONGJOHN

Anna, fourth princess of Lybica, has fallen into the hands of a dastardly pirate intent on selling her to the Aolian Primevir! Anna forces her captor's space ship to crash in a desperate bid to escape, but strange eyes from the swamp are upon them!

Argus saw the drop-gate crashed open with a splosh onto the marshy ground. A young woman dressed in a torn vermillion kirtle, her hands behind her back, stood just in front of a man, a few years older than her, blonde and wearing a bomber jacket. It took a moment, but Argus realized that the former was the prisoner of the latter.

“Move it!” the man ordered brusquely as he shoved his captive out of the bay and into the muck. Her hands were bound, and she could not catch her balance; what remained of the woman’s dress soaked up the mud and stuck to her uncomfortably when she attempted to stand.

The man, at first, looked almost apologetic and hesitantly moved to help her up but stopped himself. He pulled his Hampton gun from its holster and walked to the starboard side of his craft—there was significant damage where a tree-limb had pierced the hull.

The man shook his head, rubbed his temple and moved angrily towards the young woman, pausing just short of kicking her back into the muck.

“Blast it, Anna!” the man waved the butt of the Hampton gun in the woman’s face. “I was takin’ you in *alive!* That reward woulda had me set up good for years! I coulda quit the business! And now we’re both gonna die here!”

The woman glared through mud-coated bangs right at the man, her pout not flinching at the violent gestures directed towards her. “You’re scum, Jerry. Pirate scum. You always have been, and I should’ve known you’d be the first one to turn up when there was a bounty on my head.”

“Yeah, I’m scum,” the man pressed the gun to Anna’s bruised temple. “And you’re a Princess, dammit, so whatever the Aolian Primevir had in store for you couldn’t be that bad! Not bad enough to blow my damn ship and strand us on this hellhole.”

Anna swallowed hard, but otherwise didn’t move.

“No,” Jerry holstered his gun. “I’m not gonna shoot you for what you did. If you’re gonna die out here, it’ll be because you crashed us into this godforsaken swamp with god knows what, and when it comes for you, I’m gonna let it have you. If the Primevir can’t have you, whatever’s out here can. That’s right. I’ll even trip you, so it gets you first. How’d you like that?”

Argus circled around the wrecked spacecraft. The man seemed preoccupied with his rage, and Argus was very good at blending in with his surroundings, so it offered him an opportunity to seek out a better vantage. Soon, he was upon a low-hanging branch that arched over the rear of the damaged craft; neither the man nor the woman had taken notice of him yet.

“How much are the Aolians paying you?” Anna asked flatly.

“Nothing, since I can’t bring you to them,” Jerry shook his head. “I don’t even know if they’ve got a spaceport on this mudball. If I’m lucky, that town we blew by before we put down has a tele-magnum. Folks won’t be too happy to have to pick up when they ordered delivery. But…” he deftly pulled out and lit a cigarette with one hand while seizing her manacles with the other. “You know how much Aolians like cats. And the Primevir thinks you a fine specimen. Now, get moving!”

Argus had seen men like Jerry before on his world; pirates and traffickers were fond of it because the number of good places to hide and the authority figures who would try to root them out seemed inversely proportionate. The woman, Anna, did strike him as being a rather attractive example of whatever species she was, or so her bearing and the man’s behavior around her led him to believe. For a moment, Argus even fancied what it might be like to have either a

Primevir or a Princess, whatever those were, in his debt. But when the woman said “No”...

“What do you mean, ‘No’?”

“I mean ‘No’, I’m not going,” Anna stated bluntly, digging her heels in. “You know what? I would rather die than be put in some cage for a windbag like the Primevir to drool on me and pet me and pretend like a kidnapped fourth princess of Lybica is some kind of an alliance. So do what you’re going to do.”

“Dammit...” Jerry took a long drag from his cigarette before tossing it into a puddle near one of the rear landing struts. “You know I’m not going to kill you...”

He unholstered his Hampton, spun Anna around to face him, and hit her back-handed on the temple with its handle. The woman slumped into his left arm, and the pirate slung her over his shoulder as though she was weightless.

“But I’m not gonna let you get in the way of my payday again! I just hope the Primevir still wants you with a few scrapes and bruises.”

Jerry holstered the gun once again and set off into the swampy muck in the direction of the town, with the Lybican princess hanging limply down his back.

The pirate had barely left sight of his wrecked spaceship when a hulking form dropped in front of his path. Wide-eyed, Jerry took a step back, hand moving for his weapon—before him stood a chitinous tower of armored limbs and giant mandibles!

The thing stood well over ten feet tall upon two legs, with four menacing arms drawing closer. The creature had wings that looked like the stained glass of the Yorvan chapels, and it spread them wide as it moved toward him.

Jerry had been good to his word, dropping Anna at the thing’s feet and running back towards his ship, but the monstrous insect fell upon him and knocked the gun from his hand. The creature moved in for

the kill, but the man pinned between its forelegs was already dead. Eyes bulging and mouth agape, the young pirate had died of fright.

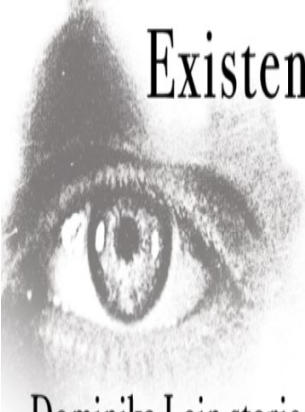
Anna had started to come to, just in time to see the dreadful display. Knowing her own end must surely be near and unable to flee, as she was still bound at the wrists and groggy from the blow to her head, Anna prostrated herself upon the wet mud, her forehead to the ground and hands held fast at her back, waiting and accepting the end that would surely come.

Argus dropped what was left of Jerry and turned to Anna. "You'll forgive me if I decline your offer, princess, but my species are egg-layers."

Abraham Strongjohn writes science fiction when he gets a minute. His stories can be found on Amazon and in the pages of Cirsova.

CAN FICTION CHANGE REALITY?

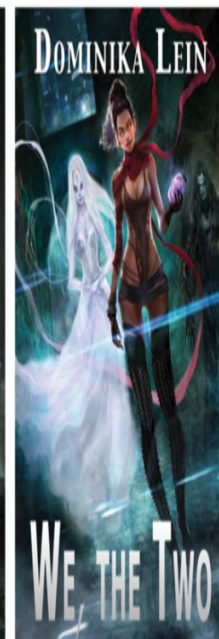
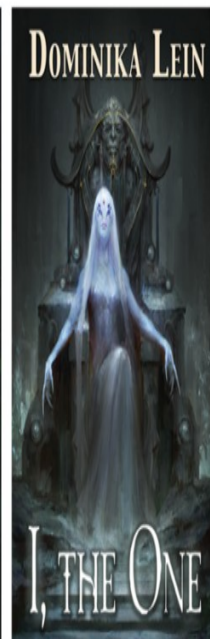
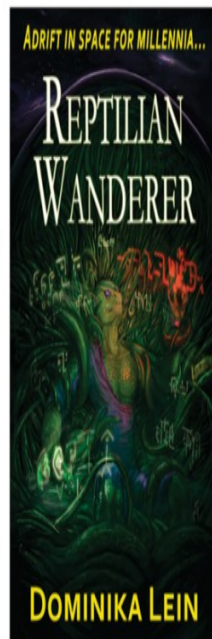
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My Name is John Carter (Part 6)

By JAMES HUTCHINGS

All who know me know well, when I speak, spirits swell,
if I speak 'midst the clamor of war,
but the silence of peace brings this power's decease,
like a ship brought to wreck on the shore.

I would rather have fought fifty foes than have courted
the kindest and gentlest maid,
but my soul must have blared what my tongue never dared
in the ear of some merciful shade,

And that phantom of eld touched the fetters that held me,
and shackles of steel turned to smoke,
and the lock on my tongue in an instant was sprung,
and herewith are the words that I spoke.

“Sapphire Earth whence I came should turn crimson with shame
to have sent such an envoy as I.
Neither greedy nor cruel—just an everyday fool
who led men to their deaths for a lie.

“First I thought myself damned, then this blank world of sand
seemed a canvas to write my repentance.
But whatever it meant, I was chosen and sent
with no hope of appealing my sentence.

“Well, the dice isn't thrown by some leap of its own,
and the clay has no say in its molding,
and for all that you prate about chance, choice or fate,
you're still left with the cards you were holding.

“And for all I may whine at this exile of mine,
like the drunkard cast out from the revel,
still if God showed a way I could go back today,
I would throw in my lot with the Devil.

“Though this world crush our will like the grain in a mill
till our mothers' ghosts grieve that they bore us,
I ascribe little worth of the fields of my birth
for they never brought forth Dejah Thoris.

“Now this ardor untold grows too heavy to hold
and delay seems akin to deceit,
therefore this I impart: if ye search for my heart,
then look down, for it lies at thy feet.”

I had said all I could, and in silence I stood,
nerves stretched taut, like a killer on trial,
till a smile lit her face, and we fiercely embraced,
and this Hell became Heaven awhile.

But no moment may last, and our journey was vast,
so we took what we could and set out,
and our joy was so great that our loads had no weight,
and our hearts held no fear and no doubt.

But we soon became lost, for the desert we crossed
was as clear as the soul of a child,
and fatigue found us first, and then hunger and thirst,
and then Death looked upon us and smiled.

When the next sloping dune seemed as far as the moon,
and the Sun was a lash on our backs,
and we wept as we went with heads wearily bent,
as if baring our necks to the axe;

When, in short, it seemed plain there was nothing to gain
nursing hope when that hope was a lie
and I reckoned it best that we sit down and rest
and pledge love to each other and die,

and prepared to give voice to this bitterest choice,
I looked up and I spotted a light.
It was golden, and near, and—to eyes full of tears—
seemed to dance, as if mocking our plight.

Soon this light was revealed as a fortress of steel
that reflected the radiant Sun,
and that edifice bore not a trace of a door
and, for all that we searched, we found none.

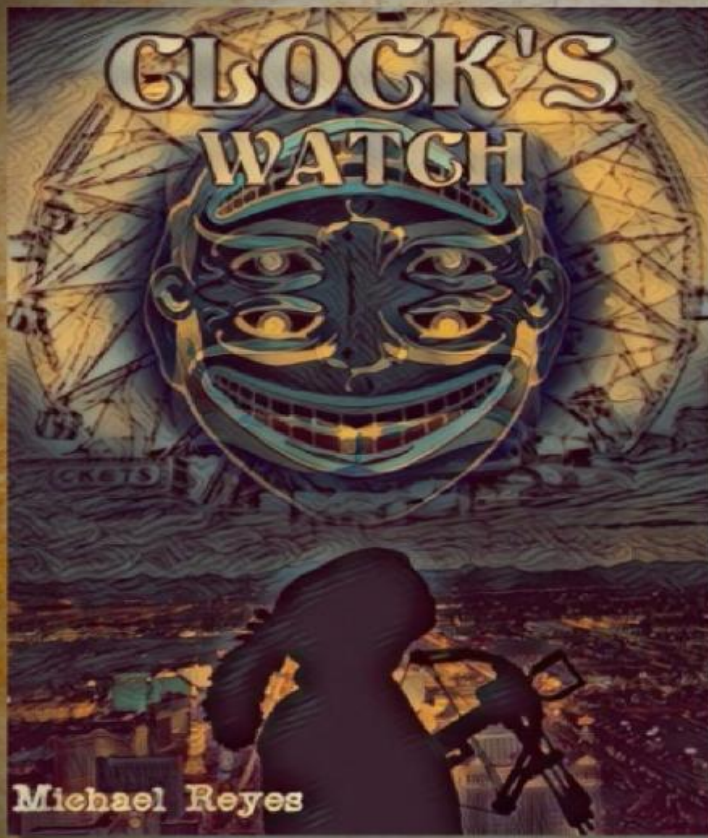
With no sign from inside, still we hammered and pried
at the walls till our fingers were bleeding.
We could no more get in than, when Man first knew sin,
Eve and Adam could go back to Eden.

Soon we fell to despair, till a voice in the air,
faint and cold as the speech of a wraith,
whispered words vague and weird and a doorway appeared.
We were saved, not by works or by faith.

James Hutchings lives in Melbourne, Australia. He fights crime as Poetic Justice, but his day job is acting. You might know him by his stage-name 'Brad Pitt.' His work has appeared in Daily Science Fiction, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly and Wisdom Crieth Without among other markets. His ebook 'Ideas and Inspiration For Fantasy and Science Fiction Writers' is now available from

Amazon, Smashwords, and DriveThruFiction. James blogs regularly at <http://www.apolitical.info/teleleli>.

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Letters From the Nest

Oh, look! An honest to goodness Letters section for a change! Today's letter comes from Dave M Ritzlin of DMR Books, publisher of Swords of Steel anthology series and the Scrolls of Legendry fanzine. Letters do not reflect the views of Cirsova Magazine, but if you send us a good one (cirsova at yahoo dot com with the subject "Letters"), we'll try to publish it.

THE OVERLORD ISSUES JUDGEMENT!

Dear Ed.:

I pen this missive to you from inside the deeps of the earth. Here in the Steel Dungeons of the Invincible Overlord, minions toil without rest to satisfy the whims of their cruel master. Daily tasks include copying necromantic formulae and collecting maidens for human sacrifice. Occasionally they are granted reprieve. Such a time occurred recently, when a messenger from the upper earth delivered a package containing the arcane tome Cirsova #6 and the Invincible Overlord (yours truly) decided to take a break.

First things first, let's talk about the cover. It's decent enough, I suppose, but man, does it look cartoony! No wonder people think Cirsova is a comic book. I suggest you fork out the cash for a more talented artist. You get what you pay for, and respectable cover art goes a long way in making a good impression.

While we're on the subject of illustrations, why no B&W interior illos? If it's a budget problem, it's not hard to find skilled artists who are willing to work for free. You'd be surprised how many people would do it just to get their name out there. Heck, Broadwords and Blasters doesn't even pay their authors. (!?!, ed.)

Let's rank the stories, shall we? The Battlefield of Keres takes top marks. It would be even better if the hero didn't have the deplorable name of Mangos. Mangos?! It's hard to enjoy a ripping heroic yarn

when the main character's name makes you think of Chris Kattan dancing in golden hot pants. At least that's not as bad as *The Witch of Elrica* from ish #4. I can't wait for the sequels, *The Witch of Coruma* and *The Witch of Hawkmoona*.

But I digress. Back to the rankings... Well, I'm not sure what to pick for second place, as the rest of the stories were all pretty decent and pretty unmemorable. Except for *The Last Job on Harz* and *Death on the Moon*, which were pretty not-so-decent and pretty unmemorable. Let's not have too much of this science-fiction stuff in the future. (Future, get it?) (*Well, it's in the name, at least until Volume 2, when we become Magazine of Occult Theosophic Mysteries, Raygun Daring, and Monster Girl Degeneracy, ed.*) The John Carter poem is rather nifty, tho.

I thoroughly enjoyed the letters column, seeing as you don't have one. Good idea. No one wants to read the ill-informed opinions of a witless blowhard unless they're in need of a good laugh.

All in all, this was the worst ish of your fine mag yet. I fear the mag is in an irreversible downward spiral and we're witnessing its death throes. Looking over the 2018 lineup certainly doesn't give me any hope. Where are your best writers, Hernstrom and Bentley? (*Hernstrom's been focusing on music lately, but maybe I can wring a yarn out of him for sometime this year. Hopefully Bentley will give us a shot at his Argantyr sequel when he finishes it!, ed.*) Instead, you're treating us to more of your worst (Tierney, Sorensen, Hart, et al). (*Ouch! If we didn't like em, we wouldn't be buying their stories! ed.*) Zarembo is a good pick tho. I'm glad to see Lang back (his story in ish 4 was a real firecracker!) but the title of his new one makes it seem like it'll be "funny." Well, if this is the end, at least you had a good run.

If you manage to survive the coming year, may I humbly suggest a few writers to get you back on track? Byron Roberts, for one. He writes like Robert E. Howard with Clark Ashton Smith's vocabulary and Moorcock's wild ideas (but not his cynicism). You should also look up Jason Tarpey, Jeff Black, E.C. Hellwell, and James Ashbey. They're all tops. (*I'd be happy for submissions from any of the Swords of Steel contributors; Hellwell's in volume 1 was a fave, ed.*) I hear there's a new guy making the rounds by the name of D.M. Ritzlin who's making a stir. Get any or all of those and Cirsova will be well on its way to becoming

the shining light of the F/SF scene once again. Oh yeah, and more HERNSTROM! And BENTLEY!

Well, I must bring this letter to a close. My minions have had a long enough of break, and I can't let them think I'm going soft in my old age. These Steel Dungeons aren't going to clean themselves! See you next issue.

D.M. Ritzlin

The Invincible Overlord

JOHN E. BOYLE



QUEEN'S
HEIR

A FANTASY SET AMONG
THE HITTITES AT
THE END OF THE BRONZE AGE

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