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The Golden Pearl

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Two Exciting Novelettes Against the Darkness

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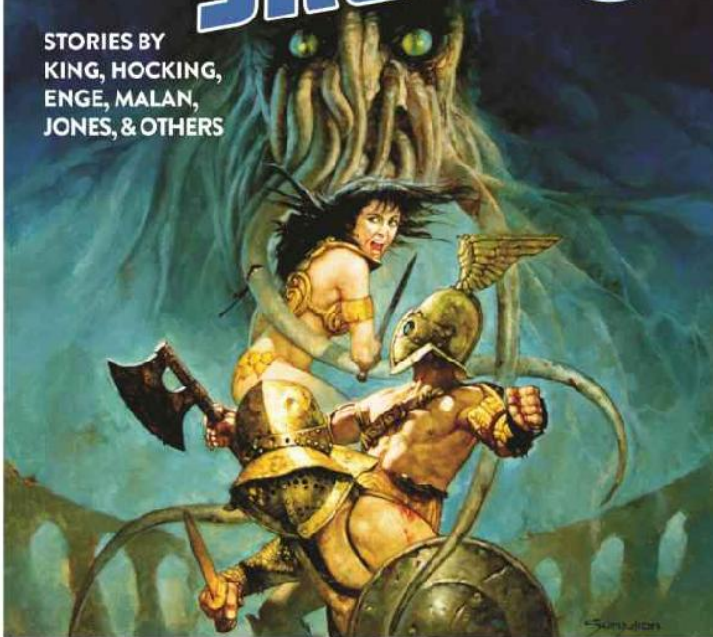
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Tales From The MAGICIAN'S SKULL

NO.3 \$14.99

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THE SKULL SPEAKS

Heed me, mortal dogs! I have fashioned a magazine like those from fabled days of yore! It overflows with thrilling adventures. There are swords, and there is sorcery. There are dark deeds and daring rescues. There are lands where heroes fear to tread. Dare you imagine it?

Picture this as well – maps to wondrous and terrible places. Electrifying art for every tale, and guides for bringing all these wonders to your own gaming table!

It may be that you have not yet heard of me, though it defies belief! I am the Magician's Skull, awakened from long years of slumber in the Chamber of Ages. I have returned from my deathless sleep with but one goal: to publish the greatest sword-and-sorcery tales in this or any other dimension. I have found modern tale-tellers steeped in the lore of the great ones – and I will share them with you!

I live again, and my magazine lives as well! Untold splendors await you! Join me!

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Alpdruck!

By MICHAEL REYES

Clock has been dispatched to the private hell of a powerful demon — and only a being of true evil on its own path towards redemption can aid him in this deadly fight!

The succubus moaned. The wraith-woman slid off her lover, and then nestled next to him, her warm embrace growing colder with each passing second.

“Must you always wear that hat?” she asked, her voice ethereal and breathless.

Clock straightened his coonskin cap and said nothing. He lit a cigarette. The succubus spoke.

“Vlad Tepes would never remove his headdress and could only perform while covered in the blood of sacrificed virgins.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Yes.”

“You make the best pillow talk, Rose. I learn something new every day. But enough about your old boyfriends. Please.”

Her pale complexion transformed to a dark olive. Straight blonde hair became curly and black, her petite body and elfin features voluptuous and heavy. She grabbed the Chaos Magician’s manhood. He didn’t flinch in spite of her icy touch.

“You’re an odd man, filled with a seemingly indefatigable degree of erotic stamina. Why are you so? I’ve broken much greater men with ease. You confound me.”

Clock took a long drag off his cigarette.

“I’m a pretty simple guy. I put my pants on one leg at a time. I give what I get, I don’t beat around the bush, I got my ducks in a row, and I don’t cry over spilt milk. That just wouldn’t cut the mustard, Rose. It takes two to tango, you know?” said Clock, finishing his stream of nonsensical idioms in a cloud of smoke.

Rose stared at him blankly.

“You play a dangerous game. I will break you, Odd One, and drain you to the core. I will siphon every drop of your soul-juice and leave you begging for the mercy of hell’s embrace. I will utterly devastate you.”

“Kinky. Again with the pillow talk.”

“But not tonight.”

“Places to go, people to see?”

“I seek haven: rest. I urge you to do the same. A sense of disquiet permeates my realm.”

Clock took a final drag off his astral cigarette. It disappeared in a flash of spectral smoke. Rose transformed into an elderly grey-haired woman. She floated off the mattress and hovered above the Chaote, gazing down at him with ancient yellow eyes. The look on her lean and wrinkled face was pensive—concerned.

“Beware, Clock. I’ve heard rumors... Whispers of a conspiracy, a plot against Narrioch’s great warden.”

He stared up at his spirit-lover.

“What else is new?”

Rose considered Clock, then frowned.

“It’s different this time. Something impedes you from understanding the true depth of your dilemma. Just be careful. I’ve come to enjoy our liaisons.”

Rose floated toward a patch of moonbeam on the motel floor. She disappeared inside of it.

Clock’s astral form stepped out of his sleeping body. A long silver cord, attached at the navel, connected Clock’s spirit to his physical anchor. He grabbed his coonskin cap’s shadow and placed it on his head. The astral traveler stretched: and his Sutratma, his life-cord, moved as he moved...pliant and inseparable. The Chaos Mage went still, then imagined himself clad in a black and white tracksuit. It instantly became a reality. His Sutratma remained superimposed over his spirit’s etheric clothing.

The Chaos Mage looked out his motel window. There was a hazy element clinging to the otherwise familiar streets: shifting aquamarine and crimson lights tinted the night’s darkness. Clock watched bright Spirit-Orbs of varying size drift along Stillwell Avenue.

A few full-bodied apparitions, too. These phantoms were common and plentiful. They posed no real threat to Clock's territory.

The Chaote observed other astral entities as well; equally prosaic, yet having no equivalent in our physical world. Giant insectile creatures scuttled on gangling legs along the avenue; florescent patches of spiritual vegetation clung to lampposts and parked cars.

The astral realm was a mutable place, capable of presenting itself with stunning variation to over seven billion souls: yet Clock's trained eyes detected certain landmarks, heavy thought-forms psychically embedded in this spirit world.

The Chaote looked toward the beach and saw Dreamland: A Phantom City—more colossal and majestic than it had ever been while on the physical plane. It dominated Coney Island's shoreline, bright ghost-lights glimmering off the ocean's haunted waves. Clock gazed inland and saw strange buildings and patches of dense wilderness in the otherwise normal Brooklyn cityscape.

Clock walked back to bed. He watched himself sleep.

The warden thought of Rose's warning. Combat in the astral realm was always difficult. Clock was a physical entity, primarily tasked with stopping spiritual threats from acting out in the material world. His powers were lessened here, yet the fact remained: he was the protector of all of Coney Island's otherworldly layers. Battle in this realm was a part of his job. Clock had no choice but to face what was coming his way.

The Chaote suddenly detected a presence in his room.

"Hey, you! Pervert! Get the fuck out of here! Stop watching me sleep!"

The red Ghost-Spider was the size of a cat, and it watched him from a corner on the ceiling. Clock drifted over to his crossbow and lifted its shadow, quickly firing his weapon up at the thing. The astral parasite dodged the shadow-bolt and noiselessly scurried out of the open window. A powerful beam of moonlight suddenly blasted through the room. Clock was thrown back. Small naked bodies frantically swarmed out of the large moonbeam. They were Hanon Tramps. Lunar Demons. Incubi. Alps... These unevolved spirits from the Moon's Dark Side went by many names, and they could take many forms.

The four Alps raced about the motel room in their truest shape. Their asexual dwarf bodies seemed to ripple and pulsate with a bizarre gravitational force; their hideous old-man faces stared at the Chaote with a perverse hunger. Two Alps jumped on top of Clock's physical chest and began to choke him.

The two nearest Moon Demons lunged at his astral body, their toothless mouths stretched down past their chests: the gaping maw of a giant worm. The astral warrior fired, and shadow-arrows quickly ripped through their lower lips and sternums. The Alps bellowed horrifically—then silently exploded in a burst of white light. The mage sucked his teeth. Though horrendous, these entities were common. They were dangerous in groups, however.

The other two Alps roared in pain and crashed off Clock's sleeping body: they had uncovered the protection amulet around his neck. He aimed his weapon at them and was simultaneously thrown across the room. The Ghost-Spider clung to the archer's back; the shadow-bow fell out of his hands. The astral vampire fed gluttonously on Clock's spiritual energy, red body bloating like a tick. He was quickly losing strength.

"Typhon!" screamed the Chaote.

The dagger's shadow broke away from its physical anchor, rapidly hurtling toward its master. Clock dug deep, then spun his back toward the blade. Typhon drove itself into the spider-thing. It exploded in a blaze of white light, and the Chaote was thrown down. He quickly grabbed his dagger and crossbow then stood. The shadowy coonskin cap on his head hadn't so much as moved an inch.

More bestial roars erupted out of the lunar beam. Reserves had been called: a dozen new monstrous bodies pulled themselves out of that moon-gate.

The two vanguard Alps had recovered at the foot of the bed. They clasped hands then let out a horrific bellow. Clock was thrown off his feet and propelled backwards. His astral body blasted through solid wall across several rooms, his Sutratma stretching like a bungee cord.

The Chaos Mage dropped his weapons and grabbed his life-cord with both hands. He halted his flight in an occupied room, then

secured his arms. It smelled like pot smoke and Jägermeister. A fat, shirtless man with auburn bangs and a blanket of chest hair lay not quite asleep on his bed. He was locked in sleep paralysis, yet unfortunately possessed a wide-eyed awareness of what transpired before him.

Clock's Sutratma was trembling with force; the Alps were now trying to sever it from his body. He shook his head and sighed, standing firmly on the motel floor. There was the sudden sound of a great door opening and slamming; Clock felt a powerful presence cross over into his territory. A dark silhouette appeared before him.

It was Natchez Trace. Warden of The Devil's Backbone.

"Greetings, friend," said the man in a Southern accent. Two emerald-green eyes stared down at Clock, out of a grim face weathered and ruddy.

Trace was tall as Clock was short; his body muscular and lean. He was dressed in black from slouch hat down to his leather boots. His jeans were dusty, as was the frock jacket he wore. The Southern warden was heavily armed. An ammo belt was draped around his Coulter shirt, a flintlock pistol holstered on his right hip, boomerang on his left. A monstrous sword-bayonet was strapped across Trace's back.

The two shook hands.

"Greetings, Natchez. Long time, no see. How are you? What's going on between Mississippi and Tennessee? How goes the Devil's Backbone?"

The half-asleep man screamed out, but could not rise. He muttered something in what sounded like German. The wardens looked at him dismissively, then at one another again.

"I been running all over hell's half acre. Busier than a one-legged cat in a sandbox."

Clock's Sutratma continued to rattle.

"Bastards!" shouted the Chaote.

He suddenly grabbed his silver-cord with both hands and shook it violently. The Alps in the room beyond bellowed in anger. The Sutratma went still, then began to tremble again only moments later. Clock looked at Trace, shrugged.

“Please continue. Pest control problem. This motel needs to be fumigated.”

“I’ve been tasked with the enviable position of Track-Herald,” grumbled Natchez Trace, scowling.

“Lucky you. You’ve always been a great multitasker,” said Clock, his smile sardonic. “How go the Old Straight Tracks and those who protect them?”

“The Cahokia Ley has fallen.”

Clock’s eyes widened.

“Is Ness dead?”

“The lawman abandoned his post. There’s speculation that he’s joined forces with John Hathorne... Who now controls three of the twelve major Tracks.”

“The former witch-hunter made warden-turned-usurper. I never figured that one out. Why Hathorne was allowed to hold a post in the first place. He was always an asshole,” said Clock grimly.

“The prime seven Tracks stand protected. But who can say for how long?”

“Hathorne wouldn’t make a move against us, Trace. Or the other five.”

Natchez scowled.

“The new co-regents are as confused as a fart in a fan factory. Hathorne would prosecute his war and take his army straight to the continental divide. I’m sure that old snake in the grass would break the Concord and take our posts if he won the throne. Hathorne’s designs are global. American soil means nothing to him.”

Clock sighed. His Sutratma jiggled. He sucked his teeth.

“The drama never ends. It kind of makes you miss old management. Any word on those two?”

“No one knows where Poe and Blue Jacket are, but the search continues. The Yellow Boy’s War rages on along the Great Plains, and San Francisco’s Track can now claim its longest warden since Norton the First. Three years and counting.”

Clock was speechless. The San Francisco ley was an extremely dangerous post, as it stood firm along the axis of Black magic. It was one of the primary Old Straight Tracks connecting America to Europe

and lands beyond. It wasn't uncommon to have a new steward every other month.

"The warden's name is Sephira. She's as tough as they come."

"I don't envy her position, though I'm sure the lavish benefits of that post make it somewhat worthwhile. What brings you here, Trace? We haven't seen each other since 2012."

The German tourist on the bed screamed. A large astral spider crawled through the window then straddled his chest. It began to drink his fear.

Natchez Trace quickly hurled his boomerang at the Ghost-Spider, cleaving it in half. The astral vampire exploded on top of the man. He remained paralyzed, then began to make strange clucking noises. The boomerang returned to Trace. He snatched it out of the air and secured it within the blink of an eye.

"I'm here to warn you, Clock. I've discovered that you're being hunted by a Shadow Man."

Clock shrugged.

"It's not the first time, and it won't be the last. No offense, but that kind of threat doesn't normally warrant a visit from a Track-Herald. Not that I'm not happy to see you."

Natchez Trace stared hard at his peer.

"He isn't your average Shadow-Kin. He was once incarnated on earth. He's a member of the Black Sickle."

Clock frowned. The Black Sickle: that ancient cult of esoteric murderers.... Soul-hoarders who slaughtered the innocent so they can later use them as slaves in their purgatorial death-realms.

"A serial killer."

"Yes. Once known as the Zodiac. He knows you. Looks like it's a personal vendetta."

"Is that a fact? I know of him. But I don't know him."

"I'm concerned, Clock. Why does an enemy from your prior life hunt you? And why haven't you discovered this before me? You're protected. Has your security been breached? What's going on?"

Clock became defensive.

"Are you here to spy on me, Trace? Is this a goddamned investigation!?!"

Natchez Trace laughed.

“On behalf of whom? Our co-regents? They’re idiots. They could throw themselves on the ground and miss. No, friend. This is genuine concern.”

“Something may have happened, but... I’m secure now. My post is safe. Our obscurity isn’t infallible. You know this, Trace. Shit happens.”

Trace stared him down.

“You’ve always been too friendly, Clock. I avoid those with the Sight. You seem to embrace them.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Two of your friends have been kidnapped.”

Trace suddenly ripped at thin air, then clawed a small window through astral fabric. Clock looked inside and saw his friends, Leo and Sal, huddled against a mudbrick wall in a hellish place. Scenes of torment played out in front of the two. Flayed corpses were piled high on a blood-soaked ground, masked figures with whips lashed at deformed, naked bodies on torture racks. The duo’s eyes were glazed over, their mouths slack. Fiery Leo, the old Vietnam veteran, and jovial Sal, the overweight bus driver, were practically zombies. They were pitiable—and nearly unrecognizable to Clock.

“The Zodiac has taken their souls to his realm. He kidnapped them through Dream-Time. They lay in physical comas as we speak.”

The astral window closed. Clock cursed under his breath. How had he not discovered this? The Chaos Mage grew angry at himself and, for some reason, his patron goddess Eris, yet he didn’t know why.

“There isn’t much time, Clock. You have to confront your enemy now. And that means traveling deep into the astral realm, where the worlds of dream and death meld. You’re going to have to leave your post—and life-cord—with me.”

Clock looked down at his Sutratma.

“Don’t you trust me, Clock?”

He stared hard at Trace. The Chaote trusted this warden more than any other. Yet, to put his silver thread in the custody of another being was madness. It was a tremendous risk. Losing it permanently would mean physical death, pure and simple.

The Coney Island Chaos Mage recalled the vacant, lifeless faces of his two friends—and his heart grew heavy. Those were two men who loved life! To see their souls so beaten and deteriorated made Clock nauseous, it shook him to his core.

He had once again put his friends in danger just by knowing them. Coney Island's warden had no choice. He had to do the right thing.

"I trust you, Natchez Trace."

The brooding warden took an immediate pride in Clock's faith. His posture straightened—and he nodded, emerald green eyes glowing eerily.

"I've arranged travel guides and someone to fight alongside you. A battle buddy."

He whistled.

A tall Shadow Man instantly stepped out of the wall next to Trace. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and spectral cloak. He bowed to the two, then stood in silence. His hands were fluid shadow blades.

"A reformed member of the Black Sickle. And a deadly enemy of the Zodiac."

"A serial killer, Trace?"

"Reformed."

Clock stared blankly at the Southern warden. The Shade walked over to the paralyzed man, then looked down at him. Fear swelled up from the hapless German tourist: a red fog. The Shadow Man inhaled his terror, and it coursed through his dark body like blood through a leech.

"You're sending that...with me?"

"You'll need someone who's navigated the Black Sickle's purgatory realm. The Ripper knows it well. He once called it home."

"The Ripper? As in East London, Whitechapel, most notorious serial killer of all time?"

"Simply a reformed convict in my debt, and at your service."

There was a sudden flash of light on the wall above the German's bed. A door-shaped portal opened in a blaze of sunshine.

Two Aboriginal men and one woman leapt out the door and onto the sleeping man in quick succession. He cried out in German but remained motionless. The Dream Travelers hopped off the bed and approached the trio.

The newcomers nodded at Natchez Trace, then gazed at Clock and the Ripper.

The woman was in her early fifties, with traces of grey in her long, curly hair. Her large brown eyes were bright and astute. A wry smile lay tucked behind the corners of her mouth.

Her two companions were both in their early thirties, one tall and skinny, the other squat and fat. The portly Aborigine's eyes were a deep cobalt, startling in their intensity. They appraised the situation glumly, out of a homely face pockmarked and large. The skinny Dream Traveler looked high as a kite. The expression on his youthful and unblemished face was beatific—his heavy lids were half-closed, and he smiled warmly on everything he saw.

The trio were dressed identically, in crisp white t-shirts, faded blue jeans, and dusty black boots. They all had boomerangs strapped along their waistbands.

"This is getting fucking weirder by the second," said Clock in disbelief.

"Is this who we're working with, Trace?" asked the woman in a thick Aussie accent.

The Southern warden nodded. The fat one considered Clock, then the Ripper.

"The little fella seems fine enough, but I don't know about this Shade-Man. Gives me the heebie-jeebies, mate."

"He won't give you any trouble."

The Dream Travelers looked at one another. The woman shrugged, nodded. They turned to face Clock.

"Pleasure to meet you, Clock," said the woman.

The trio took turns shaking his hand. None offered their identity. Clock faced Natchez. The Southern warden was scrutinizing his tracksuit.

"Are you going to wear...that outfit?" asked Trace, frowning.

"Fuck yeah, I am. It's comfortable as hell. And better yet, I'm going to get you a matching set when I get back. There's more to life than cowboy hats and leather boots."

Trace scoffed and shook his head.

"Like hell there is. Fucking Yankee. Anyhow. They'll now escort you and the Ripper through their Dreamtime. Time is of the essence,

Clock. I would now begin Watch.”

Another portal opened in the motel room by the front door. Hazy summer light poured through it. Clock grabbed his Sutratma. His hands trembled with fear, his pulse quickened. Clock concentrated—breathed in deeply, and yanked. The mage’s silver-thread came clean off his navel. He instantly gasped for air. It felt like he was drowning.

The Alps in the room beyond roared in short-lived victory. Clock quickly handed his Sutratma to Trace. The great warden wrapped it around his bicep. Clock’s life-cord merged into Trace’s limb.

The woman grabbed a quartz crystal out of her back pocket. She placed it inside of Clock’s hollow navel, and it instantly fused. Clock was grounded: he could breathe again.

“Don’t fear, Chaote. Your life is safe with me.”

Natchez Trace flexed—then shook the cord. He yanked it a bit, and half a dozen Alps came falling backwards into the room. The Ripper set upon them with his hand blades. The stunned Lunar-Goblins were ripped to shreds within seconds, a staccato of white light flashing wildly as the Shadow Man sent them back to the Moon’s Dark Side. Clock and his Dream Companions watched in uneasy silence. Natchez Trace just grinned.

“Now make haste, friend. You haven’t much time!”

The Dream Travelers were already stepping through the portal. Clock followed, the Ripper right behind him. The last thing Clock heard as he stepped into the bright gateway was the German’s horrified screams as he awoke from his nightmare, and Clock’s reality.

“Alpdruck! Heiliger Strohsack! Ich glaub’ mich knutscht ein Elch!” screamed the German tourist over and over again.

Clock walked into a strange Outback. An azure psychedelic sheen coated dune fields and mesa; the ground seemed to crest and fall as if they were standing on a rubber raft in the middle of the ocean. The great expanse stretched in every direction, as far as the eye could see. Clock looked skyward. Herds of Spirit-Orbs flew over the group’s head, they numbered in the thousands. A sun and several moons, all in various phases, lay draped across a light purple sky. Golden clouds of every conceivable form drifted above this astral

Outback. They cast strange shadows on coarse grasses and stunted shrubs.

Clock's eyes detected bizarre chimeras, animal hybrids of many different kinds, grazing and hunting in the distance. They vanished then reappeared sporadically beneath the waves of cloud and light. There was no wind, or scent, in this place.

The trio of Dream Travelers walked before the Chaote in a single file. The Ripper was at his side. Clock gave him a sideways glance then walked, or rather bounced, next to the Dream Travelers. He blinked, and the Ripper was beside him again. Clock scowled. He touched the crystal in his navel. It was warm.

"Thanks for the gemstone. It really helped," said Clock to the leader.

"No worries, mate. Standard operating procedure. You could get on without it, but the whole trip would take much longer. And time is of the essence."

"You break it, you buy it," blurted the fat one.

"How much?"

"50,000 dreams, mate. Both night and day," said the skinny Dream Traveler, his voice distant and wistful.

Clock nodded. He watched a Zebra-like creature with a Falcon's head race past.

"Is that how Trace pays you? In dreams?"

The leader scoffed. Then spoke.

"Trace pays in Kuwaiti dinar. The crystal requires Dream-Currency, but we don't. We prefer cash money. Strong notes."

"So, you guys are living people? Somewhere in the real world?" asked Clock quietly.

The two male Dream Travelers stared at their leader. She glanced at Clock, then nodded quickly, in silence. The fat one scowled. The skinny Traveler shrugged, smile faltering a bit. Neither said a word.

The flatland suddenly dipped, and they bopped down into a crater. The Dream Travelers halted. It was several feet deep, and along its circumference lay a maddening kaleidoscope of vivid images. Fantastic dream sequences from the minds of countless beings crested into a solid tapestry at the top of the crater only to break

apart and form new images below within seconds. Clock stared in amazement at the rolling waves of dream-stuff.

“This is it, mate. The Crater of Dreams at the Bottom of the Great Rock,” said the skinny Astral Traveler.

Clock turned his attention away from the marvels on the depression’s wall.

A great sandstone suddenly rose out of the earth before the group. It pushed the sides of the crater out at an incredible speed, yet the companions were not affected; they remained motionless. The dream-images streamed into the air, then were gone. The red stone covered miles within the blink of an eye. The Chaote instantly recognized it, or at least its real-world counterpart.

It was Uluru. Also known as Ayer’s Rock.

The leader walked over to Uluru and knocked. A door immediately opened in the great red sandstone. Clock nearly gasped, but quickly regained his composure. He could sense the Ripper’s critical gaze, and he didn’t like it.

“How much Dinar is Trace paying you? The entire trip took less than ten minutes,” asked Clock brusquely, tone acid.

The Aborigines looked at one another, then erupted in laughter. The fat one spoke after several moments.

“Had you somehow managed to find this place without us—even though most couldn’t in a hundred years—you’d have been set upon by its guardians instantly.”

Clock stared hard at the fat Dream Traveler’s smug face. The Ripper hung close to his charge.

“That Zebra thing with the bird head? Was that a guardian?” asked Clock, smirking.

“No. Those,” said the skinny Dream Traveler, pointing over Clock’s shoulder. The mage turned to face a pair of horrific, jackal-faced creatures. Great white shark teeth protruded out of mouths more arachnid than mammal, yet the guardian’s bodies were humanoid, sexless and giant, at least twelve feet tall. The sere-things were cloaked in a coarse blanket of shadow.

Clock stared at them and said nothing. The Ripper’s posture straightened, hands turning into razor sharp sickles.

“But you’re with us, so it’s all good, mate,” said the fat one, grinning widely. The creatures loped away from the group, quietly racing across the mesa.

“Point taken.”

“Be swift, Clock. Knock when you’re done. We’ll be waiting for you. Good luck!” said the leader cheerfully.

The door in Uluru opened wider to reveal a dark chasm. The Shadow Man stepped through and disappeared. Clock looked back gloomily at the Dream Travelers. The trio smiled and flipped him a thumbs-up in unison. The Chaote frowned, unsheathed Typhon, and followed the Shadow Man, stepping forward onto solid ground. The door slammed behind him.

The Chaote was submerged in an absolute darkness. His heart slammed against his chest. After several moments of silence Clock spoke.

“Hey, um, Jack. You there?”

Clock’s question was answered with an annoyed hiss. An impression of a voice, doused in heavy radio static, answered in his mind.

“Quiet. Working.”

Clock’s skin tingled. His ears popped.

He could vaguely make out The Ripper’s red outline several feet ahead, slashing at the darkness. The feeling of claustrophobia was intense, and it was getting to Clock. He placed one hand out to his side and felt something cold and clammy graze it.

The Ripper went still. Some thin ribbons of light had managed to break through the Stygian gloom. The ex-serial killer turned to face Clock.

“Don’t do that again.” The static tone was greatly diminished. The voice was now deep and audible: the accent British. He began to lacerate the darkness once again. His red outline grew stronger.

Clock said nothing. He looked up and saw a great ocean of stars sliding only a few feet above his head, as if pressed down upon a glass pane. They offered no descending radiance, and they made him instantly disoriented and nauseous.

He put his hand on Typhon then gazed at the darkness to his left. Pale, shining faces glided beside him; dead and rotting, millions of

disembodied heads floated mere feet away from Clock's shoulder.

The Ripper continued to tear at the dark as beams of hazy light punctured this pocket of nowhere. The crimson glow leaked onto the surface before the mage, and he saw images of himself toppling off its side and into an abyss.

Clock blinked and screamed out. He was tumbling into the sea of dead! Putrid faces exploded—and hands plunged out of featureless skulls to grab and subdue the Chaote! He slashed at them with Typhon, but they held and yanked him further into their realm. Typhon sang and cleaved into the phantoms, yet they kept wrenching—

Clock's world suddenly swung right side up. The Ripper held him by the back of his neck, blade-hands now icy fingers that kept his charge at bay. The mage breathed heavily, face warped in terror. His white-knuckled grip on Typhon was absolute; the dagger was bloodthirsty and still yearned to ravage the dead.

Safely back on the causeway, Clock watched the current of lost souls continue miserably along their way. He cursed and shook his head. His coonskin cap was gone. The Chaote looked ahead.

The duo stood before a bright crimson doorway. The Shadow Man glanced at Clock, then produced a wide-brimmed hat from his cloak. He placed it on the Chaote's head and shoved him through the bright door. The Ripper followed a moment later.

"We're here."

The sky above was crimson. The smell of sulfur and death lay heavy in the air. Clock stared angrily at the Ripper. The warden tried to tear off his new shadow cap, but it wouldn't budge.

"You must wear it in this realm. You're Shadow-Kin. You are Alp!"

Clock grimaced and tried to yank the hat off again.

"I am not Alp! I am most definitely not Alp, weirdo! I don't want to wear this hat!"

The Shadow Man scowled at him, yet seemed to chuckle.

"You must wear it for your protection, Clock. And for its abilities."

"I don't understand."

The Ripper touched the brim of his own hat, and it lit up like a red flare. Clock saw a tremendous amount of spiritual energy radiating from the thing.

“It strengthens your power in this realm. It will be easier now to materialize your thoughts and psychic energy.”

The Chaote gave him dirty look, but he stopped struggling. Clock glared about his environment. The crimson ground beneath his feet matched the sky above. The immediate surroundings were an empty wasteland, but off in the distance, and in every direction, lay various structures of sinister design.

Castles, coliseums, hotels, skyscrapers and some buildings that were beyond definition lay scattered about the hell-scape. One crimson aerie dominated the Black Sickle’s death-realm—it lay east, and it stood over 3,000 feet tall. Clock squinted, then shook his head in disgust. Millions of corpses were hung on poles along every side of the monstrous spire. The Ripper followed Clock’s gaze.

“The abode of Vlad Tepes. Ruler of this realm.”

Clock stared at his guide, eyebrows arched in sardonic amusement.

“Vlad Tepes? What are the chances? Huh.” A thin smile curled about the Chaote’s lips.

“You know of him?”

“You could say that. I’ve heard rumors that he’s...um, a very eager lover. If you know what I mean.”

“Rose says the same thing about you.”

“Huh? She said that? That’s not true! How do you know Rose?”

The Ripper said nothing. He pointed west to a large grey temple. It was somber and plain, in stark contrast to its baroque and grotesque neighbors.

“Our destination.”

Clock glared at the Shadow Man. He spoke after several moments.

“It looks really far, miles away. How do we—”

“We won’t approach it directly. The Zodiac’s defenses are too strong.”

“So how is this going to work, Ripper?”

“I know a secret way inside. Through a shadow patch in an uppermost balcony.”

“How do we get there?”

“Come inside me.”

“Huh? What? Excuse you?”

The Ripper collapsed onto the ground. Clock approached, then gazed down at the flat image of the Shadow Man.

“Step inside me. It’s the only way.”

Clock sucked his teeth. He looked around the astral death-realm and felt a deep chill and sense of dread. Demonic clouds began to race overhead. The hell-structures in the distance began to tremble and rock.

“Quickly! Before we are located!”

Clock cursed under his breath. He stepped into the two-dimensional puddle of Shadow Man and disappeared instantly.

Clock was in a cold, dark space. He looked forward, saw nothing, then felt sudden motion. The Ripper moved with astonishing speed, yet Clock was secure. The odd enclosure grew warm.

Coney Island’s warden began to see a foggy three-dimensional light surrounding his dark perch, and scenes of another man’s life. A wicked man, evil and notorious. The Chaote watched seedy Victorian summer nights play out behind that thin membrane of light; they shifted and became dark alleyways and desolate gas lamp-lit streets.... He saw the Ripper’s victims through his own eyes. The blades, blood, and torture. Clock turned away in disgust.

“You’re a sick *thing*. Why am I seeing these images? Is this your way of fucking bragging, or something?” asked Clock bluntly.

“Boasting? Far from it. My crimes play out in a constant loop across my mind’s eye. They won’t stop, and they mustn’t. I am on the road to redemption. It is a necessary affliction. There are many others.”

Clock’s natural empathy and humanity seized him for a moment, and he felt a sharp pang of emotion rock his body. He stopped it. This thing who was once a man had lived as a monster, and he deserved this fate.

“Good for you. I hope your victims find some solace in your suffering. It’s well deserved.”

The Shadow Man halted. The images disappeared. Clock was back in a seat of cold darkness.

“We are here.”

Clock twisted and fell out of the suddenly upright Shadow Man. His world spun, and his ears were bombarded with cries of pain and sadistic pleasure. Clock stood, drew his crossbow and looked around. They were at the back of a bone-hewn terrace, a fifty-foot wide circular balcony of chalk-white skeletons overlooking a strange nightmare scene. Clock crept forward and peeked over the sill, and a hundred feet down into a courtyard of torture and vicious carnal passions.

Slaves, shackled and hooded but otherwise naked, were being tormented by bizarre figures wearing the Zodiac's signature black solar cross mask. These oppressors were of both human and demonic aspect. Some were scaled and goat-legged: their ebon tails slashed wildly at their victims.

The Zodiac Killer sat motionless on a giant tie-dyed throne in the middle of the square. He was over fourteen feet tall and naked save for his black mask. He held a long metal chain caked in blood. Bizarre orgies were conducted before him amidst the dead bodies and brutalized victims.

Streamers with zodiacal images were hung around the coliseum. The dead serial killer's hell-kingdom possessed a strange sixties décor. The temple was awash in avocado and yellow colors...Lava lamps and giant strips of tangerine shag carpeting lay where the dead were whipped back to life and tortured anew. "Cherish" by Sixties band, The Association, played on loop.

"My God, this *is* hell," said Clock.

"Not quite. But close enough."

Coney Island's protector turned to stare at the ex-serial killer. His eyes narrowed. There was a fire in his veins.

"And you once had a place just like this?" asked Clock angrily.

The Shadow Man seemed to shrink.

"My excesses were not quite this extreme, but yes. All in all."

Clock shook his head and looked away. He gazed into the hellish courtyard then spotted Leo and Sal. They were in a corner, collapsed in front of a torture rack.

"I see them!"

"We prepare for battle."

Clock stared at the Shadow Man, perplexed.

“How do we fight them? My weapons won’t do. There are too many.”

“The Zodiac’s plane is stunted, a thing of the past. Bring an essence of your time into this limbo! Distort, mesmerize, then strike him with your strongest conjuration!”

The Chaote nodded, a plan quickly forming in his mind.

“I will now do my part.”

He stared at the Ripper. Clock’s vague plan was instantly dashed.

The Shadow Man stood on the edge of the balcony then let out a burst of radio static. The Zodiac’s court went still. The demon-spirit glanced up at the Ripper and gave the slightest nod of acknowledgment.

Zodiac’s great chain flew at the Shadow Man. It struck him violently, cleaved him in half. The sundered Ripper collapsed onto the ground below without a sound.

“Shit,” muttered Clock. He ducked behind the balcony sill.

“Come out, old enemy.” said the Zodiac in a deep, booming voice.

“Sit on it, sucker.”

“I’ve finally lifted the veil of amnesia and brought you to me. I’ve ascended. Soon I will challenge the lord of this land.”

Think, the Chaote’s mind raced. *Jack said to bring an essence of my era into this limbo, something to throw this creep off.*

The sixties hippie music continued to blare. Clock smirked. He began to Mindscape, melding this limbo’s fabric.... The shadow cap glowed a bright red.

“You can’t hide anymore, Clock!” thundered the demonic voice.

Clock closed his eyes and concentrated. The sound of lighthearted Sixties-era pop music began to fade from the death-realm.

“I now look upon the face of my killer!” Three voices spoke in unison on the balcony. The trio of Zodiac duplicates stood several feet away from Clock, chains in hand. The Chaote opened his eyes. The 60s music vanished, and synthesized beats and bass lines sonically erupted, followed by the sound of scratched turntables. The decibel was overpowering, and it caught the Zodiac Killer completely off guard. His trio of doppelgangers doubled over, covering their ears and dropping their chains. The Zodiac’s Sixties-era hell-bubble was next rocked with the sounds of Heavy Metal—loud distorted guitars

and dense bass and drums pulverized the serial killer's perverse oasis.

Clock performed his summoning ritual within this sonic onslaught. A default spell, one deeply ingrained in his spiritual core. The Chaote felt an electric surge rip through him. The warden mind-formed the avatar then whistled its theme song.

There were screams on the coliseum floor below. Clock's conjuration had appeared.

A shade of Davy Crockett now stood in the middle of the torture yard—a fifteen-foot-tall thing of shadow, dressed in deerskin clothing and coonskin cap. His outline blazed with deep shades of green and red. Crockett drew a short axe from out of his broad, obsidian chest, and he instantly began to slash down at the smaller minions. The Greater Zodiac managed to stand up from his throne, and with a magnificent bellow he silenced the blaring guitars. He staggered toward Clock's protector.

The Chaote barreled into his trio of kneeling enemies, quickly slashing two across their throats, decapitating them instantly. The other minion recovered and bolted away from Clock toward the balcony steps. The warden leaped over the two corpses and hurled Typhon at his fleeing enemy, and his aim was true. The serpent dagger drove into the lesser Zodiac's skull—he dropped. Clock retrieved Typhon, slashed the thing's throat, then raced down the balcony steps.

The courtyard was utter chaos; madness. Crockett and the Zodiac swung axe against chain in the middle of the coliseum floor, and they trampled corpses and clusters of fornicators beneath their giant feet. Slave-souls ran in all directions. Some of their tormentors gave chase; yet most hung onto Crockett's legs, attempting to slow his potent assault.

Clock spotted Leo and Sal in the corner less than a hundred feet away. He raced toward them—and was instantly kicked back by a Zodiac with horse legs. He fell hard and watched those fearsome hooves rise up to trample him... A black shadow rose behind the monster and sliced it in half with a fearsome machete blow. Another, then another formed, and within the span of seconds a dozen Rippers savaged the fallen beast-thing. Clock rose and stared in

shock. The Rippers nodded at their charge, then rushed toward the other torturers, lost in frenzy.

Clock ran to his friends. They backed away from him, startled, eyes glossy.

“It’s me! Clock! Get up!”

They continued to stare blankly at him. The crystal in Clock’s stomach began to glow, and its warm light shined on his friends. Their eyes slowly began to gain life. They stood on weak legs.

“Clock!” shouted Leo, the salty old vet. “Where the fuck am I? What you got me into now?!”

Sal pointed up and scrambled away, quickly pulling his friends with him.

“Run!”

They dodged Crockett’s giant body as he smashed against the wall, breaking it wide open. The Zodiac stood above the shade, and he produced a giant knife, ready to finish the job. A great bugle from outside of the hell-temple abruptly sounded. The Zodiac froze in terror, as did the Rippers.

“The alarm has been sounded! Tepes approaches!” screamed a solitary Shadow Man as he cut the throat of an enemy.

The Greater Zodiac’s pause cost him dearly. Crockett recovered and drove his axe right into the demon’s abdomen. It bellowed in monstrous pain then fell back, slamming hard against the ground. The banners were instantly set ablaze. Fire streamed through the temple.

“This ain’t Bensonhurst, Clock! Last thing I remember was that I was dreaming about eating zeppole’s at Geno’s! Where are we?” screamed Sal, always a bit slow on the uptake.

“How do we get out of here!?” screamed Clock at the Shadow Warriors.

“Inside me.”

The Rippers raced into a sole shadow. Jack reformed, then collapsed into a pool of himself. Sal and Leo stood behind Clock, shellshocked. The warden looked around at the other lost souls.

“I can’t leave them! Everyone! Come here! Escape! Follow!”

The slaves, a hundred or so, began to line up.

“Clock, I can only take—”

“Fuck you, asshole! You’re taking all of them!”

Clock pushed Sal into the shadow, who then grabbed Leo and pulled him. Clock moved aside as the soul slaves poured into the Ripper. His shadow swelled in size. Clock looked at Crockett, who was covered in flames and hacking away at his enemy. The trumpets grew louder, and Clock could see strange bat-like shapes racing toward the fiery temple.

“Time to go.”

Crockett vanished. Clock leapt into the shadow mass.

The sound of wailing and sorrow filled his ears. The Chaote’s crystal sparkled, and light was cast just as the Ripper began to race along his highway of shadow-time. Clock stared into the beaten, tortured faces of the Zodiac’s victims. They were absolutely mad, and twisted with inhuman grief. Sal and Leo stared around in speechless horror. Clock had never seen his friends this shaken.

“Are we going back the way we came?” asked Clock.

“*No. Shortcut. Hold onto something.*”

“There’s nothing to hold ont-”

An amazing turbulence rocked the survivors. Wails of sorrow turned into screams of horror.

“Holy shit! Slow down!”

“*We can’t. I’m passing through a curve of death. My load will now get lighter.*”

A brilliant white light appeared overhead, and scores of bodies began to fly into it. Clock watched in amazement as the Zodiac’s victims levitated, then lost their human shapes. Spirit orbs broke free and hurtled into that evanescence. Within moments there was only Clock and his two friends.

“*Now. To dreams.*”

The Ripper’s trajectory changed. His speed increased—a bluish light appeared overhead. Leo and Sal glared at Clock, then flew up into it without a sound.

The Shadow Man raced in a different direction, then stopped. Clock tumbled forward. His head spun, and he banged against something solid. He recovered and stared at the back of the red sandstone wall. Clock knocked. No answer.

“Open up!” screamed the Chaote as he pounded against the wall.

The door was swung wide open. Sunlight poured through. Clock stepped forward, the Ripper right behind him. The gateway closed. Clock turned and stared blankly at the Dream Travelers.

“You know this was overtime for us. Trace is going have to pay up. Nice hat. Let’s go,” said the leader flatly.

There was no sign of Trace, or the German man, in the motel room. But there was a loud commotion in the rooms beyond. Clock and the Shadow Man raced toward the sounds of struggle.

The Dream Travelers stood in silence. The fat Dream Traveler rolled his eyes and looked at his leader.

“Trace is lucky he has a cute friend,” said the leader. The fat one scowled, the skinny Dream Traveler smiled. They followed the pair.

There were hundreds of the Alps crowded around Clock’s sleeping body in his motel room. They viciously attacked and yanked at the Sutratma attached to Trace’s arm. He slashed at them with his bayonet, but to no avail. Hundreds of demonic hands held the warden down as they tore at Clock’s life-cord...

“Natchez! We’re back!”

The Alps faced Clock and the Ripper, their old-man faces hateful and vicious. They began to dart toward the duo.

A great thunderclap echoed throughout the motel room. The Dream Traveler’s bodies emanated pure light. Golden light washed over the Alps, and they bellowed in agony.

The light faded, and with it, the Alps. They completely vanished. Clock, Trace, and the Ripper stood still, breathing heavily. They faced the Aborigines.

“Are you going to at least tell me your names?” asked Clock after a moment, eyes set firmly on the leader. She flipped her hand through her hair and shrugged.

“I haven’t decided.”

She suddenly waved her hand, and the quartz in Clock’s stomach glided out. She waved her hand again, and his Sutratma flew out of Trace’s shadow and back into Clock’s stomach.

“Catch you around, Clock. *See you soon, Trace.*” A gateway opened, and the Travelers disappeared inside of it.

“You made it,” said Trace flatly.

Clock looked at the motionless Ripper.

“Couldn’t have done it without him. I hate to admit it. But I have to.”

The Ripper said nothing.

“Nice hat,” said Trace after a moment.

Clock smirked and tore it off. He walked over to his bed, looked down at his sleeping body, then grabbed the coonskin cap’s shadow, and placed it on his head. He walked over to Trace and shook his hand.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Clock stared at the Ripper’s blade hands, then gave him a nod.

“Thank you. I hope you attain your salvation.”

The Ripper gave a slight bow.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I need to wake up and get some rest. Get the hell out of my motel room.”

Clock awoke, warm sunlight streaking through his windows. He stretched, adjusted his coonskin cap, then watched the two shadows stride away from his bed, into a darkness beyond death and dreams.

Michael Reyes is a writer from Brooklyn currently living in the Bronx. His fiction has appeared in Weird Tales, Cirsova, Body Parts Magazine, Morpheus Tales, Red Sun, and other publications. He is the author of a dark urban fantasy series named “Clock’s Watch.”

IT'S HARD TO FIGHT WIZARDS AND DEMONS
WITH A BADGE AND A GUN.

HARD-BOILED FANTASY FROM MISHA BURNETT



"HIS UNDERSTATED
DESCRIPTIONS AND
EMOTIONAL SUBTLETY
ARE ON DISPLAY HERE
AT THEIR FINEST."
JON MOLLISON

"I DEVoured THIS AND I
HAVE BEEN JADED BY [A
LOT] OF FANTASY. I
REALLY HOPE WE SEE
THESE MORE OF THESE
CHARACTERS AGAIN."
FIVE-STAR AMAZON REVIEW

BAD DREAMS AND BROKEN HEARTS
NEW FROM LAGRANGE BOOKS

Pour Down Like Silver

By CYNTHIA WARD

Banished for refusing to follow her order-pair into death, Rhesanna seeks the Tower of Ancient Time to free her comrade's soul from the demon they failed to slay!

As she limped into the caravanserai, Rhesanna the Swordmaiden went blind.

She stayed by the door, her hand on her sword-hilt. As her sun-dazzled eyes adapted to the dim interior of the common-room, she heard the babble of many conversations. She knew the noise might hide other sounds. And by the time her vision cleared, the approaching man was nearly upon her.

She didn't draw her sword, for the man wore the robes of a caravanserai owner and bore a blue-glazed bowl in his hands. She didn't relax either, for he bore a long Southlands tanmogayi with worn hilt and scabbard, and his keen eyes were fixed on her face, as if he were trying to confirm a suspicion. And she wore a man's garments, an act forbidden by the Sunlord.

The caravanserai master's eyes met her watchful gaze.

"Be welcome, Northman." His voice was warm, and his words in Khyronese, the trade language of the Kesar Desert. His sudden smile transformed his face so the ritual scars she'd thought intimidating revealed their beauty. "My water is yours," he said and extended the moisture-beaded bowl.

When each had drunk from the small bowl, concluding the Kesar hospitality ritual, the master fell in beside Rhesanna, describing the amenities of his caravanserai as she limped to an unoccupied table, away from other customers, and sat with her back to the wall.

Before she could speak, the master addressed her softly in her native tongue.

"I speak Enishzian, Swordmaiden."

Her hand flew, quick as a needletail, to her sword-hilt.

“Fear not, I will not betray you,” the master continued in her language. “No one will know you are a woman. Neither will they learn you are a Swordmaiden, bound in service to the patron goddess of the Northcountries.” He touched the gold pendant at his throat—it resembled his curved sword—and said, “I swear by the Warlord, I will keep your secrets.”

She opened her mouth to deny his words—she was a tall, thin woman, clad in a city Desertman’s loose robes and head-cloth, and until now everyone had taken her for a man—but she realized a lie would only make matters worse with the caravanserai master.

“How did you know?” she whispered in Enishzian.

“I was a mercenary in my youth,” he said. “I traveled widely, even to the Icelands of the Far North. So I recognized your weapon as a moonsword, the weapon borne only by a Swordmaiden.”

Rhesanna kept her face blank. She was still alive; so, technically, she was still a Swordmaiden. But she had dishonored her service to the Moon Goddess, and then she had failed to die, as she was sworn to do, upon the death of her partner in the Moonlady’s Order.

“I am Abayomi, master of this caravanserai,” the man continued. “What brings a Swordmaiden so far from the Northcountries?”

Rhesanna drew a deep breath. She never liked to reveal her destination. No one liked to hear it.

She answered in a voice as soft as the breeze of a Northcountry summer evening: “I am Rhesanna. I seek the Tower of Ancient Time.”

Abayomi’s eyes narrowed.

It begins, Rhesanna thought. *Will he judge my blasphemy so grave that he breaks his oath to hide my identity?*

But she steeled herself and spoke again. “I’ve heard this caravanserai is the closest to the Tower of Ancient Time. You’ve traveled to lands far from your own, master. Have you traveled to the Tower?”

Abayomi’s stance grew stiff. “This oasis is the closest to the Azure Sands, where the Tower is said to stand. But I have never been there. The Tower of Ancient Time is forbidden.”

Surreptitiously, Rhesanna drew a deep breath. “So, you cannot say where I might find the Azure Sands.”

“To the east.” Abayomi had switched to the trade tongue, his tone returning to an innkeeper’s neutrality. “Have you any needs this caravanserai might answer?”

She replied in the same language. “A private room for the night, and your ordinary, and a jug of your strongest wine.”

Abayomi replied, “The cost for the meal, a calabash of arrack, and my smallest room for one night is one silver palm.”

Rhesanna restrained a wince. But the price meant nothing. The man’s disapproval meant nothing. Even the gods’ disapproval meant nothing.

Rhesanna had no choice. Only by ascending the Tower of Ancient Time could she read the Scroll of Immutable Knowledge, which had been written by the Elder Gods, and contained all their wisdom. And only the gods knew how to save a doomed soul.

She gave the caravanserai master her last silver coin.

Rhesanna locked and barred the door, then turned to examine the most expensive room she’d ever rented. Tiny, windowless, bare-walled, it was more a closet than a chamber. She dropped her saddle-bags to the sand floor, then turned to the small table on which she’d placed a brass tray and clay lamp. As she sank carefully to a cross-legged position, her left knee cracked, loud as a branch breaking.

She rubbed the leg reflexively. The dry, warm days of desert winter had lessened her leg pain, but it was always present.

The tray held a chicken and vegetable stew, accompanied by almonds, dried dates and figs, goat’s milk cheese, and flatbread. A red clay water-jug stood beside the calabash.

The stew proved spicy. Rhesanna sipped from the calabash. Her eyes widened. “Arrack is as strong as brandywine.”

When she’d devoured the meal, she drew her moonsword. Though made of silver, it was more than a symbol of the Swordmaiden’s power of life and death. Forged with arcane magic, the cut-and-thrust weapon was stronger than steel, and never rusted or lost its edge. But it could tarnish, so Rhesanna began polishing the gently curved blade.

She realized she was swaying and smiled grimly. “Perhaps I wasn’t overcharged, after all.”

Usually, alcohol dulled her memories. That was why she drank whenever she could. Tonight—perhaps because she’d drawn her moonsword, or perhaps because the arrack was so potent—Rhesanna’s most painful memory only grew stronger.

Rhesanna and Elsanae had grown up together in the all-female Order House of Maitana, Goddess of the Moon. The Order raised infant girls who’d been abandoned or orphaned. When they turned seventeen, these foster-daughters were initiated into the Order as priestess, foster-mother, wizard, or warrior. Wizards and warriors—Spellmaidens and Swordmaidens—defended the peoples of the Northcountries from supernatural threats, like the demons who entered the world at the bidding of rogue wizards or on their own. Trained in the moonsword, Rhesanna underwent the secret ritual that made her a Swordmaiden.

Then Rhesanna received her moonsword and was sent to the high priestess, to be assigned her partner in Maitana’s service.

Entering the Order’s throne-room, Rhesanna was overjoyed to find her closest friend kneeling before the high priestess, the rowanwood staff of a Spellmaiden in her hand.

Half a year had passed since that morning, but remembering Elsanae’s delighted smile at her appearance had never grown less painful.

“Rhesanna and Elsanae,” Mother Arika had said. “You are partners now, joined for life in service to the Moonlady.”

“Yes, Mother,” said Rhesanna and Elsanae in unison.

Then Elsanae gave Rhesanna a wink.

Mother Arika noticed. “Elsanae, you are irreverent. But evil cannot be taken lightly, as you and Rhesanna will discover in your first mission as anointed servants of the Moonlady.”

“Yes, Mother,” Elsanae said, subdued.

“And you,” Mother Arika faced Rhesanna. “You are overconfident. You aren’t nervous in my presence, as even high-ranking priestesses are. You don’t even quail to face a demon.”

Rhesanna returned her glare calmly, heart beating at a leisurely pace.

“Rhesanna,” Mother Arika continued, “fearlessness is folly. It can lead you to dangerous—even fatal—decisions. And if you die, your partner Elsanae must die, as well.”

At the reminder of the Moon Goddess’s ancient law—that Her Swordmaidens and Spellmaidens must either be in a life-long pair, or dead—both young women sobered.

“To stay alive in Maitana’s service, Rhesanna and Elsanae,” Mother Arika said, “you must learn fear and solemnity. To ensure you do so, you will kill a demon without assistance.”

Rhesanna and Elsanae looked at each other. Elsanae’s expression told Rhesanna they shared the same thought. *Are we to face a demon with no help from other Order-pairs?*

“A demon is ravaging the villages of eastern Enishzia,” Mother Arika continued. “The monster has a taste for human flesh. That means it is vulnerable to swords and spells.”

Rhesanna touched the hilt of her new weapon. Though moonswords were forged by a magical process, they possessed no innate magic and conferred no uncanny powers or protections. Maitana’s warriors survived by the skill of their hands and the quickness of their minds. Even those legendary Swordmaidens Marked by the Moonlady had received no further assistance in their divinely ordained quests.

“You’ve slain demons before, with the help of other Order-pairs,” Mother Arika had concluded. “But your training is over, and you will face this demon by yourselves. Now, go forth, Rhesanna and Elsanae, and serve your Order and your goddess.”

Rhesanna shook her head violently to dispel the memory and slammed her moonsword into its scabbard.

“Half a year I wasted, Elsanae, wandering the Northcountries to question ignorant hedge-wizards.” She spoke aloud as if her friend could hear. “I should have realized immediately that our only hope lay in the Scroll of Immutable Knowledge.” Her voice was rising, her words slurring. “Well, I’ve come to the Kesar Desert at last. I will win the Scroll. I will bring you back!”

Rhesanna drained the last sip from the calabash and slumped over.

She drank to forget, but her dream remembered.

She and Elsanae were ascending a steep mountain trail. Far below, the slope leveled, disappearing beneath edelweiss and gentian, buttercups and daisies, clover and grass. Above, the peak was blinding with perpetual snow. But an early summer breeze was blowing gently. It carried faint sounds of cow-bells to the new Swordmaiden and Spellmaiden as they approached a dark cave-mouth where the slope was steepest. The cave was said to be the abode of the demon they'd been sent to slay.

Though they would face the demon alone, Rhesanna was confident of victory. Elsanae, too, looked calm. But Rhesanna knew her too well to miss the tension in her features.

Unlike many of the women raised by the Order, they'd never become lovers—instead, they were fascinated by the boys of the surrounding villages. But involvement with a male meant execution for any member of Maitana's Order. Rhesanna and Elsanae had honored the laws of the Order.

As the pair neared the cave-mouth, the demon emerged. Demons could look very different from one another. Neither of the young women had ever seen or heard of a demon that looked like this.

The demon was naked and sexless, vaguely humanoid, almost eight feet tall. It shuffled toward them on two disproportionately short limbs that reminded Rhesanna of the rounded legs of oliphaunts in Eastlands tapestries. The demon's arms were long and snaky, with elongated fingers tipped by dagger-like claws. It wafted an odd but not unpleasant smell, like dry autumn leaves set afire, and its naked flesh reminded Rhesanna of candles, for it was yellowish and wattled and streaked, like beeswax that had melted and cooled.

The demon's flesh was covered everywhere with tight little cuts or seams. The seams did not bleed or seep or look like wounds or damage. They sparked a puzzling sense of familiarity, yet they felt so out of place that the hairs stirred on the back of Rhesanna's neck. Somehow, the seams were *wrong*.

In the demon's bald, man-like head, the bulging eyes resembled featureless balls of beeswax. Its pale lips opened in screams which

sounded like a man's. The screams held no note of hunger, or threat, or any other emotion Rhesanna expected.

The demon was screaming in terror.

It's a trick, Rhesanna told herself. The demon is trying to fool us into thinking it fears us. I'm not fooled.

Raising her sword, she ran to meet the demon.

Elsanae kept pace, gesturing with her rowan-wood staff and chanting a powerful death-spell.

Then Rhesanna drew ahead of Elsanae, and the demon reached for her. Rhesanna darted to one side, avoiding the long claws, and swung. But the edge of her moonsword barely cut the waxy skin of its arm, and the impact jarred tremendously, as if she'd tried to fell a thick oak with a hatchet-blow.

The bloodless cut closed without a trace.

The waxy lips opened in a scream of pain.

And the seams everywhere on the demon opened. They were wax-colored lips, jutting wax-colored tongues as they screamed. Every scream was in a different human voice.

Rhesanna froze, her sword-arm falling to her side as if suddenly paralyzed. Her moonsword nearly slipped from her fingers. Her pulse sped until it seemed to gallop like a racing-horse.

Elsanae shouted the last line of her death-spell and struck the shrieking demon with her staff. Light flared, spell-energy flowing from the tip to cover the demon. The energy dissipated harmlessly.

A demon-arm knocked Elsanae flat.

She never made a sound when injured, no matter how badly. But, as the demon flung itself on her, losing shape as its flesh flowed like hot wax, Elsanae screamed. Then the flesh flowed over her completely and cut off her cry.

Rhesanna backed away.

She'd not taken two steps when the demon's body reformed. The body levered itself upright with its long arms. Where Elsanae had fallen, there was nothing save stone and lichen.

The demon's head had changed.

From the dip in the delicate chin to the line of the straight nose and curve of the fine eyebrows—in every detail save the color and featureless eyes—the waxy head was Elsanae's.

The mouth in Elsanae's face opened wide, screaming in pure terror.

The voice was Elsanae's.

Rhesanna turned and ran.

Her foot came down on nothing.

She tumbled off the mountain trail and plunged through the air.

Rhesanna woke with a yell. Her heart was pounding as if to burst her rib-cage. The leg she'd broken, landing on a mountain ledge, ached with the nocturnal chill that had seeped into the room. Ignoring the pain, she drew up both legs. Then she rested her brow on her knees and tried to forget.

Memory flowed, inexorable as death.

She'd regained consciousness in a healer's hut. A goatherd had found her lying unconscious. Her recuperation took weeks. Her leg didn't heal true, but she knew she could have lost the limb. She knew she could have died.

She knew she would soon be dead.

When she could walk, she returned to the Order House. As she ascended the high mountain on which she had been raised, she found herself trembling and breathing rapidly. She had gained a fear of heights from her fall.

A pair of Swordmaidens took Rhesanna's moonsword. They brought her before the high priestess.

When she'd reported her failure, Mother Arika spoke scornfully. "Your partner died, and the demon still ravages Enishzia," she said. "You failed, Rhesanna. And you shamed yourself further by returning alive."

She gestured for the woman who held Rhesanna's weapon to return it.

"Rhesanna shall redeem her honor," said the high priestess, "by falling on her moonsword."

Rhesanna braced the hilt on the floor and leaned toward the point. But the memory of the demon screaming with Elsanae's face and voice filled Rhesanna's mind.

Elsanae's soul was trapped in the demon's body.

Rhesanna sheathed her moonsword and limped out of the audience room. She couldn't move with her former speed. But no one stopped the honorless young woman as she left the Order House and made her way, trembling, down the mountain.

"I will find a way to free Elsanae's soul," Rhesanna vowed. "That is more important than even honor."

She sought out witches and wizards and scholars all over the Northcountries. She found no one who knew a spell to save a demon-devoured soul. But a few whispered that she would find such a spell if she succeeded in doing what no one ever had.

"Ascend the Tower of Ancient Time, which stands at the heart of the trackless wastes of the Kesar Desert," they told her. "Reach the summit, and you may gain the Scroll of Immutable Knowledge, on which the dread Elder Gods recorded everything they knew."

And some leaned close and softly murmured in her ear. "With the Scroll of Immutable Knowledge, you can do more than release your friend's soul to the Afterworld.

"You can bring her back to life."

Pre-dawn light paled the eastern sky and revealed the shaggy heads of palm trees, nodding in a faint breeze. The sight made Rhesanna's heart stutter at the strangeness of her surroundings. She was so far away from everything she knew.

Filling her waterskins at a well, she saw Abayomi approaching, his face impassive.

"Swordmaiden," the caravanserai master said in Enishzian. "A moment of your time."

Rhesanna looked around the courtyard. A pair of nomadic Desertmen were tending their horses; closer to the gate, a caravan was assembling in a chaos of people and camels and dust. No one was paying her any mind. If the master harbored some malign plan to kill or capture a blasphemer, he had no accomplices she could discern.

"I have spent a sleepless night, wondering if I should tell an outsider this." Abayomi's breath was white in the lingering night chill. "But I'm an outsider myself. And I would not have you die because I

wouldn't speak. Swordmaiden," he said, "my grandfather tried to go to the Tower of Ancient Time."

Rhesanna's eyes widened.

"He didn't speak of it, but there were rumors, of course," Abayomi said. "And before I left our homeland to follow the mercenary's path, I asked him if it was true he'd set foot on the Azure Sands. He nodded, and said only, 'Everything you fear is there.' He refused to say more."

"Thank you," Rhesanna said quietly. The words were frightening, threatening, cryptic; yet a man's return meant it wasn't death merely to reach the Azure Sands.

"The Tower is due east of the oasis," Abayomi said. "Less than half a day's walk."

As close as that?

Rhesanna's stomach clenched. She began shaking so she spilled water. But it didn't matter what she felt about being so close to the gods-blasted wasteland known as the Azure Sands.

All that mattered was Elsanae.

"If I don't—" Rhesanna started again. "I should leave my mare and saddle-bags with you."

Abayomi accepted the coin-pouch she took from her belt, making no comment on its near-emptiness. "I will care for your horse and secure your belongings," he said. "Do you need a lodestone?"

"I have one."

Abayomi inclined his head. "Good luck, Swordmaiden."

"Good custom to you, master," Rhesanna said. "And all thanks."

She slung her waterskins over her shoulders and strode out of the oasis.

The Azure Sands were accurately named.

The accursed waste began abruptly, as if there were two different deserts, intimate yet separate, like beach and sea.

But where was the Tower of Ancient Time? The sands were as empty as the open ocean. How large was the blue wasteland?

"Everything you fear is there," Abayomi had said of the Azure Sands. What kind of warning was that? What could it mean?

Rhesanna loosened her moonsword in its scabbard with shaking fingers. She yearned for a bow or spear, though she had no training in either. Maitana's servants were forbidden projectile weapons, as they were forbidden shields and armor.

Rhesanna drank some water, finishing one of the skins she carried. The air held a trace of coolness. But she'd learned thirst was never far away in the desert.

The Swordmaiden drew her dagger and extended it, bringing its tip closer to the air above the sharp line where yellow-tan sands gave way to blue.

Though her blade passed over the line, nothing happened.

She waited for several minutes. There was no delayed response. No defense-spell warded the Azure Sands, it seemed.

Rhesanna sheathed her dagger and unsheathed her moonsword. She drew a deep breath. Then she stepped onto the Azure Sands.

Immediately, she saw a glint on the horizon. She stopped, squinting. Whatever was creating that flash was too distant to make out.

What could it be, if not the Tower of Ancient Time?

A sick wash of fear flowed from Rhesanna's belly. All accounts put the Scroll at the top of the Tower. This—she admitted it to herself at last—was the reason she'd not traveled to the Kesar Desert upon first learning of the Scroll's existence.

Though she wanted to flee to the oasis and drink until she passed out, she pushed her shoulders back. She was done with drunkenness. She would climb the Tower, gain the Scroll, and restore Elsanae to life.

Rhesanna took another step. Everything vanished. She was falling through a dead black void.

Everything you fear is there.

She could see nothing. She could feel nothing, except the ache of her leg and the pressure of her stomach trying to rise into her ribcage. She reached out to grab something, anything, and her fingers closed on air. Terror raged as she fell, seeing nothing with her straining eyes—

—feeling no wind against her face, as she had when she'd plunged from the trail in the Enishzian Mountains.

“No!” she cried. “There’s no abyss here!”

Rhesanna lay, dizzy and gasping, on blue sand. Clutching at the ground as if trying to hold on to the world, she squeezed her eyes shut against dazzling sunlight. Behind her lids, white flakes pulsed in rhythm with her pounding heart.

An illusion, she thought. How else to explain “Everything you fear is there,” if not with a powerful spell that turned a person’s fears against her?

Rhesanna opened her eyes. Sun had given way to moon. Midnight had come in seconds.

The moon expanded, drawing closer. A silvery blur filled the air. Then the Moon Goddess stood before Rhesanna, looking as the mortal had always pictured her.

Maitana’s hair lay over her shoulder in a Swordmaiden’s braid that might have been plaited from impossibly fine-spun silver. Her cream-and-roses complexion was without flaw. Her tall, lithe body was clad in a Swordmaiden’s tunic and trousers, framed by silken folds of a cape as black as night. A moonsword in a gemmed silver scabbard was at her left hip.

“The Tower is under divine protection,” the goddess said, her voice more musical than a lark’s, her silver-grey eyes blazing. “Do you believe the gods need stoop to *illusion*?”

Rhesanna pressed her face to the sand, as if trying to burrow away from the lash of the Moonlady’s voice.

“Who are you to come to the Tower of Ancient Time?” Maitana demanded. “You broke the laws of my Order. You lusted for men and imagined taking them as lovers. You became so weakened by fear, you doomed your partner to an agonizing death, then refused to kill yourself. You are not only dishonored, Rhesanna. You are damned.”

Rhesanna’s head felt so heavy, the goddess might have struck it to stone. But Rhesanna had to confirm what she thought she’d seen. She raised her head.

The goddess looked exactly as she had always imagined.

Why would the Moonlady match her imagination so precisely?

“Coward,” Maitana said scornfully. “Do you really believe your Order-partner would care to be with you now? Elsanae would repudiate you.”

Rhesanna felt sick at hearing her greatest fear spoken aloud.

But what success might bring—what Elsanae might feel—did not matter.

“If Elsanae lives to despise me—well, she’ll be *alive*.” Seizing her moonsword, Rhesanna rose. “What an illusion says doesn’t matter.”

She lunged, swinging for the Moonlady’s neck.

The goddess vanished.

Rhesanna gasped. The Tower of Ancient Time was mere yards away. Its distance too had been an illusion.

She fell to her knees as she stared up at the tallest spire she’d ever seen. The crystal tower rose higher than even the prayer tower of the Great Temple of the Sunlord in Khyro.

The Tower of the Scroll was surrounded by buttresses and arches, columns and spirals, loops and less identifiable structures, all of crystal. Rhesanna squinted against the reflected sunlight. She could see no stairs. How would she climb a slick, impossibly tall spire?

Advancing hesitantly, she extended her empty hand to brush her fingertips over the nearest column. The crystal wasn’t as smooth and clear as she’d expected; it was scored over every square inch with innumerable scratches, the scars of sand driven harder than snow in a Northcountry blizzard. Despite the sharp separation of the tan and blue sands, winds crossed the Azure Sands.

As she proceeded cautiously into the forest of crystal structures, Rhesanna spied a staircase. There were no rails or barriers on the crystal staircase, though it wound its way around the crystal spire until it reached the top.

Drawing a ragged breath, Rhesanna sheathed her sword and began to ascend the Tower of Ancient Time.

The sand-scratches kept the crystal steps from being slippery under her boot-soles, but did not make the crystal opaque; as she went up, Rhesanna could see the blue sands blurrily receding. That there was something solid between her and the ground didn’t matter. She sank down on her hands and knees, squeezed her eyes shut, and crawled up the stairs.

Rhesanna lost count after three hundred steps. Sweat stung her sunburn and dripped from her chin. Her thick braid of brown hair lay between her shoulder-blades, sweat-soaked, heavy as rope. Her

tongue felt dry as ancient leather. Her head began to throb, but she didn't dare pause to take a drink. If she stopped moving, she might not be able to start again.

Rhesanna reached for a step and sprawled flat.

Cautiously, she cracked open her eyelids. Before her spread a crystal surface, round and level and some twoscore paces across. She'd reached the top of the Tower of Ancient Time.

She forgot everything when she saw a crystal plinth displaying a jewel-crusted gold scroll-case. The metal gleamed, and the gems threw sunlight back in every hue. Squinting against the blaze, she limped forward. She wouldn't let the height keep her away from the answer to her prayers.

The restoration of Elsanæ's life.

Rhesanna picked up the long, heavy case. There was no shock of power, no tingle of magic. Her fumbling fingers sought the removable end. The cap resisted, then gave way with a skin-prickling screech. She threw the cap aside. It soared over the edge of the Tower.

She slid her hand into the case. Her fingertips brushed parchment. The case slipped to the floor with a loud clank she barely heard. She stood holding a browned scroll.

Fine dust settled on Rhesanna's hand and snowed down on the crystal floor as—fast as thought—the thousand-year-old parchment disintegrated.

Rhesanna stared in disbelief at her empty hand.

Her cry rose to the empty sky. "*No!*"

In a blur of motion, she drew and swung.

Her moonsword shattered the plinth as easily as a fragile wineglass and struck the floor.

With a sound like the clangor of ten thousand crystal bells, the Tower of the Scroll shivered to powder that glinted like sun-struck rain and poured down like silver.

Numberless fine shards sparkled around Rhesanna as she fell. The wind of her passage buffeted her body. She screamed in rage, and consciousness fled.

Rhesanna woke on smooth blue sand beneath a blank blue sky. She should be lying in agony, every bone shattered, every

organ pulped, in a pool of crystal dust where the Tower of Ancient Time had been. Instead, she felt no pain—not even the old, familiar pain of her badly healed leg.

She whispered, “I must be dead—”

“You are not dead,” said an oddly familiar voice. “You are not dishonored. Nor are you coward.”

Rhesanna closed her eyes. That voice had addressed her in an illusion. All her effort, all her terror and pain, had been for naught.

“Goddess help me,” she said brokenly. “It’s *all* been illusion.”

“The Tower of Ancient Time was no illusion.”

Rhesanna opened her eyes and saw the face she’d seen in the illusion—yet this time it wasn’t exactly as she’d always pictured it.

The Moonlady was more beautiful than she ever could have imagined. The Moonlady’s long silver hair hung loose, and her skin had a silver sheen. Her moonsword sheath was plain leather. From neck to toe, she was clad in shining chain-mail, and on her back were a bow and quiver of arrows.

“The spell changes, hoping to fool me,” Rhesanna said, anger stirring. “But the Moonlady forbade armor and projectile weapons to her Swordmaidens—”

“I never forbade shields or armor or projectile weapons to any members of my Order.”

Rhesanna put her hands over her face. “Illusion—”

“No illusion, daughter,” said the voice. “Maitana stands before you. You survived the Azure Sands. You ascended the Tower of Ancient Time. You found the Scroll—”

“I did all those things.” Rhesanna leaped to her feet, her hands closing in fists. “For *nothing!*”

“For nothing?” the moon goddess said. “You have the gratitude of the Young Gods. For you freed this world from the ancient curse which the Elder Gods laid on the Tower, and thereby upon the world.”

“But—you—how could *you* not end the curse—”

“When we Young Gods defeated the Elder Gods, we forced them to sign a pact—a pledge to abandon this world for eternity. It did not matter that the Elder Gods’ oath was recorded on perishable parchment, for it was written in their own blood, which bound them

irrevocably. But they had one last trick. They bound the scroll to the Tower of Ancient Time and warded the Tower with an illusion-spell they thought no mortal could survive. Then they spread a false story so mortals would seek the scroll. It was a cruel jest, and one we Young Gods could not undo.”

Rhesanna stared at the Moonlady. “There was never a Scroll of Immutable Knowledge?”

“That scroll was a treaty, and be thankful for it,” Maitana said sharply. “The Elder Gods made chaos of your world. By the end of their reign, the very landscape of your world flowed like water—or poison. And how could there be a Scroll of Immutable Knowledge? Little is immutable.”

“No Scroll,” Rhesanna said. “Elsanae is damned to eternal torment, and you come to taunt me with your indifference!”

“I’m here to reveal the truth. Hearken, daughter. Before Mother Arika sent you and Elsanae against the demon, she sent other experienced Order-pairs to kill it—and it devoured them.”

Rhesanna’s eyes grew wide. “I didn’t know!”

“Arika did not like your spirit, or Elsanae’s,” the Moonlady said. “Arika eliminates my servants when she fears they might oppose her. So she sent you and Elsanae against a powerful demon unaided.”

Rhesanna shuddered with recognition of horrific truth.

“The demon still lives, and kills, because of Arika’s self-righteous pride,” Maitana continued. “But she is not the first high priestess to implement decisions or rules that hurt my Order.”

“What—” Rhesanna’s mind reeled at such blasphemy.

“As my brother the Sunlord never ordered women in men’s garb to be killed, I never decreed that my servants must use only sword or staff,” the Moonlady said. “Neither did I say that all the Order’s fosterlings must join the Order, or that any servant should kill herself if her partner died.”

“You didn’t?” Rhesanna whispered.

“And now I choose you, Rhesanna, to strip the false rules from the Order I established when I became the patron goddess of the Northcountries.”

Rhesanna stared.

“Why choose a dishonorable coward who doomed her own partner?”

“Only you, of the hundreds of mortals who’ve ventured here, overcame your fear sufficient to break the Elder Gods’ curse.”

Leaning forward, the goddess kissed Rhesanna’s brow. The kiss was like the touch of a burning coal. It was the most painful thing she’d ever felt, save for the loss of Elsanae.

Then the Moonlady straightened, and the pain was gone. Rhesanna touched her brow. It bore a new, crescent-shaped scar. The Mark of Maitana.

Rhesanna shivered.

“I have Marked you for a great duty, daughter.”

“To do what you want,” Rhesanna said, “I will have to kill many in your Order. Perhaps even your high priestess—”

“Probably,” said the Moonlady. “But most of my daughters cry out for change in their hearts. I send you in answer to their prayers.”

“What of my prayer?” Rhesanna demanded. “I want Elsanae’s soul saved and her life restored!”

“Slaying the demon will free every soul trapped in its flesh,” the goddess said. “But not even the gods can bring Elsanae back to life.”

Rhesanna sank to her knees as if her bones had failed.

“Slaying the demon will free Elsanae’s soul, you say—but I don’t know how to kill the demon.”

“That demon is not invulnerable,” the goddess replied. “I know not whether you will succeed in killing it, Rhesanna, or in restoring my Order to its rightful path. But the ability to do both lies within you.”

Maitana startled Rhesanna by touching her on the brow—on the Mark.

“Sleep, daughter—” Rhesanna was already sagging, her eyes closing “—and when you wake, fulfill my command.”

Rhesanna woke to light rain on her face.

She sat up, seizing her left leg. She rubbed her knee and ran her hands along thigh, calf, and foot. Her leg was no longer crooked. And, even when she rose and walked, testing, it did not hurt.

The goddess had been no illusion.

And, by the noise and smells that came to her on a breeze, it was no illusion that the caravanserai was only a few hundred yards away.

Close at hand, an unfamiliar oilcloth was spread beside her on the brown sand. She lifted a corner of the oilcloth. She saw the gemmed gold case that had held the scroll. She also saw Maitana's bow and arrows, and a suit of shining chain-mail, and padded garments to wear beneath the armor.

Rhesanna dropped the cloth as if it had burned her.

She'd been assigned an immense mission—and the goddess would give her no further aid.

She was on her own.

She resented being forced by the Moonlady. But she bore no injury from her fall. Her damaged leg was whole and hale. She was alive. And she had learned that destroying the demon would release Elsanae's soul.

For so many unasked gifts, she owed the Moonlady.

She would reform the Order or die trying. She would joyfully kill the Order Mother who'd deliberately sent Elsanae and so many others to their deaths. But first Rhesanna would destroy the demon and free its captive souls.

And, when she died, she would be reunited at last with Elsanae.

Cynthia Ward has published stories in Analog, Asimov's, Broadwords & Blasters, Skelos, Weirdbook, Weird Tales, and elsewhere. She edited Lost Trails: Forgotten Tales of the Weird West 1-2. Her short novel The Adventure of the Naked Guide: Blood-Thirsty Agent Book 3 will be released March 2020.

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Lest Darkness Wreck the Stars

By ROBERT ZOLTAN

When Dareon and Blue uncover a mysterious gemstone in the wastes, a strange violet star appears in the sky and visions of a lovely woman invade Dareon's dreams!

*Trust not in gods or chance or fate,
Nor earthly locks or bars,
Burn bright the light on heaven's gate,
Lest darkness wreck the stars.*

—From the Recollections and Admonitions of Dareon Vin

Until this moment, the favors bestowed upon the poet swordsman, Dareon Vin, by his supernatural patron, Lady Luck, had confined themselves to avoiding deadly plagues, escaping adventurous brushes with death (and marriage), and finding the missing words for stubborn rhyming couplets. But money matters she seemed to neglect, except for the occasional winning hand while playing Jackdaw.

But with one random blow of his hammer in the rugged hills east of Argenta, all that had changed. Peering out from the brow-like ridge of the black rock face was a violet gem as large as a man's eyeball.

Dareon gaped. He blinked, as if to make sure he was not suffering hallucinations from sun exposure. He glanced around, as if expecting to find he was the victim of some improbable practical joke by his comrade, the Indari warrior known as Blue. But if Blue even had a sense of humor, it surely took a far more subtle form than this. He began to chisel carefully at the dark rock around the gem.

When he had freed it, he held the gem behind his back and walked to the nearby rock formation where Blue was at work, bare-chested and with a determined set on his bold-featured face. Dareon had to admit that Blue at work was a marvel to see. The Indari's copper-toned, tattooed muscles swung his pickaxe with far less expectation and far more gusto than Dareon had. Knowing the Indari, he was simply enjoying the physical exertion.

Dareon smiled, letting Blue work up a bit more of a sweat before he spoke. He tried to sound as crestfallen as possible.

"I've had enough. The rumors of valuable gems in these hills are most likely the wishful dreams of desperate drug-crazed miners."

Blue shrugged and continued swinging. Dareon suppressed a laugh, thinking that if he left the Indari out here for another month, there would be no hills left.

"You give up too easily," said Blue with a grunt.

"You think so?" asked Dareon.

"Nothing worthwhile comes without hard work. What did you expect on the first day?"

"Oh, I don't know. A near-priceless violet gem the size of an eyeball?"

Blue snorted. "Ridiculous."

"Oh, yes? Hey, Blue. Catch!"

Dareon tossed the gem as the Indari turned. Blue caught the gem in his right hand, brushed his long black hair from his eyes, and held it up. The look on his face was priceless.

Dareon grinned like a cat that had just caught a violet bird. "Shall we go home?"

Digging for a couple more hours in the same area where Dareon had found the gem produced no other minerals like it or anything else of value. They packed their horses and rode across the rugged plain back toward Argenta.

"Strange to find a solitary gemstone like that," said Dareon.

Blue grunted assent.

"An enigma," said Dareon.

Blue shrugged. "Most things are."

"We should sell the gem in Merth. We'll get twice as much as we would in Argenta."

Blue agreed. Though an important port on the southernmost tip of the Jabwa peninsula, a kind of gateway to the east leading past the Dragon's Claws into the Sea of Kardon, Argenta was by no means a thriving commercial center.

They departed north on their horses without delay up the Shining Coast that very morning. Their remaining funds were insufficient to acquire passage on a ship. Dareon patted the saddlebag that held the violet gem, wondering if soon they might have enough to buy a ship of their own. As they rode alongside the Succulent Sea, fantastic sums

danced through Dareon's mind. He was no jeweler, but he assumed by the size, color, and purity of the stone that it was of substantial value. He was sure by the number of prisms that the gem wasn't an amethyst. In fact, it looked unlike any stone he had ever seen, being unusually round and glimmering with a violet light that seemed to glow from within the gem itself. He was tempted to take it out and gaze at it again, but then he pictured the gem slipping from his grasp, bouncing off the cliff to his left, and plunging into the pounding surf to be swallowed by the sea. Better not to press his luck.

Their workday had been short but strenuous, and the summer sun wore them down. They stopped soon after twilight to camp for the night, sheltered in a small natural alcove in a hill that faced away from the western Red Winds that blew in from across the sea. They ate a simple meal of dried beef and apples. The evening breeze was cooler, but the summer night was still too mild to require a fire.

As the first stars winked on in the night sky over the world of Plemora, they lay down upon their blankets and slept. And dreamt.

At dawn, Dareon awoke with the disquieting feeling that he had forgotten something important. He checked his saddlebag. The violet gem was secure. As they packed their gear, he wracked his brain for what was unsettling him, but was left with nothing but a sudden urge to leave the coast road, travel inward, and journey home through the Whispering Wastes.

He glanced at Blue. The Indari seemed unusually withdrawn and preoccupied.

"Sleep well?" asked Dareon, probing the Indari's mood.

Blue only grunted an assent as he tied his blanket to his horse.

Dareon cleared his throat. "I was thinking we might cut inland and ride through the Whispering Wastes."

Blue glanced up at Dareon as if in slight surprise. The Indari's brows furrowed. Dareon knew it was a strange request and was about to defend the pointless idea when Blue replied.

"Yes, a good idea," said Blue, as if he had been thinking the same thing himself. Then he mounted and spurred his horse up the road.

Dareon stared after him. He wanted to ask Blue why it was a good idea, but then he remembered that he himself had suggested it. It was true that the Whispering Wastes were a straighter, more level route than the winding, hilly, precipitous coast road. But travelers shunned it, and

Dareon and Blue had never taken it, for a reason. The Whispering Wastes, as their name aptly implied, were arid, windswept lands, with no apparent water or game. Rumors of roving bandits and tales of weird creatures and supernatural occurrences kept away those who were not deterred by the inhospitable environment.

Dareon believed that the rumors of bandits were unfounded and that they had more chance of being robbed of their precious violet gem on the more-traveled coast road. The strange tales were probably superstitious nonsense. And he, and especially Blue, feared no wilderness. So it only made sense to take the shorter way. But under the oh-so-logical rationalizations, Dareon felt an unreasonable compulsion he could not explain to take that less traveled, roadless path. He mounted his steed, patted the violet gem through the pack, and followed after Blue.

With no further discussion, they veered right off the coast road where the hills dipped down to form a shallow gully that their horses could more easily traverse. Leaving the Shining Coast, they wound through the weathered hills, and after more than an hour's ride east, came in sight of the Whispering Wastes.

They descended to the broad ivory plain and veered due north. The western Red Winds blew over the hills and through the gullies and ravines to their left to sweep softly across the sandy plain with an intermittent hush. The wastes appeared endless to the north and south and continued east beyond sight to the inland sea.

For two more days they traveled, sleeping from nightfall until dawn. Each morning Dareon awoke with the same forgetful feeling, even stronger, and some memory stirred at the edge of his mind like the sound of a distant sea. Blue seemed sullen and disturbed, very unlike his usual placid self. In fact, it seemed as if he were holding something back from Dareon. And Dareon himself felt a peculiar guilt as if he were holding something back from Blue, though if he was, he was holding it back from himself as well.

This made Dareon wonder about something he had pondered before, that each person was not really one, but several people, or at least several minds. For he had often felt—as he did now—as if he were in conflict with himself. And one cannot be in conflict, for more than one is required for that.

This existential paradox kept Dareon's mind distracted from his growing desire to see something just beyond his vision, to grasp

something just beyond his reach. Soon, the scarlet sun sank below the rolling western hills. In the dusky twilight, they saw the only native life they ever detected in that region: small blue lizards that emerged from the protective sand to hunt red beetles, the purpose of whose nocturnal wanderings was known only to the beetles themselves.

On the third night in the Whispering Wastes, Dareon spied the violet star. It floated just above the southern horizon, glittering through the clouds of phantom dust.

Dareon knew that the violet star was the answer to the question he had been asking. But both the question and the answer still seemed somehow veiled from his conscious mind. He pointed out the star and its unusual color.

“Blue, note you the bright violet star just to the stern of the Drunken Monkey’s tail, a finger’s height above the southern horizon? Violet is for violets, or Zembian daisies, or for that matter, our large unique gemstone. But not stars.”

Blue halted his mount. Dareon could see the Indari nod by the full starlight.

“Strange,” agreed Blue. “As if our gem had escaped to fly into the heavens.”

Dareon raised a brow at the uncharacteristic poetic flare of the Indari’s statement. The poet’s reaction was much more prosaic: he patted his saddlebag to be sure the gem was still there. It was.

They rode on in silence. The pull of the star upon Dareon’s mind increased as they drew nearer. Two hours later, the Indari pointed out the star’s strange stillness.

“See your violet star now? She has moved not an inch, hanging one hand’s breadth east of the White Goddess’ breasts.”

“Yes,” said Dareon, feeling entranced by the sight of the violet light. “Like a violet gem holding her place amid the river of diamonds flowing by.” He turned in the saddle toward Blue, though he saw little more than a dark silhouette against the starlit sand and sky. “Wait. Why is it a *she*?”

Dareon felt, more than saw, Blue shrug.

“Seems a she,” replied the Indari. “I know not why. Perhaps her proximity to the Goddess. Or perhaps your talk of flowers.”

“Boy star or girl star, I have never seen one so misbehave. Does she think herself a queen on her throne, refusing to be unseated?”

Another hour south brought a change, but not the one expected.

“Your queen grows in size,” noted Blue, for the star had visibly increased.

“Perhaps she was but an infant girl that has now grown after suckling the breast of the White Goddess. Never have I witnessed a star be violet, be still, or grow. If it does not grow, it draws nearer, and its course is straight for Plemora, or even us.”

They rode another hour. The wind whispered on the sand, the star grew, and finally, Blue spoke again.

“That is no star.”

“What, then?” asked Dareon, trusting the Indari’s superior vision.

Blue reined in his mount. “Do you see the round glow framing the star, as if from the edges of a window?”

“Window? Are you suggesting a tower?” asked Dareon. “Of such height? In the middle of nothing and nowhere?”

“Yes.”

As they drew closer, Dareon squinted. “I see it now. Yes, it is a tower! Tall, slender. Almost impossibly so. Who would, who could, build such a place, live in such a waste? I have never heard tell of it.”

“Who would have seen to tell? Almost none travel this route,” countered Blue.

“Whoever inhabits it must be unused to guests. But they are about to receive two. I’m sunblasted and windblown, weary of wandering on this plate of sand.” But that was not Dareon’s main reason. He felt he must know the source of the illumination. All of his longing since that first morning on the Shining Coast seemed linked to this violet light.

“And I,” agreed Blue.

Dareon was not surprised by the Indari’s reply, for he now sensed that Blue was being drawn by a similar obsession as he.

They rode on. Despite Dareon’s vibrant compulsion, the omnipresent breeze and taxing travel lulled him like a drug. He tried to stay awake by composing verse in his head. In his trance-like state, words formed as if spoken to him, and after turning them about several times in his mind, he recited them aloud.

“Trust not in gods or chance or fate,
Nor earthly locks or bars.
Burn bright the light on heaven’s gate,
Lest darkness wreck the stars.”

“Where did you hear that?” asked Blue, sounding strangely anxious.

“Hmm?” asked Dareon. The Indari was seldom moved by Dareon’s verse.

“That poem. When did you first hear it?”

“When? Just now, when I made it up in my head. At least, I think I did.”

“What did you mean by ‘Lest darkness wreck the stars’?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. It just came to me, a poetic phrase. What are you flustered about?”

Blue grunted. “Nothing.”

Dareon was too sleepy to pry information out of a stubborn Indari warrior. He yawned and fought to keep his eyes open. The last thing he saw before drifting off was the violet star.

Dareon dreamt of a pale woman. She was cloaked in a nimbus like the moon on a foggy night, as violet as the tower light. Her hair swirled as if she floated under the sea; her eyes were dark shadows shining with two distant violet stars.

Stars surrounded them on all sides, as if the light in the sky were perfectly reflected in a calm sea. She turned to him in surprise, as if he were intruding on her dream and not the other way around. Then she smiled and spoke words intelligible but strange.

“What manner of dream man are you?” she asked. “With skin so brown and hair so black, like a man made of earth, with dark stars for eyes?”

“Only a man, and not a dream one. It is *you*, lady, who are in *my* dream,” said Dareon.

“Surely not. Where are you truly now, if you do but dream?” she asked, laughing.

Dareon looked down and saw a blue-green sphere floating in space just below. He pointed. “I am upon that world, I believe. It is called Plemora. I ride upon a desert plain at night beneath the stars, approaching a tower with a violet light.”

Again her face showed surprise. “A tower with a violet light? But there is no tower there, for I have seen no signal given. If there were a Sentinel on that world, they would have warned us away. But then, how could you know of the tower and the light if they are not there?” She looked concerned, but then laughed suddenly with much gaiety. “I had forgotten. You know of towers with violet lights because those things are in my mind, and you are created by my mind!”

“Madam, although I know not my true mother and father, I assure you, I was not created by your mind. I exist. *You* are the phantom. Though I must admit, I have never had a character in my dream claim that I was the dream. Well, one of us shall be proven right when we awaken.”

“Perhaps we are both phantoms in someone else’s dream,” she suggested with a smile.

Dareon smiled back and wondered how it would feel to kiss those glowing lips. “Now you unnecessarily complicate matters. Tell me, what is this place?” He felt he was inside or upon something, but he could not understand its shape or nature, only that he was enclosed in some way or sheltered, yet open to see all the stars around him, and Plemora floating below.

“Ah, I ride upon sweet, gentle Galaktiphon. He carries me safely, with a stroke of his mighty tail and a rush of his great wings, swimming through the sea of stars to the Edge of Eternity and the Great Rendezvous. But he must feed when hunger calls him to a succulent sphere like the one below, marked by no signal from a Sentinel’s light, and thus, free of higher feeling and thinking forms. Sated, he then journeys onward until hunger calls him again, as it will, for the way is long beyond reckoning.”

Dareon frowned. “Madam, your words would disturb me if you were aught but a dream. For I am sure the world waiting below is mine. And I do not wish it to be food for anyone but myself.”

She laughed. “Worry not. You will disappear when I awaken, and no harm will be done.” Then she frowned.

“Why do you now look sad?” asked Dareon.

“Because you will soon be gone, and I find delight in your company and your appearance, dark as it is.” Then her eyebrows raised. “But then, since this is but a dream, may we not do as we please?” Her smile returned in a sly manner. “Come, dream man, kiss me.”

She held her arms open. Dareon floated into her violet cloud and wrapped his arms around her thin waist. Then he brought his mouth to hers.

Dareon jerked awake. Then he remembered. He had dreamt of this woman the night before, and the night before that, and again, trailing all the way back to the first night after he had found the gem. It was always the same dream. And each morning, he had forgotten, as if

the sunlight washed the memories from his mind, just as the stars disappear in the overwhelming presence of the sun.

He gazed up at the violet light in the tower as they drew near. It was the same color of light that had shined from the woman's eyes and floated about her lithe naked form, the same burning violet of the gem.

The synchronicity of phenomena was incredible, yet too strange for a coincidence. And at that thought, the clanking gears of his skeptical mind began to turn. *Of course*, he reasoned. *I have not dreamt of her before at all! My memory has forged a false document, signing it with the name of the past. This comfortably and neatly explains why I had not remembered the dream any day before. No such dream occurred!*

No doubt (continued his iron material logic) the strange violet light, coupled (a most apt term!) with his current loneliness for female companionship had sparked his poet's imagination to create a Dream Stargirl to keep him company in sleep. Her violet light was the light of the gem he had found, representing his hope for riches, though in his dream, the riches were of the romantic kind. He laughed silently to himself and thanked his brain, though he would have much preferred a real girl in waking state possessing more than merely dream flesh, dream smiles, and dream caresses (and curse his brain for waking him before the kiss!). Still, in the absence of the real, she was delightful in her own way. After all, what real girl shimmered with violet luminance?

Still, it was strange how clearly he could picture her in his mind: the swirling mass of hair, the small mouth like a tulip bud, the impossibly slender ears, the lithe form seemingly naked, but sparkling as if she herself reflected the glittering cosmos around her, or was somehow clothed with stars.

Then Dareon frowned. This did not explain the identical color of the gem and the light in the tower. Nor did it give any reason for his undeniable urge to travel the Whispering Wastes. His supposedly airtight shell of rationalism began to crack.

He hesitated to tell Blue of his dream, for he would be teased about the obvious symbolism of masculine loneliness. Or worse, Blue would exaggerate its importance. For unlike Dareon and most other city-bred folk who dismissed most dreams as mere flotsam and jetsam of the mind, the Indari saw dreams as glimpses into possible pasts and futures, other worlds, and even the world to come.

The woman's words about Plemora being swallowed once again cast a long shadow upon Dareon's mind. As unlikely as the whole thing

seemed, her words decided the matter for him. He told Blue of his dream and of his compulsion to travel this route.

Blue reined in his horse. "This troubles me greatly."

Dareon sighed. "I knew it would. Blue, it's probably just a dream. I simply thought perhaps I should—"

"Dareon," said Blue in a stern voice, cutting him off. "I also felt the urge to come this way. And I too had something plaguing my mind, something I could not recall. It was your poem that brought it back to me."

"Brought what back?"

"I too have had a recurring dream. But mine has no beautiful woman. It is simpler and more akin to a nightmare. I stood upon a high place and looked up to see the stars disappearing, and then the entire world of Plemora forever swallowed up by a darkness blacker than night, where no star remained except one, a small curious violet star that twinkled not."

Dareon realized he was holding his breath. Even his skeptical mind had a limit. "To the tower!"

They spurred their horses into a gallop. The arid night wind brushed against their faces and whipped their hair in wild strands. The sound of their horses' hooves now sounded like the approach of apocalyptic horsemen. They reached the tower a few short minutes later. Now that they were at its foot, they saw that the tower was perhaps five hundred feet tall and only forty feet wide. No stairs led up to it, no fence or wall surrounded it, and the land around it was in no way developed. It had only a short platform as its base.

"How does it even stand?" asked Dareon. "It's far too slender. You would think the wind would blow it over."

"It looks like a sword plunged straight into the earth from above and sunk to its hilt," said Blue.

Dareon's brow furrowed at the Indari's statement. He wondered if the tower had been built here or somehow placed by an incomprehensible power.

They reined in and dismounted. The tower had no feature by which to secure their mounts. They used their climbing and mining tools to secure a stake in the ground to tie the horses securely. Then they stepped up on the base and walked around the tower until they spotted a doorway that appeared as an arched darker rectangle against the lighter-colored material. It hung halfway open, clearly broken by force.

"Somehow, this seems an ill omen," said Blue, drawing his longsword.

Dareon felt a similar foreboding and drew his rapier.

They stepped inside, both consumed by the single thought of reaching the top of the tower.

A dim violet ambience flowed down the stairs, showing a plain circular chamber devoid of furniture or features, except for spiral stairs leading up on the right. With a brief mutual glance, Blue started up the stairs with Dareon just behind.

“Strange smell, or perhaps I should say, lack of it,” said Blue. “No odor of food or body. No smell of smoke or parchment. Nothing.”

“Except for a violet light such as we have both seen in our dreams,” said Dareon.

“And in that gem,” added Blue.

The curved ceiling of the staircase was high overhead. Their feet echoed softly as they climbed. They saw no landings or alcoves, and if any doors existed leading from the stairs, those were invisible or without discernible seams. The steps seemed endless. Five hundred feet they climbed, and the violet glow grew. Their legs began to burn from the exertion when suddenly they emerged from the stairwell at the top, winded and fatigued.

They were standing in a chamber with no roof and four circular openings facing north, south, east, and west. But these mundane details their minds barely registered, for the sight they beheld in the middle of the room was weird and wondrous beyond their combined experience and comprehension.

A pale, thin figure in a light robe lay upon the floor with its back propped up against a strange device consisting of spheres, bars, and arcs of metal. The figure was completely immobile and stared with unseeing eyes at the stars above. A stain was upon the front of its robe. It was clearly dead, and though it resembled a man in form, it was too thin, its hairless skull too high, and its narrow eyes too close-set. Near the wall another body lay prone, human and male, dressed in leather. A sword lay on the floor next to him.

Above the device was the source of the violet light. It resembled a newborn baby wreathed in a cloudy violet luminescence, floating as if it were in water. The being somehow stared at both Dareon and Blue at the same time.

It smiled.

They stood frozen in bewilderment.

Then a third eye opened in the middle of the baby's forehead, and before they could even blink, a violet beam shot forth into both of their foreheads.

Suddenly, it was as if they floated disembodied just above the tower. It was daytime. The thin being below them was alive and thoroughly absorbed by an incomprehensible task, making some kind of observation or calculation with one segment of the device. There was no sign of the floating infant.

The being paused and tilted its head as if listening. A moment later, three men dressed in leather and bronze with drawn swords emerged from the stairwell. They charged at the thin robed being. The being pointed its fingers at one of the men. Violet lightning cascaded across the man's body, and he was flung backward against the wall. He fell face forward and did not move. One of the two remaining men lunged forward and thrust the being through with his sword. The being collapsed.

The men quickly searched the chamber, and then moved to the device in the center. A strong, steady glow came from a violet gem set in a socket at the top of the apparatus. One of the men removed the gem and it dulled to a normal appearance. Then, with one last look around the tower, they departed down the stairs.

Shadows shifted, as if time were elapsing in a compressed manner. The being stirred, crawled to the device, and seeing that the gem was gone, propped its back up against the machine with great effort. Then it stared into the sky and ceased to move. A moment later, a violet light streamed from the being into the socket where the gem had been. The phantom infant materialized above the device.

Then the image of the machine's empty socket came close within Dareon's and Blue's fields of vision. Immediately after, an image of the night sky was before them. Suddenly, a black spot appeared in the middle of the sky and spread, blotting out the stars until there was nothing left but darkness. The image changed back to the empty socket in the device, and then to a violet gem that was a duplicate of the one Dareon had found. The image of the empty socket and the image of the violet gem switched back and forth with ever-increasing speed until they blended as one.

Suddenly, Dareon and Blue were standing back in the tower. But now, the only light was the starlight from above. The floating infant, if it had ever been there, was gone, and along with it, the violet glow.

For several moments, even garrulous Dareon was too dumbfounded to speak. “What just happened?” he finally asked, rubbing his itching forehead.

“Did you see the floating infant?” asked Blue.

“Yes,” said Dareon. “And the death of this being. And...”

Dareon looked up. Moonless and far from the lights of any city, the stars bloomed in countless numbers like wildflowers in a field of night.

But then he noticed one barren patch, a splotch of darkness in the middle of the sky where no stars shone. And as he watched, the darkness that was blacker than the night sky spread, engulfing the stars all around it. He cried out.

“The stars! Something’s swallowing the stars!”

As they watched the sky, the winds shifted, swirling from every direction in a chaotic stream that grew in volume and power. Dareon and Blue felt a vibration under their feet that coursed through their bodies. A rumbling sound like the roar of distant ocean waves was building.

“The gem!” yelled Blue over the whirlwind.

“It’s still in the saddlebag!” replied Dareon, wide-eyed in growing terror.

“Damn it, Dareon! Come on!” shouted Blue, grabbing the poet’s arm and yanking him down the stairs.

“Stop halfway down,” shouted Blue, sheathing his longsword. “I’ll get the gem and relay it to you. We’ve got to replace—”

“I know what to do!” yelled Dareon.

As Blue raced down, Dareon sheathed his sword and descended into the pitch darkness of the stairs at a slower pace to save his breath and strength, despite the panic he felt. It would take time for Blue to reach the ground and climb back halfway up. Too long, and it could be the end of Plemora. He finally stopped and steadied his breathing. The howling of the wind reverberated through the stairwell. The entire tower was now shaking with a tremor. Dareon tried to keep his mind off what was happening in the sky above. Soon, it was all he could do to stay on his feet. He sat, steadying himself against the wall as best he could, and waited.

After an unbearable eternity of minutes, he began to call Blue’s name down the stairs in desperation. Moments later, he heard the Indari’s voice.

“I’m here!”

Dareon reached out and found Blue’s arms. The Indari thrust the gem into Dareon’s hands and yelled between gasps of his breath.

“Go!”

Dareon turned and leapt up the stairs, stumbling now and then on the steps but keeping hold of the gem as if it were Plemora itself. Though already weary, he ran upwards harder than he had ever run before. Up and up the shaking tower he raced, his legs and lungs burning with the strain. It seemed the steps would never end. He cursed the tower for being so impossibly tall. Finally, he felt his legs would collapse under him, and he would simply lie upon the staircase, waiting for the world to end. A moment later, the howling of the wind grew. As he reached his foot for the next step, it simply wasn't there. He stumbled and fell onto a level floor. He was in the open, buffeted by the wind. At first he was confused, thinking he had stumbled into some terrace or open room that they had not seen before. For when he looked up, he could see only the darkness of what he thought was a ceiling. But then he realized it was the sky.

The stars were no longer there.

What could swallow the stars? Then he realized his mistake. Nothing had swallowed them. Something so vast hovered over his world that it was blocking out the stars. Something that would soon swallow all of Plemora.

He crawled forward and groped in the dark for the apparatus. He felt metal, and then his hand found the socket. He slid the gem into place.

Nothing happened.

Dareon cursed. The tower was shaking so hard that he was knocked off his feet. This was perhaps for the best, for the wind was now so strong that it might have blown him into the sky. He flattened himself on the floor, closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth. He faintly heard Blue's voice calling to him. Then he felt the Indari's hand upon his arm.

“Did you do it?” yelled Blue.

Dareon barely heard him, even though the Indari was shouting next to Dareon's ear.

“Yes! By all the gods, yes!” screamed Dareon.

He opened his eyes but still saw only darkness.

Then he noticed a faint violet glow illuminating Blue's form beside him. A strange hum grew under the roar of the wind. The violet glow grew brighter and began to pulse like a heartbeat.

“Shut your eyes!” cried Blue.

The Indari didn't have to tell him. The light was already disturbingly bright. Suddenly the hum rose to a higher volume and pitch. The light

became blinding, even behind Dareon's eyelids. He squeezed his eyes shut, covered them with his hands, and tried to bury his face in the shaking floor. He screamed, sure that the world, at least his world, was ending.

Then all at once the quaking ceased. Soon the wind died down to a normal breeze.

Dareon rolled over. He was afraid to open his eyes and look at the sky. When he finally did, he could see only darkness.

"It didn't work," said Dareon. But then, he turned his gaze elsewhere and saw the same blackness.

"I think it did," said Blue. "Hopefully the stars are back. Sadly, we can't see them."

"Why not?" Dareon asked, even though he knew. In an even voice, Blue confirmed his worst fear.

"Because we're blind."

"Blind! Is it permanent?" asked Dareon, blinking his eyes in the hope that it would somehow magically make them function again. He wanted only one answer, even though he knew that Blue couldn't give it.

"It might not be. Try to remain calm."

"Remain calm? Never to see the stars again? Never to read a poem? Never to see a beautiful woman? The ocean? The Golden Hills in springtime?"

"Shh," said Blue. "Listen."

"For what?"

"Just listen," said Blue.

Dareon listened. All he could hear was the hushed sound of the Red Winds. For a moment, he thought he heard the distant whisper of the Succulent Sea, but he knew that it was too far. Suddenly, he noticed the flat blackness in his vision giving way to a richer darkness. Soon, he noticed a blurred shadowy shape waving back and forth in front of him.

"See that?" asked Blue.

"Indistinctly, but yes. Is that your hand?"

"Yes," replied Blue.

Dareon sighed. He felt so relieved that he had to pause a moment before speaking.

"You think it will fully return?" he asked.

"I think so. Wait and see. Mine's getting clearer already."

"Mine as well!" replied Dareon. "I can dimly see the violet light, glowing quietly and steadily again. By the way, what were you having me listen

for?”

“Silence,” replied Blue. “I was just distracting you from your eyesight to calm you.”

They both lay on their backs with their heads resting on their hands, feeling completely drained. They stared up at the sky. Soon they saw faint, blurry, gray spots. Before long, these spots shrank into pinpoints of diamond light. Within minutes, they were gazing again at the stars they knew and loved so well.

“The Swordsman!” said Dareon, pointing into the western sky. “See him?”

“Yes,” said Blue. “And the Seven Sirens, just below the White Goddess.”

“Ah, yes,” said Dareon. “Seven Sirens serve their Goddess just above, Octopus and Drunken Monkey chase the Goddess, both in love.”

Then for a time, they simply let the stars speak.

“It would have been a small price to pay, you know,” said Blue, finally.

“What?” asked Dareon.

“Our eyesight. In exchange for saving the world.”

“Not a small price for us, my friend.”

“True. But we would have been alive,” replied Blue.

“And so we are. And still broke!” said Dareon. “Unless...” The poor poet glanced at the glowing violet gem.

“Don’t even think about it, Dareon,” said Blue.

“But maybe the gem’s not needed anymore.”

“And maybe it is. Send your mind back to a few minutes ago, forgetful fool! You want to risk that again?”

Dareon hemmed, but only half-seriously. “No. But, it’s a damned shame.” He sighed as he stared at the beautiful violet light. “The riches we’re giving up.”

“Riches? We have all the riches we need. Just look up.”

Dareon returned his gaze to the priceless night sky. And he wondered about the violet woman, and Galaktiphon, and what the Edge of Eternity would look like, and what in all the worlds the Great Rendezvous might be, and who would attend it.

For some time they rested on the floor of the tower, looking up in awe, grateful for the stars and for eyes that could see them. Then, in silent agreement, they rose, slowly made their way down the long staircase and out of the tower. They mounted their steeds, and rode north across the Whispering Wastes, toward Merth, and home.

Robert Zoltan is the author of Rogues of Merth and The Incomparable Quill series. He was a Semi-Finalist in the 2019 Writers of the Future Award. Robert is also an award-winning composer and music producer, audiodrama producer, illustrator, and host of Literary Wonder & Adventure Show for Dream Tower Media.



**RetroFuture TechNoir
Coming Soon
From Jon Mollison**

My Name is John Carter (Part 8)

By James Hutchings

(Editor's note: Continued from Cirsova Volume 1 #10—See Vol 1 #s 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, & 10 for previous installments!)

Thus the guard-gabled gate gaped wide open, and ate
two diminutive, trifling morsels,
who required no force to be sent on their course,
like the children of Hamelin ensorcelled.

Cloying clouds of sweet smoke, like the street's swirling cloak,
eyes as gray as a Boston December,
winding alleys as dark as the guts of a shark;
this and but little else I remember.

Does my memory fail, or some merciful veil
cover sights that are better forgotten?
Or am I like a tongue that tastes honey as dung
and swears freshly-baked bread to be rotten?

Did each serpentine street truly twist like deceit?
What if others left Earth, and I stayed?
Would those windings have looked like the curves of a brook
and the shadows like sycamore's shade?

Then perhaps I am wrong, and that limitless throng
wasn't tight as a noose, and another
would have called it as tight as a blanket at night
wrapped to comfort and warm, not to smother

and the voices that lashed at my soul as they clashed
in cacophonous, quarrelsome barter
spoke the wisest of words, and their tone was like birds,
and the dissonant note was John Carter.

To be sure, I was stranded in faraway lands
amidst folk of an alien race,
but then war seems to change you: you're always a stranger,
however familiar the place.

Mars could carry no blame when I'd feel just the same
if I wandered some street in the South
with a heart like a stone for these folk of my own

and a sneer never far from my mouth.

When you've seen a man's eyes at the moment he dies,
seen how easy a body may break,
seen the mounds of the slain like the summer's new grain,
all of life comes to seem a mistake.

All their dreams and their aims seem an imbecile's games,
and their joys provoke naught but misgiving.
Who takes Death for a wife turns his back upon life,
and he shrinks like a ghost from the living.

But all journeys must end, though the road seems to bend
till it twists from the clutches of time,
and we came to a stop by a down-at-heel shop
with an eye cast in bronze for its sign.

The old woman within was as ugly as sin,
with a face like an old leather sack,
and her deep, squinting eyes opened wide in surprise,
and she beckoned us into the back.

Later on I was told of the service she sold:
reading omens in wealthy folk's dreams.
But this trade was a lie: she was Helium's^[1]spy,
passing on all the hints that she gleaned.

"When they learned you were slain, all the nobles made plain
that their nature was poisoned with malice.
Every cruel, clumsy jest was a sword in my breast,
and I died in each mansion and palace.

"I pretended delight and I echoed their spite,
and I lauded their wit with a smile,
and I gathered my hints from each matron and prince
and imagined their deaths all the while.

"But the hunger of hatred can never be sated.
Whoever would try is a fool.
'Tis a well that is cursed that it cures no thirst
though its water be sparkling and cool.

"'Tis a back-breaking race with an easy first pace
and most start with a laugh at a sprint
and at first it's downhill, though it cripple and kill.
This I thought as I gathered my hints.

"They repeated the tale till at last it grew stale
and their ravening wrath craved for more

and their words and their thoughts turned to intricate plots
to drink deeply of Helium's gore.

"Yet the schemes that they spun were unraveled by one
stubborn, awkward, invincible fact:
They were small, and their fleet would be burned in defeat,
and Zodanga, not Helium, sacked."

Now the youth, strong and swift, never pauses to sift
through the dust of the past, and his gaze
is on deeds to be done and on glories to come,
and he thinks not to number his days.

But at last he grows old, and hot blood becomes cold
and the things yet to pass become fewer,
and when Death, whom he scorned in his life's gallant morn
is a grim, unrelenting pursuer,

and his life is a moon that is waning, and soon
will be dark, and that dwindling crescent
gives no comfort to him, then his thoughts turn within
and dwell more on the past than the present.

And Barsoom has a past inconceivably vast,
and the past holds Barsoom in its thrall.
Written records began ere the Earth bore a man,
and the Martian will study them all.

The American mind, never looking behind,
finding joy in the latest invention,
who is restless, and bold, scorning all that is old
would, to Mars, be beyond comprehension.

So they zealously combed every record they owned
stretching back to the first Martian's weaning.
Books for centuries closed had their secrets exposed
and each syllable drained of its meaning.

And they found what they sought in a faith that was taught
long ago, in the race's far morning
and the fruits of this creed being bitter indeed;
what it preached was set down as a warning.

It was said by this sect (so the book recollected)
that Martians were made from the soil
by a species far greater, to whom they turned traitor.

The elder race made them to toil,

and they warred to be free, till the elders could see
certain doom, of their own foolish making
and, lamenting, that race had gone out into space
leaving all of Barsoom for the taking.

All Barsoom—and their store of unparalleled lore.
But the Martians cared little for learning,
and none bothered to write down the slave-cities' sites,
for none gave any thought to returning.

But the sect knew to seek on the highest of peaks.
Only there could the cities have lain,
for the elders grew sick where the air was too thick
and the heat of the day gave them pain.

The revered and the wise had declared it all lies
with but little debate, in the main.
If they set to that task, it was only to ask
if these preachers were frauds or insane.

Few dissented, but those who were moved to oppose
were the brightest and best of the young
spurning selfish appeals, led astray by ideals
and the spell of an eloquent tongue.

All considered them mad, but they gave all they had
and their gaze wavered not from their goal,
and their spirits were high as they said their goodbyes,
and the wilderness swallowed them whole.

'Twas a sorrowful tale—and one fated to fail,
for its readers were blind to its lesson
(yet I cannot condemn—I was blinder than them
in that blood-sodden folly Secession).

But their hate—that deceiver, that gluttonous fever
that flame that consoles and consumes—
fills the head full of thoughts that seem wise, and are not
like the oracle, mad from her fumes.

Could it be that this sect had, in truth, been correct?
So Zodanga's logicians contended,
and with hope as their spur, drove 'perhaps' to 'they were',
and Zodanga's paralysis ended.

James Hutchings lives in Melbourne, Australia. The nostalgia of things unknown, of lands forgotten or unfound, is upon him at times.

The Golden Pearl

By JIM BREYFOGLE

After a harrowing experience in their search for Burning Fish, Kat and Mangos are determined to never be poisoned again — could a Golden Pearl be the answer?!

One year after the fall of Alness (and Mangos has forgotten all about it)

The muscles in Mangos' back creaked as he and Kat pulled the boat up the beach. The rollers under the boat crushed shells in concert with his efforts. He licked his lips, casting a covetous glance at the fruit hanging from the lush bushes above the high tide mark.

"Rare, eh?" he said.

"I'm sure," Kat answered. She sweated as she helped drag the boat.

"Valuable, too?" His foot slipped, and he had to grab the gunwale to keep from falling, sand spraying as he tried to get his feet back under him.

"Very."

"Better be."

They had just sailed for weeks in a small boat, and it better be for something more valuable than low hanging fruit, no matter how tasty.

The sun was hot, and he was hungry and thirsty, but it was golden pearls he really wanted. The pearls were a cure for any poison, and he and Kat figured that sooner or later they would need some. They had made many enemies during their time together, not the least of which was the notorious Bursa of Alomar. "Just making sure."

"As you have every day so far," Kat said.

"That should be far enough." He was thinking of how far he'd have to push it back out to go pearl diving.

Kat stopped pulling, looked at the tidemarks, and nodded. She was tanned by the sun, which also lightened the color of her hair. She brushed it from her face, and the sea breeze blew it right back.

Mangos climbed to the bushes, eyes fastened on the dark red fruit. He picked the largest, darkest fruit; it lay heavy in his palm, filled with juice. His mouth began to water. He lifted it and opened his mouth.

“That’s poisonous.”

Mangos blinked, looking around to see who spoke. Kat was looking past him, so he turned to see a young girl, about thirteen, holding a sheaf of dry palm fronds and a two-tined trident. “You can eat it if you want,” she said, “but paligrates *are* poisonous.”

Mangos regarded the paligrate, his mouth suddenly dry. It looked so good he didn’t want to believe it was poisonous. *That’s why we need Golden Pearls*, he thought as he threw the fruit into the ocean.

“Who are you?” Kat asked.

“Kimi.”

“We’re looking for Golden Pearls.”

“Everybody’s looking for Golden Pearls,” Kimi replied with a shrug, as though the actions of the world didn’t concern her.

“I’ll bet they are,” Mangos muttered. He glared at the rest of the red paligrates, offended that he couldn’t eat them. “Then they could eat this fruit.”

“No...” Kimi gave Mangos a puzzled look with her blue eyes, making him feel as though he didn’t know the most basic thing about the island. “To give to the Killanei in hopes she will give them the Elibli fruit.”

Nobody spoke, the wind, surf, and rustling leaves the only sound. Mangos tried to remember what Kat had told him about the island. A few miles across, one village, only place to find Golden Pearls: nothing about Killaneis or Elibli fruit.

“What is the Killanei and Elibli fruit?” he finally asked.

Kimi shifted her trident, keeping it between her and them. She frowned. “Why did you come if not for the Elibli fruit?”

“For Golden Pearls,” Mangos said. “We said that.” His stomach growled. “And something to eat.”

“Why would you want the Pearls if not to give to the Killanei?”

“To cure poison. Just in case somebody feeds us bad fish.” Mangos glanced at Kat, trying to see if she thought Kimi as innocent as she appeared. Kat smiled at his fish jest and shrugged to his unspoken question.

“If someone gave you bad fish, you would have been foolish to eat it, but they did it to make you eat your Golden Pearl,” Kimi said.

“Kimi!” a deep voice called out. “Tell them no more. They are not your friends.” An old man pushed his way through the bushes. He had white hair, his skin was dark and wrinkled. He had the same blue eyes as Kimi.

“I have no friends,” Kimi retorted. “But they are strangers who do not know of the Killanei.”

“They are liars,” said the old man. He shook his fist at Mangos. “Leave her alone. She has nothing the Killanei wants.”

“By the gods of Eastwarn!” Mangos swore. “What are you talking about?”

The old man curled his lip. He took Kimi by the shoulders and turned her away. “Go home,” he commanded. When she hesitated, he pushed, making her stumble. She righted herself quickly and walked away, her back straight.

Once she was out of sight, the old man turned to Mangos. He pointed to the paligrates. “Have some. They’re very good.” Without another word, he vanished into the bushes.

Mangos raised his eyebrow at Kat. “Elibli fruit? Killanei?”

“I have no idea what they’re talking about,” Kat replied. She poked the fruit on the bush and looked after the old man. “Good for whom, I wonder?” She shrugged. “Let’s find the village and see if we can buy some food.”

“They’ll probably try to sell us poison.”

“And that’s why we need the pearls,” Kat replied.

Not knowing where the village might be, Mangos suggested the first thing that came to his mind—follow the path and the footprints into the jungle.

A bird landed in the bushes. It was blue—a blue the Alomari dye makers would have envied—with strips of yellow and orange on its wings. It screamed raucously and another bird answered.

After two weeks, Mangos wanted something besides dried meat, something fresh. Counting a half dozen varieties of fruit he could easily pick didn't help. They all looked good, but he didn't know if any were edible.

People shouted in the distance, calling to each other in hard voices. The words were indistinct, but the tone was of dockworkers—men thrown together by the necessity of their jobs, not the desire for companionship.

Footsteps pounded on the trail behind them; Mangos turned. An islander pulled up to avoid running into them. He was flushed from exertion, his eyes dilated with pleasure. He scowled, but a smile kept tugging at his lips. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"The Mongoose and the Meerkat," said Mangos. "At your service."

"What do you want?" he was clearly trying to conceal his excitement, and failing.

"Golden Pearls," said Mangos.

"There are none," snapped the man. "They are a lie."

Kat raised an eyebrow, shook her head minutely.

Mangos let out a lungful of air. Easier, he thought, to force the truth from the man. But the man ran past them and disappeared down the trail. They followed after.

The voices grew louder, and with them came the smell of smoke. They rounded a bend in the trail and entered the village. Silence fell.

It was the silence of humans. The birds still sang, the leaves rustled, the surf still sounded in the distance, but the villagers remained silent, staring. Not motionless, they still moved about their business, but not paying it any mind. They stared at Mangos and Kat without a word.

They weren't afraid, Mangos decided. Not angry, either. Wary, like a mercenary might size up an opponent. He rested his hand on the hilt of his sword.

The jungle brush had been cleared, leaving the tall palms to shade bare dirt and dozens of huts. These were centered loosely on a communal fire but flung away from each other, as if the inhabitants wanted as much space as possible. The walls were made of woven branches, thicker than Mangos thought necessary, and most had a

caged bird hanging before the door. The birds squawked like watchdogs when someone approached.

A large kettle hung on the fire, stirred by a stooped old woman who watched their every movement. A man sauntered toward them, a big man, taller, broader, and thicker than Mangos. He had dark, wild hair. He wore a cloth around his waist. Tattoo stripes covered his right arm from wrist to shoulder. They moved like snakes when he flexed his muscles.

"I am Marumbi," he said. It sounded like a threat.

"Mangos," Mangos answered, keeping his hand on his sword. "Kat." He jerked his head toward Kat.

"The Killanei doesn't give the Eibli fruit to strangers." Marumbi stopped just out of reach.

"We're not here to talk to the Killanei," said Mangos. "And if the Killanei doesn't favor strangers, you have nothing to worry about." *Epecially since I don't know who the Killanei is*, he thought.

"I have nothing to worry about anyway." Marumbi slapped his waist, and Mangos noticed a long knife hanging from a leather belt. He grinned. "Strangers used to land here often." His grin made it clear unfortunate things happened to those strangers and that he enjoyed it. "They never found what they wanted. You won't either, but maybe you'll find what you *don't* want."

Marumbi turned and walked into the jungle.

Mangos watched him go. He didn't like being threatened. *I could take him*, he thought. He turned to Kat. "Leave now?" The idea amused him, and he had no intention of doing so. He smiled.

Kat shook her head. "If we leave without Golden Pearls, sooner or later, we'll die. Arrow, knife, or drink; somebody will poison us."

"But what about this Eibli fruit?"

"Let's ask her." Kat gestured. He followed her hand to see Kimi sitting across the clearing where the communal fire burned. There was no sign of the old man. Kat led the way to her.

"Thank you for warning us about the paligrates," Kat said.

Kimi nodded. "It's clear you don't know anything."

Mangos covered his annoyance with a cough.

"Will you get in trouble talking to us?" asked Kat.

“No. Grandpa only yells at me when we happen to meet. He spends all his time searching the island for a pearl somebody else hid.” She paused, then explained. “He can’t dive deep enough to get his own pearl oysters anymore. But when someone finds a pearl, they hide it so it won’t get stolen. Grandpa tries to find those pearls.”

“All this to give it to the Killanei?” Mangos asked.

“And we don’t know what the Killanei is,” Kat admitted.

“She is the spirit of the Elibli tree.”

“People think a lot of the Killanei,” Mangos said.

“It is all they think about,” said Kimi. “Especially now, as the fruit grows ripe.”

“What fruit is this?” Kat asked. “I haven’t heard of it.”

“The Elibli fruit? There is only one each year, and it must be eaten soon after being picked. It cannot survive a trip off the island. Everybody tries to convince the Killanei to give it to them.”

“Why?”

“It can heal anything, but more, it gives health and vitality. It is like an extra year of life.”

Mangos whistled. “An extra year of life?”

Kimi nodded, her blue eyes sad. “Marumbi is over eighty years old. The Killanei favors him often.”

“Everybody would want that,” Kat said. “Cure disease, heal injuries, live longer. The competition must be fierce.”

Kimi looked down, made an arc in the dirt with her foot, and nodded. “Most people try to gain the Killanei’s favor.” She took a deep breath. “And they will try anything to get it. Marumbi has a stripe on his arm for each person he’s killed.”

Mangos’ stomach rumbled. He blushed.

Kimi laughed. It reminded Mangos how young she was. “There is food.” She pointed to the kettle on the fire. “Take some. It’s for all.”

“They’ll let us?” Kat asked. “It is safe to eat?”

“Oh, yes,” Kimi answered. “It is the one thing that is safe and free. You can’t poison *everybody*.”

Why not? Mangos wondered, but it sounded like poisoning the communal pot was taboo. Or maybe potential mass murderers just didn’t want to cook for themselves. “And I thought it was because you like each other so much,” he said.

Kimi looked puzzled, then smiled as she got his jest. “Of course not. But it’s the only thing that brings people together. As much as we hate and fear each other, we desire company.”

“The barest minimum to remain a community,” Kat said. “You are a perceptive young lady.”

All gathered to take their food, a type of stew made from wild pig and tropical fruit served in wooden bowls. Villagers made a large circle around the fire. Each spoke, a few with apparent warmth, to a particular person or other; one, Mangos assumed, whom they trusted. For the most part, though, they seemed wary, holding their food close and keeping an eye on their neighbors.

“You said the Killanei likes Golden Pearls,” Kat addressed Kimi.

“Yes. Everybody dives for pearls. But nobody gives them to the Killanei.”

Mangos paused from slurping his stew. “What? Why work so hard to get pearls for the Killanei and not give them to her?”

Kimi pointed to a man across the fire. “Karabi found a pearl,” she whispered. Karabi, Mangos realized, was the man who had overtaken them as they walked in from the beach. “His wife was attacked by a shark and cannot walk. The Elibli fruit can heal her, so Karabi has hidden the pearl until he can give it to Killanei.”

“How can you tell?”

“He is too happy.”

“That’s bad?”

“Not that he wants to heal his wife,” Kimi said. “Only that everybody knows he found a pearl.”

Even as she spoke, Karabi slapped at his neck, plucked at the skin. His fingers came away red and he stared in horror at the thorn he held.

“Poisoned,” Kimi murmured.

“Damn you!” Karabi shouted at the jungle. “The fruit is not ripe, and she cannot walk to Killanei—I must do it for her!” He rushed into his hut.

“He needs to speak with his wife,” Kimi explained. “If he uses the pearl to save his own life, there is no hope the Killanei will give him the fruit.” She shrugged then added, “He must hurry to decide.”

Several minutes later, Karabi staggered out, doubled over and gasping. He pushed his way into the jungle.

Nobody said anything.

“Friendly,” Mangos grunted.

“We have no friends.” Kimi sounded bitter.

When Karabi returned, cured of the poison, he neither sat by the fire nor went into his hut. He sat just outside the door, legs curled to his chest and weeping.

“That is why people hunt pearls but do not give them to the Killanei,” Kimi continued. “Perhaps he will have better luck next year.”

Conversation began amongst the villagers as though nothing had happened. Marumbi swaggered into the village, and went straight to the kettle to get food. He saw Karabi weeping and burst into laughter.

“**W**hy talk to the Killanei?” Mangos asked. He spoke quietly so Kimi, who walked a few feet ahead of them, would not hear.

“She may know where people have been successful in pearl diving.” Kat shrugged. “Or not. But it doesn’t hurt to ask. Nobody else is going give away likely dive spots.”

“There is her grotto.” Kimi pointed. “People only speak to her once a year, to ask for the fruit.” She stopped. “Otherwise, they do not bother her.”

They didn’t want to bother her, or just didn’t want to bother? Mangos wondered.

Kat stepped around Kimi. “We’ll claim ignorance.” Mangos hurried to catch up. The silence behind him told him that Kimi did not follow.

“Let me talk,” Kat said. “Killanei is a tree spirit. She will seem very young, but she is not.”

Mangos agreed. Kat obviously knew more about this than he did.

The circle of large stones that formed the boundary of the grotto rose twelve feet. Vines of green leaves and orange flowers entwined them, binding them together. Water trickled over one of the stones, darkening it and sprinkling the leaves before pooling at the base and flowing into a crack in the earth.

Palms rose over the grotto, their fronds moving in the breeze, striping the ground with moving shadows. Inside a plant grew, maybe many but forming one growth, for it grew from many stalks. It had small leaves, no longer than Mangos' finger and wide as two. Yellow-orange blossoms alternated with leaf clusters.

Wind rustled the stalks, and a girl stood as if she had always been there. "Who are you?" She was slight, with large eyes and long hair. Her dress was leaf green with yellow-orange flowers.

"Are you the Killanei?" Kat asked.

The girl smiled a sad smile. "*The* Killanei? I am Killanei." Her expression hardened. "The Elibli is not ripe."

"I am not here for the Elibli," Kat said.

"Why then?"

Kat shrugged. "Courtesy."

Killanei cocked her head. "How very strange."

"Are your guests not courteous?"

"They come once a year, bearing gifts, professing their love of me, and telling me why I should hate the others." Killanei ran her hand down one of the stalks of her plant. "They lie, about both their love and their rivals, but they *are* courteous."

"And they bring you pearls."

Killanei snorted. "They make excuses for why they don't have pearls, and they promise me pearls if I will give them the fruit." Her expression became thoughtful. "Many years ago, there was a man who brought me pearls."

"Marumbi?"

Killanei's eyes grew dark. "No. Marumbi killed him."

Mangos and Kat exchanged looks. "I wonder where the man found all his pearls," Mangos said.

"I never found out," Killanei answered. "Only that he dove off the northern point, outside the reef. It never mattered. I cannot leave my grotto." She sighed. "So few pearls now and they are so pretty. I wonder what became of them."

"They are used by desperate people," Kat said.

"I have seen their desperation under Marumbi."

They were silent. Mangos shifted his weight. *The sooner we find our pearls, the better*, he thought. He had no wish to become

involved in the competition for the Elibli fruit. Only the pearls would help them in the years to come.

Kat merely waited, a sympathetic expression on her face.

Killanei broke the silence. Her voice was hesitant, as if she wasn't sure she should confide in them. "Marumbi scares me."

"He should," Kat agreed.

"But he dares not push too hard, or I will not grow the Elibli fruit." She lifted her chin a little, a small gesture of defiance.

Clever, Mangos thought. Marumbi could influence but not control Killanei, the same as he could the villagers. So he created an atmosphere, a system almost, that favored him. He might not get the Elibli fruit every year, but he would get it most years.

Kat began telling Killanei the story of their journey to the island. It bored Mangos, but Killanei listened intently. She enjoyed their company, for she clearly got little, and Kat told the story in a way that made her laugh. One story followed another until hours had passed, and they made to leave.

"Must you go?" Killanei asked.

"Yes," Kat said. "But what do you like? What can we bring you?"

"We are not exchanging gifts." Killanei stretched her hand up, cupping it as if she could catch the sun's rays like she would the rain. "I eat of the sun's bounty and drink the water of the earth. I need nothing. But I thank you for your company."

"**W**e can't dive here," Mangos complained. There was no bottom outside the reef, only the wall of coral falling away into the depths. For two days they had waited, unwilling to dive while the islanders watched from the shallows. But now the Elibli fruit was ripe, and everybody was begging Killanei, so Mangos and Kat were free to search untroubled.

"Wait." They drifted over an alcove in the coral, a sandy niche a few yards wide and a hundred yards long. "Here it is."

Mangos dipped his hand over the side. The water caressed him, surprisingly warm, like liquid air. He could see the bottom, it looked so close he thought he should be able to stand.

Throwing over the anchor, he watched it sink down, down. It struck bottom, and he pulled, dragging it along the bottom until it caught on

the coral. "Fifty feet?" The depth surprised him.

Kat tied back her hair. "I'll dive."

Mangos nodded. He didn't like swimming. He could dive, but maybe not that deep.

Kat dove over the side, knifing into the water with barely a splash. Fish scattered from her. It looked like she swam without moving, but Mangos knew that was an illusion. She reached the bottom, moved about, fumbling along with her hands. She grabbed what looked like a rock, slid her knife under it, shook, and kicked up.

A moment later, she burst out of the water, grabbing the gunwale and gasping for air. She did not have an oyster. "That didn't work," she said. She held up a hand, and Mangos lifted her into the boat.

"It takes too long to dive." Without another word, she dove over the side again. This time she sank quicker, leaving behind a trail of bubbles. Almost immediately she returned, gasping harder than before.

"What did you do?" Mangos asked as he lifted her back into the boat.

"Let out my breath, it helped me sink faster."

Mangos laughed, "And left you without any air when you reached the bottom."

Kat gave him a sour look. "Yes."

"I'll just tie you to the anchor and let that take you down."

A smile spread on her face. "Do that," she said. "We have a spare anchor."

Mangos found the spare anchor, a small one, perfect for this task. Kat looped the rope about her wrist; Mangos thought that foolish in spite of his joke—he would want to be able to let go. He dropped the anchor overboard as she dove, and the two sank rapidly. She disengaged the rope once she reached the bottom.

This time when she surfaced, she dropped an oyster into the bottom of the boat. Mangos pulled up the anchor so they could do it again.

As she dove, he picked up the oyster. He took his knife and slit it into the shell and twisted. He moved the knife and twisted again.

"Open up, you stupid shell," he muttered.

Finally the shell opened enough for him to get his fingers inside. With a heave, he tore it the rest of the way open. No pearl.

Kat surfaced, panting, and dropped another oyster into the boat. This was the size of his head.

“Give me a rope,” she said. “There’s one the size of a bushel basket.”

She dove and he opened the oysters, tossing them aside time after time without finding a pearl. He would finish opening an oyster and pull up the diving anchor just as she surfaced again.

Time and again; no pearl.

The day wore on, diving with periods of rest interspersed, but no pearl. The oysters began to pile in the bottom of the boat and Mangos started to feel frustrated.

During one of Kat’s rests, he leaned on the gunwale, watching the fish. There was... he had to rub his eyes, surely the water and the waves were tricking him. No, it truly was—an oyster as large as his hand, but if it were fifty feet down, it must be as large as a man!

His excitement washed away his hesitation. This was a prize he wanted to claim. He grabbed the anchor and jumped over the side.

The saltwater stung his eyes, but he closed them. He knew where the oyster was and he swam toward it, only opening his eyes for quick reassurances.

His eyes burned as he tried to find it, taking a second look because it was so large he thought the blurry shape had to be coral. The stinging look told him the oyster was open enough to reach inside. *Good*, he thought, *I could never haul it to the surface*. He reached in, groping, and felt a hard lump. He closed his hand on it just as the oyster closed on his arm.

He jerked back but was trapped. Bracing his feet, he pushed, but the oyster held him tightly. He was caught above the elbow and could not move in or out. His lungs started to labor; he needed to surface.

He tried to pry the oyster open with his free hand. It did not open. He felt his blood pounding in his head.

He looked up, the sun shone brightly, but the edges of his vision seemed dark. He kicked and pulled, pounded the oyster, but to no avail.

Kat was next to him, sliding her arm, smaller than his, into the oyster, cutting and twisting with her knife until the shell suddenly loosened. She pulled it open, and Mangos shot up, fighting to reach the surface before he passed out.

“You’ll feel better if you look at what’s in your hand.”

Mangos blinked. He lay in the boat, looking up at the sun. He didn’t remember climbing in, didn’t even remember making it to the surface.

But he held a larger pearl than he ever imagined. His fingers stretched to hold it, it may have been five inches across, a perfect sphere. It wasn’t really the color of gold; instead it was lighter, more lustrous. It had an iridescence; all the colors chased each other so quickly they were more a suggestion than a truth, leaving the pearl a shimmery gold.

“By the gods of Eastwarn,” he said, awed. He had a hard time focusing his thoughts, so he just stared at the pearl. “With a pearl this large, we don’t need any more. We can shave from this for years if needed!”

“I think,” Kat said, “we should sail away sooner rather than later. A pearl like this is as good as a free year of life, maybe even the promise of next year’s fruit too.”

Mangos looked around, suddenly afraid they were being watched. He gave the pearl to Kat, who dropped it into a pouch and hung it on her belt. “Good thing everybody is talking with Killanei. Keep it hidden while we gather supplies for the voyage.”

“I’ll get provisions so we’ll be ready to sail with the next tide,” Mangos called over his shoulder. He raced up the beach, leaving Kat to anchor the boat in the shallows. He took great lungfuls of air, still feeling giddy as he recovered from his dive.

The sound of the surf faded, and he thought of where to get food. It would be safest to trap a boar—no chance of poison, but that might not be easy and preserving the meat would take too long.

He dashed around a corner in the trail, saw somebody blocking his path, and skidded to a stop to avoid hitting them.

Marumbi held a spear with both hands, his long knife still hung from his waist.

“Why aren’t you trying to get the Elibli fruit?” Mangos demanded.

Marumbi grinned evilly. “The Killanei will not give the fruit to any but me. She knows better.”

“I’m not after the fruit.” His head hadn’t cleared, and he struggled to understand.

“I’m not a fool. I watched you. You knew where to dive, now you run to get the Elibli fruit. You must have a pearl.”

“I am not running to get the Elibli fruit,” Mangos said, reaching for his sword. It wasn’t there. He had taken it off to dive.

“I will take the pearl from your body.”

I can take him without a sword, Mangos thought. He kicked sand and lunged, but Marumbi closed his eyes and swung his spear. Mangos had to twist aside to keep from spitting himself.

Marumbi laughed. “I’ve been killing men for sixty years. I know all the tricks.”

Like surprising them when they’re unarmed, Mangos thought. He rolled away and threw himself back as Marumbi attacked. He came to his feet. He felt light, energized.

He laughed and Marumbi laughed back.

They circled. Mangos heard a call behind him but didn’t pay it any mind. He was in his own world, intent on the man before him: intent on the spear, which he intended to dodge, and the knife, which he intended to grab.

He feinted left, then right, danced back. Marumbi thrust low, and Mangos leapt high, over the spear, grabbing the knife. He tore it free and swept it up and back across Marumbi’s throat.

Marumbi wobbled. Blood spurted down his chest, but he held tight to his spear, and Mangos felt a tugging in his gut.

“There’s a trick you don’t know,” Mangos said.

Mangos coughed a wet cough. He ignored it and drove the knife into Marumbi’s chest. Marumbi let go of his spear. Mangos staggered. Marumbi’s eyes rolled up and he fell.

Mangos looked down. Marumbi’s spear protruded from his stomach, angled up. He coughed again and wiped the spit from his face. It wasn’t spit. It was blood.

“You fool!” Kat shouted. “Too long without air, you’re still not thinking right. A minute more, and I would have been here.”

“Didn’t need you,” Mangos said, finding it difficult to breathe. He took a deep breath. The pain surprised him. “Damn this thing.” He grabbed the shaft of the spear and yanked it out. “That’s better.” He covered the hole with his hand to staunch the bleeding.

“Gods, you idiot!” Kat took the spear. “Lie down. I need to look at this.”

Mangos shook his head. “Just help me get the food. We’ll be on our way.”

“Let me see the wound,” Kat said, throwing the spear into the bushes.

Mangos did not sit down, but he let her peel back his fingers for a second to see the wound. He coughed again, his breath rasping in his lungs. “I’ll be fine.”

“No,” Kat shook her head, “you will not be fine.”

“If I eat a pearl, I won’t need to worry about it festering. Somebody must be hiding a small one.”

“A pearl won’t heal this.” Kat looked anxious, thoughtful. “There is a way. Stay here. Rest.” She started down the path toward the village.

“Where are you going?” Mangos staggered after her. She did not answer; apparently she did not hear him. She ran lightly, with a haste Mangos didn’t understand and could not match.

“A pearl will keep it from festering,” he insisted. “It can heal on its own.”

He reached the village, far behind Kat, and saw her on the path to Killanei’s grotto.

“No!” he shouted. “Don’t give her the pearl!” He could survive without the fruit, he knew he could, but a pearl that size could not be replaced.

He stumbled after her, coughing again and again, having trouble getting enough air in his lungs. “Don’t give her the pearl!” His vision seemed cloudy, and he blinked to clear it.

Villagers clustered on the path to the grotto. Whether waiting to speak to Killanei or waiting for her decision, Mangos did not know. None tried to stop him; none offered to help him.

“Do any of you have a Golden Pearl?” he asked. He didn’t want to use the large pearl if he could help it.

The villagers just looked at him.

Breathing didn’t seem to satisfy him, and he couldn’t fill his lungs. He needed to rest. A couple minutes and he’d be fine, but Kat would have given Killanei their pearl. He pushed on.

“Don’t trade it,” he gasped, but Kat was too far away to hear.

His legs failed him, and he pitched forward, darkness washing over him for the second time in an hour as he tried again to tell Kat not to give away their giant pearl.

He opened his eyes. Palm fronds waved overhead. He took a deep breath. “Damn. You gave me the fruit.”

Kat, nearby as he knew she would be, said, “You would have died.”

“I would have been fine.”

“Not with a wound like that. It went through your stomach and up.”

Mangos raised his head. He was in the grotto. Killanei watched from her plant, holding the giant pearl. Kimi stood next to her, smiling. The two had evidently been talking.

Sitting up, Mangos ran his hand over his stomach. The skin felt tight, but that was all. “You shouldn’t have given up the pearl,” he complained.

Kat didn’t answer him directly. Instead, she looked at Killanei and raised an eyebrow. “Better than a pearl?”

Killanei laughed, the sound of running water. “Oh, yes. You were right.” She handed the pearl to Kat.

“What?” Mangos asked, not understanding.

Kat looked toward the opening of the grotto, making sure nobody watched as she dropped the pearl into Mangos’ hand.

He rolled it in his palm. “How?”

“She only gave me the pearl in case I didn’t agree that her real offer was better,” Killanei said.

“You needed the fruit immediately,” Kat explained as she returned the pearl to her pouch. “I hadn’t time to fetch Kimi. Think of the pearl not as a trade, but a hostage.”

Killanei laid a hand on Kimi’s shoulder. “She offered a friend.”

“On this island, friends are rarer than pearls,” Kimi said.

“And more valuable,” Killanei added. “But with Marumbi dead,” she said thoughtfully, “maybe things will change.”

Jim Breyfogle currently resides in Pennsylvania. His Mongoose & Meerkat stories have regularly appeared in Cirsova Magazine. Cirsova Publishing will be launching a Kickstarter in April to take pre-orders for Mongoose & Meerkat Vol 1: Pursuit Without Asking, out later this Summer.

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IT'S POWERS VS. MAGIC!



**7 TALES OF PURE ACTION
& WEIRD ADVENTURE
by JD Cowan**

Slave Girls for Sacrifice

By D.M. RITZLIN

A powerful sorceress with a bestial lover requires a blood sacrifice to complete her vile rites... Will Avok's brawn and bag of tricks be enough to stop the witch?!

“Oh!”

The nubile maiden recoiled at the raw caress of her captor's leather whip upon her back. Her hooded tormentor, guffawing with idiotic glee, raised his arm to deliver another vicious strike but was stopped short. A burly man in identical garb (dark hood and trousers, but no tunic) came behind the sadistic whipper and slapped the back of his head.

“Would you spoil the goods, fool? How much coin do you think we'll get if these slaves arrive in Tul-Thera covered in bruises and welts?”

“Apologies, Vratch,” said the whip-wielder sheepishly. “It's just so much fun. I get carried away sometimes.”

“I hope you get carried away to the pits of Uzz!” barked Vratch. “Although you're likelier to find mercy there than from me if I catch you tampering with the merchandise again!”

Two other captives, a man and a woman, watched the entire altercation from a few feet away. If one could not determine the man's homeland by his lengthy blond hair and large azure eyes, the leather kilt he wore, which was embossed with emblems of his clan, made it clear that he hailed from the northern land of Cythera. In spite of his predicament, he could not stifle a chuckle.

The woman jabbed a sharp elbow into his ribs. “Why do you laugh, Avok?” she asked crossly. “Is the situation you got us into not dire?”

“Me?” said Avok Kur Storn. “Look around, Exa. I'm the only male captive. Clearly, attractive young women are their preferred quarry. That's why they drugged your wine last night. If you hadn't shared it with me, I wouldn't be in shackles right now.”

Vratch, overhearing their conversation, said, “Yes, we got two for one on that deal! What a bargain! You're not our usual type of stock,

Cytheran, but nevertheless you'll fetch a fine price. A slave is a slave, after all."

Avok found that remark particularly abhorrent. "I am no slave, and never will be!" he gnarred.

"No?" said Vratch, yanking Avok's chains and laughing.

"My freedom has been temporarily hindered, that's all," enounced Avok, which made the slave driver laugh all the more.

"These chains will come off one day," said Avok through gritted teeth, "and when they do, your suffering shall be great."

Vratch was unimpressed. "Enough talk." He cracked his whip and shouted, "The rest is over! Now we march!"

Half a dozen hooded men drove the slaves onward, ever ready to punish a recalcitrant captive with their whips. They experienced little resistance, for the slaves, apart from Avok and Exa, were young women whose spirits had already been broken. Vratch and his men had stolen them from their villages, often by making deals with unscrupulous fellows, such as the keeper of the inn that Avok and Exa had the misfortune to patronize the previous night. The grimy markets of Tul-Thera would be their final destination.

The slavers sought examples of feminine beauty for their targets, which certainly included Exa. Yet hers was a different type of comeliness than the rest of the captives. Whereas the other girls were soft and curvy, Exa was more lissome. Her breasts might not have been as heavy as the other girls', but were still ample enough to attract any man's attention. Yet the greatest contrast was their personalities. No meek and submissive serving maid, the feisty brunette's inner flame burned hot. She felt no discomfiture or embarrassment from being forced to don scanty rags, only resentment at being told what to do.

Vratch directed the caravan far from the outskirts of any villages. Law enforcement was lax at best in these times, but the slaver saw no need to invite trouble. Better to take an indirect wilderness route rather than a well-traveled road to the designated point on the Tigtyg River. There, one could always find a Tul-Theran merchant eager to do business.

The group trekked through tall grasses that swayed ponderously in the cool breeze. Rather abruptly, the nature of the landscape changed, the soil becoming hard and stony rather than fertile. The rough terrain

ruined the sandals of the girl-slaves, causing many of them to whimper in pain.

“At least they let us keep our boots, eh, Exa?” remarked Avok. Exa simply turned her head, dashing her light golden brown hair in his face.

Avok grasped her wrist. “Enough of that! I told you before I’d find a way out of this. We just need the right opportunity to arise.”

Exa sighed. “Yes, you’re right. I know I should have faith in you, but—how long must we wait?”

Suddenly Vratch called for a halt.

“What is it?” asked his crony. “We’re almost at the river.”

“Look above and ahead,” said Vratch. “You see those shapes?”

“Yes. What are they?”

“I cannot say. Too large to be birds of prey. Birds of ill omen, I fear.”

“What are your orders?”

“We must continue. Hopefully they will avoid us.”

Vratch’s desires went unfulfilled, for the shapes sped unerringly on leathery wings toward the caravan. Sensing peril, Vratch set aside his whip and drew his double-headed axe. He commanded his men to do likewise.

Avok nudged his girl. “We might not have to wait much longer,” he whispered.

All the members of the caravan strained their eyes in the light of the bright ruby sun, curious as to what manner of creature they might encounter.

“Could they be Uzzic demons?” asked one of the slavers.

“Nay, they are likely beasts native to Nilztiria, such as pterodactyls,” offered another.

The speculations of the group proved incorrect. As the mysterious creatures drew closer, it became clear that they were husky goats, large as stallions, each adorned with a pair of bat-like wings. The riders of these monstrous steeds were no less strange: they appeared to be small, dwarfish men completely encased in mud or clay.

Vratch nearly panicked, but a leader’s duty required maintaining composure in front of his men. He briefly considered abandoning the slaves and fleeing, but discarded that idea. The beasts could easily hunt him down in this open land. Making a stand was his only option.

“To me, men!” he shouted. “Any cowards will be flayed alive!”

Avok struggled against his chains, eager to do battle. “Guards! One of you free me and arm me! I’ll deliver these beasts to their doom!”

The Cytheran’s offer went unnoticed, for combat had already begun. The winged goats swooped down and charged like bulls, goring the slavers with their monstrous horns. The hooded men who still stood retaliated, cleaving their cruelly-sharpened axe blades into the goats’ haunches. The stones were drenched by the blood of men and beasts alike.

One slaver drew his dagger and took several steps backward. He took aim at one of the mud-men, but before he could make a throw, a rampaging goat knocked him prone. The rider bade his steed turn around, and the slaver was trampled unto death.

The slaver’s dagger fell tantalizingly close to Avok and Exa. The barbarian lunged toward it, but the chains held him in check.

“Allow me,” said Exa. With feline gracefulness she slid her legs apart, one forward and the other behind her, and lowered herself to the ground. She caught the dagger beneath her heel and performed the acrobatic maneuver in reverse. As she arose the weapon was dragged back within Avok’s reach. He snatched it up and rapidly pried open the locks on his manacles.

“And now to make good on my promise to that bastard Vratch,” he said. As he turned his head, looking for his enemy in the mêlée, Exa grabbed his shoulder.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” she asked, dangling her shackles in front of his face.

“Oh, yes.” The Cytheran jammed the dagger into the keyhole. In his haste, he nearly broke the point of the blade, for he was quite eager to do battle.

Avok retrieved the axe from the fallen slaver’s body and ventured into the maelstrom of carnage. Amidst bloodletting blades and grunting beasts, he found the one he sought and issued challenge.

Vratch was taken aback. “What? You wish to settle this *now*?” he asked, parrying a blow from a club-wielding mud-man. “Fight for me, not against me, and I shall reward you greatly!”

“The only reward I desire is to see your head separated from your foul carcass!” countered Avok.

The slave master was clearly outmatched in this duel. Savage and ferocious he could be toward helpless prisoners and weak-willed

henchmen, but when paired against an unhindered fighting man of heroic skill and strength such as Avok, he stood no chance. The Cytheran's blade bit deep into Vrach's neck. It rose and fell thrice more, and the reward Avok strove for was gained.

The mud-man that had previously been engaged in combat with Vrach had drawn its steed aside, preferring to let the two men settle their own score. Now that that was resolved, the victor could be dealt with. It goaded its beast onward—which would be its undoing, for it had no foreknowledge of the barbarian's spectacular reflexes. With lightning-like celerity Avok dodged aside and grabbed the mud-man's leg as it passed. In one swift movement, the goat-rider was hurled to the ground. Contrary to Avok's expectations, it completely splattered upon impact. No organs or bones were contained within its frame. Its makeup had been all mud and no man.

Ignoring the brown filth which now begrimed his shins and boots, Avok grabbed the loose goat's reins. "Exa, where are you?" he shouted over the din of battle.

The girl sprang to her feet. Desirous of releasing the other slaves, she had been engaged in a fruitless search of the bodies of the slain for keys. "What is your plan?" she asked as she hurried toward him. "You don't intend to ride that thing, do you?"

Avok laughed heartily as he patted the winged goat. "Indeed I do! It should be the quickest method of removing ourselves from this scene. I don't care to be caught here once these earth-devils run out of slavers to fight—which should be momentarily."

Exa could see the wisdom in his words. Corpses of slavers littered the ground like waste from a butcher's shop. Many of the mud-men were now carrying off the shrieking slave girls and placing them on their mounts. By some occult means, they were able to manipulate the chains without need of keys.

The Cytheran leapt onto the back of his goat and gave Exa a hand up. "Now, goat, take to the skies!" To Exa's astonishment (and to a lesser degree, Avok's), the beast obeyed.

"Unbelievable!" she exclaimed over the beating of black wings. "Have you ever ridden a creature such as this before?"

"No, but I flew across a sea on the back of a demon once," Avok replied calmly as if it were an ordinary thing. "What's this? No, goat, don't take us to the river. I want to go in the opposite direction. Back,

back!" He grabbed the beast's horns and tried to twist its head as if it were a wheel on a ship, but it stubbornly refused to change course.

The other goats, laden with a bevy of abducted beauties, were now airborne and following the same sky-track as Avok. The wings of the aerial herd beat in synchrony, like the pulse of some unheard mystic rhythm. The terrain below rapidly grew more desolate until they reached the banks of the Tigtyg River. At that point the herd turned toward the north, following the opposite course of the lazily-flowing waterway. A small craft passed underneath. Perhaps it was manned by Tul-Therans, who were expecting to receive a delivery of fresh merchandise this day.

Exa, her arms encircling Avok's waist, said, "Do you have a plan?"

"Yes," he replied. "The goats will have to land eventually. When they do, I will assess the situation and do what is necessary for us to survive. Most likely, it will either involve escape or combat."

"What if that plan fails? What shall you do then?"

"Die."

Exa groaned her displeasure. "Horrible!"

"I agree. All the more reason to make sure the first plan succeeds."

The goats continued their northward flight. They passed through a less arid region, for the horizon was now dotted with grassy hillocks. After flying over a series of acclivities, the elevation increased to the point that their hooves were not far off the ground. A thought occurred to Avok: it would not be such a great risk now to leap from the steed's back into the river. Before he could take action, the goats beat their wings fervently, soaring higher in the air. It was almost as if they had discerned Avok's intention.

Steeper and steeper did the ground become; higher and higher did the winged beasts fly. The normally placid waters of the Tigtyg began to flow more rapidly. Exa leaned past Avok to look ahead, and beheld a waterfall emanating from a wide cleft in a rocky mount. The goats increased their speed and flew into the cleft. Exa, in spite of her misgivings regarding this bizarre journey, could not deny that the experience was breathtaking.

The walls on either side of the chasm were of sheer, black stone. For several leagues, the valley was quite deep, until once again the elevation increased. Eventually it leveled out, and they were no longer in a valley at all. The Tigtyg resumed its usual meandering pace.

Shortly thereafter a structure came into view, the first habitation of any kind that they had come near during this flight. On the far side of the river, shining splendidly in the sunlight, stood a tower of marble with several high windows near its top. The goats alighted on the crenellated roof.

“Get ready to run, girl,” said Avok.

A woman stood upon the roof, clearly awaiting the arrival of the winged goats. She was tall and lithe, with hair dark and long as a moonless winter’s night. The garb she wore was nearly as revealing as that of the slave girls’, but far from shabby. Sky-blue strips of silk delicately enwreathed her body, accenting her voluptuousness for maximum titillation. The rubies upon the slippers she wore sparkled with a brightness to match Nilztiria’s sun.

Accompanying the woman was a large bear with golden fur. The animal eyed the flying goats and the captives warily, almost suspiciously. It paced about in a nervous manner until the woman began to sensuously stroke its fur.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” said the woman with a sly grin on her elfin face. “My servants have done well, fetching what I requested.”

“Aye, and more than that, it seems,” said the bear. Avok and Exa were taken aback, for they were unaccustomed to hearing a bear speak with the voice of a man. “You asked for slaves, Krynthora. Why are these two not in chains?”

“Good question, Rexull,” said Krynthora. “Man, who are you? Why do you ride my winged pet? Is that woman your concubine?”

Avok answered before Exa could offer a rejoinder to that unflattering query. “We were captured by scoundrels who intended to sell us to Tul-Therans. When these monsters you call pets and servants attacked our enslavers, I fought my way out of the chaos. I caught this beast, intending to ride it to a less hostile locale, but the dumb brute wouldn’t follow my commands. Instead, it brought us to this monstrous menagerie. Now, woman, who are you, and why do you keep such strange company?”

“I am the sorceress Krynthora, and it would behoove you to speak with more tact,” she said haughtily. “Disrespect me and my pets again, and you will have to answer to my lover Rexull.”

Exa was astonished. “Your *lover*? The bear?”

“I was a man once,” said Rexull wistfully. “As an unintended consequence of one of Krynthora’s spells, I became what you see now.”

Avok dismounted from the goat, and Exa followed his lead. “My condolences,” said the Cytheran. “I do not care to stay here any longer. We will take our leave of you and your lover-boy, or rather your lover-beast.”

“Do not call me that!” growled Rexull, rising on his hind legs. “I was a man once!”

One of the slave girls found the courage to raise her voice. “Please let us go!”

“I will not,” declared Krynthora. “You see, I need your assistance in curing Rexull of his malady.”

“How do you expect us to do that?” asked Exa. “We know nothing of breaking curses.”

“No, you do not. That is why I will call on one who does—the demoness Heltorya. However, she will not appear without the requisite —”

Avok could see where this was going and made a mad dash across the rooftop. As Exa had been expecting him to make a move, she darted right by his side. They headed toward an ebony archway, which Avok presumed was an egress of some sort.

The sorceress was not unprepared for this turn of events. She uttered arcane words of power: “*Vla hekktoh ornos! Yemmos duisoona!*”

Avok’s mind and vision became clouded. Where was he? Why could he not move? He felt as if he had suddenly become entombed in a block of bizarrely-colored ice or buried entirely in quicksand composed of amethysts. Breathing became torturous. Mesmerizing wisps of emerald smoke swam before his eyes.

The barbarian forced his mind to claw its way out of the mystical disorder. He reminded himself that sorcery was unpredictable, not infallible. Enchantments could be broken.

Summoning great reserves of willpower, Avok forced his fingers to move. After that accomplishment, he clenched his hands into fists. One small success led to another. He tried to take a step forward, and suddenly the imprisoning ensorcellment vanished. Without even a cursory backward glance, he sprinted through the archway and down a curving staircase.

Krynmora laughed. "The fool did not realize his wanton wench is still under my spell." She clapped her hands twice. "Golems, take this woman and place her with the other sacrifices." Two of the small clay men lifted the paralyzed Exa, who had been frozen in mid-step, and carried her over to the girl-slaves.

"As for the barbarian," said Krynmora, "you must hunt him down, Rexull. I can't have him rampaging through my tower like a wild animal."

Rexull snarled.

"Forgive my choice of words," she said. "But still, he must be slain. Undoubtedly he will attempt to interfere with the ritual. Do not allow that to happen."

"For you, my love, I shall rend him limb from limb."

"Good. Once that matter is resolved, come to me in my chambers, where I will be meditating before the ritual. You can help me... clear my mind."

"Krynmora, we've been over this before. I prefer to wait until my true form is restored before resuming our romantic activities."

"We'll discuss that later. Now go! Bring me his head!" Rexull sped off with incredible velocity after his quarry.

The sorceress clapped her hands again. "Bring the captives to the sacrificial chamber," she ordered her golems. Mutely they obeyed.

Avok made it down two flights of stairs before he realized Exa did not accompany him. He spun around but then paused. If he returned to the rooftop, he would have to fight a bear with human intelligence... and a woman who possessed powerful heinous magicks... and winged goats. Clay golems, as well. The odds were not in his favor, he had to admit. It rankled the headstrong warrior to look for a strategy other than a relentless assault, but the situation necessitated otherwise.

An interruption to his thoughts occurred in the form of a whirlwind of fangs, fur and claws barreling down the staircase. Avok knew this was not the moment to make a stand. With a great bound he descended an entire flight of steps at once, then ran along the curve of the stairway. He passed one of the vast glassless windows of the tower, which suggested a plan to him.

Rexull, catching a glimpse of the Cytheran, charged toward him. Avok's headlong leap took him beyond the bear-man's sight, which spurred Rexull to even greater haste. In his state of frenzy, he continued his rapid descent, completely oblivious to Avok's true whereabouts...

Avok had lowered himself out the window and clung to the ledge by the fingertips of one hand. While waiting for the rampaging bear-man to pass, the tendons in his hand burned as if he grasped a torch by the wrong end. After he judged Rexull to be a safe distance away, he placed his axe on the sill and climbed back inside.

Now that the ruse had succeeded, Avok could more leisurely formulate a plan. Yet nothing came to him. He decided his best hope would be to explore the tower. If he discovered a reasonable hiding place, he could lie in wait until the hour of the ritual. Then, with Krynora unsuspecting, he could disrupt the infernal rites.

The Cytheran made his way down the stairs, his footfalls silent as a stalking cat. At the next landing an archway confronted him. Suspiciously he peered through it, wary of any signs of unknown danger.

An idea suddenly struck him. He could simply find an exit and leave the tower. That would mean abandoning Exa to a horrible death, true, but she was not his responsibility. Neither were the slave girls. He did not owe them anything.

Bah! Avok rebelled against these ideations and cursed them as cowardly and antiheroic. What manner of man would let innocent women be killed to satisfy the whims of a diabolical hell-witch? Not the sort Avok knew himself to be.

With strengthened resolve, he passed through the archway. Beyond, he found a hexagonal chamber. Across from him was a window whose width encompassed the entirety of the far wall. Gazing through it, Avok saw the languid river below. From this eyrie, it seemed a pleasing vista, albeit one incongruous with the diabolical deeds that were scheduled to be performed that night.

The other walls of the room were lined with shelves that were stacked with dusty tomes and scrolls. The shelves on two of the walls rose nearly to the ceiling, while those of the other two barely reached Avok's knees. A circular mirror nearly five feet in diameter hung above

each of the tiny bookcases. Runes and sigils adorned the silver frames of the mirrors.

Avok examined one and quickly became convinced that it was no mundane looking glass. Its surface shimmered and roiled. It was not clear at all to Avok if he was looking at a solid object or one made of liquid or even gas. He found it quite disturbing to view his reflection distorted in such a manner.

He looked over his shoulder at the mirror behind him. The image he saw was identical to the one in the first mirror. Odd that they did not multiply reflections, as two parallel mirrors were supposed to.

Warily he approached one. He wondered what would happen if he touched it. *I'd have to be mad to try with my bare hands*, he thought. He reached for a book on a nearby shelf and held the edge of it to the mirror. The book passed through without resistance, but the portion behind the mirror's surface was no longer visible.

Avok dropped the book, and it fell to the floor, seemingly unaffected in any way. "So it didn't get sucked in," he said. "But this is no time to solve mysteries. I have more immediate concerns. Yet, I am still curious..."

He allowed himself one final experiment. He grabbed another book from a shelf. "What do we have here? *Esoteric Musings* by Xaarxool the Necromancer. Well, muse on this!" He hurled it into the mirror. The book vanished into the glimmering aether of the mirror's surface. Suddenly, a light blow struck the back of Avok's head.

He whirled around, ready to sink his axe into whatever attacked him, yet he was still alone in the room. Looking down, he noticed a book on the floor that had not been there the moment before. He flipped it over and saw the title on the cover: *Esoteric Musings*.

It dawned on Avok what had occurred, and he laughed heartily. He casually tossed the volume by Xaarxool into the mirror behind him and stepped away. With his own eyes, he witnessed the tome pass through one mirror and continue its trajectory from the other. It was as if the two mirrors were opposite ends of a tunnel, albeit one that warped dimensional space and could be traversed instantaneously.

A wild idea irresistibly forced its way into Avok's mind. If it worked, he would spoil Krynthora's ritual in a way she would never expect—and never forget.

He cautiously removed one mirror from its hangings on the wall and placed it face up in the center of the room. He took the other mirror down as well and brought it closer to the open window. A quick glance was all he needed to determine that the tower was quite close to the bank of the river. He began to remove his boots when he discerned a growling noise.

He had been discovered! Rexull burst into the room. "There you are! It will please my lady greatly when I bring her your head."

"I suppose that's the only way you can please a lady these days, eh, beast?" mocked Avok.

Rexull roared and charged. With astonishingly quick reflexes, Avok kicked the mirror on the floor forward while simultaneously grabbing the other. The bear-man tumbled into the aperture that suddenly appeared beneath him. He passed through the second mirror, which Avok aimed out the window. Furry limbs flailing helplessly, Rexull plummeted two stories into the river. The Cytheran laughed with gusto.

Angrier than ever, the bear-man swam to the river's edge and pulled himself onto the bank. He rose to his hind legs and roared.

"Iljer take you, you son of a bitch!"

"If I'm a son of a bitch, what are you a son of?" answered Avok, whose laughter was now so uncontrollable it pained him to breathe.

Rexull refused to reply. The dripping wet bear-man stalked around the base of the tower, out of Avok's sight.

Now that the interruption had been dealt with, Avok could get back to work. Incidentally, Rexull's appearance had proved useful, for now Avok knew that living matter could be transported between the portals with no apparent detrimental effects.

The Cytheran, still holding one mirror in his hands, stepped out onto the ledge. He placed one arm through the wire on its rear used for hanging. He now wore the mirror on his back like a glimmering shield. He inhaled deeply, steeling himself for what he was about to do.

Avok semi-gracefully dove from the ledge into the river. He hit the water with a resounding splash. With a grin on his face, he surfaced and paddled toward the bank. Once there, he sought with his hands for a sturdy place to set the mirror beneath the waters. An outjutting rock just level with the surface made a perfect hook to hang the mirror from. After securely stationing the mirror, he ducked underwater, swam through it, and resurfaced in the hexagonal chamber.

“By the gods, the plan worked! So far, that is,” he said while wringing out his long mane of blond hair. “Now, to put an end to that sorceress’s foul machinations.”

Krynthora’s clay golems led the chained slave girls down the tower’s winding staircase. Exa, still incapacitated by the sorceress’s spell, had to be carried on the shoulders of one golem. Downward the group marched, each step bringing the girls closer to their doom. Several wept openly.

The march came to a halt at a pair of ironbound oaken doors. The foremost golem, merely a quarter of their height, pushed one open. Beyond the doorway was a long balcony overlooking a chamber of significant vastness. On either side of the balcony, a narrow staircase allowed access to the chamber. The primary feature of the room was a circular dais with silver and vermilion runes painted along its circumference. The slaves were forced down the stairs and onto the dais.

Exa began to twitch and convulse. Krynthora, aware that her magick was of a finite duration, had forethoughtfully instructed the golems how to act when this eventuality occurred. One golem struck a brutal blow with its earthen fist upon the skull of a slave girl, knocking her unconscious. The golem removed the invalid slave’s chains and used them to restrain Exa before she regained control of her faculties.

Once Exa’s awareness returned, she kicked and swore like a madwoman. The golems simply ignored her. Shortly thereafter her rage left her, and she sulkily lowered herself to the floor in contemplation of her fate.

The other girls looked to Exa for comfort, for they considered her their *de facto* leader. She tried her best to console them and soothe their worries, with little success. The entire experience was one she was unfamiliar with.

Eventually, there was no more left to say, and the girls became as silent as the mud golems. Time passed interminably.

With a massive creak, the doors above them swung open. The girls raised their heads and saw Krynthora leering like a gargoyle down at them from the balcony.

“I am ready to begin the ritual,” the sorceress said as she haughtily descended the stairs. “Golems! Bring the prisoners to the sacrificial

circle. But first, loose their chains. Iron will ruin the efficacy of the spell if it is present within the circle.”

A revitalizing flame of hope kindled within Exa’s heart. *Once these chains are off*, she thought, *it’s only a few quick bounds, and I can reach her*. “And then I’ll wring that bitch’s neck!” she unwittingly said out loud.

“What was that?” asked Krynthora. “Actually, I don’t care what you said. Probably just some brothel jargon.”

Exa fumed. A golem drew near, and the chains around her limbs dropped. Before she could act, her anticipated moment of glory was brutally cut short. The golem’s body elongated and twisted around her. It molded itself into a thick, solid ring, pinning her arms to her sides. Her jaw dropped in astonishment.

The sorceress gleefully chortled. “I’ve never seen anyone look so dumbfounded! Onto the dais with you. Your friends as well.”

The slave girls soon found themselves no longer enchained by mundane shackles, but by Krynthora’s sorcerous constructs. The gloppy substance of the golems pressing tight against their lithe bodies chilled them disconcertingly. Krynthora herded her victims onto the dais.

Before the ritual could begin, a loud stomping resonated from the grand hallway at the far end of the room. All heads turned and witnessed a soggy, angry bear trudging through the archway on dripping paws.

“Rexull, what happened to you?” queried the sorceress. “You’re making a mess.”

“Never mind that,” said Rexull. “That wily barbaric bastard is loose in our tower! The trickster laid a trap for me using your magic mirrors. I fell through one and landed in the river.”

Exa and the slave girls could not help but laugh.

Krynthora’s brow wrinkled. “Where do you suppose he is now? Perhaps he made use of the opportunity and escaped while, er, your back was turned.”

“I pray not!” bellowed Rexull. “I have a score to settle! If only he were in this chamber right now, I’d—”

“You’d what? Make a fool of yourself again?” came a deep, proud voice from the balcony.

“Avok!” exclaimed Exa.

“The one and only,” said the Cytheran. Above his head he held one of the mirrors, carefully keeping it parallel with the floor. “Whenever I show up to a party, I always make a *splash*.”

Avok slowly tilted the mirror forward. River water began to pour forth from it, the volume increasing as it rotated. When it became vertical, a torrent erupted, drenching all the occupants of the chamber and knocking them prone. Avok leisurely descended the steps, magic mirror still in hand. The women and Rexull could not gain their feet under the force of the aquatic eruption.

Avok, satisfied that his disruption of the ritual was as spectacular as he had imagined, returned the mirror to a horizontal position and placed it on the floor of the chamber. The room had not flooded completely, for the water was draining out through the hallway. However, the aquatic assault thoroughly melted the golems, leaving the slave girls and Exa free, yet splattered with mud.

Rexull was the first to recover. “Enough of your trickery! Are you a coward, or will you face me man to man?” he roared.

Avok drew the axe from his belt and replied, “That’s simply not possible. But I will face you man to once-a-man!”

The bear-man, too infuriated to make coherent speech, charged his insulter. Fearsome jaws snapped shut a hair’s breadth away from Avok’s arm. Had his reflexes been one iota slower, he likely would now be known as “Avok One-Hand.”

The time for taunts and mockery was past. This was now a contest that would be decided by battle tactics and physical prowess. Avok swung his axe downward, aiming for Rexull’s head, but a heavy paw batted his arm aside. Rexull rose on his hind legs and struck with a claw. Due to Avok’s lightning reflexes, he was only grazed, but four bleeding marks appeared on his chest.

The Cytheran took several steps backward. His opponent’s superior reach and size put him at a severe disadvantage. He would have to rely on his dexterity.

Rexull swung a claw again, but Avok agilely dodged away. Another attack by the beast-man, another swift evasion by the Cytheran. The battle continued in this manner for some time, until the overzealous Rexull attacked too recklessly, and received an axe wound in his paw as his reward. Rexull grunted and clutched the bleeding injury with his other paw.

At that moment, Krynmora's pained voice rang out. "Rexull, help me!"

Both combatants turned their heads to discover the cause of Krynmora's distress. Exa, now that the remnants of the mud golems merely clung to her body instead of restrained her, was enacting revenge upon her former captor, and the slave girls were all too glad to help. Limber bodies writhed in the slippery mess that was once the sorceress's servitors. Exa straddled Krynmora, madly throttling her. Incapable of enunciating the necessary syllables to invoke a magical spell, Krynmora was reduced to wildly and ineffectually thrashing out with her fists and feet at her many assailants. In the free-for-all, the attire of the women, thin and scanty to begin with, was ripped to shreds. Krynmora's plentiful bosom spilled from her silken mud-stained garment. She flung up a hand in retaliation, and, more due to luck than intention, succeeded in tearing off the meager cloth covering Exa's breasts. The pinkness of her nipples was immediately darkened by Krynmora's muddy hands, grasping for a hold.

Rexull stood transfixed, watching the spectacle in awe. Lusts were awakened within him, lusts that he had not been able to satisfy since his traumatic transformation. With tongue lolling from his jaws, he lowered himself to all fours in order to get a better view. His attention could not be driven from the shameless display of feminine charms, and that would be his downfall.

Avok was enjoying the brawl as much as any man would, but retained enough self-control to remember that moments ago he was in mortal combat with a dangerous adversary. He knew he must act before Rexull's brain began to function again. With a running start, he leapt upon the bear-man's back and forcefully drove his axe into Rexull's cranium. Brains were dashed upon the floor.

As Krynmora's only possible savior died, so did her hopes. She struggled against the mass of slave girls futilely for a moment, but her end was inevitable. The girls flipped her over onto her stomach. Exa locked her arms around the sorceress's neck and wrenched until it snapped.

The survivors of that unusual battle took a moment to catch their breaths. Panting, the girls lay or sat with their thoughts a mélange of joy, relief, amazement, and exhilaration. After the brief respite, Avok spoke.

“How filthy you girls are! You all need a bath to wash that mud off. Especially you, Exa.”

Exa glanced down at her sludge-covered chest. “I know why you want this mud gone, you lecher!” she said, crossing her arms over her breasts.

“A lecher, am I?” asked Avok. “Would a lecher do this?” He swept her up in his heavily-thewed arms to a chorus of gasps and giggles from the slave girls. Exa protested (but not too much) as he carried her to the magic mirror. “This ought to get you nice and clean,” he said and dropped her. She fell through the mirror and into the river with a great splash.

Exa’s head bobbed above the surface. “Well, you brute, now that you’ve had your fun, aren’t you going to help me out?”

“But of course,” said Avok, and reached a hand out to her. Too late did he suspect her mischievous intent. Exa grasped his forearm with both hands and yanked. Avok lost his balance and collapsed headfirst through the mirror.

Avok resurfaced, spitting water. “I should have known better than to have trusted you,” he said, and preemptively silenced her reply with a passionate kiss. Abruptly he broke it off and turned to the other girls. “Why not join us for a quick dip in the river? Come on!” He ducked beneath the water, pulling Exa with him, and swam out into the river. The former slaves, in celebration of their regained freedom, shed what little remained of their clothing and dove in.

D.M. Ritzlin is the editor and publisher of numerous sword-and-sorcery anthologies, including reprints of pulp fantasy authors such as Henry Kuttner, Manly Wade Wellman and Nictzin Dyalhis. For more information on all of his projects, visit dmrbooks.com.

Praying to Thasaidon

By TAIS TENG

No one prays to the Charnel God—but when a necromancer comes to collect on a family's debts, there may be nowhere and no one to turn to but a god of death!

The moment my father breathed his last, there came a peremptory knock on our door.

“It’s too soon!” my mother cried. “There’s a necromancer from Naat who can resurrect even...”

But the priests were already inside. They wore purple gowns and rather splendid silver masks in the shape of eyeless skulls. I instantly wanted one for myself.

They scooped my father up as if he had no weight, as if he was already a sere mummy, dried by centuries in the hot desert wind, with balsa wood bones.

“Where are you taking him?” I asked. I was too young to fear them, and I had seen more fearsome creatures stalking across the hills at sunset.

Their leader turned. I noticed that his eyes were bone-white behind the holes, with a red slash for a pupil.

“To the windowless temple. There Mordiggian will devour his body. As is His right.” His voice came in a rattle, as hoarse as my father when he whispered his final, confused words.

“Devour him?”

The priest nodded. “It is better than leaving him for the vultures as they do in Lad-Mah-Hod. Also, this way no necromancer can call him back to make him a slave.”

“His soul will fly away to the Many-Coloured Land, where the rivers run with sparkling wine and all trees are hung with honey-combs? The Holy Scrolls...”

“The Holy Scrolls tend to contradict each other. Perhaps not even the gods know? They are after all immortal, so they are probably as ignorant concerning the Hereafter as us.”

A very sweet smell wafted from beneath his robes, not unpleasing. I later learned that was the perfume of corruption, of things long dead. The most gorgeous orchids use it to attract blowflies, distrusting honey bees.

“Can I come along?” I asked.

“Sure. But no farther than the entrance. Take a step across the threshold, and your life is forfeit.”

Outside the ancient sun was a silver orb, and if you looked through a shard of night-glass you could see hundreds of sunspots dotting the surface. Beyond, in the indigo sky, a handful of fitful day stars twinkled.

I felt a sudden wave of sorrow: my father had taught me the names of the day stars, holding the night-glass in front of my face. I would never hear his voice again.

“You may weep,” the priest said. “Or shake your fist at the sky. Life was never meant to be fair. Especially not now, with the universe winding down and once glorious suns guttering out.”

We passed the temple of Ililot, her priestesses singing like larks and strewing rose petals across the gleaming black cobblestones. Moon sickles glowed on their brows.

Next came the Tower of Thasaidon, all black basalt, a blood-dripping claw on his prayer flags.

“A fearsome demon and not to be trusted,” the priest said. “You know him?”

“We have a statue in the prayer room. My father, he fled to Zul-Bha-Sair to escape His gaze.”

He set the corpse down, lifted the medallion from my father’s unbreathing breast.

“Yet he is wearing the Dark One’s token?”

I frowned, tried to remember the exact words of my father’s explanation. “It is like an inoculation, my dad said. If He sees His own sign, He may pass you by. Thinking, yes, thinking you are already one of His own.”

“Your father was a wise man. Here, take it. Don’t waste his foresight.”

The little claw felt ice cold against my bare skin and much heavier than such a small object should. Well, gold *is* heavy, and his body was no longer warm.

The temple lay across the market and we walked past the stalls of merchants. Customers scattered like alarmed fishes at the sight of our little procession. A foreign wine merchant ducked behind his man-high amphorae of ruby-red Pharadian wine.

It made me feel powerful, even if I wasn't a priest of the Charnel god and was here only at His priests' sufferance.

How great it would be to see the terror in the eyes of pedestrians, even soldiers crossing to the other side of the street at your approach!

"That is one of the nicer parts of our jobs," the priest said. "No, I'm not reading your mind, but I know little boys, having been a little boy once myself."

"Do ghouls have children? I thought they hatched from desert stones that were struck by lightning?"

The priest laughed. "Such stories! As absurd as the tale that human babies grow from cauliflowers. No, we ghouls are all male. We lie with a female corpse that is only a hundred heartbeats dead and put our icy seed in her womb. Three hours later a little boy claws his way out and eats what is left of his mother as his first meal."

"I see."

Nature was endlessly fascinating.

We strolled past the cattle market with the three-headed dromedaries and the pens with hissing basilisks, their eyes covered with leather blindfolds, the birdcages with dodos and flightless ravens.

It ended all too soon at a little windowless temple, flanked by dusty cedars.

"We're here," the priest said. "You may kiss him for the last time before we take him inside."

"Meh, he is dead. My father isn't here anymore. He is walking down the wine river, breaking off a honeycomb."

"Probably. Yes, certainly."

I fairly danced home. It had been one of the best mornings of my life, and why waste tears on my father? He was in a better place; the priest had said so. I had only tasted honey once and wasn't allowed even a sip of wine.

The rest of the day didn't go as well.

Lesh il-Ghibran, the very necromancer my mother had wanted to resurrect my father, was standing in front of our little house. Three enforcers loomed next to him, their barbed whips ready.

"And there is the lost lamb!" the necromancer crowed.

I ran, but they were professionals. A whip snaked across the street and wound around my ankles.

A tug and I fell down. The barbs had been retracted, making the whip smooth as a cobra's hide. But I knew they would bite deep in my flesh the moment I tried to flee.

The necromancer looked down at me. "Your father had debts. I bought them all and went to your mother." He shook his head. "She dug up her crock of gold from below the hearth place but found only coppers inside. The debts needed silver and pieces of gold."

"It isn't fair!" my mother cried. "Give me a week! Give me a day! My aunts will lend us money!"

"I can't wait a week. Not even a day, because I am leaving right now. I have all the slaves I wanted, and there is a caravan going down to Oroth." He smirked, nudged me with a clad foot. "Stand up, boy. You and your mother are my slaves now. Just like your sister. You'll work for me until you fall down dead." A pause. "And then you'll work some more until the flesh rots from your bones."

Il-Ghibran next wound a thin iron band around our necks.

"I don't need shackles, my dear lady. Look closely at your new keepsake, children: it resembles a snake, and that is because it *is* a snake. It comes alive the moment you try to flee. It will strangle you, and after you are dead, you'll be more obedient." He tugged his goatee. "Now, normally, I would have a slave killed the moment I bought her. Unhappily, while a dead woman has the strength of ten, they tend to run down after a year. Better to keep you fresh until I

arrive in glorious Naat.” He clapped his hands. “Now walk briskly. To the caravansary. No doubt you know the way.”

We walked past the Park of the Weeping Statues, along the Liliborne Esplanade, the pool with sleeping carps. And then there was the temple of the goddess. I looked imploringly at the smiling priestesses, lifted my hand, and cried: “Help us, in the...” But before I could utter Her name and catch the attention of the goddess, the iron snake contracted and cut off my breath. Only a croak emerged.

We were already at the gate of the caravansary when I heard a shout.

“What in the name of the Seven Broken Stars is going on here?” Keresh, the paramour of my sister Lishien halted in front of us. “A street-boy told me I could find you here. Where are you taking them? Who are you?”

The necromancer smiled. “I bought their debts and they couldn’t pay, my dear boy. So they are my slaves now.”

Now Keresh was one of the better pickpockets and a good street-fighter, too. But thinking twice before he acted wasn’t in his character. He pulled a curved knife from the leviathan bone sheath.

“That can’t be right! I’ll call the kadi. The king! He’ll be the judge!”

The necromancer pointed to the three enforcers. “Don’t bother. They are the law.”

“They are just hirelings! Mercenaries.”

“No!” Lishien cried. “He is a wizard. You can’t...”

Keresh jumped and immediately crashed face forwards on the cobblestones. The tip of a throwing knife emerged from the back of his neck.

The necromancer turned to the enforcers. “He pulled his knife first. It was self-defense. You are my witnesses.”

“Such is the case,” the officer replied.

The necromancer leaned against a palm tree, waiting until Keresh’s blood no longer gushed from his throat. When the eyes

turned up and only the white showed, he kneeled next to Keresh's corpse.

"Waste not, want not," he muttered and raised his arms. Blue fire crackled and jumped from his fingertips into Keresh's nostrils. "Rise, my, boy. Rise and walk with us."

Keresh shuddered and sat up. He pulled the knife from his throat and offered it to the necromancer.

"A fast learner," the necromancer nodded. "I like that."

With Lishien hysterically weeping, we walked into the caravansary. She tried to take the arm of her lover but he pushed her away. His steps didn't even falter.

Keresh had been deeply in love with my sister, unable to keep his eyes off her, always touching and bringing her freshly stolen ribbons and sweetmeats.

Right then and there, I decided that becoming undead wasn't an option. My corpse belonged to Mordiggian or the funeral vultures. Never to il-Ghibran.

I would have to kill him and kill him soon.

Which might be a problem. When we crossed the bridge across the carp pool, I had seen us all reflected in the still water. Mother and Lishien, me and the enforcers, but the necromancer hadn't cast a reflection. He must be one of the walking dead himself.

The slaves sat in the inner court of the caravansary, under the open sky. The stars crept in, streaming out across the sky. Half an hour later the full moon rose from behind the serrated varan-back-style roofs. I squinted but saw only featureless smudges.

Last year my father had handed me an ancient spyglass, and suddenly that little piece of dull pewter had become a whole map.

I had seen dried sea bottoms then, the moles of ancient ports. Mountains meandered across the disk, and there—the thin threads of highways? I had always been good with arithmetic: to be visible they must be tens of miles wide.

"We once lived there," he had said. "We had sky chariots that rode all the way to the wandering stars, but that is a long time ago. The

rise and fall of a thousand empires ago.”

Lishien sat down next to me, and touched my wrist. “My Keresh is gone. It is horrible that his corpse still walks. We have to kill him. Kill him truly to set his soul free.” She nodded.

“Kill Keresh?”

“My love and that man, both.” She showed me the wizard’s throwing knife. “I rolled him. Keresh taught me.”

“It isn’t easy to kill the dead,” I said.

My sister is a lot smarter than I, and she immediately caught on. “The dead? He is a corpse, too?” She frowned. “I heard about that. Some necromancers can soul-jump into a freshly killed corpse. Keep it going for a year.”

“He looks kind of local,” I said. “Red hair and a copper skin. I mean, in the tales, the necromancers are always thin and pale, with sunken eyes. Like the corpses they command.”

She frowned. “You mean this isn’t his first stolen corpse? But why didn’t he get a better one? You saw him dragging his left foot, and he is blind in one eye.” She stiffened. “He set it all up, the bastard! A street boy told me, Keresh said. Now Keresh lived on the other side of the town. Il-Ghibran needed a new body, a strong one. And you can’t go around just killing people here. Only in self-defense.”

“Wait, wait. He sent the street-boy? To tell Keresh where he was taking you?”

“Evidently.” She sighed. “Now I haven’t the slightest idea how to proceed.”

“Ask a god. Prayer always helps.” It suddenly seemed crystal clear. “He cheated Mordiggian. There are two corpses walking around in the light of day. They should belong to the Charnel god.”

Nobody prays to the Charnel god, we soon realized. There are no psalms, no true names to summon him. The only sacrifice that counts is a cooling corpse. Mordiggian is a function, like the funeral vultures or the flame that consumes a bier, not a power.

The moon stood high in the sky, then started to dip, and the few spells Lishien and I knew sputtered out without the slightest response.

“Father, he said it was fake,” Lishien said. “The blood offerings to Thasaïdon and the statue were just to make Him think we were members of His temple, worshipers. But perhaps it worked? Perhaps He will listen to us now? A pity we don’t have the statue. I don’t even rightly know how to spell his name in his own script.”

“I wear father’s amulet,” I said. “The priest gave it to me. Called Father a wise man.”

“Give it to me!” My sister’s eyes blazed. “We don’t need His true name or the right spell. This will make him notice us.” She jabbed the golden claw deep in the base of her thumb, then grabbed my hand and did the same.

Neither of us cried out. This wasn’t the time and place to be squeamish.

“Perhaps another slash?” she asked, raising the claw again but then He simply was there.

It felt horribly permanent, as if Thasaïdon had been there all along, had been there our whole life and only now manifested.

The god was a horned warrior and monstrosly ancient. He must have stridden across long sunken continents when the sun was still yellow and the moon green. This was a warrior who had worn his armor so long that he had *become* his armor, and the nail-studded mace an integral part of his arm now.

“We have to formulate our wish perfectly,” Lishien said. “All gods are tricksters. We can’t ask Him to kill il-Ghibran because he is already dead. And killing him isn’t enough anyway. He took my love and I want revenge. I want him to suffer.”

“Ah, revenge.” The voice was as shudderingly wrong as taking a bite from a rotten peach. “Taking a dozen molars for every broken tooth. Chop off all your enemy’s fingers and toes for a single broken fingernail. I like that.”

“Yes, revenge,” Lishien said. “What is your price?”

A laugh that sounded as the wind across desolate crags, as the mindless caw of a crow circling a slaughter-field. “No price. You’re my beloved child, pure in your worship.”

“What should we do?” Lishien said.

“Well, I feel him gathering his powers. He is concentrating his soul, readying his spell. The hour before dawn, when the sky turns gray as

slate and hopeless, that is the right moment for a death spell. He'll discard his own body then, take your lover's like another man dons his armor."

His shape melted away in the sky, but I knew He was still there. That I would feel his gaze for the rest of my life.

Light leaked into the sky, pushed all but the brightest stars away. My ears buzzed with sleeplessness. The necromancer stepped from the door of the guestroom, knelt next to Keresh's unbreathing body.

"Good," the necromancer said. "A sturdy boy, vigorous and lusty. Don't worry: I'll make your girlfriend cry out in joy."

I felt Lishien stiffen next to me, but she didn't utter a sound. I could feel her hate radiating from her soul, an ice-cold flame.

The transfer spell took several minutes: it clearly was much more complicated than just raising the dead.

"And there we are," the sorcerer said and crumpled, his corpse now truly dead.

Keresh stirred, sat up, and instantly fell down. He tried to cry out but came no farther than a bubbling cry.

Lishien had been quite thorough. Using Keresh's knife, she had carefully cut his Achilles tendons, severed his tongue, and sawed into the wrists until the hands were only connected with a thin flap of skin.

The necromancer flapped around like a stepped-upon cockroach.

"And now we bury him!" She laughed and it sounded joyous and more than a little bit mad. "He should remain conscious for at least a year while the worms feast on his flesh."

I could understand why Thasaidon had liked my sister and hadn't asked a price. She had already paid it in full.

Tais Teng is a Dutch sf writer and illustrator. To date Teng has sold 41 stories in the English language and two children's books. Phaedra: Alastor 824, set in the universe of Jack Vance, was published by Spatterlight Press. More: taisteng.atspace.com, @taisteng



Something moved across my peripheral vision. For the instant my eyes caught it, I saw that it was big, man-sized at least.

I belatedly realized that the figure, whatever it was, seemed to be loping along on four legs. The injured cat in my arms hissed and yowled again, as if in sudden fear.

Something crunched with a heavy tread on the loose dirt behind me, and the air filled with the roar of a hungry cougar. You hear that blood-curdling cry once in a movie or at the zoo, and it stays with you for the rest of your life.

The wildly thrashing cat slipped out of my grasp when I spun around. I didn't look down to pick it back up. That sound I heard, the thing that stood before me poised to pounce, was not a mountain lion.

I told you I couldn't remember everything that happened in the fight, but I can paint you a picture of this thing and not leave out a single detail, from the sickly yellow color of the saliva that dripped from its bear-trap mouth to the mottled, grey folds of its wrinkled skin. Its whiskered, blunt-snouted skull towered more than a foot above my head. The thing stood up on two legs, though the legs were jointed in the wrong direction for a man, like the hind paws of a quadruped. The creature was mostly hairless with scattered patches of matted fur, like it had mange. Maybe it resembled a Sphinx cat, but only if Sphinx were seven feet tall with the jaws of a jaguar and long, human fingers. Let's call a spade a spade and get it out of the way: I was staring down a werecat.

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Adeste, Fideles

By G. SCOTT HUGGINS

Long ago, the “Last Fleet” was sent to find a new world for Earth’s orphaned children! That expedition to the fringes of space had been thought lost... until now!

Chhoxa stood in the wreckage of the launch bay, silhouetted in the starlight streaming through the *Varangian’s* shattered armor, fur flattened by his pressure field. Still clinging to the ladder of their surveyor-scout with all four of her hands, Marta trembled.

They had found it: a real ship of the Last Fleet. And not just any ship. *The flagship.*

Emergency lights shone on ancient English lettering. The cavernous fighter bay was ringed with pressure hatches leading away to every station in the ship. There! She shone her hand light on one and toggled her com.

“The bridge,” she said. “This way.” Magnets deactivated, she pushed off amid wreckage of bulkheads and broken fighter craft. Chhoxa followed her, down corridors scoured by decompression, following the heads-up display of her implant-lenses, until they stood before the bridge doors.

“Odd,” said Chhoxa, looking at his hacktool.

“What?”

“Sealed. But no code. Watch.”

The doors unlocked at a command, and they pushed into the bridge. Marta sighed.

USS Varangian, the same bridge from the histories, where Admiral Anasizawi had stood when he had promised humanity that his Last Fleet would return when it found a new home.

And it was empty. Where had they gone?

Chhoxa’s curse hissed in her earplants.

“What?”

“No computer function.”

“Impossible. Nothing could wipe the entire memory.”

“Look.” Chhoxa pointed.

English glowed on the bridge screens: SYSTEM IMMOLATION. Marta mentally translated the strange phrase into her native Klaiyesh.

“They destroyed it,” she whispered back. “Their own AI. And it let them.”

No ship can function without AI. What happened? Did the Silent Dancers catch them? The Dancers don't leave wreckage. The Dancers smashed the Earth into asteroids and blew its ships to atoms.

“What found them?” Tears welled in her eyes. For generations humans had waited for the Fleet... and she and Chhoxa had found it—had dug that ancient signal out of the radio storm of this white-hot star. The flagship, beyond all hope—and empty of either life or hope.

“Better question: what did they find?” asked Chhoxa. He paused, taking one of her lower hands. “Come. Even wrecked, she is beyond price. Do not be sad, little human. Come.”

Marta tried to smile. He was right. They were rich.

But where are my people? What killed them?

Chhoxa stiffened. “Power,” he whispered.

Marta turned. “Where?”

“Medical.” He pointed at a board of mechanical repeater lights. All dark but one.

“Let's go.” Leaving the bridge, they ghosted down corridors as dark and silent, seeking the source of the great ship's power.

The sickbay was as dark as the rest of the ship, except for a single red light glowing on one man-sized cylinder of chrome steel. It was marked with red stripes and a single sliding door.

“A burn chamber,” she whispered. “Oh, gods.” Her companion hissed and stared at her.

“Chhoxa,” she said, mouth dry. “Pressurize the room.”

His mouth gaped open. “But, a burn chamber...” he protested.

Marta looked at the ominous surface of the metal and felt her guts contract.

The burn chambers were the last truly Terran invention of the Final War. Stasis capsules which locked their contents out of the universe. Outside time, outside space. Their first use had been to preserve life in the most desperate cases, and bad burns had been the most common injury in space battles. So they were called burn chambers, but that was only the beginning of their possibilities.

Burn chambers could contain anything that could fit through their doors. You couldn't know what a burn chamber contained until you opened it, but by then, it might be too late. This burn chamber was the last piece of live equipment on board the flagship of the Last Fleet.

Anything might be inside. A bomb, a booby trap, a survivor infected with an incurable plague picked up on a strange planet. A burn chamber could even contain a nuclear bomb *that had already been set off*, as the Terrans had demonstrated when Europa Base fell to the Silent Dancers. When the Dancers had opened that chamber, Jupiter had gained a ring, and the Dancers had lost a fleet.

Might the dying crew of the Varangian have left this burn chamber holding a similar trap? Marta wondered.

Or might it hold the only surviving member of the *Varangian's* crew, holding the secrets of the ship in his or her dying brain? Marta swallowed. The answer to the question that had obsessed her people for centuries might be inside: *What happened to the Fleet?*

There was no need for Marta and Chhoxa to take the risk. The hulk of the *Varangian* was enough to make them rich, if they were content to scavenge it the rest of their lives. If they could finance the effort to lift it out of the star's gravity well, it would make them famous as well. But then, someone would open the Burn Chamber. *And they would not be Terran. Might not be human.*

All Marta would have to do to be guaranteed riches beyond dreams was... not to care about her people. Her desperate, dying people. Who might be beyond saving, no matter what the Chamber contained.

If she opened it, it could kill them both.

To calm herself, Marta prepared her instruments. She aimed her multispectral scanner at the chamber. Its screen was blank, as she knew it would be. Nothing could get through a burn chamber, not

even gravitons. There could be a naked singularity inside, and even its mass wouldn't register. *This ship's AI let them murder it, rather than risk revealing the contents of the chamber.* The glowing words of the bridge screens burned in her mind. Terran Fleet AI was self-aware, easily capable of disobeying a command to self-erase. *It agreed to die to protect this chamber. Surely it is more than a trap.*

She checked that her pressure field was at maximum three times even though she knew it was by the way it slowed her movements.

"We're opening it," she said, breathing heavily. Chhoxa stiffened with anxiety. Then, slowly and deliberately, he nodded. He knew what this meant to her, and she loved him for it.

"Get ready." Marta tensed. Some burn chambers were locked, requiring complex codes to open. This one had a simple switch. She pushed forward and flipped it, then scuttled back, feet and handfeet planted on the deck.

The red light winked out, and the chamber's door slid aside. It wasn't a bomb.

A white-haired, wrinkled brown Terran, bruised but unbloodied, staggered out.

"Stop!" Marta ordered. He didn't look dangerous, but he went for his sidearm anyway. Chhoxa fired a needlebeam past his ear. "I said stop!"

The man straightened, and Marta stared at him. He stared back. Obviously, he wasn't terminally injured. He looked just like Terrans in the stories, and in histories. He wore the uniform of the Fleet. She even recognized the commander's insignia, glowing on his shoulder, just as she had been taught. His hands were raised, though one of them held his gun. It was an antique: wire-guided plasma beamer.

"Who the hell are you?" he said. "Where's...?" Then his face fell. "Oh... damn."

Of course. For him, entering the tube had been only seconds ago. Inside, quite literally no time at all had passed.

When he spoke, it was in the Hyzzak trade-language. "Who are you?"

"I am Marta Krovikian," she replied in the ancient English she had been taught. This is Chhoxa. We're... prospectors." Her voice broke. "And we've found you."

“You speak English?” His gun wavered. “Subcommander Medical, Akinsheye Stancer, Free Earthforce.” His face hardened. “You’ve found us? Why were *you* looking?”

“Why, for the Fleet,” Marta stammered, her heart hammering furiously. “You... the Admiral promised... to return for us. And you have.”

“How do you know that promise?” Stancer asked, his hand tightening on his pistol.

She began to say that every human knew the Admiral’s message, broadcast to the refugee ships, as he had led Earth’s Last Fleet into jumpspace. But Stancer spoke first: “What did you find?” he whispered, “Who’s left, besides me?”

“You’re all we’ve found,” she said. “The only ship. What happened? The Dancers?”

“No,” he said. “Our hyperdrive failed on jump.”

The hyperdrive *failed*? Impossible. No ship had *ever* survived a hyperdrive failure. But then, no ship had ever been built as big as the *Varangian*. The people of Earth had been so desperate in the last year of the war, that they were willing to risk anything to try to stop the Silent Dance that swept inexorably toward them. Built things no sane race would have tried. Only one *Varangian*-class had been built, and she was leading a hopeless counterattack in the Procyon system when Earth finally fell.

“Where were you going?”

“We were coming back. We’d kept the promise. We never thought we would be able to, but we did.” Stancer’s eyes glazed. “The Admiral only wanted to give the refugees hope. And then he led us straight through Dancer space.”

Marta gasped sharply. *But that was suicide.*

Stancer continued. “He thought we could hurt them, at least. Buy our people time to get away. They didn’t expect that. *And we got through.* After forty years, we got clear of their space. And then we found it: our world. But by then we were so badly hurt, we were just limping back. After the jump failure, the Admiral was trapped on the bridge. He ordered me into the Burn Chamber, to wait for our people to find us.”

Marta swayed in her magnetic boots, near to fainting. Beyond all hope...

"You found us... a homeworld?"

His eyes narrowed. "For us, not you! How do you know of us?"

"All humans know of you," she said.

"You're no human," snorted Stancer. "Look at yourself; there's mirrors all around. A Hrredin looks more Terran than you."

Marta rose and stood before him, two meters tall upon her two true feet. They, like her handfeet and hands, were all opposably-thumbed. She brushed her short hair away from her face with one purple hand.

"We've changed considerably since you left us."

"Changed?"

"We had to. We gengineered ourselves. To adapt to the worlds, the peoples that sheltered us. The Hrredin, the Hive." She gestured to Chhoxa. "The Kieewo. I swear by any oath you demand, I am human. Test me." He *had* to believe her.

"How could I test you? You speak English; you might know anything about us. Prospectors indeed. No wonder you prepared: even dead, this ship is a prize. Take it, then. Salvage right. But the homeworld is ours. I'm not giving it to any alien."

"No one is asking you to. Come with us. I'll prove it."

She searched his face and recognized the look on it: the same look that had been on hers when she cracked the burn chamber. He had no way to tell what was inside her, and he was afraid.

"Come with you?" He backed away. "Where you could cut me open, crack the logs from my brainware? With the ship's AI gone, my memory chips are the only way back there. Oh, no. You found no bodies, no other ships. Then maybe I'm not all that's left. Maybe another ship survived and is returning."

She paled. "This ship is a wreck; there are no other ships. If there had been, they'd have returned, long ago. And why would we trick you? Chhoxa could have shot you the moment you stepped out of the chamber."

"And he might have hit the brainware you need. Fried it forever. No." His face closed. "I can't risk you taking our world. Humanity will have to wait a little longer."

Slowly, he pointed the gun at his own head.

Marta's mouth went dry. No, not after she'd taken this much risk. She should have waited, let it be someone else's decision, *anyone* else's.

"We've waited centuries!" she cried. "Don't you understand? There are no Terrans left: only humans, like me. And with every generation, there are fewer of us. We're minorities everywhere, losing the last of our humanity. The Fleetday celebration every year is the only thing holding us together. *You* are the only thing! And it's just a ceremony: no one believes you're really coming! I didn't... until," she gulped. "Until today. Until I found this ship. Found you."

The gun wavered. "How many centuries?"

"Five. The five-hundredth when I was a child. In midwinter, we gathered, exchanged gifts. Sang songs. Of Earth. And the Last Fleet."

Tears shone in his eyes. "You sing songs? Of us?"

She nodded. "They're old. They're..." She swallowed. Inhaled. Sang:

"O Come, all ye Earthmen, hopeful and triumphant

"O Come, see the Fleet return, the promise fulfilled.

"Come and behold them: hear their skyward thunder.

"O come aboard and homeward. O come aboard and homeward. O come aboard and homeward. Earth is reborn!"

"I know that tune," he whispered and lowered his gun. Holstered it. "An alien might know our speech. Might even know our songs. But only a human could write that. Or know to sing it." He touched her cheek. "Girl. I will lead you home."

Home. Marta's heart lifted. She, and all her people, would have a home.

They left the ship, Humans together.

G. Scott Huggins is an author of fantasy, science fiction, poetry, theology, history, and more. He wants to be a hybrid of G.K. Chesterton and Terry Pratchett when he counteracts the effects of having grown up. His website is gscotthuggins.com.

Return of the Dark Brotherhood

By ADRIAN COLE

Aruul Voruum nears completion of his witchfinder training... but the remnants of Daras Vorta's cult have worked their tendrils into the heart of Mars's government!

A hundred years have passed since the fall of the Zurjahn Empire, a vast, decadent confederation of planets that had encompassed the entire Solar System, ruled by the Dream Lords, humans with superhuman gifts and mental powers that had enforced rigid control. They had administered their sprawling empire from the largest of the planets, Zurjah, re-writing history and creating a new destiny for Mankind, based on what they considered to be justifiable deceit and untruth, enabling them to maintain peace and order. Galad Sarian, son of a Dream Lord, rebelled and was sent to the prison planet, Ur, which had been the original homeworld, Earth. There, in a bloody and barbarous revolution, he had brought down its tyrannical ruler, Daras Vorta, Warden of Ur, whose own dark ambitions had led him into a blasphemous union with evil powers and the nightmare god, Shaitan.

The fall of the Dream Lords led to the collapse of the Empire, and Man slowly migrated back to Earth, gradually quitting the worlds and technology it had used for so long. Slowly the planets became as they had once been, Man's footprints were erased, and the cities and space centers returned to dust, swept away by the remorseless reinstatement of alien environments.

Now, other than Earth, only one planet yet retains a human colony—Gargan, formerly known as Mars. Closest to Earth, it supports a smaller, shrinking population, split between the ailing space depots, the miners, and a few secretive military training centers.

Even now, there are traces of the old nightmare empire of Daras Vorta and his acolytes. In the city of Annakor, a rebellion has been crushed, aided by the two aspiring witchfinders, Arrul Voruum and

the girl, Kaari, who have returned to the principal Garganian city of Melkor to complete their training.^[2]

Komis Ladrac, former Deputy Governor of the small Garganian city of Annakor, lay on his narrow bed, eyes open in the moonlight. The twin moons were high in the heavens, their light seeming to gleam more brilliantly than usual through the window, spilling on to the bed and its occupant. Ladrac's mind was unsettled, damaged in the recent conflict, a terrible battle between the rebels of Rannas Kavannian and the defenders of the city. It had ended in a bloody slaughter, with the rebellion crushed in a strange outburst of powers—some said supernatural, forbidden—which Kavannian, the corrupt Commander of the garrison, had sought to master in his quest for advancement.

Ladrac remembered nothing of it. Since those bleak events, he had been in a dream, another realm, able to do little other than perform basic bodily functions. The city's Governor, Hors Tannis, had relieved Ladrac of his duties and housed him in these private quarters, the better to aid the man's recovery, though few of those who knew Ladrac held out much hope of that.

Slowly unfolding his limbs and easing himself from the bed, Ladrac stood up, his lined face turned to the moonlight. He was a man of forty years, but the battle had aged him pitilessly: his eyes were sunken, his mouth tugged down, his lips thin, withered, and his hair was white and straggling. He reached out a bony arm, the hand a claw, as if he could grasp a handful of the light.

There was a voice, a sibilant sound, the same that had recently been seeping into his twisted dreams and waking him. Its words were vague, but tonight they imbued Ladrac with a compulsion to step to the window. Beyond it was a terrace, high above sleeping Annakor, a flat area surrounded by a low wall on which Ladrac sometimes sat in the daylight, gazing out at the clustered buildings, man-made and always alien to the Garganian terrain. Ladrac paused briefly, then heard the seductive voice again. Its gentle instruction, to step over the low base of the window and out into the night, seemed the most natural request.

Outside, the night air was absolutely still. From up here, Ladrac could see the surrounding hills in the distance, shadows on the skyline, their upper reaches daubed in the twin-orbed moonlight. The night sky was empty. Near to this tower, another rose, twice its height, though the upper section was damaged, a ruin. From its former heights, Rannas Kavannian had hurled his terrible powers, only to be foiled, the tower almost blown apart by the uncontrolled sorcery.

Ladrac gazed up at the broken tower. It was from there the voice spoke, drifting down like a cool breeze. He stood at the wall, a doll imbued with half life, waiting. A shadow drifted across the chasm between the towers, a great bat-like thing that swirled and coalesced at the center of Ladrac's flat area. He turned to it as it dropped like a fallen blanket on to the stone, absorbed by it until it seemed no more than a widening pool of darkness.

Something extended from the darkness, a limb, contorted and elongated, its mock hand opening, offering itself to Ladrac. He was powerless to do other than step forward, though there were tears now on his sunken cheeks. He put out his own hand, the fingers reaching, reaching until they intertwined with the shadow hand. It gripped him tightly, as solid as reality, cold as those twin moons. And inexorably it pulled him forward until his feet stood at the outer rim of the black stain.

Something deep inside Ladrac made a last effort to resist, but there was no hope of that now. He was jerked forward, his feet touching down inside the pool of night, stepping into its heart. There he sagged to his knees and bent his head.

"Komis Ladrac," said the voice, as clear as a bell in the vacuum of night. "Your suffering will soon be over. Relax and let the balm of oblivion soothe you. No more wild dreams, no more terrors to beset you. Go into the deeps and be eternally content."

Only for the briefest moment did Ladrac recognize the voice, the disguised threat of violence. But Rannas Kavannian masked his presence too well. It was too late for Ladrac to counteract, and in moments he was sinking down into the darkness, his damaged mind absorbed by it, overwhelmed and snuffed out like a candle. His

huddled body, the flesh and bones that had housed him, remained, like a discarded heap in the center of the tower.

Gradually the pool of darkness drew inward, infusing the body, as though with fresh blood, until none of the shadow remained. The body shook several times, then lurched to its feet. It lifted back its head, the eyes filling with moonlight that now seemed to empower them, giving new life to the body. It was not Ladrac who gazed around him, a twisted smile on those thin lips.

Rannas Kavannian laughed softly. He would enjoy his return, no matter that this body was weak. Ironically, it suited him.

When dawn came, the door to Ladrac's chamber opened, and two men entered, one holding a tray on which a simple repast had been prepared. They found, to their surprise, that Ladrac was sitting up, the expression on his face far more alert than they were accustomed to seeing.

"Sir, you seem well," said the first of the men.

Ladrac scratched his thinning hair. "Yes, I'm still a little tired, Selaster, but I do feel more awake than usual. And hungry! Bring me that breakfast."

Selaster smiled, clearly delighted to see the change in the former Deputy Governor. "Shall we prepare a bath for you, and some new clothes?"

"Indeed!" said Ladrac, with a smile. Behind that facade, Rannas Kavannian warned himself to be gradual, to effect Ladrac's apparent recovery carefully, naturally. There was much to do, but patience would have to dictate his movements.

Hors Tannis, Governor of Annakor, rose from the ornately carved chair and crossed the room, a genuine smile on his face. He clasped the hand of the man before him, Komis Ladrac, who returned his grip weakly, though no less enthusiastically.

"Komis!" said the Governor. "They tell me you are more like your old self. How are you feeling?" He was a short, stocky man of middle age, and his voice was soft, at times anxious.

"A little groggy," said Ladrac. "I don't remember a great deal. As though I have been lost in dreams. Unpleasant ones."

“No need to dwell on that,” said the Governor, indicating a chair. He could see that his colleague was not as sharply dressed as had previously been his way, a military man who had always borne himself with the precision he expected in the men he commanded. Here he seemed tired, his clothes almost disheveled.

“Have the physicians seen you?”

Ladrac nodded. “Oh, yes. There were tests. They seemed to think I just need a little time to recover fully.”

“Excellent.” The Governor had read the reports. Ladrac would never fully recover, that much was clear. His days of military service were over. He could either retire altogether or take an undemanding clerical role. Hors Tannis said as much, gently.

Again Ladrac nodded. “Yes. That would be fine. Perhaps not at once.”

“Not at all. Rest and recuperation. You have no family here in Annakor,” Tannis went on, glancing at the papers on his desk. He read that, like many of those based here in the Garganian wilderness, Ladrac had never married.

“No. My nearest relatives are in Melkor, the capital.”

“I think it would be good for you to spend some time with them.”

“I wouldn’t want to be a burden.”

“You’ll have all the support you need. I’ll arrange it. Meanwhile, take a little exercise, get yourself stronger, and when you’re ready, I’ll have you flown out.”

The Governor watched his former Deputy leave and returned to his chair. Once Ladrac was in Melkor, he would remain there, absorbed by its administrative machinery, a sad end to his career, but it was best for him and his former companions here in Annakor. Life in this dusty city here on the edge of the deserts was demanding enough without having to carry anyone not at their most efficient.

Several weeks later, the man calling himself Komis Ladrac sat in the cramped seat of the commercial flier, studying the bleak, featureless Garganian terrain as it sped past. Rannas Kavannian permitted himself a rare, secretive smile. It had been extraordinary how easy it had been to don the persona of the dead Deputy Governor. Sifting through his mind, extracting everything he needed

to impersonate him, had been a far simpler process than he'd imagined. It had not taken him many days to effect the kind of dazed, confused nature of the man, and those around him had no inkling of the truth.

Kavannian understood well enough the Governor's desire to be rid of him. As a victim of the rebellion, Ladrac was an embarrassment, an encumbrance. Shipping him back to Melkor was the perfect solution for the Governor. *And for me*, mused Kavannian. *My friends and allies there will be staggered when they find I'm alive. They thought me dead, destroyed in the conflict at Annakor. Well, we will rebuild and make the Brotherhood stronger. Annakor had never been more than a step to greater things. Melkor will be a far more valuable prize.*

Arrul Voruum woke abruptly, part of his mind still submerged in layers of dream. Something in those clouds receded, too quickly to be grasped. In the darkness, the young man probed his immediate surroundings. The barracks were stark, devoid of all but the barest necessities, and the trainees slept soundly, for the most part drained by another day's demanding exercise. Voruum had a nagging suspicion that he had been watched. Maybe one of the sergeants—another test? Not all of them were obvious. To become a witchfinder required talents beyond those of normal warriors. Somehow, though, Voruum had felt an atmosphere of malice.

Inevitably his thoughts turned to Kaari, the girl he'd been teamed up with on the recent incident at distant Annakor and the chaos ensuing there. They had been lucky, and the rebellion, under the dangerous Rannas Kavannian, had almost overthrown the military base and sparked a much wider revolution. Voruum's part in Kavannian's defeat had unlocked within him powers that had shocked him. Old powers, mental powers, once wielded in staggering force by the long-dead Dream Lords, now banned. Voruum and Kaari had parted on a promise to say nothing of it in their reports of the crushing of the rebellion, nor would they speak of them again.

He turned over and closed his eyes, courting sleep. The training schedule was harsh. He would need to be fresh when dawn broke.

Darkness closed in, and he probed it carefully, but if there had been an unwelcome presence enfolded within it, it had apparently withdrawn.

A few cramped streets away from the high walls of the military barracks, the inn shook to the raucous singing of the young men and women, enjoying brief freedom from the rigors of their training schedule at day's end. Among them, sitting at a corner table in one of the few quieter parts of the inn, Arrul Voruum drank sparingly, mulling over thoughts that had nagged at him throughout his day. His uneasy visions of the night refused to melt away, and his erstwhile companions had given up trying to coax him out of his somber mood.

He looked up, realizing he was no longer alone. The girl, Kaari, stood before him, nodding a greeting, though her face was blank, her emotions closed to him. He knew she feared his mind and what it could do. At Annakor she had known that. What Voruum kept to himself was dangerous power.

"I was told you wanted to see me," she said, sitting opposite him, though she gave no sign of enthusiasm. She had loosened her hair and let it frame her narrow face. Her gray eyes studied him. There was a feral beauty in her vulpine grace. He inevitably responded to it—she had felt that at Annakor, briefly sharing his mind, and the deep fear that went with it. And she knew he'd felt her own attraction to him, something she was determined to smother.

"I know what we swore to each other," he said. "To go our separate ways, to say nothing of—what happened—and begin our lives as complete soldiers, probably on Earth."

"Nothing has changed."

"Perhaps. I've not asked you here to persuade you otherwise. I have to ask you something." His face gleamed in the dim lighting, slightly lined as though he had not slept well. "Since Annakor, have you been aware of anything unusual? Have you felt watched?"

She shook her head. "The trainers are vigilant. I accept that."

"At night?"

"I shut myself off. And you?"

“Before we left Annakor, I sensed a dark atmosphere hovering over the city like a pall. I assumed it was the consequence of the horrors we saw there. Many died, and evil forces were woken, before we put them down.”

“You should not dwell on such things. It is over. Rannas Kavannian was destroyed. I saw the ruin of his corpse.”

“I thought when I returned here to Melkor, these things would no longer be of consequence to me. The events are not. But there are other things. Sendings.”

She studied him closely. He did not seem to be deluded or crazed. His usual calmness and sharpness of eye and wit had not deserted him. “Sendings?”

“I am being watched. I have not attempted to reach out with my mind—”

“No,” she said at once. “Arrul, you must not. Those powers are forbidden to us. They can only bring you disaster. Use your mind as any man would, but limit its use.” For a moment she had softened, but then spoke more coldly. “Who do you suspect?”

“I don’t know. But it is here, in Melkor. Evil.”

She drew back, lowering her voice. “The Brotherhood? Survivors of the rebellion? Servants of Kavannian?”

He nodded. “I’m sure they are in this city. Skulking like rats in its hidden pipes. I have said nothing to the Commander, or any of his captains. No one likes to discuss such things.”

She leaned forward and took one of his hands. “Arrul, you are right to be anxious. But there will always be dissidents, acolytes of darker powers, wherever we go. Here, they are minor forces now. Our real work begins on Earth, once we have become witchfinders. You must let matters rest on Gargan, or they will be your undoing. Put them aside. Train. Go to Earth.”

“That time is coming.”

“In less than a month for me,” she said, releasing his hand, though there was no denying the comfort she took from his touch.

“Then truly we will be separated,” he said. “I am due for Earth in two months.”

“Let that be your destiny. Kavannian is no more. The spider’s back is broken. There is nowhere for it now but the darkness. Ten years

from now, man will likely quit Gargan altogether. Everyone is saying as much. Can you not feel it, out in the streets? Melkor is dying. The Garganians will take back their world and sever all connections with ours.”

Arrul breathed deeply. “A part of me wants to deny that, but you are right, Kaari. Our future lies on Earth.”

The cloaked man hurried through the narrow alleys, furtive and nervous as if at any moment a huge bird of prey would swoop down and rip him open with its claws. In this broken down section of Melkor, where the red desert sands were slowly reclaiming the boundaries of the city, the buildings were partially deserted, some of the streets too choked with dust and tumbled debris to pass through. The cloaked man slipped into deeper shadows until he reached an underground warren that led him to a small area where lights burned dimly and a dozen figures had gathered like crows over a victim.

A lone figure sat at the head of a table, a seemingly old man, his skin bleached a ghastly pale, his face a travesty, skull-like and with rheumy eyes. The being struggled to sit up as it saw the cloaked man approaching it, and waved him forward.

“Did you see them?” hissed the old man’s voice, like a dry desert wind.

“I did, Komis. It was as you said. The girl, Kaari, sat with the man, Arrul Voruum, and they spoke secretively. I could not hear their words.”

Komis Ladrac hissed with anger, though his pathetic frame could only shudder.

“They were like conspirators. Plotting, I am sure. At one point, she reached out and took his hand.”

“As I thought! They are lovers.”

“You must be right, master.”

Komis Ladrac waved the informant away, and in a moment both he and the other men had quit the chamber, leaving the shriveled old man alone. Inside that fading husk, Rannas Kavannian allowed himself the luxury of being satisfied. This body that he’d usurped would not last much longer, but before it became one with the Garganian dust, Kavannian would extract his revenge. Voruum

would be made to suffer, through the girl. She would be the key to his pain.

In an altogether different and contrasting part of the city of Melkor, high up in one of its military towers, the Commander of its army stood at an open window and looked out at the glowing sunset, the quick darkening of the cityscape. Taran Borgas's face was pulled tight in a scowl as he thought about his son, Drakam, a trainee in the military center, out at the city boundary. The boy was tough enough for soldiering, well capable of matching most of his contemporaries in a physical fight. But he lacked the brains to become a witchfinder. If he were to become one, Taran Borgas would have to bend his own rules and grease a few palms. There was nothing new in that. He'd held his own rank by doing it for long enough.

There was a knock at the door, and Taran admitted Drakam, who bowed and stood impatiently. He never looked anything but surly, his father thought. Full of belligerence and resentment. Never able to admit that he'd been held back because of his shortcomings, not because his rivals cheated him of promotion through deceit.

"You sent for me, father?"

"Your training is coming to an end. You will be judged very soon."

"I suppose you're going to tell me that I'm to be rejected, sent back to the ordinary barracks?" Anger stirred barely beneath the surface of the young soldier.

"Drakam, there is a chance for you. The places have already been filled, and you are not among them." Taran held up a hand to prevent an outburst of indignation. "Hear me out, boy. The only way you can join the new wave of witchfinders going to Earth is to replace one."

"You mean kill?"

Taran sighed heavily. "You are always so obvious. No, not kill. You must prove yourself to be better, more shrewd, more dedicated to the chosen way."

"Fighting with sword or fists is what I do best, father."

"I'm well aware of that. It is not enough for a witchfinder. You do possess cunning, though. There is one of the trainees you could displace, but you will have to outwit him."

"Name him."

“Arrul Voruum.”

Drakam visibly wilted, his mouth opening. “Voruum! He is the best of us, the most dangerous. Surely you know he returned from what should have been an exercise at Annakor and was instrumental in putting down a revolt!”

“Of course I know! What do you know of Voruum’s methods? How did he use his peculiar skills at Annakor?”

“Only what is rumored. Voruum says nothing. He is a very private man.”

“He is hiding something. I suspect him of using power. Forbidden power. What happened at Annakor makes that obvious. If what I suspect is true, Voruum has violated our sacred vows, the laws under which we operate. Witchfinders exist to stamp out these things. Voruum may be corrupt.”

Drakam’s face twisted in a scowl as he tried to digest the disturbing information.

“If you, my son, can unveil the truth and discredit him, then you will have proved yourself to be a worthy replacement for him. You will go to Earth as a witchfinder.”

“How am I to do this?”

“Follow him. Watch his every move. Use others to help you. Befriend him if you can.”

Drakam snorted dismissively. “No one achieves that!”

“Then forget your idle dreams and become a soldier. Be posted to some remote satellite city and spend the next few years chewing Garganian dust and trying to suppress minor insurgencies.”

Drakam shook his head. “No. I am set. I will do what you say. I *will* go to Earth.”

Arrul Voruum’s sleep continued to be invaded by dark dreams, the worst of which woke him deep into the night. Around him his fellow soldiers slept, exhausted, untroubled by nightmares or sendings.

Something new heightened his anxiety, a fresh dimension to the things that troubled him. Kaari! Was she safe? Was she, like him, subjected to these sendings? And who was responsible? Had

Rannas Kavannian's acolytes elevated another leader, someone who now used the old powers?

Voruum kept very still on his bed, closing his eyes and feigning sleep. If any of the guards entered and scanned the motionless forms, they must not suspect him. He let his mind drift and used it to reach out into the night, along the forbidden routes, using it in ways that would have brought ruin upon him had the authorities known.

He saw the women's barracks, close to the men's but separated by a high, guarded wall. Fraternization here was not permitted, liaisons between sexes regarded unfavorably unless for the express purposes of a training exercise. It was how Voruum and Kaari had been teamed up at Annakor.

Slowly he descended, breaching the roof of the barracks and the chambers below. He came to the long dormitory where Kaari was housed at night. She would be asleep, along with her companions. Her bed, however, was made up, not slept in. She was absent!

Somewhere in the distance, far at the back of his roving mind, he heard something. A cry—of alarm? Kaari? He tried to focus on the sound, reaching deeper into the mind shadows. It came again but then was snuffed out like a candle's glow. He had heard enough, however. He withdrew his mind, arcing up into the night and scanned the city's towers, some lit, most in darkness. It took a number of sweeps to find anything. There was a hint, like the smell of something recently burnt.

Quickly he used his mind to roam further afield. This was courting greater danger. His every mental move now might trigger whatever watches had been set. There were witchfinders here on Gargan, secretive people, whose true identities were not shared with either the soldiers or the trainees. They spent most of their lives on Earth, but all were obliged to do a certain number of tours here.

Voruum's swift movements brought him to the outskirts of the city. Kaari had been in those crumbling streets, and not long since! He dropped down, faint as a ghost. Earlier tonight, there had been a struggle. The dust was stirred, the air still redolent with confusion. Kaari and a number of others. It could only mean one thing. She had been abducted. Voruum moved in and out of the alleyways and through shadowed streets that showed no sign of habitation. This

part of Melkor had been left to the desert, whose sands encroached ever more swiftly from beyond the city limit.

In one alley, he found stairs leading down into deeper darkness, a well of coiling shadows that writhed like serpents. Protective power! Undoubtedly. An evil place. And whoever had abducted the girl had taken her down there. Underground. For what purpose? Her mental cries had suggested resistance. Voruum must get to her. He made to go down into that writhing darkness, but it checked him. He sensed its malign intent. There was a strong barrier at work in this place. It had been fortified—and by old powers. He could be taking a terrible risk if he sought to break in alone. Especially if it were a trap.

For long moments he deliberated with himself. Ultimately he knew he would have to go before the Commander and press him for help. It would be a risk, but Kaari had to be found.

Taran Borgas sat at his desk. Behind him, the sun had barely spread its first rays of the day. The Commander studied the hastily scrawled report of one of his night watch, the urgent message that had brought him here. Arrul Voruum. The one from Annakor. Borgas looked at another report, one he'd read several times since receiving it. It was from Hors Tannis, Governor of Annakor, the words that had first alerted Borgas to the latent powers of the young trainee, and their acute dangers. Now Arrul Voruum sought an audience with him.

There was a knock on the door, and Borgas waved his guards in. They brought with them the trainee witchfinder. Borgas studied the young man, who was tall and angular but with a strong muscularity belied by his wiriness. Voruum's eyes were the eyes of a hunting bird of prey, even more remarkable than those of the other trainees, a feature of their calling. Borgas could see the panic in those eyes, more than an inkling of fear. But it was not of him or his position. Something far deeper troubled the youth.

"I understand," said the Commander, "that you have concerns over one of the female trainees. One with whom you were paired on a recent exercise at Annakor."

"Yes, sir. Her name is Kaari."

Borgas nodded. "I've had some investigations made. Apparently, the girl is not in her barracks. The indications are that she never slept there last night." He made it sound like an accusation.

"I believe she has been abducted, sir."

Borgas frowned. "By whom?"

"Agents working against your authority, sir. I know where they are and can lead a hunt for them and the girl."

Borgas smiled. The youth was playing into his hands. Perhaps this affair could work to his advantage, and his son's. "How has this come about? You were at Annakor with this girl. You developed a bond with her?"

"We were assigned to a training exercise, part of which was to exercise a degree of mental cooperation. Strictly within the permitted bounds, sir."

"You didn't overreach yourself? Or develop too personal a relationship with the girl? It's part of the test, Voruum. Restraint. One has to control mental abilities, not be controlled by them. That leads down a dark path, as you must know."

"I do, sir. We parted as colleagues, no more than that. However, I think, perhaps because it was not long ago, there has been a residue of contact. It's the only way I can explain my reaction to last night's events."

Borgas could see the youth chose his words with great care. "Go on."

"I heard a cry for help, in my mind. It came from a certain quarter of the city. I am sure the girl is there, and in some danger."

Borgas considered this carefully. If he challenged Voruum now, demanding to know precisely *how* he knew this, it might lead to a premature arrest. Better if Voruum were given a little more rope. "So, you think swift action is called for?"

"I do, sir."

"Very well. I will ask one of my sergeants to gather a small team. Take them to this place. If you find the girl and bring her back, all well and good."

Voruum's relief was palpable, though his face remained anxious.

Once Borgas was alone again, he went to an arras and pulled it aside. Drakam, his son, emerged from the passageway.

“You heard?” said Borgas.

“Yes.”

“How fortunate that an opportunity has presented itself for you so soon. You will accompany the soldiers and Voruum. There is more to this than he is admitting. He and the girl have established a bond. The report from Hors Tannis makes that clear. The two of them used considerable power in Annakor. They have hidden their skills well. I think, my son, they will be required to use them again in this venture. So—study their every move.”

Kaari regained consciousness through slowly receding waves of pain. Her arms felt bruised, and the left side of her face and neck throbbed as though she'd been repeatedly punched. Her eyes opened on dim lighting and she could almost taste the fetid air. She was in a low cave, roped tightly to a wall, alone with the silence. It took a while for her to recall something of what had happened to her.

She had been preparing to return to the barracks after another day's training, not exhausted, but tired, ready to bathe and eat before enjoying the luxury of a night's sleep. She and others had been exercising on a small private field less than a mile from the barracks and were returning in scattered groups, or in pairs. Kaari heard the inner voice, a whisper which she immediately shielded. Some of her companions had low-level mental skills, no more than permitted. She dared not let them hear this intrusion.

At first she had been annoyed. It was Arrul Voruum. He should have known better than to breach her mind. Yet he sounded disturbed. There was, he had said again, a threat to the city. *We have had this conversation*, she had told him. *There is something you need to see*, he'd responded. *Maybe it will convince you we cannot sit idly by and ignore it.*

She had repressed her reluctance to respond further. A brief diversion would be possible. If it would keep him quiet. She had slipped away down a side alley. One of the other women saw her but grinned. An assignation? Let her think so. It was not that rare among them.

Kaari had followed the mental instructions, which took her down a small maze of alleys and narrow side streets. When the attack came

she had been unprepared. There were too many assailants, and they had worked swiftly and with an assassin's skill. After a brief scuffle in which she had had no time to defend herself effectively, she had been knocked unconscious.

Now, peering into the shadows beyond her immediate confines, she saw a small group of figures approaching. Three of them were hooded, short swords visible at their belts. The fourth figure seemed to hobble, as though either very old or in some way crippled. As his face came into the fluttering lamplight, Kaari recognized him.

"Komis Ladrac!" she gasped. "What am I doing here? Why am I trussed?"

The former Deputy Governor of Annakor stood close to her, sweat dripping from his prematurely aged face. He looked even worse at this range, as though suffering from the ravages of a wasting disease, as if he would stumble to his knees. He gripped a block of stone to support himself.

"Komis Ladrac is dead," he said. As if to underpin his statement, only his eyes were alive, shining unnervingly in the glow.

His words made no sense. "Why are you here?" she asked.

"I have unfinished work." For a moment, his features twisted, blurring, and Kaari had a sudden vision of another face, other features. Something evil flared in those eyes. She drew back in horror.

"No! You cannot be."

"You and your accursed companion, Arrul Voruum, almost destroyed me. However, you are not alone in possessing mental powers. My body may have been reduced to ash by your interference, but *not* my mind. Komis Ladrac has provided me with a shell in which to house myself. For a time. Already his flesh is failing. I need someone far younger, someone with mental powers that can mesh with mine and sustain body and mind."

Kaari shuddered in revulsion at what he was suggesting. The thought of such violation almost made her physically sick. She shook her head.

"The process would already have been completed, but I wish to enjoy the transformation. And I think it would be entirely fitting if your lover witnessed the spectacle, too."

“Voruum is not my lover,” she said softly but angrily.

“I have seen into your mind, Kaari. When we three fought so violently at Annakor, its corridors opened to me, even though you bested me. You may not have enjoyed the carnal act with Voruum, but you have imagined it, and not without pleasure.”

She swore crudely, but her tormentor merely laughed. “He will come. He thinks he followed your trail and can bring soldiers to help him cut you free. By all means, try to warn him. Use your mind. I will show you how much more powerful mine is.”

She knew Voruum would try to find her. But he could not possibly know that Rannas Kavannian had survived, even in this form. He could not know that this would be a far more perilous trap than he imagined. *If I do as Kavannian suggests, I will be blocked, she thought. It's what Kavannian wants. To humiliate me further. I must feign this. Let Kavannian think I am beaten. Later, when he is off his guard, I will warn Voruum.*

Stiffening, she made a show of attempting to send a mental bolt out into the darkness, an apparent warning, and as she expected, Kavannian threw his mind-cloak around her, smothering the sending. A struggle ensued, in which she was able to learn just how powerful Kavannian was and what weaknesses remained. There were few. It would take both her mental power and Voruum's to best him, if indeed that were even possible.

Kavannian laughed, though the sound was little more than a strangulated grunt from Komis Ladrac's rotting mouth. “Save your energy. He will not hear you. He'll come, as I said. But I will be more than ready for him. In the meantime, we will leave this cavern. There are rituals to perform. Old gods to worship. And He who resides over them all, the divine Shaitan.”

The men kept close together, blending into one shadow as they moved swiftly and in practiced silence along the narrow alleyways. Their blades were drawn, and their retreat was closely covered by a rearguard. If any of the beggars or outcasts in that almost-deserted part of Melkor had seen them, they would have instantly recognized soldiers, men equipped and poised for violent action. No doors or windows opened to the fighting men in the early

morning light. At their fore, Arrul Voruum led the way ahead. He had memorized the route he had seen in his night vision and moved unerringly to the cramped alley where the steps led down into darkness.

“This is where the abductors brought the girl,” he said softly to Drakam Borgas at his shoulder.

“Do you know where it leads?” said the burly soldier. “Can you *sense* anything?”

Voruum was wary of saying too much. This was the son of Melkor’s Commander. Any knowledge imparted to him would undoubtedly be passed on to his father.

“Vaguely. Evil lies ahead. It may even be a trap.”

Drakam Borgas’s military mind evaluated the problem. “Is there another way down to what lies there? Can we surprise them?”

“I will try and see.” Voruum leaned into the deep shadow of the wall and closed his eyes. He and most of the other trainees were encouraged to use an element of mental power. Abilities varied among them. Drakam Borgas had little, an evident source of frustration to him. Voruum had sensed it and the coiled anger that went with it, especially toward himself.

Voruum sent his mind along the alleys, a subtle beam, evaluating doorways and openings. Most were sealed or ended in stone walls. But there was one, a large crack in a wall, where someone had burrowed inwards, creating a passageway through the crumbling brickwork. Voruum’s mind slipped inside and found what he sought. A sloping brick walkway into a more open vault, though its dimensions were unclear. Darkness seethed down there, as in a wide lake. It was part of the underground maze.

“There’s a way,” Voruum said, snapping back.

Drakam Borgas nodded for him to lead on, and soon afterwards the patrol was squeezing one by one through the cracked wall and into the darkness beyond. They had brought solar lights, soft, discreet beams, although they knew that if there were creatures that thrived on darkness down here, they would be fully aware of the soldiers.

“You feel the atmosphere?” said Voruum.

The men were all nodding. It was not something they could have described, an emotion rather than a palpable force, but the air here was tainted with powers that suggested pain, oppression, and something else, a seething nastiness. And there was a smell unique to these vaults, metallic as blood.

“I fought this horror at Annakor,” said Voruum. “Those who serve the demons of the night thrive on it. There is another nest here, I am sure of it.”

“You must have used significant power to defeat it,” said Drakam Borgas. “It invades the mind, does it not?”

Voruum was cautious in his reply. “If it is not suppressed, it becomes dangerous beyond words.”

“Why have they taken the girl?”

Voruum knew the answer, that she was the bait to trap him, his powers. “The Brotherhood will hunt all potential witchfinders down. She is just the first. Because she is known, as am I. If we are destroyed, Melkor and all Gargan will fall into their hands.”

“Is this the Brotherhood that once thrived on Ur? Under the monster, Daras Vorta?”

“The same. It was powerful here once, and will be again if we don’t scotch it.”

They moved on until Voruum paused again. He listened, using his mind gently. She was near! Somewhere in the darkness below, in an open area with a high, vaulted ceiling. He was about to attempt to touch her mind but drew back as if scorched. Something else hovered between them, a sinister, nauseating presence. He knew it at once and recoiled, shutting down his thoughts. Rannas Kavannian! How was that possible?

Drakam Borgas hovered close behind him. “What did you say? Kavannian? The leader of the rebels?”

Voruum realized he must have spoken the name aloud. “He was destroyed. And yet...”

“Then let us finish this.”

“Kaari is roped securely. There are three times as many men below us as we have. They will be dangerous. But you can take them.”

“And you?”

“I’ll take their leader, whatever he has become.”

Drakam Borgas could see no more than Voruum’s eyes, but he read in them a unique power, a deep-seated anger. This must be what his father, Taran, feared—the forbidden skills.

Slowly the soldiers wound their way down the ramp-like slope and into the better light. There were huge plants here, great saprophytes, common to this part of Gargan, that rose up, thick stalks like stone, wide, umbrella-like heads unfolded. They provided a miniature forest, at the center of which a wide space had been cleared. The trunks surrounding this had been daubed with bloody paint, curling symbols, and diagrammatic shapes. Principal among these was the horned god, the Goat of the detested Brotherhood.

Kaari was roped between two smaller plants that had been truncated, her arms stretched wide. She had been stripped of her weapons, her expression filled with furious resistance, but the ropes held firm.

Voruum swore softly. Beside the girl, but out of reach of her unfettered feet, the leader of this underground pack was waiting. Voruum recognized him with a start as Komis Ladrac, who had been Deputy Governor of Annakor. Yet how he had changed since they had last met! Formerly Ladrac had been a middle-aged man in good health, a little starchy, a typical product of his military background. Now he was prematurely aged, withered and bent, standing only with the aid of a crutch. In the wan light, his face was sagging, deep-sunken eyes rheumy with age, his cheeks hollowed out. Some frightful wasting illness had ravaged him.

Voruum heard the voice in his mind, a desperate cry. Kaari spoke to him. *The body of Komis Ladrac has been usurped*, she said. *The one we thought we had destroyed lives on in him.*

The pathetic form of Ladrac stirred, its head rising like that of a hound sniffing out its prey. “Voruum!” it croaked. “I know you are here, slinking in the darkness, you cur. I knew you’d come. Well, then, bring out your warriors. See if you can finish what you began at Annakor!”

As he spoke, more light flared from brands held by another group of Kavannian’s followers, now almost ringing the open area.

“Their leader is just an old man!” snarled Drakam Borgas. “Let’s finish this.” He waved his men forward down the last part of the ramp, and they split up and made for the rebels, swords flashing in the flames’ glow. Steel met steel on all sides as a ferocious battle broke out. Voruum strode towards Ladrac, but the hunched figure merely grinned at him, unmoved and certainly unafraid.

Voruum sensed that Kaari was trying to warn him about something, but her mental efforts were smothered by Kavannian’s own powers. He might be housed in a pathetic shell of a body, but his mind had not been diminished. Voruum drew closer, his sword raised, preparing to hack Ladrac’s body down and end whatever vestiges of life clung to it.

Kaari’s anger burst furiously through the mental bonds that subdued her. *No!* The word resonated in Voruum’s mind, making him stagger back. *Do not kill him.* Again Kavannian’s blanket dropped over her. Voruum used his own mind to rip at it and tear aside its muffling layers. Kavannian fought desperately to prevent him. Whatever message the girl was trying to impart to Voruum, he guarded with every effort. For long moments, the two struggling mental powers twisted and turned, writhing around each other like two serpents locked in a fight to the death. At last, Voruum gained an insight, freeing up something of Kaari’s warning.

If you destroy Ladrac, Kavannian will transfer. It’s what this battle is about. The blood of the fallen will empower him!

Voruum glanced around him. Throughout the clearing, scores of individual battles were taking place as both Drakam Borgas’s men and the acolytes of Kavannian fought each other with nothing spared. Many had fallen, leaking blood, while others, wounded, fought on. There would be no prisoners here, no mercy asked or given. Already a score of corpses littered the ground.

Voruum turned his attention back to the being before him. To his horror, he saw that Ladrac’s body was thickening, the flesh no longer pale and desiccated, as new energy pulsed within its veins. The blood of the fallen! Yes, Kaari had been right. Voruum redoubled his efforts to subdue Kavannian’s onslaught, the sound of a wild wind rushing through his head. In the distance, he heard another mental cry from Kaari.

If Ladrac's body falls, Kavannian will quit it.

Then I'll drive him into the dust—

No. He'll use me. My body. That's why he dragged me here.

The words almost knocked Voruum aside. If Kavannian succeeded, taking over the young girl's body, and probably fusing her mental powers with his own, he would be far more capable of prolonging his hold on her. Unlike Ladrac, whose mind and body simply had not coped with Kavannian's invasion.

The old man laughed. Kavannian knew. He must have sensed Voruum's horror and how it momentarily weakened him. All around them, the dead were mounting. Drakam Borgas and his men had cut down two-thirds of their opponents and lost perhaps six of their own number. Blood flowed freely, all of it fueling the sorcerer. It was obvious that the rebels would not cease fighting until all of them had been killed. Kavannian was using his mental power to drive them on. The soldiers were forced to defend themselves.

Voruum realized Kavannian's powers were split between controlling the fighting and warding him off. It was becoming more difficult for Kavannian to subdue Kaari as well.

Aid me! Voruum called to her. *Blend your mind with mine. It is the only way.*

There was a pause, but then he felt the link, as it had been at Annakor. The power was strong in her, and as it surged, pumped up with the outrage and anger that filled her because of Kavannian's abuse, Voruum knew that the combined energy of their minds would be too much for the sorcerer.

Kavannian knew it, too. His mind withdrew a little. Then a little more. Voruum fused minds with Kaari and let out a great shout of elation as he plunged the mental force like a sword of fire deep into his enemy. It was like a bolt of lightning. The body of Komis Ladrac shook as if in a violent storm, the mouth opening in a silent scream, and then it collapsed. As it fell, resembling nothing more than a heap of ragged clothes, the acolytes sagged, every one of them dropping to his knees.

"Cease your killing!" called Voruum.

The soldiers drew back, obeying, though confused. Drakam Borgas came to Voruum, his face wet with blood and sweat.

“Have you killed him? You said Rannas Kavannian was behind this.”

Voruum was looking around the circle, studying the fallen bodies. Only a few were still alive, nursing terrible wounds. They would not be fit to house Kavannian. The survivors, though, would possibly serve as temporary housing for him. Voruum counted them. A dozen, no more, all spent, all standing, exhausted, some suffering minor cuts. They had not been soldiers, these acolytes. They had been fodder for the superior skills of Drakam Borgas’s men.

“Bind the hands of every survivor,” said Voruum.

Drakam did not argue and gave the order to his men, who began the work, unopposed by the acolytes, who moved woodenly, as if now bereft of will. Voruum went to Kaari, who also looked drained. He found the key to her manacles on a rock beside her and undid them. He would have held her, but she drew back.

“I’m sorry,” he said, knowing how much the fusion of their minds disturbed her. “It was the only way.”

“I know,” she said bitterly. “It is no more palatable for that. Is he dead? I felt his mind sweep away as if on a tide.”

Voruum nodded at the prisoners. “If he survived, he’s among them. We will find out which one houses him.”

She glared at him. “I’ll not share my mind again.”

“He’s weak. I will best him this time.” Voruum went back to the soldiers, who had swiftly bound all the survivors and lined them up.

“You used your mental powers well,” said Drakam Borgas.

Voruum studied him, tempted to enter his mind and read it. He knew, however, that it would be yet more fuel to his cause, his desire to discredit Voruum.

“You used her mind, too, did you not? There was something between you. Something very powerful. Such powers are forbidden.”

“Would you have had us all destroyed by Kavannian?”

“Of course not.” But Drakam Borgas’s eyes gave the lie to his words.

They concentrated on the bound prisoners, Voruum studying them, probing gently. One by one, he discounted them. Kavannian was not among them. A shout from the edge of the circle made him turn. Drakam Borgas waved him to the first line of tall saprophytes.

One of the soldiers was crumpled beneath it, his face a mask of pain. He held his side, where blood ran from a deep sword wound.

“Halgram!” Voruum said. “What happened?”

“I don’t understand,” the man gasped, dribbling blood. The wound was clearly fatal. “It was Forgal. My sword brother. He suddenly turned on me and used his blade on me.” His eyes closed in agony as more blood ran from the cut.

Voruum looked along the saprophyte corridor. Forgal! So Kavannian must have slipped across into him, not one of the acolytes. He’d made a break for freedom. Voruum followed, Drakam Borgas at his heels.

“Kavannian is using Forgal’s body,” Voruum said. “If we find him, he will be as desperate as a cornered rat.”

Kaari watched them go, horrified at what she’d heard. She bent down to the stricken man.

“Help him if you can,” Voruum shouted back to her, taking Drakam Borgas with him in pursuit.

They sped through the growths, the shadows around them deepening. Voruum used his mental powers to reach into the darker places. Kavannian was shielding himself, but in the end, it was the sound of his feet climbing a bank of spoil that gave away his location. It was steeply heaped, its stones and rubble loose and shifting. Voruum and Drakam Borgas stood at its base, watching the figure of Forgal as it went slowly upward.

Voruum again used his mind, and the unstable slope moved, a slow downward drift that caught Forgal, trapping his legs and dragging him back downwards. The man turned, his eyes blazing with fury that was not his own. Rannas Kavannian was in complete control. He wielded the soldier’s blade. Realizing he could not get away, he gave a shout and came back down the slope.

Voruum felt the onset of a mental assault once more and used his mind to deflect it. Their swords clashed, and Kavannian added to Forgal’s skill, making his blade a blur of murderous intent. Voruum realized he should have brought Kaari with him. Kavannian was far stronger housed in Forgal’s powerful frame. Drakam Borgas must have realized this, for he redoubled his own physical efforts and drove in hard at his former companion. Their blades struck together

in a shower of sparks, and for a moment, Voruum could not reach Forgal's body. He drove another mental bolt at Kavannian and felt him weaken. Drakam Borgas also sensed an opening, and his blade sliced through the flesh of Forgal's side. Kavannian felt the bite of steel and concentrated his every effort on his own weapon, bringing it up in a dreadful thrust that bit deep into Drakam Borgas's abdomen.

The sergeant screamed in pain and sagged down, dropping his blade, his hands gripping himself, wet with oozing blood. Voruum rushed to stand over him. Forgal was already skirting the foot of the scree, once more running into the saprophytes. Voruum dropped to one knee, trying to see how bad Drakam Borgas's wound was.

"Don't let him get away," said the fallen warrior. "Use your mind, Voruum. Do what you must."

"It is the only way to defeat him and what he represents," said Voruum. "Simple mental strength is not enough."

"Yes, your way is right. That hellish creature must be stopped. Fire with fire, then. Do it!" Drakam Borgas gritted his teeth, his eyes filled with pain. Death was coming for him.

Voruum sent his mind flashing through the void. He found the running figure, wounded but not critically. Kavannian had erected a powerful shield now, deflecting all Voruum's efforts to detain him and setting up a web of illusion to smother his escape. Voruum would not leave Drakam Borgas.

"Go!" said the stricken man.

"I'll find him. There is nowhere on Gargan he can hide from me. Kaari will aid me, I promise you." He did what he could to make the soldier comfortable, but the wound was far too deep, and there was no more time. With a final curse, Drakam Borgas died.

Only then did Voruum take up the hunt anew. He did not go far. Beyond the saprophytes, there was a fast-flowing stream, a rare thing in these desert lands. It dropped down into the earth, disappearing in roaring darkness. Rannas Kavannian had taken the body of Forgal and leaped into those foaming waters. Pursuit from here would be impossible. Kavannian might even have overreached himself and drowned in the depths, far below the surface. Voruum

heard the roar of the plunging waters, a roar that twisted itself into the sound of pain, or was it wild laughter?

In the gloom of the low chamber, under the central barracks of Melkor, Commander Taran Borgas stood in silence. On the long stone slab before him, a single body had been stretched out, carefully washed and dressed in full battle regalia. Nearby stood Arrul Voruum, Kaari and the last of those who had survived the conflict with Rannas Kavannian and his acolytes.

“He was a fine soldier,” said Taran Borgas. “I was proud of him for that. He trained to be a witchfinder, but his heart was not in that. He was of the old school. Like his father, I suppose.”

“We fight a new war,” said Voruum.

Taran’s eyes rose from the body of his son and studied Voruum coldly for a moment. He said nothing. Whatever suspicions he had about Voruum’s use of power, he kept to himself.

“You have almost finished your training,” he said to him and the girl. “Kaari, the day will soon be upon us when you go to Earth. They have need of you there.”

She nodded, her body stiff, her whole manner formal.

“And you, too, Voruum. You will go soon after.”

“I would prefer to delay my leaving, sir. The enemy is still at large. We need a witchfinder presence on Gargan. At least for a time.” *And I need to be sure Rannas Kavannian is dead.*

Taran Borgas nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps. We’ll discuss this later.”

Kaari and Voruum left the grim chamber. Still she did not look at him.

“You would forego your transfer to Earth?” she said.

“He must be found. I must know that he has perished. You could...stay, for a time.”

She shook her head. “I cannot share that power again. I’ll go to Earth. There’ll be a new life.”

“New dangers. You’ll be a lone hunter.”

“It’s what I’ve trained for. I must fulfill my duties.”

He watched her as she walked steadily back along the military corridor, the sound of her boots slowly diminishing. She did not look

back. For a moment, he wanted to probe her mind one last time, read again what he knew was hidden there. Instead he turned along a branching corridor. For now, he had another destiny to shape under the blood-red skies.

A native/resident of Devon, Adrian Cole has had some two dozen novels and many short stories published, including E-books and audio books over the last 40 years. He writes sf, fantasy and horror. NICK NIGHTMARE INVESTIGATES won the British Fantasy Society Award for the Best Collection of 2015.

Outside the Outside?

A review of *The Tingleverse* and *Feast of Legends*

By J. Comer

In my forty-one years as player and GM for tabletop RPGs, I have run and played a number of different systems. The majority have been set in cod-medieval worlds, and the majority owe something (often quite a lot) to *Dungeons & Dragons*, in its multiple forms. In RPGs, as well as in the world of visual arts, outsiders and outliers share the margins of the field with outright corporate skills. This review looks at one of each of these two niche genres: *The Tingleverse*, an RPG based on the eccentric fiction of Dr. Chuck Tingle, and *Feast of Legends*, a fast-food-themed RPG commissioned and used as publicity by The Wendy's Company.

The Tingleverse, much like Dr. Tingle's erotica, is more likely to be talked about than read, and more likely to be read than played. Erotic RPGs (*Bacchanalia*, *Black Tokyo*) aren't new (or very interesting, in most cases), but this game is not about sex and contains no sexual rules or statistics. The author, who seems to be the same reclusive writer who pens the "Tinglers," focuses on paranormal invasions and gifts/powers which affect the structure of reality, rather than on sex acts.^[3] However, some abilities and characteristics have very suggestive names which we couldn't read aloud in public, even if there's nothing naughty about the ability *itself*. The game system of *The Tingleverse* is vanilla *Dungeons & Dragons*, with character classes, powers, and levels, including renamed copies of D&D spells such as Prismatic Spray, and poorly edited at that: "effect" for "affect," "drug" for "dragged" and similar mistakes. Long, long lists of spells and magic items pad the page length but add no more originality. It's possible that another system, specifically a dice-pool variation of Storyteller, might have worked better for this, but the reviewer has not playtested this idea. The setting is a supernatural/paranormal version of Billings, Montana,

Tingle's purported hometown, which is devoid of firearms and alcohol and awash in chocolate milk.

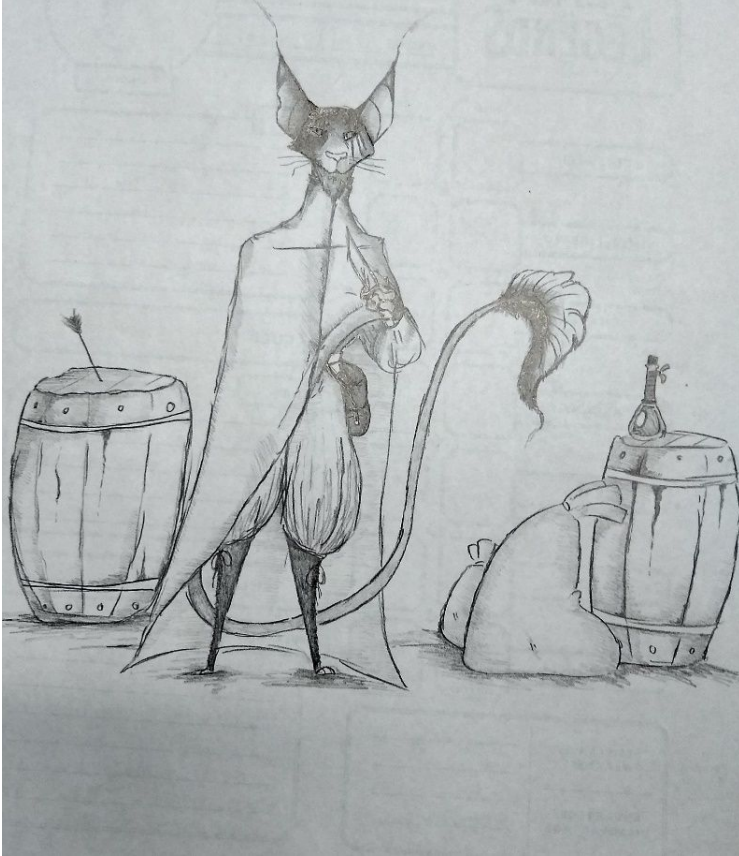
Playtesting *The Tingleverse* presented problems, since The Gauntlet, my weekend group, didn't want to roleplay any sex acts.^[4] On my repeated assurances that no sex would happen in the game, I got two players and concocted a scenario in which a living *Encyclopedia Britannica* enclosed Billings in a force-field to block out the coming of the Internet, which was making print encyclopedias obsolete. A living, millionaire jet plane was the quest giver.

The PCs, a human warrior and a Bigfoot wizard, saw the dome force-field replace the sky and a Learjet full of raptors crash—I dropped a whole subplot and simply let them cycle out to the crash site and talk to Rod the living jet plane, who'd mapped the dome and found that the town library was its center. With a healer's help, the PCs battled the evil *Britannica* to a standstill, and then the warrior offered to put it aboard the living jet plane so it could see the world (this amazed me!) and educate the jet's passengers as well. The players liked the adventure (thanks) and hated the system.

While *Feast of Legends* is devoid of the edgy weirdness of *The Tingleverse*, it is extremely strange (unique, at the moment, as far as this reviewer knows) in being a commercial for hamburgers in the shape of a playable RPG. Humorous RPGs (*Teenagers From Outer Space*, *TOON*, *Big Eyes*, *Small Mouth*) again are nothing new, though I can't say much about games I've only read and never played. In this game, PCs are in character classes and have abilities themed around the foods offered by Wendy's (for non-US readers, Wendy's is well known for decent burgers and chili). The game system, again, is potted *Dungeons & Dragons*, offering little that is new. The repeated references to eating during the game make me imagine playing it *in* a Wendy's, but I am not clear on how well an hours-long game session would be received by the manager. (Getting Wendy's takeout and decamping to a favorite gaming spot would be a safer alternative.) Combat is with spoons, forks and skillets, rather than swords, and PCs heal by eating and drinking fast-food items in a kingdom ("Freshtovia") ruled by Queen Wendy. The enemy nations are parodies of Jack In the Box, Burger King, and, of course, McDonald's; the reviewer found some of the burger-

themed humor (a character named for the late Clara Peller, for example) genuinely charming.

Aiden's sketch of SaLad, one of the Feast of Legend characters.



The short manuscript also includes a mini-campaign with several adventures intended to introduce the magical realm of Freshtovia, although how many GMs will make this strange game a regular, I can't imagine. Like TWERPS or *Microscope*, this may work better as a one-shot oddity than something people will want to go on playing week after week. However, if Wendy's supports this game long-term, who can say? The game's story includes a sequel hook of sorts...

Aiden's Feast of Legend character, Oberon



Playtesting *Feast of Legends* aroused wild excitement in The Guys, my regular weekday group. One thing that quickly became apparent was a lack of editing oversight: crossbows exist in character-class descriptions but don't have weapons stats, and the armor and clothing are hard to envision: is "bacon armor" actually made of strips of bacon? Or is it metal armor decorated with bacon symbols? A "foil robe" sounds neither comfortable nor decent, and where are the CAFOs that provide all of this meat? The Guys had mixed results. The illogicality of things like "bacon armor" led to us houseruling that this was iron and bronze armor with images of bacon, rather than pigs' flesh used as protection.

FoL also shows sloppy editing: both the Grumble and Hunger have the same magic-fart ability, and it was cut-and-pasted, resulting in passages where the wrong monster's name is used. Given that products such as *City of Judas* were edited by talented volunteers, including this reviewer, editing is not too hard to find in the field. And Queen Wendy is a sassy, red-haired warrior woman...who's been on the throne for fifty years? And so on, and on, and on.

The profusion of “orders” led to endless page-flipping, and a riddle based on Wendy’s dollar menu drove the PCs nearly berserk even with hints from the GM. Since *FoL* has no rules for nonhumans, I houseruled that you can be an elf, catperson, half-goblin, etc., but that this would have no results in the **rules** of the games, only in the narrative. A picture of SaLad, drawn by our onboard artist, Aiden, is attached. SaLad was a mage cat-person from Roast Beach, a coastal desert. The PCs went on “The Queen’s Quest” but were utterly stymied by the overuse of riddles and puzzles: one riddle was forty minutes of head-desking frustration, and eventually the GM had an NPC solve the first riddle and waive the last (of FOUR) to let the PCs have **one** combat in two hours of play. This is an example of *Feast of Legends* taking a basically good idea (riddles and puzzles instead of combat) and running it into the ground. The end of the game session saw The Guys agree to end *Feast of Legends* and return to their regular game.

Both of these games are likelier to be read than played, and neither adds anything real to the world of RPG game mechanics. However, fans of *World of Darkness* or *Kult* could make something genuinely fearsome and horrible out of *The Tingleverse*, and *Feast of Legends* might be an appealing root beer and pretzels evening, as its light content and humorous theme make it more family-friendly than, say, *Vampire: The Requiem* or *Tribe8*. Both games are recommended to aficionados and the curious.

Enjoy!

Chuck Tingle’s books can be ordered here. Website contains mildly NSFW content.

<https://www.chucktingle.com/>

Skeptical review of Tingle is here: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/10/18/12775742/who-is-chuck-tingle-fake-explained>

Feast of Legends is here: https://www.feastoflegends.com/images/Feast_Of_Legends.pdf

J. Comer is a writer and a teacher who was proud to playtest “Feast of Legends” with students in his school’s gaming club. He lives in Bellville, Texas.



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Notes From the Nest

We hope that you've enjoyed this issue! We've had a lot of returning favorites for this one, plus some new blood.

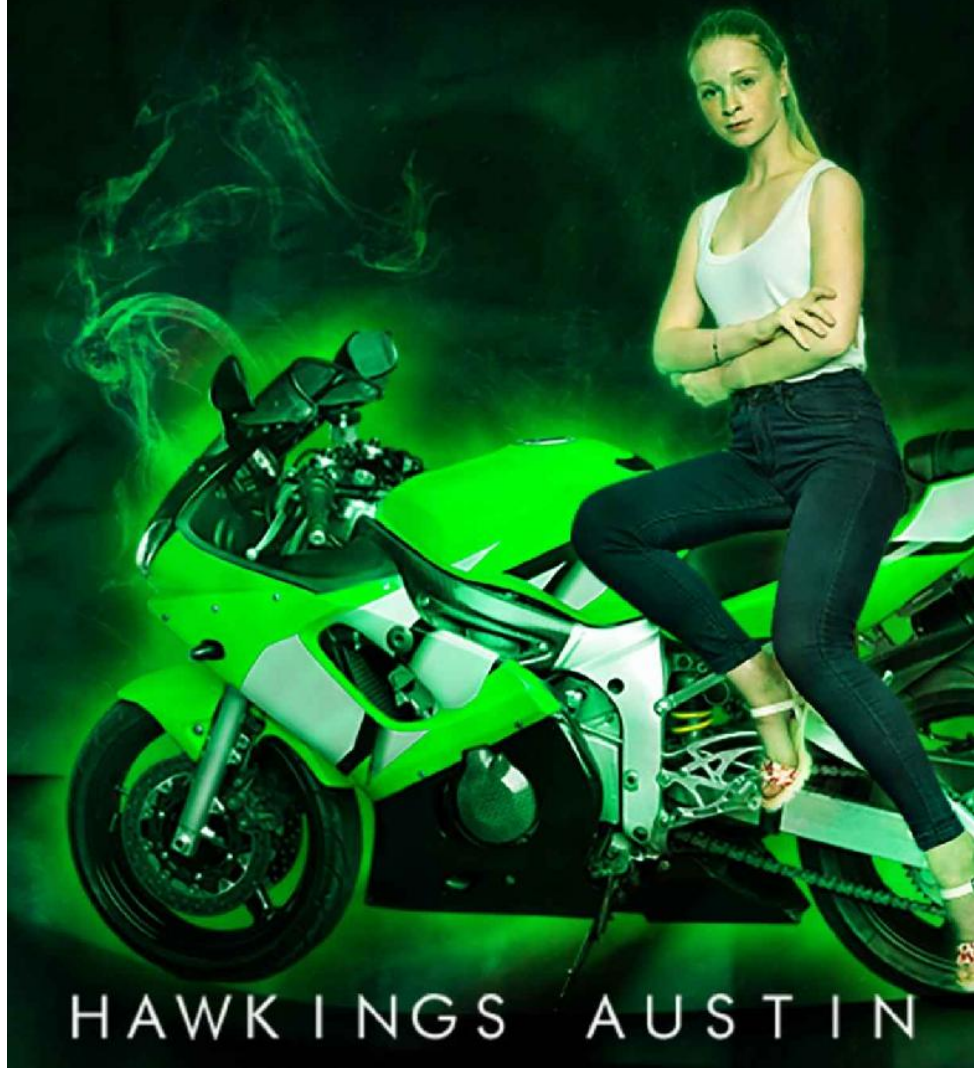
2020 is going to be a huge year for us, and this was just the tip of the ice-berg!

In a couple of weeks, we'll be launching a kickstarter for *Mongoose and Meerkat Volume I: Pursuit Without Asking*. This anthology will collect the five previously published Mongoose and Meerkat stories from Jim Breyfogle, plus a new previously unpublished short novella. This volume will also be illustrated by the absolutely fantastic Dark Filly! Be sure to keep an eye on the blog for when this goes live!

In just two months, we'll be releasing the Summer Special, with nearly double our normal content. You'll see a lot of familiar names in that issue: Paul Lucas, J. Manfred Weichsel, Schuyler Hernstrom... I guess I could list all of the authors and all of their stories, but you can see the full 2020 line-up on our website. Check it out and be blown away!

“Alex” P. Alexander, Ed.

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OF ATLANTIS AT THE CLOSE OF
THE BRONZE AGE

[1] Note: "Helium" is pronounced "HELL-ium," not "HEAL-ium."

[2] Editor's note: *The events in this story precede those Arrul Voruum adventures published in Cirsova Volume 1; Arrul Voruum and Kaari first meet in "Blood Red Sky of Mars," out now in the all-new Startling Stories!*

[3] There is also a monster manual for the game which the playtesters and this reviewer did not have.

[4] The resemblance between Tingle's work and the songs of Wesley Willis, screaming about demons, bestial sex, and 'hellrides', is impossible to ignore; Tingle's personal communications imply some degree of mental illness.