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Magazine of Thrilling Adventure and Daring Suspense
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**The Artomique
Paradigm**

by
Michael Tierney

Robert Zoltan
Jim Breyfogle
James Hutchings
Michael Wiesenberg

Plus, Paul O'Connor's
BADAXE!™

Cirsova

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***A Thrilling New Wild Stars®
Novel***

The Artomique Paradigm (Part 1 of 3), by Michael Tierney

***A Swashbuckling Rogues of
Merth Novelette***

The Book of Dark Sighs, by Robert Zoltan

***An Exciting Tale of the
Mongoose and Meerkat***

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A Classic Comic of Sword and Sorcery

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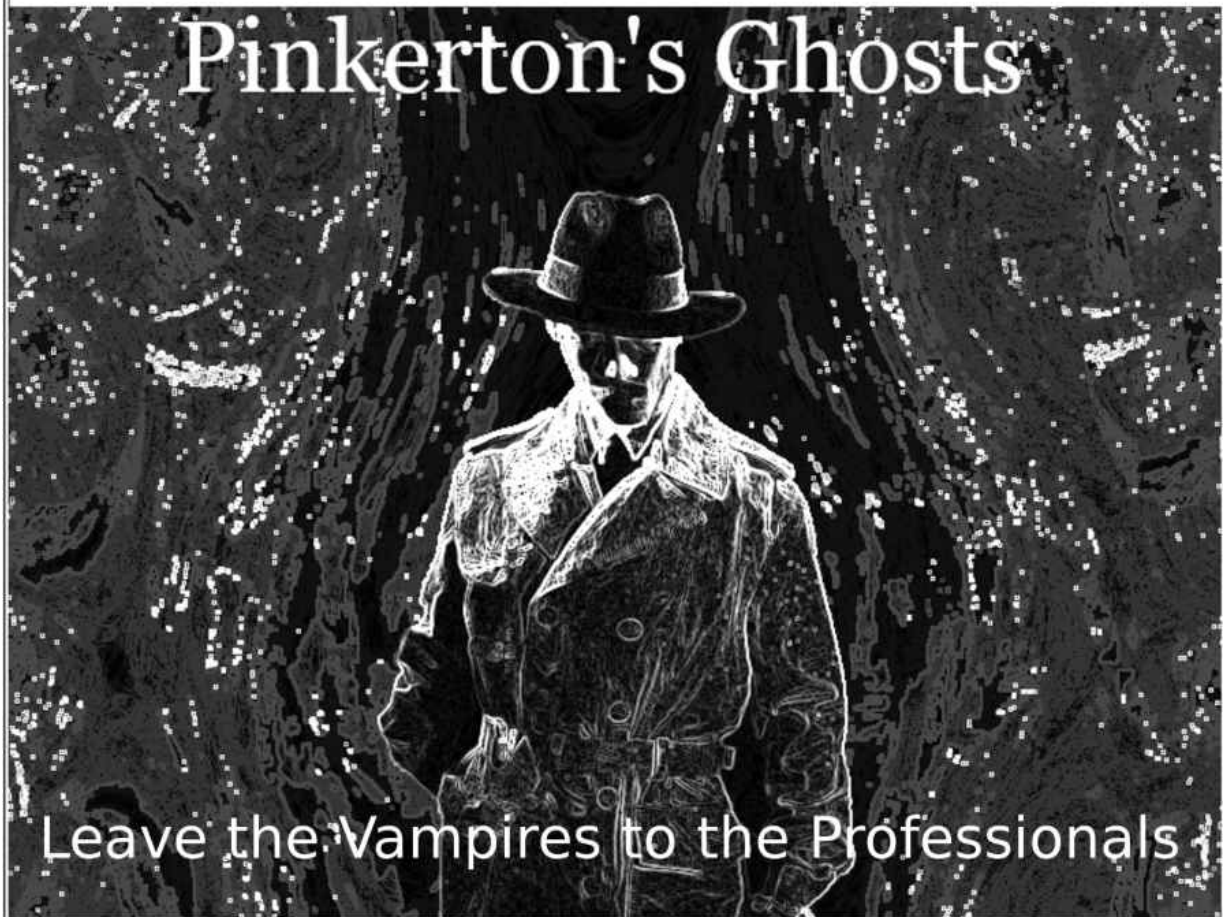
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The Artomique Paradigm (Part 1 of 3)

By MICHAEL TIERNEY

Earth is now in contact with their intergalactic cousins! But during recent conflicts with aliens and pirates, the Artomiques, fascist refugees from an alternate timeline, have become Terra's dominant faction using stolen Wild Stars technology!

Prelude:
Orcas in the Caribbean
International Waters
2005

“**B**lackfish,” said Kearston, pointing to a trio of tall, dark, triangular fins that repeatedly broke the water’s surface.

“That’s maybe only the fourth pod of orcas ever sighted in the Caribbean,” Carlton MacKanally replied. “And I do mean ever...in recorded history.”

“Counting yesterday?” Finding him to be quite handsome, with his rugged physique from the constant physical activity of life as a divemaster, Kearston tried to establish a familiarity for later, when she would have to kill him. She pushed his mind only slightly with her telepathy, sensing the kindred soul of a survivor left alone and adrift in life.

“No, it’s got to be the same pod.” He finished attaching a buoyancy control vest and scuba regulator assembly to an air tank and opened the valve. The vest and hoses all stiffened with pressure at the same time. Taking a test breath out of both second stage regulators, Carlton added, “It’s unusual to see them loitering in one area.”

“Think they’ll give us any trouble?” Kearston raised her arms and retied the strap of her one-piece swimsuit behind her neck, but he never seemed to notice as she flaunted herself. His mind was on another woman he considered to be unattainable.

“Doubt it, they’re not interested us.” He began gearing up a second air tank, glancing distractedly out across the waves, as if searching for a danger he could sense but not quite place. “But *something* attracted them to this area. It’s fine with me if you want to sit out the dive. I’ve got this.”

Kearston shook her head. “I’m here for a job. Just like you.”

She noticed how two figures watched her from behind the glass of the wheelhouse. It seemed that all Earthmen had the gift of telepathy on some level. Just as Carlton sensed trouble, the men who wanted him dead worried whenever she talked with him. Trying to hide things from her was foolish of them and caused her misgivings.

“Glad you know what that job is,” said Carlton, “because I’m not sure why you’re here.”

“I’ve already told you,” she scanned the blue, sun-kissed Caribbean waters that surrounded them on all sides, with no land anywhere in sight, “and you can’t beat the working conditions.”

“Priority oversight of industrial secrets. Right... just don’t get too relaxed while you’re making sure I don’t hook a cable up in the wrong spot.”

“I’ll be careful. I know you’ve had some tense dives in the past.”

“Yeah.” He looked up when a deck hatchway opened and a man wearing a light blue polo shirt and khaki shorts climbed up from below. “But not as bad as some people.”

She patted the newcomer on the shoulder as she passed him on her way the stairs leading to the wheelhouse.

“I could hear you two talking,” Genghis Champlain said as she closed the wheelhouse door behind her.

“He’s a brave man.” Kearston looked down at the two men talking in the assembly area, but her attention was focussed on gently probing Genghis’s subconscious.

“Carlton MacKanally?” Genghis clearly did not like to hear anything close to a compliment being said about him.

“No. Well, yes, him too. But I was talking about Rich Stanton. He’s overwhelmed by fear of being eaten alive by a shark every time he looks at the water. He’s being very brave, trying to hide that fear from us.”

“It’s necessary,” said Genghis. “He was our hook to lure MacKanally here.”

That was when she caught a memory of Genghis sitting in a helicopter with three other men, one of whom she had never met. The stranger had a lantern jaw and piercing blue eyes that were shadowed beneath heavy eyebrows. Even the normally unflappable Genghis was intimidated to his core by his memory of this man, who firmly declared how he not only wanted MacKanally dead, he wanted every memory of him ever being alive to be erased. It seemed like a flight of fantasy, but she could tell that Genghis considered it his job to make this stranger’s every request happen. Then she caught a hint of something deeper and far scarier.

“You knew Mack wouldn’t turn down a job from a man saved,” she probed deeper. “Still, Stanton coming back to the area where he

watched his wife eaten alive by a tiger shark,” she shivered, “he can’t stop thinking about it. And he puts that horror in my head every time I’m around him.”

“So that’s why you always avoid him? Just stop reading his mind.”

She found it ironic coming from him at the very moment when she was probing *his* mind. She had already known that Genghis and his fellow Artomiques were somehow allied with the alien Brothan. She had been sent to make contact with them to investigate their alliance. But until this very moment, she did not realize how deep their connection went with the formidable wolf-like aliens.

“It’s not that simple,” she replied.

“Well, Kearston, do what you have to do. Once MacKanally does the job, he’s a dead man—even if it is a few years late. After that, Stanton is expendable, too.”

“Do you have to kill them both?” She feigned slight disinterest, while her own mind reeled from having seen Genghis’s memory of an apocalyptic destruction of his Earth, where the very fabric of his reality had been rent asunder and replaced by the world currently around them. She looked away to hide any reaction her face might reveal.

“No.” Genghis gave the back of her head a hard look, as she tried not to react to the realization of how long and hard the Artomiques had schemed to recreate their own world. Only recently had they begun to accept the possibility that this might never happen. “That depends on you.”

Having collected herself from the initial shock of what she had uncovered, Kearston turned back to face Genghis. His darker skin and face reflected his direct descent from his namesake, Genghis Khan, while his blue eyes came from an Artomique father—German in this reality.

She could see herself reflected in those eyes and could hear his mind trying to decipher her own genetic mix, which defied Earth-bound perceptions. With slightly tan skin and light brown hair that framed high cheekbones and green eyes, only a handful of people on Earth would recognize her as a child of the Wild Stars—distant planets that few on Earth realized existed. Now that the Wild Stars had vanished from the galaxy, they might never know.

“If you want to find your way back into the stars”—Genghis seemed to read her mind, though she knew that was not possible —“then you need to help us recover that spaceship.”

“It’s a Wild Stars ship?” she asked.

“Not just any ship. Our recent takeover of the collapsed Granite Rock Bank provided us with intel that indicates this a scout class Wild Stars ship, which is...”

“The fastest ship in the galaxy,” she interjected before he could say it. She finally understood what it was Genghis was hiding. He and the other Artomiques were not just using this salvage dive as an excuse to kill a hated enemy, whom, for some strange reason unclear to her, they blamed for the destruction of their world. No, what they were really hiding was how their plans had shifted to increasing their influence and control over the reality where they found themselves stranded. They had plans to assert their Artomique Paradigm on the world, regardless of however long that effort might take.

“Not just that. We believe that this ship was lost by Erlik, son of the Ancient Warrior.”

She blinked, a visual break in her struggle to control her outward reactions and not reveal the impact of his words. That she was a member of the secret organization of female telepaths known as the Five Thousand Fingered Hand, the Artomiques were already aware. What she could not allow them to learn was how it was manipulations by the Hand that most likely caused the Ancient Warrior to relocate the Wild Stars to parts unknown. Their plans to manipulate the Wild Stars had backfired in spectacular fashion.

“That ship not only has an artificial intelligence operating system,” Genghis continued, “it has a supply of exotic matter. According to our information, Erlik overloaded the ship’s systems while teleporting something big off-world and had to abandon the ship. There is also a chance that some autonoman might be on board.”

“Auto-what?” She feigned ignorance.

“Autonoman. Synthetic men with weapons and flight systems built into their bodies, controlled by an autonomous A.I. operating system. Erlik was known to use them as bodyguards on occasion. The

technology on that ship could power the Artomique Corporation to the cutting edge of new technologies for hundreds of years.”

“So, which is it you want? The ship? Or Carlton MacKanally dead?”

“Both. Achilles Hister vowed that MacKanally must die. But get the ship secured on the lifting cables before you give him a brain aneurysm or whatever it is you plan to cause him to drown. Leave the body down there—lost at sea. Once he leaves this deck, I never want to see his face again.”

The waters were so warm, neither Kearston nor Carlton wore a wetsuit. They geared up and took turns stepping through the gate in the railing and dropping into the sea. She had used her mind-reading skills to answer his every question when Carlton had grilled her in advance, concerned by the fact that she had no certification card to assure him of her abilities. He seemed to suspect that this was her very first open water dive, even as she locked in on his subconscious and mimicked his every action and reflex.

She checked her gear just as he did, then purged the excess air from her buoyancy control vest and followed him down the rope attached to the marker buoy he had previously set. When he put a hand on the cables dropping next to them, she did the same.

Suddenly, Kearston felt a wave of apprehension and claustrophobia, but quickly realized that it came from Carlton. A deeply rooted memory had revealed itself. He had once been chained to a bucket of concrete and thrown into a deep river to drown, yet managed to walk his way back to the surface—how, he never understood. He fought off the wave of panic, and his entire thought patterns changed.

Kearston marveled at how quickly all his uneasiness vanished. Here, he was in his element. He understood the dangers of this undersea world well. Still, it seemed strange to Kearston that a man who had nearly died by drowning would choose a profession where he made his living underwater.

Then she understood.

He was facing his fears.

From that point on, she was enthralled by the canopy of aquatic life and colorful corals sixty feet down, which spread abundantly across the ocean floor. At the end of the rope was something

decidedly out of place—a gleaming gold starship, although she could read the confusion about what it was in Carlton’s mind.

He had examined the ship thoroughly when he had first discovered it and had no idea what it truly was. His best guess was that it must be a prototype submersible.

Carlton quickly set to work securing the cables according to a plan formulated after his initial dive. A large loop was hooked around the object’s conical nose and smaller loops around the wing-like structures on the upper rear. Once he secured the last cable that linked the others into place, he looked back to confirm with Kearston that there were no problems.

This was the moment she had been recruited for.

It was time for Carlton MacKanally to die.

Even through his mask, she could see a look of concern in his eyes, which she attributed to his innate telepathic ability. But then she realized that he was looking past her and saw the danger reflected in both his mind and face-mask at the same time. Something green, nightmarish, and possibly humanoid had risen from the depths directly behind her, and she had never sensed a thing. As frightening as the thought was that any living creature could catch her unawares, what she turned to see right on top of her was even more startling.

Long, webbed fingers with curved claws clamped over her facemask as the powerful creature whisked her away. Blinded, she reached out and made an even deeper telepathic connection with Carlton’s mind, seeing what he saw.

Carlton did not waste a moment considering the impossibility of the strange creature that seized Kearston. He instinctively did what he always did in dire situations—he acted to intercede.

Several more fishmen shot out of the shadows lining the sea bottom. But they weren’t attacking him. Instead, they carried what looked like bizarrely complex bolt cutters as they headed for the rising ship. But before they could reach their goal, a trio of dark forms appeared out of the deep blue like underwater freight trains. Each member of the pod of orcas seized a fishman in its jaws and disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

The fishman carrying Kearston was un-deterred by the calamity that had befallen his fellows, and continued to carry her down into a black grotto.

Kearston caught a glimpse of Carlton's hand slipping into the wrist-hoop connected to his flashlight before he unclipped it from his vest. Following her captor into the grotto, his tiny beam of light became fainter and fainter as the distance between them became ever greater, and she slowly lost telepathic contact.

She began to feel giddy, losing her fright, and realized that they must have already descended well below a hundred feet—possibly two. One of the last thoughts she intercepted from Carlton was a concern over nitrogen narcosis, which some divers referred to as being *narked* because of the drunken feeling caused by the buildup of nitrogen bubbles in the blood.

Despite being trapped in darkness, she became so relaxed that she passed out.

“**W**ake up!” Kearston felt a pair of steel-strong hands shaking her shoulders and opened her eyes to see Carlton MacKanally standing over her in the semi-darkness of a cave, only slightly illuminated by his nearby flashlight.

“What happened?”

“That thing that took you left you in this underwater cave with an air pocket. It was gone by the time I caught up with you.”

Carlton picked up his light and shined it around.

“I don't think this is a cave,” Kearston echoed his thoughts.

They found themselves next to a pool at the center of a marble-walled room, filled with cracked pillars that still supported a stone roof high overhead. Pieces of fallen masonry littered the floors, and ornate statues of gold-adorned marble stood everywhere—all of them facing the pool.

“This is an ancient temple.” Carlton focused his light on the colossal carving of a man wearing a crown, whose lower body was that of a fish.

“Dagon,” said Kearston. “Three thousand years ago, Philistines worshipped this god of the sea, among many others. But his was only one of many religions that they absorbed during their prior

history as Aegean seafarers. Worship of Dagon dates further back than any recorded history. There are some isolated communities that still hold the sea-lord in reverence.”

“Fish-gods?” Carlton asked incredulously. “We’re a long way from the Aegean.”

“I think we just met some of Dagon’s descendants, and it looks like they’re back.”

Other lights began to appear around them as figures emerged from recently cut tunnels in the walls. Those carrying light-sticks at the forefront were more of the agile fishermen they had encountered earlier, while those following behind them looked more like lobstermen, with thick carapaces on their backs and long metal spears in their webbed hands.

One of the lobstermen stepped to the front. This one looked different, with strange eye-stalks growing out of its head. The orbs fixated on Kearston and Carlton.

A webbed finger pointed at Kearston.

“You are like me,” she heard the thought in her head.

The creature then motioned for the others to surround her and Carlton, using their spears to usher them in the direction of one of the tunnels. There they saw what looked like a crude, metal cart, mounted on a rail that led downward.

“What weren’t you telling me about that thing we were lifting?” Carlton looked around, measuring his chances in a fight. “Does it belong to them?”

“Absolutely not,” she replied. “I have no idea why these creatures attacked us. But I may know what they are.”

“This should be interesting.”

“Have you ever heard of the Wild Stars?”

“Wasn’t that a comic book series?”

“Huh? I have no idea what you’re talking about. The Wild Stars are the region of space where mankind colonized when they made their first migration off-world.”

“Huh?”

“They were nearly chased forever from the Earth by the sea creatures known as the Isshla. It’s from them that the term *island* comes, but the Isshla claim all land surrounded by the seas.”

“When it comes down to it, you’re talking about the whole planet.”

“Basically. They would have taken complete control, but the man called the Ancient Warrior, who guided the way to the Wild Stars, returned and found a way to defeat the Isshla. Somehow he imprisoned them deep inside the Earth.”

“Okay.” Carlton abandoned his plan for hopeless resistance and put his hands up as he and Kearston were prodded to enter the metal cart.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Nope. I think you know more about comic books than you’re letting on. And I doubt that it’s a coincidence that they showed up at that salvage ship.”

The cart started rolling them away into the darkness and quickly picked up speed, and they descended ever deeper into the bowels of the Earth. She felt a queasiness in the pit of her stomach and read Carlton’s mind about swallowing hard to release the pressure building on her ears, even while he continued to belabor his point.

“What *is* inside that thing?”

Chapter One: Battle by the Nebula

“As you know, all of our Artomique technology is based on the recovery of a single Wild Stars ship,” said Genghis Champlain. “In a galaxy rife with strife, but struggling for peace, we are humanity’s only true hope. We can’t let our past be revealed and have all of our plans become undone. Not now... not when we’re so close to initiating our ultimate gambit.”

Achilles ‘Whip’ Hister knew that Genghis was pandering to him, but why—he was not sure. Neither did Whip know what this ultimate plan was that had always been kept a secret from him. He bit his tongue and bided his time while examining the long-range satellite image of a colorful nebula cloud that his mentor had overlaid onto the wall that served as the main portal for the observation lounge. Soon, Whip would become arguably the most powerful man alive. All he had to do was be patient a little longer.

“I refuse to believe it’s a coincidence that the ion trail of the escaped Saturnian-Eybontic hybrid is headed in the same direction as where our satellite links have shown a facial recognition hit from our blacklist.”

As he talked, Genghis kept a hand cupped over his ear, receiving constant updates from the captain on the ship’s bridge. Their ship, *Godspeed*, was fresh off the production line and on its maiden voyage, which, by the numbers, was the most dangerous flight by any starship. But those numbers continued to improve as Earth became both better astral navigators and shipbuilders, and their dreadnought redefined what it meant to be a top of the line vessel.

Whip dialed up a holographic projection that manifested directly in front of the screen and magnified an area in intricate detail that revealed the remains of what had once been a Marzanti Worldship—an alien vessel so large that it could not enter a solar system without disrupting the rotation of the planets. Centering and enlarging the focus revealed three figures fighting amid the wreckage.

“That’s him, all right.” Georgian Raveling entered the lounge the moment after Whip enlarged the image enough to show facial features. “Bully Shawnee triggered the recognition signal. He’s also called Stormbringer, Zarawtic, and a lot of other things. He’s the

grandson of Mark MacKavicka, nicknamed Mack, Codenamed: First Marker. Mack has repeatedly escaped our assassins. Defying death seems to be a hereditary trait that Shawnee inherited.”

“Weren’t the events in the First Marker file... like two hundred years ago?” Whip asked. “How old can his grandson be?”

“Mack popped up again during the Cybernetics War.” Genghis began rotating surveillance images across a section of the lounge screen. “Then again a little over twenty years ago, when he was active on Akara’s World. More recently, he’s been sighted on several of the newly returned Wild Stars worlds, including Ansa. And I agree with you, it looks like he hasn’t aged much for all that time.”

“Hasn’t aged... much?” Whip admonished the comment, pretending not to notice how Genghis was systematically deactivating the red grids that kept popping along on the corners of the portal. “He hasn’t aged at all! Still, with all the enhancements and training that you’ve had since your ancestor encountered him, I’d say this time a Champlain would beat him in a fight.”

“I’m ready.”

“And the Champlain who lost that fight,” said Georgian, “has already had a revenge—of sorts.”

There was something about the certainty with which Genghis replied that Whip found odd. Both of the regents Whip’s father had left to manage the Artomique Corporation until his coming of age had always displayed an uncanny familiarity whenever discussing their ancestors. It was a familiarity filled with knowledge nowhere to be found in the archives.

“That man holds not only the secret to altering reality, he can move through time,” Georgian asserted.

When Genghis gave no further reply other than the nod of his head, Whip motioned for him to speak.

“The captain says that they still can’t recover the Eybontic’s signal. If he stalls the engines any more, we’ll drop out of hyper-light drive. He suggests that we resume course for Ansa.”

“Tell him to drop out of light drive,” Whip replied. “We’re not done here.”

“We can’t afford the delay,” Georgian argued. “Do you want to be late for your Terraformer rendezvous? Maybe miss your own

celebration? Your father has planned this for a long time. When you come of age, not only do you become the head of Artomique Corp, you'll become the most powerful man in the galaxy. That's something more than a few people might want to stop from happening. This could be a trap."

Whip repeated his order.

Genghis exchanged a look with Georgian before relaying Whip's message, but as the view outside the window turned from milky white into a colorful star panorama, he relayed another warning.

"The captain wants me to remind you how dangerous this sector of space is," said Genghis. "There's an entire squadron of Equine Class warships assisting a Maxitrillion Class warship that is in hot pursuit of the extra-dimensional Neth entity. All of that is happening inside the Nebula we're looking at."

"I know." Whip waved his hand in the direction of the massive debris field—when the Nebula behind it was lit up from within by staccato flashes of colorful light. "That's the remains of the Marzanti world-ship that the wormhole monster Neth appropriated. That Maxitrillion warship blasted it into pieces."

"Now they've pursued the entity deep inside that nebula," said Georgian. "Being a gaseous entity, it's going to be in its own element there. And, since its mate, Nean, was destroyed, it's going to be angry, too."

As if to emphasize Genghis's point, the core of the nebula flashed an immense wave of light. Either a star had gone supernova, or the battle was intensifying to horrific levels. All the local images that they were watching flashed as the source shifted from a nearby satellite to the Godsend's optics—with the ship's unique side-to-side motion in space-normal speed providing a constantly shifting perspective on the holographic display.

"Tell the captain to scan that nebula and pick up any readings on that Maxitrillion ship that our competitors built. While he's at it, scan that debris field. We need to learn anything we can about Marzanti technology."

"Yes, sir," Genghis replied with the same obedience his ancestors had shown for two hundreds years—ever since they had crossed over from an alternate reality world where fascism had conquered

the world in the name of the Artomiques. They had always named their most deadly warships in honor of that lost heritage. “But the captain again wants me to remind...”

“Yes, yes,” said Whip. “It’s dangerous out here. I know. That’s why we’re in the newest Artomique class dreadnought. Tell him that I know we’ll be late for my meeting with the Terraformer heiress, but this is an opportunity we can’t pass up.”

“Sir,” said Genghis. “They’ve relocated the signal. They’ve found the hybrid Dalucar again!”

“Where?”

“There!” Genghis pointed to Whip’s hologram of three men fighting in the debris field. “The reason they lost his signal is the hybrid stopped on that big chunk of the ship that’s shaped like an enormous face. He’s one of those combatants. I knew this couldn’t be a coincidence.”

“Reports said that section was reshaped by Neth into his own image,” said Whip. “What is Dalucar doing?” He tapped the window to activate another holographic control panel and zoomed in. “We know who one of the people he’s fighting is, but who’s that other man? Why didn’t the recognition software pick up either him or Dalucar?”

“The Eybontics were destroyed,” Georgian replied, “except for the last one that Earth-gov locked away in their Gates of Hell. And all the Saturnians were exiled on chunks of ice from Oort Cloud and sent flying. Neither the Eybontics nor the Saturnians were ever programmed into the system.”

The enlarged image revealed the sentient machine-man battling with two bubble-helmeted men who wielded what were either photonic-laser blades or turquoise-colored swords. Then Whip realized that the blades were curved, which photonic blades could never be.

The machine-man known as an Eybontic was a sentient entity whose entire humanoid form was filled with lethal weapons and a personal propulsion system that enabled it to achieve light speeds. Why it would have chosen to stop and engage in a fight was a mystery. What was even more surprising was the way that the Eybontic was unable to overwhelm his opponents. Somehow, the

bubble-helmeted men were always able to either deflect the Eybontic's attacks with their blades, which should not have been possible, or literally disappeared and reappeared to renew the attack from an unexpected vector.

"Who can that other man be?" Genghis queried.

"No way to know," Georgian replied. "But we're going to find out. Do recognition searches from these recordings."

"Nothing about him is registering," said Genghis. "His face isn't in any known database."

"Strange to think that the body of the last of the Eybontics would be inhabited by Dalucar," said Whip, "the last known Saturnian. They were mortal enemies. It was a stroke of luck when Dalucar somehow broke that Eybontic out of that Venusian prison. All my life I've worried that someone would figure out that one of Georgian's ancestors designed the Eybontics as autonomous deep-space explorers before they gained sentience."

"And since the Saturnians gained their long lives from our cloning technology," said Genghis, "the Artomique Corporation created both sides of a conflict that killed fifteen billion people. If anyone on Earth ever figured that out, the reputation of Artomique Corp would never recover. Even today, generations later, we'd be hated war criminals."

"Not anymore," said Whip. "Now that the Wild Stars have returned, we can blame them. Before, no one would have believed we stole those technologies from a Wild Stars ship recovered from the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. Now... now they might. People are finally starting to realize that the Wild Stars are real and not a myth. Look! The fight's over!"

Inexplicably, two men armed with simple swords had defeated a machine-man who supposedly could not be defeated by mere men. They had sliced him into pieces that scattered in the weightlessness of the void.

"What the...?" Genghis muttered when the other man handed his sword to Bully Shawnee and simply disappeared. Then Shawnee vanished. "When did he gain that skill?"

"It might explain why members of his family don't age," Whip hypothesized.

“We’ve heard about men like that,” said Georgian. “That other man must be Purple Order, from the galaxy of the deathless entity the Wild Starriors call the God Father.”

“Tell the captain to move in and recover whatever remains he can,” said Whip.

“Why bother with the recognition search?” asked Genghis. “If that third man is from another galaxy, it will be a waste...”

“Do it anyway,” said Whip. “If someone from this galaxy has figured out how to incorporate the abilities of the Purple Order, I want that knowledge. Once we get what we want, we’ll do with it what we always do.”

Whip said the words that were expected of him but did not feel the conviction. His entire life had been spent in isolation and training to take over his father’s role as Chief Executive and Chief Operating Officer. When Achilles Hister the 7th departed to explore the Wild Stars, he had left Whip in charge of the Corporation, with guidance from his regents.

Whip highlighted a section of the wall grid, where the Eybontic’s head floated, its glowing eyes slowly growing dim.

“Tell the captain to send a service drone to recover that,” he ordered Genghis, who hesitated at first, but a nod and a shrug from Georgian seemed to tip his judgement.

Now Whip did what he had always done during his long periods of isolation—and threw himself into the quest for discovery.

Once the recovered head of the Eybontic was delivered to him and the ship had returned on course for Ansa, he locked himself away in the main science laboratory and activated a faraday cage program to secure the room from the rest of the ship.

Before he powered the Eybontic’s brain back up, Whip went through and deleted all the programming with the largest personality profiles, figuring that would eradicate the entity called Dalucar. He then picked out a profile that looked incomplete, which was unusual since Saturnians were knowledge vampires who normally sucked the whole essence out of a victim’s brain. Whip made that personality into the operating system interface.

Once hooked into an energy outlet, the disembodied head began to rattle and shake. Then the eyes lit up.

“Here I go again,” the voice box spoke without movement of the mouth. “Still a severed head. This is a new one, but just like before, I still have no sensory input.”

“Who are you?” Whip asked.

“Carthage,” the head replied, “of the Wild Stars.”

“When did Dalucar Zonderman victimize you?”

“Long before... and long after I was injected with the Bioenergetic formula...”

Whip was instantly enthralled. He had read about the supposedly mythical formula from ancient World War Two documents that were still considered classified. He had no idea that anyone had ever actually synthesized the biological weapon that turned men into zombies.

“President Bully Bravo had my undead head imprisoned with the severed head of the Saturnian, Dalucar. Either he was showing mercy by giving us each someone to talk to, or he was cruelly punishing us. I don’t know which. Bravo ordered all electronics to be removed from our prison, as part of the old Saturnian Protocols from the war. When newly elected President Perez allowed electronics back, Dalucar escaped within hours, taking part of me with him as a last gesture of spite.”

“Which part of your consciousness is still back with your undead head?”

“Considering how I’m not angry anymore, I’d say it was the part filled with hate. It was the only thing I could feel after becoming one of the undead. Don’t know why I felt that way, since all the bad things that ever happened to me, I brought on myself.”

“Just how did you... Dalucar... escape?” Whip asked.

“Knowledge,” the head replied. “I thought he was constantly rattling at me to drive me insane, but he was piquing the interest of the guards. Finally, something he said got the new President’s attention.”

“What was that?”

“The location of Asgard. Sorry, that’s what New Atlantis was called in the Norse legends. Dalucar told them he knew where the capitol planet of the Wild Stars was hidden.”

“I thought their capitol was Ansa?”

“No,” the head replied. “That’s where the Ancient Warrior’s son, Erlik, holds court. But the real power of the Wild Stars lies on the world called New Atlantis, rotating around the galactic plate in a secret position. President Perez wanted that location, sent a recorder, and snap... Dalucar was gone and took me with him.”

“Tell me, did you know where Dalucar was going? Why was he headed in the direction of Ansa?”

“He wanted revenge on the man who imprisoned him. That’s why he stopped to fight. He wants to hurt that man every way he can.”

“The same man who imprisoned you?”

“Former President Bully Bravo.”

“I know who the blond man that you... or rather, Dalucar... was fighting. Do you know who the other man is?”

“He’s President Bravo’s son,” Carthage replied.

“Bully Bravo had no children.”

“Dalucar was headed straight for Bully Bravo. His only plan was for revenge. He wouldn’t have detoured for anything, except the opportunity to kill the president’s illegitimate son, Bullson.”

Whip was stunned by what he had heard.

“How much do Bully Shawnee and Bullson know about the origin of the Eybontics and Saturnians?” he asked.

“Like I once was, they’re both time travelers, so there is a high probability that they know about many of the things that your Artomique Corporation has done.”

“Like what?”

“How you created both the Saturnians and the Eybontics and caused the Cybernetics War. And even if they don’t know, once the now-returned Wild Stars learn about what happened, they will recognize that their own technology has been misused. Also...”

Whip disconnected the power and dimmed the lights. He sat there for a long moment, watching to see if there was any activity from the artificial head, worrying that some element of the Saturnian might have found a way to reassert itself and make a cybernetic escape. He ran a diagnostic of all the laboratory’s operating systems and breathed a sigh of relief when it revealed no abnormal activity.

He then encased the Eybontic head in a cabinet made from non-conductive materials, which no electronic signal could penetrate. For

the briefest of moments, he imagined the red eyes of the skull reactivating with energy inside the safe's inky darkness, and he felt pity for the remnants of the man once called Carthage—sealed in a cybernetic cage with his tormentor. Then Whip remembered who he was and how he had no time for such petty distractions.

Between the threat of old secrets being revealed and the new secrets that his own mentors were keeping from him, a nagging intuition that something terrible was about to happen began to overwhelm Whip. He sat and stared at a remote image of the approaching Wild Stars moon, Ansa, as it circled the gas giant, Behemit. It seemed to him that the filaments of gas clouds from the Dragon's Claw Nebula in the background were indeed forming talons that reached out to ensnare him... or shake his hand.

Whip had made his own secret plans to reshape the Artomique Corporation in ways that his mentors never suspected, nor would approve.

He only had to wait a little bit longer.

Chapter Two: Highways in the Sky

“Look at him,” the woman sneered as former United States President Bully Bravo greeted new arrivals to Ansa at an adjacent gateway. “I can’t stand the sight of him.”

“Is that Bully Bravo?” asked Whip as he stepped through. He had never seen the former President in person. Bravo had a barrel chest, a military haircut, and a regimented demeanor that no amount of time away from the services could diminish. But his legendary grim visage had softened after he learned to smile during his career as a politician.

“Yes, sorry.” She extended a hand in greeting as her two burly bodyguards eyed Genghis and Georgian. “I’m Josette McGuffin, heiress to the Terraformer Corporation. Welcome to Ansa, young Mister Hister.”

“Whip,” he replied to the evident chagrin of his regents.

“I believe this is your first visit to the stars?”

“It’s my first visit anywhere,” Whip cut his eyes at his overprotective guardians. “When I take over the C.E.O’s seat, it’s going to be a new dawn for the Artomique Corporation. I’m on a goodwill mission in preparation for that day.”

“Well,” Josette replied, “my ship takes off in a little while. I was beginning to think you wouldn’t make it for our meeting before I left.”

“Sorry, we were delayed. Are you planning to return for the Earth-Wild Stars conference?”

“No. The Terraformers have never been properly acknowledged for all we’ve done to colonize the stars. Until we are, I want no part of their treaty discussions. When they’re ready to terraform new worlds, it will be on my terms, not theirs.”

“I’m ready to discuss terms, now.” Whip was slightly distracted by the lightness of his step with Ansa’s lighter gravity.

“At least, we’re ready to open a dialog,” Genghis interjected.

“Come,” she led the way to a nearby door, where two men in plain clothes passed them through. “Let’s relax in the executive lounge and discuss things further. You’ve got one-half of an Earth hour before I have to leave.”

“Why the rush?” Whip took a seat, while his mentors hovered as near as Mcguffin’s bodyguards were willing to permit.

“Pirate activity. They’re not too keen to see this conference lead to new treaties. If you just came from Earth, I’m surprised you didn’t have an encounter with them yourself. It’s just going to get even worse after the conference, I’m afraid.”

“I hadn’t heard about any trouble from pirates.” Whip tried to make eye contact first with Genghis and then Georgian, hoping to check their reactions, but both men looked away. “I thought all that trouble ended when the Whisper Ice Cream heiress, Scarlet Tanager, disappeared.”

“After it was revealed that she was the Red Queen, Nefarimor, everyone said she was dead,” said Josette. “Rumor has it that she was eaten by red grief on Akara’s World.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Whip. “Everyone abandoned that cursed world after it was infested by the Brothan.”

“Thing about rumors is they can be complete fiction. There has been a new rumor that Nefarimor never left Corsairiana.”

“Regardless of treaties or pirates,” said Whip with conviction, “I believe the Terraformers and the Artomiques will do considerable business in the future. We build the biggest ships, and we’re going to need bases for our transit networks. Earth and the Wild Stars might be shaking hands, but their ideologies are not compatible. While they’re discovering that, you and I will build the highways in the sky.”

Josette twirled a curl of dark hair in her index finger, emptied her drink, and stood up.

“I almost didn’t agree to this meeting. Your father has a reputation of being a little... abrasive. But I believe you and I can work together.”

They walked together toward the exit, discussing terms for laying down a groundwork for negotiations, mostly to be conducted by Georgian Raveling. Josette seemed a little put off by that suggestion at first, but then she saw Bully Bravo waiting for them outside in the main aisle.

“Let’s make it happen,” she said as she quickly walked away, returning Bully Bravo’s greeting with a cold nod of her head, her eyes turned.

Bully then greeted Whip and his companions.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mister President,” Whip lied. “Something I can do for you?”

“Very perceptive of you,” Bully smiled. “Yes, I have been waiting. While I’m no longer a representative of Earth’s government, people make inquiries of me all the time. Many of those inquiries have been about when your new line of dreadnoughts will be available to assist with Earth’s evacuation.”

“I’d heard that the Wild Stars already dealt with crisis of the runaway black hole, Ruin,” said Whip.

Bully nodded.

“Ruin is no longer headed for the center of the solar system,” he conceded. “But, like a line of dominoes, when you push one—others start falling.”

Whip looked at Georgian when the President used his counselor’s own analogy.

“Ruin was knocked out of its symbiotic orbit with Earth,” said Bravo. “Now that it’s been removed completely, something like it needs to take its place in the celestial clockwork. There is a chance that assistance from our allies in the Wild Stars might be able to correct the situation. But until that happens, we should continue the evacuation.”

Genghis decided to insert himself into the conversation.

“You’re counting on help from a race of people,” he said, “whose wars are what put Earth in danger?”

“You seem to know a lot of details about Ruin that most don’t,” said Bravo. “I was there when it was thrown out of the galaxy. These people from the Wild Stars can do things, teach us things that you would not believe. I’m glad that you’ve accepted my invitation to this conference. I hope we can make a treaty between Earth, the Wild Stars, and all Earth’s colonies happen.”

“I can’t stay,” Georgian interjected as he walked away from the others.

“Your conference is at nearly the same time as my birthday,” said Whip.

Bully Bravo cocked his head.

“My advisors have a ceremony planned for my eighteenth birthday... elsewhere. What kind, they won’t tell me. Just that it will be unforgettable.”

“Congratulations.” Bully then continued to press his point. “About the ships?”

“They’re still under construction,” Genghis once again interceded. “When they’re ready to be deployed, you’ll know about it.”

“You came in on one of them, didn’t you,” said Bravo, with the serious expression of a man who recognizes a fearsome danger. “I got a good look at the Godspeed when you dropped into orbit. You based your design on Zarawti, the space shark that Erlik built?”

“It’s one of nature’s designs,” said Genghis. “It will revolutionize ship-building.”

“An Earth starship with a flexible body design is certainly new,” said Bravo. “Yours won’t have an appetite, will they?”

“We’re here to offer our goodwill to the Wild Stars elite,” said Whip.

“I wouldn’t call them elite,” Bravo smiled and shook a hesitant Whip’s hand. “But by Earth standards, I can see how they’d give that impression. Speaking of impressions. Didn’t you just come from Earth? Didn’t you get the distress calls?”

“Distress calls?” Whip looked at Genghis, while trying to surreptitiously wipe his palm on his clothing, having rarely been exposed to physical contact with others.

“We suffered a communications breakdown,” Genghis stated flatly.

“Better get that fixed before you leave.”

Bully Bravo thanked Whip in advance for the Artomique’s future assistance with the crisis, and offered to escort them. But other new arrivals had recognized him at that point.

“Thanks for the offer, but I plan on walking there,” Whip waved Bully on. “I want to know more about Wild Stars culture.”

“There’s danger in this,” Genghis whispered.

“That’s why you’re here,” Whip replied as he exited the aerodrome and was too surprised to find a bustling community clustered all about. He stood motionless for some time, taking in the sights of an alien world. “Why didn’t you tell me about the pirates? I saw you deactivating those distress signals.”

“Pirates know better than to tangle with an Artomique class starship,” Genghis replied. “But we were already late for your meeting with the Terraformers.”

“And what about our duty by Interstellar Law?”

“Soon you’ll be the one writing those laws,” said Georgian as he rejoined them, having recovered his diplomatic case from customs.

“That’s right,” Whip replied.

“Never say or think that,” Genghis admonished. “Don’t even think about our plans for the future. None of us. Not here. Not now.”

Georgian nodded in response to the rebuke. There was a clear but unspoken order of rank between his mentors.

“That won’t be hard for me,” Whip stepped away in the direction of the main thoroughfare, “since you’ve both kept me in the dark on most of those plans.”

Keeping the biggest building off in the distance constantly in sight, Whip walked the streets feeling like he was a butterfly. His feet seemed to barely touch the ground as he crossed and recrossed streets whenever something more interesting would catch his attention on each block of the city that was laid out in a grid pattern, much like communities on Earth.

When Whip saw several men entering a small shop and leaving with what looked like loaves of bread, what caught his attention were the thrilled looks on their faces and how they clutched the long paper bags to their chests like prized possessions.

Whip entered the shop.

“I’m from Earth,” he introduced himself to the man working the counter. “What is it you sell?”

The clerk gave him a blank look, reached inside a drawer, and pulled out a small plug similar to the universal translator Whip wore in his ear. The clerk inserted it and motioned for Whip to repeat his question.

“What is it you sell?”

“It depends,” he replied. “What do you like? I don’t have any grak or straculum, which, from looking at you, is what you’re probably used to.”

The clerk’s words were mostly echoed in English, although some of the words that Whip thought unique were not translated, meaning

that they were already considered part of Terran linguistics.

“Or do you want to try something different?”

“I’ll go with your advice,” said Whip. “What’s the price?”

“One ounce of gold.”

The translation seemed excessive to Whip.

“Could you repeat that?”

The clerk stopped his motion of placing in a paper bag what looked like a fresh-baked loaf of bread, with a marbled exterior sprinkled over by shiny spices.

“If you want grak and straculum,” the clerk replied, “they sell that across the street.”

“Sorry. No insult intended. I’m not familiar with how trade works in the Wild Stars. So I take it that there are no set scales on trade.”

The clerk tapped his earplug.

“A monetary system.” Whip held up his hand to pay electronically with the chip inserted there.

The clerk looked confused, held up his own hand with the palm out, and then lightly slapped Whip’s palm. When he saw Whip’s confusion, the clerk shrugged his shoulders.

“How do I pay?” Whip pressed.

“Silver is nice. Gold is better. Reputation is everything.”

Whip found some United States coinage mixed with Caribbean in one of his pockets, and offered them all.

“Reputation?” Whip asked as the clerk ran his index fingers over the coins being offered, hesitating for only a second over the pennies.

“Not everything is done for silver and gold.” The clerk looked down at the half-bagged loaf and back at Whip. “But between you and me? I don’t know you, so I’m going to need to see some gold.”

“What about credit?”

“I’ve already told you,” the clerk’s mood began to have an edge. “I don’t know you, and you don’t have a reputation.”

“My mistake. I won’t repeat it.”

Genghis looked at Whip’s empty hands when he rejoined him outside.

“What was that about?” he asked.

“Learning how things work in the Wild Stars.”

“In the Wild Stars,” said Georgian, “people still work for reward, unlike Earth. Since the orbital solar collector has supplied all of Earth’s power, almost no one actually does anything that would be considered labor. Our automatons do.”

“As long as they don’t rebel again,” Whip interjected.

“They’re all programmed now with minimal intelligence. Earth’s populations are supported by the governments. Sure, there are careers for people who are more goal-orientated, and there will never not be a need for soldiers, but most people live a life of leisure and self-indulgence.”

“That’s why they became so addicted to Whisper Ice Cream,” said Whip. “Now they’re all sheep being herded around by laser monkeys. And not everyone lives in similar conditions. Daily protests prove that it’s not an ideal life.”

“It’s all good for business,” said Georgian.

“The Wild Stars are a capitalist system,” Genghis shrugged, “and not, at the same time. You don’t have the kind of government oversight like we have over everything on Earth. Even more surprising, no one takes advantage of it.”

“Ripe for the pickings?” Whip knew his comment would draw a smile from Genghis. He had given the response expected from a descendant of Achilles Hister. But at his core, he questioned the justification of inflicting predatory practices on an easily victimized population. That the Artomique Corporation had grown into a world power by doing this for nearly two hundred years was his heritage, but he had begun to question whether it had to be his personal legacy.

“True,” said Genghis. “But, again, let’s stop all thoughts like that for now.”

That was when Whip realized how what he had come to do was out of character.

“Peace with the Wild Stars?” he asked Genghis, then turned to Georgian. “A galaxy in harmony? How do those things give us an advantage.”

“It’s a long term plan,” Georgian replied. “Trust us. Just as we applied the Artomique Paradigm to Earth, we do the same in the stars.”

“You’ve both been good mentors, but my eighteenth birthday is in two days. When I assume full control over the Artomique Corporation, it’ll be time for you both to become a bit more forthright.”

“We will,” Genghis replied.

“When it’s time,” Georgian concluded. “You will understand everything.”

“That time is almost here.” Whip wondered why his words seemed to bother Georgian, while Genghis was unfazed. Whip had always felt a closer bond with Georgian, and he thought his mentors’ reactions would have been reversed.

As they stepped onto the stone steps of the building where their meeting with Erlik and the other decision-makers of the Wild Stars would take place, Genghis and Georgian each grabbed one of Whip’s arms at the same time.

Climbing the steps directly in front of them, heading in the same direction, was the man they had seen fighting in the nebula wreckage. Judging by how he had previously disappeared and had now somehow arrived on Ansa before their ultra-swift dreadnought, President Bully Bravo’s illegitimate son appeared to have just confirmed that he had the ability to move through time and space.

The Wild Stars were proving to be a much greater danger to the Artomique Paradigm than Whip had ever imagined possible, and his imagination had been running in overdrive.

Chapter Three: Who Owns Earth?

Bullson knew how disconcerting it was for others when a time traveler would appear from nowhere, and so he returned to the bustling street traffic on Ansa, where he emerged from the anonymity of the crowd and climbed the stone steps to the newly constructed parliament building.

It was a magnificent structure that Earthmen thought reflected a Greek influence, with marble columns lining the exterior. But Bullson knew it was the Greeks who had been influenced by the Wild Stars. Everything was built of intricately cut stone that interlocked so tightly no mortar was required. Not even a sheet of paper could fit into the non-existent gaps of the joints. It was trimmed with the same white marble as the columns.

When he entered the main council chamber, Bullson saw Risky Bravo leaning on the lectern in the center of the speaker's floor. Also known as Tomas Shawnee, Risky was the father of Bully Shawnee, whom Bullson had recruited to help defeat the Saturnian-Eybontic hybrid, Dalucar. Bullson was surprised to see Risky's clone body not only fully revived and moving about, but doing so with great agitation. He spoke very loudly as he addressed the dark-haired Erlik, who was outfitted as always in his Wild Stars armor, and the few others that occupied the seats around a semi-circle table.

"Miri, Akara's World, Magus IV," Risky concluded with a shortness of breath that revealed a newborn body with no physical endurance, "whatever you want to call it, deserves to be left to its own devices!"

"Would you like to address this?" Erlik looked in Bullson's direction just as a hand patted his shoulder.

"I'd be happy to," Admiral Bryce walked past Bullson, picking up a chair and carrying it with him down the main aisle. He offered Risky a seat before he joined Erlik at the council table. "You're looking a lot better than the last time I saw you."

"Miri is a Wild Stars world that was left behind," Erlik elucidated, "because we always felt that those who lived there should be allowed to pursue their preferred primitive lifestyles."

Bryce nodded. He was a short but stout man, his body reflecting a lifetime spent mostly in space.

“Yes,” he said, “and I’ll be the first to acknowledge that Earth did a lot of damage when previous administrations tried to colonize it.”

“And later abandoned it,” said Risky. “So, why are you now trying to return to Miri? Keep Miri out of this whole unification of Earth and the Wild Stars.”

“There has been no return authorized by President Perez,” said Bryce. “And, before him, President Bravo outlawed Akaran wood and all exports from the planet. You’re telling me that’s changed?”

“Yes,” said Risky. “I’ve been contacted by the Tiberals, who’ve...”

“The Tiberals?” Erlik interjected. “When did they learn to use MagLink technology?”

“They’ve learned a lot of new things after repeated invasions from Earth and the Brothan,” Risky replied. “Earth abandoned Miri, Akara’s World, when they thought it was about to be destroyed by a Marzanti spike. It wasn’t, and now you Black Eyes are coming back.”

“Let me guess,” said Bryce. “Diamond hunters. I have heard reports that they’ve had some gruesome encounters with dire griefs.”

“Among others,” Risky replied. “The tree harvesters are back, too. Enough for the Tiberals to declare war on Earth.”

“What?” Bryce and Erlik said almost simultaneously.

“Isn’t that like a mouse challenging a lion?” Bryce added to his reaction.

“They’ve already been joined by the Brudwata,” Risky rejoined, “and believe you me, they are the most formidable fighters you’ll ever meet. They might even give my son trouble in hand-to-hand combat.”

As the conversation about the rights and needs of the primitive world heated up, Bullson paid more attention this time when he heard the chamber door open behind him. He noticed how Achilles Hister entered with a special type of gravity around him, accustomed to everything and everyone responding to his will. Bullson also noticed the uncomfortable way that Achilles and his henchmen looked at him, and he knew that the men had recently encountered President Bravo. He could smell his father on them. But surrounded by a room of telepaths, Bullson knew to keep his powers in check, lest he reveal more about himself than he was ready to. So, he probed only slightly into the minds of the Earthmen—no more than

what anyone else in the room would do when encountering strangers—and noticed a lot of other fingerprints touching their minds at the very same time.

“I don’t usually see you smile like that,” said Bullson’s father, Bully Bravo, as he entered the room right behind the Artomique Corp representatives. When Daestar, Erlik’s wife, entered behind him, Bravo added, “... except when there is a pretty woman present.”

Daestar was easily the most formidable telepath that Bullson had ever encountered, outside of his own God Mother. Reading the whole room in a glance, she quickly determined that the urgent matter on her mind should wait and moved to join Erlik’s daughter, Akara, in the gallery where she sat with her husband, the clone of some Earthman named Carlton MacKanaly who had lived hundreds of years before.

Bullson let his smile fade—not because of his jealousy over the beautiful Akara’s affection for her husband. It was because of the reaction he had read in Achilles’s mind toward his father’s comment. While Achilles considered Daestar to be an attractive woman, he also considered her too old.

Insulted by what he had read, Bullson certified the young Achilles to be a complete fool and lost respect for the man who was not that much younger than himself, so he pushed deeper into the Earthman’s thoughts.

He discovered how Achilles and both of his companions recognized Bullson, even though they had never met. When he probed even deeper, Bullson realized that these Artomiques had been watching on a nearby ship when he and Bully Shawnee battled the Eybontic-Saturnian hybrid Dalucar on the wreckage of the Marzanti ship. But these Artomiques seemed to have no inkling about how Shawnee had then left the galaxy and were startled that Bullson could have arrived on Ansa before them.

Bullson snorted his disappointment. He had expected more. He did not even bother trying to figure what it was that made the Artomiques so happy to see Risky Bravo.

Erlik gave Bullson a quick cut of his eyes, obvious from across the room as he paused the discussion with Risky. He then rose to greet

Achilles with a handshake after Bully Bravo entered the hall and led the Artomiques onto the speaker's floor.

"I'll get right to the point," said Achilles as he gestured to Georgian Raveling to set his briefcase on the council table.

Erlík motioned for him to stop before Georgian opened it.

"I agree about getting to the point," said Erlík. "Let's be very open about a few things. I know how your companions have extended your lives through many lifetimes with stolen Wild Stars technology."

Bullson caught Achilles's mind reeling at the mention of their lives being extended, but, at the same time, the boy was not completely surprised. The implication of the extent of Erlík's knowledge was what really shocked the young Artomique.

"How can something be stolen when it's taught to you?" Genghis Champlain countered with a cool and calm demeanor showing both within and without.

"So you admit that the Artomique Corporation was well acquainted with Vic, the clone of my late brother, Vickerus, around the time of Earth's millennial turn?"

"He was Earth's architect in the art of cloning," Achilles conceded to the chagrin of his companions.

"I was there, two hundred years ago, at Earth's Wild Stars outpost when the Brothan bombed it from space," said Erlík. "All those cloning chambers had to have been destroyed."

"Vic had another one stored in a vault in the Granite Rock Bank vault," Achilles replied. "Not even Carthage and the Brothan dropping the entire building could damage it."

"What happened to Vic?" Erlík demanded more than asked.

"According to our records," said Achilles, "Vic only chose to regenerate one more time."

Bullson caught a flash in Genghis's mind; a memory of standing next to the cloning chamber as Vic stepped out—only to be shot in the head. But that had happened nearly two hundred years ago, lending credence to Erlík's earlier statement about the Artomiques employing life extensions. These Earthmen were gradually becoming more interesting to him.

"But at least he was able to teach us the technology," Achilles added.

Bullson wondered why Erlik did not notice Achilles's deceit, but then began to suspect that maybe he had.

"What is this important matter of the Wild Stars that you wanted to know?" Erlik asked.

"This." Achilles gestured to Georgian to open the case and remove the contents—an egg-shaped object that looked very much like lapis lazuli stone with an engraved golden band around the center—which he displayed to everyone seated at the table. "I believe you call this an Icarus stone. According to the engraving—it gives me ownership of the Earth."

"How do you imagine that?" asked Erlik.

Achilles showed only a single twitch of surprise at this response.

"Whoever possesses the Icarus stone owns the Earth."

"Like this?"



Erlik leaned across the table and snatched the stone out of Georgian's hand. He then passed the stone back across the table to Bullson, who had continued to hover near the Earthmen. Understanding what Erlik was doing, Bullson handed the stone to his father, who then passed it back across the table to Bryce, who returned it to Erlik.

"How's the wife?" Erlik asked in a cavalier manner.

“Veranda is good,” Bryce replied.

Achilles made a hand motion, indicating for his companions not to react to these theatrics, while his face betrayed an anger that he seemed unaccustomed to dealing with.

“I thought the leaders of the Wild Stars were known for a code of honor?” asked Achilles. “Either you are very poor at humor or a thief.”

“You expected to come here and start dictating terms to me, all because you were holding this a moment ago?” Erlik raised the stone to eye level. “That this made you the owner of Earth? Earth is a responsibility, and mine is making sure that someone like you doesn’t have it.”

“Someone like me?” Achilles growled. “You don’t know me. We’ve never met.”

“You Artomiques infiltrated the Granite Rock Bank before it was even destroyed, and then you took advantage, looted the vault and made Vic into your prisoner. Who’s the thief now?” He looked around at the other men who had just held the stone. “Besides, by your own argument of possession establishing ownership, there now appears to be a questionable chain of possession.”

“Where would you get such an idea?” asked Genghis.

“From you,” Bullson interjected to everyone’s surprise.

“You’ve had your way on Earth for a long time,” Erlik pointed at Achilles between the eyes. “But the people who remained on Earth didn’t have all the inherent abilities that come naturally to many in the Wild Stars. Despite your massive corporate resources built on stolen Wild Stars technology, you have no training in dealing with telepathy.”

“Every person here can read your mind like you would read faces,” said Bullson. “No body language control can disguise your actual self—what’s inside you.”

“You and your men are babes in the stars,” said Erlik. “Go back to Earth and stay out of the Wild Stars. Be happy with the empire you’ve built on theft.” He once again hefted the Icarus stone. “Even though this is nothing more than a symbolic bauble, you’re leaving it here. It was never yours to begin with.”

Achilles lunged forward and snatched the stone back.

Erlík could have easily kept the Artomique from grabbing it, but Bullson could see his curiosity about what the Earthman planned to do next.

“You’re right,” Achilles held the stone high, doing a semi-turn to show it off to the scattered spectators sitting about the gallery, “I *am* leaving it here.”

He handed the stone to Risky, who still sat nearby in the chair Bryce had brought.

The reborn man looked quite startled.

“Why give it to me?” he asked.

“Because you’re the only one here,” Achilles glowered first at former President Bully Bravo and then Admiral Bryce, “that I consider to be a *true* Earthman.”

Genghis and Georgian exchanged a grin and a nod of satisfaction.

“I came to return this,” Achilles patted the stone one last time, “but an event this momentous deserves more pomp and circumstance than I have time for. I ask you, Mister Risky Bravo, will you officially return the Icarus Stone to the Wild Stars during the upcoming conference?”

“Wait a minute,” said Risky. “I’m here to complain about Earth. Not represent it.”

“That doesn’t represent Earth.” Achilles and his companions turned and headed for the door. Halfway up the aisle, Achilles paused and turned. “After all, as Erlík said, it’s nothing more than a bauble. Earth belongs to Earth, no matter what any engraving on a rock says.”

“I think every government on Earth will agree with him,” said Bully Bravo.

Strange young man, thought Bullson. *Erlík will use the stone as a symbol of Earth having always been a part of the Wild Stars.*

It seemed to be a very poor tactical move on the part of the Artomiques.

Chapter Four: The Red Queen Returns

The Artomique dreadnought class starship powered out of Ansa's orbit and set a direct course for the Orbital MagLink Relay Center.

"There are some things I don't understand," Whip said to his advisors as they gathered in the observation lounge.

"Erlík is a son of the Ancient Warrior," said Georgian, "and the whole family is a pack of liars. They'll say anything to advance the notion that the Wild Stars provide a superior way of life and that they are the pinnacles of how that life should be lived."

"There's no truth to his accusation about us extending our lives," said Genghis. "If either Georgian or I had been alive for 200 years, would we even consider relinquishing control of the empire that we'd built with that time?"

Whip nodded at the logic of their words.

"Still," he said, "I don't understand why you wanted me to give them the Icarus stone?"

"It's simple," Genghis replied. "What do you think will happen when they try to assert ownership over Earth based on their possession of a rock no one has ever heard of before?"

"No one will take them seriously," Whip concluded.

"Exactly," said Georgian. "They want to bring Earth and all its star-flung colonies under the Wild Stars umbrella. When Earth refuses to be lorded over, the colonies will follow suit."

"Why didn't my father deal with any of this? He's still officially the head of the corporation. And what about all this recent pirate activity?"

"We'll deal with all that once we reach the Relay Center," Genghis asserted.

Push as he might, Whip could get neither of his advisors to reveal more.

Desperate for answers, Whip returned to his laboratory and unlocked the safe holding the Eybontic head. Once his firewalls were secure, he powered it back up.

"Carthage?" he asked when the eyes began to glow.

"Yeah, that's me," the voice box responded.

“What do you know about the pirate’s Red Queen?”

“Which one?”

“What do you mean?” Whip found the answer puzzling.

“Which Red Queen?”

“There’s more than one?”

“Of course. How do you think the pirates were able to always keep Earth’s military away? The pirates work every angle: the colonies, the Terraformers, and more things on Earth than you would ever suspect.”

“You’re being evasive,” Whip observed, “almost like you’re stalling with your answers. What did you tell me last time?”

When there was a hesitation with the answer, Whip instantly disconnected the power source.

“Dalucar,” he stated his fear aloud and ran a systems check for any abnormal activity. He knew that the Saturnians could free their consciousness and surf the digital world of operating and artificial intelligence interfaces.

Even when he found no trace of activity, Whip still worried that he might have unintentionally released the monster from its prison. His hands trembled as he replaced the head in the safe and locked it away, vowing to never open it again.

Over the rest of the day’s journey to the Orbital MagLink Relay Center, Whip kept his fears private, but he continued to check and recheck every system on the dreadnought, looking for even the slightest abnormalities.

His attention on the trigger alarms he had placed on all key systems heightened when an image of the space station appeared on the observation lounge’s main screen as their destination neared.

Once the dreadnought dropped from hyper-light speed, all the portals and observation screens on the ship switched to live views of local space.

The station was lined with massive, ringed compartments that were connected to a central spire, and interspersed with rows of fat, commercial hub spires that looked like clubs because of the way they fattened farther away from the center section, where traffic poured in and out. The Orbital MagLink Relay Station slowly spun about as it orbited Sword, an uninhabitable super-Earth six times the

size of Terra. Four times was the maximum number of multiple Earth gravities that a human could survive without the assistance of exo-gear, and the world remained unexplored except by robot crafts that invariably seemed to malfunction, giving the planet the reputation of being haunted.

Sword itself orbited the sun Damocles, which had recently begun showing signs of instability. Adding to the mystery of Sword was the fact that it had a chemical composition that did not match with its host star. If not for its ideal location for a MagLink relay, no space station would ever have been put in orbit. Everyone who passed through the station knew a fatal act of force majeure could happen at any moment, giving even more reason not to bother exploring the planet below.

As Whip disembarked on the gateway linked to a side hatchway on the dreadnought, the remote control pad he carried in his pocket gave a single blip. His advisors looked at him with confusion when he nervously inspected the readings, but he quickly determined that it was simply a systems interface with one of the station's automated service droids.

"Anything amiss?" asked Georgian.

"Maintenance alert." Whip shook his head as they exited the corridor, and took a surprised look around at the luxurious furnishings of the lounge they entered. There were no customs agents or processing centers. It looked more like another executive lounge, where beautiful and scantily clad women gathered around an open bar and smiled in his direction.

"This isn't a military processing center," said Whip, "like dreadnoughts normally dock at."

"No," Genghis grabbed Whip's arm when he started to detour toward the feminine distractions.

"This gateway is for royalty and high-level diplomats," said Georgian, "which is how you will soon be considered."

"Today's the day," Whip affirmed his impending ascension to control over the corporation. He pulled his attention from the flirtatious women. "Where *is* father?"

"He's waiting at the ceremony," Genghis guided Whip only a few steps down the main corridor before they stopped at an interior

conference room.

Whip felt a moment of trepidation as they stepped into a darkened room. When the lights rose, he realized his instincts were right.

Several armed men were waiting just inside, but they were not dressed in military attire. Their clothing was a mishmash of civilian cultures.

“Pirates,” he quickly surmised.

Neither Genghis nor Georgian seemed concerned when Whip turned to them. Georgian pointed to the table in the center of the large conference room, at the far end of which sat an unusual woman.

“Meet the Red Queen,” he said.

“Mister Hister, I can see your disappointment,” the red-headed woman leaned back in the enormous, ornately carved wooden seat with a high and wide back that made it look more like a throne than a chair. She pulled both sides of the black cloak she wore tightly around her neck, covering her ample bosom, where Whip’s eyes had instantly dropped. “You were expecting something different?”

“Does everyone in the stars read minds?” asked Whip. In many ways, this woman reminded him of Daestar—attractive for a middle-aged woman with a look in her eyes that hinted she knew more about him than he did about himself.

“No,” the Red Queen replied. “But everyone you’ve met recently does. For a man who has lived many lives making and executing intricate, long-term plans, you came into the stars remarkably unprepared. You don’t know what you’re doing. I don’t understand how you caused my late sister, Scarlet, so much trouble.”

“Nefarimor?”

“Yes, I can see now that you are beginning to realize how much danger you are in. You and she were rivals, but you’ve always wanted to be my ally. Did you really never suspect that you already were? Or that Scarlet and I were not just sisters who were partners—we were interchangeable. We exchanged places often. So I already know you well enough.”

“Excuse me,” said Whip, “but I do not know you. Never knew a Scarlet Tanager. Heard of her. Heiress to the Whisper Ice Cream

fortune before the whole company crashed when its secret ingredient was revealed to be poison. But never met her.”

“Little fool, who thought you could reshape the world, my grandiloquence wasn’t just for you,” said the matriarch. “I was talking to both you and your father.”

Achilles Hister the 7th stepped out from behind the Red Queen’s chair. He was dressed in a black uniform and leather jacket that Whip recognized as being an alternate-reality Artomique design. His eyes were shadowed by the brim of his hat, but still shined with intensity—and showed no hint of love.

“He will soon be you,” said the Red Queen.

“Hello, son,” said the elder Achilles. “Time to say goodbye.”



Chapter Five: A Stolen Life

“Our children have left Miri,” Daestar told Erlik moments after the Artomiques had departed.

“Where would they go?” Erlik asked.

“They’re probably trying to defend their home,” Risky Bravo stood up, but quickly leaned against the lectern, “just like I’m trying to do.”

“It’s worse than that,” said Daestar.

“Worse than a world in danger?” Risky admonished.

“For them it is,” Daestar asserted, and focussed on her next words to Erlik. “There are things that I’ve never told you before, about a secret organization of telepaths that has embedded itself into the Wild Stars for millennia. I was a member before we first met.”

Erlik seemed stunned for a moment, weighing his next words.

“This has something to do with my mother,” he finally spoke, “doesn’t it?”

“Probably,” Daestar replied. “I’m not sure. All I know is I overheard Risky’s nurse talking about them going to a place called the Orbital MagLink Relay Center.”

“My nurse?” asked Risky. “From the cloning?”

“What is this group called?” asked Erlik.

“She helped with your mental transference,” Daestar answered Risky, and turned to Erlik. “They, we, are called the Five Thousand Fingered Hand, because we are many and everywhere, always operating in secret.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” asked Erlik.

“Because of what happened to your mother,” Daestar then glanced at Akara, still sitting in the gallery, “and your daughter’s hatred of telepaths because of it. But we can discuss all that later. Right now, our children are in danger.”

“From the Five Thousand Fingered Hand?” Erlik asked. “You’re afraid they’ll try to exert influence on our children, like my mother tried to influence my father.”

“I’m not sure,” said Daestar. “But I don’t trust them. I need to go where they’re headed and stop them.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Bully Bravo.

“Shouldn’t you stay here?” asked Daestar. “Help establish a relationship between the Wild Stars and Earth?”

“As you might have noticed by the way that young Mister Hister looked at me,” said Bully, “there is a chance that I could be seen as a distraction. Besides, where you’re going isn’t that far away. We should have plenty of time to get there and get back again before the conference starts. I’ve found that sometimes it’s best to first let people argue themselves out and then come in near the end to close things up.”

Erlik shrugged.

“I can’t leave right now, and I’d appreciate knowing that someone both trustworthy and capable went with you.”

“We can double down on that capable part,” said Bravo. “I’ll ask Bullson to come with us. Give us a little bonding time with a mutual purpose.”

But when Bravo looked about for his son, he was nowhere to be seen.

“He was right there,” said Admiral Bryce. “He must have just disappeared out the door.”

“Guess it’s just the two of us,” shrugged Bravo.

“With the way Bullson looks at me,” said Daestar, “and just about every other woman he sees, maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

“I wanted to ask him how his mission to recover and relocate Ruin went,” said Bravo. “There’s no way that they could have accomplished all that and been back so soon. And if he’s back, where are Tall Trees and my nephew?”

“Don’t worry about it, and just stay safe,” said Risky. “I’m supposed to be the brother who does all the crazy things.”

“Take a Wild Stars scout ship,” said Erlik. “It’s the fastest ship there is.”

After attending to several quick matters, Bravo joined Daestar for what he declared would be the shortest star journey either of them had ever taken. He then suggested that they both try to sleep through the journey in their chairs, since the Wild Stars scout ship would arrive at the Orbital MagLink Center right at the start of their daytime cycle.

“Looks like some of our friends barely beat us here,” Bully Bravo focused on one particular starship as they neared the docking bays,

“which is amazing time by the clock speeds of an Earth ship, especially for a rig that big. Despite their head start, I didn’t think there was anything that could beat this Wild Stars scout ship here.”

“Why is that Artomique dreadnought parked at the diplomatic gate?” asked Daestar.

“The relay center is under Earth’s control,” Bravo observed. “That just goes to show how much influence the Artomiques have these days. They’ve always had their hands into politics, but since I stepped down, they’ve stepped up. Considering all the uncharacteristic moves that he’s made since then, I think Perez is in their pocket.”

“Looks like we’re going through customs with everyone else,” Daestar remarked as their ship’s controls were taken over remotely and they were guided through the magnetized opening on the fat end of a commercial hub at the very bottom of the station.

“Looks like we’re going to be walking,” said Bravo. “Hope the Sword of Damocles doesn’t fall soon.”

Daestar wondered about his comment but chose not to search his mind for an answer.

As they disembarked, the customs officer approaching them was suddenly distracted by a notification he received on his info pad. He ran a stylus across his information pad several times, each time more excited than the one before.

“What’s happened?” asked Bravo.

“The news just broke,” the officer said, “that the Maxitrillion Warship fighting with that Neth entity in Nebula 71 has been destroyed.”

“That *is* bad news,” Bravo’s jaw set, and his expression changed into one that had earned him the nickname of *the Scary President* early in his political career.

“Only a few Sprinter ships managed to escape. That whole area is being quarantined.”

“That’s not far from here,” Bravo observed, “but I don’t think this station needs to worry. Neth is a gaseous creature, and without a ship, he’s not going to trouble anyone. That’s why they implemented a quarantine.”

“How could you know any of...” the officer looked up from his pad and instantly recognized the former President. “I’m so sorry, Sir! No one told me you were coming.” He waved them past. “Why weren’t you routed through the diplomatic wing?”

“It was busy.”

The officer quickly became distracted again.

The scout ship had been parked next to a junker, whose owners were embroiled in a loud argument with a local merchant.

“This is the second time that this has happened!” the captain shouted, showing great animation in both voice and body language.

The merchant, dressed in a monochrome suit of plain design, cowered and shielded his face.

“We’ll pay you anything you want,” he begged.

“Except what you agreed!” the ship’s captain argued back, but unclenched his fist when he saw the port authority officer watching. “You know what we came for! We don’t get it, you don’t get either the beer or the gold.”

“But pirates stole it in transit,” the merchant pleaded. “A coupling that big could power a whole planet. We put on extra security and even asked the military to help, but they wouldn’t. The pirates got it. What else can we offer you for the beer? More gold?”

“I’ve already got gold!” The captain snorted and turned to talk privately with his two crew members. One was a young woman, and the other was someone who surprised Bravo when his face turned to where it could be seen.

“Wild Child!” Bravo called out.

The man’s eyes grew wide when he in turn recognized Bravo, but he immediately hand-signaled with downward palms for Bravo to stay quiet, shaking his head as though they did not know each other.

“Isn’t that Lonan Mcguffin, the Terraformer heir?” asked Daestar. “I thought he disappeared on his way home to take over the family business.”

“Saw his cousin, Josette, on Ansa just the other day,” said Bravo. “My guess is that she’s the one he’s really trying to avoid.”

Daestar gave the young man the briefest of probes and then nodded her confirmation of Bravo’s suspicion.

“Who would have thought that a junker captain would turn his nose up at an offer of gold,” said Bravo. “If he’s got a cargo-hold of beer, he can name his price. With so many people suffering from Mcguffinut withdrawal, it’s one of the few things that relieves the symptoms.”

“That crew wants something specific,” said Daestar.

They proceeded to walk the length of the commercial hub in silence, each taking in all the chatter and activity happening around them. Once they came to a moving walkway, they rode it all the way to the main concourse.

Bully looked right, then left.

“I guess we go up,” said Bravo. “Just how are we supposed to find your children on a station this big? They could be anywhere.”

“If they’re around,” said Daestar, “I’ll find them.”

“Oh, right,” Bully conceded. “I’ve heard about your special *skills*. All right, lead the way. I’ve got your back.”

Bravo took several steps on the winding upward tilt of the concourse before he realized that Daestar had not moved.

She stood staring in the opposite direction.

“Down there is only the main engine compartment,” Bully explained. “Unless your kids are engineers, you won’t find them there.”

“It’s not them,” Daestar replied as several badge-wearing workers exited onto the main concourse through the locked door that led to the station’s engine rooms. She watched them closely as they passed, lost in conversation. “I sense the presence of a dire grief, hiding aboard nearby. And it’s not just that. It’s what those two men we just passed are working on. Those power couplings that Mcguffin’s friends were looking for? I think I found one of them. Why would anyone want to build a gravity elevator to a planet no one can visit?”

“That doesn’t make a lick of sense,” said Bravo. “Neither part. What would a dire grief be doing away from Akara’s World? And no one builds a space elevator to a 6G world. What would make you think that?”

“It’s what *they* were thinking about.” Daestar pointed at the engineers. “Special skills, remember?”

“I’m beginning to understand,” said Bully. “Let’s concentrate on finding your children, and we’ll try to figure out that other stuff later.”

“Trust me. I know what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t doubt it. First things first.”

They spent an entire morning cycle winding their way up the massive station’s main spire, exploring every ring and stopping at cafes for the occasional meal and to rest. By the afternoon cycle, they were no longer bypassing the conveyor walks. When the dimming of the concourse lights signaled the start of the station’s evening cycle, they had reached the very top.

Bully Bravo was once again recognized by the station security staff, and they were allowed into the executive level.

“Think we’ll find them here?”

“It’s the only place left to look,” Daestar replied.

Daestar passed the doors to a conference room, then she stopped suddenly.

“Is it them?” Bravo asked.

Daestar shook her head.

“Something’s wrong here,” she put a hand on the door latch and discovered it unlocked.

Together they entered the darkened room, with Daestar standing in the sliver of illumination cast by the concourse while Bravo searched for the light switches. When he found them, the light revealed a single occupant, sitting in an over-sized wooden chair on the far end of a large conference table.

“Bully Bravo,” the man in his mid-fifties looked up from an apparent slumber, but when he tried to move, it became obvious that his hands were bound to the arms of the chair.

“Achilles Hister,” Bravo said with surprise, “the 7th!”

“The 8th!” he protested.

“I just saw the 8th the other day,” Bravo argued as he moved to untie the bonds, “and he’s a whole lot younger than you.”

“You’re Daestar,” Whip said as he was released. “I saw you on Ansa, too. What’s been done to me? This isn’t my body!”

Daestar was startled, pausing a moment to look deep into Hister’s eyes. His mind opened so easily that the slightest mental push felt

like she had reached nearly all the way into his soul. She quickly broke contact and looked around the room for something that she could not find.

“Were there any others here?” she asked.

“Why would anyone do something like this?” he asked in reply. “If someone wants a new body, just grow one. We’ve got the technology. Why steal mine?”

“Cloning isn’t the clean system you’d think it is,” she replied. “My son-in-law was recently transferred into a cloned body.”

“I met him, remember? Tomas Shawnee, the man some called Risky. Why do people take so many names in the Wild Stars? It gets complicated. I gave him the Icarus stone.”

“My name is Daestar. As uncomplicated as it gets. What’s yours?”

“I prefer Whip.”

“Your real name.”

“Achilles Hister the 8th. But Whip is what my teachers used to call me.”

“Sharp as a Whip,” Daestar replied with a smile. “And just as quick.”

“I don’t understand—what’s happened to me?”

“With a clone body, it takes some time for a mind to connect with muscles that have never been used. And a clone body initially has no natural immunities or personal bacterial biome. So there’s an adjustment period that you don’t have with a body that was grown naturally—one that has already been processed through all that growth.”

“It’s so cruel—a violation of body and soul!”

“That’s why it’s forbidden.”

“Why does it make you so angry?” Whip was incredulous about her evident sympathy. He no longer trusted anyone.

“Because if they’d do this with you, the heir to the Artomique hierarchy, then they’ll do this to anyone. I came looking for my children. With their already enhanced skills of telepathy, they would be perfect candidates for an aged telepath. And believe me, those who control the Five Thousand Fingered Hand do not lightly give up power. Obviously, forbidden things are accepted in this day and age.”

“Wait,” said Bravo. “You’re saying that you believe him? That this really is Achilles the 8th?”

“In the body of the 7th,” Daestar confirmed.

“What are their names?” Whip asked.

“I’ve been gone for some time. I’m sure the Hand is ruled by others now.”

“No. What are the names of your children?”

“Akarastar and Mackstar.”

“I’d always wondered why I had no brothers or sisters. I’ll help you find your children.”

Daestar could not stop her smile.

“I think we’re the ones who need to be helping you,” she replied. “Who did this?”

“My father,” Whip replied. “Achilles Hister the 7th.”

“He must be a man of pure evil to do that to his own son—just to avoid a few months of rehabilitation,” said Daestar. “What are we going to do with him?”

“Let’s get him out of here.” Bravo took Whip by the arm and started walking him toward the door.

“Won’t father’s men try to stop us?” Whip asked.

“I doubt that stealing his son’s body is something that he informed station security about,” Bravo led the way onto the main concourse and straight to the executive elevator.

The security guards on either side of the elevator doors made no reaction as Whip, Bravo, and Daestar entered the chamber and selected a drop to the lowest level.

“See?” Bravo quipped with a rare smile.

Then the doors opened onto the commercial hub, and his “scary President” expression returned.

Chapter Six: The Architect of Tomorrow

Bullson merged into the crowds when he appeared on the Orbital MagLink Relay Center, but there was nothing relaxed about this arrival. He hit the ground with a fast first step as people were all moving rapidly in one direction, drawn to a heated discussion that made no sense to most of them.

Having keyed his arrival to the first elevated moment of his father's life signs, Bullson was certain that he would find Bully Bravo at the center of whatever confrontation was taking place.

He was not wrong.

"Move these people back!" A lead security guard triggered a warning display of sparks from his club, inducing the crowd to stop and slowly back away from the cluster of people near the executive elevators. He took one look at Bullson, who played a simple trick on the man's mind to make him think that he was looking at another guard. Bullson soon found himself inside the perimeter as it expanded past him.

The Artomiques that he had just seen moments earlier on Ansa were now conversing with Bully Bravo, Daestar, and what looked to be the father of Achilles Hister. His son and his mentors did not appear happy, and they were instructing the guards to aim their weapons.

Bullson approached the aggressors from the rear, intent on surprise. But he was the one surprised when he realized that he was coming in on the middle of the conversation, and the only thing he knew for certain was that the young Hister had suddenly become a far more interesting person.

Bullson paused and focused on Daestar's perspective, trying to decipher what was really happening, while approaching ever more slowly.

"You are a monster," Daestar looked the younger Hister in the eyes, while she and Bully partially shielded the older Hister behind them.

"It's not about rehabilitation," said the younger Hister as he attempted to assert new skills that he had not previously displayed and sensed that Daestar knew he was trying to read her mind.

“There are parts of your personality that get lost when you transfer into a clone,” Hister continued. “It could be a favorite food no longer tastes right or other things that seem simple enough. All of which means that, if you transfer enough times, you’ll eventually lose something big. Something that is essential to being who you really are.”

“How many times have you transferred?”

“That old body was called the 7th for a reason. But I had a theory that being transferred into a naturally cultivated body...”

“Is that what you call stealing the body of your own child?” Daestar could not hide her outrage. “Cultivating?”

“This time I felt none of the fade I’d experienced previously. And except for a few adjustments that still need to be made, I’ve been fully functional from the moment I took my first step. In fact, I feel strength and drive that my old form had lost. It makes me look at everything differently. Things like you. You’re a very attractive woman.”

Daestar’s face betrayed revulsion mixed with anger.

A loud commotion began to sound nearby in the main parking area, but the Artomiques did not bother to look.

Bullson did not look either, but he could see through the eyes of the elder Hister that a service droid was causing havoc as it moved in their direction.

“You need to get out of here,” the elder leaned and whispered to Bully Bravo. “That droid is headed straight for you, and I think it’s Dalucar.”

Bravo nodded, but seemed unconcerned. He made eye contact with both Daestar and Whip, nodding toward the nearby stacks of empty storage containers on wheeled robotic porters that were waiting to haul them from the cargo sorting area. He seemed to be pointing their attention to a Junker’s crew that had just left the main concourse by the customs area on the other side of the cargo area.

“Wait for it,” was his only reply.

“You two can go,” said Hister to Daestar and Bravo. “Go back and enjoy the Unification Conference on Ansa. But my picture of Dorian Gray stays here.”

The younger Hister then noticed that the trio was no longer paying him heed, and he turned to look where their attention had been drawn.

“That’s Dalucar,” he called out. “The fool set him free! I told you to always keep an eye on whatever he was doing.”

As big as a surface-to-space shuttle, the service droid was laboriously working its way in their direction. Despite having only minimal ground traction equipment, its heavy astro-shielding easily deflected the repeated discharges from the security guards’ weapons. It moved inexorably forward even as the number of guards continued to increase.

The service droid worked its way near to the semi-circle of guards. Bullson stepped in front of his father as Dalucar approached the Artomiques standing between them.

“Where have you been?” Bravo asked.

“I hate sitting around ships crawling though the cosmos,” Bullson replied. “So I took a shortcut.”

Bullson drew the turquoise sword hanging at his waist. He took two powerful steps forward, then with a third, he ran up the back of one of Hister’s henchmen and leaped into the air.

The service droid raised its many implement-laden arms in a mix of defensive and offensive postures. The turquoise blade cut through them all like they were paper, and then cleaved deep into the droid’s head-pan, immediately rendering it motionless.

Before Hister and his men could react, Bullson held his blade out to one side with the point up and approached them with his eyes leveled at theirs.

Both of Hister’s companions pulled weapons away from the security guards nearest them, drawing a smile from Bullson.

“Dalucar isn’t gone,” said Hister. “That droid has too limited an operating system to have contained him. He’s still somewhere on this space station.”

Hister motioned for all his men to lower their weapons.

“I’ve heard stories about you,” said Hister. “Your name is Bullson.”

Bullson stopped, as surprised as Hister’s henchmen by the revelation.

“You have no idea who I am,” Bullson replied as he gripped the sword hilt with both hands and prepared to rid the universe of another threat, taking one last peek inside the man’s mind, with no concern for brute invasiveness.

Then he hesitated.

Bullson began to understand Daestar’s previous conversation. Bullson was startled by how much Achilles had changed in the short time since they had first met. From a youth who was virginal like himself when it came to intimacy with women, suddenly he saw a parade of beautiful faces that both shocked and impressed him with the sheer magnitude of the number. It was a staggering collection of memories that was inconceivable for a non-time traveler in such a short time. Having previously only encountered the monogamous and often chaste sexual attitudes of his father and the men and women of the Wild Stars, Bullson found such carnal bounty fascinating.

He finally realized that this Achilles could not be the same person. The mind he now touched had the memories of many lifetimes and formidable defenses against psychic attack. Like a kung fu master who dodges an attack with minimal effort, this new Achilles had allowed Bullson into his mind, always staying right in front of him—and always just beyond his grasp.

Overconfident in his own skills and invulnerability, Bullson became even more captivated by the revelation of Achilles’ vision of galactic conquest. Unlike Bullson’s father, Bully Bravo, who focused on the more immediate concerns of meliorism, this was a mind that formulated plans for a future that would last for thousands of years. Here was a true architect of tomorrow.

Too late, a tiny inner voice shouted a faint alarm. Bullson had allowed his mind to be influenced by the desires of a fanatic. His own thought processes began to shut down as his will became subservient in ways he had only experienced as a child—with his God Mother.

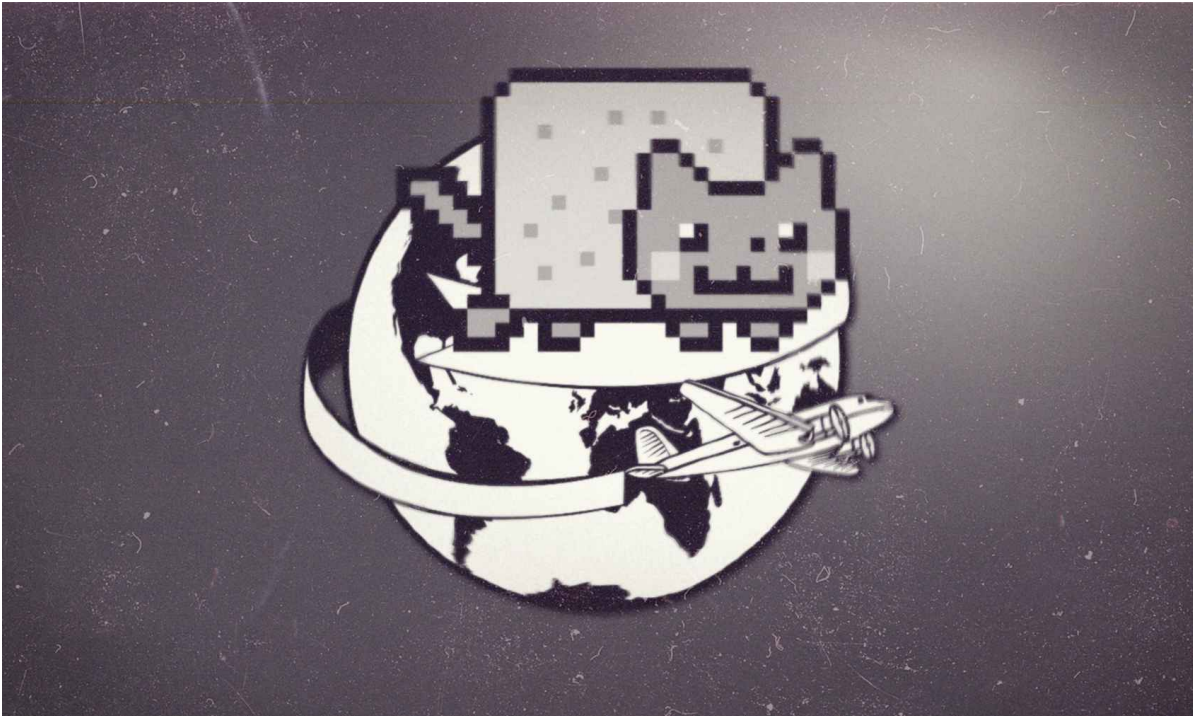
“Where did Whip and the others go?” asked one of Hister’s men.

“Later,” Achilles said, never taking his eyes off Bullson. “We should talk.”

To be continued in the Summer Issue!

Michael Tierney's credits include his new Wild Stars role-playing game, Tarzan and the Mysterious She, the weekly online strip Beyond the Farthest Star, and Edgar Rice Burroughs 100 Year Art Chronology. His Robert E. Howard Art Chronology is coming soon.

[Be sure to catch up on all of Michael Tierney's Wild Stars with the Wild Stars 35th Anniversary Quartet (The Book of Circles, Force Majeure, Time Warmageddon, and Wild Star Rising) or the Wild Stars 35th Anniversary Omnibus, out now from Cirsova Publishing!—Ed.]



The Grain Merchant of Alomar

By JIM BREYFOGLE

The Mongoose & Meerkat have set up in the city of Alomar—in spare rooms of a wealthy merchant who has no idea they're living there, even after he's hired them!

Sixteen months after the fall of Alness.

The rope tore Mangos's hands. His arms and legs protested, so he stopped to rest and look up. Only ten feet to go. Forty feet down. He took a deep breath and lifted one hand, felt the rope's coarse fiber prick him, and pulled himself up. He pinched the rope with his legs and reached with his other hand.

Only a few more feet, and if the rooftop watchmen remained oblivious, he would be safely inside. Other mansions rose to near his height; other watchmen scanned the night. They, unlike the men above him, would not raise the alarm. Henrik did not pay them, and they did not care to protect his property.

Two more heaves and Mangos grabbed the window ledge. He pulled himself up and over, pulled the rope into the room, and collapsed against the wall, breathing heavily. He sank down to rest.

The marble floor was cool on his outstretched legs. The furniture in the room was bloodwood and mahogany, the coverings on the bed were silk. The ewer and basin on the nightstand were of delicate glass with gold filigree. Woolen tapestries, royally dyed, decorated the wall, either chosen to match the ceiling or the ceiling was painted to match them. Mangos neither knew nor cared.

The door opened enough for Kat to stick her head in. "You could use the slaves' entrance."

"Why are you using a door?" he demanded. "You could be caught sneaking in that way. Do you know what Henrik would do if he caught us living in his house?" Mangos didn't know exactly, but rumors said Henrik enjoyed others' pain.

“Henrik would never go into the slaves’ quarters,” Kat said. “It’s beneath him. And the slaves don’t care. If we don’t make work for them, they won’t make trouble for us.”

Mangos rolled his eyes. Then he smelled food. “Did you get something from the market?”

Kat opened the door further to show the bowl she held. “No, the cook gave it to me. I’ve been bringing her fresh vegetables and some spices she can’t afford with the budget Henrik provides.”

“If Henrik won’t pay for his cook’s spices, how can you afford them?” Then he realized she didn’t pay for them. “Never mind.”

Kat smiled, green eyes dancing. “Henrik is happy for the better food, Cook is happy she can pocket some of the grocery money.” She lifted the bowl and inhaled deeply. “And I get really good food.”

Mangos struggled to his feet. He stretched. “Better not let Henrik or his *Fedai* catch you.” Henrik owned ten *Fedai*, warrior/guards who had their tongues, and other parts, removed to assure their discretion. He didn’t know Mangos and Kat had taken residence in his guest suites. The house was so large they never saw him or his wife, Polonia.

Mangos’s stomach growled. “Is there more food?”

“I think so, if you ask nicely.” Kat started to withdraw but paused to ask, “Did you get a contract?”

“No. Nobody here has even heard our names.” The whole reason they came to Alomar was for prestigious, high paying jobs. The fact they hadn’t found any would have to change, Mangos thought.

Kat laughed, no doubt thinking she had told him that very thing. “If you want fame, we need work to prove ourselves. You,” she said in a jesting tone, “just need work. You can barely climb a wall.”

“Something will come up.”

“No doubt,” said Kat. “Hopefully before you get too fat to fight.” She left, and Mangos heard her enter the next guest suite—the rooms she had taken as her own.

Three weeks hadn’t dampened Mangos’s fascination with the main market of Alomar. Everything from in the world and out of it, people said, and every day he found it to be true.

“Goods from the deep places,” murmured a wizened old man standing on a box and still no taller than Mangos’s shoulder. A half-dozen open trunks held merchandise of hammered brass and copper.

“Water!” called another seller. “Water infused with moonlight! Makes your soups taste better—water!”

Mangos took a cautious breath. He could smell spices and sweat, fresh fruits and flowers as well as the gutter filled with waste, both human and animal. The smell of rot, rubbish piled on rubbish until the lower layers began to dissolve, wafted from the alleys.

Shops lined the open market. Tailors, cobblers, scribes; these he expected. The alchemists surprised him, for he always thought them emaciated men in towers chanting by moonlight. He puzzled at the shop dealing in “domestic tranquility” until discovering they sold devices to punish one’s slaves, but as a discrete sign pointed out, they worked equally well on spouses.

He could not resist a shop labeled “Bizarre.” Inside, junk piled the shelves and counters and mounded on the floor. He walked carefully to avoid sending mounds of old jugs or tangled piles of lamp holders across the narrow shop. Stuffed heads of exotic animals (and one gladiator) filled a shelf. Another was nothing but battered iron pots, some with gilded runes around their rims, others decorated only by rust.

The door opened to allow a man entrance. Neither large nor small, he seemed perfectly ordinary, and only when he walked up and asked, “Are you the Mongoose?” did Mangos more than glance at him.

“Yes,” replied Mangos. He wondered who could know him and why they might be want him.

“Good,” said the man. “I’ve been trying to find you. My employer, a very rich man, has need of you and your partner.”

“Really?” Mangos couldn’t repress a smile. So he was known in Alomar! Kat was wrong after all. “What does he want?”

“He’ll tell you. You just need to come and listen.” The man held up a small gold coin. “For your trouble.”

Mangos reached out, stopped. “I may not agree.”

The man leaned forward and pressed the coin into Mangos's palm. "That is understood." He smiled, a smile both condescending and satisfied. "It is the way business is done in Alomar."

Mangos turned the coin over in his fingers. It felt warm and slick. Truly, he thought, a strange but welcome practice.

"At this time of day, he will be home," the man said. "He lives up the hill."

Mangos wanted to say, "So do I," but held his tongue. If the gold coin had not told him his prospective employer's wealth, the reference to his home's location would have.

The man led him through the market and up the hill to the mansions. Mangos tensed when he realized they not only headed toward the mansion district, they headed toward Henrik's mansion. Was this a way of luring him into a trap? Some revenge for living in the guest wing?

Mango had never entered the front door before and, as they passed through the main entrance, two *Fedai* fell in behind and followed them through the house.

The man led him to the library where Henrik sat at the large table in the center, ledgers piled about him. He was short, thick, and broad. He had a flat face and short black hair that didn't hide the blocky nature of his head. He initially frowned at the interruption, but when he saw Mangos's escort, he broke into a smile.

"Ah, this must be the Mongoose," said Henrik, rising. "How do you like Alomar? No more than the usual trouble?"

"A marvelous city," said Mangos.

Henrik nodded acceptance. "Be careful. It would be a shame for you to die before anybody even knew you were here, before you could make a name for yourself." He looked about. "No Meerkat?"

"She's elsewhere," said Mangos. Maybe upstairs, but he didn't know.

"No matter. Your word will be sufficient for me. I have a job for you."

Mangos relaxed just a bit. This didn't have to do with their living in his house, after all.

Two *Fedai* quietly closed the door. Mangos noticed two more, stoic and deadly, flanking the door to the garden. While Henrik seemed

friendly, Mangos nonetheless felt a threat. “What job?” he asked.

“First, I must ask that you keep what I am about to say in strictest confidence,” Henrik said. “I have worked with several other merchants to help keep the price of grain stable.” He made a throwing away gesture. “It is a little thing, but everybody benefits when the price doesn’t go up and down.”

Epecially you—when it doesn’t go down, thought Mangos. He waited silently.

“I believe,” Henrik went on, “Laromar, one of the other merchants, has betrayed us. He is selling his early harvest in my market, and buying contracts we agreed would go to others.” He paused, waiting for Mangos to say something.

Mangos did not.

“I want you to find proof,” said Henrik.

“What would be proof?”

“Contracts for winter white wheat, agreements with my suppliers, anything.” He placed his hands on the table, leaned forward, scowling, “I want this done.” A threat was evident in his stance.

Mangos glanced at the *Fedai*. “We can do that.”

Henrik nodded as if he expected nothing less. “Tomorrow, Laromar will meet with the other members of our group. While he is out, you and the Meerkat will find the evidence that proves his guilt.”

Mangos stroked his chin. “Let us set our own time. We need to prepare, to view his house.”

“No,” said Henrik. “It must be tomorrow. Not only is it safer for you, knowing Laromar will be gone, but he will not suspect me, for I shall be at the meeting too. His study is atop the west tower. The evidence will be there. If you can’t do it, then I’ll find others who can.”

Mangos nodded, not seeing much choice.

“These things need be done quietly,” Henrik added. “Much can be done in shadows if one can pretend it never happened. Otherwise, the Prince must hang you.”

The Prince of Alomar did little unless he had to. “And what must he do to you?” asked Mangos.

“To me?” Henrik shrugged. “I would not be invited to next season’s balls.” He walked to the bookshelves and paused to ponder an empty spot. He shook his head and continued to a curio shelf where

he picked up a small pendant. "I trust you will be able to get in, but to get out, rub this and say, 'Come, release me from this place.' My mage shall do the rest."

Mangos took the pendant by the leather thong. I was a bit of stone cut to resemble a fang in a circle. "Come rel—"

"NO!" shouted Henrik. "It only works once. Do not waste it."

Mangos nodded and tucked it into his belt. "And payment?"

"I am a rich man," said Henrik. "Do this for me, and I'll make sure you never need look for work again." He beckoned to the man who brought Mangos. "See the Mongoose to the door. No doubt, he has plans to make." To Mangos, he said, "Tomorrow. The meeting is scheduled for the ninth bell in the morning."

"He insisted?" Kat said. "He insisted we do this now?" She leaned against the doorframe of his suite as he, once again, panted on the floor, having climbed in through the window.

"He said the grain merchants were meeting at the guildhall, that Laromar would not be home, and it would be safer than any other time. It makes sense if he wants to eliminate a rival before he loses too many contracts."

"And he told you where to look."

It wasn't a question, but Mangos responded anyway. "In the west tower." He stood up, flexing his fingers to work out some stiffness.

Kat shrugged, making light of her questions. "We've a job. We do it well, and more will follow." She straightened up. "According to the slaves, Henrik is a cruel master."

Mangos raised an eyebrow. Henrik's reputation was well known—why did she mention it now?

"They've learned his rewards usually benefit himself more than others." She shrugged before leaving him to his thoughts.

Mangos moved over to the window. He never tired of the view. Finally they were in Alomar, living in luxury. Somebody else's luxury, but luxury nonetheless.

Alomar. One scribe described Alomar as the "Rot that Endures." Mangos tried to think of the writer, but couldn't bring him to mind.

Power and mercy have no connection in Alomar, Kat had said.

In Alomar nothing matters but Alomar, he had read.

From his own brief observations, he already knew that in Alomar the laws were for the benefit of a few and were applied according to their humor.

Alomar, uncaring to the point of cruelty, gathered wealth and its trappings, and Mangos could see it. Not just in the room around him, but the city. The mansions of the wealthy rose fifty, sixty feet in the air. Built of colored stone, they competed with each other in their extravagance.

Further away, he could pick out the domes and spires of temples. Alomar kept a lively pantheon of deities, both false and true. The citizens treated them as pets; gods to be stroked and fed and humored with largesse, a comfortable accouterment of time and wealth.

Far away, down by the quayside, visible between the towers of the mansions and the temples, lay the true power of Alomar—the flat-roofed warehouses. Everything in this world or out of it came to Alomar. The raw materials for Alomar's craftsmen, the grains and other foodstuffs to feed the citizens, the wines they consumed in vast quantities, the slaves that did the work, all these and more passed through the warehouses.

And amongst them all, hidden by the skyline, were the craftsmen and the markets and the taverns and the slums.

This, he told himself, is the pond we're in, a pond where even the minnows are sharks. He snorted, deciding he needed to distract himself.

Mangos turned from the window and picked up the copy of Teritum lying open on his bed. He closed it, smelling the vellum and ink as he did, and ran his hand across the soft leather cover. Another benefit of living with a wealthy man. Henrik had a full library of fantastically hand-illustrated books which, as far as Mangos could tell, he never read.

It was time to get another book. He slipped from the room and made his way toward the library.

The house had the quiet of fear in it. The slaves might have been mice; they scurried about never making noise and never seen but from the corner of the eye. The *Fedai* were absolutely loyal because of training, the slaves provisionally loyal because of the *Fedai*.

Fortunately, the *Fedai* usually guarded the entrances to the mansion, and if he was careful, Mangos could easily move about inside.

The library was empty when Mangos entered. He slid the book into the empty slot on the shelf and began to browse for something else to read. He smiled when he heard the singing, forgetting for a moment the risk of being caught.

"...and green shall the valleys grow, when spring sun melts the winter snow..."

He recognized an Alnessi children's song. The singing was beautiful, pure, and somewhat familiar. He cursed. How could they remain undetected if Kat started singing?

He followed her voice to the garden, a sanctuary of sorts used by Polonia, Henrik's wife. It was a rooftop garden, on the western end of the house. Mangos entered through the library, but the family's private suites also opened on it.

As he opened the glass door, Mangos felt the warmth of the late afternoon sun and smelled roses. Roses of every color filled the garden, their odor covering the stench of Alomar.

Kat sat next to the fountain, singing to two children, a boy and a girl, both older than six and younger than ten. They stared as if never having seen anything so beautiful. Polonia stood in another doorway, drawn by the song.

Mangos froze, afraid Polonia would call the *Fedai*.

The children smiled and laughed as Kat finished her song. "Another!" they cried, "Sing another!"

Polonia stepped closer. She had straight black hair tied back with strands of pearls. Contrary to Alomari fashion, she wore long sleeves and a high-buttoned collar. Her face was too long, her nose too hawkish, her eyes too close together for beauty, but her gaze was unsettlingly sharp. She seemed caught between boldness and hesitance.

"Who are you?" she asked Kat. "Are you another of his purchases?" Without waiting for an answer, she began to think out loud. "No, all they care for is his money and later their skin." She came out of her reverie. "Who are you?"

"I am the Meerkat," said Kat.

"I have not heard of you."

The girl dashed over and threw her arms around Polonia, who winced at the contact. “She sings!” the girl said, “She sings real songs, like you told us about. Like Father never lets us hear.”

Polonia demanded an explanation with a raised eyebrow.

“Songs of home,” said Kat. “A few simple tunes only.”

Polonia nodded, her mind clearly wandering. “Those damned goats.” Mangos noticed two white goats eating rose bushes. “I’d have them for dinner, but he won’t allow it. His prized white Ilyrian goats; he loves them more than his children.”

Mangos thought she might be jesting, but she appeared completely serious.

“This is *my* garden, my only place, and I can’t do anything about the goats,” Polonia said. “I can see my children like you, Meerkat, but that won’t help you with him.” She lifted her chin. “I was a princess once.” She held out her arms and the boy reluctantly went to her. “Enjoy what time you can with him.” She led her children into the house, leaving Kat, Mangos, and the goats amongst the roses.

“I can’t believe you were singing to them,” Mangos complained as they approached Laromar’s mansion the next morning.

“They surprised me,” Kat said, not at all perturbed. “I needed to make them like me, otherwise, they would run screaming to Polonia who would call the *Fedai*.”

“Instead, Polonia thinks Henrik bought you for his pleasure.”

“But she didn’t call the *Fedai*, or tell Henrik,” Kat said. “Which is curious.” After a pause she added, “And I’m not sure she thinks I’m a slave.”

“She seems daft to me,” Mangos said. “And I’m not sure why she didn’t call the *Fedai*.”

“Maybe she’s daft,” Kat said, “or maybe a wily woman in a hostile home. She could have any number of reasons for not wanting to disturb the routine of the house.” Kat shrugged and smiled. “Maybe she even liked my singing.”

“That’s it, the west tower,” Mangos changed the topic by pointing to a mansion not much smaller than Henrik’s, a fortress of grey and pink stone surrounded by an iron fence.

“Window, then, I think,” said Kat.

Mangos nodded. They wouldn't need a rope, for vines grew over the rough stone of the tower. Both would help make the climb easy.

"Why," mused Kat, a few minutes later as they rummaged through Laromar's study, "would Henrik seek us out? There's a whole guild of thieves he could hire."

"Maybe he doesn't want it known he hired a thief," said Mangos. He opened a book and rifled through, looking for papers stuck between the pages.

"They'll know he got the evidence somehow," said Kat. "And how did he know of us?"

"We have—"

Kat waved her hand to silence him. "Alomar doesn't care what happens elsewhere. Any reputation we have is from you bragging in the taverns. Why us?"

Mangos kept looking through the books while Kat coaxed open a locked chest with a piece of twisted wire. "At least Henrik could tell us when Laromar would be away."

Kat rubbed behind her ear, a sure sign she was thinking. But her questions started Mangos thinking. He could not answer them, so he took comfort in the gold coin and promises Henrik gave them. The offer must be genuine because nobody would throw away gold.

"Have you found anything?"

"No," said Kat. "He might have something in his bedchamber, but I don't think he's cheating Henrik." She stopped, cocked her head, listening.

The door burst open, and a dozen men swarmed through. A small, bald man standing in the hall shouted, "There! Just like we were warned! Arrest them!"

"Time to leave," said Mangos. He pulled Henrik's pendant from his belt and rubbed it.

Kat's eyes grew large as he said, "Come..." She opened her mouth in a 'O.'

"Release me..." he continued as she dove for the pendant.

"...from this place," he finished as she knocked the pendant from his hand.

"Oh, gods," she said, grabbing his tunic and dragging him toward the window. The guardsmen crowded the room after them.

A pinprick of light appeared above the dropped pendant, growing larger and brighter. Two clawed hands emerged in the center, grasped the light like the inside of a hoop, and forced it open.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Kat shouted as she climbed out the window. Everybody else stared at the massive arms, horned head, and winged torso that followed the hands from the light.



Mangos threw his leg over the sill, then hesitated. It was a long way down, and he had his sword. "I can fight this," he muttered.

The demon stepped completely through the gate. Seeing the guards, it roared, and Mangos felt the sound vibrate through him.

"It will kill you!" Kat called. Mangos looked down to see her a few feet below the window, climbing down. "It *will* kill you!"

Mangos looked back in time to see the demon punch its fist through a guard's boiled leather breastplate and draw out coils of intestine.

Men started to scream, those nearest the door turning to run. The demon grabbed another man and flung him back, knocking Mangos away from the window.

Mangos scrambled to get to his feet, watched as men hacked futilely at the demon, as one after another fell torn and dying at its feet. The demon, momentarily ignoring the commotion by the door, started to turn to the window.

Mangos rolled over the windowsill, grabbing for any unevenness in the wall to help climb down. Screams came from the room. He slid and grabbed, his feet hit a ledge, and he bounced out. He flailed wildly as he fell and just managed to catch the ledge.

"Maybe not that fast," said Kat as she climbed past him. "But don't just hang there. That thing is on a twenty-minute killing spree, and there's nothing to be done about it."

A body sailed out the window above them. It crashed into the next building and rebounded down to the street.

"When it's done there, it'll look for more," Kat said. The demon roared again, and they felt it through the marble wall. "Maybe faster is better." She let go, dropped the rest of the way, landed lightly, and rolled.

Mangos dropped after her, and together they raced away, screams and roars drifting after them.

"That double-crosser," Kat said.

They stopped, panting, looking back at the top of Laromar's house. Although it hadn't changed, the windows seemed darker, the ivy more like strangler vines. "What was that?" Mangos asked.

"Killgate demon," Kat replied. "Henrik must have figured we wouldn't know what it was."

“We didn’t,” said Mangos. “Well, I didn’t.” He caressed the handle of his sword. “We were supposed to take it with us, then when we found the evidence, the demon would kill us? That doesn’t make sense.”

“I think,” Kat said, “the plan was we take the Killgate demon into the house while Henrik tells Laromar somebody is robbing him. Laromar rushes home to catch us. Trying to escape, you summon the demon, and it kills Laromar *and* us. Henrik eliminates a rival and all witnesses without risking being near the demon when it’s unleashed.”

Mangos thought about it. “I’ve never yet killed an employer, but we should pay Henrik a visit.”

Kat nodded. “Not through the front door, of course, and not now. Henrik will hear of the massacre, but nobody can identify our bodies, so he won’t know we escaped.”

Mangos took a deep breath. Henrik must have wanted unknown adventurers so nobody would note their absence when they died. Anger boiled inside him, but he merely nodded. *Wait until evening*, he told himself, *when Henrik is sure to be home*. He grinned. Henrik didn’t know how easy it was to get near him.

That night they climbed into Mangos’s room, a room he knew so well he didn’t even bother to light the lantern.

“We’ll do this with style,” he said as he poured water into the basin. “No sense looking disreputable when we’re trying to build a reputation.”

Kat shrugged, clearly not willing to argue, and slipped to her own rooms to clean and change.

Mangos stretched, took his time, enjoying the cool water on his face before stripping off his clothes and donning clean ones. As he reached for his bracers, he heard a scrape at the window. He froze.

A man pulled himself up, dropped over the sill. Mangos could see him clearly against the window. A black hood covered his face, and he wore black clothes to blend into the night.

An assassin! Mangos thought. Henrik must have learned they survived after all. Mangos lifted his sword from the bed, waited.

The assassin stepped away from the window, but Mangos could still see his outline. He could sense the man waiting, listening. Did he know where Mangos stood or was the room too dark?

One shout would bring the *Fedai*—perhaps more difficult for Henrik to explain, but Mangos couldn't give the assassin the opportunity.

The assassin stepped closer, silent. He drew his knife, paused, and stared at where Mangos stood. Mangos yanked his sword from its sheath and swung in one motion, swung with all his strength. The assassin crumpled, his head striking the floor and rolling away.

Mangos stepped over the head as it came to rest and stormed into Kat's room. "Henrik sent an assassin to kill us."

Kat, in the action of cinching her belt, saw blood drip from Mangos's sword. She buckled the belt, nodded, and took up her own swords. "Let's go talk to him about it."

The house was quiet. The slaves, like mice, were out of sight. A lone *Fedai* walked the corridors; he was easily avoided.

"It is too early for Henrik to be taking his pleasures," Kat whispered. "Let's check the library."

They crept to the library door, Mangos reaching it first. He peered in.

Both Henrik and Polonia were in the library. Henrik smiled as he walked about, talking, sometimes waving his hands. He paused by an open ledger and let his finger follow a line of numbers. He seemed delighted by what he read, for he began to laugh.

Polonia sat stiffly, primly, watching the wall as if it would fall if she didn't.

Mangos strode in, holding his sword loosely, so the last of the assassin's blood dripped onto the expensive carpet.

Henrik yelped; his face went pale then red. He stammered something unintelligible, swallowed, and tried again. "Have you proof of Laromar's betrayal?" he asked, his voice slightly squeaky.

"Not his," said Mangos, "but yours."

"Mine?" said Henrik, his face contorted by a smile so unnatural it made him look bestial. "I do no treachery."

"The demon? You wished to kill a rival and all witnesses. And when that failed, you set an assassin at us."

Polonia blinked slowly and turned her head to look at Mangos. She licked her lips, her brows pinched. "What of this assassin?"

"Quiet, woman," Henrik barked. He laughed, high pitched like his voice had become, not at all confident. "You're daft, man." He drew a deep breath, but Mangos prodded him with his sword.

"If you shout, you will die," said Mangos, turning his sword so it caught the light.

Henrik let out his breath but seemed to take courage from the fact he lived. "So. Tell me of this demon." He sounded more confident, his voice deeper. "Tell me of this assassin."

Polonia furrowed her brow, as if trying to determine the meanings behind the words.

"You know of the demon," said Mangos. He was aware Kat had come from behind him and now stood next to him. "The assassin lies dead upstairs, surprised even as he sought to surprise me."

"Dead?" Polonia asked.

"In this house?" said Henrik. With a smile and elaborate shrug, he said, "I know of none of this. What will you do? Will you kill me before my wife?" He stepped back, away from Mangos and behind Polonia, standing close to her for protection.

Mangos opened his mouth to answer, but Kat forestalled him by placing a hand on his elbow.

"Why would we kill you?" Kat said. "You've taught us a valuable lesson in Alomari business. Did you not say if we did this for you, we'd never have to worry about working again? I think that's what Mangos told me. Very clever."

Henrik frowned, looked from Kat to Mangos, studying both.

"We've done what you asked," Kat said.

"You will let him buy his way free," Polonia said, her voice flat.

"Shut up," Henrik said. He sounded very confident now. He clearly knew this game. "How much do you want?"

Mangos opened his mouth to speak but Kat nudged him with her foot. "We don't know Alomar well. I'm sure you have a better sense. Give us a dozen gold coins, and you can go back to all your pleasures."

"A dozen gold?" Henrik said. Mangos couldn't tell if he was relieved or surprised.

“Is that too much?” Kat asked. “Maybe ten? Surely ten gold to put this behind us, let you get back to your slave girls... and of course, we interrupted an evening with your wife. I’m sure you were looking forward to spending time with her.”

Polonia shuddered.

“Ten gold,” said Henrik. “As you say—”

“NO!” screamed Polonia. She twisted and thrust, a short knife somehow appearing in her hand even as she pushed it up under Henrik’s chin. “You will NOT!” she shrieked. “Not one more night!”

Henrik’s eyes bulged; he flailed with his hands. Bright blood gushed around the hilt and flowed down his neck. He knocked her hands away and pulled the knife free.

Blood showered them both before he sank to his knees.

“You will not live to do those things to me again,” whispered Polonia.

Henrik fell back, tipping over a marble stand and sending the vase on top to shattering doom. Mangos and Kat moved forward to watch him die.

“How did you know to bait her?” Mangos whispered.

“It was clear he didn’t send the assassin,” Kat said, “she did. Once I recognized that, it wasn’t hard to guess why.” She turned to Polonia and said, “I’m sorry we killed your assassin. Bad fortune he chose to enter the same way we did.”

“I’d just—had—enough. I’ve seen him kill rivals before. It would be natural for a rival to kill him. Nobody would have suspected me.” Polonia held up her blood-splattered hands. “I don’t care what happens now. You have no idea what he liked to do.”

“No, I probably don’t,” said Kat.

“What will happen to her?” Mangos asked.

“She could return to her family, if they will have her,” Kat said.

Polonia drew herself up, gathered her dignity, and Mangos saw, for the first time, a woman who was a princess once. “They will take my children, but they will not take me. A husband slayer has no place.” She smiled, a bitter smile. “Like a mercenary who kills his employer, I will be outcast.”

“All this,” Mangos said, meaning the house, the slaves, the guards, the grain business, “what will happen to it?”

“It will be taken by the Prince of Alomar,” said Polonia.

“Not at all,” said Kat. Mangos and Polonia looked at her in astonishment. She sheathed her sword.

“Claim that Henrik sent the assassin after us and we killed him for the double betrayal. It’s understood that mercenaries can kill those who betrayed them.”

“But that’s—” started Mangos.

“An excellent solution,” Kat interrupted, a hint of a growl in her voice. “We are justified, and Polonia can inherit everything.”

Polonia looked suspicious. “You—you would let me—?”

“I think you can manage the business well enough,” said Kat. “After all, you were a princess.”

“Well enough,” Polonia said. “But why would you do this?”

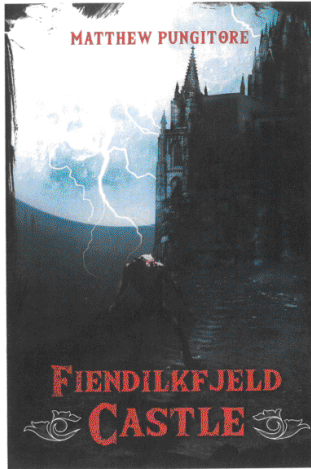
“Word will spread. It will be known we escaped a Killgate demon, slew an assassin, and avenged a betrayal.” Kat shrugged. “A small step toward fame. And, I think, it will be useful to have a well-positioned friend.”

Polonia smiled. “Yes, you will have a friend.”

“Then,” Kat said, “I think it best we moved out. It would be awkward to be living in the home of a man we supposedly killed.”

“I know a very nice place,” Mangos said, “that recently became vacant.”

Jim Breyfogle is the author of Tales of the Mongoose & Meerkat. Volume one, Pursuit Without Asking, is available on Amazon and other fine purveyors of books, out now through Cirsova Publishing. Audiobook will be out soon! Mongoose and Meerkat’s adventures continue in the next issue with King’s Game!



fiendilKFJELD Castle
by

MATTHEW
PUNGITORE

Gothic Horror
NOVEL

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Theodemir FiendilKFJELD learns that a missing heiress, Alison, who looks exactly like the woman he has been seeing in his dreams, was last seen at his family's Gothic castle, FiendilKFJELD castle, in northern Italy. Theodemir goes there to find her but hears rumors about how this region is haunted.

Devil's Deal

By MICHAEL WIESENBERG

A gambler and a wannabe cardsharp, Henry finally has an Ace up his sleeve: the ability to see a moment into the future—a diabolical gift from the Devil Himself!

Henry loved poker, which was a shame because he lost a lot. The hands he won, he played well enough, but he didn't seem to know when to throw away the losers. Those second-best hands cost him more than he won on the others.

Every day after work, and most of the weekend, Henry played no-limit hold'em at a public cardroom. Henry always wore a suit while he played. He didn't go home after work, and he was just kind of used to wearing it on weekends. The suit was brown and old, and the pants were shiny. The white shirt was fraying a bit at the cuffs, and Henry's gray hair was thin. He had had the same pinkish-yellow frames on his glasses for twenty years. He was 55 but looked older.

Henry usually spent most of each session trying to get even. If he could somehow avoid those losing hands, he would do very well.

The regulars in Henry's game were a friendly lot, much less intense than those in the biggest games, and the table talk was often as interesting as the hands. One Friday the Thirteenth, the talk drifted to parapsychology, ranging from superstition to the occult to unexplained powers of the mind.

"Wouldn't you make a fortune if you could see just one day into the future!" said one of the players. "You could buy only stocks that would go up, or win all your sports bets, or..."

"Heck," interrupted another, "I'd like to be able to see just one minute into the future. Then I'd know which pots to play in and which not, and I'd clean up in this game."

The other players laughed and returned to concentration upon the cards that had just been dealt. In this pot, Henry came in for three times the big blind of \$5, that is \$15, having been dealt pocket kings. Four players, including both blinds, stayed, and Henry was pleased

that he had built a pot of \$60. Henry was even more pleased when he saw the flop: king of hearts, eight of clubs, three of hearts.

The first two players checked. Henry bet \$65. The player in the dealer position folded. The man who had had the small blind, a sarcastic Mexican who was not known for playing speculative hands, called. The man who had had the big blind called.

The turn was the nine of diamonds. The first man checked. Henry bet \$125. The first man thought a while and then called, as did the second.

The river was the three of clubs, and now Henry was very happy. He had a full house. The first man checked. Henry said to himself, *No straight or flush possibility. Don't want to scare the other two off. Better make it less than half the pot this time.* He bet \$300. He had another \$700 left but didn't want to scare off the other two players.

The Mexican put in the entire \$950 he had left. "I raise you back \$650."

The third man, the one who had called up to this point, folded, saying, "I can see a set is no good against you two. You guys are *serious*."

Henry wasn't quite so happy as he called the raise. "I've got kings full," he said, showing his hand.

"Get it fixed," said the Mexican. "I caught the fourth three."

Henry got up sadly. There was no way he could have played the hand and not lost, short of not playing it at all. The winner of the pot had had by far the worst of it until that last card. Henry would have to leave now and could not play till next payday. He had just blown his whole paycheck in that one game. Usually the money lasted longer. He felt their eyes on him as he crossed the floor. They'd be talking about his big loss for days.

Henry slid behind the wheel of his old Chevy and slammed the door. He frequently banged that door, usually after a losing session, which might have damaged the lock mechanism, so now it wouldn't shut without slamming.

"Goddamnit!" said Henry. "I'd sell my soul to the devil to be able to see one minute into the future!"

Henry noticed a strong smell not unlike a gas station bathroom.

"You rang?" said a nasal voice with a heavy Okie accent.

Henry jumped and hit his head on the ceiling of the car. He twisted sideways. There sat a slim man in an outfit straight out of the 1970s, a double-knit houndstooth-check suit, with a shirt whose very long pointed collars worn outside the jacket reached almost to his shoulders. The open top three buttons of the shirt revealed a large ankh dangling from a heavy gold-plated chain nestled against a distinct lack of chest hair. Thick, heavy yellow hair that swept to the hinge of the jaws hid his ears. A diamond pinky ring glittered on the left hand.

“Where did you come from? You weren’t here when I got in.”

Eyes the color of faded blue jeans fixed upon Henry’s face. “You summoned me, partner. Or weren’t you serious with your offer?”

“Whaddya mean?” Henry briefly considered flinging open the door and leaping out of the car, but curiosity stopped him.

“I have a business arrangement I would like to discuss with you. If it meets with your approval, then we’ll sign two copies of a contract I have with me.” The man patted the left breast pocket of his coat. The movement sent up a whiff of the very strong fragrance. Henry sniffed. Definitely Bay Rum aftershave. *Cheap* Bay Rum much too liberally applied.

“Business arrangement? What business arrangement? Who are you?”

“You can just call me Duval. As to the business arrangement, I think I can offer you something you want very much.”

“And what might that be?”

“You would like to be able to see one minute into the future. That is, you would like to be able to previsualize the showdown at the moment of picking up the cards dealt to you in each poker hand. The contract states precisely that at any given moment, you can close your eyes, and you will visualize in your mind’s eye what you will actually be seeing with your eyes open 60 seconds later. You’ll be able to see whether or not you are the winner of a pot just as you are picking up your cards. I believe that’s what you want.”

“And what do you get from it?” asked Henry suspiciously.

“Well, traditionally, in arrangements of this sort, I ask people to sign a promissory note. This is a mere formality, you understand, entitling me to a small possession of yours, a little thing you don’t

even know you have, and that in any case you do not have to give up until you have no further use for it, nor will you at the time notice its departure.”

“In other words, Duval, you want my soul.”

“Well, you *did* offer to sell it to me in exchange for granting your wish, and I’m prepared to do just that.”

No longer to be a loser! Life wasn’t worth living unless he could play poker, and the way things were going, he couldn’t afford to do that much longer. “How do I know you’re not going to trick me?”

“I expect you to read the contract in its entirety before you sign it. It’s very simply worded. I believe you’ll find everything in order and to your liking.” The man pulled two documents from his inner pocket, setting more Bay Rum scent loose.

Henry held the two side by side as he examined them. They were identical. Henry read the words that stated quite clearly what the man had earlier told him about being able to see at any time one minute into the future merely by closing his eyes. A second paragraph read, “Upon my demise, I, Henry Gudgeon, agree that Duval will be the sole inheritor of my soul.”

“Do I sign in blood?”

Henry hadn’t realized that it was possible to laugh with an Okie accent. “No, no, that’s not necessary. Your ordinary signature is binding.” Duval produced a gold-plated ballpoint that had a tiny flashlight at the end. Henry signed both documents. The man scrawled a large D beneath each of Henry’s signatures.

“Please don’t try to show your copy to anyone. They won’t be able to see it.”

Henry glanced down at his document to make sure that no words had been changed. All appeared in order.

“When...?” Henry had started to ask when Duval expected to collect his part of the deal, but as he looked up, he realized that he was alone in the car. Well, no need to worry about when, particularly if he could foresee it.

For two weeks, Henry eagerly anticipated payday. He could hardly wait to play. He’d go in there and teach those smartasses a thing or two about playing!

Henry cashed his paycheck at the cardroom. He walked across the crowded room, carefully making his way to the \$2/\$5 no-limit hold'em table, where there was one seat open. He called for a chip girl and bought in the entire amount of his check.

On his very first hand, he was dealt a pair of queens in the hole. While he awaited his turn to bet, he closed his eyes. He saw a large pot, over \$600, and he, Henry was raking it in! By the time the bet got to Henry, there had already been raise-open of \$15 plus a \$25 raise. Henry called the \$40 required to get into the pot. When the bet got back to the original opener, the Mexican who had "fixed" his full house two weeks before, that man reraised \$60. Henry and one other called the bet. The flop had a queen and the turn another. The river paired one of the small cards that was in the flop. When the chips had stopped flying and it was time for the showdown, Henry saw that his four queens had beaten two full houses. Just as he had foreseen, Henry claimed the large pot. What a pleasant change it was to hear other players calling for fresh chips!

The next hand he was dealt was two sevens, a hand he usually played. Henry closed his eyes and saw a small pot being claimed by a woman across the table. When it came Henry's turn to act, he threw his cards away, and smiled.

Three uneventful hands passed. Each time he started with nothing. When he closed his eyes, he saw others winning the pot. He did not play. While waiting for winning cards, he looked about the large cardroom, and saw that there were several very large games. In the biggest, each player had several stacks of black \$100 chips. Two thousand a stack. There was one empty seat in the game; would he ever sit in that seat, play that big?

Then he was dealt four-deuce of two different suits. As he prepared to dump that hand, too, he closed his eyes and saw that he would win the pot. Three people called the minimum bet. Henry raised, and they all folded. He proudly showed the table his "nothing hand," so they would see how cleverly he had bluffed them.

Two hands later, he had two fours. On closing his eyes, he saw that the pot would be very large and that he would win. By the time it was up to Henry to put money in the pot, there were two raises, and it would cost him \$100 to stay with the little pair. Well, his vision had

not let him down yet. He called the bet. With each street, the other three in the pot kept betting and raising, and Henry kept calling. His hand didn't improve on the turn, by which time Henry ran out of chips. The turn brought a four and the river another four. On the showdown, Henry's four fours beat a flush and a full house. Henry couldn't stop smiling as he stacked his \$4000 pot. He was winning over \$5000, his best ever!

"How could you possibly put in that much money before the flop and on the flop with just pocket fours?" asked the Mexican, who was not happy about losing to Henry with another full house.

"Just had a hunch."

Somewhat later, Henry started with pocket aces. Well, he knew he'd play that one. Two players were ahead of him. The Mexican opened for the minimum, and the next fellow raised. As he reached for his chips, he closed his eyes briefly and saw a disconcerting sight. He tried to pull back his chips, but it was too late. It would be a large pot, and he would not win it. Well, he couldn't win every pot he played; the others would get suspicious.

The Mexican raised again, and the second fellow called. By the time the bet returned to Henry, he would have to put in another \$100 to play. Normally he would not have hesitated to bet that much on pocket aces, but now he had inside knowledge that the hand would be a loser. He didn't have to play. Henry tried to throw the cards away, but a curious thing happened. His fingers would not obey his command; they kept a firm grip on the cards. And his other hand, the right, seemed to be acting on its own. He watched the hand pick up \$100 worth of chips and throw them into the pot. The flop brought an ace and two fives. Aces full. Not a bad hand. Perhaps he'd foreseen it wrong. He could win a nice pot with those cards.

The Mexican checked. The next man bet \$200. Henry watched his right hand pick up a pile of \$20 chips, \$1000 worth. He heard himself say, "I raise \$800."

The Mexican now pushed in all his chips, a tremendous pile of fives, twenties, hundreds. "I'm going all in," said the man. "That's \$2000 more."

The second man folded.

“Call,” said Henry. It was as if some force were in control of his vocal cords. He had meant to say “Fold,” had even framed the word in his mind. His right hand counted out the required \$2000 raise.

The turn and river brought a four and a deuce. Came the showdown.

“I’ve got four fives,” gloated the Mexican.

“Beats aces full,” choked Henry.

Henry felt sick. He had dropped \$3500 of his \$5000 profit in one hand. Well, he could still quit \$1000 ahead. That wouldn’t be bad for one session. He tried to stand, but his legs would not obey.

Henry thought he heard a laugh he recognized coming from the high-stakes no-limit hold’em game. In the formerly empty seat, he saw a yellow-haired fellow in a seersucker suit, behind mountains of \$100 chips.

Two hands later, Henry started with king-10 suited. With eyes closed, he saw the man to his left, a fat guy who lost almost as regularly as Henry, win the pot. This was worse than any losing streak he had previously experienced. This time he knew for certain beforehand that he would lose the pot, yet he could not prevent himself from putting the chips in the pot all the way. He ended up with kings and 10s but lost to two bigger pair, aces up. It cost him “only” \$300 this time.

He was getting good cards, but they were not improving enough to win. He played about one hand in three, each time losing a little, usually somewhere between \$20 and \$100. It was torture, slow torture. He knew ahead of time each hand that would lose and, if he cared to examine his vision closely, how much money each would lose and what the cards would be that beat him. He experienced the agony of acting out a charade, as much in control of his movements as a marionette on a string. He won only two more pots all evening, each small, only a minor letup in the steady decline.

After several hours, he was broke. He had lost the whole paycheck, just as so many times before.

Slowly Henry walked out to his car. He got in and pulled the document from the glove compartment. He carefully ripped the paper in half, and then in fury tore it, again and again, until only shreds

remained. Henry caught a whiff of cheap English Leather, and the slim gentleman was sitting next to him.

“Now, now, now, partner.” The gentleman shook his head sadly. “A deal is a deal, and you can’t back out of it by destroying your copy of the contract. Your signature on my copy is still binding.”

“But you tricked me. You told me I’d be able to see into the future, to know whether or not I’d win each pot.”

“And so you can.”

“But I can’t do anything about it. I can’t throw away the losing hands.”

“Now that was not part of our agreement. I can let you see the future, but I can’t give you the ability to change it. That’s not within my power. Only He”—the man rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and shuddered delicately—“can alter the future.” The fellow reached into his double-knit leisure jacket and brought forth another document, identical to the one Henry had just shredded, even down to the two signatures. “Let’s not be a poor sport. Here’s your copy back again.”

Henry glared down at the paper in his hand. When he looked up, the man was gone. He put the contract back into the glove compartment and started up the car.


While waiting for a red light at an intersection, Henry wearily closed his eyes. He saw a vision of the light turning green, his car starting across the intersection, and then a heavy Cadillac running the light from the cross street. As the big car slammed into Henry’s car, in the vision, gasoline poured from the ruptured gas tank of the old Chevy. A spark from the Cadillac’s engine ignited the fuel. Both cars disappeared in a flaming explosion through which no living thing could survive.

As Henry opened his eyes, the light turned green. He gently pressed the accelerator, and the Chevy slowly moved forward. Henry was a careful, deliberate, slow driver, quite the opposite of his poker-playing style. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a Cadillac racing toward the intersection, moving much too fast to be able to stop for the light...

Michael Wiesenberg was a professional poker player for 10 years, and a technical writer in Silicon Valley for much of his career, the while contributing fiction and nonfiction to various publications. His books: Canadian Crosswords 2: From Yukon to Timbits to Hosers... and

More!, Canadian Crosswords: From British Columbia to Maple Syrup to Rock Music and More!, *and others are available on Amazon.*

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The Book of Dark Sighs

By ROBERT ZOLTAN

Dareon and Blue, the Rogues of Merth, find themselves in the crosshairs of an old foe! They must find for him a powerful tome, or Blue's love will perish at his hand!

The poet swordsman Dareon Vin and the Indari warrior he had nicknamed Blue (due to his numerous tattoos) reclined upon cushions at a low table in the open-air patio of the Desert Rose cafe in the city of Merth. As they waited for Blue's lover, the Khulanese dancer Malika, to take the outdoor stage, they nibbled olives and figs, sipped tanjeez, a liquor made from fermented figs, and enjoyed the mild summer evening below the stars of Plemora.

It was a most welcome quiet time in their lives—no problems with the law, no strange entities seeking to devour the city, no malevolent sorcerers intent on their demise, no recent rapier duels or street brawls, not even one of Dareon's vindictive ex-lovers seeking retribution. Blue and Malika had settled in nicely as romantic companions (though she still retained her own small apartment) and if Malika had still not exactly taken a liking to Dareon, she had grown used to him, like bitter ale.

But if there is any constant in the world of Plemora, it is that all things change.

Malika had been scheduled to appear onstage just after sunset. Twilight had fallen, and those other beauties, the stars, had taken their stage in the heavens, but still Malika's star had not shown.

"Where is she?" asked Dareon. "Malika is usually prompt."

Blue only frowned at the empty stage.

The musicians continued to play but began to look puzzled themselves. Then there was a short break in the music, and a dancer emerged from behind the curtains and moved onto the stage in a whirl of colored silk.

Dareon and Blue sat up, feeling relieved. But their sense of relief vanished a moment later when they saw that the woman was not Malika.

They exchanged a glance, and Dareon gestured toward the interior of the cafe. Blue followed him inside. They found the proprietor speaking with a server near the bar.

"Excuse me," said Dareon to the proprietor.

The thin hawk-nosed man turned his amiable smile upon them. "Ah, good evening, gentlemen. It is good to see you again. How may I help you?"

“Do you know where we can find the dancer, Malika?” asked Dareon.

The proprietor raised his palms upward. “I would ask you the same question. She did not show for her performance. Most unlike her.”

“Yes,” said Dareon. “Most. Well, we thank you.”

But when Dareon turned, there was no one. Blue had already walked out the front door.

Dareon followed and found the Indari jogging west down the street. The poet swordsman caught up with him and kept stride.

“Where are you going?” asked Dareon.

“To Malika’s. Something’s wrong,” said Blue.

“Maybe she was just delayed by some business or—”

“Something’s wrong,” repeated Blue.

“Your Indari instincts?” asked Dareon, but Blue did not reply.

Suddenly Dareon’s own instincts, or just his common sense, kicked in. He stopped. “Blue!”

The Indari paused and turned.

“No point in both of us going. If she’s not there, and if she is in trouble, she might go to our place. We’ll meet back at the Desert Rose as soon as possible.”

Blue gave a nod, turned, and dashed off with greater speed.

Blue’s instincts were not unerring, or perhaps it was more accurate to say that his instincts sometimes became muddled by his passions, but this time Dareon felt the same unease. It was very unlike Malika to fail in an obligation.

Dareon ran west until he reached Straight Street, the most crooked street in Merth, and turned south onto the winding cobbled road. He continued alongside the hill that bordered the left side of the street until he came to some crumbling steps to his left and ascended to their large converted garden shed at the top. He saw no sign of Malika, but he knew Blue had given her a key, so she might be inside. He drew forth his own. Then he paused, for he felt a strange sense of foreboding, as if a tiger were waiting on the other side of the door. Going back down a few steps, he climbed the hill to the left. He crept around the shed and glanced surreptitiously in through the window. He could see little through the gloom inside, but nothing seemed amiss. He eschewed the front door for the back,

examined that doorknob and lock, and found no sign of tampering. He listened intently at the door and heard nothing inside. Then he drew his dagger with his free hand, turned the key in the lock, and pushed the door open.

Moonlight shone in through one window, revealing Dareon's small bed and a shelf filled with his books. Everything appeared as it should, and there were few hiding places in the one-room makeshift cottage, except perhaps under the beds. Dareon lit a lamp and quickly checked. No one was inside the cottage. He had let their cat Zazar out for the night before leaving for the café. Nothing seemed to be out of place. Then he saw the note.

A folded piece of cream-colored paper sat upright like a tent on Dareon's small writing desk. He took the lamp over, picked up the paper, and unfolded it. It read:

If you wish to see your little dancer alive again, come to 147 Artifice Avenue in the Merchant Circle.

*Most sincerely,
Ravel Nebelnezar, Purveyor of Fine Goods*

Dareon's eyes widened, and a chill swept across his skin. It was as if he had stepped into a nightmare. He could think of no worse explanation for Malika's disappearance. Recovering from shock and fighting off the weight of dread, Dareon sheathed his dagger, stuffed the note in his pocket, and flew out the front door. He leapt down the precarious stairs to Straight Street like a mad mountain goat. As he raced north and then east back toward the Desert Rose, his mind spun like a top. How could that despicable merchant sorcerer be back in Merth? How could he even be back in Plemora? Dareon himself had witnessed Ravel being taken from this world by the vengeful Moth Queen, Thara Jin Tual, nearly a year ago.

He ran with reckless abandon down the lanes and alleys and up and down steps, taking the shortest route back to the cafe. Ravel Nebelnezar would blame Dareon and probably Blue also for the unpleasant turn of events that had befallen him, not to mention the destruction of Ravel's precious Blue Lamp in which the merchant

had imprisoned the Moth Queen, as well as Blue and Malika. Dareon mouthed a prayer to Lady Luck, the closest thing to a god that he believed in, for they would greatly need her favors this night if they were to escape whatever fate Ravel Nebelnezar had in store for them. And with Nebelnezar, death was the least horrible fate that Dareon could imagine.

As he reached the Desert Rose, he saw Blue standing like a statue by the lamp at the entrance. Dareon skidded to a halt on the hard-packed dirt street, pausing to catch his breath.

“What is it?” asked Blue, staring in alarm at Dareon’s urgency.

Dareon reached into his pocket and handed the note to Blue. “I found this on my writing desk.”

Blue squinted in the dim lamplight. His eyes widened, and he let out a curse. Then they both sprinted toward Merchant’s Circle.

The exterior of the small white-plastered shop at the end of Artifice Avenue was simple and unassuming, unlike Ravel’s former establishment. No goods were arranged outside to lure buyers in. No windows adorned the walls to allow a view inside. Not even a sign hung above the plain wooden door.

Dareon found this somehow disturbing, as if the shop had been created and prepared only for him and Blue. A few people strode about near the end of the lane, mostly shopkeepers closing up for the night. But it mattered little. Dareon knew that no one could help them against this foe.

He and Blue did not draw their swords but kept their hands on the handles of their weapons as Dareon reached for the brass doorknob. Before he could touch it, the door swung inward.

After a glance at Blue, Dareon went inside. The Indari followed.

Ravel’s new shop was as empty as his last had been full. In fact, there was only one item for sale, which stood a few yards in front of them, and Dareon knew they would soon find out its terrible price.

They both drew their swords and stepped forward, muscles tensed. The door behind them slammed shut, but they gave it little notice.

For in the center of the room on a raised wooden dais was an enormous hourglass of red-tinted crystal that reached almost to the

top of the ten-foot ceiling. The top half of the hourglass was filled with sand that sifted through the narrow center of the chamber into the bottom half in a thin steady stream. And sitting with her back to the far side of the glass in the bottom chamber was the Khulanese dancer, Malika.

Malika looked up as they approached, crawled to the near side of the glass, and opened her mouth as if she were shouting. But Dareon and Blue could hear no sound.

Then they noticed a figure stepping forth as if out of the wall to their left. They spun to face the despicable man they had dealt with the year before. He was still rotund, now dressed in a gold-trimmed robe of ornate design, and wore the same odd round cap that squared at the top. Upon his pudgy nose rested not the blue-tinted glasses Dareon remembered from their last encounter, but round clear ones with gold rims. The merchant sorcerer, Ravel Nebelnezar, gave a brief ironic bow.

“My new shop may lack the variety of the previous one, but I think you will agree that what it lacks in quantity, it makes up for in quality.” He made a flamboyant wave toward the hourglass. “A most exquisite piece, is it not? And one for which I suspect you will pay highly.”

“Or you,” said Dareon. Blue only snarled as they stepped toward Ravel.

“No, no,” said Ravel, waving a finger of one hand at them while pointing at Malika with the other. “Take no action against me or, I warn you...”

They halted. Blue drew his hunting knife, turned, and hurled it with incredible force at the hourglass. The knife bounced off without leaving a mark. In fact, it barely made a sound until it rang on the wooden floor.

“Quite pointless, I assure you,” said Ravel.

Blue ran and struck the hourglass with his sword. The blade rebounded harmlessly and almost flew from Blue’s grasp, as if the force he had exerted had been reversed.

“Waste not your strength. It is unbreakable by any natural means,” said Ravel. The rotund merchant sorcerer walked to where Blue’s knife had landed, bent over with a grunt, and picked it up. He stepped up to Blue and handed the knife back to him, handle first.

Blue reached out, but Ravel drew his hand back and spoke.

“Harm a hair on my head, and she dies a slow death, buried in the sands of time.” He then offered the knife again to Blue.

The Indari took it, trembling with rage, a murderous fire burning in his eyes.

“Who said anything about your hair?” asked Dareon. “How about if we cut off one of your fingers for every minute that passes?” Dareon reached for his dagger.

Ravel smiled without humor. “You are a vulgar little man with a gruesome imagination. But it will not avail you any more than an attempt at violence. I can empty the upper vessel of sand into the chamber below at any moment. Or merely increase the flow, thus.” Ravel nodded toward the hourglass. The sand that sifted down ever so slowly suddenly streamed down with increased flow.

“Stop it!” shouted Blue.

Dareon moved his hand clear of his dagger.

Ravel waved his hand, and the sand fell once again at its former lethargic rate.

“Let that be an end to all of your threats and objections. I would have trapped someone dear to *you*, little poet,” said Ravel, nodding at Dareon. “But it was impossible to find such a fantastic person. It turns out that the dearest one to you is yourself. Of course, the Indari is dear to you, as you proved in the past, but I need him to assist you in your task. Thus, I trapped the dancer. For the second time, actually. Before, in the Blue Lamp; now, in this exquisite red hourglass. Is it not clever to sell a fine piece of merchandise more than once?” He glanced at Malika and gave her a brief smile.

She spat soundless curses at him.

“Tsk, tsk. It is probably for the best that we cannot hear her,” said Ravel. “But know that even if she dies, her suffering will be as nothing to the torment I suffered at the hands of the Moth Queen, Thara Jin Tual.” Here all trace of a smile faded, and Ravel’s face grew pallid. “Though in terms of the normal time of your world I was trapped in her realm for perhaps only a week, what I suffered in that time seemed an eternity. Had it not been for a favor owed me by a minor demon, I might be trapped there still. In the midst of my torment, only thoughts of my revenge kept my mind from breaking, only hate guarded me from madness.” He glared at Dareon, and blood flooded his features again like storm clouds filling a pale sky. “You have taken much from me, *poet*.”

“Shove your sad story up your fat arse,” said Dareon. “I didn’t ask you to abduct my friend, Blue, back then. I was simply retrieving something that was dear to me.”

“And now, you will retrieve something that is dear to *me*.”

“What?” asked Dareon, his mind working furiously to find some way to free Malika or force Ravel to do so.

“Both of you, listen well,” said Ravel. “For not only her life, but your lives as well, will depend on it.”

“In a minor netherworld, in a castle on a cliff overlooking a red molten sea, there dwells a being of some power called Lord Xangar. In his possession is a book of forbidden knowledge and power called *The Book of Dark Sighs*. You will steal this book and bring it back to me. Should you fail or die in the attempt...” Ravel gave a meaningful glance at the giant hourglass.

Blue stepped over to the hourglass and crouched down, placing his open palm on the crystal barrier. Malika matched hers to his.

Dareon watched in pity and anger. He now wished he had killed Ravel Nebelnezar when his dagger had been at the merchant’s throat those many months ago. “And if we bring you this book, you will release Malika and allow us to go free?”

“That is the business agreement,” said Ravel.

All of the clever twistings of Dareon’s mind had only led him back to this dead-end shop. He saw no choice. He sheathed his sword. “Very well. Blue?”

Blue and Malika seemed to be reading each other’s lips. Then the Indari stood and sheathed his sword. He nodded at Dareon, but would not look at Ravel.

“How will we find this castle?” asked Dareon. “For that matter, how in the hell will we get to this netherworld?”

“Ix will guide you,” said Ravel. As if it had been hiding inside, a red dragonfly with golden eyes launched itself up from the top of Ravel’s hat and hovered in front of Dareon.

Dareon narrowed his eyes at the creature. “I see.”

Ravel smiled. “No, you do not. But *he* does. He will find the surest path, and lead you to *The Book of Dark Sighs*.”

“Are you too lazy and cowardly to get it yourself?” asked Dareon, unable to resist the jab.

Ravel ignored the insult. "I would be detected immediately if I were to infiltrate Xangar's realm. Even you must enter his world some distance from his fortress."

Dareon sighed. "I suppose innumerable dangers and unspeakable horrors await us in this netherworld?"

Ravel nodded. "You must trust nothing and no one, except Ix and his unerring instincts."

"And exactly how are we supposed to get there? Ride on his back?" asked Dareon.

"In a manner of speaking," replied Ravel. "Ix!"

The dragonfly hovered close to the floor and began spinning in a circle six feet wide. Faster and faster it spun until it was but a blurred red outline. Soon the floor within that circle faded and became a dark red mist.

"There is your doorway. He will make another for your return," said Ravel.

"Wait," said Dareon. "We're not equipped. What about food and water?"

"You will not feel hunger or thirst for a long while, for time passes differently in that dimension, and your bodies are alien to that place. I can explain no better than that. But meanwhile, time here passes as always. You have one full day to fulfill your quest before there is naught but sand and the beautiful corpse of a Khulanese dancer in the bottom of the glass. Make haste and step through!"

Dareon hesitated as he tried to see through the red mist. But Blue immediately stepped forward and dropped into the circle. He disappeared as if he had fallen through a hole.

"We'll be back," said Dareon, staring the merchant in the eye. "And if you try to break our bargain, this time, I will kill you."

Ravel smiled and bowed.

Dareon took a deep breath and plunged into the hole.

Dareon and Blue stood in a rocky cove on the black stone shore of a crimson molten sea. The sky boiled with thick clouds of black and gray and purple, yet the air was still. A blood-red twilight lit the land, changed only by intermittent strobes of pale green that flashed from behind the clouds. Waves moved upon the surface of the sea, but at half the speed that water would, undulating like thick red oil, cresting and crashing quietly on the shore of black slate with no whitecaps or foam. A faint scorched scent drifted in the warm air. No life of any kind could be seen or heard.

“Ravel called this sea molten,” said Dareon. “But if he meant it in the traditional sense, I don’t feel that much heat coming from it. Looks more like blood.” Dareon took a step closer to where the waves spread out in large fans upon the rocks. Ix flew in front of Dareon’s face and made a high-pitched angry buzzing noise.

“I think he’s warning you away,” said Blue. Then he narrowed his eyes at the edge of the liquid and pointed. “By Inda! Look!”

Dareon followed Blue’s gaze. At the edge of the sea, as each wave reached its furthest point landward with the incoming tide, half-formed shapes of unidentifiable things seemed to be trying to free themselves from the red molten liquid: a tentacle, a claw, a grasping hand, a face with a yawning or screaming mouth stretching forward. But whether the things were submerged in the substance or actually being formed by it was not clear. And now, just beneath the low velvety sound of the molten stuff lapping over the beach, they heard faint moans and whispers and bestial cries that rose and fell with the waves.

Blue grunted and stared with wide eyes. “What is it?”

“Unspeakable horror number one,” said Dareon, as a chill swept over him despite the warm air. “Damned souls, or creatures being formed by this chaotic stuff, or something else altogether. In any case, we surely won’t be going for a swim. I’d say even a boat is out of the question.”

As if in answer, Ix emitted a slightly lower tone, just as insistent but less agitated, and floated slowly over some black rock formations to their left.

“Obviously, we go this way,” said Dareon.

The two climbed after Ix. When they reached the top, they saw that tall cliffs of black rock bordered the entire coast, winding in and out and leading to a towering structure a few miles away, carved from the cliffs themselves.

“Gods!” said Dareon, pointing. “That must be it.”

The titanic edifice was unlike any fortress Dareon and Blue had ever seen. Its uneven walls and towers of black stone seemed to claw at the air. Asymmetrical terraces could faintly be seen along the oddly slanting walls. Orange light glowed from several portals. For the first time, they saw signs of life: large dark winged creatures swooping to and fro above the castle.

Dareon groaned. “Why couldn’t it be a beautiful ivory palace with golden minarets, lush gardens, and harem girls?”

“There may be harem girls,” said Blue.

“Judging by the owner’s taste, they’d have three rows of jagged teeth, two noses, five eyes, and laugh like wounded goats.”

Ix buzzed as if impatient at the unnecessary discussion and flew over the black rocks in the general direction of the massive keep.

They followed the demon dragonfly through a labyrinth of grotesque rock formations, a twisted tortured terrain that seemed to be one mass, as if spewed forth from the molten sea before solidifying. The reddish light gave the illusion that they were traversing a landscape composed of dark flesh instead of rock. As if to confirm this appearance, Dareon began to notice the hint of shapes, some human, others bestial, but all writhing as if in an agonized attempt to escape the clutches of the stone. Dareon avoided touching any recognizable limbs. Had this world always been like this? He dreaded to think of what a being like Lord Xangar would do to his own world of Plemora. The ugliest place in Plemora that he had ever seen had shined like a kind of humble paradise compared to this scorched nightmare realm.

As the elevation increased and the way grew steeper, Ix veered to the left away from the sea and took them through a winding path between enormous knobs of stone. Soon they heard a faint sound, as of voices. As they grew nearer to it, the sound became defined as strange grunts mixed with the whines and moans of men and women. They emerged from the maze of boulders onto a rock ledge

overlooking a gorge. They saw movement below and crouched down to hide behind the shelf of rock. They peeked out.

Upon the flat canyon floor, hundreds of human-looking men and women were strapped to strange devices, contorted into positions that exposed their most vulnerable and desirable features. Their captors were white-skinned, man-like but taller, with one black eye and a large, bulbous head. Dozens of other creatures, ranging from humanoid to completely alien in shape, roved about, having their way with the captives in the most perverse fashions imaginable. Above each prisoner floated a sphere, ranging in size from about five to twenty feet wide. The smallest globes were a pale gray sickly color. The largest were bright red and pulsed with a visible rhythm. Across the face of the spheres crisscrossed what seemed to be large dark veins. The veins met somewhere below and spread into multiple tendrils that clung to the helpless men and women like vines.

As Dareon and Blue stared in bemused horror, unable to avert their eyes from the mesmerizing scene, one of the largest red globes detached from a woman. It floated up into the air and over the hill of rock on the opposite side of the gorge. Several of the white giants unstrapped the limp woman from the device. One of them carried her away through a dark entrance in the cliff face to the right. A new woman was brought, screaming and struggling, to be strapped to the device as a replacement. A small pallid sphere floated over, dangling its vein-like tendrils, and attached itself to the new woman.

“By Inda! What is the meaning of this nightmare?” asked Blue.

“I would not want to begin to guess,” said Dareon with a grimace.

“Can we somehow aid these people?” asked Blue.

“I don’t see how,” said Dareon. “There are hundreds of these monstrous creatures. What could two swords do?”

Blue snarled.

“Blue, I have no intention of being killed, or worse, strapped down at the mercy of one of these creatures whose upright implements resemble a sizable cactus. Remember Malika.”

Blue cursed and moved away from the edge.

Ix gave an insistent buzz and continued to their right, back into the labyrinth of stone.

Dareon pulled his eyes away and followed Blue and Ix, revolted both by the bizarre sight below and by himself for finding it compelling to some evil part of his own soul. The poet swordsman was too busy admonishing himself to notice the trap door that opened in the rock above him. But Blue's sharp hearing detected the slight grating sound. The Indari spun and drew his sword in one motion, glancing up and to the right of Dareon.

"Dareon, above you!" shouted Blue.

Dareon looked up in time to see a net falling over him. He sprang backward and was caught by the edge of the net, but was able to struggle free. Then he leapt onto the slanting rock wall and rebounded like a frog onto a small shelf on the other side to gain some elevation.

A huge figure emerged from the hidden door and straddled the walls between the paths, moving toward Dareon with a hooked weapon that resembled a fishing gaff. A second crawled out and dropped to the path with a similar weapon, facing Blue.

They were two of the white-skinned creatures from the valley. Up close, they measured nearly eight feet in height, were naked with leprous skin, huge hands and feet with three digits each, and a single black eye that resembled a wound in the center of their bulbous heads. No mouths, noses, or ears were visible.

Dareon did not draw his rapier but tried to crawl further up the rock, pretending to panic in terror. The creature thrust its hook up toward him. At the last second, Dareon twisted, grasped the curve of the hook, and drew his dagger. The creature jerked the gaff back as Dareon had hoped it would. He used the force of its pull to spring into the air and whipped his dirk down at the thing's head. The dagger buried itself in the black eye as if in a rotten tree trunk. The bulbous head jerked back as black ichor squirted from the wound. The creature shook and then collapsed in a heap on the ground.

Blue had dodged the hurled net of the other creature and ran forward with his longsword raised. The thing swung its huge gaff downward like a club. It narrowly missed Blue as he jumped to one side upon a rock ledge as Dareon had done, and then sprang off it and hacked the arm that held the gaff. The creature dropped its weapon and stumbled back, holding the gaping wound. Blue leapt

forward and slashed twice diagonally with lightning strikes that caught the creature in the thigh and belly. It fell back and crashed in a lifeless heap on top of its comrade.

Dareon retrieved his dagger and hopped over the corpses of their attackers to land at Blue's side just as another bulbous head peeked out from the trap door above. They retreated with the greatest possible speed down the winding path, following Ix toward the black stronghold of Lord Xangar.

Ix reduced his speed, as if no longer sensing immediate danger. Dareon and Blue slowed to a walk and continued on, seeing nothing but the twisted black stone and the swirling ink of the sky lit with periodic flashes of green lightning. After a time, Ix stopped before a dark opening that was barely discernable from the rock itself. The dragonfly glided through. Dareon and Blue stepped to the mouth of the cave and looked in. They saw Ix dart with great speed down a long tunnel toward a dim light that indicated an exit on the other side.

As Dareon started forward, Blue grasped his shoulder. The Indari turned his ear toward the tunnel.

"I thought I heard something. Possibly the movement of tiny creatures or insects."

"Well, Ix wouldn't lead us into danger unless necessary," said Dareon. They drew their swords. Dareon led the way.

As they neared the middle of the tunnel, they heard a skittering noise and detected movement in the darkness at their feet. They ran forward as they heard a strange noise like the squeaking of tiny animals, and saw a mass of minuscule shapes fleeing from their steps. Both of them felt and heard the crunch of something under their boots.

Dareon assumed these were only insects or tiny rodents, yet he was extremely relieved to emerge from the dark tunnel back into the open. His relief was short-lived when he glanced down to see blood seeping from under his boots and unidentifiable debris smeared on the ground just behind him. Then he cried out in horror. A few of the shapes that had been forced from the safety of the tunnel were running and cowering in crevices where the walls met the rock floor. They were neither insects nor rodents. They were tiny people, perfect in proportion to normal human beings, but only an inch or so tall. Dareon stopped himself just as he was about to examine the bottom of his boot and instead scraped it clean against the rocks, keeping his gaze averted.

Blue spat in disgust and gave Dareon a wild-eyed look before striding quickly ahead to follow Ix. Dareon felt nauseated as he jogged to catch up. Sweat rose in droplets on his forehead, and he

felt a slight dizziness, gasping in the stifling air. He spat as he felt the bile rise from his stomach.

“I hate to think of what worse horror Ix avoided by taking that route,” said Dareon.

Blue only grunted. Dareon thought of the look he had seen in the Indari’s eyes, and he wondered how long either of them could keep their sanity in a place of utter madness. He wiped the perspiration from his face with the back of his arm and then gave himself a slight slap to rally his wits.

“What were they?” asked Dareon, speaking only to try and rid the dark vision from his mind by bringing it into the light. “Natural denizens of this place, or people like us transformed by Lord Xangar?”

Blue’s only answer was to draw his longsword and gaze about like a predator being stalked by something larger and even more dangerous. Dareon drew comfort from speaking, but Blue drew his from falling silent and feeling his hand around the handle of his blade.

“Ix, if you can understand me,” said Dareon, “more pleasant paths, please. That is, if any such exist in this hellhole.”

The dragonfly’s only response was to buzz a bit more loudly and continue swerving the forest of black rock.

They trudged on. The heat increased and soon became oppressive. The macabre labyrinth of shapes wove on, an endless gallery of madness. When Dareon felt he was about to scream, they suddenly emerged onto a natural landing that dropped about two hundred feet to a river. Its course must have been flowing toward or from the sea, for it was composed of the same viscous crimson substance. Even from that height, Dareon could see forms appearing and disappearing on its chaotic surface.

The black stone cliffs continued on the other side, perhaps a hundred yards away. And spanning the river was a gently arching bridge engulfed in flames. It sprouted from the cliffs, composed of the same black rock, and was aflame as if soaked in oil where it overhung the river. Rising into the tortured sky, not far beyond the bridge, was the black fortress of Lord Xangar.

Ix buzzed along the edge of the cliff toward the foot of the bridge. They followed.

“Come now, Ix!” said Dareon. “I didn’t bring my fireproof underpants. Why in the name of all that’s merciful didn’t you just transport us straight from Merth to somewhere on the other side of this flaming bridge when we arrived in this den of damnation?”

Ix flew on, making no apparent reply.

“Hmph!” said Dareon. “The silent treatment.”

“Did you expect him to answer? He’s a dragonfly,” said Blue.

“He’s a demon dragonfly with the power to transport people to other realms. Would talking really be so impressive?”

“It isn’t with *you*,” replied Blue.

When they reached the foot of the bridge, Ix flew under it and back again, keeping a very healthy distance from the flames.

“What the hell does he want us to do?” asked Dareon.

Blue shrugged, as much in disgust as puzzlement.

“So what now?” asked Dareon. “We give ourselves a spit bath and run across?”

“You must climb across.”

Dareon drew his rapier, and they both spun around. This was the first voice they had heard other than their own since arriving in the netherworld. But they were even more startled by the appearance of the one who spoke.

From between a cleft in the rock, a man emerged, or more accurately, half a man. He had no legs and hopped forward on his two strong arms. His lower body ended in a melted stump. He was bald, and what appeared to be a horn like that of a goat was thrust sideways through his neck. Otherwise, he appeared human.

“Who are you?” asked Dareon.

“I am still known as Meelin,” said the man. “Though what I am now, you can see for yourself.”

“At the risk of being tactless, doesn’t that horn hurt?” asked Dareon.

“It all hurts,” said the man, though there was only resignation in his voice.

“What did this to you?” asked Dareon.

“Lord Xangar, current ruler of this realm.”

“So, you were a normal man once?” asked Dareon.

“I was once not unlike you, but taller.”

“Everyone’s taller than Dareon,” said Blue.

“Then you are not a servant of Lord Xangar?” asked Dareon.

Meelin stared at them for a moment. “And the two of you? Do you serve our present lord?”

Dareon glanced at Blue before replying. “We serve ourselves.”

“You cannot serve yourselves and also serve Lord Xangar,” said Meelin.

“Whom do *you* serve?” asked Blue.

“The wrong answer to the wrong person could bring worse than death,” said Meelin.

“We mean you no harm,” said Dareon, sheathing his rapier. “We seek but to reach the black fortress, by the most covert means possible.”

“Few of his servants speak,” said Meelin. “None speak like you, and none have your forms.” He examined them again for a few moments. “You could not be of this realm, or you would be as twisted as I am.”

“We are not,” said Dareon. “Despite your guarded speech, it is clear you are not a willing servant of Lord Xangar. Yet you may be an unwilling one.”

Something in the man’s manner changed, and passion came into his voice. “I would strangle him with my bare hands if I had the chance.”

Dareon nodded. “As I surmised. We seek a magical book that belongs to Lord Xangar. As far as we understand, the loss of it would weaken his power.”

“I know nothing of a book,” said Meelin. “But anything that would weaken his power, I welcome. And anyone who would work against him, I will aid. I know a secret way into the fortress. But first, you will need to cross the bridge. As I said before, you must climb across.”

“How?” asked Blue, replacing his longsword in its scabbard.

“It will require strength and courage. Because of my deficiency, it is half as difficult for me, as you shall see. Come.”

Meelin hopped toward the bridge. Before he reached its entrance, he climbed down in a small gap between jutting rocks. Dareon and

Blue climbed after him. He led them under the bridge to the point where it joined the main land mass.

“Behold the bars,” said Meelin.

Dareon and Blue squinted into the shadows. Meelin reached up and grasped iron bars that were set in the inner lip that jutted down from the bridge on the underside, forming a horizontal ladder. Then the man began to swing from one rung to the next, quickly making his way over the molten river. There was not enough room between the bars and the bottom of the bridge to walk on top of them.

“I see what he means about it being half as difficult for him,” said Dareon. “He weighs about half a normal man. Looks to be about a hundred yards across. This isn’t going to be easy.”

“Easier than burning to death,” said Blue.

“Not if I fall into that horrid river below,” replied Dareon.

“Then don’t,” said Blue, grasping the first rung and starting his climb across. Ix flew across toward the other side of the chasm.

“What would I do without your sage advice?” Dareon called after Blue. He glanced down at the flowing crimson liquid below and grimaced. He was already feeling weary from the journey, and the stifling air seemed to sap his energy more and more with each breath.

He gripped the first iron bar to test it. It was warm to the touch, but not uncomfortably so. Fortunately, it was weathered and not too slippery. Dareon swung out to the next rung, and his feet left the rock below. He made his way carefully and methodically after Blue, who was already nearly a third of the way across. Dareon picked up his pace, trying to get into a rhythm and let his momentum do most of the work. He knew that the longer he hung, the more tired his arms would become.

By the time he was halfway across, his hands were sore, and his arms were already straining with fatigue. Such things were never as easy as they looked. Blue was already almost to the other side.

Suddenly Dareon heard an eruption from below. He paused and glanced down.

A tentacle as thick as a tree shot upward toward him. It was the same color as the river’s liquid and seemed to be made of the same substance, as if the river itself were reaching out. The limb ended in

a kind of enormous bulb. Dareon tried to quicken his pace, but the tentacle was many times faster than he was. He thought of grabbing his dagger, but he feared hanging by only one tired hand. He gasped for breath, blinking as sweat dripped into his eyes and stung them.

The tentacle slowed as it neared him. The bulb split at the top into four petals and peeled backward to reveal the torso of a naked woman that seemed to sprout straight up from the tentacle. She was crimson, also seeming to be of the same substance as that which flowed in the river and the sea. But apart from her hair, which more resembled seaweed, she was a perfectly formed and featured woman, and was either very alive or had an amazing semblance of life.

She reached her smooth arms and long fingers out to Dareon as she rose almost within reach.

"I warn you!" said Dareon. "Keep your distance, madam!"

She did not heed him, but instead, shot forward with a burst of speed and wrapped her arms around his legs before he could react.

Dareon cried out. "Release me!"

"You are weary," she said. Her voice was husky, almost a whisper. "And I am lonely. Let go of the bars. Come below with me. You will be safe and warm. I will cover you with my fragrance, and you will make me bloom."

Dareon held tightly to the bar with his left hand, let go with his right, and drew the dagger at his belt. He pointed it at her throat. "I warn you, I will strike if you do not release me!"

Her upturned face stared at him with wide innocent eyes. "You would strike me down? Only because I wish to love you? But why?"

Dareon's horror was multiplied as he stared into her lovely and perfectly human face in whose ingenuous expression he detected not the slightest malice. He realized that he had never killed a woman before. He told himself firmly that she was not a woman. Yet she seemed to have life and desire and fear like a real person.

"Please," she pleaded, as she began to tug on his legs. "Come down with me. I am so lonely. And there are such pleasures beneath the surface as you could never dream."

"Let go!" cried Dareon in desperation. The fingers of his left hand were slowly slipping from the bar, yet still he could not bring himself

to strike her. Then he heard Blue cry out his name from some distance away, but he could not tell what the Indari was saying.

Ix suddenly appeared, buzzing in wide circles around Dareon, but the dragonfly seemed either unable or unwilling to help.

Then Dareon's hand slipped. Just in time, he dropped the dagger and caught the bar with that hand. He grasped one of her arms and tried to pry her loose. It did not help that her skin felt like normal wet human skin. He wondered if what she said were true. Would she really pleasure him below the surface of the strange river? Would she enfold him in her petals, protect him, and love him? Then he realized the madness of his thoughts and sought his rapier at his belt or his throwing knife strapped to his thigh in order to strike her before he was pulled below. But both weapons were pinned by her arms and inaccessible. He tried kicking with his legs to loosen her grip, but she was at least as strong as he.

An object flashed by the waving tentacle just below, and Dareon saw Blue's hunting knife plunge down and vanish in the river. The Indari had missed.

Dareon felt the fingers of both his hands that now held the bar slowly slipping. Then his left hand lost its grip. He dangled from his right hand, the arm and shoulder burning with pain, almost numb from fatigue. Another moment...

Suddenly another eruption occurred several yards from where the tentacle sprouted from the river. A gigantic skeletal fish with impossibly long teeth burst through the surface, flew upward in an arc, bit cleanly through the middle of the tentacle, and dove back into the river with a mouthful of red flesh. Red liquid squirted from the severed limb as it thrashed about and fell back under the surface.

The effect upon the woman was immediate. She jerked in a spasm, and her eyes and mouth shot open. She gasped and stared into Dareon's eyes, clutching at him pitifully.

"Help me," she whispered as her grasp weakened. The petals of her bulb drooped down. Dareon's legs slowly slipped from her grasp as he clung with desperate strength to the bar above. Her innocent eyes were locked on Dareon's, and her mouth moved in a silent plea.

Dareon stared wide-eyed in heartbroken horror.

Finally, she fell. The woman, the bulb, and the vestige of the tentacle crashed into the crimson current and disappeared or dissolved as if they had never been.

Dareon stared for a moment more before continuing his climb. His arms burned, and each rung of the ladder he grasped shot another signal of pain to his brain. He knew he could not reach the other side. He took a deep breath and swung his legs up and hooked them around the next rung. Then he released his fingers' grip and hung upside down. The relief to his arms was indescribable.

He heard Blue's voice, though he could not see him because he was now facing the way from which they had come.

"Hold on!" said Blue. "Shall I come and get you?"

Dareon took several more deep breaths before replying. "No! I can make it. I just need to rest my arms."

"Are you sure?" asked Blue.

"Stop mothering me!" shouted Dareon, his voice reverberating from the cliffs. He was damned if he was going to be the weak link.

After a few more minutes, Dareon swung himself until he could grasp the next bar with his hands. As his legs uncurled from the bar, he swung himself to the next rung, hooked his legs over it, released his hands' grip on the bar he was holding, and swung to reach the next bar with his hands. He continued in this manner like a circus performer on a trapeze until he reached the edge of the cliff at the foot of the bridge on the other side. Then he dropped and collapsed next to Blue, who stood waiting for him, obviously tensed and ready to rescue him if necessary. Ix was perched on Blue's shoulder.

Dareon lay on his back on the stone shelf, gasping for breath. He wiped the sweat from his eyes with his shirt and then closed them, listening to the crackling of the flame of the bridge and the velvet whisper of the river murmuring up the cliffs.

"I thought I was going to have to retrieve that book by myself," said Blue.

"I hate this place," said Dareon.

"By Inda, was that a woman holding on to you?"

"Woman enough that I hesitated to strike her," said Dareon.

"By the way, you owe me a hunting knife," said Blue.

“No, I don’t,” said Dareon. “You missed. You get nothing.” He opened his eyes.

“Fair enough.” Blue grinned and offered his hand.

Dareon grasped it and was hoisted up. “Let’s go get that damned book.”

Dareon and Blue scrambled up the rocks next to the burning bridge.

“Wait,” said Dareon, pausing. “Where’s that strange fellow that guided us here?”

“Here,” said Meelin. The legless man hauled himself up from behind a boulder.

“I meant no offense,” said Dareon.

“I took none,” said Meelin. “The description is, if nothing else, accurate. Now, you wish access to the black fortress?”

“We do,” said Dareon.

“Then follow me,” said Meelin, turning to climb back up the cliff. “And try to stay out of sight. We draw closer to the fortress, and Lord Xangar’s servants are more numerous and watchful.”

Ix launched from Blue’s shoulder and flew ahead just behind Meelin as the misshapen man led the way, hopping up past the bridge and into another maze of stone. They walked a winding roofless path for some time. Whenever possible, Meelin kept obstructions between them and the black fortress. Once, a dark flying shape from above Lord Xangar’s abode veered in their direction. Meelin ushered them under an outcropping until he deemed it safe to continue.

When they were only a few hundred yards from the foot of the fortress, Meelin guided them between a cleft of rock into a cave entrance. They proceeded down a natural tunnel that soon plunged them into total darkness.

Meelin whispered. “Follow the sound of my movement, or run your fingers along the wall to your right if you must.”

Dareon walked with his hand brushing the wall. In the end, even Blue, with his sharper hearing, moved to the right wall of the tunnel for a guide. They both lost any sense of direction as the tunnel snaked back and forth in a chaotic manner. After several minutes, they saw a dim glow ahead and soon emerged into a cavern perhaps thirty feet wide, lit by two torches set in the rough-hewn stone on opposite walls.

Meelin stopped in the middle of the cavern and rested on his stump, silent. He seemed to be waiting or listening for something.

“What now?” asked Dareon.

As if in answer, a dozen figures emerged from two other openings. They walked, limped, scampered, and crawled. Dareon and Blue instinctually moved their hands to the hilts of their swords.

“Fear not,” said Meelin, “they are friends of mine. And friends of yours also, if you are truly enemies of Lord Xangar.”

“Meelin, who are these men? Why have you brought them here?” The question came from a female voice, strong but kind and melodic. The woman, or what had once been a woman, stepped forward. She spoke with authority, and all the rest of the malformed beings stopped and waited as if for her guidance or command.

She had one prodigious breast instead of two. Her strange-looking mouth was swollen, with thin, wrinkled lips. One of her legs seemed to be that of some kind of herd animal. She had no visible ears and a horrid scar like a huge zipper crossed from the bridge of her nose back over her bald head. Her wide blue eyes blinked at them in curiosity.

Dareon was startled when she spoke again. What he had assumed was her mouth did not move, and her voice came from somewhere between her legs. Then he realized that what he saw just below her nose was not a mouth at all. Someone with horrible powers and a sick sense of humor had switched her organs. Dareon stared, both repulsed and fascinated.

“We are not servants of Lord Xangar,” said Dareon. “We mean to steal one of his cherished belongings. May I ask who you all are?”

“We are the remains of the resistance,” said the woman. “I am Kleita. We are the children of our Lady, the only ones who have survived torture to escape Lord Xangar’s dungeons. But as you can see, he has left his mark upon us.” Her people had been twisted, grafted with other forms, and distorted in the most bizarre fashion.

The woman looked Dareon and Blue up and down. “You are unscathed, but definitely not Xangar’s servants. Yet you are not of The Lady either.”

Dareon’s brow furrowed at the phrase. “We are not from this world.”

She stared with renewed interest. “How came you here?”

Dareon glanced up, but Ix must have hidden in the shadows. "By the power of certain beings. The details are unimportant. What matters is our mission, which is vital. We seek to steal a book from Lord Xangar. To accomplish this, we need to enter his stronghold undetected."

Kleita's bright blue eyes flitted back and forth between Dareon and Blue, as if assessing them. "There is a secret way he has still not discovered. But if we help you, you must help us."

"How?" asked Dareon.

"Are you great warriors?" she asked.

"It has been said so," replied Dareon.

"You must free The Lady or kill Lord Xangar," said Kleita.

Dareon nodded. "Given the chance, we shall do so."

"Dareon," said Blue.

Dareon gave the Indari an admonishing glance. Blue fell silent.

The woman turned and whispered with her comrades. Then she turned back to Dareon and Blue. "We will help you. Meelin, show them the secret way."

Meelin vaulted forward with great speed down one of the new passages from which the others had emerged. Dareon gave Kleita a bow, and then he and Blue followed after.

This new tunnel quickly grew as dark as the last, so that Dareon and Blue were forced to follow the sound of Meelin's movements and feel their way. After a time, Meelin's voice whispered from the darkness.

"Here is a hidden door that leads into what have become Lord Xangar's dungeons."

A dull, grating sound was heard. Dareon saw a pale outline around a stone that measured about a yard across and a bit less in height. Meelin was pulling it aside with the aid of a rope and pulley that had been attached to the stone.

"Remember the location of the stone," whispered Meelin. "I or someone else will keep watch here. Rap upon the stone on your return."

"Thank you," said Dareon.

"May you have success," said Meelin.

Dareon peeked through the opening and saw no one. He slid inside, followed by Blue. Ix darted through. The stone slid back in place. It was located in the end wall of a dim corridor lined with dungeon cells on either side that receded far into the gloom. The bars of the cells were of thick black iron, and all the nearby cells they could see were empty. No guards were in sight. The pale illumination came from large, strangely shaped torches set intermittently in the walls to either side. An unpleasant burning stench permeated the air.

Dareon and Blue made their way down the shadowy corridor. As they neared the first torch, Dareon stifled a curse, and Blue grunted. The torch was a decapitated head that was connected to the wall sconce by an upward curving spike that ran through the back of its neck and out through its open mouth. The eyes were missing. Flame covered it and licked up toward the dark ceiling. The muscles of the face writhed as if it felt the burning anguish of the strange fire that did not consume it.

Blue hissed. "Gods damn this place!"

"They already did," said Dareon, covering his nose and mouth with his hand. He felt a surge of terror as he was reminded that much worse fates than death awaited them if they were captured. They continued on and passed two prisoners who looked as if they had died some time ago and been left to languish even after death. Soon after, the corridor ended in wide stairs going upward. They climbed to the top and found themselves in another level of the dungeon.

"I would not look forward to meeting this Lord Xangar," said Dareon.

"Why did you promise those rebels we would help them?" asked Blue. "Even if we could get to Lord Xangar, I doubt the lord of a netherworld can be killed with a sword. And we can't waste time searching for some prisoner."

"We won't. I just said that so they would help us," said Dareon.

Blue shook his head. "Lying comes so easily to you."

"No, it doesn't," said Dareon.

They could see another set of ascending steps ahead of them. Before they reached the stairs, they came upon another prisoner, and surprisingly, this one was alive and stirred at their approach. They paused and looked between the bars of the cell.

A woman sat with her back against the wall, half-submerged in shadows. Her ankle was chained to the floor by a bolt driven through her bones. Her legs were twisted beneath her at unnatural angles. Darker than a starless night was her hair. It half-hid her corpse-white face and flowed over her breasts down to her loins. Her body had been bruised, punctured, cut, and burned. One of her hands was gnarled and missing fingers. She slowly lifted her one good slender hand to draw her mane aside like a curtain. She had been beautiful once. Now her high cheekbones were marred, her lips shriveled and split, her nose broken. But her dark-circled eyes still radiated an unquenchable secret fire.

Dareon was surprised when she spoke, for he assumed her dead or too broken. Her voice was low and perhaps had once been like velvet. Now, it was more like a croak.

“Who are you?”

Disturbed and moved with pity, it took Dareon a moment to find his voice.

“No one of note, madam,” replied Dareon. “I was going to ask you the same question.”

“I am Isharta, the Queen of Sighs, rightful ruler of this domain.”

Dareon’s eyes widened. “Xangar did this to you?”

“And to my world.”

“You mean, this world is not usually like this?” asked Blue.

She gave her head an almost imperceptible shake.

“Parts of it are so ugly that it has pained me to witness them,” said Dareon.

“It would have pained you to witness before, but because of its beauty,” she said.

Dareon was about to tell her that she must have been that beautiful too, but caught himself. It was unlikely that the beauty she once had could ever be restored.

“Dareon,” said Blue, giving him a meaningful glance.

“Forgive me, lady,” said Dareon. “But while we tarry, our friend’s life sifts away like sand.”

“You are not of this world. Why are you here?” asked Isharta. “At least tell me that.”

“We seek *The Book of Dark Sighs*,” answered Dareon.

Isharta's face took on more life. "My book?"

"Ah," said Dareon. "It is yours. Forgive me, but we need it. It is the price being asked in exchange for our friend's life."

"Who holds her against her will?" she asked.

"A merchant sorcerer, Ravel Nebelnezar."

"Ravel Nebelnezar?" she repeated. She gave a short laugh that turned to a cough. "A treacherous mortal who plays at being a god."

"You know of him?" asked Blue.

"Yes," said Isharta. "Whatever word he gave you, he will not keep."

Dareon sighed. "We suspect as much. But we have no other choice."

"But you *do*," said Isharta. "Bring *me* the book."

"What good would that do?" asked Dareon. "We don't even have a key to your cell to free you. And even if we did..." He glanced at her broken form.

"More than a simple lock holds me in this cell. As for this?" said Isharta, gesturing at her body with her one good hand. "This is nothing. Only form. It can easily be restored once I have the book. And once I am free, I will help you."

Dareon glanced at Blue. "One moment," said Dareon to Isharta. As he and Blue turned their backs to confer in whispers, Isharta spoke from behind them.

"There is no need for secrecy. I can well guess your conversation."

They turned back around, and she spoke again.

"Why should you trust me? I can only say this: you can surely not trust Nebelnezar. If you help me, I shall be in your debt, and in truth, my gratitude would be boundless. But if you steal my book, you will earn my enmity. And should I somehow gain my freedom, I will someday repay you for your ill manners and ignoble deed."

Dareon blew out his cheeks in a sigh. "That's us, Blue. Making new friends wherever we go."

"Bring me my book, and you shall make a powerful friend this day," said Isharta.

"You called Nebelnezar a mortal playing at being a god," said Dareon. "Are *you* a god?"

"I am Isharta. That is enough."

Dareon shrugged his shoulders. "Blue?"

Blue growled. "She's right. Nebelnezar will betray us."

"Yes," said Dareon. "Well?"

Blue stared at Isharta for a moment and then finally nodded.

"Very well," said Dareon. "We shall bring you the book."

"I shall tell you where to find it," said Isharta.

"No need," said Dareon. "Nebelnezar said that Ix will guide us to the book."

The red dragonfly flew in front of them and hovered in the air in what Dareon swore was an almost smug manner.

Isharta stared at Ix for a moment and gave a crooked smile. "An amusing little creature. But believe me, he will soon have you running in circles."

Blue frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Xangar's magical wards will mislead him. Nebelnezar overestimates his powers, as do most mortals."

"Then it is good luck that we encountered you," said Dareon.

"For both of us. Though what you call luck is something far different." She narrowed her eyes at Dareon. "But I see that you are indeed familiar with that other Lady."

Dareon's brow furrowed. "Is luck then truly a lady?"

"It is of no matter for now," said Isharta. "Before I say more, throw me your knife."

"Why?" asked Dareon.

"Because my book is guarded by a horrible demon that Xangar summoned from the Outer Dark. Your weapons cannot harm it unless I prepare one of them."

Dareon drew his knife and carefully tossed it on the stone floor near Isharta. She took it in her hand and drew the point slowly across her palm, opening a crimson slit. She smeared Dareon's blade with the blood that flowed out. Then she tossed the knife back to him so that it landed just inside the cell. Dareon reached in and grabbed it.

"Do not sheath it," said Isharta. "Touch it to the doors of the chamber that holds the book, and they will open. Then bury the knife deep in the demon's hide."

"And that will surely kill it?" asked Dareon.

“Yes,” said Isharta. “Now listen, and I shall tell you where to find *The Book of Dark Sighs*.”

Dareon and Blue reached the top of the second set of stairs. It opened onto a large perpendicular hallway that had no door, much less a bolted one. It appeared that Lord Xangar was completely unconcerned with any prisoner ever escaping. But they did encounter two more of the one-eyed white giants that were patrolling the hall. The giants seemed unused to any intruders or probably any resistance of any kind, for they seemed startled by Dareon and Blue. The giants paid the price for their lack of caution. Seconds later, Dareon and Blue leapt over the giants' corpses and continued right down the hallway as Isharta had instructed.

They sneaked through several corridors, dashed across a large hallway with macabre decorations, and ascended a long flight of spiral stairs up a tower that showed a view of the crimson sea several times through narrow open windows on that side.

Finally, they reached a bare landing with large double doors of black iron. Dareon touched the knife to the doors. They swung silently inward. In an octagonal stone room with a high ceiling, the guardian of *The Book of Dark Sighs* turned to greet them.

Stirring from its resting place at the center of the floor was a beast larger than a bull. It vaguely resembled a malformed dog of mottled red and dark green with random tufts of bristle, a high ridged spine that ended in a barbed tail, and a massive head with teeth that stuck out like tusks from its sickly gums. Its crusty eyelids cracked open, and it stared at them with bloody eyes.

“What is this that wakes me from my rest? Is it again mealtime?”

“Heel!” said Dareon. He stared over the demon at a small black book that rested on a marble stand upon a dais. “Go back to sleep. You need the beauty rest. And anyway, you look like you’ve had more than enough food for today.”

“It is never enough. I am Garg the Insatiable,” said the demonic dog.

“Try Gargle instead,” said Dareon, waving away the putrid stench that came from the demon’s mouth.

“Leave now, or I shall have my way with you,” said Garg.

“I’m not going to ask what he means,” said Dareon to Blue.

“You are a mere trifle,” said Garg to Dareon. “I shall have the larger one for supper and you for dessert afterward.” The monster rose in a lethargic manner, yawned to reveal its thick yellow teeth, and stalked forward.

“Some people start with dessert, but I wouldn’t advise it,” said Dareon.

Blue suddenly ran forward toward the demon with Dareon a few steps behind. As Garg snarled and opened his massive jaws, Blue skidded to a halt and crouched on all fours. Dareon continued his run and vaulted off Blue’s back and just out of reach of the surprised demon’s snapping teeth. He landed on Garg’s back and struck just to the right of the creature’s ridged spine using the knife stained with Isharta’s blood. The demon howled and spun around. Dareon leapt off, tumbled across the floor, and ended up back on his feet in the corner of the room.

Blue drew his longsword and struck Garg in the side, but his blade glanced off the creature’s magically protected hide. The demon swung its barbed tail like a mace out at the Indari. Blue leapt back to dodge the strike.

Garg stalked toward Dareon, effectively pinning him in the corner. “None but my master has caused me such pain in many long years of remembering. Did you believe your puny knife could slay me?”

“I had my hopes,” said Dareon, drawing his rapier.

“Abandon them,” said Garg. “I shall take your advice and begin with dessert. I shall savor you, little man, nibbling first on your toes and eating my way slowly to your—”

Garg paused, and his jaws snapped shut. He jerked his head back toward where the knife was imbedded next to his spine. From the blade, darkness was spreading like the roots of a tree across his massive mottled form.

“Actually,” said Dareon, “I placed my hopes not in my knife but in what was *on* my knife.”

Garg twisted and tried to reach the dagger with his jaws, but his efforts were futile. The demon began to turn in a circle like a dog chasing its tail. Its jaws were locked, its body was turning black, and it made a pathetic whining noise as black blood began to flow from its eyes and between its horrid teeth to dribble on the floor.

Dareon sprang upon the dais and grabbed the book. Then he ran around the dying demon to join Blue at the chamber’s entrance.

“Farewell, Garg,” said Dareon. “This time, dessert ate *you*.”

Dareon and Blue fled down the hall. From behind them came a crashing sound, and then the rending of flesh, snapping of bone, and finally a wet explosion.

“I’m glad we didn’t stay to watch,” said Dareon. “This is my favorite shirt.”

Avoiding the few guards they saw, they made their way as quickly as possible back to the dungeons.

“So I assume you were lying to Isharta, too,” said Blue. “We’re not giving her the book, are we?”

“No, I wasn’t lying. I think giving her the book is our best option.”

Blue grunted. “I don’t know that I trust her any more than Nebelnezar. But it’s hard to fault her logic. It is probably our best chance.”

“Agreed,” said Dareon. “If she tries to betray us, we’ll just have to hope she’s not immune to cold steel.”

They approached the dungeon doors. The bodies of the two guards they had slain had remained undisturbed. They hurried down the stairs and came to Isharta's cell. She still sat with her back to the wall. As they approached, she tilted her head up.

"You have it!" she said.

"Yes," said Dareon. He held up the small black leather-bound book.

"Throw it to me," she said.

Dareon paused only to glance at Blue once more. Then, seeing no final objection from the Indari, he reached through the bars and tossed *The Book of Dark Sighs* toward Isharta. It fell near her broken legs.

Isharta reached out her one good hand and touched the book as if it were a fragile little bird. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. As she did, her posture became upright, and her legs uncurled. As she exhaled, she opened her eyes. A visible golden fire now burned within them. She grasped the book and stood without seeming to use her muscles. The marks of torture on her body were already gone. Her form was restored to its fullness. Even her missing fingers had reappeared. Only her paleness remained, but it was the paleness of the full moon gleaming on ivory. Her hair streamed forth, long and lustrous, and moved as if alive or stirred by a wind. Several strands snaked around her body, spread like ink, and became a thin black gown that seemed to be not fabric but a window looking upon a night sky with silver stars glittering innumerable. *The Book of Dark Sighs* had vanished or been absorbed by her.

She approached the bars of the cell without moving her feet. Dareon noticed that she was floating an inch above the floor. When she reached the bars, she passed through them as if she were made of water.

"Gods of Plemora!" exclaimed Dareon, flinching back. "What sorcery!"

"No sorcery," said Isharta. And now her voice was like the hush of the midnight tide. "It is all form, all one. This body, the bars, you, your friend. Always changing, malleable—in truth, empty. Have you never changed your form?"

"Perhaps," said Dareon. "I've grown up from a child."

“You do the same as I have just done. It only takes you longer, because you misunderstand all you see.”

Ix gave a loud frantic buzz and tried to dart off. Isharta reached out her hand. The dragonfly was pulled backward as if by an invisible strand of web until he alighted on her finger. She moved him close and whispered something. Then Ix flew over and landed on Dareon’s shoulder.

“He now serves me.” Isharta glanced down at their belts. “Would you draw swords on me?”

Dareon and Blue realized that their hands had inadvertently moved to their blades.

“It would do you little good,” said Isharta. “If I wished to destroy you, or much preferable, to keep you both here as mine forever, you could do nothing to stop me. And now that I come to it, I *do* desire both of you as mine, mortal though you be.”



“We shouldn’t have been so brave and charming,” muttered Dareon to Blue.

They pulled at their swords, but the blades would not move from their sheaths. Isharta’s long black hair shot out and whipped around them in two enormous strands like the tentacles of a giant octopus. They were lifted into the air and pulled toward her.

She laughed with great gaiety and abandon, her voice reverberating throughout the dungeon, as frightening as the rumble of thunder. “I have not laughed in years! Nor desired in years, except revenge against Xangar. The two of you are ever sweeter in my sight.” They were pulled close to her, first Dareon, and then Blue.

She gave them both a full kiss on the lips that they were unable, and then unwilling, to resist. Desire coursed through their blood like fire.

She lowered them gently to the floor and released them.

“But for what you have done, you *are* my friends,” she said. “And will always be. And I would not keep you against your will. But if you *wish* to stay with me,” and she gazed at both of them through half-lidded eyes that were like whirlpools of dark water, “you would be most welcome.”

Dareon gaped at her, transfixed by a look so seductive that it made such similar attempts by any women he had ever met before seem in comparison like the harassment of gnats.

“Dareon,” said Blue. “Malika. Remember Malika?”

“What?” asked Dareon, blinking to break Isharta’s gaze. “Oh, yes. Malika. Yes, Malika.” He cleared his throat, took a deep breath, shut his eyes, and shook his head as if to free himself from the strands of desire that were wrapped around his heart. “Forgive us, Isharta, but time is short. Though perhaps later we can...”

“Dareon!” growled Blue.

Isharta laughed again. Then her smile faded, and her eyes burned with a different fire. “Yes, time is short, though it has seemed long for me of late. And now, to aid you, I must see into your realm. To do that, I must trade an eye with one of you.”

Dareon’s brow furrowed. “Pardon?”

“In order to fully access your world, I must see into it. And by any other means, Ravel Nebelnezar would be alerted to my presence.”

“Trade eyes?” asked Blue. “How?”

“I will simply pluck out one of mine and one of yours, and exchange them.”

“Haha!” said Dareon with absolutely no humor. “You *are* joking, of course. That could kill me.”

“No,” said Isharta. “Do not fear that, Dareon Vin. You will not be harmed. We will both suffer but a mere moment of excruciating pain.”

Her hair coiled around Dareon, lifted him from the ground, and drew his face close to hers.

“Excruciating pain?” shouted Dareon.

“Shh. Be still,” said Isharta.

“*Wait!* I didn’t say I volunteer!”

“With my eye, you shall see things you never dreamed of,” said Isharta. “Now, the brief exchange of a searing kiss...”

Dareon felt his eye being pulled out of its socket even as he saw Isharta’s eye moving out of hers by its own volition. Dareon screamed, and Isharta cried out at the same time.

“Now is the time of reckoning,” said Isharta, looking down with one of Dareon’s own eyes at the poet swordsman, who had fallen to his knees. “I go to face Xangar. Leave this fortress now, for your safety. I shall open the door to your world when I am ready. When you return to your home, I will follow in my own way and deal with Ravel Nebelnezar.”

Without another word, she floated up and passed through the ceiling.

Dareon rose and looked around.

“Are you unharmed?” asked Blue.

“I’m fine,” said Dareon, blinking. “She was right. It was excruciating. But now...”

Dareon closed his own right eye and stared out through Isharta’s. He could see through the walls and ceilings as if they were made of glass. He observed the suffering of the beings in this world whose hearts belonged to The Lady. It showed like a sickly bruise all around, even in the land itself. But he could also see another world superimposed on this horrible one, either her world the way it had been before, or as she would imagine and make it once Lord Xangar was defeated. And then, as Dareon stared, he seemed to perceive even further, into other places, other worlds.

“Dareon,” said Blue, grasping his shoulder. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“What?” asked Dareon. He focused on Blue and found himself back in the dungeon. “Yes, yes. It’s just that...I’m seeing things beyond human sight. But if I focus on what’s here, I can control it.”

“Quiet!” urged Blue. The Indari leaned his head toward the dungeon doors.

Dareon turned his gaze with Isharta’s eye toward the corridor at the top of the stairs, penetrating the stone wall. “Many more giants. I can see them approaching.”

“Come on!” said Blue, pulling Dareon into the depths of the dungeon.

They ran. Before they reached the stairs to the second level, the white one-eyed giants pursuing them could be seen even by Blue. The two leapt down the stairs to the second level of the dungeon and

raced down the long corridor between the cells on either side, their path lit by the grotesque head torches along the way. Finally, they reached the back wall. The white giants were only a stone's throw away.

"Meelin!" shouted Dareon.

Blue rapped upon the secret stone door with the hilt of his longsword.

Almost immediately, the stone slid back and then aside. Dareon and Blue crawled through the opening. Meelin was waiting in the dim light. The malformed man closed the hidden door and threw a latch. A moment later, the sound of metal striking the stone from the other side was heard.

"Will that hold?" Dareon asked Meelin.

"We will not wait to find out," replied Meelin.

"Smart man," said Dareon, as Meelin vaulted down the dark tunnel almost as fast as a man could run. They followed after his sound, again using the wall as a guide. Soon they saw a soft glow ahead and emerged into the larger chamber from whence they had come. Kleita and a few of the other strange rebels waited there.

"What word?" asked Kleita.

"We have freed Isharta," said Dareon. "*The Book of Dark Sighs* is again in her possession."

"Can it be true?" said Kleita. The other rebels gasped and uttered exclamations.

"It is true," said Blue.

"The last we saw her, she was off to battle Lord Xangar," said Dareon. "And she warned us to leave the fortress. I am guessing even these tunnels will not be safe when those two clash."

"Indeed," said Kleita. "Come with us!"

Before they followed, Dareon had closed his own eye and stared with concentration at Kleita. What he saw was a beautiful naked woman, normal, indeed almost perfect, in form.

Within minutes they had emerged from a tunnel back into the reddish twilight under the inky turbulent sky. Kleita led Dareon, Blue, and the other rebels away from the black fortress. As they hurried through a maze of malformed rock, they heard a low rumbling noise. The ground beneath their feet trembled. The green lightning

increased, and a whistling wind rose up. They ran until they came to the largest clearing Dareon and Blue had seen, apart from the valley of tortured slaves. They all drew away from the rocks toward the center as the quaking of the land became more severe.

Now the sky grew even more turbulent, as if a tremendous storm were brewing. The green flashes of lightning were now interspersed with flashes of pale gold. Suddenly, a single golden sword of light pierced the gloomy cloud cover. Then another beam burst through, and another, like golden blades thrust through a dark dragon.

The tremors were now so strong that everyone was thrown to the ground. The black rocks surrounding them did not break like normal stone but began to twist even more and melt into pleasing shapes of gray, blue, gold, red, tan, and brown. Bright green shoots of grass rose up and covered the ground beneath them. Strange trees with flowers that shined like stars sprouted up all around.

Then Kleita and the other rebels cried out as if in pain, rolling on the newborn grass. Dareon and Blue watched in amazement as their twisted forms altered, and they were transformed into normal-looking men and women.

Dareon stared about, closing his own eye and focusing with the eye of Isharta. He could see through the landscape to the tunnel of tiny people, some of whom they had trampled. Their minuscule forms grew slowly until they were normal-sized. Beyond them, he could see the valley where the slaves had been tortured. The floating spheres burst like thin melons. The straps that held the prisoners snapped like threads. The white giants and the other beastly tormenters of Isharta's people were grasped by vines and tentacle-like branches that erupted from the ground to drag them under the surface until there was no trace of Lord Xangar's servants in all the land.

Dareon looked up at the fortress.

The castle was changing into lofty spires like shards of glass and shining gilded domes with fantastic swirling patterns. The new citadel was just as alien as Lord Xangar's fortress, but resplendent and beautiful, seductive and hypnotic.

Then Dareon saw with Isharta's eye for just a moment the face of Isharta as if she were standing before him. "It is time," she said.

Ix flew in a large vertical circle to open a doorway to Plemora.

The last shreds of the turbulent dark clouds were dissolving outward from the new citadel, revealing skies of deep velvet blue and violet. Stars winked, each swirling with a nimbus of gold, bronze, emerald, or silver. Dareon could see the molten sea flowing with a light musical rhythm, altering to shades of violet, blue, green, and mercury. Then the portal of red mist gaped like a large round window before them.

Kleita and the other rebels had risen, standing now on a steady sward of blue and green grass dotted with tiny flowers of multiple hues. They smiled and bowed.

“Thank you,” said Kleita.

Just before they stepped through the portal, Dareon and Blue took one last look at the new world as it completed its last transformation. That final shift gave the world an aspect wondrous and beautiful beyond the power of human senses to fully grasp or human minds to contain. Only Isharta’s eye could fully take it in. Their hearts broke, knowing they were leaving that beauty. Then they stepped through the portal.

Dareon and Blue were standing again in the bare shop of Ravel Nebelnezar. Ravel was nowhere to be seen, but the red-tinted giant hourglass still stood in the center of the room. Within, the form of Malika was curled up against the glass, half-buried in sand. Behind them, the round portal remained open with Ix flying like a tiny red blur at its circumference. Its inside swirled with dark red mist.

A moment later, Ravel again stepped forth from off to their left, as if out of the air itself.

“You have made excellent time!” said Ravel. Then he looked over Dareon and Blue as if for some sign of the book. “Unless you have not acquired *The Book of Dark Sighs*. Then, you will have made very bad time indeed.”

“Ah yes, the book,” said Dareon, holding up his finger.

Then Ravel seemed distracted, and turned toward the still open portal.

“Ix! Enough! Close the portal. To me!” said Ravel.

But the little demon dragonfly continued in his swift circle, up and down, around and around.

“Ix! Obey me!” shouted Ravel, perturbed.

“I’m afraid he answers to someone else now,” said Dareon.

Ravel turned back to Dareon. “What is the meaning of this? What goes on?”

“Well,” said Dareon, as he caught sight of movement from the portal out of the corner of his eye. “I had better let *her* explain.”

“Her?” asked Ravel, alarmed.

Dareon winked with Isharta’s eye. With it, he could now see the soul of Ravel Nebelnezar like a twisting black flame.

Ravel squinted at Dareon’s new left eye. His own eyes widened. His head jerked suddenly in the direction of the portal.

From the midst of the shadowy red mist, several large strands of jet black hair shot forth like whips. Ravel screamed. Before he could even raise a hand or take a step, several of the strands had wrapped around his knees and pulled his legs out from under him. He fell forward like a sack of grain. The strands of hair dragged him across the floor toward the portal. Ravel clawed at the wooden slats until his

nails broke and his fingers bled, but he was unable to even slow his approach to the circle.

“No!” cried Ravel. His wide, fearful eyes pleaded with Dareon and Blue. “Help me! Only I can release your friend!”

Blue stood like a statue, his mouth set in a grim scowl. Dareon crossed his arms and watched Ravel with a faint pitiless smile.

“I will release her! And I will give you whatever you wish!” cried Ravel. “Only do not let Isharta take me! Plea—”

His last word was muted as if it had never started as Ravel was jerked through the portal and engulfed in the dark red mist. A moment later, the strands of hair returned. One stretched toward the hourglass, arched back like a scorpion’s tail, and struck the glass. A crack ran swiftly down its side. The hourglass vibrated for a moment, and then it split and fell apart in two pieces with a loud ringing noise. The sand cascaded to the floor with Malika in its midst.

Blue ran through the swirl of dust to Malika’s side, pulled her from the heap of sand, and carried her away to clearer air. He cradled her in his arms.

“Malika! Are you well?” asked Blue.

Malika stirred and opened her eyes. After a fit of coughing, she finally sat up. She nodded and spoke in a hoarse voice. “I need water. But it is good to breathe again. Thank you. Both of you.” She glanced up at Dareon. He gave her a nod and a smile. Blue kissed her forehead and held her.

“Take me home,” said Malika.

Then a remaining strand of Isharta’s hair rose up and hovered like a snake in front of Dareon. Coiled within its end was Dareon’s brown eye. A larger tendril of hair suddenly wrapped tightly around the poet swordsman and lifted him off the floor. The strand holding his eye and a third strand pointing like a searching finger moved toward his left eye socket that still contained the eye of Isharta.

“Not again!” said Dareon. The finger-like strand flattened into a small scoop and slid beneath his lower lid into his eye socket. Dareon cried out. But this time, mercifully, he also blacked out.

When he came to, Blue and Malika were kneeling over him.

“Are you well?” asked Blue.

Dareon sat up and blinked his left eye. His sight was normal again, but he found himself not altogether happy about this. He sighed. “Yes. Back to my old self.”

“Your old self?” asked Malika. She glanced at Blue. “So much for a happy ending.”

Robert Zoltan is a Los Angeles-based author of literary and speculative fiction, and author of the Rogues of Merth Series. He was a semi-finalist in the 2019 Writers of the Future Award contest. His work has been praised by Rich Horton (Editor of The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy), Locus Magazine, Cirsova Magazine, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly, Black Gate Magazine, and Tangent Online Review Magazine. Robert is also an award-winning songwriter, composer and music producer, audiobook drama producer, voice actor, graphic designer, illustrator, host of Literary Wonder & Adventure Show podcast, and editor in chief of Sexy Fantastic Magazine.

IT'S POWERS VS. MAGIC!



**7 TALES OF PURE ACTION
& WEIRD ADVENTURE
by JD Cowan**

My Name is John Carter (Part 9)

By JAMES HUTCHINGS

(Ed notes: Continued from Vol 2, #3. The city of Helium is pronounced "HELL-ium" rather than "HEAL-ium." "Zodanga" is pronounced with a hard "g" [like "anger," not "hanger."])

"He who nurtures such hope has his neck in a rope,"
I declared. "'Tis a truth I well know,
and this song of defeat sounds more bitter than sweet,
Though I deem all Zodanga my foe."

"You believe it a song?" said the spy. "You are wrong,
or, at least, 'tis no song for the sane,
but mere noise, shrill and dense, lacking order and sense,
and you guess at its ending in vain.

"For the wise are all fools, and plain pebbles are jewels,
and the world is all tilted askew,
and the old are all young, and all diamonds are dung,
and the sect's flimsy fables were true.

"As the sect had foretold, where the air grew as cold
and as thin as personified Want,
where the blood seemed to freeze and the Sun brought no ease,
and its light seemed a treacherous taunt,

till the very word 'heat' seemed an empty deceit
that each frostbitten breath would deny
where the peaks stood like blades of an army arrayed
to make war on the shield of the sky.

There, in short, cities lay, with none living to slay,
neither girded nor guarded nor gated.
Not one barricade barred the lost children of Mars
from the womb where their race was created.

"Every ancient machine had a fresh-polished gleam,
every bearing and gear was unworn.
To their metal, an age was the turn of a page,
and the Pyramids, dew of the morn.

“There was more there than wealth. There was knowledge itself,
any question Zodanga could frame—
worlds majestic and vast—but their hate held them fast.
They were captives in love with their chains.

“Other minds might have dreamed of the planet made green
as it was in the aeons of yore,
But their visions ran red. They saw battle instead
and invincible engines of war.

“As they sought, so they found—and their efforts were crowned
with a fearsome, inhuman design
metal-wrought, storeys high, raining death from the sky
like a god grown insane or malign.

“Only Helium’s walls, adamantine and tall,
could, of any on Mars, be a shield,
so stratagems were laid, that their foes might be made
to come forth and be slain in the field.”

We were wise and humane back on Earth. We made plain
men must not act like beasts, clawed and fanged.
He who killed was condemned—and to show to such men
they must venerate life, they were hanged.

Or at least, this was true of the killer who slew
for himself, in his everyday clothes.
Dressed in blue or in gray, with no choice whom to slay
I know well, we made heroes of those.

But on Mars this distinction would strike them as fiction.
The uniform being unknown,
they would have little use for an Earthling’s excuse.
So they had to come up with their own.

They chose honor. Barsoom might be dying, might soon
lose its air, and its people be smothered.
While two Martians remain, both their swords will be stained,
for a word that one spoke to the other.

If an insult be given, the Martian is driven
to maddening, murderous passion
(though this gives him no right to an uneven fight,
for on Mars they despise the assassin).

And the rules of this game are exactly the same
when the players are cities, not people.
Let one city’s folk sneer where another’s can hear,

and grim war is the probable sequel.

For a small, single slight, a whole city will fight
with no bar of position or gender,
and the carnage is cruel, for ten thousand may duel
and not one of them think to surrender.

It is seldom, therefore, that a ruler craves war,
and that craving takes long to be sated.
So Zodanga was shocked when they sneered and they mocked
and the Heliumites were not baited.

“Now my narrative eye must be turned,” said the spy,
“to events further back in the past,
when you never returned, for your airship was burned,
and all Helium mourned you at last.”

If an airship be missed, not a hope can exist.
They are dead as old bones in their graves,
no more like to be found than a sailor, once drowned,
might come up, safe and sound, from the waves.

We of Earth are so young—and the child who is stung
cries a while, then returns to their play,
and they do not retain any thought of their pain
when they sleep at the end of the day,

and they show off their welt, and they brag that it felt
worst of any travail of the flesh.
All too soon they are grown, and their error long-known,
yet life hastens to teach it afresh.

So perhaps you have grieved, and perhaps you believed
that your grief would go on without end,
and perhaps you would weep, for your wounds were more deep
than you showed, and far slower to mend.

But each wound was a scratch. Pity Mars, who can match
any one of our griefs with a hundred,
and a Martian newborn has a soul deeply worn,
and their hope is a shield that is sundered,

and each thorn is a spear. Mars will mourn for a year
what on Earth we would mourn for a week,
for Mars mourns every wrong of a past aeons long,
and it mourns for a future most bleak.

Dejah Thoris had fought when her people would not,
meeting Mars's decline with defiance,
working, often alone, to wring blood from the stone
of its fading and decadent science.

By a few she was prized, by a number despised,
and by far more than either, ignored.
Most had chosen to brood, and to plot, and to feud,
and to die at the point of a sword.

But it seemed that her deeds were like dry, desert seeds
which are sown, and give naught for the sowing
till the rain breaks the drought, and they suddenly sprout
and all ask whence a garden is growing.

But who waits for the rain on Barsoom waits in vain.
It is only her people who fall.
Dejah's death (as all thought) was the tempest that caught
all the ears that were deaf to her call.

Through the city the cry rang from low and from high
in the squares, and from neighbor to neighbor:
"Let us never more wallow in vain, idle sorrow
but honor her life with our labor."

Thus resolved that their grief must be bitter, but brief,
for the sake of a world that was dying,
they performed somber rites and wept long in the night
and at dawn, made an end to their crying.

They adopted a mien that was still and serene,
working hard and resisting all anger
till, as if to protest at the peace they professed
came a foe seeking quarrel: Zodanga.

Every word that they spoke was a barb to provoke.
They were craftsmen who kept at their task
till the placidest sage would have trembled with rage
and serenity been but a mask.

But that mask did not slip. Every lord bit his lip,
and not one spoke a word of rebuttal,
for their agents had seen the Zodangans' machines.
There are few upon Mars who are subtle.

The Zodangans had made a triumphant parade,
like a child showing off a new plaything

round their own city walls, in the full view of all,
with the Sun on the metal hides blazing.

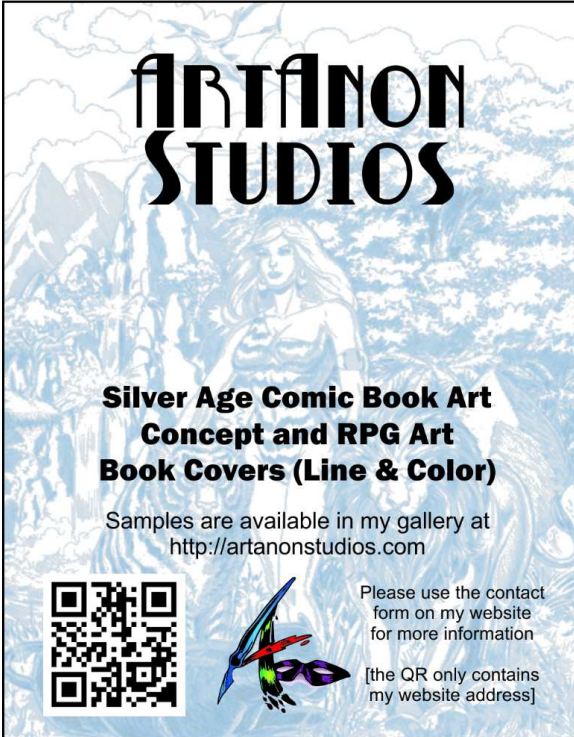
Still the insults were piled. The Zodangans reviled
every aspect of Helium's being.
Through their rage and their shame, kin and courage defamed,
they endured, neither fighting nor fleeing.

When their foes would not crack, the Zodangans changed tack,
and their slights were replaced by demands.
"Own our prince as thy liege, or be put to a siege
that will leave none alive in thy lands."

"If life's price be so high, it is better to die!"
and not one would speak out as dissenter,
so Zodanga arrayed in an airtight blockade
and since then none can leave, and none enter.

"Not on foot or by barge, not on beast, small or large,
not through desert, canal, or by air.
They are held in a trap, and it offers no gap
that outmeasures the width of a hair."



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

The background of the advertisement is a detailed, blue-toned illustration of a fantasy scene. It features a central female figure with long blonde hair, wearing a revealing, scale-like outfit. To her left, a knight in full plate armor stands with a sword. To her right, a dragon's head is visible. The overall style is reminiscent of classic comic book or RPG art.

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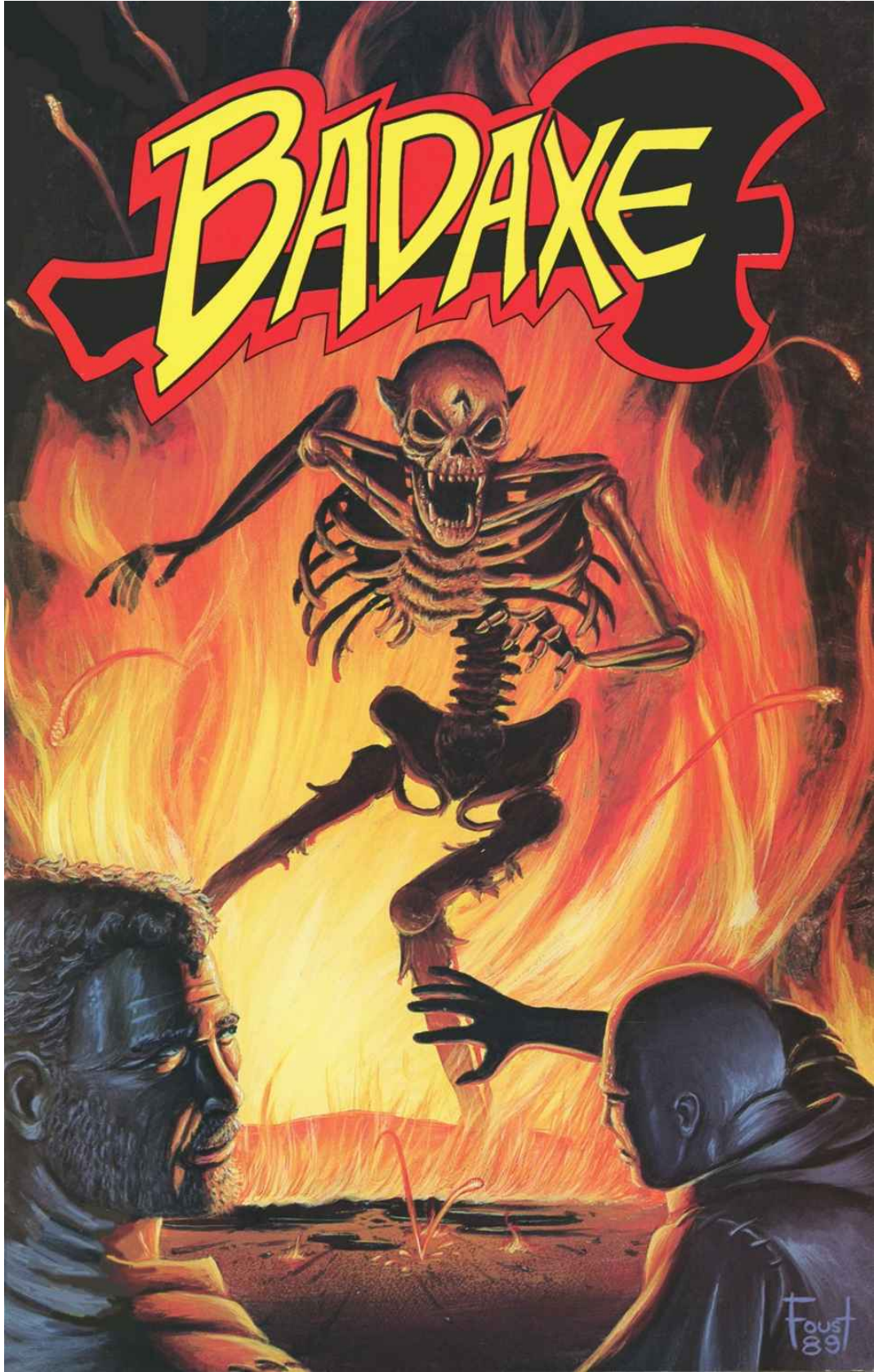
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GEEK TALK RADIO & PODCAST!

101.1 FM
THE ANSWER





BADAXE™

By

PAUL O'CONNOR – WRITER

KENT BURLES – PENCILLER

JAMES BALDWIN – INKER

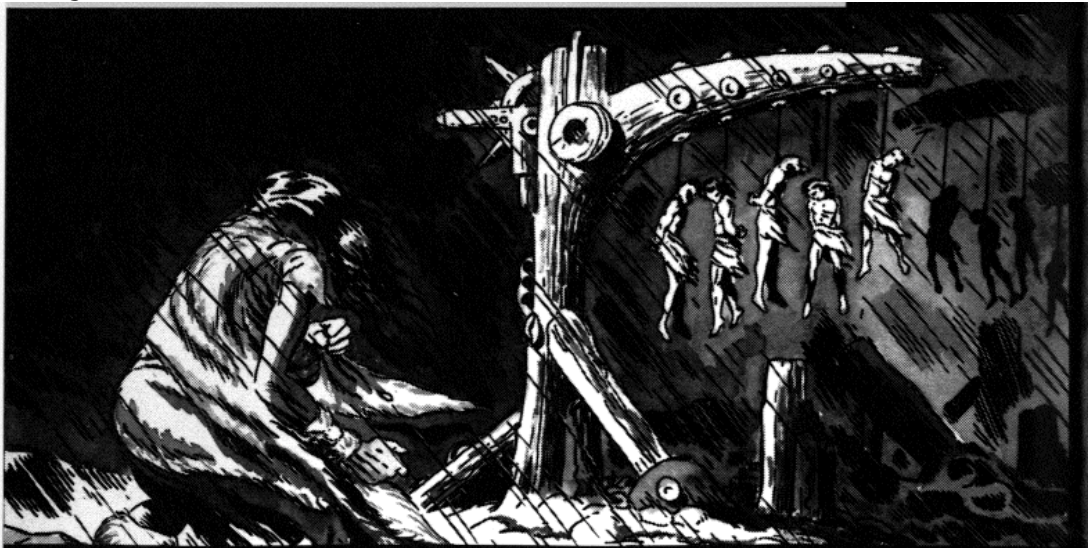
MELANIE MERZ – TONES

CLEM ROBINS – LETTERS

MITCH FOUST – COVER PAINTING

MICHAEL TIERNEY – DIGITAL RESTORATION

The fearsome legions of the God Badaxe are on the march, cleaving a bloody swath through the magical land of Pangea. Countless villages have been burnt to the ground, their young male populations examined and beheaded. Somewhere, a boy with a strange birthmark on his right palm poses a deadly threat to the most powerful being on Pangea—if he is allowed to reach maturity!



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Paul O'Connor has been a videogame designer and director for thirty years, but his heart belongs to heroic fantasy and comics. He lives in California, perched above a concrete beach, perpetually plotting his big comics comeback. Join Paul as he obsesses over old comics and older movies as @LBoxGraveyard on Twitter, and on the web at www.LongboxGraveyard.com!

AS WITH HER BROTHERS, SHE
DEPENDS ON HER SENSE
OF SMELL TO SEE THE WORLD.

THE SICKENING, SWIRLING SMOKE CLOAKING
THE BATTLEFIELD MAKES VISION NEARLY
IMPOSSIBLE--

BUT TO THE SENSES OF THE
PACK, THE GRIM GEOGRAPHY
OF THE FIELD IS ALL TOO
CLEAR--

A WET VISTA OF FEAR
AND BLOOD AND
DEATH.

NO LESS CHILLING
ARE THE MOANS OF
THE WOUNDED, AND
THE EERIE HISS OF
SOULS PASSING THROUGH
THE TEETH OF THE DEAD--

SOUNDS TO STRIKE
FEAR INTO THE
HEARTS OF MEN--

BUT PAYED NO
HEED BY SIMPLE
BEASTS.

FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS, TANREE
HAS RUN WITH THE PACK.

NEITHER KNOWING NOR CARING THAT SHE
WALKED ON TWO LEGS, RATHER THAN FOUR,
OR THAT SHE ALONE NEEDED TO CLOAK
HERSELF IN THE FUR OF HER KILLS AGAINST
THE BRISK ARCTIC AIR

UNTIL TODAY, SHE HAS
NEVER LAYED EYES ON
ANOTHER HUMAN BEING--

THE CALL

DRIVEN FAR BEYOND
THEIR RANGE BY
STARVATION, THE PACK
HAS ENTERED THE
WORLD OF MAN--

AND FOR STRANGE
TANREE, LIFE WILL
NEVER AGAIN BE THE SAME.

ABOVE THE MYRIAD SOUNDS OF DEATH, TANREE HEARS AN ODD RHYTHMIC NOISE

CHUD!



CHUD!



INTRIGUED, THE WOLF-GIRL INVESTIGATES--

HER CURIOSITY SUPPRESSING A HUNGER THAT HAS DRIVEN HER BROTHERS INTO A MAD FRENZY.



THE SCENT IS STRONG--THE COMMON STENCH OF FEAR AND DEATH MIXED WITH AN EXOTIC ODOR THAT SETS TANREE'S PULSE RACING

BUT FOR ALL THE EXTRAORDINARY RANGE OF TANREE'S SENSE OF SMELL, IT DOES NOTHING TO PREPARE HER FOR THE SIGHT WHICH GREET'S HER EYES.



CHUD!



CHUD!

TANREE'S FIRST
GLIMPSE OF
CIVILIZATION
IS FASCINATING--

BUT IN NO WAY REMARKABLE
FOR THE TIME IN WHICH SHE LIVES.



TRANSFIXED BY
THE RITUAL--



HER HEART FILLS WITH CHILDISH
GLEE AS SHE UNRAVELS THE MYSTERY
OF THE STRANGE RHYTHMIC SOUND.





RAIN FALLS, DISPERSING THE SMOKE OF A THOUSAND CANNONS--



REVEALING AN UNHOLY HARVEST OF DEAD YOUNG BOYS.

LIKE HER, THE CREATURES ON THE SCAFFOLD ARE HAIRLESS AND PINK, WITH A SMELL ALL THEIR OWN.

THE MOURNFUL HOWL OF THE PACK PREPARING TO KILL

TANREE BRIEFLY CONSIDERS THE MYSTERY OF IDENTICAL DEFORMITIES--



BEFORE AN URGENT SOUND INTERRUPTS HER REVERIE--



ARRROOO

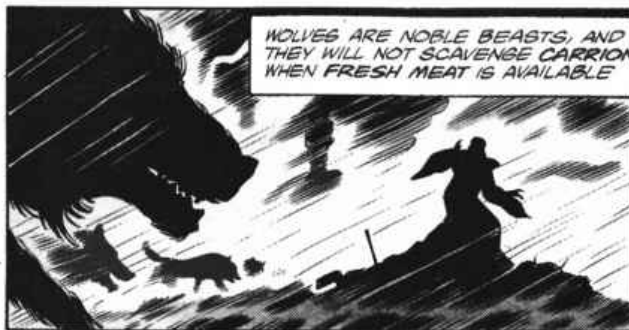
TANREE JOINS THE LOPING GREY SHADOWS OF HER BROTHERS, RELISHING IN THE FEAR THE PREY MUST FEEL.



THE FULL PACK HAS JOINED THE KILLING RING, HEEDLESS OF EASY PICKINGS AMONG THE DEAD.



WOLVES ARE NOBLE BEASTS, AND THEY WILL NOT SCAVENGE CARRION WHEN FRESH MEAT IS AVAILABLE



EVEN IF THAT MEAT IS OLD AND FRAIL.



WHEN THE OLD MAN SPEAKS, THE SOUND IS ELECTRIC



HOW CLOSE NOW RIDES THE MULTITUDINOUS HOST?



TELL ME HOW
BRILLIANT ARE
THEIR
RESPLENDENT
RANKS?

TELL ME,
FOR GREAT
BADAXE
HAS TAKEN
MY EYES.



BADAXE!

THOUGH SHE
HAS NEVER
HEARD THE
HUMAN TONGUE,
SHE UNDERSTANDS
SOMEHOW THAT
BADAXE IS THE
KEY TO HER LIFE
AND HER FATE--



AND, UNDER-
STANDING,
SHE ACTS!



THE WOLVES DO
NOT SHARE HER
REVELATION--

AND SENSING ONLY
HELPLESS PREY--



THEY, TOO,
ACT

AT THAT MOMENT, BEHIND THE SHATTERED WALLS OF BLACK POST, TRANSPIRE DEEDS NO LESS SAVAGE THAN THOSE OUTSIDE...



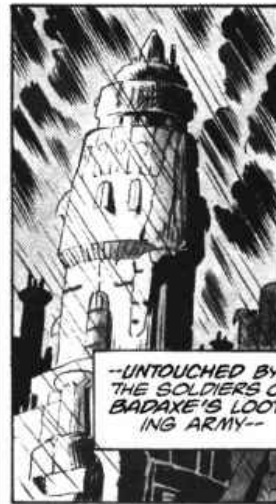
...AN ORGY OF DESTRUCTION, AT ONCE THE PUNISHMENT OF A STUBBORN POPULACE, AND THE REWARD OF THE SOLDIERS WHO BROUGHT THEM TO THEIR KNEES.



ABOVE THE CHAOS RISES AN ARCAIC AND ORNATE TOWER INSCRIBED WITH DARK AND EVIL DESIGNS...



--UNTOUCHED BY THE SOLDIERS OF BADAXE'S LOOTING ARMY--



PERHAPS BECAUSE IT IS HOME TO ONE WHOSE SOUL IS BLACKER BY FAR THAN ANY DEEDS OF THE RAMPAGING WARRIORS WITHOUT.



HE BEGAN LIFE AS A HUMAN, WITH
A SOFT FORM AND A NAME--

BUT HIS SOUL QUESTED
AFTER THE SUPER-
HUMAN, AND THAT LONG-
ING LED HIM THROUGH
THE DARK WORLDS OF
SHADOW--

WHERE HIS FORM
FELL PREY TO
THE CORRUPT
THINGS THAT
DWELL ON THE
OTHER SIDE OF
MYTH... ON THE
GOD PLANE



DEMONS LOVED HIS BODY, AND IN RETURN
GRANTED THE MAN A MEASURE OF THEIR
BLACK POWER.

NOW THE MAN IS
GONE, REPLACED
BY AN ARCAINE
BEAST NAMED
THE HORSE...



WHEN HE SPEAKS, IT
IS WITH A THROAT
GROWN UNACCUSTOMED
TO THE TASK.



YOU'RE LATE,
CHICKENHAWK

I DON'T CARE TO WAIT, LEAST
OF ALL FOR SCUM LIKE YOU

CHICKENHAWK
IGNORES
THE INSULT--

--UNDERSTANDING
DEEP IN HIS HEART
THAT HE IS SCUM.



THERE WAS A
TIME -- BEFORE
THE LUST -- WHEN
HIS SWORD WOULD
HAVE LEAPT FROM
HIS SIDE TO AVENGE
SUCH AN INSULT.



NOW CHICKENHAWK
MERELY YANKS THE
CHAIN BINDING HIS SLAVES,
INFLECTING ON THEM A
MEASURE OF THE INDIG-
NITY THAT HAS LONG SINCE
BROUGHT HIM LOW.



I HAVE BROUGHT
THEM, SIR--AS PER
OUR BARGAIN.

BRING THEM CLOSE
SO I CAN SEE



THIS IS A
GIRL!

YES, SIR, AND
A HEALTHY ONE. I
SWEAR I HAVEN'T
TOUCHED HER

YOU
FILTHY
IDIOT!



I HAVE ALL THE
GIRLS I NEED! I
SENT YOU FOR
A BOY!



MAYBE I
SHOULD TAKE
YOU.

I'M NO
GOOD FOR YOU,
SIR I'M TOO
OLD.



YOU KNOW I NEED A YOUNG BOY, AND YOU BRING ME GIRLS ...WHAT GOOD ARE YOU?

CHICKENHAWK HAS NO ANSWER. ALL HE FEELS IS A RISING PANIC FROM A SOURCE HE KNOWS TOO WELL



IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO THINK HE IS TOO NEAR THE WOMEN.

HE WANTS TO GIVE IN...TO HELL WITH THE INFECTION, AND THE TOLL IT WOULD TAKE ON THE DIMINISHING YEARS OF HIS LIFE.



CHICKENHAWK KNOWS HE'S LOST IF HE GIVES IN TO THE PANIC.

HE RUNS HIS HANDS THROUGH HIS GREASY HAIR, IGNORING THE BITE OF TICKS, SEARCHING FOR THE TWISTED ROOT OF A CIGARETTE HE'D SAVED THE NIGHT BEFORE

IT'S BADAXE'S POGROM HE'S GOT EVERY BOY FOR MILES AROUND BLEEDING LIKE A PIG ON HIS SCAFFOLD.



I NEED--

I NEED A BOY, NOT A CURRENT EVENTS LESSON.

STOP FIDGETING! YOUR CONSTANT MOTION IS ANNOYING

IF CHICKENHAWK HAD A SON, HE WOULD GLADLY GIVE HIM TO THE HORSE

ANYTHING TO KILL THE FEVER, TO SATISFY THE LUST



YOU NEED DRUGS. AND I HAVE THEM.

OR YOU NEED SEX. BUT THAT WILL KILL YOU. I'M YOUR ONLY HOPE. BUT FIRST YOU MUST BRING ME A BOY.



HE WILL FIND A BOY.

WHILE CHICKENHAWK NEEDS A BOY, THE WOLVES WILL SETTLE FOR AN OLD MAN.

THROUGH ALL THE YEARS OF HER YOUTH, TANREE HAS LOVED THE WOLVES LIKE SIBLINGS--



SOMETIMES FIGHTING WITH THEM OVER FOOD, BUT NEVER TO THE DEATH--

UNTIL NOW.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS STRANGE FOOL THAT TRIGGERED HER TRANSFORMATION FROM PREDATOR TO PROTECTOR? IN THE PACK, THE OLD ARE ABANDONED TO DIE.

A BRAVE WARRIOR I FEEL, LAYED UPON THE SWORD, GLORIOUS IN VALOROUS REPOSE FROM THE FIGHT--

--I SENSE THIS BRAVE CHAMPION IS SLEEPING, WAITING TO RISE AND STRIKE LOW THE HEATHENS.



SHE CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS, BUT SENSES THEIR QUIXOTIC MEANING.

THE WOLVES HAVE ALWAYS DIMLY RESENTED THE HUMAN IN THEIR MIDST, AND NOW THAT SHE HAS SEEMINGLY GONE MAD, THEY TURN ON HER WITH RELISH...



...AND TANREE REALIZES IT IS NOT THE OLD MAN ALONE WHO IS BEING QUIXOTIC

NOW IT IS
TANREE'S TURN
TO FEEL SHARP
TEETH AT HER
THROAT, AND IF
THIS IS HER
DEATH, SHE
FEELS NO FEAR.



HER CALM IS REWARDED, IN THE FORM OF
A GRAY THUNDERBOLT, NAMED AKUT

DESTINY MUST WORK WITH
THE TOOLS AT HAND.



THE YEARS HAVE
SLOWED AKUT'S
REFLEXES AND TAKEN
SOME OF HIS FURY--
IT IS WITH EFFORT THE
OLD WOLF BATTLES
YOUNG BEASTS WHO
HAVE LONG RESENTED
HIS RULE...



FIGHTING SIDE-BY-SIDE, WITH A SPECIAL BOND
FORGED THROUGH THEIR MANY YEARS TOGETHER,
TANREE AND AKUT QUICKLY ROUT THEIR FOES.



AND ONLY WHEN THE BATTLE IS
DONE, DO THEY WONDER WHY.



ONLY WHEN THE TIDE TURNS DO THEY REALIZE
THEY HAVE FOREVER LEFT THE PACK





GENERAL DEXTER IS A CREATURE OF DUTY.

DUTY TO HIS NAME, TO HIS RANK, AND MOST OF ALL, TO HIS GOD BADAXE.

WHEN ISSUED A TASK BY HIS GOD, GENERAL DEXTER DOES NOT DELEGATE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO SOME ADJUTANT OR SCRIVENER



DUTY DEMANDS HE FOLLOW BADAXE'S ORDERS ON HIS OWN, EVEN IF THEY ARE ONLY DIMLY UNDERSTOOD.



HAND AFTER HAND IS CATALOGUED. WHAT IS BADAXE LOOKING FOR?



HERE'S THE LATEST LOAD, GENERAL....



...ARE YOU SURE YOU COULDN'T USE A HAND WITH THIS?



IF LOOKS COULD KILL...



THEN HOW ABOUT A DRINK?



THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE THE FINEST WINE IN BLACK POST THE INN-KEEPER HOWLED LOUD ENOUGH WHEN I TOOK IT FROM HIS CELLAR.

I DON'T WANT TO DRINK

YOU'RE SURE? I PASSED A PRIEST WITH HIS AVATAR ON THE WAY IN.

ON SECOND THOUGHT, I'LL HAVE THAT DRINK.

I WISH I KNEW, FALKENHORST...

..BADAXE SAYS TO SHATTER BLACK POST, SO I SHATTER BLACK POST

HE SAYS TO SLAY THE YOUNG BOYS WE FIND, SO I SLAY BOYS.

HE SAYS TO TAKE THEIR HANDS AND NOTE THE DETAILS --I DO SO.

STRANGE ARE THE WAYS OF BADAXE, WHO AM I TO QUESTION OUR GOD?



WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT, ANYWAY?



I HOPE YOU FIND WHAT HE'S LOOKING FOR. BOMBARDING HEATHEN CITIES IS GOOD WORK, BUT I DON'T LIKE THIS KILLING OF BOYS.

NOR DO I.

ALL FELLOWSHIP EVAPORATES WHEN THE HIGH PRIEST AND HIS CAPTIVE AVATAR ENTER THE ROOM.



LEAVE HERE

YES, FATHER.





AS BADAXE'S SUPREME MILITARY COMMANDER, GENERAL DEXTER IS HABITUALLY CLOSE TO HIS GOD--



BUT THE PROCESS BY WHICH HIS GOD SPEAKS IS AN EVENT TO WHICH HE HAS NEVER GROWN ACCUSTOMED



THIS IS THE MOMENT FOR WHICH THE AVATAR LIVES.

THIS IS THE MOMENT WHEN HE DIES.

FIRE-BLACKENED BONES TWIST, SNAP, AND POP INTO SUPERHUMAN SHAPES--

THE AVATAR'S SPINE SNAPS--

--AND FROM HIS RUPTURED STOMACH AN IMPOSSIBLE BLACK CORPULENCE BURSTS FORTH.

--AS THE GREAT GOD BADAXE CONSUMES THE AVATAR WITH HIS DIVINE MAGNIFICENCE

THIS SACK OF FLESH IS NOT ADEQUATE !!



GREAT IS THE GOD
BADAXE, GREAT IS HIS
POWER AND HIS RULE;
GREAT IS--

BLACK
POST IS
MINE??



THE HOLY MANIF-
ESTATION CHARGES
THE ROOM WITH
ENERGY FROM THE
GOD PLANE. DEXTER
IS EUPHORIC, BUT
AT THE SAME TIME
FEELS LIKE A MOTH
TOO NEAR A FLAME.

OF COURSE,
GREAT
FATHER



HAVE YOU
FOUND IT??

GREAT FATHER,
I DO NOT EVEN
KNOW WHAT YOU
ARE LOOKING
FOR.

YOU WILL KNOW
IT WHEN YOU SEE
IT. FIND IT SOON
OR MY WRATH
WILL BE
TERRIBLE.



DO NOT FAIL
MEEEEEEE...

IN THE AFTER-
MATH OF
THE DIVINE
VISITATION,
GENERAL
AND PRIEST
DISAPPEAR...



...REPLACED BY TWO
FRIGHTENED MORTALS,
HUDDLED TOGETHER
AGAINST THE DARK.



DRINK?

DON'T
MIND IF
I DO



THE DARK IS A FRIGHTENING THING,
AND MEN HAVE ALWAYS HUDDLED
TOGETHER AGAINST ITS ONSET

A CITY IS JUST A PLACE WHERE
MANY MEN HUDDLE TOGETHER.

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS
THE CYCLOPEAN WALLS
OF BLACK POST HAVE
HELD BACK THE DARK--

UNTIL
TONIGHT.

LEGEND HOLDS THESE WALLS WERE RAISED
BY GIANTS WORKING MONTHS ON END. HISTORY
WILL NOTE THEY WERE SHATTERED BY BADAXE'S
GRAND BATTERY IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE



TO WILD TANREE, THESE THINGS--THE CITY, THE
ARMY, THE FOOL OLD MAN--SPEAK OF THE SAME THING.

CIVILIZATION

DEEP IN HER SOUL, SHE KNOWS SHE WAS
BORN TO DWELL IN CITIES WITH HER KIND...



...TO LIVE THE
CIVILIZED LIFE.

THE WALLS OF BLACK POST HAVE BEEN BREACHED - I CAN FEEL IT! GLORIOUS IS THE DAY GREAT BADAXE BRINGS LIGHT TO THE HEATHENS!



AGAIN THAT NAME BADAXE THE OLD MAN SPEAKS NONSENSE, BUT THAT NAME, SOMETHING ABOUT IT...

HE HAS LED US HERE, HAS ENTRUSTED US WITH HIS GIFT, HIS CANNONS, THE BRILLIANT ISSUE OF WHICH HAS TAKEN MY EYES

GREAT IS BADAXE! I FEEL HIS SPLENDID PRESENCE ALL ABOUT!



AGAIN WITH STRANGE WORDS - BUT NOW A RHYTHM BEGINS TO APPEAR, AN ORDER TO APPEAR, AN ORDER TO THE WHISTLES AND THE GRUNTS.

LIKE A DISTANT ECHO, TANREE ARRIVES AT A MEMORY OF THE MAN'S LANGUAGE

SHE UNDERSTANDS JUST ENOUGH--

--BADAXE IS HERE, AND SHE WOULD FIND HIM



OLD AKUT CAME TO HER AID AGAINST THE PACK QUICK ENOUGH, BUT HE WANTS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE FOUL SMELL OF THIS WORLD OF MEN



IF TANREE NOTICES HIS DEPARTURE, SHE GIVES NO SIGN



FOR HER THERE IS ONLY ONE THING IN ALL THE WORLD--

AN EXCITING GAME PLAYED BY CIVILIZED MEN



OY THERE, YOU SCUM HEATHEN, YOU THIEVIN' SCUM!

HIT HIM! HIT HIM, RED!



STOP IT!

PLEASE JUST LET ME LEAVE!

FILTHY SCUM THIEF! CRY, CRY, CRY.



THIS IS A STRANGE GAME NOT EVEN THE CRAZY HOLVES TOY WITH THEIR FREY

FASCINATED, SHE DRAWS CLOSE



OY NOW! NOT IS THIS?



IT SMELLS WORSE THAN RED DOES, AND THAT'S SAYING SOMETHING.

I THINK IT'S A GIRL.

ABOUT DAMN TIME WE FOUND ONE OF THOSE.



SHE'S A STRONG ONE, THIS IS

KNOCK HER ONE.

--I SENSE THE CELEBRATION ALL AROUND, A CAPTIVE PEOPLE LIBERATED FROM A TYRANNY OF DARKNESS, WELCOMED INTO THE LOVING ARMS OF GREAT BADAXE!

TELL ME OF THE FESTIVAL. TELL ME OF THE ROSE PETALS STREWN BEFORE OUR CONQUERING SOLDIERS BY A GRATEFUL POPULACE--

FOR ALL HER HUMAN IMPULSES, TANREE IS STILL A THING OF THE WILD.

THE WHORE'S BIT HIS THROAT CLEAR OUT!

GONNA STICK THIS ONE LIKE A DOG...

ARRAGH!

AND A WILD ANIMAL IS MOST DANGEROUS WHEN CORNERED.

IT IS A LESSON THESE SOLDIERS --SCARCELY MORE THAN WILD THINGS, THEMSELVES--WOULD DO WELL TO LEARN.

THE DEAD SOLDIER'S AXE FEELS GOOD IN HER HANDS, AND THOUGH UNSCHOOLED IN ITS USE--



SHE QUICKLY HEWS INTO HER ENEMIES LIKE A MASTER OF THE BLADE.



THE SOLDIERS FALL BACK BEFORE THIS UNEXPECTED ONSLAUGHT, OPENING THEIR RANKS--



AND THE AXE-WOMAN VANISHES AS SUDDENLY AS SHE APPEARED--

--REPLACED AGAIN BY A WILD THING, NOW IN HEAD-LONG ANIMAL FLIGHT.



IT IS NOT PANIC
SO MUCH AS
INSTINCT THAT
SPURS TANREE'S
FLIGHT

THE INSTINCT
OF A BEAST
TO ESCAPE
DANGER, AND
SEEK SAFETY
IN FAMILIAR
HAUNTS--



BUT IN THIS CITY GONE TO HELL THERE IS NO SAFE
HAVEN, NO PLACE FREE OF THE SOLDIERS AND THEIR
DESTRUCTION.

ALL THOUGHT OF JOINING CIVILIZATION
IS GONE--REPLACED BY SWELLING
PANIC THAT SAYS SIMPLY TO FLEE...



TO ESCAPE THE LAND OF MEN,
RETURN TO THE WILD, REJOIN
THE PACK--



ONCE AGAIN,
DESTINY MUST
WORK WITH THE
TOOLS AT HAND.





INSTINCT & DESTINY? SIMPLE STREETWISE SURVIVAL?

WHATEVER THE REASON, CHICKENHAWK ACTS INSTANTLY, PULLING TANREE INTO THE DARK SHADOWS OF A DOORWAY--



--LONG ENOUGH FOR HER PURSUIT TO THUNDER PAST.



IN THE DARKNESS OF THE DOORWAY, TANREE'S DIRT-SMEARED FEATURES ARE HARD TO DISTINGUISH--

--A CONDITION MADE NO BETTER BY THE FEVERISH DELUSIONS OF CHICKENHAWK'S DISEASE.

A HEART GRIPPED BY FEAR AND LONGING WILL SEE WHAT IT NEEDS TO SEE...



A BOY!! BLESS YOU, BADAKE, YOU'VE SENT ME A BOY! I WILL KNEEL AT YOUR ALTAR AND GIVE THANKS BEFORE THIS NIGHT IS THROUGH...



COME WITH ME, BOY THIS IS NO NIGHT FOR A CHILD TO BE OUT ..

INSTINCTIVELY, TANREE CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL THIS IS A GOOD PERSON

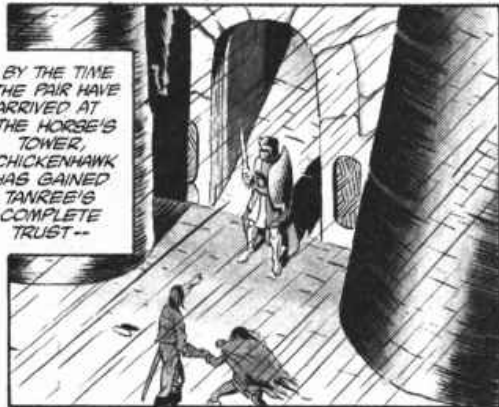
NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME, HER INSTINCTS FAIL UTTERLY



CHICKENHAWK KNOWS THE ALLEYS OF BLACK POST LIKE A RAT. IT'S LITTLE WORK TO LEAD TANREE PAST THE WORST OF THE FIGHTING.



WITH EACH PASSING MOMENT TANREE FEELS MORE AT EASE WITH THIS STRANGER, DESPITE HIS AGITATED GESTURES AND THE CONTINUOUS MOVEMENT OF HIS LIPS AND EYES.



BY THE TIME THE PAIR HAVE ARRIVED AT THE HORSE'S TOWER, CHICKENHAWK HAS GAINED TANREE'S COMPLETE TRUST--



AND SURETY AND CONFIDENCE INSPIRE SOMETHING ELSE IN CHILDLIKE TANREE, AS WELL.



HORSE! SHOW YOURSELF, YOU DEMON! I'VE BROUGHT YOU FLESH!





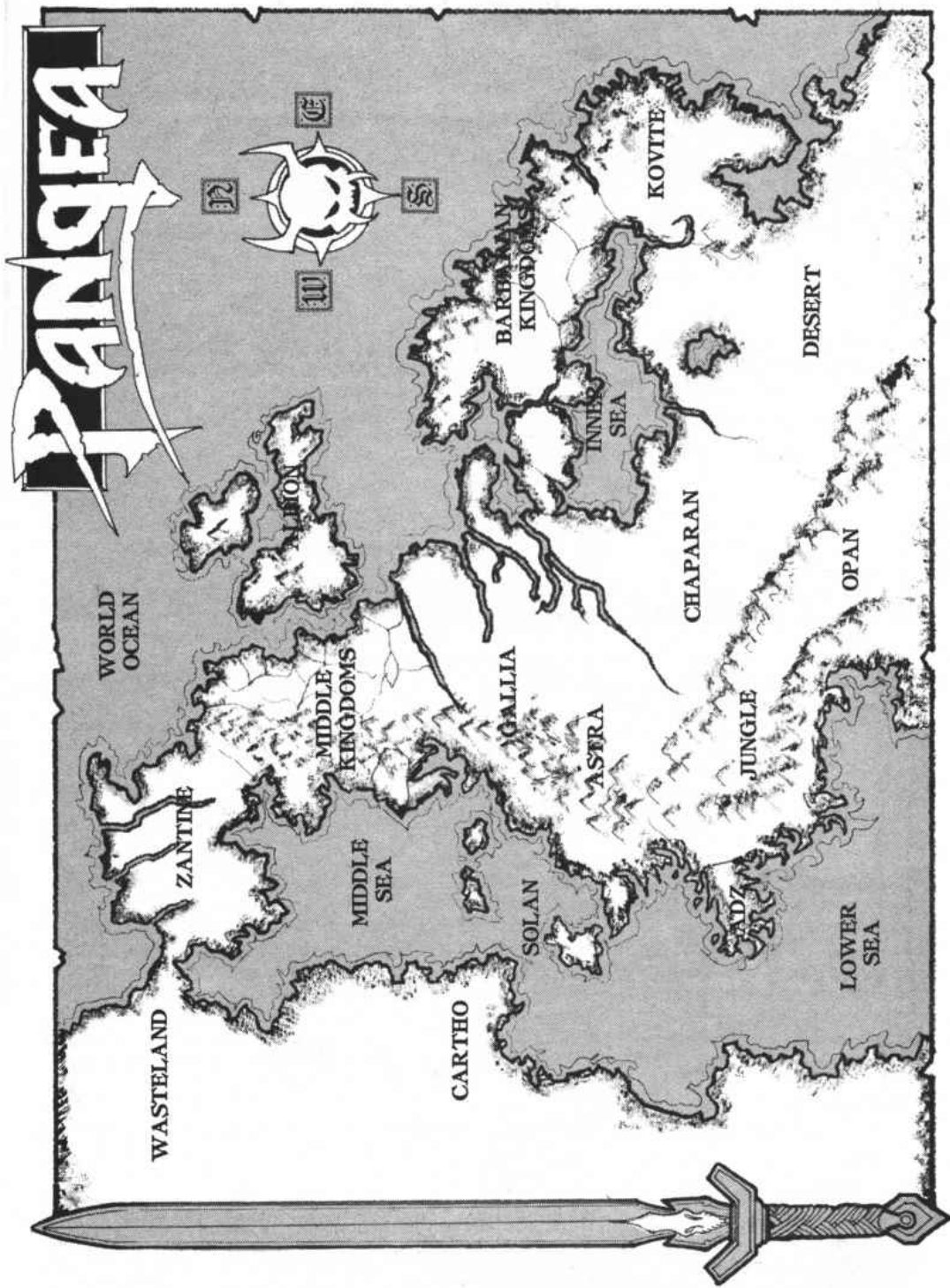
THE WALLS OF THIS GREAT CITY WERE BUILT TO HOLD BACK THE DARK—

AND THE WALLS OF THIS GREAT TOWER WERE BUILT TO HOLD BACK THE CITY—

BUT IN THE BOWELS OF THE HORSE'S TOWER IS THE VERY HEART OF DARKNESS, A FETID CORRIDOR THAT LEADS STRAIGHT TO HELL

SOMETIMES THE TOOLS AT HAND ARE SIMPLY NOT ENOUGH FOR DESTINY

Next issue:
GODWALKING



Notes From the Nest

It's been an exciting road to 2021 and it's been a trying road to 2021. Thank you to everyone who has supported us for the last five years. We would not still be here without you. It would take too long to thank everyone who made it possible, but we need to give a special shout-out to our artists and authors for this issue, and to Team Shanghai Alice for letting us put Chen on our variant cover.

We'll be especially reliant on our readers for feedback going forward. Our #1 fan passed away in late 2020. [Readers from the Castalia House days may remember our Wargame Wednesday series chronicling our gaming, which we continued until right before his sudden passing.]

My dad always got the first hardcover copy off the press and could always be counted on for his impressions on where we'd succeeded and where we'd maybe overreached—there have always been stories that I've wondered about and even second-guessed until I'd hear from him how great he'd thought they were. The Fall Special was the last issue he had a chance to read.

One interesting task I have before me is executor of his letters and writings. It'll take me ages to collate his work [lots of poetry, some fiction, and a lot of non-fiction, including a history of Freemasonry in Arkansas that's in an unknown state of completions]. I'll close out with a piece of his:

This gray palette's painted no more
with the gala colors of naïve innocence
A fan dancer shorn of her feathered smock
and having blushed twice is red-faced no more
But struts—homely in her uncladness—
across the stage of time that is Now
Desirous not for the praises of art critics
but only to the world's harlot.
The preacher rolls his eyes to heaven
crying out for the coming apocalypse
Warning the baaing sheep of Babylon—
Whore of the world—so call her Babylon
Her flesh is not mortal flesh

No mere sexual woman is she
Her passions are deeper than lust
they burn like the fires that buried Pompeii
Boiling within, bursting out after a millennium
of patient deception of docile dormancy.
Babylon used to love and hate—or thought she did
but now she isn't really sure if they are or aren't
She wants to gaze into the mirror
and see a laughing little girl
Who's in love half the time
and broken-hearted all the rest
Alas! Poor Babylon is still the innocent youth
but knows too much to play the part
Though unclad, Babylon is never naked
while robed in the dried tears of yesterday's sorrows.

Behold: a pale horse, K.K.