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**THE MASTER**



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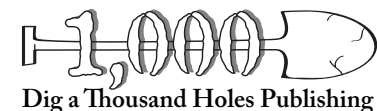
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**Dig a Thousand Holes Publishing**

## NEW & WONDROUS VISTAS TO BEHOLD

Sword and sorcery first fought its way into my life not by blade nor by pen, but by brush. It was those grand illustrators of the past who populated the book covers in the fantasy section of my local library that dragged me into the genre. And although I stayed for the stories and games, if I am truly honest, I must admit that I often judge a book by the justice it does to its cover and not the other way around.

For *Worlds Without Master*, I wanted to use the cover to showcase an artist's own sense of the genre. A piece as independent of the tales found within as those tales are of each other. And now, thanks to the might of the Patron Horde, this issue of has become the first to bear such a cover.

Behold then, "Too Far West" by Rachel Kahn, an artist whose fresh view of the genre made her the obvious choice to launch this new tradition of dragging neophytes into worlds fraught with danger and bizarre wonders.

Your Companion,  
*Epidiah Ravachol*  
Epidiah Ravachol



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# TWO SWORDS OF MARS

A tale by Rose Bailey

Illustrated by Jonathan Taylor

## CHIARO-THAT-WAS

The swordsman reeked of cheap wine. His opponent smelled much better.

The two reeled out into the alleyway, the bruiser tackling the slim swordsman, who fell jarringly on his back, still fumbling to draw his blade. This close, he could smell the bigger man's breath. Familiar... almost like cinnamon from faraway Wyeth...

No time for that now. The swordsman's head reeled with the wine even as he felt the shock from hitting the ground. All seemed lost. *This*, he thought, *this might be how I die*. But of course, it wasn't. Only a moment more and his heart began to tick faster, the wine which had dulled his senses turning to fire in his blood. He was aware, alert, *strong*. He let the big man push him down by the shoulders, then pivoted

painfully on his back, bringing a knee up into his assailant's groin.

The bruiser howled. The swordsman didn't stop pushing up, flipped the both of them over and threw the big man a few paces behind him. He scrambled to his feet, and managed to free his blade. The bruiser also got to his feet, and also wore a sword, but didn't reach for it.

The bigger man made ready to charge, and the slim one braced himself, waiting for the right moment to thrust at his rushing opponent. Then the moment came, and he missed. The bruiser was too fast.

The swordsman's blade went wide, pushing a handspan of fine Deimos steel into the big man's left shoulder. The swordsman lost his grip, unable even to twist the sword. The bigger man grimaced in pain, a feral sort of grin like a beast that will not



admit to its injury, much less go gracefully to its death. Suddenly he jerked as another sword thrust through his trunk from behind. The second blade skewered the bruiser—and very nearly the slim swordsman. For the second time they went down in a pile, and the swordsman smelled the man's last cinnamon breath.

The swordsman lay there a moment, trying to catch his breath. His heart ticked wildly, irregularly, and not for the first time he wondered if that black machine would simply wind down and leave him to die.

The thing which was his heart continued its mock-beats, and as the slowed, he shoved his assailant off of him. He recognized the tall figure standing over them, of course, but he studiously ignored her as she freed her sword from the big man. He retrieved his own sword. The angle of his thrust had been bad. He was lucky not to have snapped the blade.

"Are you getting old, Valentine?" the woman asked.

"Not old," he said, "but older. If you're here to insult me, then I don't see any need to thank you."

"I'll not take your thanks in words, in any case. We both know that your mouth is more honest in other pursuits." She smiled a little.

"I didn't need your help," Valentine said, a little sullenly.

"As I said, your mouth's not always honest. For all your grace and fine bladework, that man would have crushed the life from you. You're outright lucky I got him first."

"He was dead already, Soteria. My sword through his shoulder, and soon enough my knife across his belly. You merely put him out of his misery."

Valentine paused.

"Were you *following* me?"

"Not at all," smiled Soteria. "I didn't even know it was you. I only saw an unfair fight, and came to even the odds."

Valentine hauled the man up and flipped him fully onto his back.

"Fine clothing," he remarked, "for Chiaro-that-was."

Soteria looked around at the low, mud-brick buildings, with the tents and shanties built ramshackle between them.

"You ought to know. The blood on your shirt is going to stain, by the way."

She laughed, then, as his hands immediately went to the white silk. She fully expected several minutes of fretting, and that never ceased to make her smile. But almost as soon as he began his futile struggle to wipe off the blood, he stopped. His eyes were on the bruiser.

"My dear," and those were words he never used, except when he worried, "does this man look familiar to you?"

Soteria glanced half-heartedly.

"Good clothes... made for a traveler, but never worn on the road. Wealthy, then, slumming here before going home to roost in Chiaro-that-is."

"I already got to that. His face. Look at his face." Valentine lifted the dead man's chin so that she could see.

Soteria's face was only a light copper, but even so, it paled. Her eyes fixed on the dead man's face, when she might otherwise have noticed movement behind her, among the tents.

"He was with Hardrada, before our trip to the polar cap. For which, I might add, the old man still owes us a fair share."

"Exactly, my dear... he's Hardrada's son."

### CHIARO-THAT-WAS: SOTERIA AND VALENTINE'S LODGINGS

Soteria paced about the tiny room. Valentine and the dead man were still upon the small, hard couch.

"We went north for Hardrada."

Valentine nodded.

"We braved the polar cap, the white riders."

"As you say."

"We stole a fortune in gems from the shining abominations in their ill-omened towers."

"Abomination is a harsh word."

"Well, I was trying to forget your dalliance with their princess."

"Fair," Valentine said. "So am I."

"We gave the gems to Hardrada's representative last night, assured of a good payment and more to come."



"We did do that."

"And tonight," she rounded on Valentine, "you killed his son!"

"I wounded him," pouted Valentine. "Barely. You were the one who killed him."

Soteria's hand went to her sword. Valentine's to his knife.

They drew, and measured each other's gazes. Soteria's eyes blazing in many hues, Valentine's merely dark pools above a hook nose and grand mustache. They locked eyes a long moment, and simultaneously looked away.

"Bad time for foreplay," Valentine muttered.

"Yeah," said Soteria. "It's a shame, blood on your shirt and all." The edge of her mouth curled upward.

And then they laughed. Long, hard, and for the first time that night, they laughed together.

"I don't see what's so funny," said a voice from the doorway.

There was a slim girl standing there. She looked about sixteen. Her dress was simple, but it draped flatteringly over her skin, which was near as red as Valentine's, and her hair and eyes were near as dark.

Soteria still had her sword drawn. She raised it and stepped forward towards the girl. The point came to rest against the girl's neck, and Soteria tilted it upward, raising the smaller woman's chin.

"A lot of things are funny," the tall woman said, "when you're half-convinced of your own death. You might start thinking of a few good jokes."

"Oh," said the girl, and if her voice wavered, it was only for a moment. "You don't want to kill me. I'm here to make sure no one needs to die tonight."

"Too late," Valentine grumbled. He still sat on the couch.

"I'm here," said the girl, "precisely because it isn't too late. That man's my lover, and I can save him from your rather crude attempt at murder."

"He attacked me," said Valentine, "and without cause."

"The effects of the spice," the girl said. Her speech was delicate. For all her apparent calm, she was clearly aware of Soteria's steel beneath her chin. "It causes a strange atavism, brings barbarism to the surface that no Martian has otherwise experienced in a thousand thousand years."

"The cinnamon smell," said Valentine. "Krem. The Qans use it to release inhibition... though in rather more amorous contexts."

"That was our intent." She paused. "He got away from me." For the first time, Soteria noticed a purple bruise on one red shoulder.

Soteria lowered her sword. "If you want the carcass," she said, "take it. It'll do us no good when we flee."

"I said I could save him," said the girl. She produced a small clay jar from somewhere in her dress. "While you were clumsily hauling him away, I gathered his blood and spittle with the sand it fell upon."

"The makings of a ghost," Soteria said thoughtfully. "But not much of one. He died with no curse upon his lips. And," she added with a trace of pride, "in no long agony."

"Not much, perhaps. But I am Tien, and I am the last of a people who have no name in your tongue. I can conjure from this, and I can raise this man."

"Why all this talk, then? We offered you the body." Valentine raised his voice. He was uneasy.

"Because," said Tien, "I need something that was stolen from my people long ago. I'll need your help to get it back."

"And we help you because..." Valentine challenged.

"...because otherwise Hardrada's going to come after us hard," Soteria finished. "All right, Tien, what is it you need?"

## CHIARO-THAT-IS: MONASTERY OF THE BLIND SAINT

The chanting would have been very lovely, were it not violently interrupted by the clash of steel upon steel. Valentine stepped back out of the way of the monk's sword. His back collided with Soteria's. The impact was strangely comforting.

"Didn't she say they were blind?" he gasped.

"Well," Soteria replied, "they clearly don't have eyes. Or, for that matter, tongues."

She was right. The brown-robed monks surrounded them, empty sockets yawning and mouths open wide in their strange chant. Their faces looked like masks, except for the occasional but clear spasms of rage that distorted their features.

Valentine kept his back to Soteria, even as he ducked another blow. He came up beneath the monk's guard, and took him in the lung. The monk gasped, and the chant all around seemed to change.



He realized suddenly, uselessly, that each of them produced only a single note.

He had only a moment to wonder. Another monk grasped for Valentine's pouch. The incense within—liberated quite delicately from a treasure vault before they had been noticed—was what Tien had sent them for. Valentine elbowed the monk in the stomach, and the tone shifted again as the holy man wheezed. And then, just then, a blow that would have taken Valentine's head clean off went high.

"Soteria," he whispered. "You're better at this than me."

"That's a lovely compliment," she said, "and at perhaps the worst possible moment."

"No. You, stronger, bigger sword."

"Yes, and?"

"Take one of their heads off. Do it for me."

Valentine scrambled forward, allowing Soteria to step back and swing her sword in a great arc. She sliced two men clean through the neck. More notes disappeared... and the rest faltered.

"It's the chanting, dear. That's how they can see us."

Soteria grinned. "You could have said so."

She pushed forward and gave one of them a strong knee to the groin. He screamed, and the rest fell back a moment. At the same time, Valentine skewered a man through the throat. The seemingly unending mass of holy men faltered, and Valentine began shoving towards the door, knocking aside the





monks' clumsy, uncoordinated swings. Soteria was right behind him, and they crashed into the street.

They ran, ran in the smoky blue lantern light that protected the city from ghosts and tomb stalkers. Ran through the labyrinth of streets, and then stopped to catch their breath. And no sooner had they caught it then they were laughing again.

"Do you think this is going to work?" Soteria asked. She paused. "Do you think we're going to live?"

Valentine took a cut across his palm, and matched it to a long, bloody scratch down Soteria's cheek.

"If it doesn't, if we don't... let's just call that a church wedding."

## CHIARO-THAT-IS: TIEN'S BASEMENT ROOM

"You're late," said the near-child they were gambling on as a priestess. "I had to get the body down the stairs myself."

Soteria gave her a gray and evil eye. "We'd have been quicker if you'd elaborated a little on 'blind.'"

Tien scowled at her. "You're the killers here. Your problem."

Valentine couldn't help but smile at that.

"All right, kid, what do you need?"

Tien lit the bronze censer containing their spoils, which she had sprinkled with the dust and fluids.

"Stand at his head. Open his mouth, and breathe in and out of it."

"What about me?" asked Soteria.

"Look pretty," said Tien, "if that's the kind of thing you can do."

Soteria scowled. They could have been half a night south by now, following the ice caravans. Dawn would be coming soon, and escape from Hardrada would be harder—not to mention those priests.

Tien carried the censer close to where Valentine hunched over the dead man's face.

"You know," said the swordsman, "he still doesn't smell that bad."

No one gave him the dignity of a reply. But he soon found he didn't care. The incense and its gruesome reagents had a soft, strange smell. It slipped into his mouth and nostrils, and there it burned. He was angry, for a moment... something about a drunk in an alleyway. He blinked. Saw Tien. Her shoulders really were very slim and red. Not his usual type, but for a moment he thought he could get used to them. And then his vision began to dim, and his head to sway ever so slightly.

He was dimly aware of shouting, of Tien's lovely voice screaming, of the flash of a knife and the smell of fresh blood. Something collided with him, full body. He was flat on his back, and someone very dangerous was crouching over him.

"Are you alive?" Soteria's voice demanded. "And are you 'you?'"

"Alive," he managed to croak. "No church wedding."

## EPILOGUE

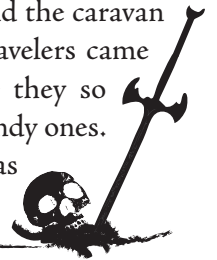
Soteria didn't like it. She didn't like it when Valentine insisted on collecting some of Tien's blood in the little vase that contained her lover's.

She didn't like that he insisted on walking out to the great tombs, beyond Chiaro-that-was, and scattering the awful mixture upon the wind.

Valentine was rather more impressed with Soteria's contribution. A man and a woman had robbed the Monastery of the Blind Saint, and so were a man and a woman found not far from there, with the stolen goods and marks on them, as if they had been set upon by robbers.

Hardrada was distraught over the loss of his son, but it only served to increase his generosity; apparently, his material possessions meant less to him in his time of grief.

Soteria and Valentine set out south, with the ice caravans. As the sun rose high, and the caravan stopped to rest, the two dusty travelers came together in the kind of embrace they so rarely shared. Dry lips brushed sandy ones. And if that kiss was not pure, it was at least very long, and very sincere.





# THE PRIZE OF BANTETETH

*A tale by Epidiah Ravachol*

*Illustrated by Gary McCluskey*

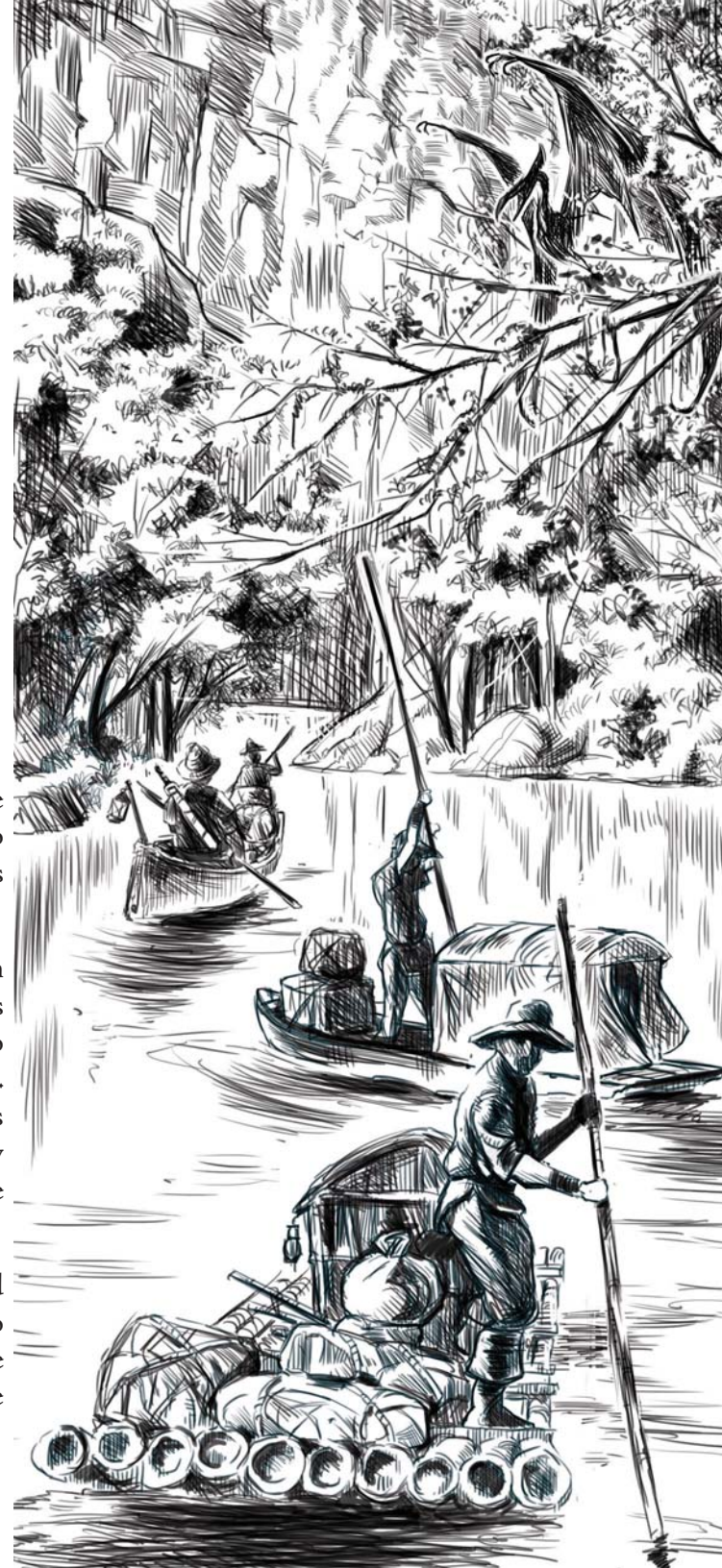
The journey inland from the port of Daninuah to the crossroads of Lep could not be measured in time or distance. By punt across acrid fen; by ox through venomous, labyrinthine jungle paths; by moonlight over leopard-haunted savannah; by raft tossed upon the uncaring currents of the mighty Venreu; by goat over mountain and crag; and finally by horse-drawn sledge through sandy scrublands—the caravan masters who traveled this route counted their ventures in the loss of goods and souls.

The work paid more in pride and glory than in silver, but for fair-bearded Snorri and the well-thewed Manyara, it was a clear path from Daninuah that few would follow. After an ill-spent night that left two galleys burning in the harbor, this was a welcome course. The two signed on as guards for Master Selu Fyrmyor's caravan and departed with the rosy dawn.

They carried with them only their clothes, a couple of stolen tankards, six coins of dubious origin, two daggers, an ax, a crooked spear, and Manyara's broadsword Well-Digger.

In the fen, a squat, amphibious beast the length and width of a horse capsized several of the punts and swallowed one of the bearers before the two could bury spear and sword in its slippery flesh. Afterward, their lofty positions as guardians did not insulate them from the leech-laden duty of diving for waterlogged parcels along with the remaining bearers.

Later, Manyara fashioned the beast's ribs and hide into a large shield and Snorri succumbed to an insect-borne fever. They dragged him upon the shield behind oxen over root and rock through the jungle paths.





Under that vicious, verdant canopy, the caravan was set upon by a score of pale and painted women and their hunting spiders. They slew two oxen and made off with all the salt they could carry before Manyara came tearing through the vines. The pursuit into the tangled undergrowth drew her far from the worn trails and, after losing sight of the nimble women and their spiders, left Manyara wandering in an indistinguishable field of green.

Snorri, crippled by fever, was left shivering on the salamander-shield. There Master Selu Fyrmyor let Snorri lie, counting him and Manyara among the tally of losses, and continued on his path toward Lep.

Upon her return, Manyara found Snorri sleeping in the coils of a monstrous constrictor, his dagger at the end of a scarlet gouge that unstitched the serpent. Jungle scavengers of feather, scale and hide feasted about him. She chased off the carrion feeders and, after failing to start a fire with the damp jungle wood, she watched over Snorri and fed him insects and raw snake.

When Snorri's fever broke, the two followed the caravan's path, seeking answers and payment from Master Selu Fyrmyor. For days they ran, through jungle and then out on the savannah where the caravan's trail was evident by the circling vultures that marked where ox carcasses had been abandoned. Despite Manyara's desires to reclaim what supplies may have been left with the fallen oxen, Snorri insisted they sweep wide of these feeding grounds and hunt their meals elsewhere. He had grown less fond of scavengers as of late.

They lost the trail in the torrents of the Venreu. The river was wide and swollen from recent mountain





storms—a foaming mélange of mud and debris—and afforded no way to reckon where Master Selu Fyrmyor’s caravan had gone. But there was no returning. So Manyara felled three small trees that the pair lashed together into a makeshift raft and they surrendered to the mercies of the Venreu.

After a long struggle with the river, the raft eventually shattered in the rapids and the pair clung to Manyara’s shield until they washed ashore. There they were found by a couple of the caravan’s bearers who were trying to fish the Venreu. They helped Snorri and Manyara to a nearby village at the foot of a mountain pass where Master Selu Fyrmyor was negotiating a trade of his oxen for sure-footed goats. He greeted them as kin and made introductions to the village elders who grew more nervous and pliable in Manyara and Snorri’s haggard but daunting presence.

Master Selu Fyrmyor, delighted by the number of goats he got in exchange for his dwindling oxen supply, welcomed Manyara and Snorri back into his employ with gifts of warm, dry furs and leathers, including long, conical fur caps—the kind favored by the local banditry—which Snorri found jaunty and Manyara found ridiculous. All other accounts, he said, would be settled upon reaching Lep.

The cargo was lashed to the goats and the caravan began the vertiginous climb through the pass, where they were harried by brigands and forced to shelter in shallow caves for several days as a spring storm raged against the mountains. But soon the party was through to the other side, losing only one goat and two bearers, which Master Selu Fyrmyor chose not to count, considering he had recently recovered both Snorri and Manyara and could put them to similar work.

In the final leg, the caravan climbed down out of the mountains where they met another caravan bivouacked among the crags. There Manyara and Snorri were asked to stand to either side of Master Selu Fyrmyor as he sat down with the other caravan leader to discuss the trade of goods and goats for horses and sledges.

The wind, cool and moist, whipped across the waist-high grass. Something in that dance troubled Manyara. She shed the scents, sights and sounds of the haggling at her feet, and breathed in deep her further senses. The sharp timbre of a loosed bowstring sped across thrashing grasses and hid in the cacophony of the caravans. But it could not escape the keen ears of Manyara, honed to winnow out such hints of danger by years of wandering.

She slung her shield up over her head and Snorri dove for shelter behind her. Three arrows sunk into the sandy ground and a fourth into the rump of a horse, spurring it into flight. Master Selu Fyrmyor shot an accusatory glance at the other caravan leader, but she was already calling her own camp to order.

Manyara tossed her shield to Snorri. He caught it and nodded just before Manyara ran off, weaving among the spare outcrops of rock that stabbed upward like islands from the sea of grass. Her thick, powerful legs, aching from days spent in cautious descent out of the mountains, delighted in familiar movements. Her hunched, panther-like sprint—a well-practiced thieves’ gait designed to swiftly carry her strapping frame below window and eye-line—kept her hidden among the grasses as she set about the hunt.

The archers had already set to foot before the first volley had even landed. Their task was done and they had no desire to see what resulted. But they were cautious in their flight and their attempts to remain hidden hampered the speed of their retreat.

With whisper-like grace, Manyara pounced upon the slowest of them, knocking him to the ground. She rolled with the impact and flipped him over, wrapping her steely arm around his throat to hold him still and silent, hidden in the grasses. It was then that she realized she had already knocked him senseless and that he was more child than man.

She released the boy and tried to slap him into consciousness. He yet breathed, but would not respond. So she threw him over her shoulder and scrambled to catch up with the other archers. They were just beginning to realize their companion was missing when Manyara allowed her shadow to be cast upon them. The sight of this dark, massive woman rising silently out of the grasses held sway over their feet, though they desired nothing more than to run. Manyara laid the boy before the girl standing nearest her.

“You will not fling your arrows at me again.”

There were four children in all: the boy Manyara had struck and three girls. Each was wrapped in filthy, tattered silks dyed dark amber and bright purple. Each was armed with a small hunting bow. The eldest, who could not have seen more than a dozen summers, stood gape-mouthed before Manyara, tears threatening her eyes.

“Nod.”

The children nodded.



“Your friend only sleeps, but he should not be left alone on this plain. Take him to shelter and see that he is cared for.”

The three bolted. They were swift, but Manyara, swifter. She lifted the nearest from the ground as she ran and carried her back to the boy. Putting her down, Manyara spoke softly, “Is this child a companion of yours?”

The girl nodded.

“Save his life so that he may have opportunity to save yours one day.”

The girl stared into Manyara’s dark eyes and they reached an understanding. Manyara helped her pick the boy up and showed her how to drape him across her shoulders before shooing her off.

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Snorri ran out to intercept Manyara as she returned.

“How went the hunt?”

“I let my quarry go. They were but children.”

Snorri laughed, “All the better! Hurry, we must catch them.”

Manyara shook her head and held her ground. “I will not deliver them into Selu Fyrmvor’s hands.”

“That is far from my intent,” Snorri said, slapping Manyara on the shoulder. “Besides, in his rage he has once more released us from his service.”

“Making payment in full this time?”

“Not yet.”

Manyara studied the gleam in Snorri’s eye with suspicion. “Come,” she said, turning toward the



camp. “We will drive him back into the tender care of the mountain bandits and pay ourselves out of whatever we can haul to the markets of Lep.”

“The most valuable of his possessions already makes its way to the markets of Lep by way of those clever children. Their archers were a diversion. They shot chaos into the camp, splitting the caravan, driving many still-burdened goats back up the mountain. I assumed the plan was to feed them to the bandits, but before I could illustrate the folly of retreat to Selu Fyrmyor, a lone child dashed through the confusion, plucked a sole parcel from the master’s own goat and fled, presumably to meet back up with his co-conspirators. This loss infuriated Selu Fyrmyor—a man we have both seen take greater loss with less fanfare.”

“What do you suspect the parcel was?”

Snorri’s moustache drew up into a great grin. “He spoke the name Banteteth.”

Manyara relieved Snorri of her shield and climbed atop one of the rocky outcrops. “They ran that way, probably toward Lep. I will join you there. And Snorri . . .”

“No harm will befall them!” he shouted as he ran off, leaving Manyara to loom upon the rock, silhouetted by the sun rising over the mountains.

Throughout the morning, Master Selu Fyrmyor made several attempts to ride out ahead of his caravan to pursue the thieves. He turned back each time he saw Manyara standing tall on the horizon, imposing herself between him and his prey. Finally, he decided to throw his trust in with numbers, and busied himself with putting his caravan back

in order. Satisfied that she had sufficiently delayed him, Manyara followed Snorri’s path.

Lep rose from the scrublands into a crimson sunset. It was a giant mercantile heart beating upon the plain. The whole of the city was as a honeycomb. Each home in it was a single chamber baked out of clay that shared its neighbor’s walls. At the center of the city, these chambers were piled five, six or even seven stories up. There were no doors or streets in Lep. Ladders led from the grasslands to the rooftops, from the rooftops to higher rooftops or through trapdoors into neighboring homes and from those homes to the stories below. Caravans poured spices, textiles and precious stones into the city, over the roofs, through the trapdoors and down into the homes, where they awaited someone willing to trade for them.

As Manyara climbed onto the first roof, a swarm of young men and women rushed out to offer their expert knowledge on what had recently passed over the walls into Lep. Manyara described a blonde-bearded man wearing a ridiculous hat and one woman grabbed her by the hand and led her to a roof that stood several stories above most of the city. The couple living there in the top chamber gave Manyara’s guide a bundle of candles and then invited Manyara in for tea.

The room smelled richly of cinnamon and onions. Its six walls were adorned with tapestries, several from cultures yet unknown to Manyara. An old lady tended a small fire pit while her young companion arranged plush cushions for Manyara to sit on. Piled in each corner of the room were treasures of varying worth from all over the world. Among them, Manyara noticed the tankards Snorri had stolen from a galley in Daninuah.

Smoke from the cooking fires from the floors below rose through the chimney of trapdoors, making it impossible for her to see further down. And when she leaned over to try, the old woman brusquely clapped at her.

The young man smiled apologetically. “It is customary to peruse your host’s inventory before dreaming of what lies below.”

“I seek the man who traded those to you,” Manyara replied, pointing to the tankards.

“These are fine mugs that have traveled far to join our collection. They are handsome indeed. It is easy to see why my wife would be so very fond of them. It may take quite a bit to convince her to part with them.”

The old woman proffered Manyara a small wooden cup of tea and smiled.

Manyara shook her head. “I am only interested in the man who traded those to you. Is he here?”

“You are in luck. He is below you. We can swiftly settle on a fair exchange for those mugs and you will be on your way. How about that sword of yours?”

Manyara lay her hand on Well-Digger’s hilt and the couple withdrew. The room swiftly became small and confining.

“If not your sword, than a fur perhaps,” the young man suggested as he positioned himself between Manyara and the old woman, who began stomping on the floor in a regular pattern. Manyara raised a finger to her lips to shush the couple. Then, reaching to her belt with her sword-arm, Manyara pulled out her ridiculous conical cap and offered it to the young man.

His hands shook as he took the cap and turned it over examining it. Then he held up a single finger and nodded to the tankards. Manyara rolled her eyes and crept to the hole leading to the next story down.

When she peered down into the smoke, she was met by the butt of a staff and a man shouting that he was closed. Ignoring him, Manyara shouted Snorri's name into the smoky depths. Consternation echoed among the unknown number of chambers between her and him.

"Manyara! I have your archers cornered in the room just below me. Have you anything left to trade?"

"No."

"What of your shield?"

"Snorri, the prize of Banteteth is valueless. Just a bauble thieves steal from one another for bragging rights."

"I know, but there is value in that! Imagine what price could be commanded for such a prize."

As they shouted back and forth, the indignation of their hosts and those living between took voice. The old woman began swinging a wooden ladle at Manyara, driving her back up to the roof, but not before Manyara bellowed for Snorri to meet her atop.

On the roof, the last wan light of the day sat heavy and blue in the sky. Across Lep, Manyara could see the glowing squares of orange and smoke that marked the entrance on every roof. One by one, the guides lit their candles and began calling out the wares they had recently seen to attract potential buyers. Their flickering lights against the coming

night reminded Manyara of fireflies and the singsong of the guide's calls fell like lullabies onto Manyara's ears. Here upon this roof, beneath the first of the night's stars, the weariness of the journey ambushed her, and Manyara came to rest, sitting against the wall of a chamber stacked even higher yet.

She burst into a deep, throaty laugh when Snorri, naked but for his conical hat and a gold and emerald bracelet, hopped out of the hole in the roof.

"I was but a room above the little thieves when I reached the end of my inventory. This," he indicated the bracelet, "was the best I could bargain for with what meager means I had."

"You still wear an idiot's cap."

Snorri smiled and sat down beside Manyara. "Yes, I am not yet ready to part with that."

"You will need more clothes to go with it."

"They will not remain below forever. When they surface, we can wrest the prize from them and then I shall be able to afford many silks and other fineries to drape upon my body."

"There is no prize, Snorri. It is a myth. Years ago, in a night of drunken boasting, I told some sailors I had stolen a grand trinket from some local thieves and that I would be willing to part with it for a swift ship out of port. They wished to know more about it, so I invented the tale and paid for my passage with stone wrapped in a thong that I called the prize of Banteteth."

Snorri fell to laughing. "If you were not damned before, may you be damned now, Manyara. I

have sought this lie of yours thrice before in my wanderings and never been so close to it as now."

"Oh, were I to be held accountable for every guileless rogue."

"So then, why not tell me out on the plains?"

"You were too eager. And I was curious if the prize was still the same leather and stone."

"Well," Snorri said, standing up, "it seems that I have traded away all my possessions for a bracelet and a myth. Perhaps I can trade these for a meal and some wine."

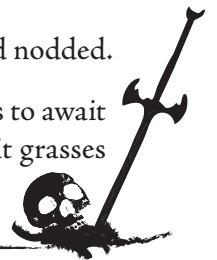
He peered to the city's edge. There the silhouettes of Master Selu Fyrmyor and his remaining bearers crept onto the rooftops.

"Or perhaps I can trade them for a great deal more. How about one last hunt this evening?"

Manyara stood and handed her shield to Snorri, who called over one of the candle-bearing guides. "In a moment, I shall run through those travelers there." He handed his bracelet to the guide. "After I do, you will sing of the prize of Banteteth along with your other wares. When they ask for it, point to me, out there on the plain."

The guide studied the bracelet and nodded.

Manyara slipped into the darkness to await Snorri and her prey in the moonlit grasses just beyond the crossroads of Lep.





# Oh, The Beating Drum!

by Bryant Paul Johnson.



WELCOME TO **NOVA CROMLEČ**, CROWN JEWEL OF THE SOMETHING-SOMETHING.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR **SERVICE**. THE GUILD OF ILLUMINATORS IS MOST PLEASED.



YEAH. **FUN**.

PLEASE. TELL ALL YOUR FRIENDS.



SEPTEM, OCTO, NOVEM, DECEM, UNDECIM, DUODECIM, TREDECIM--



I DIDN'T SIGN UP TO **BABYSIT JERKS** AFRAID OF RACCOONS AND SQUIRRELS.

I WANT **ADVENTURE**.



I WANT **FARAWAY LANDS**.



**ANCIENT TEMPLES,**  
**AND FABULOUS TREASURES.**



I WANT TO BATTLE **EVIL CULTS**.

UH... **NOT YOURS.** YOURS IS A FINE ORGANIZATION. **TOP FLIGHT.**





THE TEMPLE OF THE LIDLESS EYE ISN'T A CULT.

WE'RE MORE LIKE A SOCIAL CLUB. MIXED WITH A QUASI-LEGAL TAX HAVEN.



THEN WHAT'S WITH ALL THE CHANTING?

OH.



THAT'S JUST O.C.D. IF I DON'T COUNT TO A HUNDRED EVERY TIME I SEE A BIRD, MY MOTHER WILL DIE.



SO,

YOU DON'T HAVE ANY DARK POWERS. WHAT THE HELL AM I PAYING YOU FOR, THEN?



UH...

I HAVE THE GIFT OF LANGUAGES.

THAT'S PRETTY HANDY.



< FRIENDS! COME OUT OF THE RAIN! I HAVE WINE AND ROAST OX THAT I WOULD SHARE WITH YOU! >



UM.

WHAT DID HE SAY?

HE SAID YOU SMELL LIKE A MULE TRAIN.



OH, YOU ARE SO DEAD!

COME BACK HERE!



# SEE NEW PLACES, MEET INTERESTING PEOPLE & VISIT RETRIBUTION UPON THEM

*A supplement to Enter the Avenger by Rafu*

*Enter the Avenger* is an uncomplicated role-playing game of vengeance as uncertain as it is brutal. It first appeared in *Worlds Without Master* Volume 1, issue 1, and is also available at:

<https://sites.google.com/site/sitodirafu/Home/imiei-giochi/enter-the-avenger>

Here follow several new characters and locations for use in playing the game. Use these when you're starved for ideas or thirsting for a change of pace, verbatim or just as a spark to light the fuse of your own imagination.

## I AM...

- ◆ "...a reformed, repentant killer-for-hire, still skilled at all manners of deception and peerless with a blade, but constantly on the run from

dozens of former employers who would prefer me to be silenced in the most permanent way."

- ◆ "...a leader and a strategist, undefeated. In better days I marched at the head of a hundred thousand and conquered for myself a veritable empire."
- ◆ "...the last of a god-cursed breed, larger than human in stature, greater even than humans in feats of knowledge and magic, stronger of muscles and longer-lived, but much weaker than even humans in feats of compassion."
- ◆ "...a wild hunter, grown to adulthood amidst the labyrinthine canopy of pristine woods untouched by axe or torch, taught a greater wisdom than 'civilized' people can learn, but of course ignorant of their twisted ways."

- ◆ "...one of the Ever-runners, thought by most to be ominous ghosts or fey wandering the plains, but actually fleet-footed human women forced into the never-ending chase by a curse that only now has finally been lifted."
- ◆ "...a scientist from Earth, the only survivor from the crash of the vessel which brought me here. But this happened long ago, and I have since learned more about this world than even its natives know."
- ◆ "...a grim-looking gunslinger, lips always parched so tight I seem incapable of a smile. I speak mostly in whispers. I ride alone and only own as much as my horse can carry."

## BY WHICH NAME ARE YOU KNOWN?

- |                   |           |
|-------------------|-----------|
| ◆ Achilles        | ◆ Kael    |
| ◆ Agamede         | ◆ Krsnik  |
| ◆ Aglac-wif       | ◆ Lua     |
| ◆ Aglaec          | ◆ Máel    |
| ◆ Canmore         | ◆ Malcolm |
| ◆ Coluim          | ◆ Marco   |
| ◆ Crimson Feather | ◆ Medea   |
| ◆ Cynethryth      | ◆ Paride  |
| ◆ Domnall         | ◆ Rhea    |
| ◆ Edmond          | ◆ Shlomit |
| ◆ Herodias        | ◆ Starkad |
| ◆ Iset            | ◆ Typhon  |

## I'M OUT TO AVENGE THE UNTIMELY DEATH OF...

- ◆ "...my ex-husband, a respectable man and caring spouse, whose reasons for leaving me all of a sudden remain obscure and unexplained."
- ◆ "...my partner in crime, a real friend, who never knew I was double-crossing him, and remained unyieldingly loyal to me to the bitter end."
- ◆ "...the woman who became like a mother—no, dearer than any mother to me—after my so-called 'real' mother left me a crying infant, alone, in the wild."
- ◆ "...my most loyal underling, who lived with me through so many dangerous adventures, in which we both saved each other's beacon so many times, that we grew closer than family."
- ◆ "...my queen, whom I respectfully loved from a distance, worshipped as a goddess and ever served unquestioningly, just for the privilege of glancing at her beautiful smile."
- ◆ "...my unborn child, killed by poison or foul sorcery while still in the womb: the most abominable of crimes."
- ◆ "...the last of my kind except for myself. Not that I ever met him, for it was only by hearing about his murder that I first learned of his existence."

## IN ORDER TO EXACT MY DUE VENGEANCE, I WILL TRAVEL TO...

- ◆ "...a certain church built by the sea, so close the waves are carving out its foundations, the name of which I cannot remember for they changed it too many times, come each new government



or cult in the region, but it's always dedicated to some goddess or female saint."

- ◆ "...the monastery-town gracing the top of mount Aur, where three thousand monks and nuns live in grandiose cloisters surrounded by the diminutive houses of peasant families attending to their needs, all roofed with pale red tiles and cluttered along steeply slanted alleyways and stairways."
- ◆ "...the steep seashore of the Purple Wizard's Principality, where fishermen towns built of stone cling tenaciously to the wave-swept cliffs, amidst terraced vineyards and olive groves which bear but little fruit."
- ◆ "...the labyrinthine Cave of Whispers, still echoing any voices ever spoken into it, the faintest being centuries old and having long

outlived their speakers—or indeed anybody able to understand those ancient languages."

- ◆ "...the lush Land of Ten Thousand Gods, where each individual priest or shaman is the lone representative or founder of a distinct religion and all vie to prove the miraculous effectiveness of their own beliefs, thus winning the sanction and patronage of chieftains and kings."
- ◆ "...the Tidal Lands of Dwee, which can never be settled, for they only exist on certain phases of the moon, while at other times they're almost completely submerged by the sea—only the tallest mountaintops persisting as small inhabitable islands."
- ◆ "...the Basilean Sea, where the lordling of each islet or skerry is called a king by divine right. Vainglorious rulers of mighty nations send



troops to such a far corner of the world merely to claim a royal title, but few ever succeed.”

- ◆ “...the dreaming island-city of Dorothea, linked with the mainland by only a single bridge. Here, a hundred successive conquerors each in turn left a permanent mark, by subtly reshaping or craftily reusing some very ancient building, landmark, or custom.”
- ◆ “...those three hundred cities, towns and villages defiantly surrounding and sitting on the slopes of Firecrown Mountain, which roughly once a century are razed to the ground by the slow-burning fury of the volcano and then rebuilt, greater than they were before.”

## SUSPECTS

- ◆ “The last of an ancient, pre-human race—grotesquely alien in appearance and nameless, as their kind never had any use for names—attends, as it has attended for countless centuries, the unremarkable monolithic shrine to a likewise unnamed god.”
- ◆ “Kapooka of Vailn is, first and foremost, a famous falconer, breeding and training birds of prey for the noble and rich of many a kingdom to use in their gallant hunting parties; but also runs a profitable side-business in assassination, with a cadre of loyal and skilled human hawks to call upon for such unwholesome tasks.”
- ◆ “Short and short-tempered Markel used to be a knight’s squire, until—in circumstances now rarely discussed—he somehow crossed his master and was unceremoniously forced to leave: now he ekes out a living as an arms instructor,

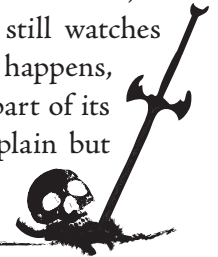
teaching horsemanship and sword-fighting to the desperate and the well-to-do.”

- ◆ “With a reputation for skill at solving crime and dealing with sensitive political issues, city magistrate Kungst is slowly but unescapably being killed by an incurable illness. Despite this, or maybe precisely because of this, magistrate Kungst is well determined to stay in charge until the very last day of appointment.”
- ◆ “Ylsa, the miller’s wife, looks unremarkable enough to her neighbors: they don’t know of the rituals she officiates at night, out in the woods, nor of the magical trinkets she has carefully hidden in each corner of the mill to ensure prosperity, nor do they know she’s actually twice as old as she appears to be.”

- ◆ “The chatty peddler going by the unassuming name of “Ulm” was actually born Ulmater of House Golmnitz-Skoow, and is a secret police spy, reporting all hints of suspicious activity to the Silent Emperor’s much-loathed Bureau of Inquisition.”
- ◆ “The intelligent and quite talkative spirit of an ancient maguey, much taller than a man and surrounded by dozens of its offspring in progressively younger circles, is sometimes consulted as an oracle in matters of health, life, and death, and is called by the human name of Kolmuné.”
- ◆ “Hesmetgard leads a company of murderous bandit cannibals, numbering perhaps a hundred sinful souls, but styles herself a queen and apes the supposedly refined manners of the rulers of

distant kingdoms, based on the stories related to her by travelers.”

- ◆ “A primeval being has, somehow, taken residence in this very place. They claim it created the world—all of the worlds, in fact—and, as some would have, perhaps it still watches over its creation. Nothing happens, these faithful say, that is not part of its great plan. They call it by a plain but lofty-sounding name: God.”



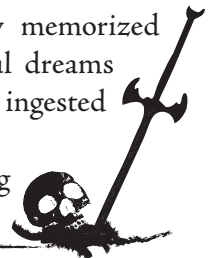
# THREE DOZEN ROADS TO FOLLOW

A miscellany by Emily Care Boss & Epidiah Ravachol

- Across the shoulders of the carcass of a titan whose arms span two mountain peaks.
- A pearl stairwell that leads down to the purple depths of the ocean.
- Lost among the gray mists that hide cliff's edge and prowling lizard.
- A great and wending walkway around the bole of a giant tree.
- A rutted wagon-way with a long line of carts and travelers destined for a celebration.
- The road of skulls and femurs that lead to the Silent Emperor's palace.
- Chasing fairy wisps down a dark lane.
- Bird-back across the empty sea.
- Through a vast glass labyrinth that lays across a desolated waste.
- Descending into a moldy crypt, too deep and too old.
- A path through a moonlight forest under the watchful eye of the wolf-elks.

- Over a wide road littered with green, blue, and gold banners and the still remains of a triumphant parade.
- Following the moon across ever-shifting sands.
- Into the maw of a giant turtle.
- Never homeward.
- Riding along a rocky shore on the backs of seahorses.
- Through the cavernous wrym-ways buried deep within the earth.
- Across a magma sea, on a path of cooling obsidian.
- Scampering down vines clinging to a great fortress wall.
- Running blind through wild grasses that tower over your head.
- Riding among the stars on gossamer moth-wing.

- Tracking game on a pine-covered mountainside.
- Against the flow of refugees and toward their homeland where the invaders lie complacent and ripe.
- Following the secret sigils of the Conspirators' Guild through the City of Fire and Coin.
- Chasing a song heard only in the quiet moments between breaths.
- Accompanying a spider caravan over a lush, rain-slick canopy.
- Beyond the map's edge while hunting the black stag with golden eyes.
- Following a herd of migrating leviathans over the seas.
- Tracking the smoking footsteps of a giant, many-clawed creature.
- By deer-drawn sled, before approaching arctic storm.
- Drifting leisurely down the azure salt river delta.
- A meadow path outlined by crimson toadstools.
- Leaping from a tower-top obscured by clouds into the stormy land of dreams.
- Along the sword-studded trail of the last march.
- Following a map, poorly memorized and recalled only in fitful dreams brought on by fever and ingested cactus root.
- Sailing into the shimmering seas of the sunrise.





## THE CONTRIBUTORS

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**Jon Taylor** is an artist, of sorts, who hails from Brighton, UK. His works include computer games you've probably never heard of, imagining people, creatures and places that may or may not exist, and designing bits of theme parks.

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## THE REALMS

You do not take up sword and spell to tag along with someone else's adventure. You do it to change the course of your destiny. To mold the world to your wants and desires.

Listed below are the stories, games, articles, and miscellanies in this issue that represent worlds available for you to craft your own adventures in. If you should so desire, you may take the characters, settings, and situations from any of these, create something new, and submit it to *Worlds Without Master*.

By default, any submission to *Worlds Without Master* is not part of any shared world. Creators have the usual controls over their creative properties. The following options exist only for creators who expressly want to take part in this endeavor.

Additionally, the following agreements exist solely between the creators and *Worlds Without Master*, and do not govern the creators' rights in regards to any other publication.

### The Free & Chaotic Realms

Anyone may submit material using the characters, settings, situations and any other part of this body of work as if it were their own as long as they also agree to make their work part of this Free & Chaotic Realm. This is as open as it gets, with the only curation being the *Worlds Without Master* submission process.

### The Curated Realms

Material submitted using the characters, settings, situations and any other part of this body of work will be sent to the original creator or the creator's designated curator for approval before being accepted by *Worlds Without Master*. If accepted, this new material is bound to that particular curated realm.

## Other Shared Realms

Groups of creators who wish to find their own agreement on how to share their worlds are welcome to do so however they wish.

### Edicts

Creators are welcome to make up a list of rules other creators must follow while using their works. These rules are set in stone. Worlds Without Master will not accept any work that appears to violate an applicable edict that is not also created by the original creator.

More about the realms policy can be found at: [www.Dig1000Holes.com/words/realms](http://www.Dig1000Holes.com/words/realms)

“ThePrizeofBanteteth” belongtotherealmscurated by Epidiah Ravachol. Their edicts may be found at: [www.Dig1000holes.com/words/edicts](http://www.Dig1000holes.com/words/edicts)





