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<i>"I have lived enough to know the gods do not keep all their promises, but you can trust them to keep their cruelest ones."</i>	<i>"The hooded oarsman places his boat lower in the sea than other men. I think this is no ordinary Garmrlander, but rather it is the ghoul said to haunt Asa Bay of late."</i>	
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<i>"The harvestman's stench was like a cloud of wasps, biting at the joints and seams in his exoskeleton and stinging his eyes. It tossed the anthropoid into the air, then lunged forward to snap it in half with its jaws, but luck was with them both..."</i>	<i>"Each cough and scuffle of foot echoes richly through the high, stone walls of the hall. The floor is soaked with the scarlet life drained from those who have failed to amuse the Silent Emperor. All present now seek to melt into the remaining stillness to avoid attention. However, one among us must speak up, and I fear it is you."</i>	COVER ILLUSTRATION 29
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THREE CAME UPON A FIRE

A tale by Epiidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Juan Ochoa

MEENO'S HOSPITALITY

Thunder rolled in across the featureless horizon. Clouds bruised the western sky and cast long shadows across the flats. They would bring cold wind and rain with them. But among the patches of thin scrub that dotted this almost unbroken land, the air remained still and heavy. Only young, one-armed Meeno moved across the amber landscape.

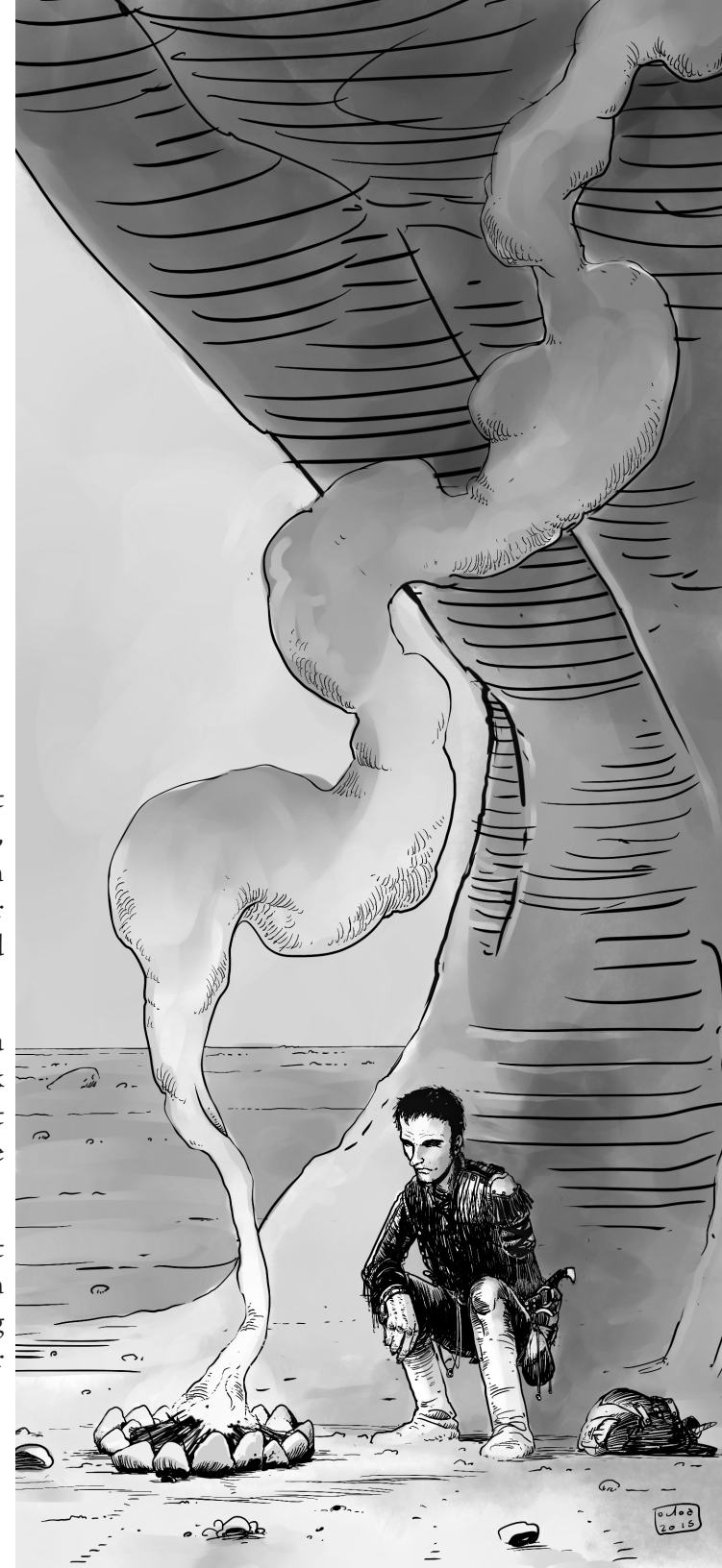
After a long trek from the south, watching the storm rolling in on his left, he found a massive jut of red rock protruding from the crust at a low angle. It had a low ceiling, but one Meeno could sit or lay beneath. It would be shelter enough from the rain, if not the wind, and it was wide enough to comfortably fit a fire.

Meeno busied himself collecting dry scrub and twigs under his only arm. On that vast plain

with little more than the silhouette of that giant rock thrusting from the flat earth to navigate by, distances were deceptive, much like they had been at sea. He ranged further than he expected to gather a usable pile of kindling, and by the time he reached the shelter again, daylight had all but disappeared.

The ground was hard and unreceptive to digging a fire pit, but time had worn chunks of the red rock free. The detritus laid scattered about the rock. Just inside the shelter's edge, Meeno assembled a circle of largest stones he could carry.

Pinning several twigs across the top of the largest stone with his sandaled foot, Meeno knelt down and—with a knife more accustomed to filleting fish—he shaved a tinder pile onto a slightly smaller stone.



From his knapsack, Meeno pulled a length of twisted horn and a small roll of seal skin tied together with a leather thong. The horn had had been hollowed out and fitted with a piston of hard wood. He removed the piston and unrolled the seal skin to reveal glistening animal fat. Securing the piston between his knees, Meeno pinched a bit of tinder between his thumb and forefinger and dabbed his middle finger in fat. He filled a shallow depression on the tip of the piston with the tinder and greased a ring around it. He fit the horn back on to the very edge of the piston.

With a sure and practiced swiftness, Meeno snatched the horn up and slammed it onto his thigh, driving the piston into it. Placing the horn on the stone next to his tinder pile, Meeno stepped on it and pulled the piston out.

A mote of ember and ash fell from the tip onto the stone.

Cupping his hand around the remaining tinder pile, Meeno nudged it toward the ember and gently blew.

A thin wisp of smoke.

Then flame.

Meeno slowly fed the smallest kindling to the flame and worked the fire off of the stone and into the circle where more kindling awaited it.

He could not sustain the fire for long with the fuel at hand. Meeno planned to build it up fast enough to heat the stones through, so that he might depend upon their warmth later. Behind him, the thunder rumbled through his roof of rock. In sympathy, his stomach growled. He could find no game while he

collected the kindling. It would be a hungry and fitful night, but for now he would enjoy the respite of the fire.

The first wanderer came upon him from the east, when the sky behind her was a deep, dark blue and as of yet untouched by clouds. He watched her approach with curiously little alarm. His spear was close at hand, and though he had to crouch to move about underneath the red rock, it made an excellent shield. So he watched as a point on the horizon grew and took form even as the shadows of night robbed that form of its silhouette.

She strolled up to the fire and stooped to greet Meeno with a broad smile. One hand she braced against the rock ceiling, and in her other hand she held out three rabbits by their legs.

“If you would share your fire, I would share my dinner.”

Being born in a port, Meeno had learned many tongues in his 18 years. Hers was familiar but not one he knew well. The words “fire” and “dinner” were unmistakable. As was her smile. Rolling his spear away, he made room for her under the rock by the fire.

She ducked under the shelter, dropped the rabbits onto a fire stop, and winked at Meeno.

“I am Kalin and overjoyed to have found a fellow wanderer in this waste.”

Meeno nodded and watched her closely. She had two swords, one at each hip. The left was sheathed in an old, ornate scabbard of leather and bronze. The other was longer, plain sword of steel that lay naked from her right hip. Neither would be of

much avail to her under this close rock, and Meeno kept his knife at hand. He probably had nothing to fear from her, but her travelling leathers bore the scars of battles past and she moved with the primal confidence of a jaguar.

As Meeno sized her up, Kalin sat in the spot Meeno cleared for her, pulled a knife from her boot and began working with the rabbit meat. “I do not suppose you have a name?” she asked without looking up from her task.

Meeno’s attention had already been drawn away. The light of the fire now beat out the last of the twilight. The world that had previously stretched to the horizon now reached only as far onto the plain the firelight could cast itself. Across this border strode another woman. She was older than Kalin, and apparently armed with only her stout walking stick. She carried with her several knapsacks and satchels, but did not seem overburdened with them. Again, Meeno thought he had nothing to fear from her, but to happen upon two travelers in such a lonesome land may not be coincidence.

“Have you room at your fire for one more?” she asked when she was just far enough to be completely visible in the dancing light.

“It is his fire and he does not say much, but the rabbit meat is mine and I share it freely with all who would join us on this night.”

The older woman nodded and approached. Addressing Meeno, she produced a bladder from one of her satchels, “I have wine to share. Not enough to slake all our thirsts, but enough to chase the rabbit down our throats.”

Again, he could not grasp the language, but understood the meaning, and welcomed her with a gesture. "Meeno," he said, for it was about time introductions were made.

"Meeno, I am Calyre," she said as she ducked under the rock.

"Kalin," the younger woman offered with a nod to Meeno and Calyre, each.

Meeno grabbed a rabbit and began skinning it with knife and tooth. It was not a savage act, but one of casual deftness. The two women sat in silence for a moment with open curiosity as they watched their one-armed firemate work.

The third wanderer happened upon them while the meat was roasting and the winds brought the first of the rain. The rock was proving to be poorer shelter than they had hoped. They shifted about to

find the driest spots near the fire as rivulets of rain crept across the hard ground.

Twice the lightning revealed the third wanderer in the distance as he ran towards the fire. The first time, it was Kalin's sharp eyes that spotted him while he was just blotch on the horizon. "We may have to prepare a place for one more guest," she said to Meeno, who nodded though he could not understand her. She reached behind her and moved Meeno's spear between her and the fire, so that he could reach. Meeno studied her face for intent. She winked and nodded out towards where she had seen the approaching figure.

Calyre witnessed the exchange. Taking her walking stick in both hands she propped herself up to one knee.

By the second lightning strike, the third wanderer was now discernable. He was a tangle of wet, brightly

colored clothing with a long sword strapped to his back. Though he was not yet close enough to make out his face, he clearly saw the three around the fire place their hands upon their weapons, for he threw his own hands up and slowed his gait.

"I seek no trouble! Simply shelter from this storm!" he shouted upon entering the edge of the firelight.

Calyre nodded to Kalin who in turn raised an eyebrow to Meeno. Setting his spear aside, but within reach, Meeno waved the soaked traveler in. And thus Bluetuck—who had no fire, food, or wine of his own to share—was welcome to a portion of theirs.

BLUETUCK'S FORTUNE

Squatting by the fire, Bluetuck warmed his hands and dried his beard. "I had already steeled myself for a night of trudging naked before the fury of this storm when I spotted the far-off glow of your fire-lit cavern. And I am ever grateful. I would offer you all the coin I have, but I fear you would not accept it."

With that, Bluetuck tossed four silver pieces that shined as gold by the light of the flames. Each was the size of a hand and engraved with delicate symbols that were made almost smooth over the centuries. Symbols that even in this worn state hinted that they may have been minted by some cyclopean dynasty now long forgotten.

They radiated inexplicable revulsion, causing Meeno and Kalin to curl their noses to them. Calyre yanked a length of cloth from one of her satchels and swiftly gathered the abhorrent coins in it, careful not to touch them. She sealed them in with

"I WOULD HUNT
THE WOLF,
SEE THE TERROR
IN HIS EYES..."

"...AND DRIVE HIS
PACK INTO
THE EARTH."



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an intricate knot that she muttered an incantation over before offering the bundle back to Bluetuck.

“Such is their welcome everywhere.” He accepted the bundle with a heavy sigh. “I am unable to be rid of these coins and, it would seem, as long as I have them, I have been unable to earn coin of any other denomination.”

“Where did you find them?” Calyre asked, peering at him with suspicion.

“I stole them, of course. You do not earn such an evil wage through honest work. At least, the first of them I stole. From a tomb high upon a craggy mountain. I was climbing the mountain in retreat from a hetman whose disfavor I had well and truly earned.”

“There must have been easier escape routes than to climb a mountain. Why there?” Kalin asked, offering a Bluetuck a piece of meat freshly torn from the spit.

“They were horse-folk, capable of riding me down on level land, and they treated the mountain with some suspicion. Even refusing to camp in its shadow.” Bluetuck explained as he devoured the morsel. “I did not intend to climb all the way to the summit. Just into a pass that I knew led to a valley beyond. But a storm such as this one raged on the valley side, forcing me to seek refuge. Day followed night followed day. My flesh, cold. My gut, ravenous. My fingers, raw. My arms, my back, my legs, all ready to betray me, ready to surrender to the sweet lure of gravity and fling myself into the howling oblivion below.

“In the dark of the following night, against the protestations of my every sinew, I pulled myself

onto a blind ledge, a smooth stone floor carved into the side of the mountain. There, in the dark, with no fire such as this to warm me, and no meat such as this to sate me, I crept into a corner and succumbed to sleep.

“There I should have died and froze to the stone floor--and fresh ornament for some hoary sky tomb. But as the sun pricked my flesh with a false promise of hope, I did wake and found that I curled up beside a massive sarcophagus, easily thrice as long as any needed for a normal corpse. I did not see the face of it, as it towered above me and I had no heart left in me to climb and see. Even in the welcomed light of the sun, the place disturbed me.

“I had resolved to climb down immediately. Every muscle and thew of me found renewed vigor in light of the discovery. And it was as I slipped myself over the side that I saw two of those coins at the base of the sarcophagus, gleaming in the dawn. Reward for all the trouble I had been through.”

“This is no reward,” Calyre said, nudging the bundle of silver by Bluetuck’s side with her walking stick.

“This I learned soon enough.” Bluetuck collected the bundle, and stuffed the lot in a pouch hanging from his waist, to everyone’s visible relief. “Once off that mountain, I found no merchant, no tradesman, no freeman, noble, or serf willing to trade me so much as a bowl of chaff for either of the coins. All that gazed upon their slick façade recoiled just as you did. I found that I could not be rid of them by any conventional means. I cannot bring myself to leave them behind or toss them into the sea. I have tried. Nor could I earn any other coin or goods in trade for,” he reached over his shoulder and lightly touched the hilt of his sword, “my services.”



Meeno, who had been resting against the low ceiling, leaned forward and gripped his spear. Touching his spear-arm, Kalin gave Meeno a small grin and felt his muscles relax.

"I had to depend on charity, voluntary and otherwise, until my path crossed that of a sorceress who did not recoil at the sight of the coins. Contrary to my experiences, she was drawn to them and deeply interested in their origin. I was invited into her seclusion, where I was fed, bathed, and clothed. I fatted there for weeks. By daylight, my hostess kept to herself, leaving me with her parchment, ink, and scribes. I was to draw all I could remember of the sarcophagus, make maps to the tomb and of all my travel since, and chronicle the minutest details I could recall. By night my hostess would avail herself to me and we would find other ways to occupy the hours.

"It was as exhausting as the climb to the tomb itself, but she promised to double my fortune, so I continued on."

"Ah, but you have suffered so," Kalin said with laughter that Meeno quickly joined despite his lack of context.

"But I have!" Bluetuck mocked injury. "When she had all that she sought, I was sent on my way with naught but two more of these cursed coins for my troubles."

Calyre chuckled. Such was the warmth and closeness of the fire that Bluetuck, too, laughed at his own predicament with these stormbound strangers.

CALYRE KINFINDER'S QUEST

The laughter faded into thunder, and the party fell into silent contemplation of the fire. Calyre shifted

to avoid newly formed rivulets, and passed the wine to Bluetuck. "To the west of here lies the crossroads of Lep. There all is traded. You may not receive a fair price, but you could be rid of your grave goods."

Bluetuck drank deep and passed the wine back. "I was traveling south in the hopes of finding an interested collector within the City of Fire and Coin."

Calyre shook her head. "I would not travel directly south. There is only sorrow to be found between here and the City of Fire and Coin."

"Tonu lies between here and the City of Fire and Coin" Kalin said, stoking the fire, "That is a somber place, but not particularly sorrowful. And worth seeing for the familial monuments. It is said that Tonu is where the wealthy make gods of themselves."

"Tonu has changed in recent months," Calyre said, her voice growing quiet enough to be lost in the storm. "It is from Tonu I travel and I do not relish when I must return."

"I know little of Tonu or its troubles, but I have had enough of my own. I will seek Lep instead." Bluetuck said to Calyre and then turned to Kalin and asked, "However, my curiosity is piqued. How do the wealthy make themselves into gods?"

Kalin spoke, "Tonu is a city of professional worshippers. They have little to offer in the way of goods or trade, but long ago they saw value in their devotion. By offering conquerors and those with coin enough a plot along the Avenue of the Divine, they were able to protect themselves and thrive. For a price, you can have a temple or monolith erected in your honor, or to honor a prominent ancestor. You



can even pay worshippers to abide by the tenets and dictates you feel will elevate yourself to godhood.”

Bluetuck’s widened and he turned to the fire, dreaming. Rapping her walking stick on a fire stone to get his attention, Calyre spoke up, “Such was the case until last winter. But no longer.

“I was in Tonu then, tending to a small altar constructed a generation ago for my great aunt. None of her children or children’s children could afford the piety fees and it had gone fallow. She was, however, important to me in my youth. So I made my pilgrimage.

“I found the monuments deserted. Not just the lesser ones. The great cathedrals of the conquerors, which normally bustled with the pious throughout the day and night, were under-worshipped. Of the few that remained, most were too old or infirmed to properly care for the giant halls. It was an inglorious sight, overrun by vermin.

“Only the altar of my great aunt showed signs of worship. Wreaths of flowers and bowls of sacrificial entrails covered it, and sweet incense still burned. And as I approached it, an old man draped in soiled rags hobbled down the avenue, calling to me by the name I share with my great aunt.

“In his own youth this old man knew my great aunt and now mistook me for her. They had been praying for her return, and he thought I was a living miracle once again walking the streets of Tonu.”

Leaning heavily on her stick, Calyre moved again to avoid more water. Meeno—who could only read the somber tone of her tale and none of its content—shifted closer to Kalin and offered Calyre a drier spot by his armless side.



“You are a caring and attentive host,” Kalin said, flashing Meeno a bemused grin. Meeno winked back, causing Kalin to laugh, “I am beginning to wonder just how much of our conversation you understand.”

Calyre settled in beside Meeno and thanked him. Bluetuck also shifted, turning to warm his back by the fire. “Were you the miracle they prayed for?” he asked over his shoulder.

“I am not my great aunt, but we do share a vocation as well as a name. It was she who taught me the art of kinfinding. This was the miracle they had sought. So, in a way, yes, I was. But it is not always a blessing to have one’s prayers answered.

“A reincarnation cult had swept through Tonu—a shepherd promising his sheep that if they just lay down for him, they would be reborn as wolves.”

With his back still to the fire, Bluetuck grinned sardonically, “And to the sheep, the wolf’s life looks ideal.”

“Oh, the hunger of that many wolves with no more sheep around,” Kalin added with her own ironic smile. Meeno read only mirth in his companions’ manner and chuckled, drawing honest laughter from both Kalin and Bluetuck.

Calyre continued, “They were worshippers by profession. This cultivated a cynicism within their hearts that the cult-father preyed on. He promised that all their devotion would be paid back to them eightfold if they would just channel it through him to the pantheon that he alone could speak to.

“Thus they were seduced and led from Tonu, seeking a devotion to end all devotion. And in their wake they left those too infirmed to travel and a thousand broken promises to the families powerful

or wealthy enough to afford monuments along the Avenue of the Divine.

“So those left behind prayed for a kinfinder, for a way to track their negligent families down and remind them of their responsibilities. The old man tasked me with finding his two sons, his daughter, and his grandchildren.

“A fatted cow was brought to me and I bathed the old man in her blood. I watched over him as the fevers took hold and forced his tongue to describe where his children had gone. Then he was cleansed of the blood, which I stored in three jars before taking the road north, one for each issue I sought.

“It was not so difficult at first. There was no need to rely on my arts to follow a camp of hundreds. But the trail became muddled. Hundreds of tracks seemed like thousands. They were joined by horses and carts. The refuse I found was not that of a pious herd wandering astray. It was that of an army hunting their way through the hills.

“A cold well of fear opened within me when I thought of all those empty conqueror temples and the demigod generals whose worshippers had been stolen.

“I am old, it is true, but I am an experienced traveler. I stopped only to sleep a few hours when it became too dark to see my way and once to refresh myself in a spring.

“I never caught the army. They must have surprised the cult in the first blue light of dawn, for the sun had barely risen when I came upon them and steam yet rose from fresh wounds. Every one of them split and strewn upon a gray and crimson field. Two trees stood amidst the carnage. A body was stretched between them like a spider web. Such was the fate of the cult-father.”

Calyre stared into the fire and all were silent while she finished off the wine.

“I picked my way through the crow-feast, kin-seeking. So savage was the slaughter that I could

not identify a soul by sight. But I know the tongue in which one can whisper to blood, to coax like into seeking like. It took a day and a night, but I had accounted for the old man’s children and his children’s children.”

With weathered hands, Calyre pulled a misshapen satchel off of her back and dropped it before the fire. It fell with a wet weight. Even Meeno—who understood the tone of her tale, if not the words themselves—recoiled.

“I had collected all I could and fled south. My intent was to return to Tonu with the remains and ill tidings.”

“How is it then that we should meet north of Tonu, these grim trophies still in your care?” asked Bluetuck, who once again turned towards the fire, no longer comfortable with his back to Calyre.

Leaning back against the rock ceiling, Calyre explained, “Odd omens plagued my journey back and invaded my restless dreams when I had chance to sleep, which was not often enough. I witnessed a magpie forego the egg and give live birth to her clutch. An errant star that had disappeared from the sky the night before I came upon the cult of corpses had returned but a few days later. And I dreamt of six children born to five families—two in the north and three to the west.

“I have lived enough to know the gods do not keep all their promises, but you can trust them to keep their cruelest ones. The cult-father was no liar. His followers have found the rebirth they sought. And now my oath as a kinfinder shall make a baby-thief of me.”



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The four fell to quietly listened to the rhythm of the rain and the crackle of the fire, counting the distance between lightning and thunder.

KALIN'S SWORDS

"This is why I never cared for oaths," Bluetuck offered after a while, "In the morning, if all this has cleared, I will take your advice and turn toward Lep."

"I may join you," Kalin said. She stood to stretch her legs, though she still had to bend over to avoid the rock ceiling, which caused the tip of her longer sword that hung at her right hip to drag in the hard dirt. "As fate would have it, I was making my way south to Tonu; but now I am not so keen to compound their misery with my company."

"You seem fine enough company to me," said Bluetuck before nodding to Meeno and adding, "and perhaps even finer company to our quiet, one-armed companion."

Meeno nodded back to Bluetuck so sagely that Kalin laughed and broke the somber mood that was clinging to the firemates.

Pointing to the elaborate bronze and leather scabbard on Kalin's left, Calyre said, "I know that sword. It is the Voice of Telhil, one of the four swords of the Elmaian Kings and the Slayer of Sallow Host."

"It is," Kalin said, drawing the sword. The firelight danced across its leaf-shaped blade, giving life to the runes inscribed there. "It was my father's sword and the sword of his father before him and his father before him. It is said to have had a long, undocumented history even before my great

grandfather and his brothers unearthed it and its three siblings.

"In my great grandfather's hands it was present at the Battle of Telhil, where it earned its name by singing out when it clashed against shield or mail. It decorated the walls of the Andorti Palace with the blood of three would-be assassins before cleaving the usurper's crown itself.

"In my grandfather's hands it travelled the breadth of the world during the Questing Years and quenched itself in the hearts of all manner of sorcerous beasts. It severed the Lovers of Cinine and is the reason why those constellations are never seen in the same sky.

"In my father's hands it vanquished the Sallow Host, littering the Coast of Tesslone with their diseased corpses. It helped to quell both great uprisings, crafting countless peasant widows and bastards upon those battlefields. And it was used to execute 131 priests and martyrs who displeased the Shining Lord.

"In my hands, I was to bring it to Tonu upon my father's death and place it in the grip of a statue of himself that he had commissioned there, so that the pious could look upon it with awe and that he may take its likeness with him as he ascended into godhood."

Bluetuck whistled. "With such a storied sword at hand, what use is the other?"

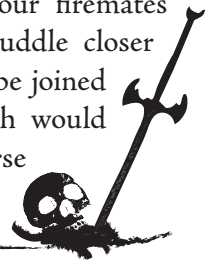
Kalin sheathed the Voice of Telhil and she pulled the steel sword from the ring that held it at her right hip. It was longer than the Voice of Telhil by a hand, but altogether less impressive. The firelight shone on its plain blade, but it did not delight in it.

Kalin turned the sword over in her hand, feeling its weight. Seeing her interest in the sword, Meeno leaned forward in curiosity.

"This is the sword my mother opened my father with," she said, winking at him.

He gave her a toothy grin and the two fell to laughter as if they alone shared a joke.

As the storm progressed, the four firemates would continue to laugh and huddle closer together. They would eventually be joined by three more, the last of which would bend each of them from their course toward an ill vengeance.



THE SPIDER & THE FOREST APES

A tale by Dylan Craine

Illustrated by Gennifer Bone

This is a tale of Kassmamon the Ranger, he of mossy-green chelicerae and sleek black fur, who stalked the old forests in the old days when they were wild and thick and full of secrets.

On one occasion, Kassmamon lurked in the canopies above the encampment of a tribe of filthy and primitive anthropoids. Each night for the past few days, he had gently lowered himself down from the trees and plucked away a sleeping anthropoid from around their feeble campfire. A good dose of venom ensured that his victims wouldn't wake up and shriek to their fellows while he smothered them in cocoons.

This was to be the last night of it. The anthropoids were too stupid to understand why their brothers and sisters were vanishing, but they'd realized something was amiss, and it was only a matter of

time before panic and desperation would set in. They had already become skittish. Kassmamon wasn't remotely scared of them, but he preferred easy meals.

But something was already wrong this night. There was torchlight. Instead of sleeping figures scattered about the fire like felled logs, he saw a procession leading up the hill, away from the campfire and the single crude tent, each member carrying a flame. Kassmamon was very surprised. For these creatures, preparing a simple campfire was a great ordeal, involving lengthy rituals and often unsuccessful. Torches were beyond their abilities. Neither were they known for their organized conduct, being instead the sort who stumbled and gibbered through the forest in ragged, chaotic packs.



He was not hungry enough to try to snatch an anthropoid from the line. He saw little hope of accomplishing that without being noticed. Besides, he still had three juicy cocoons hanging from a high branch back at his camp. There was no sense in being greedy. But his curiosity was piqued. He retreated into the trees and followed at a safe distance.

The procession wound past old, dead tree trunks and over dried riverbanks. Its members strode silently, without stumbling or turning their heads. They were joined by a second group, and then a third. The parade met a dirt path lined with deer skulls and scraps of red ribbon. It followed the path onward through the trees.

At last, Kassmamon was forced to stop in the bare branches of one final dead tree before the forest gave way to a clearing. In the clearing was a hill, and up the hill the procession went. At the top sat a plump anthropoid who was shorn of all fur and wore a

peculiar mask. The mask was a round, leathery dome with many long legs hanging off on either side. Kassmamon focused his frontmost eyes on it, trying to see. Was that the anthropoids' rendition of a spider? If so, they hadn't seen many spiders.

As the procession reached the top of the hill, the masked figure produced cloth strands of white and red and looped them around the necks of its fellows. The anthropoids who wore white retreated to the forest, where they waited, watching, at the edge of the trees. Those who were given red remained behind, fingering their collars nervously and muttering into the silence. The bald anthropoid then retrieved a small, dual-pronged knife from beside the bag that held the collars and began stabbing it into the shoulders of the red-collared anthropoids. The knife's blades glistened with some liquid coating. Those who were stabbed let their shaggy arms hang limp and allowed themselves

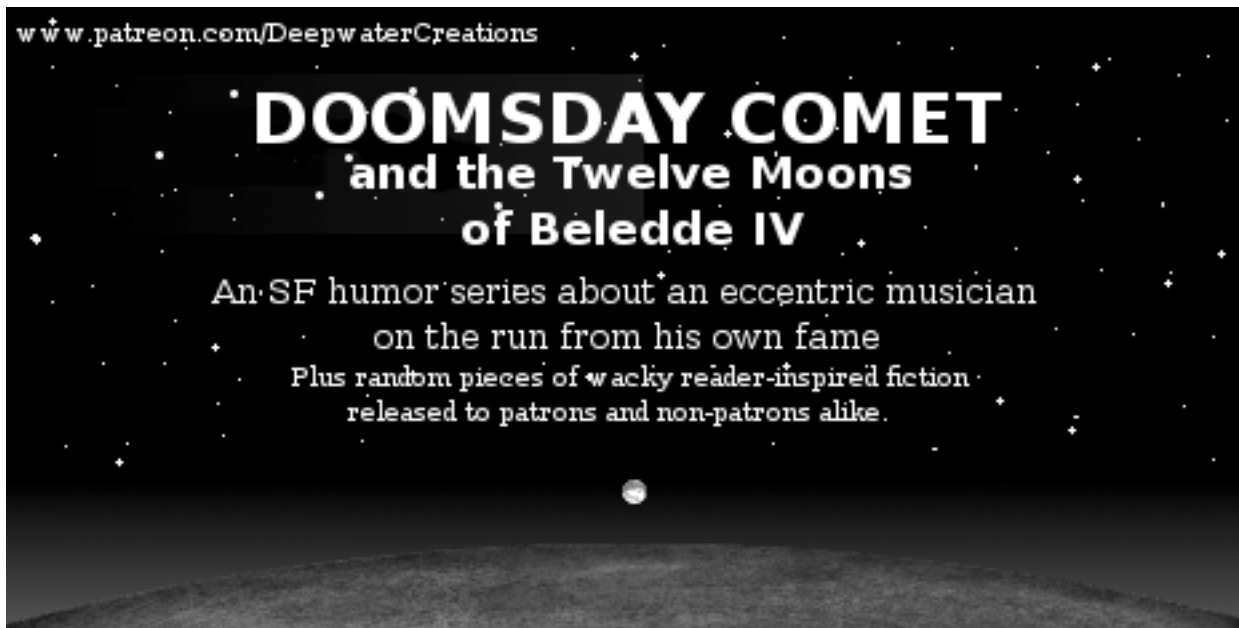
to be moved to the hill's highest point, where they stood in a rough line.

Kassmamon wondered if his fellow spiders had orchestrated this ritual. It all seemed too complex for the anthropoids, and certain elements—the shape of the dagger, the silk strands of the collars—were suggestive. Not the mask, though! If the mask was meant to appear as a spider, then spiders had not made it. He found its appearance disquieting. It reminded him of something else, something he didn't like.

His instincts told him to flee: There was danger here. His curiosity told him to stay and learn the nature of the danger. His curiosity won. He adjusted his silk-and-leather belts to make sure they wouldn't slip and constrain his legs, should he need to run, but he did not run.

After fourteen anthropoids were selected, some unseen signal went out and the rest shrieked and scattered into the forest. The bald, masked figure plucked up its bag and its dagger and went after them, showing more composure but no less haste. The red-collared figures swayed with nervous uncertainty. A couple of them began to stumble haltingly toward the tree line. They made only a few steps before it appeared.

A great, round body crested the hill first. It was tan, fanged, chitinous, with two little black eyes, one atop the other. The body alone dwarfed Kassmamon, but then it rose up on its legs, and even stoic Kassmamon had to bite down a shout of fear. Such legs! Long and thin and tall as trees! The creature towered over the clearing and the hill, and as it reached the top of the hill, Kassmamon knew it for what it was: A harvestman.



There was a waft of some acrid smell as the harvestman stooped down and snatched up an anthropoid in its jaws. The others yelped mutely and tripped over themselves, but did not run. They coughed against the smell. Some cowered, some stared blankly.

Kassmamon had heard legends of these cruel and vicious beasts, and despite all the strange things he'd seen in his life, only half-believed them. They were cruel caricatures of spiders, unbelievably tall and unbelievably vicious. He tensed, ready to flee if the creatures on the hill weren't enough to sate its vast appetite.

It finished crunching the bones of the first anthropoid and, dribbling gore onto the ground, bent to pluck up a second. As it did, Kassmamon noticed that the anthropoid with the mask stood beneath the very tree he was hiding in. It mumbled to itself and clutched its bag, staring up at the harvestman with rapt hunger.

“O greatfather longlegs, harvest the unworthy and leave those who are pure!”

So the anthropoid chanted and muttered to itself—but in the language of spiders, not the primitive guttural shrieks and yelps of its own kind. Its speech was slurred and malformed. Kassmamon did not think it knew for sure what it was saying.

Harvestmen did not spin silk for collars. Their fangs held no venom. These were traits of spiderkind. His brethren were involved – but what dark purpose could spiders have for making deals with harvestmen? Perhaps he should find out. He lowered himself quietly down beside the masked anthropoid and, before it could notice his presence,



wrapped his chelicerae around its neck, fangs against its throat.

"If you can understand me," he hissed, "then you will answer my questions."

The creature shrieked. "I answer no thing!" it cried. "Come to me and save, great longlegs! Come to me and save!" With that, it thrust its dagger at Kassmamon. Kassmamon easily knocked the dagger away with his pedipalps, but the real damage had already been done. The harvestman looked up from the carcass it had been chewing. Its two tiny little black eyes pointed directly at Kassmamon.

"You fool!" shouted Kassmamon. "Run, if you have the sense to value your own exoskeleton." He tried to pull himself back up into the tree. But the anthropoid, gibbering in its own senseless tongue, had grabbed ahold of his chelicerae with both arms. The flabby thing kicked and wriggled and hampered his retreat in any way it could. Before Kassmamon could escape, the great monster was upon them both.

It lunged for the anthropoid's ankles first. There was a painful cracking sound as its jaws latched onto them. The beast rose to its full height, the anthropoid dangling from its chelicerae and Kassmamon dangling by his own. He grabbed desperately at the shrieking forest ape with his frontmost limbs, trying to pry himself loose, but either it had lost the sense to let go or it was determined to take him along with it. He struck repeatedly with his fangs, but couldn't use his venom, since the last thing he wanted now was to paralyze the creature. Not while its thick, fleshy arms were wrapped around his chelicerae's sensitive bristles.

The harvestman's stench was like a cloud of wasps, biting at the joints and seams in his exoskeleton and stinging his eyes. It tossed the anthropoid into the air, then lunged forward to snap it in half with its jaws, but luck was with them both—Kassmamon's silk anchor line was still attached. As he fell, it caught him, and he swung back towards the trees, taking the anthropoid along. As they were carried to relative safety, the harvestman's chelicerae slammed shut on thin air where the anthropoid should have fallen.

Kassmamon nimbly grabbed the first convenient branch with three of his legs to stop their fall.

"Let go," he said, "or I'll make sure that you'll die painfully before the harvestman even reaches us."

"I have good heart!" said the anthropoid, plaintively, in Kassmamon's language. "Why it hurt me? I have good heart!"

"It doesn't care about your heart. Let go of me. That's the last time I'll ask."

The anthropoid, to Kassmamon's slight surprise, let go.

"Don't want die," it said.

"I don't want you to die, either. I have questions for you that you can't answer if you're dead. If you run, I will lead it away." Kassmamon grabbed the anthropoid and dropped from the tree.

"Go," he said, fiercely, as they reached the ground. "Run. I will come to collect the life-bounty you owe me in the morning."

As the other fled, limping and stumbling piteously on its crushed ankle, he turned to face the

harvestman. Torchlight from the fallen torches flickered in his eyes, and his chelicerae iridesced green and orange.

"You are a mightier foe than any I've faced," he said to it, "and I'd prefer not to face you if it could be avoided. Have you any kernel of intelligence? Is there a hope we might reason?"

The creature stopped, looming above him.

"I have the intelligence you ask for," it said in a deep and accented version of Kassmamon's language, "but not the hope. I desire nothing else but to sate my tremendous hunger." The harvestman laughed a long, dry laugh. "I am a creature that ends hopes."

Kassmamon, no fool, had not waited for the creature to finish speaking, and was already running for the trees.

"Come into the woods, then," he shouted as he ran, "and we'll see if you can catch my hope to end it!"

The harvestman immediately gave chase, covering the ground Kassmamon had bolted across in a mere two steps, striding over the trees as if they were only blades of grass. But it suffered a disadvantage: The dead trees were strong and did not bend. It could not push its body through the sharp branches, and therefore could not bring its fangs to bear on Kassmamon.

Kassmamon dashed between its legs and continued running. It followed, forcing him to constantly weave and dodge as it danced a harried galliard around him, spinning and stomping in an attempt to block his progress with its great, clawed tarsi. They ran on and on, but the harvestman showed no signs of tiring.

Kassmamon tried to recall what lay in this part of the forest. He was far to the east of the land he knew well. But he remembered a rumor he'd heard from termite-gamblers who'd shared a traveler's shelter with him when he'd journeyed through this area long ago. They'd told stories of a gigantic monster who lurked in a jet-black pit or lake. When animals approached, it would extend its head and neck to snap them up, leaving the rest of its enormous body inside the mysterious void. If he could remember the directions the termite-gamblers had given him and lead the harvestman to the pit, perhaps the creature would eat it. He could think of nothing else that might stop it.

The night wore on, and he ran ceaselessly through it, luring the harvestman farther into the forest. Kassmamon possessed great stamina, but every step the harvestman took was equal to a dozen of his own. He set hasty trip-lines between tree trunks when the opportunity arose, hoping to trip the creature up, but often as not, it simply stepped over them. Its second legs whipped constantly across the path, feeling the terrain. There was no chance for ruse or subtlety, nor opportunity for escape.

Dawn came at last, and in its light, the terrain seemed familiar. Old memories stirred. He thought that one particular copse-crowned hilltop ahead matched the description he so vaguely remembered, and that the clearing with the lake-pit lay just beyond. But his every joint felt as though it was fraying, and sharp rocks bounced painfully through his abdomen. His vision was blurry. He didn't have much strength left.

"Give up, little spider," said the harvestman. "Your resistance serves only to annoy me. If you run much longer, your legs will fall off, and I will be forced to



pluck them one by one from the ground before I eat them.”

Kassmamon lacked the breath for a retort, but he was intent upon his goal. He led the great long-legs up the hill, scurrying under a juniper bush and then dashing to the trees at the hill’s top. There on the opposite side lay the dark lake. It looked like a blot of midnight, as though the night sky had collected itself on the ground, and now waited, full of stars, for day to end.

But between him and it, there was a long, open stretch of ground that held no trees, bushes, boulders, narrow ravines, nor even so much as a dry creek bed or a patch of tall grass. Nothing he could use for cover.

“Where will you go from here?” asked the harvestman as it crested the hill. “My gullet would be the easiest trip; I’ll take you there myself! You must be tired, I’m sure you would appreciate a quiet place to rest.”

“Don’t sully the language of my people with your foul clacking and ranting,” said Kassmamon from behind a tree trunk. “Only a fool chats with his prey before he eats it.”

The harvestman snapped its chelicerae down, but Kassmamon had darted away – almost too slowly this time. He felt the thing’s mouthparts brush over his leg bristles. Annoyed, it slammed against a tree, causing the tree to sway and creak.

Kassmamon, seeing its strength and frustration, was struck with an idea.

“Come on then, you great, bulging body,” he cried, “who chases a spider all night and can’t even catch

him before the sun has risen! If you want this chase to end, then end it!”

The harvestman lunged for him again. He leapt off the trunk of a tree and scraped a fang across the creature’s face as he passed it, leaving a trail of burning venom. His fang barely scratched the thing’s thick chitin, but his venom dribbled into its eyes. It howled in pain and rammed a tree with all its strength and fury. The tree did not merely sway and creak this time: The creature’s strength was enough to push it over. Kassmamon jumped for the tree with the last of his strength, and clung to its branches as it slid down the hill across the slick, dew-soaked grass and came to a rest at the side of the lake.

The harvestman ran after him, still furious. It quickly caught up with the fallen tree. Kassmamon tried to pull himself from where he was tangled in the branches, but found he couldn’t easily do it. Two of his left legs were neatly pinned. As the harvestman approached, he realized he could do nothing but bury himself under the branches and hope the creature couldn’t reach him.

But it didn’t seem to have seen him at all. It felt the tree with its second legs, running them across the bark and over the leaves. Kassmamon ducked down and made himself as small as he could manage.

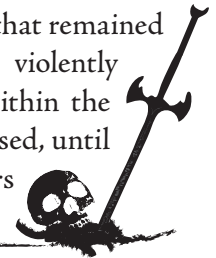
Then, through his lateral eyes, Kassmamon could see the pit begin to ripple.

As the harvestman’s feelers brushed over the branch that trapped him, he saw a giant whiskered snout emerge from the lake. It was followed by a long, sleek, short-furred body, dripping wet with inky blackness and possessing rolls of fat that jiggled

along its curves as it rose. The thing from the lake towered silently over the clearing. It stared down at the arthropods beneath it with pale, inscrutable eyes, then bent slowly towards them.

The oblivious harvestman kept searching for Kassmamon, and did not notice until the creature’s teeth had plucked it neatly from the ground. There was a mighty wailing and an ever more-terrible smell, but the harvestman was doomed.

When the monster retreated, all that remained of the harvestman was a single violently twitching leg. Kassmamon lay within the tree branches, exhausted and bruised, until the leg stopped twitching hours later.



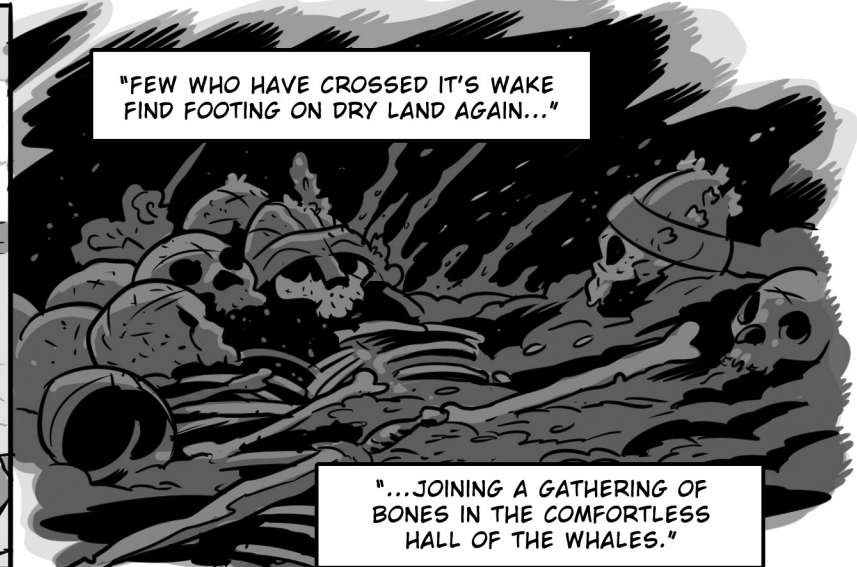
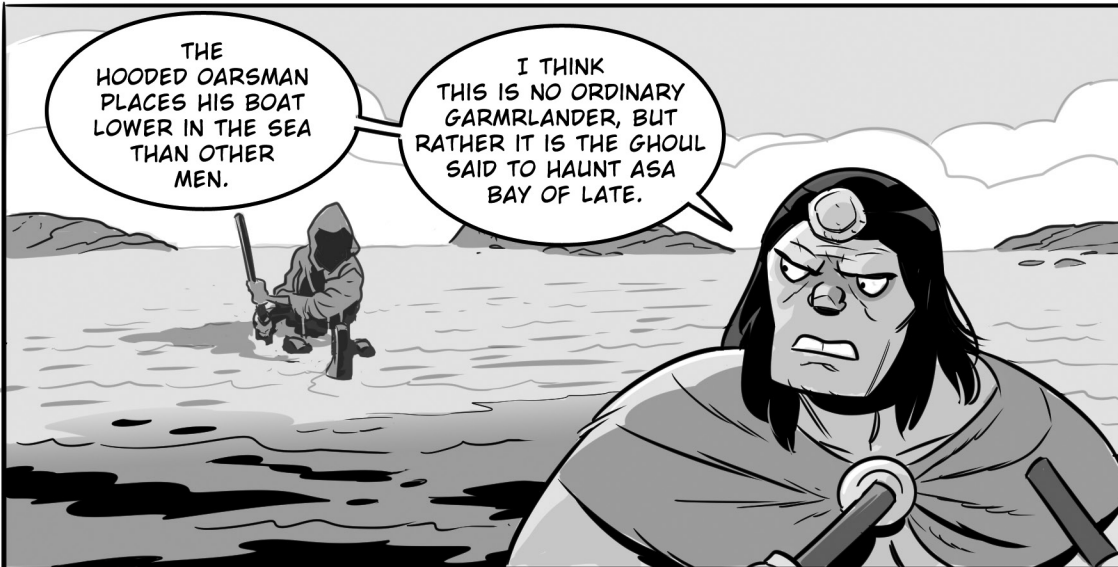
BARBARIAN LORD

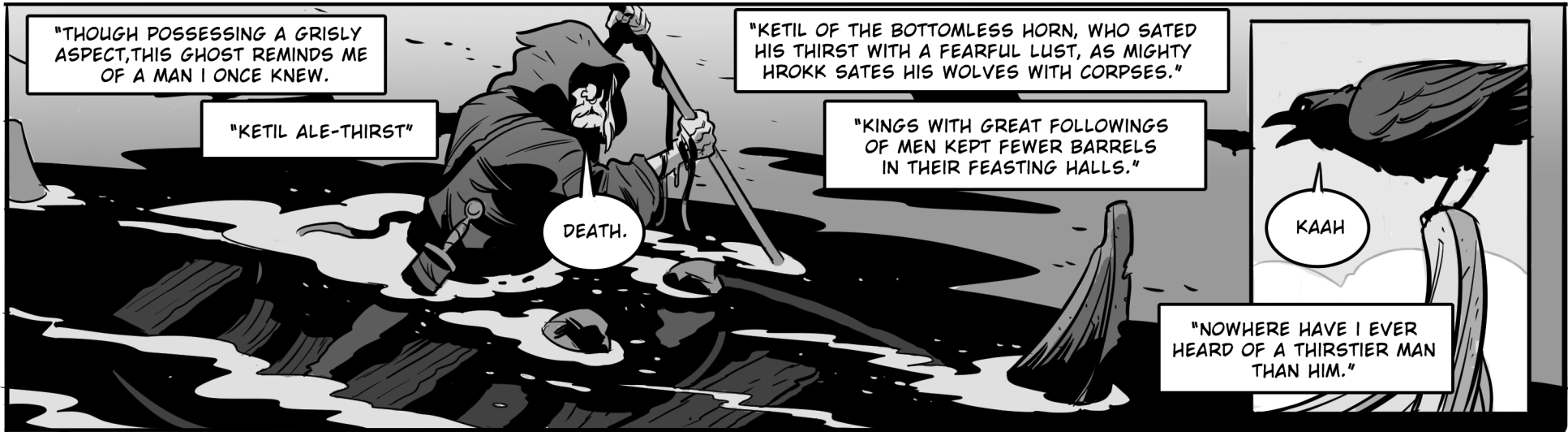
BY MATT SMITH

ASA BAY

GARMRLAND

GRAH!





"THOUGH POSSESSING A GRISLY ASPECT, THIS GHOST REMINDS ME OF A MAN I ONCE KNEW."

"KETIL OF THE BOTTOMLESS HORN, WHO SATIATED HIS THIRST WITH A FEARFUL LUST, AS MIGHTY HROKK SATES HIS WOLVES WITH CORPSES."

"KETIL ALE-THIRST"

"KINGS WITH GREAT FOLLOWINGS OF MEN KEPT FEWER BARRELS IN THEIR FEASTING HALLS."

DEATH.

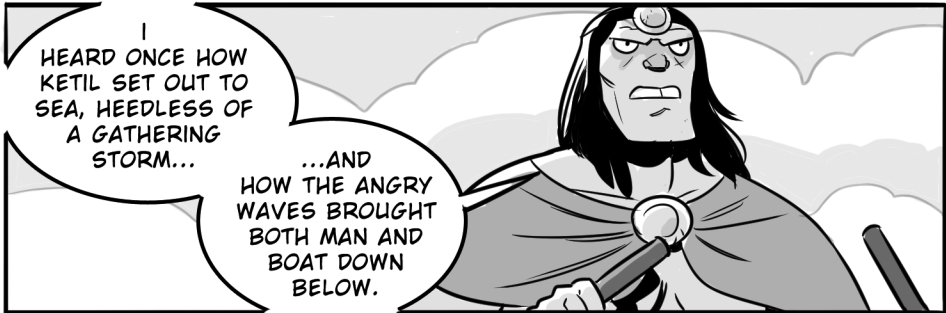


KAHH

"NOWHERE HAVE I EVER HEARD OF A THIRSTIER MAN THAN HIM."



SPLOSH!



I HEARD ONCE HOW KETIL SET OUT TO SEA, HEEDLESS OF A GATHERING STORM...

...AND HOW THE ANGRY WAVES BROUGHT BOTH MAN AND BOAT DOWN BELOW.

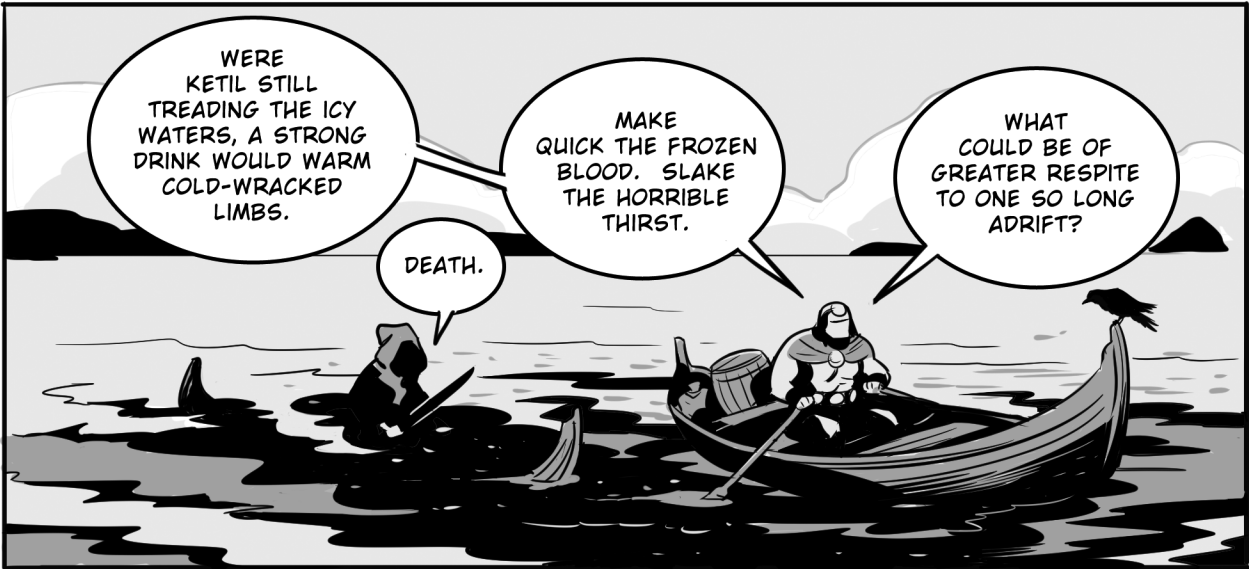


SHRK!



DEATH.

DEATH COMES FOR YOU.

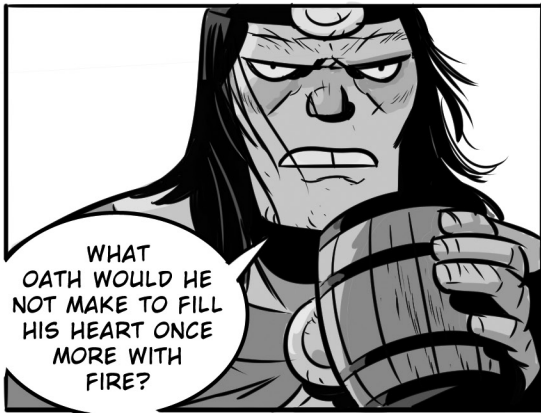


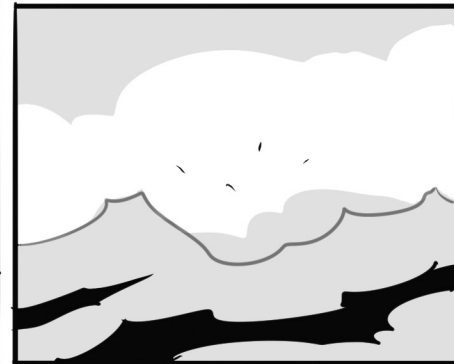
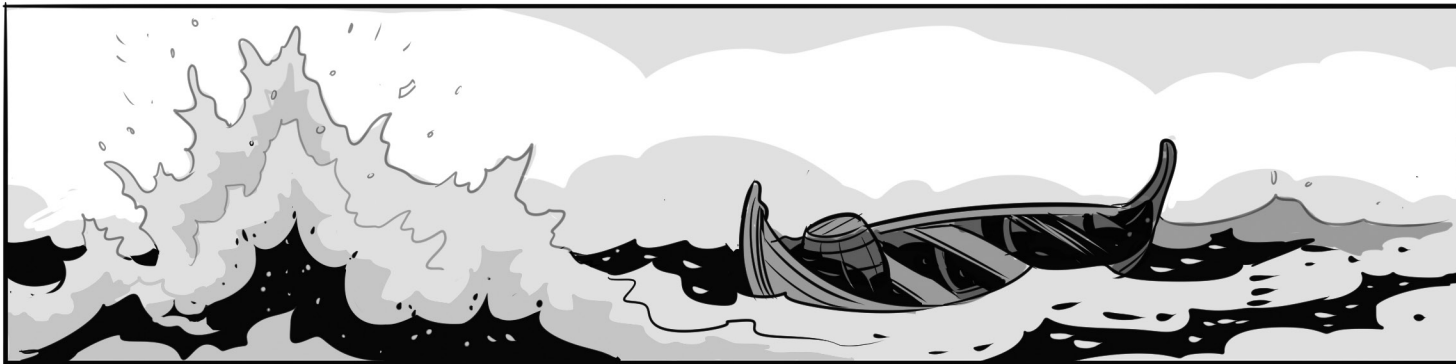
WERE KETIL STILL TREADING THE ICY WATERS, A STRONG DRINK WOULD WARM COLD-WRACKED LIMBS.

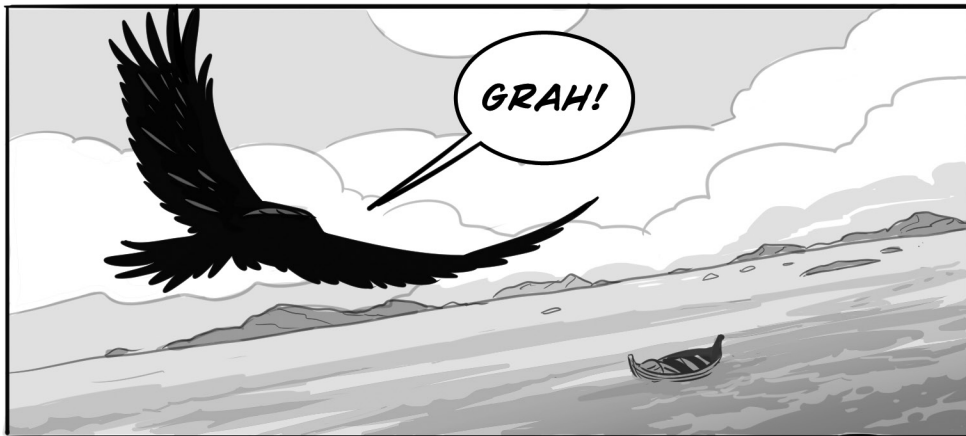
DEATH.

MAKE QUICK THE FROZEN BLOOD. SLAKE THE HORRIBLE THIRST.

WHAT COULD BE OF GREATER RESPITE TO ONE SO LONG ADRIPT?







GRAH!



TAK!



GRRK?

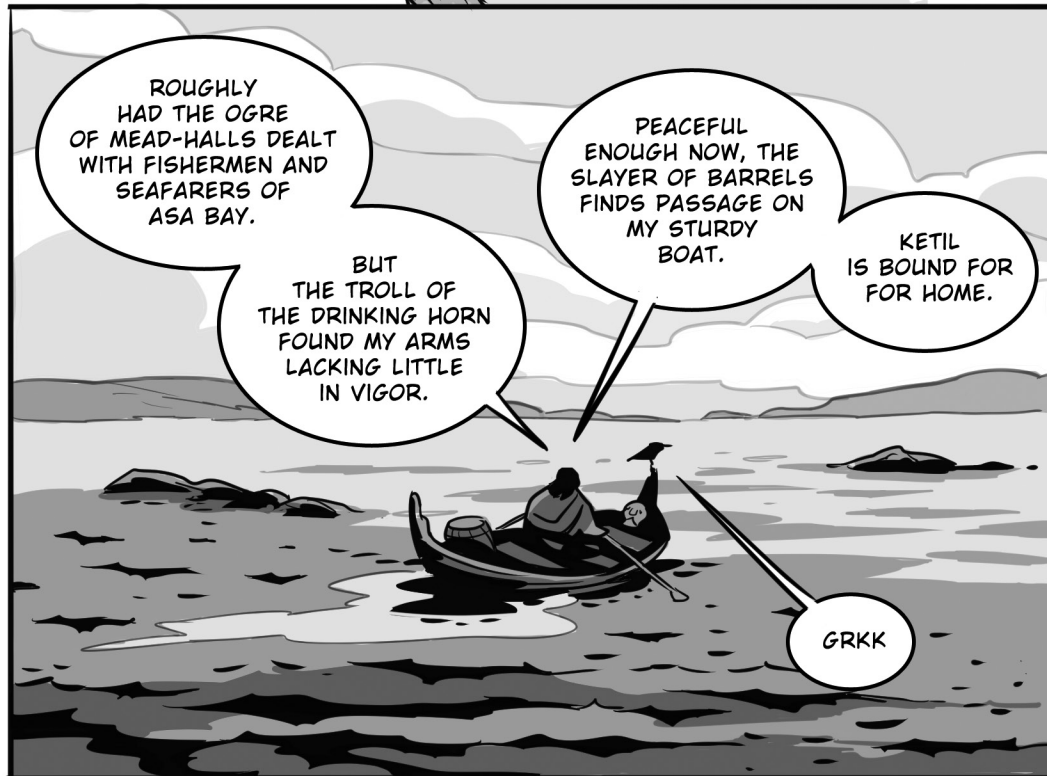


SKRRSH!



GRAA!

HO,
BIRD.



ROUGHLY
HAD THE OGRE
OF MEAD-HALLS DEALT
WITH FISHERMEN AND
SEAFARERS OF
ASA BAY.

BUT
THE TROLL OF
THE DRINKING HORN
FOUND MY ARMS
LACKING LITTLE
IN VIGOR.

PEACEFUL
ENOUGH NOW, THE
SLAYER OF BARRELS
FINDS PASSAGE ON
MY STURDY
BOAT.

KETIL
IS BOUND FOR
FOR HOME.

GRKK

INVISIBLE EMPIRE

A game by Epidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Christopher Kimball

To enter the Hall of the Silent Emperor, you must bring with you two to five co-conspirators, pen and paper, and two six-sided dice—one color of dread and the other the color of awe.

In *Invisible Empire*, you will be explorers, sages, musicians, historians, viziers, dancers, generals, diplomats, courtiers, and messengers who have come before the throne of the Silent Emperor. The Invisible Empire stretches beyond all horizons, its people are unnumbered, and the Silent Emperor wishes to know it all. You each, in turn, will regale the court with the wonders and horrors you have witnessed in your travels in the Invisible Empire. Should the Emperor be displeased with your tale or by your manner, there will be no escaping your grim fate. But those that bring before the court truly

unique experiences shall have one more glorious day with this most terrible of patrons.

To begin, decide amongst yourselves which die is the Dread die and which is the Awe die. Take a scrap of paper and write Dreadful on one side and Awful on the other. These are the Emperor's moods. When the court is Dreadful, it is sullen, gloomy, dark, and plotting. When the court is Awful, it is bright, frenetic, mocking, and vengeful.

Choose which among you shall roll for the Silent Emperor's mood at the beginning of the game. Should the Dread die be higher than the Awe die, flip the mood to Dreadful and read the following aloud:



Dread in the Court of the Silent Emperor

Each cough and scuffle of foot echoes richly through the high, stone walls of the hall. The floor is soaked with the scarlet life drained from those who have failed to amuse the Silent Emperor. All present now seek to melt into the remaining stillness to avoid attention. However, one among us must speak up, and I fear it is you.

Should the Awe die be higher than the Dread die, flip the mood to Awful and read the following aloud:

Awe in the Presence of the Silent Emperor

Fire dancers, comely men and women draped in venomous serpents, musicians fearful of losing their frantic beat, and acrobats astride monstrous tusked beasts parade before the court, seeking the favor of the Silent Emperor. Amid the chaos, mages, merchants, and ambassadors look for opportunity to raise their voices above the rest. As fortune would have it, now is your time.

Should the dice be tied, it matters not if the mood is flipped to Dreadful or Awful—choose whichever you please and then read the following aloud:

Sorcery Afoot in the Hall of the Silent Emperor

Birds with heads of pure light flutter about, illuminating the cavernous hall. Winged imps chained with silver and gold to listless and naked people command their anchors to lurch about. Figures robed in glorious colors who jealously hide their faces behind masks of ash and oak watch with a keen interest at the queue of beings—natural and preternatural—who are presenting themselves to the Silent Emperor. You stand next in line.

The player who rolled for the Silent Emperor's mood now picks up the dice and hands them to another player who will be the first to speak before the court.

From this point forward, whenever you are handed the dice, roll them immediately to determine the tone of your narration. Should the Dread die be higher, you must describe to the court one of the many horrors witnessed in your travels within the Invisible Empire. Should the Awe die be higher, you must describe, instead, one of the myriad of wonders to be found within the Invisible Empire. When the dice tie, you will keep something from the Silent Emperor, either through guile or ignorance, and this will change everything. You will learn more about this in a bit.

WHO COMES BEFORE THE THRONE?

If this is the first time you are rolling, or the first time you are rolling since your previous character met an ill-fate, then the result of your die-roll will also determine the nature of your character.

If Dread is the highest, choose from this list:

- ◆ A general bringing news of a terrible victory.
- ◆ A vizier wishing to advise the Silent Emperor on a possible uprising.
- ◆ An explorer bringing tidings of rampaging plague.
- ◆ A knight-assassin carrying the heads of state who have slighted the Silent Emperor.
- ◆ A diplomat from a kingdom on the edge of subjugation.

- ◆ Or a character of your creation with a dark tale to tell.

If Awe is the highest, choose from this list:

- ◆ A musician here to sing the praises of the Invisible Empire's bounty.
- ◆ A hunter bringing trophies of macabre beasts found within the Invisible Empire.
- ◆ A dancer who has earned this audience through rare grace and skill.
- ◆ A necromancer who commands the dead to appear and account for their sins.
- ◆ A conquered monarch bringing a tribute of wealth and kin.
- ◆ Or a character of your creation with a wonder to speak of.

If the dice are tied, choose from this list:

- ◆ A general bringing news of humiliating defeat.
- ◆ An irritated sorceress or wizard who has little time for such mortal affairs.
- ◆ A thief who is impersonating an astrologer to stay alive.
- ◆ An emissary who wishes to turn the Silent Emperor's attentions away from their home.
- ◆ A would-be usurper who needs an unwitting ally against their liege.
- ◆ Or a character of your creation with something to hide.

Take a scrap of paper and write down what you must know about your character. Should they

need a name, give one to them. Should they need a description, give them that as well. Leave room on the paper for the Emperor's Black Mark of Displeasure, which is usually a few Xs.

WHAT WILL YOU SPEAK OF?

Do not attempt to tell whole tales, with beginnings, middles, and ends. Speak instead about vistas, customs, fashions, cuisines, taboos, troubles, ceremonies, locals, monsters, routes, personages, atrocities, treasures, miracles, and discrete events.

Be florid and relish in the details, but be brief. The Silent Emperor does not seek a litany or an endless account of the day. Paint a vivid image with as few strokes as you need.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE BEFORE THE THRONE

As you give your account to the court, the other players are encouraged to act out or describe their own characters' reactions, or the reaction of characters that do not yet have players. You are also welcome to describe how the denizen of the court receive your news. All is permitted save that no one may describe what another player's character is doing or feels and none may describe what the Silent Emperor is doing.

Once you have made your report, you must prove the truth of your words. Choose another player to speak for someone else in the court—either their own character or another character of your choosing that does not currently have a player. They, too, have witnessed what you have just described and can corroborate your testimony. Ask this character

a single loaded question about what you have told the court.

This question must not be one they can answer with a simple “yes” or “no.” The best sort of questions lead them a bit.

“What sin have these people committed to cause the sun that passes over their village to rise in the west and set in the east?”

“What happens to those who do not sleep in gilded cages on that night?”

“Why do they believe no building is truly finished in the Valley of a Thousand Palaces?”

The respondent must answer in the same tone as you rolled, though they are not obliged to hide any details should the dice tie. Their answer also should be brief and descriptive. Once you are both satisfied, pick up the dice and hand them to a new player who will then immediately roll and begin their account.

PLEASING THE COURT

Prepare some scraps of paper, as many as there are players. Each scrap of paper should have enough room on it to fit three short lines of text. You may wish to draw three dots down the left-hand side of each scrap to indicate where these lines of text will go. These scraps of paper are the Silent Emperor's Favor. Stack them so only one is showing at the beginning of the game. This is the current Favor.

Whenever any player hears another player say or describe something they find particularly breathtaking, wondrous, horrifying, or amusing, they may take the current Favor and record what they found most evocative about it—detail or two

that best captures the essence of what that player said. In doing this, you are telling that player that they have amused you and indicating that the Silent Emperor may also be amused.

Each Favor has room for three elements on it. Once the first Favor has all three elements filled, bring forth the second Favor. This one works just as the first. Continue filling in Favors one at a time until there are none left to fill in. Then you begin the End Game.

SUSPICION, BOREDOM, & DISPLEASURE

The Silent Emperor will not always believe or be interested in what you have to say. There is fickleness to the Silent Emperor's whims that can only be represented by the chaotic nature of the dice. Whenever you roll for the tone of your narration, note if the dice have tied, if neither is higher than three, or if both of these unfortunate events should occur at once.

Ties & Suspicion

If the dice have tied, you have earned the Silent Emperor's suspicion. This means four things:

The first is, whatever you are about to say will change the mood of the court. This change in mood is always an escalation. A grim and Dreadful court becomes wild with Awful anticipation as they sense the Silent Emperor's mood changing. A raucous and Awful court will suddenly hush to Dreadful whispers for fear of agitating the Silent Emperor more. All should play to this escalation.

The second is that you will leave something vital out of what you are about to say. This will either

be because you are trying to hide something from the Silent Emperor or because you are ignorant of the actual facts. In either case, describe to the court what you wish to describe, just as you normally would, but then tell the other players what important fact you have failed to recount.

The third is that you will have to write a Secret. Take an unused scrap of paper and write upon it a question about your omission that you would not want asked before the court. "Who else was there to witness the death?" "If none who have seen the Risen City have returned, how can I know of it?" "Why have I not given the court a full account of all the treasures found in those tombs?" Do not answer this question yet. This scrap is called a Secret. Place it near the Silent Emperor's Favor where it will await the end of the game.

The fourth is that you will receive the Silent Emperor's Black Mark of Displeasure, and you may receive two. When you ask another character a loaded question about your testimony, they have a choice. They can choose to preserve your secret and suffer one of the Silent Emperor's Black Marks of Displeasure themselves, or they may reveal your deception or ignorance, which will earn you the second Black Mark.

If a corroborator earns a Black Mark this way and is not a character already owned by a player, write them up as you would a new character and record their Black Mark. Players who find themselves in need of new characters must first choose from the pool of characters who have already earned Black Marks this way.



Threes or Less & Boredom

If neither of the dice is greater than three, then the Silent Emperor will be bored by your account. This means two things:

The first is that you will make an account as you normally would, but the Silent Emperor will be disinterested and this should be reflected in the court. All should play to this effect.

The second is that you will receive the Silent Emperor's Black Mark of Displeasure. Unless your roll is also a tie, you will only receive one such mark this time and no mark will be passed along to the character who answers your loaded question.

Both Suspicion & Boredom

If the dice are tied and neither is greater than three, then you have the misfortune of seeing the worst of the Silent Emperor—angered and unamused. First, carry out all the rules under Ties & Suspicion above. Then, you must describe how, through a wave of the hand or a barely perceptible nod, the Silent Emperor condemns the character with the most Black Marks to an ill-fate for the entertainment of all who are present, removing them from the game. Should more than one character be tied for this ghastly prize, then all of them share the fate.

The Silent Emperor's Black Mark of Displeasure

When you earn a Black Mark, place an X on your character's scrap of paper. Whenever you have more Black Marks than there is Favor showing—including the current Favor, even if it has no elements yet written on it—then you must describe the ill-fate the Silent Emperor has sentenced you

INVISIBLE EMPIRE & SWORDS WITHOUT MASTER

For the sake of the tricks and overtricks like Echoes of the Past in Swords Without Master, you can consider Favor to work as a Motif threads and Secrets to work as Mystery threads.

to for the amusement and edification of all. How the Silent Emperor communicates the details of this execution are a mystery, but they are never uninteresting. Narrate an ending for your character befitting the Dread or Awe of the current tone.

Whenever a Black Mark is earned, discard one of the unused Favors. In the case of Suspicion, only discard one unused Favor even as two Black Marks are earned.

If the current Favor does not have all three elements yet written on it and all the other unused Favors have been discarded, it must be discarded. This might cause one or more characters to suddenly have more Black Marks than Favor showing. There is no mercy in the court of the Silent Emperor. They, too, must meet an ill-fate. This also triggers the End Game, as there are no elements of Favor left to fill in.

When a character of yours has been lost to an ill-fate, fret not, and simply make a fresh character when the dice are next handed to you. You may already have been playing some members of the court that you would like to see stand before the Silent Emperor. Embrace that.

THE END GAME

Once you have no more Favors to fill in, either because you have been particularly entertaining

or particularly trying on the Silent Emperor's patience, it is time to end the game.

The End Game works just as before, but now when you have the dice you have the opportunity to reincorporate a Favor or a Secret. This is a moment where you take what has been said before and remind the court of it.

Should you roll Suspicion or Suspicion & Boredom during the End Game, you can ignore it by reincorporating a Secret—anyone's Secret—as long as there's a secret to reincorporate. Should you roll Boredom during the End Game, you can ignore it by reincorporating a Favor as long as there is a Favor to reincorporate. Otherwise you suffer as the rules above.

When you reincorporate a Favor or a Secret, you collect that scrap of paper. You have survived the presence of the Silent Emperor and this is your prize. None may reincorporate the same one you have and none may pass you the dice again this game.

Reincorporating Favor

Favor is reincorporated by taking any two elements on the Favor and combining them, synthesizing a new element that you use in your current account before the court. Give your account and then make a case for the Favor you feel you have reincorporated.

If one other player agrees that you have done so, collect your Favor. You yet live!

Reincorporating Secrets

A Secret is reincorporated by pointing the court towards the question upon it in your account. Give an account that would lead the court to ask this question, or find a way to tactfully ask this question directly through your account. If one other player agrees that you did so without being crass, collect the Secret. You yet live!

You need not roll the dice to reincorporate and may do so while answering a loaded question from another player's testimony. But only if you are not attempting to reincorporate the same Favor or Secret as they are.

Once all the Favors and Secrets are gone, if there are players left who have not reincorporated, they must

describe the ill-fate that befalls their characters for failing to entertain the Silent Emperor.

If, however, all the players do manage to reincorporate, you are to be congratulated on an evening of exquisite amusements.

A MORE CUTTHROAT GAME

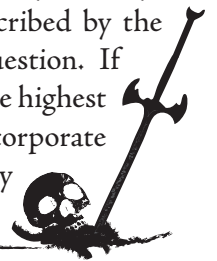
Should you desire more backbiting in your game, introduce these three rules to the End Game.

First, upon the beginning of the End Game, record the amount of Favor showing. That is not how many elements are showing, but rather how many completed scraps of Favor there are. This is the Silent Emperor's Ending Favor.

Second, if you reincorporate a Secret that is not your own, then all the characters who earn Black Marks from that Secret—either because they are the one who made the first omission or they corroborated

when asked a loaded question—earn an additional Black Mark. If this causes them to exceed the Silent Emperor's Ending Favor and they have not yet reincorporated, they must now describe their ill-fate.

Third, if you are reincorporating while answering a loaded question, you can attempt to steal the reincorporation attempted by the player who asked you the question. Your answer to the question must meet the minimum requirements to reincorporate that particular Favor or Secret. Namely, at least one other player must agree that you can reasonably reincorporate it. Then each of you roll one die and subtract your Black Marks from it. The highest positive result earns the reincorporation. Any player receiving a negative result must immediately describe their character's ill-fate. If you tie, you both suffer the same ill-fate, described by the player who asked the loaded question. If you get a positive result, but not the highest result, you are free to try to reincorporate again when the opportunity presents itself.



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THREE DOZEN ILL-FATES AWAITING THOSE WHO DISPLEASE THE SILENT EMPEROR

A miscellany by Epidiah Ravachol

- ◻–To continue your life unaware of the change.
- ◻–Planted with a sapling so that the forest beasts will know the shape of your skull.
- ◻–Hunted down by a glittering herd of carnivorous elk.
- ◻–Forced to dance with plague victims.
- ◻–Blinded and rendered mute by firebrands drawn from the your smoldering home.
- ◻–Awakening with your head upon a statue of your likeness in the Garden of Screams.

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- ◻–Cast from the astrologers' peak on a moonless night so that none may witness your fall.
 - ◻–Your soul ensnared in the fine, astral webs of spiders fed on the livers of sorcerers.
 - ◻–Left naked in the Deserts of Sighs.
 - ◻–Clothed in iron and lowered beneath the sea.
 - ◻–Served as the main course at an offspring's wedding celebration.
 - ◻–Tied to the back of giant falcon to die closer to the sun.

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- ◻–Privately drowned in a pool of tears secretly gathered over a thousand years.

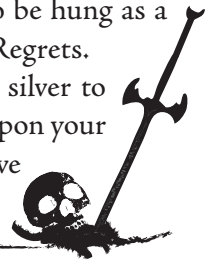
- ◻–Sold to the apothecary for your constituent parts.
- ◻–Sewn into the wall of prophets where you are whispered secrets the gods know you will keep out of spite.
- ◻–Flayed so that your skin could be bound in the book of your sins.
- ◻–Impaled on the parapets with six hundred other nameless offenders.
- ◻–Boiled in rosewater and sweet wines.

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- ◻–Erased from the memories of all that loved you through dark rituals.
 - ◻–Have your flesh surgically replaced with glass plates so that the court can marvel over the inner workings of the human form.
 - ◻–Lead into the dark labyrinths below by a friendly face.
 - ◻–Plucked by six necromancers from your future tomb on the first, third and ninth anniversary of your death and dragged into the past to devour yourself.
 - ◻–Chained to a mountain peak so your death throes echo through the valley below.

- ◻–Seared by sunlight focused through mirror and giant lenses to a dagger's edge.

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- ◻–Made to drink from the Well of Azure that silences your dreams forever.
 - ◻–Offered a mock sacrifice to a god who fears the Silent Emperor.
 - ◻–Strung as a marionette to dance tirelessly and silently upon an unforgiving stage.
 - ◻–Shrunk by magical processes and used as a playing piece.
 - ◻–Sealed within a dome that echoes your every thought back to you until do not trust yourself anymore.
 - ◻–Your name whispered to three demons who find themselves unable to forget it.

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- ◻–Poisoned by a lover known to no one but yourself.
 - ◻–Frozen to the glacial wall high on an arctic cliff, slowly sheering into the northern sea.
 - ◻–Married to a wind that will carry you beyond comfort and warmth.
 - ◻–Fed priceless gems and sent out into the world as a wandering trove for unscrupulous treasure seekers to find.
 - ◻–Desiccated and mummified alive over the course of seven months to be hung as a lantern in the Festival of Regrets.
 - ◻–Chained through gold and silver to a winged imp that feasts upon your thoughts until you have none of your own.



THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Matt Smith writes and draw Barbarian Lord as well as anything else his black heart desires, which is usually some roughsketch concerning 80's metal or Dungeons & Dragons. <http://matt-illustrations.com>

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: WorldsWithoutMaster.com/realms.

"Three Dozen Ill-Fates Awaiting Those Who Displease the Silent Emperor" belongs to the Free & Chaotic Realms.

"Three Came Upon a Fire" belong to the realms curated by Epidiah Ravachol. Its edicts may be found at: WorldsWithoutMaster.com/edicts.

