



TALES OF THE LOST LANDS



TALES PACK 2

Bullard, McCracken, Provine

This Tales Pack is released as a companion to
The Lost Lands: Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms



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AMONG THE CATTAILS

BY RICK McCracken

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Medium

“Among the Cattails” does not deal specifically with any portion of the *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms Adventure Path*. It does, however, provide the secret history from centuries past of the village of Cat’s Wife featured in **Chapter 1** of the Gazetteer. It also begins a storyline that takes place in the village itself, that has either just occurred or will be occurring shortly at the GM’s discretion. Therefore, from a strictly adventure path basis, this story has no spoilers, but if you wish to continue your campaign in and around the area of Cat’s Wife, it would be fairly spoilery of the village’s new and old tragedies alike.

AMONG THE CATTAILS

BY RICK McCracken



he river broadened into a wide pool as it rounded a bend, emerging from the confinement of its willow-lined banks. The far bank of the river, forming the inside curve of the bend, rose as a craggy bluff, its top obscured by the darkness of a spring night where, overhead, the fat white sphere of the Pale Sister floated nearly full among wispy clouds, while the smaller, dimmer moon known as the Dark Sister, waxing gibbous, hung closer to the horizon in a brooding sullenness. A night breeze brought ripples to the dark surface of the pool — alternately reflecting flashes of silver from the one sister, and smaller patches gray from the other — gently lapping among the thick stand of cattails that crowded the muddy nearer river bank.

The night susurrus of tree frog and cricket, whispered as fire flies danced above the slowly waving cattails, was interrupted by a strange gurgling that emerged from the pool and rose to a quiet roar like the low growl of a great animal. Where once had been placid waters, now a whirlpool stretched from the center of the stream nearly to the far bluff, churning the river into a froth as it drew the black waters in silver-streaked currents inexorably downward and away from the gentle exhalations of the spring night. The maelstrom continued for several minutes, its harsh currents lapping against bluff and bank in its violence, muting the nocturnal chorus into fearful silence with its choking voice.

Finally the waters calmed, and the pool at the bend resumed its course, if somewhat choppy than before. The night song resumed as well, though a faint growl, as if a remembered echo of the whirlpool, seemed to linger a moment, barely audible above the swishing

of the cattails. And if the fire flies still cavorted in their primeval choreography, they all perhaps danced a bit higher than before above the bulrushes that seemed to sway more turbulently than the night breeze alone warranted. All of them except two, that is — two of the largest specimens appeared to have alighted in the thicket below, a few inches apart, looking like nothing so much as the gleaming eyes of some wild beast settled deep among the cattails.

A shift of the winds brought a new voice to the pageant of the night. This, a song of folk and camaraderie, raised against the uncertainty of the darkness, carried faintly on the breeze. In the distance, the lights of a small village twinkled, and at its edge stood a public house, its windows aglow with an inviting promise of warmth and fellowship and door open in welcome.

“Welcome, traveler! Let warm hearth and strong drink ease the road from your bones.”

The rotund hostler barely glanced up from the platter of tankards he was handing out as he called out the traditional greeting. It was festival night in Cat’s Wife, and the taproom was packed with folk — locals and visitors alike. All were decked out in their finest: men in their long coats, recently brushed, collars starched high, and buttons polished to a brassy sheen; women in white, low-collared blouses with puffed sleeves just below their shoulders, and brightly colored aprons worn over dark, full skirts that reached the tops of their shins. Men wore hose below their knee-length breeches, and both genders wore shoes of dark leather with shining buckles set atop them. The children scurrying around underfoot wore miniature versions of their elders’ attire.

The taproom itself was brightly lit by dozens of paper lanterns hung from the rafters, crafted in vivid colors just for the festival, along with the usual oil lamps hanging in their sconces and the big circular chandelier in the center of the ceiling. The wainscoting had received a fresh polish and the plaster of the walls a fresh whitewashing to bring both to a gleaming pearlescence. The decorative gingerbread trim at the top of the walls and above doors and windows looked especially festive with colored streamers woven among them, and the mouthwatering smells of fresh bread, succulent roast goose, and warm ale filled the air.

The hostler barely glanced, that is, until he looked again, this time with a longer, appraising eye. The stranger was tall, easily a hand taller than any man in the village, his head nearly brushing the doorframe a full six-and-a-half feet high. He was lanky, though it was difficult to tell beneath the ill-fitting robes he wore. He was obviously a traveling merchant, though apparently not a prosperous one: his dark robe was somewhat tattered and a bit too short, its collar ragged and stained, probably with the remnant of some previous meal he had not yet paid a washerwoman to scrub out with a river stone. The leathern belt at his waist was fine enough but cinched tight, as if he had lost a great deal of weight recently. His shoes were likewise scuffed and worn, and seemed too small on his long feet.

It was his face that most arrested the hostler’s attention, however. It was the face of one long accustomed to hardship and maybe even a touch of bitterness. He wore his black hair long and swept back, untamed save for a leather thong to hold it in a tail at the neck, with a streak of shocking white running from the right side of his forehead back to be bound in the thong as well. His face was grizzled with at least three day’s stubble and hollow as if he had not been eating well recently. His right eye was squinted nearly shut and milky white where it could be seen, perhaps lost in an injury, but his forehead was so lined with age and worry that it was difficult to tell if any of those vertical crags might be scars or merely the marks of a hard life on the road. Despite his discomfiting appearance, he smiled broadly if somewhat warily with fine pearly teeth at the hostler’s greeting, and made his way to an open chair by the hearth. There he dropped the knapsack that had been slung over his shoulder with a metallic clunk, and the hostler’s initial vague sense of alarm was soon allayed as he left the stranger, coin in hand, with a full mug and a fresh fill for his short clay pipe.

It was some time before the traveler spoke, his voice cracking and musty, as if he had not had opportunity to use it in some time. The hour had grown late, the smallest children

already bustled home to bed by their mothers and the older children sitting sleepily on stools or upon the floor. The men had grown quieter, silently contemplating their ale jacks or enjoying the comfortable warmth of an evening well-spent. The hostler and two or three serving girls still wended their way among the tables, refilling tankards or setting out trays of cold meats and cheese for those with a late appetite. When the stranger did speak in the stillness, his quiet voice carried and drew the attention of everyone in the taproom.

The hostler sighed, thinking that now this ill-fortuned fellow would try to peddle whatever shoddy wears he carried in that knapsack beside his chair leg, or perhaps regale the crowd with his own tale of woe in an effort to gain the charity of the tavern's patrons and ruin the good cheer and carefree festive air of Cat's Wife on this fine spring night. It was festival night and the folk of Cat's Wife had plenty of other nights to worry about the hardships of living among the lawless wilds of Sunderland. He was just about to tut-tut the traveler to hush him before he upset the children, when he realized that the traveler's words were actually directed towards the children and spoken with a twinkle of joviality in his one good eye.

The hostler caught himself before he interrupted, thinking that perhaps this ragamuffin fellow was actually an experienced traveling minstrel who walked the world on his own terms and chose the hardships of the road as his dues. Such folk as these had come through Cat's Wife before, always looking more like a vagabond than a troubadour, and always bringing in far more coin from the crowds they drew than could be made in any other given week. Perhaps the luck of Cat's Wife was complete and just such a talespinner had come upon the village on the very night of the festival to captivate and entertain. The hostler was already mentally counting the coins and thinking about ways to convince the fellow to stay on for a few days.

"Tell me, young one," the traveler said, directing his attention to a lass of perhaps seven years who had been dozing on her stool only moments before. He gestured toward the mural painted on the wall behind the bar, the one that showed a rotund man with the head of a black cat who was on one knee proposing to a pretty country maiden. It was the same image that was painted on the sign above the door of the Cat's Troth Inn. "Can you tell me what that picture is?" His accent was strange, obviously a foreigner, but not unpleasant or difficult to understand.

The girl immediately brightened at the attention as all eyes in the room turned to her, and beaming she stated, "Of course, silly! That's Cat proposing to his wife, the burgher's daughter. That's what the village is named for!"

"So it is," the stranger replied gently, "but can you tell me why he has the head of a black cat?"

She seemed confused by this question and took a moment to look around the room as if for support. "Well...because he's Cat, that's why.... Everyone knows that!" She finished with a self-conscious giggle.

"Ah, I see," he nodded. "Tell me, then, have you ever seen a man with the head of a cat?"

She seemed to decide that he was testing her and went to her best mommy-lecturing voice as she embraced the moment of her expertise.

"No, but then Cat is just Cat. Everyone knows the story. He found a bag of silver pennies and decided he must become respectable and find a wife. So he came to Cat's Wife and paid silver pennies to the miller, the cooper...um, the chandler, I think, and the burgher for the hands of their daughters in marriage. But each time he found that she was not a good match, so he went to the next. Until he finally married the burgher's daughter and lived happily ever after—"

"Though without any of his coin!" one of the patrons cut in with a laugh.

There were a few quiet chuckles at his joke, and the girl's father looked at his daughter with pride at having recited the tale of the village of Cat's Wife so well and before such a crowd. The girl noticed her father's look and blushed with pleasure, suddenly shy.

"Very good, you do know story well. Good for you."

With a sudden motion of his hand a small copper coin appeared, and he quickly placed it in the girl's outstretched palm.

"For a good little girl who has learned her lessons."

All of the children were wide awake now; the traveler was handing out money. The night took on a whole new promise. The other patrons were paying more attention now, too. Even the hostler paused in his cleaning for a moment as he began to calculate the possibilities.

“But I pray you, good folk of Cat’s Wife, can anyone tell me why the tale speaks of silver pennies, rather than gold coins, say? Don’t tales usually speak of king’s treasures of gold and jewels rather than the humble silver of common folk?” His glance now encompassed the whole room.

“Because he was a werebeast — a lycanthrope. And the means to kill a lycanthrope is with silver,” came the reply from one shadowy corner. Olson the guardsman sat there, a permanent sneer marring his ruddy face. His short, tarnished blade sat across his knees where he had been polishing it with a dirty rag while he drank. The ties of his leather vest were undone at the neck, his hair was too long and unwashed, and he was apparently well into his cups. The hostler frowned at the uncouth lout; he wished the bailiff had never hired him as a town guard. The slovenly man was difficult enough to deal with when sober. Now he was on his sixth tankard and showed no signs of letting up, always honing that damnable ugly sword of his — and around the children, too!

“A werebeast, you say,” the traveler replied. A gleam of some sort seemed to grow in his eyes. “And if the beloved Cat was actually a werebeast and the silver the means of slaying him, what do you suppose to be the true fate of those miller’s, and cooper’s, and chandler’s daughters that he took as wife before seeking another?”

“Here now! The children!” the young girl’s father cut in even as a number of the other patrons eyed their own wide-eyed younglings and murmured in agreement. The room began to replace its festive air with a gloom hinting at hostility. The hostler saw his imagined remunerations shrinking by the second and quickly silenced the growing chorus.

“Here now, good people! Wait but a moment. It is the festival day and all are lively and gay. Can’t you see that we have in our midst the pleasure of a traveling troubadour, a teller of tales, a rhymer of rhymes? Fortune has favored us this night that we celebrate the founding of our village with a raconteur who seems to know a tale behind the tale, if you know what I mean.

“Let us listen with rapt ears and cheerful hearts while he regales us with heart-pounding and spine-chilling entertainments. It is but the one night; all thought of beasts or terror will be gone with the morning sun, like a brief mist before the dawn.”

The patrons seemed to settle down at this idea and, the hostler noted with glee, even began to order more drinks. The night was young yet; let the entertainment begin, he thought.

Taking his cue from the hostler, the traveler turned back to the crowd.

“Aye, a werebeast indeed, and this would be a time before yon fair village was known as Cat’s Wife. Instead it was called Willow Bend, named for?” he looked at the children again.

“The Willow River!” they all cried together.

“Yes, the Willow River, and in particular?”

“The bend in the river,” they attempted in unison, though with less success.

“Aye, the bend in the river, not a half mile from here. And what is that bend known for?”

The crowd was silent. Finally the first little girl spoke in a voice barely above a whisper.

“The Devil’s Sink.”

“The Devil’s Sink,” he confirmed grimly with a nod. “And can anyone tell me: What is the Devil’s Sink?”

A boy of ten winters spoke up this time. “It’s the eddy that forms without warning at the bend below the bluff. It’ll pull a swimmer or even a boat down, never to be seen again. It’s why you can fish the river at either side of the bend but not at the bend itself—”

He was interrupted by a young farmer. “The river’s deep. Way deeper than you think... usually deeper than you can measure with a weighted line, and at the bend they say it’s bottomless. No one knows why the Sink forms sometimes and then disappears or what happens to anything that’s swept in. It’s just gone... never seen again.”

The young boy’s voice rushed in once more to reclaim the attention, annoyed at the interruption. “And some folks say that Old Scratch walks the Sundered Kingdoms and likes to take a dip in the river to wash off the dust from the road. When he does, the Sink forms

and takes anyone it catches back to the Nine Hells with Old Scratch himself.”

“It’s the work of witches!” one of the serving girls shouted, suddenly reddening in the cheeks as all eyes turned to her. “I seen ‘em myself, dancing on the bluff in the moonlight one night.... Well I did!” she finished with a huff, storming back to the kitchen in embarrassment at some of the snickers from the group.

“An old gnomish stone-talker passed through years ago,” Olson spoke up from his perch. “He told me that it was from a process of hydraulic erosion that created a deep channel and cavernous pockets that cause a powerful crossing undercurrent with a helicoidal flow.”

The room looked at him in silent animosity until he sheepishly went back to fruitlessly polishing the tarnished sword blade before him.

Deliberately turning his back on the guardsman, the farmer completed his earlier thought, “Yes, well, whatever the reason, once it forms and drags something in, nothing escapes from the Devil’s Sink.”

The room gave a silent chorus of nods in agreement at this profound piece of local wisdom.

Taking in the quiet room before him, all eyes on him waiting for his next revelation, the traveler cleared his throat.

“I see you are all well-versed in the legends of this village and its countryside. So now, let me tell you something that maybe you didn’t know. The story of your Cat’s Wife actually takes place before your grandfathers’ grandfathers were swaddled babes; more than 200 years actually, when the village was smaller and called Willow Bend. Back then, this area was more troubled by brigands and violence. It was ruled by a warlord called Olaf Magnus — Olaf the Great he named himself. He was a warrior by reputation, a Heldring descended from those southern invaders of centuries gone, and held a small keep near here called Karnistan. The Carneystone I believe you call it now, though it is little more than a pile of moss-grown rubble at this point, hardly recognizable as having once been a warlord’s stronghold.

“Olaf Magnus had a problem, you see. A company of mercenaries, little more than bandits really, had come from the east and threatened Willow Bend and Karnistan. Their numbers were too great for Olaf and his dozen household warriors to handle beyond holding the walls of Karnistan against them. He certainly did not have enough men to defend Willow Bend as well, and Karnistan was too small to hold all the villagers. Olaf needed help, and he found it in a warrior from foreign lands: a man called Ianecht.

“Ianecht was from far to the east, the lands of Irkaina—”

“I heard it was Khemit,” Olson interjected suddenly.

“The lands of Irkaina,” the stranger continued, with barely a blink at the interruption. “He was a warrior of great renown, and was said to be capable of besting a dozen men at once in battle. He was known for his strange curved sword — a scimitar they call it — and his famed helm, a steel helm that rose to a point with intricately wrought nasal and cheek guards. A veil of fine mail hung from the peak of the helmet covering its entire surface and extending down around the back to protect the wearer’s neck. But most recognizable was the great green gemstone set into the brow of the helmet. The stone bore a crack, supposedly from the blow of some giant’s club that the magic of the helm had turned aside, but was still beautiful to behold. It was said that Ianecht had claimed the helm from a mystical warrior of Ong he had killed in the far Zagros Mountains, and such was its enchantment that he was known to wear the helm into every battle, regardless of the odds, and emerge unscathed.”

“The deal is struck then,” the dark-haired warrior said as he extended a hand, palm bloodied, towards the older, blond-bearded warlord.

“Indeed, Ianecht of Irkaina. We have reached an accord. You will lead my men into battle against the barbarian invaders, rout them from the field, slay their lord, Varrish, and allow my men to claim the spoils of their camp to bring back to me. In return, you will receive as much gold as will fill your helmet and the hand of my daughter, Katya, in marriage. But for each of my warriors who fall in the battle, one handful of gold will be removed from the helmet...to support the dead man’s widow and family, of course.”

“Of course,” the foreign warrior replied, not liking the look or trusting the word of this Heldring chieftain.

The agreement made, Lord Olaf drew a dagger across his own palm. His was not embellished like that of Ianecht, a curved khanjar with silvered edge and fine engravings along the blade and hilt, but the old warlord supposed it would serve just as well to seal the deal with this heathen.

Ianecht kissed the hilt of his still-bloodied knife before cleaning its blade and returning it to its scabbard. Olaf Magnus made the cross of Thyr after wiping his own blade clean.

Ianecht looked at the old warlord and said, “When I return, I will claim my price. Be prepared to pay,” before striding off to make his plans.

The next day Ianecht rode out at the head of the short column of Olaf’s warriors. The warlord was nervous but felt he had no choice. His stiff leg prevented him from riding into battle effectively anymore, and he suspected such a ride would have been a fool’s errand anyway. He knew he was risking much to allow his household guard to follow this foreigner, but he had secretly told them that if the battle appeared to turn against them, they were to immediately withdraw and ride hard for Karnistan Keep and leave the mercenary to his fate. Olaf would then try to buy off Varrish with gold or women from the town. But this Ianecht’s reputation for victory was remarkable and confirmed, as far as Olaf could discern. Plus, Olaf thought, he really had nothing to lose....

Three days later, Ianecht returned, his scale armor a bit battered but unbloodied — at least not with his own blood. All of Olaf’s warriors still rode with him, their plains ponies laden with bags of spoils from Varrish’s camp. They confirmed that the victory was complete, carrying Varrish’s head in a bag as proof. The few bandits that had survived had fled east with no signs of stopping for as long as the scouts had followed them. Ianecht truly was a miracle-worker, it seemed.

More vexing to Lord Olaf, though, was that they could not explain how the victory had been won. They had scouted in the night and discovered Varrish’s camp of more than two dozen raiders. Ianecht had strategically positioned the warriors outside the camp’s perimeter to cut off any retreat and to come and reinforce him if called. He then slunk quietly into camp under cover of darkness with his curved sword drawn, its blade blacked with grease to prevent any tell-tale gleams from giving him away.

They said he had worked quickly and quietly, making his way through a half-dozen tents before an alarm was even raised. He was fast and the darkness hid his movements so that, even as the raiders arose and armed themselves, they could not locate the source of the attack and fell to his blade, often before they even saw it. Soon they began attempting to flee, where they encountered Olaf’s warriors hiding in the dark, their own blades thirsty. A few made it through, but seventeen perished all told, most in the camp itself, and Ianecht came striding out of the camp with Varrish’s dripping severed head. The foreigner was unharmed, and the camp was taken with almost no effort on the part of Olaf’s men. They quickly looted and made haste back to Karnistan.

Olaf reluctantly parted with the gold he had promised. The steeply pointed helmet proved to be deep and held more coins than he had expected. He attempted to “accidentally” include some silver coins among the gold, but the foreigner uncannily noticed each of them and demanded gold in replacement, which Olaf sheepishly provided.

Then Ianecht turned and beheld the lovely flaxen-haired Katya, a feral look in his vulpine eyes. Olaf did not like that at all, but the warlord had his own crafty ways, and the wedding date was set for a week hence in the beautiful spring meadow by the willows and cattails, where the mysterious whirlpool sometimes claimed careless fishermen.

On the day of the wedding, Ianecht rode to the meadow on his black charger. He had built a small cabin near the village and claimed that he would settle down to live his life with Katya there rather than take her away on his travels, so as to not deprive Katya of her father, or Olaf of the presence of the many dark-haired grandchildren he would surely soon have. This last he said with a wink and feral grin. The dutiful Katya looked on impassively, her heart unreadable in the matter, but Olaf felt the familiar twinge of discomfort at the foreigner’s familiar ways and vulgar allusions. He had crossed himself and murmured a prayer to Thyr more than once that his wyrd would favor his plan.

Olaf stood beside Katya, his daughter so shrouded in layer upon layer of petticoats, dress, and dressing coat, that she seemed almost a haystack rather than a woman. Her head was likewise heavily veiled in the Heldring wedding tradition. Ianecht thought that she must be stifling beneath all that clothing, but smiled at his own lewd thoughts of the events after the wedding that would relieve her of the many layers. Olaf saw the small, crooked grin on Ianecht's lips and grimaced to himself. He turned to look at Friar Rimus who glanced back uncomfortably, a sheen of sweat unseasonable for the cool spring day upon his own brow.

Olaf's warriors stood on either side in polished ranks of mail and spear, and Olaf wore his own legendary weapon, the sword, *Gylbladnir*, at his hip, its storied silver blade peaking above the edge of the decorative scabbard just enough to twinkle in the sunlight. Beyond the ranks of warriors and the father of the bride stood a knot of villagers wearing their very best, which didn't amount to much — more homespun and poorly tanned hides than anything — though several of the womenfolk did wear garlands in their hair.

Ianecht noticed that Warvis, the balding cordager, held his cap in his hands and twisted it fretfully as he looked on. The bridegroom made mental note of it but gave it little more thought. He wore his finest silk tunic and his fabled helm, but he had left his scale armor and scimitar back at his cabin. This was a day for the exertions of love not war. He dismounted from the charger and made his way to stand before the village friar beside his bride-to-be. He could hear her breathing in short, heavy breaths beneath all of the thick fabric and hoped that she would not swoon before the ceremony was over. He looked once more into the eyes of his future father-in-law and again did not like what he saw, but thought that as soon as the girl was his, it would not matter. He would have the means to control this warlord and his pathetic realm and put his own brood upon its ruling seat.

The wedding was short, too long still for the impatient warrior, and when the priest finally said the binding words and fell silent with the sudden click of his teeth snapping together, Ianecht turned to claim his bride. He lifted the veil to behold the lovely Katya and stopped in shock. It was not the willowy, flaxen-haired vixen who stood before him but the portly cordager's daughter with her jowly cheeks and pox scars. She saw the sudden flare of anger in Ianecht's eyes and her own rolled back into her red and sweating brow as her knees buckled and sent her to the turf. Distantly, Ianecht heard Warvis moan in fear.

Ianecht glared over the fallen form of his new bride into the eyes of the warlord. To his credit, Olaf Magnus stared back unflinching. Ianecht was acutely aware that he wore no armor save his helmet and carried no sword. Olaf wore his own blade, which Ianecht tried not to eye nervously, and had a dozen warriors at his back with full kit. He knew he had been outmaneuvered by this pompous prig, but had no means of vengeance at hand.

Olaf spoke calmly. "Surely you did not believe that the daughter of the lord of these lands could be given in marriage to a foreign warrior, no matter how heroic he be. Katya's hand must be preserved for a dynastic matrimony that will forward the interests of her house, not to live in a cabin with a man who lives off of the blood of others."

"I believe that the very foundation of your so-called house," Ianecht spit back, "was laid upon the blood of others, not the least of which: those Matagostian raiders not a week cold."

Olaf at least had the decency to look chagrined.

"Ah yes, well be that as it may, your dynasty has begun from humble origins and only truly blossomed into its own through blood. Our own overking in distant Courghais, for instance, Thyr bless his name, began with a scouring of these lands to bring them into order. But a foreign-born swordswinger with nothing to his name other than a blade, helm, and cuirass does not a noble make.

"I'm afraid an alliance between my house and your...cabin...will be impossible. Lanny the ropemaker's daughter is a maiden of age and ripe for childbearing. She will bring you many fine offspring with which you can form your own fighting company, if that is what you wish."

The light of mirth danced in his eyes as he spoke.

"In case you're wondering, I've taken the liberty to have your sword and your armor removed from your cabin in your absence."

Ianecht now quickly counted the warriors and realized there were indeed only eleven present.

"I believe by now Rothsgar should have them securely stored in Karnistan. They will be returned to you upon the birth of your first child by Lanny. You should have no need of them before then, what with your new husbandly duties and all, and after that... well, you'll have your own dynastic concerns to consider should you choose to try anything rash after your war gear is returned. And in the meantime, if you think to use your vaunted abilities in stealth to enter my abode unbidden for some nocturnal revenge, I think you'll find my mastiffs a bit more deterring than Varrish's drunken sentries.

"So unless you wish to attack me with that pretty helmet, I suggest you load your blushing bride onto your steed — its withers look strong enough to bear up — and prance merrily home to your 'castle' to let the nuptial activities begin."

Ianecht, gave one more glance to the sword at Olaf's belt, before abruptly turning away.

"Very well, Olaf the 'Great,'" he mocked as he strode towards his horse. "You have proven both the shrewdness of a usurer and your own perfidy, qualities often occurring in twain with those of so-called 'noble' blood, I am told."

He mounted quickly and gave a final backward look.

"But this is not over. I will claim my price."

With that, he kicked his heels and the charger started away at a canter.

"That's a load of poppycock," the cook chimed in. She had just come from the kitchen after banking the coals of the oven, and stood in her flour-dusted apron listening to the tale. "Everyone knows that Olaf Magnus was a great man who ruled these lands after defeating dragons and demons with his magic sword. He was no petty tyrant or deceiver. You presume too much, traveler."

The crowd knew well the tales of their region's legendary hero. Olaf the Great was a valiant warrior who went to his grave with name unblemished, though none had considered before a possible connection between his reign and the humble pile of rubble they called Carneystone.

"Oh, an expert I see," the tale-teller rejoined with some mirth. "Indeed, Olaf Magnus defeated the Giant of Gyrth Lunlow with his bare hands, climbed the Cliffs of Parma with a lamed leg, and upon his death, was taken away along with his fabled sword by the Fairy Queen herself to ride forever in her royal entourage. How can one argue with that and claim he was but a man who lived a life and died a death like any other man? Preposterous, I know!"

As he spoke, the stranger dug about among the clanking contents of his knapsack until he pulled forth an object wrapped in a dirty linen cloth. He carefully unfolded it to reveal for all a sword hilt that lay within. It was clearly of fine workmanship and had obviously once been of great value, but now the wire wrapping the hilt was broken, bent, and largely missing. The delicate filigree of the quillons was dented, scarred, and gummed by countless years of grime and neglect. The pommel cap was long since gone, and the shattered blade ended at a broken edge only inches above the hilt, but even in that short length of steel, the amazed onlookers could see the tarnished silver lining its edges. Though broken and much abused, it was just possible that this could be what remained of the legendary *Gylbladnir*.

"How came you by that, graverobber?" Olson shouted as he leaped to his feet, instinctively taking on the heroic tone and grammar that he believed the situation called for.

"Peace, peace, guardsman. No grave has been robbed, and many things of interest can be found just lying around by those who know where to look. But let me continue my story; we have not even reached the tale of the Cat yet."

Olson resumed his stool and reached for his ale jack, the short sword forgotten where it lay on the bar. The cook, hands firmly on her wide hips, eyed the stranger suspiciously. The hostler swallowed audibly as he sensed the mood in the room growing sour.

Nonplussed, the traveler resumed his narrative.

"The disappearances began one night not long after that. It was Lanny the cordager's daughter who was the first to go missing. Ianecht had, of course, not taken her to wife,

abandoning her to her shame and back to her father's household — though truth be told both she and her father were happier for it. One fine evening as the Pale Sister shone overhead, she had gone out to bring the wash in from the lines. She never returned. The village turned out the next day to find her, fearing she had run afoul of some malicious vagabond such as wandered the troubled lands, or had perhaps taken a bad fall in the dark. Even Ianecht assisted in the search, though he gave no notice of particular grief or joy at the disappearance of the one who was legally his wife.

“Lord Olaf had half of his men join the search after the second day, and they brought with him some of his mastiffs as had been trained in tracking. Catching her scent near her home, they hadn't followed the trail far before the dogs stopped and began howling and rushing around in circles. There, amid the beaten down grass, they found recently dried blood and the prints of some great cat, like a cougar or panther. The dogs refused to go farther.”

It was difficult work continuing the search without the mastiffs, but continue the village folk did, grim-faced and tight-lipped about what they feared they would find. The dogs, proving of no use, were sent back the keep, but the warriors remained in the search, now wearing their mail hauberks and gripping spears with white knuckles. They found her by accident, really. One of the villagers not involved in the search was walking along the riverbank to check his fishing lines, when he noticed a cloud of flies in the rushes at the bend. There, among the cattails, he found Lanny, or what was left of her. Her body had been savagely mauled and the tender parts of her eaten by some foul beast. The rest had been thrown among the reeds to rot under the sun.

The villagers and warriors searched far and wide starting from the area of the bend. They did find a few more isolated tracks of the great cat that had done the deed and smears of dried blood here and there, but they were never able to pick up the trail. The perpetrator, now with a taste for human blood, was still at large.

Things settled into a sense of normalcy of a sort after a few days, though Warvis became withdrawn and was never known to have spoken a word again, twisting his cord into rope alone in his cottage, always with a haunted look on his face. Lord Olaf's men patrolled the village and surrounding lands, always in armed groups and always with at least one mastiff, but they found no more sign of the cat.

However, three nights later, when the people were just starting to think that perhaps the beast that had done for Lanny had moved on, another villager disappeared. Another woman, this one was Alyss, the young widow of a fisherman who had fallen drunk into the river and drowned the previous year. She had not yet remarried, but was known to have formally set aside her mourning scarf recently and had a number of potential suitors already preparing to court her. She was walking from a small chicken coop behind her parent's modest home with eggs she had gathered in the early hours of the morning, before the setting of the moon, when her father heard only a small shriek and then silence. Looking out back, he found her egg basket where it had dropped, the fresh eggs broken from the sudden violence, but no sign of Alyss. With the coming of morning light, he found the tracks of a large cat all around his yard and the family's dog dead out by a tree, where it had apparently been surprised and eviscerated.

The search began again, this time in large armed groups, but again failed to be able to find an actual trail left by the tracks. The beast was cunning for sure, always managing to walk on hard ground or take to the trees when possible to minimize any trail. It was only after several hours with no luck that one of the local boys thought to check the river bend. Sure enough, the freshly slain and partially devoured remains of Alyss were found lying among the bent and bloodied cattails.

After this, the village took on a veritable siege mentality. Groups of townsfolk carrying torches, armed with pitchforks and sharpened hoes, and accompanied by their farm dogs, walked the village's streets through the dark hours. Lord Olaf contributed a few of his guards and mastiffs from time to time, but mainly kept them in around Karnistan to protect his household. Yet despite these precautions, folk continued to disappear — always young,

single women and always at night. Sometimes terrified shrieks would be heard in the darkness, sometimes the scream of a great cat would sound. The scene of the attack always had the same particulars, the woman caught and bodily dragged away with a scattering of giant cat tracks in the area. On occasion there would be splashes of blood, and when the townsfolk grew wise and began barricading their daughters inside at night, the attacks would come by smashing through windows or breaking down locked doors. In these cases, the woman's entire extended family and friends might lie scattered about in various states of slaughter from trying to defend her, but the woman herself was always missing and was always discovered later, dead in the cattails along the river.

Lord Olaf and the townsfolk began setting a heavy guard on the cattails at the river bend, but there were many patches of cattails growing along its banks, and if one patch was guarded, the poor woman would be found in a different one — though the cattails at the bend, now broken and crushed by the many disturbances of massacre and subsequent search, did appear to be the beast's favored feeding place. Yet despite all of these precautions, no one ever laid eyes on the hunter, except for a few claims of catching sight of a great cat with blackest fur, though these were possibly just the fired imaginations of a hunted and fearful populace.

The fact that the victims were always single women of marriageable age was not lost on Lord Olaf, and it wasn't long before he and his warriors came calling at the cabin of the one man in the area who could claim to have been cheated of his bride. Ianecht seemed unintimidated by the armed host gathered before him, amused even, but a thorough search of his cabin and belongings was unable to find any evidence that might somehow connect him to the attacks. He assisted in the village's searches, but displayed a certain disinterest in the proceedings that only raised the suspicions of Olaf.

The lord secretly wished to execute Ianecht on the spot but held some doubt as to the foreigner's culpability — the ability to summon or command a great black cat had never been mentioned among the warrior's exploits. Also he knew Ianecht did enjoy some reputation abroad, so that his murder could potentially bring retribution from unknown quarters upon the house of Olaf. So in the end, he decided that having the man beaten and banished would be sufficient.

Three of Olaf's men took turns striking the man, who did not fight back, and with his own vaunted combat skills was able to twist and avoid the worst of most of the blows even when held by the arms. The men, also remembering the slaughter Ianecht had perpetrated on the Matagostians some weeks before, were perhaps a bit half-hearted in their own attempts, hoping to avoid a provocation that would bring this dangerous man into lethal combat with them even if he was one and unarmed against their armed twelve. The end result was that, after an unsatisfying 20 minutes of quiet grunts and poorly landed blows, Ianecht was allowed to pick himself up from the dust, seeming not overly the worse for wear, gather up a few belongings, and depart on foot to never to return to Willow Bend again under pain of death. Olaf kept claim on his horse, his sword, and his armor as surety against any future treachery, though in his heart of hearts, he hoped that the unarmed traveler would run afoul of the hunting beast out in the countryside and an end be made of him.

It was one week after Ianecht's disappearance that Olaf's worst fears came to pass, the first night of a spring full moon with the Dark Sister gibbous and waxing. By this time, the disappearances of women had continued for six weeks and the total of the lost was at nine, a majority portion of the village's young women of eligible age. In fact, several girls of the village had suddenly married beaux in hopes of staving off the depredations of the cat, and this actually seemed to be working, as none of these married women had yet been victimized. Olaf was even then considering this option for his beloved Katya, who had until then remained confined within Karnistan Keep under heavy guard. He had written missives of proposed alliance with several eligible lords in the area and was impatient for an affirming response when he discovered that his time had run out.

Olaf's first notice that something was wrong was the sudden excited baying of the mastiffs. He and five of his men were in the village at nightfall seeing to a vagrant wanderer who had been caught on the road outside of town earlier in the day. After several hours of

hard questioning, Olaf was convinced that the wretch truly was just a former tradesman down on his luck and no threat to the bunkered village. He had given the order to have the man locked in a root cellar and thrown out of town in the morning, and was making his way astride Ianecht's own magnificent charger back towards the keep beneath the light of the two moons, when the faint howling began in the distance.

Lord Olaf kicked his heels into the horse's flanks, quickly bringing it to a gallop while the shorter ponies of his men soon fell behind. Olaf drew nearer to his fortress, and his panic grew as he realized that the sounds of the dogs was becoming fainter and fainter, as if one by one the mastiffs were ceasing their baying. He then began to recognize the cries and shouts of men, though these were too faint to make out from the distance. His worst jolt of fear was when he heard the horn being sounded. One of the men had found Olaf's old hunting horn and was blasting upon it for all he was worth, but that too suddenly ceased and the old lord's heart sank further.

When he arrived at the keep, the gates were closed but no guard challenged him from the squat gatehouse above the portals. By standing upon the saddle of the great horse, he was able to reach up and grasp the planks of the platform, and despite the protest of his aging muscles and the dragging weight of his mailed shirt, he was able to pull himself up. The dead, staring eyes of Rothsgar that greeted him as the man lay in a pool of fresh blood upon the gatehouse floor were shock enough. The carnage that awaited him within the small bailey below, though, made him stop short. The mastiffs were all dead. He could not count them to know for sure of their numbers, because so many of them had been reduced to savaged pieces of bloody flesh. Among them were strewn three or four of his warriors. Like Rothsgar, they had all been savagely mauled, their spears broken, their throats torn out.

Drawing *Gylbladnir*, Olaf grimly made his way down to the bailey and into the small keep. Within he found more slaughter. The rest of his guards were dead, and before the broken door to Katya's room slumped Friar Rimus, his mendicant's robe soaked through with blood from his opened throat, the cross of Thyr in a death grip in one hand, and Olaf's shattered hunting horn still at his lips. The lifeless eyes of the old priest looked into the room of Olaf's daughter beyond the splintered door. The room was a shambles and the lone window that looked out over the courtyard below had been swung open — he was sure that window had not been open when he had made his way carefully across the bailey. A quick glance confirmed that Katya was not in the room, and despite the many signs of violence, there was no blood.

He pondered this a moment until the nickering of the charger outside reached his ears through the open window. It was not a noise of alarm, but rather one of familiarity. Eyes wide with fear and realization, Olaf dashed from the keep. Raising the bar with a panicked surge of strength, he threw open the main gate. The charger still stood where he had left it, alternately cropping at the road's weed-grown verge and raising its head to look out into the night. Following its gaze, Olaf could just make out distant movement in the moonlight. It was a black form and large. It had a strange loping stride, as if sometimes running upright like a man and sometimes dropping to all fours. But the gleam of golden hair he could make out over the creature's shoulder, glinting like a candle in the light of the Pale Sister, told him all he needed to know — it had Katya, and it was heading towards the bend in the river.

Olaf leaped astride the warhorse and kicked it to a gallop in pursuit of the beast. His straggling warriors had just reached the final turn in the road to Karnistan when they caught sight of their lord spurring madly towards the river, the reins clutched fiercely in one hand and the silver cross of Friar Rimus in the other. They turned to follow, but soon lost him from sight in the darkness.

When Olaf reached the bend, all was quiet save the gurgle of the Sink as it formed in the pool. A passing cloud had darkened the lands below so that he could make out nothing among the cattails as he approached, until he caught the glint of two golden eyes, their pupils vertical like those of a cat. He stopped the horse as he watched the gleaming eyes rise from their position amidst the rushes. The creature was standing up from a crouch to reach its full height, well over six feet. As the cloud passed, Narrah, the pale moon, bathed it in its light revealing a beast covered in short black fur like that of a panther, now spattered

in gore, wide, pointed ears laid back, and a red maw with wickedly curved fangs. It stood like a man atop backward bending legs like those of an animal, and gripped within one of its claws was the golden hair of Katya, her unconscious form slumped beneath from where she was suspended by the scalp.

Lord Olaf paused in indecision, fearing that harm might come to his daughter.

"I will claim my price," the beast growled, its low voice like tumbling stones but its foreign accent unmistakable as that of the Irkainan.

The werebeast stepped back into the mud of the riverbank dragging Katya with it, and Olaf realized that it intended to release her unconscious form into the river to be swallowed up by the churning grip of the Devil's Sink. With a cry, he spurred the charger forward. The sudden move startled the warhorse and caught the were-creature off guard. The horse bounded over the distance in less than a second and reared in surprise. Where the man-beast had been standing, now a great black panther crouched and leaped away from the horse's flailing hooves with great agility. Katya lay unconscious in the mud where the creature had dropped her.

Olaf jumped to the ground and quickly dragged his daughter's still form farther up the bank among the bulrushes, creating a safe distance between her and the greedy clutches of the vortex. He turned to look for the panther only to find it in mid-leap coming at him. Only the sudden reflex to raise the silver cross still clutched in his hand saved his life. The beast flinched away from the shining metal at the last second, and merely bowled Olaf over rather than disemboweling him. The beast landed from its leap a dozen feet away, while Olaf sat down hard in the mud. Even as he struggled to rise, the creature was already upon him. It was difficult to follow with the eyes as it moved, and its shape seemed flowing and immaterial. In the moment it took to reach Lord Olaf, it was once again a walking man-beast hybrid, and his second attempt to raise the silver holy symbol against it was met with a dismissive backhand from one of its clawed forelimbs.

The force of the blow slammed the cross back into Olaf's face, causing a brief shock of pain and then numbness around his mouth. He tasted iron and felt where his shattered front teeth had been knocked from their sockets. The cross itself bounced among the reeds before settling in the mud not far from Katya's barely stirring form.

"You are old, Olaf. Past your time as a warrior," the beast rumbled as it paced to place itself between the battered man and the silver object so recently lost. "You should never have deceived me. Your daughter was mine by right, mine to claim. She was the agreed price and will be your undoing. You should have stayed at home by a warm fire and watched your grandchildren grow to be stronger, better than you could ever have been. The house of Magnus is an insignificant trifle beside the blood of the Beast. Now your blood ends here."

Olaf rose unsteadily, spitting blood and teeth onto the muddy turf beneath his feet.

"I have done ill before, dealt in half-truths and lies when necessary to reach my position and secure my place. I have not always been honorable and have many regrets. But to refuse to give my daughter to a filthy creature like you, Ianecht, is not now, nor ever will be, one of them."

Having regained his feet, he took a shuffling step to the right, his lamed leg aching unbearably under the strain it had endured recently. He didn't know how much longer it could hold up or how long it would take for his remaining men to come to his aid; he could hear their galloping ponies approaching in the distance.

The beast, Ianecht had heard the approaching horsemen too.

"You hope for your men to save you? I will let you watch the carnage while I slaughter them before you and feed them and your daughter to the Devil-Below-The-Waters. Their spears and blades will find no more bite upon my flesh than did those at your fortress, or did you forget?"

"I did not forget, Beast," Olaf spit back at the creature while taking a second, surer stride to the right. Ianecht matched him step for step through the reeds, making sure to stay between the old lord and his daughter...and the silver cross. "I know of your kind and have thought long over these last weeks as to what may be done to end one such as you. Silver is the bane of your kind as the color of moonlight to which you are held thrall, and the plant monkshood is said to bring great discomfort, though I do not know if it will work for a

creature of cat blood as for that of a wolf. Alas, I have none.

“But you forget yourself, O Ianecht of Irkaina. You are a warrior of great renown who has gained your reputation through strength and speed and secret shield against harm, through a power most unnatural, against foes who did not know of the means of your prowess. Before you stands Olaf Magnus, Lord of Karnistan, Olaf the Great. I am old, it is true, but my legend grew from trial against those of my own kind with no enchanted strengths or unnatural armors. I have contested against better men than you, toe-to-toe, blade-to-blade, and face-to-face in battle soaked in spit, blood, and piss with no hidden tactic or trick, only the strength of sinew and the courage of my heart. And I have won them all. And do you forget, cowardly animal, I still bear at my side the fabled *Gylbladnir*?”

At those words, Olaf drew the sword; the moonlight glittered upon its quillons of filigreed gold and shone brightly along its silvered edge. It was immediately obvious from the expression on Ianecht’s bestial face that, in his triumphant boasting and still-unsated bloodlust, he had indeed forgotten the storied blade or, at least, had discounted any chance of the aged and lamed Olaf from actually using it effectively.

Ianecht eyed Olaf uncertainly for only a moment, the sound of the riders growing increasingly near, then slowly backed a long step and stooped. For a moment Olaf thought that he intended to spring, but quickly realized that he had actually reached down and recovered something that had been hidden in the mud at the base of cattails. It was a dirty satchel that appeared to be stuffed with Ianecht’s clothing and worn boots, and looped into its shoulder strap was the nasal of Ianecht’s own storied piece of gear, the distinctive conical helmet he always wore in battle. With the helmet settled firmly into place, its nasal and cheek pieces covering much of his feline face but not obscuring the view of his golden eyes, the were-beast’s face took on an expression of new confidence and not a little glee. As the silvery light of Narrah struck the great green gemstone set in the helmet’s brow, Olaf now saw that the jewel seemed to glow with its own light. Even the crack that marred the face of the stone did nothing to diminish the sense of inner fire expressed by the green gem. Olaf had a sinking feeling at Ianecht’s donning of the helm and felt sure that it held some mysterious power of its own to counter whatever advantage *Gylbladnir* might have provided.

At that moment, the five riders burst through the last thicket of willows nearby. With pointed spears and cries of fury they saw their lord and the helmeted beast, and turned their steeds to charge the creature. The quick glance that Ianecht gave the new arrivals was all the opening that Olaf needed. With a sudden shout and a surprisingly leap from his lamed leg that brought fire to his knee and hip, the old warrior covered the distance between him and the beast in a blink. He brought *Gylbladnir* up and around in a great arc as he made his charge. Ianecht turned his attention back just in time to see the silver blade swinging down in a scything arc and attempted to duck under it. The blade rang out like hammer on anvil as it caught the brow of the helm just to the left of the green stone, cleaving through steel and the flesh and bone beneath.

Ianecht’s scream of rage and pain echoed across the swirling waters of the pool, as blood poured from a deep gash running from the top of his forehead all the way down and through his right eye, now a useless bloody pool. Olaf stumbled back in surprise, his own arm numb. He stared in disbelief at the hilt of the shattered sword in his hand, the blade now ended at a jagged edge only inches above the crossguard. The strength of enchanted Heldring steel had met the mysterious sorcery of Ong, and the result had been catastrophic.

Though injured more severely than he had ever been in his life, the bite of the blade not immediately closing as it would have if from normal steel, Ianecht was stunned only momentarily. The fury and agony from the wound that made his head feel strange and obscured his vision gave him a surge of adrenaline-fueled strength, and he rushed the staggered old warrior. Ianecht opened his great cat’s mouth wide and turned his head to the side so that it encompassed Olaf’s head from either side and bit down with bone crushing force. His great curved fangs pierced the Lord of Karnistan’s face behind the eyes and in the bone of the jaw from both sides. The man’s muffled scream was both ghastly and abruptly stifled as his body went suddenly limp, leaving him to dangle bonelessly from the cat-creature’s crushing maw. It twisted and jerked its neck causing the body to shake and twitch violently, great drops of blood sailing to the turf.

The horror of witnessing their lord's gruesome demise shocked but did not give pause to the household warriors of Olaf Magnus. They had all cut their teeth in the brutal battles and harsh survival of the Sundered Kingdoms. They had learned at the feet of their great lord, and had steel in their souls as well. The charge of horses begun before Olaf's initial leap completed its impetus even as the beast shook the last of the life from their lord's mangled frame.

The first spear to pierce the creature's breast caused him little harm, the mundane steel of its head would leave a hole that closed as quickly as it had opened upon being withdrawn — no blood flowed from the wound and the beast's heart felt no strain from the shock of injury — but the force of the blow driven by a charging horse and held by a full-grown, armored man did have effect. Ianecht was thrown backward more than a dozen feet, in the direction Olaf had slowly been leading him step by painful step.

With the man's head still clutched between his clamped jaws, and the cloven helm still set upon his ruined skull, Ianecht was barely aware of the short flight before it ended in a great splash. He released the body of Olaf and looked up with his one good eye to see the five warriors bringing their ponies to a skidding stop through the cattails at the edge of the pool. A quick look around showed him that he was well out into the waters of the pool, where the currents of the Devil's Sink reached with tenacious invisible fingers.

Ianecht immediately began to fight against the swirling current. His swimming strokes were powerful in his supernaturally strong body, but they were no match for the force of the waters. He watched Lord Olaf disappear into the center of the maelstrom below the rocky bluff, still clutching the shattered remains of his sword in fingers clenched in death. And try though he might, he could not escape the grip of the Devil's Sink. His last vision in the night air before he slipped beneath the foaming waters was of the five armored warriors along the bank. Three stood and watched, faces expressionless, while the other two crouched over something between them, hidden from view among the cattails. Then all was violently swirling waters, torrents of bubbles, and darkness.

Nothing escapes from the Devil's Sink.

The traveler's voice trailed off, hoarse from the length of the tale. At his glance towards the serving girl, she quickly grabbed up a full jack of ale from the bar and carried it to him. The rest of the room was silent as if still held in the grip of some spell.

As he took a sip from the frothy drink and wet his throat, the traveler looked around the room at the silent, wide-eyed faces and continued his tale.

"I was told by a fellow on the road once, that what the lord's men were looking at on the ground was the crushed body of Katya Magnusdottir. It seems as she lay unconscious among the bulrushes, the warriors, heedless of her presence in their charge, trampled right over her. So the werebeast's promise to end Lord Olaf's bloodline came to pass after all, though not in the way he had imagined.

"That proved to be the undoing of the village of Willow Bend. Though they had slain the beast, they had failed their lord and unintentionally killed the rightful heir of Karnistan. Whether they liked it or not, they had all done murder in the eyes of the law and thought that the only way to save themselves from a hangman's rope or worse, was to do what so many otherwise good folk had done in the Sundered Kingdoms back in those days, and head into the wilderness and join one of the many bands of roving brigands who gathered together and raided those weaker than themselves just to survive.

"They proved to have good fortune in that they ran into a good-sized band of ruffians camped in the wilds only a few miles off, who had been waiting for the return of a scout they had sent into the village of Willow Bend to report on it and the defenses of its lord. They confirmed that their scout was even then locked in a root cellar in the village, having been done nearly to death by the lord Olaf Magnus through hard questioning. With the further revelation that they had just thrown their lord into a whirlpool in the river, the brigands welcomed the new warriors into their ranks, and even let them lead the attack that swept through Willow Bend at dawn."

The talespinner paused for a small chuckle and shake of his head before continuing. The serving girl who had brought his mug still stood at his shoulder. The frayed collar of his soiled robe was tacky with some dark substance. The hostler had assumed it was food when the stranger had first walked in. The serving girl now cocked her head and looked at it oddly.

“They reached the root cellar holding the scout first, and regrettably informed the other brigands that their man had already been murdered by the villagers — stabbed through the heart. And if one of Olaf’s former warriors was even then wiping the blood from his own blade, it was easily explained as being from a fight with another villager. This affront against one of their own apparently enraged the brigands and caused them to become wanton in their destruction. Few of the village’s homes survived burning, and even fewer of its inhabitants managed to avoid being murdered or carried off. Some few who did were mocked and beaten and tormented by the former guards with tales of the cat-beast and the death of Olaf to further terrify them into submission. Before leaving, the brigands made sure to stop by Karnistan Keep and thoroughly loot it, even pulling down its walls in search of a secret hoard of gold that Olaf’s men said had been rumored to be hidden there.

“By the time a group of travelers came through the area some weeks later, there was little left, other than the blackened rubble of former homes and a few hollow-eyed survivors trying to scratch an existence out of the ruins.

“‘Didn’t this used to be Willow Bend?’ one of the travelers asked an ashen-faced woman scavenging amid the rubble. ‘What caused all this?’

“Her answer: ‘The cat’s wife.’”

The traveler finished up his tale and leaned back in his chair, obviously pleased with himself over how deftly he had wrapped the threads of the story together. Still no one spoke. The serving girl behind his shoulder reached out a tentative finger towards his stained collar.

The silence was broken by the sound of Olson’s stool scraping across the tiles. The guardsman puffed up his chest and slammed his sword home in its scabbard.

“You say a lot of things, stranger,” he said angrily as he started across the taproom. “You make a mockery of our town and its history, you turn Olaf the Great into a lying cheat, and you insult guardsmen everywhere with tales of betrayal and looting. I’ve lived in Cat’s Wife all my life, and I’ve been a guardsman for two winters. The guard has never betrayed this town and your stories of monsters and bandits only show that you’re full of lies. Where’s your proof? Where’s your *evidence* of any of this?”

He placed emphasis on the word ‘evidence’ having only recently learned its meaning from Bailiff Krecher and liking the official way it sounded on the tongue.

He stopped before the traveler and crossed his arms over his broad chest as if in defiance of all that had been said. The hostler fretted near the bar, and the cook continued her vigil, hands on hips, alternating her glare between the storyteller and the guardsman.

The serving girl lightly touched the collar of the stranger’s robe and drew it back to examine the sticky red substance she found on her finger.

“So it’s evidence you want, is it?” the stranger replied. “Well, let me see what I can come up with.”

He reached again into the softly clanking knapsack and withdrew another cloth-wrapped object. This was much larger than the sword hilt had been, which now lay carefully on the hearth next to his chair. The bundle was about the size of a head of cabbage and was wrapped in a coarse layer of burlap that seemed sodden, as if it had recently gotten damp. He carefully unwrapped the object and presented it for Olson and all the rest to see.

The children and even some of the adults gasped, but others had seen a human skull before, if not perhaps one so deteriorated and stained from long burial or immersion. Many parts of it were missing, and most of the bone was a dirty brown from years of decay and staining. It was clearly large, as if it had belonged, not to a giant, but to a true bear of a man, and its thick brow seemed to imply a regal power. Most telling, however, was the damage it had sustained. It was missing many teeth as a result of its poor condition, but it was clearly apparent that the front teeth on both top and bottom had been broken out forcefully rather than falling out from natural deterioration, and indeed, the bony upper portion of the

mouth was cracked and crushed as if by some powerful blow. More gruesome still, though, were the great round holes with remarkably clean edges that were bored into the skull, as if someone had taken a hammer and driven spikes into it. There were four of them: two in the upper part of the skull just behind either eye, and two in the lower part where the jawbone once connected. It was easy to visualize a pair of great fanged jaws clamping down on the skull's face and making those holes.

Even Olson was silenced by the presentation as all considered the implications of the skull and the story they had just heard. So engrossed were they that none, save perhaps the traveler himself, heard the serving girl as she examined her reddened fingertips and whispered softly, as if in shock, "It's blood...."

If the traveler heard the words, though, he appeared to give no notice, engrossed instead in the confrontation provoked by the pompous guardsman.

"Still not convinced, eh? Well I may have one more thing in here that might clear the doubt from your mind."

He rummaged once again in the bag, the metallic rattling of before, this time, clearly heard by all. The room held its breath as he withdrew the final item, still dripping with moisture. It was an ancient battle helm, conical in style like those sometimes seen on warriors from eastern lands. It was badly corroded and pitted with several holes rusted all the way through. A fine sheet of mail once descended from its crown but had long since corroded away, leaving little more than a fringe of almost unrecognizable links rusted into a contorted configuration. Two cheek pieces and a nasal had once existed and still remained in a badly deteriorated state, and it was the cheek pieces that clanked and rattled each time helm was moved.

One would have thought that the most striking aspect of the helmet was the great green gem mounted into its brow, a gem marred by a large crack running across its surface, but of more interest to the current audience was the great rent in the brow of the helm just to the left of the stone, where a cleaving strike of great power had once struck home.

The hostler's mouth went absolutely dry at the sight of the cloven helm as understanding dawned in his mind.

The serving girl, coming out of the shock of her own discovery, said in a slightly louder, if still breathy voice, "It's blood on his collar," as she held her finger up for all to see.

With almost painful slowness, the stranger raised the helm and placed it on his head. It fit as perfectly as if it had been made for him. The rent in the brow lined up exactly with his sightless right eye, and it was now clear that one of the deep vertical creases above his own brow made a flawless path for a scar from a blow such as would have cloven the helm.

His own voice was little above a whisper but clearly carried across the room as it took on a low, growling quality. "I have come back to claim my price."

The serving girl screamed and dropped the tray that she had been holding in her other hand. Children started crying as adults bit back oaths and scrambled to grab them or retreat from the helmed tale-teller as quickly as possible, many tripping over chairs and stools in their chaotic haste. The hostler fainted dead away, slumping over the bar before rolling to the floor in a heap, while the cook just looked stunned.

Only Olson seemed to have his wits about him. He moved, though woodenly, as if perhaps he had imagined just such a scenario a hundred times but never for the life of him thought that it could actually happen. In a flash the old sword was drawn, its battered and scarred blade raised overhead. He had claimed it was a gift from his uncle, a famed adventurer of great renown in a faraway land that no one had ever heard of, but he had actually found it among the castoff garbage left by a traveling merchant. He brought the humble sword down as hard as he could onto the left forearm of the man who sat before him. He felt the satisfying sensation of flesh and muscle parting beneath the blow and the solid *thunk* of the blade biting into bone. In fact, the sensation made him feel a little sick, but not nearly as sick as he felt at what followed.

In the sudden flurry of activity, the frightened serving girl had stepped away from the stranger's chair. Her upraised arms struck two paper lanterns dangling from the rafters and knocked them to the floor, where they were quickly consumed in a flare of light as their

materials combusted and equally quickly went out. Her sudden jump also upset one of the oil lamps hanging in a nearby sconce. Made from tin, the heavy lamp clunked to the hearth and then fell to the floor, its wick snuffed in the fall. The result was that the corner of the room was now shadowed except for the flickering light of the fireplace, its own illumination reduced to the orange glow of the coals among the charred logs. The shadows danced around the stranger giving him a feral, dangerous appearance.

As soon as the guardsman's sword struck home, the stranger raised his own right arm and brought his fist smashing down on the blade of the sword piercing his flesh. The force of the blow rang out with an odd clank, and the old blade shattered, sending Olson stumbling back. As the stranger rose, knocking his chair aside, the shards of steel that had been embedded in his arm fell away and the flesh quickly closed, leaving no indication that the wound had ever existed. He stepped back so that he was fully engulfed in the shadowy corner beyond the fireplace. Only his dark silhouette could be seen with the orange glint of the coals reflecting against the rusty nasal of his helmet and the pool of darkness that was his one good eye.

In the moment it took for a breath to pass after he had stepped into the shadows, the stranger's silhouette seemed to lose cohesion and shift somehow, taking a new shape, like that of some crouching beast of inhuman proportions. Worse, the eye had changed as well, taking on an amber color that seemed to glow in the dim light of the coals, and the pupil became a long vertical slit.

Olson could barely find his voice as he stood in shock, broken hilt of sword in hand. His voice waivered and sounded like someone much younger than his 22 years.

"But...but nothing escapes from the Devil's Sink...."

"True," the gravelly voice responded, almost a deep-throated purr. "Nothing escapes from the Devil's Sink, but sometimes the Devil lets you go."

The Pale Sister had nearly reached the horizon, its course through the sky almost complete for the night. The Dark Sister hung fat in its gray gloom, growing towards its own fullness in a few days' time. The gurgle of the whirlpool was gone, the waters long since having calmed from their turbulence earlier to once again present a placid surface to the Twin Sisters who ruled the night sky, Narrah and Sybil.

The noise of the waters was now replaced by a very faint buzzing. The first accumulation of flies, still too early in the day for them to gather in any great numbers, but the few that had now buzzed about a pale form lying in the mud among the cattails. It was a man of average height and build, his face worn from many years of life on the road, his hair held back by a simple brooch. A number of articles of clothing and personal items lay on the ground nearby, as if his pack had been hurriedly emptied. Among these items was a well-polished, lovingly cared for flute, identifying him as a minstrel, a traveler of roads and teller of tales. The man himself was completely naked, someone having removed his robes and boots. He did not seem to mind his ignominious condition, however, as his eyes stared sightlessly into the darkened heavens, his throat a red ruin where it had been torn asunder as the first of the flies landed upon the raw flesh to feed and lay its eggs.

The sounds of tree frogs and crickets had been muted for some time but now began to resume as the screams, and yells, and bestial roars that had faintly echoed across the benighted land from the distant village now began to die down. The fire flies still hovered above the pool, as if they wished to enjoy one more waltz with the Night Sisters before the dawn came and sent them to the that unknown land where fire flies, and moons, and quiet creatures of the night go during the light of day. So they cavorted and bobbed as they continued their primeval dance among the cattails.

REGRETS ONLY

BY ARLAN BULLARD

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Heavy

“Regrets Only” takes place at the Morricks estate on the night of the fateful wedding five years ago, when the curse was unleashed over the entire Morricks family and their guests as recounted in the adventure *Morricks Mansion* in the *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms Adventure Path*. Spoilers abound within for players who would investigate the curse, its effects, and its source. It is recommended that you not let your players read “Regrets Only” until after they have completed the adventure *Morricks Mansion*.

REGRETS ONLY

BY ARLAN BULLARD



i t

turned the parchment envelope over in my hands, grimy with tree sap and pitch. She had arranged that it found its way into my possession, I was sure of it. It was an invitation to the wedding of Larissa Morricks of Grollek's Grove to Lord Byron Beval of Endhome. The edges of the parchment invitation itself were gilt with foil and the writing on the creamy white vellum was in silver ink. Crafting each of these invitations must have cost a small fortune...and she had made sure I received one. Of course, it did not bear my name; there was no way I could be invited to this soiree of those rich and powerful with interests along the King's Road. In fact, bore no name at all. It merely gave the date and time of the celebration, and its location at the Morricks estate

outside Grollek's Grove. Where the name of the recipient should have been was only a blank line. At the bottom of the page was the address for posting a reply, followed simply by the words, "Regrets Only."

Things have not turned out how I had hoped, or even could have imagined in my wildest dreams. The world has turned upside down. The invitation is still in my pocket, though it's badly crumpled and even bears a stain where blood soaked through my coat. Most of the silver ink has flaked off, though down at the bottom it still bears its final line, as clear as if it had just been written: "Regrets Only." I'm sure you won't understand what is going on yet. It took me awhile to figure out myself, and I was here. To understand, you have to be told why I am here...

Her name is Miranda.

To those who have yet to experience the real world, I am not what you might call an appropriate suitor for a girl like Miranda Morricks. Niece of Lord Arvath Morricks, and best friend and closest confidant of his daughter, Larissa, Miranda spent her entire life among the upper crust of society. I could never figure out what she saw in a boy like me; born the second son of a fisherman on the Gaelon, I could have had a hard but honest life following in my father's footsteps, fishing and selling the catch in the markets at Endhome. However, my elder brother made certain I would have no part of our father's boat, nets, or catch. And, as for the parents of Miranda, the disinherited second son of a fisherman would have no part of their daughter's life, unless it was as a servant. Miranda, however, was a different story. From the first day we met by mere happenstance at a trade fair along the King's Road, we were a pair separated only by the prejudices of others.

The event of the year was the talk of every village along the road. Lord Morricks was having a grand fete to celebrate the wedding of his daughter to the son of Lord Alistair Beval, a powerful shipping magnate of Endhome. Byron Beval was a good lad by all accounts, an accomplished swordsman and the spitting image of his father. It was a match almost too good to be true for the Morricks family. All of the noble, titled, and favored families of the King's Road were invited and none would miss it. Tragically, I was not invited. But, as favored cousin, Miranda was sure to be at the bride's side as maid of honor, so of course I would attend. I had only to plan my entrance carefully. Contrary to what you may have heard, just because Lord Morricks was a benevolent altruist, his hired guards were anything but hospitable to the uninvited. Avoiding a cracked skull would require every bit of my cunning.

From my current home in the King's Road trade village of Barrelton, where I had served

as one of the many coopers' apprentices for the last few years, I made my plan. To start with, I sought out Sir Helfred. A noted man of valor and mighty warrior in his youth, he was now an old man invested in several trade companies who spent his evenings in the public house, reliving his long-past days of glory. With my last remaining coin, I plied him with drink and coaxed story after story from him until he was deep into his cups.

The barman, Otto, decreed, "As you're the one wot got 'im soddered, then you're the one wot takes 'im 'ome. And 'e better make it 'ome too, unlessin' you wants a cracked skull. An' I doubt yor master'll be none too 'appy to find out one o' 'is 'prentices got 'isself a cracked skull while out drinkin'."

Feigning a mixture of disgruntled reluctance and fear, I nevertheless helped the old warrior out onto the road and towards his home through the benighted streets.

After taking Sir Helfred to his lodgings, I quickly helped myself to some of his many fine clothes as well as the Morricks invitation that I knew he would have, while the old man snored away blissfully unaware in the next room. The reputation of Sir Helfred ensured that he'd receive an invitation, while his age and health ensured that no one would expect him to come, though a little known nephew on the other hand... I might have taken a small purse of gold and silver coins, as well; I knew Sir Helfred would never miss them.

Stashing my newly acquired lucre in my knapsack, I hurried to the staging yard where a train of wagons was preparing to head south in the predawn darkness. They carried hundreds of barrels — some empty, some full — to markets to the south, but I knew at least one wagon carried tuns of wine for the Morricks feast. A few silver pennies in the hands of a teamster ensured a spot for me among his wagon's crew, and as we rolled out down the King's Road, Ollie of Barrelton, the cooper's apprentice, ceased to be. Who I would become not even I knew yet, but I mulled over the many pleasant possibilities as the new coins rattled in my pocket.

The night of the wedding, I slipped in as easy as you please. No fuss from the guards. No raised eyebrows. No suspicious glances. Maybe I was meant to be a nobleman. No one knew Wilfred, the nephew of Sir Helfred, so no one knew what he should look like. The invitation and fine attire were sufficient to make me seem the part. Now to only avoid Miranda's family while trying to work my way next to her. It happened so effortlessly. Her cousin and her younger brother walked away from her to flirt with the Radditch twins. I guess they are into homely girls with the proportions of a fence post. I made my way over to my love. She lit up like a fire made from dry pine needles. All burning embraces and smoky looks in shadowed corners. After a wonderful night of flirting and dancing, she pulled me to the side.

"Meet me in the garden grotto before the second toast," she breathed. "I'll excuse myself from the table and meet you. Then we can be alone."

The smile she gave me promised more than a simple embrace.

I couldn't believe my incredible luck. My plan had gone off flawlessly from beginning to end and without any trouble whatsoever. Ollie of Barrelton was truly dead, just as Olin the son of a fisherman before him — dead and gone without a trace. Perhaps Lord Oliver and his lovely wife Miranda would soon be making the scene among the most esteemed social circles of the southern courts. It looked like the world truly was my river mussel.

But as I made my way to the grotto, I realized what a fool I'd been. Miranda's brother, cousin, and brutes in their house livery closing in around me told the tale. I wasn't missed by her family, they'd simply elected not to do anything in front of the party guests that might embarrass their host. Her cousin even laughed about how dressing a gutter stray in silks couldn't disguise his bark. In the dim light of the strangely glowing grotto pool I was seized. Struggle as I might, I was no match for the lot of them. I'm sure my arms, hardened by years of honest labor, could've beaten the soft noble sinews of the Morricks boys, but their hired men were commoners like me and knew the rigors of hard work plus the strengthening from years of hefting a sword. I took my lumps as they took their pleasure.

My head was swimming something fierce by the time another man arrived. He was a handsome young man dressed in the finery of a bridegroom, and he held a magnificent blade in his hand, the fencing foil of a swordmaster. It was Byron Beval himself, come to

see what the disturbance was. When he saw I was no marauder that the men-at-arms had captured, but rather just a common youth snuck into the party, his face took on a look of pity — and not a small amount of disgust at the blood and bruises the boys had delivered to me. He knew low class curs when he saw them, even if they did boast the blood of merchant-nobles in their veins. He ordered the ruffians to release me and looked suddenly startled at something beyond my line of vision, but I didn't stick around for the rest as I sank into the embrace of unconsciousness.

I woke later to the sound of a dog barking in the distance.... No...several dogs. Why were there dogs loose on the grounds? They sounded sick. I opened bleary eyes to stabbing pain. Something sticky, that I could only assume was dried blood, covered my hair. I was still in the grotto, its glowing waters now roiling fiercely as if at a boil, though no heat washed over my face from that direction. My fogged mind was trying to puzzle out how old Morricks had managed to achieve that effect when the warm sunlight and the reality of my situation suddenly sank in.

What? Why was I still here? At a minimum, I expected that the boys would throw me in the road, even if the young Lord Byron had stayed their beating. More likely, they'd have managed a more permanent solution for me once the groom was inevitably pulled back to the ceremonies. Why'd they leave me here? By the height of the sun, it appeared to be midday. Then it hit me. Other than the dogs, whose barking appeared to be getting closer, I couldn't hear any other sounds. No animals. No people. Wouldn't there at least be servants out and about? I looked down at my torn and crumpled clothing and tried to rise.

Almost immediately, I fell back to the ground with the world spinning.

Okay. Let's try that again. Concentrate.

Through the pain and the dizziness, I was able to stand. I had to get out of here before I was discovered and took another beating. I wondered where Miranda was.

That's when I saw it.

Byron was no longer here, but his sword — his elegant rapier — was.... Covered in blood. No people or bodies around. I could hardly imagine the young lord murdering the men who had beaten me and then discarding his own blade. But they were all gone and a precious family heirloom left behind, clearly after having been put to deadly use. This made no sense to me. As I bent to pick up the weapon, I began to worry that perhaps the twins and their goons had done something drastic to Lord Byron himself, and the first twinges of guilt and regret began to gnaw at my conscience.

Then I saw them. The "dogs" I had been hearing. Three of them. Vaguely human in appearance, but two dressed in the uniform of the guards from the estate, and the third in the finery of a wedding guest, perhaps even one of the Morricks boys, though it was hard to say. Their bodies were strangely twisted into this half-canine form, like werewolves from the fairy tales, but these were all too real and looked equally as pathetic and miserable as they looked dangerous. But the dangerous side definitely won out, though, as they gave forth inhuman growls from distorted throats and mouths bearing broken and bloodied teeth.

Three things I can do well: talk fast, swim fast, and run fast. The third saved my life that day. The garden wall that encompassed the mansion's grounds was not far from the grotto, and even though battered and woozy, fear propelled my feet. In addition, even though the creatures had taken on weird, doglike aspects, they had not gained their speed. If anything, their awkward postures and limb articulation slowed them somewhat. I made it to the garden wall — built more to seal out foxes and stoats than determined invaders — and vaulted halfway up its height, grabbing the top with one hand. Somehow, the bloodied rapier remained in my grip. The rough stone of the wall's surface gave my feet purchase, and I was over in an instant, dropping roughly among the concealing trellises of the vast vineyards that surround the Morricks estate. The pounding, scrabbling, and horribly mangled attempts at howls rising from beyond the wall I had just surmounted convinced me that the unnatural creatures were unable to climb the wall themselves, but I made haste in departing just in case.

Making my way carefully among the vines, I soon reached the southwest corner of the garden wall, and found a fairly secluded servants' shack that I carefully determined to be

unoccupied. Once safely inside, I took a moment to examine my wounds: bumps, bruises, a busted lip, and a lump the size of a goose egg on my forehead, but otherwise, whole and sound. I then sat for a moment to assess the situation.

What happened to Lord Byron and my attackers? What were those creatures? Where were the other party guests? Where was Miranda? I struggled with answers but I had no ideas. This was all far beyond a Gaelon River fisherman's son and King's Road cooper's apprentice. But I was also outside the estate walls. I didn't know how far this madness might extend, but I felt sure I could sneak away among the acres of vineyards that surrounded the estate and make my way back to the safety of Grollek's Grove nearby. I was already to the entrance of the shack, the door cracked open, and surveying the surrounding area for cover to make my way back among the concealing vines.

Surely Miranda had escaped this madhouse. Her family would take care of her, right? But what if they didn't? Was that dog-man her brother? What had caused that? And what if she was still here? What if I was her only hope?

Damn it...

I swung the door shut again and bolted it.

Looking around the shack, I found some supplies: a lantern; a rope; a light breastplate of boiled leather to replace Sir Helfred's torn clothing; and, most importantly, an array of weapons used by guards at shift changes. I found a greatsword — ha! I could swing that in my dreams. I still had Byron's rapier, though; I thought it would suit well enough. A couple of daggers. Aha! A crossbow and a full case of bolts. Fully equipped now, I made ready to make my way back into the estate grounds and find Miranda, or confirm to my satisfaction that she was safely away. I'm no hero, though. I had no illusions that I could save the day and solve the mystery of what was happening. I was only in this for myself...and Miranda.

I spied a bottle of good brandy on the table — likely spirited from the party by some light-fingered servant — and took a long pull to steel my nerves. Down it went, fiery and pure, calming me as it travelled. No sooner had I put down the bottle than I felt a sudden stabbing in my guts. I hadn't enjoyed many spirits of its caliber, but I had thought I could handle it better than that. Can liquor spoil? I hoped I hadn't poisoned myself.... Not a thought I wished to contemplate under present circumstances.

Waiting for the worst of the stomach pains to pass, I carefully made my way back to the nearby garden wall and hoisted myself atop it. From over a copse of trees, I could see the manor house rising some fifty yards away. There were no creatures in sight, but I didn't want to take any chances. As quietly as I could, I made my way down from the wall into the garden grounds. Without the immediate panic to bolster my strength, I could now feel every bump and bruise. My grip slipped on a moss-slick stone, and I fell the last few feet to the ground with a muffled thump.

The sound brought a figure crashing towards me through the trees of the copse. He was also dressed in guardsman livery, though its tattered remnants barely covered his grotesquely huge frame. Well over six feet tall and pushing twenty stone if I had to guess, he was covered in a matted fur. His eyes were squinted almost completely shut, but his ears had grown huge and elongated, and quivered constantly as if testing the air for even the slightest sound. He wasn't carrying a weapon, but he didn't need one, as his hands were incredibly large — even oversized for his frame — with nails that were thick and blood-crustled. Some poor unfortunate soul had already met those shovel-like appendages.

I loaded the crossbow and quickly aimed it at him for a shot. The bolt sailed straight and true, until his head jerked aside at the last second to send it sailing into the trees. It was as if he had heard it coming with those ears. A swiftly hurled dagger produced the same result; he was able to hear the missile flying through the air with uncanny precision and dodge accordingly. This did not look good.

He gave a gurgling cry from a mouth choked with new hair growth and charged at me. I barely had time to pull Byron's sword from my belt and raise it before he crashed into me, knocking me back into the wall. I expected to feel his crushing nails gouging out huge strips of my flesh, but instead I heard only a strange gagging and felt liquid warmth pouring upon my outstretched arms. I opened my eyes and saw that he loomed over me,

but that Byron's sword had effortlessly and precisely pierced the front of his neck and now protruded at least two feet from the back of his head. He gurgled the last of his life's blood upon my breastplate and collapsed beside me. Hearing a swinging blade or flying arrow was one thing, but a thin rapier blade held steady straight forward apparently made no sound for him to detect.

Withdrawing the thin blade, I stared at its unmarred, unbent length. Apparently there was some enchantment upon it. That would surely serve me in good stead. Wiping it and my arms as clean as I could upon the dead creature's tabard — there was little I could do for my breastplate — I carefully returned the sword to my belt and reloaded the crossbow. I was no crack shot, but I felt much more comfortable dropping some hideous monster from a distance than facing it up close, even with a magic sword.

Feeling the full exhaustion of my plight and the aches of my many bruises, I struggled through the trees towards the house, the beautiful image of Miranda before me.

Not wishing to expose myself by entering the elevated front door, I made my way through the garden to a small wooden door set into the house's stone foundation — a servant's door or storage room perhaps. I carefully slid the bolt and nudged it open with my loaded crossbow.

I never heard his approach, but a firm hand suddenly fell on my shoulder. I whirled on the man who now stood behind me and triggered the crossbow, but his reflexes were even faster and he brought a quarterstaff up under the crossbow, knocking it askew and causing my bolt to sail harmlessly into the air. He then quickly reversed the swing and brought the tip of the staff between my ankles, tripping me and sending me to the ground, my spent crossbow falling uselessly at his feet. I reached for the hilt of the rapier, but his booted foot stepped firmly upon my wrist and pinned it in place, while the thick wooden staff thumped hard against my breastplate, just below my exposed throat.

He paused, as if considering, and it gave me the opportunity to see my attacker. He was a tall man, though old, his hair iron gray and his face lined with wrinkles. His clothing was the rough garb of a groundskeeper and covered sinews hard from years of work and — from the way he used that quarterstaff — fighting. He was also blind, but his eyes were covered in old scar tissue, the result of some long-ago injury. He was no monster like the others, just a blind, old man who must have been a formidable fighting man in his day, now retired as a hired man by Lord Morrick.

"A crossbow, eh?" he said with a slight smile. "Well, you're not one of those creatures, then. They would as soon chew on a crossbow as try to use it proper. So you're trapped here like me, then. Well, that door'll do you no good. . . . Just leads to a storage room. A dead end. Come with me down to my quarters; there's a way in from there. The name's Argrim White, one of Lord Morrick's folk. Who do you be?"

I stammered out my cover identity from the previous night as he helped me to my feet and retrieved my crossbow for me.

"Nephew of a knight, huh? Not likely, with that speech. You have the tongue of a common lad on you. Oh sure, you try to hide it with high words and flowery speech, but anyone who's spent time among the gentry'd know the difference. You must've snuck in for the wedding, or maybe for a tickle with one of the serving girls?" Another dry chuckle. "Well, nothing for it, now; you're in deep for sure."

Argrim led me to another door nearby and into small room, the bed chamber of a simple man. Another door, bolted shut, led deeper into the house's basement. He bolted the outer door behind us as well, and sat me down on a nearby chair to hear my story. By the time I was done, he only smiled grimly and then told me what I had missed during my interlude with Miranda's brother and cousin.

It had happened after the second toast. Lord Morrick had just finished his speech, honoring his esteemed guests and the family of the groom, when madness struck. The guests began screaming. Some raved and ran about in a crazed state. Argrim couldn't see it, but he heard it from his quarters. And, after emerging and being forced to kill something that had attacked him, he felt its body and realized that it was a wedding guest that had undergone some horrible mutation into a monster. Something that the people had eaten or drunk had

caused them to change, to transform into mad, twisted creatures of violence and hunger. And it wasn't just the wedding guests; it was servants and guardsmen alike.

Not everyone changed, though. Some folk had fled the estate. Those who didn't were hunted down and murdered by the others. Argrim didn't know if Lord Morricks and his family had managed to escape, but he had not yet found them among the dead or the creatures he had killed so far. Young Lord Byron was dead — killed by a knife through his throat wielded by his own hand, which was beginning to show the unnatural growth of scales in transformation — but there had been no sign of his father, Lord Alistair Beval, or of the Morricks themselves. I felt sorry for the young lord's death and grateful for the use of his sword.

Argrim told me that Lord Morricks had taken him on his staff years ago after a fight with a troll had permanently blinded him, and he owed everything to the man. He said he would not leave the estate until he had either found the Morricks or confirmed they were no longer there. He was still searching the surrounding grounds bit by bit, as that was where most of the activity seemed to be occurring, but proposed that we work together. I was looking for Miranda, who was likely to be with the Morricks family, so we could make the tasks easier. He would continue his patrol of the greater area of the grounds while I searched the house, which he had yet to start, since he figured anyone who had made it to their rooms and locked the door ought to be safe enough for the moment compared to those who might be more vulnerable out in the garden.

I readily agreed to Argrim's plan and he told me where to find the family's quarters on the second floor and how to reach them. I never saw Argrim again. I miss his grim smile and even his scarred eyes. I hope he made it. I hope I do.

After parting ways, I worked my way deeper into the manor's basement, heading for the stairs to the first floor past the laundry. I hadn't made it very far before my injuries and lack of sleep began to catch up with me, along with the brandy that still sat in my belly like a ball of molten lead. I managed to find a secluded place hidden among the crates of a storage room before I passed out. Despite my exhaustion, I had very little sleep, and what sleep occurred was filled with nightmares and punctuated by the twisting in my stomach from the liquor I had drunk and a deep itching in my leg where one of the guardsman's claws had scratched me during our scuffle.

In the morning, I awoke having thrown up blood in the night and discovered a growth of coarse, rust-colored fur in a patch around my leg wound. I also realized that I had somehow cut my tongue in my sleep, adding to the blood that filled my mouth from that evening's vomitus. There was now a split in the tip of my tongue nearly an inch deep — perhaps I had held my dagger during the worst of the throes. The pain was not bad, though it made speech difficult. But my burning desire to find Miranda had not changed. I arose and took the laundry room stairs up into the house.

It has now been three days...maybe more. I have searched the manor top to bottom with no sign of Miranda or the Morricks. More than once, I have encountered more of the twisted guests and servants, each one's transformation more horrid than the last. But my strength has returned — the bruises healed amazingly fast — and the sword of the late Byron Beval has proven to be extremely helpful in dealing with the grotesque rabble. The last feral half-creature to see me actually turned and ran rather than fight. I was faster though, and managed to run it down and sever its spine with a quick stab of the foil's blade. It didn't stop squirming quickly enough, and I ended up tearing out a part of its neck with a bite. The blood doesn't bother me so much now, and my teeth feel stronger and sharper than ever — not even a hint of the familiar ache of the rotten one in the back that I have to regularly soothe with wine. I guess desperate times bring out what is truly important and mask the rest.

Though I have not found Miranda or the family, there are several bedchamber doors on the second floor that are securely locked and too strong to be bashed in. My knocks have brought no answer, though occasionally I fancy that I hear the soft movements of someone behind the one that bars entry to Larissa Morricks's room, based on what Argrim told me — the chamber Miranda was most likely to retreat to. Of course, those soft, furtive movements might only be the heavy fur that covers my legs scraping against the floor as I kneel

before the door, pledging my troth to the woman that I believe hides behind it. My mind grows foggy from time to time, so it is hard to concentrate and really think about what all that portends.

I am usually hungry, not starving as if I hadn't eaten in several days, but hungry nevertheless, with a stomach that growls constantly for nourishment. I must be eating occasionally, but I can never remember what exactly, and for some reason, I try not to think about it. Most of my time is spent kneeling at Larissa's door, begging, pleading, crying for Miranda to come out and save me...or me to save her — I forget which. She never answers my pleas, but I know she's listening — sitting in stony silence, just waiting for me to say the right thing so she will know it's truly me and that it's safe for her to emerge. It's hard for me to speak, though. This long forked tongue fills my mouth and makes words hard to form against the jagged growth of my teeth.

I lost the breastplate and crossbow some time ago; I forget how exactly. I still have Byron's sword and one of the daggers, though. Sometimes I think about using the dagger to scratch through the heavy wood of the door, instead of using my own bloody and torn nails as I have been doing, but every time I have the thought, it disappears before I manage to get the dagger out. So I kneel...and plead...and scratch...and feed...and soon my Miranda will come out to me...

UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

BY JEFF PROVINE

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“Under New Management” takes place in the city of Oestre when the Matagost civil war was ended by the invasion of Oceanus some two centuries ago. It reveals the presence of Oestre’s most prevalent cult and the names by which its leader and its secret meeting place are known, but does not reveal the location, and allows 200 years of history to obscure the relevance of any individual persons. It does not tie in directly with any of the adventures of the *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms Adventure Path*. Spoiler material in the tale is very light and consists of little more than what would probably be considered common knowledge in Oestre (that the cult of Fraz-Urb’luu has been present and pulling strings for centuries) and some historical information on the fall of Oestre (and all of Matagost) to the Oceanders. Unless you intend to expand your campaign to deal with the cult in Oestre in detail, there should be no danger in allowing your players to read “Under New Management” to get a feel for the cutthroat politics and maneuvering that have dominated the rich and powerful of the Matagost Peninsula for hundreds of years, as well as a taste of the Empire of Oceanus and its conquests.

UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

BY JEFF PROVINE



he streets of Oestre were quiet.

Caspir Fortine stood on the balcony of Markhouse and thought about the last night he heard quiet in the city. There hadn't been one, not in his lifetime and probably not in his father's either. Oestre hadn't been quiet since well before his own grandfather came to the city as a mercenary, after the first round of wars had wiped out a generation of native-born soldiers in Matagost. A Fortine always knew an opportunity.

Eighty-six years of civil war, and now the streets were quiet, tucked in under the thick blanket of the curfew. Maybe it just seemed that way to Caspir after the screaming of the past few days. The conquering commander, an almirante as the Oceanders called it, had conducted the traditional purges of any seized city. Anyone who did not fall into form under new management ended up on the stretching block — or the gallows. Some fool in the East Quarter tried to stage a riot, but the only apparent outcome was the deaths of a dozen or so leatherworkers. Since then, Oestre had been quiet, other than the rhythmic thuds of Oceander boots on conquered ground as they approached.

A ringing shout from Borthis ath Marco split the air and made the wine in Caspir's cup tremble. "They are *what*?"

Somewhere inside the expansive Markhouse, a servant would explain in a quieter voice that the almirante's guard was marching toward the house. Caspir guessed how long it would take before he could hear the hurried slaps of Borthis's slippers.

He was off by a count of two.

Something to work on, Caspir told himself as the doors to the balcony exploded open with a flurry of ostentatious curtains and Borthis's even more ostentatious dressing-gown.

Borthis ran to the edge of the balcony, catching himself by his own belly against the marble railing. He leaned over it, sucking and spitting air.

Caspir instinctively reached out his free hand. He could have hefted Borthis to his death with simple push. Instead, he caught the robe at Borthis's shoulder. What use was he dead?

The portly mogul stared into the street from under his thinning hair that he kept woven with fresh black strands plucked from some poor servant's head. It stood up at all angles; he must have lost his hat running. His family ring with the Mark rested on his right hand's middle finger, that gently sloping slash that owned a good portion of the city.

The first rank of soldiers marched in a smart turn around the corner that led to the public market, which had been closed for weeks.

Borthis stood tall and pointed at the soldiers. "They're coming!"

"Of course they're coming," Caspir said with a calm sip of wine. "You invited them, didn't you?"

"But they're coming *now*! We aren't ready for the party!"

"The invitation we sent said 9th hour non¹, and the bells should ring out nine any moment now."

Borthis threw up his hands, appealing to the god of deception. "Yes, but you say 9th hour non so that they show up at 10th hour non!"

¹ 9th hour non = 9:00 PM in the **Lost Lands**, the 9th hour past the "non" or noon hour. (9th hour prime would be 9:00 AM, the 9th hour past the "prime" hour or midnight.)

Caspir smiled. “When shams become the rule, I suppose we should always be on watch for betrayal by truth-tellers.”

“This is no time for your philosophy, Fortine!”

Caspir rolled his shoulders in a smooth shrug and turned to look at the soldiers marching up the long boulevard to the top of the hill where Markhouse stood. He narrowed his keen eyes.

They were marines, the cream of the military in the Empire of Oceanus, and the favored tool in the hands of any almirante. The short-bladed xiphos, in the ancient Hyperborean style, feared among many nations for how effectively they were used to stab in close-quarters combat — whether on the heaving deck of a ship or the filth-strewn cobbles of an alley — now rested on their hips in embellished scabbards. It would have been a bloodbath atop the city walls if the marines had gotten footing, just as it had been on the beachhead or aboard the ships of the counter-attacking fleet. Once the Oceanders came close, the battle was soon over.

The lead marines’ polished steel breastplates twinkled in the light of the street-torches. Behind several lines of marines, a rank of segundos marched in their polished brass. Then came the primero with a breastplate of polished gold. Tucked in behind him was the almirante, his breastplate covered in shining-white enamel with blue edges. More marines followed, packed close like a wall of iron.

Polished, polished, polished, Caspir thought. He took a sip of his wine.

Their armor must have been blinding in the strong sun of the sea, but here in the dim streets of Oestre, they stood out like a beacon. That gold breastplate must have weighed a quarter-ton on the captain’s shoulders. Perhaps it was only leafed.

Gold armor was a far cry from anything Caspir had seen. War had been a daily affair since long before he was born, yet Caspir doubted he had ever seen a soldier with a matching set of his own armor, let alone an entire company. Matagost was a land of men with scaled helmets over chainmail shirts, warhammers mounted with stiletos, assassins leaping through the streets in padded leather with a few iron studs set in it to dull any arrows flung their way. Matagostians would’ve melted that gold breastplate down to hire a company of mercenaries and turned the almirante’s enamel-plate over, letting the iron beneath take the brunt of a blow with the solid backing to stop anything coming through.

Caspir cursed himself for not realizing it before. “The almirante’s not riding a horse!”

Borthis gave him an outraged glare. “What do I care if he’s not riding a horse? So his boots will be dirty as he arrives an hour early?”

A long, slow sigh rolled out of Caspir. How could Borthis be so much older and so much wealthier, yet so much slower?

“It means,” Caspir explained, “that he’s not letting anyone from a window have a clear shot at him. See how much taller the soldiers around him are than the men in the front rank? The city’s been taken, but he’s not letting down his guard.”

“So the almirante’s a nervous fellow. He’s also punctual!” Borthis shook his fists. “What are we going to do?”

Caspir stared at his elder a moment. Finally, he looked away to drain the last of the wine from his cup. He tapped it on the marble like a bell.

A servant appeared. Gasoun, Caspir recalled, as he refilled the cup. Gasoun was a good one. “Summon my servants from my carriage. Tell Petri that he and the others are to entertain our guests. Your master, the almirante, and I are to be served with my prize eclectic wine. Green bottle.”

Gasoun looked at Borthis, who stared. The servant dropped into a bow and backed away. Caspir made a note to hire him as soon as he could get the servant away from Borthis.

“Now,” Caspir said, turning to Borthis, “my servants will serve while yours finish preparations.”

“But why—”

Caspir raised his free hand to keep him from going on. “We must be gracious hosts. Tell me, what is the purpose of this party?”

A sly calm seemed to settle over Borthis. He had been practicing this, at least.

“We wish to show our support of the two young men arrested for violation of the curfew two nights past, due to be flogged on the third day. As senior members of the Chamber of Merchants, of which the two are also members, we must speak up on their behalf.”

"Noble, but why would we actually do that?"

"To show our clout in this new city management."

Caspir saluted with his cup. Borthis cocked his head, his wild, half-combed hair flopping over his broad, pink scalp.

Tison Mercume and Yatt Lacule were young idiots, out delivering after dark because the rules didn't apply to them. There was no reason to break rules just because they existed. Rules were rocks: they might get in the way, or they might serve as steppingstones.

Caspir took another sip from his cup. The affair had worked out after all, as these things always did. The concerns of mortals, so complicated when seen as the Maze of Veils, simply followed the path of Fraz-Urb'luu's will.

Caspir sipped again and spoke in a lowered voice. "What is our actual purpose tonight?"

"To test the almirante," Borthis whispered. "Can we use him?"

Borthis's eyes went wide again. He spun and looked back over the balcony. The soldiers marching in unison had nearly reached the fountain that separated the private walk of Markhouse from the street. He ducked low behind the wall. "How can we use someone who shows up on time?"

Caspir didn't hide. "Would you calm down? And straighten your hair!"

Borthis's wide hands patted his head. "I should go finish getting dressed."

"Give yourself a moment," Caspir said. "You need to be calmer. Tell me, what's in the news?"

"This is no time for news!"

"There is always time for news. How else would you know what's going on?"

"All I can think of is the almirante marching up my walk!"

"Precisely your problem. There are a thousand other things happening in the city."

"Like what?"

After a moment's thought, Caspir said, "There's Pommo. He's ruined, you know."

"Pommo? Angelus Pommo? I saw him just the other day at the almirante's parade! He's fine."

"And how do you know that?"

"He had on his gold-fringed coat! Four of his fingers had rings. He certainly has his money."

Caspir let out a long, piteous sigh. "You cannot trust your eyes. That is the first Veil to brush aside."

Borthis narrowed his eyes as if that would help him see through the works of Fraz-Urb'luu. "What am I missing, then?"

"Perhaps if you listen instead of throwing up your own Veil of Words to blind you."

"Right. So, Pommo is ruined? Do tell."

"What is his business?"

"He's the wealthiest foodmonger in the city. His warehouse is packed with everything he bought up before the surrender. Lucio told me about it yesterday."

Caspir grinned. "Lucio has reminded everyone about it. And what is Lucio's business?"

"Lucio's a foodmonger, too. His warehouse is empty, though. My agents tell me he moved all of his foodstuffs out to the countryside."

"They are correct. Why did he do that?"

"So that he could flee the city if we decided to fight at the walls instead of surrender. No matter which way the battle went, he'd collect his goods from his hidden stockpiles or perhaps just sell the maps."

Caspir nodded. "Very clever of him, no?"

"No," Marco said firmly. "Since there was no battle, now his goods are in the boonies, and Pommo has a warehouse filled to the brim with thousands of Oceander stomachs to feed."

"What's wrong with their own food?"

"It's all stalled because the rains! Haven't you been paying attention to the weather?"

"I have. What of it?"

"The road to Highreach has been turned to mire since the army marched. Their supply-lines have been cut down to a few messengers on light horses. Heavy wagons won't get through. The Oceander army will have to buy their food! Once word about Pommo's stockpile reaches the almirante's ears, he'll stand to make a fortune."

"What is the almirante going to pay for food with?"

“Gold from the war chest, obviously!”

“What is obvious,” Caspir noted, “is that coffer-wagons filled with the Oceander treasure and payroll wouldn’t make it down the road, either.”

Borthis paused. “Promissory scrips, I suppose.”

Caspir laughed. “Yes, credit! Credit, that old prostitute! And who could refuse the credit of a military-governor who, with a word, could simply seize the assets? And who could demand payment on a specific date?”

Borthis rolled his head back. “Oh, poor Pommo. He won’t be repaid until the horns call our judgment day.”

“Perhaps he should have consulted with the mages’ guild and hired a few weather spells for sunny days.... Although, to my recollection, the guild has been out on a contract for Lucio.”

Borthis gasped. “Do you think he is behind all this?”

“Of course.”

Borthis stuck up a fat finger. “No, no, of course he is not! He’s a foodmonger as well. Once they’ve made off with Pommo’s stores, the Oceanders’ll turn on him.”

“Provided the almirante knew where his warehouses were in the countryside. Even I don’t.” It was a lie. Caspir’s agents had found eight of the fourteen, and he should know the rest within the week. “Besides, I have a feeling the roads will dry shortly after Pommo’s stores are gone.”

Borthis made a long humming sound. “While Lucio sits on a stockpile until the market reopens.”

Caspir saluted Lucio, wherever he was, with a sip from his cup.

Three loud clangs rang out below them, the sound of the heavy iron knocker at the Mark-house gate. Almost exactly at the same time, the bells rang nine. Borthis jumped. He nearly knocked Caspir over, but the younger man caught himself with a hand on the balcony rail. Not even a drop of his wine fell.

Borthis shrieked. “They’re here!”

“I’ll greet them,” Caspir said. “Go finish making yourself ready.”

Borthis sprinted through the heavy doors back into the house, his robe fluttering out behind him. Caspir waited a moment more, emptied his cup, and then followed after him.

The doors led onto a broad marble landing that stood atop twin stairs cascading with elegance. Each step was sacred wood marked with a bright carpet and a statue of a figure from myth on the banister. Some were reclining maidens, others were warriors locked in combat. It was all a great deal of show, masking the hidden entrances to the landing that led to other parts of the house.

The Oceander captains stood in the sprawling entrance hall, the open door showing the rest of their ranks standing at attention outside. Petri was already there, along with the rest of Caspir’s staff, collecting helmets and capes. In the middle of them all, the almirante stood holding his own helmet with its ostentatious blue plume—blue for the Emperor of the Oceans Blue, as his imperial master styled himself. He was a short man with the thick body of a lifelong soldier. His gray hair was cropped close to his head. Even at this distance, Caspir could see his piercing blue eyes scan the room and everyone in it. They settled on Caspir as he descended the stairs. Caspir gave a smile and a nod.

“Caspir Fortune, I presume?” he asked in his thick Oceander accent, leaving his captains behind.

Caspir bowed. He spoke in the practiced tongue of Fraz-Urb’luu, free of any accent with touches of them all. No one could guess from his speech where he was born. “You presume correctly, Almirante. Please allow me to welcome you to Markhouse.”

The almirante cocked an eyebrow. “Usually the master greets his guests personally.”

Caspir bowed lower. As he rose again, he watched the disapproving faces of the captains. “Master ath Marco and I are co-hosting this evening’s event. My apologies for his lateness. He has not yet heard that man waits on the tide, not the other way ‘round.”

A couple of the Oceander guard chuckled.

The almirante did not laugh, but his stone-cut face seemed to soften. “That’s an old Oceander proverb.”

“I find it prudent to learn anything of value,” Caspir replied. “You yourself must be well informed about our fair city, recognizing me even though we haven’t been introduced.”

The almirante pointed to Caspir's shoulder. "It was your sigil, actually. The bursting star. I've seen it on my patrols of the city many times. Most often stamped on goods in the brewhouses."

Caspir didn't look down at his own brooch pinning together the shoulders of his short cape. He knew it. He only smiled. "I must say I'm impressed. Do conquerors usually pay such close attention?"

The almirante's face became hardened again. "Oestre is a city of signs. A city of lies.... None of those crates would happen to have contraband in them, would they? Bottles and casks full of murky liquid seem like a good place to hide."

Caspir continued smiling. "There is nothing in them that I wouldn't have put there myself."

Before the almirante could say anything else, there was a melodic blast of unseen trumpets. Borthis came down the staircase Caspir hadn't. He was a huge man, tall and wide, now wrapped in finery assembled from a dozen nations. His shirt of Oceander silk stood taut around his belly.

"Greetings, gracious Almirante!" Borthis floated down the last few steps and glided to the open floor, turning slightly as he made a one-footed bow. He stuck out his hand with his Marco family ring standing out. Even before he was facing them again, he began a lengthy introduction. Caspir could only imagine how commanding Borthis must have felt.

The almirante raised a hand to hail him but said nothing. The other Oceanders left their faces blank with contempt.

Caspir couldn't help but smile. *Late and presumptuous, what a way to greet men of the conquering military.*

Borthis's monologue praising the Oceanders' reorganization of the city prattled on until Petri appeared with a cloth over one hand and a green flask of wine in the other. Three more servants appeared, each with a goblet for them.

As Petri poured the wine, the almirante eyed his cup. He then watched as Caspir and Borthis received their own.

Caspir cleared his throat. "Please, my almirante, take my cup. I understand the need for caution."

The almirante's blue eyes opened wide for a brief moment and then settled into a practiced stare. "Thank you, though I believe I'll take Master ath Marco's."

Borthis's face bulged, but he handed his cup to the almirante. It trembled before becoming steady in the almirante's firm grip.

"Cheers," Caspir called.

Their cups clinked. The wine had a strong honey flavor.

"Now, my gracious almirante, perhaps we could retire to a more private location and discuss the boys from the Chamber of Merchants?"

One of the segundos stepped forward, his boot clamping on the floor as it came to a rest. Borthis made a nervous sniff.

The almirante just raised a hand. "No, it's fine. These men don't look much like killers. Besides, if I am to have Oestre trust me, surely I must trust two of its most noble citizens."

Borthis led their trio deep into Markhouse, describing its history in flowery language. It had been built by Grigor Marco in the first civil war as a hilltop fortress for the aristocracy. Rumors whispered that only he knew all of the secret passages that honeycombed the walls. When the merchants overthrew the aristocrats in the next war, Borthis's grandfather seized the house. During the aristocrats' retaking of the city, Grigor offered his aid and added "ath" to his name.

Caspir sipped again from his wine. He wished he'd known Grigor. Instead, his contemporary was Borthis, who led them into the hidden parlor deep inside Markhouse.

The room was windowless. Caspir wondered how far underground they had gone; it was impossible to tell with sloping floors and decorative steps. The walls were covered with tapestries in beguiling geometric patterns as if they were created by a mad weaver. Borthis stood near the fireplace, setting his half-drained cup on the mantle beside stonework in strange and jagged shapes. Caspir reclined on one of the velvet sofas. The almirante sat on a wooden seat, his posture straight even though he was a hand's width from the chair's back.

Borthis posed thoughtfully. “Now, about those young merchants of ours. I certainly agree with you about straightening out youngsters. We were all like that once upon a time! What we fear is that too extreme a punishment—”

“They’ll be publicly flogged,” the almirante said plainly. “Same as all the other curfew-breakers.”

“But what will the people think of merchants being flogged!” Borthis protested.

“I hope they’ll think, ‘That looks painful; I shouldn’t be in the streets after curfew.’”

Caspir laughed.

“They will lose credibility in their shops!” Borthis said. “Who will haggle with a man bearing the scars of the whip?”

The almirante didn’t answer. He was staring past Borthis. Caspir leaned to follow his line of sight to the mantel. After a moment, the almirante stood, set his cup down, and crossed the room, never taking his eyes from the mantel. Borthis slid out of the way, holding his own cup in both hands and drinking deeply.

The almirante grabbed one of the strange stone carvings standing from the mantel and twisted it. It moved freely in his hand, turning upside-down. He stood back. Before, it had been a mess of angles; now it was clearly an ape’s face. It was almost human, but its ragged ears were splayed too wide and its mouth was too full of teeth.

As the carving came to its right-side up, it fell back into the mantel. Hidden gears ground. Beside the fireplace, a portion of the wall fell back. Its imperceptible seams became gaps, and finally the whole wall rolled away to reveal a tunnel.

“Demon of deception,” the almirante whispered. He turned back to face them. “Are you followers of Fraz-Urb’luu?”

Caspir shrugged. “If we were, would we admit it so flippantly?”

Borthis just nodded over and over again.

“Everyone knows of the cults in this foul city, but Fraz-Urb’luu?” The almirante shook his head.

“He has much to teach us of what lies behind the Veils,” Caspir said. “Would you hear our words?”

The almirante took in a deep breath and set a hand on his sword. “I would.”

Caspir set aside his cup. “Then it’s time.”

The almirante marched into the tunnel, his footfalls regular, but soft and careful, as if he suspected a trap. Caspir tucked his hands into his sleeves and felt the hidden cloth there. Tison and Yatt were forgotten.

They followed the almirante down the long tunnel as it twisted for more than two miles. It was lit by lamps that became bright whenever they walked near and snuffed themselves behind. Caspir had always wondered how the lamps worked, but he had never been in the tunnels alone long enough to disassemble one. There were entrances to other tunnels, but the almirante seemed to know to follow the wide path that led to the Silent Assembly.

The entrance to the great hall of gathering stood gaping under an arch covered in cryptic symbols. The almirante crept through it carefully. Borthis slipped out one of the side tunnels. Caspir should have done the same, but instead he pulled his purple robes tucked inside his sleeves.

He dressed quickly in the shadow of the tunnel and fitted the blank-faced mask to complete his ceremonial garb. Usually he wore pads in his boots and a pillow around his waist to seem a different man, but everyone knew he would appear at the same time the almirante did. Still he felt obvious. Someone might still recognize that the tall, pudgy cultist was missing on the same night Caspir came in his own build. Fraz-Urb’luu would be disappointed.

Caspir whispered an apology and promised to sacrifice. The orphanage would feast for a week from his wallet. He decided he should buy from Lucio.

Taking in a deep breath, Caspir followed the almirante into the Silent Assembly. The room was a sphere of stone, and the almirante stood in the bottom, where the floor was still stained red with the sacrifices earlier in the evening. Caspir let the edge of his purple robe sweep over the blood that had spilled from the cult’s hands when they made their oaths.

The domed ceiling was covered in decaying frescoes of great feats of the followers of Fraz-Urb'luu. The fires raged in the fallen city at the Betrayal of the Wall at Karthis. Storms ripped apart ancient ships, the sinking the whole fleet of the Oceander's predecessors by the word of one mendacious navigator. The dying adventurers of the Misguided Legion continued their march in endless circles in the desert, tricked by a map to treasure that never existed.

Between the floor and the ceiling, row after row of figures in purple robes and plain white masks stood on tiered platforms. They were all identically dressed, though some were gangling elves or squat dwarves. Caspir assumed the rest were human, and there must have been women among them. A few held ceremonial quarterstaves, leaning on them as if they weren't weapons.

One cultist was obvious as he shuffled, huge and fat under his enormous robes to the huge central stage where the Grand Convocator stood. He still wore his ring with the Mark on his middle finger. Birthright had given Borthis the chance to stand at the Convocator's ear. Caspir wondered what Fraz-Urb'luu's reasons were.

The Voice of the Convocator, another man in the same robes and mask, stepped forward from the other side. "Behold the Silent Assembly, you lonely almirante of the Oceander. We are many, and we are secret!"

Caspir watched the almirante closely in this first test of initiation. Caspir remembered his own as just a young man, when his father tricked him onto the sacrificial floor saying it was part of a hunting outing. His response had been feigned disinterest. Everyone reacted differently. Some men cowered, some wept outright, and a few stood boldly.

The almirante was one of the few. He drew his short sword and held it aloft. A few of the Silent Assembly shifted as they stood, but no one spoke.

"So you are the would-be puppet-masters of the city of Oestre!" He made a single barking laugh. "You who pride yourselves on deception, you who have weakened your lands through generations of lies! How simple it was for me, a humble old man, to infiltrate your place of foul worship and take note of your number. By dawn tomorrow, a great purge will empty your ranks! Soldiers will flood your tunnels!"

The figures in purple robes stirred again. Those who had quarterstaves raised them up.

With a triumphant cry, the almirante turned back toward the entrance. Caspir took a step toward him with outstretched arms and then ducked away before the almirante even brought down his sword. He fell hard against the stone floor, hoping it seemed enough of a show.

When he counted to five, he jumped to his feet and hurried after the almirante. As he ran, he stripped off his mask and robe and stuffed them back into his sleeves. By the time he reached the open panel, he was Caspir Fortune again. He forced his breathing to calm and strode through the halls of Markhouse to the entrance, where he leaned into the shadows.

The almirante was shouting orders. "Guard this house! Every entrance, every exit! I want three-man patrols through the halls! You four, you're with me. We'll rouse every soldier in the garrison!"

Oceander troops began throwing themselves in different directions. It was the poetry of a war-epic in motion.

Petri the servant stepped up beside Caspir with twin cups. Caspir took both of them and nodded. Taking a long drink from one, he walked back to the hidden parlor.

Borthis was there, clumsily falling out of his purple robe. His face was bright red.

Caspir held out a cup to him. "Here, have a drink."

"Fortune!" Borthis shouted. "This is a disaster! He's seen the Silent Assembly! He'll tell!"

"Anyone who doesn't know there are cults of masked men in Oestre is a fool."

Borthis stared blankly at him.

"Come now," Caspir said, holding up the cup again. "You need a drink."

Borthis took the cup and gulped it down, belching as he did. Caspir drained his own cup. The liquid was bitter and gritty.

When he was done, Caspir set his cup down beside the one the almirante had left on the mantel. "It's too bad he wasn't one of us. He could have stayed to have some of this antidote."

Borthis gasped. "The wine was poisoned? I drank that!"

“Don’t worry, my friend. I’ll take care of you,” Caspir told him. It was wrong to plot against a fellow member of the Silent Assembly. As with all of Fraz-Urb’luu’s teachings, though, wrongness is only in being caught.

Borthis ran a fat finger around his cup to get every last drop and licked it up. “Will we be all right?”

“We’ll have headaches tomorrow, but the mulungu will do its work. I’d hate to be our dear friend the almirante when the forgetfulness and visions take hold in an hour. The shakes should cripple him within a week. We, meanwhile, have fulfilled our oaths to test the almirante.”

“But he’ll have his whole army here by morning!”

“Then we must seal the tunnel. I thought this might happen, so the servants I brought with me have skills beyond simply handing out drinks.”

As if it had been their cue, Caspir’s servants hurried into the room with buckets of fast-drying grout and trowels. Petri pried the face of Fraz-Urb’luu off the mantel, plugged up the gears behind it, and then laid mortar to replace the face upside-down. Two men with hammers hurried into the tunnel and set to work on the walls. It’d be collapsed in minutes.

“My grandfather’s tunnel!” Borthis cried.

Caspir patted him on the shoulder. “These are very trying times for Oestre. We all must make sacrifices.”

Borthis sniffed and nodded, apparently believing the old lie of solidarity.

“They’ll search your house, but they will find nothing more than a parlor. The captains will question the almirante as his mind collapses.... Perhaps he will even step down himself upon the embarrassment of losing the Silent Assembly!” Caspir laughed. Borthis didn’t, so he went on. “Within a few days, we’ll have a new almirante for Oestre. Let’s hope it’s someone less strict.”

“Maybe then we’ll get the marketplace open?”

“You have business to do?”

“Of course!”

Caspir smiled. A Fortine always knows an opportunity. “Come, let’s go speak of it. Your position in the uppermost ranks of the Silent Assembly might come into question after this little affair, and I promise I’ll do everything I can to help.”