



TALES OF THE LOST LANDS



TALES PACK 5

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This *Tales Pack* is released as a companion to
The Lost Lands: Borderland Provinces
With a fourth bonus *Tale*: "The Walls of Broch Tarna"



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IN FOR A POUND

BY KEVIN WRIGHT

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Heavy

“In For A Pound” reveals one of the great secrets of the **Lost Lands**, not only the presence of the Underguild as a pervasive criminal enterprise with its fingers spread far across the land, but also the fact that it is composed entirely of vampires. If the GM intends to run players through the adventure *Sewers of the Underguild* in *Quests of Doom*, they should not be allowed to read this story until they have already discovered the true nature of the Underguild. Even if the GM does not intend to run that adventure, if the campaign involves the political intrigues of the Lost Lands’ criminal underbelly, then it may not be advisable to allow players access to this story until after they have already discovered the horrifying truths of the Underguild for themselves.

IN FOR A POUND

BY KEVIN WRIGHT



he message was from Bolin:

New investors moving chattels in volume. They want access to our network in return for substantial consideration. Need eyes-on to evaluate for partnership. Meeting set up for moonrise on third Mootsdag of Hummidos. Third dock of the bright city. Contact is Murnau. Report on suitability and potential for investment capital. Be careful.

—Your Friend

Bolin was Milo's handler with the Friendly Men in Vermis, capital of Aachen Province. Mootsdag — market-day, the appointed day of Man's Commerce — seemed particularly appropriate for slavers. That's surely what Bolin meant by "moving chattels," not that the property was being moved (well, not *only* that), but that the property was capable of moving on its own. If it were animals, he'd have said stock. Had to be slaves, and lots of them by the sound of it. The day of Man's Commerce, the perfect day for commercing in Man if there ever was one.

The third Mootsdag of the month gave Milo plenty of time to arrange a discreet boat upriver with just the right kind of crew to provide quiet security as needed, but why did it have to be Hummidos? Hummidos, the hottest month of the year in a summer already hot as blazes. Maybe that explained the meeting taking place at night, but then again didn't someone once say "dark for dark business"?

The part that really made his eyebrows rise though, was the where. The "bright city," the sort of coded name that could make anyone think of a dozen places. He knew it for what it was: a joke of the darkest kind. It referred to Curgantium, the ancient imperial capital, abandoned now a thousand years gone and more — destroyed in a massive fire that spread for miles across the grasslands and killed tens of thousands caught in its path. A bright city indeed; bright enough to illuminate the end of an empire. Unfortunately, Curgantium was not only thought a cursed city but was also considered to be a haunted one. No one would go there; the riverboat pilots on the Great Amrin would stop at a merrow's cave before putting ashore at those ruins. The wharves of Curgantium at night would be as private a place to have a meeting as anywhere Milo could think of. He didn't know who this Murnau was, but the meeting promised to be interesting to say the least.

"Beg pardon?" Milo said, just barely managing not to spew the mouthful of wine across the table. It was an excellent Gluant cabernet sauvignon and deserved better treatment than that.

"I said that we of the Underguild are vampires, and that we want you to join us." The speaker, Murnau — a man tall and pale and bald as an egg, dressed to sartorial, if ancient, perfection — leaned back in his chair and crooked his overwide mouth into a smile that did not touch his eyes.

Milo cleared his throat. "That's what I thought you said."

This assignment wasn't turning out the way Milo had hoped. He was an agent of the Friendly Men, that lawless band of crooks and scoundrels who plied their disreputable trade from Vermis to Albor Broce, across most of the northern and central regions of the Borderland Provinces. Milo had just finished a year-long deep cover operation stealing secrets from the Friendlies' rival organization, the Wheelwright's Guild of Bard's Gate.

The long con had severely taxed his resources, both physically and emotionally. Though he'd gained the information he sought, he had also lost two very close associates in the process. This, his latest mission, seemed like a cake-walk by comparison: travel to ancient and deserted Curgantium, meet with the Friendly Men's potential new partners, survey the operation, sign the contracts, pay the fee and enjoy the hospitality. For an agent of Milo's ability and reputation, it should have been run-of-the-mill.

Except that apparently the new partners were vampires.

Milo looked at Murnau. Murnau gazed back placidly. Milo had seen that exact expression once in the eyes of a shark.

"Well?" the self-avowed vampire asked. "What do you think of the proposition?"

Milo licked his lips. "Well, um...this is quite a surprise. Why, ah...why me?"

Murnau raised his glass to his lips and sipped what Milo was now sure was not wine. The vampire opened a bound-leather portfolio and spread its contents on the table: several dozen sheaves of paper.

"We have been watching you for many years, my good friend. You first came to our attention during the Clave Heist some twenty years ago to be exact. The Underguild had worked for two years nurturing that merchant, grooming him for wealth and privilege, so that we might later use and discard him, only to find that you — a mere boy! — had managed to despoil his wealth all in one night. Many of our number wanted you put down for that offense. However, wiser minds prevailed, saying that we should keep an eye on you rather than snuff out the candle of your potential so soon.

"It was, oh, six years later that you again distinguished yourself by embezzling ten thousand crowns from the Standing Army and framing the good baron of Lughton for the crime. Our notes show that your implication of the baron was some sort of personal retribution. What had he done to earn your ire?"

Milo grimaced. "He laughed at my hat."

"Ah! Vanity. She makes fools and heroes of us all. You didn't make it easy for us, my good friend, but the Underguild tracked your movements and actions as best we could over the years." Murnau shuffled through the papers. "There was the Tarrasque Chicanery, the Beltor Riots Incident, the matter of Madame d'Tercy's tiara...ah! Here is my favorite." He held up a weathered page. "Tell me, when you penetrated the Imperate's Palace, did you really replace the Inheritor's Orb with a chicken's egg?"

Milo smiled warily. "No, I am afraid you have been misinformed."

"Oh, well..."

"It was the egg of a Ghue Island clubnek."

Murnau grinned and clapped his hands once in appreciation.

"Excellent. Impeccable skill and a sense of humor. That is too rare in these dark days. We need those like you, whose wits are sharp and wills are strong. Those who will not turn the other cheek. Those who will shape the world according to their desires and not let weakness or sentiment cloud their ambition. You are, I am convinced, such a man. By your deeds and your spirit you have proven yourself worthy of receiving the ultimate blessing: immortality! And awful strength beyond your knowing."

The vampire leaned forward hungrily, his body taut and his eyes fierce. "Will you join us?"

Milo placed a hand to his stubbled jawline and rubbed his chin pensively.

"I appreciate your interest and your offer, but I have to wonder: What are the, ah... benefits of joining?"

"The benefits are many and splendid my good friend, Milo! You have walked this earth some forty years, seen and done incredible things. I have walked it some four hundred, and seen and done such things that would leave even a man of your experience awestruck. You have taken wealth for yourself, robbed merchants and nobles and kings. We in the Underguild have plundered the tombs of fallen angels, filched treasures from the vaults of gods. Gold, platinum, diamonds, sapphires...these are worth nothing; less than the dust under our feet. In our treasuries lie wonders that would drive saints to covetous theft: the Puzzle Box of Grox, Bast's Leash, a page from the Grimoire of Hecate...and these are but the least of our riches! I tell them only to arouse your appetite. Later, when you are one with us, I

will show you all the looted glories of millennia. So...what do you say?"

Milo leaned back in his chair. His face was pallid and his hand shook ever so slightly.

"This...this is rather a lot to take in. I confess that I am overwhelmed by the magnitude of your offer." Slowly, he reached under his cloak. Murnau tensed, then relaxed when Milo pulled forth a small snuff box from his vest.

"This is all very sudden," Milo said, obviously shaken. "Would you care for a pinch?" He proffered the box to Murnau who frowned.

"No. I never touch the stuff."

"Ah, well. I hope you don't mind me partaking." Milo's shaking hand spilled some of the snuff onto his lap.

Then he disappeared.

Literally.

Between one breath and the next as the tiny grains settled on his lap, Milo Perin was gone.

The vampire made a grab at where the Friendly Man had been, but his hands found naught but empty space. A breath of air brushed past him and the door to the parlor slammed shut. Cursing himself, the vampire rose and pulled on a silken cord, to sound the alarm. The cord snapped off in his hand and he saw that all but a few threads had been cut cleanly through. Obviously, Milo had been planning ahead.

Caught between fury and begrudging admiration, Murnau shrieked horrifically, tore the door from its hinges and began an awful transformation.

Milo was flying pell-mell through the labyrinthine hallways of the Underguild's headquarters. The enchanted dust in his snuffbox had enabled him to elude Murnau initially, and even though its effects had worn off his enchanted boots now sped him along his way in great leaps and strides. He rebounded off of walls at sharp turns and took great springing steps that risked cracking his skull on the stone ceiling as he made his through the tunnels ahead of any pursuit.

Two lefts, a stairwell running up, a long hallway, fifth door on the left, he counted off in his head, retracing the path he'd taken into the place. Milo knew he hadn't much time until an irate swarm of vampires chased him down.

His fears were confirmed when two stocky figures with death-pale faces, and clothed in tattered garments long past the need of laundering and a seamstress shuffled around a corner. These were lesser servants, the degenerate spawn of the vampire masters of this place. Lacking the intellect and personal initiative of their masters, the pair were unprepared at the sight of the rogue barreling down upon them. Their reflexes were still preternatural like all of their kind, though, as they reacted instantly to the intruder with grasping clawed hands and fang-filled bites—swift as a striking snake.

Unfortunately for them, they were not expecting the abilities that Milo's boots provided him. Where once they saw the sprinting man, their claws and teeth met empty air, while above them Milo somersaulted in a seemingly impossible springing leap that carried him up and over their heads to land in the passageway directly behind. Their reactions still remained as honed as ever as they turned to pounce almost before Milo came out of his landing roll.

However fast their own supernaturally enhanced movements might be, the vampire spawn could not maintain the pace of the Friendly Man's tactical acumen. Before he had even completely risen from his roll and turned to face them, Milo had withdrawn a short iron rod from his belt pouch and scraped its soft, gold tip against the rough stone of the corridor floor. It flared suddenly into brilliant light that lit the narrow passage with the blinding radiance of a miniature sun. The spawn screamed and flinched, covering their suddenly-stinging eyes with gnarled hands, their thick nails stained with dried blood and earth. Though the sudden flare caused them no actual injury, it startled them and caught them off guard with its resemblance to the one true and perfect bane to their unnatural existence.

By the time the two realized that their flesh was not peeling and scorching under the glare of the sunrod, their opportunity to defeat their foe had passed; Milo was already

among them, razor-sharp blade in hand. His initial cuts severed the tendons at the backs of their knees, sending them tumbling to the stone flags. These injuries were not permanent and would, in fact, close very quickly, but the rogue never gave them the chance. Before the two underlings could even begin to rise, sharpened wooden implements — the severed ends of oars taken from his keelboat and whittled to a point — appeared in the intruder's hands from beneath the tunic he wore, and were thrust expertly up beneath their targets' rib cages and into their vulnerable hearts. Both vampires froze in mid-shriek as they suddenly found themselves helpless, unable to assume their mist-like forms for a quick retreat to coffins in which to recover before resuming their hunt.

Fully conscious of the human's slow and deliberate actions but completely incapable of moving to stop him, both spawn watched as he retrieved the short-bladed sword from the floor where he had dropped it. Then Milo ran its magic-hardened edge across their necks and through their spines, completely decapitating them and granting them the true death they had thought held no more terror for them. He placed a small sponge — moistened with the sacred waters of a church font he had visited two days earlier — in the gaping mouths of the two severed heads for good measure, ensuring that the staring eyes gazed sightlessly and empty of any semblance of unholy life as he retrieved a final small pinch from his snuffbox and seemingly disappeared into thin air before resuming his headlong flight.

Stairwell down, through the anteroom, up another flight of stairs, he rattled off, thankful for his earlier attention to detail that helped him find his way. It was that same fierce attention to detail that helped him discover the true nature of his hosts. Meeting them in accursed and long-abandoned Curgantium would arouse anyone's suspicions, but the timing of the midnight meeting, the complete lack of mirrors in an otherwise opulent setting, his host referring to the human slaves as 'cattle' and the way that Murnau greeted him! 'Enter freely and of your own free will,' he had said. How could he be anything *but* a vampire?

Left here. Right here. Up and then down again. Murnau had shown him their operation: underground caverns filled with cages upon cages of humans, elves, halflings, even a few tengus. The Underguild was buying slaves en masse from all over the provinces, presumably to slake their thirst for blood and fill their bloated bellies. Milo was surprised to find that it pained him somewhat to leave those slaves to their fates as he escaped. It didn't pain him enough to head down to those caverns and rescue them, but he did feel a certain twinge.

Surely by now the vampires must be alerted to his flight, must have found the bodies of their destroyed spawn, but he knew he was close to the exit. *Around another corner and then...* There, standing in front of the outer doorway and his freedom was a carved statue of purest alabaster. In form, it was like unto a seraph. Its face was palely serene and beautiful. Two majestic alabaster wings soared above its shoulders. However, its beatific perfection was marred by the four grotesque arms jutting equidistantly from its torso. The limbs seemed to be crudely hacked from mottled gray stone. Unmoving, the unnerving effigy blocked the entire hallway.

Milo felt fairly certain he hadn't passed it on his way in.

A golem of some kind? he thought. *Perhaps a gargoyle? Either way, I'd best try to slip past it unnoticed.*

At that moment, as if the gods quietly snickered at their own perfidy, the magic in the snuffbox dust faded, and he stood in full view.

The statue immediately lowered its beautiful head, and charged towards him in great, ground-shaking steps.

Just as the thief was in danger of being crushed by its pretty alabaster feet, he pitched forward into a roll that carried him between the construct's legs. His sudden movement slipped past the statue's guard but cost him a deep bruise in the ribs as one of its stony knees made incidental contact with his side. Gasping for breath at the unexpected blow, Milo attempted to come out of the tumble onto his feet, but the golem was faster. With its four evenly spaced arms, it didn't even have to turn but groped blindly for him. Only by suddenly bringing his sword up and into the crook of the thing's elbow with all the force he could muster did he avoid having his head squeezed between its crushing fingers. The blade struck stone with a tone like the ringing of a church bell followed by a splitting crack.

The arm he had struck fell to the floor, the stone cleanly split at the elbow and now ending in a blunt stump. With chagrin, he raised the blade before his eyes; a three-inch length of the blade's tip had likewise snapped off, leaving a flattened, slightly beveled surface. He didn't want to even think about the kind of magic empowering the winged statue that could break the enchantment upon his own blade.

He didn't have time for reverie, though, as the golem simply shifted slightly and brought its next arm to bear. This one succeeded in grabbing Milo's left arm and held him fast in its death-like clutches. He didn't wait for the sickening sound of the bone snapping to conclude that any chance of escape was about to expire; on pure instinct and adrenaline, Milo intoned the words to activate the dweomer of his brown-ribbed cloak. In a trice, the statue found its hand clutching only air as a tiny furry creature with leathery wings fluttered from its grip. Milo had completely transformed into a bat — *giving them a taste of their own game*, he chuckled to himself — and flew beyond the statue's reach and out the doorway into the night sky.

Vampires weren't the only ones with tricks up their sleeves, but Milo knew he had come close to exhausting all of those that he carried with him, accumulated from decades of careful acquisition and planning for all contingencies. He didn't wait around to see what the statue would do, but hurried away as fast as his wings could carry him, despite the ache of the bruised ribs that still burned in his side. Milo heard the angel-thing emerge to follow him, but he had a healthy lead.

In bat-form, he flapped through the ruins of the old city, into and out of dark, stale buildings and under decrepit porticoes and archways. Curgantium had lain dead so long that not even the memories of her ghosts were left to haunt her. Once, she had been a massively overgrown metropolis, the seat of a vast and bloody empire. Her web of brutal influence had stretched along the Great Amrin River and across the face of an entire continent and more. Her streets were once raucous with traffic and commerce, with voices laughing, haggling, yelling, and mourning in their turn. Her armies trod her paved streets with a merciless iron will. Her coffers overflowed with the raped riches of the world, a flood of golden coin and ingot, waves of sapphire and pearl. Curgantium was the envy of all and beholden to none.

But that time lay long in the past.

Now she was broken and dead, a used and discarded strumpet. Her streets were as silent as an abandoned bone-yard. No voice troubled the depths of her stillness; no army had marched here for an age. Her palaces lay in crumbled ruin, her once-proud spires jutted from the decayed wreck of the city like the fossilized ribs of ancient thunder lizards.

All of this was bad for Curgantium — but good for Milo. The wasted metropolis had a near-infinite number of places to hide. Milo soon lost his monstrous pursuer and thought to himself, *I'm home free, if I can just make it to the wharf and my boat*. There he had left his henchmen, Clive and Carl, two of the scurviest wretches he'd ever encountered, but they were smart enough to paddle a boat. Just barely.

Landing in an old bathhouse, he changed again into his human form and strove to catch his breath. The magic that fueled his cloak was spent; it would be some time before he could use it again. He listened intently and could hear harsh cries to the west; the Underguild was in hot pursuit. No doubt many of them were in bat-form even now, flying through the city as he had, eager for his blood.

Wrapping his cloak tightly around him, Milo slipped from building to building — a shadow within shadows — heading toward the river. More than once — regretting that his snuffbox dust was completely exhausted — he was forced to take refuge under an ancient, crumbling portico or behind a broken pillar to escape the notice of a quietly-winged bat. Once he saw the form of the angelic grotesquerie flying above a crumbling temple to the west, and once he even managed to evade a small pack of sullenly angry vampire spawn as they trod the city streets only a yard from where he hid, fruitlessly seeking him.

At last, picking his way through the bones of Curgantium, sneaking and hiding and scurrying from place to place, Milo heard the sound of running water. Like a hound catching the scent of a fox, he hurried to the river.

He topped a rise to see the moonlight glistening on the gentle waves of the mighty Amrin, placidly flowing from north to south. Milo could make out the dark shape of the ancient wharf below. He took a moment to survey his surroundings, then cautiously made his way to the riverside.

Stepping onto the stone quay felt like coming home. He took off in a sprint toward his boat. That is, until his foot sank, dislodged a loose stone, and slipped sideways into the unpleasantly warm river water. He yanked his foot from the wet, not bothering to smother a curse. For several heartbeats he crouched low on the wharf, looking anxiously left and right, trying to discover if the splash and the curse had attracted any attention. At length, he lifted himself up and skulked along, constantly looking over his shoulder.

When he reached his boat he hissed, "Up, you curs! Ship the oars and let's get the hell out of here!"

He received no response.

Fearing the worst, he slid over the gunwale to find his hirelings lying lifeless in the bottom of the boat, their throats torn from ear to ear. Clive's stupid face seemed locked in eternal surprise. Carl's face looked shocked and perhaps embarrassed, like he'd just soiled himself.

"Tut, tut," a voice said behind Milo. He turned to see Murnau striding along the quay, his hands clasped behind his back, the image of a disappointed professor lecturing an errant pupil.

"Don't leave your food lying around like that, Milo. It'll spoil." He grinned wickedly, fangs glinting in the moonlight. "I don't know why you're making such a fuss. I am offering you something beyond your most avaricious dreams: eternal life! Wealth beyond imagining! And yet you treat me like this." He shook his head sadly.

"I cannot see why you would reject the blessed kiss of vampirism. We know you too well. You have lived as a law unto yourself your entire life. You have stolen, you have burgled, you have looted, and you have robbed. Your soul is blemished with the sins of blackmail, perjury, arson, and torture. You have born false witness, incited riots, overthrown heads of state...yes, and even murdered. Already, you feed on the lives of your fellow men. What more his blood? In for a penny, in for a pound, yes?"

Milo bowed his head. All that Murnau said was true, no doubt about it. He was a liar, a thief, yes, and even a murderer. By no one's measure was Milo a good man. But he was still a man, and that's why he hurled the rumpled canvas sailcloth up and over the vampire's head. It snarled the old leech in its fish-smelling folds, and he twisted and growled and fought its cumbersome embrace.

In a trice, Milo leapt onto the gunwale of the boat and tackled Murnau as he thrashed in the entangling sailcloth. The two of them plunged over the gunwale and into the blood-warm waters of the Amrin. A dark embrace closed over their heads as the current carried them lazily away. The running water was acid on the vampire's skin, poison to his unliving flesh. He redoubled his frantic efforts to escape the sail that entrapped him, but Milo wrapped wiry arms and legs around him, careful to keep his flesh out of reach of the vampire's soul-leeching grasp.

If the vampire expected Milo to have to release him and return to the surface for air, he spent the last moments of his immortal existence in disappointment, for the experienced rogue, confidence man, and long-time agent of the Friendly Men had used one of his last tricks. The platinum chain that hung upon his chest beneath his tunic now floated freely out of its normal confines, and from the heavy links of its length a great bubble of air formed that encompassed Milo's entire head, allowing him to breathe freely even in the depths of the sluggish river. He silently thanked himself for choosing to rescue the Endhome merchant's daughter all those years ago, even without promise of reward, because the girl's grandmother had gifted him with this enspelled necklace for his efforts, and it now proved its value beyond any shadow of doubt.

Between his steadfast efforts and the entangling sail, Murnau was held fast as the Amrin boiled his flesh from his bones. Soon Milo found himself clinging to nothing but a naked skeleton.

Releasing the macabre remains, Milo kicked himself to the surface of the river and into the moon's light. He floated a bit, enjoying the languid waters and allowing a quiet laugh

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to escape his lips, but the laugh held no mirth and his eyes were hard gemstones in the moonlight. He soon ducked back beneath the surface, letting the necklace's bubble encompass his head once again until he found a purchase against the stones of the ancient quay.

Around him, the Amrin flowed on, unperturbed. Above him, stars shone down as they always had. He was safe from the vampires here, they could not come at him within the flowing waters of the river — flowing waters as deadly to them as acid or the lava effluvia of a volcanic vent. No, let them look, criss-crossing the city all night in their search for him. He would remain here 'til morning. They ruled the night, but morning... the morning was his. They'd had their penny; it was time to collect.

Milo hung suspended and silent in weightless waiting, a formless shadow in the dark currents of the slow river. A point in space invisible to any prying eye, a cold consciousness impenetrable to any probing thought.

The morning was his.

Bloody vampires.

In the matter of our esteemed colleague recently traveling abroad to the bright city, there is still no news. He has not reported in from his meeting, and there are no reliable accounts of him having been seen in Vermis or elsewhere since his departure some 6 weeks ago. We will continue our inquiries into the matter and report when new information is obtained.

—Bolin

HOME WATERS

BY NATHAN SHANK

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“Home Waters” gives a glance at the policies and politics that drive trade through the Amrin Estuary and the part played by the navy of Telar Brindel in its security, but it does nothing to reveal important details that would not be readily available to anyone interested in learning about shipping and trade upon the waters of the estuary. The story tells of the fate of a specific cutter and its crew, as well as a menace that inhabits the swampy northern shore of the estuary, but this does not play an important role in the overall presentation of the *Borderland Provinces*.

HOME WATERS

BY NATHAN SHANK



his is my confession. I don't have fancy words for thee, nor am I even certain you're listening — but I will speak the words of the sea, not neglecting the crest nor trough of my own actions. I hope you'll see the truth of it.

We hunted pirates; I have no regrets.

I expect you know me as well as anyone, but maybe you haven't taken the soundings of my hidden depths. Some have called me a sea dog, though a dog always finds his way home and such has not been my case. Yet like a dog, neither have I great art of speech nor verse, and I will put the sights I saw and lived in as plain a sort of words as I possess. I have had many hours under the beating sun to fathom what happened — and the conclusion of the story is simple, even though its truth still sets beyond my horizon. I am a changed man in body, in soul. Through weeks without ship or land, I have considered speaking this tale as a tragedy, and in better straits I have seen its likeness to a true, if perverse, comedy such as used to cross the stage in my childhood home of Swordport. But, as I'm of a mind that you know what happened as well as I, I'll just tell it as I lived it, without the curse of hindsight. For looking back on that mission, the more I see how terribly this today is borne out of the less that I have become.

I pray thee, Quell, if you are a god who cares at all for men of the green-blue deeps, even a worn old salt like me, then be true to your namesake, if only to set my soul — and I beg you also, my swarming wounds and ragged flesh — at rest.

In no other power, least of all my own, I continue to be,

“Captain” Elyas Montgreave, of Swordport, of Bard's Gate, of Telar Brindel, of the Constance, or of the masterless sea.

The new sailor's face bore an uncertain, jittery, nigh-frightened expression. The mess glowed low even on a good day, and the clouds that offered a brief break from the angry sun in the Amrin Est'ry still hid none of the deepening doubt on the young swab's face. Several of my crew, bottles half-empty, looked down at him expectantly.

"So who is it, Littles?" snarled the largest of the sailors, a fine-but-dense fellow named Clonner, posing the question at the luckless midshipman with a toothless smile. "Who be the most dangerous pirate from here to Karedorn? Remember, you agreed fair and square, a week's worth of rat-rooting duty if yur wrong."

"Well," Littles cleared his voice, hedging and scratching at a long-scabbed mole on his neck, "it must be the Mad Mason, said to have made his ship of unbreakable walls. Who could hurt him with those, am I right?" he offered, with a weak, stuttering laugh.

The crew burst into gibbers. "You're a fool to believe in such sprattle!" Clonner laughed in his face. "You really be full of wizards and stories. There's plenty to be afraid of in real life, as you'll soon come to know if you make it long on the seas, which, seeing as some rats might find ya tasty, may not be too long anymore." Clonner wiped his dirty face with his backhand. "The real world, boy, is much scarier than fairy-tale make-believe."

The crew all shared knowing grins, coughing down long swigs from their bottles and mugs. It was hard to keep the men sober, but stopping their nightly binges would have meant a quick and bloodless mutiny.

Disappointed, Littles sat up straighter and looked Clonner in the face: "Well, who be it then?" Clonner slurped some of the tasteless grog. "What, lad?"

Littles' near-bravado was sing-song. "Who is the most dangerous pirate from here to Karedorn?"

Clonner's mouth sobered. "Well, I suppose you have a right to know. And I have a duty to tell ya, since apparently y'ain't got no father. The most dangerous pirate from here to Karedorn and probably much, much farther than that, well that'd be Captain Goldbeard."

A chill swept into the room at his name.

"They doesn't call him Goldbeard," cut in our mixed-blood cook, wiping his greasy hands on a canvass apron, "because his scruff shines like tow. He's Goldbeard because he weaves golden doubloons into his beard, 'cause he's so certain that none'll ever get so close as to cut them off."

A reddish mate — I forget his name — piped in, "I heard it was because any yellow coward got his teeth knocked out by the pirate's mates, and then they would take his teeth and wear necklaces of 'em until they burnished golden in the sun."

"That's all rubbish!" Clonner broke back in. "He pisses north is all!"

That sent them kicking into a round of guffaws. Even Littles caught some of their putrid humor. The drink spilled from their mouths, froth hissing like the foaming waves. The men's faces went pink with fresh delight.

I listened to their spout, and while I won't deny a man a drink and spot of honest revelry, our ship might as well be snagged in a shark's maw if my whole crew thought Goldbeard a pissing fool. I descended the stairs to the mess, letting my boots creak and clonk like coils of rigging as they neared the men's heads. As I hoped, they all glanced up as if caught in some despicable act. Even my first mate, Lijah, chewing on his blacktar in the corner, looked chapped by my presence belowdecks.

"Men, I've got a word to say, but not as your Captain," I told them, "simply as a man. I've eked out not yet thirty-and-seven years, but I've seen aplenty to know what's what. And if you think Goldbeard's not worth fearing, then you've yet to learn the meaning of fear." Some of them shifted annoyed, others caught the dread. "It's not that your stories aren't the cold sword truth, it's that they're all the truth. Now, I'm not blind enough to think Goldie's the worst pirate out there, not by a blind man's harpoon throw. But I'll tell you scamps one thing: he's got teeth. I'm not one to knock the life out of you with heavy words, but man to man," — I looked straight at Clonner — "I couldn't let your minds pitch him as a children's tale about pissing north and all that rot. Keep your heads straight and we might

just find our own names in the mouths of the sea knights of Telar Brindel, spoken of with buttery words by queen and whore alike.”

By that point, I could see I had gone too far; they were over-sobered by my tone. I never did make the inspiring speeches I aimed to.

I stretched a garish grin and buoyed my voice, “But I’ve yet to lose a battle, and the *Constance* ain’t no virgin neither. Let’s loot a bottle of Eastgate scotch from my locker and drink to the death of Goldbeard. Whaddaya say? Whoever blots Goldbeard’ll be the stuff of legend, and he’ll be the love of queens and whores!”

I got a round of cheers from that. The men seemed to buy it, and I must have too. We all caught the scent of a trail, and like hounds to the fox, we would clench a neck in our thirsty maws.

Captain they call me, and to the crew of this cutter, Captain I am. But the *Constance* is too small a vessel to be the command of a captain. Rather, to the admirals ashore at Telar Brindel — they who hired me to the mercenary navy of a city without a sea, the “proud son” of a home who’s gates I’ve never seen and that stand fifteen hundred miles inland — to them whose meat and drink is the gold of their Bard’s Gate paymasters, I am Master and Commander of the *Constance* these eight years; only at sea among my own crew does the rank of captain fall upon me.

If I’m to tell my thoughts straight, I didn’t trust a single man aboard. Even Lijah may or may not have been trustworthy — I never had the chance to find out — but the old skipper knew how to run the deck. He didn’t play keeps when the men rolled at rattlesnakes, he could trim the sails to a west wind with his eyes shut, and I’d seen him break a whip over a back better than a dark elf turnkey. And if he spoke one clean word for five dirty, he’d be having an off day.

“Braggins! You filthy, blood-dog shitcorn bucket of liver bile, put your back into shining that anchor like your cheap wench of a mother is telling ya, or I’ll go find her when I get to whatever hell she’s in and make her wish she’d never birthed ya!” The poor dwarf turned pale and about pulled a muscle in redoubling his efforts. Lijah didn’t turn away but stared down Braggins for a full minute until it was clear the command meant every job the mate was ever to do on while aboard. The screams I heard later that midnight may have been coming from his bunk, but you can never be certain who Lijah’s sent to the night terrors.

Truth was, polishing the fluke began to stand out as the brightest coin in the moneybags of our days. Not that our change was much to look at in the first place. Patrolling the Es’try when we hadn’t seen a spit of life for weeks didn’t make for the most enlivening voyage. Goldbeard might be in the drunken stories, but he hadn’t left a trail, as much as I sought his cunning scent. And Lijah wouldn’t tell me in so many words — he used as few words as he could when talking to me — but the crew was restless.

We both scanned the curling ropes of gray water, gazing for a hope of driftwood or bit of cloth to show that someone else had been this way. Dead for something to say, I came up to Lijah at the bow.

“Not a spot of ‘em,” I put to him.

His dark, sunburnt eyes never left the horizon. “Aye, Capt’n.”

“Not a trace, but I’ve been told by the ones who know that there’s trouble somewhere in these waters.”

He gazed, unreadable. “Quell’s own truth.”

“Those admirals sitting at their desks in Telar Brindel, they gave me the commands. I read ‘em again just last night, all laid out with seals and gilt script.” I paused. Lijah kept his eyes seaward. “Once you unwind all the scribbles and flashes, they’re clear as these silver waters; someone’s been after the trade ships passing along the north coast of the Es’try.” I looked straight at Lijah and continued casually, “You don’t suppose admirals can be wrong, do you?”

“No, Capt’n.”

“Someone must be about these waters. There’s sure to be a brigand crew or rogue navy

ship stowing in these parts, whether Goldbeard or some thief with a boat, I know no better than you. But for all the motion we've been making back and through these same waters, I haven't caught a glimpse of the scoundrel. You'd think they'd all found some quicker route, pirates and traders alike, and we're left pacing the long way like the village idiot. For Quell's sake, we haven't even seen a fishing ship since last week! Yes, these waters are getting mighty soundless for my tastes."

"You get your gut-sucking mouth outta that glass or I'll beat your brother, pound your sister, and make your mother watch!" Lijah yelled straight into the waters. Clonner, way back at the stern, froze in mid-drink and bent back to scrubbing the deck like he was having a seizure. Lijah calmly cleared his throat and spat. "Yes, Capt'n, mighty soundless for some time now."

I *hrumphed* under my breath. "What say you, we get in sight of the Lowwater shore, pass round near those strange lagoons we spotted there?"

A thick wave broke against the hull. Not a bird spanned the air. The sky was white with heat.

Lijah eyed me for the first time. "You're thinking that's the wise course, Capt'n?"

I smiled, and the motion broke out dry cracks on my lips. "I don't know these men; they're not my people. I know these waters, but they're not mine either. I've never met this Goldbeard or his kin. I don't even remember the name of the admiral who sent us out, just that his face was flabby like an old whore's. Telar Brindel and their protocols and codes of conduct can sink like a kedge for my cares. Why I tell ya, I remember back when I was seventeen and an up-an'-coming bosun sailing on the flawless Moonsilver Sea, taking my rapier to the face of a yellow pirate. I remember the expression on his green parrot's face as I hacked at it too. Lijah, these waters may be called the Amrin Est'ry, but to me, they're nameless. I'm gonna find something in this sea and more than likely kill it. If the water near the shoreline is a bit shallow, we'll just have to push through it."

Lijah sucked his gums and spat. Impassive, he said, "Aye, Capt'n, I 'magine our cutter's got the camber to muster through."

I dropped a few steps back, a bit aimless from my usual posture, if I'm to tell it honestly. "Well then, tell the men. I'm going to check the charts, but we can't be far from the lagoon. We'll pull in near its shoals at dawn." My eyes slipped back over those colorless waters, curving like the veins on the hand of an alabaster statue I once saw in a Swordport museum. Then I left the sea, turned to the ship, and let my eyes see double as I tried futilely to imagine our fate.

The new day was a coarse brown, as though someone had taken a shipgraver's wax stylus and rubbed it sideways along the wide and rough canvass of the sky. Always just past the edge of our sullen patrol lay the southern stretch of the northern Est'ry, a passage wide as a sea that bore little of remark. It held still waters, and rarely were there breaks in the placid waves, whether from debris or animal life. These were my home waters these last eight years, just as the Moonsilver Sea off the shores of Hawkmoon held that claim in my youth. Home waters are where a sailor knows the ebb and flow of the winds and the currents, remembers the headlands that point for safe harbor. To a ship's master who has sold his rights to the highest bidder, one stretch of water is as good as the next I s'pose, or perhaps one such has no home waters at all and merely plays at a pleasant folly to convince himself otherwise.

But the Amrin Est'ry waters was where I plied my trade and held the whipstaff of my tiller. And I wasn't alone in this; the Est'ry drove plenty of traders through it, and Telar Brindel owed a pretty penny to keep it swept clean. My own gainful employment depended on it. Nevertheless, a seemingly simple task had deep and dark corners in this vein of currents. Not all believed the Est'ry safe.

I had heard stories.

At the Rancid Rum I'd accidently taken a table with fellow too large to be a dwarf but too small to be an orc. He had sharp yellow teeth, some of which looked stolen. With the

worst kind of beer breath, he told me, "Some say in the oceans there lies a current that curves the earth like a monster's long-reaching tentacles. Over the years, it pulls all the driftwood and jibs and lost bowlines of sunken ships towards it. The 'Wooden Lodestone,' it's known as by some. Others more doubtful call it 'Quell's Magic Bag.' But no doubt about it, you get deep in the northern Est'ry, and you'll think you're driving the wind just fine and the sails all smooth and waves flat as my hand, and ha! You'll be in the mud and mire and death of the Wooden Lodestone, and there you'll find a creature so black, you can't tell its tongue from its eyes!" He cackled and fell backwards into a drunken fit.

Another captain (well, *he* was a captain; you know my official rank) tried to throw me off in a game of ten bones by blathering stories. It was just after I had gotten this commission and was earning my stripes while still worthy of a few on my back, and I had bragged my news to any who'd hear.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho, the northern Est'ry, you say? The Lowwater Coast? There lives among the lagoons a tumescent goblin who sits on hot coals and commands a band of scaly swamp trolls with distended stomachs. They can feel the vibrations of a ship entering their territory from miles out, and then they spin curtains of webs that are nigh invisible. Your ship will be caught in it before you see it. And then the goblin'll take his coals and brand you as his own. From then on, your bones will ache like they're broken at every thought that does not cling to his strange and hideous will. But that's the northern Est'ry, oh-ho-ho-ho! I'm sure you're up for the challenge, Montgreave."

Such stories frightened me little more than young boy's ghost tales, and onward we steered our course until we broached the south banks of the north coast of the Amrin Est'ry.

Besides, I may not have been given the most seasoned crew, but I had a fine ship. The *Constance* could dance like a lady on the stage, and — my! — could she take to her heels like a strumpet who'd just lifted your coinpouch. She could sniff out prey like a bitch on the prow, heaving through the water with heated excitement. Why, what with the cutter's mast so far forward, the bowsprit reaching ahead like a snout, and the long oars spreading like paws, she had a sense of her own, and we could all feel it when on the hunt. She wasn't big, but she had her wits about her.

Still, the caution that had won me many a seafight before prevailed, and it was with painful turpitude that I eased her into the wetlands. The Est'ry quickly turned from open waters to a space neither land nor sea, but an intermediate purgatory, like trying to say whether a werewolf favors human or lupine features. Shoals rose as the peaks of underwater hills, while others still subsurface lay in wait for our probing oars and shallow keel to disturb. Mist gathered in clumps, but looking straight into it revealed its transparency, and you were left continually blinking and eyes darting in search of any exact pocket of space.

My knowledge of the inlets and intersecting channels that crossed the smattering heads of porous land was limited, certain only that none had explored all the caches, underhangs, and surfy clutters of rock composing this maze. I had word from the Royal Cartographer that the Lowwater Road wandered beyond the swampland, but what debased form of life chose to habitate so near these permanent uncertainties lay beyond my own powers of comprehension.

Nearly twenty of the crew must have come above decks, eager to see the decorations of our new accommodations. As the *Constance* drifted into the mists with little effort from the oars, I stood as always on the quarterdeck near the helm, having no desire to spend my days among the smell of the pug-nosed halfbreeds that were always the main diet of my crew. Wrinkled old Lijah had long since lost his sense of smell — let him deal with the scum. Besides, who knows how many races had gone into his unfathomable ancestry.

The world fell silent as we paddled alongside blue-green trees with beards of moss. Untold eyes secreted under limb and leaf no doubt descried us without our awareness. The life in these hollows lives and dies by stealth, as perhaps we all do in the end.

"Littles!" I turned and called out, facing the rowers.

"Aye — aye, Capt'n," he sputtered back at me, taken aback.

“Come to the fore.”

“Aye, Capt’n.” As he approached, I saw the blond tufts of peach fuzz on his upper lip, young enough, at least, to disguise any unfortunate heritage.

“Your eyes good, boy?”

“Aye, Capt’n.”

“Ready to earn your marks on this ship?”

He gulped. “Aye, Capt’n.”

“Take you a span of rigging, and go bind yourself to the end of the bowsprit, well out beyond our lady’s figurehead. I want you to holler if you see anything.”

“Don-don’t you mean the crow’s nest, sir?” The thing was beside himself with fear. Cruel of me, perhaps, but the loyalty of a captain is to the whole ship. Its members do, and the ship does. That was how I came to out-manuever a portly gnome commanding a bulker who raised arms against me in Moonsilver’s quick currents. No reckless Goldbeard’s cunning would outmatch my orderly procedures.

I grabbed the boy roughly with my left arm and backhanded his jaw with my right hand. “You question me again, boy, and I’ll throw you overboard as chum! There’s too much god-damned fog to see from the crow’s nest. Now get your filthy rags to the tip of the bowsprit and don’t you move from there if Vanitthu hisself comes down and tells you your watch is up!”

The boy did what he was told, and none of the crew said a word otherwise. I was only slightly ashamed to see that Lijah had rubbed off on me. It wasn’t a death-command after all, at least not in conception. In maturity, it was less than ideal, but if I had to do it over again, I’d do the same damning again.

I’ve heard men tell stories of the figure of Death stalking graves and holding a scythe, or in other cultures a notched axe. But I’ve always known him as slashing with a rusty cutlass. He drags it across the seaman’s chest, and leaves its iron tinge in place of blood.

As it turns out, we were all wrong.

The gloom surrounded us before we realized that the open seas were far behind. By then, there were too many fears suddenly upon us to count. Not that I shared them with the crew. They believed all the stories. You could sense their fear in the rowing. They had been restless before from our lackluster hunt, but now that we felt the chase, they were reluctant. You may have heard some jolly captains call their crews ‘families.’ A fallow comparison. The slaving trader ships of Libynos at least have the order of command correct. I’m no father, and the rowers acted more like a band of prisoners on parole than sons and brothers. The fear of pirates, the fear of ambush, the fear of sea monsters, the fear of darkness, the fear of snakes, the fear of poisonous vines and flowers, the fear of running into a sandbar and sinking, and the final fear — that of drowning as an unknown soul in an unknown land, of being unburied, of being forgotten by family and even the mates one labored next to — these all saturated their minds.

I thought myself immune, but some diseases infect the wary. And the unknown that surrounded us — the suddenness that fate could collapse upon our ship — that was the fear that lay entombed in me.

But fears I could accept from them, not disorder. We had a well-run deck. Our one deviation from ordinary command life was a salty pearl in our mouths besides. Many ships, like my father’s, had an officer play a drum or, at worst, beat a barrel to set the pace of the rowers. Both these practices result in a monotonous repetition that haunts one even when sleeping, the beat so slow and constant and endless. Having a half-elf aboard who was skilled with the lyre (Easton, by name), I had him saw long ballads with even tempo to set the pace of our rowing. The man had dour taste in music, though, and we seemed to always be caught in something more of a dirge than a minstrel’s lay. I vowed once again to exchange the fellow for fishbait if we ever returned to Telar Brindel’s harbor. Worse, he was out of tune more often than not, picking at the strings like a leper picks at his scabs. A future career, I remember thinking, was no doubt in store for him at the most humble

of brothels. I was certain the sea knights were not cursed with such pacesetters as mine. Perhaps one day I would join their ranks and rid myself of this filth.

The flat heads of our oars drew us forward like a ghost in the man-high reeds and bulrushes, along the beachless shores, and around the constant curves of rock and outstretched mangrove root. Before long, the sun hid herself behind high branches, and direction was more by memory than sight. Evening and morning, north and south, god and man — all lost distinction in this swamp. Lijah squinted forward, even without sunlight baking his face. Littles on the bowsprit blinked constantly and ran with a cold sweat. The rowers gained a rhythm, but still, they pulled uneasily.

I would get promoted to true captain if Goldbeard were spitted on our harpoons. If we tied him to our prow, letting starvation set in as his golden locks baked in the sun, a wizened skeleton with dark skin bleached white when we docked like a ship of the veteran dead into the daze of Telar Brindel — why, then the rich seamstresses would step out of their shops, and the guildmasters would look up from their dealings, and a chest of gems would be proffered, pound for pound, for the pirate's bones. Even the least of my inbred crew would be given a glass at the Princely Pier. It was a bit lofty of a dream, but it was not far from believable that statues might be erected in our honor: dauntless captain, wise mate, loyal crew, speared pirate. A tableau of justice. I licked my lips in anticipation.

I turned on my heel from our invasion into the wet misty shores. Grabbing a line of rigging, I crouched on the rail above the helm and looked down on the rowers. My throat was dry, but I struck out an old air in trochaic rhythm with the coughing lyre:

*The richest of rich, you may a-hear 'd,
His name be gilt as Cap' Goldbeard,
And whispers spread his secret float,
But once you learn, they cut your throat.*

*He sits among the slightest shoals
And eats from golden spoon and bowls,
Worth more than slaves with pointy ears
For treasures a-hoard be all Goldbeard's.*

*Don't pray to gods to save your life
For Goldbeard's got the gods by knife,
And blackmailed them with secret talks
Until they turned to gold his locks.*

*So rock your nodding oars to sleep,
And pray your god your life to keep,
Quicker to find you sudden a-speared
Is no one else than foul Goldbeard.*

A trance more potent than any black rum overcame us all. It was fear, or death, or daring, or the unknown. The wind picked up and, our sail down, it ran through the ship like razors through ribs. Our main mast creaked in the wind. My leather boots stretched in the wet air as I dropped back to the groaning afterdeck. Even the rigging tightened in the rickety swaying of the ship. Her bones let out a sodden grunt as she drove through the shallows. And the poor half-elf's lyre sang with scratches against its board.

We wander these seas and have no real idea what we're looking for. The wind perhaps. Some seek big game, great monsters, or buried gold. Fame on the seas, too, carries quickly in the crosscurrents, and to be known on the tongues of thousands with fear and awe is the true afterlife. Some days, I believed myself to be mounting the tall mainmast on life's ship,

trying to reach the crow's stoop atop, only to find I've been climbing the mizzen all along.

Littles had clung to the bowsprit for the full two hours that we waded through the sloppy marshland. He let out a weak cry now and then when we veered too close to a rocky growth from the seabed or roots reached out to tear our hull. We drifted much more slowly than out upon the open seas, and with the creeping of the *Constance* came the elongation of time. I could almost see the mythic sand grains break their slide down the smooth hourglass rim as I watched the sweat slip off the brows of the rowers.

In this slow sonata, the chill tune of Easton's lyre and the endless splash of the sweeps were the leading sounds among the wind and wet swishings that came out muffled from the bracken shores. It was the kind of quiet that promised to be broken.

Swampland, misnamed when the pools are more numerous than the plots of land, smells nothing like the open seas. It's enclosed and stuffy, like the airless cofferdam near the ship's innards, and can get hot. It closes the mind, insulates. Only a pirate would berth there. It made a man forget himself, pushed away from the open sky and endless waters, constantly spotting gnarled trees and moist creepers, animals never showing themselves, eyes gone in a flash. The waves don't even rise high enough. To cruise around clean bays and around pearly beaches like those near my home of Swordport, smell the wisteria and oak in the air — that was the kind of environment that made a man right.

I turned from the rowers and watched the smooth, curling bark and wide leaves of the trees. Certain branches seemed cut, as if pruned by a wild hand. And the shoreline that we skirted wasn't quite right. Some boat had clearly glanced it, like a bulky man who doesn't care if he scuffs a doorframe when he passes through. And if I knew the colors of water, even in this bruised syrup we passed through, I could see a slight darkening of oil burnt carelessly or of rum thrown off in a drunken haze.

We were on the trail.

I signaled to Lijah, and the men pulled more quickly, the lyre vibrating faster than it ought, setting the gray moss and dark vines whipping as we passed them, and carving our cutter through a path blazed by others before for us. We charged rapidly but silently down the silted channels, narrowly veering around crags and hidden shoals. I kept my eyes to the water, the trail. It was in the air; it was mordant and bitter. Before the night, we would taste bloody gold.

Sending us through a foggy inlet, the waters spilled from the tight channel to a circular cove of purple-black, bruised-looking water that opened into four more egressing channels cutting into the shore to be lost from sight among lichen-encrusted boulders and hilly shoulders that, cloaked in furry mangroves, blotted out the fallow sun. Rising up from the water, barring the luck of any ship-path through these channels, stood four jagged rocks like a bottom row of canine teeth.

The wind left us entirely and stale vapors puffed weakly around our sails. We were nearest the westernmost of these rocks, and rounding its base, when we finally caught sight of a clue in our hunt.

"A ship! I see a ship!" yelled Littles on the bowsprit.

"Keep your bloody, mother-licking tongue mum!" hissed Lijah running toward the edge of the deck.

But Littles' warning was unneeded — we could all see the shipwreck that passed into broad view. Impaled on the rock was the starboard half of a fishing craft's hull, the rest of its ribs and planks poking up in the bog.

"Full stop!" I called out to the rowers who had already nearly stilled the *Constance*. The splintered boat was clearly no pirate vessel, but it could easily have been a victim. "Lijah," — I strode next to him — "how long would you say this vessel has been reefed to this rock?"

The dauntless old cod inspected the wreckage slowly, chewed on his blacktar, and spat. "Not more than two or three days at the most, Capt'n," he said.

"Men!" I called, "Prepare your weapons. We may not be the only ones here."

The slide of rapiers and knives against sheaths cut the air. The men's eyes were darting everywhere.

"Capt'n!" yelled Littles, again, too loudly for our weak cover of silence.

"What is it?" I said.

"I — I think there's some kind of writing scratched into the hull."

"You think wha—" but I looked closer at the bulwark facing us, and rough marks seemed to stitch a regular pattern on a space that hadn't been smashed when the ship was destroyed. As I peered toward the planks in the cold light, I saw a trail of blood and etchings as if from a knife or the point of a boathook. I couldn't make out the words, just the marks that ended with an 'X' that slipped down into the dark depths.

"Can any of you men read those carvings?" We pulled our port alongside the wrecked hull and all the men got a good look in the setting daylight. They all shook their heads stupidly. But while we might not have picked out the words, the message from the sailor who had dared tried to write it in his last few moments was clear: Whatever had killed him was still alive.

We had been warned.

"Lijah, bring the *Constance* about and we'll sniff Goldbeard out in the rest of these channels. Tell the men to be prepared for ambush at any moment. And for Quell's sake, tell them to hush their mouths; we may still have the advantage of surprise."

Lijah knew a thing or two about running the mates, even runts like these. With silent orders and hand signals, punctuated with some crude gestures, he kept our ship from rubbing against the rock and wrack by maneuvering the *Constance* beyond her skill with drifts and backturns of the oars so that we almost slithered around the giant, toothy rocks.

The sun's last rays were diffusing poorly through the trees, and my eyes jumped like crazed crickets looking for any sign of a live ship and our fate. As darkness grew, some of the men lit pale, hooded lanterns. Their light caught floating stripped planks, bobbing jugs once of ale, knotted lines twisted around cloth and metal spikes. Colors had turned to grays under the cooling darkness, and any signs of allegiance of this ship — or perhaps another? — was lost in bramble and bog.

Some of the men jittered in their shoes (as I've said, a worthless lot), others said prayers joined to Vanitthu or Tykee. Easton's lyre cracked notes so slowly and terribly that I imagined bones being snapped one at a time. I braced myself with a swig of dark liquor from a flask.

The mind in days over days of gazing at the always-moving waters begins to create a great set of shelves in its back into which every slight irregularity goes. See enough planks, and you know you have more than a chance board from a ship here and there: you have a single ship gone damaged in a fight. The bits of quarterdeck and leeboard fly across the shelves in the mind and construct the very make and design of the vessel. And this one bore the marks of a rogue, jerry-rigged together in pieces while lone on the seas, upping a bulwark from a sunk dromond on shallow waters, sails a patchwork from fine and filthy garments alike, masts a circus that'd make a respectable captain laugh. Yes, these pieces clung together in my mind and I could see the scent of pirates as sure as I could smell them if they were under my nose.

And suddenly, I saw the pirates. But they weren't where I thought they'd be. Not camped out in camouflage or secreted in the tree branches, but dismembered; protruding from jelly-like mud. A lame mate's wooden leg wobbled in the thick folds of some amorphous, indescribable creature hulking like a monstrous hippopotamus above and below the marshy shallows. Shattered skulls, disconnected long bones, and swollen organs stuck out — many impaled on broken planks and splintered yards — among a field of cutlasses, bobstays, and bits. Unless my eyes deceived me, I even saw golden coins still tied to some lengths of torn chin and beard. Viscous, slime-covered mounds of swamp silt held it all together.

Then the mounded silt became recognizable as beast and began to move.

It sloughed off the huge toothy rock we had nearly rounded, and the resulting wave that jolted our hull broke our silent trance. We had discovered its den, and it was bound to see to it that no one else did.

It was as if the swamp turned from water and mud to flabby bulk studded with the wrack and ruin of past victims, and corpulence rose above the *Constance*. Brawn cut off the shoreline like a thick curtain, and curved arms that bore ship parts and our Goldbeard's grave swung with groans of dissatisfaction onto our deck, quickly shivering our mizzenmast. Mainsheets snapped and sent scything whiplashes across the deck. One severed line cut clean through Easton's neck, and the half-elf's now-lifeless hand fell across the strings of his lute in a final minor dirge chord. Another lashed across the starboard side of rowers, pitching their cries straight to the heavens.

I grabbed a loose line of tackle and swung out of the reaches of the attacking creature, yelling orders to my crew, "Backwater! Bear full speed astern! Hold to your places!"

Lijah also broke into imprecatory action, admonishing the men to row with all their piss-praying strength.

Old jagged wood pieces flew at our deck as the creature howled an unintelligible sound of burbling muck and watery depths and rained its barbaric tree-like arms above our deck.

Suddenly, it submerged and was gone.

"Men! Pull with all your might! Our moment of escape is at hand!" I yelled in a rare moment of passion, blood filling the now-pulsing veins of my neck and forehead.

They all rallied, and we got a burst of speed from the faithful *Constance*. Our maneuverability was minimal with the mizzen gone, but we seemed to put some space from the ambush and, by staying the oars on one side, managed to swing about.

We sliced out of the entrance to the cove, raking our starboard hull against the rocks. The waters continued to convulse, though we saw no signs of the creature. The sea churned and matched the consistency and smell of curdled milk.

"How many injuries?" I questioned Lijah, who had gone down to curse at the men to their faces.

"Not more than ten, Capt'n!" he called back. "At least three dead, others lost some hands and fingers."

"Send those who still can to bend their backs at the oars. We must outrun this monster!"

Waves punching the hulls, the *Constance* heaved precipitously as she jibed even without her main sail. Several of the crew lost their grips on the oars and went flying over the rails as we threatened to capsize.

"Hold your places, men! Bring her out of this next pass and we should be safe from the—"

A roar cut off my final word as only then did the beast reemerge in front of us like an uncouth dolphin. It now rose plain to be seen for the first time and defied all description. Its body, fully as long and wide as two full-grown men laid end-to-end, seemed to be composed of nothing more than shapeless layers and folds of thick mud. From this morass, massive arm-like appendages protruded and swung like forge hammers, splintering thick planks and mortal bones beneath them. From its top, a somewhat head-shaped lump appended with a formless face consisting of nothing more than a gaping maw. Throughout its shapeless bulk, broken planks and spars, weaponry, and flotsam protruded as if the exposed bones of a secret internal skeleton, and upon many of these jutting stakes hung the eviscerated corpses of the very pirate crew we had come to hunt.

I do not know what the thing was or if it even had a name. It was of neither land nor sea, but somehow a monstrous marriage of both. Who knows how long it had lain in somnolence in its marshy bower, letting the currents of Quell's Magic Bag serve as its tender to bring it the sea's castoffs and unwitting prey alike. By its size, it appeared to have existed quietly among the pools and mangrove roots for some time and, by the lack of rumor of its existence, had succeeded in protecting its secret from any who may have stumbled upon here, into its home waters.

But it was not quiet now, and any slumber it may have enjoyed before our arrival was long past. It withstood the ramming of our matchstick prow and enveloped both Littles — poor, condemned fool — and the bowsprit in its silt-like body folds.

The prow of the ship disintegrated as the beast pummeled its force against us.

"Stand to! Prepare for boarding action!" I cried, but the men had lost all sense of order. Some had grabbed harpoons and were dashing them blindly into the water, others were

racing to the aft deck, and some even bent their knees, on the verge of jumping overboard. I hurdled with a line down from the upper deck and swung to follow those headed aft.

The beast bellowed above our deck, and as I turned I could see its triangular maw vomit forth a mass of stinging vermin over our deck. Lijah had been too slow to escape aft, and I saw centipedes and other violently swarming insects consume his face in a frenzy of blood and flesh. As the beast sprayed the contents of its insides all over us, the perforated body parts of Littles came shooting out and messed itself on one crewman.

One of the monster's appendages flew towards me, and I cocked my cutlass sideways and braced my legs as the beast ribboned itself on my sharpened blade. It didn't even let out a cry of pain, and I trembled, dashing my face into the deck as another lash of its girth clipped my back.

"Men!" I called out to the few forms I could still make out on the quaking and swamped deck, "Cut the latches on the backstay lines! We'll whip it with the rigging!" Some hands went to execute my last command, and lines and spars swung at the thing's awful face, opening up lacerations in its rubbery flesh.

Like an infernal dog howling at the moon, it invoked a merciless god with wordless gibbers and disgorged more vermin over our deck. My back and arms were coated in muddy phlegm and stinging pests. They burrowed into my skin, biting and clawing. I launched myself backwards into a span of splintered hull and, with a canine shake, rubbed most of them off against the ragged board.

"Damn you, foul beast!" I cursed and charged at it recklessly as it towered above me.

Then a terrific thunderclap shook the remains of the deck, and I was sent sprawling toward the railing, hitting my head on the stern whipstaff.

After that, the quick dispatch of the *Constance* lies in scraps in my mind. I remember finding myself clutching a piece of torn decking in the violet water, watching the *Constance* sink as the monster devoured it. Men shrieked. The hull planking was eviscerated. The monster let out a mountainous belch.

Waves must have pushed me under again. I looked up, certain of my fate, into the senseless eyes of the rolling head, if such a formless shape could be called so. It seemed on the verge of swallowing me too, but then — whether distracted or possessing some tinge of mercy, only you can tell me, O Quell — it pounded the water with its fists, and the tidal wave rode me away from the foul waterlord's swampy den.

I felt the rush of nausea and relief all at once, and with my remaining strength, I used my belt to lash my body face up on the wooden fragment. In the black of night, my energy gone, I breathed toward the sky and let darkness o'ertake me.

Some stories of Goldbeard tell of the first ship he stole after he was abandoned to the open sea on a piece of board in the rough waters of the Gulf of Akados. He lay as one dead until a giant vulture came to feast on his flesh. He then wrestled the bird lifeless, turned its bones and claws into a spear, survived for weeks on the sea life he killed, drifted back to the ship that abandoned him, set fire to the vessel, stole its launch, and laughed at the screams of those abandoned as they rose into the vast and suffocating air.

Of course, that's stories for you; always a bit too tall to be true. Like him, I now lie on a rough piece of board, but I have been exiled by the gods, not by men. I know not how I went from deep in the lagoon inlets of the northern Amrin Est'ry to the open sea where I now drift on this flimsy raft. The navigation of those channels could not have been caused by the tides, nor by any ocean currents I know. But I awoke days ago below the severe sun, land far beyond the curving horizons.

If you have saved me, O Quell, have you simply left me to suffer this purgatory for my sins? I shall be eaten alive by some toothy fish or shall die elemental under the sun. Or is this endless expanse of waves the gateway to a new kingdom, a watery home where I may at last find rest? I smell the rich sea salt, the odor of creatures lurking in the depths, and the unmistakable moderate honey of wisteria and oak.

Whatever home I now belong to, O lord, hasten me there.

ECHOES FROM THE OTHERSIDE

BY JEFF PROVINE

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“Echoes from the Otherside” reveals the unique situation in the city of Mirquinoc between its mortal inhabitants and the mysterious fey who cohabitate with them. However, this information is well known to anyone who has visited Mirquinoc or even heard much of it. The story also reveals the uncertain heritage and fate of the Maroc family, but that plays no part in the scope of the *Borderland Provinces* beyond its inclusion in this story.

ECHOES FROM THE OTHERSIDE

BY JEFF PROVINE

fter the faerie's first visit, when it spoilt the whole store of milk, Farmer Maroc went to the captain of the watch.

It was a short walk from his land-hold at the foot of the second of the Keelstones down the cow-road to the gate of Mirquinoc. Maroc Farm, settled by his grandfather and renamed for his father, was the fifth largest in the Gaelon River Valley, so they said.

Now it had a pesky faerie ruining it.

Maroc didn't walk to town; he marched with stomping steps, his stride matching the scowl on his face for sheer animosity.

The uneven walls and crooked towers of the town bewitched with unearthly and uninvited guests grew steadily larger until its gate appeared ahead. A guardsman stood on either side, leaning enough on their pikes to almost conceal

their apathy, but their bored eyes gave them away completely. A momentary glance at the farmer's infamous frown was all that duty required before the guards quickly looked away — nothing to see here.

Maroc saw the telltale flicker of the sprite between the men, the creature who fancied herself the gate's true guard. The fey were always just beyond sight. He didn't know whether it was some spell they cast on themselves or if the winged mites could leap so fast a man's eye just couldn't follow, like a fly darting about.

Speaking of...flies were everywhere in his cellar now, alighting upon the befouled milk to take their filthy feedings.

Maroc ground his teeth beneath his thick lips, but he didn't grimace at the sprite. She wouldn't like that, and he had enough crazed faeries on his hands as it was.

Nearby, two wooden signs dangled on thin iron chains so the fey wouldn't knock them down (as they did with just about anything from time to time). One sign read, "Drawing steel or iron weapons in the city is forbidden." The other advised, "Ignore the Sprites."

Maroc snorted. If only it were that easy.

Captain Tansinthe stood just beyond the gate. Her stance was firm, her hand on her sword hilt and her head held high as she watched the morning stream of wagons roll into town loaded down with local produce or trade goods brought up by horses weary from their journey on the King's Road. Her gaze danced from one wagon to the next.

"Captain!"

Tansinthe turned and gave a slight nod at Maroc's call. Her eyes lingered on his famously ferocious mug only a moment before flicking back to the marketers coming into town.

Maroc marched up to her. "Captain, I must report a crime!"

She settled her watchful look on him and one of her eyebrows rose. "Is that what brings you down from Maroc Farm?"

"It is." The farmer paused to spit into the dust of the street.

Tansinthe glanced down at the spittle that marked the toe of her boot with eyebrow arched even farther and then looked back at Maroc. She said nothing.

Maroc took a deep breath, as if gathering momentum for the coming tirade. "Last night, just after second moonrise, I heard an unnatural-strong gust of wind come down from the north. I didn't think much of it — just a midnight storm — so I pulled the quilt over my

head and tried to sleep through it. Yet the wind blew so hot through the shutter that I had to kick the quilt off!”

“Strange to have a warm wind from the north,” Tansinthe said calmly.

“Exactly my point! My bedroom was sweltering, and I had to leave the house for fresh air. That’s when I saw him!”

“Him?”

“The faerie!”

Tansinthe sighed and closed her eyes a moment. She opened them again, along with her mouth, but Maroc rushed in to fill the silent space of a heartbeat with more of his tale before she could so much as draw breath to speak.

“He was a big one, big as a grown man! He was standing there, arms stretched out straight at the entrance of my dairy’s cellar. Out from his clawed hands came that horrible blast of air so strong the door’d been blown off its hinges! I could see heatwaves in the moonlight! He warmed up all the stock of milk I’d set to make into cheese for my wedding come fall!”

Tansinthe squinted a moment, then she nodded for him to go on.

“So I grabbed a stick to go after him. As soon as he saw me, he quit with the wind and waved his arms at me. He started flapping his lips, jabbering something, but I didn’t hear a thing. Then he was gone, disappeared as that lot are apt to do. My dairy cellar was heated to a boiler, and this morning it smelt worse than a mule fart in a henhouse after an earthquake!”

“I’m sorry to hear of your loss,” Tansinthe said evenly. “What would you have me do?”

“He’s a vandal! As...as good as an arsonist! I want him taken care of!”

“Master Maroc, as you well know, the fey are beyond my jurisdiction to arrest.”

“I know that, but you could do *something*!”

Tansinthe stared at him without flinching. It wasn’t often that someone was able to look at a face like Maroc’s straight on.

“Such as what?” she asked.

Farmer Maroc sputtered. “Y-you’re the captain of the guard! Something!”

Tansinthe shook her head and turned back to the wagons rolling through the gate and the weary travelers with bindles on their backs. “I only enforce mortal law, Farmer Maroc. If you have problems with the fey, see if the druids can plead on your behalf to Queen Twylinvere.”

Maroc sputtered a few more times and pointed a stubby finger with overlarge knuckles at her. “You were an adventurer once. What would you have done then?”

“I wouldn’t get on the bad side of a faerie,” Tansinthe said. She looked up at the sky. “I’d heard many stories about your grandfather’s adventures before I took up the trail myself. Bards still sing about how he braved the Dragonmarsh Lowlands. Eddar Firkin: the man who slayed a frog-beast, rescued a damsel... I always wondered what a damsel was doing in that swamp.”

“This has nothing to do with my grandparents!” Maroc shouted so hard he squeezed his eyes closed, his voice the harsh braying of a congested mule. “I want you to deal with that faerie!”

Tansinthe gave Maroc a long, cold glare. “I told you, there’s nothing I can do for you.”

Maroc glared back — and he was good at glaring. Few could stand up to the intense stare of his one good eye for long, much less the squinting one that always seemed to be looking in the wrong direction. But Tansinthe was no green recruit. She met his walleied stare and returned it in kind. Maroc continued his glare until his eyes watered and the wide pores of his nose beaded with sweat, but finally he stamped his slab of a foot and marched back towards his sour, reeking farm.

When the faerie visited again that afternoon and ruined the clean laundry, Farmer Maroc met with the mayor.

He stomped into the Sword and Squire tavern so loudly it shook mites from the thatch. The little fey thugs quickly scooted out from underfoot and back into dark corners and under low shelves with all the dignity they could muster, as if they hadn't just been shaken unexpectedly from their hiding places in the dirty roofing to tumble ignobly to the floor below. It would have been a jaw-dropping or even comical sight anywhere else. In Mirquinoe it passed without comment. One old mercer actually had to pluck a thrashing mite out of his ale stein and set it aside on the floor before taking another sip. The bedraggled little gremlin shook like a wet dog before stalking away, casting dark glares at any who dared take notice.

Gandar Golson was sitting in his alcove in the back with twelve different wooden mugs. A bookkeeper with a huge ledger in his hands made marks as Golson took a sip and muttered notes.

"Mayor!" Maroc called.

Golson set down his mug and smacked his lips. After a smile and a convulsive belch, he held out his hand. "Master Maroc! What a joy to see you in town! Come, join me. I recommend the mead and roast haunch!"

"Bah, I'm not hungry." Maroc sat down with a huff.

"Two pinches more hops in next year's winter beer," Golson told his bookkeeper in dry words. He turned back to Maroc with a toothy grin and boomed, "What can I do for you, Farmer?"

Maroc pounded on the table, making the mugs dance and slosh. "I have been tormented by a nasty faerie twice now, and I need it to end!"

Golson wrapped his mugs in his meaty arms. He picked one, tasted it, and wrinkled his nose. After another mumble to the bookkeeper, he said, "Farmer, I'm so sorry to hear that, especially with your wedding coming up in just a few weeks! I have your two kegs of choice wine set aside, by the by. When would you like to come 'round the shop with your deposit?"

"I'm not worried about the wine right now, I'm worried about him!"

"Him?"

"The faerie!"

"This sprite is troubling you that much? They're usually just playful creatures."

"Some kind of play!" Maroc gave a vindictive snort. "After ruining my milk, the blasted thing sprang up just as soon as my laundry-lady finished hanging everything on the line. It cast some foul wind-spell, and the whole lot of clothes blew across the yard into the cowfield!"

"Poor woman! Having to start all over again—"

"Poor woman? Poor me! She just ran off screamin' about the Devil!"

Golson took another drink. "Oh?"

"That faerie has horns curling back on his head. Maybe it is a devil. I don't know. Whatever the blighter is, he ruined my whole set of clothes by dressing up the cows with 'em!"

Brew exploded out of Golson's mouth followed by a loud laugh deep from his belly.

Maroc felt bile simmering up in the back of his throat and his own thick lips beginning to curl involuntarily into a hateful sneer. "It's not funny! All my shirts are stretched out from their shoulders, and my pants stained from their haunches! One had my best felt hat on its rump!"

"Stop, stop!" Golson begged amid peals of laughter.

The bookkeeper beside him smiled and waved his quill, pretending to write.

Maroc pressed his lips closed. Foul words ran through his mind like a tumbling waterfall, but he decided not to curse the mayor to his face. He chuckled wryly to himself: better to hurt him later by stiffing him on the wedding wine.

Finally Golson took a long breath and sighed. "A tragedy, a tragedy... We have the town reparation fund for damages by our spritely neighbors, although, with as wealthy as you are, it might be tough convincing the council to believe you need it."

Maroc let his curses fly then and pounded the table again causing another rattle among the wooden jacks. "You can bet I'll be getting my money for sure, Mayor!" he spit in his sudden and terrible rage. "But right now," — he proceeded more calmly as he mastered

himself somewhat — “Right now I want you to deal with that faerie!”

Golson again settled his mugs with his wide hands. “What do you want me to do?”

“Call on that Queen Twylilump and have her whip him!”

“Oh, I’m just a mayor,” Golson said, shaking his head. “I could knock on any door in town, but I don’t summon a queen. She appears as she pleases. Maybe you could speak with the druids, see if they can intercede?”

Maroc shook his head. “My family’s never cared much for druids, and the feeling’s mutual. We just keep clear of one another. And I haven’t had faerie problems before!”

Golson wiped his mouth with his hand, pausing to lick a droplet from his finger in thought. “That’s true enough. Now, I’m not a terribly old man, but I knew your grandfather. I was a lad when he bought your holding up there to farm it with that bride he brought back from his adventuring ‘round Zelkor’s Ferry in the east. It used to be Grumblefield, and it had as many sprites come around as any other farm. Ever since then, I don’t remember hearing a thing about them pranking up that way. I don’t know what kind of deal your grandfather worked, but it seems to have, well...worked.”

“That’s how I’d like it to be again!” Maroc cried.

Golson gave a warm smile. “These things happen. Best to just ride them out and count your blessings!”

Maroc snorted in disbelief.

Golson shook his head. “Just look at you! One of the wealthiest men in the valley! And you have a beautiful young bride coming to join you this fall.”

“Aye, but the dowry cost me half my herd. She’ll have to work hard to make it up to me.”

A slow grimace settled over Golson’s face. “Yes, well, marriage can be a happy union. Perhaps you’ll grow together with a family. I still recall with sorrow the news all those years ago, after the fire. It must be so lonely up there.”

“Meh, I have my hired hands,” Maroc shrugged. “Besides, it sped up my inheritance.”

Golson’s grimace contorted into a look of horror. “Your mother, father, and grandmother all burned in the farmhouse together... and after your grandfather hanged himself!”

“My mother was born ugliest baby in all of the Gaelon River Valley. The cow’s milk went sour for a week.” Maroc shrugged again. “Couldn’t blame him really.”

“But she grew into her looks!” Golson protested. “Men were falling over each other proposing before Alwin Maroc won her hand. She used to pit us against each other in boxing matches just to carry her kerchief. Alwin broke my nose once!”

Maroc stuck out his thick tongue. “And you’re saying I haven’t grown into my looks? Eh? That’s why you think I had to bribe some spinster goose from two towns over to marry me, isn’t it?”

Golson closed his mouth with a snap and didn’t say a thing.

“Like I’d miss ‘em,” Maroc muttered. “What kind of mother names her son ‘Farmer,’ anyhow?”

“It’s very...precise, at least,” Golson offered.

“Bah,” Maroc said. He stood and pounded the table one more time for good measure, Golson scrambling to keep the mugs from being upset. “So you can’t help me. I’ll be sure to remind everyone of that when the next elections roll around.”

Then he stomped away.

Upon the faerie’s third visit, when it tossed the mud from the pigyard in through the front door, Farmer Maroc went to the Tower of Iolphezar to consult with the wizard.

Maroc knocked, and Iolphezar’s door opened slowly of its own volition, no mortal hand touching it. Maroc stomped in, unimpressed.

The room was empty and dark.

Maroc only waited a moment before he stomped his muddy boot and announced, “I don’t have all day, Wizard!”

A sliver of light appeared on the wall and widened as Iolphezar stepped through. The

wizard stroked his beard and lifted his long, pointed nose high to sniff the air. “You come to me for aid, Farmer Maroc?”

“Yeah, I do. I’ve got a faerie problem.”

“I see. Have you consulted the druid—”

“I don’t want to talk to any druids. A bunch of nature-diddlers, the lot of them!”

Iolphezar’s eyes took on a distant look for a moment as he tried to puzzle that one out.

Maroc didn’t notice the sudden loss of attention from his audience, and pressed ahead undaunted. “They seem to think I’m some kind of miscreant and would try to bespell me before they helped me any.”

Iolphezar sniffed the air again uncertainly. He brought a delicately embroidered handkerchief and tucked it up under his nose. “They might not be wrong.”

“Ha. Ha. I’m in no mood for your jokes, Wizard. What I need is a powder or potion or something to deal with this faerie that’s ruining my life!”

“Ruining your life?”

Maroc told Iolphezar of the milk cellar and the laundry. “Then, just as the sun was rising this morning, the front door burst open with a tidal wave of pig muck rushing into my front parlor! I thought it was an earthquake and ran out in my dressing gown. Then I saw him again!”

“Him?”

“The faerie! He had his hands out where he’d cast some air spell to throw the whole pigyard up against my house! And *into* it! Pigs were squealing everywhere! I started chasing after him, and he started running toward me smiling and yammering his lips like he was laughing. Then he disappeared!”

“Strange activity for a sprite.”

“T’weren’t no sprite like I’ve seen here in town!”

“Describe it to me.”

“Oh, he’s a big one. About six feet, but scrawny. Legs like a goat without any hair! Sick, horrid things. And then two big horns sticking out of his puckish little head.”

Iolphezar nodded. “This is indeed a strange faerie! What you are speaking of seems to be a forlarren.”

“Never heard of a ‘fore-baron.’ He some kind of herald?”

“Forlarren. And they’re usually female. The creatures are the offspring of a nymph who has gained the interest of a fiendish spirit of some sort. They’re rare, and a male forlarren is even rarer, especially known for rages and fits of violence. This one seems to wield the ‘gust of wind’ spell with great relish. Why it has settled on you is a mystery.”

“I don’t care why! I just want it gone!”

“You’ve taken the usual precautions of a citizen of Mirquinoc, of course? Left out a bowl of milk? An extra pair of shoes and set of child’s clothes? Always leave one chore undone? Are you certain you did nothing to upset him, even in your youth? The fey have long memories, and time sometimes passes differently for them.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s all faerie superstition. I didn’t do anything to bother him, so why is he destroying my farm? I’ve got a wedding coming up in a matter of weeks!”

Iolphezar shrugged. “Who can know the ways of faeries?”

Maroc made an angry snort and dug into his coin purse. He found a few gold galleons and held them up. “What can I do to stop him?”

Iolphezar held out his hand for the coins. Maroc dropped them into the wizard’s palm. Iolphezar tested their weight, sniffed them, and wrapped them in his handkerchief, carefully wiping his hands as he did.

“Since the usual faerie-defenses seem to have failed, perhaps you should work with his fiendish side. Try creating a ring of salt and having blessings.”

“Around my whole farm? That’d cost a fortune!”

Iolphezar shrugged again. “Of course, there’s always cold-forged iron, but Twylinvere would greatly frown upon any mortal who wielded it against a fey. A horseshoe or two over the entrances on your farm might help.”

Maroc let out a long sigh through his unshapely nose. “All right, I’ll get the salt. Maybe I can find a priest who’ll bless without insisting I make a wad of donations to the poor box.”

He turned to go, but a sharp sniff from Iolphezar made him turn back. The wizard's nose twitched.

"Don't be using your wizard-sight on me!" Maroc shouted. "I've got enough problems with magicky folks, and I don't need another one peeping in my shorts!"

Maroc stomped out, leaving stinking, muddy boot prints as he went.

The faerie's fourth visit happened at noon, when he created a whirlwind in the kitchen. This time, Maroc went to the blacksmith.

Maroc had just arrived home with a wagon-load of salt; he'd get two of his hired-hands to spread it — *after* their midday meal to make sure they didn't line their pockets with some mooched seasoning.

In the meantime, Maroc sat on the wagon wheel and dug his fingers through the crystalline powder. It stung, pain lighting up each scratch or scrape on his calloused hands. He hoped it hurt the faerie even worse.

A roll of thunder burst from the kitchen in the farmhouse, and the shutters exploded outward. Maroc's cook — she had been the laundress yesterday and switched to her new position only this morning — ran out screaming. "Devil! He's the Devil again! Why? *Why?*"

Maroc jumped off the wagon and rushed to the house. Soot and sparks were blowing out of the chimney, blanketing the squawking chickens in the yard with a black coat. Maroc kicked his way through the fowl stampede and pulled himself up enough to peek over the windowsill.

Inside the kitchen was a cyclone. The chairs and tables were overturned, cabinet doors banged in the wind, and half-made food flew in every direction.

In the middle of it all, the forlarren stood with his arms raised up to near the tips of his curved horns. The faerie's eyes went wide. He turned to Maroc, grinned, and disappeared.

The cyclone stopped, and everything crashed to the floor. Farmer Maroc squeezed his salt-stinging hands into fists and swore the bloodiest, foulest oath of vengeance he could think of. Even the sun seemed to darken for a second as a cloud seemed to momentarily blow across its face.

There wasn't so much need for a blacksmith in Mirquinoc, with society frowning on iron implements. Coppersmiths and tinsmiths took up the bulk of the town-work, while the blacksmiths handled the plowshares and horseshoes of the farmers in the nearby reaches of the valley. Maroc's blacksmith turned him away, giving a disapproving nod toward the Thieves Guild hall. There Maroc was again turned away, with a wink and mumble about nefarious types to be found at the Broken Pumpkin.

Maroc sat in the tavern for over an hour, sipping a pint of the cheapest, sourest ale they had. Bits of pulp from the scrapings of the barrel floated in it, but a small smile touched his lips after having haggled the barkeep down by a full copper punt for the swill.

It was somehow much darker here than the Sword and Squire. Even though the holes in the thin roof let through rays of gray sunlight, they seemed to only serve to illuminate the dancing dust motes.

Just as he made threats to the barmaid about leaving for the third time, a man in a long woolen cloak clapped him on the shoulder and left through the back door.

Maroc followed him.

The floor of the alley behind the Broken Pumpkin was slick with slime Maroc didn't want to examine too closely. It was narrow here, and the shadows from the buildings all around made it impossible to see who was underneath the stranger's thick cloak.

The figure held out two hands, both in tattered cloth wrappings. One was empty, the other held a dagger in a leather sheath. Maroc filled the empty hand with cool gold and took the sheath. The figure brushed past Maroc and walked on as if they had never met, his boots squelching in the sludge.

He knew he shouldn't, but Maroc couldn't help but undo the leather straps on the sheath and pull out the dagger. He ran his fingers over the flat of its blade. It was oddly bumpy

from the cold-forge process. Iron splinters and burrs hung from the rough knife blade which had been crudely sharpened to a razor edge.

Maroc slid the dagger back into its casing and tucked it inside his vest. He stomped happily back through the tavern and out to his farm. A young urchin begging in the shadowed corner huddled back involuntarily, unable to differentiate the hideous grimace that served as a smile on Farmer's face from his normal scowl of anger.

Farmer Maroc held his blade tight under his pillow through the night. He was tired, but his bitterness let him lie awake. He was ready when the faerie came the fifth time.

He heard it in the darkness, creeping through the shadows of the farmyard. Its clawed hands scraped the wooden slats of the outer wall, growing louder and louder as it crept up toward Maroc's open window. Maroc couldn't help but tally the cost of the paint it would take to cover the marks the creature was undoubtedly making.

Maroc's heart pounded in his ears. He tried to lay as quietly as possible, letting out only a few rasping breaths.

He heard the lock on the shutter click and then the old hinges whined as the window opened.

A blast of cold air rushed into the room. Maroc felt his bed lift into the air. It turned sideways and dumped him out in a wave of his straw mattress. He kept his grip on his dagger, now above his pillow with his head underneath. With the rest of his limbs, Maroc flailed to kick off the quilt and linens. Finally he pulled himself free and lunged to his feet.

The faerie stood beside the overturned bed. His face was sinister, with eyes bright in the darkness. His curving horns cast ominous shadows.

"Yah!" Maroc shouted his war-cry and swung his blade. He missed completely, yet the blade seemed to find something to catch on in the empty air.

Then the forlarren made a loud gasp. He waved his clawed hands in the air and then laughed aloud, stamping his naked, hooved feet. He let out another chattering laugh. "You did it!"

"Eh?" Maroc grunted.

"Using a cold iron knife to sever the barrier that's been keeping me from you! Eddar, you're a genius!"

"W-what?" was all Maroc could say.

"I should've known you were just trying to get me close. I've been trying to push my way through that barrier from the Otherworld for so long! Then, when I get everything past it except my voice, it only takes you three days to figure it out and cut it!"

"What?" Maroc repeated.

"Surely you recognize me, Eddar! It's your old buddy Bristlecone! Remember? The one you bested in the Dragonmarsh? You showed me there's more to the world than just watching it burn and weeping among the ashes?"

"What?" Maroc asked a third time.

Bristlecone took two leaping steps toward Maroc. The farmer whimpered and brought up his dagger. His hand started shaking so badly he dropped it, the blade planting itself firmly into the floorboard next to his crooked, hairy toes with a dull thud.

"We'll trot down memory lane later, Eddar," Bristlecone said firmly. "I'm here to warn you with a message from the Otherworld: you're about to marry a green hag!"

Maroc's ears perked. *All this was about a warning?*

Maybe there was something wrong with his betrothed. He'd always suspected; why else would she consent to marry a ruddy thing like him? Just for his money? No, it was to humiliate him down the road!

"She's a hag?" Maroc asked

"Indeed! I found it out, and she banished me with her foul witchery, but now I'm back! I just couldn't tell you since, you know, magic and such, so I had to be crafty about it.

"I soured the milk to show how something seemingly good can turn wrong. I put clothes on the cows to show she was disguised. I blew pig-slime through the front door to show

what you'd be bringing into your home. I ruined the kitchen to show how bad a wife she'd be. Then I flipped your bed—"

"Nope! Stop there!" Maroc interrupted, putting his hands over his ears. "How'd you find this out?"

"I saw her with her guard down, Eddar. I didn't mean to spy on your bride-to-be in the bath, but, hey, these things happen, right?"

"Why do you keep calling me 'Eddar'?"

Bristlecone cocked his head to the side. "Because that's your name, Eddar: Eddar Firkin."

"My name's not Eddar Firkin, you lout, it's Farmer. Farmer Maroc. Eddar was my grandfather on my mother's side."

Bristlecone started to reply, but then his wide mouth dropped open instead. Its corners had such deep natural creases that he still had a wicked smile despite his obvious shock. "Are... are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Maroc stomped on the bare wood floor, his clubbed toenails leaving small gouges in the wood. "I don't even look a thing like him!"

Bristlecone squinted. "You humans... all look the same to me. Besides, it's only been... two, three, five... forty-seven years."

Maroc made a small strangled sound from deep in his belly.

"Is that a long time for you people? Time's a little hinky on the Otherside."

Maroc waved a finger in Bristlecone's face. "You're telling me that my grandfather ended up marrying a swamp hag in disguise?" he asked, a hint of desperation creeping into his voice.

Bristlecone *hmmmed*, scratched his head between the horns with one eye squinted in perplexity, as if examining some strange insect under a focusing glass. He turned and strolled over to the window. Flipping one leg over the sill, he looked back with a shake of his head, gave a small shrug, and muttered, "Huh, that's just... huh..."

"Wait! Are you saying my blood's a quarter hag?" Maroc cried.

But, Farmer Maroc of Maroc Farm had finally received his most fervent wish: the faerie was gone, never to return.

THE END

THE WALLS OF BROCH TARNA

BY NATHAN SHANK

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Moderate/Heavy

“The Walls of Broch Tarna” does not refer to any specific adventure or scenario in *The Lost Lands: Borderland Provinces*; it largely just relates facts about the Wilderland Clans War of eight years ago — details that can be found in any history of the region or in the tales of any bard or veteran of that campaign. However, the conclusion of the story does reveal some secret information about what is brewing at the old fortress and among the hill tribes of the Wilderland Hills. This is information that would not be readily available to player characters unless they were to discover it in the course of their adventures. If the GM does not intend to run a campaign in or around the region and/or the canonical events surrounding Exeter Province and the Wilderland Hills, then the spoilers located herein are only moderately revealing and may, in fact, have no bearing whatsoever on a campaign. If the GM intends to run a campaign in or around these regions (and especially if said campaign will include a political or military aspect), then the spoilers in the story could easily be considered to be Heavy rather than Moderate.

THE WALLS OF BROCH TARNA

BY NATHAN SHANK



Sir Albrair remembered the desolation brought to this fortress well. After all, he helped burn it.

Walking a road-worn stallion along the muddy path, the lone knight took weary steps toward the ruins of Broch Tarna. Wind quickened, the funeral weather shifted, and his left arm ached with old pain. Perhaps it remembered these walls. Memory was not just of the mind, Sir Albrair knew.

Even though it was past dusk, Broch Tarna was dimly illuminated by an inner phosphorescence, a faerie light old as the stones themselves. No doubt it was as his squire years' tutor, the aged physiker, Phraston had said: the weathered stones quarried to construct the fort's main bulwarks held a trace of ancient power from whatever early beings set the world in motion. Widely believed to be the oldest standing fortification upon all of Akados — perhaps in the whole of Lloegyr — Broch Tarna had never shed its ancient skin, despite having been rebuilt time and time again.

Eight years had marked the time since Sir Albrair last set foot here. Yet in the interim, the looming watchtowers, the dominating presence of the blocky citadel, and the many-layered stone courses of the rumored impenetrable walls had plagued his waking moments. But

their squat, earthen reality never manifested in Sir Albrair's dreams. There, Broch Tarna's walls always stood distorted, mottled with bizarre colors and unfeasible forms, manned by creatures hideous beyond description. When he awoke, they transformed back into the fidelity of memory, even while the unaccountable terror from the dream remained, soaking the image of these splayed walls into his mind.

Now, that memory proved itself by matching with the sloping talus of the walls before him.

But for all the years of waking up in a cold sweat, for the difficulty of shaking away those haunted images that plagued his nights, the present sight of the ruins brought no fear. Sir Albrair felt the familiar discomfort of his left arm — a strange combination of dull pain and numbness — and he felt calm. After all, his long journey ended here. Arrival is most rewarding when it comes bearing the promise of rest.

Sir Albrair walked forward across the damp overgrown esplanade toward the rubble-strewn opening of the former gatehouse where the ground bridged the steep-sided chasm of the dry moat.

"Don't worry, Bresson," he said, patting his horse. "We have nothing to fear this time. The gates and portcullis are thrown down and the fires have been snuffed for years. Before long, all will be right; you and I will both be home."

The steed's eyes reflected the fortress's gray light, and man and beast held a reverent silence as they passed under what remained of the gateway arch. Like a good knight should, he felt no fear.

The battle at Broch Tarna had ended the Wilderness Clans War and had brought Sir Albrair's first sight of the dreaded margoyles, savage kin of the gargoyles. He had learned that they blended into the rough-dressed, ancient masonry and craggy stone of the fortress walls and towers, but never could he have imagined how much that camouflage could mask their presence.

Admittedly, he was distracted at the time. He had led the initial advance, ordering a massive red oak tree timbered and chained as a battering ram. Fifty burly men had barreled it into the fortress's thick gates astride their heavy destriers, while another fifty rode beside with shields held high to deflect the rain of arrows from the myriad archer positions. It was a bold move, all Sir Albrair's own strategem. The strength and speed of the battle-trained horses as well as the heavy armor and shields of the knights proved decisive, though he lost more than fifty horses, whose bodies proved too big to be adequately sheltered from the deadly steel hail or whose shod hooves slipped from the narrow causeway that bridged the blazing, oil-soaked moat. The stench of burning horseflesh had filled his nostrils. Nevertheless, on the third pummeling impact, the mighty gates had shuddered and given way. Broch Tarna was breached; victory was within reach.

Sir Albrair had defeated the Wilderness Clans and their devilish lords without ever swinging his sword in that final battle. He remembered thinking in that moment what a pity it was that none had dared tried to best him face-to-face. If only he could have met the hill clans' champion in single combat like the stories told of heroes of old. A fair fight meant something to a knight. Skill against skill, conscience satisfied.

And then the stone had fallen.

The margoyle perched in a shallow hollow above the gate arch had never once tried to stop Sir Albrair's battering ram. It had known the odds. It had let its fortress be invaded rather than give up its near-invisibility as it crouched hidden amid the rugged stones of the ancient arch. Such was its inherent cruelty that it would rather have lost the war than lose the opportunity to kill and maim even one more human. Sir Albrair, passing right below in command of the breaching force, was too tempting a target for it to pass up. The margoyle heaved a heavy stone from its perch, and the knight never stood a chance. Sir Albrair's two subalterns heard the grating crack as the stone left its seating but broke like cowards rather than risk the time necessary to warn their captain. Their abrupt retreat delayed his own as horses' hooves suddenly churned in response to the desperate spurring of their riders and

heaving flanks momentarily pinned his own mount in place. Albrair had less than a breath to slip from his saddle and dive sidelong. He didn't make it clear in time. The falling missile crushed the spine of his horse and flattened his shoulder and arm like a cricket under a man's boot heel.

He still remembered the strange note that sounded from the east. In the pain-filled haze of his mind it seemed only moments after the fall of the block. He and everyone else present instinctively knew its source was in the far distant Forlorn Mountains, site of the cavern sanctuaries of the hill clans' margoyle war marshals, but it was somehow audible here, over a hundred miles away, even above the screaming of his dying steed and the blood pounding in his own ears from the shock and pain of his injury. The note was a deep basso profundo, felt in the bones more than heard with the ears, a dirge writ in the roots of the earth, a call from the depths of Hell. The margoyle, poised to pounce upon the hapless knight, had raised its head and looked to the east, towards those distant mountains not even visible on the horizon. It and all the rest of its kind looked long, listening to the rumbling call, and then flew away, abandoning their Vanigoth hill clan soldiers to face the combined arms of Keston, Suilley, and Toulle.

It was short work after that. The fortress had fallen, the margoyles fled.

It was a victory he knew, a victory he had been told. But in his moment of victory, he had lost his life of skill at arms, his authority as a leader of knights, his honor won as a warrior upon the field of battle, his claim to manhood. And since then, he lived as an old man even though he just now approached his prime; his twisted and useless arm now forever in a leather sling that doubled it up on itself, his limp hand hanging awkwardly next his shoulder. Sir Albrair was a cripple. It was a punishment that some could bear the whole of their lives and still manage to move on and enjoy their remaining years or decades.

Sir Albrair could not.

The years had left Sir Albrair's mind and ambitions dulled, and he was painfully aware of his plateaued convalescence. Since the moment of his injury, a long progression of decline after decline had begun.

In the weeks following the event, he pursued a dogged optimism. General Miltran Cormien, commander of the armies of Keston and hero of the war, had himself lost an arm in the war and yet found himself appointed as Lord-Governor of Keston Province not long after. Perhaps Sir Albrair's new situation was not an ending but a new beginning.

Unable to set the deranged fragments of his shattered shoulder and elbow, the healers said that loss of power to one member meant heightened strength and perception in the others as the body adapted. Sir Albrair returned one-armed to his old pastime of falconry, certain his sight could now match that of the finest bird of prey. He recast all his heraldry in the design of eagle eyes, and felt sure he could spot a fox from across a grassy plain. But when he led the hunt, the prey proved elusive, the hounds were misguided by his aggressive forays, and the other hunters became lost for hours in briars so thorny that no sane man would dare plumb their depths. There was no sign of the fox.

A whole man might have been forgiven Sir Albrair's failure, even a wounded soldier returned from war forgiven his over-enthusiasm to be about the pastimes of the genteel again, but men of action hold little regard or patience for a cripple. He fell in reputation among his peers. He was not invited on the next hunt, or the next. He released his falcons into the wild, and pitched his hunting horn into the Lesser Flaemis that flowed behind his family's estate. There would be no more falconry, he determined.

Lady Faralin, too, had slipped beyond his reach. "Indeed I remain smitten, and of course my father is still interested in the match, Albrair dear. The House of Quillarc remains in high standing despite the physical capabilities of its heir." Her eyes were sincere, her tone just the right mix of concern and care. "Men are injured all the time on the battlefield. It shows your courage, your warrior's heart."

But most men injured so grievously died, and Sir Albrair was not among this blessed

cohort. Still, the marriage arrangement remained a beneficial one to both parties, and Lady Faralin and her family's considerable fortunes made for an enviable bride by any standard. Yet when Sir Albrair pictured himself taking holy vows with his awful left arm trussed up like a curing link of sausage, he lost his vigor, told himself he would wait another year, and the next year said the same. The ties that bound their pledged union loosened and fell away. He imagined that he saw relief in her eyes at their final parting.

Worst of all, Sir Albrair's training and knightly acumen all lost their edge like a sword left out to rust. Fine manners became off-putting, practicing at swordcraft a constant reminder of what had been and now wasn't, politics a mass of ultimately pointless stratagems. Even games and revelry were a blunted, distracted pleasure. Always at the forefront of his thoughts tugged the swift cleaving of the subalterns (one his own shield-bearer!), the gut-clenching dread at the blocky falling shadow glimpsed from the corner of his eye, the blinding pain of impact on his arm like the smiting fist of an angry god or drunken father, and the deep note of the distant horn rattling through his agony-numbed mind.

From that moment eight years ago, Albrair began with a fall from horse in the midst of battle and had been falling ever since. Now, finally at the bottom, he had come to complete the course of his trajectory and find a long-awaited rest at last. He would fall only a little farther to reach his new bed, he knew: not more than the height of a man he figured.

Here, now, at the threshold of the time-forgotten fortress brought to ruin innumerable times and on a path set, not for victory or even loss, but only an end, stood the once-great Sir Albrair of Suirioc. Even his name now felt old, like he had become his own father but with the decrepitude of his grandfather for added measure.

Albrair glanced once at the indentation in the now-ruined arch above and imagined the hidden margoyle there once again. He could not even conjure up the creature's countenance in his mind's eye. Perhaps he hadn't seen it well enough in that moment of surprise and shock before it was gone; perhaps even now a part of his brain recoiled from recalling the author of his undoing, his ruining. He strode beneath the former gateway and into the fortress.

He regarded Broch Tarna's outer bailey. Sooty grime from oil set afire in the once-impassable moat still stained the detritus of the courtyard. Slain vehicles of war — decayed promethean machines that could hurl projectiles toward an incoming army — hung in timeless stillness. Formless standing stones of some primeval circle erected at the fortress's beginning stood silent, impassive. The parade ground lay barren save for the litter of broken stone and the clumps of coarse weeds that managed a living here and there. Not even the skeletons of the bygone conflict remained to lend their mute testimony to that day.

Sir Albrair wandered in his now-accustomed stupor among dilapidated buttresses, crumbling fortifications, and roofless garrisons until he approached a tall but unremarkable tower at the edge of the gates leading into the inner bailey. A trumpeter's perch, built to house the lookout who could sound the alarm, now resounded with an ashen silence that soaked into Sir Albrair's deadened senses.

The perfect place.

"Here is where we part, Bresson. You have been fearless and confident when I have not. I have already prepared your banners upon your caparison so that my father will know I am in distress. Their gold and red will tell my story. But it is better he hears it from you rather than me."

He gave the steed a slap on its hindquarters and it started back at a trot, through the ruined gate and out of sight. The sense of being truly alone pressed in on Albrair like a physical presence.

There seemed to be no true night in Broch Tarna, as the shadowy glow from the walls kept the bailey in a perpetual twilight, casting a lurid gleam over every surface like a film. Sir Albrair trudged into the base of the partially ruined tower; the overlook still kept watch on empty desolation. The stairwell was old, perhaps original construction, and

it was a tight fit, its builders of a lesser stature than a modern knight of Keston, Albrair figured. With the weight of lethargic indolence Albrair had added over the years, his passage upward was indelicate and seemingly interminable. The soot of the battle a decade ago had settled even in here and accumulated on the built up layers of grime and stain that had washed the walls for centuries incalculable. Had some ancient youth climbed these very steps in a time lost to memory with an aurochs horn shofar in hand to sound alarm of approaching attackers? Had some attacking barbarian's flint-tipped arrow found his gut, or some hurled oil-filled pot impacted at this base of this stairwell in a raging inferno and forced the watcher to choose a leap into eternity from his high perch rather than an agonizing death in flames?

Panting, unaccustomed to the exertion, Sir Albrair reached the rusted metal hatch that had been installed over the opening to the perch some time in recent decades — perhaps by the hill clans themselves in preparation for their surprise invasion of the surrounding lowlands in yon war. The hatch was jammed in place within the imperfectly-dimensioned aperture of the original construction, a joining of modern and ancient craftsmanship in ill-fitting disharmony. Albrair related to this attempt at forcing functional compliance amid surroundings never intended for the alien form, as his own maimed arm hung awkwardly in its harness, an ever-present reminder of what it meant to truly be out of place. The world seldom lent itself to fit those things that did not conform to its natural patterns.

He wedged himself on the top step, and threw the hardened steel of his gauntleted right fist at the hatch. The metal door dislodged enough that he could force it with his shoulder while pushing with his legs until it grated open enough for him to fit through. He slowly clambered up and looked around, panting with the effort. Once stashed with heavy iron shot (in case the stairwell was breached by an enemy), the small cloister held the hollow of the tower top and two windows, one narrow one looking out over the surrounding lands and the wider one looking over the inner bailey below.

The inner window's opening was just wide enough for someone to pass through. Sir Albrair breathed deeply, taking stock of the half-ruins of Broch Tarna. Why had no army been able to hold this keep for long? No simple curse explained it. Time after time, bands and armies had claimed it, garrisoned it with their finest, and died to a man under sword and arrow. Incalculable odds had failed the fort's inhabitants. Broch Tarna called the living to the dead.

A fitting place for Sir Albrair to meet his end, he thought.

Mirroring the enforced immobility that had become his own life, Broch Tarna was above all a fortress of stone. A dozen different quarries must have been mined over the centuries to provide the grades and varieties of stone that made up the original construction, subsequent additions, and countless repairs. Other than the original fortress walls that retained their mysterious phosphorescent stone — at least in their lowest courses — the vast and ancient citadel was a patchwork of masonry of different hues, kinds, and states of repair.

Sir Albrair gazed past the inner bailey below and deeper into the fortress. He observed that a narrow half-ruined lane led off another square parade ground and curled atop several runs of defensive bulwarks towards him before ending on an elevated platform above the square — perhaps a stand for reviewing troops of old. This circular overlook stood not even a heavy stone's throw from his tower perch, though several dozen feet below him. The whole structure — from the path's entry gate, to its climbing course, to the crenelated overlook — was composed of a dark stone, probably a basalt brought from the distant mountains.

Looking closer at the entry gate to this climbing lane, Sir Albrair saw that two roughly-made statues of grotesque proportion guarded the path, carved from the same dark stone as the platform itself. Batlike wings carved thin as paper shielded a maw of teeth and clawed limbs. Horns protruded from stony cheeks. Closed and squinting eyes gave the impression of vigilance even in sleep.

Yes, this was certainly the place to finish his task: in sight of stone and artistry, a place of broken aspirations and perpetual ruin, but with a hint of the fineness of noble aspirations — the faintest ghosts of the countless lords, kings, and generals who had seen Broch Tarna as a place to serve as secure foundation for defense of a kingdom or in dreams of military

conquest, only to watch their own hopes fall like a puppet off its strings.

Sir Albrair climbed out the window and onto the perch, where he stood in silence. The wind blew, and the dead fortress below shone with its cold, stony dimness. The knight braced himself at the edge of his narrow ledge with his back against the rough stone of the tower.

His good hand free, he pulled his saber from its gilt sheath, a slim shining blade with an enchantment that could cleave through stone. It was found among the Vanigoth dead after the fall of the fortress, spoils of a battle that had ended — so permanently, so irrecoverably — with Albrair's own physical defeat. No one knew which side had possessed the saber as it was found piercing the chest of a margoyle with its hilt firmly wedged against the ground. The margoyle lay atop the crushed corpse of an unknown Suilleyln knight, his left hand clutching the broken haft of a mace, but his right hand empty of either weapon or shield. Whether the saber had been the knight's and he had thrust it into the margoyle even as it crushed him to death, or had been the margoyle's and had gotten turned against its wielder's own breast as he tumbled to the ground in combat, none could say for sure. But Albrair's remorseful shield bearer had claimed the blade and bestowed it upon his commander. It was the least he could do for having failed his liege so spectacularly.

The sword was keen and never lost its edge, even when applied against the hardest marble — truly the weapon of a hero of legend, if there was such a one to wield it. Any claim Albrair had on such title was lost amid a near-decade of disappointment, rum, and self-pity. Eight years ago, that day had given him a trophy worthy of the bards yet had, at the same time, sealed his fate. Finally, though, he would return to those who had once contested these walls and now called them grave. He would merely complete the job begun by that fallen stone a decade gone.

Albrair removed the gorget from above his breastplate and put the saber's blade to his exposed neck. He could feel the flawless edge — not a nick or a burr disturbed its razor-clean edge. He gazed out over the tumble of broken walls and towers below for a final look at his tomb-to-be. The wicked faces and squinted eyes of the devilish statues flanking the climbing path drew his focus. Let these macabre countenances serve as a fitting remembrance of a life poorly spent and early retired. He prepared his soul for whatever afterlife awaited those who failed and tensed his arm as he stared at the closed orbs of evil.

The eyes of the leftmost statue opened.

Sir Albrair let out a muffled cry and nearly tumbled from his perch. His maimed arm checked his fall against the stone sill of the window, and pain echoed up and down his shoulder and back. But he was too distracted to feel it keenly. He had seen the eyes move. One of the statues was alive.

The knight's battlefield instincts kicked in. He slowly hunched back into the aperture behind him and withdrew into the concealment of the tower room until only one eye remained exposed past the edge of the window frame. The fiendish statue's arms stretched indulgently, wings furled and unfurled, and spiked neck and head rolled as if loosening muscles beneath its stony hide. Albrair was suddenly able to recall the margoyle that had maimed him in every minute detail, because this creature bore the very image of that hated memory. Did all margoyles look largely the same or was this in fact the same one that had destroyed his life with a cruel stone so long ago? He did not know. A wide grin of falcate teeth broke out across its face, and it seemed to survey the gray world around it.

It looked towards Sir Albrair.

He tensed for a moment, but then saw the true object of its gaze. A pot-bellied ogre and several rough-clad fighting men appeared in the yard below him and approached the parade ground. Though clearly hill tribesmen and looking the part of hardened raiders, they were timid as they advanced into the ruins and visibly startled when they caught sight of the margoyle grinning at them. Sir Albrair couldn't hear the words that coughed from its mouth, but they had the sound of gravel tumbling down a rocky slope and clearly struck the newcomers with fear. They raised their arms for a moment as if to shield their faces, or perhaps their ears. Then the margoyle threw its head back and let loose a long unearthly cry, too low in tone to properly be called a shriek, but reminding Albrair of nothing so much as

a bird of prey as it swooped upon its helpless target. It seemed to have the same effect on the humans and ogre, leaving them awestruck. It then stretched its stony wings wide and, in one great beat, flung itself aloft onto the reviewing stand above, where it set itself once again like a statue and frowned down at the cowering rabble.

Sir Albrair crouched motionless and continued to watch the creatures. He willed himself to be as still as stone, like the foul monstrosity before him. The margoyle, for his part though, watched the ogre and small band of uncouth warriors gathered below it. Only the margoyle's eyes moved. But as Sir Albrair followed their progress also, his concern grew. He saw other paths leading to the parade ground from the fortress's interior, other routes through its walls, and other warriors in ill-made hide armors and bearing weapons of crude but deadly construction. He was positive they were Vanigoth tribesmen, the barbaric ancient inhabitants of the hills, thought near extinct since the war. Among them were a few more ogres and several humans who were of such extreme size and grotesque proportion that ogre blood no doubt ran within their veins as well.

A restless and fearsome assembly congregated. This was no mere band; this was an army in the making. The men looked like they killed easily and often and as if their women and children must see them seldom. The ogres bore heavy armor with spikes jutting from any open space. They were missing teeth, had burnt hair, or still lugged the remnants of shackles on their arms and ankles. The misshapen ogre-kin watched everywhere at once, as if uncomfortable in their own skin, or perhaps merely itching for a fight. It was not a patient crowd.

The margoyle, however, watched them in unhurried silence and gradually drew back his lips in a vicious, stony grin once again. As the space filled with the gathering riffraff, some jostled one another, others chewed scraps of dried meat of questionable origin, a few brooded in cold scowls and glares at the others assembled. An elder ogress with a face lined by madness picked at a necklace of human fingers that hung about the many jowls of her distended neck. The margoyle let them gather and let them wait in growing anger and disquiet.

Sir Albrair watched breathless, eyes wide and unblinking except for the cold sweat that trickled into them from his forehead. Though a trained knight, his knees were weak with fear. A cough would mean his death. And though death was what he had come here to find, the sight of this throng plucked at his courage and resolve with nervous fingers.

And then the gargoyles came.

For all his training, Sir Albrair had not spotted them. These lesser creatures detached from the sides of buildings, false adornments. They emerged from tower corners. They pushed open collapsed structures and flew to the ledge outlining the margoyle's commanding platform. With wings open wide, they shrouded the throng and looked like a coven with the margoyle holding his position at the head, grinning wolfishly. Sir Albrair gazed down over their heads, keeping the margoyle in his vision.

With his voice like a mace-and-chain dragged over rough stone, the margoyle spoke, audibly now. "Beasts, men, brothers: I bring you welcome once again."

Some of the men and ogre-kin snorted and scoffed, ogres grunted, gargoyles remained impassive.

"Since the time of the Parting, we knew we would return. The full *sarn*¹ has passed as foretold since the burning of our ambitions against the lowland humans and their unlooked-for allies. The water of our failure has eroded the stone of our hides and etched us with its lines of defeat. We have craved the purifying ice winds to scour us smooth once more." He paused to eye them sharply. "But we will crave no longer!" he screamed. "The spirits of the middle air shriek down their approval upon us, the blast of their gale breath

¹ *Sarn* is a term in Terran used among the gargoyle races, particularly the margoyles of the Forlorn Mountains, that means "an appointed passage of time," usually in reference to a period of punishment or tribulation. A "full *sarn*" is used to indicate a state of completeness. To the Forlorn margoyles, the *sarn* is declared only after consulting their blind, crippled oracles that are said to "drink of the stone" to gain their preternatural insights.

cleaning our stone and laying it bare to the power of ice and wind.”

His voice dropped low now, conspiratorial and almost intimate.

“The time is at hand. The stone-oracles scream their ecstasies of pain and grinding death. The time of the Flatlanders’ strength is passed. It was fully spent in our war-feast of eight turns of the seasons past. No more will the Flatlanders of Soolee or Toollene,” — he drew these names out in exaggerated syllables, possibly in mockery, possibly from simple ignorance — “interfere with our war-feast. Even the broken corpse of the land of Kess-tawn will provide no headwind to our flights. All while our ranks have swelled beneath the stones and in the hollows. Our strength is redoubled. Our plan is better,” — then in a slow gravelly bark — “We will celebrate the war-feast on the hot bowels of our enemies!”

His audience responded to the ardor of his words. They began to shout guttural assents and imprecations against gods and men alike.

“We have suffered enough! My brethren and I have roosted on walls and atop towers and in caves and among the broken things of this world for long enough. We have bided time, completed the full *sarn*. I have lost track of the rising and setting of the seasons. Winds of heat and cold have become the same to me, especially in this cursed and ruined fortress. But we have been waiting and plotting. Many of us have scouted and concocted strategies. We have gained new allies, ones which our enemies will never suspect. And the Speakers in the Mountains have made a new plan.” He paused once again to whet their predictable anticipation. “Do you want to know what it is?”

His eyes now gleamed with an inner heat, and the enclosure of gargoyles began to shuffle and squirm with excitement. The hill-men began to thrash their weapons around, and the ogre-kin stomped their huge, misshapen feet. Cries of “Tell us!” and “Death to the Flatlanders!” and “*Buywera jaleng!*” rang out from their unfiled ranks.

Sir Albrair covered beneath the window, no longer even looking out. He listened, though, his heart in his throat.

“I will tell you! The Convocation has met before the Speakers and decided our new objective. No longer will we attack Kess-tawn, though it is weak and useless like a gargoyle with only one wing. No, the Flatlanders of that land will feed our war-feast in good time. Instead, we shall cross into the hinterlands of undefended Ecksahdur. They have but paltry perches in this sparse territory, while the rest huddle in their stone roosts in the great villages. They feel safe in this, but they are exposed.

“We will sweep down from the hills and mountains and through their perches and the few soldiers who are there. Once we have destroyed these, we will have their farms and soft villages at the mercy of our war-feast, while their warriors hide in their stone roosts. I tell you, my army, we will turn their green crops to red with our bloody dung, their strong men to wailing food, and their soft roosts into scattered twigs. By the time they come forth from the stone roosts it will be too late. We will fly swiftly back to our protected heights and digest our victory to feed our young.” He dropped back to a whisper. “All the world will know our black power, and fear — yes, the perfect, uncontrollable fear — will be ours to command.” Then he exploded. “The Flatlander nations shall quake, and we shall reign from on high!”

The throng burst into a blood frenzy, leaping and screaming war-cries of death and terror, and beating their weapons upon any surface of flesh, steel, or stone close at hand. The circle of gargoyles had become still again, but Sir Albrair could sense their intense inner excitement. Their stony bodies almost hummed. They were all of a single mind. They would sweep unlooked-for out of the Wilderland Hills and cause unfathomable destruction and suffering to Exeter Province before turning on Keston and points farther north and south. And Albrair knew that the margoyle leader was right. Exeter’s policy of sequestered defenses would leave its countryside exposed to swift attacks by aerial raiders and unchecked barbarian marauders, and Keston and the other nations remained too exhausted

² Buywera jalen (pronounced BAY-er-ah JAHNLN) is a phrase in the language of the Vanigoth hill tribes. It literally means “to spit in the ear” but is typically used idiomatically as an imprecation to bring about a horrific fate upon an enemy.

of fighting men and resources from the last war to be of any real help.

But what was Sir Albair to do? In his mind flashed the loves of his life: his aged father trying to suit up in his armor suddenly being torn by gargoyle claws; Lady Faralin preparing her gardens for some social event with foul beings bearing down on her from an open sky; his peaceful estate at Suirioc and the little village below with its famously white fences and rock falcon coops trampled and blackened by hill barbarians and ogre-kin.

He had left them just days before, given up hope for a future with them. His left arm, which had made him useless to them, now made him useless to warn them. Curse that margoyle who tipped that rock! And curse those fool subalterns unable to do their duties! And curse the tight quarters of the gateway, so cramped that he could not escape the rock's bulk! Even curse those healers who could only ease his pain and not make the arm balance a shield.

All the same, even if he could fight like a true knight, there were too many of the barbarians, and even in his prime, he could only ever battle one gargoyle at a time; he did not know if he had ever had the skill at arms to take on a stone-hided margoyle single-handedly. Now they all clamored together. To engage them would mean instant death.

But then he remembered the saber, and its enchanted blade. If he could only reach the margoyle, he could slay it in one swoop, disrupt their plans, and throw off their source of organization and strategy. The creature spoke of great schemes and organization, of countless such creatures roosting in the mountains, yet only one had come as emissary to begin the crucial process of rallying their land army. Perhaps it had exaggerated their numbers and readiness? Perhaps these 'Speakers of the Mountains' were truly relying on this lone margoyle to put their plans into motion. If he could kill it, they might be aimless. Crippled. Scared. They would not know how many lowlanders had learned of their plans, or if Albair himself had been sent to Broch Tarna because the lowland peoples already knew of their secret army gathering. The Speakers would fear sabotage at every corner, turn upon themselves and their hill-men underlings in search of spies. They would scatter, be weakened — for a time at least. Years, perhaps. Perhaps.

It was only a hope, but it was something. If he could just get near enough, he could do it, if he dared.

The margoyle now began to flap its great wings and flew slow circles around and above the hooting, clamoring throng, riling them up even more. Sir Albair could hear its wings as they flapped by his tower in a circuit above the overlook. It was crying out now in its stony native tongue. A single leap and strike could lay the creature low.

He hesitated. Would he be remembered as the savior of Exeter and Keston, or as the crippled loner who failed even in death?

Another few moments and the margoyle went flapping by again. He was close enough. How many more times would it circle? Unless he took his chance now, he might not get another. Was it worth it?

Yes, this was the end he desired. No more days of regret. No more what-ifs. A completely altruistic sacrifice; a chance to finally make something of the countless opportunities lost. Sweet rest and release from the specter of failure.

The wings beat louder and faster. Was it making its final circling pass?

When Bresson reached home, his father would send men to follow his back trail. They would track it to Broch Tarna and see the evidence of the dead margoyle and the footprints of the disbanded gathering. They would retrieve his body from its tangle with the living stone, if there was anything left of him.

He would not be remembered as a cripple, but as a knight of Keston.

The margoyle's low shriek rose once again into the air. The company below now erupted into true pandemonium.

The stony wings approached, rumbling like a cascading fall of rocks.

Sir Albair braced himself and became completely still, his emotions cold as he let the years of war training take over. His mind became blank, other than the certain knowledge of the actions he would take and the honed instincts used to analyze and adapt to any sudden changes in the field of battle. His maimed left arm remained restrained in its harness,

useless no longer as he leaned hard on it to gain purchase against the window frame for his coming leap. His right hand gripped the hilt of the saber in its gauntlet. His heart came in slow, steady beats that brought its own pulse to his ears.

Albrair, only son and rightful heir of Gastyn Quillarc and the estate of Suirioc, set his soul firmly in place and let slip its instinctive grasping for life. There were fates far worse than death. Sometimes life could be one of them.

Sir Albrair of Suirioc spun up from his crouch, his mangled and useless hand and arm serving as brace and pivot point. He felt no pain — not even a twinge of discomfort — as the bones ground harshly together under the sudden weight and pressure. His legs gathered beneath him, he sprang forward in one lunging step through the window and out onto the trumpeter's perch, his second step sailing out and over its edge into space. He hadn't needed to see the margoyle's flight to know it was there. He had known it in his soul.

Two terrestrial creatures found flight together at that moment: one terrestrial because of its composition of the earth though able to soar upon wings of stone, and the other of lighter flesh but terrestrial because cursed by form and nature to be land bound and never know the freedom of flight. For a fleeting instant they were one; two paths of intersected flight...two figures and one flashing arc of razor-edged steel.

From the window, to the ledge, to the very embrace of the margoyle, Sir Albrair bounded, putting the full strength of his arm and life into the creature of stone.

Stony nails gouged through the flesh and muscle of chest and crushed the thin bone of skull within their grip. The final moment of Sir Albrair's life narrowed quickly to only a pinhole vision of gray light and then to absolute darkness as the crush of fractured bone and rocklike claws deranged the gray and white tissues within his head. But the darkness did not come before catching, and even briefly comprehending, a final vision: a vision of a stony torso split near in twain from shoulder to gut by a splinter of razor-sharp steel, a splinter somehow gripped in a gauntleted hand that he could no longer even recognize as being his own.

From the rent throat of the plummeting creature there came a grinding, distorted shriek, a shriek that came to the man's ear as — or perhaps was immediately followed by — the single note of a distant horn — from the west perhaps? — not a dirge, but the single pure note of a clarion calling from on high, calling to muster in the realms of the upper air.