

PATHFINDER CHRONICLER

ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME IV



EDITED BY

SEAN CRANDALL & LAURA SHEPPARD

PATHFINDER
CHRONICLER
ANTHOLOGY

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Sean Crandall &
Laura Sheppard

*To my parents,
Neil and Pat,
for their love and support.*

*To Ted,
for founding Pathfinder Chronicler
and encouraging me to write.*

– L.S.

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Pathfinder Chronicler Anthology / edited by Sean Crandall & Laura Sheppard

PATHFINDER CHRONICLER

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Foreword / By Neil Spicer • Introduction / By Laura Sheppard • Wealdy's Child / By Maggie Hoyt • A Cold Wind / By W. David Wood • Better Left Alone / By Kalyna Conrad • A Broken Thing / By B.R. Bearden • Ripples of Shadow / By Matthew Roth • The Multitude / By Todd Stewart • The Black Mantis / By Ted Thompson • Golarion is our Home / By Tanith Tyrr • The Witch's Task / By Robert Gresham • Sangpotshi, the River / By David Scott • The Forgotten / By E.W. Pierce • Three Lashes for Dorian / By Michael Stevens • Zero Hour / By Dana Huber • Down to the Breathless / By Andrew Crossett • The Herald and the Mask / By Elaine Betts • Beers at the Beginning of the World / By James Tyner • The Orphan Crusade / By M.C. Shelby • Eternity's Ending / By Brian J. Fruzen • Revenge of the Red Mantis / By Ted Thompson • Anlisa's Garden Gnome / By Laura Sheppard

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FOREWORD

THE MONSTERS WE MAKE

Despite all the tales of demons and vampires—or zombies and serial killers—our worst horrors have always emerged from our own wicked imaginations. That’s because no one knows our most tortured fears and insecurities better than we do. Even if we don’t consciously create them, our dreams still betray us when we unwittingly dredge such things into heart-racing anxieties powerful enough to jar us from our beds, seeking the safety and comfort of the light—any light—to drive back the darkness and reveal the unknown before it consumes us with unrelenting fear. Without that light, we make our own monsters—and the terror rises as we wait in strained silence to receive them from under our beds. These are the truest of horrors, and they’re more fearful than any movie can ever portray.

About the only thing which comes closest to this phenomenon are the stories we read. There, too, our imaginations soar, taking over as the monsters come out to play. An author’s words may instill a terrifying scene as viewed through the eyes of the characters, but we still imagine it for ourselves. *We* are the ones who give it form and substance. And, from there, we imprint it on our mind’s eye, ready to infuse our subconscious and macerate in our dreams so we can bring it all back again—truly, as a monster of our own making.

Within these pages, you’ll find all new stories, each one with new monsters to purposefully prey on your imagination. All of them take place in Golarion—the vast and varied world of the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game. From the demon-plagued Worldwound, we experience afflictions of both the body and soul. Within the gothic stylings of ancient Ustalav, we unveil

treachery and blood. In the icy lands of Irrisen, we encounter the truly cold-hearted and those who've lost themselves. Even on the Varisian frontier, horrors appear on our very doorstep, or quietly steep in the black waters of the Mushfen swamp.

These tales take us on a tour of another world—but one not altogether different from our own, thereby making their horrors that much more believable. So read on and enjoy, but be sure to keep a light on. Your previously imagined monsters might just want to read over your shoulder.

Neil Spicer

Pathfinder Chronicler Champion 2010

RPG Superstar 2009

INTRODUCTION



Welcome, fellow short fiction lovers, to Pathfinder Chronicler Anthology Volume IV.

This is the third book I've had the pleasure of working on, and the first I've tackled as sole content editor. Quite the daunting task I must admit, but it's been a wonderful ride.

There's something about being the editor-in-chief for this anthology that makes you feel like a foster parent. Stories come to you—sometimes in their infancy, sometimes more developed—and you strive each day hoping to see them reach their potentials. You spend a great deal of time and energy on this endeavor, sleeping less and trying to balance each piece's needs with your other obligations. But you can see your efforts are worth it; the stories grow and flourish right before your eyes.

Then the day comes when they return to their other parents: the initial creators, the authors. This presents another dimension to the process. There are times when authors have different visions of where their story should head, or the wording that should be used. It can be stressful, as edits fly back and forth, and you work together to reach common ground. However, this collaborative method is truly the foundation for great works of fiction, where new ideas form and eventually each story blossoms, taking on a magnificent life of its own.

This is the joy that comes from editing for Pathfinder Chronicler, and I suppose, the joy that comes from parenting too. In the end, however, all you can really do is provide support and guidance, and see where the story takes you.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this volume, the product of months of dedication from myself, copy editor Sean Crandall, and eighteen creative

and talented authors who've chosen to work with Pathfinder Chronicler to express their love of the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game, and of its world, Golarion, by writing amazing stories.

We appreciate your support.

Laura Sheppard

aka "LauraBow"

Pathfinder Chronicler Editor

TALES
OF
HORROR



*“Let’s hope the manor lord is accommodating of travelers.
The storm will be upon us soon.”*

– TERRAL ORSALL, CRUSADER

WALDAY'S CHILD

BY MAGGIE HOYT

“*Hush now, my dearest, tho’ the long night approaches.
Sleep now, my angel, while mother is near.*”

The mother sang as she cradled the fitful child against her breast and rocked gently back and forth, stroking its soft hair.

*“Can you hear the river as it flows through your dreams?
Wide as your soul and long as your smile.”*

The mother had no blanket for her daughter, so she twisted her body over the child to shield it from the rain, allowing the water to pour down her back. Her simple dress stuck to her skin, and her hair hung in limp strings around her face. She was not cold, yet.

“Have no fear, little girl,” she whispered into the child’s ear, touching her cheek to the baby’s. “We’ll find you a good home.”

The mother looked up. She’d huddled at the base of a statue—a marble woman gazing hopefully at the horizon. The woman was so beautiful, so good, so finely dressed. Her outstretched arm seemed meant for the mother and child. She would accept the baby from the mother’s arms and never give her back.

“You can’t have her! She’s mine. Mine!” the mother declared to the sprawling city. She looked into her daughter’s scrunched face and felt her own heart race.

“What if you don’t want to find me? Your new mother will love you so,

and you won't want your real mother. Promise you'll find me. Promise! You must promise. Someday, you'll find me. Someday."

A clock chimed. The time had passed for fear. It must be done now, for twelve loud chimes signaled midnight, and the good people of Magnimar would be asleep.

The mother drifted out into the street, wading through the water-logged refuse that flowed swiftly through the gutters. The child squirmed in her arms, whimpering. The mother placed the knuckle of her first finger in the baby's mouth and let it suck.

*"I'll build a reed boat, for my baby, my dear,
And safe down that river she'll fly."*

The mother looked at the houses. "Too big. They wouldn't welcome a new little girl. You'd be their servant."

The street lamps flickered as she continued down the street. "This family has children. See their dollies on the rocking chair?" The mother took a step forward. She remembered the statue and her arms tensed. "You'd be happy," she realized. "They'll love you, and then you won't want me. No."

At the third house, the mother stopped. She sniffed the air and smiled. "This is it, little girl. This is the right one."

The home was modest and sturdy, although it needed a new whitewashing. Weeds had overtaken the small flower garden, and the stone border had a few gaps.

The mother walked up the steps of the front porch. She shivered. It was the last time she would hold her child, the last time she would ever sing to her baby.

*"Flow down the river, to the edge of your dreams,
And I'll wait for you all the night."*

The child smiled. The mother kissed her daughter on the forehead. Then she turned the knob.

The door swung open with a small creak. Nothing in the house stirred as the mother crept inside. She sniffed again and followed the scent to the back of the house, past the fireplace and the worn chairs and into the bedroom.

A couple slept soundly in their bed, but the mother spared them only a passing glance. Instead, she turned her attention to the cradle.

The mother grinned widely as she leaned over the tiny bed and began to salivate. A newborn baby girl slept swaddled in linen and wearing a small cap. The mother pulled at the linen and exposed the baby's soft thigh. She licked her lips, imagining the sizzle of the fat on the fire.

The sleeping woman sighed and turned in her bed. The mother wrapped the linen around her own daughter and tugged the cap over her ears. She traced her finger from her daughter's forehead to the tip of her nose.


"I am in your blood," she whispered. "You cannot forget me."

The mother raised the human child out of the crib and laid her daughter in its place.

No one saw the old crone lurching toward the gates of the city, her thin, matted hair dangling around her sickly green skin, baby in arms, as she returned to her fetid home in the Mushfens. But those who listened very carefully swore they could hear singing.

A GOLD WIND

BY W. DAVID WOOD

t's cold, Mallan thought. *Damnably cold. But then, everything about this place is damnable.* He shrugged his cloak tighter around his shoulders, cursing when it caught on parts of his armor plating. The overcast autumn sky matched his mood perfectly. He paused and looked about the ruins of the charred camp, nudging sticks and cinders with the toe of his leather boot. A cold wind gusted suddenly, swirling around him and flinging bits of grit through the air. He closed his eyes, shielding his face with his free hand while tightening the grip on his sword with the other. One never knew what was in the dust and ash—bits of wood, glass... even people. He waited for the breeze to quiet, then resumed his search through the debris, careful not to make noise that might draw the Enemy in.

“Mallan.” He heard a low voice whisper from behind him. He turned and saw his fellow scout, Hathik, stalking up from the tree line. “Let’s get out of this place. There’s no sign of them—no tracks, here or around the perimeter, nothing. We’ve looked for days now, and we’re late reporting back, anyway.”

Mallan nodded. “You’re right. We’re done here.”

He eyed the area one last time, then made his way silently from the remains of the camp, his friend alongside him. It was troubling, but not surprising, that they’d found no bodies and, in a way, Mallan was grateful. Finding remains was usually more disturbing than mysteriously finding nothing at all—it could mean the Enemy wasn’t finished there yet. “I wonder why the Inquisitors’ Council has men scouting this far out, anyway?” he asked.

Hathik had no answer.

A day's worth of hiking brought them back within sight of the gray stone walls of Kenabres. The fortified city rose in squat tiers atop a cliff overlooking the West Sellen River. Mallan stopped and marveled at the sight, shaking his head. He found it hard to believe this land was once green and bountiful, covered in lush scrub and teeming with game.

Now it was just shades of gray. The river was gray, the hills were gray, the city was gray.... Even the sky, thanks to the distant thick fumes roiling from the Worldwound, was always clouded and gray. Looking from a distance, one could hardly tell anything apart. It all became one vast, monochromatic smudge, giving the disturbing illusion that there was simply no end to this cursed place.

Mallan sighed. "Tell me, Hathik. How can there be so much damn gray in this place? It defies nature, I tell you."

Hathik smirked, taking in the scene as well. "I guess it means we just keep fighting, eh?"

The two men descended the hill to the river and made their way to the gated bridge, almost a small fortress in itself, crossing back into Mendev. There, they were stopped by a troop of haggard-looking guards.

The sergeant on duty stepped forward, leveling his halberd. "Halt and identify." Mallan heard the creak of drawing bows coming from the shadowed slits of the tower over the bridge.

"Scout-sergeants Mallan and Hathik, Seventh Ursus Light Foot, Third Platoon, back from assignment south of here." He jerked his thumb back toward the direction they'd come from. "Permission to pass?"

"Submit to the tests. Pass them and you can move on." The guard turned back toward the tower. "Priests!"

Mallan looked over at Hathik, who rolled his eyes. This was standard operating procedure this close to Enemy territory.

Two priests—one young and portly, the other older and whip-thin—resplendent in their robes of white and yellow, came from the bridge tower and immediately started chanting the rites of testing. They asked each scout questions that they were compelled to answer truly, and they blessed them to reveal and burn any infiltrating demons. They also inspected the scouts'

equipment for traces of chaotic contamination. That was the part Mallan hated. The priests poured over their clothes and satchels, their weapons, and finally their bodies, forcing them to strip almost to their underclothing.

“Your cloak must be confiscated. It shows signs of taint.” The older priest gestured at Mallan, who was already shivering from the cold. He handed his garment over with a scowl.

The younger priest turned to Hathik, eyeing the scout’s bow. “Your bow also shows signs of taint. It must be surrendered for purification.” He held out a pudgy, sweating hand.

Mallan started to say something, but his friend silenced him with a curt gesture.

“It’s alright. Here you are.” Hathik handed over the longbow. Mallan’s jaw dropped.

“Arrows too, please,” the priest added.

Hathik dutifully turned those over as well. Mallan just shook his head.

The fat cleric beamed as his elder companion went back to the tower. “The faithful praise your dedication, my sons. These articles will be returned to your quarters after they cleansed.” He stood to the side. “You may both pass back into Iomedae’s light.”

The two men gathered their other belongings and made their way through the bridge tower gate.

“I can’t believe you let them take your bow and arrows!” Mallan fumed as they walked across the bridge. “In a pig’s eye they’ll be returned. That chinless charlatan just got away with open thievery, I tell you!”

Hathik just smiled as they walked up the worn hillside road, past makeshift crusaders’ camps, to the city gates, while Mallan stewed until his annoyance overwhelmed him again.

“Don’t you have anything to say about it?”

“Oh, I wasn’t too concerned,” Hathik chuckled. “They were from the armory. My good ones are back at our quarters.”

Mallan laughed, clapping his friend’s shoulder with relief, and together they strode through the Southgate and into Kenabres.



The streets of Kenabres used to be a melting pot of pilgrims from across Golarion, a place where throngs of peddlers hawked their wares to any who would listen, and where you couldn't swing a stick without it ringing off a crusader's helm.

Now, though, the local church's inquisition had taken its toll. Few soldiers—and fewer merchants—wanted to come to the city and fight against the denizens of the Abyss when they risked being perceived as one and burning on the papal pyres for it. Any of the fighting units left were ones who knew a thing or two about survival in place where paranoia had made a weapon of faith. One needed to step carefully here.

Street corner mendicants howled or muttered the praises of Iomedae, Lady of Valor, while refugees jammed the alleys and gutters. City watchmen strolled along, keeping the decrepit from clogging the streets. Mallan threaded his way along the avenues until he and Hathik reached their favorite tavern.

"You, know, Hath, it never really feels like we're back until we tilt one at the Lyre, eh? We can make our report in a bit," Mallan said, eyeing the faded wooded sign hanging over the entrance. The sign once showed a beautifully painted silver lyre on a black, lacquered background. Now it was more like a chalky outline on a peeling board. Hathik nodded his agreement and they went in, finding a table next to the wall, near the fireplace. They motioned to a barmaid, holding up two fingers. She came over with two tankards of grog and took their orders.

Mallan looked around the half-empty room while waiting for their food. Things had certainly changed. He waved to a small cluster of scouts he knew from a different unit, and to Ol' Griss, the barkeep, when he caught his eye. The man wiped off a mug, then sauntered over.

"Not too busy today, eh?" Mallan asked.

Griss shook his head. "Nope. Been like this for a while, too. Refugees can't afford much, and costs have been going up as it is, so more shops have closed down. The scrutiny of the papal guard over our shoulders isn't good for business."

“Tell me about it,” Hathik sighed, a sour expression twisting his face. He tilted his stool back and leaned against the wall, sipping his drink.

Ol’ Griss smirked and shuffled off to clean a few tables, but Mallan shot his friend a warning glance. “Ease up, Hath. Everyone’s under pressure, especially the church leaders. It can’t be easy to run this town and a war as well. There are fewer soldiers, but always more to do. But it’ll pass. We’ll get reinforced and then we’ll see another surge against the Enemy—one that’ll push ‘em right back down that damnable hole, eh?”

“Maybe...” Hathik muttered over the edge of his tankard, not looking up. “But look around, Mal. Maybe they’d have enough men if they just quit burning them at the stake.”

Mallan glanced about, but no one seemed to have overheard his friend’s treasonous remark. He was about to say something else, but a wiry man in dust-streaked road leathers approached, cutting their conversation short. It was one of the other scouts Mallan waved to earlier.

“Ho, Mallan, Hathik. How be ye boys today?”

Hathik made a noncommittal noise, but Mallan nodded at the man. “I’m well, Ramiel. Yourself?”

“Good, I’m good. Mind if I join you?”

Mallan motioned to an empty stool. Hathik shrugged his assent.

The man sat, thumping his drink onto the table. “So, just back or heading out?”

“Just back. Sent to check on some things a day or so south. Nothing worth spitting on to see.”

The thin scout pursed his lips in thought. “Me an’ my squad had been sent to check that area a few weeks back.”

“Well, there were bits of a burnt up camp site, right Hath?”

The archer nodded. “More of a glorified blind, really. Just a scout troop setting up, it looked like.”

Ramiel frowned. “Can’t see why. We reported that whole area unfit for exploration or anything else. Too much sign o’ the Enemy: spoor, tainted trees and shrubs. You could’ve planted church-blessed corn out there and it’d come up rotten and screamin’, most like.”

“Then why was there a camp starting up there if it was reported unsafe? The Inquisitor’s Council must’ve known of the reports.”

Ramiel shook his head. “A mistake, then. They’ve got their hands full with refugees, much less tryin’ to run a damn crusade, poor bastards.” He gulped from his tankard and made the sign of the hilt. “The Lady take ‘em under her shield, bless ‘em.”

“Aye,” Mallan agreed. Hathik nodded gravely.

Ramiel sat back, brooding. They drank in silence together until the meals arrived, then the dusty scout bid them good day and rejoined his friends at the other table. Mallan and Hathik picked at their food, neither in the mood for talk any more. They left a few coins for the barmaid before heading toward the barracks to make their report

As they approached, they passed several groups of city guard rounding up transients and refugees. Some were being forced into wagons and carts, while others were simply marching down the road alongside their armed escorts. Mallan saw a crying girl—barely into her teens, blonde haired and with large, tear-filled blue eyes—clutching her parents. His heart melted for her, and he had to know what was happening.

He approached a guard. “Ho, guardsman. What’s going on, here?”

The guard sneered. “Who wants to know?”

“Scout-sergeants Mallan and Hathik, Ursus Light Foot.” He straightened into a more authoritative pose. “Now snap to and report!”

The watchman’s attitude improved markedly. He drew to attention and threw a sloppy salute at Mallan and Hathik. They returned it and he began to explain. “It’s for the new relocation initiative, sirs. We’ve been rounding up volunteers, so to speak, for starting new villages and such. The refugees are a burden on the city and its resources.”

“So your crew’s just giving them the boot?” Mallan asked, incredulous.

The guard looked mortified. “Aw, no, sirs. The church committee’s been sending scout squads to look for good places to settle. The city gives them supplies and such and they make a village. We make sure they all go to a safe place, what with the Enemy being about and all.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Only a few days, sirs. We go about, asking for volunteers, and when none take up, we got authority to select a quota and get them relocated.”

“How often do you... select a quota?”

“Not often, sirs. Some like the idea of gettin’ out of this cramped city to settle.”

“And surely you don’t settle them across the river.”

“Very seldom, sirs, and only if it’s been scouted good.”

Mallan exchanged looks with Hathik, clearing his throat. “Very well, watchman. Carry on.”

“Right, sirs.” He saluted again and turned back to his duties.

The two scouts walked slowly away, subdued.

“So forced relocation is getting to be the norm now, too,” Hathik observed.

Mallan shrugged. “Just another necessity in these lean times, I suppose, though I don’t like the idea of those poor folks out there alone.” The thought of that young girl being preyed upon by the Enemy made him sick.

An additional group of unfortunates was herded in with the rest as they looked on, and something else caught Mallan’s attention. Other troops were spread amongst the watch assisting them, but it was hard to tell if they were soldiers or priests. They wore an odd combination of armor and robes. Their armor looked like half-plate, but was made of dark brown enameled leather fitted over robes of a loose red fabric so dark it almost looked black. It streamed through the gaps in the leather and, as they moved, it gave the illusion that it was flowing through water. Fabric also swathed their faces, covering all but their eyes. Tight-fitting skull caps of blued steel sat low on their brows, and curious-looking curved swords—like short, wide-bladed scimitars—completed the kit. They worked in silence among the guards.

Mallan nudged his partner and pointed them out. “Eh, Hath? Ever seen that unit before?”

Hathik shook his head. “No, can’t say I have.”

Mallan strode toward one of the soldiers and tapped him on the shoulder. “Excuse me. Scout-sergeant Mallan, Ursus Light Foot. Mind if I ask what unit you’re with?”

The robed soldier turned smoothly to face Mallan.

Immediately Mallan felt an unsettling tingle slither down his spine: staring into this soldier's dark, shadowed, sunken eyes was like looking into the embodiment of pain itself. Mallan took a small step back. The odd trooper stared at the scouts mournfully and brushed his fingers across the folds of cloth covering his mouth, shaking his head. He remained silent for a few seconds before turning back to his task.

Mallan rejoined Hathik. "Did you see that?" He shuddered, trying to shake off the chill.

"Aye," his partner said, seeming a bit stunned himself.

"What manner of soldiers are they?"

"I couldn't tell you."

Mallan frowned. "Let's get to the keep. The commander might be able to tell us more. We need to hurry up and make our report anyway."

Hathik nodded, and the two men increased their pace. They kept wary eyes out for more of the odd soldiers, but saw none until they were back at the keep. Once through the gates, Mallan noticed a small knot of the robed warriors to one side, standing in a silent circle facing each other, as well as a company of them assembled on the mustering field, standing at ease. Their formation was precise, not a man out of place, all perfectly still, even the officer in Iomedae's gray and yellow colors facing the ranks.

The two scouts hurried inside the main stone building to their commander's office.

Watch Commander Kerrickson looked up at the knock on his door-frame. He closed a log book on the desk in front of him. "Enter!"

Mallan and Hathik came in and stood at attention before the desk, holding a salute until Kerrickson returned it.

"Well, you two took your bloody time, didn't you? I expected you back a day ago!"

"Yes, sir. Apologies, sir!" the scouts said in unison. Mallan swallowed, not meeting the commander's eyes, but instead picking out a spot just above his head and staring at that.

"Well, out with it! What's your report, lads?"

“We took a look at the camp you told us about. We found little left and no survivors.”

“State of the bodies?”

“None left, sir.”

“Signs of the Enemy?”

Mallan turned to Hathik. The archer was the better tracker, and he spoke up. “Nothing, sir. I barely saw sign of the scouts, either. They were good, and knew how to cover their presence. We almost didn’t find their site.”

“Perhaps it was a single powerful creature, then—maybe a flyer—since you found no tracks.”

“Perhaps, sir.”

The captain leaned back in his chair. “Well, that’s that. I’ll get it logged in the books.” He turned to grab a leathered tome from a small table beside him and thumped it down on the desk. He flipped it open and grabbed an inkpot and quill from a tray beside his right elbow and made ready to write down the scouts’ notes on their mission.

The two men remained at attention.

Kerrickson looked up at them.

“You still here?” he growled. “Dismissed.”

“Uh, sir?” Mallan started, “Scout-sergeant Hathik and I have a question.”

The captain set his quill down. “What?”

“Well, we saw these new troops about town—red robes under dark armor. Quiet types. We were wondering, do you know who they are? When they got here?”

The captain leaned back. “I only know what the church legates say. They’re an order of warrior monks from Cheliax. The Red Wind, they’re called. Good fighters, I hear, and fearless in the face of the Enemy.”

“Cheliax, sir?” Mallan was puzzled. The infernal nation was over a thousand miles away, and ruled by devil-worshippers. “Since when did our leaders allow them up here?”

“Since we needed the help, Scout-sergeant. They’re dedicated to the absolute rule of law and order, and regardless of how they apply it in their homelands, they’re just the thing we need in a war against the chaos of the

Abyss. At least that's what the Council says."

"Why wasn't there more of an announcement?" Hathik asked. "Usually there's a bit of pomp and such when welcoming a new army into the crusade's ranks."

"Well, they've been trickling in from various monasteries, not all at once. They arrive in silence and join their comrades. No point having a bunch of parties. Their leaders said they didn't want that, anyway."

Mallan shrugged. He could understand that. There was something he didn't, though.

"Why are they so damnably quiet, and why do their eyes look like they've seen a crusade or several already?" he asked.

"Well, how the hells should I know! Drugs, too much incense, vows of silence? Who knows? I ain't asking and they're not telling, anyway. Now, get some rest before your next foray. Dismissed!"

The two men snapped off salutes, turned, and marched out of the office.



A few days later, a runner caught up with them as they walked to the barracks' mess hall. He flipped them a small orders packet that Hathik deftly snatched from the air.

He broke it open as they walked down the hall. "Hey. Look." He held out the papers to show Mallan. "We're to rendezvous with another group of scouts a day's travel north and help establish an observation post."

"What?" Mallan grabbed the papers and looked them over. "This is across the river, too."

Hathik nodded. "Orders say we move out in three days." He looked at Mallan. "Why not get an early start?"

"Shit."

"What?"

"I know that look."

Hathik smiled. "Patrols are going missing lately. I think I'd like to know why."

“You know, I think I do, too.” Mallan tucked their orders away. “Bout three days early do it?”

Hathik nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t need breakfast anyway.”

They turned and walked quickly back down the hall, a new sense of urgency driving them. Mallan stopped at the quartermaster’s to restock their packs with food and fresh water, while Hathik detoured to retrieve his good bow and arrows from their quarters, then met up with Mallan at the keep’s gates.

“Ready?” Mallan asked, handing the archer a pack near-bursting with supplies.

“For what? Heading into godless lands, confronting the Enemy, and perhaps solving an odd mystery or two?” Hathik smirked. “Always. Let’s move!”



After hiking most of the day, Mallan and Hathik closed on the camp’s location just as the sun set. A fully established scout’s camp had already been situated close to a drop off next to the West Sellen. Mallan started forward, but Hathik laid a hand on his arm.

“Wait.”

Mallan crouched into the scrub again. “Why?”

“Just a feeling. I don’t like how things are playing out, lately.” Hathik kept a steady eye on the camp before continuing. “The missing patrols, the relocations, attacks and no bodies left. I say we hold back, watch the patrol. Maybe we’ll find out what’s been happening.”

Mallan raised an eyebrow. “Maybe we’ll be the ones disappearing, hmm?”

“Well, then those scouts will find out what’s going on, and they’ll have to get word back.”

Mallan scoffed. “Come now, how do you know they’re going to be attacked? It’s probably a coincidence, I tell you.”

Hathik turned his head and leveled a hard look at his friend. “Just like

sending rangers to the area Ramiel had reported unsafe was a coincidence? Just a mistake, maybe?”

Mallan sat back in the dust. “I can’t believe you just said that, Hathik. You can’t mean that.”

“Mallan, I think we’ve been sent out in the hopes we’re an extra treat for whatever’s been doing this. Maybe someone overheard me in the Lyre, or we asked a few too many questions about things we shouldn’t have. You know they’ll burn their own at the stake as soon as look at them.”

“That doesn’t mean they’ll throw these poor bastards to the Enemy!”

“If I was the kind of leader that could burn a loyal crusader to death for... for farting during mass or something stupid like that, what kind of shit would I give about bloody leaching refugees or irreverent troops that make a job all the harder supplying the crusaders I *don’t* give to the goddess, eh?!” Hathik’s voice was an urgent hiss. Evidently he felt more strongly about recent events than Mallan realized.

“The camp’ll hear you, Scout-sergeant,” Mallan whispered grimly, but followed with a sympathetic half-smile.

“Hmph.” Hathik sat back in the dust next to his partner.

For the moment, Mallan was satisfied. “Well, we’ve got a good spot to keep eyes on the blind, and decent supplies and water from the river. If you want, we’ll stay and watch a few days, see what churns. If nothing happens, we join the camp as ordered. If not, well, we’ll see then, all right?”

Hathik nodded.

Then they settled in and waited.



It was the third evening, just before dusk. Mallan was dozing when Hathik nudged his leg.

“Look.” He pointed south with an arrow before nocking it.

Mallan rolled into a crouch. A troop of men in full packs—a platoon of at least twenty—was marching silently toward the camp. They were in the dress of the Red Wind.

“Maybe they’re coming to check on them?” Mallan asked hopefully, but he began strapping on his blades. Hathik’s was already loose in its sheath.

“I don’t think so,” the motionless archer whispered.

The troop stopped as several rangers took notice, pausing in their tasks to see the soldiers arrive at camp. The camp sergeant came forward to greet the platoon, stopping before their silent ranks. A Red Wind officer, in his gray and yellow, took a step forward and, without a word, drew his blade and beheaded the man in one swift motion. The sergeant fell with his hand still upraised in greeting.

For a moment, stunned silence reigned. Then a yell came from the camp. The Red Wind broke formation and flowed through the ranger squad like its namesake, their curved steel drawn, striking swift and true. To Mallan and Hathik it looked as if small fountains of blood were springing up across the site.

“NO!” Hathik yelled, then rose and loosed a shot at the nearest monk. It struck true, sinking deep into his target’s neck.

The trooper staggered...

...then recovered and turned toward the scouts, never uttering a grunt or squeal of pain.

“Oh, shit,” Mallan cursed, clawing for his sword.

Hathik nocked, drew, and loosed again. This shot was also true, striking deep into the left eye, rocking the monk’s head back. Again the soldier staggered, then straightened and raced toward them, his blade flashing.

He was there almost before Mallan had his sword out.

Barely managing to parry, Mallan struggled as the blows came swift and relentless. He could barely keep up to defend himself. Hathik dropped his bow and drew his short sword to join the desperate fight. They attacked the monk from opposite sides, but he easily blocked their most cunning blows. His speed was terrifying, and Mallan quickly realized this would not end well. There was simply no opening they could take advantage of.

Then Hathik did the bravest—or dumbest—thing Mallan ever saw.

The archer launched himself at the monk, exposing himself to the silent warrior’s wickedly curved steel. Their opponent drove his weapon

into Hathik's side, piercing the scout's leathers and shoving the blade upward into his lungs, ripping a gurgled scream from his now-bloodied lips. Hathik's blade also struck deep, sinking to the hilt through his assailant's shoulder and into the chest. The archer hung on desperately, throwing his arms around the man's head and seizing the sword's grip in both hands. He locked his legs around the monk's torso as well, trying to make him overbalance. The Red Wind trooper staggered and went to one knee.

"R-run!" Hathik groaned, spitting bloody foam as he kept his death-grip on the monk. "I can't... hold.... Tell others..." The rest was a gore-soaked gurgle.

Mallan paused, unbelieving. He looked around and saw more monks turning in their direction. The screams from the camp had stopped. Mallan fled along the river, and the Red Wind followed.

He could hear their swift steps pounding after him, and knew more than one gave chase. He prayed he could outrun them—they had heavy packs, he didn't.

Closer.

Closer.

His lungs burned, his breath rasped.

Never had he run so fast in his life, never had he—

A stunning blow knocked him near-senseless.

He fell over the escarpment and down into the river, rolling crazily into the water. He struggled to keep afloat as the current dragged him from the narrow shore. Somehow, he managed to keep swimming until the opposite bank was in reach and he clawed his way up onto the mud. Exhausted and reeling, Mallan clutched the wet muck and sobbed for his friend and the lost scouts, trying to understand what was going on, and before minutes passed, he collapsed unconscious in the muddy scrub.



Mallan awoke to the rushing of the West Sellen in his ears and the light of day shining in his eyes. He rolled over, shook his head clear and stood,

boots squelching in the mud as he clambered up the bank and onto drier land. He stayed low, looking around for signs of pursuit, but saw none, so he rose fully and began jogging south, back toward Kenabres.

Hours later he reached the north road leading from the city, within sight of its walls. He stopped, his eyes searching the clusters of crusaders' camps dotting the approaches for signs of trouble. Nothing looked amiss.

Safe enough, seems like, he thought, and continued trotting to the gate.

The guard at the gate stopped him, tilting his upraised spear at Mallan's chest. "Halt and identify."

"Scout-sergeants... Mallan, reporting back from assignment. Let me pass."

"Oh. Very well, in you go."

Mallan staggered through and barely had time to realize the guard hadn't ordered the tests of purity before the Red Wind descended upon him.

The scout tried to struggle free and called for help, but stopped when he saw the Inquisitor's Council's personal guards mixed in with the monks. He froze, his mouth agape with shock.

"Goddess, no... What's going on?"

A prelate's man walked up and Mallan's captors parted to allow him through. "What's going on, heretic, is that we're in the midst of recruiting the perfect body of soldiers for the Lady's blessed crusade: fearless, perfectly ordered, and obedient—just what's needed in our efforts against chaos. And for interfering with this grand effort, we're arresting you on charges of treason and attempted murder of the church's allies."

Mallan had no words.

The official continued. "Normally, we'd deal with this in the usual fiery fashion, but I think the offended party should hold sway this time, hmm?" He turned to the monks' officer. "Do with him what you will." Then he turned and walked away, the inquisitorial guard leaving with him.

"NO!" Mallan screamed, finding his voice. He struggled and thrashed until his left hand was free, and he clawed at the first monk he could, tearing away the facial wraps in a last act of defiance.

When he saw the face he exposed, the fight went out of him and he

fell limp in the soldiers' arms. He finally realized where the bodies of the missing had been going.

Hathik stood unmasked and silent among the rest of his Red Wind brethren, and the last thing Mallan saw before darkness claimed him were the sorrowful, pained eyes of his old friend as he helped the monks carry him away.

BETTER LEFT ALONE

BY KALYNA CONRAD



here are some days you wish had never started. This was one of them.

“In here, please, miss.” The man opened one of the endless line of doors on our right and ushered me into a small gray room. It was empty, except for two rough wooden chairs flanking a table in the center. It looked like a cell. I turned to explain my innocence, but my guide grabbed me with rough hands and forced me into one of the chairs. Before I could protest, he’d manacled my wrist to an iron ring on the side of the chair and left.

Great. As if my day wasn’t already bad enough. How could they possibly think I was guilty of anything other than being a victim in all of this?

After only a few short minutes, a man with dusty-blond hair dressed in a brown and gray uniform entered the room and smiled. The golden arch of his Duskwarden’s badge glinted as he eased into the chair across from me and placed a steaming mug on the table between us.

“Hello there, my name’s Derew. What’s yours, dear?” His black eyes were kind as they met mine.

“I’m Myrande.” I dug a fingernail into the soft wood of the table’s edge. “And I’m seventeen, so you can drop the fatherly crap.”

“Ah.” The agent straightened. “Well then, it’s nice to meet you, Myrande.” He pushed the mug toward me. “Are you thirsty?”

I eyed the offering. “What is it?”

“Hot cocoa. I thought you were, um... younger.”

“You don’t have to be a kid to like cocoa.” I tried to scoot forward, but the chair wouldn’t budge, so I stretched out my free hand and grabbed the drink. The scalding liquid was creamy as I sipped it, but it seemed to curdle

on my tongue. My stomach churned. After what I'd seen in that tunnel, I supposed that was to be expected. "Thanks." I forced a smile and focused on the warmth of the cup in my hands.

"Don't mention it."

"So I guess you want to talk about what happened?"

Derew nodded. "When you're ready."

My hands were starting to shake just thinking about the last few hours, so I put the mug down and gripped the table. There was still blood under my fingernails. How had I missed that when I'd washed up?

"Well, first of all, it's not my fault."

Derew held up his hands. "No one said it was. We just want to hear your side of the story. So, what do you say we start from the beginning, hmm? Why were you on the Halflight Path?"

I shrugged. "Mom and I had a load of silk shawls to sell at the festival tomorrow. We wanted to leave home earlier, take the normal road into Kaer Maga, but things just kept coming up, you know? So by the time we left, the Halflight Path was our only chance to make it into the city on time."

"I see." He pulled a notebook and pencil from his pocket and flipped to an empty page. "Can you tell me how many travelers were at the gate this morning?"

I tried for another sip of cocoa, but it hit my tongue like acid. My hand jerked and I nearly spilled the whole thing all over myself. I set the mug down again. "I don't know, thirty?"

"Mm-hmm." He scribbled something in his book. "And how many groups were you divided into?"

"Three." I frowned. "Don't you know this stuff already?"

"Be patient please, Myrande. We just want to make sure all the details match. Now, you were in the last group, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And how many Duskwardens were escorting you?"

"Two?"

He lifted his gaze and pinned me with those piercing black eyes. "You don't sound very sure."

I pretended to think harder. “Two. Yeah, definitely two—one guy, one girl.”

“Good.” He went back to his writing. “What did they look like?”

“The guy was tall and skinny, maybe about thirty? He was kind of cute: shaggy black hair, blue eyes. The girl was about my height but stocky, you know? She kind of reminded me of a big, angry bear.”

“Good, good.” He smirked. “That’s definitely Benire and Shakys, all right. Now, walk me through what they did before taking your group through the gate.”

“They gave us all little medallions on leather thongs and told us to stay close—not to stop or fall behind for any reason.”

“Proper procedure followed.” He muttered as he scratched in his book. “And then what happened?”

“What do you think? They took us inside.” Sudden anger lashed up my spine. “It’s not like we paid them all that gold to put on a song and dance routine.”

Derew cleared his throat. “Myrande, please, a little decorum.”

“Sorry...” The anger slipped away as quickly as it had risen and I slumped in my chair. “Sorry. I’m just... still kind of in shock, you know?”

“I understand. It’s to be expected.” He reached out and patted my hand. “But you’re safe here.”

“Yeah... that’s what they keep telling me.” I reached for the mug of cocoa again. It was cooler now, so I forced myself to take a long sip and waited for it to slither down my throat.

Derew looked pleased as he watched me drink. “Moving on. Tell me what happened when you entered the Path.”

“Nothing.” I shrugged. “We started up the tunnel. The cute warden was up front—I remember because I kept checking out his ass—and the big tough girl was at the back. It was dark, but the little necklaces they gave us glowed with enough light to see, so I wasn’t scared. I’d heard all kinds of stories about the Path, but I was pretty disappointed. It turned out to be just a plain old cave.”

Derew chuckled at that. It made me want to punch him. “You mean

almost just a plain old cave, eh? So where exactly were you when the... disturbance first occurred?"

"Disturbance?" I snorted. "Nice try. More like unbelievable horror."

"Fine. Where were you when you first saw the 'horror'?"

"I was at the back of the line. My bag was heavy because I was carrying most of our stuff, so I was moving slow. Mom's back's all screwed up from bending over her stitching, so she doesn't lift heavy things anymore. Tough Girl was behind me yelling at me to speed up.... I wanted to hit her, but I was pretty sure she'd destroy me if I tried."

"Can you remember what part of the caves you were in?"

"Oh. Um, we were entering a new cavern after we'd just finished a section of trail on the cliff side."

"Can you describe it?"

"It was dark..." I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to remember. "There were paintings on the walls. Not nice ones like they've got in church, but more like the ones little kids draw of their parents."

"That sounds like the Founders' Hall. Very good, Myrande. You're doing very well. Do you remember anything else?"

I stared over his shoulder and shivered as the memories flooded my mind. "It was cold and damp. There was water running down one of the walls. I couldn't see it, but I could hear it. It sounded like somebody was taking a leak."

"Did you see a door? Or perhaps a section of wall that looked out of place?"

"I... um... I don't remember."

Derew leaned forward. "Think, Myrande. This is very important. We need to know exactly where the trouble occurred."

I ground the heels of my hands into my eyes. I had to focus. I could feel that there was some vital piece of information lurking on the edge of my mind, teasing me.

"Have some more cocoa." The Duskwarden nudged the cup towards me. "You look tired."

Tired? Try exhausted. I picked up the mug and took another swallow,

covering my urge to gag. I wondered if the milk was sour.

“Now, let’s try again. Where in the Founders’ Hall were you, exactly?”

“Um.” I narrowed my eyes to sharpen the image in my mind. “There was a picture on the wall... like three guys dancing in a circle... and... and a large wooden panel.”

“What did the wooden panel look like?”

“Like it didn’t belong. It was too new.”

“Good. Did it have any writing on it?”

The image swam before my eyes, just out of reach. My hand squeezed the mug I still held as I tried to bring the picture into focus.

“Yeah, it had some kind of red letters on it.”

“What did they say?”

“Um, ‘keep out?’”

“Was there a number?”

“Yes...”

“Which number?”

“I don’t know.”

“Try, Myrande. This is vital.”

I strained, fighting past the echoed sounds of screaming and the smell of fresh blood that assaulted me every time I tried to picture the door.

“It looks like... a three?”

“Excellent. Well done, dear. I think you deserve a little break.” Derew scrawled a last note in his book, then pushed himself away from the table. “I’m just going to step out for a few moments and then I’ll be right back, okay?”

I nodded and he left the room, taking his notebook with him. I lifted the mug to my lips, but couldn’t bring myself to drink; the memories were still too fresh. I caught a whiff of the sour-smelling liquid in my hands and a wave of nausea slammed into the back of my skull. The room around me flickered and dissolved into a montage of memories—a severed limb here, a surprised-looking head bleeding on a rock there—and through it all, I was aware of the echoing sound of my own laughter.

The door swung open and the room jolted back into focus. The

Duskwarden was back. I realized I had no idea how long he'd been gone. Not that it mattered; it wasn't like I had anywhere to be. I'd lost all our merchandise in that cave. I had nothing left to sell. Mom would've been so disappointed.

Derew laid his notebook out on the table again and offered me a smile. "Now, where were we?"

A distant scream lanced my brain and I sighed. "A cave with a door."

"Excellent. So you're still with me, then."

"Where else would I be?" I shook my captive wrist at him. "You manacled me to a chair that's bolted to the floor."

"Just a precaution for your safety, dear. You've been through a traumatic experience and we don't want you wandering off until we know you're all right."

"Sure, of course." My voice was reasonable, but I could feel my upper lip curling.

"So we've established that you were at door number three in the Founders' Hall, yes?"

"Yeah. Didn't you write that down?" My head was beginning to throb.

"Just double-checking. So, what happened next?"

"I was just walking along when I stepped in something goey and slipped. I would've totally fallen on my face if Tough Girl hadn't grabbed me."

"Do you remember what you stepped in?"

"Yeah. It was white—like milk—but it was way too thick to be real milk." I wrinkled my nose and plunked the cocoa down. I felt like I was going to puke.

"Where was it coming from?"

"The door."

"Top or bottom?"

"Kind of all around—even through the cracks in the wood."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I got a good look while I was standing next to it."

Derew's pencil was flying across the page now. "Did anyone else see this substance?"

I shook my head and instantly regretted it. “I don’t think so. They’d all just gone around a corner—except for Tough Girl, of course, but she was too far back to see the door.”

“So you stopped? In spite of being told to stick with the group?”

“I had to fix my stuff. When I slipped, Tough Girl grabbed me by my bag. It opened and I almost lost some of the scarves. Do you have any idea what a good silk scarf goes for in this town?”

“Of course. So it was just you and Shakys, then?”

“Yeah, until...” My voice failed as my mind shot back to that horrible moment.

The Duskwarden’s pencil tapped the page. I wanted to rip the damned thing out of his hands. “Until... ?”

I pulled myself together. “The wood panel dissolved.”

“Excuse me?” He blinked.

“The wood started hissing and steaming everywhere that white stuff touched it. Then the door just kind of melted away.”

“I see. And after that?”

I flinched, shaking my head. I couldn’t. I just couldn’t do it. My brain was freaking out and shutting down all at the same time.

He tapped the mug with his pencil. “Have another sip, dear.”

I did without thinking. It tasted like warm sewage. I spat the mouthful back into the cup.

“Everything all right?” He reached for my hand. There was concern on his face, but I also caught a glint of fear in his eye.

I yanked my hand out of his grasp and flashed him a toothy smile. “Peachy. Why?”

“You seem to have lost your taste for the cocoa... and you’re so pale all of a sudden. Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” He half-stood. “Should I get someone?”

“I said I’m fine.” I grabbed the mug, drained it, and slammed it onto the table. Nausea swarmed out of my gut and up my throat, but I swallowed it. “Happy?”

“Um, that depends.... Do you feel better?”

“Sure, why not.”

“Then let’s carry on. What did you see when the wood melted away?”

The horrific image finally lurched into focus. My brain ran screaming, but my mouth just kept talking—and smiling. “A... thing. It was taller than me and white and gooey all over. It had about a dozen bare boobs hanging on the front of it, but it mostly looked like a worm with a face—a pale human face—with long stringy hair and dead eyes.”

It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw Derew shiver. Laughter and glee bubbled up inside me. I wanted to snap at him like a shark—to gloat over his weakness—but he spoke before I could.

His voice was noticeably unsteady. “D-did Shakys see this creature?”

“Sure did.” I nodded.

“And what did she do?”

“She screamed.”

“Is that all?”

“No.” I grinned nice and wide. “She screamed and tried to run.”

“Ah... I see... all right then.” He cleared his throat and bent over his notebook. “What happened when she did that?”

“The creature ate her. Oh, yeah, and the rest of the group came back.”

He lifted his head, his pencil freezing. “I’m sorry, did you say that it ate her?”

“Yeah. In one bite. It grabbed her with its long green tongue and just stuffed her down its throat. It was like watching a snake swallow a big juicy mouse.”

“I see.” Derew’s pencil started to move again, albeit reluctantly.

I could feel a lightness growing inside me as I continued, like blinding hot joy in my chest. “The rest of our group just stood there, you know? They just watched it happen. They weren’t even smart enough to run away.”

“Did the creature kill them too, then?”

“Yeah. Picked them off one by one. A few started screaming, so they were the first to go. Everybody else just stayed where they were, staring at it with their mouths hanging open, waiting to be eaten.”

“And where was Benire during all of this?”

“He was trying to push his way through the crowd, but it was a small tunnel and there were lots of stupid people in his way. He wasn’t rushing, so he must’ve thought Tough Girl had it under control.”

“How many of your party did the creature attack before Benire stopped it?”

“By the time Cute Guy reached us, all of the others were dead or dying, except me and my mom, of course. But he didn’t stop it—I did.”

“What?”

“I was the one who stopped the thing.” The joy was making me want to giggle and snarl now.

“But... how? You’re... you’re just a girl.”

“By the time Cute Guy finally got to us, we were hiding up against the wall. He took one look around and realized that we were the last three left alive. He made a weird angry noise and stabbed at the thing a few times. I guess he was trying to protect us, but he just succeeded in getting its attention. It ate him next.”

Derew looked shocked. “But that’s exactly the type of thing Duskwardens are trained to handle. Didn’t he fight back?”

“Yeah, but the thing was really fast. Its tongue was like a whip. It curled around him and picked him up. It shook him until he dropped his sword, then swallowed him whole and screaming... just like it had Tough Girl and everybody else.”

“Right. So, tell me, if this creature could so easily defeat two Duskwardens, how did you stop it?” There was a smugness to his tone I didn’t like.

I sneered. “I picked up Cute Guy’s sword while he was getting eaten. I wanted to save my mom and our shawls. Before I could do anything, though, the thing wrapped Mom in its tongue and put her head in its mouth. I grabbed her ankles to pull her out. It was really strong, but I was determined. Finally, she popped loose.”

“Was she all right?”

“No. Her head was gone.” I waited for the horror of that image to wash over me, but it didn’t. Instead, I saw her headless corpse in my mind’s eye

with a curious sense of detachment.

Derew swallowed. He looked a little green, and I could smell his sweat. It smelled... good—delicious, in fact—like the scent of fear and weakness.

I showed him my hands, showed him the blood still caked under my nails.

“This is her blood. This is why I stopped that thing; for her.”

His black eyes fixed on my fingers, and a bead of sweat rolled down his cheek.

“I took Cute Guy’s sword and ran at the worm. It whipped out its tongue at me as I charged, but I swung hard and cut it off. The creature shrieked and collapsed to the ground. I stabbed it one more time—in the head—and ran.”

“I... I see.... And you’re sure that killed it? You’re sure it’s dead?”

“Oh yeah.” I smiled, showing all my teeth again. “I went back to check.”

“You did? Why?”

“I forgot the shawls. I’d just lost my mother. I wasn’t going to lose her shawls too.”

Derew’s eyes narrowed and he pointed the tip of his pencil at me. “If that’s the case, then why don’t you have them now?”

“The stupid thing died on my bag. The milky white stuff that oozed from it ate right through six months of stitching and dyeing. There was nothing left to save.” I chuckled. “When I found that out, I stabbed it a few more times, just for fun.”

Derew shifted in his chair. “Well, then... thank you, Myrande. You’ve been most... helpful.” He stood. “If you’ll excuse me—”

“No, I will not excuse you.”

“Wha—”

He was halfway through turning back to me when I opened my mouth. My tongue lashed out, extending further and further until it reached all the way across the room and wrapped around Derew’s body. It didn’t hurt; in fact, it felt good, like stretching tired muscles after a long wagon ride.

I flexed my new muscles, tightening my hold. Derew squeaked.

His sweat tasted good—too good.

Before I could stop myself, I was rising from my chair—metal, wood,

and fabric hissing and dissolving away from my body. I curled my tongue, lifting Derew off the floor. I drew him towards me.

His eyes and mouth were wide open as I slid him down my throat head-first. He shouldn't have fit, but he did, easily. I swallowed and felt his weight settle into my belly.

With a smile of satisfaction, I headed for the door. Something went skittering across the floor as I moved, so I bent to pick it up. It was Derew's notebook. I grinned wider and dropped it down my throat after him. "There, now you two can be together forever, safe from prying eyes. That's the problem with you inquisitive ones: you never know when something is better left alone."

My grin turned into a yawn, and I slipped out into the hall, heading back towards the entrance to the Halflight Path tunnels. It was time for a nap.

A Broken Thing

BY B. R. BEARDEN



chill gust of wind and the groan of metal greeted the two riders as they halted their mounts at the end of a dusky lane. Rusting iron gates stood open, flanking the road up the hill to a house nestled amid dark trees.

“Let’s hope the manor lord is accommodating of travelers. The storm will be upon us soon.” The taller of the pair adjusted the collar of his heavy leather coat against the breeze. He glanced anxiously at his companion, a slight woman wrapped in a deep blue cloak. She raised her head and looked with no particular interest toward the rise. The details of the dwelling were lost in the gathering gloom of approaching nightfall and the heavy clouds above. The wind blew her dark hair across her pale, angular features. She shivered.

“We’ll be inside soon, Marla. A warm fire and shelter will make you feel better.” The man urged his horse forward, the leaves swirling about its hooves as they sounded off the paving stones.

“I will never feel better again, Terral.” The woman’s voice was so soft it was almost lost in the wind as her mount followed his lead. “I am a broken thing.”

Terral reached out and patted her shoulder gently, then guided the horses up the tree-lined path to the front porch of the house. He dismounted and tied both steeds to the iron ring of the hitching post. After helping Marla dismount, he strode up the steps onto the wide landing. She followed slowly.

The door was wide and tall, carved of oak and stained dark red. Marble columns were arrayed along the deep porch supporting the overhanging roof.

There was a time when this was no doubt a beautiful manor, Terral thought, but that time is long past.

Movement above his head caught his attention and he looked up. Above the door, in the angle where wall met roof, a mass of coal-black, thumb-sized beetles with large mandibles clung to the stone. “Have you seen bugs like those?” He pointed at the crawling swarm.

The woman looked up and shook her head. “Does anyone live here? It smells of decay and sadness. Maybe we should return to the road.”

“There will be little shelter from the rain in the woods. I thought I saw a light up here as we turned into the lane. Somebody must be home.” Terral grabbed the brass door knocker—a ring held in the mouth of a gargoyle—and rapped loudly.

Moments passed with no response. Marla drew her cloak tighter and looked back to the trees, then down at her boots. Terral hitched at his sword belt, moving the hilt of his rapier in front of his left hip, within easy reach.

The door opened.

An old man stood in the doorway. His thin, gray hair was in disarray, his dark eyes set deep in his gaunt face. He wore the clothes of a gentleman, though the fine tailoring seemed frayed at the edges, and he held a brass candlestick with a large white candle lit in one gnarled hand. In his other he held a thin-bladed dagger. He looked from the man to the woman, then back to the man. “Well?”

“Sir, we are travelers, long in our saddles, and a storm approaches.” Terral glanced at the dagger. “We ask shelter, in common hospitality of the road.”

The man said nothing, but lowered his weapon and moved aside, indicating they could enter. Terral nodded to him and stepped across the threshold and Marla followed without looking at their host.

“I am Yergus Bregarus, lord of this estate, such that it is.” The man closed the heavy door and the light from his flame wavered in the breeze. It was dark inside, the candle offering no more than the vague outlines of the walls and furniture in the entry hall.

“I am Terral Orsall and this is my friend, Lady Marla Cesran. We are

returning south to Taldor after a long journey.” The tall man tidied his coat and travel-tossed auburn hair as his eyes adjusted to the dimness.

“From where?” Yergus led the way down the hall to a door on the right from which more light shone. Terral noted other doors, and a wide staircase at the end of the hall that led up into darkness.

“The Worldwound.”

“A long journey indeed.”

Marla trembled as the old man stood aside for them to enter the lit room. It was a parlor with thick, dark carpet and large stuffed chairs gathered around a softly glowing fire in a marble-faced fireplace. There were candles burning on a few tables and shelves around the room, but they did little to dispel the gloom of the large chamber.

Yergus offered the travelers seats, then moved to a table set with a tray of crystal glasses and a bottle of blood-red wine. He poured two drinks and gave them to his visitors before sitting himself. “So you’ve been to the haunted wasteland of the Worldwound? You must fancy yourselves demon fighters. And how did that quest fare?”

Terral sipped at his wine, nodding his approval at the vintage. “Not well. We lost five good companions.”

“You don’t look like crusaders. You wear no armor and your lady seems too slight for such an arduous expedition.”

Terral looked at Marla. She was sitting on the edge of her chair, staring into her wineglass. “My armor is but a chainmail shirt. It’s wrapped in a blanket on my horse, as I’m not a heavy fighter. Marla is a priestess of the goddess of healing flame, Sarenrae.”

Yergus gazed long at the woman before speaking. “A follower of a true god is a rarity in Razmiran. They worship a fool in an ivory mask here.”

Terral grew uneasy at the way the firelight played across the lord’s face, but failed to show in his eyes. “They say Razmir passed the Test of the Starstone and achieved divinity—or so we’ve been told since we entered these lands. We’ve tried to avoid the priests in their silver masks as much as possible. In truth, we just wished to pass through in peace.”

“Long has this land been devoid of peace and truth.” The old man

looked about the room, his upper lip curling in disdain. “I was a noble of some means when the self-proclaimed ‘Living God’ came to power; my wife, the daughter of a duke. But now the old nobility is gone, my wife is dead, and the gods grope in the darkness.”

Terral saw Marla react to their host’s last words with a slump of her shoulders and made to change the subject. “We thank you for the shelter; it would’ve been a wet night, and cold as well.”

“Your horses will need shelter too, I’d warrant. I’ll have my servant take care of them. Wait here.” The man rose, took his brass candlestick, and left the room through a door at the back, closing it behind him.

Terral studied the contents of their surroundings: old paintings, ceiling-high bookshelves housing only a single large tome, heavy curtains over the windows, and candles that cast shadows everywhere. There was a musty smell to the room, and though the chairs were of expensive make, they were threadbare and faded. “Lord Yergus could do with a few good oil lamps; these candles make for poor light.”

“Something is not right here.” Marla set her untouched wine on a small table. “There is sadness, but also something more—something dark and silent. Let us take to the road again, Terral.”

Her companion paused as heavy rain began pounding against the house, driven by the wind. “Too late, I think. We’ll be fine. I don’t think we’ve anything to fear from an old man with a dagger.”

“And his servant?”

Terral shrugged. “Even less.” Despite Marla’s humbling influence, he was still a Taldan aristocrat at heart, and the strength of that heritage brought him confidence. It had been his desire, not hers, to lead their friends to the crusade in the Worldwound, just as his proud nation had sent its forces north during the Shining Crusade to battle the Whispering Tyrant a thousand years ago. *Nothing motivates a Taldan as much as the chance to reclaim lost glory, they say.* He regretted the truth in that.

Soon, Lord Yergus returned. “Sadly, your horses have run off. The storm must have frightened them.”

“I should go after them.” Terral rose but their host motioned him to sit.

“Later. The storm is just beginning, but it is fierce. I’m sure they won’t wander far. It’s rare I get visitors and I’d regret it if you spent much of your time here chasing frightened horses and getting soaked to your skin.”

Terral glanced to Marla before seating himself again. “You live alone in the manor, then?”

Lord Yergus nodded. “My servant stays in the little house out back.” He steepled his fingers and touched them to his thin lips, looking thoughtfully at Marla. “So, you are a priestess, my dear?”

She shook her head. “I have little connection to Sarenrae now. We lost much at the Worldwound. Companions...friends...”

“And faith?”

“Worthiness.” The sadness in her eyes persisted as she looked around the room, into the unlit hall. “It is dark here.”

Their host nodded. “It’s always dark here. Are you cold?”

“I am always cold.”

“My wife spoke at times of Sarenrae. As a child she traveled much with her father, as far as the southern sands of Qadira. She liked the sunshine and flowers and their little pointless songs.”

“Small things are important.” Marla looked down at her hands. “I am sorry she has passed on.”

Yergus shrugged. “Everyone dies. I’m sorry you’re cold, my dear. I wouldn’t want you to get sick. No doubt you are hungry as well. Perhaps there is enough in the larder to make a meal. I’ll go hurry my servant to prepare some food. He can chase after the horses in the morning, once the storm has ceased.”

He left the room again.

Marla moved to the chair nearest the fireplace, drawing her cloak tighter as she stared into the flames. Terral knew her thoughts still lingered in the north, in the Worldwound—that great and terrible rift in the earth from which the twisted chaos of the Abyss seeped and demons crawled. The battle between the fiendish hordes and the mortal folk who fought to hold them back had become a series of long crusades. Their friends had died there, one by one, and though Marla possessed much

healing skill, she couldn't save them. It had broken her spirit to see such suffering; wounds from demonic claws didn't heal easily and were prone to infection. But it was the darkness, the clouds of choking smoke with their sulfurous stench, and the absence of sunlight that ultimately wore her down. *And now I have brought her into another dark place*, Terral thought.

He took a silver candlestick and walked out into the hall, intent on finding more candles and getting a better look around. He could tell the ceiling in the corridor was high, but the flickering light could not find it. He looked to the staircase and gasped with surprise as a shape emerged from the darkness; a pale woman stood on the edge of the shadows, one slim hand on the marble balustrade. She wore a white dress, and a necklace of rubies hung about her slender neck. The Taldan man took a single step in her direction, but she retreated into the darkness and was gone. He moved closer, but his light dimmed as if the darkness devoured it. By the time he reached the foot of the stairs, the flame was as faint as a firefly. Bewildered, he backed away, not taking his eyes off the steps, and the light slowly increased.

Terral returned to the parlor and moved to where Marla huddled by the fire.

"I saw a woman upstairs. Our host isn't as alone as he'd have us think. And there's something strange about the candlelight: it's weak enough in this chamber, but it almost went out in the hall."

"It is the darkness that is the stronger here," Marla replied. Terral noticed the chill of her breath in the air. Stepping to the fireplace, he extended his hand to the flames. There was no heat. He passed his fingers over the candle flame and felt nothing. He set it on the table.

Marla confirmed his observation. "The fire is an illusion, as are the candle flames. There is no warmth to be found in this house."

"I'm sorry you're uncomfortable." Lord Yergus interjected.

Terral whirled about; he had not heard the door open. The old man stood framed in the marble back doorway, the utter darkness behind him untouched by the candle he held.

Their host entered and closed the door. “Yes, it gives off no heat, but there’s still a comfort to it—a light that doesn’t fail, a fire that doesn’t burn out. I’m not surprised that a worshipper of the goddess of the sun and honesty would see through it.”

“I misunderstood you to say you lived alone.” Terral’s voice raised in severity, slightly shaken by how silently the man had appeared. “I saw a woman on the stairs.”

Yergus looked quickly to the hall, strode over and shut the heavy double doors. “You’re mistaken. I alone dwell here. Perhaps you glimpsed a painting? There are many along the walls.”

“Paintings don’t move away when you approach them.”

“A trick of the shadows, then. A failing of the light. Darkness is such a deceiver.” The old lord sank into his chair, holding the candlestick with both hands and letting out a soft sigh. “I hate the darkness.”

“And the cold.” Marla huddled deeper into her chair and shivered.

“It’s always cold here,” Yergus replied. “You are a priestess of sun and light. Perhaps a little light to drive back the dark? A little warmth to comfort old bones?”

Marla shook her head. “The Dawnflower hears not my voice. I lost the sun in the Worldwound. Now I am just a broken thing.”

“You’re not to blame,” Terral said firmly. “They died in spite of you, not because of you.”

“Still, they died.”

Terral frowned. He wanted to hold her, to tell her the fault was his alone, and to make her feel safe as he had before, but not in front of this stranger. Something in his gut warned him they shouldn’t both appear weak in this place.

Yergus looked up at Terral. “You said your party was from Taldor? I thought the worship of Sarenrae wasn’t allowed in that land?”

“Not openly. Yours isn’t the only land where religions are suppressed.”

“We have no religion here, only a false god. There’s no comfort for the living or rest for the dead. My estate falls to decay, the trees grow old, and no living thing tarries here.”

“Well, there was a swarm of bugs outside the door, and I saw birds in the trees. Winter approaches, but there will be a spring. The sun will return,” Terral asserted, more for Marla’s benefit than the old man’s.

Yergus laughed without mirth. “The birds are crows. They feed on the bugs—scuttling, clawing, gnashing things. I wish they would eat them all.”

“What kind of bugs are they? I’ve not seen their like.”

“They are grave beetles,” Marla’s distant voice interjected, trembling with cold. “I remember now.”

“They can’t get in.” Yergus scowled, but there was a sliver of doubt in his tone. “They can’t gnaw through stone. And the crows feed upon them.”

Terral moved to place a hand on his companion’s shoulder, and she leaned her head against him. Her cheek was like ice. “Marla is very cold. Do you have any blankets, or the makings of a true fire? She needs to shake off this chill.”

“You can’t build a fire here. The fireplace has no chimney; it’s only for appearance’s sake. But I might have blankets. Let me check with my servant.” Yergus left the chamber once more through the rear exit.

“I begin to worry that our host is insane,” Terral whispered, once the door had closed. “He leaves us on the slightest chance, as if he can’t abide this room or our presence here.” He took up the silver candlestick again and walked to the doors of the entry hall, opening one. The light from the candle barely revealed the bottom step of the stairs. He hesitated to approach them, knowing the pale woman had gone up there despite the denial of the manor lord. But Marla’s need was greater than his uneasiness, so he spoke his intent. “Surely there are blankets upstairs, in the bed chambers. I can go fetch them for you.”

“There are no bed chambers upstairs,” Marla sighed. “I fear there is nothing but cold stone, decay, and darkness. Do not leave this chamber, Terral. Please.”

Terral lingered on the threshold with his eyes trained on the dark hall, but then closed the door again. “I’m not afraid of the dark, but I won’t leave you alone.”

He moved around the parlor, holding the candle high to study the old

portraits on the walls. There was nothing sinister about them, but their painted eyes made him feel unsettled. One was the likeness of a young woman holding sunflowers and smiling; next to her, a stern man in a dark suit—certainly their host at a younger age. The woman was pretty, and there were elements in her smile that reminded him of Marla's: warmth, compassion, joy. Terral hadn't seen that smile in a long time.

He turned from the painting, then went to the shelves and stared at the heavy, leather-bound book. He lifted the cover and a light cloud of dust arose. The pages were old and brittle, the handwritten ink, faded. He held the candle close and bent to read the entries. "This looks to be a family history. It lists births and deaths, relationships..."

Marla interrupted him. "I can guess its ending. We should never have stopped here."

Terral flipped quickly through the tome, looking for the final entries. When the ink brightened, he began reading. "It seems House Bregarus fell on hard times with the rise of Razmir. They were crushed in the overthrow of the noble families, suffering deaths in battle against the new regime, suicides, and even murders! Listen to this: 'Lady Cyralia was murdered by her husband, who slashed her throat as she sat in the parlor at her needlepoint.' That is one of the final entries."

"She was sitting by the fire, just like you are now." Terral and Marla jerked their heads to see Yergus had returned. He stood again in the open doorway. "She was always cold, in body and in spirit. She betrayed her rightful husband with a mere commoner—a stable boy. She disgraced House Bregarus and thought nobody knew!"

"She was your wife," Marla said with certainty. "You killed her."

"We came here to bury my brother, the last of my immediate kin. She sat there, by the cold fire, singing some silly little song from her childhood about sunshine, while my brother lay unmourned in his tomb. Such a small thing, really. But I'd heard the stable boy whistling the same tune only that morning. And then I knew."

"It was 'The Song of Sunshine.'" Marla began to sing:

*I ask you not for gold or gems,
Or gifts from far away.
I ask for but a little light,
To guide me on my way...*

Their host cut in. "Yes, that's it! How did you know?"

"I sense her presence, her sorrow."

Yergus hissed. "You lie! She isn't here, she's dead! She's been in her tomb these many years, in the dark and cold where she belongs." The old man shook in fear and anger, the candle he held casting dancing shadows across the walls.

Terral surged forward. "Enough! We're leaving." He turned to Marla. "The storm is passing."

"You believe so?" the old nobleman asked, mockery in his tone.

"I know so. I've had enough of this dark, cold house and your cryptic words. If you think to frighten us, sir, you are misguided. The storm abates. See for yourself." Terral moved to the window and threw aside the heavy curtains, then staggered back in shock.

There was no window—only stone wall.

Yergus laughed. "The Razmiri priests burned my estate to the ground when they brought down the old nobility, but they left this house alone. It's not a gilded manor, but it serves. It serves."

"It is not a house at all." Marla stood and gestured at their surroundings. "The faded furniture, the empty shelves, the illusory fire: this is a mourning room. This was your family's mausoleum."

"No!" Yergus howled. "This was my summer estate. These woods were green and warm, and the sunlight shone through the leaves and upon the gardens."

"What's upstairs, then?" Terral pressed as he moved to Marla's side, his hand dropping to the hilt of his rapier. "Are there bed chambers or crypts? What's beyond that door behind you? Does it truly lead outside? And where is your 'servant'? I bet he doesn't even exist."

"You killed the servant, didn't you?" Marla's convictions grew stronger

in her companion's proximity. "He was the stable boy you spoke of, and you killed him when you murdered your wife."

"Not all at once," Yergus said with a wicked grin. "But dead or not, he still serves. Shall I call him for you?"

Terral looked to the priestess, a cold pit of dread opening in his stomach.

"Yes," she challenged. "Call him."

"With pleasure." The old man called over his shoulder to the darkness beyond the doorway. "Steffan, come in here and greet our guests."

At first, there was no response, but then came the sound of uneven footsteps on stone. The horrible remnants of a man shuffled into the dimly lit room. His skin was bone white, drawn tightly over his skull, and his pale hair was as stiff as straw. There were scars on his face, marks of torture on his chest and limbs, and when he opened his mouth his teeth were yellow and broken. Tattered clothing and cracked boots barely covered his bruised, pallid flesh.

"Meet my loyal servant. I sent him to tend to your horses, but the poor beasts pulled free and ran away. A pity, for Steffan hasn't eaten in a long time. He's very hungry."

Terral drew his rapier. "Stay back!"

"Or what? You'll stick poor Steffan with your sword? He's had far worse than that done to him, when he could still feel such things. We spent many a long evening discussing his sins. But alas, he finally went insane and there was no pleasure left in his suffering, so I let him live and serve me to the end of his days and beyond. He's quite devoted now."

"He's undead?" Terral whispered to Marla as he warily watched the servant.

She nodded. "A ghoul."

"Worse than a demon—at least those can bleed and die." The Taldan man put out his arm to move her behind him, but to his surprise, Marla pushed it aside and advanced towards the old man and his pet. When she spoke, her voice was strong and clear.

"So you sit here in this false parlor, fearing your murdered wife upstairs and tormenting this poor creature? Why is it you never go outside, where

the grave beetles wait for you? What truly lies beyond that doorway, Lord Yergus?"

"My study and the back door..."

"You lie! It's your tomb, where you lay in the cold dark while your fear and guilt gnaw at you. And when you can bear it no longer, you come into this chamber to sit and pretend you are alive."

"I *am* alive! *She* is dead! This betrayer is dead, and you shall die, too!" Yergus pointed vehemently at the pair. "Kill them, Steffan! Feast upon their bones!"

The ghoul cracked a twisted, broken-toothed grin and advanced on Marla, its filthy fingernails clawing the air in anticipation of tearing her flesh.

Terral cried out and moved to defend her, but the woman whirled into action like a dervish, tossing aside her cloak and raising her arms. In one hand she held her silver-inlaid scimitar and in the other, a golden ankh that was the divine symbol of her goddess.

"In the name of the Dawnflower, and by the virtues of light and truth, I strike!" The ankh blazed bright as the sun, bathing the room in light and heat. The ghoul cowered, trying to ward off the penetrating rays of the glowing medallion, but Marla was upon it. In a flash of silver the scimitar struck the undead monster thrice before it had a chance to respond. Both arms dropped to the carpet, followed by its head, and the body collapsed like a discarded rag.

Yergus stumbled back, fumbling for the thin dagger at his belt and brandishing the empty brass candlestick. The candle had melted with the heat, and wax covered his trembling hand. "Please, don't kill me!"

"You are already dead." Marla lowered her blade, but still kept the glowing ankh before her. "You have been dead for years, your wicked sins fostering a false life. This is your tomb, and the tomb of your wife. Your denial kept her from you, though she lurks in the shadows of your fear. She was never unfaithful to you, nor did your servant betray your trust; it was your arrogance and jealousy that led you to commit their murders."

"Forgive me." The pitiful thing that was once Lord Yergus of House

Bregarus slumped, dropping the dagger and candlestick onto the floor.

“It is not within my power to forgive or condemn,” Marla replied, “but when we leave and the light withdraws, then one may come whose forgiveness you may ask. And perhaps then a wife who always loved you will find it within herself to forgive, easing your suffering and her own.” Marla made an arc with her holy symbol. “Now, go. By the power of Sarenrae, you are released from this curse of unlife.”

With a whimpering moan, Yergus turned and left through the door into the perfect darkness of the grave, shutting it behind him.

Terral let out a relieved breath. The room was dim again; though the illusion of the fireplace remained, all the candles had melted down to pools of wax. However, there was a glow about Marla which Terral hadn’t seen in a long, long time. The color had returned to her face, and she looked at him and smiled.

They walked from the mausoleum in the warm light of dawn and found their horses waiting just beyond the gate in the open fields. Marla mounted lightly and laughed a little at the look on Terral’s face—a look of wonderment and love.

“It was a divine task set forth by the Dawnflower to right the wrong done to Cyrilia, a woman who had sung her songs and loved the sunlight.”

“Yes, it was,” Terral agreed, but he was not thinking of Lady Cyrilia when he added, “a quest to save a gentle woman wrapped in darkness.” As Marla rode on ahead, the morning sun radiant on her face, Terral mounted his horse and smiled.

She was no longer a broken thing.

RIPPLES OF SHADOW

BY MATTHEW ROTH

Nolan hated swamps.

“Why in all the gods’ names did you drag me here, Em?”

He glared ahead as a carefree laugh shot back to him from his young “partner,” sitting high and dry on a rocky outcropping. Her robes shimmered with the silver sheen of magic, keeping the impractical things as clean as when she’d donned them back in Magnimar.

“You’re just mad that it was my turn to pick the job this time. What’s wrong with the Mushfens?”

Nolan grumbled.

Nothing good *ever* came out of a swamp. Take this job, for instance: a trio of hunters, lost and presumed dead. Where else would they go missing but a swamp? It was impossible to track anything through the murky water; the air was filled with thousands of insects, most game tasted like mud, and clean water was a rarity. To top it all off, it didn’t smell too nice, either.

The best part about their current task, though, was certainly the pay: hardly a pittance. No sensible folks would have touched the job with a ten-foot pole.

Fortunately for those people, Emellin didn’t believe in common sense.

Which meant Nolan was along for the ride. The worried families demanded solace, the hunters’ employers demanded recompense, and Nolan demanded dinner.

Dinner ain’t free.

Struggling to pull his boot from the mire, Nolan Renwicke plodded his way towards higher ground. To her credit, his partner waited patiently, saying naught a word. When he finally emerged, his lower half was caked in mud.

Emellin couldn't restrain her laugh. "That's a good look for you, I think."
"Shut it, Em."

The girl simply smiled. Nolan sighed, brushing away several leeches that had been trying to suck life from his pant leg.

Emellin—Emily to her friends, and Em to Nolan—had a knack for getting under his skin. If it weren't for her magical talents, he'd have traded her in for a better partner years ago. He lied to himself. The truth was, though, that through sheer happenstance, Nolan had rescued Em when she was just a kid. She'd owed him, and she didn't really have anywhere else to go. The rest was just history.

Hell, Nolan thought, *Em's still a kid, really*. People had mistaken him for her *father*.

Perhaps he was getting too old for all this.

The young mage clapped a hand on the man's shoulder, then quickly pulled it away. It was slick with sweat and grime. "Oh, yuck! How do you stand being this dirty?"

Nolan looked at her, all humor drained from his face. "Unlike *some* people, I don't rely on magic to get me through breakfast." Em looked back at him as though she hadn't a clue who he was speaking of.

With a groan, Nolan strode forward towards their destination. The "dry" ground was only a few dozen yards long, ending in another lengthy trudge through the water.

"Desna weeps," he sighed, stepping forward and immediately finding the murk up to his thighs.

"Nonsense," Emellin chimed with a carefree laugh. "You love a swim! Quit complaining and enjoy it."

Despite himself, Nolan spit a laugh. Not even Em could've believed that one. He glowered at her as she flittered over the water, dancing like the youth she was, while he grabbed at his belt, hiking his pants up to keep his gear from drowning. It was a losing battle.

"And you only brought one of those scrolls because...?"

"They're tough to read," she quipped back with a nonchalant wave of her hand. "I don't speak celestial, and I can't promise a second would work."

Nolan fought against another groan.

The only bit of luck they'd had was a remarkably uneventful trek. Despite his misgivings, they hadn't run into a single boggard or giant lizard or living fungal death beast.

Nolan was almost about to crack a smile when his boot struck something in the water. His thoughts leapt to crocodiles, but the obstruction didn't move. He prodded it with his boot. It was too big to be a root, too soft to be a rock, and it seemed pretty heavy, too.

"Got something here," he called out; Emellin was a half-mile ahead of him. He started fishing as she turned back. He prayed that Desna—Goddess of Fortune—had dropped him a clue to the hunters' whereabouts.

Emellin leaned in close, excitement shining through on her face. "What'd we find? Is it shiny?" Nolan smiled. As much as she told him to quit complaining, she was as bored with the swamp as he was.

"I dunno. I can't quite...grab it."

Nolan struggled; his fingers kept sinking into the spongy surface, and its mass was just bulky enough to make hauling it out of the mud a real hassle. With a grimace, he reached in with both hands and hauled the thing up.

He immediately regretted the decision.

"Ewww..." Emellin coughed and averted her eyes.

The body was bloated, its half-rotten flesh turning a pale greenish-brown and flaking away where fish had chewed it. The eyes were gone, empty sockets in a skull still partially covered by muscle and skin. Somehow Nolan had managed to find the man's neck. He now looked as though he was throttling the poor fellow as he stared into those dead sockets.

Releasing the pitiable, desecrated corpse, Nolan stumbled backwards a step, nearly losing his footing. The body, heavy with water and rotting leathers, bobbed for a few seconds before burbling back into the shadowy murk.

He shook his head, trying to clear the image from his mind, and stepped around the dead man. "Guess he's not coming home."

Em stared at the ripples, frozen with shock. "Guess not.... Poor soul."

"Maybe so, but he's also too rotten to be one of our missing hunters."

Well, not *exactly* one of ours. Emellin didn't know he'd been speaking to

the locals back in Wartle. This wasn't the first group of trappers to disappear. This had been going on for months now.

Emellin shook her head as she followed the ranger. Her exploratory spirit seemed to have faded, eroded away by the sullen discovery.

Nolan cringed as he felt another branch snap beneath his boot. He was suddenly all too aware those weren't tree limbs lying in the depths. It was no coincidence they hadn't seen any other life here: they were wading through a graveyard. He gazed ahead at the distant shore. Somehow, it seemed further away than he remembered it. He shot a quick glance over his shoulder, finding a bank of fog creeping up over the return path. It had rolled in too suddenly—against the wind.

Em looked at him, blissfully unaware of his worries.

“Um, we should *really* hurry up.”

Ripples stretched out across the water, each darker than the last, as the white haze engulfed them. The muffled silence of the bog gave way to trickles of sound, growing quickly to steady splashing. Sinews tearing and the grating of long-dormant bone all hinted at the same tale.

Fear crept into the pit of Nolan's stomach.

He rested a hand on the hilt of his blade as he turned in place, shrouded figures on all sides. A particularly close splash splattered behind him, and he whirled around to face it.

There, mere steps away, the hollow sockets he'd gazed into only minutes before stared back at him, risen once more from the depths of the swamp. More corpses followed: humans, boggards, a dwarf—and some goblins with decaying heads even more bloated than usual. All slowly trudged forward, unabated by the resistance of the water or the softness of the earth. Nolan counted at least a dozen, but more surely lurked in the fog. Only their splashing despoiled the silence; the stillness of death robbed the undead of their voices.

Emellin's eyes were locked upon the face of the man they'd uncovered, unable to turn away from the grim sight. She backpedaled and tumbled right into Nolan.

“Stay back!” The ranger hauled her to her feet, then drew his weapon.

The blackened metal blade shone even as the waning light of day disappeared beneath the rolling mist. The *Verdant Herald* was a glittering gift of fate—a fortune cast down by Desna herself, he believed. It had served him well, time and time again. And it was time.

Instinct taking over, Nolan strode forward against the dead man with alacrity. In the tense focus of battle, the soft ground no longer seemed a hindrance. The bloated creature greeted him in kind, its jaw agape and hanging at a precarious angle, its outstretched arms mindlessly seeking sustenance and unholy vengeance.

Nolan's blade reached the creature first. The soft flesh offered little resistance against the *Verdant Herald*. Ichor oozed from the wound as he cut a swath through the shoulder. The sword caught upon bone, though it hardly slowed the zombie. It staggered forward, skewering itself. Gripping the weapon in both hands, Nolan dragged it downward, slashing through several ribs before pulling the weapon free. The zombie's arm hung limp, dangling from the rest of the body by a thread of flesh as the creature slumped forward and disappeared beneath the water. He watched as the dark swamp swallowed it up, spitting back growing ripples of congealed bodily fluid.

“Nolan, quit stalling! Get out of there!”

His eyes shot up towards Emellin. She'd already retreated to a safe distance, and a glowing pulse of arcane energy now rested in the palm of her hand. Nolan shook off his own stupor and turned to slog through the muck. It was a long way to any semi-solid ground, and he would tire far sooner than any dead man would. Surely Lady Luck had something in mind for them.

He caught a wink from Em, and knew that the wizard certainly did. Nolan pushed forward—he knew too well what Emellin was capable of. Her words were nearly inaudible, soft like a song. Her playful dance now had a serious fluidity to it, motions mimicking the sound of her words. She finished with a flourish, her hands extending outwards as if trying to embrace the dead before her.

A wave of cold breathed over Nolan's face, leaving frost in his beard and chilling him to the bone. It shimmered across the bog, and he heard ice

crackling behind him, bringing a beleaguered smile to his face. The surface of the lake had frozen solid and only the path before him remained clear. He dared a glance back, watching the dead struggle against the icy prison as the fog dissipated.

“Neat trick.” Nolan returned Em’s wink as he caught up.

“I try.” The wizard gave him a mocking bow. “But that won’t hold for long. We’d better leave before we end up joining them.” She was out of breath. The magic had obviously taken a bit out of her.

“Agreed.”

Feet back on the ground, Nolan sheathed his sword and took off. Emellin ran alongside him, but couldn’t compete with the ranger given equal footing; whatever spell she’d been using to hover above the water had run its course. He slowed his pace just enough to let her keep up. Behind them, the dead were already breaking free.

“Don’t suppose you’ve got a plan, kid?”

Emellin allowed herself a half-smirk before her face turned grave. “How’s that?” She gestured off to the far right ahead.

Nolan hated to admit that he’d nearly missed it, but he was a little preoccupied. A small stone edifice rose from the surrounding swamp, choked with creeping vines and layers of black fungus. Its exposed stone had been stained a pale, dirty brown, and was worn by centuries of weathering, blending it nearly seamlessly with the landscape.

“It’ll do.”

The ground leveled out as they approached. An old stone path led up to the structure’s entrance, despite being swamped beneath a few inches of shadowy murk. He bounded over a twisting vine and rounded the corner of the building.

“Aw, hells.”

The pair of stone doors was nearly a man-and-a-half tall, sealed shut with a pair of iron handles that were more rust than anything. Copper embellishments on the stonework around the doorway had nearly corroded completely, but they were all meaningless to Nolan—just another ancient ruin from some forgotten era. He’d seen plenty of those.

He reached for the door, but Emellin put a hand on his chest and brushed the other over the decorations on the wall. “Whoa.”

Nolan shot her an impatient glare. He could hear the fascination in her voice.

“These are Thassilonian runes. You don’t see that every day! Most of the time they’re hidden away in old tomes, but this place is *real*—it must be ancient! This is a huge discovery!”

Rolling his eyes, Nolan grabbed the girl around the shoulders and pushed her towards the door. “Wizard stuff later, Em. We’ve got bigger problems right now.”

“Oh, right. Sure.”

The stone doors were even heavier than they looked. Pulling together—Nolan was sure he was doing the brunt of the work—they managed to drag one open just enough to squeeze inside. Closing it was even worse, as the slippery floor worked against them. The stone groaned every inch of the way, until at last the entrance was sealed. As the final thud resounded through the darkness, only the sound of their labored breathing remained. The consuming dark was as silent as a tomb.

The dank, cold air reeked of death.

The consuming dark likely *was* a tomb. The idea did not sit well.

With a crack of her knuckles and a snap of her fingers, a tiny orb of light appeared above Emellin’s shoulder. It wasn’t exactly bright, but it was a welcome defense against the black. Their figures cast lengthy silhouettes down a long, sloping corridor, and cobwebs covered the low ceiling. Their inhabitants skittered away from the intruding light, as Nolan’s eyes strained to adjust to the relative darkness. A steady drip echoed from somewhere further below.

Suddenly the shadows all jumped as the magical light jerked backward. Nolan whipped around and saw Emellin frantically clawing at her arm. She offered an apologetic smile.

“Spider.”

Nolan shook his head, releasing his held breath, only to be startled again as dull, heavy impacts struck against the stone door behind them.

He slid his hand to his weapon's hilt, ready. Emellin ducked behind the ranger, using his body as a shield. Even still, she managed to conjure a small, spiraling flame in her palm. It wavered nearly as much as her voice had, calling it into being.

The entrance held. The mindless dead were not intelligent enough to open a door properly, but that was a small comfort. They were now effectively trapped between a wall of the dead and the unknown depths of the dark.

"Only one way to go." Nolan drew his blade and pointed down the corridor. "Keep close."

Em nodded.

He advanced slowly into the darkness. Runic engravings along the length of the *Verdant Herald* reflected the light of Emellin's glowing sphere, even as the sword's cold iron edge seemed to reject it. It was a weapon of duality, a light to guide them through the darkness. It had never been used quite so literally, though.

Emellin ran her hand along the wall, brushing away some of the black fungal growths to reveal mysterious engravings beneath.

"Strange," she muttered, more to herself than her partner.

"What is it?" He indulged her, knowing she was only waiting for his cue.

She flicked the black ichor from her fingers, then wiped them on the lower portion of her robes. "I haven't a clue. It's not fungus, though. Not even sure it's natural."

"Great."

Nolan pushed that problem to the back of his mind as he trailed his own shadow along the ebon stone. The corridor seemed to push further and further down into the earth, with rivulets of swamp water trickling down through the cracks above and running together into a stream at the lowest corner of the channel. Either the ruin had sunken with time, or it had been deliberately buried this deep. Neither boded well.

The entire place unnerved Nolan, and that wasn't exactly easy to do. The strange runes, the unnatural black fungus, the heavy muffling solitude

of the stone.... Everything in his gut was telling him to turn and leave.

And then a sudden cry rang out.

A shiver ran down Nolan's spine as he halted in his tracks. It was ahead of them and sounded human—and in pain. A thousand possibilities rushed through his head.

He turned to his companion, nearly knocking her over in the process. The young wizard was virtually clinging to Nolan's back; all the arcane knowledge in the world couldn't quell old-fashioned fear.

Against his better judgment, Nolan started forward into a run, pulling Em along behind him. The reluctant mage struggled to keep up as Nolan ran at the verge of the light until he abruptly slid to a stop at the threshold of a circular antechamber. The black substance from the corridor caked the walls even more thickly here, growing down from the ceiling in vine-like tendrils. A fading fresco peeked through in spots, the only sign the chamber once held some real, alternative purpose. Emellin caught up and leaned upon her knees a moment, then panted as she walked up beside him.

The source of the scream was lying in a pool of blood—his own, presumably—in the center of the chamber. Several wounds were apparent, though Nolan couldn't tell which had been the fatal blow.

He suspected the other man might know. The shivering figure hunched along the back wall of the chamber and did not acknowledge their presence.

Nolan risked an experimental step into the room, then another, followed by another. No reaction. Then his boot found a puddle, sending up water and black goo like an explosion in the silence. The figure jumped to his feet with preternatural dexterity and cowered against the wall, hiding his face from view.

The man looked ragged, beaten. He had the full beard and rugged hands of an outdoorsman and wore the heavy clothing of an experienced swamp-dweller, but it was tattered and torn. Blood caked the garments, though the shadows cloaked the man's wounds. He was probably one of the hunters they sought.

Most importantly, Nolan saw no weapon. He was harmless—or close enough. He hadn't killed the other man with his bare hands.... But why,

then, was he still standing?

The man turned, glaring at Nolan with a sudden ferocity. His eyes had been consumed with a floating blackness, except for a white gap where his pupils should have been.

The ranger took a step back; the man's gaze was unnerving. The eyes—for what else could they be called?—were too old, too deep. They bore an unnatural strength the rest of the man did not.

Emellin crept in behind her partner, leaning to get a better look. "Careful, there's something very wrong with him."

"Really, Em? I hadn't noticed." Nolan sighed and sheathed his blade back in its scabbard, silently praying he wouldn't regret it. "What happened here, sir?" His voice echoed clear and firm off the rounded walls. A reasonable enough start, he supposed.

If the man knew, he showed no signs of it. He didn't even appear to notice the dead man on the floor before them. Then the eyes wavered slightly, unfocused.

"How did you get here?" the stranger inquired.

An alternatively reasonable start. "The name's Nolan." He gestured as harmlessly as he could. "This here's Emellin. We're just passing through."

"No, no, no!" The man rushed forward. In the blink of an eye, he'd gone from trembling, helpless and pathetic to something entirely different. He gripped Nolan's shirt, pulling himself closer than Nolan ever wanted him. The ranger's hand slipped to his weapon, but Em put a gentle hand on his arm.

"You *can't* be here," the man continued. "If *you're* here, then *he's* here! You've doomed yourselves—me—us—to a fate undeserved by any man!"

"Who? Who's here?" Em's hand drifted to the man's shoulder as she asked the obvious question.

He recoiled, as expected. "Where are my companions?" The man shifted his emaciated frame, turning his glare to her. Emellin started, but stood her ground.

Close as he was to the light of her magic, his gaunt visage was fully illuminated: loose skin hung from the bones of his pale face; veins popped from its surface, making him look ancient; and the pinpricks of his white

pupils lanced out from his blackened eyes, perhaps all that remained of his soul.

Nolan interposed himself between Emellin and the madman, glancing down at the body and wondering if the corpse *was* one of the man's companions. The stranger followed Nolan's gaze, but apparently saw nothing worth noting.

"They're dead," Nolan said simply. He needed the man calm enough to answer a few questions instead of asking his own. "I assume you're one of the men from Wartle?"

The man tilted his head, as though deep in thought. It took him just a moment too long to answer. "...Yes. I'm Faenrik Kurill. Trapper, hunter, and part-time carpenter."

Em cleared her throat, rousing the courage to try another question. "How'd you end up here? I mean, the door was closed pretty tight. And..." her eyes darted to the corpse at his feet before returning, "you're all alone here. It must've been hard to open the door."

"I...don't know." The black pools in his eyes quivered. "I remember the hunt. We were there, all of us. Just another hunt.... Then Erik was gone. Just gone. We heard the screams, ran, hid. Then it came. *He* came. The others ran, but I couldn't... and then... nothing." He shook his head, confused. He gripped Nolan by the shoulders, pulling the ranger forward into the room. "They had to have made it! You have to be wrong! I know they live... I saw them!"

Nolan stole a glance at Em. The man had lost his grip on sanity, either from watching his friends being torn to shreds—or by doing it himself.

"You have to go," he rambled on. "Leave. Before he comes back. I can't—I don't have the strength to run, not like my friends. They're safe. Safe and warm with their families.... Enjoying a hot meal.... Sipping the local brew...."

Nolan put a hand on the man's shoulder, ignoring his gut instinct to run as he looked into the soulless, broken eyes.

"You need to calm down. We can help, just tell us what happened. Who is 'he'?"

Kurill stepped back, the shivering returning as he scanned the room, searching for something. He stumbled backwards, falling and soaking his clothing with ooze from the stagnant, tepid pools. At last his eyes went wide, apparently finding what he sought.

Nolan saw only a blank wall. The man's mind was slipping further away.

"I don't know... know... no... no! No! He's coming, I can feel his presence! Can't you feel that?"

Em shrugged. "No?" She pressed her hand to the wall, as though trying to fathom what the man could've been seeing.

Nolan kept his hand on his weapon. Nothing about this felt right. "What do you see? What's here?"

"*Him.*"

"Enough of this. Em, leave him. We've got to find a way out of here."

Kurill's head shot round, glaring at Nolan. His expression was impassive, but Nolan could feel something seething below the surface. His eyes seemed darker than before.

The madman lurched forward on his knees, hands grasping eagerly for Nolan's blade. Sidestepping the clumsy maneuver, Nolan looked down at Kurill as he lay on the stone. A glimmer of hope beamed through the horror on the man's face.

"Yes, you understand. It's necessary. I must die—die? No, no. No, that isn't it. *He* must die, I can feel it. Feel him. He fears death. Fears you."

Emellin stood beside Nolan, her eyes on his sword. "This is beyond my expertise. Way beyond. I haven't a clue what could've done this to him."

A large glob of black ichor dripped from the ceiling and onto Emellin's hand. She looked down at the ooze as the realization spread across her face.

"On second thought..." She stretched the mass between her fingers, curious.

Then it twitched.

Emellin jumped backward, flinging the substance onto Kurill in a panic. It quickly dissolved across the prostrate man's skin. He began to convulse wildly.

Nolan's blade was in his hand before he even knew it. He leveled it at

the man's neck, ready for anything.

Kurill rolled away, suddenly in complete control. He jumped to his feet, back turned to the pair of adventurers. "No, not yet. He comes." Slowly, he raised his hands towards the ceiling of the chamber. Black ichor flowed down and engulfed the man's arms.

Nolan moved to stop him, but an unseen resistance impeded his advance. It was as though the air itself had grown thick and heavy.

"You must wait, Nolan." Kurill spoke with perfect lucidity.

It was almost more jarring than the madness Nolan had come to expect. He watched as the rippling black substance consumed the man's body. Kurill's eyes focused, their fading light locked on the ranger as the darkness advanced. The man was dying; he needed no help from Nolan's blade.

"He is powerful, but weary. He did not expect to be discovered so soon. I can feel his uncertainty. His plans are unraveling—the plans of his master. I gave myself to save them and I do the same for you now. Please. Do not let him escape."

Speechless, Nolan could only nod as Kurill's head was submerged beneath the shadowy ichor.

"Uh, that's not good..." Em frowned as she backed away.

The black form, now just a stark mockery of a man, stood still and silent in the center of the chamber. Nolan shifted his weight and tightened the grip on his weapon.

After a few breathless moments, a pair of voids appeared where the man's eyes once were: empty sockets, just like the bloated body Nolan had found beneath the swamp. These, however, were consumed with crimson fire. It was a gaze of pure, unbridled rage.

"Weak-willed human," a deep, otherworldly voice bellowed from an unseen mouth. "How dare he resist my power! ...How dare *you!*?"

With a wave of its hand, a vicious sword sprung forth from its arm. The dark blade flowed with shadow, billowing smoky contrails into the blackness. Its edge seemed both immaterial and real at once—as though caught between planes of existence—yet it was undoubtedly sharp either way.

The thing stepped forward, its blade readied. Nolan mimicked the ges-

ture, though he was unsure his weapon could withstand—or even harm—the other.

“You humans plague my realm and disturb my slumber. This ends *now*.”

From all around the room, inky shadows leapt from their surfaces, taking shape around the creature’s body. The beast climbed in height as ripples of immaterial night wound like muscles and sinew around its existing form. Inhuman protrusions extended outward from the body, tendrils of shadow fashioned into weapons. The room itself seemed to stretch and bend; Nolan could no longer find the ceiling behind the veil of darkness, nor find the ingress they’d entered through, or even the body of “Kurill’s” last victim.

Whatever they’d stumbled upon, they were trapped with it.

Nolan assumed a defensive posture and looked to Emellin for some kind of insight, but her expression was a mixture of academic curiosity and fear—she was no help. He stared at the beast, and its distant eyes stared back. One burnt with crimson fury waiting to be unleashed, yet the other was conflicted. The slightest tinge of soft, subdued white fought against the fires.

Could it be the man at its core still lived?

That would only make fighting the beast all that much harder.

The shadows acted upon his momentary indecision, lunging forward with a bladed tendril. Nolan jumped sideways, bringing the *Verdant Herald* up to parry the attack. The impact nearly knocked him to the ground as the power of the strike broke his guard and tore a gash through his shoulder. Shadows pooled around the wound like the leeches from the swamp. He shook them off even as he counterattacked with his own weapon. Its runic, cold iron blade clashed against a second of the beast’s appendages as the weapon began to glow with a deep, coniferous green. The scent of fresh morning dew graced Nolan’s senses, easing his fears.

He really did owe Desna an innumerable debt.

With a renewed vigor, the ranger ducked beneath a second blow, knowing now that he would be unable to match the strength of a full-bodied strike. Instead, he tried to put the fiend on the defensive as he dashed inward, but each slice Nolan attempted was capably parried away, as though

by a swordsman far beyond his skill. A cackle emanated from the shadows, resounding from everywhere and nowhere.

“You can help any time now, Em!” Nolan shouted.

A familiar voice called out over the hideous laughter. “I’ve got a plan! Keep dodging it!”

“Easier said,” he grumbled as he rolled under another slash. He rose and quickly blocked an attack aimed at his chest, throwing him sprawling across the ground. He saw a shadowy blade lash out at him too quickly; he could not raise his blade. He reflexively closed his eyes.

A moment passed and he did not die.

Nolan’s eyes shot open to find the tendril buried a foot deep into a clone of himself. It was just to his left, mere inches from lodging itself in his chest instead. A quick glance around confirmed his suspicions—another dozen “Nolans” filled the room, mimicking his actions.

He laughed. It was a desperate, life-flashing-before-your-eyes kind of laugh.

Suddenly each image had a mind of its own, forming their own plans of attack: charging, parrying, running, dodging—some even drew their bows to unleash a volley on the beast. Em had used the trick on him once before as part of a practical joke, and while the illusion had no real, lasting effect, it was realistic enough in sound and motion. She had evidently been paying close attention to his tactics, and Nolan was impressed. Maybe she was learning something from him.

He knew the distraction would not fool the creature for long. He sheathed his sword and quickly strung his bow. The practiced action took mere seconds; the weapon was more at home in his hands than a blade would ever be, even if its magic could never rival the *Verdant Herald’s*. He drew a pair of arrows and sent them flying into the beast. It reacted with a howl of rage and Nolan smiled; they’d pierced its shadow-born hide.

Emellin took that as her cue. She emerged from an invisible refuge, at once dispelling her illusory army and unleashing a familiar wave of chilling cold. This blast was more focused than before, slamming the creature with the force of a blizzard and pummeling it with blinding winds and needles

of ice. Nolan's eyes squinted against the onslaught, seeking his target as he grappled for another pair of arrows.

An inhuman growl rumbled from within the ice. The creature was *not* happy. At once, a pair of bladed tendrils burst forth, and the concealment of winter offered no protection as the savage limbs easily homed in on Emelin. The first cut wide across her cheek, sending blood spilling across her face, while the second pierced through her gut. The blow sent the girl flying. Nolan heard her body crack against the stone wall of the chamber and collapse onto the floor, even as shadow began to pool around it.

The dim radiance of Em's conjured light winked out.

She wasn't dead... She couldn't be. Nolan wouldn't let that happen.

The creature turned to face Nolan, at home in the darkness. Its sinister grin penetrated the gloom, an impossibly deeper shade of black that served only to provide Nolan a target. Even as he put another pair of arrows into it, it seemed to laugh at him, bolstered by the lightless chamber.

It slashed wildly at him, eager to be done with this annoyance. Blinded and running out of tricks, Nolan turned to instinct and prayer as he dashed towards where he imagined the walls still were. Em was running out of time. She couldn't survive in that state long. Worse, she might survive in the same condition Kurill did.

And in that case, she'd be better off dead.

Nolan felt the breeze of an incoming swing and just barely dove over the top of a sweeping blow, rolling into a crouch as he pulled his finest arrow. The glittering silver tip gleamed with a pale aura even in the consuming dark, its glow a comfort to the tiring human. He put the shaft to the bow and saw his target: the soft white glow of the creature's right pupil. It shone through the gloom like a beacon. Nolan couldn't help but return the creature's wicked grin.

He murmured a prayer to his goddess, releasing the arrow, and it flew true.

The eye exploded with color and light, the combined result of the missile's inherent enchantment and the grave wound Nolan hoped he'd inflicted. The creature shrieked, and its form began to warp and deteriorate as the

shadows retreated to their logical arrangements across the room.

“This is but a temporary setback, mortal. None shall stop our ascension.” The crippled thing twisted and writhed against its fate, then reached out to him with a gnarled finger. “My master will know of your name. We will remember you, Nolan.”

The words sent a chill down the ranger’s spine, even as the quivering remnants of the shadowy creature collapsed. Its form dissolved, the remaining shadows rippling across the floor like water. When it was done, nothing remained of the beast—not even Kurill’s body. Only a few black crystalline shards littered the floor where it once stood, illuminated by the fading glow of the magical arrow.

The brief reprieve gave Nolan enough time to prepare a torch from his pack. As he struck the flint and his torch breathed to life, he spotted a glinting fragment only a foot away. Curious, he reached over to grab it. Distant, forgotten voices screamed from within the crystal as his fingers closed around it. He tossed it back and let it skitter across the floor. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good. He had more pressing concerns.

He swept the torch in an arc and found Emellin just as she regained a semblance of consciousness. She looked worse for wear in the flickering torchlight, but the dismissal of the creature had at least spared her Kurill’s fate. She didn’t even bother trying to stand. “I hope you’ve got a healing tonic in that pack of yours.”

“Wouldn’t leave home without one,” he chuckled, helping her sit up as he handed her the iron flask he kept at his hip. She downed it without a word, the blessed liquid quickly acting to mend her most severe wounds. Nolan inspected his own injury; he’d been the one to get off lightly this time around. Hopefully there’d be no lingering effects from the shadow-thing’s touch.

Em reached up and Nolan gladly offered his friend a hand to help her to her feet.

“So...that happened.”

Nolan nodded in agreement, not really sure what else he could say. He watched as Emellin began to examine their surroundings, her inquisitive

brain switching back into gear, now that the threat of imminent death had passed. Her eyes settled on the onyx shard beside them. She crouched beside it as Nolan held his tongue. She prodded it with an experimental finger, quickly drawing back. Pulling a cloth from within her robes, she wrapped up the shard and stuffed it deep into a pocket.

“Huh. Think this crystal was the source of all our troubles? Everything being driven by the evil rippling out from whatever this is...?”

“It’s something bad. Real bad. The kind of bad folks tell as campfire tales.”

Em wrinkled her nose. “The kind of bad that raises the dead and leaks bits of evil all over a swamp before retreating to an ancient ruin to make a lair?”

“The kind of bad you leave where you find it,” Nolan warned.

Emellin fidgeted with her pocket and considered his words for a long moment.

“Perhaps. But it warrants further study. *Cautious* study.”

Those were two words Nolan never thought he’d hear her use in the same sentence. He nodded. “If you say so, Em. But I don’t think this is over. There’s got to be more of these things out there. Ripples grow bigger as they spread—”

“—and the more of these, the bigger the ripples, right?”

“Right. Plus, we’ve earned the ire of something really nasty.”

Em shrugged. “We should head back to Wartle and get paid. We *did* find the missing huntsmen.”

Nolan shook his head, throwing his bow back over his shoulder as he glanced back down the long, dark corridor. “I don’t think they’ll be too eager to pay us for undead hunters. But I could use a good hot meal right about now. Especially if we’re going to hunt down the rest of these big nasties.”

“Does that mean you’re actually coming back to the Mushfens?” She sounded excited, and that spelled trouble.

“It does,” Nolan said with the first real, honest, not-on-the-brink-of-death grin he’d had all day. “Hunting down evil shadow-beasts is probably more profitable than whatever job you’d find us, anyway.”

Emellin considered this a moment, then slung an arm around Nolan as they started for the door. “True enough, but there’s still that matter of the zombie horde outside....”

Nolan sighed. *Swamps.*

THE MULTITUDE

BY TODD STEWART



What do you do if you're in love with a monster?

A slither of scales on stone, the rustle of silken sheets, soft murmurs of appreciation, and my pulse races. A brush of fingers and tongue across my neck and these most recent hours bleed into my thoughts: a blizzard of images, sounds, and smells. The ghost of a kiss on the nape of my neck, and I shiver and sigh. A single tear meanders down my face like the smallest tributary of the Styx, frozen before it touches the ground.

Who could ever love me? I close my eyes and smile.

I yearned for an answer to that question for so very long, and for so long I wondered if I would live my life just like that icy tear: cold, flawed, and cast aside.

I didn't so much find the answer to that question as it found me.



My parents were deeply disappointed when I was born. Instead of being the proper child of would-be Chelish gentry, I was disfigured and warped. Fiendspawn, they called me. Fork-tongue. Demon-bitch. Tiefling. I had no other name until I reached the age of seven. By then, I suppose they were accustomed to my deformities, and resigned to the fact that I would survive.

Oh, they fed and educated me. They didn't even beat me very much. But neither did they love me. I was their burden to bear, their socially unacceptable secret to be hidden away. This changed, somewhat, the first time I manifested my magical talent. I had something to be proud of, and for a while I stopped crying myself to sleep. At least until I found out that, for

many, it was just another reason to fear me. A simple spell conjured by force of will and I became yet another variety of pariah: a target of bitter words barbed with insults and borne on arrows of jealousy and fear. Why couldn't I be normal?

My family was happy for the chance to send me away. You must succeed, they told me sternly. You must learn well enough to become a powerful mage in service to the throne. They left unsaid the part about this being the only way to atone for what I am, and the only way they might possibly save face for birthing me. I didn't care.

I was just as happy to go, but I was trembling like a lost kitten when the Hellknights delivered me to the Academy. Situated on the outskirts of the port city of Kintargo, it wasn't as large as the schools closer to the capital, but it was large enough to be intimidating. The oppressive, Egorian-styled towers gave it a certain terrifying grandeur that both frightened and attracted me—a dichotomy that's been with me always.

For a while, it was better than being at home. The other first-years were too scared of their new surroundings to take the time to torment me. But once they adjusted, they shunned my company. Their ostracism left me alone to my thoughts and studies, and without the distraction of their social intrigues, I soon excelled far beyond them. But I was painfully alone. I had no one I could call a friend, and the omnipresent stares of pity and loathing began to wear upon me.

I suppose on some level that I can't blame them, because when they looked at me, the girl that they saw was anything but human. On some level, I've grown so used to it. Staring each morning at my reflection in the mirror, I see a face so familiar, yet so very different, from every other around me. The hair brushed back from my face is long and fine, the colors of a spent fire. It's neither red, brown, black, nor golden, but a mixture reminiscent of sullen and smoldering ashes. The scent of smoke hangs about me perpetually and cannot be washed away. It lingers even past perfume, like a shadow pooled at my feet that the sun cannot banish. Violet eyes stare back, slit and serpentine, circled with black, rather than the white of human sclera. This is the face that looks back at me, the one that elicits fear, or worse, disgust

and pity. I've wanted so badly to be normal, or at least accepted. Admiration would be too much to hope for. I am not pretty, except in those dreams that mean a morning spent in tears, wishing I had never awakened.

I don't delude myself that I am in any way attractive. My inhumanity burdens me with the unsubtle ostracism of a nation ironically ruled by a devil's puppet. I am a warped caricature of a woman. I am not beautiful to look upon like the other students my age, especially those of noble birth. I look at their coiffed hair, their painted lips, the healthy curve of bust and hip, and I despair and long for the same. My flesh is tight to my bones, my body lean and devoid of virtually all the hallmarks of femininity. My demon's blood compensates me with slender ram's horns, a dancing, whip-like tail, a forked tongue, and cloven hooves that will never grace silk slippers or dancing shoes. The other girls are beautiful and I am not. They have everything to be desired, but what do I have to offer? Who could ever love a creature such as me?

The ones I admire most can see how I look at them longingly. Though their disgust is hidden by fake smiles as much as by colored powders and creams, I can feel it nonetheless. In my presence, they sometimes compliment each other on their dress and appearance, then ask my opinion just to see my cheeks blush and my eyes dance with unrequited appreciation. I tell them truthfully that they are beautiful. They blow me kisses to watch my reaction, and then the laughter begins.

I desire all that they have. I wish to be like them: normal, beautiful, human. But I also desire them. I want someone to take me by the hand at night and embrace me beneath the warm bedcovers. I want them to be there when I awaken at dawn, looking into their eyes before we kiss once more. But I am ugly, barely even recognizable as female. When they see my hopeless desire, they mock me and insinuate the crudest things they can think of. "Imp spawn. Demon-born. Devil-whore."

Why do I still want them to love me? Do I even deserve love?

"Tainted-blood. Hell runt. Filthy tiefling."

Something breaks inside me. My wounded ego hisses and coils like a venomous serpent. My tail twitches like the same serpent's rattle.

I've suffered at the hands of their kind all of my miserable life. I've taken their barbs, their taunts, their rejection, their condescending pity and petty mockery. The blood in my veins boils and my eyes glow with black fire. They have broken me; I can endure no more. I will endure no more. With a scream from the depths of the Abyss I leap upon them, claws on powdered skin, teeth on exposed, perfumed necks and soon to draw blood from torn and ragged jugulars....

I do nothing of the sort.

I turn from them, mumble a meaningless apology and walk away quickly, my cloven hooves tapping an awkward counterpoint to the sound of their contemptuous laughter. I think of revenge, but I don't act upon my thoughts. I can't. I'm not strong. I'm not a creature of blood and violence, despite my demonic blood. I take their abuse in a servile fashion, like any other chained and bound fiend in this fiend-haunted nation.

A year passes, and nothing changes until one of the masters summons me. A curiosity has been delivered into their hands: a black opalescent gemstone bound by bands of tarnished and twisted bronze. It hums and hovers atop the table as we cluster around. It's an ancient thing, very likely of Azlanti origin. Fishermen dredged it from the deep, whence it passed through a dozen hands before finding its way to Cheliax. Such objects usually imprison the essence of a single, powerful creature, but this one apparently captures many. At least that was what the symbols upon its surface seemed to indicate: a multitude.

As one of the most skilled apprentices, the masters task me to prepare the reagents for a series of divining rituals to plumb its secrets. For a time, they leave me alone with the gemstone.

My finger traces the symbols, rubbing away grime and bright-green verdigris. The masters were mistaken in their interpretation. It wasn't "a multitude," it was "The Multitude," a proper name. Satisfied with myself, I touch the surface, once more tracing my fingers across the runes. I whisper the name, practicing my pronunciation of the archaic words. They're poetic and charming in their own way, and come easily to my forked tongue.

I say them again, smiling the second time at the melody of the sounds.

It's a beautiful name.

Suddenly the hairs on the back of my neck prickle and my tail curls against my thigh.

Something is watching me. I spin around and hide my hands, expecting an angry master to shout at me for daring to touch the valuable artifact.

Yet the door is closed and the room is empty. Still, something watches me.

My tail twitches and the skin of my arms tingles as if a cool wind was blowing. I look down at the artifact, now glowing with a pale, milky green light.

The gemstone is alive and its prisoner is aware of me.

I finish my duties and leave hurriedly, hoping the attention of the gemstone's occupant will not follow. It does. Walking back to my chambers, I hear footsteps on the stone and a tail dragging lightly behind. Nothing and no one is there. I whisper an Asmodean prayer before bed, and for a moment I feel a sense of contempt from my unknown observer.

Human children, so I'm told, often beg their parents to not snuff the lantern light in their bedrooms. When their parents smile at their ignorance and shutter the lamp anyway, they throw the covers over their heads to avoid looking into the darkness where monsters surely lurk. I never felt that way. My eyes glitter in the darkness, and I see it bright as day once the candlelight fades. But now I throw the blanket over my head, holding it tight in clawed fingers to shut out that which lurks beyond the limits of my perception.

In my fear, for the first time in my life, I don't feel alone when I close my eyes.

When I finally fall asleep, my dreams are full of strange images. I stand upon a mountain, looking up at a black sky alive with innumerable falling stars and a hungry, eclipsed sun gazing down at me. I sit among a crowd of robed, dark-haired and purple-eyed men and women, and then I watch as a star falls to the earth and obliterates their world, casting me into the sea. Sensations flood my being: the taste of a thousand lips, the whisper of a thousand names, the wet sound of lips parting for either a smile or a bite to

eat, and then not a thousand names whispered, but only mine.

Draenara....

I awaken with a startled gasp.

It was only a dream, of course—surely, just a dream.

For a brief moment, the bed feels warm next to me and the mattress sunken with the impression of hips and shoulder. I blink and the bed is normal. I'm alone—painfully so. Despite my fear the night before, at least I did not feel alone then.

Whatever dreams I had, the obligations of my life here in the Academy shackle me to reality. I dress and comb my hair. For far too long I stare at my reflection in the mirror and sigh, thinking on the Azlanti gem and the presence from my dream. It saw this face of mine that glowers back from the mirror, unsightly and tainted, but it didn't run, nor mock, nor abjure. Instead, it whispered my name.

I sigh again as my hope gets the best of me. Silly, unreasonable girl. Daydreaming will not finish whatever tasks the masters have set out for me today. With one last glance to my bed, I leave my quarters and begin my work collecting reagents, carving the names of the Whore Queens into candles and gathering the implements by which servants will be bled to empower the day's further investigations into the artifact.

I do as I'm asked, like a trained pet more than a student. In fact, I barely observe the rituals today, despite their unique natures. My eyes and attention are fixated on the gem itself. Do they see it glowing too? Do they see it pulsing with the faint beating of a heart? None of them mention it.

From their divinations, the masters think they've determined how to summon the gem's occupant and force her into servitude. I haven't mentioned their translation error to them. I don't think she wants me to. I don't know how I know, but like me, the gem's occupant is female.

That night I sit alone in one of the high towers, reading through a tome covering the history of binding devils. I know the material already, having read it for leisure months ago, but the book was now assigned to all of us. Boredom and introspection take hold like a leash and collar, dragging me away from my studies and causing my mind to wander and dream. Turning

my head to the window, I stare out into the darkness, watching the faint twinkle of lights from the faraway harbor. It's cold, but my fiend-tainted flesh shrugs away the chill. Ice on the window pane distorts the twinkling lights, exaggerating the motion of ships on the water. I yawn and put down my book, and then I feel it again: I'm not alone. She's here. Fingers touch the outside of the glass, claws almost like mine scratching at the surface. The icy rime shifts and moves, expanding with the crystalline fog of exhaled breath and the melted impression of lips.

Such a thing of beauty you are....

I awaken with a start. The book is still in my hands, the windowpane and its icy rime unblemished. I don't know if it was real or, like the other night, only a dream.

Looking over my shoulder, I gather my things and retreat back to my room, my tail twitching at every sound. I latch the door, and this time, I prepare a second place on the bed next to me.

"Whoever you are, whatever you are... stay with me..." I bite my lower lip deep enough to hurt. "Please?"

I stare at the empty spot in the bed, imagining her there, the silence and my unfocused mind forming whispers at the edge of my hearing. As I close my eyes and nestle the covers to my chin, I swear that I feel something brush my cheek.

Sleep well, beautiful creature.

An invisible force following me, watching me sleep, and even whispering my name.... This should terrify me. It does, and yet it doesn't. I'm afraid, yes, but I cherish this feeling at the same time. I've never felt this way before.

When I awaken, the feeling of having someone near me is welcome. From when I open my eyes at dawn and throughout the rest of the day, I still feel watched, especially when I'm alone. Somehow, I don't seem to mind it. But I need to know... Who is she?

I find myself staring at the Azlanti gem more and more. I daydream about holding it, tracing my fingers on the engraved words, kissing it, and kissing her, whatever she might be. The most vivid daydream involves not me touching the gem, but something from within it seizing me, holding me

tight, snarling in my ear and licking my face. I can almost feel these wished-for sensations. I've never had someone touch me. I've never had someone *want* to touch me.

The gem reflects my face like a black mirror. The longer I stare at it, the more I feel drawn into it. Slowly, my reflection changes: my horns grow larger and more ornate, my tongue longer, and my already-pointed teeth more prominent. I stare transfixed with a blank expression as my reflection smiles, very much independent of my own motion. A third eye, red and glowing, blinks.

I don't have a third eye.

I touch my face, hunting for the changes, but find none. When I look back at the gem, the fiendish augmentations are gone and I see only my face. Whoever she is, she wouldn't call it fiendish. She wouldn't mock me and subject me to the derision I've faced all my life. She would call it beautiful.

Several days later, the masters call us in to make their announcements for the winter solstice holiday. While they continue examining the object in preparation for its binding, we'll be granted a week away from our studies. We're expected to take this time to pray to our nation's infernal masters, but my attention is on another fiend entirely.

For my fellow students, time off is rarely devoted to prayer. The holidays are a fine excuse for revelry and debauchery, as well as their endless posturing and calculating maneuvers for social ranking. They might as well be nobles in the Taldan court plotting the downfall of political rivals. You must say just the right things, you must dress and decorate yourself just so, send certain signals but not others, and you must watch every one of your peers for moments of weakness if you are to enhance your social standing by undermining theirs.

That, of course, explained the letter that I found slipped beneath my door in the afternoon, sealed with the personal symbol of one of the senior students in service to the masters. I'd never so much as spoken to her, and I only recalled that she wore her hair curled and pinned high in a manner that I found attractive. It seemed that someone noticed my work with the masters, despite my propensity to fade into the background.

Draenara,

The masters have taken notice of your abilities, and your success in their eyes puts some of your fellow students to shame by comparison. As they've taken notice of you, so must we likewise desire to be fit in their eyes. Ability begets influence begets social importance. You very much have the first, but not yet the last. Most here are not even aware of your name. They have various nicknames that are beneath you and demean them for the usage thereof.

I'd suggest that you attend a party to be held on the solstice in the center chamber of the third tower at midnight. There will be other events that evening elsewhere, but this one isn't open to the students without an invitation, the process of which I oversee. You lack the social ties or political heritage to warrant an invitation, but your talent overrules your handicap, as well as your bloodline.

I've attached details on the colors and styles of clothing to be worn by those attending, adherence to which is required. Hair, jewelry, and accompaniments are left to your choice.

May Thrune & Chelias Prosper,

Malina Zevarin – first assistant to Master Ambrose

I blink in surprise. My first thoughts are a wild jumble of contradictory emotions running from confusion, to wary cynicism, to hope, to elation.

Unconsciously my tail flits with happiness. I bite my lip and I brush my hair back from my face. Have things turned a corner in my role here?

I'm not one of them. I'm not human. But maybe, just maybe, they will accept me on merit alone, or at least be forced to do so by peers seeking to leverage my talent in a social game that I'd otherwise be left apart from. Just let them no longer make fun of me.

For the next few days, I focus on the impending party, though I still feel the presence in the Azlanti artifact watching me. I think she felt amusement as I had myself measured for a gown and had my hair done, for once having it appear as something other than a sooty mop. For my part, I admit I kissed the mirror several times when I applied my makeup, daydreaming that it

was her.

She was there watching, of course.

The final time I touch the mirror with my lips, when I look at my reflection, the eyes staring back at me are a different color and the mirror image bears a smirk that my face does not.

They do not deserve you....

I brush this off, of course. However, in hindsight, I realize she wasn't trying to say that I was too humble. She was warning me of what was coming.

The night of the solstice, I arrive to the door of the third tower, dressed in my finest and clutching my formal invitation like a precious jewel. Warded to only allow those invited, the door swings open before me, and I step into a gilded carnival of shrinking lilies and velveteen dandies.

I smile and curtsy to the first one to meet my gaze, delighted to finally be a part of such events among my peers.

He frowns.

"Sir?"

He meets my eyes, grimaces, and walks away.

Two more times I introduce myself to another attendee of the party, and two more times I receive a look of distaste or outright disgust.

"You don't belong here."

I turn around to see the source of the voice, holding up my invitation to say, without words, that no, they were wrong, and that I very much did belong there.

Behind me stands Malina Zevarin, the senior apprentice who'd invited me in the first place. She looks radiant in her gossamer blue gown, a veritable jewel to my piece of polished glass.

"But your invitation, I—"

She rolls her eyes and cuts me off. "It wasn't an invitation for the sake of inviting you into social circles in which you don't belong. It wasn't an invitation to usher you into some new state of acceptance."

I blink, unable to respond.

A smug look crosses her face and she shakes her head. Beside her, two of her friends begin laughing.

“Don’t you get it?” Her painted lips curl back derisively. “This was an object lesson. You try to pretty yourself, you try to find a dress that fits—even though you have a *tail*—and you clip-clop up here as if you’re one of us. You aren’t. You don’t belong here, you little hellspawn shit.”

“I suppose that I don’t...”

She laughs, pleased that I’ve provided a moment of light-hearted amusement for her party like a tiefling court-jester. Inside, my heart is breaking as she waves her fingers in my direction dismissively. “Go cry somewhere else or throw yourself out a window. Maybe get drunk on the refreshments; that might be amusing, at least.”

I stand in dejected silence as the three of them prance off, tittering. Through my years here, the other students had mostly ignored me, or at best found brief amusement in my social ineptness. I knew the moves of their game all too well, but it was painfully obvious that I would never be a player.

Tonight, however, I’d tried desperately to fit in; I painted my claws, coiled and pinned my hair. For once in my life, I was happy with what I saw in the mirror. I pirouetted as the delicate fabric of my gown twirled around my slender ankles. It was expensive and fashionable. But now, in the midst of the throng, after the initial laughter at my rejection, it’s as if I’m invisible. No one responds to me at all, not even to mock me further for my pretensions.

I’d tried to be normal. I’d tried to be beautiful. I’d tried to be human, but it was for naught. I might as well have been on the Ethereal Plane, watching the world through a pane of smoked glass. I feel cold, and on the verge of tears.

It’s then that I see her.

She’s stunning. Her luminescent violet eyes pin me in place as the rest of the room ignore us both. She is tall and regal, with flesh carved of ice or blue marble and hair like a raven’s wing. Ram’s horns very much like mine curl back from her skull while a serpent sprouts from the base of her spine, swaying and hissing softly. She is slender, powerful, and graceful, sheathed in transparent silk artfully cut to expose glimpses of thigh and breast. She

carries herself like a savage feline predator from the depths of the Mwangi jungle, and she's looking at me as if I'm her prey. She licks her lips, tasting the air with a flicking forked tongue. As she leans closer to catch my scent, she smiles with a combination of appreciation, lust, and hunger.

No one had ever looked at me with anything but disgust or pity, and certainly not with fierce desire. I'd kneel at her feet in the middle of the crowded room if she would only ask. She doesn't, but she extends a finger and beckons me close. I feel the sight of her as a visceral, physical sensation—like what a rabbit must feel in the moment that a wolf seizes its neck.

Hello.

I tremble and lower my eyes as she approaches. She murmurs approvingly, something between a self-satisfied chuckle and the snarl of a wild beast.

Such a delicate thing, even now demure. But do look up. After all, you called to me. Normally I would have paid you no notice, but look at you. Flesh cannot drown your spark entirely, nor your mind, nor heart, nor need.

I look up into her trio of radiant, serpentine eyes. I'm afraid at first, but she's smiling. Gods bless me, she's smiling at me. Three eyes dance over me approvingly; her tongue wets her lips and she continues to smile. I shake with happiness as she touches my throat with an insubstantial tracing of claws and curls her tantalizing tail about my ankle.

Sit with me. Tell me about yourself.

No one paid us any attention. They didn't see my companion, and if they saw me at all, they gave no indication. With the wine and pesh flowing freely, the tiefling talking to herself in the corner was surely unremarkable. Ironically, at that moment I must have seemed truly a part of their crowd.

I treasure this moment as I give myself to her in words and she murmurs approval and compassion. Most of all, I simply desire to be in her presence. I want to sit at her feet, curled gratefully around her ankles as she strokes me with whispered words of endearment and understanding.

I don't remember leaving the party. I don't remember falling asleep with a smile on my face and her eyes fixed on me, but when I awaken the next morning, I feel her presence there with me.

In the coming days, she's there with me always, stalking my shadow. I can barely comprehend what manner of fiend she is, but she's unlike any I've ever known or studied.

I am different. Just like you. I was rejected. Just like you. I understand you.

Whatever she is, she's the first friend I've ever had.

The next day, I watch as the masters ask a summoned imp about her prison. The red-skinned creature begins to speak, then its eyes go wide and it weeps in terror as it looks behind me. Does it see her there? Desperate to escape, it beats its wings and hurls itself against the barrier of its binding circle again and again, shrieking incoherently until the masters banish it back to the Hells.

I watch it all and smile, privy to a secret the others don't know. I feel special.

We talk again that evening.

"Is that your name? The Multitude?"

It is a title. The Azlanti called me that long before Starfall, as did the Ydersian serpent-folk before them. I have walked Golarion for a very long time, outcast from my own kind, just like you.

She reclines next to me and smiles, her adoring eyes following my lips. She would stroke my hair, but her fingers cannot touch me.

But you, precious one, you should know the sound of my name in Daemonic. I would have you speak it to me. Speak it on a tongue mixed with blood your lessers cannot hope to possess.

I hear it in my mind and it's more beautiful than I'd hoped. It's long and difficult, but it spills from my tongue like honey. I whisper it several times and smile. I sleep well that night, dreaming of her, feeling her next to me. She's still there in the morning; she watched over me as I slept.

I'm happy. I smile as I dress, and I smile even more when I look into the mirror, seeing her there in bed, staring up at me. Before now, I'd simply tie my hair back, spending the barest minimum of time towards my appearance. But now that I know she's watching, I make an effort to look good for her, even if she claims to not care.

My happiness doesn't last long. The next day is hellish.

"Didn't you learn from my lesson the other evening?" Malina Zevarin frowns at me from the doorway to her master's chamber, flanked by two of her friends. Their eyes glance at my hair, the tidier state of my clothes, and the fact that today, for the only time except at her party, I've chosen to wear makeup.

I avoid her question and ignore their withering gazes.

"What's wrong with you?" Malina calls out, following me with the purposeful clack of her shoes echoing the clopping of my hooves. "Don't try to fancy yourself up; don't try to look like something that you aren't. You look like some silly maiden with a crush on a knight."

"You're almost right," I mutter as I brush back the hair from my face. "I'm in love."

A look of disgust passes over her features. "You're a monster. Who in the Nine Hells could ever fall in love with you?" Malina purses her lips and spits on me, following up with a flurry of bitter invectives.

A low, inhuman snarl rises and slowly drowns out the mockery. If she were physically here, she'd protect me. She's enraged beyond conception. When I finally run from them to the safety of my quarters, she follows and consoles me. In my mind, her talons grip my shoulders and hold me close, cradling me even as her serpent-headed tail hisses incoherent vitriol.

You are not human. You should not try to be like them. You are not bound by their morality, nor their poor ideals of beauty. I would take this world of hurt away from you if I could. I would strip this place of its purchase on your soul, its silvery anchor upon your flesh. I would take you up, hold you tight, and cherish you.

I love you.

I sob as she tells me this. Despite my tears, I'm happy. Three words and I am happy.

I would end all this. I would see you transcend this place of suffering and filth, and become as you should be. No longer mortal, stripped of flesh and pain, I would see you sparkle like a falling, screaming star. Oh, but I would catch you as you fell. I would be there waiting for you. I would not let you

plummet. We would meet in the next world watching the stars fall. Together.

I love you.

If only she were here with me in flesh as well as spirit. If only she weren't bound to that artifact.

Let me show you.

That promise lingers on her lips and in my mind, thrilling me to my very core. I have her. I'd give myself completely to her, if only I could. Now in my private moments of selfish intimacy, I'm no longer alone. She's there with me—watching, appreciating, whispering to me and telling me how beautiful I am in my suffering. I imagine my hands are hers. I'm not alone. For once in my life, I'm truly valued and wanted.

Am I a fool? Am I falling into a trap of all-too mortal desires at the hands of something powerful, immortal, and malicious? Perhaps. But feeling as I do now, how I could melt beneath her fingers if only they could touch me; I can't bring myself to care. She's terrible and evil beyond a doubt, but not to me. Never to me. She comforts me and she desires me, something I've never known from humans. They've only ever given me pain. And as fierce as her promises of claw and kiss may be, to be tormented at her hands is to be loved. My heart aches in a profoundly wonderful way.

Her name is on my lips at the end, the sounds so unlike Taldane but ever so fluent on my tongue. My eyes clench tight and she smiles.

Beautiful thing I so desire. I can give you more.

This is what she tells me as I drift to sleep.

The next day is a blur. The other apprentices' barbs and taunts follow me when I walk the halls. I don't give them the satisfaction of reacting. But they still haunt my mind as I retire early to bed. I must be awake at dawn for the ritual.

That night she lets me sleep, but she's there in my dreams. We sit together by a roaring fireplace, and she holds me close.

Your masters will summon me tomorrow. They will seek to bind and control me, just as they have done to you. You can stop them. You can release me. Do this and I will reward you. I will be with you. I will comfort you in

the flesh, my beautiful creature. Do this and the next time that I tell you I love you, I will do so with my teeth.

The world boils around me, flickering with afterimages as I stare at the flames. They shift and shimmer, moving from warm yellows and reds to sickly green, screaming with the voices of everyone who's ever wronged me. The tower shudders, and from all around I hear frantic cries for help, invocations interrupted by bloody gurgles, and then silence. Something terrible and merciless stalks the halls, and I know those footsteps. I know the tail that slithers behind them, the rustle of wings, and the wet smack of lips hungry for flesh and the agony it holds. She stands behind me, her transparent fingers brushing my cheeks like coils of smoke.

It's only a vision.

Bound to the artifact, she cannot interact with the flesh. But how many of my nights have been spent fervently wishing that she could? It's ironic that I so eagerly respond to her in the same way that I have since I was a child to those who abused me. I submit. I bow my head and meekly accept. The humans hurt me with their vicious tricks and petty slights because they think I'm ugly, and that makes them hate me. She'd hurt me as well, perhaps even brutally so, in her own beautiful way. But she'd do it because she thinks I'm beautiful, and because she desires it—desires *me*.

Why does that make me desire it, too? Is this the poisoned promise that all daemonic tomes warn would-be summoners to fear? Or is she simply showing me what I want most, and if so, what does that say about me?

A tear from my cheek falls through her ephemeral fingers, and she tells me to look up. I almost expect to see her standing there before me, but that's not what she shows me. I stifle a cry. My claws sink into the cushions and my tail reflexively stiffens.

You could have this. I would do this for you. I would do so much for you, my treasured, beautiful creature. I would end this world for you if I could. For you, they will die, and they will suffer in their dying. You are better than they. Mortality's shackles were never your choice, and the birth defect of your humanity can be taken away. I would strip you of that curse. I would end this pain for you.

I have been rejected just as you have, because I do not hate your kind. Oh no. I love you so, and my kind cannot comprehend that sin. I would carry your spirit away from judgment if I could, though that is not within my power. But I know where it will fall: among the plummeting damned hurled from the Spire's heights, and I will be there waiting for you, my love. I will meet you there. I will take you, I will drink you, and we will be as one. We will hunt together through the long eons.

The Multitude. I understand her ancient name now.

She butchers and she kills, but she only devours the ones she loves. Those special few, like me. They become part of her. One with her. This is what it means to be loved by a goddess.

I stare at the vision she places before me.

I care nothing for the human blood that soaks the blankets, nor the entrails strung on the walls like glistening, morbid tapestries. I smile up at the painted faces of Malina and the other two senior apprentices. Their bodies are savaged by claws, teeth, and flame; their naked, bruised flesh on display, suspended from the rafters by nooses of their own silken hose.

I would do this for you. I love you. Let me show you.

She whispers into the busy silence of my dreams. She tells me that I'm beautiful. She tells me that she loves me. She kisses my lips, she kisses my cheek and nape of my neck. She tells me once more that she loves me before she bites deep, savoring the taste of my blood like sacramental wine, leaving me horrified and ecstatic at once.

I'm startled out of sleep by the knocking at my door. A cold sweat covers my flesh. My cheeks are flushed and I'm crying. Hurriedly I throw on my robes and dry my eyes. One of the masters has come to collect me for the summoning. As I leave, I stare back at the bed and how empty it seems now. I miss her.

If I do nothing, I may never see her again. I'll live on as a tiefling, burdened by blood and rejection. I'll die alone. Unloved. Unlamented. Unless I smudge one line of wax, disrupt one sprinkle of ashes, salt, or sand. Then so many of them will die, and she will take me and love me in the only way that she can, as only a fiend can. But I know I'll be loved.

An hour later the candles are lit, the circles drawn, and we stand collected. The ritual proceeds. I feel numb until one of the masters turns and notices me, perhaps for the first time, making eye contact with me almost as if I was something other than a servant or a liability. He doesn't frown or turn away. He looks at me and smiles. I smile back as the ritual begins, my right hoof perched with uncertainty near a crucial line of binding sigils. I look at the reflection staring back at me from the gemstone's glossy surface, and then at the oh-so-very different faces of my human masters, and I make my choice.



What do you do if you're in love with a monster?

What else could I do? I did as she asked.

THE BLACK MANTIS

BY TED THOMPSON

“Don’t kill me, please!” the old man begged.

Violins played loudly down the hall, nearly drowning out his pleas. Above the kneeling man stood a fearsome visage in black leather, wearing two sawtooth swords and a helmet shaped like an insect head.

“Get up, Judge. It’s me.” The ominous figure offered his hand to help the old man up from the powder room floor.

“You gave me a start. How did you get in here?” The judge laid his trembling hand in the glove of the daunting warrior.

“I told you not to leave the theater until the show was almost over. It’s going to happen tonight. Your assassin is poised. Don’t give her an opportunity to strike.” The man took off his bug-like helmet, revealing a mask covering his upper face.

“So sure? This is Magpie Manor, not a dive in the Puddles district. The richest of Absalom don’t keep buffoons for guardians, you know.” The old man made an effort to appear more dignified and turned to the mirror.

“They may be rich, but their bodyguards won’t stop her. It’s because they’re rich that your assassin has chosen to kill you here, tonight. Stick to the plan and she won’t succeed. When the show ends, get out of the theater before the actors take their final bow.”

The old man still stared at the mirror, fixated on something. “How do you know it’s a woman?”

“I saw her. It’s unmistakable.” The man put his helmet back on.

“Really? Where? What does she look like?”

The black figure moved to a window. “If I tell you what she looks like, she’ll know she’s been identified.” Without another word, he pushed the

pane open and leapt through the window into the night.

The judge ran to the ledge, but the man was gone. "You better be worth the price they paid you," he muttered.



The opera performance plodded, slowly, dreadfully. Leto would rather have been in court, slamming his hammer down on the trespassing meek—at least that had purpose. This was a bore. Watching his wife's wealthy friends bask in their own self-indulgent limelight made it all the worse.

"Can't they be satisfied with just being rich?" he grumbled to himself as he fidgeted in his chair.

His secret protector was most astute; a cheering crowd, its attention fixed on a theater stage, would be an opportune moment for an assassin to strike.

The curtain fell. Leto stood up with the crowd, in expectation of the curtain call. His wife moved from her seat to the aisle and headed to the stage to be seen cheering her friends. After a few minutes, the curtain rose. On cue, he moved out of his seat and down the row of people, making his way up the aisle to head for the exit doors. From there, he walked down the hall. Even here, the crowd's boisterous cheers could be heard. He hurried to the side door, withdrawing into the more secluded botanical gardens.

There, feeling safe, he stopped and pulled out his pipe. He struck a tindertwig and puffed as he lit the sweet mint tobacco, then took a long draw. Calmed by his favorite smoke, he began to stroll towards a nearby bench.

"Judge Leto?" A woman's voice called from behind.

"Yes?" He responded automatically, forgetting himself. He turned, and before him stood a stunning beauty, her sumptuous red dress accentuating her exquisite curves.

"Why didn't you stay in the theater?" she asked, moving closer. "I had to chase you all the way out here just so I could talk with you." The woman's eyes shone in the scant light of the gardens, her grace captivating Leto.

"I am so sorry, milady. Had I known you had an interest, I would

have..." Leto stopped talking and stared at the woman's face. A veil of red mist surrounded the two as the woman's dress transformed into tight red leather, and she raised two jagged blades from her sides, twisting them in a circular motion. Enraptured by her beguiling performance, Leto could only watch as the blades moved closer. Their vivid patterns comforted him. As they neared the point of hacking him to pieces, Leto felt no more afraid than if he was about to receive a shave. He prepared himself to welcome the blades' touch, but as the swords reached their crescendo, the twirling stopped abruptly. Shock and panic filled the woman's face as she turned a ghastly white. Her mouth quivered for just a moment, and then she let out a horrid scream.

A menacing black shape rose from behind her, taking a fighting position. Terrified, the woman turned to face her attacker. She reached behind her to feel a dagger lodged deep in her back. The judge wanted to run, to scream, but overwhelming vertigo filled him and he could only watch, helpless on the ground, as the two engaged.

"No!" the woman hissed.

"Yes, Maritha Blood. I have come for you." The black figure pulled out a serrated sword of his own.

"Achaekkek told me I would be safe. He said you would not harm me."

"He was wrong," the man said simply. "My reign in Absalom will never end."

The woman dropped one sword and reached for a vial at her belt. In a blur of motion, she thumbed off the stopper and lifted it to her lips. But the man swung, his sawtooth sabre shattering the vial and lopping off three of her fingers.

"You won't escape like that." He tapped his blade mockingly against his palm.

Maritha howled in pain. With reckless rage, she lunged with her remaining sword at her dark assailant. The black assassin caught the blow and drew his second sword, opening her abdomen in one fluid motion.

The woman fell backwards, hitting the ground in a pool of blood.

"You, my dear, are going to die very horribly." The man slammed his

foot on the woman's arm. Leto heard the bones crack like kindling.

Maritha screamed and cried out in agony. "I'm no match for you! What does this prove?"

The man smiled contemptuously. "Precedent."

His form changed, growing ebon and skeletal. The mask pulsated and contorted, adhering to the dark assassin's face, its inhuman eyes moving and mandibles twitching. Maritha's fear turned to horror. The man's jagged swords melded with his body, becoming hooked limbs and claws. The creature lunged at her with a horrid shriek, tearing and ripping. Gore spurted across the paving stones as flesh yielded to savage ferocity, and with a final gurgled scream, Maritha's head tore from her body and rolled to rest before the judge.

The creature continued to slash at its prey in a mad frenzy, finally dragging her ravaged corpse off into the gardens. Leto felt his dizziness lifting and stood up, trying not to look at the gruesome scene or the beautiful head at his feet.

Stepping away, the judge turned and ran back toward the manor. He reached the door, seeing through a frosted window that the crowds had just started to disperse from the theater. He went to grab the door handle when, suddenly, he felt his feet pulled out from underneath him by a powerful force. Howling out in terror, he catapulted backwards, landing violently behind a tall hedgerow. A deep prickly pain shot up his back. Turning to look, he saw the black jagged arm of the large insect, its pointy exterior hooked under his skin. He could barely move.

"Y-you can't do this! Y-you said our mutual friends p-paid you to p-protect me!" Leto stammered in fear.

Clicking mandibles accompanied a hoarse reply. "I took no one's money to protect you, Judge. I just needed you alive to draw her out."

"B-but you got her! Why me?"

The insectoid creature pounced on his victim. "Because He Who Walks in Blood demands it."

The first people to exit the theater heard the sound of wet hacking and ripping. Filled with curiosity, a woman followed the unusual noise. It ceased as she approached. Just beyond a bench, she noticed a pool of blood flowing towards her. Horrified, she stepped out of the way, her shadow's absence revealing something else. The other guests turned their heads as she screamed.

District guards soon arrived to investigate. Their chief inspector was a simple man, dressed in the standard Petal District uniform. He walked the scene taking notes. Witnesses reported what they had seen. One particularly observant man reported seeing a great winged creature flying, while another said he saw a giant praying mantis. Both agreed that whatever it was headed off towards the Precipice Quarter. Satisfied, the inspector tucked his notes away and made arrangements to have the two bodies taken to a mortuary. As the coroner's assistant was filling out the final paperwork, the inspector took a moment to revisit the bodies in the shallow, covered wagon.

Looking first to see if he was being watched, he proceeded to hop inside. Kneeling next to the red-armored woman's torn body, he reached behind her to withdraw the bloodied dagger in her back. He wiped it off and concealed it within his clothes.

"I warned you, my lord Achaekek. No one murders in Absalom under my watch. No one... but me."

GOLARION IS OUR HOME

BY TANITH TYRR

Golarion is our home. The words are as bitter as the ash that chokes my throat. It is too much to hope that there will be survivors. I have seen the smoke rising from up on the mountain, where I was gathering herbs and sacred things before dawn. I have seen the twisting column of dust from the horses of the softskins as they rode away laughing, like a poisonous *sivash'targh* slithering back to its hole.

My village is gone.

The ash stings my eyes as I draw nearer. I do not cry. I am of the People. We may scar our faces to tell the stories of our pride and our shame, but we do not weep.

I want very much to go first to what remains of my father's house, but I must not. The shaman's lodge is still smoldering, and my hands are blistered before I can shift the heavy poles enough to reach the deep chamber below ground. Miraculously, my teacher is still alive—though only just. He coughs; he cannot yet speak. I help him into clean air and make him as comfortable as I can with what herbs and prayers I have to offer. It is not much.

The Farspeaker looks at me strangely. I think he is wondering why I do not slay him in his weakened state and take his place. But there would be little point in such a coup. We were a poor-enough remnant of a tribe before this attack, and now there is no place left that is worth taking. And though I have always done my best to fight as proudly and as savagely as the rest of my people for meat and status, I do not always wish it. I am the shaman's apprentice.

I hurry to my father's house, and there is hope in my heart as I see that part of it at least is still standing. A victory song rises to my lips, but it dies before it can be born: my father is laying in the doorway, the dust beneath

him a dark carpet of red ochre. His head is gone. I wrap my arms around his great chest in an embrace he would never have permitted in life, and I drag him out to rest beneath the sky so that I may enter and search his dwelling. I am not rough with him. No one is watching.

I fear no one is left.

If she is still alive, she will be in here. I squint, willing my eyes to adjust. "Tarag?" I call quietly, then louder. Then I stop. She is here, but she is not alive. Her small hands still clutch at her first bow, no more than a toy. There is blood at her nose and mouth, and automatically I wipe it away and almost start to scold her. Her eyes are open, but she cannot hear me.

I do not know who started this war. I do not know why the softskins hate us. I only know that they must hate us very much. It is true that some of our women are fearsome warriors. But Tarag had not yet grown her tusks. She had seen only five short summers. She will not see more.

I lift her without effort, and the little bow falls away. She is so very small and light in my arms. I close her eyes and gently sing her to sleep, as I have always done when there was no one else to see:

Gol-lar-gyun ha'nathli khun. (Golarion is our home.)

Shakar'va takh sa gar'nga veh, (We, the people of Iron,)

Agakh ftha, ha'vayn nakt shun, (Fight to the death, and beyond death,)

Kha'vath hai nakt sha'khor ha-e. (So that we may be immortal in war.)

It cannot be a long song, for there are others who need tending. I take her out and lay her body beside her grandfather. The task ahead of me is not small, but I do not shrink from it. My arm is strong. I am of the People.

There may be warriors still alive beneath the fire-shattered lodges. I will dig. If any question why I would be weak enough to give others succor, I will say that I was seeking goods and spoils. I will smash them with my blistered hand to show that I have only contempt for pain and weakness. But I will not hit them too hard.

This day has been hard enough for all of us.

None I have uncovered are still living. I keep digging. The moon is high

and many good spears are broken before all of my tribe is brought out and laid down on the dust. My hands are numb; I can no longer feel them. My treacherous heart is also. None still breathe but the Farspeaker and I, and he only just.

The shaman's chamber is dug deep beneath the floor of our lodge, cool and dark for working magic and seeking visions of power. It saved his life, but not his breath. The harsh smoke in his lungs is still fighting him and winning, even against my healing prayers. His back, I think, is broken, and his body is burned. But his eyes are bright and fierce. When I go to put water to his mouth, he grasps my arm with great strength. His words come out in blood and froth, but they come. "This is our land. Our home. The softskins who did this must die."

I look at the dying Farspeaker and at the dead of my tribe. I shake my head hopelessly. I am the shaman's apprentice. I am not a warrior. There is little I can do. But he is insistent.

"In the darkness, as the flames burned above me and the earth pressed me down without breath, I sent my mind forth to a deeper plane and bargained with the Dark Mother for a mighty rite of vengeance. If it is done, I will defeat death itself and bind this broken body to a new life. You must bring me sacred things to wear and to eat." He coughs, wetly and red. "Obey me and be quick, or..." His words trail off without an ending. I think that even he knows his threats are useless now, and unnecessary.

I grunt acknowledgment. "As you say, Farspeaker. *Tovorokh hai*. I am with you." Though we have no word for "ally" that does not also imply craven weakness and submission, the inflection I use means that, today, my fight is the same as his fight. We will fight together.

He nods grimly, accepting this. He has no choice.

I am numb in my chest, and my throat also. Dazed and exhausted, I feel nothing as he begins to recite the list of sacred things I must bring: a ruby stone of great worth—yes, there is one in the tribe's deepest cache, buried beneath the shaman's chamber; the ruddy sap of Akhar's Paintbrush, a rare mountain herb that I have already in my digging basket; and sacred red ochre—the blood of a warrior mixed with the earth. My father died to

protect and sanctify that ground. Even he would not begrudge a handful. All these I can bring. And then he names a thing that takes the numbness in my core away and replaces it with shards of broken glass.

“A child’s heart.” The old shaman looks back at me without flinching. “Before the sun rises. I have not much time left.”

I am no longer in a daze.

I bow my head and speak softly. It is weakness, but I cannot help it. “Farspeaker, our tribe was small. There was only one child in our encampment.”

The shaman’s eyes are deep pools of pain in his burned and scarred face. They must mirror my own. He speaks simply and harshly. “I know.”

And then he waits.

No more needs to be said. We are of the People.

Soon, the stone knife will be in my hand; first, to draw the deep trail of blood tears across my cheeks, and then to do what must be done. And when it is done, our Farspeaker will be dead-but-living, the blood-red gem set deep in his skull and the blood and heart of our tribe inside him to give him strength. He will rise and walk down the mountain to the town of the softskins, and our warriors who are resting now beneath the sky will wake and follow him to vengeance.

I will come too, dancing and singing. And we will kill them, because Golarion is our home.

Gol-lar-gyun ha'nathli khun.
Shakar'va takh sa gar'nga veh,
Agakh ftha, ha'vayn nakt shun
Kha'vath hai nakt sha'khor ha-e.



Sunlight through the trees turned the young girl’s hair to honey and amber as she waved her hands and ran to Jaden, laughing. “Did you kill all the monsters? Did you?”

The armored man slid from his horse carefully; dismounting in full plate mail was still a little new to him. He tried his best to keep his expression solemn, as befitted a sword knight of Iomedae, but couldn't quite hold back a smile. "Hi, Talla-bug." He unsaddled his tall, patient mare, stroking her neck affectionately.

Talla made a face. "I'm not an ugly old bug."

Jaden chuckled. "*Tallafwi* aren't ugly. They're supposed to be the most beautiful creatures in all of Nirmathas." He reached down to pat his little sister's head; the sight of her had always cheered him, even during the hardest times of his training. "That's why you were named after them."

She scowled. "Then how come I've never seen one?"

He took a cloth from the tack line and started rubbing down the horse's roan flanks. They were darkened by sweat and streaked with dust and ash. "Well, they only fly at night. That's past your bedtime, little butterfly. They're rare, too—I've never seen one myself. But they have wings like showers of gold."

Talla joined him in tending to the mare. "If you've never seen one, how do you know their wings are gold? Or that they're even real?"

The young knight smiled. "Because I have faith. Because people I trust say they've seen one. Because I've always liked the stories about them."

She raised an eyebrow. "Which stories?"

The mare shifted, and Jaden clucked his tongue to soothe her. "When I was about your age, the old priest of Aroden told me that a *tallafwi* is born whenever a pure heart breaks from love or grief."

Talla made a face. "I don't like stories with kissing."

Jaden laughed out loud; he couldn't help it. "Any kind of love, Talla-bug. Not just that kind. Don't you love your Fa, and your brother?"

The little girl tossed her grooming cloth down. "Not if you keep talking about silly old butterflies! I want to hear about your first battle! I want to hear about all the monsters you killed!" She scowled, but the firm lines of her small mouth dissolved quickly. "Please, Jaden?"

The young knight sighed, looking more than a little embarrassed. "There's not much to tell. There weren't very many of them, and we had

a Firecaster riding with us. Plus, all of the other knights were a lot more experienced than me. I didn't do very much. I... I helped in a fight. A little." His strokes slowed as he stared off at something far beyond the distant trees.

Talla's eyes widened. "What did you do, Jaden?"

The world was dust and burning. Jaden coughed as he tried to see through the smoke. Chaos was all around him: screams in a harsh, guttural tongue; fire crackling and roaring; the shouts of his companions. The young knight closed his watering eyes and said a prayer, then probed the area ahead with the strength of his newly honed faith. A tingling chill ran up his spine. There. An evil one was there! He moved forward, breathing as shallowly as he could, his longsword held ready.

Colonel Aldana was already engaged with the foe—the biggest orc Jaden had ever seen—expertly blocking its spear thrusts with her shining shield. The brute's back was to the door of a crude shelter that had somehow survived the Firecaster's blast, and it snarled as it lunged at the much smaller woman with vicious ferocity. Jaden charged without hesitation, slashing wildly enough to distract the furious creature. It whirled to face him, and for a moment all Jaden could see was vivid green skin and savage curved tusks. His ears filled with roaring. Then the swordswoman thrust in once, twice, and the thing was on its knees. A wide, flashing arc of her blade decapitated the beast, and it toppled with a heavy thud onto the earth.

The Colonel nodded curtly. "Good job, recruit. You clear this hut. I'll check the perimeter." She saluted and backed into the smoke.

Jaden was breathing hard, but he managed to climb past the still-twitching body of the hulking monster and made his way into the darkness, feeling ahead with his sword. As his eyes adjusted, another green-skinned face appeared. It was much smaller, but close. Too close. Something thin struck his torso, rattling off his chest plate. He thrust his weapon forward, and a horrible, high shriek tore his ears. As quickly as he could, he backed out. Bright red blood stained his blade.

The little girl was tugging at his arm, impatient with his brooding silence. Jaden looked down at her. "I guess I did get one. Just a little one, though."

Her enthusiasm didn't seem to be dampened. "But it was a monster, right? How big was it?"

Jaden shrugged. "Smaller than me. Maybe not much bigger than you." Something about the memory made him uneasy, and he shook his head to clear it. "I need to get back to the Circle. They're doing a ceremony for my knighting tonight, and I have to be prepared."

Talla looked disappointed, but she nodded, taking the horse's reins and leading her into her stall. She waved at her brother's departing back a little forlornly as Jaden walked away, still lost in thought.



"Justice and honor are a heavy burden for the righteous. Therefore, your sword arm must always be strong, and your heart given to courage and great deeds in her name." Colonel Aldana, splendid in formal white and gold, saluted first to Jaden and then to the gathered Circle. "Bid welcome to our newest Knight-Corporal, Jaden Tharn." The applause of sword clashing on shield rose to meet the setting sun.

Jaden swallowed and steadied his gaze on his commander. He had waited a long time for this moment; his heart should have been swelling with pride. But as the Colonel continued, all he could think of was how little he had done to deserve their accolade. "We are Nirmathi; no longer under the rule of devils in Cheliox or the pretenders of Molthune. We are young, but we are free, and as such, the temple of your vigil tonight shall be the forests that we defend. As you walk the near patrol alone, reflect on the Acts of Iomedae and your own actions today on the field of battle. May you ever aspire to Her greatness."

Jaden returned her salute automatically, and the Circle parted to let him through. Behind him they were already lighting the torches, preparing for the watch. If anyone spoke to him or offered congratulations along the way, he did not hear them. He was eager to get away into the solace of his duty.

The turmoil within him did not cease, even as he went through the

calming rituals of removing and carefully polishing each section of his formal armor. Memories of fire and dust, and the choking screams of slaughtered orcs replayed endlessly in his mind. But by the time darkness had fallen, Jaden was ready.

The forest paths were familiar enough that he walked them without thinking. The moon was high and full, and his footing was easy. Rigorous training had honed his instincts, but as he reached out with his physical and spiritual senses, Jaden's thoughts were focused inward.

Iomedae, he prayed silently, I do not know why my heart is troubled, or why I feel so unsure and unworthy. All I have done, I have done in your name and for your glory. Grant me the courage and confidence to be your righteous hand of justice in an unjust world, to punish evildoers, and protect the innocent from harm.

Something utterly cold and alien sent an icy tremor through Jaden's body, and he froze. Revulsion roiled in the pit of his stomach; he'd never felt anything like it. His very soul recoiled from the sensation. Whatever it was, it was unmistakably evil, blasphemous—a terrible insult to the earth and to life itself.

And it was close.

The young knight shuddered. His mind was racing. Alone, unarmored, and only lightly armed, there was little he could do but run back to the village and rouse its defenders. Jaden had no desire to get any closer to the abomination, but he had to see it. Colonel Aldana would need details for the town's protection, and the Forest Marshal would need to know. As silently and as swiftly as a mountain cat, he climbed the nearest tall maple and waited.

"Gol-lar-gyun ha'nathli khun."

The syllables were harsh, but the singer's voice was gentle, resonant and deep. The young knight tensed on his high perch, listening.

*"Shakar'va takh sa gar'nga veh,
Agakh ftha, ha'vayn nakt shun,
Kha'vath hai nakt sha'khor ha-e."*

The tone was sad but strangely lulling, and though he didn't know the

language, it reminded Jaden of the many times he'd sung his baby sister to sleep.

Then he saw them.

Mercilessly illuminated by the bright moon, a procession of deformities shambled, crawled and lurched through the forest on too many or too few limbs. Some were horribly burned, parts of their flesh half-cooked and falling away to expose charred pink meat and bone. Most of their bodies had been crudely hacked apart and reassembled by some mad god's hand. They had once been orcs, but there was no name for the misshapen things they were now. Ahead of them strode one whose limbs were intact, but a glaring red eye smoldered in the center of his skull like a live coal.

Jaden's knuckles were white around the branches he held. He willed himself to unclench his hands before the green wood gave way and sent him tumbling down into the midst of the abominable army. *Iomedae, grant me courage*, he prayed. He waited and held his breath as the grim procession passed beneath him and the funereal song drifted closer.

The last of them was tall and powerfully built, but dressed simply in a single woven garment. This orc had no deformities that Jaden could see, save for two deep, symmetrical slashes that ran down his cheeks like trails of bloody tears. His voice was the source of the guttural dirge. He was singing to the horror in front of him, his eyes fixed on its grotesque features and his face a frozen mask of grief.

Jaden followed his gaze. Sour acid rose in his throat, and he fought hard not to vomit: the hulking corpse belonged to the creature he'd distracted for Colonel Aldana—the one he'd struggled over while it was still warm and twitching—but on the thick stump of neck where its head had been, the upper half of a tiny young body was seamed wetly. It turned and lifted its little arms, reaching out plaintively to the singer through the dappled shadows.

Wings like bright showers of gold fluttered between them, alighting on the vocalist's broad shoulder and then on the little body's long, fine hair. The butterfly's shimmering light illuminated the small face, and in its pale radiance Jaden recognized the true source of his horror. He saw her clearly

now, the monster he'd killed. The small orc he'd run his sword through had been just a little girl.

The singer halted and reached out to the child, but the giant orc's muscular body marched dumbly on to carry her away. Above them, the golden butterfly rose and circled, and then disappeared as the procession was lost among the trees.

Jaden fought to stifle the small choked sounds that issued from his knotted throat. *Oh Goddess, it looked like Talla. It could have been Talla. And now she's.... What have I done?* He swallowed hard and shook his head. *No. It was a monster, only a monster. It must be, no matter what it looked like.*

With desperation honing his spiritual senses, the young knight reached out to find the evil that had to be in all of these creatures, large or small; abominations and enemies of the people of Golarion. He needed that reassurance more than he could ever remember needing anything in his life.

He began his prayer, focusing on the path of the shambling army, when a thought came unbidden to his mind: *the tallafwi....* A sudden resurgence of memory, as keen and sharp as a knife to the heart, pierced his concentration.

"Hello, youngster."

Jaden's nine-year-old heart beat faster as he turned to see an elderly priest in elaborate robes. "Hello," he whispered, jumping down from the cracked stone altar a little shamefaced. "I didn't... I wasn't... I mean, I'm sorry. I didn't know this place belonged to anybody."

The priest's hair was white and wild beneath an imposing high helmet, but his voice was calm and merry. "And so it doesn't. Aroden no longer lives in this world, except as a memory that some of us still think is worth preserving—in stories, if nothing else. Do you like stories?" Cautiously, Jaden nodded.

The priest smiled. "Someday, the God of Humanity may return and ask us to restore His temple. Until then, there are stories to tell. Come and sit down if you want to hear them."

Jaden did. Even the scolding he got for getting home late didn't keep him from coming back the next day, and the next. The tales Father Keren told about the lost kingdom of Azlant, and Iomedae and the Starstone were

exciting, but the one Jaden remembered best was the legend of the tallafwi and their wings of gold.

He had looked at the priest wistfully. "Have you ever seen one?"

Father Keren nodded. "Oh, yes. I've seen one." He was still for a long moment, then wiped his hand quickly over his eyes. "It was indeed beautiful. At that moment, it was the most beautiful thing left in this world for me."

"Do you think I might ever see one? Or maybe even... get to touch one?"

The priest sighed deeply. "If your heart is pure, then perhaps. Perhaps. The tallafwi will not abide you otherwise. They are born when a pure heart breaks. Some say they are the spiritual essence of love itself, released from a broken soul that can no longer bear that burden." His voice had become oddly rough, and he coughed to clear his throat.

Jaden nodded solemnly, impressed. "I'll try to be good. Then, maybe, I'll get to see one someday."

Father Keren smiled at the boy with only a little sadness left in his eyes. "Be careful what you wish for."

The sound of a branch splintering and the pain in his half-numbed hands broke Jaden's reverie. Horrified pangs of conscience surged forth like the bile building in his stomach. The *tallafwi* had been there. He had seen it.

Jaden tried again to sense the mind and motive of the singer. Icy fingers gripped at his heart as his seeking touched the dark power that held the mutilated corpses to their horrible unlife. Steeling himself, he persisted, reaching further, trying to single out the chanting orc. He had to know.

Father Keren's sad ghost whispered once more in his mind: *Be careful what you wish for*. Lost in concentration, Jaden wasn't even conscious of losing his grip, or of the long fall to the forest floor. When he opened his eyes again, the singer was there.

Jaden froze, his eyes darting through the area for the crawling abominations, but there was no one else. He gripped his chest and tried to rise, but pain lanced through his legs, and they would not support him. The singer watched impassively, his stern and homely face expressionless, save for the blood tears that wept deep runnels down his cheeks.

Jaden looked up at him directly, and swallowed. He tasted blood.

“You—oh, Goddess, I’m so very sorry for what I’ve done. I didn’t know. None of us knew! But, the village.... You can’t let them—there are children there! Talla!” A painful cough wracked his body, cutting his supplication short. The orc picked up a large stone and moved towards him with calm purpose. “No! You can’t! You’re not evil!” Jaden cried. He struggled to get up, to reach his fallen sword, but there was no time. The orc was upon him.

Their gazes met and locked. The young knight saw nothing of anger or hatred in the darkness of his assailant’s eyes, only deep sadness mastered by iron determination. The orc spoke quietly as he raised the stone high. *“Hagai vakh, sa varg ta’veh. Gorak nagrath’targh. Tarag hai.”*

Jaden didn’t know the savage tongue, but he’d reached deeply enough into the singer’s heart to hear a distant echo of the words in his mind. *“I regret the necessity, but you will kill no more of us. It is Gorak who sends you to join your ancestors. For Tarag.”*

Jaden closed his eyes, thinking of his sister, and the bright beauty of the *tallafwi*, and how much more there was to the priest’s story than he’d ever understood before.

Then the stone came crashing down, and there were no more thoughts left for Jaden at all.

The shaman’s apprentice sighed deeply and turned away, moving down the path to rejoin his dead-and-walking tribe. The sleeping softskin village was just below. Golden wings glinted in the moonlight overhead as Gorak once more began to sing:

*Gol-lar-gyun ha’nathli khun,
Shakar’va takh sa gar’nga veh,
Agakh ftha, ha’vayn nakt shun,
Kha’vath hai nakt sha’khor ha-e.*

THE WITCH'S TASK

BY ROBERT GRESHAM



green-orange glow tinted the morning fog as Daric tightened the scarf around his nose and mouth, then prodded the rancid mud with his ten-foot-pole, sifting through the garbage that washed up from the Kingfisher River. The breeze carried the foul odor of burning trash, and up river, half-a-dozen barges worked to clear the flotsam coating the dull-gray waters.

No wonder this place is called the Filth, he thought.

Hundreds of birds screeched and swarmed through the sky, periodically diving to the shore, snatching a chunk of rotted food, and soaring back into the air. A handful of them landed nearby and squawked as the boy exposed a decaying fish, yet as he flicked the carcass to them, he hit something solid with the tip of his pole.

At last!

Daric rushed forward to inspect his find, but frowned as he turned over a squashed metal wine goblet. It was coated in muck and felt cold to his touch. He sighed, then shook off most of the sludge and placed the cup in his sack.

A small blond-haired figure bounded over the rubbish piles toward him. He recognized the younger boy from his hop-like trot. It reminded him of a rabbit.

“You’re late, Rallo,” Daric called, pulling the scarf off his face as the boy arrived, smiling and out of breath.

“I know... I was busy... getting us a better job. Find anything?” Rallo pointed at the sack.

Daric held out the squashed goblet. “Not really. This might be worth

something though. It feels like ice. Could be from one of the old temples.”

Rallo wrinkled his nose. “Looks like I showed up right on time.”

Daric took the younger boy’s hand and they left the muddy beach, climbing onto the slick wooden boardwalk that lined the upper shores of the Kingfisher and connected it to Carrion Hill. Rallo pulled him along down the cramped roads, weaving past tanning vats, fish-cleaning stalls, and wagons heaped with goods, until they arrived at one of the town’s more sinister houses.

“Oza Manson’s?” Daric stopped and eyed the small structure suspiciously.

The steep gabled roof and narrow frame made it look like the fang of a giant beast jutting out of the earth. Sun-bleached paint peeled from bone-dry wooden planks, and the absence of windows gave Daric an unsettled feeling as the black door gaped back at them—the house-tooth’s single, giant cavity. Dead brambles, their skeletal arms still bristling with thorns, formed a tangled front hedge leading up to the porch.

“Relax,” Rallo chuckled as he bounded ahead to the entrance, “she’s not a real witch.”

The blond boy knocked hard as Daric joined him, causing the dark door to swing inward, and together they peered across the threshold into the dimness.

“Hello?” Rallo called, pushing the door fully open. He waited a few moments, then shrugged and walked inside. “I was just here and she was home. She can’t have gone far.”

Daric looked over his shoulder to the street then slowly followed.

The interior of the residence looked like an alchemist’s shop: the aroma of burning sage assailed his nostrils; a multitude of bubbling beakers and whistling tubes created an eerie, ghost-like melody; and jars filled with various colored powders lined rickety shelves, each labeled in a spidery script. Daric felt a chill sweat forming at his temples, but Rallo—carefree and whistling—began snooping through the shelves. He picked up one of the jars, holding it out to his older friend.

“What’s it say?”

“*Ibn-Ghazi*’ Sounds like something from the eastern deserts. Possibly Qadiran.”

Rallo uncapped the jar and took a big whiff. His face screwed into a comical scowl. “Well, it smells awful,” he coughed, re-corking the vessel and putting it back on the rough wood shelf.

“That’s because it reveals the true nature of *Awful Things*,” a woman’s voice snapped, causing them both to jump.

A bent figure emerged from a shadowy corner on the far side of the room, much further away than the voice had sounded to Daric. It lurched forward with a limp toward a wooden table with an open book on top. The glowing scarlet symbols on the pages seemed alive, twisting and curling around each other and illuminating their aged host’s face.

Oza Manson closed the tome with a hard thump. A warped rune on its cover pulsed once and made Daric’s stomach turn, though he didn’t quite know why.

“I told you I’d come back with my friend, so here we are,” Rallo interjected, moving forward toward the old woman and gesturing at Daric.

Oza stared up and clicked her tongue; the sound cracked through the room like a whip. A dark shape darted out from beneath the table, rubbing against Daric’s leg. A black cat with sun-colored eyes purred up at him. He reached down to stroke it, but the animal bared its broken yellow teeth in a hiss and rushed away into the shadows.

“You’re not afraid of swamps, are you, boys?” Oza eyed them up and down, and Daric’s skin began to crawl.

“No, ma’am,” Rallo answered for the pair. “We hunt for snakes there all the time.”

Daric shot him an alarmed glare.

“Good.” The bent woman picked up a large jar from the table. “Take this and fill it to the top with carrion roaches. They live in the Wrythe, feasting on the death of the swamp. My feet are too twisted to make the journey myself. When you’re done, return here and I’ll give each of you fifty gold pieces. If you’re gone more than two days, I’ll only pay you half.” She licked her cracking lips and offered the glass vessel forward with her

gnarled hands. “Do we have a deal?”

Daric looked at Rallo and they both nodded. It was more money than he had ever possessed at one time, and he was sure the same went for the younger boy. Oza grinned crookedly and handed him the jar, then shuffled them both out the front door.

“Fifty gold *each*. Can you believe it?!” Rallo gasped once they were down the road again.

“Actually, no, I can’t.” Daric looked over the glass container. “This jar’s not very big, and that’s an awful lot of coin. She could probably pay Kalor the Ratcatcher a quarter of that amount and be done with it. Why pay us?”

Rallo whistled and shook his head. “I dunno. But I’ve worked for her before, clearing out rats from her basement. Ol’ Kalor’s too chicken to step foot in her place.”

“Maybe he’s a bad example...”

Rallo’s brow furrowed. “An’ why shouldn’t she pay us, Daric! The adults in town shun her and think she’s evil because she’s uncomely. It’s cruel!” He turned away and kicked a rock, watching it bounce down the street into the muck. “If you ask me, they’re the evil ones.”

Daric was silent for a while. Aside from his fearlessness, Rallo’s compassion and kindness for others was one of the main traits that drew him to the younger boy. He felt like a heel.

“The Wrythe, though?” he finally asked, cradling the jar in one arm and laying a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “That marsh is huge and it smells worse than the Filth.”

“For fifty gold, I don’t care *what* it smells like!” Rallo laughed.



By the time they had changed into more rugged attire, gathered their gear and set off, Daric had hoped the fog would’ve cleared. But, after traveling from town into the Wrythe for several hours, the cold morning mists still hadn’t broken, making passage through the fetid swamps slow and difficult. Insects chirped and rattled constantly as the boys slogged through the

wet ground looking for their prey.

The cockroaches proved easy to find, once they knew where to look. As Rallo hopped along ahead, Daric managed to stumble over a water-soaked log, and found the creatures swarming inside the rotting wood. The pair eagerly began to gather them up, but once in the jar, a new problem arose: the bugs began fighting and cannibalizing each other. Put in three, and soon there would be only one. It was only when the roaches were full that they became docile enough to add more. Undeterred, the boys sloshed through the water, determined to complete the witch's task.

"We're going to be at this all night," Rallo complained. "With them eating each other, it's like we're collecting ten jars worth of roaches instead of just one. And the inside of this jar smells worse than this whole swamp! I bet that's where it gets its stench: from these critters." He shook the jar with annoyance, only to rouse two cockroaches into combat.

"Let's find another water-logged tree," Daric suggested. "They seem to like—" He froze as something swam against his leg.

"What is it?" Rallo bounded over, pulling out a small tarnished dagger. "You okay?"

Daric tried to respond, but the words choked his throat like an icy claw. Rallo began looking around in all directions, ready to swing his little blade at the slightest sign of a threat.

Almost a minute passed before the blood returned to Daric's face and his heart slowed enough to permit him to speak. "I don't know. Something touched me."

Rallo tucked the small knife into his belt. "It's probably just a snake; nothing to worry about."

Easy for you to say, Daric thought. I hate snakes.



By dusk, the jar was almost full, but it was clear to Daric that they would need to make camp, as the light was failing and the cold fog was rolling in again. The prospect made him nervous, but they were so close to their goal

that it was worth the discomfort.

The two boys scouted out a flat mossy island in one of the shallower sections of swamp, hoping to stay mostly dry for the evening. They tried for an hour to make a fire before giving up and huddling together, wrapping their blankets around them.

The swamp insects grew louder over the night, sounding like the high-pitched screams of someone in peril. It made it difficult to sleep, but somehow they both managed to drift off.

And then Daric started dreaming.

He was back in Oza Manson's house, but it was as if his body wasn't there. Oza was seated at the wooden table, her crimson-lettered book open before her. She cackled in manic glee as she read the strange, twisting symbols, and her black cat mewed along. As the dream continued, Daric saw the letters coalesce into a single, monstrous form. The blood-red thing seemed alive, its multiple tentacles undulating as if ready to spill forth off the page. It reared up and roared, looking right at him and sniffing the air to memorize Daric's scent. He could feel its hate, and he knew it wanted to harm him.

Daric awoke with a start. Shaking his head, he tried to banish the dream, but it wouldn't leave. Looking around, he saw that numerous sickly green frogs had hopped up onto the island to sleep. They croaked in low, deep tones as Rallo snored nearby. *At least he isn't having any nightmares,* Daric thought.

His stomach grumbling, the older boy opened his pack to retrieve some hard bread, and noticed a dull glow emanating from within. He fished around and pulled his burlap foraging sack out from the bottom. Inside, the flattened iron goblet he'd found shone pale and blue. The mud had all dried and flaked off, and it felt like ice against his fingers. Daric dropped it as soon as he felt the chill. Stuffing the sack back down, he plucked out the bread chunk and closed his pack, then ate while the dawn broke and his friend snored away.

After Rallo woke and ate breakfast, the two boys set off, sloshing through the swamp again, back towards town. Many of the carrion roaches still seemed sated from their cannibal feasting the night before, and it wasn't long before Daric and his young friend had turned over enough logs full of the stinking beetles to meet their objective.

As Rallo placed the final insect in the jar, he smiled full of triumph. "We did it! Fifty gold apiece!" He handed the jar over to Daric.

"Don't spend it all yet," Daric laughed, swinging his pack in front of him and tucking the jar inside. "We still have to get these back to the witch. She hasn't paid us yet, you know."

"I told you, she's not a witch." Rallo frowned. Then suddenly his expression dropped, a confused look crossing his face. He opened his mouth to speak, but was yanked violently backward and down beneath the water.

"Rallo!"

Daric rushed forward just as the blond boy's head broke the surface. Rallo screamed, grabbing at something around his throat, but there was nothing there—he was wrestling with thin air. He thrashed in the water, gurgling and clawing for purchase, trying to break free, but was pulled down again. Then the water went still, and scarlet liquid began to pool.

Panic seized Daric's chest and he turned, fleeing as fast as his legs and the swamp would allow. Behind him he thought he heard splashing, as if something large was in pursuit, but he didn't dare turn to look.

He just ran.

He was on the sodden boardwalks of Carrion Hill before his senses returned. He rushed through the winding street up to Oza Manson's fang-shaped hovel and threw open the door.

"Witch!" he screamed without thinking.

No response came.

On top of the table, the large cryptic book was open, and two clay dolls that looked like Rallo and himself sat next to it. Daric shook his head in disbelief and stepped inside, kicking something soft and wet.

Looking down he saw Oza—or what was left of her. Her body had been split open, almost like something large had burst out from the inside. He

gagged hard and started to back out, but a scraping sound from the front yard drove him deeper into the house. Whirling, he saw nothing through the open threshold except the bright light of morning.

But then a creak pierced the air like a scream. The porch began to bow downward as if under heavy weight, and the peeling white wood splintered. The doorway burst inward and jar-covered shelves launched toward him. Daric fell against the table, knocking it over and spilling the book and clay figures onto the floor. He slipped on a cluster of smaller jars that had rolled over, crashing to his back. The contents of his open pack spilled around him.

The floorboards began breaking as the massive, invisible thing approached. Daric hurled the jar of roaches, smashing it in mid-air against *nothing*. He began throwing broken wood and other jars to the same effect. A foul odor filled the air, and Daric could feel his stomach rebelling.

His hand curled around another jar, and he brought it up in desperation. "*Ibn-Ghazi*," the label read. He hurled it forward and it exploded against the thing, revealing its true form.

It was the tentacled horror from his dream.

Multiple, translucent, snake-like arms filled with pulsing red arteries covered its hairless, oily body. A long, malformed human face, with a ropy tongue, and rows of needle-like teeth, sprouted from an elongated, rubbery neck. It was easily the size of a large horse, and it screamed in a vibrating, resonant voice as its quasi-human face screwed into a hate-filled scowl.

"*YOG-SOT-HOT!*"

Several spilled jars shuddered against the floor and broke from the tremors. Thick, jointless stumps that served as its legs propelled the nightmare forward into the room.

Daric backed away, but the creature was fast. Its multiple tentacles cut through the air with an audible hum. One smashed down on the table, rending it in two, and showering splinters throughout the room. Another slapped down at the boy. Daric spread his legs just as the appendage crashed down, avoiding the strike.

The monstrous thing howled in anger and opened its maw impossibly wide. A stench like spoiled milk and rotting flowers spewed forth. Staring

into the black abyss of its throat, Daric could see a vaguely human face. It was Rallo. Expressions of sadness, pain, and hate washed across his features, but his lifeless eyes rolled in their sockets independently, seeing nothing.

Daric felt hot tears streaming down his cheeks as his body started to shake uncontrollably. He reached behind him, blindly searching the floor for anything to rescue him. His scrambling hands found something flat and metallic: the cold, glowing goblet he'd discovered in the Filth. He swung it up—now shining bright blue—just as the thing's fang-filled mouth came down.

The cup cut through its jaw like a hot knife through butter.

The pulsing behemoth recoiled, screaming in pain, and bolted out of the house.

Daric let out a held breath and waited for his frantic heartbeat to slow. He brought the smashed goblet up to his face. It still glowed with azure light, but the aura was starting to dim. As it faded, Daric saw the unmistakable tankard symbol of the God of Merriment.


"Thank you, Cayden Cailean," he whispered, putting the goblet away. Hoping to learn about Oza's monster, should he need to defend himself if it returned, he scooped up her strange book and the clay figures, tucking them into his pack.

A low wowl of protest issued from under an overturned chair.

The black cat slinked out, glaring at him with its yellow eyes and circling its former master's remains. Daric shuddered. "Don't look at me like that; I didn't do it." A little smirk crossed his lips. "But I guess in the end, poor Rallo was still right. She really wasn't a witch, was she?" Then he shouldered his bag and ran out the back of the house.

SANGPOTSHI, THE RIVER

BY DAVID SCOTT

s Hskoro looked out over the canopies of the Sikhyeu Rainforest, he felt his neck loosen. A sense of ease ran through him as he closed his golden eyes and let the scent of rain waft through the slits on his scaly face. The monsoon season was quickly approaching. Soon, the western winds would start their patrol across the continent, bulging, dark storm clouds marching ahead like an advancing army. When he was younger, Hskoro thought they carried the whole ocean with them. The rains would burst forth and the torrents would sweep past, howling at the mouth of the caves as he and his small family cowered. When the rains tapered enough, they'd huddle for warmth, their bellies rumbling, while father scrounged for fish. He said he could pluck them right from the trees. When Hskoro asked how this was possible, his father replied, "The Serpent's Kiss isn't always bitter."

When he was grown, Hskoro left the rainforest and moved to a more temperate climate, earning his living providing a place of safety and repose for his patrons, even if only through a meal and bottle of wine. He took a great risk with this property, but he was reminded why he did every time he saw the billowing, heavy clouds approaching from across the deep green canopy. He needed to remember where his life began, under the angry storms of the rainforest.

He ached for just a few more moments of inner peace, but a *thud* and the clatter of dishes brought him back to the present.

Hskoro hissed, narrowing his ophidian eyes and tasting the air with his forked tongue. Phung Hao was drunk again. The serving girl, Hskoro's daughter, hurried toward the bar carrying an empty jug and a tray covered

with ceramic cups. He turned to her as she set it down. “Can you do anything to make sure he stays calm, Hskori?”

His daughter’s large amber eyes darted over their troublesome patron, assessing his state. Her green-scaled skin started to take a reddish hue as she shifted uneasily.

“I don’t know. Maybe you should just ask him to leave. Nicely.”

Hskoro drew closer, lowering his voice. “I’ll remind you of the last time he was angered when deep into his wine. I barely escaped with my life!”

“You weren’t even scratched, father. As far as any of us can tell, Phung Hao hasn’t ever hurt anyone. Even during one of his... tantrums.”

“He threw a bench through my wall the last time I spoke to him. Does that sound like just a ‘tantrum’ to you? And don’t forget the mess he made when he offended the Bamboo Tempest Clan!”

Hskori laid her hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him. “Certainly that was only in self-defense. You know the Tempests start fights at any—”

Their most unruly customer slammed an open palm onto his table, slurring something that sounded like “*more*.” Hskori looked to her father, who nodded reluctantly. Hskoro repeated his mantra as his daughter walked away.

A place of safety and repose.... A place of safety and repose....

His daughter collected a fresh potable and made her way over to Phung Hao’s table, trying her best to appear content to serve.



His order couldn’t have been clearer, but the dim, scaleborn child looked at him like he was speaking Draconic. Phung Hao repeated himself, spending no effort to hide his irritation.

“More stew. More wine.”

The response he received was muddied. Phung Hao looked to the pallid man beside him for help, but Jung Fai had little to offer.

Follow the River....

Luong Jung Fai often spoke of a river, flowing through all time,

cascading over a high waterfall, turning into mist, then rising again and circling back to new life at the river's beginning. The River of Sangpotshi. Fate, destiny, reincarnation—all things were floating in the River and the River was floating in all things. The events of life and death were but eddies in the current, bends in the River, and should not be viewed with too much happiness or sorrow, for they are part of its natural course.

The philosophy of Sangpotshi was more than belabored by his grandfather. Phung Hao couldn't understand how resignation to fate could be a path of wisdom, but he weathered the lessons as best he could throughout the years. Much to Phung Hao's surprise, his grandfather's lessons continued long after the man's death.

Follow the River....

The pallid man opened his mouth as if speaking, but Phung Hao only felt his skull ringing like a struck bell. His head throbbed as waves crashed between his ears. He felt words form there, as if carved from his own mind.

More ghosts joined the conversation.

To Phung Hao's left sat a plump, middle-aged man, as sallow and discolored as Jung Fai. The surging sound increased.

Honor the Dragons....

Luong Huu Tai smiled at his nephew, sure the message was received.

Phung Hao was thankful for the distraction when his noodles arrived. The steam from the bowl filled his head and pushed aside thoughts of rivers and ghosts. The smell of carp tightened his stomach and drenched his mouth.

Luong Bach Yen, wife of Jung Fai and grandmother of Phung Hao, simply stared at her grandson. She always seated herself across the table, with her nose tilted high and her face like stone. He'd spent many summers attempting to learn calligraphy under those haughty eyes, and her critiques on his penmanship had been sharp as a lash. Even now, the piercing tones of her spirit song could draw blood. Her grandson made every effort to drown its wail in wine.

Others came and went, but it was these three that Phung Hao saw most regularly—the ones he most often needed to escape. He began grumbling

at the ghosts of his ancestors, as he always did whenever they refused to let him drink in peace.

“Who are you speaking to?”

Phung Hao’s bleary eyes wandered up from his meal and found the dumpy form that addressed him. After focusing a moment, the figure settled into the shape of a grimy old man wearing rags not fit for a peasant. For all his days in this wine house, Phung Hao had never seen such a poor specimen. What was worse, the old man’s voice was shrill enough to penetrate the fog of wine that Phung Hao was so ardently trying to deepen.

“Ah, there *is* a man hiding behind that hair!” The filthy man peered down with a ridiculous grin. “How are you this fine evening, Tian-Dan? You are of Tian-Dan origin, are you not? May I ask your name, good man?”

Phung Hao grunted and his nostrils flared.

“So sorry, I didn’t quite hear you. What... is... your... name?”

“Phung Hao.”

“And what family are you from, Phung Hao?”

The man was like a gnat in his ear. Phung Hao swatted at the air. “Who are you to question me, peasant?”

The old man sucked air into his dusty lungs and bowed deeply. “Forgive me, master, I mean no disrespect. My name is Lao Hun Jhun. I simply wish to know if you are the man I believe you are. I must be certain. May I ask again, humbly, the name of the house that bore you?”

Phung Hao leaned back in his chair and leveled his shoulders. “I am Luong Phung Hao, born under the sign of the Ogre in Ngon Hoa.” His voice still carried pride when he spoke his full name, though this was the first time he had to hide the current of shame that came with it.

Across the room, the serving girl’s eyes went wide as she shot a scared look towards her father. Her skin was flushed a brightening orange.

“Did he say ‘Luong?’” the proprietor hissed, loud enough for all to hear. “By Nalinivati, we have royalty among us!” He shoved his daughter back towards Phung Hao’s table. “Give him more wine! Give him anything he wants. Now!”

The nagaji girl wordlessly brought a full jug of wine and another cup to

the table. For the first time since she'd served him, she bowed to Phung Hao before she walked away. He made no acknowledgment.

The man in rags smiled when Phung Hao confirmed his lineage and beamed even further when the wine was put before them. He filled Phung Hao's cup, then one for himself, and placed both on fresh saucers brought by the nagaji girl. The vagrant brushed a cloud of dirt from his beard with a grin, but the joy vanished quickly when Phung Hao placed both saucers and the remaining wine next to his stew.

"No disrespect, but you should be careful, master. Wine is ever a villain when it comes to making men... more ignoble than they are..." Phung Hao drained his cup deftly, "and I've heard the stories about what you do when you are..."

Phung Hao glared again, wiping a trail of wine from his chin. He felt a pang as his shoulder tensed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his grandfather regard this ugly man with an odd look. "When I am?... what?"

The stranger hesitated.

Phung Hao emptied the second cup. "When I am ignoble?"

"Again, no disrespect."

"What do you want?"

Hun Jhun lowered his voice. "I've been asked to give you something, Phung Hao."

The nobleman's face darkened. "I have not given you permission to speak my given name."

Old hands clapped together and old eyes fell in shame. "Forgive me! I-I am unused to speaking in such high company."

"Enough platitudes. I don't want your apologies," Phung Hao sneered, "and I don't need *anything* from a peasant like you."

"Oh, but it's not from me. It's from your sister."

Her face formed from the river of wine Phung Hao swam in. Luong Xuan Linh, his little sister... Her piercing red eyes, always searching for the next challenger. The streak of crimson in her top-knot. Phung Hao heard her laughter, both warm and confident.

"Li-Li?"

Hun Jhun tilted his head. “Yes, Luong Xuan Linh. She wanted me—”
“WHERE IS SHE!?”

The barmaid gasped and the fresh jar of wine slipped from her hands. The liquid exploded in all directions, carrying ceramic shards with it. It steamed on the floor while the proprietor rushed forth and hissed curses at his daughter in one tongue, while gushing his sincerest apologies in another.

Phung Hao’s ancestors were unmoved.

The man in rags stammered. “S-she lives with your parents, still. I-if you will just take this, I can leave—”

Cups clattered, and a helping of carp stew sloshed onto the table as Phung Hao slammed his arm between them, palm up. “Give it, then!”

Hun Jhun, weeping, dropped a small, rectangular box onto the table, then stood hastily and fled.

Though Phung Hao’s ethereal companions had been silent through the exchange, they regarded the package intently. The wrapped item was less than two hands long, but had a certain heaviness about it. Phung Hao turned it over, trying to grip the paper. His fingers were sluggish and clumsy in his wine-induced stupor. His pulse quickened as his patience declined. He tugged at the twine and tried tearing the packaging, all the while making himself more frustrated.

Huu Tai’s spirit placed a plump hand on his shoulder.

Phung Hao felt the torrent take him.

He tore into the bundle like a madman, dashing it against the table and beating it with his fists until it splintered open. Something glinted under the wooden shards, nestled deep in a bed of dried grass. Phung Hao dug it out and held it toward the window for light. He had to squint to make out any details. Storm clouds were rolling in from the west, slowly hiding the sun before its time. Deep, surging thunder reached up into the wine house as it sat high on peak overlooking the rainforest.

When his eyes adjusted, Phung Hao saw the object was a flat, circular kind of silvery plate with a straight handle jutting off one end. After another moment of focus, he could tell that the blur in the center of the plate was actually the detailed engraving of an imperial dragon—a sovereign

dragon—its thin, plated frame coiled around a circular motif: the symbol of the River of Sangpotshi.

Mesmerized by the carving and the warm wine swimming through his head, Phung Hao turned the plate over, expecting another engraving. Instead, he saw not a dragon, but a man, another vagrant from the look of him: his face hadn't seen a shave for weeks, his unkempt hair was streaked with gray and fell over puffy, smoldering eyes. One great, red mound of a nose poked out from behind it all.

And that was when Phung Hao, drunk as he was, realized he was staring into a mirror.

His ancestors wept.



Luong Phung Hao had not begun his path down the River of Sangpotshi with any particular intentions. Like many who flow along the River, his fate seemed chosen for him. When he was young, he began receiving visits from members of his family, even after he saw their bodies burn. He could sense these spirits, even if he couldn't see them. There was a recognition, a change in the current around him when his relations were present.

When the family Luong discovered his talents, it was cause for celebration. Phung Hao had been given a great gift. Most of the Tian people took care to pay homage to their ancestors, and some were even granted tidbits of wisdom through meditation, but to be able to learn *directly* from those who had gone before was a rare treasure indeed. Phung Hao was told he was special, that his ancestors had chosen to speak to him for a reason, and so he lived his life this way, always in honor of his elders, living or dead.

Always.

When he and his siblings were of age, their father, Luong Jung Pai, conscripted them into a unique group. Jung Pai used his extensive military training and resources to hone his children into a powerful force for the dragon emperor's bidding. They became known as the *Kom Ma-Rohng*, the "Claws of the Dragon," and they each swore an oath to use their talents

for anything and everything the dragon emperor required. Phung Hao had proven himself to be an adept seer, a conduit of wisdom and divine might from his ancestors. His younger brother, Phung Trong, was swift and strong, and had become quite an impressive swordsman, though he was always a bit too boastful and eager to prove himself. And the smallest of them all, their little sister, Xuan Linh, channeled the spark behind her red eyes and developed into a gifted sorceress. She hurled fire like she was born with dragon blood.

Phung Hao loved his family and his homeland of Xa Hoi with all his heart, and he served them both capably as an agent of the *Kom Ma-Rohng*, but for the fire to be truly lit in his belly, he first needed to find a pair of silver eyes.

Before they ever met, Phung Hao had seen her in his dreams: gray eyes flecked with purple, and a white streak in her dark, silky hair; moving gracefully among a gathered throng, touching them as she spoke and making them shine like the noon sun. Every time, he would awake with a mingled sense of happiness and longing, never knowing if she was real. On the day Phung Hao finally saw Thuy Do Quyen walking along the street outside the palace gates, he knelt and praised his ancestors, weeping.

Do Quyen was a revered academic, a teacher at the university in Ngong Hoa. Despite their varied stations in life, their blood surged for each other, and they knew they desired marriage as soon as their families would allow.

But the River of Sangpotshi bends in more than one direction.

Do Quyen gave much to the poor and sick: time, clothing, and food, as well as considerable alms. She agreed to tutor children for no charge, even though she was qualified to teach the wealthiest intellectuals in the nation. There was only one flaw, one dark wave in the water that Phung Hao knew could be the end of his love's freedom, or worse: she possessed no love for the dragon emperor. When not making charitable work, Thuy Do Quyen openly preached that humans should be ruled by humans, that the dragons had no right to govern people that weren't their own.

Phung Hao knew the woman he desired had many enemies, but he was utterly unprepared when he learned her body had been found in her

bedchamber, slain with a single stroke. He was told it was an assassination by a lone swordsman, a hired blade who was captured as he fled the grounds. Phung Hao attended the man's hanging.

The family Luong grieved deeply with him, comforted him, and told him that the way of Sangpotshi wasn't always easy, but it was always right.

"Brother, you should remember better than anyone what our revered grandfather always said," Trong reminded him. "Life and death are but bends in the River. Those who struggle against its current will only be drowned by it."

Phung Hao nodded and let himself be comforted, knowing full well that their platitudes wouldn't be enough. The pain of loss took him, and he lost himself in grief. He wandered the streets at night, screaming, fighting, and pleading with his ancestors to bring back his beloved, but they never gave him what he wanted. He was soon locked in a secure room in his family's estate where he could thrash about until he was exhausted without hurting himself or, more importantly, his family's reputation.

Eventually, Phung Hao's anger ebbed. His innards felt like mighty stone, broken and smoothed by Sangpotshi. He reflected on his pain. He felt shame as he recalled fragments of events where his behavior was much less than becoming. Following his own impulses had only led him to ruin, and Phung Hao was ready to let his family, and the *Kom Ma-Rohng*, guide him.

A decade later, their father, Luong Jung Pai, was an old man, and though he was still strong and powerful in his way, he'd turned over control of the *Kom Ma-Rohng* to Trong. In earlier days, Phung Hao would have fought for the position, but he was obedient now. In his shame, he knew his father's judgment was the right one. It brought honor to the family, so he continued, until the last big bend in the River came hurtling toward him.

The *Kom Ma-Rohng* were sent with a small contingent of imperial infantry to dispatch an enemy of the dragon emperor. Someone named Maly Do was stirring discontent in the slums of Ngon Hoa, preaching revolution against "the scaled oppressors," and going so far as to incite riotous behavior among the poor.

As they marched with their foot soldiers towards the square at the

center of the slums, Phung Hao was pleasantly ignorant of everything around him—just following orders, following family. His siblings noticed quite a crowd had gathered. The people's cheers filled the space. As the imperial force moved closer, they could hear the voice of a child.

Phung Trong shouted for the crowd to part. Some acquiesced when they saw Trong's lacquered lamellar armor sporting the dragon's imperial seal. The rest stood aside as the *Kom Ma-Rohng* and their entourage pushed inward. The child kept shouting until Trong halted before her.

"Are you the one called Maly Do?" he asked.

The only response was a quiet nod of affirmation.

Xuan Linh was hesitant. "Brother... does this child look familiar?"

Trong ignored her. His voice was proud, and it carried, unimpeded, over the crowd. It filled the square as it bounced off the rundown slums around them. "Maly Do, you are hereby ordered, under the authority of Dragon Emperor Pham Duc Quan, to cease your rallies, your propagandizing, and your dissent. If you do not, you will be slain."

Li-Li's voice was unusually hollow. "Her eyes..."

Trong made a show of assessing the girl. "Her eyes?"

"Haven't you seen them before?"

Phung Hao looked up, his mind finally returning fully to the present. The child before them.... Her hair was a shocking streak of white against a field of black.

Trong addressed the young revolutionary again. "Now, will you quiet your riotous tongue, or will I have to slice it out of you?"

There was an impossible bravery in the girl's silver eyes. "No dragon has authority over me."

Trong chuckled. "Now I remember you." His weapon slid from its sheath.

Phung Hao's mind burned.

How old is this child, this little thing that we were sent to kill?

She couldn't have been alive any longer than ten years.

And her eyes.... *Her eyes.* Silver with purple flecks... eyes that locked onto his and for just one moment flashed recognition.

The ghosts that haunted Phung Hao all stood, facing this little girl. Luong Huu Tai spoke.

Honor the Dragons....

Phung Trong's blade cut through the air, arcing beautifully....

Luong Jung Fai spoke.

Follow the River....

Maly Do fell back, a diagonal slash of crimson across her middle.

Phung Hao felt the air freeze around him.

Trong flicked blood from his blade and sheathed it.

"Imagine, I got to kill that woman twice," he chuckled. Xuan Linh smiled, but it faded when she saw the look on her eldest brother's face.

In the tongue of the dragons, Trong announced, "The traitor has received what was earned. So flows the River of Sangpotshi."

But for Phung Hao there was no River, only a sea of rage surging through and out of him. His hand burst into black flames. Phung Hao belled as he reached out, igniting his brother with a dark fire that burned him to ash.

The sea crashed in upon Phung Hao again, dousing all thought and sense of self. The crazed oracle, now more monster than man, turned on his sister, then the crowd... then the guards that came to stop him.... He sought furious, wrathful vengeance on every living thing between him and the gate out of the city.

When his mind cleared, he was lying on a dried creek bed in his own wretch and filth. The last minutes—hours?—were so blurred Phung Hao thought he had dreamed them. Until he saw his hands. There was no denying that stain. So he did the only thing his broken spirit could.

Luong Phung Hao, kinslayer, ran until he lost himself again.



All these memories—and more—flooded through Luong Phung Hao's mind, as clearly as if he were living them for the first time. He was filled with all the despair, longing, hopelessness, and horrid shame that he'd been

avoiding for many years, from within and without. He was frozen in place as every experience washed through him again and again.

When he returned to his senses, Phung Hao felt the sting in his eyes and the ache in his belly. He lurched forward, and his stew found its way back onto the sundered table. He pushed his chair back and doubled over with a grimace. When his body stopped retching, a pair of impossibly small, slippered feet came into focus on the floor before him. Phung Hao straightened and stood, revealing, in full, the shock-white image of Thuy Do Quyen. Only the deep, violet flecks in her eyes had any color. She wore a sad, pitiful smile.

“Do Quyen, my love... have you come back to me?”

Phung Hao’s once-beloved floated towards him as if moved by the softest breeze.

“Speak to me, I beg you. Are you here to take me away? May we finally be together?”

The woman’s eyes shone with deep sadness. Her mouth opened. The pain of her spirit song was bittersweet.

“What was my crime? Am I to be shamed in this life and every other because I loved you?”

The roar of the storm outside quieted.

“No...” In the stillness, Do Quyen’s voice was soft as silk. A pale, slender hand reached out for Phung Hao’s cheek. His shoulders trembled at the frigid touch.

“Because you loved me too much.”

The clouds gave up their torrents and the oceans themselves crashed through the roof of the building, gathering everything in the flow. The world collapsed and roiled around Phung Hao as he was torn from his feet and carried away. He was dashed over rocks and hurled into the air, falling, engulfed in the flow of fate, until he crashed into a pool of deep blue and was pulled down into utter darkness.

Phung Hao's bleary face had only been in the mirror a moment before he cried out once, fell to the floor, and never stirred again. It was enough time for Luong Xuan Linh to dart outside and into the wine house's shadow. She wept as she dismissed her illusory disguise. She clutched her middle, trying not to heave onto the grass. Her brother's face was still in her mind, both the young seer she'd grown up with and the broken old man he'd become.

The nagaji girl was shrieking for a priest by the time Xuan Linh got a handle on her emotions, but there would be no saving her brother now; the fearsome phantasm conjured from the mirror had done its work on his fractured mind. Luong Jung Pai's last request—that his eldest son see justice for his crimes—had finally been fulfilled.

Xuan Linh wiped her eyes, brushing her hand over the thick scars Phung Hao had given her in his malice, then straightened her back and puffed out her chest.

"The traitor has received what was earned," she spoke softly in the dragon tongue. "So flows the River of Sangpotshi."

THE FORGOTTEN

BY E. W. PIERCE



he painted wagon rattled down the overgrown path that served for roads in that part of the world, moaning and shambling like a dead thing newly returned to life. Old, weathered ruts traced dark tracks across the frozen earth, deep as the lines on a hag's face. Naked, emaciated trees crowded the trail, skeletal limbs dragging across the wagon's roof and scratching at the faded words written along the sides in gold: *Marten the Magnificent's Traveling Emporium*.

Marten sat hunched under the roof's lip, a lean man wrapped in a thin blanket, the reins limp in his gloved hand. A faded blue scarf snaked out from the neck of his overcoat, wrapping around his ears, nose, and mouth. Long, dark hair streaked with white spilled out from under his top hat, falling into his eyes and brushing his shoulders.

Gods, but it was cold. Cold enough to kill, were a man not cautious. The land of Irrisen wasn't a place to travel lightly, cursed as it was with eternal winter. But one didn't sell useless trinkets and empty cures as long as Marten had without a head chock full of caution. Marten knew the stories and had thought himself prepared, but the unrelentingly vicious cold had taken him by surprise. At least his feet were warm. Baron, his old dog, lay coiled across his boots like a pile of shaggy furs.

The pony trudged on, head bent to the task, breath billowing out in short gusts. The world was still, save the steady stomp of hooves, the crack of ice under wheel, the groan and clatter of the wagon. Inside, vials gently clinked together rhythmically with the echo of empty promise.

He came upon the first homesteads as morning gave way to afternoon. They weren't much to look at: small, windowless mounds sunk partway into

the ground, with rounded roofs of snow and ice, and stone chimneys poking toward the sky like giants' stubby fingers. Tall, gated fences encircled each property. He thought to hail on the first homes, but there was an emptiness about them, a sense of vacancy that he recognized without needing to try the doors. He hoped the houses closer to town bore occupants; otherwise, this was liable to be a wasted trip.

They put dozens of houses behind them before encountering one with signs of life. Smoke curled from the chimney, hanging over the squat structure like a gray cloud. Surrounded by still neighbors, the lone occupied house unnerved him more than all the empty houses together. It felt unnatural, like taking up residence in a cemetery. No ghosts might come for you—Marten was too traveled to put stock in such nonsense—but no good would come either by trying to scrape out a life where man was so obviously unwelcome. Such could be said for all of Irrisen, as far as he'd seen. This was lonely country, harsh and hostile, to say nothing of the rumored curse. Which, of course, Marten did not.

The wagon topped a rise. The land fell away sharply on the other side, revealing a broad, tree-clogged valley shrouded in shifting mist. The road coiled through the gray pines like a great white serpent. A handful of buildings squatted in a clearing at the bottom, puffing at the sky.

Hodjer's Vale.

Marten scratched the dog's head. "We made it, old boy." His voice, misused these long weeks, cracked like shifting ice.

Baron wagged his tail and barked in agreement.

They took the descent slowly. Jingling and clattering, the wagon drew many folks out their doors for a look. He'd called upon towns like this before, tiny places on the edge of the map, the people isolated and unaccustomed to visitors. They'd be quiet and suspicious, most like. Even rude, perhaps, until Marten determined the tune they longed to hear. Then they'd come, friendly as you can believe, and eager to part with coin by the handful.

Marten stood carefully as the wagon rumbled down the hill and smiled with practiced ease. "Hiyo, there. Marten the Magnificent, I be. Magic and wonder be me business. Come one and all, great and small. Have a look

inside me wagon and be astonished!”

They watched him pass in silence, arms folded over their chests, frowning heavily. In truth, this nature of greeting was not unknown to him, but he'd hoped this far north, folk would be unfamiliar with his business, and therefore, appreciative of it. Even the children looked on sullenly. Normally he could count on their babbling excitement and the rush of their little feet pacing him as he made his way into town. There was no question—he'd not be long for Irrisen.

A small boy, no older than six, stood outside a gate as the wagon rolled past. He was dressed in a heavily-patched overcoat. Faded rags encircled his face. His eyes, pale and blue, regarded Marten with something very much like suspicion.

“Whoa.” Marten pulled back on the reins. The pony obliged and the wagon slid to a stop. Ducking into the cramped interior, Marten fumbled around for a moment before returning with a handful of firecrackers. “Ever seen an ear-snapper, boy?”

The boy stood on his tip-toes and eyed the round objects sitting in Marten's hand.

“Behold.” Marten flung a firecracker to the ground. It erupted into an echoing crackle of sound, spitting thin yellow lights a dozen feet into the sky. The boy watched the lights arc back toward the ground and fade away.

“Wonderful, isn't it?” Marten leaned down, his hand outstretched. “Take them. Share with your friends. Go on, it's fine.”

The boy tottered on his feet, rocking mutely. Then his hands darted out, scooping up the firecrackers. Clutching them to his chest, saying nothing, he watched as the cart started forward again.

There were only three buildings in the clearing at the bottom of the incline, and they looked even smaller and less impressive than Marten had first suspected. The largest was the ramshackle stable, looking all the world like a strong wind would tumble it down and carry the flimsy thing away. Beside the stable was a two-story wooden building—the inn, or the nearest thing to it. The hitching posts out front sat empty, and the troughs had frozen over. On the opposite side of the clearing was the last of the meager lot,

a low, windowless building backed by trees. Marten guessed this might be the gathering hall, but from the thick coat of ice covering the double doors, it hadn't been used in quite some time.

He tucked the wagon beside the inn and hopped down as a man of younger years might, for despite the gray in his hair and the wrinkles about his eyes, Marten still fancied himself a young man. The ground was hard, frozen over dozens of times, as a blacksmith folds steel to strengthen a sword. The impact sent sharp spasms up his legs and into his hips, awakening the old pain that lived there. He grasped the wagon and clung to it while the pain worked itself out. Then, his dignity mostly intact, he set about making preparations.

A healthy crowd had gathered by the time Marten emerged from the rear door of his wagon. They watched silently as he introduced the first products, unmoving, scarcely seeming to even blink. An unnatural hush lay about the crowd. Even the children stood as though frozen in place. Their eyes were mirrored glass, reflecting all, and his words a light breeze, blowing past them and not so much as ruffling their hair.

Marten did something, then, that he'd never done before—he tried to goad them.

“This potion will stop a charging bull at fifty paces. And this vial will set you to flying, free as a bird. Look here.” He held up a wood trinket he'd clumsily carved while sitting by the fire one night. It was ill-done and unpainted besides, little better than a child's attempt. “This be a talisman by which you can see your dead kin again. And what of this fierce dagger, I see some of you wondering? Why, it be the fabled hunting knife of King Longfellow of old, the very knife he used to slay Priscilla, She-Bitch of the Frothing Sea, enchanted by Queen Esmerozdal, Fairy of the Faraways, to strike true every time.” In truth, he used the old, pitted knife for cutting meat. The crowd stared and stared, silent as the grave. No grumbles of disbelief, no sighs of wonder. He'd have welcomed a heckler just to get a reaction of some kind.

He stood there for a moment, his tongue good and truly silenced. Having heard him out, the crowd stumbled back toward their homes. Marten watched them go. The boy he'd given the firecrackers looked back

for a moment, then trudged on with the rest.

Marten slammed the wagon's door closed and locked it. There was no sense in lingering here, not with daylight enough yet to see some miles. He hoped all the towns of Irrisen were not like this, or this was doomed to be a long, cold, fruitless, and frustrating trip.

"Excuse me?" A woman's voice questioned, very nearly in his ear.

Marten jumped and snapped his head around to face her. She was young, but not dangerously so. Dark hair cascaded to her waist and framed a face so achingly creamy and unblemished that Marten fought the urge to reach out and touch her skin. She wore a long-sleeved crimson dress with a plunging neckline, showcasing a bright ruby nestled into the hollow of her throat. Her cheeks blossomed like roses and her red lips parted in a smile, revealing perfect teeth. In a world gone cold and white, she was the promise of summer. Blood crept into his cheeks. "Erm... yes?"

"You're not leaving already? You've only just arrived."

"Yes, well. It seems there is a lack of interest in my offerings here."

"Not for all who call Hodjer's Vale home. I find you quite interesting. Unusual, even. This town can be so dull."

Unusual? Was that a compliment? "I should probably be on my way, while there is yet light to see by."

"But the road's so long and the next town far. Stay a night or three." She stepped closer. She smelled like sunshine.

Almost before he realized what he was doing, Marten put a hand around her waist and pulled her against him. She made a low sound like a growl and lunged at his lips, her mouth wet and desperate. He lost himself in her smell and taste. She ground against him, moaning under his mouth. Trembling.

They broke apart, gasping. With a look, she took his hand and led him toward the inn at something quite like a run.

Her name was Michelle, and she was but a torrid memory and a rumpled pile of sheets by the time Marten dragged himself from bed around noon the following day. The water in the basin was cold, of course, but it did wonders to chase the sleep from his eyes. He washed his face, then shaved by the room's tiny mirror.

Stifling a yawn, he took the stairs down to the common room to sate the hunger gnawing at his belly. His body ached as though he'd been in a fight, and in some sense he had, he supposed. Michelle hadn't been shy about showing her affections; his skin stung from the marks her nails had drawn across his back. He'd been grateful when she'd finally dozed off and let him be, and hadn't entirely been sad to find her gone when he awoke. He wasn't the young man he pretended at, and on the days he awoke feeling as he did today, he allowed himself to admit to such heresy.

Breaking his fast on old, dry oatcakes and watery ale, Marten asked the innkeeper about the girl and her whereabouts. Speaking in an emotionless drone, the innkeeper said Michelle was probably still home at her chores. He was noncommittal on the topic of whether she would return, and seemed quite content to ignore Marten. He stood, hunched over a single spot of the bar, endlessly rubbing it with a scrap of cloth.

Marten pushed away from the bar and headed outside, snatching up his overcoat as he went. He'd meant to have a little fun with the innkeeper, but the man's flat eyes and dead demeanor had spoiled that. The townspeople had given him the same blank expressions. Aside from Michelle, everyone in Hodjer's Vale seemed not-quite-there, almost like they were sleeping with their eyes open, which made Michelle's behavior all the more odd. Instincts borne of long years on the road—and many of those on the run—flared. Mayhap it was time to leave.

Baron rushed up to greet him and nudged his hand hard, whining loudly.

"Gods, boy, did I leave you outside all night?" He scratched the dog behind the ears. "Pity you, poor thing. Let's get you something to eat, huh?"

Baron took a few steps back and barked, then turned and raced toward the gate. The wagon sat next to the inn where he'd left it....

Marten cursed. Not only had he forgotten about Baron, he'd left the pony hooked to the harness all the long, cold night. Michelle must be some kind of devil, to make him forget his duties so easily, as though he were a bright-eyed cod on his first trip. He hurried toward the fence.

Exiting through the gate, the dog turned not toward the wagon, but for the stable. Marten hastened his strides, ignoring the pain in his legs. Had the innkeeper seen after his horse? It was almost too much to hope for, seeing how the man could scarcely be bothered to move from the bar.

The stable's interior was dark, and smelled of moldy hay and ancient manure. There was another smell on the air, so thick and metallic that Marten felt like he'd sucked on a copper: blood.

He saw the horse's leg first, protruding from the open stall door at a backwards angle. He stepped forward, dreading to look, but needing to see. He thought by seeing he would know what had happened and could rationalize it.

He was wrong.

The horse lay upon a circle of bloody ice, its sides collapsed inward, looking hollowed out. Thin, frozen, pink strips of flesh strung a gaping hole in its belly, glittering. Its lips were pulled back in a horrible, forever-grimace. Empty red sockets leered back at him, the eyes gone.

Marten backed away from the gruesome corpse and went back inside the inn.

"Sounds like the work of wolves," the innkeeper said, after hearing his account.

"The work of wolves? Is that all you have to say? I demand recompense for the loss of my beast, and for the frazzled state of my mind."

"Of course, good sir! And so it shall be. I'll be happy to reimburse you for your loss."

Marten nodded, his anger somewhat abated. "Who sells horseflesh in this ice pit of a town?"

"Old Man Herbert, up on the hill. He's a mite unusual, that one. Some strange tendencies. Still, he'll put you to rights, good sir; have no fear on that account."

Marten stormed from the inn. Baron, standing patiently outside, bounded on his heels. A child stood beside his wagon, staring at the painted words.

“You there! Away from my wagon.”

The child turned toward him. Swaddled though he was, Marten recognized the boy he’d given the firecrackers to.

The boy traced the gilded lettering with his finger. “What does it say?”

“Marten the fool, evidently.” The fence rattled as Marten slammed the gate closed. Baron ran up to greet the child, his nose questing into the folds of cloth about the boy’s chest. “Baron, come along.” Marten took a dozen steps up the road, surveying the horizon. There were a goodly number of hills within a short walk of town. Fiends take that worthless innkeeper....

“You there. Boy. Do you know the way to Old Man Herbert? He who trades in horseflesh?”

“Yes,” the boy replied, still looking at the wagon. “What does this say?”

Marten sighed. “Marten the Magnificent’s Traveling Emporium. Potions and tonics, talismans and wards. Now, which way to the horse seller?”

“What’s an emporium?”

“It’s a kind of store. Now, if you would just point out the hill—”

“A magical store?” The boy looked at Marten with wonder. “Can you help Ma with her remembering?”

“No. Yes.” Marten waved a hand. “What I can do is irrelevant. What I need to do is find a horse to pull my wagon. Now, the way to the horse seller?”

The boy ran to join Marten. “I’ll show you.”

“It would be better if you just pointed it out so I could be on my way,” Marten said. But the boy was already in motion, skipping ahead. Baron ran circles around him, tail wagging.

Marten hurried after them.

“What happened to your horse?”

“Killed most grievously by wolves. Attacked the poor thing in its stall. Do you have a problem with wolves in these parts?”

The boy giggled as Baron licked his hand. “Only the kind that walk like men.”

“Werewolves?” He snorted. Such things were impossible, of course, though he kept silver on the wagon all the same. And now that he knew the angle to ply, he’d milk these villagers for what valuables they owned. Werewolves, indeed....

A realization dawned. Marten stopped suddenly, looking back toward the inn. It was encircled by a fence. The stable sat outside the fence. Turning, he followed the progression of houses as the road climbed the hill; every one gated, the fences in better condition than the houses they surrounded. He recalled some superstition regarding fences and gates, some nonsense that werewolves couldn’t come inside without being first invited. Or, perhaps it was vampires. It hardly mattered—the people of Hodjer’s Vale obviously put stock in such nonsense, mayhap for just cause in this cursed place. All the more reason to flee town with haste.

“There’s my house,” the boy said. It looked much the same as its neighbors: small and rounded with a dark door and, of course, a stout-looking fence. No smoke curled from the chimney, or from any of the other houses on the street. They were all dark, still, and vaguely round, like a field of corpses blanketed in snow.

“Are there people living in all of these?”

“No. Sometimes people go away for a while.”

“Where do they go?”

The boy shrugged. “I bet it’s someplace warm.”

“Do they come back?”

“Sometimes, yes. One time, I went into Miss Cordela’s house because I was hungry and she makes the best potato pie. It was really cold inside. She was asleep, but I thought she was dead so I ran away.” He cocked his head. “Are *you* leaving?”

“Yes.”

The boy looked away. He kicked at a frozen pebble until it loosened and skittered across the icy road. “Everyone always leaves.”

Marten looked at the boy’s house. Had his mother left, too? “You said

your mother forgets... ?”

The boy did not respond. He was kneeling on the road, his face buried in Baron's coat.

Marten left it alone. “Come, the winds are picking up. On to the horseman.”

Old Man Herbert's home stood atop a squat hill just outside of town. It was a large, two-story building with a stone base, its timber walls sagging inward under the weight of the roof. The shutters hung askew, but the chimney coughed smoke into the sky, so at least someone was home. Adjacent to the house, a dozen broad horses milled about a fenced pen. A narrow man in a leather apron stood inside the fence, his cheeks red from the cold. Long white hair fell across his face as he labored with a bulky sack of grain.

“Hail-o,” Marten called. “Might you be Herbert, the horse seller?”

The old man didn't answer. Huffing hard, he upended the bag of grain in a trough.

Marten leaned over the high fence. “I said—”

“I heard ya just fine the first time.” The old man scowled. He watched as some of the horses ambled over and bent to feed. Folding the spent bag neatly, the old man tottered to the fence. “I be Herbert. You in need of a horse, stranger?”

“I am. My last had its belly ripped out whilst stabled at the inn.”

Herbert nodded. “Wolves. They venture into town on occasion, looking for food. The cold drives 'em to it.”

Marten eyed the man's stock. Broad-chested and thick-legged, with boots of shaggy hair about their lower legs, these were meant more for pulling a plow than a wagon. But they'd serve ably enough, at least until Marten reached another town. “How much?”

Herbert turned to look at the horses, frowning in thought. “Two hundred a head.”

“Two hundred? For these mangy pack animals? Fifty.”

The old farmer spat. “Horse flesh ain't easy to come by in these parts, stranger. Aye, two hundred will set you right.”

Marten smiled. "I fear I'm a bit pressed for coin at the moment. Will you barter?"

"Aye, if you've something of value."

Marten grinned to himself.

In the end, they settled on fifty gold pieces, plus six silver arrow heads and a silvered dagger besides. Wolves, indeed; Herbert thought enough of werewolves to part with his horseflesh for what amounted to half his original asking price. The boy chased Baron across the yard while the men negotiated, laughing breathlessly as he tackled the dog. Marten felt sorry for the kid, left on his own and so obviously starved for attention. He owed him a debt for mentioning this werewolf business.

The cost included shoeing, but given the lateness of the day, it'd be tomorrow before the horse was ready. Marten selected a lean, spotted mare that moved with easy grace. Then, their business concluded, he turned back for town. The boy fell in alongside Marten, eyeing the receding daylight warily. Baron chased his heels and playfully nipped at his fingers, but the boy had fallen into a sullen mood, and Baron quickly gave up the sport.

From this vantage, Marten could see that only twenty-odd chimneys appeared to be lit, including the inn's. Could so many still be about attending their work, or was there something more sinister going on in Hodjer's Vale?

Halfway into town, Marten saw Michelle—dressed practically this time—standing just inside a fence, shaking out a towel. Likely her husband was inside the house, but the door was closed. Marten ambled over. "Hail-o."

Michelle started at the sound of his voice, dropping the towel.

Marten retrieved the cloth and passed it over the fence. "Coming by the inn tonight?"

"Pardon?" She drew back a pace toward the house.

Marten smiled. Was this the game then? Hot, then cold. Did she want him to tease it out of her? "I'll be staying another night. Care to warm my bed? You did it so ably last night..."

"I... who... how dare you!" She fled for the house and slammed the door.

Marten stood at the fence. He thought to push open the gate and demand an explanation, husband or no. He'd known some women for playing games, but this was something else. "She acted like didn't know me..." But it was clearly no act; he'd seen the lack of recognition in her eyes, the confusion and alarm as she'd backed away.

"People lose time," the boy said. "They go to sleep on Oathday, wake on Starday."

"But she came to see me. How can she not remember?"

The boy shrugged. "People don't like forgetting things they done."

They stopped outside the boy's house. The chimney was cold. The fading sun glittered in the boy's eyes as he looked up to Marten. "Can I come with you?"

"No."

Sniffing, the boy hugged Baron. He stood inside the fence and watched them go.

Baron whined, then barked when Marten ignored him.

"Quiet now." Lost in thought over everything that had occurred since waking, Marten forgot his silent promise to look after the boy.



The inn was empty, save the innkeeper, surly as ever. The man served him a bowl of lukewarm onion soup and a heel of moldy bread and retired himself without another word.

Marten ate without tasting, his mind consumed with the strange events of the day: his horse, disemboweled in the night by wolves of two legs or four; the emptiness of town once they'd left the main road; the boy and the sad look he gave Marten as he considered his cold, vacant house. He felt a pang of guilt at how he'd left the kid standing there, crying. The boy had helped him find a new horse, and deserved a kinder recompense. Marten resolved to make amends with the boy, should he see him before leaving the following day.

Mostly, though, he thought of Michelle: how bright her passion had

burned through the night, and how cold she had greeted him less than a day later, as though he were a stranger. The boy's words echoed in his head: *people lose time*. Could she truly not remember?

Marten pushed away from the table, giving Baron leave to finish. They went outside. The moon was full, a great, cold circle in the sky. All the color drained from the world, save the spill of silver moonlight and the long black shadows. Slipping out the gate, Baron ran off to see to his business before sleep. Marten made preparations of a different kind, retrieving a short blade of silver, a crossbow, and a dozen silver-headed bolts from his wagon. Just in case.

Baron barked, loud and with rancor, the echo shattering the silence. The dog had wandered around the far side of the inn and was nowhere in sight. Heart hammering in his chest, Marten ran toward the noise, trying to hold the sword and load the crossbow at the same time. Baron was growling now, deep in his throat. The crossbow bolt tumbled from Marten's fingers and splintered under his boot.

The barks cut off abruptly. Marten froze, listening hard. The wind moaned. He crept around the fence toward the inn's corner, his hand trembling with the weight of his sword. Taking a deep breath, he peered around the building.

Baron stood near the fence, staring intently at something in the shadows. "Baron," he whispered. "Here." He whistled softly.

The dog glanced his way. Considering the darkness one final time, he followed Marten around to the gate.

"See something, old boy?" Marten eyed the shadows. There was nothing there so far as he could tell, but the dog had keener eyes than he. "Come. Let's go back inside."

He barred the door to his room and jammed a chair under the latch for extra measure. The window was locked. Setting the crossbow within easy reach and the sword under his pillow, Marten climbed into bed. Baron curled up on the floor beside him and was soon snoring. Marten lay awake for a long time, listening to the old inn shift and groan.

In time, he slept.

Nightmares plagued his sleep. Baron stood over him on two legs, his hunched, shaggy body twisted and deformed. The dog's teeth were bared in a snarling grin as he leaned over, groping Marten's face with long, spindly fingers. Marten tried to scream, but he had no mouth. A darkness as deep as midnight stole over him, and he somehow knew his eyes were gone. Baron's fingers made soft sucking noises as they caressed his face. A high-pitched clicking noise echoed in the silence with the cadence of laughter.

Marten awoke with a start, hands flying to his face. His eyes and mouth were right where they'd always been. Heart slowing, he lay back down. It was just a nightmare.

Thin morning light fell through the window, burning his eyes. He clenched them shut and groaned. Gods, but he was tired. Just a bit more sleep....

Marten dozed until the painful yowling of his stomach could no longer be ignored. He sat up, scratching idly at the prickly scruff on his face. It was hard to believe it'd only been a day since he'd last shaved. His body ached and his joints cracked loudly as he worked his stiff limbs.

Marten froze mid-stretch; a trickle of icy dread wormed its way into his stomach. The door stood open, the chair he'd propped behind it set casually aside. How could the door have opened? And where had Baron gotten to, for that matter? Had he somehow let himself out? The notion was absurd, of course, but then he remembered his dream: Baron, standing tall like a man with those long, questing fingers.

He fled the room, leaving behind meager luggage and threadbare clothes, taking only the weapons. The inn's common room was empty, the hearth cold. The dour innkeeper was nowhere to be seen. Shrugging on his overcoat, Marten stepped outside. A pale yellow sun slanted toward the west. He'd been asleep for almost an entire day. *Longer, mayhap*, he thought as he fingered the beginnings of his beard. More than a day's growth, surely. People lose time, the boy had said. Marten guessed he'd lost three days, maybe four.

The wind pummeled him as he wandered through empty streets, calling for Baron. He approached some of the nearby homesteads, but nobody

answered. The doors were locked, the people gone. Spinning in a slow circle in the middle of the road, he realized that none of the chimneys of Hodjer's Vale were lit.

He was alone in this frozen, forgotten place.

He returned to his wagon and retrieved his remaining gold, not even bothering to count it. He'd give it all to Herbert the horseman and be happy for the loss, if it meant he was away from this place. And if Herbert was gone, same as the others, he'd take a horse and go.

Weighed down by his coin purse, and carrying the weapons besides, the climb back to Herbert's house was arduous. Marten had to stop twice to catch his breath. The world kept going tipsy and muddled thoughts filled his head. He needed food, but that was not the full of it: he feared that something had happened to him—that it was still happening, in fact.

The horizon burned like burnished copper as the sun fell past the edge of the world. Shadows inched toward the road like creeping black hands. Herbert's house was dark. Marten didn't bother trying the door. The horses grazed lazily from the trough, the spotted mare among them. Marten nearly collapsed in relief. He'd thought he'd surely find the animals gone.

"Who's that milling about my horses?"

Marten swung around, the crossbow in hand.

Herbert leaned on a fence post. "Put that thing away, before you do something stupid."

"I came to collect my horse, as agreed." Marten lowered the weapon.

"Awfully late, ain't it? Come back in the morning."

"No." Marten ran a hand over the mare's back. "I've had my fill of Hodjer's Vale. I mean to leave tonight."

Herbert shrugged. "Seems a mite foolish to me, but as you say." He waved Marten to follow. "Suppose you'll want a bridle. I keep the gear in the house."

Marten fought the urge to hop onto the horse's bare back and gallop into the night, clinging to its neck. The old man was right. It'd be difficult to herd the horse back to town without a way to direct it. What if it ran off?

Herbert's home was no warmer than the outdoors. The hearth was unlit.

A rusty gas lantern rested on a table, casting sparse light. Marten followed Herbert through a dark kitchen and down a set of stone steps. A lantern hung on a large nail at the bottom. Taking the light, Herbert continued on, moving down a narrow corridor of stone. “Just a bit farther.”

Herbert moved with surprising grace for a man his age, setting a brisk pace that Marten struggled to match. His body trembled with fatigue and he wondered if he was feverish.

“Why do you keep the gear so far from the horses?” Marten’s words sounded distant to his own ears. He slowed, his mind circling around something that seemed important, but he couldn’t quite bring it forward. He concentrated. The logical place for horse gear was nearby the horse, right? What then was Herbert hurrying him toward?

The world about Marten crystallized in that moment, a fog lifting from his mind. He noticed the thick carpet of mist swirling about his boots, and felt the cold radiating from the ice shrouded walls and the frozen ceiling. He realized what Herbert had led him into.

This was a tomb.

Turning back, he ran. Away from Herbert’s lantern, the darkness pressed in around him. Marten’s chest tightened, vise-like. He couldn’t breathe. There wasn’t enough air. He needed to get out, to return outside.

He stumbled, one hand on the wall as a guide, the cold burning his skin through his glove. He came to an intersection and tried to remember the way they’d come.

A moan echoed out of the darkness to his left. Marten imagined ghouls shuffling closer, desiccated limbs stretching out for his warm flesh. Did he not hear their faint shambling footsteps? Stifling a shriek, Marten ran the opposite way, nearly tripping over his own feet. The noises receded.

Time grew soft and unknowable in the cold darkness. Marten felt certain he’d gone the wrong way, but was hesitant to turn back, lest he run into Herbert or whatever had been making that awful noise. The only sounds he heard now were his own: the quick cadence of his breath and the scuff of boots on stone.

The tunnel abruptly ended, the walls falling away on both sides.

Standing immobile and holding his breath, Marten listened for clues of what lay beyond, but the dark was silent.

Fishing into an inner pocket, Marten produced a sunrod and struck it. Dim light brightened the area immediately around him. Holding the light aloft, he stepped into the room and discovered the people of Hodjer's Vale.

Rows of cots marched into the darkness. Tucked under heavy blankets, cheeks rosy from the cold, the villagers slept soundly but silently.

Marten crept through the ranks, loath to disturb or touch anyone. They slept on, oblivious to his presence. There must have been hundreds—men, women, children. He even recognized some of them from the crowd that first day.

The boy was there too. Eyes closed, mouth twisted into a grimace, chest rising and falling. Marten remembered the boy laughing and chasing Baron. *I should have taken him away that night and run. He and Baron and I. Run, and gone far away from this place of cold horror.*

He lingered long at the child's bedside before moving on, leaving the boy undisturbed.

After several dozen rows the cots stopped, even though the room continued on into the darkness. An old man in a leather apron lay upon the last bed. At least, Marten thought it was a man. His face was gone; only smooth skin remained where eyes and ears and mouth should have been. Air whistled through horizontal slits where his nose would be, had it not somehow been removed. *Gods above, he's still alive.*

With a trembling hand, Marten touched his own face, remembering his horrific dream. Had it been only a dream?

Staggering back, he bumped into something soft and furry.

Baron lay asleep upon the floor, curled inward. Marten dropped to one knee, setting the crossbow and sunrod aside. "Wake up." He softly rubbed Baron's head, then grabbed handfuls of hair and tugged when the dog didn't stir. "Come on, you old bastard. It's time to go!" The dog was oblivious to all.

"Marvelous, aren't they?" Herbert's voice echoed across the still darkness.

Marten half-stood, groping for his weapon. The old farmer picked his

way through the cots, lantern held high, smiling in satisfaction. “A fine collection, if I may say so.” He stopped to admire a man sleeping on a cot, his spindly gray fingers caressing the man’s cheek.

Marten’s fingers closed around the crossbow’s wooden stock. This was not Herbert at all. It was a skin-changer, wearing people’s faces like a man wears clothes. Crossbow in hand, Marten backed away.

Herbert swept the cots with his eyes and sighed. “All so very interesting—so very unique—yet I grow bored of them. Their lives are so dull. None are half as interesting as yours.” He crept forward, eating up the distance between them.

Marten loaded the bow and fired. The bolt zipped over the creature’s head, shattering against the ceiling. Reloading frantically, Marten found his voice. “What are you?”

Herbert’s face shifted and blurred until the sullen innkeeper stared back at him. “Sorry about your horse. Try the old man north of town.” The face melted away, and now it was Michelle’s. “Stay awhile... you’re so interesting.”

Marten’s stomach churned. No, it couldn’t be. What had he done? The bolt skittered from his fingers, bouncing toward Herbert. Marten reached for a new one.

“What am I?” It slinked forward. Michelle’s features darkened, elongated and grew hair until Baron’s face emerged. The dog grinned and spoke with Michelle’s voice. “Whatever I want to be.”

“Stay away, you devil!” Marten slammed another bolt into his weapon and aimed it at the creature. The skin-changer pressed on unabated, stepping past Herbert’s cot.

There was nothing between them, now. Nothing but a few sparse feet of frozen ground.

Marten squeezed the trigger.

The creature flew backwards, toppling over a cot. Limbs flailing, it cried aloud in an ever-changing babble of voices. Marten reloaded the crossbow and stepped around the cot for a clear shot.

It leapt at him as soon as he came into view. Marten fired. The bolt went

wide, ricocheting into the darkness. Then the skin-changer was upon him, baring him down with impossible strength, forcing him to the floor. The crossbow was ripped from his hands.

Marten struggled for his sword, but couldn't free it from his belt. The creature sat astride him, holding his arms down and wearing Michelle's face.

Marten fought but her grip was cold iron, sapping his strength. Drowsiness pulled at his eyes. "Stay away from me," he mumbled.

"But I find you so interesting. So... sinful." Her mouth yawned open, impossibly wide, until it seemed the entirety of her head was an enormous mouth. Ribbons of drool hung between sharp teeth.

Leaning in, it consumed him. Marten's boot heels kicked frantically on the floor, then abruptly stilled.



In the morning, Marten returned to the inn, dragging the reluctant mare behind him. He walked with a jolly step, as a man of younger years might. His chest hurt where he'd been shot, but it was a minor affliction, no more than a bruise, really. A silver-headed arrow? As though he was some sort of horror out of a folktale? How silly humans could be.

The Skin-Man wore Marten's face and, in consuming the charlatan, also had access to Marten's memories. It *was* Marten, in every way imaginable. It knew that Marten had lived on the road many years, that he pretended at being a merchant specializing in magical devices, but in actuality was a fraud and a thief. Marten was a very mischievous sort of man. Well, he had been anyway. Now he was only Forgotten.

The Skin-Man tittered, a sound like dry bones clattering together, and prepared the wagon for travel. Hopping aboard, it gave the pony a smart crack. The wagon lurched into motion.

A vague sort of melancholy stirred in the Skin-Man's black heart as the still houses of Hodjer's Vale rolled past. In the two years it had spent toying with the townsfolk, it had become trapped in tedium. The people were dull, drab things, marking out the gray days in mindless drudgery

until they finally died. They were too stodgy to entertain more juicy fare: thefts, affairs, murders. That sort of disposition was contagious, and on an instinctual level, the Skin-Man recognized that leaving was a matter of survival. It couldn't just leave, though. The world beyond Hodjer's Vale was an enticing mystery, electric with promise, but dangerous too. The Skin-Man had needed a guide. Marten's arrival provided the perfect escape.

The wagon topped the rise beside old Herbert's farmhouse. The horses in the pen looked up and watched the cart jingle past.

The Skin-Man wondered absently what would come when the townspeople finally woke, one-by-one, in that cold, dark place. Would they run shrieking into madness? Set upon one another with sudden bloodlust? Fall into an orgiastic frenzy there upon the cold stone floor?

No. They would return to their plows and spinning wheels as though nothing had happened. Boring 'til the end.

The Skin-Man wouldn't suffer their kind again. The wagon slowly picked its way south, toward warmer lands and the cities and their people.

THREE LASHES FOR DORIAN

BY MICHAEL STEVENS



As a pigeon lay dying in a back alley in the Puddles district of Ab-salom, Dorian Furgrave stooped over it, stroking its sleek feathers, then began to remove little pieces of its body with his pocket knife. He worked meticulously for ten minutes or so, carving eight precise, one-inch cubes of matter from its chest cavity. When he was finished, he licked the blood clean from his knife and lifted the bird to his eager lips, sucking out the innards from its excavated corpse with a wet *slurp*. Satisfied with his snack, he tossed the hollowed carcass to the side and popped the bird cubes into his mouth at an intermittent rate as he continued leisurely on his way.

He arrived at a popular fish market just after sunup. It was one of his favorite morning haunts. While customers argued with vendors over the prices of the catch of the day, Dorian hobbled behind the stalls, shooing away the gulls that were gorging themselves on rotting morsels of various aquatic creatures. He spied a fetid squid tentacle dangling across a rock and his heart leapt. He retrieved a piece of parchment from his soggy pocket and consulted the list to make sure the tentacle was on it. It was! He triumphantly placed the appendage in his backpack, and rewarded himself by collecting several silvery herring scales from the ground and munching on them. Before setting out for his next destination, he was careful to pluck an eyelash from his left eye (each day he liked to alternate eyes to be certain he had eyelashes to pluck) and wrap it in a cloth napkin. *One!*

Dorian shambled away from the docks, through the streets. The slashes on his back were starting to heal and scab over, catching on his shirt; it'd been a day since he'd last seen his master, the being he referred to only as

“man-spike.” Dorian made a point to rub the wounds vigorously against a splintery post. Success! The comforting wetness of blood soaking into his shirt excited him. He waddled with a renewed vigor past several local children, who stopped playing and moved aside when “Dorian the Dumb-Dumb” scuttled by. The ragged man was well-known in the Puddles for his strangeness, his hunched-over gait and his unintelligible speech. Homeless dogs growled at him too, but even they knew not to come too close.

He made his way to a small secluded cemetery and found a freshly filled gravesite. He giggled and gathered four heaping handfuls of the cool dirt from the new plot, shakily scooping them into his backpack. With a trembling hand, he inspected his list again. What luck! Satisfied, he plucked an eyelash (again, from the left eye) with two grimy fingers and cautiously placed it in the napkin with the other. *Two!*

It was in this very cemetery where Dorian also acquired his meaty crickets. Such a delicious treat! They were unusually flighty today, but he managed to capture thirteen of them. He stuffed them into his mouth and moved along, munching as he went.

The raw gashes on his back began to sting as sweat mixed with blood, seeping through the rough blanket he wore as a cloak and staining it dark-red in the process. Dorian uncapped his waterskin and doused the area with filthy water he’d collected from a stagnant sewage pool.

Feeling refreshed, he arrived at an unpopular city park that was notorious for its violent muggings. Tall trees made a natural canopy over the entire space; it was the perfect environment for shady dealings. Two yellow-toothed thugs watched Dorian lurch by with his pack and debated about absconding with his belongings, then balked when they caught a glimpse of his misshapen and scarred head.

Dorian clambered up his favorite oak tree, and in minutes he was high in its branches. The giant spider that lived there never bothered to attack the scruffy man, preferring to scurry away instead when its frequent visitor came around. Dorian stuffed gobs of its thick webbing into his backpack until it bulged, all the while fantasizing about how the spider might taste. He examined his list one final time to ensure he’d obtained the correct items.

He jumped—or rather fell—down, and plucked his last remaining eyelash from his left eye. *Three!*

It was evening when Dorian made it back to his shack. It was on the second floor of an old, burned-out ironmonger's shop infested with rats. Dorian drooled with glee as he emptied the contents of his backpack onto the sooty floor. "Man-spike give Dorian pain!"

Dorian sat in the ashes, staring expectantly at the singed ring that marked the dead portal on the ceiling of the room. He wrung his grubby hands together. "Man-spike, please come out!" Nothing happened.

Frantically, the hunched man unrolled the day's list and made extra sure he'd obtained the items on it—spider webbing, dirt from a fresh grave, the tentacle of a squid—and feebly marked them off. He separated the substances as best he could, then screeched in rage as a chattering rat darted out, trying to make off with the rotting tentacle. Dorian was on it in a flash, scrabbling on his hands and knees, and chasing it into an adjacent room. "Bad rat," he scolded, as he caught the diseased rodent. "Rat brains good." He bit off the vermin's head with a crunch.

When Dorian returned, a golden glow lit the charred room; the portal on the ceiling sizzled with energy, and a column of light spilled down from it onto the filthy floor. A dark, heavily spiked creature—the barbed devil named Razonask—was already rifling through the spoils Dorian had so diligently hoarded. Dorian shrieked with delight when he saw the pointy fiend: this was what he lived for.

"Good, Dorian," the hamatula growled. "The mages of Cheliox will use these components in their diabolic rituals with much appreciation. And how many lashes did you get today?"

Dorian produced the napkin from his pack with the three eyelashes wrapped inside and trembled with anticipation.

"Good, Dorian." The devil's hiss turned into a wicked grin. Dorian erupted into a crude, loping dance before bending over and exposing his scarred back to the devil, awaiting payment. Using a razor-sharp barb protruding from its elbow, the devil sliced two deep gashes along Dorian's spine and one into the back of his head. Dorian screamed with glee.

“Three lashes for Dorian... for his three eyelashes,” the devil proclaimed.

Razonask placed the next day’s list into Dorian’s eager hand and patted him briskly on the head, drawing more blood. The ragged man shivered with pleasure. Then the fiend stepped into the glowing portal and disappeared with the spell components Dorian had gathered from around Absalom. In seconds, the room went dim again.

Dorian moaned and began to rock to and fro. “Man-spike, man-spike, man-spike....” Tears ran down his soiled face as he realized with disdain that it would be a whole day before the hamatula would pay him his next visit. By that time, how many eyelashes would grow back? One, maybe two? The thought of running out of lashes terrified him.

Gathering his composure, Dorian unrolled the newest scroll—his only hope for future gratification—and squinted to read the hellish script. The first item on the list was “the skull of a priest.”

Dorian laughed and clapped his hands. Then, throwing on his bloodied shirt and cloak, he grabbed his blade and entered the night.

SECRETS OF GOLARION REVEALED



*“You walked into a room full of death...
I knew it, soon as I got here.
But I also knew it wasn’t for me.”*

- ELLEND, TANKARD OF CAYDEN CAILEAN

ZERO HOUR

BY DANA HUBER



here are fifty-six clocks in the world that keep the same count.

They are scattered throughout Golarion, some resting atop obelisks of black stone, others locked in boxes covered in intricate runes. Some rest in the private collections of the wealthy; others have not been seen by mortal eyes since their creation, and lie buried beneath Osirion's ever-shifting sands; and at least one rests in the City at the Center of the World, in the possession of a group of Pathfinders—seekers of treasure and knowledge—who have placed it in a building with a hundred other unsolved mysteries and forgotten about it.

The clocks are counting down.

Their master watches the numbers becoming smaller and smaller, approaching zero. His mind is precise and ordered. He is not given to impatience.

Soon, he whispers from his resting place.

The first of his brethren twitches in his fifty-six separate jars, feeling that *soon* echo through his violent remains. Rage hums between the jars.

The second of them does not respond at all. He is at peace, drifting in blue serenity.

The third answers him with doubt. “You’ve said that before, brother,” she breathes in a dusty, dry exhale. “What makes this time any different?”

He is the fourth. He settles himself to wait. *Soon*, is all that he answers. *Soon*.

“Cyreen!”

The human man is ten feet to her right: an impatient presence, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

“I can hear you quite well, Captain. There’s no need to shout.”

Cyreen cannot see his scowl, but she imagines it easily enough. The good captain is sweating, for more reasons than just the Osirion sun bearing down on their heads. His heartbeat is elevated, a pulsing *dum-dum* in her ears.

“My apologies.” He does not sound sorry. “The men are ready to enter, if you’ll just tell us how we’re to reach the damned door. It’s three hundred feet up if it’s an inch, and Sol can’t climb it.”

The men. Cyreen runs over a mental inventory of “the men.” The captain has hand-picked this team of crypt-breakers, and swears by them with the usual over-confidence of the living. She is sure they are competent at their work, the best in Sothis that her gold could buy, and her coffers are deep.

It doesn’t matter. They will all be dead soon enough.

Time is passing. She takes a deep, slow breath, inhaling the hot and desiccated desert air. Does she breathe the same air as the god-kings? Centuries have passed—*millennia* have passed—so it’s an idle fantasy, but she indulges it all the same.

The captain no doubt thinks she is stymied by the challenge of the entrance, or that she’s trying to ready herself for the challenges ahead.

She has been ready her whole life.

Before her, the stone reaches up, seemingly forever. The wind cannot tell her the dimensions of this monument. She rests her hand on the pyramid’s face. It slants up and away, and though she knows it is stone, her fingers would argue for glass, so impossibly smooth is the surface. The desert is hot, but the stone is cool.

Veinstone. Cyreen tries to remember colors: the stone is *green*, because her studies tell her so, but she does not remember *green*. It has been thirty years since she last saw color.

She lets her fingers drift from the stone, and turns to the captain instead.

Her hand finds his shoulder unerringly. The captain flinches.

Cyreen focuses. She draws on the powers that exist in the gray space of her heart, the gray space between death and life, and calls them forth. Her free hand twists in the air, and syllables hiss from her lips.

Light as a soul freed from its shell. Fly, slipped from the bonds of the earth.

She draws her hand back. Her palm tingles with the residual power.

“I think you’ll find three hundred feet very little trouble now, Captain. I suggest you take a rope. I suggest you take *several* ropes.”

And while the captain takes a moment to realize he can fly, Cyreen draws forth a stone tablet from her robes and lets her fingers trail over the ever-changing hieroglyphs. They form numbers—numbers that are steadily running out, becoming smaller, approaching zero.

She waits impatiently for the captain to start ferrying their group up.



Sol is the first to fall. The Katapeshi burglar had been probing ahead of the others, tapping carefully at the veinstone floor and walls with a pole of intricate design. The mummy comes upon him like a silent storm.

Cyreen watches, in her particular fashion. She stands motionless behind the fury of battle, as the captain shouts orders to the others and draws his curved khopesh sword. Her head is cocked to one side, and the echoing sounds tell her the shape of the battle: the dry *thwack* of a blade biting into the mummy’s linen-bound arm; the scuff of booted feet on the floor; the shouted words of their god-servant calling down fire.... Sol’s gurgling noises, as the thief seeks to breathe despite a shattered ribcage.

She sidesteps the fighting. The men are bringing the mummy down on their own; she need not interfere.

Sol’s hands fumble, clutching at her arm as she kneels by him.

“H-help...” he chokes out.

She guesses that is what he means to say, anyway.

“Of course.” She presses her hand to the place on his chest, just over his heart, where the mummy’s hand had hit him like the hammer of a vengeful

god. She clamps her other over his mouth. This will probably be noisy.

She can feel his blood pumping beneath her fingers. It brings up the ever-present hunger, but she has not gotten to where she is by indulging her desires. She learned discipline from the one she calls Father, three hundred miles south from here, as he offered the red throats of slaves to her. She learned early on what it was to fail his tests... and what it was to have his approval.

Her hand pushes the mangled bits of the thief's sternum further into his heart.

By the time the fighting is over, Sol is standing again, gazing dead-eyed at the world.

The captain and the others stare, and then the captain spits on the polished veinstone floor, and swears.

"By all the gods. He might not have been a good man, but he was a man, dammit! He deserves better than to be your puppet!"

Cyreen wipes the blood from her hands onto Sol's dusty trousers. "He was too badly injured to save." She shrugs. "I paid for his services. Living or dead, he will render them, Captain."

She hears him step forward, towards her. A gesture of her fingers and Sol moves to stand between them.

"Do nothing you'll regret, Captain. The path through this place requires us all to work together. Don't you agree?"



The fifty-six jars of the Fiend Pharaoh—some as tall as three feet, some the size of a man's palm—quiver with restless anger. Cyreen hears their faint rattle on the stone floor, and the unease of the men behind her, shifting and muttering.

"What's in them?" the half-elf says in his quiet whisper. "Gold?"

"I advise you not to find out. There's gold enough ahead. These are mine."

"And how will you carry all of those, woman?" the captain asks dourly.

“Our hands are busy with weapons, you know.”

“Be at your ease, Captain. I don’t expect you to be porters. Now be silent, please.”

She only needs to take one jar. One of these holds Hetshepsu’s heart: the seat of his soul. Cyreen parts her lips and breathes in the dead air of the tomb. The men smell of dust and sweat; Sol smells of the dried blood on his chest. But the heart of a god-king—the still-beating, still-throbbing, red and raging core of him—yes, that has its own smell, and in the heavy silence, she can hear it rattling.

She has Sol carry the jar. It twitches and jerks in his dead hands, and the others put a good deal of distance between themselves and her, Sol, and the unnerving reliquary.



Another trap. Poisoned needles drop the half-orc warrior woman who had wordlessly gone along with the captain’s every order. Their god-servant, a dwarf whose voice echoes as though from deep tunnels, mutters useless prayers over her body. Cyreen leans down to whisper into her dead ear, and soon, the half-orc walks on her other side.

After that, the captain insists that she and her servants precede the rest of them.

Cyreen does not argue; treachery does not concern her. She is drawn by a glorious purpose; these others will act to fulfill it, no matter what they plan.

Besides, they need her for the traps. They had trusted to Sol’s eyes and hands to warn against hidden spells and falling stone. Now his eyes sit glassy in his skull, and his fingers are clumsy with the grave.

They must trust to her magic now.

The vault of the Cerulean Pharaoh opens before them. The captain, the dwarf, and the archer stop in awe. Here, the veinstone green gives way to blues: polished azure marble provides a backdrop for embellishments of lapis lazuli, turquoise, and agate.

All of this she knows from dusty scrolls alone. She can only imagine what they see, but it is not the stonework that holds the men silent.

The scrolls also spoke of rivers of gold: wealth beyond counting, beyond measure, and beyond reason.

Cyreen stands still as well, although she cares nothing for the gold. The room is silent; no whispers reach her ears. She pushes Sol's motionless shoulder. He staggers forward, feet scuffing the marble and then sinking into piled coins. The dead thief wades through treasure enough to buy his fate back from the gods.

There. The echoes of his movements—the metallic hiss of the coins—shape the room for her. At the center of the treasure is the resting place of Anok Fero. She nods to herself in satisfaction, and orders the half-orc forward as well.

Her servants reach the sarcophagus unmolested, while the living breathe noisily behind her.

“Bring it here,” she calls across the room of countless riches, and they obey.

Only when she has conjured a disc of force beneath the casket and begun to move it back down the corridor, do the others realize that she intends to leave the wealth untouched.

“Damnation on this,” the dwarf rasps, his voice cutting through the shifting echoes. “That’s blood money, Captain, and I say it’s ours for what the witch talked us into. Let’s fill our packs and leave her here... !”

The captain stretches his arm out. “Gareth, wait, you fool—”

Cyreen says nothing. She does not need to. The dwarf has already touched a goblet.

The dragon of Anok Fero rises from the gold in an explosion of sound: a thousand coins fly into the air.

Cyreen stands still as the cacophony of battle erupts behind her. It's too noisy for her to trust her perception of the world: the twang of the bow's string, the shouted prayers of the dwarf, the whistling steel of the captain's khopesh, the dragon's muffled roar, and, over all, the metallic rain of gold hailing down on a marble floor.

But also, there are screams. Many screams. That one will be the dwarf. . . .

The captain's hoarse bellow is pained. Cyreen stands still for a moment, then walks back into the maelstrom of sound.

He is on the edge of the sea of gold, struggling to get to his feet as the dragon focuses his rage on the half-elf. Cyreen reaches down for the captain's flailing hand and takes it in her own cool one, her other hand seeking a vial from her belt. It feels unpleasant against her fingers, burning and throbbing, but she has learned to ignore this sensation.

"You can do nothing for them. Drink."

He spits blood, hot and sweet, onto the marble floor. "What, and be poisoned or worse? Be damned to you, woman!"

The archer is down and the dragon savages him. They have only seconds.

"Drink."

She presses the flask to the captain's mouth and drags him to his feet with her other hand.

They make it back to the safety of the corridor, but only just. The captain breathes deeply, raggedly, and then looks down at his side. The gash from the dragon's claws is partially closed. They stand speechless a moment, listening together to the dying screams.

The captain stares at her, a hand on his wound.

"Why?"

"Perhaps I'm not as heartless as you think me, Captain."

He laughs—a harsh, barking noise that gives her the perfect shape of the hall they are in. "If you have a heart, it's made of stone. You save me, but lead my men to their deaths? For what? You don't want the damned gold, so *what is it?*"

"Something gold cannot buy, Captain: destiny. Come."

He doesn't answer, and his breathing holds steady behind her. "I won't follow you. I'm leaving this death-trap while I can."

He shoulders past her roughly, but his sword is still drawn, in case her followers grab him. She lets him pass unharried; there is time. Cyreen inspects Anok Fero's sarcophagus and tracks her last living ally by sound

until he is too far away from her to be heard. Then Cyreen follows the smell of his blood back to the entrance.

The captain is slumped against an invisible wall, beating one fist against it, his breathing ragged and his pulse swift. Outside, the bright light of the desert and freedom beckon mockingly to him, but he cannot reach it. She imagines his face: anguished or grim, perhaps? Frightened?

Cyreen watches him a while, waiting for his heartrate to slow with despair before clearing her throat. He turns on her, but he is slow and weak. He has lost a lot of blood, and would pose no threat to her even if she did not have her guardians.

The tip of his curved khopesh blade waves uncertainly in the air. “Stay back, you witch.”

She stands with her hands folded and her head bowed, as she had used to do when she had displeased Father and needed to be contrite, remorseful.

“I understand you have little reason to trust me.”

He laughs again; the sound is sharp and raw. She hears him sit down, his back to the transparent barrier that stops his escape.

“You feel I care nothing for the loss of your team.”

“You *don't*. They are only tools for you—like I am.”

She comes closer, crouching down by him. “But you are a soldier, Captain. Loss is part of battle, but the battle must still be won. You understand that.”

“No, woman. I *was* a soldier. I deserted,” he spits blood again, “because of commanders like you.”

She is silent, listening to the whisper of his blood. The scent of it scratches at her self-control. It would be so satisfying to kill him, to ride the sweetness of his life's power all the way to the completion of her mission....

But she needs him. This, too, is all part of the plan. Everything requires that she follow the plan.

“I have another curative potion,” she says, slowly. “A very strong one. I was saving it for myself, for an emergency. But you are still hurt.” She pauses, then reaches for her pack. “Here.”

The bottle is almost too hot for her to touch. She would prefer not to

be holding it at all, but she forces her hand to be steady as she holds it out to the captain.

He takes it warily. She schools her face into somber earnestness... perhaps regret, if that is what he wishes to see there. If that is what he needs from her.

She hears the cork slide loose and the sound of liquid sloshing.

The captain groans as the potion takes effect. The scent of blood diminishes: all his wounds have sealed in an instant. He gets to his feet, restored. He probably feels twenty years younger, she supposes. The elixir is potent, and it was expensive.

“That—that was some potion.” There is a shaky note of gratitude in his voice for a moment, until he adds, “But that just makes us even, woman. I won’t say thank you.”

She smiles down at the floor, her head bowed so he cannot see it. “But will you help me win my battle, Captain? Will you follow where I lead? There is glory beyond your dreams, at the end of the road.”

He snorts and raps on the wall with the flat of his blade. “It seems I have little choice. I will follow you... if you swear me one oath.”

Cyreen lifts her head to him. “What oath?”

“That if I die, you do not raise me as one of your mindless slaves.”

Ah. That, she can promise with no trouble. She smiles up at him. “You have my word, Captain.”



The Radiant Pharaoh is not in her crypt. Cyreen stands still and breathes shallowly, trying to make this make sense.

Where else would the third Pharaoh be? Can another tomb robber have gotten here first and stolen away the body? No, no. It’s not possible. The treasures of the room remain untouched. No thief, save herself, would take the body and leave the gold.

Cyreen swallows and rubs her palms against her robe because they are

sweaty. She didn't know she could still sweat.

The captain's hand—still burning with the warmth of her elixir—touches her shoulder and she flinches.

“What is it?” he asks.

She shakes her head sharply. “Nothing. All is well. We're nearly done. We... we must... we must continue, that is all. There should be a ladder. Do you see it?”

She knows it's there—it *must* be there—but in her momentary lurch of panic, she cannot decipher the sounds of the world over the noise of her own breathing.

He is silent for thirty beats of his heart before he confirms the ladder's presence. “Yes. Forty paces forward, and perhaps ten to the right.”

“Alright.” She wills her feet to move, but they are rooted to the ground by her indecision, her hunger, and her fear. The captain fears death—so do many men. She fears failure, which is far worse. One can only die once, if one is lucky.

She has trained for this all her life. But if the plan is not accurate... If anything goes wrong....

“Cyreen.” His voice breaks through her doubt, as he offers her his hand. The vibrant, charged heat of it hangs in the air. “Come. I'll lead you to it.”

She accepts his hand, his guidance. Finally, her feet move.



“You are a strange thief, to take the bodies of my brothers and leave their wealth,” the Radiant Pharaoh muses.

The tip of a spear is at Cyreen's throat, so she answers very carefully.

“That, o Radiant Queen of the Morning, is because I am not a thief, but a messenger.”

Behind her, the captain has drawn his khopesh and stands balanced on the balls of his feet, his teeth gritted, his body poised for action. Before her, the Pharaoh Ankana stands—perfectly preserved—with one hand holding the long ankh-spear casually under Cyreen's chin.

They had come up the ladder and into the fourth and last of the crypts with Sol still carrying the jar, and her disc floating behind her with Anok Fero's body in resplendent slumber. Now her servants both stand motionless, her control of them wrested effortlessly away by the true necromancers who dwell here.

Ankana, the Radiant Pharaoh, wears a golden funerary mask of perfect beauty. It tilts to one side now with inquiry, curiosity. Six thousand years is a long time to pass in a prison, even one of veinstone. The boredom becomes great.

"A message," rasps that bone-dry voice. "How novel. We've never had a *messenger*. What is your message, little blind girl?"

Cyreen takes a deep breath. This is what she has come for. She stands, at last, before the four God-Kings themselves: Hetshepsu rattles in his jar, and Anok Fero lies quiet in his coffin; the sarcophagus in the corner can only be that of the Pharaoh of Numbers; and before her, Ankana waits for her answer.

No. They *all* wait. The Fiend hisses in his jar. The numbers crawl on the black sarcophagus. The eternal torches flicker.

"I bring you a message, o Pharaohs, from his Dread Majesty, the Lord of the Dead, Geb the First and the Last. He bids you rise from your sleep and leave this place to rule your ancient lands again."

There is a blank silence in the crypt. Even Hetshepsu's jar is still. The point of the blade slowly drops from Cyreen's throat.

They have not slain her, so she hurries to keep talking.

"I know that Anok Fero sleeps. I have the ability to wake him, o Kings, o Queen. Geb has given me a great scroll, crafted by his own hand, with which to accomplish this. The current Pharaoh of Osirion is weak and sick: my lord Geb has engineered that a relic of a distant land has come into his hands, bringing the feeble monarch nigh unto death. The people of Osirion long for the return of glory, at the hands of their greatest Pharaohs. This is the hour; this is your chance. Rule again: put aside the past, great ones, and return Osirion to her rightful place as jewel of all the world."

Ankana steps closer. Her long, linen-wrapped fingers settle under

Cyreen's jaw and lift it up, so that the dead queen may stare down into her face from behind her perfect, golden mask.

"A most well-prepared messenger. But I see there is one stumbling block for which your lord 'Geb' has not planned."

"Tell me, that I may fulfill it, O Queen."

It sounds as though Ankana is smiling. "We divided our traitor brother into fifty-and-six jars as eternal punishment. His portions can never be reunited. And jars cannot sit upon a throne... even if we were willing to share rulership with him again."

Cyreen smiles.

"The Radiant One is quite correct. I do not propose he be restored to his glory, but rather... replaced."

The jar quivers with barely chained rage in Sol's dead hands. Ankana never takes her gaze from Cyreen. "By your lord 'Geb,' I suppose."

Cyreen meets the pharaoh's gaze. "By me."

Even the rattling of the jar ceases. There is a deathly silence in the tomb, broken only by the captain's tense breathing.

Then Ankana laughs.

"You think *you* can destroy our brother? Well then, little one, *try*. Hetshepsu!"

The invocation of the Fiend Pharaoh's name cracks a jagged split down the canopic jar. The writhing red ruins of the dead god-king's flesh spill out onto the stone, accompanied by the sharp tang of embalming fluid. His heart pulses wetly. His rib-bones scrape toward her like a glistening spider. She knows he is breaking forth from the other jars, well below them; that the loose rag of his skin is rising, filling with his bones and his stripped muscles once again. His tongue is squirming towards his severed vocal cords. His teeth are reuniting themselves with his jaw. Very soon he will be whole again: Hetshepsu, the most powerful of the God-Kings; the one who thought he could rule over all the others; the one that all three of them had to work to defeat, before.

The Fiend Pharaoh's consuming hatred flows over her, and she is nearly undone by it.

But ah, her captain. Her captain is brave, now, and her captain feels heroic, powerful.

“Get back, Cyreen! I’ll hold it!” he shouts, stepping between her and the flood of dismembered organs.

“Thank you,” she breathes gratefully, and she shoves him between his shoulder blades, so that he staggers forward into the swarm.

He barely has time to be shocked.

The fragments of the dead pharaoh crawl over him with terrifying haste. Dismembered fingers claw furrows up his legs. A mass of guts slithers up his body to wind around his throat. Shards of bone pierce his flesh like tiny bleached knives.

And all the blessed energy that had suffused the elixir, that had given the captain such courage and vitality, bursts out from his injuries like the mighty Sphinx River flooding its banks in the springtime.

The wave of divine healing chars the guts away into nothing and crumbles the fingers and ribs into ash. The captain’s curved sword clatters to the ground from his lifeless hands, but his unwilling sacrifice was not in vain: the only thing still twitching is the Fiend Pharaoh’s weakly beating heart.

Cyreen steps on it, grinding it down beneath her heel until it is nothing but pulp.

Then, she lifts her head to the other pharaohs.

“Shall we continue our negotiations?”



All over Golarion, the clocks reach zero.

Cyreen walks forth, her head held high despite the weight of Hetshepsu’s crown upon it. She has kept the captain’s khopesh; it will be an excellent symbol of her office. Behind her, she can hear footsteps: the tread of god-kings, walking their crypt for the last time. Walking to the world of the living.

Father is going to be so *pleased*.

DOWN TO THE BREATHLESS

BY ANDREW CROSSETT

Her Infernal Majestrix Abrogail II, Queen of devil-haunted Cheliax, went down to the Breathless wearing her blood-red evening gloves.

Most of the time, the young queen favored black and gray clothing, with a few highlights of silver. This arrangement nicely set off her jet-black hair and porcelain-white skin. It also pleased the Asmodeans and the diabolists, and lent her the desired air of menace with just a hint of allure. Often, Abrogail's turquoise eyes and dark-cherry lips were the only bits of color to be seen about her lovely person.

So, on those occasions when she chose to accentuate her usual black leather breeches, high-heeled black boots, and charcoal-gray doublet with her infamous red gloves, the effect was startling.

The gloves, which fit like a second skin and stretched up nearly to her armpits, were made from the elastic gut of some species of dragon found only in the Hells. They'd been a gift from Contessa Lrilatha, the stylish erinyes the Hell-king Asmodeus had sent to assist with Abrogail's "education." The she-devil favored similar gloves herself, because, she said, "bloodstains enhanced rather than ruined them."

Whenever Abrogail went down to the Breathless wearing her red gloves, the wicked people she passed smiled, and the good people did not. She always made sure to keep a mental note of which people smiled.

The young queen descended the long, torch-lit staircase to the dungeon, accompanied by her golem bodyguard, Chalcedony. This magnificent creature took the form of a beautiful, seven-foot-tall warrior woman made of living white onyx. Though hard as stone to the touch, Chalcedony moved

with the lithe grace of a blade-dancer, faster and more deadly in a fight than any living warrior Abrogail had ever seen. She—or more accurately, it—had been a precious family treasure of the Thrice-Damned House of Thrune throughout the reigns of the last four rulers. And she was effective. Though none of those four monarchs had died of natural causes, neither had any of them been felled by violence.

The deepest dungeon of the Imperial Palace was called the Breathless partly because it was humid, hot, and stuffy at all times. But mostly, it owed its name to the panting and gasping of its mortally terrified inmates.

The Breathless was a large circular cage with a stone passage all the way around it. Abrogail summoned the most senior of the guardsmen to join her and Chalcedony as they made a slow circuit around the cage, allowing the queen to survey the forty or so unfortunates who huddled miserably within.

As she always did, Abrogail had memorized the names and histories of each of the dungeon's inmates, as far as these were known. Sitting nearly in the middle of the cell was its youngest occupant, a little girl of five whose name was unknown. Nobody had ever bothered to name her at all, most likely. She just sat there with her arms clasped around her knees, waiting for whatever was going to happen next to hurry up and do so. The girl, Abrogail knew, had been arrested for stealing an orange from the marketplace. She'd stolen many such oranges before with impunity, but on this particular day the stall owner had been in an unusually foul mood and had called the Watch.

"Her," Abrogail said to the guardsman, gracefully extending her red-sheathed arm toward the girl.

The queen took a few more steps and spotted a man with the look of a corpse that hadn't yet fallen down. His name was Tyrain, a former long-shoreman on the city of Egorian's docks. A badly broken arm had made it impossible for him to work, much to his sorrow and that of his wife and five children. In the weeks that followed, infection had taken the arm, and starvation had taken the wife and two of the children. A few days ago, Tyrain had spotted a gold piece that some unknown merchant had dropped on the

pavement, and picked it up. Nobody knew who the coin's original owner had been, but it hadn't been Tyrain, and so he'd been arrested for thievery. He'd been languishing in the Breathless for a week. It was probably best that he didn't know what had become of his three remaining children.

"That one," the queen said, pointing him out.

A short, middle-aged man hurried up to the bars, sweaty and desperate. Abrogail knew him to be Garrick Lomen, receiver of stolen goods and serial abuser of prostitutes and barmaids. His present incarceration was due to the former offense. Nobody much cared about the latter.

"Majestrix," he said, "I know you to be a merciful queen...."

"No, you don't."

"But... but I know that you reward those who render you good service. I have a cache of treasure in a warehouse basement in the Street of Long Fingers. The guardsmen never found it. I shall tell you where it is. It shall be my gift to you, my queen, if only you will point your red hand at someone else today."

Abrogail pretended to consider his offer for a few moments. "Very well. Tell the guardsman here where the money is, and he will send someone to find it. If it is there as you say, you shall live another month. Not that you'll know the difference between one day and another."

She walked away as the fool stood there, babbling his thanks. She'd had no intention of picking him anyway, but free gold was better than none.

Abrogail chose four more prisoners: a Desnan priest, caught preaching against Lord Asmodeus; a tavern girl who'd had the poor judgment to complain to the authorities after being badly beaten by a customer she'd taken to bed; a man who'd been accused of stealing food from the city dump; and a young seamstress, heavily pregnant with the child of one of Abrogail's most loathsome but most well-connected courtiers.

The six chosen were led from the cage as all the other inmates let out sighs of great, if temporary, relief. In a month's time, the red-armed queen would be back to choose another half-dozen. A few of them would even still be alive by then.

The selected prisoners were chained together in a line and marched

behind Abrogail and Chalcedony down the long, doorless corridor that led to the awful room known as the Pit of Sacrifice. Actually, it was less of a march than a stagger, and the procession had to halt several times while one or more prisoners was dragged roughly back to his or her feet.

The double doors leading into the Pit of Sacrifice were twelve feet high, twelve feet broad and five feet thick. Abrogail placed a red-sheathed palm on each door, and pushed them open as easily as she opened the doors to her bedchamber balcony.

The large stone room beyond was flooded with light, though no light source was visible. In its center rose a circular, stepped dais with an iron throne at the top, ready for the unlikely eventuality that Asmodeus himself would respond to a summons. Before the dais was a round hole in the floor, ten feet across.

Abrogail stayed well away from the lip of that hole. Anyone brave or foolish enough to approach the edge could clearly see what was down there. That sight was mostly reserved for the unlucky sacrifices that were flung over the side, to fall ten miles to the burning, rocky ground of Avernus, the topmost layer of the Nine Hells. Their bodies would die in explosions of gore as they hit bottom, many minutes later. Their souls would not be so lucky.

The guardsmen were not allowed into the room of the Pit of Sacrifice, which suited them very well. The stone doors rumbled shut behind Abrogail, leaving her alone with Chalcedony and six miserable innocents. The unlucky half-dozen were quite aware that they now faced death and damnation as House Thrune's monthly sacrifices to Asmodeus and Hell. Most were too terrified even to weep.

From a pouch at her waist, the queen drew a cylindrical black stone. Evil-looking runes of inlaid silver wound around it from end to end.

The Imperial House of Thrune had benefited greatly over the centuries from its close associations with Hell and its god-king, Asmodeus. Abrogail's family had enjoyed unassailable power, tremendous wealth, and every decadent pleasure imaginable. The price was an early death and eternal damnation for each one of them, but no matter: that payment was always "off in the

future somewhere.” Until the day it suddenly wasn’t.

The Thrunes assumed that their useful partnership with Hell would result in favored status in the afterlife, of course. Family tradition held that the founder of the dynasty, Abrogail the First, the present queen’s great-grandmother, ruled as one of the Duchesses of Hell. Every citizen of Cheliax was required on pain of death to pretend to believe this. But the current Abrogail hadn’t been particularly surprised to learn from Contessa Lrilatha, one evening when the devil lady was slightly drunk on fairy blood, that her ancestor was in fact presently honored by acting as one of the Living Torches that lined the walls of Asmodeus’s great hall. Her screams, Lrilatha told her, anchored the high soprano section of the Hell-king’s Choir of Pain.

When Abrogail had ascended the throne, still little more than a child, her first action had been to express a desire for more direct involvement by devil-kind in the affairs of the royal court. No longer would the hosts of Hell manipulate events, unseen from the shadows. Instead, they would be allowed to hold official positions of power and influence, where they could clearly observe the results of their efforts.

And where they could, for the first time since the reign of Abrogail the First, be clearly observed themselves, out in the light they hated so much.

Queen Abrogail knew that General Gorthoklek, the pit fiend who served as her advisor and regent, and who reported directly to Asmodeus, spied, scried and kept tabs on her every move. It was simply the way devil-kind did things. But the Thrunes had never been fools, and they kept some secrets that even the hosts of Hell did not suspect.

“Chalcedony,” Abrogail called, holding out her free hand. The golem stepped obediently over and took her mistress’s hand in her own.

Thanks to an ancient and secret enchantment, any member of the royal family in physical contact with their magical guardian, Chalcedony, became simply “not there” to magical effects. Killing spells could not find their target. Scrying spells could find nothing at all. As long as she held on to her bodyguard’s white stony hand, Abrogail would be invisible to everyone in the world except the six prisoners who stood—or knelt, or slumped—before her.

Holding the black stone cylinder in her free hand, she read the spell inscribed thereon:

*Erea michi nic tan tani,
Erea hal ten karri dos.
Himal teren ka donna ani,
Erea lin den hama kos.*

Before she'd even finished reading, a figure had begun appearing. A couple of the prisoners were still able to moan with fright. Abrogail cleared her throat and stood tall and straight, every inch the confident, beautiful queen. But she took care not to let go of Chalcedony's strong hand.

A mighty winged warrior took form before her, clad in adamantine armor. His skin was green as emerald, and his eyes shone with a burning inner light.

"Greetings, Lord Kazakar."

Kazakar nodded to the queen, then surveyed the line of prisoners. "These are the best of the lot, then?"

"Yes. Of all the prisoners in the cage awaiting sacrifice, these are the least stained with guilt. All are innocent and unjustly imprisoned. They are the six Asmodeus would relish the most, unless I judge wrongly."

"You seldom do."

"Will you take them, then?"

Kazakar stepped closer to the prisoners. "This little girl has the mark of Sarenrae the Dawnflower," he said, considering. "I think Lady Xerashir at the Temple of the Shining Star in Absalom would be more than pleased to take her in. And the holy man of Desna, here, will of course be reunited with his fellows. The rest shall require more thought, but I'm certain we can find suitable places for all of them, here and there." He turned back to Abrogail. "Certainly better than becoming wet spots on the burning floor of Hell, as its king wishes, anyway. I must admit, Majestrix, that your courage is a constant source of amazement to me. The enchantment in the hand of your lovely marble servant, there, is all that prevents General Gorthoklek

from finding that you have been delivering Lord Asmodeus's sacrifices into the keeping of an angel, instead."

"Chalcedony is made of onyx, not marble," the queen corrected with a slight smile. "And we've only begun to unravel the rotten ball of hate so carefully woven by my ancestors. I hope I live long enough to see it accomplished. If I don't, I'll teach my son or daughter to continue in my footsteps. Carefully. Secretly."

Kazakar nodded. "I stand in awe of your abilities as an actress. All of Golarion knows you to be a spoiled, spiteful little harpy. The very queen of bitches."

That made Abrogail smile even wider. "Well, I have to have some fun, after all."

The planetar smiled back for the first time. "I hope your fun continues for a long while to come, then. But tell me, what will you do when Asmodeus decides to inquire about the sacrifices he was supposed to receive?"

"That's easy," Abrogail replied. "Asmodeus hasn't been expecting any human sacrifices at all. It's all just a fiction to show everyone what an enthusiastic little hell-beast I am. In a few moments, when it's safe to let go of Chalcedony, I promise to cackle viciously and rub my red hands together in evil glee."

"Amazing."

"The King of Hell is much more interested in collecting souls who damned themselves of their own free will, due to greed or lust—or plain stupidity. Splattered children and townsfolk are only of interest to the lower rabble of devil-kind."

"I bow to your great knowledge... which must have been most unpleasant to obtain. I will depart now with these innocents, to consider how they may best be comforted. Shall I see you again in a month's time?"

"You shall."

"Then farewell for now, queen of surprises." Kazakar placed his hand on the chain that bound the prisoners together. There was a brief flash of light, and angel and mortals vanished.

Abrogail finally let go of Chalcedony's hand. "Well, that's that. And

now, I'm hungry. Are you hungry?"

The words were not a command, so the golem just gazed back at her mutely.

The queen put her red-sheathed hands on her hips and glared at her bodyguard with mock severity. "One of these days, we're going to have to teach you some social graces, young lady," she scolded. "Perhaps later, when people are watching, I shall screech at you in regal anger."

Those words were not a command, either. Chalcedony stared unblinkingly at her mistress. Abrogail shook her head. "*Tsk*. Come on. The work of a wicked tyrantess is never done."

She pushed open the door of the chamber. The senior guardsman awaited her outside, looking uncomfortable.

"Is it finished, Majestrix?"

"It is never finished, minion whose name I shall never bother to learn. But yes. Hell has received its proper tribute today."

Abrogail pulled off her red gloves with twin snaps, and giggled girlishly as she headed back up the corridor. The guardsman swallowed hard and followed at a safe distance. If anything was more disturbing than the queen's anger, it was her mirth.

THE HERALD AND THE MASK

BY ELAINE BETTS



he steps go on before you,

Each challenge you endure

Will bring you closer to Transcendence and the Mask.

The god-king ever beckons,

His blessings you embrace

When you climb the steps and wear his holy Mask.

Megaira smiled as she gently brushed the long dark hair of the woman seated before her. The woman held a bundle close to her chest and rocked back and forth humming a quiet tune. At a knock on the cabin's doorframe, the woman fell silent. She straightened and turned her head away as Megaira looked at the captain of the small vessel standing in the doorway.

"Forgive the intrusion, my lady." He dipped his head in apology. "We've reached Thronestep and will be docking momentarily. I hope to leave port within the hour. My crew is anxious to return to Kyonin; Razmiran makes them nervous." The seated woman mutely turned her attention back to her bundle.

"Thank you, Captain," Megaira said with a slight nod. "We will disembark immediately so you can be on your way." The elf bowed and left them. Megaira set down the brush and knelt before the other woman.

"We're home, Lady Brionna," she whispered, securing a silver mask over the other woman's face.

"Shhh... you'll wake the baby." The noblewoman hugged the swaddled

form and rocked, resuming her humming.

Megaira stood and took an ornate iron mask from a table beside the cabin's single bed. She donned the mask and smoothed her black robes before gathering up her small bag of belongings. A worn letter peeked out from the front pocket. It was several years old now, the paper torn and faded around the edges. The elves of Kyonin delivered it to her when she lived in Greenwood, cared for by the church of Desna since infancy. Megaira had read the letter so many times she knew it by heart, but in order to have the instructions fresh in her mind, she pulled it out and looked it over once more:

Megaira Tageiryn,

Word has reached me in the capital that you desire to bring our dear sister home. I wish to help you accomplish this goal. My messenger will inform you of my terms. If you find them agreeable, send word through him and I will await you in Thronestep.

There are several measures I must insist upon to ensure our success:

Never remove your mask except to eat. It is your Face in Razmiran. The priests and priestesses of Razmir wear their masks at all times. The hierarchy of the church is represented in the masks; the costlier the material, the higher the position in the church.

Our sister is a Mask. They occupy the Twelfth Step. The silver mask I have enclosed belongs to her. It was Lady Brionna's Face long before you were born. I have also enclosed blue robes. She is to wear them in the city. For you, I have sent the painted iron mask and black robes of a Herald. The Heralds occupy the Eighth Step. It is a modest position, one that will not draw much attention.

Be reverent toward your exalted companion and all of your betters. Never address an Exalted One before they

address you, and speak only when required. Remember, in turn, that your lessers are beneath you in every way.

When challenged, present the warrant of passage I have enclosed and, if needed, let it be known that your exalted companion was commanded by our Lord Razmir himself to speak to no one until she has hand-delivered to him what he sent her to find. That alone will get you an audience.

Above all, Megaira, tell no one who you are. Never refer to your companion by name. She is Mask, that is all. And you are Herald. Never offer your names freely, but if you are pressed, reply "I am the Herald. My exalted companion is the Mask. The Lord Razmir alone knows our names. Let our lord hear that the Herald and the Mask have returned."

You will not know who I am until it is over, but I will know you. Trust only in this, and reveal your identity and your mission to no one.

I will await your answer.

Your Friend

The letter was mysterious and unexpected, but it was what Megaira had been waiting for. Her guardians in the temple raised her with the knowledge of her exile from Razmiran. The "church" of Razmir had left her to die as an infant, but Lady Brionna had brought her to Kyonin. The elves, ever at war with Razmir, welcomed them and gave them shelter and care in Greenwood. The elves had a plan, and Megaira was only too happy to serve as their emissary. The Order of Razmir was very particular and full of rules and protocols. If she misspoke even once, if she took one wrong step, it would all be over and she would find herself in a Razmiri dungeon awaiting indoctrination through torture and coercion. Megaira shuddered. She hadn't come all this way to fail now. With the guidance of her secret collaborator, she would make it through this, and she hoped that after so many years, Lady Brionna would finally find some peace.

Megaira tucked the letter into a pocket deep inside her robes. She then

helped her companion up and ushered her onto the deck of the barge as sailors secured it to the docks. Before them, nestled along the shores of Lake Encarthan, stretched the city of Thronestep, the majestic capital city of the nation of Razmiran. Megaira drew a deep breath before guiding the other woman down the gangplank. Their long exile was finally over.

The docks were crowded, but as Megaira led the lady down the cobbled streets, the peasants scurried out of their way—a direct response to the masks they wore. She kept her eyes fixed on the magnificent gates before her leading into the Steps district, the opulent center of the city.

Masks were everywhere. They were set into the walls, covered the faces of the statues flanking the entrance, and hid the identities of the acolytes guarding the doors. The iron and silver masks worn by Megaira and Lady Brionna signified their superiority in the Order of Razmir, so the acolytes bowed at their approach. After a cursory inspection of Brionna's bundle, they ushered the two women inside.

Thronestep was aptly named. The city rose in levels behind a wall that kept the masked followers of Razmir separate from the rabble of the slums—the Stones district—that sprawled around its base. Once behind the wall, the Steps seemed to rise in increasing opulence.

The lowest Step was busy with acolytes, all in white robes and simple iron masks. They bowed low before the two women and ducked out of their way, and Megaira smiled behind her mask: all of the secrecy would only help them reach their goal.

Onward they climbed, through throngs of gray-robed priests with white-painted iron masks in the Third Step, and past black-clad Heralds wearing masks identical to Megaira's in the Eighth. They all sidestepped out of the way as the two women walked purposefully through their midst, and Megaira struggled to keep an even pace as her anticipation rose. With each stride, they grew closer to the end of their journey.

The Twelfth Step of the capital brought no challenges either—the other blue-robed Masks barely gave the pair a second glance—but Megaira knew that this would change as they approached the next lavish gate. She prayed silently that her mysterious associate was watching over them as promised

and pulled the authorization permit from the pocket of her robe. This would be her true test. Regardless, she had to remember the words of the letter. Her secret ally would not be revealed until the mission was over. Until then, she could trust no one with the truth.

The sentries at the Thirteenth Step allowed them to enter, and with each subsequent Step, the scrutiny increased. Lady Brionna's bundle was examined at each gate and returned to them without comment. The letter of passage written by her enigmatic ally had to be shown at each entry in order for the guards to permit them inside. The expressionless masks increased in beauty and value, and the robes were of colors Megaira had never seen as they rose higher and higher through the city. Megaira's heart quickened and she focused on her journey as the level of attention on her and her companion grew.

Then, just as they passed through the arch that marked the entrance to the home of the Visions, Megaira and Lady Brionna were confronted by a tall figure in a gold mask. Megaira tried to remember what she'd learned about the Order of Razmir. The Visions were the most powerful of Razmir's followers. They were his advisors, his royal court. They all wore identical gold masks and red robes. Lady Brionna, as a Mask of the Twelfth Step, was one position below the Visions. Megaira, dressed as a Herald, was two positions below. She kept her gaze downcast as their superior approached. Brionna, focused on her bundle, didn't even seem to notice.

"What is your business in Fifteenth Step?" The voice was muffled yet authoritative, but betrayed nothing of the individual's gender, and the red robes flowed in such a way that it was impossible to say anything about the shape or size of the person wearing them.

Megaira hesitated, carefully choosing her words. "We seek audience with our Lord Razmir, Exalted One."

The Vision glowered at her. "You dare speak for your better?!"

Megaira bowed her head slightly. "My exalted companion has been commanded by our Lord Razmir himself to utter not a word until he has received us and what we were sent to retrieve, Exalted Vision."

The golden masked disciple stared at her in silence for some time.

Megaira forced herself to remain still under the figure's penetrating gaze. The whole confrontation felt ominous.

Just when she was sure the Vision was about to call for soldiers to take them away, another question came.

"What is your name?"

Megaira inhaled deeply, remembering the words of the letter. If she didn't reply exactly she was sure her journey—and perhaps her life—would end right there.

"I am the Herald. My exalted companion is the Mask. The Lord Razmir alone knows our names. Let our lord hear that the Herald and the Mask have returned."

Megaira held her breath as the Vision studied them intently. The silver-masked woman was absorbed with her bundle, entirely oblivious to the danger.

Don't speak, Megaira thought as the silence dragged on, hoping that the other woman could sense her thoughts. *Don't speak, don't speak, don't speak, don't speak...*

"Follow me," the Vision finally replied.

Megaira exhaled. She nudged Lady Brionna forward and they followed the Vision through the remaining Steps to Razmir's high palace.

"Wait here," their escort ordered once they were inside. Around them, other Visions milled about the throne room. They watched the newcomers, but none addressed them. Megaira and her companion stood before a dais of thirty-one steps. At the top of the staircase, on a broad, golden throne, sat a man in an ivory mask.

Razmir, Megaira thought, hate roiling within her as she stared at the false god.

The Vision ascended fifteen steps, then stopped and bowed low before his ruler.

"Great and Glorious Razmir," the Vision proclaimed loudly, "thy Herald and thy Mask have done thy bidding. They have returned to thee, thou Glorious One, and beseech an audience, oh Great Lord."

At the sound of the ruler's name, Lady Brionna dropped to her knees

and kissed the lowest step. Megaira followed her lead, hoping this was a sign that some awareness was returning to her companion's troubled mind, and she said a silent prayer for Brionna's sanity. The Visions around them whispered amongst themselves, but no one approached.

"Rise." Razmir's powerful voice resonated throughout the grand throne room. Megaira and her companion stood.

"What have my servants brought?"

Megaira reached into her robes and withdrew a talisman from a velvet pouch. The other woman gasped as the finely-wrought gold orchid was revealed, hanging from a rich gold chain. Countless sparkling diamonds decorated its petals, and set in the center of the amulet was a crystal vial stopped with a diamond-encrusted cap. Lady Brionna carefully handed Megaira her bundle, then took the amulet, holding it reverently before her, and bowed.

"A gift, my Glorious Lord Razmir, from the distant land of Thuvia, in honor of thy greatness. The princes of the desert sands beg thee, Holy One, to look upon them with favor." The blue-robed woman's voice was strong and clear.

Razmir reached out a hand, and Brionna walked slowly up the stairs. When she reached the fifteenth step, she bowed low and held the necklace out above her head. The waiting Vision took it from her hands and ascended the rest of stairs, kneeling before Razmir and presenting the amulet. After Razmir took it, the Vision walked backward down the stairs to the fifteenth step, head bowed low. The ruler studied the amulet for a moment before draping the chain over his head.

"Beautiful." He admired the amulet as it gleamed and glistened around his neck. He looked down at Megaira and Brionna, beckoning them forward. "Come. Vision, bring them to my chambers." Then he stood and vanished behind the wall of tapestries behind his throne.

"You will follow me," the Vision stated before turning to follow Razmir. Megaira watched Brionna in wonder. Her prayer had been answered in an astounding way. She'd known Brionna her whole life, and never before had she seen the woman so lucid. She just hoped her mental clarity would last,

at least until the ruse was complete.

The wall of tapestries hid a private hall lined with masked statues. The Vision led them down to the far end, where a set of black wooden doors inlaid with gold and ivory stood. There was no handle, just a large ivory mask at the center, but when the Vision pressed on it, the mask separated and the heavy doors swung inward. The three robed figures stepped into the opulent private quarters of Razmir, and the doors thudded closed behind them. Megaira almost turned when she heard the lock engage, but her resolve held and she focused ahead.

Razmir greeted them from a plush divan. "Come, my beauty. Kneel at my feet and tell me how you acquired this wonderful gift."

Lady Brionna moved swiftly to the floor before him. Megaira stayed where she was, a hidden smirk stretching across her face as Razmir reached down and removed her companion's mask. He immediately recoiled at the beaming face gazing up at him in adoration. The once-beautiful face was acid-scarred and warped beyond recognition. But no one had eyes like Brionna. Megaira knew, if he did not recognize the face he had mutilated, he would remember her eyes.

"My love," the woman whispered, placing a hand on his knee. "I've come home. I've come home with the elixir, just as you wanted. And... something else." She gestured to Megaira, who quickly brought her the bundle of cloth. The woman held it up to Razmir, her face glowing with happiness.

"Our daughter," she told him. "Isn't she lovely? I... I hope you are pleased. I named her Megaira.... It was my mother's name. It... it means orchid. Like the sun orchid! We have the elixir. I can be young again, and beautiful always. We can be together, forever. Just as you wanted."

Megaira watched in satisfaction as her mother introduced the bundle of blankets to her bastard of a father. Razmir shot to his feet and kicked the woman away from him. Megaira's mother cried out in pain as she landed hard on her side. The bundle of blankets unraveled as they rolled away from her, revealing nothing but yards and yards of fabric.

"What is this blasphemer doing in my presence?" Razmir demanded, pulling hard on the chain about his neck. "What's in this vial, woman?"

Poison? Is this your gift? Herald! What have you brought before me? You shall be severely punished for your indiscretion.” Megaira removed her mask and smiled as he backed away from her.

“Impossible,” he whispered. “Vision! Remove these blights from my holy city!” He still fought with the amulet, trying to open the latch on the chain.

Megaira froze. For a moment she’d forgotten about the gold-masked Vision who’d escorted them into the chamber. She turned, drawing a dagger from a hidden fold in her robes. The Vision took a step forward....

“No,” the low voice replied from behind the golden mask.

Visibly shaken, Razmir snarled and raised both hands in front of him.

“You *dare* defy me? DIE!”

Megaira smirked as the amulet around his neck glowed, feeding off the energy it absorbed from him as he attempted to draw on his arcane skills. The liquid inside the vial began to boil with intensity. A crackling blue light sparked out from it, surrounding Razmir and infusing the air with the acrid smell of ozone. Megaira felt the hairs all over her body stand on end as raw power surged around her.

Razmir’s scream turned to one of pain as his robes began to smolder, and the stench of charred flesh permeated the room. Megaira strode toward him as he frantically clawed at his throat.

“The amulet won’t come off. It’s a gift from the elves of Kyonin. They wanted to thank you for sending my mother to them. She taught the elven heretics all they needed to know to strike against you, as you always feared they would.” Razmir tried to back away, but Megaira was quicker. In one move, she seized him by the neck and plunged her dagger into his side. The weakened ruler grunted and dropped to his knees.

“You meant to send my mother to her death all those years ago,” she growled in his ear. “You threw acid in her face when she told you she was pregnant with your child, and still she loved you. That poor, foolish woman loved you after you destroyed her face, after you told her you’d never allow her bastard child to be born. How many others have died at your hands, or by your decree? How many have suffered? You torture and murder anyone

who dares to stand in your way. And you destroy everyone who's foolish enough to love you." She forced his head to turn toward the woman lying on the floor, sobbing and moaning as she hugged the ragged bundle of blankets tightly.

"Look at her." Megaira shook her head. "Still alive, but her mind is gone. The elves saved her... saved me. But they couldn't restore her mind." She turned back to her father and twisted the dagger further into his side. Razmir groaned.

"Only the power of a *true* god can save you now, *Father*," she whispered in his ear. Then she stood and turned to the Vision.

The tall dark man had removed his mask. "Well done," he said to her with a smile. "You followed my instructions precisely." He looked down at Razmir and his face darkened.

"I've waited long to see him fall. I've seen so many sent to their deaths... so many lives, so much human potential wasted on a vain, heartless charlatan. My dear Brionna.... She is the apex of his cruelty. I was too late save her, but by the gods, we have our revenge. It's finally over."

Megaira gave him a nod, then turned to her father. She bent down and ripped away the ivory mask to reveal a face withered with age and pale from blood loss.

Razmir stared up at her, gasping for breath. He clutched at her legs. "Mercy.... Please... daughter." Megaira kicked him away in disgust. He coughed twice, then let out a horrible wail as he breathed his last.

Megaira sighed deeply. "Thank you," she said to the Vision with a bow of her head. He was already removing his red robes and exchanging them for a set of Razmir's.

He smiled again and held out the golden mask. "It's yours, if you'll take it. I could use an ally who knows the truth."

Megaira hesitated. She looked down at her mother.

"She'll be well cared for," the man promised. "We grew up together, Brionna and I. We joined the church together, served him together. I saw what was happening, but was powerless to stop it. I couldn't protect her from him, but I can protect her now. Stay with me, Megaira. You can both

live here in the palace. No harm will ever come to her again.”

Megaira reached out and tentatively took the Vision’s mask. “What is your name?”

The man’s smile broadened as he picked up the ivory mask she’d thrown on the floor.

“Call me Razmir.”

BEERS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD

BY JAMES TYNER

Ellend was on his fourth beer when the tavern door slammed open. He'd been debating a whiskey for his next mug. Or maybe something local—some rot-gut made in a trough by someone's uncle. He'd started to feel that warm edge creeping along his face and fingers, the loosening of cold in his elbows and wrists, and that twinge in his knee that always bothered.

The open door brought a breeze that made the fire in the hearth sputter. Snow fluttered inside in tiny whirls, pooling around table legs. The pain was back in his knee. *Definitely whiskey*, he decided. A form stumbled in, covered in furs. Ellend thought it looked like a fur-lined egg. The barkeep stopped wiping the counter and smiled, showing off three perfect teeth.

“Welcome.”

The egg straightened up and a thin arm poked out. It yanked away the make-shift hood. It was a young Tian woman. The barkeep's smile stayed. “Can I get you something?”

Shivering, Egg grabbed the door and closed it. A drunk at the bar remained asleep, even with the sudden gust and drop in temperature. Egg turned and scanned the room. Her eyes went from barkeep, to drunk, to old man sitting by himself at a table in the back, to serving boy, and settled on Ellend.

“I'll take wine—any kind, just warm—and water, and bread.”

The barkeep beamed. “Of course. We'll bring it out.” He nodded at the serving boy who hurried into the kitchen.

Ellend turned back to his drink. He was on a pilgrimage: to visit all

the bars and taste every alcohol, from all corners. He'd started nine months ago on the path of Aganhei. It was a trade route that ran north from Varisia through the Lands of the Linnorm Kings and over the Crown to various parts of Tian Xia. He'd been in the Linnorm Kingdoms for months now—longer than he meant to—but here in Turvik, a small fortified town in the northern borderlands, he'd found the nicest damned barkeep and the best service to date. He took a thick gulp of his beer and hoped to fit in another.

Egg trudged over to Ellend and pulled up a chair. She started to dismantle. She took off her outer fur, caked in snow and ice. A silver wolf pelt followed. Layers peeled back like onion skins, each placed on the back of the chair until a tiny Tian woman stood before him, clutching a bundle tightly to her chest. A big bundle. A big, squirming bundle. Then she unwrapped that too. Ellend lifted his mug to the barkeep and tapped the rim. Barkeep nodded.

It was a baby. Black hair and pale white skin. A year or two old, maybe? Ellend was bad at guessing children's ages. They were just varying degrees of noise to him: born and crying, crawling and crying, walking with new steps and still crying. Egg placed the baby in a chair, and the thing didn't fall over—so a little older—but it didn't have much hair. Its head was big and moon-shaped. It was smiling.

Serving Boy came over with bread, wine and water, and another beer for Ellend. Egg thanked him and tore the bread into chunks, placing a few on the wood table in front of Moon Head. Then she snatched up her wine like it was owed gold and drank from it. A long drink. She set it down, and Ellend could see her cheeks were flushed. Not one to let people drink alone, Ellend sipped from his fresh, frothy beer.

"I am Oboko. Oboko Mistadaki." Egg's Taldane was perfect, no trace of an accent. "Two days ago, I dreamt about you."

Ellend spit out his mouthful and laughed, not bothering to wipe up. "If I had a copper for every time I heard that," he rubbed the gray stubble on his chin, "I'd have three copper. *Three*." He leveled his stare at the woman. "I'm not the kid's father or uncle. Just look—I'm a sun-kissed Andoren, through and through. And *that* is something else altogether. But hey, I'll buy you a drink for the laugh."

Oboko was serious, her face calm. “I don’t know your name. But I know you’ve been traveling for some time.” Ellend snorted. The woman continued. “I know you wear a gold chain around your neck, hidden. There’s a gold tankard trinket on it, and a silver wedding ring with two initials. An ‘E’ and an ‘X.’ It was hard to see. I know that you were married, and that you lost—”

Ellend raised a knotted hand, cutting her off. Oboko met his eyes, and a silence settled between them. A snore ripped loudly from the drunk at the counter. Ellend threw a lazy punch. Oboko’s hand spun up and over in a wide wheel, deflecting his fist. Moon Head picked up a chunk of bread and shoved it into his mouth. Ellend slouched back into his chair. Oboko’s hand hovered in a defensive posture.

Ellend drank, burped, and offered his own observations. “I know that you are a Falling Star of Desna.” His voice was steady: no excitement or humor. Specks of foam gathered on the edges of his lips. “You are fourth year, maybe fifth by that technique. You are good, probably the top of your novitiate. Not perfect, though. You need more wrist control. And keep your elbow tighter— it veers towards sloppy. You probably hear too much how good you are. It’s weakening you.”

Oboko closed her eyes and lowered her head in a bow. When she raised it again, tears streaked her face. “You are the one. I was pretty sure of it. But now I know. You are the child’s protector I dreamt about.”

Ellend’s mouth was dry. “What I *am* is tired and sobering. All I wanted was a quiet night with lots of fine alcohol. I don’t need your nonsense. I’m leaving.” He stood, bones popping, the mug still in his hand.

Oboko followed him with her eyes. “What you are, master, is a Tankard, a Tankard of Cayden Cailean. One of only two left, a practitioner of a lost style.”

Ellend ran a hand through his short graying hair. He sat back down looking defeated, ramming his drink down his throat while she talked.

“I’d never even heard of your kind before. I did not know the faith of Cayden had any monks, any formal styles, until my dream. Desna, the Resplendent Goddess of Fortune, led me to you, just as she led me to this child.”

Ellend inhaled deeply and caught a whiff of himself. He hadn't bathed in days, and he reeked of alcohol. Beer, whiskey, wines—much of it stained his shirt, like a story. His knee ached so bad that shivers pulsed up and down his leg. He hadn't been called a Tankard in ten years.

Moon Head shoveled another chunk of bread down. Ellend looked up. "Your dreams mean nothing to me. This kid means nothing to me."

Oboko bowed again, much slighter this time. "This child means everything, master, to all of us. He was born of a thief and a beggar. His grandparents a fisherman and a tailor. Uncle's a thief—"

Ellend cut her off again with a raised hand. Something in his face changed. He laughed. "You know, I knew you were coming. I knew *someone* was coming."

Oboko smiled with anticipation. "Did you dream of me, master?"

Ellend shook his head. "No, nothing that grand. You see, I've been in this country for months now. Do you know this is the nicest anyone has been to me?" He pushed his beverage towards her. "You see this beer? It's not watered down, it's delicious. There's no fighting in here, the prices are cheap, and the bartender keeps cleaning that counter. Clean and clean and clean."

Oboko looked at him, confused.

Ellend continued. "There's a family. Big. They call themselves a clan. See, many years ago, this man found he was good at killing. He decided to make a business out of it, taught his family, and his family taught their families. Now here we are years later, generations later, and they're making vast amounts of money hiring themselves out as mercenaries of a sort: you tell them someone you want dead, they do it. Very secret stuff, mind you—very quiet. I forget the exact name, but it translates into something like 'Shadow Dragon Wings'"

Oboko took a quick sip from her wine. Moon Head stuck his hand in the water mug, splashing.

"This room is filled with them." Ellend pointed with his eyes. "That drunk there, two knives in the back of his trousers. Uncle Creepy behind me, same. Bartender: that's a murderer if I've ever seen one."

The color left her face.

“You walked into a room full of death,” Ellend said. “I knew it. Soon as I got here. But I also knew it wasn’t for me. I just wanted my drinks. Have a few. Then I’d get the hell out of here.”

Oboko looked at him like she was waiting for an answer. “What do we do?” she whispered.

Ellend waved her off. “We? No. *You*.” He downed a large swig. “My advice: stop looking guilty. Enjoy your drink. I’m enjoying mine.” The barkeep made a noise as he set plates on a silver tray. Ellend caught his eye, then shrugged. “Never mind. Here comes the barkeep. This is where it starts.”

Oboko reached forward and grasped both his hands in hers. He was still gripping his mug. A small bit of beer splashed out. “The ‘X’ is for Xandra, the ‘X’ on your ring. I remember now...” Her brown eyes glistened. “In the dream, she told me to tell you to give up giving up. Please let this mean something.”

Ellend froze. He’d heard that phrase twice before.

When he was first learning the art of the tankard, his teacher had been Xandra, his future wife. He’d hated the rigidity of the novitiate. It was years of organized training and strict schedules, so different than the whimsical ideals Cayden usually taught. Xandra had said the words to him as encouragement and he’d stuck it out. She’d said them again on her deathbed. She’d kissed him with cracked and purple lips, some magic curse eating her from the inside. Then she said those words before the last breath left her.

The bartender came, smiling, around the counter with a tray of meats and cheeses, the smell thick and warm, his three teeth gleaming proudly. Ellend took a quick sip and then slammed his cup down. “Oboko: Desna Catches Stars at Dawn.”

She looked at Ellend for the thinnest of moments. She then spun to the side, the blue of her shirt a brilliant blur. She stood as she twisted, arms coming up over her head in a point. The bartender’s knife hit air. Ellend flung his mug, the last of the beer swirling out of it. It hit the barkeep in the mouth, leaving only two proud teeth.

“Sky Falls In Dreams!” Ellend shouted.

Oboko listened. She bowed low with arms wide. A dagger from the

sleeping drunk at the counter dug itself into the wood of the wall just above her head. "Take him."

Ellend stood, slowly. Uncle Creepy was up now. There was a massive ax in his hands. Ellend wondered where he'd been hiding that. Barkeep dropped the platter and pulled a long knife from his apron. Moon Head had more bread in his hands, and took a very deliberate bite, his eyes on Ellend's.

Again, a pause. This was the moment Ellend loved most. That quiet before the chaos. This was his home. And then Barkeep's knife was fully out, darting forward. Ellend leaned back. The blade cut the air, inches from his nose. Ellend kicked out. He caught the edge of the table, sliding it forward into Barkeep's gut.

Ellend pushed forward and picked up the fallen platter in one fluid motion. Uncle Creepy raised the ax over his head. Ellend went low and caught the old man in the gut. Air wrenched out of him. Ellend straightened, ramming his head into Creepy's chin. Uncle stumbled back, dazed. A blur of motion, Ellend wrapped the platter behind the assassin's head and pulled him forward into a flying knee. There was a crunch and a clang. Skull gave way to knee, the platter bending from the force.

Oboko was nervous. She'd only ever practiced. Hours and hours, years of sparring. But it was still only sparring. But then she thought of the child, and she was calm. The man in front of her was calm also, tranquil, knife held lightly. He walked towards her, cutting off distance. She took her stance, legs crossed, one hand high above her head, the other low, palm flat. The knife came quick. Low hand up, wrist against wrist, blocking. Step forward, high hand down, edge of palm to throat. And there was a sound she thought was her own breathing. But it was the man in front of her, now struggling for breath through a crushed throat.

Ellend spun away from the collapsing Uncle Creepy, and back to the barkeep. These were steps, like dance, so familiar. He caught Barkeep's knife as it came slashing at him. Again, this was rhythm. Hand to wrist, catch and turn, control joint, and other hand, palm strike. Break forearm. Knife clattered to floor. Break elbow. Joint torn, a wrenching pop. Break shoulder. Body now limp, hits the floor with a thud.

The barkeep convulsed.

And then Oboko screamed. The serving boy stood behind her, his knife buried in her back. Her eyes fluttered, her body went limp. Ellend hopped towards her, catching her with his left hand, and lashing out with his right leg. It hit the boy in the face and flung him across the room.

Ellend laid her down and looked behind him for the child. There was a soft light spilling from Moon Head, a bluish glow. There was a shape to it. Arms formed from the light, then legs and a featureless head. The child was nestled in the center of this thing of light. It seemed familiar to Ellend.

“Give me that baby, and I’ll let you go.” It was the serving boy. Ellend knew he should still be down, maybe even dead, from that kick. “You don’t know what you will cause, what you will start, if that child leaves here.”

The light around Moon Head had taken on a more distinct shape: wings, a circle of fire above the bluish head, a fist-sized eye of light glistening in the halo. The infant was calm.

The serving boy roared, a long, horrible howl. Veins bulged. From blue to purple to the black of volcanic rock. Back arched, clothes ripped, skin stretched. Ellend watched as an inky tail sprouted. The mouth opened wider and wider, becoming wicked with teeth. Horns spilled from the head. It was the size of a horse, but seemed so much bigger in the tightness of the tavern. The long neck snaked in the room, spilled over chairs, and claws splintered tables, smoke seeping from rocky crags in its hide. Ellend recognized the great underworld serpent for what it was: an imperial dragon. Its roar continued, deafening.

“You will die,” it rasped.

Before the dragon could finish its sentence, Ellend was across the room, pressed against it. Two fingers targeted the base of the throat, followed swiftly by a palm strike below that, then both hands chopped down on pressure points at the edges of the dragon’s chest. A faint ripple undulated from the dragon’s breast, a pulse that carried throughout its whole body, ending at the tail. The roar stopped. Blood splattered from its mouth, thick and black.

“If only I had a copper for every time I heard that.” Ellend smirked and

front kicked hard. The dragon pitched backward. It burst through a wall and spilled into the snow outside. It lay there, steaming, struggling to pick itself up.

Ellend followed it. “You’re dead.” He extended his arm to the laboring beast: his left palm cradled a cloud of soot. “In my hand is a piece of your *ki*: your life energy. Cayden called it ‘blood’s wine.’ Whatever. I close my fist, I close you.”

The dragon coughed. Steady drops of blood leaked from its eyes, its mouth. It hissed. “Do you know what the child is? What you’ve done? We won’t stop. It won’t stop.”

Ellend closed his hand, and suddenly there was just the sound of wind, of snow falling on snow.

The light that had surrounded the baby was gone, now that it was over. Moon Head sat quietly next to Oboko, a chubby fist wrapped around her finger. A pool of blood had unfolded beneath her. Ellend knelt next to them both. He pulled a flask from his belt and tugged the stopper free.

“You must protect him, Tankard,” Oboko whispered. Ellend could feel a weight build. It was around him, on his back and shoulders. “This is Aroden, the god reborn. And you are his protector.” And then Ellend shoved the shimmering liquid down her throat.



The road felt comfortable. Cold, but comfortable. Moon Head was asleep, drooling all over Ellend’s shoulder. Oboko had helped him with the makeshift sling. It was strange, having a body that close to him, but he found himself adjusting to the heat and shape of it quickly. They were alone, except for a few trees and the beginning of daylight. He was sore, especially his knee and the front of his foot. Oboko walked stiffly too, her body undoubtedly remembering the knife wound, even though the healing potion had closed it. But it was a good feeling, this soreness, Ellend thought. He’d missed it.

THE ORPHAN CRUSADE

BY M. C. SHELBY



he men drew their horses to a stop outside a large run-down wooden building. Lieutenant Rand swung down from his mount, his boots splashing in the mud, and gave the shabby building a studied once over. He could hear voices and the clatter of mugs and dishes coming from within. A scratched, beaten board hung from the rain-washed eaves, portraying a painted goblin's head pierced by a sword underscoring the inn's name in blocky lettering: *The Even Blade*. The imagery was fitting for Logas. The walls of the former Iseri capital were ringed with rotting goblin heads and corpses mounted on pikes and spears—a not-so-subtle warning to the scheming, pernicious creatures living beneath the nearby Chitterwood.

“Are you sure this is the place, sir?” Davin asked, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“This is the tavern. Whether he's here or not remains to be seen.” The lieutenant motioned for his five men to dismount.

Graylin, the largest of the group, standing at an impressive six feet tall, stomped his boot, knocking a mud clod off. Their entire trip here from the garrison at Wolfpoint had been beset by rain. “Lords of law, I hope so. I've had enough of this weather.”

“Be careful what you wish for...” The youngest, Jornan, had unslung his crossbow and was pulling the string back to ready a bolt. Two of the other soldiers winked at each other and stepped on either side of the young crossbowman.

“You know, they say he's a shifter,” Seiker whispered theatrically. The wiry man stroked his unkempt, stubbly beard in mock concern.

Dranith winked back over Jornan's head. “Oh yeah, I heard he can turn

into a beast and has killed—”

“Whoever he is, he’s no match for all of us!” Graylin began to pull his sword and stepped towards the tavern door.

“Alright, shut up, all of you! Graylin, sheath that blade.” Rand glowered at his subordinates. “Beast or man, he was a trained assassin in Queen Abrogail’s service. Keep your wits about you and remember your training. It’s our job to bring him in. Now, form up.”

Rand didn’t let his voice betray the trepidation he felt in his own heart. His men were young and, like young men, thought themselves invincible. Rand knew better. He’d heard the stories, and though he’d seen much action himself and been in many battles, he’d never confronted one of the queen’s trained assassins. This man could have magic or worse to unleash against them, and the only arcane talent his troop held was wielded by Dranith. The soldier’s tricks were enough to frighten the peasantry, but in reality he wasn’t much more than a hedge wizard. Rand had pleaded for a more experienced squad, and had been summarily denied. His superiors believed this to be a goose chase, an empty exercise. Rand wasn’t so sure.

Their target, Marcius Umbrago, had disappeared in Isgar nearly ten years back. His name had become legend in the Isgeri underground, but many believed he’d long since fled the country. After all, none of Her Majesty’s infernal minions had been able to discover him. Rand didn’t believe the shape-changing fables spun by Seiker and Dranith to rattle young Jornan, but he did know an assassin of Queen Abrogail was quite capable of taking out his small squad, given the advantage.

The men took positions and readied hands on weapons. Rand nodded to the point man, Davin—the stealthiest of the group—to open the door.

Inside the *Blade*, it was smoky and dark. The patrons glanced up as the soldiers entered, but quickly went back to minding their own business upon sight of the imperial colors. Lieutenant Rand let his gaze crisscross the establishment, looking for a sign—a flinch or tic—that would tip him off to his quarry. He saw nothing. Perhaps his superiors had been right.

The grease-and-ale-stained proprietor greeted him as he approached. “What can I do for you?”

“We’re looking for a man named Marcius Umbrago.”

“Never heard of him.” The barkeep looked down, but his eyes flicked to a shadowy corner where a lone figure sat.

“Very well. You don’t mind if we have a look around, do you? Perhaps bring out some ale and roasted meat, too. It’s been a long journey from Wolfpoint.”

“Aye.” The man seemed happy to move on to this new task.

Lieutenant Rand turned to have a better look about, as his men spread through the tavern, but was careful to keep his eyes on the man sitting in the deeper shadow. If this was Marcius, his capture might ingratiate Rand enough with his superiors to escape this hell-hole assignment (he winced at his own blasphemy even as he thought it, and asked Asmodeus’s forgiveness). But first, the lieutenant would have to arrest him.

Rand moved from the bar with a practiced nonchalance that he didn’t quite feel, making his way closer to the shadowed corner.

“Have a seat, Lieutenant.” The shadowed man pulled back his hooded cloak when the troop leader was within easy hearing. He was obviously Chelaxian, with curly black hair and piercing, steel gray eyes.

Rand paused. Had he really thought he’d be able to catch such a man off guard? His men started forward, but he held up a hand. So far, the seated man wasn’t threatening—he had one hand cupped about an ale mug while the other rested on the table in front of him.

Rand remained standing. “And you are?”

“Let’s not play games, Lieutenant. It seems my messenger gave you all the information you needed to find me.”

“You mean the boy?”

Marcius (if indeed it was the famed assassin) waited.

“That pathetic wretch that couldn’t even speak Common? What sort of vile patron raises a child who only knows Goblin? If he’d been older, he would’ve been strung up for uttering that filthy language. He’ll find better treatment under the proper discipline of our Lord Asmodeus.”

To Rand’s surprise, the assassin gave a short snicker. “Good luck with that. He delivered my entire message, I trust, before you—how did you put

it?—put him ‘under the proper discipline?’”

“You mean your threat.” Rand motioned with his head to his men, who moved forward to surround the table. “Marcius Umbrago, by the authority of Her Infernal Majestrix, Queen Abrogail II of the Thrice-Damned House of Thrune, I place you under arrest for high treason. Lay down your weapons and come peacefully, or we will slay you where you sit.”

Marcius smiled, and took another sip from his cup. “You mean that isn’t your first order of business?”

“This is a land of law, even for renegade assassins.”

The man rose, and Rand took a nervous step backwards, but the outlaw only raised his arms above his head.

“By all means, Lieutenant. Let us not keep the queen’s justice waiting.”

The assassin’s calm and compliant behavior was almost more unnerving than if he’d attacked. Perhaps this wasn’t Marcius Umbrago, but an imposter, or some other diversion.

“Take his sword. Search him.”

Graylin clamped two large hands on Marcius’s shoulders while Seiker and Dranith patted him down. All they came away with were a few pouches, a pair of punching daggers, and a finely crafted longsword that glittered black and silver in the hazy light—not the prize of any common beggar.

Dranith poked through the pouches. “No spell components; just some small coin and tinder, steel and flint.”

Seiker handed the longsword to Lieutenant Rand, who pulled the blade free from its sheath. The initials “M. U.” were engraved on the hilt just below the crossguard and, etched into the metal blade just above, was the mark of Queen Abrogail’s assassins. The sword felt cold and hateful in Rand’s grasp. Her Majesty would expect this back.

“I’ll hold onto this for you.”

“Thank you.”

Rand gave their prisoner another look. This encounter was nothing like he’d expected, and it was making him more nervous by the minute. He waved Davin forward.

“Bind him. And make those ropes tight.”

Marcus cooperated, lowering his hands and giving no resistance as Graylin pinned him and Davin deftly lashed his wrists and arms behind his back.

Rand spun about, his eyes touching on each tavern patron, looking for any hint of hidden threat. But there was only the occasional stolen glance of anxious fear. There was no danger in here.

“Jornan, check outside before we leave. Make sure our friend doesn’t have any surprises waiting for us. Everybody stay alert. Keep your weapons ready.” He felt his pulse begin to rise as they escorted their prisoner out of the tavern, but the exit went off without a hitch. They quickly had Marcus tied and horsed, and were ready to head off.

Rand was wasting no time. He didn’t know what Marcus’s game was, but he was trying hard not to play it. But his options were few. The only thing left was to try to get the prisoner back to Wolfpoint. If the assassin came willingly to certain judgment and death, Rand considered, it was no doubt because that was where he wanted to be. The garrison would need to increase its active guard numbers upon their arrival.

“Jornan, if we’re attacked at any time, I want you to put a bolt right in the prisoner’s throat. Understood?” Rand looked at Marcus, who remained relaxed.

“Yes, sir.” The young crossbowman moved his horse into position with his weapon pointed at Marcus.

It would have to do.

The lieutenant scanned the area one last time, then spurred his mount into a trot through the streets of Logas and back east towards Wolfpoint. The tangled darkness of the Chitterwood loomed just to their right against the gray sky, following their path.

Rand didn’t like the thought of that all too much, either.



As the shadows grew long with travel and the sky darkened, Rand’s nerves grew more on edge, along with those of his men. They all had their

eyes on the tree line, alert for ambush or assault. He found himself second guessing—should they press on through the night, or break for camp? Or maybe they should've never left Logas at all?

Marcus rode in silence, head down. At first Graylin had attempted to goad the man with intemperate remarks until Rand commanded him to stop. The assassin hadn't made a sound or looked up the entire journey. Still, Rand had the impression the man was aware of all that was happening around him. What was his plan? What had he been doing all these years? And why have a Goblin-speaking child give him away? It was all strange. Nothing fit.

Rand raised a hand, and his men drew up to a halt. If a trap lay in wait, he wasn't going to trot right into it. Best to be unpredictable and let the threat come to them.

"We'll make camp here. Davin, lash the prisoner to that tree. Make sure his bonds are tight."

Marcus slid off his mount and let the men hobble him to the tree trunk. Davin checked the ropes several times after they had him secured. It looked uncomfortable, but that was the least of Rand's worries. Let his muscles knot. He set Davin and Graylin on first watch over the perimeter, and the rest huddled together over a small campfire near the prisoner to keep an eye on him. A crescent moon split down between the clouds. To Rand, it looked as if the moon was impaling them.

"You're a braver man than I thought, Lieutenant."

Rand's eyes narrowed as he stared across the campfire at their prisoner. Now he decided to talk? He hadn't thought to have the assassin gagged, since he'd been so silent. The lieutenant's men looked at him for a response.

Marcus tilted his head. "Do you not fear the Beast of the Chitterwood?"

Rand had heard the rumors. Some supposed bestial creature stalked the woods, reportedly eating those unfortunate enough to wander too late into the night, or too deep into the forest. Several of the queen's militia had disappeared patrolling near the woods over the last few years, adding fuel to the stories. Rand had no doubt that the "Beast of the Chitterwood" was lashed to this tree.

“Stories,” Rand said, as much to benefit his men as to answer. “Whatever comes, we all do our duty.”

Seiker, Dranith and Jorran grunted in approval.

Marcus looked off into the woods. “Yes. I used to do that, too.”

Rand had never met an assassin as far as he was aware, but this even-tempered man was not what he imagined. Despite the alarms jangling in his head that no good would come of conversation, he was curious.

“And what do you do now?”

Marcus returned his attention to his captor. “I thought my message made that clear.”

“It made it clear you are a threat.”

“Isger’s children will no longer stand for Her Majesty’s imperial rule. It’s time for Chelias to give Isger, and her orphans, back.”

Rand couldn’t help but chuckle. “I don’t believe a group of children are going to worry Her Infernalness.”

“They should.”

The solemnity of the delivery removed the slight smirk from Rand’s face. Now that the assassin mentioned it, he recalled stories of children gone missing from church orphanages over the years.

Marcus continued. “In the aftermath of the Goblinblood Wars, the church of Asmodeus did its best to indoctrinate orphaned Isgeri youth into the faith. But some, freed from the Church’s grasp before they could be corrupted by Hell, escaped. And in turn, they helped others do the same. They’ve grown up and grown strong since the wars ended. And, of course, there are also the goblins themselves....”

Lieutenant Rand couldn’t believe what he was hearing. But then he remembered the messenger child—the child who only spoke Goblin. Was this man saying he’d built an army? Was he threatening war? It seemed preposterous. Rand measured his next words, certain that Marcus had no difficulty reading his incredulity.

“Why would an accomplished assassin employed by House Thrune care about pitiful children or... or filthy goblins?”

“Call it a moment of clarity.”

One of the soldiers scoffed. "Sounds like a moment of idiocy to me."

Rand shot Seiker a look, and the man dropped his head to look into the fire.

Marcus stretched his limbs to the limits of their confines before relaxing once more. He smiled as he noted Lieutenant Rand's hand had dropped to his sword hilt.

"Let me tell you a story, Lieutenant. Of course you're familiar with the Sisters of the Golden Erinyes."

"Yes, of course."

"Their monasteries are some of the primary homes for Isgeri orphans. The Devil Nuns baptize them in unholy water and discipline them into devout and proper followers of the Prince of Hell. They are very skilled at this."

"Praise be to Asmodeus." Dranith stirred a burning log, and the fire licked high with new life. "A better life than they'd get otherwise."

"For some, perhaps. But Asmodeus detests the weak, and not all children are strong." Marcus looked down at his bound hands. "I was given a group of these weak children, a baker's dozen, by the Sisters for... disposal."

The men around the campfire were silent now, but none registered surprise.

"They followed me willingly, of course, believing it to be a mere training exercise, as I trained many in the way of the blade. Hell is always looking for new talent. But as I led those pitiful thirteen children away into the wilderness, never to be seen again, the improbable happened: Her Majesty's elite assassin was caught flat-footed."

Lieutenant Rand gave a quick look around the camp, ensuring Graylin and Davin were still at their posts before returning his eyes to their prisoner. He was paying close attention, in case any useful information might be dropped.

"By the children?"

"No. I was angry, understand, at the menial task of slaughtering innocents. It was beneath my station. And, self-absorbed as I was in that moment of indignation, I failed to notice the beast lying in wait for us. It sprang from

the undergrowth and its claws bore me to the ground.”

Marcus shook his head, as if he couldn't believe his own tale.

“The children reacted faster than I could have imagined, hitting the creature with their blunted steel. Even when it spat fire at them, they continued to press in, until finally they drove it off.”

Seiker sneered. “Are you trying to convince us you were attacked by a dragon?”

“A small fire drake, to be exact. Even so, it killed two of the children.”

“While you sat and watched?” Rand didn't see anything particularly illuminating or life-changing about such an event.

“I admit I watched it all unfold. That was part of my moment of clarity.”

“You've said that twice now. All I hear is how a fabled man failed to carry through on his orders.”

Marcus shook his head. “In truth, I'd been questioning my orders for some time. It was in that moment, though, that the veil was fully lifted from my eyes. What was clear, Lieutenant, was that those children were far from weak. Individually, perhaps, yes, but not as a team. For the first time when I looked at them, I saw them as they were—not as Asmodeus would make them: true children of Isger. And when they came to me then with such ardent enthusiasm, asking if they'd passed the test, I knew what I had to do.”

“And what's that?”

“Throw off the chains of Chelias.”

A howl split the night.

Jornan sprang up. “What was that?”

“A wolf, maybe.” Seiker pulled his sword out, his expression belying the thought.

“Or maybe the Beast.” Dranith's hand darted into a pouch at his belt, fumbling for spell components.

“Do you really think so?” Jornan's fingers trembled as he tried to load his crossbow.

“Quiet,” Rand ordered, standing and brandishing his weapon. “Arm yourselves and stay alert.” He looked down at Marcus and scowled.

The men were silent, ears straining at the night. The slivered moon had

vanished behind clouds, and the campfire's light now seemed not nearly enough. A voice drifted in from the darkness.

"Lieu—?"

There was a gurgle and a ripping noise. Rand squinted into the darkness in the direction Davin's voice had come from. He couldn't see anything, but he had the sense of something moving there, just outside the range of light. Where the hell was Graylin?

"Circle round, eyes open," Lieutenant Rand commanded. He stepped next to Marcius, lifting his blade to his throat. "Your man will never free you."

"The thing out there is no man," Marcius replied.

"Hobgoblin, bugbear, whatever. Your days are over the moment my mission is in jeopardy. Dranith, light!"

"I'm trying!"

"Where's Graylin? What happened to Davin?" Jorran's voice shook, and his aim jerked from shadow to shadow.

Murmured words of magic began to coil through the air, but the incantation was cut short as something sailed into the camp and landed with a *thud* in the grass before bouncing off Dranith's leg. Graylin's sightless eyes stared up in shock from his severed head. Dranith stammered, his spell lost.

Another howl rent the air.

"It's the Beast! It's the Beast!" Seiker's voice bordered on hysteria, and he broke away from the camp in a run.

"Seiker! You fool, stop!"

But Seiker didn't heed his lieutenant's call. For a moment there was only the sound of each man's breathing—almost time enough to hope—before a wailing scream echoed from the dark.

Rand could see the fear in his remaining men, and his own sword arm quivered. There was nothing the lieutenant could tell them, nothing but that they were going to die this night. He pressed his blade harder against Marcius' throat, prepared to run the assassin through. This part of his mission, at least, would not be a failure.

"The only chance you have of that beast not killing you is to let me go."

Rand looked at Marcius as if he must be mad. Behind him, he could hear Dranith trying to incant another spell.

Something dark and hairy lunged out of the darkness, just inside Rand's peripheral vision, and he heard Dranith cry out in shock, followed by another howl. The creature was fast, very fast.

Dranith knelt on the ground, his guts dangling in wet, bloody loops between his fingers. His cries continued to resonate into the night as he collapsed.

"It's toying with you now. You don't stand a chance without me."

Rand shook his head wordlessly. He could hear the creature panting in the blackness, the low growl as it plotted its next approach. Jornan was trembling so much, Rand didn't think he could hit the broad side of a castle.

"Jornan, pull your sword." At least that might give him a chance.

Jornan looked at his lieutenant and nodded, dropping the crossbow. The beast seized that moment to strike, a dark shadow towering over the helpless recruit. There was a growl, Jornan's scream, and the crunch and snap of bone as monstrous jaws clamped down.

Rand got his first good look at their assailant in the firelight.

It stood over seven feet, and its fur was a mat of tangled knots sticking out beneath makeshift armor. Blood dripped from its snout, hair, and claws. It snarled, shaking its head and sending Jornan's severed hand flying into the night before it leered maniacally at Rand and leapt away into the darkness.

Rand knew a gnoll when he saw it, and he also knew they travelled in packs. If there was one, there were more. Jornan was on his knees now, cradling the stump of his severed wrist and crying in pain. Rand swallowed hard; this was not the way he wanted to die.

But that was exactly what was going to happen—unless he released the deadliest man within Isger's borders. A man who, even now, seemed unperturbed by the chaotic violence erupting around him.

"How can I trust you?"

"Really, Lieutenant? If I wanted you dead, I would've killed you and your men in the tavern. If you fall, it won't be by my blade, I promise. You are running out of time."

The word of an assassin. But what choice did he have? He still didn't know what Marcius's game was, but his only hope of walking away from this encounter alive sat before him, lashed to a tree. And if he did betray him, better to die by this man's treacherous blade than the thing in the darkness.

Rand cut the bonds.

Marcus massaged his wrists and stretched before standing, his eyes probing the gloom. With a slight hesitation, the lieutenant handed the man his sword back and took a quick step away.

Marcus took the blade and kept it ready at his side. "It's close," he whispered.

Marcus took a couple of steps into the darkness, away from the fire, as Rand moved toward Jorran. The cadet's moans drifted through the night as he continued cradling the end of his amputated wrist.

Peering intently into the night, the lieutenant watched as the gnoll lumbered out of the shadows near Marcus, its snarling muzzle baring rows of sharp canine teeth. It towered a good two feet above the assassin. It shook like a dog, sending droplets of dark scarlet sailing into the night.

Marcus strolled with purpose straight at the beast, whose ears pricked up at his approach. Rand's grip on his sword tightened and his arm tensed, ready to defend himself should Marcus fall.

The assassin reached up to scratch the beast behind one ear as it bent its head down. "Good work, Stitch."

The gnoll grinned happily and growled in rough Common, "Stitch good."

Rand's mouth fell open and his weapon hit the grass with a soft *thud*.

"You... you said you would kill it," he stammered. Noise began coming from the woods in all directions. *The pack*, Rand remembered through his astonishment.

"I said no such thing. I promised you would not die by my blade. A promise I will keep."

Sparks of torchlight came to life in the night, making a huge, uneven circle around them. There were hoots and hollers, and the ugly language of goblins echoed through the trees. As the torches closed in, Rand saw they

were all held by children. Some were quite young, but others were older, close to adulthood, and they all looked ragged and feral. When he looked closer, he saw dozens of those he thought were small children were not children at all, but actual goblins. They formed a loose ten-foot perimeter around the camp, wielding crude weapons and stomping their feet.

Then a small child ran forward, and Marcius knelt down to meet him. Rand didn't understand the Goblin tongue that passed between them, but he recognized the child. It was the same boy who'd delivered the message.

Marcus ruffled the child's hair, and Rand watched as the scrawny lad turned to give the gnoll his best fierce growl. The gnoll playfully growled back, and the boy ran back into the crowd with a goblin-like giggle.

"This will never work. The queen will crush you... or worse."

Marcus straightened and turned to face the lieutenant once more.

"She will try."

They stood facing each other in a moment of stony silence before Marcus spoke again.

"You should run now."



The lieutenant glanced from Marcus to Stitch and back, until comprehension dawned through his look of shocked confusion. He turned and ran.

The Children of Isger's ranks split apart to allow him passage, taunting and spitting at the queen's agent as he fled. Stitch would give the lieutenant a sizable lead before launching after, to make it more of a challenge. Marcus judged Lieutenant Rand's chances to be poor, indeed.

The former assassin sheathed his blade. Not so long ago, his role had been reversed with the big gnoll. Marcus had rescued Stitch from a brutal travelling sideshow that had thought it could use Isger's neglected orphans as food for its menagerie's ravenous carnivores. Stitch had been just a pup then, alone and barely able to fend for himself. Marcus had spared the creature, taking him into his "pack," and the gnoll had grown to be his fierce and loyal companion.

Marcius knelt beside Jornan. The pale youth hadn't done much to staunch his blood loss, and looked ready to pass out. Marcius bound the wound tight, then slipped a slim vial from beneath his tunic and tipped it against the young man's lips.

"Drink."

Jornan did so. His breathing steadied, and a bit of color came back to his face. He looked at Marcius and trembled.

"I have a message for Cheliax. Tell them that Isger will be their thrall no longer. Tell them if they think the Goblinblood Wars were bad, wait until they face the Orphan Crusade. The orphans of Isger are mine, and I will continue to liberate them from the Sisters' monasteries at every turn. This land is *ours*. Do you understand?"

Jornan nodded.

Stitch returned, picking something out from between his teeth. The hunt had been shorter than Marcius expected. Jornan blanched as the gnoll moved in close. Marcius stood up and gave the gnoll an affectionate pet.

"You're free to go, Jornan. No attack will befall you this night. You have safe passage."

Marcius watched the soldier stumble off into the dark and gave a silent signal to two of the older children to follow. He knew Cheliax would never heed his message, that it would again come to war on this soil. He had some surprises for his former queen, but still he wondered if a league of goblin-speaking cast-off youths, the new ruling tribe of the Chitterwood, would be enough to throw off the reign of Hell.

They were damn well going to try.

ETERNITY'S ENDING

BY BRIAN J. FRUZEN

Gorak held his hand to his chest in a failing attempt to calm the beating of his heart. His blood thundered so loudly in his ears that it almost drowned out the cries of his fellow soldiers as they died around him.

The ancient stone structures were built so closely that he had to slip sideways to fit between them in places, though he had an easier time of it than most others of his kind, thanks to the curse of his shamefully leaner frame. He hurried through the alleyways and told himself he wasn't a coward, that he was repositioning himself to create a strategic advantage for his comrades. However, in the echoing chaos, he couldn't be sure which direction the battle was, and he wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

It didn't help that he couldn't see. Darkness wasn't normally a problem for the orc, but his eyes weren't keen enough to see more than a short distance in the cavernous underground city. The oppressive dark spread out like an unending sea around him. Orcish shouts issued from almost every direction now, and while some were steadfast rallying cries that bolstered his courage in battle, many more were the ragged screams of those near death, one last call to their gods for glory.

Few stories conferred glory on warriors burned alive in dragon fire, though.

Within minutes of the tribe's infiltration, the great scaled beast closed on them, blocking their escape while spouting jets of flame and scattering the clan's warriors throughout the deserted streets. The buildings didn't burn; their walls were made of thick, heavy stone, and yielded to nothing except the dragon's powerful frame. In his race for cover, Gorak saw at least three of his brethren crushed beneath a tower that the creature's mighty

claws had toppled, and the thought of being squeezed to death between the dusty walls was somehow even less appealing than taking the dragon's fiery breath. He resolved, then and there, to put some distance between himself and the beast.

Gorak ducked down another path, aiming to locate a road to the perimeter. His head whipped from one direction to the other at every intersection, hoping to catch a glimpse of one of his fellow raiders, but the space between the walls was strangely still, despite the sounds of carnage resonating around him. One noise stood out clearer than all the rest. It was the sound of the deep earth, splitting open to swallow them: the sound of a dragon, as ancient as the bones of the world, opening its jaws to roar in triumph.

And it was getting closer.

He felt the stir of the dry air accompany the clumsy beating of the dragon's wings only moments before the creature's body slithered out of the darkness, its back teeming with horns like rows of parading lances. In the deep of the Darklands, such as they were, Gorak could see only in shades of gray, and he couldn't discern the color of the dragon's hide, but each scale glimmered like a shield, giving the appearance that there were a hundred thousand warriors waiting on the other side of a vast battlefield.

He stood alone against an army.

The creature's gargantuan body filled the open space between the buildings, and to his shame, Gorak dropped his sword and cowered, covering his ears to muffle the beast's terrifying roar as it thundered again. He squeezed his eyes closed, ready to never open them.

But death did not claim him. A wave of heat washed over his back as the dragon breathed another torrent of fire, and the shrieks of his dying brethren rang through the ancient city. Gorak knew he should feel rage, knew he should pick up his sword and charge thoughtlessly at the creature with oaths of murderous vengeance on his lips. So many of his kind died that way, though. He was determined not to be one of them.

He rose shakily, grabbing his weapon and commanding his legs to move. Slowly, the stones began to slip past him into the darkness as he

pressed on through the abandoned ruin. The echoes of the dying followed him, as did the thundering beat of the dragon's wings as they cut through the cavern air, but Gorak didn't stop. He darted beneath a low archway and up some steps leading to a road that cut like a canyon through more buildings. They were packed so tightly, they seemed about to tumble over into the street. He continued forward until his lungs grew weak from the stale air, as the oppressive architecture loomed over him.

Shaking the sweat out of his hair, Gorak listened to the sounds of slaughter that echoed off the far walls, barely audible now. His clan had wondered how the abandoned city had gone unclaimed for so long; in the deep, few such places were without denizens. Gorak had argued this point with their shamans, yet they were convinced the spirits had led them here, and his argument almost cost him his life. Given the scenario that unfolded now, he wondered if it really made any difference.

Lost in thought and weariness, he wandered forward until the fraying leather of his boot scuffed on a broad, stone step. Gorak looked back, wondering for a moment if bathing in dragon fire would be preferable to the fate that awaited him in the unknown ahead, but he quickly steeled his resolve. Though he'd fled from the great beast, he would at least show bravery now in following the path he chose.

Gorak began to climb.

After a hundred steps, he emerged above the vacant city's rooftops and could see flames flickering across the distant battlefield. A gruesome thought crossed his mind as he watched the blaze spread: since the buildings of the city didn't burn, the fire must be feeding on flesh.

In the clouds of ash and dust that rose in the darkness, Gorak caught only brief glimpses of the beast's form as it moved through the debris. Surely all of his orc brethren were dead by now, but the thought of them lighting his path was a strange comfort. Turning away, Gorak faced the remaining stairs to the summit.

At the top he found a tall, thin archway. It extended higher into the cavern than he could see. He placed his hands on the cool stone as he passed, letting his fingers glide over the surface. The massive slabs were so smooth

and fitted so perfectly that the seams were nearly imperceptible. Even the orc's untrained eye could appreciate the labor that went into aligning the stone. A wealthy and powerful leader must've ruled here once, and the city would've made a kingly prize. The reasons for the dragon's presence were becoming apparent.

With renewed enthusiasm, Gorak strode under the arch and traversed the widening tunnel, marveling at the stonework and speculating at the wonders he might find ahead, instead of worrying about the dragon he left behind or the dangers that might await. In his preoccupation, he didn't see the dagger that slipped out from one of the wall's concealed alcoves as he went by.

The strike was clumsy, but the blade sunk a few inches into the meat of his upper forearm, causing him to drop his sword before he was able to react. With his other hand, Gorak grabbed the dagger and the slender fingers that held it, then pulled the weapon from his flesh and twisted it from his assailant's grasp. It came away easily, as if the creature wasn't prepared for the strength of his counter attack; despite Gorak's less muscular frame and keener mind, he was still very much an orc.

Enraged, he reached into the recessed hole and pulled his opponent toward him. A thin, gangly figure with skin as dark as shadow lurched forward, its narrow face surrounded by a mass of white hair flowing around two long, pointed ears: a drow.

Gorak sneered as he wrestled it to the ground. He knew the elves of the Darklands had reputations as adept assassins and devious manipulators with a fondness for poison, so he wasted no time. He grasped the dagger stolen from his foe and made expert use of it, plunging the blade into its chest until the haft was slick and warm with blood. The life of the dark elf passed from Golarion, its white eyes wide with shock.

Then the tunnel shook. It was different than the normal shudders and quakes of the deep earth, though. The vibrations didn't come from the stone, but from the sound of something terrible on the other side of the tunnel's walls: the dragon.

Letting the body of the dark elf fall from his grasp, Gorak reclaimed his

sword and resumed his trek through the passageway while pondering the drow's presence. His band had found no evidence of the elves on their voyage into the city. Why was it here? Had the battle with the dragon attracted its attention? And could there be more of its kind lurking nearby?

Soon he came upon another narrow stone arch, much like the one he passed at the front of the tunnel. The stonework here was equally as impressive; however, the sight beyond was something he was wholly unprepared for. A vast, black emptiness stretched out before him. Gorak stopped, cautious that he'd somehow reconnected with the main part of the underground city. He didn't wish to risk an encounter with the huge fire-breather in open ground.

Another tremor rumbled, spurring him on. He broke into a run, aiming to close the distance in the broad cavern before anything with better dark-sight than his could react. In mere moments, a column came into view. It was four-sided, with each face at least the width of an orc, and stretched upward into the shadows. Unlike the smooth stonework of the arches, however, the column was covered with symbols beyond Gorak's understanding.

He passed the pillar at full speed, intending to reach a defensible position against the cavern wall, and cursed himself for his stupidity. Another drow, poised behind the stone support, greeted him with the flash of steel. The dark elf's rapier split open the leather that guarded the orc's torso and bit into his abdomen. Gorak's vision blurred for an instant, and he nearly stumbled as his strength faltered, but he couldn't tell whether it was from a poisoned blade or simply exhaustion. He growled in anger, badly wanting to crush the creature's scrawny throat, but quickly conceded that facing the elf in the open wouldn't be to his advantage.

He ran on.

A large stone monolith came into view up ahead. It jutted from the even, stone-tiled floor of the cavern, and a raised iron ring surrounded its base. At nearly thirty feet on the side, it would protect his back nicely when his assailant caught up with him. Yet, a single frail dark elf stood between him and the position. He'd be easily overcome, though: the elf had abased himself before the stone, his head pressed to the cold floor.

Gorak stopped, so suspicious of the sight that he almost missed the sounds of the two drow that pursued him. Turning to meet them, he saw that one still clutched the sword stained with his blood. Both held their weapons before them, more as shields than as tools for dispensing death. They fixed their eyes on him, though they wavered slightly. In fear? No. Uncertainty broke their resolves. They wanted to look to each other, to seek guidance in their actions, yet were too afraid to let their eyes wander far from the orc.

Then came the deafening roar of the dragon, and Gorak knew his death hastened with it. All three of them turned toward the sound, and Gorak was nearly blinded by the sudden stream of flames that erupted out of the darkness. The jet of fire wreathed the ceiling in red and golden hues, spreading like a river as it rushed past. The stones touched by the blaze were left glowing from the heat, and in the lingering light, Gorak could at last make out his surroundings: he wasn't in the open after all. Rows of columns stood between him and the dragon, supporting the ceiling almost a hundred feet above. The cavern's ceiling opened like a dome above the massive stone obelisk at its center and, luckily for Gorak, narrowed as it neared the precipice that was open to the city below. The dragon could not fit through it.

The elves didn't flee from the beast, however—they surged forward. Gorak shifted his weight toward the elf that had already drawn his blood. He wanted to settle that score first. He knew the strike would be clumsy, and easily dodged it as the elf lunged at him. He brought his sword upward as the elf's momentum carried him further, and with the force of his own mustering, he easily buried it to the hilt just under the drow's arm and smiled as he saw the steel exit the opposite side. He pushed the dying creature into his friend, and attempted to keep hold of the blade, but the other elf impacted them more suddenly than he anticipated. The falling corpse pulled the sword from his grasp.

He recovered from the strike and threw himself at his third attacker. He took a swipe of the creature's blade across his thigh, but they were too close for it to acquire enough thrust to do any real damage. Gorak bit down into the creature's neck, feeling hair, muscle and sinew yield to his jaws. The elf

cried out in agony and fell to the stone floor only moments after his friend.

“Stop this.” The elf’s last words were spoken in desperation, as he reached out to the surviving drow who remained kneeling before the stone. Gorak had a hunch that this last elf possessed great power, for calmness in the face of peril was rarely the providence of the weak.

“No.” The old drow spoke evenly. “It is time to surrender what we stole.”

Gorak cautiously approached the purple-shaded elf. The dragon roared again, letting loose a wave of flame that filled the cavern with a heat so intense that Gorak felt his hands and forearms blister as he attempted to shield himself from it. The stones washed in the fire grew white-hot and began to drip from the ceiling. Howling in rage, the dragon used its powerful forearms to claw great chunks of the molten stone away.

The elf looked despondently toward the creature. “My years are beyond counting, but he is older still. I fear his sanity abandoned him in this place long ago. He will kill us both to keep you from reaching the stone.”

“What is this?” Gorak’s voice was hoarse from the dryness in the hot air.

“Some believe that dwarves forged the world. That is nonsense. It was the dwarves that tamed it, though. They opened the soul of Golarion and bound it to the form it wears now.” The elf threw open his frail arms, gesturing toward the great monolith before him. “In doing so, they tied themselves to it, intertwining its very essence with their own, and so achieved life that would last as long as the world they lived in.

“Then came Earthfall, blanketing the world in choking ash and darkness. We elves were not gifted with the constitutions needed to survive. We were dying on the surface, poised on the edge of falling into nothingness. I led an army to this place and stole it from the dwarves. That act of treachery tainted us, warped us and turned our hearts to cruelty and chaos. You can end it! You can take what we stole! Touch the stone, and you will have immortality for all who share your blood!”

The dragon’s claws worked furiously through the molten rock. It roared, and the fire growing in its lungs sent waves of rippling heat toward the orc. Gorak wished he had more options—ones that didn’t include trusting an

elf—but he stepped up to the stone anyway and placed his hand on its dull surface. Precious moments slipped away; the dragon had hewn its way into the cavern, and the towering pillars of stone shattered before it. Yet Gorak felt nothing.

Rage overtook him.

He didn't feel the old elf break beneath his hands, didn't notice the relief on the creature's tired face as it died. Gorak turned and let loose a howl of his own, baring his bloodied fangs to the world a final time as the dragon's fire washed over him.

Not even ash remained of the orc, or the elf that died at his hands. The dragon's breath consumed them, and once the stones absorbed the last of Gorak's furious scream, silence stole over the ancient city in the cavernous dark once again. Yet, the world folded around it was indeed changed forever, for elves as ancient as almost any creature alive began to die, and the first orc who would live forever had just been born.

THE REVENGE OF THE RED MANTIS

BY TED THOMPSON

It was a typical summer night in the Coins district of Absalom. Patrons flowed through the noisy streets seeking goods and services while, off a side alley, a vacant room beneath a busy tavern waited for its tenant's return. Laughter erupted from the beer hall and a lively duo struck up a tune on lute and pipe, echoing through the basement quarters.

The musicians began to sing, and another peal of laughter boomed from above as the door to the lower apartment burst open. A man darted in, slamming the thick oak behind him. He slid a massive bolt across the doorframe and slumped down to the floor. Blood flowed freely from rents in his shredded black armor and his heavy cloth pant legs were torn and singed. The man leaned back and looked up to see the doorknob slowly twisting back and forth. The top half of his bug-like helmet had nearly been ripped away, revealing part of his sweat-streaked face.

He shifted his weight to reinforce the door and heard a strange crinkling underfoot: a sealed dispatch stuck to his blackened boot, his blood all over it. He peeled it from the sole to see an envelope addressed "Dear Chief Inspector" in an ornate script. The crest of Duke Malorik was on the reverse, imprinted firmly in the sealing wax.

A massive *thud* hit the door, jolting it against the man's head. The desk against the room's wall shook, and a quill and ink ampule shuddered across its surface. The man spit blood nonchalantly as he scanned the room, looking for a way out of his predicament. His eyes fell upon a heavy workbench in the center of the room littered with vials, flasks, and pouches.

The door pounded again, jarring the floor boards underneath the

bleeding fugitive. The inkwell on the desk fell to the floor, spilling muddy liquid all over.

The man in black began to laugh and was joined by a chorus of bar patrons above. He started towards the workbench, but another blow hit the door, loosening one of the hinges as the center bolt shook free of its confines. Thinking twice, he pushed himself against the barrier in hopes his body would reinforce it a bit longer.

Slam! The wood groaned from the strain and several nails lifted visibly from the surface. The man sighed and slid the remains of his helmet off his head.

Looking down at the dispatch beside him, he cracked open the bloodied seal and read.



“Inspector! Welcome. Welcome!” Two sentries opened the stately double doors wide as a fat jovial man strode forward, offering his hand to his wiry, dark-haired visitor. The man before him was garbed in a collared black uniform with a blue embroidered lotus on his left shoulder, signifying the Petal District.

“Forgive me, Duke Malorik, but my station is only to serve.” The man bowed formally but did not extend his hand.

“Oh, excuse me, Inspector. I didn’t mean to.... I mean, I’m so relieved you’re here.” The duke wiped his hands on his silk pants.

The inspector straightened to his full height, studying the entrance hall and surveying the opulent surroundings. All the trappings of the rich were in place: an ostentatious banister climbed the curving grand staircase; massive, self-glorifying paintings of the duke hung in gilded frames on the walls; and marble sculptures stood scattered on pedestals among the murals. In the middle of the foyer, a small gold fountain sat burbling away. It was the centerpiece to an absolutely dreadful and pretentious manor.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my duke. What can I do for you today?”

The duke fidgeted with his waistcoat and his mustache twitched. “I...I

would like to talk to you in my study, alone.”

“Very well.”

The inspector followed his flustered host, taking note of the man’s clenched fists. He could almost see perspiration glistening within. They walked past the fountain and down a hallway full of fanciful landscapes by several renowned local painters, but oddly, there were no more portraits or other family memorabilia.

“My dear duke, I do believe you are new money come to Absalom.”

The duke’s foot caught a rising fold in the carpet runner, making him stumble forward. The portly man looked at the offending spot. “Kiret! Get over here at once!” He pulled out a handkerchief, wiping sweat from his brow.

A swift Varisian man walked calmly over and bowed slightly.

“Kiret, how many damn times have I told you to straighten this carpet! I nearly fell again. See to it while I speak with the chief inspector in my office.”

The man tipped his head and departed.

The inspector was unperturbed by the disturbance. “Duke Malorik, I—”

“Huh?” The ruffled nobleman flinched. “Oh...ah, yes. Quite right.... I made my money in the sea trade, as of late. My father was an honest sea captain with a few merchant ships. Having no sea legs of my own, I remained in port, running the business end of his affairs. One day, he never returned, so after the legally prescribed waiting period, I cleared the books and....” He gestured to the grand space around him.

“I see.” The inspector pulled out a pencil and notebook.

“No, no.” The duke waved a pudgy hand over the paper. “I want no notes of this meeting, nor any record that we ever met.” He opened a door to a dimly lit room. “Enter.” The command hung in the air as the rich man turned his gaze on the inspector, then froze, noticing the policeman’s piercing glare.

“Er...please proceed, Inspector.”

The duke quickly cast his eyes down to the floor as his guest looked

back to the hall before proceeding. The quiet Varisian manservant stood in the middle of the corridor staring back at the inspector, a heavy oak plank in his hands. The two men locked eyes until, finally, the inspector smiled. The man named Kiret then got down on all fours and started pushing the wrinkles out of the carpet with the flat wooden board. His toned arms rippled as he worked. They weren't the arms of a slave, the inspector observed, but those of a disciplined swordsman.

Once the inspector had entered, the duke shut and locked the door behind them. Putting his keys in his pocket, he lumbered to his accounting desk and opened the curtains widely behind it, then sat down with a sigh so long it appeared he was deflating.

“The reason I've invited you—”

The inspector raised his hand to halt the conversation. “I know why.” He put his palm to his chest, his thumb tapping against his shirt. He studied the duke keenly. Despite the comfortable temperature, sweat rolled down the nobleman's forehead like rain. His distress was obvious.

The inspector was about to speak when he felt a slight change of air in the room. Through the dappled sunlight, he saw dust motes tumbling about, but as he paced in front of the desk, they suddenly changed direction, flowing towards a book case directly behind him. As the air currents shifted, the soft hint of jasmine wafted to his nostrils. It was a scent he hadn't smelled for a very long time.

He pretended not to notice.

Tired of waiting, the duke sighed in exasperation. “Well? Can you stop them from killing me?”

The inspector cleared his throat and turned his head to the side, cracking his neck. “I believe you're a marked man, Duke Malorik. Fate has come to take you away from this world—I know a dead man when I see one. Your demise is ordained to appease a higher power, no doubt. I can't intervene.”

The duke put his porcine hands over his eyes and began to sob. “But you're an agent of the law!”

“There, there, my poor duke.” The inspector moved to a chair and sat, shaking his head. “I'm sorry, but at the moment, there's not much I can do.

I enforce the law when it's broken. I inspect crime scenes and make deductions. There's been no crime here...yet."

The man's palms slapped down onto his desk. "Alright, alright, I'll pay! Name your price." He rummaged at his waist and fumbled with a coin purse before throwing it down. "Here! You want gold? Gems? Jewels? I don't care. Just take it! I want to live."

The inspector leaned back and steepled his fingertips against his lips. "Well, well, my duke. This is interesting.... Are you trying to solicit my station and resources for your sole benefit? Because if you are, such an investment would be considerable, but it would bring you a degree of security few could afford."

The nobleman nodded. "Of course. Will fourteen thousand gold measures, in the form of a note, suffice?"

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

The inspector chuckled. "My duke.... I'll accept a note guaranteed for that amount today...and one hundred fifty thousand gold measures in gems and jewels *afterwards*."

"That's outrageous!"

"Yes, it is." The inspector rose and headed for the door. "I'll have my courier come by in a few hours to receive the note. It must be made out in full, signed and witnessed, but the payee must be left blank. Follow these precise instructions and, if it's delivered to me by this evening, my services will continue."

"Continue?" The duke stood, dabbing his forehead again.

"Yes. My protection begins immediately."

"And what's this 'afterwards' part? Purely extortion?"

The inspector put his hand to the door, shaking his head, then turned to the aristocrat. "I've checked you out, Duke Malorik. Your money isn't from your father as you claim. You stole it from your business partner in Ilizmagorti—the sole investor behind one of the Vernai, Mediogalti Island's ruling council of assassins. They are, undoubtedly, already here, but you're under my watch now, my duke. I will thwart their attempts to kill you, and

their attempts to take back what is rightfully theirs. I suspect this game of ours will begin the moment I step out this door, but it will also end too, eventually. When it does, you'll pay me the remaining fee I mentioned and you'll never be bothered again. Understood?"

The duke's expression turned cold with resentment. "I have no choice but to agree. What else can I do?"

The inspector turned the doorknob and walked through the door. "Secure my retainer.

The rest doesn't matter to me. Just be yourself. I'll be watching, wherever you go."

The official strode down the hallway where he saw the Varisian called Kiret lying face down on the floor with a crossbow bolt in his back, penetrating his heart. The inspector stepped calmly around the bloody pool spreading beneath the body and made his way to the double doors where he'd entered. The guards opened them with stiff formality, clearly unaware of the recent death down the hall.

Once outside, the chief inspector took a deep breath and strolled to the main street. A sweet scent wafted through the air, and he admired the flowers planted in the road's brick-framed medians as he made his way to an open square. A market tent laden with expensive produce and exotic fruits caught his eye. He ducked beneath the canopy, feigning interest in a barrel filled with plump dates.

A taller, black-uniformed man joined him.

"Good shot with the assassin." The inspector picked up a date and smelled it, grinning.

The younger man sighed, running a hand through his brown hair. He was clearly exhausted. "Thank you, milord."

"You're turning out to be quite an apprentice, Gareth. Now, go to the garrison and alert a platoon of the Lotus Guard to gear up and prepare for a fight. They must be armored and ready to move, so have them wait in wagons with the horses fitted to pull. I'll send word as to the location as soon as I know."

"This is going to be bloody, isn't it...."

The inspector pulled out a spyglass and looked towards the duke's mansion. "It must be." Gareth nodded, turning to exit the tent, but the inspector put out his hand. "Just watch yourself. There is more than one killer out there."

"Yes, milord." The young accomplice nodded again, then slipped out into the street.

The inspector bit into the date, putting away his spyglass. He could feel a gust brewing behind him, emanating from a nearby park. He turned to study it.

There, in the greenspace, a lone figure clad entirely in red stood watching him.

With some hesitation, the lawman dropped his stolen fruit and approached. The park grew dimmer and hazier with each step, as if clouds had gathered overhead, yet no one else in the festive market behind him seemed to notice. This was no ordinary meeting.

The inspector's hand moved to the hilt of his sheathed blade.

Suddenly, under the shrouded foliage, the man in red wrenched his clothes apart, revealing raptorial insect claws. Two more pairs of appendages sprouted from his once-human form while his body became elongated and chitinous. The man-sized insect then grew into a towering creature: a massive, red, fiendish praying mantis.

"Terador..." Its hiss resounded with authority.

The inspector knelt and bowed his head, his hand still on his sword.

"You defy me, Terador!"

The inspector rose, showing no sign of fear. "I'm sorry, my master, but when you tried to have Jakalyn kill me, I chose to fight for my life instead of having my head eaten off. This time won't be any different. I follow you, but I don't respect that you allowed this to happen."

The giant thing's mandibles gnashed wickedly through the air. "Your insolence ends tonight! Continue to disobey, and I'll see you in ruins."

The inspector hesitated. "I still serve you, Master, but I've drawn my line here. Your Red Mantises have crossed into my territory again, and this time I'll have my vengeance." He turned back to the market and pulled out

his spyglass to see the duke leaving his home. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Master, I have a job to do.”

“*Job?* What is more important than serving your god? You’re bent on killing others who enforce my will!”

The inspector tightened his fists and whirled back with a snarl. “You chose wrong! You betrayed me for *her*, and purely out of respect for you, I let her live. Now she comes again to kill me.... Have you forgotten the blood pledge I made you? If you intervene, I’ll hold you to that dark pact, to every word and every letter!”

The giant red mantis seethed, slashing its claws and stamping in agitation. Curses, screams and monstrous howls followed, but the inspector ignored them all as he turned away and headed out of the darkened park toward his target.

With a glint in his eye, he looked back briefly at the enraged creature. “*Ex Prothex,* milord. It’s an old Absalom saying meaning ‘from the first’... and from the first moment your Red Mantises came to Absalom, they were doomed. Do not intervene.”

Spinning on his heel, the inspector continued his brisk walk back through the market, hearing the fading echo of invisible appendages crashing and tearing at the earth. The policeman caught sight of the duke again and hurried to catch up.

“Duke Malorik! Wait for me.”

The sweaty nobleman stopped with a huff, and continued on when the inspector was alongside. “I’m heading to the Petal Counting House for your note of coin. Normally I’d prefer to take my carriage, but I’m trying not to draw too much attention.” He loosened his collar and wiped at his forehead. “Come to think of it, now that you’re here, I should just hand you the note at the counting house and be done with it. The courier is just an added bother.”

The inspector scoffed. “I’m a man of the law, my duke. I can’t be seen taking bribes outside a bank. I’ll see to your safety, rest assured, but I shall not take anything from your hand directly.”

“But carrying such a valuable note could be dangerous...” Duke Malorik puffed as they walked, until he noticed the inspector’s steely glare.

Then he frowned. "And another thing, I'll have you know! While I appreciate your concern for my well-being, I could've just dismissed Kiret, and then you could've dealt with him outside my premises. There was no need to put blood all over my Qadiran rug."

The inspector grinned slightly. "Your safety is paramount, my dear duke. I must take every opportunity to kill your assassins, wherever they present themselves."

"Yes, but that carpet was an antique!"

"At least he didn't get a chance to kill you."

The nobleman shook his head. "I expect better for my money, Chief Inspector."

The lawman halted as the duke walked on, until he turned, realizing the inspector had left his side.

"Well, your money is yet to be seen, my duke. You can go on without my company. I'll shadow you from behind. Remember, my courier will be waiting at your mansion once you are safely back. Don't disappoint me."

The duke grumbled and straightened his waistcoat, then stormed off.

The inspector waited until his client rounded a corner and then crept to the edge of a building to observe. He withdrew a small perforated, stoppered vial from a pouch on his hip. Popping the top with his finger, he released a tiny mantis that scurried up his arm until it reached his neck. Touching his skin with its forelimbs, the mantis became black and made a soft *click*.

Whispering in ticks and clacks, the inspector bent his head toward the insect.

"Tell Gareth to take the men to the Counting House Repository in the Petal District, surround the building, and keep concealed at a healthy distance until I signal."

With a final click of his lips, the insect took flight down the street.

The inspector watched as it spirited off, then tucked the glass vial away before slipping a flask from his pocket. Flicking back the hinged lid, he took a deep drink. The pallid liquid inside made him shiver, but in a matter of moments he could no longer see his hands, then legs, until finally he'd completely disappeared.



Duke Malorik stepped out of the Counting House, tucking an envelope into his breast pocket. He stared up at the sky sighing, then pulled out a pipe, stuffing some dried tobacco into it. He struck a tindertwig against the stone wall and brought its flame to the leaf. Inhaling deeply, he closed his eyes a moment, then looked down at the note in his pocket, shaking his head.

“This’ll be the death of me.”

“You’ve got that right.”

A man in red armor slipped out from a shaded corner of the street. He held two sawtooth sabres in front of him and an insectoid helmet hung at his side. His expression was deranged and exhilarated all at once.

“Where’s your protector, Duke?”

The portly noble dropped his pipe as his eyes widened with horror. “He said he’d be behind me, watching.”

With a diabolical grin, the armored man drew closer, shifting his grip on his weapons and weaving them, sword tip down, in mesmerizing arcs.

Several passersby cried out, noticing the display, and quickly disappearing in the opposite direction. Shutters closed on nearby establishments, and the doors to the Counting House swung closed and locked abruptly.

The swordsman snickered. “Time to die, Duke.”

The chubby man stood rooted in place, his attention captivated as the sawtooth blades twisted ever closer. Sweat poured from the duke’s brow and his mouth hung open in horrid amazement.

Suddenly there was a grunt, followed by the soft, damp sound of metal piercing flesh. One of the attacker’s swords spun out of control and flew to the side, clattering on the cobblestones. The other immediately stilled and dropped down as the assailant’s arm went limp. The man walked just a few steps, dragging his blade, until it too clanged to the ground. Then he turned to his side and fell to his knees, a sword lodged pommel-deep in his shoulder. Blood poured from the wound, matching the would-be assassin’s

armor. The blade was embedded vertically in his torso.

Behind him stood the inspector.

The lawman walked in front of the mortally wounded man, looking deep into his eyes. The man opened his mouth to speak, but blood poured from it instead like a lion head fountain. Without a sound, he toppled to the ground, his eyes staring off in complete shock.

Duke Malorik reached out to the inspector's shoulder, panting as his knees started to buckle. The inspector helped his patron to the side of the counting house, and the overweight man leaned against the wall as he tried to calm down.

"Ugh, it's a lot to stomach. I've never seen a man killed in front of me before. I feel absolutely dreadful."

The inspector took a step back. "Just follow the plan. My courier is waiting at your manor. As I said before, you're still under my protection. Go home now."

The duke took a few more deep breaths, nodding, then waddled slowly across the street, looking over his shoulder a few times before turning a corner beyond the inspector's sight.

A moment later, a stinging pain shot up the inspector's leg. He looked down to see a dart embedded in his thigh, penetrating his padded uniform. He withdrew it slowly, noticing a thin trail of gray ooze dripping from the dart's hollow tip into the wound.

Feeling lightheaded, the inspector stumbled out into the street where the sun glared down on him. He withdrew his sword from the dead man's back and looked around him, slipping a small concealed vial into his palm from a fold in his cuff.

"I know you're out there. You can't kill me by stealth."

"You're right, Terador," a male voice rasped. A ray of emerald light hit the inspector in the chest, covering his uniform in a shimmering green haze. "We just have to make sure you won't be disappearing into the ether on us."

"Naturally," the inspector sneered.

Five mantis-helmed warriors appeared from different alleyways, converging in a wide circle around the inspector. The policeman coughed,

noticing his throat tickling and his chest starting to tighten. He poised his longsword over his head, readying to cut a wide arc. His opponents each held a sawtooth blade, and as they slowly closed in, they each drew their secondary sabres which were coated in viscous liquid. As the sunlight glinted off the blades, the inspector noted subtle shifts of color. Each assassin's sword was tainted with a different type of poison.

"It's been a long time, Terador." The grating voice continued, issuing from the smallest man of the group. "I'll admit, I'm not going to miss you much."

The inspector coughed a chuckle. "Nor will I miss you, Harlon. You always were the mistress's lap dog."

The insectoid-armored killers all ran at the inspector at once. One sword sliced down as the inspector's parried, while another cut through his padded shoulder and into his scapula. He pivoted to the side, blocking a third thrust, and just managing to avoid a poisoned blade before being nicked on the calf by its unsullied counterpart.

The leader then moved forward, laughing. "It looks like the great Terador is out of practice."

The inspector cursed. He should've dodged their hits easily, but the dart had slowed his reflexes, interfering with his abilities. He considered an assault of his own, but with his contingency in place, that was not the wisest course. Instead, he dropped his longsword, closed his eyes, and let the concealed vial slip from his palm.

A small explosion of shimmering white powder blasted outward in all directions. One of the Red Mantises charged, tumbled over something and fell to the ground. White dust floated everywhere and two other assassins swung blindly, only to hit their brethren.

A whistle blew and the shouts of men in clanking armor rushed towards them. The Red Mantis agents scattered, stumbling to flee and tearing off their helms to rub their eyes. The inspector picked up his sword and pointed it at Harlon's chest.

"Oh Terador, you won't trap me so easily. *Obscuro!*" The Red Mantis made a flourishing motion and vanished, but the shining dust clearly

outlined his shape, making the effort futile.

“I won’t, eh?” The inspector laughed as he whipped the pommel of his sword across his rival’s glistening face. A chunk of lip and several teeth shot out from beneath the Mantis leader’s mask as blood spewed from his unshielded mouth.

Petal District guards swarmed the street, coming from every direction. “They have attempted to murder an officer of Absalom. Kill them all!” the inspector shouted. Dozens of uniformed swordsmen jumped forward while several halberdiers followed in support. The white-powdered assassins were easy to spot, and the inspector retreated from the fight into a side street under the cover of his advancing men. He wheezed heavily as Gareth stepped beside him.

“For once you look worse than me.”

The inspector took quick breaths and put his arm on his pupil’s shoulder, sheathing his sword. He rummaged at his belt for a yellow vial, popped the stopper, and brought it to his lips, swallowing its contents.

“It’s time you made yourself scarce, my good man. I have one last battle to face.” The inspector straightened, but maintained his shallow rate of respiration. “If you stay by my side much longer, you’ll be targeted, and you’ll likely be dead by morning. Go someplace you never go tonight. We’ll catch up tomorrow at the garrison.”

Gareth’s brow wrinkled in concern. “Are you sure, milord?”

The inspector dismissed him with a wave and looked out to the others in the Lotus Guard. The guardsmen had formed a circle around two remaining Red Mantises, subduing them to their knees and manacled their hands. Blades and polearms hovered at the captives’ chests and faces. Their four dead comrades lay before them, along with six Petal District guards. The inspector drew closer, looking over his lost men, and saw a cadet’s uniform among them. He recognized the boyish face.

“Tender...” The inspector put his hand to his forehead and closed his eyes. Then he strode forward to the group. For a long moment there was silence, and all that could be heard were the creaking arms and armor of his men.

A guard holding a blade to one of the surrendered Mantises looked to the officer as he approached. “Sir? What of the prisoners?”

The inspector studied the two beaten and bleeding Red Mantis agents. Harlon’s swollen face glowered up at him.

The inspector scoffed. He withdrew a dagger from his boot and walked behind each of the prisoners, unceremoniously slitting their throats. He wiped his blade on Harlon’s corpse, then turned to the guards, his ashen face full of fury. “I don’t ever want to see a Red Mantis prisoner in Absalom again. If you see *anyone* wearing a red insect hat and sawtooth swords on the streets, you kill the person wearing them.” He wobbled slightly, then coughed before continuing his orders. “Their existence is a plague—burn their carcasses outside of town. They’re fouling my air.”

The men looked to each other, murmuring in shock. The inspector blinked several times and shook his head, trying to clear it.

His eyes fell again to the bodies of the slain lawmen on the paving stones. “Men...I’m sorry...” The inspector looked back at the Lotus Guards. “I’m sorry for Tender and your other fallen comrades. Put a detail on this crime scene, and mourn them in the way you see fit. I...I bid you goodnight.”

The inspector dropped his knife and coughed into his hand to see blood. The men closest to him noticed too, and two of them rushed to his side.

“Go, you fools. I’m alright.” He shrugged them off as he walked away, and the men looked to each other hesitantly, then returned to their duties.

The chief inspector went down a side alley and crossed several small access roads which linked the Petal District to the businesses of the Coins. It was tight quarters in between, with crates, carts, and refuse cluttering the space at times. Winding through the lanes, a breeze drifted over his face, carrying a whiff of jasmine with it as he came to the end of an alley.

“Well, Mistress, I can’t say our meeting is a pleasure *this time*.”

A woman in red and black armor stepped out of the shadows before him. A mantis mask was poised on her brow and she held a sawtoothed blade in each hand.

“Nor can I, Terador.”

The inspector glumly kicked a rock. “Why did you come to Absalom? You were warned repeatedly to stay away. I clearly claimed this city as my territory.”

“I heard you were dead, that an Absalom chief inspector had somehow outwitted you. At first I couldn’t believe it—you’d always managed to wriggle out of tight scrapes before—but when they brought your armor and swords back to the Crimson Citadel, I thought it true.” The woman lowered her blades a moment and her chin crumpled. “Our Lord sent her here. He Who Walks in Blood. He sent her here to find you, I suspect. She said she had visions of meeting someone special, someone she knew she’d been missing all her life. I think he encouraged it too.” Her grip tightened again on her sabres.

The inspector listed a little and hit the side of the wall. “You kept it from me?”

The mistress’s expression darkened. “She was training to follow in our footsteps and you *killed* her. She’s gone, by your own handiwork, and soon you’ll be gone as well.” The woman dropped her insect helm over her head. The dark leather fused with her skin and her body enlarged, contorted, and cracked as insect legs extended to support the torso of a mighty red praying mantis. Large mandibles gnashed at the air, and as the transformation completed, her sawtooth blades melded with her hands and arms to become raptorial forelegs.

The inspector backed up and turned to run. The monstrous mantis leapt for him with a piercing screech, swiping two shallow furrows across his back. The inspector gritted his teeth and ran to a tighter alley where the large creature had to stop chase. A droning hum followed by a clatter from above told him it was on the roof tops, looking down at him. Grimacing, he made his way up the narrow lane, coughing more blood when his breaths became too deep. As he squeezed through, he came to a section of wall vandalized by writings and murals. A small painted picture of a black mantis adorned part of the brick. He punched at the figure, and the unmortared stone gave way easily, revealing dust-covered armor plates and a helmet. He donned the breastplate quickly, wincing as he locked its arm straps over

his injured shoulder and around his chest. He reached for the greaves when suddenly a brick tumbled from above, glanced off his temple and smashed on the ground. Shaken, he dropped the leg plates and put on the helmet: a sinister black mantis head.

“You can’t hide in there forever, my prey. You are wounded, and the poison in your veins requires an antidote soon....”

The inspector reached for a pair of bracers from his cache when he heard the sound of rumbling from above. Looking up, he was hit in the face by a brick, which was followed by many more. He scrambled backward, narrowly dodging the rest, but his helmet’s visor had cracked. Desperate to recover the rest of his gear, he shoved the fallen stones until he heard skittering noises above him.

Thousands of tiny red mantises blanketed the walls, creeping towards him.

Hoping to buy time and avoid their venomous bites, the inspector stood and backed away, whispering a series of clicks and flicking his fingers toward the swarm. A handful of his own tiny black mantises droned into existence, then quickly winked away.

A buzzing chuckle echoed from above. “It seems you’ve fallen from Lord Achaek’s favor, Terador. This will be all too easy.”

The inspector wheeled around and ran.

The crimson insects immediately took flight in pursuit, with many more streaming from the roof. The inspector could feel a few of them starting to crawl under his armor and clothes. He brushed awkwardly at the pinching creatures as he fumbled for a red vial at his hip. Glancing over his shoulder, he made sure the rest of the cloud had entered the alley with him, then threw the vial into the center of its mass as he ran.

Fire flashed in all directions, roaring up the walls and exploding outward. Piles of scorched insects rained down behind him like showers of Tian fireworks. The inspector swatted at his pants, extinguishing some smoldering patches, then slowed his pace to catch his breath.

A coughing fit seized him. Taking a moment to digest the severity of his situation, he leaned into a sheltered doorway. He could hear the assassin

racing above to meet him, so he doubled back as quietly as he could, running towards a busier road. He avoided the most crowded spots, weaving and stumbling down another back lane until coming to a black wooden door.

The giant mantis jumped down into the alley after him. The policeman wrenched open the door, hearing raucous laughter from the tavern above just as a vicious strike hit his head, and half his damaged helmet lopped off at the crack. Not caring to see if part of his brain was left behind too, he ran down a small flight of stairs as he heard the outside door get ripped from its hinges. He stumbled down a dim hall to a door, pulling out a key and twisting it in the lock as he heard the creature gliding down the stairs after him. As he ran inside, a claw lashed from behind and shredded the front and side of his breastplate, exposing his bleeding torso. He struggled against the grasping spines, tearing his wounds deeper, as he pushed forward into the room and slammed the heavy oak door shut.



The bloodied note from Duke Malorik was everything Terador expected. He read it with a chuckle:

*My dear Chief Inspector,
It would appear you are the one that needs protecting, not I.
I sincerely decline your services.
-Malorik*

A spiny insectoid leg punctured the door and twisted towards the chief inspector's neck, scraping at the wood. He waited a moment for the huge limb to retract, and then fell to his side as it punched through the oak again. The door splintered and strained as the powerful front claws grabbed and pulled ever tighter.

The inspector groaned as he rose and made his way to his lab table, where dozens of vials were lined up carefully. He located a sample of gray

ooze matching the substance from the hollow-tipped dart, and poured it in a line on the table. Then he opened four colored pouches and dashed a sprinkle of powder from each one across the ooze. Three started to bubble and smoke. The blue one didn't.

The inspector scooped his finger into the blue powder and sucked on his fingertip, dissolving the antidote as the door exploded into splinters. The hideous red mantis charged in, lunging for her prey with both vicious, spiked front legs. The inspector and his workbench went flying into the wall.

"So this is where the great Black Mantis lives—hiding underground like a common roach. How pathetic!" The creature leapt to the center of the room and coiled herself back, preparing her killing strike.

The chief inspector crawled to the far corner, reaching out to a dark brick above his head. "Oh, Jakalyn.... This place isn't my home. I built it just for you."

The inspector pushed the stone and a green beam shot out at his opponent, covering her in a shimmering coat of emerald light. The giant mantis shrieked in rage and lunged for his neck, but her attack was interrupted as the entire room rumbled, and dozens of spikes lanced out from the walls and floor.

The music and laughter in the beer hall silenced as a woman's scream pierced the air.

The inspector rose slowly, watching his pursuer twitch and writhe as he pushed the black brick again and retracted the bloodied spears.

"Well, well. It looks like I have a new bug for my collection."

The skewered mantis body shrank away, reverting to the collapsed form of a mantis-armored woman. She weakly whispered an arcane word, then slumped when it failed to produce a result.

The inspector tutted. "You won't be escaping that way, my Jackie. No, no. You're magically anchored to this room. You're going to stay here, and this time it will be my pleasure." The injured man walked across the room and put on a new black helmet and withdrew a pair of sawtooth sabres from a rack on the wall.

"You...you...you lured me here...?"

“Oh yes, my mistress.” The inspector paced back in front of her. “I’m sorry about our daughter, but this...this I’ve wanted to do for a long time. Since that time you tried to do it to me, in fact, after you conceived our child. I’ll be fairer than you were, though. I’ll spare you the seduction.”

The woman looked up to see a fiendish black mantis, its huge forelimbs poised above her. She closed her eyes as it sank into a crouch. Then her head thumped off and rolled across the floor.



The bell rang at the grand mansion’s double doors and the guards opened them. The chief inspector of the Petal District stood before them, a contingent of Lotus Guards at his flank.

Duke Malorik came to the door, still wearing crumbs from his afternoon lunch on his chest. Upon seeing the inspector and his guards, the man turned white. “Goodness.”

“Hello, my duke. You look like someone just walked over your grave.”

The astonished man locked eyes with the inspector and hardly noticed the guards moving behind him.

“Let’s go to your den, shall we?”

The guards at the door dropped their weapons and more Petal District uniforms swarmed into the mansion. The inspector nodded to Gareth and the young apprentice put his hands on the duke’s shoulder, brutishly leading him to his office and hurling him into the room. The portly aristocrat hit a bookcase and tumbled to the floor.

“Ouch!”

The chief inspector motioned to Gareth to enter, while signaling the other guards to remain outside. The inspector then stepped in, shut the door and took a seat. His protégé picked the duke up by the shoulders and marched him behind his desk, throwing him into his chair. He then continued standing over him, brooding.

The inspector inhaled deeply. “Well, my duke, after all the unpleasant affairs were wrapped up, your name came to the top of my ‘to do’ list. I

settled all my business, but there's something that remains which is really insulting."

The inspector withdrew the bloodied letter.

"There's no more, Kiret. The six assassins you led me to at the Counting House are gone. Even the woman who pulled all the puppet strings is now dead, too. Duke, I'm afraid you're all out of friends on Mediogalti Island. I think you'll need some new ones, but I want you to pay me one courtesy, and please don't lie to me. Who approached you with this idea to set me up? Was it the Vernai, or was it the Blood Mistress?"

The duke swallowed hard. "I didn't mean to..."

"No, of course you didn't." The chief inspector lowered his head. When he raised it again, his eyes were cold and dead. "I want to help you, Duke, but you can't lie to me if we're going to fix this. Was Blood Mistress Jakalyn acting alone, or was the entire council plotting against me?"

The duke sobbed, but then looked up with more conviction than the inspector had ever seen before.

"It was the Vernai. It was ordained by the council members as the will of He Who Walks in Blood." Tears rolled down the duke's cheeks and he reached out to the inspector. "Please."

The inspector rose with a disgusted face as Gareth's knife slashed across the duke's throat.

The office door opened and then closed as the two lawmen exited, leaving the duke staring out the window. On the window ledge, a black praying mantis caught a small bug. It chewed off its legs one by one until it started breaking down the torso and abdomen, devouring its prey bit by bit until there was nothing left.

ANLISA'S GARDEN GNOME

BY LAURA SHEPPARD

Deep beneath the surface of Cheliax, amid a maze of tunnels worming through the strange foliage of the Midnight Jungle, Anlisa returned from a hunt. A warm breeze caressed her skin, as the amethyst glow of rock crystals welcomed her back. The pale light highlighted swaying wisps of blue fungus blanketing the corridor's walls and ceiling, and a close humidity lingered in the air. Anlisa sighed in content; the place never ceased to give her strength.

This was home.

It wasn't just a cavern, but a wondrous work of art, and Anlisa had fostered its development with her own artistic talents—her eye for beauty and her gift for sculpting.

But it hadn't always been so.

As a novice working in statuary, her early works had been chaotic and ill-conceived, and she struggled to capture natural movements and forms. Her patrons were from nearby communities, the churlish sorts who stumbled into her hillside studio, seeking to be immortalized for their accomplishments and their misguided quests for fame, glory, and wealth.

The work was demanding, but it didn't matter how callous her subjects were, because each piece gave her the opportunity to improve, challenge herself, and refine her techniques. But the creative process was anything but collaborative.

No one understood the commitment and sacrifice. Some even returned in secret, stealing her best works. It was such a betrayal—services rendered, but nothing left in return. Those were sad days for Anlisa.

As time passed, she grew bored and disillusioned, as overlooked

creative minds often did. She travelled across Cheliax, hoping a change of scenery would cure her ennui, but she couldn't regain her lost spark. Her creations looked awkward and lifeless. Resigning herself to obscurity, she withdrew deep into the Whisperwood forest and looked for a place to retire in peace.

Thinking back to that unfortunate time, Anlisa took in her surroundings and smiled, putting away her bow as she drew near her cave.

What a happy accident.

It was here, after losing her way below the tangle of Scar Thicket, that she experienced her artistic revival. The stone of these caverns was like nothing she'd ever seen. Over millennia, water laced with minerals had created grand pillars, crystal colonies, and rippling, rainbow-hued stalactites. Her sculptures were crude by comparison. Amidst these grand galleries, exotic jungle foliage flourished and Anlisa found renewed inspiration to challenge her creativity and explore a new medium: cultivating and shaping the unusual subterranean plants that were drawn to the mineral-rich formations.

The azure fungus lining the tunnel wall was just one of these oddities. Anlisa stroked the thick growth, and felt the faint buzz of electricity prickle her fingertips. Its latent current made an effective deterrent near the entrance to her home.

Odd though, she thought. It wasn't fully charged.

"Unless...."

There'd been trouble before with the vegepygmy tribes of this region, but that had died down after the initial confrontations. Still, Anlisa sensed something.

A clanging sound echoed down the corridor, accompanied by grunts and squeaks from the cave ahead. Intruders were deep in her garden.

Perhaps the mold-people had returned.

Anlisa slipped past the guardian fungus, gasping as she crossed the threshold into her cavern. Signs of wanton destruction lay all around: clusters of decapitated toadstools, trampled beds of moss, and shattered crystals littered the ground.

Shock turned to revulsion as she pressed further.

“You’d better not hurt my basidiron!” she hissed. The plant meant more to her than any friend. It was her *pet*. She stalked closer to the sounds, carefully skirting a few massive speckled puffballs that had survived the carnage. As she rounded a thick column of colored stone, the culprit was before her.

In the far corner of her vaulted chamber, a small, withered man with a long, white beard was angrily hopping up and down, holding a pointed red hat to his head. A pitiful wheeze followed each *clank* of his iron boots as an unfortunate vegepygmy was crushed to death beneath his wicked feet.

Anlisa narrowed her eyes, tears welling as she drew her dagger to defend her remaining garden. The trespassers were right next to her dear basidiron, and if they weren’t careful...

She gasped.

The plant’s proud bell-shaped head and tendrils drooped sadly, and dark ichor oozed down two of its broken stems. The nasty little man had shoved his bloody scythe deep in the basidiron’s stalk.

Anlisa’s dread turned to fury. “You *monster!*”

She raced over as the murderous creature bent to inspect his handiwork, dipping his red cap in the spreading puddle of blood and sap at his feet. He cackled with glee as Anlisa’s reflection was mirrored in the pool, illuminated by the glow of nearby crystals. Snakes writhed in coils about the woman’s face and her gleaming eyes glistened with rage.

The mean-spirited little man saw the reflection and snickered. Then he tugged his hat back on his head and crossed his arms defiantly, lifting his gaze to meet hers. Cackling again, he stomped one more time...

...then turned to stone.

Anlisa grinned smugly. “Serves him right. He was mean and nasty to the last.”

She sheathed her dagger and rushed over to her poor basidiron. She’d have to harvest the roots and replant quickly. There’d be many more pets in the future, but they’d need to be carefully tended. As she moved to find a spade, she stopped a moment, considering the scene. Crouching in her

garden amongst the remaining vegetation and bathed in the glow of purple quartz, the frozen, red-topped blighter now looked oddly...charming.

Anlisa tossed her hissing mane behind her, and set to work with a smile, considering all the new basidironds that would regrow around the statue.

Not bad for a has-been.... she conceded.



The sun crept over the roof tops of the Triumph district, glinting off the morning dew as it rose above Blackrose Gardens in the city of Egorian. Two nobles strolled among the blackened rose bushes and manicured hedges that ran alongside the cobbled path, chatting about their affairs until they reached a small courtyard. There, within a brick-bordered garden bed, stood a striking and utterly mischievous centerpiece: a garden gnome of impeccable design.

One man diverted from the path to examine the small statue. “So, this is the Crown’s infamous garden gnome.”

“Yes, Lucan. Nasty little thing, isn’t it?”

The thin nobleman moved closer, studying the stone figure intently. “Quite so, Mallus. Delightfully spiteful. But how can it be so...so life-like?”

The older man nodded. “I’ve often wondered that myself. The craftsmanship certainly cannot be duplicated, even by today’s most sinister and brutal styles. Some contend that this was the *first* garden gnome. It’s been here as long as anyone can remember.”

“It’s truly something.... Do they know who sculpted it?”

Mallus sighed. “Unfortunately not, my friend. The identity of this artistic genius will always be a mystery.”

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