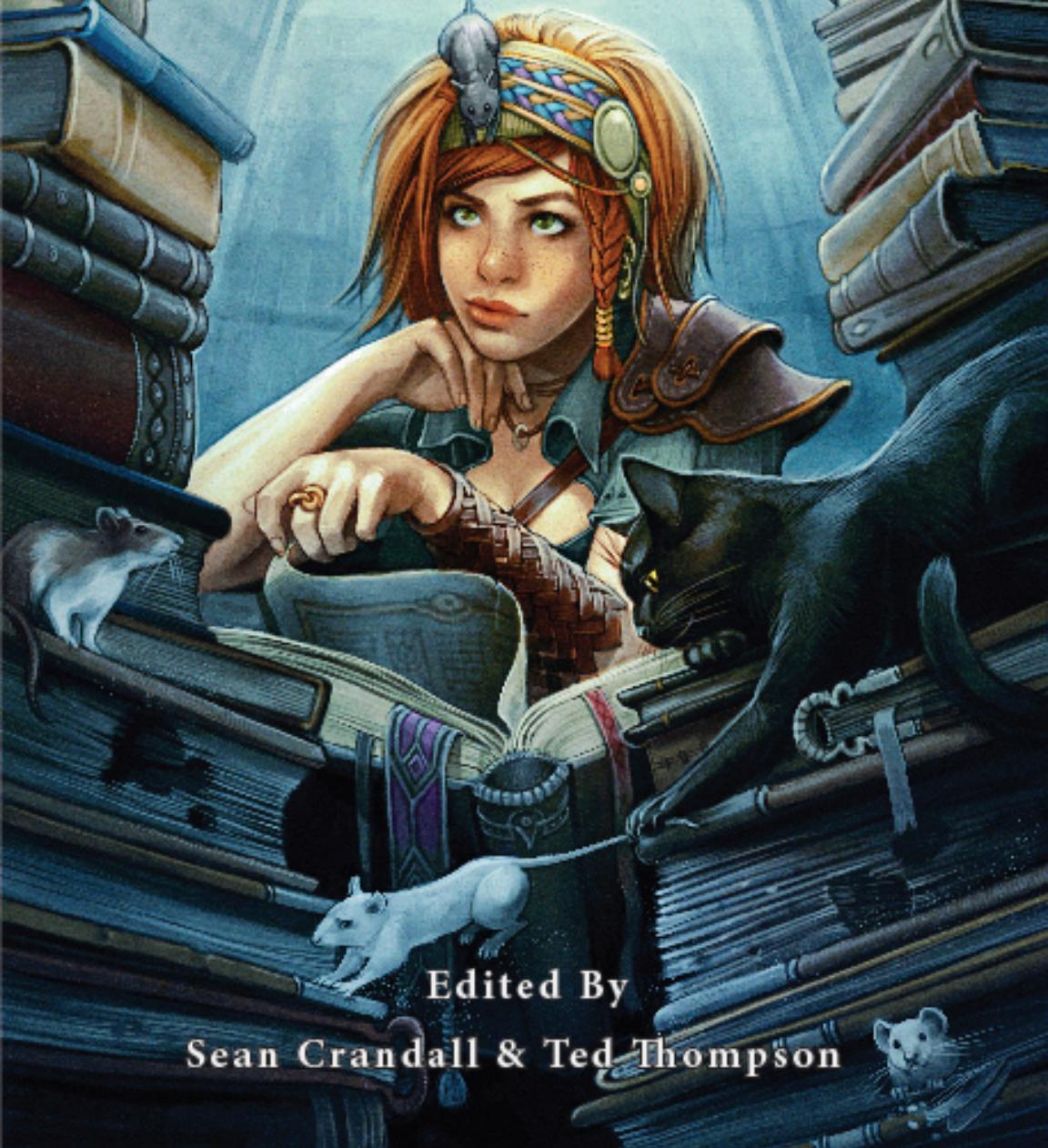


PATHFINDER CHRONICLER

Anthology

Volume I



Edited By

Sean Crandall & Ted Thompson

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Anthology

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Pathfinder Chronicler Web Fiction

The Black Mantis by Ted Thompson

The Crowheart Legacy by Paris Crenshaw

The Dangling Thread by Nicodemis Finch

Decisions of Faith by Ernesto Ramirez

From Oppara with Love by Robert Gresham

Life in Korvosa by Ernesto Ramirez

The Ritual by Ted Thompson

Midnight Prowlers by Jonathan McAnulty

A Quiet Retirement by Derek Johnson

The Road to Varno by Clinton Boomer

The Silver Lady by Jonathan McAnulty

White Shadows by Ernesto Ramirez

...and more

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Cover art by Eva Widermann

Cover Design by Jon Hamlin

Layout by Taylor Moore

Pathfinder Chronicler Anthology / edited by Sean Crandall & Ted Thompson.

Publishers' Graphics, LLC
140 Della Court
Carol Stream, IL 60188

Foreword: A World Without End / by James L. Sutter -- Introduction / by Ted Thompson
-- Wishing Day / by Clinton Boomer -- Thicker than Blood / by Jess Carson -- Family Business / by Andrew Crossett -- A Feast to Remember / by William Dodds -- Dusk of the Dawnflower Dervish / by Shawn Feakins -- Shattered Dreams / by Robert Gresham -- The Wandering Kingdom / by Trevor Gulliver -- Chains of Honor / by Rachel Hadlock-Piltz -- Enchained / by Maggie Hoyt -- Spit and Polish / by Derek Johnson -- Unrequited / by Eric Norton -- No Road Back Home / by Ernesto Ramirez -- Type of Devil / by Carl Rossi -- Rogue Ascendant / by John C. Rock -- Rain of Redemption / by Neil Spicer -- Tea with the Laughing Fiend / by Todd Stewart -- Pathfinders of Qadira / by Ted Thompson -- A Bride in Korpresa / by Dave Wood -- Glossary / arranged by John C. Rock and Pathfinder Chronicler staff

First Printing May 2011
Printed in the United States of America

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A World Without End

Fan fiction often gets a bad rap. Why, people wonder, would authors spend precious hours writing about characters and settings they don't own, slaving over stories for which they cannot be paid? Moreover, why would fans of a given setting or character bother reading unofficial fiction, especially when there's official material available?

The answer, of course, is love.

Authors who write fan fiction do so because they love a given world *so much* that they don't care who owns it. They aren't concerned with selling their work, or trying to make a name for themselves. They simply have stories inside them that need to be told. The fact is, even professional authors rarely get the chance to play with their favorite characters from movies, books, or games—while such contracted writing gigs exist, they're few and far between. And for writers and readers of fan fiction, the official version is never enough. Every setting is its own universe, and a universe has unlimited room for new characters, new triumphs, and new challenges.

As the Fiction Editor for Paizo Publishing, it's my privilege to commission the official Pathfinder Tales novels, as well as the Pathfinder's Journals that run alongside the adventure paths and the free, serialized web fiction that appears on paizo.com each week. While that sometimes seems like a lot, I know that those stories are just barely scratching the surface. The Pathfinder campaign setting is too big to ever detail fully, whether with one book or a thousand, and to pretend otherwise would hubris in the highest degree. That's why I, along with the rest of the Paizo staff, have been so flattered by and thankful for the fan authors and readers at places like Pathfinder Chronicler. They're out there telling their stories and helping each other improve as writers without compensation, without official titles—without anything, in fact, but a shared love for the setting. In many ways, their writing is of the purest sort, and it's been amazing to watch them continue to build the world we all share.

This book was produced totally independent of Paizo, and is 100% by and for Pathfinder fans. Some of these stories are the revised product of Pathfinder Chronicler's 2010 Fan Fiction Contest. Others were born directly out of the thriving community over at pathfinderchronicler.net. But all of them represent countless hours of work by authors who want nothing more than to tell their own stories, and read those of others.

On behalf of the Paizo team, thank you to every Pathfinder fan fiction author and reader for keeping the world larger than we ever imagined—or may ever know.

James Sutter
Paizo Fiction Editor
March 2011

Introduction

Oh dear, I have to write an introduction for the book and I am panicked that I will do an injustice to all these authors. Breathing slowly, thinking of happy frogs in Mexico. Ok, let's begin.

What you hold here is two years of dedication to an idea that can only be expressed through true belief.

What is Pathfinder Chronicler? What is Pathfinder Chronicler Anthology for that matter?

There are some who would say it is about stories based on Paizo's Pathfinder Campaign Setting®. And though this would be correct, it understates our true mission: **to be the best writers of fantasy fiction.**

For me, Pathfinder Chronicler is an idea put into action. It is mind over matter. It is telekinesis of the imagination unleashed.

How does a person become a writer?

Simply put, they write. They write a lot. They also edit a lot. They even rewrite a lot. In fact, a story is never finished being edited or rewritten.

And that is what Pathfinder Chronicler is really about, editing and writing. Work!

However disenchanting that may sound, there are also other aspects to Pathfinder Chronicler. This book, for instance.

In August 2010 we threw our first Pathfinder Fiction Contest to see just what the community could do. We put together a panel of five judges, and the winning five stories were sent on to Paizo Editor James Sutter who chose the top three winners. The top ten stories became featured on our website and each judge chose a single story as deserving of special consideration. The contest ended. Or did it?

The idea of Pathfinder Chronicler Anthology came about by the same people that submitted for the contest. They expressed a desire to see all contest entrees side by side and wished to have a downloadable PDF that would be put out "as is." This was a completely implausible idea (we would need some fifty plus permissions) but did have merit in another sense. Quietly, we circulated around our site the idea of an Anthology and the top ten authors from the contest unanimously supported it.

With ten stories under out belt, we proceeded to review other contest entries from authors that had become Pathfinder Chronicler members. These stories hadn't made it to the top ten but through editing and revision had become vastly improved bringing another four stories to the line up.

We then asked our original members if they wished to be added. Four of us threw in our hats to bring the story count in this book to eighteen. These original stories were first published on pathfinderchronicler.net.

As a whole, you hold in your hands the rawest fiction I have ever laid eyes on. In this book you will find a villainous halfling, a love-smitten gnome, a doomed pathfinder, obsessions with immortality, death, undeath, redemption, damnation, maniacal demons, unforgiving peasants and a whole lot more.

And though all these stories can be read on pathfinderchronicler.net (as the authors intended), you will find this book reads differently. For stylistic reasons and uniformity, we re-edited these stories and accepted revisions from all the authors. We then edited each story again to the final version you see here.

So, with great pride I present to you the combined work from the best minds the Pathfinder Community has to offer.

From all of us at Pathfinder Chronicler we hope you enjoy our labor of love and invite you all to drop by our site to read, write and comment.

Ted Thompson
aka 'Zuxius'
Pathfinder Chronicler Founder

WISHING DAY

by Clinton Boomer
Pathfinder Chronicler Original Story



Id Wishtwister Shadibriri was having himself a truly lovely day.

The barren sky hung still, sullen and gray like a pool of seething lead, low and dark upon the horizon without a ghost of sunlight behind it. Stinging snow, much of it now clumped into hard, cruel shards of ice, sifted and spattered through the black and leafless trees, filling the forest path with a drifting, bony whiteness, which crunched delightfully underfoot.

A cry of killing wind cut, crackling, through the ice-coated branches, and a smile crept unto the lips of the Wishtwister.

“Such good sport,” he thought with a quiet laugh, “and what a day.”

It was a day that promised to be delightful and productive, and most of all, simply a well-fulfilling damned enterprise. “After all,” he thought, “it’s Wishing Day!”

Thirty miles south by south-east of Gralton, soiled jewel of the River Kingdoms, the whistling Wishtwister cut through the nameless woods to his destination: a blackened little circle of seven stumps ringing 'round a jut of bloodstained and rune-carved rock dating back to the time of the old Sarkoris Binding-Witches. The creeping grin which split the Wishgiver’s face at the thought of those old hags and what had become of them was colder than even the ice-choked wind.

His smile brightened and his pace quickened. He was, of course, wearing a potent glamour, painted pleasant, bright and ruddy-cheeked as he always did when amongst humans, but the spring in his step was all real. It had simply been too long, by his delighted accounting, since Wishing Day had last come to Gralton.

Has it really been only a year?

Gralton had been a lucky find, all things considered during that winter of 4668—the year all the wishing started. Once the old aristocracy of Galt had fled from the Red Revolution and settled into their rotting river estates just long enough to hate themselves for cowardice, it had been all too easy to put the right words in the right ears; on the 11th of Kuthona, when all the faithful of Cayden Cailean were gathered by a roaring hearth, spinning tall-tales and raising a tongue-tied toast to their hero’s bold ascension, the bitter and the vengeance-minded were to be found upon a very cold and lonely holiday indeed.

A dozen souls attended that first inaugural Wishing Day.

This year, for his 42nd anniversary, Shadibriri expected a crowd of near fifty.

In truth, it should be said, there were more profitable opportunities than Gralton scattered around the great, wide world with all its mysteries. The early weeks of Gozran were always exciting, coming as they did in the very shadow of Taxfest. And the endless, aching middle of Calistril invariably saw the burning agony of some youth's heart in the desperate need of an immediate fulfillment. Strangest of all, perhaps, the last gasps of Lamashan always seemed to writhe around an artist who had lost his muse or a soldier staggering home, sick to their stomach of war. Yes, all twelve months had very special and wonderful reasons to be in the right place at the right time, with sharp ears tuned to the right desires. And when there were no temptations to sow or bargains to make, no words to massage or dull-tongued desires to bring forth into hideous life, there was always killing to be done.

Yes, always killing, and blood and fear and the bursting of hot flesh in one's sharp, slick hands. And the cries of accusations and sorcerer-burning. And the souls caught up in the shuffle, of course, and carried out into the Abyss. Delightful, all.

But for old Wishtwister Shadibriri, nothing was quite as sweet as today, perhaps because it was his—and his alone. No one else yet had a Wishing Day, ripe with those looks of pure, panicked, docile, tragic, terrified, wasted hope wreathed in angry, spiteful, blood-thrumming need. A crowd, squirming, willing to wrestle and claw and kill for the right to sell their soul short.

No wonder he loved Wishing Day.

A wandering, tuneless hum began to bounce right along with Shadibriri's mirth, and the old demon turned his thoughts, quite idly, to how he might go about conducting this day's most unique symphony of wants and promises and weeping betrayals. Would he make his supplicants fight for his favor? Fornicate, perhaps, in ugly couplings? Strip naked and race through the cold woods on frozen feet? Perhaps a wine-drinking competition, full to bursting and puking, or a teeth-pulling challenge, yanking gaping gums bare and bloody, or some other contest of trembling self-mutilation.

Each of those had always been joyous in the past.

And then the wish, of course, was the best part of all.

The old Wishtwister had never been one for plans. Ever the artist, never the engineer. An improviser instead. For him, a single second's spark of spontaneity was worth well more than a dull decade's dusty design; a moment of madness would always out-pace a century of contemplation.

But he did like to wonder.

And then, with a twinkle in his eye and a slick, savage parting of the strings of conjuration which bind the Astral spaces, the Wishtwister arrived at his destination.

There were four dozen there, all told, huddled against the cloying chill that strikes the River Kingdoms with a vengeful howl each winter and refuses to let go. Ice in their beards, hands fisted into numb clumps at their sides, wet, crimson misery in their eyes; these abandoned and shifting souls were wrapped in finery and peasant's rags alike. Some had surely rode six days out of Daggermark for this occasion, in sumptuous carriages crafted of darkwood and cold iron; others had no doubt begun the bleak march out of South Gralton's gray farmland at nightfall wrapped in all they owned. And all were here, balancing dread against obsession.

With a ringing laugh, the Wishtwister leapt up upon the tallest stump of the clearing,

and his warm voice carried against the wind. "Welcome, welcome, welcome all! And let our Wishing Day...commence!"

His sparkling smile washed over the crowd, and his gaze picked at their worried faces shining with unknown needs. He made a thousand, thousand guesses, and discarded all of them just as quickly.

Who, today, would leave with their heart's desire?

He did not know, and the joy was in the learning of it. There was, for a moment, a heat within him so fierce that it was almost overwhelming; a wild mania, a rage to pick each and every one of the gathered throng apart with his bare hands and drink their piping blood down in gasping gulps.

"Hello, hello and hello! I am the old Shadibriri, friends, who hearkens close to those in greatest need, and by the ancient pacts of these old woods I come in this hour to hear your wants and whispers. I am no god, and I seek no prayers; I am no man, and I seek no gold. I am only a spirit of hoping and of wishing and of having, and I come expecting...gifts! Who, then, has brought me a treat, a taste, a tickle or a tithe?"

One woman, all-too-young, barefooted, dressed in rag and pushing forward through the crowd: "I—I bring you fresh milk."

A grin. "Oh, and indeed I do treasure a drink of sweet milk! Is it warm, may I inquire?"

A look of terrified uncertainty. "I'm afraid—well, the—the cold..."

"Huh. You did not think to clutch it next to your body and keep it warm?"

"I—I tucked it close as I could, against the wind, but..."

"Oh, no. Then, perhaps next year you will remember to hide it beneath your cloak, against your bare and secret skin."

The woman blushed and stammered.

"I..."

"No matter, young lady! 'Tis but a bit of teasing from an old man, is all. You are bold to speak first, and I do admire boldness. You may stay, for your milk is a fine gift. Pour it, now, on the ground, and abide awhile. If I may ask then, little one, what will you wish for if the wishing be made yours this day?"

A soft gasp against the wind. "The...love of..."

"Eh? What's that, my little lamb, my little lark?"

"The love of a certain—certain person."

"Hm. Oh, but I am afraid that I cannot give you the love of another."

Red eyes startled, staring, disappointed.

A grin, as the ruined and muddy milk began to freeze upon the ground. "But I can give you this person, rest you assured. This person, their life, their body, their mind, their very heart, still hot, if you wish. All the things which make them, which is better than love. To thee, young lady, I wish the best of luck!"

Her eyes turned downward, humiliated and on the verge of tears.

"Now, who is next with gifts?"

A man stepped forward. "I bring you, master, a brick of solid silver."

"Hm. And what need has a spirit for silver, lad?"

"...taken from my grandfather's store without his knowledge."

"Ah! Then you guess at my nature, boy!"

"I remember you of years past, my master."

"Quite well, son! Well indeed, and I see your gift and am pleased, and beg of you to stay. If I may ask, my shivering and cunning friend, what shall you wish for today

if the wish is made yours?"

"Revenge."

"Oh, delightful! Come close and drop your gift at my feet! Now, of these gathered Lords and Ladies, who else has a thing to offer me?"

A black-cloaked figure pushed forward. "I offer you only death, monster."

The crowd drew back in time with the unsheathing of a blade.

A delighted gasp. "You offer me...death? So few have ever done so, and in truth I have never had it. And, then, what would your wish be, friend?"

With a scarred and battle-worn voice. "That you face me."

"Indeed!"

Screams roiled through the crowd, as some few saw, for the briefest moment, the Old Wishtwister for what he truly was. A great and gnarled limb, like the claw of some misshapen crab vomited out of the Lake of Mists and Veils, snapped forward and severed the swordsman in twain. With a gush of steaming blood, his corpse twitched upon the scarlet snows and then lay still.

"There. A wish is granted."

A murmur of panic roiled through the audience.

"Oh, fear not, friends! His request was a trifling thing, no great difficulty in granting. In truth, he deserved much more than that for which he asked; I could have given him strength beyond the mortal, or a blade more swift than blackness itself, or the insight to know his enemy's heart and the vision to see foes all around him. A pity, then, that he chose so foolishly. Now, then...who else has brought me a gift?"

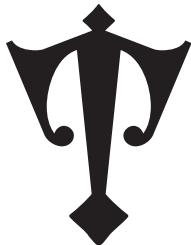
And there, as the supplication went on, and trophies piled before him, and the crowd began to turn spiteful and desperate, the Old Wishtwister decided upon the final task which would decide the victor of Wishing Day: the supplicant willing to devour, in gasps, the greatest portion of the fallen swordsman would be granted their dearest wish.

Oh yes, that would be fun. And then, and then, and *then* the very wish itself, and the new horrors dawned from it.

Ah, the joys of Wishing Day!

Unrequited

by Eric Norton
Contest Winner 3rd Place
Contest Ranking 3rd



he handsome Ulfen man was bleeding out as he sat propped against a rough-hewn wall. A gaping wound on one of his thighs fed blood to the hungry chamber floor. The crimson fluid quenched the proverbial thirst of the dust and broken bits of bone that surrounded the fallen warrior.

The blonde man was not alone in the crude, torch-lit chamber. Several paces away, a pair of gnomes stood amidst a thousand broken cogs and gears, the scattered remnants of the cavern's clockwork guardian. The gnomes, a man and woman, were a study in contrasts.

She was gnomish royalty in a kingdom she hadn't visited in years. Though she had long ago forgotten her proper name, she remembered her title, and asked that she be called Princess. Her short, pinkish-purple hair was dyed a dark brown, except where it framed the edges of her face. Her painted fingernails were showcased by gloves rendered intentionally fingerless, one of many small modifications perpetrated upon her well-worn traveler's outfit. She carried no weapons, leaving such unfashionable matters to her companion.

He was a soldier in the service of Her Royal Highness. He remembered both her proper name and his own, but the princess called him Butler, so he called himself Butler. His blue hair of modest length and his stylish beard of the same color were each untouched by dye. His modest but well-tailored courtier's outfit was kept in pristine, unmodified condition, complimented by a gleaming mithril shirt and a long traveler's cloak. He was armed with a ceremonial but deadly halberd.

Inspecting the broken clockworks, Butler announced, "It appears that our foe is vanquished, Your Highness." He sniffed the air. "And I detect no trace of malevolence on the wind."

Anxious, Princess called Butler's attention to the Ulfen warrior. "Sven's hurt."

Butler nodded. "I'll tend his wounds."

As the blue-haired gnome approached the fallen warrior, Sven raised a sword. The action required great effort on his part. The handsome Ulfen man was weak from loss of blood, to the point that his face was as pale as death and likely twice as clammy. "Not a step closer." Despite his wounds, his voice was strong and clear. His words were precise, with no hint of the accent one would expect, given the Ulfen's tribal heritage.

Butler set aside his halberd, placing the weapon gently down upon the cavern floor. His wary stance revealed that he remained cautious of the sword-wielding Ulfen, despite his intentional disarmament. He had not divested himself of his weapon as a show of confidence. He had done so in an effort to demonstrate his own good intentions.

Butler spread his empty hands. "I merely offer my talents as a healer. I may be able to mend your wounded leg."

"I'll mend myself, thank you very much." The blonde man drew a flask from his belt and pulled the stopper with his teeth. Upending the container, he poured a clear, oily substance onto his injured thigh. The oil washed away blood and wound alike, leaving uninjured flesh in its wake.

Color returned to the Ulfen warrior's face. He regained his feet and tossed aside his empty flask. The whole time, he kept his sword pointed at the blue-haired gnome. "Just who might you be?"

"It's okay," announced Princess, "he's with me."

"Then I'll address my question to you. Who might you be?"

Princess stepped closer to the towering warrior, where she could be more easily seen in the light of the nearest wall-mounted torch. "It's me, silly."

Sven inspected the gnomish princess. "You're that pink-haired gal from the tavern in Daggermark. You were selling flowers, no?"

"I wasn't selling them. I was giving them as a meaningful gift to celebrate our having found one another. Those were some of the last blossoms from the garden I kept back in the First World."

Sven nodded. "I remember you said something about a garden before blushing and wandering off. Didn't I see you more recently at a tavern in Sevenarches? You were the gal sitting in the corner, muttering and fidgeting like a nervous ferret."

"See," Princess said to Butler, "I told you he noticed me." She returned her attention to Sven. "But I'm betting you were too tipsy to remember that one night we shared in Gralton."

"What night in Gralton?"

Princess shook her head. "No, you obviously don't remember the night I'm talking about. Otherwise, you wouldn't have asked that question."

"Enough of these riddles," said Sven. "What are you doing here?"

Princess nodded towards the broken bits of clockwork on the floor behind her. "Saving you from big, metal monsters."

"I don't need to be saved by a pair of wee folk. I can handle myself."

"Fair enough," said Princess. "I'm here because the time we've been spending together in taverns isn't nearly enough, so I thought I'd take an equal interest in your daytime activities."

"In other words," said Sven, "you found out about my treasure map and followed

me here to steal the artifact.” He said nothing to indicate the nature of the artifact in question. “That’s what this is really about, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Princess, not catching the hint of disdain in Sven’s latest question. “Why would I want to steal anything from you? I’m here to share in your moment of triumph.”

“There’s only one artifact, so there’s nothing to share. The treasure is mine.”

“Yes,” said Princess, sounding bored, “I get it. I’m thoroughly impressed by your treasure-seeking endeavors. But you don’t need to impress me further. You already have me.”

Sven narrowed his eyes. “Have you for what?”

“For a soul mate. A boon companion.” Princess smiled. “You’ve finished the errand that’s been occupying so much of your time, so now we can finally be together.”

The Ulfen warrior frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“About being in love, of course.”

“In love? We’re not...” The warrior’s face went pale and his eyes went wide. “That time you were sitting in the corner of the tavern, muttering and fidgeting. You were casting a spell on me! Trying to get into my head!”

“You noticed!” said Princess, happily.

The towering Ulfen warrior backed up a step, obviously frightened. “You tried to steal my wits and wrap me around your finger. Tried to turn me into a lovesick, treasure-fetching lackey.”

“It was nothing as unsavory as all that,” explained Princess. “Just a simple faerie charm to remind you of all the fond memories we’ve shared.”

“What fond memories? We hadn’t met before that time you handed me those flowers.”

“Well, not ‘met,’ exactly. But I saw you a few weeks earlier, when some bouncers kicked you out of a tavern up in Numeria. They said you’d had one too many drinks, but they clearly didn’t know what they were talking about. And they wouldn’t listen when you explained that you’d already paid to stay in one of the rooms they kept above their bar.

“I could tell by your expression that you were raging inside against the injustice of it all, and I knew that I had to help you. So I followed you, that I might offer you a place in my room at the inn down the street. Somewhere you could pass the night, and maybe find a way to soothe your savage, animal anger.

“But when I caught up to you at the tavern down the street, you’d already found a place on the common room floor and dozed off. I didn’t want to disturb you after the rough night you’d been having, so I left after watching you sleep for a while and returned the next morning. But by the time I got there, you’d already left.

“It took a few weeks before I found you again down in Daggermark.”

Sven looked incredulous. “You’ve been following me for months!”

“And watching over you,” said Princess, pointedly. “You know how all the barmaids are always coming up and bothering you on account of your looks? Well, I’ve been stopping them from pestering you whenever I can. Convincing tavern owners to keep those shameless girls washing dishes in the back, since I know you don’t want those desperate trollops hanging all over you.

“No need to thank me, by the way.

“And I saved your life from a hedge viper last week, when I was following you through the woods north of here. I plucked the colors from a nearby flower and

sprayed them in the wicked serpent's eyes. By the time it recovered its wits, it was too terrified to continue its pursuit."

Sven made a gesture meant to ward against black magic. "More witchcraft!"

"It gets better," said Princess, mistaking Sven's healthy fear of her magical talents for enthusiastic approval. "Remember that rotten hussy that took advantage of you when you were out tavern-crawling a few nights ago? That blonde that lured you to her residence when you were too tipsy to object and then walked off with your coin purse?"

"Hester from the brothel?"

"Yeah," mused Princess, "she was a bit of a whore, wasn't she? But I got back at her for what she did, abducting and robbing you like that. I put her to sleep with a mighty spell, locked her in a trunk, and kicked her into the river."

Sven was aghast. "You drowned her?"

"Maybe," Princess shrugged, "I don't know. It didn't seem worth my time to head downriver and see if any drenched corpses washed up on shore."

At this point, Butler felt obliged to interject. "Actually, Your Highness, I hired a porter to fish that woman out of the river before she drowned."

"Interesting," said Princess. "Why would you go to such lengths to save such a villainous tramp?"

"Remember, Your Highness, humans have laws against such things as murder," said Butler. "Besides, I wouldn't want to see your soul sullied by the lingering stench of petty vengeance."

"How thoughtful, Butler. Always the faithful servant." Butler nodded. Princess ignored him, turning her attention back to Sven. "So what was I saying?"

"You were recounting a list of torments that you've inflicted upon me and those who would comfort me," answered Sven, blending the poetic traditions of his people with an impressive mastery of the local dialect. "Blacklists and dread magic and attempts at murder most foul."

Princess laughed and clapped her hands. "And they say Ulfen warriors have no way with words. Sven, you brilliant, beautiful man. With theatrical turns of phrase like that, you're more than just a warrior—you're a warrior-poet."

The Ulfen man was unimpressed. "Save your honeyed words, you foul witch. I don't care if you have been following me for months, isolating and manipulating me. You're not going to beguile me out of my rightful claim."

"Sven," said Princess. She tried approach, but was dissuaded by a wild swipe of the blonde man's blade. "Sven, dearest. You need to stop dwelling on this treasure of yours. As I said, I get it. Your ability to find and claim riches more than affirms your worth as a great and mighty hero. But you don't need to impress me. You've already won my heart."

"I have no interest in the affairs of your black, magic-tainted heart." Sven shifted into a stance that suggested impending violence.

Nearby, Butler tensed and prepared to reclaim his halberd, which still sat on the cavern floor.

Princess looked troubled. "Sven, let's talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about. Be gone from here and be gone from my life!"

"Dearest," said Princess, sounding hurt, "you don't know what you're saying. You mustn't throw away what we have with such casual words."

"What we have? We have nothing! I don't even know you!"

Princess started to cry. "Obviously not, if you think it's okay to berate me and belittle me like... like some common whore! That's what this is about, isn't it? That whore I tossed in the river."

Sven started to say something.

Princess talked over him. "You were glad that she took advantage of you, weren't you? Admit it. You never loved me. You just wanted to use me as a safe harbor while you sniffed around for tramps like Hester."

Again Sven tried to interject, to no avail.

"Well, I'm not going to stand for this. I don't care if I do love you with all my heart, I respect myself too much to put up with this tripe from any man, even you. We're through, Sven, through!" She turned her back on the Ulfen warrior and continued to cry, now in silence.

Sven looked mightily confused but equally wary. He did, however, drop out of his aggressive stance. "Very well, then. If you're through with me, I'll be on my way."

"Fine. Leave."

Sven nodded. "Very good." He took a step towards an unobtrusive alcove hidden in the shadows of the far wall, but stopped when he realized the alcove was empty. He glanced back at Princess. "Just hand over my artifact and I'll go."

"I don't have your stupid artifact."

"That's funny, because until you arrived, it was sitting right over there." Princess still had her back to Sven, but Butler followed the Ulfen's gaze, noting the indicated alcove for the first time. "I saw the artifact there when the battle started and again when the battle ended. Yet now it's gone."

"Well, I don't have it," said Princess. She turned back to face Sven, her cheeks damp and her eyes bloodshot. Her expression was a passable imitation of stoic.

The Ulfen warrior turned to Butler, who shrugged. "I don't have your artifact, either."

Sven was skeptical. "Well, I don't have it. So if neither of you has it, then who does?"

The gnomes and the tall man glanced at one another. Not moving, they then looked around the rough-hewn chamber and peered into the adjoining hallway that led back to the surface.

That's when they noticed the trio of cloaked figures creeping slowly towards the exit. Two of the three men had their hoods up. The third was a dashing, dark-haired rogue with a thin moustache and small beard. "Don't mind us," said the rogue. "We didn't mean to interrupt your little spat."

"Thieves!" Sven accused. "You followed me here to steal the artifact."

"But of course," admitted the rogue. He and his comrades leveled matching crossbows at the gnomes and the astonished Ulfen warrior. "And we've succeeded quite handily. Now I suggest you stay safely put in this cavern while my men and I go merrily on our way. It would be a pity to kill the lot of you out there after such clean work in here."

Princess, Butler, and Sven didn't so much as move.

The rogue nodded. "Farewell, gentlemen." He winked at Princess. "Lady." Then he and his compatriots were gone.

For a few minutes, the gnomes and the Ulfen warrior said nothing. They just stood in silence amidst broken cogs and gears and other worthless debris. Sven was fuming that he'd been robbed. Butler was mentally kicking himself for failing to notice the

robbers' arrival upon the scene. Princess contemplated matters of the heart.

She was the first to speak. "Sven, I'm afraid we just weren't meant to be." This elicited a snort from the Ulfen warrior, which Princess ignored. "Butler, I can't help but feel that we're somewhat responsible for Sven's loss. We should follow those ruffians and recover that artifact."

Sven grumbled, "I knew you were here to claim my prize."

Princess snapped, "I'm talking about returning your prize, you stupid Ulf."

"I don't believe you," said Sven, "and I'm sure as all hells not going with you. I'll find those cowards and settle this on my own terms, without the help of your wicked magic."

Princess waved her hand dismissively. "Very well. Do as you will." She turned to her retainer. "This changes nothing, Butler. We're still going to track those ruffians."

"So we can bring them to justice, Your Highness?" asked Butler, sounding hopeful.

"So I can see the look on their leader's face when I show him that he can't sneak by me and expect to get away with it. I want to teach him a lesson for being so smug and arrogant and... dashing." A distant expression crossed her face. "I bet he'll be impressed when I'm able to track him down. That's the kind of thing that impresses men like that."

Sven looked from Princess to Butler, who only shrugged.

Princess started towards the exit. "Come along, Butler."

"I'll catch up in just a moment, Your Highness. I need to collect my halberd."

"Very well," said Princess, continuing on her way.

Sven was wary of the halberdier. "Move slowly, gnome. If the sharp end of your stick so much as points in my direction, I will strike you down."

Butler nodded. "Fair enough." He slowly collected his halberd.

True to the code of an Ulfen warrior, Sven allowed the gnome to do so. "Now go."

Butler glanced in the direction Princess had gone and lowered his voice. "Before I do, I want to apologize for Princess. She has a sizable obsession with dangerous men and it far outweighs her better judgment."

"Then you need to talk some sense into that crazy witch."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said the gnome. "Obsessions like that are the only things that keep my people grounded."

"You call that gal grounded?"

"Compared to what she could become, yes. Yes, I do."

"And that's why I prefer the company of my own kind," said the Ulfen man. "Though you seem to have a character more akin to my own. Must you travel with the likes of her?"

"Someone has to keep her from hurting herself," said Butler, "and from hurting others."

Sven mulled that over. "So that's the obsession that keeps you grounded, is it? An obsessive need to protect others?"

"No," said Butler, "I choose to protect others of my own free will."

"Then, if you don't mind my asking, what is your obsession?"

Princess interrupted, calling for Butler to make haste. Butler apologized and excused himself. With eagerness and a wistful smile, he left to follow his princess on her latest misadventure.

No Road Back Home

by Ernesto Ramirez
Pathfinder Chronicler Original Story



The girl's silvery armor looked out of place on the unkempt road. Light mists before her began to rise, a sign that the badlands and the dark forest were behind. She did not feel at ease however, as she approached the pastoral fields and homely farms that bordered her destination. The road carried no traffic and the town ahead didn't expect visitors, especially from the city of Vigil in the southwest, where the girl hailed from.

The town was called Canterwall, and its attached lands were some of the most bountiful in the country. The land's fertility was both a blessing and a curse. Its bounty brought riches and a good life in exchange for hard, honest work, but the land's location was in westernmost province of Ustalav. Bandits and orcs pillaged and looted from the west, spewing forth from the neighboring territories, Belkzen. It was for this reason that every citizen was a militiaman, holding arms at home. To the south lay the cursed lands of Vyrlich, where the evil taint of the Whispering Tyrant could still be felt centuries after his defeat. And on the darkest of nights, when the mists poured from the mountains, every god-fearing citizen stayed home. Over the years, superstition had grown strong in the hearts of Canterwallers, and while they strove each day for their families and lands, they remained wary of strangers and what the night could bring. The girl knew, because of her faith and blood, that she would be received with suspicion in the town ahead. Thus she rode with caution, her eyes moving from one shadow to the next, as she drew near the town. One of her hands caressed her horse's mane while the other kept tight control of the reins; both were signs of her nervousness. Argentum had been trained by her own father to follow her every command, even in combat. It was reassuring to have such a reliable companion when traveling through both Belkzen and Vyrlich. As she drew closer to the town, the girl saw the wooden lookout towers and the guards within before they noticed her. They were distracted and undisciplined and judging by their expressions and postures, the girl imagined they were playing cards or dice to keep themselves awake. Such behavior would have earned them a week inside a cell in Vigil. Still, they stopped whatever they were doing and readied their crossbows. She advanced calmly and purposefully, keeping her hands in plain sight. After a few minutes of

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following her with their weapons' sights, the guards were convinced she was not a threat and lowered their weapons, then returned to whatever they were doing.

The town had once been better protected; the servants of light and justice had kept the peace and fought the darkness around it. Yet superstition reigned supreme, and in the end it had been enough to doom the region. Its defenders moved southward, beyond Vyrlich where they could better defend against the evil they fought. As for the people they had sworn to protect, the decision had been hard for the protectors to make, and even harder for the town to endure.

Now, close to the town, the girl saw that life went on, even after the protection of Iomedae's Swords had withdrawn. The fields were greener than she had seen in many of her travels. As she entered the town, the locals began to stir for the upcoming day. Shepherds were already taking their animals to graze in the nearby hills. The girl could smell the aromas of fresh bread and stew coming from nearby buildings. Despite the comfortable scene and smells, she sensed something amiss. Transactions were being conducted in low murmurs instead of the more vocalized way that was typical of Vigil. And unlike most cities, the people of Vigil always remained happy, even with the specter of constant siege. In contrast, Canterwall's people looked sad. Maybe it was not them, but she who felt so. The girl fought back tears that struggled to pour. She began to recognize a place here and another there, a familiar smell or a welcome sight.

So absorbed by her reverie, she didn't notice that people had started staring at her. Her elven ears, the symbol on her cloak and shoulder pads, even the shield tied to Argentum's saddle and the sword hanging from her waist, brought attention. The holy symbol of The Inheritor, the "Sword of Valor," a longsword surrounded by a burst of light, was well known to the Canterwallers, and they were not fond of it. It brought back dark memories of loss and disillusionment, of better times suddenly ended. Besides which, everyone around her was human, and her mixed blood was obvious. Few of these people had seen an elf, much less a half-elf, except those who might have known her father.

The girl could feel the stares and hear the whispers. She was not welcome here but none dared oppose her as she continued along her way. Argentum walked slowly and cautiously, sensing the growing tension.

The houses grew more clustered as the girl neared The Wall, a man-made boundary protecting Count Palatine's castle and separating the poor of the town from the gentry of noble blood, or at least the money to pay the heavier taxes. But that wasn't the girl's destination. Atop a hill north of the town proper stood a stout structure of stone that was undoubtedly the best defensible strongpoint, aside from Count Palatine's castle. It was the Temple of the Inheritor. As she neared the hill and temple atop it, the air thickened oppressively. The multitude watching her had grown, mocking her victorious return with suspicion and dislike. The girl looked from one face to another searching for a familiar friendly face. She found none.

The crowd parted, and through its midst, a Varisian woman strode forth. She was of medium age, dressed in a long, dark tunic that could serve either for a funerary procession or a judge in court. Her pale skin was shocking in contrast against her clothes and long black gray-speckled hair which flowed to her waist. Despite the woman's age, her figure was clearly that of one who kept herself in constant training. The sober expression on her clean face could not hide her hostility. A silver and gold medallion in the form of a spire hung from her neck, showing her high rank in

Pharsama's clergy.

Argentum stopped with a sudden neigh as the high cleric of Pharsama, goddess of balance, stepped in his way. The horse was well trained, but there was something unnatural emanating from the woman, some power beyond the grave surrounding the servant of the goddess of births and deaths.

"*Halfbreed*, those of your faith abandoned this province many years ago. What do you want here?" she said firmly, without amicability.

The girl sighed, speechless. She caressed Argentum's mane, and slowly dismounted. Every movement was precise and premeditated, a process to calm her racing mind. This woman, a Judge of Phrasarma—Judge Waletzko if she had heard the murmuring of the crowd correctly—made the girl's hair stand on the back of her neck. Compelled to draw her sword, the girl resisted the urge. This woman's word was obviously law in this town. Despite the Judge's hostility, diplomacy was called for. The girl pulled away from Argentum, the reigns still in hand. She looked directly into the judge's grey eyes, holding her ground.

"Good day, Judge. If I remember well, our temple is not abandoned. I have come to see the Sword guarding it on a matter of personal business."

The older woman looked at the girl as if measuring her worth. The Judge crossed her arms. "Are you a Sword or a Sword Knight, girl? What is your rank? Can you make decisions for your church?"

The girl stood straighter, answering with pride. "My superiors have honored me with the title of Sword Knight of the 9th Circle."

"That will do. Your abandoned temple owes the town a thousand golden suns on rent, and to everyone's dismay the Count Palatine hasn't ordered its seizure. Do yourself, your friend, and all of us a favor, and take your lady friend back home. I will pay the debt. Canterwall needs that temple in capable hands." Waletzko turned and extended her hand toward a small and pudgy woman in the crowd, dressed similarly, though her holy symbol was made of silver, not gold. "Norn Hannah Kappel needs to train her disciples and requires appropriate facilities; that place would serve her well."

The girl listened calmly, measuring her words before speaking. "I am sorry, Judge, but I don't think we have any plans to sell at the moment. Nor do I think Sword Kosel has any plans to leave this land. She was, after all, born here. But if she decides so, I will abide by her wishes." Without waiting for an answer, the girl palmed her saddlebags, which made a characteristic metallic jingle. "And you said a thousand golden suns, right? I assume Count Palatine will let me pay on behalf of Sword Kosel—after all, Vigil's gold is as good here as it is there."

Judge Waletzko's expression changed almost imperceptibly, but for the girl who was used to reading people's emotions, it was clear the judge was not pleased.

Before either could say anything, Norn Kappel intervened. "I am thankful for your good intentions Judge Waletzko, but I don't need a temple to practice my vocation," the woman spoke humbly.

The air around the three women grew even thicker with tension. The girl, not sure if she would make matters worse, touched Kappel's shoulder and smiled. "Norn, if you ever need a place to practice your craft, rest assured, Iomedae's doors are always open to those who protect life." The girl couldn't help but feel kindly toward the older woman standing by the Judge, for her face brought back fond memories of love and caring.

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The tension eased a bit around them, even though Waletzko was unhappy about how things were going. The judge angrily looked at the saddlebags.

“Just leave Canterwall, leave like the rest of your ilk. Finish what they started and let those who really care for this town take care of it.”

And with that, the Lady of Graves priestess left. Having nothing else to watch, the crowd did so as well. The young girl in silvery armor and the older midwife in her midnight tunic stood alone.

“Please forgive Judge Waletzko, I believe she desires the temple as much as Groetus desires the end of the world,” the Norn stated apologetically and smiled, looking quickly at the girl’s saddlebags, “and apparently, both will have to continue to wait.”

The girl nodded and thanked the Norn with a smile and was about to mount Argentum again, when the pudgy priestess spoke.

“What is your name, girl?” the Norn asked curiously, noticing the girl’s elvish and human features that looked oddly familiar.

The girl looked around cautiously. “Norn, I believe it best that I not say.”

Norn Kappel looked apprehensive, and though guilt lay in her eyes, she persisted. “Girl, stop talking in circles. I know you...just tell me your name!”

The young Sword Knight sighed and gave the older woman a sad smile. “Jordan, Jordan Fenix, ma’am. At thy service.”

Jordan Fenix.

The name hit a nerve.

How could Norn Hannah Kappel not recognize one of her children, one of the girls she helped bring into the world? Now she could see it clearly. Jordan’s features: her emerald eyes and pale skin. They were those of her mother, just finer due to her elven blood. Her mother had possessed long red hair, whereas Jordan had shorter black hair. Nevertheless, she was her mother’s daughter and held the same soft smile. Her ears were pointed and her eyes deep with purpose, just like her father’s. She was the same height as her mother, just a bit taller than Hannah herself, but athletic and fit for combat. The Norn lowered her face and took the girl’s hands into her own. “Child, forgive them! I am sorry my dear child, I didn’t know.”

Jordan looked embarrassed. “It’s fine, Norn. I understand, these people have suffered greatly. I can’t really blame them.”

“And yet you do, don’t you?” Hannah’s voice was but a whisper, her eyes still downcast. “You are right to blame us. You were but a child, yet I wager you remember everything. I was not in town when it happened, but that doesn’t make it less my fault. I knew I should have preached more tolerance, but once fear and anger mixed, it spread like wildfire... burning out of control.”

Jordan closed her eyes tightly, haunting memories returning in force. To her, the cries of the mob and the heat of the torches were all too real. For a moment, she was sure she had heard her name whispered in the cold east wind.

Jordan trembled. She felt like a toddler. She took her hands from the Norn and embraced the smaller woman. Her eyes closed and her cheeks became warm and moist, while she kept her voice from breaking. “Norn Hannah, you are not to blame for what the others did. My father was very thankful for your help and always spoke highly of you.” The embrace was tender, but it lasted only a few seconds before the girl moved away.

“Dear child, it has been too long. You have grown to become as beautiful as your

mother.”

Hannah, noticing the sad expression of the last statement swiftly changed the topic. “Your father, dear, how is his holiness doing?”

“He still hates it when people call him that. He is do...” Jordan was cut short when a rock struck the side of her head. She fell to one knee, dizzy and surprised.

Norn Kappel turned around. “Who did that?”

The culprit stood, dressed in rags, not too far from them. Already, he was bending to grab another rock. As he stood straight, he gave an angry cry that caught the attention of those who were close. “It’s the same damn face. Look at her! Can’t you see it? Don’t you remember her? It’s the same witch in different clothes!”

The man’s accusations were the ravings of a drunkard, yet still the people stopped and stared again. The spectators began to whisper, their memories jogged by the cries. The girl was a living image of the Fenix Witch.

Jordan regained her footing and barely dodged the second rock. She had a nasty cut in her brow and it began to bleed profusely. The blood dripped down the left side of her face, yet instead of attending to it, she kept her attention on the people, especially the drunk. Her left hand caressed her sword’s pommel while the right began moving towards its handle. There was a green fire in the young Sword Knight’s eyes, but she controlled herself.

Hannah intervened. “Child, please stop! She is not who you think!” Still, the man continued throwing rocks, adding insults and cries.

“I know who she is! She is a Fenix! Like the Fenix who practiced witchcraft and abandoned us! They are the ones responsible for my wife’s death!”

The man was Veles, a drunkard. His life had not been the same since his wife had died in childbirth. Hannah had attended the woman, yet her efforts were in vain.

A crowd gathered once more, only this time it wasn’t merely to watch. Several began picking up stones and other makeshift weapons. Hannah tried to calm them, but her words fell on deaf ears. Their angry murmurs grew louder as the drunk’s sparks threatened to ignite a bonfire.

Jordan’s instinct told her to prepare for a fight, but her sense of duty stayed her hand to not hurt these people. With a sigh, Jordan calmed herself and stood up straight to address the crowd.

“You sent us away, so you can’t blame my father or his followers after what you people did. We protected you, and in return you betrayed us. You took my mother away from us! What did you expect him to do?”

She hoped to convince them to just move on, but somehow all the resentment and sadness she had tried to forget resonated in her words, inciting even more violence.

The crowd didn’t care about her loss—they were too focused on their own pain. One stone flew toward her and then several more. Most missed by an inch or more, but a few flew true. She lifted her shield from Argentum’s saddle to provide cover from the coming barrage.

She didn’t hate them, not any longer. She had learned to live with her loss. Still, being here had revived too many feelings the young knight had long kept buried.

“Tell that to my uncle, you let him die!” One howled.

“My father too!”

“We still mourn my sister, witch!”

Before things came to a bloody resolution, Norn Hannah Kappel moved herself between the young sword knight and her attackers, and began to pray. Two of the

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stones intended for Jordan struck her. Still she prayed, unheeded by the danger. A shimmer began to glow in the air before her. A stone struck the glow but bounced away as a divine barrier separated the two women from the crowd.

The crowd stopped, becoming aware of what they were doing. The Norn was much beloved and they had no wish to hurt her. The boldest stepped forward.

“Norn Kappel, please move and let us do what must be done.”

Norn Kappel opened her eyes wide. When she spoke, it was with all the authority of her office. “No. No, my children! I helped her mother when she was born; she is as much my daughter as any of you. I expect you to treat her as you would do any of my children.”

Reluctantly, the crowd began dispersing, most in silence. Still, a few hurled insults against the young knight as they walked from sight.

Jordan lowered her shield and prayed in thanks to her goddess. Norn Kappel sighed in pain. “By the Wheel child, let me take care of your wounds.”

Jordan shook her head slowly. “Norn, I think it better I head straight to the temple.” The girl took Argentum’s reigns and turned toward her destination. She advanced, caressing the animal’s mane guiding him along the road. Norn Kappel followed close behind.



The Temple of the Inheritor had seen better days.

Jordan’s father had founded it in the name of their goddess more than thirty years ago. The Temple Fortress was dedicated to the protection and welfare of the whole region. During his time in Canterwall the place prospered. Now, after a decade from their departure, no building in the surrounding region showed more signs of abandonment and neglect.

From afar, the state of the building was barely perceptible, but as one approached, it became painfully clear of the extent of the damage and disrepair. Only the garden and orchard beside the building appeared well cared for.

The front door was left wide open, as if waiting for followers who would never return. Jordan dismounted Argentum and both women climbed the steps to enter Iomedae’s house. Inside, their steps echoed loudly in the temple’s interior. It was clean of dust and debris, though it felt abandoned. And yet, if Jordan focused, she could still feel the presence of the goddess. It was in the light glistening off the swords guarding the interiors.

Further they went in and Jordan could smell the light aroma of myrrh coming from the back of the chapel. A glorious altar of Iomedae caught Jordan’s attention. Beside it a young woman prayed, dressed in a simple white dress and adorned only with short golden braids.

The young priestess stood when she heard Jordan and Hannah’s steps behind her. Despite being in her twenties, the young woman looked tired beyond her years. She began walking, slowly at first, towards the girl in silvery armor as if she could not believe her eyes. Then suddenly she ran, sweeping Jordan into a full embrace.

“Jordan? What are you doing here?” There was amazement in the girl’s voice, as if she had come to believe she would never see her friend again.

“Mirna, I missed you so!” Jordan cried returning the embrace.

“I thought you would never come back.” She stepped back and wiped away the

tears in her eyes.

“Well, I heard you were having difficulties, but I promise everything will be fine now.”

The two looked each other over. Jordan thought Mirna looked different from the last time they had seen each other, more than ten years ago—still, she recognized her friend’s tenderness.

Mirna then noticed Hannah for the first time.

“Norn,” she said respectfully.

She then saw Jordan’s head wound. “By the Goddess! Are you ok? Norn Kappel, did my friend give you any trouble down there?” Mirna tried to keep her tone casual, but Jordan picked up on the worry.

“None at all, child; the problem were my children,” the Norn apologized.

“Just a case of mistaken identity, dear.” Jordan shrugged

“You were never a good liar, old friend,” said Mirna. She took Jordan by the hand and led her to the kitchen where she had fresh water and some healing implements.

“Please sit down. It’s not much but it is all I have.” The young priestess took water and cotton to clean Jordan’s fresh wound, but to her surprise it had already closed.

“I see the Goddess continues to give her blessings to you,” Mirna said playfully.

Jordan smiled slightly, her face blushing. “And I am thankful, for she has kept me alive far longer than I would otherwise.”

“You have to tell me all about it; I was told you traveled a lot. But you must be tired and hungry. Why don’t you bathe in my quarters while I prepare something to break our fast?”

Jordan smiled and gave her old friend a kiss on the forehead, barely able to contain her own tears.

“Later, first I need to see her. Help me take this off.”

Mirna nodded in understanding, and helped Jordan remove her armor like she used to when they were mere acolytes, leaving just the chain beneath it.

After cleaning her face, Jordan left the other two women in the kitchen. Carrying her Holy Sword, Faina, she used the blade’s magic to light her descent into the temple’s cellar. She walked, guided only by memory until at last she reached a niche in the wall. Jordan caressed tenderly the words in engraved on it.

They read: “Novannia Fenix, beloved mother and wife.”

“Mother, I’ve come home.” Jordan hoped her voice didn’t sound as hollow as the word home felt.

Type of Devil

by Carl Rossi
Contest Ranking 29th

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ahja meditated. The path to Nirvana is a full void, an infinite that stretched across a single point of the mind. To properly pursue the path, one seeks enlightenment by searching the things that one already knows. It is impossible to truly find enlightenment outside of oneself. A person will find many clues leading to it in the outside world, but ultimately it is found within.

Her journey to Nirvana had started at a Baladata or, “girl’s school,” in Vudra. It had taken her all over the Inner Sea as a sailor. Now she sat in the small shrine to Irori in Almas, the capital of Andoran. The path would most likely lead her much further, but for now, in the peaceful contentment of her soul, she felt she was where she should be.

“Mistress Sahja.” The sweet-sounding soprano of her acolyte’s voice broke through the barrier of Sahja’s mind. There was a hint of apology, possibly fear, in the voice. So the young cleric did remember she wasn’t to disturb her mistress during meditation, but felt that there was some urgency that precluded her previous instructions. More likely, since fear was involved, someone else felt their urgency overrode the acolyte’s instructions.

Sahja listened intently, but did not open her eyes. Yes, there were two people standing behind her. She could hear the breathing now that she was less self-absorbed. It was not another of the shrine. The rasp of the breathing was too desperate to belong to a cleric of Irori. He? Yes, her guest was most likely male and had run a ways to get here.

“Tell our guest to remain here; I’ll speak to him momentarily. You may return to what you’re doing.” Sahja slowly allowed her mind to return to focus in the real world. She rose, keeping her upper body rigid, swinging her bare feet fluidly under

her and standing. She wore slightly faded orange silk tightly wrapped around her upper body and yellow silks hanging from her belt and wrapped loosely to form leg coverings that didn't hinder her movement. Her skin, like most Vudrani, was well tanned—not too light or too dark. Unlike most of her countrymen, her eyes shone a brilliant green, accented with a touch of barely seen eye shadow. That and the red dot on her forehead, set above and between her eyebrows, was the only make-up she allowed herself to wear. Her black hair was worn long, clasped with a golden ring behind her neck.

She turned to face her guest. He was a youngster, no more than twelve, with rusty blonde hair and brown eyes. Like many his age, he was wearing the leather apron of an apprentice. It was surprisingly clean, especially considering he worked in a job that required ink. There was ink stained blue on the knuckles of his hands. Because of this, he could not be a scribe. A scribe would not have ink on his knuckles. Sahja let out a light-hearted laugh as she realized what the young man did for a living.

"There's a devil in my shrine," she said happily, "a printer's devil. What brings you here today, young devil?"

The young man tried to laugh nervously. "'ave we met, miss? I don't recall us meetin' afore..."

Sahja placed a hand lightly on his shoulder, trying to calm him—it had the opposite effect. She kept forgetting that Andorens had different notions of personal space than Vudrani. "No worries," she said, trying to hide her accent as best she could. They were about the same height. She lifted his hand in hers and ran a finger over his knuckles. "Scribes don't get ink on their knuckles as a rule," she said.

"Now that's a flood," he responded. "Ya 'ave the eyes of a falcon, miss. I'm a devil right 'nough."

Sahja made a motion like she was scribbling on some imaginary paper. "Or write enough." She smiled slyly at him. The devil just looked blankly at her, missing the joke. She continued quickly, "What brings you to the shrine of Irori today, Master...?"

The apprentice looked down at his hands trying to make the nervous gesture look like an attempt to rub the ink off his knuckles. "I'm Dore 'allanson. It's my master, Ben Forlin, miss. 'e needs your 'elp. 'e sent me to see if ya would 'elp him find our stolen type."

The cleric wondered if the "h" was one of the letters that was missing. "Sounds like you need the watch, not someone like me." Sahja said slowly. She had said that line many times before and it hardly ever made a difference.

"That's what I toll 'im, miss. I did. And 'e did call the watch, sure 'e did. But 'e was figurin' that seein' 'ows ya 'elped out old Zimmer last fall, findin' 'is stolen necklace from the temple..."

"Yes, the stolen stole. I doubt I'll ever live it down." She lightly rubbed her palm against her eye and forehead, but her humor was lost on the devil. Sahja supposed that he spent so much time working with words that he had little thought for playing with them. She quoted from the Azvadeva Pujila, "'Enlightenment cannot be found without service to others.' Don't worry, Dore. I'm a pushover for word devils."

The watch had already arrived at Ben's shop when the two arrived. Sergeant Mlunsa, a former tribesman of the Mwangi Expanse and Sahja's main connection inside the watch, was taking notes as she and Dore entered. "Dah!" he exclaimed. "I see the real detective has arrived." Each word was fully enunciated in a way that

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made every syllable clear. Sahja liked the sound of the sergeant's voice.

He was dressed in the typical blue, white, and gold uniform of the Almas watch. Next to him stood a short and stocky man in an apron covered with ink. He wore a white shirt with sleeves rolled up and ink on the bottom of the arms. His hair, despite a relatively advanced age, completely covered his head with an uncombed shock of white. A little tinge of blue ink streaked just above his left ear. The printer looked hopefully at Sahja.

"Oh, thank you so much for coming Miss Sahja," he said, almost pitifully. "I've heard so much about all the good you've done around here. I'm very confident you can help me out."

Sahja smiled at the praise. "Coming from a left-handed printer, does that make it a left-handed complement?" she asked.

Ben laughed. "I do say it with all sincerity—wait a moment, how did you...?"

"There's ink in your hair on the left side, but not the right" she answered lightly. "How did people not notice such things?" she wondered.

Ben laughed again. "I'd heard that I'd need to watch what I say around you, but my, I need to watch how I look too?"

Sahja simply smiled and began a careful look around the shop. The press dominated the middle with a small forge on the port side, as if the shop had been a ship and the door the front. Tongs and a crucible sat on a shelf next to it along with a couple of black bars. Cubby holes all along the wall held the casts for the different letters.

The opposite, or starboard side, held a work bench with a few random ink stains on its surface. The wall above it was noticeably empty. Unlike other walls in the place, there weren't samples of previous work or works in progress. It was just blank.

The back held a small desk that faced the door. Its surface was cluttered, so much so that it made Sahja cringe to view the disorderliness of it. Wherever nirvana existed in the universe, that desk was at an opposite point.

As Ben and the sergeant seemed busy talking, she took a moment to step outside the shop. Dore followed silently. He'd been quiet most of the walk over too. She appreciated how he allowed her to think, even if it was more out of nervousness than courtesy. The door had no knob, but had a simple latch and large padlock to secure it while the owner was away. The lock was lying on the ground. The side where the lock latched had been smashed smooth, but the keyhole looked untouched. She looked up and down the road. To the starboard side of the shop was a cooper and to the port, a blacksmith.

Sahja left the lock on the ground and poked her head into the shop. She got Sergeant Mlunsa's attention and motioned towards the cooper's shop. "I'm going to see if anyone next door heard the lock get broken off."

"Dah!" the sergeant responded. "You go and do that, Miss Sahja. We be still trying to figure out how much Ben's type was worth." The two returned to their discussion.

"Ya think the cooper might 'ave taken the type, miss?" Dore asked as they turned to leave.

"No," Sahja responded, "I just like the word 'cooper.' It sounds nice, doesn't it?"

Dore didn't agree or disagree. "That's good, miss. Both our neighbors are nice 'nough folk. I don't think either would 'urt Ben." He held open the door for Sahja and she entered the cooper's shop. She decided not to comment on Dore holding the door.

The cooper's shop was an antithesis of the print shop. It was a little smaller, but the floor was not only well swept, it was waxed. Shelves on the back wall held supplies and some tools. A workbench, clear of tools or work at the moment, sat under the only window. The cooper himself, sporting a tradesmen's apron, well combed honey-colored hair, and a large smile, sat on a stool in the center of the shop, carefully placing the slats for a large barrel with the help of a hide mallet.

"Dore," he said congenially, not able to look up from his work at the moment, "what brings you to my shop today? And who's your guest?"

"Aye, Adam," Dore said. "This is Miss Sahja. She's 'elping Ben find out 'oo stole our type this mornin'."

Adam stopped mid-swing with his mallet and several slats fell to the floor. He might come to regret the time of careful work that was lost, but for the moment, his face showed a sympathetic concern. "Why would anyone steal type?"

"The metal...it's expensive," Dore said emphatically. "It's made of lead, tin, and bit of some...secret metal. We'd be 'ard pressed to replace it all afore the rent comes due the morrow." Sahja was about to comment on the printer's devil being "hard pressed," but Adam spoke up first.

He winked at Sahja as he said, "Secret metal?"

Dore sighed and shrugged, "Ah, Adam. Don't be doin' that again. I toll ya, I'm not allowed to tell no one about the secret metal."

Apparently they'd had this conversation before. Adam's smile broadened. "Is it gold? Afraid that if people knew that.... Hey, is that why your type was stolen?!"

"Nah, it's not gold."

"Then why's it secret?"

Sahja watched the exchange with some interest. She knew what the third metal was, but guessed that Dore had a hard time saying antimony—a metal made by alchemists to help the type hold its shape better. Adam knew at least that it was something Dore couldn't pronounce. It didn't seem to matter if the cooper knew what the metal was as long as he could use it to cause a little friendly torment.

"Can't 'ave everyone knowin' or they'd all be printers too."

Sahja redirected them by saying, "Why do you need the type to pay rent if it's due so soon?

Doesn't Ben already have the money?"

Dore looked slightly indignant. "Course Ben 'as the money. We can pay rent, but then we wouldn't 'ave any type to keep on goin'."

Adam took the hint and dropped off tormenting the devil. "Landlord isn't going to be lenient this month either, with so many people wanting space here. Shop front in Almas is going for more than a copper or two these days. That explains Ben rushing to find you, Miss Sahja. I suppose I shouldn't be wasting your time by playing games with the locals." He held out his hand to her and she took it, blushing humbly as he bowed his forehead to it. When he straightened back up, he said slowly, "What can I do for you, my lady?"

"I won't keep you from your work," she said kindly, "I just have a small question." When Adam nodded once quickly to her, she continued. "The lock was broken from the door, not picked. Did you happen to hear anything this morning?"

Adam smiled. "Funny you should ask. There's a blacksmith just two doors down. I don't think I'd notice an odd hammering here or there." As if on cue, the sound of a hammer rang out a few times and then quieted again. They laughed.

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“I suppose not,” Sahja said, her voice cracking a little, as though there was a deeper joke to it all. She made the conventional departing comments and she and Dore exited the shop.

“That was it, miss?” Dore said skeptically. “You didn’t need to know any more from ‘im?” He didn’t move away from the shop just yet.

“No, Dore, I didn’t.”

“Not if ‘d ever left ‘is shop or ‘e’d seen anyone unusual or anything?”

“He wouldn’t have,” she answered with a ring of finality to her voice.

“Oh, so you mean like it was a professional job, miss. And they’d not ‘ave let themselves be seen?”

Sahja paused for just a moment, trying to decide what she could safely tell Dore if he was to keep trailing her today. She was starting to see that he was a bit brighter than his method of speaking let on. “Yes, Dore,” she said carefully, “it was definitely done by a professional.”

The blacksmith’s shop was a crowded space with the forge set on the starboard wall. To the port side was a stack of black bars, slightly lighter in color on the top with the ones further down lightly specked with red. The smith, whose name was Hammil—or ‘ammil, as Dore pronounced it—was busy working the bellows when they entered, so he didn’t hear them.

He was a large, heavily-muscled man who stood a good two feet taller than the priestess. Like a lot of people who spend most of their time around fire, very little exposed hair remained on him. The work of the forge was too hot to allow more than an apron, breeches, and boots for cover. Under a sweaty forehead sat a small set of blue eyes, looking like they were almost too close together to be on such a large man.

Inside the forge she could see the fire blazing, wood turned so bright a yellow it was almost white, sitting atop the coals. A pile of coal with a shovel nearly buried in it was next to the forge. Tongs, hammers, and other implements of the trade were set hodge-podge around the shop, apparently where their owner would need them for different jobs. To Sahja, it looked disorderly, but there was a system to it that she could appreciate, given the small, cramped space.

She had to push past the rain barrel that sat near the anvil to enter. It rolled lightly as she moved it, having recently been drained of its contents down the nearby drain in the floor. It wasn’t a high quality barrel, she considered. It was probably not the work of the fastidious Adam Cooper at any rate.

As Sahja slipped past the barrel into the main part of the shop, Hammil noticed her and Dore for the first time. “Dore,” Hammil said gruffly and loudly. He might have been slightly deaf; he had put long hours in a loud job which may have affected his hearing. “I can’t imagine you need more heat for the forge on your side. What’re you and a beautiful woman doing in my smithy?”

“This ‘ere is Miss Sahja,” Dore began his introduction. “She ‘as a question for ya about what ya might ‘ave ‘eard this mornin’.”

“Been working on a set of horse shoes for the Supreme Elect’s carriage horses all morning,” he answered. “Don’t know I’d have heard much.” He turned his attention to the cleric. “Priestess Sahja? Muddying your feet outside your shrine again, I’ll wager.” He smiled slightly as he said it.

She graciously returned his smile. “I’d rather they were muddy, or walking a ship’s deck, than growing weak sitting in the shrine all day.” The smith’s smile vanished when she continued, “I think the Supreme Elect might be a little more

lenient on you if you just returned what you took from Ben's shop this morning. It'd be the least you could do."

Hammil looked confused but Sahja continued. "There's no need to pretend. You used a hammer to open the lock this morning." She nodded to the one in his hand. "I'd guess that one would be about the right size for it and it's not made of hide like the cooper's."

The smith glanced briefly at the hammer. "What on earth are you talking about, lady?" he spat. He looked truly confused—his brow furrowed, making his eyes look even closer together.

Sahja didn't appear to pay any attention to his expression. The tempo of her words quickened as she found her true caste, her true element. "Did you want the Supreme Elect's horses to be shod with brittle metal? You'd normally use coal for the fire—it helps harden the iron, but you had to find a way to dispose of the shelves you took from the shop, so you burned them. I guess you were worried that so much weight would tear a regular sack, right?"

"I know nothing about any missing stuff, Sahja..." the blacksmith began, but the look of confusion was gone, replaced by one that hinted at the beginnings of fear.

The priestess didn't give him any more opening than that. She threw the rain barrel over and it broke as it toppled to the ground. It was definitely not the work of Adam Cooper, she decided.

"And if they weren't brittle enough, what were you tempering them in? Not with the water you'd usually use, it's all gone. I'd guess the barrel bottom gave a little when you tried to slip past it carrying one of the heavy shelves. You'd have noticed sooner if you'd been working those shoes all morning." Her voice, normally so calm and even, was slowly rising. She struggled and barely managed to remain calmer on the inside than she sounded.

"Now miss," Dore interrupted, "I think ya must 'ave it wron', miss. 'ammil 'ere, 'e wouldn't do nothin' like that."

She turned to Dore, careful to make sure it didn't sound or look like she was angry at him. "He would if it meant finally having a larger shop. You already have to share the forge so you can melt down your metal. Tear down this wall and he'd have more space and the whole forge to himself."

"Now lady, I don't know a thing about any missing metal," Hammil said, an indignant anger starting to rise in his voice.

She turned slowly to face the smith, speaking with sudden softness. "Who said anything about missing metal?"

The smith paused, his face a clear display of fear and anger mixing their volatile cocktail. "The metal that you said was stolen from Ben's shop this morning." There was no confidence behind the words. She could tell he knew he'd made a mistake. The pretending, such as it had been, was over. He stood frozen and undecided for a moment.

"I don't believe I mentioned anything about metal, but type metal doesn't rust the same as iron." She carefully picked up a bar from the stack and ran a finger along its cool surface before handing it to Dore. Her eyes stayed fastened on the smith and her voice was calm and even. "Maybe you meant this metal? It's a good thing type metal cools so fast, isn't it? This was just smelted down this morning, wasn't it?"

Dore was staring carefully down at the bar. He drew out a small knife from his apron pocket and used the back to etch it slightly. The metal was soft and with a little

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obvious effort, peeled back slightly. "That'd be type metal right 'nough." The anger began to grow in his voice as the full realization dawned on him. "Ya featherless creep..." he began. "Ben and I were almost out a job and 'omeless..." He was angry and seeing too much red to notice Hammil coming at him with his hammer raised. Apparently, the smith saw the apprentice as more of an immediate threat than the short priestess.

Sahja wasn't blinded, though. She turned inside the smith's stride with her back to him and grabbed at the arm wielding the hammer. Then she bent forward, turning the hammer slightly from its course, but using its weight and the leverage of her position to throw the smith over her shoulders. He landed on his back. Before he could rise, she placed her bare heel over his throat and pressed down. He almost tried to grab for her foot, but stopped suddenly.

"Dah!" came the enunciated voice of the sergeant, a stunned looking Ben peering over his shoulder. "You be ok, Miss Sahja? Sounds like you be catching another chained foe holding the lash. You should be ashamed of yourself, Hammil, attacking a defenseless priestess like her." The smith wisely decided not to say anything. The watchman stood over the smith, placing his boot on Hammil's chest soundly so that Sahja could move away from him.

She laughed to herself as she remembered one of her recent encounters with the sergeant. He'd come a little too late on that occasion and the thief she'd confronted was less subdued and needed a lot more persuasion. Since then he tried to keep her away from her prey if at all possible, as if he doubted her ability to disable a foe without killing them.

"Ben," Dore exclaimed., "Miss Sahja 'as found our type. We'll 'ave to drop cast new, though."

"I know," Ben said with a voice punctuated by shock, "we heard most of what she said." He walked over to Sahja, who was staring at some point on the floor in front of the forge, almost like she was willing something to appear. "Thank you, Miss Sahja. I wish there was something equally wonderful I could do..." He broke off as he noticed that her attention wasn't on him.

Sahja reached over and picked up a small object from the floor and handed it to Ben. "This is for Dore," she said, "but I'm not sure he'll understand."

It was time for her to leave. She didn't want to stay through more embarrassing "thank you" and "congratulations." It was better to depart while they were still trying to figure out what had just happened. Maybe they'd leave a note later, or donate a small gift to the shrine. A few visited directly to thank her, but not very often. And that was fine with her. She patted the sergeant once on the shoulder to make sure he understood and left quietly.

Ben was still looking at the piece of metal that she'd given him—all that remained of his casts—and laughed. When Dore approached him with a wondering look on his face, Ben handed it off to his devil. As Sahja had said, the apprentice only looked confused. It was the letter "h."

TEA WITH THE LAUGHING FIEND

by Todd Stewart
Contest Ranking 5th

“

here in Pharsma's name...?”

The man abruptly opened his eyes and reached for the sword at his hip, pausing only to wince and instead reach back to caress his head. His gloved fingers came back with flecks of dried blood on the leather and a few still scarlet congealed droplets of the same. He blinked and exhaled, gradually remembering what had happened, though it didn't exactly answer the “where” question looming in the forefront of his mind.

Rubbing his forehead wearily, Darius recalled the magical portal carried by one of his fellows. Random gateways were dangerous and generally inadvisable to invoke in haste, and sometimes they were more than a little rough on travelers. Still, it was probably better than the alternative. He was alive, after all.

Introspection faded, and for the first time he glanced around and took in his present surroundings. Thin sunlight filtered down through the forest canopy overhead, and a stand of oddly shaped, reed-like trees swayed back and forth in a gentle, cool breeze. Their long, thin leaves trailed from equally slender branches, rustling with an almost calming susurrus. Beyond their whispers and his own breathing, not a sound was to be heard.

Darius tentatively stood, and once again winced, rubbing his head. The fact that he was only bruised rather than skewered through by a Taldan pike was good evidence that their pursuers had not followed them through the well. But it didn't explain where his companions were, or whether they had also managed to escape with their lives. It was possible that the cursed portal had scattered them about whatever world or plane this was, or even to entirely different planes. The former was certainly preferable to the latter. It was also possible that he was simply the first to awaken.

A knight of the Iron Talons, a halfling wizard, a priestess of Desna, a pompous but talented elven bard, and himself. He rubbed his eyes as he imagined their reactions to awakening in a strangely silent, alien forest. None of them were precisely acclimated

to handling themselves in planar travel. A journey through a well-mapped forest was the full extent of what his party was comfortable with. For all their skill and prowess as adventurers, they'd be like lost little children if they were thrown into the middle of nature's bosom without their bearings. As a ranger, and a skilled one, Darius had to smile, but he also worried for them if they were split apart by any real distance.

Darius sighed and set himself to the task of tracking, hoping that his friends had more sense than to wander too far from where the portal had dumped them. As if in ambivalent response to his worry, the wind quietly set the forest canopy to trembling. There was an oddly sterile quality to the motion. For all its strange beauty, the eerie silence was off-putting.

The forest floor was littered with the typical debris of leaves, grasses and brush, though none of the foliage was remotely familiar. Darius was less concerned with that than the fact that it was undisturbed; there were no footsteps leading away, nor depressions to suggest that any others had arrived, nor that anyone else had approached. There were no signs of disturbance at all, as if neither insect, nor bird, nor human had intruded into what might well have been best described as a verdant necropolis.

Struck by an unsettled feeling, he blinked and remembered something he should have tried much sooner. Darius paused and concentrated, drawing on an inner reservoir of faith, willing his senses to extend into the metaphysical, a unique ability normally reserved for paladins. Normally it would have taken him only a few moments to sense the presence of any ambient or nearby sources of evil, and then a few moments more to determine their strength and their nature.

Nothing happened.

“The hell?” Darius blinked and repeated the attempt, only to end it seconds later to the same result. It wasn’t that the attempt had failed; it had simply never worked. It was quite possible that magic could nullify his power—it had done so in the past—and the nature of a place could do the same, especially if he was cut off from access to his divine patron. The failure left him with the distinct feeling that something had noticed the attempt.

Initially with the utmost caution and stealth, Darius made his way through the forest. The minutes passed, and edged closer to an hour with no evidence of anything stirring except the trees. Gradually his wariness faded to apathy. The trees and the gentle wind presented no threat to keep him alert. Outside of loneliness and nagging worry, tedium was the worst of it all.

An hour later, the forest’s homogeneity ended. Breaking through the forest’s edge, Darius paused and fixed his gaze forward. Perhaps a half mile distant, rising above seemingly abandoned fields, stood a small, ornate keep constructed in a style Darius had never encountered. A dozen fluted stone spires and crenellated towers stood solidly upon a hill, standing a cold and distant watch over the serene, hushed estate of some unseen Lord. No flags flew from its ramparts, and while the gate stood open and the drawbridge was lowered, no guards were on watch. Like its vassal forests, the castle was beautiful yet oddly sterile.

Darius realized that despite the castle’s height, he’d never once seen it from within the forest. He should have been able to do so for quite some distance through any break in the canopy cover. “There’s something there,” he thought. “At least it’s a landmark.”

With practiced ease, Darius made his way towards the keep, keeping himself

hidden in the brush and tall grass that grew in the fallow fields. The castle would be a good elevated vantage point from which to look for his companions, even if there was no one home to give him a better clue. The soil was rich, but it clearly hadn't been worked in a very long time. Except for a broken plow half buried and left from some bygone planting season, the entire area seemed utterly abandoned. Yet there were no skeletons of fallen soldiers, no crossbow bolts rusting in the overgrown furrows, and no other signs to betray an army's passage in recent history.

Finally breaking cover and stepping out onto the main road with a cautious hand on his sword, Darius approached the keep's outer gatehouse. An elaborate structure of dark stone flanked by ornamental reliefs of off-white marble, it seemed more like a work of art than a functional gatehouse. It might be the first stand of defense for the Lord of a land that hadn't seen war in generations. Still, Darius took his time, prepared for an ambush that never came, wary of defenders that failed to materialize. The outer gate and guardhouse were abandoned.

Darius gazed into the guard post's interior. There, a dozen or more men would have rested when not on active duty at the gate or marching on patrol. While neither man nor beast were to be found, the place was fit to welcome them. Darius stared at a quartet of half-eaten bowls of food sitting on the nearest table. The food was still warm, and a bit of burning pipe-fill still smoldered on the floor. It was as if something had spirited away every living thing and simply left a glass-caged diorama in its passing. Yet there was not a man to be found.

Spooked, he left the gatehouse and warily crossed the drawbridge towards the keep proper. Thirty feet underfoot, the darkened waters of the moat showed no signs of fish or frogs, or any other living thing. To Darius's relief, neither did it contain the swollen, rotting bodies of the castle's inhabitants, as he had half expected. Only his distant, distorted reflection gazed back at him.

"Greetings! Is there anyone about?" Darius shouted, his voice echoing from the looming ramparts, the arrow slits to either side, and through the open entryway into the keep's interior.

The silence was profound. Once again he felt eyes upon him, but this time it was not just rattled nerves. High above, something looked down and whispered, talking to itself more than its approaching guest.

"About time you showed up." It chuckled and gave a wry smile. "So paranoid though. It's just you and me little mortal, nobody else. Well, technically not if you wanted to consider all of the others. They don't count, however, all of their innumerable wretched lot."

Far below, Darius found the courage to move on. In response, the figure vanished, leaving only whistling wind to fill the vacuum. It was like the agonized wailing of a thousand damned souls screaming out a warning that was neither heard nor understood.

He took the first door he came to, an elaborate and frothy confection of ivory and gilt. It was standing half ajar as if in invitation. The great hall was empty, though not deserted or abandoned in quite the same way as the barracks. It was deathly quiet, but it was clean and free of dust. It simply felt vacant, not abandoned. There was neither heraldry nor artwork, but elaborate stonework decorated the walls and the archways overhead. Wandering through the keep would have been a thing of majesty, if not for the eerie feeling of being watched. He stepped into a vaulted chamber on the second story, directly above the entry hall.

Darius gasped as he stepped inside, taking a mental catalogue of the wealth on wanton, almost careless display. Chests, urns and coffers stood in disarray, filled to the brim with all manner of coins, jewelry and brilliantly faceted gemstones. Orbs of conjured light drifted in loose constellation within the chamber's yawning heights, diffusing through the gemstones below to cast a rainbow of colors. A dragon would have been jealous. But this hoard wasn't arranged as a nest in a wyrm's den, and it lacked the sharp, reptilian tang that would have long ago alerted him to such a creature's presence.

The trove might have once been on some form of organized display, but as more and more accumulated, wealth was simply piled on top of wealth in an increasingly haphazard manner. Yet for all he knew, it might be a trap, an illusion to tempt the fingers of careless thieves, coated with poison or laden with magical traps.

Gingerly, he approached the nearest table, eyes wide at the golden candelabra at its center and a trio of silver bowls piled high with cut gemstones. All of it was surrounded by coins and loose jewelry. Darius was hardly the most avaricious of his group, but he could barely contain his glee at the find. His eyes were drawn to the gemstones which were so flawless that they almost seemed to glow with an inner light of their own.

"Normally, you see, it's considered impolite to simply barge into another man's demesne and make yourself at home."

The voice was sudden and unexpected, cutting the silence like a surgeon's scalpel. Darius snatched back his hand from the bowl of gemstones.

"Consider yourself lucky, I suppose, that I'm not simply another man." The voice sounded amused, though the acoustics of the chamber's vaulted ceiling and the numerous archways around its periphery made it impossible to determine where the speaker was located.

"My apologies then, good sir," Darius said with a non-directional nod. "I find myself at a loss as to where I am, or where my companions who came here with me might be. Your castle is the only structure that I've come across."

"Good sir, good sir, that's a new one. Can't say it applies perhaps, but I do appreciate the thought."

The castle's Lord, or its presumed Lord, seemed to be talking to himself rather than his guest. His manner, though jocular, was unsettling. Darius could have sworn that it was familiar somehow, ridiculous though that might seem. But the thought was out of his head a moment later as the voice's owner appeared—or rather, something did.

The long shadow that preceded him was more or less human, though with each approaching footstep it shifted and distorted in the crazy tumult of gemstone refracted light. One moment it would grow, the next moment it would shrink. Always it seemed to dance and shift of its own accord, defying any attempts to guess its owner's nature.

"Oh, do be patient," the approaching figure lamented, its voice growing in clarity as it approached. "I have small feet and I really don't care to run within my own house."

Darius stiffened. It was as if the creature had read his thoughts from across the room.

"I have rather large ears as well. I heard you sigh a half dozen times, so pardon if I presume you to be an impatient soul. So either you are, or I'm being exceptionally difficult and providing you with an overly long wait in order to be dramatic. One or

the other, that's usually how it is."

Darius rubbed his hands together nervously as another unsettling wave of *déjà vu* tapped against his brain. But the feeling vanished like a child's sandcastle beneath the waves as the castle's owner finally made its entrance. It was preceded by his own long shadow running ahead of him a dozen feet from one of the back-lit archways.

"What the hell is...?" Darius muttered softly as his eyes followed.

"I do believe I said that I have rather large ears, yes?" The creature stood perhaps three feet tall, looking like a wizard's familiar pretending to be the master of a tower while the archmage was away. Darius suppressed a laugh.

It looked like some sort of homunculus cobbled together whimsically from disparate parts of other minor fiends. It had the slippery hide of a quasit, pale purple with darker mottled spots. Behind it bobbed the scorpion's tail of an imp, and on its queer shoulders, the head of a grinning fox. Comical-looking or not, grinning or not, it was still some manner of least or lesser fiend by Darius's judgment.

"Pardon my appearance, it's not the form that I normally wear, but it's the one that I'm wearing at the moment," the creature explained, glancing down at itself appraisingly. "Usually it's much more of a quasit, but appearances are oftentimes irrelevant for creatures such as myself."

"Now before we make our introductions, welcome to my abode." The creature gave a long and overly dramatic bow, its nose nearly touching the ground. It—or he, since its voice sounded more masculine than not—bent low, balanced precariously by the weight of the stinger-tipped tail that waved from his backside like a friendly puppy's. "Welcome, welcome, my curious friend. My name is Tegresin. And pardon, but you strike me as a man far away from home. You're not from around here."

In the flickering gemstones' light, the creature's shadow swirled and moved of its own accord. A ragged, draconic maw opened and seemed to chuckle at something amusing. A man capable of reading lips might have inferred, "But of course, neither am I. Not in the slightest."

"No, no I'm not from here either," Darius replied frankly. "I don't have a clue where I am in relation to where I was or where I call home. I'm lost, no thanks to a cursed 'Well of Many Worlds.' Originally, I come from a world called Golarion."

The fiend hopped up onto a table, sending down a shower of displaced coins and shrugged. "Can't say that I've heard of it. I don't get out much, you see."

Darius gave a shrug of his own. "Not too surprising. The cosmos is a big place and it's only one world around one of the Dark Tapestry's stars. But where exactly are we?" He gestured outwards, indicating not just the castle, but all of its surroundings.

"Small scale, it's my castle, which I've never really bothered to give a proper name to. Beyond that, a forest, and beyond that even more forest, which ultimately brings you back here."

The fiend flashed a cheeky smile and hopped down from the table, having said much of nothing. Walking a few feet over to another pile of assorted priceless junk, he fished out a pair of delicate cups and a teapot. The latter was golden and the former porcelain with golden filigree.

"Care for some?" Tegresin asked as the pot began to glow. Moments later, there was a fragrant, appealing steam of freshly brewed white tea. "I can at least offer you something to drink."

Darius smiled and nodded, "Please." As bizarre as the creature looked and as quirky as he acted, he was playing the part of a polite host. The tea smelled

wonderful. Darius accepted both cup and saucer and let the fiend pour him an ample portion, relaxing for the first time since he had awakened in the forest. Things were looking up, and if Pharamsa's smile touched upon him; soon enough, he'd find his companions and they'd be on their way back to more familiar environs.

"I take it that we're in a demiplane?" Darius finally said a few minutes later.

"Something like that, yes," Tegresin replied, pouring himself a cup of the same tea. "For all intents and purposes, a rather unique demiplane adrift within the Astral. Like flotsam from the Maelstrom's swollen, pregnant depths, or so I'm told."

Having provided a more substantive answer, Tegresin returned to his former seat and set about providing some attention to his drink, snapping his fingers and conjuring a bit of cream and sugar before taking a taste. Finding it to his liking, the fiend sipped his tea with a certain refined elegance that seemed at odds with his mangy vulpine countenance. Foxlike, he did tend to collect droplets of tea and cream upon his whiskers. Darius noticed as Tegresin surreptitiously slipped out his tongue and lapped at both sides of his muzzle, apparently hoping to not be caught in an uncultured moment.

What Darius didn't see was when the creature dripped a bit of tea from his chin, it never reached the ground. Faster than the mortal eye could follow amid the refractive circus of light at ground level, the fiend's shadow coalesced. Lashing out to slurp up the errant drop without a sound, it took the shape of something disturbingly thin, elongated and vaguely serpentine.

"Did you create this place yourself?" Darius asked, half-considering that the fiend might indeed be some wizard's familiar, be they long dead or not. It was a reasonable assumption.

"No," came an all too abrupt reply. Looming behind Darius, Tegresin's shadow snarled without sound.

Darius sipped his tea and brushed off the creature's brusque answer. "I do appreciate your hospitality, but I must ask, have you happened to notice anyone else here besides me? I had four other companions."

Unseen shadow-tendrils writhed and lashed on the wall behind. Looking cheerful, the imp sipped his tea. "Do tell me about them, all about them, and yourself as well. I so rarely get visitors."

Tegreson seemed genuinely interested in hearing Darius describe their past adventures, and what had transpired to separate them. He asked questions about one of them in particular: the knight. She and Darius had always been close, and in the exuberance of their friendship they had spent more than one night in one another's arms. Darius' thoughts kept returning to him, and so did the conversation.

"Interesting, interesting..." Tegresin said casually. His shadow stood up and leaned forward, raptly, umbral fingers baring claws that reflexively clenched and relaxed. "So by any chance, do you remember her name?"

Darius frowned, and the fiend's shadow loomed over him. He could see her face, he could remember the tone and lilt of her voice, but something was wrong.

"What was her name?" Tegresin asked again, his shadow writhing in anticipation.

Darius' brow furrowed. He could smell her perfume. He could recall the softness of her embrace with perfect clarity, the touch of her lips upon his cheek, her words of love whispered in his ear. But he couldn't remember, couldn't remember her name.

"What. Was. Her. Name. Mortal?"

"I don't remember." A tear fell from his eye. "Why can't I remember?"

The fiend glanced away and snarled, cursing in a language that burned Darius's ears and momentarily blurred his vision. Tegresin's shadow raged furiously across the stone ramparts, but when he turned back to the mortal, the expression on his face was clinically cold.

"That's unfortunate," Tegresin said, "it really is. I was worried that you'd say that again, and here I was thinking that we'd made so much progress this time around."

Darius was silent and a shiver passed through his body as his mind stumbled over the fiend's response. This time around? For the first time, Tegresin and his shadow moved in unison, both of them smiling with a genuine malignancy that caused Darius to glance nervously towards the room's exits. Something was terribly wrong.

"What are you?" Darius asked.

"Nothing from this place."

"What are you?" Darius asked again.

"That would be telling."

"Just what the hell are you?!" He demanded.

"Above all else, a liar."

Darius glanced at the exits, trying to recall which way he'd come in.

"Where do you think you'll go, Darius?" Tegresin asked. "That won't work very well and you'll only find that out once again. It can be painful if I so desire, and it frequently has been. Sadly, that doesn't get me the information that I need. The rules are complex and they remain in place, even if I neither respect them nor the beings who made them."

Darius demanded with a cold, sick feeling in his gut, "Where are my companions? Why do you keep talking as if we've spoken before?"

Again the fiend and his shadow smiled in unison. "Because we have spoken before, Darius, many times. Every time thus far you have not been able to recall her name, one small piece of history that still eludes me. It holds value to me, given what she went on to do and what she became. And how that morsel of knowledge could be used to make others suffer." The fiend smiled pleasantly, even cheerfully. "I don't care about you. You don't matter. Only the answer to my question does. I'd rip it from your soul in a moment, but it doesn't work that way, not anymore. I'm not from around here you see, and magic in this particular misbegotten reality doesn't work the way I've grown used to."

The fiend's shadow glanced rapidly back and forth to the piles of glittering, glowing gemstones piled around the chamber, and a split second later Tegresin's physical manifestation did the same, snarling. "And you wretches that follow and bind me... you I hate, and others will suffer because of it by proxy."

When Tegresin returned his gaze to Darius, his eyes were cold and merciless, juxtaposed with a pleasant smile of ivory white fangs.

"But not to worry, Darius. We'll do this again soon. I have all the time in the world, you see. And so do you, given that you died over two thousand years ago."

Darius paled. A horrific sense of *déjà-vu* washed over him like a wave of adrenaline would have if he had still possessed adrenal glands of flesh and blood.

"But not to worry, little mortal, not to worry at all." Tegresin's shadow reached out to stroke Darius' head like a gentle mother. "You won't remember this, not in the least, just like the other times. I stripped you of your capacity to remember all those centuries ago. Now back into your prison, little insect. Back to your cage, my little mortal-headed worm."

TODD STEWART

The last thing Darius saw were the fiend's claws cradling a singular black sapphire. It was the only gemstone in the room that didn't already glow with an internal light. Soon, it would be glowing, of course, just like all the others. Not that he would be able to see it from the outside.



A soft breeze brushed across the man's face and overhead, sunlight broke through and caught his slowly opening eyes. He winced, "Where in Pharamsa's name...?"

The Wandering Kingdom

by Trevor Gulliver
Contest Ranking 7th

B

efore I was a historian, I was a scribe owned by a minor mercantile house. Before I recorded the deeds of great men, I scribbled notes on debts owed, paid, and promised. My life changed on a single day with a single choice—my first choice freely made. My life as a historian began when I was sold to a new owner. And though at the time I didn't know it, it was also the beginning of my life as a free person.

A human woman and a dwarven man purchased me on behalf of their master, the Lord of Five Tents. They placed me on a crate in the back of their already overloaded wagon and we set off westward on paths traveled only by military patrols, fools, and fugitives. I was not yet sure which we were.

Our passage through the orc-ruled lands of the Hold of Belkzen was eventful but I have written of it elsewhere. The demure but eccentric elderly human woman bartered with the bellicose orcish tribal chiefs with surprising ease. Called Khar-Tanok by the orcs, she had a remarkable facility with both the orcish language and culture. The orcs gazed upon the dwarven priest, Varin, and me with obvious disgust but left us alone when Khar-Tanok was near.

By the time we left the Hold, our wagon dragged heavily through the mud, overloaded with the curious mix of shoddy merchandise that we received from the orcs in trade for high quality goods. When I asked Varin why we exchanged well-made wooden barrels full of wine, good axes, and thick wool blankets for bundles of stone-tipped arrows, bags of red sand, ropes of shredded rags, and clay kegs of undrinkable alcohol, he only smiled and nodded to the woman with a shrug saying, “Ask the witch.” I did not ask.

Our destination, Varin told me, was an encampment on the constantly shifting border between the Worldwound and the Realm of the Mammoth Lords. I had heard stories of both places but believed little of what I had heard.

We approached the camp from the east. “Friends,” boomed a cheerful voice as a muscular figure leapt up onto a small rise to the left of the trail. Silhouetted by the

sun at his back, he struck a heroic pose. “As Lord of Five Tents, I bid you welcome.”

Squinting up at the man I knew would be my new master, I made out little of his features. He nodded to the dwarf and the human woman. Varin chuckled through his beard and made a loose and mocking salute, “As you ordered, my lord, one slave who can write, sing, and tell tales, but does not embellish unless needed or necessary.”

“Ha! Well, halfling, greetings. I am your master and, as such, by the laws of most lands, I can free you...if I choose. And now, I choose to do so. You are free. Go where you wish.”

I had yearned for freedom in my youth, and taught myself to fear it as an adult. Being permitted to wander free but alone in an unknown land, far from any familiar habitation, just north of the hostile Hold of Belkzen was not something I had ever hoped for. Freedom to die alone was a freedom I had even as a slave.

He continued, “I invite you, however, as a free person with the right to choose your own destiny, to join us; join Five Tents as its scribe. If you decline, we will pay you for your service of the last week, which largely consisted, I hope, of keeping your head down and saying little. You will go with our thanks for your time and apologies for the bad company you were forced to keep. If you accept, however, we promise you irregular pay, unpredictable cooking, and adventures worth writing about. Which do you choose?”

At this point, I still doubted this man’s sincerity, and cautiously asked, “If I choose to stay for now, may I still leave whenever I wish at a later time?”

“You are as free to come and go as any other citizen of Five Tents. Unless we are in battle, all of us are free to leave when we wish. In battle, though, you must stay where we tell you.”

This sounded like a very reasonable restriction on my newfound freedom but I was still dubious. I bowed a little and then chose my words carefully, “I’ll be your scribe for a time, sir, but I don’t know much beyond bookkeeping. My words are common and simple.”

He stepped down and took my hand, drawing me close. I tried to hide my surprise at the bestial features that marked him as half-orc. “Just write what you see,” he said, “and you will see much. I am Skaldwell, Lord of Five Tents.”

Satisfied, he turned to the human woman, “What else have you brought me?”

“Things you will soon need,” Khar-Tanok answered as Varin signaled me to follow him to the camp.

I would later learn from Varin that many times in the past he’d seen Skaldwell lie in wait for newcomers and ambush them with a warm greeting, silhouetted by the sun at his back, striking a heroic pose. Knowing that he planned his first impressions carefully did nothing to diminish the dwarf’s respect for his leader.

Five Tents struck me as oddly named at first, as there were, at that time, fifteen tents. The tent at the center of the camp was not the largest but the most grandiose. Its colorful pennants and streamers flapped in the breeze, calling for attention. The boastfulness of the tent alone marked it as that of Lord Skaldwell. Four other tents had as much character, though each held brilliant standards of their own. These belonged to the four other founders of the camp, two of which belonged to Varin and the witch. I had come to know a little on my journey. Around these five tents were smaller tents that borrowed their style and character from the larger tents they neighbored and several purely functional tents held supplies.

I soon took pause as my eyes fell upon a massive fur-covered creature with a trunk

like the elephants on Garundi pottery. A tattooed Elven woman clad in armor made from the scales of what must have been a fairly large reptile stood beside it.

“Is that a mammoth?” I asked Varin.

“Other mammoths don’t think so,” he answered with a laugh urging me onwards. “They think he’s a pint-sized imitation of a mammoth, which is probably why they forced him out of the herd. We call him Tarphut.”

Tarphut cocked his head, swung his trunk, and blew up a cloud of dust in warning to us.

“Speaking of sickly, ill-tempered runts cast out from the mighty Realm of the Mammoth Lords, where’s the war-rider?” the dwarf asked.

“Tарphut does not know,” said Arna. “Kallak left camp with three of his riders scouting for a creature that wandered out of the blasted wound. Only Tarphut returned. This was four days ago.” I later learned that Arna and Kallak, the war-rider they spoke of, were the other two founders of Five Tents.

“Four days?” the dwarf grimaced as if physically hurt and stared east for a few moments, into the growing shadows. “And what are we doing about it?”

“We are preparing to hunt the demon he was pursuing,” said Skaldwell, joining us. “With luck, we’ll find the war-rider on its back, trying to tame him as a mount. Scribe, embellishment will be neither needed nor necessary, for this promises to be the greatest of hunts!”

The dwarf seemed satisfied but remained sunken into his own thoughts.

The camp bustled with activity. Despite the apparent loss of one of its beloved founders, this community of thrill seekers, holy warriors, and hunters was excited at the battle they prepared for. Besides Varin, Khar-Tanok, Skaldwell, and the elf, there were fourteen retainers. Of diverse ancestry and talents, they had two things in common: a gleam in their eyes when they spoke of tomorrow’s hunt and an obvious affection for the half-orc.

Several of these retainers sought me out in the days that followed, wishing to advise and guide me in my new role as the scribe for this community. The idea that Lord Skaldwell had purchased and freed me so I could write his adventurers did not strike any as pompous or flamboyant. They were surprised, however, that I was hesitant to commit to their cause for any longer than a few weeks. Hunting a demon sounded like a ludicrous indulgence that would get more than just a founder and his three retainers killed. The next caravan was being prepared to depart for supplies from Tolguth and I remember thinking that if I lived through the experience, I would seriously consider being on it. Still, each of them seemed to hold their leader in as much awe as he held himself. Skaldwell’s obsession with adventure, his enthusiasm for the hunt, and his certainty that tomorrow held greatness was so infectious that each member of this tiny community believed themselves at the beginning of a story worth telling. Their lives were becoming myths as they lived them. Although Skaldwell referred to this little encampment as Five Tents, others called it The Wandering Kingdom in anticipation of events to come, events with which you, my reader of histories, are no doubt familiar. “Describe things as you see them,” the camp’s cook advised me. “It will make a better tale someday if they know how it all started. Describe him as he is … describe his humble origins.”

Later, by the fire, I saw Khar-Tanok embrace the much younger Skaldwell. I watched their familiarity with curiosity that did not go unnoticed by the dwarf.

“Khar-Tanok is not her name,” said Varin as if answering a question I hadn’t

asked. "It's orcish for 'chief's wife.'" "We're not in the Hold now. Call her Dirian."

"She's married to a chief?" I ask.

"From one of the larger tribes we traded with, the Bonespurs," Varin explains.

"She's married to an orc?"

"Well, she was taken by the chief as a teen. When a younger cousin slew him in a battle for tribe leadership, she became the new chief's property. This younger chief thought pink-skins too weak to tolerate in his tents, but Dirian was too popular to kill. He encourages her to travel gathering news for the tribe. It was a 'compromise.' Dirian taught the young chief the meaning of the word."

"She's married to an orc?"

"Just call her Dirian."

In the morning, riders left the camp. Work never ceased while the sun was up. Other riders trained on the horses, striking at targets that swung from a high pole. Two men worked tirelessly mixing a foul orcish brew with some oily substance. Red sands we had bartered for with the orcs were combined in a pot creating a thick steaming mud. They put this concoction into long clay jugs. When Skaldwell was not supervising the brewing, he studied a map drawn in the sand, questioning scouts and using stones and scrub to add features to the already detailed landscape.

In the evening, riders returned with no sightings to report. A week passed like this and the waiting grated on us all. Skaldwell struggled to maintain the mood of excitement he had instilled. Desperation leaked into his voice as he promised us all a beast worth hunting and a chance to avenge a war-rider that I never knew, but in the shadow of whose tent I now slept.

Riders left the camp in the morning as they had done every morning but this day they returned within the hour. The beast had been found. Skaldwell met with the riders in his tent before addressing the camp.

"The beast destroyed a village to the north, shy of Tolguth. You know the people there, for we traded meat with them before spring last. The survivors say the creature has been attacking settlements after successful hunts, drawn perhaps to the smell of meat. Our trackers found the trail and confirmed what the war-rider had heard about our demon: it's large, invisible, and has a voracious appetite."

Grim smiles were shared as this coterie of mad fools recalled past victories. Skaldwell smiled too, "There's good news, though. The demon seems stupid or nearsighted. Our riders were close enough to be seen, but upwind. The demon did not pursue them. It's earthbound, which means we can kill it. And, best of all, it's coming this way. We're going to prepare a trap in the rift to the north and bait it with the smell of burning flesh. With skill, luck, and patience, we'll have a giant, invisible demon visiting our happy home before the day is out."

The nervous tension snapped, replaced by a blood-hungry excitement. Skaldwell did not say another word. Leaping up onto a wagon, he watched with pride as the more experienced of his tribe barked orders to the lesser. Tents were packed with expertise, thrown onto the wagons, and hauled a half-mile away to a more prominent location with a commanding view of the countryside. Varin told me that the gash, one of four cut into the stony hill upon which our relocated camp now sat, was called Nalfeshnee's Talon allegedly after its somewhat mythical origin.

I was surprised by all the work that went into such a short trip until Skaldwell took time to explain the strategic advantage of the location. A gentle ramp, 40' wide at its base, sloped up to the encampment between two gradually narrowing cliffs.

No creature could approach the camp other than by flight, by scaling the cliffs, or by charging up the long narrow ramp. The height of the hill made pitching a camp there too prominent to be safely considered, but now it was an ideal target for luring the beast.

The camp's cook made a small fire and began to slowly roast every scrap of meat in his stores. "Hope the wind's blowing this your way, demon," he said to the plains north of him.

Dirian stood at the wide base of the ramp, scanning the twisted and barren landscape with her strange and uncanny eyes.

Arna, the elven earthweaver, asked the earth to make thin holes in the cliff, five feet from the top. Four of the hunters carried the long clay jugs of muddied orcish brew and hung them from the cliffs, sliding them into the niches. They packed mud around the mouths of the kegs, leaving only thick rags poking out to serve as wicks.

Archers fired volley after volley of the crude arrows into the ramp leading up to the camp. Within ten minutes, a man could barely walk out of the camp without brushing against the crude shaft of an orc-crafted arrow.

Once this was done, Varin began to work. Warning the others to keep back, he began to pour a large bag of powdered silver through a funnel onto the ground in an intricate pattern. When finished, the circle spanned the width of the ramp, touching the feet of the cliffs on either side, making passage to the camp impossible without disturbing it. "The demon stops there," grinned the dwarf, pointing to the ground on the other side of the circle. "That is where we slice it open and see if the war-rider's shield is in its gullet."

"Bad news, Varin," shouted Skaldwell with a laugh. "I've spoken to the horses and none of them are willing to let you ride them. They claim it would be undignified to let a creature hairier than them on their back. That leaves only Tarphut. Mount up."

Surprised by this honor, the dwarf looked at the missing war-rider's mammoth with sadness. Silent and proud, he drew a lance from the pile on the ground, and stood at the mammoth's side, checking the long cinch that kept the small saddle high on its back.

The trap had been set. The bait was cooking. The demon did not make us wait long.

"The orcs venerate the great warriors among their ancestors," Skaldwell whispered to me. We were lying low on one of the cliffs overlooking the ramp where I had promised Skaldwell I would remain when the fighting began. He had urged me at first to stay at the camp but I had convincingly argued that I could not write of hunt if I was cowering in a tent throughout it. "The orcs remember their ancestors' greatest hunts in boasts and songs until memories become legends and their hunters are mythic figures. Of course, they only become myths if they die in battle."

I realized then that he was not simply making conversation, nor was he unaware of the implications of what he was saying to his scribe. He saw it in himself, the desire to be venerated, to be praised by the tribe for his prowess in the hunt so that his children's children's children would speak his name in reverence. He smiled then at my surprise, a confident, witty, toothy smile that said he recognized his failings but understood their significance too. Patting me on the arm, he lifted himself from prone and said, "Write me a tale of this. The demon comes."

And, true, the demon came. Dirian the witch, mother of half-orcs, stood at the base of the ramp as the sounds of tortured roars drew our attention to a rising cloud

of dust. The demon's invisibility did not matter much at this distance. His signs of passage were as visible as any other. The cloud came toward us. The cries grew louder, accompanied by the pounding of heavy feet upon the earth. Whether the witch drew it on by her own means or its hunger was so great that it smelt the meat from that distance I did not know.

The trap was a simple one, and I have seen more complicated traps set for rabbits. This trap was magnificent only in its size. The creature was to be lured between the cliffs, up the ramp towards the bait. Varin's circle would hold the creature back, stopping it short at the point where the high cliffs narrowed, but well before the camp. There, the beast would be restricted in movement, angry, and distracted; the hunters of Five Tents would then ambush the thing and take it down.

The dust around the creature revealed only hints of its outline. I could tell little, other than that it was five times or more the height of a human and ten times that of a halfling. When it roared, dust swirled around and was sucked into a maw large enough to bite a man in half.

The demon came so close I wanted to shout to Dirian who remained at the base of the ramp, far from the protection of Varin's magic. I only kept my mouth closed because I remembered that these hunters were mad but not incompetent. At the last possible moment, Dirian raised her arms as if to embrace the oncoming beast and then was lifted into the air by powers arcane. She flew up the ramp, drawing the nearsighted creature closer to the spot at which it would be stopped. It raced headlong towards Varin's silver circle in the sand. The visible snapping of dozens of arrows lessened the effectiveness of its invisibility.

Ten feet shy of Varin's circle, Dirian twisted around in the air and blasted the demon with a crackling burst, perhaps to further enrage it or to distract it from the circle in its path.

“Mother,” hissed Skaldwell, “get out of there!”

Dirian changed direction with another twist and flew straight up the side of the cliff. The speed at which the creature was moving should have carried it forward to the holy ground it could not enter, but this is where things went wrong.

Seeing its prey change direction and head upwards, the demon sprung at her. The pounding on the ground ceased but showers of stone and earth showed us where it pounded each claw onto the rock cliff face as it pursued her upwards. Capable of flying far beyond its reach, Dirian was in no danger.

I, however, lacked the power of flight and felt myself somewhat threatened when the invisible demon ten times my height landed with a thud near the post where Skaldwell had insisted I remain for my own safety. I remained there now, not out of courage or duty. I would not have stayed solely because Skaldwell had told me to. I stayed because I found it utterly impossible to convince my legs to move. From a thud and a new indentation in the ground I saw that the demon had halved the distance between it and I in a single step.

I was not the only one threatened by the demon slipping out of its trap. The creature soon stood on cliff top, able to head into the camp bypassing Varin's holy ward. And, though we still outnumbered it, its weight alone would beat us. Invisibility and mobility gave it more of an advantage than the hunters wanted. Skaldwell ran to meet it, interposing himself between the demon and me, shouting “Back in your hole!”

Drawing vials from his bandolier, the half-orc threw his explosive charges at the beast, each of which enraged the creature further. More fierce and frightening than

I ever imagined, the Lord of Five Tents drew his blade and looked ready to take the creature single handedly. His mother and Arna rushed to join him, knowing he could not persevere alone.

Dirian flew down behind his left shoulder and plucked at the air like a harper plucks a string, pulling the invisibility from the creature like a veil. We now saw what it was. Scaly and larger than any creature I had seen, I still believed it to be a demon but the others later assured me that many similar beasts roamed the Realm. Spikes of smoking stone protruded from its back and the stench of the abyss suggested this creature was not just a hungry refugee from the times and places forgotten.

“Poor beast,” hissed the elf running to join the fight. “Twisted and from its nature plucked. It probably wandered into the wound and returned like this. Killing it will be mercy.”

Varin, now mounted on Tarphut and did not move. “Hold,” he ordered the other riders, “trust them to push it back where we want it. Trust your Lord.”

The riders, anxious for battle but disciplined, did not move.

Skaldwell barely scratched the creature before being batted back by a huge claw. The human witch and the earthweaver blasted at the monster with shocks of current. Barely fazed, the beast came on. It still seemed likely that the beast would have the run of the hill. Suddenly, though, the game changed again.

Skaldwell lunged at the creature, stabbing it, causing it to take one step back. But then, the cliff side on which the creature stood disappeared. I do not mean that it disappeared beneath the demon’s weight. Nor was it vanished by the magic from witch or earthweaver. It simply was no longer there. Perhaps one of the good gods of chance had infiltrated the workings of evil and chaos that warps this land. For the Worldwound is a treacherous land, shifting outside of any natural laws and normally betraying all good intentions. However, chaos favors no enemy and this day evil turned against evil.

The sound of explosions in the distance assured us it was somewhere and that our alchemic concoction had been potent. The creature scrambled at the cliff face as it fell. Widened now, the ramp up to the camp was no longer blocked by Varin’s circle.

At that decisive moment in the battle, Skaldwell turned and, seeing me, grinned widely. He saw my excitement and winked, then pointed to Varin and the mounted war-riders. Skaldwell had already played out the rest of the battle in his head and knew how it would end.

I had hesitated when Skaldwell asked me to be his scribe. I stayed only because there was no safe place to go. But after this moment, if he made the same offer of irregular pay, unpredictable cooking, and adventures worth writing about, there would be no choice for me. Even if he begged me to leave him by offering my weight in gold at the front gates of a Calistrian temple, I would have still chosen to follow him rather than linger in the warm embrace of the priestesses. He had given me a choice, my first real choice. I made it then. I chose Five Tents. I began my life as a slave but I would live the rest of it freer than most. And, I would be Skaldwell’s scribe so that you too might know this freedom.

“Hold off on the charges,” shouted Varin pointing towards the remaining clay pots on the cliff that had not vanished. “It’s not close enough to the other cliff and the rubble would prevent our ride. Hit those charges if we push it back.”

The monster struggled to its feet. Varin raised his lance and urged Tarphut forward. The mammoth responded with no less eagerness than the dwarf and other riders.

TREVOR GULLIVER

Their charge began.

“For Kallak!” Varin cried.

A cry in return came from the horsemen, “For Kallak!”

With their lances true, they struck deep into the tortured beast’s hide. It gave out a horrid shriek and turned to the other cliff as its only escape.

Varin’s voice boomed out, “Charges Now!”

Flames leapt from the witch’s fingers, across the divide, and into the clay vessels. The explosion above the fleeing beast showered dust on all below. The beast shrieked in horror and then quieted. When the dust settled, I saw the thing whimpering in agony, two limbs missing. Skaldwell approached, holding his sword high. Grimly, and without his usual show or pretense, he slit the thing’s throat. Blood poured out onto the sands and the thing seemed diminished; while still huge, it was no longer as frightening as it was. Skaldwell sighed and turned to his company, raising his blood-soaked sword high above his head.

A cry rose from the entire camp, “For Kallak!” This kill had been for him. This hunt, this most glorious of hunts, was, thus, dedicated to a friend.

Family Business

by Andrew Crossett
Contest Ranking 6th



ne of the first things Tesni had learned about Elethay Ardoch was that she was, at any given time, either outdoors or wishing she were. Ellie was perfectly capable of stepping out any one of Kaer Maga's many doorways, disappearing into the grasslands and chaparral of the Storval Plains, with or without Tesni by her side, not showing her face in the city again for a month or more. Her hair, originally glossy black, had become scoured to a much lighter hue by life out in the sun, wind and dust.

Knowing that, it always amazed Tesni how easily this girl of the open country could always shut out the world to concentrate on her precious journal, even in the midst of the noisiest and most boisterous of crowds.

And The Country Round was certainly noisy and crowded this evening. It was one of the best taverns in Bis District, as well as the biggest, and certainly the loudest. The circular common room measured nearly a hundred feet across, and its painted scenes of green hills, meadows and woods—things most people in this roofed city on an arid plain had never seen up close in real life—looked cheerily down on several hundred night-lifers in various stages of inebriation and mirth. Many of them, Tesni was happy to say, had come to hear her recently-completed performance. Halfling singers were much in vogue right now in the city, and Tesni Larkwood was one of the most popular. In addition to the generous pay, she wouldn't have to buy any of her own drinks tonight, and neither would Ellie. Not that the ranger-lass really needed to buy her own drinks. Her family—the male members of it, at least—ruled this particular district of the city with a literal iron fist.

Tesni sat daintily perched atop one of the high stools. The Country Round provided for its more diminutive guests, careful to keep her knees tight together on account of the short blue dress she'd worn for her performance. She stared patiently across the table at Ellie, who was once again miles deep in that damned journal of hers—the one that was the size of a small chapbook when closed, but expanded into a huge and weighty tome when opened, with seemingly thousands of blank pages awaiting Ellie's careful notes, well-rendered sketches, and the occasional pasted-in example of local flora and fauna.

“Ahem,” Tesni ventured hopefully, “I sang The Stag Girl tonight just for you because it’s your favorite. Did you notice?”

“I noticed.” Ellie didn’t look up from her book.

“I thought it went over pretty well. I hit the vibrato on the high notes right this time. I’m never sure about it, with that song.”

Ellie looked up at her this time, and smiled fondly. “Tes, I noticed.” She flipped the journal back a couple of pages, and turned it round to show her. Ellie had filled an entire page with a fine charcoal sketch of Tesni on stage, holding her hands over the top of her head to make comic pantomime antlers, while the crowd roared with laughter.

“You did notice,” Tesni beamed.

“I notice everything. Be dead if I didn’t.”

Tesni knew from personal experience that was true—at least outside on the wild plains, where Ellie no doubt wished she were right now, and where she would be again, by midday tomorrow.

The ranger was already engrossed in her notes again. Tes craned her neck to see. “What are you reading now?” The colorful beads in her waist-length hair-braids clacked softly together as she leaned.

Ellie looked up. “You don’t think I’d take us to a place called The Hated Halls without studying up on everything I’ve found out about it, do you?”

“I don’t think you’d take us to a place called The Hated Halls at all, unless you were as crazy as a drunken troll in a rainstorm.”

Ellie gave her a sour look.

“Elethay,” Tesni said to her in her reasonable voice, “how long have you known me?”

“Almost a year.”

“See? You’re one of my oldest friends, and all that time, I’ve been telling you how pointless it is to try and prove yourself to those uncles and cousins and brothers of yours. You have breasts and you bleed every month, so you’ll never be one of them. That’s the way it is. Why would you even want to be? So you can carry a chisel on your belt and break finger bones like they do? I mean, you don’t even live here in Bis. Not really. You stop here every so often for a change of clothes, a hot bath and a warm snuggle, and then you’re off again. More often than not, I go with you. I’ll go this time, but I want to know why, apart from a point of pride that you know doesn’t matter.”

“It’s different this time,” Ellie shrugged. “It’s a matter of family honor. I may not be a very good Ardoc, but I am one. And a soul is at stake—my great-grandfather’s. Perhaps others as well.”

Tesni sighed, resigned. “It’s going to be dangerous, isn’t it?”

Ellie smirked at her. “The place is called The Hated Halls, Tes—not The Cuddly Halls. What do you think?”

“Just checking.”

Ellie closed her book at last, and slipped it into her tunic. “It’s getting late, you’ve had a long and tiring sing, and we need to get started by mid-morning tomorrow if we’re to reach the Halls by nightfall. I believe you mentioned a hot bath and a warm snuggle.”

“And so I did,” Tes smiled. “But Grey sleeps on the floor tonight.” She looked down under the table to where a mechanical animal-thing sat at Elethay’s feet. It

was a golem, one given to every Ardoch girl-child as a lifelong protector and sign of status. Each girl got a unique one, and Ellie's looked like some sort of sleek quadruped—canine or feline, or both—made of finely carved and beautifully etched metallic scales that allowed it to move with all the agility and speed of a living predator. It was made of enchanted silver and had originally shone brilliantly in the light, but Ellie had deliberately burnished and tarnished its surface to a pewter-like patina, so that it wouldn't glint in the sunlight out on the plains and attract the notice of unwelcome things. Hence its name, Grey.

"All right," Ellie shrugged, "but you know very well it doesn't actually sleep at all."

"That's what bothers me," Tesni said, giving Grey the stink-eye. "I don't like him watching us."

"He knows you, and he knows when I'm being attacked and when I'm not."

"All the same," Tes insisted, "on the floor he goes." She tried to put her foot down, and nearly slipped off her high stool.

Ellie shook her head fondly, and stood up to help Tes down. She knew the tab would be taken care of. It always was.



The journey took most of the next day, and the hot sun would have been quite oppressive if Tesni hadn't cast one of her "little spells," Pinya's parasol, which caused a bit of starry night sky to appear overhead and follow them where they walked, keeping always between them and the sun, and thus always in shade. Tes passed the time by quietly singing road songs, which Ellie even joined in with sometimes, now that no one was around to hear. Grey ran along silently beside them, or behind them, or sometimes ahead.

Ellie stopped them just as the sun was setting, at a thick stand of brush with a barren clearing on the other side.

As they peered through, Tes could make out a small building on the far side of the clearing. There sat a thatched cottage, looking quite abandoned but hardly sinister, shaded by a tall outcropping of rock and a small stand of dark evergreen trees.

"That's The Hated Halls?" Tes whispered. "Looks more like The Hated Hut to me."

"That's only the entryway," Ellie whispered back. "and it's not undefended. Look closer."

Tesni looked closer, letting her eyes slowly adjust to the deepening dusk. It took her a moment to see that what she had initially taken for a bare tree, swaying in the wind behind the cottage, was in fact a long, gaunt arm protruding from the center of the building's peaked roof.

It was as tall and as thick as any tree, and swayed about aimlessly in the air above the house. Twenty feet from its end, the arm split off into three long claw-like fingers, which wriggled and clacked together.

"That thing can and will reach anywhere in the clearing," Ellie said in a low voice. "I was here watching when a jackrabbit tried to cross in front of the cottage. It didn't get three hops into the clearing before that arm speared it with one claw, then held it straight up in the air and let its blood trickle down the finger. I think it has some sort of mouth where they all join the main arm."

“Lovely,” said Tes sourly. “And this thing is only a day’s walk from Kaer Maga?”

“It’s not always here,” Ellie replied with a shrug.

“So, how do we get in? And more to the point, why do we get in?”

“We get in with this,” Ellie replied, and pulled a small metallic object out of the blouse of her green-and-brown travelling outfit. Tesni recognized it as one of the Ardoch family’s mechanical homing pigeons—more reliable than the real things, and one of the clan’s best-selling and most affordable items.

“I’ve filled the watertight message chamber inside it with my blood,” Ellie explained. “I’ll send it flying off towards that guardian claw. It’ll take it for a living animal and catch it to drink the blood. While it’s distracted, we’ll slip in the front door. I already did a test run, so I’m sure it will work... reasonably.”

“You bled yourself into that thing,” Tes said, shaking her head. “You’re a crazy, crazy, crazy girl.”

“Better to bleed a little down here than a lot up there,” Ellie noted, pointing up at the huge thing waving tentacle-like above the cottage. “Now, the stories I’ve heard say there’s a huge fireplace inside that house... big enough for a grown human to stand up in without bending over. In it burns a green fire with no logs, coals or fuel of any kind. To get to the Hated Halls, you step into that fire.”

“I see. So the flames act as some kind of teleportation portal into the dungeon.”

“No, the flames act as flames, which burn you alive and turn you into ashes. Quite exquisitely painful, I’m told. Then you re-form a new body somewhere in the Halls. But with none of your equipment. Or weapons. Or... you know... clothes. If you’re lucky and resourceful enough, you can find your way back here again by gentler means, after you’ve traversed the Halls.”

Tesni’s glower had grown darker and darker as Ellie spoke. Then she sighed heavily.

“Okay,” she said matter-of-factly, “I’m not doing that.”

Ellie grinned at her. “Good, because I wouldn’t fancy having to come after you. What we’re looking for is in the cottage itself, not in the Halls.”

“And that is...?”

“My great-grandfather’s tombstone.”

Tesni affixed Ellie with dagger-eyes. “A rock?” she said flintily. “We’re running past that thing into a house full of naked-making demon fire and Desna knows what else, so you can bring home a rock?”

“Well, my great-grandfather’s soul happens to be trapped inside it. The magic of the portal into the Halls is powered by the souls of several great men and women trapped inside their own tombstones, and placed around the inside of that hut. We’ll fetch my great-grandfather out of there, bring him back to Kaer Maga, and turn him over to Uncle Merriman and the Brothers. And then we’ll see who’s worthy of full membership in the family.”

Tesni gave a growl of resignation and sent an exasperated look up into the now star-filled sky. “It’s a good thing I like you so much, or I’d be charging you more for my time than you could afford. I wish I’d brought more throwing stars.” She reached back to check the braids of her long hair, which had been tied together into a single long plait, with dozens of tiny razor-sharp disks wedged in between the strands. “I must be crazy.”

“Of course you are,” Ellie agreed. “You’re a bard.”

“Why did you wait until now to tell me all this stuff?”

“So it would all be fresh in your mind. It wouldn’t do to forget any of this.”

“I never forget anything, Ellie. You know that.”

“You’re in an awfully sour mood tonight,” Ellie told her. “Tell you what. When we get back home, I’ll buy you a heaping bowl of fruit-ice. Any flavor you want.”

Tes had to turn away to hide her grin. “Better have lots of whipped cream. And a cherry—three cherries—on top.”

“Deal,” said Ellie, then spat in her hand and held it out for Tes to shake.

“Ewww,” said Tes, looking at it and wrinkling her nose. “Just send up your bloody bird and let’s get to it already.”



They made it into the cottage with seconds to spare. It was so close, Elethay and Tesni could hear the claws slam uselessly into the ground outside, just as they slammed the door on it.

The interior of the little cottage looked surprisingly like... the interior of a little cottage. Simple shelves and tables were scattered around the perimeter, holding an unremarkable assortment of jars and odd items. Only three things stood out. A giant fireplace occupied the far corner, taller than Ellie and filled entirely with a greenish fire that billowed but did not roar. It seemed to give off cold rather than heat. In front of it sat a perfectly normal-looking young girl, perhaps twelve years old, spinning at a spinning wheel and looking impassively at her two sudden visitors. But of most interest to Ellie were the uprooted gravestones, in a variety of shapes and sizes and conditions, that stood propped up at irregular intervals against the wainscot.

The young girl kept her eyes on Ellie and Tes, not pausing in her spinning. Her expression was entirely inscrutable.

“Dongleman’s Rules of Dungeon Delving, number fourteen,” Tesni said to Ellie in a low voice. “Once you’ve gotten past the first death trap, all cute children should be viewed with a great deal of suspicion.”

“Oh, I agree completely,” Ellie replied. “I’m thinking the spinning wheel provides power to the fire-portal. There’s no fuel in that fireplace.”

“Then we should just smash the spinning wheel, and everything’s tea and crumpets?”

“No, if you touch that spinning wheel, I’d say it’s likely to suck your soul out, and wrap it around the distaff to add to its power.”

Tes looked up at her incredulously. “How do you know that?”

Ellie shrugged. “It’s what I would do if I were an evil magic spinning wheel. Anyway, the wheel is probably just a tool. Take away its power source and it’s useless.” She gestured at the gravestones lined up along the walls.

“You’re making an awful lot of assumptions here,” Tes told her skeptically.

“Informed assumptions. I read a lot. Didn’t you notice? Anyway, closing that portal isn’t our main purpose here. Great-grandpa Armiger’s tombstone is.”

The little girl at the spinning wheel grinned at them malevolently. “You won’t want to be here when Papa gets home,” she said in a little girl voice.

“Don’t worry,” Ellie said to her. “We’re not interested in any of your fine cutlery or quaint folk carvings. I’ll just collect my great-grandsire’s stone, and we’ll be gone from here.”

“If your great-grandsire had been a good man, his stone wouldn’t be here,” the girl told her.

“Maybe not. But you know what they say... you can’t choose your family.”

“But you can choose your fiends,” Tes appended. “Speaking of which, I’d like to go home before Mistress Mary’s papa gets here, whatever he is.”

“Just look for a stone with the name Armiger Ardoch on it... with a ‘ch’ at the end.”

“The inscribed sides are all turned toward the wall.”

Ellie sighed heavily. “Well, crap.”

The little girl gave a wicked little laugh, and suddenly from the green fire burst a swarm of tiny winged creatures, screaming in high-pitched agony as they burned through the air.

The creatures looked like fairies, winged human-like beings the size of dragonflies, and they continued to burn with the misty green flames as they shot frantically around the room, bouncing off walls, floor, furniture and ceiling as they hysterically tried to smother the flames that hurt them so. Fortunately, those magical flames seemed incapable of igniting anything in the room. Several of the creatures made directly for Ellie and Tes, perhaps in desperate search of help. One of them bounced glancingly off Ellie’s shoulder. The ranger’s scream of pain turned into a gurgle as she doubled over and retched on the floor from nauseating agony. The flames had seemed so hot as to be cold, or so cold as to be hot. It didn’t really matter which.

Tesni had grabbed the lid off a wicker basket and was using it as a makeshift shield to bat the things away from her. She could have used her throwing stars to pick the burning creatures out of the air one by one if she had wished; however, she preferred not to kill them except as a last resort.

Worst of all, the constant screaming of the tiny victims created a terrible choir that made Tes feel muzzy in the head, and she knew it must be having a similar effect on Ellie. If this effect was magical or not she didn’t know, but she knew how to fight it.

Oh give me, give me, landlord dear,
The jug at the end of the rail,
For I’ve a thirst that can’t be quenched
By mead or beer or ale...

Tesni’s lovely soprano, with a Korvosan lilt that only seemed to come through when she sang, filled the room, drowning out the wailing and breaking its hypnotic effect.

Ellie smiled at her gratefully, then pulled her bow off her back and used it to sweep the burning fairies out of her path, as gently as she could. Then she darted across the room to a spot behind the spinning girl, and yanked one of the stones away from the wall.

The girl snarled with frustration as the threads began snapping and unraveling from her wheel and distaff.

She stood up, abandoning her wheel, which continued to spin on its own, shedding frayed threads in all directions. “It’s no matter,” she said darkly. “Papa is here. I must go and see to his dinner. Gibber hello to him for me when you see him, won’t you?”

Then the girl stepped unhesitatingly into the fire. The room filled with the stink of burning hair and flesh as the girl screamed in agony, her clothes vaporizing, her flesh melting, and her bones crumbling. In a moment, she was gone.

The spinning wheel spun to a stop, and the flame in the fireplace winked out like a candle. The screaming of the tiny creatures stopped abruptly as they all burned at last, their ashes slowly sifting down to the floor.

“Damn,” Ellie muttered.

...Gods save me from another drink
From the jug at the end of the rail!

Tes finished her song and looked mournfully at the remains of the fairy creatures. “I hate this place,” she said. “Did you get what you needed?”

“This is it.” Elethay held an oblong slab of stone that tapered to a rounded point at one end. Her grandfather’s name was carved into it.

“How did you know that was the right one?” Tes asked her.

“It’s in the shape of the Ardoc family symbol.”

Tes looked hard at it. “A willie?”

Ellie made a face at her. “A chisel.” Then she looked appraisingly at the stone in her arms. “At least, that’s the official story.”

“Well,” Tes declared, opening the front door, “I’d love to stay for a cuppa’, but...”

“Be careful of the claw,” Ellie warned her. “I’ve got another pigeon full of blood here. I hope that thing is stupid enough to fall for the same trick twice.”

“It’s a wonder you have any blood left inside you.”

“I think the same thing every day.”

They carefully opened the door and peered up over the eaves at the roof. They could just make out the trunk-like claw, motionless against the night sky.

“It’s not moving,” Ellie said. “Maybe it goes dormant when the fire goes out. We’d better release the pigeon just in case, Tes.... Tes?”

Tesni was staring across the clearing with a look of horror on her face that Ellie had never seen before. Out of the corner of her eye, in the direction Tes was staring, she could see what she had at first taken to be the pale glow of the moon. Then she noticed the moon hanging low in a completely different part of the sky.

“Don’t look at it,” Tes whispered hoarsely. “Please don’t look at it.”

“Tes, what...?”

Suddenly an unseen force lifted the halfling three feet off the ground as she squealed with terror. It slammed her hard against the doorpost, and she crumpled to the ground with a groan.

Gritting her teeth, Ellie pulled her only explosive-tipped magic arrow from her quiver and nocked it to her bow. She wondered if she could hit the thing without looking at it. She also wondered how close it was to her right now, and if it could throw her around as easily as it had thrown her small companion.

As she turned, Ellie saw something small dart across her field of vision at great speed, indistinct in the dark. A sharp whirring sound came from the direction of the pallid thing, followed by an unearthly scream. The clearing lit up eerily for a moment, as if in daylight, under a spectral fog. Then everything went dark and silent.

Grey came trotting back out of the darkness and sat obediently on the ground at Elethay’s feet.

“Is it gone?” Tes asked weakly.

Ellie gazed around the clearing, which had gone silent and dark. “It seems to be. What was it, Tes?”

Tesni pulled herself up to a sitting position, wincing in pain. “It was... it was like a bright sunrise, on the day of your execution. Or like a flickering light in a dark cavern, when you know there are enemies looking for you. It was the beautiful light that comes just before the killing heat.”

Elethay shook her head. “That’s all going to find its way into one of your songs, isn’t it?”

“May Sarenrae save me from the kind of mood that would make me write such a song.” Tesni looked over at Grey, which seemed none the worse for wear. “Looks like your metal dog-cat came in handy after all. I guess when dealing with creatures from beyond Hell, it helps to be made of solid silver and completely fearless.”

“And to be able to extrude spinning blades fore and aft,” Ellie noted.

“Okay,” Tes said. “Didn’t know about that one. And you wonder why I don’t want it in bed with us?”

Ellie reached into her belt pouch, pulled out a small glass vial filled with a dark purple liquid, and handed it to the halfling.

Tes looked at it. “Ellie, is this one of Quarrimac’s Wine Potions?”

“It is.”

“Oh, these are so gooood! Almost better than sex! Well, some sex. But I’m not hurt badly enough to waste one of these on. I mean, these things heal everything. I drink this and my legs will grow back the hair I shaved off this morning.”

“It’s going to be a long walk back tomorrow,” Ellie told her. “And you’ve earned it. Nice singing back there.”

“Well,” Tes considered, “if you put it that way, I guess I can accept it in lieu of flowers.” She drank off the potion. “Oh... yummy. In the morning I think I’ll be able to carry your stone willie all the way back to Kaer Maga myself.”

“It’s a chisel.”

“Sure it is.”

Ellie threw the blood laden pigeon into the air and the two counted to three and ran.



Elethay emerged from the Kiln, her family’s headquarters, to find Tesni waiting for her by the elaborate stone fountain in the small square.

“Well, how did Uncle Merriman react to being presented with your great-grandfather’s gravestone?” Tes asked her.

Ellie sat down next to her with a heavy sigh. “Well, he took his goggles off. So he must have been impressed. He called all the Brothers around and said, ‘Look what little Elethay has brought us. Some of you could learn from her when it comes to courage and family honor.’ And they all clapped me on the shoulder.”

Tesni glanced down at Ellie’s waist. “I don’t see a chisel hanging there.”

Ellie shook her head. “I took Uncle Merriman aside and asked him about it afterwards. He smiled at me and said, ‘You’re a brave girl and you make us proud. But if nothing hangs between your legs, no chisel will hang from your belt.’”

“Damn,” Tes muttered. They sat in silence for a few moments.

Ellie shrugged. “Can’t say it’s unexpected. Family pride only stretches so far if there’s no gold involved, or access to a new market. I’d probably have made a better impression if I’d brought back a trade concession in the Hated Halls.”

“Money is nice,” Tes said. “But I’ve always preferred living to making a living,

myself.”

“I agree,” Ellie said. “So I’m leaving. I’m going down the Halflight Path in the morning and out into the wide world to seek my fortune, as they say in the tales.”

Tesni considered that. “Can I come too?”

“Yes,” Ellie replied without a moment’s hesitation.

“Good. I’m tired of living in a cave. No offense to your Kaer Magan sensibilities.”

“None even remotely taken.”

They got up and started back toward Ellie’s townhouse to pack.

“I knew it was a willie,” Tes muttered.

Dusk of the DAWNFLOWER DERVISH

by Shawn Feakins
Contest Ranking 14th



hey found her Downmarket. No sense guessing who found her first. Everyone in the crowd wanted that honor—and by honor, I mean coin. When I walked by, all the scavengers were claiming her as kin for the corpse-fee in Ankar-Te. Not one of them actually looked at her. But I did.

Scandalous clothes implied the occupation and one arm sprawled over her head like she reached for a book. Her legs were crossed under her and she stared at the sky, wide-eyed and scared. She had a bulbous nose above grit teeth, and blond hair that was thrown above her head like a spill.

The hair gets to me.

The sun peeks out behind the clouds to shine on her. I haven't felt Sarenrae's blessing in years, but I remember those days when I cared and fought my way west across the Garundi coast. I feel that old, useless pride stirring...and the anger that never fades anymore.

I step forward. "No one's selling anyone. She's family. I'll take her."

It's a bad lie and they know it.

"Come now boy," a pesh-toothless dwarf snorts. "Two days and I'll have her sold to the White Lilly. You can take her moving then. It'll be worth the wait."

I don't look kindly at that. And they all go quiet when I stare him down.

A hair-lipped Shoanti, mean but too soft from being inside these walls, looks me over. He's the biggest and it's down to him to see how this falls. "You have proof? Money? Or do Freemen hire Ulfen dogs to pick up scraps?"

I can't help but chuckle. Ulfen. He's right, but so wrong. I might be rough-looking now, but I've never worn furs in my life. "Seems to me the only scraps I'm looking at is you all. Although another might be coming..."

I take the gloves off so they can see the scars. Holding flaming scimitars will do that, especially when you lose favor. I'm a head shorter than the Shoanti bully, but about a foot wider. Even though I've given up the blades, I've wrestled gnolls and snapped the necks of undead Osiriani jackal priests. And they can see it.

I lift her off the ground and catch a familiar burnt-sweet smell from her mouth. I know where to go after I take care of her. The carrion birds flutter off and make clever comments about my parentage. It's sad, I wish some of them were true.



Kaer Maga is a city of unspoken agreements. Everyone leaves each other alone to do what you couldn't do outside. Anything goes in Kaer Maga, and if you aren't here for trade, then you're one of the depraved, the fugitive, or the lost that come for protection and no questions asked. I couldn't tell you which one of those I am nowadays.

I carry her past the Highside Stacks. A groundling like me will never see the inside of those towers, but that's just fine with the Freemen that took me in. There's pride in The Bottoms too, but it's the pride that comes from the resolve to never wear chains again. Freed slaves are as close to moral company as you can get around here.

I get looks when I carry her in, but they know better than to ask. Inside the walls, dim lanterns burn far away from Sarenrae's love. I knock on the shack made of scavenged plate mail and see a small windmill made of beaten daggers spinning in a non-existent breeze. The blind, half-bleached gnome opens the door and sniffs the air.

"She's dead," he says.

"She is," I confirm. "Ayyid home?"

The gnome steps aside and I walk past buzzing machines that have no logic except for their creator. Candles exaggerate Ayyid's hunch over the workbench as he scrapes alphabets into thumbnail-sized discs. I look over his shoulder to see a metal sphere stuck with needles ending in different letters. He doesn't look up when the dead girl's hair falls in front of him.

"I thought the dead made you nervous," he says.

I set her down on my bedroll in the corner. "I need you to arrange a burial in the Godsmouth."

He doesn't look up, but stops scraping. "Quite a bit of coin for a stranger."

I'm not sure if he's referring to her or me. Both of us crossed water to land here; me—finally—from Rahadoum and him from the magic-barren strip of Alkenstar. Neither of us asked each other what we did before Kaer Maga, or what we did to deserve being here. It's the basis of a respectful, distant friendship.

But he was right, most people found a patch outside the walls. The Godsmouth Ossuary made you pay for the privilege of having your dead swallowed inside staring stones. But someone wanted her body to vanish. In this city, the more obvious the corpse, the more likely it disappears—just to keep the peace. In fact, I wonder why the murderer didn't sell her to Ankar-Te himself. Either way, I want her kept safe until answers arrive.

And women like her deserve a burial. Too many don't get it.

"I'm good for it."

He sniffs and goes back to his invention. "One of the few that are."

I smooth her hair down. It's a stupid gesture and Ayyid is good enough to ignore it. I lean close and catch the scent again—bitter and acrid wafting from her mouth. Smells like flayleaf, but sure enough her fingers are clenched into claws. I take the stockings off and her toes are curled too. I close her eyes and open the chest at the end of my bedroll.

The scimitars wink back under the candlelight. Gold leaf and ruby sunbursts on the hilt glitter below the finest Katapesh steel. I trace Mercy's edge and my fingertip burns.

Not today. This one isn't for Sarenrae.

I take out The Birth of Light and Truth and open it to the Duskjourney prayer. I read the words quietly. It's better to do this in the open, but living inside walls means sunlight is a rarity. Besides, I sunburn easily. After a moment, I decide to take Sarenrae's symbol. Can't hurt to have some blessing, if she sees fit.

I leave the girl with Ayyid, his thoughts, and his partner. The sun is setting and the drunken carousing is starting. In the Bottoms, what comes with new freedom is the need to indulge, and there will always be those that live on those needs.

I see one leaning against one of the many taverns. Stringy hair and open shirt frame a smooth chest irresistible to some. He sees me walking toward him and smiles with teeth that seem too perfect. Just another working Tallow Boy, but the smart ones know what the work really is.

"Hard day?" he grins. "If you care to buy me a drink, I'll listen."

"Actually, I care to find a woman."

He turns away and I grab his arm. He reaches to his hip for a surely hidden dagger, and I hold my other hand up before it gets ugly.

"There was a dead girl found Downmarket before sunset. You two probably ran in the same circles. I need to find out where she worked."

He tries to pull away, but I hold him. "How do you know she worked for a Hospice?" he asks. His threatening hand never moves.

"Her teeth and clothes were too nice to be just street sweet—so are yours."

His dark eyes narrow. "I've seen you before..."

I meet his eyes and fill them. "With Elias, most likely. I know you know who that is, so spare me the dance and rush this to the people that matter."

The boy is all a different business now. "You'll be here?"

"Find me in Oriat."



You can do anything in Kaer Maga. Some people find that titillating.

They're idiots.

They settle in Oriat, too...to sing and dance and create "art" that expresses who they really are in a city that doesn't judge, even though there is nothing more they love to do.

I weave past shimmering banners and badly strummed ballads to the storefront. I truly wish the Brotherhood would just burn this place down, but it would just get rebuilt again with new murals and sculptures springing up like mushrooms on the ashes.

There was a time when I would have felt right at home here, dressed in fancy silks and singing glorious arias to Asmodeus. I would secretly fold in a few lausavísas under the frippery to make her-

No, never again.

The Succoring Muse is an unmarked building at the edge of the district, close enough to The Gap for any visitors to quickly find their chosen addiction. The obese half-orc guarding the door is picking her nose when I walk up.

Punching her in the throat is quicker than trying to barter entrance. She sinks down enough for me to shove her through the door, hitting a slip of a half-elfen boy with stone-sized pupils. I carry the bouncer over his glazed glance. The children sucking at hookahs scatter as I throw the half-orc over a table into a just emptied chair with a crunch. I step over her useless gasping into the hall, where sweet smoke and burnt promises drift out of every door. I walk past them to the far office. When I open the door, Parfus is already pulling the crossbow from under his desk. I kick the desk so it slams into his wrist, and the strings twang to fire one into his foot. He shrieks and I smile at my luck. He squeals when I pull him up.

“You remember what I said I’d do if I found another girl dead?”

“Belial burn your eyes! Do you know who I am?” he screams.

Papers fall as I slam him onto the desktop. “You’re a Sczarni orphan that couldn’t make rank in Sandport, so don’t pretend your family will care when I toss you off the nearest wall.”

His lip quivers. “You can’t do this! This isn’t Taldor!”

I keep myself from crushing his head in a drawer. Now we’re even on lucky shots, but I don’t let him see that. “When did you start selling flayleaf spider venom?”

He sputters excuses and I pull him close. “Don’t,” I growl. “I spent three years in Thuvia. Two with an alchemist. I’ve fought Poismen, the Burning Apothecary, and their Flaskwaifs. I know you grow flayleaf. I know those spiders crawling on it are nasty, and I know it must be worth the trouble being able to milk that poison...”

He tries to crawl away, so I grab his foot by the spent bolt. He howls.

“Oh, sweet fires below! It was for the Twice-Born!”

Great. More corpses.

“Doesn’t seem like they’d need it,” I muse.

“I had to get rid of them!” he groans. “They kept coming! Those things attract the wrong type of people!”

I let that irony oxidize. “Why’d they keep coming?”

“Because the sale didn’t take.”

I drag the story past his ragged weeping. Two weeks ago, a naked, massive, undead man walked in with a note nailed to his chest and a bag in his hand. The note asked for vials of flayleaf venom. There was debate whether to just give it a second death and take the money, but they didn’t want to chance angering the necromancer that sent it. They handed over the poison and took the coin.

And then it just stood there, mute and stinking...for hours. After revisiting their first idea, they dumped the remains out back. Fear of losing business outweighed the fear of reprisal. It didn’t even defend itself. Second day, another. Same thing happened. This time, they didn’t bother debating and chopped it up as soon as it froze.

With the third, came the reprisal—along with four violent corpses to make the point. They smashed up the place until they handed over the venom. Then they silently left, although not before collecting the previous payments.

I walk outside leaving curses and cleanup. Something isn’t right about those undead, but I can’t figure it yet. I’m mulling this over when a blonde child tugs my sleeve. I look down and see a Halfling man with a sultry smile—someone for the city’s Shorteyes.

“Your girl went by Ilona, held private at the Blushing Rose,” he says.

“Private?”

“Just one client.”

Odd. The Blushing Rose did well, but not well enough that girls could be picky. Something was off. “Did you Tallow Boys kill her? There’s no love lost between Elias and the madam.”

The Halfling rolls his eyes. Point taken. The Strapping Lad and Blushing Rose have been spitting at each other for months, but they wouldn’t start the “war of whores” with a dead girl tossed in the Core for anyone to scavenge like some gnoll. This wasn’t a message, it was garbage removal.

“Who’s the client?”

He grins. “Elias says you owe him for this.”

I chuckle. “I always do. He’s lucky he’s beautiful.”

“Lamont Ardoc.”

That last name sends me reeling. “You sure?” I ask.

He looks up as if I’m the one below him for asking. Sunspot and damnation. Nothing is ever easy.

“Another thing,” he says, “he took her out on weekly trips to Ankar-Te. She was a corpse fiddler. Oh, and Elias wants me to ask if you’re sure you want to get involved.”



Ankar-Te works solely on one premise: that the dead aren’t what they actually are.

I cannot abide the dead, especially not those that move and certainly not those of Ankar-Te. Douse them in perfume, wrap them in garlic, dress them in livery; it doesn’t hide the fact that someone’s rotting kin shops for people that hold no regard for life. The worst are the rotten-faced women leaning out of too-quiet bawdy houses to beckon to shamed and horrifyingly unashamed men. I could have asked my questions at the Blushing Rose, where live and willing women would fawn over my disinterest, but I’m not one for the easy path.

Which is why I sit in a waiting room trying to look at anything but the ghoul showing off her scabbed cleavage. She licks meat off her chin with a forked tongue and takes notes as I wait. An uncomfortable hour later, a corpulent man wearing gray, tattered robes extends his hand.

“Welcome to Last Rites,” he grins. “May the Pallid Princess bless you. I am Dorin Ezantali. How can I assist your life with someone’s second?”

Only in Kaer Maga. Urgathoa doesn’t give blessings. They’ve watered down her faith for better business, but he’s still used to the time it takes for me to accept his hand. “Doesn’t seem much like living,” I say.

“Well, that’s a prejudice we can work on. Come, let’s talk.”

We go to a room suspiciously lacking bones and candles. He sits at a darkwood desk and pours metallic-smelling reddish tea out of a bronzed skullpot. After a moment, I sit as well. “How was your trip from the north?” he asks.

“Pardon?”

He looks sheepish and waves toward my hair and beard. “I apologize. I assumed—”

“No,” I say, I’m not Ulfen, even with their blood. They don’t accept me now.

“Westcrown then?”

He thinks I was a Chelaxian slave. It’s close enough to infuriate. I’m in no mood given the badly hidden undead smell. “You want my life-verses?” I snap.

The fat cleric meets my eyes. “We run a respectable business,” he says calmly. “I do my best to know my customers and to assure that everything is as ethical as

possible.” I snort at that word and he smirks.

“Sir, we attract unique folk. My job is to assess the bodies...the client’s as well as the ones brought to us,” he says quietly. “For instance, you hold yourself like a former slave. You hesitated before sitting, as if waiting for permission. The weight of old chains around you is palpable.”

He speaks and I feel my face burn. “You are quite judgmental about our work, a fact inferred from that.” He points toward my chest and I look to see Sarenrae’s symbol peeking out above my shirt. It probably fell out during the tussle with that Sczarni rat. I tuck it back in as he speaks. “You’re not a priest—too many scars and too much muscle. A warrior then. And your angry retort to my questioning reveals that you are familiar with the skalds of your people. The real question is how an Ulfen finds the blessing of a Southern goddess so far from home.”

It takes time for the heat in my face to recede. That tea smells too metallic all of a sudden. “How about you answer some of my questions instead? I’m not here to cause trouble. I’m here for a dead girl.”

He smirks. “We hear that often.”

Surprisingly, he’s authentically upset about Ilona. He knew her, but she never wanted services or slaves. She came for remnants. Resurrection can be messy, and even then some corpses were unsalvageable. Dorin said she would even go to the White Lilly and take prostitutes that were abused past useful by “clients.” She always paid a fair price, more than she should have been able to. The connection between Ilona and her partner is obvious, but one thing still bothered me.

“So why wouldn’t the murderer just sell Ilona to—“

“We aren’t grave robbers,” he cuts me off. “I regret to say that others are not as discerning, but we try to set an example by confirming every identity to pay the family fairly. If need be, we’ll talk to the body—as long as it’s intact.”

Those corpse flies would have known that. They’d probably make it so no one could talk to her and bring her to a less discerning buyer. But why take the chance? Why didn’t the murderer just ruin her enough so....

Because he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“If someone wanted to buy a lot of undead quickly, how would that work?”

“Well, we have to tailor the controlling talisman to the client, of course. That takes time. How many?”

“Say a dozen.”

“At least a week. Some of the lesser stores have shoddy ready-mades, but I think everyone agrees that the last thing anyone wants is a twice-born not doing what it’s told.”

He was helpful. I shake his hand and promise to keep in touch about Ilona. As I leave, the ghoul licks her lips and thanks me for dropping by.

I smash her head against the desk until it bursts. I run before the watch wights arrive.

I just cannot abide the dead.



I arrange things with Ayyid in case it goes wrong. I also borrow a leather apron and gloves. Some of the Freemen that served with the Ardocs took their uniforms when they escaped. I have to adjust the gloves. Residents of Bis usually lack fingernails.

The crafters punish people by taking knuckles, but never enough so that they can't work. I also borrow tools from Ayyid. Aprons are one thing, but no one dares steal tools from Crafters.

Impossible scaffolds and ramps climb the western walls. Mortared, rune-carved men haul stone, helped by clattering monkeys of cutlery. There's tension between Bis and Ankar-Te. Both say their slavery is superior and want to prove it, although it usually doesn't matter to the living on either side.

Here, people accept the occasional knuckling in exchange for security. Obviously not enough, as I'm able to walk in unnoticed with my borrowed apron and hammers. I slowly fake work and move toward the Kiln where the Crafting is done. That's when I see one. A naked, stitched together corpse shuffles along, carrying books. One look at his eyes and my suspicions are confirmed.

I see someone directing it. More fleshmen surround him. He keeps them close. He looks exhausted. I walk up to tap him on the shoulder and he testily ignores me.

"I'm here about your sister," I say.

He freezes and turns to look with the same nose and eyes as Ilona, if that was ever her real name.

I can read his eye's debate, so I win it. "I know someone that has this funny device that lets you write like a book. He's been working all day on your story, so if you kill me..."

He blanches. "No one will believe it."

"Maybe, but it'll make your brothers wonder. Probably enough to take a closer look."

He stands as still as his "creations" for a moment before walking away. I follow him.

He looks over his shoulder as he unlocks his workshop. Inside is a charnel house. Bodies lined up on slabs attached to tubes and elaborate machines. It would fool me and most anyone else, but not a real Brother of Bis. I look into one of the dead's eyes and he looks back. They've been ordered to stay still until Lamont "makes" them.

"It wasn't a bad idea," I say. "Add stitches and most couldn't tell. Except the eyes. See, Biscraft is just a thing that moves, but the twice-born were ripped from somewhere better. You can see hate in their eyes for that."

He sinks exhausted into a chair. "How did you know?"

"Clothes. The dead you sent to the Muse were naked. Ankar-Te covers their slaves. It helps the lie. You Ardocs could care less. They're just objects to you. I'm guessing the first ones you sent were hers. She probably had a standing order for them to never directly assist in her death so they stopped dead at the door. Pardon the pun. I used to be a poet. You get rid of the rest?"

He rubs his eyes. "I had to. Who knows what other orders she gave?"

"So you bought twice-born to do the job. Probably better that way. Keeps the suspicion on the necros. And you would have had to buy them eventually to keep your tools."

I look across the dead. "You Ardocs and your rules. She was the Crafter, but women don't build. They're just useful for babies. Better than men without the unbreathing touch, though. Those are just pitied."

I glare at him. "She must have kept it secret. Otherwise, she'd be locked up for breeding a whole brood of carvers. But she told her brother. And then he locked her up anyway."

He looks up suddenly, the old terror of being disowned renewed. "It was her idea." "Oh, she wanted to be a whore?"

He moans. "She wanted to work. Do you know what it's like being prevented doing *what you were born for?*"

What was I born for? It wasn't what I found in Sarenrae. Certainly not what I was taught.

"She animated a spoon and showed it to me. She came to me!"

I remember her bedtime stories about noble warriors of ol' Deadeye. When day broke, I was dressed and perfumed to perform for Chelaxian nobles as proof that upbringing and blood could civilize the dullest of races.

"We agreed. We fake her death and hide her so she can craft and I take the credit."

Slaves can have children, whether by violence or broken promises. I never knew by which I was born, but I was kept all the same by a Taldorian historian too stubborn to leave Westcrown after the demons rose. I never knew what he did, but I knew his one tiny act of rebellion: me.

"It worked for years!"

And then whatever house he courted fell out of favor.

"Then she wanted to come back! She wanted to prove to them she could do it!"

When he ran, he took his most valued possessions. She wasn't one—I was. Hellknights cut her down as she ran after our carriage. A few months later, he sold me in Omash to pay ancient, meaningless family debts.

"She would have ruined everything we worked for! I had to do it! I wasn't evil! I tried to find a gentle poison!"

Left like she was nothing.

"I cried as I watched her eat! I loved her! Gods, why do you care?"

I stab Lamont in the neck with Ayyid's awl. The watching dead ignore the wrong as he gurgles and slumps. He tries to slap me away as I search for the talisman and find it under his shirt. He used up all his wit with the murder, no time to be clever with the hiding. He begs and I smash it against the table, figuring that he didn't have enough time or money left over after buying a dozen dead for anything fortified.

It shatters and the rescued dead moan.

I slam the door and call for help. The journeymen don't recognize me, but Lamont's screams distract them. I babble about a rampage and push past the gaping crowd. I throw myself against the wall as rusting constructs led by a full-brother run down the hall toward other cries. I toss the apron aside and walk out to the Core.

The sun has passed behind the clouds and looks to stay there. I've disappointed

SHAWN FEAKINS

Sarenrae. I should be used to it. I don't blame the Dawnflower any. I didn't grant any mercy and redemption has long since passed.

There won't be much left to interrogate after the dead are done, no matter how good the priest. After the cleanup, some full brother will see Lamont's work for what it is. They'll be too blinded by the outrage of it all to look much further than Ankar-Te. The quiet war may get loud and by the time it silences no one will remember how it started.

Maybe.

I was messy. Too many loose ends. All it takes is someone asking an augur's bloody innards and they'll know. It's likely the Muse and Last Rites will be after me soon enough. With all that, someone could piece it together. Someone could come for me.

I just hope that by then the Dawnflower lets me feel again. Maybe just one more time, the doves can fly out, the sun can shine on my face, and I can feel Sarenrae's blessing fill me up again. And I will take up my blades again and dance, trailing flames and fury.

More likely I won't. That's all right though.

I just want to see the women I love when I die. I pray that whoever finally gets me doesn't leave enough for the necros or the crafters. I hope I made them angry enough to destroy me completely.

Because I just cannot abide the dead.

A BRIDE IN KORVOSA

by Dave Wood
Contest Ranking 10th



mas reckoned that if all had gone as planned, he and Rulhor would have been safe somewhere, discussing their spoils, enjoying spiced mead whilst catching the eye of a friendly bar wench. But no, their efforts did not go as planned, and Omas chuckled mirthlessly at the thought that, in spite of all the attention needed to run a demanding cosmos, the Gods still found time to prevent any modicum of success from occurring in their plans. Instead the two were running along the darkened streets of Korvosa's North Point district in the wee hours of the morning with the merchant's guards in dogged pursuit. The noise made by all of them gradually drew more attention from the early risers hoping to get the jump on a new day.

"You just had to grab that damn platter, didn't you?" hissed Omas with his breath rasping through clenched teeth, hands cramping as he clenched a bag of loot over his shoulder. He remembered his clumsy friend reaching for it, nudging it over, and how it toppled into the wares on the settee, the clatter waking the residents and alerting the house guards.

"I thought it was nice!" Rulhor growled, his own bag clutched under his left arm, his right pumping furiously as he ran alongside his partner. He pulled it from the bag. "See? It has an engraving of Sarenrae on it. People like her. It should fetch a decent price!"

"Where!? We don't know anyone to sell it to! I said 'stick to coins and gems', which apparently you misheard as 'grab shiny stuff'!" Omas huffed slightly as he leapt over a fallen barrel. Rulhor dodged around a pushcart emerging onto the main street from an alley.

Deciding the growing traffic was paying a bit more attention to them than was comfortable, Rulhor grabbed Omas by his shoulder and yanked him into the next alleyway they came to—it was all the small man could do to hang onto his bag of plunder, both feet nearly leaving the cobbles as he was swung around and shoved down the foul-smelling, narrow street. "This way!" The big man yelled.

"Really?" Omas gasped, sarcasm dripping like venom. The alley was full of refuse and sheens of slime, and water coated the cobbles. The two dodged barrels

and crates of noisome garbage and finally drew up short of the end—a dead end, at that. Omas' shoulders sagged while Rulhor looked frantically for a way out. He tried a door set in the wall at the end of the alley, but it was locked. Omas slouched behind a pile of boxes to keep an eye towards the street they had just been on. Rulhor sat his bag down with a clatter, drawing a small pack from a pouch strapped to his right thigh and shaking its contents into his hand.

“Tell me if someone is coming. I’m going to try to get this door open.”

“Right.” Omas slid into a crouch and drew out his short bow. If any of the guards poked their noses this way, well...he would have to make them question their wisdom. He glimpsed one, then another, as they trotted past the alley’s entrance. A street peddler was stopped by a third. “How many guards did that old fool have!?” Omas muttered as he eyed an animated discussion taking place between the peddler and guard.

The guard held his hand up high, indicating a tall man, possibly. “I think he’s describing you, friend.” Then the guard held his hand low. “I think he’s describing me, now—what? I’m not that short.”

Rulhor chuckled at his friend’s indignation and kept working at the door’s lock.

“This is taking a bit longer than I thought it would, Rulhor.”

“I’m doing my best. Would you care to have a go?”

“Well, at least I’m not in the habit of breaking picks off in the... uh-oh.”

“What?”

“It appears our guard has just been joined by his friends, and that poor little vendor just pointed down this alley!” Omas hissed, notching an arrow. Rulhor drew his own bow and looked around as he joined Omas behind the pile of crates. Narrow field of fire, chokepoint easy to defend—decent place to make a stand—it would do.

“You know, my friend, I’m thinking a career in thievery is really not suited for the likes of us,” the big man said as he readied an arrow then laid his large, single-edged sword within easy reach. Omas nodded as he pulled two well-worn kukris and sat them on the crate in front of him. “How did things come to this?” he thought. Two men of action, so to speak, late of Katapesh, coming eventually to Korvosa searching for adventure and, as their stomachs grew empty, work. They sought employment as house guards at one point, but were rejected. That would have been the end of that, but the rejection came with insults and laughter from the officer in charge. This led to a desire to teach that particular household a lesson in just how incompetent its guards were, which led to their attempt at looting said household, which in turn led to their present situation.

“All the way from Katapesh to die in a Korvosan alley. Just doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

“Aye, friend,” Omas replied, silently cursing the pride that goaded them to this fool’s venture.

The three guards started slowly down the dark alley, looking around and prodding piles of trash with their short swords. The third hung behind a few steps with a small crossbow, covering his companions’ advance. Omas and Rulhor knew they would have to make this quick for fear of attracting the Korvosan Guard. These were house guards—nothing special to deal with, but the Guardsmen were professional soldiers, grimly astute in the execution of duty and keeping order. Rulhor was actually amazed that they had not gotten involved already, but didn’t voice his speculation for fear of jinxing that single sliver of luck that hadn’t deserted them yet.

Omas glanced at Rulhor and nodded briefly twice, a signal that they would shoot at the second guard inward, the one with the crossbow. "We wound them and break past," he whispered. Rulhor acknowledged with a nod. Omas extended the fingers of his right hand, keeping the short bow seated in the crook of his thumb. He wrapped them back around the grip, one at a time, ticking off the moments until they would rise and fire as one. Rulhor watched his friend's fingers count down the fate of the crossbowman, the small finger, the ring finger, the long finger, the...

The door behind the two unlatched loudly and crashed open, eliciting squeals of surprise from the two companions and cries of alarm from the house guards now fully a third of the way down the alley, as well as a hastily fired bolt which thunked into the wall three hands above the door. A girl, hardly into her womanhood, stood in the doorway, visibly upset and clutching the doorframe. Omas and Rulhor sat motionless in the muck of the alley, astounded at the sight. The crash of the guards bashing through garbage to their position brought them out of their shock. Omas rose, spinning and sending a shaft down the alley to keep their heads down and Rulhor followed suit, his arrow biting into a guard's thigh. Their remaining foes dodged behind their own piles of refuse while the wounded one lurched to the side and fell, calling for help. The two friends turned and regarded the girl, glancing from her to where the guards had taken refuge to her again, readying arrows.

"If I let you in will you help me?" she gasped, chest heaving, nails digging into the doorframe. The two erstwhile thieves looked at one another, then at her. Omas scooped up his blades as Rulhor grabbed up his sword. They both rushed at the girl, snatching her under each arm. She yelped in surprise as they piled through the door with her, throwing their bags of loot back toward the guards as they went. Rulhor dropped his gear and slammed the door shut, tripping the latch and setting his back to it, his eyes wide at the surprising upturn in their fortunes. Omas looked around quickly and, seeing no trap or guards waiting for them here, sighed heavily.

"Please let my arm go, good man—you are hurting me," the girl said softly, a slight, fearful tremor to her voice.

"Oh," Omas said, "I apologize, dear girl. Stress of the moment, and all." With that he released her upper arm gently and patted smooth the rumpled sleeve of the white house dress she wore. Omas backed up a step and took in their surroundings, noting another door opposite of the one they just came through and a lantern giving off a feeble light, hanging from a hook in the center of a low ceiling. The chamber they were in seemed to be a storage room. Boxes and bundles of neatly folded linens were piled neatly against the plastered walls, allowing room to walk in spite of the chamber's small size, and a small table with papers and an unlit lantern on it stood in the corner, a single tall stool next to it. "Young lady," he said, "I must admit this is quite an awkward situation, and that we may appear to be quite the ruffians you suspect we are, but I assure you that my friend and I will not harm you. My name is Omas Adib, of Katapesh." The girl nodded. "And my large friend by the door is Rulhor Aazhal."

"Also of Katapesh," the big man said and stood away from the door, giving a half-bow and grinning in a neighborly way. The girl nodded to him, and seemed to relax, but only a little.

The young woman regarded the two men. One was large, but more sinewy than muscular, and bore himself like a statue, moving only when needed. The other was shorter than most men and looked...fluid? He never seemed to stay still, every

movement marked with careful grace instead of nervous restlessness. They both possessed an air of wariness, but whether that was due to the situation or their natural state of mind she couldn't tell. They truly did not seem to be the ruffians she first took them for when she saw them from an upstairs window, and she was relieved her decision to let them in may pay off. "My name is Daniela Hozzek of the House of Hozzek," she said, drawing herself up slightly and wiping at her eyes. The two men looked at her blankly. "My family holds several posts in the government?" Omas and Rulhor looked at each other, and then back at her, obviously at a loss. "Uh," she muttered, tapping a slippered foot on the flagstone floor.

"I'm sorry, milady," Rulhor said, not meeting her gaze, "but we're new here, and haven't quite got down who's who in the city, yet." Omas looked at his friend, surprised at the man's apparent sheepishness. He shook himself and turned back to the girl.

"Lady Hozzek, any moment now there might be several irate guards who will want in to get at us, provided they haven't left with our, uh, other bags. If we could..." he trailed off, gesturing to the other door, his expression a mix of hope and pleading.

"Don't worry," Daniela said, her noble bearing reasserting itself now that it seemed these two would not accost her, "that door is made of Darkmoon oak. If they tried, they could take all day and still not force it open. Here, take these." She handed them several sheets of cloth from one of the stacks. "Tie your gear into bundles and pretend to be package bearers. The house is preparing for a..." she paused, as if a bad taste had welled up in her mouth "...celebration of sorts, so you will not look out of place following me." Rulhor and Omas efficiently secured their equipment into neat bundles.

"I'm assuming the contents of those bags you had was not yours in the first place, am I correct?" Daniela said, her cheeks flushing. The two men didn't answer, and wouldn't meet her eyes. "Hmph, some thieves you two are, acting ashamed when confronted with your deeds," she smirked, one eyebrow arched.

"Dear girl," Omas began, clearly wishing a change of subject, "you mentioned something about needing our help?"

The girl's haughty expression shrank from her face, replaced with a look of growing distress. "Yes, the celebration I mentioned earlier is...my wedding day."

Rulhor and Omas looked at each other, then at her, expressions of profound confusion covering their faces. Rulhor chuckled nervously. "Your wedding day?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Today?"

"Yes!"

"In this house?" Omas asked.

"Yes..." she hissed quietly, brows knitting, her foot tapping again.

"And it's a problem...how?" Rulhor asked.

Daniela sighed, not out of frustration or sadness, but weariness. They could see it in the set of her shoulders and her posture how this day weighed upon her. "An arrangement, I assume?" Omas said. "One you find disagreeable?"

"Yes," she said, much quieter.

An awkward silence prevailed for a moment. Rulhor and Omas were familiar with the custom of arranged marriages—in their homeland, some contracted marriages involved brides of only thirteen or fourteen years old joined with husbands barely

older than that. Spiteful of all their travels and experiences, how something forced on such young and unwilling participants could ensure the stability of a treaty or keep two houses from eradicating each other was still a mystery to the two men. They looked at the young woman in a new light. She seemed more a scared girl than the willful daughter of a ranking politician.

Daniela cleared her throat delicately, composing herself. "True," she began, "It is arranged. I have never met the man who is to be my husband. To ensure my house's good fortune and preserve the arrangements that provide for it, a girl is given in marriage to a nobleman of Cheliax, a man with strong ties to our patrons there. This is done every fifty years, and though the ceremony is always held here, the bride accompanies her new husband to his home in Westcrown. I knew for a long time this was coming, but it never seemed real until, well..." A single tear welled up in her eye then coursed down her cheek—but only one. She shook herself and wiped her cheek. "What I need you to do is steal me."

They blinked in unison, "What?"

"After the wedding, I need you to follow the coach that will convey us to Westcrown. Accost it on the road and steal me away."

"Why can't we take you now? Just take you and..." Omas started.

"Because," she interrupted, "the benefits of the arrangement would be void, and my house would lose its patronages from Cheliax. The marriage must take place. Whatever happens afterwards, though..." Daniela trailed off.

"We see," Rulhor said. He looked at Omas with a 'well-she-did-let-us-in' look on his face. The smaller man shrugged. "Well, we'll need a place to hide, preferably one from which we can observe guests arriving so that we'll see what your intended's carriage looks like."

"Done. You can use my brother's room. He is seeing to our interests in Magnimar, so it is unoccupied. It is in the front of the house, with windows overlooking the avenue out front."

"Oh, and food and drink if possible," Omas suggested, grinning roguishly.

Daniela smirked. "Very well, but we should go now." She opened the inner door and led them into the hall.

The walls in what the two men came to realize was a huge mansion were plastered and whitewashed throughout. Omas wondered how such a grand home could have such a deplorable alley at its rear—everything needed a backside, he guessed. His attention was brought into focus when Daniela led them through the main areas of the house. Servants abounded as the place was made ready for the day's festivities, and the two were grateful the staff never gave them a second look—Daniela was a common sight, and the two men following her were carrying packages; not a bit out of place considering the current activity. In a short time she led them up a wide staircase to the second floor, then down a hall ending at a modestly ornate door. "Here," she said, opening it. "Stay and do not come out. Watch for my intended's carriage so you will know it for when the time comes. His insignia is two crossed morning stars over a horse's profile, all in black on a red field." She paused. "I trust you to do this for me. Please. I will reward you both." She backed away a few steps, keeping her eyes on theirs, then turned and walked back the way they came.

Rulhor and Omas entered the room, closing the door behind them. The little man whistled in appreciation. It was lavish, but not obnoxious, dominated by a huge bed centered along the wall across from the door. Colorful tapestries lined the walls. A

huge wardrobe stood to one side of the door, and a small desk and chair sat next to the one large window that looked over the avenue. "Very nice," he said. Rulhor agreed, placing his bundled gear on the desk.

As time wore on, they took turns, one watching events outside while the other napped. A meal had been sent up earlier: spiced meats, some cheeses, and a flagon of watered wine, which they enjoyed readily. Some time in the late afternoon they noticed the number of servants dwindling, but the number of guests arriving by foot and carriage increasing. They were both watching by now, but after a bit Omas saw Rulhor standing at the wardrobe, a look of deep consideration on the face of the big man as he examined it. Omas knew what his friend was thinking and smiled as Rulhor finally opened it. Inside was an array of attire fit for any minor noble in shades of color from subtle to daring. "Feel like a change of clothes?" Rulhor asked, smirking.

"Feel like going to a party?" Omas replied, grinning ear to ear.

"Her brother must be a large man," Omas thought, seeing Rulhor in a dashing outfit of silk blouse and breeches, a cape, sash, and beret finishing the ensemble, all fitting well. The smaller man, though, had to make do with a shirt heavily tucked into soft leather britches that were nearly pulled up to his ribs. A broad sash concealed just how far the pantaloons were pulled up. Most importantly the outfits allowed them to carry their weapons—Rulhor's large, curved sword carried in its baldric under the cape, and Omas' kukris within the sash. Various daggers were secreted in boots and belts. They left their bows hidden in the wardrobe.

"Well..." Omas started.

"Shall we?" Rulhor finished, and they strode from the room.

They followed the noises of celebration to a great hall, and it was here they joined in with the guests. In spite of their rough backgrounds, the two were not entirely unschooled in ways of decorum. They mingled and passably impersonated actual guests. They were growing quite smug in the success of their deception when they were surprised the clanging of a small gong.

"Honored guests," a crier announced, "we are fortunate for the friendship you give this house in helping celebrate the wedding of Arbiter Ossaiah Hozzek's daughter tonight. As is traditional, the ceremonies are private affairs; only a few will attend, then our dearest Daniela will be leaving us." Applause, coupled with sounds of pity for the father losing his daughter echoed about the great hall. Arbiter Hozzek stood to the side of the crier, an odd expression on his face, Omas observed. He didn't look like a man experiencing the bittersweet loss of his daughter to another. He looked more like someone with a dagger to his throat. A man in charcoal gray priest's raiment stood to the crier's other side. Something else struck Omas as odd.

"Why doesn't he mention the groom's name?" he asked Rulhor. "His arrival wasn't even announced."

"And," the big man said, "where is Daniela? Shouldn't she be here?"

"True, we haven't seen her all night—not that I want to—we'd probably catch hell's wrath for being here." Rulhor nodded, agreeing.

The crier bade everyone goodnight, and safe travels. The two friends looked at one another, puzzled, watching the guests filing from the house alone or in small groups. "Everyone was leaving, but since they weren't allowed to the ceremony anyway, why not stay and continue celebrating?" Omas thought.

"This is strange," he whispered. They moved with the crowd slowly, blending in, and slipped into a side chamber then bolted the door. "Even the servants are leaving.

Perhaps we should forget this whole thing—it's smelling weird to me.”

“You didn’t leave me in that cage, did you?” Rulhor said, reminding him of when they first met.

“Cayden’s piss,” Omas muttered. “Alright, we’ll look around when things have settled down.”

Later, after the guests and servants appeared to have gone, the two ventured out. The lanterns in the hall had been turned down, and all other illumination was extinguished, giving shadows sinister dominance. An eerie, utter silence reigned, making nerves taunt as lute strings. Their soft steps seemed to echo in the halls. With weapons positioned where they could easily be reached, the pair continued their exploration. Omas paused, holding up his hand.

“Rulhor, do you hear that!?” he whispered.

Rulhor coked his head, straining. “Yes—barely!”

It was the scream of a woman, faintly echoing further on. They ran toward the source. The screams rose and fell, becoming louder as they drew near a door within an older corridor. Rulhor reared back and kicked, snapping bolts from the jam. The door swung open, revealing a stairwell descending into darkness. Shrieks echoed up the stairs as the two men scrambled down to the bottom. A dim light at the end of a long stone hallway illuminated their path. They began to hear another sound, a low, rhythmic chant rising and falling in cadence with the screams. Drawing weapons, knuckles whitening on the grips, they rushed down the hall to a circular chamber...

...and emerged into a nightmare.

Daniela was screaming hoarsely, chained into a kneeling position on a low table, the links bolted to its surface. An open pit, fully a man’s height across, lay before her. A ring of braziers on its far side gave off an unholy glow. To her right was a priest in charcoal gray, leading the perpetrating chant. Her father stood on her left, his face betraying every bit of pain he should feel for doing this to his own flesh and blood, but he chanted as well. They both seized her arms to bring her to the pit, her screams becoming squeals of animal survival. “A bride, oh Hozzakel, freely given!” the priest yelled.

The friends surged forward, weapons ready. Omas moved to the priest, slashing expertly, his blades a haze of blurred steel. The man reeled, clutching his neck and hissing curses even as his life’s blood spurted through his fingers. Hozzakel saw and dodged to the side as Rulhor slashed and missed, the large sword whistling through the air. He fumbled for a blade, but the big swordsman was faster, swinging the pommel into Hozzakel’s chin with a meaty crunch. He screeched and fell, gripping his jaw, teeth and blood tumbling over his fingers.

The two stood back, measuring their handiwork. The priest was dead, his dark eyes staring into oblivion. Arbiter Hozzakel groaned, holding his bleeding face. They moved to help Daniela, who collapsed on the table shuddering for breath. “I, I’m so-so-sorry,” she sobbed. “I, I didn’t know, didn’t know...”

Omas stroked her hair as Rulhor tried to find the chain’s lock. “It will be alright now, we’re here, girl.”

“I’m sorry, Omas, Rulhor, I’m so sorry—I didn’t know it meant this. Gods,” she whimpered. “Every fifty years this happens. This is what really happens...a ‘private ceremony’, the bride always secretly leaving for Westcrown...” Her voice trailed off and she began sobbing again. Omas put his arm around her and stroked her hair.

“There’s a lock on the chains,” Rulhor hissed, cursing.

“Try the priest, maybe he has a key,” Omas said urgently.

Rulhor grunted in agreement. He stepped over to the priest’s body and began rooting through the bloody robes when a rumbling tremor briefly shook the room; it seemed to come from the pit.

“Hurry!” Omas yelled. Daniela started flailing from the pit but the chains held her firmly to the table.

“I got it!” Rulhor jumped up, brandishing a key and grasping at the lock.

“Good! Let’s—”

“Hold,” a deep voice rumbled, echoing from the pit and sounding of mauled kittens and collapsing stone. The two clutched their ears, senses reeling, and collapsed to the floor. Daniela’s mouth worked noiselessly, tongue lolling and eyes bulging in horror at hearing such an utterance. She threw herself against the chains and they clanged tightly, the table rocking from the force of her frantic spasms. The rumbling came again, more violently.

A column of bubbling crud and hopelessness lurched up from the pit, and with it came the stench of roses, lust and rotten flesh. It teetered for a moment, then flopped onto the table, covering Daniela completely and cutting off her sudden howl. The two men watched helplessly as the fetid mess slid back, taking Daniela and the table with it into the pit. “A bride,” the voice boomed, “freely given. The house of my flesh has earned its boon!” Blood welled from their eyes and ears at the sound of it, and they wailed as beaten children in their horror from facing such a thing. They thrashed on the stone floor, screaming and clutching their bloody faces until the tremors faded. Soon they rose to their feet, dazed and trying to make sense of what had happened. The groaning of Arbiter Hozzek was the only sound in the chamber.

The would-be rescuers looked at one another, picked up their weapons and staggered from the chamber, scrubbing at their bloodied faces with their cloaks. They made their way to the surface, their steps growing surer, and soon they were striding confidently into the light of a new morning.

Their mood was dark, though, and they did not talk. Their pace would not slow until they were well through the North Gate of Korvosa and, setting their backs to that city of mist and sin, they continued on, and would think of that place no more.

A FEAST TO REMEMBER

by William Dodds
Contest Winner 2nd Place,
Contest Ranking 4th



slapped my hand on the bar, barking laughter and coughing out lung-fulls of smoke. The men around me cackled along, trying to remain atop their barstools as assistant chef Bodairo pantomimed Lady Pentoray's strange and lewd flirtations.

"Chef Vondal, you certainly need to visit my garden. I pay outrageous prices to keep it lush and in full bloom. My gardener enjoys such a life, and the fruits are the juiciest and the berries are the tartest to be found within Absalom."

Bodairo batted his eyelashes at me, pretending to flutter a fan in front of his face. I wiped tears from my eyes and coughed the last wisps of smoke from my lungs. The rough hole-in-the-ground bar we were holding court in was poorly-lit, stank of sweat, smoke, and spilled beer. We loved it, even if the worst musician ever sat twanging away in the corner on a gittern missing half of its strings. I was surrounded by my kitchen workers, my Troglodytes, and we were drinking after our evening of serving merchants and lesser nobles high-class food at the Chelcedian. I was the Named Chef, running the kitchen and employing my most trusted workers, knife, and grill-men. My name and feats brought in the curious, the daring, and the rich. Their work kept them coming back again and again.

I leaned back against the bar as the trog squad all made suggestive comments and called for more alcohol. The barkeep Gogen sidled over, grinning in amusement as he ran a bottle of spirits across the hastily pushed forward row of glasses. Gogen was good people, for a half-orc. Gogen's Trick was located a few blocks away from the Chelcedian in the Merchant's Quarter of Absalom. We have been coming here long before Gogen had won the place (by trickery, of course), but the change of ownership didn't bother us. We liked his style.

This was a typical end to the week. We had knocked out over seventy high-quality meals that night, and had few complaints. Nobles and rich folk are picky and liked to whine. The Chelcedian's owner, Seret Valdus, was a genteel noble's son himself, and he generally knew how to deal with those kinds of people so I didn't have to, even when some overfed, finger-sucking fool demanded to give his compliments or complaints to the chef, excepting Lady Pentoray, unfortunately. She and Seret were grand friends, so I had to suffer her attentions.

I repacked my pipe and lit it with a tinder twig, passing the short stick to the others of the squad doing the same. I glanced over at the threesome that had come in some time after we did, and only one of them was drinking. I was still jumpy from the dinner service and had noticed them entering the bar shortly after us. Gogen had sent one of his spectacularly ugly waitresses over to get an order, and she had brought a glass of wine back to the trio, but nothing else. Considering the regular glances I was getting from at least two of them, I was betting they wanted to talk to me about something. The third burly figure was obviously a bodyguard for the well-swaddled man in the middle who occasionally sipped the terrible wine from the scarred table in front of him.

Seeing me give them a thorough look over, the fellow on the opposite side stood up and approached. He was unhealthily thin, as if the fat had been boiled away from beneath his drawn, pale skin. His hands flexed under the long cuffs as his eyes darted between the Trogs, who had all turned interested looks at the man encroaching on their drinking.

“Wizard,” I thought, noticing the heavy sleeves and adding that to the twitching, discolored fingers poking out from them.

“Are you the Chef Vondal Daine? If you are, my Lord would like to speak with you,” the wizard said.

The Trogs oooohed at me and whispered at each other. I gave the nervous wizard a lazy smile. “I am. Buy the boys a round and I’ll talk to your lord.”

The wizard blinked at me, and then reached into a pouch. The trogs grew quiet, and I could easily imagine their hands resting on their sharp hidden knives, ready to draw if he pulled a weapon or tried to cast something at us. It was simple gold he drew from the pouch though, and as it clinked onto the counter, they roared approval, calling for Gogen.

I stood up and bowed with a flourish, sauntering over to the table. I dropped into the chair in front of the supposed “Lord” and peered under the cowl that hid its owner from across the bar. A heavy-jawed face peered back at me, cheekbones jutting from layers of powdered fat; a nose that girls could only ignore for money dominated his face, and his mud-colored eyes rested in a nest of thick, pale wrinkles. When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly cultured and smooth, making him seem younger than his appearance.

“You are Master Chef Vondal Daine. The man who served princes poisonous flesh that tasted divine and made not one guest ill; the innovator of bunyip-head soup and who serves linnorm steaks as standard fare. You braved the wilds of Varisia to hunt and cook various types of linnorms to determine which one tasted best.”

I waved his compliments away. “Quit blowing smoke at me, stranger. What is it you want?”

He leaned forward and his eyes seemed brighter. A little drool collected at a corner of his mouth and I was suddenly leery of him.

“I have a commission for you, Vondal Daine. I want your services for an exclusive dinner I am planning for a select number of my fellow nobles. The fare for this feast will be, one could say, unique. Your talents would be called upon as never before.”

I smiled. “What haven’t I prepared already?”

The noble leaned back, face sinking back into his cowl. “We will be serving such delicacies as harpy and flank of centaur, with a dizzying array of side dishes with the most exotic ingredients money could buy. Our main course will be whole roasted

halfling.”

My stomach roiled at the thought. I can cook damn near anything if I had the right spices and ingredients, but the thought of carving up and serving other talking races made my stomach contract and smacked of the profane festivals of Urgathoa.

My face hardened and the bodyguard’s mailed fists creaked as he caught my change of demeanor.

“Not interested, you croaking boggard.”

The bodyguard made as if to surge to his feet, but the fleshy hand of the nobleman held him back with a touch. The noble smiled and chuckled, blinking rapidly before taking a sip of wine. He grimaced, having forgotten how bad it was. “I haven’t even made an offer to you. Why would you refuse when we haven’t even discussed gold?”

“I was raised by centaurs. My sister was a halfling. What does it matter? This isn’t some fetish-worshipping Kellid mud-town. I’m not serving food to chattering goblins. You can buy any damn thing over in the coins, but that doesn’t mean I’ll carve it up and cook it for you.”

The man’s smile slipped a little. “Twelve thousand gold for one night’s work, plus one hundred gold for each of your servants. You will never see this kind of offer again, I can assure you.”

I paused. That was a lot of money. I could fund another trip to Varisa, or upgrade my lodgings from the ratty rented flat to something nice, like a townhouse in the Ivy District. It was tempting.

Still, one had to have standards.

“Stick it, nosebeak.” I gave him a mean little smile.

The noble shook his head, mouth turned down as if he tasted something rotten. He stood to leave, and his bodyguard stood with him. He glanced at the wizard and the man’s hands twitched as he mumbled something. I felt a spell slide across my face, and the world began to fade at the corners for a moment, before it fortunately passed.

The wizard, his voice low and doubled as if he were whispering with two voices, murmured “You will forget we ever had this conversation.”

I smiled stupidly, “What conversation?”

The trio exited, with the bodyguard glancing meaningfully at me before they exited the bar. I maintained my blank smile until they left and it slipped into a scowl.

Bodairo took the few steps over to the table as I toyed with the stem of the barely-touched wine. His eyebrow cocked, “What was that about?”

I thought quickly, tapping a ragged nail on the thick wine glass. “Noble garbage, murder, and more gold than I’ll see in a year. I think I choose to be insulted. The wizard tried to cast a spell on me.”

The eyebrow dropped into a glaring position. “Do we need to follow them and pull a ‘Bloody Barber Special’ in an alleyway?”

I thumbed the butcher knife at my belt, its worn handle familiar as a lover’s skin. “Not yet. Get the Troglodytes out, though. I can’t be the last Named Chef he’ll try to get. Find out who else he talks to and anything we can find out about this nose-beaked noble and his special dinner.”

A couple days later I was in the bazaar, jostling between barkers and buyers, looking for my main course for the end-week when we do most of our business. I was at one of my favorite butchers, Arandov and Son, but unfortunately I was speaking to the ‘And Son’ side of the business. He did not seem to know much about his father’s wares. His bored glares and impudent service was annoying me. Arondov finally

hustled over, edging himself in front of his increasingly angry son. He reached out and clasped my hands, bobbing his head in feigned pleasure. “Vondal! Greetings, my friend! What can we do for you?”

I smiled broadly. “Arandov, it is a pleasure to work with you again! Many prayers to Sarenrae and Gozreh that you live to a ripe old age, for your son is a fool with half your knowledge and none of your charm.”

Arandov’s smile became strained and he bobbed his head again. “What can we offer the Chelcedian this fine morning?”

I checked wyvern steaks and chattered with Arandov about what he had for the offering as I pondered what should be the main courses over the following weekend services. Recipes and sauce concoctions whirred through my head as I constructed menus, juggling what produce was currently in season to what may pair with the wide array of meats Arandov and Son had to offer. The wyvern was certainly not ready for sale yet, and would need to be aged before grilling.

Bodairo came sidling through the crowd, and with a glance I knew he had some news for me. I said “One moment, good Arandov,” and leaned back towards my assistant. Bodairo muttered “The Pear and Hart is closed this Starday and Sunday.”

My mouth twisted in distaste. “Grogan Charl is head chef there, yes?”

Bodairo nodded, pursing his lips.

I shook my head. “I’ve always hated that Galtish bastard. I’m not surprised he’d take up the gold to cook a meal better served on Asmodeus’ table.”

Bodairo shrugged. He hated everybody equally.

“Any word on the noble Nosebeak?”

Bodairo shrugged again, scratching at the side of his face.

“Find one of Charl’s assistants and poke him until answers fall out.”

My chief assistant and procurer nodded, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

My eyes lit upon something special on Arandov’s cold board display and an idea surfaced, making a grin slither across my face. Oh yes, that will be fitting.

I turned fully towards Bodairo, “I have plan. We need one of those ‘special’ hats.”

Bodairo’s mismatched eyes met mine and a crooked smile hovered at the corners of his mouth. “One of them expensive Party Hats?”

My smile broadened. It was so nice to have someone who thought just like me.

“The very same.”

He clapped twice and minnowed his way into the crowd, snickering.

I spun back to Arandov. “My dear butcher, here’s what I need.” I rattled off my order. “And last but certainly not least, I need all of those,” I said, pointing at the rare and expensive selection that had caught my eye, “though you need to keep them cold for me. The Chelcedian’s cold storage can’t keep them at the right temperature. We will pick them up on Starday, yes? Don’t deliver them—I want them as fresh as possible.”

Arandov bobbed his head again, pleased at the large order I had just purchased. “It shall be done.”

I nodded. “Menus to be made, people to find, Arandov. Good day to you.”

I strode away, recipes flashing through my head, plans simmering.

Starday was the Feast.

Bodairo had found one of Charl’s grill men drunk in one of the many cruddy bars we cooks frequent, and managed to hustle him out the back before his fellows

realized he was gone. My trog squad tenderized him a bit before sticking him a few times to see what he knew. We keep our knives sharp, and it didn't take long before he was blubbering the full story to us.

Grogan Charl had requested personal time away from the Pear and Hart for those two days, leaving his crew unattended and foolishly out two days' pay. A well-paid and appreciated chef's crew was priceless and usually had more loyalty than any rabble street gang. It seems named chef Grogan Charl wanted all of Nosebeak's money to himself. Charl would be cooking alone, except for the nobleman's own kitchen staff.

That made things so much easier.

It had taken some bribes to the wine merchants to find out which noble houses were hosting intimate and expensive parties this day, but enough gold and promises of free dinners at the Chalcedian loosened their tongues. We named chefs have an easier time tonguing the suppliers for information. They liked to chat with important people. My trogs did the rest; they can get into places I cannot, talk to servants, slaves, and common folk.

Those of House Urduth were old money with nothing noteworthy in their current state, except their ability to keep afloat in the churning stew of Absalom lower-end nobility and evidently the occasional secret sick Feast like the one I had been invited to prepare for them.

Bodairo had completed his kidnapping mission the previous day, and would be meeting me later at House Urduth with my special selection from Arondov and Son. The rest of the trog squad would be nearby in case things went seriously wrong.

I arrived sometime after dawn, disguised in my invisible "Special Party Hat." Nobleman Fesk Urduth met me while consuming breakfast, and I had to force myself to relax. He didn't rise, and I bowed to him as he took a massive bite from the pastry he held in one chubby hand.

Mouth full, he warbled, "Chef Grogan Charl, I am extremely glad you have taken us up on our offer. We of the Grist Club are excited to taste your preparations, and hope that the staff we have provided to you will serve your needs. Ask Barbosk to see our 'guests of honor' before you begin." He tittered and indicated the mailed dark-skinned bodyguard I had seen at our first meeting.

"Of course, my Lord. I am eager to begin preparations. I have some ingredients being delivered later and closer to serving time for the freshest taste possible."

The words tumbled from my mouth in the voice of Grogan Charl and left an oily aftertaste. I resisted the urge to adjust my special cap which gave me the guise of the umber-haired Galtish Chef and instead bowed a second time. I indicated for Barbosk to lead the way.

The hulking guardsman took me towards the center of the manse and I glanced back to see the corpulent Nobleman shovel another pastry into his maw. Shreds of flaky crust covered his chest. I was looking forward to later even more. Barbosk took me to the kitchen, where the staff was lined up for my approval. They were a thoroughly beaten down set of slaves, with all emotion obviously drained from them over their years of servitude. To my surprise, the kitchen was in good working order and relatively clean, with a fire stoking in the oven and the scent of the morning's baking still in the air.

Barbosk impassively took me down beneath the kitchen to the cold room. Many noble houses had them these days, as it kept meats and produce fresher for longer,

allowing a wider range of foodstuffs to be served. The cold-boxes were a thriving trade for the wizards who crafted them. I passed the butchery stall and paused. Hanging upside down were several haunches of what looked initially like horse, but I realized it was the dappled hides of Varisian centaur. I forced myself not to react, as I knew Barbosk was watching me. I leaned close, smelling the flesh and testing the firmness with pinching fingers. "How long has it been aging?"

Barbosk shrugged. "We had to kill it a week ago. Damn near escaped and trampled two slaves. Broke another guard's leg. Centaurs are a rough bunch."

I nodded. "Better that way. Aged meat is much better than fresh in most cases," I said, revolting inside.

Barbosk stared at me placidly then turned away to open a locked door. As soon as the heavy iron-shod door opened, I heard the whistling screech of the harpy, though garbled.

I followed the guard in and looked at the cages surrounding. The harpy was in one, fluttering and straining at the leather ties that kept her limbs spread apart. She twisted and screamed, and I realized that her tongue had been cut out, removing her ability to enthrall with her song. Shivering in two separate cages were two halflings, ears and heads wrapped in heavy wool and sackcloth. They stared at us with desperate eyes and clutched the cage bars with poorly wrapped hands. Despite the circumstance, they seemed rather healthy physically, though being kept in a cold room caged near a furious and maimed harpy might have already driven them into madness.

I chuckled at the irony of the last potential Feast victim, remembering my first conversation with Fesk Urduth. A flaccid boggard hung from hooks at the end of the room. Barbosk looked at me curiously and I pointed at the boggard. "Might as well toss that. Once those things die, their bodies decay quickly. I can't produce anything from it." Though the thought of serving the florid Urduth a taste of his nearest physical cousin did appeal to me, I wasn't about to experiment with rubbery boggard flesh.

I got busy in the kitchen, preparing vegetables, selecting ingredients from Fesk Urduth's incredibly well-stocked pantries. It was a dream kitchen, to be honest. If only I were not preparing a feast of horrors, I would have enjoyed myself more.

Eel pies were prepared, to be baked at the last minute so their wriggling interiors would erupt at the touch of a knife into the fragile pastry crust. Skewers of lark's tongue and adder's belly were among the appetizers, with a rich tomato-fox tripe stew for the soup course. Tiny candied skeletons of tit-mice suspended in a cube of glossy gelatin were prepared for a mid-course refresher, the tiniest hint of venom for a kick of verisimilitude. The haunch of centaur I had no choice but to prepare, for it had to broil long and be regularly basted. I just kept telling myself that it was horse.

When the wizard stepped into the kitchen, I was carefully preparing a presentation of steamed miniature mantraps, each filled with a delicate stuffing of summer squash, goat cheese, and Mwangi leopard meat and arranged to look as if the plant were growing out of the presentation pan. I had dreaded seeing the skeletal magic-user again, and desperately hoped the charm I wore would protect me and hide the party hat's magic as was advertised. The twitchy and painfully thin man observed my work for a moment and I stood back for him to look at the faux-mantrap plant. Held low but prepared for use, the butcher's knife quivered in my hand. I longed to use it, but it was not the time.

The wizard sniffed, looked at me with bored blood-shot eyes, and left the kitchen

after taking a loaf of freshly baked rosemary bread. I began breathing again, and noticed the rest of the kitchen staff relaxing perceptibly too. He obviously unnerved them as well.

I laughed shakily and waved them back to work as I finished the dish.

Bodairo arrived at the appointed time, his arms full of “last minute ingredients.” Barbosk led him in, obviously not recognizing the—for once—clean and well-shaven man. Bodairo whistled at the well-appointed kitchen and I bade him to put the ingredients where I needed them. He went downstairs with the special packets he had prepared and quickly returned, shivering from the cold room and the hideous garbled shriek of the harpy.

“The halflings are prepared, sir.”

I nodded and gave him some instructions. He hopped to it and we began serving the appetizers.

The Grist Club was utterly unexceptional. A collection of bored rich people with too much money and leanings towards the macabre, they were universally either rotund or bone-thin. Comprised of male and female, some were old while others eager and young. The wizard sat to his master’s right side. The collection of feasters represented a crosscut of the lower nobility of Absalom, and I detested them all.

They slobbered through the appetizers, chattering to each other of the nuances of flavor and depth. The soup course was less of a success, but tripe usually was of bovine, aurochs, or swine. I had never before prepared fox tripe. The mantrap was resoundingly applauded as I sliced the plant apart and served, and they giggled like school children over the gelatinous cubes I had created, crunching on mouse bones and lauding each other over consuming the fatal acids of the course.

I smiled and bowed through their unctuous praise.

“Good Lords and Ladies, I have prepared a most difficult presentation of a dish you will certainly remember for the rest of your lives. While the main course is marinating and before the roast centaur flank is to be served, I wish to present to you something quite special. Allow me to serve each of you, but I ask one indulgence: that you all taste the delicate breast at the same time.”

Fesk Urduth, face red and sweating from the hint of venom, asked “Breast of what? I ordered no fowl and serving duck or chicken to us would be an insult to this fine Feast you have prepared already.”

I bowed. “My lord, allow me to bring it to you first.”

I returned to the kitchen, where Bodairo fussed over the platter of poached pale faintly green breasts, swimming in a butter and lemon sauce. He laid sprigs of dill along the edge as I shaved thin curls of red truffle on the platter.

“The Squad is in the garden,” he murmured, placing the golden platter in the rolling serving tray.

“Remember your part,” I hissed, and Bodairo smirked, one finger tapping his serving tunic.

We trundled out the serving tray and I delicately placed the filleted breast upon Fesk’s plate, squeezing a drizzle of lemon as I served. Bodairo went up one side of the table and I, the other, serving each of the guests. I haughtily ignored the eager demands to explain the dish, and playfully slapped a fork from someone’s fingers when they went to taste it before Fesk Urduth. “Not yet, please, my Lords and Ladies. Do not insult your host by eating before him.” The corpulent man preened under the attention, until I was back next to him. Bodairo went back near the wall,

near Barbosk.

“My esteemed nobles, allow me to present to you breast of cockatrice, lightly poached in butter and lemon, with shaved red truffle and dill.”

There was a sharp inhalation from many mouths, and Urduth looked at me angrily. “Do you intend to poison us, Charl?”

My eyes widened. “No, Lords. This dish is perfectly safe, I assure you. I will even taste my Lord Urduth’s dish prior to you all!” I used an unattended fork and gently took a slice of the cockatrice breast, dipping it into the sauce and popping it my mouth. I chewed lustily and swallowed.

“My Lords, is this not a Feast of experimentation—of danger? I assure you, it is perfectly safe.”

The nobles fell upon it with relish as I stepped back from the table. I looked to Bodairo as he shoved the long knife up under Barbosk’s arm once, twice. The man gasped, reaching for his weapon, and the two of them tumbled to the ground.

The nobles took no notice though, for they all were gasping and twitching as their bodies’ muscles contracted and held them in a rictus pose.

I doffed my hat and the guise of Chef Grogan Charl disappeared, leaving my own charming face. Fesk Urduth’s eyes were flickering in my direction as he spasmed in his seat. His wizard shoved away from the table, raising his fingers as a spell began stuttering from his lips, but I was faster. My chef’s knife easily slid through his robes, punching through his lung and pinning him to his chair. He coughed, trying to gasp out the spell, but my second longknife finished him. I had expected him to be prepared for poison.

I turned back to Fesk Urduth and slid his plate over to me, cutting another pale slice of cockatrice.

“I’m sorry, my Lord, I lied to you. There was no adder venom in the cube. It was cockatrice spittle.”

I took another bite of the prepared dish, savoring the earthy quality of the truffles combined with the mineral hint of the breast meat.

“While this dish is perfectly safe, combining the spittle with the flesh of the beast produces a reaction not unlike petrification. I have spent years studying how to prepare and serve odd dishes like this. I have also supplied your halfling course with lock picks and daggers, and by now they have silenced that foul harpy forever. They likely are already gone. Do not worry though, you will all pass away from lack of air soon enough. No knives will be necessary.”

I removed the blades from the wizard, wiping them callously on the silk table linens.

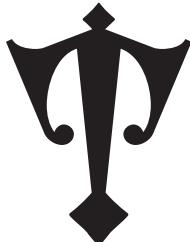
I bowed to the dying nobles and tipped my head to Urduth.

“Truly, this has been a feast to remember. I bid you all a swift trip to the hells.”

Bodairo and I exited the silent room.

RAIN OF REDEMPTION

by Neil Spicer
Contest Winner 1st Place
Contest Ranking 1st



he wet branches and tangled undergrowth of Backar Forest slowed Ella as she ran, snagging at her muddy tabard and catching on the crossbow strapped to her back. Her breath came in short, ragged gasps as she paused to free herself. Although the sharp briars pricked her fingers, she ripped free and pushed on, her heavy steps churning the mud underfoot until she finally broke from the thicket. A shower of dislodged rain further soaked her hair, following the blonde curls wetly stuck to her face and bringing the taste of her own tears to her mouth. Despite the rising fear in the pit of her stomach, the girl's senses felt sharper and more alive than ever. As she ran, she could smell the scent of pine on the damp breeze, the earth and leaves of the forest floor, and even the wet leather and metal buckles of the straps holding her armor and weapons in place. All a stark reminder she still lived. And yet, behind her, she could also hear the delight of the ghouls pacing her over the rain, tirelessly closing in, ready to feed on her flesh, or worse—make her one of their own.

With that thought spurring her on, Ella sprinted down a little-used game trail, her hopes lifting as she made faster progress. The path led downward, towards the gorge and river, where she hoped to quickly cross, despite the flood—anything to put an obstacle between her and the undead. But she misjudged the steep descent in the fading light. Her left foot suddenly slipped on the angled hillside, sliding through a layer of rain-slick pine needles that sent her crashing to the ground. Her momentum rapidly carried her downhill, bursting through the treeline and over the edge of a high ridge overlooking the flood waters of the swollen Nosam River, thirty feet below.

Awash in a mudslide, Ella grabbed for anything to slow her fall down the sharp embankment. She blindly latched onto a thin sapling ten feet down, but the grip twisted her shoulder at an awkward angle against the hard edge of her breastplate, bringing her to a painful, jarring stop. Something popped in her shoulder, wrenching an anguished cry from her lips, audible even over the churning water below. Along with the noise of her descent, it clearly alerted her pursuers. Ella could already hear them scrabbling down the same muddy slope, but with far more caution than she could have spared. Hanging from the trunk of the sharply-bent tree, she braced herself against the embankment and looked up at three sets of feral, red eyes gleaming in the

dark. The indrawn hiss of their laughter made sport of her predicament, but one of the ghouls already picked its way down the slope to reach her.

Looking down, Ella debated letting go and taking a chance on swimming for the other side, but she knew her armor would weigh her down. And, tired as she'd become, she'd only drown in the strong current as the river claimed her. Holding on with her injured arm, she reached down to free the mace belted at her waist, preparing to defend herself as the ghoul drew closer. She could already smell its carrion stink, despite the heavy downpour. A grin of eagerness spread across its face when it spied her arming herself, almost as if the ghoul relished her defiance. Like a pack of wolves, the others circled around to the other side, lowering themselves through the remaining saplings with an unearthly grace they could never have managed when alive.

“Get away!” Ella shouted, trying to summon enough courage and intensity to make the ghouls hesitate or back off. But they weren’t so easily dissuaded. One of the monsters paused to gnaw through a short tree limb, holding it as a makeshift weapon while the others drew near. Initially, Ella didn’t understand the threat until the first ghoul reached for her. She swung her mace to drive it back, but the other thrust the splayed tree branch to blind and impede her. Ella batted it aside just in time to see the third reaching for her wounded arm in an attempt to pull her up. Her adrenaline surged as she swung again, smashing the creature’s claw against a rock with a satisfying crunch of bone. The ghoul gnashed its teeth in pain and pulled away, its hateful eyes promising a much worse retribution when they claimed her.

“There is no escape, priestess.” The first ghoul hissed the words in the common-tongue. “We’ll have our fill even if you fall. Water cannot drown us, so we don’t fear the river. We’ll find your body no matter where it lies.” Ella stared back at the ghoul, a frantic terror starting to take root as she grappled with the certainty of her death. She couldn’t deny the ghoul’s words. They would have her one way or another. She looked down at the raging water again, imagining a death by drowning to be preferable to the claws and teeth of such monsters. At least if they found her lifeless body, she’d be beyond caring.

As she leaned out over the river and prepared to let go, a key-shaped pendant slipped free from her tunic and breastplate, suspended from a gold chain around her neck. It gleamed with a permanent radiance, provided on the day she passed her final rites and became a faithful acolyte of Abadar. The holy symbol inexorably drew her eyes, mocking her final moments.

“Please don’t abandon me! Not now...not like this...” she pleaded. But the words sounded hollow, even in her own ears. Her sin locked her away from her god. The justiciars had told her so. And the Master of the First Vault would never again hear her prayers. After all, it was *she* who abandoned *him*, forsaking her vows to steal from the church treasury. In the eyes of his Lawgiver she was nothing more than a common thief now. And if she wanted to change that, she’d have to undo her crime.

The ghouls leaned in again. She could smell their growing stink as they swayed back and forth, perched on bowed saplings like ever-patient vultures. They would come from both sides now. She had no way to fight them off.

And then she heard the growl. Not from one of the ghouls. But an animal growl, like that of a dog or wolf. She looked up in unison with her attackers at the ridgeline. In the weak light, she made out the figure of not only a large dog, but also a man. His bow thrummed, and one of the ghouls jerked under the impact of an arrow buried in its chest all the way to the black fletching. The beast lost its grip on the tree and

plummeted into the river. Seizing the opportunity, Ella pushed off from the bank, using her own bowed sapling to swing herself into another of her tormentors. The ghoul never saw her coming. She lashed out with both feet, connecting solidly with its midsection. The monster held on, but the added force of Ella's blow uprooted its small tree. The sapling tore away from the eroded hillside, dumping the ghoul into the river before it could drag her along.

With a snarl, the last of the ghouls—the one who'd spoken—began scrambling up the slope in an attempt to reach the newcomer. The man's dog positioned itself to intercept the monster, delaying the ghoul long enough until another arrow found its mark. It wasn't a killing shot, but the ghoul recognized it couldn't overpower the rescuers in time. With a gleam in its eye, it turned instead for Ella again, launching itself to take them both into the river. But Ella saw it coming. She pushed off again, swinging her tree in the other direction. The ghoul sailed past, reaching out to mark her cheek with a dirty claw before disappearing into the flood. The scratch stung and began to burn, making her muscles go rigid and lock in place. The paralysis tightened her wounded arm's grip on the sapling. But, much like the ghoul she'd attacked, her tree started to uproot from her abuse, lowering even further towards the river. She heard the man call out above, probably urging her to climb higher or switch to another tree. But she had no way to respond. The sapling pulled free and she dropped into the roaring dark.



Ella felt the warmth of the fire before she opened her eyes. Its radiating heat seeped into her tired muscles, encouraging her to lie still while it dried her out for what seemed like the first time in days. The dog alerted its master when she finally sat up. She looked from its bared teeth to the lattice framework of pine boughs arching overhead, a well-made lean-to situated on a forested hillside. The crude structure shielded the fire and her borrowed bedroll from the continuing rain, leaving her, the dog, and a moderate pile of firewood as dry as the current circumstances would allow.

Outside, her rescuer approached through the rain. He wore a leather *jorpa* over his armor, an unusual, single-piece garment treated to ward off the rain, providing a hood for the head and lace-able openings along the sides to keep the arms free. Ella had seen such coats exported by merchants from the Sodden Lands, but never expected to see one in the forests of Molthune. Of course, given the near-steady rain of the past few weeks, it seemed far more practical than her tabard, which she suddenly realized had gone missing along with her armor and clothes.

"You took my things?" The accusation sounded worse than intended, but she drew the borrowed bedroll closer anyway.

"It seemed best. You were wounded. And chilled to the bone, too. Only way to dry you out." He ducked inside the lean-to, nudging aside the dog to make room for his tall frame as he took a seat. "I apologize for the accommodations. Rue and I weren't expecting company. I'm Zieke, by the way."

She noticed his ears when he drew back the hood. A half-elf, and a moderately handsome one at that. In happier times, she might have admired his blue eyes, close-trimmed beard, and hard-set jaw. "I'm Ella. Ella Serramin of Canorate," she replied. "Do you know what happened?"

“You tell me. It’s a bit odd to find a follower of Abadar chased by a pack of ghouls in the wilderness. I hardly see your kind outside the city.”

“They aren’t just ghouls. They were bandits once. I knew them, but they have no memory of it now. A man named Mever used to lead them. Still does, I suspect. He’s wanted for the theft of several plates from the church treasury three years ago. Each one’s made of gold and carved with the stories of human civilization as far back as the Age of Enthronement. They’re priceless.”

“You’re a justiciar then? An inquisitor? Bent on punishing the wicked even to undeath, if necessary?”

“It is necessary, especially since they’re undead.”

“Well, I won’t fault you for that.” Zieke reached out to scratch the dog behind its ears. “Folks usually concern themselves more with the fey out here, but those ghouls have caused more than their share of problems, too. Me and Rue started tracking them after they killed a bunch of homesteaders in the foothills a month ago. Gruesome stuff. Ate every last one of the poor souls. Slowly, too. Kept them penned up in the root cellar, taking them one by one, and a piece at a time, from what I could tell...”

Ella grew quiet as she imagined a similar fate if the ghouls had captured her. But Zieke had prevented that. She owed him her life. She stared hard at the popping fire and then back into the dark.

“How’d you keep me from drowning?” She quietly asked the question without looking at him, afraid he might see in her eyes the willingness she’d felt to give herself to the river.

“That big one almost carried you with him. Knocked your tree loose. You fell another ten feet, then hit your head on some exposed rock and got tangled up in a patch of briars. I had a hell of a time getting you out of there.”

“Thank you.” The words were simple and sincere, but she struggled to believe them herself. In some ways, it would have been easier if she’d drowned rather than struggle on.

“Happy to help.” Zieke nodded as he pulled the pine needles from a small sprig and absently tossed them one by one into the rain outside their shelter. “I may not worship Abadar, but I follow the teachings of Erastil. And there’s a fair amount of cooperation between Old Deadeye and the City-Dweller. Seems like we have the same quarry, too. You know where these ghouls make their lair, I take it?”

“I do.”

“Good. Let’s put you back together. Then, Rue and I’ll tag along to make sure you don’t get in over your head again.” He offered the last statement with a wink meant to encourage her, but Ella only felt numb.

“How’d you track them?” he asked.

“Luck, I guess...”

“That’s some kind of luck in this rain. Mind if I ask something else?”

Ella looked back at him, afraid he may have read more into her situation than she realized. But he held a golden-headed crossbow bolt in his hand, turning it over as he examined it. She immediately recognized it from her gear. The tip bore distinctive runes denoting Abadar’s justice.

“What’s this for?” Zieke asked.

“It’s a deadbolt,” Ella spoke true, “so-called because it’s meant for one purpose: the permanent execution of a criminal as judged by a follower of Abadar’s law.”

“You plan on using this against that Mever fella?”

“It’s my chosen duty and assigned task.” The answer sounded good. It was the right thing to say. It seemed to satisfy him, and Ella was glad she didn’t have to explain the other reason she carried it. Because, if she failed to kill Mever and reclaim the temple treasure, she meant to use the deadbolt on herself—fired from her own crossbow in one last act of penance.



They broke camp two days later, after Ella fully recovered. She could tell Zieke didn’t buy her inability to heal herself. Everyone knew, after all, that Abadar’s clergy held some measure of power to cure the ill and mend the wounded. Most carried a certain stigma for charging the commonfolk for such boons. Ella lied again, telling him she’d prayed for guidance instead, focusing on ensuring their success against Mever rather than wasting such power on healing herself. He accepted the explanation with the same stoic expression as everything else she shared, but he seemed more distant now—less trusting. She couldn’t blame him. She would’ve felt the same if their positions were reversed.

At least Rue liked her now. And, truthfully, the dog had lifted her spirits over the past two days, reminding her of the pup her family raised before moving to the city. He had a nose for tracking, too, an amazing feat given the amount of rain and washed-out sign. But they didn’t need Rue to find Mever. Ella had seen his hideout before, running to him right after robbing the church. That was when he’d cast her out, turning on her as soon as the gold plates passed into his hands. Mever had promised they’d sell them and use the money to leave Molthune, to travel the world and celebrate their love. How young and naïve she’d been. How stupid. He never cared for her.

“Is that it?” Zieke pointed at a copse while Rue sniffed the trail ahead. Lightning had long ago split the hillside’s oldest tree, a marker Mever had used to identify the caves his men used after each raid. The main opening lay about fifty yards down slope, facing away from them so they couldn’t see it unless they walked straight down. They’d purposefully chosen to get upwind of the cave on a higher elevation. That way, if the ghouls came out, they’d have to turn around and come uphill to reach them. Hopefully, that would slow them down enough to pick off a few before they closed the distance.

“Yeah, that’s the one.” Ella unstrapped her crossbow and loaded it with a quarrel dipped in holy water. She saved the deadbolt for later. Mever would have plenty of gang members left. And he never failed to let others take risks before exposing himself.

“You ready?”

She took a deep breath and nodded, covering Zieke with her crossbow while he approached the tree. The half-elf dragged a freshly-killed deer with him as Rue trailed behind, ready to warn his master if anything emerged from the cave. It took several tense moments for him to hang the deer and tie off the rope. Then, he and Rue hurried back to join her.

“Guard,” Zieke commanded, and the dog took up a vigilant watch in the undergrowth while they pulled back another thirty feet to separate and hide among the taller trees. Zieke readied his longbow, its recurved ends belying the strength it took to actually nock an arrow.

“You sure he’ll be okay down there?” Ella worried over Rue’s exposure.

“He’ll be fine. That dog can handle himself. Trust me.”

It didn’t take long. The wind shifted, bringing with it more clouds, but thankfully only a light mist started falling. The breeze carried the deer’s fresh scent into the ravine and past the cave. Two figures soon emerged, hunched and bent, shuffling in that same awful gait Ella recognized from her flight through the forest. They hissed and warily started up the hill, clearly interested in the fresh kill left for them. But they were far from mindless. They could sense a trap and looked beyond the corpse at the surrounding forest, curious of who would dare leave such a gift on their doorstep.

Ella’s jaw tightened as she kept the leader in her sights. They had agreed to always target the closest until they killed each one. While the first kept coming in their direction, its partner stared up at the tree as if hesitating to climb or call the others to feed. Caution won over greed and it barked out a guttural chatter of syllables to alert the rest of Mever’s crew. Four more ghouls emerged, sniffing at the air.

Six now.

Ella didn’t like the odds. She took her eyes off the leader to glance at Zieke, but the half-elf seemed resolute, still staring at his target. She renewed her aim as well, her heart beating faster. The lead ghoul covered another twenty yards in their direction while the others milled around the tree, examining the rope and preparing to cut it.

“Ready...” Zieke whispered. “Three...two...one...”

His counting helped steady her nerves like the enumerations recited by her fellow priests in the treasury. They fired in unison and both shots flew true. The sharp impacts lifted the ghoul off its feet, killing it before it hit the ground.

A shriek of outrage came from the others and the pack scattered, taking cover among the trees. Ella worked to quickly wind her crossbow’s winch, fumbling with shaky hands to place another bolt in the tiller. She heard Zieke fire again and looked up to see one of the ghouls charging their position, weaving in an effort to throw off their aim. Zieke’s arrow pierced its leg, slowing it down, but it kept limping forward. Ella snapped her crossbow back into position and fired. Too hasty. The bolt sailed wide and skittered off a tree.

“Take your time,” Zieke encouraged, nocking another arrow. He fired again and staggered the ghoul, this time with a direct hit to the chest. But still it crawled forward, angrily gnashing its teeth with an eagerness to reach them.

The others finally sensed they had greater numbers, for they burst from the copse in a sudden rush. Before Ella could reload again, the crawler disappeared into the undergrowth ahead of them. She heard Rue rip into it, savagely thrashing through the fallen leaves. She raised her crossbow again, sighting more carefully this time. Another arrow from Zieke impacted on the lead runner and she adjusted as it righted itself to keep moving. Her shot punched straight through its skull, bowling it over in a lifeless sprawl on the muddy slope.

Realizing she wouldn’t get off another shot before they reached her, Ella cast aside the crossbow, picking up her shield and readying her mace instead. Zieke kept firing, wounding another as she stepped forward to meet them. The first ghoul bodily crashed into her, held back by her shield and the better leverage of the high-ground. Its claws attempted to scrabble past the edges of her defense, but Ella pushed back and swung an overhand blow, bruising the crown of its head. It dropped to the ground like a stone and Rue quickly rushed past to hold it down. She turned her attention to the next one, but it danced out of reach, circling around so its partner could have

her back. Even so, she kept on the offensive with several short blows on the crafty strategist, leaving the other to Zieke. Behind her, the half-elf fired again and again with wicked precision, until she heard it drop. The last one didn't stand a chance. She bashed it with her shield to throw it off balance and then took it to the ground with a well-placed strike for its knee. One more bone-shattering crunch ended its struggle, and she rose up to catch her breath. Distant thunder rumbled overhead and the rain picked up, pinging sharply off her breastplate and shield.

"Such glorious combat for a shieldmaiden. Abadar must be proud...assuming he still cares about you, Ella."

Her eyes widened as she recognized Mever's voice. Another ghoul stood by the cave, bigger and more monstrous than the rest. He carried the golden treasury plates under his arm, and she could make out her lover's features beneath the greenish cast of his long-dead flesh. Sharp fangs and a long tongue hung from his mouth, his hair and beard scraggly and dark in the rapidly pouring rain.

"I figured you'd come back..."

Mever laughed at her surprise. "Your conscience wouldn't let you stay away, would it? Even after running home, I bet you worried about your part in our crime, didn't you? Especially after they told you what would happen to us. Because they told you about the curse, right? About what the rest of us would become? All because they wanted to protect their precious plates. Did you think I wouldn't realize what happened or why? That I'd forget my old life? The curse *makes* us remember, Ella, to punish us so we can't forget our crime. And you can thank your god...your Master...for that. I've had a long time to think about it...about you...and what we did. And I think you of all people should share in this curse."

Ella retrieved the deadbolt from the quiver at her belt. "How about I share this with you instead?"

"Ah, the proper execution of justice." Mever smiled. "But which will it be? Yours or mine? With a simple bite, I'll carry out my punishment on you. But how do you expect to use yours on me? What are you going to do? Throw it at me?"

Ella looked back at her crossbow, still several feet away. She hadn't even wound the winch yet. "Shoot him!" she shouted to Zieke as she turned and scrambled up the hillside. The half-elf fired his bow, but Mever raised one of the golden plates to easily deflect his shot.

"Thank you for bringing someone else into this," Mever called, charging up the hill and closing the distance much faster than the others. "Once you're like me, we can savor his flesh together, Ella!"

"Rue!" Zieke called out and the big dog launched itself to intercept him. Before it reached the ghoul, however, Mever threw one of the plates, hurling it towards the dog's master. The heavy disc smacked Zieke in the forehead, knocking him to the ground in a daze. With a growl, Rue leaped forward, biting Mever's forearm, but the ghoul sank his own teeth through the dog's heavy coat, shaking it off until he could bodily lift the animal and hurl it into a nearby deadfall. Rue landed awkwardly with a startled yelp, impaled on the tree's broken branches.

"No!" Ella cried, furiously working the crossbow's winch to draw back the lathe.

Mever walked further uphill, approaching Zieke as he started to rise. But the half-elf recognized the threat too late. Mever kicked him hard in the head, knocking him out cold.

"Well, that didn't take long. Just you and me now, Ella."

The priestess finally drew the pin in place, fumbling with the deadbolt as Mever leapt for her. He extended his arm just as she seated the gold-tipped quarrel. But before she could fire, he knocked the crossbow aside. The deadbolt fell out and her weapon triggered harmlessly as it hit the ground. With his other claw, Mever grabbed Ella's breastplate and shoved her hard against the tree. Rain streamed down both their faces as he towered over her.

“The rain of redemption.” He tasted the air with his long tongue and then licked her neck like a snake about to strike. “You brought me this curse. Now it's time you had your share of it.”

“I didn't know about the curse!” She struggled, but couldn't break free. “You brought it on yourself by keeping the plates! It's *your* fault we stole them. And you shunned me the minute you had them. If you hadn't sent me away I'd already be like you!”

“Then welcome back.” His fangs parted in a menacing smile. The sight of it sickened her and Ella angrily smashed her forehead into his ugly face. The blow loosened his grip on her armor, and she shoved him back as they both collapsed to the ground. Suddenly free, the priestess desperately crawled away, her breath fogging the cold air as she pushed through the mud. The gleam of the deadbolt caught her eye and she reached for it just as Mever latched onto her ankle. His claws dug deep, drawing an agonized cry from her lips. And her muscles started tightening again, but this time she fought it off.

“You can't keep running from this, Ella! It's what you deserve!” Mever snarled as he violently pulled himself on top of her, “And if Abadar's going to make me like this...I'm sure he's got something extra special in store for you....”

Ella rolled over beneath him. “Not for me,” she told him, “for *you*!” She jammed the deadbolt between his fangs, skewering his tongue and driving it deep. The weapon's runes triggered in a wash of golden light, blazing outward and spreading into cracks of radiance across his ghastly face. When it faded, Ella pushed his charred remains aside and kicked free of his final embrace.



“What happened?” Zieke opened his eyes and reached for the knot on his head.

“It's done.”

“Where's Rue? I saw him get thrown...”

“Over there.” Ella looked sadly at the broken animal now lying in the mud.

“Is he okay?” Zieke closed his eyes again, fearing the worst.

“He will be.” She said the words with a confidence and conviction she hadn't felt in a long time. “With your help, I atoned for my mistake. Abadar will hear me again. He has to...”

She helped him to his feet and together they knelt by the loyal dog. Ella placed her hands on his furry coat and closed her eyes in prayer.

Rogue Ascendant

by John C. Rock
Contest Ranking 8th

N

ight's black shroud covered Absalom, but the moon escaped dark clouds long enough to spill silver light over the fine elven woman on the bed beside Cyon. Watching the light and shadow dance across her pearlescent skin, he wondered if he could ever bend the world to his whims.

Nestled under the sloping eaves of one of the many Ivy District taverns, the tiny room was sweltering from the heat below. Thin silvery-grey coils of smoke—tobacco and dreamweed both—came along with the heat. Snaking through cracks in the rough wooden floorboards, smoke pooled into a mildly intoxicating cloud just below the rafters.

The small round window was wide open; a cool breeze crept into the peaked room, its chill fingers brushed lightly on sweaty flesh. As the breeze wandered the room, the haze stirred and lazily brushed across the two elves, each of whom took long, deep breaths. The air carried a light jasmine scent, with undertones of alcohol, oiled leather, harsh steel, and fading sweat.

Blurred into the haze were snippets of laughter and broken fragments of dialogue. Kelish and Osiriani drifted up as local merchants, mercenaries, nobles, bards, and artists all attempted to talk over each other. Cyon drifted through their words absently, his attention trapped by the lithe, honed, and battle-proven figure of the female form next to him.

She reached up and ruffled his short, spiky hair with her long slender fingers. The ruffled strands held a hue between blue and true black, with occasional shots of grey that matched his eyes. Imarra's fine index finger ran down the side of Cyon's cheek, along the line of his jaw, and then dropped to his chest. Light as the breeze and nearly translucent in the moonlight, her pale fingers skimmed over his much darker skin.

Jagged scars, some long, some short, appeared as bright silver slashes. She traced each one carefully, lingering on the bigger, deeper ones, her glacier blue eyes trailing her hand.

"So many," her soft Elven syllables flowed gently into his ear. Her head rested on Cyon's shoulder, her leg twined over him, her chest and hip resting against his. Even in the room's heat her breath was warm, but her tone chilled like winter's frost, "You're getting careless."

JOHN C. ROCK

“Oh?” he laughed.

“You are.” She grazed his cheek lightly with her lips, a passing kiss before lowering her head to his chest. “Delusions of divinity don’t grant immortality.”

She sighed and Cyon felt her head lift. Peeking one eye open, he found her blue irises watching him. Her thin face was oval and angular, with sharp cheekbones. Her wide almond-shaped eyes were the color of deep glacial ice, large enough to get lost in. Her dark burgundy hair flowed freely, cascaded onto his cheek, and then teased across his neck as she hovered over him. “Poor little fool,” she chided.

Cyon opened both of his eyes and stared into hers. Moonlight played with the clouds above, and her fine, angular features were exposed in fragments of light and deeper shadow. His breath caught before he let it out.

“Inquisitor Imarra, is this professional advice,” his words were hushed but gently mocking, “or personal concern?”

“Purely professional.” She raked her polished nails across his chest, scratching thin red lines into his flesh. Cyon’s skin tensed but he didn’t move. “But you are my most beloved toy.” Imarra’s laughter was almost a purr, and Cyon felt as much as heard it.

Imarra pushed herself up on one elbow and looked into his eyes. “Why,” the hand on his chest paused over his heart, “does this thing beat just for me now? Am I the lucky one to finally melt the wintry lump cowering behind the scars?”

Her hand slid across his chest, seized his right hand, turned it over, and brought it up before his face. A large and realistic wasp hovered in the crook of his thumb and forefinger. “I thought you planned to leave this mortal mess behind. Aren’t you going to carve your way into history, storm the Ascendant Court, vault the gaping chasm, challenge the Starstone, succeed where thousands fail,” Imarra narrowed her eyes, “and then leap directly into her bed to become her pet?” She released his hand, and smiled coyly at him. “Or did I break you of that little dream?”

Cyon kept his hand up, staring at the exquisitely tattooed wasp. “Stare long enough and the wings flicker into flight, the head turns, and its black eyes seek your own.” Imbued with magic, it stood upon his skin instead of dwelling flat within it. “It has the illusion of life and always seems close to being free, but it never flies away.”

Cyon rubbed at the wasp with his left thumb, and then dropped both hands to the bed. “I won’t be bound like that, trapped by the appearance of freedom but without real wings.” Cyon cleared his throat, “So, the Starstone is the plan. It’s my only chance to escape.” His voice held more hints of his native tongue, and it tinged the Elven syllables with a harsher edge. “This is a world of paltry tasks, petty people, and pitiful dreams.” He frowned, “I deserve to be among the gods.”

“She takes many lovers, Little Wasp.”

Cyon narrowed his eyes, “When that fool Cayden Cailean confessed his love for her, she rebuffed him.” He smiled slightly and closed his eyes, “She knew he wasn’t the one.”

His smile widened as he stared at the ceiling, watching the roiling haze. “Your mistress hides many things, but even The Savored Sting has a heart somewhere...” Cyon’s eyes caught the moonlight and flashed silver as he turned to look at Imarra, “and that’s the only trophy worthy of my skill, my talent—I will beat the Starstone, and I will be the one to steal Calistria’s heart.” “Oh?” Imarra laughed softly. “Is that all that this little rogue desires?” Cyon’s lover bit his shoulder, hard enough to break skin. “Nothing more than a god’s heart?” She

moved to sit upon Cyon, her thighs just above the blades of his hips, moonlight spilling over her lithe body. She ran both sets of nails down his chest, leaving more tiny rivulets of red behind. “And what happens when it’s yours and you’re hers?”

Her hands pressed his shoulders back as she brushed her lips and teeth against Cyon’s left ear. “What will darling Imarra to do once her favorite stinger is claimed by the very goddess she worships?” Imarra did her best to look both pouty and pitiful. “Do you even care?”

Cyon pulled her hands off his shoulders and held her wrists, smiling slightly. “You are getting attached.” He pushed her arms up and away from him, the white gleam of his teeth sharp contrast to the shadows. “That’s against the rules.”

Imarra shifted in Cyon’s grip and pushed against his arms, squeezing her legs against his chest and pressing forward. “Have I been naughty, Little Wasp? Are you going to have to punish me?”

Cyon pulled her down so he could kiss her neck. “Definitely.”

Imarra laughed, her voice turning sultry and edgier as she slipped into his native tongue. “You’re still mine for tonight.” She pressed her finger to his lips as Cyon made to speak. “I paid good money for this room...and for you...go be her beloved godling later.”

“God.” He pushed her back again, met her divinely beautiful gaze with his own. “I won’t be anyone’s godling.”

“I shall remember.” Imarra’s tone was playful, and her long, thin fingers pulled something from beneath the pillows. She held it up for Cyon to see, and smiled wickedly. “Of course, your fate’s only in the cards you’re dealt.”

Cyon blinked. “You kept that?”

“Just for you.” Her smile was caught and framed by the moonlight.

“How did—?”

Imarra moved her hand into the light, revealing a battered Harrow card so washed out that its image had long since faded. “Oh, I remember everything.” she grinned mischievously, “especially the things you forget.”

“Yet I keep you around?” Cyon quirked an eyebrow and carefully pulled the worn and battered card from Imarra’s fingers. He flipped it over to look at both sides. The front and back were indistinguishable, grey, and empty.

Cyon held it to the moonlight, and as soon as the pale radiance touched it, the card flashed brilliantly. Three images—The Juggler, The Locksmith, and The Crows—each appeared upon the card’s face before fading back to nothing. Cyon grinned. “Fate has dealt its hand, and I’ve been chosen,” his smile broadened and he winked at Imarra, “though only you and I know why.”

“Our little secret?” She leaned in and snatched the card. “How quaint.” She ruffled his hair playfully, “I don’t put faith in trinkets and tokens.” Imarra rolled away and stood beside the bed, looking down at Cyon. “And I’m not sure this is the key you hope it is. But, just in case it is, I’ll keep this card for when you’re a god.” She smiled broadly. “If it holds your fortune, then perhaps it’ll make you humble in my presence.” She tilted her head and brought her free hand to her chin, appraising Cyon. “For a second or two...”

Cyon shook his head, “Humility’s a sin.”

“Perhaps,” Imarra palmed the card, “but if you’re a kind and benevolent god—at least to your chosen devoted—then I’ll return it to you as an offering.” The priestess of Calistria bowed as demurely as she could, “Cyon Fal’Duur’s divine reign will

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require my humble services," she narrowed her eyes, "won't it?"

"Possibly." He pulled the Inquisitor of Calistria closer. "It all depends on how the remainder of this night goes...." He smiled wickedly, then dropped his head to the pillow and frowned, "Though, sadly, I still have work in the Petal District tonight."

Imarra sat on the edge of the bed. "Does it get you more scars?"

"Perhaps."

She bent down and bit his ear, lightly, whispering, "Does it get you to the Starstone, Little Wasp?"

"Possibly."

Imarra leaned forward, setting one knee on the bed, resting her hands on Cyon's shoulders, "Tell me everything."

Cyon shook his head, trying not to grin. "Never."

"Wicked little man," Imarra sat over Cyon, pushing his shoulders back with her hands, "you will confess every sin and secret before I set you free."

Cyon smiled and ran a finger lightly down her cheek. "We'll see..."



"...What?" The old man's white-haired head throbbed with a dull ache, his voice was subdued, confused, and he wasn't sure of anything other than he was in his bed and he couldn't move. He thought his wife was with him, but she wasn't stirring. His head was heavy and hard to hold up, his room was dark and cool autumn air pooled around the bed. Moonlight danced around the room as wind from the open window sent heavy silk and velvet drapes dancing about.

"I said, 'Rich man, poor man, young or old; the hangman's noose is growing cold.'" There was a momentary pause, and even the cold air of the bedroom silently held its breath, waiting. When no further response came, the speaker in the shadows sighed and continued, "No matter."

The voice was strong and harsh, a reflection of the long, thin dagger that flickered in and out of the shadows, its glittering presence momentarily visible while its master stayed wrapped in the night. "I'm just killing time," the dagger paused, "since it's killing us."

The figure leaned forward enough for the light to catch him from behind, outlining his tall, thin form. "Of course," the dagger lingered in the largest patch of light, "time's more on my side than yours."

While his face was shrouded deep within his hood, the old man could feel the intruder smiling.

The dagger flashed in and out of the moonlight, pacing the room. It stilled, caught in a flash of light, and then pressed itself into the intruder's thumb. The keen blade quickly drew a drop of blood, and the silvery dagger tilted to let it slide along the edge of the blade. The old man felt the invisible grin fade. A single ruby droplet fell to the polished mahogany floor, then the shadowed hood turned towards the man bound and helpless on the bed, "Not the first or the last to be spilled tonight."

The figure faded into the black, and the old man heard the crystalline clink of small glass objects being moved about in the dark. "I knew you had these, but do you know what you have?" The clinking stilled as the tall, thin man returned to the side of the bed. There was a long pause, and the old man could feel the intruder waiting for something. "Finally," the figure sighed, "you're not a very good conversationalist,

are you?"

A woman's voice, old, frail, and shrill, came from beside the bound man, "...Who are you?"

The old man's voice gathered itself, adding, "Never mind that, do you know who we are—who I am?"

"Boring questions." The hood turned and the old man felt eyes upon him. "Ask me what I've found—say something to show that you are paying attention."

"Take it, whatever it is," the bound man's voice was still thick with sleep and drug, but its tenor held traces of old strength and lost nobility. "I have money, I can pay."

"You offer what I've already stolen? Very generous." The dark figure laughed softly. "But yes, you do, and yes, you shall."

The shadowed speaker shrugged dismissively, and returned to a much earlier train of thought, "It's one of your children's rhymes—the 'Rich Man, Poor Man' bit—it's very...old," the disembodied voice chuckled softly, "older than you, older than me." He pursed his lips and rubbed his temple with the pommel of his dagger. "Not that it was the best translation, really, but since when are children's rhymes..." He waved a hand as if dismissing the listener's confusion, "Eh, Never mind. You couldn't appreciate it anyway."

The intruder sat lightly upon the bed, next to the bound man. He leaned in close, lips nearly pressed to the man's ear, whispering as if sharing a great secret with an old friend. "And my name, since she asked, is Cyon Fal'Duur." Cyon stabbed the dagger into the mattress. "I know exactly who you are, First Marshall, First Madam. I also know something that you don't—that you're both receiving... 'guests'...tonight."

The old man stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I won't ruin the surprise." Cyon looked around dramatically. "But, I'm not staying for the..." he cleared his throat softly and swallowed, "entire experience."

Cyon stood and clapped the man on the shoulder, twice. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to bloodshed—as long as it's not my own—but this..." he shook his head in mock concern, "Well, let's just say that I wouldn't want to be in your bed."

The bound man's voice was bolder if not yet louder, "You're insane."

Cyon moved closer to the old man. "My fees can be outrageous at times, but I'm not—" Cyon's dagger grazed the Marshall's nightshirt and flicked an ivory button across the room—"murdering children." Cyon grinned wickedly. "You know the kind of reaction that always provokes." Cyon sighed dramatically and put the back of his hand to his brow. "Bawling brats, burned in their beds—it's a tragedy!" He shook his head, "Even in Absalom, you should know the unwashed masses abhor such things."

"That is none of your concern."

Cyon shrugged. "Oh, it's not my concern. But, the settling of scores is."

The old noble's tone was straining against the after-effects of the drugs just as old muscles strained against their impromptu restraints. "Untie me at once!"

"No." Cyon's voice from the shadows was calm, his enunciation deliberately crisp and each word punctuated with a pause. "That. Won't. Happen."

Cyon moved and stood next to the lofty bedpost. "I do so admire your choice in bedding. Silk—exotic, expensive, imported at great cost in lives and coin." Cyon ran his hand down the curtains surrounding the towering mahogany bed. "Very strong when bound and tied just right," there was a hint of satisfaction in his voice. "I hope

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you're comfortable..." he snickered softly, "in the bed that you've made..."

"I demand—"

Cyon shook his head. "We both know that you're in no position to demand anything." Cyon's dagger pressed against the man's throat, but his hooded head turned towards the door. "Don't fret; they're finally here."

The door to the master bedroom swung open and slammed into the wall. Two large men hurried inside; their clothes smelled of the sea and hard work, their bodies reeked of fresh sweat and tempered fear. The hooded metal lanterns they carried cut their faces into bold slashes of light and dark, making them demonic and twisted.

"Elf, you in here?" The lantern bobbed around as the speaker tried to take in the room. A thick finger slid the encircling hood open to cast more light into the blackness.

"Obviously." Cyon stepped from the shadowed side of a massive four-post bed and stepped into the half-light at the edge of the lantern's glow. He glanced at the couple tied and trussed to the bed. "Or did you think these two were bound to each other to rekindle the dying embers of dwindled passion?" His eyes gleamed with dark humor.

"No, I..." The rough Dock's District accent matched the thick fingers and the calloused hands that held the lantern. The figure tried to stand fully upright, to seem in control of the situation and his evident fear—of what he was about to do, and of the man he'd hired.

The other man nodded sharply, a quick jerk of his chin towards his chest. "Bregg and I really owe you one."

Cyon flashed a hard smile. "I got what I wanted, but I still require payment."

There was awkward silence, and the lantern's flickering light cast about wildly as Bregg dug for his purse. The slashes of illumination showed the estate's bedroom to be lavishly appointed. Cyon noted treasures taken from Andoran to Varisia, and everywhere in between.

"Everything speaks of money, but not taste." A small frown turned the elf's fine lips. Cyon shook his head in mock disappointment. "Pity. Maybe the next First Marshal will have both." The thin elf stretched his arms over his head and yawned.

The Marshal, still bound and struggling, began to shout "You will—"

Cyon spun on his heel and lashed out. The dagger's heavy hilt added weight to the force of the blow, which crushed the Marshall's nose, broke teeth, and slammed his skull into the wooden headboard. "No, I won't."

The Elf glanced back at the Docksmen. "I believe my contract is fulfilled."

The bound woman began to wail and cry. The Marshall's head lolled to one side, blood running onto his rich, brocaded night shirt. Bregg's thick, calloused hand held out a rough linen pouch, and he was in enough control that it barely shook. The pouch was light, holding only a small weight of coins.

Behind his bloodied nose, the Marshall's enraged eyes focused on the pouch. "That's nothing!"

The Elf shrugged. "To be fair to Bregg and Grigg, it's not quite nothing."

"But," Cyon pointed at the dresser, "the sands in your hourglass were worth far more than anything that could be crammed into this filthy pouch." He grinned and playfully ruffled the old man's grey-white hair. "You're just too stupid to see past the glitter to know something's true value."

Without a further glance at anything in the room, Cyon took the coins Bregg still

held. "My thanks." The elf bowed ever so slightly, and tied the pouch to his belt. "Enjoy your vengeance."

Cyon spun on his heel and swept his hand to the floor as he bowed deeply to the duo trussed upon the bed. "First Marshall, First Madam—that's an unfortunate title—the pleasure was all mine." The old woman began shrieking. "Oh, don't bother getting up, I'll show myself out." Sheathing his dagger, he spun on his heel and left the room.

Bregg followed Cyon as far as the main door, but before he closed it, he watched Cyon stroll into the night...singing what sounded like a child's rhyme, but in a tongue he'd never heard.



Dawn was just a faint crimson glow far to the east, but its tendrils were already setting the bellies of high, white clouds alight with a warm pink glow and the sky was a deep cerulean blue. Cyon watched the world come to life outside the dank and dimly lit tavern, and only slowly realized someone was speaking to him.

"What happened to the bottle of wine—"

Cyon scoffed. "Hardly call that wine."

Valen reached across the table and waved his boney, ink-stained, slightly dirty fingers in front of the seated man's enshrouding hood. "Hello? Where is the wine I spent my good money on while you sit here looking...impressively brooding." The half-elf tilted his head. "Or is it darkly menacing?"

"See the mercenaries in the corner?" Cyon spoke without indicating which corner, or which set of mercenaries.

Valen clenched his jaw in irritation, then swept his gaze over the various forms and half-lit figures scattered about, some still where they fell down drunk last night. Finally, his chestnut-colored eyes landed on three large, well-armored men huddled about a small table in the farthest, darkest corner. He turned back to Cyon, the question forming as his mouth opened, "Who—"

"Not them." Cyon was still sitting rocked back on the rear legs of his spindly chair, black leather boots atop the rough wooden table, a strange green drink off to his right. His arms were folded across his chest, and a deep cloak of dark blue was obscuring his face and features. "And names—ours or theirs—are like clothes: tailored to fit, suited to the need at hand, and discarded when worn thin."

"What?" Valen shook his head. "I'm missing something, aren't I?"

"Obviously," Cyon flashed a less-than-jovial smile of perfectly white teeth, "I just wanted to see if you'd look, and if you looked, what you'd see."

"Why? Who are they?"

"What does it matter who they are? They're not the ones drinking your wine." Cyon shook his head, "you ask, but don't question, you look, but don't see."

Valen glowered silently a moment. "No one's amused by your antics or by games they don't understand."

"I am." Cyon slid the goblet towards Valen. "Drink this." The liquid within was thick like honey, and shoving it across the table provoked no hint of ripple. Valen noted the lack of movement but found himself staring at Cyon's fingers, wondering how they were so remarkably well-manicured and clean despite everything he'd done.

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Valen dismissed the transient thought and heaved a dramatic sigh. He wiped his hands on his pants before finally leaning forward to peer into the goblet, carefully not touching it. If the light wasn't playing tricks, then the liquid within really was deep green in color. Suspended within it were sparkling streaks of purple-white and flecks of what appeared to be tiny diamonds. As Valen watched, the streaks twined about each other in loose spirals, seeming to move without disturbing the liquid itself.

The longer Valen stared into the drink, the more hints of motion he saw, until it seemed as if all of the world outside the edge of the golden goblet was slowly rotating, spiraling around in rhythm to the illusory motion within.

He jerked his head back, blinking rapidly, feeling slightly nauseous and wishing the world would stop spinning.

Valen's world stabilized, and he opened his mouth twice, gaping like a fish. "What is...?" Cyon looked up at Valen, who bit his lower lip and decided to ask something else. "Why should I drink it?"

The cowl shook slightly, and Cyon pulled his feet from the table. He kicked the chair opposite of him out towards Valen. "Sit."

"There's never a straight answer with you." Valen warily eyed the goblet. "What is that, and why send our wine away?" Valen sat as directed, looking in vain to see who'd ended up with their wine. He turned back to Cyon and opened his mouth to speak, but Cyon waved him to silence.

"The less you talk, the more you'd know."

"But—" Valen began to protest.

Cyon's voice was cold menace. "You're proving my point. Interrupt again and your lost wine will be the least of your worries." He pushed the goblet closer to Valen, "Drink it."

Valen cursed himself for falling into a game in which the stakes were over his head and there was no way to win.

"Look, I told you everything I knew about the Starstone, and I swear I didn't tell anyone you're interested in it." Valen's eyes flicked from the drink to Cyon, "Poisoning me," he paused, and winced, "I mean, if..." Valen shook his head, "I mean, I know your...reputation...and I know that your image is meticulously crafted to appear intimidating and violent, but only a fool would believe it's only illusion and guile." Valen wet his lips. "I am no fool."

Beneath his hood, Cyon arched an eyebrow—Valen knew without seeing it—and spoke, "No?"

Valen opened, and then quickly shut his mouth.

"I so delight in our little chats." Cyon's voice was calm in the practiced way that Valen knew all too well; he had tried to master it for himself, but had always failed miserably.

Cyon shifted topics, but the underlying menace was still there. He leaned forward, pushing his hood back and tossing his cloak over his shoulder.

"Look, bard, it's come to my attention that everyone wants to know what it's like to live my life. I'm constantly pestered for glimpses by beggars, whores, urchins, nobles, actors, and all the variety of vermin who infest and infect this great city."

Cyon waved a tall, blonde elven barmaid over to their table and ordered a much better selection of wine than Valen had. "The sweating throngs of Absalom, all the calamitous masses here, desire to know—and worship—me. From rabble to roused, patriarch to matriarch and deity to dame; everyone wants to clutch me to their breast,

and hold me as best they can—if only for a moment or two.” He grinned, lopsided and with a hint of mania driving his words.

Valen shifted forward in his seat, drawn closer despite his best efforts to remain distant and detached.

“You see, Valen, that they seek to feed vicariously off the deeds I have done, the legend I am becoming, and the future I shall create—” Cyon paused and looked about “—as a god.”

Cyon pushed his chair over as he stood up on their table. Raising his hands over his head, he began to shout at any within ear shot, “Dear masses, vile and repugnant as you are, I understand your unquenchable thirst for a life beyond the pale drudgery that defines your pathetic existence! I know how closely the rusty blade of death presses against the wan pulse in your wrist! For, if I were you, I would weep at what I was and wish that I was not.”

Valen pushed back from the table, but Cyon clapped a firm hand on his shoulder and pointed him at the patrons.

“Mere mortals—suffering hags, mindless nags, witless old bags that you be—Valen will tell you my tales. Through them, you will taste, just once, the forbidden nectar of glory far beyond the pitiful and woeful banality that you dare call your ‘life’.” Cyon caught Valen’s eye and winked, then hoisted the green drink high in the air.

“Perhaps, if you are truly inspired and astoundingly lucky, it will drive you to be something far better than you ever expected.” He picked up the glass of wine in his other hand, and paused to take a long drink. As he resumed speaking, he gestured with it, spilling wine atop the table under his booted feet. “Maybe it will propel you to overcome the gutter you wallow in and you can stagger upright to the bar and buy yourself a tankard of the good stuff just this once!”

“However,” Cyon sighed, “that’s a lofty goal for many—most—probably all—of you.” Some of the crowd in the tavern laughed, but Cyon stilled them with a raised finger and shook his head slowly, “I see the city, all of it, from highest to low, and most of you—all of you—have nowhere to go, or ambition to grow.”

Cyon slowly poured the remaining red wine out on the dirty and dusty floor, “So, if nothing else, if you’re too utterly wretched to advance, too mired to move, then perhaps this will be the needed nudge to push you over the edge—and your timorous fingers will finally find that last, desperate breath of strength to pull your rusty blade from your worn-out sheath and drive it deep into your quivering breast.” He fell heavily to his knees; the table rocked but didn’t fall over.

“At least,” Cyon dropped the wine glass, and clutched the goblet of green liquid to his chest with both hands, “you could say you’ve done something to better yourself, and you can thank me for pushing you to a brighter fate.”

Cyon stood and hopped off of the table, holding the goblet high with his right hand and patting Valen on the shoulder with his left. “Disgusting rabble, know that with this man’s knowledge of all those who have failed—and those few who have succeeded—and with tears that Aroden himself wept, today I challenge the Starstone! Today, I become a god!”

Cyon hoisted the goblet even higher, then clutched it with both hands and downed its contents. The thick green liquid lost its viscosity as he tipped it up, the excess spilling past his lips and running down his face.

Valen was stunned into silence—years of careful study in the Cathedral of Failure, and he missed recognizing the twining tendrils within Cyon’s drink. His mouth fell open; his voice was a hoarse whisper, “Aroden’s Tears?”

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Cyon dropped the empty goblet, grabbed Valen by the shoulder and lightly, mockingly, patted Valen's cheek with his free hand. "No matter what happens, when the mewling masses clamor for my tale, remember that it was I who offered you the drink first."

Enchained

by Maggie Hoyt
Contest Ranking 2nd



“Why must we always experiment with jann?” The haughty voice of my least-favorite student grated on my ears. Miyaz’s ill-timed outburst interrupted my focus on Jadwa’s presentation.

“Can you not bind something more powerful? A shaitan, at least.”

“Either you have forgotten your first-year lectures on genie anatomy, Miyaz, or you possess unwarranted faith in the strength of these floorboards. Regardless, I am unimpressed. Jadwa, you were about to demonstrate your theory of thematic gift-offering, I believe. You desire the janni to set aflame a beacon atop a nearby mid-sized peak. The danger is minimal.”

“Yes, Mistress,” Jadwa whispered nervously, rising from her seat to approach the janni.

Because I held the genie bound, he could not be compelled to answer my students’ requests, allowing him to judge the effectiveness of their magic where I could evaluate solely technique. I had created the bond of warding myself, largely for this very purpose. Why Kadin, a janni of no meager power, had agreed to assist me in my tutorials at one of Katheer’s colleges of magic, however, was beyond my reasoning. Such assistance went far beyond the bonds of our friendship.

After a quick conjuration, Jadwa began to speak. The formal language of her request was laced with magic, mixing persuasion with compulsion; however, Jadwa had infused the basic formula of task binding with added energy, for she had attempted to weave a gift into her arcane net. An undertaking made easier, I had to admit, by the fact that her gift was a fire opal. When she finished, Kadin critiqued her demonstration. Before I could begin my analysis, Miyaz rose lazily from his seat.

“This is a waste of time! Why should I make an offering to a race meant to be subjugated?” With that, he began framing his own request, stalking toward Kadin as he spoke. Miyaz replaced Jadwa’s formalities with abuse, allowing his magic to feed off of his hate. Steam began to rise from Kadin’s tensed form—fire always dominated his elemental nature when he was angry.

I did not wait to hear Miyaz’s request. I could not risk him breaking through my warding bond, so with a silent apology to Kadin, I asserted my control. His

subservience fueled my barrier, which forcefully repelled Miyaz's attempt to penetrate it. Disoriented from the jarring shock, he lost the momentum of his spell. He stepped back, and I lowered the barrier.

"That was out of turn. Do not do it again." Turning to my three other pupils, I announced, "That will be all for today. Next week, I expect essays discussing the theory of extending the duration of task bonds."

My students hurried out of the room, clearly frightened. Still shaken, Miyaz somehow managed a sneer as he left the room, unpleasantly reminding me of one of my brothers.

"My sincere apologies, old friend," I said as I dismissed the warding bond.

Kadin shrugged. "That is the purpose of the bond."

I smiled unconvincingly, and sat at my desk. "I think I will have him transferred to a different tutor. I cannot in good conscience ever recommend him to have any relations with genies, yet my academic conscience will not allow me to fail him. He is exceptionally talented."

Kadin put his hand on my shoulder. "You were right to increase the bond, Zafi." Before I could respond, there came a knock at the door. Kadin stepped protectively behind me as I called for the visitor to enter.

A stooped, white-haired man opened the door, bowing as he approached my desk. He wore the simple, functional garb of the nomads from the Plains of Paresh; despite his age, his sinuous frame still showed traces of a youth spent breaking horses. He was out of place in Katheer, and the tension in his gnarled hands indicated that he knew this well. I decided he was likely an advisor to one of the nomad princes. I motioned for him to sit.

"My lady Zafirah al-Mazi, your humble servant—"

"Please," I interrupted, "I make only my students grovel. Sit. How may I be of assistance? Would you like tea?"

He shook his head, then cleared his throat. I had calmed his nerves somewhat, but there was little I could do about the weight of my family name. As the youngest daughter of one of the wealthiest families in Katheer, I have long been accustomed to a certain amount of apprehension in strangers. While my father's business savvy and agricultural efficiency is certainly intimidating, far more controversial is his large-scale exploitation of his family's ancestral talent: for generations, the al-Mazi family has produced prodigiously talented genie-binders. Thus far, my father's successful enslavement of genies has offended as many as it impresses, and I know he worries about his detractors, for seated firmly in the camp of his opposition is his troublesome youngest daughter.

"Mistress, as you no doubt can imagine, polite conversation is no talent of mine, so I will be brief and blunt. I am Shafid, a servant of Prince Tahman, who requests your assistance immediately. He believes his new snow-white stallion is genie-booned, but he naturally wishes to be certain; he has heard of your scholarship, and he will compensate you generously to tell him the truth."

I shook my head. "I truly wish I could be of more assistance to you, but I am no diviner. I cannot determine—"

"But you are a daivrat."

"A friend of genies, yes. But there is no method of discerning genie boons. I will only be able to guess. Better for his lordship to pretend he knows. I cannot take his

gold for a guess.”

The man’s frown tightened, and he sighed. I regretted disappointing him, but I did not see how I could help.

“I appreciate your honesty, Mistress.”

I gestured apologetically, expecting him to take his leave. Instead, he fixed me with a penetrating glare. “Perhaps it will interest you to know that as word of the stallion’s appearance spread, one of the first to arrive was your brother.”

The silence in my office was such that I thought I could hear his words thud against my chest. I stared at him slack-jawed for a moment. His tactics were shamelessly low, but I could hardly blame him for them.

“Which brother?” I asked, seething.

“Munahid.” The younger of my two older brothers, irresponsible and ruthless. I was puzzled, for I could not imagine his interest in the stallion was business-related.

“I can be ready to leave in two days.”

The nomad ambassador thanked me profusely and bowed as he made a hasty exit, doubtlessly unwilling to test my temper. After a few moments of silence, I took a deep breath.

“Well? What are your opinions?” I asked Kadin.

“Zafi, I don’t think it is wise for me to accompany you.” He pretended to busy himself with my summoning brazier.

Not wise? I bristled immediately at his patronizing choice of words. Waiting for further explanation, I watched my friend for a moment as he calmly examined the soot lining the brazier; only his fingers, tracing the edge of the bowl, demonstrated any tension. Kadin had always enjoyed maintaining a sense of mystery, and I had always been willing to grant him that. Now, however, I was hurt that he would leave me to confront Munahid alone.

The silence became uncomfortable. My own guilt at using the warding bond gnawed at me. I had told myself it was necessary—but I obviously should have trusted Kadin to withstand Miyaz. My offense required more than a simple apology, even, apparently, when I clearly needed help.

“Then I suppose I am on my own.”

Kadin paused, inhaling as though he were about to speak, but he hesitated and the silence continued.

“Fine,” I said, unable to bear the tension and not wishing to explore this sudden wrinkle in our friendship. “I’ll see you when I return.” I gathered my belongings and cursed all the way to the street.

Beyond angry, beyond irritated, what I truly felt was overwhelmed. To thwart my brother’s unknown designs on a horse lord’s potentially genie-booned stallion without the aid of my genie ally? Impossible. Fortunately, somewhere between the street vendor’s selling of barely edible meat to tardy students and the weekly existential debate on the steps of the Beyyandar School of Philosophy, I recovered my head. This was a matter of horses, not genies. Help I would need, true, but not that of my janni friend. Luckily for me, the al-Mazi family had long patronized the sport of horse racing. I knew just who to ask.



The disheveled individual standing before me was just shy of four feet; tufts of

unruly purple hair sprouted from beneath his riding helmet, worn even outside the race track for protection. His multi-pocketed robes were covered in a sticky substance I did not care to inspect too closely—needless to say, I did not accept his invitation to join him for coffee. Brevonuish was a gnome, and one of the best jockeys on Katheer's lower circuit. Most of his competitors thought he was mad, but I knew that his squeals and whinnies were in fact the secret to his success. He could speak to his horses, and what better way to coax a sudden burst of speed in the last lap. Brev had not just devoted his energy to his occupation, however. With typical gnome obsession he had catalogued the differences in physiology of every horse he had ever ridden and studied many standard and more nonstandard methods of equine caretaking. I knew no better expert. He grinned up at me through his bushy purple mustache, wringing his hands in anticipation of my purpose.

“Brev, I know a lot about genies.” He nodded in acceptance. “As much as I know about genies, you probably know that much about horses.”

“Well, I don't think that is a fair comparison to make, exactly,” he interrupted with his thin, trembling voice. “You know a lot of things about genies that no one would care to know about horses.”

“Yes, of course, but I am referring to quantity—Brev, you are an expert on horses, correct?” He nodded. “If I were to have a difficult question about horses, would there be anyone better to ask?”

He thought for a moment. “No one I know. This is a very fun game, Zafirah.”

“Ah, but I'm afraid it must become more serious than a game. You see, I do have a difficult question about horses, but I cannot ask it unless I am certain it will be handled with discretion and prudence.”

The gnome's eyes widened and he brought his fists to his mouth as if to chew on his knuckles. “I am not sure I know what that means, Zafirah.” I looked down my nose at him and raised an eyebrow. He looked away nervously. “It means I can't tell people.”

“It also means you must obey my directions,” I said as gently as I could manage.

He squeezed his eyes tightly and nodded. “Okay, I swear. Discretion and prudence,” he said. Knowing that was as binding as anything, I sat on my heels and told him about the stallion. Wonder filled him, rising from his toes to his head; he practically panted like a puppy. “And you need me to tell you if the horse is of sufficient breeding and quality?”

“I would like you to speak to it.”

He giggled. “Zafirah, I bet it is genie-booned.”

“I hate to disappoint you, my friend, but I bet it isn't.”

“If I'm right, then I want a beaded belt with the design of a horse made in the City of Brass. I have always wanted that.”

“Isn't that a steep wager?”

“I figure the horse lord is paying you a lot.”

“True. What do I get, then?”

“What do you most want?”

A difficult question, to tell the truth; however, I had no intention of holding the gnome to his wager. “A coral comb carved with a hippocampus, inlaid with pearl from the Plane of Water.”

He murmured in appreciation and solemnly shook my hand. “I hope I win.” I could not help but laugh.

“We will leave in two days.”

“I am ready to leave now.”

“Two days, Brev. Meet me at the gates in two days.”



Prince Tahman granted us the generous welcome of an ambitious noble; the significance of this stallion to his rising influence was plain. The thinly veiled urgency behind his offers of food and wine emerged in full as we were enthusiastically ushered to the tent where the horse was kept. Both Brev and I were plenty eager to see the stallion, so we gladly followed Shafid through the camp until we reached a recently-stitched pavilion. Tethered in the center was the stallion. I gasped and felt my hand instinctively go to my heart. I watched, spellbound, as it paced slowly in a circle around the post, the muscles in its neck and back pulsing like an ocean wave. Its pure, milky white coat seemed to shimmer with a blue glow.

“You truly needed me to tell you this was genie-booned?” I asked Shafid. He did not answer.

I felt Brev tug at my hand. “I need to be closer,” he whispered as I bent down. I explained this to Shafid, who nodded in understanding and motioned for us to continue forward. Brev began to skip, barely able to contain his excitement any longer. Before I had taken a few steps, however, a familiar, unpleasant voice called to me.

“Zafirah, Sister!”

“Munahid.” I turned to face my brother, scowling at his insincere smile.

As always, Munahid was well-dressed and immaculately groomed; not a hair of his beard nor a flap of his turban was out of place. Like our father, he was stout and barrel-chested with hardly any neck, and his bottom teeth showed when he grinned. I was grateful he and I shared little family resemblance. He was accompanied by several human slaves as usual, but he had also added a small monkey to his entourage since I saw him last. The disgusting creature crouched on his shoulder.

“Come, you look so unhappy to see me! I should have known the Prince would require your expert opinion.” I refused his embrace and nodded curtly. “Petulance does not suit you, baby sister.”

“Why are you here, Munahid?” I had lost all respect for Munahid years ago, when it became an open secret then that Munahid had fathered a child on one of the jann slaves. His abuse of the poor woman had sparked my childhood indignation, but my anger surged when I overheard his plans for eventually binding his young daughter. Even now I could hardly stomach his presence.

“Haven’t you learned by now not to ask such questions, Sister?” he said, pitching his voice low and leaning in close so only I would hear. “Family business always upsets you so.”

I imagined Father’s reaction to learning that the family’s business interests in a genie-booned stallion were currently being handled by Munahid and myself. First I pictured Father’s famous lengthy sigh, then the exaggerated eye roll, his hand placed forcefully on the desk, a witty prayer to Abadar. I smirked.

“Someone has to counterbalance your depravity. Besides—you, here on business? I’m shocked you’d deign to work with us lesser beings.”

“Doesn’t that conscience of yours ever bore you? No matter, there’s no need to

concern yourself. I am here to get what I want. I'm not sure you'd understand," he said, leering. Then he sauntered away in the direction of the prince.

"The prince will not let him buy the stallion!" I hissed to Shafid as I followed Brev toward the horse.

"I do not think he wants the horse," Shafid replied diplomatically.

I inhaled deeply, preparing to argue when my eyes followed Shafid's pointed gaze. Seated in the shadows was a very young woman whose golden-streaked dark hair and exotic light eyes set her wildly apart from the nomads. I knew her instantly as a half-janni, of no more than fifteen years. She seemed familiar. "Who is she?" I asked Shafid.

"She led the stallion. We found them both wandering the plain. She will not speak, nor will she leave the horse."

I continued to stare at her, memory gnawing at my mind, but I was unable to place my sense of recognition. Finally, she felt my gaze and turned to meet my eyes. Her delicate features were tense with fear, and it was her terror that finally triggered my recollection. I was sure I had known her mother—and, unfortunately, still knew her father. My brother's presence suddenly made sense, as did, I realized, Kadin's absence.

She was my niece. She was the reason I had called Kadin, the first genie I had ever summoned, when I was thirteen, foolish, and desperate. When I realized the depths of Munahid's wanton opportunism, the despair in the janni mother's eyes and my brother's wicked laugh haunted my dreams until I could bear inaction no longer. Armed with a few cantrips, I broke into my father's laboratory. My meticulous adherence to the binding ritual succeeded in summoning a janni, but my weak bonds stood no chance of holding him, and the sheer arcane force of Kadin's arrival hurled me against a wall. Kadin told me later that he took pity on my youth, assuming that an angry warning would dissuade me from further attempts to tangle with high arcana. He was surprised, however, when I began to plead. Moved by my tears, he agreed to attempt a rescue of the mother and child.

Until now, I had known only that they had vanished—Kadin never told me the details—but I was now very certain that the girl had indeed been saved. Her association with the stallion only hinted at the breadth of detail Kadin had kept from me. Relieved though I was that his absence was not motivated by anger at me, my imagination began to fill in the gaps, and I shuddered as I pictured how Munahid might have reacted to Kadin's presence. Knowing that my niece was Munahid's object, my mind raced to discover a way to save her a second time.

Brev's insistent tugging drew me suddenly out of my thoughts. "Zafirah," he whispered, "it won't speak to me!" The gnome was nearly in a panic.

I put a reassuring hand on his shoulder and turned my attention to the horse. Muttering a few arcane syllables, I focused my eyes on the waves of magic bending in the space surrounding the stallion. I expected to find the sheer, veil-like waves of an illusion, the etched runes of the abjuration that blocked Brev's speech, or the refracting lines of a transmutation. I was shocked to find the taut, precise shapes of a conjurer's binding.

Looking into the creature's eyes, I reached out my hand. It came to me, placing its forelock under my fingers. I intended to stroke the stallion's neck, but I had to pull my hand back almost as soon as I touched its soft skin. Instead of a pulse, this horse had a rushing current. Prepared now, I replaced my hand. Although a friend to genie-kind, I

had always felt the closest connection to the churning waves of the sea, and the fierce flow of the stallion's elemental energy thrilled me.

"You are a marid," I whispered in Aquan. The horse whinnied. I pulled back and knelt next to Brev, who looked somewhat tearful.

"Brev, you cannot speak to it because it is not a horse. I believe a water genie has been bound to this form."

"Polymorphed?" I shook my head, and he looked at me skeptically.

"It is a binding. There is a difference. You know how the best necromancers can trap your soul in a jar? Well, a powerful conjurer has bound this genie's essence in a horse, and the genie has overwhelmed the horse, so to speak. I believe if I could undo the binding, we would be left with a rather ordinary horse."

Brev just pouted, disappointed that his skills had been of little use. I ignored him, contemplating how such a bond could be created. If only I had the aid of this marid, I could stop my brother from purchasing his daughter, for I had neither the time nor the materials to call a genie myself. I needed Kadin, but he could not risk being bound by Munahid. I was on my own. I had to break the shape-bond before my brother struck his deal.



Shape binding, as I had termed it, was entirely new to me. The spell on the marid was far beyond my ability to simply dispel; I knew there must be a specific release, but without a library to consult, I was lost. Not that I remembered ever reading of this aspect of planar binding. I could not speak to my niece outside Munahid's presence, and my time spent questioning the marid was fruitless, as the bond had evidently suppressed his telepathy. Needless to say, I lay wide awake that night in the tent the prince had prepared for me. Brev had apparently resigned himself to ineffectiveness, for he had curled up in a corner and was snoring softly. My mind still frantically searched for a solution it did not hold.

Screams and horse squeals woke me from my light sleep in the middle of the night. I snapped awake, lighting my lamp with a wave of my hand before pulling on my robe. I nudged Brev awake before I left the tent and instructed him to find Shafid. I ran to the horse's pavilion and found the stallion rearing and kicking, fighting its restraints in an effort to attack Munahid, who stood just out of its reach. My niece cowered behind the horse, sobbing. As I drew closer, I saw lines of blood etched onto the horse's flank, and I heard the tell-tale crack of my brother's whip.

"I will not allow you to torment them, Munahid," I shouted as I stepped equal to the marid.

"Go home, Zafirah. Your pretty theories of equality will only get you hurt. I have bought the girl, and you will not stop me from taking her."

"No? As her kin, I refuse to allow the sale." Munahid seemed thrown by my unexpected knowledge of the girl's identity. "You do not think the prince will believe me?"

"Not for the price I am offering. I warn you, Zafirah, I do not wish to harm you. You cannot succeed."

"I succeeded before in spiriting away the girl and her mother right from under your nose. I suspect I can do it again." Now Munahid looked almost worried. Part of

me regretted revealing my role, but the larger part was too angry.

“I do not believe that,” he said, backing down slightly.

“You should. I saved them.”

“Well, if you consider wandering the desert trapped in a fox’s form safe, then yes, the mother is safe. Really, Zafirah, your standards for safety seem rather low. It is in the girl’s best interest to come with me, don’t you think?”

A fox? I was too stunned to respond. Was Munahid responsible for the shape binding? I had so far underestimated him, had not guessed his capacity for torturing even those close to him. How could the mother survive without recourse to any of the abilities of her genie nature? My loathing for Munahid intensified; I could not devise a punishment appropriate for his crimes. More stinging than my hatred, however, was my frustration, for I felt so helpless to undo his atrocities.

“It is time for me to leave with my belongings. Step down, Zafirah.”

Seething at my brother’s utter disregard for life, I stood firm.

“Very well, then,” he threatened.

The monkey jumped from Munahid’s shoulder, landing in the sand in front of me. As my brother uttered an unfamiliar spell, a flash of purple caught my eye. Brev had returned, leading Shafid, the prince, and an armed guard. Munahid finished speaking and a cloud of smoke enveloped the monkey. From the smoke grew an efreeti, who uprooted the pavilion and tossed the fabric aside.

“Your refusal to summon genies will be the death of you, little sister. It will be my displeasure to inform Father.”

All at once, the cool desert night erupted in action. Rays of fire extended from the efreeti’s hand to the stallion. Ignoring the horse’s squeals and my niece’s screams, I unleashed a rushing torrent of water at Munahid, knocking him back toward Shafid and the prince.

“Bind him!” I shouted. I turned to the efreeti. He smiled at me, one hand on the hilt of his giant fiery blade. His smoldering rays exploded once more from his other hand, this time in my direction. My knees buckled and I turned away in pain, relieved to see that my niece had fled. I turned back just in time to see Brev cut the stallion’s tether with his knife. Consumed by the efreeti, I had missed the gnome’s approach, but now as the wounded marid galloped in freedom, I saw Brev fly through the air, clinging to the severed rope. With a wild laugh, the gnome leapt to the horse’s back and rode the animal out of the pavilion.

I had no allies left, for the nomads were terrified. I had not the time to summon a small elemental, let alone a genie. I would have refused to force one to fight for me regardless. The wind had picked up, blowing my hair in front of my face and swirling the sand around my ankles. I realized I had forgotten my sandals. I dug my toes into the sand, trying to ignore my throbbing, scorched thigh and stomach.

Taking a deep breath, I began an incantation. From my outstretched palms a vortex of ice and sleet broadened toward the efreeti. He roared in torment, and I desperately began to repeat the spell, even as his hands performed the movements for magic I could not withstand. Flaming brimstone rained down upon me; one stone hit my wrist, melting the ice that had begun to form in my cupped hands. Pelted by the burning rocks, I crawled toward the efreeti, leaving his storm behind me.

Faintly, Munahid’s voice reached my ears. A quick glance told me he had escaped the nomads and was approaching the battle. I staggered to my feet and threw back my head as I simply released arcane energy in a blast of frigid air. Munahid bellowed.

The efreeti howled, seriously wounded; however, he would immolate me now, and I would be gone. I could only hope my niece had escaped. As the efreeti began to shape his spell, I prepared a simple warding, hoping I could live for just a few more seconds.

There was nothing more I could have done—no, that was not true. Munahid was right. I would die because I refused to force genies into submission. Specifically, because I had refused to bind Kadin. I was sure I could have succeeded with his assistance, but he had left me to deal with Munahid alone, and I had not compelled him to reconsider. Even now, as the consequences of my last interaction with Kadin blazed around me, I knew that no part of me could have so abused my friend. I was not Munahid, and this was how I would die.

The efreeti's ball of flame burst not far from my breast, and I collapsed, gasping for air. Munahid's piercing shriek brought me little satisfaction. When the roiling fires dissipated, shouts and footsteps woke me from my barely conscious stupor. I wept as all thoughts of Munahid, the efreeti, and shape binding momentarily vanished, for between the efreeti and my prone form stood Kadin, scimitar raised. Reality returned harshly, and I screamed as the efreeti's sword sliced into my friend. Reeling from the blow, Kadin took only a small step back, refusing to give ground.

I could see Kadin was preparing to charge, but I could not bear to witness the consequences of his attack. Pulling myself to my knees, I released one last spell, endeavoring to buy us just a little more time, though for what, I did not know. A curtain of water dropped between Kadin and the efreeti. Kadin looked back at me and hesitated; his magic could save us both, but how could we leave these people to the efreeti? Then his eyes widened.

I first heard the thundering hooves, then watched as a brilliant white horse carrying a purple-headed gnome raced toward my wall of water. With a tremendous splash they broke the curtain, and as they surfaced, the fluid form of a marid emerged, his massive, muscular back arched like a swimmer rising for a breath. Clinging to his tangled mane of blue-green hair was a tiny gnome. With a roar like the stampede of a thousand horses, the marid plunged his raised trident into the efreeti's chest. Flames consumed the efreeti's corpse, while the marid, finally freed from his animal prison, vanished with the gnome. All that remained was an ordinary, confused, dappled gray horse. I stared for a moment in awe, then Kadin lifted me into his arms, and I lost consciousness.



I did not allow myself long to recover before I devoted myself to shape binding and the plight of my niece's lost mother. My research was generously funded by the nomad prince, although I insisted I had, if anything, completely ruined his chance for profit. On the other hand, Prince Tahman had received a small windfall from my father, who had bailed my brother out of paying his debt to justice for wreaking such destruction in the nomad camp. Before we left, Kadin and I had insisted that my niece accompany us, and the nomads were in no position to deny us. Knowing that my university would only protect us from Munahid's vengeful wrath for so long, we dove into our books with an accelerated sense of urgency. His show with the efreeti proved Munahid's own proficiency in shape binding, and I was determined not to be outclassed again.

MAGGIE HOYT

And although I think we were all disappointed not to have witnessed a genie-booned stallion, we certainly did not scoff at the gifts that followed. Shafid informed me that weeks later, their herds swelled with the addition of a band of wild horses. Kadin appeared in my office one day with a new, finely engraved scimitar, while my niece awoke that same morning clutching a shell locket. And I? On my desk, wrapped neatly in soft leather, was a coral comb carved with a hippocampus, inlaid with pearl.

THICKER THAN BLOOD

by Jess Carson
Contest Ranking 32nd

Cyril paced the edge of his room, rubbing the chess piece in his hand. He was beginning to hate this room. Not that it was an uncomfortable place to pass the time. The room itself would have been the envy of any member of House Vaylen's acquisition teams. The red brocade carpet's silver strands leapt about in a flame motif covering the finest hardwood floors of any house in Admiralty Hill. Red leather chairs flanked the black marble fireplace. Stained glass doors covered in curtains of soft silks lead to the balcony. Cyril's brother, Menas, had spared no expense in building and decorating this mansion with the idea of showing all others in Augustana, whether they cared or not, that he could have the best with little effort. Menas always seemed to get what he wanted. Luxury and power were the two words most people used to describe the place—gauche and ostentatious were the others.

The ebony knight gleamed in the lamp light as Cyril placed it on the board. He crossed to his vanity, paused, and scrutinized his reflection in the mirror. He tugged at the one silver strand in his otherwise chestnut waves. He pushed his hair back and leaned heavily against the vanity. "A few gray hairs are the least of my problems," he thought.

Cyril reached for his pipe and savored the puff. There were perks to Menas' desire for the finest. He strolled to the balcony doors and opened the first set. Slivers of pale light streamed through the clearing clouds. Silhouettes swayed with the night breeze in the courtyard below. Cyril's room provided an excellent view of the yard. Small shrubs and trees, carefully maintained, lined the edges of the property and provided privacy for the house. Menas' hired guards, resplendent in their green and gold uniforms, patrolled in groups of three along the edges. Bright green hair bobbing along behind the patrol meant Picks had not yet left to retrieve Menas' latest conquest. One of the guards abruptly stopped and began swatting at the air around him, shouting about flying ants; Picks doubled over with his high pitched gnomish laughter.

"I take it Picks hasn't left yet?" Menas asked.

Cyril didn't turn around. "Not yet, he seems to be having too much fun. It's a shame to make him run silly errands." He turned to face his brother. Taller than Cyril

by a few inches and much less lean, Menas' frame nearly blocked the light from the hallway beyond. The brothers shared their family's typical Varisian traits—tanned skin and brown hair—but the similarities ended there. A composition in contrast, Menas, toned from years of swordplay, and Cyril, leaner and more mysterious, cut an imposing pair when standing together. "Next time you could knock."

"Since when do I need to be so formal with you?"

"Since I had to start knocking before I entered your study. Fair's fair, Menas." Cyril puffed on his pipe and rested his arm on the top of his sitting chair. He continued, "So what are you after tonight, hmm? A ship in the harbor has an extra case of Irrisen Ice Wine? Perhaps one of the neighbors acquired a new painting? Or is it some new artifact you found a lead on?"

Menas chuckled. He crossed the room and punched his brother in the arm. "You're in a great mood tonight, aren't you? You should be happy. Tonight's the night. We're about to get everything. And you look like you're going to a funeral. I'm glad you weren't downstairs earlier, you might've scared off my guests."

"Guests?"

"Appraisers, mages, scholars," he slowly moved to the desk and casually pushed at some of the papers, "just a few people I had researching our amulets. You know, the ones you've been unable to find anything on."

"You mean the ones you stole from the collector in Almas?"

"Stole, liberated, returned to someone who could use it—call it what you will." Menas sneered, teeth growing from ear to ear, and picked up a leather journal from the desk. "As I recall, Cyril, I wasn't the only one who benefited from that trip. Or have playing chess and reading those books from his library gotten boring already?"

Cyril shoved the pipe in his mouth and glanced at the floor.

"No, still enjoying them? Well then, shut it." He threw the journal at Cyril and continued, "Aren't you the least bit curious as to what they found? I mean, these were the amulets I said could make all our dreams come true. These are the...baubles that cost us some of our best procurers. Aren't you curious to see the answer to a puzzle you couldn't solve?"

"Not really, since there was nothing to find." Cyril set his jaw and stared past his brother.

"Little brother, you look tense. You really should try to relax more." Menas stared down at him, his dark brown eyes made colder by the shadows cast by the lamps. "You've spent almost every night locked in this room; you need to get out more. Find some new friends instead of plotting away in your room."

Muscles tensed in Cyril's face, but his brother continued to smile and talk. Cyril made every effort to keep his growing fear in check. His heart raced and drowned out some of what Menas had said.

"...these were some of the brightest researchers I could afford. What I find interesting is it took them a week to find what you couldn't in months, you must be slipping."

Cyril pulled back and rubbed his arm. "Just call it my blood rebelling from being stuck in one place for too long."

Menas turned his attention again to the desk and picked up a small stack of papers. He rifled through them as he spoke, "I'm surprised you aren't more interested. The old Cyril would've jumped at the chance to achieve our childhood dream. With my might and the magic running through your blood, we'll be unmatched. Whatever we

want, we can have. From common thieves, to manor lords, to gods among men.... Do you remember how we talked as kids?"

"Dreams change, brother."

"Perhaps. But what they found, it's so much more than I could have hoped for. Still not biting? Oh well, I hope you'll see things differently after tonight. I still plan on achieving our dream." Menas let the pages slip one by one to the floor. As the last page hit, he pivoted on his heels and headed for the door. He turned with a flourish and caressed the intricate carvings on the veneer. "Just one question before I go, brother. Is your lack of interest due to embarrassment or because the information I found isn't new to you?"

Cyril swallowed hard but kept his gazed locked ahead. The door slammed shut. The noise reverberated through his body and Cyril closed his eyes. He slammed his fist into the chair. The light breeze that rustled the curtains carried the sounds of the guards patrolling below and the scent of rose water and lily. Cyril relaxed his shoulder...that was his favorite scent.

"How long have you been out there?" he asked. He turned and stared out the balcony door. Wisps of light played among the shadows barely outlining Aerilyn as the clouds rolled away, bouncing off her ebony armor, illuminating her face and reflecting the icy blue eyes he had missed. The tall half-elf stretched her neck and shoulders.

"Long enough." Aerilyn stepped into the room with the grace of a cat. Warm golden light flooded her porcelain face giving her an almost ethereal glow. Cyril wondered how this curvaceous woman could move so lightly and with such flexibility. He followed the line of her armor until he noticed her shaking head. Cyril looked in the direction of her gaze. It stopped on the painting over the west wall. "That's what you chose for an art piece? I thought I taught you better than that." The coldness in her voice was offset by her wry smile—a smile he'd never forget. She looked almost the same as the night he'd left with Menas a year ago: tall, athletic, and angry. Only her hair was different.

He pointed to her auburn hair. "You let it grow longer. I like that look."

"Typical Varisian, trying to charm your way into my good graces."

"Does it still work?"

She extended her right arm and clasped his. "I think this makes us even." She drove a left hook into his stomach.

Cyril struggled to catch his breath.

"It...really...suits...you," he gasped. Aerilyn brushed the dark hair away from his emerald eyes. She leaned in closer and grinned.

"Flatterer."

Cyril braced himself against her as the color returned to his face. He mustered what he hoped was a disarming smile. She didn't return it.

"You left me in a catacomb," she said.

Red flooded his face. "Aer...let me expl-" he began.

She cut him off. "You left me in a catacomb with dead bodies, some of whom had been alive when we got there."

"Aer-" He tried again.

"You drove the pommel of your dagger into my stomach and left me beside a sarcophagus as several guards rushed into the catacombs looking for you and your brother. You took off with the same man who told you to kill me...so no one else

would know what we stole. You choose a stupid amulet and a man who at best makes a lich seem friendly over me.”

Cyril stared through her. The last image he saw every night before slipping into sleep was her doubled over body, coughing, gasping, and bleeding. He hadn’t forgotten the tears staining her cheeks.

“Aerilyn, I didn’t have a choice. He was my brother. Besides, I knew you’d be fine. You’re a hard woman to pin down.”

She moved around the room as she spoke. “Well I’ve thought about that night for quite some time—months.” She paused at the chess set and grimaced. She picked up the black queen and tapped it against the back of her hand. “Oh, I was angry. How could you have done that to them—to me? Then, one night I heard something the wind carried. It almost sounded like you, apologizing. But that was absurd, you apologizing for something. Still, you hadn’t killed me, and I wondered why. I wanted to hate you.” She stopped and leaned in close behind him. Cyril looked at the carpet, her voice cold and hard.

“I was in a tavern in Almas one night, and the strangest thing happened. I overheard two men talking. They knew you well. They started talking about how you’d changed and the strange things you were doing. They recounted seeing you standing outside, staring up at the sky and muttering to yourself. They said it sounded like you were talking to the sky. They made you sound crazy. ‘Crazy Cyril, having one sided conversations with the sky.’ I listened until tears burned my eyes. The next thing I knew I was throwing punches.”

Cyril swallowed hard as she continued.

“In that instant,” she went on, “something clicked. I remembered that night in Falcon’s Hollow, the one where we’d had to sleep in separate rooms. You sent me a message that night on the winds. I listened in the darkness like I had then, and slowly I heard you. I remembered the Cyril who made my nights so very interesting. The one I knew, the one Menas didn’t, and my anger melted. So I trained. I planned. I waited.” Sweetly, she whispered in his ear. She caressed his shoulder as she turned to the fire. Cyril relaxed and stood tall. Tears filled his eyes. He never should have doubted her.

“Tonight isn’t going to be any more fun than those catacombs,” he said.

“As long as there are fewer guards and no leaving me by a sarcophagus, I think we can manage. Now, care to elaborate on what just happened in here?” Aerilyn breathed in deeply.

“Menas thinks I’m still easily manipulated, but he’s more persistent than even I realized.” Cyril emptied his pipe into the fireplace so he could add more tobacco. He sighed. “You have to understand something: we had nothing while growing up. We survived, but by no means were we rich. It wasn’t a bad life, but Menas wanted more.”

“One of his most endearing qualities.”

“He’s almost always gotten what he wanted, even when we were kids. He had extra candy from our mother and women falling at his feet. And even though I was the one with magic in my veins, it was he who seemed charmed. Except when it came to our father. More than anything, Menas craved our father’s approval. He may have shared our father’s look, but I shared the fire that ran in my father’s blood.” Cyril held up his hand. “Our father said it was his legacy to me. I shared the same ‘blessing’ as he did. He was the one who taught me to cast spells, though he reminded me I’d never be as powerful as he was.”

"And your brother doesn't have any "blessing" other than a winning personality."

"You can see how that would create a complex," Cyril shrugged. "Father made sure to remind him of that every day. Instead of driving us apart, though, it made Menas more determined that the two of us would grow to be more powerful than our father or anyone in the world."

Aerilyn nodded. "So where does that gaudy amulet you ran off with figure in?" she asked.

"You are not going to let that go, are you?" He picked up a piece of paper from the floor and handed it to Aerilyn. It was a drawing of a silver medallion etched with a spiral and an opal set in its center. She recognized it and rolled her eyes, looking at the chess piece in her hand. Cyril then handed her a leather journal. She flipped through the book. Her forehead wrinkled as her eyes widened.

"He'd planned everything that night," Cyril began, "right down to choosing who would work with us. I was thrilled he'd let you come along. I knew you had talent and now he could see it. How many nights since I've wished we left you out? The amulets were upstairs. It went perfectly, we didn't make a sound and no one would ever have known we were there. Menas was almost giddy. He placed one around his neck and the other around mine. He put both hands on my shoulder and said, 'It's time to start, I hope you're ready.' I had no idea what he was talking about, but the look in his eye.... I should have ended it then."

He shuddered as he spoke with a low voice, "He handed me that journal. There was barely enough light in the room, but I could see. It described the amulets and their power, something about stages. To unlock their full potential would take years. It would start with a blood sacrifice." Cyril's voice broke and tears streamed down his face. Aerilyn put her arms around him and pulled him close.

"He killed them all, the whole family: mother, father, children, everyone. While you and the others were downstairs looking through the library, I watched my brother as if I did it with my own hands, powerless to stop him. It happened so fast. In the time it took for everything to sink in, he was done and headed downstairs. That was why he killed the others as we left, that was why I was supposed to kill you." With her arms still around him, she closed her eyes and rested her head against his.

"But you didn't kill me," she whispered.

"No, I could never. Since that night he's been obsessed with unlocking the rest of the amulets' power. He left the journal and tasked me with finding the way to unlock the second stage. He'd done his part to help us 'achieve our goals' and now it was my turn. I didn't want it. What he gave me that night explained everything, but he didn't have enough patience to translate it. A year after the initial awakening, their second power was ready to be unlocked: immortality! It comes with another price, though. I thought I could stall him long enough for the window to close, but I didn't expect him to hire others to translate it for him."

He slammed his fist on the mantelpiece. Aerilyn placed her hand over his.

"This isn't your fault, but we'll set it right." She pulled away.

Voices from the courtyard below caught their attention. The words were difficult to make out, but Cyril recognized both the guard captain's deep voice and Picks' higher-pitched babble. Silver streamed through the clouds and outlined a bounding green bushel of hair heading towards Augustana. Cyril took the queen from Aerilyn's hand and turned it over. A faint golden crest glowed in the firelight.

"Picks is off to get the celebratory wine Menas told him to steal from the harbor.

We don't have more than an hour."

"More time than I need." Aerilyn beamed.



Soft clinks of glass bumping against glass with rapid feet on the cobblestones heralded Picks' arrival. The crate he carried was twice his size, but he still bounced cheerfully, feathers sticking up from his newest hat. Cyril watched and smiled. He never understood how that little gnome could have so much strength. From where he leaned on a tree beside the walls of the rectangle courtyard, Cyril waved to the approaching guards.

"So, I see your trip to the docks was fruitful," Cyril called to Picks as he passed by.

"Cyr, so that's where you've been hiding. In plain sight no less. I like that. I didn't see you out here earlier. You're much more fun to hang around than they are." Picks pointed to the three approaching guards.

"Now Picks, they're supposed to be no fun; they work for Menas." Cyril laughed. "What did you manage to find this time?"

"Oh, this? Well, I was wandering down by the docks, and there it was: a whole crate of wine. Ice Wine. You know how much I love this stuff. It was like someone left it for me, all it needed was a pretty bow," Picks said with a smile.

Cyril leaned over the box and whispered to the gnome, "And of course it was just sitting there unattended."

Bottles clinked loudly as the gnome laughed. "You know it, just sitting there. Well, right after the workers ran off screaming. Seems that banshee who haunts the wharf appeared on their boat. They were almost as quick as me." Picks wiggled his fingers as he laughed even harder.

The patrol made its way towards them. Cyril smirked and waited. Two of the guards looked barely old enough to hold a sword while the third kept yawning. One of the younger men kept a wary eye on the gnome. Picks noticed and suddenly pointed his finger at him. The guard jumped, closing his eyes in fear as the young man's blonde hair suddenly turned blue. The whole group erupted in laughter.

"Not funny!" the guard said brushing his hair with his hands as if the blue would flake out. The others roared even harder.

"Picks, you really shouldn't annoy these young men," Cyril said as he wiped the water from his eyes, "they are patrolling when I'm sure they'd rather be doing something else. I think you need to make amends." Cyril pulled the top of the crate open that the gnome carried and pulled out two bottles of wine.

"Hey," cried the gnome, "those are mine—well, some of them anyway."

"Yes, and the rest belong to my brother, right? Think of it like this, if you give them a nice gift and I give them the night off, maybe they'll learn to be more fun," Cyril devilishly pointed out.

"My Lord, I don't think we're supposed to drink while on duty. Thank you but I'm not..." the other young guard began but was cut short by his tired companion.

"You idiot. He's telling us we've earned a break and you want to insult him? It's ridiculous, night after night the lot of us patrolling...and for what? Nothing ever happens around here. I say if one of the men who pay me is offering me a reward for a job well done, who am I to argue? And since I outrank you and blue bonnet there, that's what we're doing." The oldest of the three took the bottles. "Thank you, sir."

He turned to Cyril and saluted.

“Enjoy it with our compliments.” Cyril gently nudged Picks.

“Yes, yes, enjoy it. But remember this, the next time I turn you orange or something.”

Cyril knew his grumbling would only last a moment longer. They watched as the three men headed for the servants’ quarters around the back of the house.

“You realize, those two bottles aren’t coming out of my share.” Picks had a wicked smile growing across his face. “Although I can use this the next time they complain about me. If they tell Menas on me, I’ll threaten to tell on them. That’s brilliant. You’re always looking out for me.” He put the crate down and secured the lid.

Cyril looked down at his friend. “Picks, do me a favor and take the rest of the wine with me blessing and go home.”

Silver light reflected off the man made pond in the center of the courtyard, dancing in patches around two old friends. Picks stared up at Cyril, small creases forming across his brow.

“Why would I want to go home? Menas said there was going to be a party tonight. He’s been so happy lately. It’s been a long time since we threw a proper party here and he said you’d be happier tonight than anyone has ever seen you. I really can’t wait for that. Why would I want to go home? I mean, that really doesn’t make any sense. Cyr, you look kind of wobbly. Are you ok?”

Cyril knelt down and put his hand on Picks’ shoulder. He whispered quickly, “You know I wouldn’t want to see you get hurt. Menas’ party isn’t the kind of party you want to go to. He’ll be looking for both of us soon. Please, don’t ask any questions and just go home. I promise I’ll find you later and explain.”

“But Cyr, the party...” Picks’ voice trailed off as a shadow passed behind Cyril.

“Yes Cyr, the party. Why would you want Picks to miss that? I thought you would be as excited as I am for tonight.” Menas looked at the puzzled Picks.

Cyril tensed as he looked into Picks eyes. He mouthed “Run!” as he stood to face his brother.

“Menas, I told you I wasn’t in the mood for a party tonight. Besides, what’s there to celebrate? I never could crack the secret of these amulets,” Cyril said.

“And I told you brother, I took care of it. Now look, your strange behavior is scaring our little friend. He’s practically a statue standing here. Seeing it’s almost midnight, I think we’d better get the festivities started, don’t you?”

Menas called out and three guards appeared at the entrance to the house, while three more closed off the entrance to the courtyard. Menas’ toothy grin crept onto his face. Cyril despised that look.

“You know, brother, I find it amusing that you’re trying to sabotage my little party. You’re trying to drive away one of my guests. You really have been no fun this past year. I went through a lot of trouble to get these amulets. I bribed and bartered with scholars, stole and betrayed mercenaries, and even got blood all over my hands, just so you wouldn’t have to. That’s what brothers are for. And you thank me by being ungrateful? Did you honestly think I wouldn’t find out about this?”

The largest member of Menas’ guard had crossed the courtyard towards them as they spoke. His boots made a sharp staccato sound on the stone path, punctuated by the occasional chime of his scabbard ringing off his belt. He handed Menas a leather journal. Cyril recognized it instantly and reached for it, but Menas was too quick.

“Brother, I already knew what the journal I gave you said. How incompetent do

you think I am? I feel I've given you more than enough chances to come around and fulfill our dream. We're better than those around us and we deserve to live forever. Tonight will be your final chance. Stand with me, brother. Don't betray the dreams we shared."

Wind rippled the water and rushed through the grass, but Cyril only heard the beating of his heart. He stepped between Menas and Picks and sneered at his brother.

"This is one time I'm glad to disappoint you," Cyril said.

Pain crossed Menas' face and a horrible dread swallowed him from inside. Words choked in his throat as emotion overcame his trembling voice, "Reginald, detain my brother."

Captain Reginald started towards Cyril when a dagger lodged itself in the ground between his feet.

"I really don't think you want to do that," Aerilyn called from the tree line. Shadows melted from her as she emerged.

"Well, this is a surprise. Didn't Cyril already kill you?" Menas stated sarcastically.

"I guess it just goes to show, even a half Taldan woman is more than a match for a full-blooded Varisian man," she taunted.

"So all the players are finally at the board. I see you've managed to keep some secrets from me, Cyril. I am impressed, but you must realize nothing will stand in my way." Menas grasped his sword.

"Have no doubt Menas, we're going to try to stop you," Cyril replied. He reached his hand behind his back into a pouch. He worked a ball of phosphorus between his fingers.

"Then I am sorry, brother."

Menas wrenched his sword free and lunged at Cyril. Picks, no longer frozen, dove towards the trees as a disk of fire erupted between the two brothers.

"Come on," Cyril shouted, "did you honestly think I'd be that easy to kill?"

The guards were no longer stationary, but neither were Aerilyn or Picks. A bright green ray of light shattered the darkness and two of the charging guards stood helplessly staring into the night sky. Picks nervously giggled and ducked behind a shrub. Aerilyn shifted her weight to her back leg and spun around Captain Reginald. His long sword cut only air.

Cyril dodged to the left and bashed his fire shield against his brother. The guards from the house were twenty-five feet away, the perfect distance for one more spell.

"What's the matter Menas, can't beat your little brother? I thought you were the best," Cyril taunted. He darted out of the way as Menas' long sword arced over his head. Aerilyn was at his back clashing blades with the Captain. Cyril shoved his hand into the pouch on his belt and pulled out a small piece of bat guano and a pinch of sulfur. Menas charged raising his sword; the blade caught Cyril in the side. Intense pain coursed through him, but Cyril gritted his teeth and pushed through it. Three words escaped his clenched lips as he flung a small pea-sized orange sphere in the direction of the mansion. It grew in size and strength until incinerating flames suddenly released, bathing the charging guards in a fiery death.

Cyril pulled his arm and shield above his head and pressed his hand into his side. He saw Aerilyn dance around the Captain while keeping his sword at bay. Frustrated by a fury of misses, his swings got wilder and more reckless.

A sharp scream rose above the noise giving everyone pause. A lone guard snaked his way from the tree line dangling Picks by one arm. The guard was smaller than the

others and went unnoticed as he stalked the little gnome.

“This is why I hire men with a multitude of talents,” Menas shouted, “you don’t get these kinds of results by just hiring men who only know brute force. Now, if you will excuse me, I must have a word with my friend Picks.”

Menas reached out and grabbed Picks by both arms. Picks struggled and squirmed, screaming at the top of his lungs. Cyril ran towards them, but a snaking guard tackled him mid step. Aerilyn darted at Menas, but Reginald leveled the pommel of his sword into her back.

Menas raised the gnome eye level yelling, “Immortality is mine!” The opal in the center of the amulet glowed a sickly yellow and outlined Picks. Wisps of color flowed off him as the light from the amulet absorbed it. The panicked gnome shrieked in terror for a moment before going limp. Menas dropped the dulled and colorless body of the gnome to the ground and kicked it aside. Smiling, the murderer raised his hands to the sky.

“You see Cyril, painless. You sure you won’t give it a try? The Captain has the perfect sacrifice for you,” Menas vented.

Fire filled Cyril’s blood, roaring in his ears. He scrambled to his feet and spun to face the man who attacked him. Flames burst from his fingertips as a cone of fire erupted, engulfing the man’s clothes, creating a firestorm of howls. Screams of agony mixed with Aerilyn’s cries of “Monster.” Aerilyn leapt to her feet and dashed for Menas. She melted into the shadows as she moved, reappearing behind her target. With all her strength she swung her dagger, burying it into Menas’ leg. She brushed against him as she tried to move away.

Menas caught her along the chest with the flat of his blade, swinging up to slice her cheek. Icy crystals formed in the wound, freezing in a silvered line, sending her reeling backwards from the pain.

“You’ve learned some new tricks, but mine are better,” Menas scoffed. He ran past her, blurring as he moved and slashed at her back.

“Leave her alone!” Cyril shouted. He circled around the edge of the reflecting pool and let loose another cone of fire from his hand, searing his brother and drawing his attention. He forgot about Reginald and the Captain’s blade swung towards Cyril’s face, nearly knocking him off balance. Menas again charged his brother but with blinding speed. Cyril avoided the Captain’s swing only to be caught across the chest. As Menas curved his sword towards Cyril for a second swing, Aerilyn appeared out of the shadows once more, taking the full force of Menas’ blade to her side. She fell before the wicked man, on her knees. Cyril sent one last cone of fire into Captain Reginald and Menas. The Captain screamed and fell back, but Menas answered the blow with a sword to Cyril’s right side causing searing pain of ice. Now bleeding and gasping for air, both Cyril and Aerilyn knelt in the grass while Menas towered above them.

He poked the tip of his sword into Aerilyn’s arm. “Did you think I would fall for that? Give me back my amulet and I’ll make your death quick,” Menas seethed.

Aerilyn leaned against Cyril and he put his arm behind her. His hand sought a little pocket sewn into the side of her vest.

“So you figured that one out, bravo. Any half-witted ogre could have done that, Menas. You must be so proud of yourself.” Aerilyn mocked the man, “I’m surprised, never took you for having even that much intelligence. But aren’t you the least bit curious about the very odd coincidence you’re overlooking?” Aerilyn coughed and

pointed her finger.

“What are you talking about,” Menas asked.

“The fact that I’m here.”

Menas smiled as he leaned over her. “Should it matter to me, what an insect like you does? What could an insignificant half-breed do to hurt me.”

“Half-breed,’ that’s the best insult a murderer can come up with. I’m glad I might die, I don’t know how much more of this I can bare,” Aerilyn responded.

“She’s right, you know, aren’t you curious as to why she’s here?” Cyril asked.

Menas paused, a light dawning in his eyes.

Cyril held his brother’s gaze as he spoke, “Now, you probably suspected I wasn’t going to do what you wanted, but you never knew how far I’d be willing to go to stop you. I feared you would murder again, as you had before. I also feared that I wouldn’t be able to stop you.” Cyril reached to Picks’ body caressing his faded hair. “You were right, Menas, those writings you found told me a lot about the amulets, more than I think you realized.”

Aerilyn winced as she righted herself, still kneeling beside Cyril. Menas dropped his sword slightly to listen.

“In case I couldn’t stop you from draining someone, I needed to know if I could reverse it. It’s not nearly as hard as I thought. Simply smashing the thing will do it, but the amulets are a set and both activated that night you murdered that poor family. That means that both have to be destroyed at once to free Picks. I have no problem doing that.” Cyril pulled the amulet off his neck and held it in his hand.

Menas grunted and lunged for his brother, but loud voices coming from the courtyard’s entrance stopped him cold. Cyril pulled the other amulet from Aerilyn’s pocket. With both in his right hand he smashed them against the marble pool beside him. Yellow and green vapors swirled around and the blast of energy blew Menas back.

“Those voices you hear, well that’s the other part of the plan. It’s been almost a year since I had a good night’s sleep. There’s far too much blood in my dreams. The only way to set that right would be if someone who was being hunted by an inquisitor managed to bring proof that pointed the bloodhounds in the right direction. Something like a chess piece with the arcane mark of a slaughtered family that went missing, the night they were murdered,” Cyril said.

Realization swept over Menas.

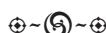
“You ready for one more trip?” Cyril rubbed Aerilyn’s back as he began mumbling.

“As long as...it’s somewhere...nice,” Aerilyn gasped between coughs.

Menas shouted for his men, but two were still frozen, looking at the sky. Captain Reginald could barely lift his weapon. Torches blazed at the entrance as the shouts became men running in their direction.

The veins in Menas’ neck throbbed. “I no longer care, as long as you two die by my hands.”

Cyril finished his spell as the cold of Menas’ blade brushed against his shoulder. Light surrounded them as Aerilyn slumped. Augustana faded and the two were in a small room with wooden floors and a tiny window. Cyril breathed a sigh of relief.



Sunlight streamed over Aerilyn, revealing the red highlights in her hair. Cyril

traced the curve of her face with his fingers. Slowly she stirred and opened her eyes. "Where...?"

He grinned, "Someplace nice." She rolled her eyes and tried to sit up. He handed her a wineskin. "You had me worried there for a moment."

"You know I've always been a quick healer," she winced as she reached for it, touching the side of her face.

"The cut wasn't that deep, but it will leave a scar," he said reading her body language, "but it's quite fetching on you. Makes you look mysterious." Pink spread across her pale face.

He caught her hand as she returned the wineskin and held it for some time. Her fingers traced the lines in his hand.

"So," she asked, "what will you do now? Will I have to listen to the wind or do I get a straight answer?"

"Did you mean what you said to me last night? If you forgive me, I'd love to have your company. I need you..." He stopped short.

She met his gaze and stared at him. For a moment they were a year younger, together as if nothing had happened.

"What happened to Picks after you smashed the amulets?" she asked.

"He's at peace. I'd give anything to have him brought back, but at least I could give his spirit freedom."

"So you'd give up immortality to free him?"

Cyril caressed her leg. "I could never have lived with myself if I followed Menas. He was my brother and we shared a dream once, but the dream became a nightmare. Even if I had more than one lifetime, I would never truly be living. One lifetime is enough, and even then I need someone to keep me out of trouble..."

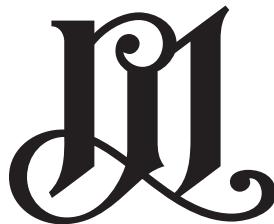
She smiled warmly, "Then we'd better find someone who can, just not someone prettier than I am."

Fire danced in his eyes as he squeezed her hand. "Perish the thought." He leaned across the bed, pulling her close to him. He wanted to tell her so much. She had every right to leave him to his fate; instead she returned for him. She redeemed him, she saved them both, but all she could say was, "Have I mentioned I love that you let your hair grow long?"

"Flatterer."

SHATTERED DREAMS

by Robert Gresham
Pathfinder Chronicler Original Story



Martin could hear a low buzzing noise, causing him to open his eyes. Lying on his back, he felt cold stone pressing sharply against his body. He tried to turn his head, to move—but couldn't. Dim blue light emanated from somewhere below him, allowing his eyes to see. He could only stare forward, his eyes locked on the moist rock ceiling. A strange smell of something in the air was both sweet and sickly, reminding him of fetid water and rotten vegetation. He called out for help, but his lips stayed tightly shut, the shout dying in his throat.

Something was coming.

The footsteps were small and quick, like a child made. Martin's heart raced. He was terrified of the approaching figure but didn't know why. The buzzing grew louder, rising from somewhere *below*. Sweat formed on his temples and an annoying itch grew on the bridge of his nose as his heart thundered ever louder in his ears. His vision pulsed in and out with his heartbeat, a dull ache pounding between his eyes.

The footsteps became faster, louder. His tormentor was almost here. He could hear it laughing and giggling, a high-pitched, child-like voice.

Martin was suddenly aware that he could swallow. With immense effort, he forced his tongue to the roof of his mouth, nearly gagging, as he tasted a thick, revolting paste. Painfully, Martin turned his head, seeing he was underground and the blue light originated from patches of wet moldy fungus, which grew off the earthen floor. He was on a stone slab stained black with dried fluid, one foot off the floor.

Martin turned his head to the other side of the slab and stared straight into the face of a grotesque child. He screamed through a mouth filled with viscous paste, the sound echoing in the little chamber. The child creature smiled a large grin full of broken, bluish-black teeth, and laughed.



Covered in sweat, Martin awoke with a start, screaming his lungs out. The sound woke his wife Ingrid and his toddler son Jan, who began to cry. Clutching his chest, Martin sat up, trying to soothe his pounding heart. He was out of breath as if he'd

just run a mile.

"Martin my love, what's wrong?" Ingrid touched his arm in concern.

"I don't know. Just a dream. Just...a dream."

"It must have been horrible. I've never heard you scream before."

"It was...but I can't remember." Martin gave a weak smile. All he remembered was being underground and hearing Jan laughing. The rest was more of a feeling.

He climbed out of bed and went outside to pour a fresh pitcher of water from the well. Back inside, he filled two glasses and returned to bed, handing one to Ingrid. He rinsed his mouth out, washing away a nasty film that coated it.

"Can't afford to get sick now," he thought. Martin went back to sleep.

For nearly a year, Martin had been unable to find work and the hardship of the loss couldn't have come at a worse time. His first child Jan, was born during the beginning of his unemployment, and their last coin had been spent preparing for his arrival. The struggle to feed a family without reliable work was difficult. He and Ingrid scraped by with whatever they could, selling almost everything they treasured.

But Abadar be blessed, Martin was reinstated with work once more. The guild needed him for a renovation at Rollo Tincture's tavern, The New Andoran Rose. The dwarven owner was adding a room to his wine cellar and needed additional hands to complete the task quickly.

Martin's first day back at work had made him so excited that he arrived at the site just before dawn, tools in hand ahead of everyone else.

However, this morning he arrived late, exhausted from the previous night's sleep. The assembled workers were short one as well. Martin noted he wasn't the only one tired. With a touch of dread, Martin headed down the steps into the cellar, his heart racing as sweat formed on his forehead. A sudden pain stabbed into his left side and Martin turned to see what pricked him, but nothing was on the stairs. Rubbing his side and taking deep breaths, he continued to the landing, trying to calm his nerves. He grabbed his pick and joined his foreman, Eddie.

The room was small, no more than ten-foot square, with one wall dominated by a large wine rack, flanked by a wall with a two-foot deep hole gouged out of it. This was the area they had worked on the day before, but at days end they hit a pocket that caved in a revealing hole that went far deeper. A lantern hung in the center of the room providing a dim illumination.

Karon, their gopher, took hold of the lantern.

"Should I put it in the hole, see how deep it goes?"

Another man snickered.

"Why not?" Eddie spit.

Karon smiled large and clambered up to the hole. It was nearly four feet wide and two feet deep. He reached in with his lantern hand, peering through the gap.

"What do you see?" Eddie whispered.

"Anything?" Martin echoed.

"I think..." Karon trailed off, "not sure...it looks like..."

He was quiet for a moment as he peered closer into the hole, staring intensely.

"What is it?" Eddie dropped his pick.

Karon did not answer, staring harder into the hole. Suddenly he jerked, his lantern arm thrusting deeper into the hole. Martin and the others watched in terror as Karon flailed about, trying to remove his arm. He screamed.

Eddie and Martin cringed.

Karon suddenly relaxed and pulled the lantern free, laughing hysterically, tears running down his face.

“By the Gods!” Martin yelled clutching his chest.

“Ha-ha-ha. You should see your faces. Those looks are priceless! I got you all good!” Karon held his sides, laughing hard.

“You jerk!” Eddie yelled, clearly un-amused. “What if you’d really been hurt? You don’t go jesting about things like that.”

Karon wiped tears from his eyes and cheeks.

“Relax, you’re all acting like someone died. I had to lighten up the mood before I choked on the tension.”

“You pull a stunt like that again and I’ll lighten your shoulders personally.” Eddie threw a small rock in prankster’s direction.

“Now get back to work!”

The picks began to fall and the fragments were put in baskets. Karon’s antics had done little to alleviate everyone’s sour mood. Fatigue set in around midday for Martin and he couldn’t stop yawning. The second half of the shift was like torture as he nursed a sharp pain in his back, barely accomplishing any additional work. At days end, the six laborers had only carved out a half-foot.

A door opened from above, and the sound of small feet came down the stairs, alerting the crew that the proprietor had come to check their work. Standing up, the men waited for the inevitable disappointment that would cross the dwarf’s face.

“Aah crap! They don’t call me Rollo because I roll over and give good gold as handouts. I’ll not pay this half-assed work.” The men shamefully gathered their tools before the dwarf. “Tomorrow you’d better get to task or I’ll carve the wage out of your hides!”

That evening Martin did not eat supper. Exhaustion had put him in a foul mood and his temper was short with both Ingrid and Jan. The sound of the boy running through the cottage made Martin jumpy and his head throb. He retired early, though he didn’t fall asleep until Ingrid joined him. The stillness brought little peace, and each slight creak jerked him awake. At dawn, Martin yawned uncontrollably and staggered to work like a drunk.

He arrived just as dawn broke. Approaching Tincture’s he saw Rollo and the other men, plus a half dozen blue-coated city guards. Everyone stood in a semi-circle in front of the stables, near the broad side of the tavern. They remained eerily silent as Martin approached, their attention on something he couldn’t see. Eddie looked back, seeing Martin, and stepped aside.

“What’s going on?”

“Its Rollo’s horses,” Eddie said grimly, “something got ‘em in the night, hobgoblins or sea critters probably.”

“Got ‘em? How so?”

“See for yourself.” Eddie gestured with his chin towards the pen and Martin stood on his toes to see four horses lying still on the ground. They had been disemboweled and long strips of flesh had been torn from their hides. All the horses’ eyes and tails were missing.

“By the Gods.” Martin put a hand over his mouth.

“T’wasn’t no wolf done this.” Rollo shook his head.

The captain of the guard did not look impressed.

“Count yourself lucky sir dwarf, your horses seem intact enough to sell for glue.

There is no evidence I can see that shows who committed this act. Therefore, bandits did this. Yes sir, it was bandits. I shall make a report for now, but the militia can't afford to thin itself by providing just anyone additional protection." The captain smugly surveyed the crowd. "If I were you, I'd hire out. I know a few..."

Rollo snorted back, dismissing the captain's solicitations. The guardsmen departed, leaving the dwarf and his hired help alone with the mutilated livestock.

"Damned city watch." Rollo spat. "'Free country,' my arse. They only patrol Admiralty Hill and protect humans. No offense. Sometimes I feel if I was a freed Cheliaxian slave, I'd get better treatment."

Martin nodded, sharing his sentiment. Sometimes he felt that Andoran government policies favored freed slaves over freeborn, impoverished citizens. It was as if they were acting out of misplaced guilt for the actions of their Taldoran and Chelish predecessors.

"What are we to do?" Karon called out. "Start in the cellar or move these horses?"

"Neither." Rollo's voice was still and heavy. "There'll be no work today. Come back tomorrow and we'll see what's needed." The dwarf was clearly distracted. Deep worry lines marred his weathered face.

"Yes, tomorrow." Rollo muttered, walking up the front steps of the tavern, leaving the men alone with the corpses.

"Well, this is shite," Eddie said. "I was counting on that coin today. I bloody need it."



Martin took advantage of his surprise day off and headed straight for bed. Ingrid was surprised to see him, but knew better than to ask questions. Young Jan lay in his small cot, his canary colored blanket snuggled tightly in his hands, resting against his face.

Martin's eyelids grew heavy as he stared at his son's tiny face.

"Martin! Martin, wake up, something is wrong with Jan!" He had barely napped an hour when the sound of Ingrid's shouts woke him.

Bolting out of bed, Martin threw off his blankets and rushed to Jan. His son sat on the edge of his cot, a vacant stare in his eyes, with bluish drool running down his chin.

"Jan! Jan, my boy, what is it? Tell Da-da what's wrong." Martin took hold of his son with both hands.

Jan did not respond. Martin gave him a light shake. The boy didn't feel it, so Martin shook him harder.

"Stop! You'll hurt him!"

Jan showed no sign of pain and Martin shook him a few more times before relenting. The boy continued to stare, drooling. Martin waved his fingers in front of Jan's eyes and clapped his hands together with a loud crack. Still, there was no recognition.

"Something's wrong!" Ingrid cried. "We have to take him to the temple! The priests will know what to do!"

Martin shook his head.

"The clerics of Abadar would charge us twenty gold to simply look at him. We've barely three to our name! No, we can't afford their services. It won't work."

"There are other temples!" Ingrid knew Martin's upbringing forbade him from

entering a temple other than the Master of the First Vault's.

Martin looked wounded.

"I cannot. My father would never have.... Jan is destined one day to join Abadar's shining church...that's why we've kept my father's crossbow all these years." Martin shook his head, but the pleading eyes of his wife quickly melted his resolve. He turned to his son and his heart relented.

"I'm unsure about the idea, but if it's the only way, take him. Though, the services of the other temples won't be cheap either." Martin gave Jan another shake, but there was no change in the boy.

Silent for nearly a minute, Martin spoke once more. "I'll do what I can for some extra gold. Sell a few things. I—I have to go. Take him wherever you must! Martin paced the cottage frantically, twitching at the pain in his side. "I need air."

"You need air? Your son needs serious attention!"

Martin grabbed his boots, jacket, and a silver tablet inscribed with the holy symbol of Abadar that rested above the front door since they moved into the cottage.

"I'll try and get us more gold." Martin stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

Ingrid watched her husband leave with confused bewilderment. But her attention soon returned to Jan in worry. She dressed him and herself and headed out for the first temple she could find.

Martin felt terrible and couldn't think. As he walked away, his mind went to Jan and how tired he was. Though he worried for his son, he felt restless and oddly anxious at being around him. Aimlessly, Martin walked through the streets of Augustana, somehow ending up outside of Tincture's tavern. The place was closed and Martin peeked in the stables. The carcasses were gone, but long dark spots of blood remained in the earth with crawling maggots and a swarm of flies buzzing above.

His shakes and sweats returned and he backed away from the tavern, running towards Copperdown for a stiff drink. Hours later, he found himself down a road he didn't recognize, in front of a building he couldn't recall. Martin yelled out in frustration at being lost in a town he'd known all his life.

Day became night and Martin found his way. The approaching darkness renewed his irrational anxiety causing him to shake and sweat profusely. He quickly abandoned his plan to have a drink and made for home.

Inside the cottage, Ingrid held an unchanged Jan. She looked up at Martin with eyes red from crying. She was trying to feed their son a plate of mashed potatoes that he would not eat.

"Where have you been? I thought you were off to sell that plaque, but that was hours ago! I went to the temple with Jan.... Where have you been, Martin?"

"I..." Martin began but trailed off, unable to answer.

Ingrid shook her head. She felt ashamed of her husband for the first time in their marriage.

"Do you know what Mikal, the cleric from Iomedae's temple said? He said that Jan was beyond his help, that he'd already been healed and that it would do no good to heal him again! He said Jan suffered a trauma that magic couldn't fix! *What* does he mean by that?"

Martin stared at her, confused.

"What did you do to our son?" Ingrid screamed.

"Me? I don't understand what you're talking about!"

"The cleric said Jan had already been healed! That's how you knew the Abadar priests charged twenty gold, isn't it? You already had him healed! You hurt our boy and tried to hide it, didn't you? Didn't you!?"

Martin lunged for his wife and struck her hard against the face. The force of the blow sent Ingrid reeling to the floor.

"I will not be spoken to that way in my own house! Accusing me of...such an atrocity! I knew the cost because my father was a priest! You know that!"

Martin hovered over his trembling wife, his face full of rage, spit flying from his mouth as he spoke. He never, in all his life, struck a woman, and the realization made him even angrier. He turned away and stormed off to bed. He lay there nearly an hour, letting his anger subside. Ingrid did not join him.



Martin ran but his breath was failing him. Ahead was a bright blue light, almost white at its center. He had to get away or they would hurt him again.

They? Martin remembered, *there was more than one.*

His shaky legs felt heavy and mired in sticky mud. Blurriness crept over his vision and he couldn't focus. Nothing lay ahead, nothing but the bluish-white light.

The quick patter of tiny feet echoed from behind. He wanted to turn and face his pursuer, but his body wouldn't let him. "To slow down or stop would be worse than death," Martin screamed, "you have to keep moving!" His watery legs wobbled with each step. The sudden rush of a sickening, flowery smell overpowered his nostrils and burned his throat. His eyes began to sting and swell as his throat tightened shut.

The sound of pattering feet grew louder and closer. Desperately he tried to surge ahead, but tumbled to the uneven earthy floor. The blue light vanished, but somehow Martin could see the rocky ceiling above him. "I'm underground," he realized.

Suddenly a pale blue, child-like face pressed itself against Martin's.

Its eyes were bleached-white, empty. A wide grinning mouth revealed two rows of sharply chiseled teeth below flared nostrils. The thing's cherub face twisted into a grimace of pure hatred. Oily white hair sprang from its head like overgrown grass. Martin opened his mouth to scream, just as something sharp entered his left side below the ribs. His scream died and his vision grew dark. Blackness surrounded as a long-handled hook descended towards his open mouth.



Martin jumped upright in bed, slick with sweat, a scream erupting from his mouth. Ingrid was startled awake beside him, and he saw Jan cuddled to her.

"Dear, what is it?" Ingrid was half asleep.

Martin rubbed his eyes and glanced over at his son. The boy stared silently back at him, wide-awake with fresh drool blanketing his chin. Jan's eyes did not seem so vacant and stared right at him. The boy's mouth curled into a cruel smile.

Martin reeled backwards from his son, falling off the bed shaking. Closing his eyes, he took slow deep breaths.

Something in Jan had changed.

He lit the lantern by his bedside and Ingrid gasped. Martin then looked to Jan and a familiar chill ran up his spine; his son's hair had gone completely white, standing

straight on end! It turned his stomach and Martin felt heavy as the room changed to purple and then to black. Keeping his eyes off his son, Martin breathed slowly again.

“Jan!” Ingrid exclaimed. “By Abadar’s grace, what is happening to you?” She clutched Jan to her chest and began sobbing. The boy didn’t acknowledge the movement, his eyes glassy, corpselike.

Martin’s heart beat painfully now. His back was sore and his entire left side cramped. Ingrid clutched their boy, rocking back and forth as more tears came down. Rage and anxiety began to build in Martin. He couldn’t think, but hoped Tincture’s tavern had reopened and needed him. Perhaps there, he could think straight, away from Ingrid’s sobs and his son’s blank, sinister gaze.

At dawn, Martin left the cottage. He trembled in hot sweats, though the morning was anything but warm. His legs shook with each step and an ominous feeling over took him, hinting that all this had happened before. The cramps in his back and the pain in his side increased by the time he arrived at Tincture’s tavern. Martin cursed when he realized he’d forgotten his tools. He walked into the tavern with his head hanging low.

There were only four other workers sitting at the bar as Martin walked in. They all had somber looks hanging on their tired, haggard faces. Eddie didn’t appear to have slept at all. Martin wondered if his friend’s son had been struck dumb too.

Eddie looked up and smiled as Martin sat, but it was forced, disingenuous. He wanted to tell Eddie about Jan and his fear of sleep, but couldn’t bring himself to mention it.

“Martin, did you hear? Karon went and hung himself last night.” Eddie put a hand over his face.

“What?” Martin was in shock; his thoughts left his stricken son. “By the Gods!”

“Gave no reason whatsoever. His wife Mary was beside herself with grief when I went by there to pick him up.”

Martin’s head started to throb. His squeezed his eyes tightly shut, trying to ward off the oncoming ache.

“Are you okay? I didn’t know you two were that close.”

“That’s not it. My head just hurts. My whole body is sore, in fact. On top of that, I haven’t been sleeping well.”

Eddie paled and gave Martin a sympathetic look.

Glancing the bar, Eddie looked to the others. “Has any one of you seen Rollo?”

Martin realized he hadn’t seen the dwarf at his usual predawn post, sweeping the walkway in front of the tavern.

“No,” each one said, looking to the other.

“Someone had to light the lanterns, unlock the doors...” Eddie stood up, looking around the tavern as if expecting an ambush by shadowy attackers.

The men stood up from the bar in fear until the smell of freshly baked bread suddenly rushed through the room. Heavy footsteps followed as someone walked from the back kitchen. Rollo’s wife appeared, carrying a basket of steaming biscuits.

“Hello men,” she said, her voice cracking, “me husband’s off this morn on some foolish adventure and left me here to see to ye. Wouldn’t speak of where he’s off to, so I won’t know why until he get’s back. Now I’m left to do the work of three since that good-for-nothing Agna up and quit on us yesterday, following the horse killings. Human women,” she spat shaking her head, “no stomachs.”

The dwarf placed the biscuits on the bar, along with a tray of goat cheese and

butter, and then poured each of the men a pint of her lightest beer, a red cloudy ale too thick to see through.

“I heard about yer friend as ye were speaking,” she said. “Tis’ a real shame. I’ll see to his widow—Mary, ye said it was? I’ll see to it she gets the rest of his wage for this job. It’s the least me husband and I can do.”

The men raised their glasses to her and drank deeply.

After their light meal, Rollo’s wife led them downstairs to the wine cellar. Martin took Karon’s pick while another man performed his duties of hauling out the loose stone. They worked most of the day in silence, Karon’s suicide weighing heavy on them. An hour before quitting time, the man next to Martin let out an enthusiastic yell, followed by the sound of tumbling rocks. Eddie turned to see a large portion of the stonewall crumble away, revealing a natural pocket in the rock. They had uncovered a four-foot-deep chamber, but something about its shape made Martin uneasy. Eddie looked to him, apprehensive as well.

They cleared the rubble out of the way to get a better look at the chamber’s walls. The jagged stone surface was moist and lined with cracks and fissures wide enough for a small child to squeeze through.

“Nesbit, work those walls in the chamber,” Eddie directed.

Nesbit entered the new space and set to work on one of the larger fissures, trying to widen it with his pick. The others made no move to help, watching Nesbit stoop in the chamber. A worker dropped his tools to the floor and walked past Martin. The smell of fresh urine filled the air as the man wordlessly climbed the stairs. Martin fought the urge to follow.

That evening on the way home, Martin tried not to dwell on the man’s abrupt departure, but found it impossible to do otherwise. The closer he got to home, the more nervous he became. To see his son’s unsettling glare and hear his wife’s pleas for help was unbearable. He dreaded turning the corner to perhaps see them outside. And when they weren’t there, he didn’t walk up and go inside. He stood out front and stared at the cottage for a while. They were waiting for him inside. He turned away, determined to buy a strong bottle and drown in it. He needed sleep, the kind alcohol provided when one hadn’t the courage to face their nightmares.

Martin purchased his bottle and drank most of it while wandering the streets of Augustana, singing loud hymns to Abadar that his father had recited to him hundreds of times. Night descended on the city and Martin had the drunken mettle that he sought to face the oncoming darkness. For several more hours he continued his wanderings before finally returning home.

Inside the cottage, Ingrid and Jan were already asleep. Martin stumbled through the kitchen, knocking aside a chair while noticing a plate of stewed rabbit and potatoes, cold and untouched. He walked to the bedroom, kicked off his boots, and fell heavily into bed, with Ingrid shifting away in groaning annoyance. Too tired to think, sleep overcame him quickly.



The feel of cold stone beneath his body didn’t surprise Martin. His left side was wet and sticky and when he opened his eyes to look around, he recognized the stone chamber and its illuminated patches of glowing blue mushrooms. Across from him on another stone slab was Jan. He sat upright, looking quizzically into his father’s eyes,

drooling. His white hair greasily stood on end, seemingly reaching for the ceiling.

Martin tried to move, but found he could only turn his head slightly from side to side. Footsteps quickly pattered into the chamber. High-pitched voices chattered and giggled from within the blue glow of the room, chilling Martin's spine.

A child-like face came into his view, hovering inches above him. The skin was deathly blue with tiny pockmarks lining its lips, glistening with an oily sheen. The creature's fetid breath was sour as rotten milk. Moist, milky white orbs filled its sockets and its hair was like Jan's.

Leaning close, the child-thing pressed its mouth against Martins ear, whispering.
"P'nuglu iä iä. N'ga sethie e'nath"

The sounds made no sense, but Martin somehow knew they sealed his fate. The creature displayed a long-handled hook and cackled its high-pitched voice. Sharp pain tore through Martin's left side as his warm blood flowed from the wound. The child-thing jerked savagely, pulling furiously on its hook, tearing deeper into Martin's side. A flare of white went across Martin's sight as the overwhelming pain blurred his eyes. At last, the pulling stopped and Martin felt something slide out of him.

Slowly, Martin's vision cleared and he turned his eyes away from his tormentor, frantically searching for his son. The boy still sat across from him, but a devious smile crossed his drool-soaked lips. Two more pale blue child-things were on either side of him, one bearing a rusty razor, the other wearing a bushy white mustache and holding a set of tongs. Martin felt the tongs scrape up what had fallen next to him. With a horrid laugh, the thing now held a ghastly hooked-legged grub between the pinchers. With a fluid, practiced motion, the creature holding the razor ran the blade across Jan's forehead at the hairline. Blood trickled down the boy's face in a thin stream.

Jan giggled.

The mustached child-thing brought the grub to Jan's forehead. The ghastly creature leapt onto Jan, crawling into the fresh wound. The boy's head bubbled as the grub crawled under his skin, heading for the crown of his skull. As it moved, the mustached figure applied a foul smelling blue paste to Jan's forehead, while the other chanted strange words.

"Iä, iä, p'nuglu iä! W'gna gna sethie iä! Yog' so-to, Yog, so-to!"

Jan continued giggling as the grub crawled into his head. The lump settled, relaxing flat, almost imperceptible.

Martin couldn't scream, his voice wouldn't come. The white-eyed creature with the hook in him continued to yank and jerk, and with each rip came excruciating pain. He could feel the heat of the child-thing's breath on his face. The creature clamped a slimy hand down hard on Martin's nose and mouth, forcing him to swallow a salty, viscous paste.



With a start, Martin stood up, his hands reflexively wiping at his mouth. He looked at the rocking chair he had been sitting in, noticing he was on his own front porch. Somehow, he was fully dressed with his work boots laced. He shook his head, trying to remember how he'd gotten there. An empty liquor bottle at his feet suggested he blacked out. Trying to get his bearings, Martin watched the sunrise.

"I'll be lucky if I still have a job!" Martin ran at full exertion towards Tincture's

tavern.

He arrived, out of breath. There was no sign of Rollo outside, and the walkway had still not been swept. Martin climbed the stairs and burst through the doors to find Rollo's wife behind the bar, filling a glass for Duncan, one of Tincture's elderly regulars.

"Ah, there you are. The others have gone down. Didn't think ye'd show."

"I'm terribly sorry," Martin pleaded. As he spoke, Rollo's wife closed her eyes and crinkled her nose.

"Well, it smells like you swam in spirits. Humans can't drink like dwarves. They become unreliable and idle wastes." The dwarf threw a look to Duncan.

"Er, yer a waste!" Duncan slurred, slamming his mug onto the bar counter. The motion nearly threw him off his barstool.

"Shut it, Duncan, you damned fool!" she exclaimed, taking up his mug and filling it with a nearly obsidian-colored stout. "Put this in yer mouth and keep yer words to yourself."

The drunk smiled and chuckled, and the dwarf returned the sentiment. Obviously, it was a game the two played together.

"Come on, I'll show you downstairs." As she walked ahead, she spoke. "I haven't heard much racket down there this morning, so I wanna check on 'em anyway. My husband's still gone, but don't believe I'll be taken by lazy, drunken humans for a full wage just because I'm a woman."

Martin walked around the bar and followed the dwarf through the service door, downstairs to the cellar. Immediately, he was struck by the silence. As they descended, Martin saw the men standing with their backs to the landing, staring at something on the ground. Rollo's wife strode forward, but Martin held back on the stairs, having trouble finding his breath. He wanted desperately to turn and leave. The nightmare still haunted him, and although he remembered no previous instance of the dream, it felt queerly familiar.

"What's this?" Rollo's wife demanded. "Why are those picks not chiseling away?" She pushed by the men with her stocky, muscular arms.

On the floor of the wine cellar was a long-handled hook attached to a twenty-foot length of strange looking cord. More cord was wrapped around the handle. Man-sized boot prints made in blood lined the floor and seemed to disappear into the stone wall near the largest fissure.

The dwarf picked up the hooked weapon, holding it in front of the men. Martin could swear he saw all of them flinch in recognition of the thing...just as he had.

"Whose is this?" she asked, waving the wicked tool around.

"What is it?" Eddie asked, his tone dark.

"It's an akyls," she said. "You use it when you're hunting in tunnels. You throw it, hook it in and..."

She gave a quick jerk of the hook, causing the men to jump.

"...yank..."

The men stood, staring at the weapon while Martin slowly approached.

"...and you got 'em."

Rollo's wife dropped the akyls disgustedly to the ground.

"I don't hear any picks chipping stone. My husband didn't marry an idiot. If you don't earn your gold today, I won't pay." She turned and stormed up the stairs.

"The hook from my dream was used to hunt in tunnels," Martin thought.

Desperately, he wanted to say something, but kept his tongue silent out of embarrassment. Martin was sure by the reaction of the others they recognized the akyls too. He tried to say what he felt but couldn't find the words. Feeling like his tongue had been cut out, he picked up Karon's abandoned tools and set to work. The hook remained on the floor and the men took pains to avoid it.

The wall in the newly uncovered pocket was soft and the stone chiseled away easily. After three short hours, the men had made more progress than they had during the previous week.

"Herod, take over for Nesbit while he loads the baskets up. It's getting cramped in here." Eddie motioned to the baskets.

Nesbit reached into a basket, but suddenly jerked his hand away, balling it into a fist. "Ouch."

"What's the matter?" Eddie walked over to check what was wrong.

"I don't know." Nesbit examined his hand. "It feels like something just stung me." His last few words were slurred and Eddie watched in horror as the left side of Nesbit's face relaxed and drooped as he slumped motionless to the ground.

"Nesbit!" Eddie screamed and let out a terrible gurgling noise. Blood poured from Eddie's nose and mouth as he backed away from Nesbit.

Standing just behind the basket of stones was the blue-faced monster from Martin's nightmares. The creature's eyes were wet, featureless pearls. It was barely three feet tall and held in its hands a cord that was attached to an akyls, hooked into Eddie's throat. The creature's horrible cherub face was twisted in fury and it sneered at Martin and Herod through jagged blue-black teeth. Stained leather garments covered the monster's sensitive areas and its stark white hair was flecked red with Eddie's blood.

Martin and Herod raised their picks and swung them sideways at the creature just as the room was engulfed in total darkness.

Martin brought his pick down biting deep into stone. He was totally blind, and fear put him in a panic.

Herod had been luckier. His pick struck the creature and it began screeching. In the darkness, Martin could hear Eddie choking on his own blood. Small pattering feet moved behind Martin. He swung his pick and struck solid stone, the awkward strike sending a numbing pain shooting up both arms.

"By the light of the Dawnflower!" Herod screamed.

Suddenly, the cellar was awash in cleansing morning light, emanating from a stone held in Herod's outstretched fist. The creature was on the far side of the room, bleeding a thick black ichor, trying to retrieve its akyls from Eddie's still form. Martin rushed toward it, his pick raised. The creature shrieked at the top of its lungs and threw a handful of wool on the ground. Martin stopped in his tracks, dazed and struggling to keep balance.

Herod snatched up a melon-sized stone and brought it down on the creature's shoulder with a sickening crunch. The child-thing crumpled to the ground, a gout of bluish-black blood spurting over its pale blue lips. The weight of the rock pinned the creature, which began thrashing about wildly.

Martin shook his head and tightened up on his pick. He took two solid steps toward the creature and swung down, burying it deep into its chest. The pale blue child-thing let out a shockingly loud scream, smashing into Martin and Herod like a charging warhorse. Both men blew off their feet. Martin felt hot blood pouring from

his ears. He struggled to sit up, but was petrified with fear while gazing at the monster from his nightmares. Like a branch snapping in two, Martin felt something inside his mind break. The child-thing was still, its mouth agape and pooled with dark fluid.

The pain in his ears proved too much and he collapsed. Vaguely, Martin saw Herod, through a haze, crawling over to him, mouthing words he could not hear. A whistling noise washed through Martin's ears, bringing back clarity to sound. Herod took hold of Martin's leg, and instantly Martin felt a comforting warmth flow through him. The pain faded and the haze dissipated. Martin could hear Rollo's wife shouting as she came running down the stairs.

"What in the blazes was that noise?" she shrieked and then fell silent, stunned by the carnage. Eddie was dead, bled out from his throat. Nesbit was also still; long black veins webbed up his arm and into his neck, originating from a swollen cyst on his hand. Blood ran down his head from his ears.

"Are you okay?" Martin heard Herod but stared past him at the corpse of the child-thing.

"They're real," Martin whispered.

"Will someone explain to me what's happened?" the dwarf repeated. Herod helped Martin to his feet. In shock, Martin glimpsed at the child-thing one last time. As if on fire, he ran up the stairs, fleeing the cellar. He could hear Herod and Rollo's wife calling after him but he didn't stop to listen. He ran from Tincture's tavern, making for home as fast as his legs would carry him.

He threw open the door as he arrived home, wordlessly moving toward Jan.

"Da-da," the boy said, his first words in days. Martin snatched Jan up and searched the boy's hairline with trembling fingers. As he probed, Martin found what he feared: a thin waxy scar ran the length of Jan's forehead. He searched further up his son's skull, coming to a soft spot on top of Jan's head. Lightly, Martin caressed the tender tissue.

The soft spot bubbled and twitched.

Martin knew what had to be done.

He pulled his son close one last time, forgetting everything that had happened in the past few days. He remembered the first moment his son smiled, the first time he walked without being held and most precious of all, the first time he was hugged by his son.

Tearing, he turned Jan around in his hands and held the boy in outstretched arms before him, as one would carry a wild animal. Martin walked out of the cottage, heading to the back with Jan before him. Ingrid was startled to see her missing husband from the kitchen window, but when he gave her a cold, stoic glance, she was horrified. She saw Jan over his shoulder and the well her husband was taking him to. Ingrid dropped everything she was doing and followed after them.

Martin walked straight up to the well and rose Jan high above his head.

"No!" Ingrid screamed, running towards them.

"I have to do it, Ingrid!" Martin screamed not looking back. "They did something to us, the little blue devils! They did something to our son! Can't you see? This isn't Jan! It's a monster that looks like him! They stole him, Ingrid! They stole us *both*!"

"Please don't, you don't know what you're saying! Please Martin, put our son down!"

"This isn't our son," Martin replied flatly.

With steely resolve, Martin stared deep into the black abyss of the well. Above

him, Jan cried.

“No, not Jan,” Martin reminded himself, “they made Jan into something else.” Martin kept staring into the well as he whispered a prayer.

“Abadar the Gold-fisted, Master of the First Vault and Judge of the Gods, please deposit this soul into your eternal vault and protect his undying spirit forever from harm. Please accept my son, my innocent Jan, who did not deserve what has been done to him. Forgive me, my son. So it is judged.”

Martin opened his eyes and looked up at his son one final time. He knew in his heart that Abadar would forgive him for this deed. By ridding this menace, Martin would earn his place in Abadar’s eternal vault. He could hear Ingrid yelling at him from behind, but he tuned her out, resolute in his decision.

A gold-tipped bolt pierced through Martin’s chest, impaling his heart. Martin fell to the ground, Jan tumbling over his father’s crumpled chest. Jan quieted from the shock, but resumed crying again.

Ingrid stood a few feet away, holding Martin’s gold-inlaid crossbow, tears streaming down her face. She fell to her knees, her cries joining Jan’s.



A week later on the fourth of Rova, Ingrid buried her husband in the Oldtown cemetery in a quiet ceremony. Banker Clovis Hett, head of the temple of Abadar in Augustana, attended the services, along with his wife and four daughters. Rollo and his wife attended as well. Ingrid wished to know more about her husband’s relationship with the dwarves, but the dour pair made no effort to enlighten her. As the gravediggers piled earth onto the casket, Rollo sang a deep-voiced dwarven dirge, full of sorrow and grief, causing fresh tears to well in Ingrid’s eyes.

Jan had returned to his old playful self, although his stark white hair remained. Try as she may, Ingrid could not comb the stubborn cowlicks down, so Jan’s oily hair always stood on end. During the funeral, the boy seemed distracted and full of energy, trying to escape his mother several times to frolic among the headstones. As they walked home from the cemetery, Jan continually ran off giggling and grasping for shiny objects.

They walked past Tincture’s tavern on the way home and Jan ran ahead, turning down an alley between two buildings and disappearing from view.

“Jan, stop!” Ingrid ran after him into the alley and spotted her son standing near the center, staring into a sewer entrance.

“Da-da!” Jan said motioning toward the sewer.

Ingrid felt a knot in her throat and fought back the urge to cry. When she spoke, it was with choked words.

“No, sweetie, Da-da’s gone.” She couldn’t hold back the tears any longer and they flowed down her cheeks. “He’s gone, Sugar-bug.”

Ingrid took her son into her arms and sadly pondered how she was ever going to explain to him she’d killed his father to save his life. She hoped the day would never come.



A buzzing sound caused Ingrid to open her eyes. She didn’t remember leaving the alley, let alone returning home and going to sleep. She was restless but couldn’t

move, frozen in place. A blue light emanated from below and Ingrid realized she was lying on moist, rough stone. Her back ached and felt wet and sticky.

She could hear Jan crying to her left, but couldn't turn her head. The sudden smell of rotten vegetation assailed her nostrils and bile rose in her throat. Sounds like the pitter-patter of tiny feet grew louder as something moved closer. She could hear metal scraping against stone.

Jan screamed.

The shriek gave Ingrid new determination to look toward her son. With renewed vigor, she exerted herself and painfully turned her head slightly to the left.

A blue, cherub face of a monster stared at her in sick delight.

The child-thing raised a long-handled, barbed hook, and began giggling in a high-pitched voice. Its laughter grew louder as it brought a hook down on Ingrid, the impact of which made everything go black.

Chains of Honor

by Rachel Hadlock-Piltz
Contest Ranking 9th



he explosion knocked Zho into the wall of the basement laboratory, ringing his sensitive ears. Blinking out the grit of the alchemical salts that had blown into his eyes, he saw Beryl standing in the doorway, drawn by the noise. Her lips moved, but he couldn't hear what she said.

"It's the salts, I know it!" he thought. "All I did was touch them to the flame and they went off like Vudran dragon powder—but that flash of purple..." He didn't have time to finish the thought as Doctor Sever rushed downstairs into the basement; brushing his daughter aside, he grabbed Zho by the lapels of his lab coat. Zho's hearing returned all too quickly.

"What do you think you're doing? Playing games down here?!" Sever shook him. The doctor's reach didn't stop at the lapels; he grabbed the half-elf's long ears and pulled him to his feet. Zho turned red, more from embarrassment at his abuse in front of Beryl than from the pain.

"The sa-salts," he stammered, but Sever wasn't listening.

"I have to present my findings to the Morbidium in two days, and you're down here making Tian fireworks! All I asked was that you prepare the mixtures from the chart!" Gesturing at the burnt parchment that had once been a chart, Sever pursed his lips and gave Zho the fish eye.

"I can't impress on you enough the importance of this symposium. If my findings are accepted by my colleagues, I'll be a credit to Lord Fairfallow. I needn't remind you his lordship needs all the goodwill and credit we can lend him before he goes to Court."

Zho nodded. Lord Fairfallow was going to the Umbral Court in Pangolais to defend a property case brought by a rival, Lord Sarkazein Lacerious, but Zho doubted Sever's experiment for the Morbidium of Exquisite Surgeons had any bearing on it.

"It would be shameful if all our efforts were for naught, simply because you, a half-bred foreigner, blew up my laboratory!"

Zho stared straight ahead and tried to control his voice. "I didn't do that, sir. I caused a small thermal reaction because the salts were bad. They turned purple under heat."

“Purple?”

Zho nodded. “The hydradite mixed properly, but when I added the medusidium it exploded.”

Sever frowned. “We only got that shipment in yesterday.” He shook his head in frustration. “There’s another box at Fairfallow’s warehouse. Go fetch it.”

Zho glanced up towards the doorway. Beryl still stood on the top step leading into the basement, her hourglass figure silhouetted against the rare shaft of late afternoon light that managed to sneak past Nisroch’s customary gloom.

“It’s almost evening, sir.”

Sever scowled and tapped his foot impatiently. “I don’t care when you get it, just don’t come back without it!” He turned and stomped back up the rickety staircase; Beryl melted into the shadows as he passed. Sever turned in the doorway. “And if you don’t have my mixtures by Wealday, don’t come back at all!” He slammed the door shut.

Zho slouched and picked off pieces of glass embedded in his gloves. Wealday was now his least favorite week-day. He was reaching for a broom to sweep up when he felt Beryl’s presence beside him. She was as quiet as a shadow and as difficult to spot, but Zho’s elvish heritage helped him see better in gloom than most people. Shivers ran up his spine as she stood close to him.

“Please get the mixtures right next time,” she whispered. He saw the tiny scars above her perfectly arched lips tremble. “It won’t really attract Lord Fairfallow’s attention, that’s just father’s conceit, but if his experiment fails...” Her dark eyes blinked back tears. “Father is too old to seek another sponsor, or incur his lordship’s displeasure.”

Zho felt his throat constrict at the sight of Beryl’s tears. He stammered words of commiseration.

“Y-yes, he is.”

Beryl’s spine stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“I-I mean I agree. He’s too old to...to...” The lead weight of her gaze stopped him in midsentence. Words failing him, he reached out his hand in the hope that his touch would convey his sympathy, but Beryl was already disappearing through the doorway into the gloom of Sever’s Graveside manor. Zho gave the broom an angry push. He had cleaned the lab that morning and now it was a mess; worse, he had wrecked another chance to woo Beryl.

The sky was an angry red welt by the time he finished cleaning. Grabbing his hooded cloak and portable alchemy case, Zho dashed outside; he had to cross the bridge to Southbank before nightfall or the portcullis would descend, trapping him in Graveside without permission. He joined the press of southlanders hurrying back across the bridge over the Usk river to their hovels and tenements. There was always a crowd at either end of the bridge as people waited to cross. Guards at each end checked the workers’ writs of patronage, making sure each was permitted to be on Nisroch’s exclusive north bank.

The guard who examined Zho’s writ looked at him queerly.

“Where are you headed?”

“Portside.”

“What’s a Portsider doing on the Spires side of the river?” The guard, a burly man almost as wide as he was tall, thrust out his chest and blocked Zho’s way. Zho involuntarily stepped back, bumping into the man behind him.

“I’m one of Lord Fairfallow’s men.” Zho flashed the heraldic badge pinned to his cloak: a shield embossed with a skeleton holding a shaft of wheat. The guard had already seen Fairfallow’s signature on his writ; this additional confirmation should not have been necessary.

The guard didn’t look at the badge. “Ha’ elf, you mean.” Zho turned crimson—his hood had fallen and revealed his ears. He felt the people behind him staring at them.

“I’m doctor Sever’s laboratory assistant, an alchemist.” Zho held up his alchemy case as a sign of his trade. It was none of the guard’s business, but Zho was in no mood to argue. He was attracting a crowd.

“How do I know that case don’t have your master’s stolen silver, eh?”

Zho’s blush deepened. The people around him were pressing in and all eyes were on him; the guard loomed over him. Zho inhaled deeply and unclasped his cloak, then reached down his collar and pulled up a thin gold chain. At the end of it a small medal caught the last rays of sunset, flashing gold before the guard’s widened eyes.

Zho pointed to the fine Kelesh lettering inscribed on the medal, and a stamped *tughra* surmounted by the Dawnflower. “This is for my work at the Veniccan College in Katheer, given to me by an emissary of the Satrap of Qadira. It *proves* I’m an alchemist. If you do not believe me I will have Doctor Sever vouch for me in person, although I am sure he does not want to be dragged away from his work at the Morbidium for so unimportant a matter.”

The guard blinked. Then, glaring, he silently handed back Zho’s parchment and waved him on. A clap of thunder boomed over the Usk. Storm clouds overhead unloaded their burden of rain as Zho pulled his cloak over his ears and hurried across the bridge.



In the narrow Portside streets, wind-driven rain lashed at Zho’s face and soaked through the thin fabric of his cloak. He lowered his head and fought against the storm howling in from Conqueror’s Bay. Ahead of him a flickering carriage lamp illuminated a dripping noose tied under the eaves of a weathered tavern: the sign of the Glut and Gallows.

He headed towards the light; his tongue already tasted of bitter hops. He was almost at the tavern’s door when a dark bulk punched into him from the side, just below his ribs, driving him against a wall. Sharp metal pressed against his belly.

“*The medal*,” his assailant hissed. Hot breath brushed Zho’s cheek. The assailant stood between Zho and the carriage lamp so that Zho couldn’t see his face. Zho gasped for air, and pain flashed up his side. He couldn’t move his right arm, and his left was pinned against the wall. There was no reaching for the hidden pocket where he kept a thin clay vial of lye powder for emergencies.

The knife dug in deeper, and a gloved hand reached for Zho’s throat. It ripped off his cloak clasp and clawed aside his collar for the thin chain beneath it. The hand grasped Zho’s chain, then suddenly slackened. His assailant groaned and crumpled to the ground.

Behind the robber, a familiar short, peg-legged man tucked a blackjack back into his voluminous pea-coat.

“Are you hurt?” Zho recognized the dulcet voice of his friend and former shipmate, an old shanty man called Rummy. Zho looked down at his torn cloak and

shook his head.

“No,” he lied. He tucked the chain back down his collar and, carefully favoring his left side, bent down and picked up the robber’s fallen fish knife. He looked around for his cloak clasp but couldn’t find it in the driving rain, despite his good night vision.

Rummy took the knife from him and threw it into the gutter. “Southlander weapon.”

“He must have followed me from the bridge. I took it out to show a guard.”

Rummy snorted. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times: get rid of that thing.” Zho held his hand protectively over the spot where the medal lay against his chest. Then he knelt and checked the robber for a pulse.

“The Goddess of Fates has spared him, for now.”

Rummy sighed and helped Zho drag the man into an alley out of the path of the wind.

“Let’s go in before she notices us.”



“He looked at me like I was muck beneath his feet!”

Zho sat in a corner by the fire, nursing another ale and complaining about the guard who had stopped him on the bridge; or perhaps he was complaining about Doctor Sever; Rummy had lost track of Zho’s ramblings after the half-elf’s third ale.

The Glut and Gallows was nearly empty of its usual rowdy crowd of sailors and stevedores. The pirate brigs sailed on the midnight tide to avoid Chelish warships, and landlubbers with any sense were holed up for the night; people outside after dark often fell prey to Nisroch’s nocturnal monsters or the depredations of their fellow Nisrochis, as Zho almost had. That left drunks, the dangerous, and the foolish to patronize the Gallows.

Zho sighed. “I thought I could start over here. I thought Nisrochis wouldn’t care, that they’d notice my talent and not my ears.”

He pulled fitfully on his ears, the most visible sign of his heritage. “Maybe I should ask the Kuthites to chop them off.”

Rummy rolled his eyes. The Kuthites, followers of the dark god Zon-Kuthon, were experts at dismemberment. “Ask them to go ahead and blind you too, while they’re at it.” He squeezed the bellows of his concertina and started a waltz; at this hour he wouldn’t earn a copper, but his music had magic to lift men’s spirits. Zho needed that more than anyone.

“Saw Beryl again today, did you?”

The way Zho groaned and hit his head against the table confirmed Rummy’s suspicion.

“Why do you want that dour girl, anyway? If I had your looks and my old sea legs I’d be on the next ship to Jalmeray; the world’s most beautiful wenches live there.” He stomped his peg leg on the floor for emphasis.

Zho shook his head. Rummy didn’t have an ounce of refinement. Beryl was accomplished, curious, mercurial, and as seductively mysterious to him as the philosopher’s stone. Yet Zho couldn’t talk to her; each time he tried he tripped over his own tongue, said the wrong thing, or became mute when confronted by her beauty. His attempts to concoct a potion for glibness had led nowhere. His one success had putrefied while he waited to catch her alone. When he finally snuck it into his wine and drank it, the faces he made had sent her into fits of laughter that hadn’t abated

until he fled the room in embarrassment.

Rummy saw that he had touched a raw nerve. “Tell you what, I’ll go with you tomorrow and keep your company while you test the salts, eh?” Zho gave him a weak smile.

“After all,” Rummy continued, “someone has to look after fools and drunkards. With Cayden Cailean a deity *non grata* in Nidal, we’d best look after ourselves.”



Zho peered through the early morning fog surrounding Lord Fairfallow’s warehouse as the ferry docked at Waterview. Unlike the solid stone structures to either side, the wooden building leaned in the wind off Conqueror’s Bay like a tacking frigate.

Rummy nudged Zho in the ribs and pointed at four large men standing in front of the warehouse doors. Zho frowned and shrugged; he didn’t know who they were. He hoisted his heavy portable alchemy case and disembarked. He turned away to tip the ferryman, but when he turned back, the men were still there. As Zho approached the warehouse, Rummy stood back. He plucked his concertina from its strap and started playing a sea-shanty. Zho felt the music calm him—its magic made his ears and feet tingle and filled him with a vague longing for the sea.

“I’m here on behalf of doctor Sever,” he told the largest man, whose arms, the size of midwinter hams, were crossed imposingly in front of him. A scar ran lengthwise across the man’s thick neck. The two least imposing of the four men standing near Scar-neck were already distracted by the concertina; they involuntarily tapped their feet in time to Rummy’s playing. Zho showed his badge and the third man, whose pronounced under-bite and piggish nose hinted at orcish blood, glanced quizzically at Scar-neck.

“We’re not supposed to let anyone in.” Scar-neck smirked and pointed at a skeleton and shaft of wheat embroidered on his dark blue cloak: Fairfallow livery. The other three men nudged each other and wandered over to where Rummy played. Zho noticed that they all wore identical cloaks with shafts of wheat embroidered over the breast.

“I have a writ of patronage.” Zho showed them his parchment and tried to keep his annoyance at bay.

“He’s only making trouble because he knows I’m foreign,” thought Zho.

Scar-neck, whom the music didn’t seem to affect, scowled as the other three men clustered around Rummy, clapping their hands in time to the music.

“Hey, you louts! Look alive!” he rasped.

But the men paid no attention. Rummy moved farther down the dock, leading them towards the water like a rat charmer. Scar-neck, angry that the others weren’t heeding him, stomped after them, leaving Zho unguarded. Zho quietly opened the doors and slipped inside while Scar-neck was distracted.

His eyes adjusted quickly to the gloomy interior, which was empty save for a few wooden crates piled under a small window along the back wall. Zho hurried to them and opened his case. He took awhile setting up and arranging his materials, fearing each moment that Rummy’s charm would fail and the thugs would burst in. Once he had prepared his kit, he took a small pry bar from his cloak’s lining and opened the nearest crate.

Just then, above him, Zho heard Rummy softly whistling the waltz he had played last night. Zho climbed up the crates and opened the window. Rummy, limber despite his missing leg, climbed through and lowered himself into the warehouse.

“That scarred one is giving the others a beating. He didn’t like them enjoying my music. It should buy us time.”

“Good. Keep an eye out while I test these salts.”

Zho removed a pinch of salt from the crate and tested it. He had diluted the latent magic in the formula to a less potent form. Now when he lit a tinder twig, the resulting flame didn’t blow him across the room, but it still flashed purple. Was the whole shipment bad?

“Um, Zho? Should the crate have that mark on it?”

Zho turned to look where Rummy pointed: the image of a barbed whip tied in a knot had been branded into the wood. What could it mean? Zho rushed to another crate—the same mark. He quickly pried it open. This crate didn’t have salt in it, but a talc-like powder. Zho rubbed it between his gloved fingers and sniffed—it smelled briny. He was just about to start testing some on his alchemy set when Rummy gave a sharp whistle.

Zho looked up just as Scar-neck entered the warehouse with a bloody fist. Spotting them, he shouted. Zho stuffed a handful of the briny talc into his coat pocket and began to disassemble his alchemy set.

“No time!” Rummy shouted, climbing crates to the window. Zho threw tinder twigs and test tubes into his case helter-skelter and slammed the lid closed as Scar-neck barreled towards him. Zho’s jittery fingers fumbled with the latch; he heard it lock just as Scar-neck reached him. Roaring in rage, Scar-neck dove at Zho. Zho swung the case with all his might. It cracked loudly against the man’s chin. Scar-neck staggered back, reeling, and crashed into the crates.

The other three men, summoned by the ruckus, were now rushing into the warehouse. Zho scrambled up the crates and climbed through the window, landing on the ground in a heap. Rummy pulled him to his feet and they sprinted down the alley. Rummy’s speed would have surprised anyone but Zho, who had seen the shanty-man climb rigging and dance hornpipes better than most men with two legs.

Someone shouted as they rounded a corner. The pig-nosed man was trying to cut them off. Zho reached into the bandoleer at his waist, removed a vial, and threw it against the alley wall ahead. It burst into a cloud of white smoke. Zho and Rummy ran straight through the smoke while Pig-nose choked and reached out blindly, missing them.

Zho had almost reached the street when Pig-nose’s leg flew out of the smoke and tripped him. His case flew out of his hand and skidded across the cobblestones. Zho grabbed the thug’s cloak to steady himself, but it ripped loudly and they both fell. With smoke drifting about them, Zho tried to cover his mouth and nose with a scrap of torn cloak. Pig-nose grappled him, reached between Zho’s arms, and throttled him.

“Where are you?” Rummy shouted. Zho couldn’t answer. Unable to breathe, darkness creeping into his vision, Zho knew there were only moments before he lost consciousness. He reached into his hidden pocket containing the clay vial, took it in hand, and smashed it against the man’s face. His attacker screamed as his face turned blood red. He let Zho go and clawed at his eyes as the lye ate into them. Gasping for air, Zho struggled to push the man aside. His fingers burned where the lye had splashed them. Breathing through the cloth, he watched his attacker writhe on the

ground. Zho felt nauseous at the agony he had unleashed.

“But I had no choice,” he thought. He grabbed his case, holding the cloth in his injured hand, and ran once more towards the dock.

The smoke dissipated at the dockside. Zho looked around for the ferry and his heart sank—it was already far out on the Usk, sailing for Portside. Behind them, the smoke was blowing away in the breeze. Zho panicked. Scar-neck and the others would spot them in a moment.

“This way.” Rummy pulled Zho down a narrow flight of stairs exposed by the tide. They slogged through muddy sand between the pilings for several yards until they came to a tiny covered rowboat. Rummy yanked back the tarp and Zho dove in while Rummy shoved off.

Soon they were rowing hard against the Usk’s strong flow. Zho saw Scar-neck and two of the dull-witted ruffians yelling and gesturing from the dock as they escaped upriver. He shivered, thinking of the lye still eating away his attacker’s face.

Once they reached smoother water, Zho let Rummy take his oar. Favoring his right hand, he opened his alchemy kit and pulled out a jar of salve. He rubbed the salve into his left hand. The lye-burns instantly cooled and the throbbing subsided. Zho sighed in relief. He looked down at the scrap of cloth he had torn off of Pig-nose. An embroidered skeleton holding a shaft of wheat stared back at him. Zho didn’t ask Rummy how he knew about the rowboat; knowledge of illicit movement between Southbank and the Spires could draw the attention of the Silent Shroud, Nisroch’s feared guardians of law and order.

“We need to row to Graveside.”

Rummy groaned. “All the way *there*? What was in that second box?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.”



When Beryl opened the door to Zho’s knocking, she was surprised to find a short, ruddy-faced sailor with him. She ushered them in without comment but pursed her lips in disapproval.

“Miss Beryl, may I introduce...um, Rummy.” Rummy bowed and touched his forelock. Zho hefted his alchemy case over the threshold. “Is master Sever here? I must test a sample right away.”

Beryl shook her head. “Father’s at the Morbidium transcribing his notes for Wealday.” Zho grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a probing, pleading look.

“Do you have a peerage book?”

She nodded. “Yes, but why?”

“You’ve got to look up a mark; a knotted whip.” He turned to Rummy. “Draw her the symbol you saw on the crate.” He searched frantically through his numerous pockets for a quill, parchment, and ink vial, shoving them into Rummy’s hands as he found them. Without another word, he turned and descended to the basement to test his pocketful of powder.

Zho worked quickly, placing the powder in a crucible and lighting the flame. He then added a transmuting agent. The salts melted and bubbled, then became a sticky purple mass. Zho’s hairs stood on end.

Heathensnuff. Made from sea urchin toxins, this powerful narcotic numbed people to pain when inhaled or ingested. Heathensnuff was illegal in Nidal; the clerics of

Zon-Kuthon said it hid the unbelievers in their midst by allowing them to celebrate their dark god's rites without experiencing the agonies he demanded as a sacrifice for his blessing.

Either Lord Fairfallow was fencing contraband, or someone wanted to make it seem so.

“Zho!” Beryl ran downstairs waving a large tome above her head while Rummy tried to keep up. She pointed at a page in her book. “The mark belongs to House Lacerious.”

“You mean the boxes of heathensnuff belong to them?”

“Boxes of what?”

Zho quickly told her about the strange powder-filled crates and the ruffians who had blocked their entrance to the warehouse. He showed her the scrap of embroidered cloak.

“I suspected they weren’t his lordship’s men from the moment I saw them. Sooner or later they’ll attract the attention of the Enforcers and the Silent Shroud will investigate.”

Beryl bit her lip. Even the hint of an investigation would be a blow against Fairfallow at Court. “But won’t the Enforcers see Lacerious’s mark?”

“The warehouse was nearly empty. It would be easy for them to change their boxes for empty ones with Fairfallow’s mark.” He paced the lab as he spoke. “We need to find out who’s really behind this. Maybe someone wants both Fairfallow *and* Lacerious out of the way. But we can’t leave the boxes there either...”

“I’ll go,” said Rummy. “I’ll play a song to distract them.”

“That won’t work twice in one day. You’ll get farther asking questions at the Glut and Gallows. I’ll go to Waterside and destroy the boxes.”

Beryl touched his arm. “No, I’ll go. I can travel without a writ and sneak in without being seen.” She stepped into a shadowy corner of the lab and started to fade away, demonstrating the talent she had honed through her studies of the shadow plane, a twisted realm of endless night.

“I can’t let you go,” Zho said. “It’s dangerous.”

“I’m not asking you.”

Zho unbuckled his alchemical bandoleer and held it out. “Then take this. You’ll need it to destroy the snuff.” Beryl buckled the bandoleer beneath her cape. Then she stepped into the shadow realm. Zho felt tendrils of the plane’s icy chill reaching into the world as Beryl disappeared.

Rummy shivered. “I can’t fathom what you see in her.”

“Let’s get to Portside before someone notices I forged your writ.”



“No! It’s my pride and joy,” Zho pleaded, as his knuckles whitened with his grip on the gold chain.

“You’ve got to pay his price. He’s the only one who knows anything.” Rummy tugged futilely on the other end of the medal. “It’s your pride versus your living. You want to sell your case instead? Either give up the gold, or just give up.” Zho scowled, but he knew Rummy was right. He loosened his grip and turned his scowl on the other man at the bar.

“You drive a hard bargain, Fritch.” Zho reluctantly pushed his medal across the

Gallows' filthy bar. The scraggly figure on the other side extended a gloved hand and the gold medal disappeared into the shadowy folds of a tattered cloak.

"The name you want is 'Pox' Pollard," the broker's voice whispered from beneath the long matted hair that obscured his face. "Unless you can speak with the dead, you'll have to hightail it to Graveside—the Cullers have him."

"The who?" Zho asked.

A sickly grimace spread across Fritch's mouth, exposing rotted teeth. "You never heard of the Culling?"

"No, what's that?"

Fritch told him. The terror on Zho's and Rummy's faces led Fritch to offer to buy them a round of drinks out of pity, but Zho bolted from the tavern, running for Graveside as if a life depended on it. It did.



Zho stood before the solid iron gates of the incinerators compound in Graveside as a long line of abject humanity staggered past under the pitiless gaze of the Silent Enforcers. A crowd of Kuthites lined the road, throwing stones and filth at the elderly, ill, and insane. According to Fritch, the Enforcers regularly rounded up the "dregs" of society and led them to their deaths in the ritual called the Culling, meant to rid Nisroch's populace of weakness.

"'Pox' Pollard?" Zho called out as each victim filed past, raising his voice above the crowd's jeers. None of the condemned looked at him; they hung their heads in shame, wept, or stared stoically ahead, guarded by Zon-Kuthon's most devout clerics. Occasionally an Enforcer keeping order in line shot Zho a glance, but none of them silenced him; so long as he didn't disrupt the line he could shout all he liked.

"'Pox' Pollard?" A pox-marked man coughing blood into a handkerchief looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. In Shadowtongue, Nisroch's subtle language of look and gesture, he indicated who he was. Zho hurried down the line.

"You're 'Pox'?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"You sent those men to my lord's warehouse."

"It did me no good. I was promised a potion to cure me, and look at me! I'm a dead man."

"Who promised you?"

A coughing fit stopped Pollard in his tracks. An Enforcer rushed over and shoved him in the back to keep the line moving. He shuffled forward.

"What difference does it make?"

"Please tell me! Whoever it was can't harm you now."

Pollard glared at him. "I have a family. They could be harmed."

"The potion—how much?"

Pollard fingered a price.

"The heathensnuff in that warehouse could have bought you ten times that!"

Pollard's eyes opened wide in surprise. Zho could almost read his mind: if Pollard had known about the heathensnuff, he could have negotiated better protection from the Culling. Pollard had sold his services too cheaply and was paying for it with his life. Zho hoped Pollard's desire for revenge would win out over his fear.

"If this man is exposed, he can't harm your family."

Pollard shook his head. Zho glanced at the two clerics guarding the gates; they were busy restraining a madwoman who screamed imprecations at them. Zho pushed back his hood, revealing his ears.

"I have friends abroad. I'll pay your family's passage." He would have to sell his alchemy case to do it, his last possession of any value. Pollard looked at Zho appraisingly. He spit a gob of blood on the ground and shuffled forward.

"13 Leper's Gate Road. Wife, two children."

Zho nodded. "The name?" The shouting of the crowd pressed down on them like a vise. The mob of cultists thickened near the compound walls. Pollard's eyes shone with contempt.

"Lord Lacerious."

Pollard was about to sign something more, but just then, a hulking, gray-skinned Enforcer stepped between them. Zho quickly pulled his hood up and stepped back from the line. Escape from the Culling was possible, even yards from the incinerator doors, but if they miraculously evaded the clerics and Enforcers, they would likely be killed by the mob. Zho held up his hands in submission.

The Enforcer scowled and shoved Zho back, just as Pollard passed between the gates. The man bent double from a coughing fit, then stepped into the smoky compound. Zho looked away, the sight of Pollard walking into that abattoir too much to bear. Above him, the smoke rising from the incinerators blotted out the sun.

Zho felt sick and empty inside. Pollard had been right. What difference *did* it make when the one man linking the heathensnuff, the thugs, and Lacerious couldn't testify? He doubted Nidal's necromancers, for all their talent at making the dead talk, could speak with ash on the wind.



At Sever's mansion, the doctor's manservant, Jevers, answered the door. When Zho asked him where Beryl was, Jevers replied he hadn't seen her since that morning. Zho descended to the basement and carefully repacked his alchemy case for the last time. Then he waited as long as he dared, peering into the basement's shadowy corners as the hall clock chimed the hours. Beryl never appeared.

Zho shuffled back across the Usk with the last rays of sunset. Rummy was waiting on the other side.

"Did you get the name?"

Zho nodded. "Lord Lacerious." He stood at the edge of the bridge and looked downriver towards Waterview. He thought he saw smoke drifting over the district. "But I don't know how it will help Lord Fairfallow. Pollard is dead. I promised him I'd help his family leave Leper's Gate. I'll go with them." He tapped his case. "If I get a good price."

Rummy gaped. "You'd sell your kit?"

Zho ignored the question. "You know a ship?"

"Depends where you're headed."

"I hear Jalmeray has the prettiest wenches in the world."

Rummy looked at him askance. "And Beryl?"

"You heard her. She doesn't need my help." He leaned on the parapet. "I was foolish to think I'd ever fit in here. Those Kuthites..." He trailed off, too disgusted

to describe the Culling. Squinting downriver, he thought he saw flames amid the smoke; it looked like a building burning.

Rummy followed Zho's gaze. "Is that Fairfallow's warehouse?" Zho felt his chest tighten.

"Beryl," he thought.

"Do you still have that boat?"

Rummy stamped his peg. "Don't be daft! You row anywhere near that fire and they'll have you pilloried for arson and trespass."

Zho trembled. "It's my fault. I gave her my chemicals. She didn't know how to use them. I should have gone, no matter what she said!" As he watched the conflagration growing in Waterview, he shook helplessly. The cold onshore wind blew at his back, and the remembered stench of burnt flesh threatened to overwhelm him. He must be going mad because he thought he smelled Beryl's perfume, night-blooming cestrum, mingling with the smoke.

Rummy tapped him on the shoulder and pointed across the bridge. Zho turned and saw a familiar hourglass figure step from the shadow of the bridge's gatehouse. Beryl rushed to him and took his hand. Her frayed cape reeked of chemicals, smoke, and a hint of perfume.

"Jevers told me you'd wait for me. You have the name?"

Zho nodded. His throat constricted; he struggled to speak. "Beryl, you—"

She looked down at her ruined clothes. "I'm not as good an alchemist as I'd hoped." She looked over the parapet towards Waterview. "Father will need to postpone his demonstration." She faced Zho. "The name?"

"Lacerious."

A broad smile flashed across her face, pulling apart her scars.

"I knew it!"

Impulsively, she embraced Zho in a hug. His case fell, unnoticed, at his feet. The top of her head brushed his chin and he inhaled the scent of cestrum and smoke in her hair. When she stepped back and looked up at him, he saw newfound respect in her eyes. Then he remembered the promise he made to Pollard.

"Beryl, it won't do us any good. The man Lacerious hired is dead and his family is in danger if he's exposed. Lacerious betrayed him to the Silent Shroud. He may be getting rid of anyone who knows anything about his plot."

"Then we've got to get to them first." She linked her arm through his.

"You'll go with me to Southbank?"

She nodded. Rummy picked up Zho's case where he had dropped it. "It's a long walk to Leper's Gate."

"Yes," thought Zho. "Maybe long enough to find the words I need to say to her."



Despite his intentions, Zho found talking difficult. The unfamiliar sights and sounds of Southbank distracted Beryl. The streets here were busiest at dawn and dusk; Southlanders lived their lives in the marginal times between their masters' hours. Not content to let the crowds jostle Zho, Rummy also kept nudging Zho with his elbow and winking broadly at him when Beryl wasn't looking. Rummy's lewd gestures only succeeded in driving Zho further into an embarrassed silence.

As they turned onto Leper's Gate Road, the buildings and people grew shabbier.

They were nearing the city's south wall and the hovels of Nisroch's poorest residents. Malnourished children played quietly in doorways. They stopped and stared as Beryl passed. By the standards of the nobility she was beneath notice, but by Southbank standards she represented the elite. With everyone staring, Zho found it impossible to speak; whenever he opened his mouth he was sure a southlander was preparing to read his lips. The Enforcers weren't the only Nisrochis who did that.

13 Leper's Gate Road was a dark brick building with patches of crumbling mortar. Zho climbed the step and knocked on the door. He heard the creak of a crossbar being lifted. The door opened a fraction of the way and a woman's gaunt face peered out. Her yellow eyes looked them over carefully. Seeing Beryl, she opened the door wider.

"Are you Mrs. Pollard?" Zho asked.

"Yes, sir." Her voice barely rose above a whisper.

"We would like to speak with you about your husband." A pained expression crossed her face, but she opened the door and stood aside, curtsying low as Beryl entered.

The low-ceilinged room was clean, but bare. Two chairs by a small firebox were the only furniture. The firebox didn't cast much light; without Zho's keen sight the room would have been hidden in shadows. One of the chairs was occupied by two small children: a boy sitting listlessly in his older sister's lap while she spooled thread. They looked up fearfully at the strangers. Mrs. Pollard shooed them out of the chair and curtsied again as she offered Zho and Beryl the seats.

"No, Mrs. Pollard. Please sit."

"Exulde, take Ainrof upstairs." The little girl nodded and reluctantly carried her brother up a rickety staircase at the back of the room. Zho was sure the upper floor was freezing. Once the children left, Mrs. Pollard sat. She watched silently, her yellow eyes as cautious as a cat's, as Beryl sat across from her and removed her gloves out of polite habit, although the firebox barely let out enough heat to warm her hands.

"Our condolences, Mrs. Pollard. My name is Beryl Sever. My father, Doctor Sever, is in Lord Fairfallow's service." She gestured to Zho. "My father's assistant spoke with your husband at his end."

Mrs. Pollard, whose flash of pain in the doorway had been her only sign of emotion, spoke rigidly. "It was for the best. My husband wasn't a weak man..." She paused. "But he could have infected the children."

"His last request concerns you and the children." Mrs. Pollard's thin eyebrows knit but she didn't speak. Beryl looked at Zho to continue.

Zho said, "Pollard told me he had sent some men to Lord Fairfallow's warehouse in Waterview at the behest of Lord Lacerious." Mrs. Pollard's eyes widened in surprise. "Do you know anything about that?"

She shook her head fiercely. "I assure you, my husband never had the honor of meeting a Lord. He would have told me."

Zho let it go. Pollard possibly hadn't told his wife about his deal in order to shield her from any repercussions. He decided to press ahead with his good news.

"In return for that information," he continued, "I gave him my word that I would help you and your children to leave Nisroch." Mrs. Pollard gaped at Zho, speechless. "I intend to keep my word. My means are not great, but I think I can obtain passage for you as far as Korvosa or Pezzac, depending on where you would like to go." He glanced quickly at Beryl, unsure how she would react to his next words. "I would go with you to assure your safety."

No emotion crossed Beryl's face, but she shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Mrs. Pollard closed her mouth. Zho could barely hear her when she spoke.

"I am sorry, sir. You are most generous, but I cannot go."

It was Zho's turn to gape. "But why?"

"I don't know anyone in those foreign places. All of my people are here." Beryl tried to warn Zho with a look, but his mounting panic made him angry.

"Mrs. Pollard, your life and your children's lives could be in danger if you stay here. Don't you understand? Your husband may have been killed for his involvement in an intrigue, not because of his cough!"

Mrs. Pollard's fingers dug into the armrests of her chair. "I am sorry, sir, but it is you who does not understand. I told you my husband would have warned me if he was involved in anything. Your offer is very generous, but I cannot accept it."

Zho wanted to argue with her, to make her understand, but Beryl touched his arm and he closed his mouth.

"Thank you, Zho," Beryl said, staring at him severely. She turned to Mrs. Pollard. "If Zho heard your husband's words wrongly, please trust that he made an innocent mistake and only had the best of intentions at heart." She stood and Mrs. Pollard also rose and curtsied, this time abruptly. Beryl took Mrs. Pollard's hand.

"Again, if there is anything you would permit us to do for you in your time of mourning, send word to my father." As Beryl let go of Mrs. Pollard's hands, her eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Are you a seamstress?"

Mrs. Pollard nodded. "Yes."

"Forgive me, but I felt the callous on your index finger."

A weak blush crossed the gaunt woman's face and she lowered her eyes. "My thimble was silver. Pox sold it for a poultice, but it did him no good."

Beryl turned to Zho. "Is that scrap of cloth still in your pocket?" Zho searched his pockets until he found the piece of cloak he had ripped off the ruffian in their fight. Beryl took it and showed it to Mrs. Pollard. Her jaw dropped and her hand flew to the embroidery.

"Where did you get this?"

"Is it your work?"

"Yes!"

"Where did you get the pattern for it?"

Mrs. Pollard looked fearfully from Beryl to Zho and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"A man came. He provided the cloth, the pattern, and the thread. Said he wanted four cloaks. Gave me a lot of money. I told him I could do it for less with cheaper thread, but he insisted I use his. Said he'd check, and if it was different thread or cloth when he came back, he'd bring Enforcers to arrest me." She shuddered.

"Did this man wear livery?"

Mrs. Pollard nodded. "After a fashion. His doublet was embroidered. Showy. Spires stuff, but I knew he wasn't Spires class by how he threatened me." She lowered her voice so that even Zho's sensitive ears strained to hear her. "I saw him talking to my husband, a few days before the Cullers came."

"Did he have a knotted whip design anywhere on him?"

Mrs. Pollard shook her head no. "He did have one thing peculiar: his leather cape. It was...shiny and very thin. Nothing like we see in Southbank."

Beryl took Mrs. Pollard's hands again. "Mrs. Pollard, please don't allow me to

intrude on your mourning, but...your needle work is so fine that I would want no one else to touch my new gown. Would you come with me and work it over? I must have the gown ready by Wealday, for my father's symposium."

Mrs. Pollard bit her lip. Then she said, "My children..."

"By all means, bring them. I am sure they will be no trouble." All her reservations overcome, Mrs. Pollard curtsied and ran upstairs to gather her children. As they left 13 Leper's Gate Road, Zho followed a step behind Beryl, astounded. Cleverly and tactfully, Beryl had managed to lead the Pollards to safety without wounding Mrs. Pollard's stubborn pride.



The portcullis had fallen by the time they reached the bridge. For a moment they did not know what to do. Rummy ran off, leaving them at the quay; the moon had risen by the time he rowed back to them in a dinghy. He and Zho rowed Beryl and the Pollards across the swift-flowing Usk, while Beryl cast a spell over Mrs. Pollard and the children. The spell obscured them in deep shadows, so it seemed to the night watchmen in Graveside that Beryl was only a foolish woman who had kept herself and two servants out too late.

Once Beryl had Mrs. Pollard and the children sewing in her boudoir, she hurried downstairs where Zho and Rummy waited impatiently.

"She's safe now."

"Yes, but for how long? You can't hide her indefinitely."

"I won't need to. Once the man who hired Pollard testifies, Lacerious won't dare to make a move against her."

"How are we going to find him, let alone get him to testify? Mrs. Pollard didn't give us a good description. He could be anyone, or *anywhere*, for that matter."

Beryl shrugged. "I doubt that." She adjusted her gloves and cloak, then pinned her hat on in the hall mirror.

"Where are you going at this hour?"

"Shopping."

"Now?"

Beryl opened the door. "I would appreciate it if you would come with me. And bring your bandoleers."



The nightlife in the Spires was different from night in Southbank. Nobles and their retinues paraded late into the night down the wide, lamp-lit boulevards near Cathedral Summit, where the acolytes and clerics of Zon-Kuthon held midnight services to the Lord of Darkness. Tallow lights shone from the cathedral windows high above them as Beryl led them down a small, dark street in the Lower Spires, where most of the shops were closed. She stopped in front of the sole lighted shop where a wooden shuttle swung in the wind beneath a sign that read "Drapers."

"Should I go around the back?" whispered Rummy. Zho hesitated and looked to Beryl, not sure if Rummy would be safe on his own, but Beryl nodded and Rummy hobbled quietly down an alley to look for a back entrance.

Zho wanted to ask Beryl what her plan was, but she was already opening the door, her jaw clenched. Zho hurried to hold the door as Beryl entered the shop, triggering

a tiny bell on a string. A reddish light suffused the shop from an uncovered lamp above a counter near the western wall. Zho gazed upon tall racks and shelves of dark fabrics; the only hint of color was a burgundy or deep blue here and there. The majority of the cloth was died in somber shades of black and gray, which ate the lamplight and cast deep velvety shadows.

“Mister Draper? Don’t be tiresome. I see you,” Beryl said.

Zho only saw dressers dummies lined up against the east wall, staring back through unseeing glass eyes in their bald wax heads. Zho studied the room keenly but still didn’t see Mr. Draper.

Suddenly, a mound of oily cloth behind the counter rose up and turned to face them. Zho saw a rotund man glaring at him as he stowed a roll of muslin beneath the counter. The lamplight glinted off the gold thread and beads of the elaborately embroidered vest that covered his enormous belly. Draper scratched at the dark mutton-chop whiskers covering his jowls while he inspected Zho as if he were a bolt of hessian. Beryl coughed and Draper turned his attention to her.

“What can I do for you, Miss Sever?” His jowls shook as he spoke.

“I am renewing my gown for my father’s symposium. Do you have any of Lord Fairfallow’s felt? The midnight blue, I think. For trim.”

Draper pursed his lips. “That is rather cheaper quality than you deserve for so important an occasion, don’t you think?”

“Nonsense,” Beryl exclaimed. “I heard yesterday that it is much in demand.” Draper turned his back on her and reached up for a dark blue bolt of felt on the dowel rack behind the counter.

“It is even prized by our noted rivals, is it not?” Beryl said. “I could swear I saw some of Lord Lacerious’s men in that very shade.”

Draper paused for a moment in mid-reach. When he laid the bolt on the counter he looked solemn.

“You must be mistaken, Miss. One blue can easily be mistaken for another.”

Beryl smiled ingratiatingly. “I’m sure you’re right.” She fingered the cloth. “But now that I see it, I see you are also right that it isn’t fine enough.” She sighed dramatically. “I wish I could afford the new leathers that are now in fashion. I believe you yourself are wearing a cape of fey?”

Draper nodded, and lifted a corner of his cape to show off the fabric. “The fairy wings are what give it its shine.”

Beryl frowned. “Leave the felt. My old trim will do. I’ll just spruce it up with needlework.”

Draper nodded, his jowls wobbling, and opened a counter drawer filled with spools of thread.

“The harvest gold, I think.”

Draper’s hand paused over the harvest gold thread. He looked up into Beryl’s eyes. Her dark orbs gave nothing away. As he pulled out the spool, his hand trembled. Beryl took the spool from him and lifted a corner of the felt to it. Then she removed the ripped cloth from her handbag and compared the two threads and felts under the lamp.

“An exact match,” she told Zho.

Draper ogled. He looked about to say something, but shut his mouth and swallowed. Beryl stared daggers at him. After clearing his throat, Draper grinned nervously.

"If you want a new uniform, Miss, for your, ah, servant, I can arrange it."

"This patch didn't come from a servant." Beryl waved the ripped cloth under Draper's nose.

"You keep the patterns for Fairfallow livery, and you have his colors for cloth and thread. What's more, you were seen with these in Southbank. So tell me, what's the punishment for impersonating a lord of Nidal?"

Draper turned as white as a sheet. "I never impersonated a Lord!"

"But you betrayed one," said Beryl. "You owe Lord Fairfallow an explanation." Draper ceased trembling. A sneer contorted his features.

"I owe him nothing. I'm my own man! The last of the free Chelaxians in this town!" He snatched for the cloth but Beryl pulled it out of the way as Draper's huge belly blocked his reach across the counter. Zho stepped forward, his hand hovering over his bandoleer, watching for Draper's next move.

Draper growled something low and guttural. He pulled a brass key from the drawer while making a locking motion with his hand. Suddenly the street door slammed shut. Zho ran to it and pulled on the handle—it was locked, held shut by magic. Beryl didn't seem to care that their exit was blocked.

"Free?" she spit back at Draper. "When did Lacerious buy you your fancy fey cape and embroidered vests?"

Draper snorted in contempt. "You hidebound Nisrochis think you can play anyone against each other." Spittle flew from his mouth. "I've seen the pirates your Over-Diocesan harbors here! They're preying on honest Chelaxian traders, right under everyone's noses! Well, I can play that game, too. Lacerious gets his waterfront property and I make a profit."

"But you were chartered by Lord Fairfallow!" Beryl looked aghast.

Draper's face reddened and he snarled.

"To Hell with him!"

Draper gestured again and spoke an infernal word of power. Red light sprang from his fingertips and crackled over the iron bodies of the dummies. They began to stretch and move forward across the room on squeaky metal wheels. Their glass eyes turned in their wax heads to stare at Beryl and Zho. Beryl gasped as she saw the dressers' dummies brandish long sharp shears.

Zho pulled a vial from his belt, popped off the stopper, and swallowed. As the liquid ran down his throat, he felt his hands and feet tingle and his muscles jump; the small hairs on his face stood on end and his pupils became narrow slits in yellow irises. He sprang past a dummy that swiped at him with its shears and leapt to the shelves lining the walls. He pulled down a long bolt of fabric and flung it over the dummy's head. But the dummy wasn't guided by its sightless eyes and it continued moving towards Beryl, its shears cutting a long gash in the cloth covering it. The other dummies also advanced, backing Beryl against the counter front. Icy words rolled off her lips as she turned towards Draper, who held a sewing chatelaine on a long chain from his vest between his hands. He lunged at Beryl, trying to wrap the chain around her neck like a garrote, but he was too slow. She reached for the sky, finishing her spell.

A sudden darkness climbed up Draper's corpulent frame; his own shadow grew in front of him, moving independently of the lamplight and its former master. Draper quivered in his shadow's bone-chilling cold, loosening the chain around Beryl's neck. He let go just as the nearest dummy's pinking shears slashed at her.

Using his unnatural reflexes, Zho dove between Beryl and the shears, grasping the dummy's wrist to prevent the blow. The dummy's other wooden hand slapped his jaw. It hurt like a bludgeon. The other dummies turned to join in the attack. Beryl unwound the chatelaine around her neck while she climbed onto the countertop. On her hands and knees, she began opening the drawers beneath the counter while Draper tried to push away his own gauzelike shadow from his face.

"What are you doing?" Zho ducked beneath one of the dummy's battering arms and narrowly dodged another's shears.

"I'm looking for his books!"

"What books?"

Draper screamed in frustration as his hands passed through his shadow and its shocking cold ran through him. He began muttering in a dark tongue and in an instant, brilliant red flames leaped from his fingertips, the light and heat eating at his shadow like a fire, burning holes in the darkness.

"I found them!" Beryl climbed to her feet on the counter, pulling two heavy black books from a shelf. Her grasp stopped short: a metal chain latched each book to its twin and its shelf.

"He still has the key!" she groaned.

Beryl's distress distracted Zho just enough that one of the dummies, slicing upward, cut a long gash along his right arm. He ground his teeth in pain and jumped away from the counter as a dummy tried to ram him with its wheels. Two of the dummies turned to face him with their lifeless glass eyes. The third moved against Beryl again.

"Beryl, get out of here! We're outmatched!"

"We need the books!"

Another spray of flame burst from Draper's hands. The shadow burned; it was almost entirely eaten away now; long streams of lamplight fell through it. Beryl turned with the books in her hands to try to bolster the shadow with a word. The dummy lunged at her, its shears narrowly missing her arm and slicing through the chain. The stroke's downward force drove the shear tip deep into the wooden countertop. Beryl stared at the cut, wide-eyed. Then she kicked the dummy in the face, but the animated dummy stood firm on its heavy metal base.

"Take the books and go!" Zho shouted.

The dummy jerked its arm up, freeing the shear. The two dummies after Zho lunged at him at once. He dove into a pile of fabric rolls and the dummies struck each other with a resounding clang. Beryl pulled a yard of black velvet from a dowel on the shelf behind the counter and covered herself, muttering a magic word. A moment later, the velvet that had draped her fell formlessly to the countertop.

That instant, Draper burned away the last of his shadow. Breathing heavily, he turned his blood-shot eyes towards Zho, his only remaining foe. A dummy's hand slammed into Zho's shoulder above his sliced arm, pushing him into the shelves along the east wall. Zho reached up for a handhold and began climbing the shelves with the dummies slashing at his legs and feet.

"Give up, Draper!" he shouted. "Beryl's gone, and she's taken your spell books!"

Draper laughed darkly.

"Those weren't spell books."

He aimed his fingers at Zho and spoke a word of power. A red ray flashed across the room and struck Zho in the chest. Weakened, he lost his grip on the shelves and

fell onto the dummies, whose shears rose to skewer him. He screamed in agony as the shears cut into him, but the mutagen roiling through his blood forced his limbs to turn and his sinews to stretch. His unnatural reflexes helped him land on his feet between the dummies, while a third rolled towards him across the shop floor.

Zho crouched into a roll as the dummies attacked. The first two missed him but the third's arm slammed into his back as he tried to roll away. The blow's momentum sent him sprawling. Glass eyes stared down at him as the dummies wheeled towards him. Zho grimaced in pain as he rolled further away—right to Draper's feet. The sorcerer had moved out from behind the counter.

Draper raised his hand and gestured. The dummies stood motionless.

“I'll skin you alive,” Draper wheezed. The sweat from his magical exertion poured down his face. He pointed at Zho and bellowed in infernal speech. A red ray zapped Zho in the forehead and he felt his limbs go slack.

Just then, a shear flew into Draper's immense gut. Draper shrieked and looked up at the doorway to the back of the shop. A short, peg-legged figure stood there, two pairs of scissors held expertly between the fingers of his hands.

“What'll we do with a greenhorn mage?” Rummy sang, and magic rippled through the notes. He threw one pair of scissors, striking Draper in the shoulder with uncanny accuracy. “Burn his books and hang the squab!” The other pair nicked Draper's head and flew past. “How d' we pluck the eagle splayed?” Rummy stamped closer, drawing a knife from his belt. Draper pulled the shears from his gut and placed a hand over the wound, blood seeping between his fingers; with his other hand he pointed at Rummy. Rummy sang, “Shoot from the crow's nest, heave ho!”

Draper had begun to speak, but Rummy's shout was so loud that it drowned him out and released a shock wave that rattled the shop windows. Draper's spell died on his lips.

Zho felt the mutagen in his blood slowing, suppressed by the ray's debilitating magic. His yellow irises paled and his pupils expanded; the hairs on his face receded. Though he could barely lift his hand, he stretched his fingers towards a vial tucked in his bandoleer. He pushed off the cork with his thumb and shakily lifted the vial to his lips. Some of the extract splashed down his chin but he swallowed most of it. It tasted grassy and smelled like burnt offal, but he kept it down.

Draper's elaborately embroidered vest began to glow. Rummy squinted as the runes sewn into the pattern turned red and gold with power. Draper stopped the bleeding from the scissors wound in his gut. He stood straighter and stopped panting.

Zho felt the tips of his ears harden into cartilage and a stubborn strength surged through him as the mutagen worked its magic. With a burst of strength he jumped to his feet and bellowed like a bull. He almost slipped on his own blood, but didn't notice. He charged at Draper.

Draper, surprisingly fast on his feet now for such a heavy man, dodged out of Zho's way, his fey cape swishing past him. Rummy lunged at Draper's neck with his dagger, striking for his jugular. The runes on Draper's vest erupted with tendrils of gold thread that climbed up in a latticework between them. The metal threads twisted around the dagger, forcing it aside.

Zho grabbed Draper from behind, but the man's bulk kept Zho from pulling him off balance. Unable to knock him over, Zho used the strength the potion gave him to hold down Draper's arms, preventing the sorcerer from using the fiery spell at his fingertips. Rummy kept trying to stab Draper with his dagger, but each time the vest's

magical threads turned the blade aside. No matter where Rummy struck, high or low, body or limb, the threads extended and brushed away the weapon.

“Open up his vest!” Zho ordered.

Rummy reached for the buttons. When he touched them, they glowed red hot and he had to instantly let go. Draper seemed unaffected by the heat. He muttered under his breath in Infernal as he tried to worm his way out of Zho’s iron grip.

Suddenly, the vest burst into flames. Zho let go as the fire licked against his flesh. Draper, unburned by his enveloping fire, laughed and ran to the door of his shop.

“Stop him!” Zho’s second mutagen gave him strength, but the quickness of limb from his cat-gut concoction was gone. He couldn’t match Draper’s speed. Rummy threw an ineffectual dagger that simply bounced off the burning vest.

Draper opened the shop door, making the little bell tinkle. Halfway through the door, a strong kick propelled Draper back into the shop. The kicker’s gaunt, haunted face peered inside, then silently gestured behind itself.

Four Silent Enforcers stepped into the room, spreading out around Draper. The moment they stepped through the doorway, Rummy grabbed Zho’s hand and sprinted for the back of the shop as fast his leg and peg would carry him. Out of the corner of his eye, Zho saw an Enforcer drive a punch at Draper’s head that was too quick for the magical vest to counter.

Rummy ran through the cluttered back room of the shop, around cutting tables and mounds of fabric. Zho thought they were heading for the door to the alley, but Rummy pushed aside a curtain and gestured at a staircase leading up to the second floor. Putting his fingers to his lips, he hastily wrapped a piece of fabric around his peg leg. Zho heard the sound of thuds, groans, and Infernal curses coming from the front of the shop. They climbed upstairs as quietly as possible, hoping the Enforcers were too busy dealing with Draper’s spells to bother coming after them.

Upstairs, Zho found himself in a small sitting room. Rummy quietly opened a door to a bedroom. The bedroom contained a window, which Rummy opened as quietly as its hinges allowed, while Zho latched back the shutters to make sure they didn’t clatter in the wind. A smattering of wind-blown rain hit their faces as they peered outside.

“Out we go,” Rummy whispered.

Zho knew they didn’t have a choice. He was sure an Enforcer guarded the alley. This was their only way out. They would have to chance the slick roof shingles. Zho grabbed the silk sheets from Draper’s four-poster bed and tied one end around himself and Rummy in case either of them fell. A heavy thud from downstairs told him that Draper had fallen.

Rummy and Zho carefully made their way up the drainpipe, then onto the rooftop. They moved quickly, but Zho worried they wouldn’t be quick enough. His half-elven eyes caught a shadowy movement behind them and he ducked behind a chimney, pulling Rummy with him. He looked cautiously around the chimney in the direction he had seen the movement. A lanky man’s silhouette stood there against the stars, his shorn head scanning the rooftop. Then the man moved off in the opposite direction. Zho tapped Rummy to keep moving. At last they came to a break in the buildings and cautiously shimmied down a drainpipe to the street.

“I would have come to your aid sooner,” Rummy whispered, once they were on the ground, “but I had to make sure there weren’t others lurking in the shop. That’s when I found the stairs. Thank Desna I did. I didn’t know those hush men were on

our trail.”

Zho looked cautiously down the street. “Do you think they’ll kill Draper?”

Rummy shrugged.

“Who do you think tipped them off?”

Rummy looked slyly at Zho. “I believe your shadow wench may have had a hand in that.”

Zho shook his head. His “Tincture of Taurus” was wearing off and he was starting to weaken. He sagged and Rummy caught him under the arm.

“Let’s get out of here,” Rummy said. Zho was too weak to do more than put one foot in front of the other. He even lacked the strength to tell Rummy not to take him back to Sever’s mansion.



Justice was not blind in Nisroch, except when the rites of Zon-Kuthon demanded blinding. Yet something like justice, eminently lawful, saw a pale and thinner Draper chained in the witness box in the grand dark building off of the avenue leading to “pillory plaza” in Southbank. This was a colloquial name for the Pillars of the Howling Prophet, where a rougher justice was meted out to the common criminal. Draper would be forced to stand there soon, but for now his shaky finger pointed across the courtroom at a dark thin figure seated languidly at the defendant’s bench.

Zho and Beryl, seated high above in the gallery, visibly flinched at the pointed finger, but Sarkazein Lacerious did not twitch a muscle. He would have kept his cool demeanor even if Draper’s wrists had been free of their heavy manacles inscribed with abjuring runes. Lacerious gazed at Draper through drooping lids, as if nothing said or done in the court had anything to do with him.

The judges dismissed Draper after his final identification of the man who had conspired with him to defraud Lord Fairfallow of his coin and property. They had heard the testimony and seen the evidence with their own eyes: the black-bound ledgers where Draper entered his sums, and the secret, magically-hidden text that revealed his dealings with Lacerious.

The court had asked Lacerious about his payments to Draper, and the Lord had dismissed the sums as trifles for which he could hardly be expected to account. But Draper’s notations and words, and the carefully examined rolls of cloth from his shop, damned him. Unfortunately for justice, the sorcerer would be the only one convicted of theft and conspiracy; the person who had sewn the clothes and the men who had worn them were missing.

“Yet,” the leading judge said when handing down the verdict, “we can reasonably expect that they were the arsonists who burned down Lord Fairfallow’s warehouse, the property in dispute in the case of Lacerious versus Fairfallow. The ferryman testified to having seen four men wearing Lord Fairfallow’s livery the morning of the warehouse fire, and as his lordship testified that no men of that description are in his service.”

Beryl reached over and squeezed Zho’s hand. Luckily, the ferryman had left Zho and Rummy out of his testimony.

“There is insufficient evidence to convict Lord Lacerious of any wrongdoing,” the judge continued. “His Lordship paid Draper for cloth matching the ferryman’s description, but that in itself is not sufficient proof that he was involved in a

conspiracy. Mr. Draper's claims do not hold with this court—he is a foreigner known for speaking against Nidal. Without firmer proof, only his Lordship's conscience can answer for his actions. Yet we have advised Pangolais about this case, and they have elected to take our verdict into advisement in his suit."

Lord Lacerious's thin mustache twitched beneath his marble nose. It was his most expressive gesture throughout the trial. Zho smiled inwardly—Sarkazein knew he was beaten; he would likely drop his suit against Fairfallow. The stink of conspiracy hovering over it was too thick for any jurist to ignore.

When the judges read the final verdict, Draper spat and rattled his chains in defiance as the Enforcers led him to the pillars. Descending from the gallery to the street door, Zho noted happily that Beryl was still holding his hand. He was glad Doctor Sever had treated his lye burns and other injuries so skillfully. The fact that the hand holding his was Beryl's helped alleviate his pain, too.

"I'm sorry I couldn't warn you about the Enforcers," Beryl said. "As soon as I handed the ledger books to my contact in the Shroud, things began moving. They had been looking for an excuse to get Draper for a long time."

"Ridding the city of Chelish influence. A commendable goal," said a reedy voice.

Zho and Beryl turned quickly to face the speaker. The slim, dark form standing beside them looked down at them from beneath drooping eyelids. Sarkazein Lacerious's eyes took on a mocking brightness as Zho's arm reached protectively around Beryl.

"Oh, you have no reason to worry about me, Zho. I don't bite." Lacerious bared his teeth in a grin as hot and friendly as a lightning bolt. "I simply wish to extend my congratulations to Miss Beryl, on her father's success at the symposium. I keep up with the doings at the academy. I follow them *very* closely."

He bowed curtly to Beryl, then stepped outside into the daylight where a footman opened the door to a coach and ushered him inside. With the crack of his driver's whip Lacerious was gone. Despite the uncustomary sunshine, Beryl shivered.

"Don't worry," Zho said, "his threats don't mean anything. He's just bitter because he lost."

Beryl clung to his arm. "Zho? Are you going away with Mrs. Pollard? She really isn't safe here now."

Zho didn't know what to say. He looked down at Beryl, at the little scars framing her lips, and without thinking, kissed her. She didn't pull away. Zho did so reluctantly, once he realized he was making a spectacle of himself in front of the pillars mob, who were always looking for a show of one kind or another.

"I gave my word."

"Couldn't Rummy go instead?"

Zho thought about it. Only days ago he had been desperate to leave Nisroch. Now on the cusp of leaving, he was reluctant to go. He had been unable to save Pollard, but Zho knew his potions could save others like him. Then they wouldn't have to turn to heathensnuff and men like Lacerious for help. Also, Beryl needed him now.

"Well...Rummy has always wanted to go to Jalmeray."

"Imagine Mrs. Pollard in Jalmeray!"

Zho looked up at the pillars in the square, draped with dark, rusted chains, then back at Beryl, her teeth flashing white as she laughed in the sunlight, her arm linked through his. Zho thought, "You have me, Pharamsa, Queen of Fate. I escaped one kind of bondage only to find myself in another." Beryl chuckled, imagining Mrs.

Pollard in a sari on a sandy beach. A Kelish phrase sprung to Zho's mind: *the heavy fetters of Fate*. Right now, accompanying Beryl away from the plaza, he wore his own particular fetter with more pride than he had his chain of honor.

SPIT AND POLISH

by Derek Johnson
Pathfinder Chronicler Original Story

Caison crinkled his nose in reaction to the cleaning solution's caustic fumes. He thought he'd gotten used to the tear-generating vapors, but as he rubbed the cloth over the plaque, it smelled stronger than the first time he was introduced to it. Persh had been ordered to overpower the solution under the supervision of Dolan, to enhance the punishment.

Assistant Sword Master Dolan always had Caison pay off demerits in Sky Reach's Grand Hall, so everyone could witness him doing the same chore over and over. Pathfinders and dignitaries would pass by and openly chortle or snicker, while maintaining their appearance of aloofness. Caison had cleaned the hall so often that they nicknamed him "Buff." Dolan held a personal grudge for the Initiate and despised his willful defiance toward instructors. He knew Caison deemed his instructors' deeds feeble, demands petty, and lessons lacking. Nothing infuriated Dolan more than the Initiate's insolence, and he took unwarranted pleasure with his excessive punishments. Caison conceded years before he would take whatever chores the petulant instructor doled out.

Despite these hardships, Caison was thankful to receive hot meals and sleep under a dry roof in the grand city of Absalom. He'd spent his first twenty years in The Narrows of Oppara, living in squalor, fending off threats and getting by on the streets. Family and personal ties led to trouble, and when the opportunity arose, he cut those bonds.

Joining the Pathfinder Society afforded Caison the possibility to become a world explorer. In training, he kept to task, pushing for his full member status. Every trial he passed was one step closer to his goal, but his disrespect for authority was leading to his downfall. The Narrows of Oppara taught Caison much about authority, and if he had followed the rules, he either would have starved or become a slave. The only reason he was standing in the Grand Lodge was purely due to his disrespect for rules and the people who benefited from them. Caison hoped his deeds outweighed his faults, but he was beginning to doubt himself.

A dry voice cracked from across the long corridor, "While you're in here, use this feather duster and get the cobwebs off the statuary." Persh dropped an ostrich-

feathered implement to the ground and departed.

“Aye, sir.”

Persh didn’t warrant a sir, but Dolan had put the caretaker in charge of Caison so often he was like a commanding officer. Persh enjoyed the role and appreciated the respect. Caison reflected on the irony; despite his disdain for authority, years of training had planted the word sir in his vocabulary, and now it flowed off his lips meaninglessly.

Caison completed his polishing and corked the solution bottle. The feather duster waited across the hall. Though he’d been in Sky Reach’s Grand Hall countless times, he never tired of looking at the objects it contained. He paused in front of a silver goblet to read the etching on a placard. It told the tale of Irik Elinder, the pathfinder who brought the goblet from Usaro. The curious object exhibited designs of the Linnorm Kingdoms, but was found far from its home in a deserted Garundi temple. No one cared to know, but Caison meticulously polished the plaque so many times that he memorized every word.

He grinned, thinking that one day his own conquests would be etched in silver. His mind daydreamed of a sultry jungle in which he clung to the edge of a stone pyramid, searching for a hidden door. His mates waited below, watching anxiously as he crept along, searching for the next handhold. If he couldn’t find another entrance, their week-long journey through the dense foliage would be for naught. Beads of sweat trickled into his eyes and his muscles ached from exhaustion. He felt for a hidden panel and rejoiced in the feel of a mechanism. He then slid the panel’s cover and worked a tiny lever with his nimble fingers. A shudder and a puff of dust, and the door swung in. “Huzzah!” yelled his companions, and Caison’s heart filled with pride. But suddenly, a swarm of hostile natives streamed from the trees surrounding the group. Outnumbered, his companions surrendered to the cannibalistic savages. Again, it was up to Caison the Unmatched, world renowned Seeker of Secrets, to rescue his doomed comrades.

Stomping feet and loud discussion startled Caison back to reality. He double-timed to the feather duster and swept it off the floor as three men hurried into the hall: the Master of Lore, the Master of Swords, and Venture Captain Adril Hestram. They paid Caison no mind as they strode past. The Master of Lore was a bespectacled grey haired half-elf who Caison found rather stuffy and full of himself. Behind, trailed the Master of Swords, Dolan’s direct superior. He was a broad-shouldered man, burdened by a severe limp and carried a cane to offset the difference. They chattered excitedly about some matter with Venture Captain Hestram arguing in the middle. Hestram grumbled about poor timing, poor choices, and poor luck.

Caison gathered what information he could from the rapidly moving group. The discussion was about a shipwreck, lost cargo, and missing Pathfinders. The three men disappeared through a door further down the corridor. Caison stood still, considering all he overheard. They spoke so hurriedly over one another that he couldn’t put the pieces together, though individually each part of the story could seed a row of tales.

The initiate began dusting the relics. He frowned as the lint fell on silver plaques that he had just polished. Dolan would find it lacking. Caison continued but took no care dusting, knowing well the outcome. He flicked the ostrich feathers quickly over each detail of the item, making for the center hallway and then the heavy oak door. He could hear muffled voices and occasionally one that rose above all others. Caison knew it to be Hestram’s. Ever jovial, the Venture Captain’s voice never ceased to

boom, but when he was angry, he could shout down an angry troll.

Caison lingered near a single-eyed wooden idol on the left side of the door until he feared the duster's feathers would strip. He then moved to a mounted jeweled broach that lay on the right and cursed no eight-foot statue was there to mask his dalliance. He strained to discern any speech, but the door was designed to prevent such eavesdropping, and just as he considered placing his ear against the door, the voices ceased. Quickly, the initiate jumped back, skipping over the next two items to put distance between himself and the conversation.

"I suppose I'll just grab the first one I see," Hestram shouted as he threw the door open. "You, you there. What's your name?" Caison kept his head down, feigning focus on his work.

"You're ridiculous, Adril." The Master of Lore relaxed as an amused grin cracked the old half-elf's wrinkled face. He removed his glasses to polish them at length, shaking his head.

"What's your name?" Hestram bellowed as he walked toward the initiate, ignoring the derisive Lore Master. Caison had been hazed before and wasn't sure if this was a test or a trick. Nonetheless, Hestram was not a man one ignored. The Venture Captain's thick arms and meaty hands were as strong as a sailor's. "You! I asked your name."

"That's Buff," the Master of Swords snubbed as he hobbled after the Venture Captain. Caison bristled at the use of his hated nickname.

"Buff? That's an odd name. You look Taldoran. Never heard of a name like that from Taldor."

"Buff's a nickname." The Master of Swords smirked wryly. The battered veteran leaned heavily on his cane. The Venture Captain glared at the cripple, irritated as he spoke for the Initiate.

"Name?" the Venture Captain repeated curtly.

"Caison, sir."

"So you speak! Good, get your bag—you're leaving."

The Master of Swords stomped his cane.

"Venture Captain Adril, listen to me! He's a boy, not even prepared for his final trial. He's cleaning this hall as a 'third year' because he's washing out. My assistant Dolan has told me repeatedly this boy has no respect for his . . ."

"I'm no boy!" Silence filled the hall as the three men's voices hushed.

Caison had the misfortune of being short, a mere five feet tall. His stature didn't bother him and even proved advantageous at times. However, it pained him that so many treated him as a child. Back in Taldor, he wanted to grow a beard to bring the point home, but social codes forbade it. Ironically, being away from Taldor allowed the opportunity to prove his manliness, but his heritage revealed facial hairs that looked comical at best.

The Master of Swords glared as he lifted his cane to slap down the boy's indignant behavior, but the laugh of Venture Captain Hestram stayed his hand. "Your assistant Dolan couldn't even find the Grand Hall as an initiate. Not a good sign for a Pathfinder. That's probably why he's an instructor here."

"Venture Captain!" the Master of Lore cried, aghast by the insolent remark. The half-elf shook his head in disapproval, and Hestram could see his colleague considering just how this ill behavior could benefit him. Hestram cared little for political maneuvering.

“Caison,” Adril’s voice softened, altogether ignoring the Masters’ protests. “I need someone who is perceptive and quick on their feet. You were trying to listen at the door, and I’ve no doubt you heard things you shouldn’t. Yet, you were quick enough to move away when our voices died.” The initiate stared open-mouthed as the Venture Captain strolled over to wipe a finger along one of the pieces Caison skipped. With a small laugh, he held up his finger, revealing dust.

“Sir,” Caison stammered, “why me? There are others of my echelon available, and they’ve received far more accolades.” The thought of being dispatched on a real mission excited Caison, but uncertainty over why he was being chosen remained.

“You, Caison Poriat of Oppara’s Narrows, lack discipline. You’re disagreeable, work poorly in concert with your peers, and irritate those under whom you serve.” Caison stood, dumbfounded at the Venture Captain’s knowledge of his background. “But your skills are well known to me and your marks exemplary. You have no lasting ties, here or elsewhere.” He tagged on the last remark pointedly.

“S-sir, you knew my name the whole time? You know me?”

“You’re not the only perceptive person within the walls of the Grand Lodge. I like to put on a good show for the Puppet Masters. They take me for a dolt.” He turned and glared at his colleagues. “Get your bag, you’re leaving with me.”

The Master of Swords shook his cane at the Hestram. “This is very unwise and Venture Captain Valsin will be displeased.”

“You’ve made the mistakes and I’m cleaning it up,” Hestram shot at the two. “Chief Venture Captain Ambus isn’t here to consult, and our ranks are scattered across Golarion. I’ve a shallow pool from which to fish, and I can’t afford to throw back even the small ones. I’ll deal with Ambus’ objections when he returns.”

The Venture Captain looked down, his toothy grin separating his mustache from his beard. “You still here?”

Caison dropped the feather brush and rushed for the door, but turned back with his usual audacity, “Could one of you return that feather duster to Assistant Master Dolan?”

Hestram looked to the Master of Swords. “Dolan’s your assistant—pick it up.”

The Master of Swords sneered, stomping away with his cane. “I don’t have to pick it up! That’s why I have Dolan.”

Adril Hestram’s booming laugh followed Caison as fled the building.



With a stroke of a quill, Hestram drew up the papers, giving Caison temporary status as a Pathfinder operative. And not even a day after his commission, he and three other Pathfinders set out from Absalom across the island of Kortos. The brief day and a half journey was destined for the coast as dark brooding clouds filled the horizon. To Caison’s surprise, not a drop of rain soaked their camp and by morning the sky cleared. As the sun reached noon, Caison put his hand on his sheathed sword and smiled at the sound of light waves in the distance. The warmth of the midday sun bathed the four travelers with an anxious hope that soon they would reach their objective.

“Hold here.”

Caison halted as their leader held up his hand. The sleek warrior moved forward alone, scouting the immediate area. After a moment, he signaled the “all clear” and

motioned the group forward. Caison respected the man and recognized his true leadership qualities. Helstram introduced him as Aramed at the Grand Lodge, but the other companions called him Amed. He was a devout warrior, and prayed often to his god Iomodae.

From the top of a ridge, the four overlooked a crescent shaped beach. Jagged rocks jutted on both sides of the tiny bay's entrance, making for a narrow passage. Waves hurled against the rocks and exploded into white spray. Blinding light from the sun reflected off white sands. The glare was nearly complete, except for the dark shape of a three-masted carrack that leaned heavily on its port side, just beyond water's reach.

"So there it is."

Caison turned in surprise of hearing the heavyset Garundi speak. Seldom did the man say a word, detached and distant from everyone. Hestram had introduced him as Jun, which was short for Juniper; it was the tree his order named him after.

Caison wanted to learn as much as he could from these men, but couldn't resist the beautiful woman who completed their number. Her name was Nadilia, and Caison was smitten the moment he laid eyes on her. She was a wizard and held power that could kill a man dead—but to Caison, she was graceful and soft with a voice as gentle as a breeze. When she wasn't noticing, he would glance at her exquisite form, enchanted by her stunning presence. Sometimes she would catch him staring and when she turned to look, he would switch to something else, shying away from her eyes. Nadilia's beauty garnered Caison's respect but it went further than appearance. To him, she was an organizer and a follower of strict routines. Caison admired how she made clarity of every detail she was handed. She also appreciated him for the skillful way he expedited the tasks she gave him.

The afternoon sun waned and Amed studied the ship carefully from the bluff. He was a tall man, and his posture and carriage made him taller still. Calling Caison to his side, he knelt down so he could look the initiate in the eyes. Caison clenched his teeth as the larger man gave him a pitying look a child deserved. On the verge of condescension, he gently spoke.

"Before we left, Venture Captain Hestram gave me this sealed note. He instructed me to give it to you upon our arrival."

Caison reached to take the parchment and noticed his other companions watching. He could see their surprise as the secretive letter passed from Amed's hands to his. The note was folded and sealed in a wax of impossible swirling colors, bearing the stamp of Adril Hestram. Caison moved to break the seal, but Amed shook his head.

"No, lad. Continue to the beach. We will remain up here and set up camp. When you get there, open it. Then scout the ship and report back. Hestram gave strict orders for you to go alone."

Caison understood; the Venture Captain sealed it so the others wouldn't know its contents. The initiate noticed how the unopened letter cast a gloom upon the group's mood. Amed had carried this secret letter all the way from Absalom, and it shamed him that he wasn't trusted to speak for Hestram. Caison sat his pack on the ground and removed some items and a knife. He gave a final look to Nadilia and began his descent to the beach.

"Go with our full faith, Caison," Nadilia spoke softly, barely audible over the crashing waves. Caison smiled but feared the letter would say something he didn't want to know. Since their departure, Nadilia constantly reassured Caison on his

skills, but now he couldn't tell if she was truthful or merely trying to gain his trust.

"We'll have dinner prepared for your return," Jun yelled. Caison knew the large man's remarks were made in hope more than pledge. Not interested in food, Caison nodded in acknowledgement and slipped from sight.

The climb down proceeded quickly with the aid of sturdy-rooted plants, and when he reached the bottom, Caison took his first step on the beach. The waves and the sounds of birds made it difficult to hear, but he adjusted after a while and scouted the area for signs of movement. When he was sure nothing stirred, he found a tuft of marram grass upon which to sit and read.

"Initiate Caison—"

"I have selected you for the skills demonstrated during your training. I personally examined your background when you entered our walls, and have inquired of you regularly. Despite your foibles, I believe you trustworthy and reliable. Thus, I have entrusted you with completion of a most important task. Though your group is responsible for the recovery of our missing Pathfinders, I am tasking you with the retrieval of a very specific scroll. It's composed on interwoven blades of grass with rollers made of silver and elvish runes on the caps. Find the scroll and return it to the Society. All other items are inconsequential."

"Kroop Palish, the only returning member from the expedition, has rambled incoherently since his arrival back in Absalom. He repeatedly utters the name Pak Threestone, a halfling who has been in our ranks for nearly ten years. I can't be sure, but this Pathfinder may be responsible for all that has happened. The halfling's loyalty had come into question prior to the expedition, and against better judgment, the Master of Lore still insisted he be sent. Pak is wily, so be careful. Lastly, do not place much stock in any of your three companions. I know you have no personal or professional attachments other than the Society, and that is why I chose you. However, each of them was selected by the Master of Lore, and while—"

"AH"

The letter ended abruptly, and the initials were hastily scribbled. Caison tucked the letter into one of his pockets and looked up at the bluff to see Jun looking down, his big frame silhouetted against the blue sky. Behind the man, Nadilia and Amed made camp.

Caison turned and looked at the beached ship. He drew his knife and set about sharpening its edges. When satisfied, he slowly walked to the silent vessel.



As Caison neared, he noticed the ship's hull was still intact. Somehow it had avoided the rocks at bay's mouth. He climbed his way to the main deck, aided by loose rigging on the portside of the ship. When he reached the top, he found the deck in complete disarray. Knots for the rigging were loose, and when Caison checked them over, one accidentally unraveled, causing a terrible crash. Grabbing his knife, he waiting for a response—but nothing came. An ajar door towards the aft of the ship revealed stairs leading to the lower decks.

Holding his knife before him, Caison moved towards the door. He tugged several times to pry it open, and when it relented, he took his first step downward. A terrible creak made Caison wince as its echo traveled throughout the hold. Sighing deeply, the initiate took pains to dampen any more sounds as he proceeded down into the

blackness. The stench of the bilge water, oil, and rot made him want to gag. Caison pulled his shirt over his nose, waiting for his sense of smell to dull. He crouched down to silently listen. The scurrying of tiny feet starting and stopping could be heard throughout the ship. Quickly, Caison rose to withdraw a small torch and a tinder twig. He struck the tinder twig and a flash ignited into a flame, which he used to light the end of his torch. Dull orange light bathed the hold.

Large rats scurried from the light, startling Caison. He looked over the entirety of his surroundings, noting crates, bags, and barrels. Something pallid on the barrels caught his attention. Moving closer, he made out the shape of two corpses. A cursory glance told him the dead men matched the descriptions of two missing Pathfinders. The nearest was Tord of Highhelm, a dwarven axe-master. The other was Pa'resh IbenBasho, a Keleshite holy man of Sarenrae. A few rats huddled over their bodies, gnawing at the men's flesh. Caison carefully crossed the slanted floor to the fallen Pathfinders. He spotted broken lanterns and dark blotches where oil had splashed on the deck. He surmised that the wicks must have been extinguished prior to the crash, preventing the oil from igniting.

He examined the bodies, noticing their throats slit. Both men were also missing their purses, but other items including jeweled trinkets remained. A glint of metal shined inside Pa'resh's slightly open mouth as if something was pressed there. He blanched at the idea of reaching into the dead man's mouth, but leaned closer to inspect. The stench from the rotting corpse poured into his lungs and Caison immediately vomited. From the open mouth he discerned the object was metal. He pressed into the flesh with his thumb and forefinger, dislodging a silver coin. It bore a lion and crown, much like the coins of Taldor but with slight differences. It appeared that after post-minting, someone had etched the symbol of an eye on the coin. He tucked it into his belt and continued looking about the hold.

Immediately, the rats jumped off the corpses and scurried up the stairs. Caison found the behavior odd until Pa'resh twitched as if life shot through him.

Pa'resh then began deliberate movements as his body rose up to meet Caison. Frightened beyond reason, the initiate dropped his torch and stumbled backwards. The torch hit the ground and oil-soaked planks caught fire running up Pa'resh's clothing. The walking corpse attempted to howl as the fire consumed it, a moist gurgle of ooze seeping from its gaping throat. Tord's corpse then twitched as well and began to rise. Caison scrambled for the stairs as the spreading fire lighted his way. He tripped on the bottom step but managed to right himself.

The flaming dead holy man continued writhing as Tord's corpse awkwardly stood up to give chase. Caison climbed out of the hull, making his way past the lower deck when he spotted more dead stirring. He paused to count their number and note their attire until he felt footsteps at the base of the stairs. Shaken, he rushed up to the door at the top of the steps and barged it open, knocking a bony figure backwards. The fresh ocean air and the heat of the sun provided no solace as five scavenger-ravaged sailors charged after him. Caison gritted his teeth, wondering how he missed the corpses when he boarded. Fearfully, he looked for a way off the carrack, but spotted an open door to the captain's quarters in the aft castle. Thick black smoke rose from the cargo drops.

"Blood and bones," he cursed as he made for the cabin, instead of jumping off the burning ship.

The tilted deck proved difficult for his pursuers, but Caison found easy footing

along the elevated portion of the ship. He slid down to the doorway and cast a backward glance at the advancing dead. There numbers had grown and Caison counted ten heading his way. Crawling and climbing, they would be at the door in moments. Caison entered the room and shut the door, locking it. Fearful, he surveyed the captain's quarters in haste. It was a ruin and the belongings had all been cast about. The furniture oddly stayed in place, bolted to the floor. Much of windowpanes that made up the large aft window had been shattered with blood streaks on what remained of the glass. Shards lay strewn about the floor, suggesting the intrusion had come from outside the ship.

Caison made for a massive teak desk and began searching inside. Azlanti motifs depicting maritime heroes and battles decorated its exterior. In the top drawer he found a copy of the manifest log. Thumbing past empty pages in the back, he came to the last entry, but the page had been neatly torn from its binding, leaving the slimmest strip of evidence.

Scratching came at the door; his pursuers had arrived. Caison cast the worthless log aside, dreading the idea of leaving empty-handed.

“There has to be something in the captain’s room worth taking!” he yelled, looking around the room one last time. The smell of smoke filled the air and the mess on the floor seemed nonsensical and random. Caison looked to a bookshelf on the starboard wall, realizing all its volumes had flown off the shelf except three, which persisted despite the ship’s unusual slant.

The grating of finger bones had changed to pounding. Caison moved to inspect the resilient tomes. Though cleverly constructed to look like three books, it was actually a single box. Passing his fingers along the spines of each, he found a small keyhole concealed within a letter “O.” From his pocket he withdrew a tiny pick and deftly worked the mechanism until the face of the leftmost book opened. Caison reached inside and found the Captain’s Log, a parchment delicately sewn together and bound with black-dyed hide. Insatiable curiosity compelled him to open the journal, but the sound of walking dead hammering on the door changed his mind. The journal was too large to tuck in his tunic; he would have to carry it.

A violent slam burst the door open, smashing it into the wall near Caison. A skeletal hand wrapped around the doorframe. Bits of flesh hung from one of its fingers, holding in place a gaudy ring. Caison maneuvered behind the desk to put it between them. The thing emitted a hideous growl. Though it stood ten feet away, it lunged for Caison, forgetting the slope of the deck and tumbling to the portside wall. Tord’s animated corpse came next, filling the empty doorframe.

“Starstone fall on me,” Caison muttered, regretting his decision to stay aboard.

He turned to look out the broken window. The remaining glass panes were fixed right where gravity would take him if he jumped. The fall was also quite a distance down.

On its feet again, the dead sailor clutched a bed and began pulling itself toward Caison. Tord attempted a growl, but gurgled through his slit throat as he moved with exacting steps toward his prey.

“This blighted journal better be worth it.” Caison spotted a Linnorm statuette lying against the desk and picked it up. With all his might he threw it against the remaining glass pane and didn’t wait to consider the result as he leapt. He fell some twenty-five feet, thudding heavily on the sand.

His breath left him for a moment, and light flitted around his vision as he struggled

to focus. His arm was dislocated and his sleeve drenched in blood. The captain's log rested nearby. Lifting himself, he grabbed the log close and sat. His head began to throb swiftly and his vision blurred. Sounds of the dead thrashed about in the captain's quarters as fire roared out the window.

Caison struggled to his feet, but without the use of one arm, fell to his knees and finally on his back. Smoke drifted around him as the ship became an inferno. Jun's round black face appeared over him.

“Jun? Sailors . . . dead . . .” he mumbled and went unconscious.



“Wake up,” Nadilia whispered.

Caison shuddered and his arm went out to touch the voice. Nadilia's eyes widened as he opened his. A slight glow surrounded the woman and she appeared divine.

“See? I had a feeling your voice would bring him back.” The paladin smiled and walked away.

Caison turned his head rapidly to get his bearing. He was back on the bluff, and below, the burnt skeleton of the ship glowed with embers in its belly. The smell of smoke wafted up from the beach and permeated his clothes. The sun was setting and his eyes became heavy.

Night had already fallen when Caison awoke. His neck ached from a sling around his arm. Studying his wound more closely, he realized the glass had cut a considerable gash that ran up his forearm. The abrupt fall hadn't helped either.

In the distance, the ship's frame smoldered and Caison worried the dead could still fall upon their camp. He lied still for hours, listening for sign—but only calm crashing waves filled his ears. Satisfied the dead finally rested, he turned to face Nadilia, Amed, and Jun. The warning of Adril Hestram's letter nagged at his conscience and Caison considered what he would say.

“I feel well enough to talk.”

The three stood up and moved toward him. Caison gave his report to the best of his ability. When he finished, his three companions started asking questions all at once, until the men yielded to Nadilia.

“You said Tord and Pa'resh were dead, but were there any female bodies?” She twitched a nervous finger.

“I can only confirm Tord and Pa'resh were dead. A couple corpses were pretty chewed up, but their clothes did not appear female. I can be wrong though—everything happened too fast.”

Amed looked skeptical. “Whatever that note said, I no longer believe it came from Hestram. He would never condone burning a ship. Were you trying to hide something?”

Caison turned red and clutched his fists until his nails dug into his palms. “Your doubt is understandable, but nothing of the kind happened. It was an accident and I was scared. I didn't have time to go through any of the items in the hold, and saw nothing on the main or lower decks of interest.”

“Halflings?” Jun asked abruptly.

“Didn't see any.”

“So maybe Huera and Pak made it out, but where are they?” Amed looked to the ship. “They were sailing from Augustana, but with what?”

“Burned,” Jun grunted.

“I doubt it. If it was of any worth, they surely took it.” Nadilia continued toying with her finger.

“Maybe, but we don’t know. Nothing is mentioned in the recovered captain’s log either.” Amed pointed to the journal. “Tomorrow we will sift through the remains of the ship and then journey back to Absalom. The missing Pathfinders may have returned to the lodge.” Their leader nodded confidently.

“Everyone, get some sleep.”

Caison didn’t feel tired but laid down on his bedroll, opting to examine the captain’s log. He laid the book on the ground and flipped through the pages. The captain’s name was Xeric and his ship was the Pallid Mist. The journal contained entries regarding sailing conditions and ports. Caison noted the ship never went outside the Inner Sea and most recently sailed from Katheer to Oppara, Oppara to Cassomir, and Cassomir to Augustana.

A particular entry dated 20 Calistril 4710 in the port of Augustana caught Caison’s attention. The captain’s writing changed to a mixture of runes and pictographs. It also covered the page entirely, from the topmost edge of the parchment to the bottom, and from the leftmost side to right. He scrutinized the pages, attempting to discover a pattern that might indicate some code but was unable. Impatient, he turned past the puzzling entries and found readable script, which continued as before.

“2 Pharast 4710”

“My mind is muddled. First Mate Twiliger told me I spent two days in bed, cold with sweat and rambling incoherently. I have no memory of it. He reports that a number of the crew have suffered similarly. I only know the date because Mister Twiliger assures me my calendar is correct. I remember embarking from Augustana and the manifest verifies it, but the page after the last has been torn out. I don’t know if I or someone else did it.”

“I’ve never experienced anything like this. My suspicions lean toward the five members of the Pathfinder Society we took on as passengers in Augustana. An elderly man and his young grandson may also have a part in this. I’ve spent the day making inquiries about my lost memory, but the crew also suffers from the same effect. I believe the passengers are willfully withholding some truth from us. I will, to the best of my knowledge, record the names of our passengers.”

“Tord, a dwarf.”

“Pa’resh, a holy man.”

“Pak, a halfling who contends with others regularly.”

“Kroop, an odd man by any reckoning...perhaps a sorcerer of some kind, and therefore my prime suspect.”

“Hurea, a strong human female equipped like a warrior.”

“An old man known as Olin and his grandson Rour who claim to hail from Augustana.”

“I took it upon myself to inspect their cargo, but found little other than vases and statuary.”

“My crew, to the newest man, has been with me over three years—I trust them with my very life. Therefore, one or more of these passengers are causing our present troubles.”

“Mister Twiliger calls.”

“Add. ~ 2 Pharast 4710.”

“Ill tidings. Mister Twiliger, the best navigator I’ve ever sailed with informed me, by his reckoning, the island of Kortos lies directly ahead and should plainly be visible to the eye. Nonetheless, no land appears over our bow—only black clouds. The air and the water are still...and so are we. Our location is undeterminable and we can’t sail. I have called a hearing for our passengers at dawn.”

“3 Pharast 4710”

“At least I think it’s that date. I am uncertain about much. The sky is dark, heavy with clouds and no rain. The wind has returned but we’re not moving. Men below decks hear slithering along the hull. I myself have heard bumps, and not the kind that comes from rocks. Curse myself for never employing a mage. Mister Twiliger always told me sailing without one would be our end, but our voyages wouldn’t have proven profitable otherwise. We’ve restrained one sailor who began screaming repeatedly that land lies straight away, just off our port side. Despite his ramblings, our spyglasses from the crow’s nest confirmed no such thing. He will not relent, so I’ve thrown him in the brig. Given these events, my inquiry with the passengers was postponed.”

The journal ended. Caison inspected to see if any pages were removed, but detected nothing.

“I’ve studied it and can’t make any sense of it.” The voice of Amed startled Caison.

The warrior had obviously taken first watch. Caison looked over to see Jun and Nadilia sleeping peacefully and wondered how long Amed had been observing him. The large man focused his eyes outward into the night, but continued his hushed discussion with the initiate. “It appears someone tried to obscure those jumbled entries to disguise them somehow. Nadilia inspected the book earlier, but her attempt to find anything magical about the pages was fruitless. Strange the culprit didn’t just rip them out.”

Caison turned back to the bizarre pages. “Well, it was locked up when I found it. Maybe the infiltrator couldn’t get access and used a spell to make the captain put it in code. The script on the pages matches the unreadable passages and it appears the same implement was used. The captain doesn’t mention the code when his writing becomes legible either. It appears he saw the writing the same as anything else he wrote.”

“Perhaps the pages were not magically altered,” Amed theorized. “Perhaps the spell in question had control of the captain’s mind as he was writing.”

“Is that possible?”

“When Nadilia wakes, I will ask.” Amed nodded toward her.

Caison closed the book and laid it on the ground next to him. “It seems that there was strange magic all around the ship and crew. Perhaps the one man who saw land was the only sane man aboard. The ship is on Kortos, after all.”

“These are questions we can wrestle with all night and never conclude.” Amed shrugged. “Best you get some rest, we’ll head for Absalom tomorrow. The minds at the Grand Lodge will offer clarity.”

Caison couldn’t argue; his body desperately called for rest. Pulling his pillow close, he got comfortable as possible and watched the fire.

When he awoke, it was Nadilia who was reading the journal beside him.

“Oh, sorry Caison,” Nadilia said in surprise, “I didn’t mean to wake you. Amed asked me to inspect the journal. The mind-controlling magic he speculated on is not known to me, but I decided to look again for clues.”

Caison sat up. The last few hours of rest had helped tremendously and his arm had returned to full use. His mood also improved by the sight of the young wizard. Her face glowed with the orange of the firelight and while she kept her attention on the journal, he studied her skin, astounded by its smoothness.

He was caught off guard as he found her gaze shift from the pages towards his longing eyes. Caison hoped the firelight masked the red blush on his face, but her green eyes twinkled as she grinned.

“I can’t determine much from this journal, but I’m sure Amed is right—someone in the lodge will be able to help.” She pushed aside the captain’s log.

“When you gave us your report, you mentioned a coin you found in the dead Pathfinder’s mouth.”

Caison reached into one of his hidden pockets and withdrew the piece, offering it to her. When she reached for it, he touched one of her fingers. Nadilia smiled, and Caison’s heart leapt in hope she felt a spark for him.

The wizard’s lovely eyes narrowed as she studied the silver piece. “When you pulled this from Pa’resh’s mouth, the corpses came to life?” she inquired, half-rhetorically, half-disbelievingly.

Caison nodded. He pulled the sling from around his neck and tested out the mobility of his arm.

“Well, I don’t sense any magic on it. It looks Taldoran, but not like Grand Prince Stavian’s current coinage. My guess is that it predates the decline of the Empire. This marking, this eye, it’s not part of the original stamp, and it’s not any glyph I know.”

“The mark comes from Corentyn,” Caison confidently remarked.

“The Chelaxian port city?”

“Yes, it’s a custom there to mark coins with an eye for luck.”

“How do you know that? I thought you hailed from Oppara. Corentyn is a long ways from there.”

Caison felt a butterfly in his stomach. She was clearly impressed with his knowledge. “In the Grand Hall of the Society, there is a display of the belongings of Captain Harrowind, who often took port in Corentyn. The man had one silver coin on him when he died, and it bore that mark. I inquired to the caretaker and he said it’s an old superstition in that city to carry a coin with such a marking. It’s for good luck of course, but it also brings ill fortune to anyone who steals it.” Caison stared off blankly, realizing what he had done. He only hoped Pe’resh’s restless spirit sought resolution to his murder.

“I’ve seen that display, Caison.” Nadilia’s tone changed to doubt, but playful. “Of all those items, you noticed a single coin? I myself was taken by the man’s gaudy coat.”

“Well,” Caison began, “a man as renowned as Captain Harrowind is hard to forget, but I always found it worth remembering that one coin remained after his murderer stripped everything else off him. Of course, it helps that I’ve cleaned the display countless times.”

Nadilia continued to study the coin; her brow creased with frustration and worry. “I really don’t get what this might mean. An antique coin from Corentyn isn’t really a clue.”

“Do you know any spell that can see into an object’s past? Maybe you can determine who held it or left it in Pa’resh?”

Nadilia shook her head. “There is such magic, but it is beyond my abilities.”

Caison desperately wanted to impress her. If he could give her the answer she sought, his brilliance would make them closer. "Maybe the coin was purposely left for someone to find and follow to Corentyn."

Nadilia's eyes moved away from Caison. "Why leave it in such a difficult place so the discoverer is eaten by walking corpses?"

Caison's shoulders sunk and he felt foolish for offering the thought. He watched her turn the coin over in her hand one last time. Her expression abruptly changed and she closed her eyes, muttering softly. She put her hand over her chest and reached into her blouse to pull out an amulet. Caison sat bolt upright when he recognized her speech as words of the arcane. Hoping she was summoning an answer to their dilemma, he was surprised when the magic had paralyzed him. Nadilia gathered her pack and placed the journal and coin

within. Caison wanted to call out, to ask what she was doing, but couldn't. She cast one last look upon him, her eyes expressing regret, before disappearing into the night.

As the minutes ticked by, Caison thought about Nadilia's betrayal and felt ashamed he had wanted to be so close to her. His shame turned to anger as the consequences of what happened started to sink in. He had failed his first field assignment because he'd been careless. Hestram had warned him of the possibility of a traitor. He'd told him not to confide in them, yet at the first batting of an eyelash, he provided all the information the traitor needed. By morning, the others would awaken to find her gone, and all Caison could do is confess his culpability.

The fire began to die and coolness spread around Caison. The sound of a large beam collapsing cracked from the ship on the beach. It had almost been an hour when Caison began to regain movement in his hands and feet—Nadilia's magic was receding.

"How far was she ahead?" he thought.

The wizard possessed magical abilities that would undoubtedly aid her travels. Within an hour she could travel to the other end of the globe. Caison looked at his remaining companions. He hadn't decided if he should just feign sleep to hide his shame or wake them up for the better of the Society. A ball in the pit of his stomach worked on him as he remembered she took away the only physical evidence they had.

If he woke the holy warrior, the man would insist they return to the lodge in Absalom to get further guidance. And chances were that Caison would stay in the lodge and never be trusted to do another mission again, or worse: expulsion from the Society for the embarrassment he caused to all parties involved.

"Curse it!" He had to rectify this on his own.

He couldn't leave his companions helpless though, so he gathered some sticks and propped them inside the fire pit. Precariously, he hung cooking pots from them and stoked the flames until the wood caught fire. Caison packed his things and left. The sticks would eventually collapse, causing the pots to sound an alarm. By then he'd be far down the road to Diobel where the fastest ships traveled.



Caison stood speechless before the massive Arch of Aroden, backed by the immeasurable Arcadian ocean. Caison's implements of polishing lay on the rail as

he stared out in wonder. Sailors in Oppara's taverns often spoke of this marvel, but seeing it firsthand was indescribable.

"The sight never dulls," the regal captain proudly spoke from behind Caison. "Now that you've seen it, get back the rail. The East Wind doesn't enter port looking like a third generation shrimp boat. Once you finish, see to the bell. I want her shining like the Starstone before we dock."

Caison nodded to the captain as she patted him on the shoulder. Both returned to their duties as the ship swung around, heading into Corentyn. After a few swipes along the rail, Caison turned to the bell, gathering a jug of polish and a cloth made of rare Tian silk. Many would cringe at the thought of dirtying the expensive cloth with polish, but since their departure from Diobel, Caison had demonstrated time and again the benefits of using quality tools to get superior results. The captain's ship would never look the same because of it.

With the bell blinding the crew, Caison went below decks to gather his few belongings and returned to the upper deck amidst the whirlwind of sailors preparing to dock. The captain maneuvered the East Wind alongside a wharf filled with merchant vessels. Surveying the city, Caison studied how Corentyn differed from Oppara and Absalom. The architectural styles and fortifications hinted at common ancestry between the cities, but the differences were significant enough to feel foreign. Fortifications from battles long ago lay in disrepair, and newer defenses of wicked spikes, severe edges, and acute angles were built using the newest Chelaxian style. Looking at the cityscape, one could see through the ages and watch the passage of generations. Caison realized he was one small man in a very large world.

"Well boy, you've made it," a gray-haired dwarf remarked. Caison did his best to ignore "boy."

"I'd say you've earned your passage. We'd love to keep you on, but you seem driven toward a purpose. Remember what I told you and don't break any laws. Here, you'll end up regretting it for years to come." The dwarf exposed the nasty brand on his forearm, proving his run-in with Hellknights.

"Oh, and don't forget, if you go to the Iron Anchor in the Mercanto, drop my name. Eck is likely to give you the better of his drink! You do remember my name, don't you boy?"

"Yes, Second Mate Redspar." Caison winced.

"Good boy!" The dwarf smiled, running off to secure the mooring lines.

"I'm not a boy," Caison whispered under his breath,

With the gangplank secured, Caison wasted no time. He waved goodbye to the captain and hurried up the dock toward's the harbormaster. It was the first motionless ground he'd stood upon since leaving Diobel, eight days prior. Though he rarely gave thanks to the gods, he knelt to praise Cayden for his arrival.

Hurriedly, he walked ahead, where a group of merchants and visitors gathered in a semi-circle around a large board, inscribed with an extensive list of regulations. A tall soldier made taller by the crate he stood upon read the regulations at length in a droning voice. It was evident the soldier had read them hundreds of times, for his words oozed out of his mouth and his sentences ran together incomprehensibly.

"Weapons are to remain sheathed within fifteen feet of a town official or guard. When entering the Noble Quarter, one must submit to a search of his person unless bearing a writ from the Archheathen himself. Any persons transporting cargo to and from the docks must . . ." Caison didn't break stride as he passed beyond

earshot.

No idea where to start his search or how much time he had, Caison pondered on who exactly he was chasing. Pak Threestone and Nadilia were both strong possibilities, but he wasn't sure if they were even in Corentyn. It was only on the slimmest of evidence he was here himself.

He spent a good part of the day scrambling on the waterfront and exploring shops. His inquiries into Nadilia and Threestone turned up nothing. With his stomach growling, Caison set out to find the Iron Anchor.

Locating the Mercanto was no small feat, but once there, the Iron Anchor was easy to find. Caison was surprised to find the place still bustling as he walked in during the early evening. Many of the patrons were soldiers, recently released for the night. And unlike so many of the taverns Caison had frequented in his life, the Anchor was well kept and well lit. Slipping through the crowd he made for the richly fashioned bar.

"Keer Redspar of the East Wind recommended I come in for red wine and Ergosian cheese."

The barkeep smiled at the mention of the dwarf's name and nodded in acknowledgement, disappearing to the back. A moment later, he returned carrying a tray full of bread and cheese. He pulled out a large goblet and poured red wine from a ceramic vessel. Caison slapped the last of his coin on the bar. Looking around, he saw all the tables were full, so he leaned on the rail and ate. The bread was still warm with a thin crust, and as Caison bit he smelled hearty grains that were rich with flavor. The cheese was buttery and nutty all at once. Looking about, Caison took a draw from his glass of wine, savoring the silky liquid as it quenched his pallet with sweet fruitful overtones.

The food, drink, and warm atmosphere took Caison's mind somewhere else. He thought about Amed and Jun whom he left sleeping by the fire. Now that he was alone, hundreds of miles from Absalom, he missed their presence. Still, he wasn't the leader of the group and it was his instinct to take action. Amed, despite his battle prowess, was too inclined to run back to Absalom, and that would have put Caison in an awkward position. As the barkeep walked past, Caison promised himself not to regret his decision. He was in Corentyn and would make it happen.

"Like Redspar, I will sing your praises far and wide," Caison spoke to change his thoughts.

The barkeep smiled and nodded, showing his appreciation. Caison finished the last of his wine and put his hand out to the barkeep. The man looked up for a moment from the steins he was cleaning. "I'm looking for a rare artifact." Ecks handed a barmaid some drinks and turned to Caison, shaking his head. Caison couldn't determine if he didn't deal in such information or he didn't know such things. He simply wasn't talking.

"Listen, I've traveled very far to get here. I'm in search of an item . . ." the barkeep interrupted his plea by pointing over to two men, each with thick whiskers and tanned, leathery skin. They sat at a table crowded with empty bottles, contrasting sharply with the watchmen milling about the rest of the tavern. Amidst the bottles they played "Five Finger Filet," and judging by their posture had been drinking for some time. If they continued their game much longer, one would walk away short a finger. Caison noted the watchmen were well aware of the two men and gave them a wide berth.

Nodding his thanks, Caison made his way over to the table. He circled around the men, keeping his eyes on their game. Annoyed by the new arrival, they paused. One leaned back in his chair, looking at Caison through blurry eyes. The other stuck a knife in the table and evenly divvied up the last of a bottle.

“Good evening, I’m looking for a rare artifact. I’ve been told you two might know about such things.”

“Whoever told you is mistaken.” The reclining man waved Caison away. “We’re just sailors ashore for the night.” He grabbed his glass and took a long drink. The second man chuckled and then pulled the knife, restarting their game. Caison watched, considering his options.

The sudden sound of shattering glass grabbed everyone’s attention, including the two men in front of Caison. A soldier slammed a bottle over the head of another and a tussle ensued. A good deal of shouting commenced and a table was broken in the scuffle, but the soldiers managed to end the fight.

“I guess that’s as good a reason as any to share a tavern with soldiers,” Caison laughed. The two men pretended not to hear him.

“Listen gentleman, it’s vitally important that I find this artifact. I’d be willing to buy a fresh bottle for the man who points me in the right direction.”

“Bottle first,” one replied with a yellow-toothed grin.

Without another word, Caison made for the bar, returning with a bottle which he dangled before the men.

“Samson’s Salvage,” the second man spoke for the first time.

“I’m not looking for junk.”

“There ain’t a single piece o’ junk at Samson’s” Yellow-tooth licked his lips.

“Where might I find Samson’s?”

Both men grinned wide, as if they shared some secret that Caison feared would cost him.

“East Drenches.”

“Thank you, gentlemen.” Caison nodded politely, set down the reward, and took his leave. On his way out, he stopped to speak to the tavern master. “Mr. Eck, would you be so kind to return this to those men after I leave?” Caison relinquished a coin purse, and as he left the Iron Anchor, he questioned taking no coin for himself.



Two large guards hauled Caison out of the East Drenches and threw him to the streets. Pedestrians walking by grinned a mischievous smile that was all too familiar from the Iron Anchor. They knew only the wealthiest and most refined merchants could enter the district. Caison’s traveling clothes and demeanor made him a prime candidate for expulsion. After being forcibly removed from the area, Caison spent considerable time sneaking down alleys, climbing over rooftops, and creeping through open windows to reach the square in front of Samson’s Salvage. Although the district housed a number of curio and magic shops, Caison spotted Samson’s Salvage. The scroll he sought would be there if it were in the city at all.

The building stood alone, facing an open square where five streets intersected. Constructed entirely of brick with narrow windows, it looked more akin to a fortress than a shop. The heavy iron door at the front appeared the only means of entry. Close-set outwardly curved spikes, interwoven with blade-wire, lined the tops of the walls,

making access by rooftop nearly impossible. Caison knew little about the arcane, but he was sure a building so outwardly secure would also have some kind of ward protecting against magical intrusion.

He doubted any man could enter unbidden, so he hid under the eaves of a building across the square. Traffic passed through and people frequented the other shops, but none went into Samson's Salvage. When evening came and the businesses closed, the intersection became quiet. Sunset turned to night and streetlights magically came to life. A near full moon cast light on the intersection, though plenty of shadows remained for those not wishing to be seen. The peal of distant bells sounded off as two lamps were lit inside Samson's Salvage.

A group of four emerged from a street to Caison's right. At their lead strode a confident halfling, flipping a coin. He wore a garish hat and fit the description of Pak Threestone, the rogue Pathfinder. A woman shuffled behind, her hands and feet somehow bound. Two poorly dressed brutes followed, shoving the woman along.

"Blood and bones," Caison cursed, for he had hoped to find Threestone alone. The halfling was a formidable opponent, but adding two brutes tilted the scales. Still, he couldn't allow them to enter the shop. Stealthily, he dropped ten feet from his perch to the cobblestones, silently creeping into the moonlit square.

"Caison?"

The voice startled him and he instinctively drew his dagger, searching for whoever spoke. The group heading for Samson's stopped, turning to face Caison who stood in the open.

Nadilia stepped from the shadows behind him, surprising her companion. She held the same amulet that paralyzed him back on Kortos.

"Ahh, Nadilia." Threestone ceased flipping his coin, resting his hand on a small rapier at his side. The halfling motioned to a thug who grabbed the woman roughly, holding a knife to her throat. Caison noticed a gag in her mouth.

"There needn't be more bloodshed," an elderly voice spoke from a completely new direction.

Caison turned to his left to see an old man and a young boy emerge. He thought back to the captain's log and recalled that the two were mentioned aboard The Pallid Mist.

"How?" The halfling was astonished. "You can't—you couldn't . . ." he stammered, his composure gone.

Caison was surrounded and he turned in a circle, trying to keep eyes on everyone.

"Threestone, don't be foolish. Hand over the scroll." The old man held a boy's hand. "I implore you, this matter is far greater than what you seek."

"Listen, old codger," Pak Threestone spat, "this great matter is why the scroll will keep me in luxury until I'm an elf's age. I offered to share; I could have killed you both as I did the others. My mistake, but I'll fix that."

"The scroll is not yours to sell. It was your charge to deliver it." The old man angrily scowled.

"Oh, I'm delivering it, alright," Pak nodded to Samson's Salvage, "to the highest bidder."

Pak looked to the middle of the intersection in annoyance at Caison. "You look strangely familiar. Nadilia seems to know you, but it's obvious you're not together."

"I'm here to retrieve the scroll for the Society," Caison demanded.

"Isn't everyone?" Pak laughed looking to Nadilia. "Well, not everyone."

“Let Huera go!” Nadilia yelled.

Caison turned to Nadilia, realizing for the first time she was here to perform a rescue.

“Ahh,” Pak’s smile spread. “Nadilia didn’t tell you Huera is her half-sister. I guess daddy will have some explaining to do when this business is done. I knew Huera would get under the Master of Lore’s skin. He can’t afford to follow the rules when family is on the line. Hypocrites! Time to make the cheating players work for me. I offer you a deal, Nadilia: assist my sale tonight, and I will give you back your sister, unharmed.”

Nadilia’s eyes narrowed as she thought.

Caison couldn’t read her face, but doubts began to overwhelm him. If Nadilia considered the proposal any longer, he would have to act. Caison sweated profusely, wondering if he was about to be paralyzed once more. He focused his eyes on the others while discretely altering the grip on his dagger, preparing to throw it.

“We were mistaken to entrust this task to you,” the old man’s voice was as deep as the ocean in contrast to his frail appearance. A heavy accent, unheard in his earlier words, seeped into them.

His thunderous voice drew everyone’s attention. They stopped and looked at the old man, who began moving toward the halfling and his thugs. The elder released the young boy’s hand and advanced, taking longer, more determined strides. The boy grew, his features morphing, becoming elflike as his skin color turned to an aqua blue while his hair grew long and shined silver in the moonlight. Armor formed from his clothes and a slender longsword was sheathed at his side. The old man changed little, though his wrinkles eased from his skin, taking on the color of the sea.

“Mordant Spire elves,” Nadilia gasped.

Pak slipped behind his two bodyguards and Caison heard arcane whispers from Nadilia’s lips. He dared not look back for fear he might act before she had a chance to prove herself. If he were wrong, it would be over quickly.

Nadilia chanted, pointing her amulet at Pak, who began walking backward toward Samson’s door with his rapier drawn. Noticing the direction Nadilia was looking, Pak sneered and yelled up at the thug who held her sister’s life to a blade. The would-be assassin’s eyes were fixed on Spire elves, but Pak quickly got his attention so he could give the fatal order.

As he spoke, a surge of energy burst from the amulet, hitting the halfling right in the chest, hurling him against the iron door. His blade flew from his hand, clattering into the street. The thug holding the knife to Huera’s throat threw her to the ground and drew a heavy blade, forged with barbed edges. His partner brandished two short swords and howled a battlecry.

Caison was relieved to see Pak thrown off his feet, and maneuvered to get line of sight on the halfling.

One thug ran out to meet the younger Spire elf that raced for his employer, while the other ran straight for Nadilia. Caison thought about throwing his knife at the ruffian, but stayed focused on Pak.

The halfling climbed to his knees, pounding furiously at the entrance. A quick but muffled exchange followed with the door opening slightly. Caison hurled his dagger at the halfling just as he slipped inside, disappearing into the fortress-like shop. The door closed, accompanied by a sharp tick of his knife missing its target. Clash of metal to his left sounded as the elf and thug engaged in combat. Behind, Nadilia

grunted as a flash of light sparked followed by a thug's shriek. Caison didn't look to see the outcome, fixed on the shop's door.

A thin strip of light outlined the entryway and Caison realized the door was partially open with his knife wedged in one of the hinges. He quickened his step and crashed the door open.

The quick change of lighting overwhelmed his senses, and before he could adjust, a piercing pain shot into his left shoulder. He reeled backwards, falling inside the shop. Pak Threestone attempted to kick the door, but the dagger prevented it. Caison stumbled, tripping over a small table and shattering an amber-colored statuette.

Pak popped the dagger out of the hinge and slammed the door. He pressed his back to it, trying to catch his breath. Caison glared at the halfling and wanted to grab his short sword, but the bolt in his shoulder gave him pause to look for the shooter.

There stood a short well-groomed dwarf who Caison assumed was Samson. He held a loaded crossbow at both man and halfling. "One of you I don't know—the other, I don't like. Take your fight out of my shop, Threestone!"

Pak appeared rational and nodded in agreement but pulled a dagger, taking a slash at Caison. Defending himself, Caison drew his sword to meet the halfling's dagger, but the pain from his shoulder made his sword weaken. He managed to deflect the blade, but it grazed his arm, leaving a shallow cut. Pak spun to the floor, landing on one knee, a bolt protruding from his thigh. Samson reloaded his crossbow, spitting on the halfling.

Pak fell against the closed door once more, his chest heaving. .

Caison took a moment to consider his surroundings. He had heard correctly—Samson's Salvage didn't appear to contain a single worthless trinket. Antiques, curiosities, and wondrous relics filled the room from floor to ceiling. Having surveyed the building earlier, Caison judged that this large showcase wasn't the only room in the establishment.

The shop owner whistled and a curtain opened, revealing a woman, built much like Samson. She carried a box and handed it to the dwarf, who in turn gave her his crossbow. He withdrew from the box a beautiful scroll made of fine woven palm fronds, and its silver end caps shone brightly in the magical light of the shop. Caison knew instantly it was what Hestram sought.

"Take your goods and be gone." Samson threw it onto Pak, like worthless paper.

"It's not his," Caison protested, "he stole . . ."

"I don't care how he got it. He's the one that brought it, and..." the man reclaimed his crossbow from the woman and pointed it at Pak's chest, "...he's the one who's going to take it back. You brought trouble to my doorstep, Threestone, and that's bad business. Now both of you, get out!"

Pak struggled to his feet, while at the same time jerking the crossbow bolt out of his leg. "Listen Samson, this thing is worth . . ."

"Don't want it, all the gold in the world ain't worth my reputation."

Pak turned to Caison, holding his arms up with the scroll in his hand. Caison pointed his sword at the halfling, but the pain from the bolt in his shoulder made him flinch. Pak looked to the shop owner and Caison shifted his gaze. Seizing the moment, Pak threw a fistful of dust into Caison's eyes. Caison blinked hard, but his eyes stung and his tears started to blind him. The halfling pulled open the door and fled into the night.

Caison clamored outside to pursue, nearly tripping over Nadilia. Pak had knocked

her down as he ran by. Through his blurred sight he recognized the two thugs, dead on the ground. Huera was still bound near them and the older of the Mordant Spire elves lay motionless, while the younger knelt over his body.

“Where?” Caison reeled with the bloodshot eyes of a drunken sailor.

“Down that way, toward the docks.”

Caison didn’t move to help Nadilia free her sister, nor did he check on the health of any of the others. Instead, he reached for the bolt in his shoulder and yanked it out. For a moment he swooned and thought he might fall to his knees, but he gritted his teeth and ran down the dark street. Ahead limped the shape of Pak Threestone. With every step, Caison could see the halfling more clearly as Pak’s parlor trick washed away.

Pak sped through the streets quickly, despite his wounded leg, and passed two city guards strolling by. The guards clearly saw Pak was being chased, but showed no interest. Caison contemplated yelling for them to stop the Halfling, but decided to remain silent. Should the authorities get involved, the scroll would most likely be lost in corrupt legal channels and bureaucratic paperwork. Instead, he concealed his sword low to his leg as he passed by.

“Ha, ha, you silly little imp. Come back here.” Caison laughed, hoping the two guards wouldn’t notice the wounds he bore. They continued without a pause in their conversation. His ruse worked, but had they been Hellknights, he doubted it would’ve gone so well.

Rounding a large warehouse, Caison spotted Pak at the docks. He cursed not having a tanglefoot bag or something to incapacitate the little rogue.

“Stay right there, Pak!” Threestone turned to face him. “You’ll never sell that scroll for much now. Once Samson spreads word, no one will buy it.”

“Listen Pathfinder,” Pak spat, “this scroll leads to a treasure never seen in a thousand years on Golarion, a history long lost. Believe me, I’ll get more than a handful of gold! You’re a fool.”

“Will you inform your buyer the scroll is yet to be deciphered?”

“Depends if they ask.” Pak became less flippant, somber. “If they pay, it matters little to me.”

Pak remained silent.

Caison and Threestone stared silently at one another. Caison knew he was failing to dissuade the halfling. Pak glared at him, turning the scroll over and over in his hands.

A hiss and roar of water broke the silence. Caison took a step back as a waterspout sprang from the harbor, rising behind the halfling. It towered above the docks, spraying down on Pak who turned to back away.

Caison advanced toward it just as a slimy creature, unlike anything Caison had ever seen, emerged from the water column. Tendrils whipped around it and a voice as deep as the ocean spoke. The sound gurgled like a drain and bellowed like crashing waves, penetrating Caison’s mind.

“None shall enter our domain. The key is ours. We will have it.”

Caison and Pak looked at the scroll, failing to notice a tendril reaching out to grab Pak. It wrapped tightly around his arm, lifting him off the dock. With lightning speed, Caison drew his sword and ran to the rogue’s aid, slashing across the tendril. The sea creature reeled and the halfling fell to the ground.

Caison stood defiantly, but a second tendril lashed out, catching him in the chest.

The slam threw him backwards into a building window. Shattered glass flew as Caison crashed into a number of model ships on a table. The pain in his wounded shoulder became dull in comparison to the wracking pain he had just endured. Outside, he heard the sizzle of arcane energy, a clap of thunder, and a roar. Feeling his consciousness slipping, Caison smelled a familiar pungent odor that refused to let him go.

The chemical reminded him of the stronger cleaning solutions Persh mixed for polishing in the Grand Lodge. The odor burned Caison's nose and throat, prompting him off the table. Quickly Caison studied the room; all around were blueprints and rolled up sheets of ship designs. He had landed in a shipwright workshop. The smashed models were replicas of ships the wrights were working on. Outside, the clamor of battle rose even higher. Caison gained his feet and looked through the broken window.

A second sea creature joined the fray and Nadilia with the younger Spire elf fought alongside two Coretyn watchmen. The creatures were more than monsters, and Caison watched in horror as one watchman struggled to find air as an unyielding bubble of water formed around his head. Pak dodged tendril after tendril as both creatures boxed him in on a section of the dock. Nadilia's hands worked the air and she chanted arcane words, while the elf launched missiles from a bonelike crossbow, each strike creating massive gashes in the beast.

Caison began climbing out the window when he realized his sword was missing. The creature's blow had knocked it from his grasp. "Desna be merciful," he pled in exasperation. He sought for some sort of weapon, but found none. Cursing, he looked through the room for anything he could throw. The smell of the cleaning solution wafted in the air. On a shelf by the window was another bottle. Caison took it and leapt through the window.

The remaining watchman scored a masterful blow, causing the creature to make a horrendous howl that echoed through the harbor. The stab exposed his rear and a tendril came from behind entangling around the man's neck. It tightened and twisted, giving way to a snap; casually, the tendril tossed the watchman's body to the side. Nadilia's eyes squinted as she thrust her hand forth, releasing a powerful bolt of energy into the face of the beast. A massive roar shattered windows and vibrated everything in the area. The creature's burnt, misshapen face retreated into the waves. Nadalia fell to her knees, too exhausted to stand.

The elf's barrage of missiles ceased as he shot the last from his weapon. The remaining creature recognized the reprieve and pressed for Pak, who was crawling backward from the edge of the wharf. Caison charged forward, letting loose an angry cry as he threw his improvised weapon. The bottle shattered on contact, washing detergent over its skin. The creature shrunk back as the potent chemical intensified from the seawater, while its strong smell assaulted everyone in the area.

"Praise Desna, I'm a believer," Caison smiled as the creature began to sink back into the waterspout, submerging into the harbor. Pak sat on the dock like a drenched cat, hair and clothes sticking to his body, his chest heaving from frantically dodging tentacles.

"C'mon," Caison held out his hand to Pak, "let's get away from the docks."

"Get away from me," he spat as he climbed up to his feet.

"Listen to me . . ." Caison began, but before he could say more, two tendrils reached up out of the fading waterspout, grabbing Pak's ankles. He screamed as his

legs jerked from underneath him, his face hitting the dock.

Caison dove for the halfling's wrists, holding tight. The strength of the tentacle dragged the two to the water. Caison's face bounced off the dock boards, his added weight making little difference on the creature's pull.

"Help me!" Pak squealed.

A sharp sound of metal hitting wood rang in Caison's ears, and he abruptly stopped; the halfling's wrists were featherweight. Pak screamed as he slipped under the water. Only a faint stir on the surface remained. The Mordant Spire elf stood emotionless over Caison, his longsword shining in the light of the moon. Quietly, the elf reached down and wrenched the scroll from the amputated appendage.



"You can't be serious, Chief!" protested the Master of Swords. He scowled at the bearded Adril Hestram, though his comments were directed toward Ambus Valsin, the Chief Venture Captain in the Pathfinders' Grand Lodge. "Buff is undisciplined, his actions in the past weeks have proven that. Hestram made a bad decision in your absence, and only through fortune did things turn out well. Our work cannot be left to mere fortune."

"I understand your concerns, Master." The Chief Venture Captain kept his eyes focused on the small man sitting across the large darkwood table from him. "However, Mr. Caison Poriat has proven resilient, resourceful, and most of all, reliable. He did what was necessary to reclaim the scroll, which was his appointed task."

"But he abandoned his companions. That's not the way we operate."

"Sending unscrupulous Society Members on such a task is not how we operate either, Master," Adril interjected with his bear-like voice.

"That was the decision of the Master of Lore." The Sword Master stopped rapping his cane and lowered his head.

"And the Decemvirate has called him to answer for it," Ambus grimly spoke.

"Caison took a rash step indeed. He also failed to consider that having his comrades would make the endeavor easier—a lesson I hope he learned. However, this Pathfinder knows about the scroll and something of those who would prevent us from using it. The Aboleths know we have it and can deduce our intentions. When we unlock the secrets of the scroll, they will be waiting for us." Ambus leaned forward to Caison. "Does that scare you?"

"It does," Caison swallowed.

"If it didn't, you'd be a fool." The chief leaned back in his chair and turned to Venture Captain Hestram. "I would have disagreed with your choice, Adril, sending this initiate on such a mission, but he proved to be a Pathfinder both in heart and skill. Make sure he is recognized and get him to the trials so we can make it official. Prepare yourself, Mr. Poriat, for when the scroll is deciphered, you will certainly join those who follow its leads."

The debrief ended.

Caison wandered the Grand Lodge and the halls of antiquities he had once polished. Dust coated many of the pieces he had attended to. He had inquired about Amed and Jun, but they were dispatched on another endeavor, preventing him from personally apologizing. He penned two letters and sent them out to where they'd been deployed.

As Caison headed to the initiates' quarters, he saw Nadilia gathering her items.

Caison knew she was leaving the Grand Lodge for good. Dismissed, as was her father, the Master of Lore, for misconduct and abuse of power. Huera and Nadilia were born to the Master of Lore through two Pathfinder women back when he was a Venture Captain. The length of time that had passed since those indiscretions warranted ignoring, but a recent ruling by the Decemvirate justified dismissing him. Huera left the Society honorably by her own choice.

“I’m very sorry.” Caison gestured.

Nadilia looked out of the window of her small room. “You needn’t apologize. I should be the one apologizing to you and the others. I’m sorry for what happened but, Huera’s my blood and father and I knew what we were doing.”

She put another item in her pack, noticing Caison’s puzzled look. Sensing his lack of empathy, Nadilia looked into his eyes.

Caison’s voice quivered “How could you break the trust you were given? The society surely would have considered...”

Nadilia shook her head.

“You are very good at what you do, Caison, but know this: the Society sent you on a dangerous mission that would kill an ordinary initiate. Perhaps it was for good cause, but neither noble nor selfless acts can replace you. Your well-being never factored into their desire for the scroll. You might be willing to accept that, but never put missions and glory above those whom you love.”

Nadilia walked over and hugged Caison. She pulled the man back and then pressed her lips to his. Caison’s heart raced and he melted as her taste crept into his being. Her form pressed against his with devastating effect and Caison realized she cared for him. Thoughts raced through his mind. He would give the world to be with her. There was nothing he wanted more. Not the Society, not the adventure and not even the fame he so desperately longed for. Caison then realized the truth in her words. He would betray the Society for her. Scared, Caison broke the kiss that changed him forever.

Nadilia smiled at his restraint and reached into one of her secret pockets to withdraw a vial. “I hope this will prove useful when you need the wisdom.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a gift.” She threw her bag over her shoulder and walked past.

Caison panicked. Soon she would be gone and the words he had yet to think would never be spoken. He wished for her to stop, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

Nadilia paused and turned her head, smiling as she had at the campfire. “You will make a fine Pathfinder, Caison the Unmatched, world renowned Seeker of Secrets. All you need is...”

...a little spit and polish, and that dust will be off those placards.” Persh continued talking as Caison dusted the models. There were still two more displays left. Persh walked off to retire for the night, leaving Caison alone in the Grand Hall.

When the caretaker was gone, Caison dropped the feather duster. He walked along the Grand Hall, where the achievements of great men were displayed all around him. With contempt he spoke.

“One day my name will be etched in a plaque beneath some silver goblet in this room. One day I’ll no longer need spit or polish. One day, I’ll be a Pathfinder and all will know such tales like no other.”

Caison moved to the next display, leaving behind a model ship. The plaque below

shined ever so bright and on its header was etched,

*In Memory of
The Lost Pathfinders of The Pallid Mist.*

PATHFINDERS OF QADIRA

by Ted Thompson
Pathfinder Chronicler Original Story

22 PHARAST 4709 AR

THE INNER SEA



ack to Qadira I go, to a land which is more than just deserts and mystical air. My mission: travel to Katheer and wait for further instruction by Venture Captain Mansoor Sorush.

As delver and archaeologist, I am expected to find what others fail to see. I have done this duty to the best of my abilities in many previous excavations. But during my last tour in Qadira, I tarnished my good name over an affair with a woman.

When the request was made for a delver to go to Qadira, my superiors believed I would be too ashamed to return. When I agreed without a word, they took it rather apprehensively. They knew well what had happened before and feared things had yet to play out.

As for how I feel, my last trip to Qadira changed me forever—*damaged* me. What I felt during that time never changes, despite what I am told. My old instructors used to say it takes courage to change. I want to change.

I want to prove myself to the Society, to be everything they hoped for. But at the same time, I can't rid myself of what I feel. Looking out at the lonely sea, I remember such thoughts, feelings that I fear will tear me down. Do I really return to Qadira for the Society?

Our ship has made good time and we will be in Katheer by tomorrow afternoon. Once there, I plan to take a room at Baqiya's Inn, an old place that I used to frequent. I hope they changed the style of their rooms; anything else would revive memories best kept forgotten.

My last days in Qadira were tragic, but it is my desire to make amends. I just hope Mansoor is willing to forgive what I can't forget.

23 PHARAST 4709 AR

KATHEER

I have stopped at a small coffee house to update my journal. Things happened too quickly this day to write any sooner.

At morning's light we traveled south along the Saray Coast from the north, in

order to keep a visual bearing. Though this was the surest route to our destination, we ran the risk of ambush by Taldor pirates. The captain assured me that our standard, the flag of Absalom, would be respected for its neutrality. And though I never saw any sign of Taldor privateers, I was informed we passed several in wait.

Further south we hit the mouth of the Pashman River, long coveted by Qadira as its waterway to Katheer. Heavy fortifications and light Qadiran ships guarded the passage, ever vigilant for their enemies from Taldor.

The current upriver quickened against our voyage and the captain had the crew set to oars. As we made progress upstream, the banks of the river began to rise quickly, turning into a magnificent canyon. It soon towered above our ship to miraculous heights, and as impressive as that was, something else overshadowed that even more: great fortresses of stone jutting straight up in the middle of the river. These fortresses were actually water-sculpted divides, which the Qadirans hollowed out and built upon. They were fitted with hoses that spewed oil, ignited by fire to burn down invading ships. I winced each time we passed beneath these menacing structures, for a mistake would lead to our fiery death. High above on the cliff facings were positioned immense ballistae, ready to let loose on anything that flew or sailed. The Qadirans' defenses didn't stop there either, for towers lined the canyon cliffs with flying carpet patrols even higher still. The layers of defenses were truly awe-inspiring, but when I saw the appearance of a massive Qadiran dreadnought, I had to shake my head in disbelief. It is hard to imagine, but the Kelish Empire rules by spectacle and inconceivable power, and this river was a demonstration of that philosophy.

When we neared the capital city of Katheer, a peculiar stink started to fill our senses. It only got worse as we pulled into the harbor and were bombarded by a relentless stench that turned our stomachs. Our captain apologized for our misfortune, stating we had arrived a week into Katheer's annual camel auctions that traded just outside the harbor.

As our ship proceeded towards the main dock, memories of my first arrival flooded back. I had brought several crates of materials and provisions and was forced to rent ten slaves to carry my cargo from the docks to Mansoor's home. When I came to his door for the first time, he couldn't believe what he saw and laughed uncontrollably. At the time, it seemed like a good idea to have all my excavation tools available, but that was soon proven wrong when everything was later stolen. This time I carried just *one* backpack.

I made my way through the labyrinth of docks Katheer prides itself for. It wasn't easy. The camels walked back and forth from the ships, often urinating and leaving fecal matter on the docks. Navigating this proved to be quite difficult if you preferred to keep your shoes clean. Already I had all the auction I could stand. In Absalom, we have camels too, but nothing like this. The manure and the blistering heat created an unforgivable foulness. As hot as Katheer's weather is, one would think that such a baking would turn their leavings into dust, but it just magnified the rancid filth. Flies swarmed everywhere and were so thick they appeared like clouds of black smoke on the horizon. Uncontrollably, I waved my hat in front of my face for each breath. Many just wore silk veils, knowing full well how the event affected life near the docks. As I put distance between the harbor and I, the stink and flies receded.

Before I continue, I must add how strange it is to have lived in a place that felt like home, only to return and find it a hodge-podge of useless memories and misconceptions. If this day has taught me anything, it would be that I no longer stand

in the Katheer I remember.

When I reached Baqya's Inn, several children surrounded me in an attempt to grab whatever hung from my pack. I tried to bribe them away with coin, but they remained persistent to get something more of value. Luckily I had tied everything down, and they eventually wandered off. I watched them return to their parents on the opposite side of the street. They then directed their children to other potential people. The parents watched my every move and finally turned to some rougher-looking men that glanced in my direction. Surprised to see this activity from a respected street I had once known, I looked for the guards who normally patrolled, but none ever came. I proceeded into the Inn and was quickly surrounded by five scantily dressed women. The Inn that I had grown so fond of in memory had now become a brothel!

I usually pride myself on being self sufficient and keen to my surroundings, but I know when to admit defeat. Quickly, I headed back to the docks to an area I passed which seemed safer.

Now, sitting at this coffee shop, I realize I have no place to go. I didn't plan to turn to Mansoor so soon, but I have little choice as night falls and the businesses start to close.

23 PHARAST 4709 AR

KATHEER, THE HOUSE OF MANSOOR SORUSH

At last I rest. My anxiety is over and my meeting with Mansoor is behind. Outside, thunder and lightning keeps me from falling asleep. I am glad this night is nearly over because I truly dreaded facing my old Venture Captain.

When I arrived at Majeer's tent of Exotic Weaponry and Antiquities, I realized they were closed for the night. Mansoor's house lay just behind the shop, so I went to the alley and carefully stepped through the gardens that adjoined his patio.

Upon seeing his door, dread filled my being. I could still hear Mansoor screaming at the top of his lungs, completely absent of mind as his temper got the best of him.

"Never set foot in this house again!" The door slammed and a piece of glass fell from a pane in the nearby window.

My heart beat rapidly. I considered what I would say, but only poorly worded attempts at apology came to mind. Tensing with my eyes tightly shut, I knocked. I didn't know what to expect but prepared for the worst.

Mansoor opened the door and smiled. Surprised, I smiled back without thought. He then held out his hand to lead me through the door.

"Welcome back, Suri! Come in."

Stepping through the door, I entered the home I thought I would never see again. Mansoor noticed my pack and gave a solid look outside, expecting to see slaves with more crates. Chuckling, he closed the door.

"If there isn't anything else, you can leave that pack at the door; my servants will take it to your room. Follow me and don't mind the dusty trinkets on the walls."

Mansoor walked ahead and I was close behind, completely spellbound by the new additions of ancient relics adorning his walls. Though they were neither magical nor notorious, I could see their value. Mansoor's house had become a gallery of ancient art. There were a few pieces in particular that I could have studied all night, but Mansoor literally pulled me away.

He took me through a long hall to a lavish study. My mouth dropped as I took

in the room's finer points. He had artifacts, maps, hunting trophies, certificates, and medals all impressively displayed. I commended him on his successes.

Graciously, he accepted and excused himself from the room for a moment. Those few seconds I tried to recall what the room had looked like before. It had been more for utility in the past, an office for administering Society matters. Mansoor returned holding a tray that contained an intricate tea set. "I usually have the servants make a small pot for just myself, but I made extra tonight in case you stopped by. I hoped you would come and it means a lot to me that you considered staying the night here first." He poured two cups and offered one. I put the cup to my lips and was immediately surprised to see the ancient engravings lining the brim. Mansoor smiled, noticing my shock.

"We found this entire tea set in the Royal Naefsta's burial chamber. Believe it or not, it was meant for his cat to drink from, somewhere in the great beyond."

I laughed, trying not to spill the tea. The set's exquisite detail was fit for a Taldor king—not a cat. I smiled at the story and raised the teacup to my lips once more. It had been a long day and I hoped to gain strength from the kay leaves that lay within.

As we set our cups on the table, we shared a moment of silence. I glanced around the study until I noticed a small painting. It was of her. I turned my head to something else and hoped Mansoor didn't notice, but he looked at the painting immediately. I drew a deep breath, but Mansoor spoke first.

"Do you want to be in Qadira, Suri?"

I stopped and thought about his question. "Yes, I do want to be here."

"Good." He closed his eyes for a moment as if relieved.

"I am sorry for what happened between your daughter and I, Mansoor. I have wanted..." but Mansoor raised his hand and cut me off mid-speech. Sighing, he spoke.

"The past is done, Suri, and I should have used more discretion with my daughter. Your age, her age—I was that age too once. I should have been ahead of things, but I was preoccupied as always. I put you both in a situation where temptation was possible. But...Anadira is married now. All is well. So let us move ahead and forget the past."

The realization of what Mansoor said both touched and hurt me all at once. Despite the fact I was forgiven, my most cherished desire had married someone else.

Mansoor studied me for a moment before he spoke once more. "Suri, I will be moving out of this place to one of the richest houses in Katheer. The clientele that I sell to demands it, so I am going to deal exclusively in fine antiquities and leave the exotic weapons to my brother. All these operations I oversee in Qadira are creating quite a market for artifacts, non-magical of course. I have a reputation and the richest in Katheer demand I meet them in more tidy surroundings. I guess my dreams of wealth are coming true despite my desire to remain humble." Mansoor looked around the room as if it were somehow hollow in its glory and sighed.

"My father and mother passed by many ruins in their travels. They always kept me away from them because few who ventured in ever returned. I had to become a very experienced soldier and a leader to know what I could and couldn't do. Before I learned to fight, I was much like you. I had the knack to find things most people couldn't see, but I didn't have the experience to survive what I uncovered. The Qadiran desert is a dangerous place. Many die out there, many Pathfinders. The Society sends me adventurous youths excited to make a name for themselves, but most are lucky to

have their name engraved on a tombstone. The work in Qadiran ruins is very tricky.”

Mansoor pointed to the wall directly behind me. “Now tell me, what do you see?”

I followed the direction of his finger where many artifacts had been hung. Among them a dish seemed to stand out; it modest compared to other pieces.

“I see a plate, nearly two thousand years old. The inscriptions on it use characters that haven’t been written in over a millennium. If I were to guess, I would say it was ceremonial, perhaps an offering plate used by the Dune Druids of old.”

Mansoor nodded, appearing impressed.

“Yes, you are right. There are very few in Qadira who would know this; brilliant assessment. You are a true Delver, Suri. Now let me tell you the history of this plate you don’t know. We found it in a ruin much like the ones you will find yourself in. It was full of statues that seemed quite unremarkable, but one was a golem, covered with spider webs and dust just like everything else there. Motionless but with purpose, it had waited two thousand years for us to come. It awoke to kill and before it was done, three of my closest friends lay dead on the floor. I was the sole survivor of the experience. That is what I see when I look upon this plate.” Mansoor brushed his eyes with his hand.

I entreat you to be cautious in your work. Know your limitations, so you won’t suffer the fate of my dear friends.” Mansoor stared at me with such intensity that I was forced to look away. At last he relented his gaze.

“Come, my friend, I have a room prepared.”

Mansoor led me through his house to the room that had once been his daughter’s. He opened the door and handed me a lamp. “I will see you in the morning.”

As he walked down the hall, I swallowed hard. Taking slow, deep breaths, I stepped inside and shut the door, closing my eyes.

I opened them to a delusion. It appeared she had just stepped out and was coming back. The room looked nearly the same, as if time stood still. Everywhere her things lay just as she had left them. I could hear her voice echoing, “If my father catches us...”

This was where I had spent the happiest moments of my life.

Now it was abandoned, empty...forgotten.

I try never to think of her name, but Mansoor said it so easily.

Anadira.

How could you find someone else?

Now I am alone in this world. What use am I without you wanting me?

Thinking of her made me sick.

I killed the lamp and undressed, hoping darkness and sleep would be my escape. But when I slipped between the covers, Anadira’s intoxicating smell remained, even on the clean sheets.

The night air blew forcefully through a cracked window and kept knocking a storm shutter back and forth. A thunderstorm was nearing. A crack of lightning flashed in the sky, striking somewhere in the distance. The storm moved quickly and rain started to fall softly. Tossing and turning, I thought the noise would never end. A bolt of lightning struck a tree outside, shaking the bed with a shattering boom. Mansoor’s house shook to its very foundations as rain began to pour down in buckets. I pulled a tinder twig from the nightstand and relit my lamp. Water was rushing through the window at a frightful pace. I ran to close the storm shutters and finally the window, nearly drowning myself in the effort. Mansoor’s servants tromped about the house in

a panic, securing the other storm shutters and windows. They knocked at my door to see if I was all right and I belayed their fears.

At this moment, judging by the lantern oil, it has been two hours since I started writing. No surprise that I am still awake.

Somewhere in Katheer, Anadira is also living through this storm. I fear it will be a long night before I sleep the memory of her away.

24 PHARAST 4709 AR

KATHEER, THE HOUSE OF MANSOOR SORUSH

I will be dining with Mansoor and his wife soon. It is to be a special occasion celebrating my first assignment since my return. Odd, considering Mansoor told me that the fate of many novice Pathfinders is death. Better to just write than ponder such a thought.

This morning started out rather groggily after the horrendous storm. It had inflicted severe damage to the area. Mansoor spent half the day giving orders to his servants on how to clean it all up. He also went out to check on his extended family; no doubt he paid a visit to Anadira.

For me, sleep came late after the storm passed and I didn't have any desire to get up until I felt somewhat rested. When I finally awoke, Anadira still remained fresh in my mind, and the storm seemed like a warning against my desire. It worries me that I am obsessing about her.

I dressed quickly and left the room for the kitchen where I found a prepared plate of grapes and bread left by Mansoor's wife. On the table Mansoor had placed a note saying he would return after midday. The grapes looked fresh and smelled incredibly sweet. I picked one and was about to throw it in my mouth when Mansoor hurriedly came through the door. Surprised, I started to stand but he told me to take my time and meet him in his study when finished. I ate as fast as I could.

Mansoor was reading a letter when I entered the study. He motioned for me to sit on a couch and continued to read while adjusting his eyepiece. After a moment he sighed, looking at the letter one last time as his eyepiece slipped from his face, falling to his side.

He sat down on the couch next to me and put his hands together.

"Suri, my lead Pathfinder Victonius recently discovered a temple, a defiled one. We need to identify it, see how old it is and who originally built it. Are you up to the challenge?" Mansoor seemed reluctant to even pose the question.

"Of course, it's why I'm here."

"Ok, then let's prepare for your journey."

Mansoor pulled out a map and a magnifying glass. We spent the rest of the afternoon discussing the temple. Victonius had found it by accident while following a lead on another task. He stumbled upon a cult of Rovagug worshippers who were in the middle of their blasphemous ceremony. A fight ensued and Victonius, having the temperament of a Hellknight, killed everyone.

Mansoor's subsequent investigation had revealed that the structure was an ancient temple, though it wasn't originally built to worship the Rough Beast. The desecration by the cultists made it difficult to identify its origin. Mansoor made a few sketches of the exterior, which I noticed were incomplete. He explained that the temple was still mostly under sand. We spent hours looking through every source within Mansoor's

home, but found no history or lore about temples in that particular region. Seeing that research was of no use, we gave up, retiring to our rooms to dress for supper.

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OUTSIDE KATHEER, FLYING TO THE TEMPLE

It has been a long time since I have traveled by flying carpet. It takes a while to get comfortable with this type of magic. The force that keeps one a float feels like it will let go from underneath at any moment.

My wayfinder is set to my destination, and given that I am within Katheer's protection, I have decided to catch up on my writing.

Last night, Mansoor's wife created a feast.

It has been said that Qadiran meals heighten one's expectations of what a meal can be. At Mansoor's house this is especially true. With their servants in full attendance, Mansoor's wife cooked a banquet of dishes hailing from all across Casmaron. I truly doubt that the Padishah Emperor himself dines so well. The stuffed game hens were without equal and the Hisem spiced vegetables I can still taste. If you have never tasted Hisem spiced vegetables, then obviously you have never been to Qadira. Hisem spice is an herb that comes from far across the greater empire of Casmaron. The journey to deliver this spice is long and arduous, made difficult by its delicate leafy qualities. The spice remains fresh for only a few weeks, and by the time it reaches Qadira, it has just a couple days left before it is nearly tasteless. At this point, it requires great amounts to bring out the proper strength of its flavor, driving costs well beyond its worth. However, you won't think of the cost once you have experienced it. At first, it creeps into your senses. You taste just a hint on your tongue mingling with the vegetables. This would seem like a tease, until your entire mouth begins to feel strangely excited. As you are trying to pinpoint the cause of this miraculous sensation, a seductive savoriness comes along, stealing away all your fondest memories of great food. It is no accident that many Qadirans feel superior to the rest of the world. Hisem is one of those reasons. Trips abroad have left many a Qadiran shocked by the barbaric tastes of the natives. In Absalom, I always knew I was near a Qadiran when I heard, "If only I had fresh Hisem here with me now."

There was plenty of Hisem on my table last night and the food just didn't stop coming until I finally refused everything offered. When it would seem nothing else could fit in my stomach, Mansoor pulled out a smoke-pipe. Though I tried to refuse, I knew very well it was custom after dinner and Mansoor wouldn't allow my foreign quibbles. With both my lungs and stomach full, Mansoor's wife proceeded to break out the Qadiran ale calling one of her servants to play a Nay for us. Caught in the rhythmic moment, she began to dance and sing as she had once with her daughter, Anadira. A glow formed around the moment and I can no longer recall anything else other than the taste of vanilla and cloves in my mouth.

Despite the Qadiran ale I had consumed that night, I felt quite refreshed in the morning and ready for my assignment. I met Mansoor for breakfast and discussed the details of the trip, where he gave me maps and instructions for travel.

He told me the temple was one hundred and fifty miles southwest, deep in the Ketz desert. A camp had been secretly staged near the site to avoid attention with men waiting there to assist. Everything seemed in order as Mansoor walked with me to Majeer's tent, but he had one thing left to say.

“Suri, I was at this temple. I sensed something strange about it, making me uncomfortable. Call it a Qadiran soldier’s intuition speaking to me.” Mansoor reached out and clasped my shoulder. It was the first time he had touched me since the night he threw me out of his daughter’s bed. I was about to say something, but he spoke first.

“You are among the best at what you do, Suri, but I am afraid for you. Take your time, that’s an order. Don’t feel pressured to make decisions that might jeopardize you or the men unnecessarily. If you find something new to report, please come back immediately. Don’t proceed alone. Understood?”

I thought on his words and saw no reason to say no.

“Of course!”

“That’s good, remember that.” He put his hand down and smiled.

Turning away, I felt nervous about his concern. I thought about all he had said since I arrived. I missed Absalom and my mother back home. I hoped to see her again, but I had to do something with my life. Too many days slipped by while I lived in comfort under her wing. This was my moment to prove myself.

I headed to Majeer’s shop, feeling independent for the first time. Shaking off the fear Mansoor instilled in me, I went inside the tent and procured an old dusty carpet leaning in a corner. The carpet wasn’t for sale and only Pathfinders could touch them. Majeer didn’t bat an eye as I grabbed it.

“Kirah,” I spoke, and the carpet transformed into a brilliant tapestry, floating just off the ground. I walked away from the tent, guiding the hovering fabric to my gear. I gave one last glance to Mansoor who was watching me from his door. He appeared regretful but I couldn’t think say why. I loaded the carpet’s secret pockets and stepped aboard. Gently I tugged the carpet and it began to rise higher. When I reached sufficient height, I tapped my left foot and rushed up into the sky. Katheer was behind me and I hoped Anadira was too.

25 PHARAST 4709

SOUTHWEST OF KATHEER NEARING THE KETZ DESERT

I will be heading into the deep desert soon. I have laid a course across it with my wayfinder guiding me to the excavation. The landscape I fly over intrigues me. I wish I had time to set foot on some of the places I have passed, but such an indulgence would be at great peril.

The open desert of Qadira is magnificent. The colors of the sandy dunes and the textures of the jagged mountains thrusting up from the earth is unimaginable in contrast. The smell of the desert fills my senses, intertwining with the spiced food I had just eaten this morning.

The only thing that takes away from my enjoyment is the sun’s relentless heat. It feels akin to sitting close to a roaring fire you can’t step away from. Clothes are very important in this kind of torridness. One could be dead in a day if they walked this arid land, dressed as I. Without a flying carpet, I would be forced to wear completely different attire. Even then, carrying my weight in water on foot, I would be dead in four days.

But from this lofty view, I don’t need to think about such possibilities. Flying empowers one to feel they are above the elements, but it is a false sense of security. It makes one careless and there are others who prey upon that. Flying bandits know

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when someone inexperienced is passing by their watch. They swoop in fast, forcing one down to the ground so they may take whatever they like. When they are done, they leave you without water to die horribly. Vigilance and discretion is the only way to survive when you are beyond Katheer's border patrols. The Flying Royal Guard won't come to your aid once you cross a certain point, and there are suspicions that the guards tip off the raiders. Mansoor warned me long ago to watch for mirror signals during the crossing, which appear from both behind and ahead. The bandits lurk very high so they can view large expanses below. Once they have their victim chosen, they plummet towards their target like a bird of prey. I know the way these brigands operate, so I travel along the contours of the land, avoiding the Royal Guards too.

25 PHARAST 4709 AR

156 MILES SOUTHWEST OF KATHEER, EXCAVATION CAMP

I have seen the temple and I'm concerned. Everything I was told was wrong, right down to where the camp is. When I arrived, my first desire was to see the excavation and maybe the interior of the temple. In hindsight, this was a mistake. I believe the day's travel in the scorching heat robbed me of my senses and I should have taken more care in organizing the camp and feeling out the men's morale. Had I done so, I would have recognized they needed proper motivation to carry out my task. Instead, they are now in opposition to my work. The whole situation has soured my mood. For the record I will give an account of the day's events, though I do not wish to.

When I first spotted the camp I thought my wayfinder was slightly off. The camp was west from what I had been told. It wasn't well hidden either. Though I didn't know at the time, these were the first signs something had gone terribly wrong.

Knowing what I know now, I am relieved that I took the precaution of burying the carpet, my wayfinder and a few vials of water a short distance from the camp.

To explain my sudden appearance, I cleaned myself off, put on my trusty pack and walked into the camp holding a blank scroll. I hoped the men would assume the scroll had been magical.

I was greeted with scimitars at the throat. Four mercenaries took me for an intruder and quickly had me surrounded. Speaking to them in Kelish, I introduced myself and presented my letter of introduction containing Mansoor's raised seal. Hesitantly, they lowered their weapons and then snatched the letter from my hand. From this first meeting, I knew my presence wasn't wanted. The mercenaries were a tad jumpy, and they looked at me like I was trouble. I should have talked to them right there, but instead I chose to ask for my excavators. Smiling strangely, one pointed in the general direction and walked off.

Advancing through the camp, I noted the tents weren't properly tied down and were unattended. And when I found the workers' tent, I peered inside, seeing the men were asleep; it appeared they had been so all day. Opening the flap, I startled one awake. In turn he woke the others. One man he shook woke up screaming and cowered in terror until he realized where he was. Ashamed, he turned red-faced and stood. Never had I seen a sleeping man wake so frightened. I tallied their number to make sure they were accounted for. Six was the correct number. I introduced myself and asked to be shown the temple. They looked at each other hesitantly and argued in their own regional dialect.

After a heated discussion, they nodded hesitantly to one man who appeared to

represent them. I began to have concerns if my work would be aided. The men appeared terrified at the prospect of going, like animals trying to escape the slaughter. Their fear was something I wasn't prepared for. As I left the tent, the mercenaries were nowhere to be seen. I considered bringing one along as an escort, but my assistants were already pointing the way and leading me out of camp. They picked up a few sacks, which I assumed were supplies for excavation. I was relieved they had found some resolution to their fears, but their expressions remained grim nonetheless.

We left camp and set out over the tall dunes. It was further to the dig than Mansoor had told me. As we walked, I kept thinking the site would be over the next dune, but we continued to walk for well over an hour. I was ready to ask how much farther we had to go when we came to a clearing containing the remains of a camp. It looked roughly the same size as the one we left. I asked the men if they could explain what this was, and they admitted to relocating the encampment a day after Mansoor left.

“Why?” I was completely bewildered.

The man said one word: “Nightmares.”

As we passed the abandoned camp following a wash into the hills, the men began to quarrel and finally halted. Their argument became so heated that four of them turned back to camp. Only two remained: a small lanky fellow and another who was more muscular than the mercenaries. Though they did not leave, they warned me they weren't going any further and would wait until dusk.

I could see superstitious fear in their eyes, so I began to tease them until they were more angry than afraid. Eventually, I goaded them to guide me over a carefully charted path to the temple. As we walked, they informed me there were several sinkholes around this part of the trail. I had almost convinced myself that this was the cause of all their apprehension, when the temple came into view. The men's faces went white as their eyes widened. There was no doubt—they were terrified of the temple itself. And for my own sake, I was feeling quite afraid too. Mansoor had told me the temple was almost entirely buried. As I stood before it on the sands, it towered above me, fully visible to all.

“It is happening as I dreamed,” the lanky one said in a quivering voice.

The trembling man looked about the wind as if expecting something horrible. Standing there, I also felt a sense of danger. How could so much sand move away? We were at the base of the dunes and the temple was completely surrounded. The lightest of sandstorms would bury the structure but yet it was uncovered. The two men were convinced other forces were at work and there was no denying the temple was acting against nature itself.

My first thought, I must confess, was to return to Katheer—but with the temple so exposed, I was fearful others would soon come to plunder it.

The day's light was beginning to fail and I wanted to take a closer look, both inside and out. I asked one of the two men to bring forth a lantern. He looked at his partner and I could tell he thought me insane. The lanky man finally pulled out a sack and brought out a lantern, but as he walked to me, he seemed to doubt himself and was stricken with terror. He dropped the lantern and ran past his comrade, who in turn followed. Shocked, I yelled for them to stop but despite my commands they disappeared over the dunes and out of sight.

I turned my attention to the lantern. Much of the oil had spilled out onto the sand and the wick had fallen out too. The sun was setting and the winds were rising. I picked up the lantern and headed for the entrance of the temple. The dim light

revealed a flight of stairs descending inward. I entered the stairwell to remove myself from the increasing gusts and pulled out a new wick for the lantern. Striking steel to flint, I attempted to light the wick but paused to take in my curious surroundings. I had the feeling of being in a cave, a darkening cave. The light was fading fast and my wick was proving difficult to light. A foul stench of rotting decay crept into my nose. My heart nearly stopped. Mansoor's cautioning words returned to me. I knew nothing of what lay at the bottom of the stairs and I was alone.

What if something was down there?

I gave up on the lantern and decided to use a little magic. I was beginning to miss my wayfinder and its ability to radiate light. It would have been useful now but it was safer where it was. I didn't want the men to steal it.

I took off my pack and withdrew a stone from one of its exterior pockets. Slowly, I drew my sword and set my pack on the stairs. With my blade outstretched I proceeded downward, commanding the stone to shine. Lantern light would have been brighter, but I felt the stone's glow would be enough.

Carefully, I advanced down the stairs until reaching the bottom. The nauseating smell was overpowering my senses. I stuffed cloth in my nostrils and pulled my scarf over my nose. Looking around, my light revealed a large ceremonial chamber. Thick, tall pillars supported a vaulted ceiling, which at the very top had some sort of exhaust hole. The pillars were white and their surfaces caught my dim light. Below on the floor were piles of moving masses. Frightened, I turned my light towards them and the pests went reeling back, leaving large lumps of blackened, decaying corpses. I shook my stone to increase the intensity of light. The infestation was a horde of desert beetles. Remains of creatures and human-like forms laid everywhere. I shined my light throughout the carnage, aghast at the mutilated and badly decomposed corpses. I saw a slain Naga and perhaps a leonine body next to a head of what I think was a woman, but only the long hair distinguished it as such. There were so many bodies and their races were indistinguishable.

How did Victorius accomplish this?

He obviously delighted in cutting off their heads, for not a single body had one. This was butcher's work! The cult's god, Rovagug, existed to destroy all things and the Rough Beast must have approved of this handiwork.

Though there were too many corpses to count, I noticed some hadn't a single bit of flesh on them. It was as if their bones had been polished clean. The munching and snapping made it clear what had accomplished the deed. As the carnivorous beetles continued their sickly feast, I decided to move no further into the temple. I would need plenty of fire-lit oil when I returned.

Succumbing to the rancid smell, I backed away from the ghastly scene and ran up the stairs. Vomit flew from my mouth before reaching the top as my nausea was too strong to contain.

A somber howl droned from the desert dunes as winds began to blow against the exterior of the temple. By early moon's light I could see sand swirling here and there, small dust devils. I procured my pack and started out for camp, holding my lighting stone before me. As I left, I noticed a pair of scorpions locked in a death struggle. I didn't get more than a glance, but now that I am writing about them, I clearly remember them violently ripping each other apart.

The long return to the camp actually went smoothly, as if something guided me safely back. Despite the darkness, my stone was able to reveal my footing, so I didn't

stumble. When at last I reached the encampment, my stone's light failed and I tripped over a tent spike, skinning my shin. Regardless, I was relieved to have made it.

Despite what I had seen at the temple, I had a voracious appetite. I walked through camp, looking for the largest tent, hoping to find some food. One tent in particular had crates and supplies all around it and a light illuminated the entrance. I headed for it, but as I neared, I overheard several whispers from within. Not priding myself a snoop, I threw open the cover only to have four familiar scimitars drawn on me immediately.

I raised my hands to surrender. Again, the mercenaries looked me over suspiciously, but eventually lowered their swords. I asked why they were so jumpy, and the four answered, "Zaub," which translates into "evil spirit." According to superstition, such a spirit haunts your dreams, revealing your imminent death through nightmares. That explained a lot, but it would have been better to know before I had recklessly pushed to the temple.

I opened a chest and found something edible, which I took to the corner of the tent. The men continued to talk amongst themselves; sometimes speaking openly in Keleshite, while at other times using their colloquial dialect, which I didn't understand. Satiated by dry figs and salted meat, I asked the mercenaries where my tent was. One took me outside and pointed in the proper direction. I could not help but feel removed from the men. Since I arrived I have felt completely isolated. I thanked the mercenary, but he said nothing in return. The desert air was beginning to cool quickly, but I wasn't sure if it was colder than the men in this camp.

Seeing my tent for the first time was bittersweet. Inside was everything I could hope for. There were plenty of tools to carry out the dig and provisions for working within the temple. Mansoor had not missed a detail, but I know now that none of them will be put to use. It is clear that I am not leading a team. Exhaustion has gotten the better of me and my writing seems rather glum as I close this entry. My quill hand has faltered repeatedly during this journaling. I hope tomorrow gives me some hope that things will improve. I will try to rally the men's spirits in the morning.

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SOUTHWEST OF KATHEER, EXCAVATION CAMP

Just when I thought things couldn't get worse, I awoke to find the mercenaries have run off! The four of them left in the night, taking all the camels and most of our provisions. I could chase them down using the flying carpet, but then I would have to confront them. Admittedly, I am not a great swordsman and the thought of losing my carpet or my life doesn't appeal to me.

The remaining men are very frightened and have asked to go home. I have assured them that the camels are not needed and I can get them back safely, though I did not say how.

What I thought would be weeks of detailed research seems to be ruined. It would appear my camp is spiraling out of control. The men's desperation could turn into something terrible. I can almost imagine them torturing me to discover the means of their escape. To pacify them, I have said we will be leaving soon. I cannot be sure if they have their own plots, but as long as I am in the temple, their fear of it will keep me safe.

I will be making my way to the site after breakfast. Given how fast things keep

changing, I have decided to write more often in case something should happen and this book survives me. I hope to identify the temple's deity as one that is benign, and perhaps that will be enough to quell their fears.

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SOUTHWEST OF KATHEER, TEMPLE EXTERIOR

I have learned that the temple dates back some four thousand or more years. Despite all that's gone wrong, I am completely thrilled about this discovery. After translating portions of the wall markings, I have come to the conclusion that this is the oldest temple I have ever excavated.

I also have no doubt that it was dedicated to the worship of Sarenrae. I took the time to venture back to camp and inform the others, but they remained as dismal as ever. Whether they believe me or not, there is no denying the ancient glyph of the Dawnflower etched in stone. However, there are some strange peculiarities that I just can't reconcile. Typically, the Dawnflower is a representation of Sarenrae, appearing as a winged angel with fiery hair, holding a flaming scimitar in one hand and the sun in another. This particular portrait is nothing like that. Instead of Sarenrae holding her flaming sword, she proudly held a shield in one hand and wielded the sun's searing rays in the other. Ancient Kelish below this mural tells of the blinding light of Sarenrae and her shielding powers. I am elated and intrigued by this profound inconsistency. The shield makes sense given that this temple to Sarenrae is the only one I have ever seen with a ceiling. Normally, Sarenrae's temples are open-air structures so that her worshippers can gather and pray under her watchful eyes but this temple is constructed as if to keep Sarenrae shielded from her worshippers, a very odd contradiction that I am eager to solve.

Further excavation of the exterior could reveal more, but that would take time I know I don't have. I am afraid my concentration will have to focus on the interior of the temple, despite the risks. The temple is visible and this will make it a magnet for attention. If I take the time to catalogue everything outside, I'll certainly have a run-in with the local flying residents. They'll just steal what's inside and then its history will be lost.

I have contemplated the dangers of staying and consequences of giving up. The Grand Lodge in Absalom has faith I can carry out this mission, but I doubt they imagined what I am dealing with now. So many things have gone wrong and I am not accustomed to working under such bizarre conditions. I feel certain the temple hides an incredible secret and I don't want to miss this chance to prove myself. In my heart, I feel every Pathfinder has to deal with situations like this. They have to make the tough choices and see it through. If I always play it safe and never take the initiative, how will I ever become anything more than an errand boy? I don't see a choice in this matter. I am sorry, Mansoor, I can't become more without pushing myself.

Besides, I've lost the one I care most about. She won't miss me either.

I will proceed back to the temple. The thieving mercenaries that left camp are surely heading straight for Katheer. Once there, they will sell what they know to the highest bidder. They may even go to the Satrap, Xerbystes II of Qadira. The last time something like this happened, the whole find was confiscated in his name.

Xerbystes II, with his massive network of spies, "The Many Eyes," may already be listening to those mercenaries' tale by some magical means and a Qadiran regiment

of soldiers could already be dispatched. I refuse to let the greedy Satrap have his way this time. My loyalty to the Pathfinder Society is resolute. Either I will discover the secret of this temple or have my dead body lie in it.

26 PHARAST 4709 AR

SOUTHWEST OF KATHEER, TEMPLE INTERIOR

I have made another discovery. One that I feel will increase my standing at the Society. But first I must continue my account of what happened to this point.

After the two-hour trek to and from camp, I concluded my time was completely wasted. My idea to get the men to help with the excavation had dismally failed. I could not fathom they would shy away from a temple that represented the dominant religion in Qadira. So I proceeded alone, straight into the temple. The noon sun had passed and I made my way down the stairs. Light seemed to panic the beetles momentarily before, so I brought a good lantern I could trust. From what I experienced last time, I made the assumption the beetles would leave me alone as long as they had corpses to feed on. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I spotted the beetle hoard feasting. They appeared like a mesh of squirming movement and I imagined accidentally falling in them. Surely, I would have to return to Katheer for treatment if I did. The rotting smell that had been so prevalent yesterday had subsided greatly and I knew it was due to the clicking and clacking of the pests. Regardless, the smell of beetle dung was musty and strong.

I decided to retrace the events of Victonius' discovery of the cult. Mansoor had briefly described the event, but now I was seeing the details firsthand. Looking at the stairs first, I found no trace of blood or struggle, leading me to believe the cult hadn't posted any sentries. The main area of the temple must have been making quite a commotion during their ceremony, for I found what I believed to be Victonius' first victim, facing away from the stairs. A second guard standing nearby failed to notice what had happened and he too was easily dispatched. With the cult's guards dead, Victonius appeared to make his way to what could have been a Naga. This would have been the Hellknight's greatest threat, since the creature is known to cast spells. I am not sure how he managed to slay it, but there was no questioning its lifeless corpse. From there he hacked mercilessly, working his way down to the lesser creatures. From the arrangement of the bodies, it appears he killed half the chamber before he was noticed. He must have caught them by complete surprise. Still, I am baffled as to why there is little sign of panic or melee fighting. It almost appeared as if the worshippers didn't see Victonius or notice the death of their own cultists. Were they in a trance? That would explain their lack of response.

I turned my view away from the carnage to look at the temple's wall decorations. There I saw cloth pictures depicting grotesque rituals. I still feel sickened by what I saw. How could a mind become so warped that it imagined such things? The wall decorations were beyond comprehension. I wasted no time ripping them down to see what the actual stone held behind. Not to my surprise, I uncovered dried smeared blood over chipped away stones.

Unfortunately, finding desecration such as this is common in my work. One could say that worshippers believe that all temples are vessels. If you empty that vessel and fill it with something else, it becomes yours. That is the point of desecration: to change ownership. However, the faith of those who built this temple was very hard to

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remove and I could still see its righteous origins.

I started translating whatever fragments I found and continued ripping down the bloodied grotesque cloths. I threw them in a pile, making sure I could hang everything back up the way I found it. Not so much that I cared to return it to its owners, but rather to not miss any clues. In my work it's important to remember the order of things, even with depictions such as these. It was difficult to find a place to keep the cult's tapestries safe with all the masticating beetles running about.

A dais was the centerpiece of worship for the temple. There was a massive raised dish there full of oil. A reservoir hole in the dish siphoned oil from a larger vessel high above, allowing a fire to burn for extended periods. Looking to the ceiling, I saw the exhaust vent I had seen before and realized it was there to vent out the smoke. I took out my tinderbox and started kicking sparks into it. The oil finally caught ablaze and lit up the entire room. I marveled at the brightness, which revealed a shrine behind the fire. In the center of the shrine was an idol of a massive spiny worm with arms and claws. It seemed to stare right through me and I couldn't take my eyes off it, for it appeared so real. At any moment it looked like it might jump off the table and come right for me. Instead, it seemed satisfied being a conductor to a gruesome chewing symphony of beetles.

The next several hours I spent studying the walls. Though the cultists may have worshipped an insane god, they were methodically destroying the murals. To my surprise, there were still some murals completely intact. These pictures told a different story than the gory decorations I had removed. As I read through and translated the old glyphs, I began to feel less threatened by the place. This temple had seen some great moments of faith. My enjoyment would have been more if it weren't for the constant sound of noisy chewing from the bugs. Their snapping through flesh reminded me of the breaking of small sticks. More than once I looked behind to make sure they were content with the bodies, and not looking for something warmer.

I was about to return to camp when I recognized something peculiar. Temples, especially old ones, usually follow a point of symmetry that abides by certain rules. They are built to focus a worshipper's prayers and usually align with the stars. The architect uses what materials are available and seldom resorts to anything else during construction. There was a wall completely deviating from the temple's other materials. The clay that was used to make the bricks was whiter than the gray mud that made up the rest. Perhaps I wouldn't have noticed this had the mortar not been revealed by the cultists, but I think I would have found it because the wall ruined the temple's symmetry, something I've never seen before.

I am fairly convinced that this wall is false and hides a secret. I feel compelled to report this to Mansoor, but I know my time is short. If I head back to Katheer for assistance, we may only return to find the place looted. Right now, I am certain no one has seen what is on the other side of that wall. Am I supposed to hand this off to someone else? Is it my fate to return to Katheer to find a worthy glory seeker to push the wall open with a finger's touch? No, this is my opportunity to prove myself and I feel strangely compelled to do so.

***SOUTH OF KATHEER, TEMPLE INTERIOR
26 PHARAST 4709 AR, SOMETIME LATER***

Despite my identifying the false wall, it actually took some time getting to it. The

cultists had an array of items against the wall, which had to be cleared. Carefully, I moved their ceremonial relics, noting the order of their placement. I moved the table, clearing the way for me to examine the wall. Running my finger around the crevices of the mortar, I looked for abnormally deep indentations but found nothing.

The wall was caked with dust, so I brushed it off and waited for everything to settle. Taking a few steps back from my handiwork, everything became clear. The cultists had taken little care in removing anything else but the paint of the murals. The chipping and scratches formed the Dawnflower's figure, standing proudly over the entryway to the secret chamber. This depiction, though scarred, was newer than the Dawnflower I had found outside and the wall looked like a very distinct add-on. I went to work, trying to figure the date of the expansion, but could do little other than speculate. My guess is that it was built four hundred years after the original temple.

After the work I had done with the wall, I was in a feverish state. The only thing that kept me going was the significance of the discovery. I went on searching for a mechanism to open the passageway and used a magic detecting scroll to determine if the door was mechanical. No magic surrounded the door. Cursing that I didn't have assistants, I wished their labor had been here to save me time and energy. There would have been a lot more accomplished by now.

After an hour, I gave up on finding the source of the mechanism. Instead, I focused on removing one of its pieces so that I might force entry. Though the main mechanism eluded me, there was an access in an adjoining wall next to the secret doorway. Inside the panel there were stones that moved with sand. I hoped they controlled the opening and closing. I pried one of the stones out so the sand poured out of the access. A small thud came from the ceiling and the wall jutted out a few inches on one side and pressed in on the other. It was a pivoting wall, but it didn't swing freely. I attempted to pry something into the corner of the adjoining wall using whatever I could. Nothing seemed the right size. Taking my sword out, I slammed it into the side and heaved. The door moved. Adjusting, I got the better part of my sword in and put my foot on the wall and pulled. The wall moved slightly, but then my sword snapped as the metal gave out. I tumbled to the floor hard and stared straight up at the ceiling. A skittering sound came from the direction of the beetles and I turned to find one heading right for me. Quickly, I jumped up and smashed the thing with my foot, kicking it back into the pile, where its friends immediately consumed it. Grabbing what was left of my sword, I pried once again, using the thicker half of the blade. This time, the wall pivoted freely.

I can't contain my excitement because now I get to enter the room. I have lit my lantern and I'm ready to proceed. I will head into the room now and put this chapbook into my side pocket. These may be the last words anyone reads from me. The temple is getting very cold all of a sudden. The false wall I opened must have created a draft.

SOUTH OF KATHEER, TEMPLE INTERIOR

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I feel horrible, and I can't remember all the details of the past days. What I am certain of is its presence around me. This temple was never a place for the good to worship...I realize that now. It is a prison, kept secret by the Dawnflower priests to hide something too terrible to imagine. I made a mistake going ahead. I should have returned to Katheer. My greed got the best of me—or maybe *it* did. The thing is a

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smothering presence within, growing more powerful by the minute. I am doomed. I hope that whoever recovers this journal can save me. I remember some things that happened, but not everything. I am powerless to stop what is coming. It pains me to write because the thing is against it. The Satrap and his “Many Eyes” are the least of my worries now. I would gladly let him take this prize. There is so much to write and my will to do so wanes. But if I do not, no one will know what I unleashed.

When I entered that dreadful room, it was dusty and full of artifacts, undisturbed for several millennia. I could barely contain my excitement at the find and I was sure the room held the answers I sought. I began to delude myself with the fame I would achieve with this journal and the items that would prove my legitimacy, making my chapbook a candidate for entry into the Pathfinder Chronicles. Mansoor had never discussed what would happen if I found treasure, and I am sure he never meant things to go this far. Nonetheless, I felt compelled under the circumstances. And I was wrong.

With this discovery, I reasoned that I had to take what I could. If I didn’t loot it for the Society, someone else surely would. I spent several hours appraising the most valuable pieces. I marked with rocks the locations of the artifacts I would be taking, in case we returned from Katheer to find the temple undisturbed. While collecting the pieces, I was struck by the fashion of their time. The holy symbols were made of solid gold and very detailed with deep engravings, weighing considerably more than today’s equivalents. The urns and instruments of ritual lay on a table, as if ready to perform at a moment’s notice.

The room was untouched, aside from a thick layer of dust. A parchment lay on the table, but it was completely illegible after so many millennia. The paper could have been made of ash, for all it was worth, nothing written survived. Next to the remains sat a strange little figurine that appeared to be half man, half dragonfly. It was crafted from black obsidian and felt warm to the touch. I thought it could be magical and marveled at it until a brilliant light illuminated the piece. My heart jumped as I looked for the source. Fearful, I reached for my sword, forgetting I had destroyed it while prying open the false wall. To my surprise, the bright light shown through a crack in a wall, a sign of another room.

Somehow the room had reacted to my presence. I did not know what I was feeling, but understood that it wanted my help. My mind ran wild. I speculated a priest from long ago lay trapped within, somehow suspended. The light from the room shined rays through the darkness, showing me the way. It illuminated the figurine and something in the corner of the room. I moved away from the figurine towards the object in the corner. It was dry rotted wood that had crumbled up. Inside lay something wrapped in tattered cloth. I reached in and grabbed the cloth, noticing a disabled trap, which had been set off long ago. I unraveled the cloth and something metal slipped out, falling to the floor. The ray of light strangely moved from the chest to a key. I reached down, picked it up, and placed it in my pocket. Within the cloth a fine mesh of paper must have been wrapped around the key, but it too had turned to dust.

I moved to the source of the light and began cleaning the exterior. I searched for something resembling a keyhole. Light began to shine through a small crevice, revealing a tiny gap. I pushed the key in. I began to realize my hands were not my own and I was a willing puppet. Slowly, I turned the key until I noticed the magnificent Dawnflower adorning the wall. Her hand was stretched forth right where the key entered, as if halting a trespasser.

I stood back for a second contemplating the picture. The Dawnflower's eyes were unforgiving and cold, an angry god of justice. I looked over the chamber once more, but the light that had shown through the cracks ceased. Whatever was on the other side, the Dawnflower had been drawn to oppose. The priests who painted this mural weren't being secretive. Had I been able to read the several parchments I found, perhaps I would have known what waited.

I thought for a while considering what to do. I tried to ignore my overwhelming desire to turn the key, but the insatiable curiosity that brought me to this point couldn't be suppressed. I stared at the door for several minutes, completely visualizing a four thousand-year-old priest who held the knowledge of the ancients, welcoming me. I thought about my reckless actions, realizing I wasn't only ignoring Mansoor's advice, but I was also acting no better than a heedless tomb robber. Looking at the treasure I had stuffed in my pack, I questioned my grabbing the artifacts. Perhaps they had been arranged and left the way I had found them...for a reason. I looked away from my pack and felt something in my pocket. Peering in, I saw the statuette of the dragonfly man. I hadn't put it there!

Even now as I write this, the Dragonfly figurine's presence is sealed to me. I should have respected Mansoor. How wrong I was to think I could carry on without his guidance.

Finding that Dragonfly man in my pocket was the first real sign that something was wrong. My heart started to race as fear overcame my senses. Outside the room, I heard the sound of the bugs chewing in the main temple. Their noise calmed my panic, for at least they had something to satiate themselves on other than me. I had been down here a long time and I wondered if it was dark outside.

I thought about the turncoat mercenaries and the "Many Eyes" of the Satrap. What would happen if I returned to camp and they were there? Maybe they had already arrived and were walking down the temple steps at this moment. They would find this secret place, especially after the mess I made of the false wall. I couldn't put it back together.

And what of this new secret chamber I found, with its mysterious light? Once they had taken everything on me, they would have the key. They'd have no compunction about putting it in the keyhole and opening the door. They'd find out what lay beyond before I did. I couldn't let them have that opportunity. I walked over to the door looking at the mural and the keyhole. I cannot say what happened after that, but I abruptly awoke as I collapsed to the floor, my legs falling beneath me. I skinned my palms while cushioning the fall. Looking up from the dust at the keyhole, I was overcome with doubt that I could secure this find. I had to open that door before the Satrap arrived. I went to turn the key, despite the mural's warning, my hand quivering as I grasped the handle. I could almost hear a voice saying, "Yes, yes, yes." Sweat dripped from my body as the air in the room became so cold that I could see my breath. Something was in there and the pressure it was exerting on me didn't feel good. It was encircling my thoughts as the key slowly turned.

I swallowed hard and spoke the last words of defiance I would ever speak to *it*.

"I can never let whatever you are out of this chamber!"

Convinced something horrible waited behind that door, I threw away any thoughts of ambition I had for myself. The air around me became very heavy and I felt a hideous anger growing in the room. I had to leave for Katheer quickly and hand Mansoor this key. I pulled it from the slot using the last bit of strength I possessed

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and dropped it in my pocket.

And with that one motion, my fate was sealed. The clattering of the beetles rose to a fever pitch outside.

It was time to leave.

I walked out of the secret chamber and froze in my tracks. All the bugs in the ceremony chamber were now congregated before me. The bodies that had kept them so occupied were picked clean and the things prevented me from leaving. I looked into the swirling pile, mesmerized, watching them eat each other. After several minutes they stopped, and it occurred to me that the strongest of the beetles had triumphed and now were looking at me. Reaching the wall door, I attempted to close it, but they lunged too quickly and skittered right for me. Falling back as far as I could, the horde followed after, crawling everywhere.

I remember such disgust at the thought that these things were going to eat me alive.

With all hope lost for my survival, the chamber's rays lit once more through the cracks. The bugs curiously stayed away from the lit chamber and I moved back to the door I had so valiantly resisted before. They slowly crawled to my feet like a devouring carpet ready to envelop me. I pulled the key and looked at the Dawnflower mural, her hand outstretched as if to say "No!" I pushed the key forward between the fingers as the swarm of clattering pests began to crawl up my leg. If they were afraid of the chamber, than perhaps I would be safe inside. I turned the key and pulled hard, hearing pressure release as the door swung wide. The chamber was dark. It no longer needed the light to entice me.

The smell from it was like swallowing a mouthful of fecal sewage. I coughed, choking on the ghastly stench. Before I could look back at the beetles, I heard a horrible shriek that deafened my ears of all sound. I looked to my feet to see the beetles chewing through my pants legs and squirming under my clothes. The loud ringing in my ears didn't stop, and I thought my death certain. And then *it* came jutting out of the darkness. I can't remember what it looked like, though I feel it must have been too horrible for memory, and perhaps, I really don't want to remember. What I am certain about is how fast it hurled me into its unholy prison.

Off my feet, I flew into the darkness. Too afraid to look, I closed my eyes, bracing myself for the landing to come, but it never came. Instead, gentle hands caught me midair. I opened my eyes, surprised to see that I was lying in a strange barren land. Red purplish skies illuminated a dusty sunset. A figure stood towering above me, neither man nor beast. An obscuring blur surrounded it, though I could make out features that showed expression. It slurred something that sounded like hisses and abrupt clicks. When it had finished, my body went limp and my head began to hurt. The thing was staring at me like something it was about to eat. I closed my eyes in fear of the inevitable. A moment passed and nothing happened. Unable to keep my eyes closed, I opened them as something large was rammed into my mouth. Shocked, I saw a wide thorny pipe protruding from my lips. The creature held the other end, grinning fiendishly. I tried to move my arms or turn my head, but I could do nothing. It took the pipe to its maw, inhaling deeply, making my mouth turn dry like paper. It drew in more breaths and nausea overwhelmed my senses. Looking at my side, I witnessed my hands turning gangly white, shriveling up. It smiled as it sucked even more, and my bones started to show through my skin. A tugging on my eyes began to turn everything black. Darkness surrounded what I saw and my vision

became smaller and smaller. The sucking became louder and louder and the blackness eclipsed my sight. Suddenly, I realized I was in the pipe! I tried to resist, but the pull was unimaginably strong. I slid down into the vacuum of blackness straight into the maw of nothingness.

Everything cleared. I was exactly where I was before. The thing took the pipe out of its mouth, as if revolted by some taste it had endured. Leaning over, it began a fit of gagging and heaving. Pain seemed to rack its face as it coughed and choked in convulsions. Turning its head away from me, it cleared its throat and spit out blood and tissue. It stared down at my decrepit shape in reverence, smiling sickly. It heaved once more, but this time a yellow pussy vomit started to spew from its mouth. To my horror, it grabbed the pipe again, vomiting forth the obnoxious yellow fluid down into it. I winced with panic, desiring to resist, but my body remained lifeless and paralyzed. Screaming and tears did nothing as I gagged on the smell of it pouring into my throat.

Revulsion! Disgust! Burning! Invasion!

I cannot describe the pain, but raising my limbs to stop it was impossible. I wanted to die. My stomach began to bulge obscenely as the skin around it stretched and burned. Its eyes looked at me like a hunter cleaning a kill. Surrendering, I longed for the torture to end. I stared back into the thing's eyes and it intently looked into mine. In a flash, my sight changed to its. I lay there before me. Mouthfuls of vomit spewed down the pipe below. My pitiful body shook in horrid agony. I was glad to be out—the suffering was unimaginable. The eyes of my torturer stripped me of my own decency. We watched together as my body endured its torture. Suddenly, I realized its mind had become conscious of my own. It willingly moved its consciousness into mine. For a moment I hesitated in the thought of melding with it to avoid further suffering. I should never have done that.

Sensing the opportunity, it quickly overwhelmed me. Calculating alien intelligence, beyond the scope of my own, started to obliterate my existence. Hate and disgust filled my being and I could feel an irreversible taint grow like a cancer within.

I felt nothing... I was nothing.

My mind opened like a one-page book and it went about erasing everything I understood. In place of my memories, it was teaching me...insanity.

I could not stand to be there another second and I was heaved out. With a splash, I traveled down the pipe in a pile of slithery yellow. The smell of bile burned my senses as I slid down into my own mouth. Bouncing on some tissue, I realized I had landed in the back of my own throat. Wriggling in yellow sludge, I saw a beetle. It screeched upon seeing me, calling forth a horde from my own esophagus. Quickly, the hungry things snagged me, hurtling me down into my own stomach where a nest had been made. Surrounded with no escape, they began to tear my limbs, shredding me into manageable bites. I screamed, only to feel my voice echo in a pipe full of slime. My torturer still stood above with its disgust pouring in.

A strange coldness chilled my body as a new source of strength filled my being. My limbs regained some strength and I grabbed the pipe, wrenching it from my mouth. Turning my head to the side, I belched out whatever I could. My assailant threw its pipe down and continued vomiting next to me, creating a pool of its hideous slime. Horrified, I noticed I was lying in a shallow depression...and the putrid liquid was filling it at a frightful rate. I tried to sit up, to move away, but the weight of my being was impossible to budge. The yellow liquid rose up around my face and finally

down my nose.

I could not scream.

I could not move.

The rancid filth entered me.

Drowning, I longed for death's embrace. This nightmare had to end. With my last breath, my body shook uncontrollably. Relieved it would soon be over, I waited for the sweet relief that was to come—but it was not to be.

Instead, the murky yellow above abruptly splashed as a slender hand reached in to pull me out. The hand was unmistakable; Anadira was somehow here with me. How she had come, I can't say, but the force of her presence frightened the creature. Shrieking, it moved away a sizeable distance. Anadira watched as it ran, staring at it. Then, looking back to me I could see the horror she felt as she looked upon my appearance. "Oh, Suri!" Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I am coming for you! Hold on!" She held my head softly, my grotesque shape dripping yellow filth from my naked body.

She had brought me back. However, I could not forget the thing just beyond us. Looking outward, I saw it in the distance. It was clearer to make out than before. It had wings like an insect. Its face was a lifeless visage of hate with a fearsome sneer. Protruding from its mouth were two long mandibles that led to razor sharp teeth. It stared at me, and I at it. A maniacal smile crossed its face as it began to hover off its feet, floating towards us. As much as I wanted to look to Anadira or away, it held my gaze. My jaw locked up and I tightened in fear. Closer and closer it came. Anadira took hold of my head and screamed into my ears, "Don't look at it, Suri! *Wake up!*"

Shaking my head, I lifted my cold cheeks off the floor of the darkened chamber. Pain shot up my right arm as I felt broken bone piercing through the skin of my palm. Tears were in my eyes and the realization of what had happened frightened me. Moving slightly, I noticed an unusual stillness permeating the air.

I couldn't hear anything.

Tapping the floor created no sound. I rubbed my ears and butted my head.

Nothing.

I tried to speak.

Nothing.

For a few minutes, I sat in utter silence thinking back, the horrific shriek.

Immediately, I heard a ring. I tapped the floor once more.

I could hear it. It was faint and dull.

Relieved, I lay my head back down to wait for my hearing to return. I dreaded the thought of checking for other injuries. Rest would have to do...for now.

As for the dream, I considered it...just a nightmare. I theorized that the pain from my injury had caused trauma that manifested in my subconscious. It seemed plausible, but the experience was unlike anything I had ever felt.

There was no denying that something had thrown me in here. That I couldn't dispute. I tried to forget how dire my situation was as I slowly recovered and focused on the dream. Yes, it was horrible but it did allow one blissful moment with Anadira. I would endure such torture a hundred times if it ended with me in her arms. In the darkness, I imagined her bedroom in Katheer. I could feel her embrace, taste her soft lips and breathe in the sensual perfumes she wore. I teased myself with the moments we were tangled in each other.

Thoughts of her didn't last and a terrible loneliness followed. I wanted her again. Had she really been here? Been here in my dreams?

Forgive me, Mansoor.

Hours later, my hearing improved. The sharper sounds became more audible and the ringing in my ears faded. I hoped my hearing had recovered, but I could still hear a high-pitched sound somewhere in the distance. I was surprised when the sound seemed to move. One moment it was far and faint, while at the next it sounded nearby. I listened to the strange ringing, but exhaustion started to overcome me. With my eyelids getting heavy, sleep covered me like a blanket and I started to slip away. As I spiraled into unconsciousness, the high-pitched sound began to move, as if sensing a change. Though I had perceived this, it was too late to wake. It headed directly for me, growing louder and louder. Even in my sleep, I sensed the growing malevolence, its presence moving into the room. I grated my teeth from the earsplitting blast and gasped from the pain.

Waking up howling, I fully regained consciousness. The ringing went from thunderous to quiet in all but an instant. Trembling, I rose without a thought, shocked to realize I could stand. Swiftly, I felt for broken bones and injuries. There were none. That was when I came to a horrible conclusion and terror filled my being at the thought. *I had to leave this room and escape whatever I let loose in the temple.*

The room was too dark to see in, but outside in the artifact chamber, it was still dimly lit from the brazier in the ceremonial hall. Closing my eyes, I took the first step to leave the nightmarish chamber. I crept slowly to the doorway, looking carefully at all the places something could hide. There was nothing. I moved into the artifact room as quietly as I could.

Something had changed. I couldn't smell and my throat was sore. The air around me was freezing and my breath was visible. Looking at the artifacts, I noticed they had been reorganized. The ornately-placed instruments had all turned upside down, facing backwards. There were also no sign of tracks, other than my own. I expected to see evidence of the thing that attacked me or the beetles' tracks on the dusty floor, but there was nothing.

What happened?

I considered everything I learned about strange creatures and environments. I had heard about a mold that caused powerful hallucinations. Perhaps the dust in the room contained such a mold? At the time I tried to calm my fears by thinking logically about what I had experienced. If only it was in my mind.

I headed out to the main ceremony hall where the dais held the large brazier. The pain in my hand had become excruciating, and I desperately wanted to try and reset the bone. In the better light, I was mortified to see what really happened.

The dragonfly man statuette had imbedded itself into my hand.

No longer was it the pristine smooth obsidian I had found—it had become a thorny insect with protruding tendrils that buried themselves under my skin. Looking at the revolting site, I knew what had to be done. The malignant thing had to be wrenched out. I saw the tip of my broken sword on the floor and walked over to pick it up.

Carefully, I slipped the steel shard under the statuette. Blood dripped down my arm as I felt the claws of the thing tighten to my flesh. Disgusted by the insidious will of the figurine, I applied all my strength, ripping and tearing my hand. The dragonfly man's claws grasped deeper still with its tendrils tying themselves to my bones and tendons. The pain shooting up my arm was excruciating, and I could feel myself

getting heavy on my feet. I turned my thoughts away from my agony and focused on Anadira. Still, it did not stop the torture.

I jerked hard and screamed as I felt the first tendril slip off my bone.

Encouraged by the result, I pulled again and another released, followed by three more, with only one tendril remaining.

Bracing myself for the final heave, I was shocked to feel a painful bulge suddenly lift under my forearm. The bulge burned as it moved down my lower arm towards my wrist. As it reached my gouged palm, I was revolted to see an insect head peak out and look at me. Violently, it grabbed one of the loose tendrils dangling from the statuette. Sensing the insect's presence, the tendril bonded with the insects arm. My grip on the statuette slipped as shock and horror took me by surprise. Three more insect legs emerged from my hand to grapple the remaining tendrils. Sweating profusely with blood all over my arm, the statuette slipped away from my grip, embedding into my flesh as it had before. Distraught, I gave up as the tendrils burrowed into my hand. Looking at the stairs beyond the pillars, I shook my head. I would have to get it taken care of in Katheer. I looked back at my hand once more and the statuette took on a life of its own. The head of the statue turned to face me with a menacing glare.

Sickened, I pitched my head downward to vomit. Yellow and black puss spewed from my mouth, landing in a pile at my feet. Within that putrid bile, slimy-covered beetles emerged. Surprised to be expelled, they skittered off into the temple, seeking the refuge of darkness.

Horrified and enraged at the mocking face on the figurine, I changed my mind about leaving the temple and resolved myself to remove the statuette. I decided to cut off the tendrils! Once more I brought the sword tip against my wounded hand, preparing to saw the things off.

Immediately, my blade was ripped from my hand. I looked about fearfully, seeing nothing. A faint echo of metal hitting the floor came from the other side of the temple. Stillness followed and then I heard the ringing. My heart raced as the horrid sound grew in intensity. Gritting my teeth, I backed up to the wall.

The sound continued to grow like a loud whistle too high for my ears to completely take in. Objects nearby were thrown aside by an unseen hand. A terrible breathing filled the room, frothing and angry. A massive thud slammed at the ceiling, causing dust and debris to fall. The shrill sound grew louder, forcing me to cover my ears. When I thought my head would explode, the room fell deathly silent. I pulled my hands away from my ears, waiting for something to happen. All was still.

A small pebble rolled to the floor from behind me. I ran for all I was worth. I jumped over bony carcasses and crunched upon others. Light shined down from the outside and I saw the stairs that would lead to my escape.

The temple's entrance was a mere ten feet away when I was thrown off my feet. Blood spurt from my nose as I looked around from where I was on the floor. Something powerful grabbed my leg, dragging me back into the temple. There, it picked me up and slammed me against a wall. Once again, the loud breathing was before me. Turning slightly, I attempted to walk away, but a force wrapped around my throat, picking me off the floor. Pain shot through my arm as the statuette burrowed even deeper into my hand. Its head turned to look at me, letting loose a tiny shriek. That same shriek I had heard before...in the darkened chamber. I choked from the grip as it squeezed tighter and tighter. The room shifted to a haze of purple, quickly becoming black. My arms and legs went limp as the last of my strength left

me. My terror was feeding on itself and I couldn't think. The more afraid I became, the more I felt a throbbing in my head. The pain felt strangely like...squirming and popping. I could hear burrowing sounds mixed with chewing and tearing. The shrill sound returned in a burst so intense that I felt one of my teeth shatter. Overcome, blackness surrounded me while a voice I had never heard before spoke out echoing in the temple, "Suri, miiiiiiiiine."

I do not recall what happened after that, but I awoke sometime later with my backpack lying near me. I never picked it up after I left the dais, but somehow it made its way to me. My hand continues to grow more gruesome. I keep it covered to hide the face of the thing. It smiles. No longer have I the strength to lift myself. Writing in this journal is all that is left. I think this entity can sense I am writing. The ticking in my head hurts when I write too much.

I don't know what it's waiting for.

Anadira, are you really coming to rescue me?

SOUTH OF KATHEER, BASE CAMP IN MY TENT

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I don't know where to begin. Part of me doesn't want to write. It is far from over and inside I feel it never will be. There is no happy ending to write. What I have written down in this chapbook isn't memorable or brave, but quite to the contrary.

Anadira lies on my cot in a state of shock from her despair. This day has seen the end of her father. Mansoor is dead, killed by the very thing that sought to overthrow my mind. As I gather my meager belongings for the trip back to Katheer, the afternoon sun begins to sink. The camp is deserted and we are alone. The flying carpet is retrieved and nearly loaded. When we reach Katheer, they will heal me and I will be rid of this awful graft and its infestation. I am sad Mansoor had to die, but I'm grateful that Anadira lives.

My escape from the creature began when both Mansoor and Anadira arrived at my side. Despite the conditions, it was a welcome surprise. They both spoke, telling me why they came, but I couldn't make out their speech. She said something about "seeing me in her dreams" and a power "greater than the creature's hold on me." Mansoor mentioned he had the means for our escape and he was sure it would work. I wasn't sure my reality was becoming my dreams.

Anadira sat and held me in her arms, and I felt all my prayers had been answered. Dehydrated and weak, I could barely speak. I hoped this was real. I wanted it to be real. The tell tale sign I was looking for came in the form of a wedding ring around Anadira's finger. Quickly, everything became incredibly real.

Mansoor stood above, looking around the ceremonial room for anything to come. Anadira held me tight until she gasped at the sight of my open palm, the statuette and its tendrils wired to my hand. Yellow ooze dripped from the skin and my hand had turned a leathery brown.

"Get up, Suri!" Mansoor raised his voice but winced that it seemed so loud. His eyes darted from left to right, expecting impending doom. He withdrew his sword, speaking a word that made blue flames dance upon the blade. Fearfully, he stepped around like a protector.

"Are you real?"

Mansoor swallowed hard. "Yes, Suri, and the danger here is very real as well."

Anadira's soothing touch played on my desires, and I wanted to fall asleep or die in her arms. The thought she had come so far for me to such a place would have made me weep if my eyes weren't so dry. I was terrified she would become its next victim and the thought of her suffering was unbearable.

"Kill me," I gasped, but Mansoor didn't hear me.

Anadira covered my mouth. "We have to get you out of here, Suri." Tears ran down her eyes. "It doesn't end this way."

Mansoor withdrew a large pouch from his sash and tossed it to the floor next to me.

"Only you can do this, Suri—it won't kill you. Take this dust and create a circle to protect us." Mansoor turned away, looking pensively to the darkness.

I grabbed the bag and opened it slowly. Inside was white powder. I ached at the thought of moving, but found enough courage to hand Mansoor my arm. He pulled me up, but couldn't hide his revulsion as he looked at my hand.

"We'll get that taken care of in Katheer. I am sorry about this, Suri." Mansoor shook his head.

"How could you know?" I hoarsely spoke.

"But I did know, Suri."

Contemplating Mansoor's words, I began to sprinkle the dust on the floor to make a circle. Questions bounced in my mind, with one more important than all the others: had he known, why send me?

"My warnings to you would not have stopped what happened here. I spoke against the idea of you taking this task, but someone higher up in the Society intervened." Mansoor's face pained as he grimaced from his own shame. "I should have known it was a demon toying with my senses."

I remembered his reluctance to give me the assignment and now it made sense. I paused at the revelation that the Society had no regard for my life.

"If it is any consolation, Suri, I am leaving the Society." I stopped and looked at Mansoor in disbelief, looking back to Anadira. He was leaving because of what happened to me.

"Please, you must hurry!"

I continued laying down the powder as a chill crept across the room and a slight perceptible ringing began.

"It's approaching." Mansoor readied his weapon

Once more, loud, thudding footsteps echoed in the temple. I had an uneasy feeling that unseen eyes were watching me, hatred brooding. I focused on laying down the powder as the footsteps quickened towards us. As I completed the circle, a howl of anger shook the temple. Mansoor spoke two words and the powder glowed with runes. I looked at Anadira in dread of the retaliation that was to come, but she turned to her father confidently.

The ringing subsided, seemingly muffled by an invisible wall. Silence returned as I felt relief that the powder had prevented another attack.

The temple shook; dust and debris fell all around us. A pillar collapsed with sand and rock, filling a large area. A howl echoed throughout the temple and the loud footsteps moved towards us once more.

It stopped, standing right before us, breathing deeply. Air rushed out like a vacuum had been created, but rushed back in as a force let loose, slamming towards us in the circle. The impression of a mighty fist halted six feet above the powder,

suspended in air. Another blow came, followed by a succession of smashing and hitting, reaching a furious fervor. The impacts echoed strangely within the circle, as if we were surrounded in glass. The power behind the blows was terrifying and the air blew in and out with each punch. I fell down from the concussions and bounced on the floor as the thing desperately tried to get in.

“I should have trusted my instincts. I never liked sending soldiers to their deaths as a Qadiran officer and I’m not about to let it happen to you,” Mansoor yelled above the creatures constant slamming.

Finally, the thing gave out a pitiful howl and its sounds diminished as it relented.

Mansoor looked exhausted from the ordeal, but smiled with a little satisfaction.

“Alright, the next part will be even more difficult, Suri. You have to create a path to the temple’s stairs. Spread two rows for us to walk between. Only you can do this without being truly harmed.” Mansoor handed me another sash of white powder.

“I’m afraid,” I said, taking the pouch.

“So am I, Suri.” Mansoor said a word to his sword and the flames abated. He returned it to his sheath. Once again, Mansoor helped me to my feet. I looked back at Anadira and she encouraged me to go forth.

The powder seemed to weigh more than it appeared. I tossed it from the circle, careful not to extend my hand too far out. I created two rows that formed a path, but eventually I could not toss any further. If the path were to go to the stairs, I would have to step out of the circle.

“It is time, Suri. Be brave so we may live.”

I lifted my hand from the circle, throwing the white dust. Nothing. I stepped from the circle remaining on the path, still nothing happening. Shocked and in fear, I set to work throwing the powder out further still, extending the path to the stairs. I looked behind to see Anadira and Mansoor waiting, trapped by something they couldn’t see.

I spread the dust through the ceremonial chamber and up to the pillars reaching the main entrance. All the while I wondered, “Why didn’t it attack?” Was Mansoor’s white powder truly that powerful? There was no complete circle. I pushed thoughts of wards from my mind and focused on creating the path, being careful not to leave any gaps. It was only when I saw the stairs leading up that I truly believed escape was possible. I kicked the bones of the carcasses out of the path.

A small sharp pain came across my arm, distracting me from my task. Looking to it, I saw a fresh slit into my skin. Blood seeped red from the wound. Before I could consider the source, another slice cut across my knee.

Panicking, I poured the powder hastily. Another slice on my calf stung and my shoe began to feel wet and sticky inside.

“You are almost there Suri, just a little further,” Mansoor yelled from within the circle, far back in the temple. I had only a few more steps and I would be at the entrance where the sun could touch the powder. A wind howled from outside, gusting against the ashes, tossing them to and fro. I poured more to seal the path, but it kept blowing off. Each time it did, I was painfully attacked. It felt like a whip was peeling off my skin. Looking into the bag, there was little dust left.

Another gust blew the ashes away and a loud shrill crashed against my eardrums, causing me to wince in agony. Catching a glimpse of my shadow on the wall, I saw another shadow just behind. It looked human, but it had wings that fluttered and tendrils just like the figurine embedded in my hand. It was standing right behind me.

“It’s on the path with me, Mansoor!” I screamed as loud as my hoarse voice would

allow.

“Complete it! It can’t stay on the path after that,” Mansoor hollered.

Despite the winds, I did as he asked. That was when I felt a sharp blow to my abdomen, knocking me to the floor. Anadira screamed and the shadow fled upon hearing her. Looking at the dust, I realized there were no gaps.

“It’s done!” I coughed.

Mansoor spoke his words and the path became lit with runes. Anadira ran from the circle with Mansoor following close behind. They ran through the ceremony chamber and up to the pillars. Upon reaching the stairs, they helped me back up.

“See, Suri, that wasn’t so bad.” Mansoor smiled.

Anadira ran up the stairs, and as she reached the top, a massive gust came from the outside. Mansoor pushed me up, heading right behind. Taking my first step without help, I looked down at the ash—it had blown away. The path was broken. I continued out of the darkness until I heard Mansoor give a long sigh from behind. Looking back, I saw disbelief in his eyes. Blood dripped from his mouth as two massive tendrils wrapped around his body, ripping him from view. Blood sprayed just beyond the steps, and a terrible scream of pain came from the darkness, followed by the creature’s earsplitting shriek. I hobbled up the stairs quickly as I heard the thing bolt up, chasing me up the stairs. As my foot stepped into the sunlight, the creature gave a terrible screech as the sun’s rays scorched it. I looked back, but the fiend had retreated into the darkness.

Anadira looked at me, expecting Mansoor to follow. I put my head down and she turned away, brushing something from her eye. She then walked past me to look down the stairs. Defiantly, she looked up at the midday sun.

Fearful, I tried to calm her, but tears were already streaming from her eyes. I told her about the gusts, but nothing seemed to dissuade her. “I’m going down there to get my father!” As she headed for the stairs, I used the last of my strength to grapple her to the ground. Quickly, she threw me off.

“Please don’t go,” I begged her.

She stopped and looked at me in pity. Turning from the stairs, she sighed and went over to help me up.

“We must head back to camp, Suri. The sun won’t keep it at bay once night falls,” she solemnly spoke.

On the trail I staggered and fell many times. Anadira kept close to me and sometimes nearly carried my weight. It seemed we would never reach the camp as the afternoon sun beamed down more oppressively than I have ever known. From a distance I saw the camp and noticed many of the tents had been blown down. We yelled out, but no one responded. Making our way into my tent, everything appeared as I left it. Anadira went out into the camp and brought back water and food to help me get my strength back for the journey home. She sat on the end of a cot, facing away from me.

This will be the last entry before I return to Katheer. Nightfall is coming and the carpet is prepared. With Anadira by my side I feel strangely at peace. She knows what’s needed to be done, and I will follow her to the ends of Golarion. I will be rid of this graft and its unholy infestation. I will be rid of this graft. I will be rid.

I will...

I will see you all burn in the fires of your own hell. I will tear a hole in this world that no one can fill. All will cower in terror as I unmake all that is made.

Come to me and bring the claw of Rovagug. Do it or the boy's soul will follow me into the abyss.

The epic continues in

Pathfinders of Qadira: Demon's Call
Exclusively on PathfinderChronicler.Net

Glossary

Absalom: “The City at the Center of the World,” Absalom is a 4,000-year-old metropolis whose influence and prestige is known throughout the rest of the world of Golarion. Its economic, social, and military presence exerts direct control upon the surrounding Inner Sea region.

Abadar: The “Master of the First Vault,” the “Judge of the Gods,” and “The Gold-Fisted,” Abadar is the even-tempered and patient deity of cities, civilization, merchants, order, law, and wealth. Among the oldest of Golarion’s gods, this human-appearing being is the guardian of the First Vault, which he created to contain perfect versions of everything ever produced by Golarion’s inhabitants. Abadar is also responsible for assisting in establishing the world’s first civilized societies.

Andoran: A parliamentary democracy, Andoran is a nation governed only by the principals of “common rule,” which grants every inhabitant a voice. With its democratic roots and virulent anti-slavery sentiments, Andoran is often called the “Birthplace of Freedom” and is seen as the diametric opposite of Infernal Cheliax.

Ardoc Family: A family famous for crafting golems from deep within the city of Kaer Maga.

Aroden: A survivor of Azlant, an empire destroyed when the Starstone struck Golarion. This “Last of the First Humans” raised the Starstone from the bottom of the Inner Sea, created the city of Absalom, became a god, ascended to the heavens, and was later the patron deity of the Kingdom of Taldor. He is currently presumed to be dead.

Ascendant Court: At the physical center of the city, the Court is the heart of Absalom’s religious center. While most of the city’s temples are here, it’s most renowned for being the spot where four gods made their ascension and for holding the cathedral of the Starstone

Augustana: The second-largest city in Andoran, Augustana is renowned for being one of the largest ports, and has the most shipyards of any nation along the Inner Sea.

Belkzen: An area comprised mostly of dangerous peaks and deadly orcs. The orc warlord Grask Uldeth rules from the city of Urgir with typical cunning and savagery, yet in recent years he has begun to encourage trade with his non-orc neighbors.

Brevoy: Three hundred years ago, Choral the Conqueror claimed large swaths of two warring nations: Issia and Rostland. Aided by two dragons, Choral defeated the armies sent against him and spawned a line of descendants to rule his new nation. Recently, that line has been broken, and Brevoy is now on the verge of political implosion.

Calistria: A fickle schemer, always maneuvering for a better position, “The Savored Sting” is the beautiful female elven deity associated with lust, trickery, and revenge. Wasps are commonly associated with her for their ability to repeatedly sting others without dying. Her mantra is “Savor the three stings of passion, guile, and vengeance.”

Canterwall: Called the “Breadbasket of Ustalav,” as it has rich soil and abundant crops. But while it has fertile field, it also has powerful enemies, especially the hostile Hold of Belkzen, whose orcs greedily look to take Canterwall’s resources for their own.

Cayden Cailean: Dubbed “The Drunken Hero,” Cayden is the God of freedom, ale, wine, and bravery. He is one of three mortals who have taken and passed the Test of the Starstone to become a god—in his case allegedly on a drunken dare.

Cheliax: “Infernal Cheliax” is what remains of the once great Imperial Cheliax, an empire that dominated the much of Golarion for over 500 years. In the wake of Aroden’s death, modern Cheliax suffers under rampant diabolism and tyranny. Diabolism is supported because many nobles believe it is the only way to secure power and allow Cheliax to regain its former glory.

Daggermark: Daggermark is a walled city deep within the chaotic and bandit-ridden area known as the River Kingdoms. Ruled by both the Daggermark Assassins’ Guild and the Daggermark Poisoners’ Guild, and backed up by the largest army in all the River Kingdoms, it is remarkably stable and free of the predations of local bandit-lords.

Desna: Also called the “Song of the Spheres,” Desna is the elven goddess of dreams, stars, travelers, and luck. One of the earliest gods, she has remained firmly focused on the heavens, the stars, and the secrets hidden in the sky. She is worshipped by those who travel and explore, and anyone seeking a bit of luck.

Garund: Prior to the fall of the Starstone, the continent of Garund was the heart of civilization, and the center of at least two ancient empires. Now, the nations of Osirion and Katapesh cling to its outer edge, while the dense jungles of the Mwangi Expanse, the corrupted Mana Wastes, and a permanent hurricane called the Eye of Abendego all pose unique and deadly threats to anyone foolish enough to venture too closely.

Golarion: The primary world featured in the official campaign setting for Paizo Publishing’s OGL-compatible Pathfinder game system. Like most fantasy settings, including the world’s most popular role-playing game upon which it is based, Golarion is rife with adventurers of many races and classes. Pathfinder Chronicler’s Anthology is a work of fan fiction, and all pieces are set within Paizo Publishing’s world of Golarion.

Harrow Card: A Harrow deck consists of 54 cards, and they are typically used for fortune-telling. Each card has a related meaning or significance, and when doing a reading, additional symbolism and meanings are derived from how the various cards are aligned or matched.

Hellknights: The legal enforcers of the Infernal Empire of Cheliax. Interested only in upholding the laws of the land, their draconian methods make both the innocent and the guilty fear them.

Inner Sea: A direct result of the devastation caused when the Starstone struck the planet, the Inner Sea now connects and serves as the lifeblood for the majority of the most powerful nations in Golarion. At the eastern end of the sea is the Isle of Kortos, hosting both the famed city of Absalom and the Starstone itself.

Iomedae: “The Inheritor,” Iomedae is the Goddess of valor, justice, and honor. She is one of only three mortals who have succeeded at the Test of the Starstone and ascended into godhood. After her ascension, she served as the herald of Aroden. Upon his apparent demise, she has inherited the majority of his followers and faithful.

Kaer Maga: Within Varisia is a massive cliff known as the Storval Rise. Atop this rise is the hexagonal city of Kaer Maga. Built within ancient and unfathomable ruins, it is a city where anyone is welcome and everything has a price.

Katapesh: The “Bazaar of the Bizarre,” the desert nation of Katapesh is the result of an extension and expansion of the political, military, and economic power of the city of the same name. Ruled by The Pactmasters of Katapesh, and spurred by their mercantile ambitions, the once lawless trading post became a town, then a city, and is now a very powerful nation. From slaves to things far more dangerous, dark, or outright fantastic, the bazaars of Katapesh sell all manner of goods to travelers and buyers from all corners of Golarion. Anything can be bought, everything has a price, and no matter what, do not interfere with trade.

Katheer: Glorious Golden Katheer is the capital city of Qadira. Katheer hosts a massive harbor, making it a center for trade. It is also one of the Inner Sea’s major centers of learning including the Venicaan College of Medicaments and Chirurgery.

Korvosa: The largest city in Varisia, Korvosa’s location and harbor have made it a primary hub for trade throughout the region.

Lamashtu: Lamashtu was once a mighty demon lord, and is now considered the first such entity to achieve true godhood. Her unholy symbol is a three-eyed jackal head, but she is known by many names: The Demon Queen, the Mother of Monsters, the Demon Mother, the Mother of Beasts, the Mother of Perversion, and the Mistress of Insanity. Regardless of her name, this demon-deity claims to have given birth to all the monstrous races of Golarion.

Lands of the Linnorm Kings: A series of smaller kingdoms, united by their Ulfen lineage. Each Linnorm King rules a single town and the surrounding fiefdom. Only the mightiest warriors may become Linnorm Kings, and they rule with complete authority. The number of Linnorm Kings has varied, but there are currently four.

Lastwall: Founded after the Whispering Tyrant’s defeat to ensure that the lich would never escape his eternal prison beneath his cursed capital of Gallowspire.

Magnimar: Founded by Korvosan dissenters, and vying with Korvosa for power over the region of Varisia, the so-called “City of Monuments” stands as a political and economic rival to Korvosa.

Nidal: Bound to serve the whim of dark god Zon-Kuthon, conquered by neighboring Cheliax, and ruled by the shadowy Umbral Court, Nidal’s well-guarded port of Nistroch is its only major point of contact with the outside world.

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Numeria: Dubbed the “Savage Land of Super-Science,” Numeria is a wasteland inhabited by barbarians and ruled by a drug-addled despot called “The Black Sovereign.” Supported by mages of the Technic League, their fearsome Gearmen constructs, and dark magic, most Numerians simply seek to avoid any contact with the rulers of the land and go about their lives in relative peace.

Oppara: The largest city in Taldor, as well as its capital.

Pangolais: Ruled by the Black Triune and shaded by the canopy of the Uskwood trees, this capital of Nidal is in perpetual shadow.

Pathfinder: 1. Paizo Publishing’s Open Game License (OGL)-compatible role-playing game system which features the fictional world of Golarion. 2. A Pathfinder is an explorer who, as a member of the Golarion-traveling Pathfinder Society, dedicates their life to uncovering hidden secrets, ancient artifacts, and forbidden knowledge of the world’s most dangerous locations and exotic cultures.

Pathfinder Chronicles: A series of books recording the most distinguished discoveries and accomplishments of the Pathfinder Society’s membership. The books are not intended for the public, and meant to be read only by members. The Decemvirate decides which of the myriad tales collected from Pathfinders worldwide are of sufficient quality to inspire future Pathfinders.

Pathfinder Lodge: Outposts built by the Pathfinder Society to provide support for Pathfinder Society members. Though no two lodges are the same, each one is required to offer Pathfinders a place to sleep, a library, a meeting room, and communication with other lodges.

Pharsma: The “Lady of Graves,” Pharsma is the goddess of fate, prophecy, birth, and death. As they disrupt the natural order over which she presides, Pharsma loathes all undead and considers them abominations.

Qadira: A desert kingdom with an ancient history. It forms the westernmost satrap state of the Empire of Kelesh. While he must serve and owes allegiance to the Kelesh emperor, the young ruler of Qadira, Xerbystes II, craves a regional war to prove himself.

Restov: Boasting several Aldori and Taldan dueling schools, the Free City of Restov is one of the largest cities in the area of southern Brevoy.

River Kingdoms: Dubbed “Independent Realms of Low Character,” the area collectively known as the River Kingdoms is comprised solely of whatever tiny fiefdoms local bandits, mercenaries, despots, and warlords can carve out of the twisting labyrinth of rivers and marshes. Food is scarce, war is ever-present, murder is commonplace, and the only constant is the continual chaos caused by the seasonal rise and fall of each petty tyrant.

Sarenrae: Called “The Dawnflower,” the “Healing Flame,” and the “Everlight,” Sarenrae is the Goddess of the sun, redemption, honesty, and healing. Sarenrae is known to be among the earliest of gods, and the one that brought light to the world. While a good and compassionate god, she is vigilant and steadfast when called upon to protect the weak.

Starstone: A meteorite that struck Golarion long ago, causing a great cataclysm and the downfall of empires. It was retrieved by Aroden, who became a god in the process. It now resides in the largest cathedral of the Ascendant Court of Absalom. There, the foolish and the brave who seek to ascend to godhood can take the Test of the Starstone. After Aroden, thousands of others have tried and failed. Only three other mortals are known to have passed the test: Cayden Cailean, Iomedae, and Norgorber.

Taldor: Once a mighty empire, Taldor has fallen far from its glorious past. Ruled by decadent nobles who battle each other for the last scraps of power, threatened by its neighbors, and resented by the states it spawned, Taldor teeters on the brink of collapse.

The Decemvirate: The mysterious group that controls and directs the Pathfinder Society. The identities of the 10-member Decemvirate are unknown, perhaps even to the gods. Society members are sworn to absolutely obey the will of the Decemvirate, those who disobey risk expulsion or worse.

The Grand Lodge: A massive fortress located in the Foreign Quarter of the city of Absalom. This lodge has been the headquarters for the Pathfinder Society for 400 years and all potential Pathfinders must present themselves here in order to be considered for induction. The Grand Lodge also houses the Repository, which contains all the artifacts, books, scrolls, relics, and research collected by the Society and recorded in the Pathfinder Chronicles.

Ulfen: Towering blonde humans from the distant north, these former raiders are typically hired as sailors, but especially prized as bodyguards due to their imposing size and reputation for savagery.

Umbral Court: Rulers by the divine decree of Zon-Kuthon, the Umbral Court commands Nidal with an iron fist empowered by the deadly power of darkness and horror that is the Midnight Lord.

Ustalav: While it once seemed to hold a promising future, The Immortal Principality of Ustalav is now little more than a land of fog, darkness, and horror. It is a land struggling to resurrect itself from centuries of near-continuous upheaval and political chaos.

Varisia: Built upon the ancient ruins of Thassilon, it was an empire, destroyed when the Starstone struck Golarion. And while it was later a part of the Chelaxian Empire, it exists now largely as an untamed wilderness. It boasts only a handful of independent city-states, scattered rural communities, ancient ruins, and uncharted wilderness.

Venture-captains: Senior members of the Society who are assigned their own lodge. Venture-captains receive orders directly from the Decemvirate and pass them on to the Pathfinder Society members assigned to them.

Vudra: Also known as the “Impossible Kingdoms,” distant Vudra consists of more than one hundred semi-independent kingdoms ruled by rajahs who all serve the emperor-like maharajah.

Westcrown: Once known as the “City of Nine Stars,” Westcrown was the ancient capital of the Chelaxian Empire and a cosmopolitan rival to Absalom. Aroden’s death plunged the city into civil war, and eventually the Diabolist House Thrune seized power and control of the empire. Thrune’s ascension doomed the once-great metropolis, and the former hub of culture is now dubbed the “City of Twilight.” Modern Westcrown is plagued by crime, corruption, and fell beasts that roam the night, slaying any in their way.

Whispering Tyrant: Slain by Aroden long ago, the wizard-king Tar-Baphon later returned as a lich who united the orcs of Belkzen under his banner and used them to conquer Ustalav. Several centuries later, General Arnisant of Taldor used the Shield of Aroden to weaken the Tyrant enough that he could be imprisoned under the former capital city of Gallowspire.

Worldwound: Another product of Aroden’s death, the Worldwound is a demon-infested wasteland that is a manifestation of a planar rift to the Abyss itself. Given its demonic nature, the realm’s chaotic borders are never static and the very land itself can change before your eyes. The Worldwound is an endless source of demons, all bent on the destruction of Golarion and the Material Plane within which it resides.

Zon-Kuthon: “The Midnight Lord,” Zon-Kuthon is the god of envy, pain, darkness, and loss. Zon-Kuthon is the patron deity of Nidal, where he is openly worshipped by the sadists, masochists, and madmen who comprise his faithful.

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