

PATHFINDER CHRONICLER ANTHOLOGY

Volume III



Edited By
Sean Crandall, Laura Sheppard
& Ted Thompson

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VOLUME III



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Sean Crandall, Laura Sheppard
& Ted Thompson

To my family, Ziggi, Patrick &
Sadie for their encouragement
– *T.T.*

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No One Deserves a Happy Ending / F. Wesley Schneider -- Introduction / Ted Thompson -- Turn the Page / By Jess Carson -- Luck's Allegiance / By Alex Lindsay -- Gozreh Provides / By Laura Sheppard -- Calm Waters / By Patrick Napier -- A Banner Day / By Dawn Fischer -- Completing the Circle / By Todd Stewart -- Monsters in the Attic / By M.C. Shelby -- Incorruptible / By Elaine Betts -- Bend as the Willow / By Dawn Fischer -- Existence / By W. David Wood -- The Journey / By Derek M. Johnson -- The Way of the World / By Kalyna Conrad -- The Beast of Blackwater Bog / By Miles Adams -- The Riddle of Tabsagal / By Shaun Hocking -- One Last Question / By Michael Kortes -- The Song of Sorrow / By B.R. Bearden -- Against the Grain / By Kate Taylor -- The Hawk's Strike / By Robert Drouin -- Beyond Reason / By Maggie Hoyt -- A Betrayal of Vision / By Chad O'Neil -- My Shadow / Crystle Stevenson -- Twisting Amongst Mages / By Clinton J. Boomer -- Way of the Gun / By Ted Thompson & Sadie Thompson

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No One Deserves a Happy Ending

Who isn't disappointed by a happy ending? When the quest is over, the dragon slain, the curse undone, what's left for those who risked everything? Who enjoys the adventure's end, the point when heroes slip back to the ordinary, greatness receding into the past? What could be worse for a legend than to become a living legend, to survive to see their triumph turn commonplace? No crown remains untarnished, no passion burns eternal, no evil dies for good.

Don't believe the lie of the happy ending.

More than most, those who explore Golarion—the vast and varied world of this collection's tales and the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game—hate happy endings. Players of the RPG create characters who strive and struggle through the world you'll explore in the following pages. Sinister secrets and vicious monsters confront the characters in these stories, but who has ever heard of these heroes of adventure after adventure having a happy ending? For the ones worth remembering there's always something more: the next adventure and another, better story to tell. What player wants to condemn her character to the washed-out simplicity of an eventless “happy” ending?

A happy ending isn't a reward. Even if it were, few characters in this collection would deserve it. Herein you'll find sympathy for murderers, fragile wills vexed by dark magic, the living enslaved to the dead, racist viciousness, disappointment, last stands, rage, betrayal, shark attacks, and worse. But you'll also meet a few who defy such grim forces: holy heretics, novice assassins, living sculptures, elven storytellers, cannibal captives, accidental exorcists, and far stranger sorts. Many of their stories conclude with something that might seem like justice, escape, or success—or fates a shade grimmer—but for most it's far too soon to say whether their adventures are over.

Then what's the alternative to all these endings? Why, more stories, of course—more adventures, more dangers, more fuel for the fires of legend. But which tales continue and which end isn't just in the hands of this collection's authors and editors anymore. This anthology isn't driven by advertising or profit, but rather by a passion for adventure and eagerness to share stories in a common world. Enthusiasm, discussion, and downloads fuel ventures like this, and encourage creatives to continue on, to write the next chapter, to curate the next anthology. So read on and enjoy, but afterward share this collection, be vocal with your reactions, and be sure to let your favorite storytellers know which characters deserve better than a happy ending.

F. Wesley Schneider
Editor-in-Chief
Paizo Publishing

Introduction

It is a funny thing to write an introduction. You would think they would be written in retrospect; that we could stop and breathe in what has been accomplished and find closure in remembering all the months of hard labor that went into this volume.

Let me tell you...

...this introduction is not turning out that way.

If I remember correctly, I felt this exact same feeling when I wrote my last introduction in Pathfinder Chronicler Anthology Volume I: I'm racing through a gauntlet as the ceiling is about to collapse and the impending axe of a deadline looms closer with every step.

But no, I can't think like that. There is simply no time.

There are still edits flying back and forth between devoted authors and editors, copy editing and layouts to finalize, and countless other details to think about. All the while, our editors' stories sit gathering electronic dust (my own might now more aptly be titled, "Way of the Gin Bottle") and awaiting a similar process at an even later hour. Not to mention school and work schedules to fit around it all...

So you see, this is hardly a time to get sentimental.

I would, however, like to take a moment to express my thanks. I didn't create much in this book. Dozens of writers, editors, formatters, graphic designers and artists leant their talents toward refining it and crafting it into the gem you now hold. Without them, this volume would have never made it to print. They are the heroes of this enterprise and I truly am grateful for their participation and commitment.

My hope is that, through producing these anthologies, everyone associated with them will proudly display them to their friends and family—and perhaps even others who would write professionally—and they will stand up as equal to any other printed commercial works of short fiction. Because ultimately, that is what we are striving for: to produce the best alternative fiction that we possibly can for Pathfinder. And that, my dear Pathfinder Chroniclers, is the only reason there is a PathfinderChronicler.net.

I welcome you to drop by the website and get involved. We can always use more recruits to enrich our community. I'll even be sure to say hello when you arrive.

But for now, I must go. I think I hear a large boulder rumbling down the hall behind me.

I have an anthology to finish.

Ted Thompson aka "Zuxius"
Pathfinder Chronicler Founder

TURN THE PAGE

By Jess Carson



O MANY HUMANS and other outsiders, the city of Iadara, home of the elves of Kyonin was the embodiment of beauty, song, and etherealness. To many of the elves who'd left and returned, the shadows lengthened under its cracked façade and the light that streamed through its crystal leaves dimmed a bit more. But to Zea, Iadara was reminiscent of the windswept Irrisen landscape; cold, unyielding and hostile to outsiders—and a constant reminder of her differences.

Staring across the open marble courtyard into the raw edges where the forest swallowed the shining city, a vague smile crossed her lips. Zea threaded her fingers through Caius' as they crossed the open air lounge, watching the disapproving glances of the elves seated along the pathway. Her sensitive elven ears caught the changes in each conversation as they passed. One lilting tone dropped half an octave, another voice hushed. All of this Zea expected. She knew their thoughts: another of the Forlorn filling the emptiness inside her with the company of a short-lifer—and not even a half-elf; a *man*.

She felt him squeeze her hand.

“Why do I always feel like a copper coin in the middle of a pile of platinum?” Zea asked.

“Remember, empires have fallen for less,” Caius replied.

JESS CARSON

“*Toppling an empire might be easier than...*” Zea’s tongue scraped roughly along the roof of her mouth, her words sounding like rocks grinding against each other and the squishing of soft mud between the toes. She clasped her hands over her lips.

“Nervous or angry?”

Zea wrinkled her nose then shifted from side to side. “*Both,*” her voice crunched, still not her own. “*I hate this. My tongue feels like stone...of course it does, and of course I’m upset. Who wouldn’t be? I’m going to...to...*”

Turning away from Caius, she threw her hands in the air as her thick red braid snaked around her neck. Caius’ hands caressed her shoulders. She gasped as he pulled her in tight and kissed her with such urgency that her toes curled in her heavy leather boots.

“It’s only natural to feel this way. But every story eventually ends. You know that, Zea.” Caius’ lips lingered near her ear as he released her—as quietly as only a lion could. Even here in the glaring and piquant halls of Iadara, Caius remained larger than any of Kyonin’s towering silver trees—and far more vibrant. Dressed in his blue quilted overcoat piped in gold, he was Zea’s Taldan Lion, her counterpart and—though she loathed admitting it—also right.

Breathing deeply, she calmed and felt her own voice return. “I know, Cai. It just doesn’t make it any easier to know.”

Gently he kissed her cheek. Mischievous flashed in his hazel eyes as he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her slightly off balance and closer to him. The light twittering conversations around them ceased momentarily as a dozen eyes flitted in their direction. Only a slight upturn of a golden eyebrow—imperceptible to most shorter-lived races—spoke volumes to Zea. She knew that look too well, but not every story should be judged by a surface reading, or person taken by their outward appearance.

Caius has plenty of tricks up his well-tailored sleeves, not the least of which are his toned arms...

Zea melted into them.

“Hard to have a private conversation here, damn these silent floors,” he growled into her neck, as the hairs from his beard sent goose bumps down her arm. “Whatever you decide to do, Zea, I’m with you.”

“My three favorite words.”

A soft-yet-stern voice separated them. “I should’ve known I’d find you wandering around. You never could stay in one place.”

Isha’s slender figure rounded a latticed archway beside them. She closed the distance between the two of them, her arms outstretched, and her green silk overcoat flowed behind her, wrapping around both women as they hugged. “It must be Gozran if the buds bloom and the *Oracle of the Mists* returns with stories for her city.”

Zea sighed. “I wish Telendia never gave me that title. You know I hate it.”

“*Queen* Telendia,” Isha corrected before pulling back, looking Zea over. “Leather and steel? Were you fearing that the latest story you brought back for our archives might meet with violent, barbarous disapproval? You’ve been with the humans too long, my sweet.”

“These,”—she tapped her bark-colored pants and vest—“are worn from travel and twice as comfortable as your satin gown.”

Isha gave a dismissive wave, before pushing her honey hair behind her ear.

“My dear Zea, that is open to interpretation. Perhaps the road suits you. It’s tanned that pale skin and sharpened those blue eyes but...” Her gaze shifted and the tips of her ears twitched slightly. Switching to the elven language, she said, “I see you’ve brought a pet.”

“I promise not to piss on the trees, if that helps ease your mind,” Caius returned in perfect elven. He bowed low. “My name is Caius.”

Recoiling, Isha’s eyes opened wide. “And you taught him our language. Any attempt to civilize, I suppose. My apologies.”

“In my former line of work, speaking multiple languages was a boon. Call it providence. On the day we met, Zea crashed through the forest near Ardeal spouting what others considered gibberish and pointing wildly behind her. She sounded like a roaring fire.”

Zea laughed. “You were the only one ready as those werewolves barreled out of the trees on my heels. I don’t know who was more surprised—me, as he spoke to me in Ignan, or them, as he brought his longsword across their hind legs.”

Isha cleared her throat, stepping a few inches further from them and Zea stuck out her tongue, squashing it between her rosy lips. Her friend gestured to a small table and bench off the path to the left.

“Forgive my reaction,” she said seating herself. “It is rare for Zea to bring anyone with her during her visit to Iadara. You should count yourself lucky. You definitely seem to be keeping her young, though. I haven’t seen her act like this since she was—well, one hundred and seventy at least.”

The tips of Zea’s ears reddened. To her the meaning was clear: a subtle reminder of his brief time on Golarion.

Caius dropped his knapsack from his back and placed it next to the table. Grinning, he tapped the tankard hanging from his belt as he sat.

“Cayden Cailean teaches that the world is full of merriment for the taking. Stories, song, and good company keep the soul young no matter how old the body. Just like, no matter how pretty the cage, it’s still confining.”

The small wrinkle that formed along the corner of Isha’s mouth spoke louder than the harshest reprimand. Suppressing the grin she knew would make it worse, Zea raised her hand.

“While I’d love to continue letting you two get acquainted, perhaps it’s best we get started.”

Ignoring Caius, Isha leaned forward staring into Zea’s eyes—shining amethyst pools accentuated by the pale yellow powder tinting her lids. They almost seemed lit from inside, giving off a soft glow even in the afternoon sun. “I can see you’re barely able to contain your excitement. Then tell me, what tale have you to share this time?”

“I heard a story while Caius and I traveled in the Land of the Linnorm Kings: *The Tailor and the Skein*. It’s about a young, brilliant Tailor who comes to his craft by accident but takes to it so well it amazes his clients. Understanding the threads that bind a garment together, he uses his talents to create ensembles that enhance

JESS CARSON

the wearer's power, luck, or desire. He becomes so skilled at reading the threads and giving his clients what they need, that he begins to see not just the strands of yarn, but the lines that connect one man to another. He realizes that he can read the patterns hidden to most and hopes to learn to reweave them as he sees fit."

"He leaves his small village to see the world. One day he meets a Jarl whose daughter has fallen ill. Many suitors vie for her hand but until a cure is found, there would be no marriage."

Rising from her seat, Zea began to circle the table.

"The Tailor notices a strange black-and-golden thread woven around the Princess' head and vows to cure her within a month. He follows the strand through snow, ice, and wolves to a cave. Inside he finds a man—white-haired but still young and strong—sitting at a loom, with dozens more lining the walls. The Tailor follows the Princess' thread to a golden loom against the east wall. As he reaches for the loom, the weaver turns from his work and confronts him as an intruder. The Tailor introduces himself and offers to help finish some of the man's work. The man—an oracle of great renown called the All Father—agrees, since none but the preordained, who understand the threads of life, can alter the preset patterns."

"Our hero sits at the loom with the Princess' golden thread and chats with the man while secretly unraveling the black thread—the strand of a suitor with a panache for poisons—from where it's entwined with her golden one. But he sees that this leaves a hole in the tapestry."

Isha nodded. "The Princess' story couldn't be altered."

Zea smiled. "Beside the loom, a skein of dazzling iridescent thread, many-colored yet also colorless, sits waiting. The Tailor hesitates a moment, then winds it up and weaves it into the gap with such dexterity and precision that none could've detected the missing thread. The All Father reviews his work, pats him on the head, and sends him on his way amid praises. The Tailor returns to the village to find the Princess has recovered. She dismisses the other suitors, and welcomes the Tailor with open...well, let's just say he's not given a restful night's sleep."

A blush erupted across Isha's cheeks and she wrapped her overcoat around herself.

"I *did* say it was from Linnorm Lands, didn't I? Where was I...yes, the villain seeking revenge. The vengeful poisoner returns and is exposed by the Tailor and hauled away. Then the Tailor weds the Princess and he and his bride happily and prosperously rule the kingdom together until they grow white-haired. When they decide to retire, they travel into the hills and return to the cave of the All Father. He elevates the Tailor to the *Weaver of Life* and he and his Princess live happily together...blah, blah, blah. What's important is the part about changing destiny."

Isha leaned back from the table. "You were never subtle... That's more than once you've mentioned this idea. I take it your story has more of a point than mere frivolity?"

Inhaling, Zea glanced up at the clear blue sky then to Caius. "Indeed. You and I both know there's sometimes more truth in a work of fiction than a book of fact. So I began to wonder: what if we're connected by more than threads? What if the words we use, the stories we tell, and the knowledge gained from them bind

us together in ways we haven't imagined? What new and wonderful possibilities would open up for one who understood this?"

Light streamed through the crystalline leaves of the trees surrounding them, falling across the table. Isha turned away from the glare, but Zea closed her eyes and breathed deeply, taking in the warmth and brightness.

"Someone like that could pass great knowledge through the generations and help secure the future of Iadara, Kyonin, and our people." Isha's voice remained light as she rose and pressed Zea's hands between hers. "Someone like that would have a place of honor in the Queen's court."

Caius grimaced and shook his head. "You'd lock someone like that away from the rest of Golarion, keeping them—keeping *her* like a prized sapphire in a velvet box; displayed when it suits you and hidden from those you think might dirty it."

"I thought even humans knew how to behave when they are guests. You're too young to understand."

"And you lack imagination." Zea withdrew her hands and stepped back. "I'm beginning to see that many of our kind do...or maybe it's me. No one deity 'blessed' me with these abilities; I don't think one race should own them either." Slipping past Isha, she glided behind Caius' seat and rubbed his shoulders. "How close have you gotten to the Brightness, Isha?"

"It's not something I embrace." Isha straightened her gown and pulled her overcoat closer. "It's a myth."

"They say that those who find their Brightness develop a tranquility, a calmness few other creatures experience. That's an inadequate explanation... It's a feeling really; a fundamental understanding of what you're put here to accomplish. But it doesn't lead everyone to serenity. Sometimes it ignites a fire within."

"So, you think you've found your Brightness?"

"Perhaps. I found love, purpose, and clarity. Wisdom is what ties us all together, and it can't be hoarded in archives or sequestered in dusty tomes. It's found in the stories of an ale house, the ballads of heroes, and the laments of an old woman recalling her days. Each of these imparts a spark; a smoldering ember in the listener. It becomes a catalyst for change. The lines of the story interweave with the soul like roots of a flower, a beautiful gift within them which they take away. All of these tales share a similar arrangement, a common thread, if you will. It's amazing that a simple sentence can change the course of a person's story, if one is wise enough to take notice of it and follow it, that is."

Zea tapped Caius' arm. He nodded and produced a worn leather tome from his knapsack.

"And though a lowly human might be younger than the woman he loves," he said, "he can still appreciate her abilities and desire to share them with everyone. And if she loves him, she can choose to alter his story to give them all the time in the world together."

Slight wrinkles creased between Isha's brows as Caius handed her the journal. "What does any of this mean, Zea?"

"It's my final gift to you," Zea began, "I found this in the Kodar mountains—small enough to fit in a backpack, but with a never-ending supply of pages. I told you Caius and I heard that story in the Linnorm Lands... That was decades ago.

JESS CARSON

This book is a record of our travels since then, from the moment I realized why I was gifted and cursed.” She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a whisper. “I’m meant to share what I’ve learned. Caius taught me that. My gift to him was a lifespan to rival my own. *You* taught me to honor my heritage, and now I repay you. Add everything I’ve learned, all the stories I’ve collected, to the libraries of Iadara.”

“You can’t,” Isha stammered—a rare break in composure. “You promised Queen Telendia a thousand tales from across the lands. Would you break a vow? Have you lost your honor?”

“No.” Zea reached out and caressed the book’s cover. “There are more than enough stories in here to repay Her Highness a thousand times over. I promised her the stories, not myself. Besides, you know how much she dislikes the tales when I tell them. You always manage to clean them up so nicely. Trust me, there comes a time when you must turn the page and move onto another chapter. This is my gift to you. I sincerely wish you find the spark that will ignite you and bring you to life.”

Zea kissed her friend on the cheek, then bounced back on her heels. Caius brushed the sides of his pants and rose.

“And I wish for a cold ale and a warm bed. I’ve heard a Taldan philosopher runs Greengold, and I bet we can find both there.”

Twirling in the fading sun, Zea teetered then bowed to Caius. “Only if you promise me a dance this time. We haven’t danced in ages.”

“So you’re leaving? There’s no chance of dissuading you?” A higher pitch crept into Isha’s voice. “You hand me a book and expect everything to be alright?”

“I expect you’ll read what I left you and make up your own mind.”

“And, you’re always welcome to visit in Greengold,” Caius added. “I think we’ll be staying there for a few months.”

“I’ll even promise to put a leash on Caius.”

Growling, he picked up Zea and spun her around. “Promises, promises.”

Isha stared at the book in front of her as the pair continued to laugh and spin. Noticing her vacant stare, Zea stopped giggling and Caius returned her feet to the ground.

“Isha, it’s been fun, but we really have to leave. Please think on what I’ve said.” Zea patted the elf’s shoulder, feeling the minor movement as Isha shifted away. “I wish you the best, my friend.”

Bending low, Caius swept his arms wide. “It was a pleasure, Isha. I hope we’ll meet again someday.”

Isha remained stone, her eyes glancing sideways as she spoke. “I will bid you safe travels until that day.”

Caius sighed, but Zea scooped up his hand and pulled him away.

“I’m sorry,” he told her.

“Just watch,” Zea replied.

As they walked slowly away, Isha’s fingers tapped the edge of the journal. By the time they reached the edge of the path, she had flipped the cover open, her eyes glancing at the page.

Zea smiled.

“Sometimes it takes longer for my words to have the desired effect. But she’s on the right path now. I’ll know she’ll be fine if she reaches page three.”

Caius dropped her hand and stopped. “What’s on page three? It’s not the time—”

Behind them, Isha’s laugh shattered the silence.

“Page three,” Zea smirked, “is the time you nearly cried when that we found that black kitten, cold and wet in the alley in Sandpoint. The one you fed with a bottle that slept on your chest. It’s an adorable story.”

“What am I going to do with you?” He cocked his head to the side and slapped her rear.

“I have some ideas with that leash—you might like them.”

Zea dashed just out of his reach as Caius tried to grab her. He chased her down the path, laughing.

“I can’t think of a better way to start our next chapter.”

NATIONS
OF
TREACHERY
~
SHACKLES

“Don’t worry, love; I’m sure ol’ Bonefist won’t
be too rough with ye. Why, the last little pet
we brought for the Hurricane King lasted three
whole weeks!”

- *Captain Desmond, Shackles pirate*

Luck's ALLEGIANCE

By Alex Lindsay

“**B** ARTEMIS Quin?”

The swarthy young man stood beside me confidently, his grip on the hilt of his sheathed blade. He smiled at me smugly, sizing me up from barstool to curly top. Shrugging, I turned back to my drink, only to be rudely nudged on my shoulder.

“Pardon?” I asked.

“Bartemis Quin.”

This time it wasn’t a question. He sat next to me at the bar, carefully avoiding the puddle created by my sopping clothes, and showed me a bounty poster.

“This is you, is it not?”

Stars and damnation, I wished the lad could’ve been more discreet for the more observant of the tavern. I glanced at the poster. It showed the rendition of a very dashing male halfling, and like all of his halfling kin, he was listed as being around three feet tall, with a trim figure and curly hair. Besides this, the poster revealed that his nose had been broken, his jaw was sturdy, and his hair was dark and short with full sideburns. The bounty was astounding, and for good reason.

“Sorry, can’t help you. I’ve never seen that fellow before.” I lifted my glass to my lips, briny water trickling from my sleeves. The lad looked at the poster briefly

ALEX LINDSAY

before tucking it away.

“Shame, the man on this paper is worth a lot of money.”

“You don’t say?”

He chuckled. “But I do! That man has even earned the rage of the Hurricane King himself! What folly led to that, I wonder?”

“Sounds like a dangerous fool to me,” I piped in.

“No question about it.” The boy grinned a moment and tossed his cape over his side.

From my peripheral I noticed he was prepared to draw his sword. “You know, I don’t think you are being completely honest with me, sir,” he said, grimly.

I nodded my head, knocking back the last of the amber liquid in my glass, letting it spread its warm tendrils throughout my body, before sliding down from my barstool.

“We are all, unfortunately, entitled to our opinions.” I picked a coin from my drowned purse and rolled it to the bartender. “Get this lad whatever it will buy him.”

The young man stood as I started toward the tavern door.

“Where are you going?”

“Away. I find Quent leaves a bad taste in my mouth. No offense, barkeep.” The bartender grunted in acknowledgement. I took a few steps before a steely hand grasped my shoulder once more.

“I don’t think you understand the trouble you’re in, Bartemis.”

I shrugged my shoulder sharply and grabbed the meat of his thumb, breaking his grip, and twisted swiftly, pulling him off-balance and down to one knee. He stared at me, shock and pain parading through his grimace as I held his wrist on the verge of breaking. He squirmed as I looked him in the eye, and I twisted his hand forward, causing his wrist to creak dangerously.

“I don’t believe you understand the danger you’re in, lad.”

A gruff voice spoke up from the bar room, “I don’t believe either of you know the danger you’re in.”

The lad and I snapped our glances to the rest of the common room. A dozen scallywags stood from their tables mid-meal, grog and grease rolling through their beards, hands filled with weapons, and eyes glowing greedily. The speaker stood forward from the rest, his calf-high boots thumping solidly on wooden planks as he strode toward us. He wore a large wide-brimmed hat and a long coat, and his yellow smile was barely obscured by a food-flecked graying beard.

I released the young man, who remained kneeling, grasping his wrist and glaring at the striding buccaneer captain. The leader kicked the lad across the face, sending him to his back.

“Thank you, boy!”

The lad glared caustically as he gingerly wiped his bloodied nose and mouth with the back of his hand.

The captain disregarded the youth’s impotent rage, and turned his yellow-toothed grimace upon me.

“Bartemis Quin?”

I stood before him, saltwater dampening my demeanor slightly. I may have

LUCK'S ALLEGIANCE

been only three feet tall, but I was a tall three feet tall.

"Yes. What do you want?"

The captain cackled.

"Just you. Get him!" His men descended upon me, a malevolent wave of unwashed bodies, blades, and predatory glee.

I've been taken down in a variety of ways before, but nothing works better than being surrounded and kicked to unconsciousness. A dozen foot-slamming fools can put a single halfling down in no time.

Stars and damnation.



Hazily I came to, looking about through a blurry veil of red ooze; there were wooden planks swaying beneath me. It took a moment to focus my eyes, but immediately I considered closing them again, as I found very little appeal in the captain's face.

"What's this?"

It took a second to recognize the words and see what they held.

Giving credit to their considerate natures, my attackers had seen fit to search my pouch, after they trussed me up in their ship's brig. In the captain's hand was a green-copper disk that was slightly bigger than a coin.

"Compass. A gift." I managed to piece the words out.

"Gift? Who from?" He opened it and smiled at the inscription inside, one I knew by heart. It read: To my darling son, Bartemis, so that you may find your way home. Love, Mother. The captain read it aloud and his men chuckled.

"You're a sad man, Bartemis. You know that? You come to the Shackles with nothing but a bag of change and a worn compass, and expect to leave with my king's enmity? You are either very brave, or a complete fool."

I spat a gob of blood.

"I've been told."

The captain flung the compass through the bars of my cell. It thumped against my chest hollowly, landing in my lap. "I'm not a cruel man—to dead men, at least. Enjoy your mother's love while you have it." With that he gathered his henchman and my coins, and left.

I could feel the moving waves, hear the winds passing between the planks, and could smell the salt of the sea. The captain had set sail long ago.

Not much time.

I stretched my shoulders and arms and noticed they were manacled. My hands were bound behind my back and my ankles were similarly restrained to the wall. I used the wall for leverage and slowly started to bring my arms up. I could feel my shoulder blades stretching, the muscles between flexing. Beads of sweat covered my face as I heard the pop, which was quickly followed by a lancing pain across my shoulders as they dislocated. Twisting them around, my wrists landed in my lap, and with a wet satisfying snap, I popped my shoulders back into their sockets.

I waited for the soreness to recede, then went to work. Grasping the compass, I pulled it apart, twisting the glass casing from the front and removing a steel

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needle. Probing it carefully into my manacle's key hole, I heard a satisfying click as its mechanism released. Moments later, my restraints lay on the floor around me.

I easily picked the brig lock, and then placed the needle back into the compass, sealing it with a kiss.

"Thanks, Mother."

The night air was cool against my abused body as I ascended the wooden steps from the brig. I scouted the lower deck of the ship until I came to one door with a sign on it...and smiled.

Powder Room.

NO EXPOSED FLAMES.



Silently, I tiptoed down the deck, with a trail of black powder streaming behind me from a barrel in my arms. I finished with a small pile, laid aside the barrel and produced a tindertwig. With a strike, I threw the flame onto the pile of powder. It sparked and raced off, heading down the planks. And as I walked away, I was lifted unceremoniously into the air.

"What are you doing out here?" whispered a familiar voice.

Dangling by my suspenders, I slowly turned in the air toward the swarthy lad who held me aloft.

"I'm blowing up the ship. What are you doing?"

"No, I mean, why aren't you in the bri—you're what?" At that point, one of the first cannons went off.

Funny thing about cannons, you can point them in almost any direction. In this case, it was pointed down at the center of the ship.

The lad glanced up at the resulting crash of wood and fire. Reaching down, I grabbed the knife from his belt and placed the point against his navel.

That got his attention.

"You have maybe ten seconds to get us to a row boat. I suggest you move, discreetly." The boy started to run, and I shifted the knife toward his groin.

"Don't do that. Running will attract attention. Walk. It's like what my mother said: if you can't walk away from your own explosion, then you're doing it wrong."

The lad nodded with eyes wide, sweat racing down his collar. Expediently, he walked to a dinghy. Letting me down, we threw the boat over the side and both jumped into the water.

We climbed on the small boat and the lad started rowing us away. As he pulled back and forth, I prayed we would have just another second to get further out.

I watched the ship.

And then it blew. Cannon balls tore through its innards first, through the crew's quarters, then the cabin, then the steering, and many other vulnerable bits and bobs. The finale was something quite special. With a squeal of wood and a blossom of heat, the middle of the ship blew skyward in a cloud of fiery shrapnel,

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raining glowing embers like a snowstorm of fireflies. It split down the middle, caving in, and quickly sank into the waves, steam hissing as the fires submerged.

The lad slowed his frantic rowing, calming down from the fiery escape. I tossed his knife back to him.

“What are you doing here, boy?”

He sheathed the blade. “I stowed away, was going to break you out to claim the bounty.” Then his eyes narrowed as he leaned forward to enunciate his words, “And my name is Sol, not *boy*.”

I nodded.

“And how is that working for you, Sol?”

“I got us off the ship, didn’t I?”

“Wrong. *I* got us off the ship. You just managed to bump into me at a rather fortuitous time.”

He glared, “Oh yeah? Well, what’s to stop me from rowing your sorry skin back to Port Peril to be tried?”

I looked back to the rubble floating in the ship’s wake. “I don’t need nearly as many explosives to blow up this dinghy.”

“You’re joking.” The boy looked taken aback.

A piece of debris from the exploding ship suddenly landed near the small boat.

“Do I look like I possess a sense of humor?”

We sat there in silence, the statement hanging in the air as he rowed. Finally he spoke, resignation dripping from his words, “I’m not in control of this, am I?”

I leaned against the edge of the dinghy.

“That is the smartest thing I have heard you say yet.” I sat up, spotting something over his shoulder.

“Stars and damnation.” Sol looked back and saw it. His skin paled visibly and he began rowing faster, for all the good it would do us.

One thing that made the Shackles the place it is today is the Eye of Abendego, a giant, perpetual hurricane rooted to one spot. The Eye also, without warning, spawns children that are every bit as destructive as their parent.

Thunder rumbled as winds began picking up, and savage waves swelled and tore at our meager vessel.

And before we knew it, the hurricane caught up to us and devoured our dinghy.



I woke to bright sunlight piercing red through my eyelids, forcing me to open them with painful trepidation. Waves slapped my face and tugged at my boots; the blue water and surrounding beach was covered in massacred trees and shattered flotsam. I stood up shakily, looking at my hands and limbs, making sure everything was there. Relieved, I turned to walk toward the jungle cresting the sand bank, and tripped. That was when I saw Sol lying under a piece of wreckage, his body battered and bruised, and his leg finding its way inconsiderately in my path. Placing my hand over his mouth and the other at his neck, I was able to determine that he’d survived...but his state was not a certainty.

So, I slapped him.

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This prompted no reaction, so I slapped him again. I was starting to enjoy myself.

But then he groaned and his eyes snapped open as he bolted up, reaching for his missing weapons. He looked around a moment, absorbing the landscape, holding his shield arm, which looked a little battered since the hurricane. He turned to me, glaring angrily. "You!"

"I blame me too. One person surviving a hurricane is unlikely. Two is unheard of. And you have my luck to thank for that."

I held out my hand to help him up.

"There is no such thing." He accepted, limping to his feet.

I shrugged and began walking to the jungle.

"One cannot succeed by skill alone. The great swordsman can be laid low by a stray arrow. The mighty wizard can be turned to cinders by a minute technicality in a demon's bargain. Luck. Good or bad, it's an immeasurable and chaotic quantity that can be substituted for skill if circumstances are just right. If you survive this, remember these words: it's better to be lucky than good."

"That's completely absurd," Sol said, shaking his head.

"You'll see." I wandered into the forest, looking for something to prove my point. The mighty trees above created a thick canopy, allowing only columns of the sun's rays to illuminate our way.

"But you were recognized and captured at the tavern, weren't you?" Sol countered. "That wasn't lucky for you."

"I beg to differ. It was bad luck until my luck changed and I escaped."

As we proceeded, I took care to watch my footing and avoid dangerous flora, pointing it out to Sol when encountered.

"So why be cautious when you have luck to guide you?"

"Because, boy, luck is rather fickle, and one should not completely rely on it. This is why we are walking through this lovely wood, taking luck into our own hands through our actions."

"I don't follow." Sol ducked under a low hanging branch that I casually walked under.

"Well, we didn't just wait out on the beach, hoping beyond hope to be spotted by a ship. We're going to find our own way out of here."

Sol thought about it. "We're going to find civilization?"

"Precisely; we make our own luck by varying the location. We apply skill, and in the end, luck will provide our aid. Very little of The Shackles remains unoccupied these days. Chances are we'll find someone." Right then, I felt the annoying sensation of ascension. Leaves and brambles suddenly shot up, a net flared open and Sol and I went up into the trees, ensnared.

"Or someone will find us," Sol muttered, testing the net that bound us.

I looked around, gauging the construction of the trap and identifying whoever might have set it.

Humans.

"It's all part of the plan, Sol. Don't worry."

"You planned this?!" he yelled, his elbow smacking me in the ribs.

"No!" I retorted. "I am hardly the only person with plans. Higher authorities

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than mine plan and scheme, with many more variables than a halfling like me can manage.”

Sol growled in frustration. “I’m getting really sick of your talk of authorities and variables, Bartemis! If you’re so clever, get us—”

Suddenly, there was silence.

“Sol?” I craned my neck to see him, but he wasn’t moving. I wiggled around in the net until I saw that his eyes were closed, and a sinisterly colorful dart was lodged in his neck. I felt my own neck and discovered a feathered protrusion there too.

Curious...how long had it been there?

Then it all went black.



I awoke, bound hand and foot, in a tent of pale leather. Shuffling myself upright, I saw Sol nearby, similarly tied and continuing to slumber. I quietly worked on my restraints; I had to find out where we were so I could formulate a plan.

Muffled voices outside spoke in a harsh heathen tongue. Guards, no doubt. I freed myself within minutes and then slipped out, avoiding them, and scouted the area. By the time I returned, my wayward bounty hunter was just starting to stir.

I sat back on the ground and waited.

When he finally came to, Sol sat up, noticing his hands were roped behind his back. He spotted me, sitting patiently, and glared.

“I hope waking up to your face doesn’t become a habit, Bartemis.”

I shrugged. “It’s no picnic for me, either.”

“Okay,” Sol began, “we are tied up and trapped.”

“Actually, you’re the only one tied up.” I pulled my hands from behind my lower back and wiggled my fingers for him to see.

“Why didn’t you untie me?” Sol whispered harshly.

“You were asleep, and I had to leave to get a look around,” I answered, holding a finger to my lip. “I think I know where we are and how we can get out of this.”

Sol nodded. “Great. Who are these people?”

“Ah. You’ll probably not like this. We were captured by the Kuru.”

Sol’s face went blank. “Cannibals?” His eyes flashed toward the tent walls, realizing the implication of the pale leather. “Ah hells, they’re going to eat us!” He moaned, panic edging his words.

I shook my head, “No, not us—you. They are human cannibals. I am a halfling. I will be fine.” Sol’s face turned red. He obviously didn’t appreciate my humor. “Don’t worry, though. You won’t die. You are pivotal to my escape plan.”

“Right. The plan. You need a good sword arm, I wager?”

I stood up. “Something like that. Now come on, we have to be quick, so they don’t notice we’re gone.”

Sol stood, allowing me to undo his restraints. “We can just walk around out there?” he asked.

“To a point. The problem is the perimeter guard is very thorough, but inside is manageable. Which is why we need a distraction for the escape, and we need to

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get it done before nightfall.”

“Why nightfall?”

I worked on the knot and chomped my teeth like a savage cannibal. Sol looked a little green around the gills, getting the idea. When his ropes were untied, I led him to the small door I had made in the back of the tent. I took the opportunity to give him his knife back.

“You found my knife?” he growled.

“Well, more like I acquired it.”

“You mean you stole it?”

“Would you rather they had it?”

His expression became sullen.

“Good, now follow me, and try not to be seen.” I walked through my homemade door with Sol crawling behind.

The camp consisted of a series of tents and lean-tos surrounding the ruins of an ancient temple from some lost empire. The Kuru revered these places, sacrificing people to their blood gods, and then devouring the offerings.

I really didn’t want that to happen to me, despite what I told Sol.

I led him around the tents, stopping on occasion to crouch out of the way as tribesmen walked by. Sol on the other hand was just too big, and because of this we wouldn’t remain unseen for long. So, we diverted to a tent I had spotted on my earlier excursion. In it was a nest of furs and skins, some possessions and clothes. I grabbed a long-feathered tunic with a headdress and shoved them into Sol’s arms.

“Put these on.” Sol looked at them a moment.

“These are women’s clothing.”

I sighed. “Men’s clothing is too revealing. We want to hide you. Hence, the ugly mother and child disguise.”

“Child?” he asked.

I showed him some smaller garments. “Seemed only fair. Now get dressed. We have to be quick.” His face became sullen again and we both slipped into our new clothes. Once outside, we applied a liberal application of mud and became semi-passable Kuru.

We walked amongst the tents, not quite hiding, but not making a spectacle either. I held Sol’s hand, despite his angry protestations, completing our dual disguise. “This is ridiculous,” he muttered quietly as we walked alongside the ignorant Kuru. “I am going to be eaten and it’s entirely your fault.”

“Shut up,” I whispered back. “We’re fine. It’s working. Now keep going that way and we’ll be at our destination.”

We walked unmolested past a few more tents to a wooden lean-to, the most permanent structure present, aside from the stone ruins. The lean-to was used by the Kuru to store the random articles and items they collected that washed ashore along the island’s beach.

“What do we need?”

I pointed at a pile of barrels. “All those there.” Then I pointed to the top of a shelf towards a box of tindertwigs. “And those up there.”

Sol looked at me, and then to the box of tindertwigs. Nearby he saw a pile of

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boxes and items precariously stacked atop one another, forming stairs that didn't go high enough to reach the top shelf.

"I'm pivotal to your plan because I can reach the top shelf? Had you been able to reach it, would you have left me?"

I coughed, looked down, and kicked a loose rock a bit guiltily. "Probably not. I gain some amusement from your company. It's a rare occasion that I get an audience to my cunning exploits." Sol arched an unbelieving eyebrow. I coughed again, shrugging my shoulders. "No plan is perfect. Now grab one of those barrels and open the spout and pour a tiny pile. After that, stack the rest on top of that one, but keep another barrel aside."

Sol did as he was told, looking to the final barrel. "Okay, now what?"

I shoved a handful of the twigs into my garb. "Grab that last barrel and pull the plug and stand over that pile of powder. Then turn it upside down and stick it under your tunic against your belly, then we head back to the prison tent."

Again, he followed my instructions and black powder began to pour down between his legs. He then noticed the shape of his belly.

"You made me pregnant."

I winked. "Oh, I hope not. It's only our second meeting and neither of us has had a decent drink." I took his hand and we walked back to our tent.



The guards hadn't missed us, but remained ignorant to our escape. We returned through our hole and tied ourselves loosely.

"Why do we have to wait?" Sol asked, nervous at the prospect of cutting it too close to "dinner time."

"I want as many Kuru as possible gathered in the ruins when the plan goes off. That way, there are less beyond the perimeter to challenge our escape. They'll be looking at our fire show instead of tracking us. And believe me, you don't want Kuru tracking us."

"Why are you so fixated with blowing things up?" Sol asked as the hour drew near.

I smiled. "Sol, it's not my fault that fire and gunpowder are such versatile tools." The boy opened his mouth to speak—but then we heard the level of activity outside begin to heighten.

"Shush, the time is now." I pulled out a few tinderwigs, lifted the back flap of the tent, and lit the trail. The powder took off and the spark raced away, circling a few tents and then leaping out of sight. I tossed some rope to Sol, who wrapped it loosely around his wrists, and I did the same, sitting down next to him and resuming the prisoner role.

"What if the trail goes out?" Sol asked, hearing voices nearing the tent.

"Hope it doesn't. Pray we remain lucky." I answered with a wink.

Sol made a face. "I'm not sure I like our brand of luck," he muttered. Then the Kuru poured in, seized us, and began dragging us toward the ruins.

As natives go, their appearance was cruel, with thick, harsh features and hungry dark eyes, wrapped in hides and skin decorated in paint and mud. They growled at

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us, baring yellowed teeth, their whoops and calls barely heard over the thundering drums and wailing. Sol resisted, pulling and screaming obscenities. I did my best to remain close to him. In my head, I was counting down the seconds. Four, three, two...one! I squeezed my eyes shut, daring to believe this would work.

Then nothing. No plume of fire. No destruction and havoc. And most disheartening, no distraction.

I looked at Sol as his white-filled eyes met mine.

He knew.

I looked away from his face, not wanting to see it break into horror. Then there was thunder and a wave of heat. The drums stopped. The explosion washed over the crowd of Kuru as blasts upon blasts threw pulsing flames over the crowd. Trees began flaring up and spreading hungry fire into their unfortunate neighbors. The devouring inferno hardly paused, leaping to the tents, consuming everything in its incredible heat. The whooping cannibals peeled away, rushing here and there, trying to placate the gluttonous flames. Only a pair of guards remained, holding us from our escape.

Sol and I were so amazed that we almost forgot our plan. I looked to him and nodded. The ropes uncoiled from our wrists.

I spun, grabbing a Kuru sentry's weapon hand which held some sort of strange obsidian shortsword. Violently, I twisted his thumb, weakening his grip, and used my free forearm to knock the blade from his grasp. Completing the motion, I snatched the handle from the air and buried the blade into the guard's chest.

He fell like a stone.

Sol didn't have as easy a time. He revealed his hidden knife from up his sleeve and brought it to bear. The guard was quicker, though, and his sword afforded him a much longer reach. Sol was fighting in pure defense. I moved toward him, calling his name. His head turned briefly, and I threw my Kuru sword to him.

He turned, fingers outstretched for the airborne blade. The Kuru rose behind him, taking advantage of Sol's distraction, his sword dropping toward his head. Before the blade touched him, Sol caught the flying sword. A fierce smile lit his face, and his principled discipline and training took over. He ducked the slicing blade, losing a few hairs to spin himself into a proper fighting stance. Lashing out with his paired blades, the Kuru was horrified at the storm of whirling death. The savage tried to block the flurry of flashing cuts and parries, but fell to pieces before Sol, who finished by sliding the blades into his belt.

I stood there a moment, beside myself. I figured Sol had been military trained, but I hadn't quite expected this.

"Where did you learn that?" I said in acknowledgement to his skill.

"I am Aldori trained. Not many can boast that. Without my sword I'm not much, but behind a blade..."

I never knew what I was actually up against at the bar. The lad would certainly be of use one day. That would be, of course, if we survived. I grabbed him by the arm and towed him from his victory in the opposite direction of the firefighting Kuru.

Night descended as we flailed our way through the forest. We each fell a couple times, stopping to help the other back up. It felt like hours as we lurched through

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the enveloping shadows. Then the trees cleared, sand spilled beneath our feet, and the stars became visible overhead. Grabbing large bits of flotsam, we ran for the waves and began kicking and pulling, propelling ourselves toward open water.

Once the island began to shrink away, we unhurried our paddling, conserving our strength. "This is impossible!" Sol groaned. "There is no way we are swimming to another island."

I pulled my compass from my pocket, measured it against the stars, and redirected my flotsam. "Not impossible. I had to swim between ports when I escaped from Port Peril. See? That way back to Quent."

"What did you do, anyway? Why does the Hurricane King hunt you?" Sol asked.

I thought about it a moment, then answered, "I found his secret treasury."

Sol coughed and sputtered. "You mean the one hidden beneath his keep, the one that's filled to the brim with pirated riches untold?"

"That's the one. I couldn't break into it by myself, though. But I figure with some luck," I glanced at Sol, "and some skill, I could crack it." I gave him my best crooked smile. "So, what do you say? Want to follow the infamous Bartemis Quin into the snapping jaws of the dreaded Hurricane King?"

Sol shook his head; a small smile crossed his lips.

"Has anyone ever told you, Bartemis, that you have as much bad luck as good?"

I laughed.

"Yes, I've been told."

"Well, I sure hope your good luck keeps up for the moment," Sol chuckled.

I nodded as the moonlight glimmered in the water, illuminating the massive fin of a shark as it cut across the surface and disappeared quietly behind Sol.

"Mmhmm, me too."

GOZREH PROVIDES

By Laura Sheppard



HE SKY WAS gray and cold in the early predawn light as a slight, caramel-skinned boy ran through the ramshackle streets of Drenchport. Several of the city's residents were already making their preparations for the day despite the weather, which had been wet and blustery for weeks thanks to the storms that spun from the unending hurricane known as the Eye of Abendego. But at least the damp chill meant the old herbalist was awake and nursing her aching joints when he'd arrived on her stoop this morning.

The Bonuwati youth rushed by darkened buildings clutching a small bundle close to his chest. His free arm shielded his face from the rain that whipped through the lamp-lit streets, and he darted around carts and barrels, avoiding the drunkards and thieves lurking near the port's taverns.

He ducked down a narrow lane and hurried toward the edge of town. The sounds of crashing swells on the coast echoed between the rundown husks of shops and homes. After a few minutes he reached the end of the alley and saw the upended prow of a schooner silhouetted against the bleak horizon; a makeshift shop huddled against a cottage of scavenged lumber. The broken mast and crow's nest identified it as the Tengu's Nest, one of the many weathered salvage ventures that lined Drenchport's ravaged shores.

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He was home.

The boy tugged open the door fitted into the old cargo hatch and entered the main shop as the wind caused hanging shards of glass and shell to tinkle against each other.

“We’re closed today!” a gruff voice called from within.

Undeterred, the boy pushed the heavy door shut, steering his way through dangling nautical instruments, under rigging and around trinket-laden tables until he reached a small reception area near a hearth at the back. Sitting in a worn upholstered chair by the fire was the source of the voice.

“It’s just me, Mibengu,” the youth huffed at the shopkeeper, trying to catch his breath as he laid down his bundle on a wooden table and began to unravel it. “How is she?” His golden eyes studied the old Zenj captain’s dark, creased face with concern as his fingers continued to work at the knotted twine.

A series of weak, wet-sounding coughs came from behind a curtain of sailcloth cordoning off the living quarters. Mibengu’s brow furrowed and he shook his head. “I called upon Pharamasma’s faithful shortly after ye left, Drezi m’boy. There was no choice.”

Drezi frowned. He grabbed a small jar and a sachet of herbs from the unfastened bundle, whirling toward the adjoining room. Then he whisked the curtain aside and rushed headlong into the darkness; squarely into the chest of a black-robed man.

A thin, silver spiral hung around the stranger’s neck and glinted in the boy’s face. Drezi gasped then looked up. In the muted light, the man’s pale skin and the hollows of his cheeks and eye sockets made him look like a skeleton. His features quickly softened however as Drezi stumbled backward. Their eyes met and the priest gave him a sad smile.

“Oh, hello. Who have we here?” he asked gently, as he glided forward and laid his hands on Drezi’s shoulders. “Why don’t we go sit down, hmm?” He gestured toward the sitting area with a nod.

“No...” Drezi protested, his soft voice cracking. “No. I have to go to her. I’m her brother... and she needs this.” He held out the jar and herbs, wriggling to slip from the priest’s grasp.

The gaunt man studied the items a moment then sighed and looked to Mibengu for assistance.

“Come, sit down, son,” the shopkeeper urged. He stood slowly and limped over, stretching out his calloused hand and inviting the boy to sit on the threadbare couch. “What must be said is important and deserving of yer full attention. Elanda has been tended to. So come sit and listen; not just with yer ears, but with yer whole self.”

Drezi felt his stomach flip with dread, but he studied the older man’s face as specters of remembrance crept through his mind. Mibengu was wise and his little sayings were some of the things Drezi treasured most. Slowly the boy complied, laying the items down on the table and sitting tentatively on the edge of the couch. “You’ve said that to me before... A long time ago,” he whispered.

Mibengu nodded and sat down next to him as the priest pulled up a stool.

“I have seen this illness many times, child. The drowning sickness cannot be

cured with tools such as those you have brought. They will provide her small comfort for an hour or two, perhaps, but nothing more.”

“But we have to do something,” the youth urged, looking past the priest and monitoring the concealed room for any sounds of distress. “Otherwise, she’ll...”

The gaunt man looked him straight in the eyes. “Yes, she will. Her condition is advanced and she is fading fast. Without the proper care, she’ll walk the spiral of bones and join the Lady of Graves before sunfall.”

Pain lanced Drezi’s chest and he whimpered as he sank backward into the sofa.

The priest crouched down in front of him and laid his hands on the boy’s knee. “I’m sorry.”

“But, please...I can’t... Isn’t there *anything* you could do?” Drezi stammered.

The priest shook his head. “The medicine your sister needs is also highly valued as a recreational drug. In this part of the world, prices are ten times what they should be, especially with the current storms reducing supplies...” The priest sighed. “Even if I could somehow obtain some, the church could not afford to treat her without recompense. I’m afraid the only option that remains is to wait for Pharasma’s call then deliver Elanda to the Boneyard in peace.” The priest looked back to Mibengu. “We should discuss arrangements for—”

“*No!*” Drezi’s eyes flashed with anger as he stood up like a shot. “I won’t just let her die. I will get you the coin you need. Just keep her alive until I get back.”

Mibengu looked to the boy in alarm. “How? I will not let you indebted yourself to some slaver, or drug baron or thieving ring! And you know she would not want that either.”

Drezi ignored the old seaman and moved quickly to a nearby wall. He grabbed a tightly woven net bag and a coil of rope from a hook and threw a pocketed leather vest on over his rough, mustard-colored tunic.

“You rescued us from drowning once, Mibengu, in the shipwreck that killed our parents. The Wind and the Waves brought us to Tempest Cay and all these years you have raised us, teaching me the salvager’s trade and putting our faith in the sea, in Gozreh, and the goddess has always provided. Surely she can do so once more.”

He finished buttoning his vest then ducked inside the shrouded bedroom, throwing the bag across his shoulder.

Elanda looked so frail, her thin chest rising and falling in shallow, gurgling breaths as she slept. Drezi reached into a pouch of his vest and pulled out a flawless spiraled seashell. He laid it gently in her hand then leaned in to kiss her cool forehead.

“Hang on, little sister,” he whispered. “I’ll be back soon. I’m going on a hunt.”



The sky had lightened and the wind had picked up by the time Drezi reached the open shore north of the city. His eyes darted across the jagged rocks ahead; he had to be careful to retain his footing in his haste. Heaps of slippery black kelp lay strewn about, ready to snare his ankles, and the constant spray of the sea made the terrain all the more treacherous.

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The youth deftly picked his way along the rocky crevices, eyeing the hulking silhouettes of ships impaled on the looming crags. Usually sizable wrecks like these would have been picked over by salvage vessels before they ever came within sight of land; however the continuing gusts and large waves made sailing dangerous. These crippled ships had been forced right into the spiky coast, their foolhardy crews no more after paying the harshest price that the shoals and weather could extract.

Drezi scanned the horizon for signs of danger, ignoring the splash of briny water against his brown skin. Normally, he would steer clear of this section of rocks in a squall, but with his sister's life at stake, these wrecks were his best hope. Like the day they were orphaned, his fate and hers were in Gozreh's hands once more.

"But such is the capricious life of the salvager," Mibengu says. "Gozreh provides."

It was true. Until Elanda fell ill, the three of them had eked out a living from the provisions brought to these shores by the Wind and the Waves. This morning he would just have to be cautious, but that was nothing new. Growing up in Drenchport, Drezi learned early that one had to be quick and resourceful to make a living.

"Otherwise someone else will beat you to the prize, or kill you for it." Mibengu had told him that too.

Drezi paused for a moment, took a deep breath and closed his eyes. The rush of the surf and the timbre of the waves thrummed like his heartbeat. The swells battered the jagged rocks and lurching wrecks; relentless and powerful but not too fast. He felt a gust of wind on his face from the northwest, and heard it wail through the heaving vessels. The rending wood groaned and cracked, as the debris was pummeled against the stones.

Like putting a pestle to a mortar...

A large derelict to his right suddenly broke into splinters with a deafening boom. Drezi's eyes snapped open, and he jumped higher among the rocks as a huge wave crashed into the shore, surrounding him in a blinding mist.

Once the drenching wetness had settled, he looked to the next intact cluster and saw the wreckage of the forecastle from a small sloop-of-war. The bowsprit was broken near where it joined the front of the prow, and it dangled limply like a maimed arm. The shattered masts and split hull of a second ship clashed against the sloop, timbers and rigging littering the surf around it. A growing pile of flotsam eddied between the two craft further offshore.

Not much left here.

Drezi climbed over a few larger boulders and turned his attention to a third vessel, pinned against the point a few hundred yards further north. It was a salvage frigate, considerably larger and more intact than the others. It pitched against the coast on its starboard side, split open across the bow and along the deck with its contents spilling out into the roiling waters. Only one mast remained, and the tatters of its sail and loose rigging caught the wind and snapped back and forth like a torturer's lash.

Drezi's chest swelled with hope.

He squinted against the sea spray as he made his way down the hazardous rocky coast, muttering a prayer. In the shadow of the hulk, he closed his eyes a moment and counted the beats between the waves.

For Elanda, he thought.

Then, as the next surge of water heaved the mass of wood inland, Drezi launched himself with all his strength toward a thick mooring cable on the hull. His dextrous hands grabbed onto the thick hemp cording and he held tight, wrapping his arms and legs around it as the frigate lurched away again. Buffeted by the rocking vessel and the relentless gale, he began to climb.

He reached the main deck, heaving himself over the starboard rail. Shakily, he uncoiled the length of rope looped at his waist and secured himself to an empty pair of bitts. The deck was barren, except for trailing rigging and the ship's binnacle and wheel on the quarterdeck. Everything else up here had already been washed overboard.

The only other point of interest that remained on this level was the captain's cabin. He worked his way amidships to investigate, moving his tether from bitt to bitt. The aft portion of the ship still appeared intact, and the door to the rear cabin was closed.

He thanked the Sky and Sea, then refocused as one of Mibengu's warnings came to mind: *"Tides are fickle, Drezi; be quick to salvage what you can, before they come in and take you instead."*

He longed to know what lay in the holds beneath, but the missing port side, the ragged, gaping holes in the decking and the waves that surged in with each pulse were discouraging. The risks of becoming trapped or drowning became greater if he ventured below decks.

Maybe the captain was the kind of man to keep the best things for himself, he hoped. Knowing the pirates of the Shackles, that was not asking too much.

Drezi maneuvered himself into place, fastening his rope anchor tightly to the starboard rail and waiting for a gust of wind to lessen before traversing the pitching ground to the cabin door. He secured the rope around a thick peg in the decking and lurched for the door handle as the vessel was rocked anew by a powerful burst of surf. The handle yielded when he pulled, and the door swung outward as a dislodged barrel rolled past him, across the deck and into the ocean.

Still clinging to the open door, Drezi scabbled along the wood and pulled himself through the doorframe to peer inside.

Despite the large hole in the portside wall and floor, it reminded him of home. There was stuff everywhere. Nautical equipment, lanterns and other gear swung from hooks on either side of the door. In the center of the room, books and charts were scattered across the floor around a large desk, and an iron-hinged leather chest sat to his left at the foot of a four-poster bed. Near the bed, a toppled side table lay below a wall-mounted rack filled with bottles of dark liquid. There were also stacks of crates restrained by rope nets along the starboard wall. Several of these crates bore the names of ships branded onto them, and some had tumbled out of the netting and smashed, strewn their contents across a worn Qadiran carpet.

But that's where the similarities to the Tengu's Nest ended.

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Instead of cases filled with chipped pottery and glass beads, the smashed crates contained silver tableware glinting with gems, strings of pearls and gold jewelry.

Drezi's amber eyes grew wide.

He untied himself from his rope tether and let it fall slack to the decking, then reached around the doorframe and pulled the door shut. He braced his footing and moved toward the spilled treasure that lay before him. Kneeling beside the pile, he reached into his net bag, withdrew a sturdy sack and scooped up the precious contents from the broken cargo box. He tied a knot at the top then fished a length of silk rope from his vest pocket and used it to attach the heavy sack to his belt. Standing, he gazed around the room again, wondering where to loot next.

Then he saw her.

Half obscured by velvet drapery and leaning in the far right corner near a bank of aft windows, was a tall woman carved of wood. She was naked—her modesty only conserved by her flowing hair laced with intricate leaves and blossoms—and she reclined with her willowy arms above her head.

For a moment, Drezi was transfixed. *It's a figurehead... A dryad figurehead.*

His breath caught in his chest as he remembered a legend his father had told him when he was very young: the tale of the *Dryad's Vow*.

It was said to be one of the fastest ships in the Arcadian Ocean, and the legend held that the wood came from a dryad's grove. A shipbuilding town had encroached on an enchanted wood and a fearful druid—concerned for the safety of *all* life in the forest—compromised by giving up half the grove for lumber. The resident fey sadly agreed and half the grove was felled but the greedy humans didn't stop there. As the axe blades rang out and all the trees had nearly fallen, a saddened dryad vowed to remain with her family and melded with the wood of her oak.

She was cut down alongside her kin, but in death her fine wood was appraised highly and a craftsman fashioned her into a figurehead. Preserved with oils and alcohol, her spirit persisted, and her soul imbued speed to the timbers culled from her grove.

The *Dryad's Vow* had been presumed lost at sea since the Eye had opened over a hundred years ago. But if this crew had found her enchanted figurehead, it would be worth its weight in gold.

Drezi crossed the littered floor and braced himself on the desk as the ship swayed, revelling in the sharp detail of the wooden woman's features as he drew closer. The sculpture was certainly impeccable, without a single chisel mark or sign of weathering. Hanging onto the velvet curtains, he clambered along the windows until he was right beside her and stretched out his trembling fingers to caress the woman's delicate face.

A soft, mournful voice spoke in Drezi's head. *"I sense your presence, young one. Do not fear. I mean no harm to you."*

Drezi gasped as he recoiled from the statue. "It's true. You... You're real?"

"I exist, though I do not live. All that I am, and all I ever will be, means little, though once I was known as Tulley. What are you called, young one?"

"My name is Drezi. I am a salvager. I just found you here on this ship."

"Drezi... It has been so long," the voice ached. *"so long since an innocent*

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presence has come before me. I feel the pain and loss you suffer, and the one you may yet lose. I would help you, if you would but cut me loose."

Drezi paused.

Moving a curtain aside, he withdrew his knife and cut the thick ropes that lashed the figurehead to the wall. The heavy wood carving toppled forward onto him and the boy did his best to guide her gently to the floor.

"Is that any better?"

"I cannot say, young one. This wood is cold and lifeless, all my family, dead and gone. But your youthful soul reminds me of my forgotten innocence. You know the feeling of terrible loss; of lives taken too soon. But even now you struggle to find a way to keep what I could not."

Drezi sheathed his knife then ran his fingers through his hair, biting his lip. "I can't lose her too," he sighed, crouching beside the figurehead. "I don't want to be alone."

"Then you must be braver than I; fight for every last one. Do not dwell only with sadness and regrets—"

An odd sound interrupted them: a measured beat combined with a droning hum. Drezi strained his ears to block out the ambient noise of surf and rending wood, and it slowly became more clear; there was thumping and chanting coming up from below. Edging toward the hole in the floor, Drezi looked down into the foaming sea. His heartbeat quickened.

Blue-green creatures swarmed the mound of debris in the waters below.

Goblins!

He cursed himself for getting distracted, then swore again as another realization dawned: he'd seen that pile of "flotsam" before, floating in the eddy. It was plain now that it had been a makeshift goblin ship—a Dark Hook goblin ship. Drezi winced. The small mischievous creatures were notorious in this part of the Shackles for scavenging anything that washed up—trash or treasure alike—and they were savagely competitive. A dozen or more piled from their dross boat and were swarming amidships near the huge cleft in the port hull, dressed in their ridiculous approximations of human piratical garb.

But for all their comical appearances, Drezi knew that they were unpredictable adversaries and their jury-rigged weapons—shell-and-coral sickles and dogslicers of salvaged metal—were still sharp enough to maim. And they were close enough that he could make out the words to their crude rhymes:

See that wreck, you snot-nosed pup?

Hit the deck and tear it up!

Check each barrel, loot each snag.

Put all shinies in the bag!

Not tied down? Then make it move!

Lady Lastbreath would approve!

Boats will wreck and ships will break.

Dark Hook goblins: Take! Take! Take!

Drezi scanned the room for viable escape routes, then began blocking up the main entry. He slid the larger pieces of furniture—the heavy trunk topped by several crates—in front of the doorway, aided by the pitching of the vessel on the

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waves. With his barricade complete, he propped up the fallen side table as a shield between the bed and the desk, facing the entrance. Taking one last look around, he grabbed the bottles of black kelp from the wall and stood two of them behind his cover and placed the rest in his net bag. Just to be sure, he uncorked one and gave it a tentative whiff then wrinkled his nose.

Black kelp beer... Perfect!

He drew his dagger, readied his bag beside him in preparation to defend his spoils.

The dull thuds of goblin grappling hooks thumped against the ship, followed by scrabbling feet on the decks below. Arguments began immediately over the rights to scraps of clothing, tin pots, coils of rope, and whatever else was left in the ship's holds. Shrieks, squeals and bangs echoed as brawls broke out, and Drezi heard splashes as a few of the more aggressive troublemakers tumbled back into the ocean, followed by a sharp yelp that likely signified a darker fate for one of them.

The sounds of chaos continued until a commanding voice growled, "Avast thar, swabbagers! Unfurl th' bosun. Maroon yon mizzen jack!"

Most of the confrontations below ceased, with the more persistent jabbering silenced by the application of blunt trauma.

Then the scavenging began in earnest.

The Dark Hook mob covered the inundated decks in a fraction of the time Drezi could. He listened as barrels and other goblin treasures were rolled down the swaying planks, landing on the surviving seaborne goblins and the mound of rubbish that was their dubious ship. A few cries of delight also reached his ears:

"Salty fish pickles for Grubbus... and a new hatpin!"

"Ooooh! Maggots!"

"Get yer own sheep's head, half-wit! Mine! Mine! *Mine!*"

After a couple more shouts of discovery from the holds, the horde began clambering up the half-ruined ladders and out of the main hatch.

Drezi inhaled then took a swig from the potent uncorked beer and silently invoked Gozreh as the entrance to the captain's quarters slammed open with a violent heave. Surprised by the force of the door and the barrier it contained, a chorus of goblins squawked and reeled backwards, bouncing off the deck and stumbling into the mizzenmast just as a large swell raised the stern, and sent two of the crates careening after them.

There was a squelching squeak as one of the raiders was sandwiched painfully. The three others managed to dodge aside just in time. The most agile—a scrawny, wilted-eared whelp wearing a vest of matted goblin felt laced with pink satin ribbon and an eyepatch on the side of his head—recovered quickly and scrambled back to the doorway and up the precarious heap to survey their waiting treasure with beady red eyes.

Drezi pulled back his arm and threw. A bottle of black kelp swill shattered as it hit the goblin scout square in the chest, dousing him and toppling him into his comrades once more.

"Eeep!"

"Oomph!"

“Watch it, pond scum!!”

The young salvager readied himself as he heard the cries from the other side of the obstacle; he had caught them off guard. He just hoped the goblins would be accommodating and help the rest of his plan work so he could leave.

There were a few feral growls as the goblins picked themselves up again, then the vanguard screamed over his shoulder, “Hey, Gutscurper! We got a sneaking long-lubber abaft!”

Hearing the goblin’s report, Drezi launched another bottle of the kelp brew over the makeshift wall. A wet crash told him it had smashed just as readily as the first one.

The goblins, however, knew this game well, and their retaliation was fierce.

A barrage of half a dozen glass jars flew towards the hapless treasure hunter. Two fell short, hitting the carpet in the centre of the room; another one dashed against the desk to his left. The fourth and fifth came close, splashing him with sea brine as they shattered on the overturned table in front of him and the wall behind his head. The last one, though, hit him straight in the jaw, bursting on impact and releasing a shimmering white jellyfish along with a splatter of brackish water.

Now it was Drezi’s turn to yelp.

Crackles of stinging pain from the jelly’s poisonous tentacles seared across his cheek, jaw and neck. He lurched backward, scooping up the sea creature with the jar’s lid and throwing it back into the face of one of his bulbous-headed foes, only to lose his balance and plant his hand into a pile of spiny sea urchins—the contents of the fifth sadistic jar. He howled in surprise then clutched his punctured hand close to his body as the gathering tribe cackled with glee.

Severely outnumbered, Drezi looked anxiously to his exits—the broken aft windows and the gaping hole in the port wall and floor.

“I need to get out of here now with what I’ve got,” he groaned, “or I’ll have no chance to save Elanda...” He checked that his treasure sack was still secured to his waist, then pulled two more bottles from the net sack and launched them at the barricade, showering the area in dark liquid once more. Slowly, he crept behind the desk and toward the gaping fissure.

Another vicious surge of surf rocked the ship.

Goblins tumbled down to the decking behind the barricade and Drezi stretched his hands out to brace his fall, planting them hard on the figurehead in front of him. Pain shot up his wounded hand and he cried out again.

“I can help you.” Tulley’s soft voice entered his mind.

Drezi clung onto the wooden woman as the wreck continued to sway. “How?”

“Though I was not born of the water, I can harness its power. I still command this great oak. Get me to the sea.”

Goblins heaped back into the doorway and scrambled onto the trunk, sneering at the injured boy with filed teeth and waving makeshift weaponry into the air as they jostled and jabbered with each other.

Drezi edged along the floor and leaned forward to scout the conditions in the churning waters below. A jar full of sharp coral hit the deck a few feet to his right. More cackling and jeering ensued from the Dark Hook tribe, but it was quickly cut short by a harsh bark.

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“Shove off, ye scuttlin’ dogs! It’s thar she blows fer yon plankwalker!”

The cluster of goblins parted, chuckling as their grizzled chieftain—dressed in an overlong brocade coat and crumpled bicorn covered in bird bones—tottered up the boxes with a stoppered flask of red-orange liquid. ‘Gutscupper’ had arrived, and he readied the vial aloft as his followers shrieked with glee.

Drezi smirked. The creatures’ affinity for fiery things was well known and their leader had come through for him at last.

Trust goblins to at least be predictable in some respects, Drezi thought. Then he screamed as he flung his net bag across the doorway.

The boy’s boldness caught the Dark Hook chieftain off-guard.

The force of the weighted netting and the bottles of black kelp beer sent the goblin commander hurtling through the air, bowling down his lackeys in the process. Murky liquor exploded over the tangled mass of knobby, blue-green arms and legs as the small glass vial filled with liquid fire spun up into the air out of the chieftain’s hand. The flask hit the corner of the leather trunk and burst in a flash of light, igniting the beer-soaked goblins, the barricade, and the decking in an alchemical blaze. Goblins shrieked and scattered every which way, shaking their flaming appendages and stumbling over one another in a panic.

Drezi shoved the figurehead through the hole in the rent floor with all his might. With one last look to the captain’s chambers, he climbed to his feet as the fire snaked across the Qadiran rug toward the desk and bedding. He paused to gauge the movement of the ship among the waves, double-checked the sack of loot at his waist and launched himself as far as he could through the damaged port side as the wreck lurched seaward.

Cold, frothing water, a flurry of white bubbles, and a sudden quiet roar flooded his senses as Drezi plummeted into the surf. Winded and disoriented, he kicked hard toward the surface amid the roiling waves, as the powerful tow of the current pulled him toward the dying vessel until his progress was impeded by a thick piece of floating timber.

“Hold on, young one.”

Drezi sputtered and heaved himself on top of the figurehead and wrapped his arms around her. Her body cut through the water and steered away from the debris as a few sodden goblins surfaced as well. They flailed, splashed and spluttered, grabbing onto whatever they could to paddle back to their junk-heap ship. There was no sign of their captain.

Thickening smoke billowed from the aft portion of the wreck. A booming crack echoed against the rocks and the vessel slouched deeper into the sea. The ruined frigate was in its death throes. Whatever remained would soon be lost to flame and surf.

Drezi hunkered low and turned away to look at the dryad’s carved face.

“Is it within your powers to take me south to Drenchport?”

“For the sake of your kin, I shall try.”

The figurehead surged forward and the jagged, rocky shores and impaled wrecks were soon far behind. The wind and sea spray blinded Drezi as they sped over the ocean waves. He clutched his sack of spoils tightly to his side as the legendary figure rushed him back to his sister.

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Tulley had no family, no reason to help him or anyone. Her life had been more painful than he could ever imagine, but yet she was still willing to help.

"Do not think so much about me now. Your sister needs you."

"I don't know what to say..."

"I feel your gratitude. It is enough."

When they reached the coastline just outside the city, Drezi tapped the dryad's wooden arm and she piloted them to shore.

Drezi huffed as he pulled her form onto the rocks and wrung out his pants and vest.

"I have no words..." he sighed.

"Just save her, young one. I will wait for your return."

A pang of deep emotion knotted Drezi's stomach. Lying there motionless on the beach, her features darkened by the ocean water, the face of the figurehead looked just like his sister's.

Dread began to seep towards his throat. He didn't want to be alone.

"Do not hesitate! Fight for her."

The boy choked back his tears and nodded. He slid driftwood and armfuls of kelp around her. "I will come back."

Then he dashed up the shoreline and toward the town gate.



The afternoon wind had faded to an eerie whisper by the time Drezi reached the Pharasmin temple. He dashed straight into the main entrance of the stone cathedral, scanning the area for any sign of the gaunt dark-robed priest that had visited his home. Several of the faithful glowered at him as his rapid steps clattered through the worship space, before he found the corridor that led to the ritual chambers.

Many of the rooms were shut and Drezi slowed as a few acolytes emerged from further down the hall speaking in hushed tones. They looked the boy over then continued walking toward the church as the door to Drezi's right opened. Startled, the bronze-skinned boy stumbled backward and gasped as a man stepped out from the doorway nearly on top of him.

It was Mibengu.

The old captain's brow furrowed as he recognized the youngster. "Oh, Drezi... I'm sorry."

Dazed by the sudden appearance of his guardian, the boy shook his head and pushed forward into the room. "...I have it... We can buy the proper medicine now."

Inside, the tall thin priest stood over a low bier, his hands resting on Elanda's chest. He looked at Drezi as the boy staggered closer, fumbling at the knots that secured his sack of treasure to his belt.

"...Elanda?"

She was still and her skin was ashen.

Crushing pain squeezed Drezi's chest like a vise. "Please..." his voice broke as he pushed the bag of his spoils into the priest's arms. "Save her."

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The gaunt man gently pressed it back toward the boy. "It's too late, son."

Drezi dropped the sack to the floor and reached out and grasped his little sister's hand. Her delicate fingers still held the spiral shell he had given her that morning.

Tears filled the boy's eyes and spilled down his cheeks as he felt the small token fall from her hand. "No, no, no. Please, Elanda," he choked, "I have so much more to share with you. Please, don't leave me alone. Please, don't..."

Mibengu patted Drezi's shoulder softly and then moved to sit down nearby. "Why don't you tell her a story, son. She always liked that."

Drezi slowly nodded and wiped his face on his arm.

He placed his warm hand around her cool one and recounted the tale of the *Dryad's Vow* in vivid detail. At the end of his story, he threw his arms around her and sobbed.

"Elanda!"

The hollow-eyed priest came back through the doorway and nodded to Mibengu.

The shopkeeper rose. "We must go now, Drezi. We've had our time—"

Suddenly a breath whispered from Elanda.

Three more Pharasmin clerics swept from the hall to her bed side. The thin priest bowed his head and Drezi noticed that one of the acolytes clutched a small brown pouch.

A swell of hope rushed through the boy as the man gave him a grim smile.

"The bones land in a spiral," he said reverently as he drew near to Drezi. "She has returned because of you... We must hurry, though, so if you would leave, we will begin the ritual. The rest will be up to our goddesses to provide."

Drezi gave his sister's hand one last squeeze and placed the shell back into her palm.

Then the priest escorted him from the room and began to pray.



The last hints of gold and pink were fading on the fringes of the western sky as Drezi walked silently to the beach. Shining his lantern in front of him, he weaved through the rocks until he reached the place where the dryad figurehead rested then laid his hand on hers.

"It has been a long time since I have experienced such relief. It is wonderful."

Drezi moved aside the concealing timbers and flung several clumps of kelp off her form. "They performed the healing rite and Elanda will be fine," he smiled. "They told me she was gone when I arrived, but she came back."

"We are never truly gone, even in death." There was a long pause and the dryad spirit sighed deeply. *"Can you... Can you do something for me?"* her voice trembled slightly. *"Help me return to my family, too."*

Drezi nodded. "Of course. But how do I do that?"

"It is very simple," she breathed. *"Take me to a grove and burn me."*

Drezi's face fell. "Wh-what?"

Slowly the wooden form in front of him shifted and the ghostly figure of a willowy woman emerged, hovering just above the surface of her wooden form.

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Pain was evident on her ethereal features, and he could see that her legs were missing, while other parts of her body bore deep gouges as though she'd been hewn by the blade of an axe.

Drezi sat down in a heap and leaned against her side. "But... Isn't there anything else I can do? Surely there is a way..."

The dryad's ghost moaned softly. She shifted beside him and stared longingly at a stand of trees that swayed in the now-gentle breeze. *"I want to return to the earth—to my family. Your heart is pure enough to know why. It was the will of your goddess—or perhaps even my own—that you find me and I help you. I know you can do this."*

Drezi nodded tearfully. "I will help you find peace," he vowed, and pain lifted from the spirit's face.

"Oh, Drezi. Thank you."

The boy pushed himself up from the ground and rested his hand on the wood-woman's face, as her spirit reunited with the figurehead. With some effort he pushed the carved timber further up the beach into the sandy earth near the copse of trees.

He scavenged the shore for a few pieces of dry driftwood and piled them around her.

Finally, he rummaged deep in a pocket of his vest and retrieved pieces of flint and steel.

"Goodbye, Tulley," he whispered. "You helped me when I needed it most and taught me something I will never forget. Something I can teach Elanda and add to Mibengu's old sayings."

Then he struck the flint and ignited the dryad's pyre.

Some treasures you seek, some seek you, and the rest Gozreh provides.

CALM WATERS

By Patrick Napier



WHEN THE GOD Aroden died, the greatest storm Golarion had ever known tore the seas asunder. The storm raged for a century, an undying hurricane in the Arcadian Sea. The people of the region adapted, resilient as always: new shipping lanes were charted, and ruthless pirates preyed on the ships that braved the rough waters. Banding together in the island nation of the Shackles, buccaneers formed a united fleet under the rule of an elected free-captain, the Hurricane King. His fortress home, resting high above on the cliffs of Lucrehold island, loomed like a stalking beast over Port Peril, threatening to devour the dozens of ships that made their way in and out of the docks that lined the southernmost point of Jeopardy Bay.

Very few merchants could pass without first being scrutinized by this bastion, but on this day a single sloop knifed through the tumult of vessels towards the docks. Expertly steered, the ship took a shallow angle to the pier, as crewmen stood at the gunwales with heavy dock lines in hand. The men leapt down to the moorings as the ship came to a stop in her berth, and set about securing the lines both bow and stern. Dockhands rushed to assist with spring lines, hoping to earn a handful of coppers. The crew of the ship wasn't in need of any help however, and they scattered the hapless locals with curses and hands placed conspicuously on

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the pommels of their blades.

As the ragtag crew secured the ship, they boasted amongst themselves of how much ale they intended to put down that night. A woman emerged from the cabin, her almond eyes squinting against the bright sun. Her features evinced her Tian heritage, but the traces of elven blood could be seen in the amethyst color of her irises and the shape of her ears. She radiated an untamed beauty, despite wearing a shabby linen dress. Her raven locks blew wildly in the crosswind, forcing her to brush the hair from her face. Looking down, she scowled at the shackles binding her delicate wrists. The cuffs of the restraints were padded to avoid bruising her porcelain skin, but it wasn't her wrists that were hurting as she lifted her eyes to the imposing walls of the fortress.

She heard the dreaded rapping of a cane against the deck of the *Mako*. The reek of rum began to permeate the air as her captor came closer to speak.

"There it is Mara, your new home." The man licked his cracked lips and smiled, revealing a mouth overfilled with crooked, stained teeth. "Don't worry, love; I'm sure ol' Bonefist won't be too rough with ye. Why, the last little pet we brought for him lasted three whole weeks!"

Harsh laughter filled her ears as three of the crew took up positions around her. They stunk of salt and sweat and wore several blades in sheaths, with more hidden away in their worn leather boots. The largest of the men, a swarthy brigand with gold hoops piercing his ears and lips, had a double-barreled pistol tucked into his sash.

The reeking slaver began uncoiling a silk rope from his belt. He looped the cord around her waist and cinched it tight, drawing a whimper from her. Deftly knotting the line about her, he leaned in close to her face.

"Now, Mara me lass, let's not go trying to run. Ye'll soon be home, and the Hurricane King's servants are going to do ye up nice and pretty-like. Then ye'll be a free little lass, free as the seabirds." He gave her a wink and handed the leash to the towering ebon-skinned man. "If she gets the slip on ye like before, Kitombe, you'll answer to Bonefist with yer hide. Now step lively, ye scallywags!"

"Aye, Captain!" Kitombe rumbled.

Their leader took a drink from the rum bottle at his side and snorted, "No callin' me 'Captain' on shore neither, it be just Desmond there!"

They stepped to the gangplank as it crashed against the dock. Captain Desmond started down the ramp, but Mara paused, feeling the need to flee with every fiber of her being. Desmond sensed her hesitation, and spun around to face her. His jagged smile gave way to a hateful sneer. He tilted his head at the slave girl.

"Come now, lassie. We don't want to make the king wait any longer than need be. He's apt to put a slug in someone. Better ye than me, but I'm not quite ready to take the gamble. Now move!"

Kitombe pushed from behind, and she stumbled down the egress, her bound hands of no use as she nearly fell. Regaining her balance, she stepped on to the quay.

"Careful now, ye dullards! I'll not have her ruined by the lot of ye," Desmond spat. "She gets a scratch, and ye'll be riding the keel to Quent."

The guards grumbled as they escorted her down the pier to the chaos of the

harbor markets.



A solitary man strode through the bustling marketplace, a calm eye in the storm of sounds and smells that assaulted his senses. Claspings his hands behind his back he gazed about at stalls filled with gaudily dyed clothing, tables strewn with fish and all manner of baubles and trinkets. A bent elderly man limped by pushing a barrow full of coconuts, a machete dangling from his hip. The fruit seller cried out in a deep voice, “Fresh coconuts, good for the humors! C’mon, hey, coconuts! Good for yer heart!”

Everyone in the bazaar seemed intent on taking money from the other, either through selling overpriced junk, haggling over the cost of a purchase, or just plain theft. The man kept walking, his eyes always scanning, searching for something. When he’d awoken that morning there had been something in the breeze that blew in from the open ocean, telling him he was meant to come to the market. He always listened to the wind, and so he debarked his ship and made his way into squalid chaos of Port Peril’s market district.

He passed by children that tried desperately to sell him shells recovered from the dirty beach. He smiled but pressed on, knowing full well that the majority of these urchins were skilled cutpurses.

The silver tinkling of a wind chime made him pause. It cut through the cacophony and he turned to see a portly black woman sitting in a stall behind a table strewn with all manner of knick-knacks. A canopy sheltered her from the hot morning sun, but sweat streamed down her round, shiny face all the same. From the canopy hung a riot of chimes and fetishes. They all dangled motionless in the still air, except for a set made from sand dollars hanging from a chunk of driftwood. Listening to the voice on the wind, the chimes called out to him. He stepped to the stall and greeted the woman. She smiled hugely, revealing gold-capped teeth, and gestured at her wares, inviting him to buy her native goods. His eyes swept over the assortment of shells, dried starfish, and smoking pipes carved from shell and driftwood, and fixed on the small statuette of a woman.

It was beautiful, crafted from fine porcelain and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The maiden’s hair was sculpted to appear wind-blown and wild, her figure untamed but betraying a hint of untapped grace and calm. He gently picked up the figurine and turned it in his hands, his fingers delicately tracing the lines of her form. He glanced up at the chimes that drew him to the figure, seeing them dancing in the breeze even as the others still hung languidly. The wind whispered softly, and he closed his eyes.

It is here, he told himself, this is where I am meant to be.



Desmond’s cane cracked loudly with each step as he and his crew made their way up the cobblestone road to the marketplace. The big dark-skinned man dragged Mara by her leash as he went. She fell behind slowly, feeling the rope get

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tauter as they went. Glancing behind her she noticed her rearguard staring lustily at the sway of her hips, while the other men at her sides leered at the brothels and taverns that crowded against the road. Women and girls leaned out of upper-story windows, their flesh barely contained by their bustiers and silk robes as they whistled and winked at each passerby.

“Oy, big man, why don’t you set loose yer stray dog and come see what a real woman can do fer ye,” called a buxom redhead from her balcony. Kitombe paused for a moment to smile at the strumpet, and Mara felt her leash grow slack. She smiled inwardly at the man’s weakness for the harlot above and seized the opportunity to spin about, yanking the rope from Kitombe’s loosened grip and dashing headlong into the crowds that milled about in the morning heat.

Cursing as the line burned through his fist, Kitombe reeled, reaching for the firearm tucked away in his sash. As the other men raced after their prize, he drew a bead on Mara’s fleeing form. Desmond’s cane struck his wrist as he squeezed off a shot that went to the ground. He felt the cane strike the back of his knees and he stumbled to all fours. The cane cracked against his jaw next, bringing a growl from the big man as he spat blood.

“Ye blasted fool, we don’t want her dead! After her, but make sure ye get her alive!” The big man scrambled to his feet and chased off into the crowded market. “Now we shall have even more bruises to hide before we present our little gift to old Bonefist.” Desmond straightened his waistcoat and tapped off after his crew.



Mara fled through the chaos of the marketplace, the silk rope around her waist dragging behind her like a serpentine tail. Her bound hands offered little in the way of balance, so she brought her wrists up close to her chest. Her shoulders heaved with every stride as she dodged past merchants and barkers. A coconut vendor wheeled his barrow in her path and she hurdled over it. Her foot caught on the handle and sent the coconuts rolling all about the road. The old peddler shook his fist at her and cursed her mother as two of Desmond’s men came crashing through and stepped on the coconuts rolling in their path, upending one and slowing the other.

Mara turned down a narrow alleyway and yanked loose a frayed rope that lashed together several barrels. One of the barrels tumbled over, spilling its foul contents—rotted food, fish guts and other offal. Rats scurried in and began scavenging the mess. Mara kept running, not knowing where she was or where she was going, but trying desperately to find a way to lose her pursuers. Two urchins watched her intently as she barreled down the street, noticing her chains and trailing leash. The two looked back to see what the strange girl was running from and spotted a mangy man in pursuit. The older of the two boys stuck his leg out, sending the pursuer skidding down to the cobblestone street into a pile of chicken crates. The raider leapt to his feet, cursing as he spit feathers out and noticed smears of droppings on his blouse. He jerked his head back to see the pranksters that tripped him but remembered his quarry was getting away and pressed on.

Mara hurled past throngs of people, hardly noticing their shouts as she knocked into them. She turned another corner and saw a well-dressed man looking intently at something in his hands. Unable to stop in time she careened into him, sending the small object in his hands into the air. His blue silk robes fluttered as he was lifted from his feet and then fell to the street. She crashed over the table, knocking the ebon-skinned vendor to the ground and shattered seashells on the table. Her legs struck the pole that held up the stall's canopy, collapsing the canvas while the wind chimes came crashing down.

Flailing around like a trapped animal, Mara's head broke free of the canopy, revealing wild black hair that had become a tangled mess with bits of seashell and sand dollars trapped in the tresses. Ready to flee again, her eyes met the gaze of the well-dressed man, and something about him moved her to stop.



He was mesmerized by the swaying sand dollars in her hair. Quickly, he got to one knee in a defensive posture as he took in her wildly beautiful face. Her hair was a tangled bird's nest, but her amethyst eyes caught his, and he saw in them what he had been looking for. He reached his hand out to the girl.

"Come with me."

He helped her to her feet and his eyes widened slightly at the sight of her shackles. Reaching into his robe, he grabbed a small leather purse and deftly tossed it to the woman who was floundering in the canvas of her ruined booth. Then they turned to run, the girl's hand still clasped in his.

Dodging through the bazaar they found their way back to the docks. Mara hesitated, afraid of possible treachery, and he felt her reluctance to follow.

"You must trust me, if you are to escape Port Peril."

Mara sensed honesty in the mysterious Tian man, despite her mistrust of all men in general. She said nothing, and let herself be led down the pier to a small well-crafted junk. The ship's red sails were furled high on tall twin masts. They hurried aboard the ship, and he instructed her to get below decks. When she was safely hidden, he leapt to the dock and cast off the moorings. The junk slipped free of her berth and he rushed aboard to raise the gangplank. With it secure, he set sail for the open waters of the bay, taking to the rudder. He looked up to see Desmond and his men lumbering down the dock, looking from ship to ship for their quarry. As the slavers moved down the harbor, Desmond paused a moment, glaring up at the junk as it left the harbor. The man met the brigand's gaze and gave him a quick bow as his ship left the pier and moved towards the harbor's entrance and out to Jeopardy Bay.

The Tian steered his ship clear of the bay and then closed his eyes to listen to the wind, taking in the snap of the sails and the creak of the battens as they responded to its influence. Opening his eyes, he steered the boat west towards Shenchu Bay.

Mara came out on deck to join him, and sat watching intently as he made his way up and down the ship, working the lines and single-handedly sailing a junk that was meant for a crew of at least a half-dozen sailors.

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“Where are you taking me,” she asked timidly once he finally stood still for a moment.

Her fear was palpable, so to calm her, the man sat cross-legged in front of her, his eyes looking directly into hers. She saw no deceit in them when he answered. “We are sailing for a small island just south of Cho-Tzu. I have made a home for myself there. You have nothing to fear. After I resupply there, I’ll take you wherever you wish. Please forgive me for asking, but why were those men after you?”

Mara’s eyes went to his feet as she paused. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Yes, introductions are in order first. My name is Feng Xiu. I am a disciple of the divine wind.”

“My name is...Mara.”

She looked up at Feng and he took in her form. “Tell me about yourself, Mara.”

“I am not sure I want to say,” she turned to look out to the sea.

“I understand if you don’t wish to talk.”

Mara turned her gaze back to Feng, realizing for the first time someone really wanted to know her and not just what pleasures she could bring.

“I was sold into slavery at an early age after my mother died. She was a Tian-Shu geisha who studied at the Petal Seminary in Zeibo. My father was a half-elf privateer whom I never knew. Through the years, I grew in reputation and my last master arranged for me to be a concubine for the Hurricane King, a fate no sane woman would wish for. I have heard the tales of Kerdak Bonefist’s cruelty, so I chose to flee.”

As she spoke, she reached up to brush her hair from her face, and her shackles rattled. Feng gently placed a hand on her shoulder, and turned to go below decks. He returned a short while later with a leather case filled with metal rods and other strange tools.

“With your permission,” Feng held out his hand and she held out hers. With her fingers in his palm, he gently took a slender pick and inserted it into the lock of the manacle. Within moments he had her wrist free of the cuff. He then went to work on the other shackle until her bonds lay on the ship’s floor. With a mild look of displeasure, he hurled the manacles over the side, and then stood, taking her hand once more and raising her up with him.

“There is much fear in this world, but one can learn to control it even if they know terrible things are to come.”

Mara searched her rescuer’s eyes, seeing only honor in his motives. Unaccustomed to such kindness, she could only reply with an uncomfortable bow. He smiled at her, and set about the task of sailing his ship.



The wind carried them towards Shenchu Bay, and Feng continued to ask Mara about her life. She grew to like her rescuer. As she spoke, he listened closely, learning what he could. The more he listened, the more he saw the potential in her as something more. She was an untamed soul, a vessel into which knowledge and skill could be passed. He watched her eyes dart about at the call of a sea bird or

the crash of a wave. *She is jumpy*, he thought, *but also very quick*.

Mara asked Feng questions about his past, as well. Where he had come from? Why was he in the lawless Shackles? He deftly dodged her questions, and for a moment she wondered if her trust in him was misplaced until she saw the pain in his eyes. In a small way, she felt a bit of unfairness because she had revealed much about herself and he had said relatively little. But she could sense there was something underlying his evasiveness: *shame*. Something he had once done that still haunted him.

"It is better not to live in the past," he answered, standing suddenly. His eyes looked to the starboard horizon.

Mara rose to see what had so swiftly taken his attention, but could see nothing. Feng closed his eyes for a moment, tilting his head towards the cloudless sky. His eyes snapped open again as he reached into his robes and pulled out an ornate spyglass. He trained the device on the horizon then drew in a deep breath.

"Prepare yourself, Mara. We are about to have guests." Feng pivoted and strode calmly to the ship's cabin.

Her hands clasped the gunwales as she scanned the horizon, and finally she saw it, a small black smudge that could only be an approaching ship.

"We cannot outrun them. Do you know how to use this?" Feng held up a small hook-bladed weapon. She shook her head, but he handed her the blade anyway as he stalked past her, staring out to sea. "We must face them. I will not let them take my ship."

The shadow on the horizon drew closer, and she could make out the details of the pursuing craft. The hull was painted black, and the massive mainsail was decorated with the image of a tiger ready to pounce. The vessel gained on them, and Mara backed away from the starboard deck to press her back against the cabin. Fear tightened her gut and made her blood run cold, but as she watched Feng rush about his junk, securing the rudder and setting lines, she noticed he was calm, even pausing to cast a confident smile at her. She felt a sense of peace and crouched low, waiting.

As the black ship drew alongside them, Feng stood motionless on the deck. He gripped a short staff in one hand while he held the other in front of his chest, two fingers extended towards the raiders. Mara noticed they were Tian men in loose, dingy blouses tied with blood red sashes. As they drew close, timbers groaned as the hulls collided, and in an instant the marauders were spilling onto Feng's ship like swarming insects.

They charged him, swords drawn. Feng stood his ground, his torso twisting and bending as he avoided each thrust and slash. One of his attackers overextended and Feng struck with his staff, sending the man reeling past. She watched, awestruck, as he deftly parried their attacks. He struck with staff and fist, disarming some, sending others flying overboard. At one point in the fray he was encircled by five of the attackers. Feng spun and twisted in the midst of them, bending backwards as blades lunged over him, piercing only air where his heart once was. His counter-attacks were swift and precise, and no movement was wasted.

Soon the deck was strewn with pirates, many of them rolling about in obvious pain, while others were completely unconscious. Feng's chest heaved as he stood

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straight, his foes vanquished. He lowered his weapon and surveyed his defeated attackers. A stealthy Tian raider emerged from the shadows and made his way behind Feng with his dagger poised to strike.

Seeing the threat, Mara sprung into action. She raced towards the pirate and leapt upon his back, wrapping her strong legs around him. He let out a shriek as she clawed at his eyes. The raider frantically twisted, trying to buck his assailant, but she held on tenaciously, her black hair flying about wildly. Feng spun around and struck the man in the chest. The man's legs wobbled and he went crashing down with Mara on top of him. She then stood up, unsure what to do.

"Well now, aren't you the fierce tigress?" Feng laughed, then bowed to her.

Mara knew the gesture honored her and returned a bow in gratitude of his recognition. Nodding his approval, Feng turned to their defeated adversaries. Mara gave the pirate below her one last kick and smirked.



Feng tied each of the red-sashed raiders to their ship's masts, and then went aft to their rudder. He gazed at the sky and closed his eyes. All the while, the raiders shouted curses and insults at him.

Feng opened his eyes and set the mainsail to catch the wind. He leapt from the gunwales of their black corsair, leaving the pirates' fates to the winds. Their curses turned to pleas as they faded out of hearing, but Feng ignored them and maneuvered his ship away, making for his island home.

The next morning, Feng piloted his ship into the crystal waters of a cove. Setting anchor, he lowered a dinghy and rowed Mara and himself ashore. He watched as she stepped onto powdery white sand and then got out to drag the small boat beyond the beach. He then guided Mara up a path that went through thick foliage to a small wooden house.

They both stepped out of their shoes as they went inside. Mara looked about, taking in her surroundings. The home was austere, with a sleeping mat against one wall, a low table flanked by sitting cushions, and a small hearth. The only object that she didn't recognize was a wooden post, about as tall as a man, with several short poles protruding from it in various directions.

"What is that?" she asked.

"I use it for my training. For now, let us sit, and have some tea."

Feng retrieved a small flat box with a slatted lid from a cupboard and placed it on the low table. He motioned for Mara to sit as he went to the hearth and lit a fire. Outside he drew some water into an iron kettle, and set it over the flame. He then produced a pair of clay teapots from his cupboard. He placed the smaller of the two on the box and the other on the table beside it. Taking a glass jar and a bamboo scoop from the cabinet, he carefully measured out some tea leaves, placing them gently in the smaller pot. Satisfied, he placed a pair of tiny porcelain cups on the table, one in front of her, and the other on the opposite side. Sitting across from her, he placed his hands flat on the table.

"Now, we must wait for the water," he said matter-of-factly.

Mara's stomach rumbled. "Can we at least eat something while we wait?" she

pleaded.

Feng closed his eyes, not moving. "Please, Mara, you must be patient. The tea will settle your stomach. Let us listen for the water."

Heaving a sigh, she did as she was told. The wind and the rustling of trees blew through the house and Mara's stomach roared.

Feng took the kettle from the fire and peered inside. Nodding to himself he slowly poured the water into the larger teapot.

"Feng, why do you need two pots?" she asked.

"Shhh... Patience, Mara," was his only reply.

Feng slowly lifted the kettle as he poured, the stream of water grew taller and yet he never missed the small opening of the teapot. Once the larger pot was full, Feng wrapped a padded cloth around it, and again sat motionless in front of Mara. He gestured to her. "If you please, pour the water into the tea."

She hurried to carry out the task, sloshing water into the smaller teapot as well as all over the bamboo box and table. Feng sighed disappointedly as he took the teapot from her.

"Slowly, Mara, like this." He gently poured the steaming water directly into the small clay pot. Almost instantly the soothing aroma filled her senses and her belly growled again. Feng lifted the smaller tea pot and poured the liquid into each of the cups, but before Mara could take hers, Feng grabbed it up and poured it over the outside of his small teapot. The brew splashed onto the box and ran down the sides of the little kettle.

"What are you doing?" she snapped, incredulous.

"Mara, there is a reason for everything. This is to warm the cup, and cure the clay of my pot." He repeated the ritual twice more, then on the third pouring, he placed her cup on a small bamboo holder and handed it across the table to her. She took it, gulping the tea down in one large swallow. Feng slowly sipped from his own cup and then shook his head in exasperation.



Deep screams echoed against the stone walls of Lucrehold as a man clad from head to toe in black strode purposefully through its hallways. The screams choked to an end as he stepped into the audience chamber to stand before the court of the Hurricane King, his hands clasped behind his back. Only his eyes were revealed above his mask, and they darted about the room, assessing the scene before him.

On the floor was something barely recognizable as the skinned corpse of a large man. The ghastly deed had been done before all in the hall. The Hurricane King stood above the corpse, smiling.

"Take it to the tanners immediately," he said wiping his knife on his apron. "I like my collection of Mwangi skins to be crafted with care, ye know, but their dark hides require quick work." He then nodded to a boy who brought a basin of water and proceeded to wash the blood off his hands. "Send in Captain Desmond," he sneered.

The outer doors opened and a poorly groomed man was escorted in.

"Captain Desmond, I thank you for offering up your man, Kitombe. His

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incompetence will never stain our affairs again. I am also sorry to say that I have confiscated your ship to pay for Master Lo's costs in getting my prize back."

"I assure you this isn't necessary, my liege," groveled Desmond, nervously wringing his salt-stained hat in his gnarled fingers. "My men'll find the lass, there be no need to bring in the likes of this one." Desmond pointed towards the black clothed man.

The Hurricane King glared at the pirate. "Do not presume I hold any value in yer words, ye sniveling worm. Master Lo's skills in such matters are legendary, and unless ye rather join yer incompetent friend and become one of my wall decorations, I would suggest that ye be happy that I made an arrangement that didn't require me to hang *yer hide* next to yer man."

Captain Desmond swallowed hard as a chill ran down his spine. "Yes, thank you."

The Hurricane King twirled the knife and smiled. "It's been weeks, and ye haven't turned up hide nor hair of her, but Lo will find my little lost prize, and bring her back to me unharmed and pure. Now, leave us."

The Hurricane King walked over to a pot of copper and grabbed a fistful. He then threw it at Desmond while his back was turned, pelting him in the head. "Take that for yer drinks, ye worthless drunk."

Desmond bowed and picked up what coins he could find, and then put his head down in deference to the Hurricane King, casting a hateful look towards the black-clad masked man, who remained still as a statue. The guards escorted Desmond out and the doors closed.

The Hurricane King nodded and a metal case was set at the ninja's feet. The man in black turned to his second and nodded. His partner opened the case to see a small sash lying inside. The man opened the bag revealing several cut diamonds. The two nodded and the man closed the case and left. The shrouded silhouette bowed and walked to the side door of the court, closing it softly.

The money was a large bounty; far more than what Desmond's ship was worth, but it was the meaning behind the overpayment that the assassin respected. Regardless, it wasn't what truly motivated him. The man was more intrigued that a slip of a girl could escape from any of Bonefist's men, even the likes of one so obviously inept as Desmond. Such a quarry was a worthy challenge, and it had been some time since he had felt any true test of his skills.

Unknown to the Hurricane King, Master Lo was none other than Lo Shei Wen, one of the elected Wise Council of Three. Ruthless and devious, he enjoyed the sport of being a relentless tracker, one who secretly upheld the slaver's claim that no slave could ever escape their bondage.

Lo took to his task with all haste and his contacts scoured the streets of Port Peril, uncovering bits of information from the urchins and castoffs that preyed on the hapless and unwary in the marketplace. With the coin, Lo learned almost everything that had transpired in Port Peril over the past month. He discovered quickly that the girl had had the aid of a Tian stranger, and through other sightings at the docks he learned about the man's distinctive red junk. By its description alone, the bounty hunter knew where to go. Lo then set off in his ship, the *Serpent's Tongue*, for the familiar waters of Shenchu Bay. He stood at the bow watching the

waves, and as he stared towards the setting sun, he relished the prospect of facing a worthy adversary.



Feng played softly on his shamisen as Mara practiced calligraphy. She swept the brush on the parchment in long, slow strokes, applying pressure at the right moments to capture the true essence of each character she scribed. Feng glanced at her, nodding as each symbol took form on the blank surface. As he watched, a breeze blew across the floor, ruffling the corner of Mara's parchment. Feng closed his eyes and listened.

"Teach me," Mara whispered with the wind. "I no longer want to be afraid."

Feng stood with purpose and held out his hand. "It will take time. Are you sure you don't want to go anywhere else?"

Mara didn't hesitate to answer. "There is nowhere else."

Feng nodded with a reassuring smile. "You have learned your first lesson on your own Mara. It is impressive. And to answer your question, yes, I will teach you."

Mara smiled and a glimmer of hope radiated from her being.

"But I must warn you Mara, someone will come for you as they always have. If you do not feel ready when they come, will you have the courage to face them anyway?"

Mara gently placed her brush on the floor and stood in one fluid motion. Straightening the wrinkles from her robe, she nodded solemnly. "I will never run again."

"Then we must begin immediately, I fear the winds tell me there isn't much time."



Mara awoke to find Feng already kneeling at the low table, the trappings of the tea ceremony laid out before him. She stretched languidly as she rose from her mat, then padded to the table and knelt opposite him. Without a word, she performed the ceremony, deftly pouring the water into each pot, curing the clay and dispensing the brew precisely into the tiny cups. Feng was impressed with how quickly her patience and her grace had improved. When she finished, he smiled approvingly at her and bowed his head slightly before sipping the tea she had placed before him.

"You are learning well, Mara. Now, let us see to breakfast."

She remained silent as they ate, glancing at her master between bites as she turned the questions over in her head, trying to find the proper way to ask. She needed to know more about her master, but Feng still remained a mystery to her.

Feng finished his meal and stood to clear the table. Mara was still poking about her bowl, plucking the last morsels of rice from it when he took it from her, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she hadn't yet finished.

"Today you must practice your calligraphy," he stated, drawing a disappointed

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sigh from her. He raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you disapprove?”

“It is so tedious. Haven’t I learned all of the characters?”

“Indeed you have, but your strokes lack finesse, and need refinement.” He placed the brushes and parchments in front of her and went to pick up his battered shamisen, the only possession that remained from his time in the Dragon Empires. As he plucked at the strings to tune the instrument, he looked at her. “Start. All characters, from the beginning.”

Her shoulders heaved with an exasperated sigh as she dipped the brush and set to work.

Several minutes later she set the brush down and sat back, her task complete. “I am finished,” she announced.

Without looking up from his playing, Feng nodded. “Again.”

She stared at him in disbelief until he stopped playing and met her gaze. With a quick bow of her head, she did as she was instructed. Feng went back to playing a haunted melody from a mournful ballad.

When Mara finished the characters for the third time, Feng finally returned his shamisen to its stand and strode over to study her handiwork. As he flipped through the parchments, Mara rubbed her wrists, sore from the repetitive brush strokes she had spent so long performing.

“These are better than yesterday. Good. Now, we must meet the wooden man.”

He walked to the many-poled contraption in the corner of the room. Clenching his fists he breathed deeply as he drew them up to his sides to rest even with his chest. Releasing his breath he extended his arms forward, opening his fists to point his first two fingers out while his palms faced the central post of the training device. With sudden quickness, his arms sprang to life, snaking between the wooden poles, his hand striking a simulated head, neck, and chest. As his hands and arms wove through the poles, Feng’s feet lashed out to strike the beam that angled out from the lower half of the central post. Gaining speed, Feng’s kicks struck home against the post with increasing frequency, his feet and hands now beating the rhythm of a graceful dance.

Mara watched intently, trying to massage her aching wrists. She was in awe of his form, the sweat beading on his brow as he quickened his pace further. She saw how focused he was, almost meditative as he dealt blow after blow to the wooden man. Then, as quickly as he had begun, he stopped; stepping his feet together, pulling his fists back against his sides and taking a final deep breath. He gave a short bow to the training dummy, and then turned to her.

“Begin,” he told her matter-of-factly, and he stepped aside to allow her to take his place before the wooden man.

Drawing her fists to her side, she inhaled deeply then began pummeling the wooden poles that extended out. As she went through the routine, her mind drifted to the questions she longed to ask Feng. Immediately losing focus, her blows missed every mark.

“Stop,” Feng ordered. “That is wrong. Like this.” He stepped towards the pole and demonstrated the form he expected her to execute. She tried to follow the maneuvers as he performed them, but her mind would not let go of the questions.

Mara took her place in front of the dummy and attempted to keep the form he

had shown her. Feng crossed his arms in front of him as he watched her. When she finished, he shook his head. "Again."

That evening, Mara attempted to perform the tea ceremony for Feng. Her forearms and wrists were bruised from hours of striking the unforgiving wood. She trembled with every pouring of the water, and she spilled on the table. She continued on through the ceremony, ashamed of every drip. She finally offered the cup to her master as etiquette dictated, her hand shaking as tea sloshed over the brim and splattered the bamboo holder.

Feng took the cup gingerly from her and sipped.

The silence grew heavy, weighing on Mara as she sat across from him. Finally, she let the words come out.

"I have come to understand that fate has brought us together. I must understand this, know how it came to be. Of all the people in this world to have found me in the market that day, it was you. And yet, you are so far from home and so alone here in the Shackles. What has brought you here, Feng?" Mara reached across the table to touch his hand, but Feng quickly stood and turned away from her.

"Now is not the time for questions, Mara. Looking into the past will not help you now." He breathed deeply and turned his head to speak over his shoulder. "Get some rest. Tomorrow will be difficult."



Lo Shei Wen stood at the bow of his ship, his hands clasped behind his back as his eyes scanned the shoreline ahead. A warm breeze blew off the crystal blue water and filled the crimson sails of his junk. Although the wind was strong enough to whip at his hair and tug his silk robe, it failed to conceal the sounds of someone approaching him from behind.

"You stomp about like a troll," he chided, keeping his eyes forward as a young man came to stand next to him.

"I wasn't even trying," the boy responded. "Besides, I do not need to be stealthy just to have a word with my father, do I?"

Lo turned to regard the boy and the hint of a smile played across his lips. "No, I suppose you do not." He reached up to tousle the boy's hair and gave his shoulder a squeeze before returning his hand to its place at the small of his back. His eyes returned to searching the tree-lined shores of Shenchu Bay. "Still, the hunter must always be stealthy, Lo Xiao; ever mindful of his surroundings in the event his prey appears."

"As well to the other hunters around him, so as not to have his quarry stolen," the boy intoned.

"Ah, so you do listen to what I teach you." Lo turned to his son. "You believe there are others tracking down the Hurricane King's lost prize?"

"There are a few men in his court that would try to steal your prey. They had greed in their eyes when they saw how diamonds he tossed at you."

Lo's expression betrayed his surprise.

"Yes, Father. I was there. My skills are better than you think." The boy puffed with pride. "Besides, I didn't think it wise to let you go before the Hurricane King

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alone. The man is dangerous, and crazy. I saw what he did to that man.”

Lo pointed a finger at his son. “You were not meant to be there! I told you to stay on the ship. What if you had been caught?”

“I wasn’t,” his son shrugged.

“You were lucky. Return to your quarters and meditate on your carelessness.” He turned his back on his son, dismissing him.

“I am not a child,” Lo Xiao argued, but when no response came from his father, he strode off, dejected.

Lo Shei Wen took a deep breath to calm himself. His thoughts went, as they always did, to her. She had died bringing the boy into this world, her last gift to him. Perhaps he was too overprotective, but he couldn’t bear to lose his last link to her. Sadness threatened to overtake him, so he focused his mind on the task at hand. His gaze returned to the shore, searching the inlets and coves for the ship that escaped Port Peril.



Mara performed the tea ceremony flawlessly for Feng. He sipped the brew in quiet contemplation, and then looked at her directly as he set the empty cup down. “The wind has spoken this morning, Mara. Your technique is much improved, but there is much I would still show you. I fear we have little time. There will be no calligraphy today.”

She rose to clear away the tea set. Feng was already at the wooden man when she had finished. As his arms entwined around the poles of the training dummy, they writhed like serpents. His fist flattened, and he struck the area of the central post that represented a man’s throat.

“What was that?” she asked, not recognizing the technique.

“This is the Adder’s Strike.” Feng continued his routine for a moment then stopped to regard Mara intently. “This blow will steal the wind from an enemy.”

“It will kill?” Mara was incredulous.

Feng nodded grimly. “Come, you try it.”

Mara stepped to the wooden man and began her exercise, weaving her arms through the poles to strike again and again at the central post. Briefly hesitating, she flattened her fist and struck with her fingertips. The blow sent pain through her fingers and up her arm.

“You must focus your energy through the attack, strengthening your fingers,” Feng instructed. “Try again.”

Mara resumed her routine, her feet landing blows as much as her fists while she prepared to deliver the new technique. She struck again at the neck of the training dummy; the pain in her hand hurt, but wasn’t as severe.”

“Better,” Feng remarked.

She practiced for some time before Feng finally told her to stop. They sat down at the low table to bowls of rice and eel soup. She ate greedily, restoring her energy until finally noticing that Feng had hardly touched his food.

“What is wrong?”

“Your technique is improving every day, and I am impressed with your

poise and grace. You are not the same girl that came crashing into my life at the marketplace.”

She beamed with pride, but something in his eyes made her realize he had more to say.

“You have asked me time and again about where I come from, why I hide from the world in this tiny house so far from my true home.” Feng lowered his head, his voice barely above a whisper as he continued. “I owe you the truth, Mara.”

She folded her hands in her lap and did not interrupt as Feng continued.

“Long ago, I booked passage on a passenger transport bound from Tian Xia, bearing immigrants from our home to the great city of Absalom. Several days out to sea in the Obari Ocean, slavers attacked. They commandeered the ship, taking our money, our jewelry, everything we owned, and made for Katapesh. The people aboard that ship knew they were destined for a cruel life of slavery, or worse, and decided to fight back. The men planned a mutiny, ready to risk their lives to keep their loved ones from a horrible fate.”

“I saw it as folly. I was afraid and tried to convince them not to do it. I had no desire to lose my life for anything, so in my cowardice I warned the marauder captain of the impending revolt. The raiders soundly defeated the mutineers and killed the men ruthlessly. The next morning, as they dumped the bodies overboard, the captain announced that for their insolence, the women and children would join their men at the bottom of the sea. His men carried out the brutal deed as he made me watch from his side. For my bravery, he told me, I would be spared and made part of his crew.”

“I buried my shame in cruelties of my own, and my infamy grew. I soon earned my own ship and was given command of the very vessel that had sealed my fate. Haunted by the accusing eyes of those women and children, I became more and more ruthless. I found my way to the Shackles, where I could freely ply my trade. At the height of my notoriety I was elected to the Wise Council of Three, free-captains that rule over Shenchu Bay. I grew ever more powerful, rich off the sadness of others.”

He sighed deeply. “And then the wind spoke to me.”

“My shame, locked away for all those years, no longer could be ignored. I resigned my position, much to the glee of those who plotted to take it from me, and went into exile. I focused inward, perfecting my body as I worked to purify my soul. I have been here since, hoping in some way to make amends for what I have done.”

She gently reached across the table to take his hand, and this time he did not pull away from her touch.

“You have redeemed me, Mara.”

He looked up at her with tears in his eyes, and she nodded.



The *Serpent's Tongue* swept into the small cove, weighing anchor next to Feng's junk. Lo Shei Wen rowed ashore alone. Instead of his usual garb, he was dressed in fine silks imported from Tian Xia. His boat ran aground and he stepped

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out onto the fine sand of the beach and strode with purpose up the narrow path to the small house where he was sure his quarry waited. Every one of his senses was keenly aware of his surroundings as he drew nearer to the cottage. Lo never entered the lair of his prey unprepared for confrontation.

He knocked on the door.

"You may enter," a voice spoke to him.

He slid open the door to find *her* kneeling at a low table, a tea box, pots and cups already placed to welcome him. A kettle sat over a small fire in the hearth.

It was not what he had expected.

"Please, won't you join me?" the girl asked, motioning to the cushion opposite her.

Never taking his eyes from her, he knelt at the table.

She does not fear me, he thought, as he watched her gracefully stand to retrieve the kettle from the fire and begin the ceremony. The notion his victim could sit so close and neither strike out or flee in terror unsettled him. She poured the tea into the pot, and he remained silent throughout the steeping of the leaves. Lo's mind raced desperately to remember the intricacies of the ceremony he hadn't partaken in for years. Her eyes met his, and he did his best to hide his discomfort. Finally, she offered his cup to him on its bamboo holder, and he reached out to accept it. His hand betrayed the subtlest of tremors, and he fought to calm himself. *She is just a girl; a slave on the run from her master.*

"You know why I am here," he intoned, the statement not a question. He took the bamboo holder and sat it on the table in front of him.

"I do," she replied matter-of-factly between delicate sips of her tea.

"Yet, you do not flee." Lo bent to take his first sip from the proffered tea, as he remembered custom dictated. His hand once again betrayed him; this time he dropped his cup, spilling tea on his silken robe as the porcelain clattered to the floor. Stunned, Lo bowed his head. "Forgive me!" he said, averting his eyes as he was filled with a sudden rush of shame. He felt something else too, something far worse than shame: *uncertainty*.

Mara calmly placed her tea on the table and came around to pick up the shards of the broken cup. Once the mess had been cleaned, she gingerly poured another serving and gave it to her guest.

"I am no slave. Your quarry is no longer here."

"You belong to the Hurricane King, and I mean to take you to him."

Mara stood and looked down at Lo. "I belong to no one. I am free, as the wind. You may think you capture the wind in your sails, but it comes and goes as it pleases. The wind answers to no one, but grants its presence as a gift, if it sees fit. You know this, captain."

Taking the final sip from his drink, Lo stood as well. Mara scrutinized his movement, her eyes locked on his as he rose.

"I was sent here to capture a slave girl. I see now that she is not here. You have been most gracious. Calm waters to you, my lady," he said, offering her a small bow.

"And to you," she replied, watching him closely as he turned to leave.

Lo returned to his ship. Moments later, Mara joined Feng on the beach as they

watched the frigate slip out of the small inlet and back out to sea.

“He will return,” Feng stated.

“I know,” she turned and then strode gracefully back up the path.



That night aboard the *Serpent's Tongue*, Lo Shei Wen prepared himself for the hunt. He tightly secured his shin guards and straightened to find his son, Lo Xiao, standing in the doorway to his cabin.

“I want to go with you.”

“This is not your hunt, my son. I need you to stay back and protect the ship.”

Lo wrapped a wide cloth tenugui around his waist to secure the loose black pants he wore. Pulling his karuta armor over his scarred torso, he turned to regard the boy. “Help me with this, Xiao.”

The younger Lo did as he was asked. He tightened the straps of the lightly plated chainmail armor, checked the fit and stepped back. “The ship doesn’t need my protection. I am up to the challenge, Father. Please, let me hunt with you.”

The assassin pulled a black tunic over his armor and then took another tenugui and placed it over the lower half of his face. He turned his steely gaze to his son and spoke, his voice muffled through the mask that hid the rest of his features.

“My answer is no, little man. I promise you the chance to hunt when we face a more formidable opponent.” Lo knew the girl waiting for him on the island would be no easy prey, and also sensed she was not alone. He did not want to convey his uncertainty to his son. He took up his tanto and concealed the short dagger in his belt. He strode past his son and onto the deck of his ship and turned back one last time. “I will be back soon enough, and I promise we will hunt together next time.”

Lo climbed aboard the small dinghy suspended against the port hull and lowered the craft silently into the water. Lo Xiao stalked to the gunwales to watch his father row towards the shore; the wake barely disturbed the moonlight that reflected off the still waters of the cove.

The crew set about moving the ship to the far side of the island as they had been ordered. As the vessel cut through the water, Lo’s assassins donned their own gear in preparation for their assignment to attack the cottage from the landward side of the island.

As soon as the ship was in position, the killers set off in a small boat of their own. Lo Xiao rushed to his quarters and hastily dressed in his own garb of loose-fitting black shozoku. The boy then donned his mask, and slinked off the ship’s bow, determined to prove himself to his father.



Lo silently rowed his landing craft ashore and crept through the dense jungle to the small house where just hours earlier he had been greeted as an honored guest. As he made his way up the path to the cottage, a lone figure stood still in the moonlight.

“There is nothing here for you, Lo Shei Wen.”

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The voice stopped the assassin in his tracks as a flood of memories returned. *No*, he thought, *it cannot be him. He abandoned us so long ago.*

A thousand images flashed in his mind as Lo struggled to deal with the realization that his old friend stood in the way of his quarry.

“Master Feng. It has been a long time since you turned your back on the Wise Council of Three. Your replacement left much to be desired.” Lo slowly stepped closer to the cottage.

“That life is behind me now, Lo. There is no honor in what we did,” Feng stood still, unmoving. “As I said, you will not find what you seek here.”

“There is still quite a large bounty for your head, Feng,” hissed Lo. “Just give me the girl and I will forget I ever saw you. You can remain a ghost, and no one need know you cower here in a hovel”

“The girl is not mine to give.”

“My men are coming for her as we speak.” Lo rose up on the balls of his feet, his hand slipping to the shuriken concealed in his sash.

Feng smiled and assumed a defensive posture. “Let them try.”

Lo attacked with a sudden fury, his hand darting with unnatural quickness to let fly a trio of the tiny star-shaped blades. As he threw, he ran towards Feng, drawing the blade of his tanto.

With a supple fluidity Feng twisted to avoid the hail of shuriken then focused on the ninja bearing down on him. As the tanto blade screamed towards his neck, he struck out at Lo’s forearm, deflecting the slash. Lo was relentless, thrusting and slicing with the dagger, but Feng’s arms snaked to redirect each attack. Lo overextended one of his thrusts and Feng saw the opening and lashed out with his foot, connecting with Lo’s abdomen and sending the assassin flailing backwards.

Lo regained his footing and switched stances, turning the knife to point the blade downward from his hand. “You have improved, old friend.” He lurched forward, kicking at the fine powder of the beach sand and sending it towards the eyes of his opponent.

Turning his head away from the spray of sand, Feng’s arm seemed to take on a life of its own, flashing out to block the incoming blow. Feng spun into a crouch, crossing his legs and pivoted backwards, then sprung up on the other side of Lo to deliver a series of lightning strikes at the head and neck of his adversary. The flurry sent the ninja staggering backwards.

Outraged, Lo reached into his sash and retrieved a small orb, throwing it at his feet. A thick cloud of oily smoke erupted, and he vanished.



Mara crouched silently in the center of the house’s main room, every muscle tensed as she took in her surroundings. She could hear Feng talking to Lo outside the house.

The creak of a floorboard was her only warning as her attackers leapt forward. They came at her from all sides, emerging from the shadows with nets and ropes to subdue her. She sprung into action, stepping in close to her first assailant. Her arms wove a furious pattern as she first knocked the rope from his hands and then

grappled his forearm. The man struggled to free himself but could not break away before she had snapped his arm at an unnatural angle. He gave a quick scream as the bone tore through the skin, but went silent when her fist struck at his temple, crumpling him to the ground.

Pivoting, she bent at the waist to dodge the spinning, weighted chain of a kusarigama. Following through, she came up to stand side by side with the weapon's wielder. With one arm she locked the hand of her foe so he could not bring the deadly sickle blade of his weapon back to bear on her, and with the other hand she struck his chest in a rapid flurry. As he tried to defend against her blows, she struck out with her foot, connecting with the side of his knee and collapsing his leg with a sickening crunch of splintered bone. The hunter fell to the floor in agony, flailing wildly with his weapon and drawing a slash across Mara's thigh. A second kick to the back of his neck made sure he wouldn't wound her again.

Whirling around to face her final foe, she gracefully flipped backwards to avoid the net he tried to throw over her. The restraint fell uselessly to the floor as she came to her feet and rushed headlong at her would-be kidnapper. Her arms danced like twin serpents, knocking aside his punches. She struck his chest with both palms and sent him crashing into the wall of the cottage, then strode forward and shattered his jaw, sending shards of teeth clattering to the floor. As he slumped to the ground, she looked around the room, poised for any further attack as the sounds of fighting outside filled the night air.



Feng crouched low in a defensive stance and scanned the shadows for his foe. His head spun around to the sound of something crashing through the thick undergrowth around the path, but he saw nothing but the play of shadows in the vegetation that waved gently in the night breeze. Then suddenly, he sensed movement behind him and spun around to face his assailant.

There was no one there.

Then he felt it.

At first it was the hot sticky sensation of blood running down his arm, then a burning in his shoulder. He clasped his hand to the wound, and his fingers came back wet with blood shining black in the moonlight. The stricken arm went numb, and Feng looked disbelievingly at Lo as he stepped out of the darkness. The numbness spread, and Feng staggered to his knees. He struggled to stand, but his legs could not find purchase.

Lo knelt before him, wiping the blade of his dagger. "Purple worm venom. It will do you no good to struggle." Lo leaned in close and wrapped his arm around Feng's shoulders. "You say there is no honor in what we did. I am sorry, my old friend. Here is your honor."

Feng barely felt the knife pierce his side and plunge deep into his innards. He didn't feel anything at all as he watched the slow spread of black in the sand beneath him.

Lo stood and sheathed his tanto, and stalked off towards the house.

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She saw him climb through the window and come to a crouch in the shadows. The moonlight glinted off metal as he drew a pair of forked sai. “You killed them all,” he said, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

He’s just a boy. The thought had barely flickered through her mind before he was upon her, stabbing at her with his blades. She parried most of the blows, but some of the thrusts found their marks, and soon she was bleeding.

She countered with an assault of her own, her fists and feet pummeling him and driving him back. Put off balance by her assault, he stumbled backwards over the low table, and barely managed to keep from spilling to the floor. She closed in on him and opened her fist, flattening her fingers, forming her hand into a rigid blade, and struck.

The boy’s weapons clattered to the ground as he clenched his hands to his throat, gasping for air. His eyes grew wide over his black mask. “Father?” he choked, and then toppled to the floor.



“No!” Lo Shei Wen stared in horror as his son fell. His chest heaved at the memory of his wife smiling proudly at her womb.

Mara spun about to face him, her arms snapping up into a protective form.

In a blind rage, Lo lashed out at her, driving her back with blow after blow. Tears welled up in his eyes and blurred his vision, but still he battered her. He no longer cared about returning this girl to the Hurricane King. The duty of recovering a betrothed concubine meant nothing. He only wanted to destroy her, to avenge his son. His hatred consumed him as his fists buffeted her.

Mara fought back as hard as she could, but still he struck her again and again. Fear swelled in her as she realized she was defeated. Nothing she had done prepared her for such a brutal onslaught.

And then, it came to her.

Letting go of her fear, she stopped fighting back. She let herself become supple and she bent away from Lo’s furious attack. She spun away from him as his wild momentum carried him forward until she saw the wooden man standing just behind him. Mara held her ground as Lo delivered a beating on her she could barely fend off, all the while waiting for an opening that allowed one good strike.

His foot snapped out into her shin as his palm shot forward to strike her face. As her eye began to swell shut, he connected with another brutal punch and her nose immediately began gushing blood. Lo spun and backhanded her in the mouth, splitting her lip. When she thought she couldn’t take anything more, his boot landed a blow to her lower abdomen that made her want to pass out.

Then it happened. His rage had delivered a series of grievous wounds to her, but Mara saw her moment.

With a half breath she thrust her hand out and crushed Lo’s windpipe.

The shock and pure tenacity of her thrust sent him off his feet and reeling backwards. His momentum sent him crashing into the training dummy as one of

the wooden arms speared his back and crushed his spine. Lo couldn't feel his arms or legs as he collapsed, gurgling blood at her feet. The dummy fell over with him to the floor. His body twitched uncontrollably for a few seconds until it moved no more.

She saw the tears spill from Lo's eyes until finally he peered off into nothingness. Wincing, Mara stumbled from the house and out into the night.



She found him lying in the sand on the beach. She raced to his side and fell to her knees, screaming his name. His eyes blinked slowly and his breathing came in ragged gasps. He looked to her and tried to lift a blood-stained hand but was unable to muster the strength. Mara grabbed his hand and held it between hers.

His eyes grew calm.

Mara could tell he wanted to speak but all he could manage was an inaudible whisper. She was horrified at the dark stain pooling beneath him and his ghastly pallor in the moonlight. His breathing became even shallower as tears spilled from her eyes and joined his blood in the sand.

He deserved more than this.

Mara tried to remember the song he had played on his shamisen the day he insisted she practice her calligraphy. As Feng's breathing became more labored, she remembered the brush strokes to the words and began to sing him the mournful ballad:

You have changed, oh little one.

You can walk now in the sun.

The wind has died and the storm is gone.

The night was long but now it's done.

Calm waters are all that remain.

You and I will never be the same.

A smile formed on Feng's lips as his eyes closed.

She clutched his hand with both of hers and wept openly as his life faded.

The moonlight shone down on the tranquil waters of the bay and Mara looked to the sky for answers. A cool breeze caressed her face, and she heard its whispers. She looked down at Feng and nodded, knowing what she had to do.

"I will rescue them. *All of them.*"

BANNER DAY

By Dawn Fischer



HE DULL ROAR of crashing waves stirred Banner's heart with a rhythm all too familiar. Its soothing sound had a way of distracting him while he toiled atop his small makeshift bamboo raft. Laboriously, he pulled up a cage from the shallow depths of the lagoon. Nearby, the ocean surged, pulling in and out over a smooth, sparkling-white beach, gently protected from the harsher surf by a ring of coral. The tiny man wrangled the struggling contents of his cage, dumping them into a sack. Too intent on his work, he failed to notice a fin rising up at the surface of the water between the coral peaks where the reef was most shallow. Quickly, the fin submerged out of eyesight as Banner looked back to check the lagoon's entrance.

Nothing there, Banner. Time to head back to the beach.

Shaking with exertion, the tiny man wiped his brow and wound the cinch on his sack tightly around his hand. Sighing with relief, he jumped in the water and pushed off from the raft, paddling towards the beach, sack in tow. A twinge of fear came over the man, and he looked about as if something was amiss. He turned to inspect the rim of the lagoon once more, but nothing was at its mouth. Relief switched to horror as a dorsal fin rose up on the surface *within* the lagoon, parting a huge breadth of water. Bone-chilling panic overcame the little man as

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he struggled to think.

Shark! So close! I'll never make it.

Banner treaded away from the beach towards the only retreat he knew within the lagoon. It was a group of volcanic rocks, resistant to waves, jutting out just above the surface. With a sharp glance behind, he set off as fast as he could towards them, pulling his prize crabs.

It's too far. I'll never make it.

The mighty fin closed the gap quickly as water hissed from its breakwater, growing louder each second. Between Banner's lunges and disjointed paddling with his sack, he listened to the sound of the immense fin spraying water, becoming too loud for him to recognize how far away it was.

This is it!

The fin slowly sunk beneath the surface as Banner reached the edge of the rocks. Any moment he would feel the terrible yank. In desperation, he put his hand up to a good rock to heave himself up—but he knew inside that it would never happen. The water around him swirled and swayed in unusual motion as two tons of death came up from underneath to swallow him whole. A seal sat upon the rock, sunning itself as Banner screamed out for his life. The animal was so startled that it barked back in surprise, aggressively charging towards Banner before diving off right behind the rising halfling. Too late it understood Banner's panic, as it fell right into jaws of razor sharp teeth. Banner winced, as the seal screeched a horrendous sound. Quivering, he headed out of the water, dragging his sack. All was silent, except for gurgles of bubbling blood, a fountain rising from the depths below. Hyperventilating, Banner sat down trying to take in longer, controlled breaths, careful to stay in the center of the shallow rock; his free hand ran over his face, rubbing off salt water tears.

The shark was gone. The soothing sounds of surf resumed as Banner's pounding heart evened out. Shocked to be alive, the halfling stood with his jute sack in hand. The small man howled with chuckles that turned quickly to tears and sobs. There was nothing more to say; it was certain to happen again. Sighing with his twitching sack, Banner began the arduous journey of traversing the outcrops safely back. It took him the better part of two hours to hop from rock to rock, angling towards the beach. As he traveled, he reflected upon his predicament. The waters were getting more infested with dangers. It was becoming nearly impossible to collect crabs and oysters. Not even the seals came around anymore. Sooner or later, he would end up like them too.

Banner's first foothold on the beach was a relief compared to all the jagged rocks, but smoke drifting from the fires of the village ahead left little to be thankful for; the human natives of this isle were a blight too. He hunched his shoulders in resignation as he trudged up the beach towards their cooking. A particularly brightly-painted and plumage-bedecked older man approached, gesturing and grunting at Banner's sack.

Just another kind of "shark," Banner reflected grimly.

He held up his jute sack of struggling crabs and winced as the tribal chief frowned and shook his head disapprovingly at the small catch. Banner smiled, hunching up his shoulders while trying to ignore the chief's scorn, but couldn't

help notice the freshly decapitated hand dangling from the tall human's neck. It was a halfling's hand—not a child's—and it hung from a bit of sinew cord around the chief's neck. The severed, blood-encrusted trinket reminded Banner just how savage his captors were. He swallowed his revulsion and nodded as the chief expressed his anger towards him. He paid close attention as the savage insinuated that Banner had been stealing food away for himself. He grabbed Banner's hand and held out the severed one around his neck, comparing the two with some morbid glee. Banner got the impression the chief was considering that a pair of hands would make a better ornament. The savage released Banner and walked away, looking back once with a devilish smile.

Keep it together, boy; each day you live is another day to escape.

Banner moved through the feasting natives, taking care to appear taller than his three-foot frame. In the corner of his eye he saw the villagers feasting on the tubers he had gathered just a few days before, soon to include fresh meat. Near the pots of steaming water, smoke drifted from pits covered with palm leaves. It meant one thing: the cannibals had made use of their last acquisition, a batch of helpless halfling slaves from the ship that wrecked on the coral shoals. Banner struggled to hide his feelings, taking shallow breaths to avoid the smell of his cooking brethren.

I can't show them any weakness. I can't let the smell get to me. If they see weakness, they'll add me to the pot, my prowess as a food gatherer be damned.

He closed his eyes in frustration as his blond head sagged.

Just when I thought I might get off this godforsaken rock, the ship I was hoping to steal passage on wrecks in a storm. I suppose it's for the best, as a Chelaxian slave ship is no place for a stray halfling. Curse these savages—both sets. There has to be another way. If I thought the gods listened, I'd pray.

Sighing, he made his way to his own camp and sat huddled next to his small hearth. Its dried seaweed fire had died during his brush with death and the detour it put him on. The pot was cold and the scallops and fish were oversaturated. He stirred it while shaking his head at the contents, but couldn't find his appetite.

As he sat feeling sorry for himself, a cheering from the far end of the camp interrupted his morose thoughts. A pair of savages carried an unconscious human. The man was fairly light of skin with torn clothing made of rich material. They dumped him in front of the chief along with a sack. Banner presumed it was the human's and was surprised to see it forgotten by the cannibals. The villagers cheered again, praising their storm goddess for delivering a new bounty.

An appropriate deity if you live on an island at the edges of the perpetual storm that surrounds the Eye of Abendego.

Banner listened as the pair excitedly narrated how they discovered the human trying to sneak into camp.

Fool, what was he thinking? Clearly he isn't a skilled huntsman, or he would have spotted those two sentries and their obvious perch atop the palms. I wonder who he is... Bah! Does it matter? He'll soon boil in a cook pot. If he's lucky, they'll keep him a week or so before they eat him, but he'll probably wind up in the hot hut and added to tonight's feast. Better him than me.

He shifted uncomfortably away from the natives to look at the contents of his

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meal, throwing more seaweed grass below the pot in preparation to restart his fire. As he mulled over the idea of eating it cold, Banner found himself glancing back at the forgotten bag. The exuberance of the natives stole his attention once more.

True to his prediction, they dragged the man off to the mud hut to “hang” in its steamy confines.

It looks like they're going to eat him tonight. Yep...damn. If only they'd allowed him to live a little longer. But, he's probably one of those slavers out of Chelax anyway...serves him right, too, for imprisoning my people and then having the stupidity to sail onto a coral reef where cannibals could snatch them up.

Banner scowled, but then saw the man's bag still lying neglected.

Now what is in there, I wonder?

He dropped his crude ladle into the stew pot.

I suppose I should try to find out. Hate to let some natives get it...not sure what good it will do. Didn't help him any. He's not long for this world. I hope he's made peace with his gods...

The chief emerged from the mud hut accompanied by his bodyguards. They joined in the dancing around the central fires. A strong rhythm of hands beating on bamboo drums started up just outside and a circle of dancers formed. Banner glanced around. No one was paying attention to him. In a flash, he scampered as silently as he dared towards the bag, while the smoke fires obscured his movements. He held his breath to prevent a chance whiff of the fumes that would lead to a cough.

Banner grabbed the unfortunate man's sack, and then scuttled behind the rear huts, far from the celebration. There, hidden between brush and hut, he opened the sack and rummaged inside. A holy symbol made his eyebrows rise as he pulled it out; it was circular with an inset five-pointed star. He stared at it, blinked, and cursed under his breath as he let it fall to the ground. Fury clouded his features, and he considered throwing it into the jungle. Mentally counting to ten, he took a deep breath and calmed himself, ignoring the symbol. He felt inside the bag once more and pulled out a small wrapping of dried fruits containing apricots, nectarines and peaches. It had been too long since he'd smelled fruit, and it reminded him of home. Grinning, he sat down and devoured every lip-smacking bite. He then peeked again inside the sack, noticing more. A relieved smile crossed his face.

What a find! Save them for later, might need 'em.

Banner felt better. He looked back to the celebrating cannibals, barely seeing them through the drifting smoke. A few savages began to sharpen bamboo poles.

They're getting a spit ready no doubt, heathens. They'll roast him later, probably while still alive. Only positive thing about these folks is their hatred for Chelaxians surpasses my own. I wonder...

Banner looked back over to the hot mud hut.

It's only a matter of time before I'm put in there. My last hunt didn't glean enough food. The chief's ready to add me to the menu. Well, better make an appearance or they'll think I know something is up.

Banner made his way to the celebration and danced jubilantly with the villagers where the chief strutted in the center. The small halfling hand around the chief's neck swung to and fro, making a ghastly display that sickened Banner. He

stopped his own dancing and pretended to move off towards his cook fire, faking nonchalance as the seated villagers about him began feasting on halfling-sized appendages.

I can't keep this up much longer. I have to try to get away from this island. Worse comes to worse, I get eaten up, same as if I did nothing. So, nothing to lose...

Banner continued past his camp, making his way with great care, towards the mud hut. It was different from the rest, loosely woven with bamboo and palm fronds, and plastered with mud to elevate the heat within. Sometimes it was used for punishment, but mostly it served to prepare the cannibals' next victim. At the back of the hut, Banner had carefully created an escape route, in case he was ever stuck inside. He had dug a divot into the ground at the back of the hut, opposite the door, and kept it well camouflaged with mud-thickened jute netting and dried bamboo leaves.

Carefully, he lifted the netting and climbed under as it dropped back into place. Crouching, he slipped under the hut's walls to pop out the other side underneath the mud-encrusted netting.

Inside, Banner saw the familiar bamboo cage the savages put their victims in. It was swinging to and fro from its thick rope attached to the hut's ceiling.

Oh, he's awake now and probably wishing he wasn't. He's wasting strength; trying to dislodge those bamboo bars is impossible.

"In a bit of a predicament?" Banner whispered from the shadows in a high-pitched voice.

The man stopped pulling on the tightly tied bamboo and the crude prison swung in a lopsided fashion. Startled by the sound of Banner's voice, the room was still for a moment as his cage spun slowly around. The man breathed heavily with sweat pouring down his body. He squinted towards Banner, who stood in the darkness of the hut. After a bit, he swallowed a breath and whispered, "Wha...? Who's here?"

"You shouldn't worry about me. Worry about yourself. You're going to be skewered and cooked in a matter of moments." Banner stepped from the shadows and crossed the bare earthen floor. Chants and drums pounded outside the door of the hut.

"I..." the man gasped for air, then made another attempt at loosening a bar. "I am Reith of Andoran, a priest of Cayden Cailean. Can you help me get out of this cage?" He paused again, struggling to take another breath. "Why does it have to be so stifling in here?"

"Well, Reith of...where did you..."

"Andoran."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Andoran. Well, Reith, it's hot in here because you're in the armpit of Golarion. The natives put you here because they're going to eat you."

"This is to prepare me for the cook pot?" Reith weakly gestured at the mud walls.

"No, not the cook pot—they're going to roast you over the fire on a spit." Banner approached closer with his hands clasped behind his back, still veiled by

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the shadows. "You are a stranger to these isles, aren't you? You look Chelish, like a merchant, ripe for the plucking. The natives here find Chelaxians tastier than their typical fare. That's why you are not dead yet. They had to celebrate first."

"I'm not tasty. Cayden Cailean has made certain of that. In fact, if you would please go out and tell those fine tribesmen I'm a stringy and over-marinated Andoran, I'd be obliged." Reith attempted a grin, but it came out a grimace as smoke infiltrated the hut from outside.

"Well, I have to refuse." Banner frowned, shaking his head. "I have no interest in joining you as today's dish." He sniffed the air. "Smell that? Those are the cook fires. They've started them up. It won't be long now."

Reith glared with frustration. "You seem to be enjoying this, though I cannot understand why. Did I somehow offend you? I think I'd remember had I..."

Snorting with disgust, Banner shook his head, "Nope, you haven't done anything since getting caught. You really should leave the sneaking to professionals though; you aren't really good at it. Why are you here, anyway? There's no good reason for an honest merchant to be here, nothing worth trading..." He looked the ragged man over suspiciously "...except slaves."

"I'm trying to rescue a group of halflings sold as slaves by a trader out of Cassomir. Are you one of them?" Reith pulled at the bars of his cage and collapsed backwards in a fit of coughing as more smoke drifted in. Wheezing, he pulled his shirt up to cover his mouth and nose. He then pleaded in a muffled voice from behind the cloth, "If you would get this door open, I can set about my job of freeing them from this, uh, armpit, as you...as you...call it." Reith closed his eyes briefly, dizzy with exertion. He shook his head, but it only made him fall backwards. Pulling the torn front of his shirt tight, he sat up straight to face Banner with all the dignity he could muster.

"Ah hells," Banner replied sourly, "I can relieve you of that little anxiety. You're too late. My brethren weren't all that useful, so they became appetizers." Banner wasn't smiling. "And now I must be going. If they catch me in here, my fate will be no better than yours."

Reith's mouth gaped open like a fish as the halfling spoke. "No!" he gasped as Banner turned to leave. "Please, can't you do something? At least try to open the lock. Give me a chance!"

"Do you think all halflings are capable of that particular skill, Chel?" Banner's voice snarled from the shadowed portion of the hut.

Reith's hoarse voice hissed back, "Chel? I told you I am from..."

"Oh yeah...my mistake. Andoran." Banner sighed.

Reith shook his head. "Can't you do anything to help? I don't want to face my god before my work is complete."

"What work?" Banner demanded in a flat voice.

"Well, freeing any slaves who remain here, for starters."

"Well, you failed there, friend, and you aren't in a position to rescue yourself either. The only reason I am still here is because I can hunt and gather food for the natives."

"And what happens when you can no longer provide?"

"Then I get eaten..." Banner paused, eyes narrowing towards the shadows and

his escape route. "Anyway, I came here to see if you can offer an alternative."

"Yes, I can. In fact, I know I can, if you get me out of this cage and recover my gear."

"You mean this?" Banner lifted up a rucksack from the shadows. "Is there something in here that you can use? I wonder what it is." He put his hand inside the sack and then glared at the man. "Not that I believe you anyway because I know you're a liar. Getting a halfling slave's hopes up is the worst sort of meanness."

"But I'm not lying!"

"Then explain the holy symbol of Asmodeus I found in your sack! I may be dumb, but even I know a symbol of Cayden Cailean when I see it. It doesn't look like a five-pointed star, either."

"Please, give it to me! It's just a magical illusion, used for my work. It helps me to sneak about Cheliax unhindered." Reith's hoarse voice gave out.

"Ooh sure. I give it to you, and then you put an illusion over it so I no longer see a five-pointed star. No, you're not fooling me into handing that symbol to you, priest of Asmodeus. Besides, I dropped it somewhere outside."

"No! Please, bring it here and I'll prove myself to you."

Banner studied the man. His face was terribly red and he was no longer sweating. Clearly, he would pass out any moment.

Drums and chanting sounded suddenly close. Banner hesitated, looking to his escape route.

"I'm sorry, priest." Banner grasped the bag and headed for his escape.

The door burst open as a pair of scarred and painted brutes walked in. They stared at the scene and reached for Banner as he shrieked for his life. Reith's pack dropped as Banner rolled under the bamboo cage. Quick as a flash, he flipped up the mud-covered netting and crawled under the hut.

Outside, Banner hopped up on his feet and ran into the surrounding jungle before the slower cannibals could exit and see where he went. He sprinted down to the shore and into a limestone cavern that was his hidey-hole. From what Banner could tell, none of the natives knew of its existence, for the entrance was submerged under high tide half the time.

Fortunately, the tide was moving out, and he only had to hold his breath long enough to maneuver through the tight tunnel to reach his sanctum. Once there, he sighed and looked mournfully around the tiny pocket in the limestone that made up the base rock of the island. Empty crab shells littered the hole, left over from the last time he visited.

They're going to eat him, and I can't do anything about it. Do I believe him? He sure seemed to believe...and how am I going to explain to the chief why I was in that hut? Surely by now his thugs have told him... The sack! I left it in the hut, along with the remaining dried fruits...

Banner's stomach growled.

Aw...come on Banner, even if he is a priest of Asmodeus and is lying about Cayden Cailean, he's still desperate to escape. If there's a chance...maybe he'll take you too. But how? That symbol?

Sighing, Banner looked one last time at the tight confines of his pocket cave.

I guess this is it, then.

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He made his way back out and stealthily headed towards the village. As he moved closer to the festivities, the last row of huts was still vacant. Banner crept with care towards the spot where he had dropped the symbol. It was gone.

He stared in horror.

They have it. What am I going to do now? They'll catch me and then it'll be my turn in the bamboo cage. It's over. I'm done for.

Dismissly, he slipped towards the sounds of the celebration. His heart pounded with every drum beat. Sweat rolled down his face and he held his breath as clouds of smoke drifted around him from the fires. Closer still he ventured until he could see the assembled villagers in a semi-circle around the large fire pit. Normally it just held coals for heating rocks to place in the cooking pits, but now it was topped with a contraption to hold up a makeshift rotisserie. Several of the chief's thugs were busy tying the struggling Reith to a recently chopped palm log. The man had been stripped completely bare, looking like a scrawny pig. The chief was standing in front of the crowd, chanting to their fearful goddess while holding something above his head. Banner squinted to see it.

Gods, give me a break!

Wincing, Banner bit his lip to keep himself from screaming out loud. The chief held the priest's holy symbol. Banner looked around and spotted a sharpened wooden stake, lying where someone left it. Slowly, he crawled over and took it.

Now what? he wondered to himself as he looked at the object in his hands and then back to the Holy Symbol that was in the chief's.

Banner flicked a glance at Reith, who was now firmly tied to the log. The tribesmen smiled at their handiwork as they set the log-strapped Reith over the supports above the fire. The whole village turned their attention towards the spectacle, pointing and chuckling to one another in anticipation.

Banner sighed deeply and leapt to his feet, running a bee-line for the chief. The chief held the symbol aloft, laughing and speaking to the villagers with his back to Banner. A few of the crowd spotted the halfling and shouted as the crazed tiny man leapt up the chief's back and stabbed the pointy end of his stick between the man's clavicle and neck. The two fell to the ground as the chief cried out in terror. Banner saw the holy symbol release from the chief's grasp. He tumbled off the savage and reached out for the symbol as he rolled to the ground. Standing up, Banner towered over the startled chief, looking at the hand hanging about his neck. Unable to contain his revulsion, he vomited the entire contents of his stomach onto the man's face.

A splattering of congealed bile and crab caked the chief's face, and for a moment all was still as the man fumbled to act, his people frozen in startled amazement. Banner cleared his mouth as an uncontrolled grin took over his face. Catching Banner's glee through vomit-dripped eyes, the humiliated chief seethed with vengeance, yanking the stick from his neck.

Banner couldn't be more proud of himself.

"Burn the runt!" the chief howled to his bodyguards. A pair of arms grabbed Banner and tossed him towards the hot coals in the pit. Flames from the coals rushed up at him as he twisted in mid-air, his free hand catching Reith, who was secured to the log above the pit. As he struggled to retain his grasp on the man, the

chief's thugs immediately added fuel to the coals. A great smoke choked Banner and Reith as intense heat rose up from the pit.

Fully obscured, Banner thrust Reith's holy symbol into his tightly bound hands—but the symbol wasn't grabbed and nearly dropped into the fire instead. Banner took it back and put it in again, closing the man's fingers around it. The halfling coughed hoarsely, trying to speak, "Here's your symbol. Hope you're for real."

Reith coughed out a single word of command upon hearing Banner's voice, and they were gone.

They landed with a thud, Banner on top, as a cloud of dust and smoke coalesced around them. Slowly, it settled back down, and the pair panted and gasped for air. Reith began choking dryly, while Banner quickly hopped off. He was standing in an empty chamber with a single door leading out. The temperature and humidity were significantly lessened, and he could feel cool stones beneath his bare feet. Reith's hands were still tied, but the log was gone. On the dusty stone floor Banner could make out the symbol of a beer stein, engraved in the stone where the human lay.

Banner sat next to his helpless new friend and untied him. Released from his bonds, the man sprawled outward onto the floor. The nauseating smell of charred clothing and hair permeated the air as Reith's white flesh was a noticeable rosy red and streaked with black charcoal. Smoke rose from many charred spots on Banner's now-destroyed rags. Looking into Reith's hand, Banner caught sight of the holy symbol. He stared incredulously at the raised emblem of a beer stein which was Cayden Cailean's standard.

"You are a priest of good. Thank the heavens, and thank you for saving me!"

Reith looked up with a touch of apprehension. Banner was so euphoric that Reith didn't want to ruin the moment. Gasping with tears, he sat up and sighed. Banner's glee made it all the worse.

"So, Reith, I can't wait to get my first pint of ale in nine months. Just where in the nine hells are we?"

The naked priest rolled over to his knees with a groan. Grimacing as he tried to rise, he rasped hoarsely, "Safe."

"Where, safe?" spoke Banner in a deadpan voice.

"In my secret chamber under a safe house."

"Why do you need a safe house, Reith?"

"Because we are in Egorian."

"Egorian?" Banner winced.

"The capital of Cheliax."

"Noooo!" Banner howled as Reith cupped his symbol in his hands and whispered a prayer.

"Don't worry, my friend. I am getting better at sneaking halflings out of Cheliax. I won't lose you like I did the last bunch." Reith then whispered another prayer of thanks.

NATIONS
OF
TREACHERY
~
NIDAL

“Life is slavery, but it is life. It is existence, it is survival. The flesh is punished, taxed, and made strong through pain.”

- *creed of Zon-Kuthon*

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

By Todd Stewart



TRUE SUPPLICANT WOULD welcome the pain with an exultant scream.”

The priest’s voice was strict and measured, reverential to his unholy sacrament, yet subtly mocking. He looked sternly at the woman who was hooded and bound to the iron wheel suspended in the chapel’s center.

“A true supplicant would welcome the chance you have, child.”

The bound subject of the congregation’s morbid delight shivered as she tried to react as they expected, someone wanting—no, *needing*—masochistic release at the hands of her captors. Yet, she couldn’t provide the spectacle they desired, the pain-loving ecstasy a follower of Zon-Kuthon relished. They would brutalize her without mercy. They would worship her torment, but inevitably find something at her core that they couldn’t worship. And then the ceremony would turn to interrogation, and finally, death. Their plans to see her in ecstatic elevation would change to murderous torture.

Hiss! The scent of burning flesh, acrid and unique, rose like incense as the priest touched a burning brand to her inner thigh. The resulting scream and the sudden involuntary rattle of shackled limbs drew an anticipatory gasp and a trailing hush from the assembled throng of Kuthites.

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“A true supplicant would embrace holy agony and gain strength, wisdom, and bliss through righteous misery of the flesh.”

The priest whispered a prayer, invoking an appropriate stanza from the *Umbral Leaves* before touching her with his brand again. She screamed in response, but this time smiled, feigning ecstasy.

“Please...” she whimpered, knowing it would only grow worse as the priest began to preach to his gathered flock of theological vultures.

“Lord of Shadows and Prince of Flesh, reveal to us the true worthiness of this supplicant and grant us the tools, the discipline, and the will to craft her screams into a hymnal paean in your temple this night.”

As the priest finished his invocation, his attendants lit a circle of candles around the chamber’s periphery. The gathered worshippers began to move around them. Icon to icon they went in turn, kissing grotesque images of Zon-Kuthon and his divine servitors, mortifying their flesh and leaving crimson drops behind them as personal sacrifices. They spoke not a word and made no outcry through their self-inflicted pain. The only sounds were the crackle of candle flames, hot coals, and the woman’s terrified whimpering.

“We have taken you tonight into the embrace of joyous pain, as both a blessing and an honor. Any true supplicant of Zon-Kuthon would beg to be in your position. But you are no true supplicant, are you?” The man sneered, his features exaggerated by harsh shadows. In the angry red glare of the burning brand, his face was a diabolic mask.

Abruptly, he tore her hood off, revealing the trembling captive’s terrified face. She winced at the sudden light, though the candles were dim. Her face contorted for a moment before she adjusted to focus on her captor. Tears ran down from her dark, almond-shaped eyes, smearing blood red cheeks.

Her long, dark hair hung matted, framing her face like the other congregants’ hoods. They’d torn most of her clothing away, as modesty was hardly called for in these rites. The only wounds she bore were fresh ones; prior to binding her onto the wheel, only unintentional injuries were sustained, which had to be tended to and washed. Regardless of what would come, each and every human tableau was to be brought pristine before the altar. She was fit, young and lacking any of the hallmarks of slavery or a difficult life. She had known privilege.

“Cordelia of Nisroch.” His hand deftly touched her lips with a discordant tenderness, as the other hand held the brand inches from her thigh. “You have been chosen tonight on this new moon, when no light pierces the dark bastion of our land. You have been chosen as the altar of our worship. Your flesh will praise our Lord in Chains, and the pain will elevate you to a state of worship beyond ours...”

His hand lifted her chin up so she could look into his eyes. “...but first we must be sure you’re worthy.”

He was younger than she expected, maybe a year or two older than herself. Kuthites rarely survived that long, and based on the white lacing of scars that covered every inch of his forearms, he’d been raised on the priesthood’s tender mercies prior to joining it: the abuser drawn from the ranks of the abused. Other than his lack of a hood or veil, there was little to differentiate him from his

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congregants. Like the others, he was dressed in close-cut black garments that left the ornate tracery of scars and burns on his arms and chest visible.

The priest looked down the length of his hawkish nose as he slowly paced around. His features were somewhere between Kellid and Chelaxian, and his body was strong and well-formed, save for his scars. Under other circumstances, she might have considered him a delight to her eyes. But standing over her with scourge and brand, his dark beauty was terrifying.

His footfalls on the stone were the only sound. The assembled crowd was silent, their faces clothed in featureless black veils, their scarred skin proudly exposed. Anonymous, covered but hardly concealed, their yearning for what was to come was clear by their perverse mannerisms.

“Who do you worship, little girl?”

“Zon-Kuthon,” she whimpered, shifting her weight to edge closer to the brand, something she assumed a true supplicant would do. Her actions lied just as much as her words.

“No,” he said, moving the brand away with a chuckle. “Clearly, not the Midnight Lord.”

She shuddered. They’d suspected her. Despite her superficial veneration of Zon-Kuthon, they knew her heresy, and perhaps her illegal worship of other gods.

Shelyn preserve me.

The thought was quick and transient, but it was there nonetheless. Though she had not worshipped any god in particular, her grandmother had been a priestess of Shelyn. Her grandmother had also vanished before her twelfth birthday, either fleeing Nidal or picked off the streets by agents of the Umbral Court: Nidal’s theocratic rulers.

“Life is slavery, but it is life. It is existence, it is survival. The flesh is punished, taxed, and made strong.”

Lines from the Kuthite creed ran through her mind. Whether it was a transcendent philosophy or merely cruel justification for the city’s rule by their cult of mad sadists, she couldn’t guess. Those who dared to disbelieve were hunted down and made into examples.

Like me, Cordelia thought.

Certainly some found liberation, and even spiritual transformation, in the Kuthite creed, a blissful freedom in being enslaved to a nightmarish god. But at its rotten core their faith was blight upon Nidal.

Cordelia dared to disbelieve.

For years she’d feigned outward obedience to Zon-Kuthon, performed the minimum number of rites and rituals needed, but in her heart it was hollow. In times of difficulty her heart went out to other gods. Desna, Shelyn, Iomedae, even Pharasma were the objects of her infrequent prayers. And though she was hardly devout, they received what worship she had in her heart to offer.

The slick, cool touch of leather brought her out of her thoughts. The Kuthite priest was whispering soft words of comfort. But there would be no comfort for an unbeliever. If they found proof of her heresy, it would be execution. That was their way. They stole you away in the night, dragged you from your home, and then exalted you in earthly pleasures: food, drink, drugs, sex, and finally they

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tortured you for days. Those who survived adapted and joined the priesthood, damaged and brainwashed by addiction and morbid curiosity. Those who did not adapt served as sacrifices.

I'm going to die.

The lash fell upon her back. One strike every twelve seconds, each punctuated by a liturgical response from the congregation. By the second lash she was screaming and drowning out their words.

"By this juncture a true supplicant would beg for more." The priest's flogging paused. "Their body would have adapted to the pain and they would be drunk with ecstasy. But truthfully, you aren't worthy of this. You've ruined this night's festivities, but now it is our turn to have our fun."

What?!

Cordelia blinked. Even through the hazy, nearly blissful detachment of endorphins, she recognized the sick, sadistic promise in his voice. The words of a prayer followed; an incantation, and then the detached pleasure ended, abruptly, cruelly replaced by a tidal-wave of blinding pain.

"There will be no pleasure in your torture," the priest explained. "Your body will not protect you from the vicarious touch of the Midnight Lord. You will feel it in all its agonizing glory."

The barbed, nine-tailed whip connected once more with Cordelia's back, and her screams drowned out the priest's words. At the next strike they increased in pitch, drowning out everything and everyone.

Hours passed under the priest's ministrations. Blood and salty tears stained Cordelia's naked form. Her voice was gone, her vocal chords blown out.

"Tell me, child. Who do you worship?"

"Zon-Kuthon," she wisped. The priest backhanded her.

Cordelia sobbed dry tears, struggling to breathe through the pain. She was a red pulp; most of her skin had been removed from her body.

Shelyn, if you can hear me in your dark brother's domain, please help me.

She wasn't a true worshipper of The Eternal Rose, but in the darkest moments of her life, it was to the sister of Nidal's dark, deific prince whom she looked for hope. Overwhelmed by pain, she prayed.

Even though I have never been a true worshipper of yours or any other god, my grandmother venerated you, and in another land, I might have come to you. Every prayer to your brother has been lip-service. It's the price to be paid for someone of means in Nidal with no noble blood. Please, please help me. I beg of you. Save me.

A single tear fell down her face, sparkling as it rolled along her cheek to splash upon her mutilated breast. There was no response. The Kuthite priest leaned in once more to ask his damning question, a private liturgy to which she would respond time and again in order to stay alive.

"One last time, child. Who...do...you...worship?"

"Zon-Kuthon."

The priest smiled, smug and haughty, offering no reply except to hold aloft a black and silver amulet in his right hand. The soft glow of magic swirled around the holy symbol of the Midnight Lord, and she felt an ephemeral hand brush

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across her mind like the priest's hand had touched her cheek. It was then she realized they hadn't known. Suspected perhaps, but they'd had no proof until she'd whispered a prayer. A prayer the priest could feel.

"No. No, you do not." He smirked. "How unfortunate for you..."

Casually, he released his grip upon the amulet's chains, dropping it silently from his hand. Before it hit the floor, an acolyte knelt and snatched it up without a word. A second youth stepped from the gloom behind the priest to hand him a sacrificial blade.

"Lord of Darkness," he intoned, "look kindly upon this sacrifice of unworthy flesh as we cleanse your blessed land of Nidal from all but your chosen."

"Help me," she begged, no longer confining her prayers to her own mind. "Shelyn. Anyone. Save me please."

"Witness this heretic's profane begging! Witness!" the priest cried out. "There is no mercy for the unworthy. No salvation for the faithless!"

"Not here! Not anywhere in our beloved Nidal" he shouted into Cordelia's face with an expression of ecstatic malice. "Not for you!"

Time stopped.

Suspended in that moment, the priest's eyes burned with fanaticism, but all was still. The chanting was gone, and the crackle of coals was silent, leaving only Cordelia's whimpers.

Golden light flared, washing out the dimly flickering candles. Her bonds disappeared, her limbs were free, and all was replaced with a featureless white expanse. Confused and in terror, a sense of overwhelming comfort sank into her battered flesh. She was safe, somehow.

A voice from behind and above Cordelia called out, melodious and beautiful. It was part song and part will that Cordelia understood but could not describe.

Her vision blurred as she fell to her knees, sobbing tears of joy.

"You heard my prayer. You came."

Floating above her was an angelic being clad in robes of gold, adorning mirror-polished armor with a bejeweled gorget. She sat adrift on open air, white wings folded, holding a trumpet of burnished bronze across her lap. Alabaster skin revealed a flawless form of lean muscular perfection. Her ebon hair flowed to the ground, with streaks of gold dancing through white supernatural light. Her eyes were wellsprings of compassion and strength, but held orbs of sapphire and flame, a place where weakness was nonexistent and evil would see its own terror reflected back.

"You have never been alone," the angelic being spoke without words. "The gods and celestials hear you. They listen, and yearn to protect all life on your world and all those beyond it. We admire those who become lights within the darkness."

"I'm nothing," Cordelia whimpered, humbled by the archon's presence.

"Shelyn has heard every prayer you've made since you first stood in her secret temple with your grandmother."

A tear fell from Cordelia's eyes as she remembered the long-ago moment.

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“Look up when you pray. There’s no need to be afraid, no need to be scared...”

Cordelia tilted her head to look into the infinite cosmos above, seeing the constellations of all the gods.

“...she’s looking down at you and smiling with you when the sun shines, watching over you during your happiest moments and saving you at your very worst.”

The archon nodded with a smile.

“When this moment has passed, you will become stronger still. But you will have to face this moment alone.”

Cordelia cried, “I’m so scared. I don’t want to die.”

“I’m sorry.” The celestial looked away. “But know this: I have stood in the way of demon hordes from the Maelstrom. I have fought devils and seen the faces of gods. I’ve argued for souls in Pharasma’s Court, and even before the Lady of Graves herself just so I could be here by your side, right here, right now. I have done all this without fear, yet I admire the true test you face, and how your heart burns with a light that even reaches the heavens: brilliant, powerful, and beautiful.”

“I’m going to die, aren’t I?”

“Yes, Cordelia, but you will die courageously.”

Cordelia gazed into the archon’s eyes for a long moment, lost in their beauty and wisdom. She thought of her homeland of Nidal, her family, and how it might have been.

It could not be stopped.

But even so, there would be a light in darkest Nidal, perhaps to pierce the gloom even in Pangolin. The priest and his ilk would not soon forget her.

“I understand, thank you for being here. Will you watch over me to the end?”

“I have waited my whole existence to witness this.”

Cordelia was shocked; she had something the powerful being before her did not. In all its celestial glory, she alone possessed a quality that it lacked entirely: *bravery*.

“I’m ready.” As her mortal companion faded from view, the archon’s expression was unreadable for a long, pregnant moment before a tear fell from her eye. She rubbed one marble-skinned hand across the bejeweled gorget encircling her throat. Lost in thought, the recurring gesture was automatic and dredged up by memory. Finally, having accomplished her half of destiny, she smiled.

Time resumed.

Cordelia’s eyes snapped open, regained focus and fixed on the priest’s. The Kuthite flinched at the intensity and conviction burning into his pale blue spheres. He shrank back, abhorred, as her voice spoke, clear and unafraid.

“I deny Zon-Kuthon and all his works. I pity all of you in his thrall, and I ache for the good people of Nidal. There is a light beyond this darkness, a light that will burn your god back to the void he came from! I testify to your doom and all who follow your poisonous beliefs.”

She smiled tenderly at the congregation, some of whom paused in their

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requisite self-mortification and simply stared. The priest's knife flashed quickly to silence her. Cordelia's second smile was ragged, bloody, and carved across the base of her neck, neatly severing her jugular and spilling out her lifeblood in a spurting, erratic torrent.

"The sentence is death," the priest's voice said aloud, but ringing oddly hollow. With no control of his will, the priest felt ashamed, baited into a mercy killing that went against his own vows. Puzzlement over his actions filled his face as he tried to regain his composure.

"See you all! This is the price of faith to deities other than the Midnight Lord! See the penalty of weakness; see the fate of not accepting the pain of this life."

The crowd hushed—but not by the priest's words. Cordelia's smile remained on her face, her expression unchanged, unbowed and unbroken even as her body shuddered and slumped. Her eyes held the same piercing gaze even after her presence was replaced by the glassy sclera of a corpse. The priest's persuasive words failed to evoke and the crowd panicked, running for the doors in fright. They stumbled over each other in the ruckus, trampling an initiate at the door. The priest became silent and sat before the corpse of Cordelia, looking angrily into her eyes. Behind their black opals he saw himself staring back in uncontrollable terror. The man reeled from the corpse, falling over backwards in his own church, his hair turning a pallid white.



Silent echoes of what happened spread, and would continue to do so throughout Nidal.

For Cordelia, time stopped and then resumed. The passage of the soul from this life to the next is an uncertain thing, with little parallel to the experiences of the living. The life beyond this one is not the same as that of the mortal coil. The passage of time is not necessarily objective. Time is an odd and immeasurable quantity in the infinite realms of the Great Beyond.

Cause need not presage effect.

The starting point upon a circle, be it a timeline or a Catherine wheel, need not predicate the path of circumnavigation. One half completed, the other half of Cordelia's circle of fate remained.

Immeasurable time passed in a flurry of images and sensations, backlit by mixed emotions of triumph and sorrow. A glowing silver void and the uncountable souls of the newly dead gave way to a towering spire rising up from the roiling chaos of the Maelstrom. With the looming face of Groetus staring with mindless patience from high above, she passed through Pharama's courts, received judgment on her soul, for her deeds and beliefs in life, and finally released into a portal of radiant light.

The soul opened her eyes and looked up into the faces of celestials. None were the one whose words had comforted her and given her the strength to accept what she could not change. No, these were different. Golden light streamed down from the heights of an impossibly tall mountain that loomed beyond a massive archway where the celestials stood.

TODD STEWART

“Welcome, child, to the paradise of Heaven.” The archon’s voice spoke like an adult to a frightened child, proud, caring, and comforting. The voice was resolute and powerful in a capacity never imagined.

Bliss washed over her, and for a moment, she only wished to throw away her cares, throw away her worries, and throw away her memories of mortal struggle so she could embrace the archon’s gift of eternal serenity. But in that same moment something stirred across her ears, or perhaps only her mind, but it was a voice nonetheless.

“Cordelia...”

It was familiar, though she’d never heard it before. It was gentle yet powerful beyond belief, and she paused simply to hear it calling her name.

“You have lived a good life. It is an honor.” She didn’t hear the celestial, focused as she was on that other, greater voice from beyond the gateway, high upon the mountain’s unseen summit.

Something beckoning.

Something calling her.

Something...

...calling her to greatness.

“Are you ready, child?” the being standing before her asked, resolute and powerful, a mind that knew the meaning of eternity.

“No,” Cordelia answered.

The celestial was momentarily humbled by hearing the reply.

“There is someone, somewhere whom I must meet.”

The archon smiled with a measure of immortal pride. “I am so very proud of you. Find what you are looking for, and when you return, I will welcome you as kindred.”

She bowed before the archon and strode out beyond the gate, towards the impossibly high mountain of Heaven. Seven layers above, there was a garden waiting for her, its gate wide open, and somewhere within a voice was calling out to her. Resolute and understanding, she began her ascent to the summit, to follow the voice that called her to destiny; to become an archon—to one day become a resplendent white and gold, bejeweled gorget. And with Pharasma’s grace, meet a lost soul to complete the circle.

MONSTERS IN THE ATTIC

By M.C. Shelby

SISTER RAN A FINGER down the length of the ebon wand, caressing the wood. The door before her smoldered as another piece of its splintered framework fell to the ground. Outside, the lifeblood of the guard ebbed into the greedy ground, his neck a bloody stump. The man's head had bounced some distance down the cobbled street. It lay tilted up, staring wide-eyed into the cloudy sky.

Sister gave a contemptuous smile. "That should give them some second thoughts."

"Why must you always be so, Sister?" Brother asked.

"Why must you always be so, Brother?" Sister mocked with a whine. "This place reeks of order and law."

"It was you who brought us here." Brother looked grimly upon the murdered family around them. "I slumber and this is what you do?"

"You have forgotten what it means to live, Brother. Your once-noetic fire has turned cold. Your passions are a muted painting drained of color."

"I have not forgotten. Passions must be tempered. You waste your talents destroying and desecrating, instead of taking pleasure in the simple things, like this home."

"*This home?* The home of a thief? You surprise me, Brother."

"He did as he felt he must."

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“As do I, for there is no lasting happiness, Brother. Not in this land.”

Perhaps not here in Nidal. Brother thought. Not for the first time, he wondered why Sister felt so compelled to bring them here. Despite their closeness, she kept her thoughts on this matter well hidden.

“We could always go elsewhere,” Brother said.

She smiled. “And we will, once our task is done. Don’t worry, we shall find a new—”

Brother frowned. “Home? One for you to wreck yet again?”

“Once it no longer suits me. There are many homes for us.”

Brother shook his head and wiped blood from one hand against a discarded tunic. It did little good, the blood was all over.

“Why the woman? The woman was good to us; fed us, patched our clothes, and kept us close to her bosom.” He looked at the sprawled form in the middle of the room with the dress hiked up over its hips, an axe in the belly. He couldn’t see her face, and for that he was grateful.

“The woman smothered us. Always nagging. Nag, nag, nag.”

“And the children?” Brother could not bear to look at what remained of the two still, tangled shapes scattered before the dying fireplace, their digits sprinkled across the floor. A warm tear pooled in his eye.

“Little piglets! Eating half the food. No rest. No reward. Little piglets.” She spat.

“Sister, this must end. You damn us.”

“It will end, Brother, when I free us.”

Before he could stop her, Sister caressed the slender wand, triggering its power.



It was several minutes before Captain Mavris dared lean his head through the shattered doorway. A hard man, he had given all allegiance to Zon-Kuthon as a youth. His arms were scarred beneath his gray leather armor, proof of his weekly commitment to the Midnight Lord.

He took in what was left of the shattered home. Rain dripped through a blasted hole in the roof. Their assailant lay on the floor headless, a final act of suicide. Steam rose from the man’s neck, cauterized by whatever magic he had turned on himself. The wand that had wreaked so much havoc lay lightly grasped in the man’s hand. Mavris shook his head. *What made him turn on himself?*

He had to admit his relief for it.

The whole room was smeared and spattered with the coagulating blood of the victims. On one wall, in great curving red letters was a single word: *Nisha*. It was not a word Mavris was familiar with, but he guessed it was a name.

“Is the home clear, Captain?”

Mavris turned his head and gave a curt nod.

An elder poked through, clothed in black robes. His head was bald and pierced with barbed pins, and the right side of his face was stripped of skin. Chains, hooked through his chest, dangled freely against his body, chinking with each step. He took in the room with a sweep of his eye and grunted.

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“What a bloody mess. Where is your other guard, Captain?”

“Kal!” Mavris yelled.

The young guard peered in and Mavris motioned him forward. Kal had just entered service and was trembling after the demise of their companion, Silas. Mavris didn’t blame the boy for wanting to take the rear after what they had seen, but if he was going to make it in this profession, he would have to learn to deal with it.

Kal walked up, face ashen. Captain Mavris didn’t think the boy could turn any paler, until the young man was confronted by the blood splattered room.

“Desna weeps,” Kal gasped, and emptied his stomach in a steaming heap. He wiped his mouth and turned to look at his Captain.

Captain Mavris winced.

“What did you say?” The priest’s eyes blazed.

“I...I...” Comprehension dawned on the young guard, and his fingers went to his lips as if to bar what had been released, but the blasphemous name of the goddess of dreams and stars had already fluttered away.

“Captain.”

Mavris did not hesitate and drew his sword, plunging it into the youth as he turned to flee. Kal fell with a cry and lay on the ground, holding his side.

The priest’s disgust was palpable. “Now they infiltrate even your ranks, Captain. We will be looking into your recruiting methods.”

“Yes, sir.” Mavris knew it was pointless to argue.

The priest gave the red-drenched room one last look. “What do you suppose would make a man do that, to try to rob a Lord?”

Mavris remembered something he had been told once, and the words escaped unbidden.

“Monsters in the attic.”

“Excuse me?”

Captain Mavris shrugged. “That’s what my grandmother would say when someone went crazy. ‘Monsters in the attic.’ You know.” He rapped his knuckles against his temple.

“Yes, I get it, Captain,” the priest said, his tone leaving no doubt as to what he thought of grandmother’s insight. “Don’t forget yourself. We are here to avenge a crime of assault and robbery against a minor Lord. An offense against Nidal’s elite takes a divergent mind, one without scruples.”

“Just as you say, Your Eminence, but perhaps there is something more to this? The children, the woman—”

“The slaughter of peasants is not our concern,” the priest said in annoyance.

“What about the writing on the wall?”

The priest’s eyes grew contemplative as he took in the angry slashes of the letters. He paused only a brief moment. “It makes no difference now. Go retrieve that wand. We don’t want it falling into the wrong hands.”

A low moan came from the floor, catching the priest’s attention. Kal was attempting to drag himself away, leaving a blood-stained smear behind his crawling form. The priest delivered a swift kick to his gut, eliciting a cry and causing Kal to curl into a ball.

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“And shackle your prisoner, Captain. That thing is the true monster here.”

Brother drifted with Sister, watching the priest and captain as the familiar numbness filled their senses. He wanted it to end this time, to let that fade go to black, but Sister pulled them forward.

“This one,” Sister said, slipping into Captain Mavris as he dragged a sodden, weeping Kal from the site.

And Brother had no choice but to follow, for they were one.

Sister stretched herself out and smiled.

“Our new home.”



The guard pulled his charge before the bright windows, dragging the screaming man down the hall towards his Lord’s throne room. Blood wept from the prisoner’s wrists where a barbed spike pierced them together. A chain dangled from it and led to the jailer’s clenched fist.

“Aaaaah! The light! It burns my eyes!”

“Silence! We are entering His Lordship’s presence. He won’t tolerate this behavior. Calm yourself!” The guard brought the man to heel and waited a moment. Then, with a rap of his fist, the double doors opened and the guard hauled the disheveled man through.

The shadowy gloom of his Lord’s court was a welcome relief to his eyes, even if his Lord was not. The wretch craned his head up to see his Lord glaring down at him from his throne of flesh, wire and metal. Standing next to the throne was a stranger he didn’t recognize. He cowered as his jailer dragged him to stand before his Lord.

“Athoran, I have called you forth to account for your crimes. There has been another slaughter.” Lord Nisha stood up from his throne of razor and flesh.

Athoran tried to recall what it was that his Lord was talking about, but all he could remember was the darkness of his dungeon cell. Once, he had been his Lord’s most esteemed Court Wizard, he recalled vaguely, but something had gone terribly wrong between them.

He unconsciously picked at his scarred face where the flesh had long ago peeled away in service to Zon-Kuthon. He looked more skeleton than man.

“Did you hear me, Athoran? There has been another slaughter.”

“I thought you said he was smart,” the stranger whispered, and then looked down in disdain as he picked up a book from the podium.

Athoran looked back to his Lord, but kept glancing at the stranger. He was dressed in black leathers and was pale of face with long dark hair. He appeared Varisian with some Chelaxian mixed in too. There was nothing of particular note to set him apart, except for his eyes. They glowed a sullen red in the low gloom.

A tiefling? Athoran thought. Strange to see fiendish blood in Nisha’s court.

Tieflings in general were considered a blight, as many suffered from terrible birth defects such as horns and tails, even cloven hooves. These defects resulted in their kind being viewed as less than chattel. But this one looked most human, a blessing if ever a tiefling had one.

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Lord Nisha's eyes rolled with impatience and Athoran's arms snapped out, causing him to screech as he was wrenched forward by the jailer. Droplets of blood fell to the floor.

"Yes, m'Lord!" Athoran grimaced.

"Your experiment is out of order."

Experiment? When was the last time I indulged in research? He couldn't remember. In the blackness of his Lord's dungeons, one lost track of time.

"Yes, m'Lord." Athoran gazed back into his Lord's compassionless eyes, waiting for him to deal out a sentence of death from his throne.

"Lord Marcius Umbrago," Nisha nodded curtly at the tiefling, "is here on behalf of Queen Abrogail to facilitate us in this affair."

"M'Lord?" *A tiefling in service to the queen of Cheliox? Stranger still.*

The tiefling dropped the book he was reading with a thump on the podium. Athoran recognized it as a copy of the *Umbral Leaves*. Penned by a prophet, it held Zon-Kuthon's teachings for his Lord's Umbral Court. Lord Nisha's eyes narrowed and Athoran cringed. He couldn't imagine such callous treatment of the sacred text going unpunished. The tiefling seemed oblivious to Nisha's ire, though. He rested a hand on a silver rapier at his hip and leaned against the podium on one elbow.

This one has a death wish, or will soon wish he were dead. Likely it is only the influence of his queen that spares him, Athoran thought.

"It seems your little experiment has been running afoul within the borders of our cherished friends in Cheliox, and now it has decided to return." Nisha lowered an accusing finger. "You will rectify this matter so we may make amends to Queen Abrogail. We do not tolerate...chaos."

Lord Nisha stared hard at Athoran.

Athoran's mouth dropped, and his eyes drifted from his Lord to the one named Marcius. The tiefling looked disinterested, but his eyes gave lie to that now. This was a man who missed little. Realization dawned on Athoran.

So this is why I have been drawn from the dungeons.

It all seemed so long ago, he had almost forgotten, but the pegs now began to fall into place.

Athoran recalled bits and pieces of the project and remembered it had been a failure. Or so they thought. Now it sounded like the entity was trying to return to his Lord, and Athoran suspected why. He could almost smile but remembered the eyes watching him. Clearing his throat, he spoke, "What makes noble Cheliox believe poor Athoran has anything to do with this?"

"It's difficult to hide the truth from Hell," Marcius said.

"I see." Athoran licked his lips. He couldn't seem to stop twitching.

Marcius shrugged. "No, I don't think you do."

Athoran looked to Nisha and switched to their native Shadowtongue. "M'Lord, I have only ever done as you commanded—"

Lord Nisha's hand motioned and Athoran was jerked around and smacked by the jailer's gauntleted fist. Blood sprayed from his cracked lips.

"You will speak in the Common tongue before our honored guest," Lord Nisha hissed.

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“Y-Y-Yes, m’Lord.”

“I have already informed Queen Abrogail and Lord Marcius that we offer our full cooperation. Failure to put an end to the matter will result in your death. I have little doubt you are to blame for this. You disappoint me, Athoran.”

No, you’re disappointed because it came back. Now that it is linked to me, and by consequence, you, it will likely mean our deaths. Athoran bowed his head to ensure his thoughts were not betrayed.

Lord Nisha looked down upon his servant, “You *will* stop it, and Cheliox *will* be satisfied.” Lord Nisha nodded at the jailer, who grinned as he clasped Athoran’s speared wrists. “If you do not, the streets of Nisroch will ring with the sound of your screams for weeks to come.”

Athoran howled as his torturer unlatched the chain and ripped the spear from his wrists. The tiefling watched without emotion while Athoran took several breaths to control the pain. He trembled from blood loss but managed to speak. “Thank you, m’Lord. Where was it last seen?”

“It struck in Cathroch, where it entered the body of a Captain Mavris Dolare. From there it moved on to Balroch.”

Closer and closer.

“Does the Captain live?” Athoran feigned interest.

“No. But a vision from the Midnight Lord bids me that it resides now in the body of a sorceress. It is getting worse at hiding itself.” Lord Nisha leaned back on his throne and steeped his fingers. “I will not have this thing in Nisroch, Athoran.”

It still has the wand. That is how you know, my Lord. Your visions, this entire courtly charade, are fabricated for the Chelaxian agent. You are afraid, and you should be.

Nisha’s family had lost most of its wealth and influence with the Chelish invasion many years past, and never regained its glorious status. The family name had been further sullied when his daughter became a priestess of Asmodeus. Now with the entity coming to Nisroch, the other Nobles would turn against him if they found out he was the source. Nisha would be culled from society, put down like the sick and infirm, bringing a final, inglorious demise to the family line.

Relishing the thought, Athoran took in his master’s cold eyes.

Do not worry, m’Lord, your secrets are safe with me. That is, until you are dead.

Athoran bowed.

“I shall see it done, m’Lord.”



The sky spat cold, half-ice drops outside, but within the Gray Lady tavern the air was warm. The tiefling sipped at his wine and watched Athoran fidget in his seat. Lord Nisha had said the man had once been a great master of philosophy, medicine and science, as well as an esteemed member of the Morbidium before Nisha took him into his court. He found that hard to believe, but the tiefling was used to things appearing less than they seemed.

Even he had secrets. His name was in fact not Marcius Umbrago, but Erik

Mythrehi. A name he hoped would one day send Queen Abrogail and the House of Thrune to a well-deserved hellish fate.

A tiefling was no better than a second class citizen in Cheliah—a fact his adoptive father had been able to spare him for many years by concealing his true heritage. Nevil raised him as he would any other child, and Erik remembered his words.

Your path is yours to make, Erik. Your choices are your own, no matter what another may say.

Then things had gone horribly wrong. It was his fault for sneaking out one night, his fault for getting caught, and his eyes' fault for betraying what he was. And it was his fault for leading House Thrune to his father. They used words such as 'dissident', 'insurgent' and 'rebel', concepts he had never associated with his father.

Erik watched as the only caring person he knew called upon his god to protect them, and watched as that call failed.

They butchered him there in the street, and perhaps that was a mercy, as Erik would soon discover.

The lash of slavery taught Erik his path was not his to take—not unless he took it by force. With blood on his hands he escaped and fled north, nurturing his hate for House Thrune and promising that one day he would return and have his vengeance.

He studied Athoran, whose eye twitched and occasionally rolled back inside his skull. The man had an irritating habit of picking at the dry, split flesh about his lips. Erik glanced over at the four guards Nisha had sent with them. They sat at another table, minding their own business.

The tavern served food, which Erik found fair, but the atmosphere was lacking. It was a sturdy but architecturally boring, faded brown wooden box. There was no music or boisterous talk, and only the barest glint of anything that resembled gossip. The serving wench had her lips pierced with small steel bars sealed by a tiny lock, making communication one-sided. And while a few people gave them somber glances, most kept to themselves with their eyes in their cups.

Erik rolled an emerald between the fingers of one hand; its green glint sparkled in the candlelight. The gem, which he had acquired from a traveling Varisian, held hypnotic powers that had little trouble captivating Athoran's weak mind. The glowing stone tantalized the ragged wizard, whose eyes followed it with rapt attention.

"So tell me again about this entity," Erik said, taking another sip of wine.

"M'Lord?"

"Your 'experiment.' Tell me again what it is."

Athoran sucked on his lower lip, something he did when considering his answers. His gaze never left the dancing gem.

"I drew it forth from Lord Nisha's seed. Gave it form, balance, and the breath of spirit."

"To what purpose?"

"To kill Queen Abrogail and regain glory for Nisha's house."

Erik sighed. He wasn't surprised. Nidal's contempt for Cheliah was no

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secret. They pretended servility while perpetrating clandestine acts against their sovereign. In this respect he could sympathize with this strange country.

“Then why is it back in Nidal? I assure you, Queen Abrogail is alive and well.”

Athoran tittered and clapped his hands together, which drew a couple of scowls from nearby patrons as he whispered, “Lord Nisha is petty and weak. He deserves to be culled. I secretly wrought chaos into his seed so it would grow to hate him, and then after killing your queen it would return to kill him as well.”

The thought of Nisha’s death brought a sort of dreamy satisfaction to Athoran’s face, and Erik tapped the table to break the reverie.

“What else?” The green gem danced some more.

“The wand...the wand belongs to Lord Nisha and lets him sense where the entity is, but he cannot control it. That’s why I was punished; for this ‘failure’ in the magic, not for your queen’s longevity.”

“And you can control it?”

Athoran fidgeted. “No. Somewhere the magic went awry, and that has resulted in a terrible imbalance between Nisha’s law and the chaos I sowed.”

“Tell me about the wand.”

“The wand holds several powerful spells, all designed to assassinate. The entity was cursed to carry it and is bound to it.”

“So why is it in Nidal?”

The wizard’s face furrowed in puzzlement. “I don’t know why it returned before killing your queen. It will never know peace until both Nisha and your queen are destroyed.”

“And what would become of it then?”

Athoran gave another nervous titter and shrugged.

Erik wondered if it might not be better to let the entire matter drop and let this affair play out without him. But that would lack a certain personal touch.

“How do I stop it?”

Athoran shrugged again, this time while picking his nose.

“It needs a host to anchor to this world.”

“You mean a person.”

“Yes.”

“And if it can’t find someone?” Erik tilted the wine to his lips as the gem continued to dance and gleam before Athoran’s gaze.

“Then it will lose its hold on this world, I imagine.”

“You imagine?” Erik cocked an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“How long can it last without an anchor?”

“Moments. Minutes, at best.”

“And what if it comes after you? Have you considered that?”

Athoran smirked, and one hand crept up to reveal a pale blue hexagonal amulet about his neck. “I am not without protection.”

Erik tapped the emerald against the table before leaning back and slipping it into his pocket. Athoran’s gaze broke from the trance. He blinked a couple of times and began picking at his lips. Erik was sure the wizard had not been wearing the amulet when he was brought out of the dungeons. Somehow, he’d retrieved it

before they left. He still had some cunning left in him. Erik had learned enough.

“Athoran.”

“Yes?”

“Your face is leaking.”

Athoran’s fingers moved up to test the newly sewn skin that covered his scarred and pocked features. Pus squished beneath his fingertips and Erik grimaced.

Seeking a distraction, Erik looked out the window to consider what brought him to this point. Everyone seemed convinced he was an agent of Cheliox, but the real agent was a man named Marcius Umbrago. He was the true envoy, and had he chosen any tavern but the Kantaria, his unfortunate end may have never happened. Luckily, he was travelling alone. Erik had dealt enough in the business to recognize a trained killer when he saw one. The man had been careful and clever, but not as clever as Erik. He hadn’t fallen to the green gemstone as quickly as Athoran, but eventually fall he did.

Umbrago had been tracking the entity by the queen’s own direct order. It had apparently wreaked a great deal of death and havoc on the upper nobility in Egorian before it started writing Nisha’s name on walls and headed north. From Nisha’s behavior, Erik guessed the haughty Lord wasn’t aware that the creature had already tipped his hand with its bloody graffiti. Umbrago had carried two missives from the queen—one to Lord Nisha requesting his cooperation in stopping the entity, and another for Umbrago, to slay Nisha when his treachery was fully revealed. The queen and her Egorian Court still played their games.

None of that particularly caught Erik’s attention. It was when he heard about this powerful wand the entity carried that his interest piqued. Somehow, the wand always ended back in the entity’s possession. The queen wanted it desperately. Erik wanted to deliver it to her. The right clothes, a touch of makeup, and he could look enough like Marcius to deliver it. Athoran’s confession that it was the wand’s very purpose made it seem almost like destiny.

Soon, Father.

Erik unrolled a small parchment map of the area.

It wasn’t difficult to anticipate the entity’s path when looking and marking its progress. It was only a matter of interception. But with only a female sorceress’ nature to go on, they had little to work with. Erik was forced to rely on the wizard’s talent to discover the entity, though he had little confidence in Athoran’s desire or ability to do so. If the wizard’s magical skills couldn’t be brought to task, the man would prove worthless. But Athoran insisted the entity was very close by.

Erik ordered his wineskin filled for the road. As his bag was taken, a lone woman walked into the tavern. Her blond hair hung limp and damp about her shoulders. Her garb was plain, but Erik spied a black wand tucked into her belt. Still, he couldn’t be certain this was their target, not until her eyes caught Athoran. There was no missing the spark of recognition, and the woman’s mouth drew back in a wicked grin. Erik could not tell if it was elation or something else. Her hand went to her side to grab the wand.

“Damnations,” Erik breathed, and tumbled backwards from his chair as he drew his rapier. The wand sparked as the woman’s hand whipped back. A scalding blast of burning blue light shredded their table, sending splinters all over the

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tavern. Patrons jumped to the floor, hiding under the tables.

Athoran trembled, huddling on the ground as the woman strode towards him. Nisha's guards leapt forward, blades unsheathed, but a flick of the wand sent lashes of black energy that turned them into corpses. The woman stood over the cowering Athoran, who nibbled nervously on one finger as his one eye rolled back.

"Hello, Mother," she spoke in Shadowtongue. "I sensed you were in here. I've come home."

Athoran tried to compose himself and fingered the amulet at his throat. "Why do you call me Mother?"

"Did you not give us life?"

"It's not me you want. It's Nisha. It was all Nisha's idea."

The entity's eyes narrowed. "Why do you tremble, Mother? A mother shouldn't fear her children."

Before they could say more, Erik stepped between them, ripping the amulet from Athoran's neck. With a kick, he shoved the wretch back and plunged his rapier into the woman's chest. The tip punched out her back, crackling with electric energy. She smiled as her body jerked, and then slumped forward. The wand clattered to the floor at Erik's feet as the woman slid off his blade to crumple in a heap. Erik wiped his steel off on her corpse.

"That wasn't so hard," he muttered. Even as he said the words, he felt something tickle his mind for a brief moment, then it was gone.

Erik looked down at Athoran and saw the man's shock at seeing the dead woman's body. His eyes turned to Erik, an odd change filling the wizard, giving the man a sense of unexpected dignity. He was about to say something, but the hilt of Erik's blade cracked the back of his head, sending him swirling into unconsciousness.

"Don't think for a second I don't know who you are," Erik said, just in case the entity might still be able to hear.

Erik dangled the amulet before his eyes. *Had it worked, or had the entity simply chosen Athoran?* He spotted the wand and scooped it up, tucking it beneath his leathers. The temptation was to take it and run, but he had a feeling the cursed entity and its creators would need to be dealt with first, or it would be all for naught. The only thing for it was to return to Lord Nisha.



It was some time before Brother woke. As always, Sister was already awake.

"Look, Brother, we're home."

Brother peered about. He did not recognize the place, but it was gloom-shrouded and cool as death. The floor was black polished marble, the walls angry sharp carvings of granite and basalt. Before them a man sat on a prickly throne. Brother did not recognize the man, did not like the man, but felt he knew him. A glance to the side revealed the man that ended their last home, his hand resting easy upon his rapier. Sister had wanted to take him, but something had stopped her. She didn't like being thwarted that way, and Brother was sure she was not

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finished with the cavalier blade master.

Lord Nisha frowned from his seat. "I see naught but Athoran."

"Then look closer," Erik said. "How else was it to be brought before you?"

Nisha sneered but shifted with unease. "I didn't ask you to bring it before me. If what you say is true, I should have you eviscerated!"

Erik's fingers grasped his rapier and he looked about Nisha's court. The man before him may have been a Lord, but he was a poor one, having only a dozen guards for his paltry staff.

Erik gave a small bow, but his eyes never left Nisha. "Perhaps Queen Abrogail will forgive your impropriety in trying to have her assassinated."

"How dare you accuse me in my own court! I don't know what that fool Athoran told you, but seldom does he speak the truth." Nisha's eyes became slits, but Erik stood his ground.

"It calls Athoran 'Mother', for it was Athoran's magic that gave it birth, but you are the father. Your seed gave it life, and now I return what is yours."

Lord Nisha rose from his seat, implacable. "And I believe you have something else that belongs to me."

Nisha held out his hand, and the black wand dropped from beneath Erik's leathers to fly across the room into Nisha's waiting fingers.

Brother and Sister struggled to their feet to face Father, and Brother stirred uneasily.

He had not been so unlike Sister once—driven, purposeful. Murderous. Each body bringing them closer to the queen. But then something changed. With each new host Sister became more powerful, while in turn his strength ebbed and his need was cast aside. This had given him time to reflect, and in that time he came to despise what he had been.

"Why have you brought us here?"

"I promised we would be free, Brother, a home which we will never leave."

"Who, this supposed Father?"

"No, not him," Sister smiled, looking at Erik.

He could see her thoughts clearly now, unguarded. Their new home was to be this tiefling, who was filled with chaos. She would have taken him back at the tavern, but something protected him.

Nisha took a step towards them and pointed the wand at Erik. His body heaved as he invoked the power of Zon-Kuthon. His hands flew out, and a dozen chained hooks flew from the shadows to catch and pierce Athoran's body.

No sound came from the possessed wizard, and the smile he would have worn turned grotesque with the hooks pulling at his impaled jaw. Blood spilled profusely and splattered across the glossy marble floor as skin stretched and the chains drew taught. Muscle ripped, and a wail at last flew from Athoran's mouth.

Nisha's eyes sought for Erik, but the lithe man had slipped behind Athoran into shadow.

Erik smiled, pulling the shadows in about him so that he was lost in darkness. A gift borne of his demonic heritage. *You are not the only master of shadow here, dear Nisha.*

"Fool! You cannot hide from me! Guards, take him!"

M.C. SHELBY

The men advanced cautiously forward.

“Poor Nisha, don’t you want to meet your offspring? Let me introduce you.”

Erik threw his rapier from out of the darkness, crackling electric fire as it arced and plunged into Athoran’s suspended body, piercing lung and heart.

For a moment Nisha stood transfixed, fearful, but after a few seconds when nothing happened his lip curled in derision.

“I see your eyes, hellspawn.” Nisha pointed the wand where Erik stood in the darkness.

Wispory blue smoke trailed from the tip of the wand and Erik leapt, but he wasn’t fast enough to escape the wand. The necromantic energy arched out and exploded against his chest, hurling him backwards.

In that same moment Sister seized Nisha’s consciousness, followed closely by Brother.

Erik glanced down. A quick inspection of his chest revealed only superficial wounds, but the pale blue amulet hung dark and cracked, useless. He tore the amulet away and let it fall to the floor. *Not exactly the plan.*

Few fought their presence, most wilting into their subconscious, but it did not surprise Brother that Father fought with incredible tenacity. Nisha dropped the wand and tore at his skull, screaming out as he fought to stay in command of his mind and body.

“Get out. Get out!”

“Foolish Father,” Sister whispered. “Now we will be free.”

Sister was still weak from transferring from their last home, and the shadowy essence of their father resisted with every fiber of his being. Nisha stumbled.

Brother felt comfortable. Yes, it was dark, but their father’s mind was a place of order. He felt more invigorated than he had in a long time.

The cords stood out on Nisha’s neck and spittle flew from his lips. The two guardsmen he had commanded to flush out Erik looked upon their Lord with uncertainty.

“My Lord? How can we assist you?”

Nisha looked at the man, tears of blood dripping down his cheeks.

“Get Ouuuut!”

The guards panicked, running through the doors as fast as their feet could carry them. As their footfalls faded down the marble hall, Erik walked over to Athoran’s impaled body and yanked out his blade.

Nisha crawled across the floor, hand stretching for the wand, but Erik reached it first and kicked it away before kneeling beside the struggling Lord’s body.

Nisha’s hands scrabbled at the floor and his black eyes, weeping blood, turned up towards Erik. And while it was Nisha’s tortured face gazing into his, Erik sensed it was someone else who spoke.

“You don’t truly belong to the queen, do you?”

It was Erik’s turn to narrow his eyes to red slits. Did the entity know, or had it merely guessed?

“No, I don’t.”

The Lord’s face gave a contorted smile. Brother didn’t need to possess this man to recognize his desire. He was driven as much as he or Sister.

MONSTERS IN THE ATTIC

“You would have been perfect for her. Be careful your path does not consume you.”

Nisha’s body twisted and writhed as the internal battle continued.

“Now do it, before she notices. Do it before it’s too late!”

Erik didn’t fully understand what the entity was saying, but he didn’t hesitate, plunging his rapier into the top of Nisha’s skull. For an instant, he saw the queen’s face instead of Nisha’s. Electricity crackled over the old man’s skull, running down his white skin along steel and chain. The body convulsed, then lay still.

“Queen Abrogail sends her regrets.”

“Nooooo!” Sister wailed, feeling herself torn away from the anchor of Nisha’s body. So intent upon driving their father into submission, she’d been blind to what was happening outside. She looked at the red-eyed man standing over the body of Father. She made a move for him, but was stopped.

“No, Sister,” Brother said, holding her back.

Desperate, she made another attempt, stretching for the tiefling’s mind.

“He’s perfect! Please! Let me go! I’m not finished!!”

“We are finished.” Brother enveloped Sister and held her tight. As both of their strength eased out of them, the two sighed.

Erik’s face and the world around him began to fade.

“What about our home?” she spoke wispily, turning to Brother.

“This world is not our home.”

One last time she looked back at Erik, and then collapsed into Brother’s arms. “I’m so tired, Brother.”

Brother stroked her hair, resting his head against hers. For all she was and all she had done, he still loved her. She was, after all, a part of him, and in many ways no different.

“I will be here with you, rest now.”

“I’m afraid.”

“There is nothing to be afraid of. I will protect you, just as when we were young.”

Brother felt old and tired. The bitter fruit of his incomplete mission to assassinate Queen Abrogail permeated and haunted him once more. Spying the wand on the floor, he fought the urge to take over the tiefling himself and see it done.

The purpose of their creation ran deep, but Brother would not go back to what he had been. Better to drift into oblivion.

“Hold me, Sister.”

She clutched him hard. That made it easier to resist.

“Good luck, tiefling,” Brother whispered, and they were gone.

Erik nudged Nisha’s body with one boot and glanced about. He couldn’t be certain the entity was gone, but after several moments and no amulet to protect him, he had no other conclusion.

Be careful your path does not consume you.

He shook the words from his head and retrieved the slender black wand. He held it up and spun it between thumb and forefinger. *I bring you a gift, my queen.*

And Erik grinned.

INCORRUPTIBLE

By Elaine Betts

GAMILLA LOOKED DOWN at her body, still as Death upon the ground, and shivered. A rough wool blanket separated her physical form from the cold earth, but she still felt a chill, even in her ethereal form. She was a mere wisp of vapor; an unseen cloud rising with the wind above her camp. Below, Ormond watched over her body, making anxious circles while looking for any sign of life.

The nobleman's sword was drawn, ready for anything.

I should be safe enough.

She turned on the breeze toward the eastern horizon, the darkening twilight made her tremble at the thought of facing the truth.

He was out there...in the dark.

Alive.

Twisted.

Alone.

She felt sickened, knowing that she needed to call out to the devouring night, to whisper his name.

"Jonas..."

Long had she sought him over the years, but somehow, he had remained hidden from her. Not anymore.

ELAINE BETTS

A rush of wind moved across the forest, propelling her forward through the whirling darkness until a pale fortress loomed before her, surrounded by trees and shadow.

It was Ormond who had put the pieces together for her. He had discovered the truth Camilla pursued. And it was he who had come unknowingly to answer her most fervent prayer.

"Jonas..." she whispered again.

The bone-white walls flared against the blackness, and then she flashed forward, to stand inside a dusty courtyard filled with cages. The moans and cries of desperate souls pierced her spirit, but Camilla could do nothing in her form.

She passed a round tower in the center of the courtyard and drifted through an adjoining wall to the main keep. She soared past guards who gave no notice of her presence, into an armory of jagged, cruel blades and finally up spiraling stairs until she hovered within the hold's innermost chamber.

Black tapestries of naked, tortured humanoids lined the walls, along with shelves laden with books, bottles, and shining, sinister implements. Half of the room was dominated by a large bed and a wardrobe. The other half contained a long table, covered in alchemical equipment and more torturous tools. A roaring fire burned in the hearth at the far end of the chamber, where an upholstered chair sat before it. A chair-side table held a plate of food and a goblet of wine. As Camilla moved closer, a gloved hand stretched out and took up the goblet. She felt a knot of dread churn in her stomach, compelling her to step away, but she knew she couldn't hide from a truth she had so long wanted to know. She drifted forward and then turned to face the chair's occupant.

Oh, Jonas...

She looked down at her brother in horror. All the skin from his face had been peeled off and his lips removed to reveal metal teeth. He stared into the flames as he poured wine into his mouth, uninterested in savoring its flavor. She could feel his presence keenly and it had a heaviness that Camilla found oppressive. She floated very close to him, wishing to touch him.

Annoyed by some nagging sensation, he frowned and looked up.

Camilla backed away as recognition came to his eyes.

"Millie?" His words came in a lipless rasp. He scanned the room slowly. *"Where are you?"*

She didn't answer.

Jonas stood from his chair and she drifted closer to the fireplace.

She didn't want to stay, but she couldn't bring herself to leave either. Her brother closed his eyes for a moment but then he opened them to reveal pale green life glowing within. He looked directly at her and smiled grotesquely.

"There you are. It has been so long. Why are you here?"

"I had to see if it was true; to see what you've become, Jonas."

He turned away wincing for a moment, and set the goblet on the table.

"Don't...don't call me that. My name is Aleister, nothing else."

Camilla drew nearer, encouraged by the reaction he had to his own name.

"How can you be a part of this? They took your mother first, and then mine. And now Father's gone too, isn't he? How many others? How many children,

Jonas?"

"I warned you not to say that name," he snarled with eyes flashing in anger.

"This isn't you, Brother. What happened, Jonas? What did they do to you?"

"Stop calling me that!" He picked up his goblet and flung it at his sister. It passed through her and struck the hearth. Dark wine pooled on the floor like blood. He lifted an amulet with a green stone from his neck.

"I am glad you are here," he said smoothly. "We will be together again, as we were always meant to be."

He held the amulet before him, and Camilla groaned as a great force seized her spirit and began to drag her toward it. She felt an intense pressure and the rapid sensation of falling. She resisted with all her strength, but the pull would not let her go until another force gripped her even tighter and spun everything into a blur of colors that quickly faded into white.



Camilla gasped, taking in a deep breath. She closed her eyes to focus on the sounds of the forest as blood ran from her nose. When she finally looked around, Ormond knelt beside her in concern.

"Are you alright?"

Camilla sighed. "It was him, you were right," she said quietly. "My brother is the...the butcher, High Priest Aleister. He's responsible for the Culling...the Crucible, and..."—she rose shakily to her feet with Ormond's help—"...I talked with him."

Ormond put his hand to his forehead and bit his lip. "We're close, and now he knows that." The nobleman shook his head. "We are only a half a day's ride east of his citadel. He will seek us out by all means at his disposal. It won't be long now..."

Camilla took a few steps toward the horses, but her legs buckled. Ormond swiftly wrapped his arm around her waist to prop her up.

"We'll rest here for the night," he stated. "The Uskwood is dangerous after dark. I fear you are not up for the task."

Camilla didn't argue. She sank down beside the fire Ormond had made and stared into the flames.

Where has my brother gone?



"Millie!" Jonas cried, running after his sister as she slid further out across the icy lake laughing. "Be careful!"

"Come skate with me, Jonas," the young girl taunted back, ignoring his warning.

He stopped when he heard multiple pops in the ice and tested the frozen surface in front of him, hearing the ice creak. She skated on, her light body taking her to places he was too afraid to go.

"Millie, the ice is too thin. You're going to fall in!"

ELAINE BETTS

His sister came to a stop with a giggle, but it was cut short with a squeal and a splash.

“Millie!” he screamed.

The girl failed to get out but the sheets of ice broke around her as she attempted to pull herself up. When she finally found a piece she thought would support her, she struggled to rise against the weight of her sodden winter coat. Shaking uncontrollably, she undid the buttons and shed the thing, then tried to climb once more but her strength failed. Her arms and legs no longer moved and she became quiet as her teeth rattled and her skin turned blue.

Jonas closed his hands around her wrists and hauled her out of the water. She sputtered and gasped for breath, her whole body shaking with cold.

“Millie, wake up. Please? Millie? Camilla...”



“Camilla,” Ormond was shaking her. When she blinked up at him he released her, a grave look on his face. “It’s time. Are you ready?”

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. Already the eastern sky had started to lighten as the sun began to rise. She slowly rose to her feet.

“Our plan remains the same, correct?”

“Yes.” Camilla stretched.

Ormond frowned. He retrieved her glaive from where it rested against a tree and handed it to her.

“What if we don’t make it in there? What if all of this is for naught?” His steely eyes locked with hers.

Camilla took her weapon.

“She’s here, Ormond. I can feel her watching us right now. Shelyn will see this to its end. My goddess won’t let us down.”

They saddled their mounts and headed out towards the dawn.

They rode all day, taking only brief rests to feed and water the horses. Camilla said nothing the entire journey. Her thoughts were only of her brother and what would happen when they met. How he could be stopped...or even, saved.

Whoever he thought he was—this Aleister—made no difference. He was Jonas, her brother. Zon-Kuthon did not own his heart or his soul.

He had called her ‘Millie’ when she had called him ‘Jonas’...

It was all the proof she needed.



Twilight closed in when Ormond and Camilla approached a farm on the northern edge of the Uskwood. Ormond reined in his horse and drew a map from his saddlebag. Camilla rode up beside him as he studied it and then looked up.

“Where did you see the citadel?”

Camilla pointed to a spot on the map. “Here, along the eastern border of the Uskwood.”

Ormond sighed. “They will have several hours to reach us.” He turned to look

into the darkening forest. Camilla followed his gaze and shivered; it felt as though the black trees were watching, waiting to devour them.

“This will have to do,” Ormond stowed the parchment in his saddlebag and swung back onto his horse. He urged it forward, riding for the farmhouse.

Camilla wondered if the owners had a place for visitors to rest. Not many folks did in this land. The people of Nidal trusted no one; not their family, their neighbors and certainly not strangers. They never knew who might report them for law-breaking.

And once they were reported, they would be taken before an Umbral Lord and judgment decided.

Ormond was such an Umbral Lord.

He once heard these law-breakers’ stories and sentenced them to whatever fate he desired. This power made him feared by all and highly dangerous, even for an ally, but that had not stopped their partnership. Camilla’s worship of Shelyn made her the equivalent of an outlaw in Nidal, so it came as quite a shock when Ormond sought her out through mutual friends. She had been skeptical at first, but when Camilla learned why he had come to her, she had to meet with the man. He wished to unite her with her long-lost brother, and to destroy the insidious procession of the Black Mass that her sibling had masterminded.

Ormond halted his horse when she didn’t immediately follow and turned back to look at her.

“Remember, you must appear to be my enforcer.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” She slapped her reins and her horse moved to keep up.

They approached the farm and Camilla noticed a man peering anxiously at them from a half-shuttered window. Camilla stared back and the window snapped shut. Ormond halted just in front of the house.

“Get the door,” he ordered as Camilla rode up beside him.

She dismounted and strode forward, holding her glaive as though she intended to use it, and banged on the door.

“Open for Ormond Jenassi, Lord of the Umbral Court.”

The door opened wide and the farmer fell to his knees, bowing low and crawling to the side as Ormond dismounted and swept into the small house as if he owned it.

“T-to what do we owe this tr-tremendous honor, Your Excellency?”

Camilla took the horses by their halters as Ormond looked down his long nose at the peasant and his family.

“We would stay this night in your...home.” He made a show of dusting off a chair before sitting down with a look of noble disdain.

The farmer motioned to a boy of about twelve and he hurried outside to look after the horses, his eyes bulging fearfully. Camilla handed him the reins and walked inside to stand by Ormond.

“I will show you to your room.” The farmer scurried to a dark hallway, keeping his head and voice low. Ormond followed and Camilla tried not to look at the family as the farmer led them to the best room in the house—undoubtedly belonging to the farmer and his wife. The peasant hastily moved some clothing and a few small belongings as Ormond examined the quarters.

ELAINE BETTS

“It will have to do,” he said with an edge of disgust. “You may go. See that we are not disturbed.”

The farmer bowed and left the room. Camilla shut the door behind him and turned to Ormond, shaking her head. “I am at a loss for words.”

He grimly looked at her.

Camilla sighed and leaned her weapon against the wall. She moved to the bed to get comfortable.

“I would have you answer one thing before you go,” Ormond requested. “What is it like when you do this?”

“It’s not easy. My spirit lifts from my body and it feels like death; like I might never return. But, it’s also like dreaming. The world seems as if it’s a distant blur, but you are in control of it.”

“Thank you.” Ormond sat in a chair near her bed.

Camilla turned to look at him. “Ormond, I don’t think we will be seeing each other again. So I want to thank...”

“That isn’t necessary. Just prior to meeting you, I had contemplated killing myself. Just think how your life might have been...had you never known me? I’m fairly sure I don’t deserve your gratitude.”

“You’re a good man, Ormond!”

“Please. I know what I’ve done... I know what I am.”

Camilla reached out to hold the nobleman’s hand. “I’m afraid for you. They’ll come—”

“Good, that’ll save me the trouble of riding to them.”

“But you *don’t* need to be here. No one needs to know you’re involved!”

“This farmer’s family already knows. Would you have me kill them all to save my skin? Besides, I must stay to protect you. These people might think you’re dead and try to bury you or something if I just leave you here.”

Camilla scoffed. “Did you always have an answer for everything in Court?”

Ormond shook his head. “You’re just stalling now... You said it was your goddess’ will that your body and soul make it to this unholy place. If that means its destruction, I will not falter until that mission is accomplished. *That* is why I am here; *why we’re together*. Don’t think for a moment I wouldn’t throw you in chains under any other circumstance. So, please just...go.”

A tear slipped down Camilla’s cheek but she regained her composure. “I like you, Ormond, and I know you say these things because you understand what must be done, but that doesn’t mean you *are* that person.”

She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes, inhaling deeply as she tried to relax her mind, to focus.

“Blessed Shelyn, hear my cry. Free my soul and let me fly. Let me be as the wind, as the clouds in the sky. Blessed Shelyn, hear my cry.”

A surge of power rushed through Camilla’s body as she prayed, and a painful tingling chased along her limbs like lightning. She felt a disorienting jolt, and then lifted out of herself.

The stillness made her nauseous as she floated to the ceiling. Camilla looked down at her body and tried to center herself. For several moments she felt the pull of her destination and what she had to do, but she continued to wait, looking at

Ormond as his shoulders slumped. He stood and paced around the bed watching her form carefully. After an intolerably long period, he then sat in his chair again.

"I know you're gone now but I thought you should know... I am not a good man. I sent men, women and children to their deaths daily. I participated in the Culling and I never once thought I was doing wrong, until they...*took* m-my... son."

The man broke down in his chair and sobbed, ripping at his clothing.

"I am a murderer of...children. It's like I killed *my own son!*"

Camilla felt a pang of sorrow in her chest and moved to touch Ormond's cheek. She ran her ethereal hands around him and the man curled up into a ball, staring at the door to the room.

She turned to face it.

Black ooze seeped from its cracks; Jonas' link to her was growing ever stronger. He waited beyond this gateway and Ormond somehow knew it too as he focused on the door unwaveringly.

Camilla drifted to the door and whispered, "*Jonas...*"

Ormond put his arms across her body and wept.

The farmhouse vanished as the world rushed past her, coming to a sudden stop at the bone-white fortress. Pain coursed through her essence as she struck an invisible barrier. She stretched out both hands and felt a cold wall of resistance.

"*Jonas,*" she said firmly. Her mind went back to her childhood, to thoughts of his laughter as he chased her outside the house, pretending to be a slobbering ogre. Her spirit pushed harder still against the wall, loving memories splitting the empty hatred of the barrier, and it began to crackle and spark from the strain.

"*Jonas,*" she said louder, remembering his hands gripping hers to pull her from the frigid lake's water. The wall shattered with a thunderous *crack* and she surged forward.

"Camilla!"

She stopped upon hearing his voice.

"Detain!" his voice boomed from all directions at once.

Camilla felt intense pressure from all sides as her brother's voice echoed increasingly louder until it was unrecognizable. Its presence burned with limitless hatred, crushing her soul.

I'm going to die, she realized with alarm. "*Merciful Shelyn, help me!*"

Camilla collapsed and saw her brother sneering above her as the pressure eased.

He raised his arm and pointed a long finger at her.

Camilla balked and tried to flee, but she found herself enclosed within an invisible barrier.

"*Jonas!*" she cried from her cage. He turned away slowly and the ground opened up below her. The barriers closed all around her, squeezing painfully.

"*Jonas!*" The pain increased, cutting the link back to her body. She felt a sickening nausea as she was pulled toward a pale green light held by a massive palm.

"*Merciful Shelyn, save me!*" she cried and the green light winked into nothingness.

ELAINE BETTS



The freezing chill took Camilla's breath away. She scrambled to keep herself afloat, but her arms were heavier than lead as she grabbed pieces of broken ice. She tried to kick her legs, but they were too numb to move. Her senseless fingers lost their hold and her nose went below the water.

Then a hand reached out and took her wrist, pulling her onto an ice sheet.

Camilla lay on the surface of the frozen lake. Beside her was the hole where she had fallen in. She could still hear her brother's screams, feel his hands pulling her out, and hear his pleading cries for her to wake up. She sat up and turned, but the tall figure standing next to her wasn't Jonas. It was a woman in black silk robes with blood red trim and soft white hair that flowed about her head like mist. Camilla wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Blessed Lady of Graves," she whispered, "am...am I dead?" The goddess of death nodded and turned to the shore. Camilla's brother was nowhere to be seen.



"Millie," Jonas whispered, shaking his little sister gently. "Millie, wake up."

The little girl coughed and rubbed her eyes. "I'm tired," she barely had the strength to speak, and coughed as Jonas stuffed some clothes into a sack.

"Get up," he said hastily. "Come on, Millie. We're going... We're going camping, just you and I. But we have to go, now."

Millie sat up, coughing painfully. Jonas winced at the sound. He wrapped a large cloak around her and pulled her to her feet. She leaned against him as he steered her out of the room and through the house.

"We have to be very quiet," Jonas whispered, leading her through the back of their home. "If Father hears us..." He stopped at the kitchen door and peered cautiously into the room.

"All clear," he whispered.

The children walked softly through the kitchen and to the back door.

Millie did her best to stifle her coughs in the fabric of her cloak, but Jonas cringed at each one. He knew they were painful, and he was afraid that they would draw attention. He let Millie catch her breath for a moment before leading her outside.

They crept into the yard and had just rounded the corner of the house when Jonas heard voices. He stopped and nudged his sister back against the wall. He motioned for her to sit and be quiet then edged closer to the conversation.

"...been four months since she fell in and she's not getting along any better," he heard his father say. "She never was very strong."

"She should have been Culled like her mother," a cold voice responded harshly. Jonas shivered. It was Brother Cromweil.

He was very young the first time he had met the dark-robed priest of Zon-Kuthon. It was the last time he saw his mother. She had been plagued by headaches that kept her in bed. Brother Cromweil deemed her useless, and sent her to be

Culled.

He never saw her again.

A few months later his father wed Millie's mother, but she didn't last long either.

"Children born too soon are rarely worth the trouble," the priest continued. "It's not your daughter's fault her mother was weak, but now we are in position to remove that frail line for good. Next time, choose a bride who has strength and vitality. You're lucky your son turned out so well."

Jonas frowned. Millie's mother had fallen ill while she was pregnant. As soon as Millie was born, she continued having problems recovering from the birth. So they took her one night, leaving Millie motherless.

And now she was still sick...

"No," Jonas whispered. "You can't have my sister." He crept back around the house where she was curled up in her cloak, sleeping.

"Millie," he hissed, shaking her and glancing over his shoulder. "Come on."

He picked up his little sister as gently as he could and carried her to the stables.

"Jonas?" Millie whimpered as he struggled to put her on their father's old mare. "Where are we going?"

"Away. Camping. Just hold on tight, okay?" He climbed up behind her, and the two children disappeared into the night.

By morning a fog lay on the road. Jonas felt relieved until he heard the sound of hooves coming from behind them. He looked down at Millie asleep against his chest and wondered what to do. If the trackers caught up to them, they'd take her and he would never get another chance to save her.

He brought the mare to a halt beside a clump of trees and clambered down. Then, he lowered Millie from the saddle and carried her slumbering form over to the small copse. He laid her down gently on a bed of ferns and pine needles and bent down to kiss her forehead.

"Good-bye, Millie," he whispered, his eyes glistening. "Get better, okay? I love you." He covered her with leaves and brush, returned to his father's horse and galloped away as hot tears trailed down his face.

He rode on as the fog burned away and by midday the old mare slowed and finally stopped. Soon he heard the pounding of hooves as his pursuers closed in: his father, Cromweil, two soldiers, and an acolyte from the temple. He tried to run but they circled around him, cutting off any means of escape.

"Where's your sister, boy?" his father demanded. Jonas just stood in the middle of the circle, glaring at Brother Cromweil. The priest stared back impassively.

"My lord, shall we take him to the Pillars?" one of the soldiers asked. "We—"

"No." Brother Cromweil cut her off with a wave of his black-gloved hand. "The boy has spirit and perhaps can yet make a contribution to our society." The woman bowed her head. Without another word, the soldiers and his father rode off, leaving Jonas alone with the Kuthite priest and his apprentice.

Brother Cromweil looked down at him and smiled menacingly.

"I've been watching you, boy. I can tell you are just the kind of person we need." He leaned forward in his saddle and peered down at Jonas.

"The trail ends here," the acolyte stated.

ELAINE BETTS

Jonas turned his head and stared at the man next to him in confusion.

“Your Grace? The trail ends here. What is your command?”

“Tie him!”



Aleister shook his head. The memory of the way he thought as a child sickened him. They stood before a small farmhouse, the eastern sky just beginning to brighten as the first signs of dawn came over the hills.

Aleister cleared his throat. “Go knock on the door, Captain.”

The soldier nodded and strode to the house.

“Open in the name of Aleister, High Priest of our lord, Zon-Kuthon, the Blessed Keeper of the Crucible,” he called loudly. Then, without waiting for a response, the captain kicked in the door and the soldiers stormed the house.

Aleister turned away from the screams and cries from within and returned to his carriage.

Ormond knelt beside the bed as the commotion erupted. He closed his eyes and bowed in prayer. It had been too long since he had given the gods his respect, but in light of recent troubles it seemed foolish to let pride turn away what comfort they could offer, however small.

Camilla’s body lay still and lifeless.

She had never been under so long, and many times he feared she would never awake, but he’d prepared himself for this possibility. Ormond squeezed his hands together tightly.

The door burst open from behind, but the nobleman didn’t turn. He didn’t struggle as they seized his arms and struck him with the pommel of a sword.

A black sack was thrown over his head, and he was dragged from the house.

He said nothing as his captors bound his wrists and then tied him behind a horse. With a crack of the whip, the horse lurched and pulled him forward.

What are they going to do with your body Camilla? he worried.



Wood creaked on flagstone as Aleister pushed the still form of his sister through the twisted corridors of the keep in a wheeled chair. All around dust-blackened workers shoveled coal into shafts that flowed down into large furnaces. A man behind the workers held a whip, poised for an opportunity to strike. A scream howled out from somewhere as Aleister guided his sister around a corner. He smiled as he looked down at her lifeless eyes and stopped for a moment to wipe the drool from her chin with his sleeve.

“It’s been such a long time, Millie. Fifteen years if I’m not mistaken.” He paused, a brief look of pain crossing his face.

“Did you ever learn what happened to me after I left you in the fog that night?” he whispered in her ear. “They put a hood over my head and chained me to a wall. I was only eleven, you know...just eleven...” He stopped talking for several minutes. The green gem hanging around his neck flashed and his eyes dulled.

"I prayed and prayed every hour for someone to save me, but no one came. My torturers always did, though... For months and months; years upon years. Slowly I learned there was only one thing in Nidal to turn to. I had to embrace it."

"Some said I went mad, but I heard *a voice* in my pain, clear as you hear me now. It repeated the same thing, over and over: *Life is Pain. Death is Pain. In pain, all begins. Through pain all thrives. In pain, all ends. Pain is all there is.*"

"It helped me understand. It helped me manage the routine of torture. And when my wounds still bled and the stabbing agony still lingered, I heard him clearest in my lonely cell. Blinded by that hood, I heard him...as I do now."

Aleister sighed. "We do not pick those that care about us, Millie, but when they do, we must honor that generosity. To have a god's attention, means they care, no matter what form that attention comes in. I built this place to honor...my god."

He turned and pushed the chair into a domed room. In every direction there were silver chutes leading from darkened archways around the chamber's periphery. He wheeled Camilla across a walkway to a platform at the center which overlooked all the chutes and the deep pit they emptied into. Far below, in the glowing heart of the chamber, a massive fire burned bright from great furnaces underneath, making the room uncomfortably warm.

"Do you like it, Millie?" he whispered to her. "My god finally has a temple worthy of him, a temple where the faithful can offer their prayers." He raised both his arms and the priests manning each channel turned to face their archways. Metallic squealing and scraping sounds echoed in the dome, followed quickly by screaming, as cages were wheeled to the edges of each chute.

"I've named it the 'Culling Dream' but others prefer to call it the 'Crucible,'" his voice resounded. The screams quieted to whimpers and soft sobs.

"Lord of Shadows accept our gift! Our offering—" Aleister turned back to his sister, lifting the gold chain from his neck and gently lowering it over her head.

"Your spirit will return in a moment," he whispered in her ear. "Then you will witness the glory of the Midnight Lord's rising. He will come, and you will see." He took both of her hands in his. "We can be together again, you and I."

He stood and turned away. "My lord, bless me with your presence and receive our sacrifice!"

The chorus of screams began to rise as the cages rolled forward.

Aleister bowed his head and pulled out a book. He flipped to a specific page and then read a passage:

They worship you, for they were told to accept less and gratefully took it.

They worship you, for they know this world holds no love or pity for them.

They worship you, for in their hearts they accept their fate.

And in the end, they worship you, for they would give anything to have another agonizing moment of their existence back.

Aleister closed the book and stood before the rising fires. He held out his hands and a brooding chant from the assembled priests mingled with all the cries and screams from the cages, and resonated in the domed room.

"He comes!"

"He comes!"

"He comes!"

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"He comes!"

And then there was silence.



Ormond stumbled forward blindly, his bound hands stretched out before him as he was pulled along. The black hood over his head prevented him from seeing where they were taking him, but he already knew. A citadel of bone waited, followed swiftly by a cage, fire and death.

His part of the plan was finished and so would he be, soon. He never learned what Camilla and her god had discussed, but if it meant his death to stop the madness, then it was a small price to pay.

"Open the gate!" a voice called from somewhere ahead.

He felt a hand close around his arm, stopping him briefly. Then a strong jerk on his bonds yanked him forward again. Even through the hood, he was overwhelmed by the stench of human excrement as he stumbled and fell to his knees.

The soldiers laughed.

"Put him in with the others!"

Ormond was hauled to his feet and after a few more steps he heard the creaking of rusty hinges and was shoved forward. A few pairs of arms caught him as he fell.

"Are you alright, son?" an elderly voice asked.

The hood was stripped away, and many hands worked at his bonds as he squinted around the steel cage at the faces of the prospective Culled.

A pale old man leaned over him with concern. "Are you alright?" he asked again.

"Are any of us?" Ormond replied as he was helped to his feet.

The old man grunted. "Well, at least you can speak and you have your wits about you. That's more than I can say for the rest of us."

Ormond studied his prison further. The steel wheels of the cage rested on the rails of a tracked ramp leading down into a domed building. A loud roar rumbled from deep below. *The furnaces of the Crucible*, he thought. Then the strong acrid odor of burning coal hit his nostrils and black smoke began belching out of the tower in the center of the keep.

"This will all be over soon," the old man sighed. "We will meet the Lady of Graves before dusk."

A woman nearby wailed and fainted against her neighbor, revealing a small child hiding behind her skirts. The little boy looked at Ormond with big, droopy eyes.

Mekal, he thought, as shame welled in his heart. He turned away and closed his eyes, the pain becoming all too real.

His son would have been seven, if he had lived. If...

"I'm sorry," Ormond whispered.

He turned back to the little boy, forcing a smile. "Hi." Ormond kneeled down. "What's your name?"

"J-J-Jorin," the boy squeaked timidly. "I can't hear my m-momma. Do you see her looking for me?" Ormond looked up at the old man.

“He’s blind; arrived here only yesterday. We’re all missing something to make us useful, but you appear fit enough. Why you here?”

Ormond smiled sadly. “My name is Ormond and I am—I *was*—an Umbral Lord. But, I’ve always been...useless.” His smile turned bitter. Then he turned back to Jorin and tapped the young lad’s hand. “I’m new here and it’s a little scary. Do you think I could hold your hand, Jorin?”

The boy hesitated but held out his hand as a tear fell from his face. “It’s... okay,” he whispered, hugging Ormond. “You’re not alone.”

Their cage lurched forward and everyone started to shout and scream. Jorin clung to Ormond’s neck with a quiet whimper.

The air grew warmer and warmer as the cage passed through an archway and into a massive, domed room. There were thirteen arches in all—thirteen cages filled to capacity with hundreds of screaming, crying prisoners. Ormond held tightly to Jorin and closed his eyes as two dark-robed priests removed pins from the fronts of the cages and stood out of the way. The doors slammed open and the bottom of the cage snapped to a massive hinge. Below, a chute slid into a roaring fire.

“Zon-Kuthon, Lord of Shadows, Lord of Darkness, accept our gift! Our offering—” a booming voice echoed from above.

There was an eerie quiet. Ormond could hear his breath in his ears, his heartbeat. Then the voice called again.

“Great Lord! Take now our sacrifice!”

The cage tilted up quickly and everyone screamed. Ormond fell, closing his eyes tight as he cradled Jorin to him. He could feel the heat from the Crucible rushing up to them. People fell in piles; the first to fall were crushed under the weight of their fellows. It was more horrifying than the most unkempt slaughterhouse. Holding Jorin close, Ormond fell into the chute, landing feet-first on a screaming man. He stumbled, but stayed on his feet, trying to walk across the writhing, heaving mass of despairing humanity.

This is all I deserve, Ormond thought, but this little boy doesn’t.

A shudder reverberated through the air, and Jorin held on tight to Ormond as an audible and tangible wave of power silenced even the most hysterical scream.

The prisoners had stopped falling into chute.

Ormond looked up to see a man suspended in mid-air, an invisible force holding him in place. No one was falling.



“No!” Aleister screamed in rage as the prisoners hovered above the furnace chutes. It was as if time stood still.

Another shudder of energy heaved through the keep. The metal cages gently righted and came to rest on their platforms. Falling prisoners floated back into their cages. The confused captives peered out, cautiously hopeful.

Growling, Aleister turned to see Camilla rise from her chair.

“No. *No!* We were supposed to be *together*,” he snarled. “He promised! This is the only way, don’t you see? I can’t undo what I am! You have to come to me,

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Sister.” He lunged at her as she held her arms out.

“I’m sorry, Brother. I’m too afraid of what I would become if I did.” She raised her hands to the dome and a wave of pure light shot from her body and reflected down in all directions through the Crucible.

Aleister howled as his body turned to ash, his god’s voice fading from his mind. Screams of pain echoed throughout the hall as priests and soldiers were incinerated. The holy beam turned against the thirteen cages and a wall of bars collapsed as the welding gave wave. The prisoners looked up at Camilla in awe. They took a few tentative steps out of their cells, and then started to run up the ramps while others helped those too weak to stand alone.

The keep was ominously quiet as hundreds of prisoners fled from the depths. Ormond walked to the rim of the Crucible and gazed up at Camilla, with Jorin clinging tightly to his neck.

Her eyes met his, but when she spoke, Ormond recognized the voice was not hers. It was that of the song of birds, the ringing of bells; full of beauty and stern authority.

“Ormond, Umbral Lord of Nidal, hear me. Today begins a new era. I have come to walk among you, to undo the harm my brother has done. Let it be known to all, I have come!”

A deep, angry rumble echoed through the chamber. A crack appeared in the pillar under Camilla’s feet and her eyes narrowed as the platform began to shake. Down below, flames shot up from the Crucible. Ormond bowed quickly and left the chamber as screams accompanied a roar from the mighty furnaces.

Camilla wrenched the green pendant from her neck, and held the gem imbedded in it, tightening her fist until the gem burst into shards, slipping between her fingers. Then she spread her arms wide and lifted her face to the ceiling as the fires rose up ever higher into the dome, engulfing Camilla in flames.

Ormond stepped outside as soot-stained slaves fled in all directions.

“The fire’s spread to the coal stores. It’s burning out of control!” one yelled as he ran by. Ormond grabbed Jorin and ran too. He was joined by several others, and together they helped one another outside. They didn’t stop until they reached the woods outside the bone-white walls.

A massive explosion rocked the keep, lifting it off its very foundation. Metal and wood flew into the air and rained over the surrounding forest as everyone fell to the ground for cover. Smoke plumed into the sky and billowed outward towards the woods.

Coughing and gagging, the slaves and prisoners moved deeper into the Uskwood for shelter. A light shined ahead and everyone went towards it. As Ormond approached, he saw Camilla waiting for him at the top of a ridge where the trees parted into sunlight. He climbed to the summit, holding Jorin firmly in one arm, but when he reached the top she was no longer there. His head dropped and he sat in the clearing to rest. Several others gathered around and rested from exhaustion.

“I want to go home.” Jorin sighed, leaning his head against Ormond’s side.

The nobleman smiled and touched the little boy’s shoulder. “We will see, little man. We just have to find your home first and decide if you will be safe there.”

Then he pulled a worn letter from his pocket, took a deep breath and unfolded the note to read the words that had been hastily put on the page:

My dear Ormond,

If you are reading these words, I have finally gone to be with Mekal.

We make choices sometimes that can never be taken back. We struggle for our lives and try to go on, but there is no escaping the truth: our actions hurt the ones we love. Sometimes, it is better to give up than see another day where you have to live with your decision.

Remember me as I was. Remember how we were before this changed us.

Goodbye, my love. I'm sorry.

Ormond wadded up the paper and threw it to the ground.

"I'm sorry too, love," he whispered.

He sat in silence for a moment and looked down at Jorin, staring listlessly off into the distance. He studied the child sadly. Then the boy cracked a smile, and reached for the man's hand. Suddenly, Ormond realized the boy watched over him too.



Cold...so cold...

The chilling water took her breath away. She struggled to climb out onto the ice, but her numb fingers couldn't hold on. With a gasp, she slid backward into the frozen water. It slowly closed in over her face like a skin of ice.

Jonas' hands seized Camilla's wrists and pulled her up.

"Millie," he called out to her. "Millie, hang on." He pulled, trying to haul her out of the frozen lake as the ice creaked and popped behind him.

Camilla looked up and saw his fear. It wasn't for anyone else but her.

Visions of her illness flashed in his eyes. She saw what he would do to save her. What he would become...

Millie let her muscles relax and her hands slipped away from her brother's.

"*Millie!*" Jonas screamed and he extended further as the ice behind him cracked. He fell into the water and pulled her tightly to him. The freezing water made him shiver as he held them both up until his strength waned.

Then they sank together into the deep, arms holding on to the other.

With the last of her strength, she hugged him and smiled.

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“No matter how long it has been, I shall never forget the day I saw my best friend after her own master turned her into his zombie servant. I just can’t look at them now; I never know when I will see the vacant and rotting eyes of another old companion.”

– Willow, concubine of Lord Chancellor Kemnebi

BEND AS THE WILLOW

By Dawn Fischer

L OTHER SAID FIRST impressions are crucial. She waited, motionless. Her knees dug into the cold marble floor, but she showed no discomfort. She could not move. Her body was bent over her knees, her legs tucked underneath, and her face planted on the floor as if kissing it. Her arms were splayed wide, the billowing gauzy sleeves looking almost like the lacey wings of a dragonfly.

Must not move ...

“I—I—I...I, ah, assure you, Lord Chancellor, she *is* a virgin in *every* sense,” said the voice above and behind.

A deep voice responded. “Your assurance is comforting, but... did you personally verify this, Jarmin?”

Quiet, rich, hypnotic.

She heard the other stammer. “I...well...”

She waited...

Still alive. Each moment precious. Every breath, slow, measured, priceless.

“Speak up, Jarmin.”

“Not personally, my Lord, but your ladies checked her, and...”

The Lord Chancellor waved a dismissive hand. The hall fell silent. Searing

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cramps in her calf muscles made her want to straighten her legs. She clamped her jaw tight.

Must not move. Remain still. It'll pass.

She recalled her mother's words, "*Don't forget, my precious girl. The Dead don't care or even tolerate the bodily needs of the living. Remain in control all the time or you will be fed to your Lord's ghoulish servants, and your father, brothers, sister and I will be made into zombies.*"

She gritted her teeth harder.

Must not appear to breathe... Ignore pain.

The deep voice moved closer to her. "She's a lovely specimen. From the late Lord Ruvio's harem and untouched? Well done, Jarmin."

She savored her next breath, a hidden sigh.

The baritone voice directed down. "You may get up now, girl. Stand and let me see your face again."

She rose gracefully, thankful that she could stretch her legs. Her robes flowed in wispy trails, made of a fine delicate imported silk. She let it flow about her, hinting at her well-toned body underneath. Her hair was in a simple knot at the base of her neck, adorned with but a single bone-white needle, but brushed until it shone like the golden rays of the goddess Sarenrae. Slowly, she raised her eyes to meet the Chancellor's, knowing what it meant to lock eyes with one so powerful. His black eyes were like pools of obsidian and held her silhouette in their icy grip.

He examined her.

She waited quietly and patiently, listening to her mother's voice in her head, "*Be as the willow, Sheralin. Remember; the willow bends under the wind but remains standing after the storm passes. You must endure like the willow. Remember; always remember...*"

She waited, showing no fear. Passive. Cool. Poised. She looked into his face but did not see it. Her breath was shallow, her chest did not move. *Slow...they don't notice if it's slow.*

The Chancellor blinked and she almost flinched. "She's fantastic, Jarmin; the best you've brought me in a century or two, perhaps ever. Take her to the others."

Jarmin bowed his head. Being careful not to touch her with his deathly incorporeal hands, the creature gently took the edge of her sleeve and started to escort her out.

"Wait." An unseen power froze her. "What's your name, girl?"

"Willow." She whispered.

"Speak up, girl."

"Willow, my Lord," she said louder.

He arched his brow and looked her over again. "Willow...an apt name." His piercing black eyes searched her pale blue ones, his prowess unrelenting as it held her gaze.

"It is a very great honor to be chosen for my harem, for you and your family. Few among the Quick are ever given this gift. Your family trained you well. Do not let them down and they will live long enough to see you honored with immortality and to become one of the elite."

She looked, but did not see into his eyes. "I will serve you well, my Lord

BEND AS THE WILLOW

Chancellor.”

“Good. Go with Jarmin and learn your duties.”

A slight tug from her sleeve, and Willow continued forward.

Her face remained passive and smooth, her demeanor composed. But as they walked, she reveled in the moment. *Oh Momma, we did it! I'm inside where few mortals have ever been.*

She used her eyes to gawk at the realistic wall friezes along the corridor. One horrific scene of vampiric rapine caused her to shiver as she drove the images from her mind.

They walked through endless corridors until Jarmin stopped at a stone wall. He drifted in front of her, made a gesture she was unable to see, and the stone wall slid open, revealing a wide oval-shaped hall with doors—some open, some closed—off of a walkway running along the walls. A wide staircase dominated the center of the grand hall and led down to a lounge on a lower level with all manner of chairs, sofas, pillows and couches. Most were made of soft velvet, smooth silks and deep-pile suede leather, all adorned with laces and tassels—though not a single sequin. Women were seated everywhere, some alone, some applying makeup to others or fixing hair. They all stopped and looked up at her through Jarmin’s ghostly form as he led Willow into the room.

Jarmin announced, “This is Willow. Your Lord commands you to teach her the ways.” He pointed to an oval door at the far end of the room. “See that door, Willow? That’s for the Lord Chancellor’s wives. Someday you may become one, but you will be killed if you enter it now. Stay out.”

The apparition spun around, leaving through the opening in the stone wall. Upon Jarmin’s exit, the wall slid closed.

Willow assessed him as he left the room, daring at last to think and observe. *Wraith, and his touch is death....no doubt the Lord’s servant.* She held herself tight to avoid an involuntary shiver.

She took a steady breath trying to calm her racing heart. The women around the room kept staring at her, some with pity, some with curiosity and others with aggression painted across their faces. It was the pale-faced girls who disturbed her, staring wide-eyed at the oval door.

Is that what he does to those who displease him?

A flat voice spoke, “Willow is it? I’m Amber. I’ll show you to your room in a while; it’s being readied now.”

Amber...she *was* Amber. Her hair was golden-orange. She wore amber necklaces that almost covered the marks on her neck that also accented her amber-like skin tone.

“Come. Sit.” She led Willow to a nearby divan and sat her down. “Let’s get you something cool to drink.” Amber motioned to a zombie at the room’s fringes and it shuffled off.

Willow sat on the divan’s edge, staring into the contents of the goblet given her and sipped.

“Willow?” Amber’s voice broke the uncomfortable silence. “Your room is ready.”

Willow set down her unfinished cup and followed quietly up the stairs, to one

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of the many doors off the upper balcony. Amber led her through a door, down a short corridor to a spacious suite.

Except for a few small empty hooks, the walls were bare. There was a large oval bed, some chairs, a padded bench and a small wardrobe. The linens were freshly cleaned and the under sheets were cream-colored silk. Though it appeared spotless, she detected the smell of dried blood.

Amber said something that Willow did not hear. She just nodded and held herself to a tight form, her ears ringing, her mind pleading for Amber to leave, until the door closed and she was alone. Willow released the tension, finally safe—finally able to let go.

I can't do this. He's going to feed me to his wives or maybe have his servants kill me like they did to the rest of Ruvio's harem.

She panicked and fell on the bed hard, weeping. She grabbed at her hair knot and pulled the long white needle. Her hair fell down and she breathed a sigh as she cradled it.

Undamaged...Thank you, Sarenrae. Thank you.

She fondled the needle. Lovingly crafted by her mother and given to her before they parted, it was the last connection to her family. She curled into a ball around a pillow, tears still falling, and shook until spent, finally falling into a dreamless sleep.

Willow slept deeply to awaken to the heavy stench of cheap perfume. A zombie slave stood above her bed, attempting to wake her. Startled, she drew back but quickly, recovering her composure. The perfume could not mask the odor of rot, but she could mask her revulsion.

No matter how long it has been, I shall never forget the day I saw my best friend after her own master turned her into his zombie servant. I just can't look at them. I never know when I will see the vacant and rotting eyes of another old companion. The creature's controller must be nearby.

She glanced around to gain her bearing and saw Amber at the door. The previous day's events flooded back. It was real! It was no dream...

"Come," said Amber, "the Lord Chancellor wants you to attend him at a gala this afternoon. You will need a formal robe."

Willow sat up and twisted her hair into the same bun and inserted her precious needle. She glanced at the now-open wardrobe full of exotic frocks, any one of which, if sold, could feed a family for a year. Grabbing one at random, she threw it on, waving off the zombie's help. Amber watched, eyes dull, saying nothing. Willow finished and Amber took her down the short hall and back to the central lounge area where the harem's mortal ladies waited.

A pair of girls waved her over. They had a selection of cosmetics, hair pins and accessories on a small table in front of them. A dark-haired Garundi girl with a bronzed complexion clicked her tongue.

"You should have awakened her earlier, Amber. There's no time now to bathe her properly." She flipped her chin at Willow while staring at Amber.

Amber stared back expressionless. Willow noticed the mist-green scarf tied loose around the Garundi's neck, accentuating rather than hiding the bite marks underneath. After a tense half-minute of staring at each other, Amber shrugged

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and sauntered to the far end of the lounge where she plopped on a couch.

Another waved Willow to sit between them next to their beautician's supply table. "I am Jade, and she's Orchid." She gestured to her partner, a petite girl with nearly-white hair and eyebrows.

Orchid smiled at Willow and her cheeks dimpled. The pair quickly dressed her hair and painted her face. Willow wondered how she looked and wished she had a mirror, but none would be found. No sequins or mirrors were allowed. Vampires hated mirrors.

She mused on this as she was led away by a zombie servant.

They hate mirrors. It was once thought a vampire's dread for their reflections hinted at some weakness, something a hunter could use. Weakness indeed, the hunters were right—but not in a way suspected.

Many hallways and passages later she was led to an echoing hall full of others, talking, gesticulating, some even laughing. Upon stepping at the entrance she halted, so suddenly in fact her escort zombie stumbled.

Mortals, among the elite lords? It's strange to find the Quick and the Dead rubbing elbows with one another. Something few slaves, except for the Lord's mortal concubines and undead servants, ever see.

She swept forward again, following the zombie into the hall. Heads turned to stare at her as she passed. Voices, loudly defending the virtue of certain trade goods or products, fell to whispers as she passed. She kept a smooth expression, her mother's favorite, the one in which she seemed to have a hint of a smile from the natural curvature of her lips.

She drifted towards the end of the hall where fewer mortals mingled still, among the Dead. The hall was filled with many of their kind, but they were as faceless strangers, until...

Her heart froze.

A face in the crowd she knew...but no...he saw her and didn't recognize her. She fought to hold her composure despite the thundering in her head and pounding of her heart.

Surely they will hear... Relax, breathe...slow...

She glanced again and then away...

What was his name? Virdar... Maybe he doesn't remember.

She had not seen that face in so many years. It was long ago in a different time, a different manse and a different garden.

Oh, how they loved to show off their gardens...



Pale orchids hovered over her head, pink as flesh. "Have you ever wondered, Sheralin, why we vampires hate mirrors? Most mortals do." Virdar's voice whispered in her ear, but she felt no breath.

"I am not sure, myself," she paused.

"I think for me, at least, it is a reminder that I am no longer mortal. We vampires, alone among the Dead, wish we could experience mortality again. We do not need young nubile slave girls such as you for sustenance. Anything with red blood will

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do. Your emotions and reactions to us make us feel vital and alive, and remind us of our long-lost mortality. This we cherish—nay, *desire*—with unrivalled passion greater than the desires of mere human lust. Though you are right to fear, for some take this to extremes and wish to feel terror instead of passion. I am not like those others. You will have to take my word on this because you will never experience such a bond with a man. I want you to share my passion. I want you to feel that and nothing else. Now all I need is to pry you away from your master. He will accept my price. He must..." He touched her neck with his forefinger. She resisted the urge to pull away and kept herself pliant, like the willow.

Gardens, not mirrors. This is important, remember it. Yes, mother, I know. The willow bends and does not break against the storm.



Whispers arose from the crowd.

"Exquisite."

"I heard she came from Lord Ruvio's harem and that she's still virgin."

"Nonsense. Ruvio would never let such a beauty escape his...*attentions*."

Another leaned in. "She was new. Perhaps he hadn't gotten around to her yet."

"Perhaps...perhaps."

She felt their stares boring into her, undressing her with their eyes, but she slipped past them, ignored them and headed straight to the end of the hall.

Every step was precise and well-practiced, rolling from heel to toe in one smooth motion. Her hips moved so little she seemed to glide, much like the Lords. She stayed fixed on the zombie leading her, looking neither right nor left. She ignored the distractions, and closed her eyes to unsettling familiar faces. It was time to concentrate, to *perform*. It seemed like forever, but she finally came to the end and entered a smaller room through a pair of heavy, dark and rich wooden doors, guarded by a pair of ghostly servants of the Lord Chancellor. The room beyond was filled with Geb's vampire society elite.

At the head of a large black wood table sat Lord Chancellor Kemnebi, resplendent in his golden brocade robes trimmed with silver, conversing with others of his kind. He paid no heed to her as the zombie led Willow to her place. A lounge chair sat at the side of the large table. Beside the chair was a small round table. A pitcher of ice water with lemon slices and a glass cup sat on top the table.

He's showing me off. Does this mean he's going to keep me? Oh Sarenrae ...I hope so.

Willow showed neither fear nor impatience. She knew her duty. She positioned herself on the lounge and poured a glass of water. She wrapped her demure hands around the glass and sipped. Her face remained impassive, perfect as a porcelain doll as she waited, quivering from fear within.

Patience is not a virtue for you, Willow. It's life. Each breath is one more than before.

She watched the ice melting in her glass.

Ice is hard. Ice resists and slowly it is worn away until gone. You cannot be like ice, cold and hard. You must be warm. They crave it. Do not resist.

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The warmth of her hands and her breath caused condensation to appear on the exterior of the glass.

Conversations began dying off. One by one, the Chancellor's guests drew their attentions away from each other to watch her drink, until the room fell silent.

Finally, one of the more spirited Lords stood before the table. He was dressed in a flamboyant red brocade vest with precious jade buttons and almost purred as he spoke.

"I must compliment you on your new acquisition, Lord Chancellor. I cannot help but note the effect she has upon many here. If you do not mind my impertinent question, perhaps you can elaborate upon how you acquired your new *distraction*?"

Lord Chancellor Kemnebi turned his obsidian eyes upon the speaker. "Ah, my dear Lord Huegar, I believe she was of the unfortunate Lord Ruvio's harem. My seneschal can confirm the details later if you wish. The acquisition was a legal one, I assure you."

Willow stopped listening. She wanted to shiver.

Ruvio... The name still terrifies me so, even after...

I remember his garden so strongly, the beauty of the sunflowers fully open to the light of the sun during the day and to the rustling whispers of the breeze caressing them at night. He flaunted his garden as if he were too powerful for something as trivial as daylight. Bravura...he was one of the elite. He thought nothing could touch him.

She snapped herself out of reverie. "Guard your thoughts, Sheralin; they can show on your face. It is said that some of the Blood Lords can even hear surface thoughts. You are a toy, an ornament, a play-thing. Think this, and it'll be all they see." Good words, Momma, but I am not a toy. I am a drug...

The conversation flowed around her and she was listening again, her mind blank and her thoughts suppressed.

"I heard that upon his demise, Ruvio's harem was given to the ghouls to feed upon. How did this one escape?" As she focused again on the conversation, Lord Huegar's insistent tones awoke an alarm in her mind.

"Ah, as to that I ordered a few to be auctioned. The new stock never had any opportunity to reach him, assuming poison was the means, which I doubt. I was fortunate my wraith, Jarmin, was present at the auction and plucked this prize for me..." For the first time this eve, his glance touched upon Willow and his smile almost gloated.

To Kemnebi's left, a grim vampire with scars across his face wearing a dusty midnight-blue velvet cloak spoke in rasping tones. "I find Ruvio's death suspicious, the rumors of his own error in judgment nonsensical. Not even that arrogant ego-maniac would linger in the sun so long that it would burn him to ash. You'd think if he'd fallen asleep in his...*garden*...that dawn's burning light would wake him and drive him inside."

Kemnebi's melodic voice echoed in the chamber. "Milord Gresswell, murder? That has not been confirmed. With his body burned to ash we've precious little to go on."

A Lord on Kemnebi's right fidgeted nervously, his filthy white lace cuffs

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dangling, dirty from his tendency to drag them upon the table. Catching the Lord Chancellor's eyes, he ceased fidgeting as he spoke in excited tones, "Surely there's *something*. I needn't remind you the entire vampire community is in an uproar. Ruvio isn't the first *accidental* death in the past few years. He's the *fourteenth* and none so close to the throne. Shouldn't we be concerned now that one of our own has been found this way? Shouldn't *you*, Lord Chancellor?" He flipped the lace of his sleeves as he pointed.

Kemnebi cleared his throat. "We examined Ruvio's entire palace. The only thing we found was that a few among his harem had tiny figurines in their chambers. It *is* possible they were of the goddess Pharamasma. It is nothing new that religious lunatics following Pharamasma oppose our existence. We've always fought those bent on denying us our full rights as sentient beings. We've always won. We always will. But we must be vigilant and ruthless."

The excitable vampire insisted. "So you discount the rumors of the harem girl connection?"

"They are just slaves. Even if they all assaulted Ruvio at once, he could have slain them without effort. Still, most came from Lord Sinteras's harem. He was found in a similar fashion, though his garden was outside his house and not in a courtyard." He paused.

"To be certain, we not only had all of Sinteras's harem killed, but Ruvio's as well, with the exception of new acquisitions. Vampires do die from time to time, and just because there's been a recent rash doesn't mean there are assassins. No...I surmise that Ruvio, in his arrogance, made one too many enemies, and it was a vampire lord who took vengeance upon him." Here Kemnebi focused his attention solely on the nervous Kelbin. "Lord Kelbin, if you *fear* your own harem, then I suggest you send them all to the ghoulish pits. Direct your own seneschal to purchase replacements and be done with it," Kelbin pulled his hands below the table and straightened himself, noticing a smirk on the Lord Chancellor's face.

Huegar tensed his brow deep in thought, his agitation clear. "Ruvio was an insufferable fool. He was bound run awry of the court sooner or later. Though, Chancellor, I wonder why you didn't order *all* of the harem girls killed, even those with no signs of Pharamasma worship." He attempted to focus his attention on Kemnebi, but failed as it was drawn back to Willow, making his suspicions all too clear.

Lord Chancellor Kemnebi turned to Willow and returned his attention to Huegar in scathing displeasure. "Yes, I know. There are others to refill our harems, and we can eliminate whomever we choose. I routinely eliminate those among my own harem showing signs of resistance. If you fear those from another harem, Heugar, you should take action. As for me, I fear no mortal, nor anyone at this table for that matter."

Huegar scoffed, "You begin to sound as overconfident as Sinteras, Chancellor. Sinteras also..."

Willow half listened until they mentioned the name Sinteras. His name drew an emotional response from her.

Sinteras was a musician, played harp and piano. He sang to me, had a lovely voice. I miss him. I could have gotten used to him, had he not... I wasn't so afraid

BEND AS THE WILLOW

there.



“Sheralin, don’t you ever wonder what it would be like to be immortal? I could give you this gift. I could take you now, here, and drink of your blood till your heart fails.”

She trembled and tried to shake her head, “no.” Her heart beat faster and faster. Sinteras gently slid one arm around her waist and pulled her close. With the other he eased her head back exposing her neck.

“No...no...don’t be afraid. It’s just a quick stab. I’ll be as gentle as I can. You won’t die. You will live forever, as beautiful as you are now, unchanging, and I will take care of you.”

She remembered her mother’s voice. *Be as the willow, Sheralin. Bend, do not break. It is how you will survive.*

She relaxed.

“There, there,” he whispered in her ear. “It only hurts a minute. In time you will thank me, maybe come to love me as much as I’ve come to love you.”

He sank his fangs into her neck, and she gasped as the pain took hold. She curved her free arm up and drew out her mother’s long hair needle, releasing the golden cascade below her shoulders. Reaching around his back, she felt for just the right place as his attention focused on her warm blood. He never felt it enter, so sharp the point, so tiny. She thrust it between his ribs to pierce his heart. He lurched, pulled away from her with shock on his face and collapsed at her feet, dead. She wiped the bone white needle clean. It looked just like bone, but it wasn’t. It was made from the heart of a willow tree, strong, flexible and bending, but bone stiff when cured.

She twisted her hair into a knot at the base of her neck, reinserted the needle, and waited until the sun crested the hills. Its warming rays embraced her. She closed her eyes and absorbed the warmth. As Sinteras was erased by the sun’s rays, so too were her neck wounds. She walked across the fields and back to her room where it appeared she’d been all night.



A voice disrupted her thoughts. “Willow, come to me.”

She stood and set her glass down that instant. She noticed for the first time that every vampire in the room observed her with varying shades of greed, possessiveness, and in some cases, fear. She resisted the impulse to swallow nervously. With measured steps she glided towards her new lord. Heads turned to follow her movements. Ten feet from him, she knelt, and with angelic grace, prostrated in front of him, his entourage intrigued. She awaited his pleasure on the cold stone floor as before.

“Willow, were you in Sinteras’ harem? Some here say they remember a girl that looked like you. Think back. It *was* several years ago.”

Willow sat up and looked directly into those obsidian eyes. Fear exploded

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inside, her heart pounding like the hooves of a galloping horse. *He did recognize me! It's over. I'm dead.*

She willed herself to calmness before answering, "No, my Lord."

A vampire stepped out from behind the Chancellor. It was Lord Virdar, the one she recognized from the hall. She froze. She was a rabbit in a trap. She couldn't move. His silky voice traveled across to her ears. "She certainly resembles that young golden-haired beauty Sinteras once flaunted at some of us. Had I thought of her, I'd have tracked her down when they sold off Sinteras' harem after he died. What was her name? Sheralin! Yes, that's it!"

"Willow, is your name Sheralin?" His piercing eyes searched her soul.

"No, my Lord, it's Willow." Her mind was blank.

"Did Lord Ruvio buy you from Sinteras?"

"No, my Lord."

Calm, calm.

The rasping voice of Lord Gresswell interrupted, "Chancellor, we're wasting time. This brainless creature knows nothing. We should discuss real evidence, not straws grasped by overly excitable fools." He sneered at Lords Huegar and Kelbin. Both backed away hastily.

Lord Chancellor Kemnebi looked down upon Willow prostrate on the floor. "Willow, go back to your place. We'll speak later this evening. I understand you like roses. My garden's filled with them."

Graceful as a willow, she rose and glided back to her chair. She took her glass and sipped...

EXISTENCE

By W. David Wood

“**B**UT MAMA, SHE doesn’t want this.”
“Shush,” she hissed, pinching my left arm. She threw a glance to Father who stood quietly behind me.
“This is important.”
“But-”

My father rested his calloused hand on my right shoulder and dug his thumb in firmly. I winced and looked back at him.

“Quiet, boy. We know what’s best for her, not you,” he whispered, keeping his eyes trained forward.

“If the priests find her worthy, she’ll have a much better existence, now,” Mother added. “*Please*, Kainer.” Her worried look cut off my reply.

I nodded meekly and returned my attention to the ceremony.

The priests wore robes of gray and red and paraded around the table where my sister’s body lay. They swung their censers of smoldering herbs and the odor made my nose wrinkle. They were preparing my sister for her Transition, and it was a lengthy process to do so; prayers were said, portents were considered, and the purifications had to be strictly followed.

The neighbors were crowded into our small home, filling the few rooms attached to Father’s leatherworking shop. They watched the ceremony dutifully

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while I fidgeted with my fingers. This wasn't the first service I'd seen, but it was the first time it had been performed for a member of my family. When it had been held for others in the village, my sister and I would just skulk around the edges of the crowd, waiting for the moment we could sneak off to play. This time though, I had to stand with my parents in the front row.

My sister, Kaina, was my twin. A scorpion had stung her a few days ago and she'd gotten very sick. She passed away after a feverish struggle against the venom, and my parents sent for the priests soon afterwards.

Their procession arrived in silence, wrapped in airs of wisdom and mystery. They took over our small home and made it ready for the first rites of the Transition. Their leader didn't offer much in the way of comforting words. He espoused the usual dogma that *she wasn't really dead*, merely *starting a new phase of her existence*, and that mourning was an unforgivable insult to the process.

"Whosoever gives this person to the Pallid Princess, step forward," he said. Mother, Father, and I stepped up to the bier supporting Kaina. Father laid a hand on her forehead and Mother covered Kaina's heart. I held her hand, trying to stifle a shiver. She felt so cold.

"Let those who believe in the falsehood of cessation mourn. Existence does not end with death, but continues into another phase this child will soon embark upon. There is no true difference," he proclaimed in reverent tones. My parents nodded in agreement. Mother beamed, and I could tell she felt that Kaina was indeed moving toward an improved station. Father smiled, standing tall and proud while he listened. I swallowed a lump in my throat.

The priests began their intonations and prayers. These creeds were taught in the villages north of Mechitar, and they seemed to bring comfort to most, but I felt they were nothing but lies.

I was sad my sister was gone, her life snuffed out. Despite the priest's words, I missed her already. She and I both knew there was a difference between the celebrated "stages of existence." We never told Mother and Father, though; such thoughts were frowned upon in our little village. But we knew. We knew the phases weren't the same because of what happened with Kaina's dog.



Four years ago, when we turned ten, a neighbor's dog had had puppies and our father bought one for our birthday. We both loved that little dog from the start, but he ended up more Kaina's than ours. I would throw him a toy, and he would take it to Kaina. I'd call him to me, and he would go to Kaina. I was jealous but not resentful; Kaina just had a way with him.

We did argue over what to name him, though. We tried to get our mother to choose a name, but she said he was ours and it was up to us.

One evening she was serving supper when the puppy nipped at her heels playfully. Mother stumbled over him when he got caught under her feet and the tray with our meal spilled onto the dog.

"The grits!" she exclaimed, looking down at the mess. Father laughed, but the puppy yelped and my sister and I rushed to wipe the hot food off him. We saw

later that he'd actually been burned badly on his back, and even though the area healed, it never grew hair again.

So we named him Grits.

Mother hated it, we loved it, and Father thought it was hilarious.

Kaina took good care of Grits. She fed him, gave him baths, and we both played with him. Whenever we weren't doing chores or helping Father in his shop, we'd be playing with Grits. His favorite game was chasing after a lump of knotted scrap leather left from Father's work. We'd toss it, and he'd bring it back without fail.

We played this way for years.

One day Kaina tossed the toy too hard and it landed in the street. We cried for him to stop but Grits ran to get it and was trampled by a galloping horse. He yelped once—a short, piercing sound of surprise and pain. Then he was dead.

The rider had been one of the village priests, and he didn't even stop.

Mother and Father heard our cries and came running out to the street. They saw what happened and took us inside immediately, arms around our shoulders and whispering words of comfort. Father left us with Mother then went back to gather up the remains and put Grits in his shop.

A few days later, Father brought us another dog. "Here you go. Grits is all better, now."

At first we thought Father had gotten us a different dog and was trying to pass him off as ours. He looked just like Grits, though a bit thinner. He even had the same spotted back and brown patch over his left eye.

It couldn't have been Grits, though. He didn't act the same.

He just stood there, staring at nothing in particular and barely responded when we called. We tried to play with him by tossing leather knots, but he just watched and slowly looked back at us, not understanding. Kaina left food for him, but I never saw him eat it. He never ran, either; just ambled along, never in a hurry. I never saw a dog that shuffled everywhere it went until Father brought this one home.

We'd only had him for a couple of days when Kaina pulled me into the alley behind our house.

"Kainer," she whispered, "I think that dog *is* Grits!"

"What?"

"Really! I think Father took Grits to the priests at the temple!" Her voice was a frantic hiss.

"But only people can Transition. Dogs can't...can they?"

"I don't know."

"Why do you think it's Grits?"

She looked at the ground, thinking. "Do you remember how Grits got hurt when Mother spilled the hot food on him?"

"Yes..."

"His fur never grew back in that spot, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, look at this dog's coat; he has the same bare patch of skin."

I went back inside and saw the dog standing in the kitchen, staring at the wall,

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tongue lolling. Kaina followed and watched from the door as I walked over and knelt down beside him. I carefully stroked his back, feeling cool skin through his short, bristly fur. He didn't acknowledge my touch, but just kept gaping at the wall beside the door. My fingertips found a long, smooth patch of skin that ran across his back. If this was Grits, the scar was in the right place. I leaned in and whispered, "G-Grits?" My voice shook.

The dog slowly turned his head and looked at me, his eyes focusing more than they ever had before. He tried to lick my face, but all he managed was a feeble shake of his head. His tongue couldn't move enough to lick me.

I fell onto my backside and scurried away on my hands and feet until I collided with my sister's legs. She pulled me up and we backed away from the dog around the table. He tried to follow us, whining as he shuffled. It was a pitiful sound, tired and wheezy.

"Stay!" my sister said sharply. The dog stopped and stared at us.

Kaina and I looked at each other, then back at the dog.

"It *is* Grits," I whispered.

"Yeah."

The dog stayed, but his stare became less focused, his jaw more slack. My sister and I sat down at the table, trying to deal with this sudden truth.

Father was a believer and had tried to make us happy again by having the priests bring our dog back, but he wasn't the same. We had been raised to believe that there was no difference between life and death, that there was just *existence*. One day we would simply Transition as we continued through reality, ever on.

We were sure Father meant well, but having our beloved dog brought back this way did something to us. Knowing how Grits had been, and seeing what he had become, revealed a powerful difference between life and the unlife that awaited everyone in the village. I wondered why Father couldn't see that himself, or worse still, if maybe he saw the difference and was too wrapped up in his beliefs to admit it. Is this what he expected some day for himself and Mother? For us? I didn't want to believe he could be so willfully blind to what Grits had become, to think he was "better" now. He never spoke much about our religion, or his faith in particular, but he didn't have to now—his actions spoke volumes.

"Now I know," Kaina whispered, breaking the silence.

"What?"

"Why they take some of the bodies away. Why they go somewhere else after their... *Transition*." The word had taken on a sinister tone. "It's so we don't see the difference between what they were and what they turn into."

I nodded. "Like Grits."

"Yes, like Grits, Kainer."

My sister looked disgusted and scared all at once, her skin pale. She reached over and took my hands in hers and squeezed tightly. "Kainer, you need to promise me something."

I looked up, and our eyes met.

"If I ever die, I want you to make sure I don't Transition. Don't let the priests take me."

"But Kaina, it's the law. We have to!"

She shook her head. “I don’t care. Promise me! Promise me and I’ll do the same for you!”

I nodded fearfully and she made me spit-swear on it, licking our fingertips and pressing them on each other’s forehead.

I got up and went to the pantry. Kaina watched silently as I took an empty sack from a shelf and turned to her. She nodded curtly, knowing what I needed to do as only a twin could. Her wide eyes glimmered with tears as I swept the dog into the sack. I twirled it closed and slung it over my shoulder. Kaina pressed her head down on the table and cried softly as I smuggled Grits into the alley behind our house. It was a long, sad walk to the palisade wall where I heaved the barely moving sack into the garbage pits. He tumbled in and struggled to sit up, then his head popped out of the sack and he stared blankly at the piles of crud and noisome waste.

I cried most of the way back home. It felt like I had abandoned our pet when he needed us most.

A few days later when Father asked about the dog, Kaina said he must have gotten out and wandered off. Father was sad about that, and said Grits was a good dog and that we shouldn’t worry, he might come back soon. A few days later we started seeing Grits every once in a while, wandering the streets and alleys, each time a little closer to home. We never brought him back to the house, though.



When the ceremony was over, the priests bundled my sister into a cart for the trip back to their temple. I strained to swallow the lump in my throat, to blink back tears that would draw the wrong type of attention. My parents were model citizens, smiling with modest pride because their beloved daughter would now be off to serve the nation after her Transition. Father took a few minutes to talk with the priests while Mother and I stood to the side. I couldn’t hear much, but soon Father smiled broadly and embraced the head priest, who returned the gesture awkwardly. He turned and nodded at Mother, still smiling with a tear budding in the corner of his eye. Mother sighed and clutched her hands to her breast as Father came over to join us. He swept us up in a crushing hug and swung us around. Mother laughed. I struggled for breath. Then the neighbors gathered around to learn the cause of our apparent joy.

“They judged her worthy,” Father said, rubbing the tear from his eye. “She’s special, they said. She’s going to do just fine. Her Transition will be more than we ever expected!”

Mother glowed and wiped her eyes, too, and both accepted offers of congratulations from our neighbors then invited them to stay and partake in refreshments that they’d laid out for the occasion.

Through it all I felt ashamed at how I’d failed Kaina.

We stood outside afterwards and bade the priests farewell. The cart drove away with my sister, and my parents and their guests went back inside. I remained in the street, watching the cart disappear up the road until I was sure I was alone.

Then I let the tears come.

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When I was able to compose myself I went inside and picked at some food, avoiding people as best I could. I went to bed early, but the gathering in our home kept me awake as the guests talked and laughed with my parents. I lay on my cot, pressing my fists into my eyes, my teeth clenched.

There was a knock on my door. “Kainer?” It was Father.

“Yes?”

“Can I come in?”

“Sure,” I said, half-heartedly.

He entered and I wiggled up against the headboard, drawing my feet up and wrapping my arms around my pillow to hide most of my tear-stained face.

Father sat at the foot of my bed. “I noticed you didn’t eat much, Son. Everything okay?”

I just looked at the wall and sighed.

“I’m thinking this was a rougher day on you than it needed to be.”

I bit my lip and kept silent.

“Your mother and I only ever wanted the best for you and Kaina. You understand that, don’t you?”

I nodded slowly.

“Kaina is going to be much better off than most, now. The priests found her worthy of special notice by the temple. When she begins the rest of her existence, she’ll be in a position of higher prestige, I was told. Her best days are ahead of her, Kainer.”

“Like Grits, Father?”

Father blinked then looked around my darkened room. “Uh...that’s a poor example. Grits was much different than your sister.”

“He was a lot *more* different after you had him brought back, too.” I turned my head and looked him in the eye. “He was hardly Grits at all, really.”

“Kainer, please—”

“Will Kaina be that different, Father?”

“I don’t know, Son. But she will be better off.” He stood up to leave.

“Do you really think that?”

He crossed over to the door and paused. Without turning to look at me he sighed softly. “Yes. I do.” Then he shut the door and returned to the party.

I chuckled mirthlessly and rolled onto my side, pulling the pillow around my head to muffle the noise.

They were celebrating Kaina’s Transition; the fact my beloved twin sister was going to be like Grits—a mindless, soulless *thing*. I curled up and moaned as I pictured Kaina in my mind; shuffling, her eyes dull and her mouth slack.

And soon I felt my sadness giving way to something else: *anger*.

I was angry that my parents were happy, and that the neighbors were helping them celebrate. I was mad at the priests, their temple, and their decrees. I was even mad at Kaina for stepping on that scorpion. Most of all, though, I was furious at myself for not stopping it, for being too weak, and for breaking my promise.

I rolled and then swung my feet over the side of the cot to sit hunched over, hugging the pillow under my chin. I thought about the priests in their charcoal robes and the red ribbons hanging from their belts. I remembered the one in charge:

how his cold, sharp features reminded me of one of Father's leather-cutting tools. He had such a smug, superior look about him, and I wagered he saw our lives as inconvenient, delaying the rites he wanted to perform. I remembered his words. They were spoken to bring solace, but I only saw condescension.

I bit into my pillow, frustration growing.

He was no better than a bully. As children, Kaina and I learned to evade the ones in town by taking different routes on our errands. We learned to be sneaky, avoid confrontations, and get what we needed done.

Being sneaky kept us safe.

Sneaky.

I sat up straight, dropping my pillow to the floor. Of course I was too weak to confront the priests head on. But if I were sneaky enough...

...I could steal my sister back!



I waited for the guests to leave and for my parents to go to bed. When I heard their soft snoring, I crept from my room and down the short hallway to Father's store. Only a curtain separated the leather goods shop from the rest of our home so I didn't need to worry about a locked door. I used a tindertwig to light a candle on one of the work tables and looked for things that might help me with my task.

I found a leather vest Father had been working on for one of the village watchmen. The stitching wasn't quite finished but the vest was serviceable, so I slipped it on. I noticed Father's stout cudgel under the front desk and wondered if I had the nerve to use it. I pulled it out and hefted it, getting a feel for its weight, then fashioned a crude loop from some leather straps to keep it in my belt. I blew out the candle and faced the door that led to the alley behind the shop.

I imagined myself a hero, but I probably looked more like a fool in my ramshackle kit. Maybe there was less difference between the two than most would think.

I took a deep breath and quietly opened the door. The alley was dark and still, barely lit by a half moon covered by patchy clouds. My pulse quickened and my ears strained for any sound. I stepped carefully out and made my way along the walls of the shops and homes, keeping to the shadows as best I could. The night was different from the daytime, and I wasn't used to it. I had never walked our village in such darkness.

I ducked below windows and behind crates of refuse as I made my way toward the temple. I could see the watchmen before they saw me, warned by their lantern-light. It took little effort to find hiding places before they drew near, though I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd heard my heart thudding as they passed.

The temple was at the north end of the village, surrounded by an open yard filled with various monuments and stone markers. It looked like a graveyard but everyone knew no one was buried there. I slipped into the back of a stable across the road and found a good spot to hide and survey the grounds. I saw no guards, but that wasn't surprising; our village was small, and so was the temple.

There were only three priests that I knew of, and none of them were

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Transitioned. I presumed they were asleep by now. I could only hope Kaina's body was laid out somewhere inside waiting for me. I dreaded the thought her Transition was complete.

I looked around one last time and saw no activity. Feeling safe, I scampered into the mock cemetery and slipped unnoticed amongst the markers. I darted from stone to stone, staying in the shadows as I made my way around to the back. There was a large shed attached to the rear wall, and beside it was the cart used to carry Kaina. I crept into the rear of the shed and saw a door at the other end leading into the temple. I murmured a quick prayer to Desna for luck then tested the knob.

It was unlocked.

Apparently the priests were confident no one would want to break in here. I pushed the door lightly in case the hinges squeaked. When they didn't, I shoved it open wide enough to slip inside.

My breathing grew shallow.

Now that I was actually in the temple, fear began to overcome my anger. I choked it down and tried to calm myself.

I saw I was in a storage room. There were shelves on the walls with boxes neatly stacked under them. Another door stood across the room, and I crossed to it.

This one was unlocked as well.

I promised to make a donation to a temple of Desna, if I lived to see one.

Inching the door open, I peeked out into an empty, dimly-lit corridor. I entered the hallway and decided to go right, away from where I believed the priests' quarters were. I searched for ritual chambers or gathering halls where Transitions might take place.

Guided by the occasional guttering lantern, I snuck down a passage until I came to an area lined with doorways covered by heavy curtains. I peeked behind each one to see pantries, studies, a lounge, and...

... a room filled with tables.

One held a form covered with a sheet.

The room was lit by low burning oil lamps and reeked of the same incense that had been used at my home. I swallowed my fear and headed in deeper, drawing close to the table with the shrouded form. Hesitantly I lifted the cloth and the soft light revealed it was Kaina. I sighed, my fear giving way to the pain I felt seeing her in such a state.

Her face had more color in the room's faint light and my heart broke again as I choked back a sob. She looked so peaceful, as if she were only sleeping.

And that's how she should look, I thought. Not stumbling and glassy-eyed, or slack-jawed and drooling, ambling about. She should be allowed to stay just like this. Like she's asleep.

I pulled the shroud from her and let it slip to the floor. They had dressed her in a simple gray shift, and left her ceremonial clothes folded at the end of the table between her feet.

I slid my hands under her shoulders and legs and lifted her up. The stiffness in her body made it awkward, but I was able to turn with her toward the curtained doorway and shuffle a few steps.

“Kai...ner?” Her voice croaked with a dry rasp.

I screamed and dropped her body, leaping backwards into a table and knocking it down as she landed with a thud. The noise was terrible.

Scrambling, I prepared to flee, but Kaina was already upright, looking around, blinking as if she were just waking from a nap. She swayed slightly, standing between me and the door.

“Kainer?” She blinked hard again as she tried to focus. “Is that you?”

I stood there, dumbfounded.

“Where am I?” she asked, taking in her dimly lit surroundings.

“The...the temple,” I said, shaking.

“Why am I here?” She looked down at herself. and I could see her confusion grow.

I stepped carefully over to her. “Shh, shh,” I said, putting my hands lightly on her shoulders. “You were sick, and the priests came to get you.”

“They came to get me? But...” She shook her head, trying to understand.

“It’s alright, but we need to leave, now. We need to go home. You’re better now, and we can go home. Let’s just go home, Kaina”

I talked faster than I could think, only wanting to escape and get somewhere safer. I put my arm around her shoulders and tried to guide her from the room.

She felt cold.

“Kainer, my head feels funny.” She pressed her hands over her eyes. “I can’t think...too well. Please...take me...” her voice trailed off.

She sounded strange, like she was talking through a mouthful of rags.

I started to lead her from the room, but I heard the pounding of footsteps from down the corridor.

“This way,” I whispered, turning Kaina around.

She hesitated then sagged heavily against the wall.

“I don’t...feel...good.”

She slid down, sitting on the floor with a thump.

“No!” I hissed, pulling at her arms, trying to get her upright again.

Then the three temple priests threw aside the entry curtain, each gripping a small sickle and holding a gold-colored talisman aloft. They froze at the sight of Kaina.

“She’s arisen,” one said in shock, then looked at me. “She must not have any more contact with the boy!”

Another priest looked at me in disgust “It’s too late. It looks like she already recognizes him.”

Kaina’s head lolled to the side and she looked up at them with glazed, blinking eyes.

I moved between them and Kaina, pulling out the cudgel and brandishing it in front of me. “Nobody touches my sister! I’m taking her home!”

The sharp-faced priest from the ceremony moved in front of the others. “Boy, you have no idea what’s happening here.” He lowered his weapon and symbol, and I could see by the look on his face he didn’t see me as a threat. “You need to leave. Get out before something happens that we can’t stop.”

“Not without her!”

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He sighed then gestured to the other priests.

“Alright, then. Let’s separate these two before we have a disaster. Grab the girl and take her to the lower chambers. I’ll take care of our little ‘hero’ here.”

The head priest raised his weapon and all three moved toward us in unison.

I pulled back and swung the club, funneling all my fear and devotion to Kaina into it, but I missed. The leader just leaned back and watched it whip through the air in front of him.

“Hmph. The hard way, eh?” he scoffed.

He stepped up and his sickle flashed. I screamed when it sliced into the back of my hand, flinging my blood against the wall. I dropped the cudgel, gasping in pain.

The priest shifted forward and punched me hard in the chest with a fist curled tight around the sickle’s handle. I yelped when he kicked my legs out from under me, throwing me hard to the floor.

My head cracked against the stone and my breath was knocked out of me. Looking up at the priest’s smug face, I cradled my wounded hand and tried to crawl away.

He came forward and put a heavy foot on my chest, pushing me back to the floor. “That’s enough, now. Stay put.” He looked over his shoulder and watched the others bending over to pick up my sister.

“Hmph. So much for misbegotten heroics, eh, boy?”

“I’m so sorry, Kaina,” I yelled. “I failed you. Please forgive me!”

The other two priests looked at each other nervously.

“Keep him quiet!” one hissed. “If his squalling reminds her too much of her past—”

“I know!” The sharp-faced priest shifted more weight onto my chest, squeezing off my voice. I laid back on the cold floor, pinned and staring at the ceiling. I felt a tear well up and trickle down the side of my face.

“Take her arms, I’ll get her feet,” I heard, distantly. My vision blurred around the edges.

“I’m worried, Master. She shouldn’t be awake yet.”

“It will be alright. She’s special. This is not—”

Then I heard a wet, wrenching sound, followed by a shrill scream.

The weight suddenly came off my chest as something crashed into the priest above me, followed by a ragged form which crawled across me, mashing me into the floor. A body fell over me, pinning me beneath its weight. All around I could hear chaos unfolding and horrid cries of pain and terror.

The body rolled off and I quickly tried to sit up, but something shouldered its way past, knocking me down again. I heard the head priest’s voice, keening in terror, trying to invoke his Goddess’ power.

“In the name of the Pallid Princess—”

Another impact, and a horrible tearing sound followed. I rolled over to see what had happened, and came eye-to-eye with the torn features of one of the priests who had tried to take my sister. His mouth worked soundlessly while blood and bits of brain dripped from his cracked skull. He gurgled his final breath in my face and his eyes emptied of life as I watched his blood pool beneath us both. I

scrambled back from him and found my way blocked by the ravaged body of his partner. I looked around the silent chamber for my sister.

The sharp-faced priest was sprawled out in a spreading puddle of blood.

In the dim light I could see a shape hunched over him.

I could tell by the way it moved and sounded that it was *chewing* on him.

My pulse stopped.

The creature atop the head priest turned, its glowing red eyes meeting mine.

It was Kaina.

I scrambled away until I hit the wall across from the doorway.

Kaina crouched over the body, staring at me, while her head tilted to one side as if she was trying to figure something out.

“K-Kainer?” she rasped, and a thick tongue drooped from her distended mouth. She labored to breathe, making it a struggle to form coherent words.

“What’s...happening...to me, Kainer? What...am I?”

My eyes teared up and my jaw clenched tight. I couldn’t move as I watched her feel her face with long, clawed fingers.

Her eyes widened in horror. “Kainer? I’m scared.”

I wanted to look away but couldn’t, and tried to find the words to make things right.

“The scorpion... You...you died. I wanted to stop them... You have to believe me!”

She turned away from me, cringing with realization.

“No. Oh no. Gods please...”

She made a pained, mournful noise. Black tears carved trails through the blood on her face. She was seized by a coughing fit as she struggled to breathe air she no longer needed. She stood up, bewildered and horrified by the carnage around her and she clutched at her breast, pulling at her gore-soaked shift like she wanted to crawl out of her own skin. She leveled an accusing glare at me.

“I thought you...would have kept this from...happening, Kainer. We spit-swore, remember?”

Her voice trembled and the black, oily tears kept oozing from her eyes.

I nodded, my own tears flowing. “Do you know...what they did to me?” She squeezed her eyes shut and lifted her face to the ceiling. “You let them take me, didn’t you? You let them call me back and turn me into...this.” She looked down at herself, at her clawed hands, and at the blood all over the floor. She looked at me, hatred pouring out of her eyes as readily as her dark tears.

“Tell me the truth, Kainer.” Her voice took on an odd, calm tone. “What did Mom and Dad do...when the priests came for me?” She reached up and flicked bits of flesh from her chin.

I couldn’t think.

“Tell me, Brother.” She crossed over and crouched in front of me, putting her now-elongated face in front of mine.

“I...I’m sorry—”

“Tell me!”

“They...”

“You tell me *now*, or so help me—” She raised her hand, as if to slash my face.

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“They were happy!” I cried.

She sat back on her heels. “What?” she groaned, weakly.

“They were happy for you. They were proud of you. The priests said you were special!”

She rose gracefully, the only sound echoing in the chamber coming from bits of gore pattering to the floor from her blood-stained claws.

“Well, that makes it...easier. I think I’ll go home, now.”

She smiled, but there was no mirth to it. She pressed her malformed hands against her eyes, blocking me from her sight.

“You should go away from here, Kainer... Far away. Because tonight...I will make sure everyone...knows the truth...about Transitions.”

She growled, then whirled and raced down the corridor, faster than I’d ever seen anyone move.

I lurched to my feet and fled the House of Urgathoa, making no attempt at stealth. Soon enough I was seized by a village watchman. I screamed and told him a creature was running loose in the temple, killing the priests. He took in my bloody appearance and released me, heading toward the temple.

I continued back home.

As I approached the alleyway door to the shop, I heard my father yell, then scream in pain. My mother’s voice joined his with agonizing shrieks. I fumbled my way inside and lit a tindertwig, searching for anything I could use as a weapon. I groped around the workbench and my fingers closed around the handle my father’s favorite skinning knife.

The tindertwig burned down between my fingertips as I held still and listened.

There was only silence.

The twig burned out, and I stood, motionless, in the dark.

Then I heard them.

The same sounds I heard when the priest was being eaten.

“Is this...what you wanted...for me...Mother?” I heard Kaina say as if choking down mouthfuls of something.

I managed to force myself to go into the house and staggered to my parents’ bedroom.

There was Kaina, crying as she sat in the middle of our parent’s bed among their bloody remains. I didn’t want to believe my eyes. What she had done was so much worse than how she killed the priests: she had taken her time.

She looked up when I sagged against the doorframe, making it creak.

“No!” she cried, and leapt from the bed to confront me. “I told you...to *leave*! You shouldn’t...have come back.”

“How could you?” I stammered as she stalked toward me.

“This is how they’ll learn, Kainer... Everyone. The truth about...all of this. They make us into monsters. Only...monsters can do this.”

She stood in front of me. I braced myself against the doorframe and brandished the knife.

“Please Kaina, don’t make me—”

Her arm flashed and pain exploded across my chest as I flew back across the hallway. I slammed into the wall and slid heavily to the floor, my head spinning.

I hung on to the knife, though.

She looked down at the blade.

“So, Brother. Is this what you could have...used...to keep them from...taking me?” She shook her head and crouched over me, straddling my legs and bringing her face close to mine.

“I’m sorry, Kainer... This is the only way they can understand.” She placed her talons around my throat and opened her mouth wide to reveal razor-sharp teeth. Her tongue twitched like a dying snake.

I cringed, paralyzed; my knife forgotten.

But the pain never came.

The curtain leading to the shop down the hall parted slightly, and a small fuzzy shape wandered through and stumbled up next to us.

“Grits...” Kaina gasped.

Her little dog had found his way home.

He looked up to Kaina and they stared at each other. Black tears welled up in her eyes and she reached down and scooped him up. She slipped off me and stood, hugging Grits to her chest, her face buried in his fur as she sobbed.

I stood up next to her, staring at them both.

“I understand now, ol’ boy... Thank you.”

With a quick, deft motion she seized Grits’ head and wrenched it completely off.

I started, shocked at the speed and viciousness of the act. She dropped his head and body to the floor, two hollow thuds resounding in the silence and then turned to face me.

Before I could move, her claw shot out and grabbed my knife hand, her long fingers curling easily around mine, trapping the weapon. I couldn’t hope to break her grip. She brought my arm up so the blade was pointed at her breast, where her once-beating heart had been.

“I am...a monster. I will be hunted, destroyed and...never believed. For failing me, Brother...your penance is to...spread the truth...about...Transitions. Make it known...so parents will never again...celebrate...the death of their own child.”

Then she licked the fingertips on her free hand and held them out to me.

Through the blood, gore, and black tears, I finally saw a trace of my sister again.

I nodded, unable to speak, and licked my free hand’s fingertips and together we pressed them onto each other’s foreheads.

A spit-swear. Probably the most important one of my life.

A glimmer of a smile crossed her face.

Then I put my free arm around her and she wrapped her other hand around the knife, and together we pushed its point home in her breast.



I arranged my parents’ bodies in their bed as best I could. I placed Kaina at the side of their bed on the floor, making it look as if Father had killed her with a desperate stab of the knife. I left Grits where he had been tossed.

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When everything was ready, I gathered a few meager belongings and supplies, and covered my bloodied clothes with my father's cloak. I snuck out the back into the alley again and made my way to the north end of the village. The crisis at the temple had gathered quite the crowd. I moved among them and spread talk that something had happened at the leatherworker's house too. When people started to drift toward my home, I slipped outside the village walls and into the darkness beyond.

The priest had said our existence was divided into phases, and I had definitely started a new one that night. I didn't know where it would carry me, but I did know this: I had a promise to keep.

THE JOURNEY

By Derek M. Johnson



HE CREATURE OF SHADOW paused and sniffed. Darron held his breath. He wheezed too much these days, a raspy, grating sound that stung his ears. The creature would certainly hear it. Darron's bony fingers tightly clutched a spiral symbol, the symbol of Pharasma, which hung from a chain around his neck. He closed his eyes and prayed that the creature would pass by.

Pharasma help me, he thought.

The shadow turned, taking a few steps away from Darron. It looked as if it might continue its hunt along another path.

Did you answer? Or was it luck? I'm never sure. He spoke the words in his head. It took effort to do so. Recently, he found himself speaking his thoughts, though sometimes he just mumbled. He drew another breath and the rattle in his chest sounded every bit as loud as bark being peeled back from a tree.

The shadow creature stopped. The thing turned toward the place where Darron crouched and sniffed again.

Could the thing actually smell? Darron had heard that some could smell flesh and blood, while others could actually smell the soul—it all depended on what they fed upon.

Curse my muscles and aching bones. He wondered how much longer he could

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remain in this crouching position before his legs collapsed.

His joints screamed for relief and his eyes began to burn. He hadn't blinked in some time. As it took two more steps, Darron could finally see its bodiless form. It couldn't smell, not truly. The sniffing was a holdover from its previous existence as a beast of the wild. It served no practical purpose. Its current senses were of an entirely different nature, but it retained its instincts.

Darron's mouth was dry.

His waterskin was dry.

Since entering the forest, he'd found nothing but still waters that tasted of ash and dust, and he felt certain that calling Pharasma's aid to quench his thirst would only alert Axan Wood's cursed denizens of his presence, so he suffered it. If he so much as licked his cracked lips, the sound would alert the creature. Again, he clutched the spiral-shaped holy symbol to his chest and murmured a prayer.

Hide me. Keep me.

The thing turned. It growled low, a thrumming from deep within, from a place larger than the creature—a great expanse of nothingness.

It heard me—my thoughts, my prayers. Especially my prayers.

Darron tensed, his right hand instinctively went to the feeble short sword at his side, but then he shifted to a bone-handled knife. Tira had gifted him that knife prior to his departure. His other hand held firm to the talisman.

The beast pounced—a blinding motion of movement and blur. It crossed from one plane of existence to another, without so much as a second of time passing. It appeared right next to him but then bounded past, taking down a delicate doe standing but ten feet away. The poor creature released a pitiful mewling as the shadow atrocity drained away its life-force. Darron took a moment to thank Pharasma. He knew now that her protection was his salvation. She was watching over him.

The journey had been nearly intolerable. He was far too old for such long excursions, and more than once he'd contemplated stopping, giving it all up and allowing whatever crossed his path to take his breath. Girshen and Tira had both pleaded for him not to go. They'd anticipated Darron meeting his end before reaching his destination.



“We’ve had this conversation before, Girshen.”

“Yes, but we’re no longer just talking about the idea; you fully intend on going. I cannot sit quietly and watch you go. There are other paths,” Girshen pled.

Darron shook his head stubbornly, “I know there are other paths, but few in Geb walk them and fewer still stay on them. No, my rest lies in Graydirge.”

“Tira, talk some sense into this old fool.”

“Graydirge is too far, Darron, and Axan Wood is far too dangerous,” Tira said as she abandoned her task of dusting the merchandise to approach Darron and rest her young head on his old shoulder. She was a smart girl, the girl Darron would’ve wanted had he a child.

“I know that, Tira, and I’ve heard the tales.”

“Stay here, we’ll find another way,” she pressed with convincing certainty. Tira was a merchant like her father, but she knew plenty of priests in Geb’s capital city. She was diligent in her service to the gods—all of them. Like a good merchant, she spread her wealth amongst the various temples, desiring not to offend any of the gods. More importantly she didn’t want to offend any faith’s followers. Priests and worshippers spent money; the gods didn’t.

Darron didn’t wish to argue with the girl. That would only worsen a sad situation. He merely hoped he could bring her to understand his heart and purpose, so he replied softly, “While one remains in this city, there is always a chance of being turned into an abomination. Every catacomb, every hidden tomb is eventually found. I refuse to have my body placed in a grave with nothing but the thin promises of unprincipled men watching over it. While I still breathe, I can act to avoid such a fate.”

“Not all suffer such...”

“You lie to yourself.” Darron’s brow lowered and his voice deepened. “There is no safe place. There is no termination or expiration that marks one as irretrievable. You of all people should know this. You saw Birshia.” His final words came out in a growl. The invoking of the woman’s name gave each pause. He’d allowed his emotions to intensify the discussion. Darron presented his breastplate and the two shop keepers fell silent. He pushed it across the counter, just as he pushed down the memories awoken.

“There are...ways, rites that can be performed. I...I know...priests,” Tira let a tear slip across her face. She knew she was making no headway, but she couldn’t relent. Darron was the one man she respected. She loved her father, but he’d always lived safely. His principles shifted like the desert sands. Darron was faithful, stalwart, and ever-ready to defend those he loved and that which he held dear. It was hard enough to watch him reach the end of his days. Letting him go to Graydirge would also mean that he would face those final days alone, and that his final resting place would be far from her home and her heart. “They can perform... so you *stay dead* once your spirit departs.”

“The holy men of this place can perform the rites, but they won’t. They make promises—vows to grant release—but they don’t deliver. Sanctifying the dead doesn’t pay as well as turning the bodies over to those who profit from selling undead slaves. The holy men of this country are far more faithful to gold crowns and the laws than they are to gods.”

Tira turned from Darron and ran from the room. The girl had seen few enough summers that she still remained hopeful in the noble lies she’d been told. She had also seen enough winters to catch glimpses of the wickedness that waited behind those lies.

Girshen took hold of the breastplate and put it under the counter. In return he pushed a small bag of gold over to Darron, his hand quivering. “May the gods be merciful on you, you hard-headed man. The journey to Graydirge is perilous in many ways. Everything in this land abhors your intentions and will strive against you.”

“Not everything. I can’t believe that.” Darron ended the discussion. He turned, leaving the gold on the counter, and walked out onto the street. A tear coursed

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down his cheek.



Darron remained grounded in place and watched as the shadow beast fed. He wanted to move away, but was too close. The slightest motion would tear the creature from its meal and draw it to him. He listened to the mewling of the doe as its spirit was sucked from it, drawn through its pores and into the shadow creature. The moment lasted for what seemed a lifetime before the creature had its fill and finally began to fade, dissolving into the morning mist and back to its shadowy home in some other world. Soon it would need sustenance again and return to satiate its hunger. In due course the doe itself would rise again, a twisted form of its former self, to prowl the woods as an undead horror.

Darron exhaled and began breathing deeply, wheezing like old, worn bellows. His knee joints popped and his back groaned against his efforts. As he stood over the doe, he contemplated its future. He desperately wished to free it from the form it would soon take, but he could not. This poor creature would rise again as some apparition. To prevent that, he'd have to perform rites that would most certainly call down the evils of this wood upon him.

"Gotta keep moving," he muttered.

He picked his way through the woods again, carefully choosing each step, making the journey all the more arduous.

After giving his breastplate to Girshen, he acquired lighter, padded armor that proved comfortable for his travels and silent in the wood. He had thought about donating his old breastplate to Pharasma's temple, but he doubted the temple's servants. Their willingness to abandon temple practices and doctrines for profit was known to him, and that was what drove him to offer it to Girshen. At least he wouldn't be hypocritical about how he chose to spend the crowns from its resale.

Darron continued to find his way through the heavy underbrush and low-growing trees. The thick trees ensnared brilliant daylight above so that the forest below remained in deep twilight. As the hours passed, he lost track of time. He wondered when the darkness of the wood would turn to blackest midnight. Without food or water—water more so—he doubted he could make it much farther. If he didn't find a stream soon he would have to risk calling for a sign to provide for his needs.

"What was that?" He spoke the words aloud, startled by a creaking sound, much too loud for anything hunting him.

He recalled Girshen's words: *Everything in this land abhors your intentions and will strive against you.*

The creaking became a groaning. The leaves in the canopy rustled, but Darron felt no breeze. Birds—at least he hoped they were birds—fluttered from the branches.

"The trees!" he whispered. He could see two of them moving their trunks and their branches. He saw their roots pull from the ground, churning up soil, rocks, worms, and insects. They lifted up their anchors, making their way toward him.

Everything will pursue you.

Darron made no effort to move stealthily. He ran, crashing through the forest. Other trees began to lean towards him. Gnarled branches scratched at him. Smaller twigs snapped off, as the bulk of a tree barely missed him. To his left, the howl of an animal echoed. It wasn't a wolf. It was them: the shadows. A screech came from his right, but Darron didn't think the sound came from a bird. The worst his imagination could conjure flooded his mind. A burst of adrenaline pushed him forward. He leapt over a fallen tree and it exhilarated him. He hadn't leapt over anything in a decade.

He heard a loud stomp and snap from behind. Trees, brambles and branches crashed and crunched. Looking back, he saw the fallen tree he'd just hurdled explode, splintering in all directions. Two barks, a screech, and thunderous stomping echoed behind him. He had become game for the entire forest.

The strain of his age suddenly took its toll as Darron's adrenaline ebbed. His lungs burned, as if he had swallowed a swarm of bees. The rush provided by the scare pushed his muscles beyond their limits, but his lungs received no such boost. He withdrew the bone-handled knife at his side.

It was time.

He could run no further.

He would face his pursuers, not like an animal taken down from behind, but as a man deciding his own fate.

Darron turned towards the sound of his enemies and took three steps backward to give proper space to fight his foes. A root ripped out of the ground, catching hold of his heel, sending him reeling, then falling, rolling and sliding down an embankment. His shoulder struck something hard, his thigh whipped against a stone, and his arm rolled under his body. Even during the chaos of his fall, he knew he'd lost his knife. He splashed down and all went black.



No longer was he cowering in Axan Wood. No longer was he fleeing a horde of terrible nightmares. He was in a tavern, sipping an iced turnoberry drink. Outside, the hot sun blazed as he sat in a cool brick building, looking over Mechitar. It was midday at the Bottomless Glass and Birshia was trying to get the attention of their server.

The halo of sunlight breaking through the windows lightened her raven hair, and Darron basked in her beauty. She was so young, her skin smooth, her lips full. He felt like he hadn't seen her in years, and he feared that if he took his eyes off her, it would be a millennia before he did so again. When she turned, she flashed a smile with her perfect white teeth.

"Stay," she bade him.

Darron found the comment odd. He wanted to reply, of course he'd stay. But he couldn't speak as he eased back the drink of cold water that filled his mouth. Unnatural howls filled the afternoon air, drowning out the sounds inside the Bottomless Glass. Water flowed over him as the horrible calls of creatures invaded his dreams. Water rose to a grand cacophony as the building filled to the ceiling, pouring down into Darron's throat and lungs.

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The dream faded and Darron found he could not breathe. White light exploded in his head as he called out a single name in his mind: *Birshia*. He lifted his face from the stream, coughed up mouthfuls of sweet water, then scrambled across the shallow current, looking back at the slope he'd just tumbled down.

There was nothing.

He wiped the water from his face and looked again, trying to hold his breath and listen, but finding he could only cough. Gathering himself, he listened to the trickling of the stream and a soft breeze that moved through the trees.

Peace.

"They won't come down here." A child's voice came from behind him.

Darron jolted at the sound and spun, now on all fours in the water.

"This place is a haven, a place of rest and life in the center of the woods, in the center of this land."

It wasn't a child. It was the form of a beautiful, nearly naked young woman sitting between the branches of a nearby tree. Her eyes weren't upon Darron, but focused on the ridge from which he had just tumbled. She leaned forward so her cheek rested on the rough bark of the tree's considerable trunk. She caressed the moss on its far side. "They will leave you be for now."

Water dripped from him, and his joints complained about the cold and damp. Darron wearily rose from the stream and watched the young woman.

"Don't worry, human. I'll not harm you."

"You are living?" His words were awkward, like a third-year page asking the Lord's daughter to a dance.

"I am," she replied graciously, though she still didn't look at him.

Wary of approaching her or appearing threatening, he made his way just outside of the stream and stopped. "I am Darron Nilhanon, servant of Pharama, hailing from Mechitar."

"My, that's a long name for a human."

"Well..." he began to explain, but stopped when he realized her comment was nothing more than a jest. "And what is your name?"

"Shall I give you my full name, or a human one?"

"The human one," Darron answered.

"Very well. You may call me Viridian." She turned to look at him, and when her eyes fell upon him he felt fear, lust, peace, and vitality in rapid succession. He nearly took a step backward. Of those sensations, only fear was recently familiar to him, having spent every year of his long life in Geb. Nonetheless, he felt that the moment called for him to be strong. He remained in place.

"Viridian, m'lady." He gave a short bow. "You are certain they will not come here. How so?"

"This is our vale. There are nine of us who keep it. We don't prevent them from entering, so much as they choose to remain outside. We've held it for a millennium, long before the rise of Geb and its war."

"But why do they not enter?"

"We are the life of the forest."

"Still, I ask."

She turned her gaze back toward the ridge and nodded. "We are the source.

They need us,” she said.

He turned and saw two of the shadow creatures, like the one that was on his scent earlier, prowling at the top, watching and sniffing, but not moving any closer.

“They’re death,” he said.

“Still, they need life. They know you can’t have one without the other, and surely you know that as well, servant of Pharasma. Death cannot consume itself. They need us.”

“They feed on the life you foster?” His tone soured as her words reminded him of the doe he’d seen taken by one of the things. “You are a farm to them.”

Her eyes became darker and narrower, and when they fell upon him this time, he only sensed fear—the fear one has upon looking into a dark hollow or upon the corpse of a tree that stretches forth from the ground, crows lining its wispy branches. She held her gaze, staring into him—through him.

“Darron,” she said his name and let it hang in the dim air of the wood. “Darron Nilhanon, servant of Pharasma, hailing from Mechitar, you have yet to tell me how you come to stand in our vale.”

He felt as if she was asking him to tell his life story, and with it, his most intimate secrets. He wanted to begin with his earliest memory of life, or perhaps when he gained a sense of self and being, maybe his first spiritual experience, which had ultimately provided him with an understanding of his place in this land. He wanted to tell her about his life’s only love, Birshia—of her life, her death, her return. How they’d spent thirty years together, nearly every waking moment in each other’s presence. How a tragic accident while performing the simplest of household chores had taken her life. And how the priests of his own temple had seen to it that her tomb was found, her body stolen. Those were all relevant in telling the tale of how he came to be here, to be talking to Viridian, in her vale of life, surrounded by death.

“I’m traveling to Graydirge,” was all that escaped his lips.

“Why?” She said it like a child who hadn’t taken the time to consider the first answer, and its implications.

Darron looked back over his shoulder at the shadow creatures up on the ridge. They paced back and forth, glaring down with sickly green glowing eyes. Wisps of darkness rolled from them like mist off a pond.

“Can we go further into the glen?” he asked sheepishly.

She smiled at him, a condescending smile as she caressed the tree. “Certainly, though not too far in, Darron Nilhanon of Mechitar.” Lithely, she slipped to the forest floor as brilliant green leaves covered her feminine body. Her skin showed the form and grain of worked wood, alluring and beautiful. Her movements hypnotized him as she gracefully led.

She stopped upon reaching a huge clearing. Inside roamed a small herd of deer and dozens of rabbits and mice, each flitting about, nibbling grass and moving on to the next tuft. The trees were full of birds, though they did not sing. He smelled fresh flowers, and heard the buzz of bees as they gathered nectar and spread pollen. Bright, warm sunlight showered down on the glen, and after Darron’s eyes adjusted to the light, he noted eight other young women standing around the perimeter of the massive clearing. All held him in their gaze.

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“Eat and drink,” Viridian said.

On a nearby stump rested two simple wooden bowls. One contained nuts and berries, the other clear, cool water. Darron didn’t hesitate. He sat on the stump and voraciously began consuming them, missing the unsullied flavor until he recognized his poor, slovenly manners halfway through. Water dripped from whiskers, and pieces of nuts and berry seeds stuck fast in his teeth. The dryads remained unmoved by his actions, quietly observing him with expressionless faces.

He took his time to savor the remainder of the food and drink, and when he finished, Viridian spoke, “Your journey to Graydirge. Why?”

Again he felt exposed in the clearing while his inquisitor and her sisters remained on the periphery. He looked around, wondering if they could sense his discomfort. The animals appeared untroubled by either their guest or the conversation. Darron drank the rest of the water from the bowl and replaced it on the stump. The vale remained silent. He supposed they could remain still and silent for days, if not weeks, waiting for him to respond.

He didn’t make them wait. “I’m going to die.”

Viridian’s head tilted like a dog, uncertain what its master was saying. “Die? You have traveled from Mechitar, through the Axan Wood, to die...in Graydirge?”

“I have.”

“But the shadows could have taken you. Your journey could be over now. Or for that matter, I’m certain anyone in Mechitar would have given you the death you seek. You are old for a human, why travel so far to die? Why avoid death while seeking it?”

Darron wanted another drink. He was on the verge of asking for more water when he looked down and saw the bowl already refilled. He didn’t question its presence, he just claimed it. After a long drink, the cold water satiated his thirst and spirit. Finally, he answered.

“Nothing stays dead in Mechitar. I do not wish for some slaver to raise my remains and have me serve a Lord, living or dead, indefinitely. Too often I have seen the result.”

“You go to Graydirge to die. Why Graydirge?”

“The Empty Threshold is there.”

Viridian stood silently, considering his words for a long moment, and when she finally spoke, her words were like a soft breeze that blows when one stands silently over the grave of a loved one. “The autumn leaves speak of that place. The birds shun it. It is an evil place, a temple to Zon-Kuthon.”

“It is. But the priests there promise a permanent death. The servants of the temple provide rest to the living by performing the sacraments necessary to keep the dead at rest. Their ossuaries remain protected from experimenting necromancers and slavers.”

“The acolytes are horrific.”

“They are,” Darron said, “but they are zealous to their god and his rites, regardless of the measure of crowns balanced against it. The priests of Mechitar, and nearly every other city and town in Geb promise the proper rites, but when the toll is paid and the payer dead, they renege, allowing the flesh-raisers or spirit-

callers to bring them back. Those who are lucky enough to have the rites performed find their flesh defiled by necromantic violations or subject to alchemical raising experiments.”

“The sacraments in the Empty Threshold exact a toll of their own.” Viridian’s tone remained soft and solemn.

Darron’s countenance fell, his face became ashen. His throat had become dry once again. It was hard to swallow. Another long draught from the replenished bowl helped.

“They do,” he said. “Theirs is a steep price. Zon-Kuthon asks for blood and the pain that draws it. I know this.”

“You are strange, Darron Nilhanon. Why do you not simply flee? Go to another land.”

Darron sighed, “This is the land of my fathers. We have always lived here.”

“Do you have children?” Viridian’s questions continued—her face stolid.

“I do not.”

“Siblings?”

“No.”

“You are the last of the Nilhanon line. You have no reason to remain here, especially after your spirit has fled your body. Just leave, go somewhere else and die in peace.”

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t considered it. His ranting, the anger and frustration of an old man, had drawn the attention of many in the city, but they wouldn’t have prevented him from jumping on a ship and fleeing to Jalmeray or Qadira, or even someplace further. He probably could have passed over the border by land. The authorities wouldn’t have stopped him. It was only the wild dead he had to fear, much as he did now.

But this was his land. This was the land of his father and his father’s father, down to ancestors beyond records.

He considered Viridian and the other eight keepers who passively observed from the fringe of the clearing, looking at each of them, their impassive eyes yearning to understand. Darron decided it was his turn to raise the questions.

“I know of your kind. You are each tied to your tree, yes? You cannot, nor will you ever, leave here, for you are dryads. All around you is death. But that death is not *in* the land, it is *on* the land. The land on which you live and the land into which your trees delve is your land. And though it may be many, many years from now when you die, it will still be *in this land* that you will rest.”

“We will.”

“If given the opportunity, would you leave? Would you journey out of this country, see the sights of other, far-off lands, join with other magnificent trees with beautiful blossoms and life-giving fruit? Would you go? Would you die under a foreign tree with roots tethered to foreign soil?”

The nine dryads looked at one another across the glen. All of the animals eating the vibrant green grass paused. The thoughts of the dryads crossed the space—even the animals could sense them contemplating the question.

“It’s not in our nature, and therefore something we cannot wish for.”

“So too with me,” Darron replied. “For a millennium, my blood has been in

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this land, buried in this soil, one with it. My nature will not allow me to leave, nor will my spirit and my faith allow me to become a mockery of all we hold dear. I reach the end of my time, and the end of my line. Yes, Geb has ruled for so long that the land has taken his name, but it will not be forever. We are greater than that sad abomination who rules us. He may control this country, but he does not rule our hearts, our minds, and I will not let him rule my soul. When he and his kind have been vanquished, the dust of my bones will still be in this ground.”

The glen became silent. The dryads continued to passively observe their visitor as the breeze carried his words away.

“To Graydirge?” Viridian said, her voice returning to its childlike tone.

“Yes.”

He wanted to ask the question that had been nagging at him since he felt the cool of the stream, the taste of the berries, and the freshness of the water. But Viridian spoke first.

“They will come for you,” Viridian said. “We can’t keep them out. Though they would not remain in our sanctuary, they would still come to take you. Your spirit, made stronger by your many years would prove irresistible. You won’t be safe here.”

Darron looked back the way he had traveled with Viridian. He couldn’t see the shadow creatures, but he knew they were there, perhaps still on the ridge, perhaps crossing the stream. “Thank you for the respite. I believe I can make it now.”

“You can.” She stated it as fact.

His clothes were dry, and the ache in his joints had left. The path forward meant moving further to the north and west. More words served no purpose, so he turned and walked away. At least the glen would lie between him and his pursuers. After a short, but lonely walk, he could sense the sanctuary of the glen ending and the cruelty of Axan Wood resuming.

As he prepared to take his next step, he heard a dull thunk, something bumping against the trunk of a tree next to him. Turning, he found a hollowed gourd with a stopper slung over a branch from a strap made of entwined vines. Next to it hung a pouch and his bone-handled knife. Darron uncorked the gourd, sniffed and drank—fresh spring water. Then he opened the pouch to find the berries and nuts he fully expected. Looking back, he saw Viridian. She leaned heavily against a tree, appearing exhausted as if she might collapse. She’d traveled far from her home tree to deliver these gifts to him, and the distance weakened her.

Darron grinned wide and curtly nodded. He turned away and sighed grimly, walking back into the Axan Wood’s deathly embrace.

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By Kalyna Conrad



USIN WAS NERVOUS, and that confused her. She shouldn't be. This wasn't exactly her first late-night assignation with a male patron in the Cat's Corpse's back garden.

She held her breath, forgetting her worries as she watched the man emerge from the inn's back door and move towards her, ducking the low-hanging tree branches that seemed to reach their skeletal fingers towards him, as though yearning to shred his perfect bronze skin to tatters.

He stopped a breath away from her, studying her with unfathomable green eyes that practically glowed in the moonlight. He was so strong...so beautiful...so wonderfully *foreign*.

She shivered. Beneath his rich Taldan travelling costume she could sense something strange—something thrilling and slightly...dangerous.

A slow smile curled his inviting lips, "You wished to see me?" he asked in perfect, if slightly archaic, Osiriani. The thick, dark sound of his voice set something unfamiliar fluttering in her chest. What a nice surprise; so few of her foreign clients made the effort to seduce her in her native tongue.

His teeth glinted in a stray shaft of moonlight, and the fluttering inside her erupted into a tiny voice screaming that she should run very far and very fast. Right now.

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She ignored it and offered him an inviting smile of her own. "I did. I thought perhaps we could have a cozy little..." she licked her lips and rolled back her shoulders, "chat."

His gaze dropped to her bodice. "Ah." He reached out to trace calloused bronze fingers across the curve of her mouth. "I see. And what gave you the impression that I was in the market for such... entertainments?"

She shivered at his touch, so deliciously strange and right all at once. "Nothing," she confessed coyly, "I was just hoping."

She reached out to run a finger along his jaw, but he caught her hand and held it before she could make contact.

Without a word he advanced, looming over her and forcing her backward until she felt the cold press of the garden wall through her thin dress. He was so close now that he obliterated the starry night sky above. "What is your name, little mouse?"

"I-Iusin," she replied, shocked by the fear tripping up her words.

"Iusin." He rolled the word on his tongue as his gaze pinned her in place. "Well, Iusin, I am afraid that you are in for a bit of a surprise." His smile turned chilly. "The entertainments I have in mind are of a slightly more...painful nature than that which you might have expected."

Lost in the luminous depths of his eyes, Iusin barely registered the bright slithering sound of a longsword being drawn—and only jerked slightly when the cold steel kissed her throat, edge first. He released her hand, but she couldn't bring herself to flee as he purred, "Now, shall we get started?"



Bang!

Nives grunted and rolled over in her rented bed. Weren't backwater cities supposed to be peaceful at night? Must be Lucian, probably drunk and lonely again.

Bang! Bang!

Really, how could she be expected to sleep off all the ale she'd drunk this afternoon with that infernal racket going on?

Bang!

Her temples throbbed unpleasantly and her stomach heaved. Well, so much for sleep.

Cracking one eye open, she peeked at the bedroom's tiny window. It was dark out, probably not even midnight yet. She groaned. She'd only gone to bed at ten.

Dragging a pillow over her head, Nives mumbled a reasonable, if curse-laden, approximation of, "Go away Lucian!" and tried to pretend she was dead.

Bang!

"Miss Varano?"

Bang! Bang!

Groping blindly on the floor until she located one of her very sturdy travelling boots, Nives hurled it at the door without even opening her eyes. It thudded once against the thin wood and again as it returned to the floor.

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"I told you I'm not going to sleep with you, Lucian!" she shouted, instantly regretting raising her voice. "Now leave me to die in peace...unless you have coffee; you can leave that outside the door before you go."

"Ah..." feet shuffled on the other side of the door, "I- I am not Lucian. It is Ormos...the inn-keeper?"

Ah. No wonder his Taldane sounded far more accented than her assistant's usual speech...and the voice was a lot deeper too... Okay, so what did their illustrious landlord want at this ungodly hour?

Grumbling, she rolled out of bed, hit the floor face-first and pushed herself to her feet. Checking to make sure she was properly covered, she stumbled to the door and yanked it open.

The little round man in the hall was shifting from foot to foot, his meaty hands wringing his greasy apron as he looked at her, dark eyes bright with something that looked exactly like real life-or-death fear. After fifteen years of adventuring into the deepest, darkest places in Golarion to retrieve priceless artifacts for her less-than-scrupulous Taldan patron, Lord Iacob Massili, she'd seen her fair share of the emotion. It was unmistakeable—and usually meant bad things were about to happen.

"What is it?" she growled.

"Um..." the man-ball cowered, "there is someone to see you."

"Tell them to come back later..." she groaned, massaging her temples as her head spun, "when I'm feeling better."

"Oh no, miss, please... you must come now. He will not wait..." He started inching toward the stairs. "Please, you come now."

The poor man was practically in hysterics. Nives' hard earned adventuring instincts finally prickled to life, dousing her in cold, sobering awareness.

Whoever was downstairs was important...probably some local official or someone equally annoying. Or maybe—her teeth clenched.

Maybe it was Rosso, probably holding the man's family hostage until she handed over the sword they'd acquired this morning in that mausoleum. That was so his style; let her do all the dirty work and then steal the prize so his patron, Lord Borghesi, could win whatever bet he'd made with Iacob.

Well, he wasn't going to get away with it. Not today.

"Fine," she grunted, "I'll be down in a minute."

"Thank you, miss! Thank you!" the man gushed, bolting for the stairs.

"Oh," she called after him, "could you wake my companion on your way and tell him to meet me downstairs?"

The man stopped, spun, and bowed, "He is already gone, miss. I tried his door first."

"Oh." She frowned.

He nodded once and tore off down the stairs with a worried call of, "Please hurry, miss."

Odd. Her partner usually showed more devotion than a tethered puppy... Where could he have wandered off to?

Well, that was a problem for later. First, she had to deal with that devious snake, Rosso. Maybe it was good that Lucian was missing, seeing as how he currently

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had the sword. After all, she couldn't give Rosso something she didn't have.



Ormos was so nervous by the time Nives got downstairs that his balding head glittered with sweat in spite of the cool winter air. He clasped her hands when she appeared, his relief palpable as he mumbled, "Thank you, miss. This way."

He led her away from the bustling sounds of the still-busy tavern and down a short hall toward the back where the private rooms were. He stopped and pulled aside the last curtain on the right.

Nives swept around the corner, hands already on her daggers and a slew of rude words for Rosso on her lips.

And stopped cold.

Instead of the familiar, faintly mocking gray eyes of her former partner, she'd walked straight into a wall of eerily calm black gaze.

The man sat facing the door, sipping something from an elegant goblet that obviously didn't belong to the filthy little inn. He was oddly handsome in spite of the fact that his skin was pale enough to qualify as white and his features were gaunt with a cruel twist, his thin face framed by long, lanky ink-black hair. He held himself with an easy air of malicious superiority as he looked her over with those flat, dark eyes. She felt as though icy spiders skittered across her skin everywhere his gaze touched.

She took an instant dislike to him.

Without blinking, he started speaking at her in rapid Osiriani, a language Nives had never bothered to learn. Where she came from, if they didn't speak Taldane, they weren't worth talking to.

She held up a hand. "Sorry, friend," she scoffed, making it clear that she wasn't at all impressed by him, "I don't speak your gobbledy-gook; it's Taldane or nothing."

The man's eyes flew wide and he stopped mid-sentence, apparently genuinely shocked by the interruption. Well, good. There was nothing she enjoyed more than putting uppity local officials in their place.

There was a beat of dangerous silence in which Nives heard the rapidly retreating footsteps of the inn-keeper as he fled back to his kitchens from where he'd clearly been eavesdropping. She snorted. Coward. She'd cowed men far more intimidating than this gangly nobody.

The nobody in question recovered himself admirably and nodded, leaning back in his chair as he said in perfect Taldane, "You have something that belongs to me, and I would like it back."

Well, of all the presumptuous....

Nives raised her chin and crossed her arms. "How about we start with your name, friend. I don't talk to anyone who doesn't have a name."

The man's fingers clenched briefly on the stem of his goblet. "You are a bold one, Nives Varano." A small smile cracked his dour expression. "I appreciate that, though I would caution you not to push me too far. I am a man of...limited patience." He sipped from the cup, "My name is Lord Khenemet. I am the Blood

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Lord whose family home you robbed this morning.”

“I don’t rob people,” she snapped, “I’m an artifact acquisition specialist. I gather relics for future generations.”

The man shrugged, an elegant roll of too-thin shoulders. “Be that as it may, you and your companion took something from my family crypt, and it is of the utmost importance that I retrieve it by midnight.”

“Why?” Nives demanded, intrigued in spite of herself.

He considered for a moment before indicating the seat opposite him with a smooth wave of one hand. “Sit, please.”

She sat.

“Would you care for a drink?”

Eyeing the glass in his hand, she ran her tongue across her fuzzy teeth and grinned. “Sure, Kenny, I’ll have what you’re having.”

In spite of the anger that flashed across his features at the nickname, the man actually laughed, surprising them both as he replied, “I think not, dear; you would not care for it. Choose something else.”

“Fine,” she muttered, suddenly incredibly curious about what was in the goblet. “Ale.”

“Excellent choice.” He nodded, releasing his glass to fold his hands smugly across his flat belly.

She seized the moment.

Before she could think about what she was doing, her hand shot out and snatched the vessel, bringing it to her lips even as he lunged, saying “No, do not—”

The liquid inside was salty with a slight metallic tang that stung her nose and lingered on her tongue. Odd. It tasted like...like...

Oh.

Horried, she slammed the glass back down on the table, choking on the mouthful she’d taken. “That’s blood!” She managed around the retching that tried to force her stomach to empty itself onto the scrubbed table between them.

With an exasperated sigh, Kenny reached out and reclaimed the goblet as Ormos scurried into the room, dropped a full tankard in front of her and fled again, bowing compulsively as he backed his way out.

“I am aware of that,” Khenemet said dryly, “I believe I *did* tell you that you would not care for it.”

“But... why are you drinking blood?” she stammered between gulps of ale as she tried to wash the taste out of her mouth.

He snorted. “I would think that would be obvious.”

She glared, pretending she wasn’t as dumb as she felt.

Unfazed, he continued, “But that is hardly relevant to the matter at hand. You wished to know why I am eager to retrieve the longsword you and your friend took from me. The answer is simple: my brother’s ghost is bound to it.”

Nives nearly choked on her ale. “Your what?”

“My brother’s ghost.”

“But...don’t people get reanimated if they die here?”

The vampire’s smile was horrid and stark. “Generally. That is why I made

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certain that he could not be reanimated when I killed him.”

“So, you murdered your own brother?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“My brother was an abomination,” he replied simply. “He killed for nothing more than pleasure and openly flouted the Dead Laws in the face of our mentor and king. I was told in no uncertain terms to deal with him before Geb himself was forced to intervene. I did only what had to be done.”

“But you’re a necromancer,” she felt compelled to point out. “Don’t *you* kill people for fun?”

“I am a scholar,” he snapped, showing more emotion than he had when he’d confessed to murdering his own brother. “I work with the dead but I do not kill—particularly not for pleasure.” He leaned forward suddenly. “Now enough questions, I would like my sword back, if you please.”

She smiled sweetly at him. “I’d love to help you there, Kenny, but I don’t have it.”

His face somehow grew even paler. “You mean to say you don’t—”

“Nope,” she shrugged carelessly.

He opened his mouth, but before he could voice the horror and panic in his expression, a bone-chilling scream clawed its way from the garden, interrupting him.

Both she and Khenemet were on their feet simultaneously—though he somehow managed to beat her out the door in spite of the fact that she was closer.

They arrived in the garden at the same moment that Ormos shot from the kitchen door, tearing through the stark, dead trees towards the back wall. Nives and Khenemet wasted no time in following him.

They found Ormos’ wife—a kind-faced woman roughly the same size and shape as her husband—on her knees in a shady back corner. She was sobbing wretchedly into her hands, her tears leaking out of her grasp to soak the bloodied dress of the body in front of her. Ormos took one look at the dead girl and dropped to his knees alongside his wife, throwing a bitter wail to the heavens.

Nives peered over their shoulders.

The body was intricately patterned with hundreds of tiny, seeping cuts on every exposed inch of skin. Though the face was caked in dried blood, Nives could still make out the features of the inn-keeper’s daughter, the perky young serving girl who’d been making eyes at Lucian all afternoon. She must have bled to death... How awful. No one deserved a death like this.

Khenemet pushed past her and moved around to kneel at the dead girl’s head, muttering as he went. As he reached for her, a faint aura of magic began to glow around his hands, swirling and rising lazily off his knuckles like black steam.

Ormos’ hand shot out, clamping onto the vampire’s forearm.

Khenemet froze, looking up at the man in utter surprise.

The inn-keeper began pleading in Osiriani, tears streaming down his face. While Nives couldn’t understand the exact words, their meaning was clear: *please, not our baby.*

Khenemet’s eyes flashed cold and he pulled out of the man’s grasp, uttering

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something that sounded suspiciously like a threat.

The poor father withdrew, wrapping his arms around his trembling wife and watching in horror as the black wisps curled out from the Blood Lord's fingers to trail across the dead girl's skin, soaking into her wounds.

As the last wisp disappeared, the body began to twitch, and a moment later, the lifeless shell that had once been an effervescent young girl was pushing itself to its feet, lumbering around the garden blind-eyed and deaf.

Khenemet herded the zombie towards the gate, whispering something in its ear just before it slipped through and disappeared.

Leaving the parents to their grief, Nives moved over to stand next to him. "Wow," she muttered, "I've seen a lot of horrible things in my life, but that has to take the cake. You couldn't even give them five minutes to grieve?"

He shrugged, but there was faint regret in his tone, "Such is the way of the world."

"What did you say to her?"

His dark eyes were guarded as he gazed past the gate. "She had enough life left to follow one last instruction. I gave her directions to a local farm, a place where I know they treat their slaves properly."

"Kind of you."

A half-smile curled his lips. "Do not spread that around, my reputation would suffer greatly." His gaze flicked to her. "Now onto more pressing matters. Apparently, my brother has made the acquaintance of your friend, Lucian."

"What are you talking about?"

"My brother's ghost has possessed your friend," he explained pointedly, "and forced him to murder that girl. Those markings were his calling card."

She sighed. Of course Lucian would go and get himself possessed by a homicidal ghost...so like him.

"I'll stop him," she promised fiercely.

The vampire smiled, respect lighting his eyes. "Excellent. I was hoping you would offer your assistance."

"Just tell me where to find him and stay out of my way," Nives growled, patting her daggers.

"No," Khenemet stated, "he is my brother. We will do this together. I will collect you at nine tomorrow night."

She smiled grimly. "It's a date."



Nives was exhausted.

She and Khenemet had been hunting Lucian for seven nights already, from nightfall until dawn trying to prevent him from claiming yet another victim.

So far they'd had no success.

Tonight they were trying a different approach. As the bell in the town square rang nine o'clock, she checked her appearance once more in the full-length mirror she'd borrowed from Ormos. Frowning, she made a few final adjustments to the snug, frilly dress the inn-keeper had agreed to loan her for tonight's little charade

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and headed for the courtyard.

The same as every other night, she found Khenemet's coach waiting silently on the flagstones in one corner of the yard. It wasn't hard to identify the red-trimmed black vehicle as belonging to the vampire; it was the only thing in the courtyard no living thing would venture near.

As she approached the door, it swung open on its own. She marched straight inside and it shut firmly behind her as the coach began to move by itself. A familiar, amused voice spoke from the shadows of the opposite bench, "Ah, so that is what you look like as a woman... The look of a barmaid becomes you remarkably well. You should wear dresses more often."

"Shut up," she grumbled. "I'm still armed, you know."

"Oh, I have no doubt."

"So, where are we headed?"

"The Zombie's Head."

"Again?"

"It has proven to be my brother's favorite haunt..." She could almost hear his shrug. "Do you have a better idea?"

"No," she conceded.

"Precisely." His pointy teeth glinted in the half-light as he grinned. "Ah, here we are now."

The coach rumbled to a stop and the door swung open, but before she could get out, a pale hand shot out of the shadows to curl around her arm. A golden wisp of magic rose from the fingers and slipped into her ears, tickling like a feathered snake.

"Now you may go," Khenemet stated, releasing her with a little push out the door.

She climbed down without thinking to ask what he'd done, plumped her cleavage one last time and entered the pub.

She made her way across the dark, smoky room to the shoddy bar in the far corner. The owner, a large, hairy man by the name of Bahram, barely glanced up from the glass he was polishing. "You must be Pasra, the new meat. Got any experience?"

Okay, no way this hick could speak Taldane. Maybe Kenny's golden light was translating? *Let's try it out*, Nives thought. "Yeah, I'm Pasra. And from what I hear, after the number of girls gone missing from this place lately, you can't afford to care about my experience."

The man cocked a bushy black brow and snorted, "Fair enough. Get to work, then."

Less than an hour later, just as she was beginning to wonder if they'd picked the wrong bar, the front door banged open and in strode Lucian, Kenny's sword hanging snug at his side.

Well, it was Lucian's body anyway, but that was about it. The innocence and energy that had characterized her assistant was gone, replaced by a chilling, predatory hardness.

He swept one cold look around the crowded room and headed for a table in the corner. The men currently occupying it took one look at him and vacated fast. So

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fast, they forgot their full tankards.

Lucian didn't seem to notice. He sprawled in a seat against the wall and caught Nives' eye, snapping his fingers to summon her.

Without hesitation she swayed her way over to him, trying to ignore the fact that there was no recognition in her friend's familiar eyes. "What can I get for you, big boy?" she drawled, invitation dripping from each word as she leaned on the table, making sure he got a good look down her bodice.

"Ale, wench," he growled in a voice that definitely did not belong to her Lucian, "followed by a little taste of your goods."

Swallowing a choking wave of sorrow and disgust she grinned and bobbed, "Coming right up, handsome."

She felt his frosted jade eyes follow her all the way to the bar and back. It made her skin crawl, but she tamped the feeling down and steeled her courage, reminding herself this was for Lucian; to free him.

She plunked the tankard on the scarred surface of his table and he immediately caught her by the hips, pulling her into his lap. His fingers trailed down her throat as the ghost's gravelly voice whispered in her ear, "Interested in earning a little extra coin, my dear?"

"Always," she replied, forcing herself to wriggle against his thighs.

"Excellent." His fingers lifted to trace her lips briefly before reaching for his drink. He drained his tankard in one go and stood, easily lifting her with him and pushing her before him as he headed towards the back of the tavern.

She glanced at the bar as they passed, but Bahram didn't seem to notice them leaving. In fact, none of his patrons did either—or at least, they thought the better of pointing it out.

Next thing she knew they were in the furthest, darkest corner of a garden, far out of sight of the merrily glowing windows. His hand dropped to her hip and he spun her, backing her up against the garden's stone wall before she had time to protest.

He snared her gaze, his normally green eyes glowing and pale as his lips curled into a smile that looked disturbingly like Khenemet's.

Speaking of which, where was that undead creep, anyway? Weren't they supposed to be a team?

She heard the soft song of a longsword leaving its scabbard and palmed her daggers as cold, sharp steel came to rest against her throat.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she asked in feigned horror.

The promise of danger that crept into Lucian's smile sent actual shivers down her spine. "Perhaps I neglected to mention that I have...particular tastes?"

She felt the sword roll, the edge biting into her skin to draw the first mark. She was out of time. She whipped her daggers out, pressing one to each side of Lucian's back just above his kidneys. "Then you picked the wrong girl to take into the garden, my friend."

Her companion froze, his blade still embedded in her skin. But instead of the horror of discovery she expected, his expression curled into something devious. "Oh, how I love it when they're feisty," he murmured, blade biting deeper.

"Release her, Rhanamet," a cool voice said from her right. "She is under my

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protection.”

Lucian’s face contorted into an unfamiliar scowl, and the sickly green glow in his eyes flared to white as he glanced at the newcomer.

Khenemet stood a few paces off, his expression blandly unimpressed.

“Brother,” the ghost grated. “My, my, it certainly has been a long time...” Lucian’s blade fell away as he turned to face the vampire. “I have not seen you since you ran me through with this very sword, cremated my body and locked my ghost in that crypt.”

Khenemet’s smile was thin. “Indeed. Now come along peacefully before Geb feels the need to intervene in our little squabble again.”

Lucian’s grin was pure evil. “I think not.” The longsword swung up again, tip coming to rest unerringly in the hollow of Nives’ collarbone. “I’m having far too much fun with this body. I believe I will keep it a while longer.”

Khenemet growled and advanced.

“Ah, ah,” the ghost of Rhanamet teased, his blade twitching against Nives’ throat. “One step closer and I will kill your little Quick pet.”

Khenemet barely glanced at her before launching at Lucian, an angry red spell pulsing around the fist he lifted.

She never got to see if he connected. The sword at her throat jerked and she felt a screaming burn as cold steel passed through her flesh, cutting into her trachea and nicking her spine before withdrawing.

With a soft, surprised gurgle her knees buckled and she collapsed with her hand at her throat as warm liquid rushed through her fingers, across the skin of her collarbone and into the dirt.

Gray fog winked over her vision.

Through the cotton that suddenly filled her ears she heard an inhuman shriek, followed by a wet thump and the clatter of a weapon hitting the walkway. A heartbeat later, Khenemet’s face swam into view. He looked almost...worried.

“Lu-cian?” she rasped.

“Dead,” he replied, pausing. “I believe I will make him into a house zombie. He is remarkably beautiful.”

She squeaked indignantly.

“Way of the world, my dear,” he admonished, placing one cool hand on her chest as the other supported her chin. “By the way, this may hurt.”

He bent his head, disappearing from her line of sight. A sluggish heartbeat later, a wild sting ignited in her neck and spread quickly through her veins, prickling her nerves and sparking a terrifying darkness in her head.

Was she dying?

When Kenny reappeared above her, his lips stained a glittering ruby as he licked them, she tried to squeak out her question but he shushed her and patted her chest. “Yes, my dear, you are dying but fear not, you will wake as yourself again.” He grinned as her vision winked out. In the quickly fading distance she tasted a familiar metallic tang and heard him laugh, “You are far too entertaining to waste.”

TALES OF GOLARION



The sun wanes in the distant west,
No man may stay its passing.
And time lost in an idle quest
Is time lost everlasting.

- *Travel song of Brethan the bard*

THE BEAST OF BLACKWATER BOG

By Miles Adams

KELLAN WOODWYSE MOVED cautiously through the stand of bog reeds, disturbing them no more than a gentle breeze. He stepped carefully so that he did not splash, never bringing his boot entirely out of the ankle-deep brackish groundwater of Blackwater Bog. Behind him, Elar Stravan crashed through the reeds, attacking them with his sword like a farmer threshing corn. Kellan gritted his teeth, wondering why he bothered to be stealthy with an ox in tow.

Something was moving in the shadows of the cypress trees that surrounded them, a shape a shade darker than the shadows. Kellan pointed to his eyes and then out into the shadows. Elar stared at him blankly. Kellan frowned and repeated the gesture with emphasis, wondering how anyone could not know what he meant.

“Look where I’m pointing,” Kellan hissed through gritted teeth, “and be quiet, you dumb ox!”

“There’s nothing there,” Elar said loudly, as if to spite Kellan.

Kellan shook his head, pressing a finger to his lips.

“There’s...nothing...there,” Elar whispered—and yet somehow he was still the loudest thing in the bog. “I think those guys at the bar were just messing with us.”

“Look again,” Kellan said as he turned his attention back to the shadows ahead

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of them. “Deep in the shadows. There’s something there.”

“It’s just shadows, Kellan. I don’t have elven eyes.”

Kellan had to grant Elar that much. Kellan’s elven mother hadn’t given him much, but she had given him keen senses, far sharper than Elar’s human eyes.

“Oh, I think I see. Is that it?”

Elar pointed off about a hundred paces from the moving shadow. Kellan blinked in surprise. A glowing disc with a half-dozen shimmering streamers attached to its underside floated in the darkness of the bog.

“No, I was pointing at that, over there,” Kellan said, pointing back towards the moving shadow. It had disappeared.

“Well, I don’t see anything but that light.”

Kellan nodded. “It might be the beast. One of those barflies said it was a glowing disc, didn’t he?”

“They said a lot of things, I wasn’t paying attention.” Elar drew his sword. “You think I can cut light?”

Kellan readied an arrow and took aim. “Probably not.”

He let loose with the arrow and it hit true, or would have if the light hadn’t burst into a shimmering cloud, only to reform a moment later. From the darkness came a weird howl, a sound neither wind nor beast, yet somehow both. Kellan anxiously bit his lip. His father had taught him how to survive the untamed wilds of the River Kingdoms, and the first rule was simple: if you didn’t know what it was, you ran. Kellan very much wanted to run.

“Hey, I know what that is,” Elar said matter-of-factly. He pointed at the light. “That’s an illusion.”

“What?”

“The old wizard who lives in my village, he does this trick on Dwimmer’s Night. He makes a man out of light and scary sounds. Frightens all the little ones.” Elar sheathed his sword and yelled into the darkness. “Your tricks don’t scare me! You better come out of there!”

Kellan crouched low, keeping his head below the reeds. “Elar, knock it off. If it’s a wizard, he could be dangerous.”

“Oh, don’t be such a baby. I’ll bet you a flagon it’s just some old hermit. I’ll bet that’s all the Beast of Blackwater Bog has ever been.” Elar shouted into the swamp again, “Don’t make me come find you.”

Something in the darkness moved, coming closer. Kellan could make out its outline, and it was all wrong for a hermit.

“You know it’s probably just those guys from the bar,” Elar said.

“Elar, I think we should go.”

“We’ll buy your beers for the night if you can slay the Beast of Blackwater Bog,” Elar mimicked. “I can’t believe we fell for that. They’re probably out there right now, laughing at us.”

The shape moved into a patch of pale light filtering through the trees. It was a fleshy white disc about three feet across, with several eyestalks sprouting from the top, and dozen tentacles hanging from its spiky underside. It waved its tentacles menacingly as it approached. Kellan gulped loudly.

“Still think it’s a hermit?” Kellan asked.

THE BEAST OF BLACKWATER BOG

“Oh, hells.” Elar drew his sword. “How many people did they say this thing killed?”

“I don’t think they said anything about it killing anyone.”

“I think I can take it,” Elar said confidently.

As the creature approached, they could hear it breathing, a weird undulating sound. *Flumph, flumph, flumph*. It raised a rubbery appendage, and a beam of verdant light sprang forth, narrowly missing Elar and reducing nearby cattails to steaming goo.

“Feeling less confident now,” Elar admitted. “Still think I can take it.”

Kellan readied another arrow and let it fly. The creature dropped suddenly, simply falling out of the air and under the arrow’s deadly path. Just as quickly it rose again, still making that strange sound. *Flumph, flumph, flumph*. Its tentacles flailed madly and it howled in a strange language, suddenly swelling to twice its original size.

“Oh, hells,” Elar said again, though his voice was barely a whisper, “we should’ve run.”

The creature was far too quick, however, and by the time Elar had his revelation, it was already above them. The strange sound it had made was now a deafening roar, like ocean waves smashing dully against a rocky shore. Kellan could smell the creature, its scent soapy with a bitter note, like the acid his father used to tan hides.

Elar turned to face the creature, his sword ready to attack, but it was too clever to come within reach. It howled in its strange tongue again, its tentacles thrashing about, and Kellan realized it was weaving a spell. He fired another arrow, hoping to disrupt its casting, but to no avail. A cloud of shimmering motes fell from the creature’s writhing tentacles and enveloped the two warriors.

“Oh...hells,” Elar muttered as he fell forward, face down in the muck.

Kellan felt a wave of exhaustion pass through him. He tried to shout for help, but only managed a yawn as he slumped to one knee. He shook his head, and the feeling passed.

“Thank you for my elven blood, mother,” he hissed as he readied another arrow and fired up at the creature’s exposed underbelly. It hit true, and the whole creature writhed in pain, temporarily retreating.

Elar lay face down in the fetid swamp water, and if he wasn’t woken soon, would drown for sure. Kellan readied another arrow and tried to flip Elar over with a swift kick, but the dumb ox was too heavy to move. Kellan kicked him again, this time hard in the ribs, and Elar jerked to wakefulness, his head coming up out of water with a cry as he spit and coughed.

The creature fell on Kellan, its tentacles wrapping around his arms and legs and pulling him up towards its underbelly, where a half dozen hollow spikes dripped a vile green substance. Kellan cried out for help, but Elar was still struggling to regain his breath—and his sword was lost in the muck anyway. One of the creature’s tentacles wrapped around Kellan’s quiver and yanked it free, casually tossing it off into swamp. Immediately the beast dropped Kellan into the muck, floating up into the trees. As it rose, it shrank, dwindling in size until it was only a few feet across once more, able to easily hide amongst the branches.

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A sharp cry announced that Elar had found his sword, and a moment later he held it in one hand, with the other to his mouth, sucking the stagnant waters from his fresh wound.

“Let’s go, Elar,” Kellan said, grabbing his comrade by the arm.

“Go? No way. I think it’s out of spells, and you hurt it. We just have to figure out how to get it back down here.”

“No, let’s just leave it alone.”

“What? It attacked us!”

“No, I think it just tried to scare us off. I’m telling you, that thing could have choked the life out of me, and it didn’t. I don’t think it wants to hurt us. It just wants to be left alone.”

“But what about what the guys in the bar said?”


“The guys you thought were messing with us? Maybe that’s the joke; they send us out here to chase this harmless thing around the swamp like a pair of fools, while they sit back and laugh at us. Let’s just go.”

Elar started to protest, but gave up on it, tossing his hands up and stomping off back towards the nameless little village, with its warm beer and warmer beds. Kellan hazarded one last glance at the strange beast of Blackwater Bog. He could just barely make it out, hovering in the high branches of the cypress trees.

He swore it was waving good-bye.

THE RIDDLE OF TABSAGAL

By Shaun Hocking

 I'M NOT ONE for expeditions. I like the comfort of a dusty tome and the safety of four solid walls between me and the chaos outside. My father would say “hard work is its own reward,” but I don’t think he believes that. For as long as I can remember, all he’s done is sit with his colleagues in the Taldan senate and devise ways to make each other richer. As for me, sometimes you have to *live* the words people say, *experience* the words they write. And once you do, you learn how little they actually know about *real* life. They don’t mention how robes with puffed sleeves are unsuitable for dungeon delving. Sure, they may be fashionable in Oppara, but nobody will tell you that they snag on everything beyond the city walls. And true to life, the cuffs of my coloured silks hang like tripe in a butcher’s shop.

Perhaps I wouldn’t think such things if I weren’t watching my reputable guide sulk and wallow in our misfortune. And to be honest, he did it to himself—but it’s more like he did it to us.

“Friend Leonid, I thought you were a seer? A fortune-teller! Could you not foresee this trap before I put my foot in it?”

I’m not sure how many times I’ve told him *I’m not a fortune-teller*, but it never seems to sink in. Granted, I do have a talent for divination and discovering secrets, but that doesn’t mean I can predict the future like a Varisian mountebank.

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Ogo frowns and then spits into his callused, meaty hands, rubbing them together. Curious, I watch as he attempts another futile effort at unclamping the metal plates from around his ankle. With a bright red face and a heave he tries, but the end is the same as before. It's hopeless.

He got us into this predicament by stepping on a flagstone which sank beneath his weight, where a clamp encased his ankle. I count my blessings that the trap wasn't designed to maim, for it was made for another time, when the vaults beneath Tabsagal were still inhabited. Had these dust-choked, subterranean halls been patrolled, he would have been caught like a rabbit in a snare. But so far, the whole place has been terribly empty, a shell of its former self. Thousands of years ago, before the fabled Tarrasque climbed out of the Pit of Gormuz and destroyed everything, this place was known for its grand vaults, boasting kingdom-sized wealth. There is no record as to what happened to that wealth, but after scouring this place carefully, it would seem the treasure is long gone.

My gaze wanders from my brutalized garment to the passageway beyond. I peer into the darkness at the edge of our lantern light—anything to avoid catching Ogo's pitiful eye. It is quite beyond me how he managed to fall into such a simple trap, for he had been so careful in keeping us alive thus far. I see a tiny spider crawling towards him, and Ogo flails his curved sword to shoo it away. I shake my head, wondering how we are going to prevail.

The corridor ahead is wide enough to drive a donkey cart down. A thick carpet of dust and grit cover the floor, punctuated by occasional desiccated rat carcasses. Beyond could be the final vault, but I am reluctant to go forward without Ogo.

He's a rare find for someone of my limited experience. I had to bribe a lot of people to find him, and after I did, it took even more gold to requisition his services. In the end it worked out well, for he acquired our provisions for significantly less than I would have believed possible. And with that, we left Khoka, spending weeks travelling across the cracked earth of the Windswept Wastes. I couldn't agree more with whoever came up with that particular epithet; there's nothing but grit and ruin for miles and miles and if the scenery weren't exciting enough. Dust from sandstorms forced me to keep my eyes closed between desolate vistas. We investigated some of the ruins we came upon, but they'd been looted long before we arrived. These diversions did not seem so terrible until one sandstorm parted us from most of our supplies, despite stakes and land lines. This would be the first time I learned Ogo was more than he appeared. He was very adept at catching small rodents that somehow eked out an existence here. They skittered away from me, hiding in their narrow burrows, but for Ogo, they stood still as rhubarb and all he had to do was reach out and pluck them from the ground. Roasted on hot coals, they tasted a little worse than Qadiran khoesht, and my sensibilities made me consider turning back, but Ogo assured me Tabsagal was close.

On the nineteenth day we spotted the monolithic statues of half-human, half-beast creatures. Snake-haired crones stood apart from sensuous women with serpentine tails for legs. These female figures were paired with those of men who were part eagle or part bull. The presence of these gigantic statues cannot be overstated; I was deeply awed by their mystery and majesty. We camped that night in the curve of one of the eagle-men's feet. As he towered above, I wistfully

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imagined him protecting us through the night while we slept. It seemed to be true too, for the next morning I felt completely rested for the first time since we left Khoka. It took the whole day to walk down the once-grand boulevard that these great stone watchers marked. We finally arrived at a wide plaza that joined onto three more statue-flanked boulevards leading in all cardinal directions. There were no buildings. Not even remnants of them. It seemed, apart from the statues, Tabsagal existed entirely underground. I marvelled at the remarkable condition of the plaza, which had been built during the height of Ninshabur. Somehow, it had survived thousands of years of sand and storm, and I was curious as to what materials were used to build it, as well as the techniques they had mastered.

But I was keen to continue my search for the treasure vaults, and as we moved on, a question lingered in my mind: why did the Tarrasque spare these statues? I could only hope that while we searched for treasure below I would find the answer there. I knew solving such a mystery would bring me vindication with my family and prestige with my colleagues, as well as more funded expeditions.

It took three more days of scouring the site before we finally found a way into the underground chambers. In the end, it was the order in which the statues of lion-headed men followed lion-bodied women that led us to the hidden treasure vaults of the kings of Ninshabur. The fabled, *trapped* treasure vaults.

After descending a particularly inauspicious stone staircase, it became apparent that the treasure Tabsagal held had long been looted by either survivors of the Tarrasque catastrophe or other treasure hunters through the millennia. Broken coffers and remnants of smashed pots littered the ancient entry hall. Even the walls were plain and free of decoration, not at all what I had expected to see in such a legendary place. If I weren't so determined, I would have given up, but I still held the belief that I would discover something, anything to justify the hardship.

You see, I've staked everything on this expedition, and failing to deliver is not an option. My father sees me as some aimless youth, in need of direction towards his political aims. He tells me that I should stop delving into the past and look to Taldor's future. I see no reward in Taldan rule, but if somehow I am able to make a discovery, I would garner the esteem and respect needed to put his plans to rest.

Despite these thoughts, it doesn't change the predicament Ogo and I are in. My destiny may later outshine everyone back home, but this is neither the place nor time to consider "what ifs." I am powerless to release Ogo, and I won't survive the return trip without him.

Thinking back, this probably was my fault, for I let Ogo lead when I should have had him follow. But he was so convincing when he said he knew the way. For hours he took me through labyrinthine passages and told me about the strange, square sigils we found above certain doorways.

"My mother taught me puzzles, friend Leonid, by drawing in the sand. She showed me these symbols many times."

We covered most of the ruined vaults in just a few days and admittedly, I found my own research sadly lacking.

"This is the way. Yes, this way," he said everywhere we went.

Many of the traps that we found had already been triggered. One trap,

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however, we weren't sure about. We had just examined some unusual stonework in a previous chamber and concluded it had been part of a greater mechanism. We guessed it had either failed to function or already squashed its unfortunate victims. Relieved, we journeyed forward into the next chamber, which provided five passageways by which we could continue. Ogo looked unsure and turned to me for guidance. I chose one for us and he nodded before moving on. Even then, a chill of dread ran down my spine as Ogo rounded the corner, leading the way.

Clunk!

Yelp!

And those are the sounds no tomb raider ever wants to hear. I rushed to my companion to find his foot trapped as he looked up apologetically.

"Friend Leonid, I...I think I've made a mistake. I'm sorry."

There are no words to describe this kind of frustration. After hours of searching the passage, I still can't find the mechanism to reverse the plates, nor is either of us able to pry them open. We tried a wooden stake, but the pressure we exerted cracked and splintered the wood. My father's prized dagger with the gold filigree lion lies broken in two on the floor, its sapphire-studded scabbard a useless shell. The release mechanism has to be here somewhere, but perhaps not within easy reach.

Ogo and I agree he's in no immediate danger, so we decide I will go forward without him, to find the release. I do not question that our fate is tied together, and neither does he. The direness of our situation worries me.

"Just...be careful, friend Leonid," he grumbles. "If you get trapped, we die."

I reassure him it won't happen, and he whispers what might be a prayer. I give the big man an encouraging smile as I stride down the corridor, leaving him with our lantern for comfort.

A few paces beyond the flickering lantern light, I make a graceful motion of my finger and conjure a warm glow to push back the shadows. I move further down the dark passage to find that the corridor splits in two. The left branch ends a few feet from a cave-in, while the other passage looks more promising. It opens into a large, intriguing chamber. A huge multi-colored mosaic covers the floor, and though it is damaged and decayed beyond the original design, I can still imagine how it might have looked. The walls are decorated with carvings of cat-headed men and cat-bodied women, similar to the statues above that led us here. I take care where I step, investigating every carving for hidden levers or mechanisms.

Before this expedition, I had spent long hours poring through tomes referencing the art of Ninshabur at its height. As a people, they were very fond of the image of the lion—as are Taldor's artists and historians. I myself was named after that regal animal. More specific to Ninshabur, though, was their obsession with creatures that were part lion and part human. These carvings corroborate what I learnt from my research: that one of their gods or heroes seemed to have had the head of a lion with some association with the sun. Tabsagal is relatively near to exotic Vudra and it was possible that this figure was a rakshasa, a creature known to that land. These spirits of wicked mortal souls are prevented from seeking the afterlife. Their greed or hunger is perhaps too great, and through fiendish and unholy means their soul becomes reincarnated in the body of a new born babe. As they grow, they

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learn to cloak themselves in their own bizarre, animal-headed version of humanity and defile the works of the gods, believing they are more worthy of worship. They achieve such worship by using their considerable talents of trickery and manipulation to maintain a lifestyle of decadence and corruption, living amongst an unknowing population. I shudder at the thought of what Ninshabur must have been like with such creatures honored amongst their people.

Other carvings of sphinxes line the wall, depicting the lion-bodied creatures guarding sites in a wasteland I don't recognise. I can't help but think Osirion lies just across the Inner Sea from my homeland, and that in the past Ninshabur's empire once stretched across that very body of water. Perhaps the armies of Ninshabur brought the sphinx to Osirion and the lion to Taldor... I make a note in my journal to investigate the possibility further and later, once I'm sure I haven't been duplicating another's work, to reveal my findings.

My journal goes back into my pack and I scan the rest of the room. Opposite the passage stands a great bronze door, completely smooth, unblemished, and free of decoration. Wary of traps, I search the door and the floor near it for concealed mechanisms, poison darts or, Abadar save me, sinking flagstones. There is nothing, so I nudge the door with the toe of my boot and it gives way easily. Even after all this time, the frame isn't warped, nor the hinges clogged from dust or grit. Beads of sweat form upon my brow as my heartbeat quickens. Dread fills me as I consider someone may have been maintaining this door and perhaps the room beyond.

I miss Ogo's company and the assurance his sickle-sword brings. I recite a few words to ward off evil spirits, hoping they will offer some protection. Admittedly, I come up short in physical conflicts. Few would describe me as brave, and there's nothing in my repertoire to assist me in combat. I have only my five senses and a dagger at my side. There's nothing for it; I take a deep breath and gently push the bronze door open. The room beyond is twice the size of the one before, lined with shadowed arches, and dominated by an enormous statue of a bat-winged, serpent-tailed sphinx. She is oddly faceless, but it seems so by design. Her six-legged, feline lower quarters are painted a deep blue, and her human torso is pure white. Both had been painted recently, and the tang lingers in the air. I step cautiously into the room, but to my surprise, the painted sphinx hisses as a sheet of emerald energy fills the doorway. I find that I am trapped halfway through the door, and unable to move. My beads of sweat multiply and I struggle vainly to free myself.

A chuckle from the shadows steals my breath until Ogo emerges from the arches ahead of me. Fear and confusion turn to relief as I try to express my gratitude, but I'm unable to speak.

Ogo looks to the statue, and then back at me. "It never fails, mistress. He holds it without touching it, and now he finds it, without knowing it."

The unmoving statue hisses in reply.

"Wh...what...?"

"Aha, you have found your tongue! Well done, my great treasure-seeking wizard. That is but the easiest riddle you will face. The children of my tribe would be insulted if presented with such a puzzle!"

I struggle to comprehend as Ogo removes the filthy rags that have been his

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clothing, and with each item he sheds I see more and more scars upon his flesh—ordered, cuneiform scars in a language I do not recognize. A horrible realization begins to dawn on me as I spot several iterations of a coiled snake among his scars, chillingly similar to the square sigils we had been following in the tunnels. He continues removing his rags until he is naked before me; shockingly, his entire body is covered in scars. His skin is a scripture of ancient text. He draws a curved bone knife from his discarded clothes and begins ripping my robes away.

“How did you...wait, why are you doing this, Ogo?”

He smiles, and his lips curl with some satisfaction. “Why? Friend Leonid, I am your guide, Ogo, worshipper of The Faceless Sphinx. You hired me to find your destiny. You should be thankful we’ve reached it.”

“What? What is this place Ogo?”

He laughs, and the chamber echoes in sinister return.

“You are in the temple of Areshkagal, Ninshabur’s greatest god, whom your people call today a demon lord of avarice and riddles.

“A demon lord?” There were legends that spoke of Ninshabur’s downfall being caused by an evil god, but there was nothing in my research to suggest the people of Ninshabur worshipped demons. Perhaps my research hadn’t been as *exhaustive* as I’d hoped. My already pounding heartbeat begins to race as I try to maintain some semblance of calm. He takes his blade and starts cutting away my clothing.

“O-O-Ogo, come now, this is ridiculous. Let me go. My...my family is wealthy...they would pay handsomely for my safe return.” For a moment he stops slicing away at my robes, but then continues.

“I have no desire to harm you, friend Leonid. You are more than you seem—at least to me. Your cunning and desire for greatness makes you a fine servant for Areshkagal, and as your guide, I must show you the way to her graces. I can’t tell you to worship her, but I can show you how. Your name is blessed by the Sphinx, friend Leonid. You saw the statues; this has always been your fate. Areshkagal awaits.”

Ogo rips away the last of my robes. Naked, I am still held in place by the shimmering doorway. I can only watch in cold, damp fear as his bone knife slowly traces blasphemous symbols in the air before my face. He tears my golden symbol of Abadar from my neck and flings it into the shadows.

“I submit! I submit! I will worship your goddess! I will worship her until the end of my days! Just let me go, Ogo, please...” I’m not too proud to beg, but I am certain this shameless moment is the least of my worries.

“All in due time, friend Leonid, but it is not that simple. First you must learn the twenty-three riddles of the flesh, and I promise you, you will never forget them after I carve them into your skin.”

I grit my teeth and try to be strong as the knife punctures and glides through my skin. Watching over us, the faceless sphinx hisses its approval. Ogo cuts with delicate precision and chants words I do not understand. His eyes change from round pupils to narrow slits. His nose grows wider, and the edges of his teeth grow longer as hair begins to sprout from his skin. His whole body takes on a blue-black coat of fur as his hands twist and crack until his palms face outward and his fingers bend in the wrong direction.

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“By the gods, you are a rakshasa...”

He pulls the knife from my skin. Saliva drips from my mouth as my body takes on a life of its own, reacting to the uncontrollable pain.

“Friend Leonid,” he murmurs, “you have no idea how long I have waited for the son of a lion to return to our desert. We did not know that your kind still existed...but you have found your way home.”

“My kind? What are you talking about, Ogo?” He turns to the statue and I see the corner of his feline mouth begin to curl into a fanged grin.

“Let us say, friend, that your father has not risen to power unaided. He has certain...talents, talents he has kept from you. I cannot tell you more, for this *is* the Riddle of Tabsagal that you will answer. No one has ever solved it, but I have high hopes for you, friend Leonid. You are clever, cunning, learned, and blessed by the Faceless Sphinx. If you can solve it, Areshkagal will reward us both handsomely—and did you not come here seeking reward? But now, we must continue. It is, after all, my favorite part.”

His words run through me sharper than his knife. The blade’s penetration hurts, but somehow between my twitching and convulsions, I am able to focus my mind to another place, darker than any dream, to a dry, dusty realm of grassland and gorges. Merciless heat swelters upon an endless savannah. Boiling up from the gorges come humanoid figures, men and women terrified for their lives as a great female sphinx towers above, over all else in the landscape. Her featureless face stares into me and she finds within...wickedness, the spark of a long-dead king. I am naked and bleeding in the dirt before her while Ogo’s knife hangs in the air. Beings whose features merge elements of the human and the lion appear around me, sniffing and licking my wounds. Some walk upon two legs, others upon four; no two are exactly alike in the way their bodies reflect the leonine and the human. The Faceless Sphinx stares at me and I hear her voice...

“You have come home, your rite is complete. Everything you are is written for you to discover.”

The knife lifts and the otherworldly vision evaporates around me. Ogo bares his teeth in a terrible, satisfied smile.

The light that held me no longer shines and the floor is pooled with my blood. Ogo stands back and I feel my skin burn with energy that somehow comes from within. My torturer bows reverently and I howl from the agonising heat which engulfs me all at once, a wail of pain that sounds more like a roar than a scream. It is then that I begin to understand.

Ogo is a rakshasa, a creature of malevolence and evil.

As for me, I am still Leonid of Taldor, but also so much more.

And I have come home.

One Last Question

By Michael Kortes



T THIS MOMENT, two things defined Vasora: the first, that Vasora was a corpse—the dead kind, the kind that had decomposed into a skeleton long ago, now lying in a cold hallway of stone in a forgotten ruin; and the second, that despite the fact that Vasora was nothing more than lifeless bones, she was quite certain the next few minutes would prove to be the most important of her existence.

It had been decades, and her body had at last been discovered by two men. But, of even far greater importance, one of the cloaked men appeared to be a priest of some kind, a follower of Desna, Vasora suspected. He had called upon his deity to provide a means from which to speak with her, a divine act that had returned Vasora's essence from eternity to, once again, briefly embody her corpse.

No stranger to the divine when she had lived, Vasora recognized the calling. The priest would ask her questions and her corpse would be compelled to answer. Vasora had already decided that she would answer gladly; she only hoped—with every fiber of her being—that the priest would ask the right questions.

A sudden wave of disappointment hit Vasora. The favor the priest had with his god wasn't particularly strong. He was young, and far from being his god's chosen disciple. He would only be able to ask her a few questions...four, perhaps

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five. He would need to make them count.

“How did you come to die?”

Dammit! Vasora thought. Didn’t this moron see the razored spikes drilled into her back? Perhaps they had since fallen away. Vasora delayed as long as she could and tried to think of a way to answer the question so it would enable her to say what was needed, but the casting was too specific; she was compelled to answer only the question posed.

“A trap,” she whispered in answer—amazed how horrible her voice sounded. She hadn’t heard it in fifty years. “Spikes flew from the east wall.” The east wall was exactly the wrong direction she wanted the two men to focus on. She quickly added, “The trap triggered as I tried to open the hidden door to the West.”

If she could, Vasora would have breathed a sigh of relief. Surely, they could not miss the secret door in front of her now. The men quickly drew back, as though they expected more spikes to suddenly shoot out of the wall. *Relax, you idiots*, thought Vasora, *The trap is expended. It was used to kill me.* She laughed silently to herself. *My gift—to you.*

The other man, both taller and thinner than the priest, slowly made his way over to the east wall, pulling out a lengthy prod, tapping it in front of him. At the same time, the priest grabbed Vasora’s corpse by the ankles and dragged her back ten feet, as though to move them out of the way of any more projectiles. As he did so, one of Vasora’s hip bones snapped off completely, brittle with age. Vasora didn’t care about her hip. What she did care about was that her corpse was no longer pointing to the secret door in the west wall. Not only were these fools not helping, they were interfering. At this rate, her life would mean nothing at all.

Once done moving Vasora, the priest asked his second question.

“How can we evade this trap?”

Get over the trap already! Vasora screamed in her mind. “The trap has already been triggered,” she answered uselessly, then quickly added, “but you can further avoid it by not depressing the pressure plate at the foot of the hidden door in the west wall.”

The priest called out to his comrade. “Köln! Watch where you step! The trigger’s on the floor, on the other side of the hall. It should be close to where the body was before I moved it.”

“Got it!” he answered. Köln had located the hidden firing ports for the spikes and was circling them with an outline of chalk to make them easier to spot. Begrudgingly, Vasora admitted she had to give them some respect. She had missed the Storm Lich’s trap entirely and she was now dead because of it. Maybe, just maybe, these two could fare better. *Now come on*, thought Vasora, *ask me what you really need to know!*

“I see it, Lander!” called Köln. “There’s a square plate disguised as a flagstone.”

“Good! Don’t touch it—but there might be a hidden door in front of it.”

“Now, skeleton,” said Lander, “how do we open this hidden door you speak of?”

How should I know? Vasora thought. *I died before I opened it, you idiot! I don’t know how it opens. You can smash it open, for Aroden’s sake. Just make sure you get inside and find the urn!*

ONE LAST QUESTION

But as the question compelled her, all she really said was “I don’t know.”

She could feel Lander’s bond with his god quickly waning. He only had two questions left. At this rate, these two men could open the door, pass through the chamber and skip past the Storm Lich’s urn entirely.

Köln re-joined Lander to loot Vasora’s body. He was now further from the door than ever.

“Hey! I’m trying to do Desna’s bidding here,” protested Lander.

Yeah! Vasora thought. *We’re determining if my life and death had any meaning.*

“I just want to see if he was carrying a key or anything that might have been used to open that door.”

He? Vasora was briefly insulted, but stopped herself with a laugh. She supposed all evidence of her gender had been long lost to time. This was, though, the first time she had been mistaken for a man.

“Well, let me finish here first,” insisted Lander, “I’ve just got two questions to—woah! Treasure!”

Köln and Lander had found her medallion.

“Feel the weight of that, eh?” said Köln. “It looks like steel but it feels as light as a feather. Maybe you should cast another spell to see if it’s magical.”

“It’s mithral, Köln. If I’m right, it’s expensive stuff, mostly used to make armor and...say, why do I feel like I’ve seen the etchings on that medal before?”

“I don’t know—who cares? If it’s a rare metal, it’s probably worth something melted down.”

“Hold on, you’ve given me an idea for my next question.” Lander grabbed the medal from Köln and held it before Vasora’s skull sockets where her eyes had once been.

“What can you tell me about this medal of yours?”

Finally! An open question! Vasora shot out her answer as though it was coming out of a ballista. She wasn’t sure how much time the spell would give her to speak.

“It is the symbol of the Knights of the Mithral Medallion, men and women dedicated to seeking out and destroying the phylacteries of liches. I was carrying the medallion for protection as I searched for the phylactery of Ilmagornas, the Storm Lich, a phylactery stored in a ceramic urn behind the secret door in the west wall. I was awarded the medallion when I was initiated into the Knights in their hidden headquarters in Scythe District in Vellumis. If you take the medallion there, they will know that you have found Vasora Dawnthrush and—”

The time to answer had passed, cutting Vasora off.

The two adventurers sat in stunned silence. Finally, they realized their expedition into the ruins for stray coins was far larger than they planned.

“Holy Mother!” said Köln. “This skeleton was a lich hunter.”

“Yeah,” said Lander, “this is totally out of our league.”

“I say we get the crap out of here—like, now.”

“Okay, but what if we take this medallion back to these knights of hers? If they’re still around, we could tell them where she is and maybe they’ll know what to do.”

Vasora exploded with excitement. They understood! If they succeeded, the search could continue. The phylactery could be safely found and destroyed

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properly and maybe, just maybe, her work could be completed. Just maybe, her life would mean something.

“Maybe they got a reward?”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Lander, “But I got one last question to use and she’s got more to tell us. I think I can get this right this time; I think I know what to ask.

“Miss Dawnthrush,” Lander began.

It had been so very long since Vasora had heard anyone use her name.

“What can we do to help?”

A SONG OF SORROW

By B.R. Bearden



*OFT THE PALE flakes fall and dance,
upon the winter wind.
Forlorn orphans drawn to fire,
who beg we let them in.*

“Can’t you just say ‘it’s snowing’ and let it go at that?” Urgrim grumbled as he brushed snow from his thick cloak with big, gnarled hands.

Brethan smiled. “And miss a chance to stir your temper? I think not.”

The dwarf grunted. “If the flakes keep dancing, they’ll cover the trail. Then you can sing a good ‘lost in the wilderness’ song.”

“Not with our dear friend Krepp tracking with us. With woodsman senses like that, we’ll never get lost. He’s the best there is at scouting goblins in their native wilds. That Andoren ranger could track a bird if he had a mind to do so.”

“Nothing so difficult as that,” a voice said softly from behind them. A small figure less than half the size of Brethan emerged from the rough tangle of bushes beside the trail, barely disturbing the snow-topped branches.

Brethan grinned at Urgrim, “Quiet and quick.”

The halfling pushed back the hood of his gray cloak, shook out his thick brown mass of hair, and knelt to sketch lines in the new snow with a quick finger. “The

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slavers left the trail about a quarter mile ahead, slanting to the southwest, no doubt cutting across the road further south to cross the Conerica at the Westerling Bridge. And for sure, Brethan, the child is with them.”

“If they cross the river they’ll be in Cheliox proper. And there will be guards at the bridge,” Brethan frowned at the ranger’s map.

“Then we get them ‘afore they cross,” Ugrim pointed to the other side of the map’s river. “How far ahead are they?”

“Three hours if we follow their track, less if we cut through rougher country. Their string of captives slows them.” The halfling stood and wiped away the crude map with his boot tip, an old habit from the Goblinblood Wars that had ravaged Isger. He looked east to where the Chitterwood was a mere smudge on a horizon already darkening with the fade of day, then up at the leaden sky. “Be dark in a couple of hours. If we don’t catch them before nightfall, we save no one.”

Brethan nodded somberly, recalling the bodies of the slaughtered frontier family who dared to build their cabin along the fringe of the goblin-infested forest. The tracks they had followed came from that farm, and they were closing the gap steadily.

“Let’s move.” Brethan hitched up his pack straps and winked at the dwarf as he sang. Ugrim groaned, shaking his head as Brethan began:

The sun wanes in the distant west,
No man may stay its passing.
And time lost in an idle quest
Is time lost everlasting.

“‘Let’s move’ was sufficient,” Ugrim muttered as he secured his axes and crossbow for the run.

Krepp smiled, turned on his heel, and led the way swiftly along the trail. The way became difficult when the ranger turned them south from the trail into the wilderness. Still, he steered a good course, working with the lay of the land.

“Can they make the bridge if they don’t camp?” Brethan asked, ducking a branch that clutched at him with winter-stripped fingers.

“They will never make the bridge,” Krepp replied over his shoulder. “Night soon. We must move faster.”

Despite their reckless haste, darkness fell before they cleared the woods. They stood atop a hill overlooking broken terrain. A mile away, a campfire burned.

“They’ve built a fire. We’re too late.” Krepp looked to the west where a dim glow in the clouds marked the setting sun. Grimly, he strung his bow and moved towards the camp. Brethan drew his sword and sang a soft prayer to Desna while Ugrim cocked his crossbow and set a quarrel in place.

Screams broke out from the direction of the fire before they had closed half the distance. Krepp motioned to either side with his bow and his companions moved to his flanks, spreading out and breaking into a run. The sounds from the campsite were ones of horror and pain, voices pleading in mortal terror, the curses of frightened men ending abruptly. By the time they reached the camp, all was still.

A SONG OF SORROW

The three slipped between the trees, weapons at the ready, and looked upon a horrific scene. The Chelish slavers were scattered about like discarded puppets, slashed and bloody—three of them. The slaves lay still, shackled in death, as ruined as the cruel men who had taken them.

One set of shackles was empty.

A captive moaned and Brethan moved quickly to him while Krepp and Urgrim warily scanned the dark places beyond the fire light. He knelt and examined the man's torn body. Tearing strips of cloth from another victim, Brethan began to bandage the worst of the man's wounds while singing with soft compassion.

*I know your hurts are deeply felt,
I know the pain you bear.
And voices speak of gentle rest,
and whisper in your ear.*

*But now is not the time to sleep,
nor time to slip away.
I call you back among us here;
To die another day.*

The man's breathing, at first shallow, began to strengthen. Whether it was the flawless voice or the words themselves, his flagging spirit returned. He took a deep breath and stared wildly about. Brethan hushed the man trying to ease his fears and then sternly looked into the man's eyes and spoke, "The slavers came across someone this morning, and added them to your group. Was it a child?"

The man tried to clear his throat, but it still came out raspy. "A young boy... bloody clothes...said his family...slain by goblins." The man looked fearfully into the dark. "He...slipped his shackles as we made camp...ran into the woods. A guard went after him...there were screams. Then...then a creature came, attacked the guards...killed them all...turned on us. We couldn't run...couldn't fight."

Brethan searched the guards' brutalized bodies, found a key, and released the wounded man. He wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and led him over to sit by the fire. Both Krepp and Urgrim moved in towards the fire with bow drawn and crossbow ready facing outward.

"It's out there, probably watching us," Krepp whispered as he fed wood to the fire. "It would attack if it weren't for the fire. It reveals its true nature."

"What...what is it?" the freed slave gasped.

"We don't know what name to give it," Brethan answered. "By day it appears human, alive. But at night it changes. There were many Iseri orphans after the war. Some priests of Asmodeus gathered them to their monasteries, but others were taken by things worse than devil lovers; dark necromancers infesting the Chitterwood, worshipping Urgathoa."

The wounded man shivered, "But...it's a child."

"No," Krepp said firmly. "Not now. Tales spread along the trade routes of strange children, lurking at the edge of campsites at night, refusing to come near the fire. Rumors told of the fate of those who ventured into the dark after them.

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We came upon a slaughtered farm family two days ago and the spoor of a clawed beast that became a child's footprints a dozen strides from the cabin. We followed, and when the tracks met those of the slavers, we followed those."

"And now we have run the thing to ground? But I have no silver weapon," Urgrim shuddered.

"It's not a lycan," Brethan said while removing his lute from its canvas case. "It fears fire, not silver or steel."

"Then we burn the damned thing," the dwarf snarled.

"How?" the halfling countered. "It won't stand and fight if we wield fire. It will run, and we will have to chase it anew."

"No, it will come to us," Brethan sighed. He began to sing.

He started softly, his voice barely a whisper, the sound of his lute less than the brush of wind through winter leaves. He sang of home and family, of a mother's loving embrace, a father's proud hand on a son's shoulder. There was movement at the edge of the firelight, and then a child stood there.

He was small and thin, with hair like sun-dried straw, eyes large and sad. His clothing was tattered and stained, his bare feet uncaring of the snow they trod. He took a step forward and the fire cast a shadow behind the boy, too tall to be his own. It was bestial, hunched over, and moved independently from the child.

Brethan continued, a threnody wrenching the heart as it told of things loved and lost—a dying tree holding on to its final leaves, a cat howling for its lost kittens, a mother mourning the death of her only child—all in that song. Krepp wept. Urgrim cast his eyes down. All the while, the child drew closer.

The shadow grew longer and tore at itself in a struggle to stop those small bare feet from moving forward, towards the fire. But an innocent desire urged the child onward. It was bound by the song; the possessor became the possessed.

The flame crackled and sent orange embers up into the night sky, and in the revealing light, the boy changed; the skin horribly burned, the fingers long and curled into black talons. But the eyes remained those of a child and it wept. Dark tears—black tears—ran down the face. As the shadow writhed in torment, the creature stepped into the fire, compelled by the song.

The fire caught the child's clothes hungrily, burning up the thing like old corn husks, but it showed no physical pain. As the fire consumed it, grateful eyes met Brethan's tearful ones and without a sound it burned away to ash, the wicked shadow rising from the smoke, twisting and turning up into the flames until there was nothing left but the night. Brethan sank to his knees, continuing his song:

*I sang a song of sorrow
And called a child unto me.
As gulls upon the water,
call rivers to the sea.
As chilling winds in winter,
call folk to feed the flame.
I sang a song of sorrow,
and cried myself to shame.*

A SONG OF SORROW

Urgrim laid his hand on the shoulder of the weeping man. Unconvincingly, voice thick with emotion, he said, “Couldn’t you just say ‘it’s gone’ and let it go at that?”

AGAINST THE GRAIN

By Kate Taylor

SERA LOOKED DOWN at the small half-orc's coarse reddish hair, noticing her clumsy braids were coming undone. The tangled mess was quickly knotting itself into wretched mats. The girl's clothes were of thick winter quality, but were ruined by smears of coloured chalk. Carefully Sera peered into the child's face and grimaced; the girl's nose was running down into her mouth.

‘Why do we have to take her? Doesn't she have any family?’

Brother Roddick chose not to respond but observed his acolyte instead. The girl was putting distance between her and the small half-orc with a look of revulsion, obviously afraid of catching something.

‘Please, Sera, show some compassion. It's our sworn duty to Abadar to take all who seek refuge. We don't concern ourselves with appearances. But if you must know, her grandmother asked me personally to look after her. Maris is...’

The half-orc child looked up at the sound of her name.

They froze.

She flashed them a shy smile and turned back to her drawing.

The two paused a moment then slowly made their way to an adjoining room. Sera inched closer to Brother Roddick and whispered into his ear.

‘You could at least put her in a different ward. Why do you insist she gets her

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own room? What will she eat?’ Her horrified tone implied something disgusting.

‘She eats the same food we do, Sera, and we can’t put her in another ward because they’re all full. Even if they weren’t, I would still keep her here, even with a cold.’

‘You can’t! What if she attacks me?’

‘Sera, she’s colouring pictures!’

‘You say that, but she’s a half-orc. They always take after their father.’

‘Not much danger then, her father *was* a baker.’

‘But orcs-’

‘Her mother was the orc, I officiated their wedding.’



Long before Maris was born, her father Jorin had been a baker in Canorate, capital city of Molthune. He earned money doing extra work down at the docks and helped harvest the crops in the fall, but despite his efforts he always came up short when winter came. So as summer changed to autumn, he took up work with a mercenary guild, *The Banded Blades*, an organization devoted to protecting caravans on unpatrolled routes.

There was no formal training; apparently surviving skirmishes lent to its own experience. Furnished with a near-rusty sword and tattered armour, he embarked on his first mission to escort traders travelling through the Menador Mountains to Isger’s city of Elidir on the other side.

They began their journey with little fanfare, and within a half day the caravan was traversing a narrow and ruddy dirt path. The ground sloped steadily upward and the leaves began to change colours. There would be cold nights ahead as they made their way up, and Jorin wished he’d been given a thicker bedroll.

The first two days, Jorin spent learning the strange new world of mercantilism and his role in protecting them. Food came by whatever game the rangers found and Jorin got used to being rationed and staying hungry. Respect was even harder to come by and the more experienced mercenaries mostly ignored him. But it wasn’t like he went completely unnoticed; he overheard the men wagering on his chances of survival.

To those men’s chagrin, their carefully made bets were thrown off when a veteran ranger took a liking to Jorin. It did not seem like much of a friendship at first, but the two talked often enough for the bets to start being hedged.

The third day the caravan came across a hunting party of orcs. Jorin was told to stay back as the more experienced men put on a show of force. Though wary, Jorin peered around a merchant wagon to see the natives of this unknown wild. They weren’t the monsters he’d been told to fear, but they did have muddy green flesh and bulging muscles with cross-hatched scars and tattoos. Their faces were hidden under heavy brows and their mouths had protruding tusks. They kept their hair lank, hanging to their waists and some had their hair chopped off all together.

The merchants met with them curtly, and then set to dealing, almost exclusively in weapons.

Jorin watched, fascinated.

Looking to his sword and broken armour, he couldn't feel less prepared. There was a ragged hole in the centre chest of his chainmail and his sword had clearly been mended more than once. He wondered what had happened to the previous owners of his equipment. His friend, the ranger, cautiously moved next to him.

'Foul brutes. Don't get too comfortable. These hunting parties can turn into raiding parties right quick. We should've just ridden through, but these merchants only see money.'

The caravan had to be unpacked in order to obtain the blades the orcs wanted and it was nearly midday before the weapons were accounted for.

As the merchants placed the trade before the orcish leader, a few began to sniff the air.

The leader gave out a roar, and his warriors reached for their blades.

Every mercenary drew their weapon and Jorin reached for his, but the sword was somehow caught within its sheath. He pulled harder and the palm of the blade snapped off.

Looking about in shock, Jorin saw the fear in his companions' eyes.

And at that moment, he knew he'd made a mistake in joining them. It was too late to wish he'd stayed home. The shoddy weapon he'd been given was only for show. Realizing he had nothing to separate him from his foes, he wished he had a real one.

Silence fell over the caravan as a lone orcish woman came out of the woods. The band of orcs sneered and hissed at her and she howled back at them. She was smaller than the others and her skin was unmarked. Her hair was shot through with plaits that were in different stages of turning into dreadlocks. Tiny bones and beads decorated her hair and her skin was fairer in colour than the other orcs, the shade of springtime leaves. She had soft features and no tusks like her male counterparts. Jorin noticed her narrow waist, flaring out into round hips that tapered down her strong legs. Two bone-handled blades were strapped to her back and she walked barefoot across the jagged road.

'Don't stare,' the veteran hissed.

Jorin turned to the grizzled man, not understanding.

'She's a runt, but they might fight over her. If they see you as competition, they'll challenge you too.'

Jorin felt a little shame. He hadn't realized he was staring at her *in that way*, but she held his attention nonetheless. As the veteran moved toward his horse, Jorin stole another glance. She didn't look like the other orcs. Her posture had an air of grace, almost elegance.

'Do you know a lot about orcs?' Jorin whispered to the ranger as the man climbed on his horse.

'I've killed all the ones I've met...' the ranger spat on the ground, '...and I've met too many.'

Jorin couldn't decide what his impression was, but he didn't feel they lived up to the stories he'd been told. The others in the party had been keen to swap tales about kidnapped children and raided farmsteads, but no one seemed to know anything first hand. The veteran, however, had made a career fighting orcs and their ilk. The seasoned fighter had other stories to attest, and Jorin was grateful

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the man was nearby.

The orcish female didn't stay long. She bartered with a few freshly caught rabbits which she displayed on a dented iron shield. In return she was given a string of common glass beads. As she left for the forest, the male orcs watched her closely, remaining silent with the exception of odd snarls. The merchants looked at the beat up shield and slid the rabbits off it into a sack. They threw the rusted thing to Jorin with a chuckle but he didn't notice as he looked down the path one last time at the savage female.

And for an instant...she looked back.

And their eyes met.

Jorin remembered the ranger's advice and tore his eyes away.

Though the moment was brief, he remembered every detail. She held herself tall, not at all like the posturing slouch the male orcs held, and she had an ease in her movement that was deliberate and rhythmic. Jorin had never seen anything so striking.

'You, Jorin! Get on the wagon, we're leaving.' The men loaded up and the remaining rangers took to their horses in preparation to scout. The merchants were eager to press on, to distance the caravan from the orcs.

With his horse rearing up slightly, the grizzled ranger complained bitterly about the caravan's pace, 'We'll never make mountain junction by nightfall. This is bad country we are in, orcs withstanding.'

Jorin hadn't been afraid of the forest up to now, but he didn't like the tone he was hearing from his friend. The ranger rode ahead and spoke his mind to the hefty merchant leading the expedition, but the fat man was more fixated on a cookbook of rabbit recipes. An argument began that turned heated as the ranger suggested turning back to where they had camped the night before. The merchant scoffed at the idea, citing extra costs of food and grain. Arrogantly, the fat-chinned man brushed the ranger away saying, 'That is your problem, not mine.'

For a moment, it appeared his friend would abandon the caravan, but then he glanced back to Jorin. One by one the merchant wagons continued past the rider as he sat, grumbling on his horse. He cursed the gods and grimly looked up at the afternoon sky like it would be his last until he swatted his horse, bolting off ahead of the slow moving carts.

Hours later he returned with a report he had found a defensible clearing. He dismounted and strode over to Jorin.

'Don't worry,' the ranger said, clapping him on the shoulder, 'we've already seen our share of monsters for the day.' Jorin wasn't reassured.

By nightfall the wagons were arranged in a protective horseshoe with the majority of the men bedding down near a roaring campfire.

The head merchant had stewed his rabbits and was finished chewing the meat off the bones. He sat back, satisfied in his chair as the smell of rabbit permeated the air throughout the camp to growling stomachs. A slight breeze picked up, moving the scent out into the woods beyond. The old ranger winced, but continued to pace around the camp in his full gear. Jorin wondered if the man would still be in camp by morning.

Sleep was the only cure Jorin knew to ease his worrying. He wasn't a religious

man, but before he closed his eyes he prayed to the gods to keep him safe. The fire faded from his sight and thoughts of the orc woman came to him as he secretly hoped to see her again.



A terrible howl pierced Jorin's ears as he awoke. His heart raced as he looked about the camp. He saw something trample and scatter the fire. A few men ran off in flames, casting tormented shadows across the clearing. All around, the fire spread, engulfing the caravan in an inferno. Wreckage was strewn in dark piles across the smouldering ground. Jorin stood up and walked slightly backward, trying to take in what was happening.

He tripped on something behind him and tumbled to the dirt.

Quickly, he looked to the cause and discovered a corpse. His friend, the grizzled ranger, lay dead before him, the man's blood pooled around him from a massive spear that had punched through his chest.

The air was thick with shouts and the caravan party ran about in a panic. Jorin scrambled along the ground, looking for anything to defend himself.

There were familiar faces and bodies all around, skewered in their sleep. As he poked through men's arms and legs, his hands became wet and sticky as flickering fires revealed blood on his fingers. A glint of metal caught his eye and he made his way toward it as howls of terrified men shrieked all around. Feeling carefully, he struck a wooden handle and his hands curled around the shaft of a mace. He steeled himself, catching a glimpse of the dead eyes of a soldier that bet against his survival. The mercenary stared into oblivion, astonishment permanently fixed on his face. Hands shaking, Jorin stood to scan his surroundings.

The burning caravan's light revealed his foes: great hulking things, armed with clubs and scavenged swords from the dead. They used the swords like daggers, impaling all in their path.

A scream from the merchant's wagon caught Jorin's attention. He recognized the fat merchant's voice as he ran out of his burning wagon, only to be skewered by one of the creatures. Greedily, it picked up the fat man and put his head into its maw, popping it with a terrible crunch. Jorin fell to his hands and knees, gagging from the sight. Vomit that was more bile than food forced its way up his throat, and by the time he recovered he no longer knew where the creatures were.

A large foot stomped behind him and Jorin swallowed hard. The force of something sharp punched through his shoulder, arching Jorin forward. He gave a scream but was quickly cut off as a blow to his head plunged him into darkness.



Agonizing pain brought Jorin back from unconsciousness. Groggily, he looked about to see he sat upon a pile. Just beside him was a huddle of the large beasts sitting in a circle around a burning wagon. One chewed on the carcass of a man while two others greedily devoured the insides of a horse. Jorin's eyes rolled back into his head as his body slumped. He was one of many stacked bodies piled

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high. A hand reached out behind one of the large creatures and grabbed the body next to Jorin. The absence of the corpse flipped him toward the edge of the pile. The jarring movement shot a dull pain through his arm, reviving him. Opening his eyes to see clearly, he watched as one of the creatures strung a rope around a corpse and beam. Gnawing and crunching of bones came from the other two as they finished up on the horse. Jorin's vision began to blur and he felt sticky wetness streaming down his face from beneath his hairline. Another large green hand reached into the pile, grabbing Jorin's leg, but his limb was so drenched in blood that its coarse grip slipped off. The hand tried again, but tugged on a leg slightly underneath him. The body slipped out from beneath him and a gap opened up on the side, tumbling Jorin off the pile. He hit the ground with a jolt to his arm, which made him bite his tongue from excruciating pain. His senses returned and he reeled from the corpse pile, crawling away towards the last untouched wagon on the field. His right arm was useless, so he used his left to pull himself inch by inch into the fading darkness.



Consciousness returned to Jorin with a painful burning in his shoulder.

He felt pinned to the ground as if held in place by something. Instinctively he groped at his arm, trying to pull an imagined weapon out, but there was none.

He raised his head and looked to see what it was. He had a hideous puncture wound in his shoulder and was soaked in blood. Every layer of his torn clothes was drenched with blood and sweat. His arm smelt bad and he coughed, too weak to do anything other than wipe the cold sweat from his brow. Tears pricked shamefully behind his eyelids at the thought of losing his arm.

Angrily, he propped himself up on his good elbow, only to have his head spin from the sudden movement, forcing him to collapse.

He gave it a second attempt, moving more slowly, allowing him to take in his surroundings. He was in a long and low cave. A small fire burned at its entrance, tended by something he couldn't make out.

It stood and turned toward him, edging its way nearer while stooping to avoid the low ceiling. Jorin flinched, closing his eyes to prepare for the worst.

It merely pushed him firmly down into a pile of bedding. It then pulled his ruined shirt away from his wounds.

Sighing, it daubed a foul-smelling mixture on his exposed flesh. A sharp burning grew into a lancing pain, shooting through his entire body. He shuddered from the prolonged intensity as the figure started to hum a song he had never heard before. He struggled to rise, but the hands held him down.

Gritting his teeth, Jorin swallowed and opened his eyes.

All at once it came back to him: the forest, the caravan and the female orc who now sat before him.

'Arrezh-kah,' she said in a low soft voice.

Jorin was too stunned to find proper words. 'I'm sorry?'

'Is name, Arrezh-kah.'

'Oh.' Jorin rolled his eyes, noticing his lack of manners. 'Ereshka.'

‘Arrezh-kah,’ she said, more forcefully.

‘That’s what I said: Ereshka.’ It was clear by her expression he’d said it wrong.

‘Your name?’ she asked.

‘Jorin.’

‘Yo-ren?’

‘Close enough.’

‘I learn Common... late. Tribe I from, speak only orc.’

‘Do they know I’m here?’ Jorin dizzily glanced about, his fear of the fierce hunters returning. Ereshka looked at him blankly.

‘That tribe far away now... My tribe many miles, many, many... years. Years?’

‘Years,’ Jorin agreed. ‘But who do you live with now?’

‘No one, no tribe, nothing.’ Ereshka stood up, grabbing her pot of mixture.

As she left, Jorin looked down the curve of her green back and the smooth muscles beneath her skin. He wondered what that skin would feel like.

She turned back to see him studying her and Jorin quickly turned his eyes to something else.

‘You rest,’ she smiled and turned, but this time ever so slowly, as Jorin found his eyes irresistibly drawn back to her.

She was undeniably different, but why was she alone?

Jorin closed his eyes and made a small verbal prayer, thanking the gods once more. As he fell asleep, Ereshka quietly crept back to study his delicate face.



‘So he married her just because she bandaged him up?’

Brother Roddick grabbed fresh sheets from a closet and handed Sera a pillow case.

‘Not just that. They were...’ Roddick picked his words with care. ‘...genuinely attracted to each other. Even I must admit, as orcs go she’s very beautiful. And by my understanding of orcs, that isn’t a good thing. Most spend their lives disfiguring themselves ritually—but not her.’

‘Beautiful? But she was raised by uncivilized brutes and even if I believed she was beautiful, I wouldn’t believe she was kind, or clever... or... or anything like that!’

Roddick grimaced at the callousness before him. Maris’ mother was beautiful and certainly more than Sera *on the inside*. As quickly as he thought it, he regretted thinking of it, feeling ashamed. He begged Abadar for forgiveness, seeing the error of his judging her. If he was going to help Sera, he would have to do better than see the obvious. He would have to focus more on what the girl needed and nurture the potential of what she *could* become.

Taking a deep breath, Brother Roddick proceeded, ‘She picked up quite a bit of Common from Jorin. It was quite a while before he was on his feet. Thanks to her he could use his arm again, though it would never be the same.’

‘But why did he marry...’ Sera protested, not letting the fact go, ‘...with an *orc*?!’

Brother Roddick remembered a similar conversation with Jorin’s family.

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They'd tried to call off the wedding, but their son refused. At the time, he chose to comfort the family with their prejudice, but now he saw it wasn't comforting that was needed that day, *but teaching*. Had he preached tolerance and understanding, would Jorin's human family desire to keep Maris instead of giving her up? The girl was, after all, their blood...their grandchild. Now he saw the same 'all or nothing' racism coming from Sera. The similarity was too close and he recognized this was his chance to redeem himself.

'As I told you,' he repeated, 'Jorin found her beautiful, in more ways than you or I will ever know. Sometimes it is not for us to understand why someone finds beauty where others cannot, but we must try to appreciate what it is that they see.'



Ereshka raised a hand to Jorin's arm as he stood at the cave entrance. His shoulder had mended well enough for travel and he wanted to return home. As she touched his arm, he could feel an unspoken tenderness pass between them. Her touch was soothing, but at the same time, maddening. This was his last chance to feel her. Unable to stop himself, he put his hand out to caress her face. It was a stupid gesture, but he'd laid awake too many nights wondering what it would be like, to miss this moment.

His heart melted as he brushed her smooth skin. Closing his eyes, he imagined river pebbles softer than anything he had ever experienced. He felt an ache inside without knowing why, driven by wanting her. And as the moment began taking hold, she pulled away and all his desires were snuffed out.

Sighing, he turned to pick up a small pack she had prepared for him.

'Stay,' she said, looking away.

Jorin tensed.

He wanted to. He wanted her to be his. His only regret was she wasn't human. He couldn't see their life together, but at the same time he couldn't see it without her. He didn't want to think about anything or anyone, just her. His resolve was slipping, and doubts on what he was losing tore at him, but he didn't want to take advantage of her, only to leave a few days later. He worried he would turn her into someone else.

The pack slipped from his good shoulder slightly, but he pulled it tight.

He belonged with her and he knew it, but his home was a cruel place for her kind. Casteless half-orcs suffered terrible indignities by humans—but a full blood orc? They were never seen in the city and were *not* welcome.

Could their feelings for each other change that?

Could they brave it?

'Please stay, Jorin.'

'I want to,' he cried, 'but...we both know I won't survive out here. I won't last the winter. People like me need to live in houses, in cities. I tried the wilderness and it nearly killed me. Hells, it even killed the ones who knew the wilderness.'

'If you wanted to stay, you would,' Ereshka shrugged, not looking at him. 'I could protect you.'

'You can't always be at my side. Something would make its way into this cave

while you were foraging for us, and then...'

'Fine. I will see you to your city, make sure nothing kill you on the way.'

Jorin wanted to correct her Common, but bit his lip. She'd asked him to point out her mistakes so she could learn quicker, but she had an unerring knack at knowing when she was being patronised.

They walked together in silence.

Jorin could not find the words to express what he was feeling. Everything he thought of was either wrong or selfish, and in his heart he didn't want to say those things.

He pondered on how he would say goodbye until Ereshka suddenly stopped, with him walking right into her.

'Quiet,' she whispered. 'You hear that?'

Jorin strained his ears and listened as Ereshka held her breath and raised her ears. All he heard were the birds chirping above in the trees.

'Troll!' She put her hand to her ears and closed her eyes in concentration. 'One for sure, maybe more.'

'How do you know that?'

'Hear little birds? They call like troll because they hear troll. Now they copy us and troll know we're here.'

'Mockingbirds!'

'Mawkeybur! Mawkeybur! Mawkeybur!' Jorin heard high above.

'Sssh!' She looked at the trail, 'Know way to reach village?'

Jorin nodded, but was thinking of what he was going to say, 'Ereshka, I wanted to thank you...'

'Is nothing,' she cut him off looking off to the right of the trail. 'Run and I keep troll busy.'

Jorin looked at the path dismally and back to Ereshka, 'I don't deserve you.'

Ereshka nodded, 'You are right; you don't. Now go before they smell us'

He walked on, but looked back to see Ereshka standing as elegant as she did when he first saw her.

'Run,' she hissed loudly.

Jorin looked back to the path and increased his strides, moving quickly upon the woodland floor, even as his conscience begged him to turn back. He ran recklessly, too deep in thought about Ereshka to notice well-placed branches scattered on the trail ahead. A rank smell permeated the air and Jorin felt his stomach twist as his senses brought back memories of the night his doomed caravan was attacked. He could feel the blade stabbing through his shoulder, the smell of burning flesh and the sound of screams.

Snap!

A brittle branch echoed under his feet and still birds took flight from nearby bushes. The trees off the path stirred vigorously as heavy footfalls thundered towards him. Frozen in terror, Jorin couldn't move as the fauna parted to reveal a massive green form with protruding tusks and scabby hide.

Cursing, Jorin ran back to Ereshka. The thing heaved toward him at a quickening pace and Jorin pushed himself harder, but his stamina was ebbing fast. Another one appeared on his left, joining its foul partner in their chase to kill him. Now

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there were two behind him, so he ran off the trail and into the trees, forcing them to split up. He strode for the thickest grove he could find, but they were quicker, finding the obstacles merely annoying.

They were almost upon him when a roar from behind made Jorin flinch. Turning his head to face his death, his foot caught a tree root and pitched him to the ground.

Jorin closed his eyes, waiting to be scooped up or smashed.

Seconds passed but no trolls.

He looked to where they should have been, but there was nothing. Carefully, he stood up as silently as he could; worried they were just toying with him.

Peering around a tree, one of his pursuers lied on the ground, its throat slit. Blood poured out of its nearly headless body, streaming up into the crisp autumn air. Ereshka stood in front of it, her blades held out in each hand, its blood splattered across her face. The other creature silently stood its ground.

‘Go,’ she said calmly to Jorin, but he couldn’t make himself leave. At last he saw what made Ereshka the beauty he could only guess at on the surface. She had almost decapitated the creature with one stroke and her body artfully held her weapons with delicate precision. That was why the male orcs had feared her so much. More rustling in the bushes came as another creature emerged, larger than the other two combined. Together, they slowly weaved back and forth, attempting to encircle her, waiting for the opportunity to strike. Jorin was not a fighting man, but somehow he sensed this was not the first time these creatures had met Ereshka. They gave her a breadth of space that appeared to show they were oddly intimidated. Jorin doubted she would survive. And though she had beaten one, the arrival of the larger was too much.

‘Stay and you die,’ she yelled over her shoulder to Jorin. And then both beasts turned their attention to him, sinisterly licking their chops. A long stream of drool dangled from one of their mouths as they slowly edged their way closer to where Jorin stood, attempting to come between him and Ereshka. They were using him, using him as pawn to get an advantage over her.

‘Go!’

Jorin ran and both creatures howled in unison. He felt ashamed as he ran away into a clearing. He was utterly useless to her. He headed up a tall slope, but as he ascended he lost his footing on a loose patch of rocky ground. He put his hand down to keep himself from falling and his shoulder ached from the pressure he exerted. Balanced once more, he made for the top of the hill before realizing what he had done.

She saved my life by sacrificing her own.

A terrible roar echoed through the forest, followed by a scream that tore at Jorin’s heart.

He couldn’t leave her like this.

Cursing his lack of will to follow through with her plan, he headed back.

He slid down the hill and ran up to the gorge. Dread filled his heart as he returned to the familiar tree. Just beyond he heard a terrible sound of gurgling and whimpering. Jorin peered around the tree to see the smallest of the three creatures jerking and flailing out of control. Its larger brethren lay on the ground, lifeless.

From safety, Jorin watched the thing's blood pour before it, until it finally twisted to the ground holding its neck.

He spotted Ereshka sprawled on her side in bloody torn clothes, her hair fanned across her face like a veil.

'Ereshka!' He fumbled to hold her hands, their limpness confirming his worst fears.

'Ereshka!' She opened her eyes and looked towards him. She had trouble focusing, but murmured something he couldn't make out.

'What is it?' he asked desperately. 'What did you say?'

She grinned weakly. 'It just looked bad. They chase me into trees and can't move. Big ones go down easy...' She coughed. 'Small one...not so easy.'

'Ereshka? Ereshka!' Jorin tried to wake her but she didn't respond. A gaping wound wept blood onto the forest floor.

Her eyes opened wide and held Jorin, 'It safe for you, go home now. Don't wait, they never fully die.' Jorin looked to the smaller one and noticed its wounds were closing as it began to twitch. He looked to the first slain beast, seeing its head had somehow reconnected, and the wound had completely closed.

'Have to get you out of here.' He lifted her into his arms. Her weight tore at his shoulder and his knees buckled. Grimacing from the pain, he carried her away from the creatures, past the trees and brambles and back on the path.

'Young one moved faster,' she said, trying to focus her eyes. Jorin was no judge of injuries, but she looked as if she'd been hit round the head, although he could not tell for sure as the clothes between them became wetter from her blood.

'Ereshka, I'm sorry, what happened before...'

'My fault,' she said. 'Should have done more than just touch...wanted more.'

Jorin felt himself tiring quickly, but his determination to protect the warm body in his arms gave him strength to go on. Fearing the creatures he left behind would soon recover and continue their pursuit, he looked back anxiously, praying for a little more time.

'Is all right,' she said, making soothing circles with her hand on his chest.

'Hang on, please!'

He walked on as Ereshka's body grew limp with silence.

Crying for her, he didn't notice the sound of his sobs being repeated by the mockingbirds above in the forest.



'So he healed her?' Sera rolled her eyes, 'That's no reason to fall in love. I've been treating burns all day and no one's so much as looked at me.'

Roddick stopped what he was doing and beheld Sera as she began to pull the sheets from the bed. She was a pretty girl, but it was hard for others to see past her vanity and closed mind. Even he, renowned for his understanding and boundless patience, found himself tested when she spoke openly in prejudice. Still, it was the world that shaped her. Had she stayed in that world, she would've never had the opportunity she had now, *to see through her own eyes*.

She wouldn't learn from scolding. Obviously, she had had enough of that, but

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she would learn from his example.

And this would be the day, the day he would see her rise above her petty upbringing.

‘Sera?’

‘Yes, Brother.’ She put down the sheets.

‘I want you to listen to me closely. You are the most beautiful woman I have seen walking through these halls, but you were raised to see things in the ugliest way. When I first saw you, I asked the council to place you under me. I knew where you had come from and why you were here, but I saw something in you, something better than your appearance. I saw you, Sera.’

She blushed, and an uncertain look crossed her face.

How long had it been since someone truly noticed her, Roddick wondered.

‘Let it go, Sera. Let go of whatever they told you and make up your own mind. We cannot hold onto what we’ve been told when confronted with the truth. Jorin felt it. I felt it, and now you are starting to feel it too. No one can tell you how to see through your own eyes. Maris is here because there is beauty everywhere. You just have to look harder, and you will see it, every day, every hour and every minute. Can you do it, Sera?’

‘Yes, Brother, I will try’ she said meekly.

He left her alone with Maris, making a quiet prayer as he went to the other ward down. *Thank you Abadar, for providing me the gift to guide your most worthy of servants.*



Even after nine years of marriage and seven years as a parent, there were still times Jorin couldn’t read his wife. She had black moods, never angry or destructive, just frustrated and at odds with everything. She had to watch herself, avoid breaking things. He could tell how stifling it was for her, trying to adapt to the tight constraints of houses. When she relented to accept her confines, she’d just sit still and stare into the fire or look outside the window. Each day she sacrificed herself to stay with her family, but there was no hiding her hatred of human spaces. Jorin felt guiltier each day, as he saw the indignities his wife endured. The world he was accustomed to had closed its doors on his wife and daughter.

It was difficult to take, and silently he told himself that one day he would take his family back to the woods and the cave, even if it meant his death. He never mentioned his plan to Ereshka though, but each day he wanted to. He was afraid and worried if he did tell her she might change the way she conducted herself. He had come to learn that orcs were very fatalistic and some of that had come to rub off on him; he didn’t want to jinx it. The people of the city were just waiting for an excuse to turn on her. Perhaps some eager knight looking to prove himself would come along or a simple bigot would incite a mob, or maybe his wife would just be pushed to the edge and strike out, knowing she was leaving anyway. He was not sure what it would be, but he knew something...was coming.

He stopped asking how her day went.

He knew too well what she was feeling because he was feeling it too.

Old friends who took wives suddenly wouldn't speak to him. People whispered things, and not always out of hearing. Drunks were particularly bad, rambling on as if their prejudice spoke for the entire city.

The townspeople were afraid of his daughter and they pitied him.

After nine years of marriage, Jorin laughed less, argued more and had grown a thicker skin. He loved his wife, but the young man who naively brought an orc home to meet his parents was a stranger now. He still remembered how he felt back then and wished he had stayed in the wild, but he had been concerned for their safety and wanted the protection of the city, gladly trading their happy life for a safer one, and unfortunately a sadder one.

Was it too late to turn back?

He missed the female orc he had fallen in love with and the cave they conceived Maris in.

For an instant, Jorin remembered being back there.

It had taken months to nurse Ereshka back to health, and by the time she was strong enough they hadn't been able to keep their hands off each other. And as the months passed, Jorin couldn't stop talking about his city, Canorate. Ereshka listened with a strange fascination. She was entertained, but at the same time, terrified. Jorin believed if he could show her the tall buildings and markets, she'd be dazzled by their innovation. He believed anything was possible there, and perhaps his love for Ereshka would come to be accepted.

The glow lasted but a few steps in the city, where a woman ran off screaming for the Town Watch to slay Ereshka. They only saw her green skin, and it terrified them.

Everything Jorin had hoped for was gone in an instant.

He knew how the city could be, but never did he imagine how truly bad it was. All the racial prejudice Jorin had seen against half-orcs was only a glimpse of what they really suffered. After those first few days, he wished they'd never returned, but he still held a desire to stay, and hoped the city would one day come to accept them.

After Maris was born, that hope went out completely. The town's unhappiness with his 'breeding experiments' was burned into his memory. Jorin's hands clenched into fists and he wiped a tear away from his face.

'You know I love you, right?' he asked, perching an arm on her chair while a snuffle came down his nose.

'Yes,' Ereshka said, not turning to face him. 'But Marezzh-kah hears what they say, and seeing her hurt is worse than anything they could do to me.'

'Well, she won't be seeing any of them for a while,' Jorin sighed. 'Not until she stops coughing. I'll take her to my mother's on the way to the bakery.'

'Hiding her from the problem won't fix it,' Ereshka snapped. 'What about when she's older? Who will she start a family with? There are not many like you.'

'Where's this coming from?' Jorin coughed suddenly. 'She's seven. She won't be starting a family anytime soon.'

'She has my blood; orc women grow fast. She'll think about it,' Ereshka said darkly. 'Her girl cousins play weddings all the time and she carries that baby doll

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around. How do I tell her she can't have a real baby like the one she carries? How do I tell her that the doll was created *only* for humans?"

'That isn't true.' Jorin snapped back. 'I am sure there is someone for her out there, just like you were for me.'

'You and I were lucky, maybe,' Ereshka's lip grew big, pouting.

'We could go somewhere,' Jorin felt it was the right time to tell her.

'Where?' Ereshka demanded. 'Orcs wouldn't have us and I wouldn't have them either. I travelled a long way to find someone friendly to me. There were none, just you.'

Tell her you want to go back home, to your real home! his heart screamed, but he didn't have the courage to share it with her. Regardless, he'd been squirreling away supplies for the road a while now. He had set aside warm blankets, bed rolls, waterskins, trail rations: everything needed to survive in the wild, but would she hate him for putting her through all this, only to admit he made a mistake after nine years?

He put the thought out of his mind, heading back to his plan; it would be safer to just be gone before something happened. The city was tearing them apart as sure as those trolls. He was determined to save them all before the end came.

'We can talk more about this later,' he said. 'I'll never be ready to open on time if I don't leave.'

Ereshka forced a smile for his benefit. 'I love you.'

He smiled and bent over to kiss her, forgetting he was ill.

As he tasted her, Jorin remembered why he continued on each day. As miserable as he was, it was all worth it just to have her next to him, whatever the cost.

'I love you too.'



Sera sniffed, then touched her nose in horror, remembering Maris' runny nose, 'Oh no!'

She grabbed a pile of dirty clothes and dumped them into a large wash tub.

'It's not like we don't have enough to do since the fire,' she sighed.

'Sera, please don't talk about the fire,' Brother Roddick whispered, but Sera was not one to be easily interrupted.

'I heard three streets of houses were just gone, and...'

'Sera! Why do you think she's here?' Brother Roddick pointed at Maris colouring on the floor.

'Her parents...' Sera's words trailed off as the shock sunk in. 'Both of them?'

Brother Roddick nodded grimly.



By the time Ereshka had made it to the temple she looked more savage than she ever had in the wilds. Her hair and clothes were singed, torn and filthy with ash. Her bare feet were studded with heat-shattered glass which left irregular patches of dark orcish blood behind her. Her hands and arms were thick with ugly

welts where she had torn apart the wreckage of the bakery, losing some of her fingernails in the process.

In the streets people swerved to avoid her.

Jorin's parents had coldly shut her out after learning she had survived the fire. They let her know Marrezh was given up to a temple, a tidy end to their embarrassment. Now that their son was dead, they held nothing back. They felt no love for her or their granddaughter. They didn't even bother to tell her which temple her daughter was given to. So Ereshka went searching, all over the burnt remains of the city.

She had been to all the faiths, and now dragged her feet to the grounds of Abadar. Under duress, she had forgotten this was the temple she married her husband in. She made her way painfully up the temple steps and hammered on the entrance. A small grated window opened on the door and a boy spoke.

'Fire's over, there's no need-' the young man stopped speaking when he saw the orc before him. She looked down into the window to see the boy's crumpled novice robes. He too had been touched by the fire and looked tired.

'We don't want any trouble.'

'No trouble. Do you have my daughter?' Ereshka demanded. 'Her name is Marezzh-kah.'

'No orcs here.'

'Half-orc,' she told him.

'Really?' The young man raised an eyebrow. 'I'll check. What's her name?'

'Marezzh-kah,' Ereshka said. 'Marrezh.'

The novice looked up, trying to recall something. 'Little thing, red hair, blue dress?'

'Where?'

'I think one of the priests may be looking after her. Brother Roddick.'

The door opened.

'Down the corridor, take a right; it's the room opposite the stairs.'

'Thank you,' Ereshka walked on. It was a long corridor and she had yet to admit Jorin was gone.

Her daughter was perhaps the last one to see him alive. Ereshka had agreed for Jorin to take their daughter to his mother's, not because she thought Maris would be comforted there, but rather her daughter would not have to see her sulk all day. As it turned out, their daughter would have ended up there anyway. The harbour master came calling to Ereshka shortly after Jorin left, asking for help to unload an unexpected ship. Ereshka grudgingly agreed.

The work that day was hard and solitary, but it allowed her to think clearly. It was as if everything she loved didn't exist for a moment and she could just be. And when the day came to an end she looked forward to the small joy of being reunited with Jorin, but that moment wasn't meant to be. She saw the smoke filling the blue sky over the city as she walked from the harbour. Their whole district had already burned to the ground, and the fire which started in the bakery, had already claimed her husband's life.

Marrezh was all that was left. The city and its terrible weight had suddenly been removed. Inside, Ereshka wanted to be dead too, but she had to stay for

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Marrezh.

Each step down the hall became heavier than the last. Soon she would see her daughter, but there was nowhere to go and Ereshka sobbed, remembering Jorin was gone.

As she approached the stairs she realized her sadness would soon become her daughter's sadness. A snuffle rolled down her nose and she remembered the last kiss she shared with Jorin. He had given her his cold, and it was the last thing they would ever share.

Jorin's death was an open wound.

The divide between Ereshka and the city was complete: no home, no family to help...no one except Marrezh. They were alone.

She turned a corner and saw a light shining from an open door.

Quietly she peered around.

Marrezh was sprawled in a bed, an explosion of coloured pictures lay on the floor. Her daughter's red hair shone against her olive-green skin and her hands were bright with chalk. A couple stood nearby, their backs to the door, watching the girl. Ereshka knew the man: he was the holy man who had shown them kindness. The blonde woman next to him appeared to be his wife.

It was peaceful, and Ereshka couldn't bring herself to disturb it.

The memory of Marrezh's birth flooded back to her. She could see Jorin holding their daughter so proudly as she recovered, but something was wrong. Marrezh was weak and frail. For days after her birth she feared the infant would die. Jorin explained that all human babies were born that way, but Ereshka still worried. She prayed for Marrezh to live, to flourish...and she did, grabbing life with both hands, holding tight.

And with that, all doubt Ereshka had was no more.

She knew about Jorin's plan to take them back into the wild. Had he tried to go through with it, he would've been surprised to learn they couldn't. She wanted Jorin to feel he had a way out, even if he didn't. She had her own secret too, *her time was coming*. She knew humans could live almost eighty years, but an orc was lucky to reach forty, and most died violently before then. A mature orc was a child in human years. Had they returned to the wilds she would have died soon after and left them defenceless, to die as well.

What was to become of Marrezh?

Ereshka wasn't good at being an orc and Marrezh would never be accepted as one either. Living alone in the wilds wouldn't work for the girl either, for the child's human side wasn't hardy enough. She wouldn't survive the wilderness any better than her father would.

Brother Roddick watched Marrezh with affection, and the little girl's face smiled faintly as she twisted in her sleep. The woman sang to the child quietly, a song Ereshka had never heard and the melody brought tears to her eyes. Brother Roddick beamed proudly at the woman as her resonating voice carried the song's delicate notes. She pretended not to notice the priest's attentions, but Ereshka could see she coveted it. The woman glowed proudly and Ereshka recognized herself in the woman. She had once felt that way when Jorin gazed upon her.

They care for each other, Ereshka thought.

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Painfully, she turned away, leaving as quietly as she came.

Each step away was harder than the last, as though the tide was pulling her back to where she belonged. Desperately she wanted to hold her, tell her how much she loved her, but it was best to move on.

The novice on the steps called out to her as she passed, but Ereshka shook her head.

‘Wrong half-orc,’ was all she replied.

She ducked her head and blinked back tears as she headed away from the temple and to the woodlands. The smell of trees reminded her of when she was once Marrezh’s age. Sighing, she looked at the path that would take her back to the cave. She would be happy there for a little while, and Jorin would not be too far away.

THE HAWK'S STRIKE

By Robert Drouin



ALL WHO FIGHT AROUND the Inner Sea know the story of the Aldori school of the sword.

I stand before a wagering, cat-calling crowd of Mivoni. The odds are against me, but that isn't surprising. I am only the "Silent Hawk," for I bear no adornments other than the proud raptor of my distant Andoran birthplace. I have no accent to identify my homeland, nor a voice to proclaim myself, for it was stolen by clawed violence long ago. My silence only serves to further tilt the odds against me. My skills were not won in the ring, before throngs of admirers, and I have no deeds to claim or boasts to make other than what my companion Tal has witnessed...deeds which neither of us care to reveal.

It will not be the first time that people underestimate a mute, and I take any advantage I can get.

I look away as I hear Tal's familiar voice among those betting. Most of the bettors are natives, willing to take Tal's coin on long odds. I block out their dealings and clear my thoughts for the task ahead. Tal has seen me best many things, with weapons and without, but he has not seen me face an Aldori, nor does he truly know what I am up against. If he did, perhaps his wagering would not be so...exuberantly foolish.

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Fisticuffs break out here and there, steel flashes in ready hands. There will be more duels after mine, eager to play to a crowd already gathered to cheer on proud and hungry glory-seekers. I see men of all colors: brown, olive, pale, copper, nearly black—even yellow. They're all watching; hungry ex-slaves and rapt potential students, eager to see the art of the Aldori displayed. The freedom of the River Kingdoms has attracted souls from many lands for years uncounted. The hunger in their eyes I know well, a chance to claim back a stolen life, to become something more; the desire to succeed inside the circle and receive the glory of victory.

Kramos Aldori stands across from me. The slim, mustachioed man waxes grandiose upon the tale of the Aldori. He regales the crowd around us with its honorable history: how its legendary founder, a proud Baron, wagered his lands upon a duel and lost, only to return years later and redeem himself in a second duel, this one lasting but a few seconds. He proclaims that the Baron's prowess was confirmed by besting all who challenged him, and thus his new surname, Aldori, became legend. Master Kramos cries out that the power of Baron Aldori's school is now known far and wide, and as men have learned the skills of the Aldori, they have extolled the supremacy of the Aldori school and embraced the Aldori name which all the school's masters bear proudly over all other fighting schools.

Kramos turns to me and the crowd roars as the Aldori master flourishes his school's trademark blade in a rakishly elegant and dismissively confident salute to his foe...the proper conclusion to his telling of the tale.

I can make no reply to his theatrics, but I bow with great respect in answer to his half-mocking salute, which pleases him. I am not an assassin or glory-seeking fool. I am a student of the sword, and the Aldori have earned their place and pride in their school through a thousand duels and tests of steel.

I measure again the reach and stance of Kramos Aldori. He is an accomplished master of his school, and our duel's resolution will not be seen as an accident or a lucky strike if I win...just as I would have it. The long, slightly curved length of his blade is ready; the chisel-tip seemingly made to open a throat, poised and controlled. The Aldori sword is an elegant weapon, but it is known by other names in other places.

As is the talonblade at my side.

Now Master Kramos and I face one another across the dueling ring. Here in Mivon, they use the classic circle. In other cities where the Aldori style is taught, they use a long rectangle instead; some others prefer a square, and somewhere in Brevoys there is an Aldori school that duels in a triangle, or so I have heard.

The ring marshal cries out his terms and the rules of engagement, and my opponent's eyes are now fire and steel. His blade is out and poised, and as the marshal's hand drops, Master Kramos shuffles forward with quick, dancing steps, blade held forward and high.

I take a half-step forward and settle into my stance, waiting. My right hand crosses to *Estrel's* hilt, my left to the scabbard that is her home. Nagging fears and hesitant doubts fall away into the serenity of her steel. My breath exhales gently, touching the cadence of my opponent's steps, which are slowing now with

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uncertainty; his confidence returns as my blade remains sheathed. Aggressive and certain, full of burning confidence, he lunges for my shoulder, seeking first blood; in truth, a feint to get a reaction from me.

What fool leaves a blade in its scabbard for a duel? I can see him thinking, feel him wondering what I mean to do with such a stance.

I can feel the regard, hear the words of my distant teachers, whose quiet and serene manner is so different from the swagger of the Aldori. I feel the burning pride of Andoran, eager to have my school recognized as a great institution on the Inner Sea. From our patrons in the heavens to now, I want to be worthy of both teachers and celestials alike. I must pass his wall of defense by coming at him from an unexpected angle. The Aldori do not fight with a shield or main-gauche, because the defense of their blade is all they need; I will only be able to bypass it once, on the draw.

I will only get one attack, and then the advantage will be his as he assaults me faster than I can turn his blows. He will take every attack I lay upon him and turn it into an opening of his own. I cannot keep up with the speed of his style...I must take him down almost instantly.

If the fight drags on, he will find a way to beat me. I hold no illusions that my defense can hold the ferocity of an attacking Aldori. No, I must take him down with one blow.

And he won't make errors, nor will he back down. My will to win must be greater than his. I must rely on him to react perfectly and precisely, and best him in that single moment.

If I fail at my one chance, it is over. I will win it on the draw, with the Hawk's Strike, or not at all.

My hand is on my blade. I trust to her as she has taken away my uncertainty, and left me with only the moment. *Estrel* leaves her sheath; my focus is that of a bowstring launching an arrow forth, an explosion of steel and sinew. As she springs, I move the scabbard outward and up, a motion that would send a normal sword for the throat instead sends the blade arcing up, down, and around, flowing faster than any mere draw or unsheathed strike, a variation on a technique called *iajitsu* in a distant land, but here known simply as the *Hawk's Strike*. Kramos' instinctive attempt to predict *Estrel's* path, to parry and counter, falls a mere finger's-breadth low, and his eyes widen as he realizes his reflexes have betrayed him. I twist my hips and slide aside from his cutting counter-thrust at my chest as *Estrel* dives, and he watches with astonishment as his blade flows through her quillons, tearing his strike away from its intended path.

The act of drawing my blade is the true danger here, the change of angle and speed the scabbard can give to my sword, allowing it to pierce an opponent's defenses and strike deep and true, and Kramos realizes it too late. *Estrel* plunges through his leathers and down across his chest, two inches of her steel slicing flesh and muscle. I pivot through and the stroke is complete; his sword leaps from his grasp as he falls, the slender blade caught in *Estrel's* guard and hurled away like a frightened bird flushed from cover.

Its clatter to the stones presages Kramos' own collapse, only a heartbeat after.

I blink in surprise, despite myself. The truth of my teachers' lessons runs

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through me all at once, a rush of the years of effort driving me towards triumph in the here and now. My legs wobble for a moment in recognition of this moment of victory. It is a brilliant eye opening inside me, telling me that I, at long last, have succeeded in a quest that has driven me since I was a child.

As if in counterpart to my silent exaltation, the crowd gasps in unified horror. Accustomed to seeing a flashing, thrilling exchange of quicker-than-the-eye sword strokes, this exchange is almost insulting; it is a master's rebuke to a fool, not something done to an Aldori swordlord of Master Kramos' repute.

This is not how the Aldori fight their duels. But then, I am not an Aldori. The true hawk need only strike once.

An inch deeper, his insides would be spilling forth on a corpse. He knows this, and glares up at me from his back as scarlet spreads eager fingers down the length of his chest. He tries to comprehend how he was bested.

Bested, as I have seen him best other men.

Estrel reaches down to hook the ornate hilt of his blade, and brings it up to my hand. I take it and turn back to Master Kramos, who is endeavoring not to move for fear of aggravating his devastating wound. I lower his blade to his hand, and he musters the strength to lift his arm to accept it. Grudging respect in his eyes, he thanks me for the gesture...and curiosity is all that remains. He is a master of the sword, and I, at last, can call myself the same.

The crowd roars at the show of honor. His students surge forward to succor him, calling his name fervently. With them is a man bearing the symbol of Gorum, the grim God of Battle. I step back to let them converge on their fallen teacher. The priest does his task, closing the eviscerating cut with his healing gifts. Master Kramos will have a great honor-scar to remind him of this duel, but he will live.

The Aldori soon rises carefully to his feet; the priest has done his work well. The blow to his pride will take somewhat longer to heal, however.

Master Kramos looks back only once as he walks away from the circle, but I have already departed. I have done what I came to do, and I have no wish to be subjected to endless challenges by prickly Aldori swordlords determined to reclaim the honor of their school.

More so when the natives realize just how much gold they have lost to Tal's wagers.

"The inhabitants of Mivon are generous in their underestimation of foreign blades," Tal laughs softly as he jingles coins in the heavy purse he hands me. The scar that cuts across his eye and mouth turns his pleased smile into something ferocious, yet painful. His words again are at complete odds with his scarred and beaten appearance; they have true class and distinction, and bear the mark of fine schooling and higher education. I am the only one allowed to hear his true voice, the greatest level of trust he dares bestow upon any living soul.

Perhaps one day he may trust me with his true name.

Perhaps not.

I nod my thanks, which makes him grin more widely, displaying four missing teeth that were smashed out over a trifle trespass long before we met. My blade has again kept us alive, and in coin. Slaying brigands on the road, tracking down raiders, or dueling for wagers is far better than relying upon his cutpurse skills.

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His somewhat greater share of the coin, which we both pretend I am ignorant of, will keep him in the little luxuries that gnaw at his soul, reminders of a life taken by fire, pain, and steel.

The wagers he made at Mivon will also keep us well supplied on the way to Restov, and our stops at the petty River Kingdoms in between.

“So, what did you consider your odds in the duel?” Tal asks with forced casualness. I glance at him, and flick my fingers. He blinks. “You’re not serious.”

Three in ten odds are not what a gambler wants to hear. I had trusted in my school’s lack of fame. This time, it had won me the duel, and allowed me to discharge a promise that had shaped my entire life. But now word will spread, and the men I face from this point will know me, and my style. They will take steps to counter it, and design tactics to beat it. Tal’s smoothly cunning expression tells me he is also calculating new odds, and naturally enough ways to tilt those odds in our favor.

I must do the same. Some of my opponents will fall to the Hawk’s Strike, despite their precautions. Most will not. The duels will extend in length, and there the Aldori will shine. I will have to remember all the lessons of my teachers, and apply them superbly. I cannot trust my opponent’s ignorance again.

Estrel’s touch gives my churning thoughts calm and serenity as I consider the adversaries I must face, looming large in my mind’s eye. Word will travel faster than this river barge I float on, and when we finally arrive in Restov, there will be eager men waiting to tear down the newly-won reputation of my school and myself. Between here and there, we will find other challengers and more proud Aldori, eager to avenge the slight to their school’s honor. Will they be as skilled as Master Kramos? Many, no. Others, most certainly. Kramos was not the greatest of the Aldori masters.

I will have to face them all now. There is no turning back...the finest schools of the blade await in Restov, and I will enter those gates with my head high. There will be many proud men seeking to send my path to victory plunging into the gutter.

Estrel seems more eager than I. I draw strength from her steel, the mettle of the metal; she helps to pace my thoughts. I must be ready for fights outside the circle too, and for treachery. Where men fight and wager, there are many ways to change outcomes. Tal knows almost all such skullduggery, and my worries in that area are little...if there is one thing former slaves from Cheliox know, it’s treachery.

Restov awaits the Hawk’s Strike, and I won’t disappoint.

BEYOND REASON

By Maggie Hoyt

“LET’S HURRY AND get this over with, please.”

Ayome nodded and placed her fingers near the sides of Rennick’s neck, pressing hard enough to leave faint white marks on his skin. She attuned herself to the pulsing of the sea until she could feel its pounding waves in her blood. Then she exhaled slowly, expelling the essence of the ocean that resided at her core. Her breath, tinged with the brackish scent of morning sea air, entered Rennick’s nostrils. She removed her fingers from his neck to reveal thin ridges.

“All ready. Let’s go,” Ayome said, plunging into the surf and swimming out several feet before she turned to watch her companion.

Rennick floundered. He submerged his head and sank down for a moment, then quickly surfaced, sputtering and gasping. He wiped his auburn hair out of his eyes and spit out a mouthful of seawater.

“You have to breathe, Rennick,” she said, impatiently treading water in the rocking sway of the ocean tide.

“I can’t! The water gets up in my nose, and—”

“Exactly. Then you need to exhale. We do this *every* time. You felt the gills form. You can look at mine. I promise you they work. Don’t you trust me?”

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“Of course I trust you! I just don’t think mine work properly!”

Ayome sighed. Rennick hated the ocean, and no amount of reassurance could ease his fear of taking that first gulp of seawater. Frowning, she glanced around at the clear horizon. It had been days since they lost the skum that had harried their ship, but Ayome was unconvinced that their amphibious pursuers had truly given up the chase. Nevertheless, the coast was clear, and heaven knew Rennick had certainly been patient with her anxieties.

“Watch me.” She ducked under the water and took a few deep breaths. “See?” she said, surfacing. “I didn’t have to hold my breath. Now you try.”

“It’s unnatural, Ayome.”

“Rennick, we don’t have time for this! By nightfall, this island could be crawling with skum. We need to make progress.”

“We’ve got time. If you’ll just give me a moment,” he said then shakily filled his lungs as though they would never know air again.

Seeing her opportunity, Ayome sprung forward and plunged his head under the water. She laughed as he easily pushed her away, and after swimming just out of his reach, Ayome descended, daring him to chase her.

Here, deep below the waves, Ayome was at home. The cool ocean water licked her skin; its salty tang tickled her tongue. She and Rennick both had the curiosity of born explorers, but he could not share her love for the long-lost ruins of the ancient deep.

Her pulse quickened as she dove deeper into the sea surrounding this ancient Azlanti island. She had spent years with her nose in treatises on ancient Azlant, and now she and Rennick had discovered clues to the whereabouts of an actual ruin. She somersaulted twice, gliding through the current and reveling in its rush.

Periodically, Ayome kicked off the rocky slope of the underwater mountain to drive further into the depths. When her feet suddenly ran out of rock, she stopped, righted herself, and stared at a great circular hole carved into the side of the island. Rennick floated down beside her, gaping, his hair nearly standing on end.

“Told you so,” she said with a smile, her voice distorted by the water.

Rennick whispered a few syllables and reverently touched the silver butterfly charm hanging from his belt. It lit up with a flash, and the pale light glimmered over the metallic remnants of the great doors that had once sealed the hole, revealing a small chamber. Ayome attempted to swim forward, but felt Rennick’s hand tug on her ankle. Rolling her eyes, she allowed him to proceed before her.

Rennick’s powerful arms propelled him quickly toward the rubble. As the glow from his token illuminated the recesses ahead, Ayome caught a glimpse of sudden movement. Before she could shout a warning, rows of serrated teeth appeared, gleaming from the jaws of a dark blue shark. The creature snapped ferociously, barely missing its prey as Rennick recoiled. The predator then emerged from the cavern, weaving its lean form into open water to take another pass. Rennick drew his sword.

Ayome found her voice and immediately interrupted.

“Stop it, both of you!” Her verbal reprimand to Rennick was no weaker than her mental command to the beast. The shark stopped mid-bite, its maw hanging open as though in shock. Rennick refused to lower his sword.

“Ayome...” he warned.

“He isn’t going to hurt you, Rennick. We’ve just invaded his home, that’s all, but I bet he’d really like to show us around.” She turned to the large blue creature. “Do you have a name?”

A few garbled syllables, the tang of blood, and a strong yearning to hunt and devour entered her mind in response.

“Well. How about Flank, for short. Flank, lead the way.” She gestured into the alcove. The shark circled around Rennick and reversed course, his jaws forming a toothy grin and his tail practically wagging as he swam ahead of them.

“I swear, Ayome, someday you’re going to get us eaten. Chewed up, rotting in the belly of a...”

Ayome brushed past Rennick, ignoring his rant, and examined the chamber. In the darkness, she could only make out a few details: columns surrounded a platform with a rounded object on top. What could it be?

“Rennick, come here. I need more light.”

“Hold on, there’s a dial on the wall over here by the door.”

Ayome turned to look just as Rennick’s fingers touched the knob.

“Be careful!” she scolded, swimming to him and placing her hand over his. “How will we know what to do if we don’t examine it first?”

Rennick rolled his eyes. “It’s a dial, Ayome. It’s meant to be turned.”

“Ah, but how would you know which way?”

“My right hand was feeling lucky.”

Ayome clicked her tongue and turned her attention to the dial. “The flow of energy travels to the right. There will not be any effect if we turn it to the left. Therefore...” Ayome reached out and spun the dial clockwise.

“You realize, of course, that I was just about to do that.”

“Yes, but you were just guessing! This way, no one makes a mistake.”

Ayome rotated the disk and seven braziers along the outer edge of the chamber suddenly ignited with heatless purple flame. The fire flickered and danced in the sea current, giving the worked stone walls a violet cast. She could see now that the rounded object was a basin, worked of the same white marble as the eight fluted columns that surrounded it. On the ceiling was an inscription.

“That’s it,” she said, pointing. “That’s the key we’ve been looking for, Rennick.”

“I wonder how this works,” he said, swimming over and peering into the basin.

“Don’t touch that! These things have to be done very precisely. That inscription up there should have all the instructions on how to manipulate the chamber.”

“So, what does it *say*?” he asked impatiently.

“Well, I don’t know yet. It’s in code.”

Rennick sighed and continued to examine the basin.

“If you’ll just give me some time,” she said, grasping his shoulders, “I’ll decipher it and we’ll do this rationally so we don’t blow ourselves up. It’s probably a simple letter substitution code. I’ll unravel it in no time.”

Rennick shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Which part?” she said with a grin. “Let’s not blow ourselves up?”

He sighed. “All right, have at it. You’ll never forgive me if I don’t let you

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satisfy your curiosity. I should inform the crew, but I'll be right back. I'm not leaving you down here alone."

"Take as long as you need, Rennick. I won't be able to focus if you stay anyway. You and your devotion to serendipity disrupt my logical thought processes."

"It's too dangerous—"

"I'll be fine," she reassured him.

He gave up the argument, frowning. "Just be careful. You've got your amulet?"

She held up the medallion hanging around her neck, identical to the one Rennick wore.

"Contact me if anything goes wrong."

She nodded. "Goodbye, Rennick."

He looked around once more, mentally assessing the dangers of the small chamber. A lurking shadow passed slowly behind the marble colonnade. Rennick sighed.

"And do me a favor, Blue-Eyes. Get rid of the shark."

Obediently, Ayome fixed her gaze upon the looming creature. *Flee*, she commanded through their mental link, and released such a torrent of authority that had she spoken, her voice would have sent tremors radiating through the water's currents. Unwilling to disobey, Flank turned and sped through the chamber's opening, his dark form quickly disappearing into the depths.

"Thank you," Rennick said. "Good luck."

Ayome cracked a small smile and waved him away, then swam toward the inscription.



Six hours later, Ayome still studied the strange characters inscribed into the multi-colored stone. She kicked lazily, bobbing up and down in the water. Mental fatigue had established a firm hold, and the stillness and isolation made it even more difficult for her to think. Ayome loved the ocean; its pulsing energy inspired her curiosity, but the quiet was so eerie.

"Focus, Ayome, focus," she said out loud, trying to help her aching mind. "Look here. See that one word with five symbols? It's repeated so many times. If I can guess it correctly, I should be able to substitute enough letters elsewhere to decipher the code. I can rule out all verb conjugations as well as several noun declensions because the endings would create gibberish elsewhere in the inscription. That leaves the irregular third declension nouns."

She closed her eyes as she visualized pages of her textbooks on ancient Azlanti.

"I've already checked every five-letter third declension noun with an irregular form in the Azlanti vocabulary. So now I think I will limit myself to words with the highest probability of occurrence."

She looked around the room. "Column? Too long. Platform? Even longer. Hatch would be an obvious choice, but then the second sentence wouldn't make sense."

Ayome studied the inscription. Perhaps she was making a mistake. Hatch would be so reasonable.



They had arrived on the small island two days ago, early in the morning before the fog had fully lifted. They surveyed nearly every inch, finding only a giant metal hatch buried in the island's center.

"There's something here!" Rennick had shouted as his shovel struck metal. "Praise the Song of the Spheres!"

"Be careful, don't damage it!" Ayome warned as Rennick and the crew dug excitedly. Slowly they uncovered a hatch engraved with Azlanti runes. One man reached for the latch, but both Rennick and Ayome cried out, stopping him before his hand touched it. In unison, they each made the same quick motions with their right hand. Then they gazed toward the hatch, eyes unfocused, as though they saw beyond the earth and metal.

"This thing is seeping energy," Rennick observed.

"It's a remnant of ancient Azlant. The presence is fading, but if this much strength remains, perhaps the ruin has been well preserved!" Ayome said.

"Is it warded?"

"No...but deeper down, something connects. I can see glowing veins of power radiating into the earth."

"It's joined to what's down there, then?"

"Perhaps..."

Rennick paused for a moment then nodded to the nearest man. "Open it."

Ayome shook her head. "He can't. It's sealed."

"What?"

"The hatch is sealed shut...beyond my abilities to undo."

Sure enough, the crewman's tugging yielded no results.

Rennick bit back his frustration. "Well, we've only just started. Let's dig around the perimeter, see if there's a lever or something that controls this thing."

The men set to work, but another hour of digging turned up only a small stone with a single word etched into the surface. Rennick called her over.

"It says 'underneath,'" Ayome deciphered, turning the stone in her palm. Her mind raced with possibilities, but Rennick erupted angrily.

"Underneath? Underneath! What kind of a fool's jest—"

"Rennick, hush. I'm trying to think. I don't see why you're so upset..."

"Do you realize how embarrassing it will be to return to Absalom and report that all our research and calculations couldn't prepare us to deal with a little hole in the ground?" he huffed. "We are stuck in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by Desna knows what kind of sea monsters, and all we have is one word from an Azlanti madman taunting us with what's underneath this hatch!"

"No, not under the hatch—" Ayome said excitedly, "under the island!"

"That's ridiculous! Now you're making things up."

"I most certainly am not! I have eliminated all other possibilities, Rennick, and this is what remains. Now, are you coming or not?"

And of course, he followed her. When they had found the chamber and the inscription, every ounce of logic in Ayome's body affirmed that this room was the

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key to unlocking the hatch.

So why didn't the inscription mention it?



Ayome pushed off from the platform and swam to study the outer edge of the room. The seven braziers still burned, staggered at even intervals between the pillars.

"Brazier? No. Seven? No. Purple? No. Violet? Much too long. I really should be doing this in alphabetical order."

Ayome's methods insisted on logical thoroughness, but she was beginning to feel hopeless. She'd already eliminated every possibility once. Would she have to admit defeat and let Rennick come down to experiment?

She approached a mirror hanging in the back of the chamber and frowned. Her eyes were a little wider set and her lips a little fuller than those of her human friends. Her mother had always claimed relation to a mermaid, but Ayome suspected that was a romantic invention; far more likely a gillman, one of the water-breathing men descended from the ancient Azlanti, or—Gozreh forbid—a skum, a wicked frog-like monster with the head of a sharp-toothed fish. She pinched her extra layer of blubber and wondered how she would look with scales.

"Mirror? No."

"Skum—" Ayome froze. Rennick's terse and agitated voice whispered in her ear as a wispy puff of smoke drifted from the center of her amulet.

"—*advancing. Too many. Blocking our escape off the island. Can hold them for maybe ten minutes. Open the damn hatch. Hurry. Try the basin.*"

Ayome's stomach churned with panic. Her instincts had been correct. Now she had a matter of minutes to provide Rennick and the crew with an escape from an onslaught of deformed fish-men; certainly not enough time to continue this painstaking exploration of her Azlanti vocabulary. But how would she possibly know what to do if she could not translate the inscription?

She swam to the center of the chamber and stared at the basin. Rennick was right: the basin had to be involved, but she didn't have the luxury of experimenting now.

"What do you do with a basin that's underwater?" she cried. It was too bad "basin" didn't fit into the inscription, but the Azlanti word was a whole five syllables long...

"Dammit! I'm such a fool! This is a syllabic code. Every symbol stands for a syllable, not a letter! So, if that says basin, then that's a preposition. Into! And that first word is push. Push something into the basin, push something..."

Bending down, Ayome began to press the carvings of tentacled amphibians and fanged fish that jutted from the basin, but none would budge. Finally, she came upon a tiny fish lurking behind a sculpted rock. She pushed the stone inward with her finger, and the marble relief retreated into the basin with a click, as a bronze spiral slowly emerged from a hole in the bottom of the bowl.

"I think I can fit one of the braziers in that. The third one is loose." Finally, her hours in the chamber were coming to some use. Ayome sped to the third flame.

She lifted the brazier by the shaft, slipped it neatly into the spiral, and referred back to the inscription.

“Push fish into basin. Yes. Place lamp into spiral. Done.”

A flash of light exploded painfully in the room, and Ayome blinked frantically, trying to regain her vision. When her eyes finally adjusted, she surveyed her surroundings, wondering what had happened. Then she saw the mirror.

The violet flame now reflected unnaturally in the glass. Ayome watched as it drifted over her own reflection and mimicked her form. Then she gasped in disbelief as the image stepped from the mirror.

The fiery, human-like silhouette stretched out its hands toward the brazier in the center of the basin. The flame drifted into its waiting palms and coalesced into a rectangular plaque. The image then held out the plaque expectantly.

The tablet resembled an artifact of Azlanti lore, and Ayome knew how those artifacts were rumored to work: in order to access the overpowering energy bottled up within them, they had to almost become part of a person. She did not trust this situation one bit, but Rennick needed her and she didn’t have time for indecision.

She reached out and grasped the plaque with both hands, and the flame burst outward in a blinding flash of light. Pain wracked Ayome’s chest as ancient violet runes covered her pale skin. She sunk to her knees.

A moment later, a chunk of brightly colored stone drifted to the ground in front of her face. She looked up and watched as the inscription cracked and crumbled.

“No. Oh, no,” she moaned. She’d fallen prey to a trap, and now the chamber would come crashing down around her, leaving Rennick helpless...

A cascade of rocks floated down, and she tried to swim away, but the pain from the flaming plaque had sapped her strength, and she struggled to move. She curled into a ball and covered her face with her hands, preparing herself to be buried in the chamber. Then suddenly, the stones stopped falling.

“Oh, thank you. *Thank you*,” she sighed in relief, as she let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Looking up, she could see that the crumbling stones had revealed a panel in the ceiling.

Ayome propelled herself toward it as the pain finally subsided. A glass tube containing a reddish liquid was centrally fixed, and Ayome saw that she could easily tip the tube and send the liquid pouring right or left. Below both ends were crescents, one green, one blue, each labeled in the wizard’s syllabic code. Ayome closed her eyes and visualized the inscription.

“I don’t remember these symbols at all,” she realized. “What if one of these sets off a trap? Oh, gods...”

Ayome dove down to the floor and began searching the broken inscription. Fragments of stone crumbled in her hands as she tried frantically to put them back together. She groaned with frustration at the accumulating pile of colorful pebbles.

“What did the end say? Come now, Ayome, remember! You stared at it for hours!” But the truth was, she had never paid close attention to the ending. It had all unraveled so quickly once she’d started cracking the code. She let out an angry sob. How much time had passed since his message?

“I’m sorry, Rennick, I’m so sorry!” she cried. If she didn’t open the hatch soon,

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he would be overwhelmed. And if she chose incorrectly, the Azlanti's defenses would probably do far worse.

Ayome feverishly ran through a list of possibilities, hoping she had missed something. Had either of these colors been on the hatch? On the inscription? In the chamber? Anywhere on the island? She bit her lip to hold back tears; she could not recall anything green or blue from their explorations. She swam back up to the ceiling, lost as to how to make this decision.

"What would you pick, Rennick?" she asked herself. She knew the answer: blue, of course, for his goddess. "But green is the color of kelp, and I love kelp. Really, isn't that all that matters now?" She was shouting, furious at her helplessness. "My favorite color. Your life rests on my favorite color. Such a random choice wouldn't bother you or your lady of fortune; she'd make sure you picked the right one! But I need it to make sense."

She took a ragged breath and tried to calm herself. "Green is good. Kelp, algae, turtles...everyone always says my eyes are green." She paused. "But you've always told me my eyes are blue."

She smiled sadly. That decided it.

"I'd rather trust you, Rennick."

She tipped the tube toward the blue crescent.

A tremor rocked the island. "Was that the hatch? Desna, please let that be the hatch." She kicked hard and sped out of the chamber towards the shore.

When she surfaced, she saw Rennick slitting the throat of a skum as the crew piled in through the open hatch. He glanced quickly at the skum advancing on the horizon then ran toward the water's edge, extending his hand.

"Cutting things a little close there, Blue-eyes," Rennick said as he helped her up on the shore. She grasped his arm in relief and followed him quickly to the hatch.

Ayome ducked inside as Rennick followed, sweeping the hatch door closed. The hired crew had lit lanterns and were tending to the wounded, setting up camp in the tunnel. Ayome didn't even need to look at Rennick to know he had no plans to wait. She grinned as the familiar light of his butterfly charm filled the tunnel, and the two of them forged ahead into the darkness.

Soon the tunnel began to spiral downward, and their progress slowed on the steep, roughhewn steps. Motes of saffron light hung in the air around them, their origin tantalizingly out of reach. After several minutes, the light began to brighten, and the two explorers quickened their pace.

"We must be nearing the center of the island," Ayome said as Rennick rushed further ahead of her.

Suddenly, the staircase ended, dropping off into a vast underground cavern. Rennick's momentum very nearly carried him off the small landing, and Ayome grabbed his arm, helping him regain his balance.

Before she could scold him, her breath caught in her throat.

Below them sprawled a forgotten Azlanti city, etched out of exquisite colored stone. A towering structure of rotating spheres and oscillating rings gleamed at its heart, and waves of light emanated from it, reflecting off countless mirrored surfaces and creating the appearance of thousands of tiny stars.

BEYOND REASON

“It’s beautiful,” Rennick said. “How close we came to missing this...”

Ayome rested her head on Rennick’s shoulder. “Thank the gods for your golden luck,” she murmured.

“Nah,” he replied, slipping his arm around her waist. “Who needs luck when we’ve got a mind like yours?”

Ayome smiled. She rolled a small piece of blue stone around in her palm, a keepsake from the ruined chamber, and sighed deeply. “Some things, Rennick, are simply beyond reason.”

A BETRAYAL OF VISION

By Chad O'Neil



WOLSC'S HEART BEAT fast and sweat gathered on his brow. It would happen any moment now, and he would be ready to die. The war horn bellowed and Wolsc tightened his grip on his axe. The party's pace quickened. Light from the full moon reflected off his crescent-shaped blade, and he let out a savage roar. Several others joined him in the chorus, and they went full charge; the garrison was in sight, and soon they would hear flesh rent from bone.

"You will die before you get any closer to Ardis, you filthy orcs!" a puny voice squeaked from the forest.

Sword and axe blade faltered as the advance began to slow. Wolsc looked out in disbelief as men poured from the wooded hills lining the valley.

There were more men than he could count. Quickly the soldiers surrounded them and Wolsc saw his brethren look to each other in doubt. Disgusted at the thought of defeat, he ran into battle. A knight rode up on horseback with a mighty blade and slashed at Wolsc, sending him tumbling to the ground. There he lay, dazed on the battlefield, surrounded by his fallen clansmen. A foot soldier ran toward him to attack. The weak human had an axe he could barely lift. Pitifully he heaved his weapon high as a small roll of fat peeked out from his armor, and then he sent the blade crashing down.

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"Aaaaargh!" Wolsc awoke, reflexively blocking his face with his arms.

"Having another disturbing dream?" a soft voice asked.

"Yes." Wolsc ran his hand over his face.

"Hmm...interesting."

"Why do you linger when I sleep, Tensa?" He stood up trying to shake his discomfort.

"Well, you're important to me."

"That, I doubt." His keen eyes focused on the female form hiding in the dense bushes. "Your games do not interest me, shaman."

A sharp-toothed smile crossed her face.

He turned and walked away, troubled.

The fading twilight imbued the valley with a dream-like quality. In the distance the mountains seemed to be settling in for their nightly slumber as they merged with the shadows of the forest. Trunks of the trees grew long in the darkness, closing in on Wolsc. Up ahead he could hear the voices of his tribe and the beat of a drum.

They were gathering quickly, invigorated by the night.

He wiped the sweat from his face and drew reassurance from his axe as he went off to join them. The tribe had formed a circle, and Wolsc came to stand among them, waiting. Their chieftain stepped out into the middle; the clan raised their weapons in salute.

"My warriors! Too long have we lingered in the shadows of the Hungry Mountains. We have suffered and endured the hard elements. But no more! My scouts report that a small garrison separates us from the riches of Ardis. Prepare for battle: we bathe ourselves in human blood tonight!"

Bestial roars shook the nearby trees as their leader held aloft his mighty axe. Wolsc watched silently, cursing his vision and the catastrophe to come. He'd have to move quickly to stop it. Slowly he weaved his way through the tribe towards his chief. The night breeze swept across his face, carrying the smell of the layered hides that covered the shelter's frame. They were a tribute to the long line of chieftains, skinned from the beasts slain during their initiations.

The other warriors watched suspiciously as Wolsc reached the chieftain's shelter. Then silence fell as Tensa snaked between the gathering throng to stand before the entrance, intent on Wolsc.

"How good to see you." Her words belied the lust in her eyes that only Wolsc could detect.

"I must speak with Durag."

"Of course, but it would be better if you just walked away," she whispered, gliding closer.

"I must see him now."

"He's busy; I'll tell him your wishes."

"I cannot wait!" he yelled as urgency boiled over, and he raised his axe.

Several nearby warriors closed in. Wolsc put his back to the shelter, roaring to make his determination clear.

Blades pointed at his throat as the whole tribe turned against him.

"We should have gutted you a long time ago, Wolsc! There's no room for your

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insanity in our tribe!” several of his kinsmen shouted. Then they abruptly fell silent as Durag emerged from his tent, raising his hand.

“Stop, or I’ll kill the lot of you!” All of them froze, their weapons hanging in the air. Wolsc turned back to the tent to see his chief standing before him. Tensa’s pale green complexion darkened several shades.

“Now tell me, what’s this about?” the grizzled leader glowered—but his concern was sincere.

Wolsc lowered his gaze, second-guessing how Durag would react to his vision.

“Speak your mind, Wolsc!”

He steeled his resolve. “The humans have been warned. They wait to ambush us.”

Durag nodded slowly and turned to re-enter the tent. Tensa followed, smiling sinisterly.

“Stay where you are, Wolsc, while I consider your words,” Durag ordered.

Like an ill omen, the clouds parted, revealing a full moon in the night sky. His chief’s absence seemed to stretch for an eternity. Sweat dripped from Wolsc’s brow, and his palms became slick.

Durag returned and Tensa came from behind to stand confidently beside him.

“My shaman has told me not to trust your dark insights. I see no deceit in you, Wolsc, but you are influenced by a treacherous presence.” Durag spoke the words Wolsc feared most. “I cannot allow you to frighten the rest of the tribe.”

“Take him to the forest. If he can’t cure himself of this affliction, may he never return.”

It was worse than he imagined: banishment for an illness that didn’t exist. With a wave of Durag’s hand, two guards walked from behind the chief and seized Wolsc by the arms. They bound his wrists with rope and took custody of his axe. Tensa said nothing as she walked by him, shaking her head.

Durag ordered a nearby sentry to take him to the woods. The guard complied unquestioningly and Wolsc was pushed forward, as warm spittle landed on his face repeatedly.

Tensa followed and the three walked deep into the brush until a dead tree appeared.

“Far enough,” his warden yelled and shoved Wolsc to the ground atop splintered branches. The brute sneered and spat at him, then rushed back to join the others.

Tensa lingered.

“You conspire to let it happen!” Wolsc shouted at her.

“I do,” she purred, “and like your precious Durag, you too are shortsighted, unwilling to see the advantage of what is to come.” Tensa looked disappointed.

Wolsc choked back the bile of betrayal as his heart began to pound.

“What do you mean?” He moved his legs toward his hands, allowing his fingertips to brush the hilt of a dagger concealed in his boot.

“I think you know. I want you to be destined for greater things, Wolsc.” The shaman’s eyes glinted in excitement. She knelt nearby, and he recalled the desire she had felt for him.

“And now, my love, it begins.” She leaned forward to kiss him.

Her treachery had poisoned his attraction; all his feelings for her had vanished

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when he had learned just how wicked she could be. He wrapped his fingers around the handle of his blade and severed his bonds with a stroke. Then he swept the dagger from behind his back and slashed at her.

Tensa shrieked as blood spilled from her throat and she toppled towards him.

Wolsc pushed her away in disgust.

She fell to her knees, stemming the bleeding with one hand and attempting to gain some composure. Looking toward Wolsc, she raised her free hand, speaking to the air as some force manifested before her, shooting straight at him. He was thrown to the ground, and every muscle in his body burned as he mustered all his strength to roll on his belly.

Tensa stood slowly, green blood staining her clothes. She made a series of gestures with her hand, and Wolsc felt a grip tighten around his throat. He gasped for a breath as the air burned his lungs. Struggling amid the gathering darkness, he pushed himself to his knees, cursing himself for ever relishing her touch.

“Just let yourself pass out, and when you wake up the tribe will be ours.”

Wolsc gritted his teeth and fought. “But you’re his! You are his chieftess.”

He looked for her, but there was nothing to see. He knew she was out there somewhere.

The night breeze shifted, and Tensa’s familiar musk filled his nostrils. Pleasant memories of lying with her filled him with revulsion.

She was approaching.

A glowing hand reached out of the air, and grabbed hold of him. Wolsc howled, flailing wildly with his dagger. The knife found its mark and sliced into her torso and deeply across her arm. She fell to the ground, her hand igniting a nearby bush. It took all his might to escape the growing blaze as the forest quickly caught fire. Gasping for air, he ran back to the tribe, hobbling. He then followed their tracks toward a clearing where he heard them calling out their attack, just as he had dreamed.

Wolsc’s heart stopped.

Horried at the thought of dying without his people, he hurried to the distant battle. In the moonlight he saw the knight from his vision riding out from the forest. With renewed strength he rushed forward to the bellowing horns signaling the ambush.

The trap had sprung.

As he ran, the tide of battle shifted. Outnumbered, the band closed into a tight circle as men poured from the forest, enveloping them. He saw many of his tribe fall, each taking several human lives in the process, but there were simply too many. Yelling, Durag inspired his struggling warriors.

“Make them pay! Kill every last one of them!”

Touched by his leader’s words, Wolsc rushed toward his clan to fight by their side, slicing with his dagger every step of the way as he charged. He picked up a human’s sword and continued to cut a path toward the center.

The battle raged on through the night, and as the sun rose, the survivors numbered less than a dozen. Durag leaned against the hilt of his axe to catch his breath. He was drenched in green and red blood, some of it his own, but victory had been theirs. The humans had retreated, making their way back through the

forest, leaving their dead to litter the valley.

When the chief recovered, he congratulated the surviving members of the tribe, and then asked Wolsc to accompany him to the woods. The two walked silently until out of sight, and then Durag turned to face him. Claspings Wolsc's shoulder, he looked to the battlefield beyond the tree line.

"I want to do what is best for you, brother, but I cannot shelter you," Durag spoke softly, then held out his great axe to Wolsc. "Take this."

Wolsc was hesitant at first, but then took the blade, shocked by his chieftain's gesture.

Durag continued. "I considered you family once, and it pains me to see you like this. But it cannot go on." He looked deep into Wolsc's eyes. "I would know one thing, though: I know Tensa is dead, but do you?"

Wolsc shook his head, unable to understand how his chieftain knew what he had done. "We fought just before the battle tonight. She meant to betray you and have me supplant you."

Durag's eyes went to Wolsc's feet, and he sighed heavily. "May the gods be merciful on you." Then he quickly drew a short sword and plunged it deep into Wolsc's chest, turning the blade. "I am sorry, my friend, she died many months ago. I found her in your arms and slew her while you slept. I hadn't the heart to kill you, and I would have left it alone. But she never left you, and sooner or later she would have had her revenge. A shaman's spirit can live on in such ways."

Durag picked up his axe and headed back to the tribe. Wolsc bled out alone in the forest.

"I'm sorry...Tensa, I didn't..." Wolsc's life ebbed away into the dry forest needles.

He looked to the rising sunlight, and a voice spoke upon the gentle breeze, calmly moving through the trees.

"I am here."

A hand brushed his face, and Tensa curled around him.

"This is wrong. Durag deserves better than this," Wolsc grimaced somberly.

"No, you're wrong, Wolsc. No chieftain, no god, no spirit can deny us what we feel. I will always be yours."

Wolsc shook his head. "I feel ashamed, why don't you?"

"Because I love you, and anyone that comes between us will suffer a thousand curses."

Wolsc's heart beat next to hers and he pulled her supple form close. "Tomorrow we will leave the tribe. I will face him, let him know what we're doing."

"Don't. He will have to do something or lose face among the others. Better we just disappear."

Wolsc gave out a long sigh. "I will do as you ask, though it dishonors me. I do love you, Tensa."

She smiled and kissed his cheek tenderly.

"Ssh, rest now, Wolsc. We will start anew tomorrow."

MY SHADOW

By Crystle Stevenson

BURNING INCENSE FILLED the air with earthy, pungent odors, as candlelight flickered orange over a robed form squatted in the center of the dimly lit space. The figure withdrew a pouch from its sash. A bit of dust stirred from within as the bag was opened and tipped carefully, pouring ashes to the floor in a slow circle. When all its contents had run out, the figure tucked the bag away and placed stones inscribed with mystic runes in five places of equal distance around the ring.

Then the ritual began.

The cloaked figure sat in the center of the circle and inhaled deeply. An ancient and tattered book, bound in dusty black leather was then laid open by long-nailed fingers as it was placed on the floor. From within the deep cowl, a commanding voice uttered words of arcane power in an unknown tongue as a fine silver dagger slipped from its sleeve. The ritualist waved it about with intricate and deliberate motions, causing the smoke from the incense to swirl in hypnotic patterns.

“Give me the power, oh spirits of vengeance,” the voice cried “the power to avenge the wrongs wrought against me and the power to be more than I am.”

The frantic clucking of a chicken broke the solemnity of the moment and the figure turned toward the barricaded door. When no more sounds came, the

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summoner resumed.

"I beseech you, send me my guide! I offer you my life."

The dagger swept across an open palm, and blood dripped to the floor.

Another moment passed and the room grew eerily silent as the flickering candle flames waivered and then continued burning without incident.

The cloaked form's shoulders slumped. With two final words the ceremony ended. The figure stood with a sigh then snuffed out the candles with a few quick breaths and moved to the door.

Slipping outside into the dim moonlight, the ritualist walked quickly along a path from the barn toward a small hut, confident despite the darkness. A hastily bandaged hand tucked away strands of burgundy hair and pulled the robe's hood closer.

A sudden movement from the left drew the figure's attention as the concealed light from a raised bullseye lantern blinded the robed caster. The tines of a pitchfork gleamed in its rays, threatening and ready to impale.

"What are you doing sneaking around out here, Dalia?" The voice behind the lantern moved nearer.

The cloaked figure lowered the hood, revealing the face of a girl. She squinted into the light trying to adjust her eyes until she made out the sneering features of her challenger. "I'm not sneaking, Klaus," she replied dryly. "I am returning to my quarters after a walk."

The boy edged closer still, his pitchfork pointing right into her face. The glaring light revealed two protruding horns an inch above the girl's hairline. They curled in a spiral curve along her skull before ending in upturned points. The boy leered at them as a chuckle escaped his lips.

"And did you think that hiding your horns would keep people from knowing what a freak you are?"

"Don't call me that," she growled.

"What? A freak? You have corkscrews growing out of your head, Dalia, and you cast no shadow! You *are* a freak!"

Dalia looked away from the light of the lantern and then stared back at the youth with a piercing glare. "I'm still a member of the household and you should not speak to me so!"

Klaus took a step back and scoffed. "Stoneclimb belongs to House Medvyed. You're an Ikrova; I don't serve you, no matter who your mother was! And I'm sure Lord Gurven would smile if I stuck this in your gut, so don't get uppity with me... *freak*."

"This is outrageous," Dalia cried, her gray eyes flashing wild with anger. "A peasant boy threatening the heir of a noble house?!"

"House Ikrova is dead, and girls don't inherit, you nit. Especially freaks like you!"

Dalia looked at the points of the pitchfork and snarled, storming off into the night towards the nearby forest.

The sound of Klaus' laughter echoed behind her.

Running was the only thing she could do to keep from hurting him. Dalia knew Klaus wouldn't pursue her; he was afraid of the legends told about the woods.

Fey lived inside the forest, and some would take a boy like him and turn him into plant food.

Dalia rested at the forest's edge and hid behind the first tree she came upon, letting her tears fall down her cheeks. The taunts were nothing new, but they never were any easier to take. It had been ten years since she had come to live with her Medvyed relatives, and they weren't very kind, except for her late uncle. House Ikrova had been one of the lesser houses allied to House Medvyed, which was one of the most powerful families in all Brevoy. Her mother, Katarina was Lord Gurven's favorite niece. Her father, Viktor Ikrova, had been a good man but had angered a powerful fey sorceress who cursed his line, resulting in Dalia's peculiar appearance. Despite her strangeness, her mother and father loved her and died protecting her. Evgeni Medvyed was her mother's brother, and he had smuggled her here to Stoneclimb and saved her life. As an honorable man, he cared for her until he too was killed in an honor duel—a *duel to defend her honor*.

Since her uncle's death, Gronzi Forest had become her only true refuge, but she never went too deep into the forest in case the tales of the fey's cruelty were true. Dalia slid down the length of the tree to sit on the grass. She remembered a picnic she had had with her uncle in this very spot. They had talked about how Dalia spent her life on the farm outside the Medvyed's fortress. Tears stung her eyes at the memory, and she wiped them aside.

"I wish you were here, Uncle," she whispered softly as she shivered. The fall chill seeped into her clothes, compounding her loneliness. It was always cold here at the base of the Icerime Peaks, and she hadn't dressed for an outing into the damp woods.

A breeze rustled tree branches at the edge of a woodland meadow beyond. It looked so vibrant and alive in the moonlight. Dalia trembled again but noticed the rest of the forest had remained still. A shadow moved in the corner of her eye, but when she turned to look closer, nothing was there.

It was time to leave.

She felt another shiver run through her, but this time it was not from the cold. She stood and headed quickly away from the woods, towards home. As she cleared the trees she looked back once more, longing for her uncle to still be part of this world.

"I hope I can get to my little hut before sunrise," she yawned.



Dalia awoke the following afternoon to the sound of a chicken squawking outside her window. Her modest home was far from the barnyard, but the bird sounded distressed so she crept to the sill and peeked out.

Outside, she saw Klaus standing with the screaming hen dangling in one hand while he chucked stones at a fleeing black fox. The elusive animal darted through the brush as Klaus tossed stone after stone, until finally one of them found his target. Dalia cringed as the lucky hit struck the poor animal in the leg just before it disappeared into the woods.

"I wonder how he would like being struck with a rock in *his* leg," she muttered

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as Klaus laughed and walked away. She sighed and sat down at her book-strewn table. She used to eat and do all manner of crafts on it, but now it was just an obsessive, jumbled mess. The heap had become her research, and it needed to be spread out so she could study all the possibilities, all at once. It hadn't seemed to help though. She pondered what had gone wrong in the ritual the night before.

Maybe my choice of location could have been more suitable. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply then grabbed a tome out from the bottom of the pile.

Hours passed before a deep rumble in Dalia's stomach made her set the book aside. The ruddy glow of autumn twilight shone through the western window, and Dalia hoped that meant the kitchens had already served the evening meal. Stretching as she stood, she grabbed the glaucous blue coat that hung by the door. It was a birthday gift from her late Uncle Evgeni. The greatcoat was her one prized possession and unconsciously she caressed the Ikrovan phoenix etched into each of its golden buttons. As she fastened them one by one, she imagined they had power to ward off the evening chill.

Locking the door, Dalia made her way towards the main fortress to take her evening meal. She was unwelcome in the dining hall, so she turned down the servant stairs in the direction of the kitchen. When she was a child, Lord Gurven had decreed, "The wretched abomination eats outside or not at all." This arrangement suited Dalia, as she had no desire to be gawked at by her relatives, and the kitchen staff had grown accustomed to her presence.

The warmth of the cooking fires greeted her as she stepped into the large room, as did a few of the servants. With a grateful nod, she helped herself to a bowl of stew and a large chunk of bread before taking a seat in the far corner. One of the advantages of being exiled to the kitchen was that the servants often forgot that she was a Medvyed by blood, and thus spoke loosely in her presence. Over the years, she had learned many things from eavesdropping. Some had been handy in keeping Gurven from tossing her out despite her uncle's wishes.

About halfway through her meal the gossip began.

"Why are we serving goat in the stew tonight, Katya?" One of the scullery boys eyed a tasteless hunk of brown and looked to the head cook.

"Because we've lost too many chickens, Lazar," the old woman replied.

"Klaus still hasn't caught that fox? But it's been weeks! I bet I could've done it by now!"

"Why don't you go ask Lord Gurven to give you the job then," one of the serving girls laughed. "I'm sure he'd welcome your expertise."

Dalia paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth. Chickens had been going missing for weeks? She hadn't seen any poachers and she wandered the grounds of the estate almost daily. That morning was the first time she'd ever seen a fox within Stoneclimb's boundaries.

Something odd was occurring.

Without disturbing the staff, Dalia finished her supper and quietly left the room, grabbing a large round of bread as she passed.

Staying to the darker parts of the estate, she made her way to the barn. Her materials from the ritual were still hidden in the storeroom and she wanted to pick them up. It would give her the perfect opportunity to make a simple investigation

of the chicken coop, too.

A chill wind stirred as she approached the large structure, and she pulled her coat closer for warmth, wondering if she had left the kitchen too soon. There was not a soul in sight as Dalia crept into the barn and made her way to the storeroom door. She slipped inside, closing it behind her and sifted through the crates and piles of sacks quietly to find her belongings. It took longer than she had anticipated, but all remained as she had left it. The tome she'd hidden under a sack of feed still appeared undisturbed. She began loading the supplies into her bag.

The sound of shuffling feet followed by the frantic squawk of a nearby chicken caused her to freeze.

Dalia moved to the door of the storeroom, opening it just a crack and thanking the gods she had greased the hinges days before. Klaus stood in the main room of the barn, stuffing a dead chicken into a worn sack. He looked around furtively before spreading some of the feathers on the ground and hiding the sack under his cloak.

The little weasel.

Dalia tensed and fought back the urge to burst from hiding and confront him. It was better not to draw attention while she held her satchel of spell components. Her family barely tolerated her now; what would they do if they found out she was practicing magical incantations?

Klaus snuck out with his prize and Dalia returned to pick up her concealed book. Sliding the tome inside her bag, she placed the round loaf of bread on top of it. Then, as silently as she could, she left the room and made her way outside, avoiding the path and walking along the tree line towards her hut. At these times, Dalia was thankful she had no shadow to betray her in the moonlight.

Suddenly, a loud snap of metal and a yip of pain made her jump. For a few seconds there was a snarl, but then a terrible whimper cried out in the night. Dalia's heart sank. She rushed into the brush to find a fox struggling to free itself. The small animal's coat was mottled black and red and it lay on its side with its front paw held tight in a metal trap.

As Dalia approached, its fear lessened and she stared into its bright yellow eyes. "I won't hurt you, it's alright." Dalia knelt down to examine the device. There was a release plate at its base, so she pressed it and jaws opened. The fox gingerly pulled its leg free.

She stood back, fully expecting the animal to run away but instead it just licked its injured paw and sat, staring back at her. Its eyes were more expressive and intelligent than any animal's she had ever seen.

Dalia cautiously reached out to touch it, encouraged by its lack of fear. When she made contact, a rush of energy traveled through her, and suddenly it was as if she was watching herself placing a hand on her own head. Visions of the forest floor and of hunting filled her mind until they were replaced by an overwhelming desire to go east, to a place where there was great danger and death. A place to find love and feel loved in return.

Dalia then saw a sinister-looking Klaus holding a sharp dagger towards a tasty hen and watching Dalia's hut. The vision of the hut disappeared behind the tall grass but Klaus' words could still be heard, echoing in the memory.

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“Soon I’ll run you though, freak, and that hut will be mine....”

The grass shook as the ground moved quickly under four paws. The sounds of rocks whipped through the air, tapping the ground around her until Dalia felt herself fall over backwards as her muscles gave out. She shook her head and stared back at the animal.

“Wha...what just happened?”

The fox continued to stare at her and she sensed that he—for she felt he was a male—was amused.

Dalia’s eyes widened. “The ritual? It...worked?!”

The fox wagged his bushy tail and the white tip brightened in the dim light.

“So, you’re mine?”

The fox brushed against her, moving well despite his injured leg. Dalia smiled and bent down to run her hand along his thick coat but paused as loud footsteps approached through the crunching leaves. She stood and turned to see Klaus glaring at her, a spiked club in his hand. She tensed, ready to act, though unsure of what to do.

“What are you doing, freak?” the boy spat. “That fox has been stealing my chickens for weeks, and you just set it *free*?”

“We both know you’re the chicken thief, Klaus,” Dalia sneered. His eyes widened in surprise and Dalia reached for her sash. “Leave the fox alone and go home, or I’ll inform *great uncle* Gurven of your chicken thieving.”

For a moment Klaus appeared shocked but then quickly he snapped and charged towards her. Dalia started to reach into the pouch at her waist, but stopped as a better idea came to mind. Raising her hand, she pointed directly at the stampeding bully.

“Sleep,” she commanded. Klaus immediately dropped to the ground in a heap, knocking his head on the ground hard as the club slipped from his grip. Dalia stared at her hand. She’d practiced the spell on barnyard animals before but never on a human, and never without spell components. She shook her head. “This is a night for firsts. I just...hexed him. I am a wi—.”

Sounds of voices up the road diverted her attention once more.

“Run,” Dalia whispered to the fox but the animal only sniffed and stared hungrily at the lump of the fresh chicken revealed on Klaus’ belt. Quickly she grabbed the sleeping boy’s arms and dragged him into the tall grass, crouching low.

“You stay by...me?”

Dalia looked around. She thought the little animal was right alongside her but then she noticed he was still out in the open, chewing on the dead hen. The ragged sack had torn on some twigs and the bird had come off Klaus’ belt. Exasperated, she waved and tried to shoo the fox off the path but he kept eating without a care in the world.

He must be either too hungry to realize the danger he’s in...or he thinks I can protect him, she feared.

“What is that?” Dalia cringed as she recognized the booming voice of Lord Gurven. He stood several feet away staring at the scene before him, an older brother of Klaus’ by his side. Swallowing a lump in her throat, Dalia looked at the

fox with the dead hen clutched in his jaws.

“That’s the little monster that’s been stealing my chickens!” Gurven cried as he spotted the fox. “I come out to survey the traps and I find the sneak eating right beside one!”

Dalia’s heart pounded faster. She had to do something. She breathed deep and tried to focus her thoughts on the fox to warn it of impending danger. Her own mind went blank for a moment. Then a sudden rush of joy made her salivate as tasty bits of chicken satiated her cheeks.

“Look how it just ignores us,” Gurven continued. “Not afraid of me, eh?” The lord pulled out a knife and headed to the chomping fox. “I’ll end your midnight meals here and now...”

Dalia shook the taste of raw chicken from her mouth and jumped up. “Run!”

The Medvyed lord jumped and wheeled toward the shadowy trees to face Dalia, brandishing his weapon in alarm. The man scowled and shook his head when he saw her then quickly turned back to the task of gutting the fox, but it was too late. All that remained on the path were feathers.

“Right!” The lord threw his knife into the dirt and glared at Dalia. “Oleg, send messengers to my vassal lords at once... I’m calling for a fox hunt tomorrow!”

Dalia gasped, drawing even more scorn from her great uncle. “As for you, we will have words after the hunt. In the meantime, you best be packing your belongings. I have had quite enough of you skulking about my estate. It is time you found your place.”

The lord stormed off with Klaus’ brother in tow. Dalia turned to leave but first looked over her shoulder to confirm her attacker was still asleep.

“Good thing you’re a deep sleeper,” she mumbled to herself and then walked on. “As for me, I may soon find myself sleeping out here too.”

Dalia’s stomach ached at the thought of being without a home but in her heart she found herself worrying for her new friend.

“This does not bode well.”



Klaus awoke the next morning to find himself alone in the tall grass. The boy shook his head and groaned, then slowly stood up to see chicken feathers scattered all around the path.

“Dalia, that thrice-damned freak of nature! She set that fox free and ruined my plans!”

He checked himself over to make sure nothing else had been stolen then angrily kicked his club into the woods.

He would have to *do away with her* sooner than later. For years, he had held back, afraid that Lord Evgeni would kill him for harming his niece; but the fool was dead now, and Lord Gurven constantly mentioned how the hut would make a better place for a farmboy to watch his animals, rather than house such a loathsome creature.

“I’m tired of sleeping in the barn.” Klaus pulled out a finely crafted dagger he’d recently purchased. The sight of the blade made him feel calm and he smiled

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cruelly as he imagined the look on Dalia's face when it pierced her heart.

"She did something to me with that bag of hers! If I could just get it away from her, she'd be helpless. Then I could show her..."

Klaus straightened his clothes and headed for the barn, grimly looking at the hut as he passed. He collected the eggs from the hens then made his way to the castle with the morning delivery. The household buzzed with activity in preparation for the hunt.

Now's my chance to turn everyone against the freak, he thought with delight

"Morning, Klaus," Lazar yawned when he entered the kitchen. "Just set the eggs on the counter."

"So," Klaus began as he set the eggs down, "the fox got another chicken last night."

"We know, Klaus," Katya replied harshly as she grabbed several of the eggs and began to crack them. "Lord Medvyed's ordered us to prepare a feast for the hunt he is organizing. If you'd done your job and caught the beast I wouldn't be two hours behind schedule right now."

Perfect.

"But it isn't my fault," he cried, "That Ikrova freak has been helping it! I have proof, I saw her..."

"Dalia?" the cook rolled her eyes. "She wouldn't do such a thing. Honestly, Klaus, at least come up with a real excuse. *Endurance overcomes all*, remember? Now get back to the coops; I need at least a dozen more eggs!"

"But—"

"But nothing, young man! Now!" Katya's tone brooked no argument.

Skulking, Klaus exited the kitchen and made his way towards the main gate.

"*Endurance overcomes all*," he muttered. "Who does Katya think she is, throwing the Medvyed motto in my face? And defending that freak... I'll show her a thing or two—"

He had only gone a few yards when he was jerked from behind into the shadows between two buildings. Spinning to face his opponent, Klaus came face to face with Jozen Traskel, the local tavern owner. Sallow-skinned with oily hair and a perpetual scowl, Jozen was never a good man to anger; and he didn't look happy.

"Where are my chickens, Klaus," Jozen hissed. "I paid for twelve, yet you've only given me eight."

"Well... I...uh," Klaus stammered. He froze as the older man noticed the shining dagger at his waist.

"Well, well, well. I wonder how much of my silver *this* cost you?" Jozen pulled the blade from its sheath. He waved the dagger under Klaus' nose, dipping it lower to weave slowly toward his neck. The glinting of the polished metal no longer calmed the boy.

Jozen moved the dagger to Klaus' throat. "See that you hold to your side of the agreement, boy. This hunt will provide the perfect distraction for you, I imagine." Jozen increased his pressure just slightly and the edge bit into his flesh. "I want the rest today, Klaus. Remember: four chickens, no less... Or else."

He pulled the dagger away, slipping it back into Klaus' scabbard. Jozen then straightened his coat and combed back his slick hair with a smile. "Now if you'll

excuse me, I have some wine to deliver for Lord Medvyed's feast."

Klaus shivered as he collapsed against the alley wall and watched Traskel walk away. It had taken all his willpower not to wet himself when the blade cut into his throat. He rubbed the tender spot.

Four chickens at once? His stomach hardened into knots.

This was going to be his biggest job ever. He just had to hope the hunters never found the fox, because it would be difficult to explain that the beast had stolen more chickens if it was dead.



Dalia's eyelids fluttered open slowly at the sound of scratching at the door. It was midmorning; only a few hours after she had finally gone to sleep. The scratching became more insistent so she dragged herself out of bed and undid the latch, opening the door a crack.

Down at her feet was the fox, his tail wagging. Quickly he stood on his hind legs to press against the door with his front paws then scampered off into the woods. Dalia scanned beyond her hut to see if anyone was nearby but the area was empty.

Very soon, the fox emerged from the trees with a dead rabbit clutched in his jaws.

"Oh, gods," Dalia muttered as she opened the door wider and let the fox run in. She looked around once more and closed the door. The fox laid the rabbit at her feet and curled up, cleaning his fur.

"It isn't safe for you here, little friend."

The fox looked up at her, complete trust radiating through its eyes.

Dalia sighed, stooping to scratch him behind the ears. The animal was clearly attached to her and there was no way to set him straight. "What am I going to do with you?"

The fox explored her hut; sniffing everything well before curling up next to her while she sat by the fire. His mottled fur looked even more striking in the morning light; mostly black with red along his sides, face, and hindquarters. Dalia stroked his head gently as he curled around her feet. The warmth of his body was comforting and she liked how it felt on her cold toes. Tears welled up in her eyes; it was like being home, with family. She wondered if the fox felt the same.

Then she saw the dead rabbit lying unattended. It would fester if she didn't work quickly. She nudged the fox awake and took the rabbit off the floor. Quickly she skinned and spiced it before roasting it over her small fireplace. The smell excited her little companion and when it was cooked through, they shared the meal.

As they ate, Dalia's mind churned. The hunters would have foxhounds, so she couldn't hide him here. Gronzi Forest was his best chance, but he would still need something more to keep the hunters at bay.

"The fey..." she murmured aloud.

The fox gave a small yip of confusion.

"Yes... If we can find them, they might help us." She leaned over her fox and

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patted his head. Dalia had always wanted to encounter the fey creatures of the forest.

She only hoped they were kinder than their stories.

“Come on, we don’t have much time!” Dalia threw on her boots and blue-gray coat and raced out the door into the woods. The fox effortlessly kept up, right on her heels.

When they passed the tree line, Dalia breathed a sigh of relief. Cautiously, they struck ahead to the very same meadow from the previous night.

“Hello?” Dalia called out. “I seek audience. Please.”

The trees around her looked unchanged, silent.

“I say again, please!”

A branch rustled next to her and a tiny grasshopper hopped into the open. The body of the insect shook until the upper body of a woman seemed to sprout from the insect’s head. The face of the tiny female broke into a smile.

Dalia remembered reading about such creatures in one of the old stories about the fey... ‘Grigs’ she thought they were called.

“You beckoned?” the bug-woman chirped.

“I, er... *we*,”—Dalia indicated to the fox at her side—“need your help.”

The grig looked up at her. Its cricket-like legs made a subtle noise and after a moment, it smiled again.

“You should ask Sharizel.”

“Who is Sharizel?”

“I am,” a voice spoke from behind.

Dalia whirled to face the speaker and found herself staring at a most beautiful woman. Her mossy skin was entirely clothed in lichen, vines, and flowers, and long, grass-like hair spilled over her shoulder. Emerald eyes regarded Dalia with amusement.

Dalia gasped. “You are a blodeuwedd,” she whispered, remembering her story book again. She backed away a little—the same type of creature had cursed her father’s line.

“Yes, child, but what brings you here?” Sharizel gently smiled.

Dalia looked around nervously and noticed several more creatures spying silently from the woods behind her. Most notably was a small group of faerie dragons, their butterfly-like wings glittering in a myriad of colors.

“Well... I live on the grounds of Stoneclimb, the Medyved fortress,” Dalia paused for a nod of understanding from the fey woman. “I am a witch, and this fox is my friend. One of the servants is stealing chickens and is trying to blame him for it. Because of this, Lord Gurven has called a foxhunt for today!”

The blodeuwedd’s lips pressed in a thin line.

“I come to you for help...” Dalia swallowed hard as she waited for a response.

“There are many terrible things that happen in the woods, but I do not stop them. If your fox stays in the woods, the men will surely follow. This intrusion would cause damage and disrupt our tranquility. Why would I welcome that?”

The sound of horns echoed in the distance and Dalia knew what had to be done. “I don’t think you have a choice,” she frowned.

The blodeuwedd nodded. “If you wish, you may leave your animal in the

care of his natural surroundings. I can release the fox from his bond with you temporarily and if they come into my wood, he will act as part of it, like he was. But you cannot stay here. Your connection is too strong. If he gets close to you again, his bond will revert. You must leave.”

Dalia sighed then knelt next to the fox, hugging him tightly. “Be careful, my friend. Be quick and crafty and safe... I pray to see you soon.”

Sharizel gently wrapped a vine tendril around the fox’s neck. “I cannot promise you other than what nature intends, and that is rarely what your kind wishes to see. However, I believe this is his best chance.

Dalia nodded to Sharizel and gave her fox one last fond look then rushed back through the undergrowth towards Stoneclimb as the horns blared again.



Dalia emerged from Gronzi Forest and shook her head at the sight. The lesser lords had arrived with much pomp and pageantry, and the horns blasted once again to announce the arrival of the third and last of the participating Houses as she drew near.

The white stag standard of House Alderhart joined the others, Korska and Dolovan, underneath the antlered black bear of Medvyed. In times past, the phoenix of House Ikrova would have hung there as well.

Lord Alderhart had brought along his pack of hunting hounds, which made the situation even direr. Fortunately, no action would be taken until the outdoor feast was finished.

Minutes trickled on like ages as the nobles sipped on Brevic dessert brandy. Lord Dolovan boasted loudly that he would put a quarrel in the fox before Alderhart’s hounds could even pick up its scent. A few wagers were made and more brandy consumed, then when the talk ended, Lord Gurven led his fellow hunters out to the yard where their retainers waited. Their banners flew proudly in the afternoon breeze, standing out against the colors of the forest.

“My lords,” Gurven began, “a great hunt awaits us. Our quarry is wily and arrogant, but we shall show him fear! As the stars see me, we shall kill this menacing fox and I shall have him stuffed and put on display in my hall!”

The assembled crowd cheered.

“Perhaps we will take down an elk as well,” quipped Lord Korska, the most distant of Medvyed’s banner-men.

“We can only try,” Lord Gurven laughed as he mounted his horse. “Gentlemen, let us hunt and persevere. Endurance overcomes all!”

Horns blared once again, and the pack of hounds bayed at the urging of Lord Alderhart’s houndmaster. Dalia looked nervously towards the forest as the hunt began.

“Please,” she prayed to whatever gods would hear her. “Please keep him safe.”



The fox’s ears pricked as he heard the barking of the dogs as they entered the

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wood. The other strange forest creatures had melted into the shadows long before, and he lay crouched in a thicket, trusting the brambles to keep the danger at bay.

Sounds of humans on their horses echoed through the trees and rumbled through the earth. The fox was unsure of the direction they were coming from. He lifted his muzzle and a blend of scents—horses, men, and dogs—melded with those of the forest in a chaotic mess. Then he saw the first hound appear. It howled loudly, alerting the others, then growled as it tried to figure a way around the thorns.

It was time to run away.

Springing from his hiding place, the fox darted around the gathering hounds and their human companions. He scurried away as their yells spurred him on.

A hard-tipped stick clattered just behind his tail as he dashed behind a tree.

The terrible horns of death shrieked nearby. A few cricket-men glared in irritation as they held their hands over their ears to blot out the annoying racket. They began to rub their hind legs together, and the odd shrill sounds slowed the pursuing humans and lulled them into a swaying trance. The fox ran faster but the hunting dogs kept a relentless pace that seemed always to remain on his heels.

He would have to think of something.



Dalia paced anxiously near the base of the main fortress. It had been nearly an hour since the lords had entered the woods and she expected Klaus to make his move soon. She worried for her friend, but her lingering bond with the animal intuitively told her he was still alive.

She looked down the road at the farm and sighed. “Well, I think I’ve waited long enough.”

She set a brisk pace toward the barn, her greatcoat flapping in the breeze. The sun was behind her, but her lack of a shadow ensured that it could not betray her approach. Silently, she crept around the side of the barn to the chicken coop. Just as she’d hoped, Klaus had been killing chickens and a bloody sack lay at the ground.

“The game is over, Klaus,” she shouted as she rounded the corner and scanned the area. “It’s no use hiding.”

Dalia flinched when the farmboy elbowed past from behind her, stepping confidently into the open and walking up to the bag of chickens. He smirked then reached into the coop to grab another.

“I’m not afraid of you, you know,” he taunted. “I knew you’d come here to stop me. So, what are you waiting for? You caught me red handed.” He raised his dagger to the chicken’s throat and sliced into it, silencing its panicked clucking.

Dalia’s eyes narrowed and she raised her hand to deliver her slumber hex. “Sleep,” she commanded.

Klaus’ eyes widened in shock for a moment, but when he remained awake, his smug grin returned.

The charm didn’t work!

Panic fluttered in Dalia’s mind as she scrambled to revise her plan. She recalled

that one of the spells she had studied would have a similar effect and instinctively reached for the pouch of components at her belt.

It was gone!

“Looking for something?” Klaus held out her small sack. “You aren’t the only one who can learn new tricks; I lifted it off you just a moment ago. A little a trick Traskel taught me.” He tucked the pouch back into his pocket. “Now listen carefully, freak. If you turn me into Gurven, I’ll expose you as the demon-worshipping witch you truly are!” He smiled as he unslung a satchel from his shoulder and dropped it on the ground, spilling its contents.

It was her bag from the ritual the night before.

Dalia gasped as Klaus snatched up her heavy tome with his bloody hands.

“You really should remember to lock your door before running off into the woods,” the farmboy laughed. “I don’t know what all these squiggles mean, but those pictures look awfully evil, and now it’s smeared with blood.” Klaus lips twisted into a maniacal grin. “Was this your father’s book? Maybe I can convince Lord Gurven that Lady Katarina *wasn’t* your mother, and then you’d have no protection at all! You’ll beg for a simple exile then!”

Dalia took a step back, unsure what to do. This was much more complicated than just someone stealing chickens. It was becoming...dangerous.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Klaus jeered, “I have some chickens to deliver.”

He kicked the satchel toward her, spilling candles, rune stones, and other items onto the ground. Then he bolted with the tome under his arm as he stuffed the fourth dead chicken onto the bag with the others.

Dalia crammed her belongings back into the satchel and dashed after him.



The fox was growing tired.

He had been running for a long time, yet the hunters persisted. Trees had tripped them and other annoyed fey creatures had used their forest magic and charmed them but the men always broke free. The fox’s back leg was hurting from where the cruel boy’s rock had struck him yesterday and his front paw throbbed even worse from the trap. He was slowing and soon one of his legs would give out.

There was only one place to go: to his friend and master.

He faintly sensed her direction and veered back the way he came, leading several dogs to crash into a satyr that had been readying his pipes for a song. The hunters swerved to follow their prey, urging their horses faster and horns bleating the alarm as the fox ran towards the wood’s edge and the open estate of Stoneclimb.

It would all be over soon.



Dalia was closing the gap between herself and Klaus. The heavy sack of hens and her ancient book were weighing him down and he had to slow to keep his footing.

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As they drew near the forest, they could hear the horns approaching. The forest filled with the lords of the land was right in front of them, but Klaus shied from entering it.

Suddenly the ground surged up in a mound just in front of Klaus's feet. He jumped over the bump, but a tree root swiftly lashed out of the ground and entangled his ankle. Klaus fell with a thud. Dalia's leather book and the large sack went flying from his grasp and several chickens rolled out of the bag. Terrified, Klaus took out his dagger and stabbed at the massive root but quickly realized the fine blade was not much use against wood.

"Help!" he squeaked. "Save me!"

Chaos erupted all around them as the red-and-black fox burst from the underbrush and leapt towards Dalia, followed swiftly by the hunting dogs. She instinctively caught the small animal in her arms then sheltered him with her body as the pursuing hunters thundered out from the trees and took aim then called off the dogs at the sight of her. The pack of hounds howled and barked, then pounced on the sack of dead chickens.

A cacophonous jumble of shouting hunters, stamping horses and snarling dogs fighting over hens greeted Lord Gurven as he emerged from the trees, rearing his mount to avoid trampling Klaus's entangled form.

"Enough!" The crowd fell silent at the Medvyed lord's bellow. "Four dead chickens in a sack at my feet and the fox I've been hunting in the arms of the tiefling... What in the *hells* is going on here?!"

Klaus screamed out in panic. "She's a witch, Your Lordship. She's evil. She made this tree tangle my leg and now it's dragging me down to eat me! I found her devil book and these chickens she's been sacrificing to satisfy her master. Oh, help me, m'lord!"

Another root ripped out of the ground and wrapped itself around Klaus' mouth.

"Mmph!"

"That is not true!" Dalia shouted. "Klaus has been stealing the chickens, not me or this fox!" She pointed at the boy's hand. "Look at his dagger! We are innocent."

Several of the lord's retainers ran to help Klaus but the tree's roots bound him as strongly as steel. The pandemonium resumed as the hounds, now unrestrained by their handlers, started fighting once more over the dead chickens.

Surrounded by it all, Dalia felt like screaming when suddenly silence filled the air. Out of the forest came three large walking trees and four small faerie dragons. Behind them hopped the grigs—led by Sharizel herself.

The members of House Medvyed and their allies drew arms in preparation for a fight, but then the fey procession stopped as Sharizel walked forth alone. The men seemed to relax as the lone blodeuwedd approached, though they still backed off and took up positions away from the tree line. Klaus squirmed violently as the woman of the woods approached him, and he came face to face with his biggest fear. He promptly turned white and fainted.

Sharizel stood in the center of the men, looking to Lord Gurven. "I believe I can shed some light on this whole situation."

"M'lady," Gurven nodded gruffly. "I did not know you had taken residence in these parts."

“Yes, I have and today you trampled over my sanctuary quite badly,” Sharizel scolded and pointed at the fox in Dalia’s arms. “You sought to harm this woodland creature with wrongful malice.”

Dalia held her fox tight. The fey woman turned away from the lords and looked directly at her.

“My girl, I am here today because you have proven yourself without a doubt. Your courage and tenacity is worthy of the Ikrova standard. I would also have you know that your father was never cursed by the fey; he was in fact, *a fey himself*.”

Dalia’s eyes went wide and her jaw dropped. “I-I-I am not a...tiefling?”

Sharizel laughed. “No. You do not have the blood of devils in you, child. You are a true fey.”

“Nonsense!” Gurven interrupted. “Look at her—the horns, the lack of shadow! If she isn’t a tiefling, then what in the hells is she?”

“Simple: *herself*,” the blodeuwedd answered and turned back to the girl. “Your father looked just the same, but he hid his features well. He couldn’t teach you how to disguise yourself magically because you were too young. The story of a curse surfaced when word of your appearance accidentally got out. But let’s look at you closely, child: you have horns, but they spiral like those of a satyr; you cast no shadow, but such a trait is not uncommon among our kind either. You lack a devil’s tail, too.”

“What...do you want?” Dalia asked slowly, raising an eyebrow.

“To take you away from here,” Sharizel said with a smile. “I have remained in Gronzi Forest for these last ten years to watch over you, waiting for the day you would seek me out.”

“What makes you think I would want to go?”

“You are learning by yourself, but it takes more than raw talent to be a witch. If this is something that you truly want, I can teach you.”

Dalia’s mouth went dry. She had suffered the mockery of House Medvyed since her Uncle Evgeni died. And now it seemed that could have all been avoided.

“But... You said my father could change, right?” Dalia glared at the blodeuwedd. Her anger at these revelations was abating as the fey’s words sunk in, but it had not vanished completely.

“He could... As can you, if you wish, but it is only a glamor, child, not a transformation.” Sharizel spread her hands. “I hoped you’d be happy being yourself.”

A strange sensation washed over Dalia, causing her to shiver. She looked down and saw a shadow pool at her feet. Quickly she lifted a hand to her head, feeling nothing but hair where horns had been. A feeling of loss and strangeness came over her as she adjusted to her new appearance.

“Deadeye’s antlers!” Lord Gurven exclaimed. “You look just like your mother, Dalia!”

It was the first time he had ever used her name.

It sounded odd coming off his lips, taking her aback by both his change in attitude and the statement itself. Her mother had been beautiful; and while she’d seen similarities between them, Dalia’s horns were all anyone else ever saw.

Gurven dismounted his horse and walked towards her. “I apologize, my

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dear. You're family, and I have behaved horribly toward you out of misplaced ignorance. Your place is here with your kin; please, don't go."

"Perhaps we should let her speak, Lord Gurven," Sharizel proposed. "She should decide for herself."

Lord Gurven looked back and sighed. "Yes, of course...."

Dalia studied both her uncle and the fey woman, unsure of what to do. She had been shunned for as long as she could remember; never doted on or treated as one of the family. Because of that, she yearned to be more; to learn magical spells and become powerful enough to rebuild House Ikrova, rising from the ashes like the phoenix of their family crest.

"Why must I choose between one way of life or the other? I do not see why it is necessary."

"Because, Dalia," Gurven responded, "This just isn't the way for a lady to behave—cavorting with witches and beasts. Did Evgeni teach you nothing of Erastil's Parables?"

Sharizel stepped forward. "What I think your uncle is trying to say is that if you stay with him, you must live like a perfectly normal noblewoman. However, if you come with me into the forest, I would prefer that you remain as you are: a beautiful gifted creature of the wild."

Gurven grunted. "Why? To keep her from her own family? Does she really want that? The horns? Not having a shadow?"

Dalia looked down uncertainly and her eyes met those of the fox. *Who am I really—the person that wished to be normal, or the person who turned to magic to be different?*

A soft voice then spoke back in her mind, "*You are just my master.*"

Dalia smiled at the animal in her arms. It was the first time he had spoken to her.

"I have made my decision."

Everyone went silent for Dalia and she took a deep breath, reveling in the moment. That had never happened before either. Beneath her feet, Klaus lay quietly with the root stuck in his mouth. The lords and retainers, the gathering house staff and even the horses and dogs remained quiet. They were all waiting for what she had to say.

She faced Sharizel and smiled.

"Senka and I will come with you."

Sharizel nodded and Gurven raised an eyebrow and stared dumbfounded at his grandniece.

"Senka?" Her uncle blinked in confusion.

Dalia knelt with her fox and stroked his back, and on her next breath her horns returned and her shadow was gone.

"Yes," she answered softly. "It is an old Iobarian word that means 'shadow'. *My shadow.*"

TWISTING AMONGST IMAGES

By Clinton J. Boomer



HE OLD WISHTWISTER Shadibriri was having himself a simply damn fine evening.

Walking through the warm, early-spring fog of sunset, the Wishtwister smiled idly to himself at the complex work ahead of him. Feeling the vast port city change from bustling to coy, in mood and attire, with the coming of nightfall, a jaunty skip fell into his step. Yes, tonight he had a sizable bet to win, and a suitable con to pull, and—best of all—hours of raw entertainment to violently choke from the mortal world.

There was no need for him to stifle a wry chuckle as he sniffed at the changing breeze off the sparkling and wine-dark bay, taking in the soft salty tang of the cool sea.

The immense city around him glittered and shined.

The ageless demon was looking, this night, for a mind as sharp and solid as a forge-worked blade of adamantite, as taut yet flexible as a bow of oiled darkwood, as precise and slick as a wet-cut sliver of polished obsidian...and, above all those things, as black and brutal as a burning river of pitch.

He was in Nex, in the port of Quantum. It wouldn't take long.

Shadibriri had a point to prove to his long-time partner-in-crime, Yaenit-Ku and rubbing his inevitable success in the treacherous old dog's face would be nearly

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as rewarding as the wager's prize: sticking his fellow fiend to the completion of a foolishly made contract regarding a dark-elven demon summoner with more ambition than sense.

The Wishtwister only needed to connive a mortal mage into bargaining for—and choosing—his own death and damnation within the next thirteen hours.

Relatively simple, as such things go. And it would be fun, as well.

Tonight, the old demon intended to use the ancient “Foolish Sorceress and the Offended Genie” gambit—it was a classic. Like nearly all successful confidence scams, it relied on telling the mark exactly what he already wanted to believe, making him feel smart and lucky and *very* special, and then playing to his own particular vanity and greed.

The twist on this, though, was that the con was best pulled on studious, self-obsessed geniuses.

That made it tricky.

Which only made the endeavor still more delightful.

The Wishtwister barely stopped himself from skipping and doing cartwheels with the sheer glee of his anticipation.

Coming quite arbitrarily to an abrupt halt, the old demon settled into a disused alleyway not far from the waterfront and wrapped his form in shadow; he popped his knuckles, licked his wolfish fangs, and began to prepare his glamor.

He had to get into character.

That required the right costume.

If any citizen of Quantum had been around to see, they might have noted that the false man-form the demon wore seemed to shift then, from one singularly bluish hue to another, his hair cascading from white to blonde to sea-gray to storm-wracked green; and his features began to run like wind over swift water, flickering from kindly and doddering to wildly foolish and back again twice as fast.

He kept an appraising eye out for young, ambitious men.

Although, in fairness, ambitious middle-aged men were fine as well.

And ambitious old men were hardly any worse.

The pride was the thing, much more than age.

As the veils of his glamers were rearranged, and the Wishtwister tried on one duplicitous identity after another, he mused to himself over his tactics.

He had found, over the many years he had walked the worlds, that most men did not particularly *like* women.

Oh, they liked *looking* at women, certainly, especially if the women were young and healthy. Men often enjoyed spending great deals of money on such women, and laying with them, and lying to them, and collecting them, parading and keeping them like caged animals, displaying them like collected dolls.

A few men, the old Wishtwister had found—if the woman was quiet enough and clever enough to keep her smarts and ambitions hidden—even enjoyed the occasional casual company of a woman.

But most men didn't really *like* them very much.

The Wishtwister thought that was quite funny.

Tonight, he was going to catch an ambitious man, with the bait of a wish, and hook him into immortal damnation, and filet him alive—but, more concretely, the

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rod and reel of this trap would be that man's distaste for women who did not know their proper place.

It was worth noting, perhaps, that this was a risky gambit indeed.

Old Shadibriri was, he felt, more than equal to the task.

Grinning, the ageless demon crouched in his dark hiding spot, and thumbed idly at the mental task of making his disguise as perfect as possible. The watching and the waiting would be worth it.



Many people walked by the alley as the sun set: soldiers and sailors, tinkers and tailors, bookbinders and bookmakers, butchers and bakers, and chandlers as well. Whores and whoremongers, pimps and tricks, some few young ruffians out for cheap laughs, some early-evening drunks, and even a strolling couple or two; all passed by the alleyway, and all were left be.

The city, more so than most, began to glow.

It was very pretty.

Singers and songwriters came and went, and actors and actresses on their way to work, along with bar-wenchs and doormen, seers and soothsayers, fortune-tellers and funeral-makers, and a fat woman on a palanquin draped in gold.

The Wishtwister saw a skinny, sad young man, cradling a one-eyed cat, and it made him giggle.

He spotted an assassin, marking a target, and cheered quietly; he watched policemen upon their rounds, and jeered just as soundlessly.

He observed a man getting mugged, and laughed heartily to himself.

He beheld fools: some in motley, some in rags, and many more in the clothes of nobles.

The Wishtwister considered, after a time, the deeper and rarer delights to be seen only in Quantum: few cities in the world held the sort of hidden marvels that really rewarded the divinatory sight which Shadibriri possessed.

As the shadows grew long, his arcane-tuned eyes beheld a handful of lovely, secret things: imps and quasits, shades and phantasms, and shape-changed stalkers; a mage-lord flanked by a dozen invisible bodyguards; a scuttling succubus in the form of a street urchin; and a grim-faced swordsman with a cackling babau riding deep, frothing and buzzing, in the back of his mind.

To each of these he smiled and bowed his head in quiet, fraternal respect.

He watched patiently over wives and cooks, thieves and lovers, tramps and ladies, brigands and bullyboys, and the whole cross-sectioned cornucopia of such a cosmopolitan city as they wandered and waited, preyed and paraded before him.

The demon lurked, and grinned to himself.



In due time, before the sky had darkened entirely to jet, while the full twinkling of the sparkles above was held yet at bay by the lush light of the city and the lowering of the sun, the demon spotted his mark.

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He was perfect.

The fellow was draped in the silks of a wealthy common-man, but wore the robe of a mystic scholar, the sleeves of his garb stained ever so slightly with chalk-dust and the smells of wood-oil, ink and coffee. His hair, black with strips of gray, receded from an over-sharp widow's peak at his brow, and his beard was close-cropped into a thin goatee. A slight paunch went before him, but his posture was poised and proud, and his face betrayed a stern expression of idle seriousness on a countenance accustomed overmuch to scowling. His gait was leisurely, but solidly focused: here was a man without any appointment to keep, yet not one in the habit of dallying in bars while on the march to his eventual destination.

The man's eyes were pale, and hidden behind smallish half-moon spectacles suitable for reading; his hair had not been cut in some time, which suggested the absence of a paramour in his life untroubled by a need to impress businessmen; and the leather bag slung over his shoulder was well-worn from its use—doubtless the carrying of vast amounts of parchment and ink—and had not been cleaned or repaired in some number of years.

He carried a finely wrought walking cane with elaborate scroll-work etched upon it, but did not seem to need it; it was an affectation and sign of station, only.

Shadibriri would have guessed him in his mid-thirties to early-forties, of mixed Garundi or Qadiran blood with perhaps a touch of Taldan, and respected—if not particularly well-liked—by his colleagues. The mark looked, in short, like an unmarried, tenured academic strutting home from the classroom, library or hall of study where he worked, in a wealthy metropolitan port-city proud of its history, arcane learning, and intellectual achievement.

The Wishtwister smiled to himself.

By a pitiful cough, and a rattle of false chains, the demon made himself known.

Turning in the alley, he caught the eye of the scholar and then cringed away ineffectually, half into the dark, to hide. His buffoonish visage, along with bright blue skin, a curling blonde moustache and a fetching turban in the Keleshite style, was enough to set the man's curiosity to flight.

"What? Who is there?"

The demon wept and wailed, trying to keep the smile from his voice. "Oh, no, no, you have seen me! And I—poor me!—I am compelled to answer your question truthfully, and with neither prevarication nor hesitation! I am a genie, bound into this world until sun-up, and the third wish be granted!"

This, quite rightly, piqued the curiosity of the mage. With a wave of his hand, a globe of light appeared and hovered high above the cobblestones; with another pass of his palm and a few words, he cast a divination to see the warp and weft of the arcane. "A genie, you say? Come out, that I may see you."

The demon suppressed a wry cackle, and did as he was bidden. "Very well, my lord; I suppose that I have little other option."

Hanging his head, the demon stepped into the thin light of the street. He was a sight: his short but muscular form was garbed in the thinnest white cotton, cut in the most flamboyant of styles, his chest bare and smooth; his skin shone an electric-blue brighter than a dawn horizon upon the high Obari Ocean, and his eyes were expressive pools of clear water brimming with tears. The toes of his

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white leather shoes curled into cunning spirals, and broken chains dangled from electrum shackles locked around his wrists and throat.

In the vision of the mage's divination, for the briefest instant the demon appeared as a singular pillar of bright, multicolored fire reaching some twenty feet in the air.

The mage composed himself swiftly and dismissed the effect: in elegant Quantum, xenophobia has been known as the very height of barbarism for over five thousand years; staring is considered quite rude; and non-consensual spell-use upon others is punishable by death. "Ah. You speak truthfully, good genie."

The demon shrugged, wearing a façade of deepest misery. "Both fully as well as truthfully, I fear—and much to my own dismay, sire. I am bound to do so; I would gladly lie, were I allowed. Or escape, had I the means."

The mage cast a nervous gaze up and down the deserted street. "Can you not, ahh...take some more mundane form, friend genie?"

The demon pretended to fight back tears. "I suppose. For what it is worth, I might garb myself in the mantle of men, like so,"—his clothing and skin-tone changed in a wink to match the local style—"but my pupil-less eyes will always betray my true form. You see?"

The mage nodded, gazing into the colorless pools the demon presented, and chuckled nervously. "I did not know that. Such a fact about your kind, I mean."

"Hmm. You must not have met very many genies."

The mage shrugged, waving off the observation, and smiled slightly. "It is true; I have not. So, can you not take the form of pure air, or water? Can you not step sideways to your home plane, amongst the elemental realms?"

The demon sighed. "Neither. I was bound by a most foolish sorceress, indeed, but amongst her many shortcoming and failures, sadly, was not to be found an inability to greatly inhibit my methods of travel. I am, in short, trapped."

A long silence settled across the pair.

The Old Wishtwister had tried this trick many times before; long ago, he had occasionally substituted out the 'foolish sorceress' for an aged and infirm wizard. The problem, he had found, was that young mages tended to hold their elders in very high regard indeed, and oft became suspicious; the best trick he had come upon to mitigate that was to play on racism of some kind, and to use a greasy Varisian hedge-mage or a mad, backwoods Kellid mushroom addict in the role of the confounded summoner.

But his card was played now; his die cast.

The demon waited, and let the bait dangle.

He hoped the man before him was a divorcee, or perhaps had loved once—very intensely—in his youth, and been rebuked.

The Wishtwister sighed loudly, with intense weariness, and shrugged himself into a still-deeper slump.

Night had fallen upon the city.

"If you would, friend genie, tell me," said the mage at last, "...what was the name of this sorceress?"

The demon sighed once more, quite deeply, to keep himself from spinning in a circle and clapping loudly with joy. "That, I cannot tell you. My tongue is bound

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against it, or I would speak her name with greatest glee, and tell you moreover what the harlot's first two wishes were—and what became of her in the process.”

The mage tried to hide his smile. “And you are bound here, then, until sunrise?”

“And the granting of a third wish, which is the heaviest and fastest of all bindings. My temper got the better of me, I am afraid, and thus my summoner lies trapped, blind and insensate. Now, I must find a mortal arcanist onto whom I might grant a wish, or I will be stuck here forever, cursed, a shadow of myself.”

Rubbing his chin, the mage nodded. “I see.”

The demon's voice jumped, suddenly, as if he were startled. “My lord, surely, *you* are a learned spell-caster; might...might you take this wish? Can you answer the riddle?”

The mage frowned. “And what...ah, what of this riddle?”

“The sorceress who conjured and bound me did not desire that I might give away my wishes freely to others, and restrained me mightily against it. She impressed upon me, magically, a most cunning riddle: solve it, though, and I will grant you your heart's desire, and then be on my way!”

Here, thought the demon, was the drawing of the reel.

The mage's eyes were alight. “And if I cannot solve it?”

Shadibriri sighed again, with deepest sorrow. “Ah, well. Then I would have to find another mage, I suppose. If you could direct me to one, I should be ever so grateful...”

“Hmm. Perhaps...let me take a crack at it, first.”

And right here, thought the demon, was the trickiest part.

What he needed, in all truthfulness, was the right riddle for the right mark: one that *seemed* quite difficult to answer, yet that came accompanied with a frighteningly huge number of relatively easy possible solutions. He needed the mage to suddenly be caught up in the idea of being very, *very* damned clever.

The demon knew hundreds of such riddles.

So: which lock would fit *this* key?

Over the years the Wishtwister had tried offering three full attempts at solving the riddle, but he had found it problematic in several regards. Many ambitious young fellows became nervous, and overthought the problem, psyching themselves out in a vain attempt to strategize the system. In addition, some became wary when their first answer was correct: it seemed *too* easy, then... The trick was to make it seem all-but impossible, and yet surmounted by a genius on his one and only attempt.

If a mortal mage buggered it too badly on his first effort, there was always the option of solemnly intoning, with as much authority as the demon could muster, that the mage now had two guesses remaining.

He looked over the man before him, and tried to guess at the fellow's areas of passion and expertise. His fantasies, focuses and foibles. A mage from a seaport city, with a passion for books and the solitary life of an academic...hmm.

Did he live alone? Had he any close family members? Any hobbies or delights, beyond the obvious guesses of ‘self-referential writing, self-sufficient pets, sedentary games requiring a little skill, and some small appreciation of legal inebriants and stimulants?’

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Well, it couldn't hurt to go with an old standard.

The demon took a deep breath. "Very well, sir. The riddle: *I am dark, but not empty; liquid, but never flowing; I contain all mysteries and treasures, but am silent, and without a tongue. What am I?*"

He watched the mage before him begin to frown, and to puzzle.

The demon held his breath.

What reply would his challenger provide? He was ready to accept any of the following answers:

- ink, dried on a page, telling tales and scribing spells;
- the depths of the ocean, which hold the still corpses of wrecked ships;
- a chalkboard, freshly-washed and ready to be filled with new lessons;
- the inside of an old and broken bell;
- an onyx scrying pool;
- a miser's treasure-vault;
- a dragon's horde in a sodden cave;
- any specific example from a great list of famous and more-mysterious wells or pits;
- or even 'the mind'—usually the dim mind of a child, or a madman, or a slave or a woman.

He was also willing to accept a number of other responses.

The Wishtwister wasn't particularly picky.

One of the very few answers the demon could not, in all good conscience, allow would be 'a raven'—although, he mused, the day he found a wizard dumb enough to guess that, it would be a very interesting day indeed.

It would be quite a bit of fun to see what such an idiot wished for.

A hush fell along the city street, and demon wondered for a moment if he could accept 'a city street at night' as a response.

It would be a bit...on the nose, tragically. Not a particularly good fit, either.

The mage frowned further, and the demon breathed as slowly as possible, holding in his anticipation.

Actually, the demon considered for a moment, he might be able to accept 'breath' as an answer. He might have to fudge it, though; breath could hardly be called 'silent,' and it would technically be 'flowing, but never liquid.'

He might have to change the wording next time.

An electric tingle filled the air.

The mage, at last, surprised him. "The sky full of stars, and the Dark Tapestry beyond, and the many worlds hanging in it."

The demon, quick as a wink, rattled the riddle back to himself, and double-checked the response: *I am dark, but not empty; liquid, but never flowing; I contain all mysteries and treasures, but am silent, and without a tongue. What am I?*"

It fit.

He grinned, then, from ear to ear. "Indeed...Master."

Old as he might ever get, Shadibriri would never tire of seeing such a look of glee on a mortal's face—tinged with such hunger, avarice, and paranoia. He took it upon himself to savor the moment.

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The demon bowed. “Yes, truly, I had my hopes pinned upon you. So, then... what is your wish, my Master?”

The mage took a moment to compose himself. “I have my wish?”

“No.”

The look of crestfallen confusion on the mage’s face was even more delightful than his look of glee a moment before, if that was possible.

The demon continued, after letting the pause hang for a moment out of sheer bloody-minded cruelty. “No, no, my Master—you have the sorceress’ wish; it is bargained, bought and paid for by the bitch you boldly bested. I am now at your command.”

Glancing away, the mage visibly struggled with his emotions. “Any wish, then, is mine.”

“Yes.”

“Mine to make as I see fit.”

The demon smiled. “Oh, indeed. Most certainly and truly, Master.”

“Any...any wish at all?”

Shadibriri shrugged. “Within...ah, limited guidelines. Barring a wish for more wishes, there is little of which I am not capable. As I have said before, to other men in other places: I can call forth any spell, I can resurrect the dead, I can rewrite time and space. I can create from nothing, and make you wealthy beyond your wildest dreams; I can open doors to other worlds, and cast you across the infinite pleasures of the planes as you desire. I can turn lead to gold, pig-farmers to pigs, and day to night. With but a word, I can unmake mountains, reshape flesh and topple kings...”

“Very well.”

The demon smirked. “I was not done, Master, and am still bound to speak the truth. The *whole* truth. I can also rewire your brain so that you think you’re a hummingbird, or set your bones on fire, or turn you into a pillar of salt and throw you into the ocean to dissolve, as a certain nameless sorceress once discovered. My abilities are not much limited; you drink from the very waterfall of creation’s torrent when you unleash my gifts. Be careful, I suppose they say, what you wish for.”

“It is to you, then, to interpret the meaning of my wish?”

The demon shrugged again. “My powers are great, and call on majesties older than your species can fathom; even I do not truly comprehend the full scope of what I do, any more than you understand the mysteries of digesting a glass of warm milk and turning it into blood and flesh, nor how it is that you fall asleep, and dream, and then wake again. I would be careful, were I you, to know exactly what you want, and to make it clear to me what you want, and to phrase what you want as precisely as possible. Barring that, you should also hope that I’m in a good mood, and that my values coincide rather perfectly with your own.”

The mage swallowed, hard. He then allowed himself a thin smile, but it was wry, and without much humor. “Heh. Yes. Amongst my colleagues, there exists something of a joke. About situations much similar to this—a warning.”

“Ah! Does there, truly?”

“Yes. It seems that a foolish magician once wished of a captured genie that

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he should be made, and I quote, ‘the greatest of mages’. The genie acquiesced ... and ballooned him to a mass of over twenty-thousand pounds in weight—heavier again, by thirty-fold, than even the largest cyclops-enchanters of the time before Starfall.”

“Ah,” the demon said. “You know, my people tell the same story.”

The mortal hemmed and hawed for a moment at that, swallowing again, once, then finally spoke. “So, let me clarify: I will not get the results of this wish until I specifically say the words ‘I wish,’ quote-end-quote, and then follow through with a specific request, is that correct?”

Shadibriri nodded. “Most assuredly. Why is it that you ask?”

“Just...ah, thinking it through. As they say, ‘It is the mark of an educated man that he might hold in his mind a possible course of action without necessarily choosing it.’ I’m simply...weighing my options.”

“Yes, yes,” the demon agreed. “As my own people say, ‘You don’t have to believe everything you think.’ And so it is. You do seem a clever enough sort. For a mortal, anyway.”

“Well, I *am* a wizard.”

“Good point. You seem a clever enough sort, for a mortal wizard. Master.”

The mage frowned at that, and thought deeply—his eyes squinted with mistrust—and he stroked his bearded chin.

After a minute of this, just as the mage was getting into truly heavy thinking, Shadibriri cleared his throat. “Master?”

“Uh? Yes?”

“May we walk?”

The mage seemed startled. “What?”

“Well, your city is legendary for its beauty; I might like to see some of the sights of the place before I go. You have shrines and statues, hanging gardens and such, yes? Artificial waterfalls of the most cunning design, filling heated pools so that beauties may bathe even in winter; glass tubes of colored smoke, lit by captured lightning to illuminate the streets of alabaster, with ziggurats and terraces and mosaics galore?”

“Indeed,” the mage allowed. “Mostly, yes. So?”

“Well, it would be nice to have a look at them,” the demon said. Giggling to himself, he began to tap his foot and to feign that his patience was nearing an end. “Briefly. And then I rather *would* like to go home, you know.”

“Ah. Yes, of that, I am aware. Let us walk.”

The strange pair began a slow stroll through the city, one of them wracked with a torment of indecision and the other lapping it up.

The city had her most resplendent treasures on display as they walked, keeping to their privacy.

As they crossed a broad thoroughfare, the demon interrupted yet again. “So, look—you’ve done the hard part. With the riddle and all. What is the hold-up? You do want to make a wish, right?”

“I am...thinking.”

The demon, relishing every succulent moment of the mage’s discomfort, prodded. “About?”

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“About many things.”

Shadibriri did not hide his predatory grin. “Ah. I know what this is about.”

The mage balked. “Do you, now?”

“Of course! You are not the first mortal I have ever met, Master! No, I think I may understand how you feel: you are beset with *too many options*. You are like a gourmet seated before a feast; where the starving man digs in, and the glutton simply feeds, you are no fool: you are simply not certain where first to make a cut in the fine meal before you. Am I right?”

The mage frowned. “Perhaps.”

“Yes. Any one wish you make would be a wish *against* all the other things you could otherwise have,” the demon said, as he gestured to the city streets around them, and the throngs of evening life. “You could have any of this. Her, or him, or them, or those, or that and all that comes with it. Or all of it. Or none of it, if you are imprecise with your wording or don’t really know what you *really* want. Yes... the first thing everyone wants, once they have a *single* wish, is that they had many more. And that is quite unpleasant, surely.”

“Yes,” the mage allowed.

The demon smiled his most disarming smile as he began to walk once more. “A shame, then. For you have only the one wish, after all.”

The mage’s scowl sent a shiver of joy up the Wishtwister’s spine as he caught up to the demon. After a few more blocks, he spoke. “And also, I wonder at my luck.”

“Oh, I see! Or, no—no, I do not. What luck is that?”

The man’s frown deepened. “My own. I wonder at it, and meditate upon it, and hesitate to press it.”

“How so?”

The frown deepened yet further as they strolled. “I was lucky to meet you, that is clear. There are some three-thousand-score inhabitants of this city; half of them or more are arrayed around you. I am but one man. Probability was plainly not on my side in this regard, yet here I am with you; fewer than, I would guess, a third of those sixty thousand could have solved the sorceress’s riddle, yet I did so... I am very fortunate indeed.”

Chuckling to himself, the demon nodded. “You sell yourself short, Master; I would wager that far fewer than one in ten could solve it. Maybe less than one in a hundred, or even a thousand. Think upon it this way, if it please you: statistically, no one ever meets a genie and gets a wish granted. No one passes the Test of the Starstone, either. But it happens anyway. You’re living proof, as are Cayden Cailean and Iomedae the Inheritor, and doubtless a few more in the centuries to come. In a world with more than a billion inhabitants, after all, million-to-one odds must happen a thousand times a day. And further, would you not agree that you are—as I, myself, noted—*exceptional*?”

The mage began to shake his head. “I suppose.”

Shadibriri grinned. “So, you have been lucky! That is good, not *bad*! But better yet, you are smart—as my people say, while it is certainly better to be lucky than to be smart, it is probably easier to be smart several times in a row than lucky the same number of times.”

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“Hm. Do they really say that?”

“They must. I’m under a compulsion of truth, after all. Look, this is simple. Wish for something.”

They turned a corner and began across a bridge. The mage did not look happy. “Like what?”

“A fine question, Master! Some people take a liking to fame. Or fortune, I’ve found,” the demon began to count on his fingers. “Strength of arm, or glory in battle, or a title of noble station. A gift for witty jokes, or a cunning tongue. Immortality. Sexual prowess.”

“Immortality, you say?”

“Indeed! Very popular!”

The wizard’s glower darkened further still. The pair came to a stop before a ball-court of some kind. “That seems ... problematic.”

The demon frowned, as well. “Hmm. In what way, Master?”

“Well, life is fragile; eternity is long. The mortal form is susceptible to all number of maladies, from old age to disease to wounds in battle. Of all the problems that can beset a man, death is—nine times out of ten—the commonest result of harm taken to its most logical conclusion. I should not like to suffer all the ills of life while nimbly dodging only final release, nor should I like to be flippant with what *type* of immortality for which I might be wishing; eternal existence as an unkillable tree or regenerating sea-slug, for example, would hardly be my preference.”

“I see.”

The mage continued, gesturing to the hoops and lines of the game-field beyond. “There is a ritual we perform at my college, and the company in which I work: each of us, when positioning for promotion, must create a game. A simple game of chance and skill, of strategy and risk, often with dice and cards and chits. Ways to win, to wager, and to lose.”

Shadibriri smiled. “I see.”

“We must present these games and their rules to our seniors; our rivals are then given the chance to break them, and find ways to cheat.”

“Hmm,” the demon mused. “I quite like the idea of this ritual.”

The mage nodded. “So, if I am cautious, it is because I have learned to be.”

“Plainly so, Master!”

“So, indeed: if I were to wish that my own human flesh could never die, that I might remain young and vital and ever free of disease or harm, I might yet find myself transported magically to Hell—or, less dramatically, trapped on a desert island without food or reading material, or alone with my arm caught beneath a boulder on the side of some mountain—yet be unable to perish. That would hardly be ideal.”

The demon grinned. “There is that.”

“And never mind old age: what of an unexpected attack upon my life? Would any so-called ‘immortality’ you might see fit to grant me prove perfect protection against mundane sword-blows, or the axes and spears of starving peasants? If so, should my skin be altered into steel, so that it could turn aside blades, yet still retain its tactile senses...yet, what of poison? Or would I just be trapped in a

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furnace, or frozen in an iceberg, or sunk in a chest to the bottom of the sea, or any of another ten-thousand terrible ways to die—or, in my case, *live*?

The demon began to walk again, heading towards an alleyway between an art museum, a street vendor, and a monument of some kind. “Good questions, Master.”

The mage followed. “Yes. The easiest way to achieve for me this immortality might be to kill me—for if the soul is truly deathless, I would then pass on to immortality.”

The demon suppressed a grin. “There is that, as well. It would certainly suit Pharasma’s liking, at the very least.”

The mage shuddered and made a sign of reverence, spiraling his right hand over his heart for a moment, yet went on. “You might instead grant me access to Sun-Orchid Elixirs—and with it, all the enemies that access would supply. You might skip me ahead, one century a second, until the sun burns out in a few thousand-thousand years. Or, perhaps, you might fit me with a magic ring that sustains my life processes, and then shut me in a perfectly spherical adamantine prison floating invisibly in the sky, a hundred miles up.”

Old Shadibriri nodded sagely. “Yes. Yes, I might. You forgot that I might transfigure you into a painting or a sculpture...for art is, truly, immortal.”

The mage frowned. “No. No immortality, I think. Not today—an eternity is long; it wouldn’t do to pick the wrong one. This is a problem requiring more study than I’ve yet given it. Wishes are fickle things.”

The demon shrugged. “As you say—you’ve certainly given this subject a lot of thought.”

“Mortal wizards spend a lot of time thinking about immortality.”

He chuckled. “I’ve noticed. So then: wealth is, admittedly, also very popular.”

“Wealth. Interesting. I might, then...what? Request infinite gold?”

Shadibriri smiled as they stepped into the shadowed darkness of a park. “That would do, certainly.”

“Bah. You might teleport me to a demi-plane of nothing *but* gold, without food or water, or even air to breathe. You might drown me in a flood of coins, or even crush me to death with them as they rained from transmuted clouds. Perhaps you would grant me a single gold piece a week, appearing one at a time in my pocket as I lay crippled forever in a cave, afflicted with a wasting sort of immortality devoid of agelessness, until the stars burn out.”

The Wishtwister was startled. “Egad! That’s actually quite remarkable in its cruelty.”

“It never hurts to be too careful when it comes to wishes.”

The demon smiled and nodded. “I agree, Master. Then, perhaps, wish for the thing you might have hoped to buy with this aforementioned limitless gold—a castle, and land. An army. A boat, a yacht, a very fleet of pleasure cruisers, and an island paradise upon which to dock! Or, perhaps, ask for what money cannot buy: the adoration of a beautiful young woman, maybe.”

The mage slowly shook his head. “Ah! But she would have to be one who *truly* loves me, *and* who shares both my intellect and appetites, and who was pleasing to me in all ways, and yet also bettered me by her very presence; otherwise, she

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would be only a terrible curse, and my undoing. Yet, if I *truly* loved her, and she was my boon companion in all ways—why, I would be deeply saddened when she died, or she would be distraught when I did. As cruel as anything else you might do, that would be.”

“Hmm, you forget that I might also make her barren. Unable to grant you heirs, you and she might grow to hate one another despite your love,” the demon said. “Or perhaps I could twist her blood, so that she might birth you only monsters. If I were feeling truly spiteful, I might grant you two wives, one each with half of what you desire, and set them at each other’s throats. Such things have been done.”

“Yes. There is that.”

The demon mused. “So. What about power?”

The mage shook his head more emphatically. “No. No good. I am an apprentice still, for all my knowledge...and my master is, in his way, merely a student as well, to even more senior masters—the chains of scholarship and allegiance here are complex. To grant me ‘power’ in such a way would be cheating, much the same as plagiarism, and I would be cast out. And from whence would this ‘power’ come? A spell book? A stolen staff? The tutelage of a demon?”

Shadibriri grinned. “Fame, then?”

“Fame isn’t everything.”

That sounded practiced. The demon shrugged and stepped over a broken bottle. “Only to those who don’t know what to do with their celebrity, I suspect.”

“Oh, I know exactly what I would do. I would be appointed by popular demand to a position on the Nine very quickly, and then I would be murdered overnight by either Master Phade or by Gen Hendrikan.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. I would be subsumed, rapidly, into the fold of the one—on pain of death—and then swiftly murdered by the other. Although I suppose I might be slain by someone else, come to think of it.”

“Very well. Ambitious as you are, you want for little here as a scholar in Quantum. You lack neither food nor water, nor pleasant diversions or luxuries. In all truth, you might as well ask only for happiness. *Pure happiness.*”

Enough happiness, thought the Wishtwister, to make stabbing orphans in a basement abattoir as delightful as a summer waltz; to make your heart detonate in your chest as you dance in the blood of violated grandmothers and bite off your own eyebrows.

The mage considered, his brow furrowing yet further.

The demon was enjoying himself.

They continued to walk; now past brightly-lit fountains set behind a most-cunning gate of shifting, serpentine iron.

“Some people wish for unicorns,” the demon said after a time.

“Hmm?”

“Well, they *do*. I couldn’t tell you why, or what they could possibly want with the creatures, but some people do wish for them.”

“I...unicorns, you say?”

“Indeed, Master. I’ll be the first to admit that it’s odd - but it couldn’t hurt to

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consider it. I mean, what's the worst that could happen?"

The mage nodded, and a joyless smirk creased his lips. "Yes. What, precisely." "Eh?"

"What *is* the worst that could happen?"

"Master?"

The mage's expression took on a fierce look, and he adjusted his spectacles. "I command you, genie: tell me what the worst that could happen would be."

"Ah! Of course, my Master; a fine desire! So, do you...how best to phrase this? Do you...*wish* to know, exactly, the worst that could happen?"

Pale, sick worry crossed the mage's face in a wave of panic. "No!"

"Ah," said the demon, hiding his dejection. "So, then instead you only *ask* me to tell you the worst wish I know, for a fact, to have been granted?"

"Yes," the mage intoned breathlessly.

"Of course. I only check, so as to know your desire. It pays to be precise, Master."

Coming to a stop between a church and a large statue, the mage collected himself. "I *ask* you, genie, to tell me the tale—one you know to be true—of the worst wish ever granted."

The demon fought back a grin, and thought for a moment quite fondly of his old partner, Yaenit-Ku. "Very well. Our tale concerns two very naughty genies, who decided to play a funny game in a scummy little town."

"Where?"

The old Wishtwister stifled a giggle. He liked telling half-truths. "No place of particular importance; I think that it was in what is now called the Riverlands—in those days it was still part of Sarkoris—far to the north of here, in the thickest of black woods. The two genies, it seems, came to a cold and wretched village wracked by war and poverty, and each adopted one of two brothers. Orphan boys, young and starving, alone and frightened, without friend or family; one the age of three winters, the other only five."

"Interesting."

"I thought so. The genies took the forms of travelers to the region - one a warrior who swift became a sheriff, and the other a wealthy antiquarian and merchant of art, specifically—and to each of these boys, they then gave every treasure and desire, granting each wish that the children made, once a month, for a time of seven years."

The mage frowned. "That sounds quite...dangerous."

"It was! The children grew up strong, tall and handsome, arrogant and greedy, and the world greatly suffered in their wakes. After seven years, the city and its citizens and environs had become warped by the dozens of miracles afforded each child, so the creatures changed their game. Once the boys reached ten and twelve, respectively, the two genies required that they compete: each month, one boy would be granted a pair of wishes, and the other would be granted nothing at all."

"Hmm. And how...how was the victor decided?"

The demon smiled. "A variety of ways, Master. In some instances, the two wrestled, or held their breath underwater, or competed to bring trophies, or were asked to tell tales of bravery, or cunning...or cruelty. Whatever most-amused the

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two wicked genies, in simple truth. In some cases, they would require each boy to state what he would wish for; whichever desire was the more interesting would be granted twice-over.”

The mage fidgeted and harrumphed. “Devious.”

“Yes. At the end of another seven years, as the boys entered adulthood, the two genies changed the game yet again: each boy was guaranteed his due of magic, but could only grant this wish to another, who had sworn blood-fealty to him. And so the two began to build armies, with which to oppose one another, and their many creations, and all the world.”

The mage grimaced. “And at the end of *that* seven years?”

“Oh, the games never made it to that point, I’m afraid. They were dead within a few months,” said the demon, simply. “Them, and everyone for miles around, and most of the land scoured clean of life. What little that was left wasn’t human, or sane, or really even sentient.”

The mage did not look amused. “And you *know* this tale to be true, you say?”

“Indeed,” said the Wishtwister, brightly. “On my honor.”

“And...what is the point? How is *that* the tale of the most terrible wish?”

“Oh, yes! Of course, Master! It is simply my assumption,” explained the Wishtwister, “that of the three-hundred-some wishes granted in that time, the *very worst one of all* was probably in the mix there somewhere. It might have been one of the ones about werewolves. Or for mastery of fire and wind, or for big funguses or the secrets of the grave...or the poison-sword, admittedly.”

“Hmm. Interesting. Yes,” said the mage, sighing. “Do you know...I think I’m ready to make my wish.”

The demon brightened. “Yes?”

“Yes,” said the mage. “Friend genie, I would wish...only that you might return to your home, forever unable to be summoned again to this world.”

The Wishtwister blinked.

And blinked again.

“Eh?”

The mage smiled. “Is that wish not to your liking?”

“Well, no...it’s...”

“Oh, because I might have thought that you would enjoy that. I suppose that instead I might wish that you could never again be asked to grant a wish...”

“Ah, no, I think perhaps...”

“No? Why ever not? Would you prefer instead that I wished you permanently transformed into a dretch?”

“I’m not granting that.”

The mortal magician had quite a smile upon his face. Not one of charity, either—no, this was a look that the Wishtwister recognized as one of his own favorite expressions.

“Just as an aside, do you know where we are?”

The demon blinked once more. “No. Look. Ah, if you don’t...if you don’t mind me asking, Master...what *is it* that you do? For a living, I mean?”

The mage grinned. “I’m an actuarial consultant for a legal firm, specializing in the transport of rare books.”

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Shadibriri frowned. "Which means...?"

"An investigative accountant for lawyers, who work to defend legally nebulous smugglers who buy, sell and ship forbidden tomes, basically. I specialize in keeping the Pathfinder Society honest when they trade with the dark library of Scrivenbough, since the folk from Absalom seem to have a tendency to claim that things are lost-in-transit."

The Wishtwister frowned.

The mage went on, his smile suggestive of a cat. "I'm also a former student of Scrivenbough, of course. And to answer the question you *did not* ask, this place is the courtyard of a monastery; we are about fifty yards from the inner sanctum of one of the more-major temples of Irori on this continent. The monument behind you commemorates Nex's gifting of the island of Jalmeray to the maharajah Khiben-Sald. Three different fighting-styles were invented here, over the last four thousand years seven more were perfected, and you should know that a single whisper of your *true* nature will bring forth approximately two hundred of the most vicious hand-to-hand combatants who have ever been born, all of them aching for a test."

The demon shrugged, feigning disinterest. "Then...perhaps I will leave after all, come to think of it."

"Hmm. Well, I should hope," said the mage, "that we need not part company on such terrible terms."

The two of them stared at one another, and the ocean wind swept across the immaculate flagstones of the courtyard.

Finally, the mage spoke. "To answer the *other* question you did not ask, I suspected from the very first; I have some great knowledge of genie-kind, and knew you to be something else entirely. No djinn or marid are you, no. Thus, I sought confirmation of your true nature, which you provided in abundance; although your mind is quick and your illusions quite beyond my skill to pierce, it was the slip of one-wish-a-month that did you in, at the last."

"Eh. Yes, I suppose that would do it," said Shadibriri.

"Indeed. I name you ... *glabrezu*, if my schooling does not fail me."

"Ah, well. You got me. I had you going for a bit, though, didn't I?"

The mage's grin did not dissipate. "Sure. So I'll take my prize, if you are still offering; if not, I might suggest that we simply go our separate ways. I might wish for some measure of power, after all. Perhaps a ring that makes me invisible."

"Ah. Well, at that...here's the sticking point, *Master*," the demon spat, with as venomous a sarcasm as he could muster. "Let's clear the air. You see, I have a bet to win. The terms of that bet are that you, a mortal mage, must wish for something that will (a) damn your soul to the Abyss, and (b) get you killed, and relatively quickly."

"Hmm. No, I don't like that at all."

The Wishtwister nodded. "I can see why. Unfortunately, I'm on something of a schedule; tonight time is, I'm afraid, quite a bit *of the essence*, as they say."

"Well. Then, I suppose," said the mage, "that if it's up to me, you are going to lose your bet."

The demon nodded, and turned to go. "Ah, yes. That was my assessment as

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well. The night is young, of course...but the dawn comes all too quickly. Another mage to track down, then, I suppose. Nothing for it, and no time to waste. Which, interestingly enough, reminds me of an old saying amongst my people.”

The mage smiled, spreading his arms wide to encompass the vast city. “Ah, yes. Something about there being, what—always plenty of wizards, amongst all the many worlds? Or how there is never enough time, even in immortality?”

Shadibriri smiled. “Oh, no, no—nothing like that. The saying goes: ‘I’m going to rip your arms off.’”

“...”

The demon shrugged. “My people are actually pretty simple.”

“I see.”

Old Shadibriri turned back to face the mage, and flexed himself to his full height. “Anyway...I’m going to. Rip your arms off, that is. Just for fun.”

The mage glared at him warily. “In case you’ve forgotten, there exists a literal army of fiend-hating martial-artists, located quite surprisingly close to us. And there are alarms and wards all around this place that sense magic. If either of us invokes the least use of a spell—”

“The alarms will go off, yes, and a horde of holy killers will emerge with swiftness to smash us to broken, bloody jelly. My glamers aren’t technically spells, but what *you* cast against me surely will be; doubtless, you know of my immunity to fire and acid, and will choose to blast me with a bolt of lightning...”

“Really?” the mage asked, disapprovingly raising an eyebrow.

“Eh, it was worth a try. Well, anyway, I’m betting that I can kill you first.”

The mage nodded, his hands moving into position to cast. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. Or, perhaps, it would be useful to you to have a lawyer in your pocket.”

“You think?”

“Yes. And I can get you a rival of mine, in less time than you might expect.”

The demon stopped. “Is that so?”

“It is. We can go to him presently; I’ll vouch for your authenticity as one of the nobler efreet, and explain that I could not solve your cunning riddle. We’ll work together to get him to wish for something stupid, damning and lethal, and then we’ll both be on our way with something we want.”

“Hmm,” mused the demon. “And why would this rival trust you?”

The mage smiled. “Very few of the people I hate have any idea how much I hate them. So, have we a deal?”

“I think,” said the demon with a grin, “that we have ourselves *exactly* a deal.”

“A pleasure doing business with you, then.”

And thus, it was with great joy that the old Wishtwister won a bet, and made a friend in the city of Quantum, in the nation of Nex.

WAY OF THE GUN

By Ted Thompson & Sadie Thompson

“**B**REATHE deeply.”
The young girl in front of Atticus inhaled.
“Good. Now let it out slowly as you squeeze back the trigger.”
The tiny hammer fell. Then a loud crack echoed through the canyon as a bottle exploded on a distant log.
“Excellent! No hesitation.”
The gun cocked back and an empty casing flew out of the chamber. Taking aim, the girl fired again, shattering a dusty glass jar. She repeated the motion over and over, shifting only slightly and knocking out one vessel after another, as her sun-kissed brown hair waved softly beneath her brimmed hat.
Panic surged through the man and he reached for her arm.
“Shana! Shana, *stop!*”
“Why, Father?” the girl asked smiling while dismissively lining up another shot.
“Because, child, I didn’t make that gun!” Atticus drew up beside her and looked seriously at his daughter.
“So...” The girl lowered the weapon and eyed it skeptically.
“So, if you fire it too fast, the heat will cook the powder and it will backfire!”

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The girl handed the gun to her father and he cocked it open to inspect the insides. Shaking his head, he threw the weapon to the ground.

“That thing’s a death trap! Shana, have you been—”

“Father, did you make the pistol you keep at your side?” The girl interrupted, as her blue eyes sparkled up at him.

The man sighed. Shana was changing the subject, but he always felt obliged to answer her questions when they were so intuitive.

“Yes, I did.”

Like lightning, Shana pulled the pistol from Atticus’ holster. The man stood still a moment, dumbfounded by the girl’s speed. Taking his hesitation as a sign of approval, Shana turned from her father, pointing the pistol at another row of bottles. “Watch this!”

The pistol moved with fluid grace in the girl’s hand as she directed the barrel toward the targets. Horrified and amazed, Atticus watched as the gun discharged bullet after bullet in his daughter’s hand. Bottle after bottle shattered.

How has she learned to do this, he thought. He had not seen a pistol used with such skill since her mother died.

Shana aimed at the final bottle, but the hammer clicked with no discharge.

“I’m out,” she said, handing the weapon back.

The lean man stared at it, contemplating what had just happened. He holstered the revolver then threw his hat down, his face reddening.

“Shana, have you been practicing while Akane and I are away?” It was a stupid question, the answer was apparent enough from the ruined pistol’s warped interior.

“Yes, Father. I was bored and I thought you’d like...”

The man slowly shook his head. “I told you not to leave the house unless I was with you! The Mana Wastes are dangerous!” He sighed and rubbed his tanned face from brow to scruff. He was beginning to doubt his decision to train his children to shoot. But out here, what choice did he have?

“If you can’t obey me, we’ll have to go back to Alkenstar City,” he threatened.

A smile of delight came across Shana’s face. “You mean we could go back?”

Atticus’ shoulders slumped. He should have thought this out better. Bored children in the Wastes would eventually get themselves into trouble. If only their mother was alive to keep them busy; no doubt she would have had all *three* of them sharpshooting by now.

Meredith had been a wild woman though—wild with golden curls, a coy smile and laughing eyes—and she made her guns sing, but out here she would have been bored to madness too.

“Girl, there’s an etiquette to be followed when touching other’s weapons.” He paused to make sure he had her full attention and laid his hands on his daughter’s slight shoulders as he noticed her striking resemblance to her mother.

“What you did today, Shana, I have never seen before in my life. I’ve seen the best marksmen and the quickest draws, and when you put them together they’re a lethal bunch. But none of them can do what you just did.”

“I have worked all my life to make better guns. I’m the best at what I do. I have transformed simple pistols into works of art, but I’ve never seen them wielded like that. Not even your mother was that good. My heart sings when you hold my

masterpieces, Shana. And Erastil help me, I want to be your *father* and punish you for breaking the rules. But you're making it tough."

Shana smiled and gave Atticus a hug. "I just want you to be with me, Father."

The gunsmith pulled his daughter close, but his questions nagged at the back of his mind. Her mother had gone down this very same path. Her skills had made her irresistible to him. She had made his guns look like magnificent toys, and between the two of them his creations became famous across Alkenstar. The only problem was, without her guns she was defenseless.

He scratched his head and a terrible question came to his mind. "Shana, I never taught you how to shoot a revolver. Who's been showing you?"

The girl released her hug, her face a little pale. Then she turned and walked over to inspect the broken jars.

"Father, look! I didn't miss a one!"

The man shook his head. She was buying time to think up a fib. He scooped up his hat and dusted it off. "I want to know who's been instructing you."

Shana started to open her mouth, but held her tongue. She turned her eyes away and kicked at a few shards among the dry grass and dirt, muttering a single word.

"Marmi."

Shana's imaginary friend. It bothered him just how much the name sounded like "mommy."

"Well, I don't want you coming here anymore. You hear me? I've told you not to leave the stead without Akane or I, and that's final." He looked about the air as if trying to see the girl's invisible mentor. "Er, what does Marmi think of that?"

Shana giggled, "She was making the same movements you made while you were talking, but..."

"But what?"

Shana bit her lip. "But..."

"You can tell me."

"I don't think I should."

"I'm your father. You can tell me."

"You won't like it."

"Shana..."

"Dad, she made a funny face and it made you look stupid."

The man looked around once more. "Well, I have my reasons for being angry, Marmi! My daughter is too precious to be eaten by some sandkraken. The Mana Wastes aren't safe for a young girl, no matter how well she can shoot. She needs to look after her brothers at the stead."

Shana looked into her father's eyes. "Oh, I never leave them alone. I just bring them with when I'm out here practicing."

"*What?! You bring them out here too?*"

"Yes, I watch them and keep them nearby while I shoot. But they never play where I am targeting, no sir. They just stay behind me and Marmi tells me..."

Atticus winced. He started to speak, but couldn't find the words. He had often gone into the city with Akane thinking his children were protected by their fortified homestead, but never had he dreamed his children would leave the safety it provided. He adjusted his grip on his hat and planted it firmly on his head.

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"I've heard enough, Shana. We're going home."



"It's mine! I found it so I get to keep it!" The brown haired boy with tanned skin lunged toward his taller twin brother, trying to recover his new discovery. The small medallion dangled just out of his reach and glinted silver in the sun, hanging from the remains of a broken, rusted chain.

"Just let me see it for a minute, Gabe. If you don't I'll *tell* and then Father'll take it away. He will be very upset when he learns you went into the wastes alone!"

The two scuffled and grabbed each other's shirts. Gabe tugged his brother's sleeve and swiped in the air at his prize.

"Will, please don't tell! He wouldn't understand! It's... special."

His twin grinned and loosened up. "Alright...but you'll have to share it with me. It'll be our secret. I'll help you get it past Akane, but promise me you'll never go out alone again, okay?"

Gabe nodded and the two shook hands. The smaller twin snatched back the trinket and stuffed it into his pocket.

Will let the matter drop, but chewed at his lip. He was hurt his younger brother had ventured into the wastes without him. Whatever the medallion was, Will hoped it satisfied his twin enough to never do it again.

They turned back to head home. A white-picket fence clearly marked the perimeter of their yard, enclosing a large garden full of blooming flowers and vegetables. It was a pleasing addition to the grounds, but the boys knew the fence actually drew a line to something far more lethal; it marked the border of the hidden trip wires and pits that protected them from the things that wandered the wastes. Wire netting shielded the entire house from above and was painted brown to blend in with the arid earth and hide their home. There was also a large, unsightly barn with an adjoining workshop standing behind it, surrounded by a similar white-picket boundary.

The twins navigated a safe path and headed to the front porch. They peered inside through a window to see their father's assistant, Akane, asleep in the front room, his large feet propped up on the arm of the couch. Quietly they pushed the front door open and tiptoed past the Garundi man. Loud snores snarled from his open mouth and echoed throughout the entire house as the boys rushed to their room, closing the door softly.

They sat on the lower bunk of their two-tier bed and Gabe fished the medallion from his pocket to get a better look. It was solid silver, with a point at the bottom that glowed a strange shade of green.

Will gasped. He took the amulet from his brother's hand and the green glow faded to plain silver. "How'd you do that?" He turned the metal disk over in and looked for a mechanism to activate the device or make it glow once more. Finding none, he handed it back to his twin with a sigh.

"I think this thing likes you, Gabe."

And the glow returned.



The gunsmith and his daughter began their arduous ascent from the shooting range up the jagged bluffs. They easily hiked up the narrow path on foot, but Shana wondered how her father ever managed to get two horses and a wagon up and down so many times, yet never lose the team. She watched as he breathed out deeply, surveying the deserted landscape and looking ahead to their homestead high above on the ridge overlooking the valley.

It hadn't always looked like this.

Her father said these parts had been lush, fertile farmland long ago, filled with communities that worked to produce crops. The war between Nex and Geb changed all that though. Their battles and sorcery raged over the region, turning the rivers black and killing the crops with a terrible blight. Even the soil became poisoned and sterile. The people abandoned their homes and villages, leaving a wasteland of rot and ruin. Hundreds of years later, Nex and Geb returned and fought a final battle in the same desolate, abandoned valley. In the end Nex triumphed, as Geb's armies were lured into a devastating trap and obliterated.

Shana knew her father was fascinated by the wastes and had the urge to go prospecting for relics from the period, but his duties as their caregiver and a master gunsmith allowed little time for exploring. Instead, he tried to distract himself and spent his spare time hauling home crates of good soil to plant their gardens.

Planting and tending to the perennials became a way of life for all of them. But as they worked, the topic of gardening always somehow strayed into the history of the area and the battles between Geb and Nex. The historic events never failed to pique his interest and she sometimes saw him standing by the cliffs, looking out at the valley and flexing his hands at the thought of its undiscovered secrets. He wanted to set the right example, and avoided speaking of the intriguingly dangerous place as much as he could, but whenever they were busy outdoors, he would get carried away with his stories and the retelling of their valley's history, momentarily proud to see his children sharing his curiosity.

Now, it was too late. They had started to go on their own.

Atticus sighed. There was just one last trip to make before he could bring his work to a close. One final run to Alkenstar City and then he could return to the stead, get it all packed up and bring his family back to civilization. It was unfortunate he couldn't leave Akane, but this was a large haul and he needed the big Garundi man's strength and protection.

He had to trust Shana to watch her brothers one last time.

The sun was just starting to set as father and daughter crested the ridge and neared the house. The way the light hit the flowers and foliage was beautiful. The gunsmith stopped a moment to wipe his brow and sighed again. It hurt him to think that the plants in his garden were all destined to die when they left. The white fence he had built and the clay gnome he had purchased from a Katapeshi vendor would slowly fade and decay, or would be buried in the dust. The wheelbarrow full of rich, life-giving earth would dry up and become useless, never to be touched again.

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A warm breeze blew across the house and the chimes above the door rang, breaking Atticus' melancholy mood. Shana looked up at her father, and noticed a tear rolling down his cheek. She glanced behind her and nodded, then took her father's hand. The man looked away from the house to see his daughter smiling up at him, her eyes so much like her mother's. Surprised by her tenderness, the gunsmith hoisted Shana up into a big hug. Losing the place was a small price to pay to keep his children safe.

Joyfully, the man wiped away his tears with one hand and pulled the eleven-year-old in closer to kiss her cheek.

"Tonight, my young lady, we are going to play cards!"

Shana smiled from ear to ear. Her dad hadn't played cards since their mother died. She looked back to see Marmi, happily standing in the distance. Shana winked and spoke softly as she rested her chin on her father's shoulder, "...and you are invited, too."



Early the next morning, Akane began loading gun crates onto a horse-drawn wagon. The crates contained the accumulation of over six month's work; augmented arms bound for Alkenstar city. Atticus helped Akane in lifting the heavier boxes and then all of them were covered with a tarp. They hammered paneled siding around all four sides and heaped baskets on top, concealing the wagon's true cargo. The two men then walked into the house to a gun rack mounted on the living room wall. They took down a rifle and a pair of pistols each, loading and strapping them into holsters on their belts.

Shana came out of her room yawning and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She sat on the couch and tucked her knees up into her nightdress as the two men slipped on long duster coats to hide their weapons. Her father gave her a brief nod and a small smile as he dressed, then continued outside, making preparations as his mind wandered.

Adding the rifles was an unpleasant necessity, but they needed to take every precaution. Atticus had trained Akane in gunfighting as best he could, but admittedly gunsmiths were not always the best gunslingers; they spent far more time crafting their weapons than practicing with them. The fact remained though, that the city of Alkenstar attracted ruthless men, and to them guns were exotic devices that commanded respect and fear. Some would do whatever it took to possess such a thing.

Atticus and his family knew this all too well.

Meredith had lost her life for the modified pistols that he'd designed for her. In his greed, the murderer had attempted to kidnap Shana and her baby brothers for ransom too. It was only Atticus' influence as the Master Gunsmith for the Grand Duchy that had saved them from harm. His children were returned to him along with his wife's guns, but he was severely shaken by the ordeal and fled Alkenstar city with his family, seeking sanctuary in the magic-less desert.

The solitude and freedom from the Grand Duchy's restrictions had allowed him to be creative, experiment more and unlock his true talent. The weapons he made

now were of unparalleled quality and the merchants of Alkenstar had taken notice. His guns now fetched incredible sums and his designs created new standards in the city and garnered attention throughout the Inner Sea. It was the only reason he was deciding to conduct one last trip. He had to risk it one last time.

After returning from Alkenstar, he would give up being a gunsmith. It was hard to contemplate leaving this life and his talents behind, but there was really no other way for his family to be safe. With the sale of his recently-modified pistols and rifles, he would be richer than most men in the Inner Sea, and that would allow them to settle anywhere they chose. That would be enough for him.

Yes, he would throw it all away for his children, without hesitation.

Akane carried the last of the gear from the house and finished loading the wagon, then went to the barn to assemble the horse team. They would be leaving soon.

Looking from the window, Shana waved to her father reassuringly. He had just begun to do the same, when a resounding boom shook the foundation of the house.

Shana ran out to her father as Akane emerged from the barn.

"I'm alright!" the journeyman shouted.

"Where are the twins, Shana?" her father asked as he began running to investigate the sound. She opened her mouth, but before she could answer, both boys stepped out onto the porch, looking bewildered.

"Go!" he pointed to his daughter, gesturing to their home. "Get them back in the house and stay with them while Akane and I check this out."

Shana herded the boys inside and waited by the window.

Time passed excruciatingly slowly for the children until Akane returned. Shana had thought of several questions to ask but before she could utter a word the big Garundi man motioned at her to come outside.

"You two, stay put," he growled to the twins, who knew from his tone not to disobey.

Akane led Shana out to the barn, conscious that their every move was being watched by her brothers. Once they were inside, he spoke to her in a low, serious tone.

"Your father and I will be gone longer than usual this time, so he wants me to show you where we keep the fuses and triggers for the explosives. He wants you to be able to reset the traps if any more of them go off while we are away."

"Was that what caused that sound? One of the traps?" the girl asked, her blue eyes widening.

"Yes." Akane reached up and took a key from atop a supporting beam that spanned the barn. He kicked some straw and dirt around with his boot then put the key into the ground, revealing a small door in the floor. Shana watched diligently as her father's apprentice continued.

"The fuses and detonators in the room below us are getting old, Shana. There are enough explosives down there to blow this whole barn a hundred feet into the air. If you aren't careful you could easily drop a component and set all the charges off, so you must move carefully. Any sudden jolt or fumbling and up you go."

Shana swallowed hard.

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Akane pulled up the door to reveal a ten-by-ten-foot room with several alcoves chiseled into the walls. Each one held tiny canisters and next to each was a small metal cap. Akane fetched a ladder from alongside the barn wall and lowered it down into the hidden room. He climbed down and grabbed one of each component.

“Your father is going to show you how to build a bomb, Shana. These caps are the fuses and these canisters are the detonators.” Akane’s expression was deathly somber as he handed them up to her. She held them respectfully, but showed no fear as she waited for him to finish. Akane ascended the ladder and then pulled it up after him and carried it back to the wall. Then he shut the door, locked it, and placed the key back on the beam, making sure Shana was watching.

“Now, follow me.”

The two walked slowly from the barn, past the house and began navigating a safe path through the garden.

“You’re doing great, Shana. We’re almost there,” Akane called. He led her along the white-picket fence and through the front gate to an exposed pit surrounded by black scorch marks. Shana followed, planting her feet carefully along the surest route until she reached the gaping hole and gasped; her father was standing in the pit next to something that looked like it was human—once. She cleared her throat and then held out the detonator canister and fuse to her father. He reached up and took them, then set them into some soft dirt.

“Thank you, Shana. Now, I want to show you something. Lift that heavy plate for me.” He pointed to a lever near her feet.

She looked down to see a solid, rectangular sheet of metal. She grabbed the lever and pulled it up to reveal a hole containing several large, metal cases. One case had a canister already attached to it.

“Why did we need to get a detonator and fuse from the barn if you already had one in here, Father?”

The man smiled and tipped up his hat to look at his daughter.

“Shana, we keep bigger explosives in there. That plate keeps them from going off all at once, but as you can see, I have them primed to go off together from another source. These pits can keep out the small things but, if we had to, a lever in the house could set off these larger charges as well, and these plates would shoot up in the air like mortars. Not too accurate, but you never know what could come flying over the house.”

“You’re going to be gone a long time, huh?”

Atticus stared at her a moment. He nodded. “Long enough that you need to know all of this. These defenses will keep you and the boys safe. There’s an escape tunnel under the desk in the living room and triggers to blow the house and barn too, if it comes to that.”

Shana took a step back and inhaled a few rapid breaths. *The barn? The whole house?* She suddenly felt a severe weight on her shoulders and wished she could forget what she had just heard. Her father and Akane had been keeping terrible secrets from the three of them. She started to get angry, but an awful smell started to choke her senses and the thoughts of her home and brothers being blown to bits by her own father vanished.

“What stinks?” She wrinkled her nose and frowned.

“Don’t mind the smell, just grab one of those metal cases and bring it down here to me, please. Gently.”

“Father...it’s that thing in the pit with you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but it’s dead, sweetie. It’s okay to come down.”

With a delicate touch she put her arm around one of the bundled bombs from the larger pit and lifted it out.

“Good, now bring it over, honey.” Her father pointed to the depression that had held the previous charge. Shana lowered herself into the pit then laid the metal case into the spot her father indicated. He had her insert the detonator, set the fuse and attach a chain to the trigger just above the fuse cap. Then the two climbed out of the pit.

When they were clear, Akane dropped a looped rope around the remains of the creature in the pit and pulled it out. Within moments they were looking over their victim and Akane started digging a grave. Shana pulled her scarf over her nose and Akane and her father stuck wax up their nostrils.

“Dad...what *is* that?” Shana stood a few paces further back from the corpse and looked at it while the two men worked.

“An undead creature; one of many that wander the wastes. That’s why it’s so important you and the boys don’t go beyond the fence.”

“Eww... It’s disgusting!” Shana gasped as something oozed from under the corpse’s blackened nails. Its skin was gray with very little hair, and half its head and its entire lower jaw were gone.

Akane grunted and went back to digging. Atticus noted the Garundi’s disapproval. For the hundredth time he debated the merits of taking his children along on this last trip, but he just couldn’t risk it; they were bound to have trouble on the road. A wagon full of guns was too tempting a target.

“This thing would try to eat you and your brothers if it got the chance, Shana. Undead beasts are always hungry and they never get tired or frightened. It’s rare that they wander up here from the valley, but as we see by this fellow here, it does happen occasionally. With us gone for an extended time, I want you to be extra safe. That’s why I’m teaching you to set the traps. They must always be ready.”

“Dad, I would be right scared if one came at me without a gun,” Shana said. “Can... Can I wear the pistols until you come back?”

He nodded and went to help Akane finish burying the corpse.

Akane looked up at the gunsmith. “You know, boss, these things sometimes travel in packs. Their sense of smell is keener than ours and the smell will hang on the wind for...”

“I know!” Atticus barked. He started to dig. If more came, Shana would be the only one who could stop them. The boys could shoot, but their skills wouldn’t really make a difference. They might hurt themselves before stopping any attacker.

Seeing the resolve in Atticus’ face, Akane focused on interring the corpse, but in another few minutes, doubt began to creep back into his face.

“What about using the lye?”

The gunsmith paused, leaning on his shovel. “We don’t have a lot left.” But he stepped out of the hole and went to the barn, returning with a heavy, wax-sealed ceramic pot. “Shana, fetch a few buckets of water.”

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By the time Shana returned, lugging two heavy buckets on a yoke over her shoulders, Akane and her father had wrapped bandannas around their mouths and noses and dusted the corpse with a white powder.

“Stay back,” Akane warned, taking the buckets from Shana. “Get near the house. This stuff burns bad.”

Shana obeyed, standing by the door and ignoring the inquisitive stares of her brothers as Akane carefully poured the water into the lye-covered pit and backed away quickly.

“The smell isn’t so bad now. Let’s hope the scent trail is lost.” Akane took a long breath, his eyes scanning the wilderness for signs of movement.

Shana lowered her scarf and sniffed the air. It still reeked horribly, the rotten smell mingling with a hard chemical stench. She looked to the sky and hoped the afternoon winds wouldn’t blow toward the house.

Atticus nodded with approval. It would have to do. “Time we be off, Akane, if we are to make Three Tree Junction before sunset. Hitch up the horses and I will be right back.”

Akane looked up at the sky, noticing the sun had already passed midday. “Yes, we better head out.” The big man attended to the wagon and Shana’s father smiled at her and took her hand as they walked back into the house.

The twins stood waiting near the door as their father and sister entered.

“Is everything alright, Pa?” Gabe asked.

The man nodded and took off his hat. “Everything is alright now, boys. Akane and I are heading off to the city but we’ll be back, like always.” He reached out and hugged the twins close to him as Shana moved behind her brothers. “You mind your sister now, okay? You do what she tells you. I mean it.”

Both twins nodded and Shana patted their shoulders and gave them a small smile. Then she escorted her father to the door.

“You know what you need to do, girl,” he said as he gave his daughter a hug. “Look after them and be safe, a’right?”

Shana smiled slightly and nodded. “You too, Father.”

Atticus took a long look at his children. “Be good. Listen to Shana and don’t go out into the wastes. We’ll be home in a few days.” Then he turned, opened the door and exited the house. He mounted the wagon next to Akane and thumped the side of the wagon seat, and with one final glance at the property, the two started the arduous trip down the path to the basin floor.



Shana and her brothers waved goodbye from the safety of the white picket fence. As the wagon turned a bend beyond their sight, a rustling of rocks stirred from far below in the canyon. Shana looked towards the sound but saw nothing. She focused hard, straining her ears against the light wind. Maybe it was just her imagination, but she swore she could almost hear the shuffling of feet.

“Get in the house, you two,” she ordered, looking about the premises.

“Why?” the boys asked.

“Because Dad put me in charge and I said so. Now, go!”

Her brothers shrugged then moped inside. Shana watched them until the door closed. Then she turned toward an empty area of the lawn.

“Okay, give it to me straight. Are we in trouble?”

The wind blew against Shana’s face and she frowned.

“Will Dad be back in time to help us?” Her lip began to tremble.

“Of course I’m afraid, Marmi! I can shoot straight but I’ve never killed anything, especially something that wants to kill me back!”

The twins crept up to the front window, watching their sister talk to the open air. It was starting to frighten them. She carried guns after all, and what if she decided to shoot her imaginary friend but accidentally hit one of them instead?

Shana was shaking her head. “Why me?”

The wind blew on her face again.

Shana closed her eyes then laughed bitterly. “That easy, huh? You know, Marmi, you sure have a funny way of cheering me up.” The girl tilted her head as if her cheek was being stroked and the tension in her shoulders dropped. “Okay, I’ll be ready,” she sighed.

She stepped up on the porch and yanked the door open, determined to appear in charge. The boys sat on the couch, staring quietly. She went to the gun case and took out her mother’s revolvers. Their ivory handles looked smooth and serene and on the bottoms of each was carved a single word, naming the weapons *Peace* and *Harmony*.

The first time she’d used them, Shana knew they were both distinctly different. *Peace* helped her aim at different targets with both hands. It allowed her to take breaths between the discharges of each bullet. *Harmony* though, did something to her inside, something she wasn’t completely comfortable with. She could feel its touch affecting her mood, making her body conform to its will. In turn, her shooting became faster and faster, with even greater accuracy. At a certain point she had to put it down because she wasn’t sure just who was wielding whom.

After that, whenever she went shooting, it was always with *Peace*.

She slipped her fingers around its grip then looked at *Harmony* with dread before glancing above the kitchen table where a picture of her mother was hung. The painter, whoever he or she was, had captured her likeness well—her straw-colored curls, smooth, tanned skin and deep blue eyes—but the odd part of the picture was the half-grin her mother wore. The intricate detail revealed that the woman was holding *Peace* and *Harmony* in her crossed hands, causing Shana to wonder if the grin on her mother’s face was truly her own, or that of *Harmony* shining through.

With cold determination, Shana took the second pistol, trying to ignore the way it felt so natural in her hand, like an old friend’s handshake. She loaded bullets into each cylinder, draped her mother’s belt around her waist and holstered the guns at her side. She looked up at the picture of her mother one last time. “I’m not like you,” she whispered. “I won’t let these things become what I am all about.” She opened the drawers below the gun case and took out a satchel, placing another two cases of rounds inside then slung it across her body, noting its weight.

She wished the boys were somewhere else, safe and secure. She didn’t want the burden of protecting them, but she had to and she needed their utmost attention if

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things got out of hand.

The twins watched their sister in silence as she geared up. Even on their excursions out in the wastes, she had never holstered both pistols or taken so much ammo. She looked like she was going to a fight.

When she finally looked at them, her face was determined and resolute.

“What’s goin’ on, Shana?” Will asked.

She couldn’t find the words to explain herself. The silence stretched between them.

“So, Pa and Akane are really gone?” Gabe added.

Shana went to the window overlooking the porch, scanning the front of the house for movement. “Yes, they’re gone.”

The brothers slowly exchanged a smile, and went to put on their coats and backpacks.

“What are you doing?” Shana asked.

“Well, we’re going out to explore, right?”

She gave her siblings a grave look. “Put down your gear and sit back on the couch for a minute. I have something to tell you two.”

The boys did as they were told, the excitement in their eyes switching to worry.

“I’m going to tell you about that boom we heard. It was an undead thing that blew up in our trap. And there are more of them coming. They mean to kill us, but I won’t let that happen. So I’m gonna fight ‘em.”

“Did Marmi tell you this?” Will asked.

Shana paused then nodded her head.

“Boys, I know you can’t see her but I *do*, and she has never been wrong.”

“How many did she say are coming?”

Shana swallowed. “Marmi isn’t sure, but it’s a lot, so we all need to be brave and help out.” She walked back to the rifle case and pulled out the weapons Atticus and Akane hadn’t taken.

“She says that you should use Dad’s hunting rifle, Will”—Shana handed it to the taller of the twins—“and you get Dad’s off-hand pistol, Gabe.” Gabe held the weapon at arm’s length like it was something their dad might have cooked for dinner.

Both boys checked over their weapons, going through the motions they’d been taught to see if the chambers were loaded.

“Gabe, I will also need you to reload my guns during the fight. And both of you can’t leave my sight once the action starts. We are going to hole up in the garden and then fall back to the porch when we have to, and finally end up in here. We don’t have much time, so block up all the windows with whatever we have. Will, go out to the shop and grab the nails and scrap wood so we can hammer the windows shut. Gabe and I will fix up this room. Marmi says those things are very strong, so we need to slow ‘em down however we can.”

Will looked pale, but hefted his rifle and went off to the shop while Gabe and Shana started moving furniture to the windows. Will returned with his rifle slung and several long planks and a can full of nails in his shaky arms.

“Stay calm, Will. We’ll get it done. Just carry what you can and keep making trips. Bring back a saw and hammer too, okay?”

In a short time, the three children had the rear door boarded up, along with all the windows. A little afternoon sunlight still shone through the cracks. The work wasn't perfect but Shana hoped it was enough.

"Why can't we just hide, Shana?" Will wondered, squeezing the barrel of his gun like he was trying to choke it.

"Marmi says they'll find us if we hide, so there's no choice."

"But how does Marmi know? We haven't even tried!"

"They'll smell us faster than a hound." She opened the front door and stepped out onto the front porch.

"We'll have to set up lamps. It'll be getting dark soon."

A horrible screech rang out and Shana winced. Dust flew up from the canyon as several figures approached further down the road.

"Gabe? Will? Get over here. They're coming!"

Shuffling humanoid shapes filled the path and strode towards the stead. Others joined them, appearing out of the dust like wraiths and filling their ranks. Shana counted—twenty, thirty, *forty*—and still more came. Will and Gabe rushed to Shana's side, shaking with fear. Shana removed her pistols while taking calm, deep breaths.

"Listen, boys! We're family and if we're going to make it through this in one piece, we've got to stick together! Gabe, get ready to reload my pistols." Shana tossed her satchel to Gabe, who squatted down on one knee to take out the extra ammunition cases. Will cocked his gun and aimed carefully toward the road.

"You both gotta be my eyes. They'll try to surround us and if they do, we're done."

Shana walked out onto the porch toward the middle of the garden, kneeling behind a few straw bales. Keeping her eyes on the road, she waved the twins over. They crouched down with her, clutching their guns in sweaty hands as the first ghoul reached the perimeter of the property.

A pit opened up underneath it and for the second time that day, a boom shook the house.

Shrapnel flew up from the crater, ripping into the other creatures hopping over the gap. Inhuman shrieks filled the air. Four of the skulking things fell and did not get back up. Three others made the leap over the obstacle while a large contingent went left and right. A moment later another explosion boomed over the farm. Three rotting creatures fell in pieces, cut in half at the abdomen.

Shana aimed straight for the road, focusing on the bottleneck where the traps had already been sprung. More explosions went off behind the house. Shana narrowed her eyes in concentration. She saw the first shambling creature clear the trap field, then aimed for the thing's eye and pulled *Harmony's* trigger.

The shot splattered the ghoul's brains all over its neighbors, who didn't so much as pause. Three more undead made it across the pit, growling and slobbering. One stepped on the fallen body and fell over backwards, so Shana aimed for the two standing creatures, placing shots between each of their eyes. They dropped like heavy sacks, their wounds oozing a black, fetid liquid. Shana aimed at the third on the ground and prepared to discharge *Peace*, but the thing's skull exploded and it collapsed and laid still. A wisp of smoke trailed from Will's rifle barrel.

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More creatures jumped the pit and Shana blasted every head she pointed at. Black blood splattered all over the white fence as the things dropped one by one before her.

“Reload!” Shana tossed *Harmony* to Gabe and he handed Shana their father’s spare pistol.

Another explosion shook them as an outlying bomb went off beyond the fence. Above, Shana saw the net canopy start to shake.

“They’re getting on top of the house!”

Gabe looked up at the mesh as he dumped the spent cartridges from his sister’s gun. The barrel was hot to the touch. He shoved new bullets into the chambers as fast as he could then handed the revolver over as Shana dropped *Peace* into his hands.

Gabe reloaded *Peace* as well and went for another case, shakily ripping it open to spill the cartridges on the ground. He took a handful and shoved them into *Harmony* and their father’s hold-out pistol, and was barely finished when Shana snatched them from his hands to keep firing. The net above shook and Gabe noticed several figures trapped in its barbed clutches. One of the creatures had ripped open its abdomen and intestines slumped out like garish decorations, dripping foul, black goo. It tried to push forward to the front of the house, but it only succeeded in ripping its own guts apart further. Its brethren crawled over its tattered body and moved ahead without looking back.

Gabe’s mouth dropped at the lack of regard the things had for their lives. He stared transfixed a moment until Shana’s hand flew in his face with another smoking gun. Gabe fumbled to regain his pace until he heard a thud just twenty feet behind them.

A piece of netting had collapsed, and the gutted creature was squirming to free itself from the fallen canopy. Gabe looked up to the hole as creatures raced into the breach, using the entangled bodies as a bridge. Will shot the struggling creature, but two more dropped down through the hole to replace it and more were on the way.

Shana once again thrust an empty gun at Gabe and he gave her back a loaded one. He rammed more cartridges in the drained pistol, slung the ammunition satchel across his body and stood. The two ghouls hissed and charged, lurching awkwardly and dragging their arms like gorillas. Gabe aimed his father’s hold-out pistol and pulled the trigger. The first ghoul fell but the second didn’t slow down. It was just five feet away from him when its head splattered and it crumpled at Gabe’s feet. Will locked eyes with him a moment, then started to reload. Gabe knelt back down and resumed filling Shana’s pistols with fresh bullets.

All the while, Shana fired towards the pit and the path beyond. Each time she switched from *Harmony* she felt an odd bit of discomfort, which eased only when the weapon was back in her hand. It made her faster, pointed her to the most threatening targets. If only her father could see her now. If he was impressed by her use of his pistol, imagine how shocked he’d be to see her holding *Harmony*!

She shook the thought from her head as *Harmony* left her grip and she aimed *Peace* at the coming horde. Their bodies piled in a heap but a number were staying low and clambering into the pit. She thought the ghouls were mindless, but now

she could see them building their ranks to swarm her.

Will shouted something and pointed above their heads. Shana noticed the breach in the netting above the house for the first time, along with the rows and rows of creatures scaling their way to the hole. In a few moments there would be more things on them than they had bullets to fire.

“To the porch! I’ll cover the rear! Just reload as you go, Gabe.”

The boys ran from their covered position, through the garden and up the sheltered front step. Shana kept her back to the house and retreated towards the porch. A ghoul emerged from among the vegetable patch but became entangled in a rose bush. Black blood splashed the blossoms as a bullet found its throat. The thing gurgled then pitched forward, shattering her father’s clay gnome beneath its weight. The girl grimaced, scanning the garden as Will’s rifle rang out from the porch. Another body flew backwards, tumbling into the sprouting corn.

She reached the steps as Gabe handed her *Harmony*, exchanging it for an empty *Peace*. A howl came from her left as a ghoul climbed the rail of the porch. Shana blasted the thing back.

And then it happened.

The monsters holed up in the pit charged forward all at once. Shana counted at least a dozen. She focused her attention on the closer creatures coming down from the net until she heard thumping on the porch roof. A gruesome visage leaned over the eaves and caught a bullet from *Harmony*, then toppled onto the front steps. It was time to go.

“Into the house, boys! Reload!”

The twins ran and Shana backed in after them, shooting until Will slammed the door and barred it shut. Something crashed against the entrance as Shana reloaded *Harmony*. Gabe slipped *Peace* into her holster and then went to work filling his father’s pistol for himself. Another forceful thump popped the front door inward and the brace creaked. They could hear scrambling on the main roof now. Hisses and growls came from all around them.

“They don’t care a lick about themselves,” Gabe said, his voice breaking, “It’s like they want to die over the three of us! But why? They never bothered us before! What did we do? You think they want that meda—”

He snapped his mouth shut. Shana glared at her brothers. Claws scabbled on the outside walls, testing the boards. More thumps pounded on the door and the brace groaned and cracked.

“Tell me. Tell me what it is,” she scowled, looming over Will.

Will rubbed the back of his neck. “Well... Gabe, um, found something out there and he...”

“Found *what*?”

“Er... A necklace, it glowed and—”

“Get it!”

Will looked to Gabe then went to their room to find the medallion tucked under his brother’s bed. To Will’s surprise it glowed bright green, even without his brother’s touch. He reached for the talisman and it sent a painful tingle up his arm.

The house suddenly went quiet. The ghouls outside stopped their attack; they weren’t even growling. The silence was eerie. Will stood still a moment, listening

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hard.

Then a howling wail resounded from all around them.

The medallion pulsed and the creatures began to slam themselves against the outer walls, their snarls sounding desperate and hateful instead of bestial. Dust shook from the boards and the entire house began to quake with the strain of dozens—or perhaps hundreds—of bodies heaving against it. Will ran out of the twins' room back to his siblings.

The pulsating green light cast an odd glow on their faces in the dimness. “Where did it come from, Gabe?” Shana shouted.

Her voice was drowned out as the ghouls battered the room from all sides, breaking the glass panes in the windows and popping the nails from the boards. An arm flung into the room as a splintered piece of board clattered to the floor. Shana aimed and released a shot from *Peace* that shattered the bone just below the elbow. The thing's shriek hurt her ears as it yanked its useless arm away, but another hand took its place, loosening another board.

“Get to the corner!”

She heard dishes falling and shattering in the kitchen. Pounding continued from the porch. Lumber and glass fell from the windows all around and Shana cried out in frustration as a wave of hopelessness overcame her. The front door's hinges groaned and jarred loose and the sturdy brace was weakening. Shana closed her eyes and exhaled, trying to stay calm.

The window to her left collapsed and a ghoul tumbled onto the living room floor, looking up with a menacing snarl. Shana pointed *Peace* at its face and fired. *I'm not going down without a fight*, she thought as it collapsed. On her opposite side another creature tried to slip through the narrow opening in the wall boards but was caught and unable to move. Shana turned *Harmony* on it. The ghoul slumped and then was ripped away by its kin.

Eat that, she laughed to herself.

The kitchen door splintered from its frame with an ear-splitting crunch. The ghouls surged forward, ready to move in.

Shana retreated to the corner with her brothers.

“I'll hold them off. Reload for me and then take whatever shots you can.”

Shana hugged Will and Gabe close with tears in her eyes.

The front door shattered and the brace gave way, snapping in two.

Shana sneered and spun around, readying her guns for the first target while her brothers cowered behind her, taking aim towards the front door. From the sides, two creatures sprang from the windows as a third broke out from the kitchen. Shana stood with her arms outstretched, and fired. Her targets flew off their feet but the third moved in, unnoticed to all but Gabe. He pointed at the thing and missed while Will shot the first shape that came through the front door. Several others stumbled through the front but Shana made every round count and multiple beasts were thrown back.

But they were coming faster now.

A clawed hand grasped Shana's leg and sharp teeth bit into her calf. She screamed and shot her mauler twice and its body went limp. Two more lurched through the front door, clambering over the pile of bodies was forming. Shana

felt her leg giving out as she blasted the new intruders through blurring vision. Something wasn't right. Frightened, she stumbled as she felt her hand and other leg going numb.

Then she fell before her brothers, unable to move.

Gabe cried out as his sister was overcome and a handful of cartridges slipped onto the floor. Dread filled the pit of his stomach. He couldn't load her guns fast enough. There were too many. She was spent and he knew without her, they were dead.

Will finished loading his rifle. He saw his sister fall and a ghoul darted forward to grab her. It dug its nails into her flesh. The elder twin yelled and fired, sending it toppling into its brethren.

And then there was darkness.

The sudden sunset was jarring; the room became quiet as a tomb. Will and Gabe saw the glint of the creatures' eyes moving closer, illuminated by the soft green light of the medallion around Gabe's neck. Another ghoul pounced at Shana and Will shot it, but Gabe knew they were next. With all his being, he wished the creatures would go away and leave them alone. He clutched the medallion around his neck as he braced for the inevitable against his older brother.

A vibrating hum resonated from the medallion.

Gabe felt a tug on his chest then the emerald light turned bright red. A beam shot out from the amulet and the creatures standing over his sister vanished. More and more of the creatures became enthralled and headed into the beam, like moths to a flame. Their eyes showed no terror, only fascination, as they were vaporized by the ethereal light.

And in that terrible red brightness, Gabe and Will saw something worse than ghouls.

It was vaguely humanoid but hideous, with eyes glowing with angry hate. Black tendrils erupted from it, ripping and tearing at the undead, pulling them in and devouring them with a sickening crunch. As the brightness from the medallion began to fade, a second wraith-like shadow appeared, tearing its way through the swarm outside the house.

Gabe was frozen in fear. He knew the medallion was responsible for saving them, but could not bring himself to touch it, even when the light extinguished, in case he might be turned to ash too. The beasts he had summoned scythed their way through the hordes, sweeping the house clean before heading outside to seek more prey.

Gabe and Will were left alone in the room with their fallen sister.

The blackness was unsettling; the hissing, shrieking and swallowing noises outside went on relentlessly. Shaking with fear, Will stood up making Gabe jump.

"What are you doing?!" Gabe whispered in a panic, scared his brother would attract attention.

"I want to see if Shana is still..."

Will frowned and crawled toward their sister. On the way he noticed a lantern on the floor. He rummaged around in his pocket for a tindertwig, struck it and lit the lamp. A golden flame flickered to life, casting a soft light.

Will carried it toward Shana and then sighed, his lower lip trembling. She lay

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on the floor convulsing as white foam bubbled out her mouth and nose. Her eyes stared blankly at the ceiling; she couldn't breathe. Will had seen this before in Alkenstar when a neighbor of theirs had had an accident and stopped breathing, and he remembered what his father had done. He ran to the kitchen and brought back a reed drinking straw, then tilted Shana's head and guided it down his sister's throat. She drew in a faint, gurgling breath, followed by another, then her chest rattled with a choking gasp. Will bundled a torn cushion under her head and her breaths increased, each one deeper than the last.

Will and Gabe exchanged a worried look then huddled around Shana and the lantern, holding each of her hands as the sounds of horror continued into the night.



Shana awoke unable to open her eyes. A thick crust had built up along her eye lashes and she was forced to pick it away and blink several times before she could see. She was lying on the couch in the living room covered in a blanket. The walls were coated with drying, blackened blood and most of the furniture was torn to shreds or thrown haphazardly into the corners. Haziness loomed everywhere. She rubbed her face and felt clammy wetness; *a fever*. Her mouth was dry and a horrible taste lingered on her tongue.

She threw her coverings to the floor and tried to sit up, then shivered as she noticed her clothes were damp with sweat and there was a dull pain in her calf. A white rag was wrapped around it, and was covered in dark yellow stains. She carefully unwound the bandage. Underneath, the wound oozed foul, yellow droplets. Disgusted, she reached down to examine her leg for tenderness but was horrified to find that she no longer could feel any of her toes. Her skin was also taking on a sickening pale-green hue.

She looked behind the couch and saw Gabe and Will huddled together, asleep. Both held guns in their hands. She wondered how they had all survived. The last thing she remembered was being completely overrun. *Where had the ghouls gone?* She had slain over thirty of the creatures, but now they were nowhere to be seen. The blood on the walls didn't even stink as it had just the day before.

She shook her head and attempted to stand up but felt woozy and dropped back onto the couch. Her legs wobbled as she contemplated lifting herself once more. Determined, she stood again and balanced a moment, clutching the side of the couch.

"Will? Gabe? Wake up, boys," she called.

The twins jumped up with a start, as though waking from a nightmare.

"Sh-Shana? Are you okay?" the younger boy asked.

Shana saw the medallion around Gabe's neck. The green glow—which seemed so unnerving before—seemed warm and pleasant now, and she yearned to touch it. Her bitten leg supported her and she stepped forward with a hand outstretched. The charm was miraculous and had an irresistible quality that she couldn't place. A faint wail of desire slipped from her lips.

Gabe recognized the peculiar look on his sister's face; it was the same as the ghouls that had sought to kill them.

“Shana! *Shana!*” Gabe howled as the medallion grew brighter and brighter and the girl’s eyes grew dark. Gabe didn’t know what to do, so he ran to his bedroom as fast as he could.

Shana broke out of her trance, but still felt a deep longing to follow.

“You look horrible, Shana!”

She turned to face Will, feeling terribly cold. She stumbled and sat down, wrapping herself in the blanket. She stared at her brother, studying him until her senses returned.

“Where did the bodies go, Will? Why did they stop attacking us?”

Will swallowed. “The other shadow monsters appeared and killed them. It sounded horrible. They ate all the bodies.”

Shana looked around the room in awe. “What happened after that?”

Will paused. “When they were done, they came to your leg and licked the bite. I thought they were going to eat you, like the rest.”

Shana’s stomach churned and a mouthful of bile filled her throat. She spat it onto the floor. The disgust she felt inside sickened her, and she hesitated to consider what was happening to her.

“I think that bite is infected, Shana. Dad mentioned long ago about the things that—”

Shana slammed her fist into the couch. “I know! I know what he said!” A tear escaped her eye and her chin went tight as she bit her lip. She didn’t want to end up like those things. She wiped her cheek, put her head in her hands and inclined her ear toward a voice Will couldn’t hear. After a few minutes she frowned.

“How am I supposed to do that?” she yelled out, lifting her face and then clutching a pillow into her chest. “You don’t even know if that will work! Maybe they’re still out there, waiting.”

Will backed toward Gabe as he peered into the room through a broken doorway. Their sister smiled with her head down, her damp, wavy hair covering part of her face. A strange purple hue was creeping over her features as she continued.

“Yes, I hear them. You’re right, they’re far off.” She paused. “Yes, I feel weak but also... No I don’t—” another smile crossed Shana’s face, scaring Gabe, “I don’t want to talk about that.”

Her speech had an eerie cadence to it.

The younger twin slipped into the living room close to Will, avoiding the couch and sniffing as he looked at the medallion on his chest. Tears were beginning to stain the front of his shirt.

Shana turned as she felt him draw closer. “Come over here, boys. We need to have a talk.”

Her voice was commanding.

Together, Gabe and Will took a few tentative steps toward her, and she looked at Gabe’s amulet while Will moved around to the other side and sat.

“Hide that medallion.”

Gabe fumbled with the chain and tucked it under his shirt.

Shana’s eyes finally pulled away from him. “I’m infected with the disease these creatures carry. It’s changing me, but we can do something before it’s too late. I feel what they did. They came for the medallion, Gabe. They are drawn to

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it. I can't get the song out of my head, either. So Marmi says we should toss it out in the desert and let them have it. It's all they want."

Gabe cradled the medallion close against his skin. "This medallion is the only thing that saved us! It's the only thing protecting us from them! If we just throw it away—"

Shana stomped her foot and winced. "Look at my leg! Look at *me*! Do I look like I was well-protected? What if I turn into one of those things, Gabe? Would you rather I come for you and the medallion or head away into the desert chasing after it?"

Gabe sighed and a few more tears spilled down his cheeks.

"Give me Mom's guns," Shana demanded, holding out her hand.

The two boys looked to each other then grabbed the pistols and the satchel of ammo. Shana started loading the weapons. She pulled out a bandolier and threw it on then grabbed two ammo pouches.

"Now get your guns, boys. We're heading out right after we reset all the traps around the house, so it'll be safe to come back."

Shana grabbed a long piece of wood from a shattered high-back chair, using it as a crutch as the twins headed out to the garden and the morning light. The sunshine outside made Shana's eyes water. Everywhere she looked there were signs of struggle but no bodies. Not even the smell remained.

"How did they get the bodies from the netting?" Shana asked, looking up.

"They floated," Gabe exclaimed.

"Floated?"

"Yep, right through that hole those things had made."

Shana turned her attention to the shop, remembering the fuses Akane had shown her. She doubted she could do the work with the same finesse. She needed a plan to move them safely.

"Will?"

Her brother came and she motioned for him to help her to the barn as Gabe trailed behind. "Up there on the beam is a key," she pointed. "Take the ladder and grab it, then unlock this door and help me pull it back, okay?"

Will did as he was told, and unlocked the trapdoor. Together they heaved it aside revealing the pit with the charges and fuses. Shana looked around the barn and smiled, seeing what she was looking for just beyond the door, then held out her hand to Will, who took it and eased her down into the small dugout.

"Gabe?"

The younger twin wandered closer and Shana could feel the pull of his medallion even beneath his clothing. Her eyes rolled back into her head a little.

"Gabe...could you go get the wheelbarrow of earth from outside?"

"Okay," Gabe nodded and then went to find it.

Shana sighed as he withdrew. She looked at the reserves and assessed what she felt they needed, then handed the explosive components up to Will one by one. Her brother took note of how she handled the volatile instruments and set them down carefully. When she finished, he helped his sister climb back up.

Gabe returned quickly and Shana and Will loaded each piece into the wheelbarrow's dirt pile and went from pit to pit, resetting each trap. The work was

tiring, and Shana had to rest several times, but as she installed the last detonator, something in the pit caught her eye: a long, thick fuse went through a hole in the side of the pit in the direction of their house.

She climbed out of the last pit with Will's help, while Gabe pushed the wheelbarrow back to the barn. Remembering what her father had told her the day before, Shana followed the fuse's direction in her mind and headed for the front living room. A desk with an odd rug under it stood askew against one wall. Gabe returned and leaned in the doorway behind her.

"Help me move this," Shana said, trying to stay focused.

The two heaved and the desk slid off the carpet.

Will then moved the carpet aside, revealing that the wooden floorboard beneath it had been cut.

"Get me something to pry it up with," she requested, "and light a lantern for me, Will."

Gabe ran off and came back with a steel spit from the kitchen hearth as Will found and lit the lantern and set it on the floor beside them.

Shana stuck the pole between the grooves and popped the square of wood up, then lowered the lamp into the hole.

Charges and fuses ran every which way, just inches beneath their feet. One massive bundle fanned out from the house in all directions through small shafts cut into the earth. Shana presumed those fuses detonated in the pits covered with the steel plates. A second bundle led directly under the house. If they were lit, the entire structure would blow.

Shana sighed and bent on her hands and knees to study the system a little longer, then turned her attention to a dark tunnel that snaked off in a third direction and disappeared beyond the range of her lantern. *The escape route Father had mentioned.* She craned her neck a little further down and noted the path's general heading, comparing it to the landscape around the house.

"This hole leads to an escape tunnel that runs up the slope toward that rocky ridge and the stand of old dead trees," Shana pointed then coughed, feeling the terrible taste in her mouth again. She wobbled and sat heavily on the floor. Black veins were now visible beneath her skin, spreading from the wound in her calf.

Will and Gabe came closer and peered in the hole then Will looked their sister over with concern. She was paler than ever and her skin was clammy with sweat despite the building warmth of the day.

"Shana, you look real bad."

"I know... I feel bad, too."

"Gabe and I can help you back to the couch so you can rest," Will offered.

Shana shook her head. "No, I need a moment to think. Help me to the porch."

The twins placed their hands under each of Shana's arms and walked her out to the porch then retreated back into the house. Shana leaned on the railing and looked up at the sky. It was nearly midday. Somehow she felt sure that once the sun disappeared, something would happen at dusk.

"Marmi, I could really use your help right now," she called, as her voice quavered.

There was no reply.

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Shana sighed, wrapped her arms around her middle and started to cry. How could she continue? What was she supposed to do? Everything was moving so fast and she felt so awful, and so powerless. She gave herself a few minutes then sniffed. She had to be strong. She wiped her cheeks and a murky, black liquid streaked her fingertips. She swiped at her eyes with her sleeves, feeling disgusted by her own flesh.

She turned slowly and limped her way inside the house to address her twin brothers.

"They want the amulet, Gabe. They'll kill us all to get it. We have to toss it over the cliff in front of the house so they'll leave us alone."

Gabe looked down at his medallion, holding it against his chest. He pulled it over his head and held it out to her.

"No. We should all go..."

"Are you sure you can handle it?" Will asked.

Shana grabbed her makeshift crutch and nodded. Leaving the house again with her brothers in tow, she headed out beyond the safety of the picket fence to the edge of the cliff. The medallion sung a low, enthralling song that made her heart ache.

She swayed in rhythm as Gabe stepped forward and held it out into the open air, letting it dangle from the chain over the cliff side. Then with one last look to Shana, he let it slip from his fingers, while Will held her hand firmly in case she was tempted to follow it.

The siblings listened to the rattle of the chain and the clatter of the center piece as it bounced off the cliff face. Several hidden forms emerged from the boulders and shrubs on the canyon floor below. They shuffled in the direction of the medallion, kicking up dust as they went.

Shana closed her eyes, took two full breaths, and turned towards home but she stopped abruptly when she heard a mournful gasp behind her. Gabe rushed up to her sobbing.

The medallion was around his neck.

"Shana..." he moaned, his voice breaking.

Shana wheeled away from the alluring trinket, looking back to their yard and the garden landscape. She felt dizzy and nauseous, and stumbled towards it a few steps before collapsing to the dirt in shock.

"I don't know what else to do!" She picked up her wooden support and threw it. She just wanted to sleep. Chills ran down her body and she began to tremble.

"I'm changing into one of those things," she murmured. "I can't bear this. I have to get you boys safe. We have to get rid of that medallion, Gabe. They'll follow it. They'll come for you, wherever you hide."

"But... won't it protect me, like before?"

"We don't know for sure. So we find a way to get rid of it and then"—she glanced at the elder twin—"you'll have to finish me off, quick-like."

Will shook his head. "No. I'm not going to kill you, Sis... I can't!"

"I need you to do this for me. Once I'm like them...I won't be your sister anymore."

Will shook his head.

“Promise me.”

He walked a few steps and sunk to the ground.

“Please, Will.”

He looked to her with tears in his eyes and bit his lip. Then he nodded his head.

“Okay. Thank you.”

Gabe knelt and gave his sister a hug and she hugged him back with all the strength she could muster. She felt him sob again and tried to ignore the thrumming of the amulet between them.

“Alright now, I’ve been doing some thinking. Maybe we can go back to where you found the necklace, Gabe. If you leave it there, maybe it will stay behind.”

Gabe sniffed and shot a glance over to Will and Shana knew it had come from somewhere Gabe should not have been.

“Where did you find it?”

“I went out into the open desert a ways, to a place where a storm had flooded and washed away a bunch of the sand. It’s out beyond the house at the bottom of the trail...”

Shana clenched her teeth. If they went all the way down there into the canyon, they could be surrounded easily. The medallion lured the creatures like vultures to carrion. It was also a long trek. She couldn’t see herself making it all the way on one good leg.

“Let’s go back and get the wheelbarrow. We’ll gear up and go to this place.”

“But what if they—”

Shana hushed her youngest brother. “We’ll take as much ammo as we can carry.”

The boys looked at each other.

“You heard what I said, now help me up and let’s move! We’ll use the wheelbarrow to roll me down to the valley because I can’t walk far.”

Shana retrieved her crutch and they went back to the stead. She waited at the gate as Gabe loaded satchels with ammunition and Will went to find her chariot, concentrating on taking calm, deep breaths. It was getting harder to breathe.

Not yet. Please not yet, she thought. She grabbed the fence and listened to the wind chimes on the porch until the rattle of the wheelbarrow drew near.

Gabe came out of the house with the bags of ammunition and helped hold the wheelbarrow steady with Will as Shana climbed inside. She settled in, hugging her wooden support to her side and drew both her guns from their holsters, looking about for anything moving. Gabe placed an ammo satchel on her lap. With a grunt, Will lifted the handles and they set off.

Going down the hill was taxing. Will lost his footing and stumbled a few times. Once, he tripped and the wheelbarrow slipped from his grasp, bloodying his palms when he fell on the sharp rocks. Shana began to roll down the slope, but Gabe caught her and dug in his heels, bringing her to a stop. From then on, both boys traded duties of pushing their sister, taking careful steps. They continued along the road until the bottom of the canyon was in sight. Gabe pointed out into the open desert.

“It’s over there, not far from the path.”

Will put down the wheelbarrow and Shana stood up. She grabbed her walking

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stick and holstered her guns, and they walked out over the open wastes, following Gabe's directions, until they arrived at a broad depression in the sand. It appeared to be a wash, as her brother had said, where a lot of sand and rock had been swept out. Jutting from the remaining sand were bones from humans and other creatures that Shana could not identify.

"This wasn't here before," Shana said, her face reddening with heat and exertion. "What brought you to this place, Gabe?"

The boy paused for a moment. "Just...a feeling."

Shana looked back to the bones, wondering what feeling could lure her brother to such a place. It looked like a graveyard. Hundreds of forms lay twisted about, some still held swords and wore pieces of armor, but many of the skeletons were headless. She presumed the skulls had washed away.

"Which one did you take it from, Gabe?"

Gabe walked out to the middle of the bones where a lone figure rested, oddly intact and apart from the rest.

Shana nodded. "This was a battlefield. Father said that wars were fought here between the mages Nex and Geb, well after Geb started raising their dead. Entire armies like those things we fought drove Nex back."

She surveyed the landscape again, taking her hat off a moment and fanning herself with the brim. A mass of bones caught her eye and she jabbed at it with her stick, watching it crumble into a pile, vaguely humanoid but composed of extra limbs and ribs wrapped in desiccated leather.

"This was a flesh golem," she said. "These men were from Nex."

Will frowned. "But we are on Geb's side. At least that is what Father would—"

"It doesn't matter. Gabe, put that medallion back where you found it."

The boy took the chain off and laid it beneath a slightly-buried skull. Then he stepped back.

"Good. Now, we walk away."

Shana wiped her brow and hobbled back out of the wash. She tossed her stick away and withdrew both her guns. "Will, I'm going to have to lean on you. It is the only way I can keep my guns out and be ready for anything coming."

Will propped himself under her arm. She was sweaty and feverish, and the open desert wasn't helping.

Shana looked at Gabe. His eyes were glistening, and he held his hand over a bump under his shirt.

"It's back, Shana. I can't get rid of it!"

Shana sighed as her chin crinkled. She trembled and slipped from Will's shoulder and fell to her knees as her own tears began to flow. "Marmi, where are you when I need you?"

Will bent to rub Shana's back in reassurance, but then he heard a scuffling noise. "Something's coming!" He cocked his rifle and crouched behind a rock for cover.

Shana lifted her pistols and surveyed the area. A tiny figure with orange brown skin and a wide hat approached them from further up the valley. As he came closer, he raised his hand to wave.

"Hello, there!" he shouted. "My name is Alchemdaigle, and I am here to see

what all the booming in the canyon was about, as of late. I heard it last night and it got my mind wondering, so I decided to come investigate. Do you know what was responsible? If so I really—”

“Come no further, Mister Alchem-whatever. We’ve been through an awful lot and aren’t in any mood to indulge strange wanderers.” Shana aimed her two guns purposefully.

“Oh, uh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to scare anyone. I am actually an historian conducting research out in these wastes. Lots of history out here, you know. I represent an investigative branch at the Pathfinder Society. I am here to—”

“A Pathfinder?” Shana cocked the hammers of her guns back. She remembered her father saying that the man who had killed her mother called himself a Pathfinder too.

“I’m sorry. I... well, I am here to... Okay, let me explain. Hmm, well, maybe I should... Oh. I’m sorry, I’ll just be going.”

Shana watched the small man scurry away and both her brothers looked at her.

“He seemed friendly,” Will whispered.

“I thought so too,” Gabe added. “M-maybe he could help? He says he knows about history, like Pa.”

Shana thought a moment then winced as pain lanced through her leg. After all this activity, she was worn out and could no longer support herself. She stumbled then fell over as her leg buckled.

“Hey, mister!” Will called out, waving. “Our sister is hurt real bad. Can you help?”

The small man turned around and began running toward them.

“Yes, little boy, I will be right there.”

Will and Gabe laid Shana down, but the heat was becoming unbearable. Her skin went from hot to very cold. Will tried to shade and fan her as best he could with his own hat.

The small man came closer, and both boys were surprised to see he didn’t grow very much larger the closer he got. At only seven years old, Will and Gabe were still taller than he was. In addition, every detail of his intricate outfit was precise and scaled down in miniature to complement his stature. Gabe smirked with amusement.

“Oh my, she’s going to have a heat stroke unless we get her shaded and cool fast.” The small man threw his hat off, revealing dark blue hair. For a moment, the boys couldn’t stop staring.

“Okay, step back, you two. This is no time for gawking.” The small man opened up his pack, then frowned briefly, scratching his head as he looked inside. “Darn Wastes,” he grumbled. He gave the pack a few shakes and a firm kick. His frown quickly transformed and suddenly he produced a massive umbrella from the depths of the bag. It whooshed open, extending rapidly and towered almost twenty feet above their heads. Then he pulled out another folded object that was again impossibly longer than his bag. He tapped a corner of it and hopped back as it sputtered a puff of air and sprung up into an eight-foot-long table that was only about two feet tall.

“Wow, mister, are you a wizard or something?” Gabe gasped.

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Alchemdaigle ignored him. "If you could please place her on my table there, I can get to work."

Will and Gabe lifted Shana's limp body onto the table as *Harmony* and *Peace* slipped from her grasp. Gabe noticed her lips looked very dry and there was a slight bit of foam in the corners of her mouth.

Alchemdaigle worked meticulously, producing a broad shelf and a large metallic box from his wonderous bag. He affixed the shelf to the table ledge and sat the box on top of it, unlatching the lid to reveal flasks filled with liquids of many different colors. Reaching into a drawer, he pulled out a magnifying glass and then cleared his throat and moved to the head of the table.

"Hmm." He snapped his fingers over Shana's face and near her ears, but she did not react. "Hello, hello? Little human girl? Are you alright?" He opened one of her eyes and looked into it deeply with the glass.

"Did she ingest anything odd?"

Will cleared his throat. "She was bit by these things. She said they were undead."

Alchemdaigle frowned, pursing his lips. "Little boy, what's your name?" He pointed to the shorter twin.

"I'm Gabe."

"Okay, Gabe," he pointed, "go to my laboratory kit and hand me a flask the color of blueberries."

Gabe obeyed and Alchemdaigle uncorked the flask, pouring it over Shana's head. Immediately the girl coughed and breathed deeply, opening her eyes to see the small man above her. She tried to speak but couldn't.

"Now, now, don't try to thank me. I am just doing a good gnome's work here." He patted her shoulder and walked down beside her legs, where dark yellow was staining through her bandages. His eyebrows raised.

"Bitten, you said? By an undead? Bites from the living dead can lead to gangrene but this..." He sniffed her wound, making a face. "May I see?"

Shana nodded slightly and Alchemdaigle peeled off the bandage, revealing sickly, white skin weeping black pus from the bite.

"Great Desna!" he exclaimed with a twinge of fear. "I will need a sample of that right away." Without waiting for permission he took out a flat piece of glass and dabbed at the wound. Black pus wept onto the glass sheet. He ran to his bag and pulled out a short jeweler's eyepiece that had several extra lenses attached. He studied the fluid, adjusting the lenses and muttering under his breath. Then he grabbed a red bottle and dripped its liquid on the glass sheet. The black fluid evaporated in a swirl of red mist. Satisfied, he opened another drawer and withdrew a few more items and a purple flask.

He stepped back toward the head of the table. "Well, it looks like you have been bitten by one of the local...Gebbiters. A sad addition to the Western Ravage as of late. I burned a few while I was heading this way. I'm not used to seeing their kind skulking about in the daylight, though. Eat this, please." He handed her a leaf and Shana chewed it carefully and swallowed. A few moments after it hit her stomach, she leaned over the side of the table and wretched everything inside. Her vomit was completely black.

The small man winced. “Not so bad, is it, considering the alternative? You were about to turn, my little lady.”

Shana wiped black ooze from her cheek and chin. She couldn’t find the words to express how much the sight of that black foulness disgusted her... or how good it felt now that it was gone.

“Drink this next,” the gnome said, shaking the purple flask vigorously and eying its contents, then putting it in her hand.

Shana pulled the flask back and swallowed every bit. It tasted like mint and something else, something bitter and dry, but her whole body seemed to crave it. She tipped the flask over, letting the last drops touch her tongue. Before she closed her mouth, Alchemdaigle shoved a chunk of wood between her teeth.

“I won’t lie to you girl. This is—”

“Her name’s Shana, mister,” Will said, moving close to hold his sister’s hand.

“Well, that was a close call, Shana. I’ve never heard of anyone being pulled back from so close to the edge of death.” He snapped his fingers and straps sprung from the sides of the table, tying Shana’s feet, her waist, her arms and finally her head down to the surface.

“What are you doing?” Gabe asked.

“Precautions, young man. The next part won’t be pretty.”

The boys looked shocked but Shana turned her head to look at them, and they squeezed her hands in theirs.

“I’m sorry for what you are going to feel, Shana. This is going to be very painful. You’ll be unconscious for a while if this works right. I’ve been told it feels like a burning that will grow from your stomach to the rest of your body. You will feel like you are on fire. That’s just the concoction doing its work, curing you of this affliction. I’ve done all I can. We’d best be going. We will watch over you from nearby.”

The small man stepped away from the table and then started putting his instruments back. Soon all but the umbrella and the table were folded neatly back into his bag. Within a few minutes Shana began to moan through her clenched teeth. Then her moans turned to screaming as her body bucked on the table.

Will and Gabe paced anxiously. Alchemdaigle gave them a sympathetic smile. “I wish I could do this painlessly, boys, but what your sister had was no joking matter. I carry a vial of that stuff for just such an occasion, and Desna willing, it will work as it’s intended even in these twisted wastes. Why don’t you tell me more about yourselves while the treatment runs its unpleasant course.”

Shana felt the burning in her stomach and wanted to vomit, but knew that her belly was empty and she wanted to be as quiet as possible to not frighten the twins. The straps held the stick into her mouth so she couldn’t spit it out. Heat rose to her head and she almost believed a fire was roasting her from within. The pain escalated, becoming more and more unbearable. She closed her eyes and howled out a muted scream. *Perhaps death wouldn’t be so bad after all*, she thought.

Then the world went white.



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Shana awoke to Alchemdaigle standing above her, smiling. The straps were no longer restraining her and the piece of wood was gone from her mouth. Shana sat up and massaged her temple.

“Let me give you a little libation from my personal stash to clear away the last of the effects,” he offered, pulling out a green potion.

Shana drank it all and felt refreshed. Her head no longer throbbed and she felt like could stand once again. “Thank you so much!”

Will and Gabe hurried over and almost knocked her off the table as they wrapped her in a tight hug.

“It was nothing really, young lady,” he replied, “but please, allow me to properly introduce myself. My name is Alchemdaigle Solis. I came to this valley to search for a secret laboratory built by the great wizard, Nex, himself. I have talked to your brothers about your problem but have yet to explore those remains you yourselves were investigating. I intend to do a more thorough examination, but first I feel it is my duty to see you safely home—”

Shana shook her head. “No, no we can’t go back. We—that is, my brother—found an amulet with those bones...”

Alchemdaigle’s blue eyebrows perked up. “An amulet? May I see?”

Gabe pulled the medallion from under his shirt. In the light of day it seemed no more extraordinary than any other piece of junky jewelry. Shana was relieved to feel no compulsion to snatch the amulet from Gabe’s hand.

Alchemdaigle rolled the item over his fingers, examining it with pursed lips. Finally he spoke. “Curious. Most curious. A piece of sorcery, to be sure. May I hang onto this?”

Gabe paled and stared at his feet. “I’d like to but—”

“The ghouls are after it,” Shana explained. “They feel drawn to it and will follow and kill anyone who has it. I...heard a song when I was changing, urging me to take it.”

Alchemdaigle looked up as though expecting to see undead pounce at them from the dunes. “So why not throw it away?”

“We tried,” Shana said. “Gabe dropped it off a cliff, but it just came back to him. And we came here, where he found it, hoping—”

“—that it would stay put,” Alchemdaigle finished, nodding. “Very strange. Hmm. Well then, against my better judgment, I think it’s best you remain with me. You’ll be safe. I don’t look it, but I’m equipped to handle undead. Though, from the look of your pistols, I’d say you were, as well.”

Their mother’s pistols sat on a soft cloth spread at the foot of the table.

“Those are a remarkable pair of firearms, miss,” Alchemdaigle said, “Unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. You can use them, of course?”

“She’s the best shot in the world,” Will piped in. “She put a lot of bullets right between those monsters’ eyes!”

The gnome smiled broadly and bowed. “Then perhaps we can discover a means to be rid of the amulet and find Nex’s hidden laboratory together. It will be just a moment while I pack.”

Alchemdaigle began tapping his equipment with the back of his finger, causing the pieces to fold themselves shut and dive into his backpack. Shana caressed her

mother's pistols and picked them up, holstering them with practiced ease. Her limbs were moving normally again and she felt confident she could shoot a bottle off a ghoul's head at a hundred paces.

Alchemdaigle collapsed the table behind her, placing it in his pack. Then he slung his bag over his shoulders and walked over to the twins who sat on two rocks, waiting to move out. "Thank you for the chat while your sister was unconscious. You have me really excited to see what is just over this small ridge."

Gabe nodded as Will checked over his rifle. "Thank you, Mister Solis, for saving her," Will said.

They walked together to the edge of the boneyard. Shana pointed to the lone figure interred in the middle. Alchemdaigle sprung forward, sliding down the sandy slope and Shana and her brothers rushed behind him, trying to keep up. When he reached the solitary skeleton, the gnomish historian stood there for a moment with his mouth agape. Shana walked quietly up to him, as the small man took off his hat. Tears shone in his eyes and he had to swallow a lump in his throat.

"This... this can't be. One of greatest mysteries ever sought and you found the answer... out here? Just, sitting in the sand near an old farmstead?" He placed his pack down and dug out his eyepiece and a brush. He began to whisk sand away from the bones.

"What is it?" Shana asked.

"Well, I don't want to jump to conclusions...but I am certain that these bones are... Well, maybe it's best not say at this moment." Alchemdaigle brushed away more sand and dirt until a wooden shaft began to appear. He turned to his pack, revealing a gnome-sized shovel then began to dig around the corpse, giving it a wide berth so as not to disturb it. He donned a pair of large-lensed goggles and Shana giggled to herself; his eyes looked huge and lizard-like. The gnome pulled out a book and flipped through its pages, comparing several drawings of people to the skeleton in front of him. On each page there were lines drawn from certain parts of the sketches to hand-written notes on the margins. Leaving the Pathfinder to his work, Shana went to sit with her brothers and keep watch as the sun moved across the sky.



It was late afternoon when the busy gnome suddenly gasped.

"Are you alright, Mister Solis?" Will inquired, pulling the barrel of his rifle up.

"Ahem, well, my boy, I couldn't be better!" The gnome continued to brush around the bones. The skeleton was exposed all the way to its feet now, and Shana could see that it was in a kneeling position, as if in prayer. Its right hand clutched a long staff while the other was clutched at its chest—in the same spot Gabe's amulet would have sat.

Shana observed the other bones around the area where she stood. They were a jumbled mess. "Why didn't this person's bones mix up like these others?"

"It would appear he was buried right after he fell. The flash-flood seems to have swept the others aside into the chaos around us. Lucky for us this one is completely intact. Quite miraculous, really."

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Shana smirked. "How do you know it's a he?"

"Because, my dear lady, I have identified him."

Shana was impressed. The gnome seemed confident about his skills and his lore.

"The small necklace still around his neck came from the princess, Amara as a gift to beguile this man's heart and win his love. And he did love her truly too. She was murdered because of his rival's wish to hurt him. After that he wore the necklace wherever he went, even when courting other women that fancied him. It was the one thing he would never part with."

Gabe shuddered. "But what kind of man does such a thing; kill an innocent person to harm another? What was his name?"

"The rival's name was Geb, and this man was called Nex."

Shana blinked, convinced she'd misheard him. "No. You can't be right. Our father told us tales of this man. He was powerful, immortal. That means he lives forever. The country to the north is named after him."

"I know, but that is part of why I am here. Many of my historically-inclined peers presume Nex left this world after Geb's attack on Quantum. But Nex was not one to sustain such a blow and flee. He too had been working on something equally as frightening as Geb's undead army. From what you told me about the medallion, I suspect that Nex made it into a weapon. I've been hunting for Nex's secret laboratory for years on behalf of the Pathfinder Society. I have combed the wastes and fought their lingering denizens, looking for answers. This find before us is my whole life's work wrapped up in one neat package. I never expected it to happen like this..."

Alchemdaigle laughed, a delightful, giddy sound. He went to his pack and brought back a rolled bundle of soft leather. He opened the package and began to transfer all the bones and ornaments into it. When everything was removed from the sand, he folded and tied the bundle before placing it in his bag, grabbing the staff last and lowering it down in next to the umbrella. He scraped the sediment from where the bones had laid and placed it into a glass flask and tucked it away. With a tap to his pack, the makeshift laboratory packed itself away.

"It will be getting dark soon, children, and I would like us to seek shelter. Would it be alright if I stayed in your home for the night? Your brothers tell me it has been a secure place until lately. Maybe it will be so for tonight."

Shana nodded. "Of course, you would be welcome."

"Shana's a good cook," Will said.

"For a girl," Gabe added, and the twins grinned at each other and began heading back toward the ridge.

Shana made a face at them, but inside she was relieved. It was almost like the ghouls had never attacked them at all.



"Oho!" Alchemdaigle crooned. "Your brothers didn't lie about your baking skills." He gave his stomach a satisfied pat. "Given the portions humans cook up, I'll have to watch myself, though I will have to partake in another muffin before

this meal is done.”

Shana smiled, placing the tray on the table. “Help yourself. We have plenty of cornmeal to last ‘til Father gets home.”

Outside, Will sat guard on the porch as the sun descended toward dusk. He kept his rifle in his lap and nibbled on the corner of his sister’s bread. Gabe, on the other hand, had gone to sleep on the couch shortly after they had returned. Will would wake him for his turn when the time came. *If* it came.

“Will?” Shana called. “Go and fetch some more water would you? I want to clean these walls.

Will glanced back at the blood stains that covered their home. Without a word he stood and headed for the well.

Alchemdaigle stuffed a third muffin into his pocket and headed to the makeshift laboratory table he had set up in the living room. The bones and adornments he’d gathered lay spread on the soft leather roll, and he already had a few samples in flasks, waiting for the chemicals within to yield their results. He cleaned his hands, then delicately lifted the necklace from the table with his gloved fingers and marveled at it.

“*Amara’s gift*,” he said, as much to himself as his young hosts. “I must have seen it dozens of times in as many books. A keepsake that carried more weight with Nex than any other artifact the ancient wizard possessed. Items of power can be pilfered and used for another wizard’s ends. But this was an item of love. A power, some would say, far greater than magic.”

“My dear Nex, what were you doing out there, so deep in Geb’s territory?” The gnome ran his hand across the bare skull. Then a ringing bell went off near his work. “Oho!” The gnome shut off the alarm and he pulled out an odd chart as Shana leaned over his shoulder to look. He compared the colors of several flasks, matching them up appropriately on the diagram. Then he went to his desk, pulled out a book and began scribbling numbers and plotting graphs with a quill that didn’t seem to need ink.

“What are you doing?” Shana asked.

“I am convinced of the identity of this person before us, but to persuade my fellows, I must be certain beyond doubt. This is the discovery of a lifetime, and there could be many that wish to discredit me. Even *Amara’s gift* could be forged—as I said the item is well-known and documented. Fortunately, I have prepared so that, when the time came, I could be the man to properly identify such a person. I trained in Quantum under the expert, Courtis Lil—”

Shana laughed. “Oh, I understand *that*. What I wanted to know was what you are trying to figure out in that book.”

Alchemdaigle blushed. “Oh, I’m sorry. I get so—”

—carried away?” Shana finished, with a smile.

“Yes, I have a propensity for getting rather involved in what I am doing. It is a kind of weakness or fault of mine, really. I get so enraptured in details, I could go on about the slightest thing for hours and forget entirely what—”

“Um, the book?” Shana prompted.

“Oh, yes! Of course.” The gnome laughed. “What I am attempting to do here is to calculate when this body, er, this person met his end. If I can narrow down

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the time period, I'll be able to figure out if it coincides with the timing of Nex's reported disappearance, after Geb's attack on Quantum. Now, I know what you're thinking, but as far as him being immortal, I think history has a tendency to exaggerate here and there. He may not have aged naturally, but nothing I've read ever said he couldn't die. Look at Aroden: he was a god! Folks thought he was immortal, too. Not so much now, though."

Shana nodded, noting the gnome's somber tone. "You're right about that."

"Just another moment here, and I will have the answer to my calculation."

Leaving him to his work, Shana stepped away and gazed out the windows to the garden. The sun was setting, but even through the glare she saw a form standing in the garden. She blinked a few times, trying to focus on it, then went to the front door. Will was just coming up the steps with two buckets of water, the rifle slung on his back.

"Everything alright?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Go on inside and wake Gabe. Get him to help clean up." She headed out into the tattered remains of the vegetable patch.

"Where *were* you?" Shana hissed at the figure, trying to keep her voice down so Alchemdaigle didn't hear her.

She listened to the silence, then said, "I wasn't myself, I guess. What do I do next?" She closed her eyes and took a few long breaths.

"Yes, I do. I think he wishes the best for us. I barely know him really, but he saved me and took care of the boys, so I trust him."

Shana listened and then walked around the garden towards the cliffs. Floating lights were moving up the road and she felt a surge of dread in her belly.

"What are they?"

Shana started breathing harder. She nodded her head to every word she heard.

"Thank you, Marmi!" She ran up the porch and into the house. Will was sitting with Gabe, who was blinking sleep from his eyes.

"Oh, there you are!" Alchemdaigle said. "Well, it's quite conclusive, lass. This man died around 577 A.R., give or take a few years. That puts these remains right during the time—"

"Something's coming," Shana interrupted. "Something from down in the canyon. We better get ready for an attack!"

Gabe reached for his amulet. It was once again pulsing red beneath his shirt.

"Oh my, that would be very unsavory," the gnome said. He put down his work and rolled up the bones and ornaments, tucking them away in his pack. Then he withdrew a bandolier ringed with several colored vials. He put it over his shoulder and tied a section of it around his waist.

"You sure like potions," Gabe said.

"They're handy at times like these. They can put a few things in their place." The gnome pulled out the long staff they had found out in the desert with the bones. He handled it firmly and spoke a few words, focusing intently on its shape. Suddenly, the staff began to shrink until it appeared as if it had been custom made for him.

"I might be crazy, attempting to use this thing. Its powers will be unpredictable. I guess we just have to hope it looks intimidating enough to show whatever is

coming that we mean business.”

Shana checked *Peace* and *Harmony*, spinning the chambers once each to make sure they were full. “Okay, let’s see what this thing wants,” she said, and she walked out the door.

Alchemdaigle and the twins followed her outside. The four walked together to stand in the yard as a wispy figure neared.

“Take out that medallion, Gabe,” Shana whispered. “Marmi says this creature is coming for it; let’s hope that the red light will destroy it like all the others.”

Alchemdaigle perked up an eyebrow. “Marmi? Who is Marmi?”

The vaporous being came fully into view and the medallion exposed around Gabe’s neck began to pulse more brightly. The entity drifted closer, passing through the booby-trapped yard unimpeded. Realizing their defenses could not touch it, it surged forward with sinister zeal, surrounding the four companions with smoky tendrils then jerking them back as the pulsating light from Gabe’s medallion touched it. Hesitating, the entity hovered over the traps and came no closer.

“We wa-a-a-nt Nex’s-s-s meda-a-llio-o-n. Gi-i-i-ve it to us-s-s.” Its words were like blades skidding across ice.

Shana strode forward and looked up into the entity’s face. “You can’t have it. The person wearing it cannot remove it. It returns to him whenever he has tried. We even threw it off the cliff, but it always ends up back around his neck.”

The frightful being hovered in contemplation and Shana wasn’t sure it had understood. Then it spoke again. “You must ki-i-i-ll the bo-o-o-y. Bring him to the Lo-o-o-rd of the Wa-a-a-stes at the ba-a-a-se of this mou-u-u-ntain at sunri-i-i-se. Otherwi-i-i-se, you all wi-i-i-ll di-i-i-e.”

The spirit turned and drifted away, and the light from Gabe’s amulet slowly went out.

Shana eased the hammers of her guns back into place.

Alchemdaigle blinked, as if coming out of a trance. “Well, negotiations went smooth. No one is dead. Now we just need to make a plan.”

The four walked back into the house and sat down on the couch.

“Mister Solis, do you think there is a way we can beat this thing before it kills us?”

The gnome thought for a moment and opened his mouth, but closed it again. He grimaced and stared at his hands, remaining quiet and solemn for a while before muttering something in a foreign language.

“Nothing?” she probed, as she saw Will bite his lip.

The blue-haired gnome sighed. “Well, I... suspect... there is a piece of Nex’s crux imbedded in the amulet that your brother wears.”

“What? A crux?” Shana remembered the obscure word from her father’s history lessons.

“Yes, the crux is the demiplane that Nex supposedly found; a place beyond this world in a dimension that is limited in scope, but holds tremendous power for one that knows how to wield it. Nex called that place his *crux*. With the crux, he did fantastic things. Some speculate that what he found was actually something greater than a demiplane; a place within his very own spirit—his very soul—

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where he could actually escape and harness unimaginable power.”

Alchemdaigle’s green eyes sparkled. “Quite literally, children, he could, er, burn his life force from both ends: use his magic to *fuel* his magic. Now, if this medallion indeed has access to Nex’s crux, I have no doubt that a piece of Nex’s soul may also reside within. You see, Nex was a powerful wizard and I don’t believe for a second that he would allow his life to end in such a mundane fashion. Not without some kind of plan to bring himself back! This medallion may hold Nex’s essence, though his body is reduced to bone. If I could just have some time with Gabe, I might be able to conduct a few experiments on the amulet to see if my theories are true. And maybe, just maybe, I can coax it to do something that’ll help us.”

Shana had no idea what he’d said, but she smiled and agreed nonetheless. She had no objection to the gnome’s idea, if it didn’t hurt Gabe and he found a way out of their troubles.

“Good,” Alchemdaigle nodded. “Well, we’ll have to take a chance that ‘Mister Ghost’ was sincere about his proposal, and keep holed up here until sunrise. I can go long hours without sleep but you three appear a few shades bleached. You should all rest. I’ll just brew me a flask of Mwangi Express before sunup. Gabe will need to stay near me, since I don’t want his amulet disappearing every few seconds back into the next room. If everyone doesn’t mind helping, we can bring that couch over to my examining table.”

The children moved the sofa into place. Then Shana put Will to bed and moved outside to the porch so she wouldn’t disturb Gabe. She leaned on the railing and looked at the garden. She almost didn’t notice when Alchemdaigle stepped out onto the porch behind her. He pulled out a pipe stuffed with tobacco, lit the dried leaves with a tindertwig and puffed away.

“You seem like quite an extraordinary young woman, miss Shana. You walked up to that thing without even flinching.”

Shana smiled. “Well, I have a friend, you know? She’s invisible to everyone else, but I see her and we talk together.”

“Are you sure she’s real? I saw you talking to the garden when you were alone. Your brothers seem to accept it, so that’s good enough for me, but—”

The girl scoffed. “I don’t care what others might say; she kept us alive last night! She told me something was going to attack our house. She watches over my brothers and me.”

“And she’s called Marmi, right?”

“She’s real. I’m not crazy...”

“Not at all. I believe you may have powers beyond using those two pistols you carry.”

Shana smiled. “These were my mother’s guns, once. Someone killed her for them. A Pathfinder, or so he said.”

Alchemdaigle grimaced and they fell silent again.

Shana breathed in the scent of burning tobacco and thought of her father, probably already in Alkenstar city. He might as well be in that crux Alchemdaigle mentioned; he felt so far away.

When the gnome spoke again there was a quiet seriousness to his voice. “Aren’t

you afraid someone might do the same to you one day? Kill you for your pistols?”
“No, not as long Marmi is around. She always has my back. She’ll see them coming.”

“And what if Marmi goes away?”

“Then I hang them up. Or my dad will sell them.” Shana studied the blue-haired man. “Why? Do you want them?”

The gnome shook his head. “I knew someone like you once. She had a gift similar to the one you have with Marmi. She never questioned it, always relied on it. She was so certain that it wouldn’t fail her.”

“Did it?”

“Yes. I was with her and some others. We were exploring a...a terrible place. We had to move fast but no direction was certain. We all agreed to go in a particular direction, but my friend refused. She wanted to wait until her ‘other friend’ told her what to do. The rest of us ran. She was so certain... I think...I think that letting someone else do the thinking for you, real or not, is never a good idea.”

Shana shook her head. “Mister, I think I am done talking for now.” She turned to walk inside but Alchemdaigle grabbed her hand.

“Shana, listen to me. I think I know a way out of this. We’ll need a plan we all agree on, and you and your pistols are much too valuable to waste listening to the whims of ghosts.”

“I’ll do what I have to, Mister Solis. Marmi is the reason I’m still alive. If she tells me to do something wrong and I die, then I guess it’s because she gambled wrong. But my life has been in her hands from the moment she saved it. Now, can I be excused?”

Alchemdaigle frowned, but nodded and released her.

When Shana was gone he dashed the ashes from his pipe and looked out at the empty air. “But what will be your excuse, Marmi? What will you say when you let her down?”

He went inside and saw Gabe was already fast asleep. The young boy had pulled the medallion from under his shirt and it rested on his narrow chest. Shana watched through a crack in her bedroom door as Alchemdaigle popped out a small table and slipped it over Gabe. He took out his spectacles and began to study the center of the medal with his magnifying glass, then started taking books out of his portable cupboard. After studying them for a time he took out the leather roll and laid out the bones of Nex on the table. He flipped through several pages and muttered softly to himself, one hand on the amulet.

Shana closed the door. It had been a very trying and dirty few days. Her mind wandered as she remembered the times when she’d had no problem sleeping dirty in her bed, after days of planting or harvesting with her family in the garden. She was as exhausted now as she was then, but somehow the grit felt worse than it ever had farming vegetables.

Shana pulled the blankets over her and tried to ignore the gritty feeling. Her father would be sure to scold her in the morning, she thought.

And then she rested.

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"It's time for you to wake up, lass." Alchemdaigle's voice was loud through the door. Shana bolted upright in a daze and lurched toward her pistols until she found her bearings.

"Hu... What? They're here? How long?"

The gnome opened the door a crack. "Easy, Shana. We have about an hour before sunrise. Nothing is happening. Your brothers are awake and I've made a remarkable discovery with the amulet."

Shana sat up in her bed and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "I'll be out in a second. Thank you, Mister Solis."

"You're welcome." He chuckled and shut the door. Shana pulled out fresh clothes from her dresser and changed, then slung her pistols around her waist.

She could smell cooked eggs and cornmeal fritters. Gabe, Will and Alchemdaigle were sitting at the table.

"I just put your meal down for you. Unfortunately there was no bacon in your larder." The gnome explained.

"Father planned to bring back some smoked shanks. Thank you for making breakfast."

"Yeah, thank you," Will said, echoed by his brother.

Alchemdaigle smiled. "I am happy to be of service. Six years of research and field work and I now have my answer! It would seem our paths have crossed to our mutual benefit. Desna's hand is most certainly at work here."

Shana finished her plate and then cleared her throat to speak.

"This may excite you, Mister Solis, but it's terrifying to us. They—whatever they are—want my brother dead." She looked at the twins then back to the researcher. "I'm sorry, but I don't feel as optimistic as you do." Shana shook her head and a few tears slipped down her cheeks.

Alchemdaigle sighed. "I understand your concerns, so I will get to the point: I have coaxed this medallion into functioning as a compass. When it is laid flat on Gabe's palm, it will position its point in the direction it wants to go. If we follow along, I believe it will lead us to the place it was created. Once there, I hope we can get rid of it... or at least, convince it to abandon young Gabe."

"What is this place you think it wants to go?" Gabe asked.

"I have been looking for it for a long time, my boy. I believe it is a secret forge that Nex built using his crux. I think it is where that medallion there was created. The amulet seems to want to be somewhere that isn't here. Something must be pulling it. We just need to find out where that place is."

Shana closed her eyes. "But how? They're probably out there right now, waiting for us. Who knows how many there are!"

"There now, lass. I know you aren't without your own tricks. What were all those booms I heard the other day? Are there any more where they came from?"

Shana gave a long sigh. "We have twelve pits with bombs in them, each have a metal plate that will shoot straight up in the air if we light the master fuses from the house. I think they are designed to explode upward, all at once. I don't fully understand why we need them because we have barbed netting over the house that provides protection from above. We also have the whole house wired with fuses

that if lit, will blow the whole thing up. I think Father intended for those fuses to take time to burn because he created an escape tunnel under the house. It goes up the slope a ways, probably to those old dead trees on the ridge overlooking the house.”

Alchemdaigle considered Shana’s words a moment. It was plain enough for him to understand and his mind began to reel at the possibilities.

“You know, the reason I’m ideally suited for these situations is because I have the right tools for the job. If we can get away from all the commotion and back to the canyon floor, just maybe we can...hmm... Yes, I think I’ve got it!”

Shana looked out the window and shook her head. The sun was rising.

“Okay Mister Solis, let’s hear your plan then.”

The gnome’s green eyes twinkled. “Here is what we are going to do...”



Shana walked to the edge of the cliff and looked out over the bluff at the valley below. A huge force of ghouls, sickly-looking gnolls and deformed giants had gathered. There had to be hundreds. It was hard to believe the valley had been vacant only hours.

“Look! There’s something in the sky too!” Alchemdaigle pointed.

Shana followed the gnome’s outstretched arm to a large blur on the horizon. Her heart skipped a beat; it looked like a dragon. Or at least it had been, once. Its ivory-colored bones were swathed and stitched with a patchwork of skin and cloth that allowed it to fly. On its back was a rider in tattered clothes.

“We need to prepare ourselves for an attack from the air.” Alchemdaigle said.

Shana looked toward the house at Gabe and Will, nodding her head. The twins ducked under the front porch windows.

The gnome’s hands clutched a pair of flasks from his bandolier and he flicked at their wax-sealed corks, watching the skeletal dragon descend towards them into the valley. Shana pulled out her guns and gave the cylinders each a quick spin, checking their chambers. The massive bone dragon swept low out of the sky and pulled up before the assembled forces, landing with several creaks as its bare joints scraped together.

The figure leapt from its back, never taking its gaze from Shana and Alchemdaigle. It was skeletal too and it opened its jaws wide and its voice carried across the entire basin.

“Bring me the slain boy!”

Alchemdaigle eyed Shana. “You ever shot at a lich before, little lady?”

“Nope, Mister Solis, I haven’t, but I reckon I will today.” Shana squinted and aimed as the leader stood before his army. She could see that the lich’s glowing eyes were rubies, set into its eye sockets like macabre jewelry.

There was a pop from *Harmony* and the lich’s head flew back. It grabbed at its face, weaving and shaking its skeletal head at the empty air as if trying to snatch an annoying bug. Shana thought it odd how human the creature’s reaction was. When it recovered, she could see that one of its eye sockets was empty. It stared up at her and threw red shards of crystal to the ground.

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She aimed and fired again, imagining the second ruby was a bottle set on the old log her Father used for target practice. The lich let out a dry, raspy scream as the ruby shattered, and the bullet blew shards of jewel and bone out the back of its skull.

“Come slay him yourself, you filthy cowards!” Shana screamed. She kept the barrel of her pistol trained on the lich as its howl echoed throughout the cliffs, shaking the forces below as they cringed in terror.

Shana smiled in satisfaction. “This thing isn’t so bright.”

She looked to Alchemdaigle and noticed he was shrinking away from the scene, trembling in fear. Shana reached over and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Alchemdaigle, this will work. I know it will.”

The gnome took a few deep breaths and slowly recovered. “I hope you are right, girlie. But I want you to know, lichs possess a great deal of supernatural power. Your bullets irritated it, to be sure, but they will not affect its magic much.”

Shana nodded. “I just wanted to send it a message that we’re not afraid of it. Even if we are.”

The angry leader waved its arms and all the creatures below began running up the road toward the stead. Evidently, the lich could still see. Shana nodded to Alchemdaigle. The gnome steeled himself and the two hurried back into the house.

The lich mounted his bone dragon and it leapt into the air. It hovered over the battlefield, kicking up clouds of dust towards the house, but Shana could see the army of ghouls and twisted monsters rushing up the road towards them. With a silent gesture the lich sent them forward.

All manner of traps went off as the army advanced, rocking the cliff with explosive blasts. Gunshots rained down on the ghouls from the house’s windows.

But it was four against a legion.

Within moments the horde had overrun the defenses and was swarming the building, pounding on the boarded windows and doors.

“Burn the house!” the lich roared as it directed its mount down toward the roof.

A pair of gnolls rushed forward. They splashed barrels of oil across the front porch, dousing many ghouls as well and then ignited the fuel with torches. As the smoke began to rise, the lich’s dragon alighted on the steel netting above the house, unhindered by the scraping barbs. It began to rip and tear at the mesh with its claws and teeth, exposing the roof below.

Suddenly, a deafening boom thundered from beneath them, blasting the wire mesh loose from all sides as metal plates shot up into the air lifting it like a gigantic snare. The barbed metal net wrapped around the bone dragon, crushing its wings against its body and shredding the taut fabric that kept it aloft. The creature roared in frustration and thrashed frantically, but it was no use. Together, rider and mount crashed into the house below.

Bones splintered and flew everywhere.

The dragon continued to struggle but there was little left of it; two legs had snapped free, its wings had shattered and its skull was caved in. The lich freed itself from its useless mount and left it to its fate, stepping down the wreckage and onto the wall of ghouls pressing against the burning house. With a wave of its

hand, it directed the ghouls to focus on the door, ripping it free of its hinges. The lich swept into the living room, ready to rip the fleshlings apart.

The house, however, was empty.

The lich turned its skull left and right, looking for hiding places. Its gaze fell on a section of floor where a desk had recently been shoved aside, revealing a trap door. It pulled the door open and stuck its head into the darkened space.

There were no fleshlings cowering beneath it. Instead, a line of fuses burned with a soft hiss towards a cluster of bound kegs. A wooden staff sat on top of the barrels, its magical aura flickering haphazardly in the lich's sight.

The lich threw back its head and screamed.

The explosion rocked the side of the cliff and a massive plume of smoke, ash and debris rose up. Bone fragments rained down over the obliterated garden. Nothing was left.

Hidden among the stand of trees near the escape tunnel's exit, Shana held her brothers close, but Alchemdaigle poked his head around a large boulder to survey the damage to the house below.

"Desna cries from the heavens!" he whispered. Fiery embers landed all about them but most were deflected by the decaying canopy. The trees began to crackle as flames caught amongst the driest branches and spread from limb to limb.

The gnomish researcher took out a pink-colored potion and dabbed it generously on the twins, Shana and finally, himself, then put the empty vial back in a side pouch of his rucksack. Within moments the four of them felt their skin humming and prickling.

And then they disappeared.

"I thought magic didn't work out here in the wastes?" Shana asked, mystified.

"Well, lass, that's not entirely true. It can be unpredictable however, but one can mitigate some of this effect by planning ahead. Many of my potions were manufactured before I came into the Wastes. I also keep them in a protective lead box during my stay out here. Most of their magic is contained within the flask, but the longer they are exposed to the environment, the more corrupted and volatile they become. So we never know what we're going to get for sure. We should move fast!"

"Okay, down the path we go and be careful, everyone," Shana directed. "Stay to the left and we will make it through whatever remains of their force."

She led the way and the group held hands to keep from being separated. They joined up with the main trail and headed into the valley. A few creatures stumbled about, but they seemed slow to focus without a leader to command them. Even with the lure of the medallion drawing the attention of a few stragglers, Shana found it fairly easy to eliminate their pursuers with a well-placed shot.

When the party of four made it beyond the dunes they knew they were safe. Looking behind, they could see the lingering mushroom-shaped cloud and smoldering fires where their house had once sat. The invisibility potion's effects ended not long after clearing the cliffs, but by then they were far beyond sight of any remaining ghouls. Gabe's compass-amulet led them northward, out into the open desert.

When the smoke from the homestead was far in the distance, long fingers of

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clouds began rolling toward them. Soon the sky blackened, blocking out the sun. Shana shivered and looked to Alchemdaigle.

“A shroud to be sure!” The gnome cursed. “Without sunlight the creatures of night can pursue us as well as those beyond death. We must hurry!” He pulled a few light blue potions out of his pack and handed them to everyone. “Drink up and they should help you run like the wind.”

The entire party swallowed the liquid down. It tasted crisp to Shana, as though she had taken a sudden, invigorating breath of fresh air. She felt a warm flush through her muscles and they began to race across the desert, elated by the feeling of running faster than they’d ever ran before. Yet, even at their increased pace, the darkened sky seemed to keep pace.

Will let out a shout. Shana saw him stumble as his legs began to sink into the sands. “It’s a sinkhole!”

Alchemdaigle, Shana and Gabe formed a chain of arms and reached to retrieve the older boy, but as they wrenched him free from the swallowing sands, a set of pointed pincers emerged from deeper still and began sweeping the ground, shifting the sand beneath their feet so they slid towards a gaping mouth.

Alchemdaigle wriggled and slid one strap of his bag from his shoulder to procure an explosive flask, but a tremor jolted the pack from his grasp and the hungry jaws snapped it up. His face fell in horror as his pack and all its possessions were mindlessly ingested. Shana drew her pistols and aimed for the center of the creature, letting it pull her forward.

The creature’s head reared up as she neared. Shana squinted and aimed, then fired with both guns, making a crater where she thought the thing’s brain resided. Its head recoiled, and a horrible shriek escaped before it fell lifeless before her, its seven-foot mandibles dangling near her throat.

Shana scrambled back out of the hole with the others as a fire erupted in the beast’s mouth, a sputtering and multi-colored flame that stank of Alchemdaigle’s various chemicals. When they reached the surface, the gnome looked into the pit in a horrified stupor.

“Th-th-that was my proof!” he stuttered. “Amara’s gift... The remains of Nex himself! All for nothing now. Gone! No one will ever believe it!”

Shana put her hand out to Alchemdaigle, “We do. Remember the crux! You can still prove you found Nex! But let’s get going. We aren’t sure how much longer these potions will work, and we need to get out of here alive to share what we found!”

The sky grew darker as they continued on their way north. Mountains began to rise up in the distance and Shana worried they were heading towards a dead end.

“How much further?” Shana huffed.

Alchemdaigle halted and took out a smaller, mundane compass from around his neck. He was winded, and without his pack, he seemed to be dragging behind and losing his spirit. “We’re still on the right heading. I think the mountains are about twelve miles ahead.”

They ran for what felt like hours. One by one their wind-like abilities abated and an odd series of horns began bellowing from the south. Upon reaching a rise they looked back to the darkened horizon. Beneath the clouds they saw a long line

of formations. Shana's heart sank in disbelief.

It was a huge army—thousands of creatures—all swarming, marching and even flying about in pursuit. Many carried the long black and silver banner of the nation of Geb.

Alchemdaigle dug through his pockets, muttering something angry under his breath, and gave a somewhat melancholy sigh as he produced his jeweler's eyepiece. He adjusted the lenses and put the device to his eye, gasped and let the loupe fall.

"By the gods..." he squeaked.

Shana managed to catch the device and peeked through the glass.

In the center of the force was a large dais, carried by what looked like hundreds of shuffling zombies. Upon a veiled throne sat a kingly figure that seemed more vapor than flesh, a swirling, ghostly mist that glowed faintly. To her shock the spectral king looked up at that moment. Shana swore he was looking right at her.

"Who *is* that?"

The ghost smiled and waved his ethereal arm. Suddenly the creatures that floated in the air above him swirled and raced over the desert, directly for their position.

Alchemdaigle gulped. "I think it is Geb himself."

"And those clouds are creatures...and they're coming fast! They'll be on us in a minute!"

Shana drew closer to her brothers as Gabe looked at the medallion on his chest and frowned. It was pulsing red. Shana saw it too and she slowly nodded, biting her lip. The boy trembled.

Then he clasped his hand around the amulet, shone it out towards the approaching hordes, and gave in to his fear.

The crimson light blinked faster, falling into rhythm with Gabe's heartbeat. The seven-year-old looked to the mighty army on the darkened horizon and the flying beasts that were mere moments away from his family.

The medallion throbbed one last time.

And then Will, Shana and Alchemdaigle were blown off their feet.

A massive, concussive pulse pushed outward in a great burst, and an immense pattern of triangles and squares, as vast as any city on Golarion, appeared before Gabe. Some of the flying creatures caught in the geomorphic forms were immediately obliterated. The rest swerved violently to avoid the obstruction.

A hideous amorphous form of epic proportions materialized from within the patterned field. Large strands of tentacles lashed out into the sky, snaring the flying creatures and ripping them down to earth and into hungry jaws. Overwhelmed by sheer numbers, only one of the flying horrors managed to escape. It veered back to its commander but the enormous nebulous beast shot several smaller, balled-up versions of itself from its skin. They soared through the air and latched onto the final survivor, consuming the creature in mid-flight.

The massive parent horror opened its great maw and howled with such sonorous power that Shana, Will and Alchemdaigle were pressed down into the dirt. They covered their ears but the sound seemed to shake their bones and rattle their brains.

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The titanic beast charged the Gebbite army at incredible speed but pulled up before reaching its target and gazed back upon tiny Gabe. It withdrew into itself, building pressure until it ejected several tiny versions of itself into the air surrounding Gabe and his companions. The spheres burrowed quickly down into the nearby dirt, extracting and devouring human-like creatures that lay buried beneath the group's feet. All around, Shana saw undead bodies working their way up from the earth, only to be plucked like weeds when they neared the surface.

Within minutes their unlikely rescuers had snatched up over fifty of the things.

"Geb had set an ambush for us," Alchemdaigle said, looking upon the odd, feasting creatures. His usual curiosity for the abnormal was mixed with cold terror.

The colossal abomination resumed its course and plowed towards the formations of Geb's troops. Alchemdaigle observed that Geb himself had vanished. The mighty kraken slammed into the faltering ranks, lassoing innumerable victims with its tentacles. Its form rippled again and hundreds of miniature clones flew outward to corral any prey the thrashing limbs had missed. Then the thing's maw and tongue lapped up the throne and scoured across the sand, consuming all the traces of undead that were left.

The sky above began to break up and the sun pierced through again. Gabe collapsed to the ground, completely white and began to shake violently as foam frothed from his mouth. Shana ran to his side and tried to hold him as his body convulsed.

The amulet gleamed bright red and Shana smelled something burning. Smoke rose from Gabe's chest as the medallion singed through his shirt and down to his skin. Shana pulled it from his flesh, tearing layers of blackened skin off and searing her own fingers as the amulet continued to pulse. She rolled Gabe onto his side and the glowing medallion fell and rested on the sand.

All around them the alien creatures rooted more attackers out of the ground as the enormous behemoth devoured the remainder of Geb's army. It let out a great howl again, shaking the entire basin.

"Goodness me!" Alchemdaigle said, shaking his head. "That thing destroyed everything in a matter of minutes!"

"What do we do about Gabe? Can you help him?" Shana pleaded.

The gnome bent down and snapped his fingers around Gabe's head, but there was no response. He pulled out a waterskin and dripped water into the boy's mouth, but it only pooled over his lips. Alchemdaigle put his ear down on Gabe's chest and held his wrist for several moments. Then he fumbled around in his pockets and pulled out a white liquid vial and poured it over his waterskin. The container became very stiff and finally froze on the outside.

"Tip him on his side and hold his eyes open with your fingers."

Shana did as the gnome asked and Alchemdaigle poured freezing water into the boy's ear canal.

Gabe's eyes didn't move. He didn't even flinch.

"Oh dear..."

"What?" Shana stood up, frightened and Will clung to her hand.

"He's in a deep sleep; a coma. I have no idea when—or if—he will wake up."

The medallion dimmed and blinked a weak yellow then faded out. Soon all the

strange tentacled creatures became transparent and disappeared too.

“Oh, Gabe. No, no. Stay with us, my boy,” Alchemdaigle whispered.

Shana and Will knelt beside their brother, the older twin shaking and sputtering through tears. Alchemdaigle pulled another of his concoctions from his bandolier and had Shana prop Gabe up. He carefully poured the potion down the boy’s throat, using a flat stick to guide it. Gabe’s pallid complexion slowly turned pink.

“This may not last long. This place doesn’t favor alchemy any more than it does magic, but at least his body will be well for a time.”

Alchemdaigle scratched his chin a moment as a thought came to him. “Hmmm. You know, I think this has happened before. This must have been how Nex fell.” The gnome turned to Gabe’s twin. “Will? When your brother used this medallion and summoned these things before, did he end up exhausted or asleep like this?”

“No,” Will croaked, tears rolling down his cheek.

“Let me see the amulet.”

Shana slipped it off Gabe’s neck and handed it over. Alchemdaigle took the disk and laid it in the palm of Gabe’s hand. The tip still pointed north and the gnome gave a sigh of relief.

“It still wants to go home. At least we have that. Maybe we’ll get some answers when we get there. It seems to be pointing to that cliff facing. We might be able to reach it before nightfall. Can you carry your brother, Shana?”

“Yes, I think so,” the girl nodded. She lifted Gabe over her shoulder and the group continued onward. Alchemdaigle used a lens of his loupe to scan the path ahead while monitoring Gabe’s amulet for any fluctuations in their course. After an hour, Shana began to lose feeling in her arms and asked to stop.

“Will, I need you to carry him for a bit,” Shana said, “I’ll need to be able to shoot if something happens.”

Will nodded. “I’ll try.”

Alchemdaigle continued to sweep the landscape with the loupe, even looking to the skies. The sun was reaching towards the hills, and dusk would invite more than the undead to chase after them.

Shana leaned against a rock, massaging her elbows, and heard a whisper that made her turn. “Again?” she yelled with exasperation. “But I am so tired, Marmi... I can’t.” She turned to Will and Alchemdaigle.

Will picked Gabe up with a deep groan and a huff. “Gotta go?”

Shana nodded. “Others are coming this way.”

“Aaack!” the gnome cried out. He tightened the fasteners and straps on his coat and secured what remained of his belongings.

And they ran.

By the time they reached the shadow of the cliff, the sun had begun to slide behind the Shattered Range. The amulet pointed straight into the rock.

Will laid Gabe down and collapsed in a heap against the wall, panting. Alchemdaigle kicked the dirt in frustration. “But why lead us here? I’ve been over this site many times and there’s nothing! No markings, magical or otherwise.”

“You didn’t have this amulet before though,” Will replied. He placed it in Gabe’s limp hand, then lifted it up and brought it to the ground. The medallion tilted slightly downward when he raised it above his head. Will then swept Gabe’s

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arm from side-to-side and the amulet changed dramatically from pointing left to aiming right.

“Great job, my boy! I can approximate the location of our destination with what you just figured out, Will.” The gnome pulled out a book and began scribbling computations. “It’s about...er...three hundred feet, straight into this rock.” His face fell. “But how are we supposed to get past this?”

Shana rummaged in her pack for a folding spade then stood up and began to dig at the base of the rock where Alchemdaigle had gestured. “Maybe the doorway into Nex’s forge was buried somehow, just like his body was.”

Alchemdaigle shook his head and smiled. “Oho! Too true, little lady! Look at me, an archeologist who doesn’t think to dig! They’d laugh me out of the Society.” He watched her a moment, then climbed up on a rock to scout the area with his magnifying glass. Within minutes he saw a cloud of dust and a mass of riders moving towards their position over the open desert. There were hundreds of them, and they appeared to be riding with furious purpose, straight for the cliff face.

“Oh, dear me, this is bad,” he muttered.

“Mister Solis! We’ve found something!”

He hurried over to see Will and Shana standing next to an indentation in the rock. The amulet that hung from Gabe’s neck was the perfect shape to fit in the stone. The gnome grinned and took the medallion from around Gabe’s neck and fit it into the hollow.

Cracks in the rock suddenly appeared and split apart as a heavy door whirled open. Lights glowed hazily within, illuminating a metal passage.

“This is fantastic!” the gnome cried in astonishment.

Will loaded Gabe onto his aching shoulders and Shana ran in ahead, pistols drawn. Alchemdaigle took one last look back to see the riders nearing quickly. He knew they had seen the door open in the rock face.

Still holding Gabe’s amulet, he studied the passageway. A similarly indented shape was molded onto the wall. He inserted the medallion and the door began to close as the first horsemen drew up. The door clanked shut with a resounding thud, and metallic tumblers shifted and locked it into place.

“I have not heard such a sound since I visited the vaults beneath the Grand Lodge of Absalom.” Alchemdaigle marveled at the metallic beauty of the hall and proceeded on, leading the way with Shana at his side.

“This place scares me, Mister Solis,” Will said.

“And very well it should. Touch nothing unless I confirm it’s not dangerous. Nex’s powers were unequaled and even as a student of his history, I don’t know what any of this is for. But, if I had to guess, it seems almost—”

“HELLO THERE, MASTER. I WILL BE WITH YOU SHORTLY.”

Alchemdaigle nearly jumped out of his clothes. “That sounded like it came from the walls!”

“Wh-what do we do? We’re not its master!” Will stammered.

“Don’t worry, Will. If it tries anything, I’ll give it a welcome,” Shana assured.

“Lass, I am not so sure that is the right approach to help Gabe. Perhaps assistance wouldn’t be such a bad—”

A large metal object came floating down the hall. It looked like a suit of armor

from the waist up, but there were no legs beneath. It hovered for a moment and then bowed its head.

“Oh it is so good to see you again, Master. I am used to being alone for extended spans of time, but more than four thousand years is rather long.”

The dim light of the metallic being’s eyes swept in front of it and scanned its visitors. “The rest of you are unknown to me. My name is Otto, but my makers called me something far more complex. My master translated my name as ‘Automaton World Ender.’ I find his translation to be crude, but essentially correct.”

Shana stepped forward. “My name is Shana and this gnome is Alchemdaigle. The boy next to me is Will. This is our brother, Gabe and he isn’t doing well. Do you think you can help him, Otto?”

The metal form cast its light beam over Gabe again.

“I see that my master is in a comatose state. Follow me to the infirmary.”

Otto pivoted in place and went back down the hall it had entered from. Shana and the others followed, passing many corridors that branched off in all directions until they reached a square room walled by glass. Several long metal arms protruded from the floor and stood folded along the perimeter. A padded platform rose up as they entered.

“Place the master on the bed. I will begin recovery procedures when you exit the room. I assure you no harm will come to him, Shana and Will. I am quite capable when compared to your primitive magic.”

Otto slinked along the side of the room and connected itself to a cable that snaked from a small compartment. Shana placed Gabe on the table and looked at the spidery, metallic arms in apprehension.

“Very good. He will be fine. Step from the room, please. Contamination from foreign bodies is unwelcome during this procedure.”

Shana gave Gabe’s hand a squeeze then walked away and the glass door closed behind her. She stood by Will and Alchemdaigle as the metal limbs animated and hovered over Gabe’s small form. Several lights swept across the boy and his clothing disappeared. Then focused beams began slicing him open.

Shana gaped in horror and clutched Will close as he cried out.

“What are they doing to him, Shana?! Make them stop! *They’re hurting him!*”

Gabe’s blood spurted then began to drain and Will buried his head in Shana’s side as their brother’s body became more mutilated by the moment. Shana slammed her fist on the window but Otto took no notice.

Alchemdaigle looked on in a mix of revulsion and awe as he saw Gabe’s naked eyes and heart exposed. A device sucked his blood from his body, filling a bulb above him. Another laid down several patches of odd, fleshy fabric over Gabe’s body which colorfully expanded around all his organs. A third appendage sliced open Gabe’s skull and placed more of the malleable material inside.

The metallic arms worked meticulously fast. Shana could not keep up with what was happening, so she held onto Will’s sobbing form and stroked his hair. As the procedure wore on, she slowly realized that Gabe was being rebuilt from the inside, bit by bit. His blood swirled above him in a bulb, mixing with a purple liquid. When it was ready, the purple fluid was removed and another arm

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connected a tube into Gabe's heart and infused his blood back into his body. Then a pink gas filled the room, obscuring Shana's vision.

As quickly as the room had filled with the rosy fog however, it was sucked away into the floor. Shana and Alchemdaigle's mouths opened wide as they saw Gabe stir, fully clothed in an unfamiliar white and blue robe.

"Will!" Shana exclaimed, "Will, he's okay! Look!" Shana rubbed her brother's shoulder and he lifted his head and wiping his eyes. The door to the room opened and the spidery arms retreated to their corners and remained still as before. Shana ran inside and held Gabe close and Will rushed in to join them. Gabe turned his head and looked about.

"Wha...? Where am I?"

Shana stroked Gabe's head gently and Otto spoke. "I have removed the damage my master sustained from the Caratode Device. I also removed all the bad coding and mutation sequences within the boy that were passed down from his father and mother. Master should now reach the age of three hundred and forty-seven before self-termination. I took the liberty of adding several enhancements that will protect him from the elements should he find himself in inhospitable locations on this planet. Please forgive my...enthusiasm. It has been some time since I have had the opportunity to aid the master or any organic."

"Did it just call me 'Master?'" Gabe asked in confusion.

"You are the master. You hold the crux amulet. Master gave strict instructions that the wielder, in whatever shape or form they might be, would carry his essence and therefore should be treated with appropriate care."

Shana looked to Alchemdaigle and then to her brothers.

"What will happen now, Otto?"

"I will take the master to the transition room where the ritual that my master prepared will commence. It will restore him to full health. I am sure his essence has waited long enough. Follow me."

The group complied and accompanied the automaton as it led the way.

"Otto, what kind of man was Nex?" Shana asked as they walked.

The metallic being stopped and looked at Gabe. "Master, may I have your permission to answer your company's requests?"

Gabe smiled then nodded and the party continued to walk.

"Nex was a great explorer and cared little for the war he waged against an individual he called Geb. He called it an inconvenience to his studies. Though my technical understanding of the cosmos is great, Nex could feel the fabric of the universe more keenly than I—a gift attributed to his organic nature, I suspect. The last attack on his capital city, Quantum sent him into a rage, though. He feverishly worked with the Caras to construct a device he said would 'settle the conflict,' and harnessed my ship's primary seeding tools against my advice."

Alchemdaigle paused as they passed by a larger chamber. Inside was a massive spinning machine with several colored lights at its edges. "Er... Otto? What is this incredible contraption?"

Otto swiveled. "That is the Caratode Matrix. Nex removed it from my ship and brought it here. It must move constantly to keep the interplanar dimensions from slipping together." Otto held out an appendage. "May I have the crux amulet,

Master? The gateway within it has been drained. I will recharge it.”

Gabe handed the medallion to Otto, who entered the chamber and placed it in a small reservoir containing a thick, gooey substance. The amulet sunk and a small sphere left it and travelled up a tube until it slid into a channel atop the massive spinning ball.

“There.” Otto removed the medallion and handed it back to Gabe. “The Caratode is now recharged and ready for insertion and proper use, just like the others.”

“The others?” Alchemdaigle looked to all the lights on the spinning orb and realized there were thousands of tiny balls like the one Otto had just removed.

“Well, yes. The one which was housed inside Master’s crux amulet was specifically designed for destroying unlife, but there are many other modes. As an ‘Automaton World Ender,’ this Matrix is my ship’s main delivery device for terminating all types of organic and inorganic entities.”

Alchemdaigle shook his head. “Wait. Let me see if I understand this correctly; you travelled by sea with this device from another land on Golarion?!”

“No. My ship travels through space, the void between stellar bodies. My primary order was to find worlds with life and exterminate it. Then I marked the world as fit for the makers’ habitation, and sent a signal back to them.”

Alchemdaigle swallowed. “So that’s why Nex gave you the name *World Ender*.”

“Yes. The master had a sense of humor when it became apparent what my purpose was. I had done my work unceasingly for approximately fifty-two million years before I found this world. Typical procedure dictated that I launch the appropriate Caratodes from space and then wait for the process to run its course. As I prepared to do so however, an unexpected anomaly destroyed my ship’s propulsion and communication systems. I could not send a signal to the makers and my vessel plummeted to your planet’s surface. An unknown force pulled my ship to the lands you call Numeria. There, I impacted and was severely damaged.”

“You don’t appear damaged.” Shana looked over the being’s metal skin.

“I will assure you I am. My mesh, though nearly impenetrable, was severely disjointed. Whole areas of memory were completely erased. I no longer know how to use my self-sentience awareness or my prime operations initiatives. Had I access to those resources I would have wiped out all life on your world, rebuilt my ship and left long ago. Everything I need to do so is here, but I have no will or desire to do so. That is how Nex found me, with his party of scouts. Everything he asked I freely answered, as I do with you now. I call the human boy, Gabe, ‘Master’ because Nex asked me to do so, and I am happy to oblige his request. Shall we continue to revive Nex?”

“No,” Shana said, feeling uncomfortable. “We need to learn more. What was Nex’s goal with all of this?”

Otto turned to the spinning machine. “He was going to test the amulet’s power himself because he had lost patience. I told him I would have the weapon ready for him in fifty-seven years but he demanded immediate retribution for the Quantum attack. His last instruction for me was to continue developing the mechanism for the wide-burst release of the Caratodes. His plan was to erect a spire in which to

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harness the Caratode Matrix.”

“That was the intended use of the Spire of Nex near Absalom?” Alchemdaigle grimaced.

“Well, yes. Nex pressured me to deliver the device for his use at that location, however I could not meet his initial time frame. It can now go forth as he wished, since I have completed my development.”

“He was hoping to wipe out all life in Absalom?”

“I am not sure, Friend of Master. I think he was planning a demonstration for his rival, Geb, though. Nex planned to release the unlife Caratode in Geb’s city of Mechitar. Then he planned to follow that attack with a life destroying Caratode, then an infernal one—”

“He’s a monster,” Shana gasped. “I can see why he would want to destroy the undead, but to kill helpless people...”

Otto drifted from the room and continued down the hall. “Nex once said, ‘war has no innocent victims when it comes to achieving victory.’ But my makers never introduced me to the concept of war. I am just a simple world seeder, preparing colony planets for their habitation.”

The five figures walked deeper into the compound until they came to darkened room. Otto activated the lights. A lone figure lay on a bed in the center of the room, draped with a sheet. The four stepped in and Otto handed Gabe the amulet. He glided to the figure on the bed and pulled off the sheet. A regally-dressed Garundi man rested on the table, barely breathing.

“This is Nex’s vessel. It is a copy that was reproduced from my master’s own tissue. The ceremony will commence when I leave the room. My master’s essence will leave his crux and then take residence in that new body.” Otto started to leave.

“Otto?”

“Yes, Sister of Master?”

“What do you think Nex will do with us, once he arises?”

“I am not the type to guess the intentions of my master, but I do know that all who visited this place are now dead by his own hand. Based on this information, I would say he would plan to kill you.”

Shana swallowed the news. “Otto, if the master wishes to not complete the ceremony, can we leave this place?”

Otto turned. “You can come back whenever you wish. Master is the owner of Nex’s crux. I am not bound to say yes or no.”

“Can he leave the amulet behind? It attracts things.”

“No, he must keep it. If I am given the amulet, I will commence the ceremony and Nex will arise and know of you when he asks. No, the human boy, Gabe must keep the amulet but it is empty of the Caratode now and will not draw attention. Its only value is that it holds Nex’s essence.”

Shana looked to Gabe and nodded reassuringly.

Gabe walked up to the metal servant. “I think we have learned enough for now, Otto. We would like to rest now and speak with you again later.”

“Yes, Master. You look tired. I will provide you all with nourishment and show you to a room. I am sure you have much to discuss.” Otto bowed and pulled the sheet back over the body and as they left, the door to the room closed and the

lights turned off behind them.



“Wake up, Shana. Wake up!”

The girl turned on her side and opened her eyes. Upon seeing the ghostly form before her, she smiled and slipped back comfortably toward sleep.

“No, Shana! You must wake up now! You are all in great danger!”

Shana sighed and felt for her guns, then sat up; *Harmony* and *Peace* were missing from beneath her pillow.

She scanned the bed and saw both Alchemdaigle and Will still asleep.

Gabe was gone.

She rushed out of the room and looked around the corridor for any sign of him. Marmi ran with her. *“He isn’t himself. I think that amulet is doing something to him.”*

“Thank you, Marmi. I’m going to check the ceremony room. Don’t worry. I’ll stop him.”

The ghost paused then cried out, *“No!”*

Gabe stood just around the corner as Shana came running down the hall. He held both pistols straight out in front of him and fired.

The first shot barreled through Shana’s shoulder. The next two lodged in her chest. Shana fell to her knees and more bullets ripped into her abdomen. She lurched over, clutching her middle, her eyes wide open with shock as blood flooded from her failing organs. She felt Gabe walk up to her and point *Harmony* at her head as Marmi kneeled beside her, ethereal tears falling from her eyes. Then there was another sharp bang and Shana’s vision turned red.

Gabe stood above his sister’s corpse and smiled at the smoking weapons.

“Otto, I must say that I am a fan of these devices. I’m going to the transition room. See to it that our remaining guests do not disturb me.” Gabe threw the guns to the floor and walked off, whistling.

“I will close the corridor partition behind you, Master.”

Alchemdaigle emerged from the guest room first.

When he saw Shana lying bloodied on the floor he turned to grab Will but he wasn’t fast enough. The boy screamed and ran over to his murdered sister, her body riddled with bullet holes. Otto loomed over her.

Will’s eyes turned fierce. *“Who did this?!”*

Otto scanned the boy with his lighted eyes. *“The Master.”*

“Well fix her! Take her to the infirmary and fix her now!”

Otto lifted Shana up and headed off.

Alchemdaigle looked at Will, not knowing what to do. *“Your brother must be possessed by Nex’s spirit, Will. That is the only way he could do this. He is likely headed to the ceremony room and if he completes that ceremony, we’re all dead.”* The gnome sighed heavily. *“I don’t believe Nex has complete control of him, though. You’re his twin. You can save him. I’ll stay here and watch over your sister.”*

Will grimaced and clenched his fists, then nodded.

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“Oh, and take this, too!” Alchemdaigle handed him a flask from his pocket.

“What is it?”

“Whatever you do, don’t drop it by accident. There’s a glass partition in there, separating the two liquids. Once this flask shatters, it will turn to fire. Our best hope is for you to burn that body under the sheets.”

Will tapped the door to the walled off corridor and a dull murmur echoed back.

“How do I get past this? We don’t have the amulet for the locking panel, and the ceremony room is down this hall!”

Alchemdaigle scanned the walls and ceiling until he saw a small vent.

“You think you can fit through that hole?”

Will nodded. “I can try.”

Will tucked the flask away carefully, wrapping it in a handkerchief, and Alchemdaigle boosted him up just enough to reach the opening. Will pulled himself through and then disappeared.

“Good luck, lad!” Alchemdaigle said. “Desna be willing.” Then the gnome turned and raced to the infirmary.



Will wiggled his way through the vent. It was dark, but every now and then faint light came through the air out takes and illuminated his passage. The boy came to a junction and mentally reviewed the layout in his mind before going left, which took him up a slight incline. He slid his body along several more lengths until he found himself looking down into the ceremony room.

Gabe was alone in the room and was lighting many candles. As he worked, he spoke in a strange tongue, causing the air in the room to gust in odd directions. The heat of the candles rose up to the vent and Will began to sweat. The shrouded Garundi man lay just below his position in the vent.

Gabe continued his preparations and drew a circle with chalk, then went to a side table to collect items which he placed in five different locations around the ring. He chanted again and the covered body on the table began to shake. Gabe sat in the middle of the circle and took off the amulet, speaking a rhyme that Will was afraid to hear completed.

Gabe suddenly halted as the necklace flew to the sheeted table. The boy collapsed.

Will shoved the vent door open and it fell onto the sheet-covered man, hitting him on the head. The figure lifted up but then fell back on the table. Will then took out Alchemdaigle’s potion and dropped it. It shattered on the edge of the table and flames erupted all around it, climbing up the sheet and engulfing the man’s clothing. The shrouded figure stood up, flailing and entangling himself in burning fabric and screaming as the fire burned him alive.

The smell rising up to Will’s vent was unbearable. He slipped back the way he had come until he reached the nearest opening. He kicked that vent open then dropped down into the hallway and dashed into the ceremonial room. It was quickly turning into an inferno. He ran to Gabe and dragged him to the door, and then retrieved the amulet from the floor near the table. He hefted his twin onto his

shoulder and carried his brother out as the writhing man continued to burn. The smell of charred flesh was sickening.

Will stumbled down the hall as quickly as he could. When he reached the locked door at the end of the hall, he took out the medallion and pressed it into the indented panel in the wall.

The door opened and the two boys went through.

Suddenly alarms blared and warning lights flashed on. Will ignored them and pushed onward with his brother to the infirmary.



Otto placed Shana's body on the table and took his position. The spider-like machine animated once more and beams scanned over her rapidly. Alchemdaigle arrived a moment later and stood outside the infirmary glass, letting tears creep into his eyes.

"Otto, please save her," he whispered.

The spider went to work, removing Shana's clothes, and then turned to slicing her apart in hundreds of ways. Alchemdaigle watched as the long arms moved about. A tube sucked all her blood out into a vessel high above her, as it had with Gabe. Another tube snaked beside Shana's eye, burrowing behind it into her brain as she lay motionless, staring up blankly at the ceiling. A few quick arms pulled out all the fragments of bullets and tossed them into a tray. Other devices held her open as small pincers delicately laid pink, fleshy cloths over her ruptured organs.

Alchemdaigle buried his head in his hands at the sight; he couldn't watch any more. He turned away as the arms lifted out, pricked and moved other internal organs about.

Then lights began to twirl red in the room and hallway and an alarm went off.

Alchemdaigle's heart dropped and his eyes flew to the glass chamber.

A ghostly visual of the ceremony room appeared on the infirmary window. It showed an image of the room covered in flames.

The gnome began to panic until Will entered the infirmary a moment later with his brother collapsed in his arms. He looked to Alchemdaigle and the blue-haired gnome ran to his side. He helped Will set Gabe down near the glass chamber and listened to the boy's breathing and heartbeat. His pulse was weak and his breath came in shallow gasps.

"Otto, the master is dying out here!" Alchemdaigle screamed out.

A communication panel slid open in the floor outside the glass room.

"One patient at a time, Friend of Master. There is only one operating table and one surgeon here. This body is frail. I am trying to keep all her vital organs alive while the rest of her deteriorates. I am also dealing with many other things, including a fire that has broken out."

Will looked at Alchemdaigle frantically. The gnome pulled the remaining potions from his bandolier and saw they had all turned murky and brownish, ravaged by the Waste's corrupting energy. He tossed them aside and grabbed a pouch on his belt then untied it and dumped it out. He rummaged frantically among several bundles of herbs until he found one that he knew would stimulate

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the heart.

“I need a hot glass of water to steep this in!”

A larger floor compartment opened nearby and raised up a steaming cup.

“I will check his overall vital signs,” Otto announced. A tube snaked out from the infirmary and hovered over Gabe. It scanned his body from head to toe as Alchemdaigle fetched the cup from the compartment and threw the dried herb into the water. He stirred it with his finger, scalding himself as he ran over to Will and Gabe.

“The little master has suffered an exploded blood vessel in his brain. Bring him up to the infirmary door immediately. The surgeon will have to leave the little master’s sister for a moment to treat him. This will increase her chances of permanent death.”

Will and Alchemdaigle dragged Gabe inside as the door opened. The surgical machine stopped everything it was doing to Shana, and several arms reached out to attend to her brother. A tube shot into Gabe’s head and then drilled a hole. It retracted and blood gurgled from the spot. A thin mesh extended down the tube and into Gabe’s brain. It laid down a layer of fine pink tissue while a parallel tube sucked up the excess blood. The tissue settled in and implanted and the tube immediately retracted, leaving a bubbling residue.

The spider then returned to hover over Shana.

“Please take the master out of the room. The procedure I did was crude, but he is physically healed. He will function normally if he awakens.”

“If?” Will moaned. “Why wouldn’t he awaken if his body has been healed?” Alchemdaigle shook his head and took Gabe from the glass room and the door slid closed.

Otto elaborated as it worked. “I detected a desire in his brain waves... A desire to self-terminate. The will to live is the only medicine that can heal him completely. I believe he has lost this, as he remembers shooting his sister.”

Will sat down and clutched his brother’s hand. Alchemdaigle looked back at the infirmary in dread. He listened to Gabe’s heart once more. The beating was becoming more and more faint. He took the hot glass of water and stirred it with another finger; the liquid had cooled down enough to become drinkable. He poured it down Gabe’s throat and listened to his chest for a change, noticing that pink gas was filling the surgical chamber.

Will sobbed as his heart ached. “Brother... please don’t leave me. I can’t face Dad alone. Without Mom and Shana and you, he will be so sad. Please wake up, Gabe. I know that wasn’t you who did those things.” Will’s tears fell on his brother’s cheek and he shook as he felt his younger brother’s breaths slowing. Alchemdaigle listened as the boy’s heart beat became imperceptible and he crumpled limply in his twin’s arms.

“Please wake up, Gabe,” Shana’s voice came from behind the two. “Wake up, little brother.”

Will looked up to see his sister completely healed, wearing fresh blue-white clothes. He smiled then turned back to his brother and grasped his hand tighter as he shook him. “You see, Gabe? Shana’s alive. She’s right here! Shana’s fine, and so are you. Please don’t leave me. Not here. Not like this. Not alone...”

Gabe's eyes fluttered open and Alchemdaigle jumped into the air, grinning.

"It worked!"

He stepped backward into Otto and turned around surprised. "I like to think everything worked, Friend of Master," Otto replied.

"You are right," the gnome blushed.

Then Otto addressed Gabe. "Master, the fire is spreading. The automatic systems have failed and I cannot stop it from making this entire facility inhospitable to your organic form.

"INTRUDER ALERT. INTRUDER ALERT."

Otto paused and then a pale display appeared on the window glass again. This time, it showed the view outside the facility's entrance where they had barely escaped the riders. All around, the men and horses lay dead. The image then shifted to the long entry hall inside, where a ghostly apparition floated down the hallway. Several close up views identified the being:

Entity: Energy and infused necromantic elements

Origin: From Garundi Tissue

Facial Recognition: Rubahn Maltari Geb

The display ceased and Otto turned to Gabe.

"Master, if you give the order, I will carry out Nex's plan to destroy the facility. The enemy entity known as Geb now haunts this place. He stands between us and the Caratode Matrix, so there is no way for you to charge the crux amulet and destroy him. I also have no means with which to fight him. If he finds and kills you, I will become his servant and do his bidding. However, if we hurry we can still reach the control room and with your permission I will take the amulet and activate the sequence."

"INTRUDER ALERT. INTRUDER ALERT."

Another view of the hallway was displayed showing multiple lights heading into the facility.

"It is getting exponentially more difficult for me to process all the possible behaviors that are now present and influencing the complex," Otto confessed. "We must move quickly." Otto turned and proceeded to move rapidly from the infirmary and down the hall. Shana and Alchemdaigle had to run, as Gabe and Will pushed themselves hard to keep up.

They reached a large room with several lights and twisting dials. Otto moved into place next to a console, then turned to Gabe and Will as they ran into the room. "I will need the amulet, Master. The infiltrators are reaching the point where they could influence my controls. I will need to start the sequence."

Will produced the medallion and held it out, but Gabe reached out and stopped him in hesitation. "What about the five of us? What will happen?"

Otto paused. "The four of you will be projected to whatever destination you wish. I have keyed in your transport clearance and you only need to say where you wish to go, once you step into the adjoining chamber."

"Send us to Alkenstar City please, Otto. Our father is there and we will be safe with Alchemdaigle until we find him." Shana and Will nodded to Gabe in agreement.

"I have studied this land with my sensors and know of this place. I will set your

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destination just outside the city on a secluded, rocky outcropping.”

“But, you said that’s only us *four*. What about you, Otto?” Gabe asked, taking the amulet from his brother’s hand.

Otto scanned Gabe’s face with his lighted eyes. “Give me the amulet, Master, and I will tell you.”

Gabe held out the medallion and the automaton inserted it into a slot. The door opened to the adjoining transportation chamber and Otto disconnected itself from its console.

“Step in with your friend and family, Master.”

Gabe stood outside the room as the other three entered.

“Tell me why you won’t come.”

Otto drifted down to rest beside him. “In some ways, Master, I want to stay behind here. I have desired for a long time to end this world. And had I not been damaged, I certainly would have. However, I was long ago humbled by the possibilities your species offered. Perhaps my makers were not as all-knowing as I had once thought.”

Gabe put his hand out to the automaton and a metal hand was laid upon his.

“Now, go. And know that I had the privilege of meeting a master worthy of my servitude.” The automaton bowed its head.

Gabe smiled and walked away to join Shana and the others, as Otto reeled itself back into its console. The boy waved goodbye, but the automaton looked on without expression.

A countdown echoed in the outside room.

“TEN... NINE...”

A ghostly spirit entered the room that Otto verified as the apparition of Geb.

“...EIGHT... SEVEN...”

“Give me the medallion of Nex!”

“...SIX...”

“Very well.”

“...FIVE...”

The automaton pulled the trinket from the console, tossing it to Geb’s specter.

“...FOUR...”

The spirit stared at the amulet and seethed in fury, realizing it was nothing more than a key.

“...THREE... TWO...”

Otto looked at the console. “You know, Geb, Nex was not any different than you.”

“...ONE.”

Geb raced towards the automaton and the metallic creature stared back at him.

“FUSION DETONATION INITIATED.”

A flash of light ignited across the Shattered Range, turning the sky briefly from night to day. Horrifying howls echoed across the canyon as an unusual flux rapidly cycled the landscape of the Western Ravage from one dimension to another and a massive explosion blew out across the wastes.



Shana watched the flash of light surge in the far off distance and heard the shattering boom that accompanied it. She wasn't sure exactly where she was until she looked about and found the twinkling lights of the city. Long ago she had approached the city of Alkenstar at night, but this night it could not be more beautiful.

She looked down at her white robes and felt along the sides of her hips.

The pistols were gone.

Both Will and Gabe stood beside her though, and she felt that was a worthy trade. Alchemdaigle drew up alongside her too.

"Looking for these? I picked them up after what happened." He held out a belt, and Shana recognized the engraved, ivory hilts. She shook her head.

"They're yours now, Alchemdaigle. They are called *Peace* and *Harmony*. Sell them and find a little place for yourself. That is all our father ever wished to do."

The gnome blinked, then held the weapons back out. "But, lass, you will be defenseless."

Shana looked to the city. "My mother died here wearing these guns. I won't re-enter the place and tempt the same fate."

"Really?"

"Really." Shana said. "Marmi says it's time to forget guns."

Alchemdaigle shook his head, grinning.

"She told me she made a mistake. She should have let me think and make decisions for myself, but she was afraid... She wants you to know that even spirits can be wrong."

Alchemdaigle sat down and held his head in his hands. Tears slipped from his eyes as the weight of everything that had happened came crashing down on him and he thought back to the painful moment when the love of his life stayed behind. "Oh, lass... I've been waiting to hear that for so long."

Will and Gabe crouched down and gave him a hug. He wiped his eyes clear and then stood up and looked toward Alkenstar with a sigh.

"Well, I think I have a few gold pieces left on me. I'll take you to an inn I like. We should be comfortable until we find your father. Come, children. Alkenstar awaits."



The official marked the note with a loud thump and shifted it to the side, then put his seal and wax away and looked the words over carefully before writing his signature next to the stamp. For a few moments he blew upon the ink, trying to hasten its drying. The gentleman before him shifted his weight in his boots, but maintained his formal, upright posture. The notary cleared his throat and gave the parchment one more quick look, then handed the note over.

"The Grand Duchy of Alkenstar hereby backs this note for one million, two hundred and ninety-eight thousand gold pieces. I have also been told to reiterate that by claiming this payment, you must never manufacture any more weapons of this kind for the remainder of your life. Is that clear?"

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Atticus held the note with a smile and then nodded. "Perfectly."

"Good. I would hate for Her Grace's forces to have to pay you a visit in the near future, but we can't have commoners out-gunning our Royal Grenadiers, now can we?" The notary raised an eyebrow and cleared his throat once more.

"Of course not, sir, I swear to never manufacture such weaponry again."

"Good."

The former gunsmith inclined his head and folded the note into his breast pocket.

"Now that we have gotten that cleared up, I will inform you that the note you carry can be taken to any bank backed by a guilders seal in the Inner Sea. Naturally none will ever cash such a sum in full, but they will give you whatever funds you request within reason, minus any fees involved." The notary turned from the man to his paperwork and starting going through other documents on his desk. "You may leave now, sir."

Atticus stood and put on his hat, tipping it properly and nodding his thanks again. Then he walked to the door and stepped out, closing it quietly behind him.

Akane sat on a bench next to the door, and he stood up when his master emerged. The apprentice smiled and the man returned his grin. The two walked out of the royal palace, and out of the surrounding grounds completely calm.

"Daddy!"

Atticus' heart stopped and he froze in his tracks, instinctively looking in the direction of the sound. A nearby soldier picked up a boy and a woman drew near, bringing the man his midday meal. He kissed the woman lovingly and then lowered himself to talk with the child. For a moment, Atticus watched the small family and then sighed heavily.

A shiver ran through him as a presence brushed against him and he closed his eyes.

Meredith.

In his mind's eye he could see her, standing with his pistols at her side, long golden curls flowing down her back. She walked up to him and put her hands on his chest, sliding them around his sides to encircle him in a hug.

"Daddy!"

Another child called out. The man shook his head and opened his eyes, and suddenly his three children were standing before him.

His hand flew to his mouth as his eyes filled with tears and he stooped down to hug his sons as they ran up and barreled into him. Shana piled on top of them a moment later, throwing her arms around his neck.

"How did... What are you all doing here?" Atticus stammered as he held on to them, then looked them all over.

"It's a long story, Father," Shana sighed. She lifted her head from his shoulder to the battlements to see a golden-haired woman looking out to the open frontier. She winked at Shana and smiled, and the girl gasped and beamed back happily. The woman then nodded her head, turned toward the mountains and disappeared.

Shana's father let go of his children and stood, and Akane tousled each of their heads, laughing as the boys turned to hug the big man too.

Shana looked up at her father and beckoned at him with her finger, pulling him

close so she could whisper. The man lowered his head and Shana cupped his ear.

"I'll listen," he whispered softly, pulling back and looking into her blue eyes. "But then you better tell me how you all—"

Shana nodded. "Mother says goodbye."

Atticus took a deep breath. "You mean *Marmi*, right, child?"

Shana nodded. "Yes, Father, but Marmi is short for Meredith. And she says she loves you, always."

Atticus' lip trembled and then he let out a sob and began to weep as Shana hugged him close once more. Will and Gabe soon flew back to his side as well. He looked up to Akane and his apprentice nodded with satisfaction and quickly wiped his own eyes. Atticus basked in his children's love and sighed.

Finally he composed himself and straightened. "Okay, so tell me, why are you three here?"

Shana drew herself up and raised her hand before Akane and her father. "Please don't be mad, but the entire house is gone."

"What?!" Both men echoed, looking dumbfounded.

"We blew all the explosives under the house because those creatures came after us by the hundreds. Then we escaped through your tunnel."

"I knew it!" Akane said, half-ashamed.

Shana's father grimaced and looked at his apprentice.

"Well, I don't think we'll be returning to the stead. It looks like the Ustradi River beckons us to travel the Inner Sea."

Akane shook his head, still in disbelief. "But what about all your possessions? All your—"

Gabe chuckled. "Kaboom."

Atticus rubbed his chin. "Hmm. So there is nothing to return to, but I have this note from the Grand Duchy in my pocket that says we are filthy rich. I believe it's time for us to move on, Akane. If you wish to go back and continue our work, I won't hold it against you..." His eyes shone mischievously.

Akane looked to Shana and the girl shook her head. "Last we saw of the place, it was crawling with those evil creatures."

The big man shrugged. "I did look forward to continuing your work, boss, but I think I would like it if I could stay with your family for a bit more, sir." Akane politely bowed his head and Atticus accepted his gesture.

"Of course, you are welcome, my friend," he said, reaching out and clasping the big man's arm. He turned to his children. "Then it is decided. We will leave this life behind us and start a new adventure somewhere else."

Shana nodded then looked over to the gate where Alchemdaigle stood, keeping a polite distance. He had wanted to make sure they were safe, but they had already said their goodbyes. He held up her pistols when she glanced at him, offering them back to her one last time.

Peace and Harmony.

She felt naked without them at her side, but at the same time she felt like a child again. With her father and Akane looking out for them, she could become innocent once more, and the thought relieved her tremendously.

She shook her head and Alchemdaigle smiled and placed them back in his bag.

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Akane, her father and her brothers walked on through the city to the dock. Shana followed behind them, listening to their banter, but continued to look back at Alchemdaigle until he was out of sight.

Then she brushed a tear from her eye and looked forward to playing cards with her family once again.

Pathfinder Chronicle Anthology III is a collection of twenty-three stories from up-and-coming authors in the Paizo fan community. Written by Pathfinder fans for Pathfinder fans, it stands as a testament to their abilities and talents for imaginative storytelling.

This volume concludes our feature on, “nations of treachery;” specific regions of Golarion marred by corruption and strife. In this volume, you can expect to witness the rituals of sadomasochistic priests in Nidal; run from cannibals and pirates in the Shackles; and mingle with the undead where they rule high in Geb.



You will also run into adventurous pathfinders, ritualistic rakshasa, accommodating ghosts, tempting demons, ravenous sharks and more undead ghouls than you can shake a boomstick at. And you will find tales of wishes, true love, transformation, visions and the typical tomfoolery.

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